Sharp Ink

D. H. LAWRENCE

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PART ONE

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Chapter 1
The People of Nethermere

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I stood watching the shadowy fish slide through the gloom of the millpond. They were grey, descendants of the silvery things that had darted away from the monks, in the young days when the valley was lusty. The whole place was gathered in the musing of old age. The thick-piled trees on the far shore were too dark and sober to dally with the sun; the weeds stood crowded and motionless. Not even a little wind flickered the willows of the islets. The water lay softly, intensely still. Only the thin stream falling through the millrace murmured to itself of the tumult of life which had once quickened the valley.

I was almost startled into the water from my perch on the alder roots by a voice saying:

“Well, what is there to look at?” My friend was a young farmer, stoutly built, brown-eyed, with a naturally fair skin burned dark and freckled in patches. He laughed, seeing me start, and looked down at me with lazy curiosity.

“I was thinking the place seemed old, brooding over its past.” He looked at me with a lazy indulgent smile, and lay down on his back on the bank, saying:

“It’s all right for a doss — here.”

“Your life is nothing else but a doss. I shall laugh when somebody jerks you awake,” I replied.

He smiled comfortably and put his hands over his eyes because of the light.

“Why shall you laugh?” he drawled.

“Because you’ll be amusing,” said I.

We were silent for a long time, when he rolled over and began to poke with his finger in the bank.

“I thought,” he said in his leisurely fashion, “there was some cause for all this buzzing.”

I looked, and saw that he had poked out an old, papery nest of those pretty field bees which seem to have dipped their tails into bright amber dust. Some agitated insects ran round the cluster of eggs, most of which were empty now, the crowns gone; a few young bees staggered about in uncertain flight before they could gather power to wing away in a strong course. He watched the little ones that ran in and out among the shadows of the grass, hither and thither in consternation.

“Come here — come here!” he said, imprisoning one poor little bee under a grass stalk, while with another stalk he loosened the folded blue wings.

“Don’t tease the little beggar,” I said.

“It doesn’t hurt him — I wanted to see if it was because he couldn’t spread his wings that he couldn’t fly. There he goes — no, he doesn’t. Let’s try another.”

“Leave them alone,” said I. “Let them run in the sun. They’re only just out of the shells. Don’t torment them into flight.”

He persisted, however, and broke the wing of the next.

“Oh, dear — pity!” said he, and he crushed the little thing between his fingers. Then he examined the eggs, and pulled out some silk from round the dead larva, and investigated it all in a desultory manner, asking of me all I knew about the insects. When he had finished he flung the clustered eggs into the water and rose, pulling out his watch from the depth of his breeches’ pocket.

“It thought it was about dinner-time,” said he, smiling at me.

“I always know when it’s about twelve. Are you coming in?”

“I’m coming down at any rate,” said I as we passed along the pond bank, and over the plank bridge that crossed the brow of the falling sluice. The bankside where the grey

orchard twisted its trees, was a steep declivity, long and sharp, dropping down to the garden.

The stones of the large house were burdened with ivy and honeysuckle, and the great lilac bush that had once guarded the porch now almost blocked the doorway. We passed out of the front garden into the farmyard, and walked along the brick path to the back door.

“Shut the gate, will you?” he said to me over his shoulder, as he passed on first.

We went through the large scullery into the kitchen. The servant-girl was just hurriedly snatching the table-cloth out of the table drawer, and his mother, a quaint little woman with big, brown eyes, was hovering round the wide fireplace with a fork.

“Dinner not ready?” said he with a shade of resentment.

“No, George,” replied his mother apologetically, “it isn’t. The fire wouldn’t burn a bit. You shall have it in a few minutes, though.”

He dropped on the sofa and began to read a novel. I wanted to go, but his mother insisted on my staying.

“Don’t go,” she pleaded. “Emily will be so glad if you stay — and father will, I’m sure. Sit down, now.”

