

Lady Charing
is
Cross

A Play in Three Acts

Gordon Daviot
[Elizabeth Mackintosh]
1954

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Lady Charing is Cross

Gordon Daviot (Elizabeth Mackintosh)

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CHARACTERS

LADY CHARING

LADY TILlicOUNTRY

LORD CHARING

NEIL TUMMEL

CRIPPS, *a maid*

VICTOR, *a footman*

SCENE. *The first scene takes place in a part of LADY CHARING'S bedroom; for the rest of the play the action takes place in the small drawing-room at Charing House, W.1.*

TIME. *The middle of Edward the Seventh's reign.*

ACT I

SCENE I

It is a May morning in London, and we are looking at part of LADY CHARING'S bedroom at Charing House. The house is situated in a Mayfair Square, and the bedroom is on the second floor. Through the open window at the back one can see the tops of the trees in the sunlight, and from the square below there comes, since this is the reign of Edward VII, the faint clip-clop of horses' hooves and the purr of tyred wheels.

At the dressing-table, clad in a ravishing creation which she calls a wrapper, is LADY CHARING. Her hair is in the process of being arranged for the day by her maid, CRIPPS.

LADY CHARING was forty last month, but no one remembers the fact; partly because her beauty has an ageless quality, and partly because she is less a person than an institution. For more than ten years now Charing House has been the social centre of London. No climber 'arrives' until his name appears on the Charing House list; no fallen idol is 'cut' until his name is dropped from that list. There are those who say that LADY CHARING'S taste is a little too catholic; but these, no doubt, are such as have had to wait too long in the crush on the magnificent stairs when the Charings 'receive'. Neither the catholicity nor the crush prevents them from being on the stairs next time.

CRIPPS, too, is ageless. She comes of five generations of 'service', and in her own time she has been passed on from one generation to another, like a christening robe or any other valuable family possession. Occasionally she is sent to take lessons from a fashionable hairdresser. She translates her new knowledge with tact and success to her mistress's head; but her own hair is done as she first learned to do it thirty-odd years ago.

LADY CHARING (breaking the comfortable silence while she watches CRIPPS'S activities in the mirror) Well, Cripps, was it a happy reunion last night in the housekeeper's room?

CRIPPS Very pleasant, my lady.

LADY C. Have you left any of us a rag of reputation?

CRIPPS (*quietly reproving*) We are interested, my lady, but never censorious.

LADY C. And what have you gathered of interest? (*Referring to a lock of hair*) A little farther back, that.

CRIPPS Like that, my lady?

LADY C. That is better. Well, what is the gossip?

CRIPPS No less than five Americans have taken houses in the Square for the season.

LADY C. (*not particularly interested*) Oh? All railways?

CRIPPS I understand that none of them are railways, my lady.

LADY C. (*genuinely inquiring*) Dear me! What else do Americans make money in?

CRIPPS Beginning from the north end of the Square, Number Three is tintacks, Number Ten rubber goods, Number Seventeen toothpaste, Number Twenty-two lumber—that is something to do with wood, not second-hand things, my lady—and Twenty-eight is something new called Advertising.

LADY C. Are the Broomes not opening Twenty-eight this year, then?

CRIPPS No, my lady. They married the last daughter off at a Christmas ball.

LADY C. What, the fat one? What a little mistletoe will do!

CRIPPS They say it was the punch, my lady.

LADY C. What other news?

CRIPPS Lady Trundle has been stealing umbrellas again.

LADY C. The woman never had any sense.

CRIPPS It is said to be involuntary, my lady.

LADY C. (*not listening*) Imagine acquiring anything as convenient as kleptomania and squandering it on umbrellas.

CRIPPS They have engaged a gentleman to go round after her and pay for anything she takes.

LADY C. A gentleman?

CRIPPS The younger son of an impoverished baronet, I understand, my lady.

LADY C. (*having considered it*) Oh, well. I suppose it is no worse than chasing sheep in Australia. What else?

CRIPPS Old Sir Archibald is breaking up.

LADY C. Poor dear. His memory, is it?

CRIPPS No, my Lady, he has taken to carrying parcels in the street.

LADY C. I hardly think that is an infallible sign of decrepitude. In the winter one does things, even in town, that one would not dream of doing during the season.

[*There is a knock on the bedroom door: CRIPPS goes to the door and consults with the knocker, while LADY CHARING picks up a buffer and idly polishes her nails.*]

CRIPPS Lady Tillicoultry is downstairs, my lady, and wants to know if she may come up.

LADY C. But of course! Of course! (*As CRIPPS gives the message and comes away from the door*) I wonder what Poppy is doing out of bed at ten of a morning.

CRIPPS She is no doubt glad to have you back, my lady.

LADY C. No doubt. But it is a gladness that could be contained until luncheon. (*After a second's pause*) There was no gossip about the Tillicoultlys, was there? (*The accent is on the name, and she obviously expects the answer to be 'No'*)

CRIPPS (*a little shocked*) Oh, no, my lady. Certainly not. One would as soon expect gossip about our own household.

LADY C. (*having considered it a moment longer*) Perhaps she just had cramp.

[*With a sketchy knock at the door, LADY TILlicoultry comes in, and crosses to kiss her friend.*]

LADY T. Millie, my dear, how nice to have you back.

LADY C. (*genuinely glad to see her; holding out a left hand, presenting her cheek for the kiss*) Poppy! How are you? You are looking radiant.

LADY T. What a wonderful wrapper. How are you, Cripps?

CRIPPS I am very well, my lady, thank you. (*She provides a chair for the newcomer*)

[*LADY TILlicoultry—Venetia Mary Violet Graham-Grant-Moffat, Countess of Tillicoultry—is a year younger than her friend, but looks a little older. Her clothes, down to the last glove button, are as elegant as anything worn by the mistress of Charing House, but they have an odd air of having been put on by accident. Even her very fashionable and becoming hat is not quite straight.*]

[LADY T. *sinks into the chair that CRIPPS has supplied, which is placed so that the two women can see each other in the mirror.*]

LADY T. I know this is an absurd hour for anyone but the butcher's boy to call, but if I waited till luncheon there would be a dozen people and I would never see you again alone until August.

LADY C. (*dispassionately*) Your wig is crooked.

LADY T. (*equally matter-of-fact, putting up her hands preparatory to correcting the slant*) Which way?

LADY C. The usual way.

LADY T. (*adjusting it without looking in the mirror; equably*) Cosmo says that if I don't get a new wig he will acquire a mistress. I wish he would. No woman should have to endure the attentions of a devoted husband after eleven years of matrimony.

LADY C. Why don't you go back to your own hair? It must have grown by now.

LADY T. Oh, I could never endure to go through that every morning. (*She indicates CRIPPS' administrations*) If one must have measles one might as well get some advantage from it.

LADY C. You would make a profit out of Satan. Why did you want to see me alone?

LADY T. Because you are my best friend and I am in trouble. (*She sounds not at all perturbed*)

LADY C. Bills, bile, or blackmail?

LADY T. It's Kilcrannock.

LADY C. Kilcrannock! Why waste a May morning in London worrying about a Scottish county?

LADY T. It is not the county; it's the constituency. Didn't you read any papers in Nice?

LADY C. (*only half-serious*) Why should one? Nothing important happens in England when I am out of it.

LADY T. You'd be surprised what can happen in Scotland!

LADY C. The by-election, was it? What went wrong?

LADY T. They have elected the Socialist creature!

LADY C. But I thought young Whatshisname was all ready to step into old

Brigham's shoes when he died?

LADY T. So did everyone else. That is what went wrong! Everyone was so sure that no one bothered to vote. So the Socialist creature sailed in.

LADY C. (*half-amused*) Dear me! That must be a shock for a Tory stronghold like Kilcrannock.

LADY T. The situation is quite appalling. Nothing like that has happened to the Tillicoultrys in all their hundreds of years in Scotland.

LADY C. It serves you right for owning any part of the benighted country.

LADY T. Is it my fault that Charles the Second had an evening off in Perth? Don't be so detached, Millie. You must help me.

LADY C. Help you?

LADY T. One cannot allow oneself to be represented by someone so unrepresentable.

LADY C. What do you propose to do about it?

LADY T. Now that the creature is here in town his habits can be judiciously—supervised.

LADY C. Are you suggesting blackmail?

LADY T. (*indignant*) Certainly not! The creature has never done a wrong thing in all his stupid life.

LADY C. Then what *do* you suggest?

LADY T. I thought that you might, so to speak, take the rough off him.

LADY C. *I!*

LADY T. You know: give him tips about ties, and weed the grosser misconceptions from his mind.

LADY C. (*drawling*) My dear good Poppy! May I ask why you do not 'take the rough off' for yourself?

LADY T. How can I? We are not on speaking terms. I shall have to bow, of course, when we meet on the same platform. When I open bazaars and things. But we cannot have any converse. He objects to us even more than we do to him.

LADY C. (*silkily*) And you think he would not object to me?

LADY T. Well, you are a Liberal, and therefore of no consequence politically. It would not, I mean, be 'crossing the floor' to accept your hospitality. And you are, after all, Millicent Charing.

LADY C. Thank you, my dear.

LADY T. Has anyone ever refused an invitation to Charing House?

LADY C. Not that I can remember. So you think your wild man might put up with me? And can you tell me why I should be bored by having a piece of original conglomerate dumped in my drawing-room?

LADY T. But you would not be bored. You *like* creatures. Even if someone found him there, no one would think it odd. Everyone expects you to be a little promiscuous.

LADY C. My dear Poppy!

LADY T. Socially speaking, of course.

[LADY CHARING, *her hair-dressing finished, steps out of her wrapper, and is assisted into her morning toilette by CRIPPS.*]

LADY C. What is he called, your creature?

LADY T. Neil Tummel.

LADY C. (*puzzled*) Tumble as in fall?

LADY T. No, as in the river. T-u-m-m-e-l.

LADY C. (*without emotion*) Uncouth. I cannot do it.

LADY T. Oh, please, Millie. Pretty please. I do not ask for miracles. Just a corner off here and there, and a new suit or so. (*As this produces no immediate answer*) I promise you he is no duller than that Theosophist woman. Or than that pianist boy you took up last season.

LADY C. (*defending her choice without heat*) Stanislaus was a Pole, and amusing, and an artist. You ask me to put up with a Scot who is a politician and a reformer. It cannot be done. (*After a pause filled with the exigencies of dressing*) It's that *worthy* streak in the Scots that makes them so unbearable. If they were utterly damnable like the Irish, everyone would begin finding excuses for them.

[*A light tap at the door, and the door opens a little.*]

LORD C. (*off*) May I come in?

LADY C. Oh, good morning, Gussie.

[LORD CHARING *comes in. He is a kind little man, considerably older than the wife he still adores. If he had married a plain little woman with negative tastes he might have had the energy to give up the social life which puzzles and tires him and to retire to the country existence*

which he loves. But having acquired as a partner one of the great beauties of the day, he has resigned himself, not unhappily, to being the tail of a comet.]

LORD C. (*crossing to his wife and kissing the proffered cheek*) Good morning, my dear.

LADY C. How is the lumbago?

LORD C. Oh, gone, gone. Poppy, my dear. (*He shakes hands with her*) How nice to see you after all those months. How was the winter in Scotland?

LADY T. Wintry and Scottish.

LORD C. (*gallantly*) Better for the complexion than the Riviera, I dare say. How is Cosmo?

LADY T. Having his catarrh. On the first Sunday in May every year Cosmo has catarrh.

LORD C. Nothing if not a good Conservative. And the children? Well, I hope?

LADY T. (*making a little noise of qualified assent*) I doubt if we should have sent Marjorie to that school.

LORD C. Not in trouble, is she?

LADY T. Not exactly. Unpopular, I gather. She was asked to write an essay: Would she rather be beautiful or good? She said she would rather be beautiful and repent.

LORD C. Dear Marjorie. Great favourite of mine. You have a nice family, Poppy.

LADY T. I have done my duty. Two sons to be heirs, and two daughters to make alliances.

LORD C. You don't pull any wool over my eyes. You dote on your little brood—and rightly.

LADY C. (*continuing his thought, without malice, and without pausing in the details of her dressing*) Now Millicent never remembers that she has a family.

LORD C. (*hastily disclaiming his subconscious thought, and unaware that he has had it*) Oh, nonsense, Millie, my dear. I have never known you forget a birthday of either of them.

LADY C. If I didn't know you so well, Gussie, I might suspect you of irony. As it is, I will not have you burning incense under Poppy's nose right in front of my eyes. There is no enormity of which the woman is not capable. Do you know what she came hot-foot to suggest? That I adopt her Kilcrannock socialist and shake the fleas out of him.

LORD C. (*amused*) And you, of course, are going to.

LADY C. (*her attention caught*) What makes you think that?

LORD C. Am I wrong?

LADY C. You overrate my amiability.

LORD C. It was your curiosity I banked on, my dear.

LADY C. (*without heat*) Don't be absurd, Augustus. I am the least curious woman in London. Only last week some magazine said that I had 'an almost masculine indifference to tattle'.

LORD C. Oh, tattle—yes.

LADY C. Well, then?

LORD C. But you do like to discover (*he looks for a phrase*) what makes people tick.

LADY C. (*with the ghost of a snort*) I know what makes Mr Neil Tummel tick. Ambition, vanity, and a Calvinistic love of interference. I see no reason to give him either tea or attention.

LADY T. There's me.

LADY C. You?

LADY T. Am I not a good reason?

LADY C. It is no great hardship to share a platform with someone, even if he does look like the wrath of God.

LADY T. But it is not only platforms; it's Westminster; everything! The member for Kilcrannock. I shall die of shame.

LADY C. I don't expect you'll die of anything. You'll probably talk your way out of even that. I wouldn't be surprised if St Peter sent you home in his own barouche.

LADY T. Make her be sympathetic, Gussie.

