

THE WOMAN WHO HAD IMAGINATION

I

THE yellow brake climbed slowly uphill out of the town, leaving behind it the last ugly red houses; the two white horses broke into an abrupt trot along the level road, the brasses tinkling softly and winking brilliantly in the noon sunshine, and all the passengers who had leaned forward up the hill to ease the strain on the horses leaned back with relief and then lurched forward again with the sudden onward jerk of the brake, the men's straw boaters knocking against the wide sunshades and the big flowered hats of the giggling women. There were many shouts of mock alarm and laughter: 'Whoops! What ho, she bumps! Whoa! mare! Want to throw us out? Whoa! Get off my lap! Stop the brake, me voice's slipped down me trousers' leg! What's the matter? Horses going to a fire or something? Oh Lord, me bandeau's slipped! Get off my lap I tell you! Whoops! Steady! How d'ye think we're going to sing after this? Stop 'em, me voice's crawling up me other leg! Oh, ain't he a case? Oh dear! Ain't he a caution? What ho! Now we're off! Oh, don't he say some bits? Now we're off! Altogether! Whoops! Dearie! Altogether!'

Gradually the parasols became still and circumspect,

the women gave their hatpins little tidying pushes and smoothed their dresses, and the horses fell automatically into a smoother pace, the sound of running wheels and the click-clocking of hoofs becoming an unchanged and sleepy rhythm in the still midsummer air.

At the rear of the brake, wedged closely in between a hawking fishmonger who still gave off an odour of red herrings, and a balloon of a woman who was sucking rosebud cachous and wheezing for breath as though she had swallowed a button-whistle, sat a youth of twenty. At the height of the giggling and banting and shouting he sat in unsmiling silence. He looked proud and bored. The brake was filled with the Orpheus Male Voice Glee Singers and their wives and sweethearts. That afternoon and again in the evening they were to sing on the lawns of a big house, in competition with a score of other choirs, ten miles on in the heart of the country. Aloof and sensitive, the youth had made up his mind that he was above such things.

'Like a cachou, 'Enry?' said the stout woman.

'No thanks,' he said.

'Real rose. Make your breath smell beautiful.'

'No thanks.'

He had come on the outing against his will. And now — cachous! He looked about him with a kind of bored disgust in which there was also something unhappy. The whole brake was tittering and chattering with a gaiety that seemed to him puerile and maddening. The strong odours of violet and lavender perfumes

and the stout woman's rose-scented cachous mingled with the hot smell of horses and sun-scorched varnish and men's cheap hair-oil. He caught now and then a breath of some dark carnation from a button-hole, but the clove-sweetness would become mixed with the odour of stale red herrings. At the front of the brake he could see his father, a little man dressed in a straw hat cocked on the back of his head and a dapper grey suit with the jacket thrown wide open in order to show off a pale yellow waistcoat with pearl buttons. Opposite his father sat his mother, plump, double-chinned, with big adoring brown eyes, dressed in a lavender-grey dress and hat to match his father's suit. Round her neck she wore a thin band of black velvet. The very latest! No other woman in the brake sported a band of black velvet. Yet he thought his mother looked hot and uncomfortable, as though the black velvet were strangling her, and his father sat as though she never existed, bobbing constantly up and down to call to someone in the rear of the brake, talking excitedly to anyone and everyone but her.

It was solely because of his father that Henry Solly had come on the outing. Solly! What a name! His father was conductor of the choir, a sort of musical Napoleon, very small and absurdly vain, who wanted to conquer the world with the sound of his own voice. Stout, excitable, electric, he was like a little Napoleonic Jack-in-the-box, with tiny cocksure blue eyes, a fair, sharp-waxed moustache, and a kind of clockwork

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chattering voice that changed as though by a miracle, when he sang, into a bass of magnificent tone, warm, rich and strong. By profession he was a draper, but the shop was gloomily unattractive and poorly patronized, so that Alfred found a good deal of time to sit in the back living-room and practice hymns and oratorio and part-songs on the American organ while Henry attended the shop. It was a boring, passionless, depressing existence. 'When you grow up, Henry,' his father had been fond of saying, 'you'll have to wait in the shop.' He often wondered and sometimes still continued to wonder what it was he must wait for? Already he had now been seven years in the shop, waiting. And he had begun to feel now that he would go on for another twenty, thirty, perhaps even fifty years, still waiting and still wondering what he was waiting for. There he would be, fifty years hence, still dusting and re-arranging the thick flannel shirts, pants, waistcoats, corduroy trousers, body-belts, patent collar fasteners, stiff cuffs and starched white dickies; still writing the little white cards to pin on the frowzy articles in the window, *Solly for Style — Solly for Smartness — Solly for Shirts — Socks — Suits — Studs and Suspenders — Solly for Everything*; still dusting and setting out the window every Monday morning, carrying in the absurd naked dummies, dressing them and pinning on them, as he did now, a card saying *The Latest for 1902*, only changing the style of the dresses and the date as he grew older. He saw himself as some

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fatuous patriarchal draper grown half-idiotic from years behind a counter, his mind starved and enfeebled by lack of the commonest pleasures of the world. And there he would be, still waiting, with the certainty of achieving nothing but death. He felt sometimes as if he could hurl a dummy through the shop window on some dead and empty Monday morning and then walk out and never come back again. Or if only one of those grey, naked ladies' dummies would come to life!

