Man and Maid

by E. Nesbit

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MAN AND MAID

BY

E. NESBIT

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LONDON T. FISHER UNWIN ADELPHI TERRACE MCMVI

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TO ADA BREAKELL MY DEAREST AND OLDEST FRIEND

MAN AND MAID

By the same Author.

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LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN

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MAN AND MAID

I THE HAUNTED INHERITANCE

The most extraordinary thing that ever happened to me was my going back to town on that day. I am a reasonable being; I do not do such things. I was on a bicycling tour with another man. We were far from the mean cares of an unremunerative

profession; we were men not fettered by any given address, any pledged date, any preconcerted route. I went to bed weary and cheerful, fell asleep a mere animal—a tired dog after a day's hunting—and awoke at four in the morning that creature of nerves and fancies which is my other self, and which has driven me to all the follies I have ever kept company with. But even that second self of mine, whining beast and traitor as it is, has never played me such a trick as it played then. Indeed, something in the result of that day's rash act sets me wondering whether after all it could have been I, or even my other self, who moved in the adventure; whether it was not rather some power outside both of us ... but this is a speculation as idle in me as uninteresting to you, and so enough of it.

From four to seven I lay awake, the prey of a growing detestation of bicycling tours, friends, scenery, physical exertion, holidays. By seven o'clock I felt that I would rather perish than spend another day in the society of the other man—an excellent fellow, by the way, and the best of company.

At half-past seven the post came. I saw the postman through my window as I shaved. I went down to get my letters—there were none, naturally.

At breakfast I said: "Edmundson, my dear fellow, I am extremely sorry; but my letters this morning compel me to return to town at once."

"But I thought," said Edmundson—then he stopped, and I saw that he had perceived in time that this was no moment for reminding me that, having left no address, I could have had no letters.

He looked sympathetic, and gave me what there was left of the bacon. I suppose he thought that it was a love affair or some such folly. I let him think so; after all, no love affair but would have seemed wise compared with the blank idiocy of this sudden determination to cut short a delightful holiday and go back to those dusty, stuffy rooms in Gray's Inn.

After that first and almost pardonable lapse, Edmundson behaved beautifully. I

caught the 9.17 train, and by half-past eleven I was climbing my dirty staircase.

I let myself in and waded through a heap of envelopes and wrappered circulars that had drifted in through the letter-box, as dead leaves drift into the areas of houses in squares. All the windows were shut. Dust lay thick on everything. My laundress had evidently chosen this as a good time for her holiday. I wondered idly where she spent it. And now the close, musty smell of the rooms caught at my senses, and I remembered with a positive pang the sweet scent of the earth and the dead leaves in that wood through which, at this very moment, the sensible and fortunate Edmundson would be riding.

The thought of dead leaves reminded me of the heap of correspondence. I glanced through it. Only one of all those letters interested me in the least. It was from my mother:—

“Elliot’s Bay, Norfolk, 17th August.

“Dear Lawrence,—I have wonderful news for you. Your great-uncle Sefton has died, and left you half his immense property. The other half is left to your second cousin Selwyn. You must come home at once. There are heaps of letters here for you, but I dare not send them on, as goodness only knows where you may be. I do wish you would remember to leave an address. I send this to your rooms, in case you have had the forethought to instruct your charwoman to send your letters on to you. It is a most handsome fortune, and I am too happy about your accession to it to scold you as you deserve, but I hope this will be a lesson to you to leave an address when next you go away. Come home at once.—Your loving Mother,

“Margaret Sefton.

“P.S.—It is the maddest will; everything divided evenly between you two except the house and estate. The will says you and your cousin Selwyn are to meet there on the 1st September following his death, in presence of the family, and decide which of you is to have the house. If you can’t agree, it’s to be presented to the county for a

lunatic asylum. I should think so! He was always so eccentric. The one who doesn't have the house, etc., gets £20,000 extra. Of course you will choose that.

"P.P.S.—Be sure to bring your under-shirts with you—the air here is very keen of an evening."

I opened both the windows and lit a pipe. Sefton Manor, that gorgeous old place,—I knew its picture in Hasted, cradle of our race, and so on—and a big fortune. I hoped my cousin Selwyn would want the £20,000 more than he wanted the house. If he didn't—well, perhaps my fortune might be large enough to increase that £20,000 to a sum that he would want.

And then, suddenly, I became aware that this was the 31st of August, and that to-morrow was the day on which I was to meet my cousin Selwyn and "the family," and come to a decision about the house. I had never, to my knowledge, heard of my cousin Selwyn. We were a family rich in collateral branches. I hoped he would be a reasonable young man. Also, I had never seen Sefton Manor House, except in a print. It occurred to me that I would rather see the house before I saw the cousin.

I caught the next train to Sefton.

"It's but a mile by the field way," said the railway porter. "You take the stile—the first on the left—and follow the path till you come to the wood. Then skirt along the left of it, cater across the meadow at the end, and you'll see the place right below you in the vale."

"It's a fine old place, I hear," said I.

"All to pieces, though," said he. "I shouldn't wonder if it cost a couple o' hundred to put it to rights. Water coming through the roof and all."

"But surely the owner——"

"Oh, he never lived there; not since his son was taken. He lived in the lodge; it's on the brow of the hill looking down on the Manor House."

“Is the house empty?”

“As empty as a rotten nutshell, except for the old sticks o’ furniture. Any one who likes,” added the porter, “can lie there o’ nights. But it wouldn’t be me!”

“Do you mean there’s a ghost?” I hope I kept any note of undue elation out of my voice.

“I don’t hold with ghosts,” said the porter firmly, “but my aunt was in service at the lodge, and there’s no doubt but something walks there.”

“Come,” I said, “this is very interesting. Can’t you leave the station, and come across to where beer is?”

“I don’t mind if I do,” said he. “That is so far as your standing a drop goes. But I can’t leave the station, so if you pour my beer you must pour it dry, sir, as the saying is.”

So I gave the man a shilling, and he told me about the ghost at Sefton Manor House. Indeed, about the ghosts, for there were, it seemed, two; a lady in white, and a gentleman in a slouch hat and black riding cloak.

“They do say,” said my porter, “as how one of the young ladies once on a time was wishful to elope, and started so to do—not getting further than the hall door; her father, thinking it to be burglars, fired out of the window, and the happy pair fell on the doorstep, corpses.”

“Is it true, do you think?”

The porter did not know. At any rate there was a tablet in the church to Maria Sefton and George Ballard—“and something about in their death them not being divided.”

I took the stile, I skirted the wood, I “catered” across the meadow—and so I came out on a chalky ridge held in a net of pine roots, where dog violets grew. Below stretched the green park, dotted with trees. The lodge, stuccoed but solid, lay below me. Smoke came from its chimneys. Lower still lay the Manor House—red brick

with grey lichened mullions, a house in a thousand, Elizabethan—and from its twisted beautiful chimneys no smoke arose. I hurried across the short turf towards the Manor House.

I had no difficulty in getting into the great garden. The bricks of the wall were everywhere displaced or crumbling. The ivy had forced the coping stones away; each red buttress offered a dozen spots for foothold. I climbed the wall and found myself in a garden—oh! but such a garden. There are not half a dozen such in England—ancient box hedges, rosaries, fountains, yew tree avenues, bowers of clematis (now feathery in its seeding time), great trees, grey-grown marble balustrades and steps, terraces, green lawns, one green lawn, in especial, girt round with a sweet briar hedge, and in the middle of this lawn a sundial. All this was mine, or, to be more exact, might be mine, should my cousin Selwyn prove to be a person of sense. How I prayed that he might not be a person of taste! That he might be a person who liked yachts or racehorses or diamonds, or motor-cars, or anything that money can buy, not a person who liked beautiful Elizabethan houses, and gardens old beyond belief.

The sundial stood on a mass of masonry, too low and wide to be called a pillar. I mounted the two brick steps and leaned over to read the date and the motto:

“Tempus fugit manet amor.”

The date was 1617, the initials S. S. surmounted it. The face of the dial was unusually ornate—a wreath of stiffly drawn roses was traced outside the circle of the numbers. As I leaned there a sudden movement on the other side of the pedestal compelled my attention. I leaned over a little further to see what had rustled—a rat—a rabbit? A flash of pink struck at my eyes. A lady in a pink dress was sitting on the step at the other side of the sundial.

I suppose some exclamation escaped me—the lady looked up. Her hair was dark, and her eyes; her face was pink and white, with a few little gold-coloured freckles

on nose and on cheek bones. Her dress was of pink cotton stuff, thin and soft. She looked like a beautiful pink rose.

Our eyes met.

“I beg your pardon,” said I, “I had no idea——” there I stopped and tried to crawl back to firm ground. Graceful explanations are not best given by one sprawling on his stomach across a sundial.

By the time I was once more on my feet she too was standing.

“It is a beautiful old place,” she said gently, and, as it seemed, with a kindly wish to relieve my embarrassment. She made a movement as if to turn away.

“Quite a show place,” said I stupidly enough, but I was still a little embarrassed, and I wanted to say something—anything—to arrest her departure. You have no idea how pretty she was. She had a straw hat in her hand, dangling by soft black ribbons. Her hair was all fluffy-soft—like a child’s. “I suppose you have seen the house?” I asked.

She paused, one foot still on the lower step of the sundial, and her face seemed to brighten at the touch of some idea as sudden as welcome.

“Well—no,” she said. “The fact is—I wanted frightfully to see the house; in fact, I’ve come miles and miles on purpose, but there’s no one to let me in.”

“The people at the lodge?” I suggested.

“Oh no,” she said. “I—the fact is I—I don’t want to be shown round. I want to explore!”

She looked at me critically. Her eyes dwelt on my right hand, which lay on the sundial. I have always taken reasonable care of my hands, and I wore a good ring, a sapphire, cut with the Sefton arms: an heirloom, by the way. Her glance at my hand preluded a longer glance at my face. Then she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

“Oh well,” she said, and it was as if she had said plainly, “I see that you are a

gentleman and a decent fellow. Why should I not look over the house in your company? Introductions? Bah!”

All this her shrug said without ambiguity as without words.

“Perhaps,” I hazarded, “I could get the keys.”

“Do you really care very much for old houses?”

“I do,” said I; “and you?”

“I care so much that I nearly broke into this one. I should have done it quite if the windows had been an inch or two lower.”

“I am an inch or two higher,” said I, standing squarely so as to make the most of my six-feet beside her five-feet-five or thereabouts.

“Oh—if you only would!” said she.

“Why not?” said I.

She led the way past the marble basin of the fountain, and along the historic yew avenue, planted, like all old yew avenues, by that industrious gardener our Eighth Henry. Then across a lawn, through a winding, grassy, shrubbery path, that ended at a green door in the garden wall.

“You can lift this latch with a hairpin,” said she, and therewith lifted it.

We walked into a courtyard. Young grass grew green between the grey flags on which our steps echoed.

“This is the window,” said she. “You see there’s a pane broken. If you could get on to the window-sill, you could get your hand in and undo the hasp, and——”

“And you?”

“Oh, you’ll let me in by the kitchen door.”

I did it. My conscience called me a burglar—in vain. Was it not my own, or as good as my own house?

I let her in at the back door. We walked through the big dark kitchen where the old three-legged pot towered large on the hearth, and the old spits and firedogs still kept their ancient place. Then through another kitchen where red rust was making its full meal of a comparatively modern range.

Then into the great hall, where the old armour and the buff-coats and round-caps hang on the walls, and where the carved stone staircases run at each side up to the gallery above.

The long tables in the middle of the hall were scored by the knives of the many who had eaten meat there—initials and dates were cut into them. The roof was groined, the windows low-arched.

“Oh, but what a place!” said she; “this must be much older than the rest of it——”

“Evidently. About 1300, I should say.”

“Oh, let us explore the rest,” she cried; “it is really a comfort not to have a guide, but only a person like you who just guesses comfortably at dates. I should hate to be told exactly when this hall was built.”

We explored ball-room and picture gallery, white parlour and library. Most of the rooms were furnished—all heavily, some magnificently—but everything was dusty and faded.

It was in the white parlour, a spacious panelled room on the first floor, that she told me the ghost story, substantially the same as my porter’s tale, only in one respect different.

“And so, just as she was leaving this very room—yes, I’m sure it’s this room, because the woman at the inn pointed out this double window and told me so—just as the poor lovers were creeping out of the door, the cruel father came quickly out of some dark place and killed them both. So now they haunt it.”

“It is a terrible thought,” said I gravely. “How would you like to live in a haunted

house?”

“I couldn’t,” she said quickly.

“Nor I; it would be too——” my speech would have ended flippantly, but for the grave set of her features.

“I wonder who will live here?” she said. “The owner is just dead. They say it is an awful house, full of ghosts. Of course one is not afraid now”—the sunlight lay golden and soft on the dusty parquet of the floor—“but at night, when the wind wails, and the doors creak, and the things rustle, oh, it must be awful!”

“I hear the house has been left to two people, or rather one is to have the house, and the other a sum of money,” said I. “It’s a beautiful house, full of beautiful things, but I should think at least one of the heirs would rather have the money.”

“Oh yes, I should think so. I wonder whether the heirs know about the ghost? The lights can be seen from the inn, you know, at twelve o’clock, and they see the ghost in white at the window.”

“Never the black one?”

“Oh yes, I suppose so.”

“The ghosts don’t appear together?”

“No.”

“I suppose,” said I, “whoever it is that manages such things knows that the poor ghosts would like to be together, so it won’t let them.”

She shivered.

“Come,” she said, “we have seen all over the house; let us get back into the sunshine. Now I will go out, and you shall bolt the door after me, and then you can come out by the window. Thank you so much for all the trouble you have taken. It has really been quite an adventure....”

I rather liked that expression, and she hastened to spoil it.

"... Quite an adventure going all over this glorious old place, and looking at everything one wanted to see, and not just at what the housekeeper didn't mind one's looking at."

She passed through the door, but when I had closed it and prepared to lock it, I found that the key was no longer in the lock. I looked on the floor—I felt in my pockets, and at last, wandering back into the kitchen, discovered it on the table, where I swear I never put it.

When I had fitted that key into the lock and turned it, and got out of the window and made that fast, I dropped into the yard. No one shared its solitude with me. I searched garden and pleasure grounds, but never a glimpse of pink rewarded my anxious eyes. I found the sundial again, and stretched myself along the warm brick of the wide step where she had sat: and called myself a fool.

I had let her go. I did not know her name; I did not know where she lived; she had been at the inn, but probably only for lunch. I should never see her again, and certainly in that event I should never see again such dark, soft eyes, such hair, such a contour of cheek and chin, such a frank smile—in a word, a girl with whom it would be so delightfully natural for me to fall in love. For all the time she had been talking to me of architecture and archæology, of dates and periods, of carvings and mouldings, I had been recklessly falling in love with the idea of falling in love with her. I had cherished and adored this delightful possibility, and now my chance was over. Even I could not definitely fall in love after one interview with a girl I was never to see again! And falling in love is so pleasant! I cursed my lost chance, and went back to the inn. I talked to the waiter.

"Yes, a lady in pink had lunched there with a party. Had gone on to the Castle. A party from Tonbridge it was."

Barnhurst Castle is close to Sefton Manor. The inn lays itself out to entertain persons who come in brakes and carve their names on the walls of the Castle keep.

The inn has a visitors' book. I examined it. Some twenty feminine names. Any one might be hers. The waiter looked over my shoulder. I turned the pages.

"Only parties staying in the house in this part of the book," said the waiter.

My eye caught one name. "Selwyn Sefton," in a clear, round, black hand-writing.

"Staying here?" I pointed to the name.

"Yes, sir; came to-day, sir."

"Can I have a private sitting-room?"

I had one. I ordered my dinner to be served in it, and I sat down and considered my course of action. Should I invite my cousin Selwyn to dinner, ply him with wine, and exact promises? Honour forbade. Should I seek him out and try to establish friendly relations? To what end?

Then I saw from my window a young man in a light-checked suit, with a face at once pallid and coarse. He strolled along the gravel path, and a woman's voice in the garden called "Selwyn."

He disappeared in the direction of the voice. I don't think I ever disliked a man so much at first sight.

"Brute," said I, "why should he have the house? He'd stucco it all over as likely as not; perhaps let it! He'd never stand the ghosts, either——"

Then the inexcusable, daring idea of my life came to me, striking me rigid—a blow from my other self. It must have been a minute or two before my muscles relaxed and my arms fell at my sides.

"I'll do it," I said.

I dined. I told the people of the house not to sit up for me. I was going to see friends in the neighbourhood, and might stay the night with them. I took my Inverness cape with me on my arm and my soft felt hat in my pocket. I wore a light suit and a straw hat.

Before I started I leaned cautiously from my window. The lamp at the bow window next to mine showed me the pallid young man, smoking a fat, reeking cigar. I hoped he would continue to sit there smoking. His window looked the right way; and if he didn't see what I wanted him to see some one else in the inn would. The landlady had assured me that I should disturb no one if I came in at half-past twelve.

"We hardly keep country hours here, sir," she said, "on account of so much excursionist business."

I bought candles in the village, and, as I went down across the park in the soft darkness, I turned again and again to be sure that the light and the pallid young man were still at that window. It was now past eleven.

I got into the house and lighted a candle, and crept through the dark kitchens, whose windows, I knew, did not look towards the inn. When I came to the hall I blew out my candle. I dared not show light prematurely, and in the unhaunted part of the house.

I gave myself a nasty knock against one of the long tables, but it helped me to get my bearings, and presently I laid my hand on the stone balustrade of the great staircase. You would hardly believe me if I were to tell you truly of my sensations as I began to go up these stairs. I am not a coward—at least, I had never thought so till then—but the absolute darkness unnerved me. I had to go slowly, or I should have lost my head and blundered up the stairs three at a time, so strong was the feeling of something—something uncanny—just behind me.

I set my teeth. I reached the top of the stairs, felt along the walls, and after a false start, which landed me in the great picture gallery, I found the white parlour, entered it, closed the door, and felt my way to a little room without a window, which we had decided must have been a powdering-room.

Here I ventured to re-light my candle.

The white parlour, I remembered, was fully furnished. Returning to it I struck one

match, and by its flash determined the way to the mantelpiece.

Then I closed the powdering-room door behind me. I felt my way to the mantelpiece and took down the two brass twenty-lighted candelabra. I placed these on a table a yard or two from the window, and in them set up my candles. It is astonishingly difficult in the dark to do anything, even a thing so simple as the setting up of a candle.

Then I went back into my little room, put on the Inverness cape and the slouch hat, and looked at my watch. Eleven-thirty. I must wait. I sat down and waited. I thought how rich I was—the thought fell flat; I wanted this house. I thought of my beautiful pink lady; but I put that thought aside; I had an inward consciousness that my conduct, more heroic than enough in one sense, would seem mean and crafty in her eyes. Only ten minutes had passed. I could not wait till twelve. The chill of the night and of the damp, unused house, and, perhaps, some less material influence, made me shiver.

I opened the door, crept on hands and knees to the table, and, carefully keeping myself below the level of the window, I reached up a trembling arm, and lighted, one by one, my forty candles. The room was a blaze of light. My courage came back to me with the retreat of the darkness. I was far too excited to know what a fool I was making of myself. I rose boldly, and struck an attitude over against the window, where the candle-light shone upon as well as behind me. My Inverness was flung jauntily over my shoulder, my soft, black felt twisted and slouched over my eyes.

There I stood for the world, and particularly for my cousin Selwyn, to see, the very image of the ghost that haunted that chamber. And from my window I could see the light in that other window, and indistinctly the lounging figure there. Oh, my cousin Selwyn, I wished many things to your address in that moment! For it was only a moment that I had to feel brave and daring in. Then I heard, deep down in the house, a sound, very slight, very faint. Then came silence. I drew a deep breath. The silence

endured. And I stood by my lighted window.

After a very long time, as it seemed, I heard a board crack, and then a soft rustling sound that drew near and seemed to pause outside the very door of my parlour.

Again I held my breath, and now I thought of the most horrible story Poe ever wrote—"The Fall of the House of Usher"—and I fancied I saw the handle of that door move. I fixed my eyes on it. The fancy passed: and returned.

Then again there was silence. And then the door opened with a soft, silent suddenness, and I saw in the doorway a figure in trailing white. Its eyes blazed in a death-white face. It made two ghostly, gliding steps forward, and my heart stood still. I had not thought it possible for a man to experience so sharp a pang of sheer terror. I had masqueraded as one of the ghosts in this accursed house. Well, the other ghost—the real one—had come to meet me. I do not like to dwell on that moment. The only thing which it pleases me to remember is that I did not scream or go mad. I think I stood on the verge of both.

The ghost, I say, took two steps forward; then it threw up its arms, the lighted taper it carried fell on the floor, and it reeled back against the door with its arms across its face.

The fall of the candle woke me as from a nightmare. It fell solidly, and rolled away under the table.

I perceived that my ghost was human. I cried incoherently: "Don't, for Heaven's sake—it's all right."

The ghost dropped its hands and turned agonised eyes on me. I tore off my cloak and hat.

"I—didn't—scream," she said, and with that I sprang forward and caught her in my arms—my poor, pink lady—white now as a white rose.

I carried her into the powdering-room, and left one candle with her, extinguishing

the others hastily, for now I saw what in my extravagant folly had escaped me before, that my ghost exhibition might bring the whole village down on the house. I tore down the long corridor and double locked the doors leading from it to the staircase, then back to the powdering-room and the prone white rose. How, in the madness of that night's folly, I had thought to bring a brandy-flask passes my understanding. But I had done it. Now I rubbed her hands with the spirit. I rubbed her temples, I tried to force it between her lips, and at last she sighed and opened her eyes.

"Oh—thank God—thank God!" I cried, for indeed I had almost feared that my mad trick had killed her. "Are you better? oh, poor little lady, are you better?"

She moved her head a little on my arm.

Again she sighed, and her eyes closed. I gave her more brandy. She took it, choked, raised herself against my shoulder.

"I'm all right now," she said faintly. "It served me right. How silly it all is!" Then she began to laugh, and then she began to cry.

It was at this moment that we heard voices on the terrace below. She clutched at my arm in a frenzy of terror, the bright tears glistening on her cheeks.

"Oh! not any more, not any more," she cried. "I can't bear it."

"Hush," I said, taking her hands strongly in mine. "I've played the fool; so have you. We must play the man now. The people in the village have seen the lights—that's all. They think we're burglars. They can't get in. Keep quiet, and they'll go away."

But when they did go away they left the local constable on guard. He kept guard like a man till daylight began to creep over the hill, and then he crawled into the hayloft and fell asleep, small blame to him.

But through those long hours I sat beside her and held her hand. At first she clung to me as a frightened child clings, and her tears were the prettiest, saddest things to see.

As we grew calmer we talked.

“I did it to frighten my cousin,” I owned. “I meant to have told you to-day, I mean yesterday, only you went away. I am Lawrence Sefton, and the place is to go either to me or to my cousin Selwyn. And I wanted to frighten him off it. But you, why did you——?”

Even then I couldn’t see. She looked at me.

“I don’t know how I ever could have thought I was brave enough to do it, but I did want the house so, and I wanted to frighten you——”

“To frighten me. Why?”

“Because I am your cousin Selwyn,” she said, hiding her face in her hands.

“And you knew me?” I asked.

“By your ring,” she said. “I saw your father wear it when I was a little girl. Can’t we get back to the inn now?”

“Not unless you want every one to know how silly we have been.”

“I wish you’d forgive me,” she said when we had talked awhile, and she had even laughed at the description of the pallid young man on whom I had bestowed, in my mind, her name.

“The wrong is mutual,” I said; “we will exchange forgivenesses.”

“Oh, but it isn’t,” she said eagerly. “Because I knew it was you, and you didn’t know it was me: you wouldn’t have tried to frighten me.”

“You know I wouldn’t.” My voice was tenderer than I meant it to be.

She was silent.

“And who is to have the house?” she said.

“Why you, of course.”

“I never will.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because!”

“Can’t we put off the decision?” I asked.

“Impossible. We must decide to-morrow—to-day I mean.”

“Well, when we meet to-morrow—I mean to-day—with lawyers and chaperones and mothers and relations, give me one word alone with you.”

“Yes,” she answered, with docility.

“Do you know,” she said presently, “I can never respect myself again? To undertake a thing like that, and then be so horribly frightened. Oh! I thought you really were the other ghost.”

“I will tell you a secret,” said I. “I thought you were, and I was much more frightened than you.”

“Oh well,” she said, leaning against my shoulder as a tired child might have done, “if you were frightened too, Cousin Lawrence, I don’t mind so very, very much.”

It was soon afterwards that, cautiously looking out of the parlour window for the twentieth time, I had the happiness of seeing the local policeman disappear into the stable rubbing his eyes.

We got out of the window on the other side of the house, and went back to the inn across the dewy park. The French window of the sitting-room which had let her out let us both in. No one was stirring, so no one save she and I were any the wiser as to that night’s work.

It was like a garden party next day, when lawyers and executors and aunts and relations met on the terrace in front of Sefton Manor House.

Her eyes were downcast. She followed her Aunt demurely over the house and the grounds.

“Your decision,” said my great-uncle’s solicitor, “has to be given within the hour.”

“My cousin and I will announce it within that time,” I said and I at once gave her my arm.

Arrived at the sundial we stopped.

“This is my proposal,” I said: “we will say that we decide that the house is yours—we will spend the £20,000 in restoring it and the grounds. By the time that’s done we can decide who is to have it.”

“But how?”

“Oh, we’ll draw lots, or toss a halfpenny, or anything you like.”

“I’d rather decide now,” she said; “you take it.”

“No, you shall.”

“I’d rather you had it. I—I don’t feel so greedy as I did yesterday,” she said.

“Neither do I. Or at any rate not in the same way.”

“Do—do take the house,” she said very earnestly.

Then I said: “My cousin Selwyn, unless you take the house, I shall make you an offer of marriage.”

“Oh!” she breathed.

“And when you have declined it, on the very proper ground of our too slight acquaintance, I will take my turn at declining. I will decline the house. Then, if you are obdurate, it will become an asylum. Don’t be obdurate. Pretend to take the house and——”

She looked at me rather piteously.

“Very well,” she said, “I will pretend to take the house, and when it is restored——”

“We’ll spin the penny.”

So before the waiting relations the house was adjudged to my cousin Selwyn. When the restoration was complete I met Selwyn at the sundial. We had met there often in

the course of the restoration, in which business we both took an extravagant interest.

“Now,” I said, “we’ll spin the penny. Heads you take the house, tails it comes to me.”

I spun the coin—it fell on the brick steps of the sundial, and stuck upright there, wedged between two bricks. She laughed; I laughed.

“It’s not my house,” I said.

“It’s not my house,” said she.

“Dear,” said I, and we were neither of us laughing then, “can’t it be our house?”

And, thank God, our house it is.

II THE POWER OF DARKNESS

It was an enthusiastic send-off. Half the students from her Atelier were there, and twice as many more from other studios. She had been the belle of the Artists’ Quarter in Montparnasse for three golden months. Now she was off to the Riviera to meet her people, and every one she knew was at the Gare de Lyons to catch the pretty last glimpse of her. And, as had been more than once said late of an evening, “to see her was to love her.” She was one of those agitating blondes, with the naturally rippled hair, the rounded rose-leaf cheeks, the large violet-blue eyes that look all things and mean Heaven alone knows how little. She held her court like a queen, leaning out of the carriage window and receiving bouquets, books, journals, long last words, and last longing looks. All eyes were on her, and her eyes were for all—and her smile. For all but one, that is. Not a single glance went Edward’s way, and Edward, tall, lean, gaunt, with big eyes, straight nose, and mouth somewhat too small, too beautiful, seemed to grow thinner and paler before one’s eyes. One pair of eyes at least saw the miracle worked, the paling of what had seemed absolute pallor, the revelation of the bones of a face that seemed already covered but by the thinnest

possible veil of flesh.

And the man whose eyes saw this rejoiced, for he loved her, like the rest, or not like the rest; and he had had Edward's face before him for the last month, in that secret shrine where we set the loved and the hated, the shrine that is lighted by a million lamps kindled at the soul's flame, the shrine that leaps into dazzling glow when the candles are out and one lies alone on hot pillows to outface the night and the light as best one may.

"Oh, good-bye, good-bye, all of you," said Rose. "I shall miss you—oh, you don't know how I shall miss you all!"

She gathered the glances of her friends and her worshippers on her own glance, as one gathers jewels on a silken string. The eyes of Edward alone seemed to escape her.

"Em voiture, messieurs et dames."

Folk drew back from the train. There was a whistle. And then at the very last little moment of all, as the train pulled itself together for the start, her eyes met Edward's eyes. And the other man saw the meeting, and he knew—which was more than Edward did.

So, when the light of life having been borne away in the retreating train, the broken-hearted group dispersed, the other man, whose name by the way was Vincent, linked his arm in Edward's and asked cheerily: "Whither away, sweet nymph?"

"I'm off home," said Edward. "The 7.20 to Calais."

"Sick of Paris?"

"One has to see one's people sometimes, don't you know, hang it all!" was Edward's way of expressing the longing that tore him for the old house among the brown woods of Kent.

“No attraction here now, eh?”

“The chief attraction has gone, certainly,” Edward made himself say.

“But there are as good fish in the sea——?”

“Fishing isn’t my trade,” said Edward.

“The beautiful Rose!——” said Vincent.

Edward raised hurriedly the only shield he could find. It happened to be the truth as he saw it.

“Oh,” he said, “of course, we’re all in love with her—and all hopelessly.”

Vincent perceived that this was truth, as Edward saw it.

“What are you going to do till your train goes?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Café, I suppose, and a vilely early dinner.”

“Let’s look in at the Musée Grévin,” said Vincent.

The two were friends. They had been school-fellows, and this is a link that survives many a strain too strong to be resisted by more intimate and vital bonds. And they were fellow-students, though that counts for little or much—as you take it. Besides, Vincent knew something about Edward that no one else of their age and standing even guessed. He knew that Edward was afraid of the dark, and why. He had found it out that Christmas that the two had spent at an English country house. The house was full: there was a dance. There were to be theatricals. Early in the new year the hostess meant to “move house” to an old convent, built in Tudor times, a beautiful place with terraces and clipped yew trees, castellated battlements, a moat, swans, and a ghost story.

“You boys,” she said, “must put up with a shake-down in the new house. I hope the ghost won’t worry you. She’s a nun with a bunch of keys and no eyes. Comes and breathes softly on the back of your neck when you’re shaving. Then you see her in the glass, and, as often as not, you cut your throat.” She laughed. So did Edward and

Vincent, and the other young men; there were seven or eight of them.

But that night, when sparse candles had lighted “the boys” to their rooms, when the last pipe had been smoked, the last good-night said, there came a fumbling with the handle of Vincent’s door. Edward entered an unwieldy figure clasping pillows, trailing blankets.

“What the deuce?” queried Vincent in natural amazement.

“I’ll turn in here on the floor, if you don’t mind,” said Edward. “I know it’s beastly rot, but I can’t stand it. The room they’ve put me into, it’s an attic as big as a barn—and there’s a great door at the end, eight feet high—raw oak it is—and it leads into a sort of horror-hole—bare beams and rafters, and black as Hell. I know I’m an abject duffer, but there it is—I can’t face it.”

Vincent was sympathetic, though he had never known a night-terror that could not be exorcised by pipe, book, and candle.

“I know, old chap. There’s no reasoning about these things,” said he, and so on.

“You can’t despise me more than I despise myself,” Edward said. “I feel a crawling hound. But it is so. I had a scare when I was a kid, and it seems to have left a sort of brand on me. I’m branded ‘coward,’ old man, and the feel of it’s not nice.”

Again Vincent was sympathetic, and the poor little tale came out. How Edward, eight years old, and greedy as became his little years, had sneaked down, night-clad, to pick among the outcomings of a dinner-party, and how, in the hall, dark with the light of an “artistic” coloured glass lantern, a white figure had suddenly faced him—leaned towards him it seemed, pointed lead-white hands at his heart. That next day, finding him weak from his fainting fit, had shown the horror to be but a statue, a new purchase of his father’s, had mattered not one whit.

Edward had shared Vincent’s room, and Vincent, alone of all men, shared Edward’s secret.

And now, in Paris, Rose speeding away towards Cannes, Vincent said: “Let’s look in at the Musée Grévin.”

The Musée Grévin is a wax-work show. Your mind, at the word, flies instantly to the excellent exhibition founded by the worthy Madame Tussaud, and you think you know what wax-works mean. But you are wrong. The exhibition of Madame Tussaud—in these days, at any rate—is the work of bourgeois for a bourgeois class. The Musée Grévin contains the work of artists for a nation of artists. Wax, modelled and retouched till it seems as near life as death is: this is what one sees at the Musée Grévin.

“Let’s look in at the Musée Grévin,” said Vincent. He remembered the pleasant thrill the Musée had given him, and wondered what sort of a thrill it would give his friend.

“I hate museums,” said Edward.

“This isn’t a museum,” Vincent said, and truly; “it’s just wax-works.”

“All right,” said Edward indifferently. And they went. They reached the doors of the Musée in the grey-brown dusk of a February evening.

One walks along a bare, narrow corridor, much like the entrance to the stalls of the Standard Theatre, and such daylight as there may be fades away behind one, and one finds oneself in a square hall, heavily decorated, and displaying with its electric lights Loie Fuller in her accordion-pleated skirts, and one or two other figures not designed to quicken the pulse.

“It’s very like Madame Tussaud’s,” said Edward.

“Yes,” Vincent said; “isn’t it?”

