

Forrest Reid

A young girl with long, wavy brown hair is sitting in a tree, looking towards the left. She is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and pink shorts. The tree's branches are dark and thick, and the background is a dense canopy of leaves. The entire image is overlaid with a halftone dot pattern, giving it a textured, printed appearance.

Uncle Stephen

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CHAPTER I

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Beyond the iron wicket-gate stretched an avenue of yew-trees with, at the end of it, four wide shallow steps, dark and mossy, descending in a terrace to the graves. This avenue was straight as if marked out with a ruler. The yew-trees were straight, trim, and sombre, of a dull bluish-green that was not so dark as the shadows they threw on the unmown grass. They stood up stiffly against a deep ultramarine sky, and composed a picture at once formal and intensely romantic.

That is, if it happened to burst upon your vision unexpectedly, as it did upon Tom Barber's, flooded with a light from Poe's *Ulalume*. Young Tom in his new and ill-fitting suit of rough black cloth, beneath which he had sweated freely during the long drive, was for a minute or two rapt by that instant recognition into forgetfulness of the business that had brought him here. It was but a brief respite, however, and he awakened from it guiltily. Certain muffled and sliding sounds caused him to shrink back. *This* was not like *Ulalume*—this ugly varnished brass-handled box covered with flowers. For the flowers somehow increased its ghastliness. Shoulder-high his father's coffin was carried through the narrow gate and down the avenue, while he followed with Eric and Leonard—the chief mourners.

A feeling of resentment arose unhappily in his mind against everything and everybody connected with the funeral. The solemn wooden faces, the formal clothes, the secret indifference which had allowed hired men to bear the

burden, depressed and exasperated him. If anyone had really cared! But all this, and particularly those hideous wreaths with the cards of their donors carefully attached to them, suggested neither grief nor affection, but only the triumph of clay and worms, and the horrors that were already at work out of sight.

The burial service began. Mr. Carteret in his starched yet ghostly surplice stood by the grave slightly apart from the bare-headed group who watched and listened to him. It was as if everything for the moment had passed into his hands, and he were, by some mysterious incantation, sending forth the soul which till now had lingered near its old dwelling on a perilous and distant journey. Tom felt a sudden desire to weep.

He turned away. Deliberately he fixed his attention on a creamy, black-spotted butterfly who had entered the avenue. The butterfly's wavering flight as he flickered in and out of the bands of shadow and sunlight barring the green path seemed purposeless as that of a leaf in the wind. He, too, was like a little soul newly exiled from the body and not knowing whither to fly. The soul of an infant, perhaps. Then suddenly he alit on a stalk of foxgloves and became at once a comfortable earthly creature, warm with appetites, eager, impatient, purposeful, as he explored cave after purple cave, forcing an entrance, greedy, determined. Tom smiled: he very nearly laughed.

His smile faded and he blushed hotly as he encountered the rather dry and speculative gaze of Dr. Macrory. Dr. Macrory looked away, but Tom knew he had been caught. He felt ashamed and miserable. Furtively he glanced round

the little group of mourners of whom he was the smallest and youngest, but every face was still drawn to an appropriate expression of apathetic decorum. Only *his* mind had wandered, and yet it was his father they were burying. He was only Eric's and Leonard's step-father; only Uncle Horace's brother-in-law: as for the rest, there were even several persons there whose names Tom did not know.

He heard a faint cawing of rooks, like sleepy distant music. If he could slip away now, away from that raw red gaping hole.... He heard Mr. Carteret's voice: 'to raise us from the death of sin into the life of righteousness; that when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our brother doth; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day....' The words fell with a solemn cadence, but for Tom they had neither more nor less meaning than the cawing of the rooks. Any gentler feelings he might have had about death were at present obliterated by its unsightliness. The ugliness of death had been revealed suddenly, much as if he had come on an obscene inscription or picture chalked up on a wall. You didn't hang wreaths of flowers round *that*, or put on your best clothes to mope or to gloat over it. And supposing it was somebody you *loved* who had died—then all this kind of thing would be doubly revolting....