At the same smooth and now monotonous pace the brake went on into the heart of the country. All the time he sat silent and contemplative. He was fair-haired, with a pale, almost nervously sensitive face that had something attractive in its very pallor and in the intensity of the blue eyes and the small mobile mouth. His body, slight and undeveloped from years of waiting in the ill-ventilated and gloomy shop, had something restless and almost anxious about it even as he sat still and stared from the faces in the brake to the fields and woods, quivering and bright in the noon heat, that travelled smoothly past like some slowly unwound sun-golden panorama. It had about it also something stiff and unsatisfied and unhappy. His straw hat was fastened with a black silk guard to the lapel of his coat; it was his mother's idea: as though on that windless, burning day his straw hat would blow off! And just as his straw hat was tied to him he felt tied to the brake, the absurd giggling passengers and the monotony of his own thoughts. As he sat there, unhappily wishing

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he had never come, he thought dismally of the afternoon ahead — singing, tea in a noisy marquee, more singing on the lawns in the summer twilight, refreshments, more singing, the ride home, and more singing again. Singing! It would have been different if the word had meant anything to him. But he couldn't sing a single note correctly or in tune. How often had his father offered him half a crown if he could sing, without going sharp or flat, one verse of 'The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, is Ended.' He had never succeeded.

'Can you 'itch up a bit?' said the fishmonger suddenly.

Henry moved along the plush seat a fraction, but without speaking.

'That's better. Ain't it hot? If this weather holds I'm a dunner. Fish won't keep, y'know. I had a case o' fresh whiting in yesterday and the missus fainted. Went clean off. That's the fish-trade. See y'money go bad under your eyes.'

The fishmonger's coarse red skin oozed little yellow streams of sweat, which he kept wiping off with his handkerchief, puffing heavily as he took off his bowler hat and mopped his red bald head. He was renowned for his voice, a light sweet tenor, and for his moving and passionate interpretation of 'Come into the Garden, Maud'.

'Blimey,' he kept saying. 'I'm done like a dinner.'

The road, after climbing up a little, had begun to

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drop down again towards a wooded valley. The country stretched out infinitely green and yellow under the pure intensity of noon light. In the near distance the road shimmered under the heat like quivering water. Cattle had gathered under the shade of trees, unmoving except for the clockwork flicking of their tails as they stared at the passing brake with its crowd of laughing passengers. By a woodside there was a murmur of doves invisible in the thick-leaved trees, warm, liquid, sleepy, and no other bird-sound except the occasional cry of a jay disturbed by the noise of wheels and voices. The brief cool wood-shade was like a draught of water; the shrill voices and clucking hoofs made cool empty echoes in the deep sun-flickered shadowy silence. Someone in the brake reached up and shook a low-hanging bough that in swishing back again seemed to set all the leaves in the wood rustling with a soft, dry, endless whispering. The scent of honeysuckle was suddenly very strong and exquisite, pouring out from the wood in a sweet invisible mist that seemed to disperse as soon as the brake was out in the sunshine again. After the dark coolness of the overhanging trees the day was blinding and burning. And out in the full glare of sunlight the world was steeped in other scents, the smell of drying hay, the thick vanilla odour of meadow-sweet, the exotic heavenliness of lime trees.

The road went down to a village. There, at a white-washed public-house with red geraniums blazing

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vividly in the window-boxes, the brake pulled up to a concert of cries and laughter.

'Whoa! What's the matter with you, old horses? Whoa there! Are they teetotallers? Whoa!'

Shouting and laughing, the passengers began to alight and vanish into the public-house. Those who did not drink walked about to stretch their legs or stood in the shade of the inn wall. Men reappeared from the public-house doorway with glasses of golden beer, their mouths ringed with beads of foam. From the tap-room a bass voice boomed and pompommed deep impromptu notes of noisy pleasure.

Henry got down from the brake and walked about moodily. His father and mother stood in the shade, each drinking a small lemonade.

'Get yourself a lemon, 'Enry, my boy,' said his father.

'No thanks.'

'Feel dicky?'

'I'm all right.'

'Liven yourself up then. Haven't lost nothing, have you?'

'I'm all right,' said Henry.

He refused to sip of his mother's lemonade and walked away. He felt bored, morose, out of touch with everyone.

With relief he saw the passengers emerge from the public-house and begin to climb back into the brake. He climbed up also and found himself sitting, this time, between a tall scraggy man with a peg-leg who

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gave off the mustily dry odour of leather, and a girl of his own age who was dressed as if she were going to a baptism, in a white silk dress, white straw hat, long white gloves that reached to her elbows, white cotton stockings, white shoes and a white sunshade which she carried elegantly over her left shoulder.

'Oh! It's going to be marvellous,' she said.

'What is?' he said, 'Don't poke me in the eye with that sunshade.'

'The choir, the house, everything.'

'Glad you think so,' he said.

The brake had begun to move again, the shouting and excited laughter of the passengers half drowning the girl's voice and his own. And above the din of the brake's departure there arose the sound of insistent argument.

'I tell you it's right! Seen it times with my own eyes.'

'You dreamt it.'

'Dreamt it! I *seen* it. Plain as a pikestaff.'

'In a churchyard? Tell your grandmother.'

'Well, if you don't believe me, will you bet on it? You're so cocky.'

'Ah, I'll bet you. Any money. Anything you like.'

