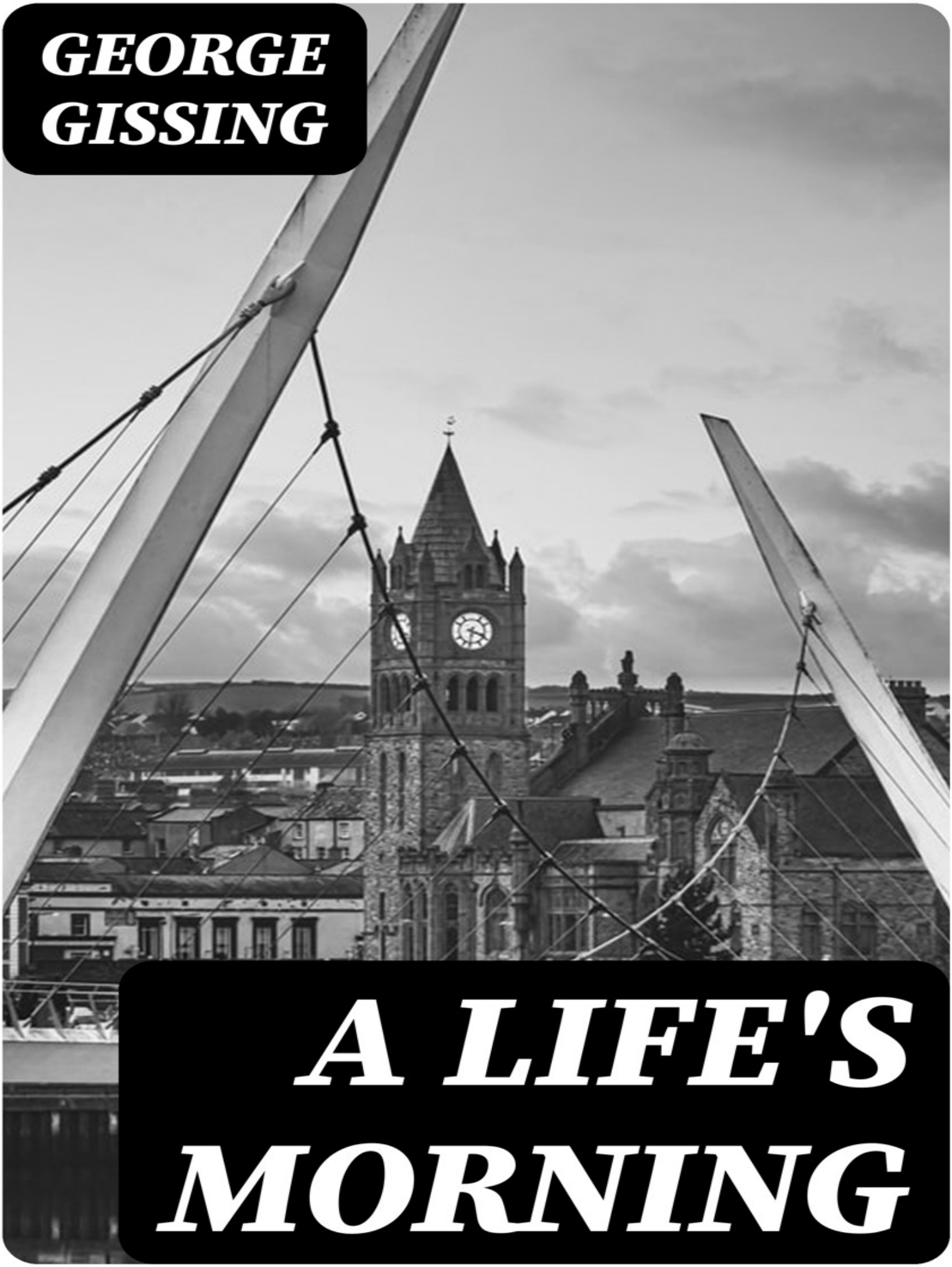
GEORGE GISSING



A LIFE'S MORNING

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CHAPTER I

AN UNDERGRADUATE AT LEISURE

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Wilfrid Athel went down invalided a few days after the beginning of Trinity term. The event was not unanticipated. At Christmas it had been clear enough that he was overtaxing himself; his father remarked on the fact with anxiety, and urged moderation, his own peculiar virtue. Wilfrid, whose battle with circumstances was all before him, declined to believe that the body was anything but the very humble servant of the will. So the body took its revenge.

