The Doll Maker

Sarban

Table of Contents

The Doll Maker.....**1**
Sarban.....2
1.....3
2.....10
3.....21
4.....26
5.....31
6.....40
7.....46
8.....52
9.....56
10.....64
11.....73

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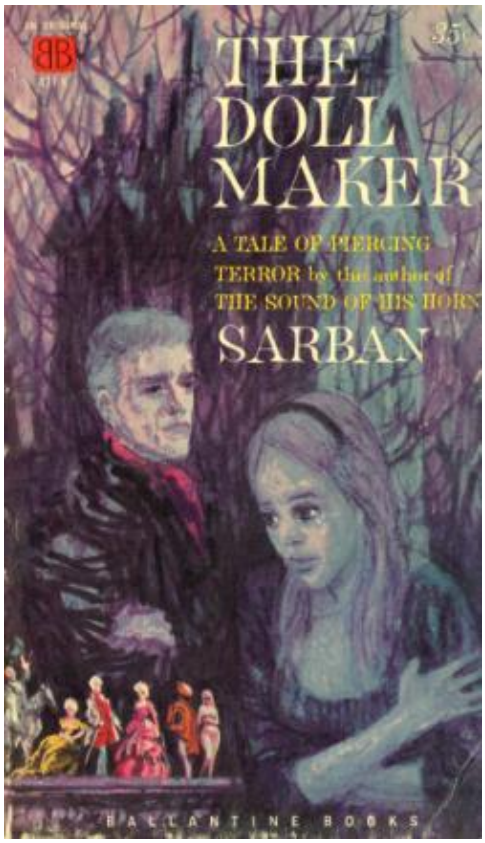
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11



1

"Paston Hall, with its beautiful and extensive grounds," so ran the Prospectus, "stands in a high and healthy situation, and while the School is surrounded on all sides by charmingly wooded, unspoilt country which ensures complete tranquillity, communication with the pleasant old−world market−town of Pentabridge is easy and regular.... The girls are encouraged to lead a varied outdoor life, which includes gardening, games and riding, under careful supervision.... Particular attention is paid to individual training in habits of mind and person, such as intelligent observation, initiative, acceptance of responsibility.... Entire charge is taken of pupils whose parents are abroad."

These phrases, and particularly the last, were present in the mind of Clare Lydgate, one December night, as she crossed on tiptoe the dark Prefects' Room on the ground−floor of Paston Hall and gently drew back the oiled window−catch. She saw Miss Sperrod carefully selecting which words to underline on the shiny glazed paper and was revolted by the hypocrisy which, quite recently, she had discovered to be the main element in the Principal's character and the main component of the atmosphere she had been breathing for the last five years.

Clare climbed out of the Prefects' Room window and drew it quietly to behind her. The night was moonless, but the unclouded stars thinned the darkness so that gravel paths and grass and the bulks of trees were just distinguishable. In two long strides on the tips of her gym−shoes she crossed the loose gravel of the path and gained the grass, where footfalls were silent. She glanced back at the school building once to make sure that all the windows on her side were dark, then walked slowly, but with the confidence of one to whom the place was wholly familiar by night, across the short grass of the grounds.

She went with bent head, neither observing the rare embroidery of the black sky above her nor heeding the small night sounds of creatures awake in the school grounds and in the woods beyond the walls. The charmingly wooded, unspoilt country surrounding the school was as little known to Clare, or any of the Paston Hall girls, as was the pleasant, old−world market−town of Pentabridge. In claiming the countryside as one of the school's amenities Miss Sperrod did not mention the rule which strictly forbade her pupils to go about in it except in safe numbers under the eye of a Mistress. The Principal calculated that most parents, and especially those who perspire in the tropics, subscribe vaguely to a Wordsworthian doctrine of the beneficial influence of Nature in England on the growing child; but Miss Sperrod was aware of other influences lurking as much in the nearly unspoilt village of Halliwell as in the cinema and *palais de danse* of the old−world market−town, which, though they were native enough to English soil, were likely to produce effects on her pupils which would be sharply reflected in her accounts. The temptations of Pentabridge were, indeed, the lesser danger, for the town was six miles from Paston Hall, and the "easy and regular communication" consisted, in fact, of a contract with the County Bus Company to convey pupils to and from the railway−station when necessary. In an emergency girls might be taken to the town, suitably escorted, in a taxi, but most of them saw nothing of Pentabridge except its railway−station at the beginning and end of term.

Clare Lydgate had not even enjoyed that excursion this autumn term. She was one of those of whom entire charge was taken during the holidays. In the past she had accepted the position philosophically enough, for her father had had a long contract at the Rio Tinto copper−mines and she had been able to go to Spain for the summer and Christmas holidays, and the shorter Easter and Whitsun holidays and the half−terms at Paston Hall were endurable. Now, however, her father was in Malaya; it was impossible to go out there for the holidays. Neither her father nor her mother had any near relatives in England with whom she could stay; and so, for Clare, there had been not terms, but one long term, stretching unbroken in all but the incidence of lessons, from the last Christmas holidays to these. To make matters worse, the clique of friends who in the past had shared internment at Easter and half−term holidays with her was now broken up. Clare was eighteen; she would have left Paston Hall at the end of the last summer term with her contemporaries but for her father's insistence that she sit for an Oxford scholarship.

The Prospectus declared that girls were "prepared for School Certificate, Higher Certificate and entrance to the Universities". Only dimly aware what an unexpected asset she had proved to the Principal, and the small

Governing Body which discreetly made a living out of Paston Hall, Clare had by native intelligence and wide reading satisfied the examiners for the two Certificates and set a record in the annals of the School. Perhaps the flush of this triumph, which was naturally the School's, and the novelty of finding one of the awkward little creatures in whom she dealt actually co−operating with her in her patient and subtle task of drawing fees from parents' pockets, had gone to Miss Sperrod's head and led her to encourage Mr Lydgate's design and foster his belief that Clare could be coached at Paston Hall up to the standard required for a scholarship to Oxford. She was, no doubt, for one occasion in her life, the victim of immediate influences; there was the recent glory of a Higher Certificate, there was the flattery of Mr Lydgate's letter, there was Clare's own ambition and seeming promise, and, finally, there was Miss Otterel.

The Principal had engaged Annie Otterel through a scholastic agency. She was very young, without any teaching experience and without a Teaching Certificate; but she had a degree in History and she was under the necessity of finding a job promptly on going down from London University. She impressed Miss Sperrod with her inside knowledge of the higher academic world—almost as the conversation of a minor canon might impress a tailor who valued the custom of the Chapter—and she inspired Clare with yearning for the delights of University life.

So, convinced though she was that an excess of zeal is the worst of all excesses, the Principal had allowed herself to be carried away by her junior mistress's enthusiasm: Clare was to be specially coached by Miss Otterel, B.A.; the extra fees were assured and the increment of prestige appeared more than a possibility. As for Clare herself, it seemed to her that the heavens had opened; a goddess had descended upon Paston Hall—that all the girls frankly acknowledged from Miss Otterel's first day among them, but Clare was to be distinguished among the general congregation of worshippers and admitted to the goddess's particular intimacy throughout long, private hours of delightful study and confidence.

Then, before the autumn term began, Miss Otterel had died.

Standing in the Principal's sitting−room, watching Miss Sperrod's thin, rapidly−working lips, and listening with a kind of sullen helplessness to her embarrassed, glib, over−emphatic explanation, Clare was slow to grasp the news the Principal told her that morning. When she did she was shocked more by her discovery of the Principal's attitude than by the fact she was attempting to convey. Clare's real revolt against Paston Hall began that morning.

Incredulously, she saw that Miss Sperrod was neither shocked nor grieved at the death itself, only apprehensive. Her gabble of words had an exculpatory undertone, as if she were refuting in anticipation an imputation that the School might in some way be held to be concerned in Anne Otterel's death.

“Of course, it's seven weeks since she left,” the Principal repeated. “She went up to town the day we broke up. She was absolutely fit when she left; I remember distinctly noticing how well she looked after the summer term here. I remember Matron remarking to me how much better she looked than when she came at the beginning of the Easter term. That's what's so dreadful about that disease. The healthiest person can pick up the infection; and the incubation period is really frightfully short, so I'm told. She could have picked it up travelling in the train back to Pentabridge, or with the people she was staying with. They've had quite a number of cases in Pentabridge. It was a question whether the High School shouldn't be closed last term. Two children at least died, I know....”

Clare escaped and tried to obtain a clearer account of the facts from Miss Geary, the one assistant mistress who had stayed at Paston Hall throughout the summer holiday. In the interval which elapsed before she found her, Clare began to feel the full weight of the news. She had not known death before. With it, a strange importance seemed to have shouldered its way bulkily into Paston Hall's affairs and into Clare's own life. She had been living through the summer holiday in a kind of mellow haze of anticipation, gilding the term to come with fancies of delight. Death blew the haze away and revealed a drabness stretching endlessly onward.

At once the attractions of study and the possibility of success seemed to disappear with Anne's death. Special work for the Oxford scholarship now resolved itself into a mere continuance of the dispiriting sequence of lessons she had been groaning through for the last five years. With a new, ruthless clarity of vision she saw that to sit for the scholarship without the coaching of someone like Anne was folly; she accepted the defeat, but she was bewildered and bruised in mind by the tragic excess of the power that had been used to obliterate her dream; she could not yet see her little defeat as a mere incident in a monstrous

thing's passage.

Miss Geary was an aboriginal: a teacher at Paston Hall since its foundation. Successive generations of new girls had unquestioningly accepted from their seniors her nick−name of “Queery” and with it the traditional belief that she was not in perfect possession of all her faculties. The juniors, instructed by school−girl literature, approved an eccentric and gratefully diverted themselves with all the little peculiarities of her appearance, her dress, her voice and her absent−minded habits; the Middle School subscribed to a theory that she was a poor relation of one of the Governors, and treated her with the scorn proper to her situation; the Seniors, when they thought about her at all, dismissed her as a poor old thing.

When Clare, concealing the lesser death that had occurred in her own heart, asked bluntly what Miss Otterel had died of, the old lady stroked away her straight grey hair from her brow, narrowed her eyes and held back her head as if regarding Clare from very far away, from one of the remote plateaux of reverie where she spent most of her waking hours; then, suddenly descending the cliffs, as it were, bent her head, and articulated precisely:

“Infantile paralysis. It's become serious in Pentabridge.”

She nodded and was about to walk on.

“But,” said Clare, detaining her boldly and speaking with the authority of her unhappiness, “what was she doing in Pentabridge? Why didn't she go home for the holidays?”

Miss Geary retreated to her plateau.

“I haven't the least idea,” she murmured, addressing someone, it seemed, invisible to Clare.

The term began; the girls came back, but not Clare's generation. The new Sixth Form seemed to her impossibly young, garrulous and stupid. She had not the patience to learn their slang or the intricacies of their internal relations. She constituted a form by herself and the others were slightly in awe of her. They left her alone.

The gap of the summer holiday and the substitution of a new Sixth Form for the familiar crowd with whom she had come up in the school put the previous summer term at a vastly greater distance from her than a mere eight weeks of calendar time. She looked at the few notes Anne Otterel had made for her at the end of the last term, looked at the programme of study they had fleetingly discussed, and the ideas and projects they represented seemed to her to belong to another life, as unassimilable with this as those distinct, isolated existences she had led in summer months in Spain long ago.

Miss Sperrod made spasmodic, bright pretences to plan Clare's studies, and Miss Geary, in a discursive way, took on the supervision of her French reading; but none of this carried conviction. The plain fact stared Clare bleakly in the face every time she sat down to her books, that there was no one at Paston Hall now who had the least conception of what was necessary for a scholarship examination. She had until the following Easter to find her own way about the ground to be covered for the syllabus, and she recognised that she was completely lost.

For a time she persisted, in a mechanical fashion, with the programme Miss Otterel had sketched out for her; but without Miss Otterel's presence and the stimulating desire to please her, she slipped little by little into reading only the things that immediately interested her, leaving the rest. By the end of the autumn term her reading was almost exclusively the English novelists and modern English and French poets. The French classical dramatists bored her, and the Latin she had to acquire baffled her. There had never been a Latin teacher at Paston Hall. Arrangements had been made for the very few girls who needed enough to scrape through the School Certificate examination to be coached by a mistress from Pentabridge High School, who came one or two evenings during the week in the terms when Miss Sperrod was entering a candidate. Clare had somehow managed to reach a pass standard two years before, but what she had learned then had since fled. She had secretly resolved to work her utmost with Miss Otterel: to learn the whole Latin Primer by heart, if need be; to read and translate ten verses of Vergil every day, to make the Odes of Horace her own. She looked at her books now and saw all the dreary, unrewarding grind she would have to undertake alone, and abandoned the project in despair.

It was in this mood of defeat that, one night late in the autumn term, she did something she had not done for four years. She crept down from her room after eleven o'clock, climbed out of the Prefects' Room window and prowled about the grounds for two or three hours. Once it had been an adventurous secret, closely

guarded among her gang of friends. In the Third Form they had discovered that it was easy to get out by this particular window. They had taken care to keep the catch oiled, and they had a route across the lawn outside which took them quickly out of sight from any windows of the school. About once a week they climbed out and picnicked in the small wood at the bottom of the grounds; the gardener's boy was suborned to bring them sausages and eggs and tea from Halliwell village, and they had found a place by the wall where they could make a fire without the slightest danger of its light being seen from the school. For four or five terms, summer and winter, the gang kept up the practice; then, at their metamorphosis into Middle−School girls, the adventure became insipid and a little ridiculous to them and they abandoned it. But their secret was never discovered and never disclosed to any of the juniors following them on through the school.

Clare reverted to it simply because the most urgent need in her life now was to get away from Paston Hall. Her longing to have a life of her own, a place of her own, some privacy and freshness, something untainted by school and Miss Sperrod's influence, had become intolerably strong. The bedroom, which, as Head−Girl, she had to herself, was her own, but it was too cramped; its scratched furniture, worn rug and pencilled woodwork were too recently inherited; they smelled of school. The grounds were spacious, but the pseudo−Gothic turrets and gables of Paston Hall dominated them, and on one side a high bounding wall, on the other a gaunt iron fence, laid hard emphasis on the limits of freedom. Clare remembered from Third Form days how night changed the world and how those who ranged it made their own laws. The night could be one's own place of privacy and freedom and freshness. The Prefects' Room window still opened as silently as ever; she had but to push the catch to roam a kingdom that might be boundless.

This night of the Christmas holidays was the seventh or eighth she had spent in ranging the grounds since she heard the news of Anne's death. She found the great−girthed beech−tree by the wall between whose roots they had been used to make their fire, and sitting there she thought that she began to see her school life in its true proportions. The greater part of her five years had been a drab waste. She excepted entirely from her school life those few holidays in Spain: they were glittering bits of another existence altogether, chipped off and dropped by accident on to this dun expanse, this desert of time which she could almost perceive with her senses as she could feel and smell the peculiar cold stale stuffiness of a winter class−room. The only fun and excitement in that time had been those nocturnal adventures in the Third Form. They were pitiful enough, but they had been real; the risks had been real, and so had been the goodness of the red firelight, the smell of the woodsmoke and the taste of the sausages and the strong sweet tea that the Australian girl, Pamela, made in an enamelled can. She remembered those picnics kindlily now because they were a real escape. The independence and the high adventurous life Anne Otterel had seemed to beckon her to, had proved in the end only a glamour and a deception.

She stood up, cramped and cold from long sitting on the roots of the beech−tree and, though weary of her own discouragement, she was still unwilling to go back, out of the kingdom of the night into the prison of her narrow room. She stroked the smooth bark of the tree and, groping behind, stretched across and found the wall with her fingertips.

It was a high brick wall, much older than the Victorian building of the school. Clare knew that it was the original bounding wall of the neighbouring property, an old house called Brackenbine, which she had never seen. Some people by the name of Sterne lived, or had lived there, and, if the gardener was to be believed, they owned Paston Hall, which had been built seventy years before on part of their estate outside their old park wall. A modernising Sterne had built it, the gardener said, because the old house was small and dark and damp—“all smothered with great old trees and so slumped into the side of yon old Akenshaw Hill that the rabbits can run over the roof,” he said. Clare knew, too, that the School had not long tenanted Paston Hall. She had heard Miss Geary mention the days when it was known as Paston House and occupied three villas in a North London suburb. She had never been interested enough to speculate why the Sternes had left the new house and returned to the old one. It occurred to her now, with her new appraisal of Miss Sperrod's object in keeping a school, that the Sternes must have become hard−up and been obliged to let the Hall. They must, she thought, have let it very cheaply.

The bricks she touched were not those of the wall itself, but of a buttress. Each course was set a little back from the one below to give the necessary inclination to the top of the wall, and thus, Clare remembered well, it formed a steep stairway for the toes, by which, and by propping oneself with one arm against the

beech−tree, the coping of the wall could be reached. They had done it often as Third−Formers, and sat astride the wall−top and looked into the gloom of the wood on the other side and talked about the house of Brackenbine which was hidden in it. Her toes seemed of their own will to find the first step on the buttress; she braced herself against the tree−trunk and in a few moments she had found a familiar hand−hold on a horizontal bough of the tree and had twisted herself on to the top of the wall. She settled herself there on the rounded coping; one leg in the school grounds, the other in Brackenbine wood.

It was pitch dark in the wood. A cold little wind crept through the bare trees and made a bough or two creak quietly. Clare pulled the belt of her coat tighter and blew into her gloved hands. In the old days there would have been a leaping of flames below, the crackling of dry twigs and a fine, bold sizzling of sausages, not this black loneliness of cold and the wandering of the uncomfortable wind. Clare groped with her toe for the foothold on the buttress in order to climb down again, but, as she half−turned, she saw a light among the trees of Brackenbine.

It was a little yellow spark of light, low down, near the ground. It went out a moment after Clare noticed it, but it was so odd that someone should be abroad in Brackenbine wood in the middle of a winter's night that Clare, secure in the darkness that mantled her, settled herself again on the wall−top and waited to see if it would reappear. It was not long before it winked again, and again it went out and quickly reappeared, as though someone were searching about among the trees with a lantern or a torch. The light seemed not to approach any nearer to the wall, but it winked and moved about quickly over a small area. It flitted so rapidly from side to side that Clare began to wonder whether it could be a lantern after all; doubtfully, she turned over the possibility that it was a will−o'−the−wisp. Then she saw the explanation: there was not one light but several; two or three shone for an instant together.

They were such tiny points of light, weaving so mazily in and out of the tree−trunks, that had Clare been in Spain she would have put them down as fireflies. She stared so hard that after a time she could not be sure how near or far they were from her; they might have been a number of lanterns far away, except that she had seen by daylight how thick Brackenbine wood was and knew that she would not see an ordinary lantern at all if it were any great distance from the wall. It seemed to her, all the same, that one of the lights was more powerful than the others; it gave a broader and more diffused glow, and suddenly, in some alarm, she realised that it was much nearer to the wall than she had thought, for she caught a glimpse of twigs and dead leaves faintly lit by it for a moment.

Cautiously she drew up her legs and slowly got to her feet on the wall−top in order to descend the buttress on her own side, but as she steadied herself against the beech−tree bough she put her weight on a thin dead branch which snapped with a loud crack. She lurched and clutched again at the bough, but the mortar of the old rounded coping−stone under her feet had all perished; the stone rocked and gave way, and though her hold on the bough saved her from pitching headlong down, her feet followed the stone and she swung helplessly over the Brackenbine side of the wall. Careless of the noise she made now, she tried to heave herself up again, but before she could find a foothold someone rushed over the dead leaves below, and a pair of arms winding swiftly round her waist plucked her from her hold and she was pressed down on her back into a bed of damp leaves and crackling, rotten twigs.

She had scarcely found breath to give a shout before her assailant's grip was relaxed and his weight lifted from her. Two hands under her shoulders lifted her to a sitting position and then one passed briefly over her head and face.

She heard a deep intake of breath and then an awkward little laugh.

“By Artemis!” a man's voice exclaimed softly. “A lady nighthawk! Has Diana turned bat−fowler, or are you simply Halliwell's first female poacher? I'll have you know, on the one supposition, that bats are sadly out of season; and, on the other, that there hasn't been a bird bagged at Brackenbine since my great−uncle Jabez blew a stuffed one out of the Bishop's wife's hat on the morning after the relief of Mafeking. Hoosh! Grim, sheathe your claws! This is *my* mouse!”

Clare, too breathless and astounded still for speech, tried to wriggle away from a set of small claws which had hooked themselves in her collar and a little rough tongue which was rasping determinedly at her neck. The man recovered his breath while still speaking; his voice was soft and bantering, but he held Clare down with a firm hand on her shoulder when she tried to rise.

"Not so fast!" he said. "Who are you, and what are you doing? Were you climbing in or out?"

Clare found her tongue. He had held her and talked just long enough for her first alarm to quieten; his voice was educated and young, and he sounded amused. He must, she guessed, as she gathered her wits, be one of the Sterne family. The fall on the dead leaves had not hurt her, and her indignation at his rough handling vanished with her physical fear; but it was followed by a more acute embarrassment and alarm of a different kind at being caught in such an escapade by someone who probably knew Miss Sperrod.

"I wasn't doing anything," she said, in a voice that seemed to her own ear to speak directly out of Third−Form days. "I was trying to get back when you pulled me down."

"I'll be bound you were! Why were you on our wall at all at this hour of the night, I'd like to know? If Miss Spoil−the−Child approves of these nocturnal exercises she should have warned us to expect an occasional—what shall I say?—involuntary invasion?"

"Spoil−the−Child?" Clare repeated, uncomprehending, and then, forgetting how foolish she felt, she laughed. "That's one we never thought of!" She paused and became uncomfortably aware again that the man's hand was still on her shoulder. "Well," she said, very awkwardly, "you know where I come from. Will you please let me get up? I have to get back."

"By cock−crow, you would imply?"

"No, before the housekeeper gets up," Clare answered simply.

"Hm! If you hadn't scrabbled among those branches like a porcupine in a laundry−basket and plumped some−, thing solidly on to these dead leaves here, I might think" you a being less substantial than you claim to be. I'm only half convinced that you are one of Spare−the−Rod's little lodgers, for I've never known one before that had the nerve to prowl about the borders of Brackenbine by night. Besides, the place is closed for the holidays."

There was so sharp a note of suspicion in the last words, that an anxious and disarming explanation tumbled at once from Clare's lips.

"I see," he said slowly. "But I'm still not convinced. A sprite so shrewd as to take on the form of a schoolgirl would be sure to have an explanation for everything. I think I had better make sure of you by tracing a circle about you and reciting certain words of power to bind a spirit."

He released her and she heard the dead leaves rustling a short way off. She scrambled to her feet and groped to find the wall.

"Don't run away," said the man quietly. "I speak to the corporeal casing you may, or may not, have borrowed," he went on. "You can't climb the wall on this side. And it's devilish dark in the wood. Whether that body is your own or not it won't thank you for a pair of barked shins and a broken nose."

Clare stood bewildered. She had no idea of the layout of Brackenbine grounds; she knew only that the wood was wild and tangled and that, as he said, the wall was smooth and unclimbable on that side. She heard a slight metallic scraping and then found herself looking into the little yellow−lit window of an old−fashioned dark−lantern. The light moved regularly up and down and then proceeded slowly to circle her, while, with solemn and sonorous emphasis the man, whom she could not see in the dark behind the lantern, recited a litany of jargon. Clare saw her own form in the lantern−light and shrank, as she pivoted slowly with the circling flame, to think that the unseen eyes were examining her.

The circle was completed; the lantern was lowered to the ground, and Clare gave a sudden loud gasp of fright: two green eyes shone out at her from the shadow where the feeble rays failed. The man shifted the lantern slightly and revealed an enormous black cat sitting with upturned face, steadily regarding her. She had forgotten the small paws that pounced on her when she was thrown down on the leaves.

"Grim," said the man, not addressing the cat, but introducing him. "Short for Grimalkin. He told me someone was about before you snapped that branch off."

The man stood, entirely concealed in the dark and was silent for so long that Clare twisted her hands uneasily together, more puzzled, perhaps, than nervous, but wishing more and more to escape, while too acutely conscious of looking silly to make a dash into the wood. So she stood, as though the circle he had jokingly traced had indeed bound her to the spot.

"Well," he said at length, "I do appreciate your anxiety to be off, and though there's a great deal I should like *to* ask you still, I won't take the risk of Spare−the−Rod's not doing so—metaphorically, of course. So,

night−wandering sprite, I command you, or schoolgirl, I invite you, to return whence you came. Whichever you are you cannot choose but obey now the spell is cast.”

A momentarily−seen black shadow, he crossed the lantern's ray, bent down near the wall so that she could just make out his dark head, with face averted, and his two hands, with fingers interlocking, making a step for her to mount.

The unexpectedness and decisiveness of his act kept Clare rooted where she stood. Then he spoke, and she started, hurried to the wall, put her foot in the stirrup his hands made, and scrambled, careless of inelegance, to the top of the wall.

There, when she had twisted round and found the buttress with her toe, she regained self−possession enough to pause and say “Thank−you", but he had shut off the light and retreated into the black wood.

She lowered herself until her head was below the coping, and then, being back in the School territory, a frank, schoolgirl concern came to the surface of her feelings.

“I say,” she called over the wall. “You won't tell, will you?”

She listened, but there was no reply; only the quiet creaking of the boughs in the cold wind.

2

It wanted three days to Christmas. Miss Sperrod came looking for Clare in the Prefects' Room and found her sitting in the window−seat with her head against the rain−beaded glass, staring out at the sodden lawn to where the bare poles of coppice trees seemed to hold up a thick soft fabric of mist to veil the school wall. It was only when the Principal spoke that Clare turned her head and got reluctantly to her feet. Even then she was not clearly aware what Miss Sperrod was saying; she saw that she had a sheet of blue notepaper in her hand and realised that she was offering some confused explanations; her habitual note of over−emphasis which seemed always to anticipate objection was more than usually pronounced. “I really can't go myself,” the Principal was saying. “Quite some time ago I arranged to go to town for Christmas. Quite some time ago; and I really must go up on Christmas Eve. It is most awfully kind of Mrs. Sterne and I feel quite distressed that it's fallen out so awkwardly. I wouldn't wish to give her the slightest cause for offence. I shall write and tell her how terribly sorry I am that I can't alter my own arrangements now. I'm sure she'll understand. And I shall tell her that Miss Geary and you will be delighted to accept. It really is unfortunate that she didn't give me a little more warning. She didn't invite us last Christmas, or I would have waited before making my arrangements with my brother. But Miss Geary will represent me, and you, Clare, will have to represent the Prefect Body. Of course, Mrs. Sterne doesn't expect there to be many senior girls at school for the holidays.”

“Is it an invitation?” Clare asked.

“Have I not made myself clear?” said the Principal. She looked at the sheet of notepaper again. “Mrs. Sterne says she would be very pleased if I and any of the assistant mistresses and senior girls who are staying in school for Christmas will give her the pleasure of taking tea with her on Christmas Eve.”

“Mrs. Sterne,” Clare repeated with such an air of vagueness that the Principal spoke sharply.

.”Mrs. Sterne, of Brackenbine. She has been very helpful in several ways. She is interested in the school and it is very proper that the school should pay her the courtesy of accepting her invitation. I'm only sorry that there are so few people here. But Matron and Miss Finch will be required to stay in school to look after the juniors and that only leaves Miss Geary. You must be there quite punctually at half−past four.”

“I've never been to Brackenbine,” said Clare.

“It's perfectly proper for you to go with Miss Geary,” replied the Principal. “Miss Geary knows the family. It will be a very nice change for you, Clare, and I hope you will give Mrs. Sterne an interesting account of the work you are doing for the Oxford Scholarship.”

At luncheon Clare found that Miss Geary had received news of the invitation and welcomed it with scarcely restrained jubilation. Only then, seeing what pleasure the prospect of a little change gave her, did Clare realise what a dull, restricted life the old lady must lead. It was well known to all the girls that Miss Geary had no other home than Paston Hall, but that had never seemed strange to them; they were observant of her eccentricities, but, childlike, they had no comprehension of her circumstances, or sympathy for her loneliness and her difficulties. Clare understood now that Miss Geary was quite alone in the world and probably very poor; she could guess that the school paid her next to nothing and that she would probably never get another post if she left Paston Hall. Now she shared her excitement over Mrs. Sterne's invitation and experienced a gush of remorse for many childish mockings and mimickings.

“I think it's really kind of Mrs. Sterne,” Miss Geary said. “She must have spent a Christmas holiday at school herself, once.”

“I'm surprised I'm allowed to go,” Clare said. She looked at Miss Geary boldly, but the old lady seemed only mildly shocked at the implied rebellion against the customary controls.

“My dear,” she said, “if Mrs. Sterne invites you, that's quite different. Your parents couldn't possibly object to your visiting there. You see, the Sternes are a very old family, and then, you see, they *own* Paston Hall. It was only because Mr Arthur Sperrod knew old Mr Sterne that the Governors were able to take the Hall, and we are very lucky indeed to have such a delightful place.”

“*Old* Mr Sterne?” Clare asked, wonderingly.

“Yes, that was Mr Jabez Sterne. He was Mr Andrew Sterne's uncle and he died about nine years ago, soon

after we came here. He was rather a queer old gentleman, I believe."

"I'm getting muddled," said Clare. "Who is Mr Andrew Sterne? Is he a young man?"

"Oh no! Mr Andrew was Mrs. Sterne's husband. He died a long time ago, before his uncle. Then the estate came to his widow. She was a Trethewy, from Cornwall. Some cousins of mine knew her. But she was related to the Sternes by blood, also. I think I've heard them say that she married her second cousin."

"Who else lives with her?"

"Well," Miss Geary hesitated, "I'm afraid I don't really know. I believe there is some family, or at least one son. But I've never met any of them but Rachel— that's Mrs. Sterne. I knew her, oh! ages ago, before she married. I didn't see her again until old Mr Sterne died after we came here. You see, she's lived nearly all her time abroad till recently."

"But you've been to Brackenbine?" Clare asked.

The old lady looked at her, and seemed to study the question for a while.

"Yes," she said at length, "I've been invited there before. Some of the other teachers, too. But I haven't been since last summer."

Clare was too busy wondering how to elicit the particular information she wanted, to pay much attention to the slight embarrassment with which Miss Geary spoke.

"Will there be many people there?" she asked. "I mean, has Mrs. Sterne got people staying with her for Christmas, perhaps?"

"I don't know. I don't know that anybody's heard. I don't think anybody's been there since—well, since last summer. But I think I shall enjoy it better if there isn't a big party. We shall be able to have a much nicer talk. Rachel's very interesting." Miss Geary mused for a while, looking at Clare, but obviously contemplating someone very different and much further away from her. "She's been able to do the things she wanted, you see," she went on. "She's been able to carry on with her painting and become really good. She went to Paris and Rome. I was sketching in Cornwall when I first met her."

