

A WELL-REMEMBERED VOICE

Out of the darkness comes the voice of a woman speaking to her dead son.

'But that was against your wish, was it not? Was that against your wish? Would you prefer me not to ask that question?'

The room is so dark that we cannot see her. All we know is that she is one of four shapes gathered round a small table. Beyond the darkness is a great ingle-nook, in which is seated on a settle a man of fifty. Him we can discern fitfully by the light of the fire. It is not sufficiently bright to enable him to read, but an evening paper lies on his knee. He seems wistful and meek. He is paying no attention to the party round the table. When he hears their voices it is only as empty sounds.

The mother continues. 'Perhaps I am putting the question in the wrong way. Are you not able to tell us any more?'

A man's voice breaks in. 'There was a distinct movement that time, but it is so irregular.'

'I thought so, but please don't talk. Do you want to tell us more? Is it that you can't hear me distinctly? He seems to want to tell us more, but something prevents him.'

'In any case, Mrs. Don, it is extraordinary. This is the first seance I have ever taken part in, but I must believe now.'

'Of course, Major, these are the simplest manifestations. They are only the first step. But if we are to go on, the less we talk the better. Shall we go on? It is not agitating you too much, Laura?'

A girl answers, 'There was a moment when I--but I wish I was braver. I think it is partly the darkness. I suppose we can't have a little light?'

'Certainly we can, dear. Darkness is quite unnecessary, but I think it helps one to concentrate.'

The Major lights a lamp, and though it casts shadows we see now that the room is an artist's studio. The silent figure in the ingle-nook is the artist. Mrs. Don is his wife, the two men are Major Armitage and an older

friend, Mr. Rogers. The girl is Laura Bell. These four are sitting round the table, their hands touching: they are endeavouring to commune with one who has 'crossed the gulf.'

The Major and Mr. Rogers are but passing shadows in the play, and even nice Laura is only to flit across its few pages for a moment on her way to happier things. We scarcely notice them in the presence of Mrs. Don, the gracious, the beautiful, the sympathetic, whose magnetic force and charm are such that we wish to sit at her feet at once. She is intellectual, but with a disarming smile, religious, but so charitable, masterful, and yet loved of all. None is perfect, and there must be a flaw in her somewhere, but to find it would necessitate such a rummage among her many adornments as there is now no time for. Perhaps we may come upon it accidentally in the course of the play.

She is younger than Mr. Don, who, despite her efforts for many years to cover his deficiencies, is a man of no great account in a household where the bigger personality of his wife swallows him like an Aaron's rod. Mr. Don's deficiencies! She used to try very hard, or fairly hard, to conceal them from Dick; but Dick knew. His mother was his chum. All the lovely things which happened in that house in the days when Dick was alive were between him and her; those two shut the door softly on old Don, always anxious not to hurt his feelings, and then ran into each other's arms.

In the better light Mr. Don is now able to read his paper if he chooses. If he has forgotten the party at the table, they have equally forgotten him.

MRS. DON. 'You have not gone away, have you? We must be patient. Are you still there?'

ROGERS. 'I think I felt a movement.'

MRS. DON. 'Don't talk, please. Are you still there?'

The table moves.

'Yes! It is your mother who is speaking; do you understand that?'

The table moves.

'Yes. What shall I ask him now?'

ROGERS. 'We leave it to you, Mrs. Don.'

MRS. DON. 'Have you any message you want to send us? Yes. Is it important? Yes. Are we to spell it out in the usual way? Yes. Is the first letter of the first word A? Is it B?'

She continues through the alphabet to L, when the table responds. Similarly she finds that the second letter is O.

'Is the word Love ? Yes. But I don't understand that movement. You are not displeased with us, are you? No. Does the second word begin with A?--with B? Yes.'

The second word is spelt out Bade and the third Me .

'Love Bade Me----If it is a quotation, I believe I know it! Is the fourth word Welcome ? Yes.'

LAURA. 'Love Bade Me Welcome.'

MRS. DON. 'That movement again! Don't you want me to go on?'

LAURA. 'Let us stop.'