He had been delicate in childhood, and the stage of hardy naturalism which interposes itself between tender juvenility and the birth of self-consciousness did not in his case last long enough to establish his frame in the vigour to which it was tending. There was nothing sickly about him; it was only an excess of nervous vitality that would not allow body to keep pace with mind. He was a boy to be, intellectually, held in leash, said the doctors. But that was easier said than done. What system of sedatives could one apply to a youngster whose imagination wrought him to a fever during a simple walk by the seashore, who if books were forcibly withheld consoled himself with the composition of five-act tragedies, interspersed with lyrics to which he supplied original strains? Mr. Athel conceived a theory that such exuberance of emotionality might be counterbalanced by studies of a strictly positive nature; a tutor was engaged to ground young Wilfrid in mathematics

and the physical sciences. The result was that the tutor's enthusiasm for these pursuits communicated itself after a brief repugnance to the versatile pupil; instincts of mastery became as vivid in the study of Euclid and the chemical elements as formerly in the humaner paths of learning; the plan had failed. In the upshot Wilfrid was sent to school; if that did not develop the animal in him, nothing would.

He was not quite three-and-twenty when the break-down removed him from Oxford. Going to Balliol with a scholarship, he had from the first been marked for great things, at all events by the measure of the schools. Removal from the system of home education had in truth seemed to answer in some degree the ends aimed at; the lad took his fair share of cricket and football, and kept clear of nervous crises. At the same time he made extraordinary progress with his books. He acquired with extreme facility, and his ambition never allowed him to find content in a second place; conquest became his habit; he grew to deem it the order of nature that Wilfrid Athel's name should come first in the list. Hence a reputation to support. During his early terms at Balliol he fagged as hard as the mere dullard whose dear life depended upon a first class and a subsequent tutorship. What he would make of himself in the end was uncertain; university distinctions would probably be of small moment to him as soon as they were achieved, for already he spent the greater portion of his strength in lines of study quite apart from the curriculum, and fate had blessed him with exemption from sordid cares. He led in a set devoted to what were called advanced ideas; without flattering himself that he was on the way to solve the

problem of the universe, he had satisfaction in reviewing the milestones which removed him from the unconscious man, and already clutched at a measure of positive wisdom in the suspicion that lie might shortly have to lay aside his school-books and recommence his education under other teachers. As yet he was whole-hearted in the pursuit of learning. The intellectual audacity which was wont to be the key-note of his conversation did not, as his detractors held, indicate mere bumptiousness and defect of self-measurement; it was simply the florid redundancy of a young mind which glories in its strength, and plays at victory in anticipation. It was true that he could not brook the semblance of inferiority; if it were only five minutes' chat in the Quad, he must come off with a phrase or an epigram; so those duller heads who called Athel affected were not wholly without their justification. Those who shrugged their shoulders with the remark that he was overdoing it, and would not last out to the end of the race, enjoyed a more indisputable triumph. One evening, when Athel was taking the brilliant lead in an argument on 'Fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute,' his brain began to whirl, tobacco-smoke seemed to have dulled all the lights before his eyes, and he fell from his chair in a fainting-fit.

He needed nothing but rest; that, however, was imperative. Mr. Athel brought him to London, and the family went down at once to their house in Surrey. Wilfrid was an only son and an only child. His father had been a widower for nearly ten years; for the last three his house had been directed by a widowed sister, Mrs. Rossall, who had twin girls. Mr. Athel found it no particular hardship to get away

from town and pursue his work at The Firs, a delightful house in the midst of Surrey's fairest scenery, nor would Mrs. Rossall allow that the surrender of high season cost her any effort. This lady had just completed her thirty-second year; her girls were in their tenth. She was comely and knew it, but a constitutional indolence had preserved her from becoming a woman of fashion, and had nurtured in her a reflective mood, which, if it led to no marked originality of thought, at all events contributed to an appearance of culture. At the time of her husband's death she was at the point where graceful inactivity so often degenerates into slovenliness. Mrs. Rossall's homekeeping tendencies and the growing childhood of her twins tended to persuade her that her youth was gone; even the new spring fashions stirred her to but languid interest, and her music, in which she had some attainments, was all but laid aside. With widowhood began a new phase of her life. Her mourning was unaffected; it led her to pietism; she spent her days in religious observance, and her nights in the study of the gravest literature. She would have entered the Roman Church but for her brother's interposition. The end of this third year of discipline was bringing about another change, perhaps less obvious to herself than to those who marked her course with interest, as several people did. Her reading became less ascetic, she passed to George Herbert and the 'Christian Year,' and by way of the decoration of altars proceeded to thought for her personal adornment. A certain journal of society which she had long ago abandoned began to show itself occasionally in her rooms, though only as yet by oversight left to view. She spoke with her brother on the

subject of certain invitations, long neglected, and did not seem displeased when he went beyond her own motion to propose the issuing of cards for a definite evening. Then came Wilfrid's break-down. There was really no need, said Mr. Athel, that she should transfer herself immediately to the country, just when everybody was well settled in town. But Mrs. Rossall preferred to go; she was not sure that the juncture had not some connection with her own spiritual life. And she maintained, on the whole, a seemly cheerfulness.