Uncle Horace and Eric and Leonard:—he found himself staring at them with hostility. And at home there was his step-mother, and Jane his step-sister—Jane, who among all these 'steps' was the only one he really liked. He *had* liked Eric—liked him more than he would ever like Jane—but it is impossible to go on caring for a person who shows you he

doesn't want to be cared for. Eric did not like him, and Leonard did not like him, and his step-mother did not like him. The only difference was that he could see Mrs. Gavney—now Mrs. Barber—*trying* to like him, an effort that faintly tickled his sense of humour, which was as odd as everything else about him. Of course, both Eric and Leonard were older than he was—though Leonard was only a year older, and for that matter Tom knew the question of age had nothing to do with it. They did not despise him because he was young but because he was different. And the worst of it was that in all on which they set the slightest value they *were* his superiors....

Tom's eyes closed for a moment at the sound of the shovelling of earth—the first dull thuds on hollow wood. It was horrible, but it passed quickly: once the coffin was covered there was only a scraping, scuffling noise. And all this squeamishness was not really sorrow for his father. *Was* he sorry—even a little? While his father had been alive he had never felt much affection for him: an atmosphere of coldness and remoteness had, as far back as he could remember, surrounded him. His father had never been unkind, but he had been extraordinarily unapproachable. And after his second marriage—his marriage with Mrs. Gavney, the mother of Eric and Leonard and Jane—he had seemed to think Tom must now have everything he needed—a second mother, companions of his own age. This last advantage had actually been mentioned—during a painfully embarrassing conversation from which Tom had escaped as soon as he could. Well, they needn't think he intended to go on living in that house in Gloucester Terrace, because he

didn't. Not without a struggle at any rate! If only he were his own master how easy it would be! In that case he would simply pack up and go; for though he knew nothing of his father's affairs, he knew his mother had left him plenty to live on. His mouth pouted in the incipient and repressed grimace inspired by Uncle Horace's solemn and proprietary gaze at that moment directed full upon him. Uncle Horace! All this 'uncleing' and 'mothering' had been from the beginning *their* idea! Uncle Horace was merely his step-mother's brother, Mr. Horace Pringle—no relation whatever. If it came to that, he had only one true relation in the world, or at least there was only one he had ever heard of, his mother's uncle—Uncle Stephen....

Tom's expression altered. The freckled face—redeemed from marked plainness by a pair of singularly honest and intelligent grey eyes—became stilled as the water of a pool is stilled. He might have been listening intently, or merely dreaming on his feet. Probably the latter, for when he awakened it was as if the hands of the clock had suddenly jumped on, leaving a little island of submerged time unaccounted for. It was strange: a few minutes had been lost for ever: he had been here and yet he had not been here! ... *Could* you be in two times at once? Certainly your mind could be in one time and your body in another, for that was what had happened—he had been back in last night. But suppose his body had gone back too! Then he would have vanished! Uncle Horace would have said, 'Where is Tom?' and somebody would have answered, 'He was here a minute ago: he was standing over there: he can't be far away.' Only, he *had* been far away. As far away as last night

—and in his bedroom. This odd experience seemed to make all kinds of things possible. Somebody might come to you out of *his* time into yours. You might, for instance, come face to face with your own father as he was when he was a boy. Of course you wouldn't *know* each other: still, you might meet and become friends, the way you do with people in dreams. The idea seemed difficult and involved, but doubtless it could be straightened out. Dreams themselves were so queer. When he had dreamed last night, for example, he was almost sure he had been awake. What he wasn't so sure of was that it had been a dream at all, or at any rate *his* dream....

Abruptly he became aware of a movement around him—an involuntary communication, as of so many simultaneously-drawn breaths of relief—and next moment he found himself shaking the damp hand of a stout elderly gentleman who seemed to know him. Tom's own hand was damp, with little beads of sweat on it, and his shirt felt moist and sticky against his body. Several other people shook hands with him: Mr. Carteret placed his arm round his shoulder.... And the midsummer sun beat down on the hard earth.

Eric and Leonard had put on their black bowler hats, and Tom put on his. They began to retrace their path, walking in twos and threes along the yew-tree avenue, at the end of which the cars were drawn up in a line. Tom came last; he did not want to walk with anybody; but Dr. Macrory waited for him.

