CHAPTER THE SECOND

MY MOTHER'S LAST DAYS

Section 1

NEXT day I came home to Clayton.

The new strange brightness of the world was all the brighter there, for the host of dark distressful memories, of darkened childhood, toilsome youth, embittered adolescence that wove about the place for me. It seemed to me that I saw morning there for the first time. No chimneys smoked that day, no furnaces were burning, the people were busy with other things. The clear strong sun, the sparkle in the dustless air, made a strange gaiety in the narrow streets. I passed a number of smiling people coming home from the public breakfasts that were given in the Town Hall until better things could be arranged, and happened on Parload among them. "You were right about that comet," I sang out at the sight of him; and he came toward me and clasped my hand.

"What are people doing here?" said I.

"They're sending us food from outside," he said, "and we're going

to level all these slums--and shift into tents on to the moors;"
and he began to tell me of many things that were being arranged,
the Midland land committees had got to work with remarkable celerity
and directness of purpose, and the redistribution of population
was already in its broad outlines planned. He was working at
an improvised college of engineering. Until schemes of work were
made out, almost every one was going to school again to get as much
technical training as they could against the demands of the huge
enterprise of reconstruction that was now beginning.

He walked with me to my door, and there I met old Pettigrew coming
down the steps. He looked dusty and tired, but his eye was brighter
than it used to be, and he carried in a rather unaccustomed manner,
a workman's tool basket.

"How's the rheumatism, Mr. Pettigrew?" I asked.

"Dietary," said old Pettigrew, "can work wonders. . . ." He looked
me in the eye. "These houses," he said, "will have to come down,
I suppose, and our notions of property must undergo very considerable
revision--in the light of reason; but meanwhile I've been doing
something to patch that disgraceful roof of mine! To think that
I could have dodged and evaded------"

He raised a deprecatory hand, drew down the loose corners of his
ample mouth, and shook his old head.

"The past is past, Mr. Pettigrew."

"Your poor dear mother! So good and honest a woman! So simple and kind and forgiving! To think of it! My dear young man!"--he said it manfully--"I'm ashamed."

"The whole world blushed at dawn the other day, Mr. Pettigrew," I said, "and did it very prettily. That's over now. God knows, who is NOT ashamed of all that came before last Tuesday."

I held out a forgiving hand, naively forgetful that in this place I was a thief, and he took it and went his way, shaking his head and repeating he was ashamed, but I think a little comforted.

The door opened and my poor old mother's face, marvelously cleaned, appeared. "Ah, Willie, boy! YOU. You!"

I ran up the steps to her, for I feared she might fall.

How she clung to me in the passage, the dear woman! . . .

But first she shut the front door. The old habit of respect for my unaccountable temper still swayed her. "Ah deary!" she said, "ah deary! But you were sorely tried," and kept her face close to my shoulder, lest she should offend me by the sight of the tears that

welled within her.

She made a sort of gulping noise and was quiet for a while, holding me very tightly to her heart with her worn, long hands . . .

She thanked me presently for my telegram, and I put my arm about her and drew her into the living room.

"It's all well with me, mother dear," I said, "and the dark times are over--are done with for ever, mother."

Whereupon she had courage and gave way and sobbed aloud, none chiding her.

She had not let me know she could still weep for five grimy years. . . .

Section 2

Dear heart! There remained for her but a very brief while in this world that had been renewed. I did not know how short that time would be, but the little I could do--perhaps after all it was not little to her--to atone for the harshness of my days of wrath and rebellion, I did. I took care to be constantly with her, for I perceived now her curious need of me. It was not that we had ideas

to exchange or pleasures to share, but she liked to see me at table, to watch me working, to have me go to and fro. There was no toil for her any more in the world, but only such light services as are easy and pleasant for a worn and weary old woman to do, and I think she was happy even at her end.

She kept to her queer old eighteenth century version of religion, too, without a change. She had worn this particular amulet so long it was a part of her. Yet the Change was evident even in that persistence. I said to her one day, "But do you still believe in that hell of flame, dear mother? You--with your tender heart!"

She vowed she did.

Some theological intricacy made it necessary to her, but still------

She looked thoughtfully at a bank of primulas before her for a time, and then laid her tremulous hand impressively on my arm. "You know, Willie, dear," she said, as though she was clearing up a childish misunderstanding of mine, "I don't think any one will GO there. I never DID think that. . . ."