MRS. DON. 'Not unless he wishes it. Why are those words so important? Does the message end there? Is any one working against you? Some one antagonistic? Yes. Not one of ourselves surely? No. Is it any one we know? Yes. Can I get the name in the usual way? Yes. Is the first letter of this person's name A?--B?----'

It proves to be F. One begins to notice a quaint peculiarity of Mrs. Don's. She is so accustomed to homage that she expects a prompt response even from the shades.

'Is the second letter A?'

The table moves.

'FA. Fa----?'

She is suddenly enlightened.

'Is the word Father? Yes.'

They all turn and look for the first time at Mr. Don. He has heard, and rises apologetically.

MR. DON, distressed, 'I had no intention--Should I go away, Grace?'

She answers sweetly without a trace of the annoyance she must surely feel.

MRS. DON. 'Perhaps you had better, Robert.'

ROGERS. 'I suppose it is because he is an unbeliever? He is not openly antagonistic, is he?'

MRS. DON, sadly enough, 'I am afraid he is.' They tend to discuss the criminal as if he was not present.

MAJOR. 'But he must admit that we do get messages.'

MRS. DON, reluctantly, 'He says we think we do. He says they would not want to communicate with us if they had such trivial things to say.'

ROGERS. 'But we are only on the threshold, Don. This is just a beginning.'

LAURA. 'Didn't you hear, Mr. Don--"Love Bade Me Welcome"?'

MR. DON. 'Does that strike you as important, Laura?' LAURA.

'He said it was.'

MRS. DON. 'It might be very important to him, though we don't understand why.'

She speaks gently, but there is an obstinacy in him, despite his meekness.

MR. DON. 'I didn't mean to be antagonistic, Grace. I thought. I wasn't thinking of it at all.'

MRS. DON. 'Not thinking of Dick, Robert? And it was only five months ago!'

MR. DON, who is somehow, without meaning it, always in the wrong, 'I'll go.'

ROGERS. 'A boy wouldn't turn his father out. Ask him.'

MR. DON, forlornly, 'As to that--as to that----'

MRS. DON. 'I will ask him if you wish me to, Robert.'

MR. DON. 'No, don't.'

ROGERS. 'It can't worry you as you are a disbeliever.'

MR. DON. 'No, but--I shouldn't like you to think that he sent me away.'

ROGERS. 'He won't. Will he, Mrs. Don?'

MR. DON, knowing what her silence implies, 'You see, Dick and I were not very--no quarrel or anything of that sort--but I, I didn't much matter to Dick. I'm too old, perhaps.'

MRS. DON, gently, 'I won't ask him, Robert, if you would prefer me not to.'

MR. DON. 'I'll go.'

MRS. DON. 'I'm afraid it is too late now.' She turns away from earthly things. 'Do you want me to break off?'

The table moves.

'Yes. Do you send me your love, Dick? Yes. And to Laura? Yes.' She raises her eyes to Don, and hesitates. 'Shall I ask him----?'

MR. DON. 'No, no, don't.'

ROGERS. 'It would be all right, Don.'

MR. DON. 'I don't know.'

They leave the table.

LAURA, a little agitated, 'May I go to my room, Mrs. Don? I feel I--should like to be alone.'

MRS. DON. 'Yes, yes, Laura dear. I shall come in and see you.'

Laura bids them good-night and goes. She likes Mr. Don, she strokes his hand when he holds it out to her, but she can't help saying, 'Oh, Mr. Don, how could you?'

ROGERS. 'I think we must all want to be alone after such an evening. I shall say good-night, Mrs. Don.'

MAJOR. 'Same here. I go your way, Rogers, but you will find me a silent companion. One doesn't want to talk ordinary things to-night. Rather not. Thanks, awfully.'

ROGERS. 'Good-night, Don. It's a pity, you know; a bit hard on your wife.'

MR. DON. 'Good-night, Rogers. Good-night, Major.'

The husband and wife, left together, have not much to say to each other. He is depressed because he has spoilt things for her. She is not angry. She knows that he can't help being as he is, and that there are fine spaces in her mind where his thoughts can never walk with her. But she would forgive him seventy times seven because he is her husband. She is standing looking at a case of fishing-rods against the wall. There is a Jock Scott still sticking in one of them. Mr. Don says, as if somehow they were evidence against him:

'Dick's fishing-rods.'

