

men beat upon the board with podgy palms or bony fingers, and drink again. The princess has left the swine alone with their troughs. The dull sound of the mingled voices swells into volume once more. It is as if the girl had brought the souls of the men with her, to fill the ugly bodies and keep them quiet while she sang—and now she has taken their souls away with her.

This was what Seymour Charlton was thinking. He was a tall dark man of thirty-five, who sat near the bottom of one of the side tables; and to him the singing voice had seemed to convey a curiously insistent message—a message not easy to understand, yet impossible to evade,—a message for him only: something on which he must continue to brood until he could pierce all its meaning. As he roused himself and looked round the room, his thoughts lost all concentration, became vague and blurred, like impressions too hastily recorded: as when moving fast in a railway train, one sees something, and forgets it because a new image has presented itself. Thus, in flashes, he could see the ugliness of this crowded room, the bestial idiocy of men who sit within closed walls and gorge on May nights, the mental sloth and the total inability to guide themselves to definite goals that alone can make such gatherings possible; again, he could see beyond the room, in flashes widening to the ends of the earth, the aimlessness of life, its monstrous futilities, its ever-increasing sadness.—That was the message, if anything:—the futility of life and its sadness. How can one escape either?

His host was talking to him. He smiled and answered. The singing spell had faded; he could see the room and the men as they had been a few minutes ago. No ugliness, nothing unusual: just a pleasant, good-natured lot of fellows.

"The Duke speaks well, doesn't he?" said young Mr Malcomson.

The chairman was a duke of secondary importance—a countrified sporting nobleman of small account in the gilded chamber, but fond of all prominent positions outside it.

"It is a jolly evening, isn't it?" said Mr Malcomson contentedly. "So glad you could come, Charlton."

Tom Malcomson was a City man, and Seymour Charlton was the son of a peer—younger son of old Lord Brentwood. Good-natured, beaming Mr Malcomson was not perhaps ill-pleased to show "a blood" among his guests.