



COTTER'S ENGLAND
Christina Stead

For my Friends Anne and Harry Bloom

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Introduction

IN *COTTERS' ENGLAND* Christina Stead creates one of the most remarkable heroines in modern fiction. Heroine may not be the right word. Nellie Cook, born Cotter, is a monster. Stead—always an uncompromising writer—risks centering on a woman who is excessive, melodramatic, almost a comic caricature. Nellie alienates us at every turn. She is a self-proclaimed socialist whose politics are nothing but mystical waffle; noisily proclaiming her feminist loyalty, she exploits and betrays her closest women friends, even driving one to suicide. But Nellie springs off the page with a vitality that compels our attention. We respond more deeply to her, learn more through her, than a score of more conventionally sympathetic characters.

Almost forty, Nellie scrapes a living as a journalist on a left-wing London paper. Her editor is increasingly impatient with her "sobsister" prose, and her marriage to labour leader George Cook is breaking down. Anxious, lonely and ill, Nellie rushes frenetically from her job to the pub to political meetings, from her decayed Islington house to the Tyneside slum where her parents still live. She drinks, smokes, stays up all night coughing her heart out. And she talks. And talks, and talks. All of Nellie's energy, all her frustrated creativity, pour into words. She never stops haranguing, arguing, wheedling, charming, complaining. She talks endlessly about the value of talk, insisting that her friends plunge with her into orgies of confession and introspection. Yet she *has* friends. For though she is absurd and pompous and pretentious, though her "perpetual outlandish chick, pet, sweetheart and her northern affectations" grate on the ear, Stead convinces us that she is indeed a spellbinder. Even her more distant acquaintances are—at moments—captured by the "inner melody of the northern voice and its unexpected cry, its eloquence".

Nellie prides herself on her realism, on a unique insight into human suffering born of her working-class origins. Anyone who views the world differently is dismissed out of hand. According to Nellie, her newspaper editor "tailors reality" to fit his socialist theory, her friend Caroline is lost in her bourgeois dream world, and her brother Tom drifts through life as a vagabond, a mountebank, a mere shadow of a man. Yet it is immediately obvious to the reader that it is Nellie who shrouds the truth in fancy words, Nellie who postures and play-acts, who glosses over anything which might puncture her sentimental rhetoric about the grand old days up north, or about her perfect marriage. Nellie knows nothing, her brother complains, about her friends or about herself. She is a hypocrite—and at the same time she is engaged in a gallant attempt to re-make herself and the world she lives in. Stead takes her contradictions seriously, and still manages to view her ironically, with a sharp sense of her comic value.

Nellie's deepest feelings are all for her brother, Tom Cotter. Neither can bear the other, nor bear to let the other go. Locked together in a narcissistic and sterile love rooted in adolescence, they are bitterly and accurately critical of one another, and of their own reflected selves. Nellie clutches Tom jealously at her brother, competes with him, tries to monitor his relationships and to experience them vicariously, while he clings, resentfully and tenderly, to the older sister who had seduced him into drink and drugs and politics, who had formed him in her image. Unable to give themselves, unable to rest, both seek frantically for someone, anyone, who might fill and complete them; they are always driven back on each other. They share a sadistic adolescent pleasure in provoking emotions in others which they are incapable of experiencing in themselves. Each has fantasies of being a healer, a saviour; each brings pain and despair to those who love them. The novel is littered with their victims.

At the very end of the book, George Cook's first wife, Eliza, who has tried to ignore the damage done to her by both Nellie and her callous brother, has a sudden shocking memory of her first impression of the "fatal" couple. Nellie is an "imp of Satan ... a mummer, a liar", and Tom a "curious being with a floating soul, neither man nor woman, and not human; neither of them human".

And Tom's deserted wife cries out angrily against his cold self-absorption. "He's walking by the mirror and looking in to smile, and coming back to you like a man out of a mirror, and he eats your heart away." And she is even more hostile to Nellie, who came between them, who even now, under the cover of affectionate concern, is "post-morteming for all she's worth, wringing the juice out of a corpse".

In one of the most chilling scenes in the novel, Nellie and Tom try to recapture their childhood intimacy by visiting the hall of mirrors at a country fair. They dance, "so there was a string of them in the dusty narrow corridor, a ballroom of the strangest people, but always the same two". They are amused, shaken, almost disgusted when they glimpse the truth of their own distorted reflections—Nellie is a "spindling hatchet witch" and Tom a "playing-card king". Stead's prose is riddled with images from folk or fairy stories, many of them grim and bloody. Richly realistic characters suddenly, jokingly, appear in more primitive guise as witches or ghouls or harpies. Nellie jealously asserts that Tom's many women friends consume him and suck him dry. But the metaphors of cannibalism—greed and insatiable appetite—cluster around Nellie herself: she is the vampire, a figure at once comic and terrifyingly destructive. When she claims that her brother has no heart, he turns the phrase back on her in a brutal, physically literal way: "You took it from me and lived on it and now you're scurrying around from one body to another, hungry and thirsty, and you'll do anything to still the pain."

Nellie may plead, seductively and convincingly, for greater intimacy with her friends. In fact, she is avid to possess and devour them, to incorporate their lives in hers. She flaunts her sympathy with prostitutes and deserted wives, with all the pathetic women who are wronged by men, at the same time secretly enjoying the pain inflicted on other women by her brother and her philandering husband. And in the end she does more harm than either of them. The most vulnerable of her friends is Caroline, who is deeply depressed by a broken marriage. Nellie, overwhelming her with compassionate concern, makes impossible demands on her; she belittles the girl's uncertain attempts to write and to form new relationships and gradually undermines her fragile hold on life.

At times, her brother remarks, a demon or an evil spirit seems to be speaking through Nellie; and in a scary climactic scene, she talks Caroline into a belief that suicide is the only way out of her trouble.

The episode brings out all the power and the weakness in Stead's writing. The whole novel has prepared us to recognize and understand Nellie's fascination with death. Fantasies of death excite and restore her, and the idea of suicide, of violent death of any kind, seems to heighten her sense of herself. But when an over-heated Nellie begs Caroline to offer herself as a blood sacrifice so that she, Nellie, may find renewed life, the narrative trembles on the edge of absurdity. And the lesbian bacchanalia at Nellie's weekend party, which finally unhinges Caroline, works neither as realism nor as fantasy. Stead suddenly seems nervous of her material; the relationship between Nellie and her "Bohemian" friends is never explored, and the episode disintegrates into brilliant but obscure fragments, into unsupported hints at unspeakable corruption. What Stead *does* communicate superbly is Caroline's sense that she is bewitched, trapped in some nightmarish, subhuman realm. Caroline walks the night streets to her death, exhausted, hallucinating, and "overshadowed by the lank hobbling stride of the woman who had taken her up, haunted her and ruined her. She was walking away from her, but Nellie was someone she carried with her, as you carry a bad parent always with you."

Nellie is a killer, but she is a victim as well, and demands our understanding and sympathy. Stead never allows us a cut and dried moral judgment. Nellie is presented so fully, so suggestively, that we must constantly shift and revise our attitudes to her. Stead never explains or expounds any of his characters; her talent is for giving them depth, for suggesting the kind of lives they lead off-stage, and for dramatising the multitude of ways in which the past lives on in the present. As in many of his novels, the story of one individual also involves decades of a family's history. Nellie's parents are old now, but their personalities stand out in sharper relief with the onset of death. They are viewed coldly and sardonically, at times with an almost Dickensian humour. Pop Cotter, once a professional footballer, is an unscrupulous charmer who plays to the gallery even on his death bed; his senile wife is finally and gleefully able to express her dislike of her own children; Uncle Sime, the lifelong bachelor who shares the house, skulks in the basement kitchen all day refusing to let anyone turn up the heat. All the family jealousies and fears that helped make Nellie and Tom are still startlingly alive. The pair are imprisoned by that cramped dark house as surely as is their sister Peggy who complains that she has wasted her life looking after the old people.