She says forgivingly, 'I hope you don't mind my keeping them in the studio, Robert. They are sacred things to me.'

'That's all right, Grace.'

'I think I shall go to Laura now.'

'Yes,' in his inexpressive way.

'Poor child!'

'I'm afraid I hurt her.'

'Dick wouldn't have liked it--but Dick's gone.' She looks a little wonderingly at him. After all these years, she can sometimes wonder a little still. 'I suppose you will resume your evening paper!'

He answers quietly, but with the noble doggedness which is the reason why we write this chapter in his life. 'Why not, Grace?'

She considers, for she is so sure that she must know the answer better than he. 'I suppose it is just that a son is so much more to a mother than to a father.'

'I daresay.'

A little gust of passion shakes her. 'How you can read about the war nowadays!'

He says firmly to her--he has had to say it a good many times to himself, 'I'm not going to give in.' But he adds, 'I am so sorry I was in the way, Grace. I wasn't scouting you, or anything of that sort. It's just that I can't believe in it.'

'Ah, Robert, you would believe if Dick had been to you what he was to me.'

'I don't know.'

'In a sense you may be glad that you don't miss him in the way I do.'

'Yes, perhaps.'

'Good-night, Robert.'

'Good-night, dear.'

He is alone now. He stands fingering the fishing-rods tenderly, then wanders back into the ingle-nook. In the room we could scarcely see him, for it has gone slowly dark there, a grey darkness, as if the lamp, though still burning, was becoming unable to shed light. Through the greyness we see him very well beyond it in the glow of the fire. He sits on the settle and tries to read his paper. He breaks down. He is a pitiful lonely man.

In the silence something happens. A well-remembered voice says, 'Father.' Mr. Don looks into the greyness from which this voice comes, and he sees his son. We see no one, but we are to understand that, to Mr. Don, Dick is standing there in his habit as he lived. He goes to his boy.

'Dick!'

'I have come to sit with you for a bit, father.'

It is the gay, young, careless voice.

'It's you, Dick; it's you!'

'It's me all right, father. I say, don't be startled, or anything of that kind. We don't like that.'

'My boy!'

Evidently Dick is the taller, for Mr. Don has to look up to him. He puts his hands on the boy's shoulders.

'How am I looking, father?'

'You haven't altered, Dick.'

'Rather not. It's jolly to see the old studio again!' In a cajoling voice, 'I say, father, don't fuss. Let us be our ordinary selves, won't you?'

'I'll try, I'll try. You didn't say you had come to sit with me, Dick? Not with me!'

'Rather!'

'But your mother----'

'It's you I want.'

'Me?'

'We can only come to one, you see.'

'Then why me?'

'That's the reason.' He is evidently moving about, looking curiously at old acquaintances. 'Hello, here's your old jacket, greasier than ever!'

'Me? But, Dick, it is as if you had forgotten. It was your mother who was everything to you. It can't be you if you have forgotten that. I used to feel so out of it; but, of course, you didn't know.'

'I didn't know it till lately, father; but heaps of things that I didn't know once are clear to me now. I didn't know that you were the one who would miss me most; but I know now.'

Though the voice is as boyish as ever, there is a new note in it of which his father is aware. Dick may not have grown much wiser, but whatever he does know now he seems to know for certain.

'Me miss you most? Dick, I try to paint just as before. I go to the club. Dick, I have been to a dinner-party. I said I wouldn't give in.'

'We like that.'

'But, my boy----'

Mr. Don's arms have gone out to him again. Dick evidently wriggles away from them. He speaks coaxingly.

'I say, father, let's get away from that sort of thing.'

'That is so like you, Dick! I'll do anything you ask.'

'Then keep a bright face.'

'I've tried to.'

'Good man! I say, put on your old greasy; you are looking so beastly clean.'

The old greasy is the jacket, and Mr. Don obediently gets into it.

'Anything you like. No, that's the wrong sleeve. Thanks, Dick.'

