One Doubtful Hour

Ella Hepworth Dixon

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TO EUGÉNIE PHILLIPS

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Marth 1904.

ONE DOUBTFUL HOUR

Were it good
To set the exact wealth of all our states
All at one cast? To set so rich a main
On the nice hazard of one doubtful hour?
It were not good: for therein should we read
The very bottom and the soul of hope;
The very list, the very utmost bound
Of all our fortunes.*Henry IV.*

I

A MAN and a woman were leaning side by side on the bulwarks of a Peninsular and Oriental steamer from Bombay. The man had grizzled hair, kindly eyes, and a skin of that special yellow−brown produced by years of summers in the Plains. The woman was thin—almost angular. She was dressed cheaply, but with audacious coquetry, and showed traces of having once been a pretty pink−and−white girl. She had an air of having taken the grizzled man in charge.

'Malta!' said the grizzled man with a little sigh of pleasure; 'why, we're almost home!'

'Yes,' murmured the faded girl, 'almost home!'

The great steamer swung round in the harbour of Valetta, and then the scrooge of the anchor was heard, and in another instant it was thundering into the green water. Overhead there was a canopy of purest cobalt−blue. A military tattoo could be heard from the heights above. A line of scarlet was seen threading up towards a drawbridge. One or two monster ironclads filled the harbour with their menace. It was an imposing scene enough. Even the Anglo−Indian ladies stretched on deck−chairs languidly closed their parasols and stared around them. The doctor stood ready at the gangway, waiting to get *pratique*.

'You don't seem to look forward to getting back to England with as much pleasure and interest as I do,' said Colonel Simpson, smiling down at her.

How formally he talked, thought Effie Lauder—so unlike the soldiers she knew. Colonel Simpson, to be sure, was in the Engineers, and Sappers, as every one knew, were either 'mad, methodist, or married.' That, perhaps, was what made him so formal in his speech, making him stare at her slang: that particular military slang which consists in saying 'What?' at the end of every sentence.... In all other respects he was delightful, she thought. He was just the right age—forty−three or four. He was a bachelor, with only one sister, and lately his father had died and left him a small private income.

'Home,' said Effie, with a laugh which was not quite pleasant, 'isn't always the happiest place. What?'

'I am sorry to hear you say that,' said Colonel Simpson, kindly, after a pause, in which Effie suddenly realised that she had said the wrong thing.

'I mean,' she broke in hurriedly, 'that I'm awfully fond of my brother. And after two years with him in India, it was beastly leaving him, don't you know. I daresay it will be tremendous fun to be back again at Westsea. I always have a good time there. There's always plenty going on.'

Miss Lauder felt she had saved the situa− tion. The colonel's eves wandered off to the frowning limestone bastions of Valetta. 'You must be a great favourite at West−sea,' he said presently. 'And of course you are fond of dancing? I like to see girls fond of dancing. It is natural, is it not?'

'Ye−s,' said Effie, faintly.

Twelve years ago, when she first came out, she had been a good deal admired in Westsea. But Colonel Lauder had died some ten years ago now, leaving behind him a widow, two boys, who had already passed for the army, and three girls. They had nothing particular to live on, but things were eked out as only the widows of officers know how. Regularly Effie appeared at the balls—those five−shilling dances which form the marriage−market of Westsea; and, though Mrs. Lauder never ceased grumbling, the family, with their lower portion of a house in Bellevue Crescent, had presented a brave front to the world. But how tired Effie was of balls! She had been to so many in her life, had danced so unceasingly in pursuit of an ever−vanishing husband. She had been trying to look arch, and pretty, and lively, for exactly twelve years. ... How weary she was of it all! In her heart she did not care for 'gaiety'; she would like to have stopped at home, in a snug little sitting−room of her own, doing fancy work by the fire while her husband read the newspaper. Her smiles would not have been forced; they would have come naturally enough then. She would like, above all, she thought, to have had a baby of her own, a baby with dimpling, creasy wrists, and little feet which kicked. She would like to have felt a child's fat arms locked round her neck.... It was one of the eternal ironies of life that, in pursuit of this ideal, she had been obliged to dance and giggle, and say audacious things for exactly twelve years. Two or three times, indeed, it had been nearly coming off. At twenty she had been actually engaged, for a fortnight, to a captain in a dragoon regi−ment. But the young man had money, his family had interfered; and Effie had been too proud—and too sure, at that age, of her popularity and good looks—to insist upon the marriage. After that her admirers at Westsea had been numerous,

but nothing had come of it all. At twenty−nine, a year or two before she had gone to India, there had been a nice boy in the Gunners who had proposed. Freddy was just twenty−three, and full of hope, but he was ordered to an up−country station in India. Cholera was rife in the long rains; Freddy was taken ill early one morning, and they fired a salute over a hastily−dug grave at night−fall. Effie had liked the boy, but she did not take the incident so seriously as to prevent her from accepting her brother's invitation to spend a year with him at Mhow. The finer edge of her sensibilities, by this time, had been rubbed away.