LADY C. The first time I met you, at the age of six, you got out of eating bread and butter by making your nannie heat the milk and pour it over the bread and butter so that it made a pudding, and you have been getting out of things ever since. It is time that you kissed the rod.

LADY T. (*in something approaching a wail*) My dear, not when the rod is six feet of pepper-and-salt tweed, with a shocking accent, no manners, and the most alarming ideas!

LORD C. (*referring to the thing she has missed out*) It would seem that his morals are above suspicion.

LADY T. Above rubies, my dear Gussie, above rubies. A monument of God-fearing fearsomeness.

LORD C. It might be interesting to meet Mr—— (*As she supplies the name*) Tummel, and find out exactly what he plans to do with us.

LADY T. Do with us?

LORD C. I take it he has plans for us. What I would like to know is whether the plan is capital—that is to say, a piece of rope and a lamp-post—or whether he would be content to see me working a small-holding. If he could really arrange that I spent the rest of my life in the country with my pigs, I would become his earnest disciple tomorrow.

LADY T. I forgot to ask for the pigs.

LORD C. Oh, they're nicely, thank you, nicely. Teme Valley Irene is going to sweep the board at the Five Counties Show in June. (*To his wife*) It is the 25th, by the way, Millie. You will see that we have nothing that will need me at the top of the stairs about then?

LADY C. The 25th. I shall remember.

LORD C. If Mr Tummel insisted on small-holdings I would never have to stand at the top of those stairs again.

LADY C. If he hanged you, you wouldn't either. I have to stand at the top of the stairs too.

LORD C. Yes, my dear, but you have a moral support that I lack.

LADY C. Support?

LORD C. No one says about me: Isn't he looking radiantly lovely tonight!

LADY C. (*she casts him a smile for that*) Why don't you get Augustus to civilise your monster for you?

LADY T. Oh, Gussie would be no use.

LADY C. You don't consider him a civilising influence?

LADY T. Can you imagine Gussie telling the creature that his tie is all wrong?

LORD C. If it is a question of Mr Tummel's wearing apparel, I beg to be excused. I hold that it is the inalienable right of every free man to choose his own ties.

LADY T. (*with a lift of her palms*) You see! No public spirit!

LADY C. Ah, well. Even Crusader blood grows thin after twenty generations.

LORD C. (*with his usual gentle amiability*) A damned interfering set of rascals.

LADY T. (*reproving*) They had faith and zeal, my dear Gussie.

LORD C. I sometimes think that all they had was high blood-pressure.

LADY C. Or domestic trouble. (*Coming to think of it*) I may have been wrong about your Mr Tummel. It may not, after all, have been his Calvinistic blood that sent him on his socialist crusade. He may have a shrew of a wife.

LADY T. He has neither wife nor an alibi.

LORD C. Just a natural inclination to sin.

LADY T. (*tartly*) Just a gift of the gab.

LORD C. (*preparing to go*) The Commons are going to be entertained, it seems. I wish something like Mr Tummel would relieve the awful tedium of the House of Lords.

LADY T. You may not have to suffer the tedium much longer. He is going to abolish you. He is going to abolish both of you.

LADY C. (*arrested in action like a pointer*) Abolish me?

LADY T. I take it you are 'the bedizened society women who make charity a pretext for decking themselves with gauds and aping the manners of the playhouse, what time'—what was it?—'what time men slave in pit and foundry to provide their finery, and their starving children cry in the gutters'.

LORD C. (*simply*) Good gracious!

LADY C. (*slowly*) My dear Poppy! I don't believe it. Nobody talks like that nowadays. It went out with Knox.

LADY T. There were better bits than that, but I remember that one because it was Cosmo's favourite.

LADY C. (*still slowly*) Dear me. It seems that Mr Tummel really does need educating, quite badly.

LADY T. (*aware of the nibble and playing the fish*) It is sad that you won't do anything about him; but then, of course, he might have refused to have anything to do with you, mightn't he? (*She makes it a statement, not a question*)

LADY C. You make me sound like an importunate parlour-maid.

LADY T. I expect those gauds stick in his throat. I wish they would choke the creature. What is a gaud, exactly?

LADY C. You think that if I invited the man to Charing House he would refuse my invitation? (*Considering it*) That *would* be a refreshing thing in my life.

LADY T. (*'daring' her on to it*) To be snubbed by a little Scotch nobody?

LADY C. It would be no sensation to be snubbed by a King. I suppose I couldn't use you as a reference?

LADY T. (*getting up to go; the fish practically on the grass*) Not if you want to make an impression. Are you going my way, Gussie? I can give you a lift.

LORD C. I am going round to the Club, but I think I had better walk, thank you. It is so easy to lose the use of one's legs in Town.

LADY C. (*in the unaccented tones of one resuming a former subject*) What was it you wanted done with Mr Tummel?

LADY T. (*matching the careless tone*) Oh, just (*she waves a hand for a phrase*) the bristles made a little less stubbly.

LADY C. (*as one accepting an instruction*) I see.

LADY T. (*going*) There is a yellow suit he wears that is my particular bane.

LADY C. (*startled*) Yellow?

LADY T. Well, a sort-of-mustard tweed thing. If you could get rid of that you would be doing the country a service.

LADY C. I shall make a note of it.

LADY T. You seem to think that he will come.

LADY C. I know he will.

LADY T. What makes you so sure?

LADY C. He will want to preach at me.

LADY T. You will be careful, Millicent, won't you?

LADY C. Careful?

LORD C. I don't want you carrying a candle through the City clad in a shift.

LADY C. If there is to be penance in this affair it is not Millicent Charing who will do it. (*There is an edge to that that has not been apparent in her light exchanges about references*)

LADY T. Well, my dear, I go. Let me know if the creature accepts.

LADY C. Are you lunching at home, Augustus?

LORD C. No, with Archie. He has a man from India he wants me to meet; the man who did that irrigation scheme. Watered a whole province. Wonderful.

LADY T. Au revoir, my dear. (*Pausing for a last word*) Oh, he has a frightful habit of saying Uh-huh. Perhaps you could do something about that.

LADY C. You aren't expecting me to make him into a Tory for you, are you?

LADY T. No; I am hoping that you'll make him a Liberal. Then he will be defeated at the first General Election.

LADY C. Your wig is crooked.

[LADY TILlicouLTRY *puts up her hands matter-of-factly to straighten it as she goes out with* LORD CHARING.]

LADY C. Has Miss Mair come, do you know, Cripps?

CRIPPS I expect so, my lady. It is half-past ten.

LADY C. Send a message down that the first free tea-time in my engagement book is to be given to a Mr Neil Tummel. Tummel as in the river: T-u-m-m-e-l. (*To herself*) Did anyone ever hear anything so uncouth?

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The small drawing-room at Charing House ten days later. The room is not part of the magnificent suite used for formal entertaining. It is a friendly and charming place, its impressiveness tempered by its obvious air of everyday use.

L. is the fireplace, and beyond it the door to the landing. Back, is the main window, looking out on the square; and down extreme R. is a small side-window looking out on one of the streets leading out of the square. Both windows have balconies. At the smaller window is a desk, half-sideways, so that the light falls from the writer's right front.

Since the room is on the floor below Lady Charing's bedroom, the trees that were mere tree-tops before are now a green forest outside. The room is full of their green light.

It is between four and five o'clock.

In a high-backed chair in the big window LORD CHARING is sitting reading a newspaper. All one can see are his head, his feet, and the newspaper. His chair is turned away from the door, and is of course well beyond it, so that anyone opening the door sees nothing but an empty room.

After a moment there is a murmur of voices, the door opens, and a FOOTMAN shows in NEIL TUMMEL, bows and goes.

NEIL TUMMEL is twenty-eight, tall but clumsily made; his profile excellent but dull, his eyes deep-set but too close together; his chin aggressive, but his mouth pettish and stubborn-weak. He is the owner of what is now known as an inferiority complex, but so deeply seated is it and so unsuspected (even by himself) that no vestige of it is apparent.

Both NEIL himself and the world in general would be surprised to know that he was not supremely sure of himself; in fact, neither would believe it for a moment.

His clothes are militantly non-conformist. He is wearing the famous yellow suit. It is, soberly speaking, not yellow at all, but it is sufficiently remarkable in a London drawing-room, a dirty pepper-and-salt in colour, and in texture reminiscent of a potato-sack.

Since he, like the FOOTMAN, takes the room to be empty, he advances a step or

two and stands irresolutely. He begins to eye the room, and presently his eye arrives at LORD CHARING. He is startled. He clears his throat to draw attention to his presence.

LORD CHARING, *startled in his turn, looks round the wing of his chair.*

LORD C. (*getting up hastily*) Dear me! I had no idea there was anyone—Victor must have thought the room was empty. I have usually gone to the Club by this time. Won't you——?

NEIL My name is Tummel. Neil Tummel.

LORD C. Oh, yes. How d'you do. Won't you——?

NEIL You'll have heard of me.

LORD C. Yes, yes, of course. Poppy told me about you.

NEIL (*repressive*) Poppy?

LORD C. Yes, an old friend of the family.

NEIL (*coldly*) I don't know anyone called Poppy. I was referring to my being the new Member for Kilcrannock.

LORD C. Ah, yes. The by-election. Quite an achievement. Won't you sit down? I expect you've called to see my wife.

NEIL (*in a tone which implies that LORD CHARING may suspect him of trying to sell something*) I was invited to tea by Lady Charing.

LORD C. Yes, yes. She will be here any moment. She is very busy over this Hospital affair. A committee is raging in the billiard-room at this moment. One of those historical pageants, and everyone wanting to be Queen Elizabeth. (*He suddenly remembers NEIL'S expressed opinion of charity dressings-up, and his never very fluent small-talk dries up completely*) Victor will have told her that you are here. (*Making an effort, since NEIL seems to be making none*) It is good to see the trees in the square green again, isn't it? It almost consoles one for living in town.

NEIL I like them bare.

LORD C. (*trying again, indicating the paper he has been reading*) I see that India chap got a decoration at the Palace this morning. That was a wonderful job. Ten years' work and his health gone. But what a thing! What a thing to look back on. A whole province saved from famine; saved for all time. It makes one envious.

NEIL (*disappointed that the new Member for Kilcrannock seems of no*

account and some unknown from India so admirable) I can't see that ten years on a dam in India is any more praiseworthy than ten years in the slums of Glasgow.

LORD C. (*genuinely interested*) Is that what you did?

NEIL (*at a disadvantage*) No. No. But I know the slums, of course.

LORD C. (*attempting a little joke*) When a man dies of thirst in Glasgow, I understand it's through drinking Red Biddy.

NEIL Neither the Glasgow slums nor Red Biddy is a joking matter.

LORD C. (*beginning to lose heart*) No. No, I expect not. (*As a last hope*) Know anything about pigs?

NEIL *Pigs?*

LORD C. (*humbly*) Yes.

NEIL (*warmly*) If you're at a loss for matter, Lord Charing, my favourite subject is Aristotle. (*It isn't. His favourite subject is NEIL TUMMEL, and matters allied thereto. But Aristotle is good enough to use as counter to a man who talks down to him to the extent of pigs*)

LORD C. (*surprised and charmed*) No! Really? What an extraordinary thing!

NEIL (*offended*) I fail to see anything extraordinary about it.

LORD C. But I find so few people who share my——They think it rather odd, you know. So you are an admirer of Aristotle?

NEIL Who isn't?

LORD C. Well, I have known men who found fault with his form. Personally I think it cannot be more satisfying. Shall I tell you something? When speeches grow too boring to be borne, I think about Aristotle. Extraordinarily comforting. Such an intelligent creature, too.

NEIL (*a little surprised*) Who?

LORD C. Aristotle. His sire, Arcturus, was fine to look at, but sottish, distinctly sottish. But Aristotle, there is a boar!

NEIL A bore! I thought you admired him.

LORD C. I do. Extravagantly.

NEIL Then how can he bore you?

LORD C. But—— (*Realising*) Oh! (*Deflated*) I'm afraid we are talking at cross-purposes, you know. You are talking about the Greek philosopher, aren't you?

NEIL Certainly.

LORD C. I am talking about a pig.

NEIL (*staggered*) You mean, *you* are interested in pigs?

LORD C. Yes. Yes, I'm afraid it is all I *am* interested in. I was hoping that you knew something about them.

NEIL (*who knows something about practically anything*) Oh, I know plenty about them. My grandfather kept pigs all his life.

LORD C. (*brightening again*) What breed?

NEIL Oh, just pigs.

LORD C. (*finally deflated*) Oh.

[*There is a slight pause. NEIL begins to simmer again. He comes from circles, both domestic and social, where he is the centre of interest. Being taken for granted he finds intolerable.*]

LORD C. (*descendant of Crusaders, coming back for more punishment*) I hope you are comfortable in London?

NEIL I'll get used to it, I expect. I have a Scotch landlady, so things might be worse.

LORD C. Ah. I had a Scotch nurse when I was a small boy. She taught me to knit, once when I was ill. Red garters, I remember. (*As NEIL ignores this triviality*) Tell me, Mr—er—Mr Tummel, I am greatly interested in your—in your policy. I don't know what that policy may be, but it would be interesting to know just what——

[*The door opens and LADY CHARING comes in, followed by VICTOR, the footman, with tea.*]

LADY C. (*greeting NEIL*) Mr Tummel. How delightful of you to come. Forgive me, won't you, for having kept you waiting. I don't need to tell you what committees are like. And when I tell you that I am not only chairman but holder of the casting vote, you will realise how miraculous it is that I am still in one piece.

LORD C. Is everyone in one piece?

LADY C. Yes. Babs Dacre is a little frayed round the edges, but at last sighting was still travelling under her own steam.

LORD C. Well, I shall leave you to——

LADY C. Won't you stay and have some tea, Augustus?

