



Mary Webb

*The House
in Dormer Forest*

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Introduction

MANY of the best things in life seem to come to us simply by chance, and it was certainly chance which first brought me into contact with Mary Webb. On the eve of departure some years ago for Australia I was given *Precious Bane* by a friend whose opinion I greatly trust, and it so impressed me that, in addition to recommending it to all my friends, I wrote to the author and told her that I had read nothing more inspiring in modern literature. This started what to me was a most interesting correspondence, and I shall always remember that when I was ill just before I retired from St. Martin-in-the-Fields she brought me a bunch of wild flowers which she had picked herself—it was so expressive of her nature to choose wild flowers instead of the more formal stock-in-trade of the florist. So it is particularly pleasing to be asked to write a foreword to one of her books, though I cannot write as a literary specialist, but only as an ordinary and very grateful reader.

I must confess that modern fiction as a whole gives me little encouragement or pleasure, and therefore when I first read Mary Webb's novels it seemed to me that I had made a rare discovery. Here was an author who had more than an empty story to tell, whose writing was so sincere and so obviously the unforced product of an unusually sensitive imagination that to read her books was to experience a vivid human contact. She had visions to share with those who cared to follow her, and subsequent re-reading has only strengthened my first impressions of her work.

For the moment I will say nothing of the peculiar beauty of her nature-imagery, since the essential quality of her writing is primarily a passionate sincerity rare in this age of psycho-analytic experiment. This sincerity amounted to genius, and I use that word fully conscious that it is, in general, most unworthily overworked. But to me genius means the expression of actual truth, of the fundamental verities which lie hidden beneath the ordinary distractions of circumstance. We can all tell the truth about the material facts within our knowledge, but to discover spiritual truths demands an apprehension so unusual that it must rank with the finest manifestations of the human spirit. This apprehension Mary Webb had in high degree, and flashes of truth bring sudden light to her work. She never appeared to force her inspiration, but seemed rather to write as if she were listening to a voice within her, as if she herself, like her own Amber Darke, 'left the shallows of beauty that is heard and seen, and slipped out into the deep sea where are no tides of change and decay, no sound, no colour, only an essence.'

I do not mean that she neglected the beauty that is heard and seen—indeed, her books, and *The House in Dormer Forest* as much as any, are alive with that beauty. Listen to this description of a misty plain in the early morning:

'To the west the mist thinned and was like pale water. Upon it, with delicate dignity, the trees floated, like water birds of faery, gravely and magically tinted. Some were brown-green like grebes, others of the ashy tint of coots, the soft grey of cygnets. The chestnuts, where the sun struck

them, were like sheldrakes with their deep bronzes; and the beeches had the glossy green of teal. The white sea was populous with these faery creatures, floating head under wing.'

There is the imagination which is rendered creative by exact observation, and as an outcome we have this:

'Amber's ideas of God were vague and shadowy. The moment she tried to materialize them they vanished. But now she felt, with a shock of reality, that there was more here, on this airy hill, than could be seen or touched or heard.'

That is genuine nature mysticism, and it is the essence of Mary Webb's strength, the foundation upon which all her work was built. She took her inspiration from the sights and sounds of the Shropshire countryside, and it was because there was to her more in those sights and sounds than could be seen or heard that her books have actually deep spiritual qualities.

I feel that *The House in Dormer Forest* was in a sense autobiographical, for Amber Darke so clearly speaks the mind of Mary Webb, with her intensely spiritual understanding of God. Her sole object in writing, it seems to me, was to formulate that understanding, to explain the abiding reality which lies behind the beauty of nature, and therefore her books cannot be definitely classed as novels. They were essays in the life of the spirit, as readers of *The House in Dormer Forest* will readily agree, and judged solely as novels they may be open to criticism on the score of ragged technique and construction. But if they are open to

such criticism, they should be spared it, for the mechanics of Mary Webb's work are not ultimately important.

Some writers have so little to say that they must depend on a perfectly worked-out plot, whereas others, and Mary Webb was one, only use a plot because it gives them a rough but necessary skeleton upon which to make concrete their visions. I do not wish to imply that her novels were restricted simply to the expression of that nature mysticism: they were always interesting as stories and as character studies. In this particular book, for example, the contrast between Catherine and Amber, the smug self-importance of Ernest and the independent idealism of Michael, between Jasper and Peter is consistently interesting, while some of the subsidiary characters are drawn with real humour and fidelity. There is Sarah Jowel, for one, the servant who was obliged to break people's china when they offended her, and grandmother Velindre with her surprising Biblical quotations, two characters who live so vividly that they are evidence of genuine creative insight and power.