'All right. You'll bet as what I've told you ain't on that tombstone in Polwick churchyard? You'll bet on that?'

'Ah! I'll bet you. And I *know* it ain't.'

'Well, go on. How much?'

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'Tanner.'

There were shouts of ironical laughter and reckless encouragement. A little black frizzy-haired man was bobbing excitedly up and down on the brake seat urging a large blond man wearing a cream tea-rose in his buttonhole to increase the bet. 'Go on. Make it sixpence ha'penny. You're so cocky. How can you lose? You know it ain't there, don't you? Go on.'

'Sixpence,' said the blond man. 'I said sixpence and I mean sixpence.'

'You'll go to ruin fast.'

'I dare say. But I said sixpence and I mean sixpence. And here's me money.'

'All right! Let the driver hold it.'

The blond man handed his money to the fishmonger, who had climbed up to sit by the driver, and then began to urge the little man:

'Give him your money. Go on. And say good-bye to it while you're at it. Go on, say good-bye to it. Ah, it's no use spitting on it. It's the last you'll ever see o' that tanner.'

'You're so cocky. Why didn't you bet a quid?'

'Ah, why didn't I?'

Up on the driving-seat the driver and the fishmonger rolled against each other in sudden storms of laughter. Women giggled and men called out to each other, making dark insinuations, urging the driver to stop at the churchyard.

Opposite Henry and the girl a handsome man with

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a dark moustache and wearing a straw hat at a devilish angle had rested his hand with a sort of stealthy non-chalance on the knee of a school teacher in pink. She in turn averted her eyes, trying to appear as though she were thinking profound, far-off, earnest thoughts.

'What's the matter?' he said.

'It's so hot,' she murmured.

'So are you,' he whispered.

The school teacher's neck flushed crimson and the blood surged up into her face.

And as if to cover up her own embarrassment the girl at Henry's side began to talk in a rather louder voice to him, but her prim banal voice became lost for him in the giggling and talking of the other passengers, the loud-voiced arguments about the bet, the everlasting sound of wheels and hoofs on the rough, sun-baked road. Down in the valley the sun seemed hotter than ever. The brake passed a group of haymakers resting and sleeping in the noon-heat under the shade of a great elm tree. They waved and called with sleepy greetings. A woman sitting among them suckling a baby looked up with sun-tired eyes. Further on a group of naked boys bathing in a sloe-fringed pond jumped up and down in the sun-silvered water and about the grass pond-bank, waving their wet arms and flagging their towels. In the brake there was a thin ripple of giggling, the women suddenly ducking their heads together and whispering with suppressed excitement. The blond man and the frizzy-haired dark man

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argued and taunted each other with unending but friendly vehemence. And under the intense sunshine and the dazzling fierce July light the slowness of the brake was intolerable. Up the hills it crawled as though the horses were sick. Down hill the brakes hissed and checked the wheels into the deathly pace of a funeral. Henry sat drugged by the heat and the wearisome pace of progress. Faintly, through the sun-heavy air, came the strokes of one o'clock from a church tower. Already it was as if the brake had travelled all day. And now, with the strokes of the clock dying away and leaving the air limitlessly silent beyond the little noises of the brake it seemed suddenly as if the journey might last for ever.

Twenty minutes later the brake went down hill through an avenue of elms towards a square church tower rising like a small sturdy grey fortress out of a village that seemed asleep except for a batch of black hens dust-bathing in the hot road. The sudden coming of the brake sent the fowls squawking and clattering away in panic-feathered half-flight.

'Ah! Your old horses are too slow for a funeral. Might have had a Sunday dinner for nothing if you'd been sharper. What d'ye feed 'em on? Too slow to run over an old hen. Gee there! Tickle 'em up a bit.' And mingled with these shouts the repeated cry:

'And don't forget to stop at the churchyard.'

The frizzy-haired man began to stand up and wave his arms. He became ironically tender towards the

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blond man. 'I feel sorry for you. It's like taking money from a kid. Pity your mother ever let you come out.' The blond man kept shaking his head with silent wisdom. The brake crawled slowly by the churchyard wall. 'A bit farther,' cried the dark man with excitement. 'T'other side o' that yew-tree. Gee up a bit.' The passengers were craning their necks, laughing, standing up, bantering remarks. With mock sadness the frizzy-haired man patted the blond man on the back, shaking his head. 'Feel sorry for you,' he said in a wickedly dismal voice. The blond man airily waved his hand with a gesture of pity. 'Not half so sorry as you'll feel for yourself in a minute,' he said.

The frizzy-haired man did not listen. He was beginning to survey the tombstones with great excitement, craning his neck. Suddenly the blond man seized him and held him aloft like a child.

'Now can you see, ducky?' he cried.

'A bit farther! Farther! Steady now. Whoa there! Whoa!'

The brake stopped. The small man wriggled down from the blond man's arms. There arose a pandemonium of laughter and shouts in the brake. The driver stood up and chinked the money in his hand. The small man spoke with twinkling irony.

'Oh! No, it ain't there, is it? It ain't there? It's melted. Well, well, I must be boss-eyed. The sun's so hot it's melted. Would you believe it? Fancy that. Just fancy that. It ain't there.'

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The blond man was staring with dumb gloom at a gravestone.

'What are you looking at?' began the small man mercilessly. 'What? — If it ain't a tombstone I'll never. Well, well!'

'I'll be damned,' the blond man was saying slowly. 'I'll be damned.'

