The Red House

Edith Nesbit

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I. THE BEGINNING

CONVENTIONALLY our life−story ended in a shower of rice at the church door, amid the scent of white flowers, with a flutter of white favors all about us. We left behind us those relatives whose presence had been so little desired by us during our brief courtship, and a high−heeled white satin slipper struck the back of the brougham as we drove off. It was like a parting slap on the shoulder from our old life−−the old life which we left so gayly, eager to fulfil the destiny set as the end of our wooing's fairy story, and to "live happy ever after."

And now all that was six months ago; and instead of attending to that destiny, the fairy princess and her unworthy prince were plunged over head and ears in their first quarrel−−their first serious quarrel−−about the real and earnest things of life; for the other little quarrels about matters of sentiment and the affections really did not count. They were only play and make−believe; still, they had got our hands in, so that when we really differed seriously we both knew exactly how to behave−−we had played at quarrels so often. This quarrel was very serious, because it was about my shaving−brush and Chloe's handkerchief−case. There was a cupboard with a window−−Chloe called it my dressing−room, and, at first, I humored her pretty fancy about it, and pretended that I could really see to shave in a glass that faced the window, although my shoulders, as I stood, cut off all light. But even then I used really to shave at Chloe's mirror after she had gone down to make the tea and boil the eggs−−only I kept my shaving things in the embroidered vestments which my wife's affection provided and her fingers worked, and these lived in the "dressing−room." But the subterfuge presently seemed unworthy, and I found myself, in the ardor of a truthful nature, leaving my soapy brush on her toilet−table. Chloe called this untidiness, and worse, and urged that I had a dressing−room. Then I put the brush away. This had happened more than once.

On this memorable morning I had set up the pretty ivory shaving−brush, clean and pleasant with its white crown of lather, among her hair−brushes. Chloe came up just then to ask me whether I would have two or three eggs. Her entrance startled me. I cut myself slightly, but infuriatingly, and knocked the brush down. It fell on Chloe's handkerchief−case−−pink satin, painted with rose and cupids, a present. Chloe snatched it up.

"You are horrid," she said. "Why don't you shave in your own dressing−room?"

"Whatever does it matter?" said I.

"My sachet's ruined," she said, dabbing at it with her pocket−handkerchief.

My chin was still bleeding.

"It's no use," she went on. "I spend all my time trying to keep the house nice, and you're always putting things down on things. You put your hateful fountain−pen down on the new drawn−linen table−centre only yesterday, and it's made a great ink mark. Yes, you did−−when you were writing the check for the butcher."

I was ill−advised enough to murmur something about trifles.

"But they're not trifles," said Chloe. "They're just the little things that make all the difference between a home and−−"

"And?"

"And other places. Breakfast will be quite spoiled. You're frightfully late. And I don't think this girl means to stay; she's been quite rude about the haddock already."

Now that I knew what my wife was so cross about, I might, perhaps−−but I didn't. My chin was still bleeding.

I said, "Please don't wait breakfast for me, and began to brush my hair with a dignified aloofness. Chloe went out, and I own that she banged the door.

When I was ready I went down to breakfast. Chloe was reading the paper−−a thing she never does. She poured out my tea and gave it to me without a glance. Thanking her coldly, I helped myself to haddock and opened my letters.

It was with the second letter that the shock came. I read the letter twice. And I looked round our little dining−room−−it was about ten feet by nine−−and I sighed. For I knew−−surely if inexplicably−−that the dove of peace which had folded its wings there had spread them on a flight from which it would, perhaps, never return. I had quarrelled with my wife−−about a shaving−brush; but that episode had now shrunk to less than nothing in the presence of the new, the wonderful danger that threatened our home. I looked at the neat breakfast−table, bright

with our wedding−presents−−cruet−stands, butter−dishes, and silver−plated teaspoons. I looked at the row of shelves over the mantel−piece, where the more attractive of our crockery stood displayed; at the corner cupboard, picked up for a song in Great Portland Street, and fitted with a lock inexorably guarding the marmalade, the loaf sugar, the sardines, the bottled beer, and such like costly items. I looked at Chloe, mutinously reading the paper−−in a white muslin blouse which had been green, with white flowers on it, when we bought it together in the Lewisham High Street for twopence three farthings the yard, and which to my mind was all the prettier for the theft, by soap and water, of its original hue and design. I looked at the remains of the haddock on the dish, the two eggs in the eggstand−−another wedding−present. And again I sighed.

Chloe laid down the paper irresolutely and looked towards, but not at, me.

I sighed again and stirred my tea. I could see that Chloe was making a heroic resolve to overcome her pride and end the quarrel. She did it.

"Are you sorry you were so cross?" she asked, severely.

"Frightfully sorry." I spoke from the heart.

"Then so am I!" she cried. And suddenly the first quarrel found itself over. Presently we went on with the breakfast. To be more accurate, we began. But my thoughts refused to bury themselves in the beefsteak−pudding which Chloe unfolded as a brilliant dinner prospect, and I sighed once more.

"What is the matter now? Have you forgotten that you're not cross any more, and you're never going to be again−−or−−is the haddock really like she said?" Chloe asked, making horseshoes in her pretty forehead, as she always does when life presents to her any problem not immediately soluble in a laugh or a joke. "Is it another bill? Never mind! I'll ask them to wait. You'll get the check for that detective story on Monday, if the editor has a thread of conscience left, and I'll go up to town to−morrow and draw the money from old Moses for those last drawings of 'The Holy Life.'"

"It's not a bill, madam," I said, "and Moses can send his money by post. To−morrow we have another errand. To−day, alas! I must finish my article for the Weekly Wilderness."

"Do you want to drive me to suicide?" she asked. "Give me the letter!"

"Allow me," I said, "the melancholy pleasure of communicating its contents. If you have quite finished your eggs and things you may come and sit on my knee."

She came and perched there.

"Don't be a pig, Len," she said. "I'm not a baby, to have bad news broken to me."

Then I put my arm round her and spoke out roundly.

"My dear," I said, "we are ruined."

"Oh, Len, are we really?" said Chloe, much interested.

"Yes," I said, firmly. "Hitherto we've worked for our living and earned it. Now we are degraded from the ranks of the noble army of workers. My uncle James has died, and he has left us a hundred a year and a house. Our independence gone−−it's a cruel blow! We'll ride over and see it to−morrow as ever is."

I am not sure that Chloe did not weep for joy. Though as a rule, one knows, that sort of weeping is only done in books. You see, we really had worked so very, very hard. However much in love one may be, one does not like to work ten hours a day. Though two may not grudge it as the price of life together. I wrote, Chloe illustrated−−we worked hard−−hard−−hard, and earned enough to keep body and soul and the two of us together in our microscopic house. "The Bandbox" we called it, but on its gatepost it called itself Ross Villa. And now−−a hundred a year, and a house−−such a house. It came back to me out of my youth, a monument of comfortable affluence, with vineries and pineries, and pits and frames, clean−shaved lawns and trim orchards, yew avenues, box edgings, stabling and coach−houses and pigsties and henneries. Chloe and I clung together in an ecstasy, till "the girl" came in to clear away breakfast. I never saw anything more dramatic than the way in which she indicated, as she bore out the empty dish, that her opinion of the haddock was not only entirely unaltered, but indeed confirmed, by our having eaten it.

My article for the Weekly Wilderness got itself written somehow, but with difficulty, for Chloe, demoralized by our good fortune, interrupted me at every sentence−−a thing we have carefully trained each other not to do.

"Has it a garden?" she asked, suddenly, stopping in front of me with a compelling wave of her wand, or feather brush. "Are you sure it has a garden?"

"More or less," I said. "Don't chatter, there's an angel."

"And out−houses?" after a pause and an interval of fluffy energy.

"Of sorts," I said; "but don't talk, my dearest child. You lost me an epigram then."

"I am so sorry−−but−−since you are interrupted−−dear, dearer, dearest Len, tell me in six words, what is the Red House like?"

"It's not red at all−−at least only one wing of it. It's a big yellow house−−stands all alone in fields. Has a great alarm−bell and, I believe, a ghost. Now be quiet or I shall slap you. To−morrow we'll see it."

But the interruption ruined a delightful sentence, conceived in a spirit of the most delicate irony, and dealing with the late deplorable action of the London water companies−−and again I experienced that premonition of unrest. Never again, I felt certain, should I be able to be sure of a clear morning's work. I made allowances for my wife. I was not, I feel certain, unjust or unreasonable, but I saw that while the house and the money were new topics, she could not be expected to preserve on them the hours of silence which my writing exacted. And by the time the topics were stale, the beautiful habit of letting each other alone during working−hours would have been broken forever. I laid down my fountain−pen to make these reflections. I heard Chloe pulling out drawers and opening cupboards in our room overhead. Yet before I could snatch up my pen she had whirled in and caught me idle.

"Oh, you're not doing anything. Then I sha'n't interrupt you if I just ask whether there's a hen−house."

"I don't know," I said, beginning to write very fast, and not sufficiently grateful, I fear, for her indifference to the money as compared with the house. "Why don't you settle down to your work? This is the beginning of the ruin I foresaw."

"I−−I don't think I'll work to−day," she said, guiltily. "I'm looking over some things. But I won't bother."

But she was back again in less than half an hour with a question about larders burning on her lips, and my article degenerated from the clear, sustained logical argument which it meant to be, to a piece of patch−work−−of patch−work ill fitted. I became desperate, and avenged my poor broken article by telling Chloe anything rather than the truth about my uncle's old house. In the end this disingenuousness was paid for to the uttermost. If I had prepared her, if I had had the intelligence to overpaint, even, the charms of that old house−−but I was firm, firm to the point of spitefulness. "A yellow brick house, as ugly as a lunatic asylum, standing alone in the fields, bearing an alarm−bell and a ghostly reputation." This was the most she got out of me.

My piece of patch−work got its last stitches put in sooner than I expected. I put it in its envelope, addressed it, and went up to our room.

All the wardrobe drawers were pulled out. Chloe was sitting on the floor amid a heap of stuffs−−a roll of chintz which her mother had given her for covers to our drawing−room furniture, if ever we had any; some bits of velvet, soft reds and greens, that we had bought together at Liberty's sale; and she was snipping and tearing at a muslin and lace gown−−a gown I had always admired. I remember she wore it to breakfast the day after our wedding. I felt as though my tenderest memories were being unpicked, stitch by stitch.

"What on earth−−" I said. She looked up with a flush of excitement on her little face.

"Oh, Len, look here. Don't you think these velvets would cover some cushions very nicely? And the chintz would make lovely long curtains, and I thought I could get at least four short blinds out of this muslin for the new house."

My blood actually ran cold. I sat down suddenly on the clothes−basket. Chloe was not too preoccupied to tell me not to, for perhaps the twentieth time.

"You know it won't bear your weight," she said. "Look here. I shall put the lace like that, and like that, and tie it back with yellow ribbon. I've got a soft sash here."

She got up, scattering muslin and velvet, and began to turn over a corner drawer. I found a trembling tongue.

"But, my dear child, we can't live in the house."

She dropped a lace scarf and her best ivory prayer−book to look at me.

"But why?"

"It's too big. We can't afford it."

"But we pay rent for this−−and we shouldn't for that."

"It's impossible. Why, of course we must let it. It ought to bring us in a couple of hundred a year."

Chloe's eyes actually filled with tears.

"My dear, my dear," I said, "this is very terrible. Is it possible that after so short a time I find you longing to

leave the Bandbox−−our own little Bandbox−−the pride and joy of our hearts?"

She came to me then and asked me not to be so horrid.

"Don't tease," she said, "just when I was so pleased, too! You don't know how I hate the people next door, Len. Oh, fancy having no one next door! I'd live in a barn on those terms."

I talked to her in a thoroughly reasonable way, and she presently promised that she also would be reasonable. She agreed that we must let the house. Also she insisted that as I had finished my work, we should go at once and look at it. I in my turn agreed. It was while I was lacing my boots that she said, sighing:

"Well, it is hard. But you say it's absolutely hideous−−that's one comfort."

Even then I might have put up an arm to ward off the blow fate was aiming at me, but my bootlace was in a hard knot, and I said nothing on any other subject.

In the hour when afternoon ends and evening begins, we set out to see the Red House. We rode our bicycles, of course. Poor as we were, we could yet command, on the hire system, machines which, at any rate, in their first youth, might have been the desire of princes. Once we had passed the dusty avenue of little villas (wherein our Bandbox, the corner house, squeezed in between two more portly brethren, is of all the most unworthy), and had done the three miles of respectable semi−detachedness which form on this side of town the outer fringe of London's loathly suburbs, our way lay through green lanes where hawthorns were budding in pink and pearl. And here I received a final note of warning.

"Oh, Len," Chloe sighed, reining in her shining steed to gaze wistfully on the trim green of the scattered suburban pleasaunces, "if we could only live out here−−away from the washing and the organ−grinders and the people next door! Oh−−I know we can't−−but I wish we could."

"I wish so, too," I said, briskly. It was merely a polite acquiescence in her aspiration, but it was noted. I, blind mole, noted nothing. The most explicit warnings pass us by unheeded; it is only after the doom stroke has fallen that we perceive the significance of portents.

We climbed the hill and passed through the long, sunny village street, clamorous now with bean−feasters and superior private pleasure parties in wagonettes drawn up in front of the "Spotted Dog" and "The Chequers" and the "Castle Hotel," for was it not Saturday, and the village but a bare ten miles from Charing Cross? Then came the sharp turn to the left, the delicious downward rush through hawthorn−scented air, the black bar of shadow from the railway bridge, a red cottage, a red wall, tall chestnut−trees, pyramids of green fan−leaves and miraculous−scented flowers−−a green gate.

"This is it," I said, and Chloe brought down the brake in that reckless way of hers, and sprang to the ground. The sun−blistered, old, green gate swung long and wide on loud, red, rusty hinges as we led our beasts in. We left them under the biggest of the chestnut−trees, and walked up the wide, moss−grown drive to where the front door, fortified by heavy stone pillars, seemed to defy us, the besiegers.

"Is this really it?" asked Chloe, in a whisper. And well might she ask. The yellow brick on which in my talk I had laid so much stress was hidden almost−−at any rate transformed, transfigured−−by a net−work of great leaves and red buds; creepers covered it−−all but. And at the side there were jasmine that in July nights would be starry and scented, and wistaria, purple−flowered and yellow−leaved over its thick, gnarled boughs, and ivy; and at the back, where the shaky green veranda is overhung by the perilous charm of the white balcony, Virginia−creepers and climbing roses grew in a thorny maze. The moat was there, girdling the old lawns−−where once the Elizabethan manor stood−−with a belt of silver, a sad swan and a leaky boat keeping each other company. Yellow laburnums trailed their long hair in the water, and sweet lilac−bushes swayed to look at their pretty plumes reflected in it. To right and left stretched the green tangled mysteries of the overgrown gardens.

We stepped back onto the bridge that crosses the moat, and looked up at the tall house. Before the ivy dressed it, it must have been very ugly. I suspect my uncle of having had that ivy clipped to its last leaf every spring; and he must have had the house scraped and "pointed" pretty often. How otherwise account for the yellow brick hideousness that glared at me through the mist of the years lying between me and my childhood?

The Red House is square, and very tall, but it has two large, low, long wings ending in four square brick turrets with pointed roofs. We stood and looked at it, and I said,

"You see it's much too big for us to live in−−"

Chloe assented, feverishly: "Oh yes, of course, ever so much. But can't we get in?"

We couldn't, because I had forgotten to call at the plumber's in the village for the key.

"But I'll go back for it," I said, "only−−I didn't think of it−−the shop's sure to be shut. It's Saturday, you know."

"Then we won't waste time," said Chloe, firmly. "Let's be burglars. Break a pane of glass, and let's get in by a window."

Already she was stooping for a stone.

"Well−−if you insist. But let's at least find a window without shutters."

We went round the house and round the house, like the snow in the riddle; but every window had its eyelids down, as Chloe said.

"Stupid, sleepy thing," she said, "we must wake it up. Can't you climb up to the balcony and get in there?"

"Shutters again," I said. "My worthy uncle believed in them. Now I come to think of it, he had shutters to every window, and a patent fastening for each, and all different. But−−"

I was looking at the thick, twisted stems of the ivy that clung to the wall of the low left wing.

"There used to be an apple−room with a window opening on the leads. In happier days−−"

"Happier?"

"No−−earlier! I have climbed up the ivy in my time. But I dare say the apple−room is locked. But I'll go and see, if you insist upon it."

Chloe measured the height with her eyes, some ten feet.

"Very well," she said, meekly. And I went up the ivy. It was as easy as going up a ladder; but I own that as I stepped onto the leads I did not expect to hear my wife's voice just below my feet, saying,

"Look out−−you'll kick me."

She had climbed up the ivy behind me. I said nothing till I had pulled her up to stand safely beside me, and then I fairly shook her.

"You wicked," I said. "Suppose you had slipped? You might have broken that little, silly neck of yours."

She laughed.

"My dear boy, I was climbing trees when you were in your cradle!"

As I was out of my cradle twenty−two years ago, and that was three years before she was even in hers, this insult called for no reply.

"Did you really think I should allow you to see an inch of even the apple−room without me?" she said. "Come on−−oh!−−how jolly the garden looks from here! Is this the window?"

It was. I broke one of the cobwebby panes, and opened the window, but, of course, it was barred.

"Idiot that I am−−I remember now−−I used to creep through. I've grown since then. It's no good. We must give it up."

Chloe was looking at the bars. Suddenly she took her hat off.

"I'm not so very big," she said. "You called me a shrimp only yesterday."

The bottom of the window was level with the leads. She twisted her skirt round her ankles as she sat down, and pushed both feet between the bars.

"You can hold on to my arm if you like till I feel the floor. Oh, don't be silly. I must."

She twisted herself like an eel through the bars.

"Right. Let go," and the next moment she was laughing at me out of the dark window.

"Mind the stairs," I said.−−"Open the door at the top, and I can come in, too."

She disappeared. The little door shook to her withdrawal of the rust−locked bolts. I bent my head and stepped in. A kiss met my face in the dark.

"Welcome to your house," she said.

We went down the little, dark, rickety staircase. At the bottom was a door. Locked.

"Oh, this is too much!" said Chloe.

"Go back a few steps," I said, for my blood was up now, and, besides, the door did not feel very firm.

"Broad shoulders are useful sometimes," she said, when the door had given way to the pressure of mine, and we found ourselves standing in the great, dark kitchen, where the thin, dusty shafts of yellow sunlight shot through the shuttercracks.

We had down those shutters, and looked out through the dingy windows on the moat.

"Oh, Len, what a place!" she said, and kissed me again. "Just look at the roasting−jack, and the rack for guns,

and the hooks in the roof to hang hams and things−−and, oh−−there's a great bacon−rack. It is too beautiful!"

We explored the pantry and the servants' hall, the little bedrooms above, and then along the flagged passage to the great hall, tiled with white and red marble, with the oak staircase winding up out of it.

We explored the living−rooms that led from it, and before we had climbed the first flight of stairs to the great drawing−room, my wife was breathless with enthusiasm. She kissed me in every room−−"for luck," as she explained−−and when at last even the great attics held nothing concealed from us, I calculated that I had received twenty−nine kisses.

"It ought to let for a good bit," I said, thoughtfully, when at last I had replaced all the shutters, and had persuaded her to come out and let me bang the big door after us.

"It'll want some doing up, won't it?" said Chloe. "That's a very dangerous hole in the staircase. Come, let's go round the garden."

We went. The old garden had always been beautiful to me, even in the days when I used secretly to eat gooseberries there, and plums, and peaches in an unripe state; and it was beautiful now, even as I remembered it, only now its trees and bushes were incredibly grown−−moss− cushioned its paths. Its fountains were dry and weed grown, and its sun−dial was covered with briony and woody nightshade. I put aside the green trails to show Chloe the motto, Horas numero nisi serenas ("I chronicle only the sunny hours").

She leaned her elbows on the top of the sundial, and looked at me.

"There now, you see," she said. "We must live here! We simply must. Only sunny hours!"

"My dear, it's madness. We can't live here. We can let it for two hundred pounds a year."

"I don't care if we could let it for two thousand," said she.

"And our furniture would about fill the servants' hall and the kitchen."

"Then we'll live in the servants' hall and the kitchen."

"And we could never keep up the garden. It would take three men all their time."

"It wouldn't. And I'd get up at three in the morning and weed."

"But you promised to be reasonable."

"I am; it's you who aren't; and if I did I don't care. It's what I've wanted all my life. Oh, Len, you must."

"If you're so keen on the place we might live in one of the cottages." There were four on the estate.

"I hate the cottages. Poky little things."

"They're bigger than the Bandbox," I said.

"I hate the Bandbox," she said, mutinously. Then I laughed.

"After that heresy," I said, "I shall take you home. My darling lunatic, come away. The Red House has turned your brain."

Chloe mounted in silence, and in silence we rode away. In the village I stopped at the plumber's−−he is also a builder and a house agent, and though it was Saturday, he was, after all, at home−−and rather hurriedly told him to try and let the Red House.

Chloe said nothing, but stood beside me pale with the strain of her inward protest.

We rode on.

"How could you?" she said, presently. "When shall we ever have such a chance again? That glorious green garden, and the orchard, all pinky and white, and the drawing−room−−it must be forty feet long−−and the cottages, and the still−room, and the dear, darling, little apple−room. The whole place is like a picture out of Silas Marner. I'm sure that long, low room where you have to go down two steps was called the white parlor. It's like all the houses I've ever dreamed of. And after I've kissed you in every room for luck, too, and everything! Oh, Len, you don't really love me, or you'd let me live there!"

"You certainly put a great strain on my love, madam," I said, "when you cry for the moon in this disgraceful manner on the king's high−road. Cheer up! Perhaps you'll feel saner in the morning. If not, we'll send for the doctor."

"Well, you'll never let it," she said, riding faster and faster in her indignation. "That's one comfort! If you do, I shall never believe in anything again. It's the most beautiful place in the world−−and it's ours−−our very own. You'll see; no one will dare to take it."

What spells she worked I don't know, nor how she worked them. But, curiously enough, no one did take the house. City gentleman after city gentleman approached and retreated after a parley, that always ended in

suggestions for repairs to the tune of from four to five hundred pounds. At first each new applicant was to me an object of interest, and to Chloe an object of jealous detestation. But as time wore on, and each new candidate told the same unflattering tale of the shocking state of repairs at the Red House, the hour came when at the accustomed formula I merely smiled. But Chloe laughed, a laugh of triumph and delight.

We used to ride over there every day to see if the house was let, and it never was; and more and more flowers came out in the garden−−old, small sweet tulips and forget−me−nots and hearts−ease, and the roses were in tiny bud.

And never for a day did Chloe cease to cry for the moon.

The 27th of May is her birthday. It is also the anniversary of the day on which I first met her. So that when, on that day, she held her hand up to look at her new turquoises, and said, "It is a lovely ring, and you're a dear, reckless, extravagant millionaire, and I love you; but oh, Len, I wish you'd give me the Red House instead"−−I could hold out no longer.

"Very well," I said, "you shall have the moon, since you won't give up crying for it. But don't blame me if you find it's only green cheese, after all."

"Oh, you darling!" she cried. "But I knew all the time you would−−if I only kept on−−"

"This revelation of your methods of government−−" I began, with proper severity.

But she stopped my mouth quite irresistibly.

"Now, don't growl when I'm so happy," she said. "We shall never have any horrid rent to pay again. We are just being economical, that's all. We can't afford to keep a great house eat− ing its head off in the stable; and, anyway, we sha'n't dun ourselves for repairs."

"There will be rates," I said.

"And roses," said she.

"And the expense of moving."

"And the economy of moving."

"And we can't afford a gardener."

"And we don't want one."

"And we've got no furniture."

"Yes, we have; a whole Bandbox full."

"And there's a ghost."

"We sha'n't see it−−"

"And if you do?"

"I'll train it to run on errands and clean the windows."

"No servant will stay with us."

"They won't as it is."

"There's a condition," I said.

"Anything on earth," said she.

"If I give you the Red House for a dear little birthday present, I must insist on being allowed to put my shaving−brush down anywhere in it; just anywhere I choose."

"You shall. There's room enough," she said, but even at that moment she sighed.

"When do you wish to move in?"

"On your birthday, of course."

And so it was decided. The blow I had dreaded had fallen. My own hands had guided it. On the 6th of June we were to take possession of an immense mansion, standing in its own grounds, replete with every possible inconvenience. Chloe dropped her work and sewed curtains all day. I had never known her so happy. And indeed, now that the die was cast, I myself felt that our new experiment had in it at least all the elements of interest. I owned as much.

"Ah," said Chloe, "I knew you hid a kindly heart under that mask of indifference. Interesting? Oh, my dear boy, you haven't the faintest idea of the interesting things that are going to happen to us at the Red House."

Nor had she. Had either of us even faintly imagined a tenth part of what was to befall us in that house−− And yet I don't know. Chloe says now that she would have left the safe shelter of the Bandbox just the same. And I−−well, as you see, if Chloe only "keeps all on," I am foolish enough for anything.

II. IN THE RED HOUSE

"YOU look like a historical picture," Chloe said. "What's−his−name weeping over the ruins of Somewhere or other."

"I am weeping, over the ruins of my happy home," I replied, as I sat on a packing−case and stirred with my boot−toe a tangle of brown paper, string, dust, and empty bottles on the dining−room floor.

"Nonsense!" she said. "Your happy home's where I am, isn't it?"

"That's just what I say. This adorable Bandbox of ours contained my heart's one treasure, and therefore−−"

"If you mean me," she said, briskly, "your treasure is not going to be kept in a Bandbox any longer. It is going to live in a palace−−"

"Unfurnished−−replete with−−"

"Historic associations and other delights," she interrupted. "And not quite unfurnished, either. Poor, dear boy−−was it unhappy at the nasty flitting, then? And was it like a cat, and did it hate to leave its own house? It shall have its paws buttered−−its boots, I mean−−the minute we get into the new house!"

She came and sat beside me on the packing−case, and I absently put my arm round her.

"Allow me a moment for natural regrets," I said. "It is not fair to distract my mind with undue influence when I'm watching the dark waters of time close over the wreck of that good ship, the Bandbox."

"That's fine writing," she said, contemptuously. "Talk sensibly, there's a good boy."

Acquiescing, I pinched her ears softly. What my wife terms sensible conversation is unworthy to be reported.

The Bandbox lay before us, so to speak, in little bits. All the curtains were down, and all the pictures. The crockery was packed up, so were the wedding−presents. The saucepans and kettles sat in a forlorn group on the sitting−room floor. Our comfortable beds were now nothing but rolls of striped ticking and long, iron bands−−lying about where one could best trip over them. The wall−papers, which had looked so bright and pleasant with our books and pictures on them, now showed, in patches of aggressively unfaded color, the outlines of the shelves and frames that had hung against them. The fire that had boiled our breakfast−kettle had gone out, and the cold ashes looked inexpressibly desolate.

As we sat awaiting the arrival of our green−grocer, who had undertaken to "move" us, I pointed out the ashes to Chloe.

"I believe you would like to put some on your head," said she.

The green−grocer had promised to come at nine o'clock. That was why we had got up in the middle of the night, and finished our packing before eight o'clock. It was now past ten.

"He has thought better of it," said I. "He is a far−seeing man, and a kindly. He knows it cannot be for our real good to leave our Bandbox. Let's set to work and put all the things back in their places!"

"Here he is," said Chloe, jumping off the packing−case at the squeaking sound which ever preludes any weak effort on the part of the Bandbox door−knocker. "Oh, Len," she whispered, in awestruck tones, "it isn't the men! I can see through the door−glass, and it's a lady, and look at me!"

"Life hardly offers a dearer pleasure!" said I, and indeed, in her white gown and blue pinafore, with her brown hair loose and ruffled, she made so pretty a picture that I could not help thinking how a really high−toned green−grocer might well have refused base coin as the price of "moving" us, counting himself well paid by the sight of her.

"I'll go, if you like," I said, and went. Chloe hid herself behind the kitchen door, where the jack−towel used to hang. Even its roller had been unscrewed and packed now.

"Chloe!" I called, "it's all right. It's only Yolande."

"Only, indeed!" Miss Riseborough echoed. "Oh, here you are! What on earth's all this? A spring cleaning?"

"Yolande?" Chloe cried. "But I thought you were in Italy!"

"So I am. At least I was last week, and shall be again next. I've just run over for a few days on business, and I slipped away to the Bandbox to rest my eyes with a look at the turtle−doves. But they don't look restful at all."

She was taking the long, pearl−headed pins out of her hat as she spoke.

"Oh!" said my wife, again. "Sit down−−no−−not on that−−it's crocks and newspapers−−and the chairs are all

packed. Try the packing−case."

But murmuring, "The divan for me!" Yolande sank down on a roll of bedding.

"I've yards to tell you, only I thought you were in that horrid Italy, and I've been too busy to write. We're moving into a house with twenty−nine rooms in it."

Then the whole story came out−−of Chloe's folly and of my madness. Yolande listened intently, her bright, gray eyes taking in Chloe's transports, and my all too moderate enthusiasm, as well as the devastated state of the Bandbox.

"You poor, dear things," she said. "I wish I wasn't going back to Italy to−morrow. I should like to lend a hand."

"I know you would," said I, with intent.

"Oh yes, but you can't wound me with your sneers. I own I love to have a finger in my neighbors' pies, and the more I love my neighbor, the more I long to infest her house on baking−days. But look here, I wish you'd do me a good turn. If your house is that awful size, you will certainly have a couple of spare rooms in it."

"More like five−and−twenty," I said.

"Well, I've let my flat, unfurnished. Could you, would you, can you, will you be angels enough to take in my poor, homeless furniture, and give it board and lodging and the comforts of a home for a month or two?"

Of course we would, gladly, and we said so. And then we talked−−always of the Red House.

"You'll have a good deal of fun for your money in your new house," Yolande said, at last, "but, oh, you make me feel as if you were the Babes in the Wood and I were the wicked uncle. I do wish I could stay and help you, but I've three pupils waiting in Florence with their mouths wide open, and a mere temporary chaperon guarding them, and I must scurry back to fill those gaping beaks with fat plums of learning. It's a dreadful trade, a crammer's−−almost as bad as the samphire−gatherers'."

"Wish the pie luck, anyhow," said I, drawing the cork of the ginger−ale, "though you can't have your fingers in it this time. But I dare say there'll be a bit of cold pie left for you when you come back." So we stood up solemnly and raised our glasses to my toast,

"Here's luck to the Red House!"

Then said Yolande,

"And to the Babes in the Wood!"

And to Chloe's toast, "Here's to the wicked uncle−−I mean the fairy godmother," we emptied the glasses.

Then Yolande said good−bye, and pinned her hat on to her bright hair. At the door she turned to say:

"By−the−way, you won't mind my asking you to keep my things aired, will you? The furniture−warehouse people always let them get mothy, and give the piano a cold in its head. You might hang up the pictures, if you don't mind the trouble; they've all got cords, and they keep better hung up, like meat or game, you know. And furniture keeps best when it's being used. You'll sit on my chairs now and then, for the sake of the absent, won't you? My settle would go awfully well with your gate−table, and my oak press would do in those 'marble halls' you were talking about. I must rush, or miss my train. Good−bye. I'll send the furniture down to−morrow."

And she was gone.

Chloe turned to me with wide−open, sparkling eyes.

"Oh, Len, isn't she a darling? Just because she saw how our Bandboxful of furniture would rattle about in that big house like a peanut in a cocoanut shell, to lend us all hers! She is a darling."

"She is," I admitted, "and her hair is the real Venetian red. But you'll miss the furniture horribly when she takes it away."

"Don't grumble," said Chloe. "We shall have all her lovely things for months and months, and by the time she comes back we shall have made some money to buy things. I'm going to work like a nigger directly we get settled. And so must you. Oh, here are the men at last. Two hours late!"

"Perhaps it is as well," I said. "Harriet is only just ready."

Our fat−faced maid−servant, who had rigidly refused during the whole morning to assist us in the least, on the ground that she "had her packing to see to," now descended the stairs, bearing her whole wardrobe in two brown−paper parcels and a tin hat−box.

"Come in, please," said Chloe, to our remover. "You'd better take these oak boxes first. They're very heavy."

"I wants chesties of drawerses," said the man, hoarsely, "all the chesties of drawerses you've got, and the

pianner. Come on, Bill."

"Right you are, Charley," was the response.