Undoubtedly she could tell a moving story, as she so well proved in *Precious Bane*, but that aspect of her genius I am content to leave to the expert critic. I can only attempt to convey here my personal gratitude for the strength and vision which I found in her work, and to express my belief that since she based her books on the spirit of beauty which is eternal, they may themselves share that immortality.

H. R. L. SHEPPARD.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE: Dormer

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DORMER Old House stood amid the remnants of primeval woodland that curtained the hills. These rose steeply on all sides of the house, which lay low by the water in the valley. This was called Oolert's Dingle, and there were plenty of owls to justify the name. On a moonlit night, passing, high up, from side to side of the cuplike valley, they looked like breeze-blown feathers. Higher still, on the very rim of the cup, the far-travelled winds shouted across to one another, all winter, news of the world. When the bats slipped from their purlieus in the cobwebby outbuildings and climbed toward this rim, they had to ascend step after grey step of the windless air, and only attained their ambition after long flying.

From these heights, in fine weather, the house and its gardens lay open to the view, small but clear, beside the white thread that was Dormer brook. The place had been patched and enlarged by successive generations, very much as man's ideas are altered, the result in both cases being the same—a mansion to the majority, a prison to the few. On clear evenings, when the westering sun struck up the valley and set the windows on fire, one could see the centuries in the house, like ferns in a fossil. There was the timbered black-and-white centre, once the complete house, with diamond lattices and the unassuming solidity of an Elizabethan manor; there was the small Queen Anne wing on the left—one room down and two up—built by a rich ancestor of the Darke family; there was the solemn,

Georgian porch with its rounded, shell-like roof and Grecian pillars. The right wing, hideously stuccoed, consisted of one large room with many-paned sash-windows and a steep red roof, and had been built by the father of Solomon Darke, the present owner. At the back, perilously clinging to the Elizabethan farm, was an ancient cottage, which seemed to be the nucleus of the whole, and was built of stone and thatched. When the ambitious Elizabethan set about building his manor, no doubt the two bottle-glass windows of this cottage eyed him reproachfully, as a Vandal and a despiser of his ancestors. It was neglected now, and remained, weighed down by the large-leaved ivy, haunted by its whisper year after year, and used only by Enoch, the gardener, who stored apples there, and by the mice, who consumed the apples. The house, as a whole, had something of a malignant air, as of an old ruler from whom senility takes the power, but not the will, for tyranny.

All these things you could see in clear weather; but when it was misty—and mist lingered here as of inalienable right—the house was obliterated. It vanished like a pebble in a well, with all its cabined and shuttered wraths and woes, all its thunderous ‘thou shalt nots.’ At such times it did not seem that any law ruled in the valley except the law of the white owls and the hasty water and the mazy bat-dances. Only those who slept there night by night could tell you that the house was overspread with a spider’s-web of rules, legends and customs so complex as to render the individual soul almost helpless. It is the mass-ego that constructs dogmas and laws; for while the individual soul is, if free at all, self-poised, the mass-mind is always uncertain, driven

by vague, wandering aims; conscious, in a dim fashion, of its own weakness, it builds round itself a grotesque structure in the everlastingness of which it implicitly believes. When each unit of humanity merges itself in the mass, it loses its bearings and must rely on externals. The whole effort of evolution is to the development of individual souls who will dare to be free of the architecture of crowd-morality. For when man is herded, he remembers the savage.

Round the House of Dormer stood the forest, austere aloof. The upper woods had never known the shuddering horror of the axe, the bitter and incurable destruction of the day when gnomes of ugly aspect are let loose with flashing weapons among the haughty sons and daughters of the gods, hacking and tearing at the steadfast forms of beauty, until beauty itself seems to have crashed earthwards. Successive Darkes had threatened to fell the forest; but there was always plenty of wood from the reaping of the storms and from trees that fell from the rottenness of great age; so they had let it alone. The trees looked down upon time-shattered hulks of others in every stage of gentle decay. There were some mouldered trunks yet standing with a twig or two of green on them, especially among the yews, which must have weathered the winters of a thousand years. Others were of such antiquity that only a jagged point showed where once the leaf-shadows flickered on the wolf litters. Among these giants in their prime and in their dignified dissolution rose on all sides in supple grace the young trees and saplings. From the lissom creature that only needed the gradual massing of maturity to make its beauty

perfect, down to the baby stem with two absurd, proudly-waving leaves, all took part in that slow attainment of perfection through stages of beauty on which all Nature seems intent. They stood, rank on rank, with rounded or pointed tops, their foliage sometimes heavy and solemn, as in the yew and the oak, sometimes fluffy as in the elm, or transparent and showing the sky through its trceries as in birch and larch. They seemed to peer at the house over one another's shoulders like people looking at something grotesque, not with blame or praise, but in a kind of disdainful indifference.

