**Half-holiday**

Aldous Huxley

I

IT was Saturday afternoon and fine. In the hazy spring sunlight London was beautiful, like a city of the imagination. The lights were golden, the shadows blue and violet. Incorrigibly hopeful, the sooty trees in the Park were breaking into leaf; and the new green was unbelievably fresh and light and aerial, as though the tiny leaves had been cut out of the central emerald stripe of a rainbow. The miracle, to all who walked in the Park that afternoon, was manifest. What had been dead now lived; soot was budding into rainbow green. Yes, it was manifest. And, moreover, those who perceived this thaumaturgical change from death to life were themselves changed. There was something contagious about the vernal miracle. Loving more, the loitering couples under the trees were happier—or much more acutely miserable. Stout men took off their hats, and while the sun kissed their bald heads, made good resolutions—about whisky, about the pretty typist at the office, about early rising. Accosted by spring-intoxicated boys, young girls consented, in the teeth of all their upbringing and their alarm, to go for walks. Middle-aged gentlemen, strolling homewards through the Park, suddenly felt their crusted, business-grimy hearts burgeoning, like these trees, with kindness and generosity. They thought of their wives, thought of them with a sudden gush of affection, in spite of twenty years of marriage. “Must stop on the way back,” they said to themselves, “and buy the missus a little present.” What should it be? A box of candied fruits? She liked candied fruits. Or a pot of azaleas? Or … And then they remembered that it was Saturday afternoon. The shops would all be shut. And probably, they thought, sighing, the missus’s heart would also be shut; for the missus had not walked under the budding trees. Such is life, they reflected, looking sadly at the boats on the glittering Serpentine, at the playing children, at the lovers sitting, hand in hand, on the green grass. Such is life; when the heart is open, the shops are generally shut. But they resolved nevertheless to try, in future, to control their tempers.

On Peter Brett, as on every one else who came within their range of influence, this bright spring sunlight and the new-budded trees profoundly worked. They made him feel, all at once, more lonely, more heart-broken than he had ever felt before. By contrast with the brightness around him, his soul seemed darker. The trees had broken into leaf; but he remained dead. The lovers walked in couples; he walked alone. In spite of the spring, in spite of the sunshine, in spite of the fact that to-day was Saturday and that tomorrow would be Sunday—or rather because of all these things which should have made him happy and which did make other people happy—he loitered through the miracle of Hyde Park feeling deeply miserable.

As usual, he turned for comfort to his imagination. For example, a lovely young creature would slip on a loose stone just in front of him and twist her ankle. Grown larger than life and handsomer, Peter would rush forward to administer first aid. He would take her in a taxi (for which he had money to pay) to her home—in Grosvenor Square. She turned out to be a peer’s daughter. They loved each other… .

Or else he rescued a child that had fallen into the Round Pond and so earned the eternal gratitude, and more than the gratitude, of its rich young widowed mother. Yes, widowed; Peter always definitely specified her widowhood. His intentions were strictly honourable. He was still very young and had been well brought up.

Or else there was no preliminary accident. He just saw a young girl sitting on a bench by herself, looking very lonely and sad. Boldly, yet courteously, he approached, he took off his hat, he smiled. “I can see that you’re lonely,” he said; and he spoke elegantly and with ease, without a trace of his Lancashire accent, without so much as a hint of that dreadful stammer which, in real life, made speech such a torment to him. “I can see that you’re lonely. So am I. May I sit down beside you?” She smiled, and he sat down. And then he told her that he was an orphan and that all he had was a married sister who lived in Rochdale. And she said, “I’m an orphan too.” And that was a great bond between them. And they told one another how miserable they were. And she began to cry. And then he said, “Don’t cry. You’ve got me.” And at that she cheered up a little. And then they went to the pictures together. And finally, he supposed, they got married. But that part of the story was a little dim.