"We haven't a piano, here," said Chloe, and Charley seemed at once to form the lowest opinion of us. He was a thick−set ruffian with a red and angry eye. He was one of the four helpers engaged by the green−grocer to "move" us. His clothes and those of his friends smelled strange and stuffy, as though they had been smeared with putty and mutton fat, and locked away for years in a cupboard full of pickled onions and yellow soap and mice. The clothes of the unskilled laborer always have this strange scent. It lingers about everything they touch in passing through a house, and after days its freshness is still unimpaired. But I never knew any scent so overpowering as that which clung to the clothes of Charley and his mates. They strayed loudly up the uncarpeted stairs, urgent in their insistence on "chesties of drawerses," and Chloe would have followed them, but Harriet came forward with, "Please, 'm, could I speak to you for a moment?"

"Well?"

"Please, I should wish to leave at the end of my month. Mother says the place ain't fit for me. The 'ouse is too large and the work is too 'eavy."

"But we're going into another house," said Chloe, cheerfully.

"Mother don't 'old with movings," resumed Harriet, "and she says the 'ouse is too large and the work too 'eavy."

"Very well; you can go into the kitchen and wait till we're ready to start," said Chloe, with dignity.

But when the fat−faced traitress had stumped away down the little passage, Chloe dragged me into the dismantled dining−room and flung her arms round my neck. This was not, I knew, affection. It was merely despair.

"She's a pig," said my wife, with tears in her voice. "Her month's up in a week. She might have told us before. And I'm sure we've been kind to her. I gave her that green moreen petticoat, and some stockings and collars and things, only yesterday. And the petticoat was as good as new."

"I'll have satisfaction for that outrage, at any rate. A moreen petticoat−−and green, too!" I cried. "She must be a stranger to all the higher emotions of our fallen nature. Cheer up, my darling, we'll get another girl right enough−−a better one."

"We couldn't have a worse," said she. "Oh, they've broken something. I heard it smash. I do hope it's not the Dresden vases."

It was only our best looking−glass, the same in which I had rebelliously dared to shave. "Never mind," I said. "They'll have to replace it, and Charley will be unlucky for seven years. That's one comfort."

It was almost our only one. Reckless as a herd of pigs in mid−flight, yet slow as an army of lame snails, Charley and his confederates packed our Bandboxful of furniture into the dark van that smelled of matting and straw and quarter−day. They broke an "occasional" table, and the door of the corner cupboard, and they smashed on the door−step the great jar of pickled walnuts which my mother−in−law had told me would last us a year. But it was Harriet who, sulkily obeying my order to make herself useful, went to the top of the house to fetch two highly colored texts from the walls of her bed−room, and, returning, fell over the best toilet set, smashing the jug and the soap−dish lid! It was rather a nice set, too, dark green, that Yolande had brought from Italy, and, by us, here, totally irreplaceable. I sent Harriet into the back kitchen then.

"And don't you come out till we're ready to start," I said.

When the last of our "sticks" had been dragged from the house, and the van had been half unpacked to recover my coat and hat, zealously hidden under the dining−room table in the van's centre, and when the forlorn party of chairs and bookcases had been removed from the pavement and once more envanned, we added Harriet, speechless with sulky displeasure, to the van−load; and as we watched them drive off, my heart, at least, was lighter.

We set up our bicycles ready, and blew up the tires. Then we went all over the little house, "to say good−bye to it," my wife said. Her face was quite sad now. It was in that horrid little dressing−room that she slipped her hand into mine and said:

"I didn't think I should be sorry. But I am. Dear little Bandbox−−we've been very happy here, haven't we? Oh, do say you think we shall be just as happy there. You do, don't you?"

A narrator cannot be expected to chronicle all his replies. My answer satisfied Chloe, anyhow, and she

consented to dry her eyes on my handkerchief.

Then we took a last look round, and went out.

"Good−bye," we said to our Bandbox, and wished it a happy future.

"I hope the next people who live in you will be kind to you," said Chloe, "and keep you clean, and be very happy in you, poor, dear little house."

We rode away, turning at the corner for one more last look at our Bandbox. Its bare windows blinked forlornly at us in the June sunlight like the eyes of a deserted orphan. We rode on in silence.

We passed our furniture about half a mile from the Bandbox. And we had been keeping our tempers for more than two hours in the spacious emptiness of the Red House before the rattle of harness and the scent of Charley's coat announced the arrival of the van.

Charley and his minions made a hollow pretence of putting the furniture in its place. They did put the bedsteads together, insecurely, and in the wrong rooms; and they set up "chesties of drawerses" against walls. The oak chests they carried to the attic, and the best steel fire−irons were discovered, weeks later, in the cellar. But almost everything−−saucepans, crockery, coal−scuttles, books, hearth−rugs, stair−rods, fenders−−was dumped on the floors of the hall, the kitchen, and the dining−room. I remember that I had to move half a ton of mixed valuables to find the tea−kettle, when, after two hours of breathless energy, we heard the van's retreating wheels, and were moved towards the kitchen by one common longing−−for tea.

Chloe got the tea, and I cleared it away. Harriet reluctantly consented to wash up the tea−things.

"But," she added, and it really was like a blow in the wind, "I must get away before dark. No, it ain't no manner of use talking. There's ghosts in this 'ouse, and I wouldn't sleep under this 'ere roof, not for any wages you could offer."

In vain we besought her to reconsider this decision.

"Mother always said to me, 'Don't you never lay your 'ead on your pillow in a 'ouse where there's ghosts, or you'll see 'em walk−−safe as eggs. It runs in our family,' says she; 'my mother's second cousin see a calf without a 'ead walkin' on the church−yard wall, as plain as the nose on your face,' says she. And I can't go agin my own mother, so if it's convenient to you, sir, I'll leave as soon as I've dried the tea−things."

"If it's convenient!" said Chloe. And then we both began to laugh. That saved the situation, besides making Harriet uncomfortable. We let her go, because we could not help it, and we set out our supper−−it was tinned salmon and bread−−on a sheet of newspaper, because we couldn't find any table−cloths.

And we washed our hands with mottled soap, because the brown Windsor soap had hidden itself away somewhere. And we dried them on Chloe's apron, because the towels were mislaid. And we made some cocoa, because the ginger−ale could not, at the moment, be found. It never was found, by−the−way. The search for lamps being fruitless, we walked together to the village in the cool, pale evening, and, returning with a pound of candles in a blue paper, it seemed natural to wander round the shadowy gardens, slowly wrapping themselves in the blue veil of the summer night. The stars came out, one by one, and a little moon that had been like a cloudy ghost through the gold of the afternoon seemed to wash her face with liquid light, and set to work shining in bright earnest. The house seemed very chill, very dark, very silent, as we let ourselves in. The most energetic search and half a box of wax vestas failed to find us a single candlestick. How we regretted, then, the empty bottles left behind at the Bandbox!

At last we set up our candles by melting the ends and sticking them in tea−saucers. Then I broke up a packing−case and made a fire in our room. By a fortunate accident, Chloe, looking for her brush and comb, found the blankets. We went round the house and closed all the shutters.

"Now," said Chloe, cheerfully, "we really are at home."

I looked round on the unspeakable confusion−−the whole Bandboxful of our effects emptied out, as it were, "tumbled out of a sack" upon the floor, and I said,

"Yes."

The birds woke us in the morning; such an orchestra as I had never even imagined. Sleep seemed fled forever. It was I who went down to light the fire for breakfast. It was good to fling back the shutters and window−sashes, and to lean out through the drifted net of green jasmine leaves and taste the fresh sweets of the morning.

Presently Chloe came and leaned beside me. The whole world seemed blue and green and gold; the trees and the grass sparkling in the dewy sunshine, and on the bright turf the long, black, tree shadows.

"I never saw shadows like these," Chloe breathed; "they're quite different to the evening ones. And there's no one next door! Oh, it is very good!" The birds sang, the sun shone softly, the swan in the moat spread wide wings, preening his white feathers. A purple haze covered the hills. It was indeed "very good." The wood began to crackle. I looked at my watch. Five o'clock.

"We must always get up at half−past four," Chloe said. "I had no idea anything could be so beautiful. Think of the poor silly people who only get up at eight."

I thought of them, and I knew that very soon we should once more be numbered among that pitiable band.

But I said nothing. We cleared away the breakfast and made our room tidy, and every now and then she would stop to clap her hands−−once there were two flat−irons and a duster in them−−and to say:

"Oh, isn't it perfect? Isn't it amusing and interesting and thrilling, and everything anything can possibly be?"

We arranged a scheme of disentanglement, and applied it to our goods. Chloe dived into the mass and came up with treasures, which under her directions I bore to the situations she indicated. But many things seemed homeless, and the command, "Oh, I don't know−−anywhere−−on the kitchen−table," grew so frequent that the kitchen−table groaned beneath its load, and even the tall dressers showed signs of repletion.

But we got one room clear−−the white parlor, Chloe called it. It was really half panelled in oak−−painted, of course, by some vandal middle−Victorian hand−−but still charming, with its carved garlands and flourishes, its high mantelpiece and odd corners. We swept it; we put down our best carpet and hearth−rug; we brought in our oak gate−table and our polished beechwood chairs with the rush seats, and the corner cupboard, and the little bow−legged oak sideboard; we put some green Flemish pots on the mantel−piece. Chloe ran out and came back with half a dozen late tulips, and when she had set them on the table in a jar of Chinese willow−pattern (hand−work, none of your transfers), why, then we had a "room ready," a refuge, as Chloe said. We also carted the remaining chaos into the kitchen.

"Because I give that up," she said; "we can't get that clear for ages." So pictures and curtains, and all the things that take time to their fixing, were carried away. And the swept hall looked large and beautiful, especially when we had cleaned the red and white of the marble inlaid floor with a wet broom and a pail of water.

As I rubbed the broom vigorously over a discolored square of the marble, I was suddenly conscious of a guilty feeling. Analyzed, the sensation frightened me. I was becoming interested in these details. And I had not once thought about my work, though to−morrow was the day for my article in the Weekly Wilderness. It had never even entered my head to dream that I could ever be interested in cleaning a floor. Yet here I was calling joyously to Chloe, deep in a packing−case in the kitchen:

"It's coming the same color as the other."

"It won't be when it's dry," she said, "but I've found the corkscrew and the lamps. One of them is wrong way up and full of paraffine. At least it was. It's anywhere you like now."

I carried my pail and broom into the kitchen.

"My dear," I said, "have you found my shaving−brush?"

"Why?" she asked. "Do you want to put it down on the parlor mantel−piece?"

The very thought appalled me, and the fact that it did so appalled me still more deeply.

I pointed out that a shaving−brush is useful for other purposes than for putting down on things, and presently we found it involved in a pair of lace curtains.

We had lunch in the garden.

And then Yolande's furniture suddenly loomed at our gates. We had wholly forgotten it. The white parlor had to be reorganized to accommodate her oak settle. The piano we boldly ordered into the drawing−room, where it lived out long days of lonely grandeur. Her furniture was really charming−−Chippendale chairs and a Sheraton bureau, pictures by the dozen and lovely crocks by the score. The men who moved her things had linen jackets, and they were not scented like Charley. They actually put things where we wanted them. We stood by in humble amazement. But when they asked where they should hang the pictures, we looked at each other, almost speechless with wonder and gratitude. They hung the pictures, they asked for a broom, and, if ours had not been wet, they would have swept up the dust their careful feet had not been able to help bringing in. They dusted the furni− ture, and asked if there was anything else they could do. I said there was not, and felt in my pocket for silver, far more than I could afford. But Chloe said:

"Oh yes! How kind of you! Do please ask every one you know if they know of a servant. We haven't one, and

you see−−"

They saw. They promised all things; they took my silver and went.

And that very evening a trim young woman came "about the situation," accepted it, went off to fetch her box, and never returned. Perhaps she saw the ghost as she went out. We never knew.

Next day I sat down with my type−writer in the parlor. Chloe went to London to ransack the registry−offices, so that there was no one to do house−work. Therefore, when I had done my article−−it was on "The Pleasures of Home," I remember−−I tidied the place up a little. Happening to find the black−leading apparatus in the bread−pan, I tried my hand at polishing the parlor−grate. It is much less easy than one would suppose, and I barked my knuckles against the bars. Then I cleaned some windows. I knew, from Cranford, that this was done with newspapers. The middles of the panes were easy, the corners inaccessible and irritating. Then I got tea ready and filled the lamps. I experienced all the sensations of an explorer in an unknown and ravishing country. All this was new and extraordinarily fascinating. I chopped wood and filled a box with it, ready for the morning. I also chopped my finger, and decided that I had done enough house−work for the moment. Then I remembered my article. I had forgotten to post it, and the post was gone when I got to the village. I had to walk to Blackheath to catch the late mail−−four miles there and back. When I got home Chloe was sitting on the door−step with a perfect stranger.

"We've been here hours," she said. "How could you go off like that? This is Ellen−−she is coming to live with us."

I could see in Ellen's eye that she was not so sure of this. When Ellen saw the kitchen, with its indescribable complications of domestic matter, she blenched, and I knew the worst. We all turned to, however, and tidied the kitchen superfically, arranged Ellen's bedroom, assisted her to prepare supper, went to bed worn out, and came down in the morning to find Ellen gone. She was not wholly bad; she had some kind impulses. She had lighted the fire and put on the kettle before leaving. But we were a little late that morning, and all the water had boiled away. When I filled the kettle at the tap it cracked, and Chloe said it was always the way, and snatched the kettle out of my hand, and boiled the water for tea in a saucepan that had had cabbage in it. So, after breakfast, I insisted on a turn in the quiet, sunny garden, and she grew calmer.

"It is awful, though, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes," I owned, "but I black−leaded the parlor−grate yesterday, and I did several other things that you never noticed."

She was stricken with remorse. I followed up my advantage.

"And now I'm going to scold us, pussy. It was entirely my fault that we left the Bandbox, but I hope you'll forgive me, and let's make the best of it. And we mustn't take things too seriously. What does it all matter? Through life, my precious pussy−kitten, the best weapon is laughter. Let us agree to laugh at everything, unless we have to cry at it, and if we do cry, to cry−−like this."

For she was crying−−with her head on my shoulder and my arms round her.

"I'm so tired," she said, presently.

"I know you are. Now we're going to sit down on this dear, old stone bench under the red may−tree, and, if you're good, I'll tell you things. We won't try to get a servant again till the kitchen's straight. And we'll shut up all the rooms except the kitchen, and we'll move our bedroom things into one of the down−stairs rooms, so as not to have to use the stairs at all. And the little room that opens out of the kitchen we'll put two tables in, and do our work there−−for we must work, you know. And we'll take it in turns to do the house−work, and the other shall work. And when it's all straight we'll get a treasure of a maid, and all live happy ever after! Now you're going to sit here quietly, and I'm going to fetch the Inland Voyage, and read aloud to you for an hour."

We did all these things, and gradually some sort of order evolved itself from chaos, and the scent of Charley's coat faded slowly away.

Then we had a rapid succession of unsuitable servants; five, I think, were honest, the sixth went off with all Chloe's lace petticoats and her mink cape.

Then we got a woman from the village to come in by the day. She worked fairly well, but she carried a covered basket, and it cost us too much in tea and butter.

All this time we had never had a moment for gardening, and Chloe's dream of growing our own vegetables was being swiftly hidden by the weeds of oblivion. There were flowers in plenty, though, now. Hundreds of roses,

red and white and yellow. Thousands of pink roses. Canterbury−bells, red daisy−flowers, lupins, columbines, and giant larkspurs. Chloe kept the house a flowery bower. I cleaned the boots and the knives, and whistled at my work. It was when half the neck of mutton got into that covered basket and, ostrich−like, left its tail sticking out, that I told Mrs. Coombe that we must part. She asked for no explanation; I gave none. We parted without unnecessary words. That day it began to rain−−a thunder−storm first, then slow, steady, pelting rain for hours and hours. We sat over the kitchen fire that evening and told ghost stories till I saw my wife beginning to cast glances over her shoulder to where the darker shadows lurked in the corners of the great, black−raftered kitchen. Then I lit twelve candles, set then on the mantel−piece, and made port−wine negus, and we drank it and went to bed.

In the pitch−dark middle of the night, Chloe caught me by the arm.

"You must wake up," she said, in a terrified whisper; "there's some one in the house−−or−−or something. I've been awake for hours. Listen! Can't you hear it?"

I listened.

"It's like−−Oh, Len, I am so frightened It's a sort of dripping, dripping."

She held me very tight with both hands.

"It's like−−it's as if some one had been killed and there was blood dripping onto the floor. Oh, listen, and do strike a light! I'm afraid to put my arm out for the matches. It is like blood, dripping! Listen!"

I listened.

And it was.

III. THE GHOST

I HAD held my breath to listen to the drip, drip−−loud in itself and hollow in its echo through the grisly silence of the middle night. Now I let my breath go in a sigh.

"It is blood, dripping," said Chloe.

"It can't be," I said; "there's no one in the house to kill any one else−−and no one to be killed, either. Don't be a darling idiot."

"Perhaps it's some one who was killed long ago!" Her teeth chattered.

"A ghost, you mean?" I said, cheerfully. "Not it! I expect some tramp's got in and upset a beer−bottle. Let me get my boots and the poker."

I had always resolved that in no straits would I ever, barefooted, face a burglar. Think of the horrible advantage of hobnailed burglar−boots over shrinking, bare toes.

"But there is no poker up here," Chloe said. "You know we never could find the bedroom fire−irons. My umbrella; you know−−the one with the purple knob."

One of the ugliest of our wedding presents, the umbrella with the rock−amethyst handle the size of a fives−ball, stood in the wardrobe corner. I balanced it in my hand.

"I think it would crack a nut, if need were," said I−−"even the most hardened nut of the most hardened burglar."

"How can you?" said Chloe. She was creeping into her dressing−gown. "Now, then−−I'll carry the light."

"You're not coming with me?"

"Do you think I'm going to stay here alone?"

"But if it is a burglar?"

"Exactly−−"

"You mean you're coming to take care of me?"

"Oh, don't," she said−−"only I will come."

I blew out the candle and took her hand.

"If we are to surprise any enterprising professional, we sha'n't do it with a candle," said I. "Now, then−−"

We opened the door slowly and softly, and very softly and slowly crept along the dark passage hand in hand.

At the stair−foot we stood still and listened. Not a sound but the drip−drip−dripping. It seemed to come from the white parlor.

My wife clutched my hand in both hers.

"I can't," she whispered, and struck a match. Her hands trembled so that she could hardly light the candle.

I took it from her.

"You'd better go back," I said. But we went on.

I flung open the door of the white parlor, while Chloe stood with her back to the wall, hiding her face in her hands.

I took two steps into the darkness. Then I laughed aloud and put down the candle on the table.

"Len, what is it? Oh−−what is it?"

"It's all right, dear," I said, "but it's fortunate I brought the umbrella."

I put it up as I spoke, and, catching Chloe's hand, drew her under it. The drops splashed on the umbrella heavily from the ceiling above. Chloe and I looked in each other's eyes and laughed.

"Oh dear, how silly! Why, it's only the water coming through the roof!"

"Yes−−only!" said I. The floor was an inch deep in water, and from the ceiling it was falling, in heavy, capricious showers, on furniture, books, cushions, curtains.

"You're not frightened now?" I asked, shutting the wet umbrella with a flap.

"No."

"Then we'd better get dressed and see what can be done."

We dressed hastily and lit the candles in the tall, old brass candlesticks on the white−parlor mantel−piece. It took us some little time to find places, where these could stand without prompt extinguishment from the dripping

ceiling.

Then, barefooted both, with my trousers tucked up, and Chloe's skirts kilted to the knee, we did our best with pails and mops and house flannels.

We carried all our books out into the hall, and stood them up on their edges, with their leaves open, to dry. We carried out our furniture−the settle, and the gate−table, and the rush−bottomed beechwood chairs. We took down the wet curtains and hung them on the bacon−rack in the kitchen. "I do wish we kept a pig," said Chloe, in parenthesis. "Fancy sides of bacon swinging here, instead of wet, floppy, droppy curtains!" It was a night's work. When the gray of the dawn showed us, through rain−wrinkled window−panes, the green tangle of our garden, all beaten down to one dripping desolation, with a gray sky above, and over all the rain, I looked at my wife and said:

"This has been an adventurous night. It is a ghastly morning. Do people who have been up all night have breakfast? Tea, for instance? You are wet as any mermaid, and twice as pretty. But water's not your native element. You must be dried. I'll light a fire."

She had caught at the rope of bright hair that hung below her waist, and was wringing the water out of it. Her bare feet were pink and rosy in the mixed radiance of dawn and candlelight. Her striped red−and−white skirts gave her a sort of coquettish smartness, as of a Parisienne at Trouville. She held out her hand with a dramatic gesture.

"Come with your mermaid," she said; "come and light a fire of driftwood in her ocean cave."

She led me through the kitchen to the little room where we worked. A fire burned red and glowing; on her drawing−table, white damask covered, were bread, butter, tea−things. The brass kettle sang softly on the hob.

"The ghost must have done this," said I. "You said you'd make it run errands, but I never thought you'd get it to light fires."

"But I did, you see," said Chloe. "I taught it−−little odd minutes when you were carrying buckets and sticking up damp books on their poor tails, so that you shouldn't notice what I was doing. Isn't it a clever ghost? Aren't I a good teacher?"

"You are an angel," I said. "I'll make the tea."

"Aren't I a noble wife? Aren't you proud of me? Don't you love me very, very, very?" said she.

"Not exactly," said I, holding her in one arm and making the tea with the other. "Respect, admiration for your talents−−look out, you nearly had the teapot over!−−but love! Don't be exacting−−and don't shake my arm, or I shall scald us both. Go and get something dry on, and I'll cut some sandwiches."

"And you don't love me?"

"I might like you better if you were dry. Go! Run! Skurry!"

"The potted meat is in the chiffonnier," she said. "Are you going to keep wet?"

"Yes, I've got to go out and see what there is on the roof, as soon as it's light enough to see to put up a ladder. Madam, withdraw, and take five drops of eucalyptus oil on a piece of sugar."

It was rather a pleasant breakfast, though the drip, drip, drip went on merrily all the time.

When the last sandwich had vanished Chloe put her elbows on the table and said:

"Len, I'm afraid it's very wrong, but I've rather enjoyed myself. I seem to like things to happen. But, oh, what a mess everything is in!"

"It is," said I, "but I do, too. And it is wicked−−a morbid craving for excitement, even at the expense of a cherished library−−the cream of our country's literature. Now put on your macker, and we'll go up on the roof."

I helped her into her mackintosh, and we went.

The roof of the white parlor is one of the leaded spaces on the wings of the Red House. It has a parapet at back and front. These formed a sort of tank; all the waste−pipes were stuffed up with leaves and twigs, and I pulled a black, sodden starlings' nest out of one of them. The rain came down pitilessly. I looked about me. I knew that, below, the flood in the white parlor must be momently gaining in depth and intensity.

"Chloe," I said, "this is no time to be tender of bricks and mortar. Go and fetch the bass−broom, and I will seek for the coal−hammer."

I found it, after some search, in the pantry. I had taken it there myself, I remember, in the avowed belief that it, and it only, could serve to break into the first gooseberry pie of Chloe's making. I brought it up onto the roof, and with it smashed away the bricks and cement till I had a two−foot embrasure in the back parapet. Then I paused. A moment's silence full of concentrated reflection broke as I said, "Wife of my heart, to think that quite

by accident you have married a mechanical genius!"

Then we went to find the spade. With it we dug clay from the banks of one of the little streams which feed our moat. I transported it in the wheelbarrow, always through the rain, to the scene of action, and we raised it to the roof by a cord and the waste−paper basket. With it I built a dam round my embrasure. Then again I paused in Napoleonic meditation, and then−−

"The dust−pan, beloved," I said, looking down on my wife's pink, rain−wet face.

Then I knocked over the last three inches at the bottom of my embrasure. The water from within my dam rushed out down the face of the house−−behind the dam lay the tank of water, but my dam held firm.

"And now a broom−handle, soul of my soul−−or, I'll tell you what, that garden rake we've never used, and some clothes−line."

I spliced the dust−pan's handle at right an− gles to the handle of the rake, and laid this last across the embrasure. The parapet held its ends securely, and the dust−pan, face downward, projected itself out through the opening. I made all fast with clay and then called Chloe to come up the step−ladder and share with me the triumphant moment when my dam should be broken down and my new dust−pan−cum−rake water−shoot come into play. One's wife should share one's joys as well as one's sorrows, I said.

The ingenious contrivance, which I thrilled to have found myself capable of devising, acted perfectly. I kicked my dam to pieces, and the imprisoned water behind rushed impetuously through the embrasure, and, directed by the trusty dust−pan, fell in a cataract a yard and a half from the house, to meander away harmlessly along the gravel path. I helped the flowing tide with the bass−broom, and all the while the rain splashed and spun and sputtered on mackintosh and bared heads. When the leads held but half an inch of water I strengthened the dust−pan and rake with clay, and we went indoors.

The white parlor was unspeakably wet−−but the water no longer dripped from the roof.

We mopped again, dried and dressed, and did our ordinary house−work. Then the sun came out. We took cushions and rugs onto the balcony, and fell asleep. We slept till late in the afternoon. Then I went to fetch a plumber. He came, many days later, cleared the wastepipes, and sent me in a bill for £2 17s. 7d. This was the first charge on the legacy we had received from my uncle.

The second was made by the inspector of the water company. He compelled us to put in new patent taps all over the house. This cost £7 9s. 3d.; and when a grand−maternal government came down on us about the question of sinks and overflow−pipes−−Chloe, in my absence, had the misfortune to cringe before its minion−−the matter ended in a bill of £29 19s. 11d.

Then I said: "Chloe, ruin stares us in the face. When we lived in the Bandbox−−"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted, "but there's such a lot to do here."

"The 'ouse is too large and the work too 'eavy," I quoted.

"It isn't that, but everything's so large," she said. "Why, it takes me two hours to do the flowers, and they must be done three times a week at least."

"We must go flowerless, Chloe, or seek the refuge of the neighboring workhouse. Now, in the Bandbox−−"

"Yes, I know," she said again. "Oh, Len, don't scold−−it's horrid of you!"

Remorselessly I pursued my advantage, for Chloe seemed to be in a yielding mood.

"In the Bandbox−−" I began, but she caught me by the shoulders and shook me and took the words out of my mouth.

"In the Bandbox," she said, "I worked and you worked. And now we don't either of us work a bit more than we can help. And I know why it is, too−−we've both found out how interesting other things are. You'd rather chop wood or clean the boots than write your nasty, dull articles and stories, and I'd rather put up shelves and arrange flowers than draw silly pictures of idiotic people for imbecile magazines. We're both demoralized by−−what do you call it?−−the joy of life. I hate work. I wish it was dead!"

"Don't you call sweeping and scrubbing and cooking work?"

She hesitated, then: "No," she cried, defiantly, "it isn't. Work is what you hate doing, and have to do for your living. Anything else is play−−you know it is!"

"My gentle playfellow, we must work−−either here, in our own Red House, or in the yellow brick mansion provided by a tender country for its more obvious failures. The Red House or the Union−−which is it to be?"

"There's Uncle James's two hundred," she said, with a mutinous glance.

"Chloe, Chloe," I said, "I speak more in sorrow than in anger. In the Bandbox−−yes, I insist on my right to mention that hallowed spot as often as I choose−−you went to town twice a week to wring remunerative orders for illustrations from the flinty hearts of editors. You have often explained to me that to be on the spot is the thing. The work is given to the people who look after it. How often have you been to London since my birthday? Once−−and that was the day when you went to the registry−office and brought back the fiend who burned the bottom out of the kitchen kettle."

She hung her head and said I was just as bad.

"I know it, but I am a practical reformer. Reforms personally attended to. Brush my frockcoat, please, if you have any idea where it is, and my high hat, if you can find it. I am going to town this afternoon. In my absence I expect you to finish your illustration for the Lady's Battalion−−the one where the duchess is dis− charging her butler for shaving in the boudoir, and leaving his shaving−brush on the marble console−table."

"You're not nice. You know it is a humble companion refusing a duke's offer of marriage. He does look like a footman, I know; her arm is all wrong, and his legs are hideously out of drawing. Legs are so difficult to do, especially in clothes. We never had models in trousers at the Slade School−−"

"Ah, these art−schools!" I said. "Now find that frock−coat, my Michaela Angelica, and speed the parting reformer."

"I think I saw it once in the dresser drawer," she said, dreamily. "If you'd seen it you'd have put it away. Len, talking of shaving−brushes, how is it I used to be so tidy in the Bandbox, and you not, and now you're tidier than I am?"

"It is your influence," said I.

"And the other's mine?"

"Well," I answered, "when two people are moderately fond of each other they do teach each other things, don't they?"

"Then you've corrupted me?"

"And you've redeemed me, or are redeeming. When we've quite converted each other we can begin again and change back. But the coat, and the hat. I must shave, and there's only just time to catch the 11.32. For the sake of our home, for the sake of our future, for the peace of our domestic existence, Chloe, do try to find that hat and that coat!"

The hat was all right, but the coat was full of creases. It was not in the dresser drawer, after all, but on the bottom shelf of the oak side−board, and I had to iron it before I could dream of putting it on. Chloe told me how to do it, but she owned that I did it far better than she could have done it herself. My best boots were mislaid, too, as it happened, and, before I had discovered them in a corner of the bare drawing−room, I had missed the 11.32. I went up by the 12.40, however, and in the train I wondered to myself how it was that Chloe, who in the Bandbox had kept all in so neat an array, was now growing more untidy than I in my most reckless moods had ever been. It was a problem, and I bent myself to it as the train whirled me through green pastures outlined with elm−trees and hawthorn hedges, then through villas, red and self−consciously trim, with their neat gardens, geranium−flushed, calceolaria−gilded−−neat as a prize map at a first−class high−school. The problem did not resolve itself. It was not till the train was rushing through a wilderness of yellow brick houses, all alike, all soot−begrimed, all standing, with their bits of blackened garden, their stunted flowers, their carefully trained snippets of creeper, for lives full of the courageous struggle of man's innate love of beauty against the iron of environment, the crippling of the accident of birth, the handicap of hereditary submission to the undeserved darkening of life, that I began to see the answer to my question.

In our first home−−the Bandbox, the little nest that had held us at our first mating−−Chloe had struggled to reproduce, and had reproduced, on a microscopic scale, and with the aid of a woman servant more or less tractable, the habits and methods learned in her mother's house in Bedford. There were rules, and she followed them. I for my part had met the new rules as part of a new and delightful comedy, wherein my wife was heroine. At the same time I had felt no urgent need for altering the habits of years spent in chambers, at the mercy of an uncomplaining and systematically dishonest laundress. But when the Bandbox−−I paid it the tribute of a perfunctory sigh, even in my railway−carriage solitude−−when the dear Bandbox was left behind, and we entered the Red House, we entered, too, on a new life−−a primitive existence where law was not. The rules Chloe had learned in Bedford as to the duties of servants and the routine of domestic life were now inapplicable, since we

had no servant, and consequently no recognized routine. We were in the position of folk cast upon a desert island (I mean an uninhabited one, but the phraseology, as the instinct, of boyhood survives). And here we had suddenly changed parts. The chart of custom by which Chloe had steered in Bandbox days had been reft from her. She had nothing left but delightful, genuine impulses towards beauty−−the arrangement of flowers, the fixing of shelves, and the deep, eternal instinct to satisfy the cravings of hunger in herself and hers−−me. I, on the other hand, being face to face with a new problem, met it, man fashion, with a new solution. I perceived that order alone could make our life in the Red House possible. As the train steamed over the bridge one practical conclusion came as the result of my meditations. Chloe must have a servant.

I saw several editors, received a commission to write a series of articles on foreign politics, and a short story of strong domestic interest. Then I stood at the corner by the Mansion House in a meditation so deep as to provoke the amused and contemptuous scrutiny of my fellows, and at last, just as a small boy was murmuring at my elbow, "Makin' up your mind whether you'll be prime−minister or not? Well, take your time, sir; it's worth thinkin' over," I hailed a 'bus and was borne away by it. I went straight to Mrs. May's registry−office in Tottenham Court Road. The ladies who attended to my needs seemed to me to have the most perfect manners in the world. So well did they act for me that in half an hour I had engaged an amiable general servant, who was to come on the next Monday "as ever was."

"Now look here," I said to her, "you mustn't expect our house to be like any one else's. We're not in the least like any one else. We live in a very large house"−−her plump face fell−−"but we only use a few rooms. Your mistress will help you a bit, and you can go out one evening a week and every Sunday, and you can have your friends to see you any evening"−−her face brightened−−"but no young men, unless they come by twos−−see? My wife and I will both help you, and if you help us we shall all be perfectly jolly. What do you think? Would you like to try?"

I could see the smile Mrs. May was trying to conceal, and I felt a tremor of doubt. Perhaps, after all, it did not do to treat servants as though they were of the same flesh and blood as one's self.

The girl hesitated, looked doubtfully at me, I smiled at her in my best manner, and she smiled back heartily, and as it seemed to me without mental reservations.