They are in the ingle-nook now, and the mischievous boy catches his father by the shoulders.

'Here, let me shove you into your old seat.'

Mr. Don is propelled on to the settle.

'How's that, umpire!'

'Dick,' smiling, 'that's just how you used to butt me into it long ago!'

Dick is probably standing with his back to the fire, chuckling.

'When I was a kid.'

'With the palette in my hand.'

'Or sticking to your trousers.'

'The mess we made of ourselves, Dick.'

'I sneaked behind the settle and climbed up it.'

'Till you fell off.'

'On top of you and the palette.'

It is good fun for a father and son; and the crafty boy has succeeded in making the father laugh. But soon,

'Ah, Dick.'

The son frowns. He is not going to stand any nonsense.

'Now then, behave! What did I say about that face?'

Mr. Don smiles at once, obediently.

'That's better. I'll sit here.'

We see from his father's face which is smiling with difficulty that Dick has plopped into the big chair on the other side of the ingle-nook. His legs are probably dangling over one of its arms.

Rather sharply, 'Got your pipe?'

'I don't--I don't seem to care to smoke nowadays, Dick.'

'Rot! Just because I am dead! You that pretend to be plucky! I won't have it, you know. You get your pipe, and look slippy about it.'

'Yes, Dick,' the old man says obediently. He fills his pipe from a jar on the mantelshelf. We may be sure that Dick is watching closely to see that he lights it properly.

'Now, then, burn your thumb with the match--you always did, you know. That's the style. You've forgotten to cock your head to the side. Not so bad. That's you. Like it?'

'It's rather nice, Dick. Dick, you and me by the fire!'

'Yes, but sit still. How often we might have been like this, father, and weren't.'

'Ah!'

'Face. How is Fido?'

'Never a dog missed her master more.'

'Oh,' frowning. 'She doesn't want to go and sit on my grave, or any of that tosh, does she? As if I were there!'

'No, no,' hastily; 'she goes ratting, Dick.'

'Good old Fido!'

'Dick, here's a good one. We oughtn't to keep a dog at all because we are on rations now; but what do you think Fido ate yesterday?'

'Let me guess. The joint?'

'Almost worse than that. She ate all the cook's meat tickets.'

They laugh, together, but when Dick says light-heartedly, 'That dog will be the death of me.' his father shivers. Dick does not notice this; his eyes have drawn him to the fishing-rods.

'Hullo!'

'Yes, those are your old fishing-rods.'

'Here's the little hickory! Do you remember, father, how I got the seven-pounder on a burn-trout cast? No, you weren't there. That was a day. It was really only six and three-quarters. I put a stone in its mouth the second time we weighed it!'

'You loved fishing, Dick.'

'Didn't I? Why weren't you oftener with me? I'll tell you a funny thing, When I went a soldiering I used to pray--just standing up, you know--that I shouldn't lose my right arm, because it would be so awkward for casting.' He cogitates as he returns to the ingle-nook. 'Somehow I never thought I should be killed. Lots of fellows thought that about themselves, but I never did. It was quite a surprise to me.'

'Oh, Dick!'

'What's the matter? Oh, I forgot. Face!' He is apparently looking down at his father wonderingly. 'Haven't you got over it yet, father? I got over it so long ago. I wish you people would understand what a little thing it is.'

'Tell me,' very humbly; 'tell me, Dick.'

'All right.' He is in the chair again.

'Mind, I can't tell you where I was killed; it's against the regulations.'

'I know where.'

Curiously, 'You got a wire, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'There's always a wire for officers, even for 2nd Lieutenants. It's jolly decent of them.'

'Tell me, Dick, about the--the veil. I mean the veil that is drawn between the living and the----.'

'The dead? Funny how you jib at that word.'

'I suppose the veil is like a mist?'

'The veil's a rummy thing, father. Yes, like a mist. But when one has been at the Front for a bit, you can't think how thin the veil seems to get; just one layer of it. I suppose it seems thin to you out there because one step takes you through it. We sometimes mix up those who have gone through with those who haven't. I daresay if I were to go back to my old battalion the living chaps would just nod to me.'