'Read it!' yelled the little man in triumph.

'I've read it.'

'Read it out loud.'

'Ah, what d'ye take me for? Three pen'worth o' tripe? You read it.'

'All right. It's worth it.'" Solemnly the small man read out the rhyme on the tombstone:

*'Let wind go free where'er you be:
In chapel or in church.
For wind it was the death of me.'*

Suddenly the driver clicked at the horses and the brake jerked violently on. The women shrieked, the blond man sat disconsolate, the small man piped in triumph above the bubbling and spluttering of laughter.

Henry sat with a little smile on his lips, faintly aloof, his thoughts lofty and cool. He felt wonderfully above and detached from the puerile jokes and empty laughter of the rest of the brake, his brain manufacturing little self-conscious philosophies which seemed very clever, and when the mood seemed to be dying at last it was suddenly revived by the spectacle of his father

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standing up in the brake, signalling the driver to halt for a moment and delivering his final words of advice and admonition to the choir.

'Well, we shall be there in a few more minutes. And I just want to remind you of a few things. We've had our little jokes. And now I want to be serious for ten seconds. This is a serious business. We are down to start singing at four o'clock. All hear that? Four o'clock. Four o'clock on the big lawn in front of the house. We shall start off with "Calm was the Sea"; and then after that it will be "On the Banks of Allan Water" and then last of all "My love is Like a Red, Red Rose". We shall sing these three in the afternoon. And then in the evening, at seven o'clock, we shall sing a test piece chosen from one of these and three others. It might be one of these three. It might not. It might be anything. We don't know. We've got to stand ready to sing anything at a moment's notice.' He waved his arms up and down constantly in his excitement. His voice was like that of a little chattering ventriloquist's doll. 'And one more thing. Remember the words. When it says "Calm was the Sea" don't sing it as if it were "The Wreck of the Hesperus", but sing it as if it were calm — calm and soft. Imagine it. Lovely day. Boats hardly moving. Softly, softly, does it, softly. Imagine it. Imagine you're on Yarmouth pier if you like, looking at the sea. Water hardly moves. And then "the wandering breezes". Soft again, very soft. Let them wander. Let them flow from

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you. And breezes — remember it's breezes. Not a thunderstorm. Still soft — you'll see in the copy is marked *dulce*. Italian word — means sweet, soft, gentle. Remember dulcimer. Close your eyes if you like. Sing it as if you was dreaming.' He closed his fair-lashed eyes and put on a wrapt, dreamy expression of soft ecstasy. 'Dah — dah-dah — daah-dah!' he sang in a soft falsetto. 'Wand'ring bre-e-e-zes.' He opened his eyes. 'Feeling — that's it — feeling. Expression. That's everything. Anybody can bellow like a bull. But that's not singing. That's not interpretation. Not feeling. And don't be afraid of how you look. The judges aren't looking to see how pretty you are. They're *listening*. Well, make them listen, soft, softly does it, remember, softly.'

His voice trailed off to a fine whisper and he sat down. Henry smiled and the brake went on, the passengers in a changed mood after his father's words, the women tidying their hats and smoothing their stiff puff-sleeves and long dresses, the men fingering their buttonholes, clearing their throats and sitting in silence as though suddenly musingly nervous of the thought of the singing.

The country began to change also. The yellowing wheat-fields, the dark fields of roots shining and drooping in the hot sun, the parched hayfields and woods were replaced by an immense park of old dark trees under which the grass was still spring green and sweet. Far off, timid and startled, groups of young deer,

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palest brown against the dark tree-shadows, with an occasional dark antlered, resentful stag, stood and watched the brake go past with glassy, wondering eyes. Soon, through wider spaces between the trees, there was the big house itself, a square, stone tall-windowed place, with a carved stone balustrade round the lead roof and immense black cedars encircling the lawns. It looked cold and sepulchral even against the rich darkness of the trees in the hot sunlight.

The brake turned into the park through high iron gates on which the family crest blazed in scarlet and gold. It was as if it had driven into a churchyard. The passengers were suddenly transformed, sitting with a stiff, self-conscious silence upon them. As the brake drove along under a great avenue of elms extending like a sombre nave up to the lawns of the house, the horses fell into a walk. The fishmonger sat very upright on the driver's seat, preening his buttonhole, and the fat woman, sucking her last cachou quickly, wiped her lips clean with her handkerchief. The handsome young man in a rakish straw hat, taking his hand away from the school teacher's knee, ceased his seductive whispers. The carriage-drive emerged in an immense sweep from under the dark avenue into the sunlight and curved on between the lawns and the house. The brake pulled up behind a row of other brakes standing empty by a tall yew-hedge and the choir began to alight, the men handing down the ladies from the awkward back-step and the ladies giving little

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delicate shrieks and pretending to stumble. Henry's father dragged out from under the brake seat an immense portmanteau of music. From over the lawns gay with parasols and flowing frocks, there came a scent of new-mown grass and women's dresses, the swooning breath of lime trees and a hum of human voices like the sound of bees.

Across the lawn also came a man in an old panama hat, a yellowish alpaca suit and a faded green bow, beaming with smiles and gestures of aristocratic idiocy.

'Oh, pardon, pardon me!' he cried. 'But 'oo are you? Oh! Orpheus choir! Yes! Orpheus! Marvellous! T'ank you a t'ousand times for coming. Yes! And if you desire anyt'ing please come to me. Anyt'ing you like. Anyt'ing. And T'ank you a t'ousand times for coming! T'ank you a t'ousand times! And eez it not ze most marvellous day? Most marvellous!'

