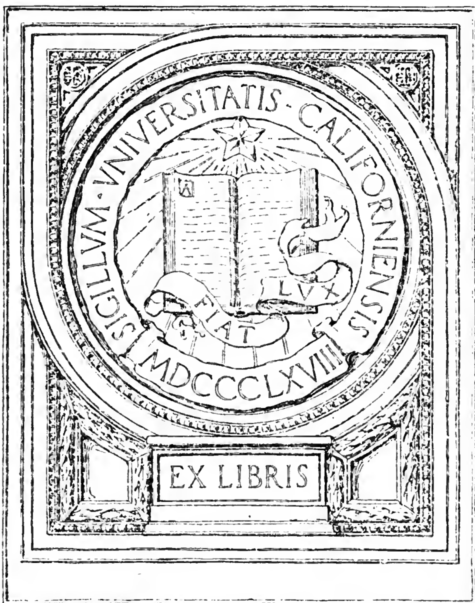

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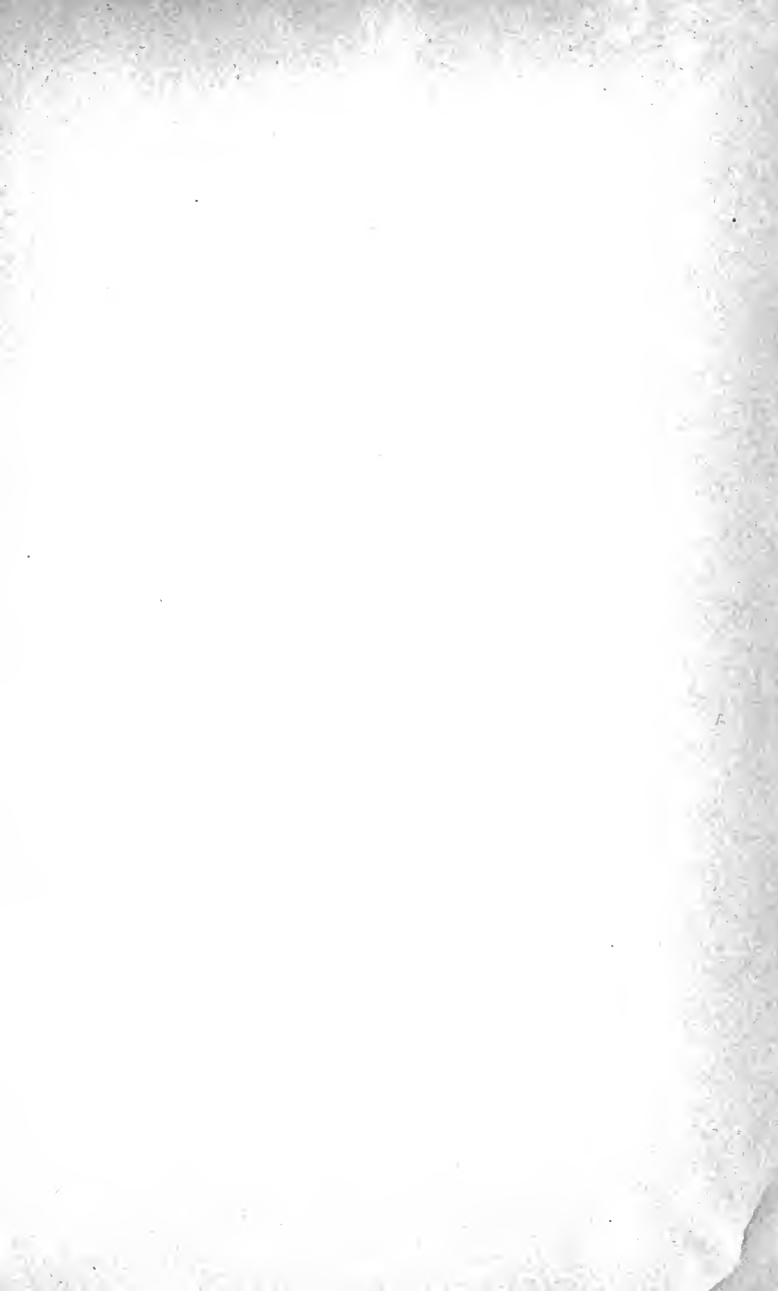

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She stood quite silent for a moment, staring at Nick.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

GREAT DISCOVERIES

NICHOLAS BARTON was born with a queer temperament. He was one of those who think a great deal but say very little. He was a dreamer, something, perhaps, of a poet. At least beneath all his quietude and reserve there was a great well of emotion, with deep waters which threatened to rise and overwhelm him when they were stirred by kindness or unkindness, by queer unexpected beauties of sound or color or scent, or by some keen, sharp touch from one of those mysterious fingers of fate which sometimes come out of the darkness to pluck at human heart strings.

He was conscious of great mysteries about him. Sometimes he walked a little way toward them, with peering eyes, with a wild beating of the heart, with an adventurous fear, like a primitive creature in a great forest. Then, panic-stricken, he would hurry back to his familiar work, saying nothing of his venture, or of the things he had seen.

He was very watchful, and, as it were, always on his guard, as though encompassed by hidden perils. Because it seemed to him that at any moment the vast powers about him might change the familiar

into the unfamiliar, the known into the unknown. And it was of the unknown that he was afraid, though he was tempted to explore it.

Yet he was not a coward, nor weak-willed, nor of morbid moods. There were times when he showed extraordinary courage, facing great dangers with a quiet and noble resolution. His strength of will amounted at times to a stubborn obstinacy when not all the great powers about him, not Bristles nor Beauty nor Polly—not even the Beast—could make him budge an inch if he did not want to budge. As for being morbid, I think Nicholas Barton's history will prove the falsity of such a charge. He was a dreamer, and he liked loneliness, and he indulged in queer, fantastic, and, sometimes, preposterous imaginations, but his dreams were such as come to people who are sensitive to the beauty and wonder of life, and in his loneliness he was cheerful, and busy with brain and hands. His chief desire was to get at the truth of things, and that kept him busy. Because in spite of his insatiable curiosity, his intense inquisitiveness, his probings and searchings, the truth of things was always difficult to grasp. Truth was always playing a game of hide-and-seek, like God, like the squirrel (whom he loved better than God), like Bristles when he said "Let's be bears!" —and disappeared under the table-cloth.

Yet it was this desire for truth, this questioning

of his soul, the big, eternal queries in his eyes, which gave to Nicholas Barton his peculiar power, and made people a little frightened of him. Even before he had uttered his first word in the world, when he lay dumb and watchful in a wheeled carriage, Bristles had been scared by his son's eyes.

"He seems to look into one's bones," said Bristles. "I believe he knows what an awful rotter I am."

"He frightens me sometimes with the enormous gravity in those blue eyes of his," said Beauty. "I am sure he knows when I lose my temper with you."

"You shouldn't lose your temper with me," said Bristles. "You know how much I love you."

"That is why," said Beauty. "If you had a little bit of the bully in you I should be as meek as a lamb. I think every woman should marry a bully."

"Hush!" said Bristles. "The kid is listening."

"How absurd of you! As if he could understand!" said Beauty.

And yet she had a quaint idea that Nicholas Barton, her son, had listened and understood. For his blue eyes were fixed upon her with his great desire for truth. He had that grave stare, before which, a few years later in his life, his mother drooped her eyelashes so as to hide her soul.

That was when he was eight years old, and after the Beast had come.

During those eight years of life he had been mak-

ing many strange discoveries about the world in which he lived. He discovered that he was not the only kid in the world, but that there were thousands of kids, each of them belonging to a Bristles and a Beauty, and living in the square holes behind the big walls which hid them from him after they had run away from the shadows which crept across the grass and stole down from the tree-trunks and whispered together in dark corners, just about the time when the lamps became alive. That discovery came to him gradually. It must have been when he was four years old that the tremendous fact of other kids, more than ever he could count by using his ten fingers over and over again, burst upon him like a thunder clap. It made him feel rather miserable at first, because, as he told Polly, it made him feel frightfully little. Of course Polly could not understand—she never could —and he did not take the trouble to explain to her. It was about this time that he made the discovery that the world was ever so much bigger than the biggest thing he could think of. It was bigger, even, than Battersea Park. Polly said it was a million times bigger than Battersea Park, but then she could not tell him what a million was. After counting up to twenty she said it was ever so much more, but she couldn't be bothered. That made him feel frightfully little, too, and he was glad to get back home, where sizes were more convenient, and where

he felt bigger, although he had to climb almost as high as the sky—he never could count the number of steps exactly right each time—before he reached his front door, and although the grandfather's clock in the hall was an enormous giant with a great cavern inside his stomach. But here, once past the grandfather's clock, he was safe—safe from the thought of bigness which frightened him. His own room was full of little things, a chair in which he could sit without dangling his legs, a bed in which he could lie without wondering whether he would ever find his way out again, and a chest of drawers which he could overlook if he stood on a hassock. That was where most of his friends lived—most of them like the British Army, and the Golliwog, and the Lady Without-a-head, and the Crab which wouldn't walk, lived in a crowded-up way in a cupboard which sometimes he didn't dare to open in the dark because the Golliwog seemed to blink its eyes, rather nastily, and because Something might jump out. But other friends lived in different parts of the room. Peter Rabbit always lived on the mantelpiece, next to Jemmy, the Dog-with-one-ear, and not far away from Bill, the Cat Without-a-tail. The Wheelbarrow lived under the washstand, with its ears sticking out. The Red Engine lived in the hearth-place, ready to steam away on far journeys with him as soon as he fell asleep.

In the dining-room his best friends were the Lions

with rings through their noses on the sideboard—they were laughing lions, though he had never found out the joke—and the hassock on the hearth-rug, which was a fat, comfortable old fellow who didn't mind being kicked, and the arm-chair where Bristles sat when he smoked his pipe, which always held out its arms as though longing to embrace somebody. At the back of the arm-chair were two buttons like eyes, which winked and blinked in the firelight, so that Nicholas Barton used to turn round to see if they were looking when he stole across the room to peep inside the sideboard cupboard, or when he went to the window to see if the lamps had come to life after the shadow-people had come into the street. Here in the dining-room also lived the magic carpet, where a great forest grew, full of flowers and creeping plants, in which Nicholas Barton used to wander on great adventures, until sometimes he was so tired that he fell asleep.

With these friends, and many others in the kitchen and the bedrooms—such as Mr. Big Kettle, Mr. Rolling Pin, and the magic clothes-horse, which could be changed into a giant's castle, a railway station, or a butcher's shop, Nicholas was more intimate and unreserved than with the people who did not understand them. He often whispered things to Peter Rabbit, or into one of the hassock's ears, which he would not have told to Bristles or Beauty, or even to Polly, because he understood them, and

they understood him. They never laughed at him when he made one of his big discoveries. They never told him to do things which he didn't want to do, and they never surprised him by doing the most unexpected things when he wasn't ready for them. Besides, their whole life was lived inside the flat, so that he knew all about them, whereas Bristles and Beauty were always going away mysteriously and leading a secret life of which he had no knowledge or share.

Although he was always watching these two people he could never be quite sure of them, or make out the mystery of them. Bristles was a man of queer habits and queer character. He was pretty good at fairy tales in the early morning after Nick had come in from his own room to snuggle into Bristles' bed and pinch his nose, but presently, just at the exciting point where the Small Boy was knocking at the door of the Giant's Castle, or when he had been wisked up to the stars on a witch's broom-stick, Bristles would give a great yawn—so that Nick would feel as if he might tumble to the very bottom of Red Lane—and calmly go to sleep again. If Nick ventured to pinch his nose once more —which was not always a safe thing to do—and if he went on with the story, it was just as likely as not he would muddle the whole thing up and change the Small Boy into a Fairy Princess, or the witch into an ugly dragon with fiery nostrils.

He was a most forgetful man, and made Nick believe that all men had this habit of forgetfulness, so that he was terrified lest the same thing might creep upon him as he grew older and older every time the clock ticked. Bristles would begin a game of bears under the table-cloth, and behave very well for a little while, but then suddenly he would forget, and instead of growling like a bear would begin to roar like a lion, or grunt like a pig, or crow like a cock-a-doodle-doo. Or if he pretended to be a railway train on the way to the North Pole, his forgetfulness would come on suddenly and he would change into a fire-engine, so that the whole game went astray, in spite of Nick's angry shouts.

He was a weak fellow, too, was Bristles. Sometimes he would pretend to get very angry, and threaten to give Nick a jolly good hiding, but Nick pooh-poohed his threats, knowing the falsity of them. Once, when Nick called Beauty a dirty toad, a beastly wretch, and a nasty damn thing—all names learned from Polly in her moments of excitement—Bristles was ordered by Beauty herself to take him into the bedroom and thrash him severely. For a long time Bristles refused, pleading that Nick did not mean what he said and that he was too young to be thrashed, and that, after all, boys will be boys. Both people had red faces—Beauty was like a flaming poppy—and spoke in loud voices, while Nick

looked from one to the other with grave, observant eyes.

"Good heavens! the boy will go to the bad if he is not beaten sometimes," cried Beauty. "Surely you are not going to let him see that you are afraid of punishing him, are you?"

At the end of the argument, Bristles took Nick by the hand and led him to the bedroom, and carefully closed the door.

"Look here, Nick, old boy," said Bristles, "I have got to beat you. So take it like a man."

Nick gave a piercing howl before a finger had been laid upon him, and made a frightful noise, while Bristles became very pale, and then thrust a penny into his hand and said:

"I'm sorry, old man. Stop crying, and tell Beauty you didn't mean what you said."

Some time after Bristles and Nick strolled back into the drawing-room. Bristles was whistling in a careless way, while Nick, clasping his penny, was wondering why Bristles always whistled when he tried to hide anything from Beauty.

"I hope you gave it to him hot and strong," said Beauty. "I never heard such language from a child."

Bristles nodded, and said, "He won't speak like that again."

Beauty drew Nick close to her, and whispered into his ear:

"Bristles didn't *want* to hurt you, Nick, but you must be punished when you do bad things."

Nick gazed into Beauty's eyes, in his grave, thoughtful way.

"Bristles didn't hurt me. He didn't touch me. And I don't see why I should be punished when I do bad things. Nobody ever punished you."

"What?" cried Beauty, looking at Bristles with eyes like glowing fires. "You didn't touch him, after all? Oh, you blithering idiot!"

She was furiously angry, and Bristles said "Damn" and then was very quiet while he filled and smoked his pipe. And from that day Nick had no fear of Bristles, and knew him to be a weak-willed fellow. But they were good friends, for Bristles was, on the whole, obedient, and understood things, and was not so grown-up in his mind as most people who have lost belief in magic carpets, and chairs with blinking eyes, and old lions with rings through their noses, who laugh and laugh at some joke which they never tell.

Yet even with Bristles one could not feel quite safe. Nick knew that between this man and Beauty there were secrets which they hid from him. He heard them quarreling sometimes after he had gone to bed. At least, it was generally Beauty who quarreled, in a rather shrill, high voice, like the top notes in the piano, while Bristles only grunted, or rumbled in the bass notes. Having been away all day, he

would come home sometimes looking sulky (as Polly would say when Nick put on the same look), and instead of playing games, would say, "I don't feel like it to-night, old man," and sit staring into the fire—though he never could see the same pictures there which Nick saw—and giving every now and then a big sigh, and then getting up quite suddenly, to pace up and down the room just like a lion at the Zoo, with the same worried look in his eyes.

Beauty was hardly ever at home in the evenings, and perhaps that accounted for the sulkiness of Bristles. Nick believed that must be the reason, for he asked one day:

"Why do you play at lions all by yourself?"

"Because I am as lonely as an old lion in a cage," said Bristles.

"Why are you as lonely as an old lion in a cage?" asked Nick.

"Because Beauty, my lady lioness, goes to play with monkeys," said Bristles.

After that he burst out laughing, and said: "After all, I am not quite lonely. Let you and I play at bears."

But Nick wondered within himself why did Beauty go and play with monkeys. Or, if she was so fond of monkeys, why didn't she take Bristles to join in the game?

It was only very rarely that Bristles went. When he did, he put on black clothes and a waistcoat with

a big hole in the middle of it, so that a stiff white shirt showed through, and a hat that folded in and out with a click. But it didn't agree with him. Nick always knew that he would be sulky next morning after he had been to see Beauty play with the monkeys.

Perhaps it was because he could not lie in bed so long as Beauty. He was always up to breakfast with Nick, while Beauty lay in bed until lunch time, so that Nick had to go on tip-toe past her door, lest he should get "What for," as Polly said.

That was one of the differences between Beauty and Bristles, though it did not explain all the mystery of them. There were other differences. Bristles was out all day, and Beauty was out all night—or, at least, so far into the night that Nick was never awake when she came back. Bristles dressed himself, just like he had taught Nick to dress himself, but Beauty always wanted Polly to help her, and Polly was always in a bad humor during dressing-time, and said "Drat the woman!" when Beauty called for hot water, and "Lord Almighty!" when she called for a clean chemise, and "Oh, what a life!" when Beauty sat back in a blue dressing-gown while Polly did her hair, and while Nick sat on a small stool in a room littered with clothes about the floor, with newspapers, supper things, cigarette-ends, and paper-backed novels with lovely ladies on the covers.

But none of these picture ladies were quite as lovely as Beauty. It was quite a long time before Nick made that discovery. He made it one morning when Polly was doing Beauty's hair. It was long golden hair, which shone and sparkled in the sunlight which came through the window. It seemed to Nick that it flowed down from Beauty's head like a river of gold which he had once seen in a waking dream. And as she sat smiling at her own image in the glass, while she smoked a gold-tipped cigarette, it seemed to Nick that her face was like one of the dream princesses whom he had once married in a great castle when Peter Rabbit had gone on a big adventure with him. Only Beauty was not quite the same as the dream princess, because she had blue eyes instead of green, and because her smile showed a row of teeth like little white birds in a nest of rose-leaves.

"Why are you so lovely, Beauty?" asked Nick.

"Bless the boy!" said Beauty, laughing. "I suppose God made me so."

"But why did God make Polly so ugly and you so lovely?"

It was Polly's turn to laugh.

"Lor', ma'am, what do you say to that?"

"Perhaps because God made Polly so good, and me so wicked," said Beauty, who seemed to find a great joke in Nick's most serious questioning.

"That's no reason at all," said Nick. "It would

have been more sensible if God had made both of you lovely and both of you good."

Polly laughed so much that she dropped all Beauty's hair-pins, which Nick picked up one by one, wishing to goodness that grown-up people did not laugh at the wrong places. But Beauty did not laugh this time. She put her head down a little and said:

"I wish God could have managed that, little Nick. It would have been so much better for me. It would save me such a lot of worry."

Nick came to the conclusion that God, whom he imagined to be a very big and superior kind of policeman with white gloves and enormous brass buttons, always watching people from mysterious hiding-places, had had a quarrel with Beauty, and wanted to prosecute her for not keeping off the grass. The idea rather frightened him, because he was afraid that she might be taken away one day, by a sudden pounce.

He was often rather frightened about Beauty, because she had rather alarming ways. For one thing, she was always in a great hurry, except in getting out of bed. She would hurry over her meals, and keep calling out to Polly to hurry up, and then whisk away in a hansom cab, like Cinderella in the fairy coach. Sometimes she came home rather breathlessly, and told Bristles or Polly that she had just flown in for a few minutes and must fly off again

as soon as possible. Nicholas had believed at first that she really possessed the power of flying, but when he saw with his own eyes that she generally drove up in a cab, he considered that she was not quite truthful—which was a shock to him.

Another of her alarming ways was the habit of talking to herself—laughing to herself, and crying to herself in the dining-room when the door was shut. Nick often held his breath and listened to Beauty's voice speaking inside the room, saying the same things over and over again. Once he heard her laughing quite loudly, not once, but many times, and he believed she must have found out the joke at which the lions on the sideboard were always smiling. He wanted to ask her, but somehow the fact that she had shut him outside the door before she began to laugh to herself made him afraid.

She frightened him also by getting angry quite quickly and suddenly, by slapping him on the hand so that it was as red as though it had been stung by a bee, and then kissing it and crying out that she didn't mean to hurt her darling Nick and that she was a wretch to lose her temper. Once she lost her temper so badly—it was about something that Bristles said—that she look a vase off the mantel-piece and let it drop onto the fireplace, so that it smashed into a hundred pieces, which Polly had to clear away with a dustpan and broom. Nick felt his heart going tick-tock like the big clock in the

hall, and his eyes growing larger and larger until they seemed as big as his head. There was a dead silence for a moment after that awful crash. Then Bristles shrugged his shoulders up to his ears —Nick learned the trick from him—and went out of the room whistling a tune. Beauty put her hands to her face, and tear-water oozed through her fingers, and her body shook like a tree in Battersea Park when the wind blows. It was the sight of Beauty's shaking body which made Nick suddenly rush to her, clutching at her skirts with a great howl of grief. Then, to his surprise, Beauty took her hands away from her face, and burst out laughing, although her eyes were all moist and shining.

"If you ever break a vase like that," she said, "I'll skin you alive, Nick."

"Why did you break it?" asked Nick.

"Because I had a monkey on my back," said Beauty. "Such an evil little monkey."

Nick walked round and looked at his mother's back.

"I think you tell most frightful whoppers," he said.

And yet he knew that better than anything in the world to him was Beauty on her good days. That was when she was not in a hurry for once, but curled up on the hearth-rug with him, telling him queer little fairy-tales, better than any that Bristles could tell, because all her people seemed alive and spoke in

different voices, so that it really seemed as if they were in the room; and when she came and knelt down by the side of his bed with her arms clasped about him, letting him ask all the questions he wanted to ask, and answering them in a voice which sounded like music in his ears when at last he could not keep his eyes open; and when she came to him in wonderful dresses, all white and shimmering, like a cloud in the sky, and said: "Do you think I look pretty to-night, my Nick?" and bent to kiss him so that he could take deep breaths of the scent in her hair, like the smell of the flower-beds in the Park, and stroke her soft white arms, and whisper his love for her. Sometimes at these times there was an excited light in her eyes, so that they shone like the candles on each side of his mantelpiece, and sometimes she would swish up her skirts and dance about the room on the tips of her toes, and sometimes Bristles would come in and stand with his hands in his pockets staring at her with a queer smile, until she sank into a deep curtsey and into the waves of her white dress before him, when he would hold out his hand and raise her up, and kiss her on the arm as she danced out of the room. Those were scenes which Nick cherished in his heart, and which long afterward he remembered like wonderful dreams.

It was in his sixth year that he made his greatest discovery about Beauty.

It was made in the kitchen, where he was building a giant's castle out of a cardboard box, while Polly was ironing handkerchiefs, and spitting on the hot iron so that it made that splendid sizzling noise which Nick loved to hear. It was between one of the spits that she gave a great sigh and said:

"The Lord be praised *I* ain't a hactress!"

"What *is* a hactress?" asked Nick.

"Your mother is a hactress, my poor poppet," said Polly.

Nick was silent. It was clear to him from Polly's tone of voice that a hactress was a very awful and horrid thing.

"Why shouldn't she be a hactress?" he said, putting himself on his guard.

"It's what no good woman ought to be, in my opinion," said Polly, dabbing down the iron with a bang.

Nick had a great respect for Polly's wisdom. She could do many things which neither Bristles nor Beauty could do. She could bake bread and make suet puddings with plums in them, and sugar mice with currant eyes. She knew almost everything there was to be known about grown-up people, cats, babies, policemen, beetles, cutting out paper figures, folding paper boats, healing burns and blisters, getting good luck by putting on a stocking inside out, and other things worth knowing. But Nick was

not going to allow her to say bad things about Beauty.

"If you say my mother is a hactress, I will kill you dead," he said.

Polly did not see his white face or his burning eyes. She was busy with her iron.

"Nothing I can say can alter things," said Polly, breathing hard over her iron. "She's a hactress by nature, and a hactress by calling, and it's no wonder your father is getting old before his time, poor dear."

Nick took a careful aim with the pair of scissors with which he had been cutting out a giant's castle, and threw them straight at Polly's face.

"Take that, and dammitall!" he shouted, and he was only a little bit sorry when Polly gave a loud shriek, dropped her iron, and put her hand up to a great gash in her cheek.

Bristles came striding into the kitchen.

"What on earth's the matter?" he asked, sternly.

Polly was still screaming, and her face was dabbled with blood.

"She called Beauty a hactress," said Nick, "and I tried to kill her."

That night he went supperless to bed, after begging Polly's pardon and receiving her tearful kisses, which melted all the rage in his heart. He cried himself to sleep, not because he had no supper, not because he had been forced to beg Polly's pardon

—which was frightfully hurtful to his pride—but because Bristles had confirmed the awful fact that Beauty *was* a "hactress," and had said, beneath his breath but not so quietly that Nick had not heard the words:

"And I wish to God she wasn't!"

Nick had not the faintest idea what this awful thing might be, but he was sure that it was the worst thing that could have happened to Beauty, and was a shameful secret which he must hide from all the world.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE BEAST

NICHOLAS BARTON, when he became something of a scholar, divided the history of his world into certain definite stages: B. C. and A. D., before the Great Fire and after the Great Fire, before the coming of the Beast and after the coming of the Beast.

It was before the Beast came that he was initiated into some of the mysteries of Beauty's life outside the flat, and into the meaning of that word "hactress" which Polly had pronounced as a thing offensive to her nostrils.

It was Bristles who gave him this wonderful knowledge.

"Look here, Nick, my son," he said on a certain historic evening, "would you like to come to the theatre and see Beauty in all her glory?"

Nick was drawing pictures of Battersea Park. They were his private pictures which nobody could understand but himself. But there, clear enough to *his* eyes was the old tree with arms that tried to reach down to small boys but were not quite long enough, and the Squirrel which was always hiding in the back parlor of his cage, so that only one

bright eye looked out, and the twin old gentleman owls, and the one old lady owl, who were always taking afternoon naps, even in the morning, when the sun was shining, and there was the lake, with boats full of boys who were always shouting because they had discovered a magic island where toffee and gingerbread nuts and striped bulls' eyes grew on the trees. All these things had Nick put down in pictures, but he had not yet drawn the noise of the shouting boys, nor the smell of the flowers which grew by the side of the lake, when Bristles asked him the big question.

Nick bit the end of his pencil thoughtfully, and then said:

"What *is* a theatre?"

"It is a place where people pretend to be other people, like you and I pretend to be bears. They get so much into the habit of pretending that half of them never get back again to their real selves."

Nick stared at Bristles in alarm.

"I should hate that. What does Beauty pretend to be?"

"Well, to-night she is pretending to be a fairy princess in love with an ass. It's rather good fun, old man."

"But ladies never do fall in love with asses, do they?" asked Nick.

"Oh, often," said Bristles, who was putting on

his boots, the shiny ones in which Nick could see his own face.

"It would be awkward if Beauty fell in love with an ass, wouldn't it?" said Nick.

"Devilish awkward."

Bristles gave a queer laugh, ending in a queer sigh, and Nick didn't like the look of things. It would be frightful if Beauty got so much into the habit of pretending that she couldn't get back again to her real self.

But he accepted the invitation to the theatre because of his desire for knowledge, and although he yawned once or twice because it was getting near bed-time, he told Bristles that he had sent the old dustman off with a flea in his ear.

Polly was in a very bad temper when she helped him to dress in his best things.

"Shameful, I call it, keeping a child out of his bed. And the theayter is no place for my poor innocent poppet. It all comes of having a hactress for a mother."

It was the first time she had used the word since Nick's attack with the scissors, and, as she said afterward to the servant in the next flat, she could have bitten her tongue off for having mentioned it again. But Nick had made one of his great discoveries. It came to him in a flash.

"Is a hactress a lady that pretends to be what she isn't, and can't get back to her real self?"

"Lord save the child! And how did you know that?" asked Polly, startled out of her wits by such precocious wisdom.

Nick did not answer. So *that* was the meaning of the word! This new knowledge cast a gloom over his spirit. It hurt him to think that Beauty might have been pretending to him all the time. Perhaps he had never known the true self of her. He must try to find it out. He would watch and try to catch her unawares, just as he had caught the Squirrel once when it thought that nobody was looking. It was quite a different squirrel to the one he had imagined when he had only seen its bright eye peeping out from the back parlor of its cage.

On the journey to the theatre with Bristles in a hansom cab he sat very quiet, drinking in all the new impressions of this great adventure in the night. All the lamps were alive, thousands of them, like shining flowers that came dancing past the window of the cab. And all the buildings were like fairy palaces, so white in the glow of the night lights, so terribly black where the shadows made their hiding places. The world was full of music, full of little tinkling bells, like those on the cab horse, playing thousands of jig tunes, while lots of small boys, whom he could not see in the darkness, were blowing on whistles. All the world was going to the theatre in cabs and carriages, and the noise of

the wheels made a rushing sound like water turned on from bath-room taps. He stared out at shadow people passing along the streets. All their bodies were black, but their faces were white like ghosts, and they went by quietly, as though creeping on tip-toe. He looked up into the sky, and gave a little shiver of excitement, for there, so close above the cab in front of them that the driver could almost touch it with his whip, was the old man in the moon, smiling down as though seeing a great joke in the world, and not far away from him was a tiny star, winking its eye.

"Bristles," said Nick, with a quiver in his voice, "why does the moon smile? Do you know the joke?"

"Yes," said Bristles, "but it is a bad joke. You are too young for me to tell you."

"When shall I be old enough to know?"

Nick knew that there were some jokes for which he would have to wait, all those jokes at which grown-up people laugh, but which do not seem a bit funny to small boys.

Bristles put his arm round Nick, and pressed him closer to his side.

"When you are as old as I am, Nick. Everybody finds out the joke then, worse luck!"

At the theatre Nick felt very small as, holding on hard to Bristles, he walked between some marble pillars into an enormous place crowded with men

with holes in their waistcoats so that their shirts showed through, and with women who had bare arms and necks, and dresses like the best flower beds in Battersea Park. Bristles passed through the crowd, nodding to one or two people, and saying good evening to a gentleman in a white wig, a purple coat and breeches, and white silk stockings, whom Nick knew, without being told, to be the owner of the theatre, and an immensely rich man. Then Bristles went down a long corridor where two or three women like Polly, only not so ugly, said "Good evening, sir," and grinned in an aggressive way at Nick, and finally opened a door which led into a little room where there was a big window without glass, with a balcony outside, looking into a vast hall full of velvet chairs and white faces and little twinkling lights.

"Is this the theatre?" asked Nick.

"Yes. Take off your coat, and make yourself at home."

"Where's Beauty?" asked Nick.

"Oh, you will see her presently."

Nick took off his coat, and Bristles hung it on to a peg absurdly high above a small boy's head. Then Nick drew up a chair to the open window, and tried to find Beauty. There were thousands of faces just like he sometimes saw them in dreams, high up and low down, all exactly the same, unless he stared at them hard and noticed the differences,

and all with shining eyes. He could not see Beauty among them, though he looked ever so hard. Down below in the great cavern of the hall was another crowd of people, but he could not see their faces so well, only their heads, and to his surprise he noticed that most of the men had taken their hair off, so that their naked heads looked like big birds' eggs. Then he saw a lot of wild people in a cage. Only one or two of them had taken their hair off. The others had long hair, like the manes of lions.

"Are they savages?" he asked, and Bristles, following the direction of his pointed finger, laughed a great deal, as though it was a joke, and said:

"Well, they are rather fierce."

But they seemed to be tamed by a man who sat in a high seat waving a stick at them. After three taps of his stick they took up queer-looking instruments, and played queer music which sounded at first like the roaring of wild beasts, and then changed and became very soft, like the singing of the birds in Battersea Park after the shadows had crept down from the trees, and then changed again, so that thousands of notes tripped over one another, like the leaves blown along a path on a gusty day, all singing as they scurried along.

Presently, at the end of the great hall nearest to Nick, a curtain which everybody had been staring at, rolled up in an invisible way, and at the same time nearly all the lights in the great hall

suddenly died, so that the people's faces could only be seen through the black fog of darkness, more like a dream than ever, but here and there a light still remained alive, just like a watchful eye staring through the blackness. But now beneath the rolled-up curtain there was a little world of light, just like Battersea Park on a summer day, only more real, because the fairies which Nick could only see in Battersea Park when he shut his eyes, were here frisking about among the trees, even when he kept his eyes open, and there was one of them called Puck whom he recognized at once as a fellow he had met in a fairy tale. He wore exactly the same grin, and made the same funny jokes which you could not quite understand, but laughed at all the same.

"Why didn't you tell me the theatre was fairyland?" said Nick, speaking to Bristles in a loud voice.

"Hush!" said Bristles, "you mustn't talk till the curtain goes down, old man."

So Nick sat very mum, but a little later he nearly jumped out of his seat, for there, coming from behind a tree, was Beauty, his Beauty, dressed up like a fairy and followed by a lot of little fairies. He was so excited that he forgot all about not speaking, and leaning over the balcony, cried out in a high voice:

"Hullo, Beauty!—Beauty!"

Bristles grabbed him by the waistcoat, and hauled him back into his chair, but not before Beauty had looked up and smiled at him, and not before there came a great flutter of laughter from the darkness, as though a laughing wind had blown across all the white faces.

For a long time Nick sat as quiet as a mouse, watching all the people of fairyland, who were doing queer things which he could not understand, and saying things which meant nothing to him, while he watched with grave eyes, and listened with straining ears. Then, presently, he felt himself getting very excited. Some big Fear was trying to get inside his head. It was when everybody was laughing because a fat man like one of the gardeners in Battersea Park was being changed into an ass. Nick could not see anything to laugh at. It seemed to him very cruel to change a man into an ass. He began to hate Puck for playing such a trick. But that was not the reason why Fear was trying to get into his head. It was because of Beauty. It was because Beauty was falling in love with the ass. He wanted to warn her. It was frightfully dangerous. She might never get back to be herself again. It was beastly to see the way she stroked the ass, and cuddled him, and kissed his ugly nose. Supposing she went on loving the ass? What would happen to Bristles and Polly and him? He could not bear it. He felt that Something was going to

burst in his head, and that all the water in his heart was ready to rush out of his eyes. He suddenly shouted out again:

"Beauty, you mustn't love the ass! Please don't love the ass!"

Once again there came the noise of a laughing wind blowing gustily over the white faces. But Nick did not hear the wind. He was sobbing bitterly against the white shirt through the hole in Bristles' waistcoat. Bristles kept on saying "Hush, old man," and carried him down the long corridor, and then went home again with him in a hansom cab. But long before they had reached Battersea Park Nick was asleep, with his head against the white shirt-front, which was all stained with his tears.

Nick was never quite sure what things happened between this visit to the theatre and the coming of the Beast, because he could not keep count of the days, and things had a habit of getting muddled in his mind just like his toys got muddled in the cupboard—all heads and arms and legs mixed up together—so that it was difficult to sort them out again. But some time passed, with its days of new discovery and its nights of new dreams, before that one day when he was called out of the kitchen to come and be polite in the drawing-room.

He did not want to go in the very least, for he hated being polite, and he was quite happy in the kitchen with Polly, to whom he could talk just as

he liked, or with whom he could be silent when he liked, and who, at this time of his life, was his best and most faithful friend. For he had trained her up in the way she should go, and by this time she had learned that she was not to laugh at him when he made discoveries, and that she must not tell him wrong things when he asked straight questions, and that he was quite to be trusted in front of the kitchen fire, with the rolling pin, the flat iron (in its cold moods), the coffee grinder, the mangle, and other things which he preferred to his own toys because they were more real and more useful. When he was called from the kitchen on this day, he was just making a private loaf for himself out of a piece of dough left over from a rabbit pie, now baking in the oven, and he had just stuck the top on with a French nail (because it would keep wobbling off). It was therefore most annoying that he should be summoned to make himself tidy and go to shake hands with a visitor.

"It's absurd," said Nick, "I don't want to shake hands with the visitor, and I can't see why the visitor wants to shake hands with me."

"Oh, there are lots of things you can't see just yet," said Polly. "Do as you're told, is the motto for small boys. Blest if it ain't the motto for grown-ups, too. I have to do as I'm jolly well told, Master Nick."

"Yes, but you're a servant," said Nick. "You're

paid for it. I don't see why I should do as I'm told without being paid for it."

"You'll get paid if you don't, my poppet!" said Polly, and Nick knew that she meant just the opposite, which was a way she had.

So Nick rubbed the flour off his waistcoat with the kitchen table-cloth, squirted some water onto his hands from the tap in the sink, wiped them with a duster, smoothed down his hair with a boot-brush in the scullery—Polly was busy with a pudding—and presented himself in the drawing-room. That is to say, he opened the door very softly, got down upon his hands and knees, and crept under the gate-legged table, from which hiding place he could reconnoitre the visitor before making himself polite.

It was then for the first time that he saw the Beast.

He called him that instantly, in his own head, because there was something beast-like about the man who sat smiling at Beauty from the peacock arm-chair. He had a soft, pointed brown beard, and a fluffy brown mustache, which seemed very beastly to Nick, who was accustomed to men with bald faces, like Bristles, who cut the stubble off his chin every morning as soon as it began to sprout above the soil. He had brown eyes, which smiled and smiled, like a yellow tiger at the Zoo, and when he smiled and smiled he showed two rows of very sharp white teeth, just like the yellow tiger's teeth, though not

so big. And he wore a brown velvet coat, which, when Nick ever touched it, after this first meeting, made his blood run cold in a horrible way. He hated the Beast from the very first time he ever set eyes on him.

"Nick, dearest," said Beauty, "come and say how-do-you-do to Mr. Danvers."

"I will say it here," said Nick, and from beneath the table he said, very politely, "How-do-you-do?"

The Beast laughed. It was a quiet, oily laugh. But he spoke words which made Nick quite sure he hated him.

"I am afraid you have spoiled the boy, Mrs. Barton."

"Nothing could spoil him," said Beauty, and then clapped her hands. "Come out from the table, Nick."

But Nick did not budge. He made up his mind not to budge on any account for such a beastly kind of Beast.

"Do you hear me, Nick?"

But Nick put his fingers in his ears, so that he could not hear.

It was then that something happened, something inconceivable to Nick. His leg was grasped as in a vice by a long white hand. An enormous force was tugging at him. Though he clutched at the carpet, the great force was stronger than all his strength and with a sudden jerk he was lifted right out from

beneath the table, and set down on his legs in front of the smiling man with the soft brown beard.

"Small boys must not disobey their lady mothers," said the man, smiling so that he showed all his teeth again. "Now will you say how-do-you-do like a little gentleman?"

But Nick did not say how-do-you-do like a little gentleman. He looked at Beauty, whose eyes were rather troubled, and whose face had put on its flaming poppy-color. Then he looked at the bearded man, straight into his smiling eyes. The Something that lurked deep down in Nick's heart leaped up into his head, just as it had leaped up when he threw the scissors at Polly's face. But he did not throw anything at the visitor. There was nothing in his hands to throw. He just stared at him ever so quietly, and then said in a voice that seemed to rush out of his throat:

"You—Beast!"

Then he turned round and walked very slowly out of the room, while something went buzzing in his ears, so that he did not hear the bearded man's quiet laugh, nor Beauty's cry of anger.

The time came when Nick had to say "How-do-you-do" to Mr. Reginald Danvers (whom he only called the Beast in private, to Peter Rabbit, the Squirrel, the Red Engine, and the hassock with two ears, after his first public announcement of the name), several times a week. For Mr. Danvers came

to Beauty's flat, high up in the sky, on many afternoons a week, and when he did not come to the flat, he came somewhere else, wherever Beauty happened to be. He turned up in the most surprising places, and always so quietly and unexpectedly, that Nick believed he must carry a magic carpet about with him, so that he could wish himself in the right place. Sometimes he would turn up round about the Owl-house in Battersea Park, and if Beauty had gone there for a walk with Nick, which she never used to do before the coming of the Beast, and sometimes Nick would see his smile and his brown beard coming across the rustic bridge over the lake (above the big stones where the water rats bob in and out), and sometimes he would be sitting with his brown felt hat at the back of his head, smiling into the face of the sun, opposite the ducks' feeding place. He also seemed surprised to see Beauty, and always said the same thing:

"Now who would have thought of meeting you! What a stroke of luck!"

And he always patted Nick on the shoulder, and said, "Well, little man, and how are you?" but never waited for an answer, because he was in such a hurry to talk to Beauty.

Nick noticed that Beauty's face was sometimes like a flaming poppy when she met Danvers, and that afterward there was a queer shining light in her eyes, and that she forgot all about Nick himself

as long as Danvers was with her. Afterward, as though she was sorry for having forgotten him such a lot, she would hug him tight to her, and kiss him quite a number of times, and lean her forehead up against his face, as though to make sure she should not forget him again.

Danvers knew that Nick hated him, and Nick knew that he knew. But Danvers was always trying to make Nick like him, and Nick hated him for that worse than ever. He used to bring boxes of sweets out of the pockets of his velvet coat, and say: "Here's something for you, little man." And sometimes he would stop in front of a toy shop and wave his stick at the window and say: "Do you see anything you want, Nick, my lad?"

Of course there were heaps of things which Nick wanted, but when the Beast asked him he shook his head and said: "No, thanks," so that Danvers was surprised, and laughed with a bad sound in his throat. But he had to take the Rocking Horse. It was impossible not to take it, because it came in at the front door on the shoulders of a man who puffed and panted and said: "Them steps is the very devil," and dumped down the big parcel from which a tail stuck out at one end, and a horse's nose at the other.

"Goodness alive, what's this?" cried Polly.

Even Beauty came out of her bedroom in her dress-

ing-gown at the noise of the parcel being dumped in the hall.

"Why, it's a Rocking Horse!" said Beauty. "Whoever can have sent it?"

Polly solved the mystery by peering at a label tied to the horse's neck.

"To Nick, from Mr. Danvers."

"Oh, I see!" said Beauty, and she went back into her bedroom rather quickly.

"Oh, it's from the Beast!" said Nick. The words slipped out of his mouth before he could swallow them, but fortunately Polly didn't hear, as she was busy unwrapping the brown paper. Certainly it was a magnificent horse, with a bushy white tail and a curly white mane, and a laughing eye on each side of its head, and fiery nostrils to show that it had a proud spirit, and reins fastened on by gold-headed nails.

Nick gazed at it with reverence and admiration, but something seemed to stick in his throat like a fish-bone. He was quite silent while Polly showed her delight by a series of exclamations, such as: "Well, I never did!" "Upon my word!" and "Who would have thought it now?" Then suddenly she noticed Nick's lack of enthusiasm, and said:

"Eh, but don't you like it, Master Nick?"

"It's splendid," said Nick, "but somehow I haven't begun to love it yet."

He loved it tremendously by the time he went to

bed, but as he lay back on his pillow so that he could see Robin's white mane (he called it Robin because it had a red breast), like a cloud blown back by the wind, and one of his laughing eyes gleaming in the rays of the night light, he gave a deep sigh and said:

"I am sorry the Beast gave you to me, Robin dear. But I suppose it can't be helped."

Nick supposed it couldn't be helped that the Beast came such a lot to see Beauty. And he supposed also that it couldn't be helped that the Beast played the piano better than any one else in the world—though he *was* a Beast.

It was Beauty who said that he played better than any one else in the world, and Nick knew that she spoke the truth. Because sometimes when the Beast played, it seemed to Nick that his own soul had jumped clean out of his body and that it went on strange and wonderful adventures, farther into the mystery places than he had ever been before. There were great chords, like enormous thunder, as though the sky had burst and then there were thousands of little pattering notes like all the rain-drops in the sky chasing each other, and singing little songs to each other, and dancing round and round each other. And sometimes the Beast played so softly and so sweetly that it was like the voice of Beauty just before he went to sleep, humming a little tune to him full of mother love.

Beauty must have guessed that, for when the Beast played these tunes she sat very still, with a funny little smile round her lips, and her eyes like flowers with the dew in them. There were other tunes he played which seemed to frighten Beauty, for they made the color come ebbing into her face, and once she cried out sharply:

"Don't! That's wicked music!"

"Why wicked?" asked Danvers, twisting round on his music stool. "It is the music of the loving heart. Hark, how pleading it is, how passionate!"

At times he played so sadly that Nick seemed to hear a strange wailing, like that of lost boys crying to be found, and he knew that it was sad to Beauty too, for her eyelashes were wet, and she said:

"It is like the cry of a broken heart. I hate it when you play like that."

But he could play tunes which made Nick laugh in spite of himself, tunes full of jokes which he could not quite catch before they had gone, but which were enormously comical. And one afternoon, when he sat playing there, he twiddled a little in the treble notes, and turned his head round so that he could see into Beauty's eyes, and said through his soft beard, very softly:

"Dance to me!"

Beauty shook her head.

He played a few more twiddly notes in the treble,

and looked into Beauty's eyes again, and said once more:

"Dance to me!"

Beauty said: "I will not dance to you!" but Danvers suddenly struck a sharp chord, and then played a strange dance tune like a tip-toe dance, very light and swaying, and Nick, who was watching Beauty, saw the color rise from her throat into her face, and a queer glint of light come into her eyes, and though she still clasped the arms of the chair, she half rose from her seat.

"Dance to me!" said Danvers across his shoulder.

The dance tune seemed to have a spell in it, like one of the witch's spells in Grimm's Fairy Tales, and it caught hold of Beauty so that she unclasped her arms from the chair, and stood very straight, and then moved forward, swaying like the music swayed, with a queer, half-frightened smile on her face. Then she rose onto tip-toes, and to each little note her feet seemed to trip in little steps, and her arms, which were outstretched, shook a little and quivered to the tips of her fingers. Presently she took up her white skirt and danced more quickly, and her body writhed like a snake, and as the music changed, her face and body changed, and she became rather mad, and there was a strange light in her eyes, and she snapped her fingers with little clicks, like the crack of a whip, she plucked a rose from her hair, and put it to her lips and let it fall,

and as the music played on, she seemed to make love to the fallen rose, and swayed about it, bending to it, and then recoiling from it and shuddering back from it, as though it had changed into some ugly toad. All the time Danvers watched her over his shoulder with a smile half hidden by his soft beard, until at last he crashed out a final chord, and before the sound of it was silent Beauty half fell onto the sofa, with her face in her hands, weeping.

Danvers was frightened. He leaned over Beauty and said:

"Hush, little woman, it's all right. I am sorry it got into your blood like that."

"You bring out all my beastliness!" said Beauty.

Nick heard the words, and wondered at them, and cried because Beauty was crying. That made her sit up, and she said: "Nick! I forgot you were here. It's all right, mannikin. There's nothing the matter with Beauty."

She laughed quite loudly, and then seemed a little frightened again.

"Don't tell Bristles, Nick," she said. "Promise me you won't tell. Promise me, Nick."

"What does it matter?" said Danvers.

"Promise me, Nick."

She was down on her knees before him, clasping the boy with both hands.

Nick promised not to tell Bristles, but it was a promise which put a pain into his heart.

Why shouldn't he tell Bristles? Didn't Beauty belong to Bristles, and didn't Bristles belong to Beauty? Didn't they share each other's secrets? . . . He could not understand, but from that time he hated the Beast more than he had ever hated him.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL OF THE GROUND-FLOOR FLAT

Of course there were other people in the world which centred round Nicholas Barton besides those who inhabited or visited the small flat, high up in the sky, which looked down to the trees in Battersea Park.

As the days of the years of his life stole past so quietly that they seemed to walk on tip-toe, Nicholas came to know many people by sight, and many by heart. Because the flat which he used to call his "hole in the wall," until he knew the proper name for it, was in a most excellent position for learning all about the world on the sunny side of Battersea Park in the enormously long street where blocks of mansions had grown higher than the highest tree in front of them, so that the clouds almost touched the chimney-pots on their flat roofs.

There was an iron balcony outside Nick's flat, with iron railings through which, with a little squeezing, he could put his nose and both his eyes and about half his head, so that he could get a bird's-eye view of all the balconies below him, and each side of him, and of all the funny things which happened there. Lots of funny things happened, and

lots of funny people came through the windows on to their balconies, or out of the front doors into the street. This comedy of life began at about eight o'clock in the morning, when Nick and Bristles used to come out to get a breath of fresh air before breakfast. (That was an idea belonging to Bristles, who used to come on to the balcony, stare across the tree-tops in the Park, and take enormous gulps of air, as if he were drinking it.) Other people came on to their balconies. One of them was a young man in pink pyjamas, who seemed eager to know how tall his nasturtiums had grown in the night, and who used to talk to an invisible lady through the window while he examined his plants. Sometimes she became visible for a few moments, in a blue dressing-gown, and then would dart back again if she thought anybody were looking. After breakfast she would become visible in a linen dress, the color of light brown paper, so that she might kiss her hand to the young man (who had taken off his pyjamas and put on black clothes and a chimney-pot hat) as he came out into the street in a tearing hurry. Nick noticed that for some weeks the lady was altogether invisible and the young man never turned back in his tearing hurry to look up at her balcony. But she became visible again a little while after the morning when the young man found a bald-headed baby in one of his flower-pots. At least,

Bristles thought he must have found it there, and said he was a lucky beggar, and he had half a mind to grow nasturtiums himself. After that the young man and the bald-headed baby were always having jokes together, and Nick used to listen to all the chuckling and gurgling and crowing and laughing which used to come up from that balcony.

He also knew the Giant with the wee wife (that was what Bristles called them) who lived in the balcony next but one. The Giant was so big, and wore such a big-brimmed hat and such a big cloak over his big clothes that he seemed to fill up the whole balcony when he sat there in a cane chair—with the wee wife quite hidden by him—writing tremendous long letters to some one Nick did not know. He was always writing these long, long letters, and he seemed to make jokes in them, for sometimes he would stop and laugh loudly, with a Giant's laugh, and then dash over the paper with a fat pencil, as though to catch up to another joke. Every morning at ten o'clock a hansom cab came below the balcony with jingling bells, and the Giant would come out into the street with his wee wife walking behind him, and get into the cab first, because (as Bristles said), if he had got in second, his wee wife would have had her wee life squashed out of her. The old, old cab-horse—he was at least a hundred years old—used to stagger in the shafts, and the cab would rock backward—as though an earthquake

had happened, and the old, old cabman—he was at least a hundred and twenty years old—used to shout "Gee-up!" And so the Giant and his wee wife would drive off to one of the mystery places.

Then there were all the mothers of all the bald-headed babies who had been found in the flower-pots on the balconies, and all the nurses bought by the mothers to look after the bald-headed babies, and all the fathers who looked after the mothers who had bought the nurses who looked after the bald-headed babies. They used to come out on to the balconies, dancing the babies up and down when the piano-organs played in the street, and they used to make a great fuss round the perambulators when the bald-headed babies used to go out to say good morning to the ducks in the Park, and the mother of each baby used to say exactly the same things to the nurses who wheeled each perambulator. Nick knew exactly what the mothers would say, even before they had said it. First they would say: "Isn't he a precious sweet?" Then they would say: "Do you think he is warm enough?" and thirdly they would say: "Oh, the beautiful darling, I could eat him, I could!"

But it was an extraordinary thing, thought Nick, that no one seemed to find more than one baby in a flower-pot. There was one balcony to each flat, and one baby to each balcony. He consulted Bristles on the subject, and Bristles, after puffing at his

pipe, said he supposed it was because the flower-pots were not large enough, or because babies preferred houses to flats, which seemed true, for Nick knew houses on the other side of the Park where the mothers had two nurses and two perambulators, and sometimes two babies in each perambulator. He wished sometimes that Bristles and Beauty would go to live in a house, because, though he had never actually spoken to a bald-headed baby, he thought it would be rather fun to have a few about him, so that he could have jokes with them. When he got tired of them, he could shut them up in a cupboard with his other toys.