But of course, as a matter of fact, no accidents ever did happen and he never had the courage to tell any one how lonely he was; and his stammer was something awful; and he was small, he wore spectacles, and nearly always had pimples on his face; and his dark grey suit was growing very shabby and rather short in the sleeves; and his boots, though carefully blacked, looked just as cheap as they really were.

It was the boots which killed his imaginings this afternoon. Walking with downcast eyes, pensively, he was trying to decide what he should say to the peer’s lovely young daughter in the taxi on the way to Grosvenor Square, when he suddenly became aware of his alternately striding boots, blackly obtruding themselves through the transparent phantoms of his inner life. How ugly they were! And how sadly unlike those elegant and sumptuously shining boots which encase the feet of the rich! They had been ugly enough when they were new; age had rendered them positively repulsive. No boot-trees had corrected the effects of walking, and the uppers, just above the toe-caps, were deeply and hideously wrinkled. Through the polish he could see a network of innumerable little cracks in the parched and shoddy leather. On the outer side of the left boot the toe-cap had come unstitched and had been coarsely sewn up again; the scar was only too visible. Worn by much lacing and unlacing, the eyeholes had lost their black enamel and revealed themselves obtrusively in their brassy nakedness.

Oh, they were horrible, his boots; they were disgusting! But they’d have to last him a long time yet. Peter began to re-make the calculations he had so often and often made before. If he spent three-halfpence less every day on his lunch; if, during the fine weather he were to walk to the office every morning instead of taking the bus.. .. But however carefully and however often he made his calculations, twenty-seven and sixpence a week always remained twenty-seven and six. Boots were dear; and when he had saved up enough to buy a new pair, there was still the question of his suit. And, to make matters worse, it was spring; the leaves were coming out, the sun shone, and among the amorous couples he walked alone. Reality was too much for him to-day; he could not escape. The boots pursued him whenever he tried to flee, and dragged him back to the contemplation of his misery.

II

The two young women turned out of the crowded walk along the edge of the Serpentine, and struck uphill by a smaller path in the direction of Watts’s statue. Peter followed them. An exquisite perfume lingered in the air behind them. He breathed it greedily and his heart began to beat with unaccustomed violence. They seemed to him marvellous and hardly human beings. They were all that was lovely and unattainable. He had met them walking down there, by the Serpentine, had been overwhelmed by that glimpse of a luxurious and arrogant beauty, had turned immediately and followed them. Why? He hardly knew himself. Merely in order that he might be near them; and perhaps with the fantastic, irrepressible hope that something might happen, some miracle, that should project him into their lives.

Greedily he sniffed their delicate perfume; with a kind of desperation, as though his life depended on it, he looked at them, he studied them. Both were tall. One of them wore a grey cloth coat, trimmed with dark grey fur. The other’s coat was all of fur; a dozen or two of ruddily golden foxes had been killed in order that she might be warm among the chilly shadows of this spring afternoon. One of them wore grey and the other buff-coloured stockings. One walked on grey kid, the other on serpent’s leather. Their hats were small and close-fitting. A small black French bulldog accompanied them running now at their heels, now in front of them. The dog’s collar was trimmed with brindled wolf’s fur that stuck out like a ruff round its black head.

Peter walked so close behind them that, when they were out of the crowd, he could hear snatches of their talk. One had a cooing voice; the other spoke rather huskily.

“Such a divine man,” the husky voice was saying, “such a really divine man!”

“So Elizabeth told me,” said the cooing one.

“Such a perfect party, too,” Husky went on. “He kept us laughing the whole evening. Everybody got rather buffy, too. When it was time to go, I said I’d walk and trust to luck to find a taxi on the way. Whereupon he invited me to come and look for a taxi in his heart. He said there were so many there, and all of them disengaged.”