For it does not seem that Nature, as some divines would have us think, was built to stage man's miracle plays, or created as an illustration of his various religions. Nature takes no account of man and his curious arts, his weird worships, but remains dark and unresponsive, beetling upon him as he creeps, ant-like, from his momentary past to his doubtful future, painfully carrying his tiny load of knowledge. But indifference is not hampering, as interference is; therefore those that feel within them the stir of a growing soul prefer the dour laws of earth to the drag of the herd of mankind, and fly from the house of man to the forest, where the emotionless silence always seems to be gathering, as waves mount and swell, to the disclosure of a mystery.

CHAPTER TWO: The Family at Supper

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THE Darkes had just finished supper, the event of the day. The red woollen bell-rope still swung from Peter's onslaught; for when, at Mrs. Darke's morose order, 'Ring for Sarah,' he kicked his chair aside and strode across the room, he always seemed to wreak a suppressed fury on the bell-rope, and more than once the tarnished rose to which it hung had been torn from the wall.

'The room. Drat it!' said Sarah in the kitchen, like a person proposing a toast.

Armed with a large tin tray, she burst into the dining-room. Clearing was, in her hands, a belligerent enterprise in which her usual sulky manner in the presence of her mistress gave place to more open hostility. She wrested the plates from their owners, and had been known to leave Ruby, who liked two helpings, stranded, with no plate for her last fruit stones. To-night it was Mr. Darke who cried, 'Howd yer, Sarah!' and clung to his plate.

'Don't say "Howd yer!" like any old waggoner, Solomon!' Mrs. Darke spoke with exasperation.

'Waggoner, Solomon!' echoed a less irritated, thinner, more tiresome voice, that of Mrs. Darke's mother, Mrs. Velindre.

Solomon Darke, a man of sixty, sat with his shoulders bent; his jaw, of the kind sometimes called 'jowl,' rested on his Gladstone collar and large 'made' tie. The expressionless heaviness of his face was redeemed by something of the patience of oxen, and rendered intimidating by a hint of the

bull-dog in the mouth's ferocious tenacity. It was obvious that his one idea in any crisis would be to resort to physical force. Between him and Peter sat Catherine Velindre, a distant relation who lived at Dormer as a paying guest, calling Solomon and his wife 'uncle' and 'aunt' as terms of respect. Her pointed face, her chestnut hair, demurely parted and pinned round her head in a large plait, her small and thin-lipped mouth, might have belonged to a Chaucerian nun. But her eyes were not those of a nun; they were too restless. They were peculiarly long, of the type called almond-shaped, with very little curve in them; the lids, being large and heavily-lashed, added to the air of secrecy and awareness that was Catherine Velindre's chief expression.

In extreme contrast with Catherine were Ruby Darke, a tall, plump, pretty girl of eighteen who was sprawling across the table, and her elder sister, Amber, who was in no way a success according to Dormer standards. Her manner, when she was at ease, had charm, but it was spoilt by shyness. Her hair was of an indeterminate brown, and her complexion was ruined by ill-health, due to the perpetual chafing of the wistful mind longing for things not in Dormer.

Peter, black-eyed, silent in the presence of his parents, and—for all his twenty years—full of the sullenness of early adolescence, had the look of a creature gathered for a spring, but he was without sufficient concentration to know in what direction he wished to go or what he wanted to grasp. The air of repression which brooded over the family, putting a constraint on emotion and impulse, seemed to act as an irritant to Peter. He was vaguely aware of something

inimical, as animals are, but he knew nothing about atmosphere and would have flushed scarlet if anyone had spoken to him of emotion.