The rain ceased before Christmas Eve, and in doing so solved Miss Geary's major problem, which had been how to get to Brackenbine if the weather should be wet. The question whether it would be permissible to order a taxi from Pentabridge to go so short a distance had plunged her into agonies of indecision. Clare herself was not free from some anxiety about the invitation. It was not expected that girls would go to parties or even pay visits outside the school in term−time, and the assumption was that those who stayed at school for the holidays were subject to the same restriction. Besides her school uniform, therefore, Clare's outfit contained nothing but one dark−blue velveteen frock, cut to the general directions laid down by Miss Sperrod for the Senior School's evening dress. She spread her frock out on her bed in the daylight after luncheon on Christmas Eve and dwelt on the signs of age and use it exhibited; she put it on and stood in front of her inadequate looking−glass and brooded helplessly on the fact that she had grown out of it. It was a very good frock, but it had been bought for her the last time her mother was in England nearly two years before, and the hem and cuffs had been let down already to their limit.

She wished she knew whether it was going to be a big party at the Sternes'. If it were only a small family affair she would be conspicuous; but if it were a big party there would be other girls, in pretty frocks. The thing began to seem such an ordeal to her that for a time she debated whether to go to Miss Geary and ask the old lady to leave her behind. Miss Sperrod had already gone to London; Miss Geary might be persuaded. It would be the easier way. She did not think that she had the courage now, when it came to the point, to take the risk of the young man's being at the tea−party. She had deliberately made herself put it no higher than that: a risk that he might be there.

She stood and looked closely into her mirror. Had she been pretty, she thought, she might have carried off her dowdy frock. She imagined how one or two of the senior girls of the last year would have managed the affair, and frankly admitted to herself now, in the time of need, how much she had envied their good looks and self−assurance. She tried to look at her own face objectively: her brown hair was straight and without lustre; her brow and chin were too square, and her eyes, which she called grey, were called green in the school. It seemed a very solemn, scared face in this dusky light of a winter afternoon. Clare counted its sole merit a good complexion; yet there was something there that only experience could have interpreted for her. The steady stare of those greenish eyes, and the straight, sure lines of mouth and chin, might have suggested

to another observer that under her adolescent diffidence there was both mental and physical courage—a certain adventurousness of mind and a hardihood that circumstances might cause to be labeled either an obstinate defiance of authority or an admirable independence of character.

Clare had only so far discovered in herself a capacity for revolt; to shirk the consequences of her midnight encounter seemed to her in the end to be a denial of the Tightness of revolt against Paston Hall, and that she would not admit. By the time Miss Geary was ready to go Clare had managed to subordinate most of her misgivings to the necessity of completing her adventure.

The sun set on a day of dry cold, and before the red light had faded behind the woods the puddles in the gravel paths were filming over with ice. Well muffled−up, Miss Geary and Clare set out on foot. They turned left outside the school gates and in a few yards had entered territory that was entirely unknown to Clare. Pentabridge lay in the other direction, and the lane to Halliwell turned off the Pentabridge road a little before the school fence was reached. On fine Sunday mornings in term−time a 'crocodile' dragged its way to church along that lane, and that was the limit of topographical knowledge of the district that any Paston Hall girl was allowed to gain. In the other direction the road bent round the slope of Akenshaw Hall, with the shape and colours of whose wooded height Clare was familiar enough through five years of looking on it in sun and cloud from the school grounds. Sometimes, as a junior, she had let her eye trace possible pathways to its top, but dreamily, as she might have climbed in fancy the steeps of Ruwenzori pictured in a travel−book. The same high brick wall that divided the school grounds from Brackenbine bounded the road on their left hand, and it was only now that Clare realised that it went so far. Akenshaw Hill was a rough cone, standing in isolation from the broken chain of high ground that ran westwards from Pentabridge, and it seemed to Clare, as they walked on, with the road curving steadily away to the left, that the wall must girdle the whole hill.

The evening sky gave yet light enough to see the contrast between the fugitive greys and browns of the oak−wood which clothed all Akenshaw Hill and the solid black−green of the fir and pine plantations which stretched away in a broad sweep to the horizon on the other side of the road. The hill stood like an island in a dark sea; the dark red wall was its rampart cliff, and somewhere among its rocks and groves stood a house that one of its inhabitants, at least, could pretend was an enchanter's castle.

Clare heard Miss Geary's voice telling her about Mrs. Sterne, but she was listening to another voice reciting solemn nonsense, and she was watching again, three−parts serious in a game of make−believe, a dim lantern that drew a magic circle to prove that the other side of Brackenbine wall was indeed a world away from Paston Hall.

The entrance to Brackenbine was a pair of wrought−iron gates between sandstone pillars standing flush with the brick wall. Beyond them the wall went on, curving round to complete its circuit of the hill. The gates stood a little ajar, and Miss Geary, fumbling to draw her electric torch from her pocket, sidled through. Clare paused to cast one last glance round, at the band of wan light separating the deepening sky from the dark coniferous plantations, at the dusky web of bare boughs spreading out over her head from the park within, and at the pale ribbon of the lonely, houseless lane bending onwards out of sight into the gloom.

It was quite dark inside the park, for the trees arched over the drive and on each hand there was a tall undergrowth of laurel and rhododendron. Miss Geary's torch threw a little pool of light which enabled them to pick their way along the ruts and over the half−frozen puddles. Sheltered though they were from the breeze, Clare felt colder here than in the lane outside; they went more slowly, up and down, across the slope of the hill, following something more like a cart−track than the approach to a gentleman's house.

It seemed to Clare they must have gone winding about nearly a mile through the wood from the gate, before they reached the house, and then, suddenly, they were at the door almost as soon as they caught the first gleam of its lighted windows through the trees.

Clare had scarcely known what to expect; the descriptions she had heard from the Paston Hall gardener and Miss Geary were so mixed up with fancies started by her encounter with the young man in the wood. But she had imagined something nearer to her conception of an old manor−house, something, however much decayed, more dignified and extensive than this. For an instant, as they stepped straight from the bushes to the front door, she thought that this could not be the house, but only a lodge or keeper's cottage. Then Miss Geary crossed unhesitatingly the single stone step, pushed the half−open door and entered a little lamp−lit hall.

Firelight and lamplight and a broad warmth poured on them from a wide−open door within the hall, and

while they were still busied with their coats and goloshes, a soft, clear welcoming voice wished them a Merry Christmas. From where she stood just inside the outer door, Clare looked through the inner one, straight across to a huge open fireplace full of flames from a log fire. She saw Mrs. Sterne crossing the room to greet them, gliding towards them with that red and yellow thicket of flame behind her, wearing a dress of golden−coloured satin that shimmered and glowed as though it were a thing of fire itself.

From that first glimpse of their hostess Clare was captivated. Surprise contributed to the extraordinary attraction she instantly felt. For some reason, perhaps nothing sounder than her friends' baseless conjectures in the Third Form, she had never questioned that Mrs. Sterne was an old woman—as old as Miss Geary, and she still could not quite believe that this was *the* Mrs. Sterne, the old friend and contemporary of Miss Geary. This woman seemed only half Miss Geary's age; her fine, small face was unwrinkled, her hair was jet black and her large, dark eyes were brilliant. But Miss Geary greeted her as 'Rachel' and laughed and expanded in the warmth of meeting and put on an ease and confidence of manner that Clare had never seen in her before.

The conversation that Mrs. Sterne and Miss Geary fell into, immediately after the exchange of greetings and Clare's introduction, was about persons she had never heard of, and so, being freed from taking a part in it she gave all her attention to the room into which Mrs. Sterne led them. She was aware at once of a contradiction to her first impression of the house: it was a big room, the very sort of spacious, panelled drawing−room that she would have expected to find in an old country manor−house. There were two oil−lamps with yellow silk shades, but the fire gave more light than they, and painted the room with a rich pattern of golden and ruddy lights; yet it was so long that neither lamp nor firelight could fully illuminate its depth, but only pick out, here and there on the end wall the gilt of a picture−frame or a gleam of polished moulding on the paneling, and these few highlights in the brown dusk created an illusion of vaster depths beyond. Its spaciousness was far different from the drab and draughty width of the greater rooms of Paston Hall; there were no hard surfaces here, but a soft mingling of tones of brown and gold—the tawny carpet, the dull−gold curtains, the velvet and leather of the armchairs and the dark old woodwork all harmonising like the colours of an autumn wood, enriched by the warm firelight as by the light of the setting sun.

This Christmas Eve the woods in fact contributed to the room's decoration: round the fireplace there was a great arc of interwined fir and holly branches, and dull red sparks of holly berries glowed from sheaves of evergreens in vases about the room, while between the two long windows on the side opposite the fireplace stood the biggest Christmas−tree that Clare had ever seen. It was a ten−foot−high spruce planted in a great wooden tub, and wax candles, not yet lit, stood on its boughs as thickly as blossom candles on a noble chestnut−tree in June.

Mrs. Sterne had drawn them to the hearth, where a low table covered with a white cloth stood before the fire, and Clare had scarcely done taking in the room when a man's voice, accompanied by much rattling of crockery, sounded cheerily from the little hall, and very unsteadily, bearing an enormous brass tray loaded with tea−things, there came in the young man who had captured Clare by the wall. Even without the big black cat that bounced into the room behind him, even had he not raised his unmistakable, clear and bantering voice, she would have known him by his dark head and long, brown hands. For all her previous guess at her captor's identity and her attempts to prepare herself to meet him in the light, her self−possession forsook her and, as she rose, she moved near to Miss Geary's chair and looked down at her shoes.

“Niall!” exclaimed Mrs. Sterne with a soft gasp. “How like a man to crowd everything on the tray at once! And what a tray!”

“What's wrong with the tray?” demanded the young man, lowering it to the table, which it entirely covered. “I thought our guests worthy of the lordliest dish we've got, and Rajas may have eaten their rice off that!” He straightened up and with a whisking movement removed from his waist a little parlour−maid's apron which he rolled into a ball and tossed behind a chair.

“My son,” said Mrs. Sterne; and he bent with a foreign air that had nothing mocking in it as he took Miss Geary's hand. He turned then more slowly to Clare, and took her hand in a firm, short clasp as Miss Geary introduced her. He smiled gaily, but without the slightest sign of recognition when she looked up and met his eyes for a second with her own grave, appealing gaze.

Then, while his mother poured the tea, without interrupting his flow of light chatter about their lack of servants, he began to hand cups and plates and sandwiches.

As she observed him in covert snatches, for Clare was now drawn to Mrs. Sterne's side and plied with questions about her school life which it required some diplomacy to answer in Miss Geary's presence, Niall Sterne appeared to be about twenty−five years of age: at least, Clare told herself, puzzled by yet another seeming contradiction, he could be no more than that, because his mother was so young. Had she not seen his mother she would have guessed that he was thirty−five. He was very like her, with the same black hair and dark, brilliant eyes; yet there was something in his face that made him seem really the older of the two. Whereas her complexion was as soft, and the contours of her face as smooth and full as a girl's, some severe macerating process of time or sickness had removed all the youthful softness from his, and stretched the brown skin with a kind of lean economy over the essential bone and muscle. Clare felt that if she could have seen his features when he was not being consciously gay and amiable, when the light of his quick smile was put out, none of his mother's winning charm would remain. He seemed to her to wear this cheerfulness like a mask, while his natural expression would be one of melancholy and ascetic seriousness.

Very soon he had drawn Clare, first into helping him with the sandwiches and cake and mince−pies, and then, with a sly grin at the subtlety of his abdication, into taking sole charge of the service. “You do it with so much more natural address,” he said in a courtly fashion; then added in a loud aside on a wholly natural tone of regret, “Pity you can't stay for the washing−up!”

By−and−by, while Mrs. Sterne and Miss Geary talked painters and the latest exhibitions, Clare found herself sitting on a large leather cushion, looking into the blazing logs and talking quietly and privately to Niall as he lolled in one of the deep armchairs with his feet stretched to the hearthstone and Grim, the cat, on his shins.

Clare was amazed at the ease with which she could take her cue from him and copy his mild duplicity in pretending this was the first time they had met. Gradually, however, in that atmosphere of ease and friendly understanding which was so new and stimulating to her, she felt no more embarrassment at remembering her first meeting with him. Here, indeed, might be the meaning of the magic circle he had drawn about her—the circle of fire−lit ease and friendship, the talk, the quick understanding, the mirth and the arrowlike flight of ideas, a whole new, exciting and satisfying world of the heart and the head contained in one room, and such a world as she had once dreamed might have been her own, at Oxford. She talked now about her work for the scholarship, and from giving Niall a flat outline of her programme passed, under the influence of his questions, to argument and discussion, and, to her own wonder, found interest and ambition starting to life again. Niall had not been to the University; he had not even been regularly to school—his education had been a roving one—but he had read everything: the literature she in her despondency had abandoned for dead was as lively and as fresh as a summer woodland to him. While he talked she saw again that the vision Anne Otterel had shown her was not an illusion; this was what reading with Anne could have been like, and Paston Hall could have been the antechamber to rooms at Oxford. She felt the injustice of death and the irretrievable loss of wasted days more bitterly now than at any time since she first heard that Anne was dead.

She did not mention Anne Otterel to Niall. She said only, with resignation, that she had no hope; there was no one to help her at Paston Hall. They could not, or would not, even provide all the proper books.

“If it's only books...” said Niall, glancing at the tightly packed shelves about the room. “Let me see your syllabus. I shall be surprised if we can't raise what you're lacking.”

Clare shook her head. “It's not much use. There's so little time left now. And even if I felt sure of the French, there's the Latin. That alone will wreck my chances. It's not much in the Exam. Just two Unseens. But I've let it go. I don't seem to be able to grasp it at all by myself, from books.”

“Latin?” he exclaimed. “Why, you want my mother for that. Her father was a noted philologue of the old school. She'll discourse you Latin like Queen Elizabeth putting the Pope right on communion in two kinds. I say, Mother....”

But Mrs. Sterne spoke to him at the very instant when he called to her. Miss Geary was saying that it was getting quite late and they had a long walk back.

“But you must see the Tree lit up!” said Mrs. Sterne. “Niall, we've forgotten the Tree.”

“Oh no, I haven't!” replied Niall, jumping up. “I was just waiting for the signal. Come on, Clare, help me to light the candles!”

He gave her a box of matches and set her to lighting all the lower ones, while he fixed a taper in the end of

a split willow−wand and lit the upper ones with as solemn and reverent a care as a priest at the high altar. For the second time Clare witnessed him performing a rite: there was something in his manner she understood very well, though she had only known the thing herself for a very brief period in her life: it was the fun of pretending to believe in magic, of pretending to find a way by ceremonies from everyday things to a world of shadows and strange powers. Softly, so that none but she could hear, as he lit his candles he recited some such abracadabra as he had chanted when he drew his magic circle in the wood.

He was so deliberate that Clare had lit all the candles she could reach before he had finished the higher ones. She stepped back and looked up. The tree had no conventional decorations except the candles, but holly berries were strung about it on invisible threads so that in the increasing shine of the candles they seemed to hang from the tips of the branches like drops of bright blood. Her eye travelled to the tree−top, and now that it was so brightly lit she saw that there was one other decoration. Not at the apex, where people might have put a star or an angel, or a fairy, but below the leading shoot there was tied a little figure: a doll with long fair hair, dressed in a green gown. It was fixed standing upright against the stem of the tree, ill−placed for a decoration, and when Niall lit the remaining candles that stood in front of it, she could no longer see it across their bright points of flame.

The tree was a pyramid of lights, but not at all Clare's idea of a Christmas−tree, which ought to be loaded with glittering balls of glass and draped with tinsel; yet it was odder still, on an unconventional tree, to put just one doll. She would have liked to ask why, but the question would have seemed disparaging.

Niall blew out his taper: then, crossing the room, he turned out the two oil−lamps. The fifty or sixty little candles on the tree illuminated the room far more brightly than the combined lamplight and firelight had done. Both Clare and Miss Geary looked wonderingly about them.

“It's a beautiful room,” said Miss Geary, meditatively. “One would not imagine, from the outside...”

“I know,” Niall interrupted her. “You mean it's too ambitious for so small a cottage. Rum, isn't it? The place is out of proportion.”

“It's not a big house, then?” Clare asked him.

“Very small, really. I mean, for what the builder presumably intended it to be. There's only one other room downstairs besides this: the little parlour across the hall that we use for our dining−room. Come, I'll show you! Never mind,” he added to Miss Geary, “don't hurry off. I'll convoy you back to your gate.”

They moved out into the little hall, which was no more, in fact, than a short, flagged passage from which two other doors led off and which ended in a staircase, mounting steeply and turning at a small landing.

Niall picked up a lamp and opened one of the doors to show them the little parlour: a cottage room with white−plastered walls above a low wainscot, furnished with an unstained oak table and chairs and an old−fashioned, high sideboard. The stone flags of the floor were uncovered except for a skin rug before the open hearth.

“The other door goes to the kitchen and usual offices,” Niall explained. “And that's really all there is downstairs.”

“It seems a very old house,” Clare said. “I suppose it's much older than Paston Hall?”

“About a hundred and fifty years older,” said Niall. “This,” he went on with mock sententiousness, “is the original manor of Brackenbine, the seat of the Trethewys. Paston Hall represents the debased taste and distorted values of a mid−Victorian Sterne suffering under the influence of low taxation, the New Plumbing, and Sir Gilbert Scott.”

“I wouldn't call our plumbing very new,” murmured Clare. “It's prehistoric.”

“Well, there isn't any at all here,” said Niall, complacently. “That simplifies matters in a hard winter. All I have to do is to fit the pump with a straw overcoat. But it's also one reason why we can't keep a servant.”

“You had a girl in the summer, though, hadn't you?” Miss Geary asked Mrs. Sterne. “I thought she seemed a nice girl.”

“I must keep an eye on the candles,” said Mrs. Sterne abruptly, turning back into the drawing−room. Miss Geary followed her.

“Yes, do,” remarked Niall. “The old place is three−parts timber,” he explained to Clare. “It would burn like a match factory.”

Clare heard Mrs. Sterne replying to Miss Geary's question about the servant: “Ah yes, Janet. She was a

good girl, poor thing. She really did look as if she was going to stay and then she took her holiday last July... stayed with her aunt in Pentabridge....” Mrs. Sterne's voice became indistinct as she moved further into the room, and Clare caught only another phrase or two: ”... put into hospital... just the height of the epidemic... died in a few days.”

“There!” exclaimed Niall, lifting the lamp high and approaching the end of the passage where a roughly−squared black beam stretched across, supporting the wall above the stairway opening, “there you see the Builder, his Mark!”

He held the lamp close, and in a plain shield deeply carved in the wood of the beam Clare read the initials 'I.T.' She repeated them.

“Yes,” said Niall. “'I' for John, the Waterman. John Trethewy, that stands for. Captain John Trethewy, I should say.”

“Was he your ancestor?”

Niall seated himself on a big oak chest that stood at the foot of the stairs. “Sit down here and I'll tell you about him,” he said. “My mother's started another gossip with your teacher, so there's no hurry.” He dropped his voice, giving her a rapid smile as she sat down beside him: “The sprite may want to flit off like a bat, but the schoolgirl must wait on her mistress!” And, before she could consider whether to respond to his sudden acknowledgment of their conspiracy, he had resumed in his former tone:

“Captain John Trethewy is the earliest ancestor we can trace with any certainty. He was the son of a respectable apothecary of Truro. At least, I say so. My mother says I've invented that bit. But anyway, John was put to study medicine, and his father appears to have had a share in a merchant ship, so I argue that he was a man of some substance and it is probable that he apprenticed little John to his own trade.

“But John had an itch to roam. He went to sea, perhaps in the ship his father had a share in, perhaps in one of Old Noll's—we don't know. But he does speak of Blake's bombardment of Algiers as if he had actually been there, so I think it probable that he shipped as a naval surgeon.”

“Speak?” Clare asked. “Did he write a book?”

“Well, if you can call it a book. Jottings, rather. Observations on divers curiosities of Nature collected in the course of sundry navigations; all written in most chirurgeonly Latin.

“We don't quite know how he fared at the Restoration,” Niall continued. “But some time later he appears to be voyaging prosperously out of Bristol to the Gulf of Guinea and from there to the American Plantations with slaves; there are some hints also that he cruised the Caribbean for a time, less respectably—though there again, my mother would say that's my romantic fancy. In any case, he conducted his navigations with prudence and was able to put away a considerable number of pieces of eight in his old oak chest—perhaps this one—until the day when he fell foul of the Sallee Rovers. Making for Guinea, he is boarded by a galley off the coast of Barbary, and then, as he pathetically notes, bereft of all but his breeches he is sold to a most miserable slavery, southwards from Same.”

“Well, he had sold the poor negroes in America,” Clare said.

“Yes,” agreed Niall, “and in his wretched state of bondage it was some consolation to him to know that the profits of those transactions were safely enchested in Truro. However, reading between the lines, I divine that his slavery was not so harsh as you might think. It seems that he was bought by a powerful noble, a Kaid, as he calls him, of those parts, and carried off to his castle in the mountains. There, by and by, he finds occasion to demonstrate his art as a surgeon, and from that day he advances steadily to a great degree of favour. From the liberty he was allowed I suspect that the old fellow—though, of course, he wasn't so old then—must have satisfied the formal requirements of Islam and become a True−Believer; though he is naturally reticent about that in his notes. The fact is, however, that he was able to travel freely about over a large part of Morocco, and when he finally made up his mind to escape, he not only found the facilities to do so, but he left Barbary with considerably more than he took into it. There is a passage which can only mean that he sailed away in a boat of his own, manned by Christian slaves whom he had somehow or other managed to release. “Still, his experience seems to have cured him of his desire to rove. Sometime before the Glorious Revolution he bought this estate of Brackenbine and settled down to live as a country gentleman; his old father presumably by this time *obiit.*”

“He must have been quite wealthy, then?” Clare asked.

"Well enough off," agreed Niall. "But the interesting thing is that you can deduce that the old chap had ideas larger than his fortune. You'd have expected that after his hard life he would have wanted a comfortable little estate in his native country—just a small place where he could browse about among his herbs and botanise in the hedgerows. But instead of that he comes out here, a long way from Cornwall, in a district that was pretty lonely and wild at that time of day, buys a large tract of woodland with old Akenshaw Hill in the middle of it, and blows the major portion of his hard−earned coin on building miles and miles of high brick wall all round his property. We know he built the wall first, and we know what an expense it was and how he worried over it until he got it finished. That, to my mind, is the reason for the odd disproportion of this house. He had planned a spacious mansion, but the wall took all his money—or far more than he had estimated—so he is forced to compromise with a cottage, but he won't abandon his plan altogether, so he builds one room in his cottage to the proportion of the house he would have put up if the money had stretched so far."

Niall paused and looked at Clare, musing for a few moments. "A deer−park wall was a normal thing, I suppose," he said. "But it sometimes seems to me when I look at this one that old Captain Trethewy must have gone a bit queer through his Moroccan years. There's a touch of Kubla Khan about this one—

'So twice five miles of fertile ground,
With walls and towers were girdled round...'

Though it isn't ten miles, of course; and as for fertility, well, the oaks do well enough: little else has ever been tried. I think he must have brought back Moorish ideas of privacy. There couldn't have been many inhabitants in this district then, but what few there were he didn't want poking their noses into his business."

"What was his business?" Clare asked. "Did he still do something?"

"Well," Niall hesitated. "He turned gardener—botanist of a sort. He had collected a good number of exotic plants in his voyages. He tried to acclimatise them, and, also, he was trying some interesting tricks with the growth of plants—something like the Japanese art of growing dwarf pines and oaks, though I don't suppose he ever got as far afield as Japan. Perhaps it was something he had seen in Morocco. He seems to have had a theory that these very small trees could resist natural decay and live for ever. It might be—though it's just a guess—it might be that he planned to plant all his estate with a miniature forest, and for that reason he was so intent on getting his wall built, to protect his little trees. The interesting thing about that is that he may be right."

"Right?" Clare repeated, not quite understanding.

"About the life of his little trees, I mean," Niall replied.

"Why? Did he manage to make them grow?"

"Yes," said Niall. "Yes, he did. Some of them are still growing. I'll show you them when you come again, in the daylight."

Clare gave him a startled look. "Oh, I don't think..." she began, but he interrupted her, jumping up from the chest.

"Oh, I say, Miss Geary's really bent on going and I haven't shown you the rest of the house yet. Come on, you can see it in a couple of minutes while she's getting her goloshes on!"

He seized the lamp, and without giving Clare time to object began to mount the stairs. She rose, looked to the drawing−room door, and hesitated. Then he called to her from the landing and she ran up the first flight of stairs to join him.

The stair twisted awkwardly between half−timbered walls. Niall climbed ahead and called a warning to Clare to mind her head as he gained the top landing.

"Coming up here always makes me feel a bit like a mouse living in a hollow tree," he said. "My Great−Uncle Jabez in his latter days refused to climb the stairs at all. He slept in the parlour. It was really because he was stiff and rheumaticky, but he used to tell me that it was because he was going up one night when he met the Captain's ghost coming down and the Captain refused to go back, so, not liking to walk through him—seeing that he was a relation of sorts—he went down and stayed down ever after. That was just his way of making a little boy feel cosy in the place, of course."

"It's not really haunted, is it?" Clare asked, half−seriously. She looked round the irregularly−shaped space

of the top landing where they stood, at the wide old black doors in the timbered and plastered walls, at the diamond−paned window in a deep recess and at their own shadows swinging about them as Niall moved the lamp to and fro.

"Ah, pity!" said Niall regretfully. "Christmas Eve, a two−hundred−and−fifty−year−old house, and no ghost! The Captain would have made such a lovely one, too, in his wig and sword and buckled shoes and all, and goodness knows what deeds done on the Spanish Main to rob him of his mortal repose. But you want a sticky end to make a ghost, and for all we know the Captain died quietly in his bed with his buckled shoes off. Though, in strict truth, there's no record of where, when and how he did die. I expect it was in here, though."

He turned to one of the doors and put his hand on the iron ring which served for a knob. He half−turned it, then, pausing, listened to the murmur of voices from below, and gave Clare a delighted smile.

"This is fun, your coming to Brackenbine again, after all. You know, I had a sort of fear you might be too shy to come after our encounter. But I'm glad you weren't."

Clare looked down at the dark, uneven boards, not knowing what to answer; he seemed to hesitate whether to say more about the other night, then turned the ring and opened the door.

"We always call this the Captain's room," he said, entering and holding up the light. "It was a lumber−room when we came here. You see we've made it into a studio."

It was a long room, as long as the drawing−room downstairs, but with a ceiling sloping on each side to within six feet of the floor. At one end long curtains seemed to cover a window, and at the other was an open fireplace piled with white wood ashes which still gave off an appreciable warmth. In the middle of the ceiling on one side was a large skylight. Niall advanced into the centre of the room, showing her how the apparatus of his mother's occupation and his own crowded the place: wooden presses and stacks of canvases were ranged round the walls; some little tables were thickly littered with pots and tubes of paint and jars of brushes; under the skylight stood an artist's easel and, to one side, a joiner's bench strewn with tools and chips; there was a profusion of odds and ends—books, pottery, pieces of material, bottles and boxes, all in disorder, but in a warm and living disorder: it was a room in which someone was constantly busy, where creative work was done; and a space in front of the fire had been made comfortable with a high old leather screen to shut off the draught and some well−worn armchairs and low bookshelves and a reading−lamp by the corner of the hearth.

"Do you paint too?" Clare asked.

"Oh," he answered, deprecatingly, "not seriously. I never studied. I'm no good at any of these things, really." He nodded towards the bench. "I amuse myself with wood−carving: puppets, you know."

"Puppets?" Clare repeated in great surprise.

"Yes, little dolls that you can animate."

"I know," she said. "I mean, I know what puppets are —it was only—well, I've never actually seen them. Do you make them act—have a puppet theatre, I mean?"

"Yes," he said. "Act, yes. After a fashion. No, but it's really just the making of them, the perfection of their animation, that fascinates me. I first saw them made in Italy. In a little village near Florence where we were living then. There was a family that had made puppets ever since the Middle Ages. I used to sit and watch the old man and his sons by the hour and I picked up most of what I know about the craft there. My mother became interested, too. She dresses them and paints them."

Clare's eyes wandered over the bench on which he had now set down the light. "Ah," he said, divining her thoughts, "I've got nothing on hand now. I haven't done anything for some time. I'm pretty lazy, really." He brushed a little heap of chips together with his hand, sweeping them carefully back from the edge of the bench, as though they were valuable. Clare asked suddenly:

"Is that one of your puppets that I saw on the Christmas−tree?"

He jerked his head up in a startled way and looked hard at her for a moment before replying; then, almost grudgingly, he said: "Well, yes. She's one of mine." He looked down at the bench again and then remarked, as if he had resumed a train of thought that Clare's question had interrupted:

"I'm not an artist at all, I think; though I may be a frustrated craftsman; I think the itch I have to make something in the round is a more primitive impulse than the ideas that inspire true art. I suppose sculpture grew out of a desire to make something as nearly resembling a living human being as possible; and the idea of making a statue that could come to life has always haunted men's imagination. In Ancient Egypt they made

portrait statues of the dead which the soul could return to animate if the mummified real body by chance were destroyed. And isn't there some idea behind it all of creating a body of something more durable than flesh and blood? The flesh of man decays within a century, but the flesh of the oak endures for many centuries and marble may endure for ever. A man made of marble would never die; one made of oak might live a thousand years."

"He'd be a bit stiff in the joints, though," said Clare, flippant because she did not quite understand his meaning.

He laughed. "So all art may be a fallacy of duration, since duration's nothing worth if the life dies. All marble, carved wood and painted canvas is vain. Unless—yes, unless one *could* perfect the artifice of eternity."

He picked up the lamp again and turned away from the bench. "Ah well," he said. "My fancies outrun my skill, perhaps. I chip out my little dolls and study to perfect their animation—to create the amusing illusion that they have an independent life, and I make them out of the most durable organic material I have discovered because, I suppose, of the attractiveness of that other illusion of immortality. If I could wed the two—animation and durability, then I should be a master−artificer."

He cast a casual look round the studio. "There's not much to see, I'm afraid; not much to give background to my Great−Uncle Jabez's rather thin story of the Captain's ghost. No four−poster, no antique oak presses—those things are plywood. I used to like this room, though, on the rare occasions when I came to stay with Great−Uncle Jabez when I was a little boy. This end of the house runs right into the hill, you see. The bluebells grow level with the eaves and it's solid rock behind that wall. You can walk up on to the roof straight out of the wood. We had this big skylight put in, but there used to be a little one there before, and I used to sneak in through it from the roof. Hello! That sounds like Miss Geary going; we must go down."

They started towards the door of the studio. As Niall passed the easel he brushed against the projecting end of its ledge, causing it to slew round a little. A canvas that had been leaning against its foot fell backwards on the floor. "Tut!" said Niall, and picked it up and set it against the easel again, but with its face outwards to the room. Clare threw a glance at it, then started and could not check a swift intake of breath. At the sound Niall looked curiously at her, then shone his lamp full on the painting. It was of a young woman in a summer frock, sitting on the grass, with a dappled light falling through trees upon her; a gay, laughing portrait, full of life and summer light. The face was tilted sideways up, with a listening air; the lips were curved in a delighted smile and the brown eyes were soft and bright with interest and affection; the artist had caught all the brilliant animation with which a fresh young girl would listen to her lover in his gayest mood.

