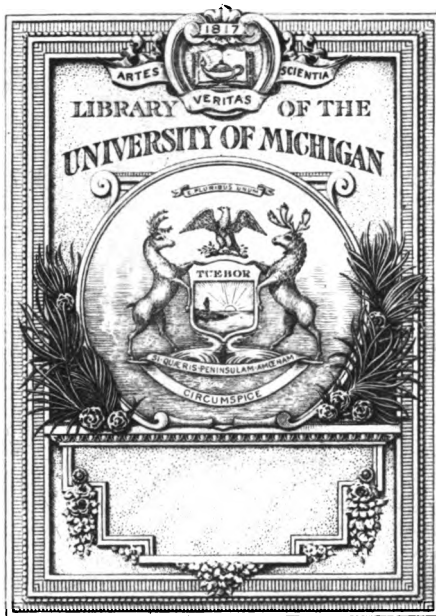


A 922,864



828
6443
1926

SOUNDINGS

By A. Hamilton Gibbs

GUN FODDER

SOUNDINGS

SOUNDINGS

A NOVEL

Arthur
BY
A. HAMILTON GIBBS



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1926

Copyright, 1924, 1925
BY A. HAMILTON GIBBS.

All rights reserved

Published March, 1925
Reprinted March, 1925 (twice)
Reprinted April, 1925
Reprinted May, 1925 (twice)
Reprinted June, 1925 (three times)
Reprinted July, 1925 (three times)
Reprinted August, 1925
Reprinted September, 1925
Reprinted October, 1925
Reprinted November, 1925
Reprinted February, 1926

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

31 28-29 KWT

"Life is an uncharted ocean. The cautious mariner must needs take many soundings ere he conduct his barque to port in safety."

PART ONE

Wab:
1-14-29
18650

Chapter One

I

It was half-past five in the morning. The village was stretching itself. Thin spirals of blue smoke began to creep out of first one chimney, then another. From inside cow byres came the subdued rattle of chains and the swish of cows being milked. One by one the animals came out into the dewy paddocks with that peculiar low mumble as though grumbling to themselves.

"Ullo Curly!" The speaker was an upstanding youth who emerged from the Fields' barn, carrying two brimming buckets of milk. His roving eye had caught sight of Fred Collins, cap in hand, moving swiftly and noiselessly across the grass. "Where be goin'?"

Fred started and moved the cap behind him. "No-where," he answered. "Be back in a minute."

Young Fields laughed knowingly. "Aye, 'tain't far!"

The back of the other lad's neck felt uncomfortably red as he hurried along without further reply. His fair hair curled closely — hence the nickname that stuck like a burr — and it was only the challenging spark in his blue eyes and his ready fists that had prevented him from being called softy. They had tried it once, the others, but the blood-stained noses which resulted were no encouragement to continue the pastime, even at ranges of a hundred yards, from the cover of impassable hedges.

Thereafter Curly went his own way, and that way was not a gregarious one. On holidays, and when work was

Soundings

over, instead of playing cricket and horseshoe quoits with the rest, he went off into the woods. He could have told any bird how to make its nest, and in which tree. He could always draw an answer when he whistled their calls. To him the forest that crowned the hill and held its own for many miles to the south was like a well-thumbed book, which he had read and reread, until it and its ways were part of him, and he of it. At night he was up there with snares, noiseless as a ghost, wide-eyed as a cat.

This morning, carrying his cap gingerly, he made a short cut over hedge and ditch and fetched up in the lane by the Hawthorne cottage. Here he looked quickly up and down and then raised the latch of the gate, silent as a burglar. There was no smoke coming from the chimney. It was still too early, he knew, for the gentry. Yet he tiptoed along the flags almost furtively, glancing at the upstairs windows, which were open, with unconcealed anxiety.

The sun was already on the brass knocker. Curly winked back at it, and from his cap drew forth something protected by two large cabbage leaves, still wet with dew. He laid them down on the doorstep and in another moment was gone.

The only observers of this visitation were a family of swallows, the bottom of whose nest made it necessary to open or close the upstairs window with infinite care. The parent birds were functioning swiftly in response to the noisily expressed desire of four juveniles who were scarcely in training for the flight of many hundred miles south which they were so soon to take.

Their shrill twitterings at last drew a response from inside the room. There was a deep sigh, a stirring, a rustle of sheets, and a girl sat up in bed and looked at her wrist watch. For a moment she blinked, then, with a devastating yawn, gave a scramble and was up on her feet.

Nancy Hawthorne was eighteen and tall for her age and, when she had unbraided and brushed out her two plaits, was the possessor of a mane of chestnut hair that seemed sometimes as if it were on fire. Her straight nose was her father's. The mouth and eyes were her mother's. With a vigor that was peculiarly her own she pulled off her nightgown and began to climb into a one-piece bathing costume.

She emerged presently and hammered on the door across the landing.

"Hello, Dad! — Coming for a swim?"

The reply was a monosyllable, definable perhaps as a grunt. "Lazy devil!" said Nancy. She smiled and went downstairs. The usual noises were taking place in the kitchen, — the slurring of stove lid and kettle.

"How soon breakfast, Weeksie?"

The voice of Mrs. Weeks survived the clatter. "'Bout 'alf an hour, dearie. Don't be long."

Nancy opened the front door. The two cabbage leaves were sitting there.

A smile played with the corners of her lips as she stopped and lifted the top leaf. A mound of strawberries made a splodge of color on the bottom one.

She ate one, chuckling at the knowledge that they had been looted from some one's garden, and carried the rest into the cottage. Then, with a flash of bare legs beneath the raincoat, she ran down the lane and across the meadow to the bathing pool that gleamed in the sun like a turquoise. As she raced up and halted breathless on the edge, there was a stirring behind a willow.

Curly came out. At that moment he was supposed to be hoeing in the outfield behind the Squire's. He had been, until fifteen minutes ago. Then he had glanced at the sun and muttered, "She'll be stirrin' now." Where-

Soundings

upon he had scamped it to the end of the row and leaped through the hedge.

“’Ullo, Miss Nancy!” he said.

Nancy stood, her hand at the button of her raincoat. “Hullo!”

Curly’s eyes flashed to her face and away again. That was the worst of it. He always felt loutish and tongue-tied when he did see her. Alone in the woods, he dreamed of how he would lead her through them and show her all the secrets that he had discovered there. She would follow and listen breathless, awed, while he expounded his kingdom.

Once for an hour it had come true and Curly had touched the pinnacle of happiness, — only to crash headlong when, emerging into a clearing, Nancy had exclaimed rapturously at the sight of her father sitting there before an easel in his shirt sleeves, the bubbling and chuckling of his pipe in tune with the chirping of the crickets. The sight of him had stopped Curly’s tongue and overwhelmed him with awkwardness. The momentary sense of equality with Nancy was shattered like a burst bubble. He did n’t know enough to define it as class consciousness, but although he and Nancy had sat side by side in the parochial school as children under the same teacher, there was always something about her that told him more plainly than any words that she belonged to a different world. Nevertheless his dream of her remained.

“Curly, you’re a rotter! I’m ashamed of you!” said Nancy. “But all the same I’m going to love those strawberries when I get back to breakfast.” Her frank smile was delicious.

The lad grinned. “I thought you would,” he said. “I picked the best ’uns. And no one won’t know unless you tell!”

While she was busy tucking her hair into a bathing cap

his eyes worshipped her. As she raised both her arms behind her head, the curve of breast in the tight green bathing costume just visible beneath the raincoat made him catch his breath.

"Well, I won't this time," said Nancy. "The deed is done, but I want you to promise me not to pinch any more. Will you?"

She turned her brown eyes upon him. His blue ones met them, to see if she really meant that. He liked strawberries himself and it was so easy in the dawn just to go down a row. — She did mean it. He nodded. "All right."

Nancy rewarded him with a smile. "Good for you! — Now you run away. I'm late. Hurry!"

Curly turned and ran. A long way off, at the edge of the field, he stopped and waved to her.

Nancy did n't see it. Nor did she see the dejection in his manner as he turned and disappeared through the hedge. She was already in the water.

II

The shuffle that heralded Mrs. Weeks' approach from the kitchen was not so agile as it had been. She came bearing a tray of breakfast things. In her own phraseology she "did for the 'Awthornes." In other words, she came in every day and cooked and scrubbed. If her methods were simple, they were also efficient. She had done for them from before the time that Nancy was born. She had had total charge of that young lady's infantile career. Having buried three of her own, she considered herself, and was considered, an expert in the upbringing of children.

Buxom even in her prime, she had spread under the moulding touch of time. In appearance she resembled a Chinese ivory figure, some squat, calm mandarin. There was the

Soundings

same yellowish pigment of skin, the same leatheriness of texture, the same stray hairs at the corners of her upper lip. Western garments mercifully concealed, but could not diminish, the same protuberance of stomach. Her hair, now streaked with gray, was drawn back tightly from her forehead and formed a diminutive bun behind.

Such education as she possessed she had received first-hand from life, — work, marriage, childbirth and burial of her dead. But just as the last three are generally mere interruptions in our ego, with Mrs. Weeks they were only additional reasons for the first, work — she having no ego — and perhaps initiations to the inner sisterhood in village life.

To Brimble, marriage meant only a different angle to conversation. To have a child was merely indicative of the inevitable. To have had three gave one, however, a certain priority of speech at the cottage doors; while their burials elevated one to the dignity of an elder in the council, a sort of Grand Mistress. It was considered highly probable that she would eventually bury her husband who, once a beery champion of political reform, still confined his waning enthusiasms to the sanded barroom of the inn, where, week by week, he drank his old-age pension in the full satisfaction of having done his duty to king, country and wife. He had long since forgotten that the disability of Mrs. Weeks' left eye — it would not open more than halfway — was a forty-year-old vindication of his inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.

She bore no grudge. It was all in the day's work, according to her philosophy. Indeed even now she sometimes gave evidence of a flickering affection by fixing him up a culinary titbit from the Hawthorne larder which she took home and fed to him, much as one says to an ancient dog,

“You are a good old thing, after all. Here's a bit of soft meat for you!”

As she finished laying the table and turned, her good eye fell upon the strawberries. "Well, I declare!" she muttered. For a moment she stood considering them. Then she shook her head. "That young Collins ain't up to no good, 'anging around like this. She's *that* pretty!"

The old stairs cried out beneath a heavy footstep. "What's that, Mrs. Weeks? Were you saying something to me, or just thinking aloud?"

A fat chuckle added a hundred wrinkles to her face. "That's a good one, — thinking aloud!" She looked squarely at Jim Hawthorne as he came down the last stair on to the tiled floor.

"Yes, I was thinking that you and me are getting along and that our Nancy is growin' up. It 'll be mating time for her before you know it!"

"Mating time! — Nancy?" Jim Hawthorne gave a short laugh of dismissal as he stepped out into the sunshine. The idea was preposterous.

Mrs. Weeks shook her old head. "That's all right! You can laugh. I ain't blind, although my 'usband is responsible for one eye not bein' up to its work exactly."

Across the meadow Jim caught sight of his daughter. She had taken off her bathing cap and came running. Suddenly she waved a towel.

Jim waved back. Mating time? Good God, no! The rejection came quickly, almost with a touch of anger. He was n't ready yet.

"Hullo Dad!" Her cheeks glowing, her chest heaving, Nancy paused at a cluster of carnations. "Here's a poem for you," she said. She picked one, sniffed it, and walked up to him.

"Hullo, old lady! Have a goød swim?" His arm slid round her shoulder.

Soundings

She rubbed her head against his chest and then looked up at him.

"It's a sort of tingly morning, this morning, Dad. Do you—why, is anything the matter? Sniff this and you'll forget it!" She tickled his nose with the flower, but though she smiled there was an almost maternal anxiety in her glance.

It was her presence which finally dispelled her father's moment of uncertainty. As he looked down at her mop of hair and into the honest brown eyes, unmarked by any shadow, Mrs. Weeks' croaking seemed laughable.

Jim Hawthorne reached round and smacked her. Nancy laughed as she arched her body forward at him to dodge the blow. "You run up and dress," he said, "or I won't wait for you, young woman! I'm hungry."

She kissed him and dashed off, and presently, from the little window under the swallow's nest, came the sound of her voice like a magnificat.

Her father listened. There was no frown on his forehead now. A casual observer at the bottom of the lane would have said, "There's a man who has made his pile and succeeded in building up a charming domestic atmosphere in which to enjoy a well-earned leisure and grow old gracefully. The study of nature, the cultivation of flowers, probably a little golf, an occasional jaunt to town just to get the feel of crowds again,—that's his programme. He probably wags a forefinger when he lays down the law about politics and explains how much better he could have handled the job if he'd been Prime Minister!—Well, well! perhaps I'll have the luck to do it myself some day."

Certainly from outward appearances that comment was justifiable. Jim Hawthorne, tall, straight, sunburned, his hair almost white, his face deeply lined, had at least some of the earmarks of a retired and contented business man, at

Soundings

peace with himself and the world. A closer observation, however, would have reversed the casual judgment. No conflict for financial gain alone ever engraved a man's face as his was engraved. It was scarred by fundamental readjustments, like that of a man, for example, released after serving a life sentence for a crime committed by some one else.

Chapter Two

I

THERE are still places within an eighty-mile radius of London where the hand of progress has not left its dirty thumb marks in the form of factories, with their attendant squalor and cheap movie shows. To find them it is necessary to turn off the motor roads and adventure more sedately, in a manner becoming the approach to Arcady.

What inhabitants there are will stare with the frank all-seeing stare of babies and yokels, and presently, if you are lucky, you may bump your way into some old-world village with its inn and its apothecary; the one, before whose door creaks a faded sign, perhaps of a Duke's head and a coat of arms, the other, whose windows contain the Gargantuan flagons of red and green fluid that might have been the elixir of youth. Sometimes there is a village green where ducks move in solemn procession and ancient horses crop such herbage as has escaped the hobnails of the children. Generally, behind a mellow red wall, may be glimpsed the upper storeys of the Squire's house, half hidden by giant yews, planted when gentlemen in white wigs and knee breeches strutted it before their patched and powdered ladies.

Even now the atmosphere of "benevolent" feudalism has not departed. The rustics touch their caps, the women bob, and families of six are reared on a few shillings a week, regardless of the overthrow of empires and the rearrangement of the map.

Such was Brimble, strung out along the ledge halfway up the great hill where the ancient Druids had carved a mighty cross into the chalky face of the earth. Few outsiders ever found their way there, — a fisherman, perhaps, to whom some fellow angler had confided the promise of the stream, or an artist happening upon it delightedly in the course of a sketching tour.

That was how Jim Hawthorne had discovered it twenty years ago. To him then the cottage was like dreams come true. In place of the three-roomed, exorbitantly priced apartment in a dingy London street, where he toiled at black-and-white drawings for the magazines while his wife gave tragic music lessons for a farcical reward, here was a fairy spot of color and peace, where blew the great winds of health and freedom and ambition. It fired him to stake the future and his faith in himself against their senseless bread-and-butter routine.

He telegraphed to Nan, his wife, and met her at the diminutive railway station six miles below, led her wondering through the fields of corn and stood her at last on the brick walk outside the cottage door.

She was silent, ecstatic at the outstretching patchwork quilt of country beneath her. Then they stroked the old oak beams that held up the ceiling, pictured wonderful evenings by the enormous open fire, clambered up the rickety staircase to the sloping roofed bedrooms close beneath the thatch and sniffed the honey-suckle that peeped in upon them. At last they stood still, their faces alight.

"This is *home*, Jim!" she whispered. "Brimble! Why, the name's a poem, of bumblebees — and babies!"

He took his arm from around her shoulders. "Come along then! We'll go and take the 'For Sale' board down."

"Can we? — Dare we? We have n't —"

"We're young and we've got each other. We can buy it,

Soundings

Nan, for a hundred and fifty! What do you say? Shall we risk it?"

"It's our chance!" she answered.

Hand in hand, like two excited children, they ran down the lane to grab their happiness.

II

The front door opened into a large, red-tiled, uneven-floored room. The old beams were oiled. A copper hood, dark and gleaming, lured you to the fireplace. There were pewters and old brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece above it. Copper bed-warmers hung down on either side. China treasures sat on the high shelf that made a dado around the room. A grandfather clock ticked solemnly in the corner. The carved panels of an old oak pulpit, picked up in a rambling bric-a-brac shop in Brittany, stood out at right angles to the fire, forming, as it were, a room within a room, a cosy corner. Against them squatted a low couch whose gay chintz was the same as that which hung at the windows. These had small, square, leaded panes where they had been built out in a great bay, three-sided. The broad cushioned window seat inclosed the dining table, on which a silver bowl was always kept filled with flowers.

The workshop opened out of this, so called because there Jim kept his painting materials. There too was the small grand piano where Nan drew them into the world of melody when candles were lit and Jim, full stretch upon the sofa, watched her as she played and sang. Around the walls were landscapes in oils, a tribute to his dreams of color.

Upstairs were a bulging library, a bathroom with hot and cold water — there was only one other in the whole of Brimble — and two bedrooms with gems of dressing tables

and mirrors for which the auction rooms of London had been ransacked.

What savings and computations had gone to the purchase of each treasure! Every pewter and candlestick had its story of mutual planning and happiness. What triumph when at last the piano, bought with the sweat of a hundred drawings, was opened, and the first exultant chords resounded through the cottage! The bathroom was a milestone in Jim's career, an answer to faith, the result of the Bond Street exhibition and sale of his first twenty landscapes, an epoch!

And while this brief idyll was being played, neither he nor she had time to realize that where there is a beginning there must also be an end.

III

A poem of bumblebees — and babies!

When ends barely meet it is difficult to make such a poem rhyme. They had not dared in London. At Brimble, however, the note of oppression, of threat even, that lies in the rumble of the city, yielded to the slow rhythm of the country. There was such composure in the succeeding seasons, such acceptance in the changing tasks of farmers. It seemed that life breathed, unhurried, with the confidence of a sleeper. Confidence, that was the keynote of it all! It was like a constant invitation to attune one's mind to its steady pace, to relax from the frenzy of ambition, to absorb quiescence of pulse, to grow broader and deeper in the certainty that the answer lies in being rather than in straining to be.

The little partition of her mind in which she had locked away her dream of children opened wide as the beatitude of Brimble permeated her, body and soul. At first Nan had

Soundings

been like a bird released from a six-inch cage of osiers on a nail in a back alley, — almost frightened at the space around her, fearful of beating her wings with full vigor. There might be still a bar somewhere upon which to bruise them.

With realization, however, came intoxication. She drank happiness recklessly, in great gulps. —

In the hospital down the hill rain was beating upon the windows when they sent downstairs to tell Jim to come up quickly.

Words came to him through a fog. Time stood still. Something incoherent that was meant for a prayer came soundlessly to his lips. There were people, murmurs, movements, smells, getting in between him and Nan. — There was more, death.

When Jim stood up, the world had crashed in ruins about his feet.

Some one was saying, "Steady, old man, steady!"

He brushed off the arm that supported him. "Christ!" he whispered. "Jesus — Christ!" Unconsciously he passed a hand across his mouth.

A nurse came forward with the baby.

Jim turned and went out of that house into the rain.

So, one June day, the child Nancy was born.

IV

It was as though more than half of Jim Hawthorne were lopped off and placed in that graveyard down the hill, leaving him empty and desolate, a meaningless husk, without desire, almost without thought.

To the violent oscillations of the needle of his mind seeking, in spite of itself, a new magnetic north, seeking some one stable truth to which to cling, was added the intolerable burden of loneliness. Nan had been more to him than he knew in the days of struggle in London when the next meal for them both had frequently remained a problem to which they had no immediate solution. How greatly he had drawn upon her courage only came home to him now that there was no longer that alter ego whom man's nature demands, — at whom to grumble and complain, to whom to turn for help, sympathy and spiritual comfort, on whom to lavish all the manliness and gentleness, the strength and weakness, the bigness and the littleness that are his.

Like a haunted thing he roamed the woods, unseeing, a strident discord. The cottage was full of shadows. The piano was closed. Pictures and pewters were mere daubs and pieces of metal. None of their treasures spoke to him with any meaning. That which had given them personality, meaning — the mutual faith and idealism of man and wife striving towards the same goal — was swept away like a thing of no worth, since their goal had been founded on fallacy. It was the debacle.

He prayed for death and death refused him, thrust him back to an unrelenting conviction of the utter worthlessness of life.

Leaving Mrs. Weeks to make what arrangements she pleased for the infant, Jim went to France, seeking in movement the repose that Brimble no longer held.

He walked through Brittany and headed southeast. After many days, Provence spread her endless white ribbons of road before him and he left them behind. At Marseilles his lean figure might have been seen in the bow of an old freight boat that was about to nose her way to Algiers. Weeks of wandering elapsed before he fetched up in Cairo,

Soundings

brown as any Arab, silent as the Sphinx, but with his problem unanswered.

As though from some immense pinnacle of isolation he looked down upon the conglomeration of more or less interrelated groups of polyglot peoples and saw each endeavoring to outdo and outboast the other, like small boys shouting through a dark wood to show that they are not afraid; each pursuing a petty self-interest under cover of grandiloquent professions of universal brotherhood; each stumbling around the vicious circle of behavior, economic, political, social and religious, like blindfolded camels turning endlessly around an Egyptian water wheel, convinced that they were progressing to endless lengths, while in reality they trod and retrod the limited circumference.

From the standpoint of evolution and its infinite æons the world seemed to him as insignificant as a piece of meat buried beneath a myriad maggots, squirming and shifting in mere indeterminate motion. There was no guiding force, no outstanding brain to give it order and cohesion, to point out an objective, to focus the wasted energy.

God, the creator of it all? "God is just a term," said Jim Hawthorne, "by which mankind is in the habit of summing up any manifestation beyond the feeble limits of its amoeba-like intelligence."

Life hereafter the reason of it all? Jim Hawthorne said, "I don't know." Angrily he sneered at the hysterical eagerness with which the crowd clutched some comfort, some reassurance, however slight, in their vain conjectures on the unpleasant but inevitable end.

Then he laughed, without humor. "I'm one of the maggots, and what brain I've got is n't big enough to find the answer. All I know is that I'm here and likely to be here for some time, because of the instinct of self-preservation which won't let me snuff myself out without a struggle. I

suppose I've got to *do* something, otherwise time will seem so damned long!"

He went back to Brimble. Time was long. A year that was just a blank elapsed before in self-defence he reached out to his art, because it was the only thing that he knew.

"The slave of habit!" he mocked and was duly amused to find that his pictures began to be talked about.

"I know they're good," he said, "but what the hell do they buy 'em for? *They* don't know the difference between a Titian and an oleograph till some tuppenny-ha'penny critic points it out to 'em, and then they believe it because it's so much easier to pick up a ready-made opinion than to form one."

It was not until the child was nearly eight years old that one day she thrust herself upon his consciousness. He saw that she had beauty and, what was more important, personality. She stimulated his curiosity. He watched her as though she were a living specimen upon the slide of a microscope. He saw her gradually unfold like a rosebud. He began to resent not only Mrs. Weeks' authority, but the instinctive way in which the child looked to her for reassurance if her small world went wrong.

From that moment Jim Hawthorne was no longer alone with his crippled ego and the success that meant nothing to him.

"Here's my job!" he said. "Every man plays his hand to the limits of the boundary prescribed by his fear of what society will say or do. This kid shall not be afraid of traditional beliefs or rules of conduct. I'll teach her to stand on her own two feet, to answer to herself alone. She shall be honest."

And Nancy was now eighteen.

Chapter Three

I

THE room was very still that night. A soft blue blanket of tobacco smoke, that changed shape just as clouds do, lazily shifting and reforming, floated just above their heads. The rays of the lamp cut their way through it sharply. Between them was a chessboard.

Jim, a pipe in his teeth, leaned back against the oak pew. His eyes shifted from the game and went to Nancy, who, with her chin supported in the crutch of her two hands, was working out her next move.

Beneath the copper hood of the fireplace occasional little spurts of flame escaped from the beech logs. They sang for a moment in a tiny elfin voice.

Mrs. Weeks' remark came back to him. In his mind he paused long enough to savor the phrase. It was rather beautiful — mating time. And yet, going deeper, it became rather beastly, rather ironic, too, as though mating and all that it meant were no affair of one's own but as inevitable as next morning. There was apparently no free will involved, no "captain of my soul." Nature was irresistible. The mind had really very little say. It just had to fight nature. It could n't direct it. She was — how old? Seventeen or so. Was it possible? Seventeen years since Nan had left him. — Was the child concerned with mating? Had that aspect of life already become an integral part of her? He did n't know. What did one

know of another individual's mind? Nothing. Yet all her life Nancy had had no secrets. But her real thoughts, her inner life, that mysterious entity in all human beings which comes into the world alone, lives through it alone, and goes out again equally alone? Was she herself beginning to appreciate that entity?

Nancy's hand went out. "I think this is a fairly conservative move." She advanced a knight. Her voice was entirely casual, but she waited, tingling with excitement. "If Dad does n't move that pawn, I've got him in three moves! I don't believe there's any way out. Oh, I *hope* he does n't see it!" She looked up at him.

Jim was intent on the game. A minute went by: two minutes. His hand hovered over the pawn.

Nancy began willing him, urgently. She concentrated. "Queen! Queen! Move your queen, Dad, your queen!" Jim's hand went back.

"Queen! Queen!" It became a chant in the girl's mind, crescendo and fortissimo when her father reached out again. Most unexpectedly he went to the other side of the board and brought up a rook.

The chant ceased. "Now what on earth—?" She analyzed the rook in all its possible bearings upon her attack and the probability of his. She could see no immediate danger. Dad was so beastly subtle, though! He might have gone her one better with that innocent rook. However— even Napoleon made errors. Now to smash him! There had been no mistake in her calculations. The three moves followed in machinelike sequence.

"A very nice piece of work, old lady!" said Jim. "Let's have another." He prepared to set the pieces up again.

Nancy kicked away her chair and stretched with a great cracking of joints. "No, no more. I've used up all my concentration. I'm restless. Let's go up on the hill."

Soundings

Jim removed the lid from a large copper box which contained the tobacco, filled his pipe, tucked a cushion behind his head and swung his feet up on the settee. "Far from being restless, I'm positively mellow with peace. You would n't drag an old man from his pipe and book at this time of night to go traipsing up a steep hill in search of moonlight effects?"

"Oh, come on, Dad!"

"You've smashed me twice running at the immortal game of chess. That's glory enough for one evening, old lady, without wanting to walk me off my feet."

"Oh, rot! Why, we've done it hundreds of times. You're just bone lazy, that's all. And the chances are that instead of reading you'll be fast asleep when I come back, with tobacco ash all down your chest." She bent down. Her lips touched his face. "I won't be long," she said.

For a moment Jim watched the gray-blue tobacco clouds swirl and close in behind her as she crossed the room and went out. If he had been a cat he would have burst into loud purring. As it was, he sucked a little harder on his pipe, gave a slanting nod of infinite satisfaction and appreciation and picked up his book. "She's all right!" he murmured.

II

The summer night was languorous. No breeze diluted the richly scented air. In the cottage garden it was possible, momentarily, to be aware of roses, of honeysuckle, of lilies, of hay, of rich earth; but they were all so blended that the air was like a physical caress. The silence was composed of a multitude of tiny noises that cannot be pinned down and defined in a word. The fields were like silver blankets with filigreed fringes where trees and hedges were worked into the pattern.

Nancy stood for a moment on the red brick path. As the warm gentle breath of the evening enveloped her, the restlessness flowed out of her. All her body relaxed. From above her head, in the thatch, there came a few drowsy twitterings that ceased almost immediately, as though the swallows had turned over in their nest and were comfortable again. Nancy's reaction was not in words, hardly even in coherent thought. She felt a wave of emotion, the same speechless ecstasy that had filled her at a concert in London when a string quartette had played Tchaikovski's *Andante Cantabile*. It was the first time she had ever heard it, and, at the end, when her father had turned to make a comment, he had broken the spell by exclaiming, "Why, darling, what's the matter?" Her face was all stained with tears. She took a deep breath, turned and went slowly from the garden into the lane that climbed steeply up the hill.

To any one not familiar with the country, being alone in the woods at night would probably be a scary affair. Any vague movement in the undergrowth would seem like a hostile presence, to make the heart beat faster and dry the skin with the first prickling of fear, to make one look repeatedly over one's shoulder, alert lest Some One or Something might be on the verge of springing out. Nancy, however, had long outgrown that. Ever since the first tiny explorations of childhood the lane had been a part of her life. How many times she had climbed the old blackened tree halfway up, an enormous beech, black, as she had learned from her father, because struck by lightning. It was exactly forty paces beyond it that the turf began and the lane, ceasing to be a lane, became a slippery track over the grass. One could see the summit from there, bare between each edge of the woods like the crown of a bald man's head with a fringe of hair above each ear. She

Soundings

had run down it pursued by Indians, rolled down it shouting, ridden down it astride her father, pushed the puffing and protesting Mrs. Weeks down it. To-night she walked slowly up in the spell of the moonlight, hands clasped behind her, humming the first movement of the *Andante*.

As she came to the top and walked along the level towards the Druid's Cross, she noticed a pin point of red that glowed in the black fringe of the woods. But for its color it might have been a glowworm. She stopped humming as the thought came to her mind that it might be a cigarette, — therefore a man. "Confounded cheek!" she thought. "A man, on *our* hill."

It was so seldom that she and her father found the solitude of the hill encroached upon that it had indeed come to seem theirs, a sort of extension of the garden. It did n't occur to Nancy to be frightened. If it were a man, it could only be some one from the village, and in that case she would know him. All the same she was aware of an alertness, an unease, as she walked steadily along, getting nearer and nearer till the smell of tobacco settled the matter beyond all doubt.

The red point which had waxed and waned dropped like a falling star and was extinguished. The twigs snapped beneath the boot that trod it out. The man emerged from the deep shadow. It was Curly who stood in the path ahead.

It seemed to Nancy that he had never looked so big before. A trick of light probably. "Poaching again?" she said. "They 'll have you in gaol yet!"

She stopped. The moon picked out every detail of her, — the mass of her burnished hair, the brown eyes that shone black, the brown V of her throat that ended in the green silk sweater into whose pockets her hands were thrust, and beneath the brief tweed golf skirt, the slim legs that had always so firm and boyish a stance.

Curly made no answer, no movement at all. He stood very still, smiling at her. How many times he had waited up there at night in the edge of the woods, only to lie soundless, motionless, as she strolled by on her father's arm, laughing, happy, unaware of his very existence. His heart was pounding. It sounded so loud that he thought she must hear it.

Nancy did n't. But there was something in his attitude that sounded a vague warning to her. What was it? He might have been a wild animal about to spring. "Oh, nonsense!" she thought, "melodrama!" She gave a laugh and moved forward. "Don't let's stand and gape at each other like a couple of idiots. Walk over to the Cross with me, Curly."

The smell of ripe hay was thick and sweet as they went along. She began to hum the Andante again, but it broke off. The motif was no longer right. It seemed that something had happened between them, as if at that precise moment an angle of relationship had been turned.

Curly had always been just the rather nice-minded boy who, unlike the others of his age, did n't drink and get rowdy and did n't hang around with squawking village girls. Given expression, he might have become a poet, a poet of the woods. Because of that possibility which she had sensed in him, she had lent him books, been interested to see what his opinion was; in a sense, and with full consciousness, she had played the Lady Bountiful towards him. She had n't actually gone to the length of calling him her village protégé, but, if pressed, would have admitted that that was her attitude.

To-night, however, it was a different Curly who walked beside her silently. It was with a touch of resentment that she said to herself, "I'm *conscious* of him. It's ridiculous. He's driven the Andante feeling away. I'm only seeing

Soundings

the evening at second hand, by force." She shot a look at him, sideways. "It *is* Curly. But the thing's absurd. Yesterday night I'm certain I could have met him like this and I should hardly have been aware of him. — Now he's — intruding. Why, even my muscles are tightened. No one has any right to — to break into me like this!"

She stopped. "I'm going back," she said. "I promised father I would n't be long. Don't come with me. Good-night."

She turned, a frown puckering her forehead, her fists making little bulges in her sweater pockets.

"Nancy!"

For a moment Curly had stood as though petrified. But as Nancy turned to leave him, he fired her name as though her movement had pressed a trigger in him.

Her mind had barely time to register the fact that the customary "Miss" was absent. "So *that's* how he has been thinking of me!" she thought; and then Curly was in front of her again, a transfigured Curly, whose repression was broken down.

"Nancy, don't go! I've got to tell yer what's bin inside o' me this year and more, what's bin eatin' me up so that I'm nigh on crazy with it. You know I ain't never kept company with any o' the village girls, like some o' the chaps as takes 'em down the corn fields. I might 'ave, if you had n't kept me to the woods by talkin' and lendin' me they books; for a chap gets a hankerin', spite o' hisself, and 'tis difficult to keep from thinkin' o' they things when the meadows be all sweet wi' hay and the girls snickerin' and lookin' sideways at you in the lanes. Whenever I wanted to, I thought o' you, and then I'd turn my back on 'em and come up here by myself and set snares i' the likely places o' the woods. There's bin nights when you and yer father has passed so close to me when I bin rabbitin' yer could 'a'

stepped on my hand if I'd stretched it out. And I've 'ad to be content wi' just seein' yer and hearin' yer voice as you've gone by. But to-night's different. Somethin' happened when I saw you a-comin' up by yerself and heard yer a-singin'. It didn't seem as if I could stand it no more. — What do yer want, girl? Do you want a man to call yer own, a man as can whip any other chap i' the vil- lage with his two hands, and has kept clean even if he ain't educated? I can work. Was n't I the champion milker last summer down to Wendlesbury, and ain't I drawin' a man's pay to Squire's now? An' I can learn. You've showed me how, Nancy, and I'm all afire for yer! Nancy — Nancy!"

With a gasp that was the expression of a very real fear, Nancy suddenly felt herself caught in his arms, arms that were thick and hard like the limbs of a tree. She had passed through a complexity of emotions during his outburst, — surprise, anger, pity; and, to be honest with herself, pleasure, a sort of reluctant pleasure that forced its way through in spite of herself. But now, in her consciousness of his physical strength as he kissed her face and throat, every- thing left her before a fierce, primeval resistance. She wrenched her hands out of the clinging silken pockets of her sweater. Panting and half sobbing, she beat him, pushed, twisted and fought.

Subconsciously the male in him rejoiced. Instinctively his grasp of her tightened. "Nancy!" he said, and gave a sort of laugh in which there was something cruel, something exultant.

There was nothing naïve in his actions as there had been in his words. He was no longer the awkward country lout frantically endeavoring to put his emotion into speech, that difficult and untried medium. He was just man, assured, poised, radiant in conflict with the woman whom he wanted

Soundings

for his own. Her strength made the moment the more perfect, in the knowledge that he could smash her at any moment if he really wanted to.

That realization reached through to Nancy's brain, and, like a fog-cloud rolling up at a touch of wind, her mind ceased to be obscured by her emotion. Physically he was her master: mentally, she told herself, he was nothing but a clodhopper. Instantly she translated that assurance into terms of action. She let herself become limp. In a moment his arms, which had drawn her irresistibly closer and closer until she was half suffocated, became mere supports.

He thought it was over. "Ah, Nancy! My girl!" He drew his face back to look at her, to read in her eyes the answering spark kindled by his desire.

He saw only a sneering contempt.

"You beast!" she gasped. "I thought you were a little more decent than the rest. You're just a filthy animal, a contemptible village lout!—Let me go! Take your hands off me! They're dirty. Do you hear, Fred Collins? Let go!"

With a quick twist she escaped from him and stood facing him, her hair all ruffled, her sweater twisted, her chest panting. A glow of triumph and a desire to punish surged through her being. She had beaten him! She knew it from the look of bewilderment that came gradually over his face and was followed by the inert hanging of his arms, the sagging of his shoulders; as though, at the icy touch of her ridicule, the glory of pure manhood given him at that moment of ecstasy had dropped from him and he was reverting to type before her eyes, slipping back to subservience, uninspired, deflated, stale.

For a long minute they stood. The revengeful, blistering sentences with which she intended to mark him for the rest of his life remained unsaid. He was down.

Suddenly the personal element fell away. As though from a great distance she saw a man and a woman, who were Curly and herself, mouthing and gesticulating for a while under the pressure of external forces, — like splinters of metal rushing willy-nilly to the terrible call of a huge magnet. The man, Curly, had been caught up for a moment in some great current.

Nancy shivered. "I'm — sorry," she said. "It was n't really your fault." She turned and walked quickly away, shaken with a thought. "Suppose I had been caught up too!"

III

The grandfather clock struck midnight.

Jim Hawthorne stopped reading in the middle of a line, although from sheer habit his eye went on to the end. "The kid's an unconscionable long time! I wonder —"

He dropped his legs from the couch and came to a sitting position, put down his book, tapped out his pipe against the ring that he wore on the little finger of his left hand and began to reload it. There was a frown creasing his forehead as though he were checking off and dismissing possible reasons for her delay, one by one.

The rasp of a match against his boot broke the stillness. There was a sort of rhythm in the alternations of the down-draw of the flame and the puffing out of a funnel of smoke. In the middle of this pipe-lighting ritual another sound came from outside. The only way in which one knew that Jim perceived it was that for two breaths the match flame held steady and the puffing paused. Then it went on again until the match burned down and Jim flicked it into the fire-place.

The garden gate clicked open and then shut again. A moment later the door opened and Nancy came in.

Soundings

"Hullo!" said Jim. "I was just beginning to wonder if the ghosts of the ancient Druids had n't whisked you off for a sacrificial offering. — Suppose we split a bottle of ginger ale before we turn in? You 'll have to go and dig it up, old lady, because Mrs. Weeks has suffered her usual lapse of memory and has departed, leaving us thirsting in the wilderness."

For a moment Nancy stood motionless, silent, as though she had n't heard. Then she walked up to her father.

"Dad, I — I'm all muddled. I want to ask you something. — It's something important if I'm right. It — it changes things rather. I don't know — I'll go and get the ginger ale."

Jim watched her go across the room and through the door into the kitchen. Then he rose and placed himself back to the fireplace, his legs wide apart, his hands clasped behind him. "What the devil happened up there?" he thought.

Nancy came back, the bottles and glasses clinking on a little tray. While her father poured the ginger ale she lit a cigarette and sat down on the couch.

Jim placed a glass on the small table in front of her.

"Here's your drink," he said, and took up his stance again before the fireplace. Apparently busy with his own glass he noticed that Nancy's hand was not very steady when she drank, that the tip of her cigarette was red-hot, that her cheeks were flushed as if she'd been running. He waited, saying nothing.

Presently, with her eyes fixed on the spot where the light struck her amber-colored drink, she said, "Dad, I'm old enough to have a child, are n't I?"

For a moment the ticking of the grandfather clock seemed preternaturally loud. Then Jim placed his glass on the table beside hers with meticulous care. "Yes," he said quietly.

Nancy's hands became motionless. The whole of her was absolutely still. There was no longer a wall to that room where she sat. Her gaze was away through it to some other place and time. It was evidently good to be there. A little smile crept to the corners of her lips. Her eyes became very gentle. Presently she took a deep breath and sat up.

"I see. — Do you remember the excitement about Mary Judkins having an illegitimate child a year ago? She was twenty, a little older than I am now. It puzzled me and I wondered how a thing like that could happen. I believe I know now." She paused and began rubbing her cigarette out in the copper ash tray.

Jim caught his breath. "Yes?"

Nancy went on. "It was n't her fault, was it?"

"No," said Jim.

"Or the man's?"

There was a moment's pause before Jim answered. "Not necessarily, no."

"You mean, not if she — wanted it too?"

"Yes."

Again Nancy nodded. "Then Mary and the man must have been caught up together." It was a statement rather than a question.

Jim raised one eyebrow. "Caught up?"

Nancy rose. With one hand she played with a button of his waistcoat. Her steady brown eyes looked straight into his.

"Dad, Curly was up on the hill to-night, and suddenly when I told him I was going home, he began talking like a mad creature, grabbed hold of me and began kissing me — utterly beside himself, in a sort of seizure, — what I called 'caught up.' It was as unexpected, as involuntary as if this perfectly well-behaved cottage were caught up by a

Soundings

cyclone and made to roll over and over downhill. Do you see what I mean?"

Jim's face was set and hard. He nodded.

"Don't worry," Nancy went on. "It was all right. I tried sarcasm on him and he just wilted."

"You mean that the brute stopped and let you go?"

"Yes."

For a moment neither moved. They stood eye to eye. Then Jim reached out and picked up his ginger ale. He emptied the glass and set it down again, carefully, in the exact spot on which it had stood before. "I think," he said, "it might be as well for me to have a word with him in the morning."

"But Dad darling, that's just the point! It was n't his fault. You said that it was n't. Suppose that cyclone had hit me? It *might* have hit me, might n't it?" Nancy caught hold of his arm and stopped him. "Don't be upset about it, Dad. I'm quite all right. But I want to — to find out about it. I need you to tell me. You see, I've never met anything like it before, and now that I'm old enough to have a child, I ought to know. Ought n't I, Dad? If this had n't happened, I probably should n't have asked you, ever. But as it has, why, I'd rather get it straightened out in my mind, once for all, than have it bottled up inside me and keep on rousing my curiosity. — Besides, one day, I — I believe I *want* that cyclone to hit me!"

Chapter Four

I

At eighteen most English girls of the "middle" and "upper" classes have been "finished", if indeed they are not "out." In other words they are already preoccupied with the exciting allurements of young men, — the inevitable sequence to the phase which they passed through at school of having a "crush" on a certain mistress, of looking up to her as to a divinity and suffering all the agonies of heart-break when they have to leave her and go home for the holidays.

It means that they have already made the break of at least one of the maternal apron strings and learned to stand on their own feet in the comparatively bigger world of school where there is, in petto, just as bitter a conflict of personality and interest as there is in after days in the world of men and women. They have learned already to form judgments of their fellows, immature if you will, but none the less harsh. They have assessed themselves, spiritually, socially and economically. It is all perfectly healthy and normal, perhaps, because part of the system; but it is also perfectly superficial and snobbish. All that they have acquired in the way of learning is a smattering of elementary subjects — practically nothing beyond the three R's — with no background of reasons why, no sense of their possible application to the scheme of everyday life, and a purposely accentuated notion of the fact that they are "ladies."

Soundings

It is a system of carefully cultivated repression and ignorance: No "lady" should ever show her feelings, — except in a perfectly "ladylike" way. To be natural is therefore a heinous offence. Curiosity is an indelicacy and truth is screened off behind a plethora of multi-colored gauzes. The cultivation of good manners is almost the be-all and end-all of these stultifying scholastic institutions which mould the female backbone of England; than which it is impossible to find anything more herd-minded and consequently more completely satisfactory.

Nancy Hawthorne was an entirely different product. Up to the age of about eight she had spoken the language of Mrs. Weeks and the children of the parochial school down the hill in Friar's Icknield, a curious singsong intonation, the local patois. She had learned spelling and multiplication by the choral method, — the whole class of twenty or more little boys and girls chanting aloud in a sort of rhythm: "C-a-t, cat; d-o-g, dog. Four-times-two-are-eight; four-times-three-are-twelve." Any time you are passing a country board school you can hear the hypnotic drone rise and fall in shrill but regulated cadences. You can almost see the teacher, an ill-paid illiterate, keeping time with a hand, her mind a thousand miles from this tedious form of work by which she manages, God knows how, to keep body and soul together.

At this stage of her career Nancy had no idea that she was a "lady." She played with the rest of the village children in happy unconcern, a sturdy little red-head, growing up higgledy-piggledy with a lot of other young animals, who bit and scratched and screamed and laughed as occasion demanded.

At home she played around in the kitchen, digging fascinated fingers in Mrs. Weeks' efforts at pastry, eating all manner of things that she should n't have eaten, when that

lady's back was turned; or she tumbled about the garden and lane, exploring in all directions like an adventurous puppy; or, later, and most wonderful of all, she marched into the workshop and evolved delightful messes on the floor with bits of paints and an old brush in emulation of the man whose eyes looked at her so speculatively.

She could n't remember when that speculation changed and the man came and sat on the floor and played messes with her and she went no more to school. But from that time on she began to take unheard-of liberties with his person, to climb up him and beat his puffed-out cheeks so that they made "'splosions", to ride on his back away out to the other side of the world, where he pulled paper bags out of his pocket and gave her nice things to eat and told her fairy stories and played lions and tigers till she grew tired. And then she would reach out her arms to be picked up and tucked against his woolly waistcoat; and at last she would fall off to sleep to the soothing joggle of his walk and the tunes that he hummed as the twigs snapped beneath his feet on the way home.

She was shown that there was another way of spelling c-a-t, cat, and that when he held her hand the pencil made not only letters and numbers but faces and dragons and brownies and birds. As soon as he released her hand, the dragons were n't somehow so dragony; and then he would take her hand again and tell her how the dragon must have been fighting with a man called St. George, — look, there he is! — and had been beaten and pummelled and punched and would have to go to the doctor. The doctor carved him here and patched him there and fixed on his tail again — all this time the pencil was working — until, after many treatments, *there* was the old dragon looking almost like himself again! All this time insensibly her ear was becoming attuned to the different pronunciation. Gradually she

Soundings

sloughed off the broad vowel sounds of Friar's Icknield and Brimble and spoke as her father did.

As she began to read freely and to ask why to everything, there began the divergence from the conventional that Jim Hawthorne had planned. He gave her no copybook answers, but translated his own explanations into words that she could understand, accustoming her mind to an angle of approach that would have broken all the rules laid down as to curiosity in the schools for the daughters of gentlewomen.

"You and I, child," he said, "are seekers after truth; and as far as within us lies we 'll gloss over nothing, but dig down to naked facts and look everything in the face, fairly and squarely."

He showed her how the food they ate in the cottage was bought from the butcher and baker in the village, how these bought it from wholesalers in London, by whom in turn it was imported from dealers in France, Australia, the Argentine, who procured their grain or stock from other wholesalers who eventually worked back again to individuals. The factors of money, of exchanges, of interdependence, of trade and government, of capital and labor, were in a sense traced right down to the cottage door. Using herself, Mrs. Weeks and Curly as examples, he opened her imagination to the problem of equal opportunity, of the fanatical pros and cons which for centuries had made the world a battle ground. He drew pictures for her of the days before machinery, of the startling results of its invention, of the immensity of good and evil of the resultant factory system which denuded the land and clogged the cities in the name of production.

To the growing girl whose mind was thus fed, learning was no tedious memorizing of dates, no absorbing of the fetich of class standards. She imbibed information as she breathed and was stimulated to a hundred questions on

subjects covering a wider range than most girls of her age had even heard of. It became too the bridge by which the lonely man and the young girl found their way to a companionship that was the greatest thing in both their lives. She knew nothing of parties and dancing, nothing of the rough and tumble of a family of brothers and sisters, nothing of the allurements of young men to which other girls of eighteen gave all their waking thoughts.

All her affection went to her father, with whom she spent almost every waking moment of the day. She knew no games except the grown-up ones, golf and chess. Their only other form of recreation was walking or going off on bicycles, when they explored the bustling little market towns that were dotted over the countryside. On these occasions they put up at inns and ate bread and cheese lunches, listening to drovers and carters and watching the diminutive turmoil of market day. Always they took sketchbooks and filled pages with the various types of rustics, or sketched in mellow corners of crumbling Norman churches.

The Curly incident, or, more properly, the resulting talk, which lasted until the daylight made the lamp superfluous, marked a period in their relationship. Nancy was unconscious of it. She was only dimly aware of its effect upon herself.

Jim Hawthorne, however, was supremely conscious of it. He felt much as a man who, walking with serene confidence in a dark but completely familiar room, suddenly crashes his head against an obstacle whose existence he never even suspected. For the first time the routine of his attitude towards Nancy was in question. He began to analyze it and was amazed at the results, amazed at himself, amazed at the fact that this child should have been able to decoy him so far from reality. Once he had given his soul to

Soundings

Nan, — and she had taken it with her. Now he had given it again to Nancy, — and was afraid. And facing that fear, he found it to be born of selfishness; he was not, as he had planned, giving the rest of an empty life to her, but drawing upon her to make his life a full one again. And so came self-contempt — for that he was nothing but a creature of his own imagination. He had imagined himself strong, aloof, toughened by rough contact, self-sufficient because alone for eight years he had struggled through the slough of despond. In reality he was none of these things. Should Nancy go, he knew that he would be revealed a coward. It was she who was his strength, who had erected the supporting scaffold poles of her young life around the crumbling tower that was his.

“So be it!” he said. “I am what I am, — spiritually speaking, no longer the gardener but the plant. Thank God, at least I’ve seen it in time!”

II

The village enjoyed a nine days’ wonder at the total disappearance of Curly. He was — and he was not!

Some one, a girl, had seen him on the night of the full moon (how did she remember that it was *that* night? Mind your own business! Well — with a giggle and a side glance — she had been for a bit of a stroll herself —) and he had come down from the Cross as if he were going to a fire. From that time on no one had clapped eyes on him.

The elder Collins, at first enraged at the serious deficit in the weekly budget, gradually changed his mind when he found himself the center of the limelight in the village inn. Beer flowed his way in sympathetic, admiring, or curious waves; and it was not in him to play the Canute. The subtle flattery of attention, turned upon him for the first

time since the day after his marriage, went to his head as potently as the old ale, until he succeeded in convincing himself that his departed offspring, brought up on kicks and growls, was the chiefest jewel in the crown of his glory.

Curly's mother was more practical. She went to the spoutless china teapot, buried beneath old clothes at the back of a deep cupboard, in which an ancient stocking contained the labored precautions of years against a hypothetical rainy day. After due examination, she replaced the stocking and reburied the pot. Her comment was terse. "Thank God it ain't rained yet!"

There were many adherents to the unhealthy certainty with which the grandmother of Mary Judkins announced her belief in his death. This, too, in spite of her reputation as a professional pessimist, due, doubtless, to the greed with which, every Sunday, she fed upon the luscious crimes in *Lloyd's News*.

The only burr that attached to Nancy's skirt was flung half-heartedly by young Fields. Had she been merely a girl of the village, other burrs would have flown thick and fast, but the subconscious feudal attitude did its work. Curly and his disappearance were entirely a village matter. The gentry were not in it.

The whole episode passed, indeed, from the front rank of interest when it was learned that Mr. Hawthorne had telephoned to the barracks at Wendlesbury and that Curly had taken the shilling in the Oxford and Bucks regiment.

It remained for Mrs. Weeks to have the last word. "And a good riddance to bad rubbish!" she said.

Chapter Five

I

THE small community of Friar's Icknield carried gregariousness to the point of exaggeration usual to most rural societies. There were sociables and high teas, mothers' meetings and progressive bridge. The relative social positions of the respective wives of the architect, the bank chairman, the dentist and the chemist were defined to a pin point. It was possible to invite the dentist's wife occasionally, as a stop-gap, to a progressive. With the chemist's wife, however, it was the thing to nod kindly in the street and ask how the baby was, — the inevitable baby.

The Vicar's wife summed it up. She came of a county family and had nursed dreams of a bishopric. "My dear John, it's all very well to read and applaud brilliant articles on internationalism. I agree with you, of course, that as an ideal internationalism is very laudable, although entirely chimeric. I *don't* see, however, any connection between it and having the dentist and his wife to dinner. That's just common socialism!"

The old Vicar passed a hand across his silver hair. "Perhaps, my dear," he replied quietly, "but they share the same Communion cup with you, and" — the little chuckle escaped him before he could check it — "they know just how many teeth we sit down to dinner with."

The Vicar's wife closed her thin lips tightly.