Mr. Athel was an Egyptologist of some distinction. Though not in person or manner suggestive of romantic antecedents, he had yet come by this taste in a way which bordered on romance. Travelling in Southern Europe at about the age which Wilfrid had now reached, he had the good fortune to rescue from drowning an Italian gentleman then on a tour in Greece. The Italian had a fair daughter, who was travelling with him, and her, after an acquaintance of a few weeks, Athel demanded by way of recompense. Her father was an enthusiastic student of Egyptian antiquities; the Englishman plied at one and the same time his wooing and the study of hieroglyphics, with marked success in both directions. The Mr. Athel who at that time represented parental authority, or at all events claimed filial deference, was anything but pleased with the step his son had taken; he was a highly respectable dealer in grain, and, after the manner of highly respectable men of commerce, would have had his eldest son espouse some countrywoman yet more respectable. It was his opinion that the lad had been entrapped by an adventurous foreigner. Philip Athel, who had a will of his own, wedded his Italian maiden, brought

her to England, and fought down prejudices. A year or two later he was at work in Egypt, where lie remained for some twelve months; his studies progressed. Subsequently he published certain papers which were recognised as valuable. Wilfrid found the amusement of his childhood in his father's pursuit; he began to decipher hieratic not much later than he learned to read English. Scarabs were his sacred playthings, and by the time of his going to school he was able to write letters home in a demotic which would not perhaps have satisfied Champollion or Brugsch, but yet was sufficiently marvellous to his schoolfellows and gratifying to his father.

For the rest, Philip Athel was a typical English gentleman. He enjoyed out-of-door sports as keenly as he did the pursuit of his study; he had scarcely known a day's illness in his life, owing, he maintained, to the wisdom with which he arranged his day. Three hours of study was, he held, as much as any prudent man would allow himself. He was always in excellent spirits, ever ready to be of service to a friend, lived with much moderation on victuals of the best quality procurable, took his autumnal holiday abroad in a gentlemanly manner. With something of theoretic Radicalism in his political views, he combined a stout respect for British social institutions; affecting to be above vulgar prejudices, he was in reality much prepossessed in favour of hereditary position, and as time went on did occasionally half wish that the love he had bestowed on his Italian wife had been given to some English lady of 'good' family. He was liberal, frank, amiably autocratic in his home, apt to be peppery with inferiors who missed the line of

perfect respect, candid and reasonable with equals or superiors. For his boy he reserved a store of manly affection, seldom expressing itself save in bluff fashion; his sister he patronised with much kindness, though he despised her judgment. One had now and then a feeling that his material circumstances aided greatly in making him the genial man he was, that with beef and claret of inferior quality he might not have been altogether so easy to get along with. But that again was an illustration of the English character.

We find the family assembling for breakfast at The Firs one delightful morning at the end of July. The windows of the room were thrown open, and there streamed in with the sunlight fresh and delicious odours, tonics alike of mind and body. From the Scotch firs whence the dwelling took its name came a scent which mingled with wafted breath from the remoter heather, and the creepers about the house-front, the lovely bloom and leafage skirting the lawn, contributed to the atmosphere of health and joy. It was nine o'clock. The urn was on the gleaming table, the bell was sounding, Mr. Athel stepped in straight from the lawn, fresh after his ten minutes' walk about the garden. Wilfrid Athel appeared at the same moment; he was dark-complexioned and had black, glossy hair; his cheeks were hollower than they should have been, but he had not the aspect of an invalid. Mrs. Rossall glided into the room behind him, fresh, fair, undemonstrative. Then came the twins, by name Patty and Minnie, delicate, with promise of their mother's English style of beauty; it was very hard to distinguish them, their uncle had honestly given up the pretence long ago, and occasionally remonstrated with his sister on the absurdity of

dressing them exactly alike. The last to enter the room was the governess, Miss Emily Hood.

Mr. Athel, having pronounced a grace, mentioned that he thought of running up to town; did anybody wish to give him a commission? Mrs. Rossall looked thoughtful, and said she would make a note of two or three things.

'I haven't much faith in that porridge regimen, Wilf,' remarked the master of the house, as he helped himself to chicken and tongue. 'We are not Highlanders. It's dangerous to make diet too much a matter of theory. Your example is infectious; first the twins; now Miss Hood. Edith, do you propose to become a pervert to porridge?'

'I have no taste for it,' replied his sister, who had become absent-minded.