I sat down on a rush chair by the long window that looked out into the yard. As he was reading, and as it took all his mother’s powers to watch the potatoes boil and the meat roast, I was left to my thoughts. George, indifferent to all claims, continued to read. It was very annoying to watch him pulling his brown moustache, and reading indolently while the dog rubbed against his leggings and against the knee of his old riding-breeches. He would not even be at the trouble to play with Trip’s ears, he was so content with his novel and his moustache. Round and round twirled his thick fingers, and the muscles of his bare arm moved slightly under the red-brown skin. The little square window above him filtered a green light from the foliage of the great horse-chestnut outside and the glimmer fell on his dark hair, and

trembled across the plates which Annie was reaching down from the rack, and across the face of the tall clock. The kitchen was very big; the table looked lonely, and the chairs mourned darkly for the lost companionship of the sofa; the chimney was a black cavern away at the back, and the inglenook seats shut in another little compartment ruddy with firelight, where the mother hovered. It was rather a desolate kitchen, such a bare expanse of uneven grey flagstones, such far-away dark corners and sober furniture. The only gay things were the chintz coverings of the sofa and the arm-chair cushions, bright red in the bare sombre room; some might smile at the old clock, adorned as it was with remarkable and vivid poultry; in me it only provoked wonder and contemplation.

In a little while we heard the scraping of heavy boots outside, and the father entered. He was a big burly farmer, with his half-bald head sprinkled with crisp little curls.

“Hullo, Cyril,” he said cheerfully. “You’ve not forsaken us then,” and turning to his son:

“Have you many more rows in the coppice close?”

“Finished!” replied George, continuing to read.

“That’s all right — you’ve got on with ’em. The rabbits has bitten them turnips down, Mother.”

“I expect so,” replied his wife, whose soul was in the saucepans. At last she deemed the potatoes cooked and went out with the steaming pan.

The dinner was set on the table and the father began to carve. George looked over his book to survey the fare, then read until his plate was handed him. The maid sat at her little table near the window, and we began the meal. There came the treading of four feet along the brick path, and a little girl entered, followed by her grown-up sister. The child’s long brown hair was tossed wildly back beneath her sailor hat. She flung aside this article of her attire and sat down to dinner, talking endlessly to her mother. The elder sister, a girl of about twenty-one, gave me a smile and a

bright look from her brown eyes, and went to wash her hands. Then she came and sat down, and looked disconsolately at the underdone beef on her plate.

“I do hate this raw meat,” she said.

“Good for you,” replied her brother, who was eating industriously. “Give you some muscle to wallop the nippers.” She pushed it aside, and began to eat the vegetables. Her brother re-charged his plate and continued to eat.

“Well, our George, I do think you might pass a body that gravy,” said Mollie, the younger sister, in injured tones.

“Certainly,” he replied. “Won’t you have the joint as well?”

“No!” retorted the young lady of twelve, “I don’t expect you’ve done with it yet.”

“Clever!” he exclaimed across a mouthful.

“Do you think so?” said the elder sister, Emily, sarcastically.

“Yes,” he replied complacently, “you’ve made her as sharp as yourself, I see, since you’ve had her in Standard Six. I’ll try a potato, Mother, if you can find one that’s done.”

“Well, George, they seem mixed, I’m sure that was done that I tried. There — they are mixed — look at this one, it’s soft enough. I’m sure they were boiling long enough.”

“Don’t explain and apologise to him,” said Emily irritably. “Perhaps the kids were too much for her this morning,” he said calmly, to nobody in particular.

“No,” chimed in Mollie, “she knocked a lad across his nose and made it bleed.”

“Little wretch,” said Emily, swallowing with difficulty. “I’m glad I did! Some of my lads belong to — to —”

“To the devil,” suggested George, but she would not accept it from him.

Her father sat laughing; her mother, with distress in her eyes, looked at her daughter, who hung her head and made patterns on the table-cloth with her finger.

“Are they worse than the last lot?” asked the mother, softly, fearfully.

“No — nothing extra,” was the curt answer.

“She merely felt like bashing ’em,” said George, calling, as he looked at the sugar-bowl and at his pudding:

“Fetch some more sugar, Annie.”

The maid rose from her little table in the corner, and the mother also hurried to the cupboard. Emily trifled with her dinner and said bitterly to him:

“I only wish you had a taste of teaching, it would cure your self-satisfaction.”

“Pf!” he replied contemptuously, “I could easily bleed the noses of a handful of kids.”

“You wouldn’t sit there bleating like a fatted calf,” she continued.

This speech so tickled Mollie that she went off into a burst of laughter, much to the terror of her mother, who stood up in trembling apprehension lest she should choke.