'Dick!'

'Where's that pipe? Death? Well, to me, before my day came, it was like some part of the line I had heard a lot about but never been in. I mean, never been in to stay, because, of course, one often popped in and out.'

'Dick, the day that you----'

'My day? I don't remember being hit, you know. I don't remember anything till the quietness came. When you have been killed it suddenly becomes very quiet; quieter even than you have ever known it at home. Sunday used to be a pretty quiet day at my tutor's, when Trotter and I flattened out on the first shady spot up the river; but it is quieter than that. I am not boring you, am I?'

'My boy!'

'When I came to, the veil was so thin that I couldn't see it at all; and my first thought was, Which side of it have I come out on? The living ones lying on the ground were asking that about themselves, too. There we were, all sitting up and asking whether we were alive or dead; and some were one, and some were the other. Sort of fluke, you know.'

'I--I--oh, Dick!'

'As soon as each had found out about himself he wondered how it had gone with his chums, I halloo'd to Johnny Randall, and he halloo'd back

that he was dead, but that Trotter was living. That's the way of it. A good deal of chaff, of course. By that time the veil was there, and getting thicker, and we lined up on our right sides. Then I could only see the living ones in shadow and hear their voices from a distance. They sang out to us for a while; but just at first, father, it was rather lonely when we couldn't hear their tread any longer. What are you fidgeting about? You needn't worry; that didn't last long; we were heaps more interested in ourselves than in them. You should have heard the gabbling! It was all so frightfully novel, you see; and no one quite knew what to do next, whether all to start off together, or wait for some one to come for us. I say, what a lot I'm talking!

'What happened, Dick?'

'Oh!' a proud ring coming into the voice, 'Ockley came for us. He used to be alive, you know--the Ockley who was keeper of the fives in my first half. I once pointed him out to mother. I was jolly glad he was the one who came for us. As soon as I saw it was Ockley I knew we should be all right.'

'Dick, I like that Ockley.'

'Rather. I wish I could remember something funny to tell you though. There are lots of jokes, but I am such a one for forgetting them.'

He laughs boisterously. We may be sure that he flings back his head. You remember how Dick used to fling back his head when he laughed?-- No, you didn't know him.

'Father, do you remember little Wantage who was at my private and came on to Ridley's house in my third half? His mother was the one you called Emily.'

'Emily Wantage's boy.'

'That's the card. We used to call him Jemima, because he and his mother were both caught crying when lock-up struck, and she had to clear out.'

'She was very fond of him, Dick.'

'Oh, I expect no end. Tell her he's killed.'

'She knows.'

'She had got a wire. That isn't the joke, though. You see he got into a hopeless muddle about which side of the veil he had come out on; and he went off with the other ones, and they wouldn't have him, and he got lost in the veil, running up and down it, calling to us; and just for the lark we didn't answer.' He chuckles, 'I expect he has become a ghost!' With sudden consideration, 'Best not tell his mother that.'

Mr. Don rises, wincing, and Dick also is at once on his feet, full of compunction.

'Was that shabby of me? Sorry, father. We are all pretty young, you know, and we can't help having our fun still.'

'I'm glad you still have your fun,' the father says, once more putting his hands on Dick's shoulders. 'Let me look at you again, Dick. There is such a serenity about you now.'

'Serenity, that's the word! None of us could remember what the word was. It's a ripping good thing to have. I should be awfully bucked if you would have it, too.'

'I'll try.'

'I say, how my tongue runs on! But, after all, it was my show. Now, you tell me some things.'

'What about, Dick? The war?'

'No,' almost in a shout. 'We have a fine for speaking about the war. And you know, those fellows we were fighting--I forget who they were?'

'The Germans.'

'Oh yes. Some of them were on the same side of the veil with us, and they were rather decent; so we chummed up in the end and Ockley took us all away together. They were jolly lucky in getting Ockley. There I go again! Come on, it's your turn. Has the bathroom tap been mended yet?'

'I'm afraid it is--just tied up with that string still, Dick. It works all right.'

'It only needs two screw-nails, you know.'

'I'll see to it.'