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In the full heat of the afternoon, tired from walking about the crowded lawns in the fierce sunshine and even more bored that he had been in the brake, Henry saw people passing in and out of the house through a side door on the terrace. Following them, he found himself in a wide lofty entrance hall that had about it the queer half-scented coolness of a church and the same hollow silence broken at intervals by the sound of

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voices and strange receding and returning echoes. He took off his straw hat and wiped his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief. The air felt as cool as a leaf on his hot face. In answer to his question a negative-faced manservant standing at ease like a tired soldier at the foot of a wide stone staircase told him that the house was open to visitors till five o'clock. He walked quietly up the stairs, his feet soundless on the heavy carpet, staring at the magnificence of gilded ceilings, dim tapestries, old dark portraits, immense sparkling chandeliers, touching the flower-smoothness of old chests and chairs with his finger-tips as he passed. Upstairs he went in and out of innumerable rooms, staring at vast canopied bedsteads, lacquered cabinets filled with never-opened books and fragile china, dim painted screens and ornate fireplaces of cold blue-veined marble. He wondered all the time who had ever lived and slept there, contrasting it all unconsciously with the room behind the shop at home, with the cheap German silk-fronted piano, the brass gas-brackets, the cane music-rack, the broken revolving piano stool, the flashy green jars containing aspidistras whose leaves his mother counted and sponged religiously every Saturday. The place had an air of unreality. The yellow blinds, drawn to keep out the sun, threw down a strange shadowy apricot light. Here and there rents in the blinds let in streaks of dusty sunlight. When he put his hand on the walls they struck cold and damp. Across the floors he

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noticed trails of candle-grease dropped perhaps by some servant coming in to lower the blinds at night or let them up again in the morning. How long ago? he wondered. There was a melancholy air of the past, of vague, dead, forgotten things. There was also a curious feeling of poverty about it all in spite of that rich magnificence. The blinds were old and stained, the paint was cracked and dirty, and here and there a ceiling had crumbled away, revealing naked laths draped with black skeins of cobweb.

Going slowly up the second flight of stairs, he stopped now and then to look at the prints on the walls. A clock in the house struck four, the notes very soft and delicate, a silver water-sound. Some visitors passed him, coming down, their voices dying away down the two flights of stairs like a vague chant. Going up, he found himself in a bare corridor.

Walking into a room by one door and out by another he turned along a narrow corridor in order to return to the stairs, but the passage seemed contained within itself, to lead nowhere. And in a moment he was lost. Trying to go back to the room through which he had come he tried a door, but it was locked. He began to try other doors, which were also locked. It was some minutes before he found a door which opened.

Relieved, he hurried through the room. But half-way across the floor, thinking of nothing but escaping by the opposite door, he was startled into a fresh panic by a voice:

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'But unfortunately, in bestowing these embraces, a pin in her ladyship's headdress slightly scratching the child's neck, produced from this pattern of gentleness, such violent screams, as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy. The mother's consternation was excessive; but it could not surpass the alarm. . . .'

At the word alarm he stopped. The voice stopped too. He felt himself break out into a prickling sweat. Across the room, with his thin fingers outstretched to a low wood fire, sat an old man in a torn red dressing-gown. He was sunk into a kind of sick trance. By his side there was a woman, a young woman. Arrested in the act of reading, she sat with her averted head still and intense, looking across the room with the blackest eyes he had ever seen, black not only with their own richness of colour but with an illimitable darkness of sheer melancholy.

'I'm lost,' Henry said.

'Lost?'

She stood upright as she echoed the word, rubbing the fingers of her left hand up and down the yellow eather binding of the book. Trying to face her he was sick with confusion. The old man turned stiffly and stared at him also. The old eyes were pale and vacuous.

Suddenly the woman smiled.

'It's all right,' she said.

For some reason or other Henry could not answer her. He stood half-foolishly hypnotized by her figure, tall and wonderfully slender, her very long maroon-coloured

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dress, her unspeakably brilliant eyes. Her voice had in it a kind of mournful sweetness which held him fascinated.

At last he attempted to explain himself. He had no sooner begun than she cut him short:

'I'll show you the way,' she said.

He still could not answer. She turned to the old man:

'Sit still. I'll come back.'

'Where are you going?' he muttered querulously. 'Who's that young man?'

In one swift movement she turned from the old man to Henry and then back to the old man again, smiling at the youth with half-grave, half-vivacious eyes. And there was the same mischievous solemnity in her voice.

'He's the new gardener,' she said.

'Eh?'

'The new gardener. Here, take the book. Read a little till I come back. From the top of the page there. You see?'

'What? I'd like some tea.'

'All right.'

'It's not so frightfully warm in here either,' he said pettishly.

'Keep your dressing-gown buttoned. You're not likely to be warm. See, button it up.'

She fingered the buttons of his dressing-gown, quickly, impatiently. And then, while he still protested

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and complained, she walked swiftly across the room, opened the far door and vanished into the passage outside. In bewilderment Henry followed her. She shut the door quickly behind him.

'Well, now I'll see you out,' she said.

She began to walk away along the passage and he followed her, a step or two behind. She walked quickly with long, impatient steps, so that he had difficulty in keeping up.