Through the skilful accumulation of gossip and reminiscence and casual allusion, we catch glimpses—oddly vivid and moving—of Nellie as she once was; a sixteen-year-old desperate to get away from home, impatient of formal schooling or the dull slogging work of orthodox socialism, driven to ever wilder and more disastrous experiments in her search for a better life. Nellie is still the adolescent. But she has the added vulnerability of middle age, of someone who must recognise that it is probably too late for radical change. Much of Nellie's near hysteria seems to be a defence against an awareness that she will never fulfil her early dreams or appease her childhood hunger. Tom, who for all his self-pitying passivity has moments of real insight, admits that they are both too marked by early privations and early choices to grow or develop much. Tom finally marries, almost at random, because he sees that he is beginning to resemble his timid old uncle. Nellie prides herself on her likeness to her glamorous father. But we gradually understand that Nellie will become—by the end of the novel is already becoming—a replica of her crafty, resentful, half-crazy old mother who can no longer tell the difference between the living and the dead.

In the United States, the novel was published under the title *Dark Places of the Heart*, which stressed its psychological or even its pathological interest. But Stead's preferred title, *Cotters' England*, indicates the novel's real strength. To understand Nellie, we must understand not just her family, but the country which they inhabit and which has formed them. They are products of an England still haunted by the Thirties' depression and crippled by the aftermath of World War I. Nellie's husband George, annoyed by her blind and sentimental patriotism, describes Cotters' England as "the country of the depressed that starved you all to wraiths, gave Eliza TB, sent your sister into the Home, got your old mother into bed with malnutrition, and is trying it on with me too." Nellie's rage is absurd and appalling partly because she is fighting for her life; she is trying to assert her *self* in an England that constrains and withers all hopes of growth. Rage and hunger and terror are constant notes beneath her endless flow of words. And these are very human responses to the physical and emotional impoverishment which the novel charts, to the lack of any real community, to the greedy egoism which George Cook embodies and which dominates all social relationships.

Beneath the psychological intricacies and the fantasy and the black comedy of *Cotters' England*, Christina Stead's political imagination is working all the time. When it first appeared the critic John Yglesias remarked that all the book's underlying questions are about politics. In fictional terms, Stead is asking "why the English working-class movement has not made the revolution. Though she deals only with its fringes and does not go to the centre of its trade union, Labour Party and intellectual

circles, she has recreated the full ambience of its opportunism, charlatanism and demoralization." This may be overstating it. But it remains Stead's extraordinary achievement to persuade the reader to link the private and the political; to take a theme that seems eccentric, peripheral and even perverse, and turn it into a sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes comic, but always involving comment on our lives and times.

Margaret Walters, 1980

Cotters' England

Some Persons

Pop Cotter, Thomas

Ma Cotter, Mary née Pike

Their children:

Ellen (Nellie), marries George Cook

Thomas

Peggy

Simon Pike, brother of Mary, Jeanie and Bessie

George Cook

Eliza Cook, his first wife

Mrs. Gwen McMahan, houseworker

Georgiana, her little daughter

Venna, a prostitute in Southwark

(does not appear)

Robert Peebles, Nellie's editor

(does not appear)

Bob Bobsey, an old woman

Camilla Yates, a dressmaker

Caroline Wooller, an office worker

Johnny Sterker, a strange woman

Other women

IT WAS a Saturday, a fine March morning. Two women and a man were in the basement front room. Mrs. Nellie Cook, a journalist, Mrs. Camilla Yates, a dressmaker, and Walter, a window cleaner. Mrs. Yates was making a blue dress for Mrs. Cook.

Mrs. Cook said to the window cleaner, "It's fresh today, pet. Did you try on that leather jacket of my brother's? I had a fit of conscience and wrote to him and said, I gave your leather jacket to Walter, did you mind? And he wrote back, You know me better than that."

"I gave it to my brother. He sold it and bought some vegetables. He's rented a truck," said the man with a questioning glance.

"I'll give you a suit, too, love, though there's moth in it somewhere. Ah, but I ought to make you give me your spattered denims in exchange, for my husband George. It would bring me fine George near to humanity. He wore them once, down on the docks; and now, nothing but tailormades. It was he started me on the primrose path, Mrs. Yates, love. I was told the other day I'd lost all me personality since I married George. But marriage is an incurable disease; and it drives out the others."

Mrs. Yates said it was not incurable.

Walter asked if he could pull the curtains apart in an alcove; he did so. A four-year-old girl was sleeping on a cot there. The window showed a brick wall, some bare trees.

Walter did the window quickly, went out to the kitchen and at the foot of the stairs stopped, "I took some hot water, Missus."

"That's all right, pet," said Mrs. Cook.

When he had gone to the attic, Nellie Cook said she wished he would wear a safety belt. It was a big drop. She didn't like to talk to him about it for fear of putting the idea of a fall into his mind.

"We're creatures of our figments, love."

He was not a professional window cleaner. He had chest trouble and needed outdoor work. Because he needed the money, he came round too often. He knew he came too often and made a concession. He got a pound each time.

Nellie said, "I'm ashamed to grudge it to the poor fellow. Besides, he admires George; and is always asking him his political opinion. I'm afraid he hasn't the head for it. He'll ask the same question several times and then he'll repeat what George said, word for word. Is that your opinion, Mr. Cook? It's touching. He followed George home from a meeting once—the same as I did meself! And he'll reassure me to this day, 'Don't worry, Missus; I didn't come to do your windows; I just wanted to ask the Mister what he thinks.' And the way he'll listen to him standing and won't sit down; and then he'll quietly go and you can see him mouthing it over to himself on the doorstep—it's pitiful Camilla darling—I may call you Camilla, love?"

The man dodged into the doorway, brought Mrs. Cook her purse from the piano and pocketed her money with thanks and a strange smile. At the door he turned and with yet another manner, mincing like a Chelsea aesthete, he said he'd be round in three weeks.

"And how is the Mister? I miss his talks on politics."

Nellie said heartily, "Do you, pet? Ah, bless you. It does me good to hear it, Walter. The bugger's on the continent yet, Walter, living on the fat of the land, touring the world as a representative of the working class of Great Britain. The call of England Home and Beauty rings feebly in his ear. He'll be

back, pet, in a couple of weeks; but I can't tell you when. He wrote he's drunk every day from midd on. That's his world of the future. That's your sex for you, Walter."

The man gravely nodded and this time glided away without a smile. In a moment they heard the front door close.

"I wonder if that's worth five shillings or whatever informers get," said Mrs. Yates, looking down at her pattern and picking up a sleeve.

"He's a pet, poor man," said Nellie.

"He gives me the creeps; he's not natural. I wouldn't let him in," said the dressmaker, good-naturedly. She was a powerful woman, in her early forties, with a straight broad back, a small class head on a strong neck, low forehead and short nose in line, dark hair and eyes.

Nellie impatiently stumped out her cigarette and reached for another.

"My test of a person is their opinion of George Cook! I stand high there meself. Eh, Walter's no better than the rest. Mrs. McMahan told George that Walter tried to kiss her and wanted to take her to the movies and asked questions about the boss; but what she wouldn't say. Gwen McMahan's a loyal soul. I could do with a cup of tea."