Peter, Ruby, Amber and Jasper—who was not here tonight—came by their names in a curious way. Mrs. Darke had been so bored by the advent of each child (for she had married Solomon not because she loved him, but because she hated the Velindre household) that she had refused to think of any names for them. There had been many long silent conflicts when her husband sat, moody and obstinate, staring at the mute bundle in the majestic cradle which was a Darke heirloom, and saying at long intervals ‘Give it a name, Rachel!’

Mrs. Darke, equally obstinate, on her large sofa with its uncomfortable ornaments of carved mahogany leaves, silently tore calico. The argument, wordless on one side, always ended without a name having been found; and, though Solomon’s nerves were those of a ploughman, they at last became irritated by the harsh, regular tearing, and by that in his wife’s character which lay behind the tearing and caused it.

‘What are you making, tearing so?’ he would ask angrily. And she would reply, like scissors snapping, ‘Binders!’

Afterwards Solomon generally took his gun and strolled towards the Rectory, which was at some distance from the church and the House of Dormer. The Rectory, a few cottages and an immense, overbearing rookery made up the village. Entering the Rector’s study with a couple of rabbits pendent in his hand, Solomon would say sheepishly:

‘Give it a name, Rector!’

Now the Rector was an authority on seals and gems. Nobody knew why he had given his life to this study, but it was generally felt at Dormer that he was an honour to the village and must be known all over the world. As Mr. Mallow, the constable and chief member of the choir, said with unintentional irony, 'The Rector's got a powerful burden of learning, and he's first in that line, no danger, for who else ever wanted to know about a stone?'

After these visits of Solomon the Rector would spend a happy morning, poring over his list of jewels, and—having dined frugally on the rabbits—would write a long, allusive letter to Solomon in beautiful pointed script. Solomon, having extracted the name from it, would light his pipe with it and say to his wife in an off-hand tone:

'What d'you think of Amber, Ruby, or Jasper?'

Whereupon Mrs. Darke said:

'That's the Rector!' and Solomon was very crestfallen.

Rachel Darke was grimly amused that her children should be called by the names of precious stones; but to protest would have been to upset her attitude of aloofness. Three gems headed the family, but, when the Rector suggested 'Garnet' for the fourth, Solomon rebelled and said:

'Call him Peter. It was good enough for his grandfather.'

The Rector comforted himself with the reflection that Peter, a rock, was only a jewel in the rough, and Peter had been true to this from his cradle. As Mrs. Cantlop, the Rector's cousin, said with one of her helpless sighs, 'Peter's such a *knobby* baby!' Mrs. Cantlop knew the children's idiosyncrasies far better than Mrs. Darke did. She knew that Ruby could absorb the crudest paint from her toys and still

flourish; that Amber, though an ailing child, was always ready to gurgle into laughter; that Jasper, even at the age of three, required reasons for obeying an order, and that he would, after pondering on them, behave 'like a Christian lamb.' She knew also, though neither Mrs. Darke nor Mrs. Velindre noticed it, that Catherine, from the moment of her first arrival—white-pinafores, reserved—ruled the nursery. Of all the children, Peter was most like his mother. He had the same long obstinate chin and the same smouldering black eyes.

To-night, while Sarah clattered at the sideboard, Mrs. Darke sat staring at the tablecloth, drumming on it with her long, restless fingers. She was just beyond the circle of lamp-light, and the dimness made her seem even taller than she was. Her thin lips, very pale and straight, were closed with almost painful firmness. Her forehead was covered with lines, both vertical and horizontal, and an expression of frigidity combined with exasperation made her face sinister.

Away from the table, in an arm-chair by the fire, sat Mrs. Velindre. She was grotesquely like her daughter. She had the same close-set black eyes, long pale face and lined forehead; but her eyes had no expression. If one penetrated them, there seemed to be something stealthily in wait behind them. It was like walking in a lonely wood and becoming aware of something running in and out among the trees, silent, invisible, and gradually being convinced that it is a ghost. There was a ghost hiding in Mrs. Velindre's eyes—a cadaverous, grisly thing which had looked at her out of other people's eyes when she was a child; slowly possessing her in womanhood; finally absorbing her whole personality—