Section 3

That talk stands out in my memory because of that agreeable theological decision of hers, but it was only one of a great number of talks. It used to be pleasant in the afternoon, after the day's work was done and before one went on with the evening's study--how odd it would have seemed in the old time for a young man of the industrial class to be doing post-graduate work in sociology, and how much a matter of course it seems now!--to walk out into the gardens of Lowchester House, and smoke a cigarette or so and let her talk ramblingly of the things that interested her. . . . Physically the Great Change did not do so very much to reinvigorate her--she had lived in that dismal underground kitchen in Clayton too long for any material rejuvenescence--she glowed out indeed as a dying spark among the ashes might glow under a draught of fresh air--and assuredly it hastened her end. But those closing days were very tranquil, full of an effortless contentment. With her, life was like a rainy, windy day that clears only to show the sunset afterglow. The light has passed. She acquired no new habits amid the comforts of the new life, did no new things, but only found a happier light upon the old.

She lived with a number of other old ladies belonging to our commune in the upper rooms of Lowchester House. Those upper apartments were simple and ample, fine and well done in the Georgian style, and they had been organized to give the maximum of comfort and conveniences and to economize the need of skilled attendance. We had taken over the various "great houses," as they used to be

called, to make communal dining-rooms and so forth--their kitchens were conveniently large--and pleasant places for the old people of over sixty whose time of ease had come, and for suchlike public uses. We had done this not only with Lord Redcar's house, but also with Checkshill House--where old Mrs. Verrall made a dignified and capable hostess,--and indeed with most of the fine residences in the beautiful wide country between the Four Towns district and the Welsh mountains. About these great houses there had usually been good outbuildings, laundries, married servants' quarters, stabling, dairies, and the like, suitably masked by trees, we turned these into homes, and to them we added first tents and wood chalets and afterward quadrangular residential buildings. In order to be near my mother I had two small rooms in the new collegiate buildings which our commune was almost the first to possess, and they were very convenient for the station of the high-speed electric railway that took me down to our daily conferences and my secretarial and statistical work in Clayton.

Ours had been one of the first modern communes to get in order; we were greatly helped by the energy of Lord Redcar, who had a fine feeling for the picturesque associations of his ancestral home--the detour that took our line through the beeches and bracken and bluebells of the West Wood and saved the pleasant open wildness of the park was one of his suggestions; and we had many reasons to be proud of our surroundings. Nearly all the other communes that sprang up all over the pleasant parkland round the industrial

valley of the Four Towns, as the workers moved out, came to us to study the architecture of the residential squares and quadrangles with which we had replaced the back streets between the great houses and the ecclesiastical residences about the cathedral, and the way in which we had adapted all these buildings to our new social needs. Some claimed to have improved on us. But they could not emulate the rhododendron garden out beyond our shrubberies; that was a thing altogether our own in our part of England, because of its ripeness and of the rarity of good peat free from lime.

These gardens had been planned under the third Lord Redcar, fifty years ago and more; they abounded in rhododendra and azaleas, and were in places so well sheltered and sunny that great magnolias flourished and flowered. There were tall trees smothered in crimson and yellow climbing roses, and an endless variety of flowering shrubs and fine conifers, and such pampas grass as no other garden can show. And barred by the broad shadows of these, were glades and broad spaces of emerald turf, and here and there banks of pegged roses, and flower-beds, and banks given over some to spring bulbs, and some to primroses and primulas and polyanthuses. My mother loved these latter banks and the little round staring eyes of their innumerable yellow, ruddy brown, and purple corollas, more than anything else the gardens could show, and in the spring of the Year of Scaffolding she would go with me day after day to the seat that showed them in the greatest multitude.

It gave her, I think, among other agreeable impressions, a sense of gentle opulence. In the old time she had never known what it was to have more than enough of anything agreeable in the world at all.

We would sit and think, or talk--there was a curious effect of complete understanding between us whether we talked or were still.

"Heaven," she said to me one day, "Heaven is a garden."

I was moved to tease her a little. "There's jewels, you know, walls and gates of jewels--and singing."