'There's a certain dishonesty about it, moreover,' Mr. Athel pursued. 'Porridge should be eaten with salt. Milk *and* sugar—didn't I hear a suggestion of golden syrup, more honestly called treacle, yesterday? These things constitute evasion, self-deception at the least. In your case, Miss Hood, the regimen is clearly fruitful of ill results.'

'Of what kind, Mr. Athel?'

'Obviously it leads to diminution of appetite. You were in the habit of eating a satisfactory breakfast; at present some two ounces of that farinaceous mess—'

'My dear Philip!' interposed Mrs. Rossall, still absently.

I hold that I am within my rights,' asserted her brother. 'If Miss Hood goes down into Yorkshire in a state of emaciation —'

Wilfrid and the twins showed amusement.

'To begin with,' pursued Mr. Athel, 'I hold that sweet food the first thing in the morning is a mistake; the appetite is checked in an artificial way, and impaired. Even coffee—'

'You would recommend a return to flagons of ale?' suggested Wilfrid.

'I am not sure that it wasn't better dietetically.'

Mrs. Rossall had taken an egg, but, after fruitlessly chipping at the shell throughout this conversation, put down her spoon and appeared to abandon the effort to commence her meal. Presently she broke silence, speaking with some diffidence.

'I really think I will go to town with you, Philip,' she said. 'I want some things you can't very well get me, and then I ought to go and see the Redwings. I might persuade Beatrice to come to us for a day or two.'

'Do so by all means. You're quite sure,' he added with a smile, 'that I couldn't save you the trouble of the journey? I have no objection to visiting the Redwings.'

'I think it will be better if I go myself,' replied Mrs. Rossall, with a far-off look. 'I might call on one or two other people.'

Having decided this point, she found herself able to crack the egg. The anticipation of her day in London made her quite gay throughout the meal.

The carriage was at the door by ten o'clock, to drive to Dealing, the nearest station, some four miles away. The twins had gone upstairs with Miss Hood to their lessons, and Wilfrid was sauntering about the hall. His father paused by him on the way to the carriage.

'What do you propose to do with yourself, Wilf?' lie asked.

'Ride, I think.'

'Do. Go over to Hilstead and lunch there. Capital lunch they give you at the inn; the last time I was there they cooked me one of the best chops I ever ate. Oberon wants exercise; make a day of it.'

'Very well.'

'You're not looking quite so well, I'm afraid,' remarked his father, with genuine solicitude in his tone. 'Haven't been reading, have you?'

'No.'

'No imprudences, mind. I must stop that porridge regimen; it doesn't suit you. Ready, Edith?' he shouted heartily at the foot of the stairs.

Mrs. Rossall came down, buttoning her gloves.

'If I were you, Wilf,' she said, 'I'd go off somewhere for the day. The twins will only worry you.'

Wilfrid laughed.

'I am going to eat unexampled chops at the "Waggoner" in Hilstead,' he replied.

'That's right. Good-bye, my dear boy. I wish you'd get fatter.'

'Pooh, I'm all right.'

The landau rolled away. Wilfrid still loitered in the hall, a singular look of doubt on his face. In a room above one of the twins was having a music lesson; a certain finger-exercise was being drummed with persistent endeavour at accuracy.

'How can she bear that morning after morning?' the young man murmured to himself.

He took his straw hat and went round to the stables. Oberon was being groomed. Wilfrid patted the horse's sleek

neck, and talked a little with the man. At length he made up his mind to go and prepare for riding; Oberon would be ready for him in a few minutes.

In the porch Patty ran to meet him.

'Truant!' Wilfrid exclaimed. 'Have I caught you in the act of escape?'

'I was going to look for you,' said the child, putting her arm through his and swinging upon him. 'We want to know if you'll be back for lunch.'

'Who wants to know?'

'I and Minnie and Miss Hood.'

'Oh, you are Patty, then, are you?'

This was an old form of joke. The child shook her dark curls with a half-annoyed gesture, but still swung on her cousin as he moved into the house. Wilfrid passed his arm about her playfully.

'Can't you make up your mind, Wilf?' she asked.

'Oh yes, my mind is quite made up,' he replied, with a laugh.

'And won't you tell me?'

'Tell you? Ah, about lunch. No, I shall not be back.'

'You won't? Oh, I am sorry.'

'Why are you sorry, indistinguishable little maiden?' he asked, drawing out one of her curls between his fingers, and letting it spring back again into its circling beauty.

'We thought it would be so nice, we four at lunch.'

'I am warned to avoid you. The tone of conversation would try my weak head; I am not capable yet of intellectual effort.'

The little girl looked at him with puzzled eyes.

'Well, it can't be helped,' she said. 'I must go back to my lessons.'

She ran off, and Wilfrid went up to his dressing-room. When he came down, Oberon was pawing the gravel before the door. He mounted and rode away.