"Well, sir," she said, "we can but try."

So that was settled. I felt the warm point of triumph which punctuates the career of the born organizer.

"Monday, then," said I; "and send your box by Carter Paterson." And with that I left well alone, and went back to Cannon Street via the Twopenny Tube.

I had to wait half an hour for a train. On the platform was the usual dingy, mixed crowd of clerks, type−writing girls, art students, and City men, and among them, her red hair shining at me down the length of the gloomy platform, a woman's figure that I knew. Her dainty dress of muslin, sown with little bunches of violets, her charming hat, her perfect gloves and shoes−−these alone might not have thrust her identity on me. Thank Heaven, more than one Englishwoman wears pretty muslin gowns and picture−hats, and has gloves and shoes that fit her. It was the set of her shoulders, the poise of her head, the modest, graceful self−possession of her attitude that made me bold to step behind her, and, without even a sight of her face, to murmur over her shoulder and into the prettiest ear−−almost−−in the world, "Yolande!"

She turned in a flash, and her face came to me in that dull place like a gleam of sunlight in a cloudy day.

"How unexpected you are," I said, "and how very, very like the most beautiful kind of French fashion−plate."

"I was going down to see Chloe−−and you. I have got a bag somewhere," she said. "I am pretty, aren't I? I got this gown in Paris."

"That's what I like about you!"

"The only thing?"

"The chief, just now. You don't think old clothes rhyme necessarily with old friends. There's just time for a cup of tea−−come. And then for the Red House. We shall find Chloe in rags, clearing out the scullery. You don't know−−or rather you do, perfectly well−−what a sight for sore eyes you'll be to her."

My prophecy was fulfilled. My wife opened the door to us.

"Yolande!" she cried, "I didn't know you were back!"

"No more did I, till yesterday," said Yolande.

"Chloe!" I cried, with proper severity, "have you done that drawing of the footman and the duchess? Your

face is extremely dirty!"

She looked at me with that disarming blink of soft lashes for the sake of which the harshest of recording angels would risk his situation.

"I've been cleaning out the kitchen," she said−−"it's lovely now. Yolande, come and take your things off. He'll make the tea and set the table. He's quite domestic now−−aren't you, Benedick?"

"Yes, Beatrice," I said; "and there's a large black on your respectable ear−−the right one."

"The better to hear with, my dear."

"And why are your hands so extremely grimy?" I returned, capping the quotation.

"The better to slap you with!" she cried, the action rhyming with the word, and fled.

She came down to tea all white muslin and lace and pink ribbons. "It's Yolande's fault," she said. deprecatingly. "I hate being smart myself. It's so unsuitable to our position. Don't look at me like that!"

Throughout tea I could look at nothing else. Yolande is a witch. How else could she have known that in these weeks of happy, hard work I had vaguely missed something, somehow, and had never guessed till now that it was my wife's beauty, so unadorned, and still so dear, that had fretted me with the unconscious desire to see it once more fitly clothed?

The evening was a festival. Yolande played Chopin to us in the dim, empty drawing−room, and if I did hold my wife's hand the while, Yolande did not mind, for she was used to us. Chloe showed us the duchess and footman drawing, and indeed the duchess's arm was hopelessly wrong, and the footman's legs things to weep over. We drank ginger−ale, always with us the outward expression of hilarity, and, as the evening waned, sang comic songs. When Yolande had gone to bed, in the room got ready for the servants who never came, I caught my wife by both hands.

"Madam," said I, "why did you never tell me how pretty you looked in pink ribbons?"

"I didn't think you cared for ribbons," she said; "besides, it's all Yolande's fault."

"To−morrow morning," said I, "I shall kiss Yolande for this."

Chloe looked at me. "You may," she said. "I don't think she'd like it, but you may. Only don't do it while I'm there, because it might make me jealous."

"What, Chloe in pink ribbons jealous of Yolande in violet muslin? I might as well be jealous of the crossing−sweeper when you smile at him and give him pennies."

"And aren't you?" said she. "You would be, if you were a really nice husband. But I'll tell Yolande you said she was like a crossing−sweeper. And she wouldn't let you kiss her, anyway!"

"What do you bet?"

"If she did it would only be to please me! And if you did it would only be to tease me. No, you can't tease me!" She paused, then−−"And, Len," she said, "Yolande's too dear to have silly jokes made about her, even by you and only to me, or even to you and only by me."

"And you're too dear," I said, with my face against the pink ribbons, "to be teased, even if I could compass it. Besides, madam, I have been guilty of a crime−−worse, an error in taste. I might be a hair−dresser's apprentice chaffing his sweetheart of the drapery department. Forgive me−−I am a little mad to−night."

She pushed me away till she could look in my eyes.

"Len," she said, "how awful it would have been if I had married any one else. There is no one else who understands everything. But why did you? You never made jokes about kissing other people before!"

"It is detestable," I said, "and it's no excuse to repeat that it was only because I am so happy. And yet it's true. Am I forgiven?"

Now what made me talk that nonsense? And suppose Chloe had laughed at it or, on the other hand, had taken it seriously, where should we have been? Now, Heaven be praised for the gift of understanding. If Chloe had done, had looked, anything but what she did do and look−−But Chloe is Chloe, and, thank God, mine.

Yolande stayed with us three days. The rainbow delights of our new house seemed newly dyed when we displayed them to her appreciative eyes. And I felt a new impulse to work, now that Chloe had some one to bear her company as she gathered flowers, rearranged furniture, or struggled, face all aglow, against the fiendish arts of the kitchen range.

I wrote half my "story of strong domestic interest," and then stuck fast. There was a scene where the hero, on the point of marriage with a respectable and admired heiress, the friend of childhood's hour, sees, as he walks up

the church to his bridal, the face of his old love, whom he had thought dead. This scene wanted something besides smartness. It wanted fire, passion, delicacy of handling, strength of grasp. And these qualities, strange to say, eluded me. I told my woes, and received from Chloe and Yolande sympathy, but no aid.

On that third moonlight evening, when we sat out on the grass, round the sun−dial, and Yolande sang Spanish and Pyrenean songs to the tinkle of Chloe's guitar, I almost seemed to surprise in myself the force to grapple with that scene and get the better of it; but when they had gone to bed and I sat face to face with my type−writer, the force shrivelled to a very agony of conscious incompetence. I wrote three abject sentences, and went to bed hopeless.

Next morning I took Yolande to a cricket match, and in the evening she left us.

"I'll come again in a fortnight if you'll have me," she said, "but now I must put on my soberest frock and a hat that would make you weep, and interview parents who want to provide their girls with a complete outfit of up−to−date culture, cheap."

We went up to the little country station, bareheaded, ungloved, to the scandal of the porters and the station−master, and waved our farewells as the train bore her away. Chloe's clean handkerchief had a great hole in it, which she never noticed till too late, and then we went back, she to house−work, and I to my story. I had left it at page thirty−one; it stood now at page fifty−nine.

The story was finished. I read the pages rapidly. The story was good, very good. All the fire and passion and force I had longed for and had known to be necessary were here. The story began tamely, and ended in vivid and triumphant drama.

"Chloe!" I called.

She came, a dish−cloth in her hand and apron round her waist.

"Some one has finished the story. Read it."

She read it slowly.

"Is it good?" she asked.

"Of course it is. But did you−− Who did it?"

"Didn't you?"

"No, of course not!"

"It must have been the ghost," she said. Then she blinked at me with long lashes, and laughed.

I laughed too.

"The ghost be it!" I said, but I read in her laughing eyes the word that sprang to my own lips−−"Yolande!"

IV. OUR NEW TENANT

OF course we have our own little stereotyped code of honor and morality, laid by on the shelf, ready for use, and in it we read vaguely that one may not put one's name to another's work, or make money by another's success. Had any one offered to finish for me the story to which I should put my name, I had refused, though the offer had been made by Rudyard Kipling himself. But when a ghost finishes your story, what's to be done? As Chloe said, "What else did the ghost do it for?" She added that of course I must send it in. And indeed it seemed to me that the matter was at least arguable. Yet I could not bring myself to sign my name to the thing.

Chloe made horseshoes in her forehead, and professed herself unable to understand my hesitation.

"If the ghost chose to finish your silly old story," she said, "you may be sure it wants to see itself in print."

"Over my signature?"

"Perhaps the ghost is modest, and would rather not venture to face the public over its own signature till it's more sure of its talents. Yes−−that must be it. It's a mutual benefit. The ghost wants to see itself printed. You wanted your story finished. There's no obligation either way."

I bit the end of my fountain−pen till it cracked.

"Suppose we ask Yolande?" said I. Chloe laughed. And I wrote to Yolande that evening. Chloe wrote, too−−about a pattern for a fichu, I believe−−and we posted the letters in the village. When we came home we found an unattractive working−man slouching by our gate. As we approached, he touched his hat with a grudging gesture.

"You the governor?" he inquired.

I ventured a modest assent.

"About these 'ere cottages of yourn, now," said he, "was you thinkin' of lettin' e'er a one of 'em?"

"Well, no," said I, truthful in defiance of Chloe's finger−pressure on my arm.

"Because if you was," said my visitor, rubbing a stubbly chin reflectively, "you and me might hit on a bargain betwixt us. My missus an' me we're a−lookin' out for a bit of a cottage, so I don't deceive you, governor."

My tenant−aspirant inspired me with little admiration and less confidence, but Chloe pinched my arm again, and said,

"Can you do gardening?"

"I'm a bricklayer's laborer by trade, miss," said he.

"But if we let you have the cottage we should expect you to keep the cottage garden tidy."

"Gardening's all I care for, out of workin'−hours," said the man, eagerly, "and my missus, she's the same. Dotes on flowers, lilies, and roses, and toolips, so she do."

"I'll think of it," said I, severely non−committal, and feigning insensibility as Chloe's fingers tightened almost painfully on my arm.

"What rent do you want to pay?" she asked.

At the word "want" a shadow of a grin passed under the reflective hand that stroked the stubble.

"Two shillings a week was about what we thought an honest rent," was the answer.

"That wouldn't do at all," said my wife. "Why, the smallest cottage has four rooms. We couldn't let it under four shillings."

"Say three and six, lady. And that's a lot to a working−man."

This alacritous acceptance of the raised figure should have warned us−−I, indeed, did perceive that the man wanted the cottage enough to pay the four shillings for it. But Chloe said:

"Very well. Three and six a week−−that's nine pounds two a year. When do you want to come in?"

"Our time's up next Saturday, miss," said the man, "and we could get our bits of sticks moved then. It's a stiffish rent, miss, is nine pun two a year, but there's the garden. I am dead nuts on a bit of garden."

"On Saturday, then," said Chloe, and our new tenant left us. I was full of doubts and distrusts, which I turned to impart to Chloe; but as our gate slammed behind us she threw her arms round my neck in a transport of avaricious enthusiasm.

"Oh, Len! How splendid! Didn't I do the arithmetic beautifully? Why did we never think of letting the

cottages before? We'll let all the others−−three and sixpence each−−and the big ones−−ought to fetch more. Why, it's fourteen shillings a week. What a heap of money!"

"What do you propose to buy with it, Mrs. Midas?"

"Time!" she answered, promptly. "Now I sha'n't feel so wicked if I waste a whole day on pottering. Why don't you write an ode or a sonnet or something, about pottering? It's the most glorious thing in the world. And this man is going to pay me to potter while he lays bricks. Noble, splendid creature!"

"This man," I said, "exactly; we don't even know his name, we haven't a hint of his address. And who are we−−land−owners, truly, but born potterers, and lacking the education accorded to those born to the purple of landlordism−−who are we that we should ask a bricklayer's laborer for references?"

"Oh, dear!" said she. "I never thought of that! Never mind−−we can ask him for them on Saturday."

But on Saturday it was too late. We learned, indeed, during the course of the day, our tenant's name, and it was Prosser, than which no surname claims a larger share of my personal abhorrence; but where was the use of asking for references when the moving had been effected during the hours immediately following the dawn, when our after−breakfast expedition to the cottage showed us the "bits of sticks" already dumped down on the cottage−garden flower−beds, and a slatternly drab of a woman carrying them slowly in? The furniture looked very dirty.

"Not, I fear, the most desirable of tenants," I murmured, as we delicately withdrew. "The furniture looks as if it had come out of the dustbin, and so does the lady."

"Oh, don't be so harsh," said my wife; "remember what our furniture looked like−−all dusty and forlorn and friendless−−when it sat outside the Bandbox waiting for the vans. And as for the woman, you wouldn't like any one to judge me by how I looked the day we moved."

"I remember just how you looked," I said. And indeed I did. "My dear, Yolande was absolutely right. We are perfect Babes in the Wood. We have let our cottage to the ideally undesirable tenant. I don't for a moment believe that he is a bricklayer's laborer! More likely a counterfeit−coiner's journeyman−−or perhaps a master−thief. He is ideally undesirable, you are impetuous, and I am weakly yielding. You and I together deserve to be sat on by a Board. Why can't we turn ourselves into a limited company and be run, together with our little property, by competent directors?"

"We must try to arrange it," she answered, gayly. "And now cheer up−−the Prossers will be better when they get straight. That girl's coming to−day−−I must get her room ready. You might just clean the front doorstep−−it's done with hearth−stone, just like the kitchen hearth. It is enough to discourage any girl to come to a house wrapped in a mantle of decay, with green mould on the doorstep. Then afterwards we'll do the kitchen together."

It was with but half a heart that I collected pail, hearth−stone, and house−flannel. I had to take a scrubbing−brush to the green mould, and I wondered why the favorite implement gave me so little joy as I wielded it. The sudden arrival of the new maid's box, by Carter Paterson, enlightened me. I found myself now working with vigor and enthusiasm. Since she really was coming! I knew then that I had never believed she would come, and it had seemed futile to spread milk−white over the doorstep, just for Chloe and me, whose eyes its blotted gray and moss green had always delighted. Now I finished the doorstep con amore, and hastened to the kitchen where Chloe and a hammer were busy together. I scrubbed the dressers and the table and the deal shelf that pulls out under the window. Chloe is always wise enough to feed energy with praise−−a diet too often grudged it.

"You do scrub beautifully," she said. "I believe you think the brush is nobler than the pen."

"You see I am an able 'performer on the instrument,' as Jane Austen would say."

"Dear Jane," said Chloe. "There−−there's glory for you!"

She had nailed up a deep flounce of green and red chintz along the chimney−piece, and another above the windows. A cushion to match nestled in the shabby Windsor arm−chair we had recently picked up for two and threepence in a back street in Deptford.

"Isn't it pretty? Isn't it cosey, and old−fashioned, and farm−housy? If this doesn't make her stay, nothing will! I'll get the hearth−rug out of our bedroom. You won't mind, will you? And do put your instrument away−−there's no more scrubbing, and she'll be here directly. Do you think we could bear to let her have two of the brass candlesticks out of the white parlor for this mantel−piece?"

"No," I said, firmly; "there are limits. But put up the cake−tins−−I polished them the other day."

The cake−tins were a shining crown to the splendor of the chintz flounce. Our crockery, well spread out upon the two large dressers, made a brave show. Our bedroom hearth−rug, also woven of reds and greens, showed up the beauty of the chintz flounce, which in its turn, by its neat newness, added lustre and importance to the hearth−rug. It was indeed a beautiful picture −−a poem, even, set to music by the singing of the new kitchen kettle, and I did not grudge the sacrifice of the parlor table−cloth to the completion of that radiant harmony.

We had our lunch in a very great hurry, so as to get the plates washed up before our new servant came. By two o'clock all was ready. Ever since the joyous day when in my well−ironed frock−coat I had gone forth and engaged a servant, Chloe had ventured, day by day, on more and more daring preparations for the maid's arrival, and Chloe had dragged me with her. We had cleaned the white parlor−−when we had a servant we could afford to sit in a parlor. We had laid down a rug or two on the red−and−white marble of the hall, and hung two or three old prints on the dull brown of its walls. We sat out some oak chairs and the old elm kneading−trough in it by way of furniture. We had put up dimity curtains in the new maid's bedroom: Chloe insisted on these, not because she admired the material, but because "dimity" is such a nice word−−the born sister of lavender, and tall presses, and well−scrubbed boards, and patch−work quilts. We had a patch−work quilt−−the gift of a gaunt great−aunt of mine−−and we sacrificed it to the fitness of things, and let it live with the dimity curtains. Chloe adorned the dimity−covered dress− ing−table with a smart, new pin−cushion with blue bows, and set a blue jug of pink roses on the broad window−sill. Our servant's bedroom was as pretty as paint. I said so, and Chloe said:

"Nonsense! it's only conventionally correct. All good girls' rooms in books are like this−−if they're servants; if they're young ladies it is muslin instead of dimity. And the pin−cushion is sometimes pink−−you put letters under it when you run away, you know."

"I hope the roses aren't just the touch too much," I said; "we mustn't spoil her."

"Roses spoil nobody."

"Or make her think us lunatics."

"We are that," said Chloe, "and it's better to recognize frankly that concealment is impossible. No one could live with us a month and not see how silly we are. It's better not to try to break things to people. Let her know the worst at once. If she doesn't have to waste her mental energies on finding out our follies, she may use them to perceive our virtues. I sometimes can't help thinking that we really are rather nice."

No courtier expecting a visit from his sovereign ever waited the monarch's advent with half the anxious embarrassment that was ours as, I in flannels and Chloe in soft muslin, we sat in the wicker chairs by the front porch, with our books and our work−basket, in an atmosphere of elegant leisure, ayant l'air de rien, just as if we sat there idly every day of the week.

At half−past three the white smoke of the down train clouded the blue above our willow−trees. Chloe put her hand to her heart.

"If I faint, don't be surprised. But you must pretend to be! Don't let her think fainting's a habit of mine. All the other servants came to us and they went, and there it was. But this is a crisis−−an epoch."

"That's because you feel that she's going to stay," I said; "her personality is influencing yours, as she comes down the lane."

Breaking a silence full of emotion came the click of the front gate.

"Courage!" I murmured.

"My heart's in my mouth," said she.

"I must have mislaid it. Give it back at once!"

"How can you talk nonsense at a solemn moment like this? No−−don't come with me. I'll face the danger alone!"

I saw her meet the new servant and lead her into the house.

It was an anxious time. I could not read, and I was trying to go on with Chloe's duster− hemming when she came back, with bright eyes and no horseshoes on her brow.

"She's a dear," said my wife, "and so are you. And I was quite right about the roses and the pin−cushion. When I took her into the bedroom she looked quite blank, and then she said:

"'This is the spare room, I suppose, mum.' And I said, 'No, it's yours.' And she just said, 'Well' and sniffed at the roses. And she came down almost directly. Oh, what beautiful things clean caps and aprons are! And she's getting the tea, Len. And she likes the kitchen. And she said it was like their kitchen at home. I do believe she's

going to be nice!"

She was. Chloe and I had simplified our lives, as people always do when their own hands supply their wants. Mary accepted Chloe's assistance for two days, and then gently but firmly declined further help.

"Why," she said, "I could do the work here with one hand behind me! You go along, mum, and play the pianna, and mess about with the flowers, or make your pretty pictures."

The change in our lives was like the change from a stormy night in mid−ocean to the mid−summer calm of a daisied meadow. The house was always neat and clean, and yet there was time for everything. I wrote now, sometimes we went to town when we wanted to go, orders grew, and prosperity seemed, like the rainbow, to be waiting for us at the end of the next field. It was a happy breathing−space. Yolande wrote, fully endorsing Chloe's view, and insisting that the ghost would certainly not have been silly enough to write half a story unless it had wanted to see it in print, and recommending us to leave the galleys conveniently lying about in the more haunted−looking parts of the Red House, so that the ghost might, if it pleased, correct its own proofs. So we sent off the story, and the editor wrote to me. I got his letter at breakfast, and I threw it over to Chloe across the tea−tray.

"Fortune smiles at last," said I. "Here's to the ghost!" and I drank its health in boiling tea.

The letter had all the beauty of simplicity.

"Dear sir," it said, "your story, 'The Return,' to hand. It is quite satisfactory, and if you care to supply a series of six, in the same style, we could, I think, find room for them in the magazine during next year." The editor said something vague but pleasant about terms, and added that he was faithfully mine, and the letter concluded with the name of a very lucky man.

"It is my name at the foot," I said. "This piece of luck has happened to me! It ought to have been addressed to Messrs. Ghost &Co., oughtn't it? Aid me, ye powers! Six stories!"

"In the same style," said Chloe, getting up from the tea−tray and coming behind me to pull my ears in sheer gladness of heart. "Are you going to imitate the ghost's style, Len?"

I did not answer.

She rested her chin on my shoulder.

"Of course you write much better than the ghost," she said, hastily; "but he does say the same style."

"I have written stories before−−and I can do it again, I suppose," said I. "I only happened to get stuck with that story. I should have finished it all right if the ghost hadn't interfered. I wish to goodness she'd let it alone!"

Chloe took her chin from my shoulder and went back to the tea−tray.

"Will you have another cup?" she said, coldly.

"What's the matter?"

She did not answer.

Then I caught at my lost temper and secured it. I laughed.

"What!" I said, "take part with a nasty, stuck−up ghost against your own husband−−so talented, yet so modest? If I am to have a rival, let it be flesh and blood, and not a ghost whose head I cannot punch, whose back I cannot horsewhip!"

"Well, then," she said, trying to balance a teaspoon on the milk−jug, "I think the ghost only meant to be kind, and I don't like to hear you speak as if you thought it had no business to interfere."

"I see," I said, slowly.

She flashed a quick glance at me. "Yes," she said, "I see you see. Here's luck to the six stories!"

It was in the morning after one of Mary's evenings out that she came to Chloe and said:

"Please, mum, are those your cottages along by the garden wall?"

Chloe smiled, scenting another tenant.

"Yes," she said. "Do you know any one−−"

"Well, mum," said Mary, "I think it's no more but right that you should know it."

Chloe said, "What?"

Mary replied: "Why, their goings−on! I see him last night, as I come in, as drunk as drunk, lying all over the front garden, and I went down this morning to have another look."

"And was he still there−−all over the front garden?" I asked.

"No, sir, not him, but everything else you can think of. But I won't say not a word more, sir; but it's not

respectable, and I thought you ought to know, sir. You're that innocent, sir, if you'll excuse me saying so. I know you won't believe no harm of any one till you have caught 'em at it. You just go and look, sir, that's all."

Chloe and I walked down the garden path, hand in hand, in agitated silence. Not till we were safe hidden under the twisted quince−tree did we dare to look at each other. Then we sat down in the long grass expressly to laugh at our ease.

"And the worst of it is it's true," Chloe said. "You are innocent. No−−don't be offended. I'm afraid I am, too. We are Babes in the Wood, Len, just as Yolande said, and Mary has the sense to see it."

I murmured something about references.

"Yes, I know you said so, and I know it's my fault; but other things are yours. You are innocent. Don't deny it. Oh, Len, we ought to be living in a villa, and paying proper little calls, and giving proper little dinners, and decorating our dinner−table with proper little cut flowers in proper little cut−glass vases; and when we dined alone the fishmonger would send in two proper little whitings with their proper little tails in their mouths; and we should have roast chicken, and it would be minced the next day, and everything would go by dull, beautiful, proper little clock−work; and you would say what a good manager I was, because we neither of us should have any idea what good management really meant. We're failures, Len. We haven't the wit to run a great estate."

"In fact," I said, "we've bitten off a larger chunk than we can chew."

"Don't be vulgar!"

"I'm not−−I'm trying to be American."

"You're not succeeding. They don't talk like that. I knew an American once. He was the nicest−−"

"I know. He thought you were the nicest. Why didn't you marry him?"

"Because he was rich, and it's my destiny to ruin a poor man. Len, I wish I wasn't such an idiot!"

"Or that I wasn't. That would do just as well. But don't let's weep about it yet. Perhaps Mary exaggerated. Our tenant may merely have been in a fit. No known system of manorial management can avert fits among the tenantry."

"But she said, 'You go and look, that's all!'"

"Well," said I, rising, "I will go and look. Will you come?"

"No," said she. "I'm frightened. Yes, I will, of course."

And we went.

Outside the red wall of our garden is a strip of ground bounded by a hawthorn hedge, and at the end of this stand the two cottages. We passed along the winding shrubbery−walk−−by reason of its darkness the only path of our garden whereon the weeds were not breast−high−−and so, pushing through the tall−standing weeds, dock and nettle, sow−thistle and cow−parsley, of the cottage garden, to the square of ground that stands between our two cottages and the road. Here were no juicy, green, upstanding weeds, graceful in their arrogant victory over flowers and fruits. The green weeds were trampled down to a damp, yellow, sodden mass, sordid and evilsmelling. Old meat−cans, sardine−tins, broken boots, decayed brooms, and battered saucepans were strewn around, "like flowers at a festival." Dirty rags festooned the faded blue of the railings; the family linen, wetted but not washed, hung on the elder−bushes, whose white blossoms drooped degraded under the foul burden. A very dirty blanket hung out of the bedroom window, and on the doorstep, among dust and flue, bones, crusts, and the miscellaneous sweepings of a filthy floor, three indescribably unengaging children, with dirty noses, were playing moodily and without smiles. Their playthings were a blade−bone of mutton, two muddy clothes−pegs, and a dead mouse.

Chloe is absurdly fond of children, but−−or, perhaps, therefore−−she turned away with a shudder. We went home boiling with indignation, but in the crucible of our thought our rage, as it cooled, left as precipitate the unmistakable consciousness of our own incompetence. True, as Chloe said, it was she who had accepted a tenant so manifestly undesirable−−lured by a bait of fourteen shillings a month. She had done it, but I had stood by and let it be done. Now, however, I must act. I would act. Was it, I wonder, an inexcusable cowardice or a wise discretion which led me to refrain from giving Mr. Prosser notice in a personal interview? I wrote to him, and bade him leave my cottage at the end of the week. But at the end of the week he was still there, and on the Monday evening, as Chloe and I wandered in the green forest of weeds and flowers that was our garden, the spell of its silence was broken for us by the sound of Mr. Prosser's voice, uplifted in one of the less agreeable comic songs of the year before the year before last.

I went down at once to give him, personally, that notice to quit which I found him in no fit state to receive.

Another call, in the morning, found my tenant conscious, indeed, but little amenable.

"I gave you written notice to quit last week," said I. "How is it you've not gone?"

Mr. Prosser, unshaved, without tie, collar, or boots, settled his head between his shoulders, and said he didn't know anything about no notice.

"Well, anyhow," said I, "you've got to clear out now. I want the cottage."

"Right you are, sir," said he, "but there must be proper notice give an' took."

"I give you notice now," said I, "and, while I am here, suppose you hand over the rent."

Then my tenant drew himself up and uttered these memorable words:

"I'm a yearly tenant, I am, and I pays on quarter−day, and six months' notice is what I'm entitled to. 'Nine pun two a year,' your missus said."

"Very well. I shall consult my solicitor," I said, and turned away helpless. I didn't know−−how should I, though I had kicked my heels, briefless, in the Inner Temple for at least two years−−whether he was entitled to that or anything else.

I wrote to my solicitor. I had never had a solicitor before, but I acquired one at once−− an old chum. He wrote me three pages of advice, in which a writ of ejectment loomed large. But his private opinion, as I read it between the lines, seemed to be that I had got myself into a tight place by my own folly, and had better trust to time to get me out of it.

Our garden's peace was broken. We never knew now when the hoarse, raucous voice of our tenant might desecrate the moonlit stillness with coarse echoes of transpontine musichalls. The knowledge of Mr. Prosser's nearness seemed to smirch the clean sweetness of life. The very jasmine stars seemed less white for the presence of our tenant's sordid ménage on the other side of our red wall. And Mary, day by day, tormented us with fresh tales of what was being said in the village of our tenant's antecedents and character, and, by implication, of ours. And all the time my inability to set steadfastly to work was fretting at my self−control. It is like a mouse gnawing at the cord of life−−the longing to work, and the inability to conquer the thousand tiny obstacles that fate erects−−fate, backed by one's own folly in having "bitten off a larger chunk than one can chew";−−I still think that a most excellent phrase, and not vulgar, only homely, going straight to the mark as the homely expression of a great truth may be permitted to do. Chloe was worried also−−her editors were clamoring for the illustrations which she was now incapable of working at. And Mr. Prosser was a live blister, and, like a blister, he hurt more and more the longer we had to bear with him.

I was sitting in our little work−room one morning, pen in hand, hardly able to meet with a confident eye the white paper that, as I stared at it, seemed to stare at me in return−−to stare rudely, contemptuously, in the confident superiority of its fulfilment of its destiny, as opposed to my manifest inability to fulfil mine. It was waiting to be written on, and no one could ask more of it. And I was waiting to write on it; and a good deal more than mere waiting was obviously demanded of me by our financial circumstances and my own self−respect. The six stories−−"in the style of the ghost"−−I longed to get them written with a longing more desperate than the longing of the lover for his mistress, the mother for her child. Though more desperate, it had not, however, the force of these natural desires, because it was not a desire for the thing in itself−−not a desire to achieve, to attain−−but depended for its vitality on a secondary motive. I longed to write the stories because I wanted the money they would bring to me. The longing was keen enough to be painful, not strong enough to get itself satisfied. So I sat idle, and drew fancy portraits of Chloe on the blotting−paper. I turned it over hastily as I heard her footstep on the kitchen floor, and I was bending over a virgin quarto page rimmed with unsoiled pink when she came in.

I drew my breath in sharply. Her face, her eyes, her whole bearing announced disaster unspeakable.

"What is it?" I cried, and I am sure I must have turned pale.

"Len, do you love me?" she asked, clasping her hands with a charming dramatic movement.

"Better than my life, of course," I said, hurriedly, "but I'm just starting on this story, and if it's some domestic detail−−"

"No, it can't wait," said she, sitting down on the edge of the table, "and it's not a variation on the domestic theme. It's the theme itself. Len−−it's all over!"

"What's all over?"

"Everything. She's going to leave."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was too upset to ask her. I just came to you."

I resisted an impulse to put aside the six re− munerative stories and spend the rest of the day in consoling my wife.

"I don't know what it is. We've been nice to her, I'm sure! She likes us−−at least I thought she did. It's Destiny−−it's like Maeterlinck−−whatever we do turns out all anyhow. There's a curse upon us!"

"Speak for yourself," I said, cheerfully. "You may be cursed, though it's barely polite of you to say so, but I am blessed above all that live, I'm blessed if I'm not−−since you−−"

She stamped her foot. "Don't you see," she said, "it's serious, horribly serious? I wish I had never come here. I wish we were back in the Bandbox−−there! Now crow over me, and tell me you told me so all the time!"

I told her something quite different, and presently, when we were calmer, I said,

"At least we may as well know why she's going."

"I'll ask her," said Chloe, drying her eyes. "It's probably Prosser. If I were you I should just take him by the shoulders and turn him out. You're quite strong enough."

"Yes, and have an action for assault and a hundred pounds' damages," said I, wise with the wisdom of my solicitor. "Go and ask her. Perhaps it's not Prosser. Even he, fiend with− out references as he is, can't be responsible for everything. Perhaps she's seen the ghost."

I had completed a fancy sketch of Mary giving notice, and alleging her reasons by unmistakable gestures indicating the ghost, in the background, when Chloe returned.

"Well?" said I.

"Well?" said she.

"Have you found out?"

"It's all right," said Chloe, with a sigh of deep relief. "We haven't done anything. She is awfully fond of us−−but she must go."

"Why?"

"She's going to marry the baker."

"Lucky man!"

"It's a love−affair," said Chloe−−"the prettiest story. They couldn't marry before because he wasn't well enough off, and now an uncle has left him some money, and he's bought a partnership."

"And how long have they been waiting for each other? How many long years of priceless constancy, tried like gold in the furnace?"

"That's the worst of it," said Chloe, blushing, as I live; "she's only known him for a month. But servants are expeditious as the wind in matters of the heart."

"Charles Reade: Hard Cash−−yes. Well, it's hard on us."

"But it's very nice for them," said my wife. "You ought to feel ever so much sympathy with lovers!"

"I do," said I, "especially when they are married and live in a house miles too big for them."

"Oh, Len," she said, "are you really so very sorry for yourself?"

"I am just as sorry for myself as you are for me."

"And I'm just as sorry for you as you can possibly be for yourself. Where had we got to?"

"We had got to Mary's marrying the baker, and your not minding being left without a servant because of your admiration for the beauty of constant love."

"Let's go into the garden and finish talking about it."

"I could talk all day about love and constancy," said I, "but my story−−"

"Bother the story!" said she, "and it's not love I want to talk about, unless you can't keep off the subject. It's advertisements, and registry−offices, and Prosser."

So we went into the garden and talked.

The garden chooses one's subjects for one, and it would not listen to any of Chloe's subjects. It was more tolerant of mine.

