

B.

Maata knelt by the dining room fire helping Maisie roast chestnuts. They had a packet of the little hard nuts beside them and a hatpin to prick them with, an old Daily Mirror leaf to hold the charred peelings. In the rosy glow of the fire the two children, leaning against each other laughed and whispered, very absorbed, very intent. By the table sat Mrs Close darning whole new feet into a pair of Hal's socks. Her skirt was turned back over her lap, her little, slippered feet curled round the chair legs. Now and again she leant forward and opened her mouth for Maisie to pop in a 'beautifully soft one', but she was, for the most part, pale and tired. With a drawing board propped against the table, sheets of manuscript surrounding, the big untidy inkstand, some pink blotting paper, the old man busied himself copying out Hal's latest score. Sometimes he whistled, sometimes he heaved great windy sighs, scratched his head with the pen end, rapped the rhythm of the score on the table. The room was warm and all pleasantly scented with the roasting nuts. The window curtains in the flickering light looked heavier and quite profound their ugly red colour—as though they wished for a little space to hold these four together. . . . Now and again, in the hush, they heard Hal's piano. He was busy with something—a theme that had seized him at dinner and made him refuse pudding but carry an apple with him to the drawingroom. Very strange it sounded. He played it over and over in different keys, varying the tempo, suddenly and wonderfully enriching the accompaniment. And sometimes it sounded uneasy and terrified—cried that it was being tortured in his hands—did not want to yield him its secret, and sometimes it sounded as though it were in love with itself and could not give him enough of its treasure.

'Mum' said Maisie suddenly 'where's our Philip.' 'Don't know, dearie—ask Maata', Mrs Close doubling a strand of wool and laboriously threading the needle. 'Do you know where he is—he'd love some of these chestnuts. Oh—do you remember how he used to love chestnuts when he was a little thing Mum, and roast them in the bonfire in the backyard, and dirty his handkerchiefs with them?'

'That I do. Do you know Maata I'll never forget one day finding the boys after they'd been having a bonfire washing their handkerchiefs and their little white 'duckies' at the garden tap on the front lawn—for everybody to see. . . . You know I didn't keep a girl then—did all the washing myself, and I had to give them whatfor if they dirtied their clothes. I couldn't bear ironing, and children make enough work. There were little Maisie's pinafores then too. But to see these kids with a bit of soap and some pumice stone they'd found on the esplanade, scrubbing their hankies and hanging them to dry on a flax bush—I thought I'd have died laughing.'