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Elsie and the Child

*A Tale of Riceyman Steps
and Other Stories*

By

Arnold Bennett

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ELSIE AND THE CHILD

I

ELSIE AND THE CHILD

I

Elsie and her husband Joe were working in the kitchen of Dr. Raste's abode at the corner of Myddelton Square and Cheval Street, Clerkenwell, E.C.1. Once they possessed a surname, but through disuse it had withered away and existed no more—save in ink on their insurance cards and medical cards. Everybody, high or humble, called them Elsie and Joe. They thought of themselves as Elsie and Joe Elsie had youth, kind, dark blue eyes, blue-black hair, a magnificent physique, the stability of a tower. Joe, too, had youth, darkness, but he was thinner and less firm on his pins than his wife.

The obscure, hot kitchen, full of cooking-range, sink, deal table, windsor chairs, washing apparatus, racks with crockery, saucepans, buckets, cloths, coal-bin, and cupboards open and shut, looked up subterraneously into the forbidden and forlorn July garden through an open window from which steam and odours were issuing.

A tremendous metallic clangour shook the air with a deafening and tyrannical summons, and died down reluctantly; it seemed to die, then revived, and died again.

"Master's forgot his key," said Elsie, casting off a thick apron and springing to a flimsier and fancier one that hung over a chair-back. Her brow had puckered with conscientiousness; it was the brow of a woman absorbed by the sense of duty.

"That ain't master's ring," said Joe in his deep voice at the range. Sweat stood on his reddened face.

"Oh lor then!" Elsie muttered in apprehension, throwing apron-strings over her majestic shoulders and fastening them behind.

She vanished through the kitchen doorway. In the space at the foot of the twilit basement steps, whose shabby and stained walls were irregularly striped with all sorts of conduits conveying water, gas, electricity and bell-wires, the front-door bell was indolently still wagging. She ran up the stairs, putting on a new demeanour as she approached the levels where dwelt the feared, worshipped and incalculable rulers of her universe. A strange caste; they were unhappy if they could not have a bath every day! And they would not eat simply; their meals were made as complicated as a church service, with all sorts of cloths, glasses, cutlery and silver which had to be arranged in a very particular way. They could not eat their fill of one dish. Oh no! They would peck at a dish and then have it changed for another one, and so on. And if you offered them solid food you must stand on one side of them, and if liquid you must stand on the other side of them. And you had to hold the dish with one hand and keep it balanced against their pressures with the spoon or fork, while they helped themselves. And upstairs you must touch nothing with your fingers. Downstairs you touched everything with your fingers, and they knew you did; but upstairs you must pretend that the fingers had never touched the food. It was nearly funny enough to give you the giggles; but of course it was all quite proper and right and nice, though a bit incomprehensible. However, there it was!

And though they didn't mind much about their own costume, they fussed terribly about yours. The cap, for instance. Never let them see you without a cap. The sight of your bare head seemed to shock them, and they drummed the cap into you so that after a time you blushed if they caught you capless and somehow felt as if you had entirely forgotten to dress yourself. You had to wear a blue print dress in the morning, but not after twelve-thirty. My word, no! After twelve-thirty blue print suddenly became improper. Most girls whom Elsie saw about in the afternoons wore black. But not Elsie. Elsie had to wear a light purple colour—missus had bought it in Upper Street, at one of the big shops there. It was so odd that to begin with Elsie had been ashamed to face the Square in it, as bad as a pantomime it was. But she had grown accustomed to it.

Then your voice, the way you had to speak to them! As a charwoman, and even as "general" to the most respectable Earlforward couple in Riceyman Steps—they as died one after the other the same day, poor things!—Elsie had always used her natural voice. But Mrs. Raste would say so nicely, "Hsh! Not so loud, Elsie!" and, "Elsie, you should speak quietly and you should move quietly." So that you actually learned to mince your words! So that you had two voices, one for "them" and their friends and the private patients, and the other for Joe and the tradesmen and the panel patients.

Nevertheless it was all simply beautiful and superior, and you were proud of it, and you felt that you had gone up in the world. What Elsie deemed not quite nice was the rule against knocking at the dining-room or the drawing-room door. She could not believe her ears when Mrs. Raste first told her of this. Well, the dining-room, perhaps that was all right. But the drawing-room! To burst in on them! To knock was for Elsie the very basis of politeness. She had compromised by coughing for a day or two. But as soon as Mrs. Raste realized that the cough had a purpose she stopped that too. And when Elsie had timidly mentioned the matter to her friend in high life, Miss Eva, the child had laughed and kicked out her long legs. "Elsie, you are too frightfully comic!"

At the front door was a strange lady of early middle age. Elsie had to keep her wits together, for she was still new to this portion of a house-parlourmaid's job, which previously had been performed by Joe. She was supposed to judge character and real errand instantly and to act accordingly; not everyone could be let into the house, and appearances were deceptive. Anyhow, she felt sure that this visitor was not a patient, nor a prospective patient.

"Is Mrs. Raste at home?"

The strange lady spoke smilingly, nicely, but commandingly. *She'd* never stand any nonsense. Now Elsie, reflect, and judge like lightning! Is it to be "Yes 'm" or "I'll see, 'm" or "What name, 'm?" or "If you'll step inside, 'm, I'll——"? Sunday morning! No prayer-book in her hand, either! Just on dinner-time! The lady stepped inside of her own accord. Evidently one of those as knew their minds. A bit cool though. At the same moment Mrs. Raste surged out of the front room, and there was such a clasping and a kissing and a burying of face in face as you never saw.

"I thought it was you, Harriet, but I couldn't believe it. How long is it?"

More kissing.

"What an elaborate carved ceiling!" said the visitor, looking up at the ceiling of the hall.

Queer thing to say, just then! Well, she was probably a bit nervous, not having seen Mrs. Raste for so long, and they so fond of each other.

"Oh, yes!" said Mrs. Raste. "There's some remains of greatness about this Square. How observant you are, you darling! You'll stay for dinner."

"Shall I?"

"Yes, you will. Elsie, lay another place, will you please?"

"Oh, certainly, 'm." A slip! It slipped out of her mouth in her agitation. She ought simply to have said, "Yes 'm." No fancy replies allowed!

From the moment the bell rang she had had a sort of an idea that somebody was coming in unexpectedly for dinner. And on that day of all days! No wonder that she was agitated! She felt that she was up against destiny.

II

"Dinner is served, madam."

This was what she had to say, and to say with precision in the drawing-room doorway. She had once said, "Dinner's ready, 'm," but that would not pass. Then she had said, "Dinner's served, 'm." And that would not pass either. The discipline reminded her, somehow, of the spirit of the tales of military life recounted to her both by her first husband, Sprickett, and by Joe.

In an hour of expansion one night she had imparted to her sympathetic mistress that her proudest desire had been to be able to wait at table. Strange ambition for a serious young woman with responsibilities, but it was hers—and call it caprice if you will! Soon afterwards she had been taken bad, and Joe had cooked a meal. The rulers did not know that Joe could cook; but Elsie knew, for Joe would prepare little snacks for self and missis in the private life of their home in the basement. Joe had the root of the matter deeply in him, whereas Elsie preferred service to cookery, for which she had no instinct. A little while, and nearly the whole of the household work was turned upside down. Most of what had been Elsie's became Joe's, and vice versa. Joe at any rate was happier because more withdrawn from the world—the

sheltered secrecy of the kitchen seemed to suit this victim of shell-shock and malaria—and Elsie, if not actually happier, was more excited. Quite a revolution in Myddelton Square!

Mrs. Raste had taken advantage of the master's occasional absence from meals to instruct Elsie in the complex craft of waiting at table. Mrs. Raste was as ambitious for Elsie as Elsie for herself. Elsie's ambition gave the mistress the opportunity effectually to counter the master's indifference to the spectacular niceties of domestic existence. The master, indeed, clung to the simplicities of his youth; the youth of the mistress had been less humble. Thus Elsie had been made into a political tool. She had already given one or two modest performances in presence of the master, but this very Sunday's dinner had been appointed by the mistress as the occasion of the first full display—and the master had had no notice of the matter. Imagine Elsie's apprehensive nervousness! And then to cap all, in comes this formidable if kindly Miss Harriet Huskisson, C.B.E.—Elsie had heard Mrs. Raste half-teasingly congratulate her adored Harriet upon the distinction! Imagine the upset! More plates to be warmed. More silver and cutlery to be got out and rubbed up! And no time for it all; and Joe muttering that the beef would get dry if it had to wait! And did the mistress watch over her, give her moral support? Not a bit. "Elsie, lay another place." No more than that!

The rulers chatted and laughed together in the drawing-room without a care. Stay! Let us be just. Mrs. Raste did run into the dining-room once. "Oh, Elsie. That won't do. Miss Eva's place must be on the master's left now. Didn't you think?" (Eva had special apparatus.) How could Elsie think of a thing like that?

Now she waited alone in the dining-room for them to come. She looked in the mirror over the sideboard at her cap, apron, dress. She turned round and twisted her head back to see if the shoulder-strings of her apron were twisted. No! Everything all right. She glanced anxiously around. Spare bread on the sideboard? Yes. Spoons in the two vegetable dishes? Yes. She would have to "hand" them both at once. Cover on the dish of meat and Yorkshire in front of the master's place. Cork loose in the flagon of Australian burgundy. Water jug full. Handles of spoons for the sweet to the right and handles of forks to the left. Yes. . . . She grew more and more nervous. Why didn't they come? Everything getting cold.

They came, gay and careless (except Miss Eva, who looked funny). *They* had only to eat, drink and enjoy themselves, while for Elsie a soul-racking ordeal was at hand. They never looked at her. The master looked at the vegetable dishes on the sideboard and compressed his lips. His fixed notion was that the vegetables should be in front of the mistress as the meat was in front of the master. The mistress had defied him, and he would have to lump it. A slight change in the atmosphere, a subtle sniff of disturbance, perceptible enough to Elsie! This, added to Miss Eva's mysterious moodiness, had its distracting effect upon Elsie. And then blowed if the door wasn't pushed open and Jack came nosing in, inquisitive and apologetic. Well, he had no right to be in the dining-room at meals; she would not have him getting under her feet; and she shoo'd him out, and quick too! . . . They were all seated. The room, the ceremony, were in Elsie's charge. She lifted the gleaming cover from the meat. ("Aha!" said the master, brightening for the sake of the distinguished guest.) As she lifted the cover, Elsie's fat, red hand trembled with stage fright, just as the elegant pale hand of some Shakespearean Viola might tremble in unrolling the parchment of Orsino's address to Olivia on a first-night.

It was with gratitude to God for His great mercy that Elsie left the dining-room with the big oval japanned tray loaded to its limit at the end of the meat course. She had come through the first course, if not with honours, without any notable disaster. Once or twice the mistress had had to signal to her—signals which Elsie, not instantly understanding, had in an interminable couple of seconds understood with an undignified start unworthy of a perfectly mechanized parlourmaid.

Once she had stretched a hand to remove the C.B.E.'s plate, and the C.B.E. in a comical supplicatory tone had appealed for further possession of the plate, not having quite finished with it. Sure enough, the lady had not put her knife and fork together to indicate that all was over for that course. A dreadful moment! The mistress had raised eyebrows, and Elsie had offered her a miserable and touching little smile of excuse, a smile entirely unauthorized by the code. Also in pouring out the master's wine she had spilt three drops from the rim of the flagon, having forgotten to give the flagon the bit of a twist which would have prevented such an accident. Another dreadful moment! For some time afterwards she could see nothing but the red stigmata on the white tablecloth, and she could see them even through the mound of salt under which the master buried them.

But the most dreadful moments were those during which she had had to stand unoccupied and moveless by the sideboard, striving to keep in order those unruly vassals—her hands, terrorized by a sickening self-consciousness, and praying that nobody would want any more wine, for if anybody did she knew she would positively spill not three drops but thirty.

The dog was at the turn of the hall into the basement steps. He would be! Down he went, head over heels, yelping, and arguing to himself that in a world so unjust there could be no God. She persuaded the heavy tray through the dark incline and round the corners, and deposited it in safety on the kitchen table. Like beaching a lifeboat full of the saved! Populations ought to have cheered.

"Sugar castor?" Joe queried in the nick of time, as she was about to set forth with cherry pie, custard sauce and plates.

God was good, but not too good. Joe dashed to the cupboard. She had the precautionary wit to shake the castor. It was empty. And she could not wrench the top off it. Between them they could not wrench it off. Months, decades, ages passed. The earth stood still. Eternity superseded time. Black shame enclosed Elsie. Tears gathered in her eyes. Joe grew incredibly, horribly blasphemous and obscene. . . . The top flew away. A tremendous metallic clangour shook the air with a deafening and tyrannical summons. Expression of dire wrath from on high! What would *they* say to Elsie when she returned to the dining-room?

They said nothing. They looked nothing. They pretended that nothing untoward had happened and that the bell had not been rung. Astounding duplicity, and somehow not at all reassuring! Elsie functioned for some minutes in a nightmare of crossing Niagara on a rope. Then, slowly regaining the realities of the meal, she noticed first that Dr. Raste had condoned the method of serving vegetables and was genuinely cheerful and agreeable; and second, that Miss Eva was crying. Joe's finest hot cherry pie lay untouched in front of Miss Eva. What had they been talking about during the struggle downstairs with the sugar castor? Elsie, being otherwise occupied, had ignored the conversation throughout the meal. She listened now for a clue to Miss Eva's trouble, but did not catch it. The sight of the softly weeping child made Elsie want to cry too; it dimmed her vision, so that she saw the table as through a steamy pane. Miss Eva, the axis and idol of the household, who while nominally the sport of autocratic parents was in fact her parents' queen—Miss Eva tore at Elsie's tender heart; and for a special reason among many; if Elsie was in service at the Rastes', it was solely because the child at their first encounter had taken such a prodigious, inexplicable fancy to her, had forced her parents to engage Elsie, and forced Elsie to accept the situation.

There Miss Eva sat, far more elegant and stylish than either of her parents, fresh, exquisite in contours, sensitive, proud, defenceless, set apart, so young in her twelve years, childlike, childlike, childlike,—broken! The adults were roughened and stained by the world, experience, years; Miss Eva had the divinity of innocence, and rather than that she should lose a particle of it, the whole world ought to be destroyed. Elsie better than anyone else in the room felt and comprehended the ineffable difference between Miss Eva and the powerful, hardened, shrewd adults. The adults were at their duplicity again, assiduously pretending that Eva had not outraged the code. But when the child's tears began to dilute the juice of the cherry pie on her plate duplicity had to be abandoned.

"Darling," said the mistress gently, "wouldn't you like to go and lie down?"

The child nodded meekly, slipped from her chair, and, staggering at first under a weight of woe heavy enough for an adult, scurried out of the room like an animal. (She usually lay down during the day because she was understood to be "outgrowing her strength.")

"Elsie," said the mistress in a casual tone, "have you any idea what's the matter with Miss Eva?"

Elsie was thunderstruck at this address, this open admission in front of company that she, the maid, the ex-charwoman, might have special knowledge of the aristocratic child's mysterious moods.

"No, 'm. That I haven't!"

The next moment some cord in her snapped, and to her own amazement, horror and shame she burst into tears with a mighty sob.

"All right, Elsie. I think we shan't want you any more for the present," said the mistress gently.

And Elsie also left the room. Unimaginable end of a meal so creditably and correctly begun! But *they* would smile among themselves calmly; Elsie knew they would.

There were strange doings in the afternoon. The adults became children.

It is necessary to explain the geography of the doctor's dwelling. The garden wall ran along the north side of Cheval Street, being a low continuation of the side-wall of the house. There were two doors in the garden wall, close to each other and close to the house. On entering the one nearest to the house you found yourself in a narrow passage with a high wooden fence on your left hand and the back wall of the house, with a little area containing the window of the basement-kitchen, on your right. This passage ended just beyond the window; it gave access to the back door of the house and the kitchen window, but no access whatever to the garden, in which the doctor had no part nor lot. The next door in the wall gave access to the garden, which consisted of a neglected lawn with a lead statue in the middle, surrounded by a tilted border of evergreen shrubs, also neglected. Abutting on the house, at the corner farthest from Cheval Street, was raised a most strange high out-house, which out-house contained nothing but a spiral staircase. Like every house without exception in Myddelton Square the doctor's had four stories and a basement. It had been spaciouly built for the prosperous in the very year in which Victoria came to the throne; but now it was divided into two separated houses.

The doctor enjoyed the basement, ground floor, and first floor. The spiral staircase led to the second and third floors, and had been devised by the landlord, who was a queer fellow, a painter, and had a vast studio in the roof. The doctor now and then saw his name, Batwing, in the papers, but had never seen any of his pictures, and could not comprehend why he should choose to have a habitation in what was to the doctor the most prosaic and most respectable of all squares. Mr. Batwing was chiefly an absentee landlord, appearing only in the spring and autumn, when he might be seen sketching in his own garden or in the central garden of the Square by St. Mark's Church. What he could find there to sketch the doctor could not conceive.

Mr. Batwing's existence in Myddelton Square was mysterious, but not, so far as anybody could judge, scandalous—and never noisy. He had a manservant as dumb as a eunuch. A charwoman came during his sojourns, equally dumb. Occasionally streams of visitors arrived, some of them radiantly smart, and a row of automobiles occupied Cheval Street. The visitors walked in the garden and were beheld and criticized from Miss Eva's bedroom or from the bathroom; they could be faintly heard exclaiming or shrieking as they passed up and down the enclosed spiral staircase. The doctor always referred to Mr. Batwing as "my landlord," with a grim, sardonic intonation, suggesting that he had a perfect curiosity and enigma of a landlord in Mr. Batwing. And the doctor's friends and leading private patients would sometimes inquire quizzingly of the doctor about "your landlord." At any rate the idiosyncrasies of Mr. Batwing confirmed the doctor and the whole Square in their conventional estimate of the race of artists.

Now Elsie in the kitchen saw the lower portions of the bodies of the rulers—that is to say, Dr. and Mrs. Raste and Miss Harriet Huskisson, C.B.E.—in the little passage whose fence separated the domain of the doctor from that of his landlord. She knew that Miss Huskisson had been inspecting the house; the party had emerged from the back door by way of the waiting-room for panel patients. It was a lovely July afternoon, and a serene gaiety was abroad.

"Do you mean to say that we can't get into the garden at all?" Miss Huskisson demanded.

"We can't," answered the doctor.

"We could if *his* garden door was unlocked, but it isn't, and he's away," said Mrs. Raste.

"Flo," said Miss Huskisson challengingly, "you are a poor thing and chicken-hearted and a slave. I'll show you if we can't get into the garden."

A large galvanized-iron dustbin stood in the passage, with its round cover leaning against it. Miss Huskisson put the cover on the top and sprang on to it, and overlooked the fence.

"Why! How beautiful!" she exclaimed. "It's all bathed in sunshine. It's like a bit of Georgian that someone's left lying about and forgotten." And she lifted herself on to the fence, which trembled beneath her formidable weight. "Oh! It'll be all right. He isn't here. And even if he was I know old Batwing. He's a friend of mine." In an instant she was on the other side of the fence, safe in the garden. "Come on. Follow! Follow!"

The doctor himself, grinning but somewhat nervous, stood on the dustbin and looked over.

"Yes," he said. "But how are you going to get back?"

"Harriet!" cried Mrs. Raste. "You're as bad as you used to be at school."

"Worse, my dear," Harriet admitted.

Mrs. Raste squealed as her husband pushed her over the fence. . . . They had all three vanished out of Elsie's sight into the forbidden garden. Elsie moved away from the window as if ashamed of, and unwilling even to countenance it by watching, the highly strange performance of three grave and responsible adults turned children on a Sunday afternoon. But she admired Miss Harriet Huskisson; she liked her voice and manner, so authoritative and yet jolly. Miss Huskisson gave out initiative, energy, life itself. Joe had said, in one of his rare communications, that he had an idea she was head-mistress of some girls' school somewhere.

A few minutes later Elsie heard a long, repeated cry from the garden:

"E-va! E-va! E-va!"

Then the throwing up of Miss Eva's bedroom window.

"Come down, Eva darling. Come into the garden."

And Eva at length appeared in the passage, prim and hesitant in her white frock, and jumped as gracefully as a cat on to the dustbin. Elsie approached the kitchen window again.

"Pile those bricks there against the fence, doctor." Miss Huskisson's bright, shrill voice! "We can get back on them."

The doctor's head and shoulders appeared above the fence, and Eva was hauled over into the garden.

"Oh, my frock, daddy!"

Elsie was partially solaced. Cheerfulness invaded her soul, despite the devastating memory of her awful behaviour at dinner. The trouble among the rulers was over.

But when the garden party returned, guiltily (except Miss Eva, who knew that the trespass was not her affair), over the fence, Elsie in her rough apron was at the side table under the window cutting bread and butter, and at the sight of her the child again began to cry gently.

"Tea, Elsie, please," Mrs. Raste called out. This unceremoniousness alone showed her how the adventure in the garden had lifted the mistress out of her groove.

"Yes, 'm."

The rulers went into the house.

"Joe!" Elsie summoned her young, silent husband, who was in the front room of the basement. "Joe, clean yourself and put your coat on. You must take the tea up. I couldn't face it again yet. No, I couldn't!"

"But what'll *she* say?" Joe asked, gazing darkly, ingenuously and submissively at Elsie. He had heard of the dinner episode, heard with sympathy and distress, seen Elsie's wet eyes, but had made no comment.

"She must say what she's a mind," Elsie answered with firmness. The most conscientious of women, Elsie had nevertheless moments of independence which defied conscience. She would rebel, make a decision, and there you were! No doing anything with her in those moments. Elsie had developed into a woman of the world—her world. She had lived through character-forming hours in the household of the deceased Earlwards. She had felt the weight of terrific responsibilities, tested her moral resources, and she could not be treated like a ninny. But fancy the cook taking up the tea to the drawing-room of such a stickler as Mrs. Raste! What *would* the stickler say when the cook appeared before her in the drawing-room? Well, she wouldn't say anything on the spot, of course, because she was a real lady and treated servants with the respect due to human beings; but she might be very inquisitive and corrective later, not merely about the tea but about dinner also. And Elsie, with such a name for niceness and sweetness and reliability and so on! That was the line she would take! Well, there you were!

When Joe descended from serving the tea, the news of the drawing-room forced him to talk. Mistress had given not a sign of being disturbed. She had seemed perfectly to understand. (Naturally she would understand, thought Elsie, repenting of her unkind apprehensions which amounted to injustice against a mistress in a thousand.) The mistress was

nursing Miss Eva, the great girl, on her knee. And the three grown-ups were going out for dinner and dancing. And Sunday night too! Yes, Joe had distinctly heard words about dancing. The master had said that he would back himself to do a fox-trot and to keep both the ladies busy throughout the evening. Miss Huskisson was leaving early in order to dress at her hotel, and Dr. and Mrs. Raste were to join her at the restaurant. . . .

Two dinners in a day! And what about poor Miss Eva, left to herself? Ah! They knew they could trust Miss Eva to Elsie! But still, all the same, it was very odd, what with Miss Eva being so upset, and it being such fine hot summer weather. Could you imagine anybody running off to one of those restaurants, all the way to the West End, on a lovely night, when they might have walked in the Square garden? However, it was deliverance for Elsie; no special supper to serve for company. But there would be the telephone. A rare ringing! Always was when the master took a night off. And if the poor man didn't have a night-call that night, might Elsie be blessed! She brewed a needed cup of tea for the kitchen, and Joe took his coat off and put on his apron, and they sat down and drank, and made the same remarks over and over again about the incomprehensible rulers. . . . The clangour once more. That was for the upstairs tea-things to be fetched down. Before he came back Joe unlocked the panel-patients' door. Some of them would be bound to be calling. No rest in that house, weekday *or* Sunday!

IV

Joe was reading in the kitchen, under the electric light; he wore spectacles; the sun had scarcely set, and reading by twilight was still easily possible on the upper floors of the house, but not in the basement; Joe's eyes were a little weak; the open window was a square of faint crimson. The kitchen seemed yet tenaciously to hold the heat of cooking the dinner hours earlier. Joe, leaning on his elbows far over the table, had neither coat nor waistcoat; a very broad leathern belt kept him together round the waist—Elsie's idea. A cigarette, burning neglected on the edge of the white deal table, sent up a straight column of smoke which spread at the top like a palm. Joe read aloud, slowly, under his breath: "We have to consider, first, what constitutes food for man. Its objects are threefold—to repair the daily waste of the body itself, a nec-es-sary consequence of life and its act-iv-ity. . . ." The book was that classic, Sir Henry Thompson's "Food and Feeding." The doctor had lent it to him upon a startling request for some book about cookery.

It was probably the only book that Joe had ever studied or wanted to study, for he was by nature no student. His passion for cookery, discovered late and in difficult and dangerous circumstances in France, had made him a student of rudimentary and certainly not scientific mind, he was nevertheless approaching the mighty subject of food in a scientific manner—and successfully. No wonder the household wondered, smiled aside gently scornful, and was in fact impressed by the miracle of the power of the love of knowledge.

Elsie came into the basement from the front room. She was ceremoniously dressed for answering front-doors.

"Oh, Joe! Joe! I thought I smelt it!" The cigarette had charred the edge of the table, which bore quite half a dozen black souvenirs of Joe's dreamy carelessness.

"I know what missis'll say—or what she'll *think*."

It was Elsie who picked up the cigarette.

"Now, Joe, yer must go out for yer walk. Ye haven't had a mouthful of fresh air all day."

Neither had Elsie had a mouthful of fresh air all day, save now and then at the front door. But Elsie had established between them the great truth that she was somehow superior to the common human needs, such as air, or even food, and that what harmed him could not harm her.

On Sunday nights they usually both went out for a walk, and Mrs. Raste took charge of the house in person. Sometimes they would actually depart before tea and make a regular afternoon and night of it with friends in Riceyman Square or elsewhere. But to-night, as the rulers had suddenly decided to seek pleasure in the legendary West End, of course they could not both leave. Neither of them saw anything at all unnatural in an arrangement under which the pleasures of the rulers involved the ruled in a sacrifice. Thus do bits of the past remain embedded in the present, and thus do old ideals, by their own pristine force, persist against energetic new ones in strange places.

Joe used a spoon to mark the place in his book, and put the volume in a cupboard. Elsie dressed the rugged-faced

dreamer. She brushed his waistcoat, his coat and his hat.

"Now here's your cigarette-case" (the dark ingenuous dreamer was something of a swell), "and here's your matches, and here's your purse." She started him up the basement steps and went with him into Cheval Street, where they stood together reflective for a moment in the soothing dusk.

"Now go along to the Duke's Head and have half a pint and don't hurry back."

He lit a new cigarette, nodded, and walked off. She stared after him, and then pushed at the side door with her broad back. She liked him to be a man of the world occasionally, thought it was good for him to get away from her and practise independence and make a show of free devilry. She liked him to return smelling healthily of beer.

The side door, which had been half closed, did not yield to the pressure of her back. Then there was a little nervous, childish giggle; Miss Eva had been behind the door. Her thick brown hair was loosened for the night and swelled amply round her head, and she was eating a chocolate.

"I thought you was gone to bed, Miss Eva," said Elsie, but she spoke carefully, diplomatically, with a background of sympathetic comprehension beyond the superficial chiding, for Miss Eva was not in a state to be handled anyhow. In her eyes there was a warning look to remind the beholder that she had suffered much that day and could not with safety be tried too hard. Moreover, she was the sole representative of the ruling class left on the premises, and hence specially invested with the class-prestige.

"I've done my hair and I saw you and Joe from the window, and so I thought I'd—only for ten secs, you silly old long-face."

Yes, Miss Eva, deeply and always aware of her position as the centre of the Raste universe, knew that in the history of the universe her every motive and act had real importance and that her every moment should be accounted for. And since sometimes she was responsible for her precious self she had sometimes to be her own historian. Her mother had watched carefully over the child's supper and had left her to read *Measure for Measure* (all Shakespeare was equally Shakespeare to the child). As for going to bed, she had the right to go to bed unaided and unquestioned; but Elsie would slip later into her bedroom—that casket—to see that Miss Eva had faithfully in all details discharged her grave responsibility to the centre of the universe.

"Elsie," the child murmured, disclosing naively her secret purpose in leaving the bedroom, "let's walk just a minute in the garden. I do want to—with you. And they all did this afternoon, so I'm sure we can. Dad simply *pulled* me over the fence."

Instead of firmly dismissing this mad, unlawful project, Elsie made an excuse:

"Yes, and I daresay, but yer don't catch me trying to wallop myself over that fence. No!"

"Pooh! You needn't. We can get in by the other door."

"It's locked."

"The key of this door fits it."

"The key of this door fits it! How do *you* know the key of this door fits it?" Elsie demanded, alarmed and indignant.

"I'll show you."

And before Elsie could do anything effective, Miss Eva had drawn the heavy key out of the Raste door and flitted into Cheval Street and pushed it into the lock of the Batwing door.

"Miss Eva!"

The child got both thin hands to the big key and twisted it in the lock and opened the Batwing door. She was probably the only person in the world with the esoteric knowledge that one key would open both doors. Elsie had a dim glimpse of the private life of the watched child, as mysterious as the life of birds in the branches, whose enterprising curiosity in some unwatched and unaccounted-for moment had led to the astonishing discovery about the key. It was incredible,

highly disconcerting.

"And have ye been in the garden by yerself?"

"Oh, *no*! But I've *looked* in. Come on, old long-face." Miss Eva ran audaciously into the forbidden garden. . . .

They walked together in the garden, Elsie in her purple and white uniform and Miss Eva in white. Miss Eva clasped Elsie's arm and skipped at every few steps, but after a time she ceased to skip and even to shake her loose hair. There was little difference in height between them—three or four inches. Elsie felt self-conscious because the garden was overlooked by the windows of several houses. She was sinning, but happy in sin, and somewhat comforted by the assurance that neither the front-door nor the panel-door bell could ring without her hearing it.

"I don't see why I shouldn't walk in the garden—they're away dancing, so why shouldn't I walk in the garden? At least perhaps they aren't dancing yet, but they will soon be. Oh, yes, they are, because they dance between the courses now—mummy told me. Miss Brendon says I shall be quite a good dancer, and that's a lot from her. I said to myself when I was walking here with them this afternoon that I'd walk here with my old long-face as soon as I could—no, it's round really, but you're so *very* serious to-day, Elsie—well, and I'm walking to-night, and so I've done it, haven't I, Elsie?" She drew Elsie across the grass to the leaden statue in the middle and stroked the fat cupid as if to express to it some of her affection.

"Oh, Elsie, it's all wet!"

"Yes, and I sh'd think it *is* all wet, and this grass is soaking and you'll catch your death and then what will missis say?"

The dew was distilling itself upon Clerkenwell. Then came soft sounds into the garden; they came straight over the roof of the house and also down Cheval Street and over the wall of the garden, sounds infinitely delicate and subtle, which might be arriving from a great distance after a long journey: the congregation singing "Abide with Me" in St. Mark's Church in the Square! The dusk seemed to thicken suddenly. Odours of blossoms wandered in from the next garden. The pair could scarcely see each other's features. The singing ceased. The final peace of Sunday night had descended upon the vast expanses of Clerkenwell.

"Oh!" breathed Miss Eva.

They were walking again on the tiled path.

"Elsie!" Miss Eva's clasp tightened upon Elsie's arm.

"What?"

"Do you like Miss Huskisson?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes. They want me to go to her school at Eastbourne. Boarding-school, you know."

"And don't ye want to go?"

"No!" Miss Eva snapped nervously.

"Why not? Don't yer want to leave yer daddy and mummy? But ye're a big girl now."

"Oh, I don't mind leaving *them*. Of course, I should hate leaving them, but I shouldn't *mind*. I could *bear* it. And mummy thinks it would be so good for me. She thinks I'm spoiled here, and I expect I am. But I won't go. I won't go."

"But why, then?"

Miss Eva stood still and arrested Elsie, and put her arms round Elsie's neck and kissed her violently and sobbed and wept.

"It's *you* I couldn't bear to leave, Elsie. I *know* I couldn't live without *you*. And they can't make me, they can't make me. Oh, Elsie, you don't know how hurt my heart is!"

A bell rang and rang in the house.

"Miss Eva, let me go, do. That's the telephone. It's always the way. Sure as the doctor goes out for a bit of a change they start. Quick!" She gave the last word in a tone of command, almost harsh. The child ran whimpering after her.

Elsie had to lock the Batwing door, withdraw the key and put it on the inside of the other door, and naturally she fumbled each little operation. And the bell kept insistently, ruthlessly ringing; it could be heard in Cheval Street, and in the passage and in the back hall, and it would not stop until, after an eternity, Elsie snatched off the receiver; that silenced it, and there was quiet. Only a few months back Elsie had been as afraid of the telephone as of a bomb, but now she talked at it with cutting callousness.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed, reproving its impatience.

The matron of the Maternity Hospital wanted the doctor to come as quickly as possible—Mrs. Aked was worse and the matron was very anxious. Elsie said she would ring up Dr. Worple, who had promised to deal with anything urgent that evening. No sooner had she hung up the receiver, in order to begin a new call, than the bell began furiously again. It was the police. The night-watchman at a drapery store in Park Street had fallen down a lift-well and seemed to be dead, but his wife and five children were with him and the wife wanted Dr. Raste and nobody else. Also the police gave notice of a post-mortem of a girl suicide the next morning. Well, she would ring up Dr. Worple, and she did ring up Dr. Worple; and that was that, except that she must slowly and clumsily write out the details for the master to see on his return.

"Here, Miss Eva, you write it for me. No, I'll do it myself. Switch the light on, will yer?"

How could she have dreamt of asking the innocent child to write such dreadful things? She wrote even worse than usual; she did not know quite what she was doing. But after all, the transactions, normal enough, on the telephone, were a trifle compared with Miss Eva's information, as to which Elsie's thoughts worked in vast, slow motions beneath the superficial agitation caused by these episodes incident to the doctor's practice.

Miss Eva had actually put her own mother lower than the house-parlourmaid. Well, it was shocking; it was against nature. She adored Miss Eva, but she could not conceive what she had done to Miss Eva or for Miss Eva to bring about this terrible state of affairs in the child's mind. She was ashamed of herself.

"Oh, Elsie! Isn't it awful?" the child burst out, surveying the situation with astounding, ingenuous detachment and at the same time accepting it fatalistically. In the effort after calm reflection Miss Eva had ceased to whimper. Then, releasing her brain from its task, she sprang at Elsie, and kissed her passionately again; and Elsie, electrified afresh, thought that there were forces in this Miss Eva far more powerful and incomprehensible than in any adult—terrific forces that neither Miss Eva nor anybody else could guide or subdue. Elsie was afraid, and her head swam as if she was intoxicated; the hall swayed and moved round and round.

"Good night!" Miss Eva unloosed her and ran off.

"I'll come up with ye," said Elsie. She ought not to have said it. To see the child into bed on such a night was wicked self-indulgence, bad for her and bad for the child too, very bad for the child. The temptation, however, was too strong, too sweet. She might have to leave her place, with Joe—how, indeed, could she decently stay, whatever the cost to Miss Eva's feelings?—but on this night she must fondly tend the child.

"No, don't put the light on," said Miss Eva in the bedroom. "It's dark only it isn't dark. And open that window wider, Elsie darling."

She yielded her long, snake-like, aristocratic body to be undressed, and Elsie's hard muscles, moving over her, grew as soft as Elsie's affection. Self-indulgence, but exquisite! Miss Eva dropped on the bed, lying stretched on the top of the eiderdown, and sighed.

"Oh, Elsie, couldn't you carry me into the bathroom?"

Elsie did so. Wickedness: that was what it was!

"I'm so tired," said Miss Eva. "I've had a very trying day, haven't I, Elsie?" And when Miss Eva was finally tucked up, Elsie set about gathering her day-clothes together and folding them exactly as the mistress had taught Miss Eva to fold

them, and laying them carefully in the empty drawer which was exclusively allotted to them—for Mrs. Raste's notion was that a little girl's bedroom should always, at no matter what hour, present a perfectly tidy appearance to any visitor expected or unexpected. And Miss Eva drew her endless arm from under the bedclothes, and her hands drooped over the side of the bed.

"Oh, Elsie, I'm too hot. And I don't want to be all tucked in." A naughty kick, which disturbed all the upper bedclothes! "I want to be *cold*."

When the affair was settled in a reasonable compromise, Elsie stood at the open window gazing over gardens and chimney-pots at the sombre sky. She was not thinking, and she did not know quite what she was feeling; but she had a vague, absurd, self-contradictory idea that she was both happy and unhappy. Also she felt that things generally were very mixed up and queer and sad and incurable, and that life was full of the most unexpected surprises—for according to Elsie there were surprises which you expected and surprises which you couldn't be expected to expect. Then the first door in the wall below opened, scraping the gravel, and she made out the figure of Joe in the gloom. She turned to the bed and stooped.

"I'm going."

Miss Eva nodded wearily. No kiss.

V

Elsie lay in bed in her home, which was the front room of the basement of the Raste home. The adjoining kitchen might be called the workshop, factory, or chief earning-place. The upper floors consisted of rooms which she knew intimately, even to the contents of some of the drawers and wardrobes, and had to keep clean, but which were foreign countries where one could neither settle nor behave quite freely. The front room of the basement alone was the haven in which Elsie could be fully Elsie, the wife of Joe, exercising her personal tastes, arranging and rearranging the things in it according to her fancy, cleaning it when and how she chose, leaving it untidy when she chose, and never asking herself the eternal question which governed all her actions in every other part of the house: "How do *they* want it done? How did *she* tell me I was always to do it?"

Mrs. Raste never in any circumstances intruded into Elsie's home, and Miss Eva very rarely—and then only by favour specially requested and against her mother's inclination.

It was a cave, subterranean, and felt like a cave; fairly large, but low, with a grimy, irregular ceiling, from which an unused short gas-chandelier still hung not quite perpendicularly. The illumination, strident as a shout, came from a single electric light, whose cord, obeying the law of gravity, put the crookedness of the chandelier stem to shame. The furniture, too plenteous, had mainly come, discarded, from upstairs. Along one wall was a whole row of shabby chairs which nobody ever sat on. There was one easy chair, of wicker, which would occasionally creak by itself in the dead of night if Joe had spent an evening in it. A pair of lace curtains, once grand in the rulers' bedroom, screened the window, and those curtains were never drawn more than a foot apart, lest loiterers on the pavement above might spy upon Elsie's privacy. A bright steel fender, with one brief poker for fire-irons, ornamented the hearth, and in front of the fender was a black rag rug on the tiled floor—otherwise bare. There were two tables, one of deal, the other of oak, and a very old oak wine-cooler, which never cooled wine, but held Elsie's spools, tapes, scissors and remnants. The wardrobes of the twain were two narrow cupboards in the wall. Elsie was very proud of their convenience. And there was a chest of drawers, chiefly filled with junk from on high. On the wall opposite the mantelpiece mirror hung an enlarged portrait of Elsie's mother, who had died just in time to balance her daughter's budget, for Elsie had accustomed the old lady to the weekly sum of 28s. 11d.—the war pension which Elsie had received as the widow of her first husband and which she lost on remarriage; this portrait, in a brilliant gilt frame, a pious folly, had cost good money; it was surpassingly ugly, but Elsie thought it most beautiful. Beneath it hung from their coloured ribbons the two war-medals of the first husband. On the mantelpiece stood four cheap and gaudy vases, wedding gifts from friends in Riceyman Square, and passionately cherished. No other bric-à-brac, no other pictures; no texts!

And yet the home had an agreeable aspect and feel of intimate domesticity, humanized by the close traffic of souls and bodies. For on the mantelpiece, in the midst of the vases, an alarm clock ticked loudly away with the ruthless and divine sovereignty of the presiding god which it in fact was. And on one small chair were piled some of Joe's clothes; and in

the easy chair were piled all Elsie's clothes, every stitch of them from cap to stockings, cast down anyhow—and no one to reproach Elsie for a natural naughty untidiness!

And in the bed, in the corner farthest away from the window and the door, lay Elsie herself, also cast down anyhow, dishevelled, not clean, hardly decent, shining in the heat of the summer night, but restfully abandoned in comfort and subject to no rules and no surveillance. You could see under the tumbled sheet what a massive creature she was in her fatigued abandonment. Blinking at the electric glare she lay on her side like an animal, but an animal with a soul highly developed. She was waiting anxiously for Joe to return from the kitchen. When Elsie went to bed she went to bed. One moment she was "up," the next she was definitely in bed. She could concentrate. But Joe, except on cooking, could never concentrate. He would do forty things after he had begun to undress. For an hour or more Elsie had hesitated to tell him about the trouble with Miss Eva, and then she had told him too soon. She ought to have waited until he was in bed and the light out, in which situation she could have managed him. But she had told him after he had taken off only his waistcoat and his shoes. And she had dropped a word, casually, about the possibility of matters so developing that they might have to leave.

She had seen his plain, homely features take on their well-known expression of dark, mysterious worry; and with an inarticulate murmur of something that he must do, he had left the home for the kitchen. In ordinary circumstances he was docility itself; but when disturbed he was capable of the most embarrassing contumacy. True, he was seldom disturbed, having adopted the habit of leaving every responsibility to his wife.

Elsie wondered apprehensively what would be the look on his face when he came back. Then there was a short, half impatient, half timid yelp on the pavement above the window.

"That dog!" thought Elsie.

Jack had been abroad on one of his night excursions, and had been forgotten. The area gate, seldom or never used—the Raste area was the only one in all the Square that had direct access to the pavement—was fastened as usual, and Jack wished to indicate that he had been round to the side door in vain and now wanted somebody to open the area gate for him. Nobody would, and Elsie heard him at last leap over the gate and tumble down the steep iron steps into the area; then there was another yelp—at the area door giving on to the area lobby.

Joe passed through the lobby, opened the door to the expectant dog, seized him and began to thrash. Elsie heard the blows, and Jack's squeals were terrible. And the blows did not cease. They waxed in power and rapidity, and Jack's squeals grew deafening.

"Oh, Joe, Joe!" Elsie murmured, sitting up in bed. Then she heard Jack's body flung savagely into the kitchen. Silence followed. Joe padded into the home, breathing hard, in shirt and trousers. Elsie did nothing so dangerously provocative as to say a word about his treatment of the dog. And, in fact, the dog needed no pity, for, pursuing the *post hoc propter hoc* method of reasoning (which was originally invented by dogs), he had reached the conclusion that the beating was a just punishment for the night excursion and felt no resentment.

Whereas the beating was naught but the expression of Joe's emotions in regard to quite another matter. The look on his face was now extremely disquieting. When he got himself into "one of his moods," it was urgently advisable to keep him out of the way of violence, for once started down the slope he might not stop until something tragic brought him to a standstill. A process of auto-intoxication would set in. The dog had unhappily provided an occasion for violence, and Joe had begun the perilous slide. He hesitated in the doorway. Then, catching sight of the two war medals on the wall, he moved up to them, ripped them ferociously from their nails and dashed them on to the floor. Never before had he shown the slightest jealousy concerning these relics of his predecessor and fellow-warrior. But now the sudden, wild gesture proved that jealousy had been always awaiting its opportunity in his subconsciousness.

Elsie maintained silence and lay back. She was living to the full her private life in these moments; she had utterly ceased to be a house-parlourmaid or anything else but a passionately loved and loving wife. She had great confidence in herself, remembering how again and again by the exercise of her native force and shrewdness she had successfully come through terrible, bloody, and even mortal ordeals. But her self-reliance was shaken by shell-shocked Joe's present demeanour. She feared. She asked herself whether indeed the final ordeal had not now veritably arrived. Joe, his mind fired by a single unfortunate phrase of hers, was out of control.

"Come to bed, Joe dear," she whispered benevolently, without a sign of reproach, surprise, or dismay.

Louring bitterly, not at Elsie but rather at the whole world, Joe went in the direction of the fireplace, and stuck his hands deep into his trouser-pockets.

"They go off . . . Sunday night too . . . dancing. . . ." He meditated thus in a low rumble of his heavy voice. Elsie said nothing, but stretched out her arm towards him. The clock ticked louder and louder.

"Well, I won't have it!" he suddenly shouted.

"But what, Joe?"

"I won't have it. I'm the husband, I suppose. I suppose I'm the husband all right. And I won't have it." He lifted his face as if to challenge anyone to deny that he was the husband. His features grew still gloomier; he was wilfully steeping himself in gloom, secreting poison for himself.

"But what, Joe?"

"This here wobbling about. This hanky-panky. If they think they want us to go, we'll go. . . . Just as we're comfortable. . . . We'll go, I tell yer, and quicker than that. I've had enough of it."

"But, Joe, they haven't said a word about us going. They haven't said a word about anything. Of course they haven't. It was only the child—talking."

"Oh, I know! I know what it is. Yer can't tell me. Here you slave for 'em night and day, and I slave for 'em night and day. And it's upstairs and downstairs and upstairs and downstairs. And they'll tell yer to go, will they? . . . And why? All because the d——d little wench can't let yer out of her sight; no, she can't! I can see. Yer think I can't see things, but let me tell yer I can see things, though I *don't* say as much as some. . . . Sunday night, too. . . . Dancing. . . ."

Elsie smiled timidly, as it were shamefaced, but whether from shame for him or for herself, who could decide? Moving to the edge of the bed she turned on to her bosom, thus hiding her face, so as to be able to stretch out her arms as far as possible, and, without looking, she groped with her hand for the hand of the deranged and dangerous man.

Her hand found his, but at the first touch he gave her hand a hard, hurting blow: tremendous reflex action!

Then he banged his right fist at the clock, which clattered noisily across the floor. Elsie's heart seemed to stand still. The blow was the measure of his barbaric sweet love for her, of his pride in her, of his jealousy for her. She glanced surreptitiously round to see if there were any knives in the room, and was relieved to discover none; she had once in the course of their love confronted a carving knife in Joe's raised hand. Poor boy: he simply did not know what he was doing! This was all the fault of the Kaiser, this was! In the succeeding silence the clock immediately reasserted its spiritual sovereignty by continuing to tick. Joe might stick out his head relatively to his body and his chin relatively to his head, but the triumphant clock dominated the room.

Then a fearful thing happened. The door slowly opened and Jack crept cautiously in. The idiot of a dog, unaware that in this crisis he was no better than a lighted fuse approaching dynamite, perhaps wanted to assure himself that peace was established. Elsie stared at him in horror. She dared make no sound. Joe was clutching the mantelpiece with his right hand, and his face worked in a terrifying manner. The dog jumped noiselessly on to the bed, crouched, laid his chin flat on the counterpane and looked about anxiously, ingratiatingly, without moving his head. Elsie again stretched forth her hand, and, as anxious and ingratiating as the dog, touched Joe's left hand once more. Joe did not move, but he sobbed. She clasped the hand, and very gently drew the reluctant body towards her. She put Joe's hand delicately on the dog's head; he did not shrink at the contact with the hair. She moved Joe's hand so that it stroked the dog—several times. The dog looked up and licked Joe's hand. Joe saw; he was crying. Elsie was living her life. Her characteristic inventive fancy had averted a calamity. The clock went on proudly ticking, but in vain. It was not heard.

VI

The next morning was lovely. The house fronted almost due east. The sun, which had been at work for hours on the rejuvenation of Clerkenwell, was pouring its bright medicine through all the front windows except the heavily curtained windows of the best bedroom where Mrs. Raste slept. The time was about seven-thirty. Elsie, who had not yet assumed the white cap, was sweeping the stairs, which rose in one long, straight flight from the hall. Joe, in green apron, was

cleaning some of his windows (every window in the house was exclusively "his"), but would shortly leave them to stone his front steps. The atmosphere of the interior was cheerfully expectant, as though God was good, and life exciting and worthy to be lived, and health triumphant over sickness.

Then Elsie heard a latchkey turn in the front-door, and the opening door grated a little as usual on the top step. The doctor had had a night call. He came briskly in, but the sun was before him, throwing sheets of dazzling light on the still unswept hall floor. The doctor was carrying his obstetric bag of tricks.

"All right, Elsie! All right!" he greeted the corruptress of his adored child. "I can get past." However, Elsie had respectfully mounted to the landing with her brush, to give him passage on the stairs.

"Fine morning, Elsie," said he pleasantly, determined to set an example to mankind.

"Sorry you had a call, sir," Elsie replied gravely. The little doctor had somehow, save for his chin, kept his spruceness throughout the night, but he was extremely pale, and his dark-ringed eyes unnaturally gleamed. Elsie in her time had roused the doctor from his bed—to come to her old employers, the Earls—forwards—and at this moment she had a guilty feeling, as for an outrage upon humanity committed long ago. She was much concerned for the doctor, because he worked far too hard and was obviously killing himself. She knew all the details of his daily existence and had pieced them together.

Whatever might have happened in the night, he always breakfasted sharp at 8.30, reading his letters and glancing at the *Daily Telegraph* as he ate. He began breakfast alone, but at about 8.45 Mrs. Raste would appear, full of solicitude, and would nibble with him to solace him, and take his instructions for answering the letters, which were written by all sorts of people, from police to maiden ladies, and all of which had to do with his profession. Generally Miss Eva would add her presence, and sometimes be permitted to enter an appointment in his diary. At nine the surgery work began; it ended at 10.30 or soon afterwards, and instantly the doctor would be off on his rounds, or he might have to go to a police court or a post-mortem; which meant that he would be late for dinner—half-past one or even a quarter to two instead of one. In twenty minutes after that he would be off once more. Theoretically, but in practice rarely, he had tea at 5.30. The second assize of panel patients started at 6, and finished between 8 and 8.30. Once, in a tremendous effort to live a civilized life, he had put the second assize forward to the afternoon, but the scheme was killed after a few months, partly by public opinion and partly by the demands of private patients. The doctor supped at 9, and might see calling patients at any time from 8.30 to 10.30. He read before going to bed. He seldom saw the adored Eva. No portion of his day was securely his own—not a minute. He always had more than he could do, and his large clientèle was steadily increasing. Elsie strongly agreed with the mistress that he ought to take a partner or an assistant. But no! He would not. He preferred to sell his life bit by bit for the five-pound notes to be used to the advantage of Miss Eva. Elsie knew that as well as the mistress knew it, and in secret she blamed the doctor for his obstinacy. Still, she deeply respected his industry.

"Five and a half hours out," said the doctor, as he climbed the stairs.

"What a shame, sir!"

"Fortune of war! Fortune of war!" he exclaimed cheerily, and rather loudly, with one of his constrained, professional laughs. "Child dead. But I think we've saved the mother." He added: "In spite of herself! No will-to-live, Elsie, no will-to-live. Husband drunk. Mother-in-law drunk."

Elsie made a protesting sound.

"Shall Joe get you anything, sir?"

"No, thanks. Mustn't spoil my breakfast. By the time I've had my bath and shaved, post will have come." He was always slow, thorough, and methodical over his toilet. Even danger of death could not hurry him there. He stopped, facing her, on the landing. Against Elsie's massiveness he was like a sturdy little tree against a monument.

"Here I am carrying this upstairs!" he said, holding out the bag to her. "Just take it down again, will you, and put it in its place." He spoke now as he sometimes did to servants, confidentially, almost appealingly, and his tone seemed to imply: "Look here, we understand each other, you and I do. I can trust your fundamental decency and you can trust mine, eh?" Such a tone was his nearest approach to unbending from an eternal professionalism, and it endeared him to both Elsie and Joe, inspiring them with an eager desire to be of service to him, to shield him from worry and unnecessary effort.

Elsie dropped her brush, and took the bag, hastening down the stairs.

"What a shame!" she thought again, including the drunkards this time in her comment. Needless for the doctor to describe the night scene to her. She had witnessed some such scenes and heard tell of many. A few hours earlier and he had gone dancing—solely to please those ladies; well, perhaps to please himself a bit too; goodness knew he wanted a change—when really he ought to have been fast asleep. Her brow puckered with conscientiousness, as though the doctor's case was her own personal responsibility.

"I say, Elsie!" The doctor, leaning over the banisters at the top of the stairs, called to her *sotto voce*. He raised his eyebrows to beckon her upwards, as for an intimate communication. She flew towards him, still holding the bag, and stopped just under him, her head level with the rail and his fountain-pen pocket.

"What's all this that Joe's been telling me?" Then he pursed his lips and put on a grim expression.

"Joe, sir? When, sir?"

"Last night. This morning, rather. When I was called. He got up, you know."

"Did he, sir?"

There were two glorious unassailable sleepers in that home, Elsie and her mistress. The house had one of the old-fashioned doctor's speaking-tubes, the lower end at the front door and the upper by Dr. Raste's bed. Mrs. Raste never heard the ruthless, quiet whistle of the tube. She never heard her husband's gentle, sharp speech into it, nor his rising from her side, nor his dressing, nor his departure, nor his undressing, nor his return to her side. Here was the great gift—indeed it amounted to genius. It helped immensely to maintain the good temper of the house, for if she too had been exacerbated by disturbed nights explosions would have occurred by breakfast-time. As for Elsie, she had always been an accomplished sleeper, and since her marriage to Joe had slept better than ever. Once she was asleep the alarm clock had no dominion over her. The clock wakened Joe of a morning, and Joe wakened Elsie with a series of physical violences.

The doctor continued:

"He said you were thinking of leaving us. Said you weren't feeling very comfortable."

"Who? Me, sir?"

"I suppose both of you."

"Oh, sir!" Elsie was thunderstruck. She had been quite sure that on the previous night she had soothed Joe into his normal quiescence and acquiescence. She could have taken oath on the fact. And here Joe, in the dead of night, and without a word to her, had been venting his sick fancies on the doctor! She was overset. She thought she knew Joe to his core. And she did not know him. She had misread his symptoms; which meant that her confidence in her power to handle him was shaken. What could she say to the doctor? Nothing. She might not be disloyal to her husband, of whose prestige she was very jealous, by superiorly smiling away his strange statements to the doctor. And certainly she might not confirm his attitude to the doctor. She felt herself to have been thrust into a terrible crisis.

"Oh, sir!" she murmured again.

"Of course if you must go, you must," said the doctor, pleasantly but coldly, indifferently, as one saying: "There's no understanding any of you people. I like you—up to a point. But I'm perfectly independent and I've no intention of being disturbed by any of you."

He suddenly turned from her and went off towards the bedroom. How ineffectual was the July sun now!

VII

Monday morning is a strenuous but somehow a glad morning in respectable households of regular habits. The clean linen is brought out in lovely white piles from the linen cupboard and distributed over the house, and the dirty linen is collected and shamefully hurried away and catalogued in a place without honour and thrown pell-mell in baskets and

despatched, and then everybody has a sweet sense of relief.

In the best bedroom Elsie waited for Joe to come and help her with the bed. Other beds in the house could be made by two hands, but this one required four, especially on Monday morning. One clean sheet (for in Myddelton Square, as in many other localities, only the bottom sheet was cast off, the top sheet taking its inferior position and being supplemented by the clean sheet)—one clean sheet, two clean pillow-slips, two clean bath towels, two clean face towels, and one clean razor cloth lay on a chair, and Elsie was impatient to see the shiny slips with their rectangular creases geometrically correct on the pillows, and the embroidered edge of the glittering clean sheet turned back and stretching precisely level across the yellow blankets, and the towels hanging in prim, virgin evenness on the towel-stand, and all the room thereby as it were reborn, newly sanctified, to the august uses of the employers. Elsie desired that nothing, not a chance smut nor an error of half an inch in the adjustment of straight lines, should hurt the susceptible eyes of the employers. She was as eager as the craftsman who is also an artist. She moved to fetch the dreamy Joe, when, instead of Joe, Mrs. Raste entered the room. Elsie instantly became self-conscious.

"I was just waiting for Joe, madam."

"And I've been waiting for Miss Eva. I'll help you this morning, Elsie. Miss Eva wanted to see us make the bed so that she can learn how to make her own. It's her idea. However, we won't wait."

"No, madam."

The bed-making began. Neither Joe nor Miss Eva appeared.