eating into it like a worm into a rotten fruit. As she sat, hour after hour, in her high, straight chair, with her white cap and black ringlets, two on each side, this ghost brooded with bat-like wings above her failing mind and endowed her with something of awe, something that proclaimed her kin to the ancient gods of vengeance and slaughter. For in her, more than in any other at Dormer, except her daughter, the herd panic, which drives man to be more cruel to his brother than are the wild beasts, held undisputed dominion. As a young woman she had known generous instincts, but now, at eighty, she could have refused without a qualm the request of a dying man, if he disagreed with her religious views. Yet she could scarcely be blamed. She had lived so long by fear and not by love, that her capacity for cruelty had grown in proportion to her capacity for panic. She had for so many years been trying to be like other people, that she was now like nothing in heaven or earth. For the more a soul conforms to the sanity of others, the more does it become insane. By continually doing violence to its own laws, it finally loses the power of governing itself. Mrs. Velindre, who was the oracle of the family, never used either intellect or intuition in giving her verdicts. She simply echoed her ancestors. If anything occurred without precedent in her tradition, she was flustered and incompetent, until she had found some text which could be made to bear on the question. Then she would give her ultimatum.

Beneath the hanging lamp, which lit the large room vaguely, the six faces, drawn in heavy chiaroscuro against the brown wall-paper, shone out dimly as from an old picture. They might have belonged to a pre-renaissance

Italian family or a household newly converted to Calvinism. But though they might have belonged to any country or period, they could only, it was clear, belong to one spiritual atmosphere. Perhaps it was the weight of this atmosphere that gave the room its medieval gloom. For the kernel of medievalism was fear—of God, devils, man, and all the laws, customs and fetishes invented by man. And this antique negation seemed to find in the House of Dormer a congenial dwelling. Thick shadows clung to the ceiling like hovering night-birds, eliminating the corners and all furniture not within the lamp's radius, obscuring detail and giving the room a measure of gloomy dignity.

'I wish Jasper would come!' said Amber suddenly. 'He's late.'

'It would be almost better,' said Mrs. Darke, 'if Jasper never came at all.'

'Wicked! A wicked boy! Never came at all,' muttered grandmother.

'He isn't, grandmother!' Amber was all on fire with wrath and love.

'Don't contradict your elders,' said Mrs. Darke. 'It is very tiresome of Jasper, with Ernest taking the curacy here, to come home an infidel.'

'D'you mean to say we've got to have that fool Ernest living here?' queried Solomon.

'I do. He is to be a paying guest.'

'Lord! The house'll be like to bust.'

'*Burst! Burst!*' corrected Mrs. Darke in exasperation.

'*Burst!*' echoed grandmother from the fireside.

'Bust!' repeated Solomon.

Peter guffawed. Any defiance of authority was a refreshment to his tethered spirit. Amber was pink with suppressed laughter. Her grandmother's voice was so like that of a distant, ruminative bird answering a near bird, and her father's explosiveness was so funny and excusable that her perpetually simmering glee at the humours of life almost boiled over. A strain of what Mrs. Darke called vulgarity in her husband was one of his most lovable qualities in Amber's eyes. She always suspected it of being at least half compounded of humour.

Catherine looked pained.

'Really, Solomon, I wish you wouldn't be so vulgar!' said his wife.

'What've I said? Bust! Well, the house *will* bust. It won't hold Jasper and Ernest together.'

Sarah, at the sideboard, gave a smothered chuckle.

'Sarah! I said, clear!' Mrs. Darke spoke with incisive anger.

'Clear!' came the faithful echo from the hearth.

Sarah, with subdued passion, concluded her enterprise and was heard dealing hardly with the crockery in the kitchen.

'Aren't you going to have any supper left, mamma?' asked Ruby.

'I am not.'

'What a welcome!' cried Amber.

'Is it a time for welcome?'

'A time to dance and a time to weep ...' quoted Mrs. Velindre, with the buoyancy given by the knowledge of having made a quotation to the point.

'I don't see that poor Jasper can expect a very cordial welcome, after his behaviour,' said Catherine.

At that moment Sarah was heard roaring (there was no other possible description of Sarah's voice when raised), 'The gun-dogs' supper's ready, sir!'

'The dogs get supper—the very dogs!' Ruby spoke obstinately.

'The dogs eat of the crumbs!' said grandmother, again buoyant.

'The dogs will enjoy their supper, won't they, father?' asked Amber.

'Ay, ay. They mop it up.'

'Jasper will be hungry, father.'

But Solomon had gone. He would not be drawn into open hostilities with his wife.

'Jasper deserves to be hungry,' said grandmother.

'Why must a fellow starve because he's expelled?' cried Peter angrily. 'If the old fools expel him, it's their look-out; it's not his fault.'