It was only natural that in this atmosphere of strict observance to social ritual Jim Hawthorne and his daughter

should be objects of curiosity and uncharitable comment. When Hawthorne returned to Brimble after his wife's death, it had been unanimously decided to "cut" him: who had ever heard of such barbarous conduct as to leave a new-born infant and go wandering off for more than a year — and to Egypt, which every one knew was one of the wickedest countries on earth?

So, mercifully, from Jim's point of view, they let him alone during his period of cauterization.

But when word of his success as an artist filtered back from the metropolis, and was duly verified, Friar's Icknield awoke to a sense of Christian duty. Poor man, of course he *had* suffered, and after all it was uncharitable not to forgive and forget. So they trudged up the hill and produced cardcases, and when, to their chagrin, they found that Jim Hawthorne was not at home, they could only leave cards for themselves and their husbands, according to formula. "That Mrs. Weeks is getting so *stout*," they said, "that it was *impossible* even to get a *glimpse* of the furniture in the *hall!*" Later they sent invitations to tea; but when neither the calls were returned nor the invitations answered, they found solace for their pricked vanity in shrugging their shoulders at the mention of his name. "That man! —" To have forgiven and then be snubbed!

The Vicar was the only one who took no hand nor part in these exercises. "Lord," he said, "forgive them. They know not what they do." And only his wife had an uneasy suspicion that he was not referring to the Hawthornes.

II

It is generally the first frost which brings such startling color evidence in proof of the fact that the leaves have really begun to turn. What subtle and invisible processes

Soundings

have been at work in preparation for that sudden almost frantic radiance? It is difficult to believe that they are not aware that it is their last chance to prove that they are a link in the endless cycle of nature and, like good gladiators in the final contest, utter a proud "Morituri te salutant!"

That Nancy had been aware of the subtle processes of mental growth before her adventure with Curly is improbable. After all, any gladiatorial cry from her would have been — "Those about to live —" The days had succeeded each other in fullness and perfection. There was nothing she would have changed. This first experience had gone deep, however, — so deep that the form of her reaction came, when it did come, as a surprise to herself.

After her talk with her father she stored away perception of a wider reality deep within herself. Immediate anxiety for Curly, on the news of his disappearance, was succeeded first by a feeling of pity for him and the failure which he represented. "It seems," she said, "such a frightful thing that one human being can love another and not succeed in firing the other with it. It suggests that there is something wrong with the law of natural selection, or at least that the individual has not obeyed it and is off on a false trail — and that's just as sad. If I fell in love and the man did n't care, I think I'd die of shame. That's what made Curly run away. Heavens, what an appalling time he must be going through! Can't we do something for him, Dad; send him something?"

Jim shook his head. "In a last analysis," he said, "one can do nothing for anybody else. The paradox of the human animal is that although he is gregarious to the point of self-extinction, his inner ego is the loneliest thing in all evolution, impenetrable, unreachable even. Take yourself and me, for instance. We not only have the association

of blood, but of a daily, hourly intimacy over a period of years. Yet there is a point in our relationship of mind, of soul — call it what you will — beyond which neither of us can pass. The ultimate you is unable to communicate itself to the ultimate me. — See what I'm driving at, old lady?"

"Not absolutely," said Nancy. "I half see it. Presumably, to be able to express a thing like that, as a conviction, as a part of one's knowledge, only comes by actual experience of the thing itself. — But I think you're right about Curly. I wish, for his own sake, he'd picked on any other girl but me. As it is, he's got to live it through for himself. If I began to sympathize actively, it would only do more harm than good and get him more muddled than he is now. — I suppose, incidentally, he did a very wise thing in going?" The question was put in all frankness. She did n't know that within her mind it found an answering echo.

"You bet," said Jim. "The lad was too good to be mooning about the village. The army'll bring him out of himself, give him a much fairer perspective on life."

Nancy nodded. The army, as such, meant nothing more than a means to an end. She found it impossible to visualize Curly as a soldier or to define the effect that it would have upon him. She saw it, however, as a definite angle, a milestone, deliberately turned, for better or for worse, as a result of the problem set to Curly at a given moment in his evolution. In a sense he had hurried on, however blindly, from one experience to another. A certain need had arisen in him and he had made an instinctive gesture, — the army, which was the only thing his imagination could encompass.

It began to dawn upon her that she, too, was in process of making a gesture, although with her there was, obviously,

Soundings

not the same urgency to respond. Her need was there, even if it were a different one.

She became aware of a certain expectancy, a sense, not of impatience, but of a desire to hurry. As she phrased it to herself, "the tempo of Brimble seems to have decreased." On trying to discover what it was towards which she desired to hurry, there seemed to be no answer. She did n't know. What was it she expected? Something — else. "And that of course is absolutely childish!" she said. "Dad's perfect. Life's perfect, and yet. — What the dickens is the matter with me?"

She worked at her painting with the same eagerness, played golf with a joy and a concentration that were, if possible, more pronounced than ever, laughed, sang and swam. The days still slipped by in fullness and perfection, she told herself, but in the odd moments there returned, with the persistence of a recurring decimal, or, better still, with the relentless rhythm of a lighthouse beam, that new feeling which expressed itself mentally in the form of an unphrasable query, physically in the form of an excess of activity, a radiance.

She was, indeed, experiencing, as she realized later, that ultimate loneliness expounded by her father.

Jim Hawthorne read the signs. "Oh, God, it's the swallows ready to go south! — Thrice damn that male man! He's busted everything sky high. I'm superannuated, flung into the discard, scrapped! Yesterday I was her world. To-day she's standing on a new horizon, straining to go forward —" He gave a harsh laugh. "She has cut her father's apron strings — and it hurts just like any other operation! And that is n't wholly an exhibition of egregious ego, either. There's an element of pure funk in it. The child may have a good mind and she may be bone honest with herself, but she said, 'I *want* that cyclone to hit me!'

One has only to look at her to know that that was a cry from her inmost being — and my God, she is n't ready! She *can't* be ready!"

For a fortnight there was no outward sign — unless it was a remark he overheard through the kitchen door. "Weeksie, why are n't there any decent people living here?" To Jim it was significant.

Then came a morning when they were starting around the nine-hole course for the second time.

"Dad, have we got lots and lots of cash?" She picked up her golf bag from the edge of the green, caught the ball which he tossed her, and fell in step with him as they went to the second tee.

Jim laughed. "Compared to Mrs. Weeks, perhaps, we're millionaires. Compared to the Duke of Westminster or Rothschild, we're paupers. Why, old lady?— Your honor!"

Nancy's bag fell with a clatter against the sand box. She teed up, made the preliminary wiggles that cause every non-golfing spectator to think the Royal and Ancient a pastime for morons, and had the boundless satisfaction of watching her ball pitch in the center of the fairway and run up on to the green. Without a word she slipped her driver back into the bag and drew out the putter.

"Very pretty!" said Jim. "We'll have you beating the best of them one of these days. — Let's see. Two hundred and five yards. I think the iron." He made it so and dropped his ball hole-high to the right of the green.

"Hard luck!" said Nancy. As they stepped out again, shoulder to shoulder, she answered his question. "I've been thinking that it would n't do either of us any harm to go off on a bust. I'm just a bit fed up with Brimble." ("It's come!" thought Jim.) "You must be, too. We have n't been off anywhere for years, not since you took me

Soundings

to Paris when I was sixteen, — a mere kid! What do you think, Dad? Could we get out of this for a bit? I feel it's cramping our style. You see, nothing ever *happens* here, does it?" ("Happens!" thought Jim. "My God!") "Has n't it got on your nerves? Don't you feel you want shaking up?" — ("While the world is crumbling!") "I do. Just lately it seems to have hit me with a bang. I want to jump out and do things and see what's going on. I want to explore. I don't care whether it's the Zambesi or the Seine. I've got the itch to go! I'd like to go to-day, this afternoon! How about it, Dad? Can we afford it?"

She tucked her hand through his arm and looked up at him eagerly.

"Of course we can, child!" He squeezed her hand to his side with his elbow. They had reached the green. Mechanically Jim took out a mashie, and dropped his bag. A mashie! What did golf matter any more? What did anything matter? He felt suddenly very old, very tired. He had never stopped before to see how far he had come and it was such an infinite distance back to the point in the road where he and Nan had first clasped strong hands. And now Nancy had actually reached that road. The cycle was about to begin again.

In the preceding fourteen days he had succeeded in making his bow to the inevitable. He proved it now, smiling at her across the green. "Could you start to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, Dad, how priceless! Can you really be ready by then?"

To Jim the exultation in her voice was like a carillon of bells to a man plunged into mourning. "You don't want knee-haltering," he said. "To have me tagging along would be to take Brimble with you. No, old lady, you pack

your little bag and sail off into the blue and see what the world looks like through your own eyes!"

Nancy gasped. "What — alone?"

"Yes," said Jim. "Alone."

Nancy took a deep breath. Then she walked across the green to her father. Their eyes met squarely. She held out her hand. "All right," she said. "I'm game!"

PART TWO

Chapter One

I

THE air vibrated with the crash of motor-busses, the rumble of enormous box-shaped wagons that had country mud upon their wheels, the staccato clicking of horses' shoes on the cobbles, the throaty "Hue-hue!" of the blue-bloused carters, the pistol crack of their long whips, and the thousand and one other honkings, cries, clatterings, clangings and swishings that came and went and merged and continued, the sum total of which is the voice of Paris in the morning, — a voice pulsating with energy, tinged in some indefinable way with abandon, as though the whole approach to the process of living were the result of a special mental attitude.

Inside the gardens of the Luxembourg it was a moot point whether the children added a shriller note than the sparrows. In every respect they seemed to be on terms of equality and almost equally undisturbed by the occasional shrill scoldings of white-capped *nounous*, the swift passage of hatless, black-skirted work-girls, or the gesticulating, curly-bearded men whose ties and baggy trousers, tight at the ankle, flapped as they picked a way around and through the groups of playing infants.

Many a passing eye, both male and female, took in the English girl who sat there so quietly but who was drawn by the sound, the movement, the color and the smell as irresistibly as the tide is drawn by the moon. To her it was a new orchestration. It was wonderful to wake up

Soundings

in the morning and feel it, be part of it, to sniff ecstatically at the fragrance of roasting coffee, to marvel at the perpetual cheeriness of unseen women down in the street — “*Bonjour Marie! Ça marche ce matin? B'en oui, Jeanne, merci! Et toi?*” — and all the while the gurgle of water sluicing down gutters and the swishing of busy brooms. From farther down, at the corner of the street, the undercurrent of many feet all hurrying to the Metro was punctuated intermittently by the voice of the newspaper seller, hard, nasal, always dropping several notes on the final syllable — “*Le Ma-tin! . . . Le Jour-nal!*”

“There’s something special about it,” said Nancy. “Brimble’s another planet! Even Rome is different. It’s more sober — more flat. This is so electric that it’s an irritant.”

“*Fais voir!*” commanded a child voice. A grubby hand reached across her knee and pulled the sketchbook.

There were two of them. They leaned against her, all warm, as they gazed, big-eyed, at her drawing. The boy was about six, hatless, sturdy, a diminutive sailor with anchors on his collar, his hair, black as ink, cropped close to his head. The girl was at the finger-sucking age. She lisped. Her brief skirt stood out stiffly like a doll’s, and her hair was all fluffed up and fastened with a butterfly bow.

Nancy had been watching them darting about. They were like two dragon flies who had paused for a moment on the same leaf. In a second they would be gone again. She wanted to keep them. The thought flashed through her mind that they were France making her welcome. She smiled and in halting French began to talk, turning over the pages of her book for them.

“Why do you speak so funnily?” asked the boy.

Nancy touched his cheek with her hand. “Because I’m English.”

“What is that — English?”

Nancy was puzzled. It would take more French than she had to answer that.

The little girl broke in. She pointed to the book. “Do some more!” It was an order.

They pressed close, breathing loudly, while Nancy made a lightning sketch of their nurse. In all too short a time their attention was distracted by some other children and with a whoop they ran off.

Was the little pang that she felt one of loneliness? “Perfect darlings!” she said aloud.

“Think so? Oh, I don’t know. It always seems to me that children are adorable when they’re other people’s. They tie one down. You’ve got to give them everything or nothing. I have n’t a nursery mind.”

A little startled at this unexpected English contradiction, Nancy turned to look at the girl who had sat down on the bench, — expensively dressed, snub-nosed, about her own age.

The girl went on talking. “I’ve seen you here three mornings running, and each morning I’ve wanted to come and tell you that I think you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You’re English, obviously. Your complexion says that as loudly as your clothes do. I’m from New York city and my name’s C’nelia, — C’nelia Evans. What’s yours?”

Nancy gasped. Was it real? What type of creature was this who remarked casually that she “had n’t a nursery mind” and who came up to strangers and told them with amazing enthusiasm that they were beautiful? Was it because she was American? She had the unself-consciousness of the two French babies.

“My name’s Hawthorne,” she said. “Nancy Hawthorne.”

Soundings

The American girl laughed and edged a little nearer. "You folks always give your last names first, don't you? But 'Nancy Hawthorne'! Why, it's perfect, like an old ballad! It makes me see all those neat little fields and those darling little stone cottages. — I'm studying for Grand Opera. What are you doing over here?"

She was a joy. Nancy was delighted at the mobility of her face, the alertness of her. Her blue eyes sparkled. Everything moved at once, lips, eyebrows, nostrils, hands, body. She was like the incarnation of radio-activity. Her smile, which seemed to go right across her face — some of her friends had called it the Great Divide — was the friendliest, frankest thing she had ever seen. "How delicious she is!" thought Nancy, and then, "Why can't I *tell* her so, instead of just thinking it? *She* would." But somehow it wouldn't come naturally. "Grand Opera! Good lord, you must have a marvelous voice to be able to do that."

"My dear, you don't suppose I'll ever get there, do you? Why, a million girls all over the States say they're studying for Grand Opera. It sounds so much more important than just having singing lessons! Most of them are really kidding themselves along, anyway. I'm doing it because it's just a wonderful excuse to stay in Paris."

Nancy laughed. "I don't believe you. You're marked out for a prima donna. You *are* one already."

Cornelia Evans clapped her hands. "That's the greatest compliment I've ever had — and from an Englishman! Listen, I'm going to call you Nancy Hawthorne, because if I can't really sing, at least I know music when I hear it. You're studying art, aren't you, Nancy Hawthorne?" She reached out and took the sketchbook from Nancy's lap.

"More or less," said Nancy. "My father's taught me all my life."

“Why, these are exquisite!” cried Cornelia. “Is your father here with you?” There seemed to be a note of anxiety in her voice.

“No,” said Nancy. “I’m on my own; having what Dad calls a wanderyear.”

“What does your mother call it?”

“I have n’t a mother,” said Nancy. “She died when I was born.”

“Oh!” said Cornelia.

Her hand darted out and gave Nancy’s a squeeze. Then, with a quick change, “How long have you been wandering?”

“About six months,” said Nancy. “Some of it in Germany, most of it in Italy. I’ve only been in Paris about a week.”

“So you’ve got about six more months before you go home,” said Cornelia. She leaned forward eagerly, her hand on Nancy’s arm. “Nancy Hawthorne, I’ve got a whale of an idea! I’m staying with my sister. She married a Frenchman and she’s the Countess de Bercy-Mormal and they’ve got two children. I thought it might be fun having a Count in the family, but it’s awful stuffy and he’s kind of sloppy, anyway. The whole thing is too darned domestic. I’m crazy to get out of it. The idea hit me when I saw you three days ago and this morning I simply could n’t keep it to myself any longer. It’s this. Will you share a studio with me? A nice, gargoyly one, high up, where we can give parties and chaperon each other? I won’t interfere with your work. What do you say?”

The impulsiveness of this child was all-compelling. Nancy was carried off her feet. After having been practically in solitude during those other months, her response to the warmth of this contact was immediate. There had been moments when the lack of companionship had been an ache, when she had been tempted to telegraph to her father to join

Soundings

her. Only her pride had kept her from doing so; yet now, when she knew that the answer was obviously yes, she found some strain of reticence in her putting up a resistance. While the other half of her desired the resistance to be swept aside, she phrased it. "It's a perfectly priceless idea!" she said. "But do you really mean it? You don't know who I am — or anything. I —"

Cornelia's nose wrinkled up delightedly. "You mean that we have n't been properly introduced? I expected something of that sort. My dear, I've not had three English beaux for nothing, — to say nothing of a brother who's at Oxford now. His name's Lloyd and he's my twin."

"Is he a Rhodes Scholar?" asked Nancy.

"No, he's an Anglophile, and that's worse." Cornelia laughed.

"He and I roamed around in England last summer for three months and it was then that I made the discovery that being unconventional with Englishmen is like dragging them out of a prison from which they are only too glad to escape. You must meet Lloyd some day. He is really worth while, *I* think. — Now you would n't ever have had the nerve to come up and talk to me, but are n't you honestly glad I had? Confess!"

"Yes," said Nancy. "Awfully glad!"

"Then that settles it! That 'awfully' is the nearest you'll ever get to telling me how beautiful *I* am and how crazy you are about *me*."

Nancy burst out laughing. "I think you're priceless! — When do we go and look for our studio?"

Cornelia jumped up. "Right this minute! — But wait. There's just one thing. Did n't I tell you my name?" Nancy nodded.

Cornelia waited. Then, after a pause, she linked her

arm through Nancy's. "My! but you're a muttonhead. My name's for use, not to remember me by!"

Nancy smiled. "All right, old thing," she said.

II

Jim put down his book and kicked the beech logs into a reluctant flame. Outside, the fitful wind had taken on that moaning note which is the prelude to winter. Its suggestion made him stoop for the bellows and blow until the fire glowed once more. Then he tilted the lamp shade. Its light slanted on a portrait of Nancy which he had hung next to the grandfather clock in place of an old sporting print. It was a portrait in oils which he had done himself, two years previously.

Then he went to his desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out a bundle of letters and came and sat down again. They were numbered, by him. They all began and ended the same way, "Darling Dad — Your loving Nancy."

Once more he began to reread them, skipping the less significant bits and pausing anew at the touches which were characteristic of her, the jerky breathless comments of excitement of one who, having long stagnated in a back-water, was now in the swirl and rush of the main stream.

He smiled now at the agony of doubt and self-questioning he had gone through at this paragraph in her first letter. "I hope I'm not really a coward, Dad. When I arrived last night and eventually got to my room, I was too frightened to go down again, even to eat. I went to bed and cried myself to sleep. I don't feel quite sure that I've got over it this morning! It seems impossible that unfamiliarity with a place can make such a difference. Suppose we took one of these people off the streets of Rome and dumped him in the woods near the Cross alone at night. Would he

Soundings

be frightened too? I believe so. Anyway, it's that idea which has stirred me to pull myself together."

A week later, still in Rome, "I forgot to tell you that I caught sight of Curly as the train was pulling out of Wendsbury Junction. Did you see him? He was in khaki with a quiff of hair curling up from under his cap; and although he was still slouching like a field worker and looked as awkward as if he were masquerading as a soldier, yet there was already a change in him. He looked more alert, as though his curiosity had been aroused. I think he has begun to reach out."

Jim stopped at that last sentence. "Good for you, old lady," he murmured. "Damned good! There's a whole philosophy in that line. Furthermore, it shows that she'd got over her funk and was back in her stride, thank God!"

The old clock made its preliminary series of cluckings and grindings and then struck midnight. Jim Hawthorne did n't hear it. He was with Nancy as she progressed from Rome to Florence and across to Venice, a progression not only of body but of mind. He chuckled at her account of little adventures with cab drivers, adventures in language, with guides and hotel people and tourists whose trail crossed hers momentarily. He nodded thoughtfully at the way she put down in words the places that she had sketched. It was evident that she had the gift of real observation. It showed in a variety of detail. It showed in her summings up of people and types, German as well as Italian.

Curly was not the only one who was reaching out. Jim exulted that the keynote of her letters was growth. She had found her feet in Italy, proved it in Germany, and now, in France, in the last letter but one, showed an exhilaration in her narration of adventure, an access of poise, a sense of

cocksureness that were almost as joyously pathetic to Jim as the sight of a young swallow screaming in triumph on the edge of his nest after a successful, though brief, first flight.

"What *do* you think happened to me to-day, Dad?" she wrote. "You couldn't ever guess. — A man *accosted* me in the street! It's the first time anything like that ever happened to me and I was just as cool and ready — outwardly, at least! — as if it had happened a hundred times. I was looking in at a shop window in the Rue de la Paix, absolutely absorbed by a ducky little vanity box in gold and platinum, when all of a sudden a quiet voice said in my ear, in fairly good English, 'Would you like it?' I looked up and there was a man in a frock coat and a tall hat, leering at me. I was petrified! And then he said, 'Let us go in and buy it. Then perhaps we might go and have a bite to eat at the Ritz?' He raised his eyebrows and touched his neat little moustache. Then I woke up. I looked him up and down and said icily, 'I don't usually lunch with the men who try on a pair of shoes for me!' Don't you think that was pretty neat, Dad? You should have seen how it worked on the man. He reminded me of one of those dying pigs that they sell in the Strand for a penny, with the same look of surprise on his face. Without another word he slunk off, crossed the street and disappeared in the traffic. Believe me, Dad, I walked on towards the Opera, feeling as if I had Paris in the hollow of my hand!"

Jim glanced at the portrait of her. "It's unimaginable! The same weapon that finished the country lout — and now a Parisian waster — that kid!" The last letter was in his hand. He read it carefully. "Evans? — Evans?" — I wonder if she's any relation of the banking man? Vaguely I seem to remember some yarn of a daughter of his eloping with some French aristocrat or something. — This girl of Nancy's must be another daughter. From the way she

Soundings

picked Nancy up and made the studio idea an accomplished fact, I should judge that she's one of those millionaire children whose life is passed in the gratification of every desire — never known control, either external or internal — good-hearted, perhaps, but a pronounced egocentric — not so much dissatisfied as unsatisfied, liable to go off on any tangent — owns the world and everything in it, especially men. — H'm! If I were her father, I should be a worried man. — Nancy'll fall under her spell at first, just because of the driving force of her. Later, when that wears off a little, she'll begin to analyze and see through her. — Think it's all right. Might be wise, however, to drop Nancy a hint. She's shooting such a par performance I'd hate to see her land in some unnecessary bunker." He rose and knocked out his pipe. Carefully he gathered the letters, arranging them in order, put them back in the drawer and locked it.

He glanced towards the side table. "Damn it, that woman's forgotten the drinks again!" With a touch of impatience, he pushed open the door to the kitchen.

III

It was teatime at Oxford.

A furtive sun streaked the afternoon sky. From every direction hatless men were returning from river, football field and track, swathed as to the neck in enormous mufflers, but with yards of bare knee beneath their diminutive white shorts. Some were on bicycles, others on foot. Some were giants, others pigmies; but all were of that tender youth which makes a walk through a university town an embarrassment, if not an indiscretion, to all whose graduation is no longer a prospect but a memory.

But for the difference in accent, Cornelia's brother, or any

other American, clad in shorts, would have passed unnoticed in that multitude; but as usual he was talking.

"By the bones of St. Francis, this is a wild and wonderful life! Look at all these bare-legged sons of Hercules, lusty but unwashed, hurrying to a million teas. — Just a minute! Let's stop in here and purchase an indigestible tickle-tummy of some sort. I'm just as good a Roman as any of you!" Lloyd Evans pushed through the swing door of a confectioner's shop in St. Giles, followed by the man he called his condiscipulus, Bob Whittaker.

"The trouble with you," said Bob, as they came out again, carrying sundry paper bags, "is that you pretend to be so ancient simply because you've got what you call an A.B. from Princeton. And who the hell ever heard of Princeton, anyway? There's only one university in the world, and that's this one, whether we wash or whether we don't!"

"Softly! Softly, little man! One of these days perhaps I'll take you by the hand and conduct you to the campus, and a well-chosen group of Tigers shall ask you 'Who the hell ever heard of Oxford?' That'll be good for your insularity. And now let's behave like good little freshmen — excuse me, freshers! — and devour tea and hotters to repletion."

The international argument was an old and tried one. They swung arm in arm through the college gate. Evans paused at the Lodge. "Any mail — I mean letters?"

The porter handed him one.

He glanced at the French stamps. "My kid sister," he commented, and the two of them plunged up the staircase, calling loudly for Jones, the scout who was to bring the tea.

"Your room or mine?" queried Lloyd.

"Yours," said Bob. "The piano's better."

Bob hadn't a voice, but he sang. Lloyd, on the other hand, was a sort of Pied Piper on the piano. He charmed

Soundings

the entire college to his rooms. This gift, combined with a genius for getting off the mark for the hundred-yard dash just as the starter was about to press the trigger, made of Lloyd Evans a marked man. At Princeton they spoke of him still.

Bob Whittaker came from Winchester, where, quite by accident, he had discovered the possession of a natural right hook. The accident had occurred one night in the dormitory when he had dropped four of the other fellows cold on the floor before some one got him on the point of the chin. Since then he had devoted a considerable amount of time to the development of his talent, with the result that he had come up to Oxford as lightweight champion of the Public Schools. He and Lloyd had singled each other out as though attracted by some atavistic process, as though one were the natural complement of the other.

Deep in armchairs on opposite sides of the fire, with plates of hot buns and crumpets on an iron stand in the fireplace, Lloyd looked up from his letter. "What are you doing for the Christmas vacation?" he asked, through a mouthful of crumpet.

"Oh, lord," said Bob, "that's weeks ahead. Dunno. Home, I suppose."

"Let's go over to Paris," said Lloyd. He waved the letter. "My kid sister writes that she's got a studio with a peach of an English girl. Let's go give 'em the merry once over."

Bob grunted. "You forget that my father is an impoverished curate *à la* Samuel Butler, with three daughters and a profligate son. How in hades do you suppose I can raise the cash to embellish Paris with the right shade of pink?"

"Oh, rats!" said Lloyd. "I propose to emulate the immortal Jorrocks, — where we dines, we sleeps. What's

a studio for? Every decent establishment should run to a couple of decent sofas. In case they haven't thought of it, I'll drop the infant a line."

"Who's the English girl?" asked Bob. "Nothing that figures in the *Sketch* and *Taller*, I hope. You people run to celebrities!" Lloyd pulled the letter out of his pocket again and opened it up. "Here we are," he said. "Name of Hawthorne, Nancy Hawthorne." He cocked an interrogative eye at Bob.

By this time Bob's feet were on the mantelpiece and he had disappeared in a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Never heard of it," he said. "If you're not too unutterably restless, what about a little Grieg? I find he goes awfully well on a full stomach."

Lloyd lit a cigarette and sat down at the piano. There was a series of burns on the lid.

Chapter Two

I

“NANCY HAWTHORNE, *where* are my clean shirts? I’ve looked through every darned drawer in the place!”

The exasperated voice in the bedroom, which made Nancy smile as she laid out the candy in a collection of small dishes in the studio, was punctuated by a series of slams. Then it moved, and as the sentence was finished, Cornelia stood in the doorway. She had n’t a stitch of clothing on except for a pair of sheer silk stockings and grotesquely high-heeled gold slippers.

At the sight of Nancy in a jade-green evening gown against a background of cream-colored wall, gay chintz hangings and sofa cushions and two large bowls of blood-red roses, softly lit by many candles, Cornelia’s temper, never very long-lived, gave place to a glow of pride. “Say,” she said, “we really have done a pretty good job. It looks dandy!”

She came into the room and helped herself to a salted nut from the table. “It’s going to be some party!”

“It certainly will be, if they catch you like that!” said Nancy.

Cornelia’s nose wrinkled. “Well, they will, if you don’t find me a shirt! I’m through! My clothes are the meanest things. — Be an angel and find me one, Nancy. If I have to go hunt again, I’ll lose my temper and it’ll spoil the evening.”

"You're a spoiled child. That's what's the matter." Leaving Cornelia happily eating nuts with her back to the stove (which had been allowed to remain because it was "atmosphere") Nancy disappeared into the bedroom. Within two minutes she found a clean specimen of the missing garment. "Here you are! Now, for Heaven's sake, hurry, C'nelia!"

It was the night of their first party, a housewarming. For a fortnight they had been on a voyage of mutual discovery on both sides of the river. On the right side they bought the essentials for physical well-being, *à prix fixe*; on the wrong, what Cornelia called "the doodabs", — in rickety, tumble-down antique shops where the prices are made to correspond with the doyen's ocular assessment of the prospective purchaser's financial status.

It was a great game, at which the two girls marveled at each other. Cornelia's bargaining instincts were revealed in all their perfection. A fifty per cent. reduction in the price asked was the least she expected and invariably got. To her Nancy was a simpleton. "When it comes to antiquing, honey, you display the innocence of a six-year-old. You just *let* yourself get trimmed, and it makes me perfectly furious! Don't you realize that these people are all robbers?"

"I know!" said Nancy. "But I just can't argue with them, that's all. If I think the price is too much, I'm perfectly willing to walk out of the shop. It's quite simple."

"You are, you mean!"

"Well, then, I am. But don't think I don't take my hat off to you. I do. You have a marvelous technique, and I envy you!"

The studio, just below the sharp angle of the "Boule Miche" and the Rue de Medicis, was "up four pair of stairs." Below their windows was spread the soft green

Soundings

carpet of the Luxembourg gardens. Behind the tree tops the broad sweep of sky was punctured by spires and domes — the twin towers of St. Francis Xavier, the Invalides, the Tour Eiffel and many others — which sprouted above the infinity of housetops in the haphazard manner of all human enterprise.

It was an outlook that gave Nancy unending ecstasy, and days of work with pencil and brush that engraved it deep into her memory. Cornelia it inspired with a sense of proprietary pride. "Come look at our view!" she would say, with the complacent air of one who had had a hand in laying it out; and it was from this basic difference that the two girls set out to explore each other.

One can eat and work for half a lifetime with a fellow human being and the outcome of that communion will be a mutual understanding and sympathy of some depth. Share the same bedroom, however, and wait till the lights are put out, and very soon that understanding seems as nothing. Perhaps the rays of an adjacent street lamp, causing an uncertain luminosity, or the moon pouring a silver pool on the carpet and leaving the rest in super-shadow, are only minor causes, sensuous inducements, to the primary need of self-revelation which responds inevitably to the intimacy of a common sleeping room.

To Nancy it was a discovery. To her indeed the whole affair of living had assumed the unbelievable nature of an Arabian Nights Entertainment, and not the least inconceivable part of it was the delight of seeing Cornelia in the opposite bed, — Cornelia who, sprung from the blue, had spread a magic carpet and wafted them both to this new life. The youth in her, diverted for so long, called to Cornelia's. She felt like an explorer who suddenly meets a fellow white man in a land of blacks. There were a million experiences to share, creeds to recite, imaginings to put out

like sensitive feelers towards this other youth, in response to an inner dictation, to see where their contacts with life had been the same, had given the same result. She had looked to her father for information. To this other girl she turned for confirmation.

After many nights, when they had talked into the small hours, she began to find out that Cornelia was a combination of sophistication and ingenuousness. Her experience, ranging from the questionable advantages of an expensive finishing school to the outwearing of the delights of being a courted debutante in New York, followed by several months of comparative freedom in Paris, had made only surface impressions. She apparently knew everything, and that first-hand; but it was undigested, unanalyzed, and therefore valueless, — like the unassembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. She still lacked the quality of perception which would make the pieces interlock and give a coherent whole. She had no goal, either mental or spiritual. She accepted each day as a complete unit, delightfully unconcerned as to what it might mean, or what life was all about.

Perched on the end of the bed, Nancy thought aloud. "I wonder if marriage will answer it all? Is a woman really a woman until she's a mother? It seems perfectly obvious that no one can begin to have any sound ideas about life until they've created one themselves. But when one is a mother, what comes next? I don't believe it's a sort of mental and physical hill from which one can look down and understand it all. From the way some of them lay down the law, you'd think it was. I believe motherhood's just a change in experience, a training for something else. What do you make of it all, Cornelia?"

"Oh, blaa!" said Cornelia. "Some people are born mothers and some have motherhood thrust upon them. You're evidently the first, and one of these fine days I *may*

Soundings

be the second, but I flatter myself I'm pretty much of a real woman, as you call it, right this minute. What does it matter what it all means? No one has ever found out, so why bother? Wait till you meet my latest beau, Jean de Courcy. He's —"

"Oh, you and your beaux!" cried Nancy impatiently. "There are enough of them to stretch from here to Brimble. Let's go to sleep!"

Cornelia chuckled. "All right, honey. Good night!"

"Good night," said Nancy. She closed her eyes.

It was perhaps an hour later when she suddenly sat up. "Are you asleep?" she whispered.

There was no answer. She could hear Cornelia breathing evenly and gently.

"Darn those beaux of hers! They won't let me get to sleep." She got out of bed and went over to the window. For a long time she stood there, looking out, restless, and annoyed at being so.

II

The guests who began to arrive were a catholic assortment, all reflecting some particular mood or tense of Cornelia's. As she thought she needed some one, so she reached out and grabbed; her method, successful with men and girls equally, being ten minutes' concentrated personality.

There were velveteen poets whose anæmic faces were in striking contrast to their hot-blooded verses which appeared semi-occasionally in the type of journal that, like the seed that fell upon hard ground, springs up immediately and then withereth away. More frequently they were written on the marble tops of café tables, enjoyed their brief hour and then were expunged into a fitting oblivion with a beery napkin by a waiter whose poetic appreciations

were only stirred by paper *pourboires*. There were girls from the atelier whose voices were undoubtedly the least profitable part of the anatomy; although, to do them, and Cornelia, justice, they had not yet found that out. Many of them looked hungry, and were. They circled around with one eye on the food, leaving a trail of chypre, exclamations and aromatic cigarette smoke, like buzzards waiting for the death.

Nancy's appearance aroused their unqualified approval, although they were checked, brought up short, by her quietness. They didn't know how to place her. Cornelia they embraced on both cheeks, screamed "Chérie!" at her and burst into torrents of chatter which was returned in the same excited key. Nancy was like a douche of cold water. She shook hands quietly, a little stiffly, replied monosyllabically, remained static. "*Ces anglisches!*" they murmured, exchanging glances and imperceptible shrugs, until Cornelia, who was nothing if not loyal, explained to the entire gathering that Nancy was the creator of the water colors and sketches which adorned the studio. At once they were contrite. She was a fellow artist! Of course! How could they ever have doubted? One had only to look at her to know!

Nancy found herself promoted to the "chérie" class; found too that the men, who up to now had contented themselves with half-interrogatory, half-admiring glances from their stand round Cornelia, began coming over one by one, like flies to a fresh piece of sugar.

For her the first half-hour of that party was an emotional confusion, a jumble of sound, smell and sight, — the scraps of incomprehensible French and broken English; the strong scents and colors of the girls, like an exotic bouquet; the beards and unusual garments of the men, all forming a hodgepodge of utter unreality.

Soundings

She could n't have told whether she answered questions or whether she merely said things without connection. She was aware of two men having kissed her hand, but for the life of her she could n't have picked them out. Odd phrases came from the cacophony like stray bullets and lodged in her ear, "Your 'air ees like a beautiful race'orse.— Ah, haha! *Mais vous êtes impayable chérie!* — *Je l'ai entendu et j' t'assure.* — When are we going to eat? — *C'est de la pure foutaise!*"

She felt like nothing so much as a monkey of tender age separated from its tribe at the water hole at dusk, gazing big-eyed and speechless at the gathering of eland, hartebeeste and springbok splashing and snorting all around.

Presently Jean de Courcy made a gallant entrance, armed with a large bouquet of violets which he presented to Cornelia with an exaggeration of humility that somehow did n't reach his eyes. He was a lieutenant in the cavalry and it seemed to Nancy that he was the only real man present. "Perhaps it's the uniform!" she thought; but as he was the latest beau, she studied him in detail. His hair was very dark and clipped *en brosse*. A perpetual twinkle lurked in his eyes. Sometimes it carried down below his silky moustache and parted his rather full red lips in a smile which revealed not only the whitest teeth she had ever seen, but a sort of invitation to comradeship. "He looks nice!" she thought.

Cornelia brought him over. To her the duties of a hostess amounted almost to a religion. She was constantly on the *qui vive*, joining a group, chatting a moment, dragging a person out of it and dumping him into another group.

"Nancy Hawthorne, this is Jean de Courcy — you know! — Now be very nice to her, Jean, and I'll dash back again in a moment!"

Jean clicked his heels together and bowed from the waist. His English was fluent. "I shall be even nicer than that if Mademoiselle will permit?"

Nancy held out her hand. "Welcome to the water hole!" she said.

"The water 'ole? Is that a new slang you bring from England?"

Nancy explained.

Jean was delighted. He threw back his head in a howl of laughter. "I 'ave never been called a monkey before — not even by a woman! — but it is the most charming compliment!"

Without intending to, Nancy had intrigued him. Her reward was a complete and immediate change from the society manner of casual introduction to one of delighted interest. Jean became himself.

They were already talking — as against the interchange of inanity — when Cornelia broke in upon them.

"Come along, both of you! Jean, you know my sister, but Nancy Hawthorne does n't. I've been keeping Nancy as a surprise for the family, in spite of all their protests, and they are bursting with curiosity!"

It was difficult to keep pace, three abreast, as Cornelia dragged them around and among people; but at last they stopped and Cornelia said, "Marguerite, this is Nancy Hawthorne. Now what have you got to say? Was n't I right?"

A little uncomfortable at this form of introduction, Nancy found herself shaking hands with a beautiful woman, whose relationship to Cornelia was obvious. Marguerite had the same coloring, the same eyes and mouth. Several years older than Cornelia and with two children to her credit, she had begun to accept the approach of a comfortable maturity. One could almost hear her say, "Yes,

Soundings

I *know!* I really *must* begin to diet," — and the pathetic, appealing smile accompanying the remark tells its own tale of a life devoted to the following of the line of least resistance.

"Why, my dear," she said to Nancy, "I'm very glad indeed to see you. You must n't blame me if I was a little worried when Cornelia first told me she was going to set up housekeeping with a girl whom she'd met in a public garden! You see, I feel responsible for her over here, even though she thinks she's old enough to run the whole of Paris by herself. But now I've met you, I'm sure I need n't feel any further anxiety!"

She gave Nancy's hand a little squeeze and threw in a nodding smile, for good measure.

"Very smooth!" said Cornelia. "I'll hand it to you, Rita!"

"It's awfully nice of you," said Nancy. "I like to know that you think I'm fairly safe."

"I want my husband to meet you," said Marguerite. "Paul, dear!"

She placed a hand on his arm. The Count de Bercy-Mormal was talking to Jean de Courcy. He turned obediently.

"Paul, I want to present you to Cornelia's friend, Miss Nancy Hawthorne."

For a brief second Nancy's heart stood still. That neat little moustache! That sleek face!

The Count looked at her. The polite smile retained its exact proportions, but a gleam of recognition and malice came into his eyes. "*Je suis enchanté*, Mademoiselle! Cornelia has an eye for beauty!"

It was the man who had accosted her in the Rue de la Paix.

III

Jean de Courcy presented himself in front of Nancy with a plate of salad and a glass of wine. "I can see an empty corner over there," he said, "will you not come?"

They went across and ensconced themselves.

"Tell me, Mademoiselle. Are you a relation of the R. A., James Hawthorne?"

Nancy's eyes lit up like stars. It hadn't ever occurred to her that her father's name might be known in other countries. The idea was thrilling. She was so proud of him and pleased with Jean that she nearly dropped her salad.

"He's my father!" she said.

"Oh, but this is delightful!" cried Jean. "Not only I have been to two of his exhibitions in Bond Street, but I bought one of his pictures!"

"You did! Which one?"

"It is called, I think, the Cross at Sunset."

Nancy beamed. "I watched him paint that!—It's where we live, just round the corner from the Cross."

Jean leaned forward eagerly. "Perhaps you would care to come to my home with Cornelia and see the picture? My mother would be very glad, and all my sisters."

"All of them?" she smiled up at him.

Jean grinned. "There are four, all sizes. The youngest is what you call a 'little nipper.'" He held up a hand about three feet from the floor.

Nancy nodded. "Cornelia will be a fool if she doesn't marry him," she thought. "I'd love to meet them," she said.

"Thank you," said Jean. Almost as though he had read her thought, he dropped his voice suddenly and went on quickly. "Mademoiselle, if you think I am 'all right', as you say in England, will you help me?"

Soundings

"Help you?"

Jean kept his eyes on hers. "I love Cornelia," he said simply. "Perhaps she has told you? — Twice she has refused to marry me. She talks about having a good time first!" He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "That does not mean anything, does it? You are more serious-minded, Mademoiselle, and you are her friend. Perhaps you could help her to get it into her head that she could have an even better time if she were married — to me! — Will you?"

"Will Mademoiselle permit me to change places for a few minutes with my friend de Courcy?"

The Count's voice caused them both to start.

Jean rose reluctantly, unable to withstand regimental tradition. A request is perhaps more potent than a command from one of superior rank.

Nancy gave him her hand impulsively. "I've enjoyed our talk most awfully," she said, "and you can rely on me to help!"

Jean clicked his heels. "I am deeply grateful, Mademoiselle! I shall hope to see you again before I go?" His answer was a friendly nod. With a little bow to the Count he turned, his eyes seeking Cornelia.

For no apparent reason, Nancy's heart began to beat faster as the Count sat down beside her, a little heavily, and began by offering her a cigarette, which she refused.

During the last fifteen minutes he had succeeded in pinning his mercurial sister-in-law into a corner. In that brief space of time he had learned everything of Nancy's background that Cornelia knew, and a little more. Then, with an eye on Nancy and Jean on their settee, he had picked a leisurely way around the studio, pausing at each one of Nancy's drawings and examining it, rather in the

manner of a psychoanalyst cogitating upon the past acts of a "case."

"So it is you, Mademoiselle, whom my wife's sister has found to live with!"

The faintest underlining of the word "you" was significant.

It told Nancy that he had not forgotten.

On crossing the street after the incident in the Rue de la Paix, his first emotion had been one of anger. The impertinent English girl had insulted him — him, the Comte de Bercy-Mormal! She had insinuated vulgarly that he was a tradesman. His wounded vanity needed soothing. He went into the club. The obsequious servants were sedatives. He ordered a *fine champagne*, armed himself with a copy of *L'Illustration* and sought the depths of an armchair. Presently he dropped off into a nap. On awaking, he remembered that he and his wife were going to a dinner party, at which, his host had promised him, he was to sit next to a very pretty woman, "*mais ravissante, tu sais, et pas trop sérieuse, mon vieux, hein?*" He had succeeded in making quite an impression; so much so that in the automobile with his wife on their way home that night, he had paid her one or two compliments. The thought of the English girl recurred to him as he was preparing for bed. The memory no longer rankled. He dismissed it with a shrug. "Bah! No English woman has taste!" Then he smiled at the thought of his dinner partner and preened himself as he gave his moustache its good-night brush before the looking-glass.

Had he never met Nancy again, both the incident and her insult would have been obliterated from his mind, without leaving even a dent in his ego. The recognition of her in the studio, however, changed the whole aspect of the affair. To know that practically within the family was a

Soundings

girl who had insulted him, dismissed him, was unbearable, impossible. His peace of mind was endangered. His reputation with himself was at stake. He knew that it would not be possible for him to resume amicable relations with himself until he had obtained an apology, until he had her at his feet. — He fingered his little moustache and sent his eyes on a pleasant journey from her bare shoulders to where her breasts were outlined beneath her dress.

Nancy was taking him quietly in, — the ingenious disposal of the thinning hair, the little bags under the eyes, the manifestly false regularity of the teeth, the looseness of skin at the Adam's apple, the curious arrangement of pouting chest and drawn-in waist that suggested corsets, the manicured but flabby hands, on one finger of which was a magnificent amethyst set in platinum, the small patent-leathered feet below the immaculately creased trousers, and the faint lingering perfume, just a shade cloying, that seemed to put the finishing touch to a quite unhealthy picture. She remembered a quotation her father once used about a certain art dealer, "God made him; therefore let him pass for a man." The pertinence of the phrase brought a smile to her lips. "How Dad would loathe him!" she thought.

The Count de Bercy-Mormal saw that smile. He tapped the ash from his cigarette with a congratulatory forefinger.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I am afraid that you misinterpreted my motives the other afternoon." The voice was honeyed.

"You evidently doubt my intelligence, Monsieur."

The Count waved a deprecating hand. "It was only from the highest sense of artistic appreciation that I ventured to express my admiration. It is not every day that one is fortunate enough to meet beauty such as yours!" He paused, savoring the felicity of his opening move.

Nancy knew nothing of the rules. This was a game she

had never played. The easy-flowing Latin compliments were distasteful to her Anglo-Saxon inheritance. More than that, she realized instinctively that he was trying to put her in the wrong. The suave, self-satisfied smugness with which he punctuated his sentence could have only that one interpretation. It was maddening. She sat up very straight. "One might almost imagine that you were expecting an apology from me!"

The Count's hands fluttered delicately. "Oh, Mademoiselle! Nothing could be farther from my thoughts! But looking to my intention, I do feel that perhaps your reply to my invitation was somewhat — shall we say, brusque, harsh? Let us forget all about it, however. Now that we are, in a sense, in the same family, I hope very much that you and I may become good friends?"

Nancy looked across the room to where Marguerite was chatting laughingly, the center of a group. To the English girl it seemed incredible that any woman could have married an obvious creature like this man and retain a shred of self-respect.

Once more the Count's voice interrupted. "Now that you know who I am, may I hope for a different answer if I suggest that we bury the hatchet together at the Ritz one afternoon?"

Nancy took one more look at him. "Why should I submit to this?" she asked herself. "He's old, and beastly!" Quietly she said aloud, "You really are quite priceless, aren't you? You must have been in great demand among the ladies before you got married."

With a smile the Count leaned forward and put his hand over hers where it rested on the sofa.

Nancy started as if she had been stung and snatched it away.

"Has any woman ever told you that your eyes leave a

Soundings

sort of clammy trail down one's face and throat — like a toad? — I feel that I shall have to go and wash myself in order to be clean again!" She rose abruptly and left him, a little breathless at what she had done, glad and ashamed, scared and excited.

She found her way to Cornelia and caught hold of her arm.

"Hullo, honey!" said Cornelia. "What's the matter? Has my beautiful brother-in-law been trying any of his little tricks?"

Nancy spoke quickly into her ear. "Oh, my dear, what *shall* I do? I've just been frightfully and deliberately rude to him!"

Cornelia laughed. "Don't let that bother you," she said. "Within three days or so he'll have twisted it into a compliment. He's that kind! Quite harmless, once you tumble to his little game!"

Chapter Three

I

THE studio had settled into regular habits.

Having done her duty by Cornelia in digging her out of bed, Nancy went off after breakfast, leaving her friend either to go to her singing lesson or to practice at the piano. In the afternoons at tea time the studio was declared open, and anybody was free to wander in and stay as long as they liked. From time to time Marguerite dropped in. She never succeeded in shedding that older-sister manner, behind whose every remark was an implied criticism. Her presence therefore always carried a sense of restraint. Then, too, she invariably explained why her husband was unable to come, — unaware of the exchange of glances between her sister and Nancy.

Jean, whose regiment was stationed at Provins, was practically one of the family. Provins is a matter of two hours south by automobile. Jean did it in an hour and a quarter on a roaring motor cycle that had beaten every other officer in the regiment; and as his duties ended with midday stables, there were few afternoons when he was n't heard pop-pop-popping like a machine gun through the villages that were like beads on the long, straight string of road between Provins and Paris. Half his time he gave to his family. The other half, and perhaps a little more, he spent with the two girls, always ready to adjust his mood to theirs.

Soundings

"The trouble is," he said, "you consider me too much like a big brother. If I were not an imbecile I should go away for a long time. Then, when I returned, the relationship might become what I want it to be!"

"That'll be about all from you!" Cornelia would smile into his eyes so that Jean was tied more securely than ever. With him as a guardian, guaranteed to behave himself if she let him hold her hand in a taxi, Cornelia and Nancy explored the side of Paris which alone they could never have done. They would start in at the Café de Paris, get halfway through dinner, and then leap into a cab and finish up at some quaint resort in the Place Pigalle; or, getting restless at the Opera, would fly off to a second-rate but exciting music hall in the Buttes Chaumont.

"Let's all go to Russia!" said Cornelia one night. They were on their way back in a taxi. It was late and the streets were empty. The street lamps were strung out in front of them like giant pearls.

"Good heavens, why Russia?" asked Nancy.

"To get some excitement," said Cornelia. "There are cabarets in New York more exciting than anything I've seen here. In Russia one might find a Cossack or two who might start something!"

Jean laughed. "I can hear a Russian girl saying, 'Paris is the place! These Cossacks are so tame. I'd like to meet a French cavalry officer' — that's me! — 'they're so dashing.' Isn't it true, Nancy, that we are all mere children reaching out for a new toy that bores us as soon as we've got it?"

"It may be," said Nancy. "Thank heaven I haven't reached that stage yet. I wonder if you blasé people can imagine the amazement with which I look upon myself here. It fascinates me to consider myself, from Brimble, with an American girl and a French officer, at night, in a

taxi, in the middle of Paris, — and the officer," she shot a glance at Cornelia, "wants the girl to marry him, and for the life of me I can't see why she does n't! But seriously, don't you see? Here are three lives, all meeting mysteriously from the ends of the earth, touching at a given point. Where will we all be ten years from now, or five? I find myself going about all the time like a big question mark. Don't you people ever wonder about things?"

II

If Nancy's wonder about things was incessant, so also was her endeavor to find out. In all weathers, sometimes with Cornelia, more often without, she took her sketchbook and explored Paris, uphill and down. She absorbed life as a hungry man absorbs steak and potatoes, — with concentration and gusto.

Perched inconspicuously in a doorway, or at the angle of a monument, she made drawings of the boulevards; of quaint *ruelles* from whose bulging windows one could shake hands with one's neighbor across the street; of groups of market barrows, each crowned with a huge cotton umbrella and attended by shrill-voiced women in shawls, whose fore-arms were Herculean.

She went down to the river and found endless joy in the solemn fishermen who never seemed to catch anything and who were apparently unconscious of the amazing beauty of the Seine, slapping at the sides of the passenger-laden vedettes that puffed pompously up one side and down the other, sucking at the giant brown barges which lay so deeply and confidently in the water. The bridges spanning it dwindled in perspective to the size of straws, across which marched and countermarched an endless army of human ants. She made friends with the old men who ran the

Soundings

second-hand bookstands along the quais, tried in vain to joke with the urchins who seemed to be infected with the virus of solemnity as soon as their first cork bobbed in the water at the end of a line, and chatted with the waiters in the hundred and one restaurants and *brasseries* where she stopped at noon.

Somewhat to her surprise — it had never entered her experience before — she began making those curious little personal discoveries that come with familiarity in any given area: how certain streets were likable, not so much because of their names as of their personality, because of some indefinable chemistry of light and situation which endowed them with individual qualities. She found herself, for instance, deliberately slowing down as she walked past a certain high wall in the Rue de l'Université. Through the iron grille could be seen a charming old-world courtyard. Creepers climbed up and a bronze boy stood on a stone pedestal in the corner beneath an ancient and barren fig tree. She never saw any human being go out there, but every time she would peer through the iron bars and discover anew that that forgotten corner struck a responsive chord in her, generally rather a melancholy chord, so that she would sigh deeply as she moved away, almost as if the ghost of the place were trying to say something to her, something which she never quite got.

She didn't speak of these things to any one else, but locked them away in her mind as rather personal, imperishable treasures, forms of loot, which she, and she alone, had got from Paris, infinitely precious, a little gallery of impressions and sensations like a secret album.