The year's invitation had stretched into two, but at last she had been obliged to return, under the care of her brother's major's wife, to home and the sordid economies practised with such vigour and asperity by Mrs. Lauder. Home! This word meant to Effie a dining−room floor in a mildewy crescent in Westsea, her mother's bedroom contiguous to their one living−room, a damp bedroom of her own built in the garden; an attic for the two little sisters, Rosie and Kate. There was a sewing−machine which was always buzzing on the days when she had one of her nervous headaches; a smell of washing arose from the lower regions. On the drawing−room floor lived Major Harkness, with his wife and ever−increasing young family.

All this slipped through her mind as she stood, side by side with Colonel Simpson, gazing at the scarped walls and bastions of Valetta, the crowd of shipping in the harbour, the swarm of tiny boats clustering round the great homeward−bound steamer, filled with gesticulating Maltese proffering strings of sponges to the passengers.

'I have some idea,' said the colonel casually, 'of settling in London for a year or two—'

'In London!' ejaculated Effie, her heart bounding.

'We Anglo−Indians get very rusty, Miss Lauder. Want a little contact with the world. We want to be, as they say nowadays, "in the movement." Now I've heard of a nice house, with a moderate rent, in the Pen−y−Wern Road, Earl's Court. What do you think of that?'

'A—a little far out, what?' said Effie quickly. 'I mean, of course, from your clubs. You know what people say in town? The way to get to Earl's Court is to drive up Cromwell Road until your horses drop down dead, and there you are, don't you know.'

' It sounds,' said the colonel, 'an expensive place to live in. But we shall see. You must give me your valuable advice, Miss Lauder. At first, you know, I'm to stay with my sister in Ryde for a time.'

'The way to Ryde is by Westsea,' said Effie, with a coquettish glance at her companion, which would have been very effective—ten years ago. The colonel took out a cigar and lit it with some deliberation. Some Cingalese merchants, with plaited chignons, had come on board to sell jewellery, and the Anglo−Indian ladies on the deck−chairs were awaking from their torpor.

'We've time to drive to San' Antonio,' said the colonel. 'Will you give me the pleasure of your company, Miss Lauder? Of course I shall ask your chaperon.'

With or without a chaperon, Miss Lauder was quite ready to drive to San' Antonio with Colonel Simpson.

In midwinter the white, steep streets of Valetta, eternally bathed in sunshine, are pleasant enough. The glare of scarlet coats, marching along the narrow thoroughfares, the women in their black gowns and quaint black veils, the white, Italian−looking houses, and, outside the fortifications, the hedges of prickly pear and the sweep of limestone landscape, make, together, a memorable picture. Yet even under the blue−fringed awning of the carriage the glare was formidable. The major's wife refused to move from the carriage when they reached the gates of the Palace, and so it fell out that the colonel and Effie passed under the white walls covered with wine−coloured bougainvillæas, and walked alone, the solitary occupants of the tropical−looking garden, down the broad central path fringed with palms and aloes.

The girl was absolutely and entirely happy. She stole little glances up at the bronzed, rather hard face at her side—a face which was softened by the kindliness of the eyes. Colonel Simpson was not a talkative man, but most women felt a sense of rest and security in his presence. He offered her his arm, smiling, and she took it with a curious little thrill of pleasure. They leant over the lily−ponds, with their mysterious green shadows. For a long time neither spoke. Then they began to talk of England. The colonel dwelt on his plans, pleased to find a charming woman who was interested in them. Effie Lauder was so radiantly happy that she seemed transfigured. That afternoon, at least, she was all sincerity.

'Time to be off, I'm afraid,' said the colonel at last, looking at his watch, 'if we want to do any shopping. I must show you the shops in Valetta, Miss Lauder. They are usually most attractive to ladies.'

In the Strada Reale, the major's wife exhibited some signs of returning animation. Effie Lauder, conscious of

empty pockets, looked in at the jewellers' windows with longing eyes.