'What *is* Jasper's fault,' said Catherine softly, 'is the sin of denying his Maker.'

Peter was silenced. He was susceptible to physical beauty, and, in the absence of more obvious charms, those of his cousin held him. The devout air, the 'preachy' sentence that he would have ridiculed in his sisters, he admired in Catherine. By one of the ironies of things, Catherine's religious words and looks were acceptable, not because they were real, but because she looked and spoke with the eyes and lips of a courtesan. Not that Catherine was anything but innocent and ignorant; she was virginal to

the point of exasperation; but there was something cold in the allure of her eyes, something knife-like in her smile, that recalled the loveless sisterhood. Grandmother spoke again:

‘A jealous God!’ she said in her most sepulchral voice. ‘A jealous God!’

‘If he doesn’t think there’s a God, how can he say there is?’ Peter asked irascibly. It was easy to see that he did not argue for a principle, but because arguing was an outlet for his volcanic dislike of things in general.

‘Why not just say there is and be comfy?’ murmured Ruby sleepily.

Mrs. Darke turned and looked at her, and the look was enough to wither her. But Ruby was not of the easily wilted souls. She was a complaisant creature. She returned her mother’s look contentedly, ruminatively, and went on eating apples. Catherine watched her.

‘You eat a great many apples,’ she remarked.

‘That’s why she has such a lovely complexion,’ said Amber.

Catherine’s eyes, narrow and lustrous, came round upon Amber, who immediately became conscious of her own bad complexion.

She looked round the room, wishing she could make it more homelike for Jasper. Dormer was not a comfortable house, though there were plenty of material necessities. No one need ever be hungry; but no meal ever partook of the nature of a sacrament. Amber often thought wearily that here food and drink were only so much solid and liquid matter put into the body in order to strengthen it so that it should once more acquire solid and liquid matter. In many a

poor home she had seen a light that never shone at Dormer; seen the chalice lifted in whose mingled wine is agony and ecstasy; heard those bells pealing out into the rainy, windy night of time which swing only in the mysterious belfries of the human heart. Sometimes when she came late through the village she would see an oblong of crocus light that seemed to come not only from the cheap lamp and the carefully tended fire. It might be a young wife who stood in the doorway, while the eldest child, with stern concentration, wielded the toasting fork. Or an old woman strained her faded eyes to embrace with their love the old man coming heavily up the path. When these vanished into the soft glow that was their rightful country, Amber was filled with a strange, wild longing. Once she talked of this to Ruby, and she was so wistful that Ruby cried: 'I'll make *you* toast, Ambie! Yes, I will—scold who may!' In her childish way she strove for the inner grace by first attaining the outer sign. The toast caused trouble, but Ruby had a capacity for obstinacy, and the war of the toasting-fork became an institution. But the Dormer meals still failed to be sacraments.

To-night the room looked exactly as usual. Catherine had brought out one of her hobbies, a device by which ink was sprayed through a wire comb by a tooth-brush on to white cardboard where ferns had been pinned. The resulting white fern silhouettes were varnished and made into blotters for bazaars. Catherine pinned the ferns on with great precision, but Amber preferred Ruby's blotters, which were blotters in every sense. The ink, in Ruby's hands, seemed to become exceedingly wet, and the spray, which should have been

fine as pepper, ran into pools. Amber, seeing Ruby's large hands doubtfully poised over the work, her indeterminate mouth slightly open, sometimes thought that Catherine—neat, competent, her dark eyes slanted amusedly towards Ruby—willed her to make blots. To-night the regular, metallic brushing worried Amber. She wanted to think about Jasper, but the room was full of small irritating sounds. Listening to them, it seemed to her that they were the essence of the people that made them—each little noise the complaint of the spirit within. Peter was whittling elderwood for whistles, drawing his breath through his teeth meanwhile. Mrs. Velindre's four steel knitting needles made a nervous under-song to the brushing. Ruby's regular munching was occasionally drowned by a rending noise as Mrs. Darke tore rags to stuff cushions. This sound predominated over the others because of its very relentlessness. Each tear was a momentary shriek. No one spoke for a long time. They seldom talked over their evening employments. When Solomon came in, Amber felt grateful to him because his amusement was a silent one. Every evening except Sunday he read *The Golden Chance*, a paper consisting chiefly of puzzles, graded for varying intellects. Some required the creation of a complete couplet of verse. Solomon looked askance at these. Others only needed an intuitive knowledge as to which lady would marry which gentleman in a line of pictured heads. But by some black decree of fate Solomon was never able to win a prize. Each Saturday, when he depressedly ascertained that he had again failed, Amber loved him more passionately. She resolved that next week he should win if she had to sit up all