It was on the balcony that some hints of the mysteries and wonders and thrill of life came into the soul of Nicholas Barton, as he sat there on sunny days with Peter Rabbit in a chair which he had made for him out of a cardboard box, and with Bristles, who was smoking his pipe, and reading his paper, and staring away over the tree-tops. For up to the high balcony came the music of life, made up of hundreds of sounds all joining into one tune —the rattling notes of a distant piano-organ, the faint, far-off chorus of the birds in Battersea Park, the laughter of the mothers on the balconies, the jingle of cab-bells, the hooting of the steamers on the river, the song sung in a high voice by the girl in the second floor flat, the scales played on many pianos through many open windows, the strange

melancholy cry of the sweep, who asked the world to "'weep! 'weep!"—the cheerful cry of "Milk-oo" to the rattle of tin cans, the shouts of the boys rowing to the magic islands on the lake.

Listening to all this, and looking down upon the little people who passed in the street, far below, Nick felt like God—at least he felt that he felt like God—gazing down upon the world from this flat in Heaven, very interested in all the goings-on down there, and wondering why the people did the things they did, and curious to know more about them.

Nick wanted to know much more about them, and he asked Bristles to tell him some of the millions of things he wanted to know.

"Why do all the men go away from home when the sun has nearly eaten up the mist and then come home when the shadows climb down from the trees?"

To which question Bristles made answer:

"Because they have to earn money to pay for the pretty hats of their lady wives, and for the new clothes of their bald-headed babies, and for all the things which have to be bought and paid for."

"How do they earn the money?" asked Nick.

To which Bristles replied, between the puffs of his pipe:

"By doing all sorts of jobs which have to be done."

"What kind of jobs?"

"Writing books for people who are too lazy to think, adding up figures for people who have so much money that they can't count it all themselves, examining fleas through microscopes and counting the little fleas on the backs of the big fleas, inventing news for the newspapers, pretending that criminals are innocent men, and that innocent men are criminals—and all sorts of useful jobs like that."

"I see," said Nicholas, though he did not see quite clearly. After thinking the matter out for some time, he searched about for some new discoveries.

"Why do the men work so hard for nothing at all?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, what do they get for themselves after they have given all their money for the things that have to be bought and paid for?"

Bristles shifted in his seat, and rubbed his nose with the bowl of his pipe, so that it shone with a bright new polish.

"Well, they get some 'baccy to smoke, and enough to eat and drink, and a bald-headed baby or two to play about with, and some nasturtiums in the balcony, and—and—I'm blest if I can think of anything else."

"I think they're asses," said Nick. "They ought to get more for their money."

Bristles laughed at the reflection of his own face in the bowl of the pipe.

"I am not so sure," he said. "You see, Nick, a fellow must work or else he gets awfully tired with himself. And it's not the money he gets so much as the fun he gets in trying to get the money. See?"

"I think I see," said Nick. "It's like when I try ever so hard to build up a house of cards, and then, when it is built, all the fun dies and I kick down the house."

"Exactly!" said Bristles. "That's just like real life, except that it is generally somebody else who kicks down the card house. The best man is the one who keeps on building them up again, enjoying the fun every time. That's what's called an Optimist."

"Are you an Optimist?" asked Nick.

Bristles rubbed his bristly jaw. The little hairs were beginning to sprout up again, although he had only cut them down before breakfast.

"I used to be," he said, at last, puffing out a long coil of smoke, "but I think I'm changing into a Pessimist."

"What's that?"

"Why, a fellow that is always afraid his house of cards is going to tumble down."

"Oh!" said Nick, very quickly. "That's rotten. You can't build any house like that. I know, be-

cause I sometimes feel like that on bad days, and then every card goes wrong."

"Quite true, old man," said Bristles. "It's bad to feel like that."

He gave a tremendous sigh, as though it made him feel very bad, and then for quite a long time he stared away over the tree-tops, as if he were looking for something in the far distance, while Nick sat watching him, and wondering if he could do anything to make his father an Optimist again.

It was on this morning that Nick made three of his really big discoveries.

After Bristles had given up looking for the something in the far distance and had brought his eyes back to the balcony again, Nick had another question to ask.

"What do *you* do to earn the money for the things that have to be bought and paid for?"

And Bristles said:

"I add up figures for the people who have so much money that they can't count it all themselves. It's what they call being Something in the City."

"I see," said Nick. "It's a funny thing I haven't asked you that before. The idea never jumped into my head."

"Well, now you know," said Bristles.

"Yes—now I know why you are so frightfully rich. I suppose you get all the money that the people who can't count don't know they have."

Bristles laughed as though he had become an Optimist again.

"My dear old man, what makes you think I'm frightfully rich?"

"Because you pay for Beauty and me and Polly and all the other things that cost such a lot."

"Beauty pays for herself, worse luck," said Bristles. "And I am as poor as a church mouse—worse luck, also."

"Not really as poor as a church mouse?" asked Nick with a great anxiety, for he somehow felt that a Church Mouse must be frightfully poor.

"Really and truly," said Bristles.

"That's rotten," said Nick.

That was all he said, but he thought about it a lot, and he knew that he had made three terribly big discoveries. One was that Beauty paid for herself. He did not know before then that any kind of Beauty ever paid for herself. And the second was that Bristles was Something in the City. That sounded absolutely awful. And the third was that he was as poor as a church mouse, which was worst of all.

These discoveries made all sorts of queer little ideas jump into his head, and they did not jump out again like some of his ideas, but grew into big ideas which took up a lot of room, so that sometimes they made his head ache.

But for some reason which he could not explain

to himself he never spoke about these discoveries to the girl of the ground-floor flat, and that was funny, because he used to tell her about nearly all the discoveries which he made from time to time. She had a lot of her own discoveries, and they used to exchange them with each other, just as they exchanged their fairy-tale books, and some of the toys they had got tired of, and some of the sweets which came to them on birthdays and holidays. This was Joan Darracott, who hadn't got a balcony, because she lived next to the street, but who had a front garden in which she planted seeds which never grew up.

Joan was a girl with a short white frock and long black legs and yellow hair like a wax doll's, which was tied up over each ear by a white silk bow. Nick had known her a long time by sight, before he knew her by heart, because she was the girl who always picked up the things which he dropped down from the balcony into her garden, and never gave them back again. He dropped down a big ball with a picture of Westminster Abbey on one side and with a picture of the Tower of London on the other side, and among other things he dropped down were his second best pistol, his biggest marble with the colored snake inside, and his mouth-organ. Joan picked these things up as though they had fallen from Heaven—and indeed they had fallen almost as far—and he actually heard her playing the mouth-

organ in her front garden one day, just as if it belonged to her, although she couldn't get any kind of tune out of it, but just blew up and down in a silly sort of way.

This was a bit too much for Nicholas Barton. He happened to be passing the railings of the ground-floor flat, and he put his nose between them, and said:

"Hi! That's *my* mouth-organ!"

The girl with the short white frock and the long black legs stopped blowing, looked round to see where the voice came from, and then said, very calmly:

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is," said Nick.

"No, it isn't," said Joan.

"Yes, it is," said Nick.

This went on for some time, until they both got tired of saying the same thing. Then the girl said, by way of a change:

"I found it in my garden, and what I find in my garden is mine. See?"

"No, I don't," said Nick. "If you'll hand that mouth-organ through the railings I will prove it's mine."

"How will you prove it?"

"By playing a tune on it."

"Pooh! *You* can't play a tune," said the girl.

"Can't I?" said Nick. "That's all you know about it."

The girl put the mouth-organ through the railings.

"It's my mouth-organ, but I will let you play one tune on it, if you know how."

Nick seized the mouth-organ, and after taking a good deep breath to last him a long time, played:

> Here we go looby-loo,
> Here we go looby-light,
> Here we go looby-loo,
> All on a Saturday night.

He finished with a triumphant note, put the mouth-organ in his pocket, said: "Now you know it is mine!" and walked away.

But he stopped suddenly because his blood was frozen in his veins by the sound of a piercing scream. It came from the girl with the short white frock and long black legs.

"What's the matter?" asked Nick, going back to the railings.

Two hands were suddenly thrust between the railings, and clutched hold of him so that he couldn't escape.

"Give it back!" screamed the girl. "Give me my mouth-organ."

"It's my mouth-organ!" gasped Nick. "I proved it to you."

"If you don't give it back I'll scream till your ears break," said the girl.

Then she started screaming so that Nick was quite sure his ears would break. He simply couldn't bear it, so he shouted as loudly as he could:

"If you will let go of my arms, I will give it to you."

She stopped screaming instantly, and waited while Nick dived down into his pocket, wrenched out his beautiful mouth-organ, and handed it through the railings, where it was grabbed by the girl.

"Sneak!" said Nick, and with that word of scorn he walked away. But he hadn't gone two yards before he heard a voice calling "Boy! boy!" He went back again, and saw the girl's eyes through the railings.

"What do you want?" asked Nick.

"Here's your silly old mouth-organ. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

Nick took the precious instrument and walked away with it, but somehow the tunes seemed to have gone out of it for a little while. He sat down in his own room upstairs, and had a long talk with Peter Rabbit.

"Peter," he said, "are all girls like that? Do they scream for things they don't want, and then give them back again to the people the things belong to?"

Peter was silent, but Nick took his answer for granted.

"Well, all I can say is that girls must be awfully rotten," said Nick.

And yet the curious thing is that, although Nick came to this opinion about girlhood in general and the girl of the ground-floor flat in particular, he found himself longing to have further conversation with that remarkable young lady. The opportunity came one day when he had gone quite alone into Battersea Park—he was old enough now to go alone—in order to have a few words with the old owls, to pass the time of day with the squirrel, in case he had come out from the back parlor of his cage, to throw a pebble at the water rats under the rustic bridge, and to stand under the big tree which stretched its arms down to catch small boys, or at least one small boy who had tremendous thrills, although he knew the tree could not stretch low enough to reach him.

It was down the path close to this tree that the girl of the ground-floor flat came with a big dog, a fair-sized nurse, and a very little sunshade, which she spun like a teetotum over her shoulder. She stopped spinning the parasol when she saw Nick, and said, with a friendly grin:

"Hulloh, boy?"

"Hulloh!" said Nick.

The nurse said: "Come on, Miss Joan," and

moved on with her nose in a novelette which she was reading as she walked.

But Miss Joan did not come on.

She said to Nick: "I bet I'll race you to the other end of the grass. One, two, three, and away!"

She was away before she got as far as two, which was not quite fair, and she won the race easily, because she had a start of at least five yards, so that Nick came up panting and humiliated.

"You cheated," he said.

The girl of the ground-floor flat laughed, and flung her sunshade on to the grass, and sat down next to the sunshade, with her short white skirt spread all round her and her long black legs sticking out, while her big dog, which had joined in the race, rushed round five trees and then came to lie down by the side of his mistress, grimacing happily with his tongue lolling out.

"You cheated," said Nick again.

"Did I?" said the girl. "Well, father says girls always cheat, so I suppose I can't help it."

"It's rotten to cheat," said Nick. "Boys don't cheat."

"Don't they?" said the girl. "I suppose they're not clever enough. They're frightfully stupid things, boys."

"How do you know?" asked Nick.

The little girl lay back on the grass and stared up at the sky.

"It was one of my discoveries," said the girl, kicking her heels up and down.

Nick was startled.

"Do you make discoveries too?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm always making them. Father says he doesn't know how I find out half the things I do."

"Do you mind telling me some of your discoveries?" said Nick, sitting down on the grass, with his knees tucked up to his chin, and his hands clasped round his knees, while he stared at the girl kicking her heels up and down.

She did not mind telling him in the least. But she said she could only tell him a few, until nurse finished her novelette on the seat over there and then came to say: "Whatever *have* you been doing, Miss Joan? I've been looking for you everywhere, and I shall tell your mamma what a naughty little girl you've been."

"But that would be an awful whopper!" said Nick. "Does she generally tell whoppers?"

"Always," said the little girl. "That was one of my discoveries."

Among her other discoveries were the following remarkable facts:

That grown-up people are always deceiving small boys and girls;

That grown-up people think small boys and girls don't know they are being deceived;

That small boys and girls don't let the grown-

up people know that they know they are being deceived;

That grown-up people are always telling boys and girls to do things which they wouldn't do themselves.

"What sort of things?" asked Nick.

"Oh, being obedient, and saying you're sorry when you're not sorry, and glad when you're not glad, and eating puddings you hate, and going to bed at the proper time like a good girl, and learning lessons which you don't want to learn, and heaps and hundreds of other things which make you want to scream the house down."

"Do you ever try to scream the house down?" asked Nick.

"Oh, often."

"Well, I hope you won't," said Nick, anxiously. "Because I live in the top-floor flat, you know."

Joan Darracott considered this idea in all its bearings.

"Yes," she said, "you would come down an awful whop, wouldn't you?"

That was about the end of the first conversation, for the nurse, having finished the novelette, came over and said exactly the things Joan said she would say. But afterwards Nick often met Joan in Battersea Park, and whenever Nick had any sweets in his pocket Joan took more than half of them, and whenever Joan had any sweets in her pocket she gave

him one or two as a great favor, and said he ought to be very grateful to her. If he had a new toy she "swapped" it for something he didn't want, so that he hated her for making him "swap" (which was a word he didn't know before), but became her victim again the very next time.

He couldn't make up his mind whether he hated her most or liked her most, because sometimes he hated her so much that he wanted to kill her, and sometimes he liked her so much that he was afraid of liking her more even than Beauty, and more than Peter Rabbit, and more than Robin the Rocking Horse.

He liked her most when she played games of hide-and-seek with him in and out of the trees, crying "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" in a voice like the top-notes of his mouth-organ, and then darting from behind a tree, with her yellow hair glittering like gold, and her eyes like dancing stars, and her white frock like a puff of white smoke.

And he liked her when she sat down under a tree with him, with her head against his shoulder, and her arm round his waist, telling him queer dream-tales about cats with pink eyes, and princesses with glass slippers, and flowers that came out of the flower-beds at night and danced until the sun got up. And he liked her when she told him about a man called Daddy, who wrote books which nobody would ever read, because they were much too good,

and about a lady called Mumsy, who said that she wished she had married a man who sold butter instead of books, because everybody wanted butter but nobody wanted books; and about a man called Uncle Jack, who said the country was going to the dogs (Joan could never find out why), and about a lady called Aunt Sarah, who said the Radicals were perfect devils (though Joan had never met a Radical and didn't know what it looked like), and about all the other people who came to the ground-floor flat.

But Nick hated her when Joan cheated him at marbles, broke his humming top and said it was his fault, and scratched his face because he had given her a new silver sixpence (the whole of his week's pocket money), which she dropped over the rustic bridge into the place where the water-rats lived.

After dropping the silver sixpence she dropped several tears, which fell into the water and made tiny ripples, and when Nick said: "Never mind, Joan," she turned round and scratched his face, and said: "It was *my* sixpence and I do mind—so there!"

But he hated her most of all when she told him of one of her discoveries.

"My mother says that your mother—the one you call Beauty—is a fast creature, and that there'll be a scandal one of these fine days."

"What's a scandal?" asked Nick, getting very white in the face.

"I don't exactly know," said Joan. "Something frightful, I expect."

"And what's a fast creature?" asked Nick, breathing very hard.

"A creature that is fast," said Joan in her wisest way. "Wound up too much, like a fast clock."

Nick knew that the Something which had a hiding-place deep down in his heart was tearing its way up, stretching out great claws into his brain, setting his eyes on fire.

He made one grab at Joan Darracott and took out a handful of her yellow hair. He still held it as he set off running to the Park gates, while Joan Darracott's screams were blown faintly to his ears by the pursuing wind.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF THE BEAST

It was about the time that Nicholas Barton took forcible possession of some of Joan Darracott's golden curls that he became aware of a secret between himself and Bristles. He discovered that Bristles hated the Beast as much as he did, and perhaps a little bit more.

This idea jumped into his head suddenly one day, and afterward grew into certain knowledge. It came to him first on a Saturday afternoon when Bristles came home early, as usual, took off his black coat and chimney-pot hat, put on an old grey coat and a pepper-and-salt cap, and said:

"Now, Nick, old man, let's go and feed the ducks."

To Polly he said:

"When will the mistress be home?"

(He always called Beauty "the mistress.")

And Polly said:

"Not till late, as she's got one of her rehearsals, poor dear!"

Nicholas had never yet found out what a rehearsal was, but he knew it was something horrid, because Beauty was always in a bad temper when she had to go to one, and Bristles always said "Hang the

rehearsals!" and Polly always said, "Poor dear!" when Beauty came home with a rehearsal-headache.

But this afternoon he did not think much about the matter, because he had been saving a number of crusts of bread all the week for this very Saturday afternoon when Bristles would come home and say:

"Now, Nick, old man, let's go and feed the ducks."

So he had a nice, warm, happy feeling under his jersey when he set off with Bristles and the bag of crusts, and thought of the tremendous quacking there would be, and the exciting chases and fights as soon as he began to throw the bread into the water.

It all happened as he had hoped it would, and Nick shouted with laughter, and Bristles chuckled with laughter, and other small boys laughed and shouted, and other fathers chuckled, when he flung crusts into the struggling crowd of ducks who gobbled them up as fast as he could throw. He knew most of them by sight and by name. There was old Yellow-bill, the greediest of them all, and little Black-eye, the next greediest, and Green-tail, the Japanese duck, and Bob-tail, the fellow who was always fighting. It was Bob-tail who made the biggest noise and who scurried across the water with flapping wings and paddling feet in hot chase of any rival to whom Nick had flung a crust.

The fun came to an end too quickly, and a store

of crusts which had taken a week to save were all gone in five minutes.

"What shall we do now?" said Nick, with that desire for adventure which sometimes made him tired of his old friends, like the Squirrel and the sleepy owls.

Bristles put his cap back, so that the sun was warm on his face, and he stared at the lake which was like a big looking-glass reflecting the little white clouds and the blue sky.

"How about a boat?" said Bristles. "We might go in search of the New World."

Nick did a double-shuffle on the pathway.

"Oh, rather! I will be Sir Francis Drake, and you can be Admiral Nelson. Only, you must pretend to have only one eye and one arm."

Bristles suggested that as he would have to row he had better be Sir Francis Drake, with two arms, while Nick might be Admiral Nelson, except when he steered under the bridge, when he would want both his arms and very sharp eyes. After some discussion this was agreed, and in a boat called the *Oak-apple,* which was a little leaky at the bottom, they set out in search of the New World. They had many adventures including hair-breadth escapes from Red Indians in other boats, and a providential escape from shipwreck when Nick, who was looking out for wild tigers on the distant shore, steered the boat into some floating timber. But then they

sighted the coast of America, and Bristles pulled steadily toward some over-hanging trees by the low-lying bank.

But suddenly he stopped rowing and rested on his oars, and Nick saw that his father had a queer expression on his face as he stared toward the trees, as though he saw some hideous cannibals or the one-eyed giant who hurled stones at Ulysses and his men.

"What's the matter?" asked Nick, with that sudden sense of fear which came to him sometimes when Bristles played the game as if it were really real. He looked toward the overhanging tree at which Bristles was staring, and then gave a shout of surprise.

"There's Beauty!—Beauty!"

Beauty was lying at full length in a boat in the little shadow-world under the overhanging tree, with her head propped up on a scarlet cushion, while at the other end of the boat Danvers sat with the rudder-strings in his hands and with his elbows on his knees, and his head drooped forward a little as he smiled down at Beauty. But they did not stay in this position after Nick's shout rang out over the water. Danvers turned his head sharply, and then sat up very straight, and Beauty raised her head from the pillow and then scrambled up like a big white bird startled from its nest. Nick knew that his voice had frightened her, and was sorry for

having shouted so suddenly. She had a very scared look in her eyes. But only for a moment. Then she waved her hand, and called out, "Hulloh" and laughed so that the sound of her laughter seemed to ripple over the water. Danvers also waved his hand in a friendly way, but Nick pretended not to see that.

"Let's row under the tree," said Nick. "I expect Beauty wants to talk to us."

But Bristles, who still had a queer look on his face, plunged his oar into the water and pulled the boat round, and then rowed in the opposite direction; and above the squeak of the rowlocks as the oars went to and fro, Nick heard Bristles say something about "that beast Danvers" between his clenched teeth. He was not a bit playful for the rest of the afternoon, and forgot all about discovering the New World. But Nick had made another discovery. He knew now that Bristles hated the Beast.

He knew it for certain that afternoon, when Beauty came home alone, with her hair untidy, after the wind had been playing with it, and with a queer little smile about her lips when she put her face up for Bristles to kiss.

But Bristles did not kiss her. He wrinkled his forehead in the way he used to do when Nick was in one of his bad moods, and pretended to be busy with his pipe.

"I thought you had got a rehearsal this afternoon," he said very quietly. "Didn't you tell me so?"

"Did I?" said Beauty.

"I suppose it was a lie," said Bristles, and then he said in such a quiet voice that he seemed to be speaking with his teeth shut, "like so many other things you have told me lately."

Nick was listening hard, and his eyes were watching the faces of Beauty and Bristles, because he knew that, in spite of their quiet way of speaking, the queer Something which is in people's hearts was trying to get up to their throats. He knew that because Beauty's face went very white all of a sudden, and because two sparks seemed to light up in her eyes, and because the wrinkles which Bristles put on to his forehead were so deep that they looked like the claws of a bird.

"Don't bully me in front of the boy," said Beauty, "because I won't stand it. See?"

"I am not going to bully you at all," said Bristles, striking a match, but forgetting to light his pipe. "All I want to know is why you told me you had a rehearsal when you had arranged to go in a boat with that beast Danvers. Perhaps you will give me a straight answer to a straight question, Beauty?"

Nick believed that Bristles was very angry until he said that word "Beauty." Then his voice seemed

to soften, as though he was sorry for being angry, and wanted to be kind again.

But Beauty "flared up," as Polly used to say when Nick suddenly jumped into a rage. She threw her hat down on the sofa, and began to tear off her white gloves.

"Don't put on your 'hanging judge' manner," she said. "I earn my own living, and I have a right to my own friends, and I decline to be cross-questioned as though I were a criminal in the dock. See?"

She always spoke that little word "see" with a sudden lift of the voice, like one of the treble notes in the piano. Nick knew that when she did that she generally cried afterward, as though it had hurt her.

Bristles struck another match, and forgot to light his pipe again.

"Look here," he said, "I tell you once for all, Beauty, that I forbid you to have anything more to do with that man Danvers. I dislike both his manners and his morals, and if he comes inside this flat I shall kick him out again. Do you understand?"

Beauty did not seem to understand. She just gave a queer little laugh, though Nick noticed that her nostrils quivered, and that the sparks in her eyes lighted up again.

"I am afraid I don't understand that word 'forbid,'" said Beauty. "It always seemed to me a very

foolish word to be used by any man to any wife. It is perfectly absurd from you to me, my dear old Bristly Bristles. Perfectly absurd!"

Then she told Nick to go and play in the kitchen with Polly, but outside the door Nick stood and listened for a little while, not hearing any words, but hearing the voices of Beauty and Bristles speaking quietly in a kind of duet, low notes and high notes clashing together. Nick was not very old, and not very big, but at that moment there was revealed to him something of the conflict of hearts, something of the great mystery of human passion, something of the tragedy of love. There were the two people whom he loved best in the world, but he could only stand outside the door and listen to the quarrel of their voices. He did not go into the kitchen to play with Polly, but crept away to ask queer questions of Peter Rabbit. He stayed in his room until the light went out from the window panes, and the room was shadow-haunted—until Beauty's voice called to him: "Where are you, Nick?" and until she came to search for him, wondering at his sitting there so still in the twilight. When she turned on the electric light he saw that her lashes were wet and shining, and that the splash of a tear was still on her cheek. Nick ran to her, and kissed her hands, feeling frightfully sorry because he and Bristles had to hate the Beast so much.

For a long time after this Nicholas did not see the man Danvers. He never came to the flat again, perhaps because he had heard that Bristles wanted to kick him downstairs—and there were ever so many stairs from the top-floor flat to the ground-floor flat—so that Nicholas only kept the memory of him in one of the back cupboards of his mind.

Nick had a lot of other things to think about now—tremendously exciting things, such as learning the difference between the letters of the alphabet, each one of which seemed to him like a person with a different character—the O was a fat, smiling fellow, the T was always holding his arms out to catch the letters on either side, the B was a little man with a big paunch, the I was a lean and lanky creature—and then fitting them together so that they made the words which Nick had used as long as he could remember, and then making sentences which seemed to have secret meanings, as though they were hiding something behind the things they said, like "The cat sat on the mat," "The boy had a big toy," "The fat cat sat on the big toy of the boy." Here was a domestic drama which seemed like the beginning of a fairy tale, but which left Nick puzzled as to the end of it. Then he learned about the bigness of the world on colored maps, and traced out long journeys from Battersea Park to Buenos Ayres, and from the river Thames to the West Indies, and he learned to make baskets with

colored straws and mats with colored papers, which he brought home as presents for Beauty and Bristles.

All these things he learned at a wonderful place called a Kindergarten, which he hated with a deadly hatred for the first week, until he liked it better than any other place, except his own top-floor flat. He went to the kindergarten every morning with Joan Darracott, the girl on the ground-floor flat, who was nearly always late in starting, because she had had a quarrel with her boots, or because she had got out of bed the wrong way, or because she had refused to eat her porridge. But she made up for her lateness by running races to the kindergarten with Nick, across the park, and always beating him, because of the long black legs which hardly touched the ground when she ran.

She had forgotten all about the way in which he had pulled out some of her golden hair, and she did not scratch his face again, but once in the kindergarten she stuck a pin into his arm because he would not let her copy his spelling from dictation, and when he gave a yell he had to stand in the corner with his face to the wall, because Miss Felicity Smith said that he must learn how to behave himself. Joan also brought him into disgrace by throwing his spelling book into a puddle in the park, because he said she was ridiculous to get out of bed the wrong way, and he was smacked on the hand

six times with the flat of a ruler because she drew a picture of Miss Felicity Smith on his copy book, and made it so ugly—it was like a turnip face with a very large mouth and very large teeth—that it was no wonder Miss Felicity was angry.

"Why didn't you say I had done it?" asked Joan Darracott in a whisper, when he returned to his desk, very red in the face, and very hot in the heart.

"Why didn't *you* say?" asked Nick.

"Because I should have been smacked with the ruler," said Joan Darracott.

"Well, it was your fault," said Nick. "I shall tell on you next time."

"If you do," said Joan, "I will put my finger into your ink-pot and smudge it all over your face. Besides, you won't tell on me. Boys never tell on girls."

"Why not?"

"Because they're not supposed to."

Nick could not argue against that. He knew it was true. He knew that although boys and girls sat together in the kindergarten, and did the same lessons, and played the same games, there was always a difference between them. The boys always got the worst of it, because the girls were let off mistakes for which the boys were kept in, and because the girls could be as rough as they liked with the boys, but the boys must never be rough with the girls.

"Ladies first!" said Miss Felicity Smith, when the class went out into the playground, and the boys had to stand on one side while the ladies, with their noses perked up, marched past them.

"Manners, please!" said Miss Felicity Smith, when one of the boys pulled a girl's hair because she had pinched him when he wasn't looking.

"Young gentlemen should always be polite to young ladies," said Miss Felicity Smith when one of the young ladies said that one of the young gentlemen had called her a "silly kid." She forgot to say that she had first called the young gentleman a "dirty toad."

Nick sometimes wondered at these unfair rules of life. But after a time he gave up wondering about it, and accepted it as a natural and inevitable thing. Or, as he put it, "it couldn't be helped," like a lot of other little things, such as Joan's uncertainty of temper, and her cocky ways with him. She was frightfully cocky with him when she came out into the Park with her best clothes on, and passed him with a "Good morning, boy," as though he were a ragamuffin. And she was still more cocky with him when she won the prize for history, though he had told her all about William the Conqueror and William Rufus and Stephen the very day before the questions had been asked, when she knew nothing about it at all, because she had used that part of her history book to make paper boats.

"I don't think you ought to have got the prize," said Nick. "I knew much more than you did. Only you always put your hand up as if you knew everything."

"My father and mother are very proud of me," said Joan. "They think I am a very clever little girl."

"But you're not," said Nick.

"Oh, yes, I am!" said Joan.

"You're only a girl!" said Nick.

"And you're only a boy!" said Joan.

This brought them to a deadlock, and they were both silent for a little while, wondering what might be the next step in this argument. It was Joan who gained the victory by a brilliant stroke.

"I will let you turn over the leaves of my prize book if you get your nurse to wash your hands well."

She knew that would crush him. It was a smashing blow, because Nick's hands were always grubby, and hers were always lily-white.

Nick put his hands in his pockets, and went away trying to whistle a pleasant tune. But his whistle dried up, and his lips were trembling. There was a terrible hate in his heart for Joan Darracott when he heard her cocky laugh behind him. And yet the hate did not last very long, for among all the girls at the kindergarten Joan suited him best. She had her good days, when she was very kind and nice,

when they went on their way to school with arms about each other's waists, and when they made promises to be friends forever and ever, because they liked the same kind of jokes, and exchanged each other's fairy-tales, and made the same discoveries about the queer habits of grown-up people.

He found Joan's friendship very useful and necessary to him when Beauty went away on tour. That was a few days after his reminder of the Beast.

The reminder came in a queer way. Beauty had been "resting" for some time. That is to say, she did not go to the theatre, and used to stay in bed longer in the mornings and read a great many more novels with lovely ladies on the covers. That left her free in the afternoons and evenings, so that she could play more with Nick and quarrel more with Bristles, in her teasing way. Nick was glad that Beauty was resting, for on Wednesday afternoons, when he had a half holiday from the kindergarten, she used to take him on what she called a "jaunt," which meant that they would go to the Zoo together, where Beauty made faces at the monkeys and gave little squeals of laughter at them, and pointed out monkeys which reminded her of various friends; or they would go to a big shop where Beauty bought things which she did not want when they were sent home, and where they had tea together to the tune of a string band, and where they watched a lot of ladies exactly like those on the covers of Beauty's

novels; or they would go to other people's houses, where Nick had to sit very still and quiet while Beauty and the other people talked about things which seemed to amuse them a great deal, because they always laughed and made a great noise while they all talked at the same time, so that he had to laugh too, although he was never quite sure of the joke.

It was on one of these jaunts that they met the man Danvers, commonly called the Beast, whom Nick had not seen for a very long time.

He was driving along the road in a hansom cab —it was somewhere near the big shop where they had musical teas—and when he saw Beauty he put up his umbrella so that the cabman jerked up his reins, and the cab-horse sprawled out its feet, and the cab came to a standstill quite close to Beauty and Nick.

"Well met!" said the Beast, jumping out of the cab and taking off his hat to Beauty. He did not pay the slightest attention to Nick.

When Beauty shook hands with him she laughed, as if it were rather funny, and her face put on its flaming poppy-color.

"I was dashing home to get some tea before dashing off again to a concert. Come home with me and pour out the tea."

"I don't think I had better," said Beauty, and

she glanced down at Nick, as though he might be in the way.

"Oh, that's all right," said Danvers, carelessly. "I will keep the boy amused."

Beauty whispered a word or two which Nick did not hear, but then Danvers said, rather impatiently:

"Surely you are not the man's slave, are you? Don't come if you don't want to."

"I do want to," said Beauty. "I am ready for any kind of adventure this afternoon—any old thing to break the monotony."

"Splendid!" said Danvers, and he raised his umbrella again, so that a hansom cab which had been crawling along by the curb-stone drew up with a clatter of hoofs.

Nick sat on Beauty's lap in the cab, and Danvers sat rather close to Beauty, and tried to hold her hand, although she did not want him to hold it, and slapped his hand quite hard when he would not keep it to himself. This game, which Nick did not like, lasted until the cab stopped before a tall white house with steps leading up to a red front door. Danvers opened the door with a tiny latch-key, and making a very low bow to Beauty, said: "Welcome home, my dear!"

For a moment she stood on the doorstep, as though hesitating to go in. Nick felt her clutching his hand very tightly, as though holding on to him for safety from something. He was quite sure she

was afraid of something, just like he used to be when he opened the door of his toy-cupboard in the dark, in case Something might jump out at him. However, in another moment or two she went into the hall and laughed, as though laughing at her own fears, and then sang the first line of a nursery rhyme which Nick knew quite well.

"Will you come into my parlor?" said the Spider to the Fly.

Danvers sang the next line, as he shut the front door:

"It's the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy!"

Then he led the way into his parlor, which was not a little one, but a big room with panels of wood round the walls, and a ceiling painted all over with cupids and roses, and a long window divided into little square panes. Nick's roving eyes saw that the room was furnished with a round table with a polished top on which was a big vase full of roses, like those painted on the ceiling, and with a short piano, which opened on top like a big box, and with glass cases full of tall books bound in red leather. There was also a tall pedestal with an undressed lady on top, and several big pictures in gold frames of ladies who wore very few clothes, and who sat, looking rather cold, in gardens like Battersea Park.

"This is my den," said Danvers. "How do you like it?"

"Charming," said Beauty. "But I don't see why you want such a big den all to yourself."

'I don't want it all to myself," said Danvers, "but I can't get anybody to share it with me. Perhaps one of these days I may get a companion to decorate the room."

He stood looking at Beauty and smiling, with his hands in his pockets.

"Anyhow, it is good to have you here this afternoon. You go with the room wonderfully well."

Beauty turned her face away from the Beast's smiling eyes, and said:

"I thought you were going to give us some tea. I am sure Nick is frightfully hungry. Aren't you, Nick?"

"Not frightfully," said Nick.

For the first time Danvers seemed to notice Nick.

"I think the boy had better have tea with my man, Johnson. They would get on together famously."

"No," said Beauty, in a sharp voice. "No, I won't allow that. Nick must stay here."

"Very well, dear lady!" said Danvers in his soft voice. "I only want to make everybody happy. That's all."

He touched a button in the wall, and a moment later the door opened very quietly, and a tall young

man with a swallow-tail coat, and little brass buttons on his waistcoat, came into the room and said: "Yes, sir?"

"Let's have some tea quickly, Johnson. And bring some cakes."

Nick wondered if Johnson had ever learned to smile, and whether he always looked so very solemn, as if he were in mourning for somebody, and whether he would have said: "Yes, sir" just in the same way if the Beast had asked him to bring in some crocodiles, or Aladdin's magic lamp, or any other thing not very easy to get. He came in so sadly with the cakes that Nick thought he must be sorrowful at having to give them up. Perhaps he wanted them for his own tea.

"An excellent fellow, Johnson," said Danvers, when the man had left the room again. "He never speaks unless he is spoken to, and then in the fewest possible words."

"How awful!" said Beauty. "I can't bear silent people. They are like walking ghosts."

"Oh, I allow pretty ladies to talk as much as they like," said Danvers, "especially if they have singing voices and laughter like silver bells."

Nick, who was listening very quietly, knew that Danvers was thinking of Beauty's voice and of Beauty's laughter, and he knew that Beauty knew what Danvers meant, for she laughed now as though little silver bells were ringing in her throat, and said:

"What absurd things you say!"

"I know," said Danvers, who was helping Beauty to some sugar, "but it is jolly to be absurd sometimes, don't you think? Don't you hate people who are never absurd?"

"Yes," said Beauty, "they make life very dull."

"And dulness," said Danvers, "is the death of life. Adventure, laughter, love, these are the only things that make life endurable, and love is the greatest of these."

"And the most dangerous," said Beauty.

"Dangerous? Why, yes! That is the joy of it. Without danger love also becomes a dull thing."

"Hush!" said Beauty.

Nick saw that her eyes had glanced in his direction, as though warning Danvers to be careful of his words. He knew those warning glances which Beauty gave when Bristles said "Damitall," or words which small boys were not supposed to use.

Danvers laughed in his throat, and rang the bell again, so that the man Johnson came in, as sadly as before.

"Johnson," said Danvers, "will you kindly entertain this young gentleman with your most sprightly conversation, and show him any of those interesting things which you may collect in your spare time."

"Yes, sir," said Johnson.

This time Beauty did not protest, and Nick took

hold of Johnson's long, cold hand, and went with him into another room, where the man sat Nick down in an arm-chair and stood in front of him, and winked very solemnly with his left eye and said:

"I suppose you are not old enough to smoke a cigarette, sir?"

"No," said Nick.

"Ah!" said Mr. Johnson. "But perhaps you would not object to me enjoying a little smoke?"

"No," said Nick.

Mr. Johnson pulled out a silver case, and took out a cigarette, lighted it, and then, sitting on the edge of the table, stared at Nick with solemn eyes. This lasted such a long time that Nick became uneasy, and shifted in his seat.

"Do you think Beauty will be very long with the . . . " he was just going to say "the Beast," when he stopped himself in time, and said "Mr. Danvers?"

Johnson thought the matter over for quite a while, and then he said:

"And who may Beauty be, young gentleman?"

"My mother."

Johnson pondered over this for a good long time, and then said:

"Eh! She looks a beauty. But I don't expect she's such a beauty as my master."

"Do you think *he* is a beauty?" asked Nick, much surprised.

"Oh, he is a rare beauty, he is," said Johnson, and then he gave another solemn wink with his left eye.

There was no more conversation for some time, but at last Nick made another effort to break the spell of Mr. Johnson's terrible eyes.

"Do you think my mother will be long with your master?"

Johnson thought the question out.

"It all depends," he said at last. "You never can tell."

Nick listened to the ticking of the big clock on the wall. Each tick seemed a minute. He hated the Beast worse than ever for keeping his mother such a long time.

"Can you show me anything, please?" he said, in a rather desperate attempt to get away from the arm-chair in which he was imprisoned under the fixed gaze of Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson was startled by the question.

He looked round the room, as though searching for something, which he might show, but there was only a table covered with brown oil-cloth, and a horsehair sofa, and three horsehair chairs, and some portraits of elderly gentlemen framed in dark oak.

"There is the *Sporting Times,* sir, if it is any good to you."

"Do you mind reading some out?" said Nick, rather liking the name of the paper, which seemed to hint at adventure.

"Certainly, sir."

Johnson cleared his throat, and read an article on the front page, leaving out the commas and full stops.

Pretty Polly won the thousand pound race in clever style and his trainer felt confident that a pull of 18 lb. with Dandy Dick would enable him to reverse the Sandown placings while Samuels was also hopeful of beating Flying Dutchman although Pretty Polly had only a pound advantage with the Lewes horse to put against the Sandown beating It was Dandy Dick who gave the winner most trouble and evidently Flying Dutchman has been over-rested The two Frenchmen were prominent for a long way and Jeanne d'Arc once raised the hopes of the Comte de Valois but retired beaten soon afterward Dandy Dick is a very beautiful creature . . .

"Is it a fairy-tale?" asked Nick at this stage of the story.

Mr. Johnson permitted himself to smile, but hid the mistake hurriedly behind his hand.

"Well, sir, these sporting papers do go in for fairy-tales as a rule. I may say that is their leading characteristic."

"I think I will take one of them in," said Nick, "if they are not too expensive."

Mr. Johnson showed a trifling agitation.

"If I may be so bold, sir, I should earnestly advise you not to patronize these papers so early in life. It is not that the papers themselves are very expensive, but the effect of them is—er—rather costly, at times."

Nicholas was not very clear as to the meaning of these words, but he did not inquire further, for at that moment a bell rang with a whirr behind his head, and Mr. Johnson put down the paper hurriedly.

"I expect that's for you, sir," he said, and his guess was right, for Nicholas was sent for by Beauty, and found her looking rather hot, as though she had drunk her tea before it had got cool.

"Until we meet again," said Danvers.

He took Beauty's hand and raised it to his lips, and then patted Nick on the head and said "Good little laddie," as though he were a dog.

Beauty was very silent all the way home, and kept smiling to herself, as though amused with a secret joke, and was very kind and nice with Bristles when he came home from the City. Everything seemed very happy, until suddenly at supper Bristles said:

"What did you do this afternoon, Beauty?"

"Oh, the usual thing," said Beauty, and then she turned to Nick and said rather quickly: "You look very tired, Sleepy-eyes!"

When Nick had assured her that he was not a bit sleepy, Bristles said:

"What do you mean by the usual thing?"

"Oh, Nick and I had tea with some friends."

She turned to Nick again, and said, more hurriedly than before: "I am sure you are ready for bed, Mr. Nick."

But Nick was not a bit ready for bed. He was wondering why Beauty had said "with some friends." Was Mr. Johnson one of the friends?

"Which friends?" said Bristles. "Any one I know?"

Beauty suddenly "flared up," as Polly would say, and became very angry with Bristles.

"Surely you don't want to cross-question me as to where Nick and I had tea? What does it matter who the people were?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Bristles. "I just inquired out of idle curiosity."

He turned to Nick, and said: "Where did you go to tea, old man?"

Nick looked across at Beauty, and there was something in her eyes which seemed to speak to him. It seemed to him that her eyes said: "Don't tell, Nick! don't tell!"

He got very red in the face, and there was a big pain in his heart. He knew that, not even when Beauty's eyes said "Don't tell," could he say something to cheat Bristles.

Then suddenly Beauty spoke:

"If you must know, we had tea with Danvers."

There was a great silence in the room, and then at the end of it Bristles said:

"I thought you had given up that man, Beauty?"

He did not say the words angrily, but with a queer break in his voice.

"I do not give up my friends so easily," said Beauty.

Nothing else was said about the Beast, but when Beauty put Nicholas to bed, he stretched out his hands and pulled her head down, and said:

"I am glad you told, Beauty, although your eyes said 'Don't tell.' "

She understood him, and a great wave of color came into her face. But she laughed at him and rumpled his hair, and said:

"What a fanciful Nick you are!"

Then she puffed out the candle and went out of the door.

But Nick lay awake for a little while, listening to the voices of Beauty and Bristles, which never ceased in the next room until he dropped asleep.

CHAPTER V

BEAUTY GOES AWAY

It always seemed to Nicholas Barton that when Beauty went on tour—he knew what that meant, after questioning Polly until her head ached—it was the beginning of the unhappiness which spoiled all the great game of life.

Beauty had been frightfully excited about going away, and had danced about the flat singing and laughing, while she and Polly packed great baskets full of dresses, and while she tried to remember all the things which she had forgotten. She was always remembering something else which she could not possibly do without, and even on the very last morning, when the cab was waiting outside the street door, she cried out to Polly that she *must* take her manicure scissors and second-best pair of slippers, and the little silver mirror in which she looked at the back of her head. These things had to be collected and stuffed into a hand-bag which was already bulging with just-remembered things.

Bristles was strolling about in a moody way, with his hands in his pockets, only taking his hands out of his pockets to fasten up the baskets and to strap up the boxes, and to fetch some of the things which Beauty had left in another room.

Nick knew that Bristles was just as sad as he was because Beauty was going away, and that he was afraid of the loneliness which would creep into the flat when all the baskets had been packed on to the cab with Beauty inside.

It was just before Polly had gone to fetch the cab that Bristles spoke of the things that were in his heart. It was when he bent down to fasten the last box. He gave a great sigh, and said:

"I hate the idea of this tour of yours, Beauty. Even now I wish to goodness you could back out of it."

Beauty was arranging her hat in front of the mirror. It was a black hat with a little white bird perched on the top of it, and Nick had never seen such a beautiful Beauty, for excitement had lighted the fires in her eyes, and had deepened the colour in her cheeks. She laughed at Bristles as she looked at him through the looking-glass.

"It is rather late in the day to suggest that. Besides, you know we need the money, and that it gives me a big chance."

"Hang the money!" said Bristles. "I would rather see you starve than run all the risks of an actress on tour."

He spoke with a sharp pain in his voice, and then he strode over to Beauty as she turned toward him, and took her by the wrists and said:

"Beauty, you promise me to be good—and careful!"

"Careful of what?" asked Beauty, releasing her hands, and putting her hat straight again.

"Careful of your good name and of mine. You know how incautious you are, how your spirit of fun and adventure leads you to take risks. . . . I am afraid."

"Afraid?"

Beauty gave a rather shrill little laugh. "Afraid of what, my timid Bristles?"

"I am afraid of letting you go alone among all those loose-minded people, in all those theatrical lodging-houses where you have no husband to protect you, and look after you."

"Thank you!" said Beauty, very haughtily. "I am well able to look after myself."

"I am not so sure," said Bristles. "Sometimes you have not shown yourself able to look after yourself."

He took one of her hands again, and kissed it and said:

"I don't want to play the Puritan, Beauty. I know that you have a laughter-loving heart, and that it has been dull for you sometimes here, and that I am a gloomy dog, unable to give you all the things you want, and all the things you ought to have; but I want you to remember my love for you, and little Nick, here. When people flatter you, when they are

paying you homage, when you are laughing and joking after the theatre, think of this little flat here, where your man and your boy are waiting for you and longing for you."

Beauty put her hands on her husband's shoulders, and bowed her head a little so that her forehead touched his lips.

"You funny old Bristles!" she said.

Then she raised her head and smiled into his eyes.

"I will try to keep on the safe side of the danger-line. You need not be afraid."

Then Polly came in to say the cab was waiting, and Beauty gave Nick a great hug, and promised to bring him back no end of toys, and then there was a great bustle and excitement as the baskets and bags were carried down five flights of stone steps. Nick carried the smallest of them, feeling very proud of his strength as he hoisted it on to his shoulder and staggered down the stairway, dropping it only at the top of the last flight, so that it rolled easily to the bottom.

"Drat the child!" cried Beauty, "I am sure he has smashed my best scent bottle."

She raised her hand as though to smack him, but then, seeing that his eyes were beginning to fill with tears, she rumpled his hair and said:

"It can't be helped. Cheer up, Nick, I shall soon be back."

She bent down and kissed him on the forehead,

waved her hand to Bristles, and in another moment was smiling from the inside of the cab, which went off with a jerk and took her away to that great adventure which was called "on tour."

Bristles and Nick stood looking after the cab until it had turned the corner of the street. Beauty did not put her head out for a last glance at them. Then Bristles gave a big sigh which was something like a groan, and put his hand on Nick's shoulder, and said:

"Well, old man, it's time for you to go to school, and for me to go to the City. You and I must do our job while Beauty is away. We've got to keep the pot boiling."

Nick's lower lip was trembling. A little fountain of water seemed to be bubbling up from his heart to run out of his eyes. He could not bear to think that Beauty had gone away, and the words which he had heard Bristles say made him feel afraid because Bristles was afraid. It was clear that some great danger might threaten Beauty in the adventure of "On Tour." She said that she would try to keep on the safe side of the danger-line. But supposing she stepped on to the wrong side, what then? Perhaps she might be gobbled up by some beastly monster, or taken prisoner by some Enemy. Bristles had said he was afraid because he would not be there to protect her. Protect her from what? Nick would not be there either. Neither Bristles nor Nick could help

their Beauty in distress. It was this thought more than the thought of the loneliness that would be in the flat which made the fountain of water bubble up in his heart, and try to run out of his eyes. But he turned the tap off with a jerk when he heard Joan Darracott's voice calling him through the railing of the ground-floor flat.

"Nick, you will be late for school. And I have been waiting for you ever so long. Why has your Beauty gone away with so many baskets on the cab? Is she taking people's washing home?"

It cheered Nick up to hear Joan's voice asking so many questions which he could not possibly answer all together.

"I'm ready!" he shouted, and he was glad that he had gulped back his tears so quickly that Joan could not see them. And yet her sharp eyes saw that something was the matter with him, for on the way to school she said:

"You look as if you were going to have the measles or something."

"What sort of a look is that?" asked Nick, trying very hard to look as if there were no ache inside his heart.

"A flabby, dabby, babby look," said Joan.

"Rot!" said Nick. And after that denial he whistled the merriest tune he could think of. But it was not a success.

"If I couldn't whistle better than that," said Joan, "I should give up trying."

"*You* can't whistle at all," said Nick.

So they began one of their friendly quarrels, and it was very comforting.

But Joan Darracott was not always handy to comfort him with her quarrels, and there were times in the flat, especially in the evenings before bed, when his heart cried out for Beauty, and he wanted her with a great aching want. For it wasn't a bit the same thing when Polly tucked him up and said:

> Pleasant dreams and sweet repose,
> Mind the fleas don't bite your toes!

Polly was all right in her way. Polly was part of the furniture of Nick's life, and he had grown so used to her that he could not even imagine a world without a Polly. But though he liked the sound of her voice, and her way of saying things, which was pure Cockney, and though to make up for Beauty's absence she cooked him special tarts and let him eat more than was good for him (which he liked very much), and spared a lot of her own time to play "Beggar-my-Neighbour" and "Snap," and generally let him win when it was time to go to bed, she did not take away his need of Beauty nor fill up the hole in his loneliness. Nor did Bristles fill up this great gap, though after Beauty had gone on tour he came home earlier from the City, and made as many jokes

as he could think of, to make some laughter in the flat, and invented all sorts of new games, and told funny tales over the dinner table when he sat at one end and Nick sat at the other, with Beauty's empty chair drawn up on the side nearest the door. At those dinner-table talks Bristles let Nick ask as many questions as he liked, and answered them as simply as he could, so that it seemed to Nick as if he were as old as his father, or as if his father was as young as he was. At least there was not that great wide space between them which is generally between a grown-up and a small boy, and Nick learned to know his father better than he had ever known him before, and made many new discoveries. He discovered that Bristles hated being Something in the City, and that he would much rather have been an engineer on a man-of-war, or a cow-boy in the Wild West, or a pirate on the Spanish Main.

But, as he said one day, "when once you become Something in the City, you can never be anything else."

Nick made up his mind then and there that he would never on any account be Something in the City, but he did not like to say so out loud, because he did not want to make Bristles feel more sorry for himself than he was already.

He also learned that Bristles had read almost every book that had ever been written, except the new books, which were no good at all because they

were only copies of the old books, and that whenever he felt that he could not bear to be Something in the City any longer, because he hated it so much, he just took down one of his favourite books, like "The Three Musketeers," or "The Cloister and the Hearth," or "A Tale of Two Cities," and immediately he was happy again, because he seemed to be one of the people in the books, going through their adventures and having no end of fun.

"After all, Nick," said Bristles, "it doesn't very much matter if one is a poor man, so long as one can get good books, for these introduce one to the best society in the world, and you can become very friendly with all the best fellows that ever lived."

"Like Hop o' my Thumb, and the Little Tailor, and Dick Whittington?" asked Nick.

"Yes, all sorts of good chaps like that. Only my favorites are fellows like Falstaff, and Prince Hal, and Hamlet, and Mercutio, and Don Quixote, and D'Artagnan, and Sam Weller, and Quentin Durward, and a lot of other gallant gentlemen whom you will get to know one of these days, if you are fond of reading."