Niall unexpectedly stepped between Clare and the canvas. She fell back a pace, confused and embarrassed.

"I thought—" she began, "I thought it was someone I knew once. But it couldn't be," she added hastily. "It's too young."

He nodded rather sadly.

"It is, though. It's Anne Otterel. It looks younger because it's not finished, perhaps. My mother was painting her when she was staying at Halliwell last summer. We were very sorry that it could never be finished."

He moved on towards the door again, and Clare, with a lingering look back at the portrait, now obscured by the shadows, followed him.

"I didn't know," she said lamely, "I didn't know you knew her ... I didn't know she was at Halliwell in the holidays. She never said..."

Niall had begun to descend the stairs. "I didn't know her particularly, myself," he said. "My mother met her. She came a few times for sittings."

When they came down into the little hall they found Miss Geary already dressed and waiting for them. Clare hurried on her things while Niall apologised. His brief seriousness of mood was dismissed; he drew his mother under the great bunch of mistletoe that hung from one of the rafters and kissed her; turning to Miss Geary he looked for a second as though he were going to claim the privilege from her, but instead, took her hand and, bowing low, kissed that. Clare, tying her scarf, moved to the door behind the mistress, but not without meeting his dark questing glance as he straightened up. He took a lighted lantern which his mother had got ready, and, with the big cat playing with little growling purrs about his feet, led them out and through

the wood. In spite of Miss Geary's protestations he accompanied them, chatting gaily, all the way back through the keen black night to Paston Hall gate.

3

Miss Sperrod came back from London the day after Boxing Day. The first news of her arrival that Clare had was in the evening, when the maid brought her a message to say that the Principal wished to see her in her sitting−room. Clare left the Prefects' Room and went slowly through to the front of the school.

She had spent the two days of Christmas in a mood of strange quietude and content: a mood out of all harmony with what she should have felt. By the experience of the Christmas before, the brittle pretence of jollity, which the Matron and Miss Finch tried to sustain for the benefit of the few miserable juniors immured with them, should have left Clare depressed and irritated. Boxing Day should have ended in a congested gloom of indigestion and ill−temper. On the contrary, when she put her head on the pillow that night, Clare felt nothing but a wide peace. It endured beyond next morning's awakening, and all morning, tramping through the hoar−frosted grounds and sitting by the little fire in the Prefects' Room, Clare mused over a hitherto unknown feeling: unknown, as far as all positive memory went; but somewhere in the lost dawn of recollection there was a fugitive knowledge of some such sensation of security and mellow peace experienced long ago in the different world of early childhood.

It should not have been so: that was the puzzle. There should have been very different feelings associated with the images of Brackenbine and its inhabitants that stood so vividly and constantly in these two days before her mind's eye. The peace and friendliness were there, it is true, and Clare had brought away the cosy warmth of the Sternes' hearth in her heart, but, starting like sharp thorns out of that sweetness, there had been other things to startle and distress her.

That sudden confrontation with Anne Otterel's portrait and the revelation of her intimacy with the Sternes should have surprised her far more than it did. She ought to have felt grieved and jealous: hurt that Anne had had friendships that she had kept hidden from her. Clare knew she would have felt so if the revelation had come a little earlier, in another way. But now there was this new tolerance and understanding, this peace in her heart. She could see herself, without any sense of perverse self−denigration at all, just as Anne must have seen her: one among a number of schoolgirls whom Anne had to do with in term−time, no one very important to Anne in her own free life. Anne would have shaken off Paston Hall from her soul as soon as she stepped outside the gate on the last day of term. Clare knew exactly now what that feeling of emancipation was, for by going to Brackenbine she herself had discarded Paston Hall. School had burst open as when a ripening kernel splits the nut, and the shrivelled husk had fallen from her.

The Sternes, in truth, were grown−up people, and they had accepted her on equal terms. They were so much more alive, so much more people of the real world than anyone at Paston Hall, and they had suddenly lifted her out of this paper−thin school world of dull pretence into the rich, full world to which she ought to belong: that was the dominant feeling in Clare's heart, and that was, she knew, the source of her great happiness. They had delivered her from bondage. Niall had made amends for the sin of his slave−dealing ancestor.

Her suspicion that it was he who had caused his mother to send the invitation had grown, over Christmas, into a certainty, and the certainty made her smile tenderly. Mrs. Sterne had sent Christmas cards to all the Staff on Christmas morning. There was one for Clare, a plain, engraved card of greetings, but slipped in the envelope with it was another hurriedly made out of a folded square of paper. It bore a picture consisting chiefly of a patch of Indian ink with a few sketchy light lines to indicate the trunks of trees—the pitchy blackness of Brackenbine wood—and in the blackness four or five tiny points of light, like cats' eyes shining from the thicket; but she knew them for the little lights she had seen from the wall−top.

That little mystery excited her curiosity more than all the other new and stimulating things she had discovered at the Sternes'. She had longed to ask Niall on Christmas Eve what he was doing with his little lights in the wood, but had just lacked the assurance to frame the question. His teasing card seemed an invitation to her to ask it now. It would be something, she guessed, as unexpected and as oddly interesting as Niall's hobby of making puppets, or the old Captain's cultivation of dwarf trees. Clare was overcome with longing to be as free as Niall and his mother to do interesting things, to follow her own bent and find and

exercise her own gifts. Before tea−time on that third day of Christmas a strong plant of resolution had taken root in her longing: just before it was too late, the possibility of winning the scholarship to Oxford had been demonstrated to her again. Busily and happily, she got out her notebooks and fell to planning an intensive course of revision and new study for the remaining weeks to Easter.

She left them with some reluctance when she received the Principal's summons. Miss Sperrod had never seemed so unnecessary a hindrance as now. She found Miss Geary with the Principal and was as surprised by the old lady's somewhat guilty and embarrassed look as by the sugariness of Miss Sperrod's reception of her. As usual, it took Clare some time to discern Miss Sperrod's purpose through the babble of all−but−meaningless preliminaries which she customarily put out, as if to hold off attack while she consolidated her own position. Clare saw, from the many glances she darted at Miss Geary during this preface, that she was not quite sure how her proposition was going to be received, but the proposition itself, when at length it was clearly stated, was the last one she would ever have expected the Principal to make.

It was, simply, that Mrs. Sterne, having learnt from Miss Geary that Clare was having difficulty through lack of coaching with her Latin, had suggested that she herself might give her a few private lessons each week until the scholarship examination.

While this communication was being made to Clare, Miss Geary looked steadily at the ceiling. Clare, dumbfounded, said nothing, and Miss Sperrod, interpreting that as unwillingness, outdid all previous exhibitions of vehemence and volubility that Clare had ever witnessed. It gave Clare time, however, to realise the astounding persistence of the vein of good fortune she had stumbled on; she would not for the world have disclosed to Miss Sperrod how much the offer meant to her, but she stammered some words of thanks that seemed too drastically controlled to carry any conviction, and asked when would Mrs. Sterne expect her to begin.

“I am sending a note to Mrs. Sterne,” said the Principal. “I'm replying straight away. It would be proper if you wrote a little note yourself to thank her. The lessons will have to be fitted into your time−table, of course, but you must try by all means to suit Mrs. Sterne's convenience. It will be a very great advantage to you. Mrs. Sterne is really highly qualified in the classics. Her father was quite a well−known professor. I am explaining that very carefully to your Father.”

To Clare nothing mattered much but that she should learn how soon she was expected to go to Brackenbine, and until she had found that out clearly from Miss Geary, she could not believe that she was not dreaming these arrangements. Then, when it was established that she might go off to Brackenbine any time that suited her to fix convenient hours with Mrs. Sterne, there was a preposterous confabulation about who was to take her. Miss Sperrod took instant alarm at the notion of one of her charges walking the public highway by herself; Clare had to listen to the discussion of half a dozen absurd schemes for chaperoning her, until her exasperation was such that it was on the tip of her tongue to tell the Principal tartly that she had no need at all to venture into the public road to get to Brackenbine. She remarked somewhat petulantly to Miss Geary, after they left the Principal's sitting−room, that girls younger than herself cycled alone from villages miles away to Pentabridge High School daily along that very road in term−time without anybody suggesting that they needed escorting. Miss Geary only answered gently that she did not see that what High−School girls did was really relevant. She undertook, all the same, to find a way over the difficulty.

In all the discussion between them, neither Miss Geary nor Clare mentioned Niall's presence at Brackenbine. There was no conspiracy between them to suppress the fact, but Clare was certain that Miss Sperrod did not know he was at home. She was by no means so naive as to suppose that Miss Sperrod would have found the same enthusiasm for the project if she had known that the young man was there. She took the old lady's tacit assumption that Niall's presence was no bar to her going to Brackenbine as evidence of a good breeding which nothing she knew of Miss Sperrod justified her in supposing the Principal possessed. At the same time, although she was grateful for Miss Geary's silent compliment to her own good taste and sense, she would have liked her to mention Niall; she would have liked to hear whether he had been there last summer when Miss Geary went to Brackenbine; she would have liked to know how much she knew and how much the Principal knew about Anne Otterel's visits there in the summer holidays. But Miss Geary did not enlighten her on any of this.

The old lady, however, managed the business of escorting her quite simply, by packing her off by herself

soon after luncheon on the following day and saying she would meet her at Brackenbine lodge−gates to accompany her back at half−past three. They would thus be at the school again before it was dark. Clare made no question of the wisdom or convenience of the arrangement, but fled along the quiet, empty road to the old iron gates of Brackenbine as light of heart and foot as a hare set free from the net.

In the fine, crisp days of the week following Christmas the arrangement worked very well. Clare would arrive with her grammar and exercise book at Brackenbine soon after luncheon, to find Mrs. Sterne waiting for her with a good log fire burning in the little dining−parlour and books spread on the oak table. For two hours they would work at Latin. It was teaching of a sort Clare had never known before. Even Anne Otterel, in the very short time she had given to Clare the previous summer term, had had something of the schoolmistress in her manner; but to enter on Latin grammar with Mrs. Sterne was like setting out with a companion to explore a newfound land: neither knowing on what wonders and riches they might chance at any moment. Clare began to see that Mrs. Sterne had learnt her Latin as a child for the pleasure of its literature; it had never been a dead language to her. She told Clare how she and her father used to talk a kind of dog−latin together, she making up words where she did not know them, her father gravely accepting them so long as they were correctly inflected. Mrs. Sterne was able to show Clare the relation of Latin to French and Spanish, which no one had ever pointed out to her before; to reveal the descent of little Spanish ditties Clare knew, from songs and rhymes heard in the streets of Rome two thousand years ago. She read passages of the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics* aloud, and suddenly that spiky fence of scansion and syntax which had previously seemed to Clare to prevent her ever feeling the power and meaning of Latin verse collapsed; the language came to life. These words upon the page had been spoken by living lips that lovingly shaped the beauty of their sounds, and they had been heard by living people who were moved by them as she was moved by a poem of Yeats.

Clare drank in huge draughts of new understanding, and in doing so acquired a voracious appetite for factual knowledge. She saw the acquisition of grammatical knowledge as a necessary preparation for their delightful expeditions of exploration, and she set about acquiring it with the same excited zest as she had given in childhood to preparing the equipment for a picnic or camping trip with her father. Endowed with an excellent memory and with a gift for concentration where her interest was roused, she mastered each morning substantial portions of grammar, and, in being so busy and in the feeling of making a real gain of knowledge, the listlessness and despair of the autumn term slipped from her. The assurance and shining content that had begun on Christmas Eve persisted.

Each day their lesson would be ended at three o'clock by the cheerful rattle of cups as Niall brought in to them an early cup of tea. It was a sound that Clare came to listen for as putting the crown on her delight. Then, for a few minutes the three of them would sit before the glowing logs and talk—of Latin and of poetry, of pictures and foreign lands, of everything under the sun, or, as it seemed to Clare, of every sunlit thing.

Usually Niall would walk back with her to the lodge−gates, through the grave brown oak−woods, and then he would be at his gayest and most extravagant, telling her tales of his Great−Uncle Jabez that set them both laughing until their voices rang back in echo from the hard−frozen slopes of Akenshaw Hill. It was Niall who explained, or rather hinted at an explanation of Miss Sperrod's concern to maintain good relations with the owner of Brackenbine.

“Old Jabez couldn't keep the Hall up,” he said. “It wants an army of servants and even in his day that came expensive. He'd run through the Sterne fortune soon after his father left it to him and got into pretty low water. He couldn't sell the estate, of course; it's entailed upon the heirs male. Then Arthur Sperrod—your Principal's brother—popped up and made himself useful, and, I suspect the consideration was that Jabez withdrew to Brackenbine and let the Hall to your respected Governing Body for a song. We renewed the lease on the same terms soon after I inherited the property. Actually, though I'm your landlord, Arthur Sperrod has the management of the whole thing. All he needs is my signature when the lease falls to be renewed again the year after next. It's an advantageous arrangement to your Governors. They wouldn't find such another place for so little now in the length of England.”

“But you're not forced to renew it, if you could get more for it from somebody else, are you?” Clare asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Oh well. It suits us well enough. We're bad business people. All we want is to be quiet and private. We might get much worse neighbours than you, you know. *We* are not unappreciative of

Spoil−the−Child's careful discipline!" He grinned.

Clare had never worked so hard in all her schooldays, and yet her activity now seemed as different from pre−examination 'swotting' as old holidays had seemed from term−time. The 'few lessons a week' that Mrs. Sterne had suggested were, from the beginning, one a day. Quickly Clare came to feel that Brackenbine rather than Paston Hall was her home; she felt at home there as soon as she passed the iron gates.

One afternoon when the New Year was a few days old she came as usual to Brackenbine, but on stepping from the little hall into the dining−parlour she found it empty. The fire burned on the hearth but no books were spread on the table. She peeped into the drawing−room, where the great Christmas−tree still stood and the evergreens still ornamented the chimney−breast; that too, was empty. She opened the door to the kitchen and listened, but no sound came from there. Then she caught the slight noise of someone moving upstairs, and, rather diffidently, called Mrs. Sterne's name from the foot of the stairs. An indinstinct reply came down to her. A little hesitantly she climbed halfway up. There she heard Niall's voice clearly raised: "Hello! Here I am!"

She went up to the top landing, and through an open door saw Niall busy with a suitcase on his bed, and drawers and cupboard doors opened round him.

"Hello!" he exclaimed as he looked up. "I thought it was my mother. Isn't she back yet?"

He came out on to the landing where Clare stood in the light from the open studio door. "She went to Pentabridge this morning," he explained. "I thought she'd be back before you came."

"No," said Clare. "No, she's not downstairs. I—I thought it was your mother calling—I came up..."

"Well," he said, after a pause during which he looked away from her, back into his bedroom, "she can't be long; she was going to get the one o'clock bus and she's only got to walk from Halliwell corner."

Clare had followed his gaze to the suitcase open on his bed and the things scattered round it.

"I'll just wait in the dining−room," she said. "You want to get on with your packing, I expect." She spoke in a flat voice, not looking at him.

"Oh well..." he said. "No hurry about that."

He moved away to the threshold of the studio and stood looking idly round at the litter of things within. He was silent so long that Clare, troubled by the strange flatness and coldness that had fallen between them, forced herself to say something:

"Are you going away for long?"

He moved over to his work−bench on the other side of the studio, and she had perforce to follow him to hear his reply. He stood looking down at his tools as if studying what he should do with them, and only after a long pause replied:

"I don't know. I don't know how long it will be."

There was a gloomy finality in his tone, and Clare did not know what to say after that. She felt her own heart sink like a stone and, standing there, a little behind him, watching his long fingers as they played with the handle of a chisel on the bench, she admitted quite simply and humbly to herself that the greater part of the fife and joy and zest of her days would depart with Niall.

She looked round the studio, from the fire still smouldering on the hearth to the curtained window at the far end. It seemed exactly the same as when she had seen it on Christmas Eve, except that the portrait which had leaned against the foot of the easel had gone. It was nowhere to be seen in the room.

Abruptly Niall turned and looked down on her with a most serious, searching gaze. His dark eyes were so intent and there was such stern concentration in his face that she shrank back a little, startled and puzzled, thinking that he was angry. But he turned his head away after a moment and smiled somewhat sadly and awkwardly.

"I've just remembered," he said. "I promised to show you something. I'd better redeem my promise before I go."

"The puppets?" she asked, relieved beyond all proper measure that he was not angry.

"No, no," he said, "or, at least, not exactly. No, it's nothing of mine. You remember I told you about old Captain Trethewy's hobby? The little tree's? Well, here they are."

He walked to the far end of the room and drew the heavy curtain aside, revealing a small window with leaded panes and a deep, low wooden window−seat below it.

He knelt on the window−seat and made a gesture to Clare to sit beside him. She did so and gave a little exclamation of surprise and pleasure as she looked out.

The sill of the window, on a level with her chin inside, was only a few inches above the ground outside. She was looking into a deep hollow of the hill, as it were an old quarry, closed on three sides by sheer walls of sandstone rock and on the fourth by the gable−end of the house. Grass and little bushes grew thickly in all the clefts and crannies of the rock walls, and the trees of the wood stood thickly all round their upper edge; while the floor of the enclosed space, which might have been a little bigger than a tennis−court, was thickly carpeted with moss. It was not a level floor: it sloped gently up towards the back and sides of the hollow, and was varied by little undulations and tiny knolls where knobs of grey stone peeped out from under the mantling moss; here and there glinted the pale surface of a little frozen pool. About all this space, planted in groves and in alleys and singly, were the Captain's trees. None was more than three feet high, yet each was a perfect tree of some evergreen species unknown to Clare. Cupping her hands beside her face to shut out the room and the normal−sized trees of the wood above, she could look out into this miniature park as if she were viewing a distant landscape, and then the little trees seemed like ancient oaks, as mighty and venerable as those of Akenshaw, stout−boled, spreading their crooked arms wide over a dark green sward.

There were miniature walks meandering among the groves and through the alleys, and level stretches of what seemed like open lawn where she could fancy a herd of deer or red cattle might graze. Her eye travelled slowly over the landscape back to where the trees stood more thickly on the gently rising ground beneath the steep wall of rock, and there it fell upon what seemed at first sight a rough pile of crags rising above the foliage, but which, as she stared, in the subdued grey light that fell into that hollow place, she thought to be rather an artificial construction, not so much a miniature mountain as some rough, irregular pile of buildings, a castle of wild, fantastic style built of brown sandstone. The little walks converged up the slope towards it, but the entrance to it was hidden by the gnarled trees standing in a thick belt before it. Niall gave a short sigh, and she turned to him.

“And did the Captain make all this—this little park and all? And it's been kept so carefully all these years?”

“Carefully?” he answered. “No, hardly that. The trees could not help but live. But the Captain's garden suffered a long neglect under the Sternes. It's I who've tidied it up. And I who've played the Vandal, too.”

With his fingertip on the panes he drew her attention to a number of stumps about the miniature park where trees had been cut. She exclaimed in distress, “Oh! Why did you cut them?”

“Never fear,” he said. “The Captain's theory was right. The roots are immortal. Do you not see the little shoots springing from the old stump, here, from this near one? Look! I have only helped myself to the timber, and I've done that sparingly like a good and careful estate−manager. I don't think the Captain would grudge me the use of the timber he planted, for nothing else would do, and the purpose I have is something in his own vein.”

“Why? What have you used it for?” Clare asked.

He rose and drew the curtain again as Clare also got up.

They heard someone moving about briskly below now, and a moment later Mrs. Sterne's voice called up to them.

“Here we are!” Niall called back.

He stood a moment and looked at Clare, smiling. “I told you I was following fallacies of duration, seeking to make things that would live for ever, even like the Captain. The wood of his undying trees is the stuff I make my puppets from.”

4

Miss Geary, by some mysterious means, learned that Niall had gone away. She mentioned it to Clare the next afternoon when she met her at the lodge−gates. Clare glanced sharply at her; the old lady's face was as serene as ever, and her tone had been as usual, gentle and remote, but Clare fancied she had caught a suggestion of satisfaction or relief in her words. Clare told herself she was over−sensitive and suspicious: what earthly reason had old Miss Geary to be glad that Niall had gone—gone and left his mother alone? She should have been sorry for Mrs. Sterne, left lonely in her silent house in the wood. Niall had been gay, *galant,* in an innocent and merry way, with Miss Geary, and she had seemed to like him on Christmas Eve. Clare could not believe that the old lady had been in any way anxious on her account because of Niall's presence.

She had missed his cheerful clatter with the tea−cups at three o'clock that afternoon more sorely than she had thought possible. With as much seeming casualness as she could affect she had tried to find out from Mrs. Sterne where Niall had gone and when he would return. The answer was vague. He had gone on business to the north of England; he might be away some time; he was frequently away from Brackenbine, of course.

Clare stuck to her programme, working hard each morning and evening and looking forward keenly to her afternoon hours at Brackenbine. Though the house was quieter and less lively now, Mrs. Sterne's company was still a rich treasure; Clare could scarcely understand how she had endured the drabness of life before she knew her.

The days were still infinitely happier than any Clare had known at school; but her nights became oddly troubled. The assurance and the shining peace were shattered after Niall's departure; they broke very suddenly after dark on the evening when she last saw him. Each evening, after that, as soon as she had closed the door of her little room and was alone, she was beset by a strange agitation of mind. Again, like the extraordinary content which it had displaced, this agitation was something she had never experienced before. She deliberately recalled all that she had felt in the few weeks succeeding Anne Otterel's death and compared her present feelings with those. There was a distinct difference of kind; then she had been dispirited and crushed; something had been taken away from her: she had suffered loss and defeat, but it had been a passive feeling. Now, if it was a loss she was feeling, it left no deadness in her heart, but a strange, active anguish; her feelings were acute, her nerves uncontrolled, her mind worked with a too−hectic voluntary energy creating images of anxiety and fear.

Yet, in waking, she could not seize the images. She was afraid, yet could not see the thing she was afraid of.

Struggling to pin down either in words or pictures the subject of her anxiety, the nearest she could come to describing it to herself was that something was broken that must, at any cost, be made whole again. In dreams, however, her fears wore distinct, visible shapes. She slept badly in these nights, tossing on her bed for hours before she lost consciousness, and when she woke she was weary in both body and mind, her brain especially tired from intensive labour. She was aware that in her sleep she had been driven pitilessly through a succession of most crowded scenes, forced to follow a baffling course among persons and things that changed with mad haste and in−deflectable purpose from form to form, always progressing towards some huge, frightening, general transformation of being that was never reached. Some parts of the dreams, a few fragments only, she knew, remained vivid in her memory after she had wakened. They all related in some way to Brackenbine and the ones of which she retained a clear visual impression longest pertained to the little park of dwarf trees.

Time and again, in her dreams she found herself groping at that little window in the studio, desperately anxious to get out, and unable to move the fastening; and there was someone out there, among the little trees, whom she must at all costs join. Then, after a long time, during which she had been hurried through tumultuous events all lost to her waking memory, she would be running frantically through Brackenbine wood, not pursued, but searching for something, something that it was of the utmost importance to find, and which ever eluded her. Then the dark trees round her would thin out and she would be running more slowly with long strides, so long she seemed to be flying smoothly and effortlessly just above a field of deep green

moss, and in a light that was neither sunlight nor moonlight she would see the Captain's evergreen oaks floating past her, and she knew that she was being drawn in her flight up towards the ruined castle behind the dark belt of forest, and there, though she could not see the entrance of the castle, she knew that there was waiting for her someone she dared not face and yet must join. She knew that she had wept with anxiety in her dream because if she could but find the thing she had lost then she would be able to face the person who stood in the entrance of the castle.

Sobbing, she looked wildly about her for the lost thing, knowing that everyone else had it and she alone had not. For now there were other people round her. She began to go more and more slowly, until she was walking, dragging her feet, rather, over the yielding moss, and she had fallen behind the murmurous throng. Still, she was not alone; she was under the gnarled old trees that screened the castle, and by every tree there stood a person. At first she could not make out who these people were, but the wood grew lighter after a time and then she saw that they were girls in shining dresses, some green, some gold and red and yellow, like flames; they stood upright, close to the trunks of the trees, so close, indeed, that she was not sure if their bodies did not form the very trunks of the trees, and their pale arms upheld long, gleaming tresses of hair which at the same time was the foliage of the trees. Round each girl was a bright ring of flames which neither increased nor diminished, but burned still and clear upon the moss; and the girls were laughing, each with uptilted face, listening to something, a voice or a sound of instruments that sounded, Clare knew, though her own ear could not catch it, infinitely sweet from the halls of the castle.

Weeping, she looked down at her own feet, round which she knew there should be a circle of bright, still flame, and all that shone there was a broken chain of little sparks, green points like cats' eyes or glow−worms. The green sparks wavered, weaving in and out about her, but would not form the circle that she must have; her feet sank deep into the moss, which clasped them and held her fast, and she awoke with a dreadful load upon her heart, hearing herself say aloud: 'It is broken! It is broken!'

It seemed to Clare that these fragments recurred constantly in the immense volume of dreams that her imagination composed every night. In themselves the images were not frightening; on the contrary, there was a strange grace and beauty about those half−human trees, but the accompanying feeling of anxiety, of dreadful sorrow for the broken circle, was so intolerable that by the third or fourth night after she began to experience this agitation of mind, she grew afraid to sleep at all and tried to force herself to keep awake by reading, but then, perversely, sleep would overcome her almost at once, and willy−nilly she was back in Brackenbine wood, or in the dark studio, a prey to the same anguish.

She told no one about these troubles—indeed, there was no one at Paston Hall whom she would ever have dreamt of telling; but she saw the effects in her pale face and darkened eyes, and she feared that either Miss Geary or Mrs. Sterne would notice the change and ask her if she was not well. Above all, she feared that Miss Sperrod would conclude that she was overworking and make her reduce her visits to Brackenbine, or perhaps advise her father that she was not fit enough to work for the scholarship and so end her connection with Brackenbine altogether. To guard against that, which would have been an unbearable loss, Clare in the first place took care to avoid meeting Miss Sperrod as much as she could, and secondly, deliberately put on a cheerfulness of expression and a briskness of demeanour beyond her normal wont.

The nightly travails of her mind ceased as abruptly as they had begun, and in circumstances that proved to her what their true cause had been.

One afternoon about a week after Niall's departure she went to Brackenbine as usual. Miss Geary had told her that she would be late in meeting her at the lodge−gates on her return, and the prospect of a longer time with Mrs. Sterne should have put Clare into the highest of spirits; but today she walked the rough road through the wood slowly, her mental exhaustion seeming to induce a like lassitude in her body, so that she felt drained of energy and as worn−out as though she had in fact laboured over all the rugged miles her dream−body had traversed the night before.

The door of the house, as always, stood open, but Mrs. Sterne was not in the dining−parlour. A slight noise or the breaking of sticks drew Clare to the door of the drawing−room, and there she saw Mrs. Sterne at the hearth piling all the evergreen Christmas decorations into a great pyre inside the chimney.

“Hallo!” Mrs. Sterne called cheerfully. “I'm just finishing!”

Clare went across to her and bent to help her to stack up the withered sprays of laurel and the branches of

fir and holly that had decked the room. The great Christmas−tree had been taken down and stripped of its candles and it lay now slanting across the fireplace as the centrepiece of the bonfire to be.

"Mind your hands on the holly," said Mrs. Sterne, who was wearing leather gloves. Clare picked up an armful of fir branches which rained needles down upon the bricks of the hearth.

"I thought you were supposed to take your Christmas decorations down on Twelfth Night," she said. "It's past that now, isn't it?"

"It is," answered Mrs. Sterne. "I just left them up until Niall came back."

Clare had taken a step inside the great fireplace. She stood rooted there with her back to Mrs. Sterne and her eyes fixed on the branches of the spruce sloping across the brick cavern in front of her.

"Niall?" she said, without turning round. "Is he back?"

Mrs. Sterne answered with incredible casualness:

"Not yet. He will be this evening, I expect."

Clare turned and began sweeping up the sprays and branches, being busy as if her dear life depended on it, and she talked in a babble which, try as she might to control it, sounded feverishly elated in her own ears.

"There," said Mrs. Sterne in a short while. "That's the lot, I think. You haven't scratched yourself, have you? There's old Christmas on the bier again. We shall sit and watch him burn tonight. Let's go across to the other room now. It's chilly in here."

Clare gave a last look at the pile of brushwood, then, with a sudden exclamation of surprise, stepped nearer and parted the branches of the Christmas−tree near its top which leaned against the smoke−blackened wall.

"Oh look!" she cried. "You've forgotten the doll! How lucky I noticed it!"

The little figure in green that she had seen on the tree on Christmas Eve was still there, tied with thread to the stem of the tree and hidden by the branches. She tugged and twisted it to free it. The few threads soon broke and she turned with the doll in her hand, to find Mrs. Sterne looking at her rather oddly, with raised eyebrows.

Clare looked down at the doll. It was beautifully made and dressed; its silken hair and delicately carved and painted features were most life−like.

"What a shame if it had got burnt," she said. "It's so pretty. It's one that Niall made, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sterne. She paused and then, when she spoke again, she sounded a little at a loss.

"I hadn't exactly forgotten it," she said slowly. "We leave the doll on when we burn the tree after Christmas. It's an old superstition. We've always done it in our family. It's supposed to bring good luck throughout the next year, you know."

Clare looked crestfallen. "Oh ... Oh dear, I'm sorry.... I shouldn't have taken it off." She turned uncertainly towards the tree again as if wondering whether she should put it back. "Oh, but what a shame to burn such a pretty little thing," she exclaimed again. "It must have taken him weeks to make it!"

She sounded so distressed that Mrs. Sterne laughed, and patted her shoulder.

"As a matter of fact he said it was a dud," she said. "But I'll tell you what: we won't burn that one. You have that one. I'll cut one out of paper for tonight. I don't expect the Fates or the Fairies or whoever it is receives these sacrifices will know the difference."

Clare was still more embarrassed. "Oh, but if it's Niall's..." she began. Mrs. Sterne laughed at her objections, and, carrying the doll off to the dining−room, quickly wrapped it in a piece of tissue−paper and stowed it in the pocket of Clare's coat. "There," she said. "Perhaps it will bring *you* good luck all this year."

Clare still protested that she could not take it. But in the end, blushing a little for the lameness of the compromise, and the confession of superstition, she said:

"I'll ask him if he'll let me keep it till after Easter, just till the exam."

"Of course!" said Mrs. Sterne, smiling. "That's it. My grandmother would have read a meaning into your coming into the house and taking the Christmas doll from the tree, like that. But I expect you don't believe in omens?"

"Only good ones," said Clare firmly.

She gave herself to the Latin lesson that afternoon with an even greater cheerfulness and energy than before Niall went away. Throughout their reading and the digressions Mrs. Sterne permitted she was alert to catch any hint of the time when Niall was expected, but Mrs. Sterne did not refer to his home−coming again.

The short afternoon darkened, Mrs. Sterne made the tea and they drank it by the firelight, and at last Clare, seeing that it was turned four o'clock, dared linger no more in the hope of hearing his footstep in the hall.