night. But she was not good at puzzles. She thought the man with a box-like chin would marry the hectic lady; Solomon was sure he loved the lady with the excessively developed figure; whereas the perfidious young man really burned for her of the diamonds. 'We might have known!' Solomon would say gloomily, and Amber always wished that she wasn't too reserved to throw her arms round him. She used to wish the same when Peter came home from school as a tiny boy with a bad report. To-night she wished it more intensely about Jasper. For he had made in the eyes of Dormer a signal failure. None of his puzzles had come right. His riddle remained unguessed. She remembered him as a small boy having been placed on the stool of repentance by Mrs. Cantlop—who had taught them all till they outstripped her in knowledge, which happened early—and standing there insecurely in a curious little yellow tunic, his shoulders humpy with a sense of injustice. When she remembered Jasper's keen love of fairness, the wild rages that shook him at the lack of it; when she thought how he would come home to-night, already frayed to breaking point by the failure of the world of college to see his side of the question, she felt dismayed. She knew exactly how they would all look at Jasper, how the souls would lean out from their faces like crowds watching a criminal—grandmother peering, Mrs. Darke glaring, Ruby and Peter curious, her father glowering, Catherine hyper-critical. Her hemming grew large and wild.

'Father?' she said questioningly.

'Um?' Solomon looked up from the page he was poring over.

'When will he be here?'

The question had been quite different, but the room was too strong for her; she fell back upon time. Time was a god at Dormer. Clocks ticked in every room with fury or with phlegmatic dogmatism, and their striking cut through every conversation. Mrs. Velindre's grandfather clock was especially dictatorial. At five minutes to the hour it hiccupped, and, when people had just forgotten this, it gave forth the hour in deliberate and strident tones that only ceased at five minutes past; so that it cynically took ten minutes from every sixty in order to preach the fleetingness of time. Mrs. Darke owned a black marble timepiece like a tomb, which ticked irritably on the cold black marble mantelpiece in the dining-room. In the hall was a tall clock which chimed and would have been pleasant if the chimes had not been slightly cracked. Sarah possessed a cuckoo clock, which shouted as unemotionally as if it knew that here at Dormer its cry did not mean summer. In all the bedrooms were alarums, bee clocks, carriage clocks. To anyone standing in the hall on a quiet afternoon, the multiple whisper of all these time-keepers was very ghostly. They rustled like autumn leaves; they hushed the living into the sleep of death. They increased Amber's feeling that Dormer was too full of people; for, where man is massed, there he seems doomed to live by rule and by time. Those who dare to be themselves are not so bounded. For the lover time is changeable; a moment of absence wears on him like a year, and a year with the beloved is gone like a falling star. For the mystic also time does not exist; already he dreams into eternity. When man is self-poised, he awakes from the hallucinations of time and law, and stealing out

into the silence of his own being hears a voice sound beyond mortality, telling him that place and time are but bubbles; that the nervous counting of moments and years is foolish; that he is free and has never been in prison, since the walls that he thought loomed about him, strong and opaque, are nothing; that he is, even now, one with the immense freedom in which these bubbles float.

Solomon looked at the marble clock. 'Not for twenty minutes. Enoch's slow,' he replied. 'And what I say is, the lad should have thought of the family. What's it matter what *he* thinks? God's God. The Saviour's the Saviour. Anyone that denies it—tar 'im and feather 'im!'

Amber was puzzled. She herself would have been willing to assent to any dogma for the sake of one she loved, for she felt that to sacrifice the human being who was dear to her for a creed, an idea, would be criminal. In her, love had a way of flaring up like a beacon, changing the world and consuming even herself. But she knew that Jasper would regard this as lying. As she recalled his sensitive, scornful face, the heinousness of what he had done faded before a sense of romance. He had been out into strange places. He had fought a ghostly warfare on the shadowy slopes of the soul. Had he lost or won? Lost, was the verdict of Dormer; but Amber dared to think not.

'I admire Jasper for not being afraid to say what he thinks,' she said, conscious of temerity.

'Admire!' cried Catherine, with pretty horror.