LORD C. Thank you, no, my dear. I should have gone some time ago. Those evening papers that come in the afternoon are a great snare. (*Shaking hands with*

NEIL) I am glad to have met you, Mr Tummel. Some day we must have a talk, and you can tell me about that policy of yours. (To LADY C.) Is it the Austrian Embassy tonight?

LADY C. Yes. Ten o'clock. We'll dine very sharp, if you don't mind, Gussie.

LORD C. I don't know why we dine at all. They give you marvellous food at that place. All I have ever been able to do with it is look.

[*He goes sadly out, ushered by VICTOR, who has been dismissed by LADY CHARING.*]

LADY C. (*beginning to dispense tea*) Ah, what peace. I hope my husband has been entertaining you?

NEIL He did his best.

LADY C. (*raising her eyebrows*) I gather that that was not enough. Are you not knowledgeable about pigs?

NEIL Even pigs have to be aristocratic here.

LADY C. (*apparently unaware of this last remark*) Indian or China?

NEIL Oh, just tea, thank you. Thick. I had better tell you straight away, Lady Charing, that the only thing that brought me here was curiosity.

LADY C. (*blandly*) How nice. I knew we should find something in common. Besides committees, I mean. Though I must say committees are a great bond. Have you ever sat on a Hospital Ball Pageant Committee, Mr Tummel?

NEIL That has not been one of my activities.

LADY C. Then I doubt if even you have known the full fury of committee life.

NEIL *Even I?*

LADY C. I understand that Socialists are great quarrellers. Among themselves, I mean.

NEIL No. Why should they be?

LADY C. I suppose, because when one is creating brave new worlds there is no limit to the variety. When one is merely making the best of this one, the choice is limited. But I am quite sure that ten Socialists fighting over ten quite different brave new worlds are lambs compared with the same number of women fighting over a charity pageant.

NEIL Why do you have a pageant, in the first place?

LADY C. It is good for trade. It is good for the hospital finances. And it gives all the

silly women in London a focus for their silliness.

NEIL Is that admirable?

LADY C. I think so. It keeps them faithful to their lovers. When you have fitted, and rehearsed, and thrown up your part daily for several weeks, there is little energy for much else. In extreme cases a lover has been known to carry over till next season.

NEIL (*in measured tones*) You're attempting to shock me.

LADY C. (*putting herself in the dock*) Am I? (*Finding against herself*) Yes.

NEIL It's no use.

LADY C. No, I suppose not. A Calvinistic mind must be a saturated solution of shock.

NEIL I never took chemistry.

LADY C. I mean, if one is shocked to the core by, say, the Continental Sunday, there can be no reaction to further shock, can there?

NEIL Your pageant shocks me a great deal more than your lovers.

LADY C. I am responsible for the pageant, Mr Tummel, but not for the private performances. What do you find so shocking about our pageant—apart from Mrs Tate in a stomacher, which you have not seen?

NEIL Lady Charing, does it not appal you that a woman in the West End is making you a fancy dress while some woman in the East End is half-naked?

LADY C. Not at all. The little woman who is making my dress supports a cripple mother and a schoolboy son. The only result of my not having the dress would be that four people instead of one would be half-naked. If I may borrow your exciting description.

NEIL But the State should support her invalid mother, and see to it that her work was productive. That she made things for the common good, not—not——

LADY C. Not gauds. I see. Ah, well, that will be something for you to do. (*Cheerfully*) Poor Rose! I hope she will enjoy making boots for the million as well as she does embroidering dresses for me. I hope they will *all* enjoy it.

NEIL Who are 'all'?

LADY C. All the people who are making money out of my pageant. The printers, the paper-makers, the bill-posters, the cooks, the waiters, the hair-dressers, the wig-makers, the gardeners, the bakers, the cabmen, the dancing-master. To say nothing of the little man who hires out the chairs. You will be kind to the little man who hires out chairs, won't you?

NEIL (*beginning a protest*) Lady Charing——

LADY C. I am sure that a well-run state will have all the chairs it wants, and he will be so lost. His whole life is in chairs. (*Having a thought*) Of course he may be dead by then. There is that possibility. How long do you think it will be before the state regulates breathing?

NEIL (*darkly*) Not so long as some people think. Society in its present form is cracking under our feet. You may think you're a benefactress, Lady Charing, but take it from me all you are is an economic outrage.

LADY C. It sounds horrid.

NEIL The people who produce the goods in this country want a share of the wealth that results. They aren't as ignorant as they used to be, they are asking questions, learning to combine, feeling their strength. They're on the move, I tell you. Men in the factory, the pit, and the yards. The working people of this country. The ferment's in them. Moving. Beginning to seethe. And what do you think the result of that is going to be?

LADY C. (*with a good imitation of a child being told a fairy-story*) What?

NEIL (*impressive*) Revolution.

LADY C. (*relaxed and matter-of-fact*) You may read economics, Mr Tummel, but I doubt if you read history. The people who make revolutions are the clerks. The middle-class malcontents. The lawyers without briefs, the writers without publishers, the climbers without cash. They lead me to the guillotine, and you to the wars, and bread goes up fivepence. That, my dear Mr Tummel, is revolution.

NEIL (*detached from his own concerns momentarily by this new view of her*) So history interests you?

LADY C. (*simply*) My dear Mr Tummel, I *am* history.

NEIL (*after a moment, leaning forward*) You may not believe it, Lady Charing, but so am I.

LADY C. (*considering him*) A Savonarola rather than a Caesar, I take it.

NEIL I'm not a second edition of anybody. I'm Neil Tummel.

LADY C. And in what role is Neil Tummel going to make history?

NEIL I am going to lead my people out of bondage.

LADY C. (*in a tone of surprise and disappointment*) Oh, you can't do that.

NEIL (*fiercely*) And why not, pray?

LADY C. That would make you merely a second Moses!

NEIL (*roused*) I am going to lead my people out of bondage if I am persecuted by every vested interest and laughed at by every Viscountess in the country.

LADY C. You wrong me, my dear Moses. I am greatly interested. I want to hear about this bondage and this persecution. Were you very poor as a child?

NEIL (*in his element*) My mother was a widow, and we were so poor that we had meat only once a week. She brought me up on milk and cabbage.

LADY C. What an excellent diet! Not much wonder you have such a good physique.

NEIL (*not sure whether to be annoyed that his pathos has miscarried or to be pleased at the compliment*) And when I went to college——

LADY C. You went to University?

NEIL I did.

LADY C. But I thought you were very poor.

NEIL Anyone can go to University in Scotland provided he has brains enough. My education didn't cost my mother a penny piece.

LADY C. Who paid for it? The State?

NEIL No. Bursaries. Scholarships. There's hundreds of them. People leave money to provide them.

LADY C. I see. Vested interests.

NEIL (*resenting the catch*) You could call them that, I suppose. (*Going back to the fascinating subject of his sufferings*) But there was food and clothes to provide. At college I lived on oatmeal. (*This is sheer imagination. It has been two generations since Scotch students brought their 'bag of meal' with them each term. But the tradition dies hard*)

LADY C. You lucky man!

NEIL Lucky?

LADY C. I adore oatmeal, but I was never allowed to eat it, because it was supposed to be bad for the complexion. *You* don't seem to have many spots.

NEIL (*definitely*) I haven't any. I don't suppose you can even imagine what it is like to face the same food day after day.

LADY C. (*cheerfully*) Oh, yes. I once lived for six weeks on nothing but bananas.

NEIL You were shipwrecked?

LADY C. No. Just a diet. It was supposed to be good for something or other. What did you do in the holidays?

NEIL I spent my holidays working on my uncle's croft.

LADY C. (*remembering*) I spent mine with my grandmother in a house smelling of bird-cages. There was nothing to do, and I shouldn't have been allowed to do it if there was. And when you left college?

NEIL I taught Junior English at Kiltrannock Academy.

LADY C. (*half-accusing, half-disappointed*) Then you are not a working-man at all?

NEIL My father was a blacksmith.

LADY C. But you say that honours shouldn't be hereditary, don't you? You can't take any credit for your father. You disappoint me, Mr Tummel. Here I was, all prepared to hear a tale of a starved and thwarted life. And what do I get? The account of a cossetting!

NEIL I? Cossetted?

LADY C. Practically tied up with blue ribbons. Compared with the freedom and consideration of your childhood, mine was a penal servitude. Are many of your party like you, by the way?

NEIL Like me?

LADY C. Men who have never produced goods to make wealth!

NEIL (*caught and annoyed*) I don't belong to any party. I'm an independent.

LADY C. But you managed to fight an election.

NEIL (*understanding the hint*) Some friends put up the money. (*Sliding away from this evidence of further 'cossetting'*) As a matter of fact, I went to see the regular Socialist crowd this morning. There was some talk of my joining them. They don't like Independents. But I decided against it.

LADY C. Too many Moseses?

NEIL They talked too much. I like to do the talking myself.

LADY C. I take it that your wife is a silent woman. Are you married, Mr Tummel?

NEIL (*his attention really arrested*) Did you not find out that I hadn't a wife before you asked me here?

LADY C. I beg your pardon?

NEIL Did you ask me here without my wife. I mean, without the wife I haven't got?

LADY C. Certainly.

NEIL (*full of offended virtue*) I wouldn't have accepted the invitation.

LADY C. Let me tell you something even more monstrous. I would also have invited your wife without you, if she had been the interesting one.

NEIL (*dropping the principle for the interest*) You find me interesting?

LADY C. Very. I could hardly wait to see this wild Caledonian from the North.

[NEIL, *who is charmed to be a wild Caledonian from the North, glows visibly.*]

LADY C. Is this your first visit to London?

NEIL Uh-huh. I've never been furth of Scotland till now.

LADY C. You must let me show you some of the lovely things.

NEIL (*who is feeling comfortable again*) On condition that you let me show you a slum.

LADY C. (*without emphasis*) No, *I'll* show you one. You won't know where to find the best ones.

NEIL (*staggered*) Do you?

LADY C. (*matter-of-fact*) Oh, yes. Before my marriage I used to work two days a week in the slums. I had a club for girls. And I used to help out sometimes at my aunt's crèche. But since I married I have had to be content with a hobby that takes less time.

NEIL (*struggling to recover lost ground*) A hobby! And what is it now? (*He tries to get a sneer into his voice but it is not very successful. He feels too much at sea*) Pageants?

LADY C. A cottage-hospital at Charing. It was my mother-in-law's creation, and I inherited it from her. Not so interesting as Rotherhithe, but it smells sweeter. What slum did you work in, Mr Tummel?

NEIL (*completely floored by the question; the only time he has ever worked in a slum was canvassing*) Well——

LADY C. (*having waited long enough for him to squirm*) Glasgow, was it?

NEIL (*snatching at the straw*) Yes, I can claim to know the Glasgow slums quite well. (*They are both aware of the prevarication*)

LADY C. It will be interesting for you to compare them with Cockney ones. And if you come with me you won't have things thrown at you.

NEIL (*trying to get his bearings and wondering vaguely how he*, NEIL TUMMEL,

has got himself into the situation where he is going to be vouched for in a slum by one of the hated aristocrats) Why should they throw things?

LADY C. They don't like snoopers.

NEIL But I'm a Member of Parliament, and a Socialist!

LADY C. The first is immaterial, and the second not immediately apparent. (*AS NEIL ponders this*) They might take you for an artist looking for copy.

NEIL (*scandalised*) An artist! Me! Why would they do that?

LADY C. Well—forgive me, but that is what the suit you are wearing would suggest.

NEIL You mean this suit makes me look like an artist?

LADY C. (*who likes artists*) I wouldn't go as far as that. It is the kind of suit that an artist might wear.

NEIL It's a good Scotch tweed.

LADY C. (*kindly*) I'm sure it is.

NEIL None of your Bradford shoddy. That's honest wool straight from the sheep's back and first time off the loom. (*Casting her a glance of contempt*) But perhaps the technicality of that is too much for you.

LADY C. (*gently*) Oh, no. I did a little hand-weaving once—as encouragement to a village industry.

NEIL (*pausing at that, longing to be caustic but deciding reluctantly to be gracious*) You're a much more knowledgeable woman than I had expected, Lady Charing.

LADY C. (*demurely*) Thank you.

NEIL I don't see why wearing a good bit of tweed should make one look like an artist.

LADY C. There is nothing derogatory in looking like a painter, is there?

NEIL It's not an impression I would like to make.

LADY C. Then I suggest that you cast your eye over your colleagues in the House, and pick out something that gives the required impression. The choice will be varied, though not, I'm afraid, sartorially excellent. You can't expect a body of men who habitually sleep in their clothes to look exactly natty.

NEIL Sleep in them? Where?

LADY C. On the House of Commons benches, of course.

NEIL (*grimly*) They won't sleep when I talk to them.

LADY C. No, I think perhaps they won't.

NEIL (*pausing to look at her a moment*) Does that mean you're impressed with me, or just that you think I've got a loud voice? (*For NEIL, this is tentative, not to say humble*)

LADY C. It means, Mr Tummel, that you are difficult to ignore.

NEIL (*considering it*) It's not exactly a *nice* attribute.

LADY C. No. It is a quality you share with Mount Everest and a boil on the neck. I suspect Moses had it too. He would never have been able to goad the Children of Israel into leaving Egypt if he had not been a bit of a gadfly.

NEIL (*scandalised*) Moses! But he *led* them out. Led them to freedom!

LADY C. That's the worst of you reformers. You know so little of human nature.

NEIL (*hotly*) I know that the fundamental desire of human nature is freedom.

LADY C. (*mildly*) It isn't. It's security. Freedom implies responsibility, and your average man hates responsibility like the devil. That is why he so often delegates it to such odd deputies. Anything to be rid of it. (*Her eye is frank and innocent; and, anyhow, NEIL has never thought of himself as odd*) Let me give you some more tea.

NEIL (*accusing*) Why do you hate reformers?