“You made a joke, Emily,” he said, looking at his younger sister’s contortions.

Emily was too impatient to speak to him further, and left the table. Soon the two men went back to the fallow to the turnips, and I walked along the path with the girls as they were going to school.

“He irritates me in everything he does and says,” burst out Emily with much heat.

“He’s a pig sometimes,” said I.

“He is!” she insisted. “He irritates me past bearing, with his grand know-all way, and his heavy smartness — I can’t bear it. And the way Mother humbles herself to him —!”

“It makes you wild,” said I.

“Wild!” she echoed, her voice vibrating with nervous passion. We walked on in silence, till she asked:

“Have you brought me those verses of yours?”

“No — I’m so sorry — I’ve forgotten them again. As a matter of fact, I’ve sent them away.”

“But you promised me.”

“You know what my promises are. I’m as irresponsible as a puff of wind.”

She frowned with impatience and her disappointment was greater than necessary. When I left her at the corner of the lane I felt a string of her deep reproach in my mind. I always felt the reproach when she had gone.

I ran over the little bright brook that came from the weedy, bottom pond. The stepping-stones were white in the sun, and the water slid sleepily among them. One or two butterflies, indistinguishable against the blue sky, trifled from flower to flower and led me up the hill, across the field where the hot sunshine stood as in a bowl, and I was entering the caverns of the wood, where the oaks bowed over and saved us a grateful shade. Within, everything was so still and cool that my steps hung heavily along the path. The bracken held out arms to me, and the bosom of the wood was full of sweetness, but I journeyed on, spurred by the attacks of an army of flies which kept up a guerrilla warfare round my head till I had passed the black rhododendron bushes in the garden, where they left me, scenting no doubt Rebecca’s pots of vinegar and sugar.

The low red house, with it roof discoloured and sunken, dozed in sunlight, and slept profoundly in the shade thrown by the massive maples encroaching from the wood.

There was no one in the dining-room, but I could hear the whirr of a sewing-machine coming from the little study, a sound as of some great, vindictive insect buzzing about, now louder, now softer, now settling. Then came a jingling of four or five keys at the bottom of the keyboard of the drawing-room piano, continuing till the whole range had been covered in little leaps, as if some very fat frog had jumped from end to end.

“That must be mother dusting the drawing-room,” I thought. The unaccustomed sound of the old piano startled me. The vocal chords behind the green-silk bosom — you

only discovered it was not a bronze-silk bosom by poking a fold aside — had become as thin and tuneless as a dried old woman's. Age had yellowed the teeth of my mother's little piano, and shrunken its spindle legs. Poor old thing, it could but screech in answer to Lettie's fingers flying across it in scorn, so the prim, brown lips were always closed save to admit the duster.

Now, however, the little old-maidish piano began to sing a tinkling Victorian melody, and I fancied it must be some demure little woman, with curls like bunches of hops on either side of her face, who was touching it. The coy little tune teased me with old sensations, but my memory would give me no assistance. As I stood trying to fix my vague feelings, Rebecca came in to remove the cloth from the table.

"Who is playing, Beck?" I asked.

"Your mother, Cyril."

"But she never plays. I thought she couldn't."

"Ah," replied Rebecca, "you forget when you was a little thing sitting playing against her frock with the prayer-book, and she singing to you. You can't remember her when her curls was long like a piece of brown silk. You can't remember her when she used to play and sing, before Lettie came and your father was —"

Rebecca turned and left the room. I went and peeped in the drawing-room. Mother sat before the little brown piano, with her plump, rather stiff fingers moving across the keys, a faint smile on her lips. At that moment Lettie came flying past me, and flung her arms round mother's neck, kissing her and saying:

"Oh, my Dear, fancy my Dear playing the piano! Oh, Little Woman, we never knew you could!"

"Nor can I," replied Mother laughing, disengaging herself. "I only wondered if I could just strum out this old tune; I learned it when I was quite a girl, on this piano. It was a cracked one then; the only one I had."

“But play again, dearie, do play again. It was like the clinking of lustre glasses, and you look so quaint at the piano. Do play, my dear!” pleaded Lettie.

“Nay,” said my mother, “the touch of the old keys on my fingers is making me sentimental — you wouldn’t like to see me reduced to the tears of old age?”

“Old age!” scolded Lettie, kissing her again. “You are young enough to play little romances. Tell us about it, Mother.”