Of Mrs. Raste it may be said chiefly that Elsie regarded her as a reasonable being. She had her fads and fancies, but you knew where you were with her. She was about the only woman in Elsie's experience of women who could be regarded as a reasonable being. All the others, though many of them were excellent, loyal, and lovable enough, were moody, "nervy," and you could never be sure where they would break out next. According to Elsie Mrs. Raste's mental processes were like Elsie's—and like a man's. And Elsie's views of her mistress were shared by everybody—except possibly, upon occasion, by Dr. Raste.

Mrs. Raste was a medium woman, not tall nor short, not fat nor thin, not fair nor dark, not smart nor dowdy, not brilliant nor stupid—but sound. She was under forty, and looked neither younger nor older than she was. She had a quiet, firm voice, with a slight ineradicable trace of an Essex accent. Among other vestiges of provincialism she kept a fine and sturdy confidence (generally justified by the event) in her own opinions about things and people. She was extremely interested in people, all people, and never tired of discussing the characters and tendencies of her friends with her friends. She had a sense of order and method, supposed to have been perfected during the time, before her marriage, when she was on what may inoffensively be called the "begging staff" of the London Hospital. She prided herself on being universally considered as reliable. She knew herself to be reliable!

She was certainly not a snob, and yet her notions about the ritual of a house were a trifle "above her station." She had regretted Joe's disappearance into the kitchen; she would have preferred the manservant to be more in evidence.

She was very fond of sweets, and gave sweets freely to Eva, believing that sweets were good for children. But she would say: "I don't know whether it's because I like sweets myself, or because I *really* think they're good for children that I give them to Eva, but I *do* give them and I shall keep on giving them to Eva." She received her expert husband's arguments for and against sweets as food for children with bland reserve.

"You're all right, aren't you, Elsie?" she asked, when they were on opposite sides of the wide bed.

Her tone was very quiet, very matter-of-fact, very friendly, but not friendly with quite the same equality of friendliness as sharp, stiff Dr. Raste would sometimes use to the servants. In Mrs. Raste's attitude to the servants there was always a sober, nice, unobjectionable implication of her superior intelligence, which she could not hide. Nevertheless she had much respect for Elsie's intelligence—on Elsie's plane.

"Yes, madam, thank ye'm."

A pause. Elsie blushed and wondered, trembling in her heart, what would come next.

"I was only thinking"—Mrs. Raste seemed to be speaking to herself—"I was only thinking. . . . Dinner yesterday."

This was the first word uttered by Mrs. Raste about the breakdown in the dining-room, and indeed, since the breakdown, Elsie had not encountered her mistress, either on the previous evening or on that morning. Had the master said anything to the mistress about Joe's announcement of an intention to leave? Probably. Yet the master had a trick of letting household matters take their course, of separating himself from them as though they absolutely did not concern him or ought not to occupy the mind of one who had more than enough worries of his own.

Elsie said naught.

"I felt very sorry for you," Mrs. Raste continued, after another pause.

"Well, 'm," said Elsie, unfolding a pillow-slip and shaking it. "I was that sorry . . . of course waiting at table . . . and company and all . . . made me . . . well, I didn't know where I was . . . and then Miss Eva . . . her crying . . . I was that sorry for her. Oh, 'm, I was so ashamed, I was. I hope as you'll look over it. I'll take care it don't happen again, company or no company."

"I quite understand, Elsie. One thing on top of another. Yes, I quite understand." Mrs. Raste smiled reassuringly.

And ten seconds after Elsie had said that she would take care it didn't happen again, tears unexpectedly filled her foolish eyes. She, very angry with herself, steadied herself, and forced back the tears and a tendency to sob. She was humiliated because the situation seemed to have got beyond her.

"This button's just beginning to work loose," said Mrs. Raste discreetly, but with no clumsy show of discretion, as she handled the other pillow-slip.

Nothing about Miss Eva. Oh, no! Mrs. Raste was not that sort. She would accept confidences but never give them. She would not even ask whether Miss Eva had confided in Elsie. Certainly not! She would have liked very much to know how much Elsie knew, if anything; but never would she inquire. To inquire would have been for her a sign of weakness. She would manage as best she could until the information emerged unsought. Assuredly she would not question Miss Eva. Assuredly Miss Eva would not have told her mother.

They finished the bed, and precisely at the moment when they were finally smoothing the counterpane Miss Eva ran eagerly in. The child was wearing her best Sunday white, but with black stockings and shoes. These, and her dark, shining hair and eyes, set off very well the whiteness of the frock, as she had discovered for herself. Not that the frock was immaculately white. In fact—partly owing to climbing of fences—it was by no means white enough for another Sunday, and Eva was "dirtying it out" on a weekday or so.

As soon as she saw the state of the bed, she stood quite still, as if transfixed, and her expression changed in an instant from joyous anticipation to the most tragic disillusion and fierce resentment.

"You've not gone and made it?"

"Yes, it's finished. You've come too late. Try to come earlier to-morrow morning, my pet." Mrs. Raste spoke with calm, soothing benevolence.

"Oh, but you must undo it, and we'll make it again. You know perfectly well I couldn't come a sec quicker." Eva brightened somewhat.

"I know nothing of the sort."

"But you *do*, mummy! Oh! Do let's do it again. You promised me."

She glanced from her mother to Elsie, and Elsie, the tactless fool, was so affected by the appeal of Miss Eva's glance that she made a movement to pull off the counterpane. It seemed to Elsie that the child's supplication was too touching to be resisted by anybody. Mrs. Raste, while looking at Eva, rebuked Elsie by a tiny motion of the hand.

"Of course we'll do it again—but to-morrow," said the wise, firm mother. And the words were scarcely out of her mouth when she perceived that, though firm, she had not been wise.

Eva was on her holidays and at a loose end. She was idle, and Satan lay in wait for her. Her "school" was a small class held by a semi-retired mistress in Lloyd Square—for some of the more select families with small girls in crowded

Clerkenwell were as hard put to it for a school as pioneers in an undeveloped colony, and they had to club together and organize themselves. Hence Eva had very few available playmates. Nor had she a nurse or governess. In holidays—until the seaside was reached—she had to depend for diversion mainly upon her own inventiveness and her mother's companionship. Her inventiveness, in order to be adequate, had to bring about enormous exaggerations. Thus she had enlarged the affair of tuition in bed-making into something supremely important and infinitely thrilling. Except a tame little tea-party in the afternoon, she had only the bed-making to enliven the immeasurable flat expanse of the day. She was now as desperately lorn as if she had lost a fortune, a lover, salvation itself. Mrs. Raste comprehended all this in a flash, but too late. What Mrs. Raste had said she had said. She knew that she had failed in a critical moment to see the value of foolish elasticity as opposed to wise firmness.

If she could have put the clock back by half a minute she would have yielded to the child's ridiculous childishness, and wrenched away every bit of linen recklessly off the bed so that Eva might begin at the beginning of bed-making; but what she said could not be unsaid. Better the end of the world and the disappearance of the human race than that.

Elsie too comprehended the gravity of the mistress's error, and she moved towards the door; certainly her duty was to avoid being present at a great and painful scene between two rulers. But Miss Eva violently seized her as she passed and clung to her tremendous arm. Elsie blushed for the second time.

"Eva! Eva!"

But the child was now transported into a region where the protests of wise, firm, powerful mothers counted no more than the cheep of a sparrow. She was in a rage of disappointment and anger. Nobody could cast out the devil in her. The devil had the whole room—Eva, Mrs. Raste and Elsie—helpless in his domination. Eva stamped her feet; tears rushed from her eyes; she sobbed. Neither of the women dared touch her, lest worse horrors might ensue. Lion tamers with magic subduing spells would not have dared to lay hands on her. She was spiritually as independent, uncontrollable, uninfluenceable in these minutes as anybody ever was in the history of Clerkenwell. And yet what was the exhibition, in parents' language, but tantrums?

"You *shan't* go! You *shan't* go!" Eva screamed, shaking and clutching Elsie with super-girlish strength; and turning to her mother: "I hate you. It isn't because of *you* I won't go to boarding-school. It's because of Elsie. I should love to leave *you*, but I'll never leave Elsie. And I told her so last night." Then, obscurely realizing that by these few words from her lips the devil in her had shattered the home and household and tumbled them in a horrible mess about the heads of all, she sank feebly to the floor, and Elsie ran out of the bedroom as from a disaster.

VIII

That same day, after what ought to have been, but was not, the dinner-hour, Elsie stood at the sole window of her home, surveying the world. The world consisted of iron railings, the tops of trees, the west front of the handsomest nineteenth-century church in Clerkenwell, the shins of occasional passers-by, and the figure of Joe, who was working at the front door.

Joe, in his green apron and shirt sleeves, was engaged in closing with a broad, short steel screw the orifice of the speaking-tube. This metal cork, immovable by the profane when once it had been screwed down with Joe's screw-driver, was inserted and made fast for holidays and in unusual circumstances; and night disturbers could then only communicate with the saviour of lives through the medium of Joe in the basement.

Miss Eva, considered to be feverish by Mrs. Raste, and with a rash on her sensitive forehead, had been put to bed, and was lying quietly. But here was no cause for sealing the speaking-tube. The doctor himself was in bed, and the blinds and curtains of the best bedroom were drawn. And here was the astounding, the incredible cause of the sealing of the tube. The doctor had arrived a few minutes early for dinner, and Mrs. Raste had at once begun to decline to him the catalogue of urgencies which had accumulated in his absence. He had said to her, interrupting: "Look here, Milly, I think I shall go to bed for a day or two. If I don't I may have a breakdown." Then one of his nervous laughs—but more nervous than usual. Mrs. Raste had instantly taken him by the arm and walked him upstairs and put him to bed and fed him—as if he might have been Eva! Mrs. Raste very well comprehended the immense significance of her husband's simple statement. She said: "I'll see to everything. Don't worry." He said: "I won't."

Neither did Mrs. Raste worry overmuch. She knew that she could trust both his sagacity and her own. And she rather

enjoyed an ordeal, as a skilled and strong swimmer enjoys a rough sea. She gave the order to Joe to ensure quietude for the night. She instructed Elsie about answering the front door. She telephoned to hospitals, police, registrars of births and deaths, to Dr. Worple, the doctor's substitute, and to the hostess of the tea-party which Eva would not be able to attend. Eva, contrary to her own prophecies, had fallen asleep—emotionally exhausted. The thrilling news about the doctor had not been vouchsafed to her. Nor was the doctor told about Eva.

Elsie stood at her window because the life of the house was arrested and there seemed to be nothing for her to do that she was capable, then, of doing. She might have attacked the arrears of her own private mending, and would have done so had she been perfect; but perfection was not hers. She wanted to think, and did think. And thinking made her hungry, and as she had had very little dinner she went into the kitchen and ate a whole dishful of cold potatoes—wreckage of the neglected dining-room dinner. She was almost desperately desirous to go and see Miss Eva—to what end she knew not, but she dare not go, for Mrs. Raste was entrenched on the first floor and none might invade it without an invitation by bell.

Not that she desired to talk to Miss Eva. No! Merely to be with the child. Nothing could usefully be said to anyone. Miss Eva with a couple of sentences had created a terrible situation; it was surprising to Elsie how talking about things could render them intolerable. The facts had not altered since the previous night, but Miss Eva in her passion had stated them in the joint presence of her mother and Elsie, and so had given them a frightful and sinister new power, which paralysed everybody. What could Mrs. Raste say to Elsie? Nothing, without self-humiliation. What could Elsie say to Mrs. Raste? Nothing—unless Mrs. Raste began—and even then. The real mistress of the dread business lay obstinate in Miss Eva's bed. Theoretically the child was at the mercy of her parents, but in practice they were at her mercy. Mrs. Raste could not bind Miss Eva and carry her screaming to a distant school. She could only persuade Miss Eva. And how could she, the mother, say to Miss Eva: "My pet, it is wrong for you to care for Elsie more than me. Do be reasonable, and do consent to leave Elsie when the time comes, and go to school like other little girls. Besides, you're a big girl now." Nor could Mrs. Raste say to Elsie: "Elsie, can't *you* do anything with my daughter?"

Of course Eva was spoilt. Yet was she spoilt? Mrs. Raste never spoilt her. Elsie rarely spoilt her. Elsie was the mother's loyal lieutenant. Of course Miss Eva was naughty. But Elsie could not think of her as naughty. She could only think of her as in need of sympathy, pity, solace. She could only think of her as "poor little thing." The wicked girl was so lovable; she reigned in Elsie's heart. Nobody could be blamed, and yet there was tragedy.

Joe came down into the basement with his screw-driver. And to Joe also Elsie could breathe no word. She dared not even let him know, in the stillness of the strange afternoon, that she knew of what he had said to the doctor about leaving. Joe was very gravely upset by the doctor's indisposition. It had shaken the roots of his existence. His restless features gave indication of secret turmoil. And Elsie might not add dangerously to that turmoil by telling, either, about the scene of the morning between mother and daughter. She passed from her home into the kitchen. Joe sat by the table there, tapping the empty potato dish with the screw-driver.

"Where's all them potatoes?" he asked gloomily.

Elsie gave him a little guilty smile.

"I'm going on with my windows," said he. Expression of his feeling that if he was to keep sane he must work violently.

Elsie, without any premeditation or any fore-knowledge of what she was about to do, sat down on his thin knee with all her massive weight and put her arms round his neck and kissed him and pressed her cheek long against his, and kissed him again and again. She was comforting him, and herself too. She was protecting him from the world and from himself. She was telling him the most important thing in the world: that the lamp of her love was burning undimmed amid calamities.

"Yes, old lad," she muttered. "Go and get on with yer windows."

She kept him near her, or herself near him, throughout the remainder of the long, hot day. She even arranged her bits of work so that now and then she could almost formally visit and talk to him—silly, pleasant nothings—while he made his panes of glass flash and glint like crystal; and she took his place in the kitchen for the preparation of such trifles as tea and slops for invalids. No supper was served upstairs; Mrs. Raste's appetite had seemingly been subdued to that of her patient's; proof that, any appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Mrs. Raste was a woman.

Dr. Worple came to attend to the panelites, and, having despatched them more quickly than Dr. Raste ever despatched them, he departed again. The last caller called; the last delivery of letters slithered on the hall floor; Joe went out with Mrs. Raste's last replies to the pillar-box. Elsie answered the last telephone call. Jack was lodged in the kitchen. Bulletins were favourable; the doctor had had a long sleep; Miss Eva's temperature had dropped to normal and the rash was vanishing from her forehead. Elsie and Joe retired definitely into their home.

She had continuously kept her hold on him. His features were steadier. He was silently grateful for her moral help. They had become most movingly intimate. And yet even they were separated by deceptions and reserves. Joe had not confessed to her that he had spoken to the doctor about leaving; he was ashamed of that little episode and went in fear of its possible consequences. And she had not told Joe that she knew, nor had she given any hint of the nature of the scene which had ended in Miss Eva's collapse. They got into bed. Darkness. Silence, save for St. Mark's clock. Elsie went to sleep with her hand on his. It seemed to her that she had scarcely laid her head on the pillow before Joe was violently shaking her. Her body protested in vain against the summons back into wakefulness. . . . The room was lighted. Joe stood by the bed in his night-shirt. The door was ajar.

"Missis wants ye upstairs," said Joe. "Missis wants ye. Missis wants ye. Missis——"

"All right! All right!" Conscience had resumed its sway over her. She sprang up.

The clock said twenty-five minutes past two.

Issuing from her home, Elsie saw that all the stair-lights were burning; they beckoned her upwards, alarmingly. She heard Jack nosing anxiously against the kitchen door. Mrs. Raste, clad in a resplendent Chinese dressing-gown, a present from herself to her husband, stood on the first-floor landing and calmly awaited the summarily clothed Elsie ascending towards her.

"Is master worse, 'm?" asked Elsie, whispering, and still knotting her apron strings behind. (She had omitted the cap.)

"Oh no," said Mrs. Raste, with rough reassurance. "He's in a beautiful sleep. But Miss Eva's very restless. *She wants you to go and sit with her.*" The dignified and masterful creature grew self-conscious as she spoke these significant words. And Elsie sympathized with her in her defeat, and grew self-conscious too. Indeed, Elsie somehow had the sensations of a criminal before a judge.

"Oh, yes'm."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Oh, no, madam. I'll sit as long as she likes."

"Thank you, Elsie." Mrs. Raste was still barring the way. "You know she's not in the least ill. But of course she's had a very trying day. She'll be all right to-morrow. And if Mr. Raste has a good night I think I shall take them both away to-morrow or the day after to Eastbourne. That's really all Mr. Raste needs."

"Yes, madam," Elsie agreed deferentially. And then she added, strangely, astonishingly, because she felt that now or never was the moment: "And perhaps when you come back Joe and me had better leave." She did not reflect that she was thus casting herself and Joe out into the world again. She knew only that it was her duty to say what she said.

"*Then you want to make it still more difficult for me. Do you want to kill my Eva?*"

"My Eva." What yielding familiarity to the servant! Mrs. Raste's emotion caused her to speak almost raspingly, with a scowl.

"Oh, no'm! Oh, no'm! I'm sure!" Elsie was deeply ashamed. When she reached Miss Eva's room the child had dropped asleep under the electric glare. The picture of the delicate child was infinitely affecting. Elsie's eyes were suddenly wet. She extinguished the light and sat down.

IX

August, and a dry, hot August. Hardly a month had passed since Dr. Raste, with that quiet, mysterious, wise instinct for

self-preservation which characterized him in grave junctures, had taken to his bed. But great things had happened, causing great waves on the flat sea of Clerkenwellian life, and the sea was flat again.

Mrs. Raste had taken her family to the seaside. Not, however, to Eastbourne—to Littlehampton! Miss Eva would not go to Eastbourne; she connected Eastbourne with the school. Useless to tell her that the school was closed and the headmistress away in Switzerland! Eastbourne was a name of dread to her; certainly not a subject of reasonable argument. She would not go. She would not have her bath nor dress nor eat, without a promise that Eastbourne should be wiped off the map. It was astonishing how effectively a supposedly helpless child could defy and defeat a handful of adults. Mrs. Raste yielded out of regard for her husband's nerves—and she had to smile, too, from the same motive. Never was a proud, sagacious and self-reliant mother more cruelly deceived in a beloved, perfectly brought up daughter, and this was perhaps nothing compared with the upheaving event of the doctor's flight from Clerkenwell, which many persons considered to be the equivalent of a death-sentence on themselves. Dr. Raste went to Littlehampton for a fortnight but had to remain there for a month. At the end of the fortnight he had prudently ordered himself another fortnight. And for four weeks Elsie had the job of preventing friction between substitute and patients and police and government functionaries. In the course of the struggle a number of people did die, were buried, and were proved not to have been indispensable.

A terrific day when the doctor, with face tanned like a chauffeur's, returned to Clerkenwell and resumed his work, calm, prim, impassible as ever! Within six hours you could not have guessed from his demeanour that he had been a day absent from his post. Elsie was thinner and paler. In addition to superintending the practice she had, with Joe's help, cleaned the house down. Then it became known that Dr. Raste had engaged an assistant, in the person of Dr. Adham's son, on the east side of the Square. This act was approved by the Square, which perceived high politics in it. Old Adham was a character, who had decreed that his newly qualified son must gain experience with another than his father. Old Adham would never join forces with anybody; but the shrewd foresaw that when he should retire his agreeable and promising son would coalesce with Dr. Raste and the biggest medical firm in Clerkenwell would come into being. Yes, great events happening and to happen, exemplifying the progress of the world! Elsie and Joe saw the affair chiefly in the light of the fact that young Mr. Adham was to take dinner (but young Mr. Adham called it lunch) and tea in the house.

The new arrangement started on the second day. Every day seemed to bring new excitements. The arrival of the Rastes from Littlehampton coincided with the arrival of the landlord, Mr. Batwing, in the garden and the upper stories of the house. The illustrious painter was entirely unexpected. Almost at once music issued from the upper open windows and entered the dwelling of the Rastes by the lower open windows, producing a queer change of mood. On the next day the delivery of a marquee and chairs and trestles and planks, and the mowing of the desiccated lawn, announced that Mr. Batwing meant to give a garden party. Then one of his servants had an accident on the spiral staircase and Dr. Raste was summoned. On the third day the festooning of the garden with lamps and Chinese lanterns indicated that the party was to be an evening party, and to occur on that very evening! And in the afternoon came an autograph invitation for Dr. and Mrs. Raste, which Mrs. Raste said that nobody could persuade, and no consideration induce, her to refuse. Here the excitement should surely have culminated; but it was raised still higher by the lighting of the garden, the breaking forth of an al fresco orchestra, and the steady flow of motor cars and taxis from China and Peru into Cheval Street. Never had Myddelton Square witnessed the like. The exit of Dr. and Mrs. Raste in full panoply through the Raste back door and so into the garden by the adjacent Batwing door took place at ten o'clock.

Elsie and Miss Eva watched the scene from the open window of Miss Eva's bedroom. According to law and custom the child ought to have been asleep, but who could expect a child to sleep with fairyland and loud music and the innumerable explosions of petrol just beyond her window? The fact was Miss Eva had rung for Elsie, who was glad enough to help her to watch.

The garden was full of strange figures, some of them engaged in heathen dances and savage rites. The appearance of a few of the women shocked Elsie, but Miss Eva saw nothing to which she could take objection. Mr. Batwing, tall, thin and elegant, dominated the spectacle in a huge-brimmed, black Spanish hat. With what a complicated curve of a Spanish flourish he uncovered when Mr. Raste led forward Mrs. Raste! The doctor and his wife were like visitants from another world.

"My tenant!" called Mr. Batwing with recondite humour to the nearest revellers, pointing to Dr. Raste.

"My landlord!" retorted Dr. Raste briskly, in exactly the same faintly sardonic tone as he always used for these two important words.

There was laughter in the garden. Miss Eva laughed too, quite wildly; but Elsie could not perceive any cause for laughter.

Within a few minutes Mrs. Raste was dancing under the rim of the Spanish hat, and Miss Eva at the sight leapt in ecstasy. She seemed to draw to herself the glory of the garden party and make it her own. She would have liked her parents to look up at the window; but neither of them did so. The dark window with its occupants—spies they were—attracted not a glance from anybody at all.

"I must go and have my supper. I haven't had my supper," said Elsie; she felt an obscure, uncomfortable disapproval of the show. "And you must go back to bed, Miss Eva."

"Oh, don't be such a silly old long-face. You know I couldn't sleep. No one could expect me to sleep. I'm sure mummy wouldn't. And I'm most fearfully hungry too. Oh, Elsie, do let me come and have supper with you and Joe. *Do!* Anyhow I shall, and if you won't let me I'll just call out loud to mother and ask her."

What a horrible threat! The child was impish, devilish. Elsie's brain could not work quickly enough to cope with her knavery.

Joe was in the home—not in the kitchen; he had had his supper, and, in trousers and shirt and spectacles, was studying his majestic textbook.

"Oh, do let's go and sit with Joe!" Miss Eva suggested. "Let's carry the food in there."

Thus she introduced herself into the home. And there were changes even in the home; Elsie had not replaced on the walls the medals of her first husband, thrown down by Joe in his fury; she had hidden them in a drawer.

"Where's Jack?" Miss Eva asked, and answered at once, "I shouldn't be surprised if he's at the party."

She was glorious with the borrowed glory of the garden party. In her very immature breast the party had lighted a fire which whole decades would not extinguish. She sat down in excitement and coquettishly smoothed out her peignoir, and shook her freed hair; her cheek was exquisitely flushed; her dark eyes sparkled; her little feverish movements gave the illusion that she was dancing as she sat on the chair. She had come into the home partly in order to practise her arts on Joe, there being nobody else handy for her young experiments.

But Joe ignored her. He sat stolidly in the large wicker chair and read his book, muttering the words thereof. He did not even pass a remark upon Miss Eva's being out of bed at such an hour, nor inquire about the party, which from the home was as inaudible as invisible. The low encumbered room had accumulated all the heat of the day, languor enough to have lulled anyone but Miss Eva.

"Joe, don't you *want* me to be here?" she pouted with consciously exerted charm.

Elsie made a sign with her mouth that the master of the home ought not to be disturbed.

"Elsie, I wonder why I'm so fond of you?"

Elsie also had often meditated in vain upon this mystery of passionate affection, for she could discover no attractiveness in herself—save for Joe and one or two younger men. As for Miss Eva the high-bred, so clever, so disdainfully critical—what could she see in the dull, slow, heavy ex-charwoman? The thing admitted of no explanation.

"D'you know," said Miss Eva triumphantly, "mummy and dad have never said another word to me about that school."

Elsie kept on eating thick bread and butter. Miss Eva was delicately consuming a banana.

"D'you know, Elsie," she began once more. "I couldn't *live* without you."

"Yer could live without her fast enough, and ye aren't so fond of her as yer think for, or yer wouldn't be turning her and me out of the house. It's all vanity and stiff-neck and I've told yer, Miss Eva."

These shattering phrases came startlingly forth into the room in the deep and solemn voice of Joe. But Joe didn't glance up from his book.

"Oh Joe, now!" From Elsie.

Miss Eva was stricken; her jaw dropped as though sustaining ligaments had been cut.

"I don't know whatever you mean," she weakly stammered.

Joe looked at her ominously over his spectacles.

"What business have yer to like Elsie more than yer mammy? And go preaching about it too! How can we stay in the same place as missis after that, can yer tell me? One way or another ye'll have to live without Elsie, Miss Eva—and soon too. Yer won't do this and yer won't do that, and what's going to happen to *us*? Yes."

This astounding utterance, from so unexpected a quarter, was the first pronouncement of any sort from anybody upon the school question for over a month. It fell among the women like a meteorite. It stripped Miss Eva's glory from her and left her naked in shame and enlightenment. She burst into tears and vanished from the room, leaving the third part of a banana behind.

"Yes!" said Joe, clinching the matter.

"Oh, Joe dear!" Elsie meekly protested as she rose to follow and succour Miss Eva.

"And sit down!" Joe commanded, shouting. "Sit down. Or I'll break every stick in this blasted home."

X

Climatically it was a quite ordinary September day when Miss Eva, like a lamb, went off to boarding-school. But otherwise the day was one of the most significant days that ever dawned on Myddelton Square. The event had tremendous importance in the household. On the day before everyone was saying in his heart: "To-morrow she goes away to school. What will the house be without her?" And on the day itself everyone was saying: "*To-day* she goes away, and this afternoon she'll be gone!" And Miss Eva walked up and down stairs—intensely, happily, miserably aware that everything that was thought of and done was thought of and done with reference to herself. Even Jack seemed to know, and probably did know, that a very great matter was afoot, and that, mysteriously and wrongfully, he was suffering in social prestige.

Mrs. Raste was to conduct her defeated and passive daughter to Eastbourne by the fast 1.20 from Victoria. Dr. Raste could not go; and he would have to dine alone; but he was spectacularly and touchingly affectionate before setting off on his morning rounds. And young Mr. Adham went so far as to give Miss Eva a beautiful grown-up pocket-book. All was in train; all was ready; for all had been arranged by Mrs. Raste. But you never know what may happen. Five minutes before the taxi was due Mrs. Raste ran down into the kitchen with a disconcerted and ireful face and said to Elsie:

"Elsie, Miss Eva would like you to come with us and see her off at the station."

Evidently there had been an altercation between mother and daughter, and the mother had been forced to surrender by one of Miss Eva's ultimatums.

"Just slip your cloak on," added Mrs. Raste to Elsie.

"I'll be as quick as I can, madam," Elsie answered submissively.

But Elsie had no intention of going to Victoria in her working clothes half hidden by a cloak. Elsie had her notions of what was decent and dignified. She regretted not to be able to oblige the mistress, but positively she could not go "as she was." She did not announce this decision to Mrs. Raste; she merely disappeared into the home. The taxi arrived and blew its horn; Miss Eva's luggage was piled on it. Joe rushed down to hasten Elsie.

"Yes. Yes. Coming," said Elsie.

Mrs. Raste stood at the top of the basement and called with restrained impatience and resentment:

"Elsie! Elsie! What on earth are you doing? Do you want us to miss the train?"

"Coming, madam. I'm coming."

The suspense was dreadful. The action of the heart of the household seemed to be arrested. Elsie heard the voice of Miss Eva on the front-steps saying: "Mummy, it's no use. We must wait for her." At length Elsie, red and breathless, ran up into the hall. She was dressed in her best black (for her late mother), with a black hat and the funereal black gloves, and she carried a purse and an umbrella.

"But what about serving the dinner, 'm'?" she gasped.

"Oh dear, Elsie, do for heaven's sake come along. . . . As if I hadn't told Joe about the gentlemen's dinner."

In the taxi Elsie sat with her back to the driver, facing the two rulers. She was horribly, very painfully, self-conscious. Self-consciousness drove every other emotion out of her heart. She did not know where to look. She dared not look at the faces of the rulers, but without doing so she well knew that they too were constrained. Nobody spoke, except once when Mrs. Raste said with a sarcastic sigh:

"I wonder whether he [the driver] calls this the shortest way to Victoria!"

Elsie had never travelled so far afield. In the great, new reverberating terminus, with its crowds, shops, and strange contrivances of all kinds she ought to have been enchanted and impressed. For, though she had indeed seen the facades of King's Cross, St. Pancras and Euston termini, she had never till that morning been inside any railway station. Nor had she ever beheld a train, save for an occasional glimpse of an Underground train on the exposed part of the Underground line south of Rosebery Avenue. As for travelling in a train—wild dream! But she was not enchanted and she was not impressed. She was naught but self-conscious.

When Mrs. Raste was busy with ticket-getting and the minute instruction of a porter, Miss Eva took Elsie's hand furtively.

"I shan't cry," said Miss Eva. "And perhaps I'd better not kiss you—not there. I'll kiss you now."

And she kissed Elsie in the midst of the hurrying crowds on the vast glass-roofed expanse of forecourt. Nobody took any notice of the act—a terminus is the theatre of multifarious shameless and shamed kisses.

"Here! Take your platform ticket," said Mrs. Raste, as they passed through the wicket. "You'll want it when you leave."

And Elsie clutched the magic card in her gloved hand. There stood the important train, with "Eastbourne" imprinted on its brows—sinister proof that Eastbourne and schools existed. Never before had Elsie seen so many fashionable people congregated together. She had always thought that fashionable people were few and scattered—quite exceptional persons; yet here nearly everybody but Elsie was fashionable. Gradually she noticed that there were many schoolgirls in the moving throng. They were everywhere. Most of them were accompanied, but a few—grand, awe-inspiring, porter-tipping heroines to frightened Miss Eva—were alone and free. Elsie heard a puffing middle-aged gentleman say that if he had known he would have chosen another day. The train was crowded, but Mrs. Raste had secured two corner seats by her foreseeing organization. Not conceiving that there might be more than one school at Eastbourne, Elsie concluded that Miss Eva's school must be a very mighty thing indeed.

When mother and daughter were seated in the full compartment, and the luggage bestowed and the porter tipped, and the door closed and the window of it dropped, Mrs. Raste regained all her usual equanimity. She talked, rather stiffly, but she talked—and not unkindly. Miss Eva, pale and struggling to command herself as she munched a comforting chocolate, did not talk. Nor did Elsie, standing at the window. Every clock in the station stood still. You looked at them, looked deliberately away for an age, and looked again, but not a finger had budged. It was most extraordinary. . . . Then a strange vibration! Was it, could it be, that the train had begun to move? The train did move, crawling.

"Good-bye, Elsie!"

"Good-bye, Miss Eva."

"Oh! And Elsie. Be sure you don't forget to strip Miss Eva's bed." Mrs. Raste smiled and nodded very benevolently, showing that Elsie was the respected and valued servant after all.

Miss Eva sprang into the window. Tears were in her eyes as she smiled and waved. Lots of people were waving, but for

Elsie Miss Eva's waving was like no other.

The ticket-inspector stopped her at the barrier.

"Oh! My ticket!"

She gave it to him, thanking God that she had not lost it. She was reflecting: "Poor little thing! She'll be very, very unhappy at first. And what the house'll be like without her I *daren't* think!" She was scared at the prospect of the house without Miss Eva! Scared! She could not contemplate the sorrow that would be her own till Christmas.

She had entered the station in a dream, and as a follower. She had no idea where she was in the terminus, or where Victoria was in London and in relation to Clerkenwell. But she got into the street at last, somewhat dazed, and walked a little way and was still more lost. She was somehow ashamed to consult a policeman. Suddenly she saw a magic number on a motor-bus, "38," and by heaven's grace the bus stopped on the opposite side of the road, and she ran over to it and boarded it. That number was a chipped-off bit of Clerkenwell for her. She knew as surely as anybody could know anything that the "38's" went up Rosebery Avenue. But because she was in a strange land she doubted.

"Does this go to Rosebery Avenue?" she asked the conductor.

The conductor said that it did. Elsie sat comfortably down in a corner to indulge her grief. She soon began to feel hungry.

II

DURING DINNER

The lounge, a large apartment of irregular shape, full of cosy corners and grouped easy-chairs inviting to intimacies, and lit by rose-shaded lamps embedded in the carved ceiling, and screened from the outer world by thick, rosy curtains, was perfectly empty. Warm and well-cushioned and softly carpeted, it waited in silence with its discreetly voluptuous engravings and statuettes, its silver trophies of sport and its gigantic ferns and palms, for the end of dinner, when it would be comfortably filled by ladies and gentlemen who, until they went up in the lift to bed, had nothing to do except digest and play cards.

The dining-room was separated from the lounge by a glass wall, through which the diners, aided by their high-priests, priests and acolytes, could be seen dining with dignity and ceremony. Not a sound came from the dining-room through the glass wall; its inhabitants might have been an optical illusion.

On the other side of the lounge was a much smaller apartment, called by the hotel proprietor the sun-room, and by certain facetious guests the grill-room. Its semicircular front wall was wholly window, and if there was any sunshine this room caught it and imprisoned it and presented it to the persons who cared to occupy the row of easy chairs ranged in front of the vast expanse of glass. The sun-room was cold at night. On this night its curtains had not been drawn, nor its lamps lit. Through the window the nocturnal pleasure-town offered itself with its piers and its promenade all festooned and jewelled in electricity, and its motors gliding to and fro, and a little ragged boy crying evening papers in the east wind just under the window.

The sun-room was not quite dark, partly because of the radiance from the streets and partly because of the radiance from the glowing lounge. Within it, gazing forth at the magic spectacle of the town, could be seen a young man in a dinner-jacket. He was tall, with a small head; he had race and distinction; he had evidently done all that was proper to his station and age, from fighting in the trenches to joining the right clubs. And although he held himself carelessly and was ever so little negligent of his attire (but not of his glossy hair) he had the authentic *chic* which the most meticulous and earnest dandies in Paris try in vain to match. He gazed at the town for quite a long time and then turned and gazed into the brightness of the lounge. He was waiting. The lounge was waiting.

Then a fat, middle-aged woman, with dirty dress and dirty apron, sidled apologetically into the lounge, carrying a dirty tool-box. Her tools consisted chiefly of various brushes and rags. She knelt down before the great patent stove that burnt coal economically and yet brightly near the middle of the lounge, and garnished and tidied and rubbed the stove and swept its hearth, and sidled apologetically out again. She knew she was an eyesore in the rich room and ought to be ashamed of herself for being visible in paradise.

And once more the lounge and the young man waited. Then a bell rang and the lift went up. The lift-shaft, surrounded by the staircase, ended in the lounge itself, so that the traffic and burdens of the lift might provide interest for the loungers in the lounge. The lift descended, bearing a young woman. It was a pity that the lounge happened to be empty of sightseers, for the young woman was worth witnessing. A blonde, rather plump, and not very tall, she had a face lovely in form and tints, glinting light brown eyes and hair, a large, richly promising mouth, and a smile that was habitual. The arched curve of her eyebrows added to her agreeable and eager expression a note of constant slightly thrilled surprise. Having a perfect complexion and lips, she had of course plentifully employed rouge and powder. Having the most adorable fingernails, she had of course most elaborately painted them. It would not have been decent for her to show herself as Nature had so exquisitely made her. She was magnificently dressed; her jewels, though few, might have been pawned for at least a thousand pounds.

She emerged from the lift well aware of her costly perfection but not a bit conceited about it. She glanced questioningly round the empty lounge with a look half-innocent and half-initiated, half-jaunty and half-bashful. The truth was that she had been married nearly three weeks, and this was not the first hotel of her honeymoon; therefore she considered herself an old hand, learned in the world's ways, omniscient on the subject of love and husbands, and not on any account to be mistaken for part of a honeymoon couple. But also she had doubts concerning her competence as a woman of experience, and her great knowledge sometimes frightened her. Nevertheless she knew that she was utterly delicious and all-powerful, and that the whole earth ought to be grateful to her for residing on it.

Satisfied that there really was nobody in the lounge, she tripped up to the glass partition and spied cautiously upon the dining-room. Then, puzzled, she crossed the lounge again and peered into the twilight of the sun-room.

"Ah! There you are! I was wondering where you'd got to."

She spoke so vivaciously and charmingly and lovingly that you would have thought that, the place being quite deserted, the young husband would have sprung at the young wife, whom less than a month ago he had snatched away in all her virginal innocence from her weeping parents, and kissed her on the spot.

But no! The young husband did not move. He did not even look at the young wife. He glared aside—at nothing. His mouth worked. He bit his lip. His hands dug themselves into the very deeps of his pockets. He was in a state of considerable emotional disturbance. Whereas the young wife, whose intimate acquaintance with the male sex was limited to a week or two, and who surely ought to have been seriously agitated—the wife maintained a beautiful calm.

"Aren't you coming in to dinner?" she asked sweetly and simply.

"No!" grunted the husband, and then after a little pause added: "I'm not."

"But what's the matter?" she demanded in gentle, complete amazement. "Phil, what *is* the matter?"

In that moment Philip, as hundreds of millions of young men and old men before him, stood absolutely astounded at woman's power of duplicity. Here was a young woman whom he had really believed to be quite different in her nature from all other women whatsoever, an honest, sincere, genuine, straight young woman, a pal as well as a wife; and now every tone of her voice and every word she said, and every movement of her hands, lied to him—lied foolishly without the least hope of deceiving him! She asked what was the matter, but she knew what was the matter, exactly and entirely what was the matter. She knew that he was profoundly hurt and anxious. Her odious tranquillity proved that she was insensible to his suffering.

"I am not going in to dinner until that fellow at the next table has come out," Philip announced with finality. And then the little pause, and then the clinching phrase: "And so now you know!"

She gave a low, light laugh.

"Oh! It's *that*? You're still worrying about *that*?" she said, just as though ten minutes earlier they had not had quite a scene in the bedroom about the fellow who sat by himself at the next table. Her method of conducting an argument was exasperating to the last degree.

"I told you I shouldn't," said Philip with restrained savageness. He was in such spiritual pain that her extraordinary physical attractiveness became loathsome to him. His evident extreme distress alarmed her somewhat, and she thought she would do well to repeat what she had said upstairs and what she had sworn never to repeat:

"But don't I tell you I've never even spoken to him? I don't know his name even."

"The man's a cad. That's certain."

"I don't see that he's a cad."

"No. Women often like cads. But he's a cad all the same. He makes eyes at you all the time, at every meal. And upon my soul you smile at him. Do you think I'm blind?"

"I think you're very silly," she replied, this time with conviction. "I can't understand you at all. I never heard of such a thing. I suppose you think I ought to feel flattered by your jealousy——"

"Jealousy!" he sneered.

"But I'm not." She still spoke evenly and kindly, somewhat like a mother to a child, though she was by six years his junior.

She imagined that her equanimity was very clever. But it maddened Philip. He began to lose control of himself, and found a terrible satisfaction in doing so. The dreadful thoughts—suspicions, accusations, criticisms, condemnations—about our best friends which lie hidden at the bottom of the hearts of all of us, and upon the concealment of which

depends the safety and decency of human relations, rose up unchecked to the surface and escaped in speech. He called his wife a flirt; he referred to her ruthless hunger for pleasure and luxury, to her egotism, to her vanity, to her faulty upbringing, to the absurdities of her parents and other relatives, and to his own confiding, trustful, foolish nature, which his wicked wife had known how to deceive.

"I'm afraid I've married a jealous monster," said she in reply sadly; and then with an assumption of courage: "Still, there it is, and I expect I must make the best of it. Anyhow, if you aren't going in to dinner, I am. You'd better take a stroll. The exercise will calm you and pull you together. . . ."

"Smiled at the man!" How grotesque! She had never smiled at the man. She had smiled at the room, smiled generally—nothing more. The man was absolutely nothing to her. Must she scowl, to please Phil? He had gone clean off his head. She had always suspected that he was inclined to be a bit jealous; but this scene was indeed too much. It was incredible, tragic, catastrophic. It was the ruin of all her chances of happiness. She thought of the wedding—only the other day, and of his tenderness and his passion. . . . She turned away with a fixed, expressionless smile, towards the dining-room. She would see the thing through. She would eat and drink, though she choked for it. She did not guess that if she had burst into tears and fled upstairs he would have followed her, furious at first—and then contrite.

Philip watched her depart. His hand behind him touched a blind-cord. He pulled at it, and it broke, and a large blind rattled down with a noise astonishingly like thunder. A stout cord, a cord nearly a quarter of an inch in diameter, and he had (he thought) scarcely touched it; and yet it had broken between his fingers as a bit of cotton might have broken! The noise and confusion of the blind seemed to him somehow to symbolize what had happened to his marriage. He suddenly felt exhausted and also frightened, and he dropped into a chair as after a long, harrowing night he had ducked back into some sort of semi-safety in the Ypres salient. He was quite alone. Ethel had disappeared into the distant dining-room. The whole brooding expanse of the deserted lounge lay between him and humanity. He ought, according to his own code, to have sworn and raged manfully. But there was no occasion to keep up appearances, and he moaned to himself weakly, despairingly:

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

That was all.

Then he was aware in the gloom of a face peering at him round the flap of a huge easy-chair that was slightly turned from the direction of the window. He was not alone! He had not been alone! The episode from beginning to end had had an unseen, unguessed spectator. Philip, discountenanced and wondering how he ought to behave in the very startling circumstances, did not move.

"I know exactly how you feel," said the spectator in a quiet, worn voice, and so naturally, so simply and amicably, that Philip could not take offence at the unheard-of familiarity.

The man rose from his chair and slowly approached Philip and stood close to him. A little grey-haired man, apparently about sixty. Philip had seen him once or twice in the hotel; he always came very late into the dining-room for meals, eating by himself. He was well dressed and of good deportment, and yet there was something queer, disconcerting, about him—about his demeanour, his accent, and about the very quality of his voice; he was both apologetic and haughty, both hard and sensitive, both common and distinguished; as for his accent, Phil could not put a name to it; further, when he spoke his lips scarcely moved.

"There's nobody can understand you better than I can," the man continued. "And there's nobody got a better right than me to warn you that if you can't control that insane jealousy of yours you have a fair chance of a tragedy in your life. Look at you! Look at your face! You're all shaking. You aren't a man. You're what remains of a man after a devil has had possession of him and devastated him."

"See here——" Philip began in sharp but feeble protest; he was somehow overawed, as much by the man's choice of words as by his extraordinary self-assurance.

"You won't mind me talking to you like this," the man stopped him, almost grandly, "when I tell you that I'm Crary."

He spoke as though he were announcing a fact of terrific, dazzling, unique interest.

"Crory?" Philip repeated the name murmuringly, as he might have repeated "Smith" or "Jones."

"The Crary."

"I'm afraid——"

"Do you mean to say you've never heard of the Crary case, the Crary-Hamwich case?"

Mr. Crary still spoke quietly, but in his tone there was utter amazement, and some resentment. His sensitive pride had been wounded by Philip's ignorance. He was really hurt. Plainly he felt that he had a grievance.

"I'm afraid I haven't."

"Oh, well!" Mr. Crary gloomily accepted the situation. "I suppose you're too young to remember even the greatest public events of the 'nineties. But believe me that for weeks, once, I was the most celebrated man in this country. . . . And now you don't even . . . Such is fame! Such is fame! Good God, sir! I'm in the 'Famous Trials' series. And even to-day I stand alone. Nobody else has been through what I've been through. Nobody!"

"Oh! What was it?"

"Well, I can't tell it you all. Take too long. So you've never heard of the murder of Mr. Hamwich! . . . I murdered him. From jealousy. That's why I thought I must speak to you. Will you listen? Nobody'll come into the lounge for twenty minutes yet." He glanced round.

"Yes," answered Philip, still shakily. He did not want to listen, but he was intimidated by the singular mien of the little man, and by the conjunction of the words "jealousy" and "murder," and by the horror of his own frightful feelings only a few minutes earlier. . . . A murderer in front of him! Why had the murderer not been hung? How came he to be at large, a guest in high-class hotels?

The little man proceeded:

"I was in love with Mrs. Hamwich as much as you are with that young lady who's just gone. I assume she's your wife."

"She is."

"Mrs. Hamwich was young." Mr. Crary's voice trembled. "And I was a bit younger. Mr. Hamwich was forty-five. I say I was in love with Mrs. Hamwich desperately. And Mrs. Hamwich was in love with me. We couldn't help it. We didn't know what to do. She wouldn't do anything wrong. She wouldn't leave her husband. A Jewess, I ought to explain. They're like that, Jewesses are. I had to give her up. That was in the afternoon in a tea-shop. Mr. and Mrs. Hamwich lived at Canonbury, you know—North London. I don't know why I went up to Canonbury that night, and into their street. I saw them walking home together. He held her arm. He was owning her. A very correct gentleman, in business. I'd nothing against him except that he was her husband and owning her. I couldn't stand the way he owned her. It drove me mad. I was so moved that I could not bear my emotion. It was unbearable. I *had* to ease it, and there was only one way. The devil rushed me across the road, and I stabbed Mr. Hamwich in the back—twenty-two times, they said afterwards. With a pair of scissors that Delphine—that was Mrs. Hamwich—had given me for a keepsake. Oh, I knew what I was doing! Only it wasn't me, it was somebody else in me. I enjoyed doing it. Yes, I enjoyed it. I'd never been so happy in my life. It was awful—my happiness was. Awful! Awful! Afterwards I was very ill. Of course they arrested me. But they arrested Mrs. Hamwich as well. They made out that she had planned the murder with me—urged me to do it. They brought evidence for that. Scissors and so on. Letters. But it was an absolute lie. An absolute lie. I was staggered. Neither she nor I had had the slightest idea that I was going to kill him. *You* don't think *you're* ever going to kill anybody, do you? No more did I, till the moment came. They tried us together. I had money, lots, and I spent a lot of it on the trial. Not for myself. No hope for me. But for her. We were both convicted and sentenced to death. I thought the jury was insane. I fainted in the dock. She didn't faint. I never saw her again. There was no appeal in those days. There was only the Home Secretary to go to. The newspapers were full of us for a fortnight. Tremendous petitions for reprieve. Then at last I heard that the Home Secretary had refused to interfere in my case. That was the day before the day. They wouldn't tell me anything about Delphine. Prison rules. Not a word could I get. And I was allowed no visits. I was sure she was reprieved. They'd put me in another cell. Nobody said anything, but I knew it was the condemned cell. I was never left alone. Two special warders all the time. Very friendly fellows. That is, they got friendly after a day or two. But they wouldn't talk about *her*—not a word. Had orders, I suppose. Only I didn't want to talk about anything else.

"It wasn't being hanged that troubled me so much. No, it was remorse. You don't know what remorse is. You can't. It's

the most dreadful thing can happen to a man. Remorse for killing Mr. Hamwich, of course. But far more, far more, *far* more, for having got Delphine into this ghastly ruin. This ghastly ruin, I say. I raged about that. I couldn't believe the stupidity of the jury, or the unscrupulousness of the Crown counsel. I couldn't believe it was all true. I had one thought in my head all day, and nearly all night. Injustice! Monstrous injustice to her! And I'd done it. I'd brought it about! In two minutes—a minute! And what had made me do it I didn't know. Sometimes I couldn't credit that I *had* done it. It was rather as if it was something I had read about in a paper.

"Well, it was the Governor himself came to tell me my petition for a reprieve was refused. I asked him about the petition for Mrs. Hamwich. He got stiff and awkward at once. He said: 'I know nothing about Mrs. Hamwich. She is not in my charge, and I've no responsibility for her.' I said: 'But she's *bound* to be reprieved!' He said: 'Yes.'

"Well, then, I made sure that she *was* reprieved. They couldn't hang her, couldn't! A woman, and innocent! I went easier in my mind. I wondered how I could ever have doubted that she'd get off in the end."

Mr. Crary ceased and turned from Philip, seated in front of him, and looked out of the half of the window not covered by the fallen blind. Not a sound from the empty, illuminated lounge. It seemed as if the lounge was waiting for Mr. Crary to be executed.

"But what next?" Philip demanded, now impatient, excited, feverish.

"I'm not telling this well," said Mr. Crary. "I've never told it before to a soul, and I'm forgetting things. I'm mixing things up. I'd forgotten about chapel on Execution Sunday—that's the last Sunday before the execution. I was taken into chapel by myself then, after the others, and I sat in the red pew at the back, pew with red curtains across it. The condemned pew. Nobody could see I was there. But all the other prisoners knew I was there, and they knew I knew. And once when I met a convict in a corridor—how he turned his head away! I asked my warders why he did that. They both blushed. One of them told me afterwards the reason. It isn't etiquette in a prison for convicts to look at a condemned man. Not nice. They think he won't like it, you see."

Another pause. Mr. Crary had not faced Philip again. He was talking quietly, but with slight emphasis now and then, to the street, to the glittering piers and the promenade and the motors gliding to and fro in the pleasure town. Philip sat up in his easy-chair and leaned forward and glared intently at Mr. Crary's back.

"Well, all that's nothing, after all. After he'd been to see me in my cell, the Governor sent for me to his office. At night. So I was taken to his office. My warders stayed outside. The Governor said to me: 'Crary,' he said, 'sit down and have a cigar.' So I did. I was as calm as calm. Then he said: 'Crary, I'm not a religious man. I don't know anything about heaven, and I don't know anything about hell. That's the chaplain's business, not mine, and I dare say this last few days you've had to listen to all you wanted in that line,' he said. 'But,' he said, 'you're going to die to-morrow morning. Before you die,' he said, 'I *should* like to know you're sorry for having killed that man.' 'Sir,' I said, 'I'm d——d sorry.' And so I was. So I am.

"When I got back to my cell they lighted the lamp outside that shines through the little window into the cell. No other light. I might have written things on the slate that they give you. But I didn't. Didn't want to do anything. One of my warders asked me to play draughts, and I did, just to please him. Then I lay down on the bed without taking off my clothes. The other warder came back. He said: 'Aren't you going to undress, Crary?' 'No,' I said. 'I'm not.' They didn't say anything to that. I slept all night. Next morning when I woke up I said: 'What time is it?' They said: 'You've got two hours yet. Try to sleep a bit more.' But I didn't try. One of the warders went out and came back in a minute or two with a bundle. It was my clothes, my dark grey suit. I was to be hung in my own clothes. I liked that. But they wouldn't let me put on my collar and necktie. You see.

"'How do you feel?' they asked me. 'All right?' 'Yes,' I said, 'all right.' Then they brought me my breakfast, which I'd asked for, two poached eggs, and the tea in a can, and the mug. I ate it all. And a cigarette. 'Is it raining?' I said. 'No,' they said, 'but it has been.' I didn't feel as if anything was real. I felt as if it was a tale—fairy-tale, yes, fairy-tale. Then the prison clock struck. I had another hour yet. Then it was the chaplain in his surplice came in. The warders went out. Don't I remember the keys rattling! When the chaplain had finished the Governor came in, and the chief warder and the assistant-executioner and the doctor. Cell was full of people. They gave me some brandy. They were all very nice, and I told 'em so. I didn't ask about Delphine or anything. Then the assistant-executioner fastened my arms. I began to feel queer. But that was nothing to when the chaplain started to say the burial service at me as if I was dead.

"Another thing I forgot to tell you. There were two doors to my cell. One of them had never been opened. It was opened now. We went out in a procession and the chaplain went on with the burial service, and there was the execution shed or whatever they call it, just outside! And the under-sheriff and one or two others were waiting there, and the executioner was waiting for me on the scaffold—he had a red moustache, and I thought he looked terribly ill and queer. So I went up on the scaffold—I tell you I couldn't believe it was true—and the executioner put a bag over my head, and I couldn't see, of course. And then there was a thud and I couldn't make out what had happened. I heard the governor's voice, very excited and nervous. He said: 'Never mind *him*; never mind *him*! *You* must do it; *you* must do it.' And the assistant-executioner said, 'No, sir. Not after that I won't do it. Not if it was fifteen hundred pounds instead of fifteen. Not after *that*.'

"I only found out afterwards what it was *had* happened. The executioner had had a fit. They took the bag off my head again, and I went back to the cell. And they were all as white as a sheet, every one of them. My sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. I needn't tell you there's no such thing really as a life sentence. After about a quarter of a century you're let out. A quarter of a century! *You*, sir, must have been aged about three when my executioner had a fit. All the time you were growing up, governess, school, college I suppose, fighting I suppose, falling in love I suppose, I was in prison, thinking about what mad jealousy leads to. And I'm still thinking about it, and after what I've seen and heard of you to-night I'm thinking about it now more than I have for years. I'm not fifty——"

"Not fifty!" exclaimed Philip in amazement.

"Not fifty. But I've lived through whole centuries.

"And I haven't told you all yet. I haven't told you the worst part. At the very moment when my executioner had his fit, my innocent Delphine was executed in another prison-yard in London. She hadn't been reprieved. They'd allowed me to deceive myself, for fear I might go mad. Someone actually proposed that the other executioner who had dealt with Delphine should come along the next morning and deal with me. The scheme 'fell through,' as they say. For one thing the fellow refused. Executioners are very superstitious.

"I've had all that to think over for a quarter of a century. Of course I don't feel it so much now—not nearly so much. I'm numbed. You do get numbed. I go about the world numbed. Nobody knows me. Naturally I don't call myself Crary." He turned at last sharply to face Philip and said with a sort of explosion: "If I wasn't numbed I should have smashed this plate-glass window with my fists long before I'd finished telling you my story."

At this point there was a thud just outside the sun-room, in the lounge. Philip gave an involuntary cry. For an instant he thought it was the executioner in a fit—astounding delusion on his part!

The thud was the noise of the fall of Philip's young wife. Girlishly repenting her resolution to dine alone and leave Philip to recover unaided from his madness, Ethel had quitted the dining-room, crossed silently the silent lounge, and, intimidated and enthralled by the discourse of Mr. Crary to the window, had hidden herself behind the wall which separated the sun-room from the easternmost part of the lounge. She had withstood the terror of the recital as long as she could, and then, just after the climax, had faltered and dropped in the arched opening between the rooms. She lay there in an ineffective posture, rather bunched up, with her lovely raiment and jewels all disordered, and her face as dead white as the faces of the officials at the execution where the criminal was not executed. Mr. Crary saw her first and pointed to her. Philip turned in obedience to Mr. Crary's scaring finger. He sprang from his chair to the archway and knelt beside her, not in the least knowing what to do.

"Let her lie. She'll come round in a minute," said Mr. Crary proudly, with his unmoving lips.

Philip was himself ready to faint under the fearful shocks of Mr. Crary's tale with its tremendous moral for the jealous. Mr. Crary had put Philip in terror of the possibilities of his own instincts. The husband felt as though he had just escaped a catastrophe for which none but himself could have been blamed, and as though the catastrophe avoided might recur soon or late in the future if he did not watch over himself night and day. He was nearly stunned by the revelation of himself to himself.

And also he was exquisitely and profoundly touched by the yielding compunction of his wife, who, after leaving him to his folly, had out of sheer loving good-nature come back to wheedle and cajole him out of his folly. His passion for his wife flamed up, burning white in those moments; it was as overpowering as the passion of Mr. Crary for Delphine.

He stroked her cold cheek, marvelling at the fineness of it and at the complex and delicate perfection of the organism which was she. His sensations had the surpassing inexpressible intensity of which people, it is said, sometimes die.