Then they passed through an arch, and behold, a long room with waxen groups life-like behind glass—the coulisses of the Opéra, Kitchener at Fashoda—this last with a desert background lit by something convincingly like desert sunlight.

“By Jove!” said Edward, “that’s jolly good.”

“Yes,” said Vincent again; “isn’t it?”

Edward’s interest grew. The things were so convincing, so very nearly alive. Given the right angle, their glass eyes met one’s own, and seemed to exchange with one meaning glances.

Vincent led the way to an arched door labelled: “Gallerie de la Revolution.”

There one saw, almost in the living, suffering body, poor Marie Antoinette in prison in the Temple, her little son on his couch of rags, the rats eating from his platter, the brutal Simon calling to him from the grated window; one almost heard the words, “Ho la, little Capet—are you asleep?”

One saw Marat bleeding in his bath—the brave Charlotte eyeing him—the very tiles of the bath-room, the glass of the windows with, outside, the very sunlight, as it seemed, of 1793 on that “yellow July evening, the thirteenth of the month.”

The spectators did not move in a public place among wax-work figures. They peeped through open doors into rooms where history seemed to be re-lived. The rooms were lighted each by its own sun, or lamp, or candle. The spectators walked among shadows that might have oppressed a nervous person.

“Fine, eh?” said Vincent.

“Yes,” said Edward; “it’s wonderful.”

A turn of a corner brought them to a room. Marie Antoinette fainting, supported by her ladies; poor fat Louis by the window looking literally sick.

“What’s the matter with them all?” said Edward.

“Look at the window,” said Vincent.

There was a window to the room. Outside was sunshine—the sunshine of 1792—and, gleaming in it, blonde hair flowing, red mouth half open, what seemed the just-severed head of a beautiful woman. It was raised on a pike, so that it seemed

to be looking in at the window.

“I say!” said Edward, and the head on the pike seemed to sway before his eyes.

“Madame de Lamballe. Good thing, isn’t it?” said Vincent.

“It’s altogether too much of a good thing,” said Edward. “Look here—I’ve had enough of this.”

“Oh, you must just see the Catacombs,” said Vincent; “nothing bloody, you know. Only Early Christians being married and baptized, and all that.”

He led the way, down some clumsy steps to the cellars which the genius of a great artist has transformed into the exact semblance of the old Catacombs at Rome. The same rough hewing of rock, the same sacred tokens engraved strongly and simply; and among the arches of these subterranean burrowings the life of the Early Christians, their sacraments, their joys, their sorrows—all expressed in groups of wax-work as like life as Death is.

“But this is very fine, you know,” said Edward, getting his breath again after Madame de Lamballe, and his imagination loved the thought of the noble sufferings and refrainings of these first lovers of the Crucified Christ.

“Yes,” said Vincent for the third time; “isn’t it?”

They passed the baptism and the burying and the marriage. The tableaux were sufficiently lighted, but little light strayed to the narrow passage where the two men walked, and the darkness seemed to press, tangible as a bodily presence, against Edward’s shoulder. He glanced backward.

“Come,” he said, “I’ve had enough.”

“Come on, then,” said Vincent.

They turned the corner—and a blaze of Italian sunlight struck at their eyes with positive dazzlement. There lay the Coliseum—tier on tier of eager faces under the blue sky of Italy. They were level with the arena. In the arena were crosses; from

them drooped bleeding figures. On the sand beasts prowled, bodies lay. They saw it all through bars. They seemed to be in the place where the chosen victims waited their turn, waited for the lions and the crosses, the palm and the crown. Close by Edward was a group—an old man, a woman—children. He could have touched them with his hand. The woman and the man stared in an agony of terror straight in the eyes of a snarling tiger, ten feet long, that stood up on its hind feet and clawed through the bars at them. The youngest child, only, unconscious of the horror, laughed in the very face of it. Roman soldiers, unmoved in military vigilance, guarded the group of martyrs. In a low cage to the left more wild beasts cringed and seemed to growl, unfed. Within the grating on the wide circle of yellow sand lions and tigers drank the blood of Christians. Close against the bars a great lion sucked the chest of a corpse on whose blood-stained face the horror of the death-agony was printed plain.

“Good God!” said Edward. Vincent took his arm suddenly, and he started with what was almost a shriek.

“What a nervous chap you are!” said Vincent complacently, as they regained the street where the lights were, and the sound of voices and the movement of live human beings—all that warms and awakens nerves almost paralysed by the life in death of waxen immobility.

“I don’t know,” said Edward. “Let’s have a vermouth, shall we? There’s something uncanny about those wax things. They’re like life—but they’re much more like death. Suppose they moved? I don’t feel at all sure that they don’t move, when the lights are all out, and there’s no one there.” He laughed. “I suppose you were never frightened, Vincent?”

“Yes, I was once,” said Vincent, sipping his absinthe. “Three other men and I were taking turns by twos to watch a dead man. It was a fancy of his mother’s. Our time was up, and the other watch hadn’t come. So my chap—the one who was watching

with me, I mean—went to fetch them. I didn't think I should mind. But it was just like you say."

"How?"

"Why, I kept thinking: suppose it should move—it was so like life. And if it did move, of course it would have been because it was alive, and I ought to have been glad, because the man was my friend. But all the same, if it had moved I should have gone mad."

"Yes," said Edward; "that's just exactly it."

Vincent called for a second absinthe.

"But a dead body's different to wax-works," he said. "I can't understand any one being frightened of them."

"Oh, can't you?" The contempt in the other's tone stung him. "I bet you wouldn't spend a night alone in that place."

"I bet you five pounds I do!"

"Done!" said Edward briskly. "At least, I would if you'd got five pounds."

"But I have. I'm simply rolling. I've sold my Dejanira, didn't you know? I shall win your money, though, anyway. But you couldn't do it, old man. I suppose you'll never outgrow that childish scare."

"You might shut up about that," said Edward shortly.

"Oh, it's nothing to be ashamed of; some women are afraid of mice or spiders. I say, does Rose know you're a coward?"

"Vincent!"

"No offence, old boy. One may as well call a spade a spade. Of course, you've got tons of moral courage, and all that. But you are afraid of the dark—and wax-works!"

"Are you trying to quarrel with me?"

“Heaven in its mercy forbid; but I bet you wouldn’t spend a night in the Musée Grévin and keep your senses.”

“What’s the stake?”

“Anything you like.”

“Make it, that if I do, you’ll never speak to Rose again—and what’s more, that you’ll never speak to me,” said Edward, white-hot, knocking down a chair as he rose.

“Done!” said Vincent; “but you’ll never do it. Keep your hair on. Besides, you’re off home.”

“I shall be back in ten days. I’ll do it then,” said Edward, and was off before the other could answer.

Then Vincent, left alone, sat still, and over his third absinthe remembered how, before she had known Edward, Rose had smiled on him; more than on the others, he had thought. He thought of her wide, lovely eyes, her wild-rose cheeks, the scented curves of her hair, and then and there the devil entered into him.

In ten days Edward would undoubtedly try to win his wager. He would try to spend the night in the Musée Grévin. Perhaps something could be arranged before that. If one knew the place thoroughly! A little scare would serve Edward right for being the man to whom that last glance of Rose’s had been given.

Vincent dined lightly, but with conscientious care—and as he dined, he thought. Something might be done by tying a string to one of the figures, and making it move, when Edward was going through that impossible night among the effigies that are so like life—so like death. Something that was not the devil said: “You may frighten him out of his wits.” And the devil answered: “Nonsense! do him good. He oughtn’t to be such a schoolgirl.”

Anyway, the five pounds might as well be won to-night as any other night. He

would take a great coat, sleep sound in the place of horrors, and the people who opened it in the morning to sweep and dust would bear witness that he had passed the night there. He thought he might trust to the French love of a sporting wager to keep him from any bother with the authorities.

So he went in among the crowd, and looked about among the wax-works for a place to hide in. He was not in the least afraid of these lifeless images. He had always been able to control his nervous tremors. He was not even afraid of being frightened, which, by the way, is the worst fear of all. As one looks at the room of the poor little Dauphin, one sees a door to the left. It opens out of the room on to blackness. There were few people in the gallery. Vincent watched, and in a moment when he was alone he stepped over the barrier and through this door. A narrow passage ran round behind the wall of the room. Here he hid, and when the gallery was deserted he looked out across the body of little Capet to the gaolers at the window. There was a soldier at the window, too. Vincent amused himself with the fancy that this soldier might walk round the passage at the back of the room and tap him on the shoulder in the darkness. Only the head and shoulders of the soldier and the gaoler showed, so, of course, they could not walk, even if they were something that was not wax-work.

Presently he himself went along the passage and round to the window where they were. He found that they had legs. They were full-sized figures dressed completely in the costume of the period.

“Thorough the beggars are, even the parts that don’t show—artists, upon my word,” said Vincent, and went back to his doorway, thinking of the hidden carving behind the capitols of Gothic cathedrals.

But the idea of the soldier who might come behind him in the dark stuck in his mind. Though still a few visitors strolled through the gallery, the closing hour was near. He supposed it would be quite dark then. And now he had allowed himself to be amused by the thought of something that should creep up behind him in the dark, he might

possibly be nervous in that passage round which, if wax-works could move, the soldier might have come.

“By Jove!” he said, “one might easily frighten oneself by just fancying things. Suppose there were a back way from Marat’s bath-room, and instead of the soldier Marat came out of his bath, with his wet towels stained with blood, and dabbed them against your neck.”

When next the gallery was empty he crept out. Not because he was nervous, he told himself, but because one might be, and because the passage was draughty, and he meant to sleep.

He went down the steps into the Catacombs, and here he spoke the truth to himself.

“Hang it all!” he said, “I was nervous. That fool Edward must have infected me. Mesmeric influences, or something.”

“Chuck it and go home,” said Commonsense.

“I’m damned if I do!” said Vincent.

There were a good many people in the Catacombs at the moment—live people. He sucked confidence from their nearness, and went up and down looking for a hiding-place.

Through rock-hewn arches he saw a burial scene—a corpse on a bier surrounded by mourners; a great pillar cut off half the still, lying figure. It was all still and unemotional as a Sunday School oleograph. He waited till no one was near, then slipped quickly through the mourning group and hid behind the pillar. Surprising—heartening too—to find a plain rushed chair there, doubtless set for the resting of tired officials. He sat down in it, comforted his hand with the commonplace lines of its rungs and back. A shrouded waxen figure just behind him to the left of his pillar worried him a little, but the corpse left him unmoved as itself. A far better place this than that draughty passage where the soldier with legs kept intruding on the darkness that is always behind one.

Custodians went along the passages issuing orders. A stillness fell. Then suddenly all the lights went out.

“That’s all right,” said Vincent, and composed himself to sleep.

But he seemed to have forgotten what sleep was like. He firmly fixed his thoughts on pleasant things—the sale of his picture, dances with Rose, merry evenings with Edward and the others. But the thoughts rushed by him like motes in sunbeams—he could not hold a single one of them, and presently it seemed that he had thought of every pleasant thing that had ever happened to him, and that now, if he thought at all, he must think of the things one wants most to forget. And there would be time in this long night to think much of many things. But now he found that he could no longer think.

The draped effigy just behind him worried him again. He had been trying, at the back of his mind, behind the other thoughts, to strangle the thought of it. But it was there—very close to him. Suppose it put out its hand, its wax hand, and touched him. But it was of wax: it could not move. No, of course not. But suppose it did?

He laughed aloud, a short, dry laugh that echoed through the vaults. The cheering effect of laughter has been over-estimated, perhaps. Anyhow, he did not laugh again.

The silence was intense, but it was a silence thick with rustlings and breathings, and movements that his ear, strained to the uttermost, could just not hear. Suppose, as Edward had said, when all the lights were out, these things did move. A corpse was a thing that had moved—given a certain condition—Life. What if there were a condition, given which these things could move? What if such conditions were present now? What if all of them—Napoleon, yellow-white from his death sleep—the beasts from the Amphitheatre, gore dribbling from their jaws—that soldier with the legs—all were drawing near to him in this full silence? Those death masks of Robespierre and Mirabeau, they might float down through the darkness till they touched his face. That head of Madame de Lamballe on the pike might be thrust

at him from behind the pillar. The silence throbbed with sounds that could not quite be heard.

"You fool," he said to himself, "your dinner has disagreed with you, with a vengeance. Don't be an ass. The whole lot are only a set of big dolls."

He felt for his matches, and lighted a cigarette. The gleam of the match fell on the face of the corpse in front of him. The light was brief, and it seemed, somehow, impossible to look, by that light, in every corner where one would have wished to look. The match burnt his fingers as it went out; and there were only three more matches in the box.

It was dark again, and the image left on the darkness was that of the corpse in front of him. He thought of his dead friend. When the cigarette was smoked out, he thought of him more and more, till it seemed that what lay on the bier was not wax. His hand reached forward, and drew back more than once. But at last he made it touch the bier, and through the blackness travel up along a lean, rigid arm to the wax face that lay there so still. The touch was not reassuring. Just so, and not otherwise, had his dead friend's face felt, to the last touch of his lips: cold, firm, waxen. People always said the dead were "waxen." How true that was! He had never thought of it before. He thought of it now.

He sat still, so still that every muscle ached, because if you wish to hear the sounds that infest silence, you must be very still indeed. He thought of Edward, and of the string he had meant to tie to one of the figures.

"That wouldn't be needed," he told himself. And his ears ached with listening—listening for the sound that, it seemed, must break at last from that crowded silence.

He never knew how long he sat there. To move, to go up, to batter at the door and clamour to be let out—that one could have done if one had had a lantern, or even a full matchbox. But in the dark, not knowing the turnings, to feel one's way among

these things that were so like life and yet were not alive—to touch, perhaps, these faces that were not dead, and yet felt like death. His heart beat heavily in his throat at the thought.

No, he must sit still till morning. He had been hypnotised into this state, he told himself, by Edward, no doubt; it was not natural to him.

Then suddenly the silence was shattered. In the dark something moved. And, after those sounds that the silence teemed with, the noise seemed to him thunder-loud. Yet it was only a very, very little sound, just the rustling of drapery, as though something had turned in its sleep. And there was a sigh—not far off.

Vincent's muscles and tendons tightened like fine-drawn wire. He listened. There was nothing more: only the silence, the thick silence.

The sound had seemed to come from a part of the vault where, long ago, when there was light, he had seen a grave being dug for the body of a young girl martyr.

"I will get up and go out," said Vincent. "I have three matches. I am off my head. I shall really be nervous presently if I don't look out."

He got up and struck a match, refused his eyes the sight of the corpse whose waxen face he had felt in the blackness, and made his way through the crowd of figures. By the match's flicker they seemed to make way for him, to turn their heads to look after him. The match lasted till he got to a turn of the rock-hewn passage. His next match showed him the burial scene: the little, thin body of the martyr, palm in hand, lying on the rock floor in patient waiting, the grave-digger, the mourners. Some standing, some kneeling, one crouched on the ground.

This was where that sound had come from, that rustle, that sigh. He had thought he was going away from it: instead, he had come straight to the spot where, if anywhere, his nerves might be expected to play him false.

"Bah!" he said, and he said it aloud, "the silly things are only wax. Who's afraid?" His voice sounded loud in the silence that lives with the wax people. "They're only

wax," he said again, and touched with his foot, contemptuously, the crouching figure in the mantle.

And, as he touched it, it raised its head and looked vacantly at him, and its eyes were mobile and alive. He staggered back against another figure, and dropped the match. In the new darkness he heard the crouching figure move towards him. Then the darkness fitted in round him very closely.

"What was it exactly that sent poor Vincent mad: you've never told me?" Rose asked the question. She and Edward were looking out over the pines and tamarisks, across the blue Mediterranean. They were very happy, because it was their honeymoon.

He told her about the Musée Grévin and the wager, but he did not state the terms of it.

"But why did he think you would be afraid?"

He told her why.

"And then what happened?"

"Why, I suppose he thought there was no time like the present—for his five pounds, you know—and he hid among the wax-works. And I missed my train, and I thought there was no time like the present. In fact, dear, I thought if I waited I should have time to make certain of funking it, so I hid there, too. And I put on my big black capuchon, and sat down right in one of the wax-work groups—they couldn't see me from the passage where you walk. And after they put the lights out I simply went to sleep; and I woke up—and there was a light, and I heard some one say: 'They're only wax,' and it was Vincent. He thought I was one of the wax people, till I looked at him; and I expect he thought I was one of them even then, poor chap. And his match went out, and while I was trying to find my railway reading-lamp that I'd got near me, he began to scream, and the night watchman came running. And now he thinks every one in the asylum is made of wax, and he screams if they come near

him. They have to put his food beside him while he's asleep. It's horrible. I can't help feeling as if it were my fault, somehow."

"Of course it's not," said Rose. "Poor Vincent! Do you know I never really liked him." There was a pause. Then she said: "But how was it you weren't frightened?"

"I was," he said, "horribly frightened. I—I—it sounds idiotic, but I thought I should go mad at first—I did really: and yet I had to go through with it. And then I got among the figures of the people in the Catacombs, the people who died for—for things, don't you know, died in such horrible ways. And there they were, so calm—and believing it was all all right. And I thought about what they'd gone through. It sounds awful rot I know, dear—but I expect I was sleepy. Those wax people, they sort of seemed as if they were alive, and were telling me there wasn't anything to be frightened about. I felt as if I were one of them, and they were all my friends, and they'd wake me if anything went wrong, so I just went to sleep."

"I think I understand," she said. But she didn't.

"And the odd thing is," he went on, "I've never been afraid of the dark since. Perhaps his calling me a coward had something to do with it."

"I don't think so," said she. And she was right. But she would never have understood how, nor why.

III THE STRANGER WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN OBSERVED

"There he goes—isn't he simply detestable!" She spoke suddenly, after a silence longer than was usual to her; she was tired, and her voice was a note or two above its habitual key. She blushed, a deep pink blush of intense annoyance, as the young man passed down the long platform among the crowd of city men and typewriting girls, patiently waiting for the belated train to allow them to go home from work.

“Oh, do you think he heard? Oh, Molly—I believe he did!”

“Nonsense!” said Molly briskly, “of course he didn’t. And I must say I don’t think he’s so bad. If he didn’t look so sulky he wouldn’t be half bad, really. If his eyebrows weren’t tied up into knots, I believe he’d look quite too frightfully sweet for anything.”

“He’s exactly like that Polish model we had last week. Oh, Molly, he’s coming back again.”

Again he passed the two girls. His expression was certainly not amiable.

“How long have you known him?” Molly asked.

“I don’t know him. I tell you I only see him on the platform at Mill Vale. He and I seem to be the only people—the only decent people—who’ve found out the new station. He goes up by the 9.1 every day, and so do I. And the train’s always late, so we have the platform and the booking office to ourselves. And there we sit, or stand, or walk, morning after morning like two stuck pigs in a trough of silence.”

“Don’t jumble your metaphors, though you very nearly carried it off with the trough, I own. Stuck pigs don’t walk—in troughs, or anywhere else.”

“Well, you know what I mean——”

“But what do you want the wretched man to do? He can’t speak to you: it wouldn’t be proper——”

“Proper—why not? We’re human beings, not wild beasts. At least, I’m a human being.”

“And he’s a beast—I see.”

“I wish I were a man,” said Nina. “There he is again. His nose goes up another half inch every time he passes me. What’s he got to be so superior about? If I were a man I’d certainly pass the time of day with a fellow-creature if I were condemned to spend from ten to forty minutes with it six days out of the seven.”

“I expect he’s afraid you’d want to marry him. My brother Cecil says men are always horribly frightened about that.”

“Your brother Cecil!” said Nina scornfully. “Yes; that’s just the sort of thing anybody’s brother Cecil would say. He simply looks down on me because I go third. He only goes second himself, too. Here’s the train——”

The two Art students climbed into their third-class carriage, and their talk, leaving Nina’s fellow-traveller, washed like a babbling brook about the feet of great rocks, busied itself with the old Italian Masters, painting as a mission, and the aims of Art—presently running through flatter country and lapping round perspective, foreshortening, tones, values high lights and the preposterous lisp of the anatomy lecturer.

Arrived at Mill Vale the Slade students jumped from their carriage to meet a wind that swept grey curtains of rain across the bleak length of the platform.

“And we haven’t so much as a rib of an umbrella between us,” sighed Molly, putting her white handkerchief over the “best” hat which signalised her Saturday to Monday with her friend. “You’re right: that man is a pig. There he goes with an umbrella big enough for all three of us. Oh, it’s too bad! He’s putting it down—he’s running. He runs rather well. He’s exactly like the cast of the Discobolus in the Antique Room.”

“Only his manners have not that repose that stamps the cast. Come on—don’t stand staring after him like that. We’d better run, too.”

“He’ll think we’re running after him. Oh, bother——”

A moment of indecision, and Nina had turned her skirt over her head, and the two ran home to the little rooms where Nina lived—in the house of an old servant. Nina had no world of relations—she was alone. In the world of Art she had many friends, and in the world of Art she meant to make her mark. For the present she was content to make the tea, and then to set feet on the fender for a cosy evening.

“Did you see him coming out of church?” Nina asked next day. “He looked sulkier

than ever."

"I can't think why you bother about him," said the other girl. "He's not really interesting. What do you call him?"

"Nothing."

"Why, everything has a name, even a pudding. I made a name for him at once. It is 'the stranger who might have been observed——'"

They laughed. After the early dinner they went for a walk. None of your strolls, but a good steady eight miles. Coming home, they met the stranger: and then they talked about him again. For, fair reader, I cannot conceal from you that there are many girls who do think and talk about young men, even when they have not been introduced to them. Not really nice girls like yourself, fair reader—but ordinary, commonplace girls who have not your delicate natures, and who really do sometimes experience a fleeting sensation of interest even in the people whose names they don't know.

Next morning they saw him at the station. The 9.1 took the bit in its teeth, and instead of being, as usual, the 9.30 something, became merely the 9.23. So for some twenty odd minutes the stranger not only might have been, but was, observed by four bright and critical eyes. I don't mean that my girls stared, of course. Perhaps you do not know that there are ways of observing strangers other than by the stare direct. He looked sulkier than ever: but he also had eyes. Yet he, too, was far from staring, so far that the indignant Nina broke out in a distracted whisper: "There! you see! I'm not important enough for him even to perceive my existence. I'm always expecting him to walk on me. I wonder whether he'd apologise when he found I wasn't the station door-mat?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders all to himself in his second-class carriage when the train had started.

"'Simply detestable!' But how one talks prose without knowing it, all along the line! How can I ever have come enough into her line of vision to be distinguished by an

epithet! And why this one? Detestable!”

The epithet, however distinguishing, seemed somehow to lack charm.

At Cannon Street Station the stranger looked sulkier than Nina had ever seen him. She said so, adding: “Than I’ve ever seen him? Oh—I’m wandering. He looks sulkier than I’vsquo;ve ever seen any one—sulkier than I’ve ever dreamed possible. Pig——”

Through the week, painting at the school and black and white work in the evenings filled Nina’s mind to the exclusion even of strangers who might, in more leisured moments, seem worthy of observation. She was aware of the sulky one on platforms, of course, but talking about him to Molly was more amusing somehow than merely thinking of him. When it came to thinking, the real, the earnest things of life—the Sketch Club, the chance of the Melville Nettleship Prize, the intricate hideousness of bones and muscles—took the field and kept it, against strangers and acquaintances alike.

Saturday, turning this week’s scribbled page to the fair, clear page of next week, brought the stranger back to her thoughts, and to eyes now not obscured by close realities.

He passed her on the platform, with a dozen bunches of violets in his hands.

Outside, on the railway bridge, the red and green lamps glowed dully through deep floods of yellow fog. The platform was crowded, the train late. When at last it steamed slowly in, the crowd surged towards it. The third-class carriages were filled in the moment. Nina hurried along the platform peering into the second-class carriages. Full also.

Then the guard opened the way for her into the blue-cloth Paradise of a first-class carriage; and, just as the train gave the shudder of disgust which heralds its shame-faced reluctant departure, the door opened again, and the guard pushed in another traveller—the “stranger who might——” of course. The door banged, the

train moved off with an air of brisk determination. A hundred yards from the platform it stopped dead.

There were no other travellers in that carriage. When the train had stood still for ten minutes or so, the stranger got up and put his head out of the window. At that instant the train decided to move again. It did it suddenly, and, exhausted by the effort, stopped after half a dozen yards' progress with so powerful a turn of the brake that the stranger was flung sideways against Nina, and his elbow nearly knocked her hat off.

He raised his own apologetically—but he did not speak even then.

"The wretch!" said Nina hotly; "he might at least have begged my pardon."

The stranger sat down again, and began to read the Spectator. Nina had no papers. The train moved on an inch or two, and the reddening yellow of the fog seemed like a Charity blanket pressed against each window. Three of the bunches of violets shook and vibrated and slipped, the train moved again and they fell on the floor of the carriage. Nina watched their trembling in an agony of irritation induced by the fog, the delay, and the persistent silence of her companion. When the flowers fell, she spoke.

"You've dropped your flowers," she said. Again a bow, a silent bow, and the flowers were picked up.

"Oh, I'm desperate!" Nina said inwardly. "He must be mad—or dumb—or have a vow of silence—I wonder which?"

The train had not yet reached the next station, though it had left the last nearly an hour before.

"Which is it? Mad, dumb, or a monk? I will find out. Well, it's his own fault; he shouldn't be so aggravating. I'm going to speak to him. I've made up my mind."

In the interval between decision and action the train in a sudden brief access of

nervous energy got itself through a station, and paused a furlong down the line exhausted by the effort.

The stranger had put down his Spectator and was gazing gloomily out at the fog.

Nina drew a deep breath, and said—at least she nearly said: “What a dreadful fog!”

But she stopped. That seemed a dull beginning. If she said that he would think she was commonplace, and she had that sustaining inward consciousness, mercifully vouchsafed even to the dullest of us, of being really rather nice, and not commonplace at all. But what should she say? If she said anything about the colour of the fog and Turner or Whistler, it might be telling, but it would be of the shop shoppy. If she began about books—the Spectator suggested this—she would stand as a prig confessed. If she spoke of politics she would be an ignorant impostor soon exposed. If——But Nina took out her watch and resolved: “When the little hand gets to the quarter I will speak. Whatever I say, I’ll say something.”

And when the big hand did get to the quarter Nina did speak.

“Why shouldn’t we talk?” she said.

He looked at her; and he seemed to be struggling silently with some emotion too deep for words.

“It’s so silly to sit here like mutes,” Nina went on hurriedly—a little frightened, now she had begun, but more than a little determined not to be frightened. “If we were at a dance we shouldn’t know any more of each other than we do now—and you’d have to talk then. Why shouldn’t we now?”

Then the stranger spoke, and at the first sentence Nina understood exactly what reason had decided the stranger that they should not talk. Yet now they did. If this were a work of fiction I shouldn’t dare to pretend that the train took more than two hours to get to Mill Vale. But in a plain record of fact one must speak the truth. The train took exactly two hours and fifty minutes to cover the eleven miles between London and Mill Vale. After that first question and reply Nina and the stranger

talked the whole way.

He walked with her to the door of her lodging, and she offered him her hand without that moment of hesitation which would have been natural to any heroine, because she had debated the question of that handshake all the way from the station, and made up her mind just as they reached the church, a stone's throw from her home. When the door closed on her he went slowly back to the churchyard to lay his violets on a grave. Nina saw them there next day when she came out of church. She saw him too, and gave him a bow and a very small smile, and turned away quickly. The bow meant: "You see I'm not going to speak to you. You mustn't think I want to be always talking to you." The smile meant: "But you mustn't think I'm cross. I'm not—only——"

In the hot, stuffy "life-room" at the Slade next day Molly teased with ill-judged bread-crumbs an arm hopelessly ill drawn, and chattered softly to Nina, who in the Saturday solitude had drawn her easel behind her friend's "donkey." "It's all very well here when you first come in, but when once you are warm, oh dear, how warm you are! Why do models want such boiling rooms? Why can't they be soaked in alum or myrrh or something to harden their silly skins so that they won't mind a breath of decent air? And I believe the model's deformed—she certainly is from where I am. Oh, look at my arm! I ask you a little—look at the beastly thing. Foreshortened like this it looks like a fillet of veal with a pound of sausages tied on to it for a hand. Oh, my own and only Nina—save the sinking ship!"

"It ought to go more like that," Nina said with indicative brush, "and don't keep on rubbing out so fiercely. You'll get paralysed with bread—it's a disease, you know. I heard Tonks telling you so only the other day——"

"It's rather a good phrase: I wonder where he got it? He was rather nice that day," said Molly. "Oh, this arm! It's no good—I believe the model's moved—I tell you I must." More bread. Nina re-absorbed in her canvas. "Yours is coming well. What's

the matter with you to-day? You're very mousy. Has the 'stranger who might' been scowling more than usual? Or have you got a headache? I'm sure this atmosphere's enough to make you. Did you see him this morning? Have you fainted at his feet yet? Has he relented in the matter of umbrellas? I'm sure he can't have passed the whole week without some act of grumpiness."

Nina leaned back and looked through half-shut eyes at the model's beautiful form and stupid face.

"I went down in the same carriage with him on Thursday," she said slowly.

"You did? Did he rush into the third class, where angels like himself ought to fear to tread?"

"There was a fog. Thirds all full, and seconds too. The guard bundled us both in, and the train started—and it took three or four hours to get down."

"Any one else in the carriage?"

"Not so much as a mouse."

"What did you do?"

"Do? What could I do? We sat in opposite corners as far as we could get from each other, exchanging occasional glances of mutual detestation for about an hour and a half. He knocked me down and walked on me once, and took his hat off very politely and beg-pardoningly, but he never said a word. He didn't even say he thought I was the door-mat. And then some cabbages of his fell off the seat."

"Sure they weren't thistles?"

"Vegetables of some sort. And I said: 'You've dropped your——whatever they were.' And he just bowed again in a thank-you-very-much-but-I'm-sure-I-don't-know-what-business-it-is-of-yours sort of way. Do leave that bread alone."

Molly, lost in the interest of the recital, was crumbling the bread as though the floor

of the life-room were the natural haunt of doves and sparrows.

“Well?” she said.

“Well?” said Nina.

“Why ever didn’t you ask him to put the window up, or down, or something? I would have—just to hear if he has a voice.”

“It wouldn’t have been any good. He’d just have bowed again, and I’d had enough bows to last a long time. No: I just said straight out that we were a couple of idiots to sit there gaping at each other with our tongues out, and why on earth shouldn’t we talk?”

“You never did!”

“Or words to that effect, anyhow. And then he said——”

A long pause.

“What?”

“He told me why he never spoke to strangers.”

“What a slap in the face! You poor——”

“Oh, he didn’t say it like that, you silly idiot. And it was quite a good reason.”

“What was it?”

No answer.

“Tell me exactly what he said.”

“He said, ‘I—I—I——’ At any rate, I’m satisfied, and I rather wish we hadn’t called him pigs and beasts, and things like that.”

“Well?”

“That’s all.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me the reason? Oh, very well—you leave it to my guessing? Of course it’s quite evident he’s hopelessly in love with you, and never

ventured to speak for fear of betraying his passion. But, encouraged by your advances——”

“Molly, go on with that arm, and don’t be a vulgar little donkey.”

Molly obeyed. Presently: “Cross-patch,” she said.

“I’m not,” said Nina, “but I want to work, and I like you best when you’re not vulgar.”

“You’re very rude.”

“No: only candid.”

Molly’s wounded pride, besieged by her curiosity, held out for five minutes. Then: “Did you talk to him much?”

“Heaps.”

“All the way down?”

No answer.

“Is he nice?”

Silence.

“Is he clever?”

“I want to work.”

“Well, what I want to know is, and then I’ll let you alone—what did you talk about? Tell me that, and I won’t ask another question.”

“We talked,” said Nina deliberately, taking a clean brush, “we talked about your brother Cecil. No, I shan’t tell you what we said, or why we talked about him, or anything. You’ve had your one question, now shut up.”

“Nina,” said Molly calmly, “if I didn’t like you so much I should hate you.”

“That certainty about the other has always been the foundation of our mutual regard,” said Nina calmly.

Then they laughed, and began to work in earnest.

The next time Molly mentioned the “stranger who might have been observed” Nina laughed, and said: “The subject is forbidden; it makes you vulgar.”

“And you disagreeable.”

“Then it’s best to avoid it. Best for you and best for me.”

“But do you ever see him now?”

“On occasion. He still travels by the 9.1, and I still have the use of my eyes.”

“Does he ever talk to you like he did that Thursday?”

“No—never. And I’m not going to talk about him to you, so it’s no good. Your turn to choose a subject. You won’t? Then it becomes my turn. What a long winter this is! We seem to have taken years to get from November to February!”

The time went more quickly between February and May. It was when the country was wearing its full dress of green and the hawthorn pearls were opening into baby-roses in the hedgerows that it was Nina’s fortune to be put, by the zealous indiscretion of a mistaken porter, into an express train for Beechwood—the wrong station—the wrong line.

The “stranger who might have been observed,” on this occasion was not observed, but observer. He saw and recognised the porter’s error, hesitated a moment, and then leaped into a carriage just behind hers. So that when, after a swift journey made eventful by agonised recognition of the fleeting faces of various stations where she might have changed and caught her own train, Nina reached Beechwood, the stranger’s hand was ready to open the door for her.

“There’s no train for ages,” he said in tones deliberate, almost hesitating. “Shall we walk home? It’s only six miles.”

“But you—aren’t you going somewhere here?”

“No—I—I—I saw the porter put you in—and I thought—at least—anyway you will

walk, won't you?"