She set off along the winding drive alone, and she went now with a brisk step. The disappointment of not seeing Niall this afternoon was nothing in comparison with the certainty that he would be there at tea−time tomorrow. Clare had discarded all pretence with herself now. She curled her fingers round the little parcel in her pocket and rejoiced that she was in love with Niall Sterne and would see him in twenty−four hours' time. He had come back and the magic circle was whole again. She felt the bright certainty ring her round like the still, clear circle of flame that had shone round the girls in her dreams.

A little before the lodge−gates were reached the drive turned sharply round a great flat rock that obtruded from the slope of the hill. Just as she reached this point Clare was startled by an animal that shot down from the dusk of the wood, stood poised for a second in the middle of the path and then scurried back behind the rock. It was too big for either rabbit or stoat, and as it disappeared she had a glimpse of a long furry tail held high. A fox? she thought, moving slowly forward again and looking wonderingly after the creature. Suddenly it sprang into full view again, on the rock, on a level with her shoulder: an enormous cat. She gave a gasp—Grim, of course! She called his name aloud.

She was answered gaily from the wood by a human voice:

“And his master! Less active on this confounded hillside but no less happy to see you!”

There was a slithering and a crackling of branches and then a tall form came scrambling down the slope of a little path under the trees beside the rock.

“Niall!” she exclaimed, aware, but heedless, of the joy and relief that sounded in her voice. He had taken her in his arms before she could speak another word and held her, looking down into her face. They looked at one another in the thickening dusk for a long time and Clare marvelled at the great tenderness the twilight seemed to lay on his face, marvelled until she understood, with a sudden, strange defection of her bodily strength, that it was not the twilight alone that had changed him. His arms encircling her were very hard and strong; she wished their circle might never be broken again.

“I am so glad it wasn't long. So very glad,” she said at length.

“Have you missed me so?'

She nodded. “The nights were the worst,” she said, in a voice which, in spite of herself, had a pitiful little note of pain in it. “I couldn't sleep. I had—ah! such wearying dreams. I cried in my sleep.”

He nodded slowly and understandingly.

“But I have drawn the circle again now. The spell is whole. Do you want it never to be broken again?”

“Never.”

He kissed her. “Never is a word of power,” he said, in a voice as low and serious as her own. “And Solomon never sealed a spell with an impression more potent than this.”

She clung to him, but at last he gently loosed her, stroked her hair, and said regretfully: “This is too short a meeting. There will be Miss Geary waiting for you at the lodge−gates, and my mother waiting for me in the house....”

“But did she expect you so early?”

“Ah, I came by a short−cut over the hill. I met this old poacher hunting in the wood and he heard you and led me to you.”

“Good Grim,” said Clare softly, stroking his broad head. “Oh look!” she exclaimed, suddenly recollecting and pulling the wrapped−up doll from her pocket. “I ought to tell you—I was helping your mother to pile up the Christmas decorations for burning and I saw this—the doll—on the tree and I thought it'd been overlooked—I mean, I didn't know she meant to burn it—”

He took the little parcel quickly from her and felt it with his fingers as if identifying its contents.

“She gave it to you?” he enquired sharply.

“Yes,” said Clare. “I wanted to put it back when she told me, but she said you wouldn't mind, and it is so pretty—I couldn't bear to think of its being just burnt: all that work. You don't mind, do you?”

“Why,” he answered, hesitating a little. “Why, no. If you like it, I'm pleased that she gave it you. Only I'd rather have made one for you specially—a perfect one. That's one of my failures.”

“A failure?” she exclaimed. “But it's a lovely little thing. Why is it a failure?”

"I don't know why," he said slowly. "I don't know why it was wrong. But something did go wrong with the animation. That's why I put it on the tree. I wouldn't have burnt a good one, of course."

"Oh, but why burn one at all? After all, even though it doesn't work it's a beautiful bit of carving. I don't mind its not working. It doesn't matter, really, does it, your not having one on the tree?"

"Ah, no. That's only old superstition: more a childhood custom than superstition now. I suppose my grandmother—my mother's mother, that is—had a lingering sort of belief in it. Perhaps she was the very last recipient of the very last shred of the memory of a Druid tradition."

"Druid?"

"I imagine so. It seems to me that the custom of the Christmas−tree descends from ancient religion in which worship was carried on in groves or under particular sacred trees. Trees played a large part in Druid ritual. We have the mistletoe from them. But the Druids also practised human sacrifice: the doll we put on our Christmas−tree and ceremonially burn is, I think, a substitute for the human victim the Druids sent to communicate with the immortals in their groves of Britain long ago. Barbarous, isn't it, to think of children playing at human sacrifices; but then, you practise a bit of ritual cannibalism every time you take communion in Halliwell Church, and I never heard that the Druids ate their victims. That practice came from the Orient I suppose."

He weighed the doll in his hand a moment, and then gave it back to Clare. "Poor doll," she said. "I'm glad I saved you."

She pondered a moment and then said:

"I'm sorry it didn't turn out right, all the same. But how do you make them work? I've often wondered, since you told me you made puppets. I've never seen them acting. Are they very life−like? It must be very difficult to make a lot of them move at once. How do you do it? With strings?"

He was silent for some time, and it had grown so dark now that she could not see his expression clearly, but she felt that he was frowning, thinking out something very difficult. Abruptly he gripped her by the shoulders.

"Listen!" he said. "Dare you come and see my puppets act? I want you to see them. But dare you come?"

"Dare?" she repeated. "Why...?"

"Because," he went on quickly, "you will have to come at night, alone, without anybody knowing. You'll have to come in the way you came when we first met—over the wall. Dare you do that?"

She could think of nothing for a few moments but the power of his hands and the strange languor they seemed to induce in her: there was an extraordinary mingling of sadness and delight in the feeling; the surrender, or captivity, rather, in which there was such pleasure, was the very captivity she had been seeking in vain in her dreams. Niall had to repeat his question, and then she replied as though the thing were self−evident:

"Yes, of course I dare. When shall I come?"

"A week tonight—but only if it's fine. I shall see you in the afternoon before, anyway. You must come over the wall by the beech−tree where you came before, at midnight. I'll meet you."

She did not answer, but as he bent his head she put up her lips, willingly, eagerly, to be kissed again. They parted then and Clare ran the remaining distance over the rough, hard frozen track to the lodge−gates.

Miss Geary had been waiting for her some little time, walking up and down on the road outside. Clare broke into apologies, but the old lady seemed not to have minded her wait.

"Poor Rachel must be rather lonely now, with her son away and no one else in the house," she observed, on their way back to Paston Hall.

"Yes," said Clare, and hesitated. "Yes, I suppose she is a bit lonely," she added, after an appreciable pause. She had meant to tell Miss Geary that Niall was expected back this night—that he was back, but she had hesitated: she could not tell Miss Geary that she had met him in the wood; and then there was her suspicion that Miss Geary did not like Niall. The moment to tell her had gone. She remained silent, justifying herself by reasoning that Niall's return would soon become known; she would see Niall at tea−time tomorrow and if Miss Geary mentioned him tomorrow she could say quite casually that she had seen him.

5

Clare slept deep and without dreaming that night; and she woke, as she had woken sometimes as a child on holiday in Spain, with a fine feeling that content was complete, that the day before her was wholly dedicated to happiness. The impress of Niall's kisses was on her lips, the strength of his arms was round her. His return and his touch had brought the final reinforcement that gave her victory over Paston Hall.

She looked round at the too−familiar, dreary little room, and laughed at it. It had no power whatsoever over her heart now. She remembered her promise to go over Brackenbine wall at midnight to meet him, and she exulted. The freedom she had ranged the night to find was not illusion: she was free—free as she had never been before, and her freedom had been found in such a desired captivity. She tried to conjure back again the overpowering happiness of being possessed that she had experienced when his arms tightened round her and his lips pressed hers; she could recapture only a part of it and she longed for the reality to be repeated. She marvelled at the paradox that surrender could bring such victory, captivity such freedom, and as she moved about her room, she glanced sideways into her looking−glass and wondered at the smile of deep content with which her musings had lit her face.

Life and time to come were very clear and definite to Clare this morning. One more term at Paston Hall, and then, freedom of body as well as this moral freedom she had won. She scarcely doubted now that she would win the Oxford Scholarship; she felt confident of overcoming any obstacle. Oxford, and the right to manage her own life.... Long Vacation when Niall would come and stay with her people in the country cottage where her father meant to settle down... long walks through green England, rambling where they would, talk and confidence and understanding as wide and deep as a summer sea and love like a sparkle of sunrise upon it. Niall and his mother would come and visit her in Oxford, in Oxford....

She recited softly to herself as she moved about the room:
'With her fair and floral air
And the love that lingers there.... '

Ah! if it were summer now, and the green leaves were spread in Brackenbine wood and the warm sunlight were pouring down into the glades.

She stood again in front of her looking−glass: her lips were curved, her eyes were bright; and yet it was so strange that a man such as he should love her, *her*—for what was she but a dull, shy, awkward schoolgirl, not even pretty in a young−girl way like some who had been in the Sixth last year? How old was he? He seemed so much older than she—but then, that might be past illness or some hard experience in foreign countries; he could not be more than thirty, and perhaps much less; he talked and laughed like a boy; perhaps he was not more than six or seven years older than she. But he had lived so much more; he had had so much more experience of the world; he must have known many more attractive girls than she. He had seen men and cities, and women, and yet he loved her.

She thought of his hands, the long, strong, craftsman's hands. His life was busy with delightful occupations and bright with constant new discoveries. With a sudden remembrance of an extra pleasure blossoming on the perfection of this morning, she opened her cupboard and took out the little parcel wrapped in tissue−paper and carefully undid it to examine the doll in the daylight.

It was hard to believe that something so life−like could be carved out of wood. The features were exquisitely made and painted with great delicacy. He had said that his mother painted his puppets and dressed them; she could imagine the care, the patience and skill Mrs. Sterne would bring to the task. And this doll had obviously been painted by an artist; indeed the face was not that of a doll at all, it was really a miniature portrait representing a girl of about Clare's own age, though, she admitted, much prettier than she. The eyes, in themselves, were a marvel, being tiny orbs of a glass−like substance inlaid in the wood and reproducing perfectly, though minutely, the white, the iris and the pupil of the natural eye. The hair was wonderfully well done also. Clare wondered what material Niall had used. It looked as though it might be silk; it was pale

golden in colour, thick and shining, flowing to the little figure's waist, and it was so cunningly attached to the head that it seemed to grow out of the wood as real hair grows from the living scalp. She examined the arms and turned back the dress and looked at the body and legs of the figure. The workmanship seemed perfect, the effect astonishingly life−like; the figure was painted in flesh−tone so that the grain of the wood was not visible, and the modelling was exceedingly fine and accurate, down to the smallest lines of the toes and fingers, yet the whole figure was not more than eight or nine inches high. There was something Clare could not understand about it: it was a beautiful little statuette, but how could it ever have worked? She imagined a puppet as something like a child's wooden doll, only with more and looser joints. This figure did not appear to have any movable joints at all. Gently she tried to bend its arms and legs, and could not make them move. Niall had said it was a failure. Was that what he meant? But it did not seem to have been made to be moved. Unless... she peered more closely at the knee and elbow joints, and at last she thought she could discern some extremely fine, faint lines there. Were those the joints that should have moved and would not? She could not tell; she would have to ask Niall to let her handle one of the good ones when he showed her his puppet theatre. She smoothed down the dress again and brushed the silky hair with the tip of her hair−brush. It was a delightful little figure and she loved it for its own sake as well as because it was his. Jealously she wrapped it up again and put it away at the back of the top shelf of her cupboard. Miss Geary did not ask her that evening whether Niall had returned. In fact, during the next week Clare saw little of Miss Geary, for the old lady caught a bad cold and could not go out. To Clare's astonishment, Miss Sperrod raised no objection to her returning by herself in the afternoons from Brackenbine. From time to time when she encountered her about the school the Principal asked her about her studies, mentioned Mrs. Sterne and said she hoped Clare was working hard to take every advantage of the opportunity given her, but such enquiries were made in Miss Sperrod's customary defensive way, as if to prevent rather than elicit a reply. Clare volunteered no information whatsoever about what she was doing, and believed that in reality the Principal wanted none.

Still, that absence of interference was so unlooked−for that she could not help remarking on it to Niall. He waited for her at the lodge−gates in these days and they walked together to the house, making the most of their time alone with each other.

“I believe you've put a spell on Miss Sperrod, as well as on me,” she said. She had told him already all that she felt about Paston Hall and all about her past miseries there and her brief hopes of escape under Anne Otterel's guidance. She had made it a kind of play to believe that he had necromantic powers.

“Could you enchant someone at a distance? I used to think of that sometimes as a kid when I was feeling particularly revengeful against the Principal. You ought to know a spell to give her bad dreams—not now, I mean: she's behaving particularly well just now. But in case she back−slides.”

“You're convinced I gave you those dreams you had?”

“Yes. I believe you're a master−sorcerer. I expect you were gathering herbs for a potion that very first night I saw you from the wall. What were those other little lights I saw that night? They could have been Grim's eyes, but they could have been witches' flowers that bloom in mid−December and glow luminous at one certain hour. Or perhaps they were mandrakes. I've read that you sorcerers go gathering mandrakes at midnight.”

“Oh? Where did you read that? What volumes of necromancy have you in Paston Hall library? But mandrakes don't shine, they shriek when pulled from their bed.”

“Who wouldn't—in the middle of a freezing winter's night?”

He laughed, and before they came to the door of the house, drew her aside between the bushes and kissed her.

“There's more enchantment in these two lips of yours and in these two dear grey eyes than in all the books of Azzimari, and no herb this side the fence of fairyland could bind the senses like this fragrance of your hair.”

“Ah, no,” she said. “There's no enchantment in me, except what you've planted. Perhaps that's it: you captured me that night and you've kept me in a magic cage ., ever since because you wanted someone to practise spells on. Is that it?”

“Do you mind if it is?”

“No,” she confessed, smiling up at him and speaking with a most innocent simplicity. “I like being your

captive."

They laughed silently at each other as he held her a little way off to look into her eyes.

"Who is Azzi—? the name you said just now?" she asked.

"Azzimari. That was the name of the Berber Kaid who bought my ancestor, Captain Trethewy, from the Sallee Rovers. He was a practitioner of this art of magic, which seeks to know the other side of Nature. It seems their doctors had studied these matters, there in the Southern Atlas Mountains, before the Koran came among them. The Captain translated some of Azzimari's books and brought them back with him."

"And you've learnt magic from them?"

He nodded solemnly. "From them and from experience."

She bent her head and stroked his arms.

"And you are Azzimari to me, and I'm a slave like the Captain. Dear Captain! I am so glad he brought Azzimari's magic home for you. I wonder if he loved his master as I love mine?"

"Perhaps. But he fled from him at last. And you too will want to be free."

She pressed close to him, winding his arms about her.

"No, no. I *am* free, like this. You must be a stern master, and if I try to break the spell you must double it and treble it, chain me down in the deepest dungeon in your castle, imprison me in the hollow of an oak in your enchanted wood. You must not let me go!"

"Ah, no," he said with wondering tenderness. "Dungeons I have and hollow oaks, but not for you. One ancient ceremony of bondage is enough. If you want to be my slave I'll perform it: the same that Azzimari performed upon the Captain. Shall I?"

"Yes, yes," she said in a scarcely audible voice, pressing her head against his coat.

He laughed. "Not now. It must be in the propitious conjunction of the planets. Time and place must adhere. I will do it when you come to see the puppets."

The Easter term began that week. The fact that Niall had fixed a night for his puppet−show after the school was full again did not trouble Clare at all. Even in the Third Form, when she and her gang shared a dormitory with others who were not in the secret, their excursions had never been discovered. Nowadays, when she had a room of her own, the risk in slipping out through the sleeping school was negligible.

It was a Saturday that Niall had appointed. Some snow fell early that morning, but by noon the sky was clear, and before sunset it began to freeze again. Niall walked back with her from the house to the lodge−gates after her lesson. Clare was happy and excited; they scooped up the soft snow from the ruts in the drive and snowballed each other, then sat, putting off their parting, on the great rock. Grim, who had followed them, thrust himself in between them and snuffed delicately at a handful of snow that Clare offered him.

She stroked his thick fur. "I never knew a cat that would follow you like a dog before," she said. "What breed is he—if cats have breeds? I don't know."

"You never knew *any* cat like Grim before," said Niall. "As to his breed, I have a theory—a fancy, my mother would say, like all my theories. Look at his colour; look closely."

Clare did so, and noticed in that cold white light something that had escaped her before. The cat's coat was not a uniform black: within its glossy darkness there were darker markings still, a kind of ghost pattern of blotches and stripes which were invisible in most lights and at a little distance.

"You see?" said Niall. "Well, now, observe his build —the breadth of his head, the strength of his body and this great bushy tail. He's different from most breeds of tame cats, isn't he? Where he came from I don't know. I found him—or he found me—in the wood. He took a lot of persuading to come to the house, but he did come in the end, and I suppose we gave satisfaction, and he condescended to retain our services. Well, my theory is that Grim is descended from wild ancestors. There must be some tame blood in him, of course, to give him his black coat, but I believe the dominant strain is *Felis Silvestris Grampia*—the wild cat of old Britain."

"But there couldn't be any wild cats in Brackenbine wood, could there?" Clare asked.

"Oh, not now. But I like to think of Grim as a true native of these woods. I can imagine a time—oh, two hundred, three hundred years ago, when the oaks of Brackenbine went all the way to Wales—this wood of ours, you know, is one of the last remnants of the primaeval forest of Britain: no Saxon felled and no English

squire planted it; that's why the Captain settled here, I think. Well, three hundred years ago there were still wild boar in England and wolves in Scotland; would it be so strange if there was still a wild cat or two lingering on in Brackenbine? Say there was but one pair in my ancestor's day; one of them is killed—there's an old wheel−lock fowling−piece among our lumber that might have done the very deed—and the survivor lives on until one day a sleek black pussy walks out of the house, as they will, you know, and meets him. Well, that's fancy, perhaps, but my Great−Uncle Jabez used to tell me that his father's keepers used to shoot what they called wild cats in the wood every now and again. I can't help but think the old strain stuck to Brackenbine, however watered down, and this is its latest representative."

"But do you *know* that Captain Trethewy kept cats?" Clare asked. "How do you know that he had a sleek black pussy?"

Niall threw back his head and laughed.

"You mustn't examine the products of my imagination so critically," he protested. "If it's a good story it's unfair to ask for proof. When I tell a story I permit my fancy its sleights, just as my hands have their sleights when I bring my dolls to life. I hope you won't examine them so critically."

"Oh, but I should like to see how they work? Can't I?"

"How they work? Perhaps I don't work them—only create the illusion in you. You must come half−way and believe what the showman wants you to believe."

Clare jumped down from the rock.

"I had rather believe you are a true magician and not a showman. You will have gathered herbs to touch my eyes with when I come tonight."

They parted and he watched her hurry away through the fading winter light until the brown trees hid her.

It was a little before midnight when Clare slipped once again out of the Prefects' Room window. It was a clear night with a half−moon just rising and beginning to shine on the thin crust of snow which crunched loudly under her feet. She ran across the light field of snow until she reached the shadow of the copse by the wall and there stood a moment to regain her breath. The night was quite windless. There was not a murmur from Brackenbine wood. She groped her way behind the beech−tree and felt for the snow−covered ledges of the buttress. It was very dark under the trees on the other side. She raised herself on to the coping and peered about for a sign of Niall. She had scarcely straddled the walltop when a feeble ray of lamplight shone out just below her and a low voice said: "Well done! Punctual to the minute!"

She saw that a short roughly−made ladder had been placed against the wall. In a moment she was down and Niall was pushing the woollen cap back from her forehead and laying his cold cheek against hers.

He led her by the hand, winding swiftly among the trees, finding his way without the aid of the lantern. He went with such swiftness and sureness through the dark wood, and, drawn on by his strong arm, Clare seemed to move with so little volition of her own, that her course was like those she had made through the Captain's wood in her dreams, and she half−looked to see the darkness change to a dream light and show her that these trees whose thin fingers stroked her were the girls of her dream spreading their foliage−tresses about them.

The darkness did lighten; they had mounted by a slanting path some way up the hillside; the trees receded and the sky was open above them; near at hand Clare saw an even slope of snow glittering in the frosty moonlight. It was some moments before she realised that the regular, smooth incline was the roof of Brackenbine House. Niall laughed softly.

"We'll not disturb my mother. I'm taking you in by the skylight."

He scrambled up the slope and disappeared through the skylight, which was propped open. Then his head and shoulders reappeared and he held out an arm. Clare grasped his hand and clambered up. He guided her feet as she turned and wriggled through the opening, and she found herself standing beside him on a low table which was set below the skylight. Wood embers still glowed on the hearth at one end of the studio and the air was warm.

Niall stepped down and opened the shutter of his dark lantern and threw the yellow beam up and down the long room as though making sure that all was in order. Clare came down from the table looking about her, a little puzzled and disappointed to find that the room was exactly the same as when she had seen it before: there were no special preparations for the show. Niall lit one of the reading lamps and blew out his lantern. He carried the lamp forward to the end of the room where the curtained window was and set it down on a stool

there. Then he turned and beckoned to Clare.

"I kept the fire in," he said, as she came and stood near to him. "You'll not be cold?"

There was a curious, suppressed excitement in his whisper which communicated itself to her so that she could not trust herself to speak, but only shook her head. Very gently he unwound the scarf from her throat and unbuttoned her coat. His fingers seemed nervous and clumsy; but when she had slipped out of her coat and pulled off her cap he took her in his arms with his old sureness.

"You've not forgotten?" he asked. "I said I would perform a ceremony—a ceremony of bondage. Do you want me to?"

She nodded.

"No, but you must say you do," he insisted. "It is a ceremony of great power. Unless you undergo it willingly, gladly, it is no use. It will fail."

It seemed to Clare that her willingness or unwillingness was without meaning. She had no will, and wanted none; his firm embrace about her was all she wanted; but it was delightful to obey him and so, when he repeated his question, urgently: "Are you willing?" she smiled and answered, "Yes, I am."

With one hand he drew aside the curtain and revealed the window and the deep wooden seat below it. He moved her towards it and seated her there with her back to the window. Then he stepped between her and the lamp and bent over her. She felt a keen breath of night air on her neck and shivered. "It's only a moment," he whispered. With a firm pressure of his left hand he bent back her head until she felt the edge of the opened window−frame just behind her left ear. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him pick up with his right hand from the window−seat a small instrument that glinted. His right hand brushed her cheek and she felt a sharp prick in the lobe of her left ear. She uttered an exclamation of pain in a startled, little−girl voice, but he caught the hand she lifted and held it fast.

"Don't touch it," he commanded with such momentarily fierce authority that her protest died away and she sat as still as a cowed child.

She saw him take from his pocket a small glass tube in which there appeared to be two or three tiny slivers of wood. He took out the stopper and pressed the mouth of the tube to the lobe of her ear where it smarted. At the same time he recited in a loud voice something in the same incomprehensible jargon that she had heard when he drew the circle round her in the wood and lit the candles on the Christmas−tree. Now, he seemed to speak over her head, out to the cold night through the open window. He plucked the tube away and released her, stepping back and laughing softly.

"There, it's over. Did I hurt you?"

She felt her ear and, bringing away her hand, saw a tiny smear of blood on her finger. She looked wonderingly at his hands, but the phial had disappeared into his pocket again.

It had hurt for a moment and it still smarted slightly, but she did not mind. It was a queerly pleasurable smart. She smiled and shook her head. "No. At least—yes— but it doesn't matter."

He shut the window and pushed the catch firmly home.

"Now," he said, "the puppet−show. Let me make you comfortable. I shall have to leave you."

While she still had not brought her thoughts and feelings into sufficient order to enable her to ask what he had done to her ear, he gathered a few cushions together in the window−seat and bade her sit still there and watch through the window.

"But on no account try to open it," he instructed her. "And don't make any noise. I shall turn the lamp out because otherwise you won't be able to see what goes on outside, and don't light it again until I come back."

He drew the thick curtain again, shutting her in the window recess as it were in a little room. Then he turned out the lamp and she heard the faint sounds of his climbing out through the skylight.

She gave all her attention now to what lay beyond the window. The moon had risen high enough to throw its light down into the steep−sided hollow that enclosed the old Captain's miniature park, but at the same time the tops of the rock walls and the trees that crowned them were lost in the dark blue gloom of the night, so that the illusion of looking into a distant valley surrounded by tremendous cliffs was complete. Over all tonight lay the pure snow on which the frost−fires glinted palely under the moon; the undulations of the landscape were smooth under that white coat, and the ancient trees upheld on crown and branch a white burden. Clare let her eyes wander slowly over the whole prospect, charmed by that white quietude and the delicate radiance of cold

lights reflected. The coppices were etched in grey and sepia against the white field, and the thicker wood in the distance was a grey cloud; behind it, barely distinguishable against the shadow of the cliff, was the denser darkness of that rough pile she called the Castle. Tonight, distincter than it had been in the daylight when the mossy sward was all green, she noticed below the far slope that led up to the thick wood a pond whose frozen surface blinked like steel in the moonlight.

Shut between the heavy curtain and the tightly−closed window Clare could hear no sound of movement either inside or outside the house. She wished Niall had not left her alone—although common sense promptly reminded her that he could not sit with her and work his puppets at the same time. It was not that she was afraid—or not exactly so, she told herself; but she was constantly looking for Niall nowadays, and missing him was as strong as a simple physical want like hunger or thirst. The need to have him near her had become doubly strong tonight since his firm holding of her head to inflict that swift, small wound on her. The wound itself had ceased to smart but she felt a kind of general, tingling excitement that verged on fear—that needed him to calm it.

She pressed her forehead against the cold panes, aware that she had been musing a long time. She wondered how long still it would be before the show began, and then, with a start, she saw that it had begun already.

Some tiny yellow points of light had appeared in the black mass of the Castle behind the wood. They remained steady, as though they were lamp−lit windows; but some others winked and flitted within the wood itself, exactly like those she had seen that first night of all in Brackenbine wood, but more than this, there was movement by the pond at the foot of the snowy slope. Figures were moving there, very small and distant, gliding and turning across the frozen pond with the unmistakable motions of skaters. In the deceptive moonlight the effect was perfect; the action of the little figures was as smooth as that of living persons. She stared and stared, trying to make out the details more plainly, but the motion and the faintness of the light defeated her. Sometimes she fancied that she could discern the lift and flow of a flared skirt and a swinging of long hair as a figure pirouetted, but she could not in the end have surely said whether the figures were male or female; all she could be certain of was that they were moved with consummate skill; but, again, how, and from where, she could not possibly make out. Before she had fairly begun to think about the mechanics of the show her attention was distracted from the skaters by more lights. These began to shine among the thinner woods and coppices on the left of her view. She remembered now that in the daylight she had noticed a drive coming down in that direction, and in a little while she saw that these new lights were lanterns borne by some kind of procession moving through the trees obliquely towards her. Soon, dim shapes were visible crossing zones of snow between the trees, appearing and disappearing. Then a group definitely emerged from the trees and turned, moving as if it would cross the open field of snow immediately in front of her window.

It came nearer and she could not suppress an exclamation of amazement and delight. It was a perfect little sleigh drawn by two horses which trotted and tossed their heads and swished their tails—or appeared to do so— with all the freedom of living animals; two lamps threw a mellow splash of light upon the snow and above them sat a tophatted driver holding whip and reins. Behind him, in the boat−like body of the sleigh, there seemed to be two figures warmly muffled up in furs. Clare gave them but a hasty glance, for more wonders followed: a cavalcade of riders, and then more sleighs. The riders were the most wonderful of all, for not only did their horses trot with as convincing an action as the sleigh horses, but the riders themselves moved in their saddles, lifted their arms, appeared to incline towards one another, as if conversing together. Their motions were indeed so life−like that Clare could almost fancy she heard faint voices and laughter mingling with the crunch of hooves and the jingle of sleigh−bells.

The light from the lanterns some of them carried, from the sleigh−lamps and from the half−moon, was strong enough to show Clare the details of these figures' dresses, though, again, too uncertain for her to distinguish the mechanism of their motion. They were gorgeously dressed, some in scarlet, some in blue coats, some with three−cocked hats laced with silver, some with black peaked caps like a huntsman's, some in white breeches and boots, some with great shining black jack−boots that came half−way up their thighs like and eighteenth−century cavalryman's. Their horses were as diverse in colour as their own costumes: black, grey, bay and chestnut and skewbald. They kept no particular order but rode sometimes in a bunch behind the leading sleigh and sometimes separated into twos and threes to accompany the other three or four sleighs.

Clare could not be sure how many of the little figures there were, but it seemed a party of not less than thirty or forty.

The procession went at a lively pace across the open area of the park in front of the window, and when they had nearly reached the trees on the other side they turned about and crossed Clare's front again, this time coming nearer still to her window. She looked intently at the leading sleigh and the four or five horsemen who accompanied it and who were made to move as if they were chatting with its occupants. Horsemen, she had assumed, from their dress, but now she was not sure that some of them were not women or girls: she saw long hair escaping from under the caps of some of them and spreading on the shoulders of scarlet coats, and it seemed to her that some of the figures had a softly feminine shape. She remembered now what Niall had said about creating an illusion: he had selected exactly the right light for his purpose and aided it skilfully by his use of little lanterns in the puppets' hands. In that strange mingling of lantern−light and moonlight, of cold radiance from the snow and soft blue shadows, there was movement enough to trick the eye into believing that the faces of the puppets themselves were animated: Clare could have sworn that she saw their expressions change, saw them laugh and move their lips and eyes—and yet there was a veiling dimness over the whole scene that was sufficient to soften and blur the mechanical jerkiness with which they must in reality have moved, and prompt the spectator's eye unconsciously to fill out and complete the imperfections of their forms and motions.

Clare had never seen any spectacle in all her life like this, and had never imagined that puppets could be brought to such perfection. She did not realise at the time, though she reflected on it later, that the very elaborateness of the puppets' costumes and the fine detail of their finish was part of the trick, for by engaging the eye with those attractions the showman might distract it from the mechanism of the show.

The leading sleigh passed in front of Clare again. The riders who were with it suddenly spurred ahead and gave her a glimpse of two figures of a man and a girl; and just before the sleigh turned the figure of the girl seemed to throw back the edge of the fur rug and Clare for a second saw a laughing face and a bare shoulder and arm, and caught a sparkle of jewels at wrist and neck. The puppet turned with an extraordinarily smooth and graceful motion to its companion, whose scarlet−sleeved arm then encircled the gleaming shoulder and drew the head of thick brown hair down to his breast. Then the sleigh, and after it the whole procession, turned up the middle of the park and went swiftly between the gentle waves of snow to the hollow where the pond lay.

There they halted for a moment or two and Clare now saw the figures of the skaters more clearly as they came up from the ice. Though diminished by distance they were recognisable in the light of the lanterns as girls clad in short fur−trimmed frocks. Clare even caught the glint of the skates swinging from their hands as they approached the main party. They appeared to greet the riders and the people in the sleighs, then mounted the sleighs with them. The whole body then formed into a procession once more and sped up the long slope in the distance and soon was lost in the darkness of the wood. Clare gazed after them until, one by one, the yellow fights in the top of the Castle went out and there was nothing to be seen except the cold, still moonlight on the snow, the grey and brown blur of the woods and the vast looming shadows of the cliffs behind.