His spirits, which at first seemed to suffer some depression, took vigour once more from the air of the downs. He put Oberon at a leap or two, then let the breeze sing in his ears as he was borne at a gallop over the summer land, golden with sunlight. In spite of his still worn look, health was manifest in the upright vigour of his form, and in his eyes gleamed the untroubled joy of existence. Hope just now was strong within him, a hope defined and pointing to an end attainable; he knew that henceforth the many bounding and voiceful streams of his life would unite in one strong flow onward to a region of orient glory which shone before him as the bourne hitherto but dimly imagined. On, Oberon, on! No speed that would not lag behind the fore-flight of a heart's desire. Let the stretch of green-shadowing woodland sweep by like a dream; let the fair, sweet meadow-sides smile for a moment and vanish; let the dark hill-summits rise and sink. It is the time of youth and hope, of boundless faith in the world's promises, of breathless pursuit.

Hilstead was gained long before lunch could be thought of. Wilfrid rode on, and circled back towards the hostelry famous for chops about the hour of noon. He put up his horse, and strayed about the village till his meal was ready; after he had eaten it he smoked a cigar among hollyhocks and sunflowers. Then impatience possessed him. He looked

at his watch several times, annoyed to find that so little of the day was spent. When he at last set forth again, it was to ride at walking pace in the direction of home. He reached a junction of roads, and waited there for several minutes, unable to decide upon his course. He ended by throwing the reins on Oberon's neck.

'Go which way you will,' he said aloud.

Oberon paced forward to the homeward route.

'So be it. On, then! An hour will bring us to The Firs.'

The house was all but reached, when Wilfrid caught a glimpse of a straw hat moving into a heath-clad hollow a hundred yards from the road. He pressed on. At the gate stood a gardener.

'James,' he cried, leaping down, 'take the horse to the stable, will you?'

And, instead of going up to the house, he walked back in the direction he had come till he reached the hollow in which the straw hat had disappeared. Miss Hood sat on the ground, reading. She was about to rise, but Wilfrid begged her not to move, and threw himself into a reclining posture.

'I saw you as I rode past,' he said, in a friendly way. 'I suppose the twins are straying?'

'They are at Greenhaws,' was the reply, 'Mrs. Winter called for them immediately after lunch. She will bring them back early in the evening.'

'Ah!'

He plucked sprigs of heather. Miss Hood turned to her book.

'I've had a magnificent ride,' Wilfrid began again. 'Surely there is no country in England so glorious as this. Don't you

enjoy it?'

'Very much.'

'I have never seen the Yorkshire moors. The scenery, of course, is of a much wilder kind?'

'I have not seen them myself,' said the governess.

'I thought you might have taken your holidays sometimes in that direction.'

'No. We used to go to a seaside place in Lincolnshire called Cleethorpes. I suppose you never heard of it?'

'I think not.'

Wilfrid continued to pluck heather, and let his eyes catch a glimpse of her face now and then. Miss Hood was a year younger than himself, and had well outgrown girlishness. She was of very slight build, looked indeed rather frail; but her face, though lacking colour, had the firmness of health. It was very broad at the forehead, and tapered down into narrowness; the eyes seemed set at an unusual distance from each other, though the nose was thin and of perfect form, its profile making but a slight angle away from the line of the brows. Her lips were large, but finely curved; the chin was prominent, the throat long. She had warm brown hair.

Few would at first sight have called her face beautiful, but none could deny the beauty of her hands. Ungloved at present, they lay on the open pages of the book, unsurpassable for delicate loveliness. When he did not venture to look higher, Wilfrid let his eyes feed on the turn of the wrist, the faint blue lines and sinuous muscles, the pencilling about the finger-joints, the delicate white and pink nails.

Miss Hood was habitually silent when in the company of others than the children. When she replied to a question it was without timidity, but in few, well-chosen words. Yet her manner did not lack cheerfulness; she impressed no one as being unhappy, and alone with the twins she was often gay enough. She was self-possessed, and had the manners of a lady, though in her position this was rather to be observed in what she refrained from doing than in what she did. Wilfrid had, on first meeting her, remarked to himself that it must imply a Certain force of individuality to vary so distinctly from the commonplace even under the disadvantage of complete self-suppression; he had now come to understand better the way in which that individuality betrayed itself.

'Shall you go to Cleethorpes this year?' was his next question.

'I think not. I shall most likely pass the holidays at home.'

'And study electricity?'

In a former conversation she had surprised him by some unexpected knowledge of the principles of electricity, and explained the acquirement by telling him that this subject was her father's favourite study. Wilfrid put the question now with a smile.

'Yes, very likely,' she replied, smiling also, but faintly. 'It gives my father pleasure when I do so.'