"For such as like them," said my mother firmly, and thought for a while. "There'll be things for all of us, o' course. But for me it couldn't be Heaven, dear, unless it was a garden--a nice sunny garden. . . . And feeling such as we're fond of, are close and handy by"

You of your happier generation cannot realize the wonderfulness of those early days in the new epoch, the sense of security, the extraordinary effects of contrast. In the morning, except in high summer, I was up before dawn, and breakfasted upon the swift, smooth train, and perhaps saw the sunrise as I rushed out of the little tunnel that pierced Clayton Crest, and so to work like a man. Now that we had got all the homes and schools and all the softness of life away from our coal and iron ore and clay, now that a thousand

obstructive "rights" and timidities had been swept aside, we could let ourselves go, we merged this enterprise with that, cut across this or that anciently obstructive piece of private land, joined and separated, effected gigantic consolidations and gigantic economies, and the valley, no longer a pit of squalid human tragedies and meanly conflicting industries, grew into a sort of beauty of its own, a savage inhuman beauty of force and machinery and flames. One was a Titan in that Etna. Then back one came at midday to bath and change in the train, and so to the leisurely gossiping lunch in the club dining-room in Lowchester House, and the refreshment of these green and sunlit afternoon tranquillities.

Sometimes in her profounder moments my mother doubted whether all this last phase of her life was not a dream.

"A dream," I used to say, "a dream indeed--but a dream that is one step nearer awakening than that nightmare of the former days."

She found great comfort and assurance in my altered clothes--she liked the new fashions of dress, she alleged. It was not simply altered clothes. I did grow two inches, broaden some inches round my chest, and increase in weight three stones before I was twenty-three. I wore a soft brown cloth and she would caress my sleeve and admire it greatly--she had the woman's sense of texture very strong in her.

Sometimes she would muse upon the past, rubbing together her poor rough hands--they never got softened--one over the other. She told me much I had not heard before about my father, and her own early life. It was like finding flat and faded flowers in a book still faintly sweet, to realize that once my mother had been loved with passion; that my remote father had once shed hot tears of tenderness in her arms. And she would sometimes even speak tentatively in those narrow, old-world phrases that her lips could rob of all their bitter narrowness, of Nettie.

"She wasn't worthy of you, dear," she would say abruptly, leaving me to guess the person she intended.

"No man is worthy of a woman's love," I answered. "No woman is worthy of a man's. I love her, dear mother, and that you cannot alter."

"There's others," she would muse.

"Not for me," I said. "No! I didn't fire a shot that time; I burnt my magazine. I can't begin again, mother, not from the beginning."

She sighed and said no more then.

At another time she said--I think her words were: "You'll be lonely when I'm gone dear."

"You'll not think of going, then," I said.

"Eh, dear! but man and maid should come together."

I said nothing to that.

"You brood overmuch on Nettie, dear. If I could see you married to some sweet girl of a woman, some good, KIND girl------"

"Dear mother, I'm married enough. Perhaps some day------ Who knows? I can wait."

"But to have nothing to do with women!"

"I have my friends. Don't you trouble, mother. There's plentiful work for a man in this world though the heart of love is cast out from him. Nettie was life and beauty for me--is--will be. Don't think I've lost too much, mother."

(Because in my heart I told myself the end had still to come.)

And once she sprang a question on me suddenly that surprised me.

"Where are they now?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Nettie and--him."

She had pierced to the marrow of my thoughts. "I don't know," I said shortly.

Her shriveled hand just fluttered into touch of mine.

"It's better so," she said, as if pleading. "Indeed . . . it is better so."

There was something in her quivering old voice that for a moment took me back across an epoch, to the protests of the former time, to those counsels of submission, those appeals not to offend It, that had always stirred an angry spirit of rebellion within me.

"That is the thing I doubt," I said, and abruptly I felt I could talk no more to her of Nettie. I got up and walked away from her, and came back after a while, to speak of other things, with a bunch of daffodils for her in my hand.

But I did not always spend my afternoons with her. There were days when my crushed hunger for Nettie rose again, and then I had to be alone; I walked, or bicycled, and presently I found a new interest and relief in learning to ride. For the horse was already very

swiftly reaping the benefit to the Change. Hardly anywhere was the inhumanity of horse traction to be found after the first year of the new epoch, everywhere lugging and dragging and straining was done by machines, and the horse had become a beautiful instrument for the pleasure and carriage of youth. I rode both in the saddle and, what is finer, naked and barebacked. I found violent exercises were good for the states of enormous melancholy that came upon me, and when at last horse riding palled, I went and joined the aviators who practised soaring upon aeroplanes beyond Horsemarden Hill. . . . But at least every alternate day I spent with my mother, and altogether I think I gave her two-thirds of my afternoons.