They both laughed. The chatter of a party of children who had come up from behind and were passing at this moment prevented Peter from hearing what was said next. Inwardly he cursed the children. Beastly little devils—they were making him lose his revelation. And what a revelation! Of how strange, unfamiliar and gaudy a life! Peter’s dreams had always been idyllic and pastoral. Even with the peer’s daughter he meant to live in the country, quietly and domestically. The world in which there are perfect parties where everybody gets rather buffy and divine men invite young goddesses to look for taxis in their hearts was utterly unknown to him. He had had a glimpse of it now; it fascinated him by its exotic and tropical strangeness. His whole ambition was now to enter this gorgeous world, to involve himself, somehow and at all costs, in the lives of these young goddesses. Suppose, now, they were both simultaneously to trip over that projecting root and twist their ankles. Suppose … But they both stepped over it in safety. And then, all at once, he saw a hope—in the bulldog.

The dog had left the path to sniff at the base of an elm tree growing a few yards away on the right. It had sniffed, it had growled, it had left a challenging souvenir of its visit and was now indignantly kicking up earth and twigs with its hinder paws against the tree, when a yellow Irish terrier trotted up and began in its turn to sniff, first at the tree, then at the bulldog. The bulldog stopped its scrabbling in the dirt and sniffed at the terrier. Cautiously, the two beasts walked round one another, sniffing and growling as they went. Peter watched them for a moment with a vague and languid curiosity. His mind was elsewhere; he hardly saw the two dogs. Then, in an illuminating flash, it occurred to him that they might begin to fight. If they fought, he was a made man. He would rush in and separate them, heroically. He might even be bitten. But that didn’t matter. Indeed, it would be all the better. A bite would be another claim on the goddesses’ gratitude. Ardently, he hoped that the dogs would fight. The awful thing would be if the goddesses or the owners of the yellow terrier were to notice and interfere before the fight could begin. “Oh God,” he fervently prayed, “don’t let them call the dogs away from each other now. But let the dogs fight. For Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.” Peter had been piously brought up.

The children had passed. The voices of the goddesses once more became audible.

“… Such a fearful bore,” the cooing one was saying. “I can never move a step without finding him there. And nothing penetrates his hide. I’ve told him that I hate Jews, that I think he’s ugly and stupid and tactless and impertinent and boring. But it doesn’t seem to make the slightest difference.”

“You should make him useful, at any rate,” said Husky.

“Oh, I do,” affirmed Coo.

“Well, that’s something.”

“Something,” Coo admitted. “But not much.”

There was a pause. “Oh, God,” prayed Peter, “don’t let them see.”

“If only,” began Coo meditatively, “if only men would understand that…” A fearful noise of growling and barking violently interrupted her. The two young women turned in the direction from which the sound came.

“Pongo!” they shouted in chorus, anxiously and commandingly. And again, more urgently, “Pongo!”

But their cries were unavailing. Pongo and the yellow terrier were already fighting too furiously to pay any attention.

“Pongo! Pongo!”

And, “Benny!” the little girl and her stout nurse to whom the yellow terrier belonged as unavailing shouted.“Benny, come here!”

The moment had come, the passionately anticipated, the richly pregnant moment. Exultantly, Peter threw himself on the dogs. “Get away, you brute,” he shouted, kicking the Irish terrier. For the terrier was the enemy, the French bulldog—their French bulldog—the friend whom he had come, like one of the Olympian gods in the Iliad, to assist. “Get away!” In his excitement, he forgot that he had a stammer. The letter G was always a difficult one for him; but he managed on this occasion to shout “Get away” without a trace of hesitation. He grabbed at the dogs by their stumpy tails, by the scruffs of their necks, and tried to drag them apart. From time to time he kicked the yellow terrier. But it was the bulldog which bit him. Stupider even than Ajax, the bulldog had failed to understand that the immortal was fighting on his side. But Peter felt no resentment and, in the heat of the moment, hardly any pain. The blood came oozing out of a row of jagged holes in his left hand.

“Ooh!” cried Coo, as though it were her hand that had been bitten.

