

LIMBO
BY ALDOUS HUXLEY

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

moulin digital editions



2015

First Published January 29, 1920
Second Impression February 17, 1920

All rights reserved

CONTENTS

FARCICAL HISTORY OF
RICHARD GREENOW

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

EUPOMPUS GAVE SPLENDOUR
TO ART BY NUMBERS

HAPPY FAMILIES

CYNTHIA

THE BOOKSHOP

THE DEATH OF LULLY

LIMBO

FARCICAL HISTORY OF RICHARD GREENOW

I

THE most sumptuous present that Millicent received on her seventh birthday was a doll's house. "With love to darling little Mill from Aunty Loo." Aunt Loo was immensely rich, and the doll's house was almost as grandiose and massive as herself.

It was divided into four rooms, each papered in a different colour and each furnished as was fitting: beds and wash-stands and wardrobes in the upstairs rooms, arm-chairs and artificial plants below. "Replete with every modern convenience; sumptuous appointments." There was even a cold collation ready spread on the dining-room table—two scarlet lobsters on a dish, and a ham that had been sliced into just enough to reveal an internal complexion of the loveliest pink and white. One might go on talking about the doll's house for ever, it was so beautiful. Such, at any rate, was the opinion of Millicent's brother Dick. He would spend hours opening and shutting the front door, peeping through the windows, arranging and rearranging the furniture. As for Millicent, the gorgeous present left her cold. She had been hoping—and, what is more, praying, fervently, every night for a month—that Aunty Loo would give her a toy sewing-machine (one of the kind that works, though) for her birthday.

She was bitterly disappointed when the doll's house came instead. But she bore it all stoically and managed to be wonderfully polite to Aunty Loo about the whole affair. She never looked at the doll's house: it simply didn't interest her.

Dick had already been at a preparatory school for a couple of terms. Mr. Killigrew, the headmaster, thought him a promising boy. "Has quite a remarkable aptitude for mathematics," he wrote in his report. "He has started Algebra this term and shows a"—"quite remarkable" scratched out (the language of reports is apt to be somewhat limited)—"a very unusual grasp of the subject." Mr. Killigrew didn't know that his pupil also took an interest in dolls: if he had, he would have giped at Dick as unmercifully and in nearly the same terms as Dick's fellow-schoolboys—for shepherds grow to resemble their sheep and pedagogues their childish charges. But of course Dick would never have dreamt of telling anyone at school about it. He was chary of letting even the people at home divine his weakness, and when anyone came into the room where the doll's house was, he would put his hands in his pockets and stroll out, whistling

LIMBO

their getting engaged. That was really all. She wished she could write about her feelings in an accurate, complicated way, like people in novels; but when she came to think about it, she didn't seem to have any feelings to describe.

She looked at Guy's last letter from France. "Sometimes," he had written, "I am tortured by an intense physical desire for you. I can think of nothing but your beauty, your young, strong body. I hate that; I have to struggle to repress it. Do you forgive me?" It rather thrilled her that he should feel like that about her: he had always been so cold, so reserved, so much opposed to sentimentality—to the kisses and endearments she would, perhaps, secretly have liked. But he had seemed so right when he said, "We must love like rational beings, with our minds, not with our hands and lips." All the same . . .

She dipped her pen in the ink and began to write again. "I know the feelings you spoke of in your letter. Sometimes I long for you in the same way. I dreamt the other night I was holding you in my arms, and woke up hugging the pillow." She looked at what she had written. It was too awful, too vulgar! She would have to scratch it out. But no, she would leave it in spite of everything, just to see what he would think about it. She finished the letter quickly, sealed and stamped it, and rang for the maid to take it to the post. When the servant had gone, she shut up her desk with a bang. Bang—the letter had gone, irrevocably.

She picked up a large book lying on the table and began to read. It was the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*. Guy had said she must read Gibbon; she wouldn't be educated till she had read Gibbon. And so yesterday she had gone to her father in his library to get the book.

"Gibbon," Mr. Petherton had said, "certainly, my dear. How delightful it is to look at these grand old books again. One always finds something new every time."

Marjorie gave him to understand that she had never read it. She felt rather proud of her ignorance.

Mr. Petherton handed the first of eleven volumes to her. "A great book," he murmured—"an essential book. It fills the gap between your classical history and your mediaeval stuff."

"Your" classical history, Marjorie repeated to herself, "your" classical history indeed! Her father had an irritating way of taking it for granted that she knew everything, that classical history was as much hers as his. Only a day or two before he had turned to her at luncheon with, "Do you remember, dear child, whether it was Pomponazzi who denied the personal immortality of the soul, or else that queer fellow, Laurentius Valla? It's gone out of my head for the moment." Marjorie had quite lost her temper at the question—much to the innocent bewilderment of her poor father.

She had set to work with energy on the Gibbon; her bookmark-

LIMBO

er registered the fact that she had got through one hundred and twenty-three pages yesterday. Marjorie started reading. After two pages she stopped. She looked at the number of pages still remaining to be read—and this was only the first volume. She felt like a wasp sitting down to eat a vegetable marrow. Gibbon's bulk was not perceptibly diminished by her first bite. It was too long. She shut the book and went out for a walk. Passing the Whites' house, she saw her friend, Beatrice White that was, sitting on the lawn with her two babies. Beatrice hailed her, and she turned in.

"Pat a cake, pat a cake," she said. At the age of ten months, baby John had already learnt the art of patting cakes. He slapped the outstretched hand offered him, and his face, round and smooth and pink like an enormous peach, beamed with pleasure.

"Isn't he a darling!" Marjorie exclaimed. "You know, I'm sure he's grown since last I saw him, which was on Tuesday."

"He put on eleven ounces last week," Beatrice affirmed.

"How wonderful! His hair's coming on splendidly . . ."

It was Sunday the next day. Jacobsen appeared at breakfast in the neatest of black suits. He looked, Marjorie thought, more than ever like a cashier. She longed to tell him to hurry up or he'd miss the 8.53 for the second time this week and the manager would be annoyed. Marjorie herself was, rather consciously, not in Sunday best.

"What is the name of the Vicar?" Jacobsen inquired, as he helped himself to bacon.

"Trubshaw. Luke Trubshaw, I believe."

"Does he preach well?"

"He didn't when I used to hear him. But I don't often go to church now, so I don't know what he's like these days."

"Why don't you go to church?" Jacobsen inquired, with a silkiness of tone which veiled the crude outlines of his leading question.

Marjorie was painfully conscious of blushing. She was filled with rage against Jacobsen. "Because," she said firmly, "I don't think it necessary to give expression to my religious feelings by making a lot of—" she hesitated a moment—"a lot of meaningless gestures with a crowd of other people."

"You used to go," said Jacobsen.

"When I was a child and hadn't thought about these things."

Jacobsen was silent, and concealed a smile in his coffee-cup. Really, he said to himself, there ought to be religious conscription for women—and for most men, too. It was grotesque the way these people thought they could stand by themselves—the fools, when there was the infinite authority of organized religion to support their ridiculous febleness.

"Does Lambourne go to church?" he asked maliciously, and with an air of perfect naïveté and good faith.

LIMBO

Marjorie coloured again, and a fresh wave of hatred surged up within her. Even as she had said the words she had wondered whether Jacobsen would notice that the phrase “meaningless gestures” didn’t ring very much like one of her own coinages. “Gesture”—that was one of Guy’s words, like “incredible,” “exacerbate,” “impinge,” “sinister.” Of course all her present views about religion had come from Guy. She looked Jacobsen straight in the face and replied:

“Yes, I think he goes to church pretty regularly. But I really don’t know: his religion has nothing to do with me.”

Jacobsen was lost in delight and admiration.

Punctually at twenty minutes to eleven he set out for church. From where she was sitting in the summer-house Marjorie watched him as he crossed the garden, incredibly absurd and incongruous in his black clothes among the blazing flowers and the young emerald of the trees. Now he was hidden behind the sweet-briar hedge, all except the hard black melon of his bowler hat, which she could see bobbing along between the topmost sprays.

She went on with her letter to Guy. “. . . What a strange man Mr. Jacobsen is. I suppose he is very clever, but I can’t get very much out of him. We had an argument about religion at breakfast this morning; I rather scored off him. He has now gone off to church all by himself;—I really couldn’t face the prospect of going with him—I hope he’ll enjoy old Mr. Trubshaw’s preaching!”

Jacobsen did enjoy Mr. Trubshaw’s preaching enormously. He always made a point, in whatever part of Christendom he happened to be, of attending divine service. He had the greatest admiration of churches as institutions. In their solidity and unchangeableness he saw one of the few hopes for humanity. Further, he derived great pleasure from comparing the Church as an institution—splendid, powerful, eternal—with the childish imbecility of its representatives. How delightful it was to sit in the herded congregation and listen to the sincere outpourings of an intellect only a little less limited than that of an Australian aboriginal! How restful to feel oneself a member of a flock, guided by a good shepherd—himself a sheep! Then there was the scientific interest (he went to church as student of anthropology, as a Freudian psychologist) and the philosophic amusement of counting the undistributed middles and tabulating historically the exploded fallacies in the parson’s discourse.

To-day Mr. Trubshaw preached a topical sermon about the Irish situation. His was the gospel of the *Morning Post*, slightly tempered by Christianity. It was our duty, he said, to pray for the Irish first of all, and if that had no effect upon recruiting, why, then, we must conscribe them as zealously as we had prayed before.

Jacobsen leaned back in his pew with a sigh of contentment. A connoisseur, he recognized that this was the right stuff.

“Well,” said Mr. Petherton over the Sunday beef at lunch, “how

LIMBO

did you like our dear Vicar?"

"He was splendid," said Jacobsen, with grave enthusiasm. "One of the best sermons I've ever heard."

"Indeed? I shall really have to go and hear him again. It must be nearly ten years since I listened to him."

"He's inimitable."

Marjorie looked at Jacobsen carefully. He seemed to be perfectly serious. She was more than ever puzzled by the man.

The days went slipping by, hot blue days that passed like a flash almost without one's noticing them, cold grey days, seeming interminable and without number, and about which one spoke with a sense of justified grievance, for the season was supposed to be summer. There was fighting going on in France—terrific battles, to judge from the headlines in the *Times*; but, after all, one day's paper was very much like another's. Marjorie read them dutifully, but didn't honestly take in very much; at least she forgot about things very soon. She couldn't keep count with the battles of Ypres, and when somebody told her that she ought to go and see the photographs of the *Vindictive*, she smiled vaguely and said Yes, without remembering precisely what the *Vindictive* was—a ship, she supposed.

Guy was in France, to be sure, but he was an Intelligence Officer now, so that she was hardly anxious about him at all. Clergymen used to say that the war was bringing us all back to a sense of the fundamental realities of life. She supposed it was true: Guy's enforced absences were a pain to her, and the difficulties of house-keeping continually increased and multiplied.

Mr. Petherton took a more intelligent interest in the war than did his daughter. He prided himself on being able to see the thing as a whole, on taking an historical, God's-eye view of it all. He talked about it at meal-times, insisting that the world must be made safe for democracy. Between meals he sat in the library working at his monumental *History of Morals*. To his dinner-table disquisitions Marjorie would listen more or less attentively, Jacobsen with an unflinching, bright, intelligent politeness. Jacobsen himself rarely volunteered a remark about the war; it was taken for granted that he thought about it in the same way as all other right-thinking folk. Between meals he worked in his room or discussed the morals of the Italian Renaissance with his host. Marjorie could write to Guy that nothing was happening, and that but for his absence and the weather interfering so much with tennis, she would be perfectly happy.

Into the midst of this placidity there fell, delightful bolt from the blue, the announcement that Guy was getting leave at the end of July. "DARLING," Marjorie wrote, "I am so excited to think that you will be with me in such a little—such a long, long time." Indeed, she was so excited and delighted that she realized with a touch of remorse how comparatively little she had thought of him when there

LIMBO

seemed no chance of seeing him, how dim a figure in absence he was. A week later she heard that George White had arranged to get leave at the same time so as to see Guy. She was glad; George was a charming boy, and Guy was so fond of him. The Whites were their nearest neighbours, and ever since Guy had come to live at Blay-bury he had seen a great deal of young George.

"We shall be a most festive party," said Mr. Petherton. "Roger will be coming to us just at the same time as Guy."

"I'd quite forgotten Uncle Roger," said Marjorie. "Of course, his holidays begin then, don't they?"

The Reverend Roger was Alfred Petherton's brother and a master at one of our most glorious public schools. Marjorie hardly agreed with her father in thinking that his presence would add anything to the "festiveness" of the party. It was a pity he should be coming at this particular moment. However, we all have our little cross to bear.

Mr. Petherton was feeling playful. "We must bring down," he said, "the choicest Falernian, bottled when Gladstone was consul, for the occasion. We must prepare wreaths and unguents and hire a flute player and a couple of dancing girls . . ."

He spent the rest of the meal in quoting Horace, Catullus, the Greek Anthology, Petronius, and Sidonius Apollinarius. Marjorie's knowledge of the dead languages was decidedly limited. Her thoughts were elsewhere, and it was only dimly and as it were through a mist that she heard her father murmuring—whether merely to himself or with the hope of eliciting an answer from somebody, she hardly knew—"Let me see: how does that epigram go?—that one about the different kinds of fish and the garlands of roses, by Meleager, or is it Poseidippus? . . ."

II

GUY and Jacobsen were walking in the Dutch garden, an incongruous couple. On Guy military servitude had left no outwardly visible mark; out of uniform, he still looked like a tall, untidy undergraduate; he stooped and drooped as much as ever; his hair was still bushy and, to judge by the dim expression of his face, he had not yet learnt to think imperially. His khaki always looked like a disguise, like the most absurd fancy dress. Jacobsen trotted beside him, short, fattish, very sleek, and correct. They talked in a desultory way about things indifferent. Guy, anxious for a little intellectual exercise after so many months of discipline, had been trying to inveigle his companion into a philosophical discussion. Jacobsen consistently eluded his efforts; he was too lazy to talk seriously; there was no profit that he could see to be got out of this young man's opinions, and he had not the faintest desire to make a disciple. He preferred, therefore, to

LIMBO

discuss the war and the weather. It irritated him that people should want to trespass on the domain of thought—people who had no right to live anywhere but on the vegetative plane of mere existence. He wished they would simply be content to be or not try, so hopelessly, to think, when only one in a million can think with the least profit to himself or anyone else.

Out of the corner of his eye he looked at the dark, sensitive face of his companion; he ought to have gone into business at eighteen, was Jacobsen's verdict. It was bad for him to think; he wasn't strong enough.

A great sound of barking broke upon the calm of the garden. Looking up, the two strollers saw George White running across the green turf of the croquet lawn with a huge fawn-coloured dog bounding along at his side.

"Morning," he shouted. He was hatless and out of breath. "I was taking Bella for a run, and thought I'd look in and see how you all were."

"What a lovely dog!" Jacobsen exclaimed.

"An old English mastiff—our one aboriginal dog. She has a pedigree going straight back to Edward the Confessor."

Jacobsen began a lively conversation with George on the virtues and shortcomings of dogs. Bella smelt his calves and then lifted up her gentle black eyes to look at him. She seemed satisfied.

He looked at them for a little; they were too much absorbed in their doggy conversation to pay attention to him. He made a gesture as though he had suddenly remembered something, gave a little grunt, and with a very preoccupied expression on his face turned to go towards the house. His elaborate piece of by-play escaped the notice of the intended spectators; Guy saw that it had, and felt more miserable and angry and jealous than ever. They would think he had slunk off because he wasn't wanted—which was quite true—instead of believing that he had something very important to do, which was what he had intended they should believe.

A cloud of self-doubt settled upon him. Was his mind, after all, worthless, and the little things he had written—rubbish, not potential genius as he had hoped? Jacobsen was right in preferring George's company. George was perfect, physically, a splendid creature; what could he himself claim?

"I'm second-rate," he thought—"second-rate, physically, morally, mentally. Jacobsen is quite right."

The best he could hope to be was a pedestrian literary man with quiet tastes.

NO, no, no! He clenched his hands and, as though to register his resolve before the universe, he said, aloud:

"I will do it; I will be first-rate, I will."

He was covered with confusion on seeing a gardener pop up, surprised from behind a bank of rose-bushes. Talking to himself—

LIMBO

the man must have thought him mad!

He hurried on across the lawn, entered the house, and ran upstairs to his room. There was not a second to lose; he must begin at once. He would write something—something that would last, solid, hard, shining. . . .