Another thing which Nick learned about his father was that he was very keen on old things—old buildings, and old furniture, and old pictures, and any old thing which is kept in a museum. It seemed that these old things could tell him tales about themselves. At least, when Bristles took Nick to the

museums, which had become a habit on a Saturday afternoon now that Beauty was on tour, he knew all about the private life of old leather boots which had once belonged to a soldier in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and about the adventures of an iron helmet which had been worn by one of the Black Prince's knights, and all about the love-story of two earthen pitchers which had been made when the Romans were in England, and, indeed, all about the life of thousands of things which had lived in the houses of people hundreds of years ago. The idea came into Nick's head one day that Bristles must have been born with a special kind of memory, so that he remembered all the things which had been done by his father and grandfather and great-grandfather, and by all the fathers that had gone before him. And then another idea jumped into his head, that Bristles, whose real name was Nicholas Barton, just like his own, was really the same person as the Sir Nicholas Barton whose portrait, with a white ruff around his neck, and with a velvet doublet covered with jewels, hung in one of the great galleries which they visited on a Saturday afternoon. Because this Sir Nicholas Barton had done most of the things which Bristles would have liked to have done. He had been a pirate on the Spanish Main, and he had fought through great adventures in the Netherlands (wherever they might be), and he had gone out to the New World and had fought with Red

Indians in a country called Virginia, and afterward had come home to write about the things he had seen and done. Nick noticed that there was something in the face of Sir Nicholas Barton which was like Bristles. Bristles had the same straight nose and high, bald forehead, and eyes that had a far-away look, as if searching for the New World. But there the likeness ended, for Sir Nicholas had a brown beard and moustache, and Bristles shaved all the hairs off his face every time they poked their heads up in the night.

"You are awfully like him, Bristles!" said Nick, gazing from the portrait to the living face.

Bristles looked pleased.

"Think so, old man? I should like to think so, because he was one of my ancestors."

"What's an ancestor?" asked Nick.

"One of one's relations a long time ago, from whom one gets one's temper, the shape of one's nose, the gout, and other little things of that kind."

Nick pondered over this, and some time afterward delivered judgment.

"It's rotten to think that some ancestor one never knew should make one get into bad tempers when one doesn't want to. Perhaps that accounts for it."

"Accounts for what?" asked Bristles.

"My getting into bad tempers when I don't want to, and Joan Darracott doing all the things she didn't ought to do, and Beauty liking the people she ought

to hate, and you doing the work which you weren't made for. Perhaps if we had had different ancestors it would all have been different."

"Exactly," said Bristles. "And that's the reason why we ought to try as hard as possible to do the right things instead of the wrong things, and be the right kind of people instead of the wrong kind of people, because we are the ancestors of those people who will come after us. See?"

"Yes, but the worst of it is," said Nick, "that however hard we try, we may be put all wrong by a great-grandfather, or some old thing like that."

"Yes, one's great-grandfather is the devil of a nuisance," said Bristles, laughing as though he saw a joke somewhere.

But Nick did not see any joke in that conversation, and he was always on the look-out for Sir Nicholas Barton in the character of Bristles.

He found it in small things, such as the bold way in which Bristles slashed off the top of his egg at breakfast, and in the way he wore a felt hat on the side of his head after he came home on Saturday afternoon and put off his chimney-pot hat, and the way he carried his stick (as though it had been a sharp sword) when he went for a walk in the park. He also found something of Sir Nicholas Barton, the Elizabethan pirate and adventurer, in his own character, when he went searching for grizzly bears among the trees in the park, and when he pretended

that Joan Darracott was a Red Indian princess, and fell madly in love with her, and threatened to scalp her (with the sharp edge of his school ruler), if she did not promise to be his wife.

"If you touch my hair again," said Joan Darracott (who had not forgotten the loss of a golden handful), "I will poke your eyes out with the end of my parasol. So there!"

"Well, will you promise to be my wife?" asked Nick, still brandishing his ruler.

"I will, if you promise to buy me some chocolates with bits of chestnut inside. You know the sort."

Nick dropped his ruler, and felt in all his pockets.

"I haven't a single halfpenny!" he said ruefully.

"Then I won't promise to be your wife," said Joan Darracott. "Good-morning."

And twirling her ridiculous little sunshade, she went off to her music lesson.

It was that incident which made him suggest to Bristles that one of Joan Darracott's ancestors must have been like Bloody Mary, of whose alleged cruelties he had just been reading in a school history book which ought to have known better. But Bristles was not in a mood for talking about ancestors that morning. Looking through the letters which had just been thrust through the box, he said rather anxiously:

"It's strange there's nothing from Beauty again!"

During the first two or three weeks of her adven-

ture on tour Beauty had sent several letters and quite a lot of postcards written in a big scrawly handwriting with crosses after her love to Nick which Bristles handed over to him so that he could put them to his lips, which was the next best thing (though not a very good best) to getting the real kisses from Beauty's lips. Bristles read out bits of her letters over the breakfast table.

It is immensely good fun, though frightfully hard work. . . . The show is a great success. The Gods cheered themselves hoarse after the jewel scene. . . . The company is pretty decent on the whole, though I must confess that there are some incurable bounders among us. Valentine St. Clair is absolutely the last thing in vulgarity. Fast is not the word for her. She exceeds the speed limit all the time. . . . Theatrical lodging-houses in north-country towns are enough to wring tears of anguish from a laughing hyena. Oh, the squalor and the dirt of them! Oh, the evil character and wicked ugliness and fiendish subtleties of the lodging-house landladies, who would cheat a blind widow out of her last mite, and steal the gilt off a piece of gingerbread! . . . We had a merry supper-party last night, after the show, and did not tumble into bed until the sunlight streamed through the windows. I smoked too many cigarettes, and have a mouth like a factory chimney. . . . But I am tremendously virtuous and as demure as a Puritan maid, and there is so much hard work that there is very little time for frivolity or—rash adventures.

So be easy in your mind. I am getting a great hand at Bridge, which we play in the trains from one town to another. Yesterday I won fifty shillings, and spent it on a new hat, which would capture the heart of a hermit if he met it with me in the desert. . . . Give my love to Polly, and tell her to feed you up. I miss little Nick most frightfully at nights, when I put my head on my pillow and have time to think. . . . Dear old Bristles, I expect you are glad to have a rest from my teasing and my tempers, and all the naughtiness which is in this wild heart of mine. I cannot help it being wild, can I? It's how one is born, and Fate seems to drag one along by the hair. . . .

YOUR LOVING BEAUTY.

Such letters as that, written just like Beauty spoke (so that when Bristles read them out Nick seemed to hear her voice behind the words and her laugh between the sentences), came several days a week during the first weeks of her tour, then dropped off a little, and then were followed by postcards with just a big scrawly line or two, saying: "Off to Rugby," or "Going Birmingham to-morrow," or "Raining cats and dogs in Leamington." But now for more than a week there came neither letters nor postcards, so that every morning after the postman's knock Bristles said: "It is strange there is nothing from Beauty," and the lines which made a crow's claw on his forehead became deeper and deeper. At night, after Nick had been tucked up in bed, he heard Bristles pacing up and down, up and down, like an

animal in a cage, and he was not nearly so chatty at the breakfast-table the next day, and forgot to tell funny stories in the evening when Nick sat at one end of the table and he sat at the other, with Beauty's empty chair on the side nearest the door.

At last one Friday evening Bristles said all of a sudden, as though the idea had just jumped into his head:

"Look here, Nick, old man, what do you say to going on a surprise visit to Beauty?"

Nick did not say anything, but gave a great shout, and clapped his hands.

"She's in a place called Canterbury," said Bristles, and we could run down there to-morrow and spend the week-end and get back in time for school and work on Monday. How is that for an idea?"

It seemed to Nick a glorious idea, and the glory of it was great when he carried his own little bag to the station next morning, alongside Bristles, who was carrying a bigger bag, and sat in the corner of a third-class carriage with Bristles in the opposite corner, and a sailor smoking a clay pipe in the third corner, and an old clergyman reading a little black book in the fourth corner. The train puffed out of the station, and Nick listened to the noise of the piston rods making a jerky kind of song, which seemed to say, "Hurry up there, hurry up there!" as if the train were frightfully anxious to get to Canterbury because Beauty was there. Then he looked out of

the windows and watched the fields fly past, and little villages from which church spires stuck up like arrows pointing to the sky, and he saw boys and girls running down country lanes on their way to school, and cows staring up at the passing train, and old women standing at their cottage doors like the old witches in "Grimm's Fairy Tales," and a thousand other pictures of life in the sunlight of a summer's day, whirling past the carriage windows so quickly that his eyes could hardly catch them quick enough. The greatness and the splendor of the big world seemed to lift Nick's soul out of his body. This was a great adventure! His spirit went faster than the train. It leaped ahead of the train into Beauty's arms. The thought of seeing Beauty again made him want to shout out and sing, but he kept his mouth shut because of the sailor smoking a clay pipe, and winking every time he caught Nick's eye, and because of the clergyman, who looked up from his little black book to stare at Nick through the spectacles on his nose.

At last the train stopped at Canterbury, and Nick walked with Bristles through streets of houses which looked like the pictures in one of his fairy-tale books, with pointed roofs and windows that bulged out over the doorways, and window-panes like green bull's-eyes, and walls propped up with great oak beams. There were grinning goblins carved in stone at the corners of little old churches which had been

built between the little old houses, and Nick held his breath and opened his eyes as wide as they would go when he looked up at a church bigger than any church he had ever seen, with great walls like those of a giant's castle, and tremendous windows which seemed to shut out the light, and sloping roofs almost as high as the clouds.

"Canterbury Cathedral," said Bristles, "that's where Thomas à Becket was murdered by the bad knights. Do you remember? But we must find Beauty before we see all the sights."

"Yes, I want Beauty first," said Nick. "How shall we find her?"

Bristles put the bags in charge of an old gentleman who sat in an old chair in the hall of an old inn called "The Fleur de Lys," and they set out again to find Beauty. She was not easy to find, and they lost their way several times in narrow alleys where the houses were so close together that people could shake hands with each other out of the opposite windows. But at last they came to the back door of a building called the Theatre Royal, and Bristles said:

"Perhaps Beauty is here, but if she isn't we shall find out where she is."

Nick made a little prayer in his heart that Beauty might be there, for he was getting very tired of waiting for her.

Bristles spoke to a very fat and very grumpy-

looking man who sat in a small office reading a pink paper, with a pot of beer at his elbow, in case his reading made him thirsty.

"Is Miss Vivian at the theatre?" asked Bristles—much to the surprise of Nick, who had expected him to ask for Beauty.

After a moment's silence the fat man looked up from his pink paper and said, "Eh?"

Bristles repeated his question.

"She is and she ain't," said the man, and then, as if this effort to speak had made him very thirsty, he took a big drink out of his pot of beer.

Bristles spoke to him sharply.

"Is she here, or is she not here?"

"She is and she ain't," said the man. "That is to say, she is here as long as this week's show is here, but she ain't here at the present time, because the show don't begin till half past two."

The man made strange noises in his throat, which Nick understood to be his manner of laughing.

"Can you give me her private address?" asked Bristles.

"Not for quids," said the man. "It's as much as my job is worth to give any lady's private address."

He took up the pot of beer and drained it to the dregs, and said "Ah!" when he put it down again, as though he felt better.

"But I am her husband," said Bristles, "and this is her little boy."

The fat man stared at Bristles and Nick, as though he had just seen them for the first time.

"Oh, you're Miss Vivian's 'usband, and that's 'er little boy? Well, now, 'oo 'd 'ave thought it? Blest if it don't surprise me, though I 'ave grown old in the theatrical profession."

Bristles looked very angry. Nick saw that his mouth had tightened up, which was always a sign of Bristles being angry.

"Look here, my man," he said, "kindly give me Miss Vivian's address, and keep a civil tongue in your head."

The fat man made queer noises in his throat again.

"My orders is to give no address to no one. Not even to 'usbands in search of their wives, not even to little boys in search of their muvvers."

Bristles turned on his heel, and said: "Come on, Nick. The man is a fool."

He went a little way out of the courtyard, but the fat man called after him:

"A fool, am I? Well, there's other fools about, and *I* 'aven't married an actress with a private address."

Bristles took Nick's hand, and Nick felt that his father's hand had suddenly gone cold.

"Can't we find Beauty, then?" said Nick. His voice trembled, and all the glory of the day departed from his spirit. If they couldn't find Beauty everything would be spoiled.

But Bristles reassured him.

"We shall find her all right," he said. "She is sure to come to the stage door before the matinee. Let's go and get a bit of lunch."

But while they were on their way back to the Fleur de Lys to get this bit of lunch, a strange thing happened. Bristles was still holding Nick's hand as they walked along, and suddenly Nick felt his hand gripped so hard that he almost cried out, and he was dragged back into the doorway of one of the old houses with windows that bulged out into the street. He saw that Bristles had become very white in the face, as if he felt ill, and his eyes had a frightened look in them.

"Good God!" said Bristles in a queer voice.

Just as he said that Nick caught sight of Beauty. She was walking very slowly along the pavement in front of them, with her hand on a man's arm, who was the other side of her so that Nick could not see his face. Beauty was talking and laughing, with her head a little on one side, so that she looked up into the man's face. She was in her white summer dress made of lace, with a pink petticoat underneath, and she wore a straw hat turned up on one side so as to show a bunch of roses. She was so beautiful that people turned to look at her as she passed, with her frock held up above her petticoat and with her high-heeled shoes tripping along the pavement. Suddenly she moved a little on one side, to let a butcher-

boy pass, and then Nick saw the man whose arm Beauty had been holding. It was the Beast.

Without thinking of the Beast or of anybody else in the world but Beauty, Nick slipped his hand away from Bristles, darted from beneath the doorway, and with a loud cry of "Beauty" ran forward to her and clasped her about the waist.

Beauty was startled. She was so startled that for a moment, at the sight of Nick, she became as white in the face as the whiteness of her summer frock. She gave a little cry of "Nick!" and then stared round in a scared way, so that her eyes fell upon the face of Bristles looking out from the doorway. It seemed quite a long time that the husband and wife stood looking at each other, without moving or speaking any word. Danvers stood on one side. He too had been startled by the sudden appearance of Nick. His eyes also had gone searching round until they had found the face of Bristles in the doorway. Now he stood looking from one to another, stroking his moustache in a careless way, and hiding a little smile beneath his hand.

"God bless the child!" said Beauty at last. "Where did you spring from?"

She stooped down to kiss him, and all the whiteness in her face changed to a deep rose-color.

"We came in a train from Battersea Park," said Nick, "and Bristles and I have been searching for you everywhere."

"Well, you have found me now," said Beauty.

Bristles had come slowly forward, and did not seem a bit glad to see Beauty, though he had come such a long way to see her. He lifted his hat, and said:

"I am sorry I did not give you warning of my visit. Perhaps Nick and I are in the way."

"Why should you be in the way?" asked Beauty, with an attempt at gaiety, which failed rather when her eyes wandered to Danvers, who still stood twisting up his pointed moustache.

At her glance Danvers came forward and said:

"How do you do, Barton? It is curious that I should have come to Canterbury and met your wife like this. A delightful surprise."

"Very curious, and very surprising," said Bristles. "Perhaps you will give me an explanation as to what brings you to Canterbury while my wife is here?"

He spoke very calmly and quietly, but Nick knew by his tightened mouth that he was trying to hide his anger.

Danvers shrugged his shoulders.

"The Cathedral is very beautiful," he said, "and I have a devotion to Thomas à Becket."

Bristles turned his back on Danvers, and spoke to Beauty.

"Nick and I have not had lunch yet. Have you time to join us?"

"Yes," said Beauty. "Yes—of course."

But Danvers stepped between Beauty and Bristles.

"I am sorry," he said, "but Mrs. Barton has promised to lunch with me. I therefore have a prior right."

Bristles swung round and faced Danvers, so that the two men looked into each other's eyes.

"Did I hear you say the word 'right'?" asked Bristles very quietly.

"Yes," said Danvers.

"In regard to my wife?" asked Bristles.

"In regard to the lady who has the misfortune to be your wife," said Danvers very coolly.

What exactly happened after that Nick did not quite see or understand. He only knew that all the world had changed for him, and that great forces which had lurked behind the mystery of things suddenly leaped out, naked and terrible, transfiguring the man who was his father, and the man whom he had called the Beast, and that all the happiness which had been in his heart, because he had come to meet Beauty, was suddenly emptied out to make room for terror.

As he remembered the scene afterward, as a boy and as a man, in strange places and at many odd times, in the days and nights, it was the picture of Bristles raising a stick which flashed in the sun like a shining sword, and bringing it down with a swing-

ing cut upon the head of the Beast, so that the man's forehead was marked with a line of blood, and then of two sticks clashing together until both were broken, when Bristles and the Beast struggled with each other, swaying to and fro, clutching at each other's throats, striking with their fists, and then of several figures thrusting inwards from a crowded circle of staring faces, and tearing the two men apart, and lastly of Bristles standing very tall and straight without his hat, with a bleeding gash down his left cheek, with his fists clenched, with his face as white as death, with his eyes burning like fires, while a little crowd of men and women bent over the body of the Beast as it lay very still upon the ground.

That was all Nick remembered until he sat alone with Beauty in a four-wheeled cab, with his face pressed against her body, which was shaking with sobs. He remembered that she kept on crying "O God! O God!" and that her tears fell upon his face, and that her hands clasped his very tight. He remembers now that he spent that night alone with Beauty, sleeping in a little room with great oak beams across the ceiling, and in a big bed with curtains round it. He remembers also that he woke up several times in the night and that always he saw Beauty kneeling by his bedside with her hands outstretched, and her body shaking as though she

were very cold. He was not awake enough to speak to her, but only just awake enough to remember that something terrible had happened, and to be very sorry for Beauty and Bristles, and to cry himself to sleep again.

In the morning when the sun streamed through the windows and when he sat up in bed, wondering for a moment to find himself in the strange room, until remembrance came back on swift wings, he was frightened to find that Beauty had gone away and that he was quite alone. On the quilt which covered him was a little white envelope, addressed with a few words which he couldn't read in Beauty's scrawly handwriting, in pencil.

Presently Bristles came into the room. He was still very white in the face, and there was a red mark down his left cheek. When he found that Nick was alone in the room a queer, frightened look came into his eyes, and then he saw the little white envelope lying on the bed. He picked it up, while Nick watched him without saying a word, and turned it over and over in his hands, as though afraid to open it. But at last he unfastened it, and after reading a few words, let the envelope fall to the carpet and stood there with his head drooping, and his hands clenched very tight.

"Where has Beauty gone?" asked Nick.

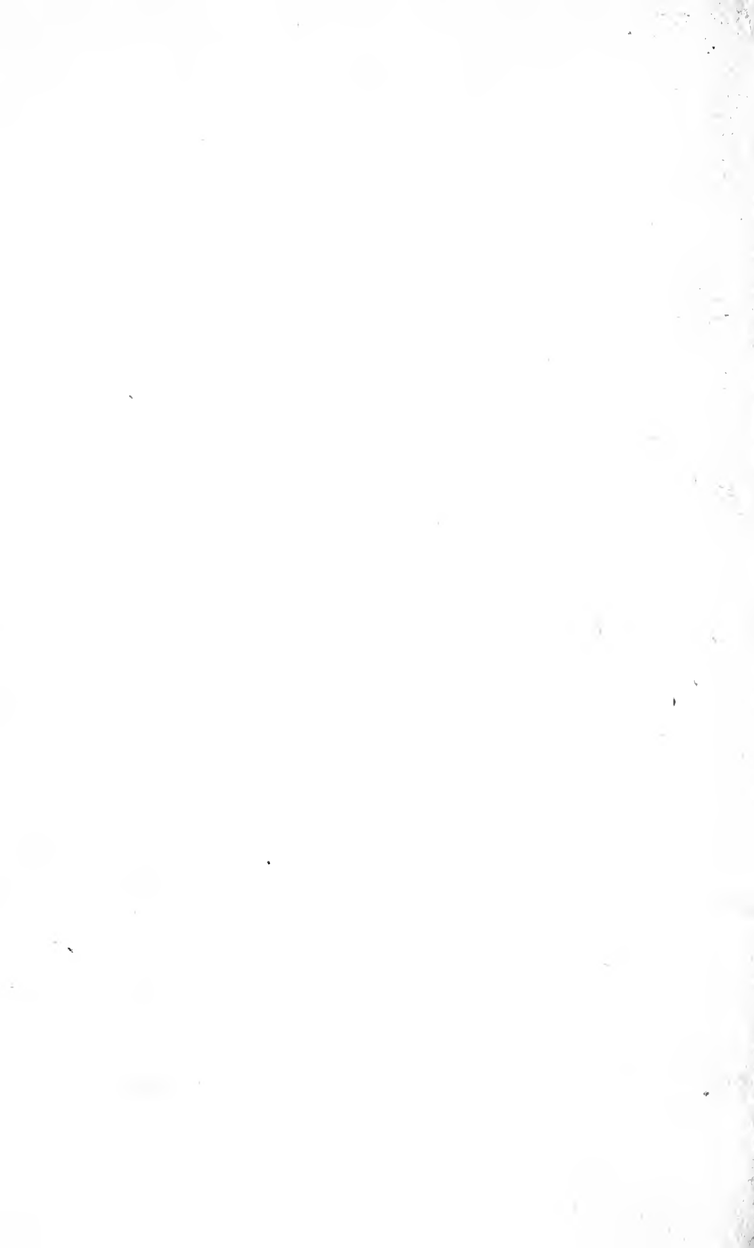
Bristles raised his head, and looked at Nick as

he sat up in bed. There was a great pain in his eyes, as though something had hurt him very badly.

"Beauty has gone on tour again," he said.

Then he sat down on the bed and put his arm round Nick and gave a terrible groan, as though the hurt in his heart was more than he could bear.

PART II



CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA

In the memory of Nicholas Barton the younger, the change from a top-floor flat in Battersea to a whitewashed cottage in Barhampton took place suddenly, after a day when the man who had once been Bristles, and who was now Father, had come home with an awful look on his face and had shut himself up in his study, and not opened the door when Nick had knocked at it. It was the same day that Polly had put on a black satin dress and had gone out early in a four-wheeled cab with Bristles, and had come back again with her face all smudged with tears. In the kitchen where he was making a railway station with all his bricks and some of the dining-room books, under the care of a servant from another flat, lent out for the occasion, Polly had flung her arms round him and cried so that all her tears fell upon his head (he had to wipe his hair afterward on the kitchen table-cloth), and kept saying "Oh, my poor poppet! Oh, my poor poppet!" as though something frightful had happened to him.

He had guessed at once that it had something to do with Beauty, who had never come home again

from being on tour, and although he pretended to go on with his railway station, and was very busy with his bricks, he kept his ears wide open to catch anything he could hear from the whispered conversation between Polly and the borrowed servant.

They kept on repeating one word which he had never heard before. It was the word "Divorce," which seemed to be the frightful thing which had happened to him, because every time Polly mentioned it she wiped her eyes again, and said, "What's to become of the boy, I really *can't* think," or something of that kind, until the borrowed servant said "Hush!" And then one sentence was spoken by Polly which seemed to be even more frightful than the other word.

"The poor master has got his decree nicely and the custardy of the child. Oh, dearie Lord, to think that it should have come to a decree nicely!"

"Well, as long as he's got the custardy of the child," said the borrowed servant in a voice that was louder than a whisper, "I don't see that he has lost very much. That woman is nothing but a creature."

It was Polly's turn to say "Hush!" and when she saw that Nick's eyes were fastened upon her, she got very red in the face and began talking about the weather.

Nick was quite sure that all these queer words had something to do with Beauty, and that night

when he went to bed—Bristles was still shut up in his study—he lay awake quite a long time, trying to pretend that Beauty had come back, and was only in the next room, and presently would steal in to see if he were asleep, and then scold him because his eyes were open. But suddenly there was a sharp pain in his heart, where a little voice inside him said, "It's not a bit of use pretending, because Beauty has *not* come back, and then he stuffed the corner of the pillow in his mouth, so that no one should hear him cry out, "Beauty! Beauty!" nor hear the sobs which shook his bed so that the brass knobs rattled.

No one would ever tell him what had really become of Beauty, not Polly, who told him lies, quite different from each other, day by day, nor Bristles, who always said, "Beauty is on tour. It is a very long tour, Nick, old man, and we must learn to do without her, if we can."

"But I can't!" Nick had said, with a howl of grief, and often he had cried, "I want my Beauty!" until one day Bristles had shouted out quite sharply, "Don't! For God's sake, don't. I can't bear it, Nick!"

Then he himself had cried, and the sight of Bristles crying—Nick had not believed till then that any man could cry—had been so frightening, because the body of Bristles shook up and down, when he put his face down onto his arms which were

stretched across the table, that Nick never cried out for Beauty again, except when he was quite alone with Peter Rabbit, and the Rocking Horse, and other private friends.

The nearest he could get to the truth about Beauty was when he asked Bristles a question so suddenly that he was taken by surprise. Nick asked it very quietly, just as he might have asked a question about how things work, or what the moon is made of, or why the stars only come alive at night.

"Is Beauty like that fairy queen we saw, who fell in love with an ass?"

"Yes," said Bristles, and then he groaned and said, "My God, yes!"

Nick ventured another question.

"Did you kill the Beast that day? You know, when . . . "

"No," said Bristles. "Sometimes I wish I had."

Then, as though he had only just noticed that it was Nick who was asking him these questions, he gave a great start, and became very pale, and said, "God forgive me, I don't mean that! Nick, why do you ask such extraordinary questions?"

"I want to know," said Nick.

Bristles was silent after this, but every now and then his eyes strayed over to the boy's face, as though wondering whether he was old enough to know. But he still kept up the pretence of Beauty being on tour, though Nick had ceased to believe

it. He did not understand that Nick's mind had grown much bigger since that day when they had gone to Canterbury together. He did not guess that this small boy, who still seemed a baby fellow, had puzzled out many little facts and pieced them together, so that a shadowy form of truth—the truth about Beauty—had been built up in his imagination. Bristles had no idea that Nick had been searching and groping in the darkness of this great mystery of his life until with a flash of light it had been revealed to him that the man whom he called the Beast had stolen Beauty away. And when Nick ceased to cry out for his mother, and didn't even mention her name, Bristles believed that he was gradually forgetting her, and that the agony of his childish grief had passed away. It did not occur to him that Nick was hugging the memory of his mother in the secret hiding-places of his heart, and that the scent of her clothes in the wardrobe, the touch of the muff she had left behind, the sight of the paper-backed novels of which she had read so many, the association of a thousand little things with Beauty, made him hungry for her, and gave him a great ache which nothing could cure.

Beauty's going away had spoiled the game of his life. Nothing was the same as it had been. Even Peter Rabbit had a sad look, and he had had his last ride on Rocking Horse, and Joan Darracott of the ground-floor flat was no longer wiser than he

about the grown-up world, because she knew nothing of the way in which mothers left their boys. He himself was different, because of the great secret, and of the mystery that lay behind it. It made him hide things from Bristles and Polly and Joan, so that often he spoke things which he did not mean, and kept his real thoughts shut up in the little cupboard of his brain.

"Why do you sit so still and quiet in the drawing-room, Master Nick?" said Polly

And Nick answered:

"I am pretending to be on the magic carpet of Bagdad, traveling about the world."

But really he had stolen into the drawing-room not once, but on many days, because when the door was shut and when he stooped down to smell the faint scent in the cushions of the sofa, Beauty seemed to come into the room, and when he shut his eyes he could see her as clearly as ever he had seen her, sitting there, with a book on her lap, and a lighted cigarette between her fingers, and a teasing smile on her face. He would steal out of the room again, shutting the door very quietly, so as not to disturb this dream Beauty, and in the kitchen Polly would look up from her ironing and say:

"What big eyes you have got, my poppet!"

And he would say:

"I have been looking at all sorts of magic things."

But he never told Polly, nor Bristles, nor even

Joan Darracott, of how he saw Beauty and the teasing smile on her face.

But now after that day when Bristles had shut himself up in his study and when Polly had come back from some mystery place in a black satin gown with her face smudged with tears, almost everything changed, as though by a wizard's wand, and the only things that did not change were Polly and Bristles, and Peter Rabbit, and some of the old toys and the old furniture and the old books, which were transplanted from the top-floor flat overlooking the tree-tops in Battersea Park to the whitewashed cottage looking out to the great, lonely sea.

It was a queer little cottage, and the last of a row of six little cottages, all exactly the same, and all just as queer. Each of them had a front sitting-room looking out to sea, and a back kitchen looking out to the river, and the sand-dunes on the other side. Each of them had a front bedroom with a ceiling so low that Bristles almost touched it with his head when he stood up straight, and a back bedroom so small that Polly was always complaining she could not swing a cat in it, though why she wanted to swing a cat in it, Nick could never understand. Each cottage had a small front garden divided from its neighbor by a fence so low that Nick could step across it, like Gulliver in the land of Lilliput, and at the end of each front garden was a wooden gate, not much bigger than a toy gate to

a fair-sized doll's house, and beyond that lay a patch of grass where donkeys browsed, and beyond that the broad sands where the children played, and beyond that the sea which reached to the end of the world, and to the hiding-place of the sun.

When Bristles told Nick that they were going to leave the top-floor flat, it seemed to Nick that the whole world was shattering beneath his feet. And when some big men came, with beads of moisture on their brows, to take the furniture away, he felt like a cat whose home is being broken up by some domestic earthquake, known as "a move." He understood that some of the "things," as Polly called these household friends, were going to be sold, and Nick wept inwardly for every one of them, and while Polly was not looking, kissed good-by to senseless articles, like the chair with the wide-embracing arms, and the hassock with two ears, and the sideboard with the laughing lions, which had been familiar to him since his eyes first opened to the world, and had been endeared to him, because he had so loved all those things to which he had given separate characters and personalities. It seemed that his own nature was being broken to bits by this destruction of his little dwelling place, and for a time he hated Bristles and Polly with a fierce and secret hatred, because they sent these old friends packing, and superintended this break-up of the world with such callous cruelty. But more agonizing to him than the selling

of the furniture was the thought that this going away from the top-floor flat meant that he would never see Beauty again. For when she wanted to come back, how should she know where they were? She would come to the door and knock, with that quick rat-tat-tat, followed by a dump, which she always gave, to let people know that she was coming, and there would be no one to answer her, and presently the neighbors would tell her that Bristles and Nick had gone away, and she might search through the whole world and never find them.

This thought was so terrible to him that he confessed it to Polly, and when he had told her, she put her hands up to her face and wept, and then said:

"My poor poppet! My poor poppet!"

After that she promised to pin a notice to the door with the new address on it, so that if Beauty came back she would know where to go. Nick kept her to this promise, and after she had written out the address of the cottage by the sea, he wrote underneath, in the smallest printed letters he could make:

"Beauty, come back!"

And after those words he put three crosses, which meant kisses.

It gave him some comfort when Polly nailed the notice to the door, with the heel of her shoe, but when the four-wheeled cab came, and the last of the luggage was piled on top, and when he stood in

the doorway of the empty flat while Polly was calling for him down below, he gave a little whimper of pain, like an animal hurt in a trap, and in his heart there was a desolation and despair. Small as he was, he knew by a little voice which spoke in his brain, that he had left forever in that empty flat the spirit of the child whom Beauty had loved, and the spirit of Beauty for whom he mourned. When he went down the stairs in answer to Polly's cry of "Master Nick!"—Bristles had gone to the station in advance—he was no longer a child, but a small boy with a big secret in his heart.

Then there had been the parting with Joan Darracott. That also had torn at his heart strings. For Joan and he had had many quarrels together, which had made them friends. And he had been glad of her teasing, though angry at the time. And in her good moods, about once a week, she had been very nice and kind, telling him all her secrets, and listening to all his new discoveries. He would feel very lonely without the girl on the ground-floor flat.

So he told her through the railings of the garden in which she sowed seeds which never came up:

"Joan," he said, "I am going away now. I shall be frightfully alone without you."

But Joan was in one of her bad moods.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," she said, digging up a piece of earth. He did not understand that she was angry with him because he was going away, and

that she had howled her eyes out that very morning because she knew he was going away.

Her words seemed like a slap in the face, and Nick became very red.

"Crosspatch!" he said. Then he spoke very softly:

"Perhaps we'll never see each other again. But I'll think of you till I'm dead."

She was startled at that.

"You are not going away to die, are you?" she asked, letting her trowel drop, and scrumpling up her pinafore with her muddy hands.

"Going away is like dying," said Nick.

He put his hand in his pocket, and after some fumbling pulled out the same old mouth-organ for which they had fought through the railings when they had first met.

"Here is a keepsake for you," he said.

Joan stared at it, and said very rudely:

"It isn't a keepsake. It's a mouth-organ. Do you think I don't know?"

Nick let it drop through the railings.

"Anyhow, I shall leave it with you. I should like to think you played your one tune on it. You know—Three Blind Mice."

"Pooh!" said Joan, "I could play dozens of tunes if I wanted to."

"Well, anyhow, I've got to go," said Nick, for Polly was calling to him from the cab. There was

a great lump in his throat when he said, "Good-by, Joan!"

Joan did not answer. She had become very red in the face. Then suddenly she put both hands through the railings and caught hold of Nick, so that he thought she was in one of her wild-cat moods. But she drew him close and put her face up against the railings, and kissed him through them. Then she began to cry, and while the tears trickled down her cheeks, she fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a silver thimble.

"Will that do for a keepsake?" she said, holding it out through the railings.

Nick looked at it doubtfully.

"Well, I can't do needlework," he said. "That's girl's work, you know."

He said it very gently, so as not to offend her. But she was offended, for she flung the thimble into the road, and said:

"Don't take it then!"

Nick ran after it and caught it, just as it was rolling into the gutter.

"I *will* take it," he said, and he put it into his waistcoat pocket just as Polly was becoming so impatient that she threatened to go without him.

So he left the top-floor flat, and as he sat very still and quiet in the cab, he felt that he was driving away from most of the things that had made life a game to him. It was only because he was too proud

to cry before Polly that he did not let the tears get higher than his throat.

That night he slept in a strange little bed in a strange little room, within sound of the great sighing sea, which frightened him. He was glad to have Peter Rabbit on the chest of drawers, and Joan's silver thimble clasped tightly in his hand. And he was glad to know that in a little while Bristles would come to sleep in the camp bed nearest to the window, so that if Nick woke up in the night he would have some one to guard him from Anything which might jump out of the darkness of this unfamiliar room.

Bristles himself had undergone a change in the break-up of the top-floor flat. He was not the same Bristles as before in his habits and way of life. He had, for instance, left off being Something in the City, and that made all the difference to him. Because now he did not have to leave home early in the morning in a chimney-pot hat and black coat, and striped trousers creased under the mattress, which was the costume worn by people who add up the figures of people who have so much money that they can't count it themselves. The chimney-pot hat, the black coat and the striped trousers had been sold, with most of the other furniture, and with Beauty's dresses, underclothing, and ornaments. Bristles always dressed now in his Saturday afternoon clothes with a soft collar, a Norfolk jacket

without a button to the waistband, flannel trousers without a crease down the middle, and brown boots which it was Nick's duty and pleasure to clean with brown paste until he could see the image of his own face in them . . . Bristles had become a story-teller.

Looking back on this change in Bristle's way of life in after years, Nick is of opinion that it did not happen quite so suddenly as he imagined at the time. He believed that Bristles must have been preparing for a good long while to give up being Something in the City, and to take to story-telling. Because the first story which was printed in a book with his name of Nicholas Barton written in small gold letters on the cover—it seemed strange to Nick to see his own name staring at him from the book-shelf—was ready almost as soon as they had settled down in the cottage by the sea, so that he must have written it some time before. Perhaps it was meant to be a surprise for Beauty, because inside the cover, on the first page, were the words "To Beauty," as though it were a present to her. But Beauty had gone away before the printers had been quick enough, and Bristles had to keep the book himself.

After that he was always writing books. In his memories of this cottage by the sea, the dwelling-place of the second part of his life, Nick always sees his father most clearly in the front sitting-room

with a pipe in his mouth, and a wreath of smoke about his head, and a pad of white paper in front of him on the table, and a penny bottle of ink, into which he dipped his nib, which seemed to suffer from an insatiable thirst, and, in his eyes just that far-away look, as though searching for the New World, which may be seen in the painted eyes of Sir Nicholas Barton, his celebrated ancestor. And this memory portrait of Bristles, the story-teller, is accompanied by the ghost of a small boy sitting at the opposite side of the table, with his heels resting on the rung of a cane chair, with his elbows dug firmly into the red table-cloth (on which were many little black spots, and one or two big black spots, caused by the flourish of the thirsty pen and accidents to the penny inkpot), and his face bent over an open book, of which he turns the pages very quietly, so as not disturb the man who is writing. This is the ghost of the boy Nick, in the second part of his life. Faint ghost sounds and faint ghost scents haunt the memory of this scene, and come into the picture. There is the sound of a bee buzzing about the open lattice window, and the very soft murmur of the surf breaking on the sands beyond the patch of grass where the donkeys browse, and the faint fragrance of seaweed stealing through the open window, mixed with the aroma of tobacco, and a subtle smell of tar and fishing nets, and a stronger perfume of stocks and sweet williams in a honey-

jar on the table. The voice of Polly, singing a Cockney ballad—it was generally:

> You'd look sweet, upon the seat
> Of a bicycle made for two!

—breaks in upon the quieter ghost sounds, and causes Bristles to groan, and thrust his fingers through his hair—and sometimes among these memory sounds there is the voice of the Merman—a jolly, hearty voice—shouting through the window, "Now, you two bookworms, come out and warm yourselves in God's sunshine!"

It was a curious kind of life for a small boy who was no longer a child, and who, as the years passed, became a big boy, older in mind than in body, because he lived very much alone, so that his thoughts grew old quickly, and who did not have many companions of his own age, but made friends with men and women who forgot how young he was.

It would have been different if he had been to school and plunged into the rough and tumble of schoolboy life. But there were two reasons why he did not go to school. One was because Bristles was still as poor as a church mouse, and the other was because Bristles wanted Nick as his companion and could not bear the idea of parting with him.

Bristles was so poor (none of his books was ever a success) that sometimes there was hardly enough to eat in the cottage by the sea. At least

there were days when they had to go on short commons, filling up the hunger-holes with bread and butter and the last bit of honey in the jar, and when Polly confessed to Nick that she couldn't even make a drop of soup, because she had boiled the old mutton-bone until it was as white as a rag, and she supposed the next thing that would happen would be the workhouse for all of them.

Bristles was so poor that there was a big hole in the elbow of his Norfolk jacket and he had to be very careful of sitting down in his flannel trousers, which Polly had darned and patched until, as she said, they were nothing but darns and patches. And because Bristles was so poor, Nick grew out of his clothes much faster than there was money earned for new ones, so that he became sunburnt half way up his arms, because his jersey was so short, and sunburnt on his knees, because his stockings would not pull up so high. It was a joy to him to put off these old rags altogether by going to bathe with the Merman at the far end of the sand dunes, where they were alone with the sea and the sky and the wind, so that his body became sunburnt from head to foot and he did not feel the need of clothes.

Bristles was sunburnt too, because, although he was always writing books, he was greedy for the sun and the wind and he arranged his days in such a way that he could get as much as possible. Nick was first out of bed in the mornings, at six o'clock,

but by the time he had run across the grass and said Good-morning to the browsing donkeys, and flung his first stone into the sea (which was a kind of religious ceremony with him at the beginning of the day), Bristles was shaving himself at the open window before putting his head out to see which way the wind was blowing. Then for an hour before breakfast he could tramp along the sands as far as the Red Rocks, turning every now and then to face the sea and take in great breaths of air, and to stare away across the waters, as though trying to see the New World.

After breakfast Nick and Bristles would settle down to work, Nick to his lessons, which Bristles corrected until Nick caught him making big mistakes in Latin, which he had forgotten since he had been to school, and Bristles to his new book, which sometimes raced along, and sometimes crawled along, and sometimes stopped altogether, with nothing but a blank page to show at the end of the morning. The afternoons were always holidays, with the Merman, the Lonely Lady, or the Admiral, or with all of them together at a laughing tea-party under the shelter of the tussocky grass above the sand-dunes. Then in the evenings, out came the writing block and the reading books, and Bristles and Nick roamed in separate worlds, but were glad to look across at each other now and again, and to know that they were not alone. Then the light faded from the

window panes, and the room was filled with a pearly dusk, when Bristles would say, "By Jove, it is getting dark!" just as Polly brought the lamp in, with the oily fragrance which mixes with the other ghost-smells in the memory of Nicholas Barton the younger, now that the cottage by the sea has been swallowed up in the swift tide of life.

The lamp was the signal for supper, at which Nick startled Bristles by his vast appetite, and at which Bristles astounded Nick by his vaster appetite, because the sea air, which had only a little way to travel before it came through the open window, put a sharp edge upon their hunger, so that even a meal of bread and cheese, in the lean days of poverty, required no sauce.

The blinds were never drawn, because the velvet darkness of night closed in the windows, and because, as another reason, there were no blinds. On a moonlight night Nick liked to glance up from his book and see the silvery radiance of the sea outside, and to hear the swish of the surf upon the sands; and sometimes he would sit in the window seat with his legs curled up, while Bristles puffed at his pipe, and read out some of the books he had brought from the top-floor flat of Nick's first home.

They were "The Three Musketeers," and "Quentin Durward," and "Hereward the Wake," and "The Cloister and the Hearth," which opened to Nick a new world of romance more wonderful and more

entrancing than the fairy-tales which had first started his imagination upon journeys of adventure.

They were great chums, this man and boy, and the man was young in his mind because of the boy, and the boy old in his mind because of the man; so that they drew close together in comradeship. And yet there was always a secret between them which each kept in his heart and hid from the other. It was the secret of Beauty, whose name never crossed the lips of the man, so that the boy was afraid to speak of her, and who seemed to have been blotted out of the mind of the man, though the boy brooded and pondered and yearned, and never forgot.

Often Nick watched his father stealthily, wondering whether he was really happy without Beauty, and whether he had really forgotten her. There were times when Bristles gave a long-drawn sigh, which seemed to quiver up from his heart, when his pen ceased to run across the paper, and when his eyes stared out of the little window to the great sea, as though he saw Beauty's face there in the glitter of sunlight or in the gray haze. There were nights when he was restless, and when Nick was wakened by the sound of a stifled groan, or by the quiet tread of his father's feet, pacing up and down the little room under the low-beamed ceiling, which nearly touched his head. And one day, when Nick came into the sitting-room, after a long walk along

the dunes, he found his father with his head over a photograph which lay on the table before him. As Nick came in, he covered the photograph quickly with some of his sheets of writing, but not quickly enough to hide the smiling face of Beauty; and though he called out "Hulloh, old man, back so soon?" his voice trembled a little, and there was a strangely drawn look about his mouth, and his eyes were moist and shining. It was the only sign by which Nick knew that his father still remembered Beauty, and after that day Nick never saw the picture of the woman whose face still came to him in dreams so vividly, so like life itself, that when he woke he believed that her spirit had been with him. But he never gave a word or a hint of that to his father, because of that strange reticence which seals the lips of boys, and makes them hide some part of their soul from the most comradely of fathers.

His father was surely the most comradely of fathers. They two at least were in closer comradeship than most fathers and sons. Nicholas Barton, the elder, was almost womanly in his love for Nicholas, the younger, so that he was uneasy when the boy was away from him, even for an afternoon, and jealous of those who took him away.

It was generally the Merman who took him away, but sometmes it was the Admiral, and sometimes the Lonely Lady.

The Merman was the gentleman next door, and

before they knew that his name was Edward Frampton, Bristles and Nick called him the Merman, because he bathed at least three times a day in warm weather, and lay without much clothing on the sand with the sun scorching his body, more like a wild man who had come up from the sea than a citizen of earthly habits. He had made friends quickly with Nick, over the foot-high fence which divided their front gardens, and had addressed him on the very first morning with a "Hi, young fellow, do you know how to swim?"

"No," said Nick.

At this reply Mr. Edward Frampton thrust his fingers through his golden beard, opened his eyes very wide, and said, "Well, I never!" and then turned to a brown spaniel which was lying on the little lawn, with its tongue lolling out, and said:

"Jem, my lad, here's a young fellow of handsome appearance and gentlemanly demeanor, what doesn't know how for to swim! What do you say to that, my friend?"

Jem did not say anything, and lolled his tongue out a little further, but Nick felt intensely humiliated before the man and the dog, at not knowing how to swim, and felt that he must make an immediate explanation.

"I come from a top-floor flat," he said, "quite a long way from the sea."

The tall man with the golden beard, who had

blue eyes, and very short, fair hair, and who was dressed in a suit of white flannels with white shoes, turned to his dog again, and explained the explanation:

"Jem," he said, "this young gentleman wishes us to know that he came from a top-floor flat very far from the sea. That is the reason why he doesn't know how to swim. But surely it is no reason at all why he should let even a single day go by without learning that beautiful art which brings a man nearer to Nature than any other human exercise? We must teach the young gentleman how to swim, my friend. It is our bounden duty, after obtaining his papa's permission."

As it happened, Nicholas, the elder, did not know how to swim either, and this was a great comfort to Nicholas, the younger, who felt less shy, and less afraid, when they both went together with the Merman and his wise dog, to the dunes on the other side of the river, where they had the sea and sky and sand all to themselves, and where, under the guidance of their new friend, they took their first lessons in the waves. The Merman was a marvel, and Nick watched him with wonder. He could swim on his back, with just his nose out of the water, paddling swiftly with his feet, and he could swim sideways, with an over-arm stroke, like a sea-lion pouncing on its prey (at least, that was what Nick thought he looked like), and he could

even swim under the water, disappearing for a long time, like a submarine, and then coming up in an unexpected place, spouting like a porpoise. But though he was very tall and strong, so that when he stood up on the sand in his bathing dress with the water dripping from his golden beard, he seemed to Nick like Ulysses must have been, he was very gentle and kind, and did not play any tricks to frighten Nick, and put one hand under his body, and kept his head out of the water, and taught him to work his hands and legs, so that very soon Nick found, to his own amazement and to his great joy, that he could swim too, without swallowing the salt of the sea. Nick beat his father by several weeks, but after they had both learned they used to go with the Merman every day into the waves, and afterward sit beside him a little while, when he lay about naked in the warm sand, telling wonderful stories of adventure in foreign lands, and laughing in a tremendous way when he described the jokes he had had, as a young man, with black people on the West Coast of Africa, and with yellow people in China, and with copper-colored people in the Pacific Islands, most of whom had tried to kill him at odd times and in odd ways. Nick thought him the most wonderful man he had ever met, and just like the hero of a boy's book of adventure, and Bristles liked him very much, and exchanged tobacco with him, and talked with him about black people's religion

and their belief in ghosts and devils, which the Merman seemed to believe in, too.

"An extraordinary chap!" said Bristles, more than once after those conversations on the sand dunes. "I can't think why he lives all alone in that little cottage next door."

"He doesn't live quite alone," said Nick. "There is Jem with him."

"Yes, that's true," said Bristles.

For some reason or other Polly did not like the Merman, who sometimes came in to tea, and sometimes, in the winter, came in to play cards, after supper. She called him "that dreadful man," much to the indignation of Nick, who had made a hero of him. But Nick knew that there was a mystery about the Merman, which was hidden from him by Bristles and Polly, who sometimes whispered about it, and exchanged queer glances. He became aware of it gradually, until the day when he had a good fright, and knew that he had stumbled up against one of those mysteries which seem to lurk in life behind the outward look of things. The first time he became aware of it was when the Merman did not come out on a hot day for his three baths and his sun bath in the sand, nor on the following day, nor for six other days. During that time there was a great silence in the cottage next door, except sometimes when Jem barked as though in pain, and when all of a sudden there was a tremendous noise, as

though the Merman was lifting up his bed and banging it on the floor, so that all the china rattled on his kitchen sideboard, and all his assegais and bows and arrows, and Chinamen's swords, and savages' knives clattered as though they had come clashing to the ground from the nails in the wall.

Bristles had been frightened, and Polly had come in to say that her heart had jumped into her mouth, and then they had all listened to the great silence which followed. Bristles had gone next door to find out if the Merman were ill, and after a little while had come back with scared eyes, saying that he had knocked six times at the little front door, but could get no answer.

A week later the Merman came out of his cottage, a little pale-looking, but quite gay and cheerful, and without a word as to the reason of his long stay indoors. This kind of thing happened at regular intervals, about once every three months. Always at these times there was a silence next door, then the howling of the dog, and then the tremendous noise, and then the silence again.

Nick could not make out the meaning of it all, but one day, after the Merman had not come out for some time, Nick saw his face at the bedroom window. At least, it was an awful caricature of the Merman's face, though so distorted and so hideous that it was like the face of a wild beast. It had bloodshot eyes, and a fierce, haggard stare,

and there was something in it that was horrible and devilish. Nick felt his blood run cold, and then crept into his own house very much afraid. He did not tell his father what he had seen. For some reason he could not speak of that face at the window, which was so like and yet so unlike the man of whom he had made a hero. But he had a queer belief that the Merman was possessed now and then by one of those black men's devils of whom he used to speak and laugh while lying on the sand dunes, and he had a great pity in his heart for this man with the golden beard who once in three months was changed into the likeness of a wild beast. And yet, when he reappeared again, with more tales of adventure to tell, with just the same old hearty laugh, it was almost impossible to believe that he had been under such an evil spell. No one else seemed to notice this mystery, except Bristles and Polly, who exchanged queer looks, and no word about it was mentioned, even by the Admiral and the Lonely Lady, who had been the Merman's friends since his coming to the cottage by the sea.

CHAPTER II

THE ADMIRAL AND THE LONELY LADY

It was the Merman who taught young Nicholas Barton to swim, and it was the Admiral who taught him to sail, and it was the Lonely Lady who taught him to draw, and it was all three of them who gave him a greater knowledge of life than he could have learned from Bristles, and Polly, and his books, and his own thoughts.

For they were all remarkable people, and it is strange how Fate had arranged that those little whitewashed cottages facing the sea at Barhampton should be the dwelling places of the most remarkable people in the world, at least, in the opinion of young Nicholas Barton.

The Admiral was hardly less remarkable than the Merman, though the Lonely Lady was more remarkable than either of them, and most mysterious. The Admiral's real name was Captain John Muffett, and he had retired from the Merchant Service after forty years on the sea as boy and man. The Lonely Lady's real name was Miss Mary Lavenham—she was about as old as Beauty—and she had come to the cottage by the sea because, as she explained very frankly, it was cheaper than a mansion in Town,

and because, as she also explained very frankly, she hated all her relations like the Devil, and had given them all the slip, so that they thought she had run away with the grocer's young man, who had disappeared about the same time. At least that was the story she told to the Admiral, and the Merman, and to Nicholas, the elder, when she came to know him, though they told her quite as frankly as her own frankness that they did not believe a word she said, and were quite certain that she was a Princess in disguise who had run away from Court in order not to marry a fat German Prince with gold-rimmed spectacles and a scar down his cheek, and a nasty habit of wearing his boots in bed. (It was the Merman who invented this explanation of the Lonely Lady, and Nick firmly believed that there was some truth in it.)

Miss Mary Lavenham was the next-door neighbor of the Admiral on one side, and of the Merman on the other, and she said that she was ashamed of both of them, because her beautiful little garden full of flowers, which she had planted with her own hands, was bordered by the Merman's disreputable grass-plot which looked as if it had the mange, and by the Admiral's still more disreputable front yard, in which he had fixed up a carpenter's bench, and where there was a litter of shavings, rusty screws, and nails, and material for the making of model boats.