There was something sensuous in the delight she felt in finding her way back in the late afternoon, pleasantly tired, when the dimming light softened all the outlines. It became almost a dream city that you wouldn't be able to

touch if you stretched your hand out, until suddenly, as if by magic, the whole world was strung with lights. At that moment it seemed to her that a subtle change had taken place, — as if a curtain had gone up on a different scene and an entirely new set of characters. With these she was not so familiar. They lent a touch of apprehension which, however, only emphasized the exquisite moment when she opened the studio door and went into the warm, candle-lit room, to be greeted by Cornelia and Jean and anybody else who might be there. The infinite satisfaction of “belonging!”

She adored those quiet hours when they sat around the stove and talked. Through half-closed eyes she imagined that it was like setting out in a boat in which each had a special place. They sailed along on the conversational sea until some one gave the rudder a push; and then they all turned and followed the new direction. In the soft light, cloudy with cigarette smoke, the group mood singularly receptive, it was fun to experiment, to handle the rudder just to see how far they would get on the new tack, to add, as it were, puffs of wind as the pace fell off.

There was no point of the compass that they didn't touch, — from astronomy to the wart on the nose of the *concierge*; from metaphysics to the question of whether, like Marguerite, it was possible to lull oneself into mental security with a husband whose roses were always in some other lady's boudoir.

In the process of going to bed one night Nancy had told Cornelia of her street episode with the Count. She had been rewarded with one of those flashes of sophistication that the American girl sometimes flung off. “If Paul were monogamous, Marguerite would die. It's only his promiscuity that saves her. Haven't you ever read ‘Anna Karenina’?”

Soundings

"Yes," said Nancy, "but I didn't understand — I'm not sure that I do now. — Do you mean —? That isn't marriage." She shivered. "It's — it's death!"

III

The door of the studio slammed.

"Hullo, honey!" said Cornelia. "You're back early." She took off her hat and dropped it into an armchair. Her fur coat followed, on top of the hat.

Nancy had pulled the other armchair up to the stove and was toasting her toes. She looked up from her book in the unseeing way of one whose whole attention is still held. Almost reluctantly she emerged from her absorption. "Oh, my dear," she said, "this is priceless!"

"What've you got hold of?"

"Wells' latest, 'Tono Bungay.'"

"Extraordinary title!" said Cornelia. She repeated it twice.

"What does it mean?"

Nancy laughed. "Among other things, it means that I shan't do any work till I've finished it. It's the reason of my being back so early. I dropped into Brentano's just to have a prow round and get some of the Christmas numbers, and caught sight of a pile of these. I just grabbed one and came straight home. — Oh, by the way, there's a telegram for you. See?" She pointed to the table.

Cornelia unfolded the piece of crude blue paper that is a French telegram.

"Well, for Heaven's sake! Will you listen to this? 'Fear not the Greeks bringing gifts. Clean up your sofas. Bob and I arrive this afternoon with Christmas presents for you and Nancy Hawthorne. Cancel all engagements.

Warn off all beaux. Tell Nancy we expect great things of her. Lloyd.'”

For a brief moment there was silence. Lloyd had been not a little pleased with himself when, scrawling his name at the end of the telegram, he had turned to Bob and said, “Think that’ll fetch ’em?” Had he been able to see its effect upon the two girls, he could very justifiably have congratulated himself.

Cornelia was on tiptoe, her lips apart, her eyes dancing, her face alight. “And I thought that letter was a joke!” she cried.

Nancy looked as surprised as though she had received a message from another planet. Hitherto just an unrelated fact, a name of no more potential meaning to her than Bagdad or Oshkosh, this brother of Cornelia’s had succeeded, by one careless phrase, in wiping out Wells’ most brilliant novel, in creating a disturbance in the mind of a girl whom he had never seen.

“Expecting great things of *Nancy*, if you please! What cheek!” cried Nancy, all excited. “How old is he? What’s he like?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Cornelia. “I’ve never seen him!”

Nancy gasped. “But, good lord, he’s your brother, isn’t he?”

“Oh, I thought you meant Bob.”

Nancy laughed, jumped up and put her hands on Cornelia’s shoulders. “Cornelia darling, you’re perfectly shameless!”

“Shameless nothing! Can you look me in the face and tell me that you’re not hoping to make a hit with Lloyd?”

The phrase was like a lightning stroke. It lit up the bottom-most recess of Nancy’s mind, defined the desire of whose existence she had only been aware as a vague, shy,

Soundings

scarcely formed thought. Cornelia had dragged it out and labeled it.

Nancy felt her cheeks begin to flame. "You're perfectly absurd!" she said. "I don't care whether he comes or not!"

IV

It would seem absurd to say that there could be any relationship between Curly and the two Oxford men; yet their influences converged at a given point, — Nancy.

The ripples caused by a stone dropping into a pond may cease, after a while, to ruffle the surface. Who can measure, however, the effect of the displacement in the depths? It is a legitimate supposition that the intrusion of the stone may shift the polarity of an entire subaqueous cosmos.

In the case of Nancy, her immediate reaction to the sex impact of Curly was expressed in terms of motion. During a period of months she had diverted her attention by a full response to the change in scene, language and responsibility. Such ripples as she had perceived had exhausted themselves. Ostensibly everything was as it always had been.

The fact that displacement had occurred, however, was proved by her self-consciousness at the arrival of Lloyd Evans and Bob Whittaker, — a consciousness of a changed self, differing by she knew not how much from the Nancy who so short a while ago had said good-by to her father at Brimble; differing, in a manner, from the recognition of which she shrank timidly. New needs and desires — as old as time — had begun to whisper their message to her. The vague clamor within resembled the murmur of a sea-shell held close to the ear — an elfin sound of languorous oceans that might at any moment become storm-lashed. It was not time to face herself with the analysis of this dis-

turbance. It was signalled — hadn't she blushed peony-red at Cornelia's challenge? — But it was something that must be put away, left alone, something that it wasn't right to linger upon because — because — Why wasn't it, when part of her yearned towards it? — Because everything that was Nancy withdrew from it with a quivering "Not yet! Not yet!"

Chapter Four

I

THERE was something about Bob!

Of course Lloyd was immense fun, but one couldn't take him seriously. He never took himself seriously. A sort of Peter Pan in the sense that he had never grown up, he was one of those rare and delightful souls who have the gift of transmuting everything to laughter. Even when he made music it was extraordinary to see how he always turned half away from the piano as though anxious to be in anything else that was going on. By sheer force of personality he took the center of the stage, in a constant mental bubbling, tossing a yeasty word into the conversational dough, commenting upon aspects of people and things in a manner which revealed them to you in an entirely different perspective. He was the incarnation of youth, uncaringly insolent, free of all responsibility, taking life with both hands and using it as he saw fit, perfectly satisfied with it and himself, delightful, exasperating, stimulating.

Thus Nancy to herself. The idea of him had been more overwhelming than the fact. She smiled at the notion of "making a hit" with him. Lloyd was not the kind that one made a hit with. He made a hit with you. He was a sort of brother-plus, like an adorable great Newfoundland pup, — belonging to some one else. You could pat him and give bits of cake to him and take his head in both hands and

88

kiss it — not that she did so — without his establishing any claim upon one's emotions.

But there was something about Bob!

Nancy observed Cornelia's tactics with a sense almost of apprehension, not for Cornelia but for herself. She found herself measuring her own reluctance against the other girl's supreme assurance. She marveled at Cornelia's feminine response to Bob's presence to the exclusion even of the memory of Jean de Courcy. Without seeming to do so, she gave him her whole and undivided attention, sought to attune her key to his, to anticipate his change of mood or tense. It was extraordinary. How could she apparently obliterate from her being the effect of the touch of Jean's lips? Did she see Bob as a complete and separate unit, rather than from the angle of comparison, subconscious if you will, with Jean? To Nancy it would have been impossible. "Then too," she thought, "it isn't because Bob has a special appeal for her. She'll be exactly the same to the next man who comes along. It's a sort of prostitution. — Why am I different? Is she normal, or am I? Why have n't I got her attitude? Why do I hold back instinctively, as I did with Curly?"

There floated into her mind the scene in the gardens on the day she had first met Cornelia. She could almost feel again the warmth of the two children's bodies against her leg. "It's that!" she thought. "It's because — to me — it means that!"

II

In a short time it would be dusk. For a second Nancy hesitated. Then she said, "Let's go this way!"

Bob turned obediently. Together they entered the Rue de l'Université.

To the ancient Romans a sneeze during the consultation

Soundings

of the augurs might determine the overthrow of a great empire. To Bob Whittaker this insignificant veering of direction was without portent. He had no idea that in Nancy's mind he was like the "cloud no bigger than a man's hand", that it was he who had pushed ajar the door of her interest; and that at this moment as she invited him to turn into the Rue de l'Université, she was putting him to a test, the result of which might mean admission or rejection. To him one street was as good as another, especially as he was walking down it with Nancy. Cornelia, of course, was devilish attractive, and so on, but somewhat obvious. Then, too, she was Lloyd's sister. — But there was something elusive about Nancy.

He looked down at her as she stepped out beside him, slim and straight as a narcissus, her cheeks glowing with the cold, a chestnut curl clinging to the brim of her hat. She sensed it and glanced up at him. There was a curious glint in her brown eyes. He took a deep breath, looked away quickly and said, "I suppose you've read 'La Vie de Bohême'?" And he was thinking, "Tillie is like rose leaves to kiss. But this girl, — my God!"

Tillie was behind the counter of a tobacco shop in Oxford.

Nancy said, "Rather! It's one of the most wonderful books ever written." And she was thinking, "Good lord! Why did I do it? I've been shy of showing my little bronze boy to any soul on earth and now I'm bringing *him* here. — Why do I want to know if he'll feel it? Why am I sharing it with him? Why am I trembling like a fool?"

The two Oxford men had been there a week, camping in the studio, meeting the girls each morning — Cornelia in a gorgeous kimono — over the breakfast coffee, lunching with them, doing Paris with them, the smoke of their final cigarettes filtering under the closed bedroom door that separated them at night.

Jean de Courcy had only been there once, although both men liked him. "Tono Bungay" had not been opened again.

In the new tempo set by this masculine invasion, Nancy's attention had been drawn by imperceptible degrees towards Bob. She had been perfectly content to leave him to Cornelia, first because she was fond of Cornelia and secondly because she was amused and willingly absorbed by Lloyd's monopoly of herself, — a delightful affair of jolly badinage which she accepted warmly and whole-heartedly.

At odd moments, however, in the rough and tumble of that foursome, a remark of Bob's, a look, an unexpected silence, had reached through to her, momentarily withdrawing her attention from the others and focusing it upon him. The result was curiosity, interest, a desire to explore his personality, to be able to pigeonhole him.

Not that her interest was purely mental. There was nothing of the Newfoundland pup about Bob. Nancy knew intuitively that he was not the type who could be patted. How she knew it, she didn't know; but she did know it, and was mightily intrigued to discover wherein lay this vital difference between the two men.

It was with surprise that soon gave place to a warm sense of triumph, of pride, that she realized that the interest was mutual, that the intended subjugation by Cornelia was not only being quietly side-stepped, but that Bob was breaking down Lloyd's monopoly. Herein undoubtedly was the cause of that impulse to give something and obtain something in return which had made Nancy turn down that street.

The Rue de l'Université had never seemed so long, but at last the grille was reached. Nancy stopped him with a pointing finger. "Look!" she said.

It was a curious moment. As she looked in at the little gray cloister which conveyed the sense of a rest between two

Soundings

bars of music, it seemed to her that the message of the bronze boy had changed. Nothing had been touched — the gnarled fig tree stuck its branches out forlornly, the boy stood starkly on his pedestal — but the feeling of emptiness, of yearning, was lifted. She could have sworn that the boy smiled, that the place had come to life, as if the fig tree might at any moment burst into bud. — She stared, open-eyed, through the grille. To her Bob Whittaker, whose shoulder was just touching hers, was no longer Bob Whittaker. The individual, it seemed, was rubbed out, his outline blurred.

The girl had found man, rather than a man, the ideal beyond and merged with the real: and the two were confused.

It lasted but a breath, in the same way that sometimes in the glow of a street lamp one catches a glimpse of a girl's tilted chin, a door opens in one's perception and through it, for the space of a heartbeat, one can follow that unknown down a vista of years.

Bob's voice brought her back.

“The world forgetting by the world forgot,” quoted Bob. “It reminds me of a place on the Cher above Oxford, a place called Water Eaton — is n't that lovely? — where an old Elizabethan house sits up on a terraced lawn. The yews are carved like peacocks, and down in the corner of the garden is an old chapel tucked away under some enormous elms. No one seems to live there. There's never any smoke in the chimneys and the windows without curtains are like blind eyes. But in some odd way, merely to sit in a punt and look at it makes one want to write love songs. Lloyd and I often go up there and drift back by moonlight.” He stopped, suddenly remembering with a smile the last occasion when they had floated downstream, — Tillie beside him in the narrow punt, his head pillowed

upon her breast, while Lloyd made Hawaiian croonings with an ukulele.

And Nancy, unaware of yesterday, heard only his words and was glad of to-day. "Oh, lucky you!" she said. "That must have been perfect."

Bob looked at her. "Almost!" he said. They smiled.

Neither moved. It was as though each was expecting the other to say something, something momentous. Suddenly the street lamps blazed out.

Then, "Let's go home and have tea," said Nancy, and with far-away eyes she fell into step.

As they crossed the street a taxi hurtled past, just missing them. It startled Nancy out of her dream. She found, to her surprise, that she had linked her hand through his arm. She had never done that before, not even with Lloyd. — She let her hand stay there.

III

The rendezvous that night for dinner was at the D'Harcourt.

A little flurry of snow was blowing when Nancy and Bob pushed open the door into the light and warmth to find the others already waiting at a corner table.

Lloyd waved a menu. "I was just betting Cornelia that you two had eloped. Bob, old man, you disappoint me! What was it Shakespeare got off about neglected opportunities binding one forever to shallows and miseries? To keep to the language of the period, you are a nit-wit! — Nancy, come and sit here. I claim your attention for the rest of the evening." He took Nancy's arm and steered her to a place beside him on the seat.

Bob sat down beside Cornelia. "Hello," he said, "how did you get on with your family?"

Soundings

Cornelia's nose wrinkled. "Duty is as duty does," she said. "Rita certainly picked a lemon when she grabbed that title."

"You're right," said Lloyd. "Let it be an object lesson to you two girls. Don't wait till the last call for dinner. Warmed-over stuff like our respected brother-in-law is bound to cause indigestion, and as marriage is the key-stone" . . .

A groan from Bob interrupted him. "Oh, lord! Give him food or drink,—anything, if you want to save yourself from his dissertation on marriage!"

Lloyd looked at him. "And you from a rectory!" he said with infinite reproach. "What is coming to the good manners of England when a parson's son cannot listen twice to the same dissertation without rude interruptions? Nancy, I apologize for my fellow Oxonian." His voice dropped to a gentler note of pompous tolerance. "A mere fresher, you understand. Hasn't fully absorbed the traditions. Doesn't quite strike the academic note; but promising, distinctly promising. — Now, as I was saying, marriage and hanging go by destiny. Some women —"

The arrival of the soup might have been expected to have a retarding influence upon Lloyd's oratory. It acted, on the contrary, as a lubricant. The interjections of Cornelia and Bob were stimulants to his good-humored fooling.

From other tables came the convivial rattle of cutlery, the excitable quality of French voices, an occasional burst of laughter, the synthetic odor of food, wine and tobacco. There was color, too, — strange white faces with carmined lips; long, white arms; vivid splashes of green dresses, orange cloaks, red hats; lesser spots of ruby and amber where the light shone down on wine glasses.

Nancy heard herself laughing and talking as if she were some one else. She was still in a sort of glamour, as though,

with one brain cell left on duty to look after the Nancy who was having dinner, the rest of her were detached, disembodied, not conscious of anything in terms of words, but just existing as a glowing warmth, a benevolence, a satisfaction, in the inner depths of which dwelt Bob.

The talk had switched to Oxford. Both men were out to get their blue, — Lloyd on the track and Bob in the ring. It could be seen, beneath their well-assumed casualness, that for the moment their athletic attitude represented the sum of their ambitions. Their mention of "next term" was made almost slightly, as though Oxford was the most boring place on earth, but they could not disguise the gleam that came into their eyes as they speculated upon what So-and-So had done during the vacation, whether he had stolen a march on them and gone into training yet. It was obvious that "next term" and its possibilities lay close to their hearts.

"When do you have to go?" asked Cornelia.

"Next Friday," said Bob. "Why don't you two come over and spend a week-end? We can't offer you a sofa, but we could pilot you round a little." His eyes sought Nancy's.

As she looked at Bob she knew that his invitation was for her. What did next Friday matter? Or their going? Or Oxford? Little things like time and space did n't count. They could n't interfere with the fullness of her satisfaction, which was something complete in itself. Something independent even of Bob's presence. Like Dad, who was miles away, Bob was within her kingdom, occupying a definite place, representing certain lasting values. Beyond that, at the moment, she did not go. Of course, Cornelia, Lloyd and Jean were there too in a way, but they were an entirely different affair, on the outer rim, as it were, sentinels on the frontier.

Soundings

Cornelia declined the week-end.

Nancy smiled. That didn't matter either. Everything was just beginning.

"At the first hint of spring," said Cornelia, "I'm going to cable Papa to let me get a car. It's going to be the most cajoling cable a man ever got. Then Nancy and I are going to run around quite a little, believe me! Incidentally we're going to swing a golf stick to some purpose."

Lloyd's ears pricked up. "Are you a golf fan, Nancy?"

"Is she!" cried Cornelia. "I believe she'd give you a half and trim you."

"You don't say!" said Lloyd. "Why, here's unexpected treasure; deep calling to deep, and so on." He tucked his hand through her arm. "Why have you been hiding your light under a bushel, Nancy? Let us discuss the merry worm cast and the vicissitudes thereof. Bob and I have ruined more acres of questionable turf at Cowley than any other four dubs who ever went forth with bags from the city of Spires. What do you shoot?"

"Meaning, what's my handicap?" laughed Nancy.

"I apologize," said Lloyd. "Whenever I get excited I invariably lapse into the vernacular."

"Well," said Nancy, "you see I've only played at home, at Brimble, and it's a tiny nine-hole course with greens like pocket handkerchiefs."

"Now! Now!" Lloyd shook her arm. "We know all about that preliminary description stuff. Do you, or don't you, go round in fours?"

"Fours! Heavens, no! About four over."

"Why, Nancy!" Cornelia broke in. "You told me that you'd broken forty."

"Well, I have two or three times," admitted Nancy, "but that was on a really good day with everything rolling just right."

"My lord!" said Bob. "I take my hat off to you, Nancy. I've never broken forty in my life."

"Cornelia," said Lloyd, "you'll have your work cut out, but *get that car!* It'll be an economy. This looks like your chance for a little free tuition."

"Oh, rot!" said Nancy. "I'm no good. Dad makes me feel like a novice. He's been round Brimble in thirty-four with a midiron!"

"You don't fish, do you, Miss Hawthorne, by any chance?" asked Lloyd. "I've got a fishing story or two that'll cap that one."

Nancy laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "If you don't believe it, you've only got to stroll into the clubhouse. The card's pinned up on the board. It's the course record and has been for two years."

"I take it all back!" said Lloyd. "May I come and caddy for you sometime?"

"Of course you will!" said Nancy. "How could it be otherwise?"

"Over my dead body!" said Bob.

"Everybody carries his own bag at Brimble," said Nancy.

"I don't mean Brimble," said Lloyd. "I would n't dare go out with you there, where you know each blade of grass by its first name. I mean over here, next vacation? If the big chief loosens up with a car the Channel won't be wide enough to keep us away."

"Well," said Cornelia, "you'd better write to Papa and back me up. He was a little restive when I wrote him a month ago and broke it to him gently that he was keeping me in a state of penury."

"Let's both tackle Mother," said Lloyd. "She's got a heart!"

Cornelia's nose wrinkled. "My dear," she said, "I'm afraid I've made that discovery too many times! Still, I

Soundings

do think she might make Papa realize the importance of a car — quite a little one — just now.”

Nancy smiled. How odd it was that they should worry and be in doubt. She turned to Cornelia with a quiet prescience that admitted no argument. “You’ll get the car,” she said.

Chapter Five

I

THE murmur of the seashell had changed its note.

Not by any process of clear thinking did Nancy awaken to a recognition of this fact, but by being an involuntary witness of a culminating moment in the lives of two little people whom she had never seen before and would probably never see again.

Up to that moment, for a long time after the departure of Bob, there existed an interregnum in the girl's mind, a delicious lull, — the kind of negative condition that creeps upon one when dangling a hand over the edge of a boat into limpid water, vaguely conscious of sun, of water lilies, of the plop of a rising fish; one's mind dreamy, drowsy, unutterably at peace.

The thought of him was never wholly absent, never wholly present. It was there as a tugging undercurrent, a vague background. It was there in the same way that a new element might be there, as for instance the unconscious readjustment of one's heart action after living for a period in a higher altitude, so that one is unaware of the changed atmosphere. It was as though her faculties had stopped working, like the engine of a liner in mid-ocean, carried forward of its own momentum, but with a sense of pause, of suspense.

It was not an interference; rather an accomplishment, in the same way that one can go through a day's activi-

Soundings

ties listening through everything, not so much with the ear as with the mind, to the lilt of a certain bar of music.

Nancy went through the days just as accessible as ever. Far from being able to complain that she was relegated to second place, Cornelia found that any demand upon Nancy was met with a more eager response than formerly. In every sense of the word, she was quickened. Cornelia phrased it otherwise. "Nancy Hawthorne," she said, "I'm jealous of you. You seem to be getting more outrageously lovely to look at every day. If you rob me of Jean as you did of Bob, there'll be trouble."

The remark was half serious, half joking. Without a trace of the embarrassment that had covered her before the coming of the two men, Nancy laughed, took Cornelia's face in her two hands and kissed it. "Jean is as safe from me as the Bank of England," she said.

There was no sense of flatness, of emptiness, in the studio after the men's departure. Cornelia had telegraphed for Jean before leaving the station when they had waved a final handkerchief at the departing boat train. Nancy had her dream and her work.

In due course they received a joint "bread-and-butter" letter in which the inspiration of Lloyd was so evident that for a moment it was almost like having him in the room again. February brought no communication, but in March they received an excited letter. Both were on the eve of the inter-Varsity competition; both had won the preliminary events and had been awarded their blues.

Nancy felt a little throb of pride, and when two telegrams eventually arrived within a few days of each other, announcing briefly that Bob had knocked out his man at Cambridge and Lloyd had won the hundred at Queen's Club, they telegraphed back "love and congratulations to you both." It was addressed to Lloyd. Nancy signed it, too.

Then came April, that sweet urgent month, — April, when almost overnight the whispered credo of the budding trees bursts forth into a full-throated magnificent of green; when little clouds go racing excitedly across the sky as though to carry the good news to the uttermost horizon, only to break up into gusts of rain as though the speed were too great; when man, like the other wild animals born in captivity, throws back his head and sniffs the air restlessly, with indeterminate longing.

It was at the end of April that Nancy saw the two little people. She saw them from her bedroom window.

Behind her in the room Cornelia lay sleeping. Nancy, reading late, had just snapped off the light, but the moon was so beautiful that she got up just to look out before going to sleep.

A little breeze ruffled the curtains, a breeze laden with lilac from the gardens below, where every blossom was picked out hard and clear. The perfume was exquisite. She leaned farther out, breathing it down, vaguely stirred by the murmurous voice of the silver night. It seemed to need only the note of some strange instrument to make it an Arabian night, a night of adventure and gallantry to the tinkle of fountains in cool courtyards, passionate whisperings behind half-open lattices, the distant call of a flute rising and falling in an eerie minor key that would drive one frantic with longing.

Was Bob floating downstream from Water Eaton tonight? Nancy moved restlessly.

There were two people strolling along the path, a soldier and a young girl. How distinct was the scrunch of their feet on the gravel. Their voices came up, very low.

Lovers? Nancy smiled. "Why not? I hope they are," she thought. "But it is n't fair to be a Peeping Tom like this. The darlings imagine themselves alone in the

Soundings

world." She looked away to where the glow in the sky indicated Montmartre beyond an infinitude of roofs. Lovers! How perfect it would be to float downstream to-night.

A sharp "*Non, non, non!*" in the girl's voice made her look down again quickly.

They were standing in the middle of the path. The soldier had his arm around the girl; with one hand she was pushing him away, her head back, resistance in every line of her.

Nancy turned hot all over. It was Brimble again, and the hill and Curly.

She wanted not to look. She wanted to go away from the window. And yet she wanted to see; she wanted to stay there. Everything that was civilized in her told her to go away. Everything that was primeval held her there.

The man's voice came low and insistent. Nancy stood rooted, her throat dry, her heart thumping.

The man was pulling her nearer, nearer. — Suddenly the girl gave a little cry, yielded, went into his arms, pressed against him, eagerly, hungrily, locking both her white arms round him as though with desperate courage.

At last Nancy wrenched herself away from the window, white, shaking. All the little half-thoughts and dissimulations that for three months had just popped their heads up and gone again — of what he might have said when they turned away from the bronze boy together; of the way he had smiled when he held her hand at the station and said, "Good-by, Nancy. See you again soon — I hope"; of his clothes and how he wore them, his hair and how he did it; his habit of stroking his chin between thumb and finger when he was thinking; the way he lit his pipe and blew out his match always with a long gray funnel of inhaled smoke — all these and a thousand more came rushing out of their limbo, assailed her with their real meaning, so that it stood

out in her mind as starkly and clearly as the two people down below. Nothing was blurred any more. All her senses echoed with the shouted message. She wanted Bob like that! —

For three months she had been a passive resister. For three months this truth had clamored and struggled for recognition. She had turned aside, switched her mind to something else, played with half-truth. But the action of the girl down in the garden was like a spark to gunpowder. It was obvious that that girl had held back from the admission of her own desire until the strain was at breaking point, since the violence of her yielding was almost terrible in its final candor.

In that smell of lilac which she would never forget, Nancy stood there quivering. She saw herself and Bob, his mouth on hers, her heart thumping against his, their arms holding one another close.

Nancy closed her eyes in surrender.

II

The sober light of morning saw Nancy striding up the Champs Élysées, with set face, seeing nothing, headed for nowhere in particular, anywhere, provided she kept on walking.

With the receding of the tide of emotion that had swept her away, her mind came into its own again, critical, revengeful even. Fool! idiot! weakling! were some of the epithets she hurled at herself. She drove herself on with the deliberate idea of punishing herself. She made no attempt to deny to herself that her yielding last night was just as much a fact as the French girl's. She had abandoned herself completely to the moment. The mere memory made her feel hot with discomfort, and yet in a savage

Soundings

sort of way she was glad that she had. It was better than pretending, better than playing hide and seek with the truth. "I'm a *woman*," she said, "and when you've said that you've said all there is to say! — And that's damn silly too! You've only just begun. But at least last night's — exhibition has brought me out of my coma. I've been playing the fool with myself all this time. I'm not ashamed of last night. Why should I be? I'm young and outrageously healthy; but where the devil *am* I? Let's get down to this thing."

With the masculine expression that was the outcome of constant association with her father and which was second nature to her in heated moments, Nancy began to try and worry her way through. She asked herself bluntly if she hadn't been tricked by a combination of spring fever and perhaps a subconscious storing of jealousy of the physical attentions that Jean was always paying, in however tiny a way, to Cornelia. How could she see that all the time and not make some kind of response? If it were that, then she was doubly a fool to have let herself pin the results on Bob, a man whom she had only known for fourteen days. "Ah!" she said. "There you are — a *man*. Is that it? Is it Bob himself as an individual, or is it because he's a man who happened to come along just at the moment when I was ready to be attracted? How on earth do I know? How the *devil* can one disentangle this thing? Can one be in love with love? Is this a fever through which every girl — woman — goes the first time a man singles her out? How about Cornelia? She seems to be exempt; probably because she's acquired the technique of passing from one beau to another as casually as a butterfly from a rose bush to a syringa. She doesn't pretend to love any of them. Do I *love* Bob?" She sneered aloud. "Oh, rats! How could that question ever come up if I

did? Wouldn't it be something — something fundamental in me, a quiet certainty, a sort of definite knowledge that would be absolute? In that case, last night. — My God, I don't know! I don't know! I'll have to see him again. I've *got* to see him again. Just one look at him and I'll know immediately if it's really *him*, or whether I've fooled myself into thinking that it is."

She stopped suddenly, and with a gesture that was purely nervous rubbed her face with both hands. She looked about her bewildered, not recognizing her surroundings. Turning, she saw the Arc de Triomphe in the far distance. A taxi came along. She hailed it, got in, gave the studio address and curled herself up in the corner.

"Lord," she muttered, "this thing has played the devil with me. I mustn't think about it any more."

She felt suddenly terribly sleepy; her eyelids were drooping. "Mustn't think any more — fool — wait till — Bob comes." She was asleep.

Chapter Six

I

THE car was an accomplished fact.

To Cornelia it represented the fruits of victory after an epistolary bombardment that had battered down all defenses. She handled it with the same matter-of-fact precision with which she handled her toothbrush.

"There's nothing *to* it," she said. "If I were to get a dollar for every mile I've driven in New York and New England, I could live comfortably on the income."

It was low hung, the color of a canary, and possessed of a horn which, psychologically handled, could be as blood-curdling as the baying of bloodhounds, or as gently persuasive as the cooing of turtle doves. She dressed to the car and was delightedly conscious of the eyes that were drawn to their passage as inevitably as the dust. She drove with that elimination of waste motion that is the peculiar possession of the expert, gliding through the constantly shifting openings in the traffic with the smooth, steady pressure in the small of the back that is like the hand of fate. She had road sense to an unusual degree, a sort of foreflung mental antenna sensitive to the unexpected.

To Nancy, unused to anything but the rattle and crash of the uneasy but necessary taxi, the car was "just heaven"; and her admiration for Cornelia's technique was of that boundless and naïve kind with which the layman, open-

mouthed, regards the professional, — entirely forgetful of the fact that, given an equal period of time dedicated to the same purposes, he might scale equally Parnassian heights.

The news of the car's purchase was too exciting to be told in a letter. It was telegraphed to Lloyd. The reply, also by telegram, was typical. "Hot dog! Have made summer plans accordingly. Will land St. Malo June 15. You two meet boat with car. No refusal accepted. Foursome will then proceed direction unknown who cares. Bringing golf sticks. Love from both to both. Lloyd."

June fifteenth! June fifteenth! The words tapped out a rhythm in Nancy's brain like soft hammer strokes. She would see Bob again on June fifteenth. She would *know* on June fifteenth! It was impossible to sit still. She began pacing the length and breadth of the studio.

"Let's drive on there a week earlier," said Cornelia. "We can make the trip in a couple of days."

Nancy stopped in front of Cornelia. "Do you realize that on June the thirtieth my year will be over?"

"What! Oh, but that's ridiculous!" said Cornelia. "You can't go home just as the boys come out. Write to your father and tell him all about our plans. Better still, invite him to join us!"

Nancy shook her head. "It depends. You see —"

"See what?" urged Cornelia.

"Well," said Nancy, hedging, "Dad and I agreed on a year and the time will be up then. Of course I may stay a day or two over, or even a week if — if things pan out right. We'll see — I may *want* to go home at the end of June."

"Oh!" said Cornelia. "You think you'll have had enough of us by then?"

Nancy looked startled. She was jerked away from her

Soundings

own problem by the other girl's touch of hurt. "Why, dear old thing, you don't really think that!"

"I think we'll all be mad at you if you go dashing off just as the party begins!" Cornelia turned and followed her next questions with her eyes. "Why may you *want* to go, Nancy? What do you mean exactly by things panning out right? Is it Lloyd — or Bob?"

Nancy stopped, suddenly intensely aware that there were doors to her inner self through which she could never invite Cornelia. She was awfully fond of her, would sacrifice many things for her, but at that moment she knew that Cornelia had come as far as she ever could along the path of intimacy.

Deliberately, without the flicker of an eyelash, Nancy lied. "No," she said. "It's Dad. His last three letters have all asked about my coming." She went on with absolute truth. "Brimble has been growing the last few days. I mean that instead of looking back at it, as I have been, up to now, in wonder at how I could ever have been a happy cabbage there, when there was all *this* to see and do" — she swept an arm that included the studio and the whole of Paris — "I've begun to look forward to it again — as if I had traveled round the circumference of a circle. But it isn't the same Brimble, which, of course, is another way of saying that it isn't the same me. My whole attitude towards it has changed. I realize now that in the old days Brimble dominated me. It just *was*, and I accepted it as an end, rather than as a means. It was my world, unchanging and therefore unchangeable."

"And now?" Cornelia's quick annoyance had gone like a jet of steam.

"Now?" Nancy echoed the word and remained silent for a moment. How much had she changed? It was impossible to tell, would be until from some future date

she could look back upon the present. But to-day she felt within her that she had become the mistress of Brimble, that she had not only the power, but the will, to take hold of it and direct its course, to use it for her own ends. Both her father's needs and her own were going to be so different. "Now," she said, with a little laugh and a gesture of defiance, "I'm going to make Brimble a jumping-off place to life. I don't know just how. I'll have to thrash the thing out with Dad. But it's going to be done!"

II

"Darling Dad,

"To-morrow Cornelia and I start for Brittany in the car. All our good-bys in Paris are said. It's been a wonderful time, has given me something that I shall never forget; and, extraordinarily enough, as I look back at it, it seems to me that I have Curly to thank for it. Poor Curly, I hope he's all right now!

"The trip'll take us two days and we've arranged for rooms at the Grand Hotel in Paramé, which is just outside St. Malo. All my things are packed and I'm sending my pictures and most of my clothes direct to Brimble. They are being registered. I'm keeping with me just a couple of suit cases and my golf sticks. Lloyd and Bob are going to arrive in St. Malo on the fifteenth. I will telegraph you the date of my leaving there for Southampton and shall expect you to meet me at the boat! Won't you please, Dad?

"Cornelia is awfully upset at the idea of my going and I don't mind confessing that I shall miss her. She's really a perfect darling and I know that you're going to think so too. She's coming to Brimble at the end of the summer. I thought we could put her in my room and I will move into the library and camp on the sofa. Lloyd may come too!

Soundings

We can tuck him on a window seat or anywhere. I don't know about Bob.

"I'm tremendously excited and eager about coming home, Dad. I've got a funny feeling about it. It's as though some fundamental part of me had been there all the time I've been away and until I get back again and join up with myself — like a worm cut in half — horrid simile! — I won't be able to settle anything and go ahead. And I want to go ahead tremendously, — not with work and so on, but with myself, with the next chapter. At the moment I feel as though the last page of this one were just about to be turned and I'm wondering and wondering what's going to be written on the other side, by you and me and every one. What do you think, Dad? Are our books already penciled in when we are born, so that all we have to do is to go over them in ink, as it were, as we live? Several things lately have set me puzzling about that, — Cornelia's getting her car, for instance. Three months ago I knew she would get it, just *knew* it, while she was betting twenty to one against it. There have been *other things* too! I don't see how we can ever stop talking when I get back. You *will* meet me at the boat, won't you?

"I must stop now. There are a million things to do, but I'll see you *very soon*."

"Your loving

"Nancy.

"P. S. When I get back a little more confidence in my mashie my game's going to be pretty good. We've been playing about three days a week. I'm just warning you!

"P. P. S. I don't know whether I'm going to forgive you for forgetting my birthday! I was twenty yesterday, and no letter has come! If the postman doesn't bring me anything before we start in the morning — "

Chapter Seven

THE striking thing about the Grand Hotel at Paramé was its cleanliness. The girls were sharing a room which was almost monastic in its simplicity. It seemed to be mostly floor, beeswaxed to the point of danger. By way of furniture — and that did n't seem to break the floor line at all — there were a large double bed, a washstand, the chest of drawers and two stiff wooden chairs. Yet the room seemed to be filled with color. The window was the secret. It framed a great slice of sea, sky and sand, — a jade-green sea, gashed by reddish brown rocks and stippled with white-caps; a sky of unbelievable blue; and a curving sweep of sand that was the color of molten gold.

At the end of that curve, some three miles away, was a brown lump sticking out into the sea and only distinguishable from rock by a ragged sky line above which sprouted a cathedral spire. It was St. Malo, more like a fortress than a town.

Paramé revealed itself simply as an ornate casino, that slept all day in the sun and only asserted its full faculties at night; on either side of it was strung out a collection of idiosyncratic villas. These all faced the sea and they all boasted ripe old Breton names, beginning in "Ker" and ending in "ec"; but each seemed to rival the other in oddity of design. Domes and gables, columns and minarets jostled each other in international amity. They were built on a broad stone dike, raised some twenty feet above the beach which, shortly beyond the last villa, ended abruptly in a high rocky headland bristling with spike grass and gray-

Soundings

green sea holly. Huge gay-colored cotton umbrellas were planted all along the beach like a crop of giant toadstools. Each of them sheltered its quota of infant brown imps who ran about and thrived mightily in sea and sun.

Between Paramé and St. Malo an abbreviated steam tram rocked and clattered and tooted. Its passengers were brawny peasant women in rusty black gowns and wide white linen caps. Their enormous market baskets were stuffed with produce and live chickens. Elbow to elbow they stood on the tram's platform with Parisian ladies *en villégiature*, parasoled and perfumed; priests in shovel hats whose lips moved as they read their breviaries in the clamor of conversation and machinery; schoolboys in uniform, carrying square black satchels; fat bourgeois whose linen collars were almost hidden beneath silky beards; English holiday makers in white flannels and tweed jackets who gloried in their sunburn; French sailors on leave from foreign service.

The tram stopped in the shade of the plane trees under the lee of the old wall, bastioned and turreted, that for centuries had withstood the attacks of the elements and the British, — those erstwhile "hereditary enemies" whose unsuccessful attempts to sack this Breton stronghold have now passed into the limbo of folk song and legend.

Nancy and Cornelia dissociated themselves from the crowd that poured out of the little tram and passed with exclamations of delight beneath the escutcheoned battlements of the Grande Porte.

Before them the narrow cobbled high street meandered uphill, resounding with the clatter of sabots, the pistol cracks of drivers' whips, the cries of women hawking sea food in baskets, the noisy, gesticulatory conversation of shoppers who stopped and chattered even when they made no purchase.

The girls wandered haphazard, down side streets where women sat in doorways, just out of the sun, making hand lace; past rambling ship chandlers whence came the magic odor of tarred rope's ends and tackle suggestive of the seven seas; out into sunny *places* all swept and garnished with flower borders; into the deep gloom of the cathedral, the walls of whose side chapels were incrustated with commemorative plaques in honor of Our Lady of the Sea who had saved so many brave fisher lads and interceded for those who had gone down.

There was nothing of Paris here. There seemed to be a robustness and simplicity about the people, as though the salt tang in the air which gave them clear skins gave them also clear minds, demanding little but relishing that little much. Their eyes sparkled, — and it was astonishing how many blue eyes there were among the brown. They smiled easily and held themselves with a sturdy erectness that gave them almost a touch of swagger.

"Of course," said Cornelia, as they were lunching at a marble-topped table outside the hotel in the Place Châteaubriand — a square that basked in the shade of great elms towering above the city wall — "of course, I know it's awfully cute and all that, but when it comes to the seaside, give me Atlantic City! We can exhaust this place in two days. Our only hope is the casino."

"I'm in love with it," said Nancy. "It's like an old master, mellow with age and tradition. I could potter around with a sketchbook for months. Have you noticed the cathedral chimes every quarter of an hour? Aren't they the most perfect things you've ever heard?"

"Yes, they are lovely," admitted Cornelia, "but they make me feel like Rip Van Winkle."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Nancy. "I believe you're just grumbling because you think it's the thing to do. Why,

Soundings

good heavens, this place makes one feel that King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table might have trotted in a cavalcade through the Grande Porte. If all you can call it is 'cute', you don't deserve to be here!"

Cornelia's nose wrinkled in a delighted grin. "I thought that would make you mad," she said. "No, but seriously, honey. I am right when I say that there's nothing to do. It's all right for you. You've got your sketchbook, in other words, your work. *You* couldn't just moon around and look at it for long, even though it catches your imagination more keenly than it does mine. As a matter of fact, it's only because you could work on it that it does strike your imagination."

"That's true," said Nancy, "up to a point."

"All right. Up to a point. But you must admit that while you can sit and paint it, I can't very well stand and sing to it! No, honey, believe me, I shall be right there on the quay the day after to-morrow to meet our young hopefuls!"

The day after to-morrow! A sudden shyness, a wave of nervous panic dried Nancy's throat. She had forgotten. She rose abruptly. "Let's go. Where's that waiter? — *Garçon, l'addition!*"

"What's your hurry?" asked Cornelia. "It's cool here, and you haven't finished your coffee."

Nancy was fumbling with unsteady fingers at her purse. "No," she said. "I want to go for a swim. I'm all hot and sticky. Let's go back to the hotel."

The waiter's "*Au revoir, mesdemoiselles. Merci!*" followed them as they went across the square.

The day after to-morrow! Nancy was glad that the metallic screeching and grinding of the tramway made conversation impossible. She needed to collect herself. Through the windows she looked out at the sweep of sea and saw — Paris. It had been a sort of dream city, im-

personal in some ways, until the adventure of Cornelia gave it reality, brought it to life. The next period unrolled itself as a kaleidoscope of pictures, people and incidents, — a time of happy watching and sorting and classifying, through which all the time (she saw it now so clearly) her self had been elbowing for expression. She had not recognized it, not wholly, until the news of Bob's coming. Up to that moment her self had been secondary to her environment, — the color, the language, the experience, had absorbed her.

Then Bob came.

From that moment Paris had changed. Her self had erupted like a volcano, submerging the city. Only bits of it stuck up, — a day when they had driven down to Provins and explored the cavalry barracks with Jean; other isolated days when, on different golf courses, she had thrilled to find herself regaining length on her drive, getting the feel of her mashie again so that she was pitching them on the green to stop within a yard of the cup; but those occasions stood out like a chain of islands, at each of which she had paused in her voyage across the uncharted sea of (self) a lonely voyage of perplexities and hesitations, of ardors and languors, of courage and of fear.

Their two-day trip across France had been a pause; the adventure of launching themselves into the unknown an Odyssey. Listening to the note of the engine and looking ahead through half-closed eyes was like riding on the back of a great bumblebee, each village being a flower which it considered a moment in a lower note and then passed, questing the one on which it should settle.

There was a touch of the superman, something smacking of the lesser gods, in their alighting at farmhouses for bread and cheese and milk, and there for a moment touching the lives of this woman with her crippled daughter and

Soundings

hard silent husband; of that great fat farmer whose wife, big with child, was doing as much work as any horse in his barn; of an old, old woman, more wrinkled than any dried apple, who had mumbled at them in a high shrill key from the chimney corner where she sat peeling potatoes into a bucket between her feet.

There in the raw was the rich texture of life displayed before them. Were the days full of emptiness for the cripple, her dreams withered like her legs? Would that ancient crone in one county be gathered in before the farmer's wife delivered her baby in the next? Was the old woman ready, glad to go after long hard service? Was the prospective mother tenderly radiant, a-dream with ambition for that little new life, or would it be just one more mouth to feed, one added burden in the endless toil? — Were these mere syncopations in the rhythm of the race?

And, speeding on through the sunshine which softened all the hardness, Nancy pondered the meaning of it all.

Until Cornelia's comment at lunch this old-world spot in Brittany had been to her just one other port in the Odyssey, a continuation of the adventure. The significance of June the fifteenth had been held back from her mind by the exhilaration of continuous action, — as the crowd is held back by fuming policemen from a parade.

Now as her body responded to the swaying and lurching of the tram she realized, in a state of rising agitation, that it was *here* that she was to meet again the man who had given the impetus to her self, who by his shout had started the avalanche: that in a few hours almost, when she touched his hand and looked into his eyes, she would read there the signal to advance, one way or the other, beyond the crossroad of doubt which was represented for her by that April night when the lilacs had bewitched her.

It was no longer a matter of months but of hours.

Chapter Eight

I

FOOTSTEPS came clumping down the uncarpeted corridor and stopped at their door.

Nancy, lying awake, was annoyed at the furious banging that ensued.

"Il est cinq heures, Mademoiselle!"

Cornelia woke with a start. "Eh? What's that?"

"Bien, merci!" replied Nancy, "Five o'clock, Cornelia."

The footsteps retreated.

Cornelia yawned, profoundly, luxuriously. "Name of a name!" she said, "why don't they make that ridiculous boat come in at a respectable hour? These French are so beastly matinal! However — one-two-three — up!" Combining word and deed, she heaved back the bedclothes and sprang out. From the moral superiority of a standing position she turned her attention to Nancy, whose only move had been to pull the blanket back over herself.

"Do you propose to lie there all day, Nancy Hawthorne? — A little pep, please! Show a little pep!" She laughed. "My dear, to-day's the day! If by any chance Lloyd and Bob aren't on that boat this morning, I shall be so desperate that I shall display the 'Men Wanted' sign across the dining room to the handsome Englishman from the annex. He's dying to know us, poor dear, but I suppose he's waiting for me to fall down a cliff or something so that he can dash to pick up the pieces and then consider himself properly introduced!"

Soundings

Nancy pushed back her hair with an impatient gesture. "I'm not coming with you, Cornelia," she said.

Cornelia stared, wide-eyed. "Well, for the love of Mike!"

"I know it seems beastly unsporting to let you go off by yourself," said Nancy, "but please won't you leave me here? I—I just don't want to come, that's all."

The protest that was all ready on Cornelia's lips remained unuttered. There was a note in Nancy's voice that she hadn't heard before. She took a quick look at Nancy's face. It was a little drawn, tired.

Cornelia stooped swiftly, kissed the tip of Nancy's nose and gave her shoulder a firm squeeze. "All right, honey," she said. "I see!"

Within fifteen minutes she was dressed. "Well, so long," she said. "Breakfast about eight?" She went out without waiting for an answer.

For a long while Nancy remained staring at the ceiling. It was like a huge map, drawn with boundary lines in the plaster. There were two flies up there performing their morning evolutions, flying in endless patterns of sharp angles and flowing arabesques, a noiseless, unceasing ritual, as though in fulfillment of some deep purpose.

When she went downstairs there would be Bob, no longer a remote element in a problem which was hers alone, but, even if he didn't know it, a participant in a problem which was his as well.

She was like a prisoner who, having finally worked out the details of his hanging in the solitude of his cell, on the fateful morning finds the entire psychology of the situation altered on first meeting the hangman face to face.

Was Bob, like the hangman, an utter stranger to her emotion? Had he never thought of her from the day he left Paris? Had he been so occupied at Oxford that there was

no room for her in his mind? Had she never been in it — as he had in hers — from the angle of man and woman? — If not, then why had there been that gradual seeking, that iteration of momentary contact that had broken through Lloyd's assiduous attention? Was that nothing but imagination, the delusion of her own desire? No, it could n't be! Something had passed between them when they turned away from the bronze boy, something that was not hers alone. He too had been held still by that momentous sense of expectancy before the street lamps had suddenly blazed out and broken the spell. — He must have carried that with him to Oxford! He would n't be human if he had n't. -

The cracked bell in the village church struck eight.

Nancy sat up with a jerk.

Bob was there, downstairs!

Her heart was pounding. She placed a hand on it as though to try and stop it.

"Fool!" she murmured. "How *damn* silly to get all upset like this. I'll probably make an idiot of myself. — The others will be there when I meet him, and Cornelia suspects something, too!" She pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks. "I've *got* to get hold of myself! I — I wish he had n't come. It is n't worth all this."

She caught her breath. It made an odd little sound in her throat. Her hands dropped from her face. For a second she remained motionless, staring. Then, with a note almost of fierceness, she said aloud, "No, I don't. I'm *glad!*"

II

"Say, kid!" Lloyd brought a roving eye back to his sister.

"Judging by the sudden activity displayed by Alphonse I gather that the omelette is at hand. Had n't you better

Soundings

go and dig Nancy up? A cold sponge is invariably efficacious, — isn't it, Bob?"

Cornelia shook her head. "Nothing doing! I know that I'd prefer a cold breakfast myself."

"Are we going to forgive her for not coming to the boat?" queried Bob, "or shall we pull her leg a little?"

Lloyd shot a glance at Cornelia. "In case your sensibilities are shocked, my dear, let me explain that that vulgar Anglicism is purely figurative. It is employed, in their expansive moments, even by the clerical dons. It indicates no attempt upon the lady's pedal extremities."

Cornelia chuckled. "My!" she said, "but it's good to have you two lunatics around again! I confess that I'm not cut out either for my own, or exclusively feminine society."

She looked them over with approving eyes, — an act already consummated by the five other girls, of French or British nationality, who were sitting at breakfast so demurely with their fathers and mothers at various tables in the dining room.

They were both so clean-cut and fit, alert-looking, lean, ready. Lloyd's laughing eyes were an invitation to fellowship, a safe-conduct through the world. He was a born giver. It was written on his face that men — and women — would seek him out for his great gift of being able to make them see everything in terms of laughter, — a magic gift by which a ray of sunshine can be turned into the blackest corners. There was something of the Pied Piper about him, that something which saw through to the farther side of things and inspired confidence in the children. He was the kind of man that one always notices first in a gathering, and to whom one's eyes return after they have pigeon-holed the rest.

Bob was very different; but one would look at him a

second time. He was the type destined to ride alone, — a little too hard, scornful of weakness, setting his own standards and judging the others by them. To him charity would never be a virtue. He would not offer it, far less accept it. His code was that if one wanted something one should set one's shoulder silently and shove. If Bob had not already set in these lines, Lloyd at least had seen the indications when he had watched him in the boxing ring, — his face expressionless, his eyes like cold flames, his movements pantherlike in their relentless pursuit of his opponent, — one might almost say his victim.

In the *salle-à-manger* of this seaside hotel, where the majority consisted of soft, plump French women and their sallow menfolk who wore black alpaca and carried parasols lest they should catch a sunstroke, this youthful threesome was as glad a sight as the first morning of spring.

They were halfway through breakfast — a breakfast *à l'anglaise* — when through the glass door Lloyd caught sight of Nancy coming across the hall.

"There she is!" he said, and hurried out to meet her.

Bob half rose and sat down again.

Cornelia smiled and shot a keen glance at him as he looked past her towards the door. She was puzzled, disappointed. She couldn't read the tightening of his jaw, the barely perceptible narrowing of his eyes.

She tried a question. "Does Nancy look good to you?"

"Quite," said Bob.

Cornelia bit her lip.

Lloyd met Nancy as she stopped at the table on which letters were spread out for the guests of the hotel.

She had tried on three different silk waists before finding the psychological one to go with her mood and with her new golf coat and skirt.

"Hullo, there!" he said. "How's the golf pro? You're

Soundings

a sight for sore eyes, Nancy, and I'm so darn glad to see you that it seems like a thousand years since we were in Paris!"

How could he tell, as he wrung her by the hand and looked down into her smiling face and unflinching brown eyes, of the trouble that lay within, or guess that even now to form words demanded violent physical effort?

Perhaps women are better actors than men. Perhaps they recover more quickly, have a more coördinated muscular response in such moments of extreme self-consciousness. Be that as it may, not even the other girls in that hotel dining room suspected anything but delight as Nancy greeted Lloyd and passed with him, laughing and talking, into the dining room, completely mistress of the situation.

It was by purely subconscious direction that she talked sense. Had she been asked later what she said, she could n't have told. She was in a sort of trance, aware of one single thing, one great overshadowing fact, — that through the fog, just over there, where she dare not look, was *Bob*.

To those who watched her, she was almost sprightly in her walk. She felt that she was going forward on reluctant, leaden feet. With her eyes she clung to Lloyd, who steered her with one hand on her elbow.

"Here she is!" said Lloyd, as they reached the table. "Here's the young slacker who preferred to roll over and go to sleep again!"