And the empty lounge brooded with its rosy lamps and its flickering fire, indifferent and yet warmly indulgent, upon the group. And outside the gleaming motor-cars glided in curves against the glittering electric background of the promenade and the piers. And through the glass wall of the dining-room waiters, attentive and deferential, could be seen passing to and fro. And there was not a sound.

And Mr. Crary contemplated with pride what he had done, the stupendous impression he had made, the mighty lesson he had taught. After a quarter of a century of martyred subjection Mr. Crary had risen suddenly to majesty, to domination, to sovereignty. He had imprinted himself upon his fellow-creatures. He was saved from futility. The sublime horror of his tragedy clothed him. He lived again.

Returning life-blood tinged the young girl's cheeks. Philip kissed them with abandoned and tender violence. His passion was to shield and cherish her, to surround her with protective affection, to exist uniquely in and for her. His passion was by extraordinary deeds of devotion to earn her forgiveness.

"I'm all right," she murmured feebly.

He picked her up in his arms. Light! Light as down! She had no weight in his arms. He carried her off swiftly towards the lift, the pale wisp of the train of her dress dragging along the carpet. The auburn girl and the yellow girl in their tight-fitting black, caged in the reception office before vast books of account,—these saw the pair first and caught their breath. Then the hall-porter, meditating between notices of theatres, trains, and chars-à-bancs, saw them, and started officiously. He was too late. They were in the lift. The gate banged. The lift shot up, showing through its bars a glimpse of a white skirt against a black coat. It was gone aloft. . . .

The doors of the dining-room opened.

"You can say what you like," the voice of a young woman emerging was heard, breaking the enchantment of the lounge, "I prefer crème de menthe to green chartreuse."

III

THE PAPER CAP

I

Mr. Matthew Park, aged forty-two, bachelor, partner in a firm of bill-brokers in the City, was waiting for a lady in the foyer of the Grand Babylon Hotel. His figure, features, expression and clothes showed him to be a man of refinement. He aspired, indeed, to be fully civilized. He took the best out of life. He was prosperous because all firms of bill-brokers in the City are prosperous—unless they do fantastic things or transact business with fantastic people, in which case they are liable to go bankrupt for sublime sums; Mr. Park's firm avoided all fantasies. Mr. Park therefore had much money, which he spent in civilizing himself. His beautiful flat was an illustration of all the arts, including literature, and he was always sincerely trying to improve his taste in every direction. He had an eye, a nose, an ear, and a palate. It was not sufficient for his ambition to know and to love the best in painting, music and poetry. He knew and loved the best in curries, champagne, dancing and neckties. He was a comprehensive connoisseur, and accepted as such. Being refined, he was sensitive. Being sensitive, he was not unreasonably fond of society, and he could be quite happy by himself. Being anxious to learn, he had an open mind. Hence he was charitable, with broad views; it followed that he was kind. His glance was even wistful and appealing; but sometimes, when the world was specially not revolving in the direction he desired, his dark, fine, moustached face, and the curves of his still slim body, would harden, and observers become aware that he was capable of being drastic.

It was New Year's Eve, and the famous New Year's Eve dinner of the Grand Babylon, so prominently featured every December in the press by the hotel's ingenious publicity agent, was about to begin. Multitudes of correctly dressed persons surged in the foyer, a mob in fact; and strong wooden barriers had been erected across the entrance to the two restaurants. Mr. Park, who had never before had the idea of dining at the Grand Babylon on New Year's Eve, was surprised at those barriers, and he did not like them a bit. He was not accustomed to being impeded by barriers, nor to the compulsion to show tickets at them, in expensive hotels; he was accustomed to being waved and bowed and smiled into the halls of expensive hotels by the managers thereof. He did not like the mob either. It was a vulgar if a moneyed mob, and he failed to recognize a single soul in it—he who in all fashionable resorts had usually to greet acquaintances at every turn. He was indeed almost startled by the mere existence, in such vast numbers, of such vulgar persons as now surrounded him, particularly in view of the fact that the dinner cost three guineas a head, wine excluded.

Then at last he recognized a club friend, Marrian, a consummate idler, fulfilling no useful function on earth, one of those incomprehensible, agreeable individuals who justify the squandering of an immense unearned income by the assertion that extravagance in luxury keeps money in circulation, provides employment for the necessitous, helps trade, and thus contributes to the prosperity of the empire!

"Look here," said Marrian, "you aren't forgetting you're booked for my yacht at Monte Carlo in February? I'll show you Corsica and so on."

Mr. Park protested gratefully that he had the affair always in memory.

"Dining here to-night?" added Mr. Park.

"Not much!" said Marrian, with open scorn. "I've just looked in to pick up a fellow from New York."

This reply did nothing to comfort Mr. Park's afflicted sensibility.

And the wealthy mob was not the worst of his distresses. He could forgive the mob for being uncivilized, but could he forgive the lady for being late? Of course nearly all women were nearly always late for their appointments with men. They made excuses for themselves, and you made excuses for them. You pretended that it was only too good and too gracious of them to arrive at no matter what time. You passed your life in inventing excuses for the lateness of women. The phenomenon was received as the weather is received. And yet why should so gross an error in deportment, so crude a lapse from fine manners, be overlooked in women? There would be a devil of a scene if a man was late for a rendezvous with a woman. Mr. Park was a connoisseur, above everything, in deportment, which he placed higher than art, music, letters, eating and drinking, and attire. He gave indeed the very greatest importance to it. He argued that if

punctuality was the politeness of sovereigns and woman was to be counted a queen, the least the pretty creature could do was to be on time.

He wondered, in his exasperated suspense, why he should have invited this late lady to dine with him on New Year's Eve. She attracted him, but he knew not how, nor by virtue of what quality in her. Her face, for example, had not engraved itself on his mind. He could not even recall the colour of her eyes, nor the shape of her nose. He worked himself up into such a state that he feared he might not recognize her when she did come! Yet he had known her for months and months! . . .

Mere morbidity, of course!

It was exhausting work to watch for her advent. There were two swing doors, and a continuous stream of men and hooded women flowed through each of them. Now and then he had to take his gaze from the doors and look round among the mob lest she might have escaped him at the entrances. Moreover, he did not care to seem too interested in the doors; it would be humiliating to be set down by the mob as a man whom a woman dared to keep indefinitely waiting. Of course she would come in the end—they always did. But would she? His morbidity increased so that he could scarcely picture her pushing through the door. It began to be inconceivable that she would ever appear. She was carrying lateness to unparalleled excess. . . .

The incoming streams had slackened, the mob in front of the barriers was noticeably thinning. Well, he gave her precisely another five minutes, after which he would telephone, and go calmly to his club. At the end of the five minutes he decided that he might as well give her still another five. If she came it would be his duty to leave no doubt in her mind as to the enormity of her offence; he had the delicate, unexceptionable, poison-pointed words ready to lay her low. Who was *she*, to play the prima donna and darling of mankind? His mood grew terrible. Then through the swing-doors he descried a woman arguing with a taxi-driver. It might be she, because she had a passion for arguing with taxi-drivers. No! No! It could not possibly be she. . . . It was she, smiling with happy ease.

"*Am I late?*" And, not waiting for the elucidation of that particular point, she continued: "*To tell you the truth*, I wasn't sure whether you said eight-fifteen or eight-thirty." (She had arrived at eight-fifty.)

"Oh, no," he replied gaily, gallantly (miserable poltroon), "*I've only just come myself.*"

To this masterpiece of mendacious politeness, to this exquisite fineness of self-sacrifice, she answered with a slight touch of dryness:

"Well then, it's a good thing it took my maid such a long time to get a taxi, isn't it?"

He felt sorry for her. A trifle! Nothing! Less than nothing! Hardly worthy of record! But probably it was the origin of the supreme drastic decision which Mr. Park made later.

II

Emilia Juana was exceedingly well dressed, and with the most careful attention to detail. A blonde, with chestnut hair, she could successfully carry off pale blue, which is disastrous to so many women. Her frock showed all the considerable daring which fashion enjoined. It left little to the male fancy; but over her shoulders was a nearly transparent white mantilla which gave a slight exciting mystery to the perfect beauty of her skin. The general effect of her in frock, mantilla and head-gear was of something intensely and provocatively and restlessly alive, gleaming shimmering, darkling, spying, challenging, seducing, from the centre of a soft yet impregnable cocoon. The mobile face, with its Norman eyebrows, hazel eyes, curved lips and admirable complexion, had a flawless prettiness. The finish of the hands alone implied hours of work. Not surprising that she should be a little late! Indeed she was very wonderful to behold (and very complex to think about). Mr. Park was thoroughly satisfied with her appearance; it did justice to him; it showed respect for his taste and a complete ability to cope with his taste.

He noticed now and then a hard glint in her eyes, an occasional uncompromisingness of tone in her voice; and he noticed also a continuous and unshakable self-possession. These things might have been defects in an ordinary woman, but Emilia Juana was a concert singer, accustomed to support the public gaze. It was her singing of Brahms that had first attracted him to her; at any rate he thought so. Men of Mr. Park's stamp, preoccupied though they are with the arts,

seldom seek the company of public artists; almost invariably they find that such artists are crude; but Mr. Park had been impressed by the Brahms singing to such a depth that he had not avoided an opportunity of meeting Emilia Juana. He knew scarcely anything about her, except that her real name was understood to be Birdsell, and the look of her enlarged photograph on posters in Bond Street, and the look of her name on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* of a Saturday morning. Of her domestic situation he was ignorant. Her finances puzzled him; she did not get many engagements, and she often complained of the inadequacy of fees for both singing and teaching; nevertheless she must spend money somewhat freely; Mr. Park, as a man of business and a man highly civilized, could estimate the cost of perfection of detail.

Still, her finances were not his affair. For him she was simply a woman whom he had asked out to dinner, and she richly filled the bill. No woman within sight could compare with her in appearance and physical style. So superior was she that the sensitive fellow hated her to be in such an environment.

Two thousand persons were dining at the Grand Babylon that night. The tables were crowded together and the waiters could hardly move between them. There was no elasticity in the service, no choice in the dishes, no friendly chat with a *maître d'hôtel*, no changing your mind; and it had been necessary to order the wines beforehand, by post, on a special form. The fact was that to serve a long dinner to two thousand persons involved elaborate and tyrannic organization, and strict discipline for guests equally with waiters. On that night the rawest provincial up in town for a few days was just as good as Mr. Park.

The noise was terrific; bands, tambourines, explosions, gabble, clatter: you could just hear yourself speak. The heat was oppressive; waiters were freely perspiring—and not too amiable. All over the restaurants, as far as the eye could reach, diners soon began to get rowdy. The management had provided clients with coloured missiles, which they would throw violently at other clients to whom they had not been introduced. Women and girls joined in the rowdiness. Strange scenes! Disturbing scenes! The mere vulgarity shocked Mr. Park.

And in the midst of the enormous vulgarity sat this work of art, Emilia Juana, this interpreter of Brahms. She ate heartily of the second-rate food—you cannot even at the Grand Babylon serve first-rate food to two thousand people simultaneously—but Mr. Park attached no importance to her appetite, being aware that women as a sex do not understand food. She drank of everything, but with restraint. Mr. Park engaged her in conversation about Brahms. She seemed to know and care nothing about Brahms's place in the history of music. Brahms was simply something for her to sing. She had seen scarcely any operas. The entire universe was an apparatus by means of which she, a concert singer, might rise to great fame and power. Though she threw Mr. Park a clever compliment from time to time, she really talked about herself alone. But with what charm and grace she did it! And what a marvellous spectacle she made for Mr. Park's eyes!

More and more she gazed around at the environing spectacle. Could it be that she enjoyed the dreadful display and horrid cacophony?

"Well, how do you like it, now you're here?" said Mr. Park at length. He put no critical disdain into his question, because it was she herself who had suggested that they should dine on New Year's Eve at the Grand Babylon.

"Oh! I love it! I adore it!" she answered in an ecstasy.

And she was sincere. She did love it. She did adore it. Mr. Park was nonplussed by the contradictions of human nature.

The din was now deafening. The waiters had distributed rattles, little harmonicas, flails made of wood and paper, balloons, noses, paper caps, heaven knows what! Emilia Juana started to throw coloured balls at a man who had adopted a false nose. He was an appalling man; the people at his table were appalling. Further, he was tipsy; sundry other guests were tipsy, and not all the tipsiness was confined to men.

"Do put a cap on," Emilia Juana urged Mr. Park.

"Suppose we go and dance," suggested Mr. Park.

"To please me," Emilia Juana insisted with amazing arch persuasiveness.

"Suppose we go and dance," Mr. Park insisted. He could not conceive himself in a paper cap.

They went to dance. The ball-rooms were packed, and noisier than the restaurants. Dresses were torn, eyes leered in the

ball-rooms. Emilia Juana greeted acquaintances. Mr. Park endeavoured to dance. It could not be done. Only jostling could be achieved. And against what shoulders—shoulders in black cloth and shoulders bare!

Mr. Park, under heavy and varied fire, retreated with his partner to what looked to him like safety in a large smoking-room, where people were sitting at tables and recommencing the evening with fresh supplies of champagne. He procured a table and two chairs. A waiter carrying a huge tray of glasses slipped, and every glass was smashed in silvery cataracts of sound. Tumultuous applause! Ringing cheers! Then the lights grew dim. Some individuals jumped on to tables, holding champagne. The rest formed into circles, holding crossed hands and waiting. The lights flared up again. Tumultuous applause! Ringing cheers! The New Year was "in."

"A singular and barbaric way of turning over a new leaf," thought Mr. Park.

Emilia Juana gaily insisted on them entering a circle and joining crossed hands and singing "Auld Lang Syne." Mr. Park had never felt so self-conscious and absurd. He did not know where to look.

Then the final drama occurred. As soon as they had sat down again, Emilia Juana picked from the floor an abandoned scarlet and blue paper cap, and popped it on to Mr. Park's head.

"You've *got* to wear one, anyway!" said she, in a sort of harsh ultimatum.

Tumultuous applause! Ringing cheers! From the whole room! Mr. Park did not blench. He did not fail to smile! He did not snatch the cap off again. He maintained his politeness and his suaveness in their entirety. It was a prodigious feat of manners. But Mr. Park had come to a drastic decision. He had done with society, and for him Emilia Juana symbolized society.

Bidding him good-bye at 2 A.M. at the entrance to her flat, she thanked him with unusual enthusiasm for a delightful evening.

"I've enjoyed myself frightfully," she exclaimed, and then added: "but I think you might have been more cheerful."

It was the crowning insult; for he was convinced that throughout the evening he had concealed his wounds and his humiliations and his horror with a smiling skill and a success unique in the annals of courtesy.

III

On quite a different kind of evening, at the end of the following July, Matthew Park was afloat in a small motor-launch on the Beaulieu River, a mysterious stream with an antique village at one end of it and the Solent and the Isle of Wight at the other. The Solent, at that period of the year, is the crowded haunt of the most expensive and the most luxurious yachts flying the British flag. But you follow a curving line of beacons, put your helm over, and in a moment, as it seems, you are shut out of the world, and the river in which you suddenly find yourself might be an African creek whose bordering trees are the jungle.

The first shadows of twilight were gathering under the trees. Mr. Park's launch moved swiftly and almost silently over the opposing current. He had been to visit the antique village and was now returning towards dinner. No other craft moved on the stream; no soul could be seen on the banks. Mr. Park was alone in a secret and withdrawn world save for the engineer and the steersman of the launch. These were both fat, taciturn men with perfect manners—which Mr. Park could well appreciate. When addressed by him they replied in restrained voices, and neither curtly nor loquaciously. They had much respect for him, and they had also self-respect. They were, Mr. Park thought, ideal. In white, across their blue jerseys, they bore a name, *Juana*; and even thus labelled, as surely no human beings ought to be labelled, they could still be dignified.

At a bend of the river Mr. Park saw the white sides of a yacht reflected in the quiet water. At her stern the blue ensign waved idly. The launch came alongside the yacht, whose life-buoys bore the name *Juana*, Mr. Park stepped on to the gangway of the yacht, climbed the stairs, and was greeted as his feet touched the yacht's decks by two officers who raised their peaked caps to him.

"Lovely evening, sir."

"Lovely."

A steward appeared from below, took Mr. Park's mackintosh, and disappeared.

"Shall you want the launch any more to-night, sir?"

"No, thanks."

The next moment the launch was being hauled up to her davits.

Mr. Park paced the deck in ecstatic content. Wherever his gaze fell it fell on beauty. He had entered into his kingdom, and his kingdom satisfied him. Nay more, its felicity far exceeded his hopes.

It was the holiday in Marrian's yacht at Monte Carlo which had at once confirmed Matthew Park in his decision to cut himself off from all the antipathetic and exasperating ugliness of the world and shown him how best to carry the decision into effect. Marrian's yacht, owing mainly to bad weather, had never quitted Monte Carlo during Mr. Park's stay. The hideousness and the costly idiocy of social life at Monte Carlo had struck Mr. Park as never before. He had seen the place in a new light; it was the very mirror and microcosm of all that offended his refined tastes. And a yacht, while the best instrument for enjoying what the mass of knowing people called "life," was obviously also the best instrument for eschewing it. A yacht was a thing of grace, elegance and style. Further, it was a complete home, and it travelled. When you travelled in a yacht you had not to pack up, to catch trains, to sleep or lie awake in strange beds, to suffer under strange cookery and incompetent unfamiliar servants who exploited you. You travelled with your own cook, your own bed, your own servants, your house, your books, your everything. You retreated with the entire apparatus of comfort and luxury.

The drawbacks were sea-sickness, high cost, and the necessity of absence from the centre of affairs. None of these drawbacks affected Mr. Park. Waves did not incommode him; he had ample money, and his situation was such that he could and did leave his business to the care of others without abandoning any of the profits. He bought a schooner yacht, and sardonically re-christened her *Juana* in order that he might be continually reminded of past foolishness. She was a ship of a hundred and ninety tons, about the length of two cricket-pitches, and twenty feet beam; she had twin screws, twin bathrooms; she made her own electricity; she had every new convenience; she was fast under sail; she was as beautiful as a bird, to behold from without, and, within, was decorated according to the dictates of Mr. Park's full connoisseurship.

At eight o'clock precisely a bell rang, and Mr. Park went into the large deckhouse, which he used as a dining-room, and sat down and was served by two attentive stewards clad in blue and gold—what an agreeable change from the everlasting evening-dress of butlers, *maitres d'hôtel*, and waiters. The food was English and plain, but sound and well-cooked. "All I can say is, sir," the cook had said to him after listening to his praise of the breakfast bacon, "you have the best there is." The dinner; potato soup, fried plaice without sauce, two cutlets with French beans, a soufflé and curried eggs. Merely perfect.

Mr. Park propped a weekly review of advanced opinions against the flower-vase and read as he ate. He chose the periodical because it was well written and also because its opinions coincided with his own. Now and then he offered a remark to one or other of the stewards, who responded—smiling discreetly if he had been jocular—with just the same admixture of respect and self-respect as Mr. Park had enjoyed in the launch. Mr. Park greatly admired his men, and the captain had informed him that they were very happy together.

After dinner Mr. Park strolled about the deck in the dusk illumined by one electric light enclosed within a genuine Chinese lantern. At the forward end of the ship he could discern several men smoking their pipes and conversing in quiet tones. The night chills of a characteristic English summer suggested to him that he should go below, and he went without being driven, because he never tired of inspecting his buoyant and movable home. He turned on all the lights and walked from room to room and gazed at the decorations and the small pictures set everywhere in the panelling. There were three spare bedrooms in the yacht. (Only one spare bedroom in his flat!) He had no intention of using them all, but at intervals he would invite one or two carefully selected men to cruise with him for short periods. He was content in solitude. At last he subsided on to the couch in the library. A small compartment, with only a few hundred books—but what books! He took down a volume of Balzac, and, having suitably arranged the lamp over his head, set himself to enjoy the most human and the most grandiose of all novelists. Pinned on to the curtain which screened the door was a curious scarlet and blue paper object. The stewards supposed it to be a mascot, and liked Mr. Park the more for being a bit superstitious. They could not divine that it was the cap in which Mr. Park had begun the New Year at the Grand Babylon

Hotel, or that Mr. Park had displayed it permanently for a warning to himself—as he had named the ship.

He read the Balzac, but with an imperfect interest. The fact is, he was too happy to read. He preferred to reflect upon the exquisite success of his scheme for avoiding the friction of contact with an uncivilized world. He was severed from the world for as long as he chose. Nobody could get at him unless he chose. There was no telephone. There was no post, unless he cared to send for it. There were no disturbing women. He was safe; every sense was gratified and no sensibility hurt. And on the morrow, with two propellers capable of driving the ship at eight and a half knots, he could defy winds and go where he liked; also he could stay indefinitely in the soft quietude of the Beaulieu River.

Then his sensitive ear caught sounds which he could not credit. For a moment he thought that he must be the victim of a delusion, or that there must be something the matter with his hearing. But he was soon convinced that his hearing was quite normal and that he was the victim of no delusion. The sounds were the sounds of a music-hall song played on a cheap gramophone and sung by several raucous voices with an unsatisfactory notion of tonality. The refrain of the song was:

"If it wasn't for the houses in between."

Mr. Park sprang from the couch. If he had been capable of turning as pale as death, he would surely have turned as pale as death: such was his horror, such was his resentment. The sounds were the work of his beloved crew amusing themselves in their fashion after the day's work and supper. It seemed impossible that his beloved crew, so well-mannered, so skilful at their jobs, so accustomed to beautiful surroundings and a bracing life, so respectful and so self-respecting, could commit such an enormity. But it was not impossible. Mr. Park listened in agony. The song ended, and was followed by another with the burden:

"Could do with a bit, could do with a bit,"

which was followed by a fox-trot. Mr. Park had no objection to a good fox-trot, and he admitted always that there were many fine tunes among fox-trots, but the crew's taste in fox-trots was dreadful. He hurriedly got on to a chair and shut down the skylight, but the sounds could not be excluded. They penetrated and filled the entire ship. He ran on deck. Not a soul was on deck. All hands were enjoying the concert. A gleam of light came from the fore-castle hatch, and with the gleam a rushing geyser of awful noise. Mr. Park went into the deckhouse. No surcease! In a ship whose length is only equal to two cricket-pitches you cannot escape from any phenomenon of sound whose origin is on board. Mr. Park trembled. He strode to the bell-push almost beside himself, and was just about to ring furiously, when his advanced social opinions (which as is usual in human nature did not at all agree with his tastes) leaped forward and stayed his hand. He reflected:

"There are fourteen human beings in the fore-castle. It occupies less than a third of the ship. More than two-thirds of the ship is given up to my luxuriousness. The fourteen human beings start work at 6.30 a.m. They finish when I have done with them, which may be midnight. They toil for my pleasure. They are decent men; they are polite men; they are experts; if I go to sea I entrust my life to them. They eat in the fore-castle, and twelve of them sleep in the fore-castle (which is no bigger than my deckhouse), in rows, in tiers one above another. Who am I to forbid their simple pleasures, and to impose my taste on theirs?"

He simply could not ring the bell. Had he rung it he would have lost his self-respect. He sat down, all his sensitiveness subjected to the most appalling torture. He put his hand to his forehead. His forehead was damp.

"This is hell!" he murmured bitterly. "Hell! Hell!"

The rosy future which he had planned for himself lay shattered at his feet. After half an hour, which was half a century, the concert terminated. The men were laughing heartily. Mr. Park rang the bell.

"Bring me a liqueur brandy, will you?" he said to the steward.

"Shall you require my services any more to-night, sir?" asked the steward, when he had poured out the brandy.

"No, thanks. That'll be all."

"Thank you, sir. The captain wished me to ask whether you had any objection to the crew's gramophone, sir?"

"Not the slightest," answered Mr. Park nobly.

"Thank you, sir. Good night, sir."

"Good night."

Mr. Park slowly drank the brandy, gazing through the brass-protected windows at the calmness of the water and the mystery of the jungle. He was a changeable man. A few moments earlier he had been ejaculating "Hell, hell!" He now ejaculated "Great Heaven!" but in precisely the same accents of utter despair.

IV

Emerging at last from the deckhouse to go to bed, he paused on the cabin-stairs as a faint and distant sound caught his attention. The clock under the flag-locker, solemnly and implacably ticking its way through time into eternity, showed eleven fifteen. The barograph, revolving its drum more slowly than the motion of the moon, showed 30.5 degrees—and rising. The sound increased. Matthew Park returned on deck. He could descry on the stream afar off, in the direction of the Solent, a pale object, approaching at a tremendous speed. The object soon became a white launch—one of your modern launches, which do not resemble boats and which look seriously out of place in the davits of a yacht, but which accomplish eighteen or twenty miles an hour in smooth water.

Mr. Park had an incredible premonition:

"That launch is coming to me. That launch is Marrian's launch."

He knew that the *Sardonyx*, Marrian's yacht, was lying in Cowes Roads; but yachtsmen are not in the habit of paying distant visits to one another on the verge of midnight. Now he could see clearly the gleam of the two sides of the furrow which the launch cut in the flatness of the river. It was all most mysterious, even thrilling. Now he could see the forms of women in the launch; he could hear laughter. He heard a triumphant voice: "I told you he wouldn't have turned in. He's standing by the gangway." And louder: "Lower your gangway, old man." The voice of Marrian himself. And Mr. Park regretted—did he really regret?—that he had not gone to bed earlier. He began to loose the rope that held aloft the foot of the gangway. The launch slackened speed, its thrumming diminished and ceased. Two sailors held it with their hands against the gangway.

"I'm sure you're perfectly delighted to see us, old man," Marrian called, looking upwards. "Here's Emilia. As soon as she knew you were here, she insisted on coming to see *her* yacht instantly. So I've brought the party."

"I should think so indeed!" Mr. Park heard the voice of Emilia Juana. "Fancy naming a yacht after me and never telling me!"

It is an extraordinary fact that this aspect of the yacht's baptism had never presented itself to Matthew Park, who indeed had been completely absorbed in his own psychology. He wanted to cry out that he had not named the yacht after Emilia Juana, and that Juana was a very common name (in Spain) and he had chosen it solely for its beautiful sound. He could not cry this out in the night, invaded by these madcap visitors. Nor could he, either, inform Emilia Juana that he had used her name for a warning to himself. Nor was he even quite sure that this explanation of the baptism was wholly correct.

In a minute or so the visitors, consisting of a dark Jewish woman and her husband, Emilia and Marrian, had enthusiastically taken possession of the yacht, and it was alight with electricity for inspection from stern to the fore-castle bulkhead. (The crew had given no sign of waking.)

"Do show me your library again," said Emilia enchantingly, and he took her down, leaving the other three in the deckhouse with biscuits and liquids. As soon as they were alone together in the confined space of the little library, Emilia threw off the heavy white coat in which she had arrived, and Matthew Park had the ordeal of the vision of her in a glowing evening frock.

"You know," she said, in a peculiar, challenging tone, and gazing at him with a peculiar gaze, "you're really rather queer."

"Am I?" responded Mr. Park weakly.

He spoke weakly because of a sudden realization that he *had* been queer, and because of a sudden realization of the absurdity of attempting to cut himself off from the world. He perceived that this particular planet on which he happened to exist was unalterably what it was, that he must accept it in its totality, that no man was big enough to defy it and repudiate it, that—in brief—his business was to take the rough with the smooth and adapt himself to the planet instead of sulking because the planet would not adapt itself to him. He perceived further that though the rough might be rough, the smooth could be very smooth. Emilia, in all her artificiality and egotism and caprice, was a marvellous creature in the tiny brilliant room. He sank back on to the couch. Emilia, perhaps somewhat constrained, cast a glance round the walls.

"Well!" she exclaimed in a most disturbing, dissolving voice. "You're even queerer than I thought. Imagine you keeping that!" She had seen the paper cap pinned on the curtain; it had escaped her before. "You're the bafflingest man I ever met. But you're a dear!"

And, very astonishingly to Mr. Park, she bent down and pecked his cheek with her lovely lips. Their eyes met close for the fraction of a second. It was revealed to Mr. Park more clearly than ever that this planet is not a planet to despise.

"Come along! Come along!" murmured Emilia urgently, with a laugh like a whisper. "We must go back or they'll wonder what on earth we're doing." And she fled, glancing over her shoulder. "Bring my cloak."

IV

THE BOX-OFFICE GIRL

I

The Rotunda Royal, as everyone who knows the world knows, lifts its immense mass of yellow masonry (not really masonry but iron thinly faced with stone) right in the middle of London. It is the largest music-hall in London, and the most successful music-hall in London; and it burns more electricity than any other place of amusement in London. Its upper parts are glitteringly outlined in green and yellow electricity; its high tower can be glimpsed from all manner of streets, and the rich glow of the whole affair illuminates a cloudy sky for the whole of central London to see. Though entirely respectable, it has an altar of its own in the hearts of the young and the old bloods of provincial cities who come to town strictly on business. It is the Mecca of suburban inhabitants with a dull afternoon in front of them and ten shillings in their pockets to squander. To have his, or her, name printed in fire on the façade of the Rotunda is the ambition of every music-hall artist in the world, and of many another artist besides. In brief, the Rotunda is a very important, grandiose, and impressive organism, an organism which emphatically "functions." And it is a household word. Even judges of the High Court have heard of the Rotunda. No daily paper in London ever appears without some mention of it somewhere.

Now daily and nightly behind a counter on your left as you enter by the main entrance into the grand foyer stood, until lately, a girl named Elaine Edar. She was a blonde, with bright hair, an attractive, pretty and benevolent face, and a good figure—because these attributes were essential to her position. Her simple, smart dress was of black, but it had touches of fantasy and of colour—because Mr. Walter King (managing director—risen from call-boy, as he openly stated about ten times every day) had said that he did not care for his girls to look like hotel clerks. Elaine's face and hair were known to tens of thousands of people. Often in the street such people would start at the sight of her and murmur something to a companion, and Elaine knew that they were saying:

"That's the box-office girl at the Rotunda."

So that she had a certain importance on earth, and assuredly at the Rotunda. For she gathered in money, and to Mr. Walter King ("Old Wal" behind his back, to his employees, and "Wally" without concealment to those proud persons who had the great privilege of his intimacy)—to Mr. Walter King the Rotunda was in the end nothing but a machine for gathering in more money than it paid out. Not that Elaine was the sole instrument for gathering in money. Far from it! Above her counter were displayed the words: "Box office for this performance only. Boxes. Royal Fauteuils. Royal Stalls. Stalls. Grand Balcony." All advance booking was done in a special office up the street, and each of the unreserved parts of the house had its own entrance, with turnstile and money-taker. Still, Elaine took a goodish bit of money twice a day, and she was easily the most prominent of all the human machines that received silver coins and notes in exchange for bits of coloured paper or base-metal discs.

Twelve performances a week—and Elaine had to be on duty ten minutes before the doors opened and to remain on duty until one hour before the end of each performance. Then she had to check her money and prove to the cashier's department that the total was correct. An anxious job, especially during the "rush" quarter of an hour, when she had to read with the glance of an eagle the numbers on the "sheet" of the performance, treat every patron as a benefactor, return good for evil, give change like a flash of lightning, detect spurious coins in the tenth of a second, and render sweet smiles to louts, curmudgeons and cats! Happily she was by nature profoundly and universally benevolent—and in this respect indeed a wonder to her assistant who did the telephoning and lent a general hand. It was her benevolent air that had recommended her to Mr. Walter King, who had sacked her predecessor for being hoity-toity to patrons whenever business was abnormally good. She was devoted to the theatre. Nobody thought of her apart from the theatre, and in fact she had little private life. Mr. Walter King was himself passionately devoted to the theatre, and he expected all the staff to be passionately devoted to the theatre; but whereas his own devotion brought in a large share of the profits, Elaine's devotion brought in only a small fixed salary, which Mr. King did not dream of passionately increasing when business grew fabulous. Elaine saw nothing odd in this arrangement.

It was a quarter to ten. The day's work was nearly over. Elaine's assistant had gone. The entrance-hall and foyer blazed, deserted, with their super-lavish electricity. When an idle programme-girl swung open a door at the end of a vast

corridor and peeped forth, Elaine could faintly catch the sound of clapping. She rarely got more of a performance than these brief distant rumours of applause. For her the Rotunda was not an auditorium but a foyer with box-office; and the artists were mere names on bills. She estimated the quality of the applause and glanced at the clock and the time-table to know who was being applauded, for she had to be in a position to inform patrons what artist was "on" at any given moment. Then she proceeded with the secret counting of notes on a shelf beneath the counter. In view of the absence of a grille to protect the counter and of the prevalence of gangs of robbers in London, her situation with all that money for Mr. Walter King might seem perilous. But it was not so in reality. Elaine and her treasure were well guarded by formidable giants and astute dwarfs in the shape of gorgeous doormen and pages. Though he disapproved of grilles, Mr. Walter King took no chances with the night's receipts. Elaine was as safe as a priestess in a temple, dedicated, imprisoned, inviolate.

Then a dark and elegant young man in full evening panoply appeared from the street. The guardians saluted him. He saluted Elaine. This unidentified and mysterious gentleman came nearly every night towards ten o'clock. Elaine guessed that he came to witness the performance of the Russian dancer, the incomparably illustrious Feodora.

"Did you keep the fauteuil for me, Miss Edar?" (He had picked up her name from somewhere, it seemed.)

She nodded, kindly smiling. She liked the regular visitant, not in the least because he was regular, but because he was dark, elegant, slim, and had a sad, wistful smile. Yes, she had kept the stall for him, despite the fact that if he had not come to claim it she would have had to pay for it out of her own pocket. He usually telephoned just before the rush, and Elaine had accepted the risk of his not coming quite a dozen times. Occasionally, as to-night, he would try to get a box, and if successful would pay for both the box and the stall. And he would show amazing indecisions. To-night she had no box to sell; the sole empty seat in the house was the one she had retained for him; and yet in his rich, low voice he would keep talking about a box, and also she had to repeat to him several times precisely where the stall was in regard to the stage.

At length he paid, raised his hat again, and went off towards the auditorium, followed by her benedictory, sympathetic smile. The head-doorman, his pocket gaping for the harvest of sixpences which he would shortly garner for putting patrons into cars and taxis, winked at her rather broadly, as if to indicate that the dark gentleman was queer in the head. But Elaine gently deprecated the wink, seeing in the dark gentleman a victim of hopeless love for a Russian dancer. Silence fell upon the foyer, whose ceiling was upheld by the immobile figures of pink, nude girls.

Elaine had taken out the self-locking steel cash-drawer from its niche, detached and hidden the telephone, and was about to disappear through the little door behind the counter, when Rachel Gordon hurried up rather breathless from somewhere. "I'm the publicity lady," Rachel would introduce herself to the new artists in the wings and in dressing-rooms when she wanted material for piquant press-paragraphs. She did all the day-to-day publicity work for the Rotunda. A pretty Jewess, with full lips and eyes, waved hair, striking clothes, carefully tended complexion, and a general air of knowing all that was worth knowing; not quite young, but far from old! She spent every evening in the theatre, and little in it escaped her attention.

"Feo asked me to give you this note," said she. "I'm so glad I've caught you before you'd gone."

She handed the note, with a characteristic, sparkling glance that was full of chicane and the spirit of plotting. "Feo!" Thus she familiarly referred to the great, the unique Feodora! But then she managed to be very friendly with all, and she could be highly useful even to the greatest.

As Elaine read the note she showed extreme astonishment. It ran: "My dear Miss Edar, I give a party to-morrow night at the Fantasy Club, some friends, dancing, fun. Will you come? I do hope. Your obliged Feo." Indeed the thing was enough to astonish a box-office girl. "Your obliged." Elaine knew what that referred to. A fortnight earlier, when a not uncommon state of war existed between Feodora and Mr. Walter King, Feodora had been unable to get two free seats for friends. She had most particularly wanted those seats, even if it should be necessary to pay for them. But she was too haughty to tell Mr. King that she would pay for them, and so she had herself run round (furs and pearls and all—as described by Rachel for the press) to implore Elaine to allot seats to her even though all seats were sold. And Elaine, by methods known to box-office keepers only, had bestowed upon her the two desired seats—and Mr. Walter King not a penny the wiser! Feodora, in the generosity of her impulsive, poetic heart, had not forgotten.

"Shall you come?" asked Rachel, who evidently knew what was in the scrawled note.

"I—I haven't a rag to wear," answered Elaine, much flustered.

"Oh, stuff!" observed Rachel simply. "You're always awfully well turned out. Everybody knows that."

"But evening wear——" protested Elaine, despite a secret mistrust of Rachel.

"Oh, stuff!" Rachel repeated.

Elaine could scarcely sleep that night. It was an incredible happening. She rose early to look through her wardrobe.

II

The Fantasy Club, scene of Feodora's party, was in Goodge Street, off Tottenham Court Road. Elaine had never heard of it, and indeed had some difficulty in finding it, since its portal was hidden at the end of a long covered passage and showed no signs of festivity. No wonder the conductor of the motor-bus by which she travelled could give her no information about it! In the lobby she saw a printed notice: "Breakfasts served from 5 a.m." This frightened her, but she was reassured by the sight of Rachel Gordon in the cloak-room.

Rachel gave the names of sundry high-brow novelists and painters and musicians who regularly frequented the club, and she said that in the art of turning night into day they were the greatest experts in London. Rachel laughed at the nocturnal pretensions of the more famous dancing-clubs—she scorned them as "bourgeois." Anyone could join them, but according to Rachel not anyone could join the Fantasy. You had to be someone or the approved friend of someone to be admitted to the Fantasy.

The dancing-room was large, low, and very bare—compared to the ornate interiors of the Rotunda. It had no decorations except electric lights in Chinese lanterns, and the costumes of the ladies. These decorations, however, were extremely effective. The room was full; it was also noisy and torrid. Revellers were eating, drinking, dancing, chattering, laughing, and giggling, with much gusto.

"There's Feo's table," said Rachel, pointing to the biggest and busiest table in the place, and led Elaine towards it. Elaine was nervous.

"How sweet of you!" the slim and gorgeous Feo greeted her. "How sweet you look! No! It is more than sweet. I understand now when Carly does say how you are *exotique*. It is so. Yes. Sit down. Have drink? Have chicken? Or soup? Yes. Soup first. Rachel, occupy yourself with Miss." Feodora turned to two young men, who kissed her hand.

Elaine listened eagerly to the confused talk at the table, but, though all laughed or giggled, she heard nothing that struck her as amusing. No doubt the humour was being accomplished in French or Russian, of which languages Elaine had no knowledge. However, all the ladies looked either lovely or strange. She was still very shy, but she was mysteriously happy too—somehow uplifted.

"Who is Carly?" she murmured to Rachel, and Rachel by a discreet turn of the head indicated a young man who stood behind Feodora against the wall. Elaine started and flushed. It was the nightly visitant for whom she reserved stalls. The word "exotic" in the tiny mouth of Feodora had already exercised Elaine, who could not comprehend how anybody could regard her as deserving of such an adjective. That the nightly visitant should deem her exotic, and should have said so to a high goddess like Feodora, almost disturbed her—while enchanting her! Rachel beckoned to the nightly visitant, who approached.

"Mr. Lyeskov," said Rachel. "Miss Edar. I think you have met."

She laughed. Mr. Lyeskov blushed.

The next moment Elaine became aware that her hand had been kissed. A unique experience. Hand-kissing was, of course, "foreign" and somewhat foolish, but it was surprisingly delicious, even flattering. So this was the young man who, while paying for stalls from which to worship Feodora, had found time to examine herself and to decide that she was exotic. Yes, disturbing! Disturbing!

He now asked her to dance. Could she refuse? How ridiculous! Unfortunately, in the dance she could not think of a single thing to say to him. He was a fine dancer, but scarcely cleverer as a talker than Elaine. They just danced, yielded

themselves to the music and the movement. It was exquisite.

"You are a natural dancer. You have the gift," he remarked.

She smiled. She knew that she was a natural dancer. She had no more learnt to dance than she had learnt to breathe; she rarely danced—and only in suburban resorts with one or two dull acquaintances; yet she knew all the steps and never erred, never hesitated. They danced two consecutive dances. As he restored her to the table he asked if he might dance again with her very soon. Feodora called to him.

"How did you get on?" Rachel demanded of Elaine, with a peculiar glance.

"Oh, splendid! He's asked me for another dance."

"And did you refuse?"

"Ought I?"

"Don't be silly. Can't you see he's mad about you? Why do you suppose he comes to get tickets off you every night? Why do you suppose he got Feo to ask you here to-night? And let me tell you—he may be a French-Russian, but he's very serious and very rich. *He* didn't lose anything in the Revolution, he didn't! Pity he's so shy, isn't it?"

Elaine's face burned again. The fact is, she was overwhelmed, absolutely overwhelmed, as she realized bit by bit that "Carly" came nightly to the Rotunda not to worship Feodora but to worship her! It was staggering! She was glad when a male performer in Feodora's troupe invited her on to the floor. She did not care for his face, nor for his coarse manners, nor yet for his dancing—how different from "Carly's"!—but he enabled her to escape from Rachel Gordon's enigmatic scrutiny. As she went round the room with the professional dancer something happened to her and she half stumbled and turned wholly pale. It was a night of sensations, blushes, and pallors, such a night as she had never before known. The dancer looked at his faltering partner inquiringly, but said no word, and Elaine recovered herself. No one knew, no one could guess, what had happened to her. And after all it was naught. She had only caught sight of Ned seated at a table with another man, and he had seemed to be somewhat unprosperous and defiant, in his shabby evening-dress. And he looked older, thinner, worn.

Ned was the one man who had entered into that private life of hers the existence of which none of the patrons of the Rotunda could visualize. It was six years ago, when she was twenty-one, and before her connexion with the life of music-halls. Ned was an advertising-agent and lots of things beside—he had had a hand in promoting one or two of the earlier dance clubs. He was up one month and down the next. He had defects, but he had made love to her, proposed to her, been accepted. She gave him all her heart; she learnt rapturously to love love. The world became magical. The date of the wedding was fixed. Then Ned came one day and said that candour was best, and that the sole manly course was to confess to her. What? What? That he had mistaken his feelings. That he had found that he did not care for her "in that way." Whereas he did care for Alice "in that way" and Alice cared for him "in that way." That, of course, he was hers to command, but would it not be better for her sake and for the sake of them all if she . . . ? He was extremely sorry. He did not and could not defend himself. . . . Alice was a friend of hers, had but a few months before been congratulating her on her betrothal to nice Ned. Ned married Alice. And so that was that. Elaine's tragic grief softened gradually into vague regret, and vague regret changed into a vague feeling that perhaps she had done well to lose Ned. Such stories lie buried in the memory of numberless girls who go through life apparently as though butter had never melted in their mouths. And you dig up the stories with difficulty, with amazement. . . .

Well, she had caught sight of Ned Haltright.

The next minute his table was empty. She hoped he had not seen her, and could not help thinking that he had. Undoubtedly she had had a shock. But, after powdering herself anew and drinking some champagne, she put her hand once again in the hand of Carly Lyeskov, and felt his right hand lightly on her back, and resumed the dance with him, the effects of the shock soon disappeared. She glimpsed herself in a mirror and was satisfied with the vision. Idle to deny that she was pretty, had a good figure, or that her frock was smart! She was as presentable as most, and more so than a lot of them, though her only trinket was a necklace of Chinese-dyed mother-of-pearl. Carly's worship of her blossomed like a flower. It was heavenly to be worshipped, to be able to confer a favour by merely consenting to exist. She had a sense of dominion which intoxicated. And then there was the band, the colours, the movement, the feeling of being surrounded by illustrious and witty artists—she wondered who was who! And Carly was so distinguished. His very shirt-front was a

miracle. And he was so deferential.

"May I ask where you live?"

She told him Fulham.

"I suppose you would not let me drive you home in my car?"

Yes, she would—he was really too kind! Romance! Romance! Soon she was thinking that Carly was unique in the whole world—so sympathetic he was! And he worshipped her. He had gone off his head about her. Triumph! Power! Dizziness! It was silently established between them that they would dance every dance together! And they did. The Fantasy faded to a dim background for their emotions. And Elaine looked with pity at her past life, at the horrid grind and daily work, at her loneliness—because behind her counter she was nearly as lonely as a bus-driver, and at home in her rooms she was terribly lonely. How had she supported it? Could she possibly continue to support it?

At three o'clock, when the gaiety was at its apogee she said she thought she must go home. Not that she wanted to go home or had any reason for going home. She wanted simply to command him and to prove to the entire Fantasy Club that he was hers to command. She took leave of Feodora, who poured over her a delicious cascade of protests. And Carly did drive her to Fulham—Parson's Green it was. No little "liberties" in the large, smooth-gliding car, such as are expected and condoned by the primmest maidens after such ecstasies, in such circumstances, at such an hour! Nothing but the deepest respect! Yes, he was "serious." . . . She leaned forward suddenly and tapped on the window. The car stopped. Mr. Lyeskov sprang to the pavement, handed her out, removed his hat, kissed her hand, and was richly rewarded by her smile under the lamp-post. He waited until she had found her latchkey and opened her door. Of course it was a poor little suburban house. But she knew that that didn't matter. It was where she lived. Her presence in it transformed it for him. Another smile from her; another bow from him. She shut the door. The car drove off.

III

Elaine went to bed in a state of ecstatic, blissful excitement. No sooner had she laid herself down than she heard the prolonged trill of the front-door bell in the back room. She occupied the two rooms which constituted the third or top floor of the old house. (In earlier days she had had only one room, but destiny had been fairly kind to her.) The front room was a sort of bed-sitting-room; the back was a kitchen-scully-dining-room. The floor was her home and held all that she possessed. Compared to many young and ageing women in her situation of life she was affluent and of luxurious habit. Now there were four bells on the front door, each labelled. Sometimes, and especially at night, visitors got confused and rang the wrong bell. Elaine thought that on this occasion the wrong bell had been rung.

"They'll have to keep on ringing," she said. After all, the bell did not make a great deal of noise. The bell continued to ring.

"Nobody can possibly be wanting me at this time of night," she said.

Nevertheless she put on her dressing-gown and opened the window and looked forth and down. But she could not see who was ringing because of the wide, leaded eaves of the old-fashioned porch. She shut the window and shut out the invading chill of the dark night. At length the persistent bell began to exasperate her fatigued nerves, and with an annoyed, apprehensive shrug, she crept step by creaking step all the way downstairs and softly undid the front-door.

Ned Haltright was standing in the porch. She gave a start, and instinctively drew the thin peignoir more tightly round her shoulders. As she did so, she stiffened, looking at him. She was affronted, angered, by this inexcusable visitation. Nothing but sheer good nature prevented her from shutting the door in Ned's face.

"I saw you at the Club——" he commenced.

"Not so loud, *please!*" She stopped him in a sharp whisper, thinking of her immaculate reputation in the crowded house that so often buzzed with gossip. To have come home at God knows what hour in a car was bad enough, but to receive male callers still later . . .!

"I want to see you. I must talk to you," Ned whispered plaintively.

"Not now," she whispered.

"Yes, now."

She shook her head firmly.

"Fancy coming here now," she whispered, in still colder reproof. "And how on earth did you get here, at this time?"

"Walked," he whispered.

"Walked?" she whispered.

"Yes."

He must certainly have walked over six miles. The whispering seemed to render them intimate in spite of her aggrieved attitude towards him. It struck her as strange and affecting that she had once been his affianced sweetheart, that they used to kiss each other with long kisses, and that now they were nothing to each other. . . . She made a sign for him to enter. She very gently and cautiously closed the door.

"I'm on the top floor now," she murmured, scarcely audible.

He nodded. The fan-light over the door let through the ray of the street-lamp, so that the first flight of stairs was fairly plain. The higher flights were dark. But Ned knew the staircase. Ned followed her on tip-toe, and every now and then a stair creaked with a thunderous sound that no prudence of tread could avoid. Elaine had the horrid illusion that behind every door as they passed it women with slanderous tongues were greedily listening.

At the summit of the perilous climb she led him into the kitchen-scully-dining-room, and found the matches, lit the gas, lit the gas-stove. She put her fingers to her lips. They must still exist and communicate without sound. No sound-proof floors in that house! She motioned him to the wicker easy-chair. He sank into it. She looked at him and looked round the room. Happily the room was very tidy and cosy. He was pale, pathetic, with his pointed, exhausted, weak-charactered features. He wore a blue Burberry, strapped close at the waist and bulging out above and below, over his evening clothes. In his hand he held an ordinary bowler hat.

No style! What a contrast with Mr. Lyeskov! He had the air of defeat, even of being a prisoner-of-war. And he had walked more than six miles in his madness. Without a word she turned away, lit the gas-ring, and began to make some tea. She had to do it from simple humanity. And there she was with him, sharing surreptitiously the room with him, in night-dress, peignoir and slippers. And their tender intimacy emerged towards them out of the past, indestructible. Somehow, what had been still was. How could she treat him as a stranger? She could not. Moreover, she felt far superior to him in moral force; she felt, despite her resentment, almost protective in a casual condescending way. She had the adoration of Carly Lyeskov at her back.

"Well?" she whispered.

Ned gazed at the rug under his feet. Silence. Hiss of the gas-stove; hiss of the gas-ring; fizzing of the blue-yellow gas-jet within its mantle!

"Well, how's Alice?" she whisperingly questioned, in a rather indifferent, half-quizzing tone, as if saying: "Well, you got your Alice. How does it work now you've had her six years?"

He whispered solemnly:

"Poor Alice died two years ago, and the baby's two years old. Hadn't you heard?"

She shook her head. She could not speak; her throat was suddenly constricted; tears glittered in her eyes. At length:

"I'm sorry to hear it." How poor the words! Then after a pause, while Ned stared at the inside of his hat: "Is it a girl or a boy?"

"A girl."

"What have you called her?"

"Alice."

"And how do you manage about the poor little thing?"

"Ah! That's the trouble. How *do* I manage?" He looked up suddenly, and he was crying.

"Ellie"—nobody else had ever called her "Ellie"—"Ellie, I made a frightful mistake when I broke it off with you, and I've known it for years. And then when I saw you to-night. . . . It was too much for me. Yes. I had to talk to you." His whispered utterance was so obscure and feeble that she had to guess what he said; but she guessed right. The water boiled. She turned from him again to fill the teapot.

How weak he was! So impulsive! But so enterprising, too! Full of initiative as usual! He had had the wild idea of coming to her and he had come. He had arrived. He had wanted to talk to her, and he was talking to her.

"And how's business?" she asked, extinguishing the gas-ring. She was bound to say something—and something ordinary, banal, off the point.

"Oh, pretty fair," he whispered. "Not bad. Changeable, of course. But you rub along, you know."

She was confirmed in her notion that he was out of luck. He drank the hot tea, which seemed to revive him—he was a man easy to revive and easy to deject. She took some tea herself. As an after-thought she cut some bread-and-butter; she gave him a slice with her hand, as there was no plate save the wooden bread-platter. He ate it savagely, and several more slices. The scene was domestic. The night, the enforced whispering, his trouble, her peignoir, the informality of the little meal, made it domestic. She stood near the fire in order to keep warm in her thin raiment.

"Ellie," he said, rising vivaciously to put his cup and saucer on the table, and standing near to her, "I've always been in love with you. I know there's no excuse for me. I didn't treat you right. But there it is. And when I saw you to-night——" He had raised his voice.

"H'sh!" she warned him.

She spoke gently, keeping resentment out of her voice, partly because she was flattered by the realization of her power over him (and she had the same power over Carly Lyeskov), and partly because he was so wistful and she pitied him in his unhappiness. Nevertheless in her heart she was indignant. And she thought of her independence, of the stability of her position as a self-maintained woman beholden to none. She did not see Elaine Edar abandoning her independent situation for the status of the wife of a Ned Haltright, asking a Ned Haltright for money when she needed it, considering his wishes in regard to her own conduct, sacrificing herself to the baby of the girl who had supplanted her, sharing the material vicissitudes which must inevitably result from his character. He might love her, admire her, but that could not compensate. Moreover, the whole idea was absurd, monstrous. His suggestion amounted to effrontery. And Carly Lyeskov existed and worshipped. However, she offered no reasoned reply. Her daily traffic with all sorts of human beings had taught her when to argue and when not to argue.

"Please don't say any more," she murmured firmly. "You can't burst out like this."

"But I've had it on my mind for years, I tell you."

"Please don't say any more."

He seemed to wither.

"I'll go. Better go. Sorry I spoke."

The wicker easy-chair, empty, complained with creakings of the burden which it had had to bear. The dawn began delicately to announce itself in silver-grey gleams through the interstice between the curtains of the window.

"You mustn't go yet," Elaine whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because it's getting light, and the people on the first floor will be about, and I can't have a man, especially in evening-dress, leaving my rooms at this time. Besides, there's no buses or trams yet. You must wait till everyone's up and people

have begun to go up and down stairs, and you must cover up your shirt-front properly. Then you can slip out." She whispered soberly, with the sagacity of a young woman who has learnt her world. She added: "I shall lie down. I'm frightfully tired, and you must be too. Try to sleep in the chair." She left him for the front room, and locked the door, and dropped on to her bed. She was indeed exhausted, but she could not sleep. Her eyes burned. She reflected that dancers were still dancing at the Fantasy. Then she slept.

IV

When she woke, the alarm-clock (which never alarmed) showed the hour of ten. The memory of the night gradually re-established itself in her mind. How fortunate that her charwoman came only at eleven-thirty! She thought gladly: "Yesterday it was the day after to-morrow that I was to see Carly. Now it is to-morrow. Tea at the Regent Palace at five." It was she who had chosen the Regent Palace. She arose, washed, dressed deliberately, gave particular attention to the toilette of her face. Cautiously she unlocked her door and cautiously went into the back room. Ned was fast asleep, in a twisted, uncomfortable posture in the wicker-chair. His pallid face had the pathos of a corpse. He appeared tragically defenceless, so much so that she could have cried at the sight of him and at the thought of his weaknesses, his perils, his incompetency to deal with the responsibilities attached to little Alice the baby. Much gas had been burned, but she did not care. She drew the curtains back and the entire room became pathetic—the tea-cups, the teapot, crumbs on the floor. The image of Carly Lyeskov was obscured in her soul. She turned off the gas-jet. Ned awoke with a jump.

"You're all dressed. Shall I go now?"

"Where's little Alice?"

"She's with some people in Canonbury."

"Who are they? Relations?"

"No. Not relations. I'm not strong in relations. *You* know that. I think they're very decent people. She seems to be pretty well looked after."

"Oh, Ned! You must give me the address. I'll go and see her to-morrow morning. I'll have a look at things a bit."

The images of Carly Lyeskov, automobiles, luxury, distinction, worship, adoration, passion, eternal romance, began to slip away from her. She clutched at them, drew them back, held them fast, hugged them, but the next moment they were wriggling away again like eels.

"Oh, Ellie! There's nobody like you, and there never was. You're an angel and nothing else."

She wept. She let the tears fall—drop, drop; they slipped down her cheeks and fell into space. Perhaps she was sorry as much for herself as for little Alice and little Alice's father. She saw vistas of effort, struggle, reverses, obstinate recommencings, narrownesses, dependence, despairs, fluttering hopes, quarrels, reconciliations, disillusiones, and illusions. People would cease to stare at her in the streets of the West End because she would never be in the West End. She would be withdrawn from the vast world of pleasure and excitement and electricity, where tinted statues of nymphs supported heavily carved ceilings on their frail shoulders. Yet an immense peace took possession of her disturbed soul and stilled it.

"This is my fate," she thought. "I was born for it. I wasn't really born for the other thing."

The immense peace in her was warmed and lighted with tenderness, and by the memory of far-off kisses. It was a strange sort of happiness, austere, purposeful, braced; but she was happy. She smiled kindly. Ned advanced towards her. She lifted her chin and stopped him. Did he suppose that things were as simple as all that, that the virgin fortress would yield like that at the first summons of the trumpet? Her smile changed to a look of self-possession and extreme gravity.