V. THE LOAFERY

I WAS writing in the red−and−white marble hall that morning−−I really had made a beginning on the first of the six stories. It was not a good beginning, but there it was. I had reached page three, and knew that unless any domestic event more than commonly cataclysmic befell that day I should see the sun set on twelve pages of laborious type−writing.

The walls of the marble hall are thick, and the windows look to the northeast, so that even when the sun is turning the garden to fine gold, and the westerly rooms to a burning, fiery furnace, the hall remains cool as a cave. Through the open door I could see the feathery flowers of the Spanish chestnut; through one window I could see the copper−beech, wine−dark, and through the other a gap in the avenue showed me a square of blue sky backing a single pillar of Normandy poplar, straight, slender, self− possessed. The garden was full of bird noises and the faint rustle of leaves. In the kitchen sounded the clink of silver−−of electro−plate, to be more accurate−−and the chime of china. The tapping of my Remington hardly did more than underline a silence which it might have broken to an ear that loved its monotonous music less than did mine.

The hall is the great highway of the Red House. Chloe passed through now and then with duster and broom, with an armful of blue−frilled cushions, with a folded rug, with something that rattled in a covered waste−paper basket. She looked at me, and I knew she was wondering why I did not ask her what she was playing at. But I forbore, because I had reached the fourth page, and I dared not tempt fate by pausing to enjoy more deeply the charm of a life my right to which I ought, without doubt, even at that moment to be earning. Besides, I feared to break the spell. When once the fatal third page is passed fluency holds her own against ordinary attacks. Not against Chloe, if one allows her to begin to explain a new idea. Yet my fingers worked more slowly, and my full stops gave me time to count forty instead of four, as they tell us to do at school, just because I could not either resist or understand a growing im− pression that my wife did not want me to ask any questions. Had I felt that it would please her to be questioned. I could have wrestled with the definite temptation to please her, and have thrown it. As it was, my phrases grew feebler, my narrative less convincing. I had to clutch with both hands at my vanishing interest in my story; and when the struggle was over I found that I had complicated the career of my hero with two wives, a dissipated youth, and a proposed highway robbery. And my hero was intended to shine in a milieu of "strong domestic interest."

I gathered the pages together; it was lunchtime. The blue and gold of the morning were overclouded with thick gray; the sky looked like the canvas roof of a travelling−circus tent. A few first drops made splashes on the door−step big as five−shilling pieces. Then down came the rain−−straight, strong, masterful.

"I knew it was going to rain," said Chloe. "How good it is to hear it! Don't you feel almost as glad of it as if you were a tree? Fancy standing up to it and holding out all your leaves to feel the splash of it!"

"It makes work easier," I said. "Now you can't entice me away from my stories and tempt me to waste the golden hours in the garden."

"That's the worst of this house," she said−−"everything inside it urges to industry. The white parlor is so proper, I never sit in it without feeling that I ought to be doing open−work embroidery, if not working a sampler. What heaps of work we shall do in the winter when there's no dear garden to tempt us!"

"I wonder−−"

It was Chloe who talked just then. I was trying to keep a few tentacles fixed on my story, and I was determined that I would ask no questions. After lunch I said:

"Coffee?"

"It's not ready yet," said she, rising. Then, "Len," she said, abruptly, "I've got something to show you."

" Not more rabbits?" I said, for only the week before it had been six baby rabbits that she had to show, found in our orchard, and painfully fed by Chloe, with the finger of a white kid glove dipped in warm milk. The rabbits had not lived.

"No, no−−how can you remind me of that? Come."

She led me up the oak stairs, along the gallery, and up a further narrower flight. We were among the nest of deserted rooms on the second floor. Chloe threw open a door, pulled me through, and shut it quickly.

It was a large room, swept and cleaned; three long windows, curtained with cascades of Virginia−creeper, filled it with soft green twilight.

There were no ornaments, there were no easy−chairs, there were no flowers and no carpets. Only one Persian rug on the floor, and a great divan, twelve or fourteen feet long, against one of the walls. On the shelves in the recesses by the fireplace were some thirty books, a large deal table held a solid inkstand, a smaller deal table held a brass tray with cups and tins. Two Windsor chairs stood against the big table.

"Now I'll make coffee," she said, turning to the brass tray.

"Coffee seems very flat. Is it possible that you aren't going to satisfy my raging curiosity? What is this room?"

"It's the loafery," she said. "In the winter, as you say, we shall need a place to loaf in."

"I didn't say so."

"Yes, you did. Try the divan."

I did. It crackled when I sat down, but it was very comfortable.

"Chloe," I said, "come here!"

"I can't. I'm making the coffee." And indeed she had lighted the spirit−lamp to that end.

"Do you know that you are blushing as though you had been detected in pocket−picking, or in some generous act? Why are you embarrassed? Why are you shy? Why do you screen yourself behind a spirit−lamp? Why have you done this? And why don't you rush into my arms as a dutiful wife should, and confess how you came to have such a beautiful idea?"

"You do like it, then?"

"Like it? I protest, by all my household gods, that if I had been a bachelor inhabiting this house, thus, and in no other way, should I have furnished my living−room!"

"Why 'if you were a bachelor'?"

"Because my wife likes pretty things. She likes green Flemish pots, and brass warming−pans, and Sheffield−plate candlesticks, and flowers; and, as a husband, I like what she likes. Chloe, why are there no flowers here?"

She pointed to the green screen of leaves at the window.

I got up and began to walk up and down.

"You're a witch," said I. "How did you know exactly what I liked? Here is space−−nothing to knock down! And form−−no curtains to break the fine lines of these old windows. And color−−look at the green light; it's like a fairy palace lighted by glowworm−lamps, especially when that gleam of sunlight came! Chloe, how did you know? Is it because you love me very much?"

"Not in the least," she said, briskly. "It's because−−Len, don't laugh at me−−I knew how to do the room because it's what I like, too!"

She had made the coffee and poured it out. Then she came and took my arm. Outside the rain pattered pleasantly on the green leaves and on the roof of the balcony.

"That's why I felt silly and why I blushed−−only, of course, I never did blush. I seem to be turning into somebody else, and perhaps you won't like me so much. Or I'm half myself and half somebody else, and I don't know which half is really you. It didn't cost anything, hardly," she went on, irrelevantly. "The divan is only orange−boxes filled with straw, and covered with those old green curtains−−you know−−the ones that were so faded. And the table is out of the kitchen−−the two shelves that pull out are quite enough there, Mary says. And that's all."

We sat down among the blue−frilled cushions. "I bought the stuff for these, of course−−the green twirlies on them just match the old curtains," she said. "And that really is all."

"Honest Injun?" I said, severely.

"Oh," she said, tossing her head, "if you think I really did it to please you−−"

"But tell me, then," I pleaded.

"I don't know," she said, confusedly, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. "You see, the Red House is so big. It's like Shakespeare or Goethe, and the Bandbox was like Savoy opera. And I hate mixing things up. And then it is so awful to have to dust things! Wasn't it Thoreau who threw away his curios because he couldn't be bothered to dust them? And Mary's going, and I thought if one could have a room with just only what one needed−−a lounge, a table, two chairs−−we can put more books if you like. But I thought−−if you

would−−we needn't use it only for loafing; we could bring anything we liked here−−work or anything; but I thought if you would agree never to leave anything here, but take everything away when we'd done it, whatever it was, then we should always have one room tidy−−at least the untidiness would never be more than one day deep. It's letting the litter of the days overlap that makes everything so hopeless. And I thought, perhaps, I should get some work done here."

"You are a genius," I said, "and I am Prince Fortunate. I only regret one thing, and that is, that I did not think of it myself."

"If you had you wouldn't have done it," she said, quickly−−"that's just it. Because you thought I−−and so I did−−but−− Anyway, you're pleased?"

"I am."

"The odd thing is that I think I must be two people, because if I had heaps of servants I should have the green pottery and brass and things in every room but this. Len, since we came to live here everything seems different. I feel as if I were swimming for my life in a great sea−−nothing's the same as I used to think it was."

"Nothing?"

"Only us. I wonder if you understand−−"

"My dear," I said, "we've tumbled out of our doll's house into the real world."

"Oh no, this isn't the real world−−it's too nice."

"Into a new world, then−−a world where we have to think for ourselves and judge things on their merits. We're like Columbus, madam. The really important thing is to find out for one's self, without any sort of mistake, what are the things one cares about−−the things that matter−−"

"And the things one doesn't care about−−those are much more important−−the things one has just because other people have them−−at least, if that's not the reason I don't know what is. And we've so much to learn, and there are so many good qualities I know nothing about. Don't you feel very poor and unimportant, Len? And very, very ignorant? I do."

"I know one or two important things," said I, for I never encourage Chloe in the moods of humility that end in self−reproaches, "and I have one or two unimportant possessions−−the Red House, and a wife, and a loafery. See, the sun is coming out in earnest; how glorious it is through the green! Oh, it's a good world, when all's said and done! How thick the creeper grows. What does it hang by? Why, there are bars! This must have been the nursery."

"Yes," said Chloe, leaning her chin on my shoulder, as she stood behind me.

"It would make a splendid nursery, too," said I.

"Yes," said my wife again, still with her chin on my shoulder. "Len, I feel very silly indeed, to−day; I should like to say something stupid."

"You couldn't offer me a greater novelty."

She slipped her hand into my arm, and laid her cheek against my coat sleeve.

"You know you thought it was so mad of me wanting to come to the Red House, but I saw these bars that very first day, and I thought how nice it would be for them to have a beautiful place to remember when they grow up. Not to remember the people next door, and organ−grinders, and gritty dust, and pavements, but quietness and big green trees and lawns, and this grave old house. Don't you think it would be nice for them?"

"For them?" I said, not because I did not understand.

"For−−if ever we had any children, Len."

Some day, if we live, we shall be old and gray, feeble, and look back with dim eyes along a lane of years; and even then that good moment will stand out golden and perfect−−the moment when, strong in youth and love and hope, we stood together, looking out together through the nursery bars and the green creeper towards the years to come. The summer day when, if our eyes were dim, it was with the dew of morning, when, if our hands trembled, it was because they held such full measure of life's good things.

Chloe raised her head suddenly. "I told you I was silly," she said, "but since I am silly I'll say one silly thing more. I don't think any one in this world was ever so happy as I am. And when I get worried and cross, you know−−Oh, why am I saying all the things that you know perfectly, and that one doesn't say? You must get back to your work, and I'll try to do that drawing of the duke. And to−night we'll have a consultation about Mary. Yolande shall advise us."

That evening when Yolande and my wife were deep in a discussion on the way in which a really right−minded

dressmaker should cut a skirt, I strolled into the new room, and there on the table was Chloe's drawing of the duke and the humble companion. The duke's arm was wrong, so were his Grace's legs. Pencil and India−rubber lay near. I fingered an H.B. absently for a moment, and presently found myself seated at the table, elbows squared, head bent, working up the duke to the semblance of something human. I always took the drawing prize in my youth−−nothing to boast of, since, proverbially, it falls to "the greatest muff in the school"−−and at Oxford I had taken a keen pleasure in caricaturing those who sit in the seats of the mighty, and in idealizing those who stand behind the counters of the pastry−cook. Also, in the days when I dreamed legal dreams in the Temple, and spent my idle days in the law courts, I had made constant use of the excellent quills and stationery provided by the state, to draw portraits of the leading legal lights. And I could see the shapes of things. I knew how the arm should go. I knew also how a man's clothes hang when he is in them, which Chloe never could grasp. So I rubbed out most of her duke, and put in a duke of my own−−quite a flesh−and−blood creature, and a great deal too good for Chloe's presentment of the humble companion, with whose carefully arranged draperies I did not venture to meddle. I touched up the background a little, correcting the wild perspective of a console−table−−an article of furniture which had apparently struck Chloe as ducal−−slipped the drawing under its sheet of tissue−paper, and went off to confess to my wife what I had done.

But I found her up to her ears in sleeves and yokes, and it seemed simpler to make Yolande play the piano in the great drawing−room, and sit beside Chloe in the twilight, and think of many things, only now and then wondering vaguely how she would meet the discovery of my presumptuous iniquity.

We had agreed that we would allow Miss Richborough an evening's repose−−a night's rest−−before laying upon her the burden of our cares−−our drunken tenant and our angel servant, so soon to be translated to a sphere far from our deep need of her. And the evening passed pleasantly enough. Yolande had brought half a dozen sketch−books with her, filled with little notes of her Italian tour. She really draws rather well; and even when her drawings are incorrect, they are amusing. Chloe and I laughed and criticised, but no one said anything worth recording. The really noteworthy remark was made next morning by Chloe.

"Oh, Len," she said, coming to me, with the duke and the humble companion in her hands, "look what she−−I mean, look what the ghost has done! Oh, what a clever ghost to be able to draw and write better−−I mean as well as we can!"

I would not have believed that she could be so deceived. Yolande's drawing is absolutely different from mine; she has a sense of humor, but she is wholly lacking in any real feeling for line. Yet Chloe could believe that my duke was Yolande's work! I told myself that I felt humbled, but really I felt a proud, if chastened, indignation.

"It is indeed a ghost in a thousand!" I said. "Shall you send the drawing in?"

"Of course!" she said, opening wide eyes at me. "And I only wish the ghost would illus− trate that hateful fairy tale for the Children's Globe."

I determined that the ghost should do this, too, or I would know the reason why.

"And now," said Chloe, "we must hold a council of war."

We took Yolande and showed her our own new room−−our loafery−−and then we asked her whether she would prefer to hold the council there, or in the white parlor where her settle and bureau were, or under the cedars where the hammock hung, and where the grass would be dry in spite of yesterday's rain. We waited breathlessly for her answer. She stood at the door of our new room, and looked round it, an appreciation in her eyes before which our own dropped. Then she said:

"Not here, anyway; this is your very own room. I should feel as uncomfortable in it as I should in your boots, Len, or in Chloe's gold−rimmed eye−glasses. I vote for the cedars."

We each said, "Nonsense!" but we went down the stairs, each holding one of her kind hands. No one but Yolande would have understood. I wondered whether she had noticed the window−bars.

So it was under the cedars that we pointed out to Yolande the overflowing measure of our per− sonal embarrassments. The migration of Mary, the weed−choked garden, the impossible tenants, the empty cottages which our one experience made us fear any thought of letting. And Yolande listened with the deepest sympathy, and the shadows of the cedar dappled her green gown and stole the light from her red−gold hair.

"Can you do anything?" said Chloe at last, desperately breaking through Miss Richborough's guard of noncommittal condolence.

"I suppose I could offer to stay and help you to wash and spin, and bake and brew," she said, "but I'm not

effectual. And, besides, it would be like cutting firewood with a razor."

"Your modesty was always your strong point, my dear Razor," said Chloe.

"A razor is not fitted for chopping firewood," said Yolande, demurely, "and it is fitted for other things. If you cut firewood with it it can't do its own proper work that it was made for. And if I may just hit out once brutally and straight from the shoulder, I will relieve my mind and not hurt you very much."

"Strike here," said my wife, with her hands to her heart.

"May I? Thanks, awfully. Well, then, you all−round people, who can turn your hand to anything, you're always chopping firewood with ra− zors; you're always diverting your energies from their proper channel, and doing a dozen people's work indifferent well, because you haven't time to do it properly. Len cleans boots and door−steps and candlesticks, and comes to his real work with only half a heart; Chloe can't do her drawing comfortably, because she has sweeping and dusting and cooking to see to. A really reasonable Len, a truly conscientious Chloe, would work at its own trade, and hire other people to work at theirs. I have spoken."

"Poor fox!" said Chloe, softly; "were the nasty grapes sour, then?"

"I will not pretend," Miss Richborough said, severely, "to misunderstand your allusion. I am not an accomplished sweeper. I dust ill and rarely. When I wash up I always break a cup or a plate. I dare say I should clean a boot with whitening, or a front door−step with Globe polish."

"And yet, by your own confession, you love to have your finger in your neighbor's pies."

"Exactly; I like to do what I am fitted for. I can adjust my neighbor's pies better than any professional pastry−cook. And adjusting pies doesn't interfere with my regular work−−that's the point."

"But we like doing things in the house," Chloe ventured.

"Don't I know it? Oh, you needn't trouble to convince me of your depravity. I stick to what I said. All these irons in the fire−−yes, even that contemptible little bit of garden that you've weeded−−all take off from the energy you ought to spend on your writing and drawing. You are both exceedingly naughty children!"

"How," I ventured, "in these circumstances would a really good child behave?"

"It would not bite blades of grass, to begin with," she said, "when it was being lectured for its own good. And then look at your ruffianly tenant. When one lets houses one employs an agent, and he insists on references. He knows his business."

Chloe looked appealingly at me, and I threw a daisy at her, and said:

"We were certainly wrong there." Her eyes thanked me for the "we," and Yolande went on:

"Then as to servants, it would pay you to have a really good one, if you had to pay her thirty or forty pounds a year. Don't open your pretty eyes at me, Chloe−−I mean it. You've always got far more work than you can do, as things are now. If you really stick to your work you could well afford the wages of a paragon."

"Puzzle: to find the paragon," said I.

"Ah! that's where I come in. I can't wash dishes−−anyway, I won't. But if you'll give me a free hand I'll find you a servant as good as this Mary of yours. I'll bet my Omar Khayyam, and it's a first edition, you know, against your Shropshire Lad!"

"Done!" I said, instantly. "And what about the degraded Prosser?"

"One thing at a time," said Yolande. "The question of the tenantry must stand over till we've settled the problem of domestic service. Ah, don't talk to me any more! My brain is teeming with the most fascinating ideas, as brilliant as practicable. Let me alone while my schemes develop." She leaned back in the hammock among the yellow cushions, and in three minutes she was fast asleep. Chloe and I stole away, through the garden to the seat under the quince−tree.

"We are like babes in the wood," she said. "I wonder whether she'll succeed."

"She always succeeds," I said, shortly; "it's her métier. Ours, I suppose, is that of these same babes−−helplessness, appealing to the pity of all kindly passers−by−−and I own that it's not a métier I'm particularly proud of."

"Yolande isn't every passer−by."

"Yes, she is," I said, "every single one."

"Dear," said my wife, calmly, "you are very cross, and presently you will be sorry."

I had not been cross before−−at least, I think not; but now, perhaps−− I picked an unripe quince and threw it at a blackbird on the ivy. I did not hit the blackbird.

"Seriously," said Chloe, catching at my hand as it sought another quince, "I think Yolande's right. It's our métier to write and draw, and earn our livings. We can't be clever enough to do everything. Why should we be too proud to let her try to do what we haven't been able to do−−get a servant who will stay? You're not really vexed because Yolande said what she did? You know how fond she is of us."

"I only know I feel contemptible," I said. "I ought to be able to manage these things for myself."

"Then shall I tell Yolande not to trouble? Len, how silly you are! What is it?"

"I should have thought it would be more pleasant to you to think you'd married a man, and not a babe in the wood."

"You were manly enough in the Bandbox, but I didn't know then half how dear you were. Oh, Len! don't you think it's nice to find out all sorts of things together, even−−"

"Even our babe−in−the−woodness?"

"Yes, even our limitations. Why should we want to pretend we can do everything? We can do a great many things that Yolande can't do."

"Yes−−wash up, and sweep, and dust."

"But you like doing them. And we can write and draw."

"So can−−so can the ghost. Dear, the black dog is on my back. You'd better go away and leave me for a bit."

Now Heaven be blessed for a wife who did not answer that appeal with an, "Oh, darling, surely you don't want to be away from me?"

For one shameful instant I feared it. One does not learn everything about one's wife even in ten married months.

As for Chloe, she kissed my forehead lightly, and without a word walked away down the avenue of nut−trees. I watched her white skirt till the last sway of it against the hollyhocks, and the moment she was out of sight I sprang to my feet and ran after her. I came up with her by the bench of rotting hives where once the bees followed their sweet industry. I caught her arm, and she turned to me with a smile.

"Chloe, Chloe, I've put the nasty black dog up the chimney. I'm the happiest man alive! I'm King of the Universe, and you're Queen! Yolande doesn't belong to the reigning house. Poor Yolande! we can't do less than let her be our vizier."

I was holding her hands now, and we were looking at each other with that unquenchable amazement which still comes to us at odd moments in life's winding way−−amazement that there should be in this world two people so suited to each other as we; and the further wonder at the clemency of a fate which has allowed us to find each other. This, I suppose, is a lover's commonplace. It was our abiding marvel.

During the next week Yolande worked a good deal in her room, bicycled a little with me, went to town once or twice with Chloe, and entirely won the heart of Mary, who stated publicly that she would lie down for Miss Yo to walk on if it would please her. Twice in that week the ghost walked. It finished a story for me, and I wished it would mind its own business. But I had been positively shocked to find myself capable of a feeling towards Yolande that was very like jealousy, and just because I knew deep in my heart that the ghost's work was better than my own, I felt that it was equally impossible for me to insist on an explanation, or to refuse to send in the ghost's work as mine. I had given away my ignoble secret to Chloe now, and I could not dare to sink further in her eyes. So I sent in the ghost's work, and the editor was delighted. The pricking of that same jealousy stung me to correct two of Chloe's drawings and to originate a third. It was balm to me to hear Chloe's raptures over the drawings, and to know that she believed them to be the work of Yolande−−Yolande, who could not have done anything half so good to save her life.

It was on the evening before Mary's wedding. I had presented to her a neat service of teacups and saucers, and Chloe had embroidered for her a tea−cloth and a collar. I almost think she had sewn tears into the pretty pattern. Mary had thanked me for my gifts and for my heartfelt expressions of grief at parting from her, but it was not till Chloe presented her gifts worked by her own hands that Mary broke down.

"I ain't a−going to leave you, mum," she sobbed. "Miss Yo she told me not to say nothing, so as to make it a regular surprise for you when I come back. I'm only going for a week along of my Jim to see his father and mother down Marden way, and then I'm coming back. Miss Yo told me you'd told her to arrange what she liked."

"But your Jim," said Chloe, aghast, "what will he say?"

"He's only too pleased, mum."

"Only too pleased? Not to live with his wife?"

"Oh, mum," said Mary, giggling through her tears, "Miss Yo arranged it all. Him and me is to have all the rooms beyond the kitchen. He's got a beautiful lot of furniture as come to him from his aunt at Canterbury. He won't be in no one's way, mum, being out so much, and I'm to do for you just the same as ever; and I am so glad as never was, for I couldn't abide the notion of leaving you, mum, and you putting roses in my bedroom and all, as if I was the Queen, and now working those things for me with your own pretty hands!"

When I came in a moment later I found Mary and Chloe in each other's arms, and I am not sure but that they were both crying a little.

It was a simple solution, wasn't it? Yet Chloe and I had never thought of it. And I had lost my Shropshire Lad.

VI. YOLANDE'S REASONING

MARY'S wedding was to be a quiet one. Her Jim brought a dejected young carpenter with him, to be his "backer," as he explained, and we all walked up to the church in the village, where I was to give away the bride, while Yolande officiated as bridesmaid. Chloe merely attended, as she explained, to see fair play. The ceremony was fixed for Sunday afternoon, and when we arrived at the church we were somewhat disconcerted to find a large congregation. Mary and Jim had not any desire to hide the light of their love−match under a bushel. "We ain't ashamed of it, mum," she said, in a hollow whisper, answering Chloe's agonized glance in the church porch. "I've been reading about it in the prayer−book, and it says, 'In the face of this congregation,' and that means afore a churchful. We 'ain't got no friends here to ask, so we thought we'd have it done after service, so as to be sure of the congregation anyway."

The congregation looked at us with interest. There was no mistaking Mary's gray cashmere dress−−a wedding−garment, if ever there was one−−trimmed with lavish indiscrimination and white cotton lace. And even if the gown had left any room for doubt the orange flowers in her brown hat and in the blue bow at her neck must have enlightened the least observant. Chloe and Yolande, in pale muslins, looked quite as bridal as the bride, and Jim and his "backer" and I each looked uncomfortable enough to have been the bridegroom. The verger recognized us unerringly as the wedding−party, and showed us to a pew near the chancel, where we remained till the service was over. I had faintly hoped that the congregation would be glad to get out−−the thermometer must have been about a hundred in the shade−−but Mary had judged better than I; not a soul moved, and she was married "in the face of this congregation," as she had wished and intended.

The clergyman was old and short−sighted−−he could not see the orange blossoms, I suppose. At any rate, I found it quite difficult to prevent him from marrying Yolande, in her muslin and Valenciennes and her big white hat with the ostrich feathers, to the backer, whose white buttonhole was, I admit, twice as big and twice as bridal as Jim's.

However, the verger backed me up, and the right couple were married, at last. We all went back to the Red House and drank the health of the happy pair−−in Asti, though, not in champagne−−because Asti is twice as cheap and twice as nice. At least, Chloe says so.

Then we saw them off at the station. Then we came home and tore off our smart, hot clothes, and got into flannels or muslin wrappers, and got our own tea−−at least, Chloe and I did−−and drank it under the cedars.

When tea was over, Chloe said, maliciously, "Wouldn't you like to wash up the cups, Yolande?"

"Your cups are, I believe, Spode−−or is it only Spode and Copeland? Shall I wash up? I warn you that I cannot answer for my fingers. They lose their grasp if I become interested in my own reflections−−or, yes−−or in the conversation of others, so it's no use offering to talk to me while I do it. I know my limitations, and I abide by them."

"I'm not proud of my limitations," said Chloe.

"No, dear," Yolande answered, sweetly; "that's because you haven't any. Why don't you get some? They are a great convenience."

"You speak as though one could decide one's limitations for one's self."

"And can't one? A clever woman like you−−"

"No butter, thanks," said Chloe.

"−−Like you could do anything that silly women can do, and could do any one thing she gave her whole mind to, better than these silly women. But no one can do everything. When you've found that out, and decided what you want to do, you've learned your limitations."

"You mean," I said, "that you could wash dishes with the best, and sweep and dust und so weiter, if you only cared to?"

"Of course I could"−−Yolande opened her lovely eyes−−"I could do anything I gave my mind to. But I haven't a hundred minds to give to a hundred industries. When I was quite a child I declined to be taught to sew. I saw, even then, that one's knowledge of feminine crafts is just a weapon in the hands of the evil one, who lies in wait at every corner to keep one off one's real work. I meant to go to Girton: so when they made me wash up the

tea−things, I always dropped something. They soon left off asking me to wash up."

"How horribly immoral!"

"Not at all. I only enforced my decision by concrete arguments−−the only ones my aunt could understand. The secret of success is to know what you want and what you don't want."

I looked at Chloe−−we had said the same thing in almost the same words but the other day.

"Do you suppose," Yolande went on, "that I should have taken every prize in each form all the way up the school, and then got a scholarship at Girton, if I had allowed myself to be taught to dust the drawing−room and to make my own dresses, and sew on buttons and darn stockings for the boys?"

"I don't know," said Chloe; "perhaps mathematics take more time than drawing. Anyway, I liked learning the things you despise, and I liked doing them. I liked helping mother. I like playing with my own house."

"Helping Len−−yes−−perhaps it would be different. You see, I never had a mother. If I had had, I dare say I should have learned all these arts, just so as to be able to do something for her when she wanted it. But, as it was, I set myself to do a man's work, and I tried to live a man's life−−apart from these little worries. And what's more, I succeeded. There's not a feminine trait about me, thank Heaven."

We all three laughed. Chloe said:

"Take down your pretty hair, Yolande. I want to look at it."

The wide, lace−ruffled sleeves fell back from her creamy, rounded arms where the gold bangles shone. I could see the diamonds and sapphires and opals of her rings gleaming among the copper−gold of her hair as she drew out the silver filigree−topped hair−pins. Then the coils of bright hair began to fall over the delicate silk muslin of her gown till she stood before us clothed in a glowing mantle that fell below her knees. She threw her long hair back, with a quintessentially feminine gesture, and came and sat beside Chloe on the grass, where her hair curled and coiled on the ground, like swirls of surf on the edge of a sea lit by sunset. We looked at her−−bright hair, bright bangles, bright rings, bright eyes−−and we said together,

"No feminine traits!"

"That's not a feminine trait," she answered, elliptically. "Even a man tries to look as nice as he can. It's not much he can do−−but he does it. Look at men's ties. They use thousands of them, and nobody ever notices what they wear, any more than any one ever notices whether women wear threes or fours in shoes. Yet most women pinch their feet and their waists."

"Men notice waists, anyhow," said Chloe. "If Len sees a girl pinched in so that you wonder she doesn't snap off short, he says, 'There's a smart girl.'"

"We are wandering from the point," I said, hastily.

"Which, by−the−way, is that this very evening as ever is I'm off to my club," said Yolande, briskly. "I will not be taught to do house−work, and I love you both far too much not to fall an easy victim to your arts if I were to see you really in need of help. I can't abjure the creed of a lifetime. My only safety is in flight. When Mary comes back I'll come back, too, if you'll have me. I can't stay here and see the dark side of Mary's honey−moon. And meantime you'll give me leave to let my master−mind play round the question of your horrible tenant. Did you notice his front garden as we came back from church? By−the−way, why did you never tell me your church has a Norman chancel?"

"We didn't know it ourselves," said Chloe. "You see, we've always been to Westenden church. It's a lovely walk through the woods in the evening. Perhaps among the other things you declined to learn you escaped the knowledge that after you've moved into a new house your first appearance in your parish church is a signal that you are ready for your neighbors to call on you? Well, we didn't want them to call on us."

"Perhaps they will now, mum, thanking you for your slap about my ignorance of pretty manners."

"Oh no," said Chloe, "our appearance there was unofficial. Any one could see that."

"I'm not sure−−but I wish you luck," said Yolande. "And now I must tear myself away."

"Selfish thing," said Chloe.

"Not selfish, sweetheart! Only faithful, in the face of tremendous temptation, to the ideals of a lifetime."

"When you marry," said my wife, impressively, "your husband will be a poor little hen−pecked thing."

"I shall never marry. I never met but one man who was nice enough for a husband, and he was only nice enough for you−−not nearly nice enough for me. Now I've involved you both in the ruins of a compliment, and I'll go."

She went.

I own that it was with an invigorating sense of something pleasant promised that I awoke next morning. The feeling deepened as I stole down−stairs and lighted the kitchen fire. Mary−−may her honey−moon last her life long!−−had dried a little stack of wood and piled it in the wash−house ready for us. I filled the kettle, swept up the hearth, and had finished laying the cloth for breakfast when Chloe appeared.

I do not know which of us most enjoyed the house−work that followed. Chloe loves house−work for its own sake. As she says, it is play, because it is not what one ought to be doing. For myself, I admit that when I see my wife working about the house I experience a more intimate sense of possession even than when I walk with her in the garden, hand in hand, and certainly far deeper than I can ever feel when she is drawing away for dear life to add her share to our income. Theoretically I know how right and proper it is that she should earn money as well as I. Practically I want to earn all the money, and to let her spend it. This is the relic of a barbarous age, and so is the delightful thrill of domestic pleasure with which I see my wife busy about our house. At the same time I like to prove to her that I can sweep and dust and wash up as well as she can, if not better. The only drawback to our happiness that morning was Mary's neatness and cleanness, which left us little or nothing to do. When all her necessary work was done, I noted still a hungry look in Chloe's eye.

"What, Oliver! Asking for more?"

"Yes, Mr. Bumble. I'll get lunch now−−and then you must go and write, and I'll put on my very oldest rags and clean out the china−cupboard."

Her oldest rags were the red−and−white Trouville petticoat and a blue, long−sleeved painting pinafore. I left her with bare feet, and sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, carrying the piles of china into the hall.

"I shall scrub the shelves first," she said; "you know I've never let Mary touch it−−she's never even seen it unlocked−−so it's all as black as ink. And then I'll wash the floor, and then I'll wash the china and put it all back after I've cleaned the window."

"Let me clean the window," I said.

"No, not for the world. I'm going to enjoy myself. I'm going to play, I am−−I'm going to fritter away my intellect, as Yolande says. And you're going to enjoy the dignity of labor, and do what you are really fitted for. Lucky boy!"

"If you taunt me with my chains I won't pull an oar at all in this galley."

"Where are you going to work?"

"In the loafery. It's the only place where I can even begin to be moderately contented away from you."

"What a pretty speech! You shall bring me two pails of water for a reward. One hot and one cold. Len, why do you like the loafery so much?"

"I like the bars," said I, coming nearer to her.

My exercise with broom, mop, and the other implements of domestic industry seemed rather to have brightened my brain than to have dulled it. My story went very well. I had a good plot which Yolande had suggested, and the type−writer clicked merrily. I was in the middle of a fine scene between a baffled company promoter and the simple typist girl who has out witted him on his own ground, when I heard the familiar, long−drawn shriek of the front gate.