To Nancy everything seemed to stop, to be still.

Her eyes left Lloyd, clung desperately to Cornelia for a second, then went on.

Bob's voice came through the fog. "Hullo, Nancy! How are you?"

At the sound of that voice her self-consciousness dropped from her. She found herself looking into his eyes.

Why, of course! How stupid that she had n't known all

along. It had been like a panting struggle up a steep trail, — to come suddenly out into a cool, green meadow where there was a great peace.

She gave him her hand and was intensely aware of the touch of his.

“Hullo, Bob!” It was saying so little and so infinitely much.

Then she moved with a quick laugh. “What does it feel like to be an Oxford blue? Don’t you two feel as if you owned the earth between you?”

And as they all sat down, and Lloyd hissed loudly to catch the eye of Alphonse, Cornelia tried another question. “Well, honey,” she said, “have you decided when you’re going home?”

It was a bomb, and she knew it.

“Home?” cried Lloyd. “What on earth do you mean? You can’t go home, Nancy. Why, it would simply wreck the foursome!”

Bob made no comment. He paused in the lighting of a cigarette and looked at Nancy across the table.

Nancy raised two large, surprised eyes at Cornelia. “Home?” she echoed. Then a frown of remembrance creased her forehead. “Oh!” The exclamation was almost to herself. It was like the opening of a mental door, through which came rushing all the other considerations that had been shut out by this meeting. Then she said quickly, “I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet!”

Chapter Nine

I

WHEREAS in Paris Nancy's contact with Bob had been a progression from aroused curiosity to exploration, to a gradual finding and piecing together of certain qualities already anticipated at the moment when she first became aware of him — and it is curious that the likeableness of some one else is in direct ratio to how much of oneself one can find in that some one — their relations in St. Malo began on an entirely different plane.

Her question in Paris had been, "Is it Bob? — or just man?"

Her answer was, "It's Bob."

She no longer felt the spur of that instinctive tension, fencing, play-acting, that assumption of heightened personality which is man's equivalent to the fussy strutting in the animal world when male and female consider each other.

She had emerged from her period of consideration. She met him now with level-eyed certainty, with the calm self-possession of a mind made up. She was not conscious of impatience. It seemed that she was satisfied — momentarily at least — with the knowledge of her own feelings.

She was content just to be with Bob, to see and hear him, to hug to herself the delicious fact of his presence. To her each new day was a gift, an exaltation, a beatitude. As

they stood in the cool of the evening on the short, spongy turf of the headland and looked down over the rocky sea, the wind, that blew her hair from her face and plastered her clothes against her body, seemed to fan the flame of happiness within her. She loved it, because it played with Bob's hair too, impertinently rumpled that well-groomed head, plucked at the ends of his tie, blew his coat over his head when he turned and bent to light his pipe.

She loved the sea when they all swam in the long, lazy afternoons, because it was another element that they could both share. They did not bathe from the machines on the populous beach. They set off, hatless, with towels over their shoulders, carrying bags of cherries and sticky brown *pains d'épice* embedded with almonds. They left the last comic villa behind and, with the sun in their eyes, plowed across a stretch of sandy waste until they reached the undulating climb that led up, past the tomb of Châteaubriand, — a lonely slab of rock befriended only by sun and sea and wind, a fitting place from which to watch eternity. To Nancy it was an emotional delight that the lovely perfume of gorse bushes came in waves in the lull of the wind, that crickets sang for them, and wild flowers made a carpet for their feet. At length they came to the coast guard's hut that stood sentry, perched at the edge of the headland, against the possible incursions of smugglers in the sheltered bay below. Down the cliff's face dropped a path fit only for mountain goats. These four were their rivals, however, the scramble marking the climax to the laughter that was the constant outward sign of their inward spiritual grace. A stretch of smooth golden sand ran down to meet the sea which heaved in between great slabs of rock. Chanting "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!" they christened the place Silver's Cove.

They found a deep, dark cave in the rock, which, after

Soundings

due investigation on the part of their squires for bats, snakes or other incommodities, the ladies used as a dressing room. The squires used the sunny lee of a great brown tooth of rock on the other side of the cove.

With no other sound but the voice of the sea, no sight but the elemental rock and water and sky, they had a sense of being cut off, of being as far removed from the madding crowd as though on some desert island. To three of them this seclusion was the finishing touch in the perfection of the place. To the fourth, Nancy, a thousand people there would have made no difference. To her it was ecstasy, as the waves slapped at her throat and face and she felt the lift of a roller, to know that Bob was swimming strongly beside her.

She would look up across the deep rocky pool in which they were all hunting for shrimps, and, with a strange feeling of pride and tenderness, revel in the perfection of line that was his, as he stooped, searching intently, beneath the lacework of seaweed. He was beautiful, she thought, as beautiful as the discus thrower in the Luxembourg, as balanced and graceful and strong. She tried to imagine him in the boxing ring and could n't, but found herself primevally glad of the strength which had enabled him to triumph. The reflex of that thought made her exult in her own body and her own strength. She tingled at the thought that she, too, was not only beautiful but that she could keep pace with him in rock climbing, that she was as much at home in the sea as he, that she could actually beat him in driving a golf ball.

She found his moods extraordinary. Plunging his muscular arm into the pool, he would address his intended prey, "Now, you shrimp, I'm going to get you, so it's no use your dodging. I can see you down there just as well as you can, so, — Ah! Would you! Little rotter, getting under that

seaweed! All right, but Nemesis is after you, so don't kid yourself, my son! See? That made you utter a fervent prayer, I'll bet! And next time. — Well! Well! What did I tell you?"

His hand would emerge clasping the beguiled shrimp and his smiling eyes seek Nancy's.

"Sporting little devil, wasn't he? Shall we put him back?"

In such a manner, thought Nancy tenderly, did children run to their mother with treasure of daisies, eager to share their delight. Was it the same being whose philosophy of golf made her almost scared of him? Unlike Lloyd, who laughed at his bad shots and made the others laugh at his good ones, Bob retired into himself, stalked round with a scowling face, putting into every stroke the last ounce of concentration and effort, unyielding, doggedly persistent, determined to master the game. As Lloyd put it, he took the game brutally, as though he would like to wring Colonel Bogey's neck.

Was it the same being again who, on assuming his dress clothes, seemed to assume also a sophistication that sometimes showed itself in a sneering criticism, an aloof boredom; who, as they sat and listened to Pol Plançon's Mephistopheles in the casino, refused to allow himself to be stirred to enthusiasm? There were several Bobs apparently. Which was the real one? She was asking herself that question as he grinned at her across the pool, shrimp in hand, and asked, "Shall we put him back?"

"Why, of course, infant!" she said. She snuggled back against the rock, stretched out luxuriantly full length in the hot sun, and smiled at her toes as she twiddled them. "Is n't it grand," she said, "to be alive and fit and unafraid, to be able to feel things so intensely?"

II

They had cut the last act of the opera to watch Bob work out a run of luck at *petits chevaux*. He was only playing with five-franc pieces but it seemed that the god of the tables had taken him for the time being under its wing. Wherever he put coins, one of the numbers turned up, until his winnings became a pile, not only of coin, but of paper.

He turned to the others and there was a gleam in his eyes that gave the lie to the blasé immobility of his face. "It seems to be my evening," he said quietly. "Aren't you coming in?"

"I'm right with you, son!" said Lloyd. "Tell me what to do with this little yellow boy!" With a twenty-franc piece in his hand, he waited, as did several of the others at the table, to see which number Bob would cover.

The syren chant of the croupier, stimulating by its very monotony, began again. "*Faites vos jeux, Messieurs! Faites vos jeux!*" The ivory ball clicked delicately. "*Les jeux sont faits?*"

"Come on, Cornelia!" cried Nancy. "Let's all follow Bob and break the bank!"

"*Les jeux sont faits?*"

Hurriedly Nancy opened her small bead bag, dived among powder puff, vanity case and handkerchief, and fished out a folded note. "Put that on for me, Bob!"

Together with his own five-franc piece Bob dropped her note on to number eleven. Immediately a shower of coins fluttered on to the same baize square.

"*Les jeux sont faits! Rien ne va plus!*"

The wheel was slowing. Every eye, whether male or female, followed the nimble ball. It plopped into number twenty-three, climbed out again, ran towards the center, rolled back, skirted the zero, flirted with thirty-five, lurched

away, hovered maddeningly on the brink of seven, and then, as though obedient at last to other forces than the prosaic ones of gravitation and centrifugalism, gyrated to number eleven, dropped in and clung, regardless of the still spinning wheel.

A sort of wave of release went over the table, like the indefinite breathing and rustling that rises from a congregation as the minister turns to leave the pulpit.

A man's voice from across the table said, "*Quel veinard que cet anglais!*" and another replied, "*Pourvu qu'ça continue.*" With no change of expression or tone, the croupier made his announcement. "*Le onze rouge, impair et manque.*"

Ladies smiled at Bob, who sat back with a nonchalance that would have done credit to an habitué.

Enriched by notes that crinkled to the tune of three hundred and fifty francs, Nancy was dancing with excitement. How perfectly splendid Bob was! He didn't seem to mind a bit that all those overdressed women made eyes at him, or that the men were openly waiting to follow his lead. She felt that she, under similar circumstances, would have been awfully cocky, would have felt infinitely superior to the rest of the world. Yet there was Bob, perfectly quiet, gathering up his winnings with a steady hand!

She was still excited when they left the casino about eleven o'clock that night, their pockets bulging with money. Until they came out into the cool, starry night she hadn't realized how stuffy the roulette rooms were. The tide was high and the sea was reaching and pulling at the dike, falling back on itself with a boiling roar that streaked it as though with soapsuds. "Don't let's go back to bed," she said. "Let's go for a stroll, will you, Cornelia? — Come on, Bob! We'll set them an example."

Cornelia laid her hand on her brother's arm and checked

Soundings

the pace until Nancy and Bob, arm in arm and exaggeratedly in step, had more or less danced their way well ahead.

"What's biting you, old thing?" said Lloyd.

"Something rather special," said Cornelia. "Tell me, Lloydie, is Bob all right, *really* all right?"

Lloyd looked at his sister. "That's an odd question to ask a man about his friend," he said.

Cornelia slipped a hand through his arm. "It may be," she said, "but Nancy happens to be mine. Are you aware that she's fallen for Bob?"

Lloyd laughed, "Why, yes, but she's fallen for me too, thank God, so what's the odds? Safety in numbers, you know!"

Cornelia shook her head. "If it were just that, if you were both simply beaving her around, I should n't be worrying."

From ahead came the sound of eager conversation, broken occasionally not by laughter exactly, but by little exclamatory gurgles from one to the other.

Lloyd turned to his sister. His voice dropped a little. "You don't mean that there's anything really serious in it, do you?"

Cornelia nodded.

For a moment neither spoke.

"Now," she said, "will you answer my question?"

"You've handed me rather a jolt," said Lloyd. "I'd no idea there was anything of *that* in it. I'd thought that we were just four good fellows together."

"Four?"

"Of course!" said Lloyd, with a touch of impatience. "Bob's one of the best. He —" and just then Tillie came popping into his mind.

"You see," said Cornelia, "Nancy's full of dreams and

ideals — impossible if you like, but darned enviable all the same — and I'd hate like anything to see any one smash 'em up. However, if you say Bob's all right, why, let her go ahead and land him as soon as she can. Suppose you and I take the car to-morrow and beat it off somewhere together?"

Lloyd patted the hand where it lay on his arm. It was a sign of approval, but all he said was, "You're not in favor of letting the grass grow, eh?"

"If there's anything in it," said Cornelia, "the sooner she finds out, the better. She's due to go back home any day now."

"I see," said Lloyd.

For the rest of the walk he replied jerkily in monosyllables, his hands plunged deep into the pockets of his dinner jacket. They were almost back to the hotel when Cornelia said abruptly, "It doesn't touch you, does it, Lloydie?"

"Eh?" said Lloyd. "Me?" He laughed. "Oh, lord, no! — What do you say to Dinan to-morrow? Those English birds were talking about it in the dining room yesterday and seemed to think it was worth while."

As they came up, Bob and Nancy were waiting for them in front of the hotel. The four chatted for a few moments and then the girls said good night and went in. The two men crossed the street to the annex.

"Cigarette?" queried Bob.

"Thanks," said Lloyd.

They went upstairs.

Bob began emptying his pockets of money on to the corner of the mantelpiece. "Lloyd, old man," he said, "let's avoid that damn place for the rest of our stay. I've made enough to-night to pay my entire expenses. If we go back, I'll lose it all!"

Lloyd grunted by way of reply. He was staring out of

Soundings

the open window as he undressed, lost in the silver pathway of the moon on the quietly lifting sea. Apparently its beauty was lost on him, for there was a deep frown on his face. Apparently also he hadn't settled his problem when he turned to flick off the light.

Bob was already in bed.

"All set?" queried Lloyd.

"Quite!" said Bob.

With a snap the room was dark.

Lloyd padded across the bare floor and climbed into the other bed. For a time he watched Bob's cigarette glowing intermittently like a firefly. At last he spoke. "Oh, Bob!"

The answer came drowsily. "Uhuh?"

Lloyd's enunciation took on an edge like a knife. "Say, old man, we don't want any Tillie stuff around here!"

For a moment there was silence. Then Bob jerked up on one elbow. "What the hell do you mean?" he snapped.

Lloyd saw no need to answer. The question, he knew, was purely rhetorical.

Chapter Ten

I

“WHAT are you going to do with life, Bob?”

Nancy's question had been led up to by a long morning together in St. Malo, a morning of happy wandering and incessant talking. They had covered a lot of ground, mental as well as physical, before they lunched at the Continental.

The waiter gave Nancy a broad and meaning smile. It had puzzled her for a moment, until she remembered that she and Cornelia had lunched there just before the arrival of the two men and that she had fled in a violent state of nerves. How long ago it seemed. How far she had come in knowledge since that morning!

As she looked across the turf at him now and asked the question, with a touch of peremptoriness that was a confession of the familiarity of mind with which she regarded him, Nancy found it difficult to visualize her former state of uncertainty.

“That's more than a question,” said Bob. “It's a most complete expression of your mental outlook.”

“How do you make that out?” asked Nancy.

“Why, most people put it the other way round. They wonder what life is going to do to them. The only people who have the nerve to take life in their two hands and squeeze it dry, like a sponge, are the ones whose names live, — Napoleon, Nelson, Garibaldi, and in our own time

Soundings

that fellow Rajah Brooke and H. G. Wells. Are *you* going to be one of them? You're so amazingly definite!"

Nancy laughed. "Oh, nonsense!" she said. "Don't be idiotic." Nevertheless, if her mind refused to play with the idea, she was not displeased with Bob for uttering it. She added, "In any case" — and thus did she admit it — "you haven't answered my question."

"It's not easy to answer," said Bob, "unless one starts off negatively and says what one is not going to do with it."

"People have been known to arrive at something definite by a process of elimination! Proceed, oh cautious one, and give me a cigarette."

A seagull went screaming by. The two were lying on the crisp turf at the edge of the headland. Miles out, the channel boat like a tiny toy in an enormous bathtub unwound a ribbon of smoke half a mile long, — the only indication that it was moving at all. Below was Silver's Cove, imprisoning a great semicircle of blue and jade-green sea in its rocky embrace.

Bob plucked a sprig of sea holly, and, while he talked, his fingers explored the plant as though they were messengers sent out to gather information about it, — length of spike, texture, contour.

Fascinated, Nancy watched them and saw in imagination the pathetic — if sturdy — little boy growing up in a rectory, strangling in the odor of sanctity and inattention that had been the unconscious sins of an honestly religious father who took his profession so seriously that it blinded him to the daily enlarging needs of his own children.

The picture as Bob had drawn it for her may have been one-sided. The majority of parents, however, would be aghast if, once during their lifetime, they could learn the complete truth of what they seem in the eyes of their children.

"You see," said Bob, "at Oxford one hears a lot of men

yapping about what they are going to do, — the Bar, politics, the Church, and all that stuff. To me it's like the babbling of kiddies of six who say they want to be a policeman when they grow up. They are all vastly concerned with that stultifying word 'career.' They want to get on, to climb to the top of the tree, — in other words to get into the limelight. Having got there, presumably they'll be smugly content to sit down in it and bask. In their own words they will have 'arrived.' They don't know it, but they will begin to wonder, in a dumb sort of way, what they have missed, why life does n't mean more. Could anything be more bovine? When I listen to all that — and I firmly believe that one can listen to it in any college between midnight and one A.M., — it makes me feel overawed, apologetic that I should be such an ass as to think differently. But when I get away from the superiority of numbers, all my unanswerable, discontented questionings come back."

"I know!" said Nancy, nodding.

Bob went on. "Don't think I'm crabbing Oxford. I'm not. I never knew how to think till I went up. I'm not sure that I do now, but at least I've made a beginning, I no longer accept anything at its conventionally accepted value. I've reached the state of mind when I want to prove everything for myself." He stopped. "Am I boring you?" His eyes went to hers for the real verdict. It wouldn't have helped her to utter a polite "no."

He didn't have to worry. Nancy pushed the question aside altogether. "What sort of thing do you want to prove, — the whole sociological tangle?" She was leaning on her elbows, her chin cupped in her hands. Her hat was off and her mass of chestnut hair was deliciously rumped by the breeze.

Bob gave a little laugh, — not so much a laugh as a nervous expression of the thrill of satisfied ego that a woman's

Soundings

whole and undivided attention gives to any man, of whatever age. The consciousness of it deflected his line of thought, colored it.

"That's the idea," he said; "all the traditional things that they burble about so hypocritically, — religion, morals, patriotism. There are no such things as hard and fast rules about any of them. Ultimately they become a matter of entirely personal valuation if you scratch a man deep enough."

"Of course!" said Nancy.

"It seems to me," said Bob, "that until a man's about thirty-five it's impossible to form any lasting conclusions as to what life is all about anyway, and therefore the more varied the experience he can get in that time, the closer will be his definition of it. At the moment I'm much less interested in the possibilities of my becoming Lord Chancellor — which God forbid — than in the human equation. To me the most fascinating thing in the world is to try and fathom people's motives, to see whether they will run true to form and do given things under given conditions. The variations are infinite, amazing." He laughed and turned to the girl. "Take Lloyd and his sister, for example, or you and me. Lloyd and I hadn't seen each other for more than two minutes before we arranged to share rooms. Why? How did we know? Cornelia is the sister of that man and an awfully good sort, — and yet somehow I haven't a word to say to her, feel absolutely no response to her. Why? And here I am yapping my head off to you, whom I met at the same time as I met Cornelia, as if you were the one girl in the entire universe with whom I'm not afraid to be myself. — Why? What are the laws governing these things? What is there in you that Cornelia has n't got? What is there in me that strikes an echo of you, so to speak?"

His eyes were on hers. He came to a full stop, and suddenly with an abrupt gesture, he threw the holly over the cliff and leaped to his feet. "Shall we — shall we go and swim?"

His voice sounded unnatural. His manner was constrained.

To Nancy, who had been following every word and expression intently, the change was startling, because so completely unexpected.

Their whole conduct had been, up to that moment, not impersonal exactly, but utterly devoid of any recognition of sex-consciousness. They had "swapped backgrounds" as Bob called it, — an exciting competition in remembering incidents in their brief pasts, a competition at which, like alternating organ soloists, each had endeavored to outdo the other in the variety of stops. Nancy, for instance, her eyes moist at the picture of his isolation in the crowded rectory, had drawn a deep groan at her recital of being left for the first eight years of her life to the sole care of Mrs. Weeks.

With the unconscious dramatic heightening that always goes with a sympathetic audience, each of them, intensely serious and really moved, had lifted corners of the veil for the other to peep through. They had been very close to each other in attention, in sympathy, in response, but with none of the subtle emphasis which marks the recognized intrusion of sex.

In Bob's sudden break of tone, with its hint of strain, it came to Nancy as surely as though he had clenched his fist and hit her. She could discover no reason for it. It was as unanalyzable as the quick shifting of the wind from north to south.

She knew, however, that Bob had suddenly become obsessed with a sense of her; that he had caught fire. She

Soundings

knew, furthermore that she could extinguish him, as she had extinguished Curly at a later stage. But even as she knew it, her emotions came rushing to attack her. She didn't want to stop him. It was not Curly; it was Bob, the man she loved, and this was the moment, the dream of which had submerged the city of Paris.

"Can I give you a hand?" said Bob.

Wordless, Nancy took his, and was standing facing him.

She was aware of vast excitement, apprehension, a mental and physical incoherence.

His eyes were on hers. What was it in them that drew her, that caught her up?

"Nancy!" he said.

She gave a little cry that was silenced by his mouth on hers. It hurt her exquisitely, but he held her so tightly that she could not move, even if she had wanted to.

As though she had known how from the beginning of time, her arms went round him and she caught him close to her, awake to the uttermost tingling nerve.

II

A Greek cab driver, denied what in his honest opinion constitutes the proper three hundred per cent. overcharge on the legitimate fare, quite frequently strengthens his argument with a six-inch stiletto, — and has been known to roll the corpse into the nearest ditch. An Englishman in similar circumstances will probably look up from the offending money in his horny palm and say, "'Ere, wot the 'ell d'yer think this is?" A Frenchman rolls large reproachful eyes and exclaims, "But, Monsieur, I do not understand!"

It is all according to the nature of the beast.

By the same token, Cornelia, in Nancy's present situa-

tion, would have reciprocated in something of the spirit of repartee to Bob's urgent lips. She would have given as good as she got. She looked upon that sort of thing as a highly inspiring game, never to be taken too seriously, to be played with a certain caution varying with the individual characteristics of each opponent. The length of the game depended upon the number of opponents foregathered in the same place at different times. With Bob alone in the field, it would have been a daily contest, lasting till the moment that they left St. Malo and went their separate ways, — Cornelia in excellent practice for the next encounter.

Nancy knew none of these things. To her they were unimaginable. Amazed by some of Cornelia's reminiscences, she had once indulged in a sarcastic reference to "promiscuous hugging." Cornelia had chuckled. The phrase and its reception marked their different mental attitudes fairly conclusively.

Nancy went into Bob's arms with her soul in her eyes. In giving him her lips, and holding him to her heart, she gave herself body and soul into his keeping, and took him into hers, finally, irrevocably. Her decision would not be more absolute when she stood by his side at the altar steps and said, "I will!"

Consequently not the faintest pin prick of doubt entered her mind when, later that afternoon, Bob said, "Look, Gorgeousness! Let's keep this a secret from the others."

And Nancy, her head on his shoulder, laughed happily, shivering with delight at his extravagant nickname. "It's impossible," she said. "Aren't we two entirely different people from the you and me who started out this morning? How can we hide that?"

There was a frown between Bob's eyes, but as his cheek was on her hair she could n't see it.

Soundings

Nancy continued. "And why should we keep it a secret, my dear? Isn't it something infinitely precious that we have found out, something to be very proud of? I'm so glad of it, and proud of you, that I don't care if all the world knows."

"You darling!" said Bob. His arms were round her and the softness of her breast beneath his hand was immeasurably sweet. "You've said it yourself," he went on. "It's so precious that I don't want any one to share it. Cornelia would make it the opportunity of getting off some of her bright lines, and old Lloyd would attempt to come the heavy father. It would seem like sacrilege. Let's be misers and hoard it to ourselves."

Nancy was sitting very still, her eyes half closed as though afraid that, were she to open them wide in the bright sunlight, she would wake up and find that it was all a dream. It was the mention of Cornelia which decided her. There would be a note of sarcasm in her congratulations.

"All right, greedy!" she said. "Then we'll pretend to be very pompous and casual when we get back, and I won't dare to meet your eye across the dinner table because I know that if I do mine will flare up like a bonfire, — and then the cat would be out of the bag!"

With one hand she imitated the feline leaping forth, and they both laughed; and then for a moment were silent. Nancy sighed and settled herself more comfortably against him.

"Why must we go back, my dear? This blue lagoon of ours is unforgettable. We have made it our own for all time. Why can't we make time stand still for us? We have found heaven, — why must we go back to earth, to people who don't matter, to silly dinner tables where you will be separated from me by thousands of miles of unreality? — Oh, my dear, my dear! Don't go away from

me for too long. I want every minute of you! I hadn't any idea how jealous love could make one. I hadn't any idea what love was until you kissed me, although in my mind I had it all cut and dried." She laughed softly. "Was n't that perfectly childish? Hold me tight, Bob. — Tighter!"

She gave a little gasp and then laughed. "Oh, that hurts! We are magnificently strong, aren't we, both of us?"

And on the way back, hand in hand in the cool of the sunset, it was Nancy who stopped and turned to him. "In a few minutes we shall be in sight of the hotel, and then we shall have to begin pretending." She held up her face.

"Kiss me good-by."

Her lips were half-open as he caught her to him.

III

Sleep? That was for last night, not to-night! Who would want to lose consciousness of *this*, — this fire that flamed and seared through all her senses, this ecstasy that flashed and rioted like lightning in a summer sky? It was an icy fever, a joy that was terrific, a great wonder that she held and did not hold.

The word "Bob" became the leit-motif of a wild music whose theme was love. Her mind soared away in great imaginings and came whirling back to it again. She heard the name as a triumphant shout, a crooning, an obligato, a whole orchestra. She quivered and vibrated to the immensity of its rhythm.

It seemed that hitherto she had been looking on at life, wondering, as a child at a peep show. Now a hand had reached out and pulled her in and, with a great gasp, she was snatched up and swept away. She was one with it,

Soundings

throbbing to its throb, — but not saturated with it. This was only the first wonder-step, the fringe, the initiation. This was as far as one could go alone. To touch the very core, she and Bob were necessary to each other. They must go together, together as one, down the marvelous ways of love. Bob! Bob! — If she slept at all she was not aware of it.

As the dawn came rushing up out of the sea, she sat up suddenly in bed, her eyes shining with a great eagerness, her body feather-light, her mind racing.

Speed! Hurry! Flying would not be fast enough to keep up with her desire. A new day was waiting to be lived! A new day, with Bob!

She was up, impatient fingers bungling exasperating hooks.

At last she was downstairs, past the astonished servants, and outdoors, with a deep gloating breath at the magnificence of everything. As she came to the empty beach, gulls cried out to her, the sea smiled and a little wind came and kissed her. She stood silent, her heart shouting. The day flowed through her. She was melted into it.

Bob was coming! Without seeing or hearing, she knew it. She could feel him coming. They had made no arrangements to meet. He too, then, had felt this divine urge!

She turned and saw him in the distance. He broke into a run and came racing up.

Nancy held up her hand. "Let me look at you first!" she said.

He stopped, glowing. "Hurry up!" he laughed. "I shall die of starvation! I'm hungry to kiss you!"

There was such reckless triumph in his voice, his eyes, his whole being. Triumph, how exactly that expressed what she felt too!

The moment was too big. Her eyes half filled with tears. She went up to him and took his two hands and placed them on her breast, holding them there.

"Do you know what to-day is?" she asked. "It's *our* birthday!"

IV

June the thirtieth had passed.

Nancy did not know it. For her, time had no meaning except that every moment of it gave her a new understanding of happiness.

The game of secrecy proposed by Bob became the most exciting thing she had ever known. It kept her bubbling with inward laughter and stimulated her ingenuity to invent new methods of stealing moments alone with him, hasty, breathless moments, when the most they could snatch was a furtive hand-clasp or a whispered "darling!" uttered, however, with an intensity that was like an electric shock.

On the golf course, when some of Bob's wild slices didn't make it impossible, she deliberately drove in the direction of his ball, so that they might walk shoulder to shoulder through the fairway. Coming back in the car they maneuvered with great show of casualness for the back seat. Very politely Bob would ask if she would care for the lap robe.

"Don't you think it's a little hot for that?" she would query. And Bob would answer, "Of course, if you prefer to ruin your skirt with the dust, I'm sure *I* don't care!"

"Perhaps you're right," Nancy would reply, with an excellent assumption of boredom; and a moment later, beneath the shelter of the robe, his fingers would intertwine with hers.

Neither of them intercepted the twinkle of amusement

Soundings

that Cornelia sent her brother as she drove the purring car through the powdered roads of Brittany.

Nancy was living too fast to be able to stop and analyze her happiness. Every tendril of thought in her waking hours reached out and curled itself around Bob, around the ideal of him that she was steadily building.

To say that love is blind is to convert the truth to poetic uses. In reality it sees through a magnifying glass. What is merely precocity, it interprets as genius; homeliness it invests with a special aureole; a single tear becomes a very Niagara of affliction; a smile, and the world is suffused with radiance.

Nancy had n't learned this; so to her the everyday gestures of Bob were naturally endowed with the likeness of Galahad. He was the very "gentle parfit knight, sans peur et sans reproche."

From the moment that she had admitted to herself that her unrest in Paris was not simply a phase of growth but was immediately and absolutely personified by Bob, she saw no further need for resistance. Her mind opened itself to the idea of Bob; and now that he had told her by word and deed that he loved her, now that she was carrying with her the touch of his lips on hers, the feel of his arms around her, there was no longer that instinctive recoil, that quivering "Not yet!" which had been her response to the clamor of nature before his coming.

It seemed that Bob had legitimized that clamor. It was no longer something to shrink from as though venturing upon obscure ground dotted with great notice boards marked danger! She had looked into Bob's eyes and then gone into his arms, and the danger boards were down. Her response now was in the form of passionate kisses, in her cry to him to hold her tight, in her perfectly frank consideration of him as a part of her life.

Emotionally she was too absorbed, too intoxicated, to do any thinking ahead. She didn't ask herself whether she was, in the language of society, "engaged" to Bob, or whether she realized that it would be years before they could marry. She hadn't thought of marriage specifically. She hadn't thought precisely of anything. They had found each other, and that fact was so big, so vital, that she was unable to envisage any other. Yet if any one had challenged her with the definite question, "Are you going to marry Bob?" she would have replied without an instant's hesitation, "What an extraordinary question! — Why, of course we're going to get married. What else?" As though indeed one were doubting such natural phenomena as sunrise or high tide.

This single-minded completeness with which she regarded Bob was strengthened as the days passed. Every kiss that they managed to steal, every intimate glance that they secretly exchanged, every pretext that they devised to enable them to be alone together, confirmed the fact that life and Bob were identical, that in future to consider the one without the other was impossible. They loved each other, — and that said everything.

There came a morning, however, in the second week of July, which was to give a new set of values to these brave dreams. A new factor was dropped into their consciousness, more unexpectedly than a bomb, for that ingenious instrument of death at least announces its imminence by a premonitory scream. This one took the form of a telegram.

All four were in the car, mellow with eighteen holes and an excellent lunch, Lloyd and Bob halfway through their cigars. For a moment the only sound was the rasp of the hand brake as Cornelia stopped the car in front of the hotel and the friendly chirping of a million crickets. No one made a move to get out.

Soundings

Then in a sleepy voice Lloyd said, "Well—that's that!" He shifted slightly in his seat. "Do we stay here, or do we swim?"

"Swim!" said Nancy.

"Stay here!" said Bob.

"Swim!" said Cornelia.

Lloyd groaned. "Oh, Lord, the ayes have it. These women are Amazons!" He flipped the door open and dropped one leg out upon the running board, and at that moment caught sight of Madame coming from the hotel. "The lady carries a telegram," he said. "*C'est pour nous, Madame?*"

Madame gave him a broad smile. She liked the tall American.

"*Oui, Monsieur. C'est pour Mademoiselle!*"

Lloyd went to meet her. "*Merci, Madame,*" he said. "*Je lui*—How the dickens does one say quickly 'I will give it to her?'—Anyhow, I will!" He took the telegram from her hand and gave her another smiling "*merci.*"

"Who's it for?" queried Cornelia.

"Nancy," said Lloyd.

"For me? Why, what on earth—?" Nancy sat up and stretched out her hand. "It must be from Dad." She ripped it open and unfolded it. As she read it her face emptied itself of color. She looked up at Bob, her eyes wide with terror.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked quickly.

There was a dead silence while Nancy read the telegram aloud.

"Return immediately. Your father struck by automobile. Doing well but needs you. James Freemantle.—That's the doctor down in Friar's Icknield," she added.

"Oh, my dear," exclaimed Cornelia.

"Oh, my God!" said Bob.

Lloyd's lips were pursed for whistling. No sound came.

Nancy turned to Bob again. "Does that mean that he's dead?"

One glance at her face was enough for Lloyd. Before Bob could answer, he flung the door of the car open. "Good lord, no!" he said. "Don't talk rot, Nancy! He's had a smash, and he's probably feeling pretty groggy, of course, but there's nothing more in it than that. Come along! Hop out, and we'll see what is to be done."

But Nancy stopped him. "Don't you think he'd have signed the telegram himself if —"

"Heavens, no!" said Bob. "The doctor wouldn't let him. They're a fussy breed, and when they've got a man where they want him they're regular martinets. Besides, this one says 'doing well' and that always means they're disappointed that the patient isn't a darn sight worse!"

He helped Nancy out and began unloading the golf bags.

"I must go to-night," said Nancy, looking up at him. "I must!"

Bob's face was turned away.

"The boat leaves at ten o'clock," said Lloyd. "You go up with Cornelia and start packing. I'll take the car and see about your stateroom for to-night. And I'll also send a telegram to your father."

Nancy turned to him. "Thank you, Lloyd," she said simply.

Cornelia slipped an arm through Nancy's. "Come on up, honey," she said.

Lloyd looked impatiently at Bob. Then he stooped over a golf bag so that his head was near Bob's and said in an urgent undertone, "Aren't you going to offer to take her to England, you fool, or will you leave it to me?"

Soundings

Bob started as if Lloyd had kicked him. "My God!" he said.

"I — Nancy!" He hurried after the girls and caught them at the entrance to the hotel. "Nancy, may I come with you? I don't think it's right for you to cross alone. Let me come and look after you. It's a long way. You won't get home till to-morrow afternoon and there are a million things I —"

Nancy put out her hand and squeezed his. "You're an angel," she said. "But I — I want to be alone. You don't mind?"

Bob made no protest. Nor did he sense the desire not to hurt him in her quick little "You don't mind?"

But Cornelia glanced at his face and wondered what was going on behind his deep frown.

He dropped Nancy's hand. "Of course not!" he said. "It's quite all right if you don't want me."

V

At a quarter to ten that night the car drew up on the quay within the white radius of the arc light hissing and spluttering above the gangway. Blue-bloused porters shouted and gesticulated about the side of the ship.

A great moon silvered all the waters of the harbor. A knot of people saying good-by was gathered at the foot of the gangway. Two silent gendarmes in flowing blue capes walked slowly up and down.

Ordinarily it would have been interesting and a little exciting to watch, — the types were so different from anything one could see in an English or American port. But to-night the wing of tragedy had brushed the four young people and their nerves were on edge. They were aware only of themselves.

Three of the porters fell upon the car and fought for Nancy's suit cases.

"Get to the devil out of here!" cried Lloyd. "Here, you! Take these things." He designated one of the men with a pointing finger. The other two fell back, grumbling. "*Prenez les à la chambre trente deux!*" he added and gave the man a coin.

"*Trente deux? Bien, M'sieur! Merci, M'sieur!*" and the porter went off up the gangway with the suit cases and the golf sticks.

Lloyd turned to Nancy. "You've got all your tickets and things safely?"

Nancy nodded.

"Well," said Lloyd. "We'll see you on board. Come along." He took Nancy's arm. The others fell in behind, and they followed the porter to the stateroom. There was an air of restraint over them all.

"Well, honey," said Cornelia. "We'll expect a telegram from you some time to-morrow to say that everything's all right. I think we'd better say good-by now because the boat'll be going in a few minutes." She took Nancy in her arms. "Bless you, Nancy darling. It's going to be all right, I know! Don't worry too much, honey. We're going to miss you horribly!"

Nancy kissed her on both cheeks. "Don't forget that you're coming to Brimble if — if Dad's well enough."

"Not 'if,'" said Lloyd. "When! — We'll all come crowding down and put so much pep into your father that he'll be glad of a rest! I give you fair warning that it won't be a case of writing to invite us. Oxford is dangerously near, you know, and an invasion of amorphous freshers will make things hum!" His grin was infectious, — or very nearly so. He took Nancy's hand in both of his. "Good luck, old soldier!"

Soundings

Nancy smiled up at him, saying nothing, holding his hand very tight.

Lloyd swung round. "Come on, C'nelia! I want to mail a letter on board."

"Good-by, honey!" Cornelia blew her a kiss and followed her brother out of the stateroom.

"Good-by!" said Nancy. "You've both been perfect angels!"

Bob, hitherto hard-faced, silent, fidgety, gave the door a push with his elbow.

They were facing each other alone at last. The thought that had been uppermost in her mind all day found immediate expression. "I believe he's dead!" she said. "I believe he's dead!"

She stood there white, her hands clenched, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Oh, no, no!" said Bob. "Of course he's not!"

At the sound of his voice she shook herself, passed a hand over her face, and took a deep breath. "Yes, that's rot, is n't it? — I must n't let my nerves play the devil with me like that. We've got to say good-by, or you'll get caught on the boat."

Bob put his arms round her. "Won't you change your mind and let me come," he urged in a whisper. "I've only to stay on board, — here, with you."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "If you came I wouldn't be able to look after Dad properly. It's his turn now, — for a while, — is n't it?"

For a breath there was silence. Then, "Why, of course," said Bob steadily, "I understand."

"I knew you would," said Nancy. She put both her hands on his chest. "To go away is to die a little. D'you remember? It's true, Bob. It's like being uprooted to leave you behind, — possibly to go and lose Dad!" She

gave a little shivery laugh that was half a sob. "Curious how things turn out, is n't it? But whatever happens, I love you, my dear. I love you! D'you understand? — Is it utterly beastly of me to be saying that when Dad may be dead? I can't help it. It's true. The two things are tearing me inside, fighting each other. — Bob! Oh, Bob, I'm so frightened of them both: they're so big."

She stopped, choked, fought for control in his arms. Then with a ghost of a laugh she said, "You must go. I — I don't want you to see me make a fool of myself!"

"Oh, God! I wish I — You poor kid!" He kissed her lips passionately.

For a long moment they clung to each other. Her tears were wet on his cheek.

Then Bob let her go abruptly, caught up his hat and went out.

The ship's siren gave a prolonged blast. The throb of the engine began.

Blind with tears, her face all crumpled, Nancy flung herself face downwards on the bed.

Standing on the quay beside the car, Lloyd threw his cigarette down and stamped on it violently. "Damn it!" he said. "It's rotten bad luck!" He climbed up in front beside Cornelia and slammed the door. "Come on," he said, "let's beat it! — Oh, Bob!"

The ship pulled away slowly from the dock and with much clanging of bells and waving of handkerchiefs drew out into the harbor.

Bob, his hat clenched in his hands, his face drawn and white, turned from the departing boat. "Thank God she's gone!" he thought. "I might have — have loved her too well! She's lucky if she only knew it. A few days more and I — I could n't have helped myself!" He reached the car and got in without a word.

PART THREE

Chapter One

I

THE rattle of a high gig came near, passed and died out. From behind Grigg's place came the piercing squeals of a litter of pigs, drowned by the sudden roar of a car which changed gears as it took the hill at the end of the street.

Then there was silence, — that silence which the country knows at noon on a day in full summer, murmurous with bees and crickets and the whisper of languid leaves, interrupted from time to time by the more strident activities of man that are made musical only by distance.

Jim Hawthorne lay listening to it in a daze of pain in the hospital at Friar's Icknield, the sun streaming obliquely into the room. The doctor had just left him.

Jim's mind was moving with overwhelming slowness. He could n't seem to get hold of it and bring it down to the point. What they had told him was so fantastic, so obviously about some one else, some poor devil who had been struck by an automobile, — a car which had n't even stopped to see if the poor devil were dead or not. — Curious psychology that driver must have had! — What was it Freemantle had said? Injury to the spine. — A good fellow, Freemantle, once you got over his pompous manner. Probably due to his circumscribed life, that manner. Ought to have kicked around the world a bit before settling down to a country practice. — Injury to the spine. Partial paralysis. Poor devil, that was pretty rough luck!

Soundings

Jim was sorry for him, infinitely sorry. For apparently æons of time he stared through the dust that danced in the beam of sun, feeling wave after wave of sorrow. At last his eyes dropped to his own legs as if in sympathy for that man who would never be able to move his again — and his mind geared in to the facts with a jar that sent a cold wave of fear through him. It was he who had suffered this injury!

The verdict meant wheeled chairs and air cushions. It meant stagnation and decay. It meant terror.

The sun went black. The outdoor noises seemed full of derision. For a time his control slipped and Jim forgot himself in blasphemies against the chauffeur, against fate, against himself. He ended up exhausted by the storm of rage which had shaken him. It was succeeded by a more terrible phase of self-pity and tears, visualizing another thirty years of existence on a stretcher, — he, who had roamed the countryside tirelessly, to whom the feel of turf beneath his feet meant more than half of life. What was his crime that he should be robbed, strapped down, broken like this? He would go stark staring mad. He would grow into a mean-tempered, twisted devil, old before his time, pitied, his mind distorted and evil, nursing a perpetual grievance, hating the little charities that he must accept, hating himself as he grew worse, and perhaps even coming to hate the only thing left him in all the world, Nancy.

His body sagged and the tears ran down his face as, under the spur of fear, his imagination flamed and rioted. They had told him that Nancy was coming.

The thought of her was like a mental poultice. He gradually steadied, like a frightened horse feeling the gentle hand and hearing the reassuring voice of its rider. At last, trembling, he raised a hand and rang the bell.

“I can do that, at least,” he thought, and when the white-

clad nurse entered, he said, "Would you mind washing my face, nurse?"

The question, with its recognition of utter helplessness, almost sent him off again. But he made an immense effort of will and went on talking quickly.

"My daughter will be coming soon. It would be positively brutal to let her first glimpse of me be like this. Thank God they sent the barber in here this morning. It's incredible how soon a man goes to seed without soap and water."

The nurse smiled. "Think of it the other way round," she said. "Think of the fundamental vanity which makes you and me wash and prink every day and change our clothes half a dozen times, while the great mass love and marry and live and die in happy ignorance of either soap or water. — Put your arm round my shoulder. — That's right. I'm going to change your position a little."

She shifted the pillows at his back, moved quietly about the room and returned with a basin and water, soap and a towel.

"Do you think I can do it myself?" asked Jim.

"That's the question I always hope for," she said. "You've rounded the corner!"

It was more than suggestion. It was assertion.

Remembering the reason for which he had rung for her, Jim smiled sarcastically at himself. All the same, psychologically, it was the comment he needed. Coupled with the act of washing, insignificant though that act was in the new scale of self-reliance and independence which he would have to learn, it gave him the first stirrings of renewed courage, of the belief that he was at least on the way to get hold of himself. He was calmer when she left him again.

The old legend of Bruce and the spider came into his

Soundings

mind and it amused him to draw the analogy between himself and the insect — knocked down first by his wife's death, again by Nancy's awakening, and now, when he had laboriously climbed to the point of subordinating his need for her probable need of him, knocked down for the third time, down lower than he had ever been before. — What, in God's name, was the idea behind it all? From the unplumbed hold-all of the mind where a million unknown things lie packed away unsuspected, came rolling the sonorous lines of the psalm penned by another stricken man.

*“De profundis clamavi ad te, domine!
Domine, exaudi vocem meam!”*

Years previously, just after Nancy had been born, he had wandered into a cathedral in Brittany. The choir had chanted them. He had been struck by their magnificent simplicity, by their suggestion, not so much of appeal and hope as of command and certainty. They were not the pitiful supplications of one prostrated in abasement. They were more the self-revelation of one king to another, speaking on terms of moral equality, standing eye to eye, with full knowledge of each other's integrity.

The Latin would not come. He repeated them in English.

“Out of the depths have I cried to thee, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
If thou, O Lord, shalt mark iniquities,
Lord, who shall stand it?
For with Thee there is merciful forgiveness
And by reason of thy Law
I have waited for thee O Lord. . . .”

There was no whining there, but a certain pride. Jim Hawthorne began weighing that word very carefully.

II

The patch of sunlight had moved a foot or so across the floor.

The nurse came into the room, her eyes naturally seeking out her patient. Professionally she noted the change, but it was the human side of her which rejoiced that the dreamy, timeless, lack-luster expression of pain and sickness had gone. The nerve storm had passed. His face, and especially his eyes, were serene once more.

She crossed to the bed and smoothed it with deft touches. "You won't need me much more, Mr. Hawthorne," she said. "You're not only a million times better, but your daughter's here. She's coming up the stairs."

"That's the best news in the world," said Jim. He held out his hand. "You've been awfully nice to me, nurse. I'm deeply grateful."

She shook hands with him. "Don't forget to let me know when you hold your next exhibition!"

Voices and footsteps could be heard on the stairs. Jim's eyes were glued to the door.

The nurse went out. He heard her say, "Here you are, Miss Hawthorne. He's all ready for you!"

Nancy entered the room. Some one closed the door behind her.

It was not across ten feet of floor that they looked at one another. It was across the enormous gap that one brief year had made between them, a year whose climax had been equally devastating for both. Much as they loved each other, close as they had been during the long quiet years of Nancy's girlhood, this short separation, like a cyclone, had whirled them apart and tossed them upon far different peaks of experience.

Unconsciously their glance was an appraisal behind

Soundings

which was the desire that each would fit back in the old accustomed mental pigeonhole.

For Nancy, loaded down with the burden of new discoveries, new experiences, it would have been easier if he had met her at the boat with his usual quiet poise, familiar with the smell of Scotch tweed and tobacco. In this bare room, tinged faintly with carbolic, she was not sure of him. The fact of his lying there, without movement, caught her by the throat.

It was with something of a shock that Jim saw, not the young girl whose immaturity had been his one anxiety when she departed so gayly from Brimble, but a young woman on whom forces outside his control had been at work. She was like a bud which overnight had blossomed. It was not that she had changed physically. She was the same slim, upstanding, adorable Nancy; but she had a quality, a fineness, the word was almost "leanness", which told how much water had flowed under the bridges in one brief year. It was most wonderful and beautiful to see, the flowering of this girl, the perfection of whose youth inspired a sense of wonder and reverence, almost of holiness. If only he could catch it and put it on canvas! The thought passed like a flash through his brain and was immediately wiped out by the emotion of this vision of her immense significance. It seemed to him that she personified the whole mystery of life, past, present and for all time.

Nancy remained at the door only for the space of two quick heartbeats. Then she heard him say, in a tone almost of awe, "Nancy! My dear!" and the next moment was across the room, kneeling by his bed, her arms around him.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad, what have they done to you?"

For a moment Jim Hawthorne marveled. How amaz-

ing were some of life's paradoxes, at one moment to plunge one into the abyss, the next to give one such ecstasy as this!

He laughed, following her with greedy eyes as she sat up. "What have they done to *you*?" he asked. "Child alive, let me *look* at you!"

His laugh bewildered her. "I want to know about you first," she said. "What happened? Who did it? When was it? That telegram frightened me almost to death!"

Jim frowned. "That fellow Freemantle is too damned conscientious. He's steeped in the rules of his craft. I'd rather he'd have held his hand until I could write you."

"Tell me what happened!"

"It was my own fault," said Jim, "in a way, — like taking a mashie for an iron shot. The Judkins kid came dashing out of their front gate just as I'd edged over towards the ditch to let a car go by. For a fraction of a second I was petrified. Then I jumped, grabbed the child, — and was too late to get out of the way of the car. It caught me fair and square! Just imagine standing there like a fool! If I hadn't wasted that second before I leaped, we should both have been all right. As it was, — well, they told me that the child is all right. The car, it seemed, went off at top speed. Rottenly unsporting, I call that. However, I suppose it doesn't make any essential difference."

Nancy laughed, a little hysterically. She felt shaken and rather sick. "You're a perfect idiot, blaming yourself!" she said. "If I had my way," she sprang up and began walking up and down, "I'd track those brutes down and take them out of their precious car and *beat* them to death. It's disgusting to think that they get off scot free, while you —" She stopped and looked down at him. As she put her question she was rigid, awaiting the reply without breathing. "How long is it going to take you to get well?"

Soundings

Jim had known all along that sooner or later that question was coming. He had made up his mind exactly how to answer it, — with a quiet evasion, with a casualness that would entirely mislead her; more, would make her believe what she wanted to believe; that in a few short weeks he would be about again. But as he looked at her, he knew that it could n't be done. It would have been all right for the old Nancy, the child who went away, untouched, with no basis of experience for the proper valuation of responsibility. He was brought up short by the realization of a new Nancy. Whatever her experience had been — and even at that moment he felt a little jealous at being outside it — her voice, her manner, her whole bearing were no longer those of a child turning to her father. They were those of one individual dealing with another on terms of equality. The thought recurred to him that he had used almost the same phrase about the attitude of David in his psalm. It was right. The similarity was there. This Nancy was asking for no comfortable evasion. She was standing shoulder to shoulder with him, braced, asking as of right for the truth.

He gave it to her. "I'm afraid we're rather up against it," he said quietly. "We shall have to make some pretty basic readjustments, you and I."

Nancy was very still. "You mean —?" She herself had used the word readjustments in Paris. She was to have taken sleepy old Brimble, where nothing ever happened, in both hands and squeezed life out of it, she and Dad between them — she and Dad, and Bob!

"I shall be able to work again," said Jim, "use my hands and arms, but Freemantle says it may be years before I can walk again, if ever. The verdict is partial paralysis."

The human mind is like that extraordinary plant which curls up at the approach of a trespassing finger. Unlike the plant, however, it cannot remain shut indefinitely.

And yet it is a moot point, after all, whether the tragedy would not be greater if it could.

On the pronouncement of those words, Nancy's mind closed up tight, refusing to let their meaning percolate. It seemed that the two words lashed around inside her head, echoing and reverberating, until, the momentary spasm of contraction over, they darted at their objective, like snakes striking.

Jim was watching her. "Bite on it, old lady!" he said.

Nancy sat down on the bed again, leaning forward, her hands clasped so that the knuckles were white. "Is it true?" she said. "I can't believe it. It's — it's impossible, Dad! You —" A hundred different pictures of him flashed through her mind at once, as though they were arguments against the possibility of this monstrous thing's being true. She saw him now felled like a giant oak, slowly withering.

"One reads about these things in the papers," she said. "They always happen to some one else. It never seemed possible that it could happen to you or me. — Oh, my God, how silly it is, how futile, how sinfully wasteful, how incredibly blundering, to go and pick you when there was a whole villageful of laborers to choose from! Why, I met people in Paris who thought I was wonderful just because I was *your* daughter, who raved about your work, who could n't ask me enough questions about you! Why could n't it have been young Fields, or Curly's drunken father, or any of them? They've never contributed anything, and never will. — It is n't fair! It is n't right! There's no sense of proportion about it! It's sheer unintelligence."

"Steady, old lady! Steady!" said Jim. "That's pretty wild shooting. Any child is worth saving, and this one was 'contributed' by one of those laborers!"

Soundings

"That's not using the word as I meant it! Those people breed like rabbits. Mary Judkins herself is the only one alive out of six. The other five were merely good excuses for expensive funerals and much beer!"

"And yet," said Jim, "if you'd been there instead of me, you'd have done just what I did."

"Yes," said Nancy, "and if I'd been crippled, you'd be saying just the things that I've said! — Oh, what's the use?" It was almost a cry. She caught her father's hand and gradually her voice lost its sharp antagonism. "You would n't deny Mary the relief of giving the child a good spanking? — I had to spit out the bad taste, Dad! But it knocks the whole damn thing sky-high!"

III

The sighing of beech trees; the familiar evening breeze on the top of the Cross; a girl, alone, looking down over the teeming valley which melted into the blood-red of the setting sun. She could weep, shout, stand naked, — no one would ever know. Down there was the main stream; up here the backwater, a place of silence, stagnation, solitude.