“Be careful,” anxiously admonished Husky. “Be careful.”

The sound of their voices nerved him to further efforts. He kicked and he tugged still harder; and at last, for a fraction of a second, he managed to part the angry beasts. For a fraction of a second neither dog had any portion of the other’s anatomy in his mouth. Peter seized the opportunity, and catching the French bulldog by the loose skin at the back of his neck, he lifted him, still furiously snapping, growling and struggling, into the air. The yellow terrier stood in front of him, barking and every now and then leaping up in a frantic effort to snap the dangling black paws of his enemy. But Peter, with the gesture of Perseus raising on high the severed head of the Gorgon, lifted the writhing Pongo out of danger to the highest stretch of his arm. The yellow dog he kept off with his foot; and the nurse and the little girl, who had by this time somewhat recovered their presence of mind, approached the furious animal from behind and succeeded at last in hooking the leash to his collar. His four rigidly planted paws skidding over the grass, the yellow terrier was dragged away by main force, still barking, though feebly—for he was being half strangled by his efforts to escape. Suspended six feet above the ground by the leathery black scruff of his neck, Pongo vainly writhed.

Peter turned and approached the goddesses. Husky had narrow eyes and a sad mouth; it was a thin, tragic-looking face. Coo was rounder, pinker and whiter, bluer-eyed. Peter looked from one to the other and could not decide which was the more beautiful.

He lowered the writhing Pongo. “Here’s your dog,” was what he wanted to say. But the loveliness of these radiant creatures suddenly brought back all his self-consciousness and with his self-consciousness his stammer. “Here’s your…” he began; but could not bring out the dog. D, for Peter, was always a difficult letter.

For all common words beginning with a difficult letter Peter had a number of easier synonyms in readiness. Thus, he always called cats “pussies”, not out of any affectation of childishness, but because p was more pronouncable than the impossible c. Coal he had to render in the vaguer form of “fuel.” Dirt, with him, was always “muck.” In the discovery of synonyms he had become almost as ingenious as those Anglo-Saxon poets who using alliteration instead of rhyme, were compelled, in their efforts to make (shall we say) the sea begin with the same letter as its waves or its billows, to call it the “whale-road” or the “bath of the swans”. But Peter, who could not permit himself the full poetic licence of his Saxon ancestors, was reduced sometimes to spelling the most difficult words to which there happened to be no convenient and prosaic equivalent. Thus, he was never quite sure whether he should call a cup a mug or a c, u, p. And since “ovum” seemed to be the only synonym for egg, he was always reduced to talking of e, g, g’s.

At the present moment, it was the miserable little word “dog” that was holding up. Peter had several synonyms for dog. P being a slightly easier letter than d, he could, when not too nervous, say “pup.” Or if the p’s weren’t coming easily, he could call the animal, rather facetiously and mock-heroically, a “hound”. But the presence of the two goddesses was so unnerving, that Peter found it as hopelessly impossible to pronounce a p or an h as a d. He hesitated painfully, trying to bring out in turn, first dog, then pup, then hound. His face became very red. He was in an agony.

“Here’s your whelp,” he managed to say at last. The word, he was conscious, was a little too Shakespearean for ordinary conversation. But it was the only one which came.

“Thank you most awfully,” said Coo.

“You were splendid, really splendid,” said Husky. “But I’m afraid you’re hurt.”

“Oh, it’s n-nothing,” Peter declared. And twisting his handkerchief round the bitten hand, he thrust it into his pocket.

Coo, meanwhile, had fastened the end of her leash to Pongo’s collar. “You can put him down now,” she said.

Peter did as he was told. The little black dog immediately bounded forward in the direction of his reluctantly retreating enemy. He came to the end of his tether with a jerk that brought him up on to his hind legs and kept him, barking, in the position of a rampant lion on a coat of arms.

“But are you sure it’s nothing?” Husky insisted. “Let me look at it.”

