

Mother and Son

His clothes were dripping as he came in. The water was streaming down his cheeks, a little reddened by the wind and the rain. He shook back his long hair and threw his jacket on the bed post, then abruptly remembering, he looked through the pockets for a box of matches. The house was in partial darkness, for, though the evening was not dark, the daylight was hooded by thick yellow curtains which were drawn across the width of the window. He shivered slightly as he lit the match : it had been a cold, dismal afternoon in the fields. The weather was extraordinarily bad for the time of year and gathering the sheaves into stacks was both monotonous and uncomfortable. He held the match cupped within his hands to warm them and to light his way to the box where he kept the peats. The flickering light showed a handsome face. The forehead was smooth and tanned, the nose thin though not incisive, the mouth curved and petulant, and the chin small and round. It was a good-looking face, though it was a face which had something childish about it. The childishness could be seen by a closer look, a look into the wide blue eyes which were rather stolid and netted by little red lines which divided them up like a graph. These eyes were deep and unquestioning as a child's, but they gave an unaccountable impression that they could be as dangerous and irresponsible as a child's. As the match flickered and went out with an apologetic cough, he cursed weakly and searched his pockets. Then he remembered he had left the box on the table, reached out for it impatiently, and lit another match. This he carried over to the lamp which lay on the table. The light clung to the wick, and he put the clean globe gently inside the brackets. When the lamp was lit, it showed a moderately sized kitchen, the walls of which were

painted a dull yellow. The dresser was surmounted by numerous shelves which held numerous dishes, some whole, some broken. A little china dog looked over the edge as if searching for crumbs: but the floor was clean and spotless, though the green linoleum looked a bit worn. Along one wall of the room was a four-poster bed with soiled pillows and a coverlet of some dark, rough material. In the bed was a woman. She was sleeping, her mouth tightly shut and prim and anaemic. There was a bitter smile on her lips as if fixed there; just as you sometimes see the insurance man coming to the door with the same smile each day, the same brilliant smile which never falls away till he's gone into the anonymity of the streets. The forehead was not very high and not low, though its wrinkles gave it an expression of concentration as if the woman were wrestling with some terrible witch's idea in dreams. The man looked at her for a moment, then fumbled for his matches again and began to light a fire. The sticks fell out of place and he cursed vindictively and helplessly. For a moment he sat squatting on his haunches staring into the fire, as if he were thinking of some state of innocence, some state to which he could not return: a reminiscent smile dimpled his cheeks and showed in eyes which immediately became still and dangerous again. The clock struck five wheezingly and, at the first chime, the woman woke up. She started as she saw the figure crouched over the fire and then subsided: 'It's only you.' There was relief in the voice, but there was a curious hint of contempt or acceptance. He still sat staring into the fire and answered dully: 'Yes, it's only me!' He couldn't be said to speak the words: they fell away from him as sometimes happens when one is in a deep reverie where every question is met by its answer almost instinctively.

'Well, what's the matter with you!' she snapped pettishly, 'sitting there moping with the tea to be made. I sometimes don't know why we christened you John' – with a sigh. 'My father was never like you. He was a man who knew his business.'

'All right, *all* right,' he said despairingly. 'Can't you get a new record for your gramophone. I've heard all that before,' as if he were conscious of the inadequacy of this familiar retort – he added: 'hundreds of times.' But she wasn't to be stopped.

'I can't understand what has come over you lately. You keep mooning about the house, pacing up and down with your hands in your pockets. Do you know what's going to happen to you, you'll be taken to the asylum. That's where you'll go. Your father's people had something wrong with their heads, it was in your family but not in ours.' (She had always looked upon him as her husband's son, not as her own: and all his faults she attributed to hereditary weaknesses on his father's side.)

He potted about, putting water in the kettle, waiting desperately for the sibilant noise to stop. But no, it took a long time to stop. He moved about inside this sea of sound trying to keep detached, trying to force himself from listening. Sometimes, at rarer and rarer intervals, he could halt and watch her out of a clear, cold mind as if she didn't matter, as if her chatter which eddied round and round, then burst venomously towards him, had no meaning for him, could not touch him. At these times her little bitter barbs passed over him or through him to come out on the other side. Most often however they stung him and stood quivering in his flesh, and he would say something angrily with the reflex of the wound. But she always cornered him. She had so much patience, and then again she enjoyed pricking him with her subtle arrows. He had now become so sensitive that he usually read some devilish meaning into her smallest utterance.

'Have you stacked all the sheaves now?' she was asking. He swung round on his eddying island as if he had seen that the seas were relenting, drawing back. At such moments he became deferential.

'Yes,' he said joyously. 'I've stacked them all. And I've done it all alone too. I did think Roddy Mason would help. But he doesn't seem to have much use for me now. He's gone the way the rest of the boys go. They all take a job. Then they get together and laugh at me.' His weakness was pitiful: his childish blue eyes brimmed with tears. Into the grimace by which he sought to tauten his face, he put a murderous determination: but though the lines of his face were hard, the eyes had no steadiness: the last dominance had long faded and lost itself in the little red lines which crossed and recrossed like a graph.

‘Of course Roddy doesn’t want to help you. He’s got enough to do as it is. Anyway he’s got his day’s work to do and you haven’t.’

‘It isn’t my fault I haven’t.’ He spoke wearily. The old interminable argument was beginning again: he always made fresh attacks but as often retired defeated. He stood up suddenly and paced about the room as if he wanted to overawe her with his untidy hair, his thick jersey, and long wellingtons.