But was it? Down there she had just begun to feel the tug of the current, the exhilaration of competing; had glimpsed horizons stretching one beyond another, alluring, bewildering, vital, — only to be snatched out of it all and flung back into the cabbage patch.

"I'm spoiling to get on with the next chapter," she had said, "not with my work, but with myself, with life."

Well? Well, the page had been whirled back as though by a great wind. The new chapter was begun like crashing through ice into deep water: shock, numbness, wild struggle.

Youth expresses disappointment in a resentful phrase;

hurt, by a blind lashing out of fists and feet. Nancy had been immediately both disappointed and hurt.

By slow degrees she was reluctantly on her way to a discovery, — that reality had come rushing into her backwater like a tidal wave. Would she then go a step farther and find that there is no such thing as a backwater at all; that life, generally conceived in capital letters, is nothing but the sum total of all the small ones? Would she realize that it is never “out there”, somewhere beyond one’s grasp, but ever in the cup of her two hands? What exactly had she meant by saying that “the whole damned thing was knocked sky-high”?

What was the sediment beneath all that emotional froth?

The stiff climb up the hill was exhilarating, — and she didn’t want to be exhilarated. She wanted to be mournful. She had come there to be mournful, — and yet the glow that lay over the valley was most marvelously soft and beautiful. She wanted to say hell and damnation, to knock trees down and push boulders over the cliff. She wanted to sit down and howl, to be completely and delightfully miserable, — and her mind was reaching out, in spite of her, to all the things that were waiting for her to do. She wanted to indulge in an orgy of self-pity, and inside her was a tugging and a tingling that was absolutely callous in its urgency. How egotistic to feel like this when Dad was smashed up — smashed up — smashed up!

She repeated it in order to make herself get the full realization of tragedy, in order to subdue that unseemly tugging, as unexpectedly incongruous as a drunken man lurching about in a church.

Backwater? Stagnation? It ought to have been that! Any decent-minded girl would have been in an abandonment of grief, consumed with the catastrophe.

It was unarguable, but, and this with a certain uneasi-

Soundings

ness, Nancy could not see it that way. The first explosion of grief for her father was over. The pity of it, for him, had driven her to rage and almost blasphemy, — a lashing out with verbal feet and fists in the hospital.

Up here on the hill the unexpectedness of her mental trail began to be frightening. It was difficult to define. She sat and faced herself with it, elbows on knees, chin in hands. She felt that only a part of her was sorry, and that a minor part. The rest of her was impatient. She was amazed at finding herself unable to get into the tragedy, to become a part of it. Something was driving her on, calling, rather, leaving the tragedy to be borne by her father. She desired frantically to stop, to limp along with him. But there was something raw and brutal in her which would n't let her. She was appalled at the realization that already she was leaving him in her mind, going on, reaching out, turning instinctively from emptiness to fullness. — This was what Dad must have meant by the ultimate isolation of one individual from another. It was cruel beyond words, because fundamentally, deep down inside, there was no real desire for resistance! One *needed* to go on.

“But supposing he'd been killed,” she cried. “Would I still have felt like this?”

Her mind shied away from the answer. She didn't dare go near it. But suddenly the question took new form. “Suppose I had been crippled. Would Bob go on?”

When she came down the hill Mrs. Weeks met her at the gate.

“Why, dearie!” she exclaimed. “You look as if you'd seen a ghost.”

And to her great surprise Nancy crumpled up and burst into tears. “Oh, Weeksie, I have!” she sobbed.

Chapter Two

I

LOOKING over the hedge and across the terraced garden, whose lower slope was a blaze of roses and carnations shepherded by tall prim hollyhocks, one might have seen the two of them most fine afternoons on the red brick porch, — Jim on one side of the tea table, lying back in an attitude of superb relaxation, pipe in teeth, reading aloud to Nancy who, in the depths of a deck chair, hands clasped behind her head, one knee crossed over the other, sat listening, facing the west so as to get the last of the setting sun.

A colored linen cover concealed the rubber-tired chair with wooden hand rims on the wheels in which Jim looked so lazily at ease; and the presence of a single golf bag, a woman's, leaning against the cottage wall behind them would not have struck one with any peculiar significance.

One would probably have passed on, indeed, with an inward glow of pleasure at the picture of palship made by that perfectly beautiful girl and her big brown cheery parent in that setting of flowers with the background of the cozy thatched cottage.

A moment later, on the way to the village, one might have met a nurse, trig and well set up in her gray uniform, and it would never have entered one's mind that some time later she would be helping that big brown man to bed.

Nancy had fought against the woman's coming. "We don't want a stranger messing about, Dad! It's *my* job and you're jolly well not going to cheat me out of it."

Soundings

"Sorry, old lady, but Freemantle's promised to send her up this afternoon."

"Then I'll ride down and tell him to stop her!"

Jim shook his head. It was his first day out of hospital. "Please don't," he said. "I'll feel more comfortable with a nurse, honestly!"

That settled it. The duel of half lies was begun.

After the first month, when Jim was beginning to settle down to a routine, Nancy saw to it that the nurse was removed from the cottage and lodged in the village, with orders to come only in the morning and at night.

For the rest, Nancy gave Jim all of herself that she could, — a great affection, deep loyalty and the kind of continuous service that made her spend herself in concealing the fact that she was doing things for him. She encouraged him to read to her, demanded that he play chess with her, quarreled with his criticism of her work so that he might the more speedily be driven to grasp a brush, to prove by actual execution the argument that would always have two sides if left to discussion only. Her tactics might be described as stimulative opposition.

But when she went off by herself, sensing the times when he needed to be alone, Nancy found herself, spiritually, foot loose and fancy free. From the moment that her father turned the corner — and it was then that the nurse was relegated to the village — Nancy went on with her happiness like a squirrel in the depths of winter with its hoard of nuts.

The business of her father was like a dam which temporarily blocked up and held the stream. Jim became now like an island round which the flood water has poured and gone on, seeking its inevitable level. She was waiting, hugging to her like a miser the greatly enriched horizon which she had brought back to Brimble. She went through the long

168

quiet days like the bearer of secret tidings, — with serene superiority, seeing the things around her as infinitesimal and unimportant, unreal even, in comparison with that secret world wherein she alone might walk.

She was glad of this period of waiting. It gave her time to sort things out. "I seem to need introspection periodically," she said to herself. "It's like laying out one's clothes on the bed and going over them. One knows then what one's got and what condition it's in." She smiled. "I never realized when I went off that Curly really knew more about me than I did myself. All that going up the hill at night with Dad and the thrill that couldn't be put into words have only one meaning, now that I look back. Curly knew it! And that amazing combination of unhappy happiness, of perfection with a sense of tarnish on it, that feeling of not-quite-completeness that took the edge off things in Germany and Italy, and in France even after Cornelia, — they were the same thing, I'm perfectly sure, and I hadn't the slightest idea of it! — It's extraordinary what a difference Bob has made! I feel — how shall I put it — all gathered together. I don't want to run about any more. I'm not fussing in my mind, not restless. Thank the lord there aren't any people here one has to bother with, no men, I mean. — I wonder whether Bob is meeting other girls and hating it?" She laughed. "Do I flatter myself? Or are men less monogamous than we are?"

Something of this new tranquillity of Nancy's was manifest to Jim. It seemed to be a part of that ethereal loveliness which had surrounded her like a halo on their first meeting. He put it in a nutshell by commenting to himself that her eyes had greater depth. He was eager to probe the reason, to dispel her unconscious aloofness, to be invited into her state of being. But never by hint or ques-

Soundings

tion did he trespass. In the fullness of time perhaps she would come to him. Meanwhile there was no one aspect of her experiences abroad, as she had related them to him, to which, in his opinion, the reason could be ascribed.

Somewhere therein, however, lay the explanation; and, in the endless embrace of the wheelchair, in the manipulation of which he was acquiring considerable skill, he turned it over in his mind. There were three men of whom she talked, Lloyd, Jean and Bob. Jean, presumably, could be dismissed from any calculation. He was concentrated upon Cornelia. But the other two? Jim Hawthorne looked at Nancy and pondered.

"Ideally speaking," he thought, "youth may be all that the poets crack it up to be, the time of fire and verve, when all the world is one's footstool. But practically? No! Youth is the most difficult, trying period, whether for man or woman. More for woman because the expression of sex is so vitally different. But for both it's the hardest time in life, hedged in with half-imaginings and frightening curiosities, and with no mental ballast to steady the craft; further handicapped by that half-shame, half-timidity, which binds them to silence upon the questions that matter and that may affect the whole of their after-life; and with the possibility of that semi-knowledge that comes from God knows where — from veiled references and things half heard which act as kerosene on a flickering fire — going sour within them. — Either it's a time of inhibitions and repressions, or of what is called so carelessly "wild oats." And the unhappiness is about equal! If I'd been my own father I suppose that the inevitably emotional relationship between father and child would have obscured my judgment and made me blame myself for the fool things that I did while I was finding my way through. I didn't graduate from the blind frantic period of unconscious search

until I met Nan and figuratively speaking took root. That brought me to comparative sanity, to where, in fact, Nancy is now, if one can believe those eyes of hers. Has *she* taken root? Please God, she has! Without having made a damn fool of herself, — so long as the boy is the right kind. That's where one gets fooled. — I'd like to take a look at those two lads!"

II

September came. The only one of that group in the cottage who was conscious of time was Jim Hawthorne.

To Mrs. Weeks there was no such thing. One day merely succeeded another with divinely appointed regularity. If the beech leaves changed from green to gold, it was no affair of hers. Her days consisted in doing for the 'Awthornes, and, apart from an occasional set-to with her "old man", the rest might go hang.

The nurse, whose name was Miss Heseltine, remained as aloof as the Sphinx. She was like a perfect machine, performing a given number of revolutions daily and then stopping, — like an electric sweeper that one puts in a closet and forgets until it is wanted again. Of her thoughts, aspirations, or possible personality she gave them no glimpse. Not even Mrs. Fields, in whose cottage she lodged, could find anything as a subject of gossip, except her inscrutability. She was one of those frigid, mysterious women who consume their own smoke, who appear to have none of the normal emotions, are remarkable only for their apparent and persistent self-sufficiency and whose end is similar to that of the donkey, — you never see one dead.

To Nancy the flight of those two months was unnoticed.

It was Jim who was aware of the blaze of August gliding at last into the quieter glow of September. On him that passage left its mark, — his hair became completely white.

Soundings

Time is longer in a wheeled chair ; how much longer, not even he could tell. But he knew now by heart the feeling of that moment when dawn is in preparation. He knew and could interpret the meaning of each night sound, — the mysterious stretching of cane chairs as though some one had got up ; the creak of untrodden stairs in the dead of night ; the undercurrent of furtive movement that causes twigs to snap suddenly like pistols and patches of leaves to rustle when there is no wind ; the sleepy call of the first waking bird that starts the tumult of a new day before the darkness has been broken up. He had made the discovery that pain is like a symphony, played with infinite variations upon an innumerable assortment of instruments. He had plumbed the depths of that hour when courage ebbs, when the numbed mind is a helpless prey to fierce distortions, when death seems the only ease. He had found out that there were moments when being alone threw him into a clammy sweat of fear, of refined and unendurable terror. If only he might scream to Nancy then and have her hold his hand, he would have refused a million years of Heaven. But he found that those moments pass : and out of that last finding was born the knowledge of his having conquered.

So September came ; and with it an unexpected break in the routine of readjustment and waiting.

Nancy had written at length to Cornelia in St. Malo, giving the full news of her father and the impossibility of their coming to stay. Before she had time to write to Bob, giving him different and more private news, she received the first of a series of postcards from which she could only deduce that they had been hit by a burst of unrest the moment she had left them. The cards were like a paper-chase helter-skelter through the departments of France, — from Brittany south through Poitou into Gascony, then across to Languedoc and Provence ; thence along the

Riviera and up into the French Alps and the Franche-Comté; back through Champagne into Paris and on to the Channel.

It had been impossible to communicate with them because they gave no address and because, if their continuous speed was any indication, they had no desire to be communicated with. But every two or three days they had sent Nancy a batch of postcards which showed them greedily devouring the map of France.

One morning, however, instead of the postman, a boy came toiling up the hill on a bicycle which he dropped into the hedge at the gate and, standing shyly first on one foot, then on the other, demanded sixpence as a delivery charge for the telegram which he handed to Nancy.

Almost before Nancy had read the wire and paid the boy, trembling with excitement as she told her father that they were coming, the unforgettable note of Cornelia's horn could be heard down in the valley, as they turned the corner out of Friar's Icknield and took the hill that would bring them into Brimble.

"That's the car!" she cried.

"Perfectly splendid!" said Jim. "Run down and meet them, old lady, or they'll shoot past the bottom of the lane without even noticing it."

She was off without further comment. He watched her leap down the terrace, take the flower beds like hurdles in her stride and clamber over the fence at the bottom. Her eagerness to greet these others whom he did not even know hit him hard for a moment. He felt a hot wave of resentment at their coming, against their very existence. Then he gave a wry laugh. "I suppose that's a sign of encroaching decrepitude!" he muttered.

The car came to a stop on the other side of the trees. Jim could n't see them, but the rich youthfulness of their

Soundings

excited voices came up to him like a warning. It phrased itself: "The King is dead! Long live the King!"

They came up the lane, talking, apparently, all at once. Then the gate clicked and the two girls came down the brick path, their arms round each other's waists. The two men followed. "Well," thought Jim, "bring on your king!" His impression was of something irresistible and beautiful, but sweeping and relentless. They were the future, — and he was the past. It would be difficult, he felt, to speak the same language, much less to reach out and touch their attention.

"Here they are, Dad!" said Nancy. "You can't very well help identifying Cornelia, but that's Lloyd and this is Bob."

They stood in a group around his chair.

Cornelia smiled down upon him in all her blond loveliness. At the sight of her, little lines of good humor ran to the corners of Jim's eyes and mouth.

"Why, my dear," he said, "you're like an inquisitive little ray of sunshine. I hope you've come to stay?"

In her own phrase Cornelia "fell for him" on the spot. She gave him her hand warmly, and laughed. "Of course I'm inquisitive!" she said. "To satisfy my curiosity about you was one of my reasons for stopping off here. It would be perfectly lovely to stay, but unfortunately we're on our way to Plymouth."

"I suppose it would n't be fair to suggest that you change your plans," said Jim. "I'm curious, too, you know!" He turned a keen glance on Lloyd. "What do *you* say? You're evidently the boss of this expedition."

Lloyd chuckled. "You hear that? I knew all along that it was evident to the naked eye!" He turned to Jim. "We're running on schedule, sir. Mother and Dad took it into their heads to come over and they're due to land to-

morrow. After we've dropped Bob at his home, we're going to meet them at Plymouth and take them joy-riding."

"Nice boy," thought Jim. "Charming manners — and *clean!* — Well," he said, "I'm delighted that we can all get a look at each other, even if it must be a short one." He held out his hand to Lloyd. Then he turned to Bob who, in the ordinary British way, contented himself with a firm handclasp and an inhibitive "How do you do, sir?"

"Devilish attractive," thought Jim. "Looks as if he might go far." He shot a quick look at Nancy. Which one of these was "the King"?

III

Their stay was of a brevity that made it seem afterwards almost as if they had never come.

They dug up a picnic lunch from the car, ate it on the red brick terrace to the accompaniment of beer and shandy-gaff provided by the exclamatory Mrs. Weeks, and then departed for the other side of England.

Nancy hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. She had expected so much that to receive so little was not only teasing and dissatisfying but perplexing. It needed working out.

To see them all again was, of course, priceless. Dear old Lloyd had been in extraordinarily good form, and Cornelia had been awfully sweet to Dad. So, for that matter, had Bob. Indeed it had almost seemed as though they were in competition to see who could be nicest to him. That part of it was splendid, especially as Dad had obviously liked them all.

But the important thing, the thing between Bob and herself that had been the hub of her universe since she got back, — that was not splendid at all. When they saw

Soundings

each other, he in the car, she standing waving, that high light had appeared in his eyes, — the same high light that had come when he first took her in his arms up there on the headland. This time again it had set her pulses leaping. That was right. And then, when they had tumbled out of the car, there had been a note in his voice that was for her alone. That was right too, not merely right, but wonderful and magnificent, bringing to an end the period of waiting and starting everything forward again.

But then — then she didn't understand. Something had shut down, had broken the current between them. In all the laughter and chatter during the rest of the party, she had been alone. Bob, her Bob, had gone away somewhere. She looked at him across the picnic, joked with him, — and he had n't come back, not the inner he that was for her and for nobody else. What was the matter? What had they lost between them? In St. Malo there had never been a moment when he had left her alone like that, not even in the public dining room when Lloyd and she were in the heat of an argument. Bob had always been there, close, at her mental elbow.

But to-day he was not only not there, but she couldn't reach him: had n't reached him, even when they got back in the car and Cornelia had started the engine and Nancy had purposely kissed her again and shaken hands once more with Lloyd as an excuse to be able to do so with Bob.

She had stood there, smiling and waving as they purred away, dropped down the hill like a bullet, turned to the right at the bottom and disappeared, — smiling and waving, when all the while it felt as though the whole world were empty.

For a time she stayed there motionless. A red squirrel flirted down a tree not a yard from her, ran across the road, sat up and looked back at her, and then, with a flick of his

tail, ran up another tree and began a trapeze performance among the branches. Nancy adored squirrels. In winter she left trails of nuts, already cracked, on the brick path. Once she had succeeded in winning the confidence of one of them to the extent of having him run up her skirt and climb on to her shoulder. It had been a triumphant moment.

To-day the squirrel and his acrobatics were lost on her. She turned finally with a deep and thoughtful frown and walked slowly up the lane to the cottage.

A moment later the inevitable reaction set in and immediately a host of reasons began popping up one after the other: it was the first time he had met Dad and of course his attention had been fully occupied; there had been so little time; there was all the business of the lunch; there was the underlying consciousness of having to drive on schedule; there was the fact of its being her home and his seeing her therefore in unfamiliar surroundings, to say nothing of its being in a crowd. Had they been alone together for five minutes, this miserable hiatus, this sickening emptiness, could never have come into being. But at least there was this to be thankful for: Bob was home and now she could write to him. — Thinking back, was n't it a little queer that he had never once written since she had come home? He could have gone off by himself for half an hour at some place where they had stopped for the night. — Two whole months, and not a line, — not even to say how glad he was that her father had n't been killed! There had been postcards, of course, but they did n't count. — Funny that she had n't thought about it before! She had been too occupied with her own end of their relationship. But now it was n't funny at all. It was of such vital moment to them both that it had to be accounted for, — it, and the snapping of the current this morning.

As she pushed the gate open and marched determinedly

Soundings

along the brick path, she looked across to where she had left her father. There was no one there. He had wheeled himself away.

It was with a sigh of relief that Nancy went straight up to her room and sat down to write to Bob.

IV

When Mrs. Weeks came shuffling in with the lamps that night she found that Nancy had set a match to the fire. The room was full of dancing shadows.

"Well, I declare!" she said. "It's *that* early for a fire. But it do make the room cosy-like." As she placed the lamps on their respective tables, she gave a chuckle. Then she turned to Nancy with a coy expression in her one good eye. "You'd ought to have persuaded them young fellers to stay, dearie. They was nice-lookin', both of 'em, specially the tall one as laughed so much. 'E's a proper catch!"

Nancy caught her father's eye and laughed. "You're a naughty old thing, Weeksie!" she said. "Didn't you like the other one? Wasn't he a catch too?"

Mrs. Weeks considered the question with her head on one side. "I suppose he's all right," she said, "but it was more difficult to size him up. He's one of the quiet kind, and you can't never tell about them, not off-hand like. — Well, I'll be getting along now. Good night, Mr. 'Aawthorne. Good night, dearie!"

"Good night, Mrs. Weeks," said Jim. "By the way, have you put the ginger ale out?"

"Yes, indeed! I'd as soon forget my way 'ome as forget that."

Once again father and daughter exchanged a smile.

"Good night, Weeksie!" said Nancy.

"Good night, dearie," replied the old lady.

When the door closed behind her, Jim took a thoughtful pull at his pipe. "You know," he said, "I think she's right, at that."

"What about?" queried Nancy.

"About that fellow Whittaker."

"Bob," said Nancy.

"All right, Bob then," said Jim. "Regardless of race, that quiet type takes a good deal of knowing. It's a little over-aloof, never gives itself away and always leaves one wondering."

"Yes?" Nancy smiled into the fire. She was perched on a hassock beside Jim and was leaning with one arm on his chair.

"I don't suppose that he spoke more than twenty sentences the whole time he was here," said Jim. "The other lad was too busy cutting verbal capers. He's certainly a most charming and entertaining fellow, that American. But although he was the whole show and left a lasting impression, he couldn't altogether extinguish Bob. There was a certain force behind Bob's quietness. He was like an older brother amusedly listening to a younger one showing off before strangers, rather proud of him and pleased with the way the youngster is succeeding, but with a sense of underlying mutual understanding with the others, — like a wink between two people at the expense of a third. See what I mean?"

Nancy nodded. "Yes," she said, "I know exactly. — What else did you think about him?"

Jim pushed down the ashes of his pipe with a gingerly forefinger. "I thought he was extremely good-looking," he said. "Good features and a fine body; not an ounce of fat anywhere. He's a boxing blue you said, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Nancy.

Soundings

"He looks like it," said Jim. "What's he reading?"

"History," said Nancy.

"What's he going to do, the Bar and politics?"

"He doesn't know," said Nancy.

"Is he well off?"

"No, he's a church mouse," said Nancy. "His father's a curate."

"H'm!" said Jim. "Everything ahead of him and nothing behind, eh? If he's a *man* it may be better for him that way. He looks as if he had determination enough to undertake anything and enough gray matter to put it through. But one would have to see a good deal more of him before one's opinion would be worth anything. The most one can say about him is that he leaves one predisposed in his favor. Lloyd and he are poles apart. That boy is what Kipling calls the Little Brother of all the world. One warms to him from the word 'go', without any reservations. I suppose he'll return to America when he comes down from Oxford?"

Nancy made no reply. Her hands were stretched out to the fire, the fingers wide apart. Then she said, "Dad!"

The change in her voice was enough to make Jim look quickly at her. He became monosyllabic in his turn. "Yes?" he said.

"Do you remember the night I came down the hill and told you about Curly?"

Jim's muscles began to tighten. "For various reasons," he said, "I don't think I shall ever forget it, my dear."

"Do you remember my comparing it to being hit by a cyclone, and saying that one day I wanted that cyclone to hit me?"

"Yes," said Jim.

"Well — it has."

Jim's eyes were on the back of that brown head and those

firm shoulders. He put one hand slowly out to touch her. It trembled a little. He thought better of it and withdrew it. "I'm — I'm awfully glad, old lady!" he said.

Nancy went on, gathering speed as she went. "I did n't tell you before, because I somehow was n't ready. It was as though it had n't become a part of me sufficiently. To-night's the first time I've wanted to *talk* about it, though I suppose you've known all along, haven't you, Dad?" She swung around on the hassock and faced him. "Have n't I *looked* different since I came back? It does n't seem possible for me to have remained the same when I've felt so infinitely much older and realer ever since I found I loved Bob."

Jim nodded. So Bob was "the King"! "Yes," he said. "There was a change in you and I'd been wondering about it. — I'm glad they came down. I'm glad I've seen him. Would you — would you care to tell me something about it, old lady? When you found out and what your plans are, and so on?"

"Plans?" echoed Nancy. "We did n't have time to make any plans. We'd only just found it out in St. Malo when the telegram came about you."

"I see," said Jim. "That was too bad! — Are you — are you engaged?"

Nancy laughed. "I don't know! I suppose so!"

Jim reached out and dropped his hand over hers. "My dear," he said, "my dear! It's a long step, isn't it?"

Nancy bent down and put her cheek on his hand. "It's the biggest thing in the world, Dad; the answer to every question that I haven't been able to put into words even to myself."

For a time there was no sound in that room but the little splutter of the fire and the heavy ticking of the grandfather clock.

Soundings

Then Jim cleared his throat. "Nancy darling!" His hand tightened on hers.

"Yes, Dad?" She didn't move.

"We've hit it off pretty well together, haven't we?"

"Always!"

"Then do you mind if I ask you about — about Bob?"

"Of course not, Dad!"

"Are you awfully sure of him?"

"Awfully."

"And of yourself?"

"Yes."

"You realize that it means putting his happiness before your own if it comes to a showdown?"

"Of course!"

"Is he the sort of man who'll be a pal as well as a husband?"

Nancy smiled. Her voice was almost a whisper. "Not merely a pal, but a child too in some ways."

"Are you certain that you really know him, that you haven't built up an ideal around him?"

"I think I *know* him."

"Do you realize that he's in the middle of what may be called the phase of experiment?"

"I'm not altogether sure of what you mean."

"I mean that at that age a man's desire to find things out for himself is at its highest pitch. It's at that age that a man, the average man, begins to experiment, — with radicalism of mind and body. He's not like the average girl who, for the most part, is satisfied with half measures. A man goes the whole hog. He experiments with religion by declaring himself an agnostic. He experiments with drink by getting wholeheartedly drunk. He experiments with sex by getting girls like Mary Judkins into trouble. It seems to me that by his very nature, and by every law of

man-made convention, a man expresses himself more violently than a woman. Who ever heard of a girl sowing her wild oats? Some of them do, of course, but if they are found out they are outcast, anathema! For a man it is smugly smiled upon, encouraged even. The ethics of it are farcical, but there it is!"

"Bob's not that sort," said Nancy quietly. "He's — clean!"

"Thank God for that!" said Jim. "But don't let yourself go too soon, child. Love, after all, is largely a matter of attention to begin with. You can direct it one way or the other. But once it passes a certain point, it possesses you and you can't control it any more. If he's the right man, drop everything and go to him, any time, anywhere; but before doing so, make very sure, my dear! You see, birth and death are beyond our control, but marriage, which is so much more important than either, because it can make or break our whole lives, is the one fundamental act about which we have any say. So many people make a mess of it because they won't use their brains, because they let their emotions obscure their judgment. — You've got a good mind, Nancy. Use it now as you value your happiness! You are both so young, and age can make such drastic changes in one's feelings and ideas!"

Nancy rose and faced her father. "Would you like to see for yourself if I've used my mind about Bob?"

"How?" asked Jim.

"By asking him down here to stay."

"Would *you* like him to come?" asked Jim.

"Most awfully!" said Nancy.

"Then," said Jim, "let's get him here by the next train!"

Chapter Three

I

It was Cornelia who came, not Bob.

She invited herself after her father and mother had sailed again for New York, and drove down in the car. She spent a week adoring Jim and the cottage and the beams and pewters and even Mrs. Weeks, who was "just too cute!" — a week in which her high-spirited babble acted as a buffer between Nancy and her thoughts.

Bob had written declining the invitation on the ground that his mother was ill and that, besides, he had an awful lot of work to do to make up for the time he had slacked in France. If his mother improved he might telegraph later.

Nancy handed the letter to her father. "Is n't it rotten bad luck!" she said. "I hope there's nothing serious the matter with her." She would rather have died than admit that she was groping in the dark.

Jim read it. "Oh, well," he said, "he'll come a little later, you'll see!" He was afraid. That was n't the sort of letter one wrote to the girl one loved.

When Cornelia's visit came to an end, she was surprised and not a little flattered at the urgency of Jim's attempts to induce her to stay on.

How could she be expected to see that his brilliant and continued efforts to entertain her were in reality a gallant and heart-sick effort to prevent Nancy's going off alone, to keep Nancy constantly in the little group, to make Nancy

shoulder the responsibility of hostess and come out of herself?

For that week he succeeded and was proud of his daughter. He saw that she was, in his own phrase, "biting on it, keeping a stiff upper lip." She was gay almost to the point of extravagance, — and between them Cornelia had an unforgettable week.

After her departure Nancy tried to maintain her fierce spurt. She didn't want Jim to suspect anything. Every night she said to herself, "To-morrow Bob'll wire!" But the days succeeded one another and no telegram came.

At first she would n't admit to herself that she was hurt, — only bewildered. Bob was right, of course, in not coming. He had his own life and his own problems, and he had to work them out in his own way; just as she had had to make up her mind to leave St. Malo at a moment's notice, just as she must try now to attune her understanding to Bob's needs, to place his happiness before her own. He was obviously up against a situation at home which would n't let him come and stay.

Perhaps, even, it was selfish of her to feel bewildered. Perhaps she was expecting too much, was letting love make her greedy. She remembered the strikingly different moods that he had displayed at St. Malo, the streaks of silence when he simply smoked his pipe and stared ahead of him, in curious contrast to his outbursts of demonstrativeness, of noisy conversation. Evidently he was working his way through one of these.

So she wrote him long letters, fragrant as lilies, untarnished by the slightest hint that he was not coming up to the standard of perfection, letters which gave everything and demanded nothing in return.

For a time the writing of those letters was a safety valve. Her emotional life found its outlet in that expression.

Soundings

There were times when Jim, thanking God, heard her singing up in her bedroom beneath the thatch; other times when, with gurgles of delighted laughter, she read him either a whimsical outburst from Lloyd, who was learning to navigate a wherry on the Broads, or a lamentation from Cornelia, who complained that the studio without Nancy was unbelievably lonesome in spite of the fact that she had begun work again in the atelier and that "one or two of the new bunch of pupils were distinctly promising, — Jean to the contrary notwithstanding!" There were still other times when only half her mind seemed to be present, as though the other half were stretched out, tensely expectant. And with something between a groan and a curse Jim remembered the old ballad:

*"La Trinité se passe —
Malbrouck ne revient pas!"*

But love cannot go forever hungry. Bob's letters were all too infrequent and sickeningly sketchy. Hungry, she asked for bread, and he gave her cocktails, — impersonal stuff, full of heavy flippancies that didn't ring true. She was denied even the solid assurance of a good honest beginning like "Darling Nancy." It appeared that Bob didn't write that kind of thing. He began his letters without a beginning, and ended them abruptly with no end but a scrawled signature.

She suffered three of these before she would admit that bewilderment had given place to hurt, — three, in six of the longest weeks of her life.

One night, when sleep seemed impossible and the bed-clothes had become a hot twisted mass, she got up, lit her lamp and took pen and paper. For many minutes she wrote nothing. She remained staring out of the window. The sky was alive with scurrying clouds and the trees stirred uneasily.

"It's not good enough!" she said. "It's getting on my nerves. What's the matter with him? With me? I won't go on in the dark any more like this. We've got to have it out. If I don't *see* him, I'll begin to believe all the damnable, disloyal things that are beginning to creep into my mind. Either there's some imaginary misunderstanding that can be put right in two minutes when we're face to face, or the whole thing's a hideous lie! — It can't be! I don't believe it. I *won't* believe it!"

She stretched out her hand, took a framed snapshot from its place beside her mirror and held it under the lamp. Bob smiled out at her, — Bob, with his hair ruffled by the wind and sea, his feet dangling into the pool where they had all caught shrimps together. It had been such a perfect day when that snapshot had been taken. They had golfed in the morning and Bob had made that wonderful drive on the third, — two hundred and fifty yards and his ball on the green. Then they had driven back into St. Malo for lunch, and had played in the sea all the afternoon. And after dinner Bob had taken her off along the dike and they had climbed down on to the empty seashore; and first they had run a race together in the moonlight, holding hands like children. Then, both breathing hard, Bob had suddenly stopped and caught her in his arms. "Gorgeousness!" he said, — and would she ever forget it? — "you're the most marvelous and adorable combination of athleticism and femininity in the world! Think what a tragedy it would have been if you and I had never met!"

It was almost as though he were saying it now. How could it possibly be a lie, an experiment? She put the photograph down and dipped her pen in the ink again. She addressed an envelope to him first at St. John's College, Oxford. Then, with tight lips she pushed it aside and

Soundings

arranged a piece of note paper. "Is there such a place as St. Malo?" she wrote. "Or did I dream it?"

II

Jim Hawthorne was working. His canvas rested on a special bamboo easel with two legs that straddled his chair. From time to time he let his arms drop to rest them. But the picture was growing, "and," he muttered, with a gleam in his eyes, "it's good, by God!"

He proceeded to fill a pipe, not without a touch of excitement. "Nancy!" he called. "Can you come downstairs a minute, old lady?"

He heard her door open and her feet on the stairs.

"All right, Dad!" she answered.

His excitement crept into his voice. "Just come and take a squint at this!" he said. "Though I says it as should n't, I don't think my hand has lost its cunning."

Six weeks ago Nancy's heart would have leaped at that news, at the note in his voice. It meant the new era that both of them had been working for. This morning it was awfully difficult to get excited. One had to push aside such heavy things to make room for it.

Her father went on talking as she crossed the living room. "The thing's only roughed in yet, but, by Jove, it's coming better than I dared hope; and what's more, I've got that cocksure feeling that one always *hopes* will develop at a certain stage. *You* know! —" Nancy entered the workshop. He looked up eagerly. "Come and cast your eye on this, old lady, and see if you don't think I — Hullo! What are you all dressed up for? Where are you off to?"

The sight of her in her best hat and coat in Brimble was remarkable enough, but at that time in the morning it was striking.

"Let me see what you've done, first," she said.

She moved round beside him and looked at the canvas.

"Why, Dad!" she said. "I think it's going to be lovelier than anything you've ever done!"

"By Jove, do you really think so?" He laughed. "It would be comic, wouldn't it?"

"No," said Nancy, "not when one thinks of what has gone to the making of it!" She bent down and kissed him. "I take my hat off to you for the way in which you've stuck it out, Dad. They ought to give V.C.'s to people like you, if you're not the only one there is. I wish I had a millionth part of your pluck!"

Jim patted her hand. "Nonsense, old thing," he said. "You're worth a dozen of me. What's your programme?"

She sat down on the side of his chair. "I'm going to Oxford," she said, "to see Bob."

The painting faded. It might almost never have been. Nancy's quiet statement flung him back again into the agony of silent worry from which work had given him a moment's escape. During those many weeks he had seen expectancy dwindle and die. Not once had she asked for help, but many times he had cursed his own impotency at not being able to break down her defenses and help her in spite of herself.

"Oh," he said now, "has he asked you up?"

Nancy shook her head. "No. That's why I'm going. I haven't heard from him for three weeks. He's — not very good at writing letters, so I thought it over and it seemed to me to be a good idea to go up and — and say 'Hullo!' I thought we might lunch together somewhere and then I can catch an early train in the afternoon and be back in time for dinner. What do you think, Dad?"

Jim was thinking a great deal. It was not very difficult to guess what "saying 'hullo'" meant. He looked up at

Soundings

her steady eyes and firm chin. "I think you're right," he said. "Does he know you're coming?"

Nancy nodded. "I wrote, asking him to meet me at the train."

"Are you all right for money?" asked Jim.

"Yes, I've got plenty."

"How soon's your train?"

Nancy glanced at her watch. "I've got half an hour to get to the train. I'd better make a move." She got up. "You'll be all right without me, Dad? Shall I stop at Miss Heseltine's and ask her to come along?"

"Not on your life!" said Jim. "I'm perfectly all right. Run along and forget all about me."

She smiled and kissed him. "Good-by."

"Cheero, old lady!" said Jim.

For a long time after she had gone he remained looking out into the November day. Then he turned toward his work with a great sigh. "What is this creative instinct? Is it damnation or salvation? — For us it seems to be both!" he added, as he reached slowly out for the palette and a tube of color.

III

"I'm going to see Bob! — I'm going to see Bob!" To the accompaniment of the train the phrase sang itself as monotonously as the response to a litany.

Nancy sat hunched up in the corner of a second-class compartment. Although she was staring out of the window she saw nothing of the rolling countryside with its thinning copses and autumn colors. She saw far beyond to an imaginary platform on which Bob was marching up and down, waiting for her.

In the opposite corner was a man in the early thirties. The fact that he was burned by another sun than that of 190

England, added to the fact that he wore a regimental tie, rendered a uniform unnecessary for the purpose of further identification. He was most obviously army. He was also not impervious to feminine charm. He ran true to form in that as he looked at Nancy his hand went instinctively to the patch of bristles on his upper lip. As he twisted them he cleared his throat.

"A perfect corker!" he thought. "Look at those ankles, b'Jove! And the right shoes, too. If that hair's her own she's got the world at her feet. Let's see, what's the word for that hair? Not Rembrandt; Titian! That's it, Titian. Hot stuff! Perhaps I can improve the shining hour!"

He cleared his throat, a little more loudly, and spoke. "Excuse me, but if you'd care to amble through some of these magazines I should be perfectly delighted!"

"I'm going to see Bob!—I'm going—" The refrain was interrupted by the sudden intrusion of something into her line of vision. She looked up startled and saw a hand holding some magazines out to her. Behind the hand was a face, a man's, half smiling at her.

Nancy shook her head as one does in irritation at a fly. "No, thanks," she said, and turned a little more towards the window.

The army fell back in good order, more or less. Only by a raised eyebrow were the reverses indicated. "Oh! all right," he said to himself. "If that's how you feel." In some dudgeon he picked up the racing edition of a pink ha' penny paper. From his manner of reading, it became evident that the weights and entries were not as absorbing as usual. From time to time a questing eye turned once more to the girl in the corner over the corner of the pink sheet. Presently, watching her, he rustled it loudly, folded it and put it down.

Soundings

"Not a flicker of an eyelash!" he grunted. "Is n't she human?"

He moved restlessly, leaned forward, elbows on knees, and began playing a tune with the fingers of one hand against the knuckles of the other. Then he drew out a lean cigarette case, of the kind guaranteed not to make a lump in one's clothes. He sat up straight, opened the case noiselessly, snapped it loudly and then held it out again, open.

"Er — I beg your pardon," he said, "but will it worry you if I smoke? Perhaps you'd care to join me?"

It is more than possible that he did not draw the moral from this encounter in a railway carriage. His type is not given to overmuch analysis. Be that as it may, his attempt to subordinate some one else's desire to his own did not succeed.

Nancy did not answer his question. It is doubtful even if she heard it, for at that moment the train slowed and ran into the long platform at Oxford, and Nancy lowered the window, peering eagerly for a sight of Bob among the waiting group around the bookstall. She couldn't pick him out because the crowd moved and shifted indeterminately.

When the train stopped the army silently opened the door for her.

Nancy dropped a hurried "Thank you" behind her as she jumped out. She turned and walked quickly along the platform, her attention diverted from her search by the need to dodge porters who, heaving on loaded trucks, cleaved through the passengers with the paradoxical warning, "Thank you! Thank you!" which presupposed their getting out of the way.

Nancy reached the exit beside the bookstall and stood looking in all directions. She was so excited nervously that

she was shivering. The purposeful confusion quickly sorted itself out. People were met. Others climbed into the train. The crash of luggage and goods became less and gradually ceased. A whistle blew shrilly. With deep grunts from the engine, the train began to move.

There was no Bob!

She felt frightened, horribly alone. She had a feeling that each person who passed her on the way out stared sarcastically, as though inwardly saying, "What on earth are you doing in Oxford?"

Almost unconsciously she began to make excuses for Bob. Perhaps he'd been held up at a lecture. At that very moment he was dashing down to the station. In another minute he would come breathlessly through the door.

The bookstall man was quizzing her.

A little uncomfortably she glanced at the station clock. It was twelve thirty. She had been there five minutes already. She walked a few paces uncertainly, away from the bookstall. "I've *got* to see him!" she said, and then turned and went out into the street.

There were two hansoms still there, waiting forlornly. "Keb, miss? — Keb?"

The street was empty. It was no good waiting any longer. Nancy walked to the nearest hansom. "St. John's College," she said.

"Yes, miss!" The cabby winked at his confrere and made clucking noises to the dilapidated horse.

Jim Hawthorne and she had once spent a week in Oxford, sketching. A memory of the rambling old hotel came to her as the cab lurched under the railway bridge and took the incline at a lolling canter. What was it called? — The Mitre; that was it.

"Suppose he's not at the college," she thought. "What am I going to do?"

Soundings

The streets seemed to be full of undergraduates, all hatless, some carrying books wound up in their gowns. Her eyes hurried from face to face as they drove along.

She could not have been more than eight minutes in the cab when it stopped beneath a line of elms. Down a little bank of grass was the gateway of a college and in and out of it, with the activity of an ant heap, flowed a stream of undergraduates, on foot, with bicycles, walking, loitering, talking, laughing.

Nancy would have given everything in the world to shrivel up in the cab, to sink into the earth.

The little trapdoor in the roof of the cab went up. "Ere y' are, miss!" said the cabman. "That'll be two shillins!" Nancy fumbled, dropped her purse on the floor, bent down and picked it up, hot, flushed, uncomfortable. She handed up a half-crown through the trapdoor and then, taking a deep breath and looking neither to right nor to left, got out of the cab, walked down the flagged steps and up to the college gate, her heart thudding against her ribs.

The porter was standing in the lodge.

She did n't know it was a porter, but he was a man of some fifty years, and looked as if he were there in an official capacity.

Two bicycles missed her by an inch before she reached him. Their owners, with a look of surprise and admiration, both murmured "'Scuse me!" One of them turned his head back for another look as he went on, and crashed into the wall. He fell off in a heap and a shout of laughter went up.

Nancy felt her cheeks burning. She got to the porter at last, and with an unconscious note of defiance in her voice said, "Can you find Mr. Whittaker for me, please?"

"He 'as n't come hin yet, miss," said the porter.

Nancy swallowed. "Do you expect him in soon?"

The porter cocked his head on one side like a fat Christmas orange on the top of a bottle. "Well, miss," he said, "there's no sayin'. He may come back for lunch or he may not. It's all accordin'. Generally speakin', 'e don't come back. But if you'd like to wait a little while —" He waved a plump hand expressively.

Could Satan devise a more perfect torment than to send a girl eternally seeking a man through the infinite aisles of hell? Something like despair settled upon Nancy, but she stuck her chin out and held her ground. "Thanks," she said, "I don't care to do that. But will you take a message for Mr. Whittaker?"

"With pleasure, miss."

"Will you tell him that Miss Hawthorne is lunching at the Mitre?"

"Miss 'Awthorne at the Mitre. Very good, miss!"

"Thank you very much," said Nancy. "You won't forget, will you? I'm — I'm only up for the day."

The porter smiled fatherly upon her. "I won't forget, miss!"

Nancy thanked him again. Then she added, "The Mitre's up *that* way, isn't it?"

"That's right, miss. Past the Memorial, at the top of St. Giles on this side."

The Mitre was her last hope. In the gloom of its dining room she could sit down out of this crowd of men of which she was becoming more and more conscious, and pull herself together.

As she walked away from the college, away from that disturbing group of undergraduates, she steadied and began thinking coherently. Would that man give Bob her message? She prayed that he would. All the same where *was* Bob? Why had n't he met her? Why had he left her to face that ordeal alone? It was beastly of him. She

Soundings

had written two days before, giving the time of her train. All those men were out of lectures. It was n't likely that he was the only one to be kept late. Was it possible that he had intentionally not met her, that he was not in college because he was deliberately avoiding her? But why? What did it all mean?—But Bob wouldn't do a cowardly thing like that! If he hadn't wanted her to come, he would have telegraphed. He *could* have written: there had been time. — No, she was a fool, imagining things, because she was upset. He would probably catch her up before she got to the Mitre. Even now he might be getting her message.

She paused at Broad Street to let a car swing up. She crossed behind it, — and came face to face with Bob. They were not more than five paces apart.

“Bob!” she cried. The discouraged droop left her body. She could have cried with relief, and would have given anything to swear at him at the same time.

Bob was not alone. For an amazing second his eyes met Nancy's. Then they went cold. In a voice that cut like a chisel he said, “Oh, how do you do?” and with a finger and thumb at the elbow of the girl he was with, he passed on without stopping.

As though from an infinite distance Nancy heard the girl giggle and say, “Who's your friend, Bobbie?”

And Bob's voice snapped back, “Oh, shut up, for God's sake!”

Some murders are committed with lengths of iron piping. The victims are unrecognizable, battered to a pulp.

Spiritually, Bob's “Oh, how do you do?” did the job as thoroughly as any iron piping.

Presently Nancy, or what was left of her, became aware of a hand on her arm. “Are you all right, my dear? You look as if you were going to faint!”

A woman, under whose arm were half a dozen parcels, gazed at Nancy earnestly.

Then there came the rasping sound of metal on stone. A bicycle was jammed up, anyhow, by one pedal, against the curb and a man's voice came through the curious haze that seemed to shut Nancy off from the street. "This lady's a friend of mine. I'll look after her!"

An arm went round her shoulder and the voice, infinitely gentle, went on, "Stick to it, old soldier! Stick to it, Nancy dear!" It was Lloyd.

She made a big effort then, and in a moment was blinking up into his worried face. "It's all right, Lloyd. It's quite all right!" she whispered. "I just — just let go for a moment. I'm awfully sorry. Let's go somewhere. I'm —"

Lloyd's face might have been cast in iron. His mouth was tight with anger. He tucked his arm through hers and held it firmly. He could feel her trembling. "All right, honey!" he said. "We'll go up to the Mitre, where it's quiet, and you'll be as right as rain."

"No, not there!" said Nancy. "Don't take me there! I — I want to go home. I want to hide."

IV

At ten o'clock that night a big open car, traveling much too fast, turned down St. Giles and stopped with a jerk outside the garage. Lloyd got out.

The proprietor strolled out of his shop. "Everything all right, Mr. Evans?"

"Fine, thanks," said Lloyd. "Charge it, will you?" He turned on his heel, removed a cold cigar from his mouth and threw it away.

The college gateway, a medieval thing studded with iron

Soundings

bolts, was closed when Lloyd reached it. He kicked on it.

After a moment, footsteps shuffled on the flags inside, and, with a great clanging of bars, the small door cut in the great gate was opened by the porter.

Lloyd climbed through. With an abrupt "Thanks!" he crunched his way across the gravel of the echoing quadrangle.

There was a moon that night, and the pattern of the cloisters, picked out in silver and jet, was a thing of magic. From an open window came a medley of sound, — ragtime on a piano, singing, shouts cutting through the song. Farther along, through another window which was closed, could be seen a group of heads facing the figure of a man, standing, evidently making a speech, the air blue with tobacco smoke.

Lloyd went straight ahead until he reached his staircase. From mere habit he went up two at a time to the first floor. Facing him across the landing were two doors. On one was painted his own name in white letters. On the other was Bob's.

He went to the latter and tapped. Without waiting, he opened it. Bob was there. He was walking up and down, his hands deep in his pockets. At the sight of Lloyd he stopped. They stood looking at one another, in silence.

Then Lloyd pulled the large outer door shut — "sporting the oak", — against possible intruders, went into the room and closed the inside door behind him.

"I've just come back from driving Nancy home!" he said.

Bob stood very still.

The electric lights were softened with "art" shades. A bookshelf on one wall made a warm splash of color. There were boxing and rowing groups framed in oak on the other

walls. A bowl of chrysanthemums stood on the mantel-piece. In front of the fire was a long sofa whose rumpled cushions told of recent occupancy. One of the leaded windows was open. It was a highway in and out of college during forbidden hours.

The two men faced each other across the table.

"I've come to tell you," said Lloyd, "that I think you're a damned outsider, a low-down scut, a cad of the first water. I'm going to write and apologize to my sister for ever having introduced you to her. And now I'm going to give you the damndest licking you've ever had in or outside of the ring!"

"Why?"

Other than uttering that one word, Bob made no move.

This time Lloyd's voice was less in control. "Because I happened to see you and Tillie pass Nancy this morning!" he said. "Because you've treated Nancy like a liar and a thief! My God! You can stand there and ask me why, after getting a girl to give you her heart and then chucking it into the gutter! A decent man would n't treat a prostitute like that. I warned you at St. Malo that we did n't want any Tillie stuff, and like a cursed little hypocrite you flared up and asked me what the hell I meant." Lloyd caught hold of the table and with a great heave sent it flying back against the wall. "I was fool enough to think that the sight of Nancy had made you turn over a new leaf. You have n't *got* any new leaves. They're all dirty!"

He grasped the sofa and wrenched it close to the fireplace.

"That's all the room I need to smear you!"

Bob was no coward. He walked up to Lloyd with his hands still in his pockets. "Look here!" he said. "You've called me all the stinking things you can think of and I have n't interrupted. Why not let me have a chance

Soundings

to say something before you start hitting? If you want to smear me afterwards, — you can have a try!”

They stood eye to eye, Lloyd with his fists already clenched, Bob white-faced and tense.

Had there been a hint of sneer or challenge in Bob's "you can have a try!" it is probable that Lloyd would have hit him, then and there. But there was no sneer. It was in deadly earnest. It reached Lloyd through his anger.

For a year they had been inseparable, almost a college byword.

"Where's Evans?" some one would ask.

"Well," would come the answer, "I saw Whittaker in the garden quad just now!" And the inquirer would turn his footsteps toward the garden without further to-do.

Out of college they had shared "digs." On moving in, they had chosen rooms on the same landing. They had joined the same clubs and debating societies, spent each other's money, worked together, helped each other home after a "binge" — the blind leading the blind — and had confessed to the same headache next morning. Nothing had ever threatened their relationship. Whenever one came upon a locked door in the other's mind — there are always locked doors — he merely made a silent note of it and passed on.

Tillie's advent had been settled in a phrase.

"A skirt, eh?" Lloyd had said. "Watch your step, son!"

And Bob had answered sarcastically, "Thank you, padre!"

The subject was closed.

Each framed athletic group on the walls of their respective rooms was a milestone on their mutual journey, an illustration in the book of their two lives. In future years,

with perhaps a whole lifetime of forgetfulness between, neither would be able to look at those groups without being brought face to face with the realization of how integral a part of his Oxford life the other was. Memories would come surging back, from which neither could ever eliminate the other.

Some glimpse of this was in Lloyd's mind now. His whole expression was one of agonized bewilderment. Bob was his pal, and it was impossible to believe what had occurred, impossible to believe that he should be on the point, as he put it, of knocking his block off!

He did not realize that his faith in himself was at stake, too; that it was because of his own belief in Bob that he wanted to bolster up that belief, that he did not want Bob to be proved a rotter because it would be a reflection on himself.

The tiny pause was enough, however, to make him realize that anger was a futile method of getting at the truth because it would only antagonize Bob. He pulled himself together.

"Look here, old man, we've got to get this straightened out. Come clean, for God's sake!"

Bob's reply was like a black frost. "I'd like to know what the devil it's got to do with you?"

Lloyd choked back his rage. His face went white.

Bob went on. "Shut up and go and play the piano, there's a good chap. Have a cigarette, and leave the thing alone!"

Lloyd spoke very quietly. "Listen, Bob!" he said. "I—I like Nancy awfully. She's a peach. If I'd seen any other man cut her on the street as you did this morning, I'd have jumped on his face. That's why I can't believe you did it intentionally!"

He paused. Had they both been older men, Lloyd would

Soundings

have placed his hand on Bob's shoulders and made his appeal with a grip that could not be denied.

Youth abhors sentimentalism, however, and such a gesture, even though the outcome of the deepest sincerity, would have seemed to smack of theatricalism.

He fidgeted with the tablecloth, turned towards the mantelpiece, and spoke almost shamefacedly, not to Bob, but to the chimney.

"Say, listen! You and I have been pretty close, old man. I—I like you quite a good deal. I've always thought you were white. When I saw how things were shaping between you and Nancy, I kept off the grass. If you two were cut out for each other, it was not for me to butt in and try my hand at anything. I was only glad that you and she both showed such good judgment. But this morning!" He paused and took a deep breath and faced Bob.

"Bob, man, it was n't *you* to do a thing like that to *Nancy*! For God's sake, what's the matter?"