Clare sat on in her window−recess, held in a muse of wonder by the animation of the pleasure party that had passed before her eyes. She was entranced by the gaiety and the liveliness and colour of the spectacle and, so completely had she accepted the illusion, she felt a pang of envy of those happy little figures in their companionship. The suggestion of enjoyment was so strong: as in her dreams when Niall had been away, a laughing throng had passed by her, crowding away to the Castle where there was mirth and music and gay revels in which she should have had her part. She should have been one of those little figures in the sleighs. Her second's glimpse of the beautiful young girl with her lover in the leading sleigh was most vivid now in her memory and, in a strange perturbation of feeling, she realised that the girl's face, the movement of her arm and the toss of her brown hair were not only life−like but familiar. Somewhere she had seen that lovely, laughing face turned in just that manner towards someone; somewhere she had seen those brown eyes sparkling for their lover. She had known them, but where and when escaped her; it could only have been in some episode of those crowded dreams.

A soft thud and a noise that was half purr, half growl, recalled to her immediate reality. She drew the

curtain and felt Grim brush against her legs. Then there came a scuffling and scraping noise and Niall's voice called softly: “Here I am again! Wait, I'll make a light.”

Soon a match spurted and Clare was blinking in a lamplight that seemed excessively bright and brassy after the soft, elusive radiance of the snow theatre outside. Niall looked at her in high delight.

“Well?” he whispered. “Did you like them?”

She could not find words to express her wonder. All her vocabulary of praise seemed clumsy and inadequate for a performance of such delicacy and mastery.

“I'm glad you weren't disappointed, anyway,” said Niall, laughing with pleasure at her praise. “I thought you might have been expecting a sort of play, and the best I could do was a parade. I told you my interest is in making these little things and making them move. I have no idea how to produce a play with them.”

“Ah,” she said quickly. “It was more than a play. It was just like a few minutes of the life of a gay crowd of people. I might have been looking from a window into a real park with a big house−party out for a midnight drive in the snow and all streaming back to supper and dancing in the Castle. I mean, it was so real, I did believe that they had been living before I saw them and were going on living after they disappeared among the trees. Oh, it's hard to say what I mean, but while I was watching them I was sad that I wasn't with them, that I hadn't been invited to their party.”

“Were you?” he asked, drawing her close to him. “Were you, my beloved?”

She stroked his hand. “Yes. And yet I'm grateful. It's so odd a thing I feel about you Niall dear. I feel so many, many things all the time and yet, under them all, there's one constant thing: it's a kind of humility, a kind of humble gratitude, and I don't know whether it's gratitude to you or to the kind fates that made me meet you.”

“I know. I've felt like that to the fates who brought you over our wall that very night when I happened to be on that side of the wood.”

“No. It's different for me. I mean, I might have been any girl just happening to have the enterprise to climb out of school because she hated it—and they all do hate it. But you are so rare a person; you have so rare a skill, and all this strange knowledge and learning and power. Why, why should you care for a plain, dull girl like me?”

He took her face between his hands and tilted it to his own.

“The short answer is that you are neither plain nor dull. And what's all learning but a candle compared to the daylight of a loving eye, and what's the rarest artificer's skill beside the living body? I love you, and that's the sum of all that I could ever say of you; but still, there is a corollary: I want to please you, to make you as happy as you thought my little puppets were tonight.”

“You have. You have,” she said.

“Yes, but there might be a keener and completer joy than that. If you were constantly mine—if I could possess your heart for always and convert you to be a dweller in that rare world I love, beyond the dark wood; if I could take you there, under the immortal boughs...”

“And go up to the enchanted Castle together, to the music and the dancing,” said Clare. “Ah, but you would have to lead. You already know part of the way.”

“And would you follow?”

“Happily. Oh! so happily. I couldn't choose but go. All my happiness now is in doing what delights you. The very air I breathe is full of your enchantment. Only keep me bound by your spell. Let nothing break it.”

He caressed her ear very tenderly, touching the place where he had pricked it.

“You shall go to the Castle beyond the wood,” he murmured before he kissed her. “I do know the way and you shall ride there prouder and happier than any of those you envied tonight.”

They parted at the foot of the wall by his rough ladder. He touched her ear once more before she climbed up.

“Does it hurt now?” he asked.

“I can't feel it at all,” she admitted. “What did you do? Did you put something on it out of that little tube?”

“That's a secret,” he grinned. “I might have put something on it. I might have taken something from it.”

She rubbed it. “It seems to be all there, anyway. You couldn't have taken anything much except a drop of blood, and you're welcome to that. You won't work much of a spell with just one drop!”

She climbed to the wall−top and paused for a moment there before dropping down on the Paston Hall side. “Who knows?” he answered softly. “One drop may be habitation enough for the whole spirit.”

6

It was so delightful a thing to be in love. The symbols Clare used to herself and to Niall to describe her feelings, the fictions she played with for her pleasure and his, came to be a little more real to her than the bricks and mortar of Paston Hall and the people they housed. What she called the spell within which she lived was indeed a real thing: it made much that had been hidden before visible to her, and at the same time it clad her with a cloak, not perhaps of invisibility, but of unremarkability. She ceased even to be surprised that her connection with Brackenbine aroused so little interest in the school. The Sixth Form knew of it, but they appeared to accept it as something settled; she had no prying questions to counter. Miss Geary recovered from her cold, but she did not resume her walks to escort Clare back from Brackenbine gates in the afternoons, and Miss Sperrod seemed not to give the perils of that half−mile of lonely walk another thought. No one mentioned Niall's return to her: it seemed not to have become known. Clare would never have thought it possible before that she should enjoy such freedom at Paston Hall, but now it seemed a natural and inevitable part of the immensely greater freedom on which she had entered with Niall.

It moved her profoundly to see that he also had the same need to be near her. She found, to her delight, that in the weeks following the puppet−show very often Mrs. Sterne would have made a fire in the great drawing−room instead of in the dining−room in the afternoons; and Niall would be there, deep in a chair, pretending to read, but in reality listening to her and watching her, and heightening for her all the sweet enjoyment of those afternoons. Sometimes his mother would vainly urge him to go away and not distract Clare, and Clare knew from the meaning mock−seriousness of her tone then that his mother was aware of what was between them. Sometimes now, too, she caught Mrs. Sterne looking at Niall with a kind of warning watchfulness, and she herself would occasionally look up to meet eyes full of a sad compassion. There were little manoeuvrings, too, to prevent Niall and Clare being very long alone together—small acts and hints that told Clare plainly that Mrs. Sterne was discreetly chaperoning her. Clare laughed to herself. She knew Niall far better now, she was convinced, than his mother did. She felt boundlessly safe with him.

One result of Niall's presence at their lessons was that less Latin was done than formerly. But Clare's education advanced in other ways. Niall would often have his sketchbook with him, and Clare, stealing a glance at him, would see his pencil busy. By and by, at tea−time, she would ask to see what he had done and would find a page or two covered with little studies of herself. To her they seemed works of high professional skill and her exclamations of admiration would lead on to protests from him and comments from his mother until the afternoon became an artclass, or at least a lecture on drawing by Mrs. Sterne.

With what seemed to Clare a curious touch of jealousy she would dismiss Niall's sketches and show her own paintings. Sometimes the Latin lesson would frankly go by the board. Mrs. Sterne would interrupt Niall with a disparaging criticism before he had well begun to sketch Clare; an argument would develop and they would all go up to the studio and turn over books of reproductions and bring out old canvases of Mrs. Sterne's.

“You mustn't admire our work too much,” Mrs. Sterne said. “Niall's stuff is bad. He merely does what a ten−and−sixpenny camera can do better. Study the great painters—the *good* painters. I am no real artist either, I think. Perhaps my bent was for decoration: I should have painted flowers on china and designed patterns for fabrics.”

But Clare was not convinced. Mrs. Sterne had painted Anne Otterel and discovered a beauty in her that Clare, well as she had known the living woman, had missed. The loveliness of that eager and awakened face moved Clare with such strange emotions now that she could not bear to look upon it long.

There were other paintings of Mrs. Sterne's that the now recognised at once: the original designs of Niall's puppets. There were many studies of horses that he must have used, and there were paintings of handsome gentlemen in cocked−hats and full−skirted coats, and young ladies in elaborate rich gowns or luxurious furs, with jewels on their bosoms and in their hair; girls, too, in boyish riding costumes, and boys splendidly attired in the satins and velvets and gold lace of royal courts of former ages. There were many studies and sketches for historical costumes—a whole theatrical wardrobe for the puppet company; and Clare, even with her small knowledge, could see how much that was rich and gorgeous had been extracted from the great painters to robe

Niall's little figures.

Niall, looking over Clare's shoulder at these drawings, sighed.

"My mother does her part perfectly. But in my department, how mockingly execution still parodies design!"

Clare stopped herself just in time from reminding him how perfectly he had created an illusion the other night. Instead she said she would like to see some more of his puppets.

He smiled. "All in good time. I've been lazy. I must make some more. Mother, you must design apparel more splendid yet to dress the best of all my puppets—the one I'm going to make for Clare."

His mother did not answer. Niall showed Clare drawers full of scraps of rich and pretty materials that his mother had collected and many tiny costumes begun and left unfinished. Mrs. Sterne seemed less interested than he.

"You'll have to make the next yourself," she said to Niall brusquely and with a note of rebuff that Clare would not have expected from her. "It's such fine work," she explained to Clare. "It tires me now. Perhaps one loses enthusiasm and wonders whether the result is worth the labour—or whether that kind of result ought to be achieved at all."

"Oh, but surely, to make something so beautiful and original..." Clare began.

"Yes," said Mrs. Sterne. "If beauty were the only law and the passion to create were not in some sense a sin of pride, it might be so." Her smile puzzled Clare by seeming too sad for the toys they were discussing, and her tone too grave. "If beauty were right as well as truth it might be all we need to know. The pity of it is, we understand our errors, or our sins, only when it's too late to rectify them." She had turned to Niall. "But at least we can cease. We can go our ways and sin no more. I don't think I shall make anything ever again."

Mornings and evenings at Paston Hall Clare spent diligently at her books. She had no study of her own—Paston Hall was not big enough for that; but all the forenoon, when the Sixth Form were in class, she might have the Prefects Room to herself. She settled down there one morning about three weeks after the beginning of term with a whole day's programme of study before her. She was not going to Brackenbine that afternoon. Mrs. Sterne had told her the previous day that she would have to go into Pentabridge and would be late back. Niall had given Clare a look that plainly invited her to come all the same; but, dearly as she would have loved it, to go there openly in daylight when Mrs. Sterne might be known to be away was too great a risk.

It was a cold, wet morning, and Clare was annoyed to see that the Prefects' Room fire had gone out. The rule was that the fire was not lighted in that room until evening; by persistent agitation Clare had got the rule changed in principle, but in practice it needed constant vigilance on her part to see that the maids did make the fire in the mornings. She put down her books and went to the housekeeper's room where, after some argument, she obtained a promise that a maid would come along and relight the fire. With that she returned and buried herself in Victor Hugo.

The maid came after long delay and spent an even longer time incompetently stuffing bits of newspaper and not very dry sticks between the bars of the grate. Clare was too used to the Paston Hall system to interfere, though she could have made the fire anew herself in half the time. At last, and as it were in spite of the maid's teasings and potterings, a little flame established itself on the heap of coal−dust with some promise of permanency. Irritated by the girl's snuffling and exasperatingly slow tearing of sheets of newspaper, Clare told her to go and leave it alone.

The fire burned up slowly and Clare accomplished a couple of hours' solid work on her French Romantics. She yawned then and stretched and got up to spend a few minutes by the fire before changing to another subject. The maid had done her job in a slatternly fashion, scattering bits of burnt stick and paper all over the hearth and leaving her unused newspapers strewn on the hearthrug. Clare gathered them up and dropped them behind the coal−box. A torn half−sheet of the *Pentabridge Independent* fluttered loose, and as Clare picked it up again her eye fell on a photograph that she recognised.

That was her first thought; then she realised that she must be mistaken. There was no caption under the photograph, only a paragraph which the maid had torn raggedly across. Clare read:

"It is with deep regret that we report the death from Infantile Paralysis of Margaret Raines, seventeen−year−old daughter of Mr and Mrs. George Raines of White House, Highwood Road, Pentabridge,

who was admitted to Pentabridge Infirmary in a critical condition last Thursday night. Margaret was one of the most promising pupils who have ever attended Pentabridge High School. She not only had a brilliant record in schoolwork and examinations but had a lively interest in the wider field of out−of−school activities. She was an enthusiastic student of Nature and made a special hobby of bird−watching, being a junior member of the Pentabridge and District Natural History Society before which she read a paper which was highly commended by Sir Edward Porter, the Chairman, last spring. Miss Lancing, the Sixth Form mistress of the High School, in expressing the staff's deep sorrow at the tragic news of Margaret's passing, said, 'We all felt that Margaret was destined for a brilliant career. She was highly gifted in many directions. While she was popular in the school and a good mixer, there were fewer people who knew the more sensitive side of her character. She read much and had a fervent love of Nature which led her on many solitary rambles in the woods and fields and inspired her to write reflective poetry full of delicate observation....'"

The rest of the paragraph had gone to rekindle the Prefects' Room fire. Clare looked at the date of the paper and found it to be the previous June.

She had never heard of Margaret Raines before. The people of Pentabridge might have been dwellers in Patagonia for all the contact Paston Hall girls had with them. And yet, she was convinced she knew the face. Even in the blurred newspaper reproduction it was a pretty face. It was framed in fair hair done in two long plaits coiled over the ears. The collar of a white blouse appeared above a school gym−tunic: a Pentabridge High School girl—Clare could not possibly have known her. She might conceivably have caught a glimpse of her if she had been one of the High School girls whom she occasionally no−iced cycling past Paston Hall gates, but her conviction was that this was a face she had dwelt on, not merely glimpsed.

She stared at the photograph and then, suddenly, she had it. She folded the torn sheet hurriedly and flew with it through the school and upstairs to her room. For some time now she had not taken the Christmas−tree doll out of its tissue paper, but she had no doubts about it: the picture and the doll were twin sisters. She snatched the little parcel from the back of her cupboard shelf and unwrapped it. Then she sat abruptly down on her bed with a gasp of dismay.

She was certain that the doll had been undamaged when she last looked at it a week, no, nearer a fortnight ago. She had taken immense care of it. Now it was ruined. Her first suspicion, rushing in with indignation, was that someone in sheer mischief and malice had stolen into her room and gashed and hacked the figure; but that was too wild a suspicion: there could be no one with so crooked a mind at Paston Hall. Then she began to examine the doll more carefully and concluded at length that the damage was the result of some natural action. Chiefly it seemed that the wood had split into many small fissures along the grain; the fine joints had opened into crevices and the paint had come off in flakes. The dress was quite undamaged. Clare could not understand how the wood could so deteriorate in so short a time. There were no hot−water pipes near her cupboard, or, indeed, anywhere in the room. The walls were quite dry; nothing else in the cupboard was spoiled: her tennis racket had been stored there all winter on the same shelf and there was not the slightest trace of warping or splitting on that or its press.

She came near to tears at the disaster and blamed herself bitterly for not having looked at the doll every day to make sure it was all right. If she had noticed when first the wood began to split she could have taken it to Niall and he would perhaps have been able to stop it. And yet, how could she have suspected that it might split? It was the wood of the little trees and he had said he used that because it was so durable. There was nothing she could do now but take it to Niall and tell him just where it had been kept and ask him what had happened and if he could mend it. She must take it this very afternoon. Even though Mrs. Sterne was not at home, she must run the risk; she could not wait another day.

When her distress had abated a little by taking this decision she recalled why she had come to look at the doll now. She opened the piece of newspaper out and laid it and the doll on the bed. In spite of the damage to the figure's face she thought her impression was confirmed. She twisted the doll's long hair loosely into plaits and coiled them to resemble the hair of the girl in the photograph. The likeness was there: she had not been mistaken.

She pored and puzzled over the two things so long that the end−of−school bell caught her still in her bedroom and she was roused from her speculations by the surging rumour of noise from classes set free.

Gingerly, for she was afraid the doll might fall all to pieces, she wrapped it up again and put it away until after lunch. She folded the piece of newspaper small and put it at the bottom of her handkerchief drawer.

She replied to Niall's surprised and joyful greeting that afternoon with a few breathless words and a troubled look. Without more preliminary she pulled the doll from her pocket and held it out to him.

"Why? What's the matter?" he asked, looking from her grief−stricken face to the little parcel. She had found him in the studio; he had cleared the bench and was busily at work on a few oddly shaped pieces of wood. "Look at it," she said in a miserable voice. "I'm so dreadfully sorry. I never thought it might go like that. I had it in my cupboard. Can you mend it?"

He put down the tool he held in his hand, frowned and unwrapped the doll. She watched his face, hoping for a sign that he did not think the damage serious. He stared at the little figure with concentration; took off its dress and examined it narrowly, all over. He was so absorbed that Clare felt he had forgotten her; but at length, with an obvious effort, he wrenched his attention from the figure and his expression changed.

"Oh well..." he said. "I thought from your tragic note it was something much more serious. What's happened to that can't be helped. I told you it was a failure. I expected it to go like that. I'm only sorry because you liked it. But never mind. Look! I'm keeping my promise. I'm making you another one."

He indicated the various small bits of wood, one of which, Clare saw, might be taken to represent very roughly the shape of a human torso. She was relieved at the lightness of his tone and his reassuring smile. She remembered well all that he had said about the doll's being no good, and yet she was mystified.

"Do you know *why* it's gone like that?" she asked. "Would it have been better to keep it in a different place? Or is it because it was a wrong piece of wood?"

"Why," he answered, considering the question, "I don't think it would have made any difference where it was kept. Yes, I expect I chose a bad bit of wood." He looked down at the materials he was working with now. "Though the working of it counts for a lot, too. All this is not so precise and mechanical as you might think. I've learnt by experience—by failures such as this—that if you want to create something you mustn't try to go against the nature of your material. Indeed, I'm not sure that it's right to call this a process of creation. After all, look at that little rectangular block of wood there: one of the arms I want for your figure already exists in that. It must, because it's going to come out of it. I didn't put it there; I didn't create it; all I shall do is free it from the surrounding matter. Then, with such art as I have, bring it into association with other parts existing in other blocks of wood and articulate and animate the whole—if I can. The whole figure exists independently of me: I only serve it, and I can only serve it as the nature of the material itself dictates. I can't force this material to take the shape I wish; I can only work with it if the stuff itself is willing. I say the figure exists before I lift a tool. Who's to say that the purpose—the purpose to move and take on life, or the appearance of life—doesn't exist also, independently of me? This dead stuff is not dead. I mean, not dead in the sense of being static and immutable. Not at all. It can change, as you've seen. It's my art to learn the hidden nature of this matter, to know what you might call its private intentions about the ways in which it will change, and then to follow them. They are complex and hidden ways. It's no wonder if I go wrong sometimes, is it?"

He ended what had seemed to Clare to be a piece of private reasoning or self−justification by looking at her with a rueful smile. "The life so short," he said, "the craft so long to learn."

He opened one of the plywood presses, which was stuffed with his tools, materials and sketch−books, and tossed the doll on to one of the shelves.

Clare picked up one of the pieces of wood from the bench. It was a heavy wood with an extremely close grain.

"I do hope this one goes right," she said. "Couldn't you breathe on it, or something? Cast one of your spells on it to make it obedient? After all you can make human beings do what you want them to. Wood ought to be easier."

"My dolls aren't all wood," he said.

"Why? What else do you use?" she asked, surprised.

He grinned. "What the painter mixed his paints with: brains! The statues of Praxiteles weren't by any means made all of marble. I'd say there was as much of sweat and tears and the wind of sighs in them as there was of stone. There's flesh and blood and spirit in these things I make, and that's where I may go wrong."

“I wish I could help,” said Clare. “I feel it's selfish to make you work so hard just to make a doll for me. Although I shall be proud to have it.”

He suddenly caught up an open sketch−book that lay on the bench. “Aha!” he exclaimed. “I told you the material must be willing and here its willingness appears! I've been struggling with a problem of anatomy here all morning and sighing for a model, and now, pat you come in answer to my prayer. Slip your mackintosh off and hop on that box and hold a pose for me for a few minutes and I'll get the thing right.”

Clare did as he bade her. He arranged her in the pose he wanted, and it seemed to her that her pretence of being subject by enchantment to his will became reality when her body and limbs were ordered by his hands. She dwelt on the pleasure she found in this physical obedience, and when he began to draw her, though she knew that she held the pose voluntarily, yet she was so aware of his power and his pleasure in thus possessing her that she could believe herself fixed there by his command, unable to move, even if she wished it, until he permitted her.

He was exacting. He gave her frequent rests but was determined to make the most of the unexpected opportunity and kept her posing until the light faded. By then he had made two drawings of her full figure and several studies of her head and hands and legs. She looked at them admiringly but with a pretence of criticism.

“They'll do,” he said, with obvious satisfaction. “Not works of art, but accurate representation. That's what I want, and I've never had a chance to draw you properly until today. How glad I am you came!”

“Ah, but it's unfair,” she said, “to make me pose when I'm wearing this old thing. I hadn't time to change.”

She had on her gym−tunic this day instead of the woollen jersey and dark grey skirt which she usually wore for her visits to Brackenbine. All Paston Hall girls held gym−tunics to be hideous; they wore them in the mornings because of the daily gym period and changed at luncheon−time into something which, within Miss Sperrod's regulations, might be made to look a little more becoming.

Niall was busy making tea from a kettle he had boiled on the studio fire.

“Oh? Why?” he said. “What's wrong with it?”

Clare gave a snort. He laughed sympathetically, but while they sat drinking their tea beside his bench he cocked his head on one side and studied her anew, as if he had not been taking her dress into account earlier.

“I don't know,” he said. “I don't say the tunic as worn is beautiful, but the basic idea is good. A few slight changes could give it style. It could be made very attractive. How about this?”

He flicked over a page of his sketch−book and very rapidly drew a girl wearing a tunic. Clare watched, astonished at his speed and skill and delighted with the picture that grew before her eyes on the paper. The young girl he had drawn was lovely, and the modified tunic sat on her with the same free grace and neat lightness as the chiton on the girls of Lacedaemon.

“Ah yes,” said Clare, grudgingly conceding his point. “But I can't imagine Spare−the−Rod approving of a tunic like that! And anyway, you'd have to have the figure for it. That's not me you've drawn. It's more like...”

She picked the book up and moved to the lamp, which Niall had lit, to see the drawing better. It has been on the tip of her tongue to say the name of the girl he had drawn, and in the very instant of recognising her, the name had gone. She had certainly never known any girl exactly like this drawing—and yet there was a teasing resemblance to some good−looking young girl with short curly hair and shapely limbs whom she knew quite well; she was convinced that in another minute the errant name would return to her. While she hesitated he put out his hand and took the book from her and laid it, closed, on the bench. He took her hand and began to talk of something else and she lost the chance to pin the elusive likeness down.

Yet it still teased her, and this time, when she was leaving Brackenbine, she did not lose herself wholly in the delight of his arms and kisses. She pondered while he fondled her hair and stroked her ear where the little sign of his masterdom still remained. It was difficult to frame what she felt she must ask, and when she did find the words it seemed to her quite a different question from the one she had been trying to answer when she looked at the drawing under the lamp.

“Do you always make your puppets from a model?” she asked. “I mean, from drawings of an actual person— like drawing me this afternoon?”

“Why yes,” he said, as if not quite understanding why the question seemed important to her. “A living model's best, but not so easy to get. Sometimes I use photos instead.”

“Photos?” she exclaimed, grasping with relief at something she yet could not clearly define. “Photos in the

papers?”

He gave a short laugh. “Yes. Photos in the papers if I find a suitable one. Why?”

“Oh,” she said, looking up, aware of a curious lightness, as if a burden were lifted from her mind. “Oh, I don't know why I wanted to know. Will my doll be like me when it's finished? A sort of portrait?”

“It could be, my beloved,” he said, kissing her. “It will be, in fact, because I shall have your image in my mind all the time I'm making it. It will be more than like you. It will be you. You are constantly in my mind and heart and you will enter into the wood through these hands of mine.”

She laid her head against his shoulder.

“You must make a puppet for yourself, too, then,” she said. “Perhaps then they would be lovers like you and me and they could go together into the enchanted country where we can't go in reality. Ah yes, you must do that, and then, through them, we *can* join the others in the Captain's park and go to the revels in the Castle.”

He pressed her eagerly to him, binding her with his arms and forcing back her head with an assured dominance.

“I will! I will!” he whispered. “I'll not fail with you!”

7

One breezy Sunday morning a fortnight or more after she had returned the doll to Niall, Clare was walking round the school grounds when she heard her name called anxiously in a rather weak breathless voice from behind. She turned in some irritation, but the girl who was hurrying to catch her up was one with whom it was impossible to be annoyed. It was Reenie Ford, a Sixth Former and a Prefect, a thin, anaemic−looking girl with short−sighted brown eyes and a habitual expression of high seriousness on her pale face. She was notorious for being conscientious beyond all conscience. The younger girls made fun of her; Clare, while avoiding her when she could, did not like to hurt her feelings. She sighed and left the world of Brackenbine in which her fancy had been straying.

It was a world that had undergone some change difficult to define in these last two weeks. It was as though her visits there had become charged with more secrecy and with the excitement of some impending greater adventure which, turn and turn about, appeared delightful and frightening. Three or four times this fortnight Mrs. Sterne had been away and there should have been no visit, but Clare had gone all the same and spent the afternoon alone with Niall. Neither the danger nor the deceit of that deterred her now. She was in full rebellion, committing the most heinous offense that anyone at Paston Hall, she supposed, could imagine, and she had not a qualm of conscience.

Niall had been hard at work on his carving. Alone with him, she watched and tried to help, feeling humbly grateful and pleased when he asked her to hand him a tool or fetch and carry for him. She would busy herself making their tea, moving happily about the house, up and down to the kitchen, feeling that she was at home at last, loving Brackenbine as she had never loved any house before. Niall was making two dolls; he worked slowly and his method was complicated. There were a good many different parts all to be shaped separately, so that it was difficult yet to see what the finished product would be like.

Sometimes she begged to be shown some of the others—the little actors who had traversed the Captain's park so gaily on that white, frosty night at the beginning of term. But Niall was always evasive, putting her off, as it seemed, merely to tease her, but in the end promising that she should see them all as much as she liked when her own was finished.

Once or twice, now that the afternoons had grown longer, he had put down his tools early and taken her out through the studio skylight to ramble about the steep wooded slope of the hill before it grew dark. There she had had a brief glimpse of the miniature park again, looking down from the top of its perpendicular cliffs. Still, from the one point where he let her look down she could not clearly see the Castle: it was largely hidden by the tangled wood of little trees. There was no way down into the park from the hill, so far as she could see. He would neither tell her how he had worked his puppets from outside on the night of the show, nor let her go through the studio window to explore the park for herself. She wheedled, but all she could obtain was a promise that she should be shown the secret when the new dolls were finished.

She had been with Niall in imagination while she marched with great strides round the school grounds this morning, and Reenie Ford was alarmed at the challenging stare with which Clare met her when she wheeled round.

“Clare!” she said, panting. “I'm sorry, only I couldn't make you hear. You walk so fast. I hope you don't mind me disturbing you—I expect you're thinking something awfully difficult out—but there's something important I want to tell you, and now's a good time.”

There were no other girls about the grounds. The bulk of the school had been marched off to church at Halliwell; Clare was allowed to please herself about going, and Reenie was excused because, having weak ankles, she could not manage the four−mile walk. Not far away there was a seat sheltered from the whisking wind, which was blowing Reenie's long skirt and loose blouse about her like clothes on the sticks of a scarecrow. Clare went over and sat down. She wondered, with an internal groan of boredom, what shocking breach of discipline Reenie could have discovered in the Junior School to demand her intervention.

“What is it?” she asked.

Reenie composed herself and began. She spoke, Clare thought, as if she had learnt her piece by heart, like a

policeman in the witness−box.

"It was the night before last," she related. "Friday, at a quarter to three. Well, of course, that would make it Saturday morning, really. So, yesterday morning at a quarter to three—I looked at my luminous watch and made a careful note of the time—I woke up with my dyspepsia. I get quite bad attacks sometimes in the night, you know, and I always keep some tablets in my drawer. I took four tablets with a glass of water and then I thought that I would pull the curtains across because the moon was quite bright and I thought it would help me to sleep if I darkened the room more. Naturally, I couldn't help looking out of the window, and, do you know? I know you'll scarcely believe me, but it's absolutely true: I saw somebody coming across the grounds, towards the school. At a quarter to three in the morning!" Reenie looked at Clare with tightly−pressed lips and gleaming eyes.

"Somebody in the grounds?" Clare repeated slowly. "Last Friday night? It couldn't have been."

"That's what I said to myself," Reenie nodded. "But I put my spectacles on immediately and had another look and there was no doubt about it. Somebody was walking up to the school from the direction of the big beech−tree by the wall. But you don't have to rely on just my evidence. I was so surprised—I must admit I was frightened too—it moved, you know, *furtively*—I woke Elsie up. Elsie Butterfield, you know. We share a room."

"And Elsie saw it too?"

"Yes. Yes, well..." Reenie was a little less confident. "Just a glimpse, I think, because it had got to the corner of the building by then, and it sort of slunk round, close to the wall. But Elsie did say she saw it just before it disappeared, and she was quite awake then."

"I think the pair of you must have been dreaming," Clare said flatly. "There's nowhere where anybody can possibly get into the grounds except perhaps by the gardener's cottage, and then Williams's dog would have raised Cain." Clare could assert that with confidence. They had always given the gardener's cottage a wide berth in their night prowlings long ago. "Have you asked Williams whether he heard anything that night?"

"No," Reenie replied. "We haven't said a word to anybody yet. We discussed whether we should report it to Miss Linskill, but I thought it ought to be done through you as Head Prefect, and Elsie agreed."

Clare was relieved. "That was sensible. After all, there's probably a perfectly simple explanation. I can't believe anybody would be trying to burgle Paston Hall."

"That's what Elsie said. Though there *is* the tennis cup in the Hall. But I don't think this was a burglar, you see, it was the figure of a girl!"

"A girl!"

Reenie looked very gratified at the astonishment in Clare's voice. Clare had been preparing herself to hear the description of a man—the one man who had his night rambles on the other side of the wall and who, Reenie's tale had made her fear, might have extended them now. But a girl—

"Yes," Reenie said, "a girl, or a woman. But I think it was a girl because she had a grey coat on, just like a school coat, and she was bare−legged, unless she was wearing flesh−coloured stockings—I couldn't be sure of that; but it was a short coat. She hadn't a hat on and I think her hair was light, though the moonlight may have made it look like that. It was short, anyway. I wish I could give a better description, but being so surprised, you see, and not having my glasses on at first, and then her slinking round close to the side of the building..."

"Which way did she go?" Clare asked sharply.

"Round the end of the East Wing, you know, turning round the corner of the gym, towards the Prefects' Room...."

Clare jumped suddenly to her feet.