Coming out of the gate, Tom halted, moved by a sudden desire of escape. The ruins of the Abbey stood grey and ivy-

creeped on a low hill, and down below was the lake, its water a steel-blue, broken by immense beds of green rushes. He heard the thin cry of a snipe. Rooks were still cawing in the distant trees, which stretched away in sunshine on the right; and beyond the lake the ground rose gradually in cornfields and pasture. The thridding of grasshoppers sounded like the whir of small grind-stones. Tom instantly saw them as tiny men dressed in green who went about sharpening still tinier knives and scissors for the other insects. A blue dragon-fly, like a shining airman, flashed by in the sun. There were lots of these small airmen, he knew, among the reeds on the lake, where they bred. He had an impression of emerging from some choking stagnant valley of death into the world of life.

Suddenly he whispered to Dr. Macrory, 'Let's go down to the lake. Couldn't we? *You* say we're going. Tell Uncle Hor—; tell Mr. Pringle.'

Dr. Macrory glanced at the smooth back of Uncle Horace's morning coat, at his beautifully creased trousers and glossy silk hat. His own coat, like Tom's, appeared to be the handiwork of a distinctly inferior tailor, and the collar showed specks of dandruff. 'I don't think it would do,' he said. 'You know what they are.'

But he rested a friendly hand on Tom's shoulder which the boy impatiently tried to shake off. His face suddenly flushed and lowered. 'Oh, damn,' he muttered. 'I'm going anyway.'

The doctor's hand closed on the collar of his jacket and grasped it firmly, while at the same moment the clear voice of Uncle Horace inquired, 'Where's Tom?' He turned round to

look for his nephew, standing by the big Daimler, holding the door open. Eric and Leonard had already taken their seats at the back.

‘He’s coming with me,’ called out Dr. Macrory, pushing the small chief mourner, whose face was like a thundercloud, towards his own two-seater; and when he had him safely inside, ‘That’s all right,’ he murmured. ‘They’ll probably take your behaviour for a sign of grief.’

Tom stared straight before him through the windscreen. For all his attitude of friendliness, the doctor, he felt, had let him down. He had wanted to talk to somebody: if they had gone to the lake he could have talked—sitting by the edge of the water. But he did not want to talk now. The kind of things he had to say were not to be said in a motor car and to a person half of whose attention was given to the road before him. He might just as well be in the other car with Eric and Leonard and Uncle Horace. For a moment, among all those people who so definitely were not *his* people, who were and always would be strangers, he had felt drawn to Dr. Macrory. Now he felt completely indifferent to him: Dr. Macrory, though he looked unconventional and adopted a free-and-easy manner, was really just the same as the rest. Tom with a little shrug settled down in his seat.

CHAPTER II

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The others had arrived before him, and as he came downstairs after removing the dust of his journey he could hear them talking. They were in the dining-room, so he supposed tea was ready. But the moment he opened the door the voices ceased, and in the sudden silence he stood motionless on the threshold, with heightened colour, his eyes fixed on the assembled faces all turned in his direction. Then the flash of Uncle Horace's smile, and his rather strident welcome, broke a pause which threatened to become awkward, for Tom still hovered by the door, unconscious of the curious effect his reserve and shyness were creating. His step-mother, looking blonde, resigned, and expansive, in her deep mourning, murmured that everything was ready, that they had only been waiting for Tom, and she told Leonard to ring the bell. 'It's raining,' Jane announced from the window.

He suspected, and the impression deepened when they took their seats round the table, that a definite policy in regard to himself must in his absence have been argued out and settled. Leonard actually of his own accord passed him the butter:—'Butter?' he murmured languidly:—and Eric asked him what he thought of Dr. Macrory's Citröen. Tom had not thought of it at all; he hadn't even known it was a Citröen; but he produced what he hoped might be a satisfactory answer; and the conversation drifted to and fro,

superficially normal, though with occasional pauses betraying an underlying constraint.

It was during one of these that he made up his mind to risk the question which all day had been in his thoughts, but which, he knew not why, he had felt a strange reluctance to ask. Even now he spoke in a low voice and without raising his eyes. 'Was Uncle Stephen told?' he said.