'You have not a keen interest in the subject yourself?'

'I try to have.'

Her voice was of singular quality; if she raised it the effect was not agreeable, owing possibly to its lack of strength, but in low tones, such as she employed at present,

it fell on the ear with a peculiar sweetness, a natural melody in its modulation.

'The way in which you speak of your father interests me,' said Wilfrid, leaning his chin upon his hand, and gazing at her freely. 'You seem so united with him in sympathy.'

She did not turn her eyes to him, but her face gathered brightness.

'In sympathy, yes,' she replied, speaking now with more readiness. 'Our tastes often differ, but we are always at one in feeling. We have been companions ever since I can remember.'

'Is your mother living?'

'Yes.'

Something in the tone of the brief affirmative kept Wilfrid from further questioning.

'I wonder,' he said, 'what you think of the relations existing between myself and my father. We are excellent friends, don't you think? Strange—one doesn't think much about such things till some occasion brings them forward. Whether there is deep sympathy between us, I couldn't say. Certainly there are many subjects on which I should not dream of speaking to him unless necessity arose; partly, I suppose, that is male reserve, and partly English reserve. If novels are to be trusted, French parents and children speak together with much more freedom; on the whole that must be better.'

She made no remark.

'My father,' he continued, 'is eminently a man of sense if I reflect on my boyhood, I see how admirable his treatment of me has always been. I fancy I must have been at one

time rather hard to manage; I know I was very passionate and stubbornly self-willed. Yet he neither let me have my own way nor angered me by his opposition. In fact, he made me respect him. Now that we stand on equal terms, I dare say he has something of the same feeling towards myself. And So it comes that we are excellent friends.'

She listened with a scarcely perceptible smile.

'Perhaps this seems to you a curiously dispassionate way of treating such a subject,' Wilfrid added, with a laugh. 'It illustrates what I meant in saying I doubted whether there was deep sympathy between us. Your own feeling for your father is clearly one of devotedness. You would think no sacrifice of your own wishes too great if he asked it of you.'

'I cannot imagine any sacrifice, which my father could ask, that I should refuse.'

She spoke with some difficulty, as if she wished to escape the subject.

'Perhaps that is a virtue that your sex helps to explain,' said Wilfrid, musingly.

'You do not know,' he added, when a bee had hummed between them for half a minute, 'how constant my regret is that my mother did not live till I was old enough to make a friend of her. You know that she was an Italian? There was a sympathy taken out of my life. I believe I have more of the Italian nature than the English, and I know my mother's presence would be priceless to me now that I could talk with her. What unsatisfactory creatures we are as children, so imperfect, so deficient! It is worse with boys than with girls. Compare, for instance, the twine with boys often. What coarse, awkward, unruly lumps of boisterousness

youngsters mostly are at that age! I dislike boys, and more than ever when I remember myself at that stage. What an insensible, ungrateful, brainless, and heartless brat I was!'

'You must be wrong in one respect,' she returned, watching a large butterfly. 'You could not have been brainless.'

'Oh, the foundation of tolerable wits was there, no doubt; but it is just that undeveloped state that irritates me. Suppose I were now ten years old, and that glorious butterfly before me; should I not leap at it and stick a pin through it—young savage? Precisely what a Hottentot boy would do, except that he would be free from the apish folly of pretending a scientific interest, not really existing. I rejoice to have lived out of my boyhood; I would not go through it again for anything short of a thousand years of subsequent maturity.'

She just glanced at him, a light of laughter in her eyes. She was abandoning herself to the pleasure of hearing him speak.

'That picture of my mother,' he pursued, dropping his voice again, 'does not do her justice. Even at twelve years old—(she died when I was twelve)—I could not help seeing and knowing how beautiful she was. I have thought of her of late more than I ever did; sometimes I suffer a passion of grief that one so beautiful and lovable has gone and left a mere dumb picture. I suppose even my memory of her will grow fainter and fainter, founded as it is on imperfect understanding, dim appreciation. She used to read Italian to me—first the Italian, then the English—and I thought it, as often as not, a bore to have to listen to her! Thank Heaven, I

have the book she used, and can now go over the pieces, and try to recall her voice.'

The butterfly was gone, but the bee still hummed about them. The hot afternoon air was unstirred by any breeze.

'How glad I am,' Wilfrid exclaimed when he had brooded for a few moments, 'that I happened to see you as I rode past! I should have wandered restlessly about the house in vain, seeking for some one to talk to. And you listen so patiently. It is pleasant to be here and talk so freely of things I have always had to keep in my own mind. Look, do look at that bastion of cloud over the sycamore! What glorious gradation of tints! What a snowy crown!'

'That is a pretty spray,' he added, holding to her one that he had plucked.