"Good Lord!" she cried in dismay. "What a fool I am!"

Reenie goggled up at her blankly and Clare recovered her wits.

"Look here," she said, lowering her voice and throwing all the importance she could into her tone. "I've suddenly remembered something that may have a bearing on this— something that had clean gone out of my mind until just now. Will you and Elsie keep absolutely quiet about this? Not mention it to another soul for a day or two? Just let me see if my idea's right or not. We may make asses of ourselves if we blab it out before doing our own bit of sleuthing."

"You mean you've got a clue?" Reenie asked.

Clare was already moving away. “It may be—of a sort; I must check it first.”

She hurried back to the school building, ran up to her room, slammed the door and threw open her cupboard. There she began hunting through an untidy pile of papers, old exercise books, loose notes and letters—letters from her mother and father and from old friends departed from Preston Hall. She could not help exclaiming with impatience as she searched, accusing herself fiercely of her own negligence and stupidity. It took her ten minutes to find what she was looking for: five or six pages of a letter stuffed back into the envelope and left largely unread.

She had received it soon after the beginning of term, from Helen Gray who had left school at the end of the previous summer term. Helen had written a gossipy letter about her Christmas holiday in Switzerland and about her settling down to a job in London. It had all seemed a little remote and unreal to Clare then, dwelling as she was, heart and soul, in Brackenbine, and she had not persevered in deciphering all the vile scrawl of ill−shaped, uncertain characters sloping in every possible direction. She had meant to read it all at greater leisure, and she had simply forgotten it. Now, one passage through which she had skimmed, picking out the more legible words, had come vividly back, shocking her like the blow of a hand on her cheek.

She looked quickly over the pages to find the passage:

“Simply marvellous time at [illegible]... last holiday for donkey's years ... drudging in an office now... bookkeeping. Me!!!” Clare dropped the pages on the floor. Now she had it, on the last page.

“Should have told you we met Judy at [quite illegible]. Great fun, she and I and our cousin Harry, and of course, three of us all from Paston Hall, because Jennifer was with us too, we spent a lot of time reminiscing about the Prison House and the Ghoul. Do you know we both said the best things we ever did were those midnight picnics we used to go on, with you and Pamela and the rest of our gang. Jennifer said she couldn't believe you ever did such things because you were such a *serious and dignified* person. It seems nobody ever discovered our way out. Jennifer didn't know about it till I told her....”

Clare spelled all this passage out now carefully for the first time. She pushed the pages back in the envelope. Clearly the secret of the Prefects' Room window had been blown wide open since Christmas.

She considered Jennifer Gray, Helen's younger sister. She was in the Fourth Form and would be fifteen now, she supposed. Clare knew her by sight because she was a conspicuously good−looking girl among a uniformly dowdy lot of Middle School kids. She had naturally−curling, light−brown hair bobbed short, large blue eyes, and a figure that had somehow escaped the gawky stage of development and passed straight from baby chubbiness to a soft and supple grace. Of her character Clare knew next to nothing; she had only an impression, from remarks overheard among the Prefects, that Jennifer was pert, rather spoilt and insubordinate. She might Well be adventurous enough, also, to put to the test what Helen had told her about the ease with which one could climb out of school.

If that were so, Clare sympathised and was inclined to do nothing about it. She might persuade Reenie Ford that the shape she had seen at an eerie hour of the setting moon was a ghost, or—with sudden inspiration—Miss Geary. There was no reason why one of the teachers shouldn't walk in the grounds at any hour she chose, and Miss Geary was known to sleep badly. That would carry conviction. But then, regretfully, she saw that she would have to do something about the incident. While she remained at Paston Hall a private exit would have its uses. If Jennifer and a whole gang of Fourth Formers took to using it they would sooner or later be found out; there would be the father−and−mother of a row, and the end of it would be that Miss Sperrod would have the Prefects' Room window barred as all the other ground−floor windows, except those in the Sanatorium, were. Clare saw nothing for it but to catch Jennifer or her friends in the act and somehow put a stop to their excursions without letting the secret spread any further than it had done.

So, on fine nights during the next week she kept vigil alone in the Prefects' Room. Three nights passed without result and Clare began to be anxious: Reenie was obeying the injunction to silence most conscientiously, but it was obvious that she would very soon want to know what Clare was doing about her 'clue'. There was little risk of Elsie Butterfield saying anything. She was a fat, sleepy, unobservant girl, interested in nothing but bed, mealtimes, and the date of the end of term. Clare was sure she had not even seen the prowler when Reenie woke her.

She caught Jennifer on the fourth night. She had kept awake in her own room until nearly one o'clock, judging it sounder strategy to take her quarry as she came in rather than intercept her on her way out, when

she might produce some more or less acceptable excuse for being downstairs and deny any intention of going out of school. The other nights Clare had watched she had found the fastening of the window in place; still she had waited for an hour or two on the off−chance that she might observe something. This night she found the window−catch undone.

It was a cloudy night, but not raining. She had brought her torch with her in order not to have to switch on the lights, which might be seen shining out across the lawn. She settled herself in the most comfortable of the Prefects' easy−chairs in a position blocking the route from the window to the door, and waited.

She was not very concerned about the shock she might give Jennifer. An adventurer must expect alarms, and there was an even chance that she would have some companions. Clare felt the humour of being on the side of law and order and smiled in the darkness, anticipating the fun of telling the whole story to Niall.

Her mind went, as usual, to Brackenbine. She could open her reveries of Niall at will and find ever new wonders and joys, like turning the pages of some marvellous book. Two hours passed and she was unconscious of any tedium. She looked at her watch by the dim light of her torch shining through her fingers and saw that it was ten to three. The longer Jennifer was out the less likely it seemed that she would be alone; there must be more fun than solitary mouching round the grounds to keep her so long out of bed. Clare prepared to deal with a gang.

It could have been no later than three, however, when she sat up, alertly listening to footsteps outside. Soon there came a scuffling and scratching at the window. Clare listened critically; she and her companions in old days had taken infinitely more precaution and had been much better burglars than this. A gust of fresh, cold air blew on her and someone jumped down into the room very close to her. She rose and switched on her torch, speaking quietly as she did so. Her heart smote her at the great sob of fear she heard.

In the first flash of her torch she had recognised Jennifer Gray, and a glance at the window behind her revealed no one else. Clare lowered the beam of her torch, and keeping carefully between Jennifer and the door, gave the girl a little time to recover.

“Is there someone else with you, Jennifer?” she asked then, in a low, kindly tone.

Jennifer's voice was wildly unsteady. She was almost crying with fright, but her fright began to change to anger as she answered.

“Someone else? Where? There's nobody else! Why are you trying to stop me? What do you mean by jumping out at me like that? What right have you got to spy on me?”

“Calm down a bit,” said Clare. “If you go climbing out of school at night you know somebody *will* ask questions if they spot you. And don't shout. Nobody else knows you're out but me, and there's no need to wake the whole school up.”

“I don't care!” Jennifer retorted, lowering her voice all the same to a furious whisper. “I hate the whole lot of you! And you—*you* —you've got no right, Clare Lydgate...”

“I don't care a hoot what you do, you little ass,” said Clare coldly. “You can stay out catching pneumonia all night as far as I'm concerned, but don't you realise there are other Prefects? I'd better tell you that someone saw you coming in last Saturday morning and reported it to me. You can thank your stars they didn't tell Miss Linskill first.”

Jennifer advanced to her, standing in the pool of light that fell from the torch. She had regained almost complete control of herself now, and when she spoke again her tone was defiant.

“I don't believe you!” she said. “Nobody's seen me. Nobody knows but you, and I know how you know. You're trying to stop me, but you won't. You can't frighten me with Miss Linskill. Tell her! Tell Miss Sperrod! Then see what I can tell them about you. Perhaps you think I couldn't tell them a few things about *you* going to Brackenbine?”

“Brackenbine?” said Clare sharply. “What's that got to do with it? Everybody knows I go to Brackenbine.”

“Yes? Over the wall? At night?”

The vindictive sneer in the girl's voice so roused Clare that she could have slapped her. She controlled herself and said in a hard tone:

“What do you mean? What nonsense are you talking?”

“Oh, you can lie,” said Jennifer, coolly impudent. “You would, of course. You'd have to. But there's no need to lie to me. I know.”

"Know what? If you have the cheek to stand there and tell me to my face that I go over the wall to Brackenbine when I can perfectly well go round by the road every day, I don't know whether you're a bigger fool than you are a liar."

"All right," said Jennifer. "I'm a fool, am I? Well, perhaps you can deny that you went over the wall the first Saturday night after the beginning of term? Perhaps you can deny that they were your tracks I saw in the snow the next morning?"

"Tracks in the snow?" Clare gave a scornful sniff. "You'd better invent some better tale than that."

Her scoffing infuriated Jennifer. Her whispered reply was venomous. "Invent? I'll tell you what you've seen. Perhaps you haven't seen little horsemen through a window? Perhaps you haven't seen someone they all think is dead, alive and riding in a coach? Perhaps you haven't seen people bound by their hair to trees for disobeying *him?* Perhaps your left ear doesn't smart sometimes? Perhaps you don't *dream?"*

Clare fell back against the table. The beam of her torch wavered as her hand trembled violently. Jennifer seemed to have frightened herself by her own outburst; Clare heard her breath coming in sobs and noticed, for all her own distress, that the other girl's legs were trembling. Her legs were bare beneath her short grey coat and she had a new scratch on one knee. Clare watched the red line shudder as the muscles twitched uncontrollably.

She stared, fighting hard against an anguish that was melting her very bones. Never had she felt at once such desolation and such fear. It was not only that a whole solid, happy world had collapsed: if the world of Brackenbine had dissolved suddenly and left nothing but the drab emptiness that existed before, she could in some fashion have endured that sorrow; but in collapsing, it had opened a dreadful gulf from which unspeakable things came clambering out at her.

She shuddered and struggled free of the clutching things. She lifted the torch, and gripping Jennifer's shoulder with her other hand, looked into her face. The younger girl's eyes were wide and terrified. It seemed to Clare that only now was she realising the full horror of what she had said. Faced with that white, appalled look, Clare found some shreds of courage and common sense among her own ruins. First she held her torch close to Jennifer's cheek and brushed back the thick hair from her ear. She saw there, in the lobe, a tiny puncture. It appeared in the torchlight like a little spot of angry red inflammation.

She gave the girl a weak little shake. "Oh, Jennifer," she whispered. "You should not.... You don't know what you've done. I—I understand what you've seen. It's not real. Do you understand? It's not real. It's a bad sort of game. I know I didn't understand at first myself, either. But I do now. I know him better than you. I'm older than you. You must believe me. You must promise me that you won't go there again, ever. Promise!"

"Not go again?" Jennifer cried so wildly and loudly that Clare in alarm laid her hand over her mouth. But the younger girl calmed down quickly. She spoke again in a desolatingly miserable voice. "I don't know. I can't trust you. You might be saying this just because you're jealous. It was all so lovely before. Even—even when he told me about you I didn't mind. I wasn't jealous."

"Listen," Clare implored, almost choking with grief. "I'm not jealous either. I'm trying to help you. Oh Jennie, you know Helen and I were good friends. You know she and I first found this way out. You *can* trust me, can't you? I'm trying to save myself as well as you. I shall have to go again myself—in the daylight. I can do that. It's safe for me. But you must promise me not to go there again at night, ever! Promise me, for Helen's sake!"

"Don't tell Helen." Jennifer had lost all trace of defiance; she was crying a little. "Please don't tell anyone. Oh, please don't try to stop me now. I must go. It's my only happiness now. It's all I have to live for, to be with him. I wanted to be bound. I wanted to have my ear pricked and be his slave. I can't disobey him now. I can't, I can't."

Clare put her arm round her. "I know," she said, and she felt the tears on her own cheek. "I know what it feels like. It has broken my heart now that I know the truth. But it's *not* all you have to live for. Don't let him make you believe that. There's Helen, and your mother and father. He—*he* won't care for you long. He's playing with you like a doll. What he's shown you isn't real. It's all a play."

"That's not true!" Jennifer gasped. "And I don't care. I *want* him to play with me."

Clare looked round the dark room in despair. She could find no human argument to combat the spell whose power she knew so well herself. She was not free herself. She knew that had Niall appeared at the window

then she would have fled to him instinctively as to a refuge, as a miserable and lost puppy to its master. But to feel this child as abjectly enslaved and to have from her the disillusion and the shattering revelation of how she had been beguiled, strengthened some tiny part of Clare's spirit that had never yet completely yielded to the spell. She faced the proof of his power and of his purpose that now came flooding in on her and found in some stirrings of pride and indignation the courage to oppose him.

“Listen!” she whispered. “When have you to go again?”

“The night after tomorrow,” Jennifer whimpered.

“Look,” said Clare. “I shall go to Brackenbine tomorrow. I shall ask him to tell you the whole truth about his puppets and the game he plays with them. I'm not trying to stop you seeing him. I won't breathe a word of this to anyone. I'll shut Reenie up somehow. Don't be angry with me, Jennifer, dear. I know you love him. And I expect he cares for you much more than he does for me. I haven't seen so much of him really. I really do go there to study with his mother. I haven't seen him alone very many times. Now you must go to bed. We must both go. We shall be worn out in the morning.”

She fastened the window, then led Jennifer to the door with her arm about her shoulders. The younger girl was silent, but when, as they parted, Clare asked her again to be friends, she felt Jennifer nod her head against her shoulder and press her arm.

8

Clare did not sleep the rest of the night. By herself, in her own room, she had neither pride nor courage; the aching disillusion conquered all her spirit, and at times, during the long hours until the rising bell, she wept disconsolately. It was a heavier grief than death, and yet it was less credible. To die is common, but to Clare it seemed that no one before her could have been so beguiled by such a cruel pretence of love. She relived in those hours of the early morning every minute that she had ever spent with Niall, and in spite of the testimony of her heart she could not quite believe that all his love had been playacting. Intuition and reason were in conflict: the fact that he had told Jennifer their secret should have been conclusive, and yet reason argued that she must have read more into the younger girl's words than they would bear. He had undoubtedly been amusing himself in some way with Jennifer, but there must be some explanation of that. Clare and Niall knew each other so well now; he must be able to explain the affair to her; there must be some explanation that she could understand and accept.

And all those images of fear, those dawning shapes of terror emerging from the darkness, they must be her own creations, figments of an overworked brain and overexcited feelings. She had gone half−way to creating them for herself by her deliberate pretence of believing in Niall's super−natural powers. The words had been Jennifer's but the suggestions had been children of Clare's own imagination. So she reasoned, and her mind had some comfort, but her heart had none. The load of grief lay on it un−alleviated.

As she turned miserably on her bed she had a physical discomfort, too. Her ear, where Niall had pricked it weeks before, throbbed and burned, just as if Jennifer's angry whisper had reinflamed the little wound. Since the night he had pierced it she had felt nothing there until now. It would be easy to give way to superstitious panic—to believe that he was aware of her rebellion and was reminding her of his power over her. No! she sat up and exclaimed aloud. She was not rebelling against *him.* She loved him. She would believe his explanation of these dark acts. If she only knew what it was.... She must see him again, at once. That was the only firm conclusion at the end of those tormented hours.

Morning and the distractions of daylight life did not lessen the heavy sense of loss and ruin, but they brought Clare a little more courage to face the other fears. Those shapeless terrors were dream things and they dwindled and paled among the familiar activities and chatter of the school. Only the little red spot remained clearly visible on the lobe of her ear and the throbbing, though slight, persisted.

Reenie Ford was quick to notice, with sympathetic interest, her exhausted appearance. Her promise to enlighten Reenie about her 'clue' had been quite driven from Clare's mind. She stared back in blank consternation when Reenie cornered her alone in the Prefects' Room before luncheon, and with mysterious looks and whispers requested Clare's solution. She groped helplessly for something to say and fell back, without much hope, on her earlier inspiration.

“It was Miss Geary you saw,” she said.

“Miss Geary? Oh, I see....” Reenie's voice trailed away on a thin note of disappointment. But the name was persuasive; it summed up all oddities of behaviour at Paston Hall. With relief Clare saw from Reenie's changing expression that the vision she had of Miss Geary stalking the night sufficed; it explained all, and it blocked all further enquiry.

“I see....” said Reenie again, and sadly went her way.

Clare set out for Brackenbine immediately after luncheon. It was a cold drizzling day, and for that reason she was surprised to see the gardener's boy loitering in the road beyond the gates as if he could find no drier and warmer spot to spend his dinner interval in. He was an old friend, now grown into a tall youth, but still apt for small confidential commissions as in the days when he had bought Clare's gang their tea and sausages. He grinned and lifted the peak of his cap when she came up to him, and handed her a letter.

“Squire told me to give it you when you was by yourself,” he remarked, and with a nod sauntered off back to the school gates.

“Squire?” Clare murmured, supposing that he could only mean Niall, though she saw that the note was

addressed to her in Mrs. Sterne's handwriting. She tore it open as she walked on and found that it was in fact from Mrs. Sterne.

"Dear Clare," it ran, "I'm so sorry not to have seen you again before I go. I have to go to Cornwall on urgent business and I don't know when I shall be back. It may be a long time. It's too bad we couldn't finish our lessons, seeing your exam's so close, though I doubt whether the little extra work one does in the last few weeks makes all that difference, and perhaps you know as much as I could tell you now about what we have been doing. I'm sure you'll carry on successfully by yourself. Don't overwork, though, and don't let *anyone* muddle you; you know what you have to do. If you need help ask Miss Geary.

I didn't say goodbye yesterday because I only made up my mind to go this morning and the only good train is the twelve o'clock from Pentabridge, so that I must be off in an hour.

Every success, my dear Clare.

Yours,

Rachel Sterne."

Clare stopped when she had read this. The gardener's boy had disappeared; the lane was empty. She scarcely comprehended what the letter was about, except that she would not see Mrs. Sterne that afternoon. But the thought of doing Latin had been quite out of her mind; she had only one purpose in going to Brackenbine now. Before she reached the house, however, she did see that Mrs. Sterne's letter meant that she was not to go there: she saw also that Niall's instructions to the gardener's boy were meant to give her a chance to avoid letting anyone know that his mother was putting her off.

She approached the old house now with greater agitation than she had ever felt in her life. She had no courage for the coming meeting. Her only allies had been pride and indignation, and both had deserted her on the way through the wet wood. She crept into the little hall, hurt and pitiful, coming to the source of the hurt for comfort.

There was no fire in either the dining room or the drawing−room. She listened for a minute at the bottom of the stairs, but there was no sound from the studio. Slowly she went up and peeped into all the rooms. The house was empty. It seemed that Niall had been working in the studio earlier in the day, for the fire there was still alive and his tools lay about the bench. Clare sat down on a box by the bench and looked about her as if she were seeing the well−known room for the first time, or as if she expected it to have put on some quite different aspect and acquired some quite different contents since Jennifer's revelation. It was a hard thing for Clare to realise that she was not the sole privileged visitor to the studio. It was an absurdly unjustified assumption, she now told herself sadly; indeed, so many of her assumptions about Niall had been absurd and naive. She bent her head and her finger stirred the fine shavings and tiny chips of wood on the bench and her eyes filled with tears.

Jennifer, too, had been happy with him in this room. She, too, had been excited and delighted by the things he could show her: and, because she was a child and her relations with Niall were so different, it had not spoilt it for her to know that she was not his only——Clare looked up, gazing round the silent room as if it could supply the word her thoughts had faltered on. What was she to Niall? She had thought in her simplicity that they were lovers. But was she really no more to him than Jennifer? A sort of live doll whom it amused him to have in his power? He had played at making her his slave. He had done that to Jennifer also. Then Jennifer's words of the previous night came vividly back to her. He had not only played at making love to her; he had frightened her in some way. There had been a real fear of what he could do to her in Jennifer's voice when she cried that she could not disobey him. Could Niall really have enjoyed frightening Jennifer? Could he really have been so cruel as to show her the kind of play her mention of the dead seemed to imply? What had he really made her believe about his power over her?

In her anxiety and in the torment of uncertainty which this waiting for Niall increased beyond endurance, Clare jumped up and walked back and forth in the middle of the studio. On a sudden impulse, as she reached the far end of the room, she snatched the long curtain aside and looked out through the leaded panes of the little window again, upon the ancient dwarf trees. They looked sad under the drizzle; the park, where she had seen a play of such jollity and gay companionship, looked so deserted, so wet and drear in this grey daylight, that her heart sank and she drew the curtain slowly back to hide it.

But her mind was puzzling actively over some of the things Jennifer had said the night before. She paused in her pacing by the upturned box on which she had stood to pose for Niall, and the train of ideas that recollection produced held her still, startled by a discovery: not one discovery, but several. Jennifer was the key to more than one mystery.

She swept her gaze round the studio again: with a definite purpose, now. His sketch−book must be somewhere about. The door of one of the plywood presses stood a little ajar; she went across, swung it back, and began to search among the contents. Papers and books were piled on all the three shelves, but almost at once she found the black−backed sketch−book in which he had made his studies of herself, and, turning the pages she found again the quick drawing he had done to illustrate how a gym−tunic might be worn. Sitting there on the floor she looked at it with new understanding. Beyond a shadow of doubt it was Jennifer; not an exact likeness, but rather the handsome girl that Jennifer might grow into in a few years' time. Niall must have studied her closely to be able to draw this recognisable projection of her so rapidly and so surely; he must have sketched her many times.

The book was nearly full. Clare turned back the pages, beyond the drawings of herself. There, on the pages immediately before those studies, was Jennifer again; the contemporary Jennifer here; drawn with a masterly skill and care, her likeness delightfully caught, her youth and the slight softness and roundness of her figure brought out as if Niall's pencil had loved the lines. She turned over more pages, finding Jennifer in all manner of costumes and attitudes; finding other figure−studies, pages of detail of hands, arms, legs, separate features, careful little drawings of lips and ears and noses which she could not recognise as belonging to any face she knew. Then, near the beginning of the book she came upon a drawing of Anne Otterel.

She gazed at that a long time. She knew Niall's style too well now to be mistaken. He had certainly made the drawing. It was more realistic than his mother's painting of Anne: an exact likeness. He had taken time and trouble over it; the drawing was not such a hasty sketch as he might perhaps have done as a kind of aside while Anne was sitting for his mother. Moreover, she found on earlier pages preliminary studies for the drawing. Niall had given a lot of attention to getting as perfect a likeness as he could. Puzzled, fighting against a conviction she dare not, yet must, admit, Clare sat with the book across her knee and tried to recollect exactly what Niall had told her about his acquaintance with Anne. Jennifer's curious words, too, echoed in her mind, and hard on them came a visual image of something she herself had seen from that very room. It was true, strenuously though she had denied it to herself. The puppet she had seen riding in the sleigh, turning her head with her lover's arm round her shoulders, had been made in the likeness of Anne Otterel. Jennifer had not doubted it, and now, here in these studies of Anne, Clare seemed to have found preliminary drawings for the portrait doll. The question she had wanted to ask him and had not quite managed to express was answered. His puppets were copied from life, they did represent real persons. If Anne Otterel, then also...She quickly opened the book at the beginning.

There she was: the girl of the *Pentabridge Independent,* the Christmas−tree doll that Clare had saved from burning. She remembered her name now, Margaret Raines. There were only two full−length sketches of her. He had drawn her sitting on a stile, her hands clasped in her lap, her long plaits uncoiled and hanging over her shoulders. Unlike Anne and Jennifer, this girl was not smiling; he had caught a dreaming, wistful expression.

Clare had spent a long time looking through the sketchbook and still there was no sound of Niall arriving. Suddenly realising how late it was, she stood up to put the book back on the shelf. She stood there with it in her hands, troubled and unhappy. She had the explanation of something in her hands, and yet the explanation seemed only to propound a darker riddle. She laid the book down on top of a similar one, then, yielding to the urgency of her desire to know the ultimate answer, she slid the lower book out and began to study that. It was filled like the first with figure studies, but there was no one here she recognised. There were both boys and girls, and she had no doubt at all that they were the originals of some of the puppets she had seen. She pondered the matter, with the book open at one page covered with sketches of a young woman she had certainly never seen in the flesh and yet who had some significance for her. One detail of the drawings gave her the clue. The girl in one sketch was wearing a housemaid's cap and apron. Finally Clare traced the association: last Christmas Eve she had listened to some talk of the maid the Sterne's had had the previous year. What was her name? Janet. That was it. Niall had used Janet too for a model.

There were a good many loose papers on the top shelf. She lifted some, when she had put the second book

back, not with any conscious purpose, but because for some reason she could not bring herself to leave the cupboard until the vague idea bulking in the back of her mind should settle into cognisable shape. She raised the loose sheets idly, and had been looking at them for some moments before she actually saw what they were. Then she realised that she held in her hand the working drawings for some puppets. One was a figure drawn to scale, marked off in squares, with dimensions pencilled in; another was of an arm in sections. She sorted them out: they were the drawings for two complete puppets; they were somewhat smudged and bore every appearance of being constantly handled. They were drawn with very clear definition of line; only the ovals of the faces were blank. Yet Clare was convinced that they were the drawings he was working from now. Indeed, one of the figures needed no features to identify it: Clare could recognise Jennifer at once; and the other—she looked with a curious pity and helplessness at the other, for the features that should fill that blank oval would be her own.

She slipped the papers back and closed the door of the press. Slowly she moved away, down the room towards the door, and there, overcome by dread, she turned and ran down the stairs and out of the house, mortally afraid of meeting Niall.

She did not slow down to a walk until she was near the large flat rock where so often she had lingered with him. She leaned against it now, trying to subdue her fears, and to look at what she had discovered coolly and sensibly. “What on earth *is* there to be afraid of?” she repeated over and over, aloud. Surely, she reasoned, Niall's own explanation was simple enough. He wanted to make his puppets life−like; no sculptor, surely, would attempt to make a realistic statue without a living model. What was strange or wrong in Niall using as a model anyone he knew who was willing to pose? She clung to that clear, common−sense explanation, shaking off queer amorphous things that were trying to clutch her and drag her from her hold on safety. She shuddered physically and felt the damp chill of the drizzle penetrate her; bewildered and unhappy that Brackenbine should seem so drear and cold to her, she walked on, out through the gates into the public road.

Before she reached the school gates, however, some lineaments of the obscure riddle had become defined; some of her discoveries had classified themselves according to a common feature and showed her that her sense of something dark and dangerous beyond the seeming common sense of Niall's method was not false. She could accept Niall's casual account of making Anne Otterel's acquaintance as substantially true, though she could guess that he had left a good deal unsaid. He had known Anne much better than he had let her believe. His deception there, if it was deception, did not grieve her. Anne Otterel had died before ever she knew Niall. No doubt Anne had been a little in love with him. They would have talked, have laughed and joked together on those summer afternoons when Anne came to sit for his mother. She was not jealous of Anne. She was only sad for her, sad that it had ended as it had. Niall, too, would have been in love with Anne—or at least, strongly attracted. There was no wonder, then, that he had made a puppet in her image. She could even understand, given his extraordinary absorption in his art, that he would find nothing shocking or cruel in making her image appear to live and play when the original was buried in the cold ground.

Clare could see, too, that chance might have thrown Niall and the Pentabridge girl briefly together. Her form−mistress had told the editor of the *Independent* the one fact that could explain how Niall had met her: Margaret was in the habit of going for long walks alone in the country round Pentabridge. The lonely lane winding round the slopes of Akenshaw Hill would be an obvious attraction to someone who was interested in birds; the gates of Brackenbine stood ajar all the time and there was nothing to forbid a rambler's entrance. Niall would have received a young girl student of Nature with a charming, amused welcome. Clare could see him offering her the freedom of Brackenbine wood; at the same time his observant artist's eye would be learning her face and figure, finding in her a model for a new puppet. Clare recognised frankly now that Niall's art, or hobby, amounted almost to a monomania, so disproportionate as to have squeezed some of the common human feelings, or conventions, quite out of his make−up. A man less intent on his own single purpose would have been more sensitive than to have condemned to the flames that charming little image of a girl whom he had known and who was now dead.

Clare stopped at the gates of Paston Hall, her hands on the cold iron, her eyes on the familiar red−brick jumble of sham Gothic constructions. Some of Niall's puppets had indeed assorted themselves: three of the people he had studied so carefully had one character in common. Anne Otterel, Margaret Raines and the maid, Janet, they had all died, all of the same disease, all within a short time last summer.

9

Clare had come away from Brackenbine with her most urgent task still undone. She blamed herself for the coward haste of her retreat that afternoon. Why could she not have waited for Niall to come? He would have turned up about tea−time. But she knew well that she had not the courage to wait alone with her thoughts, now, in the empty house.

She did not know who at Paston Hall might know that Mrs. Sterne had gone away, and she dared not enquire. She could only wait, trusting that no one would mention the fact to her before the next afternoon. So, somehow, she went through her routine of opening books and appearing to study; but all that evening she was turning over and over the obscure and tangled affairs of Jennifer and herself with Niall, and of Niall with his other models. She could make the facts she knew fall into no sort of significant order, nor point to any acceptable conclusion. All they did point to was a huge, frightening shadow of imminent danger.

Clare's night was as troubled as the previous one; and, as on that night, her ear smarted and throbbed with pain which in comparison with the great bulk of her fears, was ridiculously small, but which was frightening in its petty, persistent malice.

Morning, again, was some relief, for the daylight hours crawled less slowly than the dark. This day she must see Niall; she did not know how she could live through another twenty−four hours if she should miss him again. But she believed he would be there this afternoon. He had told Jennifer to go to Brackenbine this night. Clare never doubted that Jennifer would obey. She saw her during the morning, crossing the Great Hall, just behind a knot of her form−mates. The younger girl's expression was all but beatific; her eyes seemed extraordinarily large and brilliant and there was a settled calm on her face, the tranquil assurance of one who can imagine no bounds to the happiness that buoys her up; Clare recognised that look for the expression of a feeling she herself had known. It proved to her that Jennifer's subjection was complete: heart, mind and body, she was Niall's slave and she was drunk with the honey−dew of the reward he offered for such entire submission.

The afternoon was as cold and dismal as the one before. No one, either teacher or pupil, who saw Clare going out of the building after lunch remarked on her setting out. To her, filled as she was with the strange wrong into which her life had fallen, her deception seemed transparent; but to the school, it seemed, nothing had happened to break in the slightest the monotony of term. She walked at her best speed up the road and along the muddy, plashing ride through the wood. As she stripped off her macintosh in the hall of Brackenbine she saw that this time Niall was at home.

His wet coat lay on the chest in the hall; there were slight movements audible from upstairs, and when she set foot on the bottom step, Grim came bouncing down with complacent little purrs to meet her.

Niall was at his bench in the studio. Her first glance went straight to the loose sheets of paper that lay among his tools there, then to the open door of the press she had investigated the day before. He laid down the tool he was using and grinned.

“By the pricking of my thumbs...” he declaimed. “Or should I say, By the tingling of your ear?”

“You *do* know, then,” she breathed, startled at once into an admission of a belief in his influence over her which she had meant to deny.

“Know what?” he asked, smiling cheerfully, inviting her to come close.. “I know you're angry. That sticks out a mile. I know you know I've been thinking about you— yes, even talking about you. It's a sign of that when your ear burns, isn't it? An old superstition, you know. Come here and let me look at it!”