Nobody answered.

Tom recollected that possibly they did not know who Uncle Stephen was. '*My Uncle Stephen—Uncle Stephen Collet,*' he explained. Then, as the silence continued, he glanced up.

What had he said?—for he saw at once that it must have been the wrong thing. His step-mother's hands, grasping the hot-water jug and the lid of the tea-pot, were arrested in mid air, and Uncle Horace was looking at her warningly. Tom stared at them in astonishment, but next moment Uncle Horace replied. 'I didn't think it necessary to tell him. The announcement was in the papers. As a matter of fact it never occurred to me to write. Perhaps I should have done so.'

Mrs. Barber put the lid back on the tea-pot without having filled it. 'Why?' she asked stiffly. 'Why should you write?'

'Well, I suppose, as the only blood relation——' And again, it seemed to Tom, he flashed his signal of danger.

Mrs. Barber ignored it. 'He was no relation of Edgar's, and there had never been any communication between them.'

'I meant of Tom's,' Uncle Horace murmured.

'He never took the slightest interest in Tom. He cut himself off entirely from his family years before Tom was born; in fact when he was not much more than Tom's own age.'

'Oh, I don't for a moment suppose he would have come. Still——'

'I think it is much better as it is,' Mrs. Barber said, with an air of closing the subject.

For Tom she had merely opened it. 'Why?' he asked in his turn, flushing a little.

Mrs. Barber took no notice, and it was Leonard who spoke, fixing his eyes on Tom's puzzled face in a faintly cynical enjoyment. 'That's the magician, isn't it? It would have been rather sport if he——'

'Be quiet, Leonard!' his mother checked him sharply.

Tom felt the colour deepening in his cheeks. Enough had been said to show him that Uncle Stephen had been discussed before, and unfavourably. What right had they to discuss him! Nevertheless, he was more bewildered than offended. Leonard's mysterious allusion in particular left him in the dark. He knew it was meant to be sarcastic and to annoy him; but why should Uncle Stephen be called a magician? Where did the sarcasm come in? It was at this point that Jane kicked him under the table—a hint, he supposed, that he was to say no more. He obeyed it. After all, what did it matter what they thought! And he dropped into a detached contemplation of the whole Gavney family, induced by the secret knowledge that he would not often again be seated at their table....

They certainly were a remarkably good-looking lot:—Jane, dark and vivacious, singularly unlike her large-limbed, fair-haired brothers; his step-mother, handsome too, in an opulent full-blown way; Uncle Horace, vivid, sleek, and immaculate, like the men in the pictures in American magazines. He wondered why he had got on so badly with them—or at least with his step-mother and the boys—if it had been as much his fault as theirs? Of course, he had nothing in common with them, but then he hadn't *really* very much in common with Jane either, yet Jane and he were friends. They quarrelled; they quarrelled frequently; but they always made it up again—and sometimes he thought Jane quarrelled on purpose, just for the pleasure of making it up....

He became aware that Mrs. Barber, after a glance round the table to make sure everybody had finished, was rising slowly to her feet. All her movements were slow. They were like the movements of a cow—heavy, indolent, yet not ungraceful. She even suggested milk! This last reflection was quite free from irony; it simply came to him as he watched her standing by her chair in ample profile. Next moment she turned to her brother: 'I think Eric wants to have a little "confab" with you, Horace. Perhaps you would rather talk here, and join us later.'

'Not at all,' Uncle Horace answered dryly. 'I don't suppose Eric has any secrets to tell.'

Mrs. Barber did not press the point, and they adjourned to the drawing-room, Tom loitering behind the others in the hall, for he felt tempted to go to his own room. He wondered if it would do? The fact that Uncle Horace had not gone

home to dine, but had returned with them and was evidently going to spend the evening with them, seemed to show that the occasion was regarded as a special one. It was to be a family gathering, a kind of continuation of the funeral. Therefore it mightn't look very civil if he were to disappear, and indeed most likely somebody would be sent to bring him back. Besides, if they were going to discuss Eric's affairs, he supposed he would be allowed to read, or play a game of bezique with Jane.