She drummed on the table with her tobacco-stained long fingers.

Mrs. Yates remarked in her pleasant voice, "You see? A dick. That was my first impression. He's all patches, a makeshift. I said, Now what act is that? And trying to get intimate with the maid."

"Ah, no, pet; it's no good, Camilla. No, no, your suspicious mind can't turn me against Walter. We're old friends. And Mrs. McMahan's no maid, pet; she's our friend. She's been with us since before we were married."

Mrs. Yates held out the dress. Mrs. Cook shed the faded overalls she was wearing and stood in her cotton shirt and long fleecy bloomers, holding out her arms. Mrs. Yates stood back and looked at the hang of the dress.

Mrs. Cook said absently, "You're nervous, Camilla. You feel hunted. So you think your husband is divorcing you, eh? You must be the headlong sort; you rush into the baited trap."

"I married for love."

Nellie now undressed again, was smoking furiously, hanging on to the mantelpiece, waving to the child in the bed. She said rapidly, "It's a grand thing, aye, I don't blame you. Will I do then, pet, in that dress? I won't be an eyesore at the airport when I welcome home my hero? I'll go and make a pot of tea and we'll sit down quietly. You've earned your crust. I'm glad to take it easy on my Saturday off. I'm generally on some off-the-record assignment, or visiting a sick friend, or fixing up the income tax or the mortgage, or running messages for me carefree lad."

"Eh, Camilla, there's a rooster in the hencoop! I expect they were glad to get him out of the navy. He laid out a plan of action for the admiral, or they feared he'd commandeer one of the lifeboats and sail for Tahiti. There he is making the French dames step to his tune. Eh, what a man, what a man! And do you think, Camilla, I'll do in that dress? For I want it now to go to see me mother in, to show Bridgehead, me old home town, that I'm respectable. For there's a skeleton in me cupboard. George and I lived together before we were married, pet. A cat and dog life it was; we didn't think we'd be able to stick it out. Eh, what a bloody egotist, love; but what a man! And to meself I said, My lass, you must submit, you must give up the fine free-lance life. And the wonder of wonders happened, Camilla, the perfect marriage, the perfect counterpoint, aye. Well, before that, I had to tell my folks that I was married, for I had my sister down here to visit, and Bob Bobsey, the dear old elf, who's now gallivanting with me boyo, you don't know her, a real pal, who looks as if she was a shriveled soul, but what's inside is as the meat of the walnut. Bob was in Bridgehead and she called upon my family, the

Cotters, and she had to answer my mother's thousand questions. What time of day was it? Did it rain or shine? What dress did Nellie wear? For she swore to my mother that she'd been present at the wedding. Bob's a glorious old bohemian, but she's old fashioned and she didn't approve of us living in sin. It would break my heart if a daughter of mine did it, she said to me solemnly, shaking her dear old head, that great old stone face that's like the face of Grandmother Fate—"

"She must look like a gargoye," said Mrs. Yates laughing.

"Ah, no, pet; that's your acidulous nature. She's my standby in storms; loyal and staunch. And she said to Mother, being up against it, Your daughter wore a nice blue dress. Every time since, when I go up home, Mother harps on it. Why don't you wear the nice blue dress you were married in? Because I'm keeping it in camphor out of sentiment, I said. So take the tacking threads out, darling, or you'll ruin me; and I've bought a cake of camphor to rub over it. My mother was always a foxy little deducing creature; that was her compensation for a life of defeat." Nellie, in her long bloomers and a cotton shirt, went out the back to get tea.

There were three rooms on each floor of the little three-story brick house. Down short stairs here on the ground level, was an old-fashioned W.C. with the handle in a wooden seat and a blue flowered bowl. There was no light and no window; so that generally they sat with the door slightly open looking out at the grassy back yard. At the side, a long paved kitchen. There were no windows; the door to the yard was usually kept open here, too. The small back yard was enclosed by brick and low stone walls and contained two small trees and a couple of sheds. On the left, dark old terrace houses with long back yards ran at right angles. They were occupied mostly by immigrant workers, Cypriots, Maltese, Greeks, doing sweatshop labor. On the right, along Lamb Street, were big garages, filling the space of houses knocked down by the bombs. The houses in Lamb Street, all low and narrow, like Nellie Cook's, were occupied mostly by machinists and other garment trade workers. Mrs. Yates lived across the street, with her two children, in two rooms over a small grocery shop. She lived separated from her husband. Her lover, a painter, a tall bulky ungainly man, visited her every day, ate there, used her as a model, looked after her children.

Nellie was a strange thing, her shabby black hair gathered into a sprout on the top of her small head, her beak and backbone bent forward, her thin long legs stepping prudently, gingerly, like a marsupial bird's, as she came over the hogback ground floor, stairs up, stairs down, to the front room with her tea tray. The tea tray was neatly set, with a tray cloth; and she had cut thin bread and butter.

Camilla sat with her head bowed over her work. The hooded daylight came from the areaway in the middle of the room and shone on the bright wiry hair. Her neck and curved strong shoulders, dusky and smooth, bent down in the plain blue cotton blouse, gathered on a cord and rather low. Her long thighs were apart to make a convenient sewing lap. Opposite her sat Ellen Cook, slouching, her elbow on the chair arm, her fingers to the cigarette, her nose and hair sprout in the air, the other hand on her hips. She spread her legs jauntily apart, in their gray knee-length bloomers, wrinkled black stockings. She wore pointed black shoes, the toes turned up, the thin heels turned down with wear. The light fell on the hollows in face, neck, chest and bony arm and darkened the exhausted skin. Her small eyes, dark blue, looking out sharp between half-closed lids, were tired. She sat smoking, drinking tea and nonchalantly ruminating. At length, she mentioned that she had had a budget of mail that morning, something from George. He had been to Geneva, looking for a job in the I.L.O. office, and was back in France. He was not coming home yet but was going on with the dear old elf, Bob Bobsey, to Florence. Bob had the money.

"He promised it to her long ago, and she says this may be the last time. Eh, old age is a high wall you can't climb and she's coming to the foot of it."

To save money George and old Bob had taken one room with two beds in their travels through France. George went to the Gare du Nord to meet old Bob and brought her to the hotel. Everyone at the hotel ran forward to have a look: *Mon Dieu, ces anglais!* George thought it was a great joke. When they went out for breakfast in the morning again everyone ran to look at them. George thought they admired him for being above prejudice.

After a pause Nellie said that she also had a letter from a sweet friend Caroline, she wanted Camilla to meet.

"She's known the tragedy of failure and the dead end on the lonely road."

Not long before, Nellie had been working in the offices of the Roseland Estate Development in Buckinghamshire. Nothing had developed. There they all sat in the naked old villa, with grass growing over the old avenues; but no new house had yet been built.

"It's all bourgeois waste and caprice anyway. Someone taking the ideas of some Frenchman, great blocks of flats with angles and courtyards, a brick prison, it won't suit England; no fireplaces, no chimney and everything laid on from a center. Suppose there's a strike! The whole place can be without fire or water or heating; the mothers and children sick and the fathers grousing. All they have to do is sabotage and hundreds of families can't get their tea or wash their faces. I've seen pictures of it in France. It's the home turned upside down. The British, Camilla, will never give up their fireplaces and their cosy little back rooms. You sit in front of the fire and look into it and you begin to relax after the day's work. You throw in your cigarette ends and your rubbish. How will they keep the place clean? You'll have matches and cigarette butts all over the floor, and where will you relax? Ah, Camilla love, there's nothing better than to come home when you can't go on anymore and brew yourself a pot of tea and sit before the blaze and dream. With this Corbusier there'll be no relaxing and no dreaming; only a soulless measured-off engineer's world with no place for us."