“About what, child?”

“When you used to play.”

“Before my fingers were stiff with fifty-odd years? Where have you been, Cyril, that you weren’t in to dinner?”

“Only down to Strelley Mill,” said I.

“Of course,” said Mother coldly.

“Why ‘of course’?” I asked.

“And you came away as soon as Em went to school?” said Lettie.

“I did,” said I.

They were cross with me, these two women. After I had swallowed my little resentment I said:

“They would have me stay to dinner.”

My mother vouchsafed no reply.

“And has the great George found a girl yet?” asked Lettie. “No,” I replied, “he never will at this rate. Nobody will ever be good enough for him.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you can find in any of them to take you there so much,” said my mother.

“Don’t be so mean, Mater,” I answered, nettled. “You know I like them.”

“I know you like her,” said my mother sarcastically. “As for him — he’s an unlicked cub. What can you expect when his mother has spoiled him as she has. But I wonder you are so interested in licking him.” My mother sniffed contemptuously.

“He is rather good-looking,” said Lettie with a smile.

“You could make a man of him, I am sure,” I said, bowing satirically to her.

“I am not interested,” she replied, also satirical.

Then she tossed her head, and all the fine hairs that were free from bonds made a mist of yellow light in the sun. “What frock shall I wear, Mater?” she asked.

“Nay, don’t ask me,” replied her mother.

“I think I’ll wear the heliotrope — though this sun will fade it,” she said pensively. She was tall, nearly six feet in height, but slenderly formed. Her hair was yellow, tending towards a dun brown. She had beautiful eyes and brows, but not a nice nose. Her hands were very beautiful.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

She did not answer me.

“To Tempest’s!” I said. She did not reply.

“Well, I don’t know what you can see in him,” I continued. “Indeed!” said she. “He’s as good as most folk —” then we both began to laugh.

“Not,” she continued blushing, “that I think anything about him. I’m merely going for a game of tennis. Are you coming?”

“What shall you say if I agree?” I asked.

“Oh!” she tossed her head. “We shall all be very pleased I’m sure.”

“Ooray!” said I with fine irony.

She laughed at me, blushed, and ran upstairs.

Half an hour afterwards she popped her head in the study to bid me good-bye, wishing to see if I appreciated her. She was so charming in her fresh linen frock and flowered hat, that I could not but be proud of her. She expected me to follow her to the window, for from between the great purple rhododendrons she waved me a lace mitten, then glinted on like a flower moving brightly through the green hazels. Her path lay through the wood in the opposite direction from Strelley Mill, down the red drive across the tree-scattered space to the highroad. This road

ran along the end of our lakelet, Nethermere, for about a quarter of a mile. Nethermere is the lowest in a chain of three ponds. The other two are the upper and lower millponds at Strelley; this is the largest and most charming piece of water, a mile long and about a quarter of a mile in width. Our wood runs down to the water's edge. On the opposite side, on a hill beyond the farthest corner of the lake, stands Highclose. It looks across the water at us in Woodside with one eye as it were, while our cottage casts a sidelong glance back again at the proud house, and peeps coyly through the trees.

I could see Lettie like a distant sail stealing along the water's edge, her parasol flowing above. She turned through the wicket under the pine clump, climbed the steep field, and was enfolded again in the trees beside Highclose.

Leslie was sprawled on a camp-chair, under a copper beech on the lawn, his cigar glowing. He watched the ash grow strange and grey in the warm daylight, and he felt sorry for poor Nell Wycherley, whom he had driven that morning to the station, for would she not be frightfully cut up as the train whirled her farther and farther away? These girls are so daft with a fellow! But she was a nice little thing — he'd get Marie to write to her.

At this point he caught sight of a parasol fluttering along the drive, and immediately he fell in a deep sleep, with just a tiny slit in his slumber to allow him to see Lettie approach. She, finding her watchman ungallantly asleep, and his cigar, instead of his lamp, untrimmed, broke off a twig of syringa whose ivory buds had not yet burst with luscious scent. I know not how the end of his nose tickled in anticipation before she tickled him in reality, but he kept bravely still until the petals swept him. Then, starting from his sleep, he exclaimed:

"Lettie! I was dreaming of kisses!"

"On the bridge of your nose?" laughed she —"But whose were the kisses?"