One glance at the assembled company removed all hope of games. His step-mother looked mournful, Jane and Leonard bored, Eric sulky, and Uncle Horace cross. Not exactly cross, perhaps, but ready to become so. 'Well, what is this important news of Eric's?' he asked, and Mrs. Barber, to whom the question was addressed, glanced encouragingly at her son.

'It's about the bank,' she prompted him. 'Eric has been thinking things over.'

Uncle Horace eyed the thinker impassively. 'I understood all that had been settled months ago and that he was now working for his examination.'

Eric blushed, cleared his throat, and suddenly glared at his uncle. 'I'm going into the motor trade,' he announced in a tone which nervousness rendered alarmingly final.

'It's not that he doesn't appreciate the interest you have taken in him,' Mrs. Barber hastened to explain. 'But you know he's always had this taste for mechanics, and——'

'I know nothing of the sort,' Uncle Horace interrupted. 'It's the first time I've ever heard of his having a taste for anything but cricket and football.'

Mrs. Barber looked hurt, but she continued patiently, though with an implied reproach. 'He put in your wireless set for you. And when the electric light goes wrong, or the bells, as they're *always* doing——'

'A child of six could put in a wireless set. He did it very badly, too; brought down most of the plaster, and the thing never worked from the beginning.'

Mrs. Barber coloured. 'I'm sure the poor boy did his best, and you seemed quite pleased at the time.'

'Well, I'm not pleased now,' Uncle Horace snapped. 'The thing's absurd! Everybody knows the motor trade is overcrowded—all sorts of twopenny-halfpenny firms springing up daily and cutting each other's throats. I've offered to use my influence as a director of the bank, and if he gets in I can look after him and help him.'

'I *know* that, Horace. But you won't listen——'

'Who's going to pay his premium?' Uncle Horace asked bluntly.

'Surely, if the boy has a special talent——'

'Special fiddlesticks! It was a taste a minute ago. Anybody has only to look at him to see he hasn't a special talent. If he has brains enough to pass his bank examination it will surprise most of us.'

And in truth at that moment Eric did look a good deal more angry and obstinate than talented. He had risen to his feet and now stood before his uncle, with a frown on his handsome, sulky face, and his head lowered, rather like a young bull meditating a charge. Yet it was just this vision of him which moved Tom. Forgotten were all the slights and rebuffs he had received. 'He *does* know about motors and

things,' he burst in impulsively. 'He helped Dr. Macrory to take his old car to pieces and put it together again. And the other day——'

'Oh, shut your mouth,' said Eric roughly. 'I can look after myself without your interfering.'

Tom walked to the window, where he remained with his back to the room, looking out into the wet street.

'You *are* a beast, Eric,' Jane informed him dispassionately. 'I wonder Tom ever speaks to you.'

'Nobody was speaking to you anyway,' retorted her brother.

Mrs. Barber rose hurriedly from her chair. 'You're not *going*, Horace!' she exclaimed, for Uncle Horace was already half way to the door.

'The children will be able to talk more freely when I'm gone.'

'Surely you needn't mind about the children!' At the same time she embraced the entire group in one imploring glance. 'It was Tom who started it, though I dare say he meant very well. And Jane said she wanted to show you her poem in the school magazine.'

'*Mother*, what a whopper!'

But it was as if with this too emphatic denial the scene had culminated. There followed an uneasy silence, and as it drew out Tom realized that, like himself, everybody had forgotten and everybody now remembered his father. Uncle Horace returned sulkily to his armchair; his step-mother's face reflected an odd mingling of consternation and bereavement.

‘Show him your poem,’ said Tom under his breath; and Jane went meekly to fetch the magazine.

‘Oh, Leonard, do stop!’ cried Mrs. Barber tremulously.

The feeble tune, played with one finger, which had begun to tinkle falteringly from the piano, instantly ceased. Leonard got up from the music-stool and he and Eric retired into a corner, where they began to converse together in an undertone. Tom sat upright in his chair. And the minutes grew longer and longer, stretching out till they seemed like hours. Where on earth had Jane gone to? Was she never coming back?