'Is that what takes your fancy?' said the colonel, in his kind voice. He was the sort of man who cannot be with a lady in a shop without buying her something. The rooms of his friends were covered with pretty things of his choosing.

'It's **awfully** sweet,' said Effie, with a sigh. The object under consideration was a slender gold muff−chain, with a Maltese cross in crimson enamel attached to it.

'I hope,' said the colonel, after a moment's hesitation, 'that your mother will not think it a liberty if I ask you to accept that little trifle as a souvenir of our delightful voyage. I owe you so much,' he added, 'that it would be but a poor return for the pleasure of your society.'

Effie Lauder drove back to the ship with flushed cheeks and excited eyes. Round her neck was the colonel's muff−chain.

She wore it, night and day, until the steamer dropped anchor at Southampton.

II

THE ball had not yet begun, but the squeaking and scraping of instruments being hurriedly tuned were audible above the clatter of talk.

With bright, anxious eyes which shifted restlessly, Effie stood upright by a rout−seat—not daring to sit down, lest she should be passed over by the young men in scarlet mess−jackets who were eagerly booking partners. Her heart was beating rather hard beneath her creased satin bodice, for, incredible as it seemed, no one had yet asked for her programme, and Effie was aware that, at Westsea, partners were irrevocably chosen for the evening in that scurrying twenty minutes before the band struck up. Her meagre black frock, which was cut audaciously low on the shoulders, cast up grey shadows under her chin, and accentuated the hollows in her neck. There is a certain exaggerated standard of liveliness and good looks in demand in garrison towns. No falling off is permitted in either respect in popular feminine favourites. Effie Lauder had always been a showy girl, and she had invariably been described as 'great fun.' She stood very upright, with her chin in the air, and kept on smiling.

Her glance took in the familiar Assembly Rooms—that large, bare drabbish hall which had been the scene of her little successes for ten years, now so curiously full of unfamiliar faces. The military type, however, remained precisely the same as when she had left for that two years' sojourn in India. Though most of them were strangers to her now, the same sort of men elbowed their way hither and thither in search of showy ladies. The subalterns, for the most part, looked incredibly young and incredibly pink; there were captains with square jaws and somewhat roving eyes; majors with drooping moustaches, and one or two colonels, getting a little grey at the temples, and with a more reserved manner with the ladies. To Effie, to−night, the crowd seemed to wear a heartless, pushing aspect.... Surely the men of the new regiment were not as nice as those she had left behind?

A tubby major—an old admirer—strolled up, jestingly pulled the flimsy programme from her fingers, inscribed his name opposite number nineteen, and went off, with a pre−occupied air, in search of a certain yellow−haired widow. The major was forty−five; he was a married man, and he had only asked her for the nineteenth dance!... Effie sighed.

She tried to look pleased, even when the band struck up with a sudden blare, and the whole big roomful of people fell, like automata, into each other's arms, and began to swirl round the room in the opening valse. She watched Katie and Rose, her two younger sisters, as they were borne off in the romping dance. The girls, though plain, were young and fresh, and she herself had sewn with them for a week to make new frocks of cheap white material. Effie was a good−hearted woman, and she was delighted that her little sisters should find partners. Kate and Rose were lively young ladies, whose snub noses were seen, for the rest of the evening, gyrating round the gaunt Assembly Rooms over the red shoulders of linesmen and the more sombre blue uniforms of gunners.

The elder sister kept on smiling, though she was the only dancer left now, standing up by the rout−seats which lined the room. Her mother was not there; she was chaperoning the girls herself, so, when the first rush of couples came pushing against her, she slipped on to a seat, making one of a row of thin, patient, elderly women with pinched lips and faded silk gowns.

Effie glanced down at her programme and considered the situation. One or two men had scrawled some initials opposite dances. Mr. O'Malley, Army Medical Staff, had asked for numbers nine and ten, and old General M'Taggart had invited her for a distant polka. But the whole thing spelt disaster; she had come back to Westsea after a two years' absence only to find little Katie and Rosie more in demand than herself, and to taste the humiliation of the chaperons' rout−seat.... At Mhow, on the Bombay side, where ladies were not too numerous, it had been very different. This was her first crushing sense of defeat....