'Admire!' echoed grandmother subterraneously. Mrs. Darke said nothing, but her spirit seemed to weigh on them all like an iceberg silently pressing upon a ship. Her silence

was alarming. The less she said, the more she seemed to say. Sometimes it seemed as if she were a ventriloquist, and talked through her mother. So when Amber, almost in tears, beating herself against the blank wall of their imperviousness as the winter robins would beat against the Dormer windows in terror at finding themselves in prison, cried: 'Yes! Admire! It's brave of him to tell the truth!'—it was grandmother who looked bleakly across the room, gripping her needles of polished steel with fingers of polished bone, and said: 'Jasper, until he repents, is damned.' Her voice, with its metallic lack of emotion, seemed to hack the air and leave it jagged. Solomon breathed stertorously over his puzzle; even Ruby felt the tension, and sighed. No one contradicted grandmother. The room, with its heavy shadows, fell again into silence.

Sarah's activities had died away in the kitchen, and the house lay dumb under the night. To Amber it seemed that its quiet had the quality of the spider's, mutely awaiting the faintly vocal fly. As she thought it, a soft regular sound became audible, the fateful sound of a horse trotting. She sprang up with a defensive feeling and went into the hall. As she pulled open the heavy door, the voice of the stream, swollen by the autumn rains, smote upon her suddenly, full of sad foreboding. It was deepened by the low, sonorous sound of the Four Waters, half a mile away—a monotonous and bee-like note that seemed to have been struck before the beginning of time. Dormer, in its cup at the bases of the hills, was always full of damp air and the sound of water. Besieged by this grievous music—and what is there in nature sadder than the lament of falling water?—she felt as

if she had opened the door not to the night and the stream, but on to a future full of doubt and dread, veiled in mist.

She went back into the hall. Jasper could not be here for a few minutes, and she found the light reassuring. From the dining-room came Mrs. Velindre's voice reading passages from *The Lion of the Tribe of Judah*, a paper which dealt exclusively with the vexed question of the lost tribes. She persisted in regarding the Jews not as one of the finest nations the world has seen, but as people requiring a missionary. This paper was her spiritual and intellectual fodder, and she read it nightly, with praiseworthy perseverance, to a totally indifferent family. She also read it to Sarah while she lit her fire on winter mornings, and Sarah had been heard to say that 'if the tribes must be daft and mislay themselves, she wished they'd mislay themselves for good and all, and not like hunt the thimble—no sooner lost than it's werrit, werrit, werrit to find it.' But it was useless for Sarah to rattle the fire-irons; useless for the family to talk in raised voices; for grandmother had a voice of great carrying power when she liked, and she was not afraid of using it. The good seed was sown. To-night it was being sown. Jasper's arrival was unmarked, whether by design or accident Amber did not know. She opened the door again and heard the wheels suddenly muffled as the gig turned into the sandy drive. She had put on her best frock, a white cashmere, old-fashioned in make, and she showed as a thin, insignificant figure between the large brown hall and the large blue night.

So deeply had her genius for loving been stirred by Jasper's forlorn condition—she knew he would be

unspeakably forlorn at Dormer; so greatly had the innate chivalry of the individualist (who believes in the essential beauty that is beneath the froth of action, speech and motive) been aroused by hearing the absent abused, that it almost seemed as if she might triumph over the constrictions of Dormer and express herself to Jasper.

'My dear! oh, my dear!' she whispered, as Enoch, with a 'Be good, pony!' drew up at the door, and Jasper jumped out.

He kissed her perfunctorily, looked restlessly past her into the hall, and said:

'Where's Catherine?'

Amber, alone in the porch, twisting her hands together with a crushing sense of failure and futility, murmured with a kind of smouldering passion 'Oh, I *wish* I were his mother!'

She was realizing the perpetual denial of spiritual truth by crude fact. She was feeling that it was of no avail that she loved Jasper maternally, protectingly, perceptively. He would neither expect nor welcome these things from her. From Catherine he would expect them but would he get them? From Mrs. Darke he would not even expect them. Amber raged, but her rage consumed herself only. For in the House of Dormer, with its hollow-echoing chambers, ascendancy is given to bodily and not spiritual ties; to propinquity and not affinity; to the shout of the crowd and not the faint, far voice of the soul.

Jasper disappeared in the gloomy doorway, and Amber, with the second-sight that always comes to those who ponder anxiously upon a loved one, knew, at least in part, what he must endure; she guessed also that her conflict for