“Damn them all! I will do it, I can . . .”

There were writing materials and a table in his room. He selected a pen—with a Relief nib he would be able to go on for hours without getting tired—and a large square sheet of writing-paper.

“HATCH HOUSE, BLAYBURY, WILTS.

Station: Cogham, 3 miles; Nobes
Monacorum, 4½ miles.”

Stupid of people to have their stationery printed in red, when black or blue is so much nicer! He inked over the letters.

He held up the paper to the light; there was a watermark, “Pimlico Bond.” What an admirable name for the hero of a novel! Pimlico Bond. . . .

“There’s be-eef in the la-arder
And du-uucks in the pond;
Crying dilly dilly, dilly dilly . . .”

He bit the end of his pen. “What I want to get,” he said to himself, “is something very hard, very external. Intense emotion, but one will somehow have got outside it.” He made a movement of hands, arms, and shoulders, tightening his muscles in an effort to express to himself physically that hardness and tightness and firmness of style after which he was struggling.

He began to draw on his virgin paper. A woman, naked, one arm lifted over her head, so that it pulled up her breast by that wonderful curving muscle that comes down from the shoulder. The inner surface of the thighs, remember, is slightly concave. The feet, seen from the front, are always a difficulty.

It would never do to leave that about. What would the servants think? He turned the nipples into eyes, drew heavy lines for nose, mouth, and chin, slopped on the ink thick; it made a passable face now—though an acute observer might have detected the original nudity. He tore it up into very small pieces.

A crescendo booming filled the house. It was the gong. He looked at his watch. Lunch-time, and he had done nothing. O God!

. . .

III

IT was dinner-time on the last evening of Guy's leave. The uncovered mahogany table was like a pool of brown unruffled water within whose depths flowers and the glinting shapes of glass and silver hung dimly reflected. Mr. Petherton sat at the head of the board, flanked by his brother Roger and Jacobsen. Youth, in the persons of Marjorie, Guy, and George White, had collected at the other end. They had reached the stage of dessert.

"This is excellent port," said Roger, sleek and glossy like a well-fed black cob under his silken clerical waistcoat. He was a strong, thick-set man of about fifty, with a red neck as thick as his head. His hair was cropped with military closeness; he liked to set a good example to the boys, some of whom showed distressing "aesthetic" tendencies and wore their hair long.

"I'm glad you like it. I mayn't touch it myself, of course. Have another glass." Alfred Petherton's face wore an expression of dyspeptic melancholy. He was wishing he hadn't taken quite so much of that duck.

"Thank you, I will." Roger took the decanter with a smile of satisfaction. "The tired schoolmaster is worthy of his second glass. White, you look rather pale; I think you must have another." Roger had a hearty, jocular manner, calculated to prove to his pupils that he was not one of the slimy sort of parsons, not a Creeping Jesus.

There was an absorbing conversation going on at the youthful end of the table. Secretly irritated at having been thus interrupted in the middle of it, White turned round and smiled vaguely at Roger.

"Oh, thank you, sir," he said, and pushed his glass forward to be filled. The "sir" slipped out unawares; it was, after all, such a little while since he had been a schoolboy under Roger's dominion.

"One is lucky," Roger went on seriously, "to get any port wine at all now. I'm thankful to say I bought ten dozen from my old college some years ago to lay down; otherwise I don't know what I should do. My wine merchant tells me he couldn't let me have a single bottle. Indeed, he offered to buy some off me, if I'd sell. But I wasn't having any. A bottle in the cellar is worth ten shillings in the pocket these days. I always say that port has become a necessity now one gets so little meat. Lambourne! you are another of our brave defenders; you deserve a second glass."

"No, thanks," said Guy, hardly looking up. "I've had enough." He went on talking to Marjorie—about the different views of life held by the French and the Russians.

Roger helped himself to cherries. "One has to select them carefully," he remarked for the benefit of the unwillingly listening George. "There is nothing that gives you such stomach-aches as unripe cherries."

"I expect you're glad, Mr. Petherton, that holidays have begun at

last?" said Jacobsen.

"Glad? I should think so. One is utterly dead beat at the end of the summer term. Isn't one, White?"

White had taken the opportunity to turn back again and listen to Guy's conversation; recalled, like a dog who has started off on a forbidden scent, he obediently assented that one did get tired at the end of the summer term.

"I suppose," said Jacobsen, "you still teach the same old things—Caesar, Latin verses, Greek grammar, and the rest? We Americans can hardly believe that all that still goes on."

"Thank goodness," said Roger, "we still hammer a little solid stuff into them. But there's been a great deal of fuss lately about new curriculums and so forth. They do a lot of science now and things of that kind, but I don't believe the children learn anything at all. It's pure waste of time."

"So is all education, I dare say," said Jacobsen lightly.

"Not if you teach them discipline. That's what's wanted—discipline. Most of these little boys need plenty of beating, and they don't get enough now. Besides, if you can't hammer knowledge in at their heads, you can at least beat a little in at their tails."

"You're very ferocious, Roger," said Mr. Petherton, smiling. He was feeling better; the duck was settling down.

"No, it's the vital thing. The best thing the war has brought us is discipline. The country had got slack and wanted tightening up." Roger's face glowed with zeal.

From the other end of the table Guy's voice could be heard saying, "Do you know César Franck's 'Dieu s'avance à travers la lande?' It's one of the finest bits of religious music I know."

Mr. Petherton's face lighted up; he leaned forward. "No," he said, throwing his answer unexpectedly into the midst of the young people's conversation. "I don't know it; but do you know this? Wait a minute." He knitted his brows, and his lips moved as though he were trying to recapture a formula. "Ah, I've got it. Now, can you tell me this? The name of what famous piece of religious music do I utter when I order an old carpenter, once a Liberal but now a renegade to Conservatism, to make a hive for bees?"

Guy gave it up; his guardian beamed delightedly.

"Hoary Tory, oh, Judas! Make a bee-house," he said. "Do you see? Oratorio Judas Maccabeus."

Guy could have wished that this bit of flotsam from Mr. Petherton's sportive youth had not been thus washed up at his feet. He felt that he had been peeping indecently close into the dark backward and abysm of time.

"That was a good one," Mr. Petherton chuckled. "I must see if I can think of some more."

Roger, who was not easily to be turned away from his favourite topic, waited till this irrelevant spark of levity had quite expired, and

LIMBO

continued: "It's a remarkable and noticeable fact that you never seem to get discipline combined with the teaching of science or modern languages. Who ever heard of a science master having a good house at a school? Scientists' houses are always bad."

"How very strange!" said Jacobsen.

"Strange, but a fact, It seems to me a great mistake to give them houses at all if they can't keep discipline. And then there's the question of religion. Some of these men never come to chapel except when they're on duty. And then, I ask you, what happens when they prepare their boys for Confirmation? Why, I've known boys come to me who were supposed to have been prepared by one or other of these men, and, on asking them, I've found that they know nothing whatever about the most solemn facts of the Eucharist.—May I have some more of those excellent cherries please, White?—Of course, I do my best in such cases to tell the boys what I feel personally about these solemn things. But there generally isn't the time; one's life is so crowded; and so they go into Confirmation with only the very haziest knowledge of what it's all about. You see how absurd it is to let anyone but the classical men have anything to do with the boys' lives."

"Shake it well, dear," Mr. Petherton was saying to his daughter, who had come with his medicine.

"What is that stuff?" asked Roger.

"Oh, it's merely my peptones. I can hardly digest at all without it, you know."

"You have all my sympathies. My poor colleague, Flexner, suffers from chronic colitis. I can't imagine how he goes on with his work."

"No, indeed. I find I can do nothing strenuous."

Roger turned and seized once more on the unhappy George. "White," he said, "let this be a lesson to you. Take care of your inside; it's the secret of a happy old age."

Guy looked up quickly. "Don't worry about his old age," he said in a strange harsh voice, very different from the gentle, elaborately modulated tone in which he generally spoke. "He won't have an old age. His chances against surviving are about fourteen to three if the war goes on another year."

"Come," said Roger, "don't let's be pessimistic."

"But I'm not. I assure you, I'm giving you a most rosy view of George's chance of reaching old age."

It was felt that Guy's remarks had been in poor taste. There was a silence; eyes floated vaguely and uneasily, trying not to encounter one another. Roger cracked a nut loudly. When he had sufficiently relished the situation, Jacobsen changed the subject by remarking:

"That was a fine bit of work by our destroyers this morning, wasn't it?"

"It did one good to read about it," said Mr. Petherton. "Quite,

the Nelson touch.”

Roger raised his glass. “Nelson!” he said, and emptied it at a gulp. “What a man! I am trying to persuade the Headmaster to make Trafalgar Day a holiday. It is the best way of reminding boys of things of that sort.”

“A curiously untypical Englishman to be a national hero, isn’t he?” said Jacobsen. “So emotional and lacking in Britannic phlegm.”

The Reverend Roger looked grave. “There’s one thing I’ve never been able to understand about Nelson, and that is, how a man who was so much the soul of honour and of patriotism could have been—er—immoral with Lady Hamilton. I know people say that it was the custom of the age, that these things meant nothing then, and so forth; but all the same, I repeat, I cannot understand how a man who was so intensely a patriotic Englishman could have done such a thing.”

“I fail to see what patriotism has got to do with it,” said Guy.

Roger fixed him with his most pedagogic look and said slowly and gravely, “Then I am sorry for you. I shouldn’t have thought it was necessary to tell an Englishman that purity of morals is a national tradition: you especially, a public-school man.”

“Let us go and have a hundred up at billiards,” said Mr. Pether-ton. “Roger, will you come? And you, George, and Guy?”

“I’m so incredibly bad,” Guy insisted, “I’d really rather not.”

“So am I,” said Jacobsen.

“Then, Marjorie, you must make the fourth.”

The billiard trooped out; Guy and Jacobsen were left alone, brooding over the wreckage of dinner. There was a long silence. The two men sat smoking, Guy sitting in a sagging, crumpled attitude, like a half-empty sack abandoned on a chair, Jacobsen very upright and serene.

“Do you find you can suffer fools gladly?” asked Guy abruptly.

“Perfectly gladly.”

“I wish I could. The Reverend Roger has a tendency to make my blood boil.”

“But such a good soul,” Jacobsen insisted.

“I dare say, but a monster all the same.”

“You should take him more calmly. I make a point of never letting myself be moved by external things. I stick to my writing and thinking. Truth is beauty, beauty is truth, and so forth: after all, they’re the only things of solid value.” Jacobsen looked at the young man with a smile as he said these words. There is no doubt, he said to himself, that that boy ought to have gone into business; what a mistake this higher education is, to be sure.

“Of course, they’re the only things,” Guy burst out passionately. “You can afford to say so because you had the luck to be born twenty years before I was, and with five thousand miles of good deep wa-

LIMBO

ter between you and Europe. Here am I, called upon to devote my life, in a very different way from which you devote yours to truth and beauty—to devote my life to—well, what? I'm not quite sure, but I preserve a touching faith that it is good. And you tell me to ignore external circumstances. Come and live in Flanders a little and try . . .” He launched forth into a tirade about agony and death and blood and putrefaction.

“What is one to do?” he concluded despairingly. “What the devil is right? I had meant to spend my life writing and thinking, trying to create something beautiful or discover something true. But oughtn't one, after all, if one survives, to give up everything else and try to make this hideous den of a world a little more habitable?”

“I think you can take it that a world which has let itself be dragged into this criminal folly is pretty hopeless. Follow your inclinations; or, better, go into a bank and make a lot of money.”

Guy burst out laughing, rather too loudly. “Admirable, admirable!” he said. “To return to our old topic of fools: frankly, Jacobsen, I cannot imagine why you should elect to pass your time with my dear old guardian. He's a charming old man, but one must admit—He waved his hand.

“One must live somewhere,” said Jacobsen. “I find your guardian a most interesting man to be with.—Oh, do look at that dog!” On the hearth-rug Marjorie's little Pekingese, Confucius, was preparing to lie down and go to sleep. He went assiduously through the solemn farce of scratching the floor, under the impression, no doubt, that he was making a comfortable nest to lie in. He turned round and round, scratching earnestly and methodically. Then he lay down, curled himself up in a ball, and was asleep in the twinkling of an eye.

“Isn't that too wonderfully human!” exclaimed Jacobsen delightedly. Guy thought he could see now why Jacobsen enjoyed living with Mr. Petherton. The old man was so wonderfully human.

Later in the evening, when the billiards was over and Mr. Petherton had duly commented on the anachronism of introducing the game into Anthony and Cleopatra, Guy and Marjorie went for a stroll in the garden. The moon had risen above the trees and lit up the front of the house with its bright pale light that could not wake the sleeping colours of the world.

“Moonlight is the proper architectural light,” said Guy, as they stood looking at the house. The white light and the hard black shadows brought out all the elegance of its Georgian symmetry.

“Look, here's the ghost of a rose.” Marjorie touched a big cool flower, which one guessed rather than saw to be red, a faint equivocal lunar crimson. “And, oh, smell the tobacco-plant flowers. Aren't they delicious!”

“I always think there's something very mysterious about perfume

LIMBO

drifting through the dark like this. It seems to come from some perfectly different immaterial world, peopled by unembodied sensations, phantom passions. Think of the spiritual effect of incense in a dark church. One isn't surprised that people have believed in the existence of the soul."

They walked on in silence. Sometimes, accidentally, his hand would brush against hers in the movement of their march. Guy felt an intolerable emotion of expectancy, akin to fear. It made him feel almost physically sick.

"Do you remember," he said abruptly, "that summer holiday our families spent together in Wales? It must have been nineteen four or five. I was ten and you were eight or thereabouts."

"Of course I remember," cried Marjorie. "Everything. There was that funny little toy railway from the slate quarries."

"And do you remember our goldmine? All those tons of yellow ironstone we collected and hoarded in a cave, fully believing they were nuggets. How incredibly remote it seems!"

"And you had a wonderful process by which you tested whether the stuff was real gold or not. It all passed triumphantly as genuine, I remember!"

"Having that secret together first made us friends, I believe."

"I dare say," said Marjorie. "Fourteen years ago—what a time! And you began educating me even then: all that stuff you told me about gold-mining, for instance."

"Fourteen years," Guy repeated reflectively, "and I shall be going out again to-morrow . . ."

"Don't speak about it. I am so miserable when you're away." She genuinely forgot what a delightful summer she had had, except for the shortage of tennis.

"We must make this the happiest hour of our lives. Perhaps it may be the last we shall be together." Guy looked up at the moon, and he perceived, with a sudden start, that it was a sphere islanded in an endless night, not a flat disk stuck on a wall not so very far away. It filled him with an infinite dreariness; he felt too insignificant to live at all.

"Guy, you mustn't talk like that," said Marjorie appealingly.

"We've got twelve hours," said Guy in a meditative voice, "but that's only clockwork time. You can give an hour the quality of everlastingness, and spend years which are as though they had never been. We get our immortality here and now; it's a question of quality, not of quantity. I don't look forward to golden harps or anything of that sort. I know that when I am dead, I shall be dead; there isn't any afterwards. If I'm killed, my immortality will be in your memory. Perhaps, too, somebody will read the things I've written, and in his mind I shall survive, feebly and partially. But in your mind I shall survive intact and whole."

"But I'm sure we shall go on living after death. It can't be the

LIMBO

end." Marjorie was conscious that she had heard those words before. Where? Oh yes, it was earnest Evangeline who had spoken them at the school debating society.

"I wouldn't count on it," Guy replied, with a little laugh. "You may get such a disappointment when you die." Then in an altered voice, "I don't want to die. I hate and fear death. But probably I shan't be killed after all. All the same . . ." His voice faded out. They stepped into a tunnel of impenetrable darkness between two tall hornbeam hedges. He had become nothing but a voice, and now that had ceased; he had disappeared. The voice began again, low, quick, monotonous, a little breathless. "I remember once reading a poem by one of the old Provençal troubadours, telling how God had once granted him supreme happiness; for the night before he was to set out for the Crusade, it had been granted him to hold his lady in his arms—all the short eternal night through. *Ains que j'aïlle oltre mer: when I was going beyond sea.*" The voice stopped again. They were standing at the very mouth of the hornbeam alley, looking out from that close-pent river of shadow upon an ocean of pale moonlight.

"How still it is." They did not speak; they hardly breathed. They became saturated with the quiet.