‘You know well enough,’ he shouted, ‘why I haven’t my day’s work. It’s because you’ve been in bed there for ten years now. Do you *want* me to take a job? I’ll take a job tomorrow . . . if you’ll only say!’ He was making the same eternal argument and the same eternal concession: ‘If you’ll only say.’ And all the time he knew she would never say, and she knew that he would never take any action.

‘Why, you’d be no good in a job. The manager would always be coming to show you what you had done wrong, and you’d get confused with all those strange faces and they’d laugh at you.’ Every time she spoke these words the same brutal pain stabbed him. His babyish eyes would be smitten by a hellish despair, would lose all their hope, and cloud over with the pain of the mute, suffering animal. Time and time again he would say to her when she was feeling better and in a relatively humane mood: ‘I’m going to get a job where the other fellows are!’ and time and time again, with the unfathomable and unknowable cunning of the woman, she would strike his confidence dead with her hateful words. Yes, he was timid. He admitted it to himself, he hated himself for it, but his cowardice still lay there waiting for him, particularly in the dark nights of his mind when the shadow lay as if by a road, watching him, tripping behind him, changing its shape, till the sun came to shine on it and bring its plausible explanations. He spoke again, passing his hand wearily over his brow as if he were asking for her pity.

‘Why should anybody laugh at me? They don’t laugh at the other chaps. Everybody makes mistakes. I could learn as quickly as any of them. Why, I used to do his lessons for Norman Slater.’ He looked up eagerly at her as if he wanted

her to corroborate. But she only looked at him impatiently, that bitter smile still upon her face.

'Lessons aren't everything. You aren't a mechanic. You can't do anything with your hands. Why don't you hurry up with that tea? Look at you. Fat good you'd be at a job.'

He still sat despairingly leaning near the fire, his head on his hands. He didn't even hear the last part of her words. True, he wasn't a mechanic. He never could understand how things worked. This ignorance and inaptitude of his puzzled himself. It was not that he wasn't intelligent: it was as if something had gone wrong in his childhood, some lack of interest in lorries and aeroplanes and mechanisms, which hardened into a wall beyond which he could not go through – paradise lay yonder.

He reached up for the tea absent-mindedly and poured hot water into the tea-pot. He watched it for a while with a sad look on his face, watched the fire leaping about it as if it were a soul in hell. The cups were white and undistinguished and he felt a faint nausea as he poured the tea into them. He reached out for the tray, put the tea-cup and a plate with bread and jam on it, and took it over to the bed. His mother sat up and took the tray from him, settling herself laboriously back against the pillows. She looked at it and said:

'Why didn't you wash this tray? Can't you see it's all dirty round the edges?' He stood there stolidly for a moment, not listening, watching her frail, white-clad body, and her spiteful, bitter face. He ate little but drank three cups of tea. Then he took out a packet of cigarettes and lit one nervously and self-consciously.

'Cigarettes again? Don't you know that there's very little money coming into the house. If it weren't for your father's pension where would you be . . . you who'se never done a day's work in your life? Answer me!' she screamed. 'Why are you sitting there like a dummy, you silly fool!' He took no notice, but puffed at his cigarette. There was a terrible weariness in his eyes. Nowadays he seldom felt his body tired: it was always his mind. This voice of hers, these pettinesses of hers, were always attacking his mind, burrowing beneath it, till he felt himself in a dark cave from which there was never to be any escape.

Sometimes words came to him to silence her, but between the words leaving his mind and leaving his lips they had changed: they had lost their import, their impact, and their usefulness.

His mind now seemed gradually to be clearing up, and he was beginning to judge his own actions and hers. Everything was clearing up: it was one of his moments. He turned round on his chair from a sudden impulse and looked at her intently. He had done this very often before, had tried to cow her into submission: but she had always laughed at him. Now however he was looking at her as if he had never seen her before. Her mouth was open and there were little crumbs upon her lower lip. Her face had sharpened itself into a birdlike quickness: she seemed to be pecking at the bread with a sharp beak in the same way as she pecked cruelly at his defences. He found himself considering her as if she were some kind of animal. Detachedly he thought: how can this thing make my life a hell for me? What is she anyway? She's been ill for ten years: that doesn't excuse her. She's breaking me up so that even if she dies I won't be any good for anyone. But what if she's pretending? What if there is nothing wrong with her? At this a rage shook him so great that he flung his half-consumed cigarette in the direction of the fire in an abrupt, savage gesture. Out of the silence he heard a bus roaring past the window, splashing over the puddles. That would be the boys going to the town to enjoy themselves. He shivered inside his loneliness and then rage took hold of him again. How he hated her! This time his gaze concentrated itself on her scraggy neck, rising like a hen's out of her plain white nightgown. He watched her chin wagging up and down: it was stained with jam and flecked with one or two crumbs. His sense of loneliness closed round him, so that he felt as if he were on a boat on the limitless ocean, just as his house was on a limitless moorland. There was a calm, unspeaking silence, while the rain beat like a benediction on the roof. He walked over to the bed, took the tray from her as she held it out to him. He had gone in answer to words which he hadn't heard, so hedged was he in his own thoughts.

'Remember to clean the tray tomorrow,' she said. He walked back with the tray fighting back the anger that swept over him

carrying the rubbish and debris of his mind in its wake. He turned back to the bed. His mind was in a turmoil of hate, so that he wanted to smash the cup, smash the furniture, smash the house. He kept his hands clenched, he the puny and unimaginative. He would show her, avenge her insults with his unintelligent hands. There was the bed, there was his mother. He walked over.

She was asleep, curled up in the warmth with the bitter, bitter smile upon her face. He stood there for a long moment while an equally bitter smile curled up the edge of his lips. Then he walked to the door, opened it, and stood listening to the rain.