They walked. When they reached Beechwood Common, he said: "Won't you take my arm?" And she took it. Her hands were ungloved; the other hand was full of silver may and bluebells. The sun shot level shafts of gold between the birch trees across the furze and heather.

"How beautiful it is!" she said.

"We've known each other three months," said he.

"But I've seen you every day, and we've talked for hours and hours in those everlasting trains," she said, as if in excuse.

"I've seen you every day for longer than that; the first time was on the 3rd of October."

"Fancy remembering that!"

"I have a good memory."

A silence.

Nina broke it, to say again: "How pretty!" She knew she had said it before, or something like it, but she could think of nothing else—and she wanted to say something.

He put his hand over hers as it lay on his arm. She looked up at him quickly.

"Well?" he said, stopping to look down into her eyes and tightening his clasp on her hand. "Are you sorry you came to Beechwood?"

"No——"

"Then be glad. My dear, I wish you could ever be as glad as I am."

Then they walked on, still with his hand on hers.

Nina and Molly sat on a locker swinging their feet and eating their lunch in the Slade corridor next day. Nina was humming softly under her breath.

“What are you so happy for all of a sudden?” Molly asked. “Your sketch-club things are the worst I’ve ever seen, and the Professor was down on you like a hundred of bricks this morning.”

“I’m not happy,” said Nina, turning away what seemed to Molly a new face.

“What is it, then?”

“Nothing. Oh yes—by the way, I’m going to be married.”

“Not really?”

“Check this unflattering display of incredulity—I am.”

“Really and truly? And you never told me a thing. I hate slyness and secretiveness. Nina, who is it? Do I know him?”

Nina named a name.

“Never even heard of him. But where did you meet him? It really is rather deceitful of you.”

“I always meant to tell you, only there was nothing to tell till yesterday except——”

“Except everything,” said Molly. “Well, tell me now.”

Nina jumped up and shook the bath-bun crumbs off her green muslin pinafore.

“Promise not to be horrid, and I will.”

“I won’t—I promise I won’t.”

“Then it’s—it’s him—the ‘stranger who might’—you know. And I really should have told you, though there wasn’t anything to tell, only—don’t laugh.”

“I’m not. Can’t you see I’m not? Only what?”

“Well, when I spoke to him that day in the train, I said, ‘Why shouldn’t we talk?’ And he said, ‘I—I—I—be—be—be—because I stammer so.’ And he did. You never heard anything like it. It was awful. He took hours to get out those few words, and I didn’t know where to look. And I felt such a brute because of the things we’d said

about him, that I had no sense left; and I told him straight out how I'd wondered he never even said he wondered how late the train was when we were waiting for the 9.1, and I was glad it was stammering and not disagreeableness. And then I said I wasn't glad he stammered, but so sorry; and he was awfully nice about it, and I told him about that man who cured your brother Cecil of stammering, and he went to him at once: and he's almost all right now."

"Good gracious!" said Molly. "Are you sure—but why didn't he get cured long ago?"

"He had a mother: she stammered frightfully—after the shock of his father's death, or something, and he got into the way of it from her. And—anyway he didn't. I think it was so as not to hurt his mother's feelings, or something. I don't quite understand. And he said it didn't seem to matter when she was dead. And he's an artist. He sells his pictures too, and he teaches. He has a studio in Chelsea."

"It all sounds a little thin; but if you're pleased, I'm sure I am."

"I am," said Nina.

"But what did he say when he asked you?"

"He didn't ask me," said Nina.

"But surely he said he'd loved you since the first moment he saw you?"

Nina had to admit it.

"Then you see I wasn't such a vulgar little donkey after all."

"Yes, you were. You hadn't any business even to think such things, much less say them. Why, even I didn't dare to think it for—oh—for ever so long. But I'll forgive it—and if it's good it shall be a pretty little bridesmaid, it shall."

"When is it to be?" asked Molly, still adrift in a sea of wonder.

"Oh, quite soon, he says. He says we're only wasting time by waiting. You see we're both alone."

But Molly, looking wistfully at her friend's transfigured face, perceived sadly that it was she who was alone, not they.

And the thought of the red-haired Pierrot with whom she had danced nine times at the Students' Fancy Dress dance, an indiscretion hitherto her dearest memory, now offered no solid consolation.

Nina went away, singing softly under her breath. Molly sighed and followed slowly.

IV RACK AND THUMBSCREW

Her eyelids were red and swollen, her brown hair, flattened out of its pretty curves, clung closely to her head. Ink stained her hands, and there was even a bluish smear of it on her wrist. A tray with tea-things stood among the litter of manuscript on her table. The tea-pot had only cold tea-leaves in it; the bread and butter was untouched.

She put down the pen, and went to the window. The rose-tint of the sunset was reflected on the bank of mist and smoke beyond the river. Above, where the sky was pale and clear, a star or two twinkled contentedly.

She stamped her foot.

Already the beautiful garments of the evening mist, with veiled lights in the folds of it, was embroidered sparsely with the early litten lamps of impatient workers, and as she gazed, the embroidery was enriched by more and more yellow and white and orange—the string of jewels along the embankment, the face of the church clock.

She turned from the window to the room, and lighted her own lamp, for the room was now deeply dusk. It was a large, low, pleasant room. It had always seemed pleasant to her through the five years in which she had worked, and played, and laughed, and cried there. Now she wondered why she had not always hated it.

The stairs creaked. The knocker spoke. She caught her head in both hands.

"My God!" she said, "this is too much!"

Yet she went to the door.

“Oh—it’s only you,” she said, and, with no other greeting, walked back into the room, and sat down at the table.

The newcomer was left to close the outer door, and to follow at her own pleasure. The newcomer was another girl, younger, prettier, smarter. She turned her head sidewise, like a little bird, and looked at her friend with very bright eyes. Then she looked round the room.

“My dear Jane,” she said, “whatever have you been doing to yourself?”

“Nothing,” said her dear Jane very sulkily.

“Oh, if genius burns—your stairs are devilish—but if you’d rather I went away——”

“No, don’t go, Milly. I’m perfectly mad.” She jumped up and waved her outstretched arms over the mass of papers on the table. “Look at all this—three days’ work—rot—abject rot! I wish I was dead. I was wondering just now whether it would hurt much if one leaned too far out of the window—and—— No, I didn’t do it—as you see.”

“What’s the matter?” asked the other prosaically.

“Nothing. That’s just it. I’m perfectly well—at least I was—only now I’m all trembly with drink.” She pointed to the tea-cups. “It’s the chance of my life, and I can’t take it. I can’t work: my brain’s like batter. And everything depends on my idiot brain—it has done for these five years. That’s what’s so awful. It all depends on me—and I’m going all to pieces.”

“I told you so!” rejoined the other. “You would stay in town all the summer and autumn, slaving away. I knew you’d break down, and now you’ve done it.”

“I’ve slaved for five years, and I’ve never broken down before.”

“Well, you have now. Go away at once. Take a holiday. You’ll work like

Shakespeare and Michelangelo after it."

"But I can't—that's just it. It's those stories for the Monthly Multitude; I'm doing a series. I'm behind now: and if I don't get it done this week, they'll stop the series. It's what I've been working for all these years. It's the best chance I've ever had, and it's come now, when I can't do it. Your father's a doctor: isn't there any medicine you can take to make your head more like a head and less like a suet pudding?"

"Look here," said Milly, "I really came in to ask you to come away with us at Whitsuntide; but you ought to go away now. Just go to our cottage at Lymchurch. There's a dear old girl in the village—Mrs Beale—she'll look after you. It's a glorious place for work. Father did reams down there. You'll do your stuff there right enough. This is only Monday. Go to-morrow."

"Did he? I will. Oh yes, I will. I'll go to-night, if there's a train."

"No, you don't, my dear lunatic. You are now going to wash your face and do your hair, and take me out to dinner—a real eighteenpenny dinner at Roches. I'll stand treat."

It was after dinner, as the two girls waited for Milly's omnibus, that the word of the evening was spoken.

"I do hope you'll have a good quiet time," Milly said; "and it really is a good place for work. Poor Edgar did a lot of work there last year. There's a cabinet with a secret drawer that he said inspired him with mysterious tales, and—— There's my 'bus."

"Why do you say poor Edgar?" Jane asked, smiling lightly.

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Awfully sad thing. He sailed from New York a fortnight ago. No news of the ship. His mother's in mourning. I saw her yesterday. Quite broken down. Good-bye. Do take care of yourself, and get well and jolly."

Jane stood long staring after the swaying bulk of the omnibus, then she drew a deep

breath and went home.

Edgar was dead. What a brute Milly was! But, of course, Edgar was nothing to Milly—nothing but a pleasant friend. How slowly people walked in the streets! Jane walked quickly—so quickly that more than one jostled foot-passenger stopped to stare after her.

She had known that he was coming home—and when. She had not owned to herself that the constant intrusion of that thought, "He is here—in London," the wonder as to when and how she should see him again, had counted for very much in these last days of fierce effort and resented defeat.

She got back to her rooms. She remembers letting herself in with her key. She remembers that some time during the night she destroyed all those futile beginnings of stories. Also, that she found herself saying over and over again, and very loud: "There are the boys—you know there are the boys." Because, when you have two little brothers to keep, you must not allow yourself to forget it.

But for the rest she remembers little distinctly. Only she is sure that she did not cry, and that she did not sleep.

In the morning she found her rooms very tidy and her box packed. She had put in the boys' portraits, because one must always remember the boys.

She got a cab and she caught a train, and she reached the seaside cottage. Its little windows blinked firelit welcome to her, as she blundered almost blindly out of the station fly and up the narrow path edged with sea-shells.

Milly had telegraphed. Mrs Beale was there, tremulous, kindly, effective; with armchairs wheeled to the April fire—cups of tea, timid, gentle solicitude.

"My word, Miss, but you do look done up," said she. "The kettle's just on the boil, and I'll wet you a cup o' tea this instant minute, and I've a perfect picture of a chick a-roastin' ready for your bit o' dinner."

Jane leaned back in the cushioned chair and looked round the quiet, pleasant little room. For the moment it seemed good to have a new place to be unhappy in.

But afterwards, when Mrs Beale had gone and she was alone in the house, there was time to think—all the time there had ever been since the world began—all the time that there would ever be till the world ended. Of that night, too, Jane cannot remember everything; but she knows that she did not sleep, and that her eyes were dry: very dry and burning, as though they had been licked into place between their lids by a tongue of flame. It was a long night: a spacious night, with room in it for more memories of Edgar than she had known herself mistress of.

Edgar, truculent schoolboy; Edgar at Oxford, superior to the point of the intolerable; Edgar journalist, novelist, war correspondent—always friend; Edgar going to America to lecture, and make the fortune that—he said—would make all things possible. He had said that on the last evening, when a lot of them—boys and girls, journalists, musicians, art students—had gone to see him off at Euston. He had said it at the instant of farewell, and had looked a question. Had she said "Yes"—or only thought it? She had often wondered that, even when her brain was clear.

Then—she pushed away the next thought with both hands, and drove herself back to the day when the schoolboy next door whom she had admired and hated, saved her pet kitten from the butcher's dog—an heroic episode with blood in it and tears. Edgar's voice, the touch of his hand, the swing of his waltz-step—the way his eyes smiled before his mouth did. How bright his eyes were—and his hands were very strong. He was strong every way: he would fight for his life—even with the sea. Great, smooth, dark waves seemed rushing upon her in the quiet room; she could hear the sound of them on the beach. Why had she come near the sea? It was the same sea that—— She pushed the waves away with both hands. The church clock struck two.

"You mustn't go mad, you know," she told herself very gently and reasonably,

"because of the boys."

Her hands had got clenched somehow, her whole body was rigid. She relaxed the tense muscles deliberately, made up the fire, swept up the hearth.

The new flame her touch inspired flickered a red reflection on the face of the cabinet—the cabinet with the secret drawer that had "inspired Edgar with mysterious tales."

Jane went to it, and patted it, and stroked it, and coaxed it to tell her its secret. But it would not.

"If it would only inspire me," she said, "if I could only get an idea for the story, I could do it now—this minute. Lots of people work best at night. My brain's really quite clear again now, or else I shouldn't be able to remember all these silly little things. No, no," she cried to a memory of a young man kissing a glove, a little creeping memory that came to sting. She trampled on it.

Next day Jane walked four miles to see a doctor and get a sleeping draught.

"You see," she explained very earnestly, "I have some work to finish, and if I don't sleep I can't. And I must do it. I can't tell you how important it is."

The doctor gave her something in a bottle when he had asked a few questions, and she went back to the cottage to go on bearing what was left of the interminable, intolerable day.

That was the day when she set out the fair white writing paper, and the rosy blotting-paper, and the black ink and the black fountain pen, and sat and looked at them for hours and hours. She prayed for help—but no help came.

"I'm probably praying to the wrong people," she said, when through the dusk the square of paper showed vague as a tombstone in twilit grass—"the wrong people—No, there are no tombstones in the sea—the wrong people. If St Anthony helps you to find things, and the other saints help you to be good, perhaps the dead

people who used to write themselves are the ones to help one to write!”

Jane is ashamed to be quite sure that she remembers praying to Dante and Shakespeare, and at last to Christina Rossetti, because she was a woman and loved her brothers.

But no help came. The old woman fussed in and out with wood for the fire—candles—food. Very kindly, it appears, but Jane wished she wouldn’t. Jane thinks she must have eaten some of the food, or the old woman would not have left her as she did.

Jane took the draught, and went to bed.

When Mrs Beale came into the sitting-room next morning, a neat pile of manuscript lay on the table, and when she took a cup of tea to Jane’s bedside, Jane was sleeping so placidly that the old woman had not the heart to disturb her, and set the tea down on a chair by the pillow to turn white and cold.

When Jane came into the sitting-room, she stood long looking at the manuscript. At last she picked it up, and, still standing, read it through. When she had finished, she stood a long time with it in her hand. At last she shrugged her shoulders and sat down. She wrote to Milly.

“Here is the story. I don’t know how I’ve done it, but here it is. Do read it—because I really am a little mad, and if it’s any good, send it in at once to the Monthly Multitude. I slept all last night. I shall soon be well now. Everything is so delightful, and the air is splendid. A thousand thanks for sending me here. I am enjoying the rest and change immensely.—Your grateful

“Jane.”

She read it through. Her smile at the last phrase was not pretty to see.

When the long envelope was posted, Jane went down to the quiet shore and gazed out over the sunlit sands to the opal line of the far receding tide.

The story was written. There was an end to the conflict of agonies, so now the fiercer agony had the field to itself.

“I suppose I shall learn to bear it presently,” she told herself. “I wish I had not forgotten how to cry. I am sure I ought to cry. But the story is done, anyway. I daresay I shall remember how to cry before the next story has to be done.”

There were two more nights and one whole day. The nights had islands of sleep in them—hot, misty islands in a river of slow, crawling, sluggish hours. The day was light and breezy and sunny, with a blue sky cloud-flecked. The day was worse than the nights, because in the day she remembered all the time who she was, and where.

It was on the last day of the week. She was sitting rigid in the little porch, her eyes tracing again and again with conscious intentness the twisted pattern of the budding honeysuckle stalks. A rattle of wheels suddenly checked came to her, and she untwisted her stiff fingers and went down the path to meet Milly—a pale Milly, with red spots in her cheeks and fierce, frowning brows—a Milly who drew back from the offered kiss and spoke in tones that neither had heard before.

“Come inside. I want to speak to you.”

The new disaster thus plainly heralded moved Jane not at all. There was no room in her soul for any more pain. In the little dining-room, conscientiously “quaint” with its spotted crockery dogs and corner cupboard shining with willow pattern tea-cups, Milly shut the door and turned on her friend.

“Now,” she said, “I came down to see you, because there are some things I couldn’t write—even to you. You can go back to the station in the cab, I’ve told the man to wait. And I hope I shall never see your face again.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked the question mechanically, and not at all because she did not know the answer.

“You know what I mean,” the other answered, still with white fury. “I’ve found you out. You thought you were safe, and Edgar was dead, and no one would know. But

as it happens I knew; and so shall everybody else."

Jane moistened dry lips, and said: "Knew what?" and held on by the table.

"You didn't think he'd told me about it, did you?" Milly flashed—"but he did."

"I think you must tell me what you mean," Jane said, and shifted her hold from table to armchair.

"Oh, certainly." Milly tossed her head, and Jane's fingers tightened on the chair-back. "Yes, I don't wonder you look ill—I suppose you were sorry when you'd done it. But it's no use being sorry; you should have thought of all that before."

"Tell me," said Jane, low.

"I'll tell you fast enough. You shall see I do know. Well, then, that story you sent me—you just copied it from a story of Edgar's that was in the old cabinet. He wrote it when he was here; and he said it wasn't good, and I said it was, and then he said he'd leave it in the secret drawer, and see how it looked when he came back. And you found it. And you thought you were very clever, I daresay, and that Edgar was dead, and no one would know. But I knew, and——"

"Yes," Jane interrupted, "you said that before. So you think I found Edgar's manuscript? If I did it I must have done it in my sleep. I used to walk in my sleep when I was a child. You believe me, Milly, don't you?"

"No," said Milly, "I don't."

"Then I'll say nothing more," said Jane with bitter dignity. "I will go at once, and I will try to forgive your cruelty. I would never have doubted your word—never. I am very ill—look at me. I had a sleeping draught, and I suppose it upset me: such things have happened. You've known me eight or nine years: have you ever known me do a dishonourable thing, or tell a lie? The dishonour is in yourself, to believe such things of me."

Jane had drawn herself up, and stood, tall and haggard, her dark eyes glowing in their deep sockets. The other woman was daunted. She hesitated, stammered half a word, and was silent.

“Good-bye,” said Jane; “and I hope to God no one will ever be such a brute to you as you have been to me.” She turned, but before she reached the door Milly had caught her by the arm.

“No, don’t, don’t!” she cried. “I do believe you, I do! You poor darling! You must have done it in your sleep. Oh, forgive me, Jane dear. I’ll never tell a soul, and Edgar——”

“Ah,” said Jane, turning mournful eyes on her, “Edgar would have believed in me.”

And at that Milly understood—in part, at least—and held out her arms.

“Oh, you poor dear! and I never even guessed! Oh, forgive me!” and she cried over Jane and kissed her many times. “Oh, my dear!” she said, as Jane yielded herself to the arms and her face to the kisses, “I’ve got something to tell you. You must be brave.”

“No—no more,” Jane said shrilly; “I can’t bear any more. I don’t want to know how it happened, or anything. He’s dead—that’s enough.”

“But——” Milly clung sobbing to her, sobbing with sympathy and agitation.

Jane pushed her back, held her at arm’s length and looked at her with eyes that were still dry.

“You’re a good little thing, after all,” she said. “Yes—now I’ll tell you. You were quite right. It was a lie—but half of it was true—the half I told you—but I wanted you to believe the other half too. I did walk in my sleep, and I must have opened that cabinet and taken Edgar’s story out, because I found myself standing there with it in my hands. And he was dead, and—— Oh, Milly. I knew he was dead, of course, and yet he was there—I give you my word he was there, and I heard him say ‘Take it,

take it, take it!' quite plainly, like I'm speaking to you now. And I took it; and I copied it out—it took me nearly all night—and then I sent it to you. And I'd never have told you the truth as long as you didn't believe me—never—never. But now you do believe me I won't lie to you. There! Let me go. I think I was mad then, and I know I am now. Tell every one. I don't care."

But Milly threw her arms round her again. The love interest had overpowered the moral sense. What did the silly story, or the theft, or the lie matter—what were they, compared with the love-secret she had surprised?

"My darling Jane," she said, holding her friend closely and still weeping lavishly, "don't worry about the story: I quite understand. Let's forget it. You've got quite enough trouble to bear without that. But there's one thing, it's just as well I found out before the story was published. Because Edgar isn't dead. His ship has been towed in: he's at home."

Jane laughed.

"Don't cry, dear," said Milly; "I'll help you to bear it. Only—oh dear, how awful it is for you!—he's going to be married."

Jane laughed again; and then she thinks the great, green waves really did rise up all round the quaint dining-room—rise mountains high, and, falling, cover her.

Jane was ill so long that Milly had to tell Edgar about the story after all, and they sent it in, and it was published in Jane's name. So the little brothers were all right. And he wrote the next story for her too, and they corrected the proofs together.

Jane has always thought it a pity that Milly had not troubled to ask the name of the girl whom Edgar intended to marry, because the name proved, on enquiry, to be Jane.

V THE MILLIONAIRESS

I

It is a dismal thing to be in London in August. The streets are up for one thing, and your cab can never steer a straight course for the place you want to go to. And the trees are brown in the parks, and every one you know is away, so that there would be nowhere to go in your cab, even if you had the money to pay for it, and you could go there without extravagance.

Stephen Guillemot sat over his uncomfortable breakfast-table in the rooms he shared with his friend, and cursed his luck. His friend was away by the sea, and he was here in the dirty and sordid blackness of his Temple chambers. But he had no money for a holiday; and when Dornington had begged him to accept a loan, he had sworn at Dornington, and Dornington had gone off not at all pleased. And now Dornington was by the sea, and he was here. The flies buzzed in the panes and round the sticky marmalade jar; the sun poured in at the open window. There was no work to do. Stephen was a solicitor by trade; but, in fact and perforce, an idler. No business came to him. All day long the steps of clients sounded on the dirty, old wooden staircase—clients for Robinson on the second, for Jones on the fourth, but none for Guillemot on the third. Even now steps were coming, though it was only ten o'clock. The young man glanced at the marmalade jar, at the crooked cloth stained with tea, which his laundress had spread for his breakfast.

"Suppose it is a client——" He broke off with a laugh. He had never been able to cure himself of that old hope that some day the feet of a client—a wealthy client—would pause at his door, but the feet had always gone by—as these would do. The steps did indeed pass his door, paused, came back, and—oh wonder! it was his knocker that awoke the Temple echoes.

He glanced at the table. It was hopeless. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I daresay it's only a bill," he said, and went to see.

The newcomer was impatient, for even as Guillemot opened the door, the knocker

was in act to fall again.

“Is Mr Guillemot—— Oh, Stephen, I should have known you anywhere!”

A radiant vision in a white linen gown—a very smart tailor-made-looking linen gown—and a big white hat was standing in his doorway, shaking him warmly by the hand.

“Won’t you ask me in?” asked the vision, smiling in his bewildered face.

He drew back mechanically, and closed the door after him as she went in. Then he followed her into the room that served him for office and living-room, and stood looking at her helplessly.

“You don’t know me a bit,” she said; “it’s a shame to tease you. I’ll take off my hat and veil; you will know me then. It’s these fine feathers!”

And take them off she did—in front of the fly-spotted glass on the mantel-piece; then she turned a bright face on him, a pretty mobile face, crowned with bright brown hair. And still he stood abashed.

“I never thought you would have forgotten the friend of childhood’s hour,” she began again. “I see I must tell you in cold blood.”

“Why, it’s Rosamund!” he cried suddenly. “Do forgive me! I never, never dreamed—— My dear Rosamund, you aren’t really changed a bit it’s only—your hair being done up and——”

“And the fine feathers,” said she, holding out a fold of her dress. “They are very pretty feathers, aren’t they?”

“Very,” said he. And then suddenly a silence of embarrassment fell between them.

The girl broke it with a laugh that was not quite spontaneous.

“How funny it all is!” she said. “I went to New York with my uncle when dear papa died—and then I went to Girton, and now poor uncle’s dead, and——” Her eye fell on the tablecloth. “I’m going to clear away this horrid breakfast of yours,” she said.

“Oh, please!” he pleaded, taking the marmalade jar up in his helpless hands. She took the jar from him.

“Yes, I am,” she said firmly; “and you can just sit down and try to remember who I am.”

He obediently withdrew to the window-seat and watched her as she took away the ugly crockery and the uglier food to hide them in his little kitchen; and as he watched her he remembered many things. The lonely childhood in a country rectory—the long, dull days with no playfellows; then the arrival of the new doctor and his little daughter Rosamund Rainham—and almost at the same time, it seemed, the invalid lady with the little boy who lodged at the Post Office. Then there were playfellows, dear playfellows, to cheer and teach him—poor Stephen, he hardly knew what play or laughter meant. Then the invalid lady died, and Stephen’s father awoke from his dreams amid his old books, as he had a way of doing now and then, enquired into the circumstances of the boy, Andrew Dornington, and, finding him friendless and homeless, took him into his home to be Stephen’s little brother and friend. Then the long happy time when the three children were always together: walking, boating, birdsnesting, reading, playing and quarrelling; the storm of tears from Rosamund when the boys went to College; the shock of surprise and the fleeting sadness with which Stephen heard that the doctor was dead and that Rosamund had gone to America to her mother’s brother. Then the fulness of living, the old days almost forgotten, or only remembered as a pleasant dream. Stephen had never thought to see Rosamund again—had certainly never longed very ardently to see her; at any rate, since the year of her going. And now—here she was, grown to womanhood and charm, clearing away his breakfast things! He could hear the tap running, and knew that she must be washing her hands at the sink, using the horrid bit of yellow soap with tea-leaves embedded in it. Now she was drying her hands on the dingy towel behind the kitchen door. No; she came in drying her pink fingers on her handkerchief.

“What a horrid old charwoman you must have!” she said; “everything is six inches deep in dust—and all your crockery is smeary.”

“I am sorry it’s not nicer,” he said. “Oh, but it’s good to see you again! What times we used to have! Do you remember when we burned your dolls on the 5th of November?”

“I should think I did. And do you remember when I painted your new tool-chest and the handles of your saws and gimlets and things with pale green enamel? I thought you would be so pleased.”

She had taken her place, as she spoke, in the depths of the one comfortable chair, and he answered from his window-seat; and in a moment the two were launched on a flood of reminiscences, and the flight of time was not one of the things they remembered. The hour and the quarters sounded, and they talked on. But the insistence of noon, boomed by the Law Courts’ clock, brought Miss Rainham to her feet.

“Twelve!” she cried. “How time goes! And I’ve never told you what I came for. Look here. I’m frightfully rich; I only heard it last week. My uncle never seemed very well off. We lived very simply, and I used to do the washing-up and the dusting and things; and now he’s died and left me all his money. I don’t know where he kept it all. The people on the floor above here wrote me about it. I was going to see them, and I saw your name; and I simply couldn’t pass it. Look here, Stephen—are you very busy?”

“Not too busy to do anything you want. I’m glad you’ve had luck. What can I do for you?”

“Will you really do anything I want? Promise.”

“Of course I promise.” He looked at her and wondered if she knew how hard it would be to him to refuse her anything: for Mr Guillemot had been fancy free, and this gracious vision, re-risen from old times, had turned his head a little.

“Good! You must be my solicitor.”

“But I can’t. Jones——”

“Bother Jones!” she said. “I shan’t go near him. I won’t be worried by Jones. What is the use of having a fortune—and it’s a big fortune, I can tell you—if I mayn’t even choose my own solicitor? Look here, Stephen—really—I have no relations and no friends in England—no man friends, I mean—and you won’t charge me more than you ought, but you will charge me enough. Oh, I feel like Mr Boffin—and you are Mortimer Lightwood, and Andrew is Eugene. Do you call him Dora still?”

It was the first question she had asked about the boy who had shared all their youth with them.

“Oh, Dornington is all right. He’d be awfully sick if you called him Dora nowadays. He’s got on a little—not much. He goes in for journalism. He’s at Lymchurch just now; he lives here with me generally.”

“Yes—I know; I saw his name on the door.” And Stephen did not wonder till later why she had not mentioned that name earlier in the interview.

“Here, give me paper and pens, the best there is time to procure. Now tell me what to say to Jones. I want to tell him that I loathe his very name; that I know I could never bear the sight of him; and that you are going to look after everything for me.”

He resisted—she pleaded; and at last the letter was written, not quite in those terms, and Stephen at her request reluctantly instructed her as to the method of giving a Power of Attorney.

“You must arrange everything,” she said; “I won’t be bothered. Now I must go. Jones is human, after all. He knew I should want money, and he sent me quite a lot. And I am going away for a holiday—just to see what it feels like to be rich.”

“You’re not going about alone, I hope,” said Stephen. And then, for the first time, he remembered that beautiful young ladies are not allowed to clear away tea-things in

the Temple, without a chaperon—even for their solicitors.

“No; Constance Grant is with me. You don’t know her. I got to know her at Girton. She’s a dear.”

“Look here,” he said, awkwardly standing behind her as she pinned her hat and veil in front of his glass, “when you come back I’ll come to see you. But you mustn’t come here again; it’s—it’s not customary.” She smiled at his reflection in the glass.

“Oh, I forgot your stiff English notions! So absurd! Not going to see one’s old friend and one’s solicitor! However, I won’t come where I’m not wanted——”

“You know——” he began reproachfully; but she interrupted.

“Oh yes, it’s all right. Now remember that all my affairs are in your hands, and when I come back you will have to tell me exactly what I am worth—between eight and fourteen hundred thousand pounds, they say; but that’s nonsense, isn’t it? Good-bye.”

And with a last switch of white skirts against the dirty wainscot, and a last wave of a white-gloved hand, she disappeared down the staircase.

Stephen drew a long breath. “It can’t be fourteen hundred thousand,” he said slowly; “but I wish to goodness it wasn’t four-pence.”

II

The tide was low, the long lines of the sandbanks shone yellow in the sun—yellower for the pools of blue water left between them. Far off, where the low white streak marked the edge of the still retreating sea, little figures moved slowly along, pushing the shrimping-nets through the shallow water.

On one of the smooth wave-worn groins a girl sat sketching the village; her pink gown and red Japanese umbrella made a bright spot on the gold of the sand.

Further along the beach, under the end of the grass-grown sea-wall, a young man and woman basked in the August sun. Her sunshade was white, and so were her

gown and the hat that lay beside her. Since her accession to fortune Rosamund Rainham had worn nothing but white.

“It is the prettiest wear in the world,” she had told Constance Grant; “and when you’re poor, it’s the most impossible. But now I can have a clean gown every day, and a clean conscience as well.”

“I’m not sure about the conscience,” Constance had answered with her demure smile. “Think of the millions of poor people.”

“Oh, bother!” Miss Rainham had laughed, not heartlessly, but happily. “Thank Heaven, I’ve enough to be happy myself and make heaps of other people happy too. And the first step is that no one’s to know I’m rich, so remember that we are two high-school teachers on a holiday.”

“I loathe play-acting,” Constance had said, but she had submitted, and now she sat sketching, and Rosamund in her white gown watched the seagulls and shrimpers from under the sea-wall of Lymchurch.

“And so your holiday’s over in three days,” she was saying to the young man beside her; “it’s been a good time, hasn’t it?”

He did not answer; he was piling up the pebbles in a heap, and always at a certain point the heap collapsed.

“What are you thinking of? Poems again?”

“I had a verse running in my head,” he said apologetically; “it has nothing to do with anything.”

“Write it down at once,” she said imperiously, and he obediently scribbled in his notebook, while she took up the work of building the stone heap—it grew higher under her light fingers.

“Read it!” she said, when the scribbling of the pencil stopped, and he read:

“Now the vexed clouds, wind-driven, spread wings of white, Long leaning wings

across the sea and land; The waves creep back, bequeathing to our sight The treasure-house of their deserted sand; And where the nearer waves curl white and low, Knee-deep in swirling brine the slow-foot shrimpers go.

Pale breadth of sand where clamorous gulls confer Marked with broad arrows by their planted feet, White rippled pools where late deep waters were, And ever the white waves marshalled in retreat, And the grey wind in sole supremacy O'er opal and amber cold of darkening sky and sea."

"Opal and amber cold," she repeated; "it's not like that now. It's sapphire and gold and diamonds."

"Yes," he said; "but that was how it was last week——"

"Before I came——"

"Yes, before you came;" his tone put a new meaning into her words.

"I'm glad I brought good weather," she said cheerfully, and the little stone heap rattled itself down under her hand.

"You brought the light of the world," he said, and caught her hand and held it. There was a silence. A fisherman passing along the sea-wall gave them good-day. "What made you come to Lymchurch?" he said presently, and his hand lay lightly on hers. She hesitated, and looked down at her hand and his.

"I knew you were here," she said. His eyes met hers. "I always meant to see you again some day. And you knew me at once. That was so nice of you."

"You have not changed," he said; "your face has not changed, only you are older, and——"

"I'm twenty-two; you needn't reproach me with it. Yours is the same to a month."

He moved on his elbow a little nearer to her.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he asked, looking out to sea, "that you and I were made for each other?"

“No; never.”

He looked out to sea still, and his face clouded heavily.

“Ah—no—don’t look like that, dear; it never occurred to me—I think I must have always known it somehow, only——”

“Only what?—do you really?—only what?” A silence. Then, “Only what?” he asked again.

“Only I was so afraid it would never occur to you!”

There was no one on the wide, bare sands save the discreet artist—their faces were very near.

“We shall be very, very poor, I’m afraid,” he said presently.

“I can go on teaching.”

“No”—his voice was decided—“my wife shan’t work—at least not anywhere but in our home. You won’t mind playing at love in a cottage for a bit, will you? I shall get on now I’ve something to work for. Oh, my dear, thank God I’ve enough for the cottage! When will you marry me? We’ve nothing to wait for, no relations to consult, no settlements to draw up. All that’s mine is thine, lassie.”

“And all that’s mine—Oh! Stephen!”

For, with a scattering of shingle, a man dropped from the sea-wall two yards from them.

The situation admitted of no disguise, for Miss Rainham’s head was on Mr Dornington’s shoulder. They sprang up.

“Why, Stephen!” echoed Andrew, “this—this is good of you! You remember Rosamund? We have just found out that——” But Rosamund had turned, and was walking quickly away over the sand.