"The milk," I thought. And I also thought that perhaps Chloe would not like to face the milkman barefooted, so I went down. I went softly, for I happened to be wearing rubber−soled tennis shoes. In the gallery overlooking the hall I paused, for I heard a voice that was neither Chloe's nor the milkman's−−a thin, mean, narrow, doubtfully pitched voice.

It came from the front doorstep. In the middle of the hall stood the stack of china shining with soap and water. Half the floor of the hall was cleaned, the other half partially wetted. A pail of brown−colored water stood by the table, and Chloe, her bare feet splashed with that same brown water, and a scrubbing−brush in her hand, advanced towards the voice. The voice said,

"Is your mistress at home?"

There was an instant of hesitation. Then I saw by the set of my wife's shoulders that she scorned to accept the chance of escape.

"Will you come in?" she said, cheerfully. "Mind the pail. I can't shake hands with you, because of the scrubbing−brush."

The woman had not offered to shake hands. She came in−−a face and figure that matched the voice−−a bonnet and mantle that matched the face and the figure. There were black beads about her.

Chloe ostentatiously dusted a chair with a corner of her pinafore, and handed it to her visitor. Then she stood leaning against the table, and looked at the other woman calmly. I ought to have gone down. I ought not to have left Chloe to bear alone this call, the first fruits of our appearance in our parish church the day before. But the picture charmed me. Chloe's grace and ease, the other woman's stiffness and embarrassment, the half−cleaned floor, the scrubbing−brush, the china. I hugged myself on it all.

I could see the caller conscientiously trying her best to keep her eyes off Chloe's bare feet, and off the scrubbing−brush, and all the rest of it. And I thought Chloe was a little hard upon her. But I was wrong.

"Your mistress is out, I suppose," the woman said. "The vicar told me about the marriage yesterday. I was not at church myself. I hope you will tell your mistress that I called. And don't you think, my good girl, that you could manage to get your dress changed by four in the afternoon? It has a very slatternly appearance. And do you think it conscientious to leave off your cap and apron just because your mistress is not at home? We should try to act the same in people's absence as in their presence. I suppose, now that your fellow−servant has left, you have extra work, but that need not make you careless about personal cleanliness. You must remember that your mistress−−"

Chloe sat down and crossed her bare feet.

"I am my own mistress," she said, "and the mistress of the Red House. No, don't apologize, unless it is for lecturing another person's servant−−of course you couldn't be expected to understand." Chloe spoke very sweetly, but the woman half rose. "Do sit down. You're the vicar's wife, I suppose," Chloe went on. "It's very kind of you to call. My husband will be down presently. He shall make the kettle boil and get some tea for you."

The vicar's wife certainly made a brave effort to pull herself together.

"I am extremely sorry that the mistake occurred," she said; "I am rather short−sighted."

"Yes, of course you must be, very," said Chloe, amiably. The vicar's wife looked more and more uncomfortable. Then Chloe took pity on her, and began to laugh.

"It was very funny," she said. "You mustn't mind my laughing a little. Really I ought to be proud to be taken for a servant. But, of course, moving only among the upper classes, you've never met any one who did any house−work except servants. Now, I love house−work. I like it much better than my own proper work."

"What is your own proper work?"

"Oh, I was taught a trade, and my husband has learned one. We work very hard."

"You must find this house very large, with no servants." I could not decide whether sympathy or impertinence dictated this speech. Chloe decided.

"Do you think so?" she said, politely.

The vicar's wife was encouraged to wonder why we had taken the house.

"We came to live in it because we wished to," said my wife.

"It's a very heavy rent, I suppose," the insufferable woman went on.

"No," said my wife. "Thank you so much for asking."

The woman paused ere she offered the return scratch.

"You must not expect many callers. I am afraid Elmhurst's very exclusive."

"Indeed! Why, I wonder?"

"The leading families are very select. They expect to know all about new−comers, and it is not everybody who can get on the visiting−list of our best set."

"This is very interesting," said Chloe, calmly. "The habits of the aborigines−−"

"My dear Mrs.−− I fear I do not know your name−−I am only warning you for your own good, and to prevent disappointment in the future. I shall continue to call on you. A vicar's wife has duties−− As the dear Dean of Somerset used to say, 'Social distinctions do not exist among the wives of the clergy.'"

"Did he really? How discerning!"

"Yes, he did indeed. But, on the other hand, we learn in our catechism to do our duty in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call us. And, of course, we all have our appointed stations."

"Shall please, not has pleased," corrected Chloe; "we are not forbidden to rise if we can, even from domestic service to the level of the best set in Elmhurst. What is the chief qualification? Money, I suppose."

"The best families are very well off," said the vicaress, innocently. "As the dear Bishop of Selsea used to say,

we ought not to associate in intimacy with persons of distinctly different social rank from our own."

"Did he say that? Do you know him, then?"

"I have stayed at the palace."

"Are you sure you didn't misunderstand him? I have often heard him say that a man should choose associates of his own intellectual rank−−"

"You have often heard him say?" The vicar's wife's voice trembled unaccountably.

"Yes−−I know him rather well. He is my uncle. I never heard him mention your name. Yet I seem to know your face. Were you not Miss Blake before you married?"

The vicar's wife could not deny it.

"I remember you when I was a little girl and you were my uncle's housekeeper. Well, I was saying just now, domestic service is a very honorable calling."

There was a desperate pause. The woman was indeed delivered into Chloe's hands by the long arm of coincidence. She rose.

"I think I will go now," she said, in quite a broken voice.

Chloe caught her hand impulsively.

"I am sorry," she said. "I wouldn't have said it if I hadn't thought you wanted to be horrid to me. I dare say you didn't, really, but I have a hateful temper. Please forgive me. I won't tell a soul, if you'd rather I didn't. And I like you heaps better since I've remembered that you used to work too. Do forgive me! I won't tell any one, not even my husband," she went on; and I was shocked to find she could even think of keeping a secret from me. "Say you forgive me, and let me get you some tea."

The vicaress smiled−−a smile of sheer embarrassment−−yet even that changed her face more pleasantly than I had believed possible.

"There's only one thing I wish you would do for me," Chloe went on. "Don't let the first families of Elmhurst know one of my uncles is a bishop, or they'll call. We want to be quiet. And we live here because the house is our own. The late owner was my husband's uncle."

I came down at this point and was presented to the vicaress. She quite thawed, and we had a pleasant tea. But when we called on her she was as stiff and almost as disagreeable as ever. The habits of a lifetime cannot be uprooted even by such a delightful experience as quarrelling and making it up again with Chloe. When she had gone that day Chloe began to cry. A woman can never get into a royal rage without tears for a sequel.

The awful truth about Chloe's uncle must have leaked out somehow, for later on we had streams of callers. Some of them were rather nice. And the vicar's wife was almost the only snob among them. But they were the sort of people who might have called on us anywhere, and they have really no place in the story of the Red House.

Yolande wrote to us that she could let one of our cottages to a desirable tenant. We wrote back giving her full powers.

At the end of the week Mary and her Jim came back to us and took up their dwelling in the "rooms beyond the kitchen." Two days later Yolande led me to the cottage desecrated by the presence of Prosser. It was empty. The garden had been cleared of all the unseemly litter that during his occupancy had defiled it. A portion of the cottage garden had even been dug and cleared of weeds. The cottage next door to Prosser's presented a spotless door−step, and its shining windows blinked at us over snowy muslin short blinds.

"How did you manage it?" I asked, in rapturous admiration.

"How do you get a rat out of its hole?"

"Put in a ferret."

"Wise man! And what does the rat do when it sees the ferret?"

"Bolts!"

"So did Prosser. He knew he was a rat, and fair game for the ferret by virtue of more than one shady act. So when I put in the ferret he bolted."

"But your ferret?"

"I let the next−−door cottage to the ferret for seven and sixpence a week. Rents are high here. There are very few cottages."

"That's about eighteen pounds a year. Yolande, you're a goddess! And who is your ferret?"

"His name is Bates. He is a perfectly respectable ferret. I gave him a hint to give Prosser a hint, and Prosser

took it."

"Let's go and tell Chloe."

"I've told her. And she wants to work. Let's go into Prosser's house and look over it. I'm afraid it will want doing up. Mrs. Bates has given it what she calls a rough cleaning down already. Mrs. Bates is a woman after my own heart."

We went over the cottage and decided that it must be repapered throughout.

"Mrs. Bates can do that. She's a universal genius."

"Yet you approve−−"

"Yes, in that walk of life."

I was musing. Chloe and I had often thought that we should like to do a little paper−hanging, but I decided not to tell Yolande this.

"When it's cleaned and papered," she said, with kindling enthusiasm, "I'll let that too."

"You shall," I said, and then hastening away from the subject of paper−hanging, lest she should insist on my giving the order for it to Mrs. Bates that very moment, I said:

"By−the−way, you haven't told me yet wherein consists the ferretiness of your ferret, Bates."

"Oh, haven't I?" she said, carelessly. "You see, my ferret's a policeman."

This, like Yolande's last−solved problem, was simplicity itself. And yet we had never thought of it!

VII. THE HOUSE−WARMING

HOW had Yolande triumphantly justified her boast−−her assertion, rather−−that she could do for us what we could not do for ourselves. The only thing left us was to try and be grateful. I am almost sure that I succeeded. For the rest, we were extraordinarily comfortable; our domestic service approached perfection, and was, humanly speaking, assured. Bates, that excellent trained ferret, had dislodged the criminal rat which had been our tenant. Peace hovered above us with wide, white wings. But those wings were not permitted to fold themselves about us, because I had a great−aunt, my aunt George. I think I have had occasion to name her before, in connection with a certain patch−work quilt. She gave us the quilt and a pewter teapot on our marriage. She now, quite suddenly, announced that she was coming to see us. My aunt George is fidgety, inquisitive, interfering, unforgiving, and dictatorial. She is also generous, affectionate to such as will sue to her in forma pauperis, and is an excellent sick−nurse. We, being neither sick nor indigent, and finding our home−grown stock of affection sufficient for our humble needs, hastily intrenched ourselves against a long visit by inviting Yolande to occupy our one furnished spare room. Then we invited all the relations who, like the fairies at christenings, would make themselves disagreeable if they were not bidden to a family feast, and plunged headlong into the most exciting preparations for a house−warming. It was to be an evening party with a cold supper, because we could not expect Mary, single−handed, to serve up a hot dinner to a crowd of carping aunts and uncles. The enthusiasm with which we embarked on our labors was tinged, I think, in both of us, by a desire to show Yolande that we could at least deal masterly with a brief crisis, however little we might be able to organize permanent industries.

"The materials are unpromising," said Chloe. "Aunts and uncles aren't the things exactly to make a party 'go'−−but Yolande shall see."

"Mayn't we have any young couple?" I pleaded, wistfully.

"Of course! Not enough to drown the aunts and uncles, but just enough to remind them how superior they are to the follies of youth, and to incite them to show how much more cheerful they can be, in their maturity, than these restless−−Oh, Len, I'm talking like a goody−goody book. Come on; let's make a list of who we'll ask, and what we will give them to eat, and who shall sit beside who, and then we'll decide where they're to eat it. We'll save up the peaches for the party. There are three hundred and twenty−six of them."

It is delightful to have three hundred and twenty−six peaches of your very own. It is charming to make lists, especially on rather rough paper, with a B.B. pencil. It is also delightful to roam through a big house, your very, very own, and to decide in which of its many rooms you shall hear the health and happiness of your house toasted.

"It must be the drawing−room," said Chloe, at last, "and we must have little tables, with candles and paper shades, like in a hotel, and everything carved on a sideboard."

"We haven't a sideboard," I said, feebly.

"Oh, we can make a sideboard in three minutes−−those packing−cases Yolande's china came in. We'll make a big one while we're about it−−a really impressive sideboard."

We did make it−in something under three hours. Draped in the red liberty curtains hastily taken down from our bedroom, and covered with a fair white cloth, it was−−being ten feet long and four feet high−−positively crushing in its impressiveness.

We collected all the tables from the other rooms,−−even the writing−table from the loafery was brought in−−gate tables, Pembroke tables round tables, square tables, long narrow tables, our own tables, Mary's tables, and Mrs. Bates's tables. We selected the least leggy, and arranged our guests' name−cards. The question of wall decorations agitated us a good deal.

"If we took every pikky we've got out of all the other rooms," Chloe said, "they'd hardly show in this great barn. There ought to be some idea−−Oh, Len, of course! wreaths of evergreens right up high−−oh!−−and a frieze of pink muslin, and the evergreens in loops and swags. Delicious!"

It takes some time to make properly graduated loops and swags for a room forty feet by twenty−five, and it takes some material. The evergreens in our garden had not had such a pruning this many a year. But we did it; we thought of Yolande, and we did not flinch, though our fingers were blistered and our backs a weariness long before the wreaths were done. The pink muslin proved to be too ruinously expensive, but we bought a pink

"lining paper" and pasted it up, and when we had nailed up the evergreens we felt that the result almost paid for our three days' hard labor.

Chloe fell into my arms in an ecstasy of mingled pride and exhaustion. "It's a dream," she said, "an Italian palace! But, oh, I never want to touch box or yew or laurel again as long as I live! And we've only three days now! There'll hardly be time to cook anything."

A fury of egg−beating drove me forth. A man, I was assured, was worse than useless in matters of cuisine. The crisis was urgent; I forebore to complicate it by argument; but Soyer and his noble army of followers seemed to back up my insulted sex, as I walked down the garden−paths, whose breast−high weed growths, mown down by Jim in leisure moments, now permitted glimpses of low−hanging red and golden fruit and russet leaves. The hour was five−−nominally tea−time−−but what man worthy the name would thrust the need of boiling kettles on two ardent women strenuous in the compounding of sweets?

I walked softly in the tennis shoes to which a country life seduces the weaker brethren, and the path was still weed−grown enough to betray nothing of my drawing near to the biggest of the peach−trees on the red south wall. The espaliers connived at my approach by the shelter of their wide−spread arms. Thus it was that I came plump on a man, midway up my wall; his foot rested where a broken brick had been dislodged. He was handing up peaches−−my peaches−−reserved for the high destiny of auntal and avuncular palates−−to a ruffian with a basket, who, in broad day, only one big garden's breadth from a policeman−ferret, sat astride my wall. Some one whistled−−it was not I; a spring, a swear, and both villains vanished as if by magic into the paddock. I climbed the wall; they had disappeared in the nettle−coverts of our orchard; nor, when I threaded those coverts, could I run them to earth. It was a poor consolation to return, my feet soaked to the bone through my tennis shoes, to count the peaches and to find that the despicable outcasts had only taken fifteen out of the three hundred and twenty−six.

How age mellows one's views! As a boy I never could understand why farmers made such a fuss about a few apples or plums. Now, all the land−owner welled up within me, and I understood it all−−with an understanding as full as it was bitter. I thought of netting, of man−traps, of a fierce bull−dog, of men with guns−−myself and Jim by turns−−incessantly patrol− ling my garden. All other crimes in the decalogue might, I felt, admit of some valid excuse, some reasonable explanation. But breaking the eighth commandment−−and with peaches−−my peaches−−it was intolerable! I felt myself cut off once and forever from the communion of school−boys. Villon was now merely despicable to me.

I forebore to fling my heavy news among the eggs, but Yolande came that evening to occupy the spare room, and at dinner I judged the time ripe. My thrilling narrative fell, to my amazement, on inattentive ears. Chloe, whose horror and reprobation I had expected to exceed even my own, merely said, with what I could not persuade myself was a calmness assumed to temper my own agitation: "Oh, did they, dear? How horrid of them!" and absently pressed more fish on me.

I withdrew into a proud reserve. When, with a studied air of aloofness, I had carved the mutton, and Mary, having handed the plates and vegetables, left the room, Chloe laid down her fork, and with sparkling eyes turned to Yolande.

"Now," she said, and there was just that suppressed fire about her that I had hoped to waken by my tale of the fruit−stealers−−"now, I think we might tell him. You tell him, Yolande, because it's your doing, you clever, intelligent−−"

"Spare me," Yolande interrupted; "whatever my faults may be, I'm not intelligent. That's what the police always are when they can't find out the murderer."

"Unintelligent as you are," said I, "you'll perhaps be able to break the news gently. My nerves are unstrung by to−day's revelation of the cynical immorality of men with baskets."

"Tell him, tell him," urged Chloe, impatiently. "Len, you're like Nero, talking about unimportant things when−− No, nothing's burning. Yolande, if you don't tell him I shall."

"It's nothing," said Yolande, nonchalantly, crumbling her bread and looking down so as to express indifference with her eyelashes−−a very graceful accomplishment. "It's really nothing−−only you gave me carte blanche as your land agent, and I've let the big cottage for you−−not Prosser's−−the one on the other side."

"You have? Chloe, I know it seems the basest ingratitude to Yolande, but−−think of Prosser, fairest of land agents, and tell me frankly, has he any references?"

"He simply bristles with them. His bank, Coutts's, and his father, a cotton−broker of absolute eminence, were enough for me."

"But where did you catch him? The sons of cotton−brokers with balances at Coutts's are not found in every bush. How did you do it?"

"C'est tout simple. I advertised. You never thought of that? No. Well, we all have our limitations. Chloe, if you let him throw bread at me I shall tell the tenant the house is unhealthy, and he won't take it. I advertised, he answered. I interviewed the bank and the cottonbroker,−−incredibly eminent he really is; I saw it at once. The man himself is a man of action. The agreement, signed, lies warm at this moment against Chloe's heart."

"It's in her Gladstone," said Chloe.

"The man moves his furniture down this week, and there we are!"

"He's a journalist, or an author, or something," said Chloe. "I expect he's awfully nice. Isn't she a genius?"

"The rent's a minor point, of course," I said, humbly, "but if one might ask?"

"The rent?" Chloe jumped up from her chair and came round to me. "Oh, Len, what impossibly fortunate people we are! Guess the rent!"

"A hundred a year!" I said, promptly.

"Don't be horrid." Chloe's disappointment was very pretty. "I thought you'd say twenty."

"I didn't dare. What is it? Fifteen?"

"It's thirty−five!" cried my wife; and at that my generous heart could no longer forbear, and I toasted Yolande in bottled beer.

When the enthusiasm of a landlord had sobered in me somewhat, I led the talk back to my fruit−thief−−to my secret soul still the most interesting possible topic, because he was my find; the tenant was merely Yolande's. And by skilful tactics I presently roused Yolande's sympathies. The tactics were quite simple. I asked her advice. At once the affair assumed in her eyes new proportions−−a new complexion.

"I don't know," she said, knitting her brows; "there must be same way."

"You see," I said, "if one repaired the whole wall, there are ladders, and dark nights to set them up in. You can feel peaches in the dark. And broken bottles can be overcome by sacks of straw−−"

"And all difficulties by a little thought," she interrupted, with that superb air of finality which I equally and intensely admire and detest. "Well, I'll think about it."

Yolande was not allowed to help at all in the organizing of the house−warming. An obedient execution of Chloe's orders was all that was permitted her. And when I saw the charming docility with which she carried these out, and her rigorous abstention from even the pointing of an uninvited finger at any pie of Chloe's, I confess that I was humbled and abashed, as in the presence of a soul greater than my own.

No one who has not given a party of the dimensions of ours can have the least idea of the Herculean labors involved. We all worked like galley−slaves, and on the morning before the party but little provision had been made save cakes, and the last batch of these were burned because Chloe, who had undertaken to watch their baking, had become all too deeply absorbed in the French cookery−book's recipe for soles à la Normande, a dish which we had neither the means nor the skill to prepare. She came into the hall where Yolande and I were washing the best dessert service,−−for so large a party all plates must be requisitioned,−−sank on to a chair, stuck out her feet straight before her−−an attitude recognized in our code as indicating despair−−and said:

"It's no use; you'd better send wires to put them all off. The beef is quite the wrong shape; the ham is nearly raw, I'm certain; and none of the things have come from the Stores. And now the cakes are burned!"

"Poor little King Alfred!" I said. "Never mind; we'll worry through somehow."

Do I wrong Yolande, or did a gleam of satisfaction flash through the downcast lashes of eyes ostensibly busy with dish−washing? Did she really say to herself: "I told you so! You can't organize worth a cent, either of you"?

I hope not; I almost think not. But, after all, most of us are human, and why not Yolande?

Anyhow, if any stirring of the old Adam rose at that moment in Yolande, it was fought down in an instant, and she was imploring Chloe to tell her what to do−−to let her run up to town for the Stores−things−−anything, everything, rather than that Chloe should be worried and turn her hair gray before its time.

At this, the absolutely perfect psychological moment, a shadow fell on the red and white marble from a figure approaching the front door, and a soft voice said, "Mrs. Bates."

"She doesn't live here," said Yolande, courteously. She took the word, for Chloe, on the verge of tears, sat

speechless. "She lives at the first cottage on the way to the station."

"I know," said the soft voice, betraying in its fourth word the charming accent of the dales. "I am Mrs. Bates, and your Mary was telling me you were having a party, and I thought short−handed as likely as not; if there was anything I could do−−I lived as cook before I was married−−"

The situation was saved, and it was Mrs. Bates who saved it−−or, to be more accurate, it was Mary, who had drawn Mrs. Bates to our rescue. And−−I saw it in Yolande's eyes, though perhaps it was not there−−it was really Yolande who had saved the situation, since it was she who had saved to us Mary. Even if I did see it, I dare not grudge Yolande that fleeting triumph. Before the party was over−− But let me, above all, tell my tale orderly.

For the rest of that day Mrs. Bates and Mary wrought, unaided, in the kitchen, for Chloe, in the abrupt reaction from despair, became suddenly enlightened as to a far more important matter than even food. She had nothing to wear, save yellow, which Aunt George could never abide, and pale blue, in which Uncle Bletherthwaite always remarked how washed−out she looked. So the rest of the day passed in washing, dyeing, and ironing her primrose−colored liberty silk.

The dye was pale pink, a brilliant scarlet, or a deep crimson, according to the measure of its dilution. Several minor articles were irrev− ocably ruined, and gallons of ruddy dye stood about the bath−room in pails, before the right shade of delicate pink was achieved in one of my best white silk ties. Then the primrose gown became rose−colored, and was rinsed and dried and ironed till it looked like a newly blown hollyhock blossom.

"I wish there was something more to do," Chloe said, sighing; "it does seem such a pity to waste all this lovely dye."

My cousin, an experimental chemist, had given me the dye, with the words: "The only thing is, it's such a pure, perfect color, your wife will want to dye everything in the house with it. Don't let her!"

Thus forewarned, I was firm, and I carried away the pails. Yolande followed me, begging that the dye might not be thrown away. She would find a use for it. So I put it in the tool−shed among the rakes and forks, the garden syringe, and the grass−cutter−−the only place where I could feel sure that no uncle would kick it over inadvertently, no aunt absently sit down on it.

And now it was the day of the house−warming. It was a fine day, and, acting on a sudden inspiration, Yolande and I rode over to Blackheath on our bicycles, returning laden with light, enor− mous parcels. They were colored Chinese lanterns. We hung them from the trees near the house. And then, further inspired, I tore off for more, and we strung them on wires and made the house beautiful with them. The big drawing−room, with its evergreen garlands, its little white−draped tables, sparkling with borrowed glass and silver, its bowls of radiant dahlias, its tall green glasses of Japanese anemones, its pinkshaded candles, and over all the mellow glow of the many−colored lanterns, was a picture at which our hearts beat high with pride. The sideboard groaned (it really did groan, and that in no mere commonplace metaphorical way, but honestly, because it was, in its inmost heart, only packing−cases) beneath the weight of as fine a cold supper as any aunt could wish to see, any uncle wish to eat. Chloe's pink hollyhock gown was an exquisite success. Yolande's was like a white hollyhock bloom. All was ready. The first wheels crushed the gravel of our drive. The first uncle was relieved of his great−coat by my hands, the first aunt escorted by Chloe to "take off her things." Aunts will not dispense with personal attendance in this ceremony. Gradually the hall filled. Ponderous uncles and portly aunts occupied the heavier chairs. Lean aunts and uncles stood conversing with frosty geniality. A great−uncle and a second−cousin who had not spoken for years−−a family affair about a trust and an Australian gold−mine, nothing personally discreditable to either−−sank their old feud and found out how much they still had in common, as they discussed in a wheezy undertone the extraordinary extravagance of their host and hostess−−agreeing almost cordially in the opinion that we were living in a style far, far beyond our means. Cousins of every degree enthusiastically compared notes as to the difficulty of getting to our house. Three nice nieces and a manly nephew or two offered conventional amiabilities to their elders. We had furnished and adorned the hall, and no one, we felt, could look on its marble floor and wainscoted walls without feeling himself privileged in being allowed to take part in such a pageant, so admirably staged. My aunt George objected to the wainscot as dark and out of date, and said the marble floor was cold to the feet. My uncle Reginald agreed with her, but added handsomely that beggars mustn't be choosers, and no doubt we were wise not to waste our money on carpets. Altogether, everything was going splendidly.

When the gong sounded I think it was felt to be an extravagance. I remedied this as far as I could by telling Aunt George, as I gave her my arm, that the gong was a wedding−present to Chloe. And so it was, but I bought it.

We crowded into the big drawing−room. Even Aunt George admitted that it looked very nice−−but not until I had asked her if it didn't. And then she said it would have looked better without those Christmas decorations! These were our loops and swags. I saw more than one uncle cast a glance at the foot of the sideboard as he passed, and I wondered in anguish whether the drapery had displaced itself and the naked packing−cases were disclosed to the shocked eyes of aunts. But I could not see. Yet the suspense was unbearable. Under pretext of turning down a lamp, I went to see. I must know the worst. The worst was a row−−a long row−−of gold−topped bottles.

I flashed reproachful glances at Chloe, and as I passed behind her chair, she murmured: "It's all right. Asti. The new tenant."

It seemed to me, in my agitation, to be like the new tenant's cheek, and not at all like Chloe, but this was no time for anything but the duties of a host. I returned to Aunt George, who said, "I wish to goodness you wouldn't run about so!"

Mary and Mrs. Bates waited, and the wait− ing was excellent. So was the Chianti, which was all I had intended our wine−bill to run to. But the uncles looked at the gold−topped bottles, so did some of the cousins. The aunts looked away from them. So I said: "Aunt George, we've some very fine Italian sparkling wine here−−a present. I should like you to try it."

As soon as I had said "a present," I caught my wife's shocked glance, and knew the truth; she had bought the Asti on the strength of our new tenant. But the words were out; so, in a few moments, were the corks. The avuncular condemnation of Italian vintages was almost unanimous−−but avuncular eyes sparkled, and a sort of soft current of cheerfulness passed round the room. At the round table at the other end where sat the nephews and nieces and the few young people whom we had asked to meet them, there was a low buzz of chattering and laughter. Yolande was at that table. She had insisted on it.

"Your uncle George always said," my aunt George was saying, as she held out her glass to be refilled, "that no sparkling wine was worth the drinking except−−" when a sudden rapping on the table left her with only time for a, "Well, I'm sure," before a general silence abashed her into quiet.

Uncle Bletherthwaite rose heavily in his place. He made a speech. The Fates forbid that I should render it to you. It was of a studied temperateness; it dwelt on our blessings; expressed, tepidly, the pleasure he felt in seeing us at last (he repeated "at last," and I knew he was thinking that it was eight months since he had dined with us) in our home and with our family (he looked at Yolande) gathered about us. It dwelt, and I thought at somewhat too great a length, on the good dinners he had eaten in this house in my uncle Thomas's days, and the good wine he had drunk (he looked disparagingly at the Asti); it ended by a formal hope that we and those now assembled round our board might long be spared (which I could see he didn't think likely), and with a wish that our new home might be a blessing to us. (Of course it was perfectly plain that, however much he might wish it, it appeared to him but too improbable.) He said, finally, and with a sigh, "I and your aunts and cousins and other relations, including, I am sure, those present who are not members of the family, drink to the prosperity of the Red House."

The toast was drunk in the gloomiest silence−−as to the memory of those who had fallen.

All the lights seemed to burn lower; there was an awkward pause. Chloe bit her lip and would not look at me.

Then suddenly there was another buzz from the youthful table, and our eldest nephew rose in his place.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began (adding by what was scarcely a happy after−thought, "and aunts and uncles"), "we have drunk to the old house, and now I want to call another toast−−with your kind permission," he said, catching the eye of an elderly cousin. "So fill your glasses, please−−no heel−taps−−bumpers, please! Here's to the jolliest aunt and uncle that ever were. The dearest and kindest and jolliest and best−−Aunt Chloe and Uncle Len. Long life and happiness to them! God bless them! There!"

It was his first speech, dear boy, and I think he hoped then that it might be his last. I saw his hand trembling as he lifted his glass. Then suddenly all the young people stood up; a momentary hesitation ended in the rustling rising of elder relatives, and through the rustle came the first words of the refrain, from the young table:

"For they are jolly good fellows,
For they are jolly good fellows,
Oh, they are jolly good fellows,
And so say all of us."

Before the singing was over Aunt George was leading it in her high sweet old voice, and Uncle Bletherthwaite

was thundering an irresponsible bass. I did not know where to look, and I believe Chloe nearly wept. I made some sort of speech−−I don't know how. Having one's health drunk like that is a thing that doesn't happen often−−thank goodness. So one feels it oddly.

The party "went" like wildfire after that. It was almost as delightful as if none of us had been related to each other at all. The tables were cleared, then with the help of nephews and the less frail among the cousins, cleared away bodily. Yolande sang to the guitar, and aunts nodded approval. A niece and a nephew danced a minuet, and cousins were mildly pleased. Then Yvonne and the prettiest niece danced a cachucha, and uncles were enchanted. Some one sang−−an uncle, I think; some one sniffed−−no doubt an aunt; and coffee was served at the absolutely right moment. Then shawls and hats were handed like refreshments, and we all trooped out into the garden by the moat to look at the moonlight and the Chinese lanterns, craftily lighted by Mrs. Bates while the cachucha was enchanting us. The night was warm as June. Groups of persons−−all related, yet for the moment all at peace with each other−−stood "beneath the dreaming garden trees." Chloe and I glowed with a flush of successful hospitality.

Then suddenly, sharply, the silence of the night, with its soft embroidery of talking and laughter, was shattered−−torn roughly asunder by a scream, and another scream, from the walled garden beyond the moat. Feminine cousins paled; male cousins spoke ejaculatorily of pistols; stout uncles breathed heavily of police. A few of us hastened towards the walled garden. At the door that leads to it from the moat garden we came face to face with two figures, a man and a woman, who staggered as they walked; both were in white, and both were stained on face and hands and garments with dark, ominous stains.

"Just our luck!" I murmured. "What an end to a family party!" For the light of a saffron−colored lantern showed us unmistakably that the stains were blood−red.

I flung an arm round the blood−stained woman to sustain her. And the woman was Yolande. And I heard my uncle Bletherthwaite murmur, "Well, I never!" as though he had foreseen the whole thing.

VIII. THE TENANT

A GARDEN hung with soft−tinted Chinese lanterns glowing amid gleams of green leaf−lights and deeps of black leaf−shadow; a company of aunts and uncles placated by food, drink, and the servile attentions of nephews and nieces; a silvery atmosphere of peace, shot with faint streaks of something almost approaching a modified approval; a host and hostess weary, though not wholly exhausted−−yet counting the moments till the last uncle, having consumed the ultimate whiskey, should depart in the last of the cabs−−and the rest of us−−Chloe, Yolande, and I−−should be left to look back on the party and "talk it over."

And now, on this almost pastoral stage, where uncles were all but in tune to pipe, and aunts not far from the mood when one wreathes one's crook with flowers, intrudes a harsh shriek from the darkness of the farther garden, to be fol− lowed by the unspeakably dramatic entrance of a man and a woman stained with−−well, it looked like blood, exactly.

The woman, as I have said, was Yolande; the man, whom she led familiarly, yet with a certain ferocity, by the hand, was a perfect stranger. His eyes were closed and his face was stained with crimson. It dripped still from his head and ears on to the flannels which earlier in the evening must have been pearly white.

Every aunt shuddered, every uncle winced. Uncle Bletherthwaite so far forgot himself as to mutter, "Good God!" which, in the "presence of ladies," was more from him than a good round damn might be from the lighter brethren.

The nephews and nieces crowded round, cousins drew cautiously near, and as soon as it had been inferred from my attitude in respect to Yolande that she at least was no stranger to me, the semicircle of aunts and uncles closed up about us. Uncle Reginald told me afterwards that he feared the worst just then, for none of them recognized Yolande under her new crimson disguise. As Uncle Reginald said, "They none of them knew her from Adam." He added, "By Jove! just for the moment I forgot my morals, and I was sorry for you, my boy−−I was indeed."

I do not seek to know what he meant. Chloe was very angry when I told her.

And now there was a breathless silence. It was like the scene in Kipling's His Wedded Wife.