They walked along in silence except for the sound of her dress swishing along the carpet until he recognized the window at which he had stood and looked down in the choir.

'I'm all right now,' he said. He began to utter dim thanks and apologies.

'Go and enjoy yourself,' she said. 'Have you seen the lake?'

'No,'

'Go and see it. Across the park and through the rhododendron plantation. You'll find it. It's lovely.'

Before he could speak again she had turned away. There was a brief flash of maroon in the passage, the sound of her feet running quickly after she had vanished. He waited a moment. But nothing happened, there was only a curious, almost audible hush everywhere. Outside the singing had ceased. He moved towards the stairs in a state of dejected and tense astonishment.

The singing was over for the afternoon. There was nothing to do but wander about the lawns and terraces or take tea in the large flagged tea-tent. Privileged ladies were playing croquet on a small lawn under the main terrace, giggling nervously as they struck the bright-coloured balls. Gentlemen in straw boaters and pin-striped cream flannel trousers with wide silk waist-bands applauded their shots delicately. There was an oppressive feeling of summer languor, a parade of gay hats and parasols and sweeping dresses. Henry went into the tea-tent for a cup of tea to escape the boredom of it all. Coming out again he met the fishmonger.

'Cheer up,' said the fishmonger.

'Oh! I'm all right.' He put on a casual air. 'I was wondering which was the way to the lake.'

'The lake?' said the fishmonger. His eyes began to dance like little bubbling peas as soon as he heard the word. The lake? What did he want with the lake? Becoming quite excited, he took hold of Henry's coat-sleeve confidentially and led him across the lawn. So he wanted to know the way to the lake? Well! Very strange. He wondered what he wanted with the lake? Not for fish by any chance? Oh! no, not for fish. Perhaps he didn't even know there were fish in the lake? Henry protested. He cut him short:

'Ah, you're dark, you're dark.'

Finally, losing a little of his excitement, he began to tell him of the days when, as a young man, he had fished in the lake. Fish! They hadn't breathing room. They were the days. But now there hadn't been fish, not a solitary fish, not a stickleback, pulled out of that lake for twenty years. 'Not since old Antonio came.' It was a shame, wickedness. He began to talk with lugubrious regret. Who was Antonio? Henry asked. The fishmonger echoed the words with tenor astonishment, his voice squeaking. Antonio? Hadn't he seen him running about all over the place — 'T'ank you a t'ousand times! T'ank you a t'ousand times!' So that was Antonio? Yes, Antonio Serelli. It was he who was mad on singing and had the choirs come every summer. It was he who hadn't allowed a line in the lake for twenty years. 'In the old days you could give a keeper a drink and fish all day.' But not now. Antonio wouldn't allow it. The police had instructions to keep their eyes open for anyone carrying anything that looked like a rod. And Antonio would go mad if he heard a fish had been hooked. But then he was mad. They were all mad, the whole family, always had been. The girl and all.

'The girl?' Henry repeated. 'Who is she?'

'Maddalena?' The fishmonger shook his head. He didn't know anything about Maddalena. He'd never seen her. She never came out. He only knew old Antonio.

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'And what's their name?'

'Serelli.'

'Which must be Italian.'

'Half and half. Don't do to inquire too much into the ins and outs of the aristocracy.'

Finally he pointed out the path going down through a plantation of rhododendrons to the lake and Henry climbed over the high iron fence of the park.

'Keep your eyes open,' the fishmonger whispered. 'They say he's down there every night. Singing the fish to sleep I shouldn't wonder.'

Henry left him and walked down through the rhododendrons to the lake. It was larger than he had imagined, a wide oval of water, stretching for a quarter of a mile before him and on either hand. A thick wood came down on the opposite shore to the fringe of reeds and wild iris fronds. The water was still and smooth until a pair of wild duck, frightened by his coming, shot up and flew high and swift over the alders darkening the bank, their feet dripping silver, their long necks craned to the sun, their alarmed quack-quacking splitting the warm silence. The water-rings, undulating gently away, struck islands of water lilies with a soft flopping sound. Under the sun-shot water countless lily-buds were pushing up like dim magnolias and on the surface wide-open flowers floated like saucers of white and yellow china.

As he walked along the lakeside he could still hear the faint cries that rose from the crowded lawns, and

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now and then the clock of croquet balls. Hearing them he thought of how he had wandered about the lawns and gardens trying to find courage enough to go into the house again in the hope of seeing for a second time the girl who had been reading to the old man. He could not forget the melancholy intensity of her face. But when finally he had hurried along the terrace the door had been locked.

He walked along by the lake. The grass was spongy and noiseless to walk on, the air very still and warm under the shelter of the rhododendrons, and pigeons made a soft complaint in the silence.

Abruptly he was aware of something moving on the opposite bank. He half stopped and looked. It seemed like a group of yellow irises fluttered by a little deliberate wind. Then he saw that it was someone in a yellow dress. The sleeve was waving. He stopped quite still. The sleeve seemed to be making signals for him to go on.

He began to walk slowly along the bank and the woman on the opposite bank began to walk along in the same direction, hurrying. At the end of the lake, where the water sluiced in, was a wooden bridge. The woman began to run as she approached it. Her dress was very long and hampered her movements and she paused on the bridge to straighten her skirt and then hurried on again to meet him.

'You shouldn't come along here, you know,' she began to say, as she approached him.