LADY C. I don't hate them. I merely distrust them.

NEIL Because they want to upset the world you know.

LADY C. No. They love to think that they are playing God, when all they are doing is playing old Harry. Did you take sugar? I forget.

NEIL (*takes sugar*) Lady Charing, what was your object in asking me here?

LADY C. Education.

NEIL (*justifying LADY CHARING'S gamble in telling the plain truth*) How can I educate you if you dislike me?

LADY C. But I don't dislike you, Mr Tummel. On the contrary. You remind me very strongly of a pet lamb I had once. A most endearing creature.

NEIL (*whose vision of himself is of a roaring lion*) A pet lamb?

LADY C. Very woolly, and earnest, and running round in circles, and butting its head into everything in sight.

NEIL (*swelling*) Lady Charing——

[The Curtain comes down on his protest.]

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE I

The Scene is the same as in Act I, Scene II; the small drawing-room at Charing House.

It is a night in June, and a reception is in progress.

The room is empty, but one can hear the distant strains of a string orchestra. The windows are open, and through the back one can be seen the blue summer night and the dark trees lit by the uncertain light of the lamps in the street. A log fire smoulders on the hearth. One has the impression that it is very late: early morning rather than night.

After a pause, filled with the distant music and the frou-frou of voices in the square, the door opens and LORD CHARING puts a wary head in. The room is, as he expected, empty, and he comes in, shutting the door behind him with a satisfied air. He is carrying a plate with a fork and some food on it. He comes down to the chair on the up side of the fireplace, and sits down with an air of relief. He is beginning in his deliberate way to consider the food on his plate when he remembers something. He gets up and fetches from under the cushion of a chair down L. what appears to be an agricultural weekly. He settles down happily with the food and the paper in his original chair, the paper on his knees and the plate in his hand. His knees and toes are turned inwards, and he looks rather like a small boy with an ice-cream. The orders he is wearing are incongruous.

Presently the door opens once more and LADY TILlicOUNTRY appears; jewelled, tiara-ed, and crooked-wigged as usual. She regards the unconscious GUSSIE with indulgent amusement.

LADY T. *(coming in and closing the door)* Gussie, you wicked creature. *(As he tries to get up)* No, don't move. You are a deserter and liable to be shot, but I am your ally. We can be shot together. *(Propping herself by LORD CHARING'S side on the narrow table that runs parallel to the fireplace)* Shall we be blindfolded, or shall we meet a deserter's desserts with our eyes open?

LORD C. *(relieved that it is only POPPY)* It is not desertion. Merely a strategical

retreat.

LADY T. (*looking at his plate*) I didn't see anything like that on the tables. Where did you get it?

LORD C. They keep it under the counter for me.

LADY T. What is it?

LORD C. Jellied eel.

LADY T. Really? Is it nice?

LORD C. Excellent.

[LADY TILlicOUNTRY *picks up a piece in finger and thumb, and tastes it.*]

LADY T. (*judicially*) I think it tastes rather like something that has been left out in the rain. (*Nevertheless she licks her fingers with no sign of distaste*) But perhaps I have had too much salmon. Each time I am landed with a bore I have another supper. I have had five suppers tonight, and a snack. The snack tried to borrow ten pounds from me. That Beamish creature. How does he manage to keep going, do you think?

LORD C. (*eating his jellied eel*) Lack of evidence.

LADY T. (*with a half-admiring, half-envious little sigh*) Ah, well, it has been the usual conspicuous success, hasn't it? Everything as smooth as a ballet. I've been watching Millie do this for ten years, and I still don't know how she does it. My parties look like a Sunday-school treat. Perhaps we have the wrong kind of staircase. I certainly have the wrong kind of profile. Talking of profiles, do you know who is here tonight?

LORD C. Everyone but the Shah of Persia.

LADY T. (*caustic for once*) I think I did see the Shah in a corner. No, Neil Tummel. Millie really has done a wonderful job on him. Even his dress-clothes looked as if they had been handed down rather than picked up. I wish his Kilcrannock friends could see him.

LORD C. Why?

LADY T. They don't put up any money to re-elect a man who wears a white tie in the evening.

LORD C. Dear me. I have always held that a man who wears a boiled shirt is an object for pity rather than blame. I shall be very glad to get out of mine. Why don't these people go? I sometimes think that the 'homeless' of London doesn't refer to the people on the Embankment at all.

LADY T. A great many have slipped away, but no one can go officially until the Balkans do.

LORD C. Most inconsiderate. Our own people left hours ago. Surely even in the Balkans royalty is taught when to go home.

LADY T. The trouble is, they're enjoying themselves.

LORD C. (*staggered*) Enjoying themselves!

LADY T. He has discovered Babs Dacre, and *she* has discovered the buffet. Even Millicent can't prise either of the couples apart. (*Her mind going back to MILLICENT'S achievements*) Gussie, would you say that Neil Tummel might turn his coat as well as change it?

LORD C. Shouldn't think so. A very bigoted young man. Why?

LADY T. He spent most of the evening talking to Lord Archibald.

LORD C. Did Archie appear to be listening?

LADY T. Raptly.

LORD C. Then he was probably reckoning how much he would have to pay his bookie on Monday.

LADY T. Oh, no; he was answering.

LORD C. Archie!

LADY T. He appeared to be greatly interested.

LORD C. Dear me. (*Reminiscent*) I tried to talk to the young man once, but he bit my head off. (*Considering it*) Of course, Archie *might* want him in the Liberal fold.

LADY T. Want the Tummel creature? Why?

LORD C. Oh, new blood. The party needs youth and enthusiasm. You must admit that your representative has been very noisy and conspicuous for a newcomer.

LADY T. He has been quite frightful.

LORD C. I expect Archie could use those qualities to Liberal advantage. What I don't see is what use the Liberals would be to Mr Tummel.

LADY T. They may be a dreary crowd of nonentities ...

LORD C. Thank you!

LADY T. ... But they *are* more respectable than the Socialists.

LORD C. I shouldn't say that respectability weighed greatly with Mr Tummel.

LADY T. He is probably tired of his soap-box, and wants to spread himself on a party platform.

LORD C. You Tories have been so long in office that we poor Liberals have almost forgotten what a platform looks like. We have nothing to offer a bright young man; office, honour, or employment.

LADY T. Bright young man! A foolish creature full of half-baked ideas and parrot phrases.

LORD C. (*mildly*) I like parrots. The only living creature gifted with human speech that is content to repeat exactly what it has heard without trying to make a good story out of it.

[*Enter* LADY CHARING. *She is radiantly lovely and very cross.*]

LADY C. Gussie, you wretch, you should be ashamed of yourself. And you, Poppy, for aiding and abetting him.

LADY T. We were only having a breathing-space.

LADY C. Put that mess down, Gussie, and come quickly. They are going.

LORD C. Ah, at last.

LADY C. It really is too bad of you to desert me so flagrantly.

LORD C. (*beginning to go with her*) No one ever notices that I am not there, my dear. Have they collected all their detectives and things?

LADY C. Yes; she has just sent for her wrap. Do hurry. Are you coming, Poppy?

LADY T. No. If I curtsyed any more tonight it would become a tic. (*To* LORD CHARING, *as he follows his wife out*) Take a look at her wrap, Gussie. We had a bath mat just like that when we were children.

[*When they have gone she dawdles to the mirror over the fireplace, picking up a piece of fish from LORD CHARING'S plate as she passes, and considers herself absently, straightening her wig automatically. As sounds of activity float up from the square she strolls over to the window, back, and out on to the shallow balcony, where she is half-hidden by the curtain.*]

[*Enter* CRIPPS, *the maid, and makes for the small window down R. This, being at the side of the house and looking on to the side-street out of the square, has no balcony big enough outside, but the window is wide open, and CRIPPS stands there watching the people leaving from the door, which is just below it. From the confused sounds of departure in the street there comes the voice of a menial calling: 'The carriage of*

their Majesties of Barlinnia. At that LADY TILlicOUNTRY turns from watching the people in the square and comes down, still leisurely, to the little window.]

LADY T. (*seeing CRIPPS*) Good-evening, Cripps. Or rather, good-morning.

CRIPPS (*startled, but self-possessed as always*) Oh, my lady. I didn't see you.

LADY T. (*joining her at the window*) It seems that at last we are to be allowed to go home to our beds.

CRIPPS I hope your ladyship doesn't mind my being here. (*She is not particularly apologetic*) When we have Balkan people in the house I am never at peace until they have gone.

LADY T. What are you afraid of—bombs or bugs?

CRIPPS An assassination at one of our receptions would be a major tragedy.

LADY T. It would be a nice break.

CRIPPS Nothing has ever happened at one of our receptions.

LADY T. My dear good Cripps, nothing ever happens at any reception. (*As the visitors come out on the steps below*) There they are. (*Having watched for a moment*) Cripps, does anything remind you of bath-time in the nursery at Lessowes?

CRIPPS No, my lady.

LADY T. Remember the bath-mat?

CRIPPS (*noticing the wrap*) Ah, yes. Yes, indeed, my lady. An extraordinary likeness. (*Having considered it*) They do say that her grandfather made mats in Asia Minor. Perhaps the wrap and the bath-mat had a common origin, my lady.

LADY T. It's a lovely theory, Cripps, but her grandfather was a brigand in Albania.

CRIPPS (*slightly shocked*) Not really, my lady?

LADY T. Oh, it's quite respectable. Albania's like Ireland, I understand; everyone is descended from kings. You know—you sleep with the pig, but you're all descended from Brian someone-or-other; up the Shamrock! Look at old Charlie Crale bowing the seat out of his breeches.

CRIPPS Sir Charles's hobby is Royalty.

LADY T. Well, it is a better one than his wife's.

CRIPPS What is that, my lady?

LADY T. Going to memorial services. She hasn't worn colours since the old

Queen's Jubilee. (*Her attention on another departing guest*) If Julia Froude puts on any more weight she will have to go round with a show. Is it true that she has become a Christian Scientist?

CRIPPS Yes, my lady.

LADY T. What induced her to do anything so *outré*?

CRIPPS She says that it is such a comfort to know that there is no such thing as the body. (*Considering the crowd on the steps below*) You know, my lady, the world is changing. When I was young one knew every face at a reception. Nowadays, even at our own receptions, one wonders sometimes—— (*She cannot find it in her heart to put it into words*)

LADY T. (*cheerfully supplying the words for her*) One wonders how they got in.

CRIPPS Some of these people here tonight are nothing but Members of Parliament.

LADY T. Well, it's nice to see even a Member of Parliament enjoying himself. Don't grudge them their little sup of champagne. It must be sad to belong to a trade that is both unskilled and unpaid.

CRIPPS But they are talking of paying them now, my lady. Four hundred a year.

LADY T. (*dawdling*) I don't know what one could do with four hundred a year.

CRIPPS Victor the footman says that you could get two good half-backs for the same money.

LADY T. Half-backs?

CRIPPS Football, my lady. They are paid for playing, it appears.

LADY T. (*beginning to go*) What curious ways people earn a living. (*Dawdling towards the door and straightening her wig at the mirror as she goes*) I remember being frantically in love with the most magnificent creature one summer at Weymouth when I was sixteen. I even planned to elope with him. But when I found what he did for a living I was cured overnight.

CRIPPS What did he do, my lady?

LADY T. (*serious, absent-minded, and sleepy*) He put the eyes in dolls' heads. Good-night, Cripps.

CRIPPS Good-night, my lady. (*She, too, has not smiled*)

[CRIPPS stands a few moments longer; watching the traffic below. As she turns to go, the door opens and VICTOR, the footman, comes in to tidy the room. He replaces LORD CHARING'S paper on a side table.]

CRIPPS You had better put another log on the fire, Victor. Her ladyship dislikes a dying fire.

[Exit CRIPPS.]

[VICTOR takes a log from the log box and puts it on the embers. He considers himself in the glass, tries to see himself in profile, looks at his tongue. He picks up LORD CHARING'S plate of jellied eel, samples it, disapproves of it, and is carrying it away when LADY CHARING comes slowly into the room. He holds the door for her, and shuts it as he goes.

[LADY CHARING comes down to the mirror and considers herself in her turn. She sits down wearily in the chair that LORD CHARING has occupied. After a moment she unpins her heavy tiara, and lifts it off her hair, leaving it lying on her lap.

[Presently the door behind her opens, and NEIL TUMMEL appears. He is carrying a small tray on which there are dishes and a bottle of hock. He comes down and puts the tray on the table at LADY CHARING'S elbow.

[LADY CHARING looks up, startled. At the sound of the door she has asked, without moving:

LADY C. Is that you, Gussie? Mr Tummel!

NEIL You haven't had a bite to eat all night. I've been watching you.

LADY C. (*still a little staggered*) How kind of you.

NEIL Your Chief Lackey says this is what you like.

LADY C. Yes. It was charming of you to think of it. I hope you enjoyed your evening?

NEIL I found it very interesting, thank you.

LADY C. You are looking very chic. You must admit that what you call 'the badge of the bourgeois' is vastly becoming.

NEIL (*who is very pleased with the figure he cuts in his not-very-well-fitting garments*) It is very silly. And most uncomfortable.

LADY C. I hope you have had some supper.

NEIL No.

LADY C. Why not?

NEIL I couldn't see anything I recognised.

LADY C. Do you have to be on *bowing* terms with your food?

NEIL If a ham looks like a ham I want to eat it. If it looks like my sister's wedding-bouquet, I lose interest.

LADY C. You have a sister?

NEIL I have. What is so surprising about that?

LADY C. I had somehow taken it for granted that yours was a unique birth. Why have you never mentioned your sister? Isn't she mentionable?

NEIL She is of no interest whatever.

LADY C. I see. She married well, dresses charmingly, enjoys life, supports all the local charities, and disapproves equally of you and revolutions.