I broke the silence. I shook Yolande, and said, I fear not too amiably, "My dear girl, what on earth is it?"

"Lend me your handkerchief," she said, irrelevantly; and, taking it, wiped scarlet dews from her brow and hands. "Oh, let me get away. And take him away and clean him, won't you? It's all got into his eyes."

She dropped the hand of the stranger, and would have fled, but Aunt George barred the way.

"After this scene we've just seen," she said, "I think it's due to your company to explain."

The flannelled man got at his handkerchief.

"Jove! it does sting," he said, rubbing at his eyes. "I can't get my eyes open. Won't somebody take me where there's a tap and put me under it?"

He had a pleasant voice, but it did not soften the aunts and uncles. Curiosity had taken the place of terror.

"Asking for taps like this," said Uncle Bletherthwaite, "is no excuse for this unwarrantable intrusion into the midst of a family gathering. This young person−−"

"A member of the family gathering," I urged.

Then Yolande detached herself from me, gave her face a final scrub, and spoke sweetly: "Oh, please don't be alarmed. There were some pails of red stuff put aside for the fruit trees, and this gentleman, who lives next door, unfortunately came in contact with them; and I had remembered the pails were there, and was just going to attend to them" ("In that dress!" said Aunt George, with a sniff), "and I brought him in to be washed. I think I myself will also wash. Good−night. I am so sorry to have alarmed you."

She passed the cordon of relations and fled, her last words a whisper to me:

"Their carriages are beginning to come. Leave Chloe to get rid of them. That man must be washed, or he'll die or be blind, or something."

So I took him to the bath−room and left him with the hot tap and the cold tap, and the hip−bath and the foot−bath and the long bath, and the hand−basin and the soap and a pile of towels, and some clothes of mine. And all seemed inadequate. I did not believe he would ever be his right color again.

Then, Heaven be praised! there were cabs and trains, and the house−warming party melted away, Aunt George protesting to the last against Yolande's explanation as a mere excuse for "goings−on," and Uncle Bletherthwaite feverishly anxious, even through the cab window, as to the nature of the crimson dressing designed for our fruit trees. At long last the last lingering cab−borne cousin left our gates, and Chloe and I turned to each other in the empty hall. A pale and cautious Yolande in a white wrapper peered down the stairs.

"Are they gone? Oh, give him lemons−−many lemons; I've got it all off my face with that. My hands are past praying for."

Our strangely introduced guest was still splashing and laughing and−−well, grumbling−−to himself over the lemons when Yolande rejoined us in the drawing−room.

"He'll be ages yet," she said. "You don't know what it is to get off. And he's simply soaked through and through."

"Yolande," I said, sternly, "I have borne enough; this ensanguined masquerade requires, as Uncle Bletherthwaite says, some explanation more convincing−−"

"Oh, bother!" she cried. "I am a dog, and an outcast, and an abject idiot−−and I'll tell you everything." She fell a dejected heap into the easy−chair where Aunt George had sat so upright during the minuet and the cachucha. "I know you'll scorn me forever. But 'a fault that's owned is half atoned,' and I'll own my fault. It was only my only and always fault−−I have but the one, you know−−being too jolly clever by half. I'll never try to do anything again."

"Tell us quickly, before he gets clean," Chloe pleaded. "Who is he? What was it? How did it happen? Quick−−before he bursts upon us with his clean face."

"There's no hurry," said Yolande, gloomily, twisting her reddened fingers tightly together. "You needn't be afraid of seeing his face clean yet awhile. Well, when you talked about the fruit−thief, I thought to myself, if one could only mark the thief thoroughly, it would be as good as catching him, because you could wire to all the police stations, 'Lost, Stolen, or Strayed, a Pink−spotted Fruit−stealer!' I thought I was quite clever, and really I was a mere lunatic."

I had never seen Yolande so near tears.

"It was a good idea," said Chloe, perfunctorily sympathetic; "and so you took that pink dye−−"

"Yes. I hid two pails of it, one among the currant−bushes and one under the quince−tree. And then when we were in the garden I saw a flash, and I knew some one had struck a match−−to see where the peaches were, I thought. Really, of course, it must have been this wretched man lighting his hateful pipe. So I stole away, and I got the big brass garden syringe."

"It was a good idea," said Chloe, with more conviction. "Well?"

"Well−−oh, then I stalked him; and even when I was close to him I never knew he was just a human being in flannels. I thought he was playing ghost, and I said to myself, 'All the better to mark you on, my friend!' Oh, it was funny." She began to laugh shakily. "There was I creeping along with my syringe full charged, and the pail in my other hand−−held well out, because of my gown−−and he, poor soul, sauntering along in the shadows of the nut−walk, thinking nothing less than that some one was advancing with his pink doom. When he was a couple of yards off I fired a volley−−slap in his face−−and turned to run. He swore−−but I forgive him that. My pail caught in a bough, and went over his feet, for he jumped towards the noise; he is not a coward. He caught hold of my dress, in the dark (he's torn a yard out at the gathers, but it doesn't matter; the dress was ruined anyway), and as soon as I had heard his voice, even though it was swearing−−I knew what I'd done, and I said: 'It's all a mistake. I'm Yolande Riseborough. Can't you see?' for he was staggering about. And then I saw he couldn't, and I said: 'Come and be cleaned. Give me your hand.' And so I brought him in, and on the way we tumbled over the other pail. And nous voici−−"

"You know him, then?"

"Know him? Any one would have known him, when it was too late. Oh, my broken heart! What will you do to me when you know? He'll never stay−−"

"If you play at sphinxes another moment I shall slap you. Who is it?"

"It's your new tenant. That's all," said Yolande, with what is termed the calmness of despair. "You know, permission to walk in the garden was given as one of the extra attractions of the cottage. I'll never try to be clever again. I got you the tenant−−cotton−broking lineage, and Coutts's bank, and all−−and now I've squirted him with

red dye out of a brass garden syringe, and he will never forgive it; and I wish I was dead."

One on each side of her, we were doing our best to console, when the bath−room door opened. We heard it. I flew into the corridor, pushed by four fair hands. I intercepted my partially washed tenant. I made him a speech of manly apology. Important as his tenancy was to me, I did not, even then, grovel before him. I was getting on fairly well with the speech when my tenant began to laugh−−one of the jolliest laughs I ever heard. And from the drawing−room Chloe's laugh and Yolande's joined in it. So that in a few moments I had presented my tenant to my wife, and we were all talking at once, explaining and expounding, while I struggled with the wire of the last but two of the bottles of Asti.

My tenant was young; Chloe considered him handsome. He certainly had a well−shaped head and extremely merry blue eyes. He was at home with us at once. Stiffness of demeanor is difficult to maintain in the immediate sequence of events such as had introduced us.

Three courses were open to him, as Mr. Gladstone used to say. He might have stormed, raged, threatened, and retired; he might have retired, frigidly polite; in either case following up the retirement by a notice of the termination of the tenancy. Or he might have laughed and made the best of it, and of us. This he had done. I liked the man, and I almost forgave him for being able to play the guitar−−a most effeminate accomplishment, and one I never could acquire, for all Chloe's teaching−−when I heard that he had learned it in the Philippines during the war. I detest and distrust sudden intimacies, but it was impossible to treat this man as a stranger. By dyeing−−or being accessory to the dyeing of−−a new acquaintance crimson, you skip a hundred mile−stones on the road to friendship. But it might be a hazardous experiment. Anyway, it was not till the small hours were growing out of all knowledge, and beginning to take notice, that we parted from our tenant. A second, and much better, supper had risen for us, phoenix−like, from the ashes of the first; we had sung songs, told travellers' tales, made jokes, and when at last I saw the injured tenant to his door there were hints of gray in the east.

When I came back, Chloe and Yolande, candle−bearing, had paused on the stairs for a last word.

"He's wonderful," I said. "The right sort."

"One of our kind−−yes," said Chloe; "some people are, don't you know, and some aren't; quite nice people, too, sometimes, curiously enough. And people who aren't very clever are, now and then. Besides that, he's charming−−isn't he, Yolande?"

Yolande stifled a yawn, and said she supposed he was all right.

"What a night of adventures for us!" I said, "and, oh, my only hat! what a night for him!"

"He may think himself lucky," said Yolande. "How angel−good you were to him, Chloe! Goodnight."

"Do you think it was a success−−the real party?" asked Chloe, anxiously. "They couldn't believe that about the fruit and the dye."

"It was true," said Yolande, "so I suppose they couldn't. Oh yes, it's all right; give them something to talk about for months. It was a splendid party, Chloe, though I didn't have anything to do with it. I'll never put my finger into any one else's pie again!"

She held up her pink−dyed fingers with a rather rueful laugh.

"Oh yes, you will," I said, "for the pie's our good! You see, this was such a very pink pie−−and, besides, it was just that sort of an unimportant detail that doesn't suit your genius. But it's taught−−"

"Taught me a lesson? Yes, rub it in!"

"No; it's taught us our tenant. I think he's worth learning. I'm glad we know him. Goodnight."

So ended our house−warming.

It was an extravagant entertainment, but the thought of the new tenant's rent upheld us through the gloomy work of paying the bills; and the price for my stories, as for Chloe's pictures, was rising steadily. I now had only to begin a story, and, if Yolande were staying with us, it found itself finished, and finished well, without my help. And I could not disguise from myself that my stories met now with a reception far more flattering than ever awaited them in the old days. My articles I was still allowed to write on "my own unaided hook," and I rejoiced in this till the editor of the Weekly Wilderness sent me an amiable letter congratulating me on the style of certain tales which he had had the pleasure of reading in the magazines and weeklies, over my signature, and suggesting that my articles would be none the worse for a little of the "pathetic sort of thing" as well as the "light ironic touch" which he had noticed in the stories. Then I showed Chloe the letter, and said several things. Among others I swore that I would not be interfered with any more in my work.

"I know she means it kindly," I said. "I know it's done entirely to serve us and help us, and it's most kind and charitable, and I simply won't stand it. I'm not going to go on being complimented on other people's work."

Chloe was turning over the pages of the paper in which the last but three of these stories had appeared. "But they're good, aren't they−−rather good, I mean?" said she.

"They're so beastly good," said I, "that I won't put my name to another of them. If it weren't that the whole business sounds so silly, I'd tell every single editor to−morrow, and advertise the facts in the Times as well."

Chloe had grown quite pale.

"Oh, Len, don't!" she said; "the ghost only wants to help."

"Yolande−−"

"Yolande will be off to Italy quite soon now, with her horrid pupils. Len, dear, to please me, don't make any more fuss. You don't know how unhappy it makes me. Wait till she's gone. Perhaps the ghost won't write any more, now it knows you don't like it."

"You mean you'll tell her to drop it?" said I. "What must she think of me for letting it go on so long? Well, my mind's made up now; I'll speak to Yolande myself−−"

"No, no, no! Dear Len, don't. I'm sure the ghost won't write any more. And I can't think why you mind. Yes−−I see you do−−and−−But I'm quite pleased when the ghost touches up my drawings, or even when it does them for me altogether. Dear ghost! Len, it doesn't matter which of us does the work." Her voice was very small, and broken, and I felt a brute.

"It wouldn't matter which of us did the work, my pussy−kitten," I said, "but Yolande's not one of us. She's our land−agent and our registry−office, as it is, and that ought to be enough even for her. If you don't speak to her, I shall."

"Then I will," said she, turning away. "Go on with your work. I'm certain no nasty ghost will come and interfere any more."

Still raging, I sat down to the type−writer and snapped off a letter to my Weekly Wilderness editor. Then of course I went to look for Chloe. I found her crouched among the blue and green cushions on the faded green divan in the loafery, and I stayed there with her head on my shoulder till she had consented to be completely comforted. I told her that I "did not mean to be cross," and when I had said it many times she believed it, and so did I, though it was not at all true.

After that no ghost ever laid finger on my type−writer, and I worked at it harder than ever. And my stories were not nearly so good as the ghost−ridden ones. But my drawings grew better and better, as I did more and more of them−−all of which Chloe signed and sent off with a cheerful gratitude, perhaps a little too pronounced, and designed, I knew, to show me that she wasn't too proud to accept help from a ghost−−or a friend.

The humiliation which stung me every time I thought of my indebtedness to a writer more expert than I drove me to this curious retaliation in Fate−−or Chloe−−or Yolande−−or the ghost. Since Chloe could bear that my work should be supplemented and improved by another hand−−a hand neither hers nor mine−−it pleased me mightily to reflect that no hand but mine had ever tampered with her work, and that she did not know to whom belonged the hand whose help she accepted so lightly. I hugged myself in the knowledge that it was mine, mine, mine. An order to illustrate a child's book had thrilled her with delight. She has a pretty fancy. She can see pictures−−but she cannot draw them. It was on her sketches that I always worked; and I worked hard to finish that child's book before Yolande should take flight for Italy. I found it hard to conceal from Yolande my growing irritation at the ghost's part in my stories−−an irritation doubled, of course, by vexation at the weakness of my former acquiescence. It was hard to keep the word I had pledged to Chloe, hard not to have it out with Yolande. There would, I think, have been a constraint strong enough to force on a crisis of explanations but for our new tenant. He distracted us.

He called on us; he invited us to tea; he sent us tickets for the theatres. When I saw him strolling among the green of our garden−−for he spent most of the time there that he could snatch from his newspaper−office−−I sometimes hated to think that our garden was no longer only our own; but he was discreet. If Chloe and I set foot in the garden, he disappeared, as swiftly as though our weed−grown walks had been a wishing−carpet. But when Yolande walked alone in the garden he sometimes joined her. Of course to her the garden was merely a green space to walk in. To us−−and I liked our tenant for perceiving this−−the garden was something far other and far more. He dined with us−−on a bottled−beer footing−−more than once, and more than once we and Yolande dined

with him at his cottage. On the first of these times Chloe and I could not help exchanging glances when we saw how the soft yellow of our tenant's sitting−room wall−paper suited his black−framed etchings and mezzotints. Yolande surprised the glance, and it betrayed us to her. She taxed us roundly with the crime, later on, as we sat sipping cocoa round the kitchen fire at home.

"When will you learn wisdom?" she sighed. "You know you papered that cottage yourselves."

We owned it shamefacedly.

"Are there no poor paper−hangers out of work? I ask more in sorrow than in anger. Are there no painters in Elmhurst?"

Here Chloe plucked up a spirit and said we enjoyed doing it.

"The old defence−−which is none," said Yolande, setting down her cup on the broad fender. "How many glorious golden guineas could you two have turned at your own trades in the time it took you to do that house? Oh yes, I saw the exquisite way you'd made the patterns match, and how delicately you'd negotiated all those difficult odd corners. You are incorrigible!"

"It comes of property," I said. "Our property is exigent. We love it, and it presumes on our affection and makes us do things for it. It's like doing things for one's own child. Mothers like to wash and dress their own babies, and they don't think it waste of time to spend hours over it−−even if they might be earning money instead and keeping whole armies of competent professional nurses. Now your property−−"

"Yes, I know," Yolande interrupted; "my property's in consols−−what there is of it−−and I love it for itself alone. It has no sentimental claims. Don't throw it up at me. But even if I had a house and a garden and cottages and all the rest of it−−"

"If you had a husband," said Chloe, looking up suddenly from the red heart of the fire at which she had been blinking, "wouldn't you like to sew on his buttons and mend his socks?"

"Never," cried Yolande, with energy. "You can get them done for a penny a pair, and men ought to sew on their own buttons−−"

We laughed.

"He may divert his energies so far?"

"Yes; it's good for a man, because he never does it−−or he never does it because it's good for him."

"Pardon me," I said, firmly. "I myself−−"

"Oh, you!" she said; "but I am sleepy and stupid, and I shall never be married and sit over my own kitchen fire. Good−night, Cinderella."

"Good−night, Fairy Godmother," said Chloe.

I handed Yolande her brass candlestick and went back to my wife and my own fireside. When we had sat silent for a little, listening to the slow ticking of the tall clock, Chloe said, still blinking at the fire:

"That was quite true−−what you said about doing things for your own−−"

"Yes," I said, "I know it was."

"How can people let nurses do everything for their babies?"

"Yes," I said again, "how can they?"

Her cheek was against my shoulder by this time and my face against her hair. So we sat silent another space. Then suddenly she lifted her head and said, "Len, if she ever is married, she'll be just as silly as other people."

"Probably," said I.

"I wonder if our tenant−−"

"Of course he admires her. We all do−−"

"Yes, but−−"

"It's absurd," I said, with some heat, for which I can give no reason; "she hardly knows him at all."

"That doesn't matter," said my wife. "Have you forgotten−−"

I had not forgotten. It is a joy to both of us still to remember how few times we had met before we knew, quite surely and without mistake, and so ran into each other's arms in the safe confidence and knowledge that there, for each, was the only possible home.

"But other people are different," I said, after a while.

"Not all of them−−and not so very," said Chloe. "And I think he likes her."

"Nonsense!" I said; "and, besides, he's not half good enough for her."

"I knew you'd say that," she cried, jumping up. "No, I'm not going to sit on your knee another moment." She busied herself in lighting our candle. "I knew you'd say that. Isn't it odd? Women are so glad to think of their friends being perhaps going to be happy. But men always feel injured at the mere idea that a girl they like might marry some one else. Dogs in the manger!"

"It's not the polygamous instinct at all, my pussy−kitten," I said. "It's only that women believe in marriage, and men don't."

"Don't they?" said she. "Don't you?"

"But our marriage isn't at all like other marriages. Now, is it?"

"Isn't it? Oh, I hope it is! I shouldn't like to think ours was the only proper marriage. It can't be, of course. There must be heaps of people as fond of each other as we are. Don't you think so? And quite as happy."

"Do you think so?" She had lighted the candle and was standing looking at me as I took off my boots. I stood up in my stockinged feet and put my arm round her. "Do you?" I asked again.

"No," she said, beginning to smile and blinking softly at me, "honestly, I'm afraid I don't."

"And I don't, either," said I.

IX. MANLY SPORTS

I HAVE been writing like a man milliner. I have found no manly tale to set forth−−only a record of domesticity almost florid in its decorative detail. Let the accomplished specialist in obscure psychology seek, and find if he can, the reason. For me, let me only say that had Chloe written it the tale had been far otherwise. Chloe would have dwelt, at strenuous length, on my encounter with the coal−man who refused to carry sacks down our cellar stairs. Had he contented himself with a courteous refusal, my sympathies, I own, would have been with him, for the stairs are mediæval in their uncompromising inconvenience, their gratuitous dangerousness.

But the coal−man did not stop at that, and when I came on the scene Chloe, with tears of pure rage in her eyes, and in the low, sweet voice that is always lowest and sweetest when she is most furious, was ordering him out. And he was explaining, in detail, what he would be if he would go before he was ready. So I turned him out. Chloe would have made an epic of this.

I suppose cutting down dead trees is manly work, and I certainly did that. Also I sawed them into lengths proportioned to the wood−basket. But Chloe always sat on the bough to keep it steady, so sawing cannot count as mere man's work. Rabbit−catching sounds manly enough, but Chloe was in that too, more or less. The incident which led to the rabbiting was, however, my show entirely, and I confess to a certain pride in it. My presence of mind, as well as my dramatic ability, was called into play, and I was pleased with myself on both counts.

I was wandering in the orchard at dusk one evening, pushing through the long grass and nettles, and trying to fix in my memory the way of the growing of apple−boughs for the ghost's next illustration. The mists of October drifted like wraiths among the trees, and the scent of wet earth had mingled with itself the perfume of sadness and regret and memory. In spring the wet earth smells of hope and joy and the green future. I had stood in contemplation for some moments before the golden−pippin tree, and was really beginning to know its gnarled face by heart, when I heard a scratch and a squeak, and a voice said, "Got 'im!"

I moved cautiously round my tree. In the open space beyond the orchard the wild rabbits have made their burrows, and here, grouped round one of the rabbit−holes, were two men, three dogs, a boy, and several ferrets−−the last in bags.

I was still unseen. I reflected. If I called on these rabbit−thieves to surrender, they would probably decline to do so on any terms. Indeed, why should they? There were six of them, not counting the ferrets, and I was only one. That was the point. If I had only been three−−or even two! Could I not be two, or even three? How could it be done? Arithmetic is a difficult branch of science. I reflected again. The men had killed the rabbit, replaced the net over the hole, and resumed their several stations at the mouths of other burrows. The dusk was falling fast. I crept away for a dozen yards. Then, assuming the gruffest voice at my command, and rolling my r's to the highest pitch, I cried out: "George! Fred! Dick!" and faintly answering in a tone I hoped would seem to come from a distance, I voiced a couple of shrill, "Yes, sirs"; then with my stick I beat madly on the underbushes and, rushing forward, shouted in the voice of my uncle's old Scotch gardener:

"Heck, lads; forrard wi' ye! We've gotten the rogues the noo!"

Had one of the rogues been a Scot−−but, no, all were good Deptford−bred ruffians. As I neared them, shouting, "Come on, my lads−−come on!" my rogues fled incontinently, followed by their boy and their dogs, leaving to me, as prize, fifteen rabbit−nets, five ferrets in bags, and one in a burrow. This last came out presently, creeping like a yellow snake, and looking round with bright eyes and ever−moving head for his master. I captured him, collected the nets and the bagged ferrets, and went back, chuckling, to Chloe. A well−worn trick, but a good one−−a relic of the old smuggling days, a preventive−officer's stratagem. I deserve no credit for it, but I do think I did the voices well.

This is all by way of prelude to our rabbiting. We housed our ferrets in the stable and hung the nets in the kitchen. And it was Jim who suggested, one Saturday afternoon when the October sun was burnishing the coppery leaves of our beeches, and gilding the little quivering hearts that hang from the silver birch, that we should "have some sport." Bates was invited to join; this seemed, as Yolande said, only his due as a professional ferret. Our tenant came with him. Yolande declined to join the glad throng.

"I think it's cruel," she said, shortly.

"But you eat rabbit−pie," objected Chloe.

"Yes, and I eat mutton chops. But I'm not a butcher."

"It's very exciting sport," said our tenant. "And we shall probably catch nothing."

"Then doesn't that make your sport silly in fact as well as cruel in aspiration?"

"Do come!" he said. "You can sit in your favorite apple−tree with a volume of moral stories, and cheer us on by your presence and your disapprobation."

So Yolande established herself in the low, forked bough of the apple−tree with a volume of Ruskin. "As near to moral stories as I can get," she told our tenant. But she sat with her pretty back towards the scene of our sport, and refused even to turn her head and look at us.

Chloe, in spite of my warnings, was eagerly anxious to help. She was more deft than any of us in staking the nets over the holes, and she handled the ferrets lovingly, because they loved her, and that was because she always fed them.

We had no dogs and no guns, and I felt guiltily unsportsmanlike. At last all was ready; each of us crouched by his appointed rabbit−hole. I put in the handsomest ferret; he disappeared, and we waited results in silence. Now and then we bent our heads to listen in quite a professional manner, as though we had been real poachers, for some sound of what might be happening underground. And nothing whatever seemed to be happening. We grew cramped, and changed our positions. Yolande heard the movement and called out, with insolent triumph, "Any sport?" Indignantly we all said, "Hush!" and the weary work of listening began again. Then, suddenly, just as hope had died in every breast, there was a rustle underground, a scamper−rush, a piteous little scream of horror and fear, and a small, fat gray rabbit bolted out of the earth into the net over the hole where Chloe watched. She had it in her arms in an instant. Its feet were caught in the net, but as she held it it ceased to struggle, and lay paralyzed against her bodice.

"Let me kill it, mum," said Bates.

"Or would you like to, mum?" asked Jim, kindly. "It was your rabbit, so it was! You just hold it up by the ears like this, and hit it a crack 'longside o' the head with the edge of your hand−−so−−"

But Chloe had fled, still clasping the rabbit, and leaving us to look helplessly at each other.

"Ladies are no good at sport," said Bates, philosophically. "It's their tender hearts, bless them−−"

"Missus 'll let it loose in the garden, I shouldn't wonder," said Jim, in gloom.

"Better luck next time," said the tenant, cheerfully.

I left them to recover the ferret and arrange another siege. I found Chloe by the white−parlor fire stroking the rabbit, as it lay panting and wretched on her knee.

"Well, spoil−sport?" I said.

"Oh, Len, how could you−−how could you let me? You knew what it would be like! Oh, did you hear it scream? It was like a little, little baby that some one was hurting! Don't go back to them. Promise me you'll never, never, never hunt rabbits again!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I told you you wouldn't like it," I said.

"I know, but you ought to have beaten me and locked me up, rather than let me go! I didn't know, poor, poor little rabbity! I didn't know!"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Keep it, of course," she said, opening her eyes.

"Wouldn't it be happier if we let it loose again in the orchard?"

"For some other ferret to go after? Never! Fancy running for your life with a long, crawling horror coming after you in the black dark, all cruel teeth and claws, and just when you think you are safe, and see the safe, green, light world outside where you can run and hide, you rush into a net and get beaten to death! You must give away the ferrets! You must! I won't bear it!"

I shrugged my shoulders again. "Anyway," I said, "the rabbit is slowly dying of fright in your arms. He doesn't know when he is well off."

I got a basket and some cabbage leaves. We shut in the rabbit and watched him through the cracks of the basket till we saw him recover enough to nibble.

"Now," she said, "if you care the least bit about me you'll go straight back to those hateful people and tell

them to stop. Yolande was quite right. She nearly always is."

I admitted that in this case Yolande had chosen the better part.

"And don't bring those hateful ferrets back. I don't want ever to see them again."

"But what am I to do with them?"

"I don't care," said Chloe, with almost a sob; "anything−−give them away, drown them, strangle them."

"Oh, Chloe! Chloe!" I said, "your own little ferrets that have eaten out of your hand and climbed round your neck? Drown them? Strangle them? Never! I will advertise them in the Bazar and Mart in exchange for goldfish or anything useful, and Bates shall keep them till I find a purchaser."

"All right," she said, impatiently, "only go now. Go! Or they'll have killed another."

They had killed three. The soft, fluffy bodies lay side by side on the brown turf, and even as I came upon the scene there was a rustle and a scream−−I thought of Chloe, and I hated to hear it−−and next moment Yolande−−yes, Yolande herself−−rose from beside the hole with a live rabbit struggling in her hands among meshes of net.

"Here," she said, gently disengaging its helpless little feet from the netting and holding it tip tenderly by the ears, "you kill it, Jim. I think you do it quicker than the others. And that makes four." She turned her back on the executioner and met my eyes.

"Yolande," I cried, "this cruel sport−−"

"It's not really cruel," she protested, "and it's very exciting. I'd rather die like that myself than die slowly of starvation when I got too old to go out after my food. That's the end of wild animals, you know, if we don't eat them. Isn't it?" She appealed almost abjectly from me to the tenant, who said, "That's so!" And I knew she was rehearsing those arguments by which he had drawn her down from her apple−tree to share in the sport.

"I'm very sorry," I said, "but the sport is now over. My wife decrees a reprieve to the rabbits, and banishes the ferrets. Bates, I wish you'd cart them off and get rid of them somehow."

The sporting party exchanged blank glances. Yolande's was the only comment.

"Well!" she said.

Jim and Bates collected the ferrets in a silence full, I knew, of disparaging reflections on woman's folly.

Yolande and the tenant stood a moment talking before they strolled off together, and I heard him asking her why she should not ride out on her bicycle with him to see some coursing−−only a thirty−mile ride.

"But I don't think I do approve of it, really," she was saying, "not when I'm cool and collected and in my right mind−−"

"But you will not be cool and collected when you see the first hare get up. You will be wild with excitement. You'll forget everything else."

"I don't know that I want to."

"Yes, you do; you don't want to cultivate nerves. If you don't like sport−−well, it's simple enough, and half the best women there are don't, either. If you do like it−−well, you do, and so do the other half of the best women in the world. That's all there is to it. And you do like sport. Look here, if I could get a man to take on my work for Tuesday, we could start early, say about nine. Do say you will."

I did not hear what she said, for they had strolled off down the path that leads to the moat, and when next I saw them they were engineering the leaky punt under the middle arch of the old bridge. Yolande in her blue cloth and fox fur was standing in an inch and a half of water, and hanging on to a muddy punt−pole; the tenant was instructing her.

Yolande! I shrugged my shoulders for the third time that day, and I went in to my wife. She was sitting by the fire in the beech−wood rocking−chair, singing low to herself; the song sounded like "Bye, baby bunting." I suppose the rabbit put it into her head.

I never regretted that rabbit. In three days it was perfectly tame; in a week it played with the cats and sat up on the hearth−rug, unconcernedly washing its face. At the end of a fortnight it flopped after Chloe, in and out, up−stairs and down−stairs, like a small and very plump kangaroo. When the cats grew too catty in their play the rabbit would turn round and use his deadly hind foot. They presently learned to respect this, and the rabbit was master of the hearth−rug.

Yolande went to see that coursing, I believe, though she never spoke to Chloe of it. And she listened to tales of tigers from the tenant−−more tales, and less convincing, than I should have thought any Girton girl could have

borne. She also learned to take rose−cuttings, and did it without gloves. I looked on in a frenzy of annoyance, which I hid, even−−indeed, most of all−−from Chloe. The tenant is a man of ideas−−but I never heard him talk anything but the visible−−concrete to Yolande. I felt a horrid suspicion that he thought her a bit of a prig, and that he was actually daring to try to "form her"; the audacity took my breath away. But Yolande was placid, and seemed to breathe without effort.

Mindful of that scorned suggestion of my wife's on the night of the first dinner−party at the cottage, I looked straight before me and cultivated an air of seeing nothing. I sometimes wondered whether Yolande imagined that we did not see anything, or whether she knew we saw anything, and did not care, or whether she really believed that there was nothing to see. She had arranged, as usual, to personally conduct three model young persons on a winter tour through the art treasures of Italy, and her going was fixed for the week after Christmas. She had some private pupils, and went up to struggle with them two or three times a week, but for the most part she was with us. And I was glad to have her−−first, because she is ever a sight for sore eyes, and secondly, because I began to see that I did not want either to give up my ghost−fathered pencil−work, nor yet, for some obscure reason which I can't even indicate, to confess to Chloe that it was not Yolande, but I, who had tinkered her drawings. My own work, my writing, grew less and less important to me−−only the Weekly Wilderness still commanding the service of habit.

The curious change whose initial throes I had felt when first we came to the Red House had worked in Chloe and in me, till now, while the house was usually tidy to distraction, Chloe's wardrobes and chests were in the wildest confusion.

"I know," she said one day, when I opened a drawer and silently confronted her with a swollen mass of lace, ribbons, handkerchiefs, scarfs, bead necklaces, letters, collars, wristbands, brass− headed nails, and the long−lost hammer, all inextricably tangled up with the ball of twine I had been looking for−−"I know. You see, it is so important to keep the house tidy−−and I do tidy up."

"You do, indeed," I said, fishing up from the bottom of the drawer the penknife that I had missed since last Tuesday week.

"Oh, I am so sorry. But I do forget so where things are."

"Now, I don't. I never tidy up, but I always know where to find my pencils, and I'm never in any doubt as to where I put the India rubber."

"What do you want with India rubber, anyhow?" she asked, and I trembled for my secret.

"I meant that you are," I said, feebly.

"Perhaps," she said, "if you would tidy up a little sometimes, I could keep the insides of things tidier. Let's have a grand clearing up now, this instant minute, and then I really will try! I must learn to be tidy, Len, before I'm too old to learn anything."

We did have a grand clearing up, beginning with that corner drawer. When all was neat−−the scarfs folded, the ribbons rolled, the handkerchiefs restored to the historic handkerchief−case−−I tried the other drawer. It was locked.

"Oh, that's tidy," she hastily assured me.

"What's in it?" I asked, idly.

"Oh, nothing much−−only little things. I'll show you some day when we've nothing to do but to be kind to each other. Now we'll go and clear out the sideboard cupboards and all the rest of it."

We did. We found many things−−the lost corkscrew and the button−hook and the Nineteenth Centuries that were missing. It took us all day, and when it was done there was a place for nearly everything, and everything that had a place was in it. The residue loomed hateful on a tray in the hall−−odd stoppers, screws, knobs, handles of knives, curtain rings−−all the litter that has no place and that one cannot bear to throw away. We looked at it in despair. Then I caught up the tray.

"Come, light of my eyes," I cried, exulting; "there is only one thing that we need−−a lumber−room.

We toiled joyously to the top of the house, I with the tray and Chloe with the little copper coal−scuttle whose broken handle we meant to get mended when we could afford it. We chose a fair−sized room, out of the many disused ones, opened the shutters, and dumped down our treasures on the floor. Our old tendency to furnish one room at the expense of another came irre− sistibly upon us, and we ransacked the house, carrying off to the lumber−room everything we could possibly not want. The house looked very bare when we had done, and for

weeks I found myself toiling up those stairs in search of some necessary for one of us which the other had confiscated as "rubbish"−−but we certainly had a most impressive lumber−room.