'Do you know whether any one at my tutors got his fives choice this half?'

'I'm sorry, Dick, but----'

'Or who is the captain of the boats?'

'No, I----'

'Whatever have you been doing?' He is moving about the room. 'Hullo, here's mother's work-box! Is mother all right?'

'Very sad about you, Dick.'

'Oh, I say, that isn't fair. Why doesn't she cheer up?'

'It isn't so easy, my boy.'

'It's pretty hard lines on me, you know.'

'How is that?'

'If you are sad, I have to be sad. That's how we have got to work it off. You can't think how we want to be bright.'

'I'll always remember that, and I'll tell your mother. Ah, but she won't believe me, Dick; you will have to tell her yourself.'

'I can't do that, father. I can only come to one.'

'She should have been the one; she loved you best, Dick.'

'Oh, I don't know. Do you ever,' with a slight hesitation, 'see Laura now?'

'She is staying with us at present.'

'Is she? I think I should like to see her.'

'If Laura were to see you----'

'Oh, she wouldn't see me. She is not dressed in black, is she?'

'No, in white.'

'Good girl! I suppose mother is in black?'

'Surely, Dick.'

'It's too bad, you know.'

'You weren't exactly--engaged to Laura, were you, Dick?' A bold question from a father, but the circumstances were unusual. Apologetically, 'I never rightly knew.'

'No! Dick has flung back his head again. Confidentially, 'Father, I sometimes thought of it, but it rather scared me! I expect that is about how it was with her, too.'

'She is very broken about you now.'

Irritated, 'Oh, hang!'

'Would you like her to forget you, Dick?'

'Rather not. But she might help a fellow a bit. Hullo!'

What calls forth this exclamation, is the little table at which the seance had taken place. The four chairs are still standing round it, as if they were guarding something.

'Here's something new, father; this table.'

'Yes, It is usually in the drawing-room.'

'Of course. I remember.'

Mr. Don sets his teeth. 'Does that table suggest anything to you, Dick?'

'To me? Let me think. Yes, I used to play backgammon on it. What is it doing here?'

'Your mother brought it in.'

'To play games on? Mother!'

'I don't--know that it was a game, Dick.'

'But to play anything! I'm precious glad she can do that. Was Laura playing with her?'

'She was helping her.'

'Good for Laura.' He is looking at some slips of paper on the table. 'Are those pieces of paper used in the game? There is writing on them: "The

first letter is H--the second letter is A--the third letter is R." What does it mean?'

'Does it convey no meaning to you, Dick?'

'To me? No; why should it?'

Mr. Don is enjoying no triumph. 'Let us go back to the fire, my boy.'

Dick follows him into the ingle-nook. 'But, why should it convey a meaning to me? I was never much of a hand at indoor games.' Brightly, 'I bet you Ockley would be good at it.' After a joyous ramble, 'Ockley's nickname still sticks to him!'

'I don't think I know it.'

'He was a frightful swell, you know. Keeper of the field, and played against Harrow the same year. I suppose it did go just a little to his head.'

They are back in their old seats, and Mr. Don leans forward in gleeful anticipation. Probably Dick is leaning forward in the same way, and this old father is merely copying him.

'What did you nickname him, Dick?'

'It was his fags that did it!'

'I should like to know it. I say, do tell me, Dick.'

'He is pretty touchy about it now, you know.'

'I won't tell any one. Come on, Dick.'

'His fags called him K.C.M.G.'

'Meaning, meaning, Dick?'

'Meaning "Kindly Call Me God!"'

Mr. Don flings back his head; so we know what Dick is doing. They are a hilarious pair, perhaps too noisy, for suddenly Mr. Don looks at the door.

'I think I heard some one, Dick!'

'Perhaps it's mother!'

'She may,' nervously, 'have heard the row.'

Dick's eyes must be twinkling. 'I say, father, you'll catch it!'

'I can't believe, Dick,' gazing wistfully into the chair, 'that she won't see you.'

It is a sadder voice than his own for the moment that answers, 'Only one may see me.'

'You will speak to her, Dick. Let her hear your voice.'