The silence was at last broken by Mrs. Barber, speaking in a half-whisper which perhaps he was not intended to overhear. ‘Do you think I *ought* to write to Mr. Collet?’

Tom pricked up his ears, but no reply came from Uncle Horace.

Once more his step-mother spoke, and this time her voice had sunk lower still. ‘The only thing I’m afraid of is that he may say or do something.’

‘Say or do what?’ Uncle Horace grunted irritably, as if he had not yet got over the matter of Eric and the bank.

‘Well—you never know. And if he gets any encouragement.... Suppose he were to take it into his head that he wanted to *see* Tom!’

‘About as likely as that he’ll take it into his head he wants to see you.’

‘You’re so *rude*, Horace, when you’re cross! Yet you complain of the children’s manners!’

‘I haven’t complained of anything. Even supposing he did want to see Tom——’

‘Well, you know the stories there were——’

‘I don’t.’

‘And I told you what Elsie said.’

Uncle Horace made a gesture of fatigue. ‘Elsie! Who’s Elsie? If you’re referring to a lot of servant’s gossip—gossip in this case even more nauseating than usual——’

‘Nauseating!’

‘Well, imbecile then—and libellous—for it was both.’

‘Elsie wasn’t an imbecile. She *came* from Kilbarron, too.’

‘Naturally she came from Kilbarron, or she couldn’t have picked up the gossip.’

But Mrs. Barber was not easily silenced. ‘Some of it may have been gossip,’ she pursued with a quiet stubbornness. ‘All the same, there’s no smoke without a fire, and you can’t deny that he disappeared for *years*. That at least is true, for Edgar told me so himself.’ She paused, to make her next words more impressive. ‘What was he *doing* all those years? Even now nobody knows. There was a scandal of some sort, though it happened abroad and was hushed up, so of course at this time it is hard to say to what extent he was mixed up in it. But he seems to have had some very queer friends, and when he came back it was to shut himself up in that house.’

Uncle Horace had closed his eyes. He now half opened them. ‘All this, I suppose, is on the authority of Elsie. I wonder you ever brought yourself to part with her. She must have been singularly ungifted in other directions.’

‘It isn’t on the authority of Elsie. I told you I heard it from Edgar.’

'Then you might have kept it to yourself instead of bringing out ridiculous tales before the children.'

'The children—I'm sure I've never uttered a word to the children,' Mrs. Barber was beginning, when she caught sight of Tom's solemn gaze fixed upon her, and stopped.

'You've uttered a good many in the past five minutes,' Uncle Horace dropped acidly. 'Where do you think Leonard's remark at tea came from? Or was Elsie allowed to unbosom herself to the family in general?' He turned to Tom. 'Your mother thinks you've got an uncle out of a fairy tale, Tom, but I shouldn't advise you to build a romance on that. Mr. Stephen Collet is simply a recluse—which is all we know about him.'

Mrs. Barber looked first at her step-son and then at her brother. 'In my opinion a person who avoids his fellow creatures *must* be——'

But what such a person must be, Tom, to his regret, never learned, for at that moment Jane came back, having found her magazine, and Uncle Horace stretched forth a languid hand to take it. He put on a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, read the poem, and returned it to the authoress without comment.

Jane began to giggle.

'What is there to laugh at, Jane?' her mother inquired severely.

'Uncle Horace thinks it's no good,' said Jane.

'And why should you laugh at that? I suppose you *wrote* the poem to give pleasure.'

'Well, I'm not going to cry if it doesn't,' Jane retorted. 'For one thing, I never imagined Uncle Horace would like it, and

for another, I don't expect he knows about poetry:—do you, Uncle Horace dear?'

Uncle Horace, however, without even glancing at her, had again risen from his chair, and this time with an air no one ventured to oppose.