She lit a fresh cigarette. Through it she murmured, "Caroline, aye! There's a beautiful soul, Camilla who didn't see the wrongs of it. She believes in the world, she wants the world to be beautiful. She's lonely, aye, living there in a wretched room with a wicked old landlady. Ah, the landladies! And where can you get in a one-street country village? So the only reality to Roseland is a broken-down villa with grassy rises and a landlady's damp cell with peeling walls. I've made her see it. You won't help the world, I said, with building stony streets of barracks with stone cells for the soul of man. They're tearing down the tenements, I said, to put the workers into prison; won't it be easy to isolate and machine-gun a workers' prison? There'll be no freedom then; and no desire for it, I said. Just watch your step and watch your neighbor. She's leaving it. She's coming here for a few days. She's not happy. No; there's another cause. A broken marriage with a dull man, a wandering man."

She sighed and continued, "The parents are the innocent cause. She had a hopelessly middle-class country parson background. You don't venture to say the Queen has unsuitable shoes: *But it's the Queen, dear.* And the big thing to look forward to, taking a stall at the fete to raise funds for the church hall. Aye, she tried to escape. But can the bird break the iron bars by fluttering? You are likely to see bloodied and broken wings; and the close tendrils of parental love were in this case iron bars."

Nellie sighed and blew smoke; "The old, old problem, sweetheart. Even here, where the parents are of a fine old type, the father's word obeyed and the Bible called upon to prove and refute and have the last word; and the mother with a life of unquestioning frustration and the daughter a full-blooded woman with the passions sealed in."

"How old is she, the daughter?"

Nellie hesitated; then, "Twenty-eight and she was married; but not a woman, a girl. The husband tried to get her away; but he hadn't the appeal. He took her to America; but they wrote and the

begged. Poor things! She felt the guilt. She came back; but then it was, You'll go back in the spring, you'll go and pay him a visit when the American summer is over; and then, Our dear daughter could not bear to leave her parents alone. Ah, poor things!"

Nellie brushed the tears from her eyes. She drank her tea and said dryly, "Caroline's only outlet for what she thinks is writing. She's published a thing or two, little clouded mirrors of life, that no one has ever heard of. I've asked. No one ever heard of her. In one she tried to show her husband; it's pitiful. Life—no more like the stormy, hot-blooded, passionate, unruly, unbridled thing it is, Camilla, than a cup of tea is like a river in flood. But she's fine, and it's a damn shame to see her the prisoner of sterility. Aye, she took my advice. She left home and took this room; and the parents too have nothing. I'm sorry for the older generation. Ah, true marriage, pet, when it comes, is perfection. To think the older generation never knew that! So many generations of wasted joyless lives; and only in our own day and here and there, the perfect flower of married happiness, a rare unforgettable thing, the only earthly joy. It's a grand thing, Camilla, perfection in union; to know each other as man and woman in perfection."

She placed her hands on her knees, leaned her topknot forward and looked earnestly at the dressmaker. Camilla gave her an enquiring glance and bent to her sewing.

Nellie, in the same posture, said, "What George, and I have is the flower of perfection. Physically, George is a wonderful man. It's joy, it's heaven; there's nothing like it when it's natural and sweet; a blessed union. That's what I have with George, perfection."

The dressmaker made no reply. After a short silence, she said, "Try this on, Nellie; let me see."

She made some marks with a piece of chalk. Nellie took the dress off and sitting down, smoking away, she continued to make comments along the same lines, until Camilla gave her an irritated glance. She then went on to talk about parenthood and its solemn responsibilities. Our parents, she said, were poor, pitiful, frail human creatures.

Here she was interrupted by a bad fit of coughing. She got up and lounged over to the sofa, where she lay prone, her head hanging down, coughing and hawking, gasping and puffing.

She got up, came back to the chair, picking up her cigarette, "It's me bronchitis."

She took a few puffs, inhaling deeply, and continued, like a chant, "They brought us into the world with sorrow and ignorance and haste, young people then, with their lives before them, taking us like pack animals on their backs, along the pike; and from then on destiny had only one voice, it came out of the crying mouths of little children. Taking a strange dangerous chance with us, fighting against poverty and death with us in their arms. That's the thought, isn't it, pet? It's pitiful. We must take up the burden of their repayment. We've not fulfilled their hope, I'm afraid, darling. That's beyond our poor human powers."

Camilla, won by the inner melody of the northern voice and its unexpected cry, its eloquence, considered her. Nellie was looking into the smoke. She had paused and settled herself in a businesslike way. She cocked her head, like a journalist envisaging his paragraph.

She continued, "My brother Tom doesn't think like me. The poor lad's grown heartless, nothing but the flame of the moment, a poor trifler, out of work and living like a tramp. I had a letter from him this morning, Camilla; a sad change. He was my friend. We were together in everything. I led, he followed. I led them all. But he wandered away from me. He left his beliefs in socialism, the light went out of him: a spendthrift, a ne'er-do-well, an unemployable, a mischief-maker; that's what it comes to. The poor lad, Camilla. A tragedy. Stumbling after happiness, which eludes him like a will-o-the-wisp, getting deeper into the swamp and clutching at a straw. The misery of it breaks my heart. He's in the clutches of a harpy, Camilla, wandering round the country, like two gypsies with no home. I'm desperate that this iron ration of happiness will be taken from him." When she spoke of her brother she used the home accent. She said *puir la'ad*.

"What is she like?" enquired Mrs. Yates.

~~Mrs. Cook rose and stood at the fireplace swinging one leg and shaking ash into the fire.~~

"No good, I'm afraid. It's the case of the snake and the fascinated rabbit. She's much older than he though she doesn't look it; the cosmetics and the hairdresser. She'll leave nothing undone to hold him every excuse to keep him from humanity! Persuades herself of the higher motive. She's woven him into her web. She's taken the poor helpless fly and made him her parcel. She's carrying him away death and beyond! That's the type, that preys upon men. And he's promised to die with her!"

She leaned her head on her hand on the mantelpiece.

"What!" said the dressmaker.

"Ah, Camilla, the tenacious, bloodsucking, unscrupulous harpy! It's hard to understand; for he's a bitter man, disenchanted. He's not like me, pet, apt to glamorize everyone."

She sighed.

Camilla, sewing, said, "Yes, you must feel it to lose a great friend like that!"

Nellie stared. She turned, put her hand behind the clock and drew out a tan envelope, took out a sheet of engineer's squared paper and held it out to Camilla.

"There! It came this morning from my brother. It'll show you the hopelessness. Spending the little they've got on every quack remedy, a typical woman's trick. And there's no black or white in her mind every method is fair. A superstitious roving, looking for the impossible; and costing George and me money. There's a London doctor in it and we footed the bill to the tune of forty pounds. Read it! You'll see him like a fly in the gluepot."

Camilla, after hesitating, took the sheet of squared paper and read,

Nellie:

I am sorry Mother is sick but I cannot leave Marion now. We must try everything. We have hope in a cure we are trying now. I had to bring her away from the nursing home and she depends on me. In two or three months we will know if this salve will work. It is supposed to cure third-degree burns. She is fighting it out. She will take no drugs for she says the doctors will kill her. I don't know how she stands the awful pain. I cannot leave her. If she begins to mend, I will go up to Bridgehead and see Mother.

Affly, Tom.

The dressmaker read this slowly.