Marjorie broke the silence. "Do you want me as much as all that, Guy?" All through that long, speechless minute she had been trying to say the words, repeating them over to herself, longing to say them aloud, but paralysed, unable to. And at last she had spoken them, impersonally, as though through the mouth of someone else. She heard them very distinctly, and was amazed at the matter-of-factness of the tone.

Guy's answer took the form of a question. "Well, suppose I were killed now," he said, "should I ever have really lived?"

They had stepped out of the cavernous alley into the moonlight. She could see him clearly now, and there was something so drooping and dejected and pathetic about him, he seemed so much of a great, overgrown child that a wave of passionate pitifulness rushed through her, reinforcing other emotions less maternal. She longed to take him in her arms, stroke his hair, lullaby him, baby-fashion, to sleep upon her breast. And Guy, on his side, desired nothing better than to give his fatigues and sensibilities to her maternal care, to have his eyes kissed fast, and sleep to her soothing. In his relations with women—but his experience in this direction was deplorably small—he had, unconsciously at first but afterwards with a realization of what he was doing, played this child part. In moments of self-analysis he laughed at himself for acting the "child stunt," as he called it. Here he was—he hadn't noticed it yet—doing it again, drooping, dejected, wholly pathetic, feeble . . .

Marjorie was carried away by her emotion. She would give herself to her lover, would take possession of her helpless, pitiable

LIMBO

child. She put her arms round his neck, lifted her face to his kisses, whispered something tender and inaudible.

Guy drew her towards him and began kissing the soft, warm mouth. He touched the bare arm that encircled his neck; the flesh was resilient under his fingers; he felt a desire to pinch it and tear it.

It had been just like this with that little slut Minnie. Just the same—all horrible lust. He remembered a curious physiological fact out of Havelock Ellis. He shuddered as though he had touched something disgusting, and pushed her away.

“No, no, no. It’s horrible; it’s odious. Drunk with moonlight and sentimentalizing about death. . . . Why not just say with Biblical frankness, Lie with me—Lie with me?”

That this love, which was to have been so marvellous and new and beautiful, should end libidiously and bestially like the affair, never remembered without a shiver of shame, with Minnie (the vulgarity of her!)—filled him with horror.

Marjorie burst into tears and ran away, wounded and trembling, into the solitude of the hornbeam shadow. “Go away, go away,” she sobbed, with such intensity of command that Guy, moved by an immediate remorse and the sight of tears to stop her and ask forgiveness, was constrained to let her go her ways.

A cool, impersonal calm had succeeded almost immediately to his outburst. Critically, he examined what he had done, and judged it, not without a certain feeling of satisfaction, to be the greatest “floaters” of his life. But at least the thing was done and couldn’t be undone. He took the weak-willed man’s delight in the irrevocability of action. He walked up and down the lawn smoking a cigarette and thinking, clearly and quietly—remembering the past, questioning the future. When the cigarette was finished he went into the house.

He entered the smoking-room to hear Roger saying, “. . . It’s the poor who are having the good time now. Plenty to eat, plenty of money, and no taxes to pay. No taxes—that’s the sickening thing. Look at Alfred’s gardener, for instance. He gets twenty-five or thirty bob a week and an uncommon good house. He’s married, but only has one child. A man like that is uncommonly well off. He ought to be paying income-tax; he can perfectly well afford it.”

Mr. Petherton was listening somnolently, Jacobsen with his usual keen, intelligent politeness; George was playing with the blue Persian kitten.

It had been arranged that George should stay the night, because it was such a bore having to walk that mile and a bit home again in the dark. Guy took him up to his room and sat down on the bed for a final cigarette, while George was undressing. It was the hour of confidence—that rather perilous moment when fatigue has relaxed the fibres of the mind, making it ready and ripe for sentiment.

“It depresses me so much,” said Guy, “to think that you’re only twenty and that I’m just on twenty-four. You will be young and

LIMBO

sprightly when the war ends; I shall be an old antique man.”

“Not so old as all that,” George answered, pulling off his shirt. His skin was very white, face, neck, and hands seeming dark brown by comparison; there was a sharply demarcated high-water mark of sunburn at throat and wrist.

“It horrifies me to think of the time one is wasting in this bloody war, growing stupider and grosser every day, achieving nothing at all. It will be five, six—God knows how many—years cut clean out of one’s life. You’ll have the world before you when it’s all over, but I shall have spent my best time.”

“Of course, it doesn’t make so much difference to me,” said George through a foam of tooth-brushing; “I’m not capable of doing anything of any particular value. It’s really all the same whether I lead a blameless life broking stocks or spend my time getting killed. But for you, I agree, it’s too bloody. . . .”

Guy smoked on in silence, his mind filled with a languid resentment against circumstance. George put on his pyjamas and crept under the sheet; he had to curl himself up into a ball, because Guy was lying across the end of the bed, and he couldn’t put his feet down.

“I suppose,” said Guy at last, meditatively—“I suppose the only consolations are, after all, women and wine. I shall really have to resort to them. Only women are mostly so fearfully boring and wine is so expensive now.”

“But not all women!” George, it was evident, was waiting to get a confidence off his chest.

“I gather you’ve found the exceptions.”

George poured forth. He had just spent six months at Chelsea—six dreary months on the barrack square; but there had been lucid intervals between the drills and the special courses, which he had filled with many notable voyages of discovery among unknown worlds. And chiefly, Columbus to his own soul, he had discovered all those psychological intricacies and potentialities, which only the passions bring to light. *Nosce teipsum*, it has been commanded; and a judicious cultivation of the passions is one of the surest roads to self-knowledge. To George, at barely twenty, it was all so amazingly new and exciting, and Guy listened to the story of his adventures with admiration and a touch of envy. He regretted the dismal and cloistered chastity—broken only once, and how sordidly! Wouldn’t he have learnt much more, he wondered—have been a more real and better human being if he had had George’s experiences? He would have profited by them more than George could ever hope to do. There was the risk of George’s getting involved in a mere foolish expense of spirit in a waste of shame. He might not be sufficiently an individual to remain himself in spite of his surroundings; his hand would be coloured by the dye he worked in. Guy felt sure that he himself would have run no risk; he would have come, seen, con-

quered, and returned intact and still himself, but enriched by the spoils of a new knowledge. Had he been wrong after all? Had life in the cloister of his own philosophy been wholly unprofitable?

He looked at George. It was not surprising that the ladies favoured him, glorious ephebus that he was.

"With a face and figure like mine," he reflected, "I shouldn't have been able to lead his life, even if I'd wanted to." He laughed inwardly.

"You really must meet her," George was saying enthusiastically.

Guy smiled. "No, I really mustn't. Let me give you a bit of perfectly good advice. Never attempt to share your joys with anyone else. People will sympathize with pain, but not with pleasure. Good night, George."

He bent over the pillow and kissed the smiling face that was as smooth as a child's to his lips.

Guy lay awake for a long time, and his eyes were dry and aching before sleep finally came upon him. He spent those dark interminable hours thinking—thinking hard, intensely, painfully. No sooner had he left George's room than a feeling of intense unhappiness took hold of him. "Distorted with misery," that was how he described himself; he loved to coin such phrases, for he felt the artist's need to express as well as to feel and think. Distorted with misery, he went to bed; distorted with misery, he lay and thought and thought. He had, positively, a sense of physical distortion: his guts were twisted, he had a hunched back, his legs were withered. . . .

He had the right to be miserable. He was going back to France to-morrow, he had trampled on his mistress's love, and he was beginning to doubt himself, to wonder whether his whole life hadn't been one ludicrous folly.

He reviewed his life, like a man about to die. Born in another age, he would, he supposed, have been religious. He had got over religion early, like the measles—at nine a Low Churchman, at twelve a Broad Churchman, and at fourteen an Agnostic—but he still retained the temperament of a religious man. Intellectually he was a Voltairian, emotionally a Bunyanite. To have arrived at this formula was, he felt, a distinct advance in self-knowledge. And what a fool he had been with Marjorie! The priggishness of his attitude—making her read Wordsworth when she didn't want to. Intellectual love—his phrases weren't always a blessing; how hopelessly he had deceived himself with words! And now this evening the crowning outrage, when he had behaved to her like a hysterical anchorite dealing with a temptation. His body tingled, at the recollection, with shame.

An idea occurred to him; he would go and see her, tiptoe downstairs to her room, kneel by her bed, ask for her forgiveness. He lay quite still imagining the whole scene. He even went so far as to get out of bed, open the door, which made a noise in the process like a peacock's scream, quite unnerving him, and creep to the head of the

LIMBO

stairs. He stood there a long time, his feet growing colder and colder, and then decided that the adventure was really too sordidly like the episode at the beginning of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. The door screamed again as he returned; he lay in bed, trying to persuade himself that his self-control had been admirable and at the same time cursing his absence of courage in not carrying out what he had intended.

He remembered a lecture he had given Marjorie once on the subject of Sacred and Profane Love. Poor girl, how had she listened in patience? He could see her attending with such a serious expression on her face that she looked quite ugly. She looked so beautiful when she was laughing or happy; at the Whites', for instance, three nights ago, when George and she had danced after dinner and he had sat, secretly envious, reading a book in the corner of the room and looking superior. He wouldn't learn to dance, but always wished he could. It was a barbarous, aphrodisiacal occupation, he said, and he preferred to spend his time and energies in reading. Salvationist again! What a much wiser person George had proved himself than he. He had no prejudices, no theoretical views about the conduct of life; he just lived, admirably, naturally, as the spirit or the flesh moved him. If only he could live his life again, if only he could abolish this evening's monstrous stupidity. . . .

Marjorie also lay awake. She too felt herself distorted with misery. How odiously cruel he had been, and how much she longed to forgive him! Perhaps he would come in the dark, when all the house was asleep, tiptoeing into the room very quietly to kneel by her bed and ask to be forgiven. Would he come, she wondered? She stared into the blackness above her and about her, willing him to come, commanding him—angry and wretched because he was so slow in coming, because he didn't come at all. They were both of them asleep before two.

Seven hours of sleep make a surprising difference to the state of mind. Guy, who thought he was distorted for life, woke to find himself healthily normal. Marjorie's angers and despairs had subsided. The hour they had together between breakfast and Guy's departure was filled with almost trivial conversation. Guy was determined to say something about last's night incident. But it was only at the very last moment, when the dog-cart was actually at the door, that he managed to bring out some stammered repentance for what had happened last night.

"Don't think about it," Marjorie had told him. So they had kissed and parted, and their relations were precisely the same as they had been before Guy came on leave.

George was sent out a week or two later, and a month after that they heard at Blaybury that he had lost a leg—fortunately below the knee.

LIMBO

“Poor boy!” said Mr. Petherton. “I must really write a line to his mother at once.”

Jacobsen made no comment, but it was a surprise to him to find how much he had been moved by the news. George White had lost a leg; he couldn't get the thought out of his head. But only below the knee; he might be called lucky. Lucky—things are deplorably relative, he reflected. One thanks God because He has thought fit to deprive one of His creatures of a limb.

“Neither delighteth He in any man's legs,” eh? Nous avons changé tout cela.

George had lost a leg. There would be no more of that Olympian speed and strength and beauty. Jacobsen conjured up before his memory a vision of the boy running with his great fawn-coloured dog across green expanses of grass. How glorious he had looked, his fine brown hair blowing like fire in the wind of his own speed, his cheeks flushed, his eyes very bright. And how easily he ran, with long, bounding strides, looking down at the dog that jumped and barked at his side!

He had had a perfection, and now it was spoilt. Instead of a leg he had a stump. *Moignon*, the French called it; there was the right repulsive sound about *moignon* which was lacking in “stump.” Soignons le moignon en l'oignant d'oignons.

Often, at night before he went to sleep, he couldn't help thinking of George and the war and all the millions of *moignons* there must be in the world. He had a dream one night of slimy red knobs, large polyp-like things, growing as he looked at them, swelling between his hands—*moignons*, in fact.

George was well enough in the late autumn to come home. He had learnt to hop along on his crutches very skilfully, and his preposterous donkey-drawn bath-chair soon became a familiar object in the lanes of the neighbourhood. It was a grand sight to behold when George rattled past at the trot, leaning forward like a young Phoebus in his chariot and urging his unwilling beast with voice and crutch. He drove over to Blaybury almost every day; Marjorie and he had endless talks about life and love and Guy and other absorbing topics. With Jacobsen he played piquet and discussed a thousand subjects. He was always gay and happy—that was what especially lacerated Jacobsen's heart with pity.

IV

THE Christmas holidays had begun, and the Reverend Roger was back again at Blaybury. He was sitting at the writing-table in the drawing-room, engaged, at the moment, in biting the end of his pen and scratching his head. His face wore an expression of perplexity; one would have said that he was in the throes of literary composi-

tion. Which indeed he was: "Beloved ward of Alfred Petherton . . ." he said aloud. "Beloved ward . . ." He shook his head doubtfully.

The door opened and Jacobsen came into the room. Roger turned round at once.

"Have you heard the grievous news?" he said.

"No. What?"

"Poor Guy is dead. We got the telegram half an hour ago."

"Good God!" said Jacobsen in an agonized voice which seemed to show that he had been startled out of the calm belonging to one who leads the life of reason. He had been conscious ever since George's mutilation that his defences were growing weaker; external circumstance was steadily encroaching upon him. Now it had broken in and, for the moment, he was at its mercy. Guy dead. . . . He pulled himself together sufficiently to say, after a pause, "Well, I suppose it was only to be expected sooner or later. Poor boy."

"Yes, it's terrible, isn't it?" said Roger, shaking his head. "I am just writing out an announcement to send to the *Times*. One can hardly say 'the beloved ward of Alfred Petherton,' can one? It doesn't sound quite right; and yet one would like somehow to give public expression to the deep affection Alfred felt for him. 'Beloved ward'—no, decidedly it won't do."

"You'll have to get round it somehow," said Jacobsen. Roger's presence somehow made a return to the life of reason easier.

"Poor Alfred," the other went on. "You've no idea how hardly he takes it. He feels as though he had given a son."

"What a waste it is!" Jacobsen exclaimed. He was altogether too deeply moved.

"I have done my best to console Alfred. One must always bear in mind for what Cause he died."

"All those potentialities destroyed. He was an able fellow, was Guy." Jacobsen was speaking more to himself than to his companion, but Roger took up the suggestion.

"Yes, he certainly was that. Alfred thought he was very promising. It is for his sake I am particularly sorry. I never got on very well with the boy myself. He was too eccentric for my taste. There's such a thing as being too clever, isn't there? It's rather inhuman. He used to do most remarkable Greek iambs for me when he was a boy. I dare say he was a very good fellow under all that cleverness and queerness. It's all very distressing, very grievous."

"How was he killed?"

"Died of wounds yesterday morning. Do you think it would be a good thing to put in some quotation at the end of the announcement in the paper? Something like, 'Dulce et Decorum,' or 'Sed Miles, sed Pro Patria,' or 'Per Ardua ad Astra?'"

"It hardly seems essential," said Jacobsen.

"Perhaps not." Roger's lips moved silently; he was counting. "Forty-two words. I suppose that counts as eight lines. Poor Marjo-

LIMBO

rie! I hope she won't feel it too bitterly. Alfred told me they were unofficially engaged."

"So I gathered."

"I am afraid I shall have to break the news to her. Alfred is too much upset to be able to do anything himself. It will be a most painful task. Poor girl! I suppose as a matter of fact they would not have been able to marry for some time, as Guy had next to no money. These early marriages are very rash. Let me see: eight times three shillings is one pound four, isn't it? I suppose they take cheques all right?"

"How old was he?" asked Jacobsen.

"Twenty-four and a few months." Jacobsen was walking restlessly up and down the room. "Just reaching maturity! One is thankful these days to have one's own work and thoughts to take the mind off these horrors."

"It's terrible, isn't it?—terrible. So many of my pupils have been killed now that I can hardly keep count of the number."

There was a tapping at the French window; it was Marjorie asking to be let in. She had been cutting holly and ivy for the Christmas decorations, and carried a basket full of dark, shining leaves.

Jacobsen unbolted the big window and Marjorie came in, flushed with the cold and smiling. Jacobsen had never seen her looking so handsome: she was superb, radiant, like Iphigenia coming in her wedding garments to the sacrifice.

"The holly is very poor this year," she remarked. "I am afraid we shan't make much of a show with our Christmas decorations."

Jacobsen took the opportunity of slipping out through the French window. Although it was unpleasantly cold, he walked up and down the flagged paths of the Dutch garden, hatless and overcoatless, for quite a long time.