CHAPTER III

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Jane had whispered to him not to go to sleep, and he lay in the darkness waiting for her. She was extraordinarily fond of these nocturnal conversations. Things she had plenty of opportunity to tell him through the day would be saved up for the pleasure of communicating them at midnight. Tom could see no sense in it. Sooner or later her mother was bound to find out, and then there would be a fearful hullabaloo. But it was just this element of risk which Jane appeared to find so fascinating, and she took elaborate precautions of a kind that increased the danger. To-night, however, was an exception; to-night he wanted her to come; to-night he really had something to talk about. All the same, he didn't intend to lie awake for hours, and had half a mind now to get up and turn the key in the lock. It was useless to go to sleep without doing so, for she would not hesitate to waken him; and he was still considering the matter when he heard the signal she had invented, a scratching on one of the panels of the door.

That too, of course, was silly; but he was supposed to reply to it with a cough, and if he didn't cough Jane would simply go on scratching until she lost patience and came in. So he cleared his throat, and she immediately entered, a dark figure wrapped in a dressing-gown, and plumped down on the side of his bed.

Tom playfully had hidden under the clothes, but he popped out at once when she began to laugh. 'Don't make

such a row!' he whispered angrily. 'You'd think you were doing it on purpose. You might have some self-control.'

'Well, it's your fault. You know if I once begin I can't stop.'

'Then go away: there's nothing to laugh *at*.'

Suddenly his eyes blinked as an electric torch was flashed in his face. 'Now I can see you,' Jane declared complacently.

'Put that out. Where did you get it from?' He made a grab at her hand.

Jane eluded him, but she switched off the light.

'What is it you want to tell me?' Tom asked.

'Heaps of things. We're going to have a really long talk—longer, I mean, than usual.'

'We're not; so if you've anything to say you'd better say it at once.'

'I can't unless you sit up. If you don't you'll be falling asleep. I'm going to put on the light.'

'No,' said Tom.

'But what harm can it do? Everybody's in bed, and it's so stupid talking in pitch darkness.'

'I know it is, and I'm always telling you so. If it wasn't that this is very likely the last time——'

'The last time! Don't be absurd! You ought to be pleased and flattered instead of grouching like an old man of seventy.'

'*Do speak lower,*' Tom implored. 'You know what a scene there'd be if——'

'The only scenes are those you make yourself. You're the most frightful little coward—and frightfully conventional too.'

'If I am it's you that put it into my head. I'd never have thought about it except for all your hints.'

'I'm an adventuress,' Jane admitted. 'A dark, fateful woman with lovers.'

'Am I supposed to be one of the lovers?'

'Though I'd rather be in the secret service,' she pursued thoughtfully.

'What secret service! Your mind's absolutely crammed with rot.'

'I must say you're the politest boy——'

'Well, it's your own fault, with your dark fateful lovers.'

'I didn't say the lovers were to be dark *or* fateful: they may have sticking-out ears and freckles.'

Tom tried to think of a retort, but could not find one. 'Was this what you had to tell me? Because if so——'

'I never said I had anything to tell you.'

'You did: you kicked me at tea: and you told me afterwards not to go to sleep, because you were coming ——'

'Well—so I *have* come. Why don't you tell *me* something, for a change?'

'I was going to, but now I won't.'

'You really want me to stay a long time, then?' Jane murmured pensively.

'No, I don't: I want you to go away at once.'

'But I've only just come. Tom dear, I can't imagine one single reason why I should be so fond of you.'

'Neither can I.'

'And yet I'm going to give you a kiss.'

Tom moved quickly out of her reach. 'Can't you stop fooling,' he said.

'I'm not fooling: I'm yielding to affection.'

'What have you to tell me about Uncle Stephen?'

'*Uncle Stephen!* Nothing.'

'Why did you pretend you had, then?'

Jane drew her fingers softly down his cheek, but he pushed her hand away. 'You did: you know you did.'

'I'm sorry.'

Tom suddenly sat up and clasped his arms about his knees. 'Look here, I do want to talk, only——'

'Only what?' Jane murmured.

'I don't want you to make fun of me.'

'But I won't make fun of you:—not if it's anything serious.'

Tom turned to her doubtfully in the darkness. 'You mayn't think it serious,' he said.

'Is it about Uncle Stephen?'

'Yes, it is. I've read a book that he wrote. I've got it. I bought it. It's an old book, but Browns' were able to get it for me.'

Jane's voice lost its sentimental note. 'How long have you had it?' she inquired.