Bob was picking a cigarette to pieces with nervous fingers. At Lloyd's final question he went to the window, without answering. The touch of emotion in Lloyd's voice hit him hard. When Lloyd had first entered the room he had wanted to tell him, had wanted to get the thing off his chest, in a perfectly natural reaching out for sympathy. But the touch of criticism, of anger, in Lloyd's tone had immediately put him on the defensive. It seemed that now, for a moment, he was letting the truth of Lloyd's emotion sink in. Suddenly he dropped the remainder of the cigarette and swung round. Their eyes met.

Then Bob dropped his. "Everything's the matter!" he said.

Lloyd saw the misery in his face. "Can't it be put right?"

"No!" said Bob.

"But if it's only a ghastly row?"

Bob shook his head. "It's not that!"

Lloyd shot a glance at him and looked away. "Bob, it's not Tillie, is it? — You have n't got that girl into — into a mess, have you?"

"No!" said Bob. "It's not Tillie. It's myself! I — I'm just no damn good, that's all. You think you *know* me, don't you? You judge me by yourself and think I'm a fairly normal, decent sort! I wish to God I were!"

There was deep puzzlement on Lloyd's face. "I don't see what you're driving at, quite."

"I did n't think you would," said Bob. "You're one of the lucky ones. You appear to be able to go through life without being bothered with this — this damned girl business!"

"Oh!" said Lloyd. "That! But is n't it perfectly natural that you should fall in love?"

Bob was pacing up and down the room. He stopped at this. "Man, you don't begin to understand! I tried to fall in love with Nancy!"

"*Tried to?*" echoed Lloyd.

Bob caught him by the arm. "I suppose any time you're — worried, physically, you just go and sweat it off on the track?"

Lloyd nodded. "That's the idea!" he said.

"Is it?" Bob dropped his arm. "That's all you know! I've tried that. I've taken on men in the ring one after the other till I've been ready to drop, and the damned thing's been with me at the end. *Now* do you begin to see?"

"Yes, but —"

"Until I'd satisfied my curiosity, it ate me inside, wouldn't leave me alone. I thought finding out was the only way to settle it. It is n't the sort of thing you can ask anybody. My father would have thought it indecent. —

Soundings

I found out. It didn't settle it. It began all over again like a recurring decimal."

"But, my God!" said Lloyd. "Could n't you fight it, or run away from it?"

"I've tried both," said Bob, "tried desperately, and then when I met Nancy, I thought I'd found my salvation. I thought, as you said, that I should fall in love with her. Damn it, I *did* fall in love with her! When we came back from Paris I worshiped her as a saint, as something holy. She — she made me feel just like a kid again, as if — as if none of this had ever happened. I meant to go to her when the time came and ask her to marry me. Then we went to St. Malo. Oh, God! She came out of the sea that first afternoon, all wet and gleaming — and I — I wanted her more than any girl I'd ever seen! I couldn't even keep *her* sacred!"

He stopped. He was looking out of the window, seeing nothing, biting his lips.

Lloyd shivered.

Bob went on again, sparing himself nothing. "I made a dead set at her. I was out to get her. And then, by the grace of God, that telegram came about her father. It was like a bomb full in the face. It showed me myself, — and it wasn't a pretty sight! I saw myself wading through this slime and reaching out to pull her down into it, *her!* In my thoughts I had already done it. — I was glad that her father got smashed up. I stopped dead. Perhaps you think it was easy! I had succeeded in making her love me. She wanted me to come and stay at Brimble! Can *you* realize what that means, — in the same house with her, day after day? I did n't dare read her letters. I did n't answer them. I refused her invitations. I have n't been near her. I *would n't* go near her! I wanted her to realize that she'd made a mistake. I wanted *her* to chuck me!"

"But why couldn't you *tell* her?" burst out Lloyd.

Bob went on in a flat dead voice. "You can't tell a girl that. She wrote and told me that she was coming up this morning. I did n't go near the station. I was n't coming back to college till I knew that she'd have gone. Then Tillie ran up to me in the street and a moment later I came face to face with Nancy. What I did was the only thing left. I've felt like a bloody murderer ever since, but it was the only honest thing I could think of. It'll have convinced her that I'm no good. Instead of its' slowly eating her away, she'll cut me clean out of herself and be free of me."

Bob's voice trailed off into silence.

From the window came the confused noise of a distant "binge." Lloyd was staring into the fire. He saw Nancy's face, strained and white, as it had been throughout the drive, poor kid!

"I — I'm sorry, old man," he said. "It's hell all round. I don't know what's to be done."

He crossed the room, opened both doors and went out, closing them behind him. As he stood on the landing, all the bells of Oxford began their midnight clamor.

"My God!" he murmured. "I had no idea. — Poor old Bob! Poor *devil!*"

He went slowly down the broad creaking stairs and began pacing up and down the empty quadrangle, but it was Nancy who crept into his thoughts and stayed there.

Chapter Four

I

It wasn't raining, but it was one of those smoky, raw, November days when from every piece of high ground the distance is blurred in mist, when the limbs of trees drip and the fields have a soddened look.

Lloyd shut off the engine and brought the mud-spattered motorcycle to a stop at the foot of the lane. He looked up it. There was no one outside the cottage. Only a blue wisp of smoke from the chimney brought the little place to life.

He got off his machine and kicked the support into place. Then he unbuttoned his thick coat, took off his gloves and wiped his face. "Gosh!" he muttered, "I feel as nervous as a kid, but it's the only way to fix this thing!"

He marched up the lane and to the cottage door. As he picked up the knocker he saw Mrs. Weeks inside. She had heard his step and came to the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Weeks!" said Lloyd. "How are you?"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said she. "What do you want?"

Lloyd looked puzzled. "I'd like to see Miss Nancy, if I may?" he said.

Mrs. Weeks stepped out on to the porch and pulled the door to behind her. She stood looking up defiantly at the big American as a little old female Boston bull might growl into the face of a Newfoundland dog. "Look 'ere!" she said earnestly, in a lowered voice. "Are you the one as

'as made all the trouble? Because if you are, you're going to get a piece of my mind!"

Lloyd looked straight into her one good eye. "I'm not the one, Mrs. Weeks!" he said simply.

Mrs. Weeks studied him. Then she relaxed. "I believe you," she said. "I told 'er the first time I seen you that you was the nice one!"

"Thank you very much," said Lloyd. "Then you'll allow me to see her?"

Mrs. Weeks nodded. "I don't know what's 'appened," she said, "but Mr. 'Awthorne, 'e looks *that* stern, and Nancy, pore lamb, she tries to smile and talk and 'er face is all frozen-like and 'er voice don't mean nothing. She's out now with her golf things. But I don't believe she's playing. She brought them back yesterday and I looked at them and they wasn't even dirty. A sight of you may do her good. You go and find 'er and for 'eaven's sake see if you can't cheer 'er up!"

Lloyd caught her hand and shook it warmly. "I'll do my damnedest, Mrs. Weeks!" he said. "I — I've come to tell her something that I hope may do the trick."

"That's what I like to 'ear!" said Mrs. Weeks. "That's spoken proper!"

She remained there, nodding her head until the gate clicked and she heard Lloyd making his way up the lane among the dead leaves.

The rough wooden five-barred gate that gave entrance to the links was half open. Lloyd went through. He stood on the first tee and looked around. There was no sign of life on any of the first holes, nor was there any evidence of any one's having driven off the tee.

"She may be on the other side of that ridge," said Lloyd to himself. "I'm going to find her if I have to search the countryside. I'll try the clubhouse first."

Soundings

The clubhouse was a three-roomed thatched cottage. The door was locked when he tried it. He turned away and set off for the ridge.

It was the white canvas golf bag that he saw first. It showed up leaning against a tree on the edge of a spinney. Then behind the tree he saw the familiar brown sweater that melted in with the color of her surroundings.

Nancy was seated on an old log. In her hands was a golf stick with which she was drawing patterns on the grass.

Lloyd called out while he was still some paces away. "Hullo, there!" he said.

The face she lifted to him was, as Mrs. Weeks had said, "frozen-like." She showed no surprise, no pleasure. She merely became aware of him.

It was n't an oath that Lloyd swallowed, although it took that form. It was really a prayer for help. He went up to her and held out his hand. When she gave him hers he pulled, gently but strongly.

"Come along!" he said. "Don't let's sit here. It's too damp. Let's hike somewhere, Nancy. Let's find a village about seven miles away where we can stop at a pub and get bread and cheese and beer. I came through one on the machine a little while ago, and I believe I could find it cross-country. We can leave your bag at the clubhouse. They'll take it in for you, when they open up. Won't you come? — I got up this morning feeling so darned blue that I hated Oxford and I decided that you were about the only person in the world who could cheer me up!"

The appeal was elementary. Perhaps that was why it succeeded. Nancy rose to her feet. "Poor old Lloyd!" she said. "What were you miserable about?"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Lloyd. "Just that vague rotten feeling that everything was all wrong. The only remedy is violent exercise, which is another way of saying:

Concentrate! I feel better already, because I can concentrate on you. But it won't work if we don't keep moving!"

"I can't go too far," said Nancy, "I've got to get back to Dad by lunch time."

"It's about eleven now," said Lloyd. "That gives us about two hours, doesn't it?"

Nancy nodded.

"Fine!" said Lloyd. "Then let's get going!" He caught up her golf bag, and with one hand at her elbow hurried her back to the clubhouse. Having deposited the bag, they scrambled through a gap in the boundary hedge and found themselves on a footpath that led up through the beech woods.

It was stiff going. Their feet slipped on the muddy surface of the path which climbed steeply round the flank of the hill. Their breath came in white puffs. Every tussock of grass was spread with a dewy spider's web that had all the appearance of a lacework of seed pearls.

Nancy walked as if she were in a dream, as if the walk were just a part of going on living, like getting up in the morning or going to bed at night, — presumably necessary acts in a meaningless existence.

From time to time Lloyd glanced at her face. "How am I going to tell her?" he thought. And, knowing that she was not hearing a single word of what he was saying, he went on talking, marking time. When they left the clubhouse he had begun on his father and mother. By the time they were halfway up the flank of the hill he had exhausted the tale of their joy-ride through England. So he worked back from it to New York. Metaphorically speaking, he took the city to pieces for her and dangled it in front of her eyes, on the watch for a look, a smile, that would tell him he was winning. He did his best with Fifth Avenue, up which he took her from Greenwich Village to Harlem as though

Soundings

he were driving a "rubber-neck" wagon. When he came to tell her of the upward spread of the wholesale district towards the Cathedral, he felt that he was in pretty good form when he dropped the remark that "Almighty God was being elbowed out by the Almighty Dollar." He tried again with Broadway and, although he knew it was Greek to Nancy, summed it up as "the hayseed's dream or the Morgue of the Virgins"; crossed into Park Avenue, which he called "the Land of the Golden Fleas", and dropped down again into the Bowery, where he was guilty of a frightful pun, describing it as "full of gunmen and bad yeggs."

All he had succeeded in getting from Nancy at the end of some two miles was a vague occasional monosyllable; but he not only took pride in the glow of color which had come into her cheeks, he found that he had talked himself into a feeling of confidence.

"Let's sit on this gate," he said at last, "and have a breather, and incidentally a cigarette."

To all appearances Nancy could have gone on forever. She stopped only because he did. She took a cigarette because he held the case near her hand, and then only lit it because the match was offered. She made no effort to smoke. She just held the cigarette between her fingers.

Lloyd leaned against the gate beside her, inhaling great draughts of smoke and blowing them out again with nervous noisiness.

It was only two days since he had rescued her in the middle of Oxford and brought her back to the cottage, where she had left him without a word. Then he had driven off, blindly, haphazard through the country roads.

He took a last pull at his cigarette and tossed it into the grass.

"Nancy!" he said. She didn't answer, so he reached

out and gravely tweaked her little finger. "Nancy, honey!"

She turned then. "Yes, Lloyd?"

"You're not really listening," said Lloyd. "Would you mind, just for a minute? — That's better! I'll say it quickly, before you go off again! — Will you marry me, Nancy?"

In the little breathless silence that followed, the cigarette dropped from Nancy's fingers. The corners of her mouth began to quiver. She turned her face away.

Lloyd didn't wait for an answer. "I know I'm a blundering fool," he said, "the sort of comic person that one never takes seriously, but I don't believe I'd be an utter dud as a husband if I could ever persuade a girl to believe it. Really I don't, honey! I have n't ever confessed it to anybody before, but I'm probably one of the most domesticated men out of captivity. I've got a hunch that it would be no end of fun pottering around in a kitchenette and cooking bacon and eggs and chops and stuff like that. And any time we got fed up with it, we'd go off and stay with Mother and Dad and lead the swell life for a bit! — What do you say? Could you face it? — You see, honey, I didn't know it at the time, but you knocked me for a goal in Paris. The reason I was crazy to get to St. Malo was because I'd decided that you were the first woman I'd ever met and the last one I wanted to. But when Cornelia told me that you — that — Well, after you'd gone, I couldn't sit still with it, that's all! France seemed like a squirrel's cage, and if I hadn't gone dashing around it, I — Why, Nancy! Please don't do that! Nancy! — Oh, my God!"

Nancy had put her head down on her arms on the top of the gate and was sobbing hysterically.

Cursing himself for a clumsy idiot, Lloyd alternately patted her shoulder and shook her, repeating over and over

Soundings

again, "Please, Nancy! Please, old thing! Oh, please don't!"

But this was the first time that Nancy had let go. During those two days she had n't been able to cry. It was as though she had been walled in, shut off, not only from any emotional outburst but from a thorough realization of what had happened. It was like a mental concussion, like a man in battle who is unaware of how he has been wounded until the immediate fighting is over.

With however gentle a finger, Lloyd, nevertheless, had probed the wound, and the ache of it was the more intolerable. She was overwhelmed by a complexity of emotions of which just then she was utterly unaware, — grief, wounded vanity, shame, anger.

"Please!" said Lloyd. "Oh, please, my dear!"

There are occasions, however, when control snaps and nature takes charge. Lloyd might as well have appealed to Vesuvius to stop erupting, to an avalanche to cease from slipping.

Presently the violence of her crying departed and, after a while, she raised her head and groped for a handkerchief.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!" fighting for breath.

Lloyd watched her for a moment, breathing a prayer of thanks. Then he produced a large silk handkerchief, soaked it in the dew on the top of a tuft of grass and thrust it into Nancy's hand. "Use this, old thing!" he said. "You'll feel better."

Nancy bathed her face with it until she felt that she could trust herself to speak. "I'm — I'm all right now," she said.

"Thank God for that!" said Lloyd. "You scared me absolutely pink. I'm abjectly sorry. I ought to be kicked for barging in like that. Forget that I ever said it!"

"I won't ever forget it as long as I live," said Nancy.

She clasped his hand and held it tight. "Only I'm most awfully sorry that you ever wasted a thought on me, Lloyd dear!"

"I haven't done that," said Lloyd. "I love you, that's all."

"And I — loved Bob," said Nancy. "I — I haven't come out the other side yet. I don't know *where* I am!"

"Oh!" said Lloyd. "I see! I thought —"

Nancy mustered up a smile. "The ends have been chopped off and they're still writhing. But it was awfully sweet of you, Lloyd, and I — I can't ever thank you."

"You don't have to, honey," said Lloyd. "If it would amuse you, you could walk all over me. However, if I don't stand a show, I don't propose to worry you about it. I'll wish you the best of luck and be on my way. But there's one thing I would like to ask!"

"Anything," said Nancy.

"Will you send me word," said Lloyd, "if ever you find that you wouldn't object to seeing me around? If I should happen to be in New York it wouldn't take more than seven days to hop across."

Nancy looked at him, at the quiet gentle way in which he smiled at her. There was nothing cyclonic or overwhelming about Lloyd. It came to her in a sudden flash of contrast that in Curly and Bob there had been a note of urgent demand, of greed. In a way, their love of her was a fundamental expression of ego. Lloyd was seeking to put her desire before his own. He was begging, not demanding; and yet behind that smile was a steadiness of eye that gave the lie to his almost casual words. She felt that if she raised her hand he would drop everything and come to her.

Somehow the scheme of things was all wrong. She hadn't wanted Curly. Bob didn't want her. And now she didn't want Lloyd, who, in some ways, was the best of

Soundings

them all. The unreason of it all, the waste, was heart-breaking.

“My dear, my dear!” she cried, “you tempt me to be dishonest in order not to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you, Lloyd, but I must, for your own sake and for mine too. You see, we all started together, you and Bob and I. If you were the man I — I could marry, it would have shown itself, I should have felt it. But it was n’t you, Lloyd dear! It was Bob who — who drew me from the beginning. I — I don’t know whether time can do anything, but I don’t believe that I’ll ever marry now. I’ve given all that side of myself to — to Bob, and he’s thrown it away. I haven’t any more left. It’s as though it had been poured on the ground, leaving me empty. I’m not worth marrying. Something’s gone. My faith in it, my — my dream, is all spoiled. It’ll never come back. I’m only a sort of half-woman now. I’ve got to try and — and untangle the ends and see if they won’t heal somehow. But I shall never be *me* again.”

She had been gazing out over the blurred fields while she attempted to explain herself. Now she turned to Lloyd and let her hand rest on his sleeve for a moment. “So you see I — I couldn’t ever send you word, Lloyd dear! I haven’t ever thought of you like that, but I love you enough to be honest with you, to tell you so, so that you may forget about me, — no I don’t mean forget, but put me in another place in your mind, so that you can take all your ideals and your faith and give them uninjured to another girl. You mustn’t be wasted too! Dad told me a thing that has stuck in my mind. He said that at first love was largely a matter of attention. He’s right, Lloyd! I know it now. So don’t let your mind play with the idea of me. Count me absolutely out and go on again. You can, because I haven’t taken from you what — what Bob took from me, — the —

the first admission to myself, and to any man, of man as a — as a part of life.”

She halted and stopped. The knuckles of her hands were whitened by the grip with which she twisted and untwisted Lloyd's handkerchief.

Had Lloyd been of the type that cannot take no for an answer — a type actuated solely by self-conceit — his answer would have been to take Nancy in his arms and kiss her passionately, with the simple idea of ousting the other man from her consciousness by thrusting his physical attentions upon her. Had he done so, he would have been surprised to find that his passion left her cold. She would not have struggled against it. It would have left her absolutely passive. At that moment, out of a thousand such kisses, only one would have awakened her, — and that one was denied her.

Lloyd felt it. He felt that Nancy had held her soul up for him to see. It would have been blasphemy to sink to the level of mere passion at such a moment. He was more profoundly moved than he had ever been in his life. What other girl in the world would have the courage, at such a moment, to subordinate her own hurt and try to send a man away without hurting *him*? Count her out? Not while he lived!

He was afraid that she might read this in his expression, so he caught her restless hands and bent down and touched them with his lips. Then he straightened up, with a touch of the old grin.

“Who would ever believe that an American could get away with that?” Then he added, “Don't worry about me, honey. You — you've given me something to try and live up to for the rest of my life — and what's more, I'm going to do it! One of these days I'll prove it to you! — I'll be on my way now, if you say so?”

Soundings

Nancy held out her hand. "Good-by, Lloyd! The best of luck to you!"

"So long!" said Lloyd. "So long, old soldier!"

He left her standing at the gate up there on the hill. Before the mist swallowed him he turned and waved.

Nancy raised her hand in acknowledgment. She saw him go on again, making no sound, like a phantom figure. Then the mist wrapped him round and settled down once more.

She was most utterly alone.

PART FOUR

Chapter One

I

BRIMBLE had surrendered to the touch of another spring. Cottage doors stood open. Cats and old women sunned themselves. Lilac flamed in the front gardens. Swallows shrieked as they skimmed at incredible speed above the thatched roofs.

A khaki figure came out of one of the doorways.

"Well, good-by, Ma!" he said. "See you one of these days. I'm glad you and the old man are in the pink. By-by!"

As he waved a hand, a loud sniff came from inside the cottage. The soldier squared his shoulders a little as he began to walk up the village street. He was conscious of discomfort in the regions of his throat and stomach. "I suppose the old man'll 'ave croaked by the time we see this place again!"

He exchanged nods with some of the neighbors, stopped at the Brimble Arms and enjoyed a pint on the house, as befitted the departing warrior, shook hands warmly with the host and, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand in a glow of self-satisfaction, continued on his way.

At the end of the village he heard the voice of a girl singing to herself. He saw her on a raised bank of grass under the line of elms. She was seated at an easel, painting.

A throb of different emotion stirred beneath his tunic. He turned in her direction, went up to her and saluted with a smart click of the heels. "Miss Nancy!" he said.

Soundings

Beneath her brown golf sweater was a silk blouse that seemed to make her throat gleam. Her skirt was apple-green. She wore no hat and the sun was burnishing her hair.

"Strewth!" thought Curly. "She's *all right!* But she's different, somehow, not older, exactly, but more grown-up like!"

Nancy started round at his voice. "Why, it's Curly!" she cried, and jumped up with an outstretched hand. "I'm awfully glad to see you. Good heavens, how you've changed!" Her eyes flashed over his body, no longer slouching, but well set up and stiff as a ramrod.

Curly grinned. "I'm glad to see you, Miss! I've been up to the cottage to say good-by, but Mrs. Weeks told me you were out. I saw Mr. 'Awthorne. Too bad about him. But 'e's lookin' fine now."

"To say good-by?" queried Nancy. "Where are you off to?"

"The regiment's ordered to India," said Curly.

Nancy smiled at the unconscious touch of swagger with which he said "the regiment."

"Is n't that splendid!" she said. "It'll be a great adventure. You seem to have taken to the army, Curly. What are all those things on your arm?"

Curly touched his little moustache. "Oh, them?" He was trying hard to be casual. "The stripes means that I'm a full corporal, Miss, and the other's the marksman's badge, — first-class."

After all, he would n't have been human not to add that last touch, first-class! "I'm working for my third stripe now," he went on, "and hope to be a sergeant pretty soon. Then me and the missus'll be able to lay a bit by on the extra pay."

Nancy's eyes opened wide. "I didn't know you were *married*, Curly! — I'm awfully glad!"

Curly was unbuttoning one of his bulging breast pockets. "Yes," he said, "over a twelvemonth now. And we've got a little 'un, too! She was in service in Wendlesbury when I started walkin' out with 'er. This is 'er picture, Miss!"

A handkerchief, a penny pocketbook, a pencil and a packet of Woodbines came out of his breast pocket. From them he took "the picture." With immense pride he held out a cheap but elaborate photograph which showed a smiling, anæmic-looking girl holding a plump infant.

Nancy felt something happen to her. She had been interested to chat with Curly, to see how life had treated him. There was almost a touch of pride at seeing that he had come out so well. She felt that she had had a hand in the making of him, and up to that moment her state of mind was one of mellow satisfaction.

Now suddenly her muscles stiffened. She did n't want to see that photograph. Her hand shook a little as she took it. For a fragment of a second she was conscious of an impression that the girl's face was a pale caricature of her own. Then the baby's face obliterated everything. She felt a wave of hatred surge through her, hatred that was inextricably tied up with herself, with fate, with life, hatred that was intensified because it was a jolly little face that looked up at her. It taunted her. Bitter words came to her mind. "Loathsome little beast! — Hideous! — Oh, God, it is n't fair!"

Her throat was dry. Her pulses began hammering. With a tremendous effort she pulled herself together. As she gave the photograph back, she heard herself say warmly, "She's perfectly sweet and the baby's a lamb! You must be so proud, Curly!"

The paintbrush that she was holding in her left hand snapped in two.

Soundings

Curly gave a great laugh. His eyes were alight. "Proud! You bet I am, Miss! That's the finest little nipper in the regiment!" He buttoned the photograph back into his pocket.

Nancy's hands were trembling. She put them behind her back. "I'm sure he is!" she said, and to herself, "Fool! Idiot that I am!"

Curly began shuffling his feet. His body lost its drilled erectness and he looked as if he didn't know what to do with his hands. "Before I go, Miss, I—I want to ask your pardon for what I did that night up on the 'ill — you know! It's made me fair sick, worryin' about it!"

"I'm sorry," said Nancy. "Thank God he's going!" she thought. "I forgave you," she said, "before I even came down the hill. It wasn't *your* fault."

"Thank you, Miss. I feel the better for knowin' it," said Curly. "I told the missus about it one night and she fair gave me 'ell, she did! She'll be glad to know that you've forgive me."

"You're probably catching a train," said Nancy. "Don't let me keep you." She held out a hand, and before Curly could say anything, went on quickly, "Good-by and good luck to you. I hope you'll both be very happy."

"Thank you, Miss Nancy. The same to you!" He shook her hand, stepped back one pace and saluted. "Good-by, Miss!"

He stood for a second, then pivoted on one heel and marched on.

Nancy stood very still, holding her breath, so still that two swallows shot screaming between her and the easel, unmindful of her.

When there was no more sound of Curly, the tension suddenly relaxed and she sat down, abruptly, limply, on the camp stool. Her fingers began mechanically fitting the

ends of the broken brush together. She watched them as if they were somebody else's.

The suddenness of this intrusion had broken through her guard. For a long time she had succeeded in not letting her mind dwell on all that might have been. Under the impact of that child face it turned round and began running backwards. She pulled herself up with a jerk, making an exclamation that was neither sigh, nor laugh nor sneer.

"Oh, shut up!" she said to herself. "That's barred, absolutely!" She passed a hand across her forehead as though wiping away a memory. "Pictures for you, my dear," she said, "pictures, — not children!" and, wetting her broken brush, she wrote on the corner of her board, "Nancy Hawthorne, spinster!"

II

"Golf this afternoon?" Jim Hawthorne folded his napkin and tucked it into its ivory ring.

Nancy glanced out of the window. There were only two small clouds in all the sky. "Yes," she said. "I don't think it'll rain, much. I've got to get my drive back. It was absolutely rotten yesterday. They went off like a lot of lame ducks."

"Mind if I come?" said Jim. "I may be able to see what you are doing wrong."

"Oh, rather! I'll go up and change my shoes." She rose from the table, dropped a kiss on the top of Jim's head and ran upstairs to her bedroom. The snapshot of Bob was no longer on her dressing table. It was locked away in a drawer.

Jim caught hold of the crank of his new chair and propelled himself out on to the porch. With the sun on his

Soundings

face he began loading a pipe. "Breakfast, lunch, dinner and bed! Work, eat, play and sleep! One might almost believe that man is a logical animal! Perhaps he would be if he did n't think. — I say, old lady," he called, "will you grab that box of matches on the table as you come out?" He went on with his thought. "Routine is a good crutch but a bad weapon. It's nearly eighteen months now. Thank the lord for our trip to town. It'll give her a mental fillip."

Nancy came clattering downstairs. She pushed the kitchen door open and leaned in, head and shoulders. "Oh, Weeksie dear, can we have some tea about half-past four? If you'll put out those buns, I'll toast them when we get back."

Mrs. Weeks was having her lunch. She was a slow eater. Before she could manage a reply, Nancy had vanished from the door. She caught up her golf bags and the matches from the table and joined Jim outside.

"By the way," she said, "I saw Curly this morning. He has left Brimble pretty far behind, has n't he?"

"The finest thing he ever did was to enlist," said Jim. He glanced at her quickly and then added, "Did he tell you he was married?"

Nancy laughed. "You saw the photograph too?"

There was not even a twinge now.

Jim nodded. "Funnily enough," he said, "it occurred to me that there was a trace of you in the girl. It made me wonder whether a man sticks to a certain type. It might have been purely coincidence, of course, but it would be amusing all the same to see, for example, portraits of all Henry the Eighth's matrimonial ventures, or Solomon's, or any much-married gentleman's, and see if, unconsciously, he were not merely striking the same note over and over again."

While he was talking, Nancy tucked the bag on the tray of the chair beside his legs.

She laughed. "I noticed the resemblance," she said, "but I didn't get as far as that! — Ready?"

"Let her go!" said Jim. "How about staying at the Carlton when we go up?"

And so, she pushing and Jim cranking, they started for the links.

III

It was over a year, — and Nancy could sing and laugh again, could frown earnestly and give stance and swing their rightful importance in the scheme of life. That was a long way for her to have come. But she had not come so far that a sudden attack could not threaten all her defenses. They had been undermined by nothing more formidable than the photograph of a baby. The writing of that word spinster was a gesture equivalent to the pouring in of a ton or two of reinforced concrete, the throwing up of new earthworks, the posting of double sentries.

To see her striding behind her father's chair, absorbed in the discussion of a week in London, who could suspect that she was like a young fortress bristling with guns against a single enemy, — herself? That fact had been her most important discovery among the many things that she had learned.

It was not surprising that Curly had thought that she looked older. Her fight had been hard.

There had been no ease, no escape, apparently nothing to clutch at by which she might help herself out. So much of her thought had been interwoven with Bob that it was difficult to pull it away from him. It seemed that she had made him inextricably a part of her mental fabric. There

Soundings

was nothing else left if she uprooted it by main force. It was as though it dangled limply in nothingness.

All that first winter she could n't get away from the truth. It remained untrue, fantastic, unbelievable. She spent her days arguing it out, going over it, living it again, racking herself for an explanation of what had happened, and not finding it.

Is there a masochistic element in each one of us that makes us relish our own pain, and thus, unconsciously, seek to prolong it?

It was not until Nancy reached the point of being able to accept it as a fact, that she was able to go on. The acceptance placed a springboard beneath her feet, gave her, as it were, a mental purchase. She desisted from holding the wound open and came out to a sense of shame, — shame not because she had allowed herself to go so far, had enfolded him so deeply in herself, had given so much of herself, blindly, recklessly, but shame because she had not known enough to detect the feet of clay. And at that rebellion set in, — rebellion, the first step towards spiritual convalescence. Fiercely she protested that she was n't to blame for her defeat, that it was n't her fault if her whole nature had been drawn by Bob's. She refused to admit that she had been blind. Had n't she fought herself in Paris, expelled the idea of him from her thoughts? How could she be blamed when the sight of him in St. Malo had swept all doubt away, when *he* had caught fire too and told her with eyes and hands and lips that she was justified in her selection? — Was there any truth anywhere? It seemed that the whole of life was a hideous lie when you could n't believe in your own body, or mind or senses.

“What kept me blind?” she asked herself. “Why could n't I sense the truth? I was giving him my whole self, my thoughts and dreams and faith and hopes. He —

or what I thought was he — was the answer to all those feelings which, alone, have an ache in them, but which, shared, mean utter happiness. I wanted to give him laughter and courage, ambition and fulfillment, and to find my own in him. I wanted to give him all the inner things that are me, — the real me. Was I a fool to expect the same? Doesn't love mean that? — He didn't want me. All he wanted was my body. Any one else inside it would have done. To him I was simply a physical experiment, like that girl at Oxford. I don't understand. It puts people down to the level of animals, as if one's soul simply didn't matter, as if it were entirely outside the question. I loved Bob's body too, of course, but not like that, not by itself! I loved it because it was a part of the real Bob, a part of *us both*. What possible basis of living is there if people don't belong to each other and to no one else?"

Then had come another phase in the late spring which had made her loathe herself and hate him for being the cause of it, — a phase when at times the desire to feel his lips on hers again, to have him stroke her hair and rub his cheek against her hand, frightened her with its violence. It hurt her in her pride, but at such moments she would have chucked pride to the winds, have sponged out the entire episode like a bad dream if only he would come back to her, if only she could forget all this in his arms, lose herself in pure sensation. — She would wake up in the night to hear the echo of his name and find that she had been crying in her sleep.

She began to hate waking up. It meant another day to be got through, a day of emptiness, of trying not to think. Little things began to get on her nerves until they were stretched to breaking point. When she pulled on a stocking and found a hole in it, she wanted to cry, or to burst into a paroxysm of temper. It seemed as if the hole were

Soundings

the last indignity, the ultimate spite that malignant fate could inflict upon her. One day when she had to go, as usual, to Friar's Icknield, she found her bicycle punctured. Everything seemed to go black. She snatched up a pair of garden shears and hurled them through the spokes. Then she had walked the three miles each way in the rain to pay herself out. She became gradually aware that whenever Mrs. Weeks came into the room she dropped her voice and spoke soothingly, as though Nancy were an invalid, going about heavily on tiptoe so as not to disturb her. At first Nancy merely raised her eyebrows and turned her back. Even then she could hear it going on behind her. Instead of touching her sense of humor, as normally it would have done, it became an exasperation, unendurable. At last she couldn't stand it. She swung around, eyes hard and bright, fists clenched, and stamped her foot. "Don't be a *damned* old fool!" she cried. "If you can't walk properly and talk like a human being, get *out* of here and *stay* out! I *hate* you maundering about like that. It drives me *mad!*"

Whereupon Mrs. Weeks burst into tears, and Nancy, instantly penitent and jerked out of herself by this counter-emotion, put her arms round the old lady and comforted her, the tears streaming down her own face. "There, there! Weeksie dear! I'm most awfully sorry! I'm a beast! I didn't mean to speak to you like that. It was perfectly rotten of me! Only, everything seemed to rise up at once and made me want to scream!"

All this time three factors were helping her, — time, work and the nagging, stupid details of every day, — having to think of household supplies and to order them in Friar's Icknield, where she was forced to consider the personalities of butcher, baker and grocer who wouldn't let any customer off without conversation; the million and one ab-

surd contacts with Mrs. Weeks over the running of the house.

To Nancy each of these pettifogging tasks was exasperatingly meaningless, but each one succeeded in claiming each day a little more of her attention and, in so doing, prizing her loose by infinitesimal degrees from the self-concentration which bound her. Each domestic decision that she was called upon to make was like a tiny hammer blow on the wedge that was to loosen her.

There was no definite turning point in her condition, no event from which she could date her recovery. The varying phases of her consideration of the problem merged into one another as afternoon melts into twilight and twilight into darkness.

She had said to Lloyd, "I shall never be *me* again!" It was true. The velvet had been rubbed from the butterfly's wings. The first eager bloom and confidence of youth which knows no evil and which proclaims the godhead not only of half-gods but even of mortals, — that divine trust had been trampled underfoot. She would never meet life on that plane again. She had made the first step towards disenchantment, had her first horrified peep of the worm in the bud. Suspicion, that apparently inevitable human attribute, had become a part of her equipment. Hereafter she would reach out timidly, distrustfully, alert to fly back into cover again.

The hardening process had begun.

IV

It was her father who eventually supplied the moral alternative, who, metaphorically, dropped straw beneath the wheels so that she might pull herself out of the mud.

Jim had followed every footstep of her way of the cross,

Soundings

as he called it, had watched and waited for the moment when she would again be susceptible to outside suggestion. From his own experience he knew that the first shock leaves one numbed, unreachable, like a city in tumult, all of whose wires of communication have been cut. So he had devoted himself utterly to living on the outskirts; jubilant if for a bare minute a day he could get in touch, however faintly; rewarded, after months of constant trying, by seeing her make a first effort to come out to him.

Jim didn't hoist flags and fire off salvos. Like a general who knows his job he went on quietly making preparations. She was not ready yet, and to strike at the wrong moment would be worse than failure.

He held his hand until her apathy had disappeared, until he saw her react irritably to pinpricks, until at last he saw that nervously she was all strung up again, on a hair-trigger.

Finally, one afternoon at the end of the summer, he overheard her hysterical outburst at Mrs. Weeks.

"Now!" he said.

He waited till next morning, till the after-breakfast lull, by which time he judged that the last ripple of that outburst would have died down.

He watched her leave the table, put some wood on the fire and start blowing it, restlessly, fitfully, with the bellows.

The moment had come. ●

Jim felt his heart begin pounding. He reached for his pipe and began loading it. Then he broke the silence.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I put in an hour yesterday afternoon looking over the work you did abroad."

The bellows gave an irritable dig at the top log.

Good! Jim made his next point, still quietly. "Some of it's exceedingly good, exceedingly!"

Still no word.

"It's almost time," Jim went on, "that you had an exhibition at the Gainsborough Galleries." Ever so slightly he accentuated the word exhibition.

The blowing ceased for a moment. Then it continued, more quickly.

Jim noted it with a glow of satisfaction. "You see, old lady," he said, "there's not a single one of the women doing water colors who can touch you in point of construction, or, for that matter, in color. It would n't surprise me at all if a Bond Street showing didn't definitely establish you!" Would *that* strike home?

The bellows became still.

It had! "Of course, my dear," — Jim felt that he could play with it now! — "you would n't be able to expect decent treatment from *all* the critics! That old devil Sylvester would enjoy taking a dig at you because, to him, all newcomers are pretentious upstarts. And Adams would slash you to pieces for the simple reason that he hates me! But Forster, and, I think, Jones, would both enthuse, — and the younger fry would therefore immediately hail you as a new star in the artistic firmament. So much for the gentle art of criticism! But don't let that bother you, *I* tell you that your work is good. All the same, it would be good fun, don't you think, to have them all arguing about you in the press? We'd subscribe to all the papers while the fun lasted, and, of course, we'd stay in town during the week of the exhibit! — Incidentally, there's another aspect of it which isn't entirely negligible, — the financial one. Instead of having to hawk your work around as I did and let your best things go for a song — or a curse! — you'll find yourself commanding decent prices right off the reel. There's an independent income waiting for you, old lady, if we go at this thing the right way! If the idea amuses you, and you go on plugging, you ought to be ready by

Soundings

next spring. — Do you realize how soon that is, next spring?"

There it was. Like a well-chosen fly beautifully cast to a hungry but wary trout, the moral alternative, dressed up in terms of success and a touch of fame, floated colorfully just out of reach, — far enough to necessitate effort on her part, but near enough to lure her by the seeming ease with which she could make it. It offered her a new line of thought and conduct, a definite objective. It was like the compass-bearing of land to a ship blown hopelessly off her course.

From his expression Jim was straining on tiptoe for a sign, a word.

Nancy remained silent on the hassock, elbows on knees, her chin cupped in her two hands.

Purely by way of nervous relief, Jim reached out and rasped a match against the box. His pipe would n't draw. He found that he had gone on packing it until the tobacco was as hard as a brick.

At the noise of the match Nancy stirred, rose to her feet. The match burned Jim's fingers as he followed her with his eyes across the room. Without a word she went upstairs. Her bedroom door shut with a click.

"H'm!" grunted Jim. "Now I wonder what in heaven's name *that* means?" For two days he was left wondering.

On the third Nancy came marching into the workshop and planted herself in front of his chair with an air of challenge.

"Look here, Dad," she said, "were you pulling my leg about these things of mine? Did you suggest an exhibition and — and all the rest of it, as a real possibility, or were you offering the moon to a sick child? I — I don't want to make a fool of myself again!"

"I suggested it as a real possibility," said Jim with quiet emphasis, "a practical certainty!"

The tradition of truth between them was lifelong. Nancy's faith in him was absolute. The last shadow of doubt — and that more of herself than of him — disappeared.

"All right, then!" she said, her chin stuck out. "Let's go for it, Dad. Only keep me working; that's all I ask!"

"That's it! We'll show 'em, eh?" said Jim. "After all, work's about the best that anybody can ask in this confounded world!"

Nancy gave a queer little laugh. "Is it, Dad? I used to think there was — something else. So did you, once!"

Startled, Jim looked into her eyes. It seemed to him that Nan looked out of them, her mother, as she had looked when he showed her the cottage for the first time.

"You're right, my dear," he said. "So do we all, once!"

Chapter Two

I

A LONG strip of canvas was suspended across Bond Street. Bold black letters painted on it a foot high shouted their message :

GAINSBOROUGH GALLERIES
EXHIBITION OF WATER COLORS
BY
MISS NANCY HAWTHORNE
Admission one shilling

The first time she saw it, Nancy was helping her father make a precarious way along the narrow and crowded pavement. At every step the end of the chair, or the wheels, only just missed colliding with women who walked blandly forward, oblivious of everything but the shop windows. At Nancy's embarrassed "I beg your pardon!" they turned cold supercilious eyes upon her.

"Damn them!" thought Nancy. "How dare they look at us like that!" and then, aloud to her father, "Let's bump a few of them, Dad!"

The strain on Jim's face relaxed. He smiled. "My dear," he said, "it is being borne in upon me that the London policeman is the only individual who does n't subscribe to the Darwinian theory. One of them will presently stop the entire traffic so that the unfit may survive."

Jim Hawthorne, like a million others of his kind, abhorred "fuss." The mere notion of having all eyes upon him was

enough to make him die a thousand self-conscious deaths. The journey from the cottage to the Carlton had been a prolonged agony. There had been a porter to lift him into the train and another to lift him out. Each time had gathered the inevitable group of staring idlers to whom any misfortune is a peep show, and who are unable to realize that even if they look on sympathetically, their sympathy rankles as much as their staring.

Nancy's only defense against these slings and arrows was her nervous excitement. She had said to herself in Brimble, the night before they came up, "Suppose I'm a failure in this too!" She had not dared carry the thought further, but it summed up both her dread and her need.

To see her striding along, her chin stuck out aggressively, a frown on her face, it would have been impossible to guess that she was shrinking from contact with all these people, that her desire was to hide.

It was a moment later that she suddenly exclaimed, "Good lord, Dad! look at that!" Her eyes were glued to the strip of canvas.

Jim chuckled. "Pretty good! How does it feel, old lady?"

Nancy's face was as red as a peony. "Frightful!" she said, laughing nervously. "For heaven's sake, let's get inside, quick!"

It seemed to her that with her name dangling across the street, everybody must know that it was she. Nancy Hawthorne! Miss Nancy Hawthorne! What a silly name! How perfectly meaningless! And to blazon it across the sky like that! — She broke into a clammy perspiration. Every eye appeared to fasten upon her as though she had suddenly swelled to the size of a bus. She could feel them nudging and pointing, snickering, contemptuous. What a fool she was to have left the privacy of Brimble,

Soundings

to dare to show her pictures. They were rotten, amateur, schoolgirl things. Why had she ever listened to her father? She would die of shame!

It was almost as bad the next day, for although she tried to appear coldly indifferent, looked neither to the right nor to the left as she paid her shilling, as if the whole thing were nothing whatever to do with her, she knew that if some one suddenly addressed her by name she would jump out of her skin.

On the third day there was a great change. The world had steadied beneath her feet. Jim was busy with a bundle of newspapers. "Nancy, come and look!" he called. Together they had read, and the flapping shadows had dispersed.

In the *Times* Mr. Sylvester, who considered himself the doyen of art criticism, had made his usual *ex cathedra pronunciamento*, had delivered himself of an academic reiteration of his own omniscience and wound up with the reluctant admission that perhaps in another thirty years Miss Nancy Hawthorne would have acquired the rudiments of brushwork. ("High praise!" said Jim. "To me, I remember, he recommended school mastering as a profession. Age is apparently gentling him!")

Mr. Forster in the *Evening Standard* had combed the dictionary for unusual adjectives in a column of high praise of Nancy's work. "Interfulgent lactescence" was his best effort in discussing her treatment of the bathing pool at Brimble, and he welcomed her as a "burgeoning luminary" in the artistic fold.

In the *Daily Mail* Mr. Adams had fulfilled expectations by venting much spleen in the effort to establish beyond argument that the lamentable influence of that wilfully mid-Victorian R. A., James Hawthorne, had utterly aborted whatever latent potentialities were indicated in the work —

to call it such! — of his daughter, Miss Nancy Hawthorne, now on exhibition at the Gainsborough Galleries. (“Congratulations, old lady!” said Jim. “A thorough damning from Adams means reputation and cash. The others will jump on him like wolves!”)

Already some of them had. Furthermore, two ladies had sent up their cards, representing two of the weekly magazines, and, with cameras in attendance, had invaded the Hawthorne rooms in the Carlton.

So Nancy was smiling that third day when the breeze ruffled the canvas that displayed her name to the world at large which jostled her uncaring, as she dodged her way up Bond Street.

“As far as the crowd’s concerned, it wouldn’t make any difference if there were a megaphone up there instead of a piece of canvas. It’s like dropping my scent-bottle cork into the Thames and expecting a splash! What do I care? It’s good to be alive!”

The sun danced and glinted off the wind screens of automobiles, the wind tugged at skirts and hats like a mischievous schoolboy. The busses bore into it like tugs in a head sea. Everything tingled. A woman bumped into her. Both of them laughed. “The Colonel’s lady and Judy O’Grady!” thought Nancy, as they disentangled themselves. Sisters under the skin! Sisters? — She laughed again, with a sense of surprise, as though the familiar tag were like an old bead in a drawer which had turned into an opal. She could have hugged the woman, everybody, everything, to her breast. She had a sudden feeling of being charged with great power.

As she floated along, a flame-colored sweater, silk, caught her eye in a shop window. “How perfectly scrumptious!” she said. The price on the tag was appalling. Nancy made a face at it, went in and paid cash and ordered it to

Soundings

be sent to the Carlton. "What name, please?" There was no hesitancy now, "Miss Nancy Hawthorne!"

Within fifteen minutes she was carrying three pipes in a case for her father, and a silver-backed brush and comb for Mrs. Weeks. Had a beggar met her on the threshold of the shop, she would have emptied her purse into his hand, — not because the beggar needed the money, but because she needed the gesture of expression.

It was in this exalted mood that she entered the now familiar gallery and crossed the carpeted hall to say good afternoon to the man in charge.

There was quite a gathering in the large room where her pictures were hung. Evidently the art critics were read by some one. Their carefully subdued voices reminded Nancy of a bush of honeysuckle in bloom, murmurous with bees.

Then a hand touched her elbow and a quiet voice said, "Hullo, old soldier!"

II

When Curly had returned to Brimble, not only a married man but a father, he had felt only a lofty amusement, a second-hand, induced pride at his mother's excited exclamations. She was, after all, only his mother. With Nancy it was very different. For a reason which he would never be able to define, he had wanted to tell her, had sought her out to do so, and in the telling had satisfied a fundamental impulse. How should he know that his meeting with her had resolved itself into an unconscious flaunting of sex triumph so superlative as to amount almost to a form of revenge?

Face to face with Lloyd at that moment, under those circumstances and in those surroundings, Nancy, meta-

phorically speaking, unbuttoned her pocket and showed him the photograph of her child. She caught Lloyd by the hand, her face alight, and dragged him into the room where her pictures were hung. Whispering excitedly, she conducted him from picture to picture. "Look, that one's been sold for twenty pounds! That's the one which the *Daily Mail* described as 'transpontine' because he thought he saw Dad's hand in it. — Do you remember that bit of St. Malo? It's the funny little street running downhill from the Cathedral. Some one's paid thirty for that!"

Utterly unconscious of the fact that all this time she was holding his hand, Nancy executed a mental saraband before the locked door that shut the past behind her. Every person in that room who stood looking at her work was an added note in the orchestration of her triumph. Her eyes gleamed. Carrying on the mood that she had felt in the street, she gloated magnificently, calling his attention to important points by squeezing his hand. This was Lloyd! And he must see it, feel it, understand it. Dear old Lloyd, of all people in the world, must be made to realize fully all that it meant, must be glad with her and share her triumph.

So she thought, honestly, — not aware that in reality she was merely using Lloyd to prove something to herself, to crystallize it, was indeed getting the same kind of satisfaction out of it that Curly had in telling her of his child.

It was not until they were in the hall again, having circled the room and paused at each individual picture, that Nancy's burst of ego was pierced. She was looking up into his face, beaming.

"Well," she said, "isn't it all simply priceless and unbelievable! I can't believe it's me. I feel like some one else! And it's absolutely and entirely due to Dad! Without him it would never have happened."

Lloyd was almost speechless. How should he know what

Soundings

was behind her mood? For some thirty minutes he had felt the full blaze of her personality, had been most tremendously aware of her hand in his. If he had thought her lovely in St. Malo where he had received nothing but the crumbs of her attention, he was overcome now by this apparent gift of her entire self.

As he looked down at her and answered her exclamation, he betrayed himself doubly, with eyes and voice. "In anybody else it would be unbelievable," he said, "but not in you — Nancy!"

Nancy dropped his hand as though suddenly finding that she was holding a nettle. "How about some tea?" she said quickly. "I — I'm dying for some!" She turned abruptly to lead the way out.

Fortunately for her, Lloyd kept on talking, enthusiastic at her success. He half pulled out of his pocket a bundle of newspaper clippings. He had collected them at Oxford, he said, chuckling as he quoted the amazing phrase "interfulgent lactescence" which, he added, put a crimp in his entire vocabulary. He had come up especially to see her exhibition, but of course he had n't dreamed of running into her — of course not!

Nancy felt like a horse at the gallop suddenly flung back on its haunches. The shadow, not of Bob — she found that she could contemplate Bob now with the aloof interest of one who looks at something on the slide of a microscope — but of all that his coming had meant to her, intruded itself between Lloyd and herself. It was his unmistakable look and tone that had brought it there. She was surprised, shocked. She had taken it for granted that Lloyd and she were meeting on the new plane, her plane; that they had both evolved together, had both sloughed off their old skins.

Apparently it wasn't true. Apparently life had n't touched him. She glanced at him with seeing eyes as they

turned into Piccadilly. Lloyd's face was radiant. He walked as one who owns the world, — the world as summed up in the person of the being one loves. It occurred to her to wonder, as she smiled gayly and automatically answered a question, if all the other couples that they passed, who looked equally absorbed in each other were really, like Lloyd and herself, worlds apart. He was telling her of his last visit to Cornelia in Paris, — she having confessed that their correspondence had been all too irregular. "I went over last Christmas," he said, "and she had some new man in tow, some Russian. I don't quite know what his line was, but outwardly he had all the earmarks of genius! Jean, poor devil, was still sticking to the job, but rather in the background, like an uneasy guardian angel." And while he was saying it, within himself Lloyd was uttering shouts of joy: "She's grown out of Bob! The wound has healed! She's free again — for me! For me! This is my chance at last!"

"Poor Jean!" said Nancy. "It's rotten bad luck for him. He's really desperately fond of Cornelia!" And beneath her speech was the thought, "He's been thinking of me all the time, and I'm a thousand years beyond it!"

"I wish she'd quit fooling and marry Jean," said Lloyd. "He's a good scout. — Let's go in here. What do you say?"

They had reached the Piccadilly Hotel.

"All right!" said Nancy.

They went in and presently were ensconced in straw chairs at a table for two, not as far out of range as they would have liked of an orchestra that had made its reputation at ragtime and lived up to it. The usual tea crowd, consisting of the very young and the very passées who were even younger, was there in full force, in an atmosphere of cocktails, tea, noise, cigarettes and questing eyes.

Soundings

As far as Lloyd was concerned, they might have been alone in an oasis. It was as though, once having started, he had to tell her everything.

The waiter brought tea. It was only a momentary interruption. Nancy poured it. Lloyd, she remembered, liked one lump of sugar, two in coffee. Now she glanced at him across the tea, things and broke in, "Sugar? How many?"

Lloyd never noticed it. He grinned. "One, please," he said. "By Jove, this is a great day! You know, we ought to feel like monkeys up at Oxford. While we fool around for three years kidding ourselves that we are not having a good time but are getting educated, you get down to brass tacks and make good as an artist! To perpetrate a wicked pun, your London exhibition is worth about three Oxford scholarships!" He laughed, edged his chair a little nearer under cover of the orchestra, and went on. "You see, Nancy, you're actually competing. It'll take me at least three years, after I begin, to get where you are now."

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" said Nancy. "This show doesn't mean a thing! Why, good heavens, we hire the gallery and more or less hung the pictures up with our two hands. Anybody could do that!"

Lloyd waved a large hand. "You're wrong!" he said. "It isn't so at all. Granted that anybody can hire a hall; can they get the critics' eyes as you have? That's the whole point! They've taken sides about you, and every time you come forward with a new bunch of pictures, they'll emphasize their present point of view. In labeling you, they've labeled themselves, and they'll have to live up to it. Don't you see? After all, it's only human to become obstinate about your own opinions. Believe me, honey, you're fairly launched!"