Marjorie moved about the drawingroom fixing sprigs of holly round the picture frames. Her uncle watched her, hesitating to speak; he was feeling enormously uncomfortable.

"I am afraid," he said at last, "that your father's very upset this morning." His voice was husky; he made an explosive noise to clear his throat.

"Is it his palpitations?" Marjorie asked coolly; her father's infirmities did not cause her much anxiety.

"No, no." Roger realized that his opening gambit had been a mistake. "No. It is—er—a more mental affliction, and one which, I fear, will touch you closely too. Marjorie, you must be strong and courageous; we have just heard that Guy is dead."

"Guy dead?" She couldn't believe it; she had hardly envisaged the possibility; besides, he was on the Staff. "Oh, Uncle Roger, it isn't true."

"I am afraid there is no doubt. The War Office telegram came just after you had gone out for the holly."

LIMBO

Marjorie sat down on the sofa and hid her face in her hands. Guy dead; she would never see him again, never see him again, never; she began to cry.

Roger approached and stood, with his hand on her shoulder, in the attitude of a thought-reader. To those overwhelmed by sorrow the touch of a friendly hand is often comforting. They have fallen into an abyss, and the touching hand serves to remind them that life and God and human sympathy still exist, however bottomless the gulf of grief may seem. On Marjorie's shoulder her uncle's hand rested with a damp, heavy warmth that was peculiarly unpleasant.

"Dear child, it is very grievous, I know; but you must try and be strong and bear it bravely. We all have our cross to bear. We shall be celebrating the Birth of Christ in two days' time; remember with what patience He received the cup of agony. And then remember for what Cause Guy has given his life. He has died a hero's death, a martyr's death, witnessing to Heaven against the powers of evil." Roger was unconsciously slipping into the words of his last sermon in the school chapel. "You should feel pride in his death as well as sorrow. There, there, poor child." He patted her shoulder two or three times. "Perhaps it would be kinder to leave you now."

For some time after her uncle's departure Marjorie sat motionless in the same position, her body bent forward, her face in her hands. She kept on repeating the words, "Never again," and the sound of them filled her with despair and made her cry. They seemed to open up such a dreary grey infinite vista—"never again." They were as a spell evoking tears.

She got up at last and began walking aimlessly about the room. She paused in front of a little old black-framed mirror that hung near the window and looked at her reflection in the glass. She had expected somehow to look different, to have changed. She was surprised to find her face entirely unaltered: grave melancholy perhaps, but still the same face she had looked at when she was doing her hair this morning. A curious idea entered her head; she wondered whether she would be able to smile now, at this dreadful moment. She moved the muscles of her face and was overwhelmed with shame at the sight of the mirthless grin that mocked her from the glass. What a beast she was! She burst into tears and threw herself again on the sofa, burying her face in a cushion. The door opened, and by the noise of shuffling and tapping Marjorie recognized the approach of George White on his crutches. She did not look up. At the sight of the abject figure on the sofa, George halted, uncertain what he should do. Should he quietly go away again, or should he stay and try to say something comforting? The sight of her lying there gave him almost physical pain. He decided to stay.

He approached the sofa and stood over her, suspended on his crutches. Still she did not lift her head, but pressed her face deeper into the smothering blindness of the cushion, as though to shut out

LIMBO

from her consciousness all the external world. George looked down at her in silence. The little delicate tendrils of hair on the nape of her neck were exquisitely beautiful.

"I was told about it," he said at last, "just now, as I came in. It's too awful. I think I cared for Guy more than for almost anyone in the world. We both did, didn't we?"

She began sobbing again. George was overcome with remorse, feeling that he had somehow hurt her, somehow added to her pain by what he had said. "Poor child, poor child," he said, almost aloud. She was a year older than he, but she seemed so helplessly and pathetically young now that she was crying.

Standing up for long tired him, and he lowered himself, slowly and painfully, into the sofa beside her. She looked up at last and began drying her eyes.

"I'm so wretched, George, so specially wretched because I feel I didn't act rightly towards darling Guy. There were times, you know, when I wondered whether it wasn't all a great mistake, our being engaged. Sometimes I felt I almost hated him. I'd been feeling so odious about him these last weeks. And now comes this, and it makes me realize how awful I've been towards him." She found it a relief to confide and confess; George was so sympathetic, he would understand. "I've been a beast."

Her voice broke, and it was as though something had broken in George's head. He was overwhelmed with pity; he couldn't bear it that she should suffer.

"You mustn't distress yourself unnecessarily, Marjorie dear," he begged her, stroking the back of her hand with his large hard palm. "Don't."

Marjorie went on remorselessly. "When Uncle Roger told me just now, do you know what I did? I said to myself, Do I really care? I couldn't make out. I looked in the glass to see if I could tell from my face. Then I suddenly thought I'd see whether I could laugh, and I did. And that made me feel how detestable I was, and I started crying again. Oh, I have been a beast, George, haven't I?"

She burst into a passion of tears and hid her face once more in the friendly cushion. George couldn't bear it at all. He laid his hand on her shoulder and bent forward, close to her, till his face almost touched her hair. "Don't," he cried. "Don't, Marjorie. You mustn't torment yourself like this. I know you loved Guy; we both loved him. He would have wanted us to be happy and brave and to go on with life—not make his death a source of hopeless despair." There was a silence, broken only by the agonizing sound of sobbing. "Marjorie, darling, you mustn't cry."

"There, I'm not," said Marjorie through her tears. "I'll try to stop. Guy wouldn't have wanted us to cry for him. You're right; he would have wanted us to live for him—worthily, in his splendid way."

"We who knew him and loved him must make our lives a me-

morial of him." In ordinary circumstances George would have died rather than make a remark like that. But in speaking of the dead, people forget themselves and conform to the peculiar obituary convention of thought and language. Spontaneously, unconsciously, George had conformed.

Marjorie wiped her eyes. "Thank you, George. You know so well what darling Guy would have liked. You've made me feel stronger to bear it. But, all the same, I do feel odious for what I thought about him sometimes. I didn't love him enough. And now it's too late. I shall never see him again." The spell of that "never" worked again: Marjorie sobbed despairingly.

George's distress knew no bounds. He put his arm round Marjorie's shoulders and kissed her hair. "Don't cry, Marjorie. Everybody feels like that sometimes, even towards the people they love most. You really mustn't make yourself miserable."

Once more she lifted her face and looked at him with a heart-breaking, tearful smile. "You have been too sweet to me, George. I don't know what I should have done without you."

"Poor darling!" said George. "I can't bear to see you unhappy." Their faces were close to one another, and it seemed natural that at this point their lips should meet in a long kiss. "We'll remember only the splendid, glorious things about Guy," he went on—"what a wonderful person he was, and how much we loved him." He kissed her again.

"Perhaps our darling Guy is with us here even now," said Marjorie, with a look of ecstasy on her face.

"Perhaps he is," George echoed.

It was at this point that a heavy footstep was heard and a hand rattled at the door. Marjorie and George moved a little farther apart. The intruder was Roger, who bustled in, rubbing his hands with an air of conscious heartiness, studiously pretending that nothing untoward had occurred. It is our English tradition that we should conceal our emotions. "Well, well," he said. "I think we had better be going in to luncheon. The bell has gone."

EUPOMPUS GAVE SPLENDOUR TO ART BY NUMBERS

"I HAVE made a discovery," said Emberlin as I entered his room.

"What about?" I asked.

"A discovery," he replied, "about *Discoveries*." He radiated an unconcealed satisfaction; the conversation had evidently gone exactly as he had intended it to go. He had made his phrase, and, repeating it lovingly—"A discovery about Discoveries"—he smiled benignly at me, enjoying my look of mystification—an expression which, I confess, I had purposely exaggerated in order to give him pleasure.

LIMBO

For Emberlin, in many ways so childish, took an especial delight in puzzling and nonplussing his acquaintances; and these small triumphs, these little "scores" off people afforded him some of his keenest pleasures. I

always indulged his weakness when I could, for it was worth while being on Emberlin's good books. To be allowed to listen to his post-prandial conversation was a privilege indeed. Not only was he himself a consummately good talker, but he had also the power of stimulating others to talk well. He was like some subtle wine, intoxicating just to the Meredithian level of tipsiness. In his company you would find yourself lifted to the sphere of nimble and mercurial conceptions; you would suddenly realize that some miracle had occurred, that you were living no longer in a dull world of jumbled things but somewhere above the hotch-potch in a glassily perfect universe of ideas, where all was informed, consistent, symmetrical. And it was Emberlin who, godlike, had the power of creating this new and real world. He built it out of words, this crystal Eden, where no belly-going snake, devourer of quotidian dirt, might ever enter and disturb its harmonies. Since I first knew Emberlin I have come to have a greatly enhanced respect for magic and all the formulas of its liturgy. If by words Emberlin can create a new world for me, can make my spirit slough off completely the domination of the old, why should not he or I or anyone, having found the suitable phrases, exert by means of them an influence more vulgarly miraculous upon the world of mere things? Indeed, when I compare Emberlin and the common or garden black magician of commerce, it seems to me that Emberlin is the greater thaumaturge. But let that pass; I am straying from my purpose, which was to give some description of the man who so confidentially whispered to me that he had made a discovery about *Discoveries*.

In the best sense of the word, then, Emberlin was academic. For us who knew him his rooms were an oasis of aloofness planted secretly in the heart of the desert of London. He exhaled an atmosphere that combined the fantastic speculativeness of the undergraduate with the more mellowed oddity of incredibly wise and antique dons. He was immensely erudite, but in a wholly unencyclopaedic way—a mine of irrelevant information, as his enemies said of him. He wrote a certain amount, but, like Mallarmé, avoided publication, deeming it akin to "the offence of exhibitionism." Once, however, in the folly of youth, some dozen years ago, he had published a volume of verses. He spent a good deal of time now in assiduously collecting copies of his book and burning them. There can be but very few left in the world now. My friend Cope had the fortune to pick one up the other day—a little blue book, which he showed me very secretly. I am at a loss to understand why Emberlin wishes to stamp out all trace of it. There is nothing to be ashamed of in the book; some of the verses, indeed, are, in their young ecstatic fashion,

LIMBO

good. But they are certainly conceived in a style that is unlike that of his present poems. Perhaps it is that which makes him so implacable against them. What he writes now for very private manuscript circulation is curious stuff. I confess I prefer the earlier work; I do not like the stony, hard-edged quality of this sort of thing—the only one I can remember of his later productions. It is a sonnet on a porcelain figure of a woman, dug up at Cnossus:

“Her eyes of bright unwinking glaze
All imperturbable do not
Even make pretences to regard
The jutting absence of her stays
Where many a Syrian gallipot
Excites desire with spilth of nard.
The bisted rims above the fard
Of cheeks as red as bergamot
Attest that no shamefaced delays
Will clog fulfilment nor retard
Full payment of the Cyprian’s praise
Down to the last remorseful jot.
Hail priestess of we know not what
Strange cult of Mycenean days!”

Regrettably, I cannot remember any of Emberlin’s French poems. His peculiar muse expresses herself better, I think, in that language than in her native tongue.

Such is Emberlin; such, I should rather say, *was* he, for, as I propose to show, he is not now the man that he was when he whispered so confidentially to me, as I entered the room, that he had made a discovery about *Discoveries*.

I waited patiently till he had finished his little game of mystification and, when the moment seemed ripe, I asked him to explain himself. Emberlin was ready to open out.

“Well,” he began, “these are the facts—a tedious introduction, I fear, but necessary. Years ago, when I was first reading Ben Jonson’s *Discoveries*, that queer jotting of his, ‘Eupompus gave splendour to Art by Numbers,’ tickled my curiosity. You yourself must have been struck by the phrase, everybody must have noticed it; and everybody must have noticed too that no commentator has a word to say on the subject. That is the way of commentators—the obvious points fulsomely explained and discussed, the hard passages, about which one might want to know something passed over in the silence of sheer ignorance. ‘Eupompus gave splendour to Art by Numbers’—the absurd phrase stuck in my head. At one time it positively haunted me. I used to chant it in my bath, set to music as an anthem. It went like this, so far as I remember”—and he burst into song: “‘Eupompus, Eu-u-pompus gave sple-e-e-endour . . .’” and so on, through all the repetitions, the dragged-out rises and falls of a parodied anthem.

“I sing you this,” he said when he had finished, “just to show you what a hold that dreadful sentence took upon my mind. For eight years, off and on, its senselessness has besieged me. I have looked up Eupompus in all the obvious books of reference, of course. He is there all right—Alexandrian artist, eternized by some wretched little author in some even wretcheder little anecdote, which at the moment I entirely forget; it had nothing, at any rate, to do with the embellishment of art by numbers. Long ago I gave up the search as hopeless; Eupompus remained for me a shadowy figure of mystery, author of some nameless outrage, bestower of some forgotten benefit upon the art that he practised. His history seemed wrapt in an impenetrable darkness. And then I yesterday discovered all about him and his art and his numbers. A chance discovery, than which few things have given me a greater pleasure.

“I happened upon it, as I say, yesterday when I was glancing through a volume of Zuylerius. Not, of course, the Zuylerius one knows,” he added quickly, “otherwise one would have had the heart out of Eupompus’ secret years ago.”

“Of course,” I repeated, “not the familiar Zuylerius.”

“Exactly,” said Emberlin, taking seriously my flippancy, “not the familiar John Zuylerius, Junior, but the elder Henricus Zuylerius, a much less—though perhaps undeservedly so—renowned figure than his son. But this is not the time to discuss their respective merits. At any rate, I discovered in a volume of critical dialogues by the elder Zuylerius, the reference, to which, without doubt, Jonson was referring in his note. (It was of course a mere jotting, never meant to be printed, but which Jonson’s literary executors pitched into the book with all the rest of the available posthumous materials.) ‘Eupompus gave splendour to Art by Numbers’—Zuylerius gives a very circumstantial account of the process. He must, I suppose, have found the sources for it in some writer now lost to us.”

Emberlin paused a moment to muse. The loss of the work of any ancient writer gave him the keenest sorrow. I rather believe he had written a version of the unrecovered books of Petronius. Some day I hope I shall be permitted to see what conception Emberlin has of the Satyricon as a whole. He would, I am sure, do Petronius justice—almost too much, perhaps.

“What was the story of Eupompus?” I asked. “I am all curiosity to know.”

Emberlin heaved a sigh and went on.

“Zuylerius’ narrative,” he said, “is very bald, but on the whole lucid; and I think it gives one the main points of the story. I will give it you in my own words; that is preferable to reading his Dutch Latin. Eupompus, then, was one of the most fashionable portrait-painters of Alexandria. His clientele was large, his business immensely profitable. For a half-length in oils the great courtesans would pay him a month’s earnings. He would paint likenesses of the

LIMBO

merchant princes in exchange for the costliest of their outlandish treasures. Coal-black potentates would come a thousand miles out of Ethiopia to have a miniature limned on some specially choice panel of ivory; and for payment there would be camel-loads of gold and spices. Fame, riches, and honour came to him while he was yet young; an unparalleled career seemed to lie before him. And then, quite suddenly, he gave it all up—refused to paint another portrait. The doors of his studio were closed. It was in vain that clients, however rich, however distinguished, demanded admission; the slaves had their order; Eupompus would see no one but his own intimates.”

Emberlin made a pause in his narrative.

“What was Eupompus doing?” I asked.

“He was, of course,” said Emberlin, “occupied in giving splendour to Art by Numbers. And this, as far as I can gather from Zuylerius, is how it all happened. He just suddenly fell in love with numbers—head over ears, amorous of pure counting. Number seemed to him to be the sole reality, the only thing about which the mind of man could be certain. To count was the one thing worth doing, because it was the one thing you could be sure of doing right. Thus, art, that it may have any value at all, must ally itself with reality—must, that is, possess a numerical foundation. He carried the idea into practice by painting the first picture in his new style. It was a gigantic canvas, covering several hundred square feet—I have no doubt that Eupompus could have told you the exact area to an inch—and upon it was represented an illimitable ocean covered, as far as the eye could reach in every direction, with a multitude of black swans. There were thirty-three thousand of these black swans, each, even though it might be but a speck on the horizon, distinctly limned. In the middle of the ocean was an island, upon which stood a more or less human figure having three eyes, three arms and legs, three breasts and three navels. In the leaden sky three suns were dimly expiring. There was nothing more in the picture; Zuylerius describes it exactly. Eupompus spent nine months of hard work in painting it. The privileged few who were allowed to see it pronounced it, finished, a masterpiece. They gathered round Eupompus in a little school, calling themselves the Philarithmics. They would sit for hours in front of his great work, contemplating the swans and counting them; according to the Philarithmics, to count and to contemplate were the same thing.