NEIL I thought you——

LADY C. Well, I disapprove of you too, but I cannot eat supper alone. Do you think you could pick up sufficient courage to nibble at a mystery while I eat?

NEIL Are you inviting——

LADY C. I suggest you go back to the dining-room, ask Parker to give you a tray, do 'Eenie, meenie, minie, mo' among the dishes, and bring the results here.

NEIL Well, since you suggest it, I am a bit feeown. (*As an apparent afterthought*) And of course it would be very pleasant to have supper with you.

LADY C. Tell Parker to give you a bottle of my own hock. Not any of the caterer's stuff.

NEIL You forget that I'm T.T.

LADY C. You won't be once you have tasted hock. If you don't hurry up I shall have finished before you come back.

[*Exit* NEIL.]

[LADY CHARING *pours out some hock for herself, and begins to sip it.*

[*The door opens once more and* LADY TILlicOUNTRY *appears, cloaked and ready to go.*]

LADY T. Millie, darling, I don't know how you do it. I only wish *I* could.

LADY C. Solitary drinking, you mean?

LADY T. No. Public entertainment. I begin to suspect that it is hypnotism. You've even lured Neil Tummel into good behaviour and a white tie. I do congratulate you

on that job of work, my dear. Just a little more, and you will have jockeyed him out of the Socialist race altogether.

LADY C. I promised to make him pretty for your platform, not to alter his convictions.

LADY T. (*her attention arrested*) Do you think he has convictions?

LADY C. What do you call them?

LADY T. A political point of view. Where do you think he got those tails?

LADY C. I expect he borrowed them.

LADY T. That is what they look like.

LADY C. Not being accustomed to the usages of good society, it would not occur to him to order something he could not pay for.

LADY T. (*her attention thoroughly awakened; after a pause*) Millie, dear, you are not overdoing it, are you?

LADY C. Overdoing what?

LADY T. The Tummel business. You're not growing *interested* in the creature?

LADY C. Don't be absurd, Poppy.

LADY T. You *have* been taking him about quite a lot.

LADY C. You can hardly call a private view 'taking him about'. It is impersonal and educational in the extreme. You *asked* me to cut his hair, and when I do you——

LADY T. Oh, I know he is a stupid creature, that no woman in her senses would waste her time on. It's his profile I'm afraid of. Give a man a good profile, and no one notices how silly his face is. If half those people on coins turned front face, no one would bother to collect them.

LADY C. If you let your absurdity grow, Poppy, people will collect you one morning in a plain van. Why should you imagine for a moment that I am interested in Neil Tummel?

LADY T. I didn't, until you mentioned his convictions. And now I keep remembering a very odd story that I dismissed as too silly for belief.

LADY C. A story about me?

LADY T. Yes. Someone said that you had been seen riding in a bus, with a young man.

LADY C. Is the gravamen of the charge the bus, or the young man?

LADY T. So it was you?

LADY C. I like buses. A sort of public Musical Chairs. All Change, and who gets a seat? Your wig is crooked.

LADY T. Millie, you are being outrageous.

LADY C. Oh, nonsense, my dear. A bus is a most respectable means of——

LADY T. You know that I am not talking about buses. It is your own business if you choose to be odd. But Neil Tummel is my affair, and you are spoiling everything. I asked you to tone him down, not to take him up.

LADY C. Well, I am toning him down very nicely, and I think you are very ungrateful.

LADY T. You are spoiling him. Running round the town with him, and falling in with his absurd ideas. Don't tell me that the bus-riding was your idea. (*'For I shan't believe it'—she means*)

LADY C. No. He is teaching me to be democratic. (*A dimple shows wickedly for a moment*) You must allow me a *little* fun, Poppy. (*As an afterthought*) And if you ever tell him how you and I hopped in and out of buses in our youth, I shall slay you.

LADY T. I could kill *you* at this very moment. That creature's head must be swollen past recovery.

LADY C. Oh, no. I keep him tolerably humble.

LADY T. I suppose he is besotted about you?

LADY C. Oddly enough, I don't exist except as a brand to be plucked.

LADY T. (*pouncing*) Ah! And you find that exciting.

LADY C. (*demurely, with an edge to it*) He considers that I am very intelligent, and has hopes of making me a useful member of society.

LADY T. Society?

LADY C. With a little S.

LADY T. He has a confounded impudence. And you, Millicent Charing, are a confounded humbug. You sit there and preen yourself on your intellectual amusement. Believe me, my dear, if he had a profile like a new moon, you wouldn't be in the least amused. So 'lay not that flattering dudgeon to your soul'.

LADY C. 'Unction'!

LADY T. What?

LADY C. 'Flattering unction'.

LADY T. (*unabashed*) Oh, well, unction. Though I think dudgeon is a much better word. You can't see farther than his nose.

LADY C. (*coldly*) I have said already, Poppy, that you are very absurd. (*With growing warmth*) If you admire his profile so extravagantly, why couldn't you sit on the same platform with it, and so save everyone trouble?

LADY T. If a man wears a yellow suit it doesn't matter to me if he looked like the Archangel Gabriel.

LADY C. But you think that I am more susceptible.

LADY T. Well, you don't really mind yellow suits and things; you positively rejoice in them.

LADY C. *Nostalgie de boue.*

LADY T. So there is nothing to keep you from noticing his profile.

LADY C. You should have thought of my deplorable weaknesses before you entrusted me with your oddity.

LADY T. You needn't be sarcastic with me. (*The emphasis is on 'me'*) All I entrusted you with was his ties.

LADY C. Well, I got him into tails for you. He is an ornament to any platform. And all the thanks I get is a lecture on behaviour.

LADY T. I'm not lecturing. I'm grieved. (*Her dignified pose wilting under emotion*) I—I churn inside when I think of your encouraging the creature.

LADY C. Do you imagine that a Calvinistic Socialist can be induced to knot a white tie round his neck without encouragement? Really, Poppy, you are illogical, unreasonable, ungrateful, and tiresome.

LADY T. And you are far too fond of being godmother to squids, and octopuses, and Hottentots, and moth-eaten lions. (*Without any pause or change of tone*) We are not quarrelling, are we?

LADY C. (*also without change of tone or tempo*) Of course not. I think it is very small of you, Poppy, to come and create a scene when you know what an exhausting evening I have had.

LADY T. (*unimpressed*) You've had a lovely evening.

LADY C. (*her mind reviewing the exhausting evening*) The Queen would insist on spitting out the stones of her dates.

LADY T. (*staggered for a moment*) The Queen? (*Realising*) Oh, the Balkans. A woman who wears a bath-mat is capable of anything. And I *didn't* come to make a scene. I came to tell you how lovely everything was. (*She sounds suddenly like a child whose party has gone wrong*)

LADY C. (*relenting*) All right, Poppy dear. It was generous and charming of you. I expect we are both tired.

LADY T. Yes; it is silly to quarrel over anything so—so trumpery as Neil Tummel. Forget what I said, darling. I was just a little peeved that you were being nice to the creature, forgetting that being nice is a habit with you. I know that you could never waste an unnecessary moment on the silly bag of wind. Good night, my dear. I expect Cosmo is growing impatient. Are you going to the Tavenders' on Thursday? (*As LADY C. assents*) Then I shall see you there. Meanwhile I shall leave you to your solitary supper.

[*She is making for the door when it opens to admit NEIL TUMMEL carrying a tray with food and a bottle. Sensation—as the old scripts used to say.*]

LADY C. (*smoothly, into the gap*) Lady Tillicoultry, do you know Mr Tummel?

[*LADY T. inclines her head in cold recognition of the introduction.*]

NEIL Lady Tillicoultry doesn't know me, maybe, but I know her well enough.

LADY T. Really?

NEIL My father used to shoe your father's horses.

LADY T. (*cold and detached*) Did he get paid?

NEIL (*at a loss*) Of course.

LADY T. Your father must have been a remarkable man. My father never paid anything but blackmail. Good night, Millicent. It has been a charming evening.

[*She goes out.*]

NEIL (*in righteous disgust*) That's no way to speak about her father. (*Carries his tray down and places it on the opposite side of the table from hers*)

LADY C. Don't you believe in telling the truth about one's parents? But, of course, being a blacksmith, your father was no doubt admirable. Now I think of it, I have never seen any account of a blacksmith appearing in court. Now carpenters are always in trouble. Such nice clean work, too; you would think they would be content.

NEIL You have an incurably frivolous mind.

LADY C. I don't consider every dandelion a portent, if that is what you mean. (*As NEIL undoubtedly does, she means*) As for carpenters—— (*She notices what is on NEIL'S tray; eight or nine very small plates, each with a different kind of food. In an astonished drawl*) My dear Neil! What is all that?

NEIL (*succinctly*) Samples.

LADY C. (*counting*) ... six, seven, eight, nine. Good gracious!

NEIL I took a little of everything I didn't know.

LADY C. But is that wise?

NEIL I consider that this is part of my education.

LADY C. Then I can only say that by tomorrow morning there will have been at least one part of your education that you will have paid for. However, I am glad to see that you have brought a bottle.

NEIL I'm ashamed about the bottle.

LADY C. *Nobody* has cause to be ashamed of *that* hock.

NEIL By the time I had made them give me all those little plates, I had no courage left to refuse the bottle. But of course I'm not going to drink it.

LADY C. (*pouring out some*) Of course you are. The Rhine is a dull river, and the Germans a deadly race, but between them they produce a unique beauty. That is it in your glass. Taste it, you bleak northerner. It has nothing in common with what you call drink, (*dropping her voice a perfect fifth*) which I take to be 'something to keep the wet out'.

NEIL (*twirling the stem of his glass doubtfully*) Nevertheless, that is the stuff that ties up a man's tongue (*he thinks first of speech, of course*)—or loosens it. That makes his will like water, and his judgment of no account. Because of that promises were broken, and obligations unmet.

[*He is beginning to enjoy the sound of it. LADY CHARING is eating her supper without glancing at him.*]

NEIL Fine aspirations died, and unworthiness found sweet excuse. Because of that causes were lost, leaders betrayed. Because of that sacred things were sold. Because of that Empires fell.

LADY C. (*not glancing at him; with finality*) Most Empires fell because the rain didn't.

NEIL (*with a swift return to the matter of fact*) This will be the first time in my life that intoxicating liquor has ever passed my lips.

[*She casts him an amused glance, but his eyes are on the glass.*]

NEIL I never made a pledge, of course. (*After a further pause he lifts the glass and tastes the wine cautiously. After a second more appreciative mouthful he*

sets it down) I see what you mean about it's not being drink. Just a (*he looks for a word*) fragrance.

[*She likes that and glances approvingly. It is in moments like these that she forgets his faults and remembers only his profile.*]

NEIL Is it potent? (*He picks up a fork and begins on the first of his samples*)

LADY C. Oh, no. It is the recognised tippie of maiden ladies.

NEIL I've known some maiden ladies with a real taste for the potent, including clay pipes. What is this? (*He refers to the dish he is eating*)

LADY C. Lobster mayonnaise.

NEIL (*holding up some cress on his fork*) What do they put the grass on it for?

LADY C. The cress is mere garnish, like a man's tie. Who tied *your* tie for you, Neil Tummel?

NEIL My landlady's son. It's his tie. If it comes to that, it's his suit too.

LADY C. I congratulate your landlady.

NEIL On what?

LADY C. On her very handsome son.

[*He casts her a doubtful glance at the implied compliment, but her mind has gone elsewhere.*]

LADY C. You know, Neil, you are improving.

NEIL Because I am dressed up like a monkey?

LADY C. (*suddenly out of temper*) Oh, don't be so stupid. That is the first entirely democratic outfit you ever wore. In tails all men are equal.

NEIL There *is* a difference in cut.

LADY C. Of course. But that is a matter of individuality, not of social standing. The best-cut tails I saw tonight were on Barney Cohen. The Duke of Sidborough, on the other hand, looked as if he had picked up a comedian's outfit at the last moment.

NEIL Then if it wasn't my clothes, in what way have I 'improved'?

LADY C. You haven't told me how many working-class families could be fed for the cost of my party.

NEIL (*grimly*) I'll tell you now. Five hundred families for a week, or fifty families for two years.

LADY C. It must be a dreary way to enjoy a party, reckoning what one could have

bought instead. Does the Tummel family never give a party?

NEIL Of course they do.

LADY C. When your sister got married, for instance?

NEIL Yes.

LADY C. How many people came?

NEIL We invited fifty, but fifty-six came.

LADY C. How awkward! And did you reckon how many families could have been fed for the cost of it?

NEIL No.

LADY C. Why not?

NEIL That's quite different.

LADY C. The only difference is that you have fifty friends, and I have nine hundred.

NEIL I don't suppose you knew half those people here tonight by sight even!

LADY C. No. But they know me. And expect to be asked to my house. And because they come to my house and drink my hock, someone in your beloved Kilcrannock eats a little better.

NEIL (*pausing in his supper at what seems to him this monstrous perversion*) Well, of all the——!

LADY C. (*interrupting him*) Little Señor So-and-So goes back to his South American home. He has been entertained at Charing House. He is pleased, he is flattered. He puts his docile women folk into English tweeds, and the mills of Kilcrannock work overtime.

NEIL (*scornfully*) Overtime!

LADY C. (*smoothly*) Yes. All those South American women are ten miles round. And when I am hanging on a lamp-post, Neil Tummel, the cost of entertaining little Señor So-and-So will come out of *your* pocket. (*As one contemplating a pleasing prospect*) What a *lot* of things are going to come out of your pocket when I have stopped paying for them. I shall be surprised if you have the price of a drink left. (*Noticing that NEIL is eating*) Don't you think you had better leave that till later? I think it is vanilla soufflé.

NEIL (*who has a sweet tooth and no palate*) It's fine, whatever it is. (*He goes on eating it*) So you give parties just to keep the poor of Kilcrannock happy?