Section 4

When presently that illness, that fading weakness that made an euthanasia for so many of the older people in the beginning of the new time, took hold upon my mother, there came Anna Reeves to daughter her--after our new custom. She chose to come. She was already known to us a little from chance meetings and chance services she had done my mother in the garden; she sought to give her help. She seemed then just one of those plainly good girls the world at its worst has never failed to produce, who were indeed in the dark old times the hidden antiseptic of all our hustling, hating, faithless lives. They made their secret voiceless worship, they did their

steadfast, uninspired, unthanked, unselfish work as helpful daughters, as nurses, as faithful servants, as the humble providences of homes. She was almost exactly three years older than I. At first I found no beauty in her, she was short but rather sturdy and ruddy, with red-tinged hair, and fair hairy brows and red-brown eyes. But her freckled hands I found, were full of apt help, her voice carried good cheer. . . .

At first she was no more than a blue-clad, white-aproned benevolence, that moved in the shadows behind the bed on which my old mother lay and sank restfully to death. She would come forward to anticipate some little need, to proffer some simple comfort, and always then my mother smiled on her. In a little while I discovered the beauty of that helpful poise of her woman's body, I discovered the grace of untiring goodness, the sweetness of a tender pity, and the great riches of her voice, of her few reassuring words and phrases. I noted and remembered very clearly how once my mother's lean old hand patted the firm gold-flecked strength of hers, as it went by upon its duties with the coverlet.

"She is a good girl to me," said my mother one day. "A good girl. Like a daughter should be. . . . I never had a daughter--really." She mused peacefully for a space. "Your little sister died," she said.

I had never heard of that little sister.

"November the tenth," said my mother. "Twenty-nine months and three days. . . . I cried. I cried. That was before you came, dear. So long ago--and I can see it now. I was a young wife then, and your father was very kind. But I can see its hands, its dear little quiet hands. . . . Dear, they say that now--now they will not let the little children die."

"No, dear mother," I said. "We shall do better now."

"The club doctor could not come. Your father went twice. There was some one else, some one who paid. So your father went on into Swathinglea, and that man wouldn't come unless he had his fee. And your father had changed his clothes to look more respectful and he hadn't any money, not even his tram fare home. It seemed cruel to be waiting there with my baby thing in pain. . . . And I can't help thinking perhaps we might have saved her. . . . But it was like that with the poor always in the bad old times--always. When the doctor came at last he was angry. 'Why wasn't I called before?' he said, and he took no pains. He was angry because some one hadn't explained. I begged him--but it was too late."

She said these things very quietly with drooping eyelids, like one who describes a dream. "We are going to manage all these things better now," I said, feeling a strange resentment at this pitiful little story her faded, matter-of-fact voice was telling me.

"She talked," my mother went on. "She talked for her age wonderfully. . . . Hippopotamus."

"Eh?" I said.

"Hippopotamus, dear--quite plainly one day, when her father was showing her pictures. . . And her little prayers. 'Now I lay me. . . . down to sleep.' . . . I made her little socks. Knitted they was, dear, and the heel most difficult."

Her eyes were closed now. She spoke no longer to me but to herself. She whispered other vague things, little sentences, ghosts of long dead moments. . . . Her words grew less distinct.

Presently she was asleep and I got up and went out of the room, but my mind was queerly obsessed by the thought of that little life that had been glad and hopeful only to pass so inexplicably out of hope again into nonentity, this sister of whom I had never heard before. . . .

And presently I was in a black rage at all the irrecoverable sorrows of the past, of that great ocean of avoidable suffering of which this was but one luminous and quivering red drop. I walked in the garden and the garden was too small for me; I went out to wander on the moors. "The past is past," I cried, and all the while across

the gulf of five and twenty years I could hear my poor mother's heart-wrung weeping for that daughter baby who had suffered and died. Indeed that old spirit of rebellion has not altogether died in me, for all the transformation of the new time. . . . I quieted down at last to a thin and austere comfort in thinking that the whole is not told to us, that it cannot perhaps be told to such minds as ours; and anyhow, and what was far more sustaining, that now we have strength and courage and this new gift of wise love, whatever cruel and sad things marred the past, none of these sorrowful things that made the very warp and woof of the old life, need now go on happening. We could foresee, we could prevent and save. "The past is past," I said, between sighing and resolve, as I came into view again on my homeward way of the hundred sunset-lit windows of old Lowchester House. "Those sorrows are sorrows no more."

But I could not altogether cheat that common sadness of the new time, that memory, and insoluble riddle of the countless lives that had stumbled and failed in pain and darkness before our air grew clear.