Nellie sat with a sparkling angry face and said, "You see? You see the situation? Relentless to the last."

"It's a terrible thing for the poor man. Is he alone with her?" Nellie put the note away, saying vaguely, "No, pet. I think there's someone else. They've no money for a nurse. It's a case of destitution."

Camilla bent her head over the dress.

Nellie said, "You see what it is? He has no reason for living and he goes off the deep end over something like this."

She got up and lounged about the room. She came and stood near Mrs. Yates, looked down at her and said melodiously, "I'm the guilty one. I brought him to London from the home climate and everyone doesn't transplant. I was the pathfinder. I thought I'd go out and find a way for them, my brother and sister. I threw up the college work because they kept grinding our noses into the footnotes of Shakespeare. It's the living word that matters in our day. That's the way to disgust you with

Shakespeare. And then, pet—there are some things that it is not right, even in Shakespeare, to offer innocent minds. It's enough to make you think ill of Shakespeare. It did for me. I walked out and got a job. I was getting five pounds a week when most of them had nothing a week; and I was the leader, was the dashing Jack Malone. So I influenced them too much perhaps. I knew I had something in me. Aye, I was guilty. I walked out of a good job with me poor mother depending on me pay. Me Dad, the old soldier, was wearing out his strength lifting the elbow. He made good money but it went down the gutters of Bridgehead one way and another. Ah, the grand old humbug; he's been the plague of our lives. I never liked it here, pet. They still make me feel like an invader from the north. But I had to come. It was my destiny. There it is, pet, in a nutshell. Now you understand us."

"Is it cancer?" said Camilla.

Nellie turned away for a moment, took a puff, said, "It's cancer, pet. And there they are traipsing around the country after quacks. It's all illusion: there's no reality to it."

"I'm sorry for him."

"Don't be sorry for him. His life is nothing but a dancing in a hall of mirrors."

Camilla looked at her, not understanding.

"And so I must go to see my family now. My brother's let me down."

She went out, came back again and leaned against the doorpost. She had put on a pair of blue overalls to chop some wood in the yard. She smiled at Camilla and an old-fashioned expression came into her face, like the charm of the delicate-faced crop-headed stage stars of the early twentieth century. For the first time she had a lick of beauty. She went and chopped the wood.

Presently, she came back dressed to go out and implored Mrs. Yates, "Don't think badly of me, Camilla, for leaving you alone. The house is yours, chick. Have some lunch. Mrs. McMahon will be along after lunch to clean up a bit. She's an angel and she'll beg you for work to do. She's a real friend, chick, remember. Her life's hard, poor soul. Married to an older man, a good man, but it's no happiness. And this is her home away from home. And yours too, Camilla."

"Well, I'll stay to finish this, and leave it for you. I may go away next week to see my father-in-law; he may do something for the children; I'll leave them with Edmund. They obey him like a father. They don't obey me."

Nellie gave her a sweet, open, doubting look, "Eh, Camilla, you're a damn good woman. I don't know how a man can leave you."

"Well, they say they can't. But he did," Camilla remarked in good humor.

"Were you hard-hearted to him?"

Camilla laughed.

Nellie went away shaking her head, "You're my idea of a beautiful woman! I wish my poor brother had fallen for a woman like you, pet."

Before she left, she came back with a book in her hand. She placed it beside Mrs. Yates.

"I know you've seen the world, Camilla. I'd like your opinion on this woman. Was it injustice? Was she guilty or not? She says they hounded her. We don't know what is a criminal, or how the criminal suffers do we? The law will never tell us who is a criminal. When I see someone branded I hear the hounds baying. I can't shake it from my mind. I'd be grateful for your opinion."

She took a little canvas bag, her shoulder bag and left. When she had gone Mrs. Yates looked at the book. It was the account of a murder trial at the beginning of the century; the trial of a French woman, Madame Steinheil, for poisoning her husband. A French President, Felix Faure, a friend of hers, she said, died of an overdose of aphrodisiac in a brothel. There was also trouble over a diamond necklace she said was given to her by Monsieur Faure. Mrs. Yates glanced through it and put it on the shelf. C

the shelf was a book by Frida Strindberg about her life with the dramatist. On the flyleaf was written in Nellie's flowing hand,

I thank God every day for George, for a man of genius who is human and tender and great. What if I had found one like this? Read it again and again and bless the fate that traced my lines. I was spared all suffering. From him only goodness.

When there was trouble in the industrial north, Northumberland, Durham, Nellie's newspaper sent her up there. She was able to get a week there now, some of the Tyne shipyards being struck; and after getting news along the River Tyne, she went home to her people, the Cotters, in Bridgehead. She had a cup of tea at the Bridgehead Station refreshment room and made for the hill leading to Hadrian's Grove, a long suburban road above the river, and lined on each side with small brick houses, all alike with bow windows, picket fences and roomy attics in the sharp tiled roofs. Whistling, striding, her shoulder bag flapping, she passed the church and came to Number 23. In the front yard was a grass patch, a tree; a few springs of parsley grew by the doorstep. The multiple curtains in the bow window were drawn. She tried her latchkey. The door was bolted; she rang. A dog barked and Nellie called "Eh, Tom! Where's Peggy?" When the door opened, there was a struggle. Nellie edged in with the door against her, while a furious young sheepdog jumped up and down snapping at her gloves and scarf. He got a glove and tore it quickly. Nellie called soothingly, "Eh, there, Tom man, down man, eh, ye dumb dog, how are ye, Peggy darling? Where's Ma? Stop it, Tom then man, sure he knows his old Nellie. Eh, Peggy darling, call him off, pet!"

Peggy, a short doughy woman with dark eyes and brows in an oval face, and in apron and pair of rubber gloves, said she was just doing the silver. "I didn't hurry," she explained, "because I thought it was Pop; and I thought if he can choose his time, I'll take my time."

"Well, sweetheart," said Nellie cheerily, "so old Pop Cotter's going to come home early? It must be the year of the comet. And where's me old sweetheart, where's Mary Cotter, where's me Ma?" She pushed open the door of the front room, where as well as the piano, the expensive leather suite with sofa and smoking chair, the little tables, the sideboard stacked with bric-a-brac and books, there was a double bed in which lay old Mrs. Cotter.

Simon Pike, a little lean man of just on eighty was bowed over the kitchen fire reading the *Daily Mail*. The kitchen was a small narrow room with one window looking on a little tree and asphalt path under a high wall. Opposite the window was a large fireplace with an old stove and boiler in it. There was a gas stove alongside, cupboards and a dresser in the corners, a kitchen table under the window. The hall door and the back door made a through draft. The brass rails and fender, the stoves, table and sink, and all things but the window were very clean. A ceiling clothes rack had been let down near the fire and the damp clothes touched Uncle Simon's head. He sat in a straight hard armchair in which he could not fall asleep and which almost filled the space between the fender, the kitchen table and the sink. When anyone used the sink, he was splattered and said sharply, "Don't splash me!" His chair was placed with its back to the back door which led to the pantry, scullery, vegetable racks and the back yard. When this door was opened the cold wind blew on his back and he muttered, "Shut the door." Next to his seat were the coal scuttles, a pile of wood which he had split, the firelogs; high on the mantelshelf were bundles of lighters made by him and in the oven a few newspapers to dry. Uncle Simon made, tended, mended and raked out the house fires.

It was about nine thirty at night. Simon heard a sound, got up, a bowed and cramped little man, with

his spectacles on, half-opened the hall door and sat down again, looking towards the door. Someone came in by the front door. Simon shrugged slightly. Mr. Thomas Cotter, Senior, hung up his hat and coat on the hall stand and said, "Well, well, well, well, well," in a fine loud baritone. There was no answer. He came down the hall to the kitchen door. "Where's Mrs. Cotter?" said he.