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She seemed to be very agitated. Henry stopped. He felt that she had not recognized him.

'I am very sorry,' he said.

And then, perhaps because of his voice, she recognized him. Her face broke into a half smile, but the agitation remained:

'But you shouldn't, you shouldn't,' she kept saying.

'But it was you who told me to come.'

'It makes no difference.'

He did not speak. All this time they had stood at a distance from each other, four or five yards between them. Now she came nearer. In the house he had thought of her as very young, a girl. Now, as she came nearer, she seemed much older. He took her now for twenty-seven or eight. And perhaps because of the yellow dress she seemed darker too. Her eyes were utterly black, not merely dark, and brilliant without the faintest mistiness, like black glass. And she seemed taller also and her body finer in shape, again perhaps because of the yellow dress, and her skin had a kind of creamy duskiness, soft, very smooth, a rich duskiness that had covered also her heavy southern lips and her straight black hair.

Staring at her, he was still at a loss for something to say. She had begun to bite her lower lip, hard, making little white teeth-prints on the dusky flesh, as though in agitation or perplexity. And it occurred to him suddenly why she did not want him there. She had

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come down not to meet him, but someone else. And she was angry and troubled at finding him there.

'I'm very sorry,' he said again. 'But I'll go at once.'

He put his hand to his straw hat. She startled him by saying instantly:

'I'll walk back with you.' And then added: 'I'm going back the same way.'

It looked as if she didn't trust him. But he said nothing. A path slanted up the slope through the rhododendrons and they began to walk up it. The rhododendrons, old wild misshapen bushes, were full of withered seed-heads. He said something about their having looked wonderful in early summer. She did not answer. He thought she seemed preoccupied. Once, without stopping, she glanced back at the lake as though looking for someone, and as she turned back he remarked:

'It's been a wonderful day.'

'Yes,' she said. She said it unthinkingly, the word meant nothing. And suddenly she added:

'You think so?'

And, as she spoke, she was smiling, an extraordinary smile, vivacious, dark, allusive. It had in it something both tender and mocking.

'You don't think so?' she said.

'No, perhaps not.'

She seemed to feel instinctively that he was bored.

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He felt it. And he felt that she might have triumphed over him for knowing, but she said nothing, and they walked slowly on up the path.

All the time he wondered why she had been so agitated at finding him by the lake. And finally he asked.

'I didn't recognize you,' she said.

That was all. He didn't believe her. And she sensed his unbelief at once. She looked quickly at him and he smiled. She smiled in return, the same vivacious tender smile as before, and in a moment they were intimate. She said then:

'I didn't want you to get into any unpleasantness, that's all.'

'What unpleasantness?'

'Well, the lake is private. The fish are preserved and there are keepers and so on.'

He said nothing, but at heart he was disappointed at leaving the lake.

'You're not disappointed?' she said at once.

'Yes,' he said.

And then she did an extraordinary thing. She suddenly lifted her arms with a gesture of almost mocking abandonment and declared:

'All right. We'll go back.'

He protested. But she turned and began to walk back down the path to the lake, not heeding him. He turned and followed her, a yard or two behind, protesting again. And suddenly she let out a laugh and

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began to run. For a moment he stood still with astonishment and then he ran after her.

At the bottom of the path she paused and waited for him. She was still laughing.

'What shall we do?' she said recklessly. 'There's a punt. We could go out on the lake.'

'All right.' He was ready for anything.

And then, as suddenly as she had turned and run down the path, she was saying:

'No, I mustn't. You must excuse me. I must go back.'

'Don't go,' he said.

She caught the tone of entreaty in his voice. And it seemed to hurt her. Her eyes filled with pain, then abruptly with swimming wetness, and he stood still, too astounded to speak, while she bent her head and let the tears fall helplessly down her face. She began to cry with the helplessness of utter dejection, like someone worn out, not even lifting her hands to her face to hide it, but letting them hang spiritlessly at her side, not moving. She hardly made a sound, as though her tears were flooding away her strength. And when gradually she ceased crying and at last lifted her head she never uttered a word of apology or excuse or regret. But she gave him one amazing look, her black eyes swimming with many conflicting emotions; anger, helplessness, dejection, bitterness, fear and pain.

A moment later they were walking back up the path

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again. He could not speak. She dried her eyes with the sleeve of her dress, making a little yellow handkerchief of it. He felt that there was something unforgettably strange and touching about her, about her beauty, her amazing changes of mood, her tears and her silence.

And just as he had given up the idea of her ever speaking again, she made a sort of excuse, half for her tears, half for her behaviour on first seeing him:

'My brother might be very angry if he knew people had been down by the lake. And that might mean the end of the singing contests.'

That was all. It was very lame, very unconvincing, but he said:

'I understand.'

She must have felt that the excuse was poor and that he didn't understand, for a moment later she began to tell him, half apologetically, something about her brother: of how he was passionately fond of music, of singing especially. Twenty years before, her father had brought her mother to live there. Her father had been an English doctor and her mother Italian, an opera singer, a very gay woman, but a little irresponsible. Now that her father and mother were dead the brother and sister lived alone in the place and the brother devoted himself to music.

'He lives for nothing else,' she concluded.

She told him all this quietly, a little disjointedly, offering it as an excuse. But there was a curious

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bitterness in her voice, sharpest when she said 'He lives for nothing else.' He said nothing at all and by the time she had finished speaking they had reached the crest of the path.