Stephen filled a pipe and lighted it before he said: “You’ve made good use of your time, old man. I congratulate you.” His tone was cold.

“There is no reason why I should not make good use of my time,” Dornington answered, and his tone had caught the chill of the other’s.

“None whatever. You have secured the prize, and I congratulate you. Whether it’s fair to the girl is another question.”

In moments of agitation a man instinctively feels for his pipe. It was now Dornington’s turn to fill and light.

“Of course it’s your own affair,” said Guillemot, chafing at the silence, “but I think you might have given the heiress a chance. However, it’s each for himself, I suppose, and——”

“Heiress?”

“Yes, the heiress—the Millionairess, if you prefer it. I’ve been looking into her affairs: it is just about a million.”

“Rather cheap chaff, isn’t it?”

“It’s a very lucky thing for you,” said Stephen savagely. “Perhaps I ought not to grudge it to you. But I must say, Dornington—I see we look at the thing differently—but I must say, I shouldn’t have cared to grab at such luck myself.”

Dornington had thrust his hands into his pockets, and stood looking at his friend.

“I see,” he said slowly. “And her fortune is really so much? I didn’t think it had been so much as that. Yes. Well, Guillemot, it’s no good making a row about it; I don’t want to quarrel with my best friend. Go along to my place, will you? Or stay: come and let me introduce you to Miss Grant, and you can walk up with her; she’ll show you where I live. I’m going for a bit of a walk.”

Five minutes later Stephen, in response to Rosamund’s beckoning hand at the window, was following Miss Grant up the narrow flagged path leading to the cottage which Rosamund had taken. And ten minutes later Andrew Dornington was striding along the road to the station with a Gladstone bag in his hands.

Stephen lunched at the cottage. The girls served the lunch themselves; they had no hired service in the little cottage. Rosamund exerted herself to talk gaily.

As the meal ended, a fair-haired child stood in the door that opened straight from the street into the sitting-room, after the primitive fashion of Lymchurch.

"'E gave me a letter for you," said the child, and Rosamund took it, giving in exchange some fruit from the pretty disordered table.

"Excuse me," she said, with the rose in her cheeks because she saw the hand-writing was the hand-writing she had seen in many pencilled verses. She read the letter, frowned, read it again. "Constance, you might get the coffee."

Constance went out. Then the girl turned on her guest.

"This is your doing," she said with a concentrated fury that brought him to his feet facing her. "Why did you come and meddle! You've told him I was rich—the very thing I didn't mean him to know till—till he couldn't help himself. You've spoilt everything! And now he's gone—and he'll never come back. Oh, I hope you will suffer for this some day. You will, if there's any justice in the world!"

He looked as though he suffered for it even now, but when he spoke his voice was equable.

"I am extremely sorry," he said, "but after all, there's very little harm done. You should have warned me that you meant to play a comedy, and I would have taken any part you assigned me. However, you've succeeded. He evidently 'loves you for yourself alone.' Write and tell him to come back: he'll come."

"How little you know him," she said, "after all these years! Even I know him better than that. That was why I pretended not to be rich. Directly I knew about the money I made up my mind to find him and try if I could make him care. I know it sounds horrid; I don't mind, it's true. And I had done it; and then you came. Oh, I hope I shall never see you again! I will never speak to you again! No, I don't mean that——" She hid her face in her hands.

“Rosamund, try to forgive me. I didn’t know, I couldn’t know. I will bring him back to you—I swear it! Only trust me.”

“You can’t,” she said; “it’s all over.”

“Let me tell you something. If you hadn’t had this money—but if you hadn’t had this money I should never have seen you. But I have thought of nothing but you ever since that day you came to the Temple. I don’t tell you this to annoy you, only to show you that I would do anything in the world to prevent you from being unhappy. Forgive me, dear! Oh, forgive me!”

“It’s no good,” she said; but she gave him her hand. When Constance Grant came back with the coffee, she found Mr Guillemot alone looking out of the window at the sunflowers and the hollyhocks.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

“I’ve made a fool of myself,” he said, forgetting, as he looked at her kind eyes, that three hours ago she was only a name to him.

“Could I do anything?”

“You’re her friend,” he said. “Miss Grant, I’m going down to the sea, if you could come down with me and let me talk—but I’ve no right to bother you.”

“I’ll come,” said Constance. “I’ll come by-and-by when I’ve cleared lunch away. It’s no bother. As you say, I’m her friend.”

III

Rosamund stayed on at the little house behind the sea-wall, and she wrote letters, long and many, which accumulated on the mantel-piece of the rooms in the Temple. Andrew found them there when he returned to town in the middle of October. The room was cheerless, tenantless, fireless. He lit the gas and looked through his letters. He did not dare to open those which came from her. There were bills, invitation cards, a returned manuscript or two, a cheque for a magazine article, and a letter in

Stephen's hand-writing. It was dated a fortnight earlier.

"Dear old Chap," it ran, "I'm off to my father's. I can't bear it. I can't face you or any one. I wish to God I'd never told you anything about Rosamund Rainham's money. There isn't any money: it was all in the Crystal Oil Co. No one had the least idea that it wasn't good, but I feel as if I ought to have known. There's a beggarly hundred or so in consols: that's the end of her million. It wasn't really my fault, of course. She doesn't blame me.—Yours,

"Stephen Guillemot."

Then he opened her letters—read them all—in the order of the dates on the postmarks, for even in love Andrew was an orderly man—read them with eyes that pricked and smarted. There were four or five of them. First, the frank pleading of affection, then the coldness of hurt pride and love; then, doubts, wonderings. Was he ill? Was he away? Would he not at least answer? Passionate longing, tender anxiety breathed in every word. Then came the last letter of all, written a fortnight ago:

"Dear Andrew,—I want you to understand that all is over between us. I know you wished it, and now I see you are right. I could never have been anything to you but your loving friend,

"Rosamund."

He read it through twice; it was a greater shock to him than Stephen's letter had been. Then he understood. The Millionairess might stoop to woo a poor lover whose pride had fought with and conquered his love: the girl with only a "beggarly hundred in consols" had her pride too.

The early October dusk filled the room. Andrew caught up the bag he had brought with him, slammed the door, and blundered down the stairs. He caught a passing hansom in Fleet Street and the last train to Lymchurch.

A furious south-wester was waiting for him there. He could hardly stand against it—it blew and tore and buffeted him, almost prevailing against him as he staggered

down the road from the station. The night was inky black, but he knew his Lymchurch every inch, and he fought it manfully, though every now and then he was fain to cling to a gateway or a post, and hold on till the gust had passed. Thus, breathless and dishevelled, his tie under his left ear, his hat battered in, his hair in crisp disorder, he reached at last the haven of the little porch of the house under the sea-wall.

Rosamund herself opened the door; her eyes showed him two things—her love and her pride. Which would be the stronger? He remembered how the question had been answered in his own case, and he shivered as she took his hand and led him into the warm, lamp-lighted room. The curtains were drawn; the hearth swept; a tabby cat purred on the rug; a book lay open on the table: all breathed of the sober comfort of home. She sat down on the other side of the hearth and looked at him. Neither spoke. It was an awkward moment.

Rosamund broke the silence.

“It is very friendly of you to come and see me,” she said. “It is very lonely for me now. Constance has gone back to London.”

“She has gone back to her teaching?”

“Yes; I wanted her to stay, but——”

“I’ve heard from Stephen. He is very wretched; he seems to think it is his fault.”

“Poor, dear boy!” She spoke musingly. “Of course it wasn’t his fault. It all seems like a dream, to have been so rich for a little while, and to have done nothing with it except,” she added with a laugh and a glance at her fur-trimmed dress, “to buy a most extravagant number of white dresses. How awfully tired you look, Andrew! Go and have a wash—the spare room’s the first door at the top of the stairs—and I’ll get you some supper.”

When he came down again, she had laid a cloth on the table and was setting out silver and glass.

"Another relic of my brief prosperity," she said, touching the forks and spoons. "I'm glad I don't have to eat with nickel-plated things."

She talked gaily as they ate. The home atmosphere of the room touched Dornington. Rosamund herself, in her white gown, had never appeared so fair and desirable. And but for his own mad pride he might have been here now, sharing her pretty little home life with her—not as her guest, but as her husband. He flushed crimson. Blushing was an old trick of his—one of those that had earned him his feminine nickname of Dora, and in the confusion his blushing brought him, he spoke.

"Rosamund, can you ever forgive me?"

"I forgive you from my heart," she said, "if I have anything to forgive."

But in her tone was the resentment of a woman who does not forgive. Yet he had been right. He had sacrificed himself; and if he had chosen to suffer? But what about the blue lines under her dear eyes, the hollows in her dear face?

"You have been unhappy," he said.

"Well," she laughed, "I wasn't exactly pleased to lose my fortune."

"Dear," he said desperately, "won't you try to forgive me? It seemed right. How could I sacrifice you to a penniless——"

"I'd enough for both—or thought I had," she said obstinately.

"Ah, but don't you see——"

"I see that you cared more for not being thought mercenary by Stephen than——"

"Forgive me!" he pleaded; "take me back."

"Oh no"—she tossed her bright head—"Stephen might think me mercenary; I couldn't bear that. You see you are richer than I am now. How much did you tell me you made a year by your writing? How can I sacrifice you to a penniless——"

"Rosamund, do you mean it?"

"I do mean it. And, besides——"

“What?”

“I don’t love you any more.” The bright head drooped and turned away.

“I have killed your love. I don’t wonder. Forgive me for bothering you. Good-bye!”

“What are you going to do?” she asked suddenly.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, nothing desperate. Only work hard and try to forgive you.”

“Forgive me? You have nothing to forgive.”

“No, nothing—if you had left off loving me? Have you? Is it true?”

“Good-bye!” she said. “You are staying at the ‘Ship’?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t let’s part in anger. I shall be on the sea-wall in the morning. Let’s part friends, then.”

In the morning Andrew went into the fresh air. The trees, still gold in calmer homes, stood almost leafless in wild, windy Lymchurch. He stood in the sunlight, and in spite of himself some sort of gladness came to him through the crisp October air. Then the ping of a bicycle bell sounded close behind him, and there was Stephen.

They shook hands, and Stephen’s eyebrows went up.

“Is it all right?” he asked. “I knew you’d come here when I came home last night and found you’d had my letter.”

“No; it’s not all right. She won’t have me.”

“Why?”

“Pride or revenge, or something. Don’t let’s talk about it.”

“All right. I want some breakfast; we left town by the 7.20. I’m starving.”

“Who are ‘we’?”

“Miss Grant and I. I thought Rosamund would be wanting a chaperon or a bridesmaid, or something, so I brought her and her bicycle.”

“Always thoughtful,” said Andrew, with something like a laugh.

Presently, strolling along the sea-wall they met the two girls. Rosamund looked radiant. Where was the pale, hollow-eyed darling of last night? The wind that ruffled her brown hair had blown roses into her cheeks.

“Do you forgive me?” whispered Stephen when they met.

“That depends,” she answered.

They all walked on together, and presently Stephen and Constance fell behind.

Then Rosamund spoke.

“You really think I ought to crush my pride, and—and——”

Hope laughed in Andrew’s face—laughed and fled—for he looked in the face of Miss Rainham, and there was no sign of yielding in it.

“Yes,” he said almost sullenly.

“That is as much as to say that you were wrong.”

“I—perhaps I was wrong. What does it matter?”

“It matters greatly. Suppose I had my money now would you run away from me?”

“I—I suppose I should act as I did before.”

“Then you don’t care for me any more than you did?”

“I love you a thousand times more,” he cried, turning angry, haggard eyes to her. “Yes, I believe I was wrong. Nothing would send me from you now but yourself——”

She clapped her hands.

“Then stay,” she said, “for it’s a farce, and my money is as safe as houses.”

He scowled at her.

“It’s all a trick? You’ve played with me? Good-bye, and God forgive you!”

He turned to go, but Constance, coming up from behind them, caught his arm.

"Don't be such an idiot," she said. "She had nothing to do with it. She thought her money was gone. You don't suppose she would have played such a trick even to win your valuable affections. You don't deserve your luck, Mr Dornington."

Rosamund was looking at him with wet eyes, and her lips trembled.

"Constance only told me this morning," she said. "She and Stephen planned it, to get you—to make me—to—to——"

"And then she nearly spoilt it all by being as silly as you were. Whatever does it matter which of you has the money?"

"Nothing," said Rosamund valiantly; "I see that plainly. Don't you, Andrew?"

"I see nothing but you, Rosamund," he said, and they turned and walked along the sea-wall, hand in hand, like two children.

"That's all right," said Stephen; "but, by Jove, I've had enough of playing Providence and managing other people's affairs."

"She was very sweet about it," said Constance, walking on.

"Well she may be; she has her heart's desire. But it was not easy. What a blessing she is so unbusiness-like! I couldn't have done it but for you."

"I am very glad to have been of some service," said Constance demurely.

"I couldn't have got on without you. I can't get on without you ever again."

"But that's nonsense," said Miss Grant.

"You won't make me, Constance? There's no confounded money to come between us."

He caught at the hand that swung by her side.

"But you said you loved her, and that was why——"

"Ah, but that was a thousand years ago. And it was nonsense, even then, Constance."

And so two others went along the sea-wall in the October sunshine, happily, like children, hand in hand.

VI THE HERMIT OF “THE YEWS”

Maurice Brent knew a great deal about the Greek anthology, and very little about women. No one but himself had any idea how much he knew of the one, and no one had less idea than himself how little he knew of the other. So that when, a stranger and a pilgrim hopelessly astray amid a smart house-party, he began to fall in love with Camilla, it seemed to be no one’s business to tell him, what everybody else knew, that Camilla had contracted the habit of becoming engaged at least once a year. Of course this always happened in the country, because it was there that Camilla was most bored. No other eligible young man happened to be free at the moment: Camilla never engaged herself to ineligibles. The habit of years is not easily broken: Camilla became engaged to Maurice, and, for the six months of the engagement, he lived in Paradise. A fool’s Paradise, if you like, but Paradise all the same.

About Easter time Camilla told him, very nicely and kindly, that she had mistaken her own heart—she hoped he would not let it make him very unhappy. She would always wish him the best of good fortune, and doubtless he would find it in the affection of some other girl much nicer and more worthy of him than his sincere friend Camilla. Camilla was right—no one could have been less worthy of him than she: but after all it was Camilla he thought that he loved, Camilla he felt that he wanted, not any other girl at all, no matter how nice or how worthy.

He took it very quietly: sent her a note so cold and unconcerned that Camilla was quite upset, and cried most of the evening, and got up next day with swollen eyelids and a very bad temper. She was not so sure of her power as she had been—and the loss of such a certainty is never pleasant.

He, meanwhile, advertised for a furnished house, and found one—by letter, which seemed to be the very thing he wanted. “Handsomely and conveniently furnished five miles from a railway station—a well-built house standing in its own grounds of five acres—garden, orchard pasture, magnificent view.” Being as unversed in the ways of house agents as in those of women, he took it on trust, paid a quarter’s rent, and went down to take possession. He had instructed the local house agent to find a woman who would come in for a few hours daily to “do for him.”

“I’ll have no silly women living in the house,” said he.

It was on an inclement June evening that the station fly set him down in front of his new house. The drive had been long and dreary, and seemed to Maurice more like seventy miles than seven. Now he let down the carriage window and thrust his head into the rain to see his new house. It was a stucco villa, with iron railings in the worst possible taste. It had an air at once new and worn out; no one seemed ever to have lived in it, and yet everything about it was broken and shabby. The door stuck a little at first with the damp, and when at last it opened and Maurice went over his house, he found it furnished mainly with oil-cloth and three-legged tables, and photographs in Oxford frames—like a seaside lodging-house. The house was clean, however, and the woman in attendance was clean, but the atmosphere of the place was that of a vault. He looked out through the streaming panes at the magnificent view so dwelt upon in the house agents’ letters. The house stood almost at the edge of a disused chalk quarry; far below stretched a flat plain, dotted here and there with limekilns and smoky, tall chimneys. The five acres looked very bare and thistly, and the rain was dripping heavily from a shivering, half-dead cypress on to a draggled, long-haired grass plot. Mr Brent shivered too, and ordered a fire.

When the woman had gone, he sat long by the fire in one of those cane and wood chairs that fold up—who wants a chair to fold up?—so common in lodging-houses. Unless you sit quite straight in these chairs you tumble out of them. He gazed at the

fire, and thought, and dreamed. His dreams were, naturally, of Camilla; his thoughts were of his work.

“I’ve taken the house for three years,” said he. “Well, one place is as good as another to be wretched in. But one room I must furnish—for you can’t work on oil-cloth.”

So next day he walked to Rochester and bought some old bureaux, and chairs, and book-cases, a few Persian rugs and some brass things, unpacked his books and settled down to the hermit’s life to which he had vowed himself. The woman came every morning from her cottage a mile away, and left at noon. He got his meals himself—always chops, or steaks, or eggs—and presently began to grow accustomed to the place. When the sun shone it was not so bad. He could make no way against the thorns and thistles on his five acres, and they quickly grew into a very wilderness. But a wilderness is pleasant to wander in; and a few flowers had survived long neglect, and here and there put out red, or white, or yellow buds. And he worked away at his book about Greek poetry.

He almost believed that he was contented; he had never cared for people so much as for books, and now he saw no people, and his books began to crowd his shelves. No one passed by “The Yews”—so called, he imagined, in extravagant compliment to the decaying cypress—for it stood by a grass-grown by-way that had once connected two main roads, each a couple of miles distant. These were now joined by a better road down in the valley, and no one came past Maurice’s window save the milk, the bread, the butcher, and the postman.

Summer turned brown and dry and became autumn, autumn turned wet and chilly and grew into winter, and all the winds of heaven blew cold and damp through the cracks of the ill-built house.

Maurice was glad when the spring came; he had taken the house for three years, and he was a careful man, and also, in his way, a determined. Yet it was good to look out

once more on something green, and to see sunshine and a warm sky; it was near Easter now. In all these ten months nothing whatever had happened to him. He had never been beyond his five acres—and no one had been to see him. He had no relations, and friends soon forget; besides, after all, friends, unlike relations, cannot go where they are not invited.

It was on the Saturday before Easter that the quarryside fell in. Maurice was working in his study when he heard a sudden crack and a slow, splitting sound, and then a long, loud, rumbling noise, like thunder, that echoed and re-echoed from the hills on each side. And, looking from his window, he saw the cloud of white dust rise high above the edge of the old quarry, and seem to drift off to join the cotton-wool clouds in the blue sky.

“I suppose it’s all safe enough here,” he said, and went back to his manuscripts. But he could not work. At last something had happened; he found himself shaken and excited. He laid down the pen. “I wonder if any one was hurt?” he said; “the road runs just below, of course. I wonder whether there’ll be any more of it—I wonder?” A wire jerked, the cracked bell sounded harshly through the silence of the house. He sprang to his feet. “Who on earth——” he said. “The house isn’t safe after all, perhaps, and they’ve come to tell me.”

As he went along the worn oil-cloth of the hall he saw through the comfortless white-spotted glass of his front door the outline of a woman’s hat.

He opened the door—it stuck as usual—but he got it open. There stood a girl holding a bicycle.

“Oh!” she said, without looking at him, “I’m so sorry to trouble you—my bicycle’s run down—and I’m afraid it’s a puncture, and could you let me have some water, to find the hole—and if I might sit down a minute.”

Her voice grew lower and lower.

He opened the door wide and put out his hand for the bicycle. She took two steps

past him, rather unsteadily, and sat down on the stairs—there were no chairs: the furniture of the hall was all oil-cloth and hat pegs.

He saw now that she was very pale; her face looked greenish behind her veil's white meshes.

He propped the machine against the door, as she leaned her head back against the ugly marbled paper of the staircase wall.

"I'm afraid you're ill," he said gently. But the girl made no answer. Her head slipped along the varnished wall and rested on the stair two steps above where she sat. Her hat was crooked and twisted; even a student of Greek could see that she had fainted.

"Oh Lord!" said he.

He got her hat and veil off—he never knew how, and he wondered afterwards at his own cleverness, for there were many pins, long and short; he fetched the cushion from his armchair and put it under her head; he took off her gloves and rubbed her hands and her forehead with vinegar, but her complexion remained green, and she lay, all in a heap, at the foot of his staircase.

Then he remembered that fainting people should be laid flat and not allowed to lie about in heaps at the foot of stairs, so he very gently and gingerly picked the girl up in his arms and carried her into his sitting-room. Here he laid her on the ground—he had no sofa—and sat beside her on the floor, patiently fanning her with a copy of the Athenæum, and watching the pinched, pallid face for some sign of returning life. It came at last, in a flutter of the eyelids, a long-drawn, gasping breath. The Greek scholar rushed for whisky—brandy he esteemed as a mere adjunct of channel boats—lifted her head and held the glass to her lips. The blood had come back to her face in a rush of carnation; she drank—choked—drank—he laid her head down and her eyes opened. They were large, clear grey eyes—very bewildered-looking just now—but they and the clear red tint in cheeks and lips transformed the face.

"Good gracious," said he, "she's pretty! Pretty? she's beautiful!"

She was. That such beauty should so easily have hidden itself behind a green-tinted mask, with sunken eyelid, seemed a miracle to the ingenuous bookworm.

“You’re better now,” said he with feverish banality. “Give me your hands—so—now can—yes, that’s right—here, this chair is the only comfortable one——”

She sank into the chair, and waved away the more whisky which he eagerly proffered. He stood looking at her with respectful solicitude.

After a few moments she stretched her arms like a sleepy child, yawned, and then suddenly broke into laughter. It had a strange sound. No one had laughed in that house since the wet night when Mr Brent took possession of it, and he had never been able to bring himself to believe that any one had ever laughed there before.

Then he remembered having heard that women have hysterical fits as well as fainting fits, and he said eagerly: “Oh don’t! It’s all right—you were faint—the heat or something——”

“Did I faint?” she asked with interest. “I never fainted before. But—oh—yes—I remember. It was rather horrible. The quarry tumbled down almost on me, and I just stopped short—in time—and I came round by this road because the other’s stopped up, and I was so glad when I saw the house. Thank you so much; it must have been an awful bother. I think I had better start soon——”

“No, you don’t; you’re not fit to ride alone yet,” said he to himself. Aloud he said: “You said something about a puncture—when you are better I’ll mend it. And, look here—have you had any lunch?”

“No,” said she.

“Then—if you’ll allow me.” He left the room, and presently returned with the tray set for his own lunch; then he fetched from the larder everything he could lay hands on: half a cold chicken, some cold meat pudding, a pot of jam, bottled beer. He set these confusedly on the table. “Now,” he said, “come and try to eat.”

“It’s very good of you to bother,” she said, a little surprise in her tone, for she had expected “lunch” to be a set formal meal at which some discreet female relative would preside. “But aren’t you—don’t you—do you live alone, then?”

“Yes, a woman comes in in the mornings. I’m sorry she’s gone: she could have arranged a better lunch for you.”

“Better? why, it’s lovely!” said she, accepting the situation with frank amusement, and she gave a touch or two to the table to set everything in its place.

Then they lunched together. He would have served her standing, as one serves a queen—but she laughed again, and he took the place opposite her. During lunch they talked.

After lunch they mended the punctured tyre, and talked all the while; then it was past three o’clock.

“You won’t go yet,” he said then, daring greatly for what seemed to him a great stake. “Let me make you some tea—I can, I assure you—and let us see if the tyre holds up——”

“Oh, the tyre is all right, thanks to your cleverness——”

“Well, then,” said he desperately, “take pity on a poor hermit! I give you my word, I have been here ten months and three days, and I have not in that time spoken a single word to any human being except my bedmaker.”

“But if you want to talk to people why did you begin being a hermit?”

“I thought I didn’t, then.”

“Well—now you know better, why don’t you come back and talk to people in the ordinary way?”

This was the first and last sign she gave that the circumstances in which she found herself with him were anything but ordinary.

“I have a book to finish,” said he. “Would you like to have tea in the wilderness or

in here?" He wisely took her consent for granted this time, and his wisdom was justified.

They had tea in the garden. The wilderness blossomed like a rose, to Maurice's thinking. In his mind he was saying over and over again: "How bored I must have been all this time! How bored I must have been!"

It seemed to him that his mind was opening, like a flower, and for the first time. He had never talked so well, and he knew it—all the seeds of thought, sown in those long, lonely hours, bore fruit now. She listened, she replied, she argued and debated.

"Beautiful—and sensible," said Maurice to himself. "What a wonderful woman!" There was, besides, an alertness of mind, a quick brightness of manner that charmed him. Camilla had been languid and dreamy.

Suddenly she rose to her feet.

"I must go," she said, "but I have enjoyed myself so much. You are an ideal host: thank you a thousand times. Perhaps we shall meet again some day, if you return to the world. Do you know, we've been talking and wrangling for hours and hours and never even thought of wondering what each other's names are—I think we've paid each other a very magnificent compliment, don't you?"

He smiled and said: "My name is Maurice Brent."

"Mine is Diana Redmayne. If it sounds like somebody in the Family Herald, I can't help it." He had wheeled the bicycle into the road, and she had put on hat and gloves and stood ready to mount before she said: "If you come back to the world I shall almost certainly meet you. We seem to know the same people; I've heard your name many times."

"From whom?" said he.

"Among others," said she, with her foot on the pedal, "from my cousin Camilla. Good-bye."

And he was left to stare down the road after the swift flying figure.

Then he went back into the lonely little house, and about half-past twelve that night he realised that he had done no work that day, and that those hours which had not been spent talking to Diana Redmayne, had been spent in thinking about her.

“It’s not because she’s pretty and clever,” he said; “and it’s not even because she’s a woman. It’s because she’s the only intelligent human being I’ve spoken to for nearly a year.”

So day after day he went on thinking about her.

It was three weeks later that the bell again creaked and jangled, and again through the spotted glass he saw a woman’s hat. To his infinite disgust and surprise, his heart began to beat violently.

“I grow nervous, living all alone,” he said. “Confound this door! how it does stick—I must have it planed.”

He got the door opened, and found himself face to face with—Camilla.

He stepped back, and bowed gravely.

She looked more beautiful than ever—and he looked at her, and wondered how he could ever have thought her even passably pretty.

“Won’t you ask me in?” she said timidly.

“No,” said he, “I am all alone.”

“I know,” she said. “I have only just heard you’re living here all alone, and I came to say—Maurice—I’m sorry. I didn’t know you cared so much, or——”

“Don’t,” he said, stopping the confession as a good batsman stops a cricket ball. “Believe me, I’ve not made myself a hermit because of—all that. I had a book to write—that was all. And—and it’s very kind of you to come and look me up, and I wish I could ask you to come in, but—— And it’s nice of you to take an interest in an old friend—you said you would, didn’t you, in the letter—and—I’ve taken the

advice you gave me."

"You mean you've fallen in love with some one else."

"You remember what you said in your letter."

"Some one nicer and worthier, I said," returned Camilla blankly, "but I never thought—— And is she?"

"Of course she seems so to me," said he, smiling at her to express friendly feeling.

"Then—good-bye—I wish you the best of good fortune."

"You said that in your letter, too," said he. "Good-bye."

"Who is she?"

"I mustn't tell even you that, until I have told her," he smiled again.

"Then good-bye," said Camilla shortly; "forgive me for troubling you so unnecessarily."

He found himself standing by his door—and Camilla on her bicycle sped down the road, choking with tears of anger and mortification and deep disappointment. Because she knew now that she loved him as much as it was in her to love any one, and because she, who had humbled so many, had now at last humbled herself—and to no purpose.

Maurice Brent left his door open and wandered down across his five acres, filled with amazement. Camilla herself had not been more deeply astonished at the words he had spoken than he had been. A moment before he had not even thought that he was in love, much less contemplated any confession of it: and now seemingly without his will he stood committed to this statement. Was it true, or had he only said it to defend himself against those advances of hers in which he merely saw a new trap? He had said it in defence—yes—but it was true, for all that; this was the wonderful part of it. And so he walked in the wilderness, lost in wonder; and as he walked he noted the bicycles that passed his door—along his unfrequented road, by

ones and twos and threes—for this was a Saturday, and the lower road was still lying cold and hidden under its load of chalk, and none might pass that way. This road was hot and dusty, and folk went along it continually. He strolled to his ugly iron gate and looked over, idly. Perhaps, some day, she would come that way again—she would surely stop—especially if he were at the gate—and perhaps stay and talk a little. As if in mocking answer to the new-born thought came a flash of blue along the road; Diana Redmayne rode by at full speed—bowed coldly—and then at ten yards' distance turned and waved a white-gloved hand, with a charming smile. Maurice swore softly, and went indoors to think.

His work went but slowly on that day—and in the days that followed. On the next Friday he went over to Rochester, and in the dusk of the evening he walked along the road, about a mile from "The Yews," and then, going slowly, he cast handfuls of something dark from his hand, and kicked the white dust over it as it lay.

"I feel like the enemy sowing tares," said he.

Then he went home, full of anxious anticipation. The next day was hot and bright. He took his armchair into the nightmare of a verandah, and sat there reading; only above the top of the book his eyes could follow the curve of the white road. This made it more difficult to follow the text. Presently the bicyclists began to go past, by ones and twos and threes; but a certain percentage was wheeling its machines—others stopped within sight to blow up their tyres. One man sat down under the hedge thirty yards away, and took his machine to pieces; presently he strolled up and asked for water. Brent gave it, in a tin basin, grudgingly, and without opening the gate.

"I overdid it," he said, "a quarter of a pound would have been enough; yet I don't know—perhaps it's well to be on the safe side. Yet three pounds was perhaps excessive."

Late in the afternoon a pink figure wheeling a bicycle came slowly down the road.

He sat still, and tried to read. In a moment he should hear the click of the gate: then he would spring up and be very much astonished. But the gate did not click, and when next he raised his eyes the pink blouse had gone by, and was almost past the end of the five acres. Then he did spring up—and ran.

“Miss Redmayne, can’t I help you? What is it? Have you had a spill?” he said as he overtook her.

“Puncture,” said she laconically.

“You’re very unfortunate. Mayn’t I help you to mend it?”

“I’ll mend it as soon as I get to a shady place.”

“Come into the wilderness. See—here’s the side gate. I’ll fetch some water in a moment.”

She looked at him doubtfully, and then consented. She refused tea, but she stayed and talked till long after the bicycle was mended.

On the following Saturday he walked along the road, and back, and along, and again the place was alive with angry cyclists dealing, each after his fashion, with a punctured tyre. He came upon Miss Redmayne sitting by the ditch mending hers. That was the time when he sat on the roadside and told her all about himself—reserving only those points where his life had touched Camilla’s.

The week after he walked the road again, and this time he overtook Miss Redmayne, who was resolutely wheeling her bicycle back in the way by which she had come.

“Let me wheel it for you,” he said. “Whither bound?”

“I’m going back to Rochester,” she said. “I generally ride over to see my aunts at Felsenden on Saturdays, but I fear I must give it up, or go by train; this road isn’t safe.”

“Not safe?” he said with an agitation which could not escape her notice.

“Not safe,” she repeated. “Mr Brent, there is a very malicious person in this part of

the country—a perfectly dreadful person."

"What do you mean?" he managed to ask.

"These three Saturdays I have come along this road; each time I have had a puncture. And each time I have found embedded in my tyre the evidence of some one's malice. This is one piece of evidence." She held out her ungloved hand. On its pink palm lay a good sized tin-tack. "Once might be accident; twice a coincidence; three times is too much. The road's impossible."

"Do you think some one did it on purpose?"

"I know it," she said calmly.

Then he grew desperate.

"Try to forgive me," he said. "I was so lonely, and I wanted so much——"

She turned wide eyes on him.

"You!" she cried, and began to laugh.

Her laughter was very pretty, he thought.

"Then you didn't know it was me?" said the Greek student.

"You!" she said again. "And has it amused you—to see all these poor people in difficulties, and to know that you've spoilt their poor little holiday for them—and three times, too."

"I never thought about them," he said; "it was you I wanted to see. Try to forgive me; you don't know how much I wanted you." Something in his voice kept her silent. "And don't laugh," he went on. "I feel as if I wanted nothing in the world but you. Let me come to see you—let me try to make you care too."

"You're talking nonsense," she said, for he stopped on a note that demanded an answer. "Why, you told Camilla——"

"Yes—but you—but I meant you. I thought I cared about her once—but I never cared really with all my heart and soul for any one but you."

She looked at him calmly and earnestly.

“I’m going to forget all this,” she said; “but I like you very much, and if you want to come and see me, you may. I will introduce you to my aunts at Felsenden as—as a friend of Camilla’s. And I will be friends with you; but nothing else ever. Do you care to know my aunts?”

Maurice had inspirations of sense sometimes. One came to him now, and he said: “I care very much.”

“Then help me to mend my bicycle, and you can call there to-morrow. It’s ‘The Grange’—you can’t miss it. No, not another word of nonsense, please, or we can’t possibly be friends.”

He helped her to mend the bicycle, and they talked of the beauty of spring and of modern poetry.

It was at “The Grange,” Felsenden, that Maurice next saw Miss Redmayne—and it was from “The Grange,” Felsenden, that, in September, he married her.

“And why did you say you would never, never be anything but a friend?” he asked her on the day when that marriage was arranged. “Oh! you nearly made me believe you! Why did you say it?”

“One must say something!” she answered. “Besides, you’d never have respected me if I’d said ‘yes’ at once.”

“Could you have said it? Did you like me then?”

She looked at him, and her look was an answer. He stooped and gravely kissed her.

“And you really cared, even then? I wish you had been braver,” he said a little sadly.