'Not very long: only a week or two. I'd have told you before, but I knew you wouldn't read it. It's all about Greek religion and a lot of it's *in* Greek.'

'Why are you telling me now,' Jane asked suspiciously.

'Well——' Tom's voice trailed away.

'Did *you* like it?'

'I liked the bits I understood. There were some bits I didn't understand.'

'Is that why you've suddenly begun to take such a violent interest in him? I don't believe it is.'

Tom hesitated. 'He doesn't know anything about me,' he answered evasively. 'You see, he was my mother's uncle, and even *she* had never seen him. He's my great-uncle.'

'Then he must be as old as the hills,' said Jane.

'Not so very old. He's only sixty-three.'

'How do you know?'

'I looked it up. Mother had a family tree. *Her* name's in it, and mine. I'll show it to you.'

'You put yours in yourself.'

'Well,' said Tom defiantly—'why shouldn't I...? Anyway, it was mother who told me Uncle Stephen had written a book: but I never thought of getting it till the other day. She didn't tell me *much* about him, but I know something happened when he was a boy, and he ran away from home, and never wrote, and for ages nobody knew where he was or what had become of him. And there were stories told about him. At least I think so: your mother said so to-night.'

'What kind of stories?'

'I don't know.'

'He *does* sound rather fascinating,' Jane confessed. 'But of course he may have reformed and become quite ordinary.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing: and if you're going to be so frightfully touchy about him we'd better talk of Uncle Horace instead.'

Tom hurriedly apologized. 'Uncle Stephen and I are the only Collets left,' he said.

'And you're not a Collet, you're a Barber.'

'It's the same thing. Besides, mother told me I took after her family.... Uncle Stephen was very like me when he was young.'

'Was he?' Jane asked sceptically. 'Did she tell you that too?'

'No, but I've been thinking about it. I wish Uncle Stephen *was* a boy.'

'Well, if you're so keen about him why don't you write to him? He might invite you for part of the holidays.'

'You saw what happened when I mentioned his name at tea.'

Jane's surprise was rather contemptuous. 'You mean to say you're going to let a thing like that put you off! Especially when you know how silly mother is about everybody who isn't exactly the same as herself.'

'They said a good deal more when you were out of the room, getting your poem.'

'Well, I know *I'd* write, no matter what they said—I mean, if I wanted to.... And I bet Uncle Stephen would have written when *he* was a boy.'

Tom sat quiet for a little. 'I dreamt about him last night,' he said softly. He waited for a moment or two, looking back at his dream. Then he went on in the same half-hushed, curiously childish voice. 'It was awfully vivid—just as if he was in the room. But it was dark and I couldn't see his face.'

'You couldn't have seen it anyway,' Jane pointed out, 'because you don't know what he's like.'

'He spoke,' said Tom. 'He told me not to be frightened, and who he was. He told me where he lived.'

'You knew that already.... *Were* you frightened?'

Tom hesitated. 'I think—a little—just at first,' he admitted. 'That's why it wasn't like a dream.'

'People are often frightened in dreams,' Jane contradicted. 'I've been frightened myself.'

'Not in this kind of dream. I—liked it. There was nothing to be frightened about—except its suddenness. He was suddenly there, I mean—in the room, between my bed and the door. And in a dream you're not surprised when a person is there, are you? It doesn't give you a start. It doesn't occur to you that they *oughtn't* to be there: it seems quite natural. You're just talking to them, and that's all. This wasn't like that.... Besides, I don't think I'd been to sleep,' he added. 'I'd been lying awake, feeling rather——'

He broke off, but Jane divined the unspoken words. 'You mean you were unhappy?'

Tom did not reply.

'It *must* have been a dream,' said Jane sharply. 'If it wasn't, what was it? I hope you're not going to be silly about this!' And she switched on the electric torch to have another look at him. Tom was staring straight into the darkness.

'If I tell you something,' he muttered, blinking and frowning in the unexpected illumination, which Jane immediately extinguished, 'will you swear to keep it a secret?'

'Do you want to tell me?'

'Not unless you promise.'

'All right, then; what is it?'