Obediently, Peter pulled off the handkerchief and held out his hand. It seemed to him that all was happening as he had hoped. Then he noticed with horror that the nails were dirty. If only, if only he had thought of washing before he went out! What would they think of him? Blushing, he tried to withdraw his hand. But Husky held it.

“Wait,” she said. And then added: “It’s a nasty bite.”

“Horrid,” affirmed Coo, who had also bent over it. “I’m so awfully sorry that my stupid dog should have …”

“You ought to go straight to a chemist,” said Husky, interrupting her, “and get him to disinfect it and tie it up.”

She lifted her eyes from his hand and looked into his face.

“A chemist,” echoed Coo, and also looked up.

Peter looked from one to the other, dazzled equally by the wide-open blue eyes and the narrowed, secret eyes of green. He smiled at them vaguely and vaguely shook his head. Unobtrusively he wrapped up his hand in his handkerchief and thrust it away, out of sight.

“It’s n-nothing,” he said.

“But you must,” insisted Husky.

“You must,” cried Coo.

“N-nothing,” he repeated. He didn’t want to go to a chemist. He wanted to stay with the goddesses.

Coo turned to Husky. “Qu’est-ce qu’on donne à ce petit bon-homme?” she asked, speaking very quickly and in a low voice.

Husky shrugged her shoulders and made a little grimace suggestive of uncertainty. “Il serait offensé, peut-être,” she suggested.

“Tu crois?”

Husky stole a rapid glance at the subject of their discussion, taking him in critically from his cheap felt hat to his cheap boots, from his pale spotty face to his rather dirty hands, from his steelframed spectacles to his leather watch-guard. Peter saw that she was looking at him and smiled at her with shy, vague rapture. How beautiful she was! He wondered what they had been whispering about together. Perhaps they were debating whether they should ask him to tea. And no sooner had the idea occurred to him than he was sure of it. Miraculously, things were happening just as they happened in his dreams. He wondered if he would have the face to tell them—this first time—that they could look for taxis in his heart.

Husky turned back to her companion. Once more she shrugged her shoulders. “Vraiment, je ne sais pas,” she whispered.

“Si on lui donnait une livre?” suggested Coo.

Husky nodded. “Comme tu voudras.” And while the other turned away to fumble unobtrusively in her purse, she addressed herself to Peter.

“You were awfully brave,” she said, smiling.

Peter could only shake his head, blush and lower his eyes from before that steady, self-assured, cool gaze. He longed to look at her; but when it came to the point, he simply could not keep his eyes steadily fixed on those unwavering eyes of hers.

“Perhaps you’re used to dogs,” she went on. “Have you got one of your own?”

“N-no,” Peter managed to say.

“Ah, well, that makes it all the braver,” said Husky. Then, noticing that Coo had found the money she had been looking for, she took the boy’s hand and shook it, heartily. “Well, good-bye,” she said, smiling more exquisitely than ever. “We’re so awfully grateful to you. Most awfully,” she repeated. And as she did so, she wondered why she used that word “awfully” so often. Ordinarily she hardly ever used it. It had seemed suitable somehow, when she was talking with this creature. She was always very hearty and emphatic and schoolboyishly slangy when she was with the lower classes.

“G-g-g …” began Peter. Could they be going, he wondered in an agony, suddenly waking out of his comfortable and rosy dream. Really going, without asking him to tea or giving him their addresses? He wanted to implore them to stop a little longer, to let him see them again. But he knew that he wouldn’t be able to utter the necessary words. In the face of Husky’s good-bye he felt like a man who sees some fearful catastrophe impending and can do nothing to arrest it. “G-g …” he feebly stuttered. But he found himself shaking hands with the other one before he had got to the end of that fatal good-bye.

“You were really splendid,” said Coo, as she shook his hand. “Really splendid. And you simply must go to a chemist and have the bite disinfected at once. Good-bye, and thank you very, very , much.” As she spoke these last words she slipped a neatly folded one-pound note into his palm and with her two hands shut his fingers over it. “Thank you so much,” she repeated.