Nevertheless, Miss Lavenham was on very friendly terms with both her next-door neighbors, and occasionally plunged into their cottages, without permission, and, unheeding of their passionate protests, armed with a dustpan and broom, or with a very large duster, in order to indulge in what she called a "good old tidy-up." The Merman assured her that he hated being tidied up, that it was an outrage upon his pagan temperament, and that he could hardly sit down in his own room after the process had been completed. The Admiral growled, swore some very dreadful sea-oaths, and vowed that if he did not know how to keep his own house shipshape he ought to have been hanged off the yard-arm of his first brig, which was wrecked off the Azores. But Miss Lavenham assured them that they merely made these remarks to keep up the honor of their Sex, and that they were really very grateful to her, and that if they weren't, they ought to be. After which she retired to her own cottage, which was always as clean and bright as a new doll's-house, with a collection of the Admiral's socks, and with one or two of the Merman's flannel shirts, which she darned while she read Tennyson's poems, or, as a change, Shakespeare's sonnets, sitting at her house-door, with a black cat by her side. After that she would put on a pale blue sun-bonnet (she generally wore a butcher-blue pinafore over her frock) and with a folding stool slung over one arm,

and an easel tucked under the other, set forth to paint a picture of boats in the harbor, or shrimp catchers on the wet sands, or just a big stretch of sea and sky. She was always painting these pictures, and at first Nick didn't know which was the right way up when he looked at them, though afterward he saw into the mystery of them.

For some time he avoided this Lonely Lady, though she did her best to entice him into her cottage by the promise of piping hot cakes for luncheon, or sugary cakes for tea, and always said "Good morning, Nick, won't you come into my garden?" when he pretended not to see her from the other side of the fence. For, in some curious way, she reminded him of Beauty, and brought back a great pain into his heart, and in another curious way he hated the idea of getting friendly with any woman, because it seemed to make him unfaithful to the one woman who had gone away. Indeed, though he became very friendly with Miss Mary Lavenham, and talked with her more about the big things of the world than with any other friend, he was always on his guard lest she might drive out the memory of Beauty. And she knew that he was on his guard, because often, in later years, when his boyhood was slipping into young manhood, she would say:

"Nick, I know your brain, and I know your heart, but you have a little cupboard in your soul where all the real self of you hides from me. And that is

most unfriendly after all the time I've lavished upon your moral and intellectual progress."

The first time she tried to break down his guard was when, a few weeks after his coming to the cottage by the sea, he went to tea with her, under escort of the Admiral, who had taken him for a sail up the river, taught him the first lessons in tacking, and running before the wind, and had then said:

"Now, my lad, you and I have got to make ourselves civil to the kindest-hearted, sweetest-tempered, sturdiest, bravest, and jolliest little lady in all the world—and that is Miss Mary Lavenham, who lives at No. 4."

"Have *I* got to make myself civil to her?" asked Nick, with a sinking heart.

The Admiral (of course he wasn't really an Admiral, but that was the Lonely Lady's name for him) laughed at his woebegone face.

"My lad," he said, "you'll never get on in this world, unless you're civil to the petticoats. For whether you're first mate or skipper, or Commander of the Home Fleet, it's women can make your life Heaven or Hell, and so put it down in your logbook, and don't forget."

Thereupon he grasped Nick firmly by the hand, and saying, "I've no doubt your Pa will trust you under my flag," led him straight into No. 4, where Miss Mary Lavenham was spreading bread and butter.

She put down the knife, and smoothed down her butcher blue pinafore, and smiled at Nick across a great bunch of wall-flowers in the middle of the tea-table.

"I am so glad you came," she said. "The Admiral is so old, and the Merman is so big, and I am such a very Lonely Lady that I have longed for a boy to come and make me young again, and keep me company sometimes."

This speech, to which Nick answered nothing, because it gave him such a lot to think about, seemed to make the Admiral very angry.

"Old?" he said. "Did you say I was old, ma'am? Why, I would have you know that there's many a pretty girl in port that would be glad to go to church with Captain Jack Muffett, if only he had the pluck to say the word to one. Old, indeed! That's a nice thing to say about a smart young fellow of sixty-five!"

Having said this with great ferocity, so that Nick was afraid that he might stick the table knife into Miss Mary Lavenham (it was very close to him), he suddenly gave a hearty laugh, and his gruff voice joined with the laughter of Miss Lavenham, who seemed to think the speech a very funny one.

"You're not too old to cast a villainous eye upon any bit of baggage in a petticoat, that I will admit," she said. "And what always makes me wonder is, why in the world you've never been captured and

tamed by a she-hussy. How is it you've never got married, Admiral? Tell me that, before I give you some tea."

"Bashfulness—shyness—lack of pluck, ma'am," said the Admiral. "There's many a young lady that looked kindly on me—just as you do now—but I never had the courage to offer my hand and heart and the little bit in the Bank. Funny, isn't it?"

Miss Lavenham seemed to think it very funny, and laughed with her head thrown back a little, so that Nick could see the laughter bubbling in her throat, and then shook her forefinger at him, and said:

"Oh, you wicked old reprobate! Oh, you beery, bleary-eyed old Neptune! I believe you have a dozen wives in different parts of the world."

The Admiral laughed at this speech until the tears came into his eyes, and then gulped a great mouthful of hot tea, and after that wiped his mouth on a red bandanna handkerchief, and said, "What a lady it is! What a lady!"—as if Miss Mary Lavenham were the most wonderful woman in the world.

Just as he said that a big voice at the cottage door said:

"Of course she is a lady. If anybody says the Lonely Lady isn't a lady as well as lonely, I will strike him to the ground and tread his senseless skull under my righteously indignant heel."

This awful threat, which startled Nick most hor-

ribly for a moment, was uttered by the Merman, who stood smiling into Miss Lavenham's parlor from the little front door, and then said in a wistful way, while he stroked his golden beard:

"Of course I won't invite myself to a tea-party which isn't my own, but if anybody what is giving the tea-party issues a kind invitation, I shall be most happy to accept."

"Come in!" said Miss Lavenham, but Nick, who was watching her face, saw that she had become rather red, as she bent over the teapot, and he wondered if it was because the teapot was very hot, or if it was because the Merman had asked her to invite him.

The Merman had to bend his head very low to come in through the front door, and when he was inside the room, his head nearly touched the ceiling, and he seemed more of a giant than ever. But he took up Miss Lavenham's folding stool, and put it down by the side of the tea-table next to Nick, and sat down on it, so that he did not seem so tall, and then gave a great, big, happy sigh, and said:

"How nice it is when the Lonely Lady gives a tea-party to lonely men who have almost forgotten their manners."

After that Nick watched him closely, to see if he had forgotten his manners, but he did not leave his spoon in his tea-cup, and he said, "No thank you," when Miss Lavenham asked him to take a

second piece of cake (though he looked as if he wanted a second piece very badly), and he always rose a little way from the folding seat when Miss Lavenham went from the table to the fireplace to get some more hot water, as though he would have liked to have helped her, if she had not been too quick for him. Half way through the tea, Miss Lavenham, who had been making many funny little jokes which nearly caused the Admiral to choke (because they always came when he was drinking another gulp of hot tea) and made the Merman smile in his golden beard—paused with the teapot in her hand, and said:

"You know, I feel a very selfish kind of creature."

"*You* selfish?" said the Admiral. "Pooh! Stuff and nonsense."

"Quite absurd!" said the Merman. "As absurd as though a fairy godmother were suddenly to exclaim 'How unfairylike I am!' "

"We are all selfish," said Miss Lavenham. "Here we are enjoying the society of a small boy who has made us all feel very happy, because we have only talked to grown-up people for a very long time, and we have forgotten that his poor father is missing him all the time, and sitting down to a lonely tea without him, three cottages away."

It was that little speech which first broke down Nick's guard and made him like Miss Mary Lavenham, although he wanted to hate her—for Beauty's

sake. Because all the time he had been thinking at the back of his head about Bristles, and feeling sad because he was left alone. So when Miss Lavenham said, "Will you ask your father, Nick, if he will join a tea-party half way through, with three queer people who are glad to be his neighbors," he ran off joyfully, and gave the invitation to a rather moody Bristles, who was smoking his pipe at the sitting-room window with the tea-things untouched on the table.

"Hulloh, old man, I thought you were never coming back!" said Bristles.

When Nick gave him the message he looked rather alarmed, but Nick reassured him, and said:

"You needn't feel shy, father. The Lonely Lady tells frightfully funny jokes, so that one forgets all about one's shyness."

So Nicholas, the elder, joined the tea-party, and in a little while after the cold air he had brought in had got warm, Miss Lavenham made some more little jokes, and everybody laughed and the tea-party lasted such a long time that twilight crept into the room and the only light was made by the Admiral's pipe.

Nicholas sat very quietly, listening to stories of shipwreck and storms from the Admiral, who said one sentence between each puff, and listening to tales of savage people in far lands from the Merman, who told them like fairy-tales, and listening to remarks

from Miss Mary Lavenham, who always found something funny to say, and watching all their faces in the deepening gloom. It was then that he came to the conclusion that these were the three most remarkable people in the world, and it was then that he guessed that there was some mystery between the Merman and the Lonely Lady. Because he noticed that the Merman was always looking at the Lonely Lady with a queer look of longing in his eyes, especially when she was talking to somebody else, or moving about the room, so that she did not see him. And Nick saw that the Lonely Lady knew quite often that the Merman was looking at her (when he thought she did not know), and drooped her eyelashes and moved back into a deeper shadow, and tried to avoid his look. But he did not think of that after the tea-party, when he went back home. He thought only of the stories of adventure which had brought the great wide world into that little room, and of the Lonely Lady, whom he did not want to like too much, in case she might make him forget Beauty.

Many tea-parties had taken place on summer afternoons and winter afternoons, before a very particular one which made him remember Beauty with an awakening of his old heart-ache. This particular tea-party was given by his father, in honor of another book which had been born on that day. That is to say, the first copy had been delivered from the

publishers by the morning post, and it lay on the sitting-room table, wrapped up in tissue paper through which its name shone in golden letters.

"Nick," said Bristles—the old name was still used by Nick for the man whom he also called father—"this is my masterpiece, though I say so as shouldn't. All that is best in my brain and heart lie between those covers, and if I live to a hundred I shall never do anything so good."

"Do you think it will make any money?" asked Nick. "We could do with some, for we are both pretty shabby just now."

Then Bristles confessed, with a glint of pride in his eyes, that it had already made a bit of money, for the publishers had paid him £150 on account of royalties, and the check had come by the same post as the book, and was the prettiest bit of paper that ever he had seen.

He pulled out his pocket-book, and took out the check, and flourished it under Nick's nose.

"What do you say to that, old man?"

Nick whistled.

"I say! A hundred and fifty pounds! That's a tremendous lot, isn't it?"

"Well, not tremendous, exactly," said Nicholas, the elder, with assumed indifference to this amount, "but I can reckon it's enough to make ourselves look more decent and to buy Polly a new dress, and to pay her arrears of wages, and to settle up with the

tradespeople, who have been very insolent of late, and to leave a good bit over for future need. And, by Jove, yes, I think I'll give an extra special tea-party to-day, to celebrate the event."

He went into the kitchen as excited as a boy who has won a prize, and interviewed Polly on the number of extra special cakes which she could buy for five shillings.

"Five shillings worth of cakes!" cried Polly. "I wouldn't be guilty of such wicked extravagance, and all of us as poor as church mice!"

"I am as rich as Crœsus," said Bristles. "And I'm going to be fearfully extravagant, just for the fun of the thing, and just for once in a very long while."

"As rich as creases?" said Polly. "Well, if creases make one rich, I must be rolling in money, for I've as many creases in my best frock as an old scarecrow in the fields."

While Bristles was laughing with Polly in the kitchen, and frightening her by his wild desire to spend large sums of money (it was Polly who kept at bay the butcher when he demanded instant payment for meat which had gone the way of all flesh, and it was Polly who threatened to beat the baker with her longest broom because he had said "Those who can't pay shan't eat"), Nick examined the new book on the sitting-room table. He did not think much of his father's books. They were not excit-

ing like the novels of Jules Verne and Captain Marryatt and Alexander Dumas, and secretly he had come to the opinion that Bristles could not be a good writer, because his books never seemed to earn much money. But here was a surprise. There must be something in a book which had brought in £150 before it was published. He was filled with a great feeling of pride in his father's achievement. It would be good to let the Merman know, the Merman, who was rather contemptuous of Bristles as a literary man, and the old Admiral, who always had said that Bristles would be a great man when the public came to know him, and Miss Lavenham, who always read his father's books before they went to the printers. Nick bent over the volume, and opened the cover, with a new respect for his father's work, and then he saw four words on the first page which gave him a queer little shock. They were the words:

To the Lonely Lady.

Nick's heart gave a jump. He remembered that the first book which had come from his father's pen had been sent out to the world with a different dedication. He went to the shelf and took out that first book, and stared at the first page of it, upon which were the words "To Beauty." A great emotion stirred within him, and a wave of color swept into his face, beneath his sunburnt and wind-bronzed skin. This new dedication was like a treachery to his mother. It was a proof that his father had for-

gotten Beauty and had put her out of his mind forever. For he had said that in this new book was the best of his mind and heart. He had said it was his masterpiece—and he had inscribed upon it another name than that of the woman who was his wife.

This trivial incident, these four printed words on a white page, had an extraordinary and poignant effect upon young Nicholas Barton. An overwhelming sense of remorse, of shame and of yearning took possession of him, for those words were a sharp reminder to him that he also had allowed Beauty to slip out of his mind and heart, and that, as the years had passed, the image of her had gradually faded from his memory, until now, when it came rushing back, as though clamoring for his remembrance and for his loyalty.

He spoke her name aloud, in a whisper, "Beauty!"

Then Bristles came back and said:

"Let us gather in our guests from the highways and byways, for the banquet is at hand."

He did not notice that Nick was silent and gloomy-eyed, and he went gaily into the little front garden to invite Miss Lavenham to tea, and to search for the Admiral and the Merman, who had gone for a walk along the sand-dunes. It was an hour later when the tea-party began, with an excess of cakes which brought forth rebukes from Mary Lavenham for such wilful and wanton waste, and words of

respectful admiration from the Merman who said that his eyes were bigger than another part of his anatomy, and hearty laughter from the Admiral, who said that he would willingly be shipwrecked on a desert island with such a supply of victuals. Bristles was in the greatest good humor, and while Mary Lavenham poured out the tea, he told them the secret of the good fortune that had come to him. Upon this Mary Lavenham nearly dropped the teapot in order to clap her hands, and the Merman rose to his full height with his teacup in his hand, and solemnly proposed the health of England's greatest novelist, and the Admiral fastened his red bandanna handkerchief to the handle end of the toasting-fork, and hoisting it on to the table (with its three prongs stuck into a cottage loaf) called for three cheers to celebrate such a glorious victory in the Empire of wit and wisdom.

Only young Nick was rather quiet, because he was thinking of certain discoveries he had made about the three guests at his father's table since that day when they had all sat together at Mary Lavenham's tea-table, three cottages away.

During that time, which had slipped quietly along, he had been watching and listening, and thinking and learning in the company of these four people—the Lonely Lady, the Merman, the Admiral and Bristles—and he had come to love them all with a boyish love and gratitude, which even now, when

this story of his life is being written, surges into his heart at the remembrance of them. But during those years he had learned to know their faults as well as their virtues, their folly as well as their wisdom, and their sadness as well as their mirth. For each one of these people, gathered together by some freak of fate in those little whitewashed cottages which stood all of a row facing the great sea, had been touched by tragedy, and the knowledge of this, which came gradually to young Nicholas Barton, given to him at odd times in little fragments of self-revelation, until all their tales were told, so worked into the fibre of his imagination and so colored his mental outlook, that at the age when most boys are careless and ignorant of the death-traps which lie in wait for men and women, he was conscious of tragic perils and temptations, and of the deadly punishment exacted for human error, so that he was thoughtful beyond his years, and oppressed with the sadness which lurks behind the outward gaiety of life.

It was the Merman—Edward Frampton—who had first brought him face to face with ugly horror, for this great splendor of a man, so tall and strong and handsome, so courteous and gentle and gay-hearted, in his normal moods, was, at certain regular periods, degraded into a savage, besotted beast, emptied of all his humanity. It was quite a long time after Nick had seen that hideous face with

bloodshot eyes at the window, before he came to know the secret of this change in the man who was his hero. It was the sight of a drunken man down by the estuary which had first given him the clue.

"Why does that man stagger about like that?" he asked Polly, who was walking with him.

"The wretch is drunk," said Polly, giving the man a wide berth.

"How does he get drunk?" asked Nick.

"By swilling too much beer, or wine, or spirits," said Polly. "I can't think how men can make such beasts of themselves."

"Does it make them beasts?"

"Worse than beasts, Master Nick."

He pondered over these words, and some time later, when he happened to be in the Merman's back yard—they were building a rabbit hutch together—he saw a number of boxes piled up against the wall, and each one of them was labelled "Jones and Sons, Wine and Spirit Merchants." He counted the bottles in the top case. There were twelve of them. Then he counted the boxes. There were six.

"Six times twelve are seventy-two," said Nick.

"What's that?" asked the Merman, who was busy with the rabbit-hutch.

"All those bottles," said Nick. "Did you drink all the stuff that was in them?"

Then Nick wished that he had not asked the question, for a strange and dreadful look came into

the Merman's eyes, and for a moment the hand which was holding the hammer trembled so that he could not hammer in the nail.

He did not answer the question, but said:

"Don't you think you had better lend a hand with this job, my lad?"

But at that moment Nick had had a revelation. He knew now why the Merman was sometimes changed into a different being. He became drunk, like the man who had been staggering about the riverside. He made a beast of himself by "swilling" too much wine or spirit.

It was long after that when Nick became aware that this great, strong man looked to him for help, and was strangely and terribly eager for his company when the craving for that drink came upon him. As a small boy he did not understand that his comradeship was a restraining influence upon the golden-bearded giant, that his innocence, his childish imagination, his hero-worship, the touch of his small hand, the sound of his voice, had some divinity in them which fought against the drink devil clutching at the man's throat. But as he grew from a small boy into a big boy, some vague idea of this was revealed to him. He knew at least that Edward Frampton derived some comfort from his company, that he felt less afraid of the terror which haunted him when Nick was close, and that he was sometimes wistfully and pitifully anxious for Nick to go

a-walking with him. He spoke queer words which hinted at these things.

"Nick, old chum, don't leave me. I want you—badly."

"Let us have one of our long yarns together, out in the sunshine, Nick. I am scared at the big devil Loneliness in that little cottage of mine."

"If I had a small son of my own, like you, Nick, I might have been saved from things which make me hate myself."

One day he called out to Nick from the front garden:

"Come for a stroll, old chum?"

"I can't!" said Nick. "I have got some lessons to do."

The Merman's face seemed to be clouded by a shadow.

"Give up the lessons for once. I must have you with me. I really must."

"I'm sorry," said Nick. "There's something I ought to finish. I'll come to-morrow."

The Merman's voice trembled when he spoke again.

"Come now. To-morrow will be too late. Come now, Nick. I have got a fit of the Blue Devils."

There was something in his voice and eyes which was rather frightening. It was as though his whole soul called out to this small boy to save him from a great danger.

"All right!" said Nick.

They went off to the sand-dunes together, the Merman clasping Nick's hand, rather tightly, as though he might run away. And during the first part of the walk he was quite gay, and told Nick the life-story of Francis Drake, and said that he, Edward Frampton, had stood on the very spot where Drake had first seen the waters of the Pacific, praying God that he might sail a ship on that great sea.

"It is a great thing to have a faith in God," said Edward Frampton. "I think it must give a man a grand strength and courage, because he believes that if God is on his side, all things are possible to him. The reason why there are so few great men to-day is that faith in God is dwindling out of the hearts of men. That is bad luck for us."

This was quite in the style of the Merman, and afterward he spoke of his own vagabond life, and of the way in which he had never done anything worth doing, because he had never faced the difficulties of life and overcome them, but had always taken the easier road, which generally led into a quagmire.

"Funny thing, Nick," he said, "but in this hulking body of mine there is no strength of will. This right arm of mine is as strong as steel. But at the heart I am as soft as putty. How do you account for that?"

"I expect you have got your mother's heart," said

Nick, who since certain conversations with Bristles about his ancestors was a great believer in heredity.

The Merman was strangely moved by these words, and took off his hat as if he were in church.

"My mother's heart?" he said. "God bless her, she had a heart of gold."

"Gold is soft," said Nick.

"That's true," said the Merman.

As they went on walking, Nick noticed that the man kept looking back over his shoulder, as though afraid of being followed, or as though some voice were calling him. Once or twice he hesitated, as though tempted to turn back, but he went on again, talking quickly and rather excitedly about his mother, who was a queen among women, and about his father, who had been a General and had fought in many battles, and had been a hard, stern man.

"Do you know, Nick," he said, "I come of a very great and distinguished family? Why, I have a brother now who knows the King as well as I know Captain Jack Muffett, and I have two uncles who rule over provinces in India as big as the whole of Ireland. Funny, isn't it? If they saw me to-day they would walk across the road, and pretend they did not know me. Quite right, too, for I am the bad boy of the family."

He started, as though Something had touched him on the shoulder. And although the sun was scorching his face, he became quite pale, as though some

great fear had taken hold of him. But he clutched Nick's hand tighter, and talked faster, and said:

"Nick, my boy, you have a great future in front of you. For you have got a good brain, and great qualities of character, and I believe the good fairies speak to you and keep away the bad fairies. One of these days we shall all be proud of you, and none more proud than the Merman, who taught you to swim and told you lots of yarns, and remembered all that was best in his own boyhood when he was in your company."

When he had spoken those words, he stopped dead in the way across the tussocky grass on the cliff side, and said:

"I have forgotten something. I must go back!"

There was a look of anguish on his face, which was very white. He shivered in the hot sunshine, as though he was very cold, though beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead.

Nick clasped his hand.

"Don't go back!" he pleaded. "Let us sit here and tell tales."

"Oh, my God!" said the Merman. "I must go back. Hold my hand tight, Nick, or I must go."

Nick held his hand tight, but the Merman gave a great groan, and said:

"It's no use. The Devils are at me again. Not even you can save me this time, Chummy."

He wrenched his hand free and set off at a great

pace, like a hunted man, back along the cliff road, jumping the boulders, and then running across the sands. Nick watched his figure, with a strange wonderment, a sense of impending horror. That night there was the noise of destruction in the Merman's cottage, and the howling of Jem, and for a week Jem's master was invisible.

Well, that was the Merman's tragedy, and the knowledge of it was a black cloud behind the sunshine of Nick's boyhood.

The Admiral's tragedy was not so great, yet it was a lesson to Nick of the great tragic spirit of fate, which selected some men for its victims.

No one who saw Captain Jack Muffett sailing his dinghy up the estuary, or making model boats in his front garden, or accusing himself of bashfulness to Miss Lavenham, to whom he said the boldest things, would have imagined that this merry old man was hiding beneath his merriment a memory which haunted him at night, which made him stare sometimes out to sea with tears in his eyes, which had spoiled all the memories of his seaman's life.

In spite of the tragedy which had ended his career at sea, the Admiral was of a simple and childlike character, and often his natural gaiety helped him to forget the ghost-ship of the *White Seal.* Nick found it easy to make a chum of him, because he knew so many things which a boy

wants to know, and was very keen about the things which a boy likes to do. Miss Lavenham said that she did not know which was the biggest boy—the Admiral or Nick—when they were both busy in the front garden carving out a new boat, fitting her up with spars and rigging, and making sails out of pieces of the Admiral's old shirts, with the help of big needles and thick cotton. She often came out of her front door to peep at them, or put her head through the little front window above her geranium pots, to smile at the white-haired old man and the fair-haired boy, who were talking very seriously together while they were sawing and hammering, planing and shaving. She liked to hear snatches of their conversation—Nick asking many questions about ships and shipping, about storms and shipwrecks, about desert islands and savage tribes, the old man telling his yarns as one comrade to another, interlarded with scraps of philosophy and high morality.

"It's a great training in discipline and duty—a life at sea. The fellow that skulks, or the chap who is always answering back, is quickly marked down by his messmates or the old man."

Nick had learned by this time that sea captains always went by the name of the "old man."

"We're a rough lot, we seafaring men. We get into the habit of using awful language—the Lord forgive me, I find it hard to forget the bad words

when I'm at all put out—but there's many a soft heart underneath an oily, and, taking us all in all, we're honest, hardworking, and God-fearing ruffians. You see, my lad, when you're sailing, day after day with nought but the sea and the sky around you, and with only a leaky ship under you, big thoughts come into your head, and you keep turning them over, like a plug of 'baccy in your hollow tooth. What's the meaning of life? What's the meaning of death? How long have you got before God whistles you up aloft? Why, the drunkenest, beastliest, laziest lubber that ever signed on at Cardiff and jumped the pierhead, as the saying is, knows that God stares down at him when he's got into open waters, and enters up his sins in the eternal log-book for the great court of inquiry. That's why the seafaring men are very religious, especially after they've been making beasts of themselves ashore. I tell you what it is, my lad, there's no getting away from God at sea. There's nowhere to hide."

"It must be rather awkward sometimes," said Nick very solemnly. He was always very solemn when the Admiral talked about God, because the old man seemed to have had a good deal of private conversation with the Almighty.

"Devilish awkward," said the Admiral, "especially when your conscience is biting you like a snake with poisonous fangs."

"Can't you get away from God in the cabin?" asked Nick.

"Not often," said the Admiral, "because His voice comes calling down in the wind. Why, many a time I've heard Him calling—'Jack Muffett, Jack Muffett, you're a dreadful bad lot, Jack Muffett, and I've got my eye on you and don't you forget it.'"

"It's a funny thing," said Nick, "I have never heard God speak to me."

"You aren't old enough," said the Admiral, "and you've done no sin, properly so-called. Please God you never will."

"I expect I'll have to," said Nick. "Seems to me one must do a bit of sin before one grows old."

The old man groaned.

"Why, that's true enough. But let 'em be light ones, Nick, not them scarlet-colored ones."

That was one of the conversations overheard by Miss Lavenham, and there were many like them. Sometimes she felt called upon to interrupt these dialogues on life and religion, which were getting too deep, she thought, for a boy's mental well-being, and she would pop her head out of the window and say:

"Would either of you pirates like a hot cake, just escaped from the oven?"

Or—

"How about a nip of my fine old lemonade, for a thirsty throat?"

To which the Admiral would say, with his hand to the salute:

"Why, ma'am, speaking for myself, I should say it would be a most unexpected pleasure, and thank you very kindly."

Then to Nick he would say, *sotto voce:*

"An extraordinary woman! A delightful, kind-hearted creature! If I was a bit younger and you was a bit older, she might take her choice of two lovers, eh, my lad?"

Thereupon he would chuckle, and wink at Nick, and call him "a sly young dog," and a favorite with the ladies.

Miss Lavenham did not hide from Nick that she desired his friendship, and was very happy when they two were alone together, in her own cottage, where the very floor was scrubbed so clean and white (by her own hands) that one might have eaten one's meal off it, with great comfort and contentment, and where there was an air of dainty elegance within these rooms, with their lace window curtains, and water-color paintings and china ornaments, and chintz-covered chairs, which made the place quite a contrast to the bachelor dwellings in the same row of cottages.

Often she would invite Nick in and show him albums full of sketches which she had made in Paris when she was studying art, and photographs of all the places she had visited when she was a girl—Rome

and Florence and Venice, and other cities of Europe —and photographs of hundreds of pictures by the old masters, as she called them, which she had seen in the great picture galleries.

"You must have been very rich to go about like that," said Nick, after one of his visits.

Mary Lavenham laughed.

"My father and mother were rich. But that's not the same thing, is it?"

"Almost the same thing," said Nick. "If Bristles were rich, I should be rich. Don't they ever give you any money?"

"I never ask for it," said Miss Lavenham. "I am far too proud and independent."

Then she jerked her head up a little, and looked very proud indeed.

"Have you quarrelled with 'em?" asked Nick, after a moment's thoughtfulness, and searching for the truth with his insatiable desire for knowledge.

"What a boy it is for asking questions!" said Miss Lavenham, and her face flushed so quickly that Nick thought he had offended her.

But, seeing that, she took hold of his hand and said, "I will tell you my little story, if you promise to keep it secret."

"I promise," said Nick.

"Because I don't want everybody to know why I am such a very lonely lady," said Miss Lavenham.

The reason why she was such a very lonely lady

was made clear in the story she told, after she had shown Nick a photograph of a handsome young man in the uniform of an Army officer.

"That was the man I loved," said Miss Lavenham. "He was a very splendid young man, so gay, Nick, that it was a joy to hear his laughter, and so brave that although he was a very young man he had the medal which is given for the greatest bravery."

"I know," said Nick. "The Victoria Cross."

"Yes," said Miss Lavenham, "and here it is."

She went to a little cabinet, and pulled out a little leather case, and inside was the bronze medal with the words "For Valor."

She sat with it in her lap, and looked at it with shining eyes.

"One day he asked me to marry him, and of course I was very proud and happy, because to marry Dick seemed the very best thing in the world."

"And didn't you marry him?" asked Nick.

Miss Lavenham looked up, and laughed at him, though her eyes looked as if they had water in them.

"If I had married him my name would not be Mary Lavenham and I should not be a Lonely Lady."

"Why didn't you marry him?" asked Nick. "Did he get tired of you?"

"Bless the boy, what questions he asks!" said Miss Lavenham, as sharply as if she had been stung by a bee. But then she said very softly:

"That was not the reason. It was because my father and mother did not want me to marry him. They were very rich, and my Dick was rather poor, and they wanted me to marry a man with a big name and a lot of money. So what do you think they did?"

Nick could not give a guess.

Miss Lavenham's voice changed, and her eyebrows joined together over her nose. "They whispered a lot of evil things about my poor Dick, and they made me believe that he was a bad man, who had done all sorts of badness which no gentleman should ever do. Like a fool I believed them, and sent Dick back the little ring which he had given me, and all the letters which he had written me, and all the love which I had stored up in my heart for him."

"And what did *he* do?" asked Nick.

"He died," said Miss Lavenham, speaking the words very softly and quickly.

She did not tell Nick then how he had died. It was only in after years that Nick heard that part of the story. But he knew now why Miss Lavenham was a Lonely Lady. She had found out all the falsehood of the evil things that had been told her by her rich father and mother, and she had never spoken to them again, after the time when she had uttered words which had left them white and trembling, and very much afraid of her. She had gone to study art in Paris, and afterward had come to

the little cottage by the sea, and now had settled down into being a Lonely Lady, painting pictures which she sold just well enough to keep her, as she said, "poor but proud."

After that story Nick sat as quiet as a mouse, thinking over it. He was very sorry for Miss Lavenham. But greater than his pity was the shock, something like fear, which came to him with the knowledge that a father and mother should speak bad things about a good man. His imagination shuddered before the vision of such great wickedness in life. He began to have a secret fear of the big world into which one day he would have to make his way, on the great adventure of manhood. Boy as he was, he shrank back from the unknown terrors of evil thoughts and evil things, which lie in wait for men on their way through the world. Always the memory of his own great tragedy, the going away of Beauty, her capture by the Beast, gave even to his childhood a sense of peril lying behind the outward peace of things, and in his boyhood the haunting memory was like a warning of unknown dangers, which might, at any time, pounce out upon him. He was not sure even of Bristles, nor of Polly. If Beauty had gone, why not Bristles? Even Polly might be captured by some Beast, in the disguise of a butcher, or a fisherman. For Beauty's disappearance had made all the groundwork of his life

insecure, and his little house of knowledge was built on shifting sands.

Looking back on these days, Nicholas Barton knows now that Miss Lavenham guessed these uneasy forebodings in his heart, and did her best to give him courage and strength, to fit him for his days of great adventure. When they went on walks together in the flower fields of the countryside, when she taught him to sketch from nature, as they sat together down by the estuary, drawing and painting the boats that lay on the mud-banks which gleamed like gold in the sun, or when in the long winter evenings she helped him with his lessons, and read out old tales to him, her talk to him was always of the future that lay ahead.

"One of these days, when you are a man, Nick, you will remember those tales of the Greek Heroes, and they will be like old songs in your heart, calling to you to hold your head high in the hour of danger or defeat, and to be humble and meek in the hour of victory."

Again—

"I like a man to be strong, Nick. I like men who are not afraid of taking risks, and who do not whine when they fail. Every man should try to win the medal "For Valor."

She had queer ideas about the love of men for women.

"When you are a young man," she said, "a

woman will come into your life, and catch hold of your heart. You must be very careful then, because there are some women who when they catch hold of a man's heart drag him down, and they rob him of all his ideals, and of all his courage, and leave him a poor bruised and broken wreck of a man. I have seen it many times. So you must take care to avoid a woman like that, avoid her like grim death, Nick."

"Perhaps she won't be avoided," said Nick, who was no longer a child. "What can a man do then?"

"Run away," said Miss Lavenham. "Run away as hard as ever he can, for there is no other way to safety."

These were queer conversations between a woman and a boy, but it was Nick's fate to live among queer people who talked to him as though he were almost of their own age, but just young enough to need a little guidance from their wider knowledge. And it was for this reason that he was quick to see the hint of mysteries about him which other boys of his age would not have noticed, and very quick to feel the cold touch of the shadow of an impending peril.

It was a sense of peril which came to him quite sharply when he read the words on the front page of his father's new book: "To the Lonely Lady," for these words, which were a sign that Beauty was forgotten, were also an explanation of little

happenings which at this time had made him wonder whether there was to be another upheaval of his home-life.

For some time he had been watching his father and watching Miss Lavenham, and he had been certain that there was a new secret between them which they were trying to hide from each other, and from the Merman, who was also watching. He had noticed, for instance, that his father had become very anxious to be with Miss Lavenham alone, and that he invented all kinds of excuses to get Nick out of the way when there was any chance of his being alone with her. Some of these excuses were so absurd that even Miss Lavenham had laughed at them, as, for instance, when he told Nick to walk down to the railway station to get the right time, and when he asked him to tramp to Whitecliffe—a five-mile walk—to buy a pot of honey from an old bee-keeper, although he very well knew that there was no more honey to be got from that source of supply. There were other pretexts made by Bristles to get Nick out of the way, and Nick had been hurt, and had even found a little water in his eyes, at the thought that his father was beginning to dislike his company.

Then he had discovered that Miss Lavenham was also inventing ways of being alone with his father, so that she might listen, with her chin propped in the hollow of her hand, while Bristles read out some

of the manuscript of his new book. She invented excuses when the Admiral invited her to a sailing trip up the estuary, and when the Merman invited her to a picnic at Whitecliffe, and Nick was astonished at these excuses, because in former days she had always clapped her hands with joy whenever she received such an invitation from the Admiral or the Merman. And he knew that some of these excuses could not be very true, for after she had said that she was too busy with her needlework, or too busy with her painting, he found out that she had been sitting with Bristles in his parlor or hers, until the twilight had crept through the windows, and had only hurried in when the voices of the returning wanderers had warned her of their approach. More than once or twice on coming home like this, Nick had wondered why his father's face wore such a queer look—he had a queer, shining light in his eyes, and a queer little smile about his lips—and why his voice had trembled slightly when he had said, "Hulloh, Nick, old boy, had a good time?" He had also wondered why the Merman had looked from Miss Lavenham's face to his father's face with a furtive, watchful, curious gaze, which he tried to hide, and why Miss Lavenham was uneasy and self-conscious, so that her face changed color, when she knew that he was watching her like that.

He became afraid that the Merman was beginning to avoid his father, just like his father was begin-

ning to get Nick out of the way, by all sorts of excuses. For the Merman no longer came in to play cards, and gave up the long conversations which he had liked to have with Bristles in a cloud of tobacco smoke; and if they met on the sand-dunes, or outside the cottage, or along the road to Whitecliffe, the Merman strode past Bristles with a curt nod, which was very different from the old hearty way of his former greetings.

Then one day something happened which alarmed Nick as though the cottage by the sea were threatened by a great tidal wave, which might sweep it away.

It was one afternoon, when he was coming home from a long tramp in the country with the Merman, who had been in one of his gay moods and had told many good stories of his life as a palm-oil ruffian on the West Coast of Africa. They had reached the stile which crosses the footpath from Whitecliffe to Barhampton, by way of the fields, when suddenly the Merman halted, and laid his hand heavily on Nick's arm, and said:

"Slow down a bit."

Nick slowed down, startled by the sharp tone of the Merman's voice, and then a little way ahead, under the shadow of the tall trees by the side of the stream which runs down from the high land of Whitecliffe, he saw two figures. They were Miss Lavenham and his father.

They were walking very slowly, and presently came to a standstill under a tree where a nightingale was already beginning to tune up for his evening love-song.

"They are listening to the bird," said Nick.

"Hush!" said the Merman, though Miss Lavenham and Bristles were too far off to hear Nick's words.

At that moment Nick saw his father take both Miss Lavenham's hands and raise them to his lips; and instantly that gesture awakened some memory in Nick's mind, which put sharp pain into his heart, even before he had remembered. Then the memory grew clear in his mind, like a picture which has been hidden behind a dusty pane of glass now wiped clean by a sponge. It was a little, clear-cut picture of Bristles raising another woman's hands to his lips, while he smiled down into another woman's face, which was Beauty's.

The Merman gave a harsh laugh, and Nick looking up at him, saw that he was very pale, as if one of his bad moods were coming on.

"Let's strike across the fields and take the short cut home," said the Merman, and without waiting for Nick, he strode away in the opposite direction to Miss Lavenham and Bristles.

Not one other word did he speak on the way home, but once he gave a deep, quivering sigh, as if there were some agony in his heart.

Nick himself was not in the mood for chatter. He did not ask a single question. And when an hour later Bristles came home, whistling a little tune, until he said, "Tired out, old man?" Nick kept his head bent over his book, and did not answer. For in that hour the idea had come to him that Miss Lavenham had caught hold of his father's heart, and had made him forget Beauty, whom Nick remembered as though she had come back to him after many years.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUNG LADY WITH LONG LEGS

THE CHANGE which had taken place in young Nicholas Barton during those years which had passed since he left the top-floor flat in Battersea Park—a change not only of body but of mind—was revealed to him quite abruptly one day when he met a ghost of his old life in the brilliant sunshine which dazzled on the white promenade at Barhampton and gave a rich golden tint to the sands where scores of children were digging castles. It was the holiday season, when Barhampton was invaded by many families who crowded into the boarding-houses and lodging-houses, and who, for three or four weeks, lived between sea and shore until the pale faces were bronzed almost as deeply as the color of Nick's own cheeks, and then went away with their piles of luggage, to make way for other families who took the vacant rooms. It was the season when the donkeys, who browsed on the patch of scrubby grass outside the whitewashed cottages, became beasts of burden for bare-legged children; when the black and white Pierrots set up their wooden stages on the sand and gave three entertainments a day, which filled the air with music-hall songs, whistled and hummed for the

rest of the year by the permanent inhabitants of Barhampton, who could not get the tunes out of their heads; and when the promenade was a kind of human kaleidoscope of shifting colors, as girls in striped frocks, ladies with flaming parasols, children with toy balloons, dogs with bows in their hair, and bald-headed babies in wicker go-carts passed up and down between the meal times, when there was a little quietude.

It was the season when Bristles groaned over his manuscripts because the music-hall songs came floating through the open window, taking possession of his brain; when the Merman turned his back on the sea and marched into the country-side, to get far from the madding crowd, when the Admiral carved out his model boats in the back yard instead of in his front garden, because he hated being stared at by gangs of small children, and when the Lonely Lady kept a constant watch upon her flower-beds and pounced out at intervals with a whip to chase away impertinent and intruding dogs.

Nick himself liked the holiday season, because the crowds gave him an agreeable sense of gaiety and life. He liked to hear the shouts and laughter of the children on the sands, he envied the boys and girls who ran races with each other, on donkey-back, or with bare feet, he was irresistibly attracted by the black and white Pierrots, whose comic songs and pathetic ballads appealed to his sense of humor, and to his sentiment.

But there was another reason why he liked the holiday season and the crowds of people who came from London, and that reason he kept secret. He had a queer idea that one day he might find Beauty among them. His eyes were always busy searching for her—looking under the parasols of pretty ladies, staring wistfully into the faces of women in striped frocks, who sat reading novels in the folding chairs with linen canopies, watching those who came out of the bathing-machines, with little cries of fear and laughter as they put their toes into the water. Sometimes, though he was unconscious of the fact, the searching, wistful eyes of this tall boy with the shabby clothes, and the tousled hair, and the deeply tanned face, attracted the notice of the pretty ladies, and they looked after him as he passed, and seemed to find a pleasure in the sight of his tall, slim figure, in spite of his shabbiness.

Once he overheard a lady say as he went by, "What a handsome boy!"

He looked round, not at the lady, but to see what boy had excited her admiration. But there was only a donkey-boy within sight, and he had a Puck-like, goblin face. It did not occur to Nick, even for a moment, that he was the boy referred to. As yet he had not any self-consciousness in regard to his personal appearance, except when his ragged clothes sometimes made him ashamed in the company of well-dressed people.

It was on the promenade that he met the ghost of his first life. At least, this face under a pink parasol seemed to him like a ghost face, or a dream face, stirring vague memories, making his pulse beat for a moment, like it did sometimes when he heard a strain of music which Beauty had played to him in the long ago.

It was the face of a girl with golden hair plaited up into a thick pig-tail. She was rather tall for a girl who looked about thirteen years of age, and she wore a white frock which was rather short, because of her long legs. She was a very elegant girl. Her white frock was made of silk, very soft and creamy-looking, and she wore a broad-brimmed straw hat with a curly white feather in it, and she had shoes of shiny leather with high heels and big black bows. It was something about the girl's eyes and mouth which startled Nick and made him think of a dream face. They were brown eyes with laughter in them, and there was rather a scornful look about the mouth, as if it was in the habit of speaking scornful words. The girl was walking with a lady of large size, and they stood just in front of Nick, staring at a boat far out at sea. But then, as if attracted by Nick's gaze upon her, the girl shifted her pink parasol, turned her head slightly, and looked round so that their eyes met.

"Hulloh, Joan!" said Nick.

The words slipped from him suddenly, just as the

memory of this face suddenly opened a little cupboard in his brain. At this meeting with Joan Darracott, the girl of the ground-floor flat, a tremendous excitement stirred him, so that his heart was beating like a sledge-hammer, and a bright light came into his eyes. He felt immensely glad.

And Joan did not seem to know him. At his words she gave a look of surprise, and she tightened her mouth, and stared at him, up and down, as though annoyed that so shabby a boy should presume to speak to her.

It was the lady by her side who answered Nick. She was a large lady in height and width, and she raised a pair of glasses which she carried on a tortoise-shell handle, and stared through them at Nick, with hard eyes.

"Who are you, boy?" she asked, in a most haughty voice.

Nicholas was abashed. He could not understand why Joan did not recognize him, because it did not occur to him that he had changed as much as Joan, since they had last met.

He stuttered out his answer:

"I'm Nick. I used to live in the top-floor flat."

"Nick who?" asked the large lady. "And what top-floor flat?"

Before he could answer, Joan Darracott had remembered. She laughed as though it were a good joke.

"Oh, yes, mother, don't you remember? I used to play with Nick. He was the boy who tore out a handful of my hair."

"Good heavens, child!" said the large lady, gazing now at Nick as though he were a dangerous young animal.

But Joan held out her hand—it was in a white silk glove—and said very sweetly:

"How do you do, Nick? How big you have grown!"

"Have I?" said Nick.

That was all he could say. After that he was quite tongue-tied, because he was suddenly self-conscious about his shabby clothes, and overwhelmed by the beauty and elegance of Joan Darracott. He wanted desperately to talk to her, but he could not think of anything to say, especially when the large lady was staring at him so savagely, and he thought it would be better to slink away quickly before Joan became ashamed of being seen with him.

"Good-by," he said, with a queer gulp in his voice. He lifted his cap, and, not daring to look up into Joan's face again, went quickly across the sands.

For the rest of the day he was tremendously stirred by this meeting with Joan. It brought back with a rush all the memories of his life at Battersea, during Beauty's time. He went to the chest of drawers in his bedroom and searched for the thimble which Joan had given him as a keepsake.

He put it in his waistcoat pocket, and wondered whether Joan had kept his mouth-organ. How changed she was, and yet, how exactly the same after one became accustomed to the change! She had grown like Alice in Wonderland, but she still wore a short white frock with long black stockings, and her hair was just the same color, only more like crinkled gold—he wished she had not remembered so quickly about the handful he had taken—and her eyes had the same way of smiling, and her mouth the same way of tightening up when she was vexed; even two little freckles were still on her left cheek, just as when he had teased her about them years ago.

For a few moments Nick was overwhelmed with the thought of all the time that had passed since he had last seen the girl of the ground-floor flat. He counted back four years, five years, six years. Good heavens, how quietly they had slipped by! And how strange it was that not until he saw Joan again did he realize the difference those years had made to him and her. It made him feel like Rip Van Winkle. Then another emotion took possession of him. It was a passionate regret that Joan had become too "grand" for him. Before she recognized him she had stared at him as though he were a beggar boy, or a donkey boy. She had seen the hole at his right elbow, the places at his knees which Polly had darned and darned. With sudden anger

in his heart he wished to goodness she had not come to Barhampton with her scornful look and her haughty mother. They were both fearfully stuck-up . . .

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Bristles at the dinner-table. "Anything gone wrong?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Nick.

But Bristles looked at him once or twice in a furtive way, as though wondering whether he might be ill or upset about anything.

For three days Nick avoided the sands, and the Pierrots, and the promenade, though all the time something seemed to tug him in that direction, and he had to resist the tug by exerting all his will-power. But on the fourth day, when he was sitting on the sand-dunes at the other side of the estuary quite alone, and far from the crowd, a voice called to him:

"Nick! Nick! Is that you?"

He turned his head quickly, and sat up in the sand, and saw Joan a little way off. Then she walked forward slowly, twisting her pink parasol as Nick sprang up, and took off his cap.

"I am glad I have found you at last!" she said. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

"Have you?" said Nick. "Why?"

He was tremendously surprised that she should have been looking for him.

Joan laughed, as though amused by his surprise.

"One gets so bored having no one to talk to. Mother is always lying down and reading novels. It's an absurd thing to do when one comes to the seaside. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Nick.

Joan put her head on one side, and looked at Nick, up and down, so that he quailed before her inquiring gaze.

"I suppose you really *are* Nick? The Nick who used to tell me such queer fairy-tales? You are so big and different!"

"I am the same Nick," said the owner of the name. "Shall I prove it to you?"

"If you please," said Joan, as though she did not care very much whether he proved it or not.

He fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out the thimble, and held it out on the palm of his hand.

"You see, I have kept it all these years."

Joan Darracott stared at the thimble as though it might have been a curious insect.

"How does that common little thimble prove that you are Nick?"

"Why, of course it does!" said Nick, disappointed at her forgetfulness. "Don't you remember? You gave it me the day I went away, as a keepsake, in return for my mouth-organ."

Joan poked the tip of her parasol into the sand, and seemed to be groping back in her memory.

"Why, yes!" she said at last. "I gave that mouth-

organ of yours to a grubby little Italian boy who came round with a monkey."

Nick felt the pang of another disappointment. He would have been glad if Joan had treasured the mouth-organ in remembrance of their friendship. But he put the thimble in his pocket again, and said very humbly:

"I'm awfully glad to see you again, especially as you're not ashamed to speak to me."

Joan pretended to be surprised, but she colored up a little, because she remembered that she had been a little ashamed to speak to him on the promenade. He looked almost like a fisher boy in his ragged old jersey and shabby knickerbockers and big clumsy boots."

"Why should I be ashamed to speak to you, Nick?" she asked with an air of injured innocence.

"Because you are so grand. Like a Princess compared with me."

She seemed to take that as a compliment, and laughed in a pleased way as she twiddled her pink parasol.

"I wish I *were* a Princess! That would be jolly fun. As it is, mother has to stay at beastly boarding houses with a lot of old cats spying on one from all the chairs in the drawing-room."

"Old cats? Why do they keep such a lot?"

"Old frumps," said Joan. "Dowdy old women who cackle at one. Surely you know the kind?"

Then she spread out her parasol on the scrubby grass and sat down on it, with her knees tucked up.

"What do you do with yourself down here?" she asked. "Do you live here all the time?"

Nick tried to give her in a few words some idea of his life, and told her about the whitewashed cottages and about the Merman and the Admiral and the Lonely Lady, whom he called by their real names, and about Bristles and his books.

She seemed to listen with only half an ear, and did not seem very much interested. While he was speaking she picked up pebbles and flung them down the sand bank. But presently she asked a question which made Nick's heart beat.

"What has become of your mother—the lady you called Beauty? Is she down here?"

"No," said Nick.

"Dead?" asked Joan, throwing another pebble.

"No," said Nick.

Even the bronze on his face was not so deep as the wave of color which swept up to his forehead, and he could not keep his voice from sounding queer. Joan glanced round at him and raised her eyebrows.

"Why isn't she with you, then?"

Nick was silent for a moment or two. Then he spoke rather hurriedly.

"She went away. I would rather not talk about that, if you don't mind. It—it hurts."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Joan. "I didn't mean to be a beast!"

She seemed really sorry, and Nick liked her for that, and was almost tempted to tell her of the way in which Beauty's going away had hurt him more than anything that had ever happened in his life. But he decided to change the conversation.

"Do you ever make discoveries now?" he asked, smiling, to make her forget his previous embarrassment.

"Discoveries?"

"Yes," said Nick. "Don't you remember how we used to discover things about life and then tell each other?"

"Oh, I am too old for that now," said Joan, as if she were a very old woman indeed. "There's nothing left to discover—in that way."

"Why, you don't mean to say you know all about life already?" asked Nick. "I have lots of things to learn."

Joan seemed to pity his ignorance. She confessed to him, not in humility, but with a touch of arrogance, that she knew quite as much as she wanted to know. She knew, for instance, that life on the whole was rather boring, especially with a mother who was supposed to be delicate, although Joan did not believe there was anything the matter with her, and who spent half her days lying down, reading novels.

"But don't you get any fun out of life?" asked Nick.

"Well, I like putting on pretty frocks, and I like good things to eat, when I'm hungry, which is nearly always, and I like going to theatres and concerts, and I like reading books by Charles Dickens and Captain Marryatt and Scott and Kingsley and the man who wrote 'The Three Musketeers,' and decent kind of books like that. Oh, yes, I suppose I get a fair amount of fun."

"And don't you look forward to big things?" asked Nick. "It's the looking forward that makes life so exciting. There are sure to be great adventures, some of them good, and some of them bad, and one never knows what is going to happen to one."

"I know exactly what will happen to me," said Joan.

"Good Lord, do you?"

"Yes, when I get old enough I shall get awfully sick of staying with mother while she lies down in the afternoon, and I shall meet a rich young man, who will ask me to be his wife, and I shall say yes, and marry him, and then I shall have six babies, and spend the rest of my life watching them grow up, and dressing them in pretty frocks, and smacking them, and telling them how good *I* was when I was a little girl, and all that sort of thing."

"How do you know?" asked Nick. He was astounded at this foreknowledge of fate.

"Well, of course I don't *know*. But I expect it will come like that. It generally does."