Eupompus’ next picture, representing an orchard of identical trees set in quincunxes, was regarded with less favour by the connoisseurs. His studies of crowds were, however, more highly esteemed; in these were portrayed masses of people arranged in groups that exactly imitated the number and position of the stars making up various of the more famous constellations. And then there was his famous picture of the amphitheatre, which created a

LIMBO

furor among the Philarithmics. Zuylerius again gives us a detailed description. Tier upon tier of seats are seen, all occupied by strange Cyclopean figures. Each tier accommodates more people than the tier below, and the number rises in a complicated but regular progression. All the figures seated in the amphitheatre possess but a single eye, enormous and luminous, planted in the middle of the forehead: and all these thousands of single eyes are fixed, in a terrible and menacing scrutiny, upon a dwarf-like creature cowering pitifully in the arena. . . . He alone of the multitude possesses two eyes.

“I would give anything to see that picture,” Emberlin added, after a pause. “The colouring, you know; Zuylerius gives no hint, but I feel somehow certain that the dominant tone must have been a fierce brick-red—a red granite amphitheatre filled with a red-robed assembly, sharply defined against an implacable blue sky.”

“Their eyes would be green,” I suggested.

Emberlin closed his eyes to visualize the scene and then nodded a slow and rather dubious assent.

“Up to this point,” Emberlin resumed at length, “Zuylerius’ account is very clear. But his descriptions of the later philarithmic art become extremely obscure; I doubt whether he understood in the least what it was all about. I will give you such meaning as I manage to extract from his chaos. Eupompus seems to have grown tired of painting merely numbers of objects. He wanted now to represent Number itself. And then he conceived the plan of rendering visible the fundamental ideas of life through the medium of those purely numerical terms into which, according to him, they must ultimately resolve themselves. Zuylerius speaks vaguely of a picture of Eros, which seems to have consisted of a series of interlacing planes. Eupompus’ fancy seems next to have been taken by various of the Socratic dialogues upon the nature of general ideas, and he made a series of illustrations for them in the same arithmo-geometric style. Finally there is Zuylerius’ wild description of the last picture that Eupompus ever painted. I can make very little of it. The subject of the work, at least, is clearly stated; it was a representation of Pure Number, or God and the Universe, or whatever you like to call that pleasingly inane conception of totality. It was a picture of the cosmos seen, I take it, through a rather Neoplatonic *camera obscura*—very clear and in small. Zuylerius suggests a design of planes radiating out from a single point of light. I dare say something of the kind came in. Actually, I have no doubt, the work was a very adequate rendering in visible form of the conception of the one and the many, with all the intermediate stages of enlightenment between matter and the *Fons Deitatis*. However, it’s no use speculating what the picture may have been going to look like. Poor old Eupompus went mad before he had completely finished it and, after he had dispatched two of the admiring Philarithmics with a hammer, he flung himself out of the window and broke his neck. That was the end of him, and that was

LIMBO

how he gave splendour, regrettably transient, to Art by Numbers.”

Emberlin stopped. We brooded over our pipes in silence; poor old Eupompus!

That was four months ago, and to-day Emberlin is a confirmed and apparently irreclaimable Philarithmic, a quite wholehearted Eupompian.

It was always Emberlin's way to take up the ideas that he finds in books and to put them into practice. He was once, for example, a working alchemist, and attained to considerable proficiency in the Great Art. He studied mnemonics under Bruno and Raymond Lully, and constructed for himself a model of the latter's syllogizing machine, in hopes of gaining that universal knowledge which the Enlightened Doctor guaranteed to its user. This time it is Eupompianism, and the thing has taken hold of him. I have held up to him all the hideous warnings that I can find in history. But it is no use.

There is the pitiable spectacle of Dr. Johnson under the tyranny of an Eupompian ritual, counting the posts and the paving-stones of Fleet Street. He himself knew best how nearly a madman he was.

And then I count as Eupompians all gamblers, all calculating boys, all interpreters of the prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse; then too the Elberfeld horses, most complete of all Eupompians.

And here was Emberlin joining himself to this sect, degrading himself to the level of counting beasts and irrational children and men, more or less insane. Dr. Johnson was at least born with a strain of the Eupompian aberration in him; Emberlin is busily and consciously acquiring it. My expostulations, the expostulations of all his friends, are as yet unavailing. It is in vain that I tell Emberlin that counting is the easiest thing in the world to do, that when I am utterly exhausted, my brain, for lack of ability to perform any other work, just counts and reckons, like a machine, like an Elberfeld horse. It all falls on deaf ears; Emberlin merely smiles and shows me some new numerical joke that he has discovered. Emberlin can never enter a tiled bathroom now without counting how many courses of tiles there are from floor to ceiling. He regards it as an interesting fact that there are twenty-six rows of tiles in his bathroom and thirty-two in mine, while all the public lavatories in Holborn have the same number. He knows now how many paces it is from any one point in London to any other. I have given up going for walks with him. I am always made so distressingly conscious by his preoccupied look, that he is counting his steps.

His evenings, too, have become profoundly melancholy; the conversation, however well it may begin, always comes round to the same nauseating subject. We can never escape numbers; Eupompus haunts us. It is not as if we were mathematicians and could discuss problems of any interest or value. No, none of us are mathemati-

LIMBO

cians, least of all Emberlin. Emberlin likes talking about such points as the numerical significance of the Trinity, the immense importance of its being three in one, not forgetting the even greater importance of its being one in three. He likes giving us statistics about the speed of light or the rate of growth in fingernails. He loves to speculate on the nature of odd and even numbers. And he seems to be unconscious how much he has changed for the worse. He is happy in an exclusively absorbing interest. It is as though some mental leprosy had fallen upon his intelligence.

In another year or so, I tell Emberlin, he may almost be able to compete with the calculating horses on their own ground. He will have lost all traces of his reason, but he will be able to extract cube roots in his head. It occurs to me that the reason why Eupompus killed himself was not that he was mad; on the contrary, it was because he was, temporarily, sane. He had been mad for years, and then suddenly the idiot's self-complacency was lit up by a flash of sanity. By its momentary light he saw into what gulfs of imbecility he had plunged. He saw and understood, and the full horror, the lamentable absurdity of the situation made him desperate. He vindicated Eupompus against Eupompianism, humanity against the Philarithmics. It gives me the greatest pleasure to think that he disposed of two of that hideous crew before he died himself.

HAPPY FAMILIES

THE scene is a conservatory. Luxuriant tropical plants are seen looming through a greenish aquarium twilight, punctuated here and there by the surprising pink of several Chinese lanterns hanging from the roof or on the branches of trees, while a warm yellow radiance streams out from the ball-room by a door on the left of the scene. Through the glass of the conservatory, at the back of the stage, one perceives a black-and-white landscape under the moon—expanses of snow, lined and dotted with coal-black hedges and trees. Outside is frost and death: but within the conservatory all is palpitating and steaming with tropical life and heat. Enormous fantastic plants encumber it; trees, creepers that writhe with serpentine life, orchids of every kind. Everywhere dense vegetation; horrible flowers that look like bottled spiders, like suppurating wounds; flowers with eyes and tongues, with moving, sensitive tentacles, with breasts and teeth and spotted skins.

The strains of a waltz float in through the ball-room door, and to that slow, soft music there enter, in parallel processions, the two families which are respectively Mr. Aston J. Tyrrell and Miss Topsy Garrick.

The doyen of the Tyrrell family is a young and perhaps too cultured literary man with rather long, dark brown hair, a face well cut

LIMBO

and sensitive, if a trifle weak about the lower jaw, and a voice whose exquisite modulations could only be the product of education at one of the two Great Universities. We will call him plain Aston. Miss Topsy, the head of the Garrick family, is a young woman of not quite twenty, with sleek, yellow hair hanging, like a page's, short and thick about her ears; boyish, too, in her slenderness and length of leg—boyish, but feminine and attractive to the last degree. Miss Topsy paints charmingly, sings in a small, pure voice that twists the heart and makes the bowels yearn in the hearing of it, is well educated and has read, or at least heard of, most of the best books in three languages, knows something, too, of economics and the doctrines of Freud.

They enter arm in arm, fresh from the dance, trailing behind them with their disengaged hands two absurd ventriloquist's dummies of themselves. They sit down on a bench placed in the middle of the stage under a kind of arbour festooned with fabulous flowers. The other members of the two families lurk in the tropical twilight of the background.

Aston advances his dummy and makes it speak, moving its mouth and limbs appropriately by means of the secret levers which his hand controls.

ASTON'S DUMMY.

What a perfect floor it is to-night!

TOPSY'S DUMMY.

Yes, it's like ice, isn't it? And such a good band.

ASTON'S DUMMY.

Oh yes, a very good band.

TOPSY'S DUMMY.

They play at dinner -time at the Necropole, you know.

ASTON'S DUMMY.

Really! (A long, uncomfortable silence.)

(From under a lofty twangum tree emerges the figure of Cain Washington Tyrrell, Aston's negro brother—for the Tyrrells, I regret to say, have a lick of the tar-brush in them and Cain is a Mendelian throwback to the pure Jamaican type. Cain is stout and his black face shines with grease. The whites of his eyes are like enamel, his smile is chryselephantine. He is dressed in faultless evening dress and a ribbon of seals tinkles on his stomach. He walks with legs wide apart, the upper part of his body thrown back and his belly projecting, as though he were supporting the weight of an Aristophanic actor's costume. He struts up and down in front of the couple on the seat, grinning and slapping himself on the waistcoat.)

LIMBO

CAIN.

What hair, nyum nyum! and the nape of her neck; and her body—how slender! and what lovely movements, nyum nyum! (*Approach Aston and speaking into his ear.*) Eh? eh? eh?

ASTON.

Go away, you pig. Go away. (*He holds up his dummy as a shield: Cain retires discomfited.*)

ASTON'S DUMMY.

Have you read any amusing novels lately?

TOPSY.

(*Speaking over the head of her dummy.*) No; I never read novels. They are mostly so frightful, aren't they?

ASTON.

(*Enthusiastically.*) How splendid Neither do I. I only write them sometimes, that's all. (*They abandon their dummies, which fall limply into one another's arms and collapse on to the floor with an expiring sigh.*)

TOPSY.

You write them? I didn't know. . . .

ASTON.

Oh, I'd very much rather you didn't know. I shouldn't like you ever to read one of them. They're all awful: still, they keep the pot boiling, you know. But tell me, what do you read?

TOPSY.

Mostly history, and philosophy, and a little criticism and psychology, and lots of poetry.

ASTON.

My dear young lady! how wonderful, how altogether unexpectedly splendid.

(*Cain emerges with the third brother, Sir Jasper, who is a paler, thinner, more sinister and aristocratic Aston.*)

CAIN.

Nyum nyum nyum. . . .

SIR JASPER.

LIMBO

What a perfect sentence that was of yours, Aston: quite Henry Jamesian! “My dear young lady”—as though you were forty years her senior; and the rare old-worldliness of that “altogether unexpectedly splendid!” Admirable. I don’t remember your ever employing quite exactly this opening gambit before: but of course there were things very like it. (*To Cain.*) What a nasty spectacle you are, Cain, gnashing your teeth like that!

CAIN.

Nyum nyum nyum.

(Aston *and* Topsy are enthusiastically talking about books: *the two brothers, finding selves quite unnoticed, retire into the shade of their twangum tree. Belle Garrick has been hovering behind Topsy for some time fast. She is more obviously pretty than her sister, full-bosomed and with a loose, red, laughing mouth. Unable to attract Topsy’s attention, she turns round and calls, “Henrika.” A pale face with wide, surprised eyes peeps round the trunk, hairy like a mammoth’s leg, of a kadapoo tree with magenta leaves and flame-coloured blossoms. This is Henrika, Topsy’s youngest sister. She is dressed in a little white muslin frock set off with blue ribbons.*)

HENRIKA .

(*Tiptoes forward.*) Here I am; what is it? I was rather frightened of that man. But he really seems quite nice and tame, doesn’t he?

BELLE.

Of course he is! What a goose you are to hide like that!

HENRIKA.

He seems a nice, quiet, gentle man; and so clever.

BELLE.

What good hands he has, hasn’t he? (*Approaching Topsy and whispering in her ear.*) Your hair’s going into your eyes, my dear. Toss it back in that pretty way you have. (*Topsy tosses her head; the soft, golden bell of hair quivers elastically about her ears.*) That’s right!

CAIN.

(*Bounding into the air and landing with feet apart, knees bent, and a hand on either knee.*) Oh, nyum nyum!

ASTON.

Oh, the beauty of that movement! It simply makes one catch one’s breath with surprised pleasure, as the gesture of a perfect dancer might.

LIMBO

SIR JASPER.

Beautiful, wasn't it?—a pleasure purely aesthetic and aesthetically pure. Listen to Cain.

ASTON.

(*To Topsy.*) And do you ever try writing yourself? I'm sure you ought to.

SIR JASPER.

Yes, yes, we're sure you ought to. Eh, Cain?

TOPSY.

Well, I have written a little poetry—or rather a few bad verses—at one time or another.

ASTON.

Really now! What about, may I ask?

TOPSY.

Well . . . (hesitating) about different things, you know. (*She fans herself rather nervously.*)

BELLE.

(*Leaning over Topsy's shoulder and addressing Aston directly.*) Mostly about Love. (*She dwells long and voluptuously on the last word, pronouncing it "lovv" rather than "luvv."*)

CAIN.

Oh, dat's good, dat's good; dat's dam good. (*In moments of emotion Cain's manners and language savour more obviously than usual of the Old Plantation.*) Did you see her face den?

BELLE.

(*Repeats, slowly and solemnly.*) Mostly about Love.

HENRIKA.

Oh, oh. (*She covers her face with her hands.*) How could you? It makes me tingle all over. (*She runs behind the kadapoo tree again.*)

ASTON.

(*Very seriously and intelligently.*) Really. That's very interesting. I wish you'd let me see what you've done some time.

SIR JASPER.

LIMBO

We always like to see these things, don't we, Aston? Do you remember Mrs. Towler? How pretty she was! And the way we criticized her literary productions. . . .

ASTON.

Mrs. Towler. . . . (*He shudders as though he had touched something soft and filthy.*) Oh, don't, Jasper, don't!

SIR JASPER.

Dear Mrs. Towler! We were very nice about her poems, weren't we? Do you remember the one that began:

"My Love is like a silvern flower-de-luce
Within some wondrous dream-garden pent:
God made my lovely lily not for use,
But for an ornament."

Even Cain, I believe, saw the joke of that.

ASTON.

Mrs. Towler—oh, my God! But this is quite different: this girl really interests me.

SIR JASPER.

Oh yes, I know, I know. She interests you too, Cain, doesn't she?

CAIN.

(*Prances two or three step of cake-walk and sings.*) Oh, ma honey, oh, ma honey.

ASTON.

But, I tell you, this is quite different.

SIR JASPER.

Of course it is. Any fool could see that it was. I've admitted it already.

ASTON.

(*To Topsy.*) You will show them me, won't you? I should so much like to see them.

TOPSY.

(*Covered with confusion.*) No, I really couldn't. You're a professional, you see.

HENRIKA.

LIMBO

(From behind the kadapoo tree.) No, you mustn't show them to him. They're really mine, you know, a great many of them.

BELLE.

Nonsense! *(She stoops down and moves Topsy's foot in such a way that a very well-shaped, white-stockinged leg is visible some way up the calf. Then, to Topsy.)* Pull your skirt down, my dear. You're quite indecent.

CAIN.

(Putting up his monocle.) Oh, nyum nyum, ma honey! Come wid me to Dixie Land. . . .

SIR JASPER.

H'm, a little conscious, don't you think?

ASTON.

But even professionals are human, my dear young lady. And perhaps I might be able to give you some help with your writings.

TOPSY.

That's awfully kind of you, Mr. Tyrrell.

HENRIKA.

Oh, don't let him see them. I don't want him to. Don't let him.

ASTON.

(With heavy charm.) It always interests me so much when I hear of the young—and I trust you won't be offended if I include you in their number—when I hear of the young taking to writing. It is one of the most important duties that we of the older generation can perform—to help and encourage the young with their work. It's a great service to the cause of Art.

SIR JASPER.

That was what I was always saying to Mrs. Towler, if I remember rightly.

TOPSY.