“Who produced the sensation?” he smiled.

“Since I only tapped your nose you should dream of —”

“Go on!” said he, expectantly.

“Of Doctor Slop,” she replied, smiling to herself as she closed her parasol.

“I do not know the gentleman,” he said, afraid that she was laughing at him.

“No — your nose is quite classic,” she answered, giving him one of those brief intimate glances with which women flatter men so cleverly. He radiated with pleasure.

Chapter 2
Dangling the Apple

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The long-drawn booming of the wind in the wood, and the sobbing and moaning in the maples and oaks near the house, had made Lettie restless. She did not want to go anywhere, she did not want to do anything, so she insisted on my just going out with her as far as the edge of the water. We crossed the tangle of fern and bracken, bramble and wild-raspberry canes that spread in the open space before the house, and we went down the grassy slope to the edge of Nethermere. The wind whipped up noisy little wavelets, and the cluck and clatter of these among the pebbles, the swish of the rushes and the freshening of the breeze against our faces, roused us.

The tall meadow-sweet was in bud along the tiny beach and we walked knee-deep among it, watching the foamy race of the ripples and the whitening of the willows on the far shore. At the place where Nethermere narrows to the upper end, and receives the brook from Strelley, the wood sweeps down and stands with its feet washed round with waters. We broke our way along the shore, crushing the sharp-scented wild mint, whose odour checks the breath, and examining here and there among the marshy places ragged nests of water-fowl, now deserted. Some slim young lapwings started at our approach, and sped lightly from us, their necks outstretched in straining fear of that which could not hurt them. One, two, fled cheeping into cover of the wood; almost instantly they coursed back again to where we stood, to dart off from us at an angle, in an ecstasy of bewilderment and terror.

“What had frightened the crazy little things?” asked Lettie.

“I don’t know. They’ve cheek enough sometimes; then they go whining, skelping off from a fancy as if they had a snake under their wings.”

Lettie, however, paid small attention to my eloquence. She pushed aside an elder bush, which graciously showered down upon her myriad crumbs from its flowers like slices of bread, and bathed her in a medicinal scent. I followed her, taking my dose, and was startled to hear her sudden, “Oh, Cyril!”

On the bank before us lay a black cat, both hind paws torn and bloody in a trap. It had no doubt been bounding forward after its prey when it was caught. It was gaunt and wild; no wonder it frightened the poor lapwings into cheeping hysteria. It glared at us fiercely, growling low.

“How cruel — oh, how cruel!” cried Lettie, shuddering.

I wrapped my cap and Lettie’s scarf over my hands and bent to open the trap. The cat struck with her teeth, tearing the cloth convulsively. When it was free, it sprang away with one bound, and fell panting, watching us.

I wrapped the creature in my jacket, and picked her up, murmuring:

“Poor Mrs Nickie Ben — we always prophesied it of you.”

“What will you do with it?” asked Lettie.

“It is one of the Strelley Mill cats,” said I, “and so I’ll take her home.”

The poor animal moved and murmured and I carried her, but we brought her home. They stared, on seeing me enter the kitchen coatless, carrying a strange bundle, while Lettie followed me.

“I have brought poor Mrs Nickie Ben,” said I, unfolding my burden.

“Oh, what a shame!” cried Emily, putting out her hand to touch the cat, but drawing quickly back, like the peewits. “This is how they all go,” said the mother.

“I wish keepers had to sit two or three days with their bare ankles in a trap,” said Mollie in vindictive tones.

We laid the poor brute on the rug, and gave it warm milk. It drank very little, being too feeble. Mollie, full of anger, fetched Mr Nickie Ben, another fine black cat, to survey his crippled mate. Mr Nickie Ben looked, shrugged his sleek shoulders, and walked away with high steps. There was a general feminine outcry on masculine callousness.

George came in for hot water. He exclaimed in surprise on seeing us, and his eyes became animated.

“Look at Mrs Nickie Ben,” cried Mollie. He dropped on his knees on the rug and lifted the wounded paws.

“Broken,” said he.

“How awful!” said Emily, shuddering violently, and leaving the room.

“Both?” I asked.

“Only one — look!”

“You are hurting her!” cried Lettie.

“It’s no good,” said he.

Mollie and the mother hurried out of the kitchen into the parlour.