'Only one may hear me. I could make her the one; but it would mean your losing me.'

'I can't give you up, Dick.'

Mrs. Don comes in, as beautiful as ever, but a little aggrieved.

'I called to you, Robert.'

'Yes, I thought--I was just going to----'

He has come from the ingle-nook to meet her. He looks from her to Dick, whom he sees so clearly, standing now by the fire. An awe falls upon Mr. Don. He says her name, meaning, 'See, Grace, who is with us.'

Her eyes follow his, but she sees nothing, not even two arms outstretched to her. 'What is it, Robert? What is the matter?'

She does not hear a voice say, 'Mother!'

'I heard you laughing, Robert; what on earth at?'

The father cannot speak.

'Now you're in a hole, father!' says a mischievous, voice.

'Can I not be told, Robert?'

'Something in the paper,' the voice whispers.

Mr. Don lifts the paper feebly, and his wife understands. 'Oh, a newspaper joke! Please, I don't want to hear it.'

'Was it my laughing that brought you back, Grace?'

'No, that would only have made me shut my door. If Dick thought you could laugh!' She goes to the little table. 'I came back for these slips of paper.' She lifts them and presses them to her breast. 'These precious slips of paper!'

Dick was always a curious boy, and forgetting that she cannot hear him, he blurts out, 'How do you mean, mother? Why are they precious?'

Mr. Don forgets also and looks to her for an answer.

'What is it, Robert?'

'Didn't you--hear anything, Grace?'

'No. Perhaps Laura was calling; I left her on the stair.'

'I wish,' Mr. Don is fighting for Dick now, 'I wish Laura would come back and say good-night to me.'

'I daresay she will.'

'And,' valiantly, 'if she could be--rather brighter, Grace.'

'Robert!'

'I think Dick would like it.'

Her fine eyes reproach him mutely, but she says, ever forgiving, 'Is that how you look at it, Robert? Very well, laugh your fill--if you can. But if Dick were to appear before me to-night----'

In his distress Mr. Don cries aloud to the figure by the fire, 'Dick, if you can appear to your mother, do it.'

There is a pause in which anything may happen, but nothing happens. Yes, something happened: Dick has stuck to his father.

'Really, Robert!' Mrs. Don says, and, without a word of reproach, she goes away. Evidently Dick comes to his father, who has sank into a chair, and puts a loving hand on him. Mr. Don clasps it without looking up.

'Father, that was top-hole of you! Poor mother, I should have liked to hug her; but I can't.'

'You should have gone to her, Dick; you shouldn't have minded me.'

The wiser boy says, 'Mother's a darling, but she doesn't need me as much as you do.'

'I don't know.'

'That's all right. I'm glad she's so keen about that game, though.'

He has returned to the ingle-nook when Laura comes in, eager to make amends to Dick's father if she hurt him when she went out.

Softly, 'I have come to say good-night, Mr. Don.'

'It's nice of you, Laura,' taking both her hands.

Dick speaks. 'I want her to come nearer to the fire; I can't see her very well there.'

For a moment Mr. Don is caught out again; but Laura has heard nothing. He becomes quite cunning in Dick's interests.

'Your hands are cold, Laura; go over to the fire. I want to look at you.'

She sits on the hearthstone by Dick's feet.

Shyly, 'Am I all right?'

It is Dick who answers. 'You're awfully pretty, Laura. You are even prettier than I thought. I remember I used to think, she can't be quite as pretty as I think her; and then when you came you were just a little prettier.'

She has been warming her hands. 'Why don't you say anything?' she asks Mr. Don.

'I was thinking of you and Dick, Laura.'

'What a pretty soul she has, father,' says the boy; 'I can see right down into it now.'

'If Dick had lived, Laura, do you think that you and he--?'

With shining eyes, 'I think--if he had wanted it very much.'

'I expect he would, my dear.'

There is an odd candour about Dick's contribution. 'I think so, too, but I never was quite sure.' They are a very young pair.

Laura is trembling a little. 'Mr. Don--'

'Yes, Laura?'

'I think there is something wicked about me. I sometimes feel quite light-hearted--though Dick has gone.'