“Ah, but,” she said, “I didn’t know you then—you must try to forgive me, dear. Think how much there was at stake! Suppose I had lost you!”

VII THE AUNT AND THE EDITOR

Aunt Kate was the great comfort of Kitty's existence. Always kindly, helpful, sympathetic, no girlish trouble was too slight, no girlish question too difficult for her tender heart—her delicate insight. How different from grim Aunt Eliza, with whom it was Kitty's fate to live. Aunt Eliza was severe, methodical, energetic. In household matters she spared neither herself nor her niece. Kitty could darn and mend and bake and dust and sweep in a way which might have turned the parents of the bluest Girtonian green with envy. She had read a great deal, too—the really solid works that are such a nuisance to get through, and that leave a mark on one's mind like the track of a steamroller. That was Aunt Eliza's doing. Kitty ought to have been grateful—but she wasn't. She didn't want to be improved with solid books. She wanted to write books herself. She did write little tales when her aunt was out on business, which was often, and she dreamed of the day when she should write beautiful books, poems, romances. These Aunt Eliza classed roughly as "stuff and nonsense"; and one day, when she found Kitty reading the Girls' Very Own Friend, she tore that harmless little weekly across and across and flung it into the fire. Then she faced Kitty with flushed face and angry eyes.

"If I ever catch you bringing such rubbish into the house again, I'll—I'll stop your music lessons."

This was a horrible threat. Kitty went twice a week to the Guildhall School of Music. She had no musical talent whatever, but the journey to London and back was her one glimpse of the world's tide that flowed outside the neat, gloomy, ordered house at Streatham. Therefore Kitty was careful that Aunt Eliza should not again "catch her bringing such rubbish into the house." But she went on reading the paper all the same, just as she went on writing her little stories. And presently she got one of her little stories typewritten, and sent it to the Girls' Very Own Friend. It was a silly little story—the heroine was svelte, I am sorry to say, and had red-gold hair and a soft, trainante voice—and the hero was a "frank-looking young Englishman, with a bronzed face and honest blue eyes." The plot was that with which I firmly believe

every career of fiction begins—the girl who throws over her lover because he has jilted her friend. Then she finds out that it was not her lover, but his brother or cousin. We have all written this story in our time, and Kitty wrote it much worse than many, but not nearly so badly as most of us.

And the Girls' Very Own Friend accepted the story and printed it, and in its columns notified to "George Thompson" that the price, a whole guinea, was lying idle at the office till he should send his address. For, of course, Kitty had taken a man's name for her pen-name, and almost equally, of course, had called herself "George." George Sand began it, and it is a fashion which young authors seem quite unable to keep themselves from following.

Kitty longed to tell some one of her success—to ask admiration and advice; but Aunt Eliza was more severe and less approachable than usual that week. She was busy writing letters. She had always a sheaf of dull-looking letters to answer, so Kitty could only tell Mary in the kitchen under vows of secrecy, and Mary in the kitchen only said: "Well, to be sure, Miss, it's beautiful! I suppose you wrote the story down out of some book?"

Therefore Kitty felt that it was vain to apply to her for intellectual sympathy.

"I will write to Aunt Kate," said she, "she will understand. Oh, how I wish I could see her! She must be a dear, soft, pussy, cuddly sort of person. Why shouldn't I go and see her? I will."

And on this desperate resolve she acted.

Now I find it quite impossible any longer to conceal from the intelligent reader that the reason why Kitty had never seen Aunt Kate was that "Aunt Kate" was merely the screen which sheltered from a vulgar publicity the gifted person who wrote the "Answers to Correspondents" for the Girls' Very Own Friend.

In fear and trembling, and a disguised hand-writing; with a feigned name and a quickly-beating heart, Kitty, months before, had written to this mysterious and

gracious being. In the following week's number had appeared these memorable lines:

"Sweet Nancy.—So pleased, dear, with your little letter. Write to me quite freely. I love to help my girls."

So Kitty wrote quite freely, and as honestly as any girl of eighteen ever writes: her hopes and fears, her household troubles, her literary ambitions. And in the columns of the Girls' Very Own Friend Aunt Kate replied with all the tender grace and delightful warmth that characterised her utterances.

The idea of calling on Aunt Kate occurred to Kitty as she was "putting on her things" to go to the Guildhall. She instantly threw the plain "everyday" hat from her, and pulled her best hat from its tissue-paper nest in the black bandbox. She put on her best blouse—the cream-coloured one with the browny lace on it, and her best brown silk skirt. She recklessly added her best brown shoes and gloves, and the lace pussy-boa. (I don't know what the milliner's name for the thing is. It goes round the neck, and hangs its soft and fluffy ends down nearly to one's knees.) Then she looked at herself in the glass, gave a few last touches to her hair and veil, and nodded to herself.

"You'll do, my dear," said Kitty.

Aunt Eliza was providentially absent at Bath nursing a sick friend, and the black-bugled duenna, hastily imported from Tunbridge Wells, could not be expected to know which was Kitty's best frock, and which the gloves that ought only to have been worn at church.

When Kitty's music lesson was over, she stood for a moment on the steps of the Guildhall School, looking down towards the river. Then she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"I don't care. I'm going to," she said, and turned resolutely towards Tudor Street. Kitty had been to a high school: therefore she was not obviously shy. She asked her

way frankly and easily of carman, or clerk, or errand-boy; and though, at the door of the dingy office in a little court off Fleet Street, her heart beat thickly as she read the blue-enamelled words, Girls' Very Own Friend, her manner as she walked into the office betrayed no nervousness, and, indeed, struck the grinning idle office boy as that of "a bloomin' duchess."

"I want to see——" she began; and then suddenly the awkwardness of her position struck her. She did not know Aunt Kate's surname. Abruptly to ask this grinning lout for "Aunt Kate" seemed absolutely indecorous. "I want to see the editor," she ended.

She waited in the grimy office while the boy disappeared through an inner door, marked in dingy white letters with the magic words, "Editor—Private." A low buzz of voices came to her through the door. She looked at the pigeon-holes where heaps of back numbers of the Girls' Very Own lay in a dusty retirement. She looked at the insurance company's tasteless almanack that hung all awry on the wall, and still the buzz went on. Then suddenly some one laughed inside, and the laugh did not please Kitty. The next moment the boy returned, grinning more repulsively than ever, and said: "Walk this way."

She walked that way, past the boy; the door fell to behind her, and she found herself in a cloud of tobacco smoke, compressed into a small room—a very dusty, untidy room—in which stood three young men. Their faces were grave and serious, but Kate could not forget that one of them had laughed, and laughed like that. Her chin went up about a quarter of an inch further.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," she said severely. "I wanted to see—to see the lady who signs herself Aunt Kate."

There was a moment of silence which seemed almost breathless. Two of the young men exchanged a glance, but though Kitty perceived it to be significant, she could not interpret its meaning. Then one of the three turned to gaze out of the window at

the blackened glass roof of the printing office below. Kitty felt certain he was concealing a smile; and the second hurriedly arranged a bundle of papers beside him.

The third young man spoke, and Kitty liked the gentle drawl, the peculiar enunciation. The poor girl, in her Streatham seclusion, had never before heard the "Oxford voice."

"I am very sorry," he said, "but 'Aunt Kate' is not here to-day. Perhaps—is there anything I could do?"

"No, thank you," said Kitty, wishing herself miles away; the tobacco smoke choked her, the backs of the two other men seemed an outrage. She turned away with a haughty bow, and went down the grimy stairs full of fury. She could have slapped herself. How could she have been such a fool as to come there? There were feet coming down the stair behind her—she quickened her pace. The feet came more quickly. She stopped on the landing and turned with an odd feeling of being at bay. It was the fair-haired young man with the Oxford voice.

"I am so very sorry," he said gently, "but I did not know. I did not expect to see—I mean, I did not know who you were. And we had all been smoking—I am so sorry," he said again, rather lamely.

"It doesn't matter," said Kitty, more shyly than she had ever spoken in her life. She liked his eyes and his voice as much as she loathed the expressive backs of his two companions.

"If you could come again: perhaps Aunt Kate will be here on Thursday. I know she will be sorry to miss you," the young man went on.

"I think I won't call again, thank you," said Kitty. "I—I'll write, thank you; it is all right. I oughtn't to have come. Good-bye."

There was nothing for it but to stand back and let her pass. The editor went back slowly to his room. His friends had relighted their pipes.

“Appeased the outraged goddess?” asked one of them.

“Good old Aunt Kate!” said the other.

“Shut up, Sellars!” said the editor, frowning.

“Now, which of your correspondents is it?” pondered Sellars, ruffling the bundle of papers in his hand. “Is it ‘Wild Woodbine,’ who wants to know what will make her hands white? Chilcott, did you see her hands? Oh no, of course—bien chaussée, bien gantée. All brown, too. Is it ‘Sylph’?—no; she wants a pattern for a Zouave. What is a Zouave, if you please, Mr Editor?”

“Dry up!” said the editor, but Sellars was busy with the papers.

“Eureka! I know her. She’s ‘Nut-brown Maid’—here’s the letter—wants to know if she may talk to ‘a young gentleman she has not been properly introduced to’—spells it ‘interoduced,’ too——”

The editor snatched the papers out of the other’s hands.

“Now clear out,” said he; “I’m busy.”

“Am I dreaming?” said Sellars pensively; “or is this the editor who invited us to collaborate with him in his ‘Answers to Correspondents’?”

“I am the editor who will kick you down the entire five flights if he is driven to it. You won’t drive him, will you?”

The two laughed, but they took up their hats and went; Sellars put his head round the door for a last word.

“What price love at first sight?” said he, and the office ruler dented the door as he disappeared round it. The editor, left alone, sat down in his chair and looked helplessly round him.

“Well!” he said musingly, “well, well, well, well!” Then after a long silence he took up his pen and began the “Answers to Correspondents.”

“Dieu-donnée.—Your hair is a very nice colour. I should not advise Aureoline.

“Shy Fairy.—By all means consult your mother. Heliotrope would suit your complexion, if it is, as you say, of a brilliant fairness.

“Contadina.—No, I should not advise scarlet velvet with the pale blue. Try myrtle green.”

Presently he threw down the pen. “I suppose I shall never see her again,” he said, and he actually sighed.

But he did see her again. For on her way home poor Kitty’s imagination suddenly spread its wings and alighted accurately on the truth; she formed a sufficiently vivid picture of what had happened in the office after she left. She knew that those other young men—“the pigs,” she called them to herself—had speculated as to whether she was “Little One,” who wanted to make her hair curl, and to know whether short waists would be worn; or “Moss Rose,” who was anxious about her complexion, and the proper way to treat a jibbing sweetheart. So that very night she wrote a note to Aunt Kate, but she did not sign it “Sweet Nancy” in the old manner, and she did not disguise her hand. She signed it George Thompson, in inverted commas, and she said that she would call on Thursday.

And on Thursday she called. And was shown into the editor’s room at once.

The editor rose to greet her.

“Aunt Kate is not here,” said he hurriedly; “but if you can spare a few moments I should like to talk to you about business; I did not know the other day that you were the author of that charming story ‘Evelyn’s Error.’”

The room was clear of tobacco smoke—the editor was alone—some red roses lay on the table. Kitty caught herself wondering for whom he had bought them. The chair he offered her was carefully dusted. She took it—and he began to talk about her story; criticising, praising, blaming, and that so skilfully that criticism seemed a subtle flattery, and the very blame conveyed a compliment. Then he asked for more stories. And a new heaven and a new earth seemed to unroll before the girl’s eyes. If

she could only write—and succeed—and——

"Will you come again?" he said at last. "Aunt Kate——"

"Oh," she said, with eyes shining softly, "it doesn't matter about Aunt Kate now! I shall be so busy trying to write stories."

"The fact is——" said the editor slowly, racking his brains for a reason that should bring her to the office again—"the fact is—I am Aunt Kate."

Kitty sprang to her feet. Her face flamed scarlet. She stood silent a moment. Then: "You?" she cried. "Oh, it's not fair—it's mean—it's shameful! Oh—how could you! And girls write to you—and they think it's a woman—and they tell you about their troubles. It's horrible! It's underhand—it's abominable! I hate you for it. Every one ought to know. I shall write to the papers."

"Please, please," said the editor hurriedly and humbly—"it's not my fault. It is a lady who does it generally, but she had to go away—and I couldn't get any one else to do it. And I didn't see—till after you'd been the other day—that it wasn't fair. And I was going to ask if you would do it—the correspondence, I mean—just for this week. I wish you would!"

"Could I?" she said doubtfully.

"Of course you could! And if you'd bring the copy on Monday—about two columns, you know—we could go through it together and——"

"Well, I'll try," said Kitty abruptly, reaching out for the sheaf of letters which he was gathering together.

And now who was happier than Kitty, seated behind her locked bedroom door advising "Dieu-donnée" and "Shy Fairy" and "Contadina" out of the unfathomable depths of her girlish inexperience. Her advice looked wonderfully practical, though, in print, she thought, as with a thrill of pride and joy she corrected the first proofs. And she wrote stories, too, and they, too, were printed. It was indeed a bright and

beautiful world. Aunt Eliza stayed away for five glorious weeks. Kitty, with an enthralling sense of reckless wickedness, gave up her useless music lessons, and in going three times a week to the office experienced a glowing consciousness of the joy and dignity of honest toil.

The editor, by the way, during these five weeks fell in love with Kitty, exactly as he had known he would do when first he saw her grey eyes. Kitty had never been so happy in all her life. The child honestly believed hers to be the happiness that comes from congenial work. And her editor was so clever and so kind! No one ever smoked in the office now, and there were always roses. And Kitty took them home with her, so that now there was no need to wonder for whom he had bought them.

Then came the inevitable hour. He met her one day with a clouded face and a letter in his hand.

“It’s all over,” he said; “the real original old Aunt Kate is coming back. She’s the dearest old thing, so kind and jolly—but—but—but—whatever shall we do?”

“I can still write stories, I suppose,” said Kitty, but she realised with a gasp that congenial toil would not be quite, quite the same without congenial companionship.

“Yes,” said he, picking up the bunch of red roses, “but—here are your flowers—don’t you know yet that I can’t possibly do without you? In a few months I’m to have the editorship of a new weekly, a much better berth than this. If only you would——”

“Write the correspondence?” said Kitty, brightening; “of course I will. I don’t know what I should do without——”

“I wish,” he interrupted, “that I could think it was me you couldn’t do without.” Her pretty eyes met his over the red roses, and he caught her hands with the flowers in them. “Is it? Oh, say you can’t do without me either. Say it, say it!”

“I—I—don’t want to do without you,” said Kitty at last. He was holding her hands fast, and she was trying, not very earnestly, perhaps, to pull them away. The pair

made a pretty picture.

“Oh, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!” he said softly, and then the door opened, and suddenly, without the least warning, a middle-aged lady became a spectator of the little tableau. The newcomer wore a mantle with beads on it, a black bonnet wherein nodded a violet flower—and beads and flower and bonnet were absolutely familiar to each of the astonished ones now standing consciously with the breadth of the office between them. For in that middle-aged lady the editor recognised Aunt Kate, the pleasant, sensible, companionable woman who for years had written those sympathetic “Answers to Correspondents” in the Girls’ Very Own Friend. And at the same moment Kitty recognised, beyond all possibility of doubt, Aunt Eliza—her own grim, harsh, uncongenial Aunt Eliza.

Kitty cowered—in her frightened soul she cowered. But her little figure drew itself up, and the point of her chin rose a quarter of an inch.

“Aunt Eliza,” she said firmly, “I know you will——”

“Your Aunt Eliza, Kitty?” cried the editor.

“‘Kitty’?” said the aunt.

And now the situation hung all too nicely balanced on the extreme edge of the absolutely impossible. Would this middle-aged lady—an aunt beyond doubt—an aunt who so long had played a double rôle, assume, now that one rôle must be chosen, the part of Aunt Eliza the Terrible or of Aunt Kate the Kind? The aunt was dumb. Kitty was dumb. But the editor had his wits about him, and Kate, though shaken, was not absolutely paralysed.

“It’s almost too good to be true,” he said, “that my Aunt Kate is really your Aunt Eliza. Aunt Kate, Kitty and I have just decided that we can’t do without each other. I am so glad that you are the first to wish us joy.”

At his words all the “Kate” in the aunt rose triumphant, trampling down the “Eliza.”

"My dear boy," she said—and she said it in a voice which Kitty had never heard before—the sound of that voice drew Kitty like a magnet. She did the only possible thing—she put her arms timidly round her aunt's neck and whispered: "Oh, don't be Aunt Eliza any more, be Aunt Kate!"

It was Aunt Kate's arms undoubtedly that went round the girl. Certainly not Aunt Eliza's.

"I will take a walk down Fleet Street," said the editor discreetly.

Then there were explanations in the office.

"But why," said Kitty, when all the questions had been asked and answered, "why were you Aunt Eliza to me, and Aunt Kate to him?"

"My dear, one must spoil somebody, and I was determined not to spoil you; I wanted to save you. All my life was ruined because I was a spoiled child—and because I tried to write. I had such dreams, such ambitions—just like yours, you silly child! But then I was never clever—perhaps you may be—and it all ended in my losing my lover. He married a nice, quiet, domestic girl, and I never made name or fame at all—I never got anything taken but fashion articles—and 'Answers to Correspondents.' Now, that's the whole tale. Don't mention it again."

"But you did love me, even when——"

"Of course I did," said Aunt Kate in the testy tones of Aunt Eliza; "or why should I have bothered at all about whether you were going to be happy or not? Now, Kitty, you're not to expect me to gush. I've forgotten how to be sentimental except on paper."

"I don't want to be sentimental," said Kitty, a little injured, "neither does——"

Here the editor came in.

"You don't want to be sentimental either," Kitty went on; "do you—Mr Editor?"

The editor looked a little doubtful.

"I want to be happy, at any rate," said he, "and I mean to be."

"And he can't be happy unless you smile on him. Smile on him, Auntie!" cried a new, radiant Kitty, to whom aunts no longer presented any terrors. "Say 'Bless you, my children!' Auntie—do!"

"Get along with your nonsense!" said Aunt Eliza. Or was it Aunt Kate?

VIII MISS MOUSE

They were poor, not with the desperate poverty that has to look on both sides of a penny, but with the decent bearable poverty that must look at a shilling with attention, and with respect at half-a-crown. There was money for the necessities of life, the mother said, but no money to waste. This was what she always tried to say when Maisie came in with rainbow representations of the glories of local "sales" piteous pictures of beautiful things going almost for nothing—things not absolutely needed, but which would "come in useful." Maisie's dress was never allowed those touches of cheap finery which would have made it characteristic of her. Her clothes were good, and she had to patch and mend and contrive so much that sometimes it seemed to her as though all her life was going by in the effort to achieve, by a distasteful process, a result which she abhorred. For her artistic sense was too weak to show her how the bright, soft freshness of her tints gained by contrast with the dull greys and browns and drabs that were her mother's choice—good wearing colours, from which the pink and white of her face rose triumphantly, like a beautiful flower out of a rough calyx.

The house was like Maisie, in that it never seemed to have anything new—none of those bright, picturesque cushions and screens and Japaneseries which she adored through the plate-glass windows of the big local draper. The curtains were of old damask, faded but rich; the furniture was mahogany, old and solid; the carpets were Turkey and Aubusson—patched and darned this last, but still beautiful. Maisie knew

all about old oak—she had read her Home Hints and her Gentlewoman's Guide—but she had no idea that mahogany could be fashionable. None of the photographs of the drawing-rooms of celebrities in her favourite papers were anything like the little sitting-room where her mother sat knitting by the hearth, surrounded by the relics of a house that had been handsome in the 'sixties, when it was her girlhood's home. Maisie hated it all: the chairs covered in Berlin-wool needlework, the dark, polished surfaces of the tables and bureaux, the tinkling lustres of Bohemian glass, the shining brass trivet on which the toast kept itself warm, the crude colours of the tea-service, the smell of eau-de-Cologne mingling with the faint scent of beeswax and cedar-wood. She would have liked to change the old water-colours in their rubbed gilt frames for dark-mounted autotypes. How should she know that those hideous pigs were Morlands, and that the cow picture was a David Cox. She would have liked Japanese blue transfers instead of the gold-and-white china—old Bristol, by the way, but Maisie knew nothing of Bristol. The regular, sober orderliness of the house chafed and fretted her; the recurrent duties, all dull; the few guests who came to tea. Decent poverty cannot give dinner parties or dances. She visited her school friends, and when she came home again it seemed to her sometimes as though the atmosphere of the place would choke her.

"I want to go out and earn my own living," she said to her cousin Edward one Sunday afternoon when her mother was resting and he and she were roasting chestnuts on the bars of the dining-room fire. "I'm simply useless here."

Edward was a second cousin. To him the little house was the ideal home, just as Maisie was—well, not, perhaps, the ideal girl, but the only girl in the world, which comes to much the same thing. But he never told her so: he dared not risk losing the cousin's place and missing for ever the lover's.

So, in his anxiety lest she should know how much he cared, he scolded her a good deal. But he took her to picture galleries and to matinées, and softened her life in a

hundred ways that she never noticed. He was only “Poor old Edward,” and he knew it.

“How can you?” he said. “Why, what on earth would Aunt do without you? Here, have this one—it’s a beauty.”

“I ought to have been taught a trade, like other poor girls,” she went on, waving away the roasted chestnut. “Lots of the girls I was at school with are earning as much as a pound a week now—typewriting or painting birthday cards, and some of them are in the Post Office—and I do nothing but drudge away at home. It’s too bad.”

Edward would have given a decent sum at that moment to be inspired with exactly the right thing to say. As it was he looked at her helplessly.

“I don’t understand, I’m afraid,” said he.

“You never do,” she answered crossly. There was a silence in which she felt the growth of a need to justify herself—to herself as well as to him. “Why, don’t you see,” she urged, “it’s my plain duty to go out and earn something. Why, we’re as poor as ever we can be—I haven’t any pocket-money hardly—I can’t even buy presents for people. I have to make presents out of odds and ends of old things, instead of buying them, like other girls.”

“I think you make awfully pretty things,” he said; “much prettier than any one can buy.”

“You’re thinking of that handkerchief-case I gave Aunt Emma at Christmas. Why, you silly, it was only a bit of one of mother’s old dresses. I do wish you’d talk to mother about it. I might go out as companion or something.”

The word came before the thought, but the thought was brought by the word and the thought stayed.

That very evening Maisie began to lay siege to her mother’s desired consent.

She put her arguments very neatly, so neatly that it was hard for the mother to oppose them without being betrayed into an attitude that would seem grossly selfish.

She sat looking into the fire, thinking of all the little, unceasing sacrifices that had been her life ever since Maisie had been hers—even the giving up of that treasured silk, her wedding dress, last Christmas, because Maisie wanted something pretty to make Christmas presents out of. She remembered it all; and now this new great sacrifice was called for. She had given up to Maisie everything but her taste in dress, and now it seemed that she was desired to give up even Maisie herself. But the other sacrifices had been for Maisie's good or for her pleasure. Would this one be for either?

She saw her little girl alone among strangers, snubbed, looked down upon, a sort of upper servant with none of a servant's privileges; she nerved herself to what was always to her an almost unbearable effort. Her heart was beating and her hands trembling as she said: "My dear, it's quite impossible; I couldn't possibly allow it."

"I must say I don't see why," said Maisie, with tears in her voice.

Her mother dropped the mass of fleecy white wool and the clinking knitting needles and grasped the arms of her chair intensely. Her eyes behind the spectacles clouded with tears. It seemed to her that her child should surely understand the agony it was to her mother to refuse her anything.

"I could earn money for you—it's not myself I'm thinking about," the girl went on; the half-lie came out quite without her conscious volition. "I wish you didn't always think I do everything for selfish reasons."

"I don't, my dear," said the mother feebly.

"I'm sure it's my duty," Maisie went on, with more tears than ever in her voice. "I'm eighteen, and I ought to be earning something, instead of being a burden to you."

The mother looked hopelessly into the fire. She had always tried to explain things to

Maisie; how was it that Maisie never understood?

“I’m sure,” said Maisie, echoing her mother’s thought, “I always try to tell you how I think about things, and you never seem to understand. Of course, I won’t go if you wish it, but I do think——”

She left the room in tears, and the mother remained to torment herself with the eternal questions, What had she done wrong? Why was Maisie not contented? What could she do to please her? Would nothing please her but the things that were not for her good—smart clothes, change, novelty? How could she bear her life if Maisie was not pleased?

She went down to supper shivering with misery and apprehension. What a meal it would be with Maisie cold and aloof, polite and indifferent! But Maisie was cheerful, gay almost, and her mother felt a passion of gratitude to her daughter for not being sulky or unapproachable. Maisie, however, was only stepping back to jump the better.

The same scene, with intenser variations, was played about twice a week till the girl got her way, as she always did in the end, except in the matter of cheap finery. Taste in dress was as vital to the mother as her religion. Then, through the influence of an old governess of her mother’s, Maisie got her wish. She was to go as companion to an old lady, the mother of Lady Yalding, and she was to live at Yalding Towers. Here was splendour—here would be life, incident, opportunity! For her reading had sometimes strayed from Home Hints to the Family Herald, and she knew exactly what are the chances of romance to a humble companion in the family of a lady of title.

And now Maisie’s mother gave way to her, finally and completely, even on the question of dress. The old wardrobe was ransacked to find materials to fit her out with clothes for her new venture. It was a beautiful time for Maisie. New things, and old things made to look as good as new, or better. It was like having a trousseau.

The mother lavished on her child every inch of the old lace, every one of the treasured trinkets—even the little old locket that had been the dead husband's first love-gift.

And Maisie, in the flutter of her excitement and anticipation, was loving and tender and charming, and the mother had her reward.

Edward opposed a stolid and stony disapproval to all the new enthusiasm. He said little because he feared to say too much.

"Poor little Maisie!" he said. "You'll soon find out that you didn't know when you were well off."

"Edward, I hate you," said Maisie, and she thought she did.

But when all the beautiful new clothes were packed and her cab was at the door, some sense of what she was leaving did come to the girl, and she flung her arms round her mother in an embrace such as she had never given in her life.

"I don't want to go," she cried. "Mummy darling, I've been a little beast about it. I won't go if you say you'd rather not. Shall I send the cab away? I will if you say so, my own dear old Mummy!"

Maisie's mother was not a very wise woman, but she was not fool enough to trust this new softness.

"No, no, dearest," she said; "go and try your own way. God bless you, my darling! You'll miss the train if you stay. God bless you, my darling!"

And Maisie went away crying hard through the new veil with the black velvet spots on it; as for the mother—but she was elderly, and plain, and foolishly fond, and her emotions can have but little interest for the readers of romances.

And now Maisie, for the first time, knew the meaning of home. And before she had been at Yalding a week she had learned to analyse home and to give names to its constituents: love, interest, sympathy, liberty—these were some.

At Yalding Towers Maisie was nothing to any one. No one knew or cared one single little bit of a straw whether she was unhappy or no. Her time was filled, and overfilled, by the attentions exacted by an old, eccentric, and very disagreeable lady. When she put on, for the first evening, the least pretty of the pretty dresses she had brought with her, the old lady looked at her with a disapproval almost rising to repulsion, and said: “I expect you to wear black; and a linen collar and cuffs.”

So another black dress had to be ordered from home, and all the pretty, dainty things lay creasing themselves with disuse in the ample drawers and cupboards of her vast, dreary bedroom.

Her employer was exacting and irritable. When on the third day Maisie broke into tears under the constant flood of nagging, the old lady told her to go away and not to come back till she could control her temper.

“I’ll come back when you send for me, and not before, you hateful old thing!” said Maisie to herself.

And she sat down in her fireless bedroom and wrote a long letter to her mother, saying how happy she felt, and how kind every one was, and what a lovely and altogether desirable place was Yalding Towers. Who shall say whether pride or love, or both, dictated that letter?

When her employer did send for her, it was to tell her, very sharply, that one more such exhibition of sullenness would cost her her situation. So she had to learn to school herself. And she did it. But the learning was hard, very hard, and in the learning she grew thinner, and some of the pretty pink in her cheeks faded away.

Lady Yalding, when she swept in, in beautiful dream-dresses, always spoke to the companion quite kindly and nicely and pleasantly, but there were none of those invitations to come into the drawing-room after dinner which the Family Herald had led her to expect. Lady Yalding was always charming to every one, and Maisie tortured herself with the thought that it was only because she had no opportunity to

explain herself that Lady Yalding failed to see how very much out of the common she was. She read Ruskin industriously, and once she left her own book of Browning selections that Edward had given her in the conservatory. She imagined Lady Yalding returning it to her with, “So, are you fond of poetry?” or, “It’s delightful to find that you are a lover of Browning!” But the book was brought back to her by a footman, and the old lady lectured her for leaving her rubbish littering about.

But towards Christmas a change came. Maisie had hoped—more intensely than she had ever in her life hoped for anything—for a few days’ grace, for a sight of her mother, and the mahogany, and the damask curtains, and—yes—of Edward. But the old lady, who really was exceptionally horrid, wondered how she could ask for a holiday when she had only been in her situation six weeks.

Then the old lady went off at half an hour’s notice to spend Christmas with her other daughter—Maisie would have suspected a “row” if Lady Yalding had been a shade less charming—and the girl was left. Thus it happened that Lord Yalding’s brother lounged into Lady Yalding’s room one day, and said: “Who’s the piteous black mouse you’ve tamed?”

“I beg your pardon, Jim?” said Lady Yalding.

“The crushed apple-blossom in a black frock—one meets her about the corridors. Gloomy sight. Chestnut hair. Princess-in-exile sort of look.”

“Oh, that! It’s mother’s companion.”

“Poor little devil!” said the Honourable James. “What does she do now the cat’s away? I beg your pardon—my mind was running on mice.”

“Do? I don’t know,” said Lady Yalding a little guiltily. “She’s a good, quiet little thing—literary tastes, reads Browning, and all that sort of rot. She’s all right.”

“Why don’t you give her a show? She’d take the shine out of some of the girls here if you had her dressed.”

"My dear Jim," Lady Yalding said, "she's all right as she is. What's the good of turning the child's head and giving her notions out of her proper station?"

"If I were that child I'd like to have a little bit of a fling just for once. The poor little rat looks starved, as though it hadn't laughed for a year. Then it's Christmas—peace and goodwill, and all that, don't you know. If I were you I'd ask her down a bit——"

Lady Yalding thought—a thing she rarely did.

"Well," she said, "it is pretty slow for her, I suppose. I'll send her home to her people."

"On Christmas Eve? Fog and frost, and the trains all anyhow? Fanny, Fanny!"

"Oh, very well. We'll have her down, and go the whole hog. Only don't make a fool of the child, Jim; she's a good little thing."

And that was how the dream-dressed Lady Yalding came to sweep into the old lady's sitting-room—it was as full of mahogany, by the way, as Maisie's home in Lewisham—and spoke so kindly of Maisie's loneliness, that the girl could have fallen down and worshipped at her Paris shoes.

When Maisie, in the figured lavender satin that had been her mother's, swept across the great hall on the arm of the Honourable James, she felt that this indeed was life. Here was the great world with its infinite possibilities.

"How did you get on?" his sister-in-law asked him later.

"Oh, it's quite a decent sort of little mouse," he said. "Wants to make sure you see how cultivated it is, quotes poetry—what?—and talks about art. It's a little touching and all that to see how busy it is putting all its poor little stock in the tiny shop-window."

Maisie, alone in her room, was walking up and down, trailing the lavender satin, recalling with kindled eyes and red-rose cheeks every word, every look of her

cavalier. How kindly he had spoken, yet how deferentially; how he had looked, how he had smiled! At dinner she supposed it was his business to talk to her. But afterwards, when she was sitting, a little forlornly and apart from the noisy chatter of the bright-plumaged house-party, how he had come straight over to her directly the gentlemen came into the drawing-room! And she felt that she had not been wanting to herself on so great an occasion.

“I know I talked well. I’m certain he saw directly that I wasn’t a silly idiot.”

She lay long awake, and, as the men trooped up the stairs, she tried to fancy that she could already distinguish his footsteps.

The letter she wrote to her mother next day was, compared to those other lying letters, as a lit chandelier to a stable-lantern. And the mother knew the difference.

“Poor darling!” she thought. “She must have been very miserable all this time. But she’s happy now, God bless her!”

By the week’s end, every thought, every dream, every hope of Maisie’s life was centred in the Honourable James; her tenderness, her ambition turned towards him as flowers to the sun.

And her happiness lighted a thousand little candles all around her. No one could see the candles, of course, but every one saw the radiant illumination of her beauty. And the other men of the house-party saw it too. Even Lord Yalding distinguished her by asking whether she had read some horrid book about earthworms.

“You’re making a fool of that girl, Jim,” said Lady Yalding. “I really think it’s too bad.”

“My good Fanny, don’t be an adorable idiot! I’m only trying to give the poor little duffer a good time. There’s nothing else to do. The other girls really are—now, you know they are, Fanny—between ourselves——”

“They’re all duty people, of course,” she said. “Well, only do be careful.”

He was careful. He subdued his impulses to tenderness and gentle raillery. He talked seriously to little Miss Mouse, and presently he found that she was seriously talking to him—telling him, for instance, how she wrote poetry, and how she longed to show it to some one and ask whether it really was so bad as she sometimes feared.

What could he do but beg her to show it to him? But there he pulled himself up short.

"There's skating to-morrow. We're going to drive over to Dansent. Would you like to come?"

Her grey eyes looked up quickly, and the long lashes drooped over them. She had read of that trick in a book, and for the life of him he could not help knowing it. Her answer to his question came from a book, too, though it also came from her heart.