LADY C. No. I give parties because I like it, and because I do it well. That is lucky because it happens to be my duty to give them, and it is very hard work.

NEIL Work! What would you do if you had seven children and a husband who earned two pounds a week?

LADY C. Make a success of it. I should have made a very good wife for a working-man.

NEIL You! I don't suppose you know the price of a pound of butter.

LADY C. (*reasonably*) No. But I should only have to be told once.

NEIL And tomorrow you'll no doubt lie in bed till noon recovering from tonight.

LADY C. On the contrary. I have a Pageant Committee meeting at ten o'clock. Queen Elizabeth has abdicated, and there are eleven claimants to the crown.

NEIL Have you a part in this pageant?

LADY C. I am to be Boadicea. (*This lady is now known as Boudicca, but in the Edwardian age they were satisfied with a smaller degree of accuracy*)

NEIL (*mildly*) Why Boadicea, the poor savage?

LADY C. (*matter-of-factly*) Because I look well with my hair down—— (*AS NEIL, after a delayed take, pauses and stares*) What is the matter?

NEIL (*after a pause, still staring, slowly*) It's an odd thing, but until this minute I never thought of you as a real woman.

LADY C. Was I ogre or goddess? (*AS NEIL still stares; a trifle dryly*) Not a Gorgon apparently. (*AS NEIL is still silent; a faint impatience showing*) Well, what was I?

NEIL (*still wrapped in his own thoughts*) A thing with a ticket on it.

LADY C. A ticket?

NEIL A label.

LADY C. Merciful heaven, a museum piece!

NEIL (*not having heard her*) In my mind you were always 'Rich aristocrat' or 'Famous Beauty'. Never a person with bones and flesh and blood.

LADY C. You must have granted me a stomach, or you wouldn't have brought me this supper.

NEIL No, I suppose not. I expect it was beginning to dawn on me.

LADY C. Well, now that you realise that my hair lets down, am I to be removed from your collection of untouchables?

NEIL (*grasping after his lost detachment*) It makes no difference at all in my opinion of you.

LADY C. I am still a parasite.

NEIL You are still the woman who wore that gewgaw tonight. (*He indicates with the point of his fork the tiara, which is lying on the table*)

LADY C. Didn't you think it becoming?

NEIL I thought you looked very silly in it. (*Having tasted a new dish*) I suppose this is caviare?

LADY C. Yes.

NEIL (*pushing the small dish away and drawing another into its place*) Well, I've tasted it.

LADY C. You don't like it?

NEIL Every man has his Waterloo.

LADY C. That is what Macrae, the Head Gardener at Charing, said when he lost the first prize for onions after twenty years.

NEIL (*scornfully*) I suppose you have a dozen gardeners?

LADY C. (*mildly*) Fourteen and a boy.

NEIL It's iniquitous that any individual should pay fourteen gardeners to keep his place tidy.

LADY C. If *we* didn't pay them, you would have to.

NEIL I?

LADY C. Would you destroy the gardens? In your revolution.

NEIL Of course not.

LADY C. Then the State would have to pay fourteen men and a boy. It is Augustus's dream, I may tell you. To get someone to take those gardens off his hands. He is always trying to filch sixpence from the peaches for his pigs. And he is terrified, of course, of Macrae. (*Contemplatively*) The Revolution is going to have a difficult time with Macrae. I hope you will be kind to our tenants, by the way. They are used to being looked after.

NEIL (*in a scornful summing up*) Cake in a basket.

LADY C. (*demurely*) No. Rent in abeyance. What will the State do with people who can't pay their rent?

NEIL (*lofty and repressive*) The State will look after the deserving.

LADY C. It wasn't the deserving I was thinking about.

NEIL At least there will be no more exploiting by landlords.

LADY C. The only landlord who makes a profit at Charing is the landlord of the George. You really must come and meet our persecuted peasantry. Come this week-end.

NEIL At the week-end I am going to Kilcrannock.

LADY C. You can go there next week-end.

NEIL No. I have a committee meeting on Saturday.

LADY C. (*airily*) Postpone it, my good creature. Postpone it.

NEIL It's my own parliamentary committee.

LADY C. All the more reason that they should wait.

NEIL What I have to say to them won't wait.

LADY C. No?

NEIL I am going to tell them that I can no longer represent them in Parliament. (*He goes on eating matter-of-factly*)

[LADY C. *stops eating, stares a moment, puts out a swift arm to NEIL'S bottle of hock and lifts it to the light, realises that the explanation is not there—NEIL is thirsty and has done justice to the wine, but even a teetotaller could not be greatly deranged by the amount he has consumed—and puts it down.*]

LADY C. It can't be that. Are you serious?

NEIL Perfectly.

LADY C. You are going to give up your seat? But why?

NEIL Because I have no right to keep it. I was sent to Parliament to represent the working-classes of Kilcrannock, and look at me! Dressed up like a dummy in a suit that doesn't belong to me, having supper with a countess.

LADY C. Does that prevent you from going to the House tomorrow and speaking for your Kilcrannock friends?

NEIL (*without heat*) It's a betrayal. That's what it is. A betrayal.

LADY C. My dear Neil, don't be absurd.

NEIL The money to send me to Westminster was scraped together by people who could ill afford it. They have a very clear idea of the kind of man they want to represent them. They thought I was that man. So did I. We were both wrong.

LADY C. But, for Heaven's sake, why——

NEIL The kind of man they want wouldn't be found dead in this house.

LADY C. Then I should have thought that the obvious course was to give up this house, not your constituency.

NEIL Giving it up wouldn't alter the fact that I liked coming to it.

LADY C. (*surprised and gratified*) You liked it?

NEIL (*airily*) Oh, ay. I pretended to myself that I came here just to look down my nose. And when I went about with you, and made you take buses instead of your car, I thought I was educating you; and all the time I was just flattered at being seen about with a countess and the most beautiful woman in London. Do you think a man like that is the right one to represent Kilcrannock weavers?

LADY C. But you also represent, I take it, the ...

NEIL I thought I was a Moses, and all I am is a Samson. A poor silly lump of a fellow that got his hair cut. And on Saturday I tell my committee that, and they can look for a better man.

LADY C. I have never heard anything so quixotic and nonsensical. When did you reach this curious decision?

NEIL (*without thinking*) Tonight. (*As soon as it is said he looks as if he would like to take it back, but he is too late*)

LADY C. And what are you going to do if you give up your political career?

NEIL I'll begin again, some other way. Find work in a factory, perhaps.

LADY C. Why not a stone-breaker? You know; a can of cold tea and strings round your knees. (*AS NEIL pursues his way through the samples on the plates without heeding her*) Or must you have an audience? (*Dropping the ironic manner*) My dear Neil, the whole thing is absurd to the point of fantasy.

NEIL (*dryly*) I didn't suppose you would understand it.

LADY C. You actually propose to give up your seat in Parliament because someone induced you to wear a white tie?

NEIL No. Because I'm a poor thing, but taking money under false pretences isn't one of my failings. Do you realise that my committee actually pay for my lodgings in London?

LADY C. And anyhow, to consider manual work as some sort of salvation is merely being perverse. Now, when you have caught the public eye——

NEIL It's not so long since you giped at me for not working with my hands.

LADY C. (*not listening*) I know! Let me talk to Lord Archibald——

NEIL (*startled, almost shouting*) No! (*Collecting himself at her surprise,*

more mildly) No. Certainly not!

LADY C. You wouldn't mind being a secretary for a little?

NEIL (*who hasn't been thinking of secretaryships; at a loss*) Secretary?

LADY C. Archie, being head of the Liberal Party, can always do with an extra secretary or two.

NEIL Are you deliberately insulting me?

LADY C. Insulting? I'm only——

NEIL If I want to stay in London as a working-man's representative, do you think I would stay as a hired lackey?

LADY C. You're terribly fond of the word lackey. It's a sort of shibboleth.

NEIL I didn't expect you to understand what conscience can do to a man, but I did think that you would——

LADY C. My dear, I am merely trying to bring a little realism into your——

NEIL Realism! God bless realism! and let us look to our personal profit, and the buttered side, and percentage, and perquisites, and feathers for our nest, and all the other rewards for keeping a sensible point of view, and not letting conscience talk too loudly. You can keep your realism, and I'll keep my conscience. And now, having been educated both spiritually and gastronomically. (*Getting up*) If you'll forgive me, I'll be going.

LADY C. No, Neil, wait. Let us discuss this calmly. I——

NEIL There is nothing to discuss. I made a mistake, and I am going to rectify it. That is all. I undertook something and failed to carry it through. Other men have failed before now. (*By this stage he is believing it himself*)

LADY C. But I——

NEIL Anyhow, it has nothing to do with you.

LADY C. But I feel that it has. If I had foreseen ... If I ...

NEIL You have nothing to reproach yourself with. You have been very kind, and if I have been uncouth I hope you'll forgive me. That I'm a failure is my own fault, and no one else's. (*He is enjoying himself so much now that he is almost in tears of admiration*) Thank you very much for your hospitality.

[*That is the phrase they use in Kilcrannock. He shakes hands with a speechless LADY CHARING, who has also risen by now, and makes for the door. At the door he turns.*]

NEIL And I want to tell you something. I didn't think you looked silly in that thing. (*He indicates the tiara*) I thought you looked like a queen. (*Amending hastily*) I consider Royalty a deplorable anachronism, of course. But you did look like a queen tonight.

[*He disappears.*]

[LADY CHARING *stands where she is, gazing at the closed door. As she turns slowly, she catches sight of her reflection in the mirror.*]

LADY C. (*to her reflection, as a nurse says it to a child who has broken something*) Now look what you've done.

QUICK CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE I

The Scene is the same. It is mid-morning in July.

LORD CHARING *is sitting in his chair by the window, reading a newspaper. Several more are strewn on the floor by his chair.*

Enter LADY CHARING, *making for the little desk by the side window. She is dressed to go out, and is carrying her gloves and a feathery thing that is destined to go round her neck. Half-way across the room she notices her husband.*

LADY C. (*not pausing*) Gussie. I thought you had gone to the club.

LORD C. I am getting up my courage.

LADY C. What do you want courage for?

LORD C. An unsuccessful Liberal is a fearsome thing, but a crowd of Liberals all cock-a-hoop is a thing to make a man blench.

LADY C. (*smiling: she is in a very good mood*) You are a disgrace to the party, Gussie. (*She sits down at her desk and prepares to write a note*) You ought to be standing on a chair and cheering. Nothing like this has happened to the Liberals within the memory of man.

LORD C. Oh, it's wonderful, of course. A landslide. A positive landslide. But where does it leave me? At the head of those stairs. (*At his paper again*) Did you see that the Tories have even lost Strake. A safe seat like that. Lost it by nine thousand votes. The thing's incredible. And Carlimmon. A Liberal majority of twelve thousand. God knows the Tories had been too long in power, but who would have expected anything like this? (*He chews over the news while she ignores him*) And Larborough... No, I'll never get away from those stairs now.

LADY C. (*writing*) Do you think it would be tactless to ask the Tillicoultrys to the dinner next week?

LORD C. I expect the Tillicoultrys and all their Tory clan are in deep mourning. Have you quarrelled with Poppy, by the way?

LADY C. Have you ever tried to quarrel with Poppy?

LORD C. I have not.

LADY C. The thing is an impossibility. It would be like hitting a feather-bed. (*After*

a pause) Why did you think we had quarrelled?

LORD C. It must be nearly a month since I came across her in the house. Not since that reception, if I remember. (*He is quite without guile, and not greatly interested*)

LADY C. That was just before the Tories resigned. And since then everyone has been in the country. (*She means the provinces*)

LORD C. (*going back to his paper*) Yes. Everyone has been kissing babies. The Liberals seem to have kissed to some purpose. (*Murmuring, as he scans the lists*) A landslide, indeed. Swinnington, five thousand.... I see your wild man has won Kilrannock for the Liberals. Does that mean an end of yellow suits?

LADY C. I don't know. I haven't seen him since that reception a month ago. I must say, it is a great relief to me that he has found a niche for himself. (*There is a faint shade of puzzlement, all the same, in that last sentence*)

LORD C. He owes you that, my dear.

LADY C. Because I changed his ties, you mean?

LORD C. No. Because you got him to the reception that night.

LADY C. What has that to do with it?

LORD C. It gave him a chance to work his spell on Archie.

LADY C. On *Archie*?

LORD C. Archie was so mellow that he not only offered to back him for Kilrannock—— (*He is not so greatly interested that his attention is entirely weaned from his paper, and now he catches sight of something else*) Did you see the majority at Hanborough?

LADY C. Archie! Offered him backing? Offered him *party* backing? (*She can't believe it*)

LORD C. (*coming to for a moment, and looking up with a reminiscent smile*) Yes. Young Bisset has been nursing Kilrannock for years——*with* the Party's blessing—but after an hour of Neil Tummel, and two bottles of Johannisberger, Archie changed his mind.

LADY C. It is not possible! (*She is referring not to ARCHIE'S behaviour but NEIL'S*)

LORD C. My dear, Archie was so mellow that he not only promised him party backing, but he told him that the Tories were going to resign within a week.

LADY C. I don't believe it.

LORD C. (*taking it for granted that it is ARCHIE'S indiscretion she finds*)

incredible) Oh, Archie didn't mind. When he told me next morning in the Club he said that anyone who could talk him into tears after twenty years in the Commons was worth a thousand votes to any party. The tears probably came out of a bottle. (*Shrewdly*) I think myself that Archie was looking for a Scotch counterweight to that little Welsh lawyer.

[LADY CHARING *is sitting very still, all her radiance gone, but* LORD CHARING, *busy with the ever-surprising contents of his paper, is unaware of any oddness in the atmosphere. He goes on, after a little.*]

LORD C. Well, it's nice for the young man to come in on a flood-tide. (*Reading another item*) Lanbovery West, eleven hundred. I shall be sitting at the top of those stairs in a bathchair before the Liberals go out of office.