"And now," said my wife, looking round with pride, "clearing up will be simply a pleasure."

Yolande was severe as ever when she came back from watching a foot−ball match at the Rectory Field, and found us, very dirty and very happy, resting on the stairs.

"Dear Babes in the Wood," she said, "did they invent a new, pretty game to waste their time on?"

"I'd rather waste my time at a game I can play than one I can only look on at," said I, severely. "Sit down; there are plenty of stairs."

"Thank you. As to games, c'est selon," she said, unfastening her furs. "By−the−way, before I go to southern climes I should like to render an account of my stewardship. I'll write it down. Give me a pencil, somebody, and the back of an envelope."

She wrote busily for some time, then hand− ed the paper to Chloe, who took it in her little grimy hand and read aloud:

"SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF AN AMATEUR AGENT "1. Getting one good servant to keep her situation by letting her keep her husband in it. "2. Letting cottage to ferret at £15 a year. "3. Getting the Prosser rat turned out. "4. Letting other cottage for £35. "5. Dyeing fruit−thief (a failure). "6. Letting garden and orchard to market gardener for £20 a year and as much fruit and vegetables as you require.

"Yolande, you never have!"

She rose and bowed. "Go on," she said; and Chloe, merely pausing to embrace her, went on:

"7. Letting small cottage to foreman of market gardener for £17 a year.

"Oh, Yolande, this is too much! You really are a genius! And only one failure."

"And that was half a success," said I. "Oh, Yolande, what a glorious baking of beautiful pies! And yet you said you would never have a finger in any pie again."

"I can't help it," she pleaded. "I was born to it. Give me another envelope−−no, not one with so many post−marks−−and I'll make a brief financial statement."

She scribbled again. This is what she wrote: By 1 ferret's rent £15 " 1 large cottage rent 35 " 1 small " " 17 " 1 garden 20 " 1 uncle deceased 200 Stories, output and price estimated on past 6 months 160 Illustrations on past 3 months 187 Total £634

"There's your yearly income! How's that for high?" she asked, flashing a glance of triumph at us.

We had known well enough that our income was increasing, that we no longer had, as Chloe said, to look all round every shilling. We had told Yolande, gleefully, the amount of every check we had received. But we had kept no accounts. She had.

We all three fell into each other's arms, or something very like it.

"You shall have that book of Beardsley drawings for a Christmas present, Len," said my wife, "and Yolande shall have a gold horseshoe brooch with turkisses in it, as becomes a sporting lady."

"It wouldn't become a bailiff and house agent," said Yolande.

"Never mind. You shall have a bangle with a double dangling heart−−ours−−and an inscription inside that would get you a situation anywhere. And Chloe shall have−−" I stopped.

"What, Len?"

"A very beautiful present, indeed. Something we never thought we'd have. No, I won't tell you. It's going to be a surprise."

Yolande had taken off her veil, folded it very carefully, and driven three little turquoise−headed pins through it. Now she said, "I'm beginning to think that surprises are the best things in life−−especially when one surprises one's self."

"Have you surprised yourself lately?" Chloe asked, picking up the rabbit by its ears. It had followed her, as usual.

"Very much." I held my breath. The very cigarette trembled in my dusty fingers. Could it be that already that tenant had taught Yolande to be surprised at herself? A sigh of relief broke from me as she went on: "I am absolutely astounded−−and charmed too, of course−−at my own cleverness. But all this is a swan−song. I shall have my finger in no more pies−−for good or ill. My career of usefulness is at an end. Henceforth I shall be a female fogy; never a pie shall be the worse nor the better for me. I shall cram young geese. No more and no less.

Mark my words, I have gone up like the rocket, and like the stick I shall come down−−if I have not already." She took off her hat, and twisted the blue velvet and fur in her hands. "Mine is indeed a dark and terrible lot!" she said, smiling brilliantly at us. Then without more words she withdrew.

Chloe sighed, not sadly: "Poor, dear Yolande! I do really believe she doesn't know what is the matter with her."

"And what is?" I ventured.

"Make your own diagnosis."

"Yours is?"

Silence.

"What is the matter with her?"

"Oh, nothing! Len."

"Well?"

"I think I'm glad."

"What of?"

"About her."

"What about her?"

"Oh, don't be tiresome!"

"What, do words fail you in a crisis? Mine are at flood."

"No, don't! You know what I mean."

"I understand you to mean that you rejoice to see Othello's occupation gone. You are glad that your friend has renounced her dearest pastime and will finger her neighbors' pies no more."

"Dog in the manger!" said my wife.

"No," I said, eagerly. "I'm almost sure that I'm not quite sorry."

"For what?"

"For her."

"Why should you be?"

"Because I see," I answered, slowly, "what you mean me to see−−whether she knows it or not, she'll soon be baking her own pies."

"Yes," said Chloe; "she'll understand then."

"Yes," said I; "one understands many things when one bakes at home."

X. THE INVADERS

"UGH−R−R−R!" I remarked, as we sat down to breakfast.

"I suppose it is," said Chloe, pretending to shiver. "The Bandbox was warmer, certainly, but not much. Why do people make so much fuss about being too cold and too hot? Isn't it odd that they've never found out the great truth−−that one has to be cold in the winter and hot in the summer? And if one has to be cold, how much warmer it is to be cold here than in the Bandbox!"

"You mean that great possessions warm the cockles o your heart," I said; "that's because you're all soul. As for me, I must warm my hands in the tea−cozy before I can carve the eggs."

The white parlor, with its dark−panelled walls, its olive−green curtains, its sparkling brass and silver, and nothing white about it save the ceil− ing and the table−cloth, was a delightful picture of a breakfast−room. Chloe's loose gown of turquoise−colored soft stuff with its brown furry trimmings became her to distraction. I told her so.

"But the tip of your pretty nose is pink," I said. "It was quite white−−with rage, I believe−−the day you bit me so about my shaving−brush. Do you remember? And then the letter came enclosing the Red House and all our affluence! You had on some muslin thing that day−−"

She shivered, almost in earnest this time, and poured out the coffee.

"Don't talk of muslin!" she said. "Look, isn't it fairyland? Only it's a little hard to believe that our green garden has only gone to sleep, and means to wake up again in the spring."

A light veil of snow lay on our green garden now, and on the thatched roof of the old summer−house and on the sun−dial's face, whose sentimental expression had decided my wife to decide me to decide to live at the Red House. The snow lay in sheets, like cotton−wool, on the flat tops of the cedars; and the ivy round the windows, the creepers on the old arches, and the leaves of the tall box hedge were all outlined in sparkling white.

"It is a little different," I said; "that day, when you wore−−well, I won't, then−−and we had haddock for breakfast, and the letter came. By−the−way, my hands are warm enough to open letters now."

There were only two. One was a bill for repairs to the roof−−the roof, now spread with snow, where one warm, wet morning we had fought a flood with brooms and a dust−pan; a bill that did not discompose me, for I was used to that roof. No living plumber could make its repairs permanent. The other letter was type−written, and that by a somewhat inexperienced hand. It read thus:

Junior Blackheath Society of Antiquaries &Field Club. Dear Sir

At a Meeting of the Committe of thes dg Society it wasagreedt that a field day should.) be held on Dec 20 when the Society proposis to visit the interesting church of (x) Elmhurst andalsotheold Palace they call Kin (gons)Johns. Our president MrAlbert Morris F;J.B,S! has ob and so have the rest of us. tained permission to fo out on that day/ We venture to ask whether you would allowthe members of the Cociety to walk £ through your groundsa nd inspect from without of course your beauriful house, which is as you are doubtless aware of ? great ihstoric interest having been ½ for some years. We feel sure it was the 7; residence of the celebrated amn you know who I mean. We hope if the frost ohlds you will not mind us skating on yuor moat.

I; am dear Sir, Yours faithfully, Edward Turnbull Hon. Sec. PS¼ Please excuse mistakes ihave not learned the typewriter properyl yet.

Such was the letter. The more obvious orthographical errors had been carefully corrected with blue pencil, but, even so, the document was a remarkable one. Chloe read it, taking absent bites at her buttered toast.

"Mad?" she queried, calmly.

"I don't know; the letter's very conventionally worded, except in one or two odd places. Is it possible that a genuine society could possibly employ such a ghastly rough−sketch of a typist?"

"The letter's not signed," she remarked. "The secretary's name is typed as well as the rest."

"I knew a solemn ass named Turnbull, once," I reflected, "but I thought he'd got into a bank somewhere in Kent−−Tonbridge or Dartford, or something. He used to fool around with brass rubbings and dates and archæological bores−−"

"I expect it's the same man," she said, indifferently. "But we don't want the nasty society bothering here, do we? Write and tell him there's nothing to see, and no one really important ever lived here till we did."

"I don't know," I said. "I wish I could be sure. Blackheath seems an unlikely place for it. If we were Woolwich, now, that simply bristles with improving societies; but I've a sort of idea this is a working−men's society. If the poor beggars have got a holiday on purpose, and are really interested−−or think they are−−it seems a bit piggy not to let them, doesn't it? We can keep a lookout from the loafery window and see that they don't get into any mischief. They only want to look at the house 'from the outside.'"

"I suppose they give an address?"

"Yes; Morden House, Blackheath. It sounds decent. I'm almost certain it's a workman's club. I'll write and tell them they can come. You don't really mind?"

"I'm not wholly a piggy−wig. But that letter's odd, all the same. Perhaps it's from a gang of thieves who want to come and see how the shutters are fastened."

"Well, they can't see that from the garden. Madam, I am beginning to realize that I am a proud man the day. Think of our position six months ago. Who would have wished to come and inspect, 'from the outside, of course,' our late lamented Bandbox? And now we are lords of the manor, holding the power of life and death over the field−days of antiquarian societies."

"What I don't like," she went on, quite unappeased by this feudal picture, "is that about the skating. Why should antiquaries want to skate?"

"Now to me," I rejoined, "that's the most convincing touch of all. Of course these workmen don't often get a holiday, and they want to make the most of it. 'If the frost holds' is a charming touch. It's hardly begun yet."

It did not hold. I signified to Mr. Edward Turnbull my gracious consent, and from that moment the snow began to melt, and the weather to settle itself down into something quite as warm and sunny as an English April, and far warmer than many an English May. A stray furze−bush or two at the end of our paddock broke into golden flower, and the skylarks sang in the pale blue above the orchard. The 20th was a day of cloudless beauty, and even in the midst of my mental congratulations to the members of the Antiquarian Society on their royal weather, I found room for a pang of sym− pathy for those among them who might have had their skates ground.

I recurred again that day, I remember, to our old life at the Bandbox. We were sitting in the loafery, now made cosey with curtains and a big wood fire. Chloe sat sewing in her rocking−chair. She had had some verses that morning, and, bad as they were, they had pleased her. There were seven stanzas, I remember. The first two were quite ordinary, and the other five got sillier and sillier, till at the end they were a mere jingle of nonsense−−a sort of nursery rhyme, mostly written in the "little language." The poem−−Chloe really did call it a poem−−began something like this:

TO CHLOE AT WORK

When Chloe sings And sews and swings, Rocked in her guardian angel's wings; When with dear, delicate finger−tips She cuts and measures, sews and snips;−− Silent I worship at a shrine Lighted for me, and warmed for mine, By Chloe's eyes and lips.

For what she knows, And what she sews, And all the hope that grows and blows About her sewing, twine and twist, And veil her in a rainbow mist; Until I rub my eyes and say, "Oh, can it be there was a day When Chloe was unkissed?"

She liked it all, even the nonsense of the last five stanzas, and she said that she liked it none the less because it happened to be written on the backs of a green−grocer's bill, the voting−card of a candidate for the school board, and two odd envelopes.

She said: "It is very pretty, Len. I didn't know you ever noticed whether I was sewing or not."

"You don't know my observant nature," I said, "and after all these years of married life, too."

"It's more than one year, anyway," she said.

"Do you remember the day when you made me decide to leave the dear Bandbox?"

"Shall I ever forget it?"

"And that other dear day when you invented the loafery and we looked at the bars?"

"Let's look at them now," she cried, jumping up and dropping scissors, thimble, tapemeasure, and a mass of lace and muslin. When I had picked everything up we went to the window. The creeper's leaves were gone now, and we stood between dull red curtains and looked out on the misty garden, where the dead leaves lay, patches of wet gold and brown in the faint sunlight, and where a robin on a leafless apple−tree was singing his very best, and pretending to the rooks in the elms that he was a thrush disguised in a scarlet waistcoat.

"Those Antiquarian brutes," I said, presently, "they'll be here directly. By Jove! they are here. They look horribly small. Can it be that the Junior Blackheath only admits dwarfs?"

"Those can't be the Antiquaries," Chloe cried. "Why, Len, they look like children! Lots and lots of them. What can they want? They look like a slice of a strayed, frayed school treat. And they've all got books, and they don't seem to have got any grown−up people with them. Oh, do go and turn them out!"

"I'll go and find out what they want−−"

"Oh yes, and they'll say they're botanizing, or geologizing, or something, and you'll let them stay, like you did the boys that wanted conquerors off the chestnut−trees, and overran everything. I've not forgotten it; I'll go myself."

She ran down the stairs, slipped her feet into the wooden sabots that she keeps for sudden winter garden excursions, and stumped off angrily down the path under the cedars. I took a short−cut between Jim's celery−trenches. Chloe is terrible in her wrath, but if it grows too hot it boils over in tears of rage; and I did not wish Chloe to cry, and I not there.

The invaders were grouped round the sundial. All had their backs to us, and one of them was reading aloud. I caught a few words:

"....told the time when Charles the First was beheaded, and recorded the death−devouring progress of the Great Plague and the Fire of London. There is no doubt the sun often shone even in those devastating occasions, so we may picture−−"

Then the reader heard the unmistakable threat in the emphatic stump, stump of Chloe's wooden shoes, and stopped short. Her eyes were angry, her mouth expressed inhospitable intentions. I thought I heard a murmur of, "Oh, Crikey!" from the reader, but the next moment he had stepped towards my wife and taken off his cap with an oddly graceful flourish. He was a boy; there were other boys, who followed his lead in cap−doffing. There were girls, too, rosy−faced little girls in highwayman coats and scarlet Tam−o'−Shanters. The whole invading company were, as Chloe had said, "children." And all wore spectacles.

"Do you know that this is a private garden?" said Chloe, severely. "You are trespassing, you know." Her voice is very pretty, even when she is angry, and she was not nearly so angry as she had been before the boys took their caps off.

"It's not your garden, is it?" asked the smallest boy of all, goggling at her through his spectacles, and speaking in an off−hand but perfectly agreeable manner. One of the girls shook him gently, and bade him shut up.

"We're most awfully sorry," said the boy who had been reading. "We wouldn't have come if we'd thought you'd mind, but we've got a pass, so I thought it was all right. Here, hold my spectacles half a sec., Alice, and I'll find it."

The prettiest of the red−capped girls took the spectacles, and the boy felt in several pockets, while I drew near to offer Chloe my moral support.

"Here it is!" he said, at last, disentangling a dingy paper from a mass of string, matches, envelopes, putty, and cobbler's wax, and, with really a rather nice bow, he handed to Chloe−−my letter to the Antiquarian Society!

"But this was not meant for you," she said. "This is to Mr. Turnbull−−"

"That was my fault," said a younger boy−−a thin, pale, anxious−looking child. "We tossed up who should copy out the letter on Albert's uncle's type−writer, and I was thinking about something else, so I copied it, name and all."

Chloe put her hands to her head with a gesture of despair. I said: "Just think a minute. Remember, we've no idea what all this is about. Just tell us, right away from the beginning, how you came to be here, and what you want."

There was a silence. Then the eldest girl said, "Oswald, you tell."

The boy who had been reading twisted his cap, and stood uneasily on one foot. But almost at once he planted his feet firmly on the ground and began, looking Chloe straight in the eyes with a most disarming frankness.

"First of all, we are very sorry the lady is vexed, and we beg her pardon."

"That's all right," said Chloe, unexpectedly. "Go on."

"Well−−when we were staying in the country some Antiquaries wrote to Albert's uncle−−this is Albert"−−he pushed forward a shy boy in velvet knickerbockers−−"and asked him to let them come and see his house. And we thought we should be feeling a bit slack in the holidays, so we thought we'd play at being antiquaries. And

Albert's uncle showed us this place once from the train when we were going to Bexley Heath, and he said some great person lived here once, and it was a historic place, and we can't remember who it was. And he said a clever writer lived here now, and he told us the name. So we wrote to ask leave to come, and you gave it right enough."

The voice was reproachful.

"Yes," I said, completely melted by this unexpected recognition of my−−or the ghost's−−talent as a writer. "Are you Mr. Edward Turnbull?"

"Rather not"−−his tone was somewhat injured. "I was coming to that. We decided to copy out the letter that the real Antiquity secretary sent to Albert's uncle, and Noël had to do it, because we tossed up about it, and he lost. And he got thinking of a poem he's writing, and copied it, name and all−−and only remembered it after we'd licked the stamp for the letter. So we thought it didn't matter. And if you'd rather we'd been Mr. Turnbull, you wouldn't have if you'd seen how thin his legs are, and how he couldn't laugh because his mouth was so tight."

"I'd much rather have you," said Chloe, smil− ing; and as she smiled I could see how deeply all present fell in love with her on the instant. "I'm sorry I didn't understand. We won't interfere any more. You'd like to go on reading your papers. Who wrote them?"

"We've each done one," said the eldest girl−−she was a little prim, and not so pretty as the others−−"only mine is all out of a book, because it is so difficult to think of things."

"Do you always wear spectacles?" I asked.

They all laughed. It was a very pleasant sound, this peal of young laughter in our old garden.

"Oh no!" said the prettiest girl, "only to make us look like learned antiquities−−antiquaries, I mean. It was an awful bother collecting them all; some of them have no glass in."

"One more question," I said. "If you're not Edward Turnbull, who are you?"

"We're the Bastables," the biggest boy said, with a sort of shy pride, as if he were confessing, in his modesty's despite, to royal lineage. "I'm Oswald, and these are Alice and Dora; Noël's the one who typed the letter; and this shaver is H.O.; and these are Daisy and Denny Foulkes; and Albert Morrison I told you about before."

"You'll have lunch with us, won't you?" asked Chloe, abruptly, picking up her blue train and fixing her feet in her wooden shoes. "I don't think there'll be much, but we can make out with bread and jam−−"

"I like you," said the smallest boy, before the others could answer. "I like you very much, indeed, and I'll have lunch with you, whatever it is."

The others murmured thanks, and we left them to their play.

"Aren't they perfect dears?" said Chloe, when we were out of earshot. "I don't like the Morrison boy, but the others are lovely. Why aren't all children nice?"

"They all are−−if they have nice grown−ups belonging to them," I said, enunciating lightly a tremendous dogma. "But, darling and reckless one, do you know that there's nothing in the house but cold neck of mutton, and even that, if I remember right, is invidiously distinguished as being not the best end?"

"I know," she said; "but you must go up to Elmhurst and get things: tinned tongue−−children always adore tongue−−and candied pineapple and tangerine oranges in silver paper, and nuts, and bananas. Oh, I do think children are so nice! I wish these weren't so big. The smallest boy, the one they call H.O., he's simply a duck."

"Oswald for my money," said I, "and Alice! Make a list of what I'm to get, and I'll be off. It's half−past twelve now."

I left Chloe laying the table for eleven in the white parlor. When I came back the cloth was spread, but Chloe had vanished. I found her in the garden submerged to the shoulders in a wave of children, and she carried nine pairs of spectacles in her hand. We all went in to lunch. I was now a mere outsider. Chloe, by some art unknown to me, had become one of the children, and was the most childlike child of all. The others really were not bad children. I don't think I ever met any so full of enthusiastic energy. As a permanency, they might have been a little wearing, for, strong in Chloe's extraordinary assumption of esprit de corps, they now threw away all shyness, and talked to us with simple directness of adventures, of contemporary literature, of the ways of Providence, and their own vital ambitions. They had a very full flow of conversation, and a much larger vocabulary than I remember having at their age. What struck me most was their confident assumption that, now we knew them, we could not help liking them; and the assumption was, I own, justified. This assumption was particularly marked in Oswald. He evidently thought a good deal of himself, but, as I could not but reluctantly acknowledge, with some justice! They were extremely "free in their talk," as Mary said afterwards, but never vulgar. And they were very much

funnier than they meant to be. The lunch, for which Chloe had madly brought out the best green−and−gold table−centre, charmed them. I had not thought that Chloe could be so thoroughly inspired with any menu. When no one could eat any more, the children looked at each other, and Dora, the prim one, said, quite unconscious of the evidence of rehearsal with which her speech bristled,

"Thank you very much for letting us come, and for having us to lunch."

"And for getting such a jolly lunch," said the pale boy. "I think it is splendid. If you will give me a piece of paper and a pencil I will write you a piece of poetry about it."

While I was getting these I heard the prim child say anxiously to Chloe:

"I hope you don't mind. He will do it. We can't stop him."

"It comes of his having bronchitis so often, I think," said the stout child they called H.O. "It isn't really his fault."

There was an awkward pause while the pale child sucked my pencil and rolled his eyes. He made the most shocking grimaces I ever saw, but when Chloe turned anxiously to Oswald, he said,

"It's all right; he's not ill; it's only the poetry working out of him."

Presently he stopped writing, folded the paper very small, and said suddenly and earnestly,

"Have you got a secret staircase here?"

We owned our indigence in this respect.

"We have at the Moat House," he said. "Have you explored your house thoroughly?"

"Yes, I think so," said Chloe, with a glorious inspiration, adding, "but you may explore it if you like. Don't make too much hay, that's all! Off you go!"

Noël pressed the paper into Chloe's hand and they rushed from the room, and as they went I heard the words "jolly good sort."

I drew a long breath.

"What a whirlwind!" I said.

"Children do make a difference in a house," said Chloe, wistfully.

"They do," I said, kissing her ears, "all the difference."

She gave me a doubtful glance.

"My dear little old wife," I said, "people might think themselves lucky if their children were half as nice as these."

"They are dears, great dears," she said, and then we read Noël's poem:

TO THE BLUE PRINCESS LADY WITH THE LUNCH

How good you are to give us lunch,
With pineapple and tongue to munch.
It is a generous thing to do,
And we are very pleased with you.
It is a wonderful thing to find
How many people in the world are kind.
If you would let us explore your house,
We would not harm even a mouse,
And perhaps we might find a pot of gold
Too heavy for you to hold.
Then we should have made your fortune. So
Please do let us go.
You will if you are at all wise.
We should like to find the gold
More than you can hold,
Because you are so soft and blue and pretty and nice.

"Two poems in one day," I said. "Oh, Chloe, beware of vanity."

"The dear!" she said. "And, Len, it's not half bad, is it? What extraordinary children!"

I could hear the wave of children surging wildly about the house. I lighted a cigarette, and strove for calm. I

seemed to have been living in the embrace of a friendly tornado.

Chloe looked at me anxiously.

"They are dears," she said, for the fourth time. "I do hope they haven't worried you!"

"Worry's not the word," said I. "They have electrified, bewildered, enlightened. I never saw children with such energetic enthusiasms. The Morrison boy is a muff; but the others, they are very trusting. The world must have been kind to them."

"Anybody would be," she said, "and I hope the world always will."

There was a silence in the house. I went to see whether the exploring party had drowned itself in the rain−water cistern, which is just the sort of thing that kind of child would do. No; Mary said they were exploring the cellars. As she spoke I heard a thunderous report reverberating below. Our cellars are large and vaulted; from recollections of my childhood, I could conceive that they might seem well worth exploring. But I had not all Chloe's confidence in these strange children. From the little I had seen of them I felt that they were quite capable of organizing a Guy Fawkes play, and carrying it out with scrupulous, enthusiastic fidelity if one of their number should happen, as seemed only too likely, to have any matches and loose gunpowder in his pocket.

Yolande had just come from town, and by a curious coincidence our tenant had come on the same train. I left them talking to Chloe, and went down the cellar steps. Half−way down I was met by an incredibly cobwebby boy.

"I was just coming after you," he said, eagerly. "Do you know, we've found a door behind some beer−barrels, and Oswald and Denny got in from behind under the dining−room floor; they're hammering on the other side of the door now. There are barrels in front of the door. We rolled one away. Did it make an awful row? They say there's all sorts of things inside. Did you know it was there? And please can we have a candle and matches? We've used all ours."

One−half at least of my foreboding was justified. I wondered where they had dropped the hot heads of all the matches they had used.

I got some candles and matches, and the cobwebbed child, whose name appeared to be Dickie, led me to a cellar where barrels were piled. Behind them I could just discern the shadowy outline of a door, from which came an intermittent knocking and voices:

"Have you got him?"

"Can you get the barrels away?"

"Can you get the door open, or shall we come back under the floor for the candles? It's a beastly tight fit, and I've split my waistcoat as it is."

"The last match we lighted we saw some chairs and a mangle."

There were three boys still in evidence, and the tenant had followed me to see the sport. The girls were as energetic as the boys, and one by one we rolled the barrels away. Curious that Chloe and I had never looked behind those barrels. The door was not fastened. It opened easily, and a shower of dust and cobwebs fell on the heads of the explorers who first pressed forward.

From my soul I congratulated these children. Even to such an adventurous band as this an adventure so exciting could not happen every day.

They were quite right. There was furniture in the inner cellar, odds and ends stowed away, to make room for new stuff, by busy, thrifty hands now long since folded in lavish idleness−−hands that, in their life−day, could never bear to destroy or to waste.

We carried the things up−stairs−−all but the vast box−mangle and one other thing which I said I would carry up myself later.

We bore into the kitchen, and displayed to the dazzled eyes of Chloe and Yolande, and the con− temptuous ones of Mary, a full−sized oak dresser−−in four pieces; five chestnut−wood chairs, more or less dilapidated; an oak settle−−the seat was broken, but, oh, how our hearts rejoiced in the severe beauty of its panelled back! three ladder−backed chairs−−seats gone; a large gate−table; an elm kneading−trough; and the magnificent wreck of a carved four−post bedstead!

The children were as delighted as we were, which is saying a good deal.

"I said we would," said the poet, triumphantly. "It's not gold, but it is nice. You have lots of nice things. I like the way you stick up warming−pans and brass candlesticks instead of plush brackets and crinkly ornaments."

A most discerning child, truly! When the children had been partially cleaned, our tenant invited them all to tea

at his cottage. Yolande and Chloe went to help.

When they were gone I went down to the cellar and fetched the thing I said I would carry myself. I bore it up to the loafery and cleaned it, and polished it, and mended it a little, and set it by the hearth, in the glow of the fire; and that evening when Yolande and the tenant were deep in chess, I beckoned Chloe, and took her up to the loafery, and, lighting the candles, bade her look.

"Oh, Len," she cried, throwing her arms round my neck, "it's miles better than the one we go to look at in the shop in Great Portland Street!"

"I meant to give you that for a Christmas present," I said, "but this is better." She fell on her knees beside it.

"Oh, look at the dear little daisy carving on the sides, and the little strong panelled hood, and the rockers! Oh, Len, it is lovely! Where did it come from?"

"It was in the cellar," I said. "Do you like it? No; it's absurd to thank me; thank those outrageous, dear Bastable children."

"I will," she said, coming nearer to me. "Len−−I've said it before, I know, but they are dears−−and they shall come and see the cradle they found when−−when it's better worth looking at."

Presently my wife took me into our room, and, unlocking the corner drawer, showed me all that was in it. Little, little things.

XI. THE ROOM FOR CONFIDENCES

CHRISTMAS in the Red House was charming. It made us feel like pictures on Christmas cards. Chloe and I flatly refused to have anything to do with the decorations. We had had enough of evergreens when we decorated our drawing−room with the loops and swags for the great house−warming party. And rather than we would touch box or yew or laurel or holly again, the Red House should go undecorated. We said so, but our tenant insisted that no decorations at Christmas would be the first step towards the downfall of the British constitution and the death−blow to the naval supremacy of England.

"Let me do it," he said. "I've had my Christmases in such odd, out−of−the−way places−−ships and ranches and diamiond−fields−−I haven't put up a sprig of holly since I was a school−boy. Miss Riseborough, you'll help me, I know."

"I know I won't," said Yolande. "I never do things with my fingers. I'll inspect and direct and overlook, and earn the wages of superintendence, if you'll make Mary bake them−−"

"Scones, I suppose," said Chloe. "There are heaps of string in the cellarette, and don't take my best scissors−−the old ones are in the table drawer."

"How good we are growing," I said. "Fancy you knowing where anything is."

"We're reformed characters," she answered, gayly. "Where are the pencils and the India rubber?"

I felt a pang. Was it possible that Chloe had any suspicion? Could she possibly guess that it was I, and not Yolande, who finished drawing her pictures for her? No, she certainly could not. And I more than half wanted to tell her my secret. Yet I could not make up my mind to part with it. I had nursed it in my heart till it had grown very dear and precious.

We left Yolande enthroned on the settle, di recting the labors of our tenant, but when the gong summoned us to tea and the wages−of−superintendence−scones, we found our tenant working at one end of the wreath, and Yolande busy at the other. It was not such a very long wreath as to have needed two pairs of hands, either. To do Miss Riseborough justice, she looked very much ashamed of this lapse from the principles of a lifetime.

"My hands are very dirty," she made haste to say, "and I think that many of the deserving poor would have been glad to add a little to their slender incomes by putting up your grimy evergreens for you; but−−"

"Don't apologize," I said. "We understand perfectly. We've infected you at last. It is nice to do things with one's hands, isn't it?"

"Not in the least. It is very tiresome and very fatiguing; but some one had to do it, it seems, and I at least could not sit by and see your tenantry ground down without a word of protest, or the holding out of a helping hand. I hope there are many, many scones, and very, very buttery. We deserve some reward."

After tea the work was resumed, and the hall, stairs, and white parlor were all hung with shining wreaths before dinner−time.

"Yolande can work," said Chloe to me, in confidence. "It's odd that her perverse abstention from really interesting things has not made her clumsy."

"As if a hand the shape of hers could ever be clumsy," I said, "any more than a hand like yours could ever grow coarse."

"It might have done," she said, "if you and I had gone on doing all the house−work. We ought to be very grateful to Yolande. She has practically organized the whole of our future for us. We are settled, fixed, planted−−yes, that's it−−we grow, ourselves, of course, but she has planted us in the right soil, with exactly the right aspect. Now our dear little characters can develop beautifully, and our hands keep pretty, and no wrinkles come in our nice, smooth foreheads. You've been a little I don't know what about Yolande. But you must own that what she undertakes she does well."

"Even to the red−branding of suspected fruit−thieves−−yes."

Yolande was spending Christmas at the Red House, and, it being Christmas Eve, the tenant dined with us. We had a merry evening. We had lighted a huge fire in the big, empty drawing−room where the piano was; Chloe played waltzes, and Yolande danced with me and with the tenant. When the dancing was over Chloe and I sat by the fire and the others went out to look at the stars from the balcony.

"Ah, youth, youth!" I sighed.

"They will catch their deaths of cold," said Chloe, prosaically.

I whispered: "Chloe, in a very short time those people will come through that French window with the announcement of their engagement on their lips. This is the tamest love−affair I have ever witnessed. Everything has gone far too smoothly. Yolande has fallen in love obviously, bluntly, without any of those fine shades and nice feelings which you will remember to have noted in other cases−−our own, for instance. She has grown rather dull."

"Don't talk so loud," said Chloe.

"As for him," I went on, "happiness exudes from him like−−like turpentine from the pine−tree, or oil from the skin of the castor, or beaver."

"I suppose when we're old we shall never talk nonsense," she said. "I almost think you're getting too old for it now. Castor, indeed!"

"No, I'm not. Yes, we shall. We shall never grow old, because we shall always talk nonsense. Don't you think it would be nice and kind and thoughtful of us to go up to the loafery and leave them this room? I know she'll have an awful cold if she stays out there much longer. It's a terrible thing to celebrate your betrothal by a cold in the head."

So we spoke out into the starlit twilight of the balcony, and begged to be excused, and then we crept up−stairs and raked together the red embers of our loafery fire, and put logs on and crouched happily in low chairs on the hearthrug of our very own fire. Chloe knitted and I smoked happily and quietly till it seemed that we must no longer delay to go down and speed our parting tenant. It was, in fact, eleven o'clock. I was just knocking out my pipe on the hob when a light tap on the door mingled with my own tapping, and Yolande's face looked round the door.

"Come in!" we said, "come in!" But we wondered, because Yolande had never, since the day when in our pride we first showed it to her, crossed the threshold of that room. Now she came in and closed the door softly.

"He's gone," she said. "He asked me to say good−night to you for him."