"Meet me this afternoon for tea at the Regent Palace, will you?" she said. "After the *matinée*. Then you can tell me just how matters stand."

And Carly Lyeskov went back to his Paris.

MR. JACK HOLLINS AGAINST FATE

I

Mr. Jack Hollins sat reading the paper at the drawing-room window on the first floor of his enormous house in Carlos Place, within a stone's throw of Grosvenor Square. It was a London afternoon, mild, languorous, and full of subtle colour—full also of baffling promises. But Mr. Jack Hollins was only aware that the date was the twenty-first of May and the locality the finest residential locality in the West End of London.

He was a stout man of sixty, with a thick neck, short white hair, and a clean-shaven red face, neatly dressed in a provincial style. His figure was such that though the easy-chair was capacious and he deeply ensconced in it, he seemed to be protruding out of it or hanging over the front of it. His eyes had a wary and dour expression, as though saying to the newspaper that the newspaper might fool half a million people but not him. He had once had a brother, Herbert Hollins, with a reputation throughout half the Midlands for hearty tyrannical ruthlessness and a will-power that rode down all obstacles—heaven, nature and mankind. Herbert fell ill once of pneumonia and said to his doctor, "I've got a directors' meeting at Birmingham to-morrow, and I'm going to it." "I forbid you to go out," said the doctor. "I'm going to that meeting," said Herbert with terrible finality. "Very well, then," said the doctor quietly. "As you please, but if you go out you'll die." Herbert laughed, convinced that he was above the common laws of cause and effect. He did go to the meeting and he did die. Mr. Jack Hollins used to recount this story with grim gusto, as creditable to his brother's character. Herbert, a widower like himself—their wives had both failed to survive the ordeal of living with them—left Mr. Jack Hollins half a million pounds. Jack was very rich even before that. At first he had made a little money by hard work; then he had made a great deal by a fluky investment in a company that owned cheap restaurants in various Midland towns. Thence onwards he was persuaded, and others were persuaded, that he had a genius for finance, and events certainly favoured this notion of his. In proceeding upon the principle that money breeds money, he had one inflexible rule: never to sell out at a loss. If a stock went down he held it obstinately, positive that since he held it and was a financial genius, it must ultimately rise. Often it did rise, and Mr. Jack Hollins's self-satisfaction rose with it. Occasionally, however, the company would go bankrupt, and then Mr. Jack Hollins had a momentary vague suspicion that he might have done better to spend his money instead of trying to force it to breed.

But he had a very serious and vexatious defect. Though he could make money he knew not how to spend. He was always being half-drowned under the flowing tide of wealth. He privately recognized the defect, admitting that he was a bungler in expenditure. The fact was that he had almost no imagination, and very few desires. He had bought the house in Carlos Place by a whim, a caprice, an impulse. It was very cheap. He noticed that business was gradually invading the region, and he thought that one day the place could be turned into a private hotel or a block of offices, at much profit. Having bought it, he had to furnish it. He employed a big furnishing firm. The cost of things generally startled him, whose youth had passed in the narrowest commercial provincialism, but he would pretend not to be startled. When the furnishing firm had furnished two floors he suddenly stopped them, not because the expense frightened him, but because he could not see the sense of furnishing two other floors which he could never use.

He had a dim idea that Carlos Place demanded a butler, and he engaged one. As, however, he did not know how to treat butlers he did not get value out of his fine specimen. He bought the finest cigars obtainable, and smoked them, but improperly. He bought the finest wines possible, but he could not tell a burgundy from a claret, or a champagne from a sparkling moselle. He bought a magnificent motor-car; to roll ruthlessly in it through the best streets pleased his vanity, but the car was all the same somewhat of a Frankenstein's monster to him.

He enjoyed a moderate amount of solitary travel, and would make acquaintances in the saloons of steamships, and in the smoking-rooms of first-rate large hotels in fashionable health resorts. He had no friends, didn't need friends. He showed sagacity in not attempting election to a good club; he would have met with trouble in a good club; not the most ruthless man can successfully contend against a whole club; but he sometimes walked along Pall Mall enviously.

The magnificent motor-car, with its chauffeur, was below him, waiting at the kerb. It had been waiting for two hours. He argued thus: "It's my car. I pay the chauffeur. I might want to go for a ride and I might not. Why shouldn't the fellow wait?" The argument seemed to him unanswerable. He gazed critically at the car. Then he resumed the newspaper and

read an account of the new clinic which Mr. Shelton Shelton had built and endowed and presented to West Ham. He knew that Mr. Shelton Shelton was the owner of the newspaper and a very rich man who by dint of creating free clinics all over London had become one of our leading philanthropists.

A small and insignificant car, driven by a young man of military and aristocratic deportment, drove up to the door. An elegantly dressed young woman jumped out; the aristocrat chatted an instant with her, saluted her, and drove off again.

"Who's your man, my lass?" Mr. Hollins gruffly greeted the girl when she entered the drawing-room.

"Captain Coggleshall," said she, in a tranquil, low voice, with no trace of self-consciousness.

"What brand of a Captain?"

"In the First Life Guards."

Mr. Jack Hollins, anxious above everything not to show emotion, said nothing for a few moments.

"Who is he, anyway?"

"He's the eldest son of Sir Maurice Coggleshall, Baronet, ninth Baronet I believe, or perhaps it's only eighth."

Then Samuels, the butler, conveniently brought in tea, of which Minnie partook, but not her father.

"Where did you meet him?"

"At a *thé dansant* at Queen's Hall. I was with Sarah Allbright; she knew him. He's interested in painting."

"How long since?"

"Oh! About three months ago."

The conversation ended there.

Minnie Hollins opened the lofty window, and, with the earnest eye of an art-student estimated the "values" of the surrounding architecture, foliage, pavements and sky, and sought for possible "subjects" therein. She also responded sensitively to the delicate calm beauty of the afternoon. There was something in the softness of the clouds and in the faces of passers-by that touched her. She was a tall, well-made girl, with a figure whose excellences none would dispute, and a type of countenance which most women would call beautiful and most men would not. Her gaze was patient and benevolent.

Mr. Jack Hollins continued doggedly to read the paper, just as though he had been alone in the drawing-room. Mrs. Hollins had been dead six years. He had then been faced with the problem of looking after a girl, aged seventeen and delivered from boarding-school, without letting her be a nuisance to him. Having complete confidence in her because she was his daughter, he had solved the problem chiefly by ignoring it. A girl living in a big house in Carlos Place must be well-dressed. He went further and said that she might be very well dressed. She had to dress herself, and he was satisfied with her efforts; indeed he was as proud of her appearance as he was of the appearance of his car. But he paid all the bills. She had no allowance, and not too much pocket-money, considering her exalted position. Similarly, though she attended to certain branches of the housekeeping, Mr. Hollins was the sole authoritative housekeeper, paying all bills and giving nearly all orders. To Samuels Minnie would begin: "Father says——"

Mr. Hollins's deep sagacity told him that a girl must do something in order to keep her out of mischief, and the choice of what she did was not important. He saw no harm in her learning to paint, and so she was permitted to go to the Slade School. He saw no harm, either, in her creating a studio from an attic. He never entered the attic if she was there, but occasionally when she was out he would nose around. At the Slade she made friends, and the girls among them she would now and then ask to tea, but in the back room on the ground floor, and without her father. There was absolutely no other entertaining. With the same friends she would go to infrequent concerts and plays, and semi-public or club dances. Secure in the conviction that she was no fool, Mr. Hollins let her be—on the clear, hard understanding that she let him be. They went to church together about once a fortnight; and perhaps once a year he would take her with him on a voyage. He seldom questioned her. He never kissed her.

One night a fortnight after the conversation about Captain Coggleshall, Minnie said:

"Captain Coggleshall wants to come and see you, father."

"Who's he?"

"You remember—I told you about him. He's in the First Life Guards."

"Oh!"

"Can he come to-morrow?"

"He can come when he's a mind to. But whether I shall be in's another matter."

"I'll write and ask him to come to-morrow afternoon."

As she left the room Mr. Hollins surreptitiously examined his girl for traces of emotional excitement, but he could find none. He looked up Sir Maurice Coggleshall, Bart., in Whitaker's Almanack. Yes, Sir Maurice duly existed.

Captain Coggleshall came in the insignificant car the next afternoon and was introduced to Mr. Jack Hollins by Minnie, who at once departed, leaving them together.

"So this is a Captain in the First Life Guards and the eldest son of a ninth Baronet!" said Mr. Hollins to himself sardonically. If Mr. Hollins had not been very rich he might have been nervous, but he was very rich—both in money and in his daughter. Captain Coggleshall corresponded quite satisfactorily with Mr. Hollins's notion of what a Captain in the First Life Guards and the oldest son of a ninth Baronet ought to be. He was handsome, muscular, slim, well tailored, had an admirable natural demeanour, and was free from self-consciousness. He sat down with an ease that Mr. Hollins could not have emulated, and talked with facility and yet with proper restraint. Only his voice was rather quieter than Mr. Hollins would have expected. After a few exchanges Captain Coggleshall announced that he wished to marry Minnie. He gave his age, which was thirty-one, and his record, and his expectations. He admitted that for the present he had nothing but his Captain's pay and what Sir Maurice allowed him, which was not much, because Sir Maurice was poor.

"Ho!" ejaculated Mr. Hollins.

"I should like to know, as soon as it is convenient to you to tell me," said Captain Coggleshall, "whether in principle you have any objection to the marriage," without adding anything about feeling himself to be quite unworthy of the peerless girl.

"I don't say that I have, and I don't say that I haven't," Mr. Hollins answered with brutal indifference. "But have you got enough to keep my daughter decently? Or haven't you?"

"Enough to keep us from starving, Mr. Hollins. But my father and I were hoping that you would do the usual thing and make a settlement."

"Ye were, were ye? Well, as you've mentioned your father, perhaps the old gentleman had better come and see me." He would not refer to the Captain's parent as "Sir Maurice." No, he would not!

"My father lives in Northumberland," said Captain Coggleshall with undiminished suavity.

"And what if he does?" asked Mr. Hollins. "This business is worth a journey to London, isn't it? Or doesn't the old gentleman think so?" He spoke as it were menacingly.

Captain Coggleshall replied that he would try to secure his father's presence in Carlos Place. A few minutes later he took leave. Mr. Hollins rose and accompanied his guest as far as the door of the drawing-room, and then remembered that he ought to have rung the bell to warn Samuels to be in attendance. He called out "Samuels" loudly over the banisters of the great staircase, shook hands firmly with the suitor, and returned to his seat by the drawing-room window. He said not a word about the interview to Minnie, and she showed no curiosity; but naturally she had her private source of information.

The next morning at breakfast he said:

"So you'd leave me to fend for myself?"

"Yes, father," said her father's daughter, with a quiet, unfathomable, benevolent smile.

That ended the family conversation on the mighty subject.

Money is wonderful. Two days later Sir Maurice Coggleshall made a personal call upon Mr. Jack Hollins. Sir Maurice conceived that he was performing a really very astonishing act of condescension. But being a gentleman, or the ruins of one, he kept this conception absolutely to himself and to his son Marmion. Upon the arrival of Sir Maurice it seemed to Samuels the butler that things were looking up a bit in Carlos Place. Visits from two obviously real gentlemen, one of them titled, and with an adorably curt, imperious and curse-you-for-a-flunkey manner, exhilarated Samuels, and he became a better butler for a time. The style in which he showed Sir Maurice to the drawing-room left little to be desired. Indeed Sir Maurice asked himself how the deuce these upstart plutocrats contrived always to wipe up all the best butlers.

Sir Maurice was a very different man from his son. At the wheel of a taxi he could easily have passed for an old London cabby who had taken to mechanical transport late in life. He was stout and thick-necked like Mr. Jack Hollins. He had white hair, and luxuriant white eyebrows. He wore a black-and-white check suit, white spats, and a white tie. He moved quickly. His voice was enormous.

"How d'ye do, Sir Maurice?" said Mr. Hollins; but do not imagine that he added: "Very good of you to come all this way to see me." For he did not.

However, he recognized in Sir Maurice a fellow-creature, and did for him what he had not dreamt of doing for his son—he ordered drinks and cigars. Sir Maurice puffed and blew and gulped and smacked, and talked loudly about railway trains, crop prospects, the prospects of revolution, and the folly of the nation. Then suddenly he said:

"By the way, Mr. Hollins, I suppose we can settle our little affair in two words. My son wants to marry your daughter. I agree. I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter yesterday at Claridge's. And I can only repeat: I agree. I agree. If you do——"

"Well, Sir Maurice, I'm like yourself. I'm not one for beating about the bush, and I can give you my answer in two words: I agree."

"That's a great whiskey, Mr. Hollins, if you'll allow me to say so. What settlement do you intend to make on Miss Minnie? Roughly speaking, of course. I don't want to press for details. It's a matter for our lawyers."

Mr. Hollins replied harshly in a voice as loud as Sir Maurice's own:

"I'm not much for settlements."

"But surely you'll make a settlement, my good sir. It's the usual thing."

"It isn't the usual thing in my family. It may be in yours. But we're speaking of my daughter, and my daughter belongs to my family."

"But surely, my good sir——"

"As I say, I'm not one for beating about the bush, and if you'd like it straight, I shall make no settlement."

At this moment these two stout, thick-necked, red-faced old men grew stouter and thicker-necked and more red-faced, and it appeared to be a nice question which of them would explode first. But simultaneously they both reflected and saved themselves, by astounding efforts of self-control.

Mr. Jack Hollins spoke again:

"I'm not asking your son to marry my daughter. It's him and you as are asking me to let my daughter marry him. I'm not going to buy your son. It's the duty of a man to keep his wife, and if he can't do it he'd better not marry. If your son is marrying my daughter for my money, he can't have either. If he isn't, let him prove it. That's how I look at it. If there's any hole in my argument, happen you'll tell me."

A pause. Sir Maurice finished his whiskey.

"I'll think it over," said he, dashed and irritated. "I'll think it over."

"Nay," said Mr. Hollins. "You'll decide at once, before you leave this room. If you don't, I shall. My daughter's my daughter, and there isn't going to be any hesitation."

"Do you mean——"

"Ay! I mean all of it. We're talking business and I mean all of it."

"You know, Mr. Hollins, you've succeeded in putting me in a very awkward position. I don't want to disappoint Marmion, and yet I have a duty a—er—serious duty—I appreciate your straightforward methods. I'm all in favour of straightforwardness. Saves trouble in the end. Of course! Of course!"

"Then you won't take my daughter as she is?"

"No, Mr. Hollins, I don't say that. I must beg you not to put words into my mouth. I don't say that."

"Then you'll take her as she is?"

"I see no alternative, Mr. Hollins, and that's flat. I see no alternative but to accept your conditions. May I help myself?" Sir Maurice poured out more whiskey.

Mr. Jack Hollins became grimly happy. He had defeated the ancient Northumbrian family. Minnie would be Lady Coggleshall in due course, and he would hear servants refer to her as "her ladyship." His mood softened as the mood of Napoleon would soften in intimacy after vast triumphs.

"You needn't worry, Sir Maurice," said he. "My will's made and has been this long time. Minnie's the sole legatee, and she'll come into fifty thousand pounds a year when I kick the bucket. And I don't mind telling you now, as we've come to an understanding, that I shall give her five thousand a year to do what she likes with. I'm a reasonable man——"

"You are. You are indeed, Mr. Hollins. Very generous of you."

"But I can't be forced, and I can't be bullied."

Thus the marriage of Minnie Hollins and Marmion Coggleshall, captain in the First Life Guards and heir to an ancient baronetcy, duly came to pass. Mr. Jack Hollins behaved characteristically. First he said to his daughter:

"Look here, my lass, none o' this fashionable wedding nonsense, or you won't have your father at your wedding."

"Oh, father!" answered Minnie softly. "I should hate it. So would Marmion. You needn't trouble about that. We'll have the marriage at the registry office, and I'll be married in my going-away dress."

The plan was altered, and it was altered by her father, little by little. The old man couldn't get the idea of orange-blossoms out of his head, nor the vision of his daughter in a white dress and veil. He had insisted at first that the wedding-party should consist of the two persons chiefly concerned and two witnesses, himself and Sir Maurice. And to this he adhered strictly, because he was afraid that in the midst of a concourse he might make himself ridiculous. In all other respects, however, the wedding was fashionable. The wedding breakfast was of the highest sumptuousness, like the bridal dress. The ceremony took place at St. George's, Hanover Square, and the red cloth was laid on the pavement for it and the awning erected above the red cloth, and the usual crowd gathered and was universally disappointed by the fewness of the party.

After the register was signed Minnie kissed her father, thus thoughtfully saving him the agony of making the first move to kiss her. The touch of her lips on his raspy cheek affected him rather disconcertingly. She was very mysterious to him in that moment—not like his familiar daughter, but like a woman strange, exquisite, and incomprehensible, and it seemed monstrous and barbaric that Captain Coggleshall should whisk away this delicate and sensitive creature into some withdrawn secrecy and call her his own. Fortunately the queer sensation lingered no more than a moment in Mr. Jack Hollins's soul. In another moment Mr. Jack Hollins was himself again.

He presented to the pair a small house in select Hill Street, together with two thousand pounds for furnishing, and he

paid in advance the first half-yearly instalment of the promised five thousand a year. In short he behaved with an old-fashioned grandiosity, and his satisfaction in doing so was much enhanced by the certitude of his conviction that the Coggleshalls were as poor as church mice and that if he chose he could eat up the Coggleshalls and Coggleshall Haigh (their place), and all that was theirs, without having indigestion. The prospect of living alone in Carlos Place did not in the least affright him.

II

Still, he went away for four months, reaching Parà and then doing a further thousand miles or so up the Amazon. He wrote no letters except business letters, so that Samuels was the only person to be advised of his return. On the morning after his arrival he had the idea of strolling round to Hill Street, to see how his daughter had been getting along with a husband who was captain in the First Life Guards. The colour of the front door of the Coggleshall house annoyed him very much. It was a brilliant uncompromising vermilion. As he had never wandered about Chelsea, this was the first vermilion front door in his experience. Not the colour itself but the fantastic public silliness of the thing vexed him. He noticed moreover that the blinds and curtains of the house were a challenge to the conventions of British domesticity. A parlourmaid, dressed like no other parlourmaid within his memory, opened to him.

"Mrs. Coggleshall in?" said he, and stepped forward in the firm fashion of a broker's man who must not stand on ceremony in order to effect an entrance. He had a faint hope that the maid might reply: "Her ladyship is at home." But he was disappointed; Sir Maurice had not expired during his absence, and Minnie had not yet come into a title.

He told the maid fiercely who he was, and she led him into a room which like the front door aroused his angry contempt. The door of it was black, and the door-case pale blue. The walls were not papered but palely distempered. The scanty furniture was painted in strange tints, and there was not a bit of mahogany or oak anywhere. The fireplace was draped in slaty silk. The lower half of the walls was covered with paintings and drawings and prints, whose subjects were in his opinion either incomprehensible or idiotic or indecent, and most of which had the air of having been daubed by humorous children. He could better have withstood these tasteless jokes had they been respectably and stoutly framed in English gold; but very few of them were framed at all. The cushions, which abounded, seemed to have been borrowed from a pantomime. On the mantelpiece was a whole row of unprecedented dolls. Disorder was everywhere.

Minnie came into the room, not hurrying, but moving rather more quickly than usual. There was a look on her face such as he had never seen there; she was Marmion's wife. All her physique had altered, and for the better. In fact, she would have been a magnificent spectacle but for the huge ugly apron that she was wearing, which apron covered her from neck to ankle.

"Well, father," she greeted him tranquilly, as if she had talked with him last on the previous evening, "how are you?" She shook hands, did not kiss. "We were both up in the studio painting. Quaggy will be down in a minute."

"Quaggy?" demanded Mr. Jack Hollins. "Who's he?"

"It's what I call Marmion now. I made it up."

He had left this girl sane. He had given this girl the house and two thousand for furnishing it. Such furniture as he had descried could not have cost more than about fifteen shillings. He was also allowing this girl five thousand a year.

Then the husband appeared, in a brown velveteen coat and a necktie that might have been ripped off a cushion-cover. He had decidedly put on weight, but did not seem to be in very good condition. The perfection of his social manner, however, was unimpaired. Ignoring Mr. Jack Hollins's irritated taciturnity, he talked at ease of the Amazon and the Booth Line of steamers and of similar matters suitable to the comprehension of a father-in-law. And as he talked, Minnie, with shining eyes, happy and absent-minded, stroked his velveteen shoulders at intervals in adoration. Oh! He was decidedly at peace with his world, was Marmion.

"You must see the rest of the house, father," said Minnie.

"Well, if you want to know," said Mr. Jack Hollins, after the agitating tour of inspection (the double drawing-room had been turned into two studios), "well, if you want to know, I don't like it, and that's flat."

"No," observed Marmion, with a benignant placidity, "we feared it might hurt your finer susceptibilities."

Jackanapes! The fellow was laughing at his father-in-law! Mr. Hollins was furious, but he controlled himself. He declined to stay to lunch, partly because of his general resentment, and partly because he detested the dining-table, which was ridiculously narrow and painted in a most offensive orange tint. Marmion very courteously regretted Mr. Hollins's inability to lunch. He passed his elegant hand across his forehead, and Minnie, exclaiming that Quaggy suffered too much from neuralgia, started on the disquieting subject of his health.

Mr. Hollins had a lancinating qualm:

"If he dies before the old baronet, my daughter will never be her ladyship."

Then Minnie referred, apparently quite incidentally, to the fact that Quaggy had decided to resign his commission in the First Life Guards, so that he might have more leisure for painting. This was precisely the straw that broke the back of Mr. Jack Hollins's temper. The veins on his neck became manifest. And as her father began to lay about him, Minnie was reminded of the terrible humiliations her mother had suffered in the past. She blushed for her father, but she left the situation for her husband to handle. Mr. Hollins both ramped and raved. He would have his way. His son-in-law was largely dependent upon him, and his son-in-law should not resign his commission. He didn't mind his son-in-law playing at art, but he would absolutely not permit him to be a professional painter. No! Let him understand that once for all! Mr. Jack Hollins's daughter was not going to be the wife of a professional painter. If Marmion resigned his commission he would then no doubt relinquish physical exercise entirely, and in all probability would die and the title would lapse. A pretty thing!

"What does your father say to this senseless scheme?" demanded Mr. Hollins.

"Well, my father objects to it in much the same style as you do," answered Marmion blandly, and in his tone Mr. Hollins surmised an infuriating irony. . . . You never knew how to take the fellow.

"I should think he did object!" Mr. Hollins cried. "Anybody would who wasn't a damned fool!"

At these words Marmion walked slowly to the window and looked out.

"Anyhow," Mr. Hollins finished, "you let me hear from you to-morrow morning that you've changed your mind, or else _____"

"Yes?" said Marmion, turning his head.

"Or else not another penny of my money will come into this house. You can bet your life on that. I've got my daughter's interests to think of."

"Mr. Hollins," said Marmion, looking out into the street again, "forgive me for saying so, but it occurs to me that you are presuming a little on your position as my wife's father in this house. And may I add it's not your commission I'm going to resign; it's my own."

Mr. Hollins made the worst of his way out, and nobody accompanied him to the vermilion front-door.

III

His state of mind can only be described as one of exasperated fury. The reasons for the fury were lost in the fury itself. Mr. Jack Hollins had ceased to be rational. Samuels had immediate cause to learn his master's condition. The next morning no letter came either from Marmion or Minnie. Mr. Hollins had feared that there would be no letter, and yet he was amazed at the defiance. These two persons, who had absolutely no weapons, were nevertheless defying him. He could not understand it. The thing was scarcely conceivable. He had never been defied before. All the ruthlessness of the brother of the man who had defied Nature herself and damned the consequences came into play.

And Mr. Hollins had an original and brilliant idea. He called up Mr. Shelton Shelton, philanthropic giver of clinics, on the telephone. Mr. Shelton Shelton, being a very important person indeed, was not easy to get at, even on the telephone. But Mr. Hollins, perhaps by the help of the ruthlessness in his voice, got at him, and, explaining that he desired an interview about a philanthropic scheme of magnitude, obtained an appointment for the next day. The appointment was confirmed by a secretary's letter.

The next day, there being no sign of any sort from the house with the vermilion door, Mr. Hollins kept the appointment. He had to wait for nearly a quarter of an hour in the antechambers of Mr. Shelton Shelton: which annoyed him considerably. Mr. Shelton Shelton received Mr. Jack Hollins, somewhat nonchalantly, in a magnificently furnished private office. He was a short, thin man, with a shiny red complexion, an oily insinuating voice, a short pointed white beard, a frock coat, and the habit of joining his hands at the tips of his fingers. Mr. Jack Hollins thought he resembled a revivalist preacher or a moneylender's tout much more than a renowned philanthropist; but he admitted at the first glance that Mr. Shelton Shelton must be an exceedingly clever and wary man. He was the least bit afraid lest the philanthropist might in some unimagined way get the better of him.

"Please do accept my apologies for keeping you waiting, my dear Mr. Hollins," began Mr. Shelton Shelton, his hand folding like a snake round the hand of Mr. Hollins. "I hope I needn't tell you that circumstances were too much for me. They often are, alas! Do sit down. I am delighted to meet a director of the Midlands Cooked Food Company, which has done so much to cater honestly for our impoverished middle-classes." And so on.

Mr. Hollins soon perceived that Mr. Shelton Shelton had learned a good deal about him. And after Mr. Hollins had mumbled something, Mr. Shelton Shelton went on again:

"I feel sure you'll understand if I ask you at this first interview to state your case as briefly as possible. My day has been deranged. I have an appointment with the Countess of Alcar in a quarter of an hour, and another with the First Secretary of the American Embassy in an hour from now."

"I can state my case in five minutes, not fifteen, Mr. Shelton Shelton," said Mr. Jack Hollins firmly. "I'm like yourself, a rich man." Mr. Shelton Shelton nodded approvingly. "I've got nothing to do with my money. No family, except one daughter who's married and settled. I've no vices, and few pleasures, and so I don't spend my money. I want to do something with it, something useful. I particularly don't want to leave it behind me."

"Ah! Very good! Very good! I wish there were more rich men of your kidney, Mr. Hollins. You need advice, and you've come to me?"

"Don't run along quite so fast!" said Mr. Hollins in his soul to Mr. Shelton Shelton; and aloud: "It occurred to me that a gentleman of your experience might be able and willing to give me a few tips. A nod's as good as a wink to me, and I wouldn't care to bother you. I can paddle my own canoe, but any advice from somebody like yourself would be appreciated."

"Pray don't apologize. Pray do *not* apologize. I am entirely at your service. I'm at the service of humanity. Everybody in England knows that. Unfortunately there is no lack of charitable objects which you could devote yourself to. No lack! Personally I do what I can, as possibly you may have heard. But it's so little. So little!"

At this point Mr. Hollins was startled to see tears in the eyes of Mr. Shelton Shelton. He thought at first that he must be mistaken, but when two drops tolled down the wrinkled red cheeks of Mr. Shelton Shelton he knew that he was not mistaken. The tears inspired Mr. Hollins with disgust. He feared and detested Mr. Shelton Shelton, and he would have departed, but for his resolve to pick Mr. Shelton Shelton's brain if possible. He wanted to avoid making a public fool of himself as a philanthropist, and would neglect no precaution to that end.

In such wise did these two determined benefactors hobnob together, without even a cigarette to help them—Mr. Shelton Shelton being a person of the most austere principles—for the welfare of the multitudinous bottom dog.

"Before we go any further," said Mr. Shelton Shelton, "can you furnish me with any estimate of the sum which you have in mind to employ on your proposed scheme? The choice of the scheme would obviously be influenced by the sum at disposal."

"Half a million, to commence with," answered Mr. Hollins succinctly.

Mr. Shelton Shelton glanced first at the clock and then at his watch.

"You must let me think it over, Mr. Hollins," said he. "You must let me think it over. The sum is not inconsiderable—and may I say how deeply I admire your simplicity and your public spirit? I will think it over and write you in a few days." He rang a bell. By some magic means Mr. Hollins found himself expeditiously in the street, and the novel idea presented itself to him that he was not the only strong and ruthless man on the face of the earth.

IV

Several days later, about six o'clock in the evening, Minnie called to see her father. Samuels, when he opened the door, raised his eyebrows and gave the slightest lift to his head—as if to indicate that the tyrant was above and in a highly explosive condition. No butler could have been at once more discreet and more informative. Samuels looked at his former mistress and fellow-slave and admired her greatly. Yes! Marriage had improved her and made her a magnificent spectacle.

"Good afternoon, father," she said in the drawing-room. The old gentleman was seated by the fire.

"What do you want?"

"I just looked in to see how you were getting on."

"Has Marmion resigned his commission?"

"Yes." Minnie sat down, taking off her gloves, and Mr. Hollins jumped up.

"Oh! He has, has he?" Mr. Hollins cried raucously.

He gazed at his daughter, rabid and puzzled. The blow had fallen. He was definitely and uncompromisingly defied. There had been no parleying, no attempting of any sort to placate him. He examined, as well as he could in his extreme excitement, Minnie's placid and already half-maternal face. She and her husband were ready to sacrifice five thousand a year and perhaps also the relatively trifling sums received from Sir Maurice, in order to prove their independence of him. They were facing poverty, for themselves and their children, to that same end. It was incomprehensible. There must be something, there must be a good deal, of himself in that young woman who he realized had always baffled him even when he had humiliated and tortured her and forced her to obey him. In her own way she must be as ruthless as he was. . . Ah! But he would be ruthless. He would be ruthless as never before. He simply could not bear being defied. The trouble was not now that Marmion had resigned his commission—it was that Marmion and Minnie had defied him.

"You wait!" he said, with terrible contained bitterness, and hastened to his bedroom, drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket as he went. His safe was in the bedroom. He returned with his will. It was not a very long document. He opened it and beat it out with his open palm.

"You see that!" he said. "That meant fifty thousand a year to you. It will mean nothing in a minute, because I am going to burn it. I'm going to give away most of what I have while I'm alive, and what's left'll go to charity by a new will." He kept on slapping the page and crying: "Look at it! Read it! Look at it!"

Just then Samuels came in with a letter that had arrived by the six o'clock delivery. Recognizing the envelope, Mr. Jack Hollins snatched at it, dropping the will.

The letter was, as he surmised, from Mr. Shelton Shelton. He was intending to show it to Minnie as a further proof of his plans. But it was as follows:

"MY DEAR MR. HOLLINS,—Adverting to our very interesting and agreeable interview, I cannot tell you how profoundly I appreciate your desire to give me so large a sum as half a million pounds to help forward my philanthropic schemes. It is a mark of confidence such as even I have seldom received, and encourages me to continue energetically in my life's work. If you will call to-morrow at about four I will explain to you in some detail how I propose to employ your munificent donation, and perhaps at the same time you will indicate what arrangements you are making for the transfer of the necessary stocks or other securities. Believe me, my dear Mr. Hollins, very cordially yours,—I. SHELTON SHELTON."

The recipient of the letter gasped, tried to speak and could not, stamped his feet violently, crunched the letter into a ball, and threw it into the fire and the envelope after it.

The sight of his speechless rage was appalling—so much so that Minnie lost her calm and exclaimed in protest:

"Father!"

She had never seen anything like it. The old man's face, violently twitching, seemed to puff up; the veins of his neck, overcharged with blood at terrific pressure, stood out like raised seams; his breathing was stertorous; his eyes rolled. The continued violent efforts to relieve his emotion by articulation racked his obese frame, producing such exhaustion that he fell at last into the easy-chair and his head sank to one side against the flap. Minnie knelt down to him and perceived that he had been drinking whiskey. She rang the bell, and then, as there was no immediate answer, ran out on to the landing.

"Samuels! Samuels! Father is taken ill. I think he's had an apoplectic stroke. Telephone for the doctor." Her voice seemed to resound through the house and she heard responsive feet hurrying and noises from the basement.

When she returned to him Mr. Hollins's forehead had gone white, and his hands were blue. She tried to straighten the twisted right leg; it was as heavy as lead. He was unconscious, and he was paralysed. Half an hour later, and a few seconds after the doctor entered, Mr. Hollins died. The enormous impudence and vanity of the great philanthropist had killed him. Not for another hour did Marmion arrive. Mr. Hollins was then stretched on his bed decently and in order. The lights had been extinguished in the big drawing-room.

"Quaggy!" murmured Minnie, and burst into tears. There was no sobbing, and the tears passed like a brief summer shower; but Marmion had never seen her cry before, and nobody in the house had seen her cry before. He held her gently. She was stricken with grief for the terrible old man, beaten as it were at the post of destiny. But for the chance coming of a letter at a certain moment, he might have laid waste her whole life. Yet the foolish creature, ordinarily so wise, could feel acutely the pathos of the dramatic defeat of Mr. Hollins's demoniacal ruthlessness. It was tragic that he could not win. She wondered what the burnt letter could have contained.

"All this is very dangerous for you, my dear," said her husband. "Come away!"

She controlled herself.

"What's that paper you've got?" she asked murmuringly.

"It's the will."

She turned in obedience from the bed, realizing the wisdom of her husband's advice. The thought of the vast responsibility of great riches and of her future rôle as a mother solemnized her, and she leaned softly on Marmion. He closed the door on the poor remains of the formidable and ineffectual Juggernaut.

"Poor old chap!" muttered Marmion; for he could admire the heroic even in savagery; and he was one of those simple ones who remember that we are all Heaven's creatures.

VI

NINE O'CLOCK TO-MORROW

I

James Devra descended from his car at the entrance to the Club. The same adjective applied to himself as to the car—he was perfectly appointed. A dark and handsome Jew, with riches increasing every month, he had the face of a kind, capable, clear-thinking, orderly, masterful and successful man. In the Jewish community he was much respected for strict orthodoxy, broad generosity and artistic taste. His pride of race was intense. Charitable in estimating mankind, he excepted only one type of individual from his benevolence; he had nothing but scorn—a scorn fierce, cold and taciturn—for the renegade Jew.

"Nine forty-five," he said to the chauffeur. He said it with a friendly, reliant smile, as one human being to another. But in the firm features and gaze there was somehow the warning implication that he did not mean nine forty-six.

He crossed the pavement of Pall Mall, walked up the noble and massive steps of the Club, glanced at the encaged hall-porter, who by a sign indicated that there were no letters for him, hung his hat in the cloak-room on peg No. 58 (mnemonics: five eights are forty, his age), passed into the lavatory to wash, and then through the great dim tessellated and pillared hall to the coffee-room—as the restaurant of the Club was still called. The long apartment, severe, beautiful, magnificent, disfigured only by bad portraits of statesmen, had just been lighted for the evening. It had tables for a hundred and fifty, and at lunch nearly every chair was occupied; but now there were fewer diners than stewards, cashiers, waiters, waitresses and page-girls. Devra with an inquiring eye sought among the infrequent guests for an acquaintance whose company might attract him, found none, sat down solitary at a table for four, and ordered some food and half a bottle of champagne from an old congenial steward, who devolved part of the command to a pale and high-heeled waitress.

"Rather dark here, Corser. I shan't be able to see my plate for my shadow," said Devra cheerfully.

"Yes, sir," the old steward replied, and his manner showed that he had the deep sentiment of Pall Mall in his bones. "They have talked of putting in extra chandeliers, but it seems it wouldn't suit the architecture."

"We must resign ourselves, I suppose. You might bring me the *Westminster Gazette*, will you?"

"Certainly, sir."

Corser went off to get the wine and the paper.

When the waitress arrived with the soup, Devra slyly examined the face, which he could not recall. It was a sad, pretty face, blonde and brainless, with a foolish little mouth.

He thought:

"Why is she here, with her high heels? No tips. Nothing. She ought to be in the front row of a theatre chorus."

For a moment he imaginatively conceived her as a living creature with desires and sorrows. The whole room was as melancholy as the girl's face. What a contrast with the same room in the lunch-hour, when friends and acquaintances and enemies sat close together in amiable and playful conversations, teasing one another, firing off scandal, innuendoes, indictments, satire, sarcasm—all in utmost good humour. You could say anything then, simply anything, provided you used the right Club-tone. The lunch-hour was the apogee of the Club's day. To lunch at the Club was the proper thing, far better and more amusing than to lunch anywhere else. But the diners, chiefly old, dull, and preoccupied, had the air of dining at the Club because they could dine nowhere else, an air neglected, desolate, and gloomy. They did not in fact dine; they solemnly nourished themselves. And the attendants, prisoners of the Club, seemed to partake of the desolation of the diners, as was indeed correct behaviour on their part, for it was their business to reflect the Club's mood as it changed from morn to eve.

Devra lodged the *Westminster Gazette* in front of the cruet, but to read it was too much trouble. He preferred to savour the vast despondency of the room. Not that he shared it. No! His own cheerfulness quite uninfected, he merely

commiserated the diners and with benign urbanity disdained them. Nor did he object to dining alone. Being a man of very varied interests, sentimental and otherwise, he was accustomed to evenings overfull, and occasional solitude made a piquant change for him.

Raphael Field, R.A., came vaguely in: a tall, stout, stooping, slouching old man with white hair and a boyish look on his rather rugged, red, carelessly shaven face, and pale hands whose joints were much enlarged. He wore shabby but well-cut tweeds, clumsy black boots, a low collar, and a little black tie of the last insignificance. Raphael Field's career had been a series of triumphs, not the least of which was the triumph over his fond father, an excessively bad mid-Victorian painter who had baptized his offspring with that absurd Christian name and insisted that he must and would be a great artist. That anyone so handicapped should—especially after having commenced as an author—become the most distinguished and successful painter of his epoch, redeeming his Christian name from its absurdity, and reluctantly joining the Academy late in life in order to oblige the Academy and to give lustre to that poor old body—this was miraculously against all the chances and an astounding demonstration of the man's native force. Raphael Field would have been a first-rate lion at any West End party, and the chief lion at most. But in the Club, which was a Club of celebrities, rich men, high officials, expensive professionals, prominent statesmen, he was just an individual like the rest of the members. Indeed he had a naïve, semi-apologetic demeanour, as though acknowledging that the renown of a painter, however wealthy and successful, could not truly be as authentic and imposing as that of a millionaire, a specialist doctor, a gladiator of the Bar, or a transient Cabinet Minister. He was wandering at large, rather like an ox on a high-road, past Devra's table, when Devra stopped him.

"Good evening, Mr. Field," said Devra, with his well-known bright smile, and the respect due to genius and to a man not far off thirty years older than himself.

The sound of his name seemed to recall Raphael Field from another world. He marshalled his strayed faculties, in the manner of the old, and stooped hugely over Devra and the table.

"Ah! Mr. Devra!" His faint answering smile showed the ruined, irregular teeth.

"Have you forgiven me for outbidding you for that Queen Anne table at Christie's?"

Raphael Field suddenly beamed.

"Ah!" he said in his rich, deep voice, the voice of a strong, vital energy that was not yet quite spent. "Ah! You City men always get what you want. We others are content with your leavings."

"Now, now, Mr. Field," Devra protested banteringly, "that's irony. It's common knowledge you've got one of the finest collections in London. And, d'you know, I've been ashamed of myself ever since last Thursday. I'll be delighted to send you round that table at the price of your last bid. I was carried away—with your experience as a collector you must know the feeling—and I forgot myself. Otherwise I shouldn't have dreamed of bidding against you. Let me send you the table. I should feel privileged."

"But this is exceedingly generous of you," said Field simply and sincerely. "I don't know that I shouldn't take you at your word—I'm an awful brigand—only that yesterday I happened to pick up an even more interesting table than the one you carried off under my guns—poppuns, shall we say?"

"I'm so glad." Devra put genuine relief into his tone. "You've lifted a weight off my conscience. . . . I expect you're dining with someone or I'd ask you to sit here."

"May I?" murmured the eternal boy.

Devra quickly cast the *Westminster Gazette* on to the floor.

"I shall be honoured," he said earnestly.

And he meant it. Geniuses are rare. He had only a slight acquaintance with Raphael Field and was eager enough to strengthen it. After all, his own title to distinction was slender. True, he had a house in Cavendish Square, and there were ten gardeners on his place in Oxfordshire; and he enjoyed great consideration in the City and in restaurants and in auction-rooms; and he knew a thing or two about all the arts, which is more than could be said of most artists! But Field was the unique Raphael Field. Field would receive an obituary notice of at least two columns in *The Times*—yea, and in

the New York and Chicago papers also—and his biography, when it came to be written, would run to a couple of volumes and perhaps eight hundred pages.

They talked about the menu. Field examined the card as though it were a cuneiform inscription—and yet he seemed to know all about it. Devra soon saw, however, that the old gentleman was incapable of composing a meal artistically. And he thought how strange and pitiful it was that a man should know brilliant triumph and go down to the grave without having acquired the skill to compose a meal artistically. Devra had the respect of all the chief head-waiters in London. He was gathering courage to say "May I suggest?" when the competent and soothing Corser came to Field's assistance. Evidently Corser knew Field's weaknesses.

After a colloquy with Corser, Field blew out breath.

"That's done," he said, eased.

And then he said:

"This room's very dull and dark at night, don't you think?"

"I agree," Devra responded with a grimmish smile. "I usually lunch here. It's quite different then. I'm surprised to find it is so empty. It's nearly as empty as the library. By the way, Mr. Field, what are your views about the suggestion for turning the library into the smoking-room and vice versa? The present smoking-room's uncomfortably small. The library's twice as big, and is only used as a dormitory."

"I did hear something about the suggestion," Field replied with slow negligence. "But I don't know that I care for all these changes. I remember this Club for thirty years. I remember it when you could get a meal and a tankard of ale for a shilling—or was it one and twopence? I don't find many changes for the better."

"I dare say you're right," Devra concurred deferentially. "We mustn't forget the claims of tradition in a place like this." But he was thinking sadly: "Here is one of that tribe of obstinate old mummies who keep all good clubs a quarter of a century behind the times."

"Do you dine here often?" he asked in a diplomatic tone that dismissed the delicate subject.

"Every night—nearly," said Field.

"Really! I'm never here at night myself. Mr. Field, if it won't bore you, I wish you'd tell me something about picture prices. I'm very ignorant. I've often wanted to pick your brains, but I never hoped to get the chance."

And he skilfully led the old man into the enchanting domain of prices, especially the history of the prices of Field's own early pictures. And he made Field feel glorious, and, so doing, realized with elation that he was once more casting the spell of his personal charm over a fellow-creature. Nevertheless, while he listened interested and talked interestingly he was saying in his heart: "If I hadn't asked the old fellow to sit here he'd have been dining by himself. And he dines here every night—generally by himself, I bet. What a life! What's the use of being a genius and successful and famous if you're driven to eat in this catacomb every night? Why doesn't he accept invitations? Must have lots. Simply doesn't want to, I suppose."

He grew very sad in secret. The evening despondency of the big room had at last infected him. He was filled with painful compassion for the distinguished celebrity, Raphael Field. More, he was filled with compassion for the whole human race, of which so few members had any sound comprehension of the great art of life as he understood it.

Just then he detected the waitress delivering a comic naughty grimace to the impassible Corser. This shocking and delightful phenomenon modified his mood of pity for all mankind. He hated waste.

At the end of the dinner Raphael sighed and announced that he was going home.

"I'm going, too," said Devra on a sudden impulse.

"Which way do you go?"

"Cavendish Square."

"I'm on your route then."

"If I might walk with you," Devra suggested respectfully.

"I walk so damned slowly."

"I'm not a runner myself."

Field's eyes gleamed. The friendship was growing.

Field said deliberately:

"Would you care to look in at my place? I'd show you some bits of Queen Anne."

"Mr. Field, you're too kind. It's an unexpected pleasure, and I jump at it," said Devra, with eagerness.

A renewed realization of the fact that he possessed a most singular power of captivating people began to mingle with an exciting sense of anticipation. He had an earnest desire to probe more deeply into Field's existence, and he was about to gratify it. Perhaps it was a morbid desire, but there it was—and he was an amateur of human nature! As they left the Club he murmured discreetly to the hall porter: "When my car comes, just tell the chauffeur I shan't want him any more to-night, will you? Thanks."

II

Raphael Field wore a curious short cape, thrown lightly on his shoulders in the cool summer evening. This cape, flowing out under his rather long, dishevelled white hair, added to the pathos of his appearance as he anxiously undertook the feat of threading himself between the taxi-cabs in the dark dusk of Pall Mall. Devra thought with pain: "And if I were not with him the old gentleman would be crossing Pall Mall alone." When they reached Orange Square, the whole of which had been built at the end of the seventeenth century, Field drew out a bunch of keys and turned into a side street. Although his address was Orange Square, his front door was in the side street. He spent half a minute in selecting his latchkey and another half minute in getting the door open. Then he stumbled up two steps, and, groaning slightly, switched on the electric light on the staircase, and Devra had a glimpse of pictures rising in slopes above him. They were obviously fine pictures, but the stair-carpet lacked distinction.

"We'll take the lift," said Raphael Field, banging the front door. "It's my exclusive property, but I never use it at night for fear it should jam half-way and I shouldn't be able to make my people hear. However, as you're with me. . . . It never does jam, you know, but it might." He laughed uneasily.

They took the lift, which Field manipulated. It barely held the two of them. When they emerged from it in safety, Field seemed surprised and Devra had a feeling of relief.

"Shall we go into the studio?"

But when Field pulled the switch down no light resulted in the studio.

"That fuse must have gone again," said he. "Let's try the drawing-room."

In the drawing-room he rang the bell. Devra heard the sound of it in the distance above.

No answer.

"H'm!" grunted Field, and rang again.

No answer.

"H'm!" grunted Field, and went out to the corridor and called:

"Higginbotham."

No answer.

He returned to the drawing-room.

"In bed and asleep, I suppose," he said. "I keep a man and his wife here. But I suppose one can't expect servants to work more than fourteen hours a day seven days a week." He laughed uneasily once more. "Oh! Here *are* the drinks! He's put them in the other corner to-night."

"You've lived here for about forty years, haven't you, Mr. Field?" said Devra. "At least, so it's generally understood. How central you are!" he added flatteringly. "Equidistant from Regent Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly and Oxford Street. It puts Cavendish Square quite in the suburbs."

"Oh, no, no!" answered Field. "Funny how that story got about of me living here for forty years! It's true I first had the place forty years ago, but I gave it up after seven or eight years. I had the whole house then. There were no business houses in Orange Square then. Now nearly every house is wholly or partly let for business purposes. The two floors under us are occupied by a very fashionable dressmaker. She is a limited company, and she has the main entrance and the main staircase. I use now what used to be the servants' entrance and staircase in my time. Yes, I gave up the place. Couldn't stand it somehow. When I came back to England after living in Paris, about ten years ago, I heard that the upper floors were to let, and so I took them. Thought I might as well. As you say, it's very central. What'll you have?"

"A little soda-water, if I may. . . . Can't keep my eyes off your pictures, Mr. Field. You'll excuse me if I look round."

"Do, my dear fellow. Do! Most of 'em were given to me by the painters. I've got some furniture here, as you see, but very little. The fact is, most of my furniture's stored in Paris. I couldn't be bothered to bring it over."

They examined a magnificent picture by Cézanne together.

"It's one of the three or four very finest I've seen," said Devra earnestly.

Instead of replying, Raphael Field opened a little drawer, and pulled out a duster, and delicately dusted the frame.

"I keep my own private duster in every room," said he, with his uneasy laugh.

They passed from room to empty room, all the walls lined with pictures. Field in a rather childish way returned to the studio door and tried the ineffectual switch again; and Devra vaguely made out a large, bare interior, with the statue of a woman that in the gloom resembled a living woman so startlingly as to cause his flesh to creep for an instant.

"Do you paint every day?"

"Most days. Some days I can't be bothered, and I just sit about or go to the National Gallery."

Field displayed the whole floor, even to the bathroom.

"Fairly spacious, considering its situation, isn't it?"

"It is indeed."

"H'm!"

Devra had offered appropriate remarks in front of the principal pictures. But in fact he was not thinking about the pictures at all. The existence of Raphael Field preoccupied him and desolated him. He saw the old man in his queer cape walking home solitary every night from his solitary dinner, and fumbling with his bunch of keys and fumbling at the keyhole, and puffing up the stairs (the servants' stairs) on his antique legs because he was afraid of the lift, and ringing vainly for servants, and sitting silent and lonely now in this room, now in that, and probably fumbling with the old-fashioned geyser in the bathroom with the linoleum floor; and finally undressing alone and getting into bed and lying awake alone.

But the most heart-rending thing of all was the private duster kept in every room to remedy the negligence of servants. Devra was waited on hand and foot by servants in Cavendish Square. If Devra came home at 3 a.m. and rang a bell that was unanswered he would have thought the Day of Judgment was at hand. As for switches that wouldn't work, as for geysers, as for linoleum in a bathroom, as for private dusters hidden in drawers—his imagination simply refused to conceive the phenomena in connexion with his own existence. Of course, the pictures were superb, far finer than

Devra's. The sale of them would be a notable event after Field's death. But they were chiefly gifts. Field had not bought them, and Devra somehow could not attach a genuine value to that which had not cost money. The furniture was first-rate—there were several museum-pieces—but the quantity of it was disappointing. What in the name of common sense and efficiency was the point of keeping beautiful furniture stored away in Paris? The flat was large, but it was only large for a flat. Devra's house in Cavendish Square would hold three of it; his place in Oxfordshire would hold six of it. And the flat was not clean. The one indisputable quality it possessed was an impeccable tidiness.

Here was Raphael Field, world-renowned, his name familiar and sacred to the lips of every connoisseur throughout Christendom! What had he got out of life? The pathos of him was tragic, shattering.

They wandered back through the emptiness of the flat, with the mystery of the servants' rooms above them, and the mystery of the dressmaker's ateliers below them, to the drawing-room.

"Oh! Here's that Queen Anne table I was telling you of," said the old man. "Pretty good, isn't it?"

"Very interesting! Very interesting!" said Devra responsively, after he had inspected the piece with polite thoroughness. But he did not really think that it was very interesting. It was indeed indisputably second-rate, and he wondered that the old man should have been deceived by it. Still, he went on praising it quite convincingly, for he could never resist the temptation to be agreeable.

"Curious thing," said Field. "Very curious thing! I picked that up in Mortimer Street on Monday for less than I gave for it in the eighteen eighties!"

"Then it belonged to you before?" Devra's tone was positively eager.

"It did. And there's a very curious incident connected with it."

"May I hear it? . . . Or is it a secret?"

"It would bore you."

"Mr. Field! Mr. *Field*!" Devra's dark eyes glinted a discreet flattery.

"It used to be a secret. But the thing happened so long ago it needn't be a secret any more. I wrote it all down at the time. Did you know I once had literary ambitions?"

"Ambitions,' Mr. Field. 'Did I know?' I have all your three books in my library."

The old man flushed with satisfaction, and his face was more boyish, more naïve, than ever.

"Like me to read it to you?"

"I shall insist, Mr. Field."

Slowly and clumsily the old man produced his keys, unlocked a bookcase, adjusted his eyeglasses anew, and chose a calf-bound book from the shelves.

"The first volume of a journal that I used to keep—for practice," said he, and sat down under a light, and turned pages backwards and forwards, breathing rather heavily.

"Here it is. I was looking at it on Monday night. It's very jejune, I'm afraid. Perhaps I ought to explain. . . . No! Let's let it explain itself. I'll only say that at the time I wrote it I had almost given up my literary ambitions."

This is what he read in his rich, deep voice.

III

"Friday morning I was in my beautiful new old house all by myself, just finishing my packing ready to go away for the week-end to Harry's. There was a terrible state of dirt and mess, because the workmen weren't finally leaving until next day. The front-door bell rang. At first I thought I'd let it ring; but it rang several times. The ringing of the bell made the house seem very large and empty and me very lonely in it. My charwoman had gone. I wouldn't let her stay in the house

after me. At last I went downstairs. The front door was locked and the key was gone. The workmen had taken it away, by arrangement. I was supposed to be using the servants' entrance. So I had to go out into the street by the side door and round the corner to the front door. A girl was standing in the portico. She was dressed in black. I had made a movement as if to raise my hat before I remembered that I wasn't wearing a hat. I asked her what she wanted, and she said she wanted to see Mr. Raphael Field. Then she said, 'You're Mr. Field, aren't you?' I explained how I was situated and brought her round to the side entrance and upstairs to the second floor, nothing else being even half habitable—no carpets down, naturally."

("It was to this room I brought her," Field interjected.)

"There were two kitchen chairs, my easel, dais, and so on, a floor sweeper, and the Queen Anne table I'd found a fortnight ago; that was all, except some planks and trestles that the workmen hadn't removed. She was extremely nervous, and I was rather nervous too. She said she wanted me to paint her portrait, at once—she was leaving England the next day. Just a sketch-portrait. She had come to me because I had painted a portrait of a friend of hers, and she wanted the portrait of herself to give to the mother of that friend. What friend? She preferred not to say, and hoped I would excuse her.

"I told her that I was just going out of London—should be gone in half an hour—had a train to catch. But some other day I'd be delighted. She didn't speak, and I perceived she couldn't speak. The tears were falling from her eyes. I was considerably upset. In fact I had the most extraordinary sensations. There I was alone in the big house with her! I felt very sad and depressed. I'm a successful man, but I wondered whether I could afford the big house and the servants I'd engaged, and pay the rent and everything. I felt very solitary in the world. It was very curious how I felt. All at once, and without quite intending to do so, I told her I'd go out and send a telegram to say that I couldn't leave London until tomorrow, and I'd do her a sketch portrait immediately. She didn't protest. No! She just looked at me, quietly crying. It was a rather wild thing for me to do, and I shouldn't have done it only she was a most beautiful young girl, with very fair hair, and dressed in half-mourning, which suited her. I knew nothing whatever about her except that she was a most beautiful young girl with fair hair. I had very little desire to know anything else about her. I ran off. I was kept a long time at the Regent Street Post Office telegraphing to Harry.

"When I returned she was sweeping the floor. Indeed, she'd practically swept it. Her bonnet was hung on the back of a chair. I was thrilled, couldn't utter a word. I had a prickly feeling all over my skin. She smiled. I told her I'd paint her in her bonnet, and I put a chair on the dais and asked her to take a pose.

"While I was fixing the easel and arranging my palette she looked silently out of the window. Suddenly she said: 'How much will the portrait be?' I said that didn't matter, and we'd talk about that afterwards. The things one does usually say. But she insisted that the price must be fixed before I began. So I told her to fix it. She said she could pay fifty pounds. I agreed. If she'd said five I should have agreed. She took the money in notes out of her purse. She said: 'You don't know anything about me, and I prefer to pay in advance.' I objected. The argument ended by her leaving the dais and placing the notes on the mantelpiece.

"After I'd been painting about three-quarters of an hour I decided that the portrait should be more than a sketch and that I should paint all day. But between twelve and one I began to feel terribly hungry. I never felt so hungry before. I suggested to her that we should go out and have lunch at Verrey's. She told me to go, but she declined to go herself. She said she wasn't hungry and couldn't eat. Then I said that I wasn't hungry and that I wouldn't go either. I said I'd see whether there were any leavings in the kitchen. I went upstairs to the kitchen. The fire in the range wasn't quite out. The charwoman's apron hung on the knob of a cupboard door. I searched about and discovered three eggs and then half a loaf. I was startled by a noise behind me. It was she. She said: 'If there's anything, let me cook it for you!' I pointed to what I'd found. She put on the charwoman's apron, made up the fire, looked into all the cupboards, found some tea, washed a saucepan. Her movements were simply exquisite. I think that these were the most marvellous moments I had ever lived. She was young and extremely beautiful, with fair hair. She was an absolute mystery. I thought what a fool I should have been if I hadn't sent the telegram to Harry. It made me almost sick to think what I should have missed if I hadn't stayed.

"When the meal was ready, she put everything on a tray, and I carried the tray downstairs, and we had lunch opposite to each other at the Queen Anne table."

("This table," Field interjected, pointing.)