She looked at it; then, as he still held It out, took it from him. The exquisite fingers touched his own redder and coarser ones.

'Have you friends in Dunfield?' he asked.

'Friends?'

'Any real friend, I mean—any girl who gives you real companionship?'

'Scarcely that.'

'How shall you spend your time when you are not deep in electrics? What do you mean to read these holidays?'

'Chiefly German, I think. I have only just begun to read it.'

'And I can't read it at all. Now and then I make a shot at the meaning of a note in a German edition of some classical author, every time fretting at my ignorance. But there is so endlessly much to do, and a day is so short.'

'Isn't it hateful,' he broke forth, 'this enforced idleness of mine? To think that weeks and weeks go by and I remain just where I was, when the loss of an hour used to seem to me an irreparable misfortune. I have such an appetite for knowledge, surely the unhappiest gift a man can be endowed with it leads to nothing but frustration. Perhaps the appetite weakens as one grows in years; perhaps the sphere of one's keener interests contracts; I hope it may be so. At times I cannot work—I mean, I could not—for a sense of the vastness of the field before me. I should like you to see my rooms at Balliol. Shelves have long since refused to take another volume; floor, tables, chairs, every spot is heaped. And there they lie; hosts I have scarcely looked into, many I shall never have time to take up to the end of my days.'

'You have the satisfaction of being able to give your whole time to study.'

'There is precisely the source of dissatisfaction My whole time, and that wholly insufficient. I have a friend, a man I envy intensely; he has taken up the subject of Celtic literature; gives himself to it with single-heartedness, cares for nothing that does not connect itself therewith; will pursue it throughout his life; will know more of it than any man living. My despair is the universality of my interests. I can think of no branch of study to which I could not surrender myself with enthusiasm; of course I shall never master one. My subject is the history of humanity; I would know everything that man has done or thought or felt. I cannot separate lines of study. Philology is a passion with me, but how shall I part the history of speech from the

history of thought? The etymology of any single word will hold me for hours; to follow it up I must traverse centuries of human culture. They tell me I have a faculty for philosophy, in the narrow sense of the word; alas! that narrow sense implies an exhaustive knowledge of speculation in the past and of every result of science born in our own time Think of the sunny spaces in the world's history, in each of which one could linger for ever I Athens at her fairest, Borne at her grandest, the glorious savagery of Merovingian courts, the kingdom of Frederick II., the Moors in Spain, the magic of Renaissance Italy—to become a citizen of any one age means a lifetime of endeavour. It is easy to fill one's head with names and years, but that only sharpens my hunger. Then there is the world of art; I would know every subtlest melody of verse in every tongue, enjoy with perfectly instructed taste every form that man has carved or painted. I fear to enter museums and galleries; I am distracted by the numberless desires that seize upon me, depressed by the hopelessness of satisfying them. I cannot even enjoy music from the mere feeling that I do not enjoy it enough, that I have not had time to study it, that I shall never get at its secret.... And when is one to live? I cannot lose myself in other men's activity and enjoyments. I must have a life of my own, outside the walls of a library. It would be easy to give up all ambition of knowledge, to forget all the joy and sorrow that has been and passed into nothingness; to know only the eternity of a present hour. Might one not learn more in one instant of unreflecting happiness than by toiling on to a mummied age, only to know in the end the despair of never having lived?'

He again raised his eyes to her face. It was fixed in a cold, absent gaze; her lips hardened into severity, the pose of her head impressive, noble. Athel regarded her for several moments; she was revealing to him more of her inner self than he had yet divined.

'What are your thoughts?' he asked quietly.

She smiled, recovering her wonted passiveness.

'Have you not often much the same troubles?'

'They arc only for the mind which is strong enough to meet and overcome them,' she replied.

'But look, my mind has given way already! I am imbecile. For ever I shall be on the point of a break-down, and each successive one will bring me nearer to some final catastrophe—perhaps the lunatic asylum—who knows?'

'I should think,' she said gravely, 'that you suggested a truth. Very likely your mind will contract its range and cease to aim at the impossible.'

'But tell me, have you not yourself already attained that wisdom? Why should you make pretences of feebleness which does not mark you? You have a mind as active as my own; I know that perfectly well. What is your secret of contentment? Won't you help me in this miserable plight?'

'No, Mr. Athel, I have none but very ordinary powers of mind, and perhaps it is my recognition of that which keeps me contented. There is indeed one principle of guidance which I have worked out for myself—'

'Ah! And that?'

'It will not enlighten you, for it is only the choice of a natural and easy course, seeing that difficult ones are closed. The literature of learning is out of my reach, so I

limit myself to the literature of beauty, and in this I try to keep to the best.'