I can't tell you, Mr. Tyrrell, how delightful it is to have one's work taken seriously. I am so grateful to you. May I send you my little efforts, then?

CAIN.

(Executes a step dance to the furious clicking of a pair of bones.)

SIR JASPER.

LIMBO

I congratulate you, Aston. A most masterful bit of strategy.

BELLE.

I wonder what he'll do next. Isn't it exciting? Topsy, toss your head again. That's right. Oh, I wish something would happen!

HENRIKA.

What have you done? Oh, Topsy, you really mustn't send him my poems.

BELLE.

You said he was such a nice man just now.

HENRIKA.

Oh yes, he's nice, I know. But then he's a man, you must admit that. I don't want him to see them.

TOPSY.

(Firmly.) You're being merely foolish, Henrika. Mr. Tyrrell, a very distinguished literary man, has been kind enough to take an interest in my work. His criticism will be the greatest help to me.

BELLE.

Of course it will, and he has such charming eyes. *(A pause. The music, which has, all this while, been faintly heard through the ball-room door, becomes more audible. They are -playing a , creamy waltz.)* What delicious music! Henrika, come and have a dance. *(She seizes HENRIKA round the waist and begins to waltz. HENRIKA is reluctant at first, but little by little the rhythm of the dance takes possession of her till, with her half-closed eyes and languorous, trance-like movements, she might figure as the visible living symbol of the waltz. ASTON and TOPSY lean back in their seats, marking the time with a languid beating of the hand. CAIN sways and swoons and revolves in his own peculiar and inimitable version of the dance.)*

SIR JASPER.

(Who has been watching the whole scene with amusement.) What a pretty spectacle! "Music hath charms. . . ."

HENRIKA.

(In an almost extinct voice.) Oh, Belle, Belle, I could go on dancing like this for ever. I feel quite intoxicated with it.

TOPSY.

LIMBO

(*To Aston.*) What a jolly tune this is!

ASTON.

Isn't it? It's called "Dreams of Desire," I believe.

BELLE.

What a pretty name!

TOPSY.

These are wonderful flowers here.

ASTON.

Let's go and have a look at them.

(*They get up and walk round the conservatory. The flowers light up as they pass; in the midst of each is a small electric globe.*)

ASTON.

This purple one with eyes is the assafoetida flower. Don't put your nose too near; it has a smell like burning flesh. This is a *Cypripedium* from Sumatra. It is the only man-eating flower in the world. Notice its double set of teeth. (*He puts a stick into the mouth of the flower, which instantly snaps to, like a steel trap.*) Nasty, vicious brute. These blossoms like purple sponges belong to the twangum tree; when you squeeze them they ooze blood. This is the Jonesia, the octopus of the floral world: each of its eight tentacles is armed with a sting capable of killing a horse. Now this is a most interesting and instructive flower—the patchouli bloom. It is perhaps the most striking example in nature of structural specialization brought about by Evolution. If only Darwin had lived to see the patchouli plant! You have heard of flowers specially adapting themselves to be fertilized by bees or butterflies or spiders and such-like? Well, this plant which grows in the forests of Guatemala can only be fertilized by English explorers. Observe the structure of the flower; at the base is a flat, projecting pan, containing the pistil; above it an overarching tube ending in a spout. On either side a small crevice about three-quarters of an inch in length may be discerned in the fleshy lobes of the calyx. The English traveller seeing this plant is immediately struck by its resemblance to those penny-in-the-slot machines which provide scent for the public in the railway stations at home. Through sheer force of habit he takes a penny from his pocket and inserts it in one of the crevices or slots. Immediate result—a jet of highly scented liquid pollen is discharged from the spout upon the pistil lying below, and the plant is fertilized. Could anything be more miraculous? And yet there are those who deny the existence of God. Poor fools!

LIMBO

TOPSY.

Wonderful! (Sniffing.) What a good scent.

ASTON.

The purest patchouli.

BELLE.

How delicious! Oh, my dear . . . (*She shuts her eyes in ecstasy.*)

HENRIKA.

(Drowsily.) Delicious, 'licious. . . .

SIR JASPER.

I always like these rather *canaille* perfumes. Their effect is admirable.

ASTON.

This is the leopard-flower. Observe its spotted skin and its thorns like agate claws. This is the singing *Alocusia*—*Alocusia Cantatrix*—discovered by Humboldt during his second voyage to the Amazons. If you stroke its throat in the right place, it will begin to sing like a nightingale. Allow me. (*He takes her by the wrist and guides her fingers towards the palpitating throat of a gigantic flower shaped like a gramophone trumpet. The Alocusia bursts into song; it has a voice like Caruso's.*)

CAIN.

Oh, nyum nyum! What a hand! Oh, ma honey. (*He runs a thick black finger along TOPSY'S arm.*)

TOPSY.

What a remarkable flower!

BELLE.

I wonder whether he stroked my arm like that by accident or on purpose.

HENRIKA.

(*Gives a little shiver.*) He's touching me, he's touching me! But somehow I feel so sleepy I can't move.

TOPSY.

(*She moves on towards the next flower; BELLE does not allow her to disengage her hand at once.*) What a curious smell this one has!

LIMBO

ASTON.

Be careful, be careful! That's the chloroform plant.

TOPSY.

Oh, I feel quite dizzy and faint. That smell and the heat . . . (*She almost falls: ASTON puts out his arm and holds her.*)

ASTON.

Poor child!

CAIN.

Poh chile, poh chile! (*He hovers round her, his hands almost touching her, trembling with excitement: his white eyeballs roll horribly.*)

ASTON.

I'll open the door. The air will make you feel better. (*He opens the conservatory door, still supporting TOPSY with his right arm. The wind is heard, fearfully whistling: a flurry of snow blows into the conservatory. The flowers utter piercing screams of rage and fear; their lights flicker wildly; several turn perfectly black and drop on to the floor writhing in agony. The floral octopus agitates its tentacles; the twangum blooms drip blood; all the leaves of all the trees clap together with a dry, scaly sound.*)

TOPSY.

(*Faintly.*) Thank you; that's better.

ASTON.

(Closing the door.) Poor child! Come and sit down again; the chloroform flower is a real danger. (*Much moved, he leads her back towards the seat.*)

CAIN.

(*Executes a war dance round the seated couple.*) Poh chile, poh chile! Nyum nyum nyum.

SIR JASPER.

One perceives the well-known dangers of playing the Good Samaritan towards an afflicted member of the opposite sex. Pity has touched even our good Cain to tears.

BELLE.

Oh, I wonder what's going to happen! It's so exciting. I'm so glad Henrika's gone to sleep.

TOPSY.

It was silly of me to go all faint like that.

LIMBO

ASTON.

I ought to have warned you in time of the chloroform flower.

BELLE.

But it's such a lovely feeling now—like being in a very hot bath with lots of verbena bath-salts, and hardly able to move with limpness, but just ever so comfortable and happy.

ASTON.

How do you feel now? I'm afraid you're looking very pale. Poor child!

CAIN.

Poh chile, poh chile! . . .

SIR JASPER.

I don't know much about these things, but it seems to me, my dear Aston, that the moment has decidedly arrived.

ASTON.

I'm so sorry. You poor little thing . . . (He kisses her very gently on the forehead.)

BELLE.

A—a—h

HENRIKA.

Oh! He kissed me: but he's so kind and good, so kind and good. (*She stirs and falls back again into her drowsy trance.*)

CAIN.

Poh chile, poh chile! (*He leans over ASTON'S shoulder and begins rudely kissing TOPSY'S trance-calm, parted lips. TOPSY opens her eyes and sees the black, greasy face, the chryselephantine smile, the pink, thick lips, the goggling eyeballs of white enamel. She screams. HENRIKA springs up and screams too. TOPSY slips on to the floor, and CAIN and ASTON are left face to face with HENRIKA, pale as death and, with wide-open, terrified eyes. She is trembling in every limb.*)

ASTON.

(*Gives CAIN a push that sends him sprawling backwards, and falls on his knees before the pathetic figure of HENRIKA.*) Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. What a beast I am! I don't know what I can have been thinking of to do such a thing.

LIMBO

SIR JASPER.

My dear boy, I'm afraid you and Cain knew only too well what you were thinking of. Only too well . . .

ASTON.

Will you forgive me? I can't forgive myself.

HENRIKA.

Oh, you hurt me, you frightened me so much. I can't bear it. (*She cries.*)

ASTON.

O God! O God! (*The tears start into his eyes also. He takes HENRIKA'S hand and begins to kiss it.*) I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.

SIR JASPER.

If you're not very careful, Aston, you'll have Cain to deal with again. (*CAIN has picked himself up and is creeping stealthily towards the couple in the centre of the conservatory.*)

ASTON.

(*Turning round.*) Cain, you brute, go to hell! (*CAIN slinks back.*) Oh, will you forgive me for having been such a swine? What can I do?

TOPSY.

(*Who has recovered her self-possession, rises to her feet and pushes HENRIKA into the background.*) Thank you, it is really quite all right. I think it would be best to say no more about it, to forget what has happened.

ASTON.

Will you forgive me, then?

TOPSY.

Of course, of course. Please get up, Mr. Tyrrell.

ASTON.

(*Climbing to his feet.*) I can't think how I ever came to be such a brute.

TOPSY.

(*Coldly.*) I thought we had agreed not to talk about this incident any further, (*There is a silence.*)

LIMBO

SIR JASPER.

Well, Aston? This has been rather fun.

BELLE.

I wish you hadn't been quite so cold with him, Topsy. Poor man! He really is very sorry. One can see that.

HENRIKA.

But did you see that awful face? (*She shudders and covers her eyes.*)

ASTON.

(*Picking up his dummy and manipulating it.*) It is very hot in here, is it not? Shall we go back to the dancing-room?

TOPSY.

(*Also takes up her dummy.*) Yes, let us go back.

ASTON'S DUMMY.

Isn't that "Roses in Picardy" that the band is playing?

TOPSY'S DUMMY.

I believe it is. What a very good band, don't you think?

ASTON'S DUMMY.

Yes; it plays during dinner, you know, at the Necropole. (*To JASPER.*) Lord, what a fool I am! I'd quite forgotten; it was she who told me so as we came in.

TOPSY'S DUMMY.

At the Necropole? Really.

ASTON'S DUMMY.

A very good band and a very good floor.

TOPSY'S DUMMY.

Yes, it's a perfect floor, isn't it? Like glass. . . . (*They go, followed by their respective families. BELLE supports HENRIKA, who is still very weak after her shock.*)

BELLE.

How exciting it was, wasn't it, Henrika?

HENRIKA.

Wasn't it awful—too awful! Oh, that face. . . . (*CAIN follows ASTON out in silence and dejection. SIR JASPER brings up the rear of the procession. His face wears its usual expression of slightly*

LIMBO

bored amusement. He lights a cigarette.)

SIR JASPER.

Charming evening, charming evening. . . . Now it's over, I wonder whether it ever existed. (*He goes out. The conservatory is left empty. The flowers flash their luminous pistils; the eyes of the *assa-foetida* blossoms solemnly wink; leaves shake and sway and rustle; several of the flowers are heard to utter a low chuckle, while the *Alocusia*, after whistling a few derisive notes, finally utters a loud, gross Oriental hiccough.*)

THE CURTAIN SLOWLY DESCENDS.

CYNTHIA

WHEN, some fifty years hence, my grandchildren ask me what I did when I was at Oxford in the remote days towards the beginning of our monstrous century, I shall look back across the widening gulf of time and tell them with perfect good faith that I never worked less than eight hours a day, that I took a keen interest in Social Service, and that coffee was the strongest stimulant in which I indulged. And they will very justly say—but I hope I shall be out of hearing. That is why I propose to write my memoirs as soon as possible, before I have had time to forget, so that having the truth before me I shall never in time to come be able, consciously or unconsciously, to tell lies about myself.

At present I have no time to write a complete account of that decisive period in my history. I must content myself therefore with describing a single incident of my undergraduate days. I have selected this one because it is curious and at the same time wholly characteristic of Oxford life before the war.

My friend Lykeham was an Exhibitioner at Swellfoot College. He combined blood (he was immensely proud of his Anglo-Saxon descent and the derivation of his name from Old English *lycam*, a corpse) with brains. His tastes were eccentric, his habits deplorable, the range of his information immense. As he is now dead, I will say no more about his character.

To proceed with my anecdote: I had gone one evening, as was my custom, to visit him in his rooms at Swellfoot. It was just after nine when I mounted the stairs, and great Tom was still tolling.

“In Thomae laude
Resono bim bam sine fraude,”

as the charmingly imbecile motto used to run, and to-night he was living up to it by bim-bamming away in a persistent *basso profondo*

LIMBO

that made an astonishing background of discord to the sound of frantic guitar playing which emanated from Lykeham's room. From the fury of his twanging I could tell that something more than usually cataclysmic had happened, for mercifully it was only in moments of the greatest stress that Lykeham touched his guitar.

I entered the room with my hands over my ears. "For God's sake" I implored. Through the open window Tom was shouting a deep E flat, with a spread chord of under-and over-tones, while the guitar gibbered shrilly and hysterically in D natural. Lykeham laughed, banged down his guitar on to the sofa with such violence that it gave forth a trembling groan from all its strings, and ran forward to meet me. He slapped me on the shoulder with painful heartiness; his whole face radiated joy and excitement.

I can sympathize with people's pains, but not with their pleasures. There is something curiously boring about somebody else's happiness.

"You are perspiring," I said coldly.

Lykeham mopped himself, but went [on] grinning.

"Well, what is it this time?" I asked. "Are you engaged to be married again?" Lykeham burst forth with the triumphant pleasure of one who has at last found an opportunity of disburdening himself of an oppressive secret. "Far better than that," he cried.

I groaned. "Some more than usually unpleasant amour, I suppose." I knew that he had been in London the day before, a pressing engagement with the dentist having furnished an excuse to stay the night.

"Don't be gross," said Lykeham, with a nervous laugh which showed that my suspicions had been only too well founded.

"Well, let's hear about the delectable Flossie or Effie or whatever her name was," I said, with resignation.

"I tell you she was a goddess."

"The goddess of reason, I suppose."

"A goddess," Lykeham continued; "the most wonderful creature I've ever seen. And the extraordinary thing is," he added confidentially, and with ill-suppressed pride, "that it seems I myself am a god of sorts."

"Of gardens; but do come down to facts."

"I'll tell you the whole story. It was like this: Last night I was in town, you know, and went to see that capital play that's running at the Prince Consort's. It's one of those ingenious combinations of melodrama and problem play, which thrill you to the marrow and at the same time give you a virtuous feeling that you've been to see something serious. Well, I rolled in rather late, having secured an admirable place in the front row of the dress circle. I trampled in over the populace, and casually observed that there was a girl sitting next me, whom I apologized to for treading on her toes. I thought no more about her during the first act. In the interval, when the

LIMBO

lights were on again, I turned round to look at things in general and discovered that there was a goddess sitting next me. One only had to look at her to see she was a goddess. She was quite incredibly beautiful—rather pale and virginal and slim, and at the same time very stately. I can't describe her; she was simply perfect—there's nothing more to be said."

"Perfect," I repeated, "but so were all the rest."

"Fool!" Lykeham answered impatiently. "All the rest were just damned women. This was a goddess, I tell you. Don't interrupt me any more. As I was looking with astonishment at her profile, she turned her head and looked squarely at me. I've never seen anything so lovely; I almost swooned away. Our eyes met—"

"What an awful novelist's expression!" I expostulated.

"I can't help it; there's no other word. Our eyes did meet, and we both fell simultaneously in love."

"Speak for yourself."

"I could see it in her eyes. Well, to go on. We looked at one another several times during that first interval, and then the second act began. In the course of the act, entirely accidentally, I knocked my programme on to the floor, and reaching down to get it I touched her hand. Well, there was obviously nothing else to do but to take hold of it."

"And what did she do?"

"Nothing. We sat like that the whole of the rest of the act, rapturously happy and"

"And quietly perspiring palm to palm. I know exactly, so we can pass over that. Proceed."

"Of course you don't know in the least; you've never held a goddess's hand. When the lights went up again I reluctantly dropped her hand, not liking the thought of the profane crowd seeing us, and for want of anything better to say, I asked her if she actually was a goddess. She said it was a curious question, as she'd been wondering what god I was. So we said, how incredible: and I said I was sure she was a goddess, and she said she was certain I was a god, and I bought some chocolates, and the third act began. Now, it being a melodrama, there was of course in the third act a murder and burglary scene, in which all the lights were turned out. In this thrilling moment of total blackness I suddenly felt her kiss me on the cheek."