Simon looked him up and down, a long look for Thomas was just on six feet tall, and very broad and then he said, "She's been in bed all day and she's asleep now or ought to be, if ye didn't wake her." He went back to the *Daily Mail*.

Mr. Cotter, in the door, turned cheerfully to call, "Are you there, Peggy? Where's Peggy?" He turned back, came in saying, "And me, a hungry man." Simon looked at the hall door. Cotter came in, pulling it to, and looked down at the fire. "Good evening," said Mr. Cotter.

"Good evenin'," said Simon; "your dinner's in the oven. It'll be warm."

Cotter said, in a jolly tone, "Must I get it myself with women in the house?"

Simon said, reading his paper, "It's been waitin' for ye."

Mr. Cotter sat down and at this moment the dog Tom came through the hall door and after growling a little at Cotter and a little at Uncle Simon, but only for the form, he looked in his various saucers, drank some water and came to the fire. Cotter said to the dog, "There's a bad dog, there never was a worse dog than that. Like dog, like master. If they'd given you to me, Tom, you'd be a different dog tonight." The kelpie turned round and barked at Mr. Cotter.

Quickly Peggy came in scolding, "What are ye doin' to him, man?"

"Well," said Cotter, "it's the gaffer! I'm hungry, gaffer. She's the gaffer now and we all have to wait for our P's and Q's. Where's my dinner, lass? Do you mean to say a man comes in late and nothing waiting for him, eh?"

"You could have come before, we all ate hours ago."

"And a house with women in it and I must serve myself, is that it," said Cotter tenderly, looking round.

"If it's the women's food you're eating as well as your own, I don't see why not," said Peggy, at the same time getting plates out of the oven. "Will you eat here tonight?"

"Thomas Cotter eats in his own dining room," said he graciously; "and I hope you haven't let the fire go out; don't say you haven't laid the cloth for me?"

"Now don't get excited man, I'll lay it," said Peggy, "but you leave the dog alone, Mr. Cotter."

Mr. Cotter said, shaking his head, "It's a bad dog, that dog."

"If you'd give him to me, gaffer, I'd make a dog out of him; but that's a bad dog, he's spoiled. Look at him now." He flicked his clean pocket handkerchief at him.

Peggy said, "He's a bad dog because he sees you're bad, that's all, Thomas Cotter; a dog knows a man. Now don't tease him man, or I'll make you regret it to your dying day."

As she entered the hall with things on a tray, there were steps running downstairs and Nellie's lively voice called out, "Is that you, Pop Cotter? How are you, me bold lad?" Half smiling, Peggy went into the unlit dining room where the fire still burned and a snowy starched cloth was laid for the man of the house. Nellie skated down the hall to the kitchen.

Mr. Cotter sat monumentally in his chair and, as his elder daughter entered, calling, "Hello, Pop Cotter!" he said, "Ah, Mrs. Cook, that was a bad thing you did, there was never a blacker day for the house, than the day you brought that dog in the door. You know what I think about that dog? It's a bad dog! But if the gaffer would only give him to me, I'd know how to treat him. He needs training." Meanwhile, he had fished a red handkerchief out of his trousers' pocket. He flicked it at the dog who growled at him, so that Mr. Cotter was able to kick out with his large boot and prod him.

"Couldn't you see Mother, Pop," said Nellie. "She's waiting for ye, pet. You know she doesn't sleep till you come in."

"Yes," said Mr. Cotter, "that's a bad dog and that was a black day, Mrs. Cook, when you brought that dog across the threshold, Nellie. You never did a worse thing."

Nellie laughed loudly to oblige him.

Peggy came back to the kitchen and said to her father, "Now you leave that dog alone, man, and I leave you alone." She opened the drawers of the dresser and asked good-humoredly where the silver was. "I had it all out this afternoon; and I suppose Mother took it away."

"Look for it in the grandfather clock, pet," said Nellie, "that's where she had her shoes this afternoon."

"Then that's where it'll not be; it is vexing."

"Do go and see Mother, Father," said Nellie. "She should have been asleep long ago; but she stayed awake for you, now go on."

Mr. Cotter heaved himself up and went along the hall to the front room where his wife had been sleeping since her fall on the stairs. She now spent her days there, sometimes walking about a little in her nightgown; he slept upstairs still in the fine front bedroom. They could hear him crooning and cajoling, "How are you, Mary, are you better? Are you feeling better now, this evening, Mary my girl? Are you going to sleep? Now that's right then, sleep now, my girl; are you going to sleep now? Now that's all right, now will you sleep if I tell you, will you promise?"

Peggy had found some knives and forks done up in a parcel in the cleaning drawer, had laid the tray and got the dish from the oven, a full plate of meat. "It's still hot," she said, "that's good; the fuss he makes! He thinks the whole henhouse must wait up for him."

"Now then, pet," said Nellie, "it's his right, he's the head of the family." Uncle Simon laughed at this and read his paper.

Peggy said, "As a father of a family, he's a disgrace. Why should he get it when he's spending it all in the pubs?"

"Hush, pet," said Nellie, "he's the head of the house and you must be grateful because he's always kept a roof over our heads."

Now Mr. Cotter could be heard in the hall, still crooning, "Are you all right for the night, the Mollie? Are you comfortable, Mollie? That's right then, dear. Sleep now, sweetheart, have a good night now and please me."

Nellie smiled, "Ah, he's a pet."

Peggy said, "If he worried about her, he'd stay at home and entertain her at nights."

"Now then pet, it isn't the custom of the men in this town as you know; you can't blame the pair of us for doing what the others do."

Peggy hunched. "I know he can't do any wrong with you, but he can do wrong with me. He can do wrong with her. And you can all do wrong with me, for I know what's under it all."

Nellie said, "No, you don't, darling. You don't know that."

"I know," said Peggy, "it's selfishness, it's nothing but self. The dog there has a better heart than you all."

Nellie said, "Now then, pet, now there he goes into the dining room. I'll take it in, pet, and you bring the tea."

As soon as Nellie went out with the tray, the dog began to torment Uncle Simon, by barking rowdily and snatching at his hand. Peggy said meaningly to the dog, "Don't do it, man, don't do it, man!"

Simon said sarcastically, "Don't do it, don't do it, do it!"

"If you didn't torment him man, he'd let you alone. He knows what's what."

Simon said, "Knows what's what."

Peggy cried, "Don't mumble there at him, man; it drives him silly. He's not responsible. He knows you mean harm, man! He's a young dog and he's sharp; and he knows what ye mean. Besides, doesn't he know as I know, ye kick him in the darkness of the hall? I'm on to you. Don't play so hypocritical on Uncle Simon, man. I see through you, man. Let's have a bit of peace, for God's sake."

"A bit of peace for God's sake," said Uncle Simon.

Peggy continued, "Now he doesn't mean anything. That's just his fun. He's got to play, man. He's young. He's not old and shriveled up and ready to die like you. Man, remember when you were young." And this she said in a didactic scolding voice.

Old Simon Pike replied, "When A was young, aye! A wudna be here if A was young." He laid down his paper and began to straighten his back. "When A was young A was oop before six in the mornin'. At six in the mornin' and before A set oot for wark. A was at wark at Armstrong's at six. We all were there then. It was different then. Ye wudna see a hoose aboot here then, but wan or two. A've seen snaw here for six weeks, but A was oop every mornin' at five and off to me wark before six. A was a cannon lad. Ye wudna catch me here if A was young and if your puir mother wasna so sick and Thomas never in the hoose."

