

they won't ever let me have a bottle of . . . Oh aren't they sneaks. Aren't they beasts. And they pretend to be in Love!' 'Oh let the infant play with it then' said Phil. 'We'll share a bottle and you can have a whole one. Don't swallow the marble unless you really *want* to Horse. Have some more stout mother and I'll promise you the best dream in the dream book tomorrow morning.' 'Well I don't mind. Just a drop. I hope your father's asleep. I feel so lively I could kick him out of bed. How a drop of stout in the evening perks me up—like nothing else. When you get to my age you'll need it Maata—though I must say you don't look as if you did just now. I always did have a fondness for stout—I remember the first nurse I had when the twins were born—started me off. And there is nothing like it when you're that way. Just wait till my first grandchild begins to come along!'

Hal adored his mother in this vein. He ran over to her with the bottle in his hand and began kissing her face and neck and hair. 'She's in her cups' he laughed. 'Now's the time for confidential intimacies, my friends. Give her her head. Philip—run out and get her 6d worth of gin.'

But Phil was taking off Maata's shoes, and whispering to her 'let's get her to bed, and I'll make up the fire. Come down again.' So Maata yawned and smiled across at Mrs Close. 'If you popped into bed now, mummy,' she said, 'you'd sleep like a top—while you're warm.' 'I'm going, I'm going.' The little woman got up, set down her glass and gave Hal a great hug. She pulled on his beard and murmured something. Hal winked at the others. 'Yes', he said, 'I suppose we'd better. They'll drive us away from our own fireside—but we'll go, won't we little mum—and come down in half an hour and look at them through the keyhole—' 'You little silly. Come and kiss me goodnight!' said Maata. 'What were you playing this evening.' 'Shan't say. Oh how nice your face feels—so cool. I wouldn't mind betting you my collection of apple cores that in half an hour. . . .' 'Mother take him away.'

Maata and Philip listened to the others going up the stairs, to Hal, pretending to be a baby and asking to have his hand held and saying he was frightened—could he be tucked up and where did the dark go in the daytime. And Mrs Close in answer, scolding and loving, and then laughing as Maisie laughed. Then the sound of the doors closing. Philip put out the gas and gathered the beloved Maata into his arms.