"Ah," she said, "you know!"

Then the Honourable James was honestly frightened. Next day he had a telegram, and departed abruptly. And as abruptly the old lady returned.

And now Maisie had a secret joy to feed on—a manna to sustain her in the wilderness of her tiresome life. She thought of him. He loved her; she was certain of it. Miss Mouse could imagine no reason but love for the kindness he had shown her. He had gone away without a word, but that was for some good reason. Probably he had gone to confess to his mother how he had given his whole heart to a penniless orphan—well, she was half an orphan, anyway. But the days slipped by and he did not come back. All that bright time at Christmas had faded like a picture from a magic-lantern when the slide is covered. Lady Yalding was quite nice and kind, but she left Maisie to the work Maisie was paid for.

Maisie's mother perceived, through Maisie's studied accounts of her happiness, more than a glimpse of the reality.

Then, at last, when the days grew unbearable, Maisie wrote to him, a prim little letter with agitated heart-beats between the lines, where he, being no fool, did not

fail to find them. Yet he had to answer the letter. He did it briefly.

“Dear Miss Rolleston,” he wrote, “I have received your letter and the little poem, which is very nice. Poems about Spring are the pleasantest kind, I think.—With kind regards, I am yours sincerely.”

It was not, as you may see, worth the heartache with which Maisie watched for it.

It was when she wrote again, and sent more verses, that he decided he must not mince matters.

“Dear Miss Rolleston,” was his second letter, “it is good of you to write again. Now I do hope you won’t be offended with me for what I am going to say. I am so much older than you, you know, and I know you are alone at Yalding, with no one to advise you, so it must be my duty to do it, though, for my own sake, I should, of course, like to advise you quite differently. It was a great pleasure to me to hear from you, but I must not allow myself that pleasure again, even if you were willing to give it to me. It would not be fair to you to let you write any more to a man who is not related to you. Try to forgive me for being unselfish and acting in your interests and not my own.”

And again, with kind regards, he was hers sincerely.

“Poor, pretty little duffer!” he said, as he closed the envelope. “But it’s not real. Don’t I know the sort of thing? She’s simply bored to death down there. And it’s all my fault, anyhow. By Jove! I’ll never try to do any one a good turn again as long as I live. Fanny was perfectly right.”

The letter came by the second post, when Maisie was engaged in drearily reading her employer to sleep after lunch.

It lay on her lap, but she kept her eyes from it and read on intelligibly if not with expression.

The old lady dozed.

Maisie opened her letter. And before she could even have had time to put up a hand to save herself, her Spanish castle was tumbling about her ears. A curious giddy feeling seemed to catch at the back of her neck, the room gave a sickening half-turn. She caught at her self-control.

“Not here. I mustn’t faint here. Not with his letter in my hand.”

She got out of the room somehow, and somehow she got into hat and jacket and boots, put her quarter’s salary in her purse, and walked out of the front door and straight down the great drive that she had come up four months ago with such bright hopes. She went to the station, and she took a train, and she never stopped nor stayed till she was at home again. She pushed past the frightened maid, and, pale and shabby, with black-ringed eyes and dusty black gown, she burst into her mother’s room. The scent of eau-de-Cologne and bees’-wax and buttered toast met her, and it was as the perfume of Paradise. Edward was there—but she was in no mood to bother about Edward. She threw herself on her knees and buried her face in the knitting on her mother’s lap, and felt thin arms go round her.

“It’s nothing. I’m tired of it all. I’ve come home,” was all she said. But presently she reached out a hand to Edward, and he took it and held it, as it were, absently, and the three sat by the fire and spoke little and were content.

To her dying day Maisie will never forget the sense of peace, of enfolding care, and love unchanging and unchangeable that came to her as she woke next morning to find her mother standing by her bed with a cup of tea in her hands.

“Oh, Mummy darling,” she cried, throwing her arms round her mother and nearly upsetting the tea, “I haven’t had a single drop of in-bed tea all the time I’ve been away!”

That was all she found words to tell her mother. Later there was Edward, and she told him most things, but, I imagine, not all. But the mother was content without spoken confidences. She knew that Maisie had suffered, and that now she had her

little girl again, to wrap warm in her love as before. This was happiness enough.

This story, I know, is instructive enough for a Sunday School prize. It ought to be tagged at the end with a Moral. I can't help it: it is true. Of course, it is not what usually happens. Many companions, no doubt, marry Honourable James's, or even Dukes, and are never at all glad to get home to their mothers and their Edwards. But Maisie was different. She feels now a sort of grateful tenderness for Yalding Towers, because, but for the dream she dreamed there she might never have really awakened—never have known fully and without mistake what it was in life that she truly cared for. And such knowledge is half the secret of happiness. That, by the way, is really the moral of this story.

IX THE OLD WIFE

"Yes; married by the 30th of June, introduce my wife to the tenants on Christmas Eve, or no fortune. That was my uncle's last and worst joke; he was reputed a funny man in his time. The alternatives are pretty ghastly either way."

"Doesn't that rather depend?" Sylvia queried, with a swift blue glance from under veiling lashes.

Michael answered her with a look, the male counterpart of her own, from dark Devon eyes, the upper lid arched in a perfect semicircle over pure grey. "Yes; but my wife must have a hundred a year of her own in Consols, to protect me from fortune-hunters—lone, lorn lamb that I am!"

Sylvia emphasised the sigh with which she admitted her indigence. Her pretty eyebrows owned plaintively that she, a struggling artist, had no claim against the nation.

"Mary has just a hundred a year," she said, her voice low-toned as she looked across the room to where, demure in braided locks and grey camlet, her companion sat knitting.

“I daresay,” Michael answered indifferently, following her eyes’ flight and her tone’s low pitch; “but she’s young. I shall advertise for an elderly housekeeper. And qui vivra verra.”

The words, lightly cast on the thin soil of a foolish word-play with a pretty woman, bore fruit.

A week later Michael Wood stood aghast before a tray heaped with letters, answers to his advertisement:

“Housekeeper wanted. Must be middle-aged. The older the better. Salary, £500 a year.”

Not much, he had thought, £500 a year—if, by paying it, he might win a wife who would entitle him to an annual £15,000, whose declining years he might kindly cheer, and whose death would set him free to marry a wife whom he could love. His fancy drifted pleasantly towards Sylvia.

Michael was a lazy man, who bristled with business instincts. He telephoned to the nearest “typewriters’ association” for a secretary, and to this young woman he committed the charge of answering the letters which his advertisement had drawn forth. The answer was to be the same to all:

“Call at 17 Hare Court, Temple, between 11 and 1.”

And the dates fixed for such calling were arranged to allow about fifty interviews daily for the next week or two, for Michael was a bold man as well as a lazy one. The next morning, faultlessly dressed, with carnations in his buttonhole, he composed himself in his pleasant oak-furnished room to await his first batch of callers.

They came. And Michael, strong in his unswerving determination not to forfeit his chance of inheriting the £15,000 a year left him under his mad uncle’s mad will, saw them all, one after the other.

But he did not like any of them. They were old; that he did not mind—it was, indeed, of the essence of the contract. But they were frowsy, too, with reticules of scarred brownish leather, and mangy fur trimmings, worn fringes, and beaded mantles, whence time and poverty had clawed handfuls of the bright beads. Each of them was, as a wife, even as a wife in name, impossible. The task of rejection was softened to his hand by the fact that not one of them could boast the necessary hundred a year in Consols.

The interviews over, Michael, his spirit crushed by the spectacle of so many women anxious to find a refuge at an age when their children and grandchildren should, in their own homes, have been rising up to call them blessed, went to lounge a restorative hour in Sylvia's bright little studio, and laugh with her over his dilemma. He would have liked to sigh with her, too, but the pathos of the homeless old women escaped her. She saw only the humour of the situation.

"There's no harm done, if it amuses you," she said, "but you'll never marry an old woman."

"Fifteen thousand pounds a year," said Michael softly.

Next day more poor old ladies, all eager, anxious, ineligible.

It was on the third day that the old lady in dove-colour came in, sweet as a pressed flower in an old love-letter, dainty as a pigeon in spring. Her white hair, the white lace of her collar, the black lace of her mantle, her beautiful little hands in their perfect, dove-coloured gloves, all appealed irresistibly to Michael's æsthetic sense.

"What an ideal housekeeper!" he said to himself, as he placed a chair for her. And then an odd thrill of discomfort and shame shot through him. This delicate, dainty old lady—he was to insult her by a form of marriage, and then to live near her, waiting for her death? No; it was impossible—the whole thing was impossible. He found himself in the middle of a sentence.

"And so I fear I am already suited."

The old lady raised eyebrows as delicate as Sylvia's own.

"Hardly, I think," she said, "since your servant admitted me to an interview with you. May I ask you one or two questions before you finally decide against me?"

The voice was low and soft—the voice men loved in the early sixties, before the shrill shriek became the voice of fashionable ladies.

"Certainly," Michael said. He could hardly say less, and in the tumult of embarrassment that had swept over him, he could not for his life have said more.

The old lady went on. "I am competent to manage a house. I can read aloud fairly well. I am a good nurse in case of sickness; and I am accustomed to entertain. But I gather from the amount of the salary offered that some other duties would be required of me?"

"That's clever of her, too," Michael thought; "none of the others saw that."

He bowed.

"Would you enlighten me," she went on, "as to the nature of the services you would require?"

"Ah—yes—of course," he said glibly, and then stopped short.

"From your hesitation," said the old lady, with unimpaired self-possession, "I gather that the matter involves an explanation of some delicacy, or else—pardon the egotism—that my appearance is personally unpleasing to you."

"No—oh, no," Michael said very eagerly; "on the contrary, if I may say so, it is just because you are so—so—exactly my ideal of an old lady, that I feel I can't go on with the business; and that's put stupidly, so that it sounds like an insult. Please forgive me."

She looked him straight in the eyes through her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"You see, I am old enough to be your grandmother," she said. "Why not tell me the truth?"

And, to his horror and astonishment, he told it.

“And that’s what I meant to do,” he ended. “It was a mad idea, and I see now that if I do it at all I must marry some one who is not—who is not like you. You have made me ashamed of myself.”

A spot of pink colour glowed in her faded cheek. The old lady put up her gloved hand and touched her cheek, as if it burned. She got up and walked to the window, and stood there, looking out.

“If you are going to do it,” she said in a voice that was hardly audible, “I have been used to live among beautiful surroundings—I should like to end my days among them. I do not come of a long-lived family. You would not have long to wait for your freedom and your second wife.”

Never in all his days had Michael known so sharp an agony of embarrassment.

“When must you be married,” the old lady went on calmly, “to ensure your fortunes and estates?”

“In about a month.”

“Well, Mr Wood, I make you a formal offer of marriage, and for reference I can give you my banker and my solicitor——”

Her voice was calm; it was his voice that trembled as he answered: “You are too good. I can’t see that it would be fair to you. May I think about it till to-morrow?”

The contrast between the old lady’s dainty correctness of attire and speech, and the extraordinary unconventionality of her proposal, made Michael’s brain reel. She turned from the window, again looked him fairly in the eyes, and said: “You will not find me unconventional in other matters. This is purely an affair of business, and I approach it in a business spirit. You would be giving a home to one who wants it, and I should be helping you to what you need still more. I have never been married. I never wished to marry; and when I am dead—— Don’t look so horror-stricken. I

should not die any sooner because you—you had married me. My name is Thrale—Frances Thrale. That is my card that you have been pulling to pieces while you have been talking to me. Shall I come and see you again at this time to-morrow? It is not a subject on which I should wish either to write or to receive letters."

He could only acquiesce. At the door the old lady turned.

"If you think I look so old as to make your marriage too absurd," she said—and now, for the first time, her voice trembled—"I could dye my hair."

"Oh no," Michael said, "your hair is beautiful. Good-bye, and thank you."

As the old lady went down the dusty Temple stairs she stamped a small foot angrily on the worn oak.

"Fool!" she said, "how could you? Hateful, shameless, unwomanly! And it's all for nothing, too. He'll never do it. It's too mad!"

Michael went straight to Sylvia, and told his tale.

"And I felt I couldn't," he said; "she is the daintiest, sweetest little old lady. I couldn't marry her and see her every day and live in the hope of her death."

"I don't see why not," Sylvia said, a little coldly. "She wouldn't die any sooner because you married her, and, anyway, she can't have long to live."

The words were almost those of the little old lady herself. Yet—or perhaps for that very reason—they jarred on Michael's mood. He alleged business, and cut short his call.

Next day Miss Thrale called again. Mr Wood was sorry to have given her so much trouble. He had decided that the idea was too wild, and must be abandoned.

"Is it because I am too old?" said the old lady wistfully; "would you marry me if I were young?"

"Upon my word, I believe I would," Michael surprised himself by saying. That it was not the answer Miss Thrale expected was evident from her smile of sudden

amusement.

“May I say,” she said, “in return for what, in its way, is a compliment, that I like you very much. I would take care of you, and I shall perhaps not live more than a year or two.”

The tremor of her voice touched him. The £15,000 a year pulled at his will. In that instant he saw the broad glades of waving bracken, the big trees of the park, the sober face of the great house he might inherit, looking out over the smooth green lawns. He looked again at the little lady. After all, he was more than thirty. The world would laugh—well, they laughed best who laughed last. And, after a few years, there would be Sylvia—pretty, charming, enchanting Sylvia. He put the thought of her roughly away. Not because he was ashamed of it, but because it hurt him. The thought that Sylvia should wait for a dead woman’s shoes had seemed natural; what hurt him was that she herself should see nothing unnatural in such waiting.

The silence had grown to the limit that spells discomfort; the ticking of the tall clock, the rustle of the plane tree’s leaves outside the window, the discords of Fleet Street harmonised by distance, all deepened the silence and italicised it. She spoke.

“Well?” she said.

The plane tree’s leaves murmured eloquently of the great oaks in the park. The old lady’s eyes looked at him appealingly through the pale-smoked glasses. How she would like that old place! And his debts—he could pay them all.

“I will,” he said suddenly; “if you will, I will; and I pray you may never regret it.”

“I don’t think you will regret it,” she said gently; “it is a truly kind act to me.”

Bank and solicitor, duly consulted, testified to Miss Thrale’s respectability and to her income—the requisite hundred a year in Consols. And on a certain day in June Michael Wood woke from a feverish dream, in which obstinacy and the longing for money had fought with many better things and worsted them, to find himself

married to a white-haired woman of sixty.

The awakening took place in his rooms in the Temple. He had yielded to the little old lady's entreaties, and consented, most willingly, to forego the "wedding journey," in this case so sad a mockery.

The set was a large one—five rooms; it seemed that they might live here, and neither irk the other.

And she was in the room he had caused to be prepared for her—dainty and neat as herself—and he, left alone in the room where he had first seen her, crossed his arms on the table, and thought. His wedding-day! And it might have been Sylvia, the rustle of whose dress he could hear in the next room. He groaned. Then he laid his head on his arms and cried—like a child that has lost its favourite toy: for he saw, suddenly, that respect for his old wife must keep him from ever seeing Sylvia now; and life looked grey as the Thames in February twilight.

A timid hand on his shoulder startled him to the raising of his tear-stained face. The little old lady stood beside him.

"Ah, don't!" she said softly—"don't! Believe me, it will be all right. Your old wife won't live more than a year—I know it. Take courage."

"Don't!" he said in his turn; "it's a wicked thing I've done. Forgive me! If only we could have been friends. I can't bear to think I shall make you unhappy."

"My dear boy," she said, "we are friends. I am your housekeeper. In a year at latest you will see the last of my white hairs. Be brave."

He could not understand the pang her words gave him.

And now began, for these two, a strange life. In those Temple rooms—ideal nest for young lovers—Mrs Wood, the white-haired, kept house with firm and capable little hands. Comfort, which Michael's lazy nature loved but could not achieve, reigned peacefully. The old lady kept much to her own rooms, but whenever he needed talk

she was there. And she could talk. She had read much, reflected much. In her mind his own ideas found mating germs, and bore fruit of beautiful dreams, great thoughts. His verses—neglected this long time, since Sylvia did not care for poetry—flourished once more.

And music—Sylvia's taste in music had been Sullivan; the old wife touched the piano with magic fingers, and Bach, Beethoven, Wagner came to transfigure the Temple rooms. Michael had never been so contented—never so wretched; for, as the quiet weeks went by, the leaves fell from the plane tree, and the time drew near when he must show his wife to the tenants—his white-haired wife. In these months a very real friendship had grown up between them. Michael had never met a woman, old or young, whose tastes chimed so tunefully with his own. Ah! what a pity he had not met a young woman with these tastes—this soul. And now, liking, friendship, affection—all the finer, nobler side of love—he could indeed feel for his old wife; but love—lovers' love, that would set the seal on all the rest—this he might never know, except for some other woman, who would succeed to his wife's title.

Badly as Michael had behaved, I think it is permissible to be sorry for him. His wife, in fact, was very sorry.

One day he met Sylvia in the park, and all the other side of him thrilled with pleasure. He sat by her an hour, his eyes drinking in her fresh beauty, while his soul shrivelled more and more. Ah! why could she not talk, as his wife could, instead of merely chattering?

His wife looked sad that evening. He asked the reason.

"I saw you in the park to-day," she said. "Are you going to see her? Don't compromise her: it's not worth while."

He kissed her hand in its black mitten, and in a flash of pain saw the black funeral, when she should be carried from his house, and he be left free to marry Sylvia.

And now the days had dropped past; so even was their flow that it seemed rapid, and

in another week it would be Christmas.

“And I must show you to the tenants,” said he.

“My poor boy,” she said—it was just as she had risen to bid him good night—“be brave. Perhaps it won’t be so bad as you think. Good night.”

He sat still after she had left him, gazing into the fire, and thinking thoughts in which now the estate and the fortune played but little part. At last he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” he said, “I have no lover, no wife; but I have a companion, a friend—one in a million.” And again the black funeral trailed its slow length before his eyes, and he shuddered.

I have not sought to deceive the reader. He knows as well as I do that at this moment the door opened, and a young and beautiful woman stood on the threshold. Her eyes were shining; round her neck were gleaming pearls. She was playing for a high stake, and being a true woman she had disdained no honest artifice that might help her. She wore shining white silk, severely plain, and her brown hair was dressed high on her head. A woman one shade less intuitive would have let the dusky masses fall over a lace-covered tea-gown.

“Michael,” she said, “I am your wife. Are you going to forgive me?”

He raised himself slowly from his chair, and his eyes dwelt on detail after detail of the beauty before him.

“My wife!” he said. “You are a stranger!”

“I did disguise myself well. My sister told me about your advertisement; she lives with Sylvia Maddox. We each have a hundred pounds a year. At first I did it for fun; but when I had seen how—how nice you were—my mother is very poor. There are no excuses. But are you going to forgive me?” Any other woman, to whom forgiveness meant all that it meant to her, might have kneeled at his feet. Frances

stood erect by the door. “Anyway,” she said, biting her lip, “I have saved you from Sylvia. For the sake of that, forgive me.”

That stung him, as she had known it would.

“Forgive you?” he said. “Never. You’ve spoiled my life.” But he took a step towards her as he spoke.

She took an equal step back.

“Take courage,” she said. “Who knows but I may die before next June, after all. Good night.”

“I hate you,” he said, and took another step forward. But the door closed in his face.

Next morning the old lady, white haired and mittened, appeared behind the breakfast tea. Michael almost thought he had dreamed, till her eyes, now without their glasses, met his timidly.

“Let us end this play-acting, at least,” he said. Ten minutes of fuming ended in tepid tea poured by a beautiful brown-haired girl.

He watched her in silence.

“It’s horrible,” he broke out. “You’re a strange woman, and there you sit, pouring tea out as if—— Who are you? I don’t know you.”

“Don’t you?” she said quietly. And then he remembered all the old talks with the old wife.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “I don’t want to be a brute.”

“It’s no use my saying I’m sorry,” she said.

“Are you?” He leaned forward to put the question.

“We must make the best of it,” she said. “Perhaps—— Look here, don’t let’s speak of it till after Christmas; let’s just go on as we did before.”

So the days wore on. But the situation when Michael lived in torment in the

company of his old wife was simplicity itself compared to his new life with a wife—young, beautiful, and a stranger, yet in all essentials his dearest friend. This discomfort grew daily—hourly branching out into ever fresh embarrassments—new and harassing, vexatious, half understood, wholly resented.

The wife had her burden to bear also. The laundress had only known the old wife as "Mrs Wood."

"She thought I was your mother," the wife said when Michael propounded the difficulty. But the laundress's attitude to the new Mrs Wood had a sting that was almost punishment enough to the wife, had Michael only known, for all that she had done amiss.

The hour of departure for the Christmas festivities at Wood Grange came as a relief from the persistent pinpricks of unexplained emotion which tormented him. His wife was young and beautiful, yet he was only conscious of repulsion. He hated her for her trickery. But most he hated her because she had cheated him of the old wife—the friend, the confidante, who had grown to be so much, and so much the best part, in his life. For now there was no confidence between the two—no talk, no reading, no music to brighten the Temple rooms. They lived in an almost complete silence.

Every window of the Grange shone out with yellow light across the snow. For once Christmas had been kind and seasonable—a white sheet covered the world. Holly gleamed against old oak. Priceless silver, saved from the smelting-pot in Cromwell's hard days, shone above white napery on the long tables. The tenants' dinner was over, and now was the moment when, according to the will, Michael Wood's wife must be presented to the tenants then assembled.

The slender figure in white woollen cloth and white fur, with Christmas roses at its breast, stood on the daïs at the end of the great hall, and the tenants cheered themselves hoarse at the mere sight of her beautiful face, her kind eyes.

"It went off very well," Michael said when, the last guest gone, the last shutter closed, the last servant departed, the two stood alone in the long drawing-room.

"Yes; think if you had had to present to them the old white-haired wife——"

"I loved the old wife," he said obstinately; but his voice was not quite steady.

"I wish," she said, playing with the Christmas roses she wore, "I wish you would try to forgive me. It was horribly wrong; but I began it as a joke. You see, I had only just come over from the convent where I was brought up. I thought it would be such fun: I was always good at theatricals. I will never do anything silly again. And to-morrow I'll go away, and you need never see me again. And you have got the money and the old place, haven't you? And I got them for you—and—do forgive me. It began as a silly schoolgirl's joke indeed."

"But—a convent! You have read and thought——"

"It was my father. He made me read and think; and when he died all the money went, and my mother is poor. Oh, Michael, don't be so flinty! Say you forgive me before I go! It all began in a joke!"

"Began. Yes. But why did you go on?"

"Because I—I didn't like Sylvia—and I liked you—rather—but I won't be a nuisance. I'll go back to mother. Say you forgive me. I'll go by the first train in the morning."

"The first train," said Michael absently, "is the 9.17; but to-morrow is Christmas Day—I daresay they'll run the same as on Sunday."

She took her white cloak from the settle by the fire.

"Good night," she said sadly; "you are very hard. Won't you even shake hands?"

"We had no roses at our wedding," he said, still absently; "but there are roses at Christmas." He raised his hand to the white flowers she wore, and touched them softly. "White roses, too, for a wedding," he said.

“Good night!” she said again.

“And you will go to your mother to-morrow by the 9.17 train, or the 10.5, if the trains run the same as on Sunday. And I am to forgive you, and shake hands before we part. Well, well!”

He took the hand she held out, caught the other, and stood holding them, his grey eyes seeking hers. Her head thrown back, her hands stretched out, she looked at him from arm’s length.

“Dear!” he said.

A mute glance questioned him. Then lashes longer than Sylvia’s veiled the dark eyes.

He spoke again. “Dear!”

“You know you hate me,” she said.

He raised her hands to his lips.

“Have you forgotten Sylvia?”

“Absolutely, thank God! And you—I—after all, we are married, though there were no roses at our June wedding.”

Again her eyes questioned mutely.

He leaned forward and touched the Christmas roses with his lips. Then he dropped her hands and caught her by the shoulders.

“Oh! foolish, foolish, foolish people!” he said. “We two are man and wife. My wife! my wife! my wife! We are, aren’t we?”

“I suppose we are,” she said, and her face leaned a little towards his.

“Well, then!” said he.

X THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

The thief stood close under the high wall, and looked to right and left. To the right the road wound white and sinuous, lying like a twisted ribbon over the broad grey shoulder of the hill; to the left the road turned sharply down towards the river; beyond the ford the road went away slowly in a curve, prolonged for miles through the green marshes.

No least black fly of a figure stirred on it. There were no travellers at such an hour on such a road.

The thief looked across the valley, at the top of the mountain flushed with sunset, and at the grey-green of the olives about its base. The terraces of olives were already dusk with twilight, but his keen eyes could not have missed the smallest variance or shifting of their lights and shadows. Nothing stirred there. He was alone.

Then, turning, he looked again at the wall behind him. The face of it was grey and sombre, but all along the top of it, in the crannies of the coping stones, orange wallflowers and sulphur-coloured snapdragons shone among the haze of feathery-flowered grasses. He looked again at the place where some of the stones had fallen from the coping—had fallen within the wall, for none lay in the road without. The bough of a mighty tree covered the gap with its green mantle from the eyes of any chance wayfarer; but the thief was no chance wayfarer, and he had surprised the only infidelity of the great wall to its trust.

To the chance wayfarer, too, the wall's denial had seemed absolute, unanswerable. Its solid stone, close knit by mortar hardly less solid, showed not only a defence, it offered a defiance—a menace. But the thief had learnt his trade; he saw that the mortar might be loosened a little here, broken a little there, and now the crumbs of it fell rustling on to the dry, dusty grass of the roadside. He drew back, took two quick steps forward, and, with a spring, sudden and agile as a cat's, grasped the wall where the gap showed, and drew himself up. Then he rubbed his hands on his knees, because his hands were bloody from the sudden grasping of the rough stones, and

sat astride on the wall.

He parted the leafy boughs and looked down; below him lay the stones that had fallen from the wall—already grass was growing upon the mound they made. As he ventured his head beyond the green leafage, the level light of the sinking sun struck him in the eyes. It was like a blow. He dropped softly from the wall and stood in the shadow of the tree—looking, listening.

Before him stretched the park—wide and still; dotted here and there with trees, and overlaid with gold poured from the west. He held his breath and listened. There was no wind to stir the leaves to those rustlings which may deceive and disconcert the keenest and the boldest; only the sleepy twitter of birds, and the little sudden soft movements of them in the dusky privacy of the thick-leaved branches. There was in all the broad park no sign of any other living thing.

The thief trod softly along under the wall where the trees were thickest, and at every step he paused to look and listen.

It was quite suddenly that he came upon the little lodge near the great gates of wrought iron with the marble gate-posts bearing upon them the two gaunt griffins, the cognisance of the noble house whose lands these were. The thief drew back into the shadow and stood still, only his heart beat thickly. He stood still as the tree trunk beside him, looking, listening. He told himself that he heard nothing—saw nothing—yet he became aware of things. That the door of the lodge was not closed, that some of its windows were broken, and that into its little garden straw and litter had drifted from the open door: and that between the stone step and the threshold grass was growing inches high. When he was aware of this he stepped forward and entered the lodge. All the sordid sadness of a little deserted home met him here—broken crocks and bent pans, straw, old rags, and a brooding, dusty stillness.

“There has been no one here since the old keeper died. They told the truth,” said the thief; and he made haste to leave the lodge, for there was nothing in it now that any

man need covet—only desolation and the memory of death.

So he went slowly among the trees, and by devious ways drew a little nearer to the great house that stood in its walled garden in the middle of the park. From very far off, above the green wave of trees that broke round it, he could see the towers of it rising black against the sunset; and between the trees came glimpses of its marble white where the faint grey light touched it from the east.

Moving slowly—vigilant, alert, with eyes turning always to right and to left, with ears which felt the intense silence more acutely than they could have felt any tumult—the thief reached the low wall of the garden, at the western side. The last redness of the sunset's reflection had lighted all the many windows, and the vast place blazed at him for an instant before the light dipped behind the black bar of the trees, and left him face to face with a pale house, whose windows now were black and hollow, and seemed like eyes that watched him. Every window was closed; the lower ones were guarded by jalousies; through the glass of the ones above he could see the set painted faces of the shutters.

From far off he had heard, and known, the plash-plash of fountains, and now he saw their white changing columns rise and fall against the background of the terrace. The garden was full of rose bushes trailing and unpruned; and the heavy, happy scent of the roses, still warm from the sun, breathed through the place, exaggerating the sadness of its tangled desolation. Strange figures gleamed in the deepening dusk, but they were too white to be feared. He crept into a corner where Psyche drooped in marble, and, behind her pedestal, crouched. He took food from his pockets and ate and drank. And between the mouthfuls he listened and watched.

The moon rose, and struck a pale fire from the face of the house and from the marble limbs of the statues, and the gleaming water of the fountains drew the moonbeams into the unchanging change of its rise and fall.

Something rustled and stirred among the roses. The thief grew rigid: his heart

seemed suddenly hollow; he held his breath. Through the deepening shadows something gleamed white; and not marble, for it moved, it came towards him. Then the silence of the night was shattered by a scream, as the white shape glided into the moonlight. The thief resumed his munching, and another shape glimmered after the first. “Curse the beasts!” he said, and took another draught from his bottle, as the white peacocks were blotted out by the shadows of the trees, and the stillness of the night grew more intense.

In the moonlight the thief went round and about the house, pushing through the trailing briers that clung to him—and now grown bolder he looked closely at doors and windows. But all were fast barred as the doors of a tomb. And the silence deepened as the moonlight waxed.

There was one little window, high up, that showed no shutter. He looked at it; measured its distance from the ground and from the nearest of the great chestnut trees. Then he walked along under the avenue of chestnuts with head thrown back and eyes fixed on the mystery of their interlacing branches.

At the fifth tree he stopped; leaped to the lowest bough, missed it; leaped again, caught it, and drew up his body. Then climbing, creeping, swinging, while the leaves, agitated by his progress, rustled to the bending of the boughs, he passed to that tree, to the next—swift, assured, unhesitating. And so from tree to tree, till he was at the last tree—and on the bough that stretched to touch the little window with its leaves.

He swung from this. The bough bent and cracked, and would have broken, but that at the only possible instant the thief swung forward, felt the edge of the window with his feet, loosed the bough, sprang, and stood, flattened against the mouldings, clutching the carved drip-stone with his hands. He thrust his knee through the window, waiting for the tinkle of the falling glass to settle into quietness, opened the window, and crept in. He found himself in a corridor: he could see the long line of

its white windows, and the bars of moonlight falling across the inlaid wood of its floor.

He took out his thief's lantern—high and slender like a tall cup—lighted it, and crept softly along the corridor, listening between his steps till the silence grew to be like a humming in his ears.

And slowly, stealthily, he opened door after door; the rooms were spacious and empty—his lantern's yellow light flashing into their corners told him this. Some poor, plain furniture he discerned, a curtain or a bench here and there, but not what he sought. So large was the house, that presently it seemed to the thief that for many hours he had been wandering along its galleries, creeping down its wide stairs, opening the grudging doors of the dark, empty rooms, whose silence spoke ever more insistently in his ears.

"But it is as he told me," he said inwardly: "no living soul in all the place. The old man—a servant of this great house—he told me; he knew, and I have found all even as he said."

Then the thief turned away from the arched emptiness of the grand staircase, and in a far corner of the hall he found himself speaking in a whisper because now it seemed to him that nothing would serve but that this clamorous silence should be stilled by a human voice.

"The old man said it would be thus—all emptiness, and not profit to a man; and he died, and I tended him. Dear Jesus! how our good deeds come home to us! And he told me how the last of the great family had gone away none knew whither. And the tales I heard in the town—how the great man had not gone, but lived here in hiding—— It is not possible. There is the silence of death in this house."

He moistened his lips with his tongue. The stillness of the place seemed to press upon him like a solid thing. "It is like a dead man on one's shoulders," thought the thief, and he straightened himself up and whispered again: "The old man said, 'The

door with the carved griffin, and the roses enwreathed, and the seventh rose holds the secret in its heart.’”

With that the thief set forth again, creeping softly across the bars of moonlight down the corridor.

And after much seeking he found at last, under the angle of the great stone staircase behind a mouldering tapestry wrought with peacocks and pines, a door, and on it carved a griffin, wreathed about with roses. He pressed his finger into the deep heart of each carven rose, and when he pressed the rose that was seventh in number from the griffin, he felt the inmost part of it move beneath his finger as though it sought to escape. So he pressed more strongly, leaning against the door till it swung open, and he passed through it, looking behind him to see that nothing followed. The door he closed as he entered.

And now he was, as it seemed, in some other house. The chambers were large and lofty as those whose hushed emptiness he had explored—but these rooms seemed warm with life, yet held no threat, no terror. To the dim yellow flicker from the lantern came out of the darkness hints of a crowded magnificence, a lavish profusion of beautiful objects such as he had never in his life dreamed of, though all that life had been one dream of the lovely treasures which rich men hoard, and which, by the thief’s skill and craft, may come to be his.

He passed through the rooms, turning the light of his lantern this way and that, and ever the darkness withheld more than the light revealed. He knew that thick tapestries hung from the walls, velvet curtains masked the windows; his hand, exploring eagerly, felt the rich carving of chairs and presses; the great beds were hung with silken cloth wrought in gold thread with glimmering strange starry devices. Broad sideboards flashed back to his lantern’s questionings the faint white laugh of silver; the tall cabinets could not, with all their reserve, suppress the confession of wrought gold, and, from the caskets into whose depths he flashed the

light, came the trembling avowal of rich jewels. And now, at last, that carved door closed between him and the poignant silence of the deserted corridors, the thief felt a sudden gaiety of heart, a sense of escape, of security. He was alone, yet warmed and companioned. The silence here was no longer a horror, but a consoler, a friend.

