

PRELUDE

THE north wind is keening overhead. It minds me of the howl of a wolf-dog under the Arctic stars. Sitting alone by the glow of the great peat fire I can hear it high up in the braeside firs. It is the voice, inexorably scornful, of the Great White Land.

Oh, I hate it, I hate it! Why cannot a man be allowed to forget? It is near ten years since I joined the Eager Army. I have travelled: I have been a pilgrim to the shrines of beauty; I have pursued the phantom of happiness even to the ends of the earth. Still it is always the same—I cannot forget.

Why should a man be ever shadowed by the vampire wing of his past? Have I not a right to be happy? Money, estate, name, are mine, all that means an open sesame to the magic door. Others go in, but I beat against its flinty portals with hands that bleed. No! I have no right to be happy. The ways of the world are open; the banquet of life is spread; the wonder-workers plan their pageants of beauty and joy, and yet there is no praise in my heart. I have seen, I have tasted, I have tried. Ashes and dust and bitterness are all my gain. I will try no more. It is the shadow of the vampire wing.

So I sit in the glow of the great peat fire, tired and sad beyond belief. Thank God! at least I am home. Everything is so little changed. The fire lights the