"But you might marry a poor man," said Nick, and then his face flushed again, because it came into his head that when he was old enough he would like to ask Joan to be his wife.

"I know I ought to," said Joan. "All the best heroines do in story books. But I don't think I shall. I should never be able to dress in pretty frocks."

"That wouldn't matter. You are quite pretty enough to do without them. Any old thing would suit you."

Joan was flattered by this compliment, which Nick had blurted out with absolute sincerity. She informed him somewhat later in the conversation that he had much improved since she remembered him as a small, rude boy in Battersea Park. They talked together then of the various books they had read, and they were surprised to find that they had both read so many books by the same authors.

"It is funny to think that while we have been away from each other all these years, we should have been having the same adventures. I mean imaginary adventures in books, you know."

This was from Nick.

"Well, I don't know that it's funny," said Joan.

"It's what mother calls the long arm of coincidence."

"What the dickens is that?"

"Oh, things that happen together by luck. For instance, it was the long arm of coincidence which brought me here when you were here."

"Yes, that *was* luck!" said Nick.

And yet it was not altogether luck, for there were moments during Joan's six weeks' stay at Barhampton when Nick felt hot prickles all over his body, and wished the earth would swallow him up, and bemoaned his fate as the impecunious offspring of a poor but literary father. For Joan gave him clearly to understand that she had better meet him on the lonely side of the estuary, and not on the promenade side, among the pretty ladies and the smart people, and although she said it was because she didn't want her mother to interfere with her friendship—and her mother was always making a fuss about something—Nick believed that it was because of his shabby clothes, which made her ashamed to be seen with him. There were afternoons when he waited for her in vain on the lonely side of the estuary, because, as she confessed afterward, she had taken a sixpenny seat in front of the black and white Pierrots, and enjoyed herself immensely, quite forgetful of her promise to meet him on the sand-dunes. That hurt him a good deal, not only because he had waited for so long and gone home gloomily, but because he had never been able to afford a

sixpenny seat, and knew that even if he had possessed a sixpence he would not have dared to sit beside her in the public gaze, with the hole at the elbow of his right sleeve, and Polly's darns at his knees. There were times, too, when she came across the estuary in a rather scoffing, teasing mood, and deliberately picked quarrels with him, and laughed at his ambitions and day-dreams, which he told her with a frank simplicity, wanting her sympathy—and made him angry because she accused him of being a bad-tempered fellow, and a boy with country manners, and a big bully, when he ventured to disagree with her opinions.

And yet, in spite of all the humiliation she caused him, he could not forego her company. Because there were long afternoons when they did not quarrel, and she did not scoff—golden afternoons when they wandered along the shore looking for jellyfish, or shells, or shrimps, or seaweed, which grew like ferns of many colors; when they climbed to the cliffs, and sat perched on a jutting rock, like seabirds or with their legs dangling over the ledge, while they watched the distant ships stealing past like ghosts through the pearly haze; when they sat together in a little cave of red sandstone which Nick had discovered a year before and made his sanctuary. He had carved his name many times on the soft, moist walls, and now he carved Joan's name in big, bold letters which would stand the test of time.

It was in this cave that Nick found his greatest happiness, for sitting there in the deep quietude and in the dim, rosy light of this recess in the rocks, with a soft stretch of sand at the entrance way, and beyond, the great sunlit sea, seen as in a frame through the opening of the rocks, it seemed that there were no other beings in the world but they two. Sometimes Joan's spirit seemed to be melted into tenderness by this lonely little solitude, and sitting next to Nick, with her long legs tucked under her white frock, her hand would steal into his, and she would stay there quite quietly without a word, staring to the far horizon with serious brown eyes filled with reverie. Once Nick ventured to offer a penny for her thoughts, and she gave them, without asking for the penny.

"It is funny how the sea makes one seem so little, and of no more use than a shrimp in a water-pool. And it is funny how you and I are sitting here together, with my hand holding yours and in a little while, perhaps, we shall go away from each other, and never see each other again."

Nick said very humbly that he hoped they would always know each other, but Joan shook her head, and went on telling her thoughts.

"I sometimes wonder why God made so many people in the world, and what's the good of them all. We just grow up, and go on living, until the

time comes to die, and then it's all over. It's beastly to think we've got to die, Nick."

"It's only the body that dies, isn't it?" asked Nick. "Don't you believe in Heaven and all that kind of thing?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Mother says it's best to be on the safe side, and that it's a sign of good breeding to believe in God, in a moderate kind of way."

"I don't know that it's a sign of good breeding," said Nick. "The Admiral—I mean Captain Muffett—says that the commonest sailor is often very religious, and feels that God is close to him at sea."

Joan changed the conversation abruptly, which was a way she had.

"I wish to goodness I had been born a boy! I often tell mother it was pretty rotten of her to make me a girl."

"Girls have the best time," said Nick.

But Joan disagreed with him. It was her decided opinion that girls were utterly useless, and that they had nothing to do but grizzle and grump because they weren't allowed to do anything that boys could do.

"What would you do if you were a boy?" asked Nick.

Joan had her answer ready.

"I should go out into the world in search of adventure, and have a splendid time, and make every-

body think how brave I was, and earn a lot of money, and choose the most beautiful girl for my wife, and beat her when she was in a bad temper, and do exactly what I jolly well liked."

Nick, who was lying on his back in the cave, laughed so that his body shook.

"It sounds all right," he said, "but I don't think I shall be able to do any of those things. It seems to me that no fellow can do what he likes in this life. It is life that does what it likes with the fellow."

"Oh, that is a rotten way of looking at things!" said Joan. "A man can do what he wants with his life. But a girl has to sit still and wait until things happen. That's all the difference."

Nick was silent for quite a long time. Then he sat up, and put his hands round his knees, and said:

"If life will let me, I want to do something pretty good one day. Do you think I could, if I had a shot at it?"

Joan looked at him very solemnly.

"I am sure you could, Nick. You're very strong, and you're not *really* stupid, and if you weren't so badly dressed you would be frightfully good-looking, you know."

Nick blushed up to his eyes at these words, and then laughed uneasily.

"Oh, rot!" he said.

But though he objected to this reference to his

looks, he was glad to think that Joan was so sure that he could do something good. And in his heart that day, as the twilight crept into the cave, and as the sea outside was touched with the crimson light of the setting sun, he made a vow that he would "have a shot" to do something which would make Joan less ashamed to walk with him among the crowd, and glad, perhaps, to share his honor. For the first time ambition lit a little fire in his soul, and the boy in him yearned for the activity and adventure of manhood.

That was one of the afternoons when Joan's company was a source of happiness. There were other afternoons when her mood was less peaceful and more exciting, when she was like a wild sprite, touched with a little madness, so that he wondered at her. She called to him, "Catch me if you can!" and was off like a fawn along the sands, so that in his clumsy boots he could not keep pace with her long legs, and had to stand at last, panting and laughing, while she skipped out upon a rock and jeered at him. There she unplaited her pig-tail and shook her hair free, so that it was like rippling gold, and pretended to be a mermaid, peering at the image of her face in the mirror of the sea, and singing little songs in a high voice. Then she took off her shoes and stockings, and walked for a mile or more, wading in the waves, until the edge of her frock was all wet. Nick paddled with her, though it seemed

to him a girl's game, of which he ought to be ashamed, and with his boots and stockings slung over his shoulders, and with his hand outstretched to hers, he paced through the little waves, wishing that life might be always as pleasant as this, with Joan holding him fast by the hand, while she laughed, and gave little shrieks of fear as the big waves came in, and cried out when imaginary crabs caught hold of her toes.

"Why don't you learn to swim, Joan?" he asked. "It is much more fun than this. I would teach you in no time."

But Joan, who was a town-bred girl, said that paddling was quite good enough for her, and that she could not bear the idea of undressing in the open air, with all the world looking at her.

"There is nobody here but me," said Nick, "and I would not look at you until you were in the water."

But Joan refused the offer.

"One must draw the line somewhere," she said, and she drew it very definitely at the lace edging of her white frock, which was a great disappointment to Nick, because as she would not bathe he could not bathe, and he yearned for the water like a young sea-lion.

So one afternoon followed another, and Joan was never quite the same girl on any afternoon, so that Nick was never sure whether she would be sweet-tempered or quarrelsome, dreamy or wild, scoffing

or tender, and so that he found her wonderfully perplexing. Her coming to Barhampton created a tremendous disturbance in his life, which was not altogether pleasant and painless. For he could not settle down to his old pursuits, and his studies in the mornings and evenings became farcical because all the words he read had no meaning to him, and he went through whole chapters without understanding a single paragraph. The remembrance of Joan's beauty, of her teasing smile, of her impudent, mocking words, of her swift transitions of mood, came between him and his books. It was as though her coming to Barhampton had set his whole being on fire, or had touched him with some magic spell which made his pulse beat more quickly, sent the blood through his veins with a rush of new vitality, and made all his senses strangely acute and impressionable, so that he seemed to see more vividly, to hear more intensely, to smell with nostrils that quivered at the faintest fragrance. Even his sense of touch was so stimulated that sometimes, when Joan's hair blew across his face, or when she put her hand on his sleeve, or when she leaned her head upon his shoulder as they sat together on the sand-dunes or in the cave, his body vibrated as though with a current of electricity. It was as if his whole being had been awakened into a new life, and his spirit and body lifted up by a wonderful exhilaration. He was surprised and a little frightened by this intensity

of physical and mental consciousness, and though it was joyous at times, it was accompanied always by a kind of irritability or excitability which was almost painful in its effects. He became so silent at home that Bristles and Polly were both alarmed about him, and he was short-tempered with them both when they inquired tenderly about his health, hating himself afterward for his lack of self-control. Mary Lavenham also noticed the change in him, and suspected the cause of it, for one day she asked him, quite suddenly and abruptly, whether he had made a friend of any girl in the neighborhood. For a moment he was tempted to lie to her, but the frankness of her eyes and the tenderness of her smile saved him from that humiliation. He told her about Joan, and asked her if he might bring her into tea one day.

"Why, that will be splendid!" said Mary Lavenham, as though she longed to make the acquaintance of Nick's friend, and she pretended not to notice his self-consciousness by launching into a description of the campaign of cooking which she would put in hand at once, in order to produce cakes worthy of a young lady from London.

Then she asked another question which made the color sweep into Nick's face.

"Does your father know about the Princess Joan?"

That was an awkward question, for Nick was con-

scious of a certain guiltiness in concealing the arrival of Joan from Bristles. Time and time again it had been on the tip of his tongue, but for some reason which he could not explain, he had not revealed the secret of his solitary walks across the estuary, from which he had returned late for tea. He was conscious that between him and Bristles there had grown up an invisible barrier which separated them, but this seemed to him because of the secret between his father and Mary Lavenham, which was always at the back of his mind, as a haunting and disturbing thought. Indeed, for the first time in their lives there was a lack of candor between the father and son who had been all in all to each other, because Bristles shirked his son's eyes for some reason of his own, and Nick hid his inmost thoughts with the shy jealousy of adolescence. So when Mary Lavenham asked the question, "Does your father know about the Princess Joan?" he stuttered out a few words about his own private affairs which had nothing to do with anybody else.

Mary Lavenham laughed at him, and shook her head, and put her hand upon her shoulder.

"You know you are talking nonsense, there, Sir Nick. Hasn't your private happiness or your private unhappiness anything to do with the man who has been your best comrade all these years, and who worships every hair on your head? Come, come!"

For some reason Nick could hardly keep tears out

of his eyes, though he had grown too big for childish tears.

"My father does not care for me like he used to do."

Then looking very straight at Mary Lavenham, he said:

"He is more interested in other people now."

Miss Lavenham seemed to understand his meaning, for she drooped her eyes before his gaze, and her face flushed very deeply.

"You will always be first in your father's heart," she said, rather nervously. "But you are not so greedy as to want *all* his love, Nick?"

He did not answer that, but sat staring at the pattern of her little carpet, moodily. It seemed to him that Miss Lavenham had by those words confessed that his father loved her too, and the idea that his father should love any woman but Beauty, whom he had first loved—even this woman who had been very splendid to Nick with her fine frankness, her fellowship, and her laughing jollity—was intolerable to his imagination. Oh, it was a hateful idea that one day Beauty might come back and find another woman in her place. It was an idea which upset the balance of his boyish morality, and disturbed the foundations of his belief in loyalty and love. For always he had clung to the vague but unfading hope that Beauty, who had gone away suddenly, would come back suddenly, always her

ghost walked with him, always in the cottage by the sea he had kept, as it were, a vacant chair by the hearthside, for the errant mother who, when she was tired of wandering, would return to these two people who had waited for her.

He could not explain these things to Mary Lavenham, and he did not know that she read them in his eyes and that they caused her to draw back from the pleadings of a father who did not guess the reason of her hesitations. . . .

The tea-party in Miss Lavenham's cottage was not a success as far as Nick was concerned. Joan had accepted the invitation and had come in her best clothes and with her best company manners, which made Nick feel more shabby than ever, and utterly boorish. She wore a blue silk frock, tied up with pink bows, and white silk stockings with patent leather shoes, so that even Miss Lavenham was abashed by this grandeur and said:

"My dear, you should not have put on such finery for a cottage tea! I can only give you home-made cakes, you know."

But Joan smiled very sweetly, and said in a slightly patronizing voice:

"I am sure this cottage is perfectly sweet, and it is so quaint to have tea in such a tiny room."

Then she asked Miss Lavenham how many servants she kept, and was very much surprised when she learned that Miss Lavenham was not only her

own mistress but her own servant, and ordered herself about, and gave herself a day off occasionally, and answered herself back when she was cross.

"Doesn't it make your hands rather rough?" asked Joan.

"It makes them honest hands," said Miss Lavenham, and she held them out laughingly, and said, "I am proud of them, because they are not too lazy to do a woman's work."

"How weird!" said Joan. "Mother thinks it is so unladylike to do housework. She is proud because she has never even made her own bed."

Mary Lavenham rubbed the side of her nose, which was a funny little habit she had when she was vexed with something.

"I am afraid your mother and I would disagree with each other," she remarked, and then, as though she had been a little bit impolite to her visitor, she laughed and said:

"Of course I know I am not quite a respectable person, and I feel very much honored that a young lady of fashion should visit my humble dwelling."

"I am sure I am delighted," said Joan.

Nick was rather abashed when his father strolled in to tea and was duly introduced to Joan by Miss Lavenham, who called her "Princess Joan of Battersea Park." It was obvious to Nick that Miss Lavenham had told Bristles about her before the tea-party, because he did not seem at all surprised

to see her, and knew her real name of Joan Darracott.

"I remember you quite well," he said rather nervously. "You were the little girl who used to pick up the things Nick dropped from the balcony."

Then the Merman came in, and after him the Admiral, so that it was quite an extensive tea-party, and soon all but Nick were talking away as gaily as possible; as if it were a great event to have a visitor. The Merman behaved to Joan with great deference, and called her "Princess," and "Your Royal Highness" as he handed her the cakes, and was more cheerful and amusing than Nick had seen him for some time. Only once or twice did a shadow come over his face as Mary Lavenham exchanged private kind of smiles with Bristles, and even then he tried to get back to his old friendliness with Bristles, and kept passing him the bread and butter, as though to show there was no ill feeling.

The Admiral was in quite his best form, and told a number of sea stories, and made Joan open her eyes wide with wonder when he described the peculiar ladies who had honored him with their friendship in his younger days. One of them was a Queen, of an island in the Pacific, who had fallen in love with him, because as he afterward learned, she thought he would be very tender to eat. Another was a copper-colored lady, who dressed in a necklace, and who desired to worship him as a god, be-

cause he smoked a cutty pipe and wore gold ear-rings for the sake of his eyesight. Then there was a lady who wished to be his mother-in-law, and who ordered him to be beaten on the soles of his feet until he died, because he would not consent to marry her eldest and ugliest daughter. Fortunately he was rescued in the nick of time, by the skipper and crew of the *Sea-mew* from Cardiff.

"I assure you, ma'am," said the Admiral, turning to Joan, "that I have had many hairbreadth escapes from matrimony. Even now I do not feel quite safe."

Hereupon he looked over to Miss Lavenham, and winked prodigiously, and seemed surprised at the laughter which went round the table. Only Nick was rather silent and tongue-tied. For some reason he was ill at ease, and wished that he had not brought Joan to this tea-party. It gave him a queer pain to see her laughing and chatting with these friends of his, ignoring him completely. She was excited by their attention to her, and her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone with a bright light so that she looked prettier than he had ever seen her before. But some worm gnawed at him. It seemed to him a kind of outrage that she should be taken possession of like this by other people. She had been his secret. She had been all his when they sat together in the cave, or on the sand-dunes. It was horrible that he had to give her up to others, and

sit out in the cold, estranged from her because these grown-ups monopolized her interest. For the first time in his life he knew the pang of jealousy, and there was a rage in his heart.

A few days after that tea-party, he had Joan all to himself again in the little cave which they had made their hiding place, but the happiness which gave an enchantment to this hole in the rocks, so that in its twilight there seemed to lurk all his day dreams of the beautiful things that were waiting for him in life, so that its sandstone walls were clothed with magic tapestries, woven out of his imaginings, so that this girl in the white frock, sitting with her knees tucked up, was a creature of mystical loveliness, fragrant with the odorous perfumes of all life's sweetness, touched with the glamor of divine maidenhood, mysterious, baffling, and elusive in her nature as the secret of life itself—was a little spoiled by the dread knowledge that it was the last of these golden hours he would have with her alone. On the following day she would go back to London and leave him to his loneliness. It was that sense of future loneliness which weighed down his spirit.

"Joan," he said, "I don't know what I shall do without you."

He spoke emotionally, but Joan answered in a light-hearted way.

"Exactly what you did before I came, Nick."

"That's impossible. Nothing will be the same."

Joan laughed, with her face to the sea. She had made her two hands into a telescope, and was squinting through them at a ship on the horizon line.

"I am sure I shan't take anything away with me. The cliffs will stay where they are, and this cave will still be here, and the sands will still be there. Won't they?"

"No," said Nick.

She was surprised by his emphatic denial, and half turned her head to say:

"Why not?"

"Because after you have gone this cave will be emptied of—of all that makes it worth coming to. When I come here alone, I shall only see your ghost sitting here—not your real self."

"Good gracious!" cried Joan, "I hope you won't find my ghost here. You make me feel quite creepy, you quaint boy."

"I live a lot with ghosts," said Nick, in a low voice. He was thinking of Beauty's ghost which had always seemed close to him. "Sometimes they make me feel less alone."

Joan pulled her knees up higher, and clasped them tighter, and put her pointed chin down upon them.

"It's funny to think I shall be back in London tomorrow," she said presently. "I shall think of the sea when I hear the traffic swishing through the streets."

"Is that all you will think of?" asked Nick, hoping that she would think of him a little.

"And I shall think how jolly glad I am to get back again, so that I can borrow some books out of the library, and go to the theatre with mother, when she's tired of lying down. A holiday is all very well, but one gets awfully sick of it, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry you haven't enjoyed yourself," said Nick, dismally.

"Oh, but I have!" said Joan. "Still, enough is as good as a feast . . . And now I must be going."

"No, don't go!" said Nick.

She had jumped up, and was smoothing her frock down, but she was startled at his voice, and at the queer look on his face, which had gone white, even in spite of its tanned skin.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"No, I feel rotten. I hate to think that this is your last afternoon here. Perhaps when you go outside the cave I shall lose you, always."

"Oh, I expect I shall see you in London," said Joan cheerfully. "Everybody comes to London. It's the only place where there's anything to do."

She stepped out of the cave, and stood there, framed in the entrance way of the rocks, with the sea behind her. From the twilight of the cave Nick gazed at her, this creature of light, whose hair shone

like crinkled gold, whose white frock was glamorous in the sunshine.

"Aren't you coming?" she called out, and without waiting for him, ran down to the smooth sands.

"Poor empty cave!" said Nick, in a queer, low voice. Then he followed her and at the estuary said good-bye to her, according to the rule she had made. It was tea-time, and there were few people about. There were only two old boatmen near them, leaning against a pile of timber, and some children going homeward with their pails.

Joan held out her hand.

"Good-by, Nick!"

She glanced up into his face with her laughing eyes, and then said:

"Thanks awfully. You have been frightfully decent."

He could not say good-by. He held her hand tighter than he knew, and then he stuttered out a few words, in a gruff, jerky way.

"Look here—do you mind?—Give me a kiss. I—I want it more than anything. For remembrance."

"If you like," said Joan.

She held up her face to him, and he kissed her on the cheek, very lightly and quickly, as though afraid.

"Silly boy!" she said, and as though to show him how to do such things, she put her hands upon his shoulders, and kissed him on the lips. Then she gave a funny little laugh, and sped away, leaving

him alone, overcome by a strange faintness, as though for a moment his senses had swooned.

She turned, on the other side of the estuary, to wave her hand to him, and he answered with his cap. Then she disappeared behind one of the wind-shelters, and he felt, suddenly, as though there were a great emptiness in his heart, and a tremendous loneliness about him: Boy as he was, he knew the desolation of love, the pain of it, the agony of separation, the death-throes that lie in the first farewell.

He strode home moodily, and tried to hide his heart-ache. But by a glance from his father's eyes, by the kindly way in which he put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Well, old man?" he knew that Bristles had guessed what was wrong with him. That night he went early to bed, but not early to sleep. For a long time he sat on the side of his bed, staring at the blank whitewashed wall upon which the candle-light flickered. Joan's departure had ended another chapter in his life. He was no longer as he had been before her coming. She had unlocked some little door in his heart, and let out a legion of desires, of hopes, of ambitions. He must begin to carve out his way, to prepare himself for the journey into the great world, to look ahead to his goal. He could no longer drift on aimlessly, in the same old dreamy way of boyhood. He could see, even now, the day was coming when this little cottage by the sea would no longer be large enough

to hold him. He would have to go out and away. In the future that lay before him two spirit voices would call so that he must answer them. Two dream faces would haunt him, two ghosts beckon to him. The face of Beauty, his mother, and the face of Joan, his comrade, were visible to him, even in the darkness through which the whitewashed walls of his little bedroom showed faintly when the candle had guttered out; and that night in his sleep they were strangely intermingled, so that they seemed like the face of one girl-woman, the spirit of womanhood itself.

CHAPTER IV

THE FATHER OF THE MAN

In most lives events are of less importance than ideas. The things which happen in a man's outward experience are trivial compared with the things which happen inside his brain. The great crises of history arrive, not by definite acts, but by a host of indefinite tendencies of thought, culminating in a supreme conviction. So it was in the history of Nicholas Barton. Looking back upon his early days, he remembers few episodes or adventurous incidents of any great influence upon his character and fate, but only the ceaseless adventure of a mind struggling forward to an uncertain goal, of a spirit yearning with undefined desires, of an imagination thrilled by the dim half lights of truth. He remembers moments of revelation, when a conversation, a few chance words, a sudden flash of intuition, changed his whole aspect of life, or helped him up to a new plane of understanding, or made his whole being quiver with an emotion which became a new source of inspiration. He remembers also a thousand small details of experience, all blending into one broad, even pressure upon his intelligence, and

imperceptibly directing its character and evolution. He knows now that the quiet monotony of his life in that little cottage by the sea, so uneventful and unexciting as it seemed, was charged with forces which he was powerless to resist, but which moulded him like clay on the potter's wheel.

One such force was the quiet but steady influence of Mary Lavenham, whom he had called the Lonely Lady. This curious woman of blunt speech and blunt manners had something in her character which had put a spell upon the four people who were her closest neighbors. She had no particular beauty, even her nose had a tendency to bluntness, and her chin was almost masculine in its strength, but her eyes, gray when they were tranquil, steel-blue when they were lighted with emotion, seemed to look out with an utter truthfulness and candor which captured the confidence of her friends, so that they confessed themselves to her, and revealed secrets which they had kept hidden from all others. Her gifts of practical helpfulness, too, were so great that men, who are helpless in many things belonging to the sphere of women, called to her when they were in distress. It was, for instance, to Mary Lavenham that Captain Muffett went when a button fell off his blue reefer jacket, when his second-best braces broke, when he set his kitchen on fire during some experimental cookery with a new gas stove and a kippered herring, and when he was threatened with

a week-end visit from one of his elderly maiden sisters, who occasionally invaded his small cottage and uttered severe criticisms upon his domestic economy. It was also Mary Lavenham that he called upon when he was in low spirits because the gout devils were pulling his left leg, and when he was beset with religious difficulties, because as a seafaring man he could not reconcile the story of Noah's Ark with his knowledge of ships and shipping. Always he found comfort, and many times to Nick he confessed his gratitude for the friendship of this woman, whose wisdom and kindness were beyond those of any other woman, except his own mother, dead these fifty years.

"My lad," he said, "if ever you lose your bearings in a black fog of doubt, just you send up a rocket for Mary Lavenham. She'll pilot you into safe waters, and make no charge for the service."

Once he said very solemnly, "I love the ground that woman treads on. To go into that cottage of hers is better than a sermon. She makes one feel good."

In more jocular moods he vowed that for Mary Lavenham he had a romantic passion which was wearing him to a shadow, and that only the fear of a refusal prevented him from popping the question to her, and buying a plain gold ring.

And once, after repeating that well-worn joke, he

added very mysteriously, staring hard at Nick, and speaking in a hoarse whisper:

"But I'm not the only one to feel like that for Mary Lavenham. There's rivals about, sonny."

Thereupon he winked convulsively with one side of his face, but in a solemn way.

"Rivals?" said Nick, lifting his eyebrows.

"Ay," said the old man. "And if you'll not split to a living soul, I'll give you the name of one of them, and leave you to guess the other."

"All right," said Nick. "I won't tell."

Captain Muffett stared very hard again at Nick.

"There's a man not far away from here that would give his soul to take that woman by the hand and go down on his knees before her. Poor fellow! Poor fellow! He's shipwrecked his life, and is struggling in the icy waters, and he knows that *The Mary Lavenham* is the only life-boat within reach of him, and yet he daresn't call out to her, lest he should drag her down with him. Don't you call that a tragedy?"

"The Merman?" asked Nick quietly. He knew it was the Merman, for he had seen the wistfulness in the eyes of that man when Miss Lavenham was within sight. He had seen his worshipping look when she had passed close to him.

"Ay!" said Captain Muffett, "it's Edward Frampton, whom we call the Merman. One of the noblest

men that ever breathed, except when the devil gets his clutch on him."

And then he confided to Nick that Edward Frampton would have drunk himself to death long ago, if Mary Lavenham had not come to be his next door neighbor. She had discovered his secret very quickly, and instead of being frightened and horror struck like nine women out of ten, she had been filled with a great pity, and a good courage. She had nursed the man when he had been at death's door, and she had pleaded with him to rise above his weakness, and she had struggled with him when the craving had got its grips upon him. And after the madness had left him, she had helped him back to self-respect, by showing him how she honored all that was good and noble in him, and how she believed still that he could crush the beast within him. After every attack she still put hope into him by this loyalty of faith in his power to resist, if only he tried with all his will. And at least she had succeeded in gaining longer periods of sanity and health for the man. It was only rarely now that he gave way to the poison that was in his blood.

"If Edward Frampton's soul is saved from the fiery furnace," said Captain Muffett, taking off his cap, as though he were in church, "it is Mary Lavenham who will get God's thanks, and be numbered among the saints. Amen."

Then, after a little while, he whispered again to

Nick, although they were on a lonely stretch of sands with no human being within sound of his voice:

"There's one thing that makes me afraid—afraid for my dear and noble friend Edward Frampton."

"What's that?" asked Nick.

The old man hesitated.

"Perhaps I ought not to tell. Perhaps it ain't fair to tell."

But after this expression of doubt, he blurted out some vague and incoherent words.

"It's like this, sonny. If a man clings to a life-belt to save him from drowning in cold water, it's a fearful thing if a stout swimmer comes along and takes away that one support. Then the poor fellow may go right under, losing all hope."

"What do you mean?" said Nick.

"I speak in parables, as it were," said Captain Muffett, who had been reading the Scriptures diligently of late. "Mary Lavenham is the life-belt, and the strong swimmer is a man who has only got to stretch out his hand to take her. She is ready for him. She will not resist him, because, you see, sonny, on this here tide of life God sends His life-belts to them that swims strongest. Changing the way of speech, I put it in this style. Love between a man and a woman is like two hearts bobbing about in a great sea, and then drawn to each other by a strong current, which is God's will. The heart

of Mary Lavenham is drifting steadily towards the heart of a man who, as I will admit, is the least unworthy to be united to that dear soul."

After which burst of strange and incoherent eloquence, Captain Muffett pulled out his bandanna handkerchief and blew his nose very violently.

"Who is the man?" asked Nick. But again he knew the answer to his question, though the Admiral had spoken in riddles. He knew that it was his father wno had only got to stretch out his hand to take Mary Lavenham's heart, and that knowledge made him afraid, as Captain Muffett was afraid, though for a different reason. He was afraid because he believed that his father had no right to any heart but that of Beauty, who belonged to him, though she had gone away.

Captain Muffett did not answer his question, but with the simplicity of old age, made a mystery about something which he had not been able to hide.

The knowledge of a love affair between his father and Miss Lavenham, a knowledge which grew with every little secret sign between them, with many an interchange of glances which Nick had overseen, and with certain small episodes which told him that his father had that feeling of strange exhilaration and mental uplifting which had startled Nick in his own being when Joan had come to Barhampton, made him suspicious of her and shy of her. He wanted to hate her. There were times when he

believed that he detested her. But she was so kind, so patient with all his moods, so quick to understand him, that his attempt at hatred failed utterly, and he was almost won over to be her worshipper, like Bristles and the Merman and the Admiral. He could not escape from her influence. As long as his life would last he would be in her debt for two of the best gifts of life, a love of poetry and a love of art. It was her readings of Shelley and Keats which first taught him the magic of word-music, and revealed to him the high peaks of mystical nature. It was in her room, on winter evenings, that he was first spellbound by the divine harmonies of the poets, so that when her low, thrilling voice recited their lines in her quiet room, where two candles shone like stars in the surrounding dusk, it seemed that his own dreams and instincts, and faint images of beauty, were being called up in his spirit, and made real and perfect; as when, without her book, she looked up at him, and spoke the words of Shelley's "Sleep."

O magic sleep! O comfortable bird,
That broodest o'er the troubled sea of the mind
Till it is hushed and smooth! O unconfined
Restraint! imprisoned liberty! great key
To golden palaces, strange minstrelsy,
Fountains grotesque, new trees, bespangled caves,
Echoing grottoes, full of tumbling waves
And moonlight; aye, to all the mazy world

Of silvery enchantment! Who, unfurled
Beneath thy dewy wing a triple hour,
But renovates and lives?

There was a hush after she had spoken those lines, and then, as Nick gave unconsciously a low, quivering sigh, she put her hand upon him, and said:

"It is good to understand things like that. You understand, Nick, because you, too, have the poet's mind. Beauty comes to you in dreams waking and sleeping. So I guess, at least."

And she did not know how truly she had guessed, not knowing that Beauty came to him with a woman's face.

It was Mary Lavenham who first lighted the little flame in his heart which afterward caught him up in a great fire of enthusiasm. It was when she gave him his first lessons in drawing, and said one day:

"Soon you will be teaching me, for even now you get something into your work which I strive for but cannot reach. You understand the heart of things, the secret, living character of things, that to most people seem dead. That old tree! You have got its tragic loneliness, standing solitary on the riverside. That ruin of a boat. You have made me pity it, because it is rotting to death on the mud. Those bits of washing on the line. How grotesque they seem, bellying in the wind! How do you see the human character of things like that? . . . Nick, if you liked, you could be an artist."

Those words were a crisis in his life, because after all his gropings in the dark toward a definite goal, they were like a flashlight, revealing the straight path to his supreme ambition. Yes! he would be an artist. That had been destined even from those days when, as a baby at Battersea, he had scribbled his quaint imaginations on paper, trying to draw the noise of the ducks and the scent of the flowers, and trying to put on paper the character of the familiar objects in that top-floor flat, which spoke to him in a secret language which he understood—the hassock with two ears, the wide-embracing chair, the laughing lions on the sideboard, the kettle on the kitchen fire, the teapot with the broken spout. But it was Mary Lavenham who revealed his destiny, by her words of praise, and by her never-failing encouragement, even when his pencil failed and when in the passion of a boy's despair he flung his brushes into the sea—and bought another set next day.

She was his mistress of art, teaching him the mysteries of perspective, the greater mysteries of color, showing by her own example how to hint and suggest, without too much detail, how to build up an effect by simple lines, how to see the essential things, and to turn a blind eye to the unessential. She taught him the tricks and technique of her own method, but scoffed at them and said, "You can do much better. This is just elementary school style.

You must put yourself into your work, and get away from all this old-maid trumpery."

Afterward he knew that she spoke the truth about her own work, though it seemed wonderful to him in those early days of his apprenticeship, but looking back on his career he knows even now that the best lessons of his life were when he sat drawing or painting by the side of the Lonely Lady, getting inspiration from her enthusiasm, and correcting his faults by her advice, and developing a steady purpose and ambition, because she saw great virtues in his early efforts.

He worked hard now, getting up early to make a sketch of the sunrise over the sand-dunes, sketching all day long in color, or pencil, or charcoal, and even in his sleep painting imaginary pictures with strange effects of mist and light, which seemed to him next morning more perfect than ever he could paint in his waking hours. This new ambition, this incessant labor for a real purpose, was a curious relief to him. It was an outlet for energies becoming too strong for the dreamy idleness of his younger days, and it gave scope to the restlessness of body and spirit which had made him fretful and uneasy, like a wild animal in too small a cage. Now he filled his sketch-books with an attempt to express his ideals of beauty, and his imaginative adventures. He drew grotesque things, quaint characters, fairy-tale creatures, which seemed to grow beneath his

pencil without the dictation of his mind, and imaginary scenes, with

> Fountains grotesque, new trees, bespangled caves,
> Echoing grottoes, full of tumbling waves
> And moonlight . . .

and in the evenings it was drawing now, and not reading, which filled the long, dark hours.

But though Mary Lavenham was his mistress in art, it was Edward Frampton, whom he had called the Merman, who was his master of philosophy. Between that strange man and young Nicholas Barton there was a romantic friendship, as between Jonathan and David, and the elder man leaned upon the boy. It seemed as though he saw in this boy—himself, at the same age as Nick, with the same imaginative nature, quick temper, and restlessness, and as though he desired that Nick should gain all the things which he himself had missed—honor, fame, self-respect, above all, self-control.

It was upon those subjects that he harped continually, though roaming in a wide field of knowledge, for his examples and models, and he held himself up as a horrible instance of what to avoid.

"I'm a failure, Nick, a damned waster, a broken derelict cast upon the shore. Take warning from my tragedy. The truth is that I was spoiled at the beginning of things. I began rich, and I have ended poor. You have the advantage of starting right

at the bottom rung of the ladder. All the fun is in climbing up. Now *I* have been climbing down ever since I left Oxford twenty-five years ago, as the son of a rich father, with the world at my feet."

He put down his failure to the lack of an honest friend, at the time when he needed one most.

"There were plenty of men who called themselves my friends, but they only sponged on me when I had plenty of money in my pockets, and flattered me in my self-conceit, and preyed upon my weak good nature, and were boon companions in my foolish hours.

> O summer friendship,
> Whose flattering leaves that shadowed us in
> Our prosperity, with the least gust drop off
> In th' autumn of adversity!

Edward Frampton indulged in a reverie of self-pity. He seemed to find some bitter-sweetness in the contemplation of his own failure, and a strange satisfaction in scourging himself with his own scorn.

"I was a fool of fools. Because I was popular, because I could sing a good song and make an after-dinner speech, and because I was born with a straight nose instead of a crooked one—a handsome fellow they called me then, Nick—I believed that I was destined to be a leader of men. Perhaps I might have been—who knows? But whenever I had a chance of leadership, I threw it away, bcause it en-

tailed hard work and a hard life, and I shirked work and wanted an easy life. My lad, that is the secret of my moral shipwreck—taking the line of least resistance. You can't win your way to any high place and hold it unless you are ready to eschew delights and live laborious days. I gave up a career in the army because I thought it was infernal drudgery. I wandered about the world, as a coffee-planter, as a palm-oil ruffian, as a captain of South African horse, as a trooper in the Bechuanaland Border Police, and failed every time I got a chance. Why? Because I shirked hard labor. Now look at me—a man idling his life away in futile regrets, subsidized by rich relations, who despise him."

Having lingered over his self-abasement, piling up denunciations upon his own head, he then built up a picture of Nick's rapid advancement to fame and honor.

"Nick, dear boy, I covet honor for you, as though you were my own son. I shall not be satisfied to peg out until you have gained all those things I missed. Your success will be a joy to me, as though I had a share in the making of it. And, indeed, I think I may claim a share, for in these long talks we have had together I have pointed out the perils of life, and upheld the true ideals, and helped you to play the game as it should be played by any gentleman, using my own weakness as a moral tag. There is only one thing that makes me afraid for

you. There is only one creature on God's earth that can spoil your chances."

"What is that?" asked Nick. startled by this new hint of peril.

"A woman," said Edward Frampton solemnly. And after a little while, with his hand on Nick's shoulder, not much lower than his own now, though he was a tall man, he explained himself.

"You have got an emotional heart, with which a woman may play the very devil if she once gets her fingers to work at your heart strings. If she is one of the cruel kind, she may spoil all your future. Keep away from women as much as possible, Nick. Keep your work, at least, clear from their impertinent intrusions. For Art is an austere mistress, and is jealous of all rivals."

Nick was silent, and pondered over these words. They were reminiscent of similar warnings he had had from Mary Lavenham, and they filled him with a vague alarm, because they coincided with certain signs that his father's work was being disturbed by a woman—who was Mary Lavenham herself. For some time Bristles had been restless and unable to settle to a new novel. Instead of writing in the mornings he went out for lonely walks, and did not ask Nick to join him, and came back with a queer shining light in his eyes, as though he had seen a happy vision. Nick watched him, and wondered, and was afraid, because he knew that his father was

hiding from him the secret of a love which could have nothing but an unhappy ending, because in Nick's philosophy and faith, his mother still claimed his father's loyalty.

One sentence, just a few words in length, was an epoch in his life. It was when his father said very quietly one day:

"Nick, old man, how would you like it if I married again?"

In the moment that followed that question all the secret, hidden things in the heart of the boy, all the vague memories of his childhood, the fairy-tale which had been woven like a golden thread in the texture of his life, seemed broken by a great shock of emotion which swept through him with a cold, rushing wind. Then, after the moment of dazed surprise and pain, he was possessed with a sudden passionate anger.

"I should hate it," he said. "I should loathe it."

He jerked out the words in a half strangled voice, and then, without looking at his father, who was stricken speechless by his violent protest, seized his cap and marched out of the cottage, and went for a long, lonely walk on the cliffs, in the buffets of the wind, which did not cool the rage in his heart, until at last his emotion was spent and he came home again with a whipped-dog look. During the evening meal Bristles and he sat very silent, as though an invisible barrier were between them.

Once or twice Bristles looked at his son, furtively and timidly, as though he were afraid of him, and once or twice he made a poor attempt at conversation about Nick's studies, and the weather, and the health of the old Admiral, who was laid up with the gout, but after a "Yes" or "No" from Nick, relapsed into a gloomy silence.

It was only when the supper had been cleared away by Polly, who noticed that something was "amiss" between the father and son whom she loved with the fidelity of a house-dog, that Nick broke the spell of silence by an abrupt challenge.

"I want you to tell me about Beauty—about my mother. It's time I knew."

Bristles had been waiting for that question for years. He knew that it was bound to come. He knew that one day he would have to give an account to his son of the tragedy which had made this boy motherless. And he had always been afraid of that day when the tale must be told, because it would be difficult to tell it truly, to apportion the blame, to justify himself, to explain the heartlessness of a woman of whom, as he knew, this boy cherished an exquisite memory. Now the time had come when Nick must know. "It's time I knew," he said, and Bristles must open the old wound that had seemed quite healed.

He walked to the mantelshelf, and filled his pipe, and loaded it with more than usual care to give

himself time to think out his defence. For it was clear to him that Nick was an accuser, and that he would have to defend himself for the loss of the boy's mother.

"What do you want to know?" he said, guardedly.

"I want to know why she ran away from you."

Bristles lit his pipe, and puffed out a long coil of smoke.

"I want to be fair to your mother, Nick. It would be easy for me to call her names, to dismiss the whole thing by calling her a hussy, and a bad woman . . . "

He had not finished his sentence, but Nick's face flushed painfully, and he drew a quick breath.

"But you would not believe that, and you would hate me for abusing a woman whom you remember as Beauty, the well-beloved. My dear old man, it is not easy to explain. She had a restless nature, fond of gaiety and pleasure, and I was too poor to satisfy all her desires in that way."

"But that wasn't her only reason for running away, was it?"

"The only reason?" said Bristles. He sucked his pipe, and for a few minutes brooded back into the past.

"There were thousands of reasons. Little things, all adding up to a big sum of wretchedness. From the very first our temperaments clashed. Although we loved each other in the beginning, we got upon

each other's nerves most damnably. We were always quarrelling over small absurdities, things that didn't matter tuppence, really, but which seemed to us, at the time, to matter enormously. I hated to see her reading foolish novelettes. She disliked my taste in ties, my style of collars, said that I was stamped all over with the brand of the City clerk. Ridiculous things like that, leading to continual bickerings, scornful words, sneers. I wanted to mould her to my way of thinking, and she would not be moulded. She tried to break down my serious convictions, laughed at my sense of propriety, ridiculed my conventionality. I hated her play-acting business. It made me rage inwardly, and get sullen and sulky with her when she exhibited herself on the stage, and acted love-scenes with impertinent young fools, and let herself be fondled publicly by coarse and elderly actors playing the lead in melodrama. It made me shiver. It seemed to me an outrage that my wife should be handled by fellows of loose morals. So that was another cause of quarrel. She was in her element at the theatre. Her mother had been an actress, her grandmother had been an actress; the profession was in her blood. She could not understand my objections to stage life, and thought I must be a morose, narrow-minded Puritan. In a way I was. I have got the Puritanical strain in me, but that is the fault of my ancestors. Anyhow, it seemed to Beauty that I disliked to see

her gay, that I was most gloomy when she was most high-spirited, that I was a wet blanket, damping all her joyousness. You see, I try to be fair to her."

"I don't see why you should have been so hard on her!" said Nick.

It seemed to him that all this was a proof that his father had been to blame. Everything that Bristles had said was a confession of Beauty's gaiety, of her laughter-loving spirit, just as he remembered her.

"Hard on her!"

That stung the man. It hurt him frightfully that Nick should take his stand by the side of the woman who had abandoned both of them, and against the man whom she had cruelly betrayed. And yet he had expected that. He had known all along that the time would come when Nick would be against him, because a son always takes the mother's part.

"She was hard on *me,* Nick. Beneath all her gaiety there was the hardness of an utterly selfish heart. I slaved for her in a City office, but do you think she cared because I was wearing myself out so that I might get promotion for her sake? Why, she despised me for it. She would have had more respect for me if I had run into debt and played a flash game, like one of her actor fellows, who run up bills and say, 'Damn the consequences.' Because I was honest she thought me a poor-spirited drudge."

"But she was earning her own living," said Nick. "She paid for herself, didn't she?"

"Yes, she paid for herself," said Bristles bitterly. He rapped his pipe sharply against the mantel-shelf and then leaned forward and said, with a kind of passion in his voice:

"I would rather see you dead than married to a wife who pays for herself. It puts a man into a false position. It robs him of all authority. It gives a woman an independence which is not good for her."

"I don't see why," said Nick stubbornly. He could not follow his father's reasoning at all. He was thinking only of Beauty, who had laughed and danced through his childhood. His father's defence seemed to him pitiful. Surely he could have saved Beauty from running away. If he had behaved properly to her she would not have run away. "Why shouldn't she have paid for herself?"

"I will tell you why," said Bristles harshly. "Because when she wastes her money on foolish and dangerous things, she says, 'I can do what I like with my own, can't I?' And when her husband remonstrates with her for piling up expenses which are beyond both their incomes, she says, 'I don't cost you a halfpenny, do I? Surely you don't begrudge me some little luxuries which I earn by hard work?' That's what Beauty used to say. She was so independent that I could not safeguard her from

the dangers of independence. She would go gadding off with people who had no scruples of honor, no care for my good name, no thought for my existence, and because she could say, 'I pay,' I had no check upon her. But she didn't pay. In the long run I paid, with a broken life. *You* paid, Nick, my poor motherless son."

"Perhaps if you had been more kind with her she would not have gone gadding off," said Nick, in a hard voice.

Bristles stared at him. This father was stricken because out of his past a ghost had come to claim his son. The law had given him the custody of the child, but Nature, greater than the law, had allowed the memory of the mother to wrest Nick's heart from him, and poison Nick's mind against him. He had been the comrade of his son for more than ten years now, since his wife had deserted them. He had watched over him, tended him, given him all that was best in his heart and brain, but all that counted for nothing now, and the woman who had abandoned the duties of her motherhood, who had forsaken the child of her flesh, had stretched out an unseen hand to capture the boy. Nick's last words whipped him into a sudden anger, not against Nick, but against this cruelty.

"My kindness to her was thrown away on a light-of-love. The woman was vile to the core."

Nick rose from his chair, white to the lips.

"You mustn't say that," he said, staring at his father with burning eyes.

Bristles was reckless now. His son had demanded the truth, and he must learn it.

"She was eaten up with vanity—a colossal, devilish vanity which destroyed any faint touch of moral decency which may have been in her nature at the beginning. Any scoundrel who pandered to her appetite for adulation made her forget her honor as a wife. That man, that beast with whom she went away, was not the first to tempt her to betray me, not the first to succeed. By God, I was patient with her and forgiving! God knows I warned her, and pleaded with her, and pardoned her, until her last treachery. She walked open-eyed into the spider's web. Nick, my boy, your mother was as false as hell."

Nick did not answer for a moment. He was standing very straight and still, with that white face of his and burning eyes. His mouth had hardened. There was something in the line of his mouth, something about his eyes which reminded Bristles of Beauty in one of her tempers, when she lost control of herself, and said bitter, cruel things, which stabbed him like daggers. This strange likeness to the woman who had been his wife was so vivid, so startling at that moment that the man seemed to see the woman's spirit suddenly stare at him through the mask of the boy's face. He knew that the words

trembling up to the boy's lips would be cruel words. Before they were spoken he shrank from them.

"You are brutal," said Nick, through his clenched teeth. "I think you were a brute to Beauty, and I'm not surprised she ran away from you."

Bristles sprang up from his chair, as white as Nick, and the father and son stood facing each other, staring into each other's eyes, breathing jerkily. It was a moment of enormous tragedy. Outside the open window there was the whisper of the great sea, as its calm waves ruffled upon the moist sands. Inside the room the clock ticked with a steady beat, more noisy than the world beyond the cottage. The night was so quiet, the silence brooding over sea and shore was so intense, that the open window seemed like a great ear listening to this quarrel between the man and boy, and the moon which shone like a lantern within the square window frame seemed to stare curiously at the two human beings whose comradeship had been smashed by a woman's sin. In that moment when the father faced his son, when the son faced his father, with an emotion not less passionate because it was of a deadly quietude, each knew that this was a moral earthquake which had shaken the foundations upon which, until now, they seemed to have stood so securely. Each knew that a gulf had opened up between them for which, as yet, the bridge had not been built. It seemed to Nick that all his life since Beauty had gone away

had been leading up to this crisis, when he stood as the accuser and judge of the man from whom she had fled. His waking dreams of her, the fragrant memories which had haunted him, his yearnings, his secret tears, his unuttered cries of childhood, his passionate regrets, had been storing up facts upon which his father was condemned. Because the only facts which counted with him were those witnesses in his own heart which spoke on behalf of Beauty, and pleaded as counsels in her defence.

It seemed like an hour that the father stood facing his son. It was just the time in which the heavy pendulum of the grandfather's clock swung from one side to the other. Then Bristles spoke, and his voice was hollow and lifeless:

"One day you will be sorry for having said those words."

That was all. Then he moved uncertainly across the room, fumbled with the matches on the sideboard, and lit a candle. It was early for bed, but he went upstairs into his bedroom with a heavy tread. It was the first time in Nick's memory that his father had not said good-night.

In the days that followed neither of them alluded by any word to that conversation. The name of Beauty did not pass their lips. The emotion that had stirred each of them to the depths seemed forgotten and buried beneath new interests. Their old relations of comradeship seemed re-established.

They laughed and chatted, discussed plans for the future, went on long, lonely walks, when Nick spoke of his ambitions with apparent candor, and received the warm encouragement and anxious hopefulness of the man who had been his counsellor and guide from babyhood. But they knew that neither of them would ever forget the words spoken in the silence of the world, when the sea lay calm outside the window, and that a gulf was between them, even when they walked shoulder by shoulder across the sand-dunes.

It was Mary Lavenham who had the deciding voice in the councils which were held on the subject of Nick's career, shared by Edward Frampton, Captain Muffett, and Polly, with Bristles in the background, anxious, balancing the *pros* and *cons,* hesitating in his approval of any definite plan.

Mary Lavenham's first expression of opinion had been uttered in her forcible way when she had stood behind Nick's shoulder when he was sitting down by the estuary doing a charcoal sketch of some boats lying up on the mud and of some sailors mending their nets.

"Do you think it comes all right?" said Nick.

"It is better than all right," said Miss Lavenham. "It is so good that it is a crime for you to be pottering away here when you ought to be getting the best training and beginning a great career. I have nothing more to teach you. You have left me behind

months ago. The Academy Schools are the place for you, Nick."

"Think so?" said Nick, very calmly, although his heart gave a great leap at her words. "Perhaps I have as much chance of getting to the moon."

"You will never get to the moon if you look no higher than the earth," said Miss Lavenham. "I want you to look as high as the stars and to reach up to them. You can do that if you like."

"Unfortunately I am the son of a poor man," said Nick.

"Rubbish!" said Miss Lavenham. "It's only poverty that gets the gold in the stars. If your father were a rich man you would never be anything but a silly amateur. You've got to be an artist, Nick, which means a man who lives for and by his craft."

"By Jove!" said Nick. "If only I had the chance of doing it!"

"You have a man's chance," said Miss Lavenham. "We will see that you have it."

That "we" embraced the little group of people who had constituted themselves into a committee for the honor and glory of Nicholas Barton. It included Polly, who, when this idea of the Academy Schools had become a fixed idea, discussed separately and collectively, drew Nicholas aside one day, and said in a whisper:

"Master Nick, I have got a little bit to help you

into them schools. It ain't much, dear heart, but you know my love goes with it."

She thrust into his hand an old leather purse which bulged out as though it were full of coins, and then to hide the emotion with which she seemed to be struggling she seized the rolling pin with which she was making a piece of pastry, and started singing "Take back the heart that thou gavest," woefully out of tune.

Nick stared at the purse in his hand, not knowing what to do with it.

"What's all this, Polly? Do you think I want to sponge on you?"

Polly gave a ferocious dab at the piece of pastry.

"It's my savings," she said, "if you must know, and a precious lot of good they are, unless they're put to a better use than I can make of 'em!"

"Good Lord, Polly!" said Nick. "I would hang myself before I took your hard-earned money. One of these days you will want it for yourself."