Nancy glanced quickly at him. He had called her

“honey” that day in the mist when he told her that he loved her. She made a movement to get up.

Her touch of consternation told Lloyd what he had done. “Oh, lord!” he groaned, “I never *can* get off the right foot! But you’ve got to take it, honey, so why not take it like a lady, without any fuss?”

Nancy shook her head. “It’s no good, Lloyd! It’s —” She knew she ought to stop him, but in some curious way this fitted into her mood of an hour ago, that deep sense of well-being, of new-found assurance. This male homage would mark its climax. She needed it as a sort of coping-stone. Nancy sat down again.

Taking advantage of a pause between frenzies, when the musicians wiped the sweat off their faces, Lloyd leaned forward, pitching his voice so that it could be heard by no one but Nancy.

Her last twinge of conscience flickered out. She fell under the spell of his quiet insistence.

“I’ve been trying to take your advice,” said Lloyd, “for a year and a half. It hasn’t worked. I don’t think it ever will work. I’m too much of a dumbbell, I suppose! Anyhow, it’s been impossible to keep from wondering about you, worrying about you, — praying for you, I guess!” He gave a sort of laugh, but didn’t stop. “Before I saw you to-day I had n’t the faintest idea of saying anything. I was going to keep it till just before I sailed. You brought it on yourself by being so perfect! Listen, Nancy, I go back to New York at the end of this term, after I get my degree. Will you come back with me, honey? Will you marry me and make it our honeymoon trip? Why not hold your next exhibition on Fifth Avenue, while I jump into the law game and try out the value of an Oxford Ph.D.?” He dropped his voice. “I’ve only three more words to add, but they’re the best in the dictionary in any

Soundings

language, whether you say 'em or hear 'em. I love you!"

He stopped, waiting eagerly, hopefully. Nancy remained silent, her eyes hidden.

Lloyd pressed his cigarette end into the dregs of his teacup. It made a sizzling noise, — like a hot iron of the Inquisition on the bare flesh of a victim. He wished it had been. He watched the liquid creep up the white paper, turning it brown, and began jabbing the soggy mass with a spoon.

"Would it make any difference," he said, "if I stayed over here and got called to the Bar, instead of going back to New York?"

The three best words in any language! Nancy gave a curious little laugh, dry, humorless, and struck the palms of her hands together. "They're as pitiful as lost children," she said, "until they're picked up and hugged!"

Lloyd looked at her, puzzled. "I have n't the least idea what you mean by that," he said.

Nancy swept his remark aside. "If I could come with you, I would. But I can't in any honesty. Let me try and explain. You touch something in me which no one else ever has. I can tell you things, *speak* to you, as I never have to any one else. In that sense I love you, Lloyd, in the sense that I give that much of myself to you alone."

"It's a good beginning," said Lloyd.

"Yes, but it isn't enough to marry you on. It isn't enough between us to justify our spending our lives together!"

"I'd risk it!" said Lloyd.

"Risk it!" cried Nancy. "One does n't take risks unless one is an utter fool. Don't I know it? No, my dear! One's got to be certain, dead certain, or else it's a worthless sham. You know that as well as I do! You've got the

same faith that I had. You want — oh, everything! To build from the ground up through every day, to share a word or a smile to their uttermost meaning, to sink or swim with complete indifference, so long as it's done together! — I can't give you that. Nor can you give it to me. You and I just miss it, Lloyd. There is some quality, some — some chemical, if you like, which we don't share, and without it —" She made a queer gesture of emptiness. "If I married you, we should both be accepting the second-best, knowingly, hoping that it would turn out all right afterwards. If that's all life has to offer, I'd rather not have it, thanks! That's feeble, cowardly stuff! It's unimaginable! We're much too good for meek resignation! Just *look* at us! There's the whole world to kick around in, and, my lord, I'm going to kick! Do you remember Wells' title 'The Research Magnificent'? That's it, somehow. It sums it up. It's what I want to do."

Lloyd nodded. "I had a pretty good hunch about a year ago that that would be your programme!"

Nancy stared at him. "How could you possibly think that? I couldn't have said this three months ago, or even three days ago. I had n't got here then. I was still groping. I still thought that the end of the world had come, as far as I was concerned. But to-day I feel as if I could push mountains over, as if I'd got my second wind and could go on plugging forever." Under cover of the tablecloth she dropped her hand on his and gripped it tightly. "I'm glad I got all this off my chest, Lloyd. It puts us absolutely all square with each other, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely!" said Lloyd.

"That's great!" said Nancy. "And we're both going to kick, aren't we?"

A little smile puckered the corners of Lloyd's eyes. "You bet your sweet life!" he said. "Only — you're going to

Soundings

prolong the darned thing altogether unnecessarily. I'm going to kick for you!"

For a moment Nancy remained speechless. Then she burst out laughing. "Heavens!" she said. "Here I work myself up into an emotional outburst over you, and at the end of the whole thing we're right back to where we started. I thought I was being so helpful! You're an obstinate, ungrateful wretch, and I'll accept no further responsibility for you!"

Lloyd grinned and beckoned to a waiter. "You're not the only one who can push mountains over, honey, and although I'm obstinate, I'm certainly not ungrateful! What I wanted to know was where you stood. Nine girls out of ten would simply have strung me along, kept me guessing. You come to the point with the directness of a man. That's why I'm grateful. You're perfectly right about that research. Go to it! We all have to. I started on mine when I left Princeton, and it's landed me—here! As I see it, you're not ready for me, yet. One of these days perhaps you'll find the missing chemical!"

"And if not?" queried Nancy.

Lloyd shook his head. "I refuse to consider that possibility. Let's wait and see."

As he raised one eyebrow at the waiter, asked "How much?" and reached into his pocket and paid him, Nancy watched Lloyd. Had he got hold of something that she had not yet discovered? Had she left him behind, or was he ahead of her? The first time he told her that he loved her, she remembered that she had been tremendously upset, had felt that it was a tragedy of error almost equal to her own. To-day it had almost the quality of a chess problem, absorbing, but personal only in a secondary manner. To this extent both of them had changed already; had, as it were, acquired new ingredients, and as a result reacted upon each

other differently. Next time he asked her, what then? Assuming that people were constantly in a state of flux, it seemed that love was nothing but a matter of momentary timing, a brief synchronization of imaginations, — like a moon seen at the moment of complete eclipse, from which one knows it will emerge in a matter of hours.

Nancy jumped to her feet. "Come on!" she said, smoothing down her skirt. "Let's go. One can't argue it into happening. It either does, or it does n't. But meanwhile, Lloyd" — she looked him squarely in the eyes — "neither you nor any one has put those three words in the right language!"

III

Their rooms in the hotel looked down on the Haymarket from one window, and from the other right along into Trafalgar Square.

Jim was sitting there in his chair. He had finished the afternoon paper long since. He was waiting for Nancy and had nothing better to do than to watch the traffic. After a time his eyes refused any longer to pick out units — busses with different-colored posters of plays, men who might have been born wearing spats and tall hats, pretty women in cars and on foot, soldiers in uniform and policemen marching to duty with rolled capes under their arms. The whole mass seemed to shift in perspective, to become just a moving pattern that was endless in its variations and combinations, as though mere motion was the answer to the riddle of life. How futile that crowd was; and how terrible! Futile in its diffusion of energy; terrible in the thought of its possibly being focused upon a single purpose.

"What a theme for Wells in his palmier days," thought Jim. "The whole of mankind with its face turned one way, aflame with a single desire!"

Soundings

He struck the paper on his lap. "There would n't be any of this kind of miserable class antagonism any more. 'Troops fire on the Liverpool mob!' My God!"

He turned away from the window with something of disgust, and as he did so there came a tap on the door and Nancy entered. Jim's face lit up. What he felt like saying was, "Thank God you've come at last!" What he actually said was, "Hullo!"

"Shut your eyes and hold out your hand!" said Nancy.

"Been blowing yourself?"

"Never you mind!" said Nancy. "Do as you're bid!"

When Jim opened his eyes again the case of pipes lay in his hand. "Oh frabjous day! Calloo, Callay!" he cried. "They're very lovely! Why, I don't think I've ever bought such magnificent, splendoriferous pipes in the whole course of a long and sober life!"

Nancy laughed. "Like 'em?"

"Love 'em!" said Jim. He blew her a kiss and began to sing,

"Oh, there *was* a rich *merchant*
In *London* did *dwell*.
He *had* but one *daughter*
An *uncommon* fine young *gell*. . . ."

Nancy interrupted the song with a question. "Has anything come for me?"

"On the table," said Jim.

"Wait till you see this!" Nancy snapped the string round the cardboard box, undid the tissue paper and held up the flame-colored sweater. "Doesn't this warm the cockles of your heart?"

Jim whistled. "Glorious! Put it on! Let's see you in it!"

Nancy took off her hat. "Of course it does n't go with

this skirt," she said. "Imagine my green golf skirt under it, Dad!"

There was a long glass between the windows. She put on the sweater and regarded herself with no little satisfaction from many angles.

"Passed unanimously!" said Jim. "You'd put a whole regiment of Guards out of step!"

Nancy made a face at him. "And these are for Weeksie," she said, opening the last package. "Do you think she'll like them?"

Jim glanced at the brush and comb. "I hate to suggest it," he said, "but don't you think that they'll remove her few remaining hairs within a week? — And now, tell me! What's all the shooting about? Landed a big one at the gallery?"

Nancy was in front of the mirror again, swinging imaginary golf sticks. "Oh, no!" she said. "It was the day — London — the whole thing. I just felt like going a bust, that's all!"

Jim smiled. "That grand and glorious feeling, eh?" He glanced at her keenly under one raised eyebrow. "How would you like to stay on here, old lady?"

Nancy froze in the middle of a swing. "Stay on?" She turned and faced her father with a catch in her breath.

Jim patted the chair invitingly. "Come and sit down and let's discuss it."

"No, I don't want to sit down," said Nancy. "Go ahead. I'm listening!"

She planted herself by his chair, her feet a little apart, her hands stuck in the pockets of her sweater.

Without further preamble Jim went ahead. He painted in glowing colors the attractions of a studio in Chelsea, looking out, perhaps, over the Embankment, the stamping ground of England's artists, both actual and potential.

Soundings

It would be good for her, he said, to get into the atmosphere, to meet them all, whether slackers or workers, and see for herself what manner of strange beasts they were, to talk their language for a while. It would give her a close contact with one or two aspects of life that hitherto were beyond her ken.

"A lot of it is utterly false," he said. "The glamour of art holds more allurements than drink, and sometimes does more harm. The place is full of dabblers who talk in capital letters and who achieve nothing but long hair and a relaxation of moral fiber which they are pleased to call Bohemianism. The chief purpose that they serve in life is to be amusing, unconsciously. But there is a group of very real workers, most of them quite content to starve unseen and unsung. Their sincerity is an inspiration and their tragedy is that they perish too often with their dream unexpressed. But whether workers or dabblers, they are vastly human. You would make many friends. — Since we came to town I've been doing a little thinking, old lady, and it seems to me that we're getting into a rut in Brimble. It would do us both good to be shaken out of it. I don't suggest giving it up. Our roots have struck too deep for that. But we might come in town for six months of the year, from November to April, say. What do you think of the idea?"

Jim watched her as she paced up and down the room, her brows meeting in a frown of concentration.

To Nancy the suggestion was as startling as though, a disbelieving cripple at Lourdes, she had found herself walking without crutches. The idea of coming to town had never occurred to her, because from her earliest childhood she had grown up with the belief not only that Brimble was home, but that her father's greatest achievement was his escape from London. How many times she had heard him

tell the story of the finding of the cottage. It was the one story that she used to beg for when he had shown her how to draw dragons. How many thousand times, later on, she had seen him come out on the porch in his shirtsleeves, turn his face to the sun and then look all round the garden and out across the valley with a little smile, as though he were Adam looking over Eden. And then he would say, half to himself and half aloud, "It's a good spot! — By God, it's a good spot!"

And now, if you please, he said that *they* were getting into a rut and that it would do them *both* good to be shaken out of it! What a gorgeous lie! If it was n't for her he would never have dreamed of budging. He adored Brimble. It was a part of himself, and yet he was offering to uproot himself, to come to London, which he hated doubly now that he was chained to that wheel chair! How absolutely priceless he was! It would be perfect! But every time they went out in the streets together would be an agony to him, although he would smile and pretend that he didn't mind. Hadn't he stayed cooped up in his room every time that she went out alone? Of course he had said that he wanted to read or to stay quiet. But she knew! What he disguised as being in a rut was the fact that one didn't meet any men in Brimble. And he was prepared to give up half his life — that was what it meant — so that she might do so! Well — was n't that one aspect — in fact, to be honest, more than that — of what she had told Lloyd? What was she going to say? Would she be a selfish beast if she accepted his offer? London! A studio! The research magnificent! — Crowds would come into the studio in the long evenings when the wind blew the fog smokily down the river and the pavements glistened damply under the yellow street lamps. There would be a crackling fire and they would split up into groups, some on the chintz

Soundings

window seat, others all over the sofa. How they would talk, and make music, in the full satisfaction of a room full of canvases and much work. And they would all adore Dad and come to him for advice and be awfully sweet and sympathetic.

She wouldn't want to keep Dad in town a minute after the decent weather came. It would be only too perfect to get to Brimble again, in whose calm she would be able to get a perspective on it all. And they might ask one or two of the London crowd down for long week-ends. — Oh, if only Dad weren't a cripple! What a shame it was!

Nancy came to a stop in front of the window. The evening exodus was in full force. Every bus was crammed like a tin of sardines. The subway entrance was exactly like an ant's hole. From every direction people in ones and twos hurried to it in a steady stream and disappeared underground. What could Dad do in that rush and scurry? Even from the hotel window she could see the way they fought each other for the bus, women elbowing men, and men women, eager, desperate, pathetic, but amazingly alive. The sight of them made her muscles stiffen. It was tremendously exciting. She would have given anything to get down among them and push and heave for a seat on the bus that would take her to Chelsea, to the studio! But Dad would be condemned to side streets. He could never go to theaters or concerts with her. He would be like a prisoner in a cell, a bird in a cage. — That was n't what one sportsman did to another!

She took a last look at it, a long, hungry look, and then quietly turned her back on London.

“Thumbs down, Dad! Nothing doing!”

“Why not?”

“Millions of reasons!”

“Tell me a few.”

"Oh, what's the good? It's out of the question."

"I don't see it at all. You've got to convince me."

"Well," said Nancy, "for one thing, if we came to town I'd never do another stroke of work!"

"Nonsense!" said Jim.

Nancy sat down on the edge of his chair. "Do you realize that there are about a hundred theaters here and that I should go to every single one of them?"

"Very good for you!" said Jim. "A part of your education. I used to stand in line for the gallery at every first night for years. In any case one doesn't work at night!"

Nancy laughed. "All the same it's one vast show by day and I should be tempted to be out in it all the time. Incidentally where should we play golf, and what should we do with Weeksie?"

"If those are the only reasons you can dig up, old lady, you may as well go and look up some furniture for the studio!" He smiled quietly and reached for the tobacco pouch. "Be honest and admit that you'd love it!"

Nancy jumped up. "Why won't *you* be honest," she cried, "and admit that you'd hate it, that you're doing it simply for me, and that London would be one long hell?"

Jim's laugh made the chair rock. "Good Heavens!" he said, "anybody would think that my wings were sprouting already! No, old lady, you've got the wrong end of the stick. My motives are purely and disgustingly selfish. Don't you grasp the fact that I'm gloating over the results of your exhibition, that I'm as proud as punch of you, and that I've suggested the studio because I want to see you make it a real and lasting success? I don't suggest that you would n't become that anyway, but I do think that being on the spot is half the battle, and I flatter myself that I can help you because I know the ropes and because I can

Soundings

introduce you to some vastly useful people, thus pandering to my own egregious ego by opening a door or two for *my* daughter! Do you see, child? Don't you suppose the sight of you going to the top of the tree will more than compensate for the supposed sacrifice that you insist I am making for you? Sacrifice of what, I should like to know? I give you my word of honor, as between sportsmen, that if you'll spend the winter months in town and let me give you a hand, you'll be giving your old Dad an immense deal of pleasure. — Surely that isn't very difficult to believe, is it?"

Outside the window the rumble of London was like the muttering of a giant.

Nancy found that she had to swallow before she could trust herself to speak. "It's never very difficult to make a girl believe what she wants to believe!" she said.

"Good!" said Jim. "Then to-morrow morning we'd better roll down to Chelsea and look the ground over for next autumn. Hand me a match, will you?"

Nancy struck a light for him and held it over the bowl of his pipe, one of the new ones. When it was well alight, she blew the match out and bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"Thanks most awfully!" she said, and there was a choke in her voice that made further comment unnecessary.

Chapter Three

I

ON a sunny day in June, 1914, Nancy Hawthorne celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday. The ritual of previous years was in no way different. Jim's present was on her breakfast plate, and when he kissed her, there was the usual tiny touch of heightened emotion.

The morning brought her the annual cable of three words :
"As ever Lloyd."

The afternoon was marked by Mrs. Weeks' special cake.

At dinner her father raised his glass of port across the roses and touched it to hers. "Here's to you, old lady!" he said.

So it had been on the twenty-fourth and fifth and sixth, — occasions whose tranquillity was complete, milestones which had slipped past, claiming only that brief flicker of attention which passengers in express trains bestow on way stations, a mere recognition of the name as they flash through.

For three winters she had steeped herself in London, absorbing it with the gusto of an urchin with a pie in each hand and devouring both at the same time. She had thrown off this excessive stimulation in a driving fury of work, to the pretended amusement of the curiously assorted Chelseaites who, as time went on, had made the studio a rendezvous. They had brought Nancy many things, — comradeship and laughter, envy and veiled sneers, admiration that looked out of eyes in which sometimes there were

Soundings

twin question marks. And in the fascination of this procession birthdays slipped off the calendar as softly as leaves from an autumn tree.

But this was the twenty-seventh!

As Nancy set down her glass, the words began ringing in her brain like an insistent peal of bells, "Twenty-seven! — Twenty-seven! — Twenty-seven!"

Usually the glass of port was followed by an adjournment to the porch, while the blood-red sky slowly dwindled and swallows gathered on the telegraph line for their evening chatter, a few younger ones still soaring shrilly high up in the clear opal.

It was infinitely peaceful out there after a hard-working day. The sleepy flowers were more generous of their perfume. Now and again a distant child shouted and the sound came floating like a silver note. Way down below them on the main road automobiles lost their fury of speed, the roaring rush with which they pass you, close to. They became one with the slow evening, passing on their way like majestic stag-beetles, with a high sweet hum. Cigar and cigarette became like big and little glowworms as the light yielded place to darkness, that moment for long thoughts and lowered voices.

But to-night the mood was shattered. The words "twenty-seven" had gone through it like a stone through a window pane. Just as that act changes the entire character of a room, so the ring of twenty-seven started echoing down Nancy's nerve centers until her mind, quiet on all those other birthdays, became filled with reverberations. She rose from the table abruptly.

"You must smoke your cigar alone to-night," she said. "I — I'm going out in the car."

She went upstairs and changed into a different pair of shoes and a sweater.

Jim was pouring himself another glass of port as she came down.

"I won't be very long," she said.

Jim nodded. "Take care of yourself."

Nancy stopped by his chair and kissed him. How priceless he was! He showed no surprise, asked no questions, expressed no resentment at being left. He never did.

She closed the door behind her and went down through the garden. A carnation struck her hand as she passed. She picked it, sniffed deeply, and put the stalk in her mouth.

"Twenty-seven! — Twenty-seven!"

She went into the garage, a little house of wood, painted green, tucked into the bank at the edge of the road. Two years had made it a part of Brimble.

It was Jim's car, a present from Nancy. She had earned it in the year following her exhibition, had learned to drive at an automobile school in London, and had a special body designed with a low bunk for Jim alongside the driver's seat.

The carnation made a scarlet splash against her cheek as she drove out and headed down the hill towards the main road, towards escape from the clatter of her thoughts.

Up in the cottage Mrs. Weeks had just come in to clear away. The beat of the engine came in through the open window like the purring of a giant cat.

"Good 'eavens!" she cried. "Is that Miss Nancy going out alone at this time of night? Do you think it's safe? I'm always afraid of them things blowing up. And with 'er by 'erself—." She sniffed loudly and looked reproachfully at Jim Hawthorne. "I don't know what the world's coming to!"

Jim smiled. "Progress, Mrs. Weeks," he said. "Progress! Yesterday we walked on all fours. To-day we fly. To-morrow? — God only knows what to-morrow will bring!"

Soundings

"Well," said Mrs. Weeks, "so long as it brings Miss Nancy back safe, to-morrow can take care of itself."

Jim looked at the old woman for a moment as she gathered plates with her rheumatic hands.

"I'm not sure," he said, "that that is n't the sanest way to look at it, after all. The fate of the human race depends, finally, upon individuals."

Mrs. Weeks blinked at him. "The way you do turn things!" she said. "What's that got to do with Miss Nancy?"

"Nothing," said Jim, "unless to-morrow brings her something more dangerous than driving a car."

"There ain't nothing more dangerous than that," said Mrs. Weeks.

"God knows I wish you were right!" said Jim.

He turned his head towards the window, listening. The sound of the car had ceased.

II

Nancy knew the country like the inside of her pocket. By the time it was dark she was halfway across the next county. Her eyes missed no detail of every twist and turn of the road as it streamed into the circle of her headlights. Obediently her hand on the steering wheel carried out the orders of her brain; but just as a pilot may sometimes watch the reflection of his plane stationary upon the racing clouds below him, so Nancy, as from a mental pinnacle, looked down upon the image of herself in the car at the head of a long trail of white dust, headed for nowhere in particular.

Sleeping villages yielded up their echo and fell behind. Rabbits scuttled into the ditch on either side of the dusty road. Several large night insects exploded against the

wind screen. Once two fierce topaz eyes brought her heart into her mouth before a cat glided away on silent rhythmic feet. Then came the ping of a stone flung by the tire against a brake rod, interrupting for a second the urgent hum of the engine.

As though completely dissociated from that physical self which drove the car along with subconscious certainty, and which, like an automatic apparatus, photographed the film of the road, Nancy's attention was riveted upon an inner tumult, a kind of mental battle with herself.

"That's your life, Nancy Hawthorne. You're just going full speed ahead for nowhere in particular."

"That's perfect rot! How about my work? Haven't I achieved anything these last three years?"

"Oh, yes. People are talking about you. The magazines have reproduced some of your pictures. You have even been bought by a museum!"

"Well, then?"

"Does it mean anything beyond the satisfying of your vanity? Of course it was a grand goal to work for. But now that you've succeeded — up to the present point — doesn't it seem a little futile? Isn't there something more?"

"Yes, there's Dad. He's getting old. Sticking to him seems to me a pretty worth-while job!"

"I should say it was! But why not face facts? You say he's getting old."

"Shut up!"

"It's no good saying shut up. He's fifty-seven. What are you going to do when he — when you are alone?"

"How dare you say that?"

"Be honest! Even if you've never allowed yourself to phrase that thought, it's been in your mind. You've managed to push it out as you have that other and much

Soundings

more important one. But to-night you can't do it! You're twenty-seven, and if you don't look out you'll be too old for —"

"Don't start that again, for God's sake! It's been buried since —"

"Since Bob went off. I know! But you know what happens to a seed when you bury it. This one has been germinating quietly all through your winters at the studio and your summers down here. You thought you'd killed it, but it's been just around the corner all the time."

"It hasn't! It hasn't!"

"Hasn't it? Would you like me to go back and recall to you each separate and distinct occasion on which it stuck its head up?"

"No. I won't listen!"

"Oh, yes, you will! What happened when Curly showed you that photograph? Why does the little boy next door to the studio run up the street to meet you every time you come along? Why do those cables —?"

"Oh, shut up! I *won't* listen!"

"All right, but what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

"Hadn't you better face it and find out? It'll be too late soon! Do you hear me, too late!"

The car slowed and jerked forward again as Nancy writhed in her seat and her foot slipped on the accelerator.

She spoke aloud. "I'm driving like a cow to-night. Where am I, anyway?"

She glanced at her wrist watch. "Good lord, it's nearly midnight!"

She slowed the car, stopped and looked around. The ground sloped away from the road and, through clumps of pines, soft and black like velvet, ran a gleam of silver, the river. On the other side of her was a cornfield whose pale

gold shimmered away to where it met the skyline and the stars.

Nancy laughed a little excitedly. "Well, it's still England, anyhow!" She shrugged her shoulders, switched off the engine, felt for a cigarette and lit it.

From the direction of the river an owl called. The cornfield was full of rustlings and whisperings. Uneasy sounds came from the engine as it began to cool.

Suddenly Nancy gave a tremendous sigh. It seemed to galvanize her. She leaned forward, dimmed the headlights, got out of the car, slammed the door and walked down the field towards the river. As she came out upon the bank, the owl called again.

She stood there, silent, breathing in the smell of the pines, listening to the tiny gurgle of the water, her eyes following the curve of the stream.

The pop of a rising fish accentuated the warm stillness. She found the widening rings upon the water and watched them, absently, until they merged with the stream. Then, with a last pull at her cigarette, she tossed it away. It described a gleaming arc that died in the water with a hiss. This sudden puncturing of the silence seemed to put a period to her thought.

"If I *let* it be too late, it's because I'm a coward!"

III

As the grandfather clock frenziedly worked itself up to striking midnight, Jim Hawthorne picked up his book and laid it down again for perhaps the twentieth time.

Two of the candles had burned themselves right down to their sockets. The other two guttered feebly, making grotesque shadows lurch and shiver upon the wall. The oil lamp was gradually sinking to a mere blue glimmer,

Soundings

in spite of Jim's frequent turnings up of the wick. "What a bloody fool I am!" he muttered. "It's probably nothing worse than a puncture, but the very earliest a telegram could reach me from any hospital is nine o'clock — What's that?"

He listened eagerly. It was only the faint rumble of a train along the valley.

Jim turned to the lamp savagely. "If you want to go out, *go* out and be damned to you!" His thumb and finger wrenched the winder down and a series of sparks jumped up the lamp chimney.

Jim grunted. "If she does n't come in a minute, I shall really begin to worry. Where's my pipe? God, if I only had my legs again!" Then he gave a laugh. "A lot of use they'd be to me at this moment! I'd probably be smashing up the furniture."

He found his pipe and stuck it between his teeth. Then, with a jerk he started his chair towards the porch and went outside, his ears alert for the first sound of the car. The silence was absolute.

How many evenings he had sat out there, basking in it, his eyes picking out pinpoints of light between the softened outlines of tree, barn and slope, while his thoughts ambled back and forth along the path of memory.

To-night even the fragrance of the flowers was exasperating. For an hour he alternately smoked his pipe red-hot and chewed it cold again, his imagination flaring up with pictures of frightful motor accidents.

At last a pair of headlights swung around the clump of trees at the foot of the hill.

"There she is!" said Jim. "I'm nothing but a damned old hen! Imagine not having more control than this, at my time of life! The thing to do is to sneak off to bed before she gets here."

The hill was not a long one, however, and Nancy took it with a rush. Before Jim could get under way in his chair, the car was at the bottom of the garden and the headlights picked him out for a moment as they swept along the porch and into the garage.

"That's that!" said Jim, and waited.

In a moment the engine ceased, the glow in the garage became abruptly black and the hollow thump of the doors being closed was followed by the loud click of a padlock.

She came across the garden.

"Why, Dad!" she called. "What on earth are you doing up at this time of night? Not sitting up for me, were you?"

Jim chuckled. "Oh, dear me, no!" he said. "You flatter yourself, old lady!"

"Good!" said Nancy. "I was afraid you might be worrying."

"My dear," said Jim, "the privilege of worrying belongs exclusively to the female of the species. The male has too much sense! There was nothing to worry about. You drive quite as well as if you were a professional, and the English countryside, in these happy and enlightened days of progress and Christianity, is as safe by night as it is in the sun of noonday.—No, I've just been reading and smoking. It's such a perfect night that it seemed a pity to go to bed."

Nancy laughed as she came up the steps on to the porch.

"Lied like a gentleman!" she said. "Have you drunk up all the ginger ale?"

"No," said Jim, "but you'd better take a match if you're going in to get it. Every light in the place has long since succumbed."

"I need food as well as drink," said Nancy. "How

Soundings

about some sandwiches of cold beef and the rest of that cake?"

"Sounds like an orgy to me!" said Jim.

"It'll *be* an orgy!" said Nancy. She laughed. "The word hungry is meaningless as a description of my present condition. Ravenous, emaciated, be-famined! Give me a match before I fade into thin air."

She went into the cottage. Within five minutes the place was lit up and they were both eating. Conversation was one-sided until Nancy, having replied in somewhat thick monosyllables during mouthfuls, at last sat back with a sigh and a smile of repletion.

"I've never known anything to taste so good!" she said. "I could navigate the other half of England now."

Jim slid his cigarette case over. "I wondered if you were headed for John o'Groats! If you'd been driving an aëroplane this evening, you'd have had time to drop in at the *Folies Bergères* for an hour and bring back the final edition of the *Petit Parisien*. Just as a matter of curiosity, how far did you get, old lady?"

Nancy looked at her father across the table without answering. Then she watched the thin amethyst spiral of smoke from her cigarette. Finally she spoke. "I don't know where I drove, but I got farther than I've ever been before."

They knew each other's moods and tenses very well, these two. Wherever close sympathy exists, an inflection or a hesitation can be more potent forms of expression than speech. There was a note in her voice now which took hold of the conversation and lifted it into an entirely new plane, awakened different perceptions, aroused another kind of attention.

Nancy continued. "I landed myself up against something pretty fundamental out there in the car."

“Yes?” said Jim.

Nancy nodded. She was staring at her plate, — at that curve of the river with the fish plopping. Then, with a quick, nervous movement, she said, “Tell me something about this painting game, Dad! Is it more or less steady, like other jobs? What I mean is this: for the last couple of years I’ve earned about eight hundred a year. Now, providing I go on working steadily for the rest of my days, can I count on getting at least as much as that from year to year, possibly more?”

Jim sent her a puzzled glance. “What’s she driving at?” he thought.

“I think that’s a fair enough assumption,” he said. “You see, the better known you become, the higher your price on each canvas. Other things being equal, therefore, it’s safe to say that you are on the road to earning a very decent living. But don’t forget that I’ve got enough for us both and that any time you want it it’s all yours.”

Nancy gave him a quick smile. “Thanks, Dad! But it’s not that. I just wanted some assurance on the stability of my own efforts.”

“Seeing that it’s your birthday,” said Jim quietly, “I’ll risk the chance of your getting a swelled head and tell you what I think of your efforts. I think there are few other girls in England who have made as much of their lives as you have. I’ve watched your performance these last few years not only with great pride, but with deep respect. You’ve got both guts and honesty, my dear, and in my humble opinion there’s not much else that matters.”

A silence fell between them.

They both felt a little self-conscious. Whatever flattering things each might think of the other, it was never their practice to come out with them in cold blood like this. They never got nearer than a slangy phrase.

Soundings

But in spite of the fact that for the life of her she didn't know what to say, and shifted uneasily in her seat, Nancy flushed with pleasure.

"You're a dear to say that," she said at last, "but it just shows how points of view differ! Out there in the car I was telling myself that apart from my work I was not really living at all, that I was just pattering along from day to day, getting absolutely nowhere. — No, don't interrupt, Dad! Let me get this off my chest. I want you to get *my* end of it. Don't think I'm grumbling or anything stupid like that. That would be absurd. In a whole lot of ways I know that I'm one of the luckiest people in the world. Up to a point everything has been, and is, perfectly priceless. I love my job, and thanks to you, the last three years, here and in town, have been marvelous. But —" she laughed shortly, "there's always a but, is n't there? I've only just realized what twenty-seven means. To you it probably seems nothing. You think I'm still a child. You're wrong, Dad. I'm old. Twenty-seven's a hell of an age for a woman! If I were a man, it might be different, I suppose. I don't know. Anyhow, this birthday of mine has hit me between the eyes and I've been asking myself some uncomfortable questions about life and what the answer is." With a fork she was stabbing the end of a piece of beef. "*This* is n't it, Dad! Not by itself. This is like —" she began to slow down, feeling her way — "this is like a lovely accompaniment to a song, without the song itself, or a background to a picture that is left unfinished. Do you see what I mean, Dad? It is n't all here, and I've been happily fooling myself that it was. I — I want the rest of it, the — the real things! Perhaps," with a laugh, "there's too much ego in my cosmos, but I'm not satisfied to go on working indefinitely, knowing that I'm simply marking time, nibbling at the edges!"

Had they been discussing some other girl, Jim might have mounted a high moral horse and delivered himself of much quiet, but not very helpful, philosophical criticism. He might have said, "The art of living is nothing but an attitude of mind." Or "the pinnacle of happiness is only to be reached by the elimination of desires." But this was not some other girl. It was Nancy, and his beautiful picture of her happiness was being slashed to ribbons! It didn't occur to him to philosophize. He was too deeply touched.

Up to now Nancy had maintained an element of lightness in her attitude, as though anxious to conceal the effort which this confession called for, but, the first step being well taken, she went along more steadily.

"Don't think I've only just thought of this, Dad," she said. "It's been gathering like a cloud since we first went up to London. To-night, out in the car, it broke. It showed me the stark truth of something that I had hidden away inside myself instead of having thrown it overboard completely, as I thought I had when — after I got back from France — you know! I see now that I was a fool to think it could be thrown overboard. I suppose the reason that I tried to do so was because I was too young to work it out properly, or because I was scared of it. And yet to me now, in some ways, it seems so simple and natural that I wonder what made it alarming. Don't you think that any girl ought to be able to admit to herself, perfectly frankly, that one day she would like a child?"

"Of course!" said Jim. "She wouldn't be healthy if she did n't."

Nancy nodded. Then she said, "Well, what do you think about it, Dad?"

"Think about it? How?"

"I want one," said Nancy.

"Why, of course you do!" said Jim, with eager sym-

Soundings

pathy. "I've been wondering for a long time when you were going to make up your mind to get married."

Nancy shook her head. "You don't understand, Dad. I don't think I shall ever get married."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Jim. "Besides, if you don't marry, how —"

His face changed. He leaned forward intently. "What exactly do you mean, child?"

"I'll tell you," said Nancy. "When you first suggested the studio, your main idea was not work, was it? You hoped that I would meet some one and fall in love?"

"Something like that," said Jim.

"That's what I thought," said Nancy; "and have you been keeping tabs on me at the studio?"

Jim frowned. "Why, my dear, you don't think I would —"

Nancy laughed. "Oh, not like that! I meant perfectly friendly tabs, Dad! For instance, do you remember that armful of roses that came every blessed day for a fortnight?"

"One could n't very well help noticing that," said Jim.

"Do you know who sent them?"

Jim shook his head.

"It was Zadlev."

"Good heavens! That Russian!"

"Yes," said Nancy. "He gave me rather a warm time of it. When I refused him finally and categorically, he said he was going to cut his throat. He's in Paris now, — raving about Cornelia!"

Rather unmirthfully, Jim laughed and flung up his hands.

"To think that I never had a suspicion about him! What other revelations are you going to make?"

"Well," said Nancy, "there's the delightful infant who adorns the end studio of the row, — Willie Perkins."

"That youth!"

Nancy nodded. "Every Friday afternoon last winter," she said, "at a quarter to five, with the regularity of a cuckoo clock, he asked me to marry him."

"Good lord!" said Jim; "why, he can't be more than twenty-one!"

Nancy smiled. "I felt old enough to be his mother. He's a dear and I'm awfully fond of him, but I could no more think of marrying him than flying!"

"Go on!" said Jim. "I begin to see that my idea was fruitful, to say the least."

"It certainly was!" said Nancy. "There were one or two of the others who were not so preoccupied with matrimony. I had to show them that I was not interested in the other thing. Then they reluctantly gave me up as a bad job! But there remains Lloyd."

"What about him?"

"Only that every birthday cable is a proposal!"

"Is that so?" said Jim. "Good lad! Can't you make up your mind about him?"

"Unfortunately I have," said Nancy. "I've refused him twice, and he's far the nicest of the lot! — No, it's no good my kidding myself, Dad! I'm twenty-seven and you can put me among the superfluous females."

"Oh, but good lord!" said Jim. "Twenty-seven is no sort of age. You've got all the time in the world! You—"

"How old was mother when you married her?"

"Your mother?" The interruption touched what was still a sensitive spot. "She was twenty-six."

Nancy had made her point. She refrained from emphasizing it. "I'll be dead honest with you, Dad. I hoped too, when we went up to town, that there were as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. I wanted desperately to lose myself, to be swept off my feet — and the more I

Soundings

wanted it, the harder I worked at my job. I was n't going to be satisfied with imitations. I wanted the real thing. I could marry Lloyd, or Willie Perkins, to-morrow if I wanted to, by simply telegraphing either of them. But what's the good of that? I don't care for either of them in that way, and who would want to get married just for the sake of getting married? To me, that's a form of immorality. It's worse than going off with a man for a week-end, because at least that week-end business is honest. They know just what they're doing, both of them. Don't you think so, Dad?"

"That's what you might call left wing stuff," said Jim cautiously. "But go ahead! I'm waiting to see where you're coming out."

"All right," said Nancy. "I'll sum it up like this: why shouldn't a woman of twenty-seven, healthy, of assured income, have a child which she ardently desires without committing what she thinks is an immoral marriage with a man she doesn't love? No! That's no good! It sounds too beastly abstract. But this is the situation in so many words. I don't see myself getting married and I want a child. It's no good your saying that I'm young and that one of these days Prince Charming will walk in at that door. I thought that four years ago. I've been thinking it for four years — more than that even — and here I am just where I started. Before I know it, I shall be too old to marry or to have children. I don't see it, Dad! I don't see why I should end my days as a soured spinster. It's wrong, psychologically, physiologically and every other way. Being a woman, haven't I a right to children? I know there's an awful lot of rot talked about the maternal instinct. Perhaps I'm fooling myself when I say that I've got it. Perhaps, unconsciously, I'm using that phrase as a cover for — for other things! I don't know. All I do

know is that I have tried to think it out, to live it down if you like, to substitute my work for it. Anyway, it's not only been with me from as far back as I can remember, but it has grown to the point where I had to ask you about it!"

She dropped the fork that she had been twisting in her hands all this time. It clanged loudly on the table. With a nervous dive she reached for a cigarette. Her hand trembled a little as she put it to her lips, and the first match that she struck broke as she rasped it against the box.

Outside the blackness had thinned to a gray luminosity.

The deep hush would presently be broken by the awakening birds.

"Well, Dad?" said Nancy, sharply. "Does it seem to you incredible and abnormal?"

"Good God, no!" said Jim. He moved uneasily and passed his hand over his face and hair. "Good God, no!" he said again. "It's the normality of it that's heart-breaking. Child alive, what can I say to you?"

Only twice before had he been so deeply stirred by Nancy. The first time was when she came into the hospital room after he was smashed up and her radiance had seemed to him almost unearthly. The second was the evening when, sitting on the hassock in front of the fire, she had told him that she loved Bob. — Was that indeed the key to this riddle? Did she love him still? Had she gone on loving him all these years? Or, when he jilted her, had some quality of faith gone out of her so that she could never love any other man? That fellow Bob had come into her life at the moment when all her dreams were being assembled. Utterly unaware of the existence of evil, what could be more natural than her flaming response to the touch of his arms and lips? Was n't this cry of hers for a child the logical, inevitable outcome of the hunger which that man — damn him! — had aroused in her and which had gone unap-

Soundings

peased? What but her amazing sense of honesty had kept her, as the average man would never have been kept, from satisfying it with some one else, any one else? If there was anything abnormal about her it was, in the light of this present day and generation, her not yielding, her facing it and fighting it!

“My dear,” he said, “from all moral, ethical and psychological standards you’re dead right. The trouble is you’re too right. You become anti-social. You’re up against the accepted code of this futile, but perfectly self-satisfied, civilization which has protected itself by preordaining marriage as a *sine qua non* in human relationship and which imposes dire pains and penalties on the unfortunate transgressor.”

Nancy laughed. “Spoken like a textbook!” she said. “Come down to earth again, Dad! In any case do you mean to tell me that those precious rules of yours are n’t broken in a million ways? If we were discussing this academically, I could dig up a few statistics about divorce, maternity hospitals, birth control and the rest of it, but I’m as far removed from that as though I lived on a different planet!”

“I know you are!” said Jim. “But my dear, my dear, that does n’t alter it! I wish it did! Let us leave all other questions out of it for the moment and consider one thing, — the child. Have you realized what would happen to it? You know that wolves will turn on a weak or wounded member of the pack and tear it to bits and eat it. Humans are just the same. Our cruelty is a little more refined, perhaps. At the cry of illegitimacy we turn and rend the woman who has dared to disobey the pack rules by being found out. And as if that were not enough, we proceed to brand the child for life. — Don’t you see that although you and I might be strong enough not to give a damn what

people said, the child — your child, Nancy! — would be labeled and shunned, a sort of social leper!”

Nancy gasped. She was staring at her father, white-faced, tense.

“Worse than that,” said Jim, “it is almost inevitable that one day, baffled and bewildered by perpetual hostility, it would find out the truth from some well-meaning friend, and would turn against you in dreadful accusation!”

With a cry, Nancy shrank as though she had been struck. She covered her face with her hands. “No!” she said. “No! That isn’t possible!”

“My dear,” said Jim, “you would think that charity might be found here in Brimble, where men and women live pretty close to nature, and yet do you know what they call the Judkins child? — ‘The Judkins bastard’ — and we call ourselves Christians and send out missionaries to teach the savage brotherly love! Pah!” He banged his fist down on the table. “The whole damn structure is built up on cant and hypocrisy! When a prophet comes among us, like Shaw, and shows us up with his bitter truths, all we do is to laugh and applaud and say ‘How clever!’”

It was not often that Jim Hawthorne let himself go. For himself, he was content to smile with a shrug of the shoulders and accept life as an inevitable paradox. He found a certain humor, for instance, in having crippled himself to save this child who was being taunted as a bastard. But to-night was different. He was seeing Nancy denied and stultified, and his rage and pain for her drove him to a bitter tirade. He compared civilization to a cess-pit whose foul depths are concealed by an iridescent scum of great beauty. He mocked at the church-going immorality of the smug British who winked at the sin against the Holy Ghost in their public schools while they raised their hands in horror at the so-called decadence of their Latin

Soundings

neighbors. He fired a broadside at the body politic, battered down the doors of the Church and scattered the fetishes of the social state.

When his outburst ended, there was no sound in that room.

Nancy was staring out of window with brooding eyes.

Presently Jim spoke again. "Of the two of us, it is I who am the moral coward! I seem to have done nothing but put an insuperable obstacle in your way. I have answered your question as though I were hedged in by all the fears and prejudices of my generation,—I, who have always ridiculed them, who have flattered myself that I was miles beyond them!—Don't despise me utterly, my dear, for although my immediate reaction has been to fling all my weight on the brakes and to let my imagination riot among the difficulties and dangers, I want you to know that whatever decision you come to, whatever course of action you choose, I am with you every inch of the way, through thick and thin!" He paused and went on again in a changed voice. "Your mother had her dream too. She called it her dream of bumblebees and babies. — But we were afraid, — just because we were poor! We waited too long. — So you see, I have no right to lay the burden of another fear upon you, to try and make or unmake your life. Your vision is clearer than mine. Follow it, Nancy. I shall count it an honor to stand by you wherever it may lead."

The candles were growing pale. After a time Jim moved and glanced at the grandfather clock.

"I think we'd better turn in," he said. "You'll feel like a rag if you don't get some sleep."

Nancy stirred vaguely in her seat at the window. For a moment Jim watched her. Then he took hold of the crank of his chair and went out into his bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Soundings

A bird called, perhaps a little doubtfully. Another answered; and, as if a million more had been waiting for this signal, a great chorus began to swell.

Nancy sat up, then rose to her feet. One by one she blew out the candles. On tiptoe she went to the porch door. It opened without a sound.

The sky was on fire. The glory of the sunrise caught her by the throat as she stepped out. It exhilarated her like a sudden deep draught of wine. As she stood there, wide-eyed, her face caught the glow of the sun. Presently a smile touched the corners of her eyes and mouth.

"One day it would turn against me?" she whispered, and broke into a laugh of utter disbelief. "Not *mine!*"

Chapter Four

I

THERE came a certain Sunday.

The countryside was dry and brittle. The leaves on the trees were of that hard green that bespeaks the desperation of prolonged heat. When a breeze moved them they no longer rustled; they clicked against each other. Which-ever way one looked the ground shimmered. On each side of any road the hedges were white as though they had been sprinkled with talcum powder.

In the villages, sleeping dogs lay sprawled in the middle of the road. Men sat smoking, bare-armed, in the door-ways of their cottages. The shrillness had gone out of children's voices. Only the crickets were untiring.

On the top of Boar's Hill there was a faint breeze. Hat-less and brown, Nancy sat at the steering wheel of the car, which she had stopped at the very summit.

Beside her sat Jim on his bunk, pipe in teeth, his tennis shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled up above the elbow. He was shading his eyes with one hand and gazing up at the sky intently.

Like a patchwork quilt the country was laid out below them for miles in every direction, until the haze blurred the outlines. Hidden here and there by trees, the Thames looked like a series of flat strips of burnished metal. The white sails of boats might have been bits of a torn-up letter tossed carelessly away. Far off, a jagged cluster of spires

and domes squatted down in the valley behind a protective screen of green, and the chimes of many bells came stealing out from Oxford, fatly, mellowly, as though the peace of many centuries had softened their tongues. It was impossible to conceive of their pealing out in wild alarm as in the old days of feudal excursions.

The deep drone of an aëroplane rose and fell, swelled and died away again to a murmur.

“Do you know,” said Jim, “that that’s about the twentieth that’s gone over this morning? And they’re all headed one way, — for London! I wonder —”

Nancy’s chin was cupped in her hand. She was gazing down at Oxford, but not seeing it, — except as the bright object that holds one’s vision when one’s mind is elsewhere. Something automatic in her received her father’s remark and prevented it from penetrating beyond the outer rim of her attention.

“Really, Dad?” The words dropped from her lips as though she were unaware of saying them. Her thought continued uninterrupted. “What would Lloyd say? Supposing I wrote and put it to him? — I can see him opening the letter and reading it, — but I can’t ever see myself writing it. Not to him. Good lord, no! That’s delightfully Irish, come to think of it. But it’s true, all the same. And yet, why not? Why couldn’t I? He — he wants me.”

Jim rapped his pipe sharply against his ring. There was a frown on his face. He drew in his lips thoughtfully and began to mutter to himself.

“There’s something I don’t like about it. Why Sunday? And why London? It’s uncanny!”

Nancy’s eyes, jerked away by the sound of the pipe being knocked out, found their way back to the city and focused dreamily upon a cross that glinted at the top of a spire.

Soundings

“And we would pull the hassock up to the fire and Weeksie would bring in its hot tub. — Hands as curly and soft as rose petals and the sleepy warm body tight against me — tight against me, blessed wee thing!”

For the hundredth time since her birthday such momentary visions as this had floated in front of her, like the recurring motif of a symphony that emerges and is away again before you have caught it in its slight variation. Always she visualized not just the child, but the entire scene, — the cottage surrounded by the garden and the flowers, herself and the child inside the room, each picture and object in its proper place. Sometimes the lamps were lit. At others the sun was streaming in. Sometimes the child was so tiny that its weight was no more than that of a kitten. At others it was a great lump of a thing, crawling and gurgling on a rug on the grass, or standing upright with a flower clenched in its fists as it looked up at her — always it looked up at her — and laughed.

Until the night of her birthday this had never happened. Now it seemed as though she were helpless to prevent it; as though, once having given expression to the desire, some mental clutch had been slipped and the engines were running free. In the middle of a conversation, or even in the concentration of work, she would suddenly become aware of herself and the child and, still talking or working, would watch herself enact some scene until the vision faded. Always it seemed desperately real. It left her restless and with a sense of the futility of whatever she was doing.

“A sort of social leper” was the phrase her father had used about this child. It had burned into her like acid. It made her writhe. She tried to twist away from it, to shake it off. It stayed like a scar. She had flung back wildly to a reconsideration of the possibility of marrying Lloyd. She admitted that she admired him tremendously; that

his type of mind was more than congenial, more than sympathetic; but, to her, none of those things spelled marriage. A more fundamental thing than that was needed, and this she could not feel for him. No, it was impossible. Yet there was no one else; so she tried to convince herself that the profundity of her desire for a child and the love that she would pour out upon it would hedge it about and protect it from the threat of "social leprosy."

It should never know, she told herself, and no one should ever find out. For its sake she would, if necessary, go and live in another part of the country, where no one knew her, in France even, and people would think that her husband was dead. How could they think otherwise? Both her father and mother had been alone in the world when they married, so, mercifully, there were no officious aunts and uncles who would hold family conferences and think it their painful duty to tell.

It began to seem so simple that she almost succeeded in convincing herself that her father had exaggerated the danger. She ought to have broached the idea more gently, instead of flinging it at him like a bomb; naturally he was upset and therefore had talked wildly.

In this manner she lulled herself to a sense of security or at least to a state of mind in which the threat of danger became secondary. There were two bridges to be crossed, and that one would only become hazardous when she crossed the first!

She never asked herself specifically who was going to help her with that first bridge, but, almost as if of their own volition, faces popped up and dropped again, like the small celluloid balls that dance on jets of water in a shooting gallery. And the face that danced longest was that of Lloyd. Repeatedly she shot him down. He came up again with exasperating perversity. To marry him was

Soundings

impossible and therefore to think about him like this was unthinkable!

She moved impatiently in the car.

Far over to the west two other drones suddenly became audible. Jim turned his head quickly and raked the sky. He found the planes. They were flying in the same direction as the others. He watched them become rapidly bigger.

"Vultures gathering for a carcass. — Good God!" He stopped with a jerk, rigid, like a pointer marking a bird. "Nancy!" he said. There was a curious, strained, excited note in his voice.

Startled, Nancy came dropping back to earth.

"Nancy!" said Jim. "I believe it means war!"

"It — what —" She looked at him blankly, pulled herself together and followed his pointing finger skywards. Then she too sat up and gasped.

"War!" she said. "Good lord, do you mean — '*der tag*'?"

"That's what I think," said Jim. "But I can't believe it! I can't believe it! Let's get home, quick! I — I must telegraph to London to find out."

II

It was war!

To Nancy as to a million others it was at first nothing but a word, the utterance of which induced vast excitement. One said "War!" and shivered, and there understanding stopped. But every moment things were happening, new things, beyond one's experience, things that one had thought would never be real again outside the pages of a history book. Rumor flashed like summer lightning, and the echo of stupendous happenings, the crash of incredible armies, numbed one's mind almost beyond the power of reaction.

Nancy was caught up by it as a sheet of paper is snatched

by the wind at a crossroads and whirled into the sky. She felt like a lost child in a railway terminal of an unknown city in a foreign land. Alice had gone through the looking-glass!

Jim decided to close the studio. They went up in the car to do it. Nancy would never forget that day. As they drove through the streets of London in the blazing sunshine, she began to be conscious that something was happening to her. At first she could n't make out what it was. She felt a vague physical oppression. Then she became aware that everywhere she saw nothing but men's faces. There were no women. It seemed as though all the men in the world were gathered in the streets, pouring through them in an endless flood, tense, white masks of men's faces. They hemmed her in, came beating up against the car as though she were in a boat, pitching through waves of faces which broke behind her on both sides, eager, cruel, terrible. And then Jim's voice cut its way in and rescued her from that ghastly nightmare.