'You are right, you are right! To know the masterpieces of literature, pure literature, poetry in its widest sense; that is the wise choice. Think; we feed ourselves with the secondhand wisdom of paltry philosophisers and critics, and Shakespeare waits outside the door with the bread of life. From Homer—Alas! you do not read Greek?'

She shook her head.

'And you work at German! In Heaven's name change your language forthwith! Why should you not know Greek? You *must* know Greek! I will give you books, I will advise you, show you the essentials to begin with. There are still a few days before you go into Yorkshire; you can work during the holidays on lines I shall set you; you can write and tell me your—'

He paused, for her face had lost its smile, and wore again that coldly respectful look which she seldom put off save in her privacy with the children. For the last quarter of an hour he had marked in her quite another aspect; the secret meanings of her face had half uttered themselves in eye and lip. His last words seemed to recall her to the world of fact. She made a slight movement and closed the book on her lap.

'Greek is more than I can undertake, Mr. Athel,' she said in a quietly decided tone. 'I must be content with translations.'

'Translations You would not say that so calmly if you knew what you were renouncing. Everything, everything in literature, I would give up to save my Greek. You will learn it,

I know you will; some day I shall hear you read the hexameters as beautifully as you read English poetry to the girls. Will you not begin if I beg you to?'

The elbow on which he rested moved a few inches nearer to her. He saw the pearly shadows waver upon her throat, and her lips tremble into rigidity.

'My time in the holidays will be very limited,' she said. 'I have undertaken to give some help to a friend who is preparing to become a teacher, and'—she tried to smile—'I don't think I must do more work whilst at home than is really necessary.'

'No, that is true,' Wilfrid assented unwillingly. 'Never mind, there is plenty of time. Greek will be overcome, you will see. When we are all back in town and the days are dull, then I shall succeed in persuading you.'

She looked about her as if with thought of quitting her place. Her companion was drawn into himself; he stroked mechanically with his finger-tips the fronds of bracken near him.

'I suppose I shall go up again in October,' he began. 'I wish there were no necessity for it.'

'But surely it is your one desire?' the other replied in genuine surprise.

'Not to return to Oxford. A few months ago it would have been, but this crisis in my life has changed me. I don't think I shall adapt myself again to those conditions. I want to work in a freer way. I had a positive zeal even for examinations; now that seems tame—well, boyish. I believe I have outgrown that stage; I feel a reluctance to go back to

school. I suppose I must take my degree, and so on, but it will all be against the grain.'

'Your feeling will most likely alter when you have thoroughly recovered your health.'

'No, I don't think it will. Practically my health is all right. You don't,' he added with a smile, 'regard me as an irresponsible person, whose feeble remarks are to be received with kind allowance?'

'No, I did not mean that.'

He gazed at her, and his face showed a growing trouble.

'You do not take too seriously what I said just now about the weakness of my mind? It would be horrible if you thought I had worked myself into a state of amiable imbecility, and was incapable henceforth of acting, thinking, or speaking with a sound intellect. Tell me, say in plain words that is not your way of interpreting me.'

He had become very much in earnest. Raising himself to a position in which he rested on one hand, lie looked straight into her face.

'Why don't you reply? Why don't you speak?'

'Because, Mr. Athel, it is surely needless to say that I have no such thought.'

'No, it is not needless; and even now you speak in a way which troubles me. Do not look away from me. What has my aunt told you about me?'

She turned her face to him. Her self-command was so complete that not a throb of her leaping heart betrayed itself in vein or muscle. She even met his eyes with a placid gaze which he felt as a new aspect of her countenance.

'Mrs. Rossall has never spoken to me of your health,' she said.

'But my father's jokes; he has a way of humorous exaggeration. You of course understand that; you don't take seriously all he says?'

'I think I can distinguish between jest and earnest.'

'For all that, you speak of the recovery of my health as if I were still far from the wholly rational stand-point. So far from my being mentally unsound, this rest has been a growing-time with me. Before, I did nothing but heap my memory with knowledge of hooks; now I have had leisure to gather knowledge of a deeper kind. I was a one-sided academical monster; it needed this new sense to make me human. The old college life is no longer my ideal; I doubt if it will be possible. At any rate, I shall hurry over the rest of my course as speedily as may be, that I may begin really to live. You must credit what I am saying; I want you to give me distinct assurance that you do so. If I have the least doubt, it will trouble my mind in earnest.'

Miss Hood rose to her feet in that graceful effortless way of which girls have the secret.

'You attribute a meaning to my words that I never thought of,' she said, again in the distant respectful manner.

Wilfrid also rose.

'And you give me credit for understanding myself, for being as much master of my mind as I am of my actions?'

'Surely I do, Mr. Athel.'

'You are going to the house? It is nearly five o'clock your conscience tells you that a civilised being must drink tea. I