"Want it for what?" asked Polly, rolling the pastry into a thin strip. "Surely your Pa will give me a decent funeral when I drop down dead in his service."

She pretended to get angry, and spoke with a great deal of indignation.

"Surely your Pa won't throw me out like an old shoe, after all these years, after looking after him

in his absent-mindedness, and him as helpless as a babe unborn!"

"Of course he won't, Polly. What a ridiculous idea!" said Nick. "As if we could ever do without you!"

"Well, then!" said Polly triumphantly, lifting up the piece of dough, and flinging it down on the board again. "As long as I'm drawing my wages what more do I want? I can't eat more than three meals a day, can I? You don't want me to take a jaunt over to Paris and indulge in an orgy of wickedness, do you?"

"No," said Nick, laughing at the preposterous idea. "I shouldn't think of your doing such a thing. But I can't take your money, all the same, Polly."

Polly left her pastry, and flung her floury arms round Nick.

"Dear poppet, though you're too old to be called a poppet, but always will be to me, just take it toward the expenses of them schools, and don't say another word to your poor old nurse that would let you tread over her body if it would be any good to you. Your Pa is a poor man, but every bit of them savings have come out of the sweat of his brow, so that it's only giving back what's his and yours."

Nick kissed her, as he used to in his baby days, though now he was so tall that he looked down upon her.

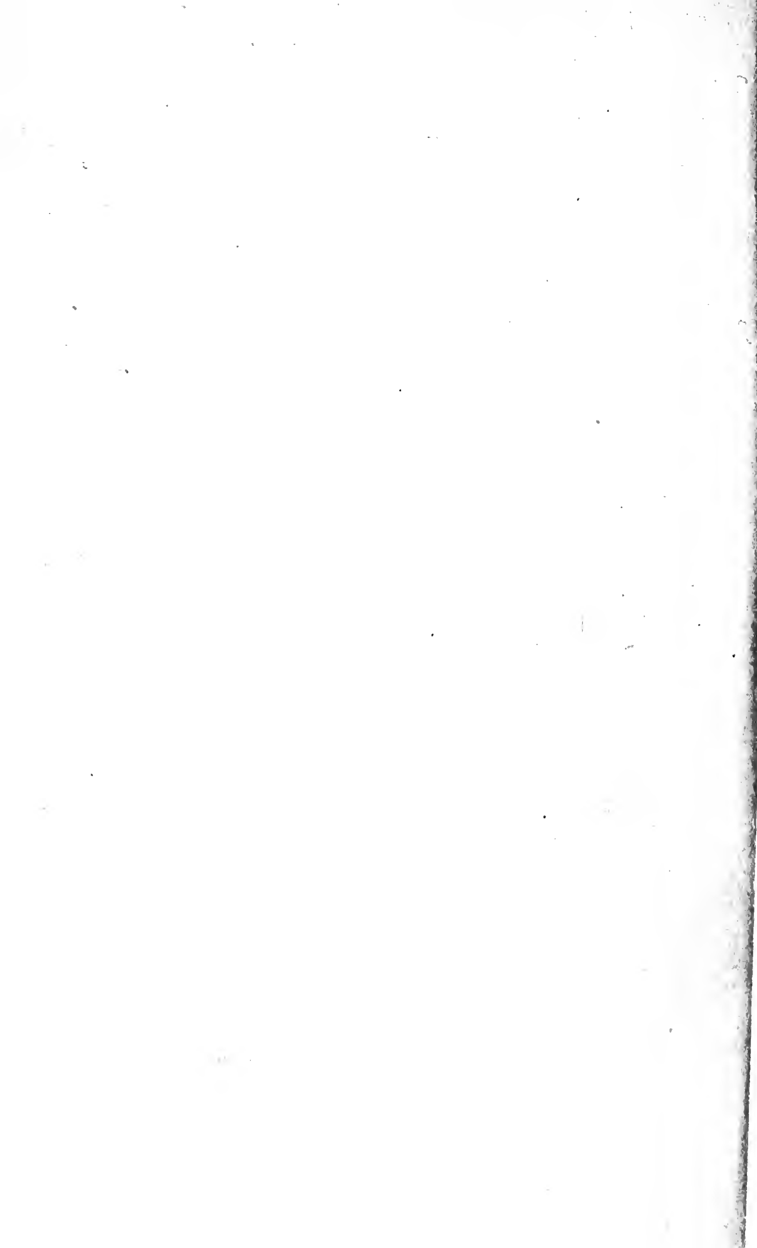
"I will take the purse," he said, "but only as a loan, Polly."

She was satisfied with that, though she muttered something about "loan be hanged," and she resumed her attack upon the unfortunate piece of dough with renewed energy and great cheerfulness of spirits.

Polly's generosity was equaled, though not surpassed, except in money values, by Nick's other friends, and when it was definitely arranged that he should go to London to attend the Academy Schools, Miss Lavenham, Edward Frampton and Captain Muffett made themselves jointly responsible for his fees, his father agreeing to this arrangement because it was made clear to him, after many arguments, that they all desired a share in Nick's glory. During those last days in the cottage by the sea, when he stood on the threshold of young manhood, facing at last the great adventure when he would go forth to seek his fortune, to stand alone, to put himself to the test of life, he was overwhelmed with a sense of thankfulness for these good friends who believed in him, more than he believed in himself, and he realized with humility and self-abasement how often he had taken their favors for granted and behaved with the selfishness and arrogance of boyhood. He did not understand that he had given back more than he received. That the child who had grown into a boy and the boy who was fast growing into a man, had filled up a gap in the hearts of these

middle-aged people by the spirit of youth, and that his companionship had kept them from growing old and rusty before their time. To Mary Lavenham he had been like one of her dream children, and she had mothered him, in spite of his shyness of her. To Edward Frampton he had been the image of his own unspoiled youth, and a young knight with untarnished armor. To Captain Muffett, the old "Admiral," he had been a comrade with whom he had grown young again. They had carved out many boats together! They had sailed up the estuary on many breezy days. The withered old heart of a man who had known tragedy had flowered into a second childhood when Nick came to ask his questions. Nick did not know those things then. He only felt fearful lest he might not prove himself worthy of their faith in him. And on the last night, when they assembled in his father's sitting-room, when the Admiral made a prayer over a bowl of punch, and after drinking to Nick's health and to his prosperous voyage on a fair sea, ended with an Amen, and wiped his eye with his bandanna handkerchief; when Edward Frampton, not touching the punch, made a fine speech in which he quoted many lines from the poets upon honor and glory, and the splendor of youth; when Miss Lavenham sat very still and quiet until her turn came to speak and she made a fairy-tale of Nick's way through the worlds of art, until he reached the high peaks of eternal

beauty after many struggles, many failures, many moments of despair; and lastly when Bristles was left alone with him, and kissed him before the last good-night in this cottage by the sea, and said, "I shall miss you horribly, old man. I must join you as soon as possible," then Nick's heart was filled to overflowing, so that his eyes were moist with tears, and he could not speak. In the loneliness of his little room that night he sat on the side of his bed until the candle flickered out, and even then he sat in the darkness thinking of the boyhood that was passing and of the manhood that was coming. The thrill of the great adventure had already stirred him. Ambition, the colossal ambition of youth, quickened his pulse, and the thought of going back to London, which he remembered only through the mists of memory, excited him like a powerful drug. For in London were the two dream faces which had haunted his imagination, and in the crowd he might find them again. As once before, when he lay down to sleep, the face of Beauty and the face of Joan came to him and intermingled, so that they seemed one face, with a little teasing smile about the lips.



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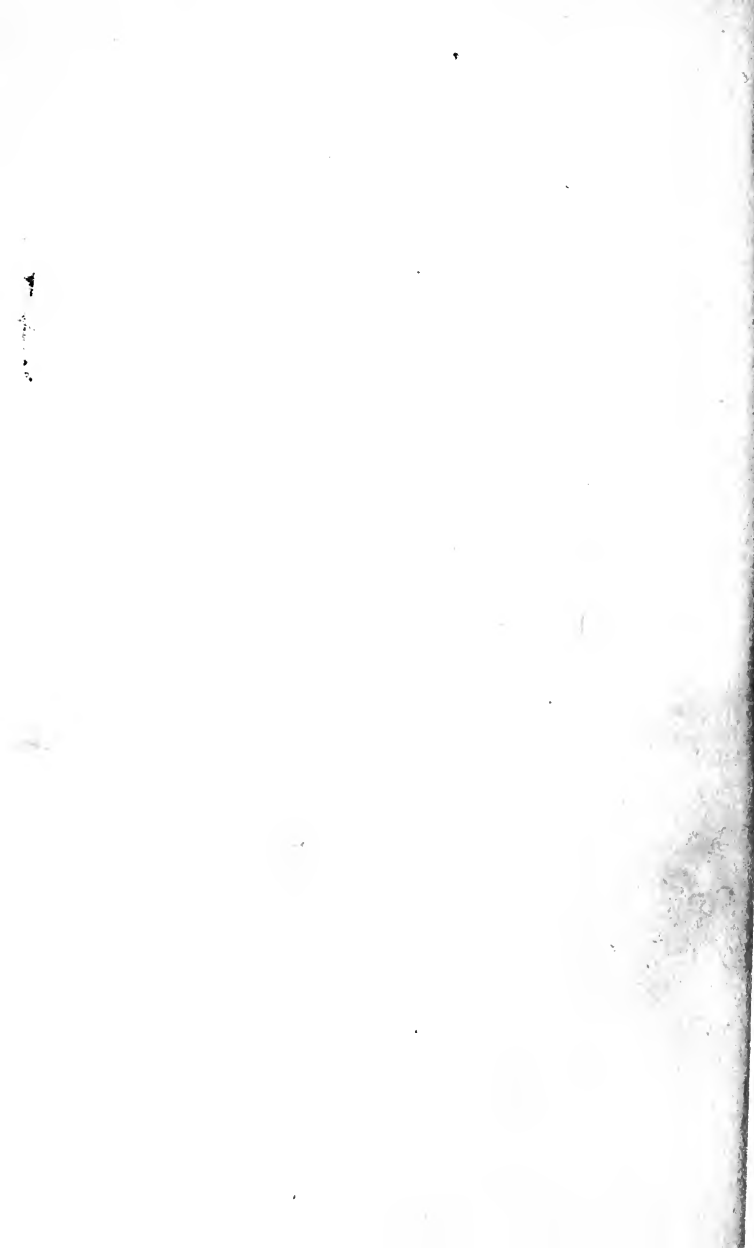

CHAPTER I

NICHOLAS IN LONDON

QUITE a number of actors and playgoers in London became familiar with the face of a young man, hardly more than a boy, who was often to be seen waiting in the queues outside the galleries, or standing at a little distance from the stage doors with an eager and searching look when the actresses came hurrying up before a performance. Suburban girls who were devotees of popular players noticed this young man partly because he did not seem to notice them. If he happened to be standing near them in a queue he paid no attention to their chatter, and did not turn his head when they giggled, and did not vouchsafe a glance at their prettiness, but stood self-absorbed, intensely introspective, with a dreaminess in his eyes. Now and again one of these girls would nudge her companion, and whisper, "There's that handsome boy again! Do you remember, we saw him at the first night of the new Gaiety piece?"—or when they passed him, standing a little aloof, outside a stage door, they would smile at each other and say, "He always seems looking for some one. I expect he's fallen in love with an actress girl's face on a picture post-card. I wish I had her luck!"

It was Nicholas Barton, who, after his days of study at the Academy Schools, came, like a moth to the candle, to every new play produced in London. After a year of plays many of them bored him unutterably. Often he would sit in the gallery staring down upon some new musical comedy, or some new problem play, with unseeing eyes, after he had scanned the faces of the actresses, without finding the face of his desire, through a pair of opera glasses which he had bought by economising over his meals. For a time the glitter and glare of the musical comedies had been wonderful to him, as all this new life in London was wonderful. For a time each new problem play filled him with new perplexities, opened his eyes to new tragedies in the relations between men and women, and stirred up uneasy thoughts about his own temperament and instincts. But the time came when he became almost as blasé as most regular playgoers, and his critical faculties wore off the sharp edge of his appetite for drama, so that he was no longer excited by a dreary piece of realism, nor ravished by a mere display of plump girls in extravagant frocks, as in the days of his first simplicity. Nevertheless he continued to go to the theatre on many nights when he was not hard at work in the little studio off the Fulham Road which he shared with his one great comrade, Jack Comyns —the Honourable John—or when he had not yielded to the solicitations of that recklessly extravagant

fellow to dine on the fleshpots of Soho or when he was not wandering on long lonely walks of exploration in and about London, watching the human drama of the streets and searching into life with that insatiable curiosity with which he had been born. In spite of Jack Comyns, art student, amourist and pampered darling of fate (he had a private income of £500 a year to set against Nick's allowance of £80 provided by a literary father who earned each penny by sweat of brow and scratching of pen), he liked his loneliness best, when his brain was busy with the ambitions of his art and when he walked with dreams even in places of most sordid realism. He was a student of faces—the faces of the crowds in the great world of London. They were etched into his brain, as afterward he drew them in his note-book—tragic faces, branded with vice and despair, horrible faces like living gargoyles, hideously grotesque, twisted with the torture of poverty, with the pains of hunger, with the stamp of sin, comic faces, like caricatures of humanity, ape-like, Puck-like, laughing out upon their gray life with the freakish humor of the half-starved Cockney, noble faces touched with sadness, or spiritualized by suffering, beautiful faces, of women unspoiled by luxury, of patrician women, a little proud, a little disdainful of the world about them, conscious of their breeding, pretty, silly, smirking faces of girls displaying their vanity to the passers-by, and faces of every type and

every class, which to Nicholas Barton, art-student, were studies of life to be remembered for his note-books, so that Jack Comyns, his comrade, was amazed at his industry, and startled into loud expressions of admiration.

It was not easy to give Jack Comyns the slip in order to go to the theatre, nor easy to explain his reason for going to plays which, as he had to confess, bored him exceedingly after the first orgy of play-going. He had not the pluck to tell that laughing, satirical, egotistical fellow who chaffed him for his sentiment and pelted him with apples from the tree of knowledge that he went not in search of dramatic emotion, but in quest of a mother whose face he only dimly remembered as in a dream, and whose stage name he had utterly forgotten, since he had heard it once at Canterbury on a day which he would never forget.

"Write and ask your Governor" would have been the advice of the Honourable John, who always wrote to his own "governor" when he had overdrawn his banking account, when he had got into some new scrape with a harpy in petticoats, and when he desired a little advice for the pleasure of neglecting it. Nick could not explain to him that the last thing in the world he could do was to write for his mother's stage name from a father who desired nothing more than to forget her. But this ignorance of her name was a great source of trouble to

Nicholas Barton, for the playbills did not help him in his search, and it was only by holding fast to his dim memory of her face that he could ever hope to find her among all the women who came on to the London stage. Even that dim memory betrayed him, so that sometimes his heart had given a great thump and his face had flushed, and he was thrilled with a great excitement, by the appearance of some actress who, for a moment or two, convinced him that at last he had found Beauty again, until the imaginary likeness faded out, and the voice betrayed itself, and he knew that he must go on searching. There came a time indeed when he was forced to believe that his mother had disappeared forever, and that he would never find her again, for never once did he see her portrait on any picture post-card or in any illustrated paper, and he was familiar now with the faces of most of the actresses in the London theatres. Perhaps she had given up the stage, so that all his trouble had been in vain.

That was a blow to his heart. Upon first coming to London he had believed, in the innocence of his youth, that he would meet the two people whom he most desired to meet, Beauty and Joan, face to face in one of the crowded streets. It was only when the vastness of London had frightened him, during three miserable months in a cheap lodging house in Pimlico, to which he had first gone, before his comradeship with Jack Comyns, that he gave up that simple

idea. And it was after screwing up his courage to the sticking point and calling at the ground-floor flat in Battersea, where Joan had lived, that he felt most lonely and most abandoned in the great solitude of the London crowds. For Joan no longer lived in the ground-floor flat, and the door was opened by a young woman with a cigarette in her mouth and a stylographic pen in her hand, who said that the Darracotts had gone away without leaving their address.

She volunteered the opinion to Nicholas Barton, who stood irresolute and wistful on the doorstep, that one of the great blessings of life in London was the way in which one could go away and leave no address.

"It is such an excellent thing," she said, "to cut and run from one's environment, and begin a new life with new friends who are not prejudiced by one's horrible past."

Then she said:

"Excuse me, I am just killing a young man like yourself, and I have left him bleeding on the hearth-rug."

Seeing a look of stupefaction come into Nick's eyes, she laughed, and explained that it was the end of the first instalment of a new story she was writing for a half-penny paper, and as she was very behindhand with her work she would have to buck

up. Upon which statement she gave Nick a cheerful "Good afternoon" and shut the door.

Nick stood irresolute in the passage, and then climbed up the stone stairway and stood outside the door of the top-floor flat. Behind that door dwelt the dream of his childhood. A flood of memory swept back to him, stirring him with a queer emotion. He remembered the day when he had left that flat, after Polly had hammered the notice on the door with the heel of her shoe—that slip of paper on which he had scrawled the words "Beauty, come back"—and all the days that had gone before, when, as a small boy, he had made great discoveries of life, and played strange games with old friends, like the hassock with two ears, and had lived in a little world of dreams with Bristles and Beauty and Polly. How different it all was now that he came back as a young man! This stone stairway which had seemed to his childish imagination as high as heaven itself, was but five flights of dirty steps. The flat inside that door must be a tiny place, instead of the spacious palace which had haunted his memory.

While he stood brooding there, the door opened, and a nursemaid came out with a chubby boy in a jersey and knickerbockers.

"Now mind the steps, Master Dick!" said the nursemaid.

"I'm going to," said Master Dick. "I want to

count them as I go down. They're always different when I count them coming up."

Nick remembered his difficulty in counting these steps, and he looked at the small boy trotting down as though he was the ghost of his own small boyhood, and before the nursemaid shut the door, he had a swift glance of the tiny hall which had been the scene of many an exciting drama in his life. The arrival of the Rocking Horse! He remembered how Polly had unwrapped it in the hall, how Beauty had come out of the bedroom in her dressing-gown, to know the cause of all the noise. . . .

The nursemaid looked at him suspiciously.

"Do you want any one?" she asked.

"No, thanks," said Nick.

He walked downstairs again, and into the park, and he spent a whole afternoon groping back to the memories which had filled this place with ghosts—the adventures with Joan under the trees, the day when he had plucked out a handful of her hair, the day in which he had threatened to scalp her if she would not be his wife. But everything had changed and shrunk. Battersea Park was no longer a vast forest with fairy walks and magic waters. The grass was burned brown and littered with paper and orange peel. But the old owls were still in their cage, or successors of his friendly old owls. How frowsy they looked as they blinked in the sunlight! A squirrel was still hiding in its cage. He saw its

bright eyes peeping out. But it was no longer an enchanted creature. All the fairies had left the park, and he could not find the old hiding-places of mystery. There was a faded, dusty, bedraggled look about the place, which was filled with ragged urchins on half holiday, and his illusions of childhood were smashed. Nicholas Barton, sentimentalist, felt like Rip Van Winkle returning home from his long sojourn in the Catskill Mountains, to find that all his old playmates were dead and gone.

Yet even now their ghosts were here. It was the faint perfume that came from a bank of flowers which revived their ghosts in Nick's mind. It was the sweet scent of wallflowers which made him stop suddenly and stare through the sunlight with a dreamy look, and with silly tears in his eyes. For some reason which he could not analyze the subtle perfume brought back Beauty's face to him, more vividly than he had ever remembered it. He saw her laughing eyes and teasing smile. He saw her in the blue dress and in the hat with pink roses, which she had worn one day when Danvers had met them by the duck-pond. At the thought of Danvers, the Beast, as he had called him, Nick gave a little shudder, as though an obscene spectre had stared at him through the sunlight, and he walked back to the studio which he shared with Jack Comyns, almost regretting that he had revisited these scenes of his childhood.

Comyns noticed the tell-tale emotion in his eyes, and said:

"Been seeing ghosts, Sir Nicholas Bare-bones?"

"Yes," said Nick. "Any objection?"

"Lots of objections," said Comyns. "You live too much with ghosts, my son. You should follow my noble example, and go in for human nature. It's much more healthy, and vastly more entertaining. Coming to that dance this evening? There will be some pretty bits of humanity to dally with."

"I'm working," said Nick.

The Honorable John Comyns, who was lying at full stretch on a chintz-covered couch, with his hands behind his head, on a velvet cushion, sent one of his slippers hurtling at Nick's head, by a well-directed kick.

"You old stick-in-the-mud!" he said. "I can't think why I chose you for my stable companion. You are a standing reproach to my uneasy conscience."

"Perhaps I had better clear out," said Nick. "I can't afford to pay equal shares, and you go in for too much beastly luxury. Besides——"

"Besides what?" said Jack Comyns, dangling his other slipper on the end of his toes.

"We are utterly unsuited to each other. You are a well-to-do amateur, playing at art, and I am a poverty-stricken devil who must work for a living, or die. Look at my clothes, and look at yours!

I wonder you're not ashamed to be seen with me."

"Great Scott!" said Comyns, addressing his speech to the ceiling. "The boy's at it again! As if I hadn't explained to him *ad nauseam,* that my colored socks and fancy ties are the nearest approach to art I shall ever get, and that his genius gives a shining light to this workshop which will one day cause the London County Council to send down a deputation in pot-hats with a medallion in honor of a famous man. 'Here lived Nicholas Barton, R.A. Also John Comyns, his unworthy friend.' The boy has got a swelled head. That's what it is. He despises poor old Jack Comyns. He's a snob of the first water."

"Rot!" said Nick.

"If you will hand me one of those cigarettes I will show you that it is not rot. Thanks. And the matches, if you don't mind. Good fellow. . . . A snob, I said. To justify that accusation I must point out to you that you are always drawing odious comparisons between my allowance and yours, between my wardrobe and yours, and between my rich, dishonest, fat-minded father, and your poor, honest, and intellectual papa. You fling my ridiculous title of Honorable into my somewhat good-looking face, and you grouse because you have to cut the fringe off your trousers and shave your shirt-cuffs. If that is not a revelation of your inherent snobbishness, I should like to know what defence you have to offer?"

Nicholas had no defence. He merely murmured something about the impossibility of going to a dance looking like a tramp.

This gave Comyns an opportunity for a further discourse.

"My dear chap," he said, "you know perfectly well that Chelsea and the Fulham Road are the only places in London where the more a man looks like a tramp the better he is liked. It's a delightful pose which I try hard to cultivate, but with poor success. It's my beastly money, and my disgustingly luxurious upbringing which prevent me from being that social success to which I aspire in this artistic quarter. I know quite a lot of little girls living on next to nothing a week and starving stoically while they paint pictures which nobody will buy, who would love me much more than they do if I had holes in my boots and if I had to ask them to sew the buttons on my shirts."

"I can't think why you play about down here," said Nick. "You would be in your element in Grosvenor Square."

The second shoe came hurtling at Nick's head, and he dodged it just in time.

"Damn your impudence!" said Comyns. "As if I hadn't a soul above Grosvenor Square! As if I don't get physically ill every time I go home and see my poor old dad getting fatter in the mind every day, surrounded by fat-minded people, wallowing in

well-to-do conventionality, and breathing in the stuffy atmosphere of wealth, sterilized of all ideas. Thank Heaven I have broken free from that blighting influence and escaped to a little sanctuary of art, idealism, and——"

"Utter laziness" said Nick.

"Quite so," said Comyns, settling further down on the sofa. "That noble laziness which is such a contrast to the vulgar hustle of this modern world; that laziness which gives a man time to cultivate his soul, to ponder over the beauties of the Eternal Beauty, to dream of great achievements which—he will never achieve."

Nick laughed, as he always laughed when Jack Comyns rode his high horse and indulged in long monologues full of far-fetched conceits and eloquent periods, which was his favorite hobby. He would talk for hours about the great picture he proposed to paint, discuss it from an ethical, æsthetic and technical point of view, and conjure up visions of the fame and glory which would be his reward, all with such exaggerated language that it was quite obvious that he did not take himself seriously, even in the heat of his enthusiasm. Then, after half a day's work he would throw down his brushes, utter a number of violent oaths with regard to the failure of his first attempt, retire behind a screen for an elaborate ritual of washing, and emerge spick and span, to spend the rest of the day in preventing his

other friends from working. In the Academy Schools where Nick had encountered him, he received severe rebukes, or satirical comments, from the masters for his slipshod work and utter carelessness. Yet they said that he had a quick eye and put a certain character and dash into his studies which showed that he might do better things if he took the trouble. Jack Comyns was satisfied with the knowledge that he might do better things if he took the trouble, but he postponed the day of trouble with light-hearted gaiety, and said, "Manana" like a Spanish Don. There was, indeed, a strain of Latin blood in this sprig of nobility who had wandered away from his class to mix with down-at-heel artists, untidy girl students, free-and-easy artists' models, in that strange district whose boundaries lie between the King's Road and the Fulham Road, and where hard work and scanty meals are accompanied by a gaiety of spirits which takes the sting out of poverty while youth lasts, or the pretence of youth. He had extended the hand of friendship to Nicholas Barton when that fellow-adventurer in art had been badly in need of friendship, having been chilled by the loneliness of his first months in London, when he hardly heard the sound of his own voice. Comyns had looked over his shoulder one day in the life class and said in his enthusiastic way, "By Jove! I would give my right hand to draw like that."

Nick was startled and embarrassed, but laughed at the queer compliment.

"Without your right hand you couldn't draw at all."

That was the introduction to their comradeship.

"Look here," said Comyns, "let's have lunch together. I hate eating alone, don't you?"

Over the luncheon table Comyns had broken the ice of Nick's reserve, by rattling on in his egotistical way, by speaking with exaggerated enthusiasm of Nick's sketch book, upon which he had seized, without asking permission, and by plunging into a discussion on the ethical purpose of art, so that Nick could not follow his high-flown arguments. Nicholas summed up this new acquaintance as an egotist, a poseur, and a dandy, and made up his mind to detest him very thoroughly, but, as the weeks passed, he had to admit to himself that the egotism of the Honorable Jack Comyns did not prevent him from being very generous in his praise of other men's work, that his pose was a harmless one which did not spoil his good-nature and sense of humor, and that his dandified appearance did not make him ashamed of walking arm in arm with Nick, who was the shabbiest student at the Schools. Indeed, to Nick's astonishment, he was singled out by this elegant young man, among all other students who were eager for the friendship of such a dashing fellow, and made to accept many small favors from him,

which he could not hope to repay—luncheons when he would have checked his hunger with a bun, elaborate little dinners in Soho restaurants, when he would have gone home to a lonely lodging for very frugal fare. He could not understand why Comyns desired his friendship, for he was as ignorant as a child of the great life in which that young man had graduated, and he had none of the conversational brilliance which sparkled on the lips of a man who was never so happy as when he was talking on big subjects in an airy way. He put the question bluntly to his friend when the idea was first proposed that Nick should share his studio, at a small cost.

"What can I give you in return? I am a dull dog, as you know, and a hard worker. I can't afford to play about."

"My dear fellow," said Comyns, "I don't want you to play about. Heaven forbid that you should play about! The honest truth is that I find in you qualities of character which I have never struck before, and which are entirely lacking from my own degenerate soul. I believe we should get on famously for that reason, and you would do me a heap of good—intellectually, morally, and spiritually."

"What qualities?" asked Nick. "I am not conscious of them."

"That's your great gift," said Comyns. "You haven't a hap'orth of self-consciousness. What

qualities? Well, first of all, an idealism which dwells on the hill-tops, secondly, the innocence of a mediæval saint who has come from a cloister into a naughty world. Thirdly, a romantic temperament which will inevitably lead to your undoing, unless you have a cynic at your elbow. I propose to be that cynic, though without spoiling your lofty ideals and beautiful romanticism, except in so far as you must be hardened against the rude buffets of actuality and safeguarded against the lures of witch-women."

At first Nicholas believed that Comyns really wanted to save him from the life of semi-starvation which he had been leading since his arrival in London, and that underneath all his friend's insincerity and carelessness there was a generous strain which made him choose the poorest, shabbiest fellow in the schools to "dig" with him. For this reason he shirked the idea, and refused it proudly. He did not want the charity of Comyns, nor of any one else, except those good friends at Barhampton who had staked their faith on his success. But when he began to realize that Comyns was prepared to make a friend of him on terms of perfect social equality, his guard was broken down, and he escaped from the lonely squalor of his lodgings into a studio of which the best piece of furniture was a gay companion.

For the first time in his life Nicholas Barton knew

the joy of true comradeship. Having lived mostly with people much older than himself it was a new and splendid thing to have a friend of his own years, and such a friend as Comyns, who was utterly candid, infinitely amusing, and unfailingly good-natured. It was true that he had many exasperating qualities, but Nick pardoned them all. His laziness was so incurable that he would often stay in bed until it was time for luncheon, or spend the morning in his dressing-gown, reading French novels and smoking cigarettes, when Nick was putting in a hard morning's work. He was villainously and outrageously untidy, littering the studio with his socks and ties, razors, shirts and boots. Though professing to scorn the conventions of fashion, his own toilet took him a solid hour, and was the result of careful cogitation upon the state of the weather, and his particular mood. Though admiring the industry of his "stable companion," he did his best to make work impossible in his company, by singing florid Italian operas, by dancing the two-step, and overturning the furniture, by interviewing the charwomen at great length upon the state of their souls and the conditions of their home life ("I am a great student of sociology" was his excuse to Nick); by wasting the time of artists' models whose services were not required, and lastly and interminably, by discussing human life from every possible angle, and literature in a spirit of the higher criticism.

His views on life were pagan and non-moral, his views on literature austere. He had read widely in French as well as in English, and could quote Rabelais, Villon, Baudelaire and Montaigne, with as much ease as he could recite Shakespeare's Sonnets, Swinburne's lyrics, and Meredith's prose. There were times when Nicholas was startled with the licentiousness of his speech, and by the utter cynicism with which he spoke of women in the abstract —not like a young man of twenty-two, but like an old and embittered man, whose life had been wrecked by a woman's cruelty. Yet watching his relations with individual women, with the girl students whom he invited to tea on Saturday afternoons, and with the artist girls to whom he "stood treat" in Soho restaurants, Nicholas, who curled up into his own shell on these occasions, saw nothing in his behavior beyond an easy gallantry and a spirit of good fun.

To Jack Comyns he owed great bursts of laughter which swept the megrims out of his brain, long talks in which everything 'twixt Heaven and earth was analyzed, criticized, ticked off, as though no more could ever be said about it, long walks, beginning late at night and ending with the dawn which crept above the house-tops, in which all conclusions were upset, and all subjects thrashed out again. Fantastic theories were upheld doggedly by Comyns, he advanced absurdities with the gravity of a philosopher, and jeered at tragedy itself with the flippancy of a

court jester. They went together into the foulest slums of the East End, and stared at naked poverty and at vice without disguise, and though Comyns scoffed even at this human misery, and pronounced harsh verdicts upon its victims, there were many times when he slipped a coin into the hand of some poor wretch who begged of him, thus contradicting his own views on the need of brutality and the law of the jungle.

"Weakness! Sheer weakness!" he said, when called upon for his defence by Nick. "Intellectually I am a despot, at the heart of me I am a sloppy sentimentalist; and I have no strength of will. But the weakness of my actions does not disprove the verity of my opinions. Now, you, my dear Nick, are an intellectual sentimentalist, which, I assure you, is a very false and fatal thing."

"I decline to wear a label," said Nick. "I am merely in search of truth."

"And you wear rose-colored spectacles on your journey. My dear chap, I advise you to look at life through plain glass windows."

So they "jawed," foolishly often, wisely sometimes, but always uplifted with the joyous arrogance of youth, and drunk with the wine that is made in youth's first vintage. It was the Honorable John Comyns who kept the cooler head.

It was John Comyns who shook his cool head and wagged a forefinger when Nicholas Barton told

him, late one night, the story of his boyhood, of Beauty, his mother, who had gone away, and of his father who had thrust her out of his life and heart.

He ended his tale abruptly and with great emotion.

"Jack, old man," he said, "I have met her again, after all these years. I found her to-day."

It was then that John Comyns shook his cool head and wagged his forefinger.

"My lad," he said, "it's the worst thing possible. Mark my words, you'll be devilish sorry for it. That father of yours is a good sort, and you know him to the bone. But your lady mother, if you will forgive my saying so, is a most uncertain quantity. You can't tell what influence she will have upon you. It will probably be thoroughly bad. I know those actresses. I've met some of 'em . . . You never know which way they will jump."

For the first time since their friendship began Nicholas took umbrage with the candid Comyns; on that day when he had found Beauty again he was in no mood for cynicism. He was overwhelmed with an emotion that broke down the bulwarks of his young manhood and made a child of him again.

Beauty had come back to him!

CHAPTER II

THE UNKNOWN MOTHER

NICHOLAS found his mother in the Princess's Theatre. He was sitting in the front row of the pit, with a girl on one side of him who was eating a prodigious quantity of chocolates before the rise of the curtain, and with a man on the other side who was reading the police court news in the *Daily Telegraph*. It was a new problem play by the celebrated dramatist, Starling Finch, and the theatre was crowded with the intellectuals, the pit especially being crammed with fluffy-haired women with long necks and big eyes, and sallow-faced young men who had come in a spirit of earnest criticism. The play opened with the usual dialogue between two servants in a smart household, who discussed the morality of their mistress and her latest carryings on with that psychological insight which seems to be developed below stairs, and then the mistress herself entered with the announcement that she was not at home to anybody but Mr. Farquhar. At least that was her line, but a round of applause which greeted her entrance postponed the statement until silence had been restored. Nicholas turned to his programme to find out the name of the actress, who

was obviously somebody of importance. It was new to him—Miss Audrey Vivian—and he saw by some words between brackets that she had just returned from her "Triumphal tour" in the States. Then, while he was looking at his programme, she spoke her words, and at the sound of her voice, and of a peculiar little laugh which followed, he jerked his head up and listened with an intense desire to hear her speak again, and stared at the woman's face with all his soul in his eyes. He was certain that it was Beauty long before the end of the first act. Gradually as the play developed he found himself remembering all sorts of characteristics which belonged to Beauty and were now revealed by this woman on the stage, who could be none other than Beauty—the poise of the head, a curious little trick of raising herself on tip-toe with her hands clasped behind her neck, a habit of sitting down abruptly and then immediately rising from the chair and pacing up and down in a restless way, a quaint mannerism of half shutting her eyes when she listened to somebody speaking, and then opening them very wide with a look of surprise. All these things, which he had forgotten, were suddenly remembered, as though the little cupboards in his brain had been unlocked by secret keys. But above all it was her voice which made him sure of Beauty. Every time she spoke and laughed he was thrilled by the sound which seemed to call back to his childhood. It was

a voice which had haunted him in his dreams. It was the voice which had spoken over his cradle, and taught him the meaning of words, and laughed at the first jokes of his life. It was Beauty's voice! And presently this woman on the stage, who was acting the part of a gay-hearted creature, ignorant as yet of the tragedy which was to smash her in the second act, sang a little song as she touched the notes of the piano. It was just a line or two, ending suddenly as the door opened, but those few notes were enough to stir old chords in Nick's heart, for they belonged to a song which Beauty had sung to him a score of times as he sat on the magic carpet of Bagdad in the drawing-room of the top-floor flat. He remembered the words:

Once a boy a wild rose spied
In the hedge-row growing,
Fresh in all her youthful pride,
When her beauties he descried,
Joy in his heart was glowing.

The girl who had been eating chocolates industriously was startled by seeing the young man at her side rise in his seat, and after groping for his hat make his way out from the first row of the pit. Her eyes followed him, and she saw how pale he was, and what shining eyes he had. She was quite sure that he had been taken ill, and felt angry when several people in the back rows called out, "Sit

down!" It was before the end of the first act, but Nicholas Barton did not return to see the second and third acts. For a long while he paced about the streets in the neighborhood of the theatre. He was too excited even to think out a plan of action. One thought only throbbed through his brain, the thought that after all those years Beauty was back again, back in his life. He returned to the theatre and made his way round to the stage door, deciding to send up his name and ask to see her. But he had to walk up and down again, with his hat off, so that the wind blew into his face, before he could steady himself down sufficiently to ask the man inside the office whether he could see Miss Vivian between the acts.

"I'll inquire. . . . Got a card?"

"I'll write a note."

Nick tore out a leaf from his sketch book, which he had taken to the theatre with him, and wrote a few words on it.

DEAREST BEAUTY:

Will you see me?

Your son, NICK.

He was kept waiting ten minutes, which seemed as long as ten times ten minutes to a young man whose emotion had made him feel a little drunk, so that he breathed deeply and jerkily, and had to moisten his lips with his tongue to gain some self-

control. For he knew that this meeting with his mother, if she consented to see him, would be a great adventure, and that his life would not be the same after he had seen her as before.

Presently the man poked his head through the swing door and said:

"Gentleman to see Miss Vivian?"

Nick followed him along a narrow passage and up a long flight of stone steps, until he tapped at a door, and said, "She's inside."

A voice called out "Come in!" and Nick opened the door and found himself face to face with his mother.

She stood at the far end of the room, with her back turned to a large mirror on a little table where candles were burning. Her face was painted and powdered, and her eyes pencilled so that they seemed very big and lustrous, and she wore a stage frock of black net over crimson silk, cut very low at her bosom. She stood quite silent for a moment, staring at Nick. while all her natural color faded beneath her paint so that she was quite white except where her cheeks were dabbed with red. Nicholas stood silent also, in the doorway, gazing at the woman hungrily, as though his eyes were seeking for the mother he had known and could not quite find her. Then he faltered forward, and with a queer kind of sob in his throat said:

"Beauty!"

She held out her hands to him, cold hands which he seized and raised to his lips.

"Nick! Good heavens, it can't be my little Nick!"

She put her head on one side, glancing up at him with half-shut eyes, and then, with her hands fluttering up to her throat, gave a strange, excited laugh.

"I can't believe it! It's impossible! I remembered my little Nick as a tiny boy. Have so many years gone by?"

"I have been waiting for you all this time," said Nick.

"How many years?" asked Beauty. "It seems only the other day since . . . "

She did not finish her sentence, but drooped her head a little.

"Fourteen years," said Nick.

Beauty opened her eyes wide.

"Good Lord! I must be an old woman, and I have never noticed it."

She turned round to the table and seized a silver hand-mirror and looked at the image of her own face, with a vague smile about her lips.

"No, I can't hide the crows' feet. I can't paint myself young again. I suppose the years have marked me more than I imagined. Nick—do I look frightfully old?"

"You look as young as when I saw you last," said Nick. Then he added in a faltering voice,

"Almost as young." For he could not hide from himself that this was not quite the Beauty of his dreams. Her face had hardened a little. It had the sharp lines of a woman who had passed through the ordeal of suffering and was not quite unscathed. He wished he had not seen her for the first time after all those years so heavily painted and thickly powdered. It made her look a little coarse. It dragged down the ideal of her beauty which he had treasured in his memory.

"You should not have added that 'almost,'" said Beauty. "It spoiled a very pretty compliment, just as it had bucked me up no end."

Nick wished she had not used that last phrase. The first time he had heard it, after coming to town, was on the lips of a vulgar little artist's model.

"My word!" said Beauty, who was now sitting down on a sofa fumbling for a cigarette from a silver case, "you are a tall and handsome fellow, Mr. Nick! If you weren't my son I should be tempted to fall in love with you."

"I want you to," said Nick.

"I shall have to be very careful," said Beauty. "I can't even imagine that you're my son. It's the funniest thing in the world."

She laughed in a hysterical way, and then puffed at her cigarette once or twice, before flinging it away in the fireplace.

"Why funny, mother?" asked Nick.

"Well, for one thing, I had quite forgotten I was a mother. I had wiped it right out of mind just as one cleans a slate. And now you come back, grown-up, and I find myself sitting in my own dressing-room with a handsome young stranger who calls me mother. It's an impossible situation. I can't act up to it."

Nick was silent. He was dimly conscious of a sense of pain because Beauty had wiped out the memory of him during all those years when he had been clinging to his memory of her.

"I'm conscious of missing my part most frightfully," said Beauty. "Here you are, a long-lost son, and here am I, a guilty and remorseful mother. What a chance for emotion! I know I ought to burst into tears, and clasp you to my breast and say, 'Oh, my de-arling bo-oy!' and then faint gracefully away. But I can't! I can't squeeze out one little tear. I want to laugh. I can't even clasp you to my breast, because it would be like embracing a gentleman visitor whom I have never dropped eyes on before. I should feel horribly embarrassed. Do you mind if I laugh again?"

Whether he minded or not, she clasped her hands behind her head, and laughed until more than one little tear came into her eyes, so that she had to unclasp her hands and mop her eyes with a little lace handkerchief.

"If I go on like this I shall have to make up again,

which would be a horrid bore. As it is, Mr. Nick, you have put me off my part altogether. I must really rebuke you for calling on a long-lost mother between the acts of a play on which her reputation is staked. In another two minutes I have got to pull myself out for a big scene."

The words sounded flippant and callous to Nick, who was craving for motherly sentiment, who was stirred with an enormous emotion, who at the sight of this woman could scarcely keep back the tears which struggled to sweep down the barriers of his self-control and to shake his body with sobs. Yet he saw that beneath Beauty's attempts at light-hearted fun, she too was stirred, and that she rattled on like this to hide a nervous excitement, and that her laughter did not ring quite true, and that the tears which she had mopped from her eyes were not those of mere mirth. Indeed, her mood changed suddenly and she sprang up from the sofa and came swiftly across to the chair where he sat with his hands clasped between his knees, and put her face against his cheek for a moment.

"I know you think I am a foolish stony-hearted creature! You see, you have taken me by surprise. I hardly know whether I am standing on my head or my heels. Give me a kiss, little, big Nick, before I go on to the stage again."

He kissed her on the cheek, and she blushed under her powder and paint, and said:

"After all, it will be fun to have a son. It is good to be kissed by a handsome young man, without offending the proprieties. . . . Not that I care a little hang for them."

There was a tap on the door, and Beauty said, "It's getting near my cue. I must go as quick as Billy-o."

She darted to the table, and powdered her face with swift dabs.

"When shall I see you again?" asked Nick.

"Not to-night," said Beauty. "I'm going out to supper with—with a friend. Come to lunch with me to-morrow at the Hilarity restaurant. One o'clock, sharp. I will put on my bestest best things for you, so that you shall see Beauty in all her glory."

Standing at the door, she put her hands up to her lips and blew a kiss at him, and then darted out of the room.

Nick found his way down to the stage door again, and went out of the theatre. He did not want to see the third act. He wanted to think out this new situation, to find out its bearings upon his life, to foresee its future working out. One thing startled him, as in the old days he had been startled by great discoveries. He did not know his own mother! She was a perfect stranger to him, as he was a stranger to her. For the first time he realized that his knowledge of this woman dated back to the time when

fourteen years ago she had slipped out of his life, and that his memory of her had not been the memory of a real woman, but the memory of a child's ideal of a woman. Now, meeting her, in his young manhood, in her maturity, the dream had become an unreality, and he had found himself in the presence of a mother of whom he knew nothing, except through the rose-mists of a childish imagination, and by the bitter words of the husband she had deserted. To know her he would have to explore her nature as though he had just been born afresh, he would have to find out her kindness or unkindness, every trait of her character, every idea and opinion, as though he had just been "introduced" to her. Yet, because she was his mother, he yearned toward her, and because of the dream he had cherished he was prepared to worship her, with the worshipful heart of youth for the ideal of motherhood.

One thought, however, which he tried to thrust out of his brain, kept stabbing him like the pain of a raw nerve. It was the thought of Danvers—"the Beast"—the man with whom Beauty had gone away fourteen years ago. Was she still living with him? He shuddered—the idea of meeting that man with Beauty as his wife filled him with a sickening sense of horror. He would want to get his hands about the man's throat, to take a brutal vengeance for all the years of his motherless life, to finish the punishment which Bristles had begun on that day of drama

in Canterbury. It would never do for him to meet Danvers. The mere remembrance of him threatened to spoil this meeting with Beauty, the long-desired.

It haunted him even when he sat with Beauty in the Hilarity restaurant, where many eyes glanced over at this laughing woman who seemed only a few years older than the young man who sat opposite to her, listening to her chatter. One question trembled on his lips, though for a long time he had not the courage to speak it.

"Where is that man—Danvers?"

But Beauty did not give him a chance to ask that question over the luncheon table. She had kept him waiting for his meal until he believed she would not come at all, and when she came suddenly, dashing up in a hansom cab, and springing down to him with a little laugh, he hardly knew her as the same woman he had seen the night before, because the powder had been wiped off her face, and the thick paint no longer raddled her cheeks, though she had left a faint touch of color there, and in a light blue frock, with a broad-brimmed straw hat on which a great white feather lay curled like a sleeping bird, this mother seemed to him like a young girl. She was almost the Beauty of his dreams.

She gave him her hand, like a girl to her lover, and during the meal chatted to him as gaily as though no tragedy had divided them for years, and

as though he were a young cavalier paying homage to her charms. She spoke no intimate word, no word of motherly emotion, she made no allusion to the old days of Nick's childhood, and not by any sign showed that she gave a thought to the father of her son. She gave a vivid account of her tour in the States, with a comical mimicry of American women, with an exaggerated caricature of American manners, and she expressed her joy at being in old England again, where she had not been forgotten.

"I can afford to ask big fees now!" she said, with a triumph in her voice. "I made a pot of money in America, and I shall skedaddle back again if business is slack on this side."

"Are you rich?" asked Nick.

She pursed up her lips.

"Rich is a big word. I can do myself pretty well, but my ambitions are much bigger than my means. They always were!"

She looked across at Nick, and seemed to notice the shabbiness of his clothes for the first time.

"You don't seem very flourishing. What are you doing with yourself?"

Nick told her about his art studies, but he broke off in the middle of a sentence, for Beauty did not seem interested, and was listening with only half an ear, while she gazed round the restaurant and gave a smiling greeting to a Jewish-looking man at one of the tables.

It was in the smoking lounge that Nick asked the question which had been trembling on his lips. He spoke it abruptly and awkwardly, while Beauty was leaning back blowing out a coil of smoke and gazing at him with half-closed eyes and a smile on her lips.

"What has become of—of that man—Danvers?"

At these words Beauty's smile faded out, and her eyes opened suddenly with a stare of surprise, and the cigarette trembled in her hand. She was white to the lips.

"What do you know about him?" she asked in a queer voice. Then, without waiting for an answer, she said, "Please don't mention that name again, or I shall quarrel with you. It's one of the things I have forgotten."

Nicholas Barton was not long in learning that his mother had a wonderful gift which enabled her to forget the things which she did not wish to remember. Indeed, her memory did not seem to go back much further than the day before yesterday, and yesterday to her was a long way off.

Nicholas asked Beauty another question which annoyed her, though he could not guess why.

"Are you living alone now?"

Beauty hesitated for a moment, and then gave a rather harsh laugh.

"From a man of the world I should regard that question as an insult."

Nick was astounded, and seeing the look of pained surprise in his eyes, she leaned forward and thrust her fingers through his hair, and said in a coaxing voice:

"Little Nick, what a simple boy you be!"

She added also that he was a pretty boy, and she was proud of him, though to have such a tall son would give her age away to all the world.

"Have you fallen in love yet, Nick?" she asked, looking at him with a teasing smile.

Nick blushed uncomfortably, and said:

"Not yet."

But he thought of Joan Darracott, whom he had lost in the world.

"Oh, surely!" said Beauty. "Why, a young man of your age ought to be in love with half a dozen nice girls. My dear boy, your education *has* been neglected."

"I have my work to do," said Nick very gravely.

Beauty made a grimace.

"Beastly nuisance, work. How I loathe it!"

Then she leaned forward and fondled one of Nick's hands, and spoke with a little thrill of emotion in her voice.

"I haven't done much for you as a mother, Nick. Not since those days which I have wiped off the slate. But now I'll make amends. Thank the Lord I've made a bit of boodle, and I am going to give you a good time. You and I will have lots of fun,

Nick. You must chuck your work for a time and play about with me."

Nick drummed a tattoo on his knees with nervous fingers.

"I want to see as much of you as I can, mother, but I can't give up my work. I have got to stick to it. You see, I have got to pay back the people who are finding the money for me."

He had told her already about the Merman, the Lonely Lady and the Admiral.

"I'll pay 'em back," said Beauty. "How much? A hundred pounds?"

"It isn't exactly the money," said Nick. "I have got to pay back other things, their belief in me, and all that. I have a chance of winning the Gold Medal—at least they think so at the Schools—and if I slog away I think I might pull it off."

"Oh, hang the Gold Medal!" said Beauty. "I will buy you one for your watch chain to-morrow."

Nicholas laughed.

"It wouldn't be quite the same thing, would it?"

Beauty pouted at her son.

"You are getting tired of me already."

"I shall never get tired of you," said Nick, "not if I live for a hundred years."

"Well, then, you must play with me," said Beauty. "Now that I've got a good-looking son I shall make the most of him. I am greedy for you, Nick."

"Thanks, mother," said Nick, laughing again. "I have been hungry for you all my life."

She fondled his hand again, and then for the first time asked a question about the man who had been her husband.

"Is your father still alive? Sulky old Bristles?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"I suppose he hates me like poison."

Nick was silent. He felt horribly embarrassed. A sense of the tremendous tragedy which had divided his father from this woman overwhelmed him.

Beauty did not press her inquiries. She gave one of her queer little laughs, and said:

"He was always hard on me. But I don't blame him. I led him an awful dance."

That was all she said about the man who had been her husband. She gave a quick gesture, as though wiping *him* from the slate, and then commanded Nick to accompany her to the nearest tailor, so that she might not be ashamed of his shabbiness.

"My dear boy," she said, "if you had not the face of an artistic archangel you would look like a tramp who sleeps in his clothes."

She was reckless in her orders to the tailor, and a week later Nick was abashed by the delivery of a parcel at the studio door containing three suits for morning wear and an evening dress suit of a most elegant cut. He was abashed, not because they came as a surprise to him, but because John Comyns gave

a howl of laughter, and after a few words of amazement, laughed again, until the tears came into his eyes.

"This beats everything in my eventful career," he said, when he had recovered his composure. "That Nicholas Barton should exchange his old blue serge for purple and fine linen is more than a joke. It's a ridiculous miracle. It's a monstrous farce. It's a most comic and grotesque tragedy. No wonder I have to mop my eyes!"

"I am glad it gives you so much amusement," said Nick, trying to hide his embarrassment. "But I fail to see why. I suppose I have a right to dress decently, as far as my means allow."

"That's where you are wrong," said Comyns. "My dear old man, you can't be a genius any more if you wear togs like that. Those are the sort of clothes I should wear, and other brainless fools of my style. But Nick Barton, who is out to win the Gold Medal, young Nick, who is the pride of the Fulham Road, must be threadbare at the elbows and wear trousers which bag at the knee and fray at the edges. You can't serve God and Mammon, or Art and the Haberdasher."

He lit a cigarette, sat on the edge of the model's throne, and gazed very solemnly at Nicholas, who proceeded to hang up his clothes on various vacant pegs, with an air of callous indifference to the re-

marks of his friend and the glory of his new garments.