She came across the room and sat down on the hearth−rug at Chloe's feet. She leaned her arm on Chloe's knee and laid her face upon the arm.

"This is the room of all rooms for confidences," she said, after a silence. "That's why I thought I might come in just this once. I've got something to tell you−−"

Chloe and I successfully avoided each other's eyes.

Another silence.

"Shall I go away?" I said, clumsily.

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's nothing so very important, after all. Only I am afraid it will surprise you a little. I am rather surprised myself. As a matter of fact, I had never been so surprised in my life. It was not at all what I expected myself to do. What do you think I am going to be idiot enough to do?"

We said, with as good an appearance of perfect ignorance as we could command, that we were sure we did not know.

"I'm going to be married," she said. "There!"

It was difficult to express congratulatory surprise−−so difficult that we failed utterly. Chloe threw her arms round Yolande's neck and began to laugh softly.

"You dear, silly, clever, blind, darling mole," she said. "Did you really think we were quite blind too−−Len and I, who love you? My dear, we've known it from the very first, almost, and long before you did, I expect."

"Known what?" said Yolande, in a suddenly changed voice; but she returned Chloe's kisses.

"Why, everything, my pretty, clever, foolish child," said Chloe. "We've been watching over you and loving you all the time, like two old birds with a young one who is just learning to fly."

"Oh, you have, have you?" said Miss Riseborough, softly.

"Yolande, you don't mind our being glad, and saying so? It's all been so beautifully simple and straightforward and idyllic; none of those horrible romantic complications that one expects from a Girton girl's love−affairs."

"Oh, it has, has it?" Yolande's voice was softer than ever. I felt in my bones that for some reason Chloe's gentle enthusiasm did not please.

"I will go and put up the shutters," I said, for I felt that I was out of place in this confidence.

"No, don't," said Yolande, with a curious stiffness in her voice. "Do you really mean, Chloe, that you have been imagining that−−"

"That the tenant worshipped the ground under your pretty feet?" said my wife. "Well, yes."

"You are strangely mistaken," Yolande said, very deliberately. "I am going to marry a man you have never seen."

"Yolande!"

"Then I must offer you more formal and less well−informed congratulations," said I. "What is his name?"

There was a slight pause.

"Percival Forbes," she said.

Our tenant's name was something quite different. A silence followed that none of us knew how to break. Chloe spoke first.

"My dear girl, how annoying you must have thought us. I am so sorry. I wish I hadn't said−−I don't know what it was I did say."

"It's all right," said Yolande, in an odd, stifled voice; "but really, if you want romance−−"

"Yolande, I don't understand you to−night." Chloe was making horseshoes in her forehead. "Tell us what you wish to tell us. I am afraid of you. I don't like to ask you anything."

"Why should you, when it's so beautifully tame and idyllic? But I'll tell you a story if you like."

Chloe stroked her hair timidly, and I, in sheer embarrassment, refilled my pipe.

"Imagine a young woman, tolerably well educated and very cocksure about everything. She meets a man, and they like each other. Then they quarrel−−oh, never mind what about−−and the man goes to India, and she is very sorry. And then he writes that he is coming back, and will she see him on Christmas Day? And she says yes−−and to−morrow is Christmas Day. And all this time they've both been perfectly miserable. Is that more romantic−−and involved?"

"Much," said Chloe, with conviction.

"But I don't like it so well, Yolande," I said, "because there is more to the story. May I hit out straight from the shoulder?−−as you said to Chloe once. Do you remember?"

"Strike here," she said, remembering, and with a smile that seemed to me unmeaning she folded her hands over her heart.

"Well, then," I said, "this is, as you say, the room for confidences. It is the Palace of Truth."

"Not quite," said Yolande, still smiling.

"Well, it's jolly well going to be," I said, in some irritation. "You must own, dear and foolish lady, that our mistake was natural. You have walked and talked, played chess, bicycled, gone to foot−ball matches, and remodelled your whole nature to please the tenant, and now−−"

"Remodelled my nature? How hateful! But I haven't."

"He at least will not be satisfied to know that all this was merely done to pass the time while you waited for your other lover−−"

"This is hitting without the gloves," said Yolande; "but go on. It amuses me."

"It oughtn't to," I said; "it won't amuse him. I like the tenant, and I think you've behaved atrociously to him. Now, forgive me for easing my mind, and let's never recur to the subject again."

"But," said Yolande, in a small, meek voice, "he is engaged to another girl−−her name is Jane−−and he happens to be his brother."

"And even so," I said, "if ever I saw true love in a man's eyes I've seen it in his when he looked at you. Jane, indeed! And all your interest in sport−−the thing you used to hate most?"

Yolande was silent a moment. Then she said: "Len, I haven't been scolded like this for years. I didn't know you cared enough about me to do it."

"You don't know how much we do care," said my wife, gently. "But, Len, what is the use?"

"Suppose," said Yolande, slowly, "one had quarrelled with the other one−−the one in India−−because he would hunt and one thought it cruel. Don't you think one might have tried to learn to like sport, for his sake?"

"I've said my say," said I, "and I hope you've forgiven me. Our tenant may be engaged to fifty girls, but it's you he loves−−"

"Yes," she said, softly. "Yes." Then she flashed a dazzling, illuminating smile at us and put her chin in the air

in the prettiest, proudest way. "Yes, I think it is."

I think I may be pardoned for taking Yolande by the shoulders and shaking her as she held out to Chloe's eyes a trembling left hand on which shone the gold signet ring which I had noted a hundred times on our tenant's finger.

"Then why did you say it was so flat and unromantic, and drive me to inventing a romance for you? It was all your fault, Chloe. No, there isn't any man in India. There isn't any man at all but the one−−there never has been. Now you're not to crow over me and say you told me so, for it's all quite different from what you think. We shall start on a basis of mutual esteem−−no, you needn't laugh−−and I will never sew a button on for him or make him a pudding as long as I live. Good−night. Thank you for your scolding, Len. I don't think I ever enjoyed anything so much in my life."

"I'll come and put you to bed," said Chloe. "It's all Len's fault. If he hadn't been here I should never have put your dear, foolish back up. But I never thought you could have told such wicked stories. I am blind, and stupid, but I have wit enough left to unhook your gown and brush your hair. Come!"

When they had gone I turned idly to the table. There lay an unfinished drawing of my wife's−−a child with an impossibly foreshortened arm carrying a jug in two dimensions, on a head like a deformed cocoanut. I looked at it for a little while and then set to work. The sketch was spirited, and I had a certain pleasure in working it out, a pleasure so engrossing that I did not hear the door open, and my heart leaped like a fish with a pike after it as two hands fell on my shoulders, and I knew that my secret was discovered−−that henceforth not Yolande, not the ghost, but I myself must carry the praise or blame due to the finisher of Chloe's pictures. I turned my head and kissed the hand that lay on my left shoulder, the hand with my wedding−ring on it. She ruffled my hair with the other hand, and, "Thank you, dear," she said, simply.

"For the kiss?"

"For that and everything−−for all the trouble you've taken with my silly drawings. I'm glad I caught you at it, you dear, industrious beaver. I've wanted to tell you−−oh, for such a long time!−−how clever you are, and how much better you draw than I do!"

"But you thought it was Yolande−−you know you did," I said, turning in my chair so that my arm could go round her as she stood.

"I know you thought I did," she said, "and I never could understand how you could think me so silly. Why, Yolande couldn't begin to do the drawings you've done! My silly boy, do you suppose I haven't got heaps and heaps of your old drawings put away? Did you really think that I shouldn't know your touch anywhere?"

"I did; I was a fool, dear. And you're a darling. But I ought to quarrel with you. Good wives don't have secrets from their husbands, madam. Why did you pretend you didn't know?"

"It wasn't my secret," she said, blinking at me in surprise. "It was your secret. And you were so fond of it, I couldn't bear to take it from you. And I always thought you'd tell me some day. Wouldn't you have? Why didn't you? I gave you lots of chances. Don't you remember−−when I asked what you wanted the India rubber for, and when I said it didn't matter which of us did the work?"

"You said that about Yolande and the ghost and the writing," I reminded her.

"Did I? Well the principle's the same, isn't it?" You see how good and kind I am. I'm not a bit angry with you for keeping secrets from me. If I'd kept a secret like that from you you'd have been frightfully cross, wouldn't you?"

"Ferocious. But then you couldn't," I said, confidently. "And you really like the drawings?"

"You know," she said; "and I'm so awfully pleased to see how clever you are. Len, I like you to be able to do some things better than me."

"I think I could talk better grammar," I said, "if I tried very hard indeed, with both hands and all my might."

"It was very nice and funny to see you nursing your dear little−big secret, and all the time it was mine, too."

"Madam," I said, "you have deceived and betrayed me. I will go and put up the shutters and forget my wrongs in sleep. Oh, by−the−way−−Yolande?"

We had both forgotten her.

"She is very happy. I must have talked like a tract or an aunt to have driven her to such extremes. But it is all exactly as I said, perfectly simple and idyllic, and the happiest thing in the world−−almost−−"

"Almost," said I. "And when are they to be married?"

"Oh, almost directly. There's nothing to wait for. They are going to take on the other cottage and run a covered way across the garden, and have their kitchen and dining−room and her study there and his study and their sitting−room in the other one. They've arranged it all in the most delightfully practical and prosaic way. And she'll want her furniture. They are to have separate studies, and always knock at each other's study doors, and neither is to be offended if the other says: 'You can't come in. I don't want you!'"

I laughed. "And the pupils?"

"Oh, that's all over. She won't have any more pupils. She's going to write a book on the Higher Education of Women."

"And she wants her furniture? Well, we have the furniture that was in the cellar, and we can go about, by−and−by, and pick up beautiful odd things here and there. We can afford to now."

"I wish you'd tell me one thing, Len," said my wife.

"Well?"

"Do you really like writing or drawing best?"

"We make a good bit of money by both," I said. "I think we must give Yolande a very, very beautiful wedding−present−−with our best love−−and the ghost's!"

She frowned a little.

"Yes, but quite apart from the money, which do you like doing best? Do tell me. Tell me straight out!"

"Well, then," I said, "I've got rather fond of drawing; I suppose because it's not my work, but yours. As Yolande says, we are incurably prone to do anything rather than our own proper work."

"Yes," she said, "we are. Go and put up the shutters now, Len, and don't be hours about it, or I shall fancy you have met a burglar."

"My father met a burglar once," I said. "He heard a row and went down, and when he didn't come back my mother thought he might have been overpowered, so she took the bedroom poker and went down to his assistance."

"I should have gone with him," said Chloe. "Well?"

"Well, she went down very softly, and there was a light in the kitchen, and there was the burglar in the arm−chair, telling a piteous tale, and my father making cocoa for him over the spirit−lamp!"

"He was a darling," said Chloe, "and so are you; but we're out of cocoa. You must give the burglar bottled beer instead. I'll stay here till you come back."

When I came back she was sitting in her favorite little rocking−chair.

"Come and sit down a little longer," she said.

"It's very late," said I, lowering myself to the hearth−rug at her feet.

"Yes; it's Christmas Day, I know, Len. We were talking about secrets just now, and you said I could never keep one from you. Would you be very angry if I did?"

"I do not advise you to try," I said, taking her hands in mine. They were cold, and they trembled a little.

"But suppose I have? Will you be very angry?"

"Tell me, and try."

"It's absurd," she said, trying to laugh. "I always thought it would be so easy to tell you, and now it is so difficult. You must tell me things first−−silly things−−to give me courage."

I told her several. Then we sat silent. Presently I said: "My pussy−kitten, have you really something serious to tell me? Or is it only that you are upset over this business of Yolande? Don't worry over trifles, dearest and best, but if there is really anything you want to tell me, tell me now. It can't be anything that it would hurt me to hear."

"I'm not at all sure about that." She spoke with a gleam of soft mischief in her eyes. "You're very kind and trusting, Len, but−−oh−−seriously, I believe you'll hate me when I tell you."

"Then tell me at once," I said. "Don't tantalize me with this promise of a wholly new sensation."

"Oh, if you will make fun−−"

"I'm not, but I won't have you make mountains out of mole−hills. Come, show me the mole−hill and we'll trample it together. Why, silly Chloe, your hands are like ice, and how they tremble! Out with it−−"

"I don't think I'll tell you at all," she said. "You ought to be clever enough to find out. Besides, you kept a secret from me, Len, and I wasn't angry."

Even then I didn't see.

She rose suddenly. "No, I won't tell you tonight," she said. "You don't really want to hear it."

I rose, too. "You will tell me to−night," I said, holding her hands. "My dear, how can you tease me so?"

She put her arms round my neck and whispered in my ear.

"And oh," she cried, "don't be cross! I can't bear it if you are."

"Cross! My dear, delightful, clever, wonderful genius of a pussy−kitten! If you only knew how I've worried and wondered. And it was you all the time−−you, you, you! Oh, what a fool I've been! But I've been punished for my folly. Chloe, I've come very near to hating Yolande, and all the time it was you−−not Yolande or the ghost, but you, who were writing all those wonderful endings to my silly stories! Sit down on your throne and let me do you homage." I put her back in the rocking−chair and knelt before her.

"I meant to tell you at first," she said, "but when you thought it was Yolande, I thought it was so funny and stupid of you, because she doesn't really see half the things I put in the stories."

"Funny and stupid, indeed," I echoed. "You were wiser. You do see things. And tell me, Chloe, which do you like doing best−−writing or drawing?"

"Why, writing, of course!" she said, "because it's not my work, but yours. Yolande was quite right."

"Then for the future you must put your name to the stories."

"Oh, must I?" she asked, wistfully. "I thought it would be so nice if we put both our names. And to the drawings, too. Because you do invent plots better than I do, and I can do sketches. Then it would all be our work−−not just yours or mine, but ours."

"Very well," I said; "better than well! Ours be it. As you've said once, or more than once, it doesn't matter a straw which of us does the work, as long as it is us, and not Yolande or the ghost."

"What about grammar now? And trying with both hands? Len, it's Christmas Day by the clock. I've got a present for you. It's a booken with pretty, pretty pikkies, but I sha'n't give it to you till it's real, live, wide−awake Christmas Day."

"You've given me a most lovely present," I said, "a beautiful brand−new secret of your very own. To think that my wife's an author−−an author of genius! I never thought to see the day."

"Don't peacock!" she said. "You've nothing to be so proud about. I'm as well off as you are. My husband's an artist−−an artist of genius! But I knew all the time, didn't I, and you didn't, so I must be much cleverer than you, really."

"Isn't that what I've been saying? Twenty times cleverer and a thousand times as dear."

"I never could do sums," she said, "but I did manage to put two and two together about the drawings, and the answer was, 'You!'"

"One and one is a better sum," I said, "and easier, and the answer is, 'Us.'"

"And what about grammar now?" said she.

XII. THE PUSSY−KITTEN

YOLANDE was married−−she was married at Elmhurst church, Chloe and I her only supporters. And after the wedding we all walked quietly down together from the church and said "Good−bye" to them at the door of their cottage, through whose windows the welcoming firelight shone out into the cheerless January dusk.

"What an ideal beginning to a honey−moon!" said my wife. "Fancy walking straight home to your own house. No broughams and slippers and things, no long railway journey and horrid hotels and lodgings, with the rice dropping out of you in showers every time you move an inch, and everybody grinning sympathetically after you. It's like Frances's wedding in the Professor."

"It's a warmer wedding than that," said I, "That description always chills me to the bone, And does it matter so much where you go, as long as you go together? I seem to remember a hideous parlor at Pevensey that once contented two moderately happy people."

"Yes," she said, "but this is best. Who knows how much happier we should have been if we'd gone straight home to the Bandbox?"

"We should never have been able to leave it," said I. "It's better as it is. Suppose I had been wise and firm and inflexible−−"

"A youthful Murdstone−−"

"And refused to yield to your superior wisdom and obstinacy, and−−"

"And we had never come to the Red House! Yes, it's all my doing, Len−−the only thing I'm really and truly proud of. It's Yolande's doing, partly, but it's mine, too. Our lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places. Come in. I feel as if it was us who had just been married and were going home to our own house. It's odd−−I always feel that we've only just been married, and yet that we've been married ever since we can remember."

"So we have," said I.

"We are very fortunate," she said, "and I am very, very grateful."

We were, indeed, fortunate. Chloe's daring adoption of the Red House as our home had been generously repaid. Instead of being the white elephant as which it had sometimes sought to disguise itself, it was now a credit to us, and an unchanging joy. Our cottages were let, and our garden. Our work in the Red House had been prosperous, the memories that had grown up there were precious, the hopes more precious still. Mary was happier than ever, now that she had a small servant−−her slender personalty wholly justified by our prosperity and our future−−to teach and order about and be kind to. Our lives were peaceful, ordered, incredibly pleasant. And if I still sometimes cleaned a candlestick or a sword, and Chloe now and then washed china or dusted the white parlor, not even Yolande could complain that we neglected our work to indulge in these recreations.

Chloe remarked one day that we had grown uninteresting. Our earlier domestic adventures, she declared, might have been made really amusing by a competent narrator, but now nothing happened to us except the things that ought to happen.

"Ah, wait," I said, "my regretful optimist; things will go on happening to us all our lives long. This is only an 'easy.' We are in a peaceful backwater just now. We shall be pulling against the stream again soon enough."

"But we are uninteresting," she persisted.

"It's not polite of you to say so. Even the plural pronoun doesn't redeem that speech. I don't find you uninteresting−−at least, not very."

"It's all quite dull and flat," she went on, scorning to take up the gauntlet; "and the worst of it is, it is so beautiful when things are flat and dull. I hardly dare to draw my breath for fear something should happen. Things that happen are always horrid. It's the times when nothing happens that are too good for one to dare to be quite happy in them."

"Nice things do happen sometimes," I said, softly. "Besides, we have the interest of watching Yolande just now. She won't elude our vigilance forever; sooner or later she'll justify your prediction and be discovered darning the tenant's socks."

"Even that won't be a very wonderful happening," said my wife; "though so far, I confess, she has lived up to her ideals most nobly. He supports her in her resolution to keep her fingers clean of house−work, and the ferret's

wife does all her sewing. It's us that things don't happen to any more. And, oh, Len, I don't want anything to happen. Don't you notice that we hardly ever even quarrel now?"

"Did we ever−−much?"

"We used to be snarky sometimes−−much snarkier than we are now. Why is it? Is it because we have more money? People are always supposed to quarrel when they are poor."

"We were never poor enough to throw the teacups at each other's heads," I said, "even in our worst days. Look at that little gold ball."

"It's winter aconite," she informed me. "It has a prettier name, but I've forgotten it. It's very late. I suppose it overslept itself; the others are over long ago."

We were walking slowly round the garden, where the crocuses showed green and gold, and the birds were singing like mad. The spikes and buds of the daffodils made green patches, and the blue squills were out. The pigeons on the farm−roof were preening their shining breasts, nestling up to each other, repeating unceasingly the pretty, monotonous, proud cry of their pairing−time.

"You can hear quite well what they're saying," said Chloe. "Listen: 'Look at us two! Look at us two!' They are absurdly happy."

"So they ought to be," I said; "it's a happy day. There's no doubt at all now that spring will come again. I've only half believed it all these winter months. How neat that market−gardener man has made everything! I do hope we sha'n't loathe it in the summer when we walk in it and remember how sweet and untidy and all−over−the−place it was last year. That would be a happening, indeed."

"If we are both alive and in this garden together in the summer we sha'n't hate anything much, shall we? Very well, I won't, if you hate it so, but it's silly not to face things. People do die sometimes, you know, even people who love each other."

"I won't have it," I said, firmly. "Dearest and silliest, you must not scratch my heart with those kitty claws of yours, or I shall be sorry I ever let you have it to play with. I'd rather quarrel with you. As you say, we've neglected that pastime shockingly. Let us begin. Come, think of something to quarrel about, and you shall see what reserve forces of crude disagreeableness I have been getting ready all these dear months. Ah, don't, don't! You know it always makes you ill to cry."

For she was clinging to me and hiding her eyes.

"Don't," I heard her say. "I don't want to claw you. It claws me just as much. You don't know how silly I am. I can't bear to let you out of my sight, because, perhaps, I sha'n't be able to be with you very much longer. Len dear, we know each other so well; we've been such friends, too, haven't we? We've been so happy. It makes me frightened. And now it's so peaceful; I feel as if things were gathering together for some awful thing to happen. You don't know!"

I was silent. Did I not know?

"Yes, you do," she went on, holding me more closely. "You do, you do, but you pretend you aren't afraid of anything, because you think it makes me cheerful. It doesn't. I hate to think that we're pretending to each other−−now. So I tell you plainly, Len, I'm very, very frightened, and you know it, and so are you, and I know that, and if you'd only let me look straight at it, perhaps I shouldn't be so frightened. Oh, there are so many things I want to say to you. There, I won't any more. Let me take your arm, and we'll walk quietly and respectably like good children, and you must let me say anything I like, and you mustn't try not to say everything that comes into your head, and you're not to try to cheer me up, because I can't bear it."

So we walked and talked. And, indeed, such talk, while it intensified my own aching passion of tenderness and solicitude, did, by its frank revelation of that passion, do more to calm and cheer my wife than all my brave pretence −−it was brave−−of confident fearlessness had ever done. But I have written already more than is needed. It is because, when I remember that time, I cannot well command my thought; and my pen, seeing its superior officer in mutiny, mutinies too. For it was March now, and the time of our great fear and our great happiness was very near.

Strangely enough, after that day it was Chloe who made the brave pretences and I who clung to her, imploring her to teach me her courage and confidence. Once again in the history of the Red House my wife and I had changed parts.

The hushed peace that brooded over us folded us in wings too soft and close to let any breath of outside

tempest come near. Yolande and the tenant talked to us, as it were, through a soft, warm veil. Our relations−−oh, fortunate destiny that was ours!−−kept away. Chloe's mother (who is as nice as any one could be who is not Chloe, and is twice Chloe's age) sprained an opportune ankle and could not come to us as she had intended, and as I had thought I wished. So that my wife and I had these last days−−the last, as we alternately prayed and feared−−alone together. The doings of Yolande and Yolande's husband were like a bright, gay embroidery on the rich fabric of our quiet happiness. And the time drew near.

It was on the 1st of April−−a too appropriate date, as Yolande afterwards bewailed−−that Chloe suddenly realized, in an imperative shock, that there was a certain Japanese dressing−jacket pattern without which she could not be happy another moment. She had the stuff to make it, a demurely eccentric Eastern−patterned silk; she also had the material−−a dull, soft blue−−for what she called the revers. I suppose a man would call it the lining, but I am not quite sure.

So she left a half−written story of the very strongest possible "domestic interest" (it was, indeed, for she was to get twenty pounds for the finished article) to go down to Yolande's cottage and borrow this priceless pattern which Yolande was known to possess. She had bought it among others for the guidance of the dressmaker who prepared her trousseau. And I, almost without a pang, abandoned a nearly finished drawing to go with her.

The buds were gray and green on the trees, on the lilacs the buds were bronze, and carmine on the creeper. The daffodils were out, and the tulips rigid with the energy of pride and promise. Everything that makes the glory of the summer garden was pushing up green leaves and crying: "I am coming, I am coming−−only be patient! And don't disturb me, for I am very busy making flowers for you. Wait, and you shall see!" The birds' song was almost as intense as in the first pairing−time. We walked up the neat cottage garden, and we remembered the days of Prosser and the rags and the dead mouse and the mutton−bone. Now the garden was all trim and neat, and the earth had stirred in her sleep and thrown out handfuls of primroses and violets and early red tulips, just to show what she could do, and to remind us what she would do for us when the sun, her lover, had kissed her fully awake.

We knocked at the cottage door. It was a very nice knocker−−old brass. Yolande−−under my guidance−−had picked it up for sevenpence at a rag−and−bottle shop in Deptford. There was a long pause. Usually the door was opened almost coincidently with the fall of the knocker by pretty, fair−haired, cheery−faced Mrs. Bates, but now we stood long on the narrow doorstep and heard from within sounds of scuffling and rustling. We had time to see how right Browning was when he said, "The leaf−buds on the vine are woolly," and how very long before their white perfection come the green pledges of the annunciation lilies.

We knocked again. The scuffle or rustle assured us that some one was within. The leisure of our next waiting showed us the auriculas−−"honey−flowers" our grandmothers used to call them; "dusty millers" the country−folk call them still−−glowing in their soft shades of primrose and orange and red and purple.

But when one desires, with all one's soul, the cut−out paper pattern of a Japanese dressing−jacket for which one has already the material, even auriculas cannot charm away desire for long.

This time it was Chloe who knocked; she knocked vehemently, and almost on the instant the door was opened by our tenant in person−−our tenant, resplendent in speckless frock−coat and gleaming high hat−−the armor in which he habitually leaves his home to fight with beasts in the newspaper−offices of Fleet Street.

"I'm rushing for my train," he said, hurriedly, and, indeed, its smoke showed already beyond the gray veil of leaf−buds on the trees of our railway embankment. "I'm glad you've come. I wanted to send for you yesterday, but Yolande wouldn't−−"

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing−−a domestic crisis. Yolande's coping with it. She loathes a crisis in little, but she's coping with it with the detail of a dictionary and the generalship of a−−of a general. I've no time to turn the phrase." He tore off down the red path, shouting as he went, "I say, Yo, I'll bring home something cold for dinner."

We were left planted on the doorstep. The next moment Yolande came down the stairs−−they lead, sans phrases, from the bedrooms into the dining−room−−and stood before us, a changed, a transfigured Yolande. Her stuff dress of dull Venetian red was pinned up over a delicious petticoat of mauve silk and lace; she wore an apron−−one of Mrs. Bates's, I knew at once by its tasteful Nottingham trimmings−−and over her bright hair she had pinned a white silk handkerchief that conscientiously strove to look like a mob−cap.

"Pray come in," she said, in a bitter travesty of hospitality. "Come in and gloat over my sorrows. Come in and tell me how you always told me so. 'This is the most unkindest cut of all'−−'Earl Percy sees my fall'−−"

"This madness of quotations," I said−−

"I'd rather be a dog and bay the morn," she went on, pretending to tear her pretty hair, "than−−than what I am."

"And what are you?" asked Chloe, sitting down on the settle.

"I'm a house−maid," she said, tragically−−"a house−maid, and a parlor−maid, and a cook, and a boy in buttons, and a butler, and a footman, and a person who mends socks and sews on buttons. The ferret's wife's sister's husband is ill, and the ferret's wife has gone to nurse her−−"

"Without asking you?"

"Of course she asked me. And what could I say? Of course I said I could manage perfectly. And now I am managing perfectly. It's been going on since yesterday morning. Have some bottled beer? 'It's not what you want, but what you need, Brother Humphrey!'"

With this last quotation she sat down and poured out foaming beer for herself and us−−at half−past eleven o'clock in the morning!

We drank it in respectful silence.

"We've been up since the middle of the night," she went on, setting down her empty tumbler. "We're both involved in one common ruin. He lit the fires; I got the breakfast. Then he found he had no socks mended, and−−and there were buttons. Chloe, Chloe! I darned his socks, but I did not sew on his buttons. He did that. I think he'll get shirts with studs for the future. The needle broke and the end went into his finger. Fortunately, I'd attended classes on−−what do you call it?−−'first injuries to the aided,' or something−−so I was able to bandage his wounds; but it all took time, and he's two trains late already. I am prostrate−−a worm at your intruding feet, for you've no business to come here in the morning and see my disgrace. But since you are here, I'll confess. I almost wish I had learned to do things like this before."

"Confess a little more, my darling housemaid, page, and cook," said Chloe, "and then I'll help you to wash up." For the breakfast things still covered the table.

"What am I to confess?" asked Yolande. Her eyes were bright, and in her cheeks shone the prettiest shell−pink.

"Confess that you like doing house−work and making breakfast and darning socks in your own house and for your own man."

"I hate it," said Yolande, firmly, but her eyes betrayed her; "but even if I liked it, it doesn't effect what I used to say to you. I used to tell you that you ought not to neglect your proper work for orgies of dish−washing and knife−cleaning or wild revels of wood−chopping. And no more you ought. But if I choose to do it, I may. If I choose to concentrate myself on it, I can do it as well as you can. And in a crisis−−it is my work. So my conscience is at peace."

"And the higher education of women!" said Chloe.

"Oh, bother the higher education of women!" said Yolande. "Let's wash up."

We helped in the house−work; it was to us a holiday excursion−−a treat to good children. Incidentally, in the course of it we observed several things. One, that the two studies were now in one house, and that the door between them had been taken off its hinges and replaced by an Indian curtain drawn back in folds too stiff and formal to allow one to suppose for an instant that it was ever drawn across the doorway. Two, that Yolande had a work−basket, and that from it peeped a half−hemmed man's necktie, and a half−knitted man's sock. Third−− But why sing songs of triumph over the vanquished? Yolande had found her happiness where we had found it, so let my last words of her leave her there.

And now, if I might, I would leave here certain blank pages to speak for me of certain April days, not ever to be forgotten, and never, never, never to be written about.

I always look with wonder alternating with envy on those men who can set down, in black and white, the heights of their joy, the depths of their trouble. And I marvel whether they have less imagination than I, or more. Chloe can do this thing−−and in a woman one can only envy the faculty; it is that which makes her a better story−teller than I.

For my part, when I think of those days my lips are closed like the lips of the dead, and my pen falls from between my fingers. So, because, somehow, those days should be recorded, I long for the blank pages, on which every man who loves his wife should read for himself what his heart would write for him there.

And now it was May, and the sweet−plumed lilac was out, the red and white hawthorns were in bud−round, shining beads of coral and pearl. The garden had forgotten the lean days of winter and was all curves and softnesses in its new green gown; fat thrushes hopped and pecked on the wide, wet lawns. The yellow tulips stood up like tall lamps above the delicate brocade of the forget−me−nots and their leaves. It was mid−May, and this was the morning which Chloe has chosen, since it is Saturday and a whole holiday, to invite the whole tribe of those astonishing Bastable children to spend the day.

They arrived, much neater than I had expected, and when Chloe had greeted them−−she remembered all their names, down to H.O.−−she said:

"I've something new to show you−−something new and nice. Come up−stairs and let's look at it."

Chloe always would go up the stairs two steps at a time when anything she wanted was at the top of them. The children now, light−footed, heavy−booted, followed, clattering, her flying Turkish−slippered feet and the flutter of her spring−green gown.

She led them to our loafery−−now transformed in many undreamed−of ways, but with its window−bars still screened with budding creeper.

"Do you remember this?" she asked, pointing to a brown object by the fireside.

"Rather," said the boy they call Oswald. "It's one of the things we found in your secret cellar that day. We all thought what a good rabbit−hutch it would make."

The girls had made a rush forward, with the prettiest "Oh!" of wonder and delight.

The smallest boy of all put his fat legs very far apart. "Why," said he, in a tone of positive injury, "you've been and gone and put a baby in it!"

"Don't you think a baby's rather a good thing to put in a cradle?" I said, meekly.

"It would have made a jolly good hutch," he said, with undisguised regret.

The girls were gloating over the cradle in the most charming feminine attitudes. I should have liked to draw them.

"The dear! the precious!" they said, in chorus. "What color are its eyes? Is it a boy or a girl? What's its name?"

"Its eyes are blue−−at present," I said, "and it is a girl. And we call it the Pussy−Kitten."

"I should have thought you would have called it after some one with a real name−−an aunt or something," said Oswald, rather gloomily.

"So I did. I called it after the dearest and best and prettiest lady in the world."

I could not help a glance at Chloe; she certainly did grow prettier every day, and as for dearer−−well, all things wax or wane.

The second boy, Dickie, surprised my glance. "Oh," he said, with obvious cessation of interest, "you mean her."

He indicated Chloe by a not discourteous gesture, and instantly asked if they might not go and see the pig. (Have I mentioned that Jim kept a pig?)

Permission given, they swept away like a tidal wave, and we heard their boots sound fainter and fainter on the stairs.

Chloe and I were left alone with the cradle.

"It is hard, isn't it," I said, meeting her eyes across the cradle, "to lose one's high estate−−even when one mounts from it to a higher?"

"Is it?" she said, covering up a fat, pink fist thrust out from beneath the pink eider−down.

"To have been a princess and then to be merely a queen! To have been a pussy−kitten and to have given up that title to another, and such a very, very small usurper, too!"

"She's not so very small, Len," said my wife, anxiously.

"It sounds like a riddle," I went on. "Would you rather be−−a pussy−kitten or a pussy−cat? Do you know the answer?"

"Oh yes," she said, softly, "I know the answer; I know the answer very well, indeed. And you−−aren't you proud to have such a collection of pussies−−a pussy−cat and a pussy−kitten?"

"Yes," I said, and across the cradle we kissed each other for the last time in this story. "You know just how happy and how proud I am, my little mother pussy−cat."

THE END