Yet this heroine of a humble, every−day tragedy contrived to look cheerful. The world—the sniffing, feminine world, particularly—must not rejoice in her downfall. For if the men had changed since she was away, the women were precisely the same.... Yet perhaps she would not have to sit out those eight weary dances until Mr. O'Malley, Army Medical Staff, claimed her to join in the ball. Some one might turn up, or, at the worst, she could pretend she was unwell; she could slip out, put on her waterproof and boots, and run home to Bellevue Crescent. The vision of her bed, just now, was sufficiently alluring.

They were playing the Washington Post, and to the onlookers on the rout−seats the spectacle was sufficiently absurd. One or two young girls looked graceful enough, carrying the thing through with the aid of their youth and

charm; but the appearance of the more mature performers gave a curiously bacchanalian air to the whole proceeding. The music was an air to which Effie had often danced at Mhow on sultry, light nights, when a monster silver moon had shed an incredible light on the parched landscape.... At Mhow, indeed, there had always been partners at the balls, if they were not so easily secured for life.... Why had she come back? It was true that Tom's wife—who had all the whims and caprices of a young woman possessing fifteen hundred a year of her own—had got tired of the sister−in−law from England, and had not scrupled to let her see it; but she felt that by appealing to her brother's good−nature, by dwelling on the sordid discomfort, the minor miseries of the Westsea household, she might have secured a prolonged invitation. She told herself bitterly that it was humiliating for a woman past thirty not to have a penny of her own, to be dependent on the caprices of a bad−tempered, parsimonious mother.

The dance had ceased abruptly, and heated couples—the ladies smiling somewhat pityingly at Miss Lauder's forlorn state—brushed by her on their way to the refreshment−room, or to those much−sought−for chairs placed discreetly down obscure passages.... How well she knew it all! How often she had been carried off triumphantly by some temporary admirer who had prosecuted a vague suit in those same passages, on the same meagre cane chairs! A young woman passed her, looking up with frankly inviting eyes at the middle−aged man on whose arm she hung a little.... It was the old, old tragi−comedy; the degrading, unceasing pursuit of the possible husband....

They had finished the fifth dane in the programme. The next was a waltz, and the band struck up an oily, lugubrious air, entitled, 'The Love that is Loved Alway.' The couples swarmed into the room again, brushing past her callously, as she sat at the end of the rout−seat by the door. From old habit, or instinct, the girl had taken this corner−place in order that she could stand up at the end of the dances, and pretend that she, too, had had a partner. This ingenious feminine ruse had partly succeeded, but when the waltz had fairly begun, she was forced to sit down again.

Only three more dances to smile through now, and then Mr. O'Malley, the red−headed little Irish doctor from Netley Hospital, would claim her for two whole dances! It was really very nice of Mr. O'Malley; he had known her three or four years ago, when he was passing his examinations at Southampton. Now he had a permanent post.... Rapidly she calculated how much it was worth a year.... Her thoughts passed on, as the cornets accentuated the trite, commonplace waltz air, and the room was once more filled with rapidly−whirling figures. Scraps of foolish talk, answered by the slightly shrill laughter of the girls, fell on her dull ears as she sat there. How tired, how tired she felt.... How lovely, in comparison, it had been on the steamier all the way from India! Effie remembered, with a thrill of pleasure, the long walks and talks on deck with Colonel Simpson; the afternoon at San' Antonio; the chain which he had given her, and which she always wore.

Effie felt absolutely sure that he 'meant something,' he had been so devoted in a quiet, reserved way. If only she could see him again! 'Men forget so quickly,' she said to herself anxiously.... Yet she found strange comfort in the thought of him; she even did not mind so much the dismal failure of to−night. What if Colonel Simp− son were really coming to Westsea! He had said that he would come. She repeated to herself his deliberate speech at parting: I shall give myself the pleasure of calling on you and your mother very soon.' Somehow this phrase seemed to sustain her, for she had begun, suddenly, to feel rather faint and light−headed. The three girls had had no dinner, only an egg and some tea before the great business of dressing. She would have liked a glass of wine and a sandwich, but no one had come near her, or offered to find her any food.

And then, of a sudden, her heart stood still as she caught sight of a new arrival in the doorway, a bronzed soldier of forty−five, with a brown moustache tinged with grey. And, as her heart leapt with a rebound against her bodice, she realised, for the first time, how much she cared for this man who had not yet seen her on her lonely rout−seat.

III

SHE stood up instinctively, and pretended to be pulling at the ruche at the bottom of her dress. It would never do for Colonel Simpson when he saw her again to find her filling the dolorous *rôle* of wall−flower...