[*He scans the paper again. LADY CHARING makes some attempt to go back to her note-writing.*]

LORD C. A landslide. A positive landslide.

LADY C. (*in a burst*) Gussie, if you use that phrase again I shall divorce you!

LORD C. Sorry, my dear.

LADY C. (*after a short silence, in her ordinary voice*) Am I sometimes impatient with you, Gussie?

LORD C. (*cheerfully*) Quite often, my dear.

LADY C. That is horrid of me. (*She says it simply, accenting no word more than another; which adds to its force*) There is no one in all the world as nice as you, Gussie, and I don't deserve to have you for a husband.

LORD C. (*in his gentle voice*) A very proper sentiment, my dear.

LADY C. (*casting him a fleeting smile for that*) Wretch! (*She makes some pretence of writing, but her mind is not on the paper. Writing*) Gussie.

LORD C. (*reading*) Yes, my dear?

LADY C. (*looking up*) Did you have a hero, when you were little?

LORD C. A hero? Yes. Let me see. Richard Lion-heart.

LADY C. (*scribbling on the blotting-paper*) Mine was Jack the Giant-killer. (*After a pause*) All my life I have kept expecting people to be Giant-killers. And all they ever prove to be are Jacks climbing the bean-stalk.

[*He becomes aware that there must be an origin for this line of thought, and turns his head to look at her, thoughtfully. She has gone back to*

her note.]

LORD C. (*after a moment, slowly*) I discovered later, of course, that Richard was a most deplorable bounder. (*He goes back to his paper, but henceforth he is aware of her*)

LADY C. How do you spell conceive?

LORD C. E-I. Who is conceiving?

LADY C. The conception is mental. We are not going to invite the Tillicoultrys next week, then?

LORD C. (*agreeing with her previous suggestion*) It might be a little tactless, certainly. (*A new thought striking him*) I wonder how Poppy likes the prospect of being represented in Parliament by Mr Tummel for years to come. Poor Poppy!

[*The door opens and POPPY appears, half-in and half-out.*]

LADY T. Who is sympathising with Poppy? (*Coming in*) And what about, may I ask? (*As the OTHERS greet her*) Victor said that I might come up. How are you, Millicent? He's a nice creature, Victor. He has decided that he still knows me, even if I am a defeated Tory. Was that what you were poor-Poppying about, Gussie? The slump in my political value?

LORD C. No, as a matter of fact, I was sympathising with you on the permanence of Mr Tummel.

LADY T. (*equably*) Oh, well. If we have to be represented by a Liberal, I don't know that Neil Tummel is worse than the next man. Especially now that Millie has prettied him up so nicely. You should have seen him in Kilcrannock, my dear. He was a credit to you. He has even got himself a new suit. Very chaste and slightly Foreign Office. As for his politics he might have been a Liberal from the cradle.

LADY C. (*extra sec*) Very gratifying.

LADY T. It's fantastic. A month ago he wanted the earth; now he's promising it. If reports are true he's promising the moon too.

LORD C. A charmer, Mr Tummel. I wonder if he is still interested in small-holdings? I was pinning my faith to that.

LADY C. If you pin anything to Neil Tummel you'll lose even the pin.

LADY T. Don't you like him any more, Millicent? Oh, dear, I hope you are not tired of him. I was going to ask you—I *was* going to suggest——

LADY C. What is it now? His shoe laces? Perhaps he does them in a V and you

prefer them straight across.

LADY T. (*ignoring any sarcasm*) Oh, no. Nothing like that. Nothing like that at all. I was hoping you would bring him to tea.

LADY C. (*regarding her*) Really, Poppy, you are quite shameless.

LADY T. I don't know what you are talking about. Now that he is a perfectly respectable Liberal there is no reason why we should not be on speaking terms. It looks well on a platform. And there are one or two little things in the constituency that I want done. So I thought the nicest way would be for you to bring him to tea one day. Tea is a nice informal thing, and doesn't commit one to much.

LADY C. I think Mr Tummel is quite capable of bringing himself to tea.

LADY T. But I should have to ask him. That is quite impossible.

LADY C. In any case, I shall not be seeing Mr Tummel either soon, or much.

LADY T. I don't know about much, darling, but you will certainly be seeing him soon. (*Answering LADY CHARING'S unspoken question*) I passed him just now in the carriage. Striding along Grosvenor Street. There was one of those dotted lines from his nose to this door.

LADY C. But why to this door? I have not heard from him for weeks. Why should he come here?

LADY T. He is coming to be admired, of course. Don't you *know* the creature?

LADY C. (*murmuring*) I begin to.

LADY T. He is bringing his sheaves, or his scalps, or whatever it is, to show you.

LADY C. (*looking at her watch with deliberate control*) Then he will have to leave his sheaves on the doorstep. I am due at Lady Archibald's in fifteen minutes. I think it would be a graceful thing if you came along with me, Gussie, and paid your respects.

LORD C. Oh, must I, my dear? I find her such a terrifying woman.

LADY T. Such a pity to have a Prime Minister's wife who looks like a horse.

LADY C. You have only to say how pleased we all are. And then you can go to your club. It will not look nearly so bad after Lady Archie.

LORD C. There is that. (*Beginning to make a move*) I suppose it is time I made a move anyhow.

LADY T. Do you hate your club, Gussie?

LORD C. Oh, no, no. The building is quite charming. Seventeenth century. But I look round at my fellow members and can't help thinking how much more interesting

they would be if they were pigs. Shall I meet you in the hall, Millicent? (*Looking at his watch*) At a quarter-past?

[*She agrees to 'ten past'.*]

LORD C. How is Cosmo? Not too shocked over the Tory defeat, I hope?

LADY T. At the news that we were going to be represented by a Liberal, Cosmo decided to go into a nursing-home. But when he found that everyone else had a Liberal too, he cheered up wonderfully.

LORD C. They do say that misfortune shared is misfortune halved.

LADY T. Well, I confess I was relieved. Nursing-homes are more expensive than grouse moors these days. Delia Delany sent for the crusts off her toast, and they charged it extra on her bill.

LADY C. (*amused and disbelieving*) Oh, my dear Poppy——!

LADY T. I do assure you. 'Crusts: five shillings.'

[*She lifts an elegant hand to the smiling LORD CHARING, as he goes out.*]

LADY T. I expect——

LADY C. Poppy, dear, you won't mind if I throw you out, will you? I must finish these notes before I go, and we can't be late at Lady Archibald's.

LADY T. (*airily*) You won't be late, my dear. You have plenty of time. Give the woman a chance to get out of her curlers.

LADY C. But——

LADY T. You go on with your notes, and I shall sit quietly here and rest for a little. I shan't interrupt you, I promise. It is a charming room to rest in. I have always wanted one like it.

LADY C. (*resuming her writing; tartly*) If it is my drawing-room you want now, Poppy, let us have an understanding at once. You cannot have it.

LADY T. (*without heat*) I don't think that sounds very nice. (*She is sitting where she can see from the window into the square*) One would think I was a cadger!

[*She can now see NEIL TUMMEL approaching below.*]

LADY T. I have my faults, but if there is one thing I am not a cadger. (*In a scientific, detached voice*) Are you a little dyspeptic this morning, Millicent?

LADY C. (*scribbling furiously in an effort to finish her letters and get out of the house before NEIL TUMMEL descends on it, but rising to the dyspepsia gibe*) I

have *never* had dyspepsia.

LADY T. I only wondered. You sounded a little impatient. Not to say peevish. Here I come rushing to congratulate you on the Liberal victory, and you——

LADY C. (*casting her a glance and going on scribbling*) It couldn't be, could it, Poppy, that you didn't remember me until your eye lighted on Neil Tummel headed this way, and that you then remembered that you wanted Government backing for your Kilcrannock soup-kitchens?

LADY T. No; for my Poor Children's Holiday Home.

LADY C. And that when I refused to bring him to your house you settled down here in the hope that he would come before you left?

LADY T. (*getting up; she has watched NEIL TUMMEL go round the corner of the square to the door below the window*) That is very unkind of you, Millie. Very unkind. If that is what you think I shall go at once. At once.

LADY C. Oh, sit down, Poppy, and don't be tiresome. We can go together in a moment.

LADY T. No, if I go now, I can at least prove that I am not using your charming room as a place of assignation.

LADY C. (*almost restored to good humour by this absurdity; half-smiling*) You absurd creature. I ...

LADY T. If I don't see you before then, we shall meet at the opening of Parliament. (*Kindly, as she is going*) And you really ought to try those little tablets that Cosmo has, my dear. I don't think your digestion is as good as it ought to be.

LADY C. (*calling after her*) Your wig is crooked.

[*As soon as the door closes behind her, LADY CHARING hurries to the bell-pull.*]

LADY C. (*as she crosses to the bell*) What a morning! (*Pausing with her hand on the bell; she is about to say that she is not at home*) No, perhaps not. I shall be gone before he comes.

[*She hurries back to her notes and thrusts them into envelopes. While she is engaged in that the door opens and again LADY TILlicOUNTRY appears leading in NEIL TUMMEL.*]

LADY T. (*as cheerfully as if they were meeting for the first time*) Millicent dear, look what I found on the stairs. (*As NEIL, very confident and pleased with himself,*

moves forward to shake hands) Your new Liberal, and our new Member of Parliament. He has brought his scalps.

NEIL My what?

LADY T Your sheaves, you know.

NEIL (*to LADY C.*) I came to thank you for your good wishes. It was kind of you to send the telegram.

LADY C. I sent three hundred telegrams.

LADY T (*too much occupied with her own concerns to notice LADY CHARING'S attitude*) Oddly enough, we were talking of you a moment ago.

NEIL (*with difficulty taking his attention away from LADY CHARING'S reception of him*) Yes?

LADY T I was hoping that you would help me with one or two little things in the constituency.

NEIL Provided I approve of the one or two little things, Lady Tillicoultry, I'll help you with pleasure.

LADY T It's mostly about my Poor Children's Holiday Home. I take it you would approve of that.

NEIL I don't know. I would have to see the books.

LADY T The books?

NEIL The accounts.

LADY T Oh, it is all most painfully honest. We're in debt. (*Her second sentence is meant as proof of her first*)

NEIL No doubt, but that's no evidence of honesty.

LADY T (*genuinely surprised*) Isn't it? (*Dismissing the problem*) Oh, well, you must come and see for yourself, and make sure that I am not baby-farming, or whatever it is you suspect me of, and then we can get the grant or the subsidy, or whatever it is, and get the new hot-water pipes in. I won't keep you now, because I know you want to tell Millicent all about your triumph. Such a wonderful majority. Wasn't it, Millie?

LADY C. Very remarkable.

[*Again NEIL casts her a puzzled glance.*]

LADY T I think he is going to be a great asset to Kilcrannock.

LADY C. Providing his Cabinet duties don't prove too distracting.

LADY T. Cabinet? But he isn't in the Cabinet.

LADY C. No, but he will be.

LADY T. You see the faith she has in you. (*Going*) I am almost ashamed to bother such a brilliant young man with my hot-water pipes.

[NEIL *murmurs that he will be charmed.*]

LADY T. *Au revoir*, Millicent. *Au revoir*, Mr Tummel; we are going to work together beautifully.

[*Exit* LADY TILlicOUNTRY]

NEIL (*after a pause*) Have you faith in me?

LADY C. If you mean, do I believe that you can reach Cabinet rank; yes. If you mean, could I trust you not to give me a bad half-crown—no.

NEIL I seem to have become a petty crook with remarkable rapidity.

LADY C. Almost as rapidly as you became a Liberal.

NEIL (*thinking he sees the light*) So *that's* what you're angry about?

LADY C. I'm not angry.

NEIL Och, woman, there are daggers shooting from your eyes. And the hand you gave me was like a haddock. (*Puzzled*) I thought you would be pleased about it. All the way down in the train I kept thinking how pleased you would be. (*He sounds like a child deprived of a promised treat*)

LADY C. You must forgive me if I am slow in getting used to the idea. When you left this room it was to become a stone-breaker or something of the sort.

NEIL (*indulgently*) Oh, well, that was a figure of speech.

LADY C. (*with an air of innocent inquiry*) A—fib, you mean?

NEIL (*hastily*) No, no. A—a dramatisation.

LADY C. And did you 'dramatise' yourself into a Liberal frame of mind?

NEIL Oh, no. That was logic. Pure logic.

LADY C. Really?

NEIL It seemed to me that if I was resigning because I was too fond of Liberal ways, the obvious solution was to become a Liberal. Don't you approve of me as a Liberal?

LADY C. My dear Mr Tummel, I have never approved of you.

NEIL (*eyeing her*) You gave a very fine imitation of it.

LADY C. Perhaps you were misled.

NEIL By what?

LADY C. My natural good manners. In polite circles disapproval does not necessarily mean a spit in the eye.

NEIL But it does in mine, you mean.

LADY C. (*considering it*) Perhaps not in the eye; but certainly a spit.

NEIL Well, thank God I am no hypocrite!

LADY C. (*sweetly*) No?

NEIL No! Do you suggest that I am?

LADY C. (*still sweetly*) I don't suggest it. I give it as my considered opinion that you are the most colossal hypocrite that it has ever been my unfortunate lot to meet. (*Going on as he is about to interrupt*) When you burst into this room three months ago you were a Moses. Do you remember? You were going to lead your people out of bondage. Because we did not subscribe to your beautiful theory that some inherent wisdom and virtue pertains to a man who earns less than two pounds a week we were knaves of the deepest dye. We were tyrants, and exploiters, and oppressors. I take it that we are still tyrants, and exploiters, and oppressors, but Neil Tummel is no longer a Moses.

NEIL (*interrupting*) I can do far more for my people as a member of a party than I ever could as a lone voice in the wilderness.

LADY C. But what became of Samson?