"A kind of intimacy developed. But we only talked about painting. She evidently knew something about painting. She didn't really know, but she had that charming superficial knowledge that women acquire of things. She must have had acquaintances among painters. I had been working about an hour after lunch when the light failed very quickly. It was impossible to continue. We heard thunder. Then came a proper heavy thunderstorm. The darkness was such that we could plainly see the lightning. She turned pale. The regular traffic of the square ceased. Only occasionally a horse trotted by. We looked out of the window. The rain rebounded from the pavements which were deserted. A few people were sheltering in porticoes. Charles James Fox in his tight coat of granite glittered with wet. And the beautiful mysterious young girl with fair hair and I were safely under cover in the big empty unfurnished house.

"We thought the rain would cease, but it didn't. It settled into an obstinate downpour. There was no hope of continuing the portrait. The church clock boomed. I moved the easel to the window so that we could examine it. She was enraptured with it. I also was satisfied. But it was far from finished. She said: 'I can come again to-morrow.' I reminded her that she was leaving England to-morrow. She said: 'Yes, but only in the afternoon. Supposing I came very early.' Thus we arranged for a final sitting. Then the rain ceased. Dusk, however, had now begun to fall. When we looked back from the window into the room, shadows were gathering in the corners.

"She put on her mantle and her gloves and picked up her reticule. She would go. She would not let me find a four-wheeler for her. She said she must take an omnibus. I followed her down the stairs. On the first-floor landing she stopped and I stopped. She said: 'Mr. Field, you've been very, very good to me and I've not thanked you at all. You haven't even asked anything about me. It's only right that you should know my name.' She opened her reticule. And then she melted into tears. She was so extremely beautiful, and so benign, and so movingly sad, and so seductive and so enigmatic, and I was so close to her that I kissed her. She did not resent the kiss, but she gave a little sob. Her mouth was wet and cool. My feelings could not be described. A piece of paper was pushed into my hand. She murmured: 'Nine o'clock to-morrow.' She ran down the remaining stairs. The door banged."

IV

The old man's rich voice ceased; he shut the book and turned to replace it in the bookcase. With his back to Devra he said, in a self-conscious, excusing tone:

"I was under thirty then."

"And what happened next?" Devra cautiously asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. She never came. The first hours of the following day were the most joyously exciting I ever spent. But she never came. The last hours of the day were the most terrible I ever spent." Raphael Field gave one of his short nervous laughs.

"But you had her address."

"I couldn't find the paper. Neither that night nor the next day. Looked everywhere. Thought I'd stuffed it into my pocket. Cut open the lining of my jacket. Couldn't find it. Only a very small paper. Never did find it."

"But hadn't you even looked at the paper?"

"No. You see, at first I just sat down and—er—thought about her. I didn't worry about her name at first."

"And you never had the least idea who she was?"

Field hesitated before replying.

"You remember the Ollinson case?"

"No."

"You wouldn't. Before your time. Ollinson was a painter. Pretty good in his day. I painted his portrait. He killed himself

in his studio in Chelsea. That would be in the autumn of 1879 about. He was always queer. And usually mixed up with women. There was a rumour that he was violently in love—he was violent in everything, but this was said to be more violent than usual, and the girl wouldn't look at him. Well, it occurred to me that the girl who came to me that night might be the girl who wouldn't look at Ollinson."

"I see," Devra said. "She said you'd painted a portrait of a friend of hers and she wanted her own portrait for his mother. Perhaps the mother had a sort of morbid interest in the girl that her son had killed himself for——"

"Just so. The mother and she might even have been friendly. Sorrow drawing 'em together and so on. Because naturally Ollinson's suicide must have upset the young woman tremendously. Perhaps it was on account of the suicide that she was leaving England. Who knows? All mere supposition, of course. I tried to get hold of Ollinson's mother. She'd died. I tried everything. I got on the traces of about nineteen girls that Ollinson was supposed to have been interested in. But mine didn't happen to be among them. And I can tell you that none of the others was the least bit like her, either."

A silence.

"*Why* didn't she come back the next day?" Devra said, half to himself.

"God knows. Perhaps afraid. Perhaps she had a sense of duty elsewhere. . . . She may have been run over. People are run over every day. . . . If she's alive now she's over sixty—she's just a ruin of the girl I knew. She may be a grandmother. It's forty years ago. A long time."

Another silence.

"I think you've never married, Mr. Field," said Devra, lapsing slightly from good taste. Devra had his moments of crudity.

"No."

"It's so long ago I suppose it seems to you now as if it had happened to somebody else and not to you."

"Nothing of the kind," Field answered with strange curtness. "It happened to *me*."

Soon afterwards Devra rose to depart.

"We may as well walk down," said Field, as he switched on the staircase lights.

Devra followed slowly, glancing at the pictures on the staircase walls, which Field had not as yet shown to him.

"This is it," said Field, halting on the first-floor landing.

There hung the unfinished portrait. Devra examined it intently. A work youthful but masterly. . . . Yes, a lovely creature in the demoded frock and funny bonnet—tantalizing, mysterious, virginal, voluptuous, acquiescent. . . . The wet mouth! . . . Worth no doubt a couple of thousand pounds at Christie's.

"I hung it there," said Field, "because it was just there—it was just there—she stopped and—told me I'd been very good to her. There was no carpet on the stairs."

Outside Devra stood and looked at the beautiful silhouetted Corinthian façade of the famous church rising from the silence of the square hugely against a soft sky. And he heard Raphael Field shooting the bolts within. To-morrow night the decrepit old fellow with his dignified smile half boyish and half senile would no doubt be dining forlornly alone once more at the Club. What a life! What a career! What a memory! The decrepit old fellow had created masterpieces; and he had lived. Devra, walking thoughtfully in the direction of his immense and perfectly appointed home, reflected that though he, Devra, had got much in this world he had not got quite everything. He was a little disturbed in his complacency to find himself envying Raphael Field.

VII

THE YACHT

I

When Mrs. Alice Thorpe, with her black Pomeranian, arrived at the Hard from the railway station she at once picked out a small motor-launch among the boats that were bobbing about the steps, and said:

"Is this Mr. Thorpe's?"

"Yes'm," said the sailor in charge of the launch.

She signalled to a lad who lingered in the rear with her valise perched on his head; the valise was dropped into the forward part of the launch, Mrs. Thorpe gave the boy sixpence, and placed herself and dog neatly in the stern-sheets; the engine suddenly began to fire and throb with great velocity and noise, and the launch threaded out from the concourse of craft into the middle of the creek, leaving a wake of boiling foam. There had been no delay, no misunderstanding, no bungling, no slip. The telegraphic arrangements for taking Mrs. Thorpe on board the yacht had worked to perfection. Efficiency reigned.

Aged twenty-seven, slim, not tall, Alice was a capable woman. Her eyes had the capable look which many men dislike, for while they appreciate the conveniences of efficiency in a girl they seem to prefer the efficiency to be modestly masked by an appearance of helplessness. Alice neither disguised nor flaunted the fact that she was capable. Her eyes had also the look of one accustomed to give orders that were obeyed. The dog was supposed to be the only Pomeranian on earth not given to habitual yapping; Alice had purged it of the hereditary Pomeranian curse by replying instantly to every yap with a sound smack on the head. She adored the dog, which was passionately and exclusively devoted to her, after the manner of Pomeranian ladies to their mistresses. This Pomeranian's mistress, if not beautiful, was attractive, especially in figure and in clothes. She was a fine dancer, with a body that always surprised her partners by its extraordinary yieldingness, responsiveness and flexibility. A man having danced with her for the first time would remember her physical elasticity for days—to say nothing of her sudden eager smiles that puckered all the skin round her eyes.

"Which is the yacht?" asked Alice of the sailor.

He was tidily dressed, but had an untidy mop of red hair escaping from his white cap, and a shapeless, ugly face; and his manner was somewhat gruff. She knew that he must be Peter, the steward and handy man, her husband's favourite, more than once referred to with laudation in her husband's letters. She did not care for him, and had already decided that he did not care for her. But she smiled amiably.

"Her's lying at the mouth of the creek, in the river," said Peter, pointing. "That's her, that ketch with the blue ensign at the mizzen."

Alice looked in vain along the vista of yachts and other craft in the creek. She did not know what a mizzen was, nor that the blue ensign was a flag—she fancied indeed that an ensign was a sort of three-cornered thing. Peter's incomprehensible indication, however, merely increased her sense of mystery and expectancy. The moment was thrilling for her.

She had met her husband when both of them were in uniform in France. She had married him in London impulsively because they were mad for each other. A week later he had been tragically swept off to Mesopotamia. Then, having got out of uniform, she had become organizing secretary to a political body, and had had to go to America on its business. During her absence James Thorpe had received unexpected leave. But her tyrannous conscience would not allow her to depart from the United States until her work was done; and she exulted in her work. Some caprice of the political body ended it in an hour by cable. She had obtained a berth on a Liverpool-bound liner the very next day.

She might have cabled the grand news to her husband, but she found somewhere in her mind a piquant pleasure in the notion of surprising him. She surprised him by a telegram from Liverpool. She knew that he was out of the army and in business. The unconventional wording of his reply to her telegram enchanted her, besides providing diversion for

telegraph operators (who are not easily diverted). He was yachting, alone. She remembered, vaguely, that he possessed a yacht (laid up for five years), and had spoken very enthusiastically of yachting. Of course he had been for meeting her in London; but she would have none of it. "You shall receive me on your yacht," she had telegraphed. As she was an expert organizer, and he was an expert organizer, the arrangements following this decision of hers were easy enough.

She was now afraid, and her fear was romantic and terrible. The creek was alarmingly short, the launch surged at an alarming speed through the dappled blue water. She had not seen her lover, who was incidentally her husband, for nearly two years. She knew him by his photographs, his handwriting, his turns of phrase, and the memory of his gestures and of the feel of his moustache—but did she know him? Would he prove on further acquaintance to be somebody quite other than the image established in her heart? The situation was acutely disconcerting as she approached it. She stroked the dog's silky hair, and the dog glanced up at her face.

"That's her," said Peter, to the composed and prim young lady opposite him, pointing again.

She almost exclaimed:

"It's a very small yacht, isn't it?" But restrained herself.

The yacht's stem was pointing up-creek, against the ebb-tide. Peter seemed to steer the launch very queerly. He was apparently passing the yacht. She caught sight of a name on a life-buoy hung in the yacht's rigging. The name was *Alice*.

"But I thought the yacht was called *Hermes*," she said.

"Guv'nor had her name changed last month," gloomily answered Peter, as it were with resentment. Peter was preoccupied with the manœuvring of the launch on the tide, and Alice perceived that he knew exactly what he was doing. The nose of the launch edged towards the yacht's side; the launch seemed to hang in the current; then it slowly swung round, the propeller stopped, and the whole affair came gently to rest against dazzlingly white cushiony fenders and a polished stairway, from the top of which hung two dazzlingly white ropes. The yacht had grown enormous. Its bulwark rose high above the tiny launch, and it was as solid and moveless as a rock.

"And now he's called it *Alice*," said Alice to herself; and the situation appeared to be rather disconcerting.

II

Her husband loomed perpendicularly over her.

"Hallo!" he cried, saluting.

She answered in a weak voice:

"Well?" Her face was burning.

She seized the white ropes and tripped neatly up the stairway, and the blanched deck of the yacht stretched out firm and vast; and tall Jim clutched at her hand.

"Come below and see the saloon," he murmured.

He pushed her to a mahogany staircase under the main boom, and no sooner were they out of sight of the deck than he kissed her with rather more than his old accustomed violence. And the situation was acutely disconcerting again, but differently.

There was a pattering of innumerable little feet on the staircase, and the dog, who under excitement produced in human ears the illusion that she was a centipede and not a quadruped, bounded into the saloon.

"Oh! Fifi! I'd forgotten you! . . . Jim, this is Fifi."

The dog sprang into her arms, and Jim praised the dog highly and stroked her.

Husband and wife sat side by side in the saloon, and talked rather self-consciously about nothing, which was rather strange, seeing that each of them had ten thousand exciting matters to impart to the other. Still, it was all right. Alice

knew it was all right, and she knew that Jim knew it was all right. They were strangers in one way and the most intimate of intimates in another. It might be said that the saloon held four people, not two.

"Oh! What's that funny thing?" Alice demanded, pointing to a very complicated kind of dial with a finger on it that was screwed face downwards to the saloon ceiling.

"That? Oh! That's a compass so that I can see the course of the ship when I'm having my meals."

"But the finger's moving right round!"

"Then you may be sure the yacht's moving right round too."

"Then we are off—already?"

And Jim said in his stern, sardonic tone:

"Didn't you hear the anchor being hauled up? Can't you feel the propeller?"

The fact was that Alice had not noticed the loud clacking of the anchor chain, her powers of observation having been temporarily impaired by the surpassing interest of her own private sensations. As for the propeller, she had in a vague manner been aware of a general vibration, but had not attributed it to anything in particular; she did not even know that the yacht possessed a propeller. Jim took her by the shoulders and they ran up on deck. The yacht was gliding out to sea, magically, formidably, by its own secret force; for the sails were not yet set. The entire adventure was ecstatic, incredibly romantic. Alice had never been so happy, so troubled, so restless.

"I do want to see all the rooms," said she, like a curious child.

"You shall. Are you given to being sea-sick?"

"I have never been sea-sick in my life," the capable woman replied with confidence.

Jim's keen eyes wandered over her admiringly.

"No," he murmured. "You aren't the sort that's sea-sick, you aren't."

They descended again to the saloon. A beautiful tea, with real crockery and brilliant electro-plate and real cakes and real cream, all set out upon a brass tray, lay on the table.

"Oh! Pete's served the tea. Good! Will you pour out? You must. You're the mistress of this wigwam."

She poured out. As she leaned an elbow on the table, the table tipped downwards under the pressure of her arm. She gave a little squeal.

"All right! All right!" Jim reassured her grandly. "Pete's taken the pin out, you know. Leaves the table free to oscillate when the boat rolls. It's weighted with lead underneath, so it can't swing far."

"Oh! I see. Of course!" said Alice, who, however, was not completely reassured. Things were not after all quite what they seemed.

She admired tremendously the internal arrangements of the yacht—they were so cosy, they were so complete: the most home-like thing she had ever seen. She visited every bit of the home. There was the saloon, or drawing-room, and there were a large double sleeping-cabin and a small single one; also there was a tiny bathroom. The multiplicity of cupboards and drawers delighted her; only in Utopia could she have imagined there would be so many cupboards and drawers. And there was electric light. And there were electric bells. You rang a bell, and it was answered just as it would have been in a real house—but much more promptly. Indeed, life on the yacht might be described as playing at perfect housekeeping. Everything had a place, and everything had to be in its place; and every place was full—except the drawers and the mirrored wardrobe reserved for the use of the mistress of the floating home. In the pantry every cup was hung on a hook; every wine-glass was lightly wedged in a fitting so that it could not dash itself against another wine-glass; and the same with saucers and plates. One surmised that even if the yacht were to turn upside down nothing would break.

And the organism was complete in itself, and sufficient to itself. Before dinner Jim said:

"Like a cocktail, beloved infant?"

The notion of a cocktail appealed to her as something wild and wicked.

"Why not?" said she. And Jim rang a bell.

"Two cocktails, Pete."

In about two minutes Peter, in a white jacket, brought two cocktails out of the mysteries of the forecastle where the pantry was. If Jim had ordered two nectars doubtless Pete would have produced them.

The dinner was very sound. It was strictly plain—oxtail soup (tinned), herring, roast mutton, potatoes, rice pudding—but it was sound. Alice admitted that Pete, for all his defects, could not merely cook meat well—he could buy good meat.

But she pointed out to Jim that Pete did not know how to lay the table properly—the fellow had put the fish knife and fork within the meat knife and fork—and at Jim's suggestion she pointed out the sad lapse to Pete personally, with a bright smile. Pete received the correction with a tranquillity too perfect, indicating by his nonchalant demeanour that if it pleased madam to have the meat knife and fork within the fish knife and fork he had no objection to obliging her, but that for himself his soul was above trifles. Pete had been Jim's batman for nearly three years in the war, and Jim spoke with quiet enthusiasm of his qualities. Alice, however, did not quite see what that had to do with the knife-and-fork question. They went on deck. The yacht was now at anchor in another estuary, whose quiet waters were full of phosphorescence. A dinghy moving towards another yacht close by threw up marvellous silver fireworks at every stroke of the oars. The night was obscure and warm and incredible. A radiance came from the saloon skylight; and a brighter radiance, sharply rectangular, from the open hatch of the forecastle. The crew (four human beings) could be heard talking in the depths of the forecastle. The old skipper appeared and made an inspection in the gloom; and Jim addressed him as "Skipper" with affectionate respect, though he was naught but a fisherman in winter and spoke with a terrific Essex accent.

The skipper disappeared. When next Alice glanced round there was no radiance, and no sound, from the forecastle. The crew had gone to bed. She and Jim were alone in the vast and miraculous world, enveloped by the poetry of water and sky. . . .

III

Nevertheless the next morning, in the double cabin, when she awoke very early in the twilight, that singular young woman was not utterly happy. That is to say, she was utterly happy, but at the same time she was unhappy—her heart being a huge place where all kinds of contradictory emotions could roam in comfort without interfering with each other. Jim was not in his berth. Through the open skylight, across which a horizontal blue blind was drawn, she could hear him chatting with the skipper. Jim was disturbingly friendly with his crew. "Look lively with the tea, Pete," he cried out. "Very good, sir." In another minute she could hear him sipping tea in enormous sips. She had an impression that he was seated, in pyjamas and dressing-gown, on the very skylight itself.

The floating home, then, had already begun to function very perfectly for the day. It was precisely the perfect functioning of the organism that upset her. Every contrivance in it was a man's contrivance. Woman had had naught to do with its excellence. It would function with the same perfection whether she happened to be there or not. It was orderly, it was comfortable; it was luxurious; and men had accomplished it and were maintaining it all by themselves. And the five males appeared to have an understanding among themselves, as if they belonged to a secret monastic or masonic order. She was outside the understanding. She was a woman, ornamental no doubt, but unnecessary. Well, she resented this in her great happiness. And she petted Fifi, who was curled within her arm, and Fifi resented it also.

So that the next afternoon Alice had a headache. It was a genuine headache, of which the symptoms were genuine pain in the forehead and a general sense of impending calamity. Considering a headache to be the proper thing at this conjuncture, she had desired to have a headache, and she had a headache; for she was a capable and thoroughly efficient woman. Hence, with Fifi, she went and lay down in her bunk in the big cabin, and parted from Jim at the door thereof, telling him that she did not want him to tuck her up. She noticed that the general sense of impending calamity had already affected Jim's gaze, and she resented that. What justification had Jim to assume that all was not for the best on board of

an ideal yacht, seeing that her behaviour towards him had been pluperfect? He had no justification. Therefore he was in the wrong.

In her happiness she gave herself up to unhappiness. And yet her second marriage—it must be deemed her second marriage to Jim, the first having been an experiment, a prelude, an overture to the authentic union—her second marriage was unquestionably a success. She was mad about him. He was mad about her. She admired his character. He admired hers. She knew that he was the man for her and she the woman for him. Nothing could have been more propitious, more delicious, more exciting, more solidly sure. But she gave herself up to unhappiness because she felt herself unnecessary to the smooth working of the material organism in which she lived, and also because she felt herself to be outside the monastic or masonic order of five mutually comprehending males. And here was the self-same woman who had commanded hundreds of fellow-creatures in France, saying to them Go and they went and Come and they came; and who had positively frightened a British political body, and startled big-wigs in New York, by the calm, unsentimental power of her horse-sense. Most of the persons with whom she had come into contact would have been ready to assert that where a woman's heart usually is she carried a bundle of pure sagacity, and none would have admitted that she could be subject to fancies. If those people whose respect she had extorted could have seen the charming little creature as she lay all wires and springs and nerves in the bunk! And if they could have looked inside her head! Marriage is a most mysterious developer. The worst of it was that Fifi encouraged Alice in her morbidity. Fifi understood; she did not argue; she did not even yap; but the glance of her eyes was a plain statement of the thesis: "You are always right, and when the created universe is out of tune with you the created universe needs altering."

Then Alice became aware of a vibration, which increased till it affected the entire ship—the bunk, the water-glass, the skylight, the pillow, the mattress, her toes, her temples. The propeller was propelling! Never before had the propeller been set to work while Alice was lying in her bunk. Why was the propeller now propelling? The weather was magnificent; the sun slanted into the cabin; the water was calm. Did not everybody know that she had a headache and was trying to rest? It was an outrage that the propeller should be set to work in such circumstances. Soon the propeller was doing more than revolve behind the stern-post of the yacht; it was revolving right inside her poor head. She could not and would not stand it. She rang the bell. A red head appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, come in," she said pettishly.

But the red head, timid in spite of campaigns, would not come in.

"Yes'm?"

"Oh! Please ask Mr. Thorpe to have that propeller stopped."

Peter merely laughed—a sort of contemptuously amused grin—and shut the door.

The propeller was not stopped. In five minutes, which seemed rather like a century, there was nothing else on earth for Alice save the propeller. It became the sole mundane phenomenon. It was revolving not only in her head, but in every part of her lithe and attractive body. It monopolized her attention, her intelligence, and her emotions. It had been going on from everlasting, and it would go on to everlasting. As a method of torture it rivalled and surpassed the most devilish inventions of the Holy Office at Toledo. It was the very thing to manufacture lunatics. Why had not Jim had the propeller stopped? He owned the yacht. If you could not silence your own propeller, what point was there in owning a yacht? Enormous and inexplicable events were passing on deck—bumps, thuds, sudden rushes of feet, shouts, bangs, rattlings, thunderings, clackings. But none of the five members of the monastic or masonic order showed the least interest in Alice and her aching head. Ah! The door of the cabin opened.

"Better?" asked Jim, standing by the side of her bunk. He was perspiring.

"No," she said.

"Tea-time. Come and have tea on deck. Do you good."

"No," she said.

"Shall I bring it you here?"

"No," she said.

At that moment the propeller stopped.

"At last!" breathed Alice sardonically and even bitterly. "If you've got a headache it's the most horrible torment one can imagine. I rang for Peter hours ago and asked him to tell you to stop it."

"I'm so sorry, my dove. But you see the propeller couldn't be stopped. We were going up the Blackwater against the ebb. And it's some ebb, believe me. Wind fell to nothing. If we'd stopped the propeller we should certainly have drifted on to a mud-bank—Blackwater's full of 'em—and stuck there till next tide. We might have heeled over and filled as the tide fell. Ticklish thing, a boat drawing eight feet odd on a falling tide in a river like the Blackwater."

"Well, I think someone might have told me. I'm quite capable of understanding, though perhaps you mayn't think it."

Jim's eyes glittered.

"My child. I never thought for a moment——"

"Just so! Just so! And let me tell you your Peter's extremely rude. When I asked him, do you know what he did? He just laughed—his horrid sarcastic grin. And I'll thank you to speak to him about his manners to me."

Jim did a surprising thing. He laughed, heartily.

"Well, of course it *would* strike Peter as comic, asking for the propeller to be stopped in a dead calm against an ebb-tide in this old Blackwater. He laughed when he came on deck and told me. It appealed to his sense of humour."

"And I suppose you all laughed!" said Alice sharply, in a loud tone. "You would!" She raised herself too violently on one elbow, and her delightful, misguided head struck the ceiling above the bunk.

"Awfully sorry, darling!" said Jim, very quietly. But whether he was sorry about Peter's enormity, or sorry merely about the detail of the head-bumping, Alice could not decide. At any rate, the bumping of her head rendered her furious and—quaintly enough—quite cured the headache.

"Peter is a fool!" she almost shouted.

"Hush!" Jim murmured grimly and dangerously.

And at the same time the skipper's voice was heard on deck:

"Let out a couple o' fathoms more chain, Charlie."

Alice's brain grasped the great truth that if she could hear the skipper, the skipper and crew could hear her, and the still greater truth that voice-raising in anger was impossible on that yacht without open scandal. She would have given about ten pounds for the privilege of one unrestrained scream.

Jim whispered uncompromisingly:

"Pete certainly isn't a fool. Also, he's a particular friend of mine."

An awful silence descended upon the yacht, and in the silence the yacht's clock, placed over the saloon stairs, could be heard ticking with uncanny loudness. In the late afternoon and early evening Alice ranged and raged about the vessel, chewing the cud of the discovery that there was no real privacy aboard. There was privacy from eyes, and plenty of it; but there was absolutely no privacy from ears if you raised your tone beyond a certain degree. And Alice wanted to raise her tone beyond a certain degree. She wanted to do that more than she wanted to do anything else in the world. She examined the dispositions of the yacht again and again, with no satisfactory result. It was sixty feet from end to end of its wonderful deck, and it was full of secret compartments, but it held no compartment in which a grand quarrel, row, and upset could be comfortably conducted according to the rules of such encounters. As a honeymoon resort the yacht was merely absurd. None but an idiot could have had the preposterous notion of honeymooning on a fifty-ton yacht.

Alice did not reflect upon the dangerous folly and the bad form and the gross inefficiency of making a scene on the third day of your second honeymoon. She did not even reflect that man is held to be a reasoning animal. She reflected simply and exclusively upon her predicament, which was surely the most singular predicament that a bride had ever found herself in. But she did not disclose her thoughts. No, to external view she was a charming, capable, sensible little

yachtswoman in an agreeable blue jumper and blue skirt, wandering to and fro in and on the yacht, interesting herself in its construction and its life, and behaving to all the men with the delicatest feminine sweetness. To Jim she was acquiescence embodied; the irritation shown in the bunk had completely vanished. Night fell, and a red eye shone forth from the land. She learned that it indicated a jetty on an island which, in mid-Blackwater, was devoted to the reclamation of habitual drunkards. She was suddenly inspired.

"Let's row ashore, shall we?" she suggested persuasively.

"But the island's private, you know," said Jim.

Here, referring to the affair of the propeller, she might have revolted, and said angrily:

"Of course you're against anything I want."

Many women in her place would have said just that. But Alice was determined to be efficient, and so she said with increased persuasiveness:

"Still, it would be a bit of a lark, wouldn't it?"

Jim gave the order to lower the launch, and they were taken ashore, and the launch instructed to return in an hour. Half an hour would have sufficed for Alice's purposes; but the captain and two of the crew were also in the launch and had to go down river to fill six beakers with fresh water from a well in the vicinity: which job could scarcely be accomplished in less than an hour.

IV

"Now," said Jim, "shall we take a stroll and look for reformed drunkards?"

"I think we'll just stay where we are," Alice answered. "I must have an understanding with you." She spoke firmly but quietly. The desire to make a noise seemed to have left her, now that she was free to make a noise without making a scandal. Both inside and out she was the self-possessed woman again, the model of efficiency and sagacity, not merely in appearance, but to her own secret judgment.

"Certainly," said Jim with calmness. "Let's understand."

She was nettled because she thought she detected irony in his powerful, almost brutal, masculine voice.

"I've already told you that I think Peter ought to apologize to me. He hasn't apologized to me. Quite the contrary."

"Ah!" Jim answered. "I knew that was on your mind. You're an A1 actress, but I'm an A1 dramatic critic." And he proceeded: "And what's more, I've already told you that Pete's a friend of mine, and I don't like to hear my wife call my friends fools."

She then burst out into one of the most voluptuous of human passions—over-righteous indignation. She didn't want any more to be self-possessed, efficient, sagacious; nor to be an exemplary wife, nor to teach a barbaric husband by the force of Christian example, nor to do any of the things that serious young wives very properly want to do. She just wanted to let herself go; and she did. The mysterious and terrible potion had been brewing for several hours; it now boiled over, surging magnificently upwards as a geyser shoots out of the ground. She was at last free of the captivity of the yacht. There was none to overhear and no eye to see except the red eye on the jetty.

"That's just like you," she cried. "That's just like you. You're ready to risk the whole of our married life in order to indulge your brutality. You once said you were a brute, and so you are. We've scarcely been three days together and yet you're spoiling for a row. You think you can browbeat me, you and your crew. You can't. You've all done nothing but laugh at me since I went on board. Look how you all stood round and smiled condescendingly when I steered. And heaven knows I only took the helm because you asked me to. You're all as thick as thieves together, and I'm nobody. I'm only a woman, a doll to be petted and laughed at. Do you imagine I wanted to steer your precious yacht? Indeed no! Give me an Atlantic liner, that's what I say. Your crew do what they like with you, and you're such a simpleton you can't see it. They flatter you, and you're so conceited you swallow it all. And shouldn't I just like to see the food bills for your precious yacht. Why, there's been as much meat cooked for us two in these three days as would keep a family for a

fortnight. You pay your crew wages that include their food, and then instead of buying their own food they live on ours. It's as plain as a pikestaff."

In a short pause that followed Jim said:

"Don't let me interrupt you. Tell me when you've quite done, and then I'll make a short speech. But if you think I'm going to lose my temper, old woman, you're mistook."

Alice resumed.

"I said Peter was a fool. So he is. But he's also a lout. And what's worse, he's a thief. He steals your food."

Then Jim, taken unawares, lost his temper. The battle was joined. A big steam tug passed slowly up the river, a noisy but a noble phenomenon in the night. They did not notice it. They noticed nothing except their own dim forms, pale faces and glinting eyes; heard nothing but their own voices and the crunching of their restless feet on the caked mud of the foreshore. The old earth was whirling round with incredible velocity amid uncounted millions of starry bodies of which it was nearly the very least. The mystery of life was unfathomed. The structure of society was shaken and cracked. Tens of thousands of children were starving in Europe. Frightful problems presented themselves on every side for solution. The future of the world was dark with fantastic menaces. And the great beauty and wistfulness of nature were unimpaired by all these horrors. But Alice and Jim ignored everything save the gratification of their base and petty instincts. They were indeed a shocking couple. The moon rose—the solemn lovely moon that was drawing incalculable volumes of water out of the ocean into the estuary of the Blackwater—and Alice snapped:

"What I say I stick to. And I tell you another thing—all red-headed men are the same."

A strange glow appeared on the yacht. They did not see it. Peter hailed faintly from the yacht. They did not hear him. They were indulging themselves after restraint. They had gone back to the neolithic age after too much civilization. And the whole fracas was due to the fact that, on a small yacht, everybody can hear everything. The ignoble altercation was suddenly cut short by the grating of a boat's keel on the muddy shingle—Peter in the dinghy.

"Yacht's afire, sir!" Peter called grimly.

So it was. They could see flames coiling like snakes about the region of the saloon hatch.

Jim came back to civilization in an instant.

"Well, why haven't you put it out, you fool, instead of coming here to tell me? Do you want the bally ship to be burnt to the water's edge?"

"Can't find the extinguisher, sir. It's supposed to hang in the small cabin, but it isn't on its hook. And we've run out of water on account of missis's baths. . . . Not as canvas buckets would be much good."

"My dog!" cried Alice. "She'll be roasted alive."

"I've brought her ashore," said Peter, pitching the animal out of the dinghy.

"Ah!"

Jim rushed to the boat's nose, shoved her back into the water, and sprang aboard.

"Pull like the devil."

"Stop!" shouted Alice. "I know where the extinguisher is." She plunged, Fifi in her arms, into the dark water, and was dragged into the dinghy.

Not only had she transgressed the rules of the yacht by taking fresh-water baths, but she had moved the Pyrene extinguisher from its hook into a locker in order to get another hook for her dresses. The small cabin had been allotted to her for a tiring-room, and her attire was all over it. Wonderful it was how one small valise could carry all she wore. She had taken things from the valise and more and more things, in the manner of a conjurer taking drapers' shops, flower shops, and zoological gardens out of one small hat.

Once aboard the vessel, she plunged devotedly through smoke into the bowels thereof and ascended again with the extinguisher. In three minutes the fire was out. It appeared that someone with a British sense of humour had thrown a piece of burning rope from the tug. The rope had dropped on to the saloon hatch. The roof of the said hatch was severely damaged and the coat of the mainsail a little charred; but that was the limit of the catastrophe.

V

The yacht was speeding up the Blackwater in the moonlight towards Maldon, James Thorpe, with all the dark fire of his nature, having determined at once to hunt the flame-scattering tug and get the law of it. He was in possession of what he considered to be sound circumstantial evidence of the tug's guilt. James himself had taken the wheel. Alice reclined at his feet. Fifi reclined at Alice's feet. The captain and crew were forward. Alice was perfectly happy. She had never really been unhappy—and especially had she not been unhappy in her nervous outpouring of riotous temper. But now she was in a kind of bliss—a bliss which was heightened by certain pin-pricks. These pin-pricks came from the facts, one, that she had upset the marvellous functioning of the ship by misplacing the fire-extinguisher; two, that she had upset the marvellous economy of the ship by using fresh water instead of salt water for her baths; and three, that James, in his enormous magnanimity, had refrained from twitting her about these lapses.

She reflected that, owing to pressure of patriotic and other business, she had not lost her temper for several years, and probably would not lose it again for several years, and at any rate to have lost it and safely found it so early in marriage, and with such an agreeable result, was not a bad thing, for it had amounted to a desirable and successful experiment. Her powerful common sense told her that there was a process in marriage known as "settling down," that this process had to be gone through by all couples, and that she and Jim were getting through it quickly and brightly. She knew that she need not apologize to Jim, and indeed that he would hate her for apologizing to him. She apologized by a touch, a glance, a tone, and by sitting at his feet.

Peter came aft to the little deck-larder that was forward of the saloon skylight.

"Pete."

"Sir?"

"Don't buy any more meat to-morrow until you've spoken to the mistress about it."

"No, sir."

Peter departed.

Jim lowered his face and murmured:

"You know you've got to admit that old Pete isn't a fool."

Alice had already fully absorbed the truth that Peter was not a fool. A man who, placed as Peter was placed, had had the presence of mind to think of the dog and bring the dog to safety ashore—such a man could not possibly be a fool. As for being the other thing that she had called him, of course that was absurd, and she had not meant it. No! She fully admitted, in the privacy of her mind, that she had been hopelessly wrong to call Peter a fool. But what she murmured to Jim in reply was:

"Why! You called him a fool yourself!"

Jim pinched her arm cruelly, but she dared not cry out lest she should be overheard. Therefore she suffered in silence and enjoyed the suffering.

VIII

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

I

The events recounted in the following recital had two sides, the outside and the inside, which must be displayed separately.

The outside was seen by Mr. Telfer. Mr. Telfer had nothing whatever to do with the affair, save as a spectator of the outside of it. Many other persons, like Mr. Telfer, saw the outside without seeing the least bit of the inside; and from among them I have chosen Mr. Telfer by sheer chance.

Mr. Telfer was a quiet, simple, regular man, and a great authority on the times and the speeds of the trains to Surbiton, which trains to and fro he would catch daily with practised skill, by thirty seconds or so. Since he lived at Surbiton he seldom went to the theatre in London, because he did not care for being up late of a night. Nightly he played patience, occasionally cheating himself, and drank two whiskeys-and-sodas during the exciting progress of the game. But one day a friend of his in the city, an official of a Trust Company whose tentacles wound themselves about nearly everything in London, said to him at lunch:

"Look here, Telfer, my lad. It's the first night of 'Twelfth Night' at the Eden Theatre to-night. I've got a stall and now I can't use it. Do you care to go?"

Mr. Telfer cared.

He took an unusual train to Surbiton, dressed, etc., glanced at his Shakespeare, and came back to town for the performance. He had frequently read in the descriptive press gorgeous accounts of the social and artistic glories of theatrical first nights, but he had never attended a first night. Seldom indeed had he ever sat in the stalls. (When he went the pace, he treated himself and a companion to the dress-circle—and no more.) Hence he was excited and very pleasurably filled with fine anticipations.

As his taxi drove up to the portals of the Eden (he was doing the thing in style as his ticket had cost him naught), he saw the façade of the theatre inflamed with the following electrical sign:

"Aida Jenkinson in 'Twelfth Night.'"

He had never heard of Aida Jenkinson till that day.

With others of the mighty and the exalted he passed between two rows of gapers into the theatre. And he saw everywhere in the entrance-hall boards inscribed thus: "MR. ASPREY CHOWN [large] presents *MISS AIDA JENKINSON* [enormous] in 'Twelfth Night' [moderate] by William Shakespeare [very small]," together with the portrait of a rather handsome and dashing dame. Elsewhere it was announced that Aida Jenkinson would sustain the rôle of Viola, the innocent girl who for adventure's sake disguised herself as a young man.

The auditorium was soon full. Everybody in the stalls seemed to know everybody in the stalls—except Mr. Telfer, who was left lonely and so had opportunity to wonder at large who was who. The band played. The lights went down, and the curtain went up on the magnificence of Orsino's palace, and after a short scene a cloth descended to represent the sea-coast, and three sailors and Viola herself entered, to a terrific roar of welcome from enthusiasts in the gallery. Mr. Telfer could not understand how they recognized Miss Jenkinson so quickly, for to his eyes she bore scarcely any resemblance to her portraits in the foyer. Miss Jenkinson stepped right out of her part and effulgently acknowledged the roar. At this stage she was still dressed as a woman, in an enveloping cloak and a hood over her head. Perhaps the cloak gave a false amplitude to her figure, but the cloak could not account for Viola's crimson cheeks and rich rubious lips, so odd in a young woman who had just escaped from a shipwreck.

"What country, friends, is this?" she began in a powerful contralto voice, the voice of a mature experience accustomed to command. Ill-mannered individuals in the stalls smiled at one another. She announced imperatively to the sailors that she would be a man and serve Duke Orsino, and that the sailors must help her, and the sailors agreed quickly, without

argument, and she made her exit, and the cloth rose on Olivia's house, wherein ageless characters, Sir Toby Belch, Andrew Aguecheek and Maria, indulged in dazzling farce to shouts of applauding laughter.

The next scene was Orsino's palace once more. It was empty. It remained empty. Murmurs began in the stalls, in all parts of the theatre; they increased to a hum of conversation. Hours seemed to pass, but probably not more than a minute passed.

Then a hidden voice said "Lower! Lower!" and the curtain fell, and a gentleman, beautifully clad in evening dress, stepped in front of it and said:

"Kind friends. I deeply regret to inform you that Miss Aida Jenkinson has had a sudden indisposition and cannot possibly act to-night. She begs me to express to you her profound sorrow, together with her apologies. All monies paid for seats will be returned at the box-office." The speaker bowed, vanished. The band played "God Save the King."

An absolutely unique sensation in London theatrical life! The audience could not believe its eyes and ears. Mr. Telfer, among others, was disappointed, and yet at the same time he was pleased and made proud by the thought that *he* had assisted at this absolutely unique sensation. He was sorry that, as his stall had been "complimentary," he could not demand twelve shillings for it at the box-office. The electrical sign was still brightly blazing on the façade when Mr. Telfer, with the rest of the amazed, staggered, and chattering audience, got into the street. It was barely half-past eight. The automobiles had been dismissed till 11 o'clock, and there were no taxis except such as came up with late arrivals. The mighty and the exalted had to get home as best they could.

The next morning Mr. Telfer examined his newspaper with extraordinary interest, expecting to see columns about the Eden Theatre matter. But he found only a miserable two inches, saying baldly that Miss Aida Jenkinson had suffered a serious indisposition at a critical moment, and that it was understood that the show would be postponed. (The show, however, was not postponed—it was totally suppressed.) Mr. Telfer had a very agreeable day at the office. He was, of course, the only man in the office who had witnessed the absolutely unique sensation.

Such was the outside of the event.

II

Now for the inside.

Mr. Asprey Chown, justly reputed to be the greatest showman in England, had his ups and downs, his years when he bought precious stones (of which he was a collector) for choice, and his years when he sold them from necessity; and he had been rather glad of the opportunity to "present" Aida Jenkinson as Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. (Not that he, in fact, did present her. She very much presented herself.) He had experienced two devastating failures at the Eden Theatre, and he could put his hand on no spectacle to follow them with a prospect of success. Moreover the Eden was eating its head off more than forty horses in forty stables. Mr. Asprey Chown was paying £315 a week rent for the Eden on a longish lease, and its market value for short tenancies was anything between £400 and £450 a week. Aida Jenkinson contracted to pay him £475 a week for three months certain, at the same time leaving him nominally at the head of the establishment. Further, she accepted the whole of the financial risks of the enterprise and she gave him ample security for her prospective liabilities. She had the reputation of being close-fisted, but in the transaction with the imperial Asprey Chown she certainly showed no sign of this quality. True, the unique Chown had qualms about the effect of the affair on his artistic prestige; but, being a very clever and ingenious person, he adopted the wise course of treating it to his acquaintances and business connexions as something in the nature of a great and original lark—as something which nobody but he would ever have dreamed of doing. And after all Aida Jenkinson was no ordinary woman, and assuredly no ordinary actress.

When some varieties of actress get into the newspapers apropos of activities other than their professional activities, it generally appears that they are the offspring of tobacconists. Aida, however, was the daughter of a strictly Christian master-chimney-sweep in Poplar. From the first there could have been no misapprehension as to her vocation. She was very obviously born for the stage. At sixteen, already fully developed, she topped an amateur dramatic society in Shoreditch. Some people were misguided enough to jeer at her; they even attended performances of the Society for the sole purpose of laughing. But at eighteen she had squeezed herself into a touring company devoted to full-throated melodrama. At nineteen she was playing leads in such pieces as *The Wronged Wife*, *Human Hearts*, *The Long Lane*,

What Men Pay For, and *The Lone Girl*. Her salary rose and rose. She saved. She made an unhappy marriage, lost both her husband and her money, and saved again, lone. She passed a year in America.

At twenty-three she had her own company, to which she paid almost nothing a week—and an extraordinary company it was. Aida did not demand talent, nor youth, nor beauty. She was ready to supply, unaided, all the talent, all the youth, all the beauty. What she wanted and demanded was the spot-light and the centre of the stage. There were still misguided people who laughed at her, who asserted that she was dreadful to the point of side-splittingness, and who regarded her posters, in which innocence was always depicted in situations of extreme danger or dazzling triumph, as the final word in chromographic vulgarity. But in the first place Aida never noticed or heard of these people. And in the second place, even if she had learnt of their existence, she would not have cared. Aida might be just what you pleased, but she delighted the public. Managers of provincial theatres worshipped her as an idol. When she got to stage-doors an hour before the performance she always saw queues of the public waiting patiently but ardently for the privilege of paying money to see her. In auditoriums she seldom saw an empty seat. She never came on to the stage, and never went off it, without exciting her audience to roars of applause.

Of course, her audiences did not consist exclusively of university professors and leaders of society. Her audiences might be fairly described as "popular." But they had the three greatest qualities that an audience can have, they paid, they applauded deafeningly, they came again. Aida's share of the week's takings in "No. 1" towns frequently amounted to a thousand pounds, and since her company and her entire expenses cost her far, far less than four hundred pounds a week, it will be seen that she contrived to live and keep her head above water.

Thus she went round and round the country, year in year out, growing richer and richer, eternally gorged, but never sated, with adulation and success, and more and more deeply convinced of the unquestionable truth that there was only one Aida Jenkinson.

But we are rarely what we ought to be. Aida ought to have been content, and she was not. A worm had insinuated itself into the rose of her happiness and was gnawing at its heart. The worm was not the desire for love. No! She had had one love affair and wanted no more. And the worm was not another phrase for the finger of time. For Aida, Aida was changeless. Nobody ever happened to mention to her that twenty years are twenty years, and as for twenty-five years being twenty-five years—well, I should hope not. On the contrary, all her employees, all those with whom she did business, conspired to prove to her that twenty-five years were less than one day in their sight; in other words, that she was not a day older, not a day less slim, not a day more mature than in Victoria's reign. She believed the tale. And so mighty is the power of auto-suggestion supported by hetero-suggestion, that it conquered even her mirror.

The worm indeed was not a worm in the rose of her happiness. Better to say that it was an adder which she nourished in her rich bosom. The adder of ambition! The ambition to play and to triumph in the West End of London. She had never played in London. Somehow she had boggled at London. She had announced that she despised London. The statement was inexact. She felt night and day that her life could not be complete without London. Once in America, where she courageously took what she could get, she had played Maria in *Twelfth Night* in a one-night-stand "legitimate" troupe. And thenceforward she had longed to play Viola. Thenceforward she had "seen herself" as Viola. And now she had the wondrous, intoxicating notion of playing Viola in London. She met Mr. Asprey Chown in a hotel in Birmingham. Mr. Asprey Chown, to her as to all successful ladies, was very *gallant*, as they pronounce it in the Midlands and the North. The contract for a season at the Eden Theatre ensued.

And Mr. Asprey Chown very soon began to regret the contract. That is to say, he did not regret the financial side of it, but he regretted the other side, the side which would affect, perhaps disastrously, his prestige with the West Enders who think that they know what is what and who is who. Mr. Asprey Chown's own rather artistic show was quickly dying in the last performances in the evenings, and in the daytime Aida was rehearsing the Jenkinsonian version of *Twelfth Night*. Mr. Asprey Chown having had tidings of the nature of the rehearsals, remained inside the manager's room which he had specially excepted from the tenancy to Aida.

The invisible man had a series of shocks. In the first place there was the cast. There was, for example, the part of Olivia, youthful, lovely, and ardent princess, the second most important female rôle in the play, the enchanting girl who had inspired Duke Orsino with a passion that amounted to madness. Aida gave the part to Emily Fantour. Emily was indeed a Shakespearean actress. Her name was known to experienced playgoers and had been printed on many bills. But she was also a grandmother. Mr. Asprey Chown remembered her from his boyhood, and it might be said, of her prime, that there were giantesses in her day. Aida offered her eight pounds a week, and she eagerly closed. The ladies of Olivia's court

all had similar physical qualities. They dwarfed Aida, which in itself was a feat. They rendered Aida by comparison girlish—another feat. The men whom Aida selected were younger and slimmer, save Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, who might well have been the monument on which Patience sat.

The next shock was Aida's choice of a producer. Mr. Cyril Blenkhorn, an honourable name in the annals of the Shakespearean stage, had played with Barry Sullivan, Osmond Tearle, and Henry Irving. Aida seemed to have raised him from the dead, and he was a funnier caricature of a tragedian than any caricature of a tragedian that Phil May ever drew.

The third shock was the way in which Aida treated Shakespeare and her producer. Aida was a business woman who knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted everything. She wanted the centre of the stage and the front of the stage, and she wanted them all the time. She wanted the audience to see Aida's face and to see the face of nobody else. She wanted to get all the tears and all the laughs. She wanted all the effective lines. She cut all the other parts with mighty shears. In the duel scene with Toby Belch and his fellow-clowns she reduced the clowns to naught and with difficulty prevented herself from killing Andrew Aguecheek dead at the first thrust. Instead of being page to the Duke Orsino she put on an air signifying that the Duke was page to her. It was all very wonderful. Blenkhorn even came along one day with a cutting from an old criticism by the great Victorian dramatic critic Clement Scott, which said that *Twelfth Night* ought to be "drenched and drowned" in Viola. Aida gave Blenkhorn a dinner for that discovery, and subsequently quoted it at every turn. Not that she needed any moral aid. She had learnt ruthlessness at rehearsals in America, and besides had a natural instinct to be tyrannic. She was capable of saying anything, and saying it continuously. The company obtained new aspects of the glorious resources of the English language. Also the company soon perceived the value of silence, acquiescence and submission.

The next shock was the manner in which Aida delivered Shakespeare's verse, and in which Blenkhorn caused the other players to deliver it. As it issued from Aida's rubious lips no one could imagine for a moment that it was blank. She gave it forth like thunder, like lightning, like shells from a twelve-inch gun, like thick clouds of vapour, like midnight motor-buses thundering through deserted thoroughfares. Curiously she never addressed any of it to the other characters in the play; it was all directed straight into the auditorium where the packed audiences were to be. She did not make vicarious love to Olivia: she made it to the audiences. She did not swear allegiance to the Duke, she swore it to the audience. But she did quarrel with Antonio—and did not quarrel with the audiences!

Every syllable was heard, every consonant, every vowel. It was all more than wonderful.

"Why don't you come down to one of my rehearsals, Asprey dear?" she asked Mr. Chown. (She called everybody by his or her Christian name.)

"I should love to," answered Mr. Chown, "but I'm so devilish busy. I will when I've time. I'm dying to see your methods."

The next and possibly the master-shock occurred when, the rehearsals having advanced somewhat, Aida, ever workwomanlike, appeared one morning in a costume which gave her freedom for action as the Duke's page.

The assistant stage-manager went up to Mr. Asprey Chown's room:

"She's in knickers!"

Mr. Asprey Chown stole across into the flies and surreptitiously gazed down.

"My God!" he murmured under his breath. "My God!"

And Aida went on, absorbed in her splendid part, absorbed in the fulfilment of her ambition, dreaming of grand triumphs, convinced that for her time did not exist, and now and then secretly reproaching herself for having chosen two mature players as a foil when really there had been no need to do so.

One day her beautiful dreams were ever so slightly disturbed by a trifling incident. She was making love, on behalf of the Duke, to the grandmotherly Olivia in her rapt, ecstatic, audible manner, and saying what she would do if she herself, the page, were in love with Olivia.

"Build me a willow cabin at your gate," she crooned, lost in Shakespearean emotion.

"Some cabin!" came a low voice from the wings.

Or seemed to come, for surely it could not have been a real voice; surely it was a delusion of Aida's fancy! She walked majestically to the side, and two members of the company simultaneously choked. Aida saw no one but Mr. Cleeby, the chief electrician, kneeling, engaged in some little job of re-wiring. He hummed quietly to himself. Aida hesitated.

"Please don't hum," she said, with majesty.

Mr. Cleeby, a stoutish, middle-aged man in creased clothes, turned as if startled and gazed at her blandly.

"Right you are, miss," he replied.

III

The dress-rehearsal arrived. Mr. Cyril Blenkhorn, with flowing white hair, and a scarf in the Barry Sullivan manner thrown picturesquely over one shoulder, sat solitary in the stalls. Twenty or thirty people—paragraph-writers, a critic or so, photographers, friends of the players—were scattered in the dress-circle, and they were joined from time to time by such of the players as were temporarily not occupied on the stage. Mr. Asprey Chown had expressed his deep regret to Miss Aida Jenkinson that he could not be present. Nevertheless he was secretly present, hidden neatly behind a curtain in an upper box. He was drawn to the dress-rehearsal by a terrible and a sinister fascination. He felt that he must know the worst. He soon knew it. Aida strutting in stockings and gaiters and knee-breeches as a page specifically described by Shakespeare as something older than a boy and younger than a man, made an unprecedented, a unique spectacle, which was rendered worse by her tremendous and impassioned earnestness. The great scene between the fading provincial star as a youth and the grandmotherly Emily Fantour as a tender and young princess became pathetic, farcical, tragic.

At any rate Aida dominated the stage, and she dominated it in the full glare of attendant beams of light, which left nothing of her features or her form to Mr. Chown's imagination. Her powerful voice threw out the lines like a string of sausages from a sausage machine. And clearly she was very content with herself; clearly she foresaw triumph.

The worst was so much worse than anything previously conceived by Mr. Chown that he honestly wished he had never seen a theatre in his life—indeed, he had a passing fancy for the grave beneath the sod. What irked him to the point of exasperation was those four words on the bills, "Mr. Asprey Chown presents." They frightened him more even than Aida's immense coloured posters in the style of cinema publicity. And he was helpless, he could not erase the words, for Aida under the contract had full control of all advertising.

Aida made her entrances and her exits, and not a sound was heard from the darkness of the auditorium. But after the first clowning scene, during which Aida was "off," came a little timid applause, such as is not unknown at dress-rehearsals.

At the end of the act Mr. Chown decided to depart, lest some calamity might happen to him; and on his way down he met Sebastian, Viola's double, and told him that his green coat was too full and ought to be taken in. And while passing the prompter's corner he heard Aida indicating extensive cuts in the clowning scenes.

"Don't you hear me, stupid? Cut *all* that, I tell you, and get hold of the parts and put the cuts in before anyone leaves to-night. Let them rehearse it to-morrow morning."

Mr. Chown stepped on tip-toe dolorously into the street. He could stand no more. He knew nothing of the photograph-call after the rehearsal, and was not aware that the photographers were commanded to portray Aida alone in eleven poses, and the whole company, with Aida most prominently in the midst, in only one pose. He was not aware that finally Aida said to Mr. Cleeby:

"Cleeby, we're going to have another lighting rehearsal now."

And that she kept the entire staff up till five o'clock the next morning.

Nor was he aware that throughout the night Mr. Cleeby, one of the greatest exemplars of self-control in the history of the British stage, addressed no remark to Aida beyond "Yes, miss," "No, miss," "It's your stage, miss," "It's all one to me, miss," "I'm here to do as I'm told, miss." Nor was he aware that at the close of the proceedings Mr. Cleeby went to a public-house off Fleet Street, specially licensed to keep open for the entertainment of newspaper hands, and informed the bar that Aida was a rare fine bit o' stuff, though long in the tooth, and that she could what *he* called act, but that if she

tried to come it over him one single inch the next night he would positively do her in, let her be as athletic and as tyrannical as she might. Four hours after this solemn announcement of Mr. Cleeby's intentions, Mr. Asprey Chown, with a bursting heart, fled to Paris. He was not aware, either, that heaven was watching over him and that he himself had quite unintentionally set in motion the strange sequence of tiny events which heaven would use for his salvation.

On "the night," in her first scene, in which she appeared as the girl Viola, Miss Jenkinson was received with shouting applause, chiefly from the gallery, but extending also somewhat through the circles down to the stalls. Her exit from that scene, however, was accompanied by silence in the auditorium.

Beneath her large, loose cloak she wore all her male attire except the tight-fitting green coat. There was ample time to throw off the cloak and don the coat before the beginning of her next scene, and she filled most of the interval by a number of sternly whispered commands and recommendations to various individuals in the complicated human machine by which a play gets itself presented. She had never done giving orders. Her dresser waited in the wings with the coat. Aida flung away the cloak and offered her tremendous shoulders for the coat, which the dresser put on. Aida pulled it together at the front, and failed to make the sides meet. The intermediate scene was ending. She could not understand what had happened to the coat—or in the alternative what had happened to herself. In her impatience she simply forced the garment with one tug to meet in front. A horrid tearing sound was heard. She had ripped the back seam nearly from top to bottom. The garment now met in front but not behind.

The situation was appalling, as much in itself as in the mighty speechless fury of the star. Everybody in her vicinity seemed to be spellbound with fear, mesmerized, petrified! Seconds were hours. . . .

Then it was that Mr. Telfer had seen the curtain descend.

With the thick curtain between herself and the audience, Aida found her tongue. She raged up and down amid the riven fragments of her ambition to entrance the West End as Viola. She knew that she could not start again the next night, or the next week, and that the coat could not possibly be repaired for any continuation of the performance the same night. Indeed, she tore the coat to pieces in the presence of her trembling company and staff. She had worked in vain; she had bullied in vain; she had studied in vain. In these moments she really was a mere girl in her broken and volcanic heart.

Mrs. Pumper, the wardrobe mistress, approached her, though Aida had not sent for her. Mrs. Pumper was fascinated by horror into attendance at her own execution.

At the sight of her Aida ceased to rage, and said with fearful contralto calm:

"That coat fitted like a glove last night."

She waited.

Mrs. Pumper gazed affrightened at the impressive figure in tight blue knee-breeches, frilled white shirt, and an auburn wig. Mrs. Pumper spoke in spite of herself.

"I must have taken your coat instead of Sebastian's, miss. I was told to take it in an inch. And I must have fastened that tab as you asked me on to his coat instead of on to yours. That's what it is. They're exactly alike and I got 'em mixed up. I'm very sorry, but there's no seeing anything up in my room. Both lamps have give out, and I asked Mr. Cleeby to see to it and he didn't, and I've had to buy candles with my own money to get anything done at all."

"You asked Cleeby?"

"Yes, miss, I did! And more than once, too!"

"Where's Cleeby?"

"I'm here, miss," said Cleeby, appearing from somewhere.

Aida loomed over the stocky, soiled, creased, bearded figure. Cleeby maintained all his tranquillity. Nobody moved.