“What are you going to do?” asked Lettie.

“Put her out of her misery,” he replied, taking up the poor cat. We followed him into the barn.

“The quickest way,” said he, “is to swing her round and knock her head against the wall.”

“You make me sick,” exclaimed Lettie.

“I’ll drown her then,” he said with a smile. We watched him morbidly, as he took a length of twine and fastened a noose round the animal’s neck, and near it an iron goose; he kept a long piece of cord attached to the goose.

“You’re not coming, are you?” said he. Lettie looked at him; she had grown rather white.

“It’ll make you sick,” he said. She did not answer, but followed him across the yard to the garden. On the bank of the lower millpond he turned again to us and said:

“Now for it! — you are chief mourners.” As neither of us replied, he smiled, and dropped the poor writhing cat into the water, saying, “Good-bye, Mrs Nickie Ben.”

We waited on the bank some time. He eyed us curiously. “Cyril,” said Lettie quietly, “isn’t it cruel? — isn’t it awful?” I had nothing to say.

“Do you mean me?” asked George.

“Not you in particular — everything! If we move the blood rises in our heel-prints.”

He looked at her seriously, with dark eyes.

“I had to drown her out of mercy,” said he, fastening the cord he held to an ash-pole. Then he went to get a spade, and with it, he dug a grave in the old black earth.

“If,” said he, “the poor old cat had made a prettier corpse, you’d have thrown violets on her.”

He had struck the spade into the ground, and hauled pup the iron goose.

“Well,” he said, surveying the hideous object, “haven’t her good looks gone! She was a fine cat.”

“Bury it and have done,” Lettie replied.

He did so asking: “Shall you have bad dreams after it?”

“Dreams do not trouble me,” she answered, turning away.

We went indoors, into the parlour, where Emily sat by a window, biting her finger. The room was long and not very high; there was a great rough beam across the ceiling. On the mantelpiece, and in the fireplace, and over the piano were wild flowers and fresh leaves plentifully scattered; the room was cool with the scent of the woods.

“Has he done it?” asked Emily —“and did you watch him? If I had seen it I should have hated the sight of him, and I’d rather have touched a maggot than him.”

“I shouldn’t be particularly pleased if he touched me,” said Lettie.

“There is something so loathsome about callousness and brutality,” said Emily. “He fills me with disgust.”

“Does he?” said Lettie, smiling coldly. She went across to the old piano. “He’s only healthy. He’s never been sick, not anyway, yet.” She sat down and played at random, letting the numbed notes fall like dead leaves from the haughty, ancient piano.

Emily and I talked oh by the widow, about books and people. She was intensely serious, and generally succeeded in reducing me to the same state.

After a while, when the milking and feeding were finished, George came in. Lettie was still playing the piano. He asked her why she didn’t play something with a tune in it, and this caused her to turn round in her chair to give him a withering answer. His appearance, however, scattered her words like startled birds. He had come straight from washing in the scullery, to the parlour, and he stood behind Lettie’s chair, unconcernedly wiping the moisture from his arms. His sleeves were rolled up to the shoulder, and his shirt was opened wide at the breast. Lettie was somewhat taken aback by the sight of him standing with legs apart, dressed in dirty leggings and boots, and breeches torn at the knee, naked at the breast and arms.

“Why don’t you play something with a tune in it?” he repeated, rubbing the towel over his shoulders beneath the shirt.

“A tune!” she echoed, watching the swelling of his arms as he moved them, and the rise and fall of his breasts, wonderfully solid and white. Then having curiously examined the sudden meeting of the sun-hot skin with the white flesh in his throat, her eyes met his, and she turned again to the piano, while the colour grew in her ears, mercifully sheltered by a profusion of bright curls.

“What shall I play?” she asked, fingering the keys somewhat confusedly.

He dragged out a book of songs from a little heap of music, and set it before her.

“Which do you want to sing?” she asked, thrilling a little as she felt his arms so near her.

“Anything you like.”

“A love song?” she said.

“If you like — yes, a love song —” he laughed with clumsy insinuation that made the girl writhe.

She did not answer, but began to play Sullivan’s “Tit Willow”. He had a passable bass voice, not of any great depth, and he sang with gusto. Then she gave him “Drink to me only with thine eyes”. At the end she turned and asked him if he liked the words. He replied that he thought them rather daft. But he looked at her with glowing brown eyes, as if in hesitating challenge.