There they paused. Across the park, through the thick summer trees, they could see the tent with its flags, the fluttering panorama of dresses across the lawns, the flowers on the terraces. And as they stood there the evening singing began, the harmony of male voices low and soft but very clear on the still evening air. They listened a moment; the choir was singing 'Calm was the Sea', and the voices, falling, crooned away almost to silence. There was a gate in the iron fence beyond the rhododendrons. The woman put her hand on the latch and he pushed it open and she slipped through and before he could say anything she smiled and was going away in the direction of the trees.

Just before she disappeared she turned as if to wave her hand and then, as though remembering something, she let it fall loosely to her side.

It was nearly midnight, the sky was clear and dark, a pattern of blue and starlight. Down the avenue of elms the line of conveyances gave departing winks of light. The horses hoofs made hollow clock-clocking echoes under the roof of thick leaves. The air was still

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warm. There was a scent of limes, an odour of horses, an acrid whiff of candles from the carriage lamps. Above the noises of departure a thin emasculate voice kept piping continually:

'T'ank you a t'ousand times! T'ank you a t'ousand times. T'ank you so much.'

It was all over. Henry was in the brake, squeezed between the fishmonger and the school teacher who sat half lost already in a pair of dark entwining arms; the brake was moving away, the lamplight was shining down the avenue, the lawn with its web of fairy-lights, azure and red and emerald and gold, was receding, fading, vanishing at last.

'Well, it's been a grand day. And if you ask me we done well. Yes, it's been grand. I'm satisfied. I shan't be sorry when I'm going up wooden hill, now. I like my rest.' The voices of the women were tired, disjointed, the words broken by yawns. A mutter of dissatisfaction ran among the men. They had won the second prize, there had been some unfairness, they had expected the first, they were sure of it, they had sung beautifully. The judges were too old, they were finicky, they had been prejudiced. The voices of the men, discussing it, were petty, regretful. 'A day wasted, I call it.' Little arguments flamed up in the darkness. 'Ah! not so strong. It's been grand.' Jokes cracked out, someone made the sweet wet sound of a kiss, laughter flickered and died, the petty arguments were renewed. A woman suddenly complained: 'There! and I forgot

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my honeysuckle,' and a voice quietened her from the darkness: 'Come here and I'll give you something sweeter'n honeysuckle.'

The brake went slowly on into dark vague country. The night was warm and soundless, the houses were little grey haystacks clustered together, the woods were blacker and deeper. It was like a tranquil dream: the lovely glitter of summer starlight, the restfulness of the dark sky after the glare of sunshine.

Henry sat silent, only half-conscious of what the voices about him said. He was thinking of the woman: he could see her in the room with the old man, he could see her crying by the lake and half-waving her hand. He could see her clearly and could hear her voice unmistakably; yet he felt at times that she had never existed.

The fishmonger broke in upon his thoughts, his breath sweetish with wine, his voice a little thick and excited:

'Remember I was tellin' you about old Fiddlesticks, Antonio? I been havin' a glass o' wine with him.'

Henry only nodded.

'Would make me have it. Dragged me into the house. Drawing-room. Kept shaking hands wimme. Nice fellow, old Antonio. You'd like him. Nice wine an' all — beautiful — like spring water. Made your heart sing, fair made your heart sing.'

His voice trailed off and he sat silent, as though overawed by these memories. Thinking of the woman,

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Henry said nothing. His mind puzzled over her with tender perplexity. Who was she? Why had she wept? What was she doing now?

The fishmonger broke in again, a little garrulously: 'Did I tell you the old man came in? No? Came in about half-way through the second glass. Dirty old dressing-gown, all gravy and slobber down the front. I tell you, nobody knows how the rich live only those who do know. Had the girl with him. In a yellow dress. Know who I mean? The girl who never comes out, never goes nowhere.'

Henry was listening now. He listened a little incredulously, but gradually there crept into the fishmonger's voice a quality of earnestness, of sober truth:

'I know now why that girl never goes out. Do you know — she didn't drink. That was funny. She just sat looking at the old man. I should like you to have seen her looking at him.'

'How did she look at him?'

'Just as if she hated him. Every time he slopped his wine down his dressing-gown she looked just as if she would shriek. And then another funny thing happened. She went out. Just as if she couldn't bear it no longer.'

'Went out?' His heart was beginning to beat with a curious excitement.

'Yes — and then, perhaps you won't believe me, the old man went mad. Raving mad, all because she'd gone. Jealousy! That's all. Mad with jealousy. In the end he went clean off — sort of fit, and Antonio and

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me had to rub his hands and get him round. Old Antonio was very upset. Kept apologizing to me. "Excuse," he kept saying. "Excuse. He is so jealous about her. He never wants her out of his sight. And she is so young. And then she is a woman of great imagination." What did he mean by that? — a woman of great imagination?' The fishmonger broke out in answer to himself, in a little burst of disgusted fury:

'Imagination! It needed a bit of imagination to marry that old cock.'

The brake had reached the crest of the hill and had begun to descend on the other side. The dew, falling softly, was turning the air a little cooler. The figures in the brake were silent, the lovers enfolded each other. A clock chimed its quarters over the still fields, the fishmonger took out his watch and verified it and dropped it back into his pocket.

'Half-past one,' he murmured.

Henry was silent and as the brake drove steadily on there was a sense of morning in the air in spite of the stars, the silence and the darkness.