"Why didn't you see to the lights in Mrs. Pumper's room?"

"Because yer gave me no chance to, miss. Yer kep' me awandering around here till five o'clock this morning, and I want

some sleep, same as other people. I ain't a mechanical toy as yer wind up."

Aida's volcano erupted suddenly in smoke and flame and covered the stage with a sizzling lava of figurative, metaphorical and symbolical language. Most of it was aimed at Mr. Cleeby, but the entire population of the stage had shares of it. The company and the staff had thought that they knew the full range of Aida's self-expression. But now they admitted themselves to be mistaken. The rich, picturesque, terrible ebullience continued from the splendid mouth which a few moments earlier had been sweet Viola's. At length it ceased. Aida took breath for a further display.

"Listen here, miss," said Mr. Cleeby. "If yer say one word more—one word—I'll wring yer fat neck for ye."

Several people laughed, but Aida Jenkinson was appalled more completely than anybody else had been appalled in Mr. Asprey Chown's theatre that night. It was a knock-out blow. She shrieked, sank down in a heap, and sobbed. Mr. Cleeby lit his pipe.

The heap was a forlorn old woman.

Surreptitious telephones were soon at work. Other theatres had the news. Newspaper offices had the news—but they stuck, following the great British tradition of propriety, to the theory of an illness. Dramatic critics went to bed early, rejoicing in half a night off.

Aida married Mr. Cleeby, the only man who had ever stood up to her. She retired from the stage somewhat poorer in money, but with a master. Mr. Cleeby also retired from the stage, in order to devote all his time to the management of his wife's possessions. She may have had regrets; but generally speaking she was happy enough, Mr. Cleeby being a male of the class, and with the social code and manners, of her father, her brothers, and her first husband.

IX

LAST LOVE

I

"Don't you hate ugly undies, Miss Osyth?" Minnie demanded vehemently, and without any warning.

The piano-lesson was finished. Teacher and pupil sat at the window of Miss Osyth's small parlour, which looked out over Mozewater, where the bright sea was creeping furtively in the dusk across the salt-marshes.

"I don't like anything that's ugly," said Miss Osyth cautiously in her soft, weak voice, and gave a characteristic little cough. She felt a responsibility towards Minnie's somewhat indifferent parents because Minnie adored her more than them. "You're not getting that edge straight," she added.

Their heads approached one another above the fine needlework. Though Minnie showed much natural facility upon the piano, more indeed than her teacher had ever had, Miss Osyth did not enjoy the piano-lessons, for the reason that the pupil seemed to be incapable of musical emotion. This was strange, seeing that she was an emotional young girl. In the matter of needlework, for example, Minnie could be rapturous. At times she was quite obviously thrilled by the beauty of Miss Osyth's achievements in crocheting and drawn-thread work. Needlework united them far more effectively than music; and Miss Osyth, who had a passion for needlework, was thereby made glad and proud and enthusiastic. Nevertheless Minnie's emphatic tendency to lavish ornamental stitchery upon flimsy garments invisible to the world disturbed Miss Osyth. She glanced anxiously at the head of bobbed brown hair and at the down-turned pretty face, and at the slim, soft, flexible, apparently undeveloped body. A boyish body. A boyish quality in the face and in the free gestures! The girl was twenty and looked seventeen. The girl's attitude towards the world was one of frank, fresh, possibly rash investigation. Nothing perverse or secretive or morbid in her! She was innocence itself. And yet this utterly unboyish pre-occupation with unseen attire, which she never attempted to explain or justify! Miss Osyth was alarmed, and at the same time curiously conscious of an agreeable excitement.

Minnie dropped the work and leaned upon a third chair that was in the bay of the window. She was always adopting the strangest sprawling positions, and could seldom sit on one chair if there was a chance of sitting on two simultaneously; her body seemed to be more than she could manage, to be somehow superfluous and cumbersome, despite its frequent startling grace.

"Miss Osyth."

"Yes, darling?"

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" Minnie intoned these words. When she was not quite at ease she would intone, chant, or even sing instead of speaking.

"Well?"

"I've been dying to ask you heaps and heaps of times."

Minnie lived in a violent and extravagant universe of her own. In this universe time existed in æons or it did not exist at all. The same with every other commodity. There were heaps, tons, stacks; or there was not a single scrap. In this universe Minnie died continually, from the mere acuteness of her sensations. She did not like or dislike. She hated; she loved and adored; no intermediate degrees of feeling! In fact a superlative universe, and dangerous to inhabit!

"Well?" repeated Miss Osyth.

"Have you ever been in love?"

A short silence.

"No," answered Miss Osyth truthfully, in a smothered voice, realizing first how the girl was mysteriously growing up, and then the shock of the question to her own mind.

To hide her constraint she looked steadily out of the window.

In a creek about fifty yards in front of the cottage were three yachts; the two smaller ones were already afloat on the rising tide; the third and largest, dismantled, was still aground. Miss Osyth saw those yachts float and take the mud every day and often twice in a day. At any hour she could tell without looking whether any or all of them were afloat or aground. She lived day and night with the ceaseless tides. This evening, as she replied to Minnie, the largest yacht with its green sagging chain and weed-clad under-sides suddenly appeared to her forlorn and pathetic.

She knew that Minnie, misjudging her tone, thought that she was annoyed. She was not annoyed, but she could not say so because to say so would prolong the topic, which she wished to close at once. It was a disconcerting topic. She could not conceive herself discussing love with the blossoming girl. Instinct warned her against such a perilous course.

"I must rush home," said Minnie, after a moment.

"I'll go with you part of the way," said Miss Osyth.

"You *are* an angel!" (Minnie's universe was peopled with angels and fiends.)

They set out, shutting but not locking the door of the solitary cottage. Two hundred yards over hummocks of grass, and they reached the hamlet of Flittering—a row of white cottages, an inn, a larger private house, and on the rough cobbled quay two antique buildings in the nature of warehouses which were in process of demolition. From Flittering, as from all the coast villages and towns of that East Anglian peninsula, there was only one road inland, and the road from tiny Flittering was no more than a broadish track, nearly impassable by footfarers for days together in winter, but now dry and dusty.

Minnie nervously skipped and ran, playing round the sedate Miss Osyth as a porpoise round a ship. When they had passed the disused little eighteenth-century lighthouse and come to the corner where the track mounted towards the village of Hoe (Flittering's metropolis) and the high road to the vast Babylon with a music-hall and three cinemas called Colchester, Miss Osyth stopped. Lilly's farm, the home of Minnie, began at the corner. Minnie leaped passionately at Miss Osyth and gave her an intense kiss.

"I do like you!" Minnie exclaimed, thus, and without another word, begging forgiveness for the indiscreet inquiry into her angel's past. Miss Osyth fondly returned the kiss. . . . The child receded, a glimmer of white in the dusk.

Miss Osyth faced eastwards again. She passed through white Flittering, calling out good-night to the landlord of the inn as she went. She passed the beautiful antique warehouses, whose slow demolition, always painful to her, now struck her as unbearably tragic. A Thames barge, with all its sails lowered or brailed except the topsail, which hung like a ghost in the sombre sky, was very slowly moving up the channel on the night tide. And in this approach of a phantom to the quay soon to be deserted for ever there was also a quality unbearably tragic.

She climbed over the hummocks of grass. The immense inlet, which at low tide was a waste of land with little lakes, had been transformed into a sea with little islands. The sea gleamed in a strange light. She entered her small garden, and looked at the roosting fowls. She opened the door and went into the five-roomed cottage, which was the end of the inhabited world, and according to her custom she glanced into each room. Then, in the parlour, she lit a candle and drew the blind.

Her mother had bought the cottage after her father's death, more than twenty years earlier. Mrs. Drine was a stern old lady, who would sit in the garden in black gloves. She talked very, very quietly, and had always expected and received absolute obedience and entire devotion from Osyth. They had kept a servant, who was the only human being with any power over Mrs. Drine. They had also a dog. Mrs. Drine died. Osyth was free, and had not the force to use her freedom. The servant ruled. The dog died. The servant died. Osyth then became the slave of the cottage, which she could not sell without loss, and would not leave. She was afraid of servants, would not engage another one, and did everything for herself. She had a very small income and slightly increased it by giving piano lessons—she had "learnt" at Colchester—and by the sale at low prices of her lovely needlework. An appreciable part of the income was spent in small surgical operations on her nose and throat. She was frequently indisposed, and often her face gave signs of the dyspepsia and neuralgia which everlastingly tortured her. The east wind which blew for two months each spring over the saltings was her enemy. She was thirty-nine. At Minnie's age she had been called pretty; and she was still slim, without being desiccated; only she was round-shouldered. Having good judgment and an unusually sound and detached sense of

proportion, she knew the cause of her failure in life. She had never been able to assert herself, never had the strength to assert herself.

She would not have called her existence an unhappy one. But now Minnie's crude question seemed to have precipitated all the unperceived misery which her life had as it were held in solution. She was shocked by the swift vision of all that she had missed. Self-pity agonized her. She slipped on to the hard sofa, and cried in the loneliness as softly as she talked and as her mother had talked. She did not sob. The tears flowed quietly. She had the illusion of hearing Minnie's fresh boyish voice: "Have you ever been in love?" No! She had never been in love. Rarely had she had the chance to be in love; and never the courage to take advantage of the rare chance.

II

In the middle of the night Miss Osyth was awakened by the noise of a quarrel in front of her cottage. She had, strangely enough for a woman of her timid temperament, not the slightest fear of solitude, but now the sound of men's angry tones frightened her; for never once in twenty years' residence at the cottage had she heard any human voices in the night on the marshes. The cottage was indeed the end of the world. Nobody could safely wander at dark on the marshes intersected by innumerable creeks. The night sounds round about Miss Osyth's cottage were the uncanny calls of birds, the wind over the rushes and in the chimneys, and during the great Christmas gales the fringes of the sea in the larger creeks. However, though she was alarmed, Miss Osyth did not bury her head. She arose and lit the candle for companionship. She dared not draw the blind aside and look out of the window. In one of the voices she recognized the gruff, fierce accents of the landlord of the Flittering inn.

"And I tell *you* you've no business in that yacht," shouted the landlord. "I've had my eye on you for three hours past."

"Oh! Have you?"

"Yes, I have. That yacht belongs to Mr. Beaumont, and he don't want no dirty tramps in her."

"And supposing *my* name's Beaumont?"

It seemed to be a young voice.

Miss Osyth heard no more. She listened for a long time to the hammering of her own heart, and at last blew out the candle and went to sleep again, thinking of the history of the Beaumonts. She was roused once more by a new and fainter noise which at first she thought was her heart, but which ultimately explained itself as an intermittent knocking on the front door. She now pulled the bedclothes over her head. The sound would not be silenced; it was like a conscience penetrating the defences of a shameful sloth. She sprang up nervously, re-lit the candle, put on a wrap, and looked out between the muslin curtains of the window. The night, which had been clear, was very dark indeed. Miss Osyth shook with apprehensions. But in a moment, as she listened, she seemed to say to herself: "I'm in a dreadful predicament. I may as well *be* in it." And she yielded, acquiescent and relieved, to the situation. There were steps on the gravel.

"Ah!" called a calm voice, of one who had probably noticed at last the candle-light above him and the shadow of a head on the muslin curtains. "Please come down, you up there! I'm all bleeding!" It was the voice of the inn landlord's late antagonist.

III

"I think I'd better light the big lamp, and I think I'd better warm some water before I begin on *that*," said Miss Osyth faintly and timidly, and yet somehow sturdily too, facing the visitor whom she had let into her parlour, where only a candle was burning.

If not precisely ashamed of her little parlour, she was concerned about his probable contempt for it, with its queer bits of Victorian furniture—hand-painted tables, comic chairs, frayed glaring carpet, her mother's crewel work and water-colours, and incredible photographs and engravings. She knew well enough that the room was enough to make a modern cat laugh. She knew that it was a pathetic exile in the implacable welter of the twentieth century. But she would not, could not, have had it altered. She would forlornly stand by it.

Also she was concerned about her own attire, which was very summary and incomplete: whereas the young man was fully and elegantly dressed, though a little ruffled. The young man had a waist line which was created by the lowest button of his jacket and which became him admirably. Miss Osyth suddenly felt more virginal than she had ever felt. She was flushed and thrilling with virginity. She was eager and defensive. She seemed to dare and to run away, to invite and to repulse, to care and not to care. Extremely unused to men, chance had thrown her close against a man, and in the most singular circumstances. However, as she had encouraged herself before, she was in a predicament, and there she was! And the roughly bandaged hand was enough in itself to reassure the sensitive primness of her virginity. The bandage had noticeably reddened. She wanted to look at the man's face, but looked at the bandage instead. All she knew about the face was that it was fair and impossibly handsome; it was as unique as the face of the angel Gabriel. In addition to feeling virginal, she felt extraordinarily and absurdly young.

"Do sit down! Do sit down!" she urged nervously, and in her nervousness bungled the lighting of the lamp, which first smelt because the wick was too low and then smoked because the wick was too high. "Dear! Dear! . . . And I must warm some water."

Even alone in the kitchen igniting the spirit-lamp with which she always made her morning tea, she was flurried.

"What a ridiculous idiot I am!" she thought.

The young man followed her into the kitchen.

"I don't want to make a mess in your sitting-room," he said. He took off the bandage himself and held his hand under the tap at the sink. He didn't know it, but he was being frightfully extravagant with her precious rain-water from the tank beneath the eave. The wound was on the back of the hand. A fairly bad wound, an inch and a half in length! The cold water soon stopped the bleeding. She was too diffident to inquire as to the origin of the wound, but she connected it with the inn landlord. Then she had to hold his wrist and bathe the wound in warm water coloured pink with Condyl's fluid. How unfortunate that she kept her cast-off linen and oddments in a drawer of the kitchen dresser, and so was forced to cut and tear the new bandage in his presence! Still, she was getting hardened now.

"I suppose you're Alexis Beaumont?" she ventured, after he had thanked her for the dressing, which indeed she had accomplished very well. She was quite sure of his identity.

He nodded, with a mysterious smile. The Beaumonts had bought a house and grounds near Hoe some fifteen years earlier. They had invaded Hoe from London, which is equal to nowhere. They were rich, and they were determined, in their ignorance of the fundamentals of English country life, to wake up Hoe. Everybody above a certain station called on them and they called on everybody. They organized flower shows and tennis tournaments, and they gave dances and established a club for the civilization of labourers. Hoe accepted all. They were marvellous in the war and after the war. Then events compelled them to leave. They imagined that the great departure would stir Hoe to its foundations. They imagined that the painted notice at the august front entrance gates: "*This property to be sold*," would cause Hoe to shed poignant tears. Not a bit! They left amid perfect calm. Their seven bright, busy years of occupation had made no more impression upon Hoe than the passage of a strange motor-car down the village high-street. In the life of the indifferent and insensitive populace, whose roots were buried centuries deep in the social history of the district, the sojourn of the Beaumonts had about the same importance as the picking up of half a crown in the gutter. It was better than a bat in the eye with a burnt stick, and that was all. The yacht alone remained to testify that the Beaumonts really had existed. An agent from Colchester occasionally let it for duck-shooting on Mozewater, but he had never succeeded in selling it. Miss Osyth had caught sight of Alexis once or twice as a boy when he was home from school for the holidays. He then had the reputation of being a spoilt boy who created strife between his parents.

"I'll go back to the yacht now. You've been most awfully kind and skilful." He said it neatly, in distinguished tones. He had a rather dazzling style with him.

"But are you going to try to sleep on the yacht?"

"Where else? There's a bed. Two beds, in fact. It's rather cosy." He smiled easily.

"But the beds must be dreadfully damp!"

"Oh, no!"

"But they must be!" Miss Osyth pitied the simplicity of the man, of all men, in practical details of daily existence.

"It's of no consequence," he said casually, and added: "*But if you'd like to spoil me*"—he uttered this phrase with a disturbing, irresistible confidence, ever so softly and gently—"I'll tell you what you might do. You might give me a bucket of water—there's soap and towels on board—and a candle."

"Yes," said she.

When the preparations were done Miss Osyth lit her outdoor lantern and they issued forth into the warm night. A loose punt was the means of transport to the yacht. One push and they were alongside. They both moved quietly, as though afraid of being overheard. To Miss Osyth's surprise the cabin of the yacht actually did have an air of cosiness; when illuminated by the lantern and a candle it revealed all sorts of handy contraptions and some food, and it was roomier than she would have thought possible. She made up the bed; she poured the water into the brass-bound barrel, which had a brass tap.

"Now have you got everything you want?"

"No, but I shall have. I shall run over to Colchester to-morrow and get a tooth-brush, and a razor, and some blacking, and a boot-brush and a clothes-brush and a shirt or two. I shall take the motor-bus."

Miss Osyth laughed, enigmatically excited by this glimpse into a man's private life.

"I can let you have everything for your boots," she said.

He shook his head in refusal. They extricated themselves one after the other from the close confinement of the cabin, Miss Osyth going first with the lantern. She got into the punt and in a moment was on the bank of the creek.

"I say," cried Alexis, low, "I must tell you you're a splendid girl. You positively are!" Enthusiasm was in his fresh, strong voice.

"Girl!" She blushed peacefully in the immense, faintly rustling darkness of the reedy marshes. She thrilled peacefully. Well, she felt like a girl. She did not feel like thirty-nine, and could scarcely believe that she was thirty-nine. She said nothing in answer. In the parlour she regarded herself in the glass, moving the lantern up and down. Of course the inadequacy of her attire was terrible, but it did not seem to matter. And honestly she was convinced that she did not look nearly her age. She *was* a girl. She had all the sensations of a girl. How old was Alexis? She made a calculation and decided that he was twenty-five. In her bedroom she sat by the window, and gazed at the candle-light steadily shining through the cabin porthole of the yacht. Mysterious! Fascinating! . . . He had given no explanation at all of his visit to the yacht.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she reflected. "What a good thing this kind of thing doesn't happen every day! It's most upsetting, and I don't know where I am. And I don't know *what* people would say!" She smiled very happily, expectantly, shakily. She cried.

IV

"Oh, Miss Osyth!" cried Minnie the next day. "You look simply frightfully young to-day! I can't think how you do it. *I* feel a hundred."

Miss Osyth blushed slightly. Whereon Minnie added:

"And you look so charming, too. But then of course you always do look charming. . . . Well, it beats me, that's what it does. It beats me."

Miss Osyth blushed a little more. She felt inexplicably happy, but constrained too; she didn't know what to say. The sincerity and enthusiasm of the young girl's praise gave her a confidence in herself which she had never had before. Obviously Minnie would not burst out at first sight of her into these impassioned praises without some very striking cause. And Minnie's observations were richly corroborated by Miss Osyth's own feelings. She indeed did feel young; and though she was tired and ought therefore according to custom to have been suffering from neuralgia, she had a strange new physical condition of good health. Had a miracle happened to Miss Osyth? Miss Osyth, being usually a

person of strong common sense, had no belief in miracles. What she at the moment believed was that she had got into the habit of regarding herself as old when she was not old. Thirty-nine. Thirty-nine was nothing. The phrase: "You're a splendid girl," glowed in her memory and heart, glowed steadily, beautifully, inspiringly; it was the magic phrase of rejuvenation.

Always, in her hidden happiness, Miss Osyth was disquieted by the visit of Minnie. This was not Minnie's day, and though Minnie did sometimes appear unexpectedly, why should she appear on just this day? Minnie had something on her mind, and she had to get it off; she had come with the sole intention of getting it off.

"Oh, Miss Osyth," she exclaimed, gazing through the window, "of course you've heard all about Alexis Beaumont? I see he doesn't seem to be on the yacht now. In fact, I know he isn't, because I saw him go past the farm this morning. He took the motor-bus to Colchester in Hoe High Street. *I* think he's *too* handsome. I'd never seen him before, at least since he was a mere school-kid. But isn't it funny, him living in the yacht like that? I can't make it out. No one can. They say he's quarrelled with his father about something, and he's waiting here till Mrs. Beaumont brings his father round. But how does he *manage*? I wonder if it's true that he had a fight with Mr. Cossange? I suppose he did, but I'm told they've made it up, and he's going to have his meals at the Maid's Head. Of course, Cossange hasn't been in the district long enough to know who he was."

Minnie had without an effort collected all the rumours connected with Alexis. She was clearly obsessed by Alexis.

"I can tell you this," said Miss Osyth, in response to Minnie's persistency. "He came here last night and asked me to let him have some fresh water."

"And did you?"

"Naturally."

"And don't *you* think he's too good-looking for words!"

"It was nearly dark." Such extreme and calculated duplicity was very unlike Miss Osyth. It ought to have disturbed her conscience, but it did not. She was delighted when Minnie reluctantly left. She desired above everything to think her thoughts in solitude—to think the same thoughts over and over again. She had her wish. No one called at the cottage, not even a tradesman; and she did not go into Flittering. She scarcely even went into her garden—lest, if he came by, Alexis might suspect that she had been lying in wait, for he could not reach the yacht without being seen from the garden. A queer, a touching modesty on her part! But perhaps also it was pride. She did no needlework. She sat. She moved, restless and purposeless, from room to room. She sat. She talked to the cat, and to the fowls, not about herself but about themselves. Like most solitaires she had the habit of talking aloud to herself; but to-day she said not a word aloud to herself. If she had talked to herself she would have heard things that would have made her uncomfortable, that would have abashed her. And she was super-sensitive; the virgin instinctive and watchful in her heart was ready at any moment to leap up like a young and uncontrollably impulsive savage and do strange deeds.

The day was glorious, perfect, endless. The memories of the sun would not leave the evening sky until at last they were annihilated by the enormous moon rising out of the sea. It would be high tide, and a very high tide, just before midnight.

Miss Osyth sat late in her bedroom. But she did not undress. She had dressed with care in the afternoon—not in her best clothes. Oh, no! That would have been absurd. Quietly. But more carefully than usual. And a lovely collarette of her own creation!

"I must go to bed. I cannot go to bed. I must go to bed," her thoughts circled round and round. . . . She looked cautiously between the drawn blind and the side of the window, not for the first time, and started. The light was burning in the yacht's cabin. Unimaginable! Unimaginable that the vibrations of light from one little candle should transpierce the glass of the porthole and the glass of her window, transpierce her head, energize her brain and cause her brain to energize the physical mechanism of her heart till it thumped, thumped, thumped against her tight-fitting blue frock! Frightening! . . .

He had mysteriously returned. How? When? She knew not. But he was there, alone, solitary as herself, within fifty yards of her, enfolded in the tremendous night of the marshes.

She sank to her knees at the window, would not move. She would wait till the light went out. She was now very sad and resentful against herself. She was utterly exhausted too; she was old. . . She heard sounds on the gravel. She heard an

ominous, delicious, soft, authoritative knocking at the door below. . . . He had come. It was impossible that he should come; but he had come. Young again, strong, eager, and fresh as though she had just risen from a long night's rest, she pushed up the window.

"I suppose you don't happen to have any aspirin?" said the calm, firm voice of Alexis. "I know it's rotten of me to trouble you; but this hand of mine's throbbing like the deuce."

V

"No," Miss Osyth said, holding the wounded hand in her two hands, and examining it by the light of the candle in the cabin, "it's going on perfectly all right. Of course, it's still a bit inflamed, but that's because you've been doing too much to-day—carrying parcels and things, I expect, and walking a lot." She spoke reassuringly, with knowledge, and as if there could not possibly be any appeal from her verdict.

"Oh, well, that's fine," he murmured, admitting her authority by his relieved tone.

She was proud. She at once took charge of the cabin. This interior was about seven feet long by six feet broad. In certain places, under the open flaps of the skylight, Miss Osyth could stand up straight in it, but Alexis could not. A narrow table occupied the centre, and two couches, or beds, flanked the table. It was small, but it was habitable; and the diminutive cosiness of it ravished Miss Osyth. While she dressed the hand with a new bandage which she brought from the cottage, she kept exclaiming upon the cabin's quality of cosiness. And it was picturesque too; the sides and the top were a dead white, touched here and there with gilt; the table was of teak, which set off the white; the crumpled blankets were highly coloured; and the floor was covered with linoleum in a pattern to imitate large black-and-white tiles.

"It's a regular little home," said Miss Osyth. "It's delicious." Her voice was ecstatic.

The place was warm, in spite of the open skylight; but she loved the warmth of it. She inquired almost menacingly about his meals, and he replied that he was eating at the inn.

"Yes," she said. "I heard you'd made it up with the landlord." She laughed. He laughed.

"Things do get about quick, don't they?" he said.

"Oh! They do."

The two exchanged a glance.

"You'd better take the aspirin in hot water."

"But I haven't got any hot water."

"But I've brought my thermos," she said, superiorly. She had laid it in a corner of the empty couch. It was wrapped in white linen.

"What's that?" he said, as she undid the wrapping.

"A clean pillow-slip. I don't mind you sleeping in blankets, but you oughtn't to have a bare pillow. Tick is horrid against the cheek."

"You're a wonderful girl," he observed simply.

"But that's not all," she said, and crept out of the cabin to the steep stairs leading to the deck. She groped with her hand on the surface of the deck, and brought down a small bunch of flowers which she had left there on entering.

All these little matters she had prepared in advance in the hope of a summons from him. The entry of the garden flowers had quite a sensationally dramatic effect.

"They'll have to have hot water, like you," she said.

"I've got plenty of cold water now," said Alexis. "The landlord was very decent. After all, I couldn't blame him for making a fuss at the start, could I? How should *he* know who I was?"

Miss Osyth said nothing. She was busy with the pillow-slip, and the blankets, and turning over the mattress, and the tin mug for the flowers and the smaller tin mug with the hot water for Alexis to drink from. She moved to and fro like a real girl, with the flexibility of a girl and perhaps also the grace. She was acutely aware of her body and rather proud of its shapeliness beneath the thin, nice frock and stockings, and of her fair complexion and soft hair. She bent over the bunk with a wilful sinuosity of movement.

"There! Now the aspirin at last."

The pillow-slip, immaculate as Miss Osyth herself, gleamed smoothly with a heavenly invitation. The coloured blankets were straightened out, and one corner of the upper one turned back with geometrical precision. The flowers bloomed on the dark table. The small tin mug steamed. Miss Osyth held the tablet of aspirin in her hand. Alexis suddenly and startlingly opened his mouth, advancing the tongue, just like a clever, spoilt child. Miss Osyth trembled at the irresistible gesture, hesitated an instant, and then shakily placed the tablet on the tongue and offered the mug. Alexis blinked. Her excitement was extreme, unique to her, and she was exquisitely troubled. Alexis's gesture was the most marvellous and disturbing phenomenon in her experience. Her finger remembered the thrilling moisture of his tongue.

"I'll go now," she said, with forced but apparently successful quietude, after he had drunk the water.

"Oh! But you haven't seen my purchases at Colchester. You must tell me what you think of them. Won't take a minute."

She would have refused to stay one second longer, but could not. She had no will-power. All fortitude had been drawn out of her by felicity. He was so fair and handsome and frank; his movements and voice were so distinguished; and he had been so obedient to her. And they were alone, and necessarily so close together in the warm, bright cosiness of the cabin. And the cabin was hidden in the night of the salt-marshes. They were safe. None knew, nor could know, of this intimacy. The sanctions of society stopped short at the tiny paradise of the cabin.

And Miss Osyth handled his small purchases, and savoured the masculinity of them. The safety razor, for instance. What a strange and dangerous contrivance! She tried it on the down of her delicate cheek. She took it to pieces, oh, so fearfully. She put it together again.

"No, no!" she cried, as she rose swiftly and unexpectedly to depart. "Don't move. I can get ashore by myself." She was gone.

Four nights later—to Miss Osyth the intervening period seemed more like a month than four days, a month in which her nights had become days and her days nights, and her whole existence turned rapturously upside-down—Alexis without warning began in the secrecy of the yacht's cabin to tell his companion about the cause of his estrangement from the home in Dorset. He had resolved to join some youthful friends in an expedition, for commercial purposes, to an uninhabited island some hundreds of miles off the west coast of South America. Five hundred pounds was to be his contribution to the general funds of the enterprise, and his rich father had absolutely refused to provide the sum. But he was sure from experience that his mother would wheedle his father into a surrender. To Miss Osyth, Alexis painted his own martyrdom in affecting colours. Tears came into her eyes as she sat by his side on the couch. He was moved by her quick generous sympathy and never guessed that she wept at the prospect of his departure to the other end of the world. He turned his face to hers, and, looking into her wet eyes, gently kissed her unresisting lips. The kiss was a sacrament for her. She bowed her head and held it bowed. He was spellbound by her fair and pure charm. Had she bowed her head in shame, or in acquiescence, or in both? He was intimidated by her innocence. She had no age then; she was neither old nor young, neither mature nor unripe. She was simply that which had been immaculate. Alexis averted his gaze. Before he could decide what he should do next, she had risen with a hysterical, instinctive swiftness and vanished. How beautiful and exciting, he thought, was the whirl of her white skirt as she flew up the steep stairs into the dark world of the salt-marshes!

VI

The next morning—but it was the same morning—after receiving from the postman a letter which agitated her from the moment she saw the Brussels post-mark on the envelope, Miss Osyth went forth towards the yacht with a pencilled note in her hand. She hurried and yet was undecided. No sign of life on the yacht. Alexis must be in the deep sleep of youth. She dared not call, and moreover she was too modest to awake him. The tide was low. Taking off her shoes and stockings she padded through the sticky mud to the yacht's side. She listened and heard faintly the regular breathing of the

unseen sleeper, to her a sacred and a beautiful sound. Life had never seemed to her more romantic or more terrible. She was mysteriously afraid of her excessively strange situation, and the immense hitherto unsuspected power of her instincts. The porthole of the little cabin was open. She ledged the note on the lower rim of the porthole and put a stone on it to keep it in place. She knew well enough, with her capacity for detachment, that Alexis must sooner or later involve her in some kind of tragedy. Nevertheless her ecstasy had not abated; it had increased; and it had only been exasperated by the letter from Brussels. Her unsigned note to Alexis ran thus: "One of my uncles is very ill in Brussels. I have to go. Shall be back as soon as possible. Please do take care of yourself."

Then began the awful fever of the expedition of a woman who had never travelled. She had to go all the way to London to obtain a passport, and then return all the way to Harwich (whose highest chimney rose on the other side of Mozewater in sight of her cottage) to catch the evening boat for Antwerp. . . .

The uncle died. She was hustled in a tram in Brussels and all her money stolen. With the amazing audacity of the timid she made a scene about this, though she could not speak a word of French, at the police station in Brussels. The staff there showed keen curiosity as to herself, and would do nothing until she had revealed, among other things, the maiden name of her mother. And they did nothing afterwards either. They caused her to understand that there were half a dozen pocket robberies a day in the trams of Brussels.

Miss Osyth reached Harwich one morning in black, poorer, but with the prospect of an inheritance. She drove by the curling road round the edge of Mozewater back to her cottage, which smelt fusty and was, to her eyes, intolerably dirty. Some letters awaited, but nothing from Alexis. She was in an agony. She could not conceivably ask for news of him. The yacht, with an air enigmatic and secretive, lay as usual in the hollow of the creek. The weather was still magnificent. In the afternoon she went out for a walk in her salt marshes; they were hers because she knew them better than any other living person. The tide was at lowest ebb. On the caked margin of the creek she saw an envelope all brown and green. It was unopened and contained her note to Alexis. No doubt in closing the porthole he had without noticing it pushed it into the water. It looked inexpressibly forlorn.

Clutching it in her hand, she moved onwards into the lonely maze of the marshes. She crossed little bridges of an incredible frailness, climbed and descended slopes, jumped the dry beds of rivulets, skirted the marvellous bright greens of treacherous moss, strode through high, sturdy rushes, dusted her shoes in clumps of bracken, startled fowl and ground-game, yielded herself to the vast powers of breeze and sunlight. The landscape was as primeval as the sun and the wind. Scarcely any foot but hers ever ventured into that tremendous waste, which indeed was dangerous enough for the unwary and ignorant. On those walks she always ultimately made for the same objective, a bowl of grass-green land protected equally from the wind and from the water.

In the hollow she saw Alexis and Minnie sitting side by side, and their lips were joined in a long kiss. They were so young, so graceful, so natural, so ingenuous, so innocent in loving gesture, so fitted to the wild and lovely landscape, that Miss Osyth stood entranced, as much by admiration as by a shocked astonishment. They were pure creatures of the golden age which never was and never will be, but which flickers now and then for a moment into a half-existence and vanishes. They had probably been there all day, and nothing but dusk would arouse them to the reality of time. They were sure of their solitude. And it was Miss Osyth herself who had taught Minnie the intricate geography of the marshes.

Miss Osyth turned and ran. She ran lest she should be seen. She ran because she was ashamed before these two of her age and her disillusion. The memory of the exquisite movements of Minnie's lithe body shamed her. . . . These two were bound to meet, and, once met, neither could resist the other.

"But do your father and mother know?" Miss Osyth asked when Minnie feverishly gave her the news.

"Well, it only happened yesterday. Alexis is going to see them to-day. They'll be all right."

"And his people?"

"Well, they've *got* to be all right," said Minnie confidently.

"But isn't there a quarrel?"

"It'll be fixed up. He isn't going on that Pacific island business."

"Oh! He's given it up?"

"You don't suppose I'd agree to such madness, do you? Oh! Miss Osyth, I love you more than ever, because he says you were so frightfully kind to him." She clung round Miss Osyth's neck. "I'm so happy I might die of it any minute. I might, really. You can't imagine how happy I am!"

"Oh, yes, I can!" said Miss Osyth firmly.

Minnie, wondering, surveyed her.

"Can you?"

When the beautiful girl had gone, Miss Osyth sat down to the piano and played all alone in the cottage a little prelude of Bach's. And as she played she resolved passionately to be the tireless guardian angel of the two youths. She forgot herself. She was poignantly happy, with a vicarious happiness.

X

THE MYSTERIOUS DESTRUCTION OF MR. IPPLE

I

As some women at a certain age give themselves out as "twenty-eight," and others at another age give themselves out as "thirty-eight," so Mr. Lewis Ipple let it be understood that he was "fifty-eight." Mr. Lewis Ipple had a fat and prominent nose, a body to match, and a waistcoat not unspotted. He had never achieved personal tidiness; but this did not matter, because he was illustrious and therefore could safely permit himself a few eccentricities.

If asked to name the chief English dramatic critic, ninety-nine people out of a hundred sufficiently interested in the theatre to know anything about dramatic criticism would have named Mr. Lewis Ipple without hesitation; and the majority of them would have added, "of course." Theatrical persons with a taste for antiquity sometimes said that in the palmy days, when actresses could be clearly heard from the pit and plays had plots, an article by Mr. Lewis Ipple in the enormous morning paper which he represented could "make or mar the success" of a piece. The theatrical world, being the most conservative in the history of mankind, still generally believed in the mightiness of Mr. Ipple's pen.

So that when, in his preoccupied and somewhat urgent manner—as of one who has a great matter in hand—he entered the Princess's Theatre, he was properly greeted by the general manager thereof, the acting manager, the manager for the production, the publicity man, the sub-lessee, the lessee, the licensee, and the owner of the building—all gentlemen far more magnificent to the eye than himself. He nodded to some, and shook hands absently with others; he also acknowledged the flatteries of a few "resting" pretty actresses. Everybody expressed pleasure at seeing him back in his kingdom after his long illness, and several said that he was looking better than ever. The manager for the production, having been dug up from nowhere in particular and not being abreast of modern customs, was foolish enough articulately to "hope that he would like the show." The commissionaire in charge of the stalls entrance did not recognize Mr. Ipple, and, instead of smiling, met him with the question: "Stalls, sir?" This was a blow, though one that Mr. Ipple could afford to laugh at. On the whole his reception had not been unsatisfactory.

The stalls were not yet half full. Mr. Ipple had arrived in time. He always arrived in time, for he took his profession seriously; he realized how on first nights the arrival of late-comers exasperated the acute nervousness of the artistes, and moreover he was of a leisurely and orderly disposition. He conscientiously studied his programme. The play was entitled *The Nice Niece*. The name of the author meant nothing to him. But the names of all the artistes meant something to him, except that of the leading lady, Betty Brik—at least, he judged Betty to be the leading lady from her position in the list of players; she came last, and was preceded by the word "and," which had a line all to itself.

"Who's this Betty Brik?" he asked of Mr. Arthur Several, who had sat down next to him with a nod, seemingly unaware that this was the solemn night of Mr. Ipple's reappearance after a painful retirement of six months. Mr. Several was a very young critic, attached to one of your sprightly evening papers; and his weakness was that he thought that ideas were a sufficient substitute for knowledge.

"Oh!" said Mr. Several vaguely, "She made some splash in the spring in something or other. Has points, I think. She's only nineteen." He spoke in a tone to indicate that, while anxious to be polite to Mr. Lewis Ipple, he had no intention of being intimidated by Mr. Ipple's prestige.

Mr. Ipple was somewhat shocked, and yet pleased, at the young man's vagueness in the matter of Betty Brik's professional history. Mr. Ipple had in his library the filed programmes of over two thousand five hundred first performances which he had attended, and he knew by heart the professional history of practically every artiste whom he had once seen.

"Ah!" said he spaciously. "Do you know her real name?"

"I think she's using her own name, except that she's taken the 'c' out of 'Brick.' Gives her a Scandinavian flavour, I suppose."

"And do you seriously say she's only nineteen?"

"I am so informed and believe," answered Mr. Several.

"Well," said Mr. Lewis Ipple, "I guarantee she'd prove to be twenty-nine if the facts were strictly investigated."

And he began to give an account of the ages at which, during the last hundred years, actresses had developed into leading ladies, together with details of tricks which even youthful actresses played with their ages. In fine he established a general principle that it was materially and morally impossible for a girl of nineteen to be a leading lady in any reputable West End theatre. Mr. Several was decidedly impressed by Mr. Ipple's small talk, and Mr. Ipple knew that he was impressed. Mr. Several, with Mr. Several's literary friends, had scorned Mr. Ipple because (they alleged) he could not "write," and because he was apt to be enthusiastic about old-fashioned sentimental plays, and very severe on plays which showed any tinge of novelty. Mr. Several on these grounds had concluded that Mr. Ipple was perfectly futile and worthy to be stamped under foot. He now, unwillingly, perceived his mistake. And when Mr. Ipple went further afield, and discoursed in precise detail of the French stage and the German stage, pronouncing French and German names with an undeniably correct accent, Mr. Several privately admitted that there might be more to Mr. Ipple's reputation than in his haste he had imagined.

Nevertheless he objected to the spots down the front of Mr. Ipple's waistcoat.

The curtain was late, as it often is when the management has specially asked the audience to be seated punctually at a given hour. The orchestra played several items; and then several others; and as the minutes passed so did Mr. Ipple maintain and secure with young Mr. Several his position as the foremost dramatic critic in London. And Mr. Ipple was satisfied with himself, and he saw in young Mr. Several's gradual change of attitude the assurance that after six months' absence from the theatrical world he, Mr. Ipple, was as strong as ever. And he was all the more satisfied in that this was the first time that he had ever had a fair tussling chance with an exponent of the new slapdash school of dramatic criticism.

"What did I tell you?" said Mr. Several, with an unbecoming nonchalance, to Mr. Ipple when Betty Brik made her appearance. And in fact Betty did not look more than nineteen. But Mr. Ipple shook his head, convinced that she would never see twenty-eight again. Since he knew everything about the theatre, and did not confine his interest to the literary quality of plays as some critics did, he knew all about the craft of making-up and the skill of actresses to recall gestures which they ought long before to have forgotten. He was, however, delighted with Betty. Evidently Betty had the stage in her bones! She was experienced as no girl of nineteen could be. And her charm was extremely potent in its endless grace. She charmed all the time, and she charmed everybody. She was incapable of being dull. She was continually doing the unexpected and yet the right thing.

She not only triumphed over Mr. Ipple and the rest of the audience—she triumphed over the play. Mr. Ipple did not like the play. On its superficial aspects he ought to have liked it, for the plot was as old as grease-paint and the sentiment as sweet as the finest theatre bonbons. It related the ancient story of the group of crusty bachelors expecting the arrival of a baby niece—an orphan—who proves to be a grown-up young lady of surpassing seductiveness. And of course she is no more a niece than she is a baby. Nieces are entirely useless in such a narrative, because crusty bachelors cannot marry their niece, and would not dream of wanting to marry their niece. On the surface everything was all right with the play. But beneath the surface irony and realism could be discerned uncomfortably moving; and in truth the play was a ruthless skit on five hundred other plays with a similar surface. At one moment the sentiment was fantastically exaggerated; at the next moment the characters were cruelly forced to behave as they would actually have behaved in real life.

Mr. Ipple, with the majority of the audience, hated irony and realism; and he did not desire the stage to be like life. He wanted the stage to be one thing and life quite another; and immediately a play resembled life he called it unhealthy. The scheme of his criticism formed itself in Mr. Ipple's mind. He would scourge and destroy the play; in fact, he would kill it; but he would save the actress; he would eliminate Betty Brik from the slaughter. She had a future. He had assisted at the début of many famous stars; and he felt that he was assisting at such a début now. Betty would need help in the terrible struggle for supremacy that lay before her. He would give help, generous and powerful help. It would be his august pleasure to do so. He decided that after the second act he would pay Betty a visit in her dressing-room. And to this end, after the first act, he broke his rule of remaining in his seat, and sought the foyer. Except on special urgent business persons of authentic importance never leave their seats during the entr'actes on a first night. Dignity forbids. The foyer is for second-raters, chatterers, and riffraff.

II

Mr. Percival escorted him behind. Mr. Percival was the manager for the production, a youngish, stout man, with full lips and a rather luscious utterance. Mr. Percival took him through the iron door behind box A that separated the front of the house from the working parts thereof. The assistant stage-manager, who was excitedly exhorting an electrician at the switchboard, saw them first and immediately became calm. The assistant stage-manager's awed eye said: "The great Lewis Ipple has come behind!" Unfortunately for himself the assistant stage-manager was not important enough in the world even to salute Mr. Lewis Ipple. The visiting pair threaded their obscure way among properties, a piano or so, and several artistes, one of whom, a stout lady who played dowagers, bowed to Mr. Ipple in the grand manner. It became generally known on the stage that Mr. Lewis Ipple was behind. Only the hasting scene-shifters ignored him; more accurately they didn't ignore him, they behaved as if he were not there, as though he were an invisible and impalpable ghost; they would have walked through him if he had not removed himself sharply from their paths. Mr. Ipple, however, knowing the ruthlessness of scene-shifters during entr'actes, did sharply remove himself from their paths. The pair climbed a series of echoing stone stairways, and Mr. Percival apologized for certain untidinesses, explaining that he had but just come into possession and that there was much to be done to a neglected theatre.

"Here we are," said Mr. Percival, stopping at a door. "Sorry there are so many stairs, but you know what these old-fashioned theatres are."

Mr. Lewis Ipple read on a white card stuck into a metal case on the door: "No. 1. Miss Betty Brik." Yes, she had No. 1 dressing-room. She was the leading lady, poor inexperienced little thing! And he had carried his vast reputation and influence up all those stairs in order to be kind to her. A tremendous compliment. Every gesture of Mr. Percival, every tone of his caressing voice, showed that it was a tremendous compliment.

"Can I come in?" called Mr. Percival, knocking sharply and opening the door a few inches.

A fat dresser appeared.

"Miss Brik visible?" he asked the dresser in a low, cautious tone. "I've brought Mr. Lewis Ipple to see her."

"Come in, come in!" rang a young girlish voice.

They went in. The room was divided in two by curtains, and Betty was at the further end, near the electric stove.

"I've brought Mr. Lewis Ipple to see you, Miss Brik," said Mr. Percival.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," said Mr. Ipple, magnificently polite.

"Oh, please!" said Betty, moving forward.

She might have added: "How can you say such a thing to poor little me?" But she did not. Her glance might have said: "I am the dust under your feet, and I never dreamed of such an honour as you are now paying me." But her glance did not. Still, success had apparently not made her conceited. She was much excited by it, but not a bit above herself. Her demeanour was natural, nice, candid, and entirely delightful.

Said Mr. Ipple to himself: "She has not caught my name."

Betty then said: "Won't you sit down, Mr. Ipple?" (Mr. Percival had discreetly vanished.)

Whereupon Mr. Ipple said to himself: "She can't have the slightest notion who I am!" And he decided, just for the fun of the thing, that he would not at present explain to her who he was. The revelation, when it came to her, would be all the more amusing for him.

Well, emphatically she was young. In the matter of her age young Several had been right and Mr. Ipple quite wrong. She was generously painted, with vermilion lips and cheeks, and eyes grossly enlarged with black, according to the usual absurd custom. The make-up aged her, but in the dressing-room it could not hide the genuineness of her extreme youth. She was so young that Mr. Ipple felt sorry for her. And the dressing-room showed that she had no career behind her. There was a small bunch of flowers, but it must have come from a blood-relation and looked as though it had been bought in the street for about two shillings. In his time Mr. Ipple had seen forty pounds' worth of flowers in the dressing-

room of a star on a first-night. And there were no expensive boxes of chocolates; indeed, no chocolates at all. And no caricatures or other sketches pinned on the walls. Still more extraordinary there were no other callers. Most extraordinary of all there were no well-wishing telegrams pinned on the walls. Mr. Ipple descried two telegrams lying on the corner of a bench; the child did not even know enough to pin them up; or perhaps she had wisely decided that two telegrams were too few to pin up and might seem ridiculous if made prominent.

Nor had Betty any flow of conversation. True, this was not surprising to Mr. Ipple, who was aware that eighty per cent. of actresses have practically nothing to say, while another ten are apt to drown you in cascades of words signifying nothing. She was not shy; she was not preoccupied with her clothes, for she had not to change; nor did Mr. Ipple think that she was preoccupied with her part. She just had the gift of being taciturn without being awkward. She had little to say, and said it. Further, she did not smoke, nor invite Mr. Ipple to smoke. Lastly, she did not hum from nervousness or constraint.

"I suppose you like your success?" said Mr. Ipple, with a benevolent interrogating smile.

"I just love it," she said quite simply; whereas Mr. Ipple would have expected her to say: "Oh, Mr. Ipple, do you really think it is a success? I feel I'm being most frightfully over-appreciated."

After a little pause, she said: "I hope you haven't come to interview me."

Mr. Ipple was much shocked. Mr. Ipple an interviewer! Mr. Ipple had never interviewed anybody in his life. Mr. Ipple was not the theatrical gossip-monger of his paper, out to pick up whatever trifles he could get; he was the dramatic critic.

"Oh, no!" he answered lightly and easily. "But don't you like being interviewed?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've never been interviewed. Daddy says it will be much better for me never to give an interview."

"Daddy!" Strange word in a star's dressing-room!

She went on:

"I'm awfully upset to-night because mother and father aren't here. Daddy's got one of his bad bilious attacks, and mother's looking after him. She came for the first act and then she went home again!"

"What a pity!" Mr. Ipple sympathized.

"Isn't it? I should just think it is!"

"Do I understand this is your first appearance in the West End?" Mr. Ipple inquired.

She nodded.

"Then you've had a lot of experience touring?"

"No. I've never what you'd call toured. Daddy didn't want me to. I did a short tour of suburban theatres with Mrs. X. [Mrs. X. being a super-star who had starred before Betty was born], but she wouldn't have me for her long tour. Daddy said it was because I got too much applause. But Mrs. X. was always very kind to me. Of course, only playing in suburban theatres, I could go home every night."

"And before that?"

"Before that?" Betty stroked her short skirt. "Before that I used to be in the Putney Amateur Dramatic Society. Nothing else."

"But where did you learn your job? Academy of Dramatic Art?"

"What's that?" Betty asked. "I didn't learn it anywhere. Of course, when we did things at Putney we always had a professional producer for the last fortnight before each show. He taught us. It was he who got me the job with Mrs. X."

"And so that's all?"

"That's all."

"Well," said Mr. Ipple, with humorous warmth, "if you haven't got a past, you've certainly got a future."

"That's what everyone says," Betty agreed with simplicity. Not with conceit—merely with disconcerting simplicity.

"It's a pity you haven't a better part in this show," said Mr. Ipple.

"But it's a splendid part!" she protested.

"No, young lady," Mr. Ipple maintained firmly. "I don't like either the play or the part. And the great majority of experienced people will agree with me. The play may run—I don't say it won't—but if it does the success will be due solely to yourself. Believe me!"

"But I can't believe you," said Betty, pouting somewhat. "Oh, Mr. Ipple, you *do* like the new school of playwrights, don't you? You *must*!"

She was actually lecturing him, but with most persuasive youthful charm.

Mr. Ipple merely raised his hands—a trick which he had learnt in the drawing-rooms of French actresses.

"Beginners for the third act." The voice of the call-boy sounded in the passage. At the same moment a head intruded into the room. It was the head of young Several.

"Hallo, Arthur!" cried Betty. "Have you brought those chocs?"

Arthur had brought them. Arthur was slightly confused at the sight of Mr. Ipple; and his confusion was comprehensible, for in the conversation in the stalls he had basely not given the least hint to Mr. Ipple that he was on chocolate and Christian name terms with Betty.

Mr. Ipple rose.

"Well, Miss Brik, I am delighted to have made your acquaintance."

"Good-bye," said she, with a very charming and honest smile, taking his hand. But he could see well enough that, though full of good-nature towards him, she was thinking less of him than of the Arthurian chocolates. She added: "And I shall read with all the more interest what the *Daily Post* has to say to-morrow morning. Good-bye. So nice of you."

Then she had known all through who he was!

Mr. Percival was abundantly waiting for him at the end of the corridor. But before Mr. Ipple got to the end of the corridor he heard a terrific explosion of laughter from the dressing-room. It was male laughter, caused by Betty's artless, sincere remark about the departed Mr. Ipple: "Oh, what a funny little old man!"

"Curious creature, isn't she?" said Mr. Percival as they descended the stairs.

"She's the right sort," replied Mr. Ipple with emphasis, and with all the authority which he had temporarily lost in the dressing-room.

"Oh! Of course! Assuredly! Assuredly!" Mr. Percival agreed with quick deference.

Mr. Ipple had defended Betty somehow in spite of himself. Betty's attitude towards himself had been as startling as it was lamentable; but she was so artless over it, so straight, so sincere, so unaffected—and so charming. The one disturbing thing was that she had mysteriously impaired his confidence in Mr. Ipple. He who was by general consent one of the greatest and most impressive figures in the world of the theatre, had been cutting no figure at all for about ten minutes.

Within a quarter of an hour of the end of the play Mr. Ipple (who, like the other morning paper critics, had fled before the unparalleled scenes of enthusiasm had commenced) was writing his notice in an office of which the tremendous furniture recalled the first-class waiting-rooms of a great railway terminus in the majestic building of the *Daily Post*. The climax of the play had by its truth to nature greatly annoyed Mr. Ipple, and he was much surprised and even disturbed to find that the audience really liked it, in addition to adoring Betty Brik. However, he was not the man to be intimidated by audiences. He had always told the public what he thought was good for it, and he would continue to do so. He wrote quickly and steadily. And he wrote at length, because the policy of the *Daily Post* was never to say anything in ten words that could be said almost as well in twenty; the *Daily Post* was spacious, and it courteously assumed that its readers were people of leisure. As he wrote, a dirty boy in a clean, smart uniform took away the filled sheets.

Mr. Ipple wrote his notices once for all; he made no alterations in them, nor did he ask to see a proof of them. He was an expert; knew his job, and did his job with perfect assurance. He began, as always, in the calm judicial vein. But within thirty lines of the heading he had definitely deviated into the vein of very severe reprimand—reprimand, that is to say, of the author. He was always severe on authors. Of actors he instinctively thought the best; of authors he instinctively thought the worst. Actors were under his protection. Actors were, in his own phrase, "faithful servants of the public," whereas authors were nothing of the kind. Authors were generally something sinister and reprehensible that came between the public (with its great heart beating true) and the faithful servants of the public, impeding the faithful servants in the proper performance of their task of serving.

To this particular play Mr. Ipple applied the following epithets: dangerous, unwholesome, sickly, shamelessly cynical, formless, amateurish, insidious, continental. He then fully admitted the unquestionable popular success of the play (for he was perfectly honest under any but a very exceptional strain); and then he said that of course the performers had saved the play and that the author owed everything to them.

The transition to Betty Brik was natural and easy. He became lyrical about Betty. He achieved prose-poetry about Betty; and at the close of his article was a highly remarkable bit of British composition. He looked back into his memory and decided that within the memory of living men no English debutante had received such a laudation, at once grandiose, sincere, and convincing, in any first-class organ of opinion.

Then he went home to his little solitary flat in Sackville Street. He was a childless widower of many years standing, and beyond a fine theatrical library and a valet who perfectly understood Mr. Ipple, his flat had no distinction. For he belonged to the race of clubmen rather than to the race of householders. He did not sleep well. Indeed he did not even go to bed for a long time. He sat in a chair, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and meditated upon Betty. Do not imagine that he was in love with the young creature—at his age! He was convinced that he was not. Do not imagine, on the other hand, that he had anything against her. No! He admired and respected her in a high degree. That was all. She was delightful. She was a genius. And no exception whatever could be taken to her. He created her ravishing image in the glow of the gas-stove, and he desired to see her again.

The next morning the valet brought to his nervous and fatigued master a selection of the dailies, and Mr. Ipple read his own article and saw that it was good. The other papers had warm appreciation of the play; which pained Mr. Ipple, who was confirmed in his opinion that the world was not what it used to be. Still, the opinions of other critics did not annoy Mr. Ipple, because he was admittedly the chief critic.

He wanted to send a marked copy of the *Daily Post*, with his compliments, to Miss Brik—not that she would not have seen it—you bet that she was anxiously reading it at that very moment!—but as a mark of esteem and regard. But naturally he could not do such a thing. It would have been undignified. He wanted more than ever to see her again. He could not call on her a second time in her dressing-room—he was too great for that. He could not even go and see the play a second time, for if he went everybody would remark his presence, and wonder what on earth *he* was doing in the theatre so soon after the first performance. And certainly he could not wait for her at the stage-door.

His mental condition was not improved when his dear old pal the titled proprietor of the *Daily Post* rang him up on the telephone and in a friendly old-pallish way expressed some astonishment at the severity of his criticism of the play. "I say—a bit stiff this morning, aren't you, old boy?" Such was one of the affectionate phrases employed by the proprietor. Mr. Ipple could not make out what the world was coming to. However, in the afternoon he was comforted at the sight of a half-column special advertisement of the play in the evening papers, giving several laudatory extracts from press notices in large capitals, and his own laudation of Betty at the top. During the day it became very plain that Betty's success was the success of the decade, of the century. It banged everything. The ticket offices had bought blocks of seats

for six months ahead. But all this did not bring Mr. Ipple any nearer to Betty.

Three days later he received an invitation from the management to a supper on the stage "to meet Miss Betty Brik." He generally refused such invitations. But this one he did not refuse. He felt as if it had saved his life.

IV

The supper was one of those upright affairs in which the champagne is hot, the soup cold, and the sandwiches disillusioned by reason of their experience of life. Nevertheless it cost money, it demonstrated the real immensity of Betty Brik's success, and it was attended by an enormous crowd of persons thoroughly accustomed to seeing their names and portraits in the newspapers. There were several peers, several editors—including the lady who had been made an editor because of her face and her exceeding talent for self-advertisement—several Cabinet Ministers, several prize-fighters, several very renowned social mountebanks, and several princes of the cinema. The rage of the mature actresses present against the chit who had bounded ahead of them all in four days was as genuine as it was well concealed.

Mr. Lewis Ipple came rather low down in the scale of importance. Also he was curiously modest in regard to Betty Brik, the queen. Though his eyes followed her everywhere, he was most diffident about going up to her and talking to her. He spent his time in eating her (with his eyes) and admiring tremendously her charm, her demeanour, her entrancing sincere simplicity. She had a rôle difficult to fill, and she filled it to perfection.