"If you're not very careful, young feller," said Comyns, "you'll be getting into the social push, and then good-by Art and good-by glory. With them clothes on and that Don Quixote-Sir Galahad-John Halifax-Gentleman look of yours, you'll be invited to afternoon tea-parties in Mayfair, and little dinners at the Carlton. Pretty girls with the brains of bunny rabbits will say how sweet it must be to paint pictures, and how shocking it must be to know so many artists' models, and then you'll let your hair grow long to please the dear creatures, and all your manhood will be emasculated and all your ideals vanish, until you get softening of the brain. By God, I am sorry for you, Nick, and one of my illusions has gone smash."

Nick swore a mighty oath.

"I'll hurl something at your head if you talk such rot," he growled. "I am going to work harder than ever, but that's no reason why I shouldn't take an evening off now and again and dress the part."

"Oh, Nick, Nick!" said Comyns, "I'm ashamed of you. I loved your shabbiness and adored your austerity in the service of Art. But, if you *are* going to put on glad clothes, for the Lord's sake don't wear a made-up tie!"

In spite of his gloomy prophecies of impending evil, he assisted at Nick's toilet, and in spite of that

young man's protests cast at his unwilling feet a brand-new pair of patent shoes, flung over to him a spotless white shirt, and in due course initiated him into the awful mysteries of tying a bow in the way it should go."

Then he stood him at arm's length and pronounced judgment.

"If you only knew what to do with your hands you would look like a blood, my boy. You have the air of an aristocrat descended from William the Conqueror, with more than a touch of Plantagenet. You might even be the hero of a musical comedy. But it will be a horrid shock to the Fulham Road."

It was a horrid shock to Nick himself when he caught a full-length sight of himself in a glass at the hotel near Charing Cross, where Beauty had a suite of rooms. He hardly knew himself in the image of a dandified fellow with a waistline. His collar choked him, and he felt foolish about the feet, and terribly weak about the knees, when he made his way through the vestibule where young ladies in evening dress stared at him as he passed. But Beauty gave a little scream of delight when she saw him, and dropped a very low curtsey to him as though he were a Prince of the Blood Royal.

"Dear God!" she said, "and there are some people who say that clothes do not make the man! Nick, you are a credit to your country, and to your mother, too."

Then she whispered to him:

"I am glad you look so smart to-night. I am going to introduce you to some of my friends."

"Oh, Lord!" said Nick, "I thought you were going to be alone."

He was panic-stricken.

But Beauty took him by the hand and led him to the drawing-room of her private suite, looking very queenly in her white silk gown cut square across the breast, and with a circlet of pearls upon her hair.

She stood in the doorway, hand in hand with Nick, who saw, through a kind of mist before his eyes, half a dozen men and women in evening clothes, and heard them, as though a very long way off, clapping hands at the reappearance of Beauty.

Beauty made a speech, still clasping his hand.

"Dear friends, I promised you a surprise to-night. I told you that I would show you all a great treasure which previously I have hidden from you, because I feared that one of you might try to steal it from me. But now, lest I should be guilty of too much selfishness, I produce this treasure, begging the pretty ladies here to refrain from covetousness, and from the game of greedy-grab. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you my son, Nicholas, student of art, and most perfect gentle knight."

These words, spoken as though they were Shakespearian verse, in a silvery cadence, were

greeted with laughter, applause, and cries of incredulity.

"Extremely well spoken," said a man's voice. "But though the words were charming you don't expect us to believe them?"

Nicholas, who had recovered his composure after the first deep flush which had been a signal of distress, saw that these words had been spoken by the Jewish-looking man to whom Beauty had smiled across the Hilarity restaurant.

"I do not expect any one to believe the truth," said Beauty. "It is only lies which are convincing."

"Good epigram!" said another voice. "Oh, devilish good, Miss Vivian. You got that from a play, I'll bet!"

This was spoken by a man with a rather flabby face like a baby of mature growth. He wore a monocle from which was suspended a broad black ribbon.

"A poor thing, Lord Burpham, but mine own," said Beauty.

A girl came over with a swish of skirts to Beauty and Nicholas Barton. She was a girl of about twenty-two, and Nicholas was astonished when her mother introduced her as Lady Burpham. She seemed far too young to be the wife of that baby-faced man with the monocle, who, in spite of his pink flabbiness had crows' feet about his eyes.

"Here's a pretty boy, now what shall we do with this pretty boy?" said the girl, taking Nick's hand

and holding it so that he became seriously embarrassed.

"Be kind to him," said Beauty, "and remember his youthful innocence."

"Kitty's youthful innocence would pervert the morals of an anchorite," said Lord Burpham.

"As the wife of Baby Burpham," said the girl, very calmly, "my innocence is in the Lost Property Office."

There was general laughter at this confession, and at the end of it the Jewish-looking man, who Nicholas learned was Amos Rosenbaum, a theatrical manager in a large way of business, made the quiet observation that innocence was a much over-rated virtue and not worth a row of beans.

It was an evening—the first of many such evenings—which provided Nicholas with new knowledge of human nature, but with no real enjoyment. Always he had an uncomfortable feeling that the social atmosphere of his mother's rooms was not good for his health of mind, and as a listener and a looker-on he heard and saw things which made him wince, which made him hate some of those people whom Beauty called her friends. They were very free in their speech and manners, and one of the women used swear words with an easy familiarity which astounded Nicholas, who had kept his lips clean. Kitty Burpham made a habit of it. This elegant girl, with hair like fine-spun gold, and with big blue eyes which

had a flower-like beauty, used oaths which would have called for rebuke in a cabman's shelter. When Nicholas ventured one day to remonstrate with her, she laughed in his face, and said, with the utmost good-nature:

"Oh, bli'my, I can't change my vocabulary at my time of life. You must pitch into my baby-faced husband, who taught me his stable lingo before I had been married a week to him."

"I should try to get out of the habit if I were you," said Nick.

Kitty Burpham made a grimace at him.

"Oh, you would, would you, Mr. Prig-too-Good-to-Live?"

It was with this girl, who had the temper of a tiger-cat at times, and the *abandon* of a French coquette, that Nicholas found himself most at ease when he went to his mother's rooms, because, in spite of her desire to embarrass him by saying risky things, and to shame him by "taking him down a peg" as she called it, she had comradely ways also, and would often throw down her cards at the table where Beauty and her guests were playing, and say:

"This is bally rot, and I've lost quite enough for one night. I'm going to keep company with Sir Nicholas of the lily-white soul."

Then she would lead him by the hand to the end of the room, where the piano stood, and play queer little tunes to him, and sing queer little songs to him

in a French *argot* which it was well that he could not understand. And between the tunes and the songs she would smile into Nick's face, and make outrageous remarks about the company present in a voice too low for them to hear.

Nicholas remembers some of these flashes of character study which made him shiver.

"Amos Rosenbaum has the brain of a vulture, the heart of a tiger, and the tongue of a snake. He is a beast of prey, and mesmerises his women before he devours them. He is trying to put his coils round your lady mother. Look how he smiles at her. Did you ever see such a Satanic smile?" . . . . "That chubby-faced husband of mine! A pretty boy, isn't he? . . . He's a satyr. He has cloven hoofs inside those patent leather shoes of his. When I married him I thought him such a dear, comical thing. He seemed such a kind-hearted, brainless dear. I didn't know that he was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Funny thing! We still live together, though we hate each other like devils. I suppose it's so difficult to break a habit. Your lady mother likes him. He amuses her, and I will say she has a sense of humor. There's no love lost between him and Rosenbaum, and I think your pretty mother is the cause of it. Oh, there's a lot of drama in real life."

"Lady Burpham," said Nicholas, very sternly, "I must ask you to leave my mother's name out of your

conversation. Otherwise I shall never speak to you again."

"Tut, tut!" said Lady Burpham. "Don't put on your curate airs with me, little boy. If you don't like my sprightly monologues, you can run away and play with your Sunday school friends. See?"

Nicholas did not see, for he was staring across at his mother, who was playing with Burpham as her partner and Rosenbaum as her opponent. Beauty's face was flushed. For an hour or more she had not given a glance at Nick. She was losing money heavily, and every time she lost Rosenbaum smiled in his peculiar snake-like way.

"These cards have got the Devil in them!" cried Beauty. "I never saw such an infernal run of luck."

Burpham was glum.

"Rosenbaum plays a devilish sharp game," he said. "The kind of game they play in the Ghetto among the cut-throat Jews of Europe."

Rosenbaum cut to partners.

"My dear Burpham," he said, "when I lose I pay, which is more than some men do, although they went to Eton and Oxford, and boast of Plantagenet blood."

"Meaning me?" asked Burpham. "If so I will put my fist in your face and spoil that Jewish nose of yours."

"Your deal," said Rosenbaum calmly.

"Buck up, Burpham," said Beauty. "Don't be bad-tempered, dear boy."

Nicholas was sickened. Why did Beauty tolerate those poisonous men? How could she laugh and chatter in that company? What pleasure could she find in their conversation? There were times when she forgot the very existence of Nicholas himself, and when his presence seemed a nuisance to her. When he went away from her rooms, overheated in the warmth of them, feverish and stifling so that he took off his hat to let the fresh air play about his forehead and drank in great draughts of it—he sometimes vowed that he would not go back into that atmosphere and that he would meet Beauty only when she was alone, without those hangers-on who flattered her and called her by her Christian name, and had the insolence to kiss her hands—as Rosenbaum had kissed her hands one night when he left her rooms.

But always Beauty called him back, with her notes saying "I expect you this afternoon," or "Meet me at one-thirty," and not a day passed but that he left his work hurriedly to join her somewhere in town for luncheon or tea or dinner, so that his pencils lay idle and his palette dry. Worse than the idleness which interrupted his spells of work was the feverish excitement which jangled his nerves, and consumed him like a fire, so that even when he had a few hours alone in his studio he could not

settle down to draw from the model and wasted his time in futile efforts, without concentration of mind or skill of hand. For Beauty's moods and tempers, her erratic habits, her utter disregard of his time and duties, her continual commands to come and "play" with her, her strange eagerness to thrust him into the society of her friends, though she did not pretend to defend their moral character, or even to disguise their somewhat shady reputations, filled him with vague alarm, and with uneasy forebodings. His ideal of Beauty, the perfect mother, was bruised, though he tried to hide the bruises from his own vision. Sometimes she wounded him to the quick by little vulgarities, by little revelations of her selfishness, of her indifference to the conventional moral code, of a low level of thought on things which Nicholas had believed to be essential to the quality of womanhood. Yet to get a smile from her, to hear her laughter, to touch her hands, to call her "Beauty," to make believe that this mother was all that he desired, he abandoned his work, turned his back upon ambition, and was false to those who had faith in him.

The crisis came one day when he opened his studio door in answer to an unfamiliar knock, and found his father on the threshold.

CHAPTER III

THE CHOICE

NICHOLAS had been more than two years in London before that day when his father arrived suddenly and unexpectedly with the news that he had given up the cottage by the sea and had come to live in town again.

"You and I must set up house together, Nick, and resume our old comradeship," said Bristles. "It was foolish of us both to live apart all this time. I have missed you horribly."

He sat down in the studio, and looked round curiously.

"A charming place you've got here. Expensive, eh?"

"More than I could afford alone," said Nick. "Jack Comyns pays the lion's share, you must remember."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Bristles. "But I am making a bit of money out of my books now. That last novel of mine has made a fair hit, thank Heaven. I need not look twice at every shilling. . . . Are there any places like this we could fix for ourselves? You and I together, Nick! That will be great."

Nicholas saw that his father had gone gray since

he had last seen him, and that he had lost some of his old gaiety. There was, too, a kind of shyness in his manner, as though he was hiding something from his son, or as though he had something on his mind which he found it difficult to say. And Nick was embarrassed also, hideously embarrassed, because he expected at any moment a visit from his mother, who had made a habit, lately, of calling at his studio to fetch him away from work, or to sit chatting with Jack Comyns, if that young man happened to be handy—they amused each other vastly—or to wander round the room examining the life studies of the two art students. It would be a horrible situation if Beauty called when his father was there. What on earth should he do?

There was another reason why this visit embarrassed him. For more than a year now he had been waiting for the announcement of his father's marriage with Mary Lavenham. In letters he had received from Captain Muffett there had been plain statements to the effect that Miss Lavenham and his father passed a great deal of time in each other's company, and were undoubtedly deep in love. At least the old Admiral had no doubt of it, and in his simple, misspelled letters, written with great splutters of ink, he had expressed his opinion that Nick would soon have a new mother, and that his good father was the only man in the world worthy of this

dear, brave lady. Nick remembered some of his sentences.

I am a-weary of waiting for the sound of marriage bells [he spelt marriage with one "r"] but I have a flag ready to hoist in the front garden, when Mary Lavenham goes to church in her best dress. It will be a happy day for the old Admiral, and after that he won't care how soon he sails into the haven of eternal rest.

After his going away from Barhampton his father's weekly budget—the letter came as regularly as clockwork by the first post on Monday morning—had contained vague hints of a probable change in his condition of life. For a year or more there had been in all his letters veiled allusions to Mary Lavenham's influence in his life. He quoted some of her words, as for instance:

I was much struck last night by something Miss Lavenham said when we were walking along the sand dunes. We were talking of novel writing, and, indeed, of all forms of art, and she ended the conversation with a laugh (you know the sound of her laughter, Nick), and then said in her dogmatic way: "Life is greater than art, and words are only the ghosts of deeds. To do a thing is better than to write about it." That seems to me true criticism. It is a rebuke to the self-conceit of the artistic temperament.

And again:

I was talking with Mary Lavenham last night in her little sitting-room—you know how she loves to chat in the twilight before the lamps are lighted—and she was full of hopes about your work and success. She takes more than a friendly interest in your career, Nick. It is a motherly interest, and she thinks of you as a woman of her only son. I wish you would write to her more often.

But latterly in his father's letters there had been a change of tone. A note of sadness had crept into them, with here and there a touch of pessimism, as though he were passing through some unhappy crisis. His allusions to Mary Lavenham were not so frequent. He complained of loneliness. He regretted that he had the cottage on his hands, so that he could not join Nick in town. Several times he put into his letters queer sentences on the subject of love and women, as though warning his son of feminine entanglements.

Do not be too quick to fall in love, Nick. Stick to your work; it is the safest way of satisfying one's heart and intellect. No doubt you will not be able to escape the allurements of women. Nature will not let you escape. But do not go half way to meet your trouble. For love is always a trouble, horribly disturbing, and sometimes destroying. Most women are reckless of men's hearts. Even the best of them are strangely careless of inflicting pain. And a man may

never be certain of them, because they are never certain of themselves. Women are not logical, even in their emotions. As a bachelor, Nick, you will have your best time, especially as a bachelor of art, devoted to a mistress who has utter loyalty.

Nicholas had read these recent letters with a sense of perplexity. What had happened between his father and Mary Lavenham? He guessed that in those two whitewashed cottages at Barhampton some strange drama was happening which had not been revealed to him, and had not been guessed by the "Admiral," whose letters still harped on the old sentimental string. Perhaps there had been a quarrel which would keep his father single. That idea became a conviction now that his father sat in the studio, discussing plans for the future which left Mary Lavenham out of account.

But at the sight of the gray hair of "Bristles," who had been his best comrade in life, and seeing sadness in his eyes, Nick was filled with compunction for his own selfishness. He realized with a sudden remorse that ever since Beauty had come back to him he had been drawing more and more away from his father, had thrust him out of his thoughts as much as possible, and had even been guilty of disloyalty to him. For once or twice when Beauty had spoken of "sulky old Bristles," he had not defended the man whose life she had wrecked, and had taken

the woman's side in that tragedy which had been of her making. Though he knew now that Beauty was fickle to the heart, though he knew her vanity and her shallowness, her lack of any moral sense, her innate vulgarity of mind, she had put such a spell upon him that he was bitterly annoyed that his father had come to town, resentful of the thought that he would have to dodge him to get away to Beauty, and scared by the deception to which he would be put, dividing his time between these two people. Each claimed him, and he would be torn in half between them.

So now, hating himself because he had no hearty greeting for his father, he sat rather silent, rather moody, and utterly miserable, so that Bristles was surprised and pained by this cold greeting.

It was not until the evening when they had dined together at the hotel where Bristles was putting up for the night that something of the old comradeship between them revived. When they sat in a lonely corner of the smoking room, Bristles pulled out one of his old and favorite pipes—Nick recognized its well-burned bowl—and after a few puffs began to speak of his life at Barhampton as though it were already remote, and an episode of the past. Then he said, in quite a careless way, as though he had just remembered a piece of news for Nick.

"By the by, there will be three empty cottages

to let this season. Our little colony will be quite broken up."

"How's that?" asked Nick.

"Well, our cottage is already empty, and there are notice boards up in Mary Lavenham's front garden and Edward Frampton's grass-plot."

"What!" said Nick. "Surely *they* are not going to leave!"

"Yes, in a few weeks. They are going to get married. I think they will set up a flat in town."

"Mary Lavenham and the Merman. Good God! —I—I—thought——"

Nick was astounded. He gazed at his father in blank amazement.

Bristles puffed at his pipe very quietly. A little color came into his face, and then faded out. He looked up at Nick with a curious smile.

"My dear boy, I thought so too. I used to have an idea that Mary Lavenham and I might set up house together. It was a bad blow when I found out my mistake. It was a hard knock for a time, but I have got over it. One gets over most things, I notice."

There was a great silence for a time. Nick did not dare to ask the meaning of this mystery. He shrank from questioning his father. But presently Bristles drew his chair a little closer to the fire, and, staring into the flame, spoke in a quiet, thoughtful way, as though analyzing a queer psychological

problem, interesting to a novelist like himself, but not disturbing to him.

"Mary Lavenham is an extraordinary woman. I never pretended to understand her, though from the very first I admired her fine courage, her splendid commonsense, her womanly helpfulness. She has a genius for friendship, especially with men. You know her gift of sympathy and her candor. . . . It was that which deceived me. I came to imagine that the sympathy she showed for my work and ideas was something exceptional, something, I mean, she gave to me alone. I got it into my head that she revealed herself to me with a frankness, an intimacy, which no other man could claim from her. In that I was mistaken. She has so big a heart that any man in distress, any man needing a little consolation or companionship, may be sure of her gifts. She gave herself, spiritually, I mean, and intellectually—in a prodigal way to any unfortunate. . . . I think for a time she and I were tremendously taken up with each other. I think, even now, there were periods when my need of her touched her emotions, stirred her senses a little. You know what I mean. . . . But the man who had the greatest need of her outrivalled me. That was Frampton, He, poor devil, suffered agony in his desire for her, and she knew that, and was convinced that she ought to sacrifice herself to save him. Indeed, I think for years she had come to look upon it as her duty, as

a kind of sacred vocation—the saving of Edward Frampton; and when I came, and appealed to her in a different way, touching her sense of romance, calling to the sentimental side of her nature, she looked upon me as a temptation. Rather humiliating to me, eh, Nick? To be regarded as a temptation! . . . Anyhow, just as I thought I had broken down the last barrier between us, when I thought I held her heart in my hands, she drew back and escaped from me, and surrendered to Frampton. . . . A queer kind of drama. Like a novel. Frampton knew all the time that he was really master of this woman, if only he put his conscience on one side and pleaded his weakness. He was master of her through his weakness. Because of his besetting sin she loved him and was eager to save him. For a long time he struggled between honor and dishonor. His conscience told him that he would be a coward to accept the woman's sacrifice. His passion for her tempted him devilishly. . . . It was only when he saw her yielding to me that he gave a great cry to her, and said, 'If you abandon me I die!' It was that cry which captured her. She drew herself away from me and said, 'Frampton needs me most. I must go to him.' . . . An extraordinary situation. Hardly credible! A novelist would be a fool to use such a plot. But there it is, in actual life. Mary Lavenham will become the wife of an habitual drunkard,

in order to save his body and soul, and I—I suffer because I am a decent-living man. What do you think of it, Nick? Pretty queer, don't you think?"

"Damnable!" said Nick. "Frightful!"

He spoke those words in all sincerity, horrified at the thought that Mary Lavenham was to be mated to a man who, at regular or irregular periods, was changed into a besotted beast. Yet, so queerly do things pull against each other in men's hearts, he was secretly rejoiced that his father would not marry again, and even a little glad that Edward Frampton, for whom in his normal moods he had still an admiration, not far removed from love, was not doomed to that fate which had been prophesied for him by Captain Muffett, if he were left alone. This thought reminded him of the old sailor-man who had staked his faith on a love match between Mary Lavenham and his father.

"What does the old Admiral think of it?" he asked.

Bristles laughed. The blow dealt to him by a woman's hand, the second blow which had smashed him for a time, had not killed his sense of humor.

"The Admiral does more than think. He rages and storms. Mary had the deuce of a time with him. He accused her of being an abandoned hussy, and said that he had a good mind to shoot Frampton like a dog. Then he blubbered like a baby and said she had spoiled the dream of his old age. Lately

he took to coming round in the evenings to cheer me up, and quoted the Scriptures, especially the Book of Job, over his whiskey and water. A good old man, though he nearly drove me mad."

That night when Nick left his father's hotel, Bristles kissed him on the cheek as though he were a small boy again, and then held him tight by the arm for a moment or two.

"I shall be dashed glad, old man, to be alone with you again—you with your art, I with my books. It will be like old times, when we two were the happiest pair of bachelors in the world. We must search for a place to-morrow."

"Yes," said Nick. "Yes."

But as he walked back to the Fulham Road his mind was full of doubts and fears. How on earth could he set up house with his father, when Beauty was clamoring at his heart? Not once in any of his letters had he mentioned the name of Beauty. Never by any hint had he let his father know that he had found his mother again. She would not be content to see him only once in a while. He would not be able to steal away for odd half hours. Even now, after only one day's absence, he found on the door-mat inside the studio one of Beauty's cards, on which she had written: "What on earth has happened to you?" and two notes sent down by hand, commanding him to lunch with her, and to dine with her. In one of them she said: "Kitty

Burpham will be desolated without you. She says you are the only good influence in her naughty life," and in the second note she said:

Baby Burpham is going away for the week-end, so you and Kitty will be able to flirt with each other to your hearts' content. Oh, you young people! It is a good thing I am old enough to play the part of Mother Grundy.

Nicholas tore up both letters and flung them into the waste-paper basket. These constant allusions to Lady Burpham were beginning to make him angry. The way in which Beauty thrust this girl into his company was becoming more than a joke. Kitty amused him sometimes, attracted him a good deal —she had a beauty to which he could not be blind and a wicked sense of humor which kept his brain on the alert—but it was not good for him to see too much of her, and, after all, she was a married woman. Nick was conscious that Kitty had a dangerous look in her eye at times when she smiled at him. It was a tempting look, which scared him. He would have to be careful of her, and of himself, yet Beauty seemed deliberately to put him in the way of temptation. It was almost as though she wished him to lose his heart to Baby Burpham's wife.

Jack Comyns came in late from a dance at the Chelsea Town Hall, and found Nick sitting in semi-

darkness on the model's throne, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

"Hulloh, old Dream-a-day!" said Comyns. "I have been hearing all sorts of bad things about you to-night."

"I can quite believe it," said Nick. "What things?"

Comyns laughed, but he gave a serious glance at his chum.

"I expect it was only the kind of things one hears from one's candid friend. It was young Gibbon, who is out for the Gold Medal. He says he's not much afraid of you now, as your hand has lost its cunning. According to him your work has been falling off pretty badly lately."

Nick groaned.

"I know. I can't put in a decent line. The game is up as far as I'm concerned."

"My dear old lad," said Comyns in his cheerful way, "what did I tell you? If you *will* go gadding about with a long-lost mother, I mean a newly found one, what can you expect?"

"For God's sake don't give me good advice!" said Nick. "It's so devilish easy, isn't it? . . . Besides . . . I've got a father to look after me now."

Comyns whistled. "What, has the famous novelist come to town?"

Nick nodded and groaned again.

"I'm in a deuce of a fix. I haven't the ghost of a notion what to do."

Comyns was very thoughtful for at least a minute.

"There's only one thing you can do," he said.

"What's that?" asked Nick.

"Give one or the other the go-by. You can't take tea with your lady mother one day and supper with your honored father the next. They would be as jealous of each other as cat and dog, and you would have to stand the racket. It won't work, old son. Believe me."

"How the devil do *you* know?" asked Nick.

Comyns was sententious as he took off his dancing pumps and flung them one after the other into the waste-paper basket with unerring aim.

"As a student of French fiction there is nothing I don't know about the relations between men and women. There is a short story I remember—the author's name escapes me for the moment—in which your present situation is completely and delicately analyzed. The story ended in the tragedy of the only son of the divorced couple. I forget whether he murdered his father, or whether he drowned himself in the Seine. However, it doesn't matter. I'm sleepy . . . good-night."

There was no good-night for Nick. He tossed about sleeplessly, and had haggard eyes when at twelve o'clock next day his father called round with

the news that he had found a jolly little house in Redcliffe Road which would suit them to a T.

"I am afraid there will be too much work for Polly," he said, "but I will get a little maid to help her. Come round and have a look at the place, old man."

But when Nick was putting on his boots and when his father was looking at some of the drawings on the wall, the door which had been left unfastened, was flung open, and a gay voice cried out, "I believe the boy is still in bed!" and—Beauty came in.

"Of all the unsociable, disgruntled, discourteous, ungrateful and unloving sons!" she cried, standing inside the door with her arm outstretched as she held the knob of a very tall parasol, and struck an attitude of melodramatic indignation.

Nick did not answer. He had just finished lacing up his boots, and he sat staring at his mother, in a stupid, speechless way. In a second she became aware that something was amiss, and aware also of a third person in the room. She turned her head, just as the man who had been her husband swung round on his heel at the sound of her voice.

"Bristles!" said Beauty.

The word came in a whisper from her lips, and all the laughter fled out of her eyes, changing to a look of fear.

The man she had called by his old pet name stood

very straight, staring at her, so that their eyes searched each other. A wave of color swept into her face, and then died down, leaving it white.

It seemed quite a long time that they stood like this, while there was a great silence in the room. Then at last Beauty turned, and shrugged her shoulders, and screwed out something like a laugh.

"How funny!" she said, "after all these years! . . . You have hardly changed a little bit, Bristles!"

"I have changed," said Bristles, "in body and heart and brain."

He spoke in a queer hollow voice, and the lines in his face hardened.

Beauty put her head a little on one side and quizzed him, with the flicker of a smile about her lips.

"You have grown a wee bit gray," she said.

She sidled forward a little, and held out her hand, and said:

"Why not?"

Nick's father drew back from her hand, as a man would draw back from the fangs of a snake.

"I do not know you," he said. "I must beg of you to leave this room, where my son and I wish to be alone together."

He spoke the words with a great deliberation, each syllable perfectly accented, like a man speaking

in a foreign tongue. Only the rise and fall of his chest showed that he was deeply moved.

Beauty laughed now in quite a natural way, a shrill, scornful laugh.

"Leave this room? My dear good man, I came here to see Nick, who is more my son than yours. Very much more. I shall stay here as long as I like."

Bristles turned to his son.

"Nick," he said very quietly, "will you order this woman out of your studio?"

Beauty was very much amused.

"I should like to see him do it! I should jolly well like to see him do it!"

She went across to him and put her arms about his shoulders as he sat in the cane chair, just as he had sat when lacing up his boots. She bent her head down and rubbed her cheek against his.

"Dear old Nick! My dear precious boy! He would rather die than wound his mother's heart."

Nicholas Barton was as pale as death.

He stared up at his father in a tragic way. Tremendous forces were at work within him, plucking at his heart, tearing him asunder. His father's eyes were fixed upon him, called to his loyalty, to their old comradeship. There was a great entreaty in his father's face. But his mother's arms were about his neck. Her face was pressed against his. His cheek was wet with her tears which had begun to flow.

She was Beauty, his mother, for whom he had yearned all the days of his boyhood.

"Father!" he said, "couldn't you make it up again? . . . Couldn't you and Beauty come together again? Is it too late?"

These words, these faltering words, seemed to give a kind of shock to the man and woman. Beauty unclasped her arms from her son's neck, and stood up straight, with an extraordinary look on her face, a look of hard contempt for the man who had been her husband, a rather cruel look.

"That is not at all likely. Once bit twice shy!"

Bristles stared her straight in the eyes.

"Nick does not understand what he asks. . . . I tell him now, before you, that I would rather drown myself than live again with a woman who has no sense of honor, no decency of mind or heart, no honesty or truth. It was too late to come together again fourteen years ago, when you betrayed me once too often."

Nick sprang up from his chair, his face aflame.

"Father, I—I—must defend Beauty. I am her son. Do you forget that?"

Beauty sprang to him and put her arm through his, and laid her face on his shoulder, weeping.

"Yes, Nick, you are my son! Thank God I may lean on you now. In the old days I had no one to defend me."

Bristles ignored the woman. He spoke to Nick.

"I do not forget you are her son. But you do not remember that I am your father. Which has the greater claim on you? The mother who abandoned you, or the father who cherished you? Answer me, Nick."

Nick answered, but it was not a straight answer.

"There were faults on both sides. There must have been! It was not all Beauty's fault. You told me that long ago."

"It was all your father's fault!" cried Beauty in a sharp, shrill voice. "You do not know what I suffered from that man, dear Nick. Oh, you will never know! He was as hard as nails to me. He was my schoolmaster. He whipped me with a moral birch, scourged me with the lash of his virtuous conceit. If he had been a little kind to me I should have clung to him. If he had been my mate instead of my school teacher I should have leaned upon him. He could have kept me straight with a smile, and called me back with a word of love. But he was always nagging, blaming, bullying. He was jealous of my art, jealous of my friends, jealous even of you, little Nick. He was as hard as this deal table here."

She struck the table with her bare hand and said:

"Hard! . . . . Hard! . . . . Hard!"

The lips of the man who had been her husband were twisted into a tragic smile, and he spoke to Nick again, not looking at the woman.

"Do you believe that, Nick? Is there any hardness in my nature? . . . Good God! I was as weak as water. If I had had any strength of will to master her I might have kept her straight. But I was a fool in her hands. It was she who was hard. She had the hardness of utter selfishness. She was as cruel as a tiger cat, and dug her claws into my heart. I have still her marks. The wounds still bleed at times."

Beauty's face was on fire.

"Your father was always a liar, Nick," she said, speaking through clenched teeth. Her hands were clenched also, as though they were ready to strike the man who had called her a tiger cat.

Nicholas stood between these two people who were the authors of his being.

He stood grasping the lapels of his coat, with his head drooping and his eyes staring at the floor. He was a tragic figure there, this son listening to the terrible words of the man and woman who accused each other. He belonged so much to both of them. He had his father's clean-cut face, but his mother was in his eyes. He had his father's voice, the same inflections of the voice, but Beauty had given him his poise of the head, the unconscious trick of passionate gesture. Their flesh and blood mingled in him and no surgeon could cut out the mother's share, or the father's.

He raised both hands to his head and then flung

them out as he turned round and faced his father.

"Lord God!" he said, "how am I to be the judge between you?"

There was a silence. His father was staring at one of Jack Comyns' sketches of a dancing girl, tacked on the wall, as though it had put a spell upon him. Then he came down to Nick, and laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

"You *must* be the judge," he said. "At least you must choose between us. Fourteen years ago the law gave you to me. It condemned this woman and gave me the custody of the child. Did I fail in my trust? Did I not pour out my love upon you? You and I have been good comrades, Nick. Are you going to let this woman kill our comradeship?"

As he spoke the last sentences his voice faltered and broke.

Beauty plucked at Nick's sleeve.

"The law was cruel to me, Nick. It robbed me of you. I bore you in pain and agony. The law could not alter that fact by writing something in a book. As the mother who bore you I claim you now. Oh, you will not leave me again! You will not, Nick!"

She put her face down and sobbed, and smothered his hand with kisses so that it was wet with her tears.

On the other side of him his father's hand was upon his shoulder.

"Nick," said the man, very calmly and quietly. "I can see that this woman is deceiving you, just as she deceived me. She is play-acting now, as she is always a play-actress. Do you think that emotion is real? I have seen her do it on the stage, to make the servant girls sob in the gallery. Those tears are not real, my dear fellow. They are sham tears without salt in them. She pretends to love you, to long for you. For fourteen years she did not give you a thought. She only wants you for a little while as a plaything. When she is tired of you she will fling you away, like a broken toy."

He took his hand from Nick's shoulder, and pulled out his watch.

"This scene has lasted too long. It is a tragic farce. I can't stand any more of it."

He looked into his son's eyes again, and all his soul seemed to be in his gaze.

"One of us must go, Nick. Which is it to be? Are you going to turn this woman out—or me?"

He went over to an oak chest and picked up his hat and stick and gloves. Then he spoke again, as Nick stood silent.

"I came up to town with the idea that you and I should set up house together. I had set my heart on it—not guessing that this was going to happen. But it must be one thing or the other. I can't share you with this woman, who would always be poisoning your mind against me, always tempting you

away from me. When you came back I should smell her scent on you, I should see her lies rankling in your brain. I should see the ghost of her hand dragging you away. No, that wouldn't do at all. We should both be miserable. . . . Come, Nick, old man. Make your choice. Which is it to be?"

"Nick will stay with me!" cried Beauty. She flung her arms round her son, and put her face up to his. Then she cried out again with a triumph in her voice, "Nick will stay with me!"

"Oh, my God!" said Nick.

He was frightfully white. This torture was too much for him. A tremendous sorrow was upon him, because he had to make a choice which Nature never meant a man to make.

"Well?" said his father.

Nick put his arm round his mother's waist.

"I can't desert Beauty," he said. "I can't . . . It's impossible."

He had made his choice.

"Nick will stay with me," said Beauty. She gave an hysterical laugh and stroked his face, and laid her head upon his chest, like a woman with her lover.

The man who had once been her lover, whose face she had stroked like this, did not look at her. He seemed to have grown older since Nick had spoken his last words. There were new lines about his eyes and lips. But his voice was steady when he turned at the studio door.

"Good-by, Nick. When she has tired of you I shall be waiting for you. I will send you my address."

He went out of the door, and there was the sound of his footsteps down the passage leading to the street.

For a moment or two the mother and son stood motionless and silent. Then Beauty unclasped her arms from Nick, and mopped her eyes, and laughed, and cried a little.

"That man is a devil," she said.

"He is my father," said Nick.

CHAPTER IV

THE WONDERFUL LADY

BRISTLES did not stay very long in London after his arrival from Barhampton. In a friendly letter to Nick, which made no allusion to the tragic scene in the studio, he explained that he had taken a small house in Redcliffe Road, and that Polly had superintended the moving of his furniture from the cottage in her usual indefatigable spirit. They were still in the throes of the horrid business of settling down. But he himself was in an unsettled mood, and as soon as things were straight, proposed to go for a walking tour in Normandy to blow the cobwebs out of his eyes and get some local color for some scenes of a new novel which was already taking shape in his head.

Following upon this letter came a succession of picture postcards from Caudebec, Rouen, and other French towns and villages, none of which contained a reference to any home-coming. But in one of them he said that any letters addressed to Redcliffe Road would be forwarded to his next address by the devoted Polly.

And, by the bye—said Bristles in a postscript—that good soul would jump for joy if you found time to go and see her.

That suggestion of a visit to Polly came one day when Nick was feeling very "down." Beauty had gone off for a motor drive to Brighton with "Baby" Burpham and Kitty and Amos Rosenbaum, and she had been very angry with him because he had stubbornly declined to join the party. His refusal had led to the first quarrel which Nick had had with his mother, and he had been astounded by the passion into which she had flown when he persisted quietly in his desire to stay behind and work.

"You think more of your precious work than you do of me!" cried Beauty. "It is hateful of you. Surely you can put your work on one side for once to give me a little pleasure!"

"I am always putting my work on one side," said Nick. "So much so that I am spoiling all my chances in the Schools. I shall never be able to make up for all this lost time."

"There you are!" said Beauty. "You are always talking about your lost time, as if you begrudged every minute you spent with me."

"That is unfair, mother!" said Nick, bending down to kiss his mother's hand.

She drew it away quickly.

"You don't love me a little bit."

"I love you too much. I have given up all my ambitions for your sake, Beauty."

His voice broke a little. This confession meant

very much to him, for his ambition had been a high ideal, and it lay broken at Beauty's feet.

"If you are a little bit sincere you will come down to Brighton with us. Kitty will think it very strange if you don't come. You are always backing out of things now. She thinks you avoid her."

"I do avoid her," said Nick quietly. "She is very dangerous."

Then he spoke with sudden fire.

"The whole crowd is dangerous, mother, I wish to goodness you would break with them. That fellow Rosenbaum is a poisonous wretch, and Burpham is much too free and easy with you. There is not a moral between them. I hate the pack of 'em."

"They are my friends," said Beauty. "They have been loyal to me through thick and thin. If you don't like them, Nick, you must do the other thing. See?"

"I will do the other thing," said Nick, very coolly.

But he did not feel at all cool when Beauty walked straight out of the studio with a very white and angry face. He felt hot all over, and cursed himself for having been bad-tempered and obstinate. Beauty still held him in the hollow of her hand. Her anger hurt him frightfully. And when she had gone he could not work. His nerves were on edge. His hand trembled. He could not concentrate his

mind. In his attempt to work he was wasting time just as much as if he had gone on the motor-drive to Brighton. At last he gave up the attempt as a bad job, and, catching sight of the postcard received from his father that morning, decided to call round on Polly, as the postscript suggested. It was a long time since he had seen the old servant who had nursed him as a baby, who had been his foster-mother in boyhood, and who had given him her purse when he started out for London.

When she opened the door to him at the house in Redcliffe Road, the joy that suddenly illumined her plain old face, the little squeals of gladness she gave at the sight of him, and the way in which she flung her arms about him as soon as he had stepped inside the hall, rewarded him for his visit, and cured his melancholy. He had to laugh at her exaggerated expressions of delight and to laugh again when clinging to his hand she fairly danced with him into the sitting-room.

"Oh, my poppet! Oh, my dear Master Nick! This is a sight for sore eyes!"

Then she wept for sheer joy, and wiped her eyes, and laughed at her own tearfulness, and was amazed at the way in which her "boy" had grown into manhood. After her first transports had subsided, she bustled away to get tea, and left Nick alone for a while in the sitting-room. Everything in the room was a reminder of his old life when he and Bristles

had been boy and man together, as the best of comrades. There was the gate-leg table on which his father had written his novels, at which Nick himself had sat poring over his lesson books or touching up his sketches. There was the grandfather's clock which had ticked off the years of his life since his first breath in the world. And everywhere there were little signs of himself, arranged about the room as though his father had desired to crowd these remembrances about him; a model boat which he had made with the old "Admiral," a pile of his early sketch books, a portrait of his father, drawn in crayons—a queer, distorted likeness now that he saw it after a lapse of time—water-color sketches and pencil sketches of scenes in and around Barhampton, and the pencil box which had been a birthday gift from Mary Lavenham.

Nick stared at these things with a sense of sadness, touched with remorse. His father loved him with a great love. Here in this little room were a thousand evidences of that fatherly affection. But by the damnable irony of fate Nick had been forced to abandon the man who had cherished all these tokens of their comradeship. He had left him alone, twice deserted, by son as well as by wife. Now in this house he was an intruder. He was no longer a part of his father's home life. He had sneaked round to visit Polly in his father's absence. The pitiful tragedy of it!

Over the tea-table Polly was a cheerful gossip. Yet, beneath her cheerfulness there was a hint of trouble. Now and again Nick caught her eyes fixed upon him with a queer wistfulness, and every now and then, between her tales of the "move" and her quarrels with Barhampton tradespeople, she heaved a deep sigh. Finally, when Nick refused a fifth cup of tea, she revealed the thought which had been worrying her, and faltered out with it.

"Oh, my dear boy, ain't you goin' to live with your poor Pa no more?"

Nick did not know what to answer her. He did not know how far this faithful old servant had learned the truth of things.

He told her the truth.

"I have found Beauty again, Polly. It makes it —awkward. Devilish awkward."

Polly was not so surprised as he had imagined.

"I know," she said. "I always knew it must come to that. A boy will search the world for his Ma. It's nature."

Then she wept a little at the thought of Beauty.

"I used to love every hair on the poor darling's head. But she was that wilful. Oh, dearie me, she would never listen to a warning word, and would fly into a temper at the least little thing. What your poor Pa suffered with her there's no telling. And as patient with her as a lamb he was, bless his heart."

She put her arms down on the table and sobbed, so that Nick was horribly embarrassed.

"Don't!" he said. "Don't, Polly. It doesn't do any good."

"I can't 'elp it, Master Nick. I really can't 'elp it!" sobbed Polly. "What ever is a-going to become of your dear Pa? He's as miserable without you as a cat without kittens. 'E wanders about as though 'is 'eart 'ad broken, that lonely and miserable. And 'e was looking forward to living with you again like a man eager for his new-wed wife. Now Beauty takes you away and spoils everything. If only you 'adn't come acrost 'er again!"

Nick groaned.

"Let's talk about something else," he said. "Let's make the best of things as far as we can, Polly. Tell me some more news."

It was just before he was going that Polly told him a piece of news which made his heart jump and put a bright light in his eyes.

"I forgot to tell you, Master Nick, that I met a friend of yours the other day, and living within a stone's throw of this very 'ouse."

"What friend?"

"Why, that young lady who came to Barhampton in her pretty frocks. Miss Joan I mean."

"Joan Darracott!"

"Ay, that's the name. You would hardly know

her now, she's grown so tall and fine. Like one of them fashion-plates in the ladies' papers."

"It's funny I've never met her," said Nick, hiding his excitement from the watchful eyes of Polly.

But it was funnier still that he met her within five minutes of saying good-by to the old servant who was loathe to let him go, and who hugged him again in the hall before opening the front door.

He was strolling along rather slowly toward the Fulham Road when he collided slightly with a girl who stepped out of a bun-shop. He raised his soft felt hat, murmured an apology, and passed on, when the girl gave a little cry of astonishment.

"Nick!"

He turned on his heel and faced her, and saw that this tall girl with fair hair coiled beneath a broad straw hat and in a muslin dress which the breeze blew against her legs, was the girl for whom he had often searched among the faces of the London crowds.

"Joan!"

She held out her hand to him and laughed.

"Good gracious! You've changed yourself again. You're quite a different kind of Nick from the bronzed boy of Barhampton."

"And you!" said Nick.

He stared at her as though she were some picture drawn by a master's hand, and there was something

in this look of admiration which made her smile self-consciously, while her face flushed a little.

"How do you find me?" she asked, rather roguishly.

"I find you wonderful," said Nick.

She seemed to him more wonderful than when she had run bare-legged races with him along the sands, and when she had played the mermaid outside the hole in the rocks, and when she had sat with him in the cave, with her knees tucked up, gazing out at the wide sea strewn with rose-petals in the light of the sinking sun. She had been wonderful then, touched with enchantment, like a fairy creature. But now she had grown in wonder, so that his spirit was abashed before this elegant young lady, whose beauty was as exquisite as a portrait by Romney.

"You mustn't stare at me like that," said Joan. "People will think there is something queer about me."

"So there is," said Nick. "It's the queerest thing in the world to find you grown up into a grand lady."

He stared down at his own shabbiness.

"You see I am still in rags. You will be ashamed of me again."

"Oh, you look all right," said Joan.

She did not tell him he looked a handsome fellow, and that his soft felt hat and gray flannel suit gave him an air of artistic distinction which she found

rather pleasant and attractive. Besides, she had a soft place in her heart for the memory of the boy whose adoration had not been hidden from her on the sands of Barhampton. It is true that she had never written to him—she hated letter writing—and it is true that other interests had crowded her mind, but often she had given just a passing thought to that holiday by the sea when she and Nick had been Adam and Eve, alone in a lonely world.

With her gracious permission Nick walked with her in the Chelsea Gardens, and she was very kind to him, and did not seem to mind a bit when people turned round, now and then, to look after the tall and pretty girl who was chatting to a shabby young man in a dump hat. She asked him a score of questions—where was he living? What was he doing? Did he ever go to dances? How did he amuse himself? Was he making any money?—and though she did not listen to all his answers, but interrupted them to ask some more questions, she seemed interested to know that he was an art student in Chelsea, and shared a studio with another young man, and led an independent life.

"Well done, Nick!" she said, with a slightly patronizing air, fully justified in so pretty a girl who condescends to be interested in the fortunes of a shabby young man. "One of these days I must come to visit your studio. It would be quite an adventure."

"Come now!" said Nick. "I will boil a kettle for you, and make some tea."

But she laughed at this abrupt invitation, and said, "Some other day, if mother does not cut up rough."

"Why should she cut up rough?"

"Because the leopard cannot change its spots, nor mothers their fads and fancies. Now that I am old enough to look after myself mother is always thrusting the proprieties down my throat. However, I am becoming more independent."

She put her hand on Nick's arm, and said, with a little thrill of excitement in her voice:

"What do you think! I am earning my own living. Not bad, eh?"

"Good Lord! I can't believe it!" said Nick, as though the mere thought of a girl like Joan earning her own living were a moral outrage.

"It's a fact. I am the typist-secretary of an anthropoid ape."

"Good God!" said Nick, horribly startled. "How do you make that out?"

"It doesn't want any making out," said Joan. "It's a most obvious fact. He's a bald-headed old ape with enormous eyebrows and a shaggy white beard, and long arms, and legs too short for his body, and he lives entirely on a fruitarian diet, and is writing a book on 'Nut Diet and Social Morality.' He's a

Professor with a lot of letters after his name, which is Wilkins."

"And what do you do for him?" asked Nick.

"Oh, I type all his letters to the vegetarian societies who want him to address their meetings, and to members of Parliament who are pledged to support a fruit diet, and to all sorts of cranks who have abandoned meat and morality."

"I don't think it is the sort of work you should do," said Nick. "Is the fellow all right in his head?"

"I don't know," said Joan thoughtfully. "He makes all sorts of grimaces at me, which I think he imagines to be friendly smiles . . . and he urges upon me the moral duty of dispensing with corsets and boots. He is an apostle of loose-fitting garments and sandals, among other things. Still, he is quite harmless, and pays me a guinea a week."

"I should like to punch his blooming old head for him," said Nick. "Surely you can get a better job than that!"

Joan Darracott glanced round at Nick's face, and smiled at its angry look.

"To be quite honest, I loathe all jobs. But anything is better than a fretful mother. Even an anthropoid ape. You see, no rich young man has come along to offer me his hand and heart and well-filled purse. A pity, isn't it?"

Nick was silent. It was quite a little time before he said, in a hesitating way:

"One of these days I hope to earn a bit of money —if I have any luck."

Joan Darracott found his words amusing.

"Artists don't earn much money," she said. "They are a poverty-stricken crowd as a rule. And they have to wait such a long time before they make a name for themselves, don't they?"

"Not always. Besides . . . "

"Yes?" said Joan, quizzing him a little.

"Poverty isn't such a frightful thing, is it? I know one or two fellows who have married on next to nothing, and they seem as jolly as the day is long."

"Oh, that's a pose," said Joan. "Poverty is only another name for misery. I have seen such a lot of it, in shabby-genteel boarding-houses. I have heard mother's tales of *her* early married life. Ugh! The squalor of it! The meanness of it!"

She shuddered a little, and then laughed.

"What on earth are we talking like this for? It doesn't matter to *us,* does it, one way or the other?"

"No," said Nick, "I suppose not."

So he spoke, though he knew that it mattered all the world to him, for he was not one of those who forget, nor one whose dreams in boyhood vanish at the touch of manhood. It was only a few years since he had thrilled in the presence of this girl, and since

she had put a spell upon him, awakening vague desires, burning hopes, great ambitions. He had given his love to her then, all the ardor of his boy's heart had been inflamed by her. The kiss she had given him when she said good-by one day on the other side of the estuary had touched his lips with a sacred fire in which he had dedicated himself to her. And though he had not found her in London, the thought of her had remained with him in a little sanctuary which sometimes he had opened with a worshipful mind.

For Nicholas Barton was not like many young men. Not for his happiness some fairy at his birth had "wished" him the gift of loyalty to his remembrances. And just as he had cherished the memory of Beauty through all the years, when many boys would have forgotten, so later he had hidden the thought of Joan in his heart so that it could not escape. Now at this meeting again his nature leaped to her, and his boy's love had grown unconsciously so that he had a man's love ready for her at this new meeting. For her the years that had intervened between their comradeship had been barren as far as that was concerned. She picked him up again just as she had let him go. But for him they had been years of growth, during which his ideal of her had developed with his own development, in body, heart and soul.

So now, when he parted with her at the door of

her own house in Elm Park Gardens, he was eager for their next meeting, and could not hide his eagerness. Nor could he hide his disappointment when Joan would do no more than promise that "if she had nothing better to do" she might possibly call round at his studio one day.

To his great joy she kept this promise, and came one afternoon when he had given up hope of her. It was Jack Comyns who opened the door to her, and parleyed with her on the threshold.

"Nicholas Barton? Yes, he's here. Inconvenient? Oh, rather not. I'll answer for that. Do come in!"

Comyns who had gone to the door with a curse and the remark, "Another of those confounded models!" came back with his most charming pose, ushering in Joan Darracott as though she were a Princess.

"Nick, old man, a lady to see you. I must apologize for being in the way."

He smiled in his cool, superior way at Joan Darracott, and said:

"Nick and I share studios you know. It's rather a nuisance sometimes, especially to Nick. But of course I make myself scarce when I am not wanted."

He strode to the hat peg, as though prepared to make an instant departure, but Joan laughed a little nervously, and said:

"I hope you won't go for my sake."

"Oh, thanks," said Comyns, "of course I should

like to stay—if Nick will be good enough to introduce me."

Nick introduced him, though deeply embarrassed, and highly nervous now that Joan had fulfilled her promise. He wished to Heaven that he had Jack Comyns' self-possession and easy manners. For in less than two minutes Comyns was on the friendliest terms with Joan Darracott, and was already explaining that he led a "double life" and had escaped to Chelsea from the dull respectability of Mayfair.

"From things I have read," said Joan, "I fancy you exaggerate its respectability."

Comyns laughed very heartily at this remark.

"Oh, I know Mayfair and morals are not supposed to go together, but you must not believe what you read in the halfpenny papers, or hear in sermons by popular preachers."

"To my mind," said Joan, "Mayfair must be a very exciting place, because there people live in the lap of luxury and indulge in all the pleasures which make up the fun of life."

"Oh, my dear lady!" said Comyns, pretending to be shocked by these views, "surely you do not think that luxury produces the fun of life?"

"Certainly!" said Joan. "There's no fun at all in wanting things which you can't have."

Comyns disputed the point, persuasively, wittily. It was the very point he loved best to dispute, because it gave him a chance of revealing his elaborate

views on the splendid joy of plain living and high thinking. For a young man immaculately dressed —he had just been completing his afternoon toilet —and terribly in debt to all the tradesmen, in spite of the handsome allowance from his rich father, he held a most austere philosophy—and Joan was quite a match for the philosopher.

While the argument was proceeding, Nick boiled the kettle and made some tea. But it was Comyns who did the honors of the table, and who, half way through the meal, ordered Nick to sally forth and buy some fancy pastries at a shop round the corner. When Nick returned Joan and Comyns were laughing very gaily at a joke which was not explained to him. It was a question of two's company and three's none, and Nick was the odd man out. Yet he was grateful to Comyns for showing himself at his best and making the tea-party a success as far as Joan was concerned. At least upon leaving she assured the two friends that she had enjoyed herself immensely, as it was such a relief from the society of the anthropoid ape to whom she must now return.