"Look out, Nancy!" he snapped. "Stop the car!"

With a squealing of brakes she did so, — only just in time to avoid driving right into a column of marching men, in civilian clothes, bareheaded, sweaty, all singing.

" . . . Last night
In the pale moonlight
I saw . . . yer!
I saw . . . yer!
'Old yer 'and out, naughty boy!"

The rhythmic thump of that gigantic millipede, the urge of that sound which came as a single note from one enormous throat, burned Nancy as though she had been touched by the end of a live wire.

Her eyes snapped and her breath came short. She

Soundings

laughed, almost hysterically. "Oh," she said, "I wish I were a man."

Jim shook his head. "My dear," he said, "you are watching the wheels of evolution go round. For a brief hour the reek of death will become the fashionable perfume while man hoists himself another fraction of an inch out of the slime!"

Nancy didn't understand.

She was still ignorant after they returned to Brimble, where their simple routine, physically at least, went on from day to day. She found it impossible to reconcile the unreality of Liège and Mons with the reality of Weeksie and the cottage and meals. The daily casualty lists simply weren't true! They couldn't be! Somewhere there was a link missing between the outer world of fantastic horrors and this one where they still went about their work and golf and sat till all hours talking, talking! But she was unable to shake off an indefinite sense of oppression. Then one day the war began to close in.

She was walking through the village when she saw a lot of women at the door of the Collins' cottage. They were talking excitedly in undertones. From inside the cottage came a noisy sobbing.

It brought Nancy's heart into her throat. She stopped.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

As one woman they turned to her. "It's Curly, Miss Nancy!"

"He's gone!"

"There's bin a telegram from the War Orfice!"

"'E's killed!"

"Oh, Gawd, I 'ope my Joe's all right!"

They made way for Nancy to go in.

Curly's mother was hunched on a chair, her arms still wet with soapsuds, her apron over her face.

The telegram was lying on the table. Nancy read it.

"The War Office regrets to report that 3201 Sergeant Collins, F. 1st Battalion Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry has been killed in action."

Feeling pitifully inadequate, she stood looking down upon Mrs. Collins, who was rocking from side to side in her chair. She tried to think of something to say, but she couldn't think of anything. An insistent voice inside her was saying, "Killed in action! Killed in action!" and she had a vision of a million other women rocking on chairs.

Shaken and sick, Nancy walked out without a word, made her way through the villagers and hurried home.

As she came up on the porch, Jim held out a telegram to her. For a moment she hesitated to take it. Then she did so and ripped it open.

"Have got commission Canadian Flying Corps. Hope see you soon. As ever Lloyd."

Fear touched her with the tip of its finger. It was coming nearer.

She sat down on the edge of Jim's chair.

"Curly's been killed," she said, "and now Lloyd's joined up with the Canadians. It's not right! It's not right!" and she beat her hands together.

Jim laughed shortly. "Not right? My dear, what blasphemy! You've forgotten that 'your King and country need you!' You've forgotten that every church in the world has proclaimed this a righteous and a holy war! Not right, indeed!"

Nancy shook her head. "Will there be anybody left when this thing ends?"

"Oh, yes!" said Jim. "The world will be peopled with cripples and women, priests and politicians!"

Nancy tried to smile, but once more that odd sense of fear made her shiver.

III

The world had shifted beneath her feet, rolled over suddenly.

At dawn she would wake with a start to the sound of a bugle and presently hear the heavy tramp of men marching through the village. Then, at the bottom of the meadow, there would sound the whinnings of horses, squeals, kickings, and men cursing as they led them to water at the stream. From the porch now they looked out upon endless groups of soldiers, horses, wagons, guns, enormous marquees, — the effect of which was confusion changing momentarily to purpose and always breaking up again into confusion.

By day Brimble spoke with a new voice. Its lazy quiescent hum had become raucous with this invasion of new life, new purpose and ceaseless activity. Even by night the change was startling. In place of the great stillness of high summer, ruffled only by the whisper of trees, the night was filled now with the vague rumor of standing horses, — deep blowing, sudden outbreaks of bad temper and stamping, groans as they laid down; and then, sharp and terrifying, a challenge, "Alt! Oo goes there?"

And Nancy, wide awake in bed, her heart thumping, made the discovery that it was not the voice in the night that was terrifying, but the idea behind it. That soldier out there was nothing but a country boy dressed up in costume and being trained to kill as many other country boys as he could before he found death in any one of several horrible ways.

She got up and looked out of her window over the sleeping camp, picked out in the moonlight in sharp lines of black and white, — tents, horses and guns aligned with the exactness of a geometrical problem.

Potential corpses, her father had called them. The phrase came back to her, appalling in its suggestion, yet borne out by the interminable daily lists of casualties.

"I wonder how many other women," thought Nancy, "are looking out of their windows to-night, English and French and German, wondering about their men? Why do they ever let them go? Do they *want* to have their hearts broken? Why don't they stop it? The fools! The weak-minded fools!"

She turned abruptly with a short contemptuous laugh. Its implication was obvious.

IV

Through the long, muddy winter, Nancy's "bit" consisted of driving an ambulance to and from the station and Wendlesbury Court, the vast country house presented to the government by the Earl of Wendlesbury and converted into a permanent hospital. To get to it she had to tramp three miles cross country; and having met train after train, each time making several journeys with stretcher cases, she tramped three miles back to the cottage.

In addition to this she worked at night in a canteen organized by the ladies of Friar's Icknield. She found that the rough, crude, rather homesick men were, at bottom, a lot of children in school for the first time. After a day's carrying of broken bodies, to Nancy their cheerfulness and sublime confidence were the most pathetic things in the world. It seemed as if some special dispensation were theirs, — of being so occupied with to-day that to-morrow's threat remained unheard. She, however, had heard the screams of men whose dressings were being changed; had driven her car almost blind with tears at the pitiful whimperings and tortured groans of those bundles behind her

Soundings

who once were men. These others in the canteen, swearing, laughing, getting drunk, and writing illiterate letters to many girls — these others would come back on stretchers, if they came back at all!

The way back from Wendlesbury Court was a footpath across the fields. It skirted the beech woods, climbed out of the grassy hollows, wound along the ridge and dropped gradually until eventually it led on to the golf course.

By day bodies of mounted men exercised their horses there; some dropping guns in a ragged row and driving off, while others fell upon the slim tubes of death, wrenched them into position and, in obedience to the shouting of orders, began loading and firing imaginary shells into the blue.

Whenever possible, Nancy avoided them. She didn't like the half-heard remarks, the suggestive laughs, the kissing noises that were inevitably flung at her if there were no officer immediately present. Frequently she would swing out in a wide half-circle in order to escape this appraisal.

It was better on the way home. The troops were all gone then, and the only men she was likely to meet were an officer or two out for a ride, or a noisy party of them snatching a few holes of golf before the light gave out. Sometimes one of these would salute and say "Good evening", but there was always a note of flippancy that made her merely nod and hurry on.

Ever since the occupation of Brimble by what the press grandiloquently called "the great citizen army of heroes", "the saviors of their country", there had been borne in upon Nancy the great gulf that lies between theory and practice. It was one thing, in the exquisite security of a summer night, alone with the stars, to lay down a rule of conduct and declare herself a coward unless she carried it

out. It was quite another, however, in the light of her months of contact with men in the mass, even to think of her theory without horrified repugnance. Either individually or in groups, these heroes were alarmingly animal. There was scarcely one of them, officer or man, in whose eyes there was not an unspoken challenge to her sex, in greater or less degree. It was different to anything she had known before the war, — as if some spiritual barrier had been lowered, some age-long restraint loosened, as a result of the new way of living that had come upon the world. The frankness of it drove Nancy away from herself. By way of self-protection she assumed an iciness guaranteed to chill the warmth of any approach. As she went about her job in the canteen and at the hospital, she appeared aloof, unattainable, immune.

But by a process of unconscious elimination she was turning all the while, not definitely and specifically, but in what might be called a thought-crescendo, to Lloyd. Without her being fully aware of it, he had begun to stand out as something different, something finer. It was a kind of spiritual rapprochement, elusive, shadowy, a thin thread that reached out without conscious purpose. All she would admit to herself was that she was glad he was coming. It was a little ray of light on which she could fasten her eyes through the dark days.

It was an ill wind, however, that blew nobody any good ! The first division had gone from Brimble to France at the end of the summer. The second had been hurried to the east coast in the middle of the winter. A third had come marching into the newly erected butts and the now sheltered horse lines. The increasingly prosperous villagers gloated over the fact that they would be an artillery training ground until the end of the war. They were making money, hand over fist. The proprietor of the Brimble Arms had secured

Soundings

the contract to supply beer to all the local canteens and had already bought himself a new horse and gig. He hadn't begun to think in terms of Rolls Royces yet. Every cottage in the village was a shop. Even Curly's mother was not slow to find out the cash value of having had a son killed at the front. She had the telegram framed and hung it over the mantelpiece.

Not all the men were in huts. Some were billeted in Brimble and Friar's Icknield. The officers of one brigade had taken up their quarters in Brimble Manor, the Squire's place.

And as the routine of militarism settled upon the countryside, Jim Hawthorne watched it all from the imprisonment of his chair. He saw and heard the chafings at the endless monotony of training, the boastings of what they would do to the Hun when they went overseas. He marked the swift blossoming of greed in the faces of the villagers, into whose lives no such opportunity of money had ever come before and might never come again. He noted that both the men and the young officers soon began to cast around for "a bit of fluff", as the phrase went, — a none too difficult attainment, judging by the severity with which the disease of patriotism had stricken the women of Brimble and Friar's Icknield. The old-time village life was dead. One distilled drop of war had fallen upon it and generations must elapse before the poison could be worked out of its system.

Jim Hawthorne multiplied this by a million and the result seemed to work out inevitably to disintegration and corruption, to the complete breakdown of all that had made for good and the flourishing of all that spelled evil. In the leading dailies and weeklies, which he read from cover to cover, the one outstanding fact that was screamed from their pages was that man had reverted to Cro-magnon

mentality. Fear, hatred and blind superstition, naked and unashamed, seemed to Jim to underlie every reported speech and action.

All his inherent cynicism was roused. He had stood aside for so long that he was proof against the emotional whirlwind that swept most people away. To him the war was a highly discreditable social phenomenon, the failure of man to cope with his self-created complexities.

One evening after dinner, in the middle of one of their usual discussions, when they had agreed that the root of the war lay in competitive industrialism, Jim broke up a pause by saying, "Looking back on his crucifixion now, do you suppose Christ still thinks we were worth it?"

"Heavens!" said Nancy. "I don't know." She was tired. It had been a hard day. She had let her head fall back against the deck chair and was gazing up at the stars. "The staggering thing to me," she continued, "is the way these hundreds of thousands of men go out and die, quite simply, almost as a matter of course, without even knowing what they are dying for. It's as if they were obeying some law of nature and could n't help themselves."

"Granting that," said Jim, "its hardly a compliment to our much-vaunted civilization, is it? It still leaves us on the level of the amoeba, or at best equivalent to salmon in spawning time! It's urge and not intellect! No, to me the most significant fact to-day is that every nation is loud in its protestations of not being the aggressor. It may mean nothing more than that war has entered upon a new plane of social valuation, but I should like to believe that it is the seed of future peace, of that remote period, as yet purely conjectural, when war will be utterly discredited. It's the only possible thing to hope for. Meanwhile we've done nothing better in nineteen hundred years than evolve a dog-eat-dog philosophy which looks like wiping out about

Soundings

three generations. Do you realize that the chances of survival of any one of those men down there are about a thousand to one against?"

Nancy bit her lip. Was there no dodging that? For months now, start where they would, every conversation came back to it.

"Oh, don't, Dad!" she said. "I don't think I can bear it. I've seen what can happen to them, and sometimes it's worse than death! Let's try and forget it, for a little while at least. — I had a letter from Lloyd to-day."

Jim started. "Oh!" he said; and then, after a little pause, "Is he — is he coming over?"

"He *is* over," said Nancy. "He was sent, unfortunately, straight to France; but he says that he's due for leave pretty soon."

There was a frown on Jim's face. He was staring out over the tree tops. "Did you happen to notice when the letter was written?" he asked.

"Yes, four days ago," said Nancy.

"Four days!" muttered Jim.

"Why?" said Nancy. "Do you think he might turn up here any day now?"

Jim cleared his throat. "A lot can happen in four days," he said. "You never know!"

Nancy went on quickly. "And what do you think! Lloyd said that the day war was declared, Cornelia, who was over in Paris again, staying with her sister, dashed down in a car to the cavalry barracks where Jean was and married him on the spot! Don't you call that a sporting thing to do? I think it was magnificent!"

There was a note of appeal and challenge in her voice. It was almost as if she had said in so many words, "Please agree with me. Don't black this out for me with your pessimism!"

But Jim was listening to something else. He shook his head.

"Poor child! Poor child!" he said. "It's like marrying a man on his way to the guillotine!"

Nancy jumped up from the deck chair.

"Oh, Dad, you're perfectly hateful to-night! What's the matter with you? Surely to Heaven *some one's* going to survive!" She kicked a pebble into the garden.

A horse down in the lines gave a shrill squeal. It was followed by the muffled thumping of hoofs.

"I'm sorry, dear!" said Jim. "I —"

He looked at her as she stood there outlined against the stars. His fingers began plucking at the straw of the chair.

"I did n't mean to be so damned gloomy," he said. He looked away, embarrassed, and when he spoke again it was as though he were feeling for his words. "It was — it was something that I saw in the evening papers before you came in. Nancy, darling, I —" He could feel her stiffen.

At the bottom of the lane the crunch of a man's boots could be heard.

Nancy turned slowly round. As soon as she looked at her father, she knew. "Do you mean — Lloyd?"

"I'm afraid so," said Jim.

Somewhere inside her a pulse began throbbing, sharp and staccato-like drumbeats. Presently she tried to moisten her lips and, after incalculable effort, succeeded in doing so.

"Show me!" she said. It was like an order given to a stranger.

Jim took the paper from the rack of his chair. The pages rustled like dried leaves as he turned them and folded the paper open at the casualty lists.

Nancy took it from him and held it in the ray of the lamp

Soundings

that streamed through the open French window on to the porch. The Canadian section seemed to jump out at her. There! — Evans, Lloyd. 2d Lieut. Flying Corps.

She stood staring at it. The words "killed in action" seared her eyes. They were written in flame across the entire sky. The little ray of light to which she had been clinging was extinguished. The paper dropped to the bricks. She was icy cold. Her teeth were chattering.

"He s-said he was coming! And now it has got him — this thing that's getting them all! — I give it up! I don't understand! Our point of view is all wrong! What's the good of caring so much and letting oneself be torn inside out? They don't care! They don't care! They don't go because they have to. They go because they love it, because it means more to them than anything else in the world. If they get killed, they don't care! The game's worth it! They're all hypnotized by it! Well — let them all play it! Let them all get killed if they want to! I don't care! I don't care! I —" She broke off, gasping. Her face puckered up and she crumpled on to her father's chair, sobbing violently, uttering incoherent words.

Jim slid his arm round her shoulder. "Oh, my dear! My dear!" he said. "Buck up, old lady! Buck up! It's going to be all right! We — we've got to stick it out like the rest of them!"

And while he patted her and uttered would-be reassuring banalities, the crunch of those boots came steadily up the lane. They stopped suddenly and Jim heard the latch of the gate click. He turned his head sharply and peered through the dim starlight, his arm tightening instinctively around Nancy, as he made out a figure in uniform advancing along the brick walk.

"Curse the fellow!" thought Jim. "What the dickens does he want?"

He gave Nancy a warning shake and whispered, "There's some one coming!"

Then he called out, brusquely. "Who is that?"

The figure halted. With a quick military salute and a slightly nervous clearing of the throat, he said, "I beg your pardon, sir! I'm afraid I startled you." (Jim felt Nancy's head come up with a jerk.) "I've been sent by the Colonel to ask if you could possibly billet an officer for a short while. The Manor's absolutely full up and there's a draft coming down to-morrow."

At the sound of that voice, Nancy pushed her father's arm away and rose to her feet. With her hair all ruffled and her face all stained with drying tears, she stood staring at that vaguely outlined man whose hands and face were merely luminous patches and down whose front ran a row of polished buttons which gleamed like the pale reflections of stars.

Jim's eyes were on Nancy, puzzled, wondering.

The officer cleared his throat again and shifted uneasily in the silence. When he spoke the assurance had gone out of his voice. It was as though, having delivered the message which had brought him, the military side of him had departed and he had nothing further to lean on. "You — you've probably forgotten me," he said. "My name's Whittaker, Bob Whittaker?"

There was a curious little upward inflection at the end of his statement, which gave it the nature of a searching question. With only the slightest pause he went on speaking. "I — I only came down here yesterday — from hospital. I shall be going back into the line soon. I wanted — I wondered if you —" His voice trailed off into silence.

One of Nancy's hands was pressed against her mouth. With the other she was clinging desperately to the back of Jim's chair. It seemed as if the whole firmament were

Soundings

rocking beneath her feet, as if she were suspended in space, miles and miles away from that patch of brick path where Bob Whittaker and Nancy Hawthorne stood face to face once more.

The moments lengthened into eternities.

Jim, too, was waiting for a word from Nancy, *the* word, that would set them all free of that mental anguish.

No word came.

And then suddenly Bob Whittaker stiffened up, hardened. He spoke again, through tight lips, abruptly, coldly.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, saluted, swung around on his heel and marched quickly to the gate. It banged behind him, and the crunch of his boots went down the lane.

Jim heard another sound behind him, a sort of choking gasp, and as he turned he saw Nancy disappearing into the cottage.

Chapter Five

I

THE slur of the stove lid, the thin treble of Mrs. Weeks singing "It's a long way to Tipperary", and the succulent smells of coffee and frying bacon greeted Nancy as she opened her door and came downstairs.

There was a letter in her hand, and a look of great excitement in her eyes.

Jim was already pulled up at the table, reading the paper. "Hullo!" he said. "Sleep well?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders and kissed him. "Isn't it a gorgeous morning?" She went into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weeks stopped singing. "Morning, dearie!" she said.

"Good morning, Weeksie!" Nancy joined her at the stove. "Look here," she said urgently, "will you be a dear and put on your bonnet and take this to the Manor?" She held out the letter.

Mrs. Weeks blinked at it. "But breakfast ain't ready yet!"

"That does n't matter," said Nancy. "This is awfully important. I'll get the breakfast!"

"Oh, all right!" Mrs. Weeks took the letter and held it near her good eye. She read the address aloud. "Robert Whittaker, Esq. — 'Oo 's 'e?"

"Oh, he's — he's an officer who called last night," said Nancy. "Now look, I want you to hand that in at the Manor and say that you are going to wait for an answer."

Soundings

Mrs. Weeks nodded, took off her apron, wiped her hands on it, hung it up on its accustomed peg and then carefully arranged her bonnet in front of the mirror.

Nancy smiled at her exhibition of the eternal feminine. She gave her a hug. "Thanks most awfully, Weeksie!"

Mrs. Weeks blinked at her. "Is 'e nice?" she said, and with a little cackle of laughter went out of the back door.

Breakfast was nearly over when the old lady returned. She came straight to the table and handed Nancy a note. With a smile of satisfaction she stood with her hands folded across her stomach while Nancy read it.

Jim raised an amused eyebrow. "We'd like a little more butter, Mrs. Weeks, please!" he said dryly.

Mrs. Weeks nodded. "In just a moment!" she said, and stood her ground.

Nancy looked up from the note and grasped the situation.

She smiled. "Everything's all right, Weeksie," she said. "Thank you."

The old lady picked up the butter dish and with a somewhat reproachful sniff at Nancy, went out into the kitchen.

Jim pushed his coffee cup across. "She's a human old codger," he said. "Curiosity dies hard."

Nancy filled his cup and pushed it back again, with a heightening of color that was a confession. "Perhaps that's why I sent word to Bob Whittaker!" she said. "Anyhow, he's coming at half-past eight to-night."

The coffee cup paused on its way to Jim's mouth. "Oh!" he said. And then, "Don't forget to arrange about the canteen, dear!"

"No, I won't," said Nancy. "I'm going to telephone from the hospital. Some one will have to take my turn!"

"Umhm!" said Jim. "By the way, what are we going to do in the matter of billeting an officer?"

"Billeting an officer? What do you mean?"

Jim kept his thoughts to himself. Apparently that part of Whittaker's message hadn't even registered! He finished his coffee and then said, "Why, apparently the Colonel sent our friend to find out if we could take an officer in here for a short time."

Nancy stared at him. "Did he? — But, good lord, we can't possibly do it! The thing's absurd! We'd be sitting in each other's laps!"

"All right!" said Jim. "We'll refuse. I'll send a note to the Colonel this morning."

"Yes, for heaven's sake convince him that it's absolutely out of the question!" Nancy rose. "Do you mind if we have dinner a little earlier to-night? I'd — I'd like to get it out of the way before —"

"Quite!" said Jim. "And incidentally, I shall have a lot of letters to write to-night, so if it's all the same to you, I'll have a fire in my room and then I shan't be disturbed."

Nancy looked at him quickly and then said casually, "Good idea! I'll tell Weeksie to have it ready. — And now I must fly or I'll be late at the hospital!"

It was not altogether because she was late that she dashed out into the kitchen, — and Jim knew it. "The kid's nerves are all on edge," he said to himself. "And I don't wonder — mine are too!"

II

The most important object in the room was the grandfather clock. First one and then the other kept glancing at it, furtively, unbelievably, as though they felt that the thing was cheating. How could it keep on hammering like a blacksmith on an anvil and yet apparently remain stationary? It seemed like a year while it crept from eight o'clock to half-past.

Soundings

Once it struck the half-hour Nancy, at least, ceased to hear it. It might have stopped suddenly so far as she was aware. Her attention shifted to the noises outside, any one of which might resolve itself into his coming. What would he do? Or say? Why had he come back? Was it just an accident, or had he come on purpose? What purpose? — Was that his step?

Ostensibly Jim was reading. Each time he turned a page his eyes had reached the bottom of it, but his mind was trying to get inside Nancy's mind.

The gate clicked loudly and footsteps sounded on the bricks. Jim put down his book. "We're queer creatures!" he thought. "Think of these sounds last night and to-night. What an amazing difference in their meaning!"

There came a tap on the front door. Jim looked at Nancy.

She rose, as white as a sheet. For a moment she stood quite still. Then she walked firmly to the door and opened it.

Bob Whittaker stood framed in the doorway. He saluted. Nancy waited for him to say something. He remained silent, looking at her.

She moved a little. "Won't you — come in?" she said.

"Thank you!" said Bob. He took off his cap and stepped inside, closing the door for her.

From beside the fire Jim leaped into the breach. "How d'you do?" he said. "You'll excuse my not moving. It's rather a business in this chair." He held out his hand.

"Oh, please!" said Bob. He went over and shook hands.

"Pull up that armchair," said Jim. "You'll smoke, won't you? Cigar or cigarette?"

"I think I'll stick to cigarettes, thank you," said Bob.

Nancy left the door and perched on the arm of her father's chair.

Bob accepted a cigarette from Jim, gave the armchair a hitch and sat down.

"Well," said Jim, "what's the latest news? It is n't often we have the advantage of comparing notes with one of you fellows on the inside!"

Bob smiled. "I think we really know less about it than anybody," he said. "Of course the camp's buzzing with rumors, and the latest is that we shall all be in France for the spring push. It's only cook-house gossip, of course, but we're all hopeful!"

"Do you think we shall try and break through?" asked Jim.

"You have n't been reading Hilaire Belloc, sir!" said Bob. "He does n't think there's a chance in the world of our doing so. They've got too much artillery."

"Then what's the programme?" asked Jim.

At some length, and with no little grasp of his subject, Bob proceeded to expound the theory of what this new form of warfare in trenches might develop into.

Nancy, with her heartfelt gratitude to her father for keeping everything impersonal, gradually began to feel less conscious of herself.

Bob's presence was disturbing, exciting. While her first inner tumult was dying down, she caught only an occasional phrase of their conversation. She was not listening to it, not even thinking. She couldn't think. Her mind, ousted from control by her emotions, was filled with incoherences. She dared hardly look at Bob. Her thoughts went reaching back to St. Malo. As he talked, intonations, gestures and attitudes came back to her. She began to remember little poignant details of those other days. They made her tremble.

Soundings

Presently she forced herself to look at him. It would help to steady her. She saw on his sleeve the three stars of a captain. Above them — and she drew in her breath sharply — was a wound stripe! Over the flap of his breast pocket ran the purple and white ribbon of the Military Cross. She felt a thrill at this. Then her eyes went to his face.

It was Jim's intensely anxious scrutiny that marked the things that time had done to Bob. It was not that he had a moustache, nor that he was leaner and more angular. The change was in his whole expression. It was a different being who looked out of those steady eyes, — no longer the boy whom Nancy had known, intoxicated with his first draught of power and life, but a man, with an air of responsibility and decision. It came to him with a surge of relief that her youthful idealization was justified. If one could judge by the sterner chiseling of that face, he had come to be what she had once imagined him to be.

But when Nancy looked at him she saw none of these things. As though she had expected to see some one else, some stranger, sitting in the armchair, her eyes widened and with a gasp of surprise she said to herself, "Why — it's just *Bob!*"

Before she could go further, her father's voice broke into her thoughts. " — and so the whole business of their landing on the east coast is pure myth! Well, I've talked long enough. If you two will excuse me, I'm going to leave you."

He patted Nancy's hand with a smile, and then turned to Bob again. "I've got some very important letters to get off to-night, so I'll say good-night in case you want to go before I've finished. Drop in again sometime!"

"I'd like to very much," said Bob. "Your point of view is extraordinarily interesting."

Jim turned to Nancy. "When Mrs. Weeks brings in the ginger ale, tell her to fetch the whisky too. I don't think Captain Whittaker would object!" He nodded and set his chair in motion.

Nancy closed the door behind him. Her heart was thumping more loudly than the grandfather clock. In her desire to conceal her nervousness from him, and from herself too, she hummed a tune as she came back to the sofa and sat down.

She found that she had to moisten her lips before she could speak. "Would n't you like to light your pipe?" she said.

"Thanks," said Bob. "I—" He hesitated for a moment and then returned to the armchair. He lit a cigarette and unexpectedly tossed it into the fire again. "Do you mind," he said, "if we don't indulge in any polite conversation? There's something I want particularly to say to you, and if I don't do it now, I may never be able to."

Nancy kept her eyes on the fire. Her hands were locked tightly together round her knee. "Is that why you came last night?" she asked.

"Yes!" said Bob. "You see, I'm liable to stop something next time I go to France, and I'm egomaniac enough to want you to think a little more clearly of me than you do."

Nancy caught her breath. "What makes you think I—"

"Please let me go on," said Bob. "My coming here at all is rather extraordinary. Three months ago I hadn't the faintest idea that I should ever see you again in this world. I was doing my damndest to strafe the Hun. Then one day a shell got me. It killed three of my men. I was merely wounded. It was n't enough to bother about

Soundings

really. I expected to be sent to some base hospital in France. They sent me to London. As soon as I was well, I applied to rejoin my unit. I received the order to report, not to my unit, nor to Woolwich or Salisbury, but to Brimble, — here, of all places in the world! That is n't all. The Colonel made me adjutant right off the reel and the very day after my arrival told me that the Hawthorne place was about the only chance we had of getting an extra billet and that I'd better come and see your father about it!" He gave a short laugh and spread his hands.

Nancy nodded.

Bob went on. "Most people would label that coincidence! Perhaps that's all it is. I don't know. I should be inclined to think so myself if I had forgotten all about you. But as it happens, I never did forget you."

The steady rise and fall of Nancy's breast ceased. There was an appreciable pause before it began again.

"My hurting you has been the skeleton in my cupboard," said Bob, "not altogether because of you — I'll be perfectly honest — but because of myself, because it smashed my self-respect all to bits! You see, one of the things I'd clung to was that no decent man ever hurt a woman. I don't know where I got hold of that, but it has been with me ever since I was old enough to appreciate an idea. It was something one never talked about but which one held in front of one as a sort of guide.

"Until you came along, I thought I was the salt of the earth. Life was simple. I had it all nicely plotted out in two colors, — black and white. They did n't even overlap! — It was easy to stick to my code, which had nothing to do with the fact that I was playing round with girls like that one at Oxford. That may sound like a contradiction in terms. It's not really, if you think it out. There was no question of hurting them.

"Then you came. I found that I was rotten enough to have thought of you as I did of them. You know the rest. My little house of cards went sky-high. I hated myself! It hurt like the devil seeing oneself stripped naked. Especially at that age. I had n't any self-respect left. I was bankrupt!

"I did n't forget you. I've carried the thought of you with me as a sort of punishment. I've taunted myself with you whenever I've been in danger of hurting anybody else. So it seemed to me, when I found myself down here, that I had been given a chance to tell you, a chance to clear myself with you. I did n't know whether you were married or not. It would n't have made any difference. I should have said this, anyway. It was for my own soul's good — if you like to call it that!

"I'm not going to ask you to forgive me, because that does n't mean anything anyhow, and because whether you do or not has got nothing to do with it and won't change anything. It would be as absurd as if your father said he forgave the fellow who smashed him up. — The point is that from now on you're going to know that I'm desperately sorry I was such an egregious little cad in those days, without even the pluck to come and apologize. — That's all I've got to say."

He got up and stood for a moment looking down at her. Her head was bent. He could n't see that she was crying. He reached for his cap. "I'm awfully grateful to you for listening to me. I shan't bother you again. Good-by!"

He crossed the room. The front door shut with a little click.

When Mrs. Weeks came in, carrying a tray on which were ginger ale and three glasses, she saw Nancy sitting alone and stopped in the middle of the room. "Well, for 'eaven's sake!" she cried. "Do you mean ter say 'e's gorn? — Why, dearie!" She put the tray down and

Soundings

hurried to the armchair. "What is it, dearie?" She slid an arm around Nancy's shoulder. "Don't cry! Tell me all about it!"

"Oh, Weeksie!" said Nancy. "I want him to come back! I want him to come back!"

III

For two days Nancy took soundings. Bob's coming, like the sudden crash of a hurricane, had swept her out of her course. Metaphorically speaking, she cast the lead into the depths of her own being.

For two days she was restless, moody, nervous. There were moments when Lloyd's death preyed on her mind and she blamed herself most bitterly for it. Even though the facts were against her, she told herself that if she had not been in England he would not have joined up so soon and therefore would not have come over. It was the possibility of her saying yes that had drawn him like a magnet. — And now that he was dead why was n't she sorrier? Why did n't it mean more to her? He was such a dear and so amazingly loyal! She felt most horribly callous because in a curious sort of way she had deliberately to interrupt herself, to try and force herself to be sorry, to tell herself over and over again that she would have been sorry if only Bob had n't come.

The irony of it struck home. It had been the same thing while he was alive. Bob had pushed him out — and at that her mind swung away from Lloyd and thoughts of remorse, and, like a tongue constantly probing an aching tooth, came back to her own problem, to Bob.

She admitted to herself frankly that she loved him, that that same extraordinary attraction which had swept her off her feet in the old days had done so again. It didn't seem to matter that he had been, as he said, an egregious

little cad, that he had left her all these years without a word or a sign. He had come back, and she loved him, and all the past was forgotten.

There were moments when she was nearly content with that knowledge, when she felt uplifted and remade with the new force that ran through her veins, that colored the days and gave them meaning. At such moments her love for him seemed a complete unit in itself, satisfying, perfect. And then, a moment later, she would topple over into the trough of despair. It meant nothing. It was a waste, a self-consuming disease, a curse! What was the good of that love when he didn't love her, had never loved her? It would have been better if he had never come back! He hadn't done so for her sake, but for his own. He had come simply to gloat over her and indulge his ego! He hadn't even asked her to forgive him! — How wrong he was when he said that it didn't matter if she forgave him or not because it would n't change things! It *had* changed things. It had revolutionized them! She had forgiven him because she understood, and in understanding had found that she loved him, — but not with the selfless desire to give that had been the outstanding quality of her girlhood. In place of that utter surrender of all her self in thought and mood and body, which in those days had been her definition of love, she felt now a strange current of selfishness, — although that was hardly the word. It was not that she loved him less, but that her own self had assumed new values, a greater importance. It came to her that she had acquired the right to demand, that there were exigencies before which he would have to yield, needs which she herself had never realized, and couldn't explain to herself even now. She felt, rather than understood, that in any relationship between them the positions were reversed, that she and what she stood for came first.

Soundings

For two days she said to herself, "He will come back! He *must* come back!" and in the expectance of it she came hurrying home from the hospital as early as she could, — only to listen in vain for the sound of his coming through the long evenings, to lie awake for hours gazing at the group of stars framed in her window, trying to decide what this impasse meant.

On the table beside her bed was the photograph of Bob which had lain buried in a drawer since that day at Oxford. It was a little faded, marked here and there by the action of the chemicals; but the smiling triumphant face was untouched. She picked it up this second night and studied it once more. "Why don't you come?" she cried, and a moment later smiled at the note of anger that had crept unconsciously into her voice.

Before turning out the lamp she glanced at her watch. It was half-past two.

"Good night, my dear!" she whispered, and turned over on her side.

From outside came the vague uneasy sound of the horse-lines, and presently the words of a song, thinned by the distance. It was the sentry, marching round the lines, trying to keep himself awake and warm. His voice was tainted with the peculiar whine of the cockney, recognizable in any corner of the globe.

"Oh, my! I don't want ter die!
I want ter go 'ome!"

In spite of herself, Nancy smiled as she listened and followed the words of the lugubrious wail. They were so utterly incongruous in the mouth of a soldier, and yet so completely an expression of his real desires.

"Oh, my! I don't want ter die!"

What was it Bob had said? The spring push! With a jerk Nancy sat bolt upright. The spring push! Suppose they went to-morrow — “I’m liable to stop something next time I go to France.” He had said it so casually. Curly had stopped something! Lloyd, too! And already Bob had been wounded once!

“They shan’t get him! They must n’t get him! Oh, God!” With twitching muscles, sweating like a frightened horse, she flung back the bedclothes and leaped out.

They would send him to-morrow. This damnable war was reaching out for Bob! To-morrow he might be gone, and she would be too late!

In a sort of frenzy she began to pull on her clothes. A warning thought pushed its way through, — “but it’s half-past two in the morning!”

“I don’t care!” she said. “I don’t care! I must catch him!” Her plaited hair she piled up on top of her head and kept it in place with a hat. Then she put on a rain-coat and buttoned it tight beneath her chin. With her shoes in her hand she stood for a moment. Finally she put the shoes down. The warning thought meant something, after all. She lit a candle and scrawled a note to Bob in pencil, caught up her shoes again and crept downstairs. Noiselessly she went out of the front door, shutting it with the key from the outside. Then she put on her shoes and went hurrying down the lane.

The village was as silent as the tomb, and the echo of her footsteps came back and buffeted her. She felt as though everybody must wake and put their heads out of window to see what was the matter. But only a cat went slinking across the street.

The driveway that led to the Manor was edged with turf, and it was with a sigh of relief that she hurried along it, at last a part of the silence.

Soundings

When she reached the Manor at last, she found it in total darkness. The open windows were like blind, staring eyes. Well, at least they were not going to-night! The thought was a crumb of comfort to her as she stood there, realizing that it was impossible to find Bob now. Silent as a bat, she tiptoed up the front steps and dropped her letter into the mail box. As she did so, she became aware of the headlights of a car turning into the drive. The slur of badly shifted gears broke up the silence. For a moment she stood petrified. Then she leaped off the steps into a flower bed and hid, cowering behind a lilac bush.

A few seconds later the car drew up at the steps. Four officers got out.

"Don't wait for me, you fellows!" said the driver. "I'll just run the bus round to the garage. You might leave the door open, though!"

"Righto, Jack!"

The car slid away, and the four went up the steps, laughing and talking, but in lowered tones. They had no desire to wake up the Colonel.

Nancy heard them fumbling with the key.

"I can't find the blasted keyhole!"

"Here, let me do it."

And then the door opened and they went in. An electric light was flicked on.

"See if there are any letters!"

Nancy caught her breath. The mail box rattled.

"Ha! Ha!" said a different voice. "A note for Whitaker in a fair female fist! — Unscented! — Do you suppose, the walrus said, that our bloodthirsty skipper can have found something in this benighted village?"

"Oh, hell!" came the answer. "There's not a woman here that's worth a second look!"

"Isn't there? How about that girl who drives the

ambulance, — the Hawthorne girl? She's a perfect corker!"

"Yes, but, my God! You don't think she's that sort, do you?"

With flaming cheeks Nancy broke out from her cover and fled across the grass.

IV

Among the many expressions which the war has put into the language, one of the most significant is "over the top."

The full flavor of it, the complete realization of its meaning down to the ultimate bitterness, belongs to those who have survived the ordeal. Only they know what goes on during those minutes which precede the signal to go, — the destitution of the mind, which seems to shrivel to the size of a pinpoint in its desire to evade the truth; the sluggishness of any muscular response; the internal chemical reactions that make the green sickly smile of the man next to you no more green or sickly than your own; the nausea that hits the pit of the stomach; the bitter stale taste in the mouth which no amount of swallowing can relieve; the semi-paralysis of all one's faculties.

Something of that feeling was Nancy's as she stood at the bottom of the lane with three minutes to go before Bob was due. Seven years had gone to the making of this moment and, now that it had come, she felt on the verge of collapse, — apparently an inescapable condition of the human animal when emotion is tuned to supernormal.

She saw him coming. It was like the signal to go to the waiting soldier.

She took hold of herself and, by the time he reached her and saluted, was able to muster a smile and say, "It is awfully nice of you to have come!" The utter futility

Soundings

of that habit-minded remark was reassuring. She felt as though she had found a hiding-place, a shell hole in which she might drop for a moment.

"I was afraid I was going to keep you waiting," said Bob. "The Colonel wanted to rope me in for a game of golf."

"Oh, I hope I didn't get you into any difficulty!" said Nancy.

"Not at all," said Bob. "I wangled it all right. But I haven't got frightfully much time."

Nancy came out of her hiding-place. "What I've got to say won't take very long. I — I thought you might be going off to France to-day, any time —"

"We shall probably be here for another month," said Bob.

"Oh!" Nancy looked quickly away so that he should not see the relief and gladness in her eyes. Then she said, "Would you mind walking up the hill with me? It's only a little way, and I — we can talk better there."

"Certainly," said Bob.

The lane was narrow. It was impossible to walk side by side. Nancy was thankful. She led the way up, seeing nothing, conscious only of the heavy grind of his boots behind her, the silvery jingle of his spurs. She didn't turn her head as they passed the cottage, but when they reached the end of the lane and came out upon the turf she waited for him to come up to her.

"It's not much farther now," she said.

"It's quite a climb," said Bob.

Nancy nodded and moved on again, not stopping until they came out at the top of the Cross.

The sun was shining and the first stirrings of spring had touched the valley. There was a suggestion of pink and green everywhere.

Nancy took off her raincoat and spread it on the ground

where the crumbling bank made a natural seat. She sat down. "There's plenty of coat for you to sit on as well," she said, "and I wish you'd smoke!"

Bob looked round with a puzzled expression on his face. Then he shrugged his shoulders and sat down. "Thanks," he said. "Will you have a cigarette?"

Nancy shook her head.

"You don't mind a pipe?" asked Bob.

She shook her head again. Out of the corners of her eyes she watched him fill his pipe, fold up the pouch and strike a match. It seemed to her as though the valley below them changed to a green-and-white sea with a Channel boat trailing a ribbon of smoke behind it. She turned to him as though expecting those hands of his to be exploring a piece of sea holly.

"Curious thing!" said Bob shortly. "I've got the feeling of having been here before."

With that vivid picture in her mind of their day on the headland, this remark was startling. Should she risk it and see if he would remember? She turned to him. "But there's no sea holly here," she said.

Bob looked at her. "Sea holly?"

He had forgotten. In spite of herself, she was disappointed. She shook her head. "I was thinking of something else!" she said. And then, rolling her handkerchief into a tight little ball in her two hands, she took a deep breath and went on. "I — I mustn't keep you too long," she said. "I suppose you are wondering why I brought you up here?"

Bob nodded. "Yes!" he said.

"I'd like to ask you something first before I tell you," said Nancy. "Do you remember saying the other night that you — that you might stop a shell within twenty-four hours of landing in France?"

Soundings

Bob's eyes narrowed. "Yes!" he said.

"Did you mean that?"

"Yes!"

"You mean — you mean that you don't think you're — coming through?"

Bob gave a short laugh. "Well," he said, "there aren't many people who would accuse me of being a pessimist, but if this show goes on, I don't think anybody's chances are going to be very bright!"

Nancy shivered. "I had hoped you were going to tell me that you felt certain they were n't going to get you."

Bob blew out a great cloud of tobacco smoke. "I've heard lots of them say that," he said, "but they have n't lasted any longer." He glanced at her curiously. "Why did you hope I'd feel like that?"

It seemed to Nancy that all her nervousness left her. A great calm came over her. Her moment had arrived. She was indeed, like a soldier who, having passed through all the stages of fear, finds himself strolling leisurely through an intense barrage. She met his eyes calmly and spoke with absolute simplicity.

"Because I want you to come through," she said. "Because if you were to get killed, something of me would be killed with you. Do you understand that? Do you understand that when I told you I loved you, years ago, I was not a child? I meant it as a woman means it. I *was* a woman. You thought I was only a girl, that I'd forget you in a few weeks or months, and fall in love with some one else and get married. Several men have fallen in love with me and have asked me to marry them. Every time I've had to refuse, because I've had nothing to give them. I had given it all to you. — I did n't know it until you came back. I thought I had forgotten you. I thought I was absolutely free, that I was going on with life again as though you had

completely gone out of it. I expected to meet a man some day who would make me feel as I had towards you. I never did. Don't think I'm blaming you for it. I'm not. It was not your fault. It simply happened, like — like the war. But when you came back, I found that you still had that part of me which I gave you at St. Malo. — You found out then that you did n't want it, and I know that you don't want it now. All right! It's just rotten bad luck, that's all! But I want you to realize it, because I'm going to ask you to do something, — something pretty big. — You said the other night that you did n't know whether it were coincidence or not which brought you back here. Personally, I don't care! The point is that you have been dumped here, and that in spite of yourself you are going to have to put in a month of your life in this village. At the end of that time, you will go away. Neither of us can tell whether you will ever come back. — I want to know if you will give me this month in return for the month I gave you at St. Malo? I want to know if you will marry me — just for this month? — After you leave here, I will never make any claim on you again. If you come safely through the war, you need never return unless you want to. I'll leave you absolutely free. — No, don't say anything. I've not done yet. — In the old days, I remember, you used to study human motives, to try and find out why people did things. I want to tell you why I've done this. Most human beings have a cherished dream of some sort, — a career, children, social success. Mine has always been for children. Its realization was bound up in you. For seven years I've had to make my work take its place. — I was not looking forward to the next seven. That's why I've asked you to marry me."

She ended just as quietly as she had begun, her eyes on his face, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

Soundings

Is it true that there is "a destiny that shapes our ends"? Or do we hasten to pick out coincidences that tally one with another and call their sum destiny? Here at least were factors that could well be dignified by that name: it was on this hill where she had just made her final appeal that Nancy had received the stimulus which sent her out into the world to meet Bob; it was her father's accident that had saved her from Bob and was now the cause of this meeting, for if he had not been a cripple, Nancy would not have stayed in Brimble, but would long ago have joined up for service in France. Was not this a "shaping of ends" by which the patterns of four lives were inextricably interwoven?

Perhaps it was the shadow of this, touching Nancy, which had enabled her to go through this testing of her philosophy, this renunciation of pride, with the simplicity and directness of a child,— the effect of which no emotional outburst could have equaled.

She had watched his face while she spoke. She had seen it change from startled incredulity at her opening words to an expression of intensity that was almost pain. She had seen him twist and turn his pipe in both hands with a grip that made his knuckles white.

As she waited now for his answer, he was leaning forward with his chin on one hand, the other hand clenching and unclenching between his knees.

The thin notes of a bugle stole along the valley and floated up to them. Nancy hated it. It seemed to her like the threat of Nemesis. To counteract it she spoke again.

"Have you decided, Bob?"

"Decided?" He rose to his feet and began walking up and down in his agitation. "Decided? Oh, my God! What can I say to you? It's not for me to decide! I warn you that you are wrong, that you are imagining in me

something which, God knows, I have n't got! I'm not fit to be in the same world with you!"

Nancy got up too. "It's an amazingly difficult world to live in," she said, "but you've been trying just as hard as I have. We've had different things to compete with, that's all!"

Bob stopped, looking at her in wonder. Then he came and stood in front of her. "For a second time you make me very humble!" he said. "As a girl you jerked all the props from under me, knocked me off the pinnacle of my conceit, saved me from the degradation I was headed for! I had thought that you would utterly despise me, and instead you — you tell me something that is altogether unbelievable! I have n't ever known a woman like you. I feel as if you were offering me a second chance on earth!"

Nancy stretched out her hand. "And you'll take it?"

They stood looking at one another. In the moment's pause the far-away call of that bugle came again.

Then very quietly Bob took her hand. "If you will let me try!" he said.

There was a great light in Nancy's eyes, as though her whole being had been kindled and was ablaze.

Chapter Six

"OH, my God!" he said, and broke into a trot along the field path. There was a great exultation in his voice.

A lark rocketed up from the golden corn through which the path lay unwound like a green ribbon. The man stopped, listening. His eyes followed the bird into the blue with a look of ecstasy. Then they dropped to the rustling corn where scarlet poppies flamed among the gold. The distant trees were in the fullness of their summer green. A little wind played, making the corn ripple and whisper.

Unconsciously the man's arms went out in a broad gesture. He stood bareheaded, motionless, not thinking — just feeling, absorbing. It was as though his arms were aërials, catching the rhythmic beat of nature. Never before had he known such intensity of perception. The song of the lark was the voice of all happiness; the color, the smell and the soothing murmur answered every unuttered longing of man.

His tunic was old and discolored. The rank of Major was on the sleeves which had been sewed with leather when the edges frayed. If the faded ribbons on his breast were not proof of the fact that he had penetrated to the ultimate meaning of war, his face was. Strain was stamped upon it. The puckered eyes spoke of sleeplessness, of super-human effort, of unending responsibility. It was like a mask of youth on which some sardonic artist had amused himself by painting in the lines of age.

In the firing line he was Major Robert Whittaker,

D.S.O., M.C., the commander of a field battery which seemed always to find itself a thousand yards nearer the enemy front line than the rest of the brigade.

He had come this way deliberately to avoid seeing the camp. Standing among the corn of this mellow, untouched English countryside, he was Bob Whittaker again, no longer a hardened soldier, but a man and a husband, and what was more, as he knew by the thumbed and dirty letter in his pocket, a father.

That letter had reached him after a time, not measurable in orderly terms of day and night, at Ypres. It had been a continued unconsciousness of food, sleep, time or eternity. He had shrunk to a brain with a single awareness of guns that were fired endlessly, by his orders. The letter had seemed without meaning. A child born, — when the world was crumbling. It was silly. And yet, vaguely, beneath his numbed mind sprouted the germ of relief that it was not a boy. The war had closed round him again.

Up the hill, though hidden from him by the woods, lay the village, — that lazy, sprawly, remembered place of friendly thatched cottages whose doors stood always open, whose small gardens were a riot of color and gossip. Great beeches spread their arms over it protectingly. A murmur of small human noises pervaded it, and it was sweet with the smell of cows. Over all came the high silvery notes of a little boy singing somewhere in the lane above.

Like a dry sponge, Bob Whittaker's war-shocked senses drank it in until he was saturated with the essential truth of it, its beauty and intense reality. For a space it would make him human again.

The hum of an aeroplane made him suddenly shiver. His arms dropped. "Nancy!" he said, and as he hurried on, his mind fled in front of him, reaching out for the woman who, through the intensity of his experience, had become

Soundings

the focus point of his faith in mankind, in life itself. As he visualized her a smile touched his face. It was like a transfiguration.

He reached the end of the cornfield and stepped out into the lane, the gravel crunching beneath his boots. His thoughts were full of Nancy now, — of her getting his telegram from London, of her waiting for him on the porch. Unconsciously he quickened his pace, eager to see her, to hold her and so to realize that all this was true.

He came to the beginning of the village. It was good to see, so quiet and so untouched. A forage wagon turned in at the gates of the Manor. The two soldiers on it saluted.

Bob winced as he acknowledged the salute. Damn it! Would n't they let him forget it all for fourteen days? That was all he'd got, and then he would have to go back into that hell. — He clenched his teeth. "Oh, God!" he exclaimed. "Let me come through this show!"

Outside the inn two ancient men mumbled their clay pipes in the sun. They turned their rheumy eyes upon him as he passed, hurrying, impatient. He was so near to Nancy now!

He rounded the arm of trees. There, tucked away on the ledge, was the cottage. The sight of it brought a great cry from him. "Nancy! — Oh, Nancy!"

His cry was answered. As he reached the gate, Nancy came out on the porch. She made no move to meet him. She just stood there and looked until she could n't see any more because her eyes and her heart were overflowing. The moment was almost too big. Then his arms went round her and, with a cry, she clung to him, saying his name over and over again.

Thirty days after their marriage in the little church down in Friar's Icknield his division had marched away, and she had waved to him — dry-eyed and smiling till he was out

of sight — with a feeling of death in her heart. For eighteen months her daily study had been the casualty lists; and when, in process of having her baby, she was too ill to read them herself, her father had read them for her.

Presently she leaned back in his arms and took his face in her two hands, — that tired face that looked so much older.

“Let me look at you,” she said; and then, “Oh, Bob, my dear, they’ve hurt you!” and placed his head against her breast. “I don’t think I can bear it if you go away again. I need you most desperately, — more now even than when you went away!”

“The only thing that has kept me sane in the shambles out there,” said Bob, “has been the thought of you.”

Nancy nodded. “I know what you mean! It’s been the same with me. I don’t think there has been a single hour of the day or night since you left that I’ve not kept you with me.”

“Just to hear you say that,” said Bob, “makes it all worth it.”

Nancy’s hand was on his hair. “Do you know what you’ve done to me? You’ve made me cease to be an individual. Ever since we were married and all the time you’ve been out there, I’ve been living not for myself any more, but for both of us, or rather for all of us.”

“All of us?”

Nancy nodded. “Yes, and absolutely in spite of myself, in a way. You see, Bob, I had trained myself to accept the fact that I should never be married and therefore I was relying on my own ego to pull me through, once I had a child. I thought it would n’t matter to me, if you did n’t come back. I was going to be self-sufficient, with my child!” She laughed softly. “Human nature is n’t like that, is it? When one need is satisfied, another wakes

Soundings

up. I didn't know it until you'd gone to France, and then I found that my ego didn't exist any more. You had already become an inseparable part of it, like color and shading in a picture. And when the baby was born, it seemed to me that all the gaps had been filled up, that the essential trinity of life was complete, — or would be when you came back!"

Bob's arms were still round her. "You've gone farther than I have," he said; "I have n't got the idea of a child at all. I've been thinking entirely in terms of us two. It's a funny thing to say, perhaps, but I don't believe I'm ready for this kid yet."

"Wait till you've seen her and touched her!" said Nancy.

Bob caught her to him, "Go easy on it, Nancy darling; don't expect too much of me. I'll try hard, but it's you I want, and no one but you."

Nancy smiled up at him. "You're not afraid of yourself, are you, or of me?"

"No," said Bob. "But I — I don't want you to change."

"But of course I'm changed!" said Nancy. "And you're going to be too, my dear, so fundamentally that you'll hardly recognize yourself! Come and let me prove it to you."

She released herself from his arms, took his hand and led him into the cottage.