But Clare halted when she was six feet away from him, resting her hand on the corner of his bench. It was not easy to speak. His mocking tone, and his half−gay, half−malicious smile put something like a wall of glass between them. She looked at the small intricately−shaped piece of wood in his vice at the other end of the bench. The two puppets he was working on were far advanced now. She took courage and looked straight at him.

“Oh Niall,” she said. “Jennifer has told me....”

His expression changed. He looked neither embarrassed nor angry, but concerned and thoughtful. He came

forward, and, taking her by the arm, led her to the end of the room by the fireplace and made her sit in one of the old leather armchairs there. She did not resist, but sat disconsolately looking up at him.

"Why," he asked, after studying her for some time, "why has that upset you so?"

"I don't know," said Clare unhappily. It had seemed to her before that in this interview today she must both reproach him and appeal to him. But it was not like that at all.

"I think I can understand," he said, gently, "and partly guess what's happened. I should have told you before. I don't know why I didn't. A kind of uncertainty, I suppose. It was such a bizarre coincidence. I didn't quite know how to take it, how to put it to you, what to make of it myself. Imagine: not long after I get to know you by your tumbling over our wall in the dark of night another girl from the same place does exactly the same thing. Lord! for a moment when I caught her I thought it *was* you. I believe I let your name slip out before I realised the mistake. But then I find that this child has not come over by accident. In fact, by a little questioning I got out of her that she knew you had been over the wall once since Christmas. The night the snow lay on the ground. She was curious to know what you had been up to. I was puzzled. Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I even suspected at one time that you might have told her something about your meeting me in the wood. What was I to do? The kid's adventurous. All my instincts are against damping that spirit. I wouldn't forbid her the wood. Upon my soul, I'd encourage *all* Spoil−the−Child's little wretches to escape and make free of our grounds if they have the enterprise."

He spoke so frankly, with such an apparently open confession of his mistake, that Clare felt tempted to accept all that he said and think no further into the matter. It would be so easy not to bother any more, just to believe what he said and be taken in his arms. But something nagged at her: he was not telling all the truth; and then, this affair was not just a matter of words in this studio, of an explanation between him and her. He was trying to make her believe that, but there was another person concerned and there were actions, too, that belied these words. She sat straight up and though it wrung her heart to speak so to him, she said:

"Don't lie, Niall. She's told me more than you know. Oh, it doesn't matter to me how she began to come here. You mustn't fall into this vein of explaining—excusing yourself to me for inviting another girl to your house. It's wrong. It puts me in the wrong. And it hurts me. You could have told me that she was coming here at nights, but I've no right to ask to be told; I don't ask...."

He had drawn a little away while she was speaking, and stood now leaning against the other side of the chimney−arch, looking down.

"I'm not insulting you," he said slowly, "by assuming that you have feelings about this that have to be met with lies. In fact I've told you none. That *is* how I met Jennifer, a few nights after I had shown you the puppets here. Chance—or at least, something quite independent of my intentions—brought her here; I dealt with the chance in my own way. Believe me, I'm bitterly sorry that it's a way that's hurt you."

"Oh Niall!" she exclaimed, and the tears started into her eyes. "I'm not, I'm not hurt in that way. I only meant I couldn't bear you to think I was in some way making you say something you should be too proud and independent to say."

A smile did then pass quickly over his features, but there was something bitter in its brightness.

"And yet you are troubled," he said.

She clasped her hands. "Yes. Yes, I am. But it's fear, Niall. I'm afraid. Ah, don't you see that I don't care about myself. I love you, Niall. Nothing can alter that. It's gone too deep. Whatever you do or say, wherever you go, what's happened can't be altered. What has been *is*, for ever. It's what's to come that may still be changed. Don't play with Jennifer, Niall. Do what you like with me. But she's such a child. She doesn't understand. Ah, and think of the risks; she might be found out again, coming here, and I shouldn't be able to cover it up another time. But it's not that only. Don't you see, she believes in it all. She may talk like a grown−up, but she's really a child. You can make her believe anything—you, because she's infatuated with you. But it's heartless. You must tell her—tell her as gently as you can, but tell her, that it's all a game. You mustn't let her believe in it."

Niall had listened to this with his head bent, frowning a little. He looked up now, raising his face until he was looking high over Clare's head, and she saw something like exultation gleam in his eyes and lighten the harsh lines of his face.

"Yes," he said softly, and drew in his breath. "Yes, she believes in it. Ah, the wonder of that swift

comprehension of a child. She has carried over something from the age of magic. That is the thing I saw in her. There *was* something. Something that brought her, too, to Brackenbine. It was not just curiosity. I felt it wasn't. I gambled on that, and I won! I *felt* that remnant of the ancient understanding in her. Did I not tell you that the craftsman must *feel* the willingness of his material? He must know by a subtle sense what he can shape and what he can't. Ah, if only my perceptions were more perfect! Had I the nose for the right kind of blood that Grim, there, has, I should succeed every time. I had no doubts about Jennifer and there was no resistance in her blood. There is such sweet satisfaction when the material and the artificer's hand are so harmoniously intent on the purpose! If you could have seen with what glad obedience she offered her ear to the awl and shed the droplet of life!"

Clare kept her eyes on him with a mounting fear and agony in her heart.

"Oh Niall, don't play with me!" she begged. "I'm deadly serious. Ah yes, it was a delightful game between you and me. I loved your make−believe. But this has gone too far. It's not safe. It's not right. It's—it's not a game any more. You must think what she is. She doesn't exist just in this room, just at the times you see her, at night. She's a schoolgirl; she belongs to Paston Hall, she's got friends, teachers, a sister, a mother and father. She may be quite a different girl to them, you see: just an ordinary young schoolgirl with all the ordinary faults and limitations of her age that every girl has and that you are forgetting about just because you see something in her that attracts you as an artist—that suits your particular game...."

Niall suddenly jerked himself away from the fireplace, strode into the middle of the room and wheeled about.

"Game? Game?" he exclaimed with a sharp impatience. "That's three or four times you've said it. *Is* it a game?"

Clare stood up. She had gone chalk−white at his new tone, and she trembled uncontrollably.

"Isn't it?" she whispered.

He moved back to her, staring straight into her wide, fixed grey eyes.

"Have I played a game with you?" he asked. "Have I *pretended* to love you?"

His intent stare bore down her eyes. The weakness of will and body she knew so well was assailing her again. But she struggled still to cling to the truth and break the meshes of pretence.

"I didn't think so," she said unhappily. "I thought you loved me sincerely. But now I don't know."

With his hands on her shoulders he forced her to sit down once more, and, bending above her he spoke with ardour, but with no tenderness in his voice.

"It is not pretence. I love you. But it is love after *my* fashion, and that's something deeper and stronger and more enduring than anything you have ever known, than anything you could ever know from any other man. These are not fine phrases: they're words that tell the fact. The reason I love you is that you, alone among the girls I've known, can understand such words. Ah!" his exclamation was angry. "Admit without more ado that it's you who're pretending, taking cover behind your daylight, book−fed reason to hide from your own understanding. Does your heart, does your understanding by *night* deny the power I have over you? *Does this?"*

He shot out his hand and seized the lobe of her left ear between his thumb and finger, pinching it brutally. She would have cried out with pain, but no utterance came, only a weak gasp. She could neither move nor speak; the waves of pain flowed through her entire body, seeming to lift her helplessly on their surges, and after a time she ceased even to feel the unrelenting pressure as a pain; it was more a force that coursed through her, spreading busily and brutally into every corner of her body, establishing his domination over every parcel of her being. In the first second she might have fought against the invader, but the power he sent in was too strong and too quick, she was subjugated before the first physical pain could rouse her to battle.

It was a long time before he released her. She had shut her eyes, and when at last the waves began to ebb she thought she must have fainted for a moment or two, for she found herself on her knees in front of him, weakly holding to his legs to support herself, for forehead pressed against his knees. She wanted to rise, but with his hand on her head he prevented her; his hand lay lightly, but it was enough: she no longer had any power of her own. Her mind only was active, and, after the temporary obliteration of every thought and every image from her brain while the waves surged through her, she found a clean simplicity of understanding. The darkness was purged of its terrors as the world may be purged by a great storm, and she saw the whole

complex of Niall's powers and his purpose leached and exposed in coherent, comprehensible order: comprehensible in his own terms but irreconcilably alien to all other experience by which she might have judged his purpose.

The things she had feared were all his creatures and her sole protection, she understood, was in the source of the fear itself. She clung to Niall because he was all the authority and the refuge there was in this new, storm−washed, inhuman world. He was at once the evil and the exorcist; from his hand came both pain and healing; he destroyed and he gave life. She trembled and waited.

He spoke after a time, very calmly, and she sighed with relief to catch a faint tinge of tenderness, or at least friendliness in his voice again.

“You see, you do admit my power. I knew you understood too well to rebel, though there were still some few shreds of wilfulness from the ephemeral world trammelling your true comprehension. I'm sorry. But fear nothing more. Put fear quite out of your heart. There will be neither pain nor fear, nor anything else but joy once the material work is done. And until then, if you will only obey me, you shall live in utter tranquillity, and when the moment comes you shall enter the trees immune from all pain and harm, guarded by a shining circle. You shall dream the days away until then and the nights shall be all a soft delight.”

He spoke slowly, and Clare felt each word dropping into the empty, wave−purged world of her mind and peopling it again, bringing colour and life, populating it with images that lived, though they were his creations. She found her voice again, and asked submissively:

“Will it be long?”

His hand travelled from her head down to the nape of her neck and he caressed her there, stroking her with a strong firm touch.

“A few days!” he said, and she heard the triumph and joy in his voice. He continued stroking her for a few moments, then raised her gently and seated her in the chair again. She sat where he had placed her, like an invalid. The great weakness was still upon her, but she had stopped trembling. Niall moved away and went lightly about the room, laughing, talking, as brisk and gay as she had ever known him. He collected up the small parts of the puppets he had been working on and put them away in one of the presses which he opened with a key from his pocket and locked again. The working drawings he threw on to the top shelf of the cupboard Clare had looked into.

Then, when he had tidied up, as casually and genially as he had ever done before, he remarked that he would make some tea, and began to bustle about, raking glowing embers under the iron stand on which he boiled the studio kettle, getting out tea−pot and cups and saucers from a cupboard in the corner. Clare saw that his confidence in his mastery was complete; nor could she resent it or rebel against it; she had submitted and there was a curious peace now in being entirely his—the peace of conformity, of joining the company of all who had submitted to him, Anne and Janet and Margaret Raines. Yet, though she felt no more anguish, though she knew that he could protect her from everything she feared, when the picture of Margaret Raines came into her mind she felt two tears trickle down her cheeks.

He noticed them, and as he set out the tea−cups he smiled and lifted his brows enquiringly.

“For whom?”

“For Margaret,” she said. “For the one that failed.”

He nodded slowly and sadly. “It was my fault; perhaps I was mistaken. I thought I saw what I wanted there, but I was wrong.”

He paused and stared into the fire, and when he spoke again it was as if to himself. He frowned and muttered:

“Yet it would have succeeded. If she had not refused at the last moment. She let me think she was willing, but in her heart she resisted me. I saw it when I came to put the heart in. The blood had died. But it was too late then.”

He stared a minute longer into the embers, then shook his shoulders and jumped up and began to pour out the tea, throwing off his gloom again and laughing down at Clare.

“I'll not fail with you!” he said. “Or Jennifer. Be glad for Jennifer. She'll both delight and be delighted. There are merry boys among my people who'll give her pleasure she can't imagine now. Ah! wait until her beauty is displayed in the summer woods when the bright streams invite! We'll see her dance, too, in the

courts, between the fountains on summer nights. You'll see her happy then, and you'll hear what laughter comes from lips of unchanging youth, of unimpairable loveliness. I shall have brought my people a flower they'll cherish and rejoice in —for ever!"

"You'll not hurt *her?"* Clare asked timidly. "She *has* been frightened."

He made a gesture of denial, or dismissal with his hand. "Nothing. She's a child yet, and has a child's waywardness sometimes. But there's no real rebellion in her. I shan't need to open up the castle dungeons for her! Some tears and scratches, perhaps, but what are those in an eternity of adventure? There are laws, too, beyond the trees, but I can be a merry judge and contrive my sentences to end in laughter."

Clare sighed. "Yes, she's seen that. You've shown her what happens to your disobedient slaves, I know. And she accepts it. She's glad to be under your rule. I expect she'd fawn on you if you punished her. We're slaves already. You have our minds now. What does it matter what you do with our bodies?" Her tone was quiet; her words were suited to the naked, rain−washed bones of truth she saw so clearly now.

"And is that a little thing?" he rejoined with energy, throwing back his head proudly. "Is it a little thing to live under my lordship? I tell you I shall set you free from your servitude to Time and Change, and when you have found that freedom my chains will be bonds of flowers, my laws as light as the brilliant air, and you will put on my livery as gladly as the tree puts on its leaves in spring."

He jumped up and began to pace about the open space in the middle of the room. Grim joined him with one bound and trotted close at his heels. Niall threw a glance up at the skylight. The day seemed lighter now than when Clare had come, as if the fine rain had stopped and the clouds had parted.

"It is too long, too long already!" he exclaimed. "And here I am wasting hours of daylight!" He swung about to the bench and stopped short, as if he had forgotten that he had cleared his work away. Then he pulled his keys from his pocket and threw open the locked press and began taking the things out. Clare felt that he had dismissed her. She rose, but could not go until he gave her some order. Seeing that he took no notice of her, but bent busily over his vice, she approached and looked at his work. He neither forbade her nor invited her, but after a while, when she picked up one part of a puppet that was lying on the bench, he straightened up and watched her as she examined it.

She handled the thing with a queer, timid care now, as she would have held some small animal in her hands. It was the torso of one of the puppets—Jennifer's—and it was almost finished; the hair was fixed, though un−trimmed yet, and the features were carved. The body seemed to lack only painting, but towards the left side, below the breast there had been drilled a round hole half−way through the body, of a diameter such that a large pea would have entered. Clare put her finger on the mouth of the hole, touching it wonderingly, concerned, as if it were a wound. He smiled.

"That will be filled," he remarked. "That's the last job of all."

She watched him for a long time in silence as he worked. Her interest was intense, but she felt no excitement, no apprehension, even, any more; only a calm patience within which she could admire dispassionately the exceedingly fine workmanship of all the little figure's intricate joints, the grace of its lines and the surpassing skill of the long fingers that worked on them.

By−and−by her eyes strayed to the press where he kept his work. She had never seen inside it before, for it was always kept locked. Now she observed that things were kept much more tidily in it than in the one where he put his sketch−books. The top−shelf seemed to be occupied by pieces of glass apparatus, small retorts and tubes held in wooden stands—small stoppered tubes such as she had seen in his hand once, containing some tiny blobs or pellets of dark stuff. On the shelf below were stacked many pieces of wood of varying shape and sizes, and in the front, something that impelled her, with a sharper curiosity to move closer and examine it: another puppet torso, less finished than Jennifer's, but still, nearing completion. Then, in looking into those small, exquisitely fashioned features, some more active feelings of pity and fear began to constrict her heart. It was herself she was looking at, or the thing that she would be when she had ceased to be herself. It was she, and yet not a perfectly true likeness: she would wear a fairer form, she saw, than in this life. Hesitantly and fearfully, she put out her forefinger to touch that small hole in the breast, the hollow where the heart should lie. He came across then and, mistaking what she was looking at, said pleasantly: "Has the Captain's coach taken your eye?" She drew back, uncomprehending. Then he bent and showed her something at the back of the shelf which she had missed in her concentration on her own doll. It was a most elaborate model of a

coach—a massive vehicle in the style of the seventeenth century, richly carved and gilded and provided with complete sets of tiny harness so finely stitched and riveted that Clare could scarcely believe it to be the work of ordinary human hands. Jennifer's words sprang into Clare's mind, and her eyes grew wide with fear; but the coach was empty now. Niall opened the door to show her the inside, stroking the upholstery with the tip of his finger, but Clare dared not touch those cushions, knowing full well what form Jennifer had seen reclining on them. Niall exhibited all the coach to her, handling it with loving care, bidding her admire it.

"Did you make it?" she whispered.

He put it back on the shelf, and shook his head.

"No. I only discovered it, buried under God knows what rubbish, broken and dirty. I was fourteen when I found it;—more than a year younger than Jennifer is now, but the day is as fresh in my memory as if it were last week. That's why I showed it to her, in use, in the Park. That day when I was fourteen, examining this treasure that I'd found, I first made the astounding discovery and first glimpsed the power I might acquire, and I swore to myself that I would see the Captain's coach in motion one day. Well, I've seen it many times, but I could never recapture that first amazement and fresh wonder of discovery until the night I saw it through Jennifer's eyes. For that great pleasure she has given me I've promised that she shall ride in it by my side, and she shall have an escort of handsome boys and girls in the finest array, and she shall drive to the ball in the gayest cavalcade that's been seen in all the long years of Brackenbine."

Clare lifted her head and fixed her eyes on him. They were wide, and their troubled grey was as sad as a winter sea under a dull sky.

"Who did make it?" she asked in a voice so low he could scarcely catch the question.

He slowly shook his head. "That's still to be known. Perhaps Captain Trethewy—or if he did not, he certainly knew who did. Perhaps those people who..."

He broke off suddenly, wheeling round towards the door, listening with a frown on his brow. Clare realised that she had been aware of some slight noises below, as if someone were in the hall, but her mind had been so preoccupied she had given them no conscious attention. They both listened now, but the sounds were not repeated. A minute passed, then there was a soft, rapid scuffling and Grim, whose absence they had not noticed, flew back into the room, his tail fluffed out to enormous size and every hair of his body standing on end. He bounded across the studio, up on to a table and from there to the ledge of the skylight, where he crouched down, his ears flattened and his sharp teeth showing in a true wild−cat snarl. Niall looked at him, and back again to the door, listening and waiting.

"What is it?" Clare asked, frightened. "Has someone come?"

"No, no, it can't be," he muttered. Then, after listening still for a few moments, he strode out, and Clare heard him run down the stairs and into the rooms on the ground−floor. He returned in a little while, grinning cheerfully.

"Some enemy of Grim's, I suppose, of his own sort," he said. He went over to the bench and picked up his tool again. "I did think for a moment it might be my mother—though she should be well on her way to Cornwall now and, anyway, he wouldn't have got into that state about her."

Clare watched him work for some time. She had looked at her watch and found that it was time for her to set off back to Paston Hall, and yet she felt she could not move without his permission. He looked up at length.

"Shall I come again?" she asked, in a faltering tone.

He considered the question.

"No. Better not, perhaps." He frowned and looked towards the door again, uncertain about something. "It ought to have been all right; and yet—No. They'll be long days when you don't come, but you had better not take the risk. It might be known now that you have no excuse for coming."

He went down with her to the hall and helped her on with her coat; then, at the door took her in his arms. She accepted his kisses obediently; when she was thus encircled his power was absolute.

"Ah, if there could be no interval," he said. "But the time *is* only counted in days. When we meet again it will be never to part."

Clare walked back along the drive with bent head, seeing nothing. The purpose with which she had come to Brackenbine this afternoon had been utterly defeated, and she could feel no anger at his victory. How could

there be any rebellion in her soul when every thought and feeling she possessed now she had on lease from him? He was incontestably her owner. Even her rebellion against Paston Hall was no longer hers; she could break all the rules now without the least sense of risk or the least doubt of her tightness, for she broke them by his authority. She walked, and it seemed to her that the very motion of her legs was directed by him. She understood all Niall's purpose now and understood, too, the process by which he achieved it. The only wonder to her was that she had ever thought it obscure, had ever turned and twisted in an agony of desire to understand. There was so clearly no need to understand, to rack her brains, to think what to do; for very simply, there was nothing for her to do. Only she wished the next few days were over. They would be a blank, an utter emptiness: she hoped that he would cast a merciful spell of oblivion on her to help her across the nothingness of those days: or, if he would be kind to her, he might fill them with dreams, so that she would be living in the enchanted wood even before her actual awakening among its groves.

She walked on, not feeling the ground beneath her feet or the air on her cheek, or noticing the pale sunlight that now shone on the tops of the Brackenbine oaks. An impalpable but impenetrable sphere immured her. Yet something, some remote, vague disturbance from outside was distracting her. It seemed an age before she could decide that it was some real sound that she was hearing, and as long again before she was well aware that the sound was a human voice, a known voice, speaking her name.

She had stopped, without knowing it, and was standing near the great flat rock not far from the gates. Very slowly, she found her bodily eyes asserting their functions, and little by little the sphere of insulation about her dissolved and she saw a human figure sitting on a boulder at the foot of the bank. It was a grey−haired figure, wearing an old grey coat which showed a tweed skirt and lisle stockings below it.

Clare heard her own voice saying, without surprise, “Yes, Miss Geary?”

The gaunt old lady stuck the point of her umbrella into the ground between her worn brogues. She arched her brows and smiled—the lofty, mysteriously amused smile that the school knew so well.

“You were so rapt,” she said, “I had to speak three times; but what I tell you three times is true; I am convinced that you *are* Clare Lydgate. Where did I bring you back from? Vergil's Rome? Or were you walking in a stranger place, with another guide?”

“Oh, Miss Geary,” Clare said, with a kind of pitiful little appeal in her voice, going and standing near the teacher, “I didn't know you were coming for me.”

“Indeed, I didn't know myself until the rain stopped,” said Miss Geary, looking up and studying her, drawing back her head, as her habit was, as if to get Clare's face in better focus. “I set out quite early and had a walk through the wood. In fact, I went as far as the house, but you evidently hadn't finished your lesson, so I walked slowly back and thought I would wait for you here. I haven't been out for so long. The gleam of sunshine tempted me. And here, see! I've found the world has woken up since I was last out.”

She pointed with her umbrella, and there, on the wet, bare earth of the bank beside her, Clare saw two or three round heads of yellow flowers.

“Coltsfoot!” she exclaimed softly, and stopped above them, then lifted her head again, gazing with curious expectation round about her. The wood was still fast−bound in winter; the oak boughs were black and bare against the sky; a few rags of withered leaves still hung forlornly here and there, and no fresh green lightened the sombre wall of laurels. The earth beneath was barren, yet the sky was light. The uniform roof of cloud that seemed to have been spread across heaven for as long as Clare could remember, was broken: between the delicately−shaded masses of pearl and smoky grey were rifts of blue, and from the south−west, from behind white ramparts, shone brave, bright lances of the sun. Clare stooped again to gaze upon the coltsfoot that lifted their little round lamps of life from the dark, dead ground, and as she bent her head she felt the tears well up in her eyes and a great sigh seemed to tear the heart loose in her breast. Miss Geary rose and slipped an arm through hers. “I thought it would be very pleasant to walk along to meet you,” she said, beginning to walk towards the gates. “And I think I've had my reward. It's just such a winter's day as you sometimes, rarely, chance on when you perceive life beginning again. You can't say it's spring yet. I expect we shall see the country deep in snow after this, and yet we've seen the change. Oh dear! What commonplace sentiments I have! I'm just saying what people have been saying for thousands of years, and yet, Clare my dear, it's something that it's right to say. Immutability is wrong, you see; life is life because it is *change:* birth, growth, flowering, reproduction and death—these are the right things. We should not seek to preserve anything for

ever, for what is living and true and lovely will always reproduce itself. I was young once and I wished I could be young for ever. But it's better to grow old and change as life will have us change. It's better to live the appointed seasons and then sleep peacefully."

She had spoken slowly with long pauses, and now they had passed the gates and were in the public road. Miss Geary turned and tugged the iron gate until it was close−shut behind them.

"I think it must be this sense of spring," she said as they turned towards Paston Hall, "that has revived those old ideas of mine. I haven't thought of them since my cousins and I and Rachel Sterne used to discuss art and life and the meaning of things when we were girls, about your age, years ago. In the arrogance of our youth we thought we knew the meaning of things. Well, I've lost my youth, and I hope I've lost my arrogance, but I still think Rachel's wrong as I thought her wrong then. I wonder if she has begun to think so herself? It was a moral question we used to debate—that the creation of a thing of permanent beauty was the highest good and justified any means, and of course that implies any exploitation or distortion or even destruction of life. But can a thing be permanent or beautiful if it disregards the laws of life?"

They walked on in silence for some distance.

"Some clever scientist, I suppose," Miss Geary mused aloud, "might make something that appeared to be alive and that could go on for ever. But could anyone ever create something as subtle as a coltsfoot, which lives and develops quite independent of anyone's will, just freely obeying the impulses of its own nature and yet taking part with such perfect harmony in the whole grand design? That's it, you see, Clare: we *are* part of a pattern; the sum of all our natures, from coltsfoot to cabinet−ministers, is a balanced and beautiful design. A mutable one, I know, but deriving immortality from its very mutability. If one of us should seek to be false to her own nature by resisting age and change she would mar the pattern. We have a duty to life, my dear."

They had reached the gates of Paston Hall. Miss Geary looked through them at the school, then back, up the road again.

"That is where I used to disagree most with Rachel Trethewy—Sterne, of course, she is now," she said. "She was wrong, and she went beyond all reason in defending her ideas. She used to say then that she'd like to have a son and bring him up to know no right and wrong except what she called the ethics of beauty. I wonder if she has done so?"

10

Clare fell ill that night. She had sat through the evening with her books in a corner of the Prefects' Room, hearing the chatter of the group of Sixth−Formers round the fire, knowing that they eyed her curiously from time to time, but taking no part whatever in their society. She had long felt herself isolated from Paston Hall life, but now she knew herself cut off from all life, expunged from the design. He had talked of tranquillity if she obeyed him, but there was no tranquillity such as she had known earlier, only a sad apathy. She could not keep her eyes from filling with tears, nor suppress the sighs that swelled at intervals and distended her heart unbearably. She could no longer think clearly and actively; she could see images and words with her mental vision, but she could not reason about them. The pictures of the afternoon were there, but they were static and they excited no feelings—or none beyond this immeasurable sadness. She could see a picture of the immediate future, too: Jennifer in the lamplight of the studio, Jennifer with wild excitement in her sparkling blue eyes, playing with him, leaping to his arms; and yet Clare could feel no fear, no anxiety, nothing that could serve as a stimulus to action. Then she could read, written on the page of her memory, the words Miss Geary had spoken that afternoon; they were clear and definite, she saw their shape, but she could not read their significance. She could dwell on them until they were magnified as by an enormous lens, until one phrase filled all her vision, and one word towered like a mountain before her; yet she could not tell what it meant.

She could see that Miss Geary understood or guessed what Niall was doing; she could see that the old lady was aware that some conclusion had been reached between Niall and her that afternoon in Brackenbine. Clare saw her shutting the gate of Brackenbine, which never had been shut, as a sign that she knew that she would never go there again. Miss Geary understood, but Clare felt neither alarm nor hope in seeing that. She was beyond all apprehension of human displeasure now, and equally beyond all expectation of human aid.

The physical weakness that had become a familiar accompaniment of Niall's embrace, had today lasted longer than she had ever known it, and with it there were sensations she had never felt before: a dull aching in all her bones and joints and an alternate tingling and numbness in her arms and legs, and sometimes her hands and feet felt mortally cold. Before supper−time she had a violent headache, her face burned and swift pains stabbed behind her eyes.

She could eat no supper, but crept slowly up to her own room. Only by an effort of will did she reach the top corridor, and there she could get no further than the bathroom. She was sick until her legs would no longer support her, and she sank to the floor.

It was Reenie Ford who found her a few minutes later; Reenie, apologising rather nervously for having followed her up, confessing to having noticed that Clare was looking ill; and it was Reenie who, having helped her to her own room, went and found the Under−matron.

Clare did not know much of what else happened that night. She was aware of being carried down, swathed in blankets, to the Matron's room on the ground floor, and from there through the short passage to the Sanatorium, a spacious room with sashed windows which contained half−a−dozen cots where the Matron could look after any children who were too unwell to be left in their dormitories. She was aware of having her temperature taken by the Matron, of being looked at, very briefly, by Miss Sperrod, and then by Miss Geary and a number of other people. There were whisperings and stealthy movements round her.

Then time became nothing but a forest of pain in which there was no other living thing but herself. She struggled in thickets that held her, tore and bruised her, and all her efforts, so fierce that they made her moan, were ineffectual. She was bound down by all her limbs, and within, tortured by forces that gripped and ground every bone.

Only after a very long time, after many hours of struggle, when her efforts to free herself from her bonds were no more than convulsive twitchings which went on of their own accord, did she find that somewhere at the centre of a frightening melee in her skull, some processes of the mind were going on. She was observing something other than her own endurance of pain. Someone was trying to get in through an aperture—a window that was shut. It was some other girl and she was frantic to get in, and Clare was struggling to wrench

open the window and help her in. But she could not, for the window was made of the bone of her own skull and the wrenching, battering pain mounted unbearably. She could only scream the girl's name aloud; scream so that someone would come and help them; but the hammering on the bones of her head swelled so loud it drowned the utmost effort of her lungs. She saw the other girl's face distorted through glass that bent and pulsed with the swinging blows; the face advanced and receded, always contorted, frightened and frightening, yet recognisable; and still Clare screamed out her name and could not hear what she screamed.

At last all that pain was concentrated in her eyes: it flowed from every corner of her body and gathered there, burning and piercing. But something moved across it now. The images were outside the pain. She shouted again and this time she heard what she shouted, but it was not a scream, only a moan. Someone touched her then, and she became conscious that her eyes were open, that pain was coming into them from without, from a glaring light.

The Matron propped her up and held a cup to her lips.

"My word, you've given us a time," Clare heard her saying? "Now you'll have to be a bit quieter. I've got another patient to look after, and she's as ill as you are."

Clare was but too thankful to be able to lie still. It was easier to fight the pain now. Her head and all her limbs still ached, but the mad struggle in her skull had settled down into a ding−dong beat on which she could concentrate, and somehow, by following its rhythm, contrive to endure it.

When she opened her eyes again it was daylight. She had opened them because there were voices near her. She made out the Matron and the Under−matron and a stout white haired man in dark clothes. They began doing things to her, putting something in her mouth, moving her arms up and down. The stout man tapped her legs, and after some time she understood that they were asking her questions. She managed, after several failures, to answer and tell them, yes, she could feel the tapping. That seemed what they wanted to know, and they left her in peace.

The whole of the daylight passed with Clare's mind twining in and out between delirium and consciousness. The images that filled her mind's eye in both states were intermingled: in delirium her visions were reality, and in her waking intervals she thought the figures and faces on which her mind dwelt were dream people. One face above all obsessed her. In her wild tossings in the darkness of pain she knew whose it was, but when her eyes were open it eluded her. She only knew it was the face of a girl with whom she had some connection and some business of vital importance.

There came a period when she lay conscious in a gloaming light. She had been looking for some time at a little glass jar containing a few flowers on the table beside her cot. They were poor little wild flowers—little rounds of yellow on scaly stems without leaves. They seemed most important to her; it seemed essential that they should be there. Then she found that someone was sitting by her in the dusk on the other side of the bed. She tried to turn; someone helped her, and she found that she was looking at Miss Geary. It took her a long time to compose the simple question she wanted to ask, but she managed it:

"What's wrong with me?"