Nick took her back to the residence of that Professorial beast, and on the way, which was a path of pleasure to him, launched into generous praise of his friend, about whom Joan asked one or two questions.

"He has a heart of gold," said Nick.

Joan seemed sceptical.

"A little bit affected, isn't he?" she asked.

"Oh, that's only part of his charm," said Nick. "He adopts a pose because he has such a sense of humor. He loves to laugh at himself."

"Well, that's a saving grace," Joan admitted. But she held out that Comyns was not quite sincere.

Comyns himself was in a good humor when Nick came back.

"I congratulate you on your friend, old man. A charming girl, and not a bit of nonsense about her."

Then he slapped Nick on the back and said:

"Sly old dog! No wonder you are dreamy sometimes! Miss Darracott is a dream for any fellow with a soul about him."

Nick was serious.

"Don't chaff too much," he said. "I hate all that kind of thing. I mean—a man's dream is sacred."

Comyns grinned at him.

"It's like that, is it? All right, old man. Enough said."

He only asked one other question. It was Joan Darracott's address.

That house in Elm Park Gardens where Joan lived with her mother became to Nick his house of dreams. Often before going to bed he strolled that way, to stand a little while on the other side of the road, beyond the pool of light below the lamp-post, to gaze up at Joan's bedroom window. He knew which room it was—the one above the porch—and sometimes by good luck he saw her shadow on the blind,

and always in imagination he saw the beauty of her face there, which no blind could shut out from his mental vision. Like all lovers who have ever lived, his heart quickened at the thought of her, his brain was on fire with the strange fever of love, and life itself seemed to him more wonderful, more mysterious, more desirable because of one girl-woman whose pretty face seemed haunted with all the loveliness of life, whose voice contained the music of life, whose slightest touch thrilled him with a vibration like that which holds the world together in the dancing atoms of its matter. . . . Yet Joan Darracott was like many other girls with pretty faces and sparkling eyes. She had no unusual qualities, and no special magic—except for Nicholas Barton.

At this time he had obtained all that he had most desired in his boyhood—Beauty and Joan. But curiously, so strange are the ways of life, he was not as happy as he should have been by the fulfilment of his hopes. Indeed, looking back to those days, Nicholas confesses to a feverish, nerve-racking, soul-disturbing time, not pleasant in recollection. He seemed to be living at too hot a pace, and to get no peace of mind or body. For some months he thrust his work almost entirely on one side, though the call of art was always in his ears, reproachful, plaintive, or commanding. The other Beauty still made continual demands upon his time, and he had not the heart to refuse her.

Every night now he took her to the theatre in her hired brougham, and then called to fetch her home again—to that suite in a great hotel which she called "home" unconscious of irony—where on most nights Rosenbaum was waiting for her, or Baby Burpham, or other men who came to play cards or to have supper, until sometimes the light of dawn glimmered through the window blinds. Nick walked home alone, his brain excited by the light and heat, by the laughter of his mother, by her teasing and her light-hearted frivolity, by strange doubts and dreadful suspicions that underneath the gaiety in her rooms there lurked ugly perils, and that in the scent of the flowers in her rooms, in that heated atmosphere there was some subtle and destroying poison.

For some reason Beauty had become more emotional of late. Her nerves seemed jangled. She was quickly elated, and just as quickly depressed. She flew into tempers even with Nick, for no apparent reason, and then petted him and fondled him, as though to make amends. More than once he saw the traces of tears on her face, and once in a passionate scene when he was alone with her she flung herself down on to her sofa and cried out that she was a vile creature and ought to be drowned, wailing like a woman in agony of soul. He went down on his knees beside her, and begged her to tell him her trouble, but in a little while she laughed as though nothing had troubled her, and that very afternoon

was in such gay spirits that she surprised even Kitty Burpham, who had come into tea.

Nick did not tell her about Joan. Yet it was not easy to hide his secret, for she was inquisitive about the hours he spent away from her. He had to dodge her questions when he had taken Joan to a matinée, and when one afternoon—unforgettable in its glory—he had rowed her on the Serpentine, where she shaded the sun from her face under a lace parasol, but had not hidden her eyes from him, and when she lay at his feet in the boat, her head pillowed on a scarlet cushion, in the deep shadow of an overhanging tree. That afternoon she had been in her most winning mood, kind and gracious and not teasing.

"It is good to be here," she said, "you and I, Nick, as we used to sit in the rock cave at Barhampton. Tell me some more of your fairy-tales."

He had told her a fairy-tale about a Princess and a beggarman, and she had listened with a little smile about her lips. The story ended with a golden kiss which the Princess gave the beggarman, so that always after that his rags seemed to him like purple and fine linen, and his black bread like choicest viands, and all his misery like unclouded joy.

"Joan," said Nick, "there is not a boat in sight, and we are alone here in the shadow of the tree. If I stoop down to you will you give me a golden kiss?"

"You must stoop low, then," said Joan, "because I am too lazy to move."

He stooped low and kissed her, and she pulled his head down lower still and kissed him on the lips.

But she seemed a little frightened after that, and sat up in the boat, and said, "I shan't do that again. It isn't playing the game. Some people seem to think such a lot of a kiss."

"I think all the world of it," said Nick.

She pleaded with him not to think too much of it.

"I meant nothing by it, Nick. Nothing at all."

She did not let him kiss her again after that afternoon in the boat, and Nick was troubled because she seemed to draw away from him a little, and put on a mask of satire to hide herself from him, making fun of his sentiment, and laughing at him when he was in a tender mood. Yet she came to the studio several times, and there were delightful tea-parties when Comyns, who did not go out so much, had put on his best clothes and his best behavior in case she might favor them with a visit. But it was distressing to Nick that she could never tell him beforehand the time of her visit, her hours with the anthropoid ape being so irregular, so that it happened several times that he had rushed off to see Beauty just before she came, and returned just as she had gone. Comyns explained that she had waited as long as she could to see him and was immensely disappointed when he did not come back.

He also explained that he had done his best to entertain her, and to keep her talking for a good while, in order that Nick might return before she had gone.

"Thanks, old man," said Nick. "You are the best of pals."

"That's all right, old man," said Comyns. "Don't mention it."

Once Nick had the luck to get back to the studio before Joan had given up waiting for him. She had stayed much later than usual, and it was nearly eight o'clock. Indeed, when Nick opened the door the studio was almost in darkness, and for a moment he did not see the figures of Joan and Comyns sitting by the hearthside where the fire had burned low. They saw him first, and Joan sprang up with a little cry.

"Is that you, Nick?"

Comyns got up slowly from the coal scuttle on which he had been sitting with his knees tucked up. He laughed rather nervously, and said:

"What a long time you have been, old man! We have been waiting and waiting for you."

"You might have had a light on the scene," said Nick. "It's like coming into a tomb."

He struck a match and lighted the gas, and then was surprised to see that Joan looked rather flushed, and that her eyes seemed to shine like stars. He had never seen her looking quite so beautiful. It seemed as if there were a kind of glamor about

her face like a girl touched with some enchantment.

"You look strange this evening, Joan," said Nick, gazing at her. "Has anything happened to you?"

"Happened?" said Joan. "What could have happened?"

Her voice was tremulous, and she laughed in a low voice, as she stooped to pick up her hat.

"I have been sitting in this gloomy old studio, waiting for you to come back. It's a funny thing! You're always out now when I come. I believe you deliberately avoid me."

"It's my most damnable ill-luck," said Nick.

He walked to Elm Park Gardens with her, and she slipped her hand through his arm, so that at her touch he seemed to be walking on air. But she was very silent, and left him to do all the talking until she interrupted him abruptly by a queer question.

"Do you think a girl can be great friends with a man without meaning anything—serious? I mean—is it playing the game and all that?"

Nick puzzled over her meaning. He could not quite see the drift of it.

"It depends on the girl, and it depends on the man," he said in a non-committal way.

Joan laughed at that.

"Yes, I suppose so. But some men are so emotional. . . . It must be all or nothing with them."

She turned to Nick, and looked up into his face. "Nick, you are awfully emotional. I wish you wouldn't be. I am afraid you will get—hurt—one of these days."

"Hurt?" said Nick.

He laughed, but with a queer sound in his voice. "As long as you are kind to me, Joan."

They were outside her gate now, and she took his hand and held it for a moment.

"You have been awfully kind to me, Nick. I shan't forget that. . . . But you must not expect too much of me. I'm a queer kind of creature. You know that, don't you?"

"No," said Nick. "I know that you are—splendid."

"Foolish old Nick."

She ran up the steps, and he heard her laugh as she rang the bell and then disappeared into the tall and gloomy house.

Nick walked home slowly, pondering over Joan's queer words. Not yet could he find the meaning of them. He only knew that this girl held his heart in her hands, and that she could do what she liked with it.

CHAPTER V

THE ROD OF FATE

It was of course a hard knock to Nicholas Barton when he failed to win the Gold Medal of the Academy Schools and saw his name low down on the list of competitors. It was not less hard because he had anticipated this result; knowing that his work for the past six months had been practically at a standstill, and that he had lost his nerve and his skill of hand and eye. But it was the plain fact of failure, and the knock-out blow to his ambition. It was a sorry reminder of the dreams and hopes with which he had come to London, now shattered like a house of cards, and it convicted him of something like treachery to those good friends who had staked their money on his success. It added gall to his bitterness when he received telegrams from Mary Lavenham and Edward Frampton. bidding him be of good cheer. "Better luck next time," said Mary Lavenham. "We learn by our defeats," said Edward Frampton. No word came from his father.

Well, that was the end of one great dream, and the pill of failure was most bitter to his mouth because he knew that he could have tasted the sweetness of success if he had not frittered away his

chances and played havoc with his time. His masters six months ago had said, "You are certain of the medal." His fellow students had said, "It's yours already, Barton. We can't compete with you." But six months had altered everything. They had jangled his nerves, spoiled his working hand, smashed him as far as art was concerned. For Art demands complete allegiance, absolute loyalty, and he had been unfaithful in his devotion, being dragged into other loyalties calling upon his emotion and energies and spiritual resources.

"Never mind, old man," said Comyns. "There is no reason to be so down-hearted. After all, gold medal or no gold medal, you've got the right stuff in you. You'll win through all right."

"I'm finished," said Nick.

"Finished be blowed! You haven't begun yet."

Beauty did not bother about her son's failure.

"Drat the old medal!" she said. "Let's go and have an extra special lunch. Half a bottle of hock will make you see everything *couleur de rose,* my dear."

But Nick saw red instead of rosy hues. He was savage with himself, savage with fate, even a little savage with his mother because she did not care for his success or failure. She cared for nothing except the immediate moment. There were times when Nick believed that she cared nothing for him, or for any one except herself. Yet, having thought so, he

reproached himself, especially as in the days following his disappointment she was more tender than usual, more clinging, more anxious to be with him. He could not quite understand the emotional affection which she displayed for him during these days. It was too great a strain upon his own temperament.

"You know I love you, Nick," she said a score of times. "Tell me that you know I love you."

"Of course I know," said Nick.

"You don't think I am a wicked woman, do you? You have seen the best in me. I am not all bad, am I, little Nick?"

"You are all good," said Nick, not with absolute sincerity.

She pulled his head down and played with his hair, and kissed him, and laid her cheek against his cheek.

"You will never think badly of me, will you, Nick? You will always make allowances, won't you?"

"There is nothing to allow for," said Nick laughing.

"Oh, yes," said Beauty. "There must always be allowances for a woman like me, with a nature like mine. I think even God will make allowances. Funny old God!"

Nick wondered what crisis was happening in his mother's life. He could not hide from himself that something *was* happening. For she had some secret trouble which excited her, which made her terribly

despondent, until she forced herself into high spirits beyond the bounds of a natural gaiety, when her laughter was rather shrill and wild and her eyes strangely and dangerously bright.

Then suddenly, after her bout of emotional mother love, she began to avoid him. He was sure of that. The telegrams which came from her now no longer summoned him to her rooms, but made excuses for not seeing him.

"I have a headache to-night. Come to-morrow."

When to-morrow came he had another message from her.

"I am off to Brighton for the day. I will see you on Monday."

She became eager for motor-drives, and explained that they cured the headaches which now afflicted her. But Nick was uneasy when he heard that "Baby" Burpham took turns with Amos Rosenbaum to be her driver. These two men who hated each other swallowed their hostility in order to keep on friendly terms with Beauty and it seemed that she had some spell over them which made them slaves to her, though they were sulky and sullen with her sometimes, and more than once, even in Nick's presence, frankly insolent.

"Why don't you play a straight game for once in your life?" asked Rosenbaum one night when Beauty told him that she had changed her mind about going to Ascot with him as she was "fed-up" with his society and desired a change.

Beauty laughed, and did not seem offended. But she was startled when Nick, who had overheard the remark, suddenly strode over to Rosenbaum with a white face and blazing eyes and clenched fist, and said:

"If you don't apologize for those words, I will knock your teeth down your throat."

He spoke the words loudly, although Kitty Burpham was in the room. He did not see Kitty rise a little from the piano stool and stare across the instrument with a queer smile about her lips, and in her eyes a look as though expecting fun.

Rosenbaum twisted his moustache, and colored up a little. But his lips curled into a sneer, and his voice was very cool when he spoke.

"What the devil has it got to do with you? I was speaking to your mother."

Nick faced the man, and a tremor passed through his body.

"If you don't apologize now, I will thrash you."

He raised his fist for a smashing blow.

"I am sorry," said Rosenbaum very quickly. He retreated a little to the mantelpiece, and said:

"I did not mean to be so brutal. Your mother knows that my tongue sometimes gets between my teeth."

He laughed nervously, and then took out a cigarette and tapped it on the mantelshelf.

Kitty's voice came across the piano.

"In another moment there would have been a lifeless corpse. Oh, Nick, you looked splendid in your wrath. Like a young god. What a pity Rosenbaum is a coward and ate his words! What a drama spoiled!"

Rosenbaum turned round savagely at her.

"Shut up!" he said.

"Oh, dear! I wish everybody wouldn't be so violent!" said Beauty. "Nick darling, you have given me quite a turn."

Kitty Burpham laughed quite gaily.

"Wonderful world! Wonderful people!"

Then her husband entered, with his monocle screwed in his eye and his fat smile on his face. He ignored his wife, and went straight over to Beauty and raised her hand to his lips.

"How goes it, fair lady?"

"I'm going anyhow," said Rosenbaum, in his most sullen way. He strode out of the room, without saying good-by.

Baby Burpham raised his blonde eyebrows so that his monocle fell.

"Has Rosy got the hump or something? Thank Heaven for that, if it relieves us of his most objectionable presence."

"He means well," said Beauty. "He's been very good to me."

Burpham gave a queer laugh, and stared at Beauty so that a wave of color swept into her face.

"In expectation of favors to come," he said.

Beauty flung a cushion at him, which he caught with his left hand in time to save his head.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Kitty. "Now we are going to have Baby's flow of original wit, his brilliant gifts of repartee, his subtle innuendoes. Nick, save me, lest I die. Take me to the theatre or something."

"Yes," said Beauty. "Take the child to the theatre, Nick, it will do you both good."

"I'll pay," said Baby Burpham, taking out two sovereigns from the silver purse on his watch-chain, and flinging them across the piano to Kitty.

Lady Burpham grabbed them, and made a face.

"They seem precious glad to get rid of us," said Kitty. "Don't they, Nick?"

Burpham grinned.

"We see too much of each other, even for such a loving couple as ourselves. Take a rest from me, Kit."

"Thanks," said Kitty. "I will. Come on, Nick."

Nick went unwillingly, cursing himself for a weak fool. Yet he was glad to get out into the fresh air, and glad to escape from Baby Burpham, whom he hated worse than Rosenbaum.

Outside the hotel Kitty stuck up her umbrella and hailed a hansom cab.

"Drive round," she said, "anywhere. Clapham Common, or Wild West Kensington. Keep going, that's all. See?"

The cabman touched his hat. He had heard of such things before.

"I thought we were going to the theatre," said Nick.

"It's too deadly," said Kitty. "Same old plays, same old women, same old jokes. God! I couldn't stand it to-night. . . . Settle yourself down, Nick. . . . How cool and sweet the air is! . . . Look at the stars twinkling above the house tops. Let's go beyond the lights of the streets, into some place of darkness where there are only stars. The Commons are not far away. . . . I feel Pagan to-night. I want fresh air, solitude, space, the smell of the earth, the song of the stars. . . . Ever feel like that, Nick?"

"Often."

They were silent for a time. Nick listened to the klip-klop of the horse's feet, the jingle-jangle of its bells. He stared at the lights as they flashed by, at the vague, white faces of hurrying people. But all the time his thoughts were with Beauty. He wished to Heaven he could persuade her to get rid of Rosenbaum and Baby Burpham. He would ask her to come away into the country with him. After the run of her piece she might like the idea, and it was coming off quite soon—to-morrow, now he came to think of it. She would be free then for a little while, and they could have a holiday alone in some old country inn among the fields and the flowers. It

would be cleansing to both of them. It would cleanse them of this London malady, this fever-stricken life.

"Nick," said Kitty, "you and I are twin souls, strange as it may appear."

"Think so?"

"I know it. I am like you, Nick—good at the heart. All my swear words don't mean anything. If I could get away from Baby I should get clean again. It is he who smirches me, who puts the devil into me. He is a beast of beasts. Away from him I should be a decent thing. I have good instincts. I love the beauty of things. I love the souls of things. Understand, Nick?"

"Perfectly."

She was silent again for a long time, until the cab took them out of the crowded London streets into the quieter suburbs, and presently into a road alongside a great open space where there was quietude and darkness. It was Clapham Common.

Kitty put her hand through the trap and said "Stop!"

"What are you going to do now?" asked Nick.

"Let's walk about a bit."

She jumped out of the cab, and after some words to the driver, who seemed anxious about the fare, took Nick's hand and walked on to the common, until they were beyond the light of the gas-lamps and in the shadow world of trees which loomed out

of the blackness. It was a warm night and the air was very still. The sky was strewn with stars. They were reflected in the mirror of a pond as though they were floating there.

"It is good to be here," said Kitty. "This is better than the theatre with its glare of lights, and stench of women's perfumes and scented hair. Pah! The beastliness of civilized life! The rottenness of it all!"

Suddenly she began to cry a little.

"What's the matter?" said Nick.

He felt horribly ill at ease. He had a sense of danger. Kitty's tears made her more dangerous to him than her swear-words.

"I'm so beastly lonely!" she whimpered. "I feel always alone in the great desert of life."

Then suddenly she came close to him, and put her arms about his neck, and her face so close to his face that her breath was warm upon his lips.

"Nick, you've been a pal to me since I knew you. I love you, Nick. Can't we cut and run together? We could be as happy as kids, you and I. I would teach you how to love. I would put my arms round you like this, and kiss you—like this!"

She kissed him a dozen times, clasping him so tight that he could not struggle free from her. She clung to him, with a kind of desperate strength.

He jerked his head back, and cried out:

"Don't! For Heaven's sake, don't! Are you mad, Kitty?"

"Yes, as mad as a hatter. I am mad for your love, Nick, because you are such a boy and so good in your heart. You would make me less sick with the world. We could make a great game of life. Oh, my dear boy! My pretty boy! I want you so badly. Kiss me, Nick. Kiss me!"

He managed to get his arms free from her clasp, roughly. He held her by the wrists, so that she could not cling to him.

"This is horrible!" he said. "Behave yourself, can't you?"

He spoke brutally, savage with her for this abandonment of self-respect. In the darkness she seemed to him witchlike. He could see the whiteness of her face, and her burning eyes.

She was panting like a wild creature.

"Don't be a prig, Nick. Be kind and human. Don't you understand? You and I want each other. We are made for each other. I am your mate-woman. God made me your mate, Nick."

She thrust her face forward again, and tried to cling to him again. Her lips were kissing the air. Her eyes had a greenish light, like cat's eyes. But he still held her wrists quite tightly, and kept her away.

"Be quiet!" he said sharply. "Remember your decency. You are a married woman. I . . . "

"A married woman? . . . That's a lie. . . . Burpham's beastliness made me free of him. . . . I owe him no loyalty. . . . But I would be loyal to you, Nick, loyal to the death, in big things and little things. Surely you won't be angry with me because I am ready to give you all the best in me. All that is good in me would be yours. And if you like you can throw me away when you are tired of me. Chuck me away like an old boot. I won't make you pledge yourself. When you are sick of me, I'll take the hint. You can send me off with a nod and a 'That's enough!' But for a little while, Nick, for a few months, a few weeks, we could be as happy as kittens. We would play at love together, and make believe, and I would be as good as gold."

"Good?" said Nick. "Oh, Lord! You don't understand the word. You speak like a vile creature. You . . . you make me shiver."

"Do I?" she said. "Do I?"

All the pleading in her voice changed to a sudden shrill rage, and she jerked her hands free from his grasp.

"Why, you are like the rest of men, as cruel as devils. I thought you were kind."

She laughed with hysteria in her voice.

"Lord God! I thought he was kind!"

Nick was scared now. This scene in the dark-

ness of the lonely common was fantastic and horrible.

"Let's go back," he said. "The cab is waiting for us."

"Go back where?" asked Kitty. "Are you in such a hurry to go back to a mother who is playing the wanton with my man?"

Nick cried out in a voice of horror, "Kitty!"

"Oh, I won't spare you now," said Kitty. "I will tell you what I wanted to hide from you, because I thought it would hurt you. Hurt you? I want to hurt you. I shall laugh to hear you moan like a wounded thing when you know the truth. Haven't you guessed the truth about Beauty and Baby Burpham, about Beauty and Rosenbaum? No, you were blinded with your virtuous conceit. You shut your eyes to the truth. That precious mother of yours! Beauty! The mother you worship with your eyes. Why, she is rotten to the heart. Baby Burpham is her lover with Rosenbaum, the Jew. Don't you know that, poor innocent? Don't you know that she and Burpham, my baby-faced husband, are as guilty as two devils? Oh, you groan. Because you know I tell the truth, and the truth hurts. But it is tit for tat. You hurt me, didn't you? Called me a vile creature? Yes, but not so vile as that lady mother of yours, who sends us out together so that she may be alone with the man she belongs to. Go back to her now, and ask her whether I lie. She

will swear I lie, but you will see the guilt in her eyes. Why, I knew it months ago. I can give you dates and times. But I said nothing. I laughed. I taunted Baby with it, and laughed again. I laugh now. It is a rare joke, and I have a pretty sense of humor."

She laughed in the darkness, and Nick shuddered at the sound of her witch-like laughter, so shrill and horrible.

"You had better go back," he said, quietly. "I will take you to your cab."

She walked a little way behind him, because he strode swiftly across the Common. He could hear the swish of her dress across the grass, the tinkle of her bracelets. On the edge of the Common the cab was waiting for them.

"Get in," he said.

She put her hand on his sleeve for a moment, and said:

"I'm sorry that I told you the truth. You had to know."

"Get in," he said.

She climbed into the cab, and huddled herself into the corner.

"We will go back," said Nick, "and I will ask you to say before my mother what you have said to me. If what you said was false, perhaps God, or something, will teach me how to punish you."

He gave the address to the man, and took his seat in the cab.

They drove back in silence. Kitty Burpham cried part of the way, and then was very still. Toward the end of the journey she spoke his name very softly in a pleading way, but he did not answer her. His face was as hard as though carved out of granite. As the cab rattled into the hotel courtyard Kitty spoke again.

"It is the truth, Nick. I swear to God it is the truth. But I'm sorry."

Big Ben struck twelve strokes as Nick fumbled in his pocket and paid the cabman.

The door of Beauty's flat was opened by her maid. The girl seemed surprised to see the two visitors, though both of them had been to Beauty's rooms much later in the night. She stared at them curiously.

"Your mother went out with his lordship," she said to Nick. "I packed some things for her. She wore her motor coat."

She glanced toward Kitty and said:

"His lordship was going for a midnight drive. I thought perhaps you knew."

Kitty Burpham looked at Nick, but did not speak. He stared at his mother's maid in a dazed way, and as he said nothing, she resumed her monologue, standing quietly at the door.

"I think there is a letter for you, sir. I saw it lying on the writing-table."

Nick strode through the door into the sitting-room. Kitty followed him. They were alone together in this room, where the chairs were littered with illustrated papers, and sheets of music, just as they had left it. The stump of one of Burpham's cigars was lying on a silver ash-tray on a little table by the side of the fireplace. On the writing-table was the letter which the maid had seen. It was addressed to Nicholas Barton, Esquire, at the studio in the Fulham Road, but it was unstamped.

Nicholas stared at it, and then opened it slowly.

Kitty watched him from a little distance, like a woman fascinated by a poignant scene in some problem drama, by some excellent piece of acting.

The letter was not a long one. It contained just a few simple words.

DEAREST NICK:

I have gone away with Burpham. I tried not to, but you know how weak I am. He would not wait any longer for me. I suppose the devil has something to do with it. Of course, I hate myself, and I know you will think the worst of me. I was born bad. If only I had been born good! You see, I blot this paper with my tears. Your father will say they are sham tears. But there is salt in them.

Good-by, dearest Nick.

Your loving
BEAUTY.

P.S.—Tell Kitty I'm sorry.

Nicholas read the letter very slowly and then crumpled it in his hand. His face was deadly white, and a mist came before his eyes. Kitty, who was watching him, saw that he swayed a little, as though overcome with faintness. But he turned round to her, and held out the letter.

"You told the truth," he said. "And you were right. It hurts. . . . It hurts."

The girl went down on her knees before him as he sat down heavily on the sofa, with his head drooping forward.

"Nick, dear Nick . . . You and I are together in this. They have both chucked us. . . . Oh, sweetheart, let us comfort each other. Let me stay with you and love you. We both want love so badly."

She poured out a flood of wild words, fondling his hands, clinging to him.

For a little while he seemed quite unconscious of her. Indeed, he was utterly unconscious of her, thinking only of Beauty, who had left him again, who had twice abandoned him.

Then he stood up very straight, and spoke in a quiet, hollow voice:

"You are as vile as Beauty. You have the same kind of heart and brain. You and my mother! A pretty pair! I don't know why such women as you are allowed to live."

She still clung to his arm, but he thrust her off

violently, and strode out of the room, and out into the passage. On his way to the door he had knocked over a little table, but was like a man blind and deaf, so that he did not see or hear it fall. In the streets of London and in the suburbs beyond he walked for hours, until the dawn came and then the day, and he staggered home to his studio half way through the morning, like a man who had traveled a long way with despair.

Yet he was quite calm when he spoke to Comyns, who had finished breakfast and was lolling back in the cane arm-chair, reading the literary column of the *Morning Post*.

Comyns was less calm. He seemed to shirk Nick's eyes, and to be restless and ill at ease. He flung the paper down and paced up and down the room lighting cigarettes, smoking them for a whiff or two, then flinging them into the fire-grate.

"Any breakfast going?" asked Nick. He busied himself with the gas-stove, and boiled up the kettle, and made himself some tea. He was famished, and hunger and fatigue dulled the sharp edge of the pain which had throbbed into his brain through the night. Now he felt strangely calm and self-composed, like a drugged man, dull about the head, with all his emotions blunted.

Comyns stared at him once or twice when he was not looking, and made some random remarks which Nick answered shortly. Then he whistled a music-

hall melody over and over again, as he stood with his hands in his pockets staring out of the window. Finally he swung round on his heel abruptly and said:

"Nick, old man, I think we shall have to dissolve partnership. I have been thinking things over, and I have decided not to go on with this art game. I shan't want this studio any more."

Nick sliced off the top of his egg.

"I thought you wouldn't stick to it. Going back to Grosvenor Square?"

Comyns laughed rather nervously.

"*En passant,* perhaps. But I shall set up elsewhere, after I have squared the governor."

"A new hobby?" asked Nick.

He was really not curious. He was only wondering where he could find a cheap studio for himself. He would have to get the cheapest place he could. Perhaps, after all, it would be good to live alone, without Jack Comyns, who was a time-waster. He would waste no more time. He would work early and late, to make up for lost time. During the night he had turned over a new leaf. After the wild grief and agony of the night, when his mother's betrayal had shattered the world beneath his feet, he had become sane with the daylight. He had seen things then with a cold, white vision. He praised God that after his accusations of all womanhood, after his condemnation of his mother, arraigned be-

fore the judgment bar of his conscience, after the sickness and loathing with which the thought of Kitty Burpham had made him spiritually ill, his faith in virtue, which had been shipwrecked, was saved by the memory of Joan. He clung to his ideal of Joan like a drowning man. He clung to his love for her as a saving grace in this wild storm of his soul. And then he groped his way back to old ambitions and lighted again the old fires, which had burnt out in his heart. He would work to win her. He would work as a man inspired by the hope of a great prize. He had failed to gain the gold medal, but, with the help of God, he would not fail to gain the heart of Joan, which was of purer gold. . . . Work, that would heal his wounds. Work, the great spiritual tonic! He would work to earn a livelihood by art. There were men not much older than himself who were earning good money as designers, black-and-white men, newspaper artists. He would learn the tricks of their trade and force his way into the open market. With a little luck . . .

It was then that he looked up at Comyns and said:

"A new hobby?"

And it was then that he noticed a curious look of embarrassment on the face of Comyns, a shirking look in his eyes.

His friend laughed again, and said, with a queer attempt at gaiety:

"It depends upon what you call a hobby. . . . The truth is—I think of settling down in my old age. I think of plunging into the adventure of matrimony."

"Fact?" asked Nick.

He was startled. He had not expected this reason for his friend's change of plans. Perhaps he was only "kidding." He was a great hand at leg-pulling.

"Gospel fact."

Nick was silent. He was casting about in his mind to think who the lady might be. It was not easy to guess. Comyns had played the gallant with so many girls—art-students, artists' models, bachelor girls in Chelsea.

"Who is she, old man?"

Comyns gave him three guesses, and glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes, while Nick tried to guess and failed.

Then Comyns uttered a remarkable monologue, with jerky sentences, unlike his usual fluent speech, and with strange hesitations and awkward pauses.

"I meant to have kept it secret from you for some time. . . . But she said it would not be playing the straight game. . . . She made me promise to tell you. . . . The truth is I had no idea . . . we drifted into it. . . . It took us both by surprise. You know the way. A sudden awakening . . . all in a flash. . . . Two souls staring into each other, meeting, mingling,

with a tremendous shock. . . . . I didn't think I could feel like that. I was carried clean off my feet . . . and it was only afterward I thought of you, and felt a cad, and got into a blue funk. . . . My dear old chap, we have been good pals. I should hate you to think badly of me. The fortune of war, you know . . . my luck. Your ill luck. . . . If it had been the other way about I should have wrung you by the hand and wished you all the best. Nick, old man, it's like this . . . Joan and I——"

He did not finish his speech. Before he had got to the end of it Nick had risen to his feet. There was a frightened look in his eyes. He seemed to be waiting breathlessly, like a man waiting for sentence of life or death. When Comyns said "Joan and I" Nick staggered, as though struck by a heavy blow. He raised his arm, as though to guard his head from the blow, and then his hand dropped limply by his side.

"Joan and you?" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "What do you mean? Joan and you?"

"Joan and I love each other," said Comyns. And then, as though conscience-stricken by the sight of his friend's face, he said, "I'm sorry, old man. I'm frightfully sorry."

The two men, both of them very young, stared at each other, searching each other's face. For a moment it seemed as if some tremendous passion was

surging into Nick's face, as though Something was struggling up from his heart to clutch at his throat. But he stood quite still, gripping the back of a cane chair, and presently the flame faded out of his cheeks and the fire out of his eyes, leaving him tired-looking, dog-tired, and done.

"It can't be helped," he said. "Nothing can be helped. One has to face it."

A little while later Comyns left the studio, and when he had gone Nick sat at the table with the litter of breakfast things about him, his arms folded across the plates, his head down on his arms. It was an hour later when he raised his head, an older man than when he had put it down, and listened to a knocking at the door. He took a deep breath, and went unsteadily across the floor, and opened the door.

On the threshold stood two old friends—the Lonely Lady and the Merman.

They stood there, hand in hand, smiling at him.

Edward Frampton—the Merman—was so disguised that Nick hardly recognized him. He wore a glossy silk hat, and a black morning coat, and pepper and salt trousers over white spats and patent leather shoes. He looked ten years younger than when Nick had last seen him, and had keen, clear eyes, and a cheery air of self-confidence and strength.

"Nick," he said, "I have brought my wife to see you. Have you a welcome for us?"

Edward Frampton's wife—the Lonely Lady—had her arms about him, and her eyes were radiant.

"My poor Nick, you look like a ghost. What has happened to you?"

"Nothing," said Nick. "Nothing that matters."

And yet when Frampton went away on some excuse, leaving his wife behind, Nick had to confess that something had happened which mattered a good deal.

"I have lost faith in life," he said. "I wish to God I were dead."

He put his head into his hands, and wept. . . . After all, he was very young.

And the woman who had been the wise woman of his boyhood, who had helped to form his character, and who had given him his first ambition, used all her wisdom now to help him.

She did not ask to know his story, but she told him hers, and laid bare her heart to him, and confessed to him some of its agonies and some of its doubts, when she, too, had wished she was dead.

"Do not lose faith in life, Nick," she said at last. "For hope is stronger when it is born of despair, and faith more certain when it follows doubt, and success more precious when it has been taught by failure. . . . Look at me, Nick! I have won through after so many years of groping, so many

weaknesses, so many futile days. I have won a man out of the depths. Edward Frampton has escaped through me. He is my miracle. You understand? . . . Nick, my poor boy, you see it is too early for you to lose faith in life. Why, life is all in front of you, and there is your work to do."

There was a long silence in the room, and then Nick looked up and took a deep, long breath.

"Work," he said, "yes, thank God for that. A man can always work."

CHAPTER VI

THE PLOT OF LIFE

THE LITTLE housemaid who was polishing the knocker of a house in Redcliffe Road did not know that Fate stood on the steps next door by the side of a young man who had hesitated outside the gate before he thrust it open. She saw only a good-looking young man, in shabby clothes and a dump hat, with a big sketch book under one arm and his right hand gripping a heavy portmanteau. She did not see that he was being watched by the vigilant eyes of eternal curiosity, that he was being touched by the invisible hands of a guiding spirit, that he was the unconscious servant of a masterful force, which some men call Fate, and others Luck, and others—in humble moments—God.

Nicholas Barton himself was unaware of the guiding hand upon his shoulder. He was aware only of a tragic depression of spirits, of a gray world, robbed of its sunlight, and of a duty to be paid. The duty was to his father. He knew now how right his father had been, how terribly right. But he had abandoned this man, who had been his comrade, for the woman who had betrayed both of them. Now the least he could do was to return, to pick up the

old threads which had been broken by Beauty's hand, to say "Father, I have come back."

Those words rose to his lips as he lifted the knocker.

"Father, I have come back."

He felt like the Prodigal Son. Yet he had eaten no swine's food. He had kept himself clean. Rather he was like a man who had gone forth from beneath his father's roof-tree in search of adventure, with high hopes, and a buoyant heart, and ideals glimmering with a white light before him, but had been waylaid by enemies and had been beaten and battered, and then had lost his way in a dark wood with no light at all to guide him, until he had struggled back, inglorious, bruised, shamefaced to his sire.

The door was opened by Polly, and he spoke to her in a queer, jaunty tone, so that the sound of his own voice rang queerly in his ears.

"Hulloh, Polly . . . I have come back."

She gave a little cry of joy, and clasped him in her arms. But a moment later she unclasped her arms, and raised her hands to her bosom and looked at him with a strange fear in her eyes.

"Oh, Master Nick!"

He was startled. He had known his old nurse's face since first he had seen any face, but he had never seen it so drawn with grief, and with such a sharp anxiety in the eyes. It seemed to him that

she spoke to him of tragedy, though her words told him nothing. The abrupt way in which her little cry of joy at his home-coming changed into that lament of "Oh, Master Nick!" made his heart fall with a kind of thud. He stammered out a question.

"The governor? Is he . . . ill?"

In his heart the question was:

"Is he dying . . . or dead?"

Polly shut the hall door, and grasped him by the sleeve, and led him into the dining-room. She spoke incoherently, putting a trembling hand to her head, and thrusting her cap sideways.

"I'm fair worried, Master Nick. Your poor dear Pa has been out all night, walking the streets, I expect. It's been the same these weeks past. No sleep. Pacing up and down, up and down, in the bedroom, and now and then a groan like a wounded thing. Then out at night, and me scared to death, and a look so sad to make any 'eart bleed, when he comes back before the milkman. But never so late before. It's ten o'clock, and he's not home yet— and all the bacon burned to a cinder, and my 'ead like an empty larder with a mouse running about inside. I have a fear gnawing in my 'ead like a mouse, Master Nick, if you can take what I mean."

"A fear?" said Nick.

He also had a fear. Those incoherent words of Polly's gave him a tragic picture of his father, of

his father's sleeplessness, of his lonely night walks, of his wretchedness.

"Like a wounded thing," Polly had said, and Nicholas knew that Beauty and he had dealt the man his wounds. Beauty had stabbed first, Nick had driven the knife deeper in.

"A fear?" asked Nick.

Polly whispered to him:

" 'E's a bit queer," she said.

"Queer?"

Nick spoke in a kind of hoarse whisper also.

"Oh, Master Nick!" said Polly, " 'e's not the same man since he came to town, so glad to think 'e would set up 'ouse with you again. He came 'ome one day quite changed. There's a 'unted look in 'is eyes. 'E speaks to 'imself. After them lonely walks 'e comes back so moody and so broody, I could cry my 'eart out at the sight of 'im."

Presently Polly left Nick alone. She had her work to do, she said, and somehow those words were a lesson to him. In spite of her fears and her troubles she "had her work to do." He heard her go into the kitchen and shut the door, and standing in his father's sitting-room, Nicholas Barton made use of the words spoken by his old nurse and his father's servant, and said:

"I, too, have my work to do."

He went to the window and stared into the street. The little red-headed housemaid who had been pol-

ishing the knocker next door was now cleaning the steps. She was singing as she worked. A butcher's boy with a tray on his head was marching along the pavement, keeping step to a tune which he whistled with a blithe note. From the opposite house a man with a black coat and tall hat came out, waved up to the windows, and then strode off to his day's work, with a brisk pace.

"Work!" thought Nick. "That's the saving grace."

Then suddenly, as he stood at the window, staring out upon the street, he saw his father's face.

Bristles came across the road, slowly, with his head bent down as though his eyes were searching for something in the roadway. He hesitated outside his iron gate, just as Nick had hesitated, went past it, seemed to falter uncertainly, came back again, and put his hand upon the gate and glanced up first at the bedroom window.

It was in that moment when he glanced up that Nick seemed to feel an icy hand upon his heart. For his father's face was stamped with the imprint of tragedy. In his eyes there was a look of dull despair. It was a face like a mask of pain. And the uncertainty with which he had hesitated before his own gate, this faltering, as though he were afraid to come home, this strange, furtive glance at the bedroom window, filled Nick with a horrible uneasiness. He stood quite still listening acutely

as a key turned in the lock of the front door. It turned very quietly, as though the man were afraid of being heard. The door was shut again with extraordinary quietude, as though by a thief in the night. Then Nick heard his father's footsteps passing with a stealthy tread across the hall, like the steps of a man creeping on tip-toe. A moment later a stair creaked slightly. A door was opened on the landing above, and shut again almost noiselessly.

The ceiling of the sitting-room shook a little with a heavy tread. Then silence.

Nicholas Barton stood with his head raised, listening. He listened as though his soul were in his ears. He did not like this silence. He hated it. It put a terror into his mind, the terror of some unknown horror. What was his father doing? Why didn't he walk about upstairs, open a drawer, make some kind of noise? Was he standing quite still there, in the bedroom, with that tragic face of his, with those despairing eyes? What was he doing? thinking, preparing to do?

Nicholas Barton listened. He held his breath to listen. And in that moment some great Force seemed trying to draw him away from where he stood, motionless, in the centre of the carpet. Something seemed to be calling to him, urging him to hurry out of the room to rush upstairs, to burst open the door of that bedroom where his father was so quiet. A tremendous impulse stirred in Nick's

brain, like some enormous and passionate instinct. Swiftly he strode across the floor. Panting a little, he took the stairs three at a time. He was trembling in every limb when he grasped the handle of the bedroom door, turned it, and stood inside the room.

Then he knew that the instinct had come from some Outsider. He had been called in time.

His father stood in front of a looking-glass. He held a blunt, black thing in his hand. He had raised it to his forehead when his son stood inside the room.

"Father!" cried Nick.

With that shout he strode across the room, gripped his father's shoulder, and swung him round.

The blunt black thing fell out of his father's hand to the carpet and spoke with a terrible shock of sound. A brick in the wall crumbled, and fell on the carpet, with a little cloud of dust.

Bristles stood very still. His eyes met his son's eyes, then drooped. A wave of color swept into his face, and then left him white.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Nicholas swung round and went to the door again. Polly was there. She had come scrambling up, anyhow, in a kind of heap.

"It's all right, Polly. There's nothing the matter."

He shut the door and locked it, and turned round again into the room.

"Father!" he said. "Good God! Not *that!*"

Bristles sat down in the chair close to his dressing table. He was trembling a little.

"You came just in time, Nick," he said. "In another moment——"

He gave a deep breath, like a man recovered from a trance, and the color ebbed back into his face again, and the glazed look passed from his eyes.

"It was the hand of God," he said.

The pistol still lay on the carpet, a spent force. There was no danger in it now. Nick was leaning against the wall, with his face in his hands. All his heart had broken into tears.

Bristles went over to him and put his arm about him.

"Old man," he said, "you have paid me back now for everything. I'm in your debt. I'm in God's debt. If my life is any good to you—I must make amends."

"Father," said Nick, "I've come back. You and I are together again. We have both been smashed. Let's help each other to pick up the pieces, and go on."

These two men, father and son, with the pistol on the floor between them, stood with God's eyes on them. Their souls were naked. They were like

shipwrecked men on one plank. They spoke things which men do not speak, until they stand, as it were, on the lip of eternity.

Hour after hour they spoke, and the father hid nothing from his son, nothing of all the agony of his despair, nothing of all the temptations of the devils in his brain, nothing of his cowardice.

Twice he had been broken on the wheel of fate, by two women, and when one of them had robbed him of the son who had been the last straw by which he clung to life, he had thrown up his arms and gone under.

Then Nick told his tale—a tale of disillusion, of failure, of horrible doubts, of broken hopes. He, too, had been twice smashed.

Father and son looked into each other's souls. There was no gulf between them now. No ghost divided them. And sometimes one or the other gave a passionate cry against the cruelty of things. Sometimes the boy flamed into anger against the mother who had borne him, against all women, against life itself. Sometimes the man spoke in a kind of strangled way at the remembrance of his agony, as though the black devils were at him again. But it was the boy's passionate grief, his bleeding wounds which gave the man new strength, which filled him with the spirit of fatherhood. For the boy's sake he must think clearly, speak bravely, get back to sanity and self-respect.

"Nick!" he cried, "we have paid God's price for sin. My sin, old man, let me not hide that from you."

"Your sin?"

"My sin, partly. Lord God! I see now that it was half my fault. Perhaps more than half. Who can weigh these things in the scales? Your mother was right. Poor child-wife! Let us be fair to her, Nick. Let us face the truth of things, now, with that thing lying there on the carpet. If I had been more patient with her I might have kept her straight, at the beginning, and so—at the end. If I had been more kind to her I might have called her back when she first went astray. I called her a liar to you. But I was a liar too, when I justified myself, when I fought for you. I see now I was hard on her. I see it all in a white light. I was hard—hard—hard."

Nicholas thought of his mother when she struck the deal table with the palms of her hands and said:

"Hard! Hard! Hard!"

"And at last," said his father, "I chose the Devil's way, which is called Divorce."

He leaned forward and touched Nick on the hand.

"When I divorced your mother, I obtained damages from the man who had betrayed her. But who paid, do you think? Who pays—always, always? Good God! It is the child who pays. The man and the woman go their way separately, and forget, or stamp on the head of remembrance. They find

new interests in life, stifle their conscience, and find new love. For good or evil, their characters have been made. They do not alter much. They are the heirs of their own childhood. But how about the child who is just beginning life, who needs both mother and father, who needs mother-love as well as father-love for the foundations of belief, for faith in the essentials of life, for guidance in the beginning of the journey? You know, Nick, you know, old man. It is you who have paid the price—to the full—every brass farthing of it. My poor old boy! How can I square up with you?"

Now that Nick had paid in agony and tears, now that he had come back to his father with the gift of life, the older man was very humble, and in the presence of the Spirit which had drawn him back from the great precipice, when he had almost lurched into the depths, he made a vow to dedicate this new life which had been given to him to the boy, who had suffered for the sins of his begetters.

"Life is all in front of you, Nick," he said. "If you will let me I will try to pay back something of my debt, by comradeship, by a father's service, by the wisdom, perhaps, that has come to me out of my folly. And with you, with your friendship, Nick, old boy, I will grope my way back to youth, and get a little stock of new hope, and pick up my work again. Is it a bargain?"

Father and son clasped hands on it.

When they went out of the room arm in arm, Polly, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, heard her master's words:

"Why, Nick," he said, "it will be quite like old times!"

"I must settle down to work," said Nick. "In the old style, eh, father?"

But both of them had begun a new chapter in the plot called Life.

THE END

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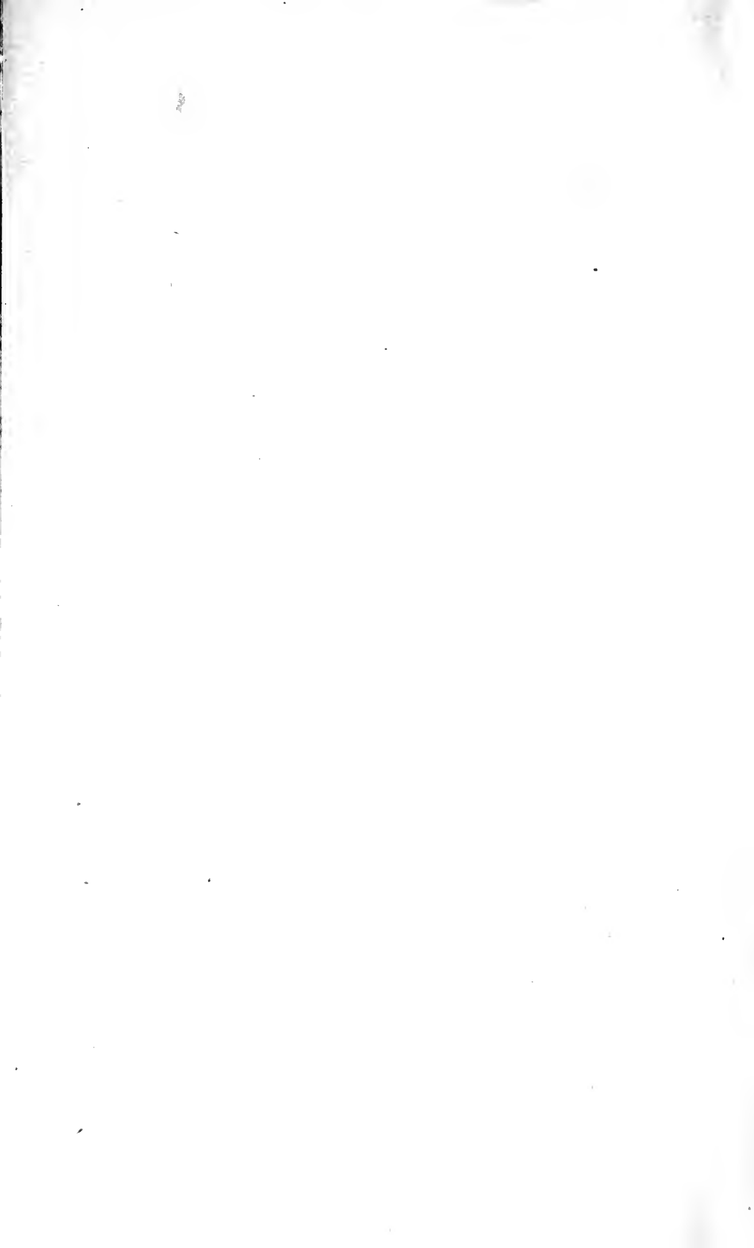

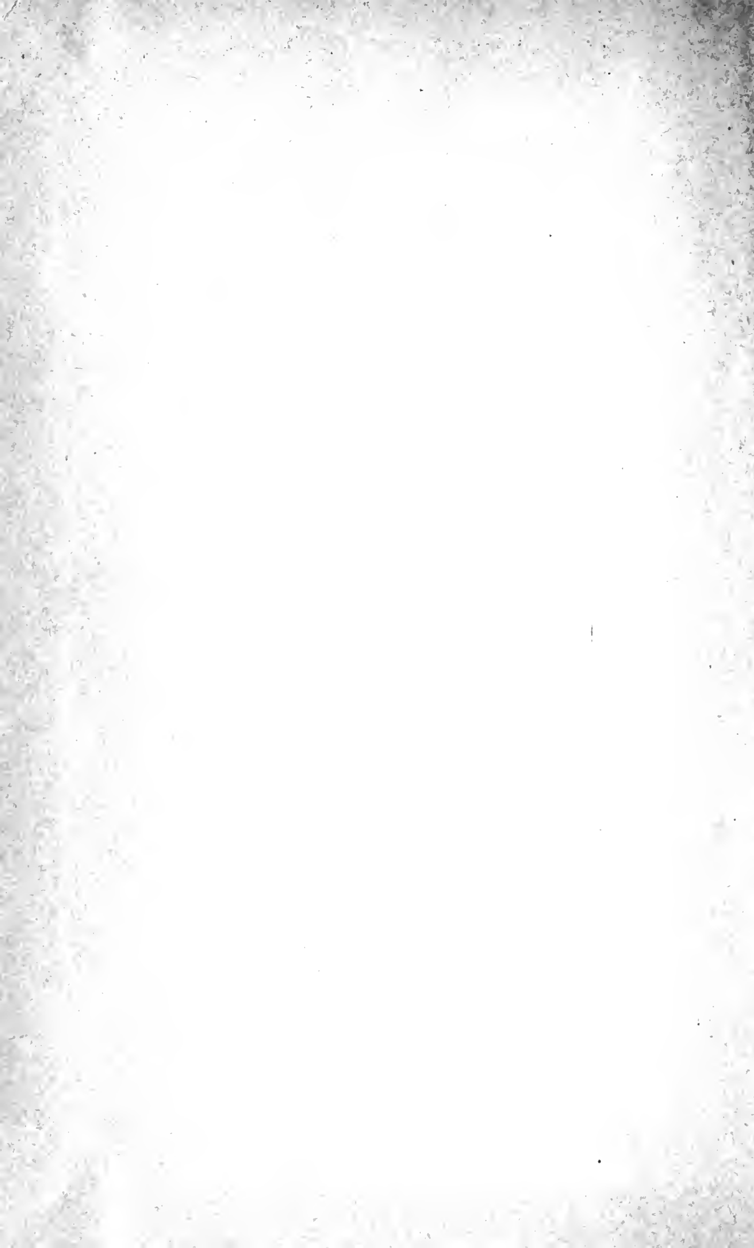

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