'Perhaps, nowadays, the fruit trees have that sort of shame when they blossom, Laura; but they can't help doing it. I hope you are yet to be a happy woman, a happy wife.'

'It seems so heartless to Dick.'

'Not a bit; it's what I should like,' Dick says.

'It's what he would like, Laura.'

'Do you remember, Laura,' Dick goes on, 'I kissed you once. It was under a lilac in the Loudon Woods. I knew at the time that you were angry, and I should have apologised. I'm sorry, Laura.'

His sweetheart has risen, tasting something bitter-sweet. 'What is it, Laura?' Mr. Don asks.

'Somehow--I don't know how--but, for a moment I seemed to feel the smell of lilac. Dick was once--nice to me under a lilac. Oh, Mr. Don--' She goes to him like a child, and he soothes and pets her.

'There, there! That will be all right, quite all right.' He takes her to the door. 'Good-night, my dear.'

'Good-night, Mr. Don.'

'Good-bye, Laura,' says the third voice.

Mr. Don is looking so glum that the moment they are alone Dick has to cry warningly, 'Face!' He is probably looking glum himself, for he says candidly, 'Pretty awful things, these partings. Father, don't feel hurt though I dodge the good-bye business when I leave you.'

'That's so like you, Dick!'

'I'll have to go soon.'

'Oh, Dick! Can't you--'

'There's something I want not to miss, you see.'

'I'm glad of that.'

'I'm not going yet; but I mean that when I do I'll just slip away.'

'What I am afraid of is that you won't come back.'

'I will--honest Injun--if you keep bright.'

'But, if I do that, Dick, you might think I wasn't missing you so much.'

'We know better than that. You see, if you're bright, I'll get a good mark for it.'

'I'll be bright.'

Dick pops him into the settle again.

'Remember your pipe.'

'Yes, Dick.'

'Do you still go to that swimming-bath, and do your dumb-bell exercises?'

'No, I--'

'You must.'

'All right, Dick, I will.'

'And I want you to be smarter next time. Your hair's awful.'

'I'll get it cut, Dick.'

'Are you hard at work over your picture of those three Graces?' 'No.'

I put that away. I'm just doing little things nowadays. I can't--'

'Look here, sonny, you've got to go on with it. You don't seem to know how interested I am in your future.'

'Very well, Dick; I'll bring it out again.'

Mr. Don hesitates.

'Dick, there is something I have wanted to ask you all the time.'

Some fear seems to come into the boy's voice. 'Don't ask it, father.'

'I shall go on worrying about it if I don't--but just as you like, Dick.'

'Go ahead, father; ask me.'

'It is this. Would you rather be--here--than there?'

After a pause the boy says, 'Not always.'

'What is the great difference, Dick?'

'Well, down here one knows he has risks to run.'

'And you miss that?'

'It must be rather jolly.'

'Did you know that was what I was to ask?'

'Yes. But, remember, I'm young at it.'

'And your gaiety, Dick; is it all real, or only put on to help me?'

'It's--it's half and half, father.'

'Face!' he cries, next moment. Then cajolingly, 'Father, K.C.M.G.!'

'When will you come again, Dick?'

'There's no saying. One can't always get through. They keep changing the password.' His voice grows troubled. 'It's awfully difficult to get the password.'

'What was it to-night?'

'Love Bade Me Welcome.'

Mr. Don rises; he stares at his son.

'How did you get it, Dick?'

'I'm not sure.' Dick seems to go closer to his father, as if for protection.

'There are lots of things I don't understand yet.'

'There are things I don't understand either. Dick, did you ever try to send messages--from there---to us?'

'Me? No.'

'Or get messages from us?'

'No. How could we?'

'Is there anything in it?'

Mr. Don is not speaking to his son. He goes to the little table and looks long at it. Has it taken on a sinister aspect? Those chairs, are they guarding a secret?

'Dick, this table--your mother--how could they----'

He turns, to find that Dick has gone.

'Dick! My boy! Dick!'

The well-remembered voice leaves a message behind it.

'Be bright, father.'

Mr. Don sits down by the fire to think it all out.