And, indeed, now he was not alone. The ample splendours about him, the spoils which long centuries had yielded to the grasp of a noble family—these were companions after his own heart.

He flung open the shade of his lantern and held it high above his head. The room still kept half its secrets. The discretion of the darkness should be broken down. He must see more of this splendour—not in unsatisfying dim detail, but in the lit gorgeous mass of it. The narrow bar of the lantern's light chafed him. He sprang on to the dining-table, and began to light the half-burnt chandelier. There were a hundred candles, and he lighted all, so that the chandelier swung like a vast living jewel in the centre of the hall. Then, as he turned, all the colour in the room leapt out at him. The purple of the couches, the green gleam of the delicate glass, the blue of the tapestries, and the vivid scarlet of the velvet hangings, and with the colour sprang the gleams of white from the silver, of yellow from the gold, of many-coloured fire from strange inlaid work and jewelled caskets, till the thief stood aghast with rapture in the strange, sudden revelation of this concentrated splendour.

He went along the walls with a lighted candle in his hand—the wax dripped warm over his fingers as he went—lighting one after another, the tapers in the sconces of the silver-framed glasses. In the state bedchamber he drew back suddenly, face to face with a death-white countenance in which black eyes blazed at him with triumph and delight. Then he laughed aloud. He had not known his own face in the strange depths of this mirror. It had no sconces like the others, or he would have known it for what it was. It was framed in Venice glass—wonderful, gleaming, iridescent.

The thief dropped the candle and threw his arms wide with a gesture of supreme

longing.

“If I could carry it all away! All, all! Every beautiful thing! To sell some—the less beautiful, and to live with the others all my days!”

And now a madness came over the thief. So little a part of all these things could he bear away with him; yet all were his—his for the taking—even the huge carved presses and the enormous vases of solid silver, too heavy for him to lift—even these were his: had he not found them—he, by his own skill and cunning? He went about in the rooms, touching one after the other the beautiful, rare things. He caressed the gold and the jewels. He threw his arms round the great silver vases; he wound round himself the heavy red velvet of the curtain where the griffins gleamed in embossed gold, and shivered with pleasure at the soft clinging of its embrace. He found, in a tall cupboard, curiously-shaped flasks of wine, such wine as he had never tasted, and he drank of it slowly—in little sips—from a silver goblet and from a green Venice glass, and from a cup of rare pink china, knowing that any one of his drinking vessels was worth enough to keep him in idleness for a long year. For the thief had learnt his trade, and it is a part of a thief’s trade to know the value of things.

He threw himself on the rich couches, sat in the stately carved chairs, leaned his elbows on the ebony tables. He buried his hot face in the chill, smooth linen of the great bed, and wondered to find it still scented delicately as though some sweet woman had lain there but last night. He went hither and thither laughing with pure pleasure, and making to himself an unbridled carnival of the joys of possession.

In this wise the night wore on, and with the night his madness wore away. So presently he went about among the treasures—no more with the eyes of a lover, but with the eyes of a Jew—and he chose those precious stones which he knew for the most precious, and put them in the bag he had brought, and with them some fine-wrought goldsmith’s work and the goblet out of which he had drunk the wine. Though it was but of silver, he would not leave it. The green Venice glass he broke

and the cup, for he said: “No man less fortunate than I, to-night, shall ever again drink from them.” But he harmed nothing else of all the beautiful things, because he loved them.

Then, leaving the low, uneven ends of the candles still alight, he turned to the door by which he had come in. There were two doors, side by side, carved with straight lilies, and between them a panel wrought with the griffin and the seven roses enwreathed. He pressed his finger in the heart of the seventh rose, hardly hoping that the panel would move, and indeed it did not; and he was about to seek for a secret spring among the lilies, when he perceived that one of the doors wrought with these had opened itself a little. So he passed through it and closed it after him.

“I must guard my treasures,” he said. But when he had passed through the door and closed it, and put out his hand to raise the tattered tapestry that covered it from without, his hand met the empty air, and he knew that he had not come out by the door through which he had entered.

When the lantern was lighted, it showed him a vaulted passage, whose floor and whose walls were stone, and there was a damp air and a mouldering scent in it, as of a cellar long unopened. He was cold now, and the room with the wine and the treasures seemed long ago and far away, though but a door and a moment divided him from it, and though some of the wine was in his body, and some of the treasure in his hands. He set about to find the way to the quiet night outside, for this seemed to him a haven and a safeguard since, with the closing of that door, he had shut away warmth, and light, and companionship. He was enclosed in walls once more, and once more menaced by the invading silence that was almost a presence. Once more it seemed to him that he must creep softly, must hold his breath before he ventured to turn a corner—for always he felt that he was not alone, that near him was something, and that its breath, too, was held.

So he went by many passages and stairways, and could find no way out; and after a

long time of searching he crept by another way back to come unawares on the door which shut him off from the room where the many lights were, and the wine and the treasure. Then terror leaped out upon him from the dark hush of the place, and he beat on the door with his hands and cried aloud, till the echo of his cry in the groined roof cowed him back into silence.

Again he crept stealthily by strange passages, and again could find no way except, after much wandering, back to the door where he had begun.

And now the fear of death beat in his brain with blows like a hammer. To die here like a rat in a trap, never to see the sun alight again, never to climb in at a window, or see brave jewels shine under his lantern, but to wander, and wander, and wander between these inexorable walls till he died, and the rats, admitting him to their brotherhood, swarmed round the dead body of him.

“I had better have been born a fool,” said the thief.

Then once more he went through the damp and the blackness of the vaulted passages, tremulously searching for some outlet, but in vain.

Only at last, in a corner behind a pillar, he found a very little door and a stair that led down. So he followed it, to wander among other corridors and cellars, with the silence heavy about him, and despair growing thick and cold like a fungus about his heart, and in his brain the fear of death beating like a hammer.

It was quite suddenly in his wanderings, which had grown into an aimless frenzy, having now less of search in it than of flight from the insistent silence, that he saw at last a light—and it was the light of day coming through an open door. He stood at the door and breathed the air of the morning. The sun had risen and touched the tops of the towers of the house with white radiance; the birds were singing loudly. It was morning, then, and he was a free man.

He looked about him for a way to come at the park, and thence to the broken wall and the white road, which he had come by a very long time before. For this door

opened on an inner enclosed courtyard, still in damp shadow, though the sun above struck level across it—a courtyard where tall weeds grew thick and dank. The dew of the night was heavy on them.

As he stood and looked, he was aware of a low, buzzing sound that came from the other side of the courtyard. He pushed through the weeds towards it; and the sense of a presence in the silence came upon him more than ever it had done in the darkened house, though now it was day, and the birds sang all gaily, and the good sun shone so bravely overhead.

As he thrust aside the weeds which grew waist-high, he trod on something that seemed to writhe under his feet like a snake. He started back and looked down. It was the long, firm, heavy plait of a woman's hair. And just beyond lay the green gown of a woman, and a woman's hands, and her golden head, and her eyes; all about the place where she lay was the thick buzzing of flies, and the black swarming of them.

The thief saw, and he turned and he fled back to his doorway, and down the steps and through the maze of vaulted passages—fled in the dark, and empty-handed, because when he had come into the presence that informed that house with silence, he had dropped lantern and treasure, and fled wildly, the horror in his soul driving him before it. Now fear is more wise than cunning, so, whereas he had sought for hours with his lantern and with all his thief's craft to find the way out, and had sought in vain, he now, in the dark and blindly, without thought or will, without pause or let, found the one way that led to a door, shot back the bolts, and fled through the awakened rose garden and across the dewy park.

He dropped from the wall into the road, and stood there looking eagerly to right and left. To the right the road wound white and sinuous, like a twisted ribbon over the great, grey shoulder of the hill; to the left the road curved down towards the river. No least black fly of a figure stirred on it. There are no travellers on such a road at

such an hour.

XI THE GIRL AT THE TOBACCONIST'S

John Selwyn Selborne cursed for the hundredth time the fool that had bound him captive at the chariot wheels of beauty. That is to say, he cursed the fool he had been to trust himself in the automobile of that Brydges woman. The Brydges woman was pretty, rich, and charming; omniscience was her pose. She knew everything: consequently she knew how to drive a motor-car. She learned the lesson of her own incompetence at the price of a broken ankle and a complete suit of bruises. Selborne paid for his trusting folly with a broken collar-bone and a deep cut on his arm. That was why he could not go to Portsmouth to see the last of his young brother when he left home for the wars.

This was why he cursed. The curse was mild—it was indeed less a curse than an invocation.

"Defend us from women," he said; "above all from the women who think they know."

The grey gloom that stood for dawn that day crept through the curtains and made ghosts of the shadows that lingered still in his room. He stretched himself wearily, and groaned as the stretched nerves vibrated to the chord of agony.

"There's no fool like an old fool," said John Selwyn Selborne. He had thirty-seven years, and they weighed on him as the forty-seven when their time came would not do.

He had said good-bye to the young brother the night before; here in this country inn, the nearest to the scene of the enlightenment of the Brydges woman. And to-day the boy sailed. John Selborne sighed. Twenty-two, and off to the wars, heart-whole. Whereas he had been invalided at the very beginning of things and now, when he was well and just on the point of rejoining—the motor-car and the Brydges woman!

And as for heart-whole ... the Brydges woman again.

He fell asleep. When he awoke there was full sunshine and an orchestra of awakened birds in the garden outside. There was tea—there were letters. One was from Sidney—Sidney, who had left him not twelve hours before.

He tore it open, and hurt his shoulder in the movement.

“Dear John,” said the letter, “I wanted to tell you last night, but you seemed so cheap, I thought I’d better not bother you. But it’s just come into my head that perhaps I may get a bullet in my innards, and I want you to know. So here goes. There’s a girl I mean to marry. I know she’ll say Yes, but I can’t ask her till I come back, of course. I don’t want to have any humbug or concealing things from you; you’ve always been so decent to me. I know you hate jaw, so I won’t go on about that. But I must tell you I met her first when she was serving in a tobacconist’s shop. And her mother lets lodgings. You’ll think this means she’s beneath me. Wait till you see her. I want you to see her, and make friends with her while I’m away.”

Here followed some lover’s raptures, and the address of the lady.

John Selborne lay back and groaned.

Susannah Sheepmarsh, tobacconist’s assistant, lodging-house keeper’s daughter, and Sidney Selborne, younger son of a house whose pride was that it had been proud enough to refuse a peerage.

John Selborne thought long and deeply.

“I suppose I must sacrifice myself,” he said. “Little adventuress! ‘How easy to prove to him,’ I said, ‘that an eagle’s the game her pride prefers, though she stoops to a wren instead.’ The boy’ll hate me for a bit, but he’ll thank me later. Yalding? That’s somewhere on the Medway. Fishing? Boating? Convalescence is good enough. Fiction aid us! What would the villain in a book do to come between fond lovers? He would take the lodgings: at least he would try. And one may as well do something.”

So he wrote to Mrs Sheepmarsh—she had rooms to let, he heard. Terms? And Mrs Sheepmarsh wrote back; at least her reply was typewritten, which was a bit of a shock. She had rooms. They were disengaged. And the terms were thus and such.

Behold John Selwyn Selborne then, his baggage neatly labelled with his first and second names, set down on the little platform of Yalding Station. Behold him, waggonette-borne, crossing the old stone bridge and the golden glory of the Leas, flushed with sunset.

Mrs Sheepmarsh's house was long and low and white. It had a classic porch, and at one end a French window opened through cascades of jasmine to a long lawn. There were many trees. A middle-aged lady in decent black, with a white cap, and white lace about her neck, greeted him with formal courtesy. "This way," she said, and moved for him to follow her through a green gate and down a shrubbery that led without disguise or pretence straight away from the house. It led also to a little white building embowered in trees. "Here," said the lady. She opened the door. "I'll tell the man to bring your luggage. Good evening——"

And she left him planted there. He had to bend his head to pass under the low door, and he found himself in a tiny kitchen. Beyond were a sitting-room and two bedchambers. All fitted sparsely, but with old furniture, softly-faded curtains, quiet and pleasant to look upon. There were roses in a jug of Grès de Flandre on the gate-table in the sitting-room.

"What a singular little place!" he said. "So these are the lodgings. I feel like a dog in a kennel. I suppose they will throw me a bone by-and-by—or, at any rate, ask me what kind of bones I prefer."

He unpacked his clothes and laid his belongings in the drawers and cupboards; it was oddly charming that each shelf or drawer should have its own little muslin bag of grey lavender. Then he took up a book and began to read. The sunset had died away, the daylight seemed to be glowing out of the low window like a tide, leaving

bare breadths of darkness behind. He lighted candles. He was growing hungry—it was past eight o'clock.

"I believe the old lady has forgotten my existence," he said, and therewith opened his cottage door and went out into the lighter twilight of the garden. The shrubbery walks were winding. He took the wrong turning, and found himself entering on the narrow lawn. From the French window among the jasmine came lamplight—and voices.

"No servant, no food? My good mother, you've entertained a lunatic unawares."

"He had references."

"Man cannot live by references alone. The poor brute must be starving—unless he's drunk."

"Celia! I do wish you wouldn't——"

John Selborne hastening by, put a period to the conversation by boots crunching heavily and conscientiously on the gravel. Both voices ceased. He presented himself at the lamp-lit oblong of the window.

Within that lamplight glowed on the last remnants of a meal—dinner, by the glasses and the fruit. Also on the lady in the cap, and on a girl—the one, doubtless, who had evolved the lunatic idea. Both faces were turned towards him. Both women rose: there was nothing for it but advance. He murmured something about intrusion—"awfully sorry, the walks wind so," and turned to go.

But the girl spoke: "Oh, wait a moment. Is this Mr Selwyn, mother?"

"My daughter, Miss Sheepmarsh—Mr Selwyn," said the mother reluctantly.

"We were just talking about you," said the girl, "and wondering whether you were ill or anything, or whether your servant hasn't turned up, or something."

"Miss Sheepmarsh." He was still speechless. This the little adventuress, the tobacconist's assistant? This girl with the glorious hair severely braided, the round

face, the proud chin, the most honest eyes in the world? She might be sister to the adventuress—cousin, perhaps? But the room, too—shining mahogany, old china, worn silver, and fine napery—all spoke of a luxury as temperate as refined: the luxury of delicate custom, of habit bred in the bone; no mushroom growth of gross self-indulgence, but the unconscious outcome of generations of clear self-respect.

"Can we send anything over for you?" the elder lady asked. "Of course we——"

"We didn't mean by 'entirely private' that we would let our tenant starve," the girl interrupted.

"There is some mistake." Selborne came to himself suddenly. "I thought I was engaging furnished apartments with er—attendance."

The girl drew a journal from a heap on the sofa.

"This was the advertisement, wasn't it?" she asked.

And he read:

"Four-roomed cottage, furnished, in beautiful grounds. Part of these are fenced in for use of tenant of cottage. And in the absence of the family the whole of the grounds are open to tenant. When at home the family wish to be entirely private."

"I never saw this at all," said Selborne desperately. "My—I mean I was told it was furnished lodgings. I am very sorry I have no servant and no means of getting one. I will go back to London at once. I am sorry."

"The last train's gone," said Miss Sheepmarsh. "Mother, ask Mr Selborne to come in, and I'll get him something to eat."

"My dear," said the mother, "surely Mary——"

"My dear mother," said the girl, "you know Mary is having her supper."

The bewildered Selborne presently found himself seated at the white-spread, silver-sparkling table, served with food and drink by this Hebe with the honest eyes. He exerted himself to talk with the mother—not of the difference between a lodger

and a tenant, but of music, art, and the life of the great world.

It was the girl who brought the conversation down from the gossip of Courts and concert-rooms to the tenant's immediate needs.

"If you mean to stay, you could have a woman in from the village," said she.

"But wouldn't you rather I went?" he said.

"Why should we? We want to let the cottage, or we shouldn't have advertised it. I'll get you some one to-morrow. Mrs Bates would be the very thing, mother. And you'll like her, Mr Selwyn. She's a great dear——"

Sure enough, the next morning brought a gentle, middle-aged woman to "do for" Mr Selwyn. And she did excellently. And three slow days passed. He got a boat and pulled up and down the green willow-fringed river. He tried to fish; he read somewhat, and he thought more. And he went in and out of his cottage, which had its own private path debouching on the highway. Many times a day he went in and out, but he saw no more the red hair, the round face, and the honest eyes.

On the fourth day he had nursed his interest in the girl to a strong, well-grown sentiment of curiosity and attraction. Coming in at his own gate, he saw the mother leaving hers, with sunshade and cardcase—an afternoon of calls evidently setting in.

Now or never! The swift impulse took him, and before he had time to recall the terms of that advertisement, he had passed the green fence of division, and his feet were on the wandering ways of the shrubbery. He felt, as he went, a glow of gratitude to the fate which was rewarding his care of his brother's future with an interest like this. The adventuress?—the tobacconist's assistant?—he could deal with her later.

Through the garden's green a gleam of white guided—even, it seemed, beckoned.

He found the girl with the red hair and the honest eyes in a hammock swung between two cedars.

“Have pity on me,” he said abruptly.

She raised her eyes from her book.

“Oh, it’s you!” she said. “I am so glad. Get a chair from under the weeping ash, and sit down and talk.”

“This turf is good enough for me,” said he; “but are you sure I’m not trespassing?”

“You mean the advertisement? Oh, that was just because we had some rather awful people last year, and we couldn’t get away from them, and mother wanted to be quite safe; but, of course, you’re different. We like you very much, what we’ve seen of you.” This straightforward compliment somehow pleased him less than it might have done. “The other people were—well, he was a butterman. I believe he called himself an artist.”

“Do you mean that you do not like persons who are in trade,” he asked, thinking of the tobacconist’s assistant.

“Of course I don’t mean that,” she said; “why, I’m a Socialist! Butterman just means a person without manners or ideals. But I do like working people better than shoppy people, though I know it’s wrong.”

“How can an involuntary liking or disliking be wrong?” he asked.

“It’s snobbish, don’t you think? We ought to like people for what they are, not for what they have, or what they work at.”

“If you weren’t so pretty, and hadn’t that delightful air of having just embraced the Social Gospel, you’d be a prig,” he said to himself. To her he said: “Roughly speaking, don’t you think the conventional classifications correspond fairly well with the real ones?”

“No,” she answered roundly.

And when the mother returned, weary from her calls, she found her tenant and her daughter still discussing the problems of good and evil, of heredity and environment,

of social inequalities and the injustice of the world. The girl fought for her views, and she fought fairly, if fiercely. It was the first of many such fights. When he had gone the mother protested.

“Dearest,” said the girl, “I can’t help it! I must live my own life, as people say in plays. After all, I’m twenty-six. I’ve always talked to people if I liked them—even strangers in railway carriages. And people aren’t wild beasts, you know: everything is always all right. And this man can talk; he knows about things. And he’s a gentleman. That ought to satisfy you—that and his references. Don’t worry, there’s a darling. Just be nice to him yourself. He’s simply a godsend in a place like this.”

“He’ll fall in love with you, Celia,” said the mother warningly.

“Not he!” said the daughter. But the mother was right.

Living alone in the queer little cottage, the world, his accustomed life, the Brydges woman, all seemed very far away. Miss Sheepmarsh was very near. Her frank enjoyment of his talk, her gay acceptance of their now almost constant companionship, were things new in his experience of women, and might have warned him that she at least was heart-whole. They would have done had he ever faced the fact that his own heart had caught fire. He bicycled with her along the pleasant Kentish lanes; he rowed with her on the little river of dreams; he read to her in the quiet of the August garden; he gave himself up wholly to the pleasure of those hours that flew like moments—those days that passed like hours. They talked of books and of the heart of books—and inevitably they talked of themselves. He talked of himself less than most men, but he learned much of her life. She was an ardent social reformer; had lived in an Art-and-Culture-for-the-People settlement in Whitechapel; had studied at the London School of Economics. Now she had come back to be with her mother, who needed her. She and her mother were almost alone in the world; there was enough to live on, but not too much. The letting of the little house had been Celia’s idea: its rent was merely for “luxuries.” He found out from

the mother, when she came to tolerate him, that the “luxuries” were Celia’s—the luxuries of helping the unfortunate, feeding the hungry, and clothing little shivering children in winter time.

And all this while he had not heard a word of sister or cousin—of any one whom he might identify as the tobacconist’s assistant.

It was on an evening when the level sunbeams turned the meadows by the riverside to fine gold, and the willows and alders to trees of Paradise, that he spoke suddenly, leaning forward on his sculls. “Have you,” he asked, looking into her face, “any relation who is in a shop?”

“No,” said she; “why?”

“I only wondered,” said he coldly.

“But what an extraordinary thing to wonder!” she said. “Do tell me what made you think of it.”

“Very well,” he said, “I will. The person who told me that your mother had lodgings, also told me that your mother had a daughter who served in a shop.”

“Never!” she cried. “What a hateful idea!”

“A tobacconist’s shop,” he persisted; “and her name was Susannah Sheepmarsh.”

“Oh,” she answered, “that was me.” She spoke instantly and frankly, but she blushed crimson.

“And you’re ashamed of it,—Socialist?” he asked with a sneer, and his eyes were fierce on her burning face.

“I’m not! Row home, please. Or I’ll take the sculls if you’re tired, or your shoulder hurts. I don’t want to talk to you any more. You tried to trap me into telling a lie. You don’t understand anything at all. And I’ll never forgive you.”

“Yes, you will,” he said to himself again and again through the silence in which they plashed down the river. But when he was alone in his cottage, the truth flew at him

and grappled him with teeth and claws. He loved her. She loved, or had loved—or might have loved—or might love—his brother. He must go: and the next morning he went without a word. He left a note for Mrs Sheepmarsh, and a cheque in lieu of notice; and letter and cheque were signed with his name in full.

He went back to the old life, but the taste of it all was gone. Shooting parties, house parties, the Brydges woman even, prettier than ever, and surer of all things: how could these charm one whose fancy, whose heart indeed, wandered for ever in a green garden or by a quiet river with a young woman who had served in a tobacconist's shop, and who would be some day his brother's wife?

The days were long, the weeks seemed interminable. And all the time there was the white house, as it had been; there were mother and daughter living the same dainty, dignified, charming life to which he had come so near. Why had he ever gone there? Why had he ever interfered? He had meant to ensnare her heart just to free his brother from an adventuress. An adventuress! He groaned aloud.

"Oh, fool! But you are punished!" he said; "she's angry now—angrier even than that evening on the river, for she knows now that even the name you gave her to call you by was not the one your own people use. This comes of trying to act like an ass in a book."

The months went on. The Brydges woman rallied him on his absent air. She spoke of dairymaids. He wondered how he could ever have found her amusing, and whether her vulgarity was a growth, or had been merely hidden.

And all the time Celia and the white house were dragging at his heart-strings. Enough was left of the fool that he constantly reproached himself for having been, to make him sure that had he had no brother, had he met her with no duty to the absent to stand between them she would have loved him.

Then one day came the South African mail, and it brought a letter from his brother, the lad who had had the sense to find a jewel behind a tobacconist's counter, and

had trusted it to him.

The letter was long and ineffective. It was the postscript that was vital.

“I say, I wonder whether you’ve seen anything of Susannah? What a young fool I was ever to think I could be happy with a girl out of a shop. I’ve met the real and only one now—she’s a nurse; her father was a clergyman in Northumberland. She’s such a bright little thing, and she’s never cared for any one before me. Wish me luck.”

John Selborne almost tore his hair.

“Well, I can’t save him across half the world! Besides——”

At thirty-seven one should have outgrown the wild impulses of youth. He said this to himself, but all the same it was the next train to Yalding that he took.

Fate was kind; at Yalding it had almost always been kind. The glow of red firelight shone out over the snow through the French window among the brown jasmine stalks.

Mrs Sheepmarsh was out, Miss Sheepmarsh was at home. Would he step this way?

He stepped into the presence of the girl. She rose from the low chair by the fire, and the honest eyes looked angrily at him.

“Look here,” he said, as the door closed between them and the maid-servant, “I’ve come to tell you things. Just this once let me talk to you; and afterwards, if you like, I can go away and never come back.”

“Sit down,” she said coldly. “I don’t feel friends with you at all, but if you want to speak, I suppose you must.”

So then he told her everything, beginning with his brother’s letter, and ending with his brother’s letter.

“And, of course, I thought it couldn’t be you, because of your being called Celia; and when I found out it really was you, I had to go away, because I wanted to be fair

to the boy. But now I've come back."

"I think you're the meanest person I ever knew," she said; "you thought I liked your brother, and you tried to make me like you so that you might throw me over and show him how worthless I was. I hate you and despise you."

"I didn't really try," he said miserably.

"And you took a false name to deceive us."

"I didn't: it really is my second name."

"And you came here pretending to be nice and a gentleman, and——" She was lashing herself to rage, with the lash of her own voice, as women will. John Selborne stood up suddenly.

"Be quiet," he said, and she was quiet. "I won't hear any more reproaches, unless—— Listen, I've done wrong—I've owned it. I've suffered for it. God knows I've suffered. You liked me in the summer: can't you try to like me again? I want you more than anything else in the world. Will you marry me?"

"Marry you," she cried scornfully; "you who——"

"Pardon me," he said. "I have asked a question. Give me no for an answer, and I will go. Say yes, and then you may say anything else you like. Yes or no. Shall I go or stay? Yes or no. No other word will do."

She looked at him, her head thrown back, her eyes flashing with indignation. A world of scorn showed in the angle of the chin, the poise of her head. Her lips opened. Then suddenly her eyes met his, and she knew that he meant what he said. She covered her face with her hands.

"Don't—don't cry, dear one," he said. "What is it? You've only to choose. Everything is for you to decide."

Still she did not speak.

"Good-bye, then," he said, and turned. But she caught at him blindly.

“Don’t—don’t go!” she cried. “I didn’t think I cared about you in the summer, but since you went away, oh, you don’t know how I’ve wanted you!”

“Well,” he said, when her tears were dried, “aren’t you going to scold me?”

“Don’t!” said she.

“At least tell me all about my brother—and why he thought you would be so ready to marry him.”

“That? Oh, that was only his conceit. You know I always do talk to people in railway carriages and things. I suppose he thought it was only him I talked to.”

“And the name?”

“I—I thought if I said my name was Susannah he wouldn’t get sentimental.”

“You ‘took a false name to deceive him’?”

“Don’t—oh, don’t!”

“And the tobacco shop?”

“Ah—that rankles?” She raised her head to look at him.

“Not it,” he answered coolly. “I simply don’t believe it.”

“Why? But you’re quite right. It was a woman in my district in London, and I took the shop for her for three days, because her husband was dying, and she couldn’t get any one else to help her. It was—it was rather fun—and—and——”

“And you wouldn’t tell me about it, because you didn’t want me to know how proud you were of it.”

“Proud? Ah, you do understand things! The man died, and I had given her those three days with him. I wasn’t proud, was I?—only glad that I could. So glad—so glad!”

“But you let my brother think——”

“Oh yes, I let him think it was my trade; I thought it might make him not be silly.

You see, I always knew he couldn't understand things."

"Celia?"

"Yes?"

"And have you really forgiven me?"

"Yes, yes, I forgive you! But I never should have if—— There's mother at the front door. Let me go. I want to let her in myself."

"If?"

"Let me go. If——"

"If?"

"If you hadn't understood and——"

"Yes?"

"If you hadn't come back to me!"

XII WHILE IT IS YET DAY

"And is it really true? Are you going to govern the Fortunate Islands?"

"I am, indeed—or rather, to be accurate, I am going to deputy-govern them—I mean, father is—for a year."

"A whole year!" he said, looking down at her fan. "What will London do without you?"

"London will do excellently," she answered—"and that's my pet fan, and it's not used to being tied into knots." She took it from him.

"And what shall I do without you?"

"Oh! laugh and rhyme and dance and dine. You'll go out to the proper number of dinners and dances, and make the proper measure of pretty little speeches and nice little phrases; and you'll do your reviews, and try to make them as like your editor's

as you can; and you'll turn out your charming little rondeaux and triolets, and the year will simply fly. Heigho! I'm glad I'm going to see something big, if it's only the Atlantic."

"You are very cruel," he said.

"Am I? But it's not cruel to be cruel if nobody's hurt, is it? And I am so tired of nice little verses and pretty little dances and dainty little dinners. Oh, if I were only a man!"

"Thank God you're not!" said he.

"If I were a man, I would do just one big thing in my life, even if I had to settle down to a life of snippets and trifles afterwards."

Her eyes were shining. They always glittered, but now they were starry. The drifted white folds across her breast stirred to her quickened breath.

"If you loved me, Sybil, I could do something great!" said he.

"But I don't," she said—"at any rate, not now; and I've told you so a dozen times. My dear Rupert, the man who needs a woman to save him isn't worth the saving."

"What would you call a big thing?" he asked. "Must I conquer an empire for you, or start a new religion? Or shall I merely get the Victoria Cross, or become Prime Minister?"

"Don't sneer," said she; "it doesn't become you at all. You've no idea how horrid you look when you're sneering. Why don't you——? Oh! but it's no good! By the way, what a charming cover Housman has designed for your Veils and Violets! It's a dear little book. Some of the verses are quite pretty."

"Go on," said he, "rub it in. I know I haven't done much yet; but there's plenty of time. And how can one do any good work when one is for ever sticking up one's heart like a beastly cocoanut for you to shy at? If you'd only marry me, Sybil, you should see how I would work!"

“May I refer you to my speech—not the last one, but the one before that.”

He laughed; then he sighed.

“Ah, my Pretty,” he said, “it was all very well, and pleasant enough to be scolded by you when I could see you every day; but now——”

“How often,” she asked calmly, “have I told you that you must not call me that? It was all very well when we were children; but now——”

“Look here,” he said, leaning towards her, “there’s not a soul about; they’re in the middle of the Lancers. Let me kiss you once—it can’t matter to you—and it will mean so very much to me.”

“That’s just it,” she said; “if it didn’t mean——”

“Then it shan’t mean anything but good-bye. It’s only about eight years since you gave up the habit of kissing me on every occasion.”

She looked down, then she looked to right and left, then suddenly she looked at him.

“Very well,” she said suddenly.

“No,” he said; “I won’t have it unless it does mean something.”

There was a silence. “Our dance, I think?” said the voice of one bending before her, and she was borne away on the arm of the partner from whom she had been hiding.

Rupert left early. He had not been able to secure any more dances with her. She left late. When she came to think the evening over, she sighed more than once. “I wish I loved him a little less, or a little more,” she said; “and I wish—yes, I do wish he had. I don’t suppose he’ll care a bit for me when I come back.”

So she set sail for the Fortunate or other Isles, and in dainty verses on loss and absence he found some solace for the pain of parting with her. Yet the pain was a real thing, and grew greater, and life seemed to have no taste, even tobacco no charm. She had always been a part of his life since the days when nothing but a sunk fence divided his father’s park from her father’s rabbit-warren. He grew paler, and

he developed a wrinkle or two, and a buoyant friend meeting him in Piccadilly assured him that he looked very much off colour, and in his light-hearted way the friend advised the sort of trip round the world from which yesterday had seen his own jovial return.

“Do you all the good in the world, my boy. ’Pon my soul, you have a tired sort of look, as if you’d got some of these jolly new diseases people have taken to dying of lately—appendi-what’s-its-name, you know, and things like that. You book your passage to Marseilles at once. So long! You take my tip.”

What Rupert took was a cab. He looked at himself in one of the little horseshoe mirrors. He certainly did look ill; and he felt ill—tired, bored, and nothing seemed worth while. He drove to a doctor friend, who punched and prodded him and listened with tubes at his chest and back, looked grave, and said: “Go to Strongitharm—he’s absolutely at the top. Twenty-guinea fee. But it’s better to know where we are. You go to Strongitharm.”

Rupert went, and Strongitharm gave his opinion. He gave it with a voice that trembled with sympathy, and he supplemented it with brandy-and-soda, which he happened to have quite handy.

Then Rupert disappeared from London and from his friends—disappeared suddenly and completely. He had plenty of money, and no relations near enough to be inconveniently anxious. He went away and he left no address, and he did not even write excuses to the people with whom he should have danced and dined, nor to the editor whose style he should have gone on imitating.

The buoyant friend rejoiced at the obvious and natural following of his advice.

“He was looking a little bit below himself, you know, and I said: ‘Go round the world; there’s nothing like it,’ and, by Jove! he went. Now, that’s the kind of man I like—knows good advice when he gets it, and acts on it right off.”

So the buoyant one spread the rumour that ran its course and died, and had to be

galvanised into life once more to furnish an answer to Sybil's questionings, when, returning from the Fortunate or other Isles, she asked for news of her old friend. And the rumour did not satisfy her. She had had time to think—there was plenty of time to think in those Islands whose real name escapes me—and she knew very much more than she had known on the evening when Rupert had broken her pet fan and asked for a kiss which he had not taken. She found herself quite fervently disbelieving in the grand tour theory—and the disbelief was so strong that it distorted life and made everything else uninteresting. Sybil took to novel-reading as other folks have in their time taken to drink. She was young, and she could still lose herself in a book. One day she lost herself most completely in a new novel from Mudie's, a book that every one was talking about. She lost herself; and suddenly, in a breathless joy that was agony too, she found him. This was his book. No one but Rupert could have written it—all that description of the park, and the race when she rode the goat and he rode the pig—and—she turned the pages hastily. Ah yes, Rupert had written this! She put the book down and she dressed herself as prettily as she knew how, and she went in a hansom cab to the office of the publisher of that book, and on the way she read. And more and more she saw how great a book it was, and how no one but Rupert could have written just that book. Thrill after thrill of pride ran through her. He had done this for her—because of what she had said.