“That’s because you have no wine in your eyes to pledge with,” she replied, answering his challenge with a blue blaze of her eyes. Then her eyelashes drooped on to her cheek. He laughed with a faint ring of consciousness, and asked her how could she know.

“Because,” she said slowly, looking up at him with pretended scorn, “because there’s no change in your eyes when I look at you. I always think people who are worth much talk with their eyes. That’s why you are forced to respect many quite uneducated people. Their eyes are so eloquent, and full of knowledge.” She had continued to look at him as she spoke — watching his faint appreciation of her upturned face, and her hair, where the light was always tangled, watching his brief self-examination to see if he could feel any truth in her words, watching till he broke into a little laugh which was rather more awkward and less satisfied than usual. Then she turned away, smiling also.

“There’s nothing in this book nice to sing,” she said, turning over the leaves discontentedly. I found her a volume, and she sang “Should he upbraid”. She had a fine soprano voice, and the song delighted him. He moved nearer to her, and when at the finish she looked round with

a flashing, mischievous air, she found him pledging her with wonderful eyes.

“You like that,” said she with the air of superior knowledge, as if, dear me, all one had to do was to turn over to the right page of the vast volume of one’s soul to suit these people.

“I do,” he answered emphatically, thus acknowledging her triumph.

“I’d rather ‘dance and sing’ round ‘wrinkled care’ than carefully shut the door on him, while I slept in the chimney-seat wouldn’t you?” she asked.

He laughed, and began to consider what she meant before he replied.

“As you do,” she added.

“What?” he asked.

“Keep half your senses asleep — half alive.”

“Do I?” he asked.

“Of course you do; —‘bos bovis; an ox.’ You are like a stalled ox, food and comfort, no more. Don’t you love comfort?” she smiled.

“Don’t you?” he replied, smiling shamefaced.

“Of course. Come and turn over for me while I play this piece. Well, I’ll nod when you must turn — bring a chair.” She began to play a romance of Schubert’s. He leaned nearer to her to take hold of the leaf of music; she felt her loose hair touch his face, and turned to him a quick, laughing glance, while she played. At the end of the page she nodded, but he was oblivious; “Yes!” she said, suddenly impatient, and he tried to get the leaf over; she quickly pushed his hand aside, turned the page herself and continued playing.

“Sorry!” said he, blushing actually.

“Don’t bother,” she said, continuing to play without observing him. When she had finished:

“There!” she said, “now tell me how you felt while I was playing.”

“Oh — a fool!”— he replied, covered with confusion.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said —“but I didn’t mean that. I meant how did the music make you feel?”

“I don’t know — whether — it made me feel anything,” he replied deliberately, pondering over his answer, as usual.

“I tell you,” she declared, “you’re either asleep or stupid. Did you really see nothing in the music? But what did you think about?”

He laughed — and thought awhile — and laughed again.

“Why!” he admitted, laughing, and trying to tell the exact truth, “I thought how pretty your hands are — and what they are like to touch — and I thought it was a new experience to feel somebody’s hair tickling my cheek.” When he had finished his deliberate account she gave his hand a little knock, and left him saying:

“You are worse and worse.”

She came across the room to the couch where I was sitting talking to Emily, and put her arm around my neck.

“Isn’t it time to go home, Pat?” she asked.

“Half-past eight — quite early,” said I.

“But I believe — I think I ought to be home now,” she said. “Don’t go,” said he.

“Why?” I asked.

“Stay to supper,” urged Emily.

“But I believe —” she hesitated.

“She has another fish to fry,” I said.

“I am not sure —” she hesitated again. Then she flashed into sudden wrath, exclaiming, “Don’t be so mean and nasty, Cyril!”

“Were you going somewhere?” asked George humbly. “Why — no!” she said, blushing.

“Then stay to supper — will you?” he begged. She laughed, and yielded. We went into the kitchen. Mr. Saxton was sitting reading. Trip, the big bull terrier, lay at his feet pretending to sleep; Mr Nickie Ben reposed calmly on the sofa; Mrs Saxton and Mollie were just going to bed. We bade

them good night, and sat down. Annie, the servant, had gone home, so Emily prepared the supper.