Violently blushing, Peter shook his head. “N-n …,” he began, and tried to make her take the note back.

But she only smiled more sweetly. “Yes, yes,” she insisted. “Please.” And without waiting to hear any more, she turned and ran lightly after Husky, who had walked on, up the path, leading the reluctant Pongo, who still barked and strained heraldically at his leash.

“Well, that’s all right,” she said, as she came up with her companion.

“He accepted it?” asked Husky.

“Yes, yes.” She nodded. Then changing her tone, “Let me see,” she went on, “what were we saying when this wretched dog interrupted us?”

“N-no,” Peter managed to say at last. But she had already turned and was hurrying away. He took a couple of strides in pursuit; then checked himself. It was no good. It would only lead to further humiliation if he tried to explain. Why, they might even think, while he was standing there, straining to bring out his words, that he had run after them to ask for more. They might slip another pound into his hand and hurry away still faster. He watched them till they were out of sight, over the brow of the hill; then turned back towards the Serpentine.

In his imagination he reacted the scene, not as it had really happened, but as it ought to have happened. When Coo slipped the note into his hand he smiled and courteously returned it, saying: “I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake. A quite justifiable mistake, I admit. For I look poor, and indeed I am poor. But I am a gentleman, you know. My father was a doctor in Rochdale. My mother was a doctor’s daughter. I went to a good school till my people died. They died when I was sixteen, within a few months of one another. So I had to go to work before I’d finished my schooling. But you see that I can’t take your money.” And then, becoming more gallant, personal and confidential, he went on: “I separated those beastly dogs because I wanted to do someing for you and your friend. Because I thought you so beautiful and wonderful. So that even if I weren’t a gentleman, I wouldn’t take your money.” Coo was deeply touched by this little speech. She shook him by the hand and told him how sorry she was. And he put her at her ease by assuring her that her mistake had been perfectly comprehensible. And then she asked if he’d care to come along with them and take a cup of tea. And from this point onwards Peter’s imaginings became vaguer and rosier, till he was dreaming the old familiar dream of the peer’s daughter, the grateful widow and the lonely orphan; only there happened to be two goddesses this time, and their faces, instead of being dim creations of fancy, were real and definite.

But he knew, even in the midst of his dreaming, that things hadn’t happened like this. He knew that she had gone before he could say anything; and that even if he had run after them and tried to make his speech of explanation, he could never have done it. For example, he would have had to say that his father was a “medico,” not a doctor (m being an easier letter than d). And when it came to telling them that his people had died, he would have had to say that they had “perished”—which would sound facetious, as though he were trying to make a joke of it. No, no, the truth must be faced. He had taken the money and they had gone away thinking that he was just some sort of a street loafer, who had risked a bite for the sake of a good tip. They hadn’t even dreamed of treating him as an equal. As for asking him to tea and making him their friend …

But his fancy was still busy. It struck him that it had been quite unnecessary to make any explanation. He might simply have forced the note back into her hand, without saying a word. Why hadn’t he done it? He had to excuse himself for his remissness. She had slipped away too quickly; that was the reason.

Or what if he had walked on ahead of them and ostentatiously given the money to the first street-boy he happened to meet? A good idea, that. Unfortunately it had not occurred to him at the time.

All that afternoon Peter walked and walked, thinking of what had happened, imagining creditable and satisfying alternatives. But all the time he knew that these alternatives were only fanciful. Sometimes the recollection of his humiliation was so vivid that it made him physically wince and shudder.

The light began to fail. In the grey and violet twilight the lovers pressed closer together as they walked, more frankly clasped one another beneath the trees. Strings of yellow lamps blossomed in the increasing darkness. High up in the pale sky overhead, a quarter of the moon made itself visible. He felt unhappier and lonelier than ever.