NEIL (*puzzled*) Samson?

LADY C. You came into this room a Moses, but you left it a Samson. Had you forgotten? You were a poor heart-broken creature who had had his hair cut and had betrayed his people and was going to hide his shame in a factory.

NEIL (*rubbing his hand over the back of his head with a rueful gesture*) Oh, well. There's no denying my tongue runs away with me sometimes.

LADY C. (*interested*) Is *that* what you call it—a slip of the tongue?

NEIL (*indulgent*) An excess of imagination, let us say. I was giving up my dream of being a Moses, and maybe I dramatised myself a little. There's no hypocrisy in that.

LADY C. No? Perhaps you don't remember how noble you were? How you sacrificed your dreams for conscience' sake? How you were going out into the wilderness to begin again.

NEIL Well, I——

LADY C. And all the time you had your first Liberal pay in your pocket.

NEIL (*startled*) What? What pay?

LADY C. The promise of Party backing for Kilcrannock. And the knowledge that the Tories were going to resign.

NEIL (*after a pause*) So you know that? (*With a naïve frankness*) I didn't think Archie'd mention it. He had no right to tell me things like that, you know. He wouldn't have, if it hadn't been for the bottle.

LADY C. You underrate your charm.

NEIL (*eyeing her*) You're a very nasty woman when you like.

LADY C. You sat there and ate my food and drank my wine and told a pack of silly lies——

NEIL (*indignant*) They *weren't* silly. They were very fine lies.

LADY C. *Silly* lies for no other reason than to make yourself important.

NEIL Well, that's no bad reason.

LADY C. To hide what a very shabby, timid, time-serving little man ...

NEIL I'm five feet ten, I'd have you know.

LADY C. So you are, and make yourself look big and fine and courageous in my admiring eyes.

NEIL Well, it serves you right for trifling with my affections.

LADY C. Tri—— (*Words fail her*)

NEIL Do you deny that you trifled with my affections?

LADY C. (*coldly*) My dear Neil Tummel, I never trifle; and I doubt whether you have affections.

NEIL You took me up. That's the phrase, isn't it? You took me up, the way you would a new kind of dog, or a clever nigger——

LADY C. (*automatically*) Negro.

NEIL —you took me round town with you, you flattered me——

LADY C. (*hotly*) I have never flattered you!

NEIL Oh, yes, you did. You flattered me by deferring to me, by letting me think that I was educating you, by—oh, in all the thousand ways that a woman like you knows how to flatter. You didn't even have to *say* anything; you had only to look as if you were listening; or to smile your own special kind of smile; or to put your

finger-tips on my arm to draw my attention to something. What defence has a man like me against a woman like you? It's your own fault if you get lies told you. When I am Prime Minister—— (*Pausing at sight of her smile*) You don't believe that one day the King will send for me?

LADY C. No. You will send for the King.

NEIL When I am Liberal Prime Minister——

LADY C. (*correcting*) Tory Prime Minister. By that time you will be a Tory.

NEIL (*with stubborn emphasis*) When I am Prime Minister—— (*Coming to a full stop—testily*) Now you've made me forget what I was going to say.

LADY C. (*smoothly*) You were going to say that by the time you reach that eminence you will stop telling lies because you will not have to impress anyone, even yourself. Believe me, being Prime Minister is no cure for anything. On the contrary. I have never known a Prime Minister who was not an exaggerated version of what he was as a Sixth Form boy. (*Regarding him*) An exaggerated version of Neil Tummel is something I shudder to contemplate. However, England has survived even stranger things at Number Ten. (*Picking up her gloves and beginning to put them on*) Which reminds me that I am due there now.

NEIL (*considering her*) Are you dropping me?

LADY C. (*absorbed in the painstaking process of donning kid gloves*) I am—I must confess to you—a born buyer of gold bricks. You are my latest gold brick.

NEIL You mean that you are putting me into the wastepaper basket just because I don't fit some sentimental picture you had of me?

LADY C. It is not sentimental to expect sincerity in a person.

NEIL (*with a sneer*) And how sincere are you?

LADY C. (*taking the wind out of his sails*) Socially I am a monument of insincerity.

NEIL Well, then?

LADY C. Morally I am an honest woman. (*As NEIL is about to interrupt*) And I consider it immoral for one person to engage the emotions of another by telling lies.

NEIL (*jumping at it*) So your emotions *were* engaged?

LADY C. (*smoothly*) Certainly. I was never so sorry for anyone.

NEIL (*dashed*) Sorry?

LADY C. Did you expect *me* to weep over that touching picture of a broken idealist? And then I find that I have been squandering my sentiments on a

mountebank.

NEIL Don't you dare call me that. Just because I got a bit carried away one night. Do you think I'm not sincere about my mission? About the improvement of the world?

LADY C. Provided the fortunes of Neil Tummel are improved at the same time.

NEIL You think me a complete hypocrite? (*Rage and incredulity struggle for mastery*)

LADY C. If you remember, I began this conversation by saying so.

NEIL You believe that I don't care a hoot what happens to the working-classes as long as I'm all right?

LADY C. I wouldn't go as far as that.

NEIL (*hastily*) Well, that's something.

LADY C. I think your interest in their salvation would be less urgent if you were not their saviour.

NEIL That is a——

LADY C. If the redemption of the world depended on your remaining an obscure little teacher of Junior English, I suspect the world would stay unredeemed.

NEIL But that's an outrageous thing to say. It makes me a—a monster of vanity.

LADY C. (*kindly*) I shouldn't worry if I were you. Most saviours are very vain.

NEIL Why are you being so cruel this morning? (*It is an expression of curiosity, not a protest*) Stabbing away at me like that. Brushing me off as if I was a golochan you found in your dress.

LADY C. A what?

NEIL An earwig.

LADY C. I think the earwig is a charming insect by comparison.

NEIL You can't be as angry as that merely because I turned my coat.

LADY C. Of course not. You could have turned your coat a dozen times with my blessing, provided you had been honest about it. Political quirks I am used to, but not—— (*she hunts for a phrase*) not crocodile tears on my drawing-room carpet.

NEIL I tell you, my tongue ran away with me. I was excited that night, having supper with you, and Lord Archibald approving of me, and drinking wine for the first time, and you looking like all the pictures in the world—do you realise that was the first time I had seen you in evening-dress?—and the summer night outside, and everything; I just *had* to make something to match it. But to damn me as a hypocrite,

body and soul, just because on one occasion I let my imagination get the upper——
(*As LADY CHARING, still busy with her gloves but nearing an end of them, casts her eye round to see where her feather ornament may be*) Look, before I went north, that night at supper, you asked me to Charing for the week-end. Let me come one week-end and—I can't talk to you now, you aren't even paying attention to me; you're just as interested in that feather thing (*even at this moment his vanity is uppermost*)—let me come one week-end when there will be time to talk——

LADY C. (*smoothing her gloves*) I shall not be much at Charing this autumn, I am going yachting. I am always very sick, but a good retch now and then is excellent for the complexion.

NEIL You are running away!

LADY C. From what?

NEIL From me.

LADY C. (*with a light and very successful little laugh*) My dear Neil!

NEIL You couldn't be all that angry if—if what I did didn't matter to you.

LADY C. (*explaining her anger*) I don't like being fooled, any more than the next woman. Nothing riles a woman like a misspent tear.

NEIL (*repeating his conviction*) You are too angry. If I was just 'an earwig', you wouldn't be so angry.

LADY C. (*considering him*) Your vanity is really pathological, isn't it? If someone is angry with you, that is the measure of your importance. If she takes a holiday, she is running away from you. Let me make it quite clear. Anger is very ageing, and therefore a luxury I don't indulge in; and I am going yachting because for the last three months, like everyone else, I have consistently over-eaten. The Romans tickled their throats, and we go to Marienbad. I, personally, find yachting more effective. And now——

NEIL That is just a lot of words. You can say what you like, but you *are* angry

LADY C. (*correcting*) Annoyed.

NEIL Well, call it what you like, but what I did was important to you. If it hadn't been, you'd have been all social-insincerity this morning, and not cared two shakes of a lamb's tail whether I had pretended to be better than I was or not. You'd have been full of polite gush like that silly Tillicoultry woman, who is ready to——

LADY C. You should be grateful to Poppy Tillicoultry.

NEIL For what, may I ask?

LADY C. But for her, we should never have met.

NEIL (*puzzled*) But you asked me to tea.

LADY C. Yes. Poppy persuaded me to invite you.

NEIL *That* woman did? Why?

LADY C. She didn't like your ties.

NEIL What has that to do with it?

LADY C. She hoped that I might change them. (*AS NEIL is silent, taking this in*) You must admit that I have been very successful. Your present cravat would not disgrace the Foreign Office.

NEIL (*slowly*) So that is why you invited me.

LADY C. To make you pretty for Poppy; yes.

NEIL And did it need so much—— (*he looks for a phrase*) personal attention to change a bit of silk round my neck?

LADY C. (*with disarming frankness*) Oh, no. I grew interested in you.

[*NEIL'S stiffness momentarily relaxes.*]

LADY C. I found you most attractive. I thought it was your principles. But I think Poppy was right; she said it was your profile.

NEIL Between the two of you, I seem to have been well chewed over.

LADY C. Between *you* and *Poppy* I have been put to a great deal of inconvenience. However, since you are both the better for it, I cannot grudge my wasted interest. And now I must go, or I shall be late at——

NEIL You can't make yourself the most important thing in my life and then walk out of it as if you were stepping into your carriage. (*There is more threat than appeal in that*) What do you think I am made of? What do you think I am? A doll to be dressed and undressed? A dummy to be pushed about on a board for your pleasure?

LADY C. (*regarding him*) No, I think you are a very silly and snobbish little climber, who didn't even notice that I was a woman as well as a Viscountess, until it was brought to your notice that my hair let down. If I have been important to you, believe me I am not irreplaceable. Peeresses in the Liberal Party are two a penny. It is absurd to suggest——

NEIL Stop it!

[*In sheer surprise she stops.*]

NEIL You know very well what I mean, and it has nothing to do with climbing or snobbery. It has to do with you and me.

LADY C. The only thing that you and I have in common, Mr Tummel, is the Liberal Party.

NEIL (*who has come close enough to her to look into her eyes, speculatively*) I wish I could see what you are thinking. All these words, and what do they mean? What did you want of me that you're so angry with me now? (*As she does not answer, but meets his gaze calmly*) Not a lover. Your virtue's a byword all over London. I suppose that means you're a cold woman. Then what did you want of me?

LADY C. I have told you. I thought your principles matched your profile. But I was wrong. You are, after all, a little man. You have a blind eye, but no telescope to put to it.

NEIL (*still considering her*) If it's a Nelson you're looking for, they're few and far between.

LADY C. I shall go on looking.

NEIL And meanwhile?

LADY C. Meanwhile?

NEIL All the 'little' fellows you have encouraged and discarded die of shame.

LADY C. That is something you are not likely to die of.

NEIL Not me. I'm Neil Tummel. I may be just a parlour game to you, but I'm going to be history to a lot of others. I'm on my way up; and you're going to watch me go. And if this is good-bye, let me give you something to remember me by. (*He takes her to him with one arm, tilts her chin with the other hand, and kisses her heartily on the lips. Releasing her*) I've wanted to do that for a long time.

LADY C. (*who has suffered the embrace without moving*) I have wanted for a long time to do something for you. Something that your mother should have done.

NEIL (*with his too-ready resentment*) My mother did everything for me!

LADY C. Except put you across her knee. However—(*picking up her wrap*)—the House of Commons will do that. So will your wife.

NEIL My wife?

LADY C. You will marry for prestige, of course; and to your last day you will never know what your wife is really thinking. As for your children ...

NEIL If you think my children will be snobs (*there is the faintest emphasis on the word 'children', since he is unconsciously admitting the truth of her first prediction*) you are wrong; they ...

LADY C. On the contrary they will disgrace you by being Socialists. You will be forever explaining away your son's antics. By the time you are forty you will have the whole world for audience, and no one to talk to; and I am very sorry for you. (*She does not sound particularly sorry*) You set out to be a Moses; then you thought you were a Samson; and all you are is an Esau.

NEIL Esau?

LADY C. A man who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. (*Following NEIL'S thought perfectly*) And if you think that the pottage may prove worth it, let me tell you here and now that it will be dust and ashes in your mouth, for one reason.

NEIL Go on. Curse me.

LADY C. (*ignoring the gibe*) However far you go, however long you live, there will be a label round your neck that you can never get rid of. They will whisper the tag behind you at assemblies, state it openly in your biographies, quote it against you in opposition, and repeat it in your obituary. 'Of course, Millicent Charing made him', they will say. 'Millicent Charing made him, of course.' And your achievement will be dust and ashes in your mouth.

NEIL (*staring at her; light and conviction dawning simultaneously; not in triumph but in a kind of wonder—slowly*) You were in love with me.

[*The door opens to admit LORD CHARING, a placid and unemotional little presence.*]

LORD C. (*in his gentle, matter-of-fact voice*) Millicent dear, I don't think I shall wait for you. It is really time that I looked in at the Club, and—— (*Catching sight of NEIL*) Oh! I thought you had Poppy with you. My dear Mr Tummel, allow me to congratulate you, and to welcome you to the Liberal Party.

[*He shakes hands with NEIL.*]

LORD C. It's a curious world, isn't it? A month ago we Liberals had nothing to offer a bright young man, and now it seems the Party is a land of infinite opportunity.

LADY C. Of which Mr Tummel will take definite advantage. I think you had better come with me (*emphasis on 'with'*) Gussie, just for a moment, to pay your respects.

LORD C. Very well, my dear. Can we drop you somewhere, Mr Tummel?

LADY C. (*going out*) Mr Tummel may as well come with us to Number Ten. He is on his way there in any case.

CURTAIN

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Lady Charing is Cross* by Gordon Daviot]