Arrived at the publisher's, she was met by a blank wall. Neither partner was visible. The senior clerk did not know the address of the author of "Work While it is Yet Day," nor the name of him; and it was abundantly evident that even if he had known, he would not have told.

Sybil's prettiness and her charm so wrought upon this dry-as-dust person, however, that he volunteered the address of the literary agent through whom the book had been purchased. And Sybil found him on a first floor in one of those imposing new buildings in Arundel Street. He was very nice and kind, but he could not give his client's name without his client's permission.

The disappointment was bitter.

“But I’ll send a letter for you,” he tried to soften it with.

Sybil’s self-control almost gave way. A tear glistened on her veil.

“I do want to see him most awfully,” she said, “and I know he wants to see me. It was I who rode the goat in the book, you know——”

She did not realise how much she was admitting, but the literary agent did.

“Look here,” he said smartly, “I’ll wire to him at once; and if he says I may, I’ll give you the address. Can you call in an hour?”

Sybil wandered on the Embankment for a conscientious hour, and then went back.

The literary agent smiled victory.

“The answer is ‘Yes,’” he said, and handed her a slip of paper—

“Three Chimneys, Near Paddock Wood, Kent.”

“Have you a time-table?” asked she.

The dusty, hired fly lumbered and jolted along the white roads, and in it, as in the train, Sybil read the novel, the book every one was talking about—the great book—and her heart was full to overflowing of joy and pride and other things.

The carriage shook itself fiercely and stopped, and she looked up from the last page of the book with eyes that swam a little, to find herself at the broken wooden gate of a low, white house, shabbily blindless, and a long way off its last painting and whitewashing.

She paid for the carriage and dismissed it. She would walk back to the station with him. She passed in at the rickety gate and up the flagged path, and a bell in answer to her touch jangled loudly, as bells do in empty houses.

Her dress was greeny, with lace about it of the same colour as very nice biscuits, and her hat seemed to be made entirely of yellow roses. She was not unconscious of these facts.

Steps sounded within, and they, like the bell, seemed to sound in an empty house. The door opened, and there was Rupert. Sybil's lips were half-parted in a smile that should match the glow of gladness that must shine on his face when he saw her—Her—the unattainable, the unapproachable, at his very door. But her smile died away, for his face was grave. Only in his eyes something that was bright and fierce and like a flame leapt up and shone a moment.

"You!" he said.

And Sybil answered as most people do to such questions: "Yes, me." There was a pause: her eyes wandered from his to the blank face of the house, the tangle of the untidy garden. "Mayn't I come in?" she asked.

"Yes; oh yes, come in!"

She crossed the threshold—the doorstep was dank with green mould—and followed him into a room. It was a large room, and perfectly bare: no carpet, no curtains, no pictures. Loose bricks were arranged as a fender, and dead embers strewed the hearth. There was a table; there was a chair; there were scattered papers, pens, and ink. From the window one saw the neglected garden, and beyond it the round shoulders of the hills.

He drew forward the one chair, and she sat down. He stood with his back to the fireless grate.

"You are very, very pretty," he said suddenly. And the explanation of his disappearance suddenly struck her like a blow between the eyes. But she was not afraid. When all a woman's thoughts, day and night for a year, have been given to one man, she is not afraid of him; no, not even if he be what Sybil for one moment feared that this man was. He read the fear in her eyes.

"No, I'm not mad," he said. "Sybil, I'm very glad you came. Come to think of it, I'm very glad to see you. It is better than writing. I was just going to write out everything, as well as I could. I expect I should have sent it to you. You know I used

to care for you more than I did for any one."

Sybil's hands gripped the arms of the windsor chair. Was he really—was it through her that he was——

"Come out," she said. "I hate this place; it stifles me. And you've lived here—worked here!"

"I've lived here for eleven months and three days," he said. "Yes, come out."

So they went out through the burning July sun, and Sybil found a sheltered spot between a larch and a laburnum.

"Now," she said, throwing off her hat and curling her green, soft draperies among the long grass. "Come and sit down and tell me——"

He threw himself on the grass.

"Sure it won't bore you?" he asked.

She took his hand and held it. He let her take it; but his hand did not hold hers.

"I seem to remember," he said, "the last time I saw you—you were going away, or something. You told me I ought to do something great; and I told you—or, anyway, I thought to myself—that there was plenty of time for that. I'd always had a sort of feeling that I could do something great whenever I chose to try. Well—yes, you did go away, of course; I remember perfectly—and I missed you extremely. And some one told me I looked ill; and I went to my doctor, and he sent me to a big swell, and he said I'd only got about a year to live. So then I began to think."

Her fingers tightened on the unresponsive hand.

"And I thought: Here I've been thirty years in this world. I've the experience of twenty-eight and a half—I suppose the first little bit doesn't count. If I'd had time, I meant to write another book, just to show exactly what a man feels when he knows he's only got a year to live, and nothing done—nothing done."

"I won't believe it," she said. "You don't look ill; you're as lean as a greyhound,

but——”

“It may come any day now,” he went on quietly; “but I’ve done something. The book—it is great. They all say so; and I know it, too. But at first! Just think of gasping out your breath, and feeling that all the things you had seen and known and felt were wasted—lost—going out with you, and that you were going out like the flame of a candle, taking everything you might have done with you.”

“The book is great,” she said; “you have done something.”

“Yes. But for those two days I stayed in my rooms in St James’s Street, and I thought, and thought, and thought, and there was no one to care where I went or what I did, except a girl who was fond of me when she was little, and she had gone away and wasn’t fond of me any more. Oh, Sybil—I feel like a lunatic—I mean you, of course; but you never cared. And I went to a house agent’s and got the house unfurnished, and I bought the furniture—there’s nothing much except what you’ve seen, and a bed and a bath, and some pots and kettles; and I’ve lived alone in that house, and I’ve written that book, with Death sitting beside me, jogging my elbow every time I stopped writing, and saying, ‘Hurry up; I’m waiting here for you, and I shall have to take you away, and you’ll have done nothing, nothing, nothing.’”

“But you’ve done the book,” said Sybil again. The larch and the garden beyond were misty to her eyes. She set her teeth. He must be comforted. Her own agony—that could be dealt with later.

“I’ve ridden myself with the curb,” he said. “I thought it all out—proper food, proper sleep, proper exercise. I wouldn’t play the fool with the last chance; and I pulled it off. I wrote the book in four months; and every night, when I went to sleep, I wondered whether I should ever wake to go on with the book. But I did wake, and then I used to leap up and thank God, and set to work; and I’ve done it. The book will live—every one says it will. I shan’t have lived for nothing.”

“Rupert,” she said, “dear Rupert!”

"Thank you," he said forlornly; "you're very kind." And he drew his limp hand from hers, and leaned his elbows on the grass and his chin on his hands.

"Oh, Rupert, why didn't you write and tell me?"

"What was the use of making you sad? You were always sorry for maimed things—even the worms the gardener cut in two with his spade."

She was struggling with a growing desire to scream and shriek, and to burst out crying and tear the grass with her hands. He no longer loved her—that was the lesser evil. She could have borne that—have borne anything. But he was going to die! The intensity of her belief that he was going to die caught her by the throat. She defended herself instinctively.

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Don't believe what?"

"That you're going to die."

He laughed; and when the echo of that laugh had died away in the quiet garden, she found that she could no longer even say that she did not believe.

Then he said: "I am going to die, and all the values of things have changed places. But I have done something: I haven't buried my talent in a napkin. Oh, my Pretty, go away, go away! You make a fool of me again! I had almost forgotten how to be sorry that you couldn't love me. Go away, go away! Go, go!"

He threw out his hands, and they lay along the grass. His face went down into the tangled green, and she saw his shoulders shaken with sobs. She dragged herself along the grass till she was close to him; then she lifted his shoulders, and drew his head on to her lap, and clasped her arms round him.

"My darling, my dear, my own!" she said. "You're tired, and you've thought of nothing but your hateful book—your beautiful book, I mean—but you do love me really. Not as I love you, but still you do love me. Oh, Rupert, I'll nurse you, I'll

take care of you, I'll be your slave; and if you have to die, I shall die too, because there'll be nothing left for me to do for you."

He put an arm round her. "It's worth dying to hear that," he said, and brought his face to lie against her waist.

"But you shan't die. You must come back to London with me now—this minute. The best opinion——"

"I had the best," he said. "Kiss me, my Pretty; oh, kiss me now that it does mean something! Let me dream that I'm going to live, and that you love me."

He lifted his face, and she kissed him.

"Rupert, you're not going to die. It can't be true. It isn't true. It shan't be true."

"It is; but I don't mind now, except for you. I'm a selfish beast. But this is worth it all, and I have done something great. You told me to."

"Tell me," she said, "who was the doctor? Was he really the best?"

"It was Strongitharm," he said wearily.

She drew a long breath and clasped him closer. Then she pushed him away and sprang to her feet.

"Stand up!" she said. "Let me look at you!"

He stood up, and she caught him by the elbows and stood looking at him. Twice she tried to speak, and twice no voice obeyed; then she said softly, huskily: "Rupert, listen! It's all a horrid dream. Wake up. Haven't you seen the papers? Strongitharm went mad several months ago. It was drink. He told all his patients they were going to die of this new disease of his that he'd invented. It's all his madness. You're well—I know it. Oh, Rupert, you aren't going to die, and we love each other! Oh, God is very good!"

He drew a long breath.

"Are you sure? It's like coming back from chloroform; and yet it hurts, and yet—but

I wrote the book! Oh, Sybil, I shall never write another great book!"

"Ah yes, you will—you shall," she said, looking at him with wet eyes.

"I have you," he said. "Oh, thank God, I have you! but I shall never write another great book."

And he never has.

But he is very happy. And Sybil cannot see that his later works are not in the same field with the first. She thinks the critics fools. And he loves her the more for her folly.

XIII ALCIBIADES

"Oh, do let me have him in the carriage with me; he won't hurt any one, he's a perfect angel."

"Angels like him travels in the dog-box," said the porter.

Judy ended an agonised search for her pocket.

"Would you be offended," she said, "if I offered you half-a-crown?"

"Give the guard a bob, Miss." The hand curved into a cup resting on the carriage window, answered her question. "It's more'n enough for him, being a single man, whereas me, I'm risking my situation and nine children at present to say no more, when I——"

The turn of a railway key completed the sentence.

Judy and the angel were alone. He was a very nice angel—long-haired and brownly-black—his race the Aberdeen, his name Alcibiades. He put up a respectful and adoring nose, and his mistress kissed him between the eyes.

"How could they try to part us," she asked, "when there's only us two left?"

Alcibiades, with swimming eyes, echoed in a little moan of true love the question:

"How could they?"

The question was put again by both later in the day. Judy was to stay with an aunt while her mother sailed to Madeira to meet there the father returning from South Africa, full of wounds and honour, and to spend on the Island what was left of the winter. Now it was December.

A thick fog covered London with a veil of ugliness; the cabman was aggrieved and aggrieving—Alcibiades had tried to bite him—and Judy was on the verge of tears when the fog at last lifted, and allowed her to be driven to her aunt's suburban house, yellow brickish, with a slate roof and a lean forecourt, wherein cypresses, stunted and blackened, spoke eloquently of lives more blank than the death whose emblem they were.

Through the slits of the drab Venetian blinds, gaslight streamed into the winter dusk.

"There'll be tea, anyhow," sighed Judy, recklessly overpaying the cabman.

Inside the house where the lights were, the Aunt was surrounded by a dozen ladies of about her own age and station; "Tabbies" the world might have called them. All were busy with mysteries of many coloured silks and satins, lace and linen; at least all held such in their hands. The gathering was in fact a "working party" for the approaching bazaar. But the real work of bazaars is not done at parties.

"Yes," the Aunt was saying, "so nice for dear Julia. I'm truly glad that she should begin her visit with a little gaiety. In parting or sorrow we should always seek to distract the mind, should we not, dear Mrs Biddle?"

"The young are all too easily distracted by the shows of this world," said dear Mrs Biddle heavily.

And several ladies murmured approval.

"But you can't exactly call a church bazaar the shows of this world, can you?" urged the Aunt, sitting very upright, all black and beady.

“It’s the thin end of the Rubicon sometimes,” said Mrs Biddle.

“Then why——” began the youngest Tabby—and then the door bell rang, and every one said: “Here she is!”

The prim maid announced her, and she took two steps forward, and stood blinking in the gaslight with her hat on one side, and no gloves. Every one noticed that at once.

“Come in, my dear,” said the Aunt, rustling forward. “I have a few friends this afternoon, and—Oh, my gracious, what has happened!”

What had happened was quite simple. In her rustling advance some wandering trail of the Aunt’s black beadiness had caught on the knotted fringe of the table-cloth, and drawn this after her. A mass of silk and lace and ribbon lay sprinkled along the edges of the table where the Tabbies sat; a good store of needles, scissors, and cotton reels mingled with it. Now all this swept to the floor on the moving table-cloth, at the very instant when a rough brownly-black, long-eared person with a sharp nose and very muddy paws bounded into the room, to the full length of his chain. His bound landed him in the very middle of the ribbon-lace-cotton-reel confusion. Judy caught the dog up in her arms, and her apologies would have melted my heart, or yours, dear reader, in an instant. But Tabbies are Tabbies, and a bazaar is a bazaar. No more sewing was done that day; what was left of the afternoon proved all too short for the disentangling, the partial cleansing of the desecrated lace-cotton-reel-silk-muddle. And Alcibiades was tied up in the back-kitchen to the wheel of the patent mangle; he howled without ceasing.

“My dear,” said the Aunt, when tea was over, and the last Tabby had found her goloshes and gone home in them, “you are most welcome under any roof of mine, but—(may I ask you to close the baize door at the top of the kitchen stairs—thank you—and now this one—I am obliged. One cannot hear oneself speak for that terrible animal)—you must get rid of the cur to-morrow.”

“Oh, Aunt! he’s not a cur—he’s pure-bred.”

"Thank you," said the Aunt, "I believe I am as good a judge of dogs as any lady. My own dear Snubs has only been dead a year and two months last Tuesday. I know that a well-bred dog should have smooth hair, at any rate——"

The mother of Snubs had been distantly related to a family of respectable middle-class fox-terriers.

"I am very sorry," said Judy. She meant apology, but the Aunt took it for sympathy, and softened somewhat.

"A nice little smooth-coated dog now," she said, "a fox-terrier, or an Italian greyhound; you see I am not ignorant of the names of various patterns of dog. I will get you one myself; we will go to the Dogs' Home at Battersea, where really nice dogs are often sold quite cheap. Or perhaps they might take your poor cur in exchange."

Judy began to cry.

"Yes, cry, my dear," said the Aunt kindly; "it will do you a world of good."

When the Aunt was asleep—she had closed her ears to the protests of Alcibiades with wadding left over from a handkerchief sachet—Judy crept down in her woolly white dressing-gown, and coaxed the kitchen fire back to life. Then she sat in front of it, on the speckless rag carpet, and nursed Alcibiades and scolded him, and explained that he really must be a good dog, and that we all have something to put up with in this life.

"You know, Alby dear," she said, "it's not very nice for me either, but I don't howl and try to upset mangles. Don't you be afraid, dear: you shan't go to the Dogs' Home."

So kindly, yet strongly, did she urge her point that Alcibiades, tied to the leg of the kitchen table, consented to sleep quietly for the rest of the night.

Next day, when the Aunt enquired searchingly as to Judy's powers of fancywork,

and what she would do for the bazaar, Judy declared outright that she did not know one end of a needle from the other.

“But I can paint a little,” she said, “and I am rather good at wood-carving.”

“That will be very nice.” The Aunt already saw, in fancy, her stall outshine those of all other Tabbies, with glories of sabots and tambourines decorated with rosy sprays “hand-painted,” and carved white wood boxes just the size to hold nothing useful.

“And I’ll do you some,” said Judy; “only I can’t work if I’m distracted about Alby—my dog, you know. Oh, Aunt, do let him stay! He really is valuable, and he hasn’t made a bit of noise since last night.”

“It is quite useless,” the Aunt was sternly beginning—then suddenly her voice changed. “Is the cur really valuable?” she asked.

“Uncle Reggie gave five guineas for him when he was a baby boy,” said Judy eagerly, “and he’s worth much more now.”

“But he must be very old—when your Uncle Reggie was a boy——”

“I mean when Alcibiades was a boy.”

“And who is Alcibiades?”

Judy began all over again, and urged one or two new points.

“I don’t want to be harsh,” said the Aunt at last, “you shall have the little breakfast room to paint and carve in as you suggest. Of course I couldn’t have shavings and paint pots lying about all over the dining-room and drawing-room. And you shall keep your cur.”

“Oh, Aunty,” cried Judy, “you are a darling!”

“Yes,” the Aunt went on complacently, “you shall keep your cur till the bazaar, and then we will sell it for the benefit of the Fund for the Amelioration of the Daughters of the Country Clergy.”

And from this decision no tears and no entreaties would move her.

Judy made a den for herself and Alcibiades in the little breakfast room. There was no painting light—so she looked out a handful of the sketches that she had done last summer and framed them. Most of her time she spent in writing to her friends to know whether any one could take care of a darling dog, who was a perfect angel. And alas! no one could—or would.

With the connivance of the cook, Alcibiades had a bed in a box in the den, and from the very first he would at a word conceal himself in it the moment the step of the Aunt sounded on the oil-cloth-covered stairs. The sketches were framed, and some of the frames were lightly carved. The Aunt was enchanted, but, on the subject of Alcibiades, adamant.

And now it was the day of the bazaar. Judy had run wires along the wall of the schoolroom behind her Aunt's stall, and from it hung the best of the sketches. She had arranged the stall herself, glorifying it with the Eastern shawls and draperies that her father had sent her from India. It did far outshine any other stall, even that of Lady Bates, the wife of the tallow Knight. The Aunt was really grateful—truly appreciative. But her mind was made up about the "cur."

"If it really is worth anything we'll sell it. If not——" She paused on the dark hint, and Judy's miserable fancy lost itself among ropes and rivers and rat-poison.

To Alcibiades the bazaar was as much a festival as to any Tabby of them all. He had been washed, which is terrible at the time, but makes you self-respecting afterwards, a little puffed-up even. He had been allowed to come out by the front door, with his mistress in her beautiful dress that reminded him of rabbits. No one but Alcibiades himself will ever know what tortures of shame and misery, fighting with joy and affection, he had endured on those other occasions when he had been smuggled out of the back door in the early morning to take the damp air with his beloved lady and she had worn a shabby mackintosh and a red tam-o-shanter. To-day he wore a blue ribbon; it was uncomfortable, but he knew it spelt distinction. He rode in a carriage.

It was not like the little governess-cart which had carried him and his mistress through the lanes about Maidstone; but it was a carriage, and a large horse was his slave. His mistress herself had tied his blue ribbon; it was she, too, who adjusted the chain that attached him to a strong staple driven in just above the schoolroom wainscotting. The chain allowed him to sit at her feet as she stood by the stall waiting for purchasers, and scanning the face of each newcomer in an eager anxiety to find there the countenance of some one who really loved dogs.

But the people were most awful, and she had to own it to herself. There were Tabbies by the dozen, and young ladies by the score—young ladies all dressed differently, yet all alike in the fashion of the year before last; all vacant-faced, smiling agreeably because they knew they ought to smile—the young of the Tabby kind—Tabby kittens, in fact. No doubt they were really worthy and interesting, but they did not seem so to Judy.

There was a sprinkling of men—middle-aged mostly, and bald. There were a few youths; by some fatality all were fair, and reminded Judy of pork. A Tabby stopped at her stall, turned over all things and bought a beaded table-napkin ring. The purchase and the purchaser seemed to Judy to typify her whole life and surroundings. All her soul reached out to the Island. She sighed, then she looked up. The crowd had thickened since she last surveyed it. Four steps led down to the schoolroom from the outer world: on the top step was a lady, well dressed—oh! marvel!—and beside her a man—a gentleman. Well, Judy supposed all these poor dear people were gentlefolk, but these two were of her world. As she gazed her eyes and those of the man met; the lady was lost in the crowd, and Judy saw her no more. The man made straight for the stall where were the framed sketches, the white dress, fur-trimmed, the russet hair and green eyes of Judy, and the brownly-black, blue-ribboned Alcibiades. But before he reached them a wave of buyers broke on the shore of Judy’s stall, and he had been watching her for nearly half an hour before a young woman’s long-deferred choice of a Christmas gift for a grandfather fell

happily on a pair of purple bed-socks, and, for the moment, Judy breathed free.

“I told you so,” said the Aunt, rattling money in a leather bag; “I knew just before Christmas was the time. Everybody has to give Christmas presents to all their relations. You see! the things are going like wildfire.”

“Yes, Aunt,” said Judy. Alcibiades took advantage of the momentary calm to lick her hand exhaustively. Judy wondered wearily what had become of the man, the only man in that cheerless assembly who looked as though he liked dogs. “He must have been trying to get somewhere else,” she said; “he just looked in here by mistake, and when he saw the sort of people we were, he—well—I don’t wonder,” she sighed, and, raising her eyes, met his.

“I beg your pardon,” said he. He meant apology.

She took it for enquiry, and smiled. “Do you want to buy something?” she asked.

Her smile was more tired than she knew.

“I suppose I do,” he said; “one does at bazaars, don’t you know.”

“Do you want a Christmas present?” asked Judy, businesslike; “if so, and if you will tell me what kind of relation you want it for, perhaps I can find something that they’d like.”

“Could you? Now, that is really good. I want things for two aunts, three cousins, a little sister, and my mother—but I needn’t get hers here unless you’ve got something you think really—By Jove!”—his eyes had caught the sketches—“are those for sale?”

“That is rather the idea,” said Judy. Her spirits were rising, though she couldn’t have told you why. “Things at a bazaar are usually for sale, aren’t they?”

“Everything?” said he—and he stroked the not resentful neck of Alcibiades; “this good little beast isn’t in the market, I’m afraid?”

“Why? Would you buy him?”

“I’d think twice before I said no. My mother is frightfully fond of dogs.”

Quite unreasonably Judy felt that she did not want to sell Alcibiades as a present to any one’s mother.

“The sketches,” she said.

“The sketches,” said he; “why, there’s Maidstone Church and Farley and Teston Lock and Allington. How much are they?”

She told him.

“I must have some. May I have a dozen? They’re disgracefully cheap, and I feel like an American pork man buying works of art by the dozen—for they are jolly good—and it brings back old times. I was quartered there once.”

“I knew it,” she said to herself. Alcibiades stood up with his paws on her arm. “Be quiet,” she said to him; “you mustn’t talk now, I’m busy.”

Alcibiades gave her a reproachful look, and lay down.

The stranger smiled; a very jolly smile, Judy thought.

“Ripping little beast, isn’t he?” said the stranger.

“I suppose you’re invalided home?” she said. She couldn’t help it. A man in the Service. One who had been quartered at Maidstone, her own dear Maidstone. He was no longer a stranger.

“Yes,” he said; “beastly bore. But I shall be all right in two or three months; I hope the fighting won’t be all over by then.”

“Have you sold this gentleman anything?” said the Aunt firmly, “because Mrs Biddle wants to look at some d’oyleys.”

“I’m just selling something,” answered Judy. Then she turned to him and spoke softly. “I say, do you really like dogs?” said she.

“Of course I do.” The young man opened surprised grey eyes at her, as who should say: “Now, do I look like a man who doesn’t like dogs?”

"Well, then," she said, "Alcibiades is for sale."

"Is that his name? Why?"

"Oh, surely you know: wasn't it Alcibiades who gave up being dictator or something rather than have his dog's ears cut off?"

"I seem to remember something of the sort," he said.

"Well," said she, "his price is twenty guineas, but——"

He whistled very softly.

"Yes—I know," she said, "but I'll—yes, Aunt, in one moment!" She went on in an agonised undertone: "His price is twenty guineas. Say you'll have him. Say it loud. You won't really have to pay anything for him—No, I'm not mad."

"I'll give you twenty guineas for the dog," said the man, standing straight and soldierly against the tumbled mass of mats and pin-cushions and chair-backs.

The Aunt drew a long breath and turned to minister to Mrs Biddle's deep need of d'oyleys.

"Come and have tea," said the stranger; "you're tired out."

"No—I can't. Of course I can't—but I'll take you over to Mrs Piddock's stall and——" She led him away. "Look here," she said, "I'm sure you're a decent sort. Here's the money to pay for him. My aunt says if I don't sell him she'll have him killed. Will you keep him for me till my people come home? Oh, do—he really is an angel. And give me your name and address. You must think me a maniac, but I am so horribly fond of him. Will you?"

"Of course I will," he said heartily, "but I shall pay for him. I'll write a cheque: you can pay me when you get him back. Thank you—yes, I am sure that pin-cushion would delight my aunt."

Judy, with burning cheeks, found her way back to her stall.

"Oh, Alcibiades," she said, unfastening the blue ribbon, "I'm sure he's nice. Don't

bite him, there's a dear!"

A cheque signed "Richard Graeme" and a card with an address came into Judy's hands, and the chain of Alcibiades left them.

"I know you'll be good to him," she said; "don't give him meat, only biscuit, and sulphur in his drinking water. But you know all that. You've got me out of a frightful hole, and I'll bless you as long as I live. Good-bye." She stooped to the Aberdeen, now surprised and pained. "Good-bye, my dear old boy!"

And Alcibiades, stubborn resistance in every line of his figure, in every hair of his coat, was dragged away through the crowded bazaar.

Judy went to bed very tired. The bazaar had been a success, and the success had been talked over and the money counted till late in the evening—nearly eleven, that is, which is late for Tabbies—yet she woke at four. Some one was calling her. It was—no, he was gone—her eyes pricked at the thought—yet—surely that could be the voice of no other than Alcibiades? She sat up in bed and listened. It was he! That was his dear voice whining at the side gate. Those were his darling paws scratching the sacred paint off it.

Judy swept down the stairs like a silent whirlwind, turned key, drew bolts, and in a moment she and the cur were "sobbing in each other's arms."

She carried him up to her room, washed his dear, muddy paws, and spread her golf cape that he might lie on the bed beside her.

In chilliest, earliest dawn she rose and dressed. She found a wire that had supported her pictures at the bazaar, and she wrote a note and tied it to the collar of Alcibiades, where she noticed and untied a frayed end of rope. This was the note:

"He has run home to me. Why did you take the chain off? He always bites through cord. Don't beat him for it; he'll soon forget me."

The tears came into her eyes as she wrote it; it seemed to her so very pathetic. She

did not quite believe that Alcibiades would soon forget her—but if he did——?

The note did not lack pathos, either, in the eyes of Captain Graeme, when, two hours later, he found it under the chin of a mournfully howling Alcibiades, securely attached by picture wire to the railings of his mother's house.

The Captain took a turn on the Heath, and thought. And his thoughts were these: "She's the prettiest girl I've seen since I came home. It's deuced dull here. Shouldn't wonder if she's dull too, poor little girl."

Then he went home and cut a glove in pieces and sewed the pieces together, slowly but solidly as soldiers and sailors do sew. So that when, two nights later, the claws and the voice of Alcibiades roused Judy from sleep—her aunt most fortunately slept on the other side of the house—she found, after the first rapturous hug of reunion, a something under the hand that caressed the neck of Alcibiades.

The gaslight in her own room defined the something as a bag of leather, the tan leather of which gentlemen's gloves are made. There was a bit of worn strap hanging below it. Within was a note.

"A thousand thanks for bringing him home. If he should run away again, please let me know. And don't trouble to send him back. I'll call for him, if I may.

"Richard Graeme."

Judy would very much have liked to let Captain Graeme call, but there are such things as aunts.

She tied another note to the "cur's" collar and wired him once more to the Paragon House railings. The note said:

"It's no use. He can bite through leather. Do use a chain."

Next time Alcibiades returned he dragged a half yard of fine chain. It was neatly filed, but Judy was a woman and the detail escaped her.

That morning she and Alcibiades slept late, the dressing-bell was ringing as she

woke.

The cook helped; the Aunt most fortunately had a luncheon engagement with a Tabby in Sidcup. Alcibiades being promised a walk later, consented to wait, trifling with a bone, in silence and the coal cellar. At eleven Judy rewarded his patience. She went out with him, and somehow it seemed wise to put on a pleasant-coloured dress, and one's best furs and one's prettiest hat.

"I am afraid I shall see him," she told herself; "but," she added, "I am much more afraid that my aunt will see Alcibiades." On the edge of the Heath she met him. "Here's the dear dog," she said. "Oh, can't you find a stronger chain?"

"I'll try," said he. "What a ripping day, isn't it? Oh, are you going straight back? I wish we'd met anywhere but at a bazaar."

"So do I," she said heartfeltly, and caressed the now careless Aberdeen: it was at a bazaar that she had had to sell that angel.

"Mayn't I walk home with you?" he said. And she could not think of any polite way of saying no, though she knew just how terrible Alcibiades would make the final parting.

Next morning the chain dragged by Alcibiades was slightly thicker; it also was filed, and this too Judy failed to notice. Early as it was she did not go out in the mackintosh but in something simple and blue, with kingfisher's wings in her hat.

The morning was thinly bright. Alcibiades saw a cat and chased it towards Morden College just as Judy met Captain Graeme. It was, for her, impossible not to follow the "cur." And how could the Captain do otherwise than follow, too? And if two people walk together it is churlish not to talk.

Next day the chain was thicker, the hour propitious, and the walk longer; that was the day when she found out that he had known her father in South Africa.

The days passed with a delightful monotony. The Aunt and her pet Tabbies all day,

a sound sleep, an early waking, a heavenly meeting with Alcibiades at the back door, the restoring of him to his master. And every day the chain grew heavier, the walks longer, the talks more interesting and more intimate.

It was very wrong, of course, but what was the girl to do? You cannot be rude to a man who is saving your dog, your darling, from rat-poisons, rivers and ropes. And if dogs will break chains, why—so will girls.

It was on Christmas Day that the spell was shattered. Judy awoke at the accustomed time, but no welcome whine, no pathetic scrabble of eager paws broke the respectable stillness of the Aunt's house. Judy listened. She even crept down to the side gate. A feeling of misery, of real physical faintness came over her. Alcibiades was not there! he had not come! He had, indeed, forgotten her.

The conviction that the master of Alcibiades would be the last to appreciate the new attachment of his dog comforted her a little; but for all that the day was grey, life seemed well-nigh worthless. Judy now had leisure to reconsider her position, and she was not pleased with herself. It was in the thick of the Christmas beef that the thought awoke.

"He is tired of meeting me; he has locked Alcibiades up. If he hadn't, the darling must have come." Since this solution left Alcibiades without a stain upon his faithful character, it ought to have been comforting, but it wasn't.

She felt her cheeks flush.

"Good gracious, child," said the Aunt, "what are you turning that curious purple colour for? If the fire's too much for you, let Mary put the screen to the back of your chair, for goodness' sake."

When the plum-pudding's remains had passed away and the perfunctory dessert was over the Aunt retired to rest.

Judy was left to face the grey afternoon alone. She sat staring into the fire till her eyes ached. She felt very lonely, very injured, very forlorn. There was a footfall on

the steps—a manly tread; a knock at the door—a kind of I have-a-perfect-right-to-knock-here-if-I-like sort of knock.

Judy jumped up to look in the glass and pat her hair, for no one but an idiot could have helped knowing who it was that stepped and knocked.

He came in.

“Alone?” said he. “What luck! I asked for the Aunt. Meant to say Friend of your Father’s, and all that. But this is better. Judy, I couldn’t stand it.... She’s coming. I can hear her.”

There was indeed a sound of stout house boots trampling overhead, of drawers being pulled out, of wardrobe doors being opened.

“I wish everything was different,” said he; “but, oh Judy, darling, do say yes! say it now, this minute; and then when she comes down I can tell her we’re engaged—see?”

“It’s all very well,” said Judy, two hours later, when, with the licence of an engaged young lady, she said good-bye to her lover at the front door. “You say you do—and—and yes, of course, I’m glad—but Alcibiades doesn’t love me any more.”

“Doesn’t he? you wait till I bring him to-morrow!”

“But he never came this morning.”

“Poor little beast! Judy, the fact is I’ve gone on making the chain heavier and heavier, and this morning—well, it was too much for him. He couldn’t drag it all the way: it was a regular ship’s cable, don’t you know? I came up with him at Blackheath Station, and he was so done I had to carry him all the way home in my arms. He’s quite all right again now; I left him at home, tied to the fire-irons in my bedroom.”

“Then he does love me, after all,” said Judy.

“Well, he’s not the only one,” said the Captain.

And at that moment came from the other side of the front door the familiar whine, the well-known scratching mingled with strange clanking noises.

Next instant three happy people were embracing on the door-mat amid the sobs of Judy, the laughter of her lover, the yelps of Alcibiades, and the deafening rattle of a poker, a pair of tongs, and half a shovel.

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Transcriber's Note

Punctuation has been standardized. Hyphenation has been retained as it appears in the original publication. The following changes were made to the original text:

Page 21, "candelabre" changed to "candelabra" (two brass twenty-lighted candelabra)

Page 32, duplicate "the" removed from text (Half the students)

Page 39, "accordian" changed to "accordion" (her accordion-pleated skirts)

Page 99, "stammererd" changed to "stammered" (stammered half a word)

Page 197, "her's" changed to "hers" (he was hers sincerely)

Page 276, duplicate "in" removed (Can you call in an hour?)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAN AND MAID ***

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