His bitten hand was by this time extremely painful. He left the Park and walked along Oxford Street till he found a chemist. When his hand had been disinfected and bandaged he went into a tea-shop and ordered a poached e, g, g, a roll, and a mug of mocha, which he had to translate for the benefit of the uncomprehending waitress as a c, u, p of c, o, f, f, e, e.

“You seem to think I’m a loafer or a tout.” That’s what he ought to have said to her, indignantly and proudly. “You’ve insulted me. If you were a man, I’d knock you down. Take your dirty money.” But then, he reflected, he could hardly have expected them to become his friends, after that. On second thoughts, he decided that indignation would have been no good.

“Hurt your hand?” asked the waitress sympathetically, as she set down his egg and his mug of mocha.

Peter nodded. “B-bitten by a d-d … by a h-h-hound.” The word burst out at last, explosively.

Remembered shame made him blush as he spoke. Yes, they had taken him for a tout, they had treated him as though he didn’t really exist, as though he were just an instrument whose services you hired and to which, when the bill had been paid, you gave no further thought. The remembrance of humiliation was so vivid, the realization of it so profound and complete, that it affected not only his mind but his body too. His heart beat with unusual rapidity and violence; he felt sick. It was with the greatest difficulty that he managed to eat his egg and drink his mug of mocha.

Still remembering the painful reality, still feverishly constructing his fanciful alternatives to it, Peter left the tea-shop and, though he was very tired, resumed his aimless walking. He walked along Oxford Street as far as the Circus, turned down Regent Street, halted on Piccadilly to look at the epileptically twitching skysigns, walked up Shaftesbury Avenue, and turning southwards made his way through by-streets towards the Strand.

In a street near Covent Garden a woman brushed against him. “Cheer up, dearie,” she said. “Don’t look so glum.”

Peter looked at her in astonishment. Was it possible that she should have been speaking to him? A woman—was it possible? He knew, of course, that she was what people called a bad woman. But the fact that she should have spoken to him seemed none the less extraordinary; and he did not connect it, somehow, with her “badness”.

“Come along with me,” she wheedled.

Peter nodded. He could not believe it was true. She took his arm.

“You got money?” she asked anxiously.

He nodded again.

“You look as though you’d been to a funeral,” said the woman.

“I’m 1-lonely,” he explained. He felt ready to weep. He even longed to weep—to weep and to be comforted. His voice trembled as he spoke.

“Lonely? That’s funny. A nice-looking boy like you’s got no call to be lonely.” She laughed significantly and without mirth.

Her bedroom was dimly and pinkly lighted. A smell of cheap scent and unwashed underlinen haunted the air.

“Wait a tick,” she said, and disappeared through a door into an inner room.

He sat there, waiting. A minute later she returned, wearing a kimono and bedroom slippers. She sat on his knees, threw her arms round his neck and began to kiss him. “Lovey,” she said in her cracked voice, “lovey.” Her eyes were hard and cold. Her breath smelt of spirits. Seen at close range she was indescribably horrible.

Peter saw her, it seemed to him for the first time—saw and completely realized her. He averted his face. Remembering the peer’s daughter who had sprained her ankle, the lonely orphan, the widow whose child had tumbled into the Round Pond; remembering Coo and Husky, he untwined her arms, he pushed her away from him, he sprang to his feet.

“S-sorry,” he said. “I must g-g … I’d forg-gotten something. I …” He picked up his hat and moved towards the door.

The woman ran after him and caught him by the arm. “You young devil, you,” she screamed. Her abuse was horrible and filthy. “Asking a girl and then trying to sneak away without paying. Oh, no you don’t, no you don’t. You …”

And the abuse began again.

Peter dipped his hand into his pocket, and pulled out Coo’s neatly folded note. “L-let me g-go,” he said as he gave it her.

While she was suspiciously unfolding it, he hurried away, slamming the door behind him, and ran down the dark stairs, into the street.