Peggy laughed cheerfully at this, "It's yourself you're thinking of, man. Sitting by the fire and reading your paper; it's not a hard life, is it? That's why you're here and getting everything, your fire and your food and all for only your pension. It suits your pocket, too. Don't make a martyr of yourself, man. It doesn't suit you: you're not a martyr, man. You're selfish like them all. All are selfish and you're most of all. A man who was always a bachelor, that's a selfish man, isn't it?"

Simon said, "No, it isn't; perhaps A had me reasons."

"Aye, reasons for spending nothing and keeping warm and cosy, and never taking a chance. You'll understand yourself, man." She cackled. "It's funny to see how the man regards himself. As a fine man. And maybe you saved the family, too, with your savings?"

Simon was still straightening himself and now he rose very slowly from his seat where he had been sitting since suppertime. Peggy looked at him and laughed, "Now, there's no need to rise to the occasion, Uncle Simon, man."

Simon said, "A'm no risin' to the occasion. If A cud rise to the occasion, ye wudna see me heels for dust. A'm risin' slowly to straighten me back and get goin' oopstairs if A'm no welcome here."

Peggy crowed, "Look at the man, now. That's a new act, that's a new song and dance. Now, he's no martyr. Take yourself off, you're more bother than you're worth with your bit of money. No one wants you, you'd be better gone to St. Aidan's churchyard, you would, no one wants you and no one needs you. Puir thing, you think so highly of yourself and you're only a man that has no family and that has been a hanger-on all his life."

Simon was now as straight as he could get and looking not at her, but into the distance, out into the hall, but seeing nothing, his voice shaking out loud, he said, "If it hadna been for me, ye'd all have been on the street wance or twice, ye don't know that." He was trembling and he looked for understanding to Nellie, who had just come from the hall to the kitchen. "There wud ha been no food in this hoose, but for me savin's which A gave ye twice." He looked at Nellie.

She said brightly to Peggy, "Now, what is it, pet? Come in, Peggy, darling, and talk to Father. He's askin' for ye. What is it, Uncle Sime, sweetheart? Sure, ye were always good to us, a guid man. We were always glad to have you, sweetheart. What would home have been without Uncle Sime in the attic? You made the fires for us every day of your life, Uncle Sime, didn't ye?"

Peggy had gone out with the teapot, and Nellie began disarranging her blouse to wash at the sink. Uncle Simon looked at her and she, with a bold daring grin at him, fully bared her starved breasts which she held in her hands and she said in dialect, grinning, "A'm goin' to wash." She went to the sink.

Uncle Simon was not straight now. He was bowed and looking downwards. When she returned from the sink, Uncle Simon still stood in the middle of the floor by his chair by the fire. She came and stood in front of him, her breasts lying loose, tempting the ragged old man. He lifted his large faded blue eyes to her sternly. She burst out laughing loudly. 'Ye mustn't take the puir girl seriously, Uncle Simon, pet." She swaggered back to the sink, "She's not to blame, pet: we are. We're all guilty, you and me too. We're all guilty."

Uncle Simon sat down and bent over the fire. He tried to control the trembling of his body and hands as he put a coal on the fire.

When Mr. Cotter had finished the plate, he said to Nellie, "Is this all you've got in the house? And what about the roast from Sunday? I need a bit of meat. I wasn't brought up on bits and bacon like you."

Peggy said, "Uncle Simon has a right to his little bit of the roast and you've had all the rest. The rest of us, mother and me, don't touch the stuff. It's not good for us. And it's not good for you or your stomach, except that your stomach's ruined by your firewater and it doesn't matter with you."

Cotter said, "You see what I say? You must look after yourself in this house. In this house you must take thought for yourself, for no one else will bother about you." He examined the butter, spread it on some bread, "It's every man for himself—in this house. Now haven't you got an egg for me? Haven't you got some cheese? Where are your pretty manners, gaffer? Aren't you the gaffer?"

"There's an egg for mother and one for me in the morning," said Peggy continuing to knit.

Cotter said angrily, "I came home the night before last and found no meat on my plate."

"Where would I get meat every night for your plate? Don't you eat all the meat off the joint?"

"Yes, you do, Pop Cotter," said Nellie; "you get more than your fair share, pet; you must think of others."

At this attack, Cotter turned to Peggy and said thoughtfully, "You see, gaffer, times aren't what they were and the money isn't coming in as it was. You must cut your cloth, gaffer—you must cut your cloth—"

Peggy cried out, "Cut my cloth! It's like your cheek, Pop Cotter, to talk about cutting my cloth. It's you who's cutting a big swath in the cloth and no cloth for anyone else. It's like your cheek."

"Now, you say it's like my cheek," he returned graciously, "now it isn't like my cheek. You must cut your coat according to your cloth, now that's well known."

Peggy said, "If forty-five shillings comes into this house, you spend fifty in drink."

Cotter went on, philosophically, gently, "You must cut your coat, gaffer. You, you, Mrs. Cook, there," he said appealing to Nellie, "my daughter, you, Nellie Cotter, that's known as Cushie Cotter now. Do you know what happened to me last week? I was down in the—football club—and a young fellow there said to me, Mr. Cotter, there's a C. Cotter writing in the papers, in the labor papers, is that your daughter? She's got an article saying that over in Sunderland there's a family—a couple with eleven children living in one room and when the beds are made for the night there's no room to walk. Now that's a libel on us and it's printed in London. Is that your daughter? No, said I, that's Cass Cotter, she belongs to those other Cotters who live near Newcastle, she's not a daughter of mine, she's no Durham Cotter, Mr. I don't know your name. There was your article, Mrs. Cook, as large as life for

every man to read, with your name in type at the top, C. Cotter. Now you could have used the name Cook; but I'm not against your using the name Cotter, Miss Cotter; it's a matter of principle. Now you listen, Mrs. Cook, you don't understand. When you've had my experience, you'll understand, Mrs. Cook, that that's a very bad thing. You can do as you please, think as you please, think what you like, but keep it dark. That's good sense and good manners, Mrs. Cook; don't wear your heart on your sleeve."

"Ah, Pop Cotter, you're talking rubbish," said Nellie.

He went on in his deliberate, gentle manner, "There you were earning fifteen pounds a week in the housing business, that Roseland Development there, and you had your principles in your pocket with you and no one asked you what you thought. You could write articles on the side; and now, look where you are. You're getting five pounds a week. We could have used the margin here at home, if you could do without—and you've got nothing for it. Don't wear your heart on your sleeve! Now a fellow asked me, Is that the same C. Cotter, my daughter and I say, No, my name's Thomas Cotter and I have no daughter of that sort. What I'm thinking, he doesn't know and doesn't ask. That's a matter of principle only; don't wear your heart on your sleeve."

Nellie said, flicking away her ash, "That's all right, Pop, that's all right."

Cotter went on with the calm power of a tall strong man, "Now I'm not against your having opinions; a man and a woman's got a right to opinions; this is a free country, isn't it?—but it's just humanity not to wear your heart on your sleeve for daws to peck at. They don't care about your principles. You listen to your father, Miss Cotter; he'll give you good advice. What good did it do, your wearing your heart on your sleeve and dropping ten pounds a week? No, said I, I'm Thomas Cotter and every man knows me; but that Cotter's another family over Newcastle way that I happen to have met, I said. But you don't know that C. Cotter."

"All right, Pop Cotter," said Cushie.

