

LIGHT

'Bless us!' said Anne, 'There's eleven o'clock. And you're nearly asleep, Robin.' She rose with a bustle of familiar noises, bundling her spools and her little cardboard boxes into the work basket. 'Come on, lazy-bones,' she added. 'You want to be nice and fresh for your first walk to-morrow.'

'That reminds me,' said Robin and then stopped. He had approached the subject three times already since his operation, once to the doctor, once to the nurse, and once before to Anne herself, and each time something seemed to have gone wrong. Now, he felt unreasonably nervous. 'I—I suppose,' he mumbled, 'there'll be lots of *light* out there—when we go for that walk?'

'You mean it will be lighter out of doors? Well, yes, of course. But I must say I always think this is a very light house. This room, now. We've had the sun on it all afternoon.'

'The sun makes it hot—?', said Robin tentatively.

'What *are* you talking about?' said Anne. That was what Robin couldn't understand; why they all sounded so angry or frightened whenever he got near the real question. It was as if they thought he was mad.

'I mean,' he said '—well, look here, dear. I've been wanting to ask you something ever since I got back from the nursing home. I expect it'll sound silly to you. But things must be different to a chap who's been blind all his life, mustn't they? It's all so new. As soon as I heard there was a chance of getting my sight—well, I looked forward. The last thing I thought of before the operation was *Light*. Wondering what it would be like. Then all those days afterwards before they took the bandages off; wondering, waiting—'

'But of course, darling. That was only natural.'

'Then—then' (his voice shook a little) 'why don't I—. I mean, where *is* the light?'

His three weeks of sight had not yet taught him to read the expression of her face, but he knew by her voice the warm wave of muddled, frightened affection that had swelled up in her as she said, 'Why not go to bed now, dearest? We can talk about all that in the morning. You know you're tired now.'

'No,' he said. 'I've got to have this out. You've got to tell me. Great Scot, don't you *want* me to know?'

'Know about what, Robin? Ask me anything you like. But there's nothing to worry about. Your sight is perfectly alright now. You're cured.'

'Very well, then. Is there light in this room at present?'

'Of course there is. Robin, do—'

'Then where is it?'

'Why, all round us.'

'Can you see it?'

'Yes. But really, Robin dear—'

'Then why can't I?'

'But, Robin, you can. You can see me, can't you?, and the mantelpiece, and the table, and—'

'That's what drives me mad. That's the sort of thing you all say. I want to see *light*. Are *you* light? Is the mantelpiece light? Is light only another name for all the other things?'

'Oh, I see what you mean. You're asking about *the* light. That's it there, hanging from the ceiling with the pink shade.'

'Then why did you tell me the light was all round us?'

'Darling, I mean that's what gives the light. The light comes from there.'

'Then where is the light itself? You see, you won't say. Nobody will say. You tell me there's light here and light there, and this is in the light and that is in the light, and people get in one another's light. But you won't point me out the light itself. If none of you know what light is, say so. If there's no such thing—if it was only a fairy tale all along—say so. If the operation was a failure and I still can't see what other people see, tell me. I can take *that*. It's this secrecy that I can't stand. You're all like conspirators. Why the devil—'

Anne began to cry and Robin apologised and comforted her. Then they went to bed.

This conversation made him more cautious. Clearly it was never going to be any use asking about light. Either there was no such thing or else he was all the time making some appalling mistake. If he was not careful he'd find himself in the hands of doctors again—psychotherapists, as likely as not. When Anne took him out for his walk next day he was on his guard. He kept on saying, 'It's lovely. All lovely. Just let me drink it in,' and that satisfied her. And he knew enough now to know that none of the things he saw could possibly be light. They were, as Anne volubly explained to him, only fields or cows or grass or the sun or trees or a quarry. Nothing could be attempted until he was able to go for walks on his own.

About six weeks went by before he first did so. During that time he had passed through every fluctuation of hope and despair but the steady trend of

his feelings was towards an increasing, and presently a tormenting, desire. He no longer concealed from himself the fact that the visible world was a disappointment. He realised that he had never really wanted it except for the sake of light and that unless somewhere amongst them he could find that pure stream and bathe his eyes in it and drink it in, all the clouds and colours and animals and what Anne called the 'views' were of no account.

On the morning when he first went out alone there was a mist, but he had met mists before and this did not trouble him. He walked out over the railway bridge and up the steep hill and then along the field-path that skirted the lip of the quarry. Anne had taken him there a few days before to show him 'the view.' She had said, 'What a lovely light there is on the hills over there.' That clue he was now following, though with very faint hope. He was almost certain by now that she knew no more about light than he did. He was beginning to suspect that most of the un-blind were in the same position. What one heard among them was probably mere parrot-like repetition of a rumour—a rumour concerning something which the very few, the great poets and prophets, had really seen and known. Somewhere it must exist. Perhaps not in England—perhaps only rare deposits of it existed, far away to the East in deserts or high mountains. In that case, he would never see it. But if he did—ah yes, if—he would dive into its very heart, give all himself away to it, drink, drink, drink it till he died drinking.

The mist thinned rapidly. Trees brightened out of it, birds began singing. He found he was hot. His shadow lay before him, each moment blacker and more distinct. That violent yellow thing, the sun, which one could never see properly, stared at him on his left hand. He pulled the brim of his hat lower over his eyes, blinking. 'If only I could see any light!' he muttered.

At that moment he caught sight of a young man who was standing with his legs wide apart on the edge of the cliff, singing and making jabs with some slender instrument at a complicated two-legged object about the same height as himself. If Robin had had more experience he would have recognised this as a canvas on an easel. As it was, his eyes and those of the wild looking stranger met so unexpectedly that Robin blurted out, 'What are you doing?', before he had time to be self-conscious.

'Doing?' said the stranger with a certain light-hearted savagery. 'Doing? I'm trying to catch light, if you want to know. Damn it.'

'Good God! So am I,' said Robin.

'Oh—you know too, do you?', said the man. Then, almost vindictively, 'They're all fools. How many come out to paint on a day like this? How many will see it even if you show it 'em? And yet this is the only sort of day when you can *see* light—solid light—light you could drink in a cup or swim in! Look at it!' He pointed into the quarry. The fog was at death grips with the sun but not

a stone on the quarry floor was yet visible. The bath of vapour shone like white metal and unfolded itself in ever widening spirals towards them. 'Do you see that?', shouted the violent stranger. 'There's light for you if you like it.'

A second later the expression on the painter's face changed. 'Here!', he cried, 'Are you mad?' The grab he made at Robin was too late. Already he was alone on the path. From a new-made and rapidly vanishing rift in the fog beneath him there came up no cry but only a sound so sharp and definite that you would hardly expect it to have been made by the fall of anything so soft as a human body: that, and the momentary rattling of a dislodged stone.