"I thought you said she was virginal."

"So she was—absolutely, frozenly virginal; but she was made of a sort of burning ice, if you understand me. She was virginally passionate—just the combination you'd expect to find in a goddess. I admit I was startled when she kissed me, but with infinite presence of mind I kissed her back, on the mouth. Then the murder was finished and the lights went on again. Nothing much more happened till the end of the show, when I helped her on with her coat and we

LIMBO

went out together, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, and got into a taxi. I told the man to drive somewhere where we could get supper, and he drove there.”

“Not without embracements by the way?”

“No, not without certain embracements.”

“Always passionately virginal?”

“Always virginally passionate.”

“Proceed.”

“Well, we had supper—a positively Olympian affair, nectar and ambrosia and stolen hand-pressures. She became more and more wonderful every moment. My God, you should have seen her eyes! The whole soul seemed to burn in their depths, like fire under the sea—”

“For narrative,” I interrupted him, “the epic or heroic style is altogether more suitable than the lyrical.”

“Well, as I say, we had supper, and after that my memory becomes a sort of burning mist.”

“Let us make haste to draw the inevitable veil. What was her name?” Lykeham confessed that he didn’t know; as she was a goddess, it didn’t really seem to matter what her earthly name was. How did he expect to find her again? He hadn’t thought of that, but knew she’d turn up somehow. I told him he was a fool, and asked which particular goddess he thought she was and which particular god he himself.

“We discussed that,” he said. “We first thought Ares and Aphrodite; but she wasn’t my idea of Aphrodite, and I don’t know that I’m very much like Ares.”

He looked pensively in the old Venetian mirror which hung over the fireplace. It was a complacent look, for Lykeham was rather vain about his personal appearance, which was, indeed, repulsive at first sight, but had, when you looked again, a certain strange and fascinating ugly beauty. Bearded, he would have made a passable Socrates. But Ares—no, certainly he wasn’t Ares.

“Perhaps you’re Hephaestus,” I suggested; but the idea was received coldly.

Was he sure that she was a goddess? Mightn’t she just have been a nymph of sorts? Europa, for instance. Lykeham repudiated the implied suggestion that he was a bull, nor would he hear of himself as a swan or a shower of gold. It was possible, however, he thought, that he was Apollo and she Daphne, reincarnated from her vegetable state. And though I laughed heartily at the idea of his being Phoebus Apollo, Lykeham stuck to the theory with increasing obstinacy. The more he thought of it the more it seemed to him probable that his nymph, with her burning cold virginal passion, was Daphne, while to doubt that he himself was Apollo seemed hardly to occur to him.

LIMBO

It was about a fortnight later, in June, towards the end of term, that we discovered Lykeham's Olympian identity. We had gone, Lykeham and I, for an after-dinner walk. We set out through the pale tranquillity of twilight, and following the towpath up the river as far as Godstow, halted at the inn for a glass of port and a talk with the glorious old female Falstaff in black silk who kept it. We were royally entertained with gossip and old wine, and after Lykeham had sung a comic song which had reduced the old lady to a quivering jelly of hysterical laughter, we set out once more, intending to go yet a little farther up the river before we turned back. Darkness had fallen by this time; the stars were lighted in the sky; it was the sort of summer night to which Marlowe compared Helen of Troy. Over the meadows invisible peewits wheeled and uttered their melancholy cry; the far-off thunder of the weir bore a continuous, even burden to all the other small noises of the night. Lykeham and I walked on in silence. We had covered perhaps a quarter of a mile when all at once my companion stopped and began looking fixedly westward towards Witham Hill. I paused too, and saw that he was staring at the thin crescent of the moon, which was preparing to set in the dark woods that crowned the eminence.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

But Lykeham paid no attention, only muttered something to himself. Then suddenly he cried out, "It's she!" and started off at full gallop across the fields in the direction of the hill. Conceiving that he had gone suddenly mad, I followed. We crashed through the first hedge twenty yards apart. Then came the backwater; Lykeham leapt, flopped in three-quarters of the way across, and scrambled oozily ashore. I made a better jump and landed among the mud and rushes of the farther bank. Two more hedges and a ploughed field, a hedge, a road, a gate, another field, and then we were in Witham Wood itself. It was pitch black under the trees, and Lykeham had perforce to slacken his pace a little. I followed him by the noise he made crashing through the undergrowth and cursing when he hurt himself. That wood was a nightmare, but we got through it somehow and into the open glade at the top of the hill. Through the trees on the farther side of the clearing shone the moon, seeming incredibly close at hand. Then, suddenly, along the very path of the moonlight, the figure of a woman came walking through the trees into the open. Lykeham rushed towards her and flung himself at her feet and embraced her knees; she stooped down and smoothed his ruffled hair. I turned and walked away; it is not for a mere mortal to look on at the embracements of the gods.

As I walked back, I wondered who on earth—or rather who in heaven—Lykeham could be. For here was chaste Cynthia giving herself to him in the most unequivocal fashion. Could he be Endymion? No, the idea was too preposterous to be entertained for a moment. But I could think of no other loved by the virgin moon.

LIMBO

Yet surely I seemed dimly to recollect that there had been some favoured god; for the life of me I could not remember who. All the way back along the river path I searched my mind for his name, and always it eluded me.

But on my return I looked up the matter in Lemprière, and almost died of laughing when I discovered the truth. I thought of Lykeham's Venetian mirror and his complacent side glances at his own image, and his belief that he was Apollo, and I laughed and laughed. And when, considerably after midnight, Lykeham got back to college, I met him in the porch and took him quietly by the sleeve, and in his ear I whispered, "GOAT-FOOT," and then I roared with laughter once again.

THE BOOKSHOP

IT seemed indeed an unlikely place to find a bookshop. All the other commercial enterprises of the street aimed at purveying the barest necessities to the busy squalor of the quarter. In this, the main arterial street, there was a specious glitter and life produced by the swift passage of the traffic. It was almost airy, almost gay. But all around great tracts of slum pullulated dankly. The inhabitants did their shopping in the grand street; they passed, holding gobbets of meat that showed glutinous even through the wrappings of paper; they cheapened linoleum at upholstery doors; women, black-bonneted and black-shawled, went shuffling to their marketing with dilapidated bags of straw plait. How should these, I wondered, buy books? And yet there it was, a tiny shop; and the windows were fitted with shelves, and there were the brown backs of books. To the right a large emporium overflowed into the street with its fabulously cheap furniture; to the left the curtained, discreet windows of an eating-house announced in chipped white letters the merits of sixpenny dinners. Between, so narrow as scarcely to prevent the junction of food and furniture, was the little shop. A door and four feet of dark window, that was the full extent of frontage. One saw here that literature was a luxury; it took its proportionable room here in this place of necessity. Still, the comfort was that it survived, definitely survived.

The owner of the shop was standing in the doorway, a little man, grizzle-bearded and with eyes very active round the corners of the spectacles that bridged his long, sharp nose.

"Trade is good?" I inquired.

"Better in my grandfather's day," he told me, shaking his head sadly.

"We grow progressively more Philistine," I suggested.

"It is our cheap press. The ephemeral overwhelms the permanent, the classical."

LIMBO

“This journalism,” I agreed, “or call it rather this piddling quotidianism, is the curse of our age.”

“Fit only for—” He gesticulated clutchingly with his hands as though seeking the word.

“For the fire.”

The old man was triumphantly emphatic with his, “No: for the sewer.”

I laughed sympathetically at his passion. “We are delightfully at one in our views,” I told him. “May I look about me a little among your treasures?”

Within the shop was a brown twilight, redolent with old leather and the smell of that fine subtle dust that clings to the pages of forgotten books, as though preservative of their secrets—like the dry sand of Asian deserts beneath which, still incredibly intact, lie the treasures and the rubbish of a thousand years ago. I opened the first volume that came to my hand. It was a book of fashion-plates, tinted elaborately by hand in magenta and purple, maroon and solferino and puce and those melting shades of green that a yet earlier generation had called “the sorrows of Werther.” Beauties in crinolines swam with the amplitude of pavilioned ships across the pages. Their feet were represented as thin and flat and black, like tea-leaves shyly protruding from under their petticoats. Their faces were egg-shaped, sleeked round with hair of glossy black, and expressive of an immaculate purity. I thought of our modern fashion figures, with their heels and their arch of instep, their flattened faces and smile of pouting invitation. It was difficult not to be a deteriorationist. I am easily moved by symbols; there is something of a Quarles in my nature. Lacking the philosophic mind, I prefer to see my abstractions concretely imaged. And it occurred to me then that if I wanted an emblem to picture the sacredness of marriage and the influence of the home I could not do better than choose two little black feet like tea-leaves peeping out decorously from under the hem of wide, disguising petticoats. While heels and thoroughbred insteps should figure—oh well, the reverse.

The current of my thoughts was turned aside by the old man’s voice. “I expect you are musical,” he said.

Oh yes, I was a little; and he held out to me a bulky folio.

“Did you ever hear this?” he asked.

Robert the Devil: no, I never had. I did not doubt that it was a gap in my musical education.

The old man took the book and drew up a chair from the dim *penetrabilia* of the shop. It was then that I noticed a surprising fact: what I had, at a careless glance, taken to be a common counter I perceived now to be a piano of a square, unfamiliar shape. The old man sat down before it. “You must forgive any defects in its tone,” he said, turning to me. “An early Broadwood, Georgian, you know, and has seen a deal of service in a hundred years.”

LIMBO

He opened the lid, and the yellow keys grinned at me in the darkness like the teeth of an ancient horse.

The old man rustled pages till he found a desired place. "The ballet music," he said: "it's fine. Listen to this."

His bony, rather tremulous hands began suddenly to move with an astonishing nimbleness, and there rose up, faint and tinkling against the roar of the traffic, a gay pirouetting music. The instrument rattled considerably and the volume of sound was thin as the trickle of a drought-shrunken stream: but, still, it kept tune and the melody was there, filmy, aerial.

"And now for the drinking-song," cried the old man, warming excitedly to his work. He played a series of chords that mounted modulating upwards towards a breaking-point; so supremely operatic as positively to be a parody of that moment of tautening suspense, when the singers are bracing themselves for a burst of passion. And then it came, the drinking chorus. One pictured to oneself cloaked men, wildly jovial over the emptiness of cardboard flagons.

"Versiam' a tazza piena
Il generoso umor . . ."

The old man's voice was cracked and shrill, but his enthusiasm made up for any defects in execution. I had never seen anyone so wholeheartedly a reveller.

He turned over a few more pages. "Ah, the 'Valse Infernale,'" he said. "That's good." There was a little melancholy prelude and then the tune, not so infernal perhaps as one might have been led to expect, but still pleasant enough. I looked over his shoulder at the words and sang to his accompaniment.

"Demoni fatali
Fantasmi d'orror,
Dei regni infernali
Plaudite al signor."

A great steam-driven brewer's lorry roared past with its annihilating thunder and utterly blotted out the last line. The old man's hands still moved over the yellow keys, my mouth opened and shut; but there was no sound of words or music. It was as though the fatal demons, the phantasms of horror, had made a sudden irruption into this peaceful, abstracted place.

I looked out through the narrow door. The traffic ceaselessly passed; men and women hurried along with set faces. Phantasms of horror, all of them: infernal realms wherein they dwelt. Outside, men lived under the tyranny of things. Their every action was determined by the orders of mere matter, by money, and the tools of their trade and the unthinking laws of habit and convention. But here I seemed to be safe from things, living at a remove from actual-

LIMBO

ity; here where a bearded old man, improbable survival from some other time, indomitably played the music of romance, despite the fact that the phantasms of horror might occasionally drown the sound of it with their clamour.

“So: will you take it?” The voice of the old man broke across my thoughts. “I will let you have it for five shillings.” He was holding out the thick, dilapidated volume towards me. His face wore a look of strained anxiety. I could see how eager he was to get my five shillings, how necessary, poor man! for him. He has been, I thought with an unreasonable bitterness—he has been simply performing for my benefit, like a trained dog. His aloofness, his culture—all a business trick. I felt aggrieved. He was just one of the common phantasms of horror masquerading as the angel of this somewhat comic paradise of contemplation. I gave him a couple of half-crowns and he began wrapping the book in paper.

“I tell you,” he said, “I’m sorry to part with it. I get attached to my books, you know; but they always have to go.”

He sighed with such an obvious genuineness of feeling that I repented of the judgment I had passed upon him. He was a reluctant inhabitant of the infernal realms, even as was I myself.

Outside they were beginning to cry the evening papers: a ship sunk, trenches captured, somebody’s new stirring speech. We looked at one another—the old bookseller and I—in silence. We understood one another without speech. Here were we in particular, and here was the whole of humanity in general, all faced by the hideous triumph of things. In this continued massacre of men, in this old man’s enforced sacrifice, matter equally triumphed. And walking homeward through Regent’s Park, I too found matter triumphing over me. My book was unconscionably heavy, and I wondered what in the world I should do with a piano score of *Robert the Devil* when I had got it home. It would only be another thing to weigh me down and hinder me; and at the moment it was very, oh, abominably, heavy. I leaned over the railings that ring round the ornamental water, and as unostentatiously as I could, I let the book fall into the bushes.

I often think it would be best not to attempt the solution of the problem of life. Living is hard enough without complicating the process by thinking about it. The wisest thing, perhaps, is to take for granted the “wearisome condition of humanity, born under one law, to another bound,” and to leave the matter at that, without an attempt to reconcile the incompatibles. Oh, the absurd difficulty of it all! And I have, moreover, wasted five shillings, which is serious, you know, in these thin times.

THE DEATH OF LULLY

THE sea lay in a breathing calm, and the galley, bosomed in its transparent water, stirred rhythmically to the slow pulse of its sleeping life. Down below there, fathoms away through the crystal-clear Mediterranean, the shadow of the ship lazily swung, moving, a long dark patch, very slowly back and forth across the white sand of the sea-bottom—very slowly, a scarcely perceptible advance and recession of the green darkness. Fishes sometimes passed, now hanging poised with idly tremulous fins, now darting onwards, effortless and incredibly swift; and always, as it seemed, utterly aimless, whether they rested or whether they moved; as the life of angels their life seemed mysterious and unknowable.

All was silence on board the ship. In their fetid cage below decks the rowers slept where they sat, chained, on their narrow benches. On deck the sailors lay sleeping or sat in little groups playing at dice. The fore-part of the deck was reserved, it seemed, for passengers of distinction. Two figures, a man and a woman, were reclining there on couches, their faces and half-bared limbs flushed in the coloured shadow that was thrown by the great red awning stretched above them.

It was a nobleman, the sailors had heard, and his mistress that they had on board. They had taken their passage at Scanderoon, and were homeward bound for Spain. Proud as sin these Spaniards were; the man treated them like slaves or dogs. As for the woman, she was well enough, but they could find as good a face and pair of breasts in their native Genoa. If anyone so much as looked at her from half the ship's length away it sent her possessor into a rage. He had struck one man for smiling at her. Damned Catalonian, as jealous as a stag; they wished him the stag's horns as well as its temper.

It was intensely hot even under the awning. The man woke from his uneasy sleep and reached out to where on a little table beside him stood a deep silver cup of mixed wine and water. He drank a gulp of it; it was as warm as blood and hardly cooled his throat. He turned over and, leaning on his elbow, looked at his companion. She on her back, quietly breathing through parted lips, still asleep. He leaned across and pinched her on the breast, so that she woke up with a sudden start and cry of pain.

"Why did you wake me?" she asked.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. He had, indeed, had no reason for doing so, except that he did not like it that she should be comfortably asleep, while he was awake and unpleasantly conscious of the heat.

"It is hotter than ever," he said, with a kind of gloomy satisfaction at the thought that she would now have to suffer the same discomforts as himself. "The wine scorches instead of cooling; the sun seems no lower down the sky."

LIMBO

The woman pouted. "You pinched me cruelly," she said. "And I still do not know why you wanted to wake me."

He smiled again, this time with a good-humoured lasciviousness. "I wanted to kiss you," he said. He passed his hand over her body possessively, as a man might caress a dog.

Suddenly the quiet of the afternoon was shattered. A great clamour rose up, ragged and uneven, on the air. Shrill yells pierced the dull rumbling growl of bass voices, pierced the sound of beaten drums and hammered metal.

"What are they doing in the town?" asked the woman anxiously of her lover.

"God knows," he answered. "Perhaps the heathen hounds are making some trouble with our men."