Cotter said more directly to her, "I'm not arguing for your turning your coat; I'm arguing for you not wearing your heart on your sleeve. I'm not the man to say a man hasn't a right to his opinions. And so you see. Miss Cotter—you see—the money's not coming in and I don't know if there will be a fresh newlaid egg for your mother's breakfast; for the gaffer there has not learned to cut her cloth. You see what you've done, Mrs. Cook? Now wasn't that a fine thing to happen to me right down in the—"

Nellie said, "The football club; all right, Pop Cotter."

He continued, as if he had not heard her, "This young fellow comes up to me. Are you Thomas Cotter, said he. I am, sir, I said, that's my name—"

"And you said, Don't wear your heart on your sleeve. I'm sick of your blather, Pop Cotter," said Peggy.

"Now, that'll do, pet," said Nellie to her young sister.

Peggy continued cheerfully nagging, "And when you set the police on us to bring us home when we were young here, you didn't like our opinions."

Nellie said, "Hush, sweetheart; we were eating his bread."

Cotter said blandly, "Now what you're referring to, gaffer, is just what I was saying. You wore your heart on your sleeve and that was for daws to peck at, a danger to the community, so a loving father, with my experience, I—"

Peggy said, "You set the police on Nellie and young Tom and me: that's the kind of father you were."

Nellie said, "Now, hush, pet, you'll not speak to father that way. He's our father and he kept a roof over our heads, no matter what; and in the blackest days he fed us."

Nellie had...

NELLIE HAD brought some money with her to buy a new pair of shoes in a Bridgehead shop that suited her; and when the money started to go for the family needs, she thought she'd get her shoes cobbled at the reliable old family cobbler's; but that money went too; and she returned to London, with her paper, in the same queer broken-soled shoes with the twisted heels.

As soon as she had turned in her material, she took a few drinks and then hurried home. She had written again from Bridgehead to her friend at Roseland Development, Caroline Wooller, to throw up her job, to come and spend a few days with her and look for a room. Caroline could get a room near the Cooks', get a job in housing, if she was still interested in that, and Nellie would guide her.

Nellie said to herself as she went along, "I love that girl; I'm so susceptible, aye. I hand out my heart like a blooming throw-away."

She rushed into her house on Lamb Street, with parcels in her arms, a cigarette in her mouth, cheerily calling out; but it was too early. No one was home from work. There were letters from George: he was traveling south, hoping to get a job in Rome. There was a little scratch from her brother, three lines, which made her angry; and one signed Johnny, and written by a woman she had known long ago up north, a ragged, dirty, big-faced, black-haired woman who hated the world and was determined to live on it for nothing; a bold, harsh, fearless tramp whom Nellie admired. Johnny was on her way south and expected to stop with Nellie when she reached London; but she was vagabonding and might not be in for months. Johnny wrote once every four or five years.

Nellie stretched out on the bed, shook off her shoes and lay smoking. She was flattered that Johnny had not forgotten her. She thought of Johnny and what Johnny had taught her, of a girl who had died for Johnny; and of others, a person called Jago, a man of forty who had taught Nellie what the world was, when Nellie was sixteen; and of an Indian boy in the Jago circle who had died a terrible death, and of things that would never come out now. Yet she suddenly began to tremble. She jumped up, "Ah, no! Ah, no!" She was loyal to comrades in the unnamed rebel battalion she marched in, outcasts, criminals, the misunderstood, women not one of whom could show a clean record; but she wished Johnny were not coming. Johnny did not believe in marriage. Nellie had not seen her since before her marriage to George. George would not tolerate the tramp woman; and what if he found out, suspected something? George was aboveboard, intolerant, and had no use for castaways, for the aimless, refractory suffering bohemian. But Johnny's contempt and wrath were sufferings Nellie could not endure, either.

She walked up and down, went downstairs, presently got a bottle from a locked cupboard and began to drink. The cupboard was locked only against herself, because she was short of money at present and liked to have a drink for visitors.

Someone opened the street door. Nellie washed the glass, put away the bottle and called from the kitchen. It was Caroline Wooller. Nellie at once became joyful, told Caroline to go upstairs, she'd be up in a jiffy with tea and sausage rolls, and she lifted a gay tender face to Caroline as she went upstairs.

Caroline was a tall sober-faced woman, with thick loose fair hair, blue eyes and a small mouth.

Nellie came up to the front room in the attic with her tea tray, sat down and told about her family at Bridgehead, putting everything in a dramatic light; and then while Caroline lay back on the bed, seeming very tired, Nellie began smoking furiously in silence. Caroline sighed.

"Well, chick, what happened to you? Were you all right while your Nellie was away?"

Caroline exclaimed, "Nellie, I've got a job! Right away! Joseph—that man—recommended me and got a job at once with the Rehousing Committee. It happened they needed someone at once."

Nellie was not pleased and said nothing.

A strange thing had happened. Caroline wondered what Nellie would think of it. Her friend Belle Coyne thought it very strange. It happened through Belle Coyne. Belle who was, she said, descended from a bastard son of one of the old English kings, was a girl in the Roseland office who had befriended her after Nellie left. She knew Caroline was looking for a room in London and brought in a newspaper with a remarkable advertisement in the ROOMS TO LET. It said, special low terms and homelike conditions for colonial and dominion girls; and quoted a very low rent.

"Belle came to London with me. I could never have found it without Belle. It was in a street, a broad street with villas running down to the Thames; but I can't tell you where, except that it was near a bridge. It was a big dark red house of brick with four stories and a slate roof and with a lot of ground in front. There was no front door. The entrance was at the side, a flight of steps under a glass canopy. You see, as I had been out to America, Belle thought I could say I was from overseas. I had my tartan silk dress on."

She paused, thinking about the event.

"Aye, pet."

"The woman who opened the door was not what we expected. She was handsome, dark, proud, well-dressed—she looked us over and told us to go upstairs, peremptory, like the headmistress of a girls' school. She said she had one room, one for me: and showed us up to the second floor. I was rather pleased that she was a lady. She didn't seem to like Belle. The second floor was nearly all ballroom with a number of small plain doors opening out of it; another staircase going up."

"Go on, pet."

"The woman showed us into a little room at the side, very plain and small with a skylight, no window. It must have been over the entrance. It was too small. I said it wouldn't do. She said, I might get a bigger room later on; but for the rent it was good. There was no running water. I said, But I will never get my luggage in here. She seemed surprised and said, Have you a lot of luggage? I said, Yes, I brought my whole trousseau back with me from overseas. This is true."

"The woman hesitated, then said she would go downstairs and find what room they had for luggage. While she was away Belle said to me, Why is there no lock? Why is there just a bolt outside the door? I looked and saw that's how it was. When the woman came back, I asked, Why is there a bolt on the outside of the door and no lock inside? The woman was angry. She said it had been a closet and anyway, no one locked the doors there; they were all friends. So we left and said we'd let her know. She was very angry and said I must let her know at once, she had plenty wanting the room. But when we got into the street Belle said it was very funny about the door; and only a cubicle with a skylight. So I have stayed on here, till you got back, Nellie."

"Aye, I'm glad you did, chick," said Nellie dryly.

"What do you think of it?"

Nellie said curtly, "I don't know, pet; it beats me."

After a short pause, she suddenly became very gay, cajoling and sweet. She told Caroline that she needed a friend, not someone like Belle Coyne, who though no doubt kind, would get her into trouble.

"I see, I see very well, you need me."

Nellie said she'd get some drinks, they'd have supper and a nice long talk. But after tea they went out to a local tavern where Nellie was known; and there she was busy exchanging jokes with customers,

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