After about a quarter of an hour the production manager pushed towards him through the crowd and said:

"Mr. Ipple, will you permit me to introduce to you Mr. Cecil Brick, our beloved Betty's father?"

Mr. Ipple permitted with alacrity, and shook hands with a clean-shaven man of about forty who looked like a lawyer, and indeed was one, if only a suburban lawyer. Mr. Cecil Brick displayed all the deference that Mr. Ipple could have desired, and all that his daughter, in her simple directness, had failed to display. He made no bones about the fact that in his mind Mr. Lewis Ipple was Mr. Lewis Ipple and the first of dramatic critics. He expressed unlimited gratitude to Mr. Ipple for the wonderful eulogy that Mr. Ipple had been pleased to bestow upon Betty. In return Mr. Ipple expressed the hope that Mr. Cecil Brick was restored to health. It appeared that while Mr. Brick was restored to health Mrs. Brick was now stricken. Mr. Ipple commiserated. They then discussed the theatre as an institution. Then Mr. Ipple, in a flash of inspiration, said:

"I'm giving a little luncheon at the Savoy next Wednesday to a few leading theatrical people. Do you think that your daughter would come, and would you and Mrs. Brick bring her?"

Mr. Brick answered without hesitation:

"I am quite sure that Betty would be delighted to come. But I shall ask you to excuse Mrs. Brick and myself. I am never free for lunch, and my wife's health would not allow her to come."

A sensible man, Mr. Brick; a man who could look facts in the face. Mr. Brick realized that Mr. Ipple did not really want parents at the lunch, and he realized also that Mr. Ipple was a man worth humouring.

The matter being settled in terms of the highest politeness, Mr. Ipple began to invite other guests on the spot. He took care to ask no really important feminine star, in order that he might put Betty on his right hand without arousing regrettable passions. The lunch would be as naught to him, and less than naught, if he could not have Betty next to him. He was very happy and excited in the prospect of the party. He met with no refusals from those whom he invited. But he had not yet spoken to Betty herself. Gathering his courage, he went straight up to her and shook hands. She was talking to her father and a peer. He considered that she was divine.

"Oh, but daddy," she said at mention of the lunch, "you know that Wednesday's the day that Arthur Several's coming to lunch."

She spoke nicely, but firmly, even somewhat haughtily. She showed a certain impatience. Already she had developed into the experienced leading lady whom the whole earth conspires to spoil. Evidently her father was no longer the sultan on the hearth-rug. Doubtless the rich film contract which Mr. Brick had made for her that morning contributed to the decision of her attitude. Mr. Brick accepted the minor rôle of a great star's father and solicitor.

Though Mr. Ipple had horrible sensations his resources did not fail.

"But I am asking Mr. Several too," he said with amazing rapidity. He won. He was happy, but not so happy as he had been a few minutes earlier.

V

At five minutes past the hour fixed for the luncheon Mr. Lewis Ipple, together with three ladies and one man, was waiting in the foyer of the Savoy Hotel. The air was full of music, and grateful odours, and appetite, and the savour of life; and the conspiracy of the directors of the hotel to convince visitors that the millennium had arrived and was functioning just there seemed to be rather successful. Mr. Ipple, however, had no such conviction. While talking intelligently about music he glanced at the stairs leading down from the great lobby, and everybody who was anybody came self-consciously down those stairs except Betty Brik.

Then she came, bringing some kind of a millennium with her. She looked as if she had come straight from the dressmaker's (having left an old frock behind) and called at the modiste's on the way (having left an old hat behind). She was clothed in the last degree of audacity, but she wore her attire with dignity. Her youthful freshness, the freedom of her movements, her innocent yet self-reliant smile, were dazzling. She appeared to have no self-consciousness. The three women—two middle-aged, one young and ambitious—exclaimed softly and flatteringly to each other and to Mr. Ipple upon her beauty, her charm, and her simplicity. Her entry would have been perfect for Mr. Ipple had Betty not been accompanied by Arthur Several. He had feared she would come with Several. He did not like it, especially as Several himself was exceedingly smart, with a hint of a waist, and very young. Moreover, the plush footman greeted Several as an established patron and took his hat and stick without any formality of giving a check in exchange.

Mr. Ipple determined to separate Betty and Arthur at the luncheon-table.

"I do hope we aren't the last," said Betty, apologizing for lateness. They were not. The last would be a certain baronet who interested himself in the stage to the extent of losing a few thousands every year in some enterprise that prided itself on not being "commercial." All felt that it was the right of the baronet to arrive last. He came (black-and-white check trousers and white spats) within the next minute, puffing, frothing, haw-hawing and giggling. Miss Tita Roden, one of the elder ladies, famous for her dowagers of the old school, with whom Betty had been chatting privately, attached herself to the baronet at once. The party of eight passed conversationally into the crowded restaurant; and since quite half of the lunchers carried complete copies of "Who's Who" in their hearts, they were recognized at once, to the universal satisfaction.

"Do let me have Sir Waverley next to me—I want to grumble at him at length," said Tita Roden with her spacious humour, appealingly, as the party gathered at the large round blossoming table in the corner on the Embankment front.

Mr. Lewis Ipple could not say no, though Sir Waverley's place was unquestionably on Betty Brik's right. By the time they were all seated Mr. Ipple had reconciled himself to the fact that by means of a secret understanding between two women Arthur Several was established in the place of honour on Betty's right. He had to be philosophic about it, because as host he had to be bright. He was a practised host. He did not entertain often, because he could not afford it; but he had been entertaining at restaurants for thirty years, and he knew how by prevision to assure the smooth passage of the meal on perilous seas.

The *maître d'hôtel* of the restaurant deigned to interest himself personally in the affair and talked to Mr. Ipple in French. But the *maître d'hôtel* was also acquainted with Betty, and talked to her in English. Yesterday Betty was nobody. To-day she was on terms with one of the most august figures in the Empire! Tita Roden did engage Sir Waverley. They gossiped tremendously in a great deal of cross-talk; they were turned towards each other on their chairs. Betty and Arthur Several also turned towards each other on their chairs, earnestly conversing, but in quiet tones and without back-chat. Mr. Lewis Ipple sat forlorn and neglected. The whole restaurant saw him, the host, forlorn and neglected. The purgatorial situation persisted for an immense period of time until Tita Roden, in a swift coy movement of her massive face as it turned away from one of the baronet's witty digs, caught sight of Mr. Lewis Ipple forlorn and saw that she had been guilty of a social lapse.

"Oh! Don't mind me," said Mr. Ipple, with an admirable imitation of archness. "Don't mind me. I'm only your host."

Whereupon the two women, Tita and Betty, combined suddenly to recompense him; they wondrously encircled him in smiles and adorable attentions, while the Baronet and Arthur Several switched off to other ladies. Mr. Ipple was less unhappy, and he would have been still less unhappy had Tita Roden not deserted her baronet. He marvelled at Betty Brik's qualities, both physical and mental. He honestly thought that such a combination of beauty, sense, kindness, strength and charm as she presented had never previously occurred in the history of the sex. But most of all her unspoilt youth charmed him. There she was sitting next to him as his chief guest in the Savoy and being exquisitely nice to him, while all the world of the Savoy watched. Scores of otherwise triumphant men must have envied him in that moment his relations with the new star of the first magnitude. Nevertheless, his contentment was only superficial, like a thin crust of ice glittering over dark depths of disillusion.

Then the catastrophe began. Tita Roden began it, by the most fulsome praise of his article about the play in which Betty Brik had found glory. She praised Mr. Ipple's praise of Betty, and, not satisfied with that, she praised his castigation of the play itself.

"I'm old-fashioned enough——" she said.

A silly phrase—silly because it implied that Mr. Ipple also was old-fashioned! He would not have minded that so much if Betty Brik's demeanour had not suddenly changed. Betty exercised, with dignity, all her prestige. Oh! She remained very nice, very kind, very polite, but she made Mr. Ipple understand plainly that she objected to his treatment of the play. Her beautiful eyes sparkled a controlled resentment. She felt with keenness about the future of the theatre, and her notions concerning the evolution of the drama were what is called advanced. She said further that his praise of herself was too indiscriminate and had made her feel rather awkward as she read it. She said that Arthur Several had found grave defects in her performance and had set them forth in his paper, while powerfully praising the play, and that she had loved Arthur's notice.

Astounding woman! Mr. Ipple had never met any actress in the least like her. Mr. Ipple was snubbed, and publicly, politely and unexceptionably snubbed. And the worst was that he continued to respect and worship his destroyer, on account of the firm character which she was now showing. She lost nothing in his esteem, but he had lost a lot in hers. To intensify his tragedy the conversation became general, and the entire table, save foolish, fat Tita Roden with her absurd "I'm old-fashioned enough"—the entire table sided with Betty and against their host.

"Am I getting old-fashioned?" Mr. Lewis Ipple asked himself.

The dreadful suspicion had never before entered his mind. He reflected that in the London notices of *The Nice Niece* he had been practically alone in one camp and all the other critics in the other camp, and now he conceived the possibility of the other critics not being all absolutely wrong; which possibility he had not conceived previously. He remembered the gentle reproof administered to him on the telephone by his proprietor. He noticed the stains on his concave waistcoat and the impeccably smart clothes of young Several. He had slept very badly during the night—why?—and now in an instant a strange and distressing lassitude overcame him and he knew that he was destroyed. Betty Brik changed the subject of conversation. She was very tactful. The tactfulness was torture to him.

As a madman digging his own grave, he went back to the subject, horribly fascinated by it, and Tita Roden committed further follies, and Betty would not abate her uncompromising demeanour, and Arthur Several smiled ironically to himself, and at last the table grew silent in constraint.

Nothing had happened and yet everything had happened. Brightness fell from the Savoy air.

The idea in the hinterland of Mr. Ipple's mind was:

"I am a back number."

The restaurant was emptying. Mr. Ipple wafted his party into the lounge for coffee. Betty Brik drank her coffee, and then, with all sweet apologies, said she had to go; and she thanked him beautifully for the luncheon, and departed, taking Arthur Several with her, and leaving Mr. Ipple's good opinion of himself shattered at Mr. Ipple's feet. Soon all the others went, except Tita. Tita wouldn't go. She talked fatuously.

"We older people——" she said.

At last she went. Mr. Ipple discharged the bill. What had Mr. Ipple against Betty Brik? He had nothing against her. He

still worshipped her. Only she had fought an invisible battle with him and annihilated him. She had smashed him because she was beautiful and talented and sincere and original and in enormous vogue, and above all young. And it was her youth that was the deciding factor of the issue. The tremendous advantage of youth is unfair and cruel, but it exists. Betty had behaved perfectly. But she had killed him, and she would very soon forget him. He had given a lifetime to the slow building of his reputation. She had supervened, and with no effort instantly wrecked it.

He walked home still thinking: "I am a back number." He would not even try to see her again. She did not guess what she had done. She was perfect.

Within a month Mr. Ipple resigned his position on the *Daily Post*—rumour said on a substantial pension. Paragraphs appeared in the theatrical columns of the Press—brief circles on the surface round a sunk stone. Then Mr. Ipple was replaced, and he was forgotten. "Poor old Ipple!" people murmured, and admired and gloated over the gorgeous increasing success of Betty Brik, the finest actress of her generation and a rare fine young woman to boot. Every untoward event in the evolution of society has its compensation, and the wise look back with sympathy and forward with eager hope.

XI

THE PERFECT CREATURE

I

The Revestres—pronounced Reveter, with the accent on the first syllable—were entertaining at tea in their marvellous sixteenth-century house, which combined the antique architectural loveliness of its period with the latest conveniences and the latest manifestations of sound art. A guest on arriving might admire the mullions, and then go inside and be ravished by an early portrait of Mr. Revestre by Augustus John, and then mount to his chamber and learn by bodily experience that the Jacobean four-poster had a Vi-spring mattress, and that the silver taps over the marble and font-like basin in the corner jetted with equal assurance both hot and cold water at any hour of the day or night. All the arts were profoundly understood and exemplified in that celebrated house, and none more profoundly than the art of life itself.

Mr. Revestre, a man of fifty, resembled a retired Major-General of the finest type, though he was only the brother of one. And that even the Major-General exceeded and surpassed a typical Major-General is shown by the mere fact that the brothers had once collaborated in a book of classical parodies of which the scarce first edition was considerably sought after by enlightened collectors. Mrs. Revestre was a slim and elegant woman of fifty, universally adored, and well meriting adoration by reason of her charm, her quick sympathy and her wide interests. At the age of forty-eight her hair had suddenly changed from an iron-grey to a magnificent copper hue. There had been no mystery about it. The worshipped Adela was far too wise to try to make a mystery about it. She had announced the miracle in advance. Everybody said how brave and simple she was, and that the colour had been admirably chosen, and that the change was a dazzling success.

These parents had a daughter, Elvira, aged twenty-three, as to whom they were privately convinced, though they never openly stated—even to one another—that she was the finest daughter in England. Thousands of parents have a silly illusion to this effect about their daughters. But in the case of the Revestres the conviction was not a silly illusion; it was no sort of illusion. If Elvira was not the finest daughter in England—at any rate there was in the land no finer daughter. She was very beautiful both in face and figure. No credit to anybody, of course, for that! She had an excellent constitution. No credit to anybody for that, either! She had a delightful disposition—at once kindly and sagacious. And no credit to anybody for that! She was born so, under heaven's inscrutable decree, which had also given her copper-coloured hair. (Hence the appositeness of her mother's choice of tint!) But the parents had treated nature's raw material with wondrous wisdom and most praiseworthy devotion. Elvira had received a superb and comprehensive education at Somerville College, Oxford. She was brilliantly familiar with literature, tongues, art, history, physics, metaphysics, philosophy, and politics—in which I include modern politics. She could play well at tennis, hockey, golf and bridge. She exhibited taste and skill on the piano. She danced well and loved dancing. She dressed well and loved nice frocks. She had a low voice. She was a graceful and amusing talker. She had been radically cured of the terrible national curse, self-consciousness. She could cook, knew fresh fish from ancient at the fish-monger's, and could manage a house and talk amiably to parlourmaids about cinemas and young men. Lovely without being vain, bright without being shallow, instructed and yet free from intellectual arrogance, virtuous but not priggish, as modest as she was gifted and fortunate, Elvira came as near to perfection as the ingrained malice of creative nature will permit. It is a pleasure to describe her.

There were two guests in the inner hall when tea was served: Mr. Edward Planta and Mr. Arthur Chains-Marlott, each illustrious. Mr. Edward Planta was *the* Edward Planta, the mathematician and philosopher, who had pursued mathematics into regions so high that scarcely anyone else could support life in that rarefied atmosphere, and who had taken up the French philosopher Bergson, and shaken him like a rat. A man of thirty-five, agreeable and nervous, dressed with careless elegance, flying a silky brown beard! That he was a Fellow of All Souls, getting a stipend not for doing but merely for being, showed that Oxford regarded him as an ornament to society. Mr. Arthur Chains-Marlott, aged twenty-eight, perfectly dressed in the taste of 1835, was the already renowned musical composer and mystic. He counted on the Continent; and he got glorious performances of his distinguished orchestral and choral works everywhere because he paid generously for extra rehearsals. Mr. and Mrs. Revestre never invited bachelors to stay in their abode unless after careful research they had been passed as eligible. The parents' aim was to give Elvira the best possible facilities for falling in love. They were much too nice-minded to reveal to her their tactics, but their tactics were not hidden from her. Edward Planta and Arthur Chains-Marlott were bachelors.

"First of all," said Edward Planta, taking a tartlet and eyeing it with destructive love, "it's only fair to differentiate between what Einstein himself says and the perfectly blithering nonsense which has been written about what he says. I should imagine that his mathematics are interesting; it will take a year or two really to pronounce a verdict on *them*. In the meantime he undoubtedly does say at the beginning of his own book that in writing it he hasn't troubled about style. Well, my view is that anyone who will seriously say a thing like that can't have what I call a mind. Without style accuracy of statement is impossible. Besides, every first-rate man of science is an artist, and therefore passionately interested in style."

"What puts me off," said Chains-Marlott, "is his violin-playing. The people who praise his relativity say he interprets Bach divinely. Well, I haven't heard him, but I know he doesn't. No one can interpret Bach divinely on the fiddle in the intervals of scientific work."

"You mean," said Elvira, "interpreting Bach divinely's a full-time job."

They all laughed, papa and mamma with natural if naïve pride, Planta and Chains-Marlott with lightning appreciation of the enchanting young creature's wit, and Elvira from the unspoilt pleasure of being appreciated.

Elvira was very happy. The world seemed admirable to her. She felt, rather than knew, that the two great men were running off the final heat of which the prize was herself. They had disposed of all other competitors in the previous heats. She was always preoccupied with love, without quite realizing that it was so. Her soul was an amazing and delicious whirl of exquisite sensations. She could not decide whether she was in love; and, assuming that she was in love, she could not decide whether it was Edward or Arthur, or both, that she preferred. She adored her parents; she revelled in the taste and the intelligence of the environment and the companionship they had created for her. How to choose between two such beings as Edward and Arthur? When she sat close to Arthur at the piano, playing duets with him, she was intoxicated by his masterful, sensitive, original interpretations, and she responded with eager ecstasy to his spoken and unspoken directions. He inspired her heart and her fingers till she could play beyond her own skill, and yet she knew that compared with his playing hers simply did not exist. Similarly with Edward, whose talk was an enchantment; she too could talk brilliantly, in communion with Edward. And they were so *nice*, were Edward and Arthur.

Like all wise girls, she was, despite modesty, well aware of her wisdom. It was not conceit that convinced her that but one girl in a thousand was capable of appreciating such men as Edward and Arthur—and that she was the thousandth!

Nevertheless, with all her education and strong sense she was in fact extremely callow. She did not judge Edward and Arthur realistically; she saw in them, not what was there, but her ideals. She knew everything. But at the same time she knew nothing. She had not a notion that love affairs were embedded in Edward Planta's past, like awkward bits of quartz in a lump of flint. All her studies had not taught her that Arthur's peculiar brick-coloured complexion was a signal of unrighteousness. She allowed nothing in her estimate of the men for the glaring and immense fact that they were trying all they could to please her. She sat in her light frock there, pouring tea into beautiful china with gestures of heavenly grace, her grey eyes roving and seeing naught that was not artistic, her pink ears listening to naught that was not intelligent and amusing, her blood beating ardently through her veins and giving changeful life to her ineffably soft skin, her copper hair wantoning fluffily on her slender neck, her brain working with the brightest, alertest efficiency, her heart honest and kindly—and never dreamt that she was the very soul and inspirer of the scene! A simpleton? Undoubtedly. A treasure—and a simpleton.

II

There was the sound of a machine-gun without. It ceased suddenly.

"What is that singular crepitation?" asked Mr. Revestre with undisturbed blandness.

Then followed some transactions in the outer hall, and through the doors separating the outer hall from the inner hall entered a human being in a dark-stained, khaki-yellow, tattered garment which was bound in tightly at the waist by a formidable belt and flowed widely forth over the hips like the petticoat of a Tahiti girl. The human being carried in his hands an enormous pair of stiff gauntlets, a leather cap, and some gigantic goggles. The effect of his advent was similar to that of a boulder flung through a vast dome of shimmering crystal. You could almost hear the cascading fall of shattered glass. The wonderful atmosphere of the tea-party was at any rate utterly destroyed in an instant.

"Mr. Herbert Clixam," announced the butler impassively.

Even Adela, supreme exemplar of social tact, was shaken out of her tranquillity. She flushed. She was a Clixam.

"I suppose you are Adela," said the visitor awkwardly, and awkwardly advancing.

"My *dear* Bertie! How unexpected and how welcome!" Adela murmured. She was a wonderful woman.

The assemblage learned that Herbert Clixam was a second cousin whose mother had been in correspondence with Adela and that Adela had suggested a visit from him if perchance he should be passing through the neighbourhood on a contemplated journey from the far north to the far south of our realm. Here he was! His arrival had been accompanied by phenomenon recalling descriptions of the apocalypse; but here he was! His gauntlets were vile, but his stubby hands were clean. Also his brilliantined hair lay on his rugged head with the shining smoothness of the hair of a seal just emerged from the water. And though his boots were gargantuan and dusty, his lounge suit, after the yellow robe had been removed, was revealed as correct enough. Further, the casual curt style in which he muttered to the butler: "You can have the suit-case unstrapped from the carrier. Here's the key," indicated that he could not be entirely ignorant of his way about. Some men would have given the butler an advantage over them by letting him have to ask for the key. And not a few would have said: "You can unstrap the suit-case——" as if any butler in such a house would personally unstrap anything whatever.

But my *dear* Bertie had apparently no social ease. He was intimidated by the aspect of the company, and his fright made him gruff and mute. He resisted doggedly all the urbane efforts of all the company, and especially of Adela and Elvira, to build up a conversation, replying to inquiries in monosyllables, and displaying not the slightest initiative. The spectacle shocked Elvira. She had had no idea that there were any Clixams like that, and she had never contemplated the possibility of any such barbaric, uncouth, maladroit specimen of the outer hordes of humanity plunging into her delicate and perfect home. Of course, she felt sorry for the young man. It was not for herself and her home that she felt sorry, but for him. She and her parents and her admirers were impeccably at ease, not showing by the slightest glance or tone that Herbert Clixam's state and insufficiency were painfully pitiable. And Elvira was all the more shocked in that conversational skill and the art of urbane deportment were the specialities of the house. She knew that excellent judges had said that at the Revestres' you could be sure of hearing the best talk in England.

At a certain moment she perceived that her mother had perceived that it would be a real kindness to my *dear* Bertie to ignore him for a little, so that he might pull himself together; and thereupon she set to work to help the others in reconstituting the beautiful atmosphere which my *dear* Bertie had so violently destroyed.

"And what's the latest about the engineering crisis, Herbert?" asked Mr. Revestre in due season, taking advantage of an opening in a discussion of Einstein's mechanics to rescue Clixam from his savage silence, which it was considered should by now have served its purpose.

"Oh! The lock-out, d'you mean? I'm not in that show, you know. I'm a chemical engineer, not a mechanical engineer," answered Clixam.

"Ah! Breaking up coal for its products and so on, I suppose?" said Edward Planta, pleased that he knew at least something of what chemical engineering dealt with.

"Not so much that as the fixation of nitrogen—that's the great stunt of the next few years."

"How interesting!" observed Chains-Marlott politely, but with the faintest undertone of condescension.

"It is," said Clixam, rather challengingly.

"Do tell us about it," Chains-Marlott pursued.

And my *dear* Bertie did tell them about it, though with possibly a too crude zeal. Then suddenly, brutally, he stopped. He had said what he had to say and possessed no idea of grace in talk.

"Am I right in assuming that chemical engineering leads to mechanical engineering—directly or indirectly?" asked Edward Planta. "My ignorance of the mechanical side of life is touching," he added.

"Well, it does and it doesn't," said Clixam lamely. (What a phrase in such a house!)

"I venture to think that if the mechanics of life were suppressed for about half a century the result might be advantageous to the human race," remarked Chains-Marlott coolly, and with a delicate cruel disdain that Elvira had deemed him incapable of.

Herbert Clixam blushed, opened his mouth, stuck, and shut his mouth again. He was not equal to the situation, tomahawks being both forbidden and unknown in the Revestre civilization.

Elvira thought of a good retort for him: "And in the interval how would you dispose of sewage, for instance, without mechanics?" That would have been a finisher for Chains-Marlott, whose daily and hourly happiness was in a high degree dependent in a hundred ways upon mechanical engineering. She almost made the rough unsavoury retort herself, but refrained, not because she thought it unsavoury—she had been brought up realistically—but because she did not like to have the air of doing for cousin Clixam what he had been unable to do for himself. The next moment Adela had put everything right, but in Elvira's thoughts Chains-Marlott had lost the final heat to Edward Planta. And she felt that they all owed some reparation to poor defenceless Bertie Clixam, and determined to defend him against Arthur vehemently if need should arise. In so doing she would be defending too the honour of the house.

III

Looking through the balconied window of the main staircase, Elvira, on her way down to dinner, perceived Herbert Clixam taking the air in the garden. He had his hands deep in his pockets, and when he turned round, at the end of the path, it seemed to Elvira that she was reminded of the movements of a tiger turning round at the end of its cage. She watched him perform about half a dozen absolutely regular tigerish turns, and then she remembered that she had not cast a housewifely glance over his room, as her mother would certainly expect her to do. In Bertie's room she saw the largest sponge she had ever seen. It was the very emperor of sponges, and of exceeding fine quality.

"Good heavens!" she said to herself. "How physical the poor thing is!"

Which impression was confirmed by a more detailed examination of the apartment. Nevertheless, while pitying him for the sponge, she also admired him for the sponge. And while admitting his exaggerated and powerful masculinity, she also felt that the great beast somehow needed protection. (Not that Bertie was a big man—but he had big shoulders.)

He made a lamentable effect by entering the drawing-room in what the Revestres always disdainfully referred to as a boiled shirt. Elvira had not noticed that dreadful detail from the staircase window. The shirt stuck out from his chest in a vast, stiff, bluish-white curve. The other men wore soft silk shirts to their dinner-jackets. In the matter of evening shirts they were all anti-starch; and Mr. Revestre, though he appreciated as well as anybody the danger of being peculiar, would not wear an ordinary stiff shirt even with a ceremonious swallow-tail coat. For him indeed the starched shirt was barbaric. And a starched shirt on the body of a guest hurt him more than if he had been wearing it himself. Still, as the whole company was full of tact and nice feeling, the barbaric Bertie got no hint whatever that he was barbaric.

Two young women came to dinner—Mrs. Revestre had fished them out from somewhere in order to equalize the sexes at her table. Like herself and Elvira, they were dressed in the height of the daring fashion—Mrs. Revestre was never afraid of a fashion either for herself or for her daughter—and at dinner Bertie Clixam assuredly did look very odd in the assemblage. However, Mrs. Revestre had him to sit next to her, and she protected him in exactly the manner in which Elvira had intended to protect him, only perhaps more skilfully. And Elvira had Arthur Chains-Marlott, instead of Bertie, next to her, and was a little disappointed, and quite unconsciously displayed her disappointment by one or two conversational fencing matches with the celebrated composer. She went so far as falsely to assert to him that she loved Brahms, which offended him.

After dinner some more couples arrived from a neighbouring mansion, and somebody suggested a dance. Now the house of the Revestres was an extraordinary house, and far removed from the mediocre and Philistine; but it resembled the mediocre and Philistine in this, that the girls in it were attracted by the idea of an impromptu dance much more than they would have been by the idea of a prearranged dance. The suggestion was received with immense enthusiasm, and Mr. Revestre had to hide his antipathy to it. Mr. Revestre believed strongly in organization, and he prided himself, modestly and with refinement, upon the perfect organization of his home. He enjoyed a dance, and he enjoyed organizing a dance, and getting a couple of musicians over from Cambridge, and so on. But what about the music for an impromptu dance? It was impossible to ask Chains-Marlott to play fox-trots.

"Haven't you got a gramophone?" Bertie asked.

"I'm afraid we haven't," Mr. Revestre replied to the barbarian, with an invisible shudder of the soul. A gramophone! In the house of the Revestres!

"Good God!" said Bertie simply.

"Mr. Chains-Marlott must play, of course," Elvira decided. "It will be the finest dance music you ever heard. . . . I hope you dance, Bertie?" She turned to cousin Clixam, who surprisingly answered:

"Well, I hop about a bit. Will you dance with me? That would give me a start, you see."

"I should love to, thanks," said Elvira amiably.

The servants had nipped up the carpet from the centre of the drawing-room, and Bertie, with his partner, began at once to hop about a bit. Elvira found that Bertie danced chiefly on his heels, and very monotonously, eschewing all variations; but he did know what he wanted and he never left his partner in doubt as to what he wanted. She enjoyed yielding to his tyrannical indications, but she did not enjoy the actual dancing. Nor did she enjoy the touch of the upper part of his hand on the skin of the small of her back. The man was evidently not accustomed to the latest fashions.

"I say," said he, soon, "what's that fellow supposed to be playing?"

"It's passages out of the waltz from Strauss's 'Rosenkavalier,'" Elvira told him. "The finest waltz of the century, we all think."

"It may be," said Bertie nonchalantly, "but it's no earthly to dance to. No earthly!"

"I suppose it isn't," Elvira admitted. "Really."

They stopped. Two other couples had stopped also. Mr. Chains-Marlott perceived that, exquisitely as he had been playing, he was not filling the bill. Lovely girls crowded round the piano and besought the genius to play something danceable. They pleaded, they apologized, they apostrophized his good nature and their own audacity, and at last Mr. Chains-Marlott was enabled to recall the air of a fox-trot, and he played it as only he could have played it—divinely. But it was not danceable.

"He may be no end of a swell," said Bertie Clixam, "but he's got no notion of keeping time."

Arthur Chains-Marlott! No notion of keeping time!

"Perhaps *you* could play, my dear Bertie," said Adela sweetly, after each girl, including Elvira, had protested that she could not possibly play for dancing.

"I can't play," he replied. "But I expect I could ladle out 'Japanese Sandman' or 'El Relicaria.'"

He was pushed into the seat of performance. His playing proved to be appalling. The wonder was that the artistic house did not crumble at the shock, and Mr. Chains-Marlott and Mr. Revestre faint jointly away. Bertie's thick fingers were like hammers. He had no soul, and, what was worse, he had no wrist. That is to say, his wrist was like a piece of cast-iron. He violated every principle of piano technique. The performance was an outrage upon the sensibilities of all cultured persons. But Bertie kept strict time. Dancing was resumed, and at the end of the first dance lovely girls crowded round Bertie and applauded him and supplicated him to continue. Chains-Marlott and Mr. Revestre had disappeared. Elvira had a curious feeling of pride in her cousin Clixam, and although she did not enjoy dancing with him she regretted that his strange pianistic ability prevented him from dancing with her. Bertie was in a fair way to become the hero of the night, when the night took an entirely fresh turn. Mr. Revestre reappeared, with trouble trembling on his countenance.

"The electricity is giving out," said he. And all agreed that they had latterly noticed a diminution of light.

This evil chance was a blow to Mr. Revestre's prestige as an organizer. In the house of the Revestres nothing ever went wrong. It was a blow also to Mr. Revestre's prestige as a judge of character. The head gardener, Blamber, was also the engineer of the establishment. He was newly engaged, and Mr. Revestre had banked on him. He had gone away that afternoon for three days to the urgent funeral of an aunt, and he had sworn that he had made enough current for three days.

And on the first evening the supply was failing! The prospect positively frightened Mr. Revestre. How, for instance, could he read in bed without the electric reading-lamp over his head? And how could he sleep if he did not read?

Bertie Clixam was not a mechanical engineer; yet the Revestres glanced at him as at a possible saviour.

"I really don't know much about these things," said he. "But I can tell you one thing. You'd better switch off the current at once and use candles. If you don't your man will probably have to give the engine a continuous forty-eight-hour run after he comes back, and there'll be gallons of bother."

Cruel, heartless advice! Adela acted upon it, and everybody said how delightful candles were, and what a superior light they gave. For beauty and softness of ray—nothing to touch a candle! But everybody left early, and, for different reasons, Mr. Revestre and the illustrious composer went to bed early.

IV

Each bearing a candle, Elvira and Bertie Clixam mounted the stairs together. They were the last.

"I wish I could have got rid of that crumpled rose-leaf," said Bertie, pausing on the landing at precisely the spot where Elvira had looked forth at him in the garden. Elvira paused too.

"Crumpled rose-leaf? What do you mean?" she asked, regarding him in bewilderment. His starched cuirass had splendidly withstood all the perils of the evening and was as glossy and bombastic as ever.

"The crumpled rose-leaf in your father's bed of roses," said Bertie with irony. "The missing electric light. He's dreadfully upset about it."

Elvira, amused and astonished by Bertie's sardonic but kindly wit, gave a charming, free laugh.

"Oh! He is!" she agreed.

"If I knew where the engine-house was I'd go and have a look at it."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"The engine-house is next to the garage," said Elvira. "I *think* the key's generally hung on the wine-cellar door in the kitchen, but I'm not sure. It used to be."

"Supposing we make sure?"

Elvira preceded him downstairs again in a sort of wild one-step. From her demeanour nobody could have divined her brilliant and comprehensive education.

A warm night full of mysterious fragrance lay softly upon the garden and grounds.

"Isn't it a lovely night?" Elvira murmured.

"The night's all right, I expect," said Clixam. "Give me the key, will you?"

He unlocked the door of the engine-house, looked in, struck a match, and then switched on the light. He gazed meditatively at the engine with its great fly-wheel, walked round it, read the printed instructions on the card nailed to the wall, and inspected the indicator and the fuel gauge.

"So that's it, is it?" he muttered meditatively. "Well, I think this might be started."

"Not to-night!"

"Why not? It might need a twenty-hour run, perhaps only ten; I don't know. *If* I can start it, there's a chance your father will rise up to-morrow morning and call me blessed. Well, good night."

"I'm not going to bed if you're staying here," said Elvira, with a note of challenge in her voice. Bertie whistled, and,

taking down a suit of yellow overalls from a hook, put them on over his dress clothes.

"You'd better stand outside while I operate this blow-lamp. That dress of yours . . . dirt . . . to say nothing of it being inflammable."

She stood outside and watched him. In three minutes his hands were foul, in four his face was smudged. In other respects he was very slow. Elvira watched him moving to and fro in the confined space of the low engine-house, and thought how like a benevolent devil he seemed, and how intensely romantic the engine-house was, and how strange it was that she had never till then suspected the presence of romance in the engine-house. As for what he was doing, his acts were a complete enigma to her. He lit a great heavy lamp that first smoked and then roared prodigiously—so much so that Elvira was girlishly frightened for his life. After a very long time he seized the fly-wheel, as it were caressingly. He repeated this manoeuvre, and at length the fly-wheel revolved very deliberately under his pressure. And then, lo! it was revolving by itself. It increased in speed, and a terrific racket grew up in the engine-house. The lamp ceased to roar and began to smoke again, and Bertie extinguished and detached it and pushed it into a corner.

"Can I come in now?" Elvira demanded.

No answer. Bertie was bending over the engine with an oil-can.

"Can I come in now?" she shouted.

No answer. He had not heard in the hurly-burly of clacking steel. She pulled at a strap at the back of his overalls and he looked round.

"Can I come in now?" she bawled.

"Yes. But keep clear of that fly-wheel. Don't go within a yard of it. You understand?"

She nodded and gingerly entered. She was extremely excited. It was very hot in the engine-house, but she felt delightfully comfortable in her scanty and pale frock—so absurdly and even wickedly different from his heavy enveloping overalls. The electric light over their heads had no mercy in its revelations of her physique, nor did she desire any mercy. She knew that she looked frivolous, but she liked to look frivolous, was proud of the appearance of frivolity. And yet—and yet—she hoped that he did not completely despise her, with her so-called brilliant education. She admitted that he was entitled to despise her on that score. What did her education and her accomplishments amount to? Little. She could keep house—the rest was frills. But he could do real things, marvellous things. He was not a mechanical engineer. Nevertheless he had mastered an unknown engine. She admired him dreadfully. Yes, dreadfully. She was ashamed of being a mere ornament to society. He reached over for a spanner. She picked it up for him. It was greasy. She rubbed her jewelled hand on her short skirt, deliberately.

"Well, that's a nice trick!" Bertie shouted. "Your dress will be ruined."

"I don't mind. . . . It's only an old one," she added untruthfully.

She did not mind. On the contrary, she went about with set purpose to stain her frock, and found a voluptuous pleasure in spoiling it. She loved to see the horrid marks on it and on her fragile iridescent shoes. She reflected in a sort of ecstasy that everybody else was in bed, and that everybody else imagined that she too was in bed, whereas she was in fact alone with him in the engine-house and in the night. The sense of adventure was acute.

"I'll step outside for a bit," said he, pushing her gently lest she should not have caught his words. She gently resisted his push, so that he should push more. Outside, in front of the doorway, he opened the overalls.

"Take my cigarette-case out of my breast-pocket, will you, please?" said he. "I daren't touch anything except the overalls."

She obeyed, thrilled. It was a complicated cigarette-case with matches in it. She picked a cigarette for him and struck a match.

"Have one?" he suggested. She shook her head, replacing the case. She wanted a cigarette, but she wanted still more to be absolutely different from him.

"So you were at Somerville?" he said, gazing at her quizzically. She nodded. "Those girls' colleges must be rum places," he said.

"They are," she agreed with fervour, thinking suddenly of the million incredible pettinesses of collegiate existence. A silence. The night was magnificent.

"Do you people here talk about the fourth dimension every day?" he asked, referring to a conversation at dinner.

She pouted.

"Almost," she said.

"Do you really think there is a fourth dimension?"

"No."

"Well, that's something, anyway!"

He threw down the cigarette and returned into the engine-house. She walked off in the direction of the mansion and came back in a few minutes with a tray holding two cold mutton chops, two glasses, a jug of lemonade, some bread, two knives and two forks. He raised his eyebrows.

"This is what I call genuine hospitality," he said. "How are we going to manage?" She put the tray on the step leading up into the engine-house, and she sat on the ground in her devastated frock, and Bertie Clixam sat on an empty tin of Mobiloil.

"What's that funny light in the sky over there?" she asked.

"That's a thing they call the dawn," he informed her, and jumped into the engine-house to nurse his racketing child, which had just given disconcerting symptoms. It began to rain, warm baptismal rain. She loved to feel it on her skin.

"I'd better return that tray to the kitchen," she suggested when both bones had been picked clean.

"Perhaps you had," he concurred. "It might look better. And don't come back. Go to bed."

"Do you think I ought?"

"I do."

"But how long shall *you* stay here?"

"Rely on me for breakfast—but you'll be asleep then."

"I *shan't*," she protested, with violent conviction.

"Well, good night. And thanks for able assistance."

She went off with the tray in the rain, and obediently did not come back. There was a sound core of prudence in Elvira.

V

Still, she was asleep for breakfast and therefore did not appear. The tragedy—it was a tragedy for Elvira—arose out of the strange conduct of the French maid, Mariette, who had once served Adela alone, then Adela and Elvira equally, and was now serving chiefly Elvira. Mariette, so the tale was related in the kitchen, had had horrible dreams during the night—including a nightmare to the effect that the electric-light engine was working throughout the night, when obviously it could not have been working. After the dreams she had overslept herself, and had consequently failed to call her young mistress at the usual appointed hour. On entering the bedroom, very late, she had found her mistress asleep, and she had also found her mistress's evening-frock lying on the carpet. She had picked it up, gazed at it thunderstruck, rushed out of the chamber with it, had hysterics in the corridor, and quite forgotten to wake Elvira. And Elvira, on being summoned to consciousness by another hand, had burst into the most astonishing tears at the information that breakfast was over. She was not angry with negligent and fanciful servants. No! She was always too good-natured for resentment, but her grief

was acute and she did not hide it.

At length descending, she had discovered her father and Bertie gossiping together very intimately, her father simply delighted at the resumption of the electrical supply and extraordinarily pleased with Bertie. Some of his admiration he had kept for his daughter, whose share in the undertaking Bertie had recounted.

Chains-Marlott had left, and Edward Planta was reading apart. As for Adela, she thoughtfully said not a word about the spoilt frock; she was a woman of the nicest tact, and she would do nothing to impair the felicity of the morning.

Elvira, however, could not partake of the household felicity. Bertie had given her one tolerant, amused, disdainful glance, as if to say: "I knew you wouldn't be down for breakfast." This glance pierced her heart, which bled freely.

"How he must despise me!" she said to herself, yawning afterwards in her bedroom.

At lunch Bertie almost completely ignored her. He was out for tea with Mr. Revestre. At dinner he casually remarked that she was very pale—doubtless worn out!—and she learnt that he had been running the engine again, without having invited her assistance! The electric light was brilliant. Mr. Revestre seemed to sun himself in it.

About an hour after dinner Elvira began to behave in a manner of which twenty-four hours earlier she would have deemed herself incapable, a manner worthy of a minx, of a designing chit, of a girl without either intellectual resources or decent feminine pride. She got Edward Planta into a corner and spectacularly flirted with him for the benefit of Bertie Clixam. She grew more and more intimate with Edward Planta; she talked in clear tones, and perhaps rather loudly (for her), on his subjects; she flattered him until he conceived a scheme for proposing to her the next day. And all the time her eye was furtively upon Bertie Clixam, and she lived in a fever of apprehension—or of expectation. She had acute difficulty in maintaining in a convincing way her share of the lofty conversation with Edward; but she did maintain it. At last Bertie, after hovering uncertainly on her horizon, approached her and said:

"I'm just going along to the engine-house. You coming?"

She looked up at him, exquisitely happy and relieved, for she knew from his voice and demeanour that he was savagely jealous of that high-brow Edward Planta.

"I don't think I'll come to-night," she said, with the sweetest smile. "Mr. Planta and I are having a great argument."

Bertie departed in silence. She was radiant and triumphant, and her deplorable tactics caused her conscience not one twinge.

VI

Then began in the refined and hitherto tranquil house of the Revestres a cyclone that raged round and round, within the house and without the house, intimidating and even terrifying the wonderstruck occupants, from Mr. Revestre himself down to the boot-boy. Nobody could do anything, nobody ever can do anything, to influence a cyclone. Because of the cyclone, the returned gardener-engineer escaped with a caution. When they retired to bed of a night Mr. and Mrs. Revestre scarcely dared to mention the cyclone to one another; the topic was too overpowering, and they were too civilized. The servants had less reticence among themselves. The servants were both frightened and enchanted. They repeated, scores of times a day, in varied terms, that Miss Elvira had gone clean off her head about Mr. Clixam, and Mr. Clixam was not much better, and they accumulated and recounted continually fresh illustrations of this unquestionable fact. Oh, yes! Miss Elvira didn't know what she was doing! She was perfectly innocent and simple and nice and gentle and somehow dignified with it all, but she didn't know what she was doing. She had lost her head. It was a lovely and an inspiring sight. Of course the poor thing's parents were helpless. They could only sit and watch. Mr. Revestre fair worshipped Mr. Clixam since that electricity business, and Mrs. Revestre naturally could not object to one of her own kin.

And Elvira was the centre of the cyclone and strangely calm. Elvira existed in an ecstasy of admiring contemplation; save in very rare intervals when she asked herself what it was in Bertie that enthralled her. He had plenty of common sense, but he was a rare Philistine, and ignorant at that. He knew and cared nothing about philosophy, history, pictures, sculpture, and very little about literature. His music was dance music! Discussions bored him. He scorned professors, dons and debaters. He was a clumsy talker. Yet she thought about him all day and dreamed about him all night, went

frequently in fear that he would despise her, despised herself for her brilliantly futile education, and fell into secret rapture at a smile or a gesture from him. During most of the cyclone week she was very much like a baby staring beatifically, and utterly without cerebration, at a bright object. The cyclone lasted only a week. One evening Bertie Clixam said to Elvira:

"Elvira, may I speak to your father?"

In her soul she gleefully roared with laughter at this characteristic and comically conventional proposal of marriage. But she was so happy, so relieved; and she was suddenly conscious of fatigue too! The strain was over. The brilliant and delicious latest production of civilization sank in repose on the barbarian's breast. And her last urgent yearning thought was:

"I will be efficient for him. I will show him how efficient and practical I can be!"

The household was staggered. A week! Only a week! Engaged after seven days! Who could have thought it of Miss Elvira? But you never could tell with those quiet, nice ones. Talk about love at first sight! It was the most amazing example of love at first sight that anybody in the Revestre house or within ten miles of it had ever heard of, and more amazing than anybody had ever hoped to see. The ordeal for Adela was extreme, but she came through it successfully. Like her husband, she admitted that she was in the presence of a higher power.

"Have you heard that Elvira Revestre is engaged to a chemical engineer and has to go and live near Newcastle-on-Tyne—a dreadful district? That perfect creature! . . . That divine creature. . . . Who is he? Nobody! Nobody at all! She simply went mad about him. Think of the chances she's had. Edward Planta was really in love with her. Well, I give it up!"

And they said it tragically; and they said it facetiously; and they said it cynically; and they said it kindly; and they said it utterly puzzled.

Elvira's happiness was intensely touching; it was at once pathetic and magnificent. The character of her mind seemed to change. Hitherto, as the result of her upbringing, she had been above the transient prejudices and conventions of her epoch. She became quite conventional. Everything had to be done in the old conventional way. Yes, even to orange-blossom, and fully choral marriage service, and vast wedding reception. Bertie's influence, of course. And withal she could hardly bear to wait for the terrific day. Every week was a year and each month a century. But when all the rites were accomplished, and she was alone with him in the moving car, and the whole extraneous unnecessary world receding away from them in clouds of dust—bliss! She had to shut her eyes! And she had not a thought of the great prize she was, of her youth, her beauty, her good nature, her charm, her distinction, her style, her elegance, her wits, her cleverness, her money—the unparalleled perfection of her individuality and appurtenances. No! She was absorbed, lost, drowned, in her own image of Bertie.

To see her soft, burning glance, the wondrous delicate curve of her downy cheek, as she looked up!. . . But, of course, you never know how such marriages will turn out. Or any other marriages, so far as that goes.

XII

THE FISH

I

Reginald Sark was sitting with several other members of the theatrical profession in the waiting-room of Mr. Cutter's celebrated agency—a shabby and dark chamber which might well have been called the chamber of hope deferred. In common with the bulk of Mr. Cutter's humbler clients who were professionally "resting," Reginald Sark looked in at the office in Chandos Street almost every day, for fear that if he didn't he might miss something good. He was a man appreciably less than thirty, fair, ingenuous in expression, and carefully dressed in the breezy manner, with special attention to collar, necktie and pin, and perhaps not quite enough to boots.

The great, fat Cutter himself invaded the room, and the conversations about horse-racing and frocks and the fictions about salaries instantly ceased as hopes deferred irrepressibly pushed forth again in the vitalizing presence of the old gentleman. Mr. Cutter's eye happened to fall upon Reginald Sark.

"Hallo, Reggie!" said he. "I was just thinking of writing to you."

This statement was untrue, but of course Reginald believed it. And also Reginald loved to be called "Reggie," because for him Reggie had an aristocratic, clubmannish sound, and it was in order to be addressed as Reggie that he had given himself the name of Reginald, which was not his own. "Sark" was authentic enough. He was justly proud of "Sark," and on the basis of a jocular remark by an acquaintance he had gradually built up a legend that his family had left the Channel Islands for England in the eighteenth century; he now believed the legend.

He rose eagerly at Mr. Cutter's inspiring words and in a moment saw himself playing a good part at a good salary in a five-hundred-night success. In another moment he had ordered new suits at a tailor's in Conduit Street and bought himself a gold cigarette-case.

"Come out here, there's a good fellow," said Mr. Cutter, pointing to the staircase. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Certainly," agreed Reginald with enthusiasm, charmed, as were other clients, by Mr. Cutter's amiable style.

On the dim little landing Mr. Cutter said, very confidentially:

"There's a walk-on at the Princess's. It's not much, but it might lead to more. Miss Flyfax's season. Sure winner, I'm told. If you think anything of it, run off there at once. But leave the salary to me to settle. Cecil Frank's the man to see. I'll telephone him you're on the way."

Urged onwards by a friendly pat on the back, Reginald swept down the stairs. His scheme for the gold cigarette-case was somewhat dashed, but with the healthy instinct of the born optimist he fastened on the magic words "Might lead to more."

In spite of Reginald's ingratiating tones, the fat and inimical stage-doorkeeper of the Princess's would not accept without confirmation Reginald's formula, "Business appointment with Mr. Frank," and he sent a boy to make sure that Reginald was not bluffing. He had been hoodwinked by plausible Reginalds too often.

"You can go up, sir," said he gloomily when the boy returned; and Reginald went up with haughty dignity—not too haughty, however, for if he got the job he would necessarily be in permanent relations with the powerful stage-doorkeeper, and stage-doorkeepers are kittle cattle.

He stood nervously in the wings. A gentleman, whom Reginald took to be Mr. Cecil Frank, was leaning over a rickety table at which was seated another gentleman. The two were discussing lines in the play seemingly in rehearsal, and Mr. Cecil Frank was scoring the script with a blue pencil. Various ladies and gentlemen strolled to and fro or stood still, and their deportment and facial expression showed that they were thoroughly accustomed to unforeseen delays. Reginald glanced over the edge of the stage into the twilight of the shrouded auditorium, and thought what a magnificent auditorium it would be to act in; he pictured it glittering with electricity and packed from stall to gallery by a delirious audience.

Then he noticed two women talking together in the little niche with a desk where the assistant stage-manager was lord. One of them was dark and the other was fair; and both were superb in dress, in gesture, and in unconscious natural haughtiness. Reginald had just attempted haughtiness; he now saw the real thing, and perceived that the next time he tried after it he could and must do better. These women obviously had the world at their feet, and would think no more of a gold cigarette-case than of a paper packet of Gold Flakes. The dark one was without doubt Emily Flyfax, the star of both comedy and tragedy, commonly referred to as "Em" in the profession. Reginald had not seen her act for years—he had immense difficulty, on account of his obscurity, in obtaining complimentary tickets at really high-class theatres—but he recognized her partly from a vague resemblance to her former self, and partly from a still more vague resemblance to her recent photographs.

It next occurred to the startled Reginald that the two illustrious women of the world were discussing himself; with smiling vivacity they were doing so quite openly, as though he were far away and could not see them. Reginald blushed and surreptitiously examined his person as well as he could, fearing that something might be wrong. Not that these illustrious women were contemptuous or even subtly satiric. No! Though unquestionably free in their vivacity, they had a benevolent air towards him. The next event in Reginald's life was that Emily Flyfax strolled forward with the grand free movement of the limbs characteristic of her, and accosted him:

"Who *are* you?" she asked, curious, kind, careless. "You're intriguing us dreadfully." She had a thrilling voice, an exquisite enunciation. She was as tall as Reginald.

"I'm Reginald Sark," he replied confused.

"Oh, of course!" said Emily Flyfax vaguely. "How stupid of me!"

Did she, then, know of him? Or was she being very negligently polite? One part of Reginald's mind knew that Miss Flyfax did not know him and could not possibly have recognized him; but, strangely, another part of Reginald's mind accepted her negligent politeness as the truth, and Reginald hugged himself because the great Em had recognized him and knew of him. Amazing moment!

Miss Flyfax stood close to him. She was excitingly perfumed. She was fashionably dressed in black, with a marvellous hat. She wore some astounding jewellery, and had a general aspect of extreme yet not strident expensiveness. But what overpowered Reginald more than these things was the sensation which he had of a personality extremely powerful and extremely feminine. It was the rich voice, the full lips, the flashing eyes, the curves of the cheek and bosom; but it was more even than these: it was something mysterious. He was attracted and afraid. He was simply naught in her presence.

"*Are* you playing in this new show?" she asked again. "I forget. I never can remember the cast of any play I'm in till after the hundredth night." She laughed humorously, but also as it seemed in self-mockery. And all the time she was examining him.

Reginald explained his presence.

"Oh! But I think you'd do splendidly for the distinguished guest who is too noble to open his mug at my party in the second act. You look it perfectly. Of course I never, never interfere with dear Mr. Frank, but I'll speak to him. By the way, have you done much understudying?"

Reginald recounted in fine general terms his career. The phraseology of this recital had become fixed, like that of a beadle showing a church to visitors. He had once played a small part in the West End, and he had understudied five small parts in the West End. (True, three of them were in one play, but he omitted minor details.) His triumphs had been on tour. (To tour in a repertory company was such valuable experience.) He had played in old English comedy on tour. By a strange and happy chance he had some press-cuttings in his pocket.

"Very interesting!" murmured Miss Flyfax, glancing at the soiled press-cuttings without the slightest pretence of reading them.

The fair woman of the world joined them, moving soundlessly.

Though somewhat flat in contour, she was very beautiful, very expensive, and haughtier even than Em. It appeared to the intimidated Reginald that both were conscious of vast power—mistresses of the earth.

"Oh, Queenie, this is Reginald Sark. Mr. Sark—Lady Queenie Paulle."

At that dazzling name, chief ornament of all popular dailies and weeklies, Reginald trembled. He could not believe that he was in such company. Lady Queenie shook hands. What a style! The two women, still youngish and yet mature in knowledge, seemed to surround him, to envelop him in their disturbing atmosphere. Never had Reginald felt anything like it. He was aware of a whole series of new sensations. Was it possible that they were admiring him? If they were he could not imagine why, for they had not seen him act.

"What do you think of his voice, Queenie?" Em asked.

"It's perfectly thrilling, but don't tell him I said so. These handsome creatures get far too much flattery," answered Lady Queenie. "They're like us," she added, gazing squarely at him as she spoke.

The ladies smiled; Reginald blushed again and smiled foolishly. They kept close to him, murmuring vaguely to themselves or to him. Then Emily Flyfax turned round.

"Cecil, you poor sweet horrid darling," said she to Mr. Frank, who had left the table, "you know I never interfere, but this time I do think we've found the missing understudy for Jack. And he's ideal for the proud silent guest. Mr. Reginald Sark. He's played all the big rôles in old English comedy—just the training we wanted, isn't it?"

Reginald wanted to deny that he had played all the big rôles in old English comedy, but Miss Flyfax merely put her ringed hand over his mouth—astonishing gesture! Mr. Cecil Frank answered absently, and shook hands like a dying man; but Reginald felt that he was from that moment engaged. And he was.

"Where do you live, Siegfried?" Miss Flyfax asked afterwards, bending towards him. "Because rehearsals in this theatre are apt to be a little irregular. They say it's my fault."

"Oh, Bloomsbury, Miss Flyfax. Quite central! Quite central," said Reginald airily.

"Are you on the 'phone?"

"Er—not at the moment."

"How sagacious, how wise you are! Queenie, the dear thing is not on the 'phone. I wouldn't be if I had the courage!"

II

Reginald did live in Bloomsbury, but so near the edge of it that he almost toppled over across Euston Road into a nether region of North London, which he could not possibly have mentioned so airily to Miss Flyfax. He inhabited an enormous mansion, sharing it with many hundred other persons. One of the advantages claimed for this mansion was that it was "convenient for the great railway termini." It certainly was. The huge building had several entrances, and it was honeycombed with numerous flights of stairs and long corridors—all of imperishable, naked, resounding stone, and all very clean. There were no such transient phenomena as lifts in the arcana of the mansion. On every side the explorer was encouraged and bewildered by the images of red hands pointing to painted groups of numbers, the numbers being repeated on one or another of some hundreds of little black doors, each of which doors was a front door and the portal of a castle.

All the castles were like Reginald's castle. It consisted of two rooms so small and so low that you could not imagine them smaller or lower, but cosy and light; together with a dark cell in which a cooking-stove and a slopstone were imprisoned for life. The landlord had set to his legion of tenants a prodigious example of economy, in space; and the tenants, helped by the force of circumstances, imitated this economy, in monetary expenditure. The mansion was a place where in every castle every penny counted and had to count.

Having changed his coat and his boots, Reginald sat down to a simple but nourishing meal and narrated the events of the morning to his wife. Gladiola was a miniature girl, born to live in the castle and fitting it to a nicety. Very dark (darker than Emily Flyfax), neat, spruce, lively, alert and decided, she was perhaps a couple of years older than Reginald. Her mother had kept theatrical lodgings in a Midland town. Reginald had unromantically married his landlady's daughter, who, in addition to being a fair cook and a very efficient manageress, had come into a bit of money. She ruled him, but she saved him from his histrionic temperament and from the whisky-and-soda fate of the mediocre young actor whose

infrequent coins burn holes in his pockets.

"If I were you I should beware of those people," said she, cheerfully, when the narration was done. "They're a queer lot."

"Oh! They're all *right*!" mildly protested Reginald, who was the more shocked by this ruthless judgment on goddesses in that Gladiola had always hailed them in the columns of the *Daily Mirror* with a respectful enthusiasm.

"Have you signed the contract?"

"No. The excellent Cutter is seeing to that, and I shall sign it this afternoon, and I am to watch a rehearsal to-night—it's in the Maiden Lane Lecture Hall. You see, they can't have the stage to-night. I must say I can't in the least make out why they've fastened on me in such a hurry."