'I've just stopped dancing,' she explained, with a high laugh, as he stepped forward and greeted her. 'Where on earth did you fall from?' she went on with unnecessary vivacity.

'I came from town this evening. I thought I should be sure to find you here. You must be in so much request, as you are only just home,' he went on, with an indulgent smile. This middle−aged soldier had the kindly expression of a man who has no fatuities about women.

' If I am lucky enough to find you disengaged, may I have the honour of the next dance?'

'Oh, certainly; I can put the other man off,' cried Effie, with easy mendacity. Her whole manner had altered; already she looked bright and pert; the smudge of lip−salve was not needed now. Her cheeks were curiously red as she began to spin round at last with the dancers. Mr. O'Malley, indeed, and old General M'Taggart with his lumbago! They, who had kept her waiting so long, might wait themselves now.

And then the eternal tragi−comedy once more began. The woman, made desperate with disappointment, snatched at this straw of happiness like one who is drowning. With worn, cheap smiles and inviting eyes, she essayed to make herself desirable. She felt giddy and faint with hunger as they swung round in the waltz; the sudden surprise and excitement dazed her, and she hardly knew what she was saying.... Yet how good it was to have him again near her.... She leant heavily on his arm. Did **he** feel the same thrill, she wondered, that she experienced when the colonel's arm slipped round her? How good, and dear, and nice he was! How different from many of the swaggering young men who had formed her ideal up to now!... Already, with her quick feminine imagination, she saw him forming part of her favourite picture; he was reading the newspaper in a cosy, lamp−lit room, while she did fancy−work by the fire....

Vaguely she felt that, hungry and tired though she was, she must keep him amused, interested. True, he had never actually made love to her, but this, she thought, with her experience of garrison balls, was merely lack of opportunity, Colonel Simpson was not the sort of man who would make love to a woman of gentle birth on a steamer.

Whatever happened, she said to herself, she must not let him go. He was on his way to Ryde, to see a sister from whom he had been parted for years.... How long would that sister keep him? When would she see him again? Something definite, it was certain, must be said or done to−night.

'I wonder now, what has brought you to Westsea, of all places?' Effie demanded archly, as they stood at length, breathless, outside the ring of dancers.

The man looked at her, struck at the change in her face and manner since he had parted with her on the landing−stage. On the steamer, he remembered, she had had a certain success. The ladies had been few, the men numerous; she had not been forced, by competition, to exaggerate her vivacity and charm. Colonel Simpson, indeed, had thought her a nice enough woman. What he had liked about her specially was the fact that she had only had two years of India; she was still associated, in his mind, with home, and green parsonage gardens, and the narrow *convenances* of the upper middle class. What had come to this Miss Lauder, he wondered? She had, for all the world, the air of a lean and hungry huntress, and moreover, although he was too gallant to acknowledge it even to himself, that of a hungry huntress of men. It was evident that, to−night, the gods were not on the side of Effie Lauder.

He hesitated before he answered.

'I am on my way to Ryde to see my sister,' he said quietly, 'but it was a real pleasure to me to be able to stop on my way and catch another glimpse of you.'

'It's awfully sweet of you to say that!' she declared, with what struck him as unnecessary gratitude. 'I—I was just wondering if you would ever turn up,' she went on, a shade too eagerly. 'You men are all alike. No idea of constancy. What?'

The colonel felt it incumbent on him to press her arm a little and smile indulgently. Effie's heart began to beat high.

'Let's—go and sit down somewhere, shall we? I'm so awfully tired,' murmured the young woman.

'Why, yes,' he said kindly, drawing her towards the passages. 'You must be fatigued. It's past eleven o'clock, and of course you've been dancing all the evening.'

At the end of the long, drab, barrack−like passage there were two chairs, a scrap of red carpet, and a shabby palm. A candle guttered in a Chinese lantern overhead. For a wonder this corner was empty.

Effie sat down with a sigh. By accident or design, their elbows touched. She felt very happy, though a little light−headed; she had forgotten now that she was hungry....

'It's awfully nice to see you again,' she muttered, raising a pair of languishing eyes to his. 'And very, very sweet of you to come,' she added.

'I was on my way—' began the colonel, but Effie did not seem to hear him. She was wrapped in a sort of dream.... It had all come right.... The man that she had waited for, had counted on, had come. Surely he must care for her, or he would not have travelled so soon to Westsea in midwinter! Well, all her anxieties, her worries, her frustrated hopes, would soon be at an end. This night, indeed, was