He got up and walked to the rail of the ship. A quarter of a mile away, across the smooth water of the bay, stood the little African town at which they had stopped to call. The sunlight showed everything with a hard and merciless definition. Sky, palms, white houses, domes, and towers seemed as though made from some hard enamelled metal. A ridge of low red hills rolled away to right and left. The sunshine gave to everything in the scene the same clarity of detail, so that to the eye of the onlooker there was no impression of distance. The whole thing seemed to be painted in flat upon a single plane.

The young man returned to his couch under the awning and lay down. It was hotter than ever, or seemed so, at least, since he had made the exertion of getting up. He thought of high cool pastures in the hills, with the pleasant sound of streams, far down and out of sight in their deep channels. He thought of winds that were fresh and scented—winds that were not mere breaths of dust and fire. He thought of the shade of cypresses, a narrow opaque strip of darkness; and he thought too of the green coolness, more diffused and fluid and transparent, of chestnut groves. And he thought of the people he remembered sitting under the trees—young people, gay and brightly dressed, whose life was all gaiety and deliciousness. There were the songs that they sang—he recalled the voices and the dancing of the strings. And there were perfumes and, when one drew closer, the faint intoxicating fragrance of a woman's body. He thought of the stories they told; one in particular came to his mind, a capital tale of a sorcerer who offered to change a peasant's wife into a mare, and how he gulled the husband and enjoyed the woman before his eyes, and the delightful excuses he made when she failed to change her shape. He smiled to himself at the thought of it, and stretching out a hand touched his mistress. Her bosom was soft to his fingers and damp with sweat; he had an unpleasant notion that she was melting in the heat.

"Why do you touch me?" she asked.

He made no reply, but turned away from her. He wondered

LIMBO

how it would come to pass that people would rise again in the body. It seemed curious, considering the manifest activities of worms. And suppose one rose in the body that one possessed in age. He shuddered, picturing to himself what this woman would be like when she was sixty, seventy. She would be beyond words repulsive. Old men too were horrible. They stank, and their eyes were rheumy and rosy, like the eyes of deer. He decided that he would kill himself before he grew old. He was eight-and-twenty now. He would give himself twelve years more. Then he would end it. His thoughts dimmed and faded away into sleep.

The woman looked at him as he slept. He was a good man, she thought, though sometimes cruel. He was different from all the other men she had known. Once, when she was sixteen and a beginner in the business of love, she had thought that all men were always drunk when they made love. They were all dirty and like beasts; she had felt herself superior to them. But this man was a nobleman. She could not understand him; his thoughts were always obscure. She felt herself infinitely inferior to him. She was afraid of him and his occasional cruelty; but still he was a good man, and he might do what he liked with her.

From far off came the sound of oars, a rhythmical splash and creak. Somebody shouted, and from startlingly close at hand one of the sailors hallooed back.

The young man woke up with a start.

"What is it?" he asked, turning with an angry look to the girl, as though he held her to be responsible for this breaking in upon his slumbers.

"The boat, I think," she said. "It must be coming back from the shore."

The boat's crew came up over the side, and all the stagnant life of the ship flowed excitedly round them. They were the centre of a vortex towards which all were drawn. Even the young Catalonian, for all his hatred of these stinking Genoese shipmen, was sucked into the eddy. Everybody was talking at once, and in the general hubbub of question and answer there was nothing coherent to be made out. Piercingly distinct above all the noise came the voice of the little cabin-boy, who had been to shore with the boat's crew. He was running round to everyone in turn repeating: "I hit one of them. You know. I hit one. With a stone on the forehead. Didn't he bleed, ooh! didn't he just!" And he would dance with uncontrollable excitement.

The captain held up his hand and shouted for silence. "One at a time, there," he ordered, and when order had a little been restored, added grumblingly, "Like a pack of dogs on a bone. You talk, boat-swain."

"I hit one of them," said the boy. Somebody cuffed him over the head, and he relapsed into silence.

LIMBO

When the boatswain's story had rambled through labyrinths of digression, over countless obstacles of interruptions and emendations, to its conclusion, the Spaniard went back to join his companion under the awning. He had assumed again his habitual indifference.

"Nearly butchered," he said languidly, in response to her eager questions. "They"—he jerked a hand in the direction of the town—"they were pelting an old fellow who had come there preaching the Faith. Left him dead on the beach. Our men had to run for it."

She could get no more out of him; he turned over and pretended to go to sleep.

Towards evening they received a visit from the captain. He was a large, handsome man, with gold ear-rings glinting from among a bush of black hair.

"Divine Providence," he remarked sententiously, after the usual courtesies had passed, "has called upon us to perform a very notable work."

"Indeed?" said the young man.

"No less a work," continued the captain, "than to save from the clutches of the infidels and heathen the precious remains of a holy martyr."

The captain let fall his pompous manner. It was evident that he had carefully prepared these pious sentences, they rolled so roundly off his tongue. But he was eager now to get on with his story, and it was in a homelier style that he went on: "If you knew these seas as well as I—and it's near twenty years now that I've been sailing them—you'd have some knowledge of this same holy man that—God rot their souls for it!—these cursed Arabs have done to death here. I've heard of him more than once in my time, and not always well spoken of; for, to tell the honest truth, he does more harm with his preachments to good Christian traders than ever he did good to black-hearted heathen dogs. Leave the bees alone, I say, and if you can get a little honey out of them quietly, so much the better; but he goes about among the beehives with a pole, stirring up trouble for himself and others too. Leave them alone to their damnation, is what I say, and get what you can from them this side of hell. But, still, he has died a holy martyr's death. God rest his soul! A martyr is a wonderful thing, you know, and it's not for the likes of us to understand what they mean by it all.

"They do say, too, that he could make gold. And, to my mind, it would have been a thing more pleasing to God and man if he had stopped at home minting money for poor folks and dealing it round, so that there'd be no need to work any more and break oneself for a morsel of bread. Yes, he was great at gold-making and at the books too. They tell me he was called the Illuminated Doctor. But I know him still as plain Lully. I used to hear of him from my father, plain

LIMBO

Lully, and no better once than he should have been.

“My father was a shipwright in Minorca in those days—how long since? Fifty, sixty years perhaps. He knew him then; he has often told me the tale. And a raffish young dog he was. Drinking, drabbing, and dicing he outdid them all, and between the bouts wrote poems, they say, which was more than the rest could do. But he gave it all up on the sudden. Gave away his lands, quitted his former companions, and turned hermit up in the hills, living alone like a fox in his burrow, high up above the vines. And all because of a woman and his own qualmish stomach.”

The shipmaster paused and helped himself to a little wine. “And what did this woman do?” the girl asked curiously.

“Ah, it’s not what she did but what she didn’t do,” the captain answered, with a leer and wink. “She kept him at his distance—all but once, all but once; and that was what put him on the road to being a martyr. But there, I’m outrunning myself. I must go more soberly.

“There was a lady of some consequence in the island—one of the Castellos, I think she was; her first name has quite slipped my memory—Anastasia, or something of the kind. Lully conceives a passion for her, and sighs and importunes her through I know not how many months and years. But her virtue stands steady as the judgment seat. Well, in the end, what happens was this. The story leaked out after it was all over, and he was turned hermit in the mountains. What happened, I say, was this. She tells him at last that he may come and see her, fixing some solitary twilight place and time, her own room at nightfall. You can guess how he washes and curls and scents himself, shaves his chin, chews anises, musks over whatever of the goat may cling about the body. Off he goes, dreaming swoons and ecstasies, foretasting inconceivable sweets. Arrived, he finds the lady a little melancholy—her settled humour, but a man might expect a smile at such a time. Still, nothing abashed, he falls at her feet and pours out his piteous case, telling her he has sighed through seven years, not closed an eye for above a hundred nights, is forepined to a shadow, and, in a word, will perish unless she show some mercy. She, still melancholy—her settled humour, mark you—makes answer that she is ready to yield, and that her body is entirely his. With that, she lets herself be done with as he pleases, but always sorrowfully. ‘You are all mine,’ says he—‘all mine’—and unlaces her gorgeret to prove the same. But he was wrong. Another lover was already in her bosom, and his kisses had been passionate—oh, burning passionate, for he had kissed away half her left breast. From the nipple down it had all been gnawed away by a cancer.

“Bah, a man may see as bad as that any day in the street or at church-doors where beggars most congregate. I grant you that it is a nasty sight, worm-eaten flesh, but still—not enough, you will agree, to make yourself a hermit over. But there, I told you he had a queasi-

LIMBO

ness of the stomach. But doubtless it was all in God's plan to make a holy martyr of him. But for that same queasiness of his, he would still be living there, a superannuated rake; or else have died in very foul odour, instead of passing, all embalmed with sanctity, to Paradise Gate.

"I know not what happened to him between his hermit-hood and his quest for martyrdom. I saw him first a dozen years ago, down Tunis way. They were always clapping him into prison or pulling out his beard for preaching. This time, it seems, they have made a holy martyr of him, done the business thoroughly with no bungling. Well, may he pray for our souls at the throne of God. I go in secretly to-night to steal his body. It lies on the shore there beyond the jetty. It will be a notable work, I tell you, to bring back so precious a corpse to Christendom. A most notable work. . . ."

The captain rubbed his hands.

It was after midnight, but there was still a bustle of activity on board the galley. At any moment they were expecting the arrival of the boat with the corpse of the martyr. A couch, neatly draped in black, with at its head and foot candles burning two by two, had been set out on the poop for the reception of the body. The captain called the young Spaniard and his mistress to come and see the bier.

"That's a good bit of work for you," he said with justifiable pride. "I defy anyone to make a more decent resting-place for a martyr than that is. It could hardly have been done better on shore, with every appliance at hand. But we sailors, you know, can make anything out of nothing. A truckle-bed, a strip of tarred canvas, and four tallow dips from the cabin lanterns—there you are, a bier for a king."

He hurried away, and a little later the young man and the girl could hear him giving orders and cursing somewhere down below. The candles burned almost without a tremor in the windless air, and the reflections of the stars were long, thin tracks of fire along the utterly calm water.

"Were there but perfumed flowers and the sound of a lute," said the young Spaniard, "the night would tremble into passion of its own accord. Love should come unsought on such a night as this, among these black waters and the stars that sleep so peacefully on their bosom." He put his arm round the girl and bent his head to kiss her. But she averted her face. He could feel a shudder run her through the body.

"Not to-night," she whispered. "I think of the poor dead man. I would rather pray."

"No, no," he cried. "Forget him. Remember only that we are alive, and that we have but little time and none to waste."

He drew her into the shadow under the bulwark, and, sitting down on a coil of rope, crushed her body to his own and began kiss-

LIMBO

ing her with fury. She lay, at first, limp in his arms, but gradually she kindled to his passion.

A splash of oars announced the approach of the boat. The captain hallooed into the darkness: "Did you find him?"

"Yes, we have him here," came back the answer.

"Good. Bring him alongside and we'll hoist him up. We have the bier in readiness. He shall lie in state to-night."

"But he's not dead," shouted back the voice from the night.

"Not dead?" repeated the captain, thunderstruck. "But what about the bier, then?"

A thin, feeble voice came back. "Your work will not be wasted, my friend. It will be but a short time before I need your bier."

The captain, a little abashed, answered in a gentler tone, "We thought, holy father, that the heathens had done their worst and that Almighty God had already given you the martyr's crown."

By this time the boat had emerged from the darkness. In the stern sheets an old man was lying, his white hair and beard stained with blood, his Dominican's robe torn and fouled with dust. At the sight of him, the captain pulled off his cap and dropped upon his knees.

"Give us your blessing, holy father," he begged.

The old man raised his hand and wished him peace.

They lifted him on board and, at his own desire, laid him upon the bier which had been prepared for his dead body. "It would be a waste of trouble," he said, "to put me anywhere else, seeing I shall in any case be lying there so soon."

So there he lay, very still under the four candles. One might have taken him for dead already, but that his eyes, when he opened them, shone so brightly.

He dismissed from the poop everyone except the young Spaniard. "We are countrymen," he said, "and of noble blood, both of us. I would rather have you near me than anyone else."

The sailors knelt for a blessing and disappeared; soon they could be heard weighing the anchor; it was safest to be off before day. Like mourners at either side of the lighted bier crouched the Spaniard and his mistress. The body of the old man, who was not yet dead, lay quiet under the candles. The martyr was silent for some time, but at last he opened his eyes and looked at the young man and the woman.

"I too," he said, "was in love, once. In this year falls the jubilee of my last earthly passion; fifty years have run since last I longed after the flesh—fifty years since God opened my eyes to the hideousness of the corruption that man has brought upon himself.

"You are young, and your bodies are clean and straight, with no blotch or ulcer or leprous taint to mar their much-desired beauty; but because of your outward pride, your souls, it may be, fester inwardly the more.

LIMBO

“And yet God made all perfect; it is but accident and the evil of will that causes defaults. All metals should be gold, were it not that their elements willed evilly in their desire to combine. And so with men: the burning sulphur of passion, the salt of wisdom, the nimble mercurial soul should come together to make a golden being, incorruptible and rustless. But the elements mingle jarringly, not in a pure harmony of love, and gold is rare, while lead and iron and poisonous brass that leaves a taste as of remorse behind it are everywhere common.

“God opened my eyes to it before my youth had too utterly wasted itself to rottenness. It was half a hundred years ago, but I see her still, my Ambrosia, with her white, sad face and her naked body and that monstrous ill eating away at her breast.

“I have lived since then trying to amend the evil, trying to restore, as far as my poor powers would go, some measure of original perfection to the corrupted world. I have striven to give to all metals their true nature, to make true gold from the false, the unreal, the accidental metals, lead and copper and tin and iron. And I have essayed that more difficult alchemy, the transformation of men. I die now in my effort to purge away that most foul dross of misbelief from the souls of these heathen men. Have I achieved anything? I know not.”

The galley was moving now, its head turned seaward. The candles shivered in the wind of its speed, casting uncertain, changing shadows upon his face. There was a long silence on the poop. The oars creaked and splashed. Sometimes a shout would come up from below, orders given by the overseer of the slaves, a curse, the sound of a blow. The old man spoke again, more weakly now, as though to himself.

“I have had eighty years of it,” he said—“eighty years in the midst of this corroding sea of hatred and strife. A man has need to keep pure and unalloyed his core of gold, that little centre of perfection with which all, even in this declination of time, are born. All other metal, though it be as tough as steel, as shining-hard as brass, will melt before the devouring bitterness of life. Hatred, lust, anger—the vile passions will corrode your will of iron, the warlike pomp of your front of brass. It needs the golden perfection of pure love and pure knowledge to withstand them.

“God has willed that I should be the stone—weak, indeed, in virtue—that has touched and transformed at least a little of baser metal into the gold that is above corruption. But it is hard work—thankless work. Man has made a hell of his world, and has set up gods of pain to rule it. Goatish gods, that revel and feast on the agony of it all, poring over the tortured world, like those hateful lovers, whose lust burns darkly into cruelty.

“Fever goads us through life in a delirium of madness. Thirsting for the swamps of evil whence the fever came, thirsting for the mi-

LIMBO

rages of his own delirium, man rushes headlong he knows not whither. And all the time a devouring cancer gnaws at his entrails. It will kill him in the end, when even the ghastly inspiration of fever will not be enough to whip him on. He will lie there, cumbering the earth, a heap of rottenness and pain, until at last the cleansing fire comes to sweep the horror away.

“Fever and cancer; acids that burn and corrode. . . . I have had eighty years of it. Thank God, it is the end.”

It was already dawn; the candles were hardly visible now in the light, faded to nothing, like souls in prosperity. In a little while the old man was asleep.

The captain tiptoed up on to the poop and drew the young Spaniard aside for a confidential talk.

“Do you think he will die to-day?” he asked.

The young man nodded.

“God rest his soul,” said the captain piously. “But do you think it would be best to take his body to Minorca or to Genoa? At Minorca they would give much to have their own patron martyr. At the same time it would add to the glory of Genoa to possess so holy a relic, though he is in no way connected with the place. It’s there is my difficulty. Suppose, you see, that my people of Genoa did not want the body, he being from Minorca and not one of them. I should look a fool then, bringing it in in state. Oh, it’s hard, it’s hard. There’s so much to think about. I am not sure but what I hadn’t better put in at Minorca first. What do you think?”

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders. “I have no advice to offer.”

“Lord,” said the captain as he bustled away, “life is a tangled knot to unravel.”

PRINTED BY MORRISON AND GIBB LTD., EDINBURGH