This last statement was an exaggeration. Reginald's mind still rang with Lady Queenie's phrase (which he had not recounted to his wife) "these handsome creatures." Was he handsome? He supposed that he must be, though among his adventures he could find nothing to prove the new and agreeable supposition. A glance now and then, perhaps...!

"I can tell you how it happened," said Gladiola. "When Mr. Cutter telephoned to the theatre before you arrived he must have said something special. You may depend upon it they all knew all about you before you got there. Only they're so sly."

In so saying Gladiola in her turn also deceived. Her own private explanation of the affair was quite different, and it coincided with Reginald's own private explanation. She had married Reginald for one sole reason. In her opinion he was the handsomest man she had ever seen. He was her luxury, her madness, her gewgaw, for which she was prepared to risk ruin. She never mentioned his beauty to him, even in those moments of transport when secrets escape from a woman's lips. She would praise his character, his sagacity, and his professional skill, none of which she esteemed. She could not understand how it was that other women—and especially actresses, in whose mentality she was deeply versed—had not perceived his extraordinary beauty. She now comprehended that one woman, if not two, had perceived it, and she grew anxious, defensive and cunning.

"Have you any money left?" she asked him, as he was making himself breezily smart for the second visit to Mr. Cutter.

"About a bob."

"Here's two shillings."

She had the money in her chubby hand mysteriously ready for him. Reginald never knew exactly where she kept the household resources. He took the florin and looked down at her, somewhat condescendingly, but yet respectfully—for, like the stage-doorkeeper, she had power. A commonplace little piece, compared with the glorious queens whom he had met and fascinated, and whom—dazzling thought!—he would meet and fascinate again that very night. However, he could not do less than kiss her. She was a good and useful little piece, if a tartar upon occasion.

"No!" she cried, flashing her black eyes, and withdrawing her head. "You didn't kiss me when you came in, and so you shan't kiss me now."

"Didn't I?" He was abashed. "If I didn't it was pure forgetfulness."

"That makes it all the worse," said she. "I wouldn't have minded if you'd done it on purpose. I can stand anything except being forgotten."

She ran off, as far as the dimensions of the flat would allow. It was plain to her that when he arrived for lunch he simply did not know what he was doing—so intoxicated was he by the flavour of the outside world. She felt that she had to sober him, to give him something to think about. She succeeded. He was more than abashed, he was frightened. To be courted, as he thought, by queens, and to be flouted by little Gladiola from a petty street in Derby!... And she had so cleverly concealed her resentment at his negligence in forgetting to kiss her on arrival, shooting it out finally in the most dramatic and surprising manner!

"Don't be late for Mr. Cutter," said she from the window.

"Oh, all right!" said he, with affected nonchalance.

He had an impulse to rush at her and force a kiss on her; but he restrained it; he would show her that he could be as independent as she. Moreover, he considered that she had taken his great news too coldly.

When he returned, at nearly midnight, after a rather disappointing evening, he had qualms about the nature of her reception of him. He entered the castle with care, not a bit like the lord of the castle. The bedroom was dark. Was she in bed and sulking or sleeping? He opened the door of the tiny living-room. The tiny electric light was burning. On the tiny sofa in front of the tiny gas-fire sat tiny Gladiola, her hair fixed for the night. Her arms had been pushed anyhow into her yellow dressing-gown. She was sewing. She twisted her head round and smiled at him. She did not remark on his lateness, nor ask him about what he had done at the rehearsal. She just provocatively smiled.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "What on earth——"

"I *did* go to bed," she said. "But then I remembered I had this sewing to do. And so I got up again and put on my dressing-gown. I'm quite warm."

Reginald hesitated, having strange sensations—not for the first time that day.

"Well," she said, singularly, throwing her head and shoulders back, "you can kiss me now. I've forgiven you."

III

The artistes were all together after a second-act rehearsal one morning when Jack Moy, the leading man, said to Mr. Frank:

"What about seats for the first night, Cecil my lad?"

"Only the most urgent applications considered," replied Mr. Frank buoyantly. "We could sell right out if we wanted."

Thereupon everybody present made the most urgent application, except Em Flyfax, who had already commandeered a box, and except Reginald. Reginald did not ask for anything, because if he had asked he would have been obliged to support his demand by saying that the seat was for his wife. Now he had somehow never found the right moment to mention to either Miss Flyfax or to Lady Queenie (who haunted the rehearsals) that he possessed a wife; and he was mysteriously ashamed to do so at the critical instant. No one in the company knew anything about him, though everyone was inexplicably polite, and some were even almost deferential to him.

"If I could have a stall for the second performance, Mr. Frank——" he suggested later, more privately, knowing that there would be no difficulty whatever about the second performance.

That night he lied to Gladiola.

"Tried my best to get you a seat for the first night. Nothing doing. Booking bangs creation. But I've got one for the second."

It was not as if his relations with Emily Flyfax had been progressing. She seldom even spoke to him, save professionally. Only once, passing him in the wings, she had murmured with an inscrutable transient smile:

"Siegfried!"

A name the tremendous associations of which were perfectly unknown to Reginald, who never read anything and was bored by what he would refer to respectfully as "classical music."

Lady Queenie conversed with him now and then, in low and slow phrases, but Reginald could not make her out, and he soon got used to her title.

He had plenty to do, for the understudies were rehearsed as probably understudies had never before been rehearsed previous to a production. This was due entirely to Miss Flyfax, who, though paid solely to play and by no means to manage, nevertheless, like many stars, did more managing than the manager; the difference between her and most stars in this respect was that what she did was done apparently by kindness, certainly not by petulance or threats. Miss Flyfax saw to it that all the understudies, including her own, were carefully rehearsed. She said you never knew what might happen.

At the first performance everybody said to everybody "behind" that the audience was "eating it." The return for the second night beat all the records of the theatre for a second night. The ticket agencies made a deal for three months. Reginald found in the press notices a few lines here and there in praise of his rendering of the mute guest. At the end of a fortnight he was quite accustomed to playing in a first-rate West End show and receiving £10 on a Friday night—far more than he had ever received before.

One evening he excitedly informed Gladiola that the two stars, Emily and Jack, had had a terrific row. The next morning an express messenger brought a note to the flat, and Reginald saw how right Miss Flyfax had been in saying that you never knew what might happen.

"Good God!" he exclaimed to Gladiola, who was washing up. "Jack Moy's ill and I have got to play his part to-night." Then in an anxious, condescending tone: "I hope *my* understudy'll pull through."

He had a colossal day of it. Clothes! Wig! Jewellery! To say nothing of a long rehearsal with Emily Flyfax and sundry others. He heard that Jack Moy's illness, though authenticated by a doctor's certificate, was purely political. What he did not hear was the general opinion in the theatre that to entrust an inexperienced mediocrity like Reginald with the principal male rôle was absolute madness, and that Em was off her head and old Cecil an idiot. (In the latter view old Cecil concurred.) The two bright spots were, one, that Reginald simply had no nerves, and, two, that anyhow nothing could kill the success of *Tea on the Terrace*.

When the curtain went up the entire company, one person excepted, perspired with apprehension. The exception was Reginald. And Reginald was justified in not perspiring. He displayed no original talent, but he came through with a sort of negative credit, partly by imitating Jack Moy to the least detail and partly by the very expert aid of Miss Flyfax. What utterly amazed the management and the entire company, including Reginald, was the clear fact that the audience loved Reginald. He had a very marked personal triumph, and at the end Miss Flyfax compelled him to take a call alone; at which the company smiled with sinister significance. Still, the company, except Emily, pelted him with compliments; and Cecil Frank slapped his back and addressed him as Reggie.

In the splendid privacy of Jack Moy's dressing-room Reginald got a note. "Come *now* and be admired, my Siegfried.—EM." Yet on the final fall of the curtain she had left him without a word! On the way to the star's dressing-room he encountered Lady Queenie, who clapped her hands.

"Going?" said he.

"Yes. I should be in the way!" said she. And then, very surprisingly, she kissed him.

"Don't tell," said she over her shoulder, running off.

IV

Emily Flyfax's dressing-room, which she had occupied continually for several years, had a more personal quality than the majority of dressing-rooms. Emily, in fact, had remade the place. It was full, perhaps rather too full, of small bits of old furniture, brocade, photographs, mirrors, electric lamps, and especially cushions. If it lacked anything it lacked ventilation; but Emily felt no need for ventilation. The cushions were heaped about the floor, and Emily had only two cushions between herself and the carpet when Reginald entered and the dresser softly closed the door. Emily did not speak at first. She simply looked up with burning eyes which ranged, as it were prowling, all over Reginald's figure. She had not removed her paint and powder, but paint and powder became her at all times; she could carry them off even at close quarters in a small room. She was scarcely young. She was, however, a magnificent, voluptuous and thrilling creature. Rendered at once self-conscious and absent-minded by his success, Reginald could not break the silence.

"Well, my child!" she murmured at length. The richness of her voice was equalled only by the perfection of her enunciation. The solemn tones permeated the room like an odour, and then seemed to hang in the heavy air like clouds of incense. "You don't know how wonderful you are!"

"Do you really think I can act?" he asked, ravenous for more praise.

She smiled indulgently, and then said:

"I don't mean your acting. I mean *you*! . . . Siegfried!"

Reginald heard and beheld her as in a dream from which he could not awake, through a veil formed of wild hand-clapping and bright upturned faces and visions of a career. And she was piercing the veil. Now she was kneeling in the cushions close to him, with clasped hands and transfigured face, and he, on his feet, was high above her in the terrific glare of light. His perceptions were at the best never keen, but he could not fail to see that the splendid mature woman was in an enchantment, a rapture, an ecstasy; she had no more shame, and no less directness, than a goddess, than Venus herself. She had passed beyond all conventions, but despite this the native distinction and force of her individuality maintained her dignity in full. Reginald was frightened—deliciously and incomprehensibly frightened, perhaps—still, frightened.

Emily breathed:

"Oh! You divine simpleton. Can't you see I'm a *grande amoureuse*?"

She appeared to become incandescent; Reginald might have been burnt up. His skin crept down his back. He was wondering, not without inklings of the truth, what a *grande amoureuse* might be, when a rap sounded on the door.

"Well," cried Miss Flyfax with extraordinary presence of mind, and then rising very rapidly and yet without haste, "come in, come in. Don't stand out there." Her features were entirely recomposed.

"Mrs. Sark wishes to see Mr. Reginald Sark at once," said the dresser, entering.

The star was putting on an embroidered Japanese robe, with which she clad herself in a single moment. Reginald blushed deeply. He did not know where to look or what to say. He was fully aware that his wife had been in the audience, for he had obtained the ticket for her, but in the intensity of his egoism he had completely forgotten her.

"Ask Mrs. Sark to come in," said Emily Flyfax with astounding tranquillity. "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Sark? So glad to meet you. I was just telling your husband——"

There stood tiny Gladiola, no doubt a force in the vicinity of the great railway termini, but a nonentity in Emily's dressing-room. She was neat enough and not scared, and she wore her one evening-dress and evening-cloak; and withal she was just like an irreproachable shop-girl satisfactorily titivated for an evening out. As she stood beside the large-framed, glorious, dangerous, orchidaceous many-faceted artiste, Reginald was ashamed of her. She did not look at Emily Flyfax. She looked at Reginald. And Reginald wondered what in heaven's name would happen next. What happened next was that Gladiola burst into tears—and it was just as if she had burst into blossom.

"But what is the matter, Mrs. Sark?" Emily inquired kindly.

Gladiola replied, to Reginald, not to the actress:

"It's only because I'm so happy. Oh! Reggie, you were too beautiful!"

Her emotion suddenly gave her an unrivalled dignity. She had lost all to her Reginald, and in so doing had found a new impressiveness, which overcame him. She sat down.

"You must drink something," said Emily Flyfax quickly, seizing a wine-glass.

The glass crumpled in her hand like a biscuit, and the fragments fell on the floor with a muffled silvery sound. Emily got another glass and gave the receptive Gladiola some soda-water.

"Thank you," said Gladiola weakly.

"How glad I am for you!" said Emily sympathetically.

"Your hand's bleeding, Miss Flyfax," said Reginald, more in order to say something, anything, than because the fact interested him.

"That's nothing," Emily answered. "I often do it."

Reginald led his Gladiola away.

V

The next morning he was round at the theatre, for no plain reason, except that in a night he had become a careerist, and the instinct of the careerist had mysteriously drawn him to the theatre. Sure enough, Cecil Frank, catching sight of him, invited him into the managerial office and gave him one of the excessively thick Turkish cigarettes which for ever lay in the inexhaustible silver box on the managerial desk.

"Look here, Reggie," said Cecil Frank, leaning back in his armed, swivelled chair. "We needn't beat about the bush. I'll give you a three years' contract, twenty-five pounds a week; usual conditions. It's a cinch for you, but I've always been one to encourage the young. Say the word, and we'll sign now."

"But how soon is Moy coming back?" asked Reginald, with wise irrelevance, and acting calmness better than he had ever acted anything on the stage.

"Between ourselves," Mr. Frank replied, "Moy isn't coming back. This theatre's too small to hold him and Miss Flyfax together any more. And I'm not sorry. But what's Moy got to do with it? Whatever you play, and whether you play or not, you'll get your salary. However, I don't mind telling you you'll play Moy's part for the rest of the run, which means till kingdom come, more or less."

"I can't sign anything without consulting the excellent Cutter," said Reginald. "He made me promise." Which was clever but untrue.

"Shall we say thirty?" cooed Mr. Frank. "Remember I've got you for the run at £10." Mistaken tactics by Mr. Frank!

"I'll push off and see the excellent Cutter at once," said Reginald, and he pushed off, Mr. Cecil Frank falsely pretending that after all he preferred Reginald to see Mr. Cutter before signing anything.

It is marvellous how things get about. There was no waiting to be done by Reginald in the agent's outer office, and he was received in an entirely new manner.

Mr. Cutter listened attentively, and then said:

"We'll do nothing to-day. I'll come and see the show to-night. Then I shall be in a better position to judge."

The success of Reginald's second heroic performance exceeded that of the first. Mr. Cutter slipped round behind at the close.

"Don't you sign for three years," said he. "We'll make him tear up your present contract and give you a new one, for Jack Moy's part, for the run, at thirty. You'll be worth a bit above thirty before the end of the run."

"How much was Moy getting?" Reginald asked thoughtfully.

"Sixty-five."

On the following morning Reginald nudged his wife in bed. She awoke and stroked his cheek. He yawned. "Frightfully heavy work," said he. "And the matinée to-day! I'll have my breakfast in bed at half-past eleven. You'd better take your things into the other room and dress there, because I'm going to sleep again." She kissed him delicately in silence and arose. At eleven-thirty, all spruce, smiling, and obedient, she tip-toed into the bedroom with his breakfast attractively arranged on a tray, apologizing for obeying him so exactly.

"You'd better look out for another flat, my dear," said he kindly. "By the way, I've been wondering how much I ought to allow you for housekeeping. If you use your own bit for your clothes you ought to be able to look quite smart, oughtn't you?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed eagerly, betraying by not the least sign that only a week ago she had had sole and unquestioned control of the combined conjugal exchequer.

All these marvellous changes happened because some people, chiefly women, clapped their hands enthusiastically and looked up with bright shining faces when Reginald made an exit or took a call. The other members of the company began to make nasty remarks about the size of Reginald's head, the badness of his acting and the idiocy of the public; but

Reginald did not hear the remarks.

VI

It was a few days later that Reginald received a quite unemotional note from Emily Flyfax. "DEAR MR. SARK,—I should be so pleased if you could come to my flat this afternoon for tea. If I don't hear from you I'll expect you. Yours sincerely." By the same post he was made aware of the fact that the illustrated press was reacting to his existence. The two great rivals in the illustrated daily press were running neck and neck after him. Both at the same moment wanted photographs and matter—an interview. Reginald had been meditating earnestly upon the photograph question. Of course, he had many photographs of himself, but he dreamed of new ones which should dazzle the beholder. As to interviews, he would grant them, but only in his dressing-room until Gladiola had discovered a desirable abode. By this time he had adopted, instinctively and honestly, a sort of amiably fatigued attitude towards the world. You could not keep people off; they simply would not leave you alone; therefore you must let them come on. And also he had grown critical of the evening's applause. If it was not up to the high-watermark he would say to his dresser: "Scarcely a hand to-night," or "Stodgy lot to-night," or "I can't think what's the matter with 'em"—when everybody knew that the applause was still extremely generous.

He entered Emily's drawing-room with a magnificent assurance; which was somewhat wasted for the reason that she was not there. A very luxurious room—and the lift porter had style—but he would attain to a drawing-room just as good, and before long too! He was not particularly curious about Emily's purposes in regard to him. Since the feverish scene in her dressing-room she had displayed no further symptom whatever of a disordered temperament. On the stage with him she was most helpful and business-like. Well, you could not understand women; nobody could; and there you were! That she still admired him he did not doubt. Anyhow, she could not dispute that he got quite as much applause as she did.

She came in wearing a rather plain afternoon dress and smiling a little sadly, and shook hands with her usual benevolent friendliness.

"So nice of you to come. Do sit down," she said. "Tea will be here in a moment."

Reginald sat rather awkwardly, and his awkwardness was increased as Emily, disposing herself elaborately on a sofa, gave no sign of undertaking the main burden of the conversation. Reginald, despite the enthusiasm of thousands who had paid money to see him disport himself in a drawing-room with only three sides to it, could not make much of a figure in a drawing-room with the usual number of walls. In particular he could not converse; and this vexed him and set him against those persons who forced him to see his own defect.

"How is your wife?" said the rich voice. "D'you know, I'd got no idea you were married! What a nice devoted creature! Keep her, Reginald. Treat her with imagination. I trust you do. A wife like that is invaluable. You'll deceive her, of course. You must. She will expect it, for she knows by instinct that no woman can possibly hope to monopolize a man like you."

Reginald gave a foolish, constrained snigger!

"Oh, oh!"

"I'm quite serious," said Emily Flyfax. "I'm always serious about such matters. Few people are. . . . Then your wife is young. She will be young for years yet. You don't know, but I know—youth is the greatest thing in the world. Don't I realize it!" She sighed.

Yet Reginald thought she was looking unusually young that afternoon. A maid brought in the tea and went out again, and Emily Flyfax made no movement.

"I wonder what she's up to this time," thought Reginald. He was incapable of comprehending that the ungovernably temperamental artiste was essaying new tactics, appealing to him in an entirely fresh way, feeling gently for his compassion instead of trying to carry him by assault. The grandeur of her despairing courage was lost on him as she stretched out an arm, seized a large early photograph of herself, offered it for his inspection, and murmured with a kind of touching majesty:

"This is what I once was. Look at it." She gazed at him, as if saying: "Do not let me abase my present self too far. I am

still a wondrous treasure of delights."

Reginald took the photograph and examined it.

"By the by," said he, interested. "Tell me who are the best stage photographers in these days."

She continued for a few instants to gaze at him after he had uttered these remarkable words, then rose slowly and left the room, not shutting the door. Reginald waited, calmly at first, for her return. Ten minutes passed like an hour. The tea was cooling. Should he pour out some tea for himself? What could she be doing? Should he ring the bell and inquire about her? What was the correct worldly course in such a singular contretemps? Well, he dared not pour out the tea! He produced his beautiful gold cigarette-case, regarded it, lit a cigarette, and resumed his waiting. He no more dared ring the bell than he dared pour out the tea. But something must be done. He was making up his mind to the extreme act of ringing the bell when the door opened wide and there entered Lady Queenie Paulle.

She was a lovely object, considerably younger than Emily Flyfax, astonishingly dressed—as though with the intention of combining all the style of the West with all the lure of the East. Her complexion was unique; but, though graceful in the serpentine manner, she had not the generous contours, nor the individual distinction, nor the tremendous force, nor the honest good nature of Emily. And her eye was hard, and her low voice not liquid.

"I've come to pour out your tea," she said, shaking hands. "And to apologize for poor Emily. Don't be afraid, my dear Reggie, I shan't attempt to kiss you." She sat down, calmly inspected the tea-tray and poured out the tea, which was fatally stewed and almost cold, but which Reginald meekly drank.

"Is Miss Flyfax unwell?" he asked.

"Not at all," Lady Queenie smiled. "Emily is never unwell, whereas I'm never well. I ought to explain to you, Reggie, that Em and I really are the greatest friends. I've taken a flat in this block partly to be near her and partly to escape my noble but timid parents. Emily ran up to see me after she left you. She cried in my arms."

"Cried!" exclaimed Reginald.

Lady Queenie nodded mysteriously.

"All on account of you. Of course it was entirely her own fault. I may as well tell you the whole truth. I'd expect Em to do the same for me. Moreover, she asked me to. Besides, you know what perfect cats women are, don't you, darling? Emily is absurd. She has the most ridiculous illusions. She thinks that you owe your position at the Princess's entirely to her, and that she quarrelled with Jack Moy solely for your sake. She's incapable of seeing that you are a great actor, with nothing to learn from her or anybody else, and that Cecil Frank would have jumped at you anyway. She won't admit that genius always comes to the top, especially on the stage. When she wants anything, she *wants* it. She wanted you to be kind to her. She tried one way and then she tried another. She can't play with a man like I can—she's too honest. I'm not honest. Moreover, she was mad about you. Utterly mad. She always admitted it. It seems she took her heart out of her breast and offered it to you half an hour ago, and that in reply you asked her for the name of the best photographers. Well, you cured her. She did cry in my arms; but she laughed too. I left her laughing and she was saying that she wondered how she could ever have thought you beautiful. The capricious creature is now convinced that you've got no chin, and your features aren't a bit regular, and you have a fatuous wistful expression that pleases silly women—which means nine women out of ten. These are her actual views, and she requested me to inform you about them. When I pointed out that your feelings might be hurt she said that that was quite impossible because your feelings are so fully protected by your admirable and absolutely impenetrable self-conceit—which we all admire so much. Another cup, Reggie?"

Reginald remarked:

"I'm hanged if you aren't both mad. I never heard such ravings."

"We aren't mad now," said Lady Queenie. "We were."

"Hang it! Can't a fellow ask the name of a good photographer?" He left his chair.

"Not in aristocratic circles," Lady Queenie answered. "It's not done . . . Reggie!" She called him back as he was departing. "Don't breathe a word of all this to-night, or there may be trouble. She didn't really tell me to tell you. But I

can never resist a new sensation, and so I told you."

VII

It is a first night at Daly's. The band is playing before the curtain. The celebrities are coming into the stalls and the experts in the pit are recognizing them, assessing them, and applauding them. Ministers of the Crown are applauded; old actresses and young actresses are applauded; prize-fighters are applauded; soldiers are applauded—all with discretion. Then outbursts a perfect roar of applause. It is for a still youngish man, with loose-jointed deportment, no chin worth mentioning, and a romantic, wistful, sympathy-demanding expression on his otherwise dull and fatuous face. The pit has identified Reginald Sark, hero of the M.O.S. or Mad-on-Sark Brigade of medalled young women. He is able to attend the first night because he happens to be rehearsing a new piece. His photographs are in the windows of all the stationery shops. The illustrated papers never lose an opportunity of publishing them, and no mean part of his considerable income derives from the said photographs. The dramatic critics keep on saying year after year that he is learning to act and taking his art seriously. He is the most popular actor in London. He never appears, either on the stage or off, without receiving enthusiastic applause. But no paper ever mentions that a Mrs. Sark exists and that he is a faithful husband to her and the father of her five children. The Brigade is convinced that his life is a constant leaping from one adoration to another, and that he is marvellously sinful.

At the end of the first act, when he leaves the stalls to go behind, the pit furiously applauds. And when he returns the pit furiously applauds. At the end of the third act, when he leaves the stalls to get a drink, the pit furiously applauds, and when he returns the pit furiously applauds. The poor man cannot blow his nose without hand-clapping. He regards the whole business as the most natural thing in the world.

"They will do it," he says to himself. "Let them. After all there is nobody like me." Ill-natured men in theatrical clubs say that his self-conceit is the Himalaya of self-conceits, that he has never in his life done anything but look wistful, and that the earth is a queer place. These cynics are unjust. It would have been impossible for Reginald, or anybody else, not to be acutely conceited in Reginald's circumstances. He cannot help his face. He may not be an actor, but he is a model citizen.

XIII

THE LIMITS OF DOMINION

I

Before the war, before the aerial mails, before emperors had been cast from their thrones, before gold had been superseded by paper, before empty dwelling-houses had come to be as rare and precious as pearls, there was a row of sixty-one new small reddish houses on the east side of the municipal park of Bursley in the Five Towns.

Exteriorly they were all alike, except that thirty of them had the bay window to the left of the front door, while thirty-one had the bay window to the right of the front door. The street was not grand enough to look directly on the Park, but the houses had long if narrow gardens at the back, with a fair open prospect of the colliery-strewn moors which enclose the Five Towns. Interiorly many of the houses were alike, especially in temperament, but some were different; and the most different of all and the most individual, the most independent, the most efficient, the most successful, was number 41, inhabited by the Furber family.

Dinah, the elder daughter, aged twenty-eight, fair, buxom, placid, plain, was the housekeeper. She got up first, went to bed last, and received no salary; when she wanted a little money for clothes—she seldom wanted money for anything else—she had to ask for it, as for a favour. Mary, the younger daughter, aged twenty-five, fair, golden, slim, pretty, nervous, critical, too much aware of the frailties of human nature and the risks of being alive, was a dressmaker's assistant, and earned twice what she spent. Maidie, the cousin (really a second cousin), aged twenty-two, red-haired, freckled, pretty, fiery, pugnacious, snub-nosed, was a mistress in the Board School at Moorthorne; she earned more than Mary and saved less; still, she saved.

Last of the young generation came Ralph, twenty-four, of medium height, stocky in figure, with brown hair and a stiff brown moustache. He was extremely uncouth, rather nervous, very untidy, and amazingly rude. He lived in the house like a wild animal, quarrelled fiercely with cousin Maidie and quarrelled even with Dinah, who nevertheless was of a notably pacific disposition; also he had dark, suppressed feuds with his father; but he never quarrelled with querulous Mary, though she made no attempt at all to placate him. Ralph was employed by the Five Towns Engineering Company, Limited, which manufactured machinery for the earthenware works of nearly the whole world, and for many collieries. It was known and admitted that he was marvellous at machinery, and people said that he was, further, a considerable organizer and that already he had performed various beneficial wonders for the F.T.E.C. He existed solely for machinery and was entitled to be called quite mad. He used the front room as a drawing office, and in such a manner that the girls could not use it as a parlour without much preliminary straightening up and grave family complications.

And he had bought a small decayed steam-engine and renewed its youth and erected it in a shanty indescribably constructed of odds and ends of wood, zinc, and iron in the garden. This engine actuated a lathe and other contrivances. When steaming it coughed—a sort of hacking cough; and the neighbours complained of it and even invoked the power of the Borough Surveyor against it. Then you should have seen how a family apparently disunited can be united, welded and riveted together! The family defended Ralph's steam-engine, which in private the girls detested, with ruthless ferocity. Neighbours for forty yards on either side were alienated magnificently for ever. The appeal to the Borough Surveyor failed. The family spat out triumph on the resentful defeated. The victorious engine continued to cough.

Over all the young generation stood the widowed Mr. Furber: a workman of the old Five Towns school, with a short iron-filings beard and no moustache; a trade unionist but a Conservative, despising all nonsense about democracy. He was senior warehouseman in an earthenware manufactory at Hanbridge, whither he went every morning by workmen's train from the station by the Park. His uniform at work was shirt-sleeves and a flowing white apron, and from an artisan's scorn of the "jacket" (apparel of clerks and other futile persons) he preferred to be in shirt-sleeves even at home. Mr. Furber was a broadminded man. He visited church and chapel impartially, studying the variations of religious doctrine with a detached mind. He kept a first-rate whippet and sometimes did a bit of coursing. But his chief delight was football, on which subject he was omniscient. He read the accounts of the matches every Sunday morning in the *Sunday Chronicle*, and the accounts of the very same matches every Monday morning in the *Athletic News*. Politics and crime he got from the evening *Staffordshire Signal*.

Father and son slept in the front bedroom. Dinah and Mary slept in the back bedroom. Maidie slept in the cellule (styled a bedroom) over the scullery.

Such was the industrious, prosperous, downright, stern, independent, metallic island-home of the Furbers on the Park mound above Bursley.

Now on a hot summer Saturday afternoon there was an astonishing knock at the front door of No. 41. Mr. Furber, for whom summer meant boredom through the absence of football, was reclining on his bed in meditation. Dinah was cleaning the kitchen. Maidie was in her room mending a glove. Mary was afield with a young man, for despite her hypercritical attitude towards life she had admirers to choose from—and she chose. Dinah opened the door, and when she opened it she blushed because the male visitor was obviously a swell and because her hair was in irons.

"Good afternoon," said the visitor. "Can I see Mr. Ralph Furber?" He had a London accent, which real Five Towners regard as affected and absurd, but which intimidates them. He did not say "Rafe"; he said "Ralf."

"I think he's in the engine-shed," said Dinah, all of a flutter, wondering: "What's afoot with our Rafe?" She added: "If you'll step through."

The visitor stepped through. The whippet in his kennel growled.

"Ralph, you're wanted," cried Dinah, and left the visitor alone to face Ralph and the whippet.

In a few seconds both Maidie and Mr. Furber were acquainted with the remarkable and disturbing advent. Maidie and Dinah were peeping out of Maidie's window. Mr. Furber was too proud and aloof to go downstairs; but he leaned on one elbow with ears cocked. The whippet had had a clout on the head from Ralph.

Fancy a swell calling to see Ralph! Ralph's importance was increased tenfold in an instant. The household, richly confirmed in its conviction of Ralph's unprecedented faculties, waited spellbound for the sequel of the visit.

And it indeed had to wait. It was still waiting at supper-time, eight-thirty. The impressive visitor had stayed nearly an hour, and had then stepped through again, back to the front door, under Ralph's own guidance; whereupon Ralph had returned to the engine-shed and been no more seen.

Supper took place in the clean and tidy kitchen, at the bare white deal table, under a gas-jet. It began punctually because both Ralph and his father were punctual persons with imperious appetites. They ate cold sausage and cheese and much bread, and drank a glass of beer apiece. The girls were content with nibbles of cheese and bread, and drank water, or milk, or milk-and-water. Mr. Furber and Ralph were in shirt-sleeves. Dinah wore her housewife's apron. Maidie, as became a school-mistress, had no apron. Mary, freshly arrived from the transaction abroad of affairs of the heart, alone was dressed up. Ordinarily Mary would have been in a brooding, withdrawn state of mind; but she was by far the most inquisitive member of the family, and her curiosity had now been stimulated almost to exasperation by the murmured news of Ralph's visitor.

However, she did not speak. Nobody spoke. It was not the Furber habit to converse at meals. Meals were for eating, not chatter. Unlike over-civilized and decadent people, the Furber family felt no awkwardness in silence at table; indeed, it scorned mere small talk as being insincere and affected politeness. Dinah, though she would gabble nineteen to the dozen in private with the other girls, rarely said a word at meals. Mr. Furber was uniformly taciturn. And the most taciturn of all was Ralph, whom nothing but the need of something that he could not get himself, or the desire to carry on an altercation, could rouse into speech. None, not even Mary, dared cross-examine Ralph; being made of dynamite, he might have exploded and blown the entire house to bits.

But something was bound to happen that evening. It happened. Maidie, the red-haired, failed first in self-control.

"Of course we must be thankful if he leaves us even a crust now—with his grand friends and all!" she snorted, flushing and lifting her snub nose, as Ralph helped himself to two lumps of cheese when there were only two lumps on the dish.

It was as if she had put a match to a time-fuse; all waited for the bang. But no bang followed. Ralph—sleeves rolled up, hastily washed face, black finger-nails, rough hair—Ralph started and glowered, then checked himself. For once in his life he was genuinely anxious to communicate facts to his fellow-creatures, and the opportunity had arrived.

"I never saw th' fellow before," he said, with pride. "But his scheme is to set me up in business. There's a works for sale at Longshaw. He's ready to buy it if I'll take it on, and he'll find twenty thousand capital besides. And now ye know." He was careful not to look at his father.

"Well I never!" gasped Mary.

"And what did ye say?" Maidie asked challengingly, dangerously.

"I said, 'Who're ye coddling of, mister?' That's what I said. But he wasn't coddling. He's going back to London to-night, and he'll come again next Saturday for my answer. That's how they do it, them folk! And so now ye know."

"And should *you* be the boss of a great big works?" Maidie demanded, with calculated incredulity.

"Yes, miss. I should be the boss."

With that Ralph suddenly rose, pushing his windsor chair gratingly across the tiled floor, and passed into the front room. He was too excited and triumphant to remain another moment with the family. He could not bear the emotional tension of his triumph. The kitchen was scared by the unbelievable magnitude of the event. The meal abruptly ended. No one could eat any more.

"What about it, father?" Dinah asked mildly.

Mr. Furber finished his beer, got up, and went to bed, formidably mute.

The girls retired into the scullery, out of earshot of Ralph, and chattered in whispers. They knew naught except what Ralph had told them, and yet they managed quite easily to find subject matter for more than an hour's glib, swift dramatic discussion of the terrific situation.

When Ralph, last of all, went to bed, leaving the ground floor to dark night and the whippet (who slept in the scullery unless under correction for sins), he found that his father had not put the candle out. The ageing man, with heavy lower lip protruding, lay in wait for the son. He brushed his beard from the back of it upwards into the air and said:

"What didst say to that there gentleman as called?"

"Nothing," answered Ralph sullenly, flinging off his boots with noise. "I said as I should speak to you about it."

"And what need to speak to yer feyther about it? Haven't ye got th' sense to settle it for yersen? What dost want to go into business for? Ye're a workman and the son of a workman. I might ha' gone into business on me own. Many an offer I've had. Lots wanted to be partners wi' me. But would I? I've seen too many good workmen ruined by a bit o' capital. They think they're going to turn th' town upside down, paying wages and keeping books and fitting 'emselves out i' jackets and neckties, and going into th' saloon-bar 'stead o' th' bar-parlour. And in six months there's writs out against 'em. And then can they go back to an honest job? They can noa', and they dunna, neither. Ye've got a good job at Fyden's." (Fyden's was the old name of the F.T.E.C. before it became limited and grand.) "Ye mayn't think it, but I can see ye earning ten pun a week at Fyden's afore ye're thirty. Ten pun a week. And they'll give ye something for yer patents too—they'll give ye a share. And no risk and no nonsense! And ye want to ask yer feyther whether ye ought to chuck up a ten pun a week job for this sky-larking wi' somebody ye've never heard of—I wonder who's been stuffing *him* up with a tale about you, my lad."

The son listened grimly as he undressed with violent movements and draggings and pullings of serviceable raiment. The harangue continued. It was the dour, obstinate expression of dying ideals, of the artisan's deep and narrow pride and prejudice, of a conviction that labour had a prestige surpassing that of capital. And it had the authority of Mr. Furber's steady and successful life behind it, as well as the authority of a father whose glance for thirty years had been sufficient to put his household in a tremble.

Ralph's suddenly swollen pride was pricked. He saw that he was nobody after all—or almost nobody. The great offer of the afternoon might be marvellous, but it was silly—it was a flighty offer, the offer of a flibbertigibbet in fine clothes. And also Ralph was secretly afraid of the fearful responsibilities which would attend on acceptance of the offer. And the habit of obedience to the respectable tyrant of the home was very strong in him. Lastly he began to feel extremely young and diffident. And he thought joyously what a "suck in" it would be for those chattering, hysterical girls when he told

them that he should decline the offer. Those girls were no better than birds of the air. He would tell them curtly, savagely. He would take the starch out of them with six words.

"Well," he said at length sharply to his father, his nose in the pillow, "I don't know what ye're making all this to-do about. I'm not for taking it on, and I never was for taking it on. But I suppose I can mention it without having me head snapped off!"

A daring speech! (Also a lie! For he had certainly intended to accept the offer.) He had had his head snapped off for far less in the past. But even Mr. Furber would think twice before attempting to snap off the head of a personage important enough to scorn such a dazzling offer as Ralph was about to scorn.

The next Saturday afternoon everything was the same as on the first Saturday. The warm, bright weather was the same. Ralph was working in his garden "shop"; though expecting a swell he had from pride made no change in his habits or dress; swells, he decided, must take him as they found him; moreover, he was to treat the swell very curtly indeed; he had a startler for the swell, who assuredly was not anticipating a refusal. Dinah was in her kitchen, but this time her hair was not in irons. Mary was afield in the land of tender sentiment. Maidie was in her bedroom mending not gloves but stockings. Mr. Furber was lying on his bed; he had come home an hour later than usual and had eaten no dinner.

The moment approached for the arrival of the swell. Dinah, to pass the time, had left her kitchen to see whether Mr. Furber was all right. It was as though the house itself awaited a crisis.

During the week not one word had been said by Ralph or Mr. Furber to any of the girls about the mighty £20,000 offer. Nevertheless the girls knew that Mr. Furber had ordained its refusal and that Ralph would obey, and that nothing could possibly change his resolution, and that still he hated to give a refusal, and despised himself. The girls were profoundly disappointed. Maidie and Ralph had had a frightful quarrel because in quite another matter she had accused him of being a miserable coward—and he well knew to what she in her merciless feminine subtlety was referring. Those two had not spoken to each other for three days, and were definitely in a state of exacerbated mutual sulks.

Ralph was all the more annoyed, therefore, when from his vibrating retreat in the garden he saw that Maidie and not Dinah was showing the swell through the back door; the girl must have taken Dinah's place simply from a mischievous desire to quiz the swell. A few seconds later—and before the stranger had reached the engine-shed—Ralph saw the back door open again and Maidie reappear.

"Rafe!"

He scowled.

"What is it?"

"I want you," cried Maidie in an imperious tone.

He would have liked to kill her, but the presence of the stranger prevented. He strode up the long garden, nodding brusquely to the astonished visitor and passing him without a word.

"What is it, you vixen?"

"Your father's just died, in his sleep."

He saw Dinah weeping in the passage behind Maidie.

"Wait a minute," said Ralph, and, turning, shouted to the swell:

"Hi!"

And then in a lower tone as they met:

"Summat's happened in th' house. I can't stop to talk to ye now. But I'll take your offer. I'm ready to take it on—that is if we can come to a proper arrangement."

Mr. Furber had been feeling queer for two days. He was late for dinner because he had been to see his club doctor. But he had confided in nobody at home.

Dinah and Maidie and Ralph stood in the bedroom together. Maidie was about to run for a useless doctor.

"What will Mary say when she comes home?" moaned Dinah, for Mary was passionately fond of her grim and taciturn parent, and she was highly sensitive; to see his body there on the bed might kill her. They were all three deeply shaken with emotion, and Ralph not least.

But in his agitated heart Ralph could distinctly hear himself muttering to himself:

"A near thing, that! A near thing, that. A very near thing."

II

Mr. Ralph Furber sat in his study on a Saturday afternoon reading a very short letter. The study was a vast apartment, larger than the whole of No. 41 where his father had died, and it was furnished in mahogany and gilt and damask. Emperors had been cast from their thrones; yet Ralph looked little older. He looked fiercer, and jollier.

The letter ran:

"DEAR RALPH,—We were all extremely disappointed that you did not come down for Mary's wedding after all, and I think you ought to be downright ashamed of yourself.—Yours, MAIDIE."

Mr. Furber frowned and glanced out at the gardens which surrounded his mansion and the park which surrounded the gardens. She had a nerve, that young woman had! He was not accustomed to being written to in such a manner. He was accustomed to flattery and to his own way. He was an exceedingly wealthy person. He had made himself rich and he had made others rich too. He had not fought in the war, because the War Cabinet would not let him fight; the War Cabinet had other work for him to do, and the work was of such a nature that he could not help making money out of it, and a lot of money. As an inventor and as an organizer he had had no superiors, and he had developed a talent for most profitably investing the money which the Government compelled him to acquire. He was popularly classed as a "profiteer," but he laughed at the epithet, knowing it to be unjust. Moreover, so far as he was concerned, people might call him what they liked—he did not care. He knew the reality of power and the value of his brain. He cared for nobody and for nothing—except dominion and the wonders of his brain.

Not quite true. He cared for the letter; the letter had pierced him like a dagger between two ribs. He ripped the letter to pieces and employed language unworthy of a gentleman.

A girl was standing near him with a notebook in her hand—one of his secretaries—but he behaved as though she did not exist.

"Anybody come yet?"

"Lady Eleanor Raysse and Sir Thomas Wrighton, sir."

These were the advance-guard of his week-end party; he had parties every week-end. His invitations were seldom refused; and his curious deportment was cheerfully accepted by all because he was he.

"Tell that fellow Peter I shall want him to play squash-rackets with me in half an hour." (Peter was a professional in various games and attended to the athletic department at Wisden, and sometimes drove a car or groomed a horse.)

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Chepter he's to take the Packard and start off for the Five Towns at once. It's a hundred and seventy miles. He's to be at Miss Maidie Furber's, 13 Clayton Street, Hillport, Knype, at ten sharp to-morrow morning to bring Miss Furber here, and tell him he's to get back here with her before tea-time. Telephone a message to Miss Furber to say the car will be there for her, and she'll oblige me very much by coming. I want to see her on urgent family business."

"Yes, sir. Do you know her number, sir? Or perhaps they'll tell me at the Five Towns exchange."

"No, they won't. She hasn't got a number."

"Then what had I better do, sir?"

"Better do? Get the Five Towns Hotel. Get old Dolci. Tell him it's me, and ask him to send a message over to Hillport instantly. Telegram wouldn't be certain to be delivered to-night. He'll do it. Compose the message and make him write it down at the 'phone."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Furber never wrote anything himself, and rarely even signed anything.

Lady Eleanor wandered into the room, although the room was his den. Mr. Furber permitted, even encouraged, his week-end guests thus freely to wander about, on the understanding that they did not expect sustained attention until dinner. He had no objection to some of them listening—or pretending not to listen—while he transacted business.

"Come back as soon as you've seen to that car," he said to the secretary as she left the room.

Lady Eleanor was young, beautiful, and beautifully dressed. She indeed had style, pedigree. She was the daughter of an earl, and she had married the brother of a baron. It was impossible that any woman should be as innocent as Lady Eleanor looked, and Lady Eleanor was not. She had seen life. She had in fact had to get rid of the baron's brother. She was now free again. Ralph, with his insight into human nature—of which he was secretly very proud—knew that she would not be free for long. He admired her. She was so slim, so lithe, so elegant, so expensive. She had such a quiet, tranquillizing voice, and such a way of looking at a man—trustful, reassuring, appreciative of man's strength. It was after all rather wonderful to Ralph that such a jewel of a girl, who knew familiarly the whole of the great world, should be on familiar terms with him. Ralph, the brother of Dinah who had married a jobbing builder, and of Mary who had married a Prudential insurance agent, and whose father used to eat in his shirt-sleeves in a house of which the rent was eight shillings a week! He took her soft hand somewhat violently and she yielded it touchingly to his violence.

"Had some tea?"

She nodded. "But not a cigarette yet."

He gave her a cigarette.

"So that affair's all over and settled now?" he began, referring to the late proceedings against the baron's brother.

She nodded again.

"Shall ye get yer costs out of him?"

"Heaven knows!" she exclaimed, with a sigh and a smile. "I hear he's off to Central Africa."

They sat down side by side on the blue sofa in the immense bow-window.

"Oh, how lovely the garden is!" she murmured, turning her head. "It's so lovely it makes me want to cry. But I dare say that's only because I'm so exhausted after this affair." She laughed. What a voice! What a gentle laugh! You could scarcely hear it.

The secretary soon afterwards returned into the room. Mr. Ralph Furber did not move from the sofa. He continued to talk in a playful, rough tone to Lady Eleanor, and then suddenly he faced the standing, respectful secretary with her notebook and began curtly and rapidly to give her a long series of varied instructions, which she scribbled down, about the electric light installation, the purchase of Treasury Bills, his new suits, a hammock, champagne, a works dispute at Newcastle, etc. etc. He poured the orders out of his mind in a continuous stream.

"And tell St. John," he finished—St. John was his principal secretary—"tell Mr. St. John to draft that letter about the *Charing Cross Echo*. He's got the heads of it. I'll see it on Sunday morning. Tell him the figure's twenty-one thousand. Tell him to make it final, and I'll give 'em until Tuesday to decide."

The secretary departed once more, fully laden.

Lady Eleanor said:

"You know you'll never buy the *Echo* for twenty-one thousand. It's the oldest-established evening paper in London, and Steinheil won't take less than twenty-six thousand. He might take twenty-five, but I don't think so. It's cheap at twenty-six."

"Cheap, is it? I know it's losing close on thirty thousand a year. And I'm to pay twenty-five thousand for the privilege of losing four hundred a week!"

"But you'd soon turn it into a paying concern. Besides, you *want* a daily! Owning a paper would round you off. I quite see that. You wouldn't get one that was paying its way for a quarter of a million. Everybody says it's dirt cheap."

Ralph seized Lady Eleanor's hand and looked her in the face loweringly.

"Listen to me, Lady Eleanor," he said, with a mixture of grimness, cynicism, and benevolence. "You're going to get a commission out of Steinheil if that paper is sold to me for more than twenty-one thousand."

"Why do you say such a thing?"

"Because it just came into my head, that's all. I shouldn't be surprised if he's offered you half of everything over twenty-one thousand. It's quite all right. Business is business." He laughed indulgently, as at a rather mediocre joke.

A deep blush spread over Lady Eleanor's cheeks and down to her neck and throat.

Ralph jumped to his feet.

"Then I guessed right," he exclaimed savagely, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Listen here. I won't give Steinheil more than twenty-one. But I'll make you a present of two and a half thousand—for your trouble."

"You're terrible. You're the most terrible man in the world. . . . I have to live. You know how extravagant I am. I can't help it, can I?"

Lady Eleanor wept.

There was an irruption of guests into the room, headed by Sir Thomas. Lady Eleanor sprang from the sofa, threw her cigarette into a bowl, and rushed pell-mell through the open french window into the garden. She was holding her hands to her face, and between her hands cataracts of laughter seemed to escape. But only Ralph knew that it was hysterical laughter.

"What's the fun, Rafy?" Sir Thomas demanded gaily.

"Go and change, Tommy," said Mr. Furber. "And I'll take you on at squash-rackets for a fiver."

III

"But I thought you were ill!"

This exclamation came from Maidie as she stepped out of the Packard on the following afternoon, Sunday. The whole of the week-end party was trailing into the house for tea, after various games and distractions. And the week-end party seemed to Maidie to be alarmingly distinguished, smart, fashionable, Londony, and sure of itself. The women thereof intimidated her. Lady Eleanor, shining in white, instantly aroused in her an irrational, unchristian, acute antipathy. The week-end party thought that Maidie must be some secretarial messenger arriving with important news bearing on the host's private affairs, and it passed on through the inner and the outer halls into the big drawing-room.

"Why did ye think I was ill?" asked Ralph, ignoring completely all his other guests.

"Well, I couldn't think why else ye should send for me. I asked the chauffeur, but he didn't seem to know much about you. I certainly shouldn't have come if I hadn't thought you were ill."

"I wanted to see ye."

"Oh, my!" she murmured involuntarily, gazing at the formidable double staircase which rose grandly bifurcating out of the main hall. She was out-faced by the splendour, and the result of her fright was that she became brusque, hostile and hedgehog-like. Ralph Furber reflected quickly.

"Which room is Miss Furber in?" he questioned the attendant butler.

"The Regency room, sir."

"Find Miss Hummel and ask her to go up there at once."

"Very good, sir."

Miss Hummel was the factotum secretary who took notes and whose entire existence was devoted to the great autocrat. He had decided that Miss Hummel and Maidie stood a chance of "getting on" together.

"Am I supposed to sleep *here*?" asked Maidie, in the glittering Regency bedroom to which Ralph had personally conducted her. She had never before had the opportunity of witnessing Ralph's way of life. She knew he was a millionaire, but she had not imagined the state of being a millionaire. She had the sensation of having stepped somehow into the unreal pages of a novel.

"But who were all those people downstairs?"

"Oh, just a job lot here for the week-end."

"But who?"

He mentioned some names.

"Well, I'm not going down to have my tea with them folk, and so you needn't think it, Ralph Furber!"

"All right, silly! All right!" he agreed testily.

In spite of his unique and disconcerting manners to friends, Ralph thought he had cast off most of his old Five Towns peculiarities. Perhaps he had. But in the presence of Maidie they all seemed to come back again. There she sat, the very symbol of the Five Towns, with her red hair, her freckled face, her snub nose, and her no-nonsense attitude. Dowdy, constrained, nervous, utterly provincial, she was yet sturdy enough in her mind to repudiate all "them folk" downstairs. So much so that Ralph actually felt somewhat ashamed of knowing them and having them in his house. He felt apologetic even for the house itself. He felt that in putting on grandeur he had somehow betrayed the rugged ideals of the Five Towns.

And she had only come because she had thought he was ill! . . . The goods! The stuff! That was what she was, the vixen! Being a realist, he admitted to himself that if he persuaded her to go to the drawing-room and be introduced to his job lot, he should be ashamed of her—do what he would. And yet he admired the girl, confound her! Miss Hummel appeared, and, worried, he left the two young women to make acquaintance.

"Mr. Furber's compliments, and he hopes you'll begin dinner without him, as he has just had a very urgent message from town which must be attended to immediately." Thus the butler to the assembled drawing-room when the dinner-gong had sounded.

And upstairs, in a little sitting-room which had somehow got mislaid among the bedrooms, Maidie and Miss Hummel were hovering expectantly round a table laid for two when Ralph, whom they were certainly not expecting, seemed to pounce tigerishly upon them, and at a hardly perceptible sign from him Miss Hummel departed, in search of another dinner elsewhere in the house.

"I'm going to eat up here with you," said Ralph.

"But what about the people downstairs?"

"Hang 'em! I've got to talk to you."

"D'ye always have dinner at this time?"

"Yes. Usual time."

"Ye know very well it isn't. And do ye always put on evening dress?"

"Well, it's evening, isn't it?"

"I don't think much of yer laundry. I could get up a starched shirt better than that myself."

"Ye think ye could."

He winked as he examined her anew. It seemed to him that she positively had not changed. The same slimness, the same fresh if freckled complexion, the same bright, girlish, bold, fighting and yet innocent glance. Difficult to believe that she was past thirty. How different she was from the women downstairs! He thought, in his instinctive partiality for the place of his origin:

"There's something in *her* that the others haven't got."

Before the parlourmaid who served them could bring the finger-bowls he abruptly told her to go—partly because he feared that Maidie might silently and witheringly sneer at the notion of him, Ralph Furber, employing finger-bowls. He thought of the old suppers in the parlour of the cottage by the municipal park.

"So ye think I ought to be 'downright ashamed' o' myself," said Ralph, quoting suddenly from her letter to him.

"Mary was most frightfully hurt, and ashamed too. . . . As if you despised her. . . . Too grand, now, to come to your own sister's wedding! . . . And crying off at the last moment, too!" Maidie's voice was hard, and the glint of her eyes was hard. None of the ladies downstairs would have dared to stand up to him as Maidie was doing. Not one! They all, whatever their lineage, kowtowed to him when it came to the point. He saw that Maidie would need handling.

"Listen here," he said, subduing his natural harshness of tone. "I sent for ye because I was very anxious for ye not to think wrong about me. I——"

"Yes," she interrupted him, in quite her old manner, "that's just like ye, that is. You think everyone's at *your* beck and call, *you* do. You always did. And I'm brought all the way down here to be put in my place and made to feel small. You're a snob, and you know it, but you want to make us believe you aren't. Well, you can't do it."

Mr. Furber achieved marvels of self-control.

"Listen here," his voice sank nearly to a murmur. "I'm telling ye I really couldn't come. I've got very important interests. Very important. I sh'd doubt if you realize how important——"

"I don't care what your 'interests' are. You haven't got any interests as important as Mary's wedding was to Mary. She expected to be married ten years ago and she ought to have been. Run after as she was! And at last it comes off, and you were to give her away and all. And you throw her over and she has to be given away by that stupid old Ezra." (Ezra was Dinah's husband.) "And it was a scandalous shame. You're the head of the family still, even if you do have lords and ladies and things at your precious week-end parties. I suppose you'll say you gave Mary a thousand pounds for a wedding present. If I'd been her I'd have ripped the cheque in half and sent it back to you in an unstamped envelope. That I would! You're a disgusting snob. And you think everybody's afraid of you and you can do what you like and we shall all lick your boots. Not a bit of it, my lad! And I'll thank you to send me to the station early to-morrow as I'm going back by train, *if* you please. You aren't the only independent person in the world."

At this point Mr. Furber picked up his finger-bowl and dashed it on to the carpet, water and all. He let himself go. Hammer and tongs were personified with astounding vigour in the little sitting-room. A report of the dialogue between the hammer and the tongs would not be edifying, but it constituted a great scene in the finest tradition of the Five Towns. It was interfered with by the sound of the gramophone from the hall. A fox-trot. The week-end party was solacing itself for the absence of the host in a dance. Silence fell between the second cousins. Then Mr. Furber left the room. Leaning over the rail of the corridor he saw the heads of the dancers below. Lady Eleanor ran up to him and leaned over by his side.

"I know you hate me," she said in a low, poignant tone, while maintaining a rapid smile for the benefit of the upward public gaze. "I know you've done with me. But if you only knew how I——"

"I don't hate yer," he answered. "I admire you for that commission idea. Business is business. Don't forget I'm a business man myself. Why shouldn't you have made a bit out of the sale of this paper? You *shall*. Go downstairs again now."

"But I must talk to you to-night. I must explain myself. You must let me defend myself. Meet me in the kiosk at eleven. I'll slip out. I shall expect you."

She glided down the stairs. He watched her. She was indeed highly ornamental. What an ornament for a rich man's home! How intensely feminine.

"She's got me," he reflected. "She was going to make a commission out of me. And I've forgiven her, and she's got me. Kiosk, eh!"

It was a relief to him to admit to himself that he was at last caught.

"Anyhow she adores me."

His ear caught a strange sound. It came along the corridor as from a distance. It reminded him of the distant gigantic breathing of the great blast furnaces over at Cauldon in the Five Towns. Only it was very, very faint. He went towards it. It came from the little sitting-room. It was Maidie sobbing with singular regularity. Her auburn head lay on the table and her arms round it amid the debris of the meal. He shut the door and approached the auburn head anxiously, hoping that he alone had heard the sound. "This is the second woman I've reduced to tears to-day," he thought grimly. He bent over Maidie. She ceased to cry. Her eyes glistened wet.

"Here, listen here!" he said. "I was wrong not to go to that dashed wedding. But ye've been saying a lot of very wicked things. And ye know ye have. Very unjust. But ye can't control yerself. Never could. And why aren't *you* married, I should like to know! . . . Fellows are afraid of you. But I'm not. I'm not. At least I don't think I am."

She smiled pitifully.

"Now why am I kissing her?" he asked himself as he kissed her. No, she did not draw back. She let him kiss her fair and square. And the terrible strangeness and mystery of destiny shook him. For he was a man who could comprehend and appreciate big things.

"A near thing, that!" he said to himself. "An hour later, half an hour later, and I should ha' been——"

Thus he reflected as he went out to give exactly two minutes to Lady Eleanor in the kiosk. He was armed now against the weapons of Lady Eleanor in the summer night.

On the first day of his ownership of *The Charing Cross Echo* appeared therein an announcement of his marriage (ceremony strictly private) to Maidie Furber, daughter of the late, etc. etc.

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Transcriber's Note

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's errors have been addressed.

Several different spellings of Shakespeare have been formalised to this one.

Page 78. he changed to be. (he could be quite happy)

Page 226. Unfortnately changed to Unfortunately. (Unfortunately for himself)

Page 284. Fairfax changed to Flyfax. (Miss Flyfax, said Reginald)

Page 294. neighhours changed to neighbours. (and the neighbours complained)