"You've been very ill," said Miss Geary calmly, "but I think you're getting better now, aren't you?"

"Yes," Clare agreed after a while. "Yes, I am better."

It was true. The pain in her head had dwindled; her bones had ceased aching, and she could move her eyes without their hurting. She let them travel about the room, pleased that she could use them without pain. They fell on one of the other cots and saw that someone was lying there.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Jennifer Gray," said Miss Geary.

"Jennifer?" Clare tried to sit up. The girl who was trying to get in at the window must be Jennifer; she must get up and let her in. But before Miss Geary had laid her hand on her she had sunk back again. Of course, the girl at the window was not real, and she could not be Jennifer in any case, because Jennifer was inside, and besides, she recollected quite clearly, the girl at the window had had long fair hair, done in plaits, coiled at her ears, while Jennifer's was short and brown.

She sighed wearily. It would be so good not to have to bother about that other girl. Why could she not go away and leave her alone? She had been trying to get in to her too long.

"How long have I been here?" she asked.

"Why," said Miss Geary, "two days, I believe. Yes, it was the night before last that you were taken ill. Jennifer was brought in last night. You didn't know anything about that. I came in to see you, but you didn't know me. I was rather worried, you know. I spoke to you, but you only muttered somebody's name over and over."

"Whose name?" Clare asked. She tried to lift herself again, tried to touch Miss Geary's arm to urge her to hasten with the enlightenment that she so wanted. Miss Geary soothed her with little pats on her hand and restrained her.

"Whose name?" Clare asked again, weakly.

"Why," said Miss Geary, doubtfully, "I don't think I ought to be tiring you like this. I'm not sure whose name it was. It sounded like Margaret."

Clare lay too exhausted to speak for a while. But the struggle was over. The strange girl was in now. Perhaps her head would stop aching altogether and that fair−haired girl's business would no longer prevent her from sinking into the deep, tranquil sleep that had been promised her.

Miss Geary had risen. "Is there anything I can get for you?" she asked.

Yes, there might be one way to make sure that the girl did not trouble her any more. It was a great effort for her to find so many words but one by one she shaped and uttered them:

"In my drawer. In my room. Under my hankies. There's a piece of newspaper. Will you bring it me, please?"

Miss Geary did not understand and it had all to be repeated. The strain was so great that Clare had sunk down with closed eyes before she could finish the repetition. She did not know whether Miss Geary had understood or not.

But when it was quite dark she was wakened again by a light on her eyes, and there stood Miss Geary holding out to her a small folded piece of newspaper. Clare looked at the table, but Miss Geary hesitated and finally tucked the paper under Clare's pillow.

"It might blow off the table," she said.

Clare managed to ask if the window was open.

"Oh yes, only a little. Matron always keeps it a little open."

That was all right. Clare sank into sleep again reassured. If the window was open and Margaret was here she could go in and out as she pleased without troubling her. Clare, poor, tormented Clare, would be free at last to obey her Master and go quietly to sleep.

She slept, but not the sleep she had resigned herself to. She woke, and with a sense of disappointment which was still strong, though ebbing as her memory began to work, she stared round her at the white walls of the Sanatorium, the enamelled iron bedsteads and the bedside tables. Disillusionment and discontent were her dominant feelings for some time: she was peevishly cross with all the people who, it seemed to her, had lately made glowing promises to her and then meanly cheated her, cajoled and inveigled her into doing things she didn't really want to do and then treacherously left her to bear the consequences.

Her ill−humour with all these people whose names she could not remember persisted, though diminishing, until the Under−matron brought her her breakfast. She was ravenously hungry, and through the act of eating, through seeing and hearing the Under−matron, through sitting up and noticing that her body, her hands and arms and her voice obeyed her, she became convinced that a great alteration had taken place: she was a different person from the one who had been suffering all those miseries, torments and deceptions for half a lifetime. Her head no longer ached; the fever had left her; above all, she could touch and see things and at once perceived their significance. There was nothing interposing between her and reality.

She sat up in bed and used her re−discovered power of reason with increasing excitement. Her thoughts were first to the date. There were only ten days left before the examination for the Oxford Scholarship. She obviously must get well before then. But there was something else of terrible importance that must be done, even before the examination: something connected with another girl. She reasoned quickly now, finding all the events of the last term drop into their proper chronological sequence. The girl she was concerned with could not possibly be the one she had lately dreamed of so much—the one whose blurred picture in the newspaper lay under her pillow now. Margaret Raines was dead.

The revelation came to Clare like a lightning−flash: it was precisely because Margaret had died that she

was important to her. She knew exactly how she had died. More than that, Clare knew why Margaret had failed to live as he had designed her to live. In a symbolic sense, Margaret *had* lived in Clare's dream−haunted delirium; but not for him; rather in rebellion against him. She had not been reborn as his slave because she refused— 'at the last moment,' he had said himself—the submission he demanded. She had resisted in her heart. She had refused to give her heart to animate Niall's image of her. Rebellion was possible—as possible as it was right: Clare had known that deep in her heart all the time, and her knowledge of that fact, clothed by dream imagination in the figure of Margaret Raines, had warred in the darkness of the last three days against Niall's spell. And it had won! Exultantly, Clare gazed about the room, drawing a deep breath of the air of this world. Rebellion had won.

Then her triumphant gaze fell on a sleeping figure in the cot furthest from her. She had exulted too soon. Jennifer lay there, and Jennifer had yielded complete obedience to him. She lay there, alive still, but already in bondage to him, merely abiding the time until he should beckon her into his world. Looking round and listening to make sure that neither the Matron nor her assistant was at hand, Clare slipped out of bed and up to Jennifer's cot. It did not occur to her until she was nearly there that she should have been too ill to walk. She was weak and tired, but she did not feel ill any longer: there was an intense excitement coursing through all her body which nerved her and convinced her of her power to move as she wished and do what she would.

She gave Jennifer one searching look and then regained her own bed. The younger girl was sleeping peacefully. The only change in her that might have been taken for a sign of illness was a flush of heightened colour in her cheeks. She slept with her lips slightly curved in a smile, the picture of utter content and peace. Niall had kept his promise there: Jennifer's few days would be passed in tranquillity. “A few days”—the phrase sounded over and over again in Clare's mind. How many did he mean? Three days had, already passed; the puppets must be almost finished now. He would have worked day and night in his eagerness; she could see him bending over his bench in intense concentration, his skilled fingers working with such certainty and speed, see him opening the press again, looking at those little tubes, preparing for the last task of all, the final task of animation that would be done by his power over the drops of blood that she and Jennifer had freely given. Clare's victory over his spell was illusory: she had won only the briefest respite, and that at a cost of bodily and mental suffering that might all have been avoided, might all have been changed to such peace as Jennifer was now wrapped in if she would have but yielded to him. Now she had only until the moment when he came to place the hearts in his puppets. She found herself speculating whether she would feel it, here, in her bed in the Sanatorium; whether he would do it brutally to punish her for her rebellion, or whether he would be merciful in the end and let her sleep through the change. She wondered which of them he would take first.

She did not know how long a respite she might yet be given: but she could take no chance of its being longer than another day. What could be done must be done this night.

The doctor came in the middle of the morning, and Clare, suppressing her excitement and masking her anxiety for action with assumed listlessness, suffered his examination obediently, smiled wanly at his pleasantries and received his verdict that she was not to get up for another two weeks with an indifference that somewhat disconcerted him. She watched keenly when he passed on from her and stood, with the Matron, looking down at Jennifer. His face was not visible to her when he made his examination. Jennifer still slept, and his visit was brief; Clare wished she could have heard his conversation with the Matron just outside the Sanatorium door.

A little before luncheon, Miss Geary came to see Clare. She spoke regretfully about the scholarship examination, then rather diffidently mentioned the question of letting Clare's parents know about her illness. Clare answered that she was well enough to write herself and would write to her mother the next day. As for the examination she had to grope back in her memory some way to find what she thought and felt about that. It was to take place a few days after the end of the Easter term: but for a long time now she had not believed in it; it had not seemed possible to her that she would ever take it; something so much more powerful had interposed. She listened nevertheless to Miss Geary's kindly efforts to console her, and to her suggestions that perhaps the chance was not entirely lost, that Clare might be able to continue studying at home when her father came to England and settled down. After all, Clare had a year in hand, she was only eighteen. It might even be better to take the examination when she was older....

“Yes,” said Clare. “I have remembered what you said about our duty to grow old.”

Miss Geary left her when the Under−matron brought her lunch, and promised to come and see her again in the evening. Clare ate heartily at luncheon, tea and supper, but the hours between dragged intolerably slowly. The only event of that interminable afternoon was that Jennifer woke.

Clare had been reading, and, lifting her eyes casually from the book she saw that Jennifer was sitting up apparently looking out of the window. She called to her, and Jennifer turned her head. The same slight smile she had worn when she slept still curved her lips. She replied with a single 'Hello,' spoken softly, in a slow, dreamy voice, and her expression did not change. Clare got up and went over to her. Jennifer did not move; she smiled and looked at Clare, but did not answer again when she spoke to her. Clare stared into her eyes: they were wide open but, if they saw anything, the images they received could convey nothing to the brain behind; their blue was of a peculiar dark intensity, which, combined with the high colour of her rounded cheeks and the soft smiling of her parted lips, gave her an appearance of fresh, vital beauty that was like a vivid and premature flowering far exceeding the promise that had been in the bud of her natural childish prettiness. Troubled and frightened, Clare drew away from her, and saw her after a while lie down again, with a gentle, contented sigh, and fall asleep.

That strange, new−flowering beauty in Jennifer's face wrought Clare's anxiety to an unbearable pitch: she believed it to be proof that Niall's work was on the point of completion. At any moment now he might begin, bending there over the bench in the ancient house behind the oak wood, to fill the little cavities in the breasts of his dolls. She pressed her hands to her own heart as if she felt the mortal change beginning there.

When Miss Geary came before supper, she told her of Jennifer's awakening, striving to depict her impression with an earnestness that came near to betraying all her fear. She wished bitterly that she could now tell the whole story to Miss Geary. But it was too late: even if she could make her, or anyone, believe her, the explanations, would be too long and complicated, and before anyone could act after she had at last convinced them, Niall's work would be done. Likelier by far, they would simply take her words for lightheaded ramblings: the doctor would find it so easy to diagnose her complaint as a nervous breakdown through overwork and anxiety about the examination. The only result would be that they would take precautions to stop her doing the one thing that might yet defeat Niall.

Nevertheless, it did seem to her that her manner had conveyed something to Miss Geary. The old lady seemed so much more alert, so much nearer to earth than usual. She did not look down at Clare from the cloudy heights of her plateaux; she watched her very closely with brown eyes somehow less dim, quick to observe and eager to penetrate. She nodded jerkily, as if understanding, but when she spoke it was not about Jennifer at all. It seemed that it was a different matter that had quickened her feelings.

“I've had a letter from one of my cousins,” she said. “One of my cousins in Cornwall. It came by this afternoon's post. She mentions something rather odd. It seems that Rachel Sterne is in Cornwall. She's staying at a hotel in Truro. My cousin's seen her. She met her by chance and she writes that she thinks there's something wrong. Rachel appears to be extremely upset. I can't quite make out what it is, but it seems that she isn't coming back to Brackenbine. As if there has been some trouble, some quarrel.... You know Brackenbine is the son's, not hers...?”

“A quarrel?” Clare repeated faintly. There had come back into her mind a momentary scene in the studio a long time ago. A few grave words, sad, though spoken with a smile— 'If the itch to create were not a sin of pride.... But we can cease. Go our ways and sin no more.' Miss Geary's speculation had hit the truth: Rachel Sterne *had* recognised that her son's art was evil. She had fled from it, and in the guarded wording of her note, Clare now saw, she had tried to warn her against Niall.

“Yes,” Miss Geary was saying. “I should be so sorry if it were so. But it *was* a very odd life for them to live there. I don't see how they could have gone on indefinitely....”

It seemed a very long time after supper until the Under−matron had finished attending to Clare and Jennifer, fussing over them, making them comfortable for the night, as she called it, and when at last she went, it was only to impose a further period of suspense on Clare. She paused at the door, looked rather severely at the book Clare was holding, and said:

“You can keep your light on till Matron looks in, but mind you put it out then!”

So Clare fretted another hour or more until the Matron herself appeared. At times in that long anguish she

could have laughed wildly at her meek obedience to the familiar, petty rules and regulations of Paston Hall while she awaited execution of a capital sentence—his or her own. But she answered the Matron, when finally she had made her visit, with a calm 'Good−night', and when, an hour later, she slipped out of bed, she had a firm control of herself. Her plan was clear and she had appraised what she might achieve. She would not let herself dwell on her one hope of salvation so that it grew out of proportion to the definite and known dangers she and Jennifer were in. One thing was proved: at the worst she would win the oblivion of real death for both of them. Niall, with all his art, all the unimaginable powers of darkness that he could draw on, could not keep his slaves from escaping into that last freedom. Margaret Raines had proved that. But Margaret had rebelled in her heart alone. Clare had seen more of Niall's art and understood the process of his doll−making better: she saw that the hand, too, might rebel and perhaps win a victory that would give life.

She put on her dressing−gown, put her bare feet into slippers, which were more indoor shoes than slippers, with buckles that held them firmly on, then forced herself to stand for a full minute, listening intently by the open window. The school was quiet, and there was no light falling from any window on the side where she looked out. She groped back across the Sanatorium to Jennifer's cot, listened to her regular breathing for a moment; then, after one brief caress of the younger girl's hair, returned to the window and quietly raised the sash.

The night was overcast, but not absolutely dark; enough faint moonlight filtered through the clouds to show Clare her way round the building. Lights were showing behind the curtains of some rooms on the upper floors and she went cautiously, taking advantage of the cover the shrubs afforded until she could strike across the grounds to the little beech copse by the wall. She found herself trembling, not from cold or fear, but from the simple exertion of walking after her fever and the lying in bed. To climb over the wall, she knew, would task her strength now, but it was the only way: the main gates of Paston Hall would be locked, and though there was a way out to the road through the gardener's cottage garden, fear of the dog prevented her attempting that. She set herself deliberately to control the shaking of her limbs and to save her strength by moving much more slowly and steadily than her anxiety urged. Even with that deliberation she had to make two attempts before she could gain the top of the wall behind the great beech−tree. She sat there several minutes, resting before lowering herself down on the Brackenbine side.

She was more familiar with Brackenbine grounds now than she had been on the two former occasions when she had been over the wall, and she had only to keep going straight through the woods, uphill, to reach the drive that wound round the slope from the gates to the house; then the house would lie some way to her left along the drive. With a good deal of bruising and scratching of her ankles and feet she made her way through the wood, and once on the drive, she stood and listened before going on, for she knew Niall's habit of ranging about the estate by night—indeed, her plan was partly built on that—and the noise she had made in pushing through the wood had filled her with fear that he might intercept her. Nothing stirred, however, except the branches in the slight breeze, and she carried on, stepping very cautiously, towards the house.

It was in darkness. She saw that thankfully: it meant that Niall was in truth out, as she had hoped, for he would not have been in bed at this hour if he had been at home. Groping forward to feel the wall for a guide, she moved to the right, round the side of the house, by a slippery little path overgrown with high laurels. It was pitch−dark and smelt of damp and decaying leaves and earth in perpetual shade where nothing could grow but the evergreens. The path sloped so steeply that she had to feel for boughs of the laurels and haul herself up by them. It was an agonising, slow business, and she felt she could have walked two miles by the road with less fatigue and in less time, but at last she came out under the oaks again, with the gutter of the house no higher than her knees. She sat and rested there again, listening all the time for some sound above her own alarmingly loud breathing. But all the slight sounds that her ear could catch seemed to her only the natural noises of the night woods.

For the next part of her enterprise she took off her shoes: she had seen before how leather soles slipped on the tiles. Pressing with the palms of her hands and her bare feet she managed better, and very painfully and slowly, crept up the slope of the roof until she could get a grip on the skylight frame. As she had expected, the skylight was open a foot or two at the bottom, and, remembering how she had done it before with Niall, she was able to wriggle herself sideways through and drop down into the studio.

She waited until her breathing became easier, though no pausing could quieten the heavy thumping of her

heart, and then moved across the dark room, feeling her way between tables and boxes and all the miscellaneous litter towards the fireplace where a few embers were still alive. Her first care was then to secure the door. The key was in the lock on the inside, where she had always seen it. She turned it, and for additional security dragged one of the armchairs up and wedged its back under the long iron key. There were piles of books and papers in the corner by the fireplace; she groped and tore a piece which she twisted into a spill, and then, kneeling, blew on the embers until she had a flame. It showed her where the lamp was, and with a second spill she lit it and carried it into the middle of the room, setting it down on the end of Niall's bench.

She leaned against the bench and for a moment or two gave way to weakness now that the first part of her task was completed. It had been the part where she most ran the risk of failure and it had cost her the greatest effort of will and bodily strength. Chance had favoured her: Niall was out, but he might return at any minute. To try to do what she had to do when he was there would be infinitely harder—so difficult, indeed, that she could not see how she had ever hoped it might be possible when she had planned her course on the supposition that he might be at home.

The place was as untidy as usual. Niall had cleared his work from the bench but left all his tools out. She considered the plywood press where he kept the puppets, and picked up a wood−chisel and fell to work on the door. Not caring now what noise she made, she chopped and jabbed at the panels of the door vainly for a few minutes until it occurred to her to try to force the lock by leverage. Then, thrusting the chisel between the door and the frame she wrenched violently at it. The tool was too delicate and the blade broke in two with a loud ringing sound. Clare rushed to the bench again, and tumbling the tools about, found something that would do better—a long stout screwdriver. She made herself pause and think and having recovered a little calmness, went more methodically to work, and, as the lock was only a small one, in a short time she was able to burst it from the frame.

The two dolls lay there on the second shelf; all but complete now, their limbs fitted on, the hair in place, the painting finished; one thing only remained to be done: the filling of the cavity in the breast. Even in her fearful anxiety to be done and to escape from Brackenbine as fast as she could, Clare felt a strong curiosity to examine her own puppet now that it was finished, and she could not repress a gasp of admiration at the perfection of the little figure which she took, almost shyly, up in her hands. As she had seen earlier, it was an idealised portrait; yet it was she, and she saw with a pang of some feeling that ran counter to all her purpose, that the very characteristics which Niall had caught so well were those he had so often said he loved in her and praised above conventional prettinesses. She felt the stirrings of a desire to keep the doll; hints of arguments that she might keep it in its incomplete state without risk began to whisper in her mind. It needed all her determination—the very firmness that Niall's fine chisel had expressed in the wood —to seize the thing, turn its features from her, and banish its flattery from her mind. Jennifer's startled her, the dark−blue eyes shone so softly up at her and the features of the doll so exactly reproduced in colouring and expression the face Jennifer had turned to her that afternoon. The correspondence between these little wooden things and the living beings they were so darkly and intimately connected with frightened her, so that her heart palpitated and her hands shook as though what she was about to do was indeed a destruction of life; and a dreadful fear assailed her as she laid the dolls on the bench that at this late stage their nexus with herself and Jennifer might in fact be physical. What if when she struck, blood should spout from the little bodies, and she should hear a shriek? With the courage of extreme horror, she set the blade of a broad chisel across the neck of Jennifer's doll, laid face down so that she might not see its smile, and swinging a mallet, struck down with all her might.

The blade bit into the wood, and with a great sob Clare saw that it was but wood. Still, heart−stricken at destroying so beautiful and ingenious a thing, and in frenzied haste to be done, she struck and struck again; then seized her own and, uttering scarcely sane sounds of grief and terror, hacked and battered that small body also. The wood was very hard and she had gone too wildly about the work; she was not damaging the torsos much after chopping off the limbs. In sheer pity she was forced to stop; the savagery of the prolonged, crude dismemberment was too appalling. She could not think what was the right tool to use, the right way to go about the work: she had no longer control of her hands sufficient to use any tool effectively. She glanced distractedly round, and sight of the fireplace prompted her what to do. Sobbing and shuddering she flew about the room, tearing armfuls of straw and shavings from the old packing−cases that stood about, splintering bits of box−lids, wrenching canvas stretchers apart, heaping a pyre above the white ashes in the wide fireplace.

A vision of the day when she had saved Margaret Raines' doll from the flames came back into her mind, and she moaned to remember the love that had led her to this deed now at this hour. But she held to her purpose and, kneeling, she blew and blew at the embers until the straw and shavings caught fire; then running back to the bench she gathered up the gashed little bodies and the severed limbs, gathered up every chip of the dolls that she could find, and put them all in the heart of the fire.

Desperately as she wanted to escape now, she saw that she must stay until the things were consumed. She backed away from the fire, watching it burn up. The straw blazed with a soft roar and the dry packing−case wood kindled with crackings like pistol−shots and sent sparks flying far into the room. She watched, and gradually became a little calmer; her blind horror of the deed itself subsided and the more reasonable fear of being caught by Niall beset her. She dragged forward a small table, crowded with bottles of oil, tubes of paint and tins of turpentine, to stand under the skylight, and swept some of the stuff off on to the floor to give her footing so that she could climb up again. But in the act of doing so she stopped and in intense agitation struck herself violently on the brow, crying aloud: “O God!”

In that ghastly mimicry of butcher's work on the dolls she had forgotten the very heart of the matter: the hearts, indeed, that should fill those hollowed breasts. To leave the drops of life−blood that she and Jennifer had given was to leave themselves still in his power: that much he had let her divine. The dolls, which, because of their astounding likeness, had seemed to be the bodies of his slaves, were after all only inanimate things—things that he could make again: the power of animation dwelt in the small tubes she had glimpsed.

She snatched up the lamp and went back to the cupboard. The tubes had stood in a little wooden rack on the top shelf when she had seen inside the press with Niall that last day. She peered among the collection of glass apparatus and with mounting panic saw that they had been moved. Heedless what more damage she did she thrust and threw the whole contents of the shelf aside. The tubes were not there. Down on her knees she raked out all the contents of the bottom shelf—a collection of models and parts of beautiful toy−like things that formerly she would have lingered over in delight for hours. She dragged out the Captain's coach, searched every corner of the shelves and finally, convinced of failure, stood up, her hand pressed to her mouth, utterly at a loss, only able to groan to herself: 'O God! O God! I can't find them!' She wept, with a kind of feeble self−pity, fear and despair robbing her for a few minutes of all power to think clearly. Then she mastered herself again. There were other presses in the room.

She took up the lamp from the floor where she had set it and lifted it high, turning round to look up and down the great shadowy room. Her eye fell on one cupboard of a different design from the rest. It was made of hardwood, and was of stouter, more workmanlike construction than the others. If only she had kept her wits she would have pitched on that at once as the likeliest place for something valuable to be stored. She had seen it before, but never open.

Going back to the bench she put down her lamp and looked for her screwdriver again. She found it on the floor and began to labour at the lock of the strong press. It cost her far more effort than the other, and though she jabbed and levered and wrenched until all her fingers were cramped and her arms ached and refused to serve her without frequent rests, she could make little impression on the lock. Her mind hunted for old lessons of experience to help her, and found them at last in memories of childhood: watching her father working with tools, deliberately and methodically in an engineer's way. She straightened her back and thought the task out.

There was a saw hanging on the wall by the bench; she fetched it, and setting the lamp on the table that she had placed under the skylight to give her a better light, she sawed, clumsily but effectively, through the corner of the press above and below the lock. Then inserting her screwdriver once more in the nick of the door, she wrenched and prized until at last she rived away the wood that held the socket of the lock. The first thing that met her eye, in the front of the top shelf, was the little rack of tubes that she was looking for. She snatched the whole rack down, gave one glance at the little gouts of dark substance two of them contained, then ran with them to the fire which by now was a glowing pile of coals. She thrust the rack as it was into the heart of the red coals, then snatched up more bits of wood and heaped them over it. She could trust no method of destruction but the utterly consuming action of the flames. She ran back into the middle of the room for more wood, flinging down piles of canvases, overturning bottles and tins of brushes to drag out cases from behind the lumber stacked between the presses. She flung on fuel until there was a great fire roaring and crackling, sending a spray of sparks up the chimney.

Then, as she passed the press from which she had taken the tubes, staggering with a big packing−case full of straw in her arms, something caught her eye. She dropped her burden and went back to the press. On bursting it open she had seen nothing but the rack of tubes. Now she saw that the top shelf contained pieces of apparatus similar to those in the other press she had opened, but below that the cupboard was entirely filled with a stack of trays, one upon another like shallow drawers, with an inch or so of space between each one. Through one of these gaps her eye had caught a gleam of something fine and glossy like light−coloured spun silk, or hair.

She pulled out the drawer, and there, in neat compartments lined with soft stuff, lay orderly rows of puppets, each small figure, naked, upon its back, with hands folded on its breast, lying in its little cell as in a coffin. Clare pulled out another drawer, and another. They were all full of dolls, all arranged in the same corpse−like fashion. She bent down, and, though the lamp and fire together did not show a good light into the drawers, she made out that the eyes of each doll were shut. They had the appearance of dead people, but she knew they were not dead. These figures had no open cavity in their breasts: the element of animation was in them, suspended in a death−like sleep.

She stood, unable to move or take her eyes from the figures, while the full import of her discovery penetrated her. This ultimate deception appalled and desolated her more than all the hurt she had had, than all the terror that had grown in her since the truth of Niall's art first began to dawn upon her. The things she had seen in the Captain's Park were neither mechanical dolls as she had thought then, nor living beings, as, in spite of all reason, she had concluded later. Life of a sort, or some astounding substitute for life they must have, but it was an animation that could only appear at their master and maker's bidding. The undying life Niall promised was a lie: his people were only toys whom he alone could cause to move. All their sports, their gaiety, their loves and laughter, were but games he made them play for his amusement, and then, when he was tired of playing, he laid them like toys back in their boxes until such time as he felt in the mood for them again. This was the immortality and unchanging youth to which Niall would have condemned Jennifer and her, to which he *had* condemned... Understanding what had been done to give these small things their life−in−death, Clare covered her eyes and backed, cold in all her limbs, toward the table under the skylight.

She reached it, and then, slowly, as though moved against the utmost resistance of her will, she lowered her hand and turned her eyes to the door. Heavily up the stairs came a tramp of feet, loud above the crackling of the fire, hasty on the wooden stairs, rushing across the landing outside. Clare could not move, her eyes only travelled slowly to the great iron key on which the firelight glinted. The thick oak door shook under the hammering of a fist and then she heard a voice shouting: “Open! Open the door!”

It was a voice she knew, but there was a note in it she had never heard, never imagined it could ever sound. A grief so deep that it engulfed even her last dreadful discovery in its own abyss of pain opened suddenly in her breast at the recognition that it was Niall who howled at her with such inhuman menace. In the pain of that appalling change the last threads of the spell that had once bound her dissolved; blinded by tears she turned and mounted the table. She gripped the edge of the skylight frame and gave a great spring upwards. The little table rocked and went crashing over with all its load and the burning lamp. Clare, struggling through the aperture, saw the pool of flame spread out below her as the paraffin and the spilt oil from the bottles caught light, and as she slithered down the roof, saw the whole great square of glass suddenly illuminated by an unbroken yellow blaze and felt the hot draught rush down on her.

She ran, staggering and fending herself off from the trees with outstretched arms, down the steep bank away from the house; down into the drive where she wheeled and, faint and sick, tried to run on towards the gates of Brackenbine.

11

It was not disagreeable to lie propped with pillows, to feel weak and helpless and to know that it did not matter. Clare looked at the glass jar of yellow wild−flowers on the table by her bed in the Sanatorium, looked from them to Miss Geary and smiled. She smiled in answer to the old lady's enquiring look, and it was a smile, too, of gratitude. Clare was calm now, and she had a sense of the solidity of the earth and the reality of the things and people about her; she felt at home in her own world, and she was content with that security and comfort, but she was not happy. Quietly and reasonably she acknowledged that happiness would take a long time to grow again, and in the meantime, the sense of safety and reality depended on not dwelling much on what had cut down the old trees of joy. Yet she had asked Miss Geary to tell her what she knew of that last night she remembered, now, when she was clear−headed again and the doctor could promise an end to her lying in bed.

It was Matron who had first noticed the fiery glow behind Brackenbine wood, Miss Geary had said, and the Under−matron who, when more people were up and observing the fire from the upstairs windows, had discovered Clare's absence from the Sanatorium.

“Of course,” said Miss Geary, “you had been a little light−headed for some days. And you had talked about the window. I guessed that if you had climbed out in your sleep you would have gone to Brackenbine. It had been so much on your mind, hadn't it? So I just dragged Miss Linskill along with me and came to look for you. I positively had to drag her; she did want so many explanations and there just wasn't time to give them. Fortunately, you hadn't got anywhere near the house. We found you by that large flat rock, you know, on the drive.”

“And there's nothing left of the house?” Clare murmured.

Miss Geary shook her head. “It's such a pity. The old house and all Rachel's pictures, too. But even if they had been at home I don't suppose they would have been able to save anything. There was so much timber in the old place and the Pentabridge fire−brigade took such a long time to come.”

“*Nothing* was left?” Clare repeated in a whisper.

Miss Geary looked steadily at her. She seemed to retire some distance and regard her from there, trying, as it were, to see her as one small figure in relation to a long vista. Then, she returned to close quarters and replied:

“The place was burned down to its foundations: in fact if there had not been a good deal of rain lately, it would have set the whole wood ablaze, too. As it is, the trees all round are charred and blackened, and all the shrubs and little ornamental trees they had in a little garden on the hillside behind are killed. I went round myself the next morning to see, because I thought I would like to write to Rachel. I think I told you that I had heard that she wasn't coming back here, even before the fire? Well, I understand now she's going to live in Italy.” Clare lay back; her eye wandered round the Sanatorium, over the five empty beds. The school was very quiet. Term had ended a few days before.

“I'm glad Jennifer's all right,” she said. She was very tired, and there was such comfort in the thought of sleep, and yet she did not want Miss Geary to go. “Will she come back again next term?” she asked.

Miss Geary looked a little guilty.

“Why,” she said, in an almost conspiratorial tone, “Mr Gray was talking to me about that when he came to fetch her away. He seemed strongly inclined to take her away from Paston Hall. He talked to me privately. I think I fail to dissuade him.”

Clare looked at a letter with a Malayan stamp which was lying on her table. Her mother was on her way home. She would have left Paston Hall soon after Easter; Jennifer would not come back. Behind the oak−woods lay a tract of white ashes, wetted by the rain, disappearing little by little into the earth. Of a term−time and a holiday, and of all animate and inanimate things they had contained, nothing remained but light ashes sifting away into the mould. She laid her cheek on the pillow and closed her eyes.

Miss Geary watched her for a while. She saw the small drop that glistened on Clare's eyelashes, and, half−turning away, she looked in a preoccupied way at the coltsfoot in the glass. Her thin, delicate hand

strayed out to rearrange them.

“I gathered them yesterday, in Brackenbine,” she remarked, quietly. “They were growing quite near where the house was. By next summer the woodland will be growing green over all that place. I'm glad you're going to be nineteen next summer, Clare.”