“Nobody can touch that piano like you,” said Mr Saxton to Lettie, beaming upon her with admiration and deference. He was proud of the stately, mumbling old thing, and used to say that it was full of music for those that liked to ask for it. Lettie laughed, and said that so few folks ever tried it, that her honour was not great.

“What do you think of our George’s singing?” asked the father proudly, but with a deprecating laugh at the end.

“I tell him, when he’s in love he’ll sing quite well,” she said.

“When he’s in love!” echoed the father, laughing aloud, very pleased.

“Yes,” she said, “when he finds out something he wants and can’t have.”

George thought about it, and he laughed also.

Emily, who was laying the table, said, “There is hardly any water in the pippin, George.”

“Oh, dash!” he exclaimed, “I’ve taken my boots off.”

“It’s not a very big job to put them on again,” said his sister. “Why couldn’t Annie fetch it — what’s she here for?” he said angrily.

Emily looked at us, tossed her head, and turned her back on him.

“I’ll go, I’ll go, after supper,” said the father in a comforting tone.

“After supper!” laughed Emily.

George got up and shuffled out. He had to go into the spinney near the house to a well, and being warm disliked turning out.

We had just sat down to supper when Trip rushed barking to the door. “Be quiet,” ordered the father, thinking of those in bed, and he followed the dog.

It was Leslie. He wanted Lettie to go home with him at once. This she refused to do, so he came indoors, and was

persuaded to sit down at table. He swallowed a morsel of bread and cheese, and a cup of coffee, talking to Lettie of a garden party which was going to be arranged at Highclose for the following week.

“What is it for then?” interrupted Mr Saxton.

“For?” echoed Leslie.

“Is it for the missionaries, or the unemployed, or something?” explained Mr Saxton.

“It’s a garden-party, not a bazaar,” said Leslie.

“Oh — a private affair. I thought it would be some church matter of your mother’s. She’s very big at the church, isn’t she?”

“She is interested in the church — yes!” said Leslie, then proceeding to explain to Lettie that he was arranging a tennis tournament in which she was to take part. At this point he became aware that he was monopolising the conversation, and turned to George, just as the latter was taking a piece of cheese from his knife with his teeth, asking:

“Do you play tennis, Mr Saxton? — I know Miss Saxton does not.”

“No,” said George, working the piece of cheese into his cheek. “I never learned any ladies’ accomplishments.”

Leslie turned to Emily, who had nervously been pushing two plates over a stain in the cloth, and who was very startled when she found herself addressed.

“My mother would be so glad if you would come to the party, Miss Saxton.”

“I cannot. I shall be at school. Thanks very much.”

“Ah — it’s very good of you,” said the father, beaming. But George smiled contemptuously.

When supper was over Leslie looked at Lettie to inform her that he was ready to go. She, however, refused to see his look, but talked brightly to Mr Saxton, who was delighted. George, flattered, joined in the talk with gusto.

Then Leslie's angry silence began to tell on us all. After a dull lapse, George lifted his head and said to his father:

"Oh, I shouldn't be surprised if that little red heifer calved tonight."

Lettie's eyes flashed with a sparkle of amusement at this thrust.

"No," assented the father, "I thought so myself."

After a moment's silence, George continued deliberately, "I felt her gristles —"

"George!" said Emily sharply.

"We will go," said Leslie.

George looked up sideways at Lettie and his black eyes were full of sardonic mischief.

"Lend me a shawl, will you, Emily?" said Lettie. "I brought nothing, and I think the wind is cold."

Emily, however, regretted that she had no shawl, and so Lettie must needs wear a black coat over her summer dress. It fitted so absurdly that we all laughed, but Leslie was very angry that she should appear ludicrous before them. He showed her all the polite attentions possible, fastened the neck of her coat with his pearl scarf-pin, refusing the pin Emily discovered, after some search. Then we sallied forth.

When we were outside, he offered Lettie his arm with an air of injured dignity. She refused it and he began to remonstrate. "I consider you ought to have been home as you promised."

"Pardon me." she replied, "but I did not promise."

"But you knew I was coming," said he.

"Well — you found me," she retorted.

"Yes," he assented. "I did find you; flirting with a common fellow," he sneered.

"Well," she returned. "He did — it is true — call a heifer, a heifer."

"And I should think you liked it," he said.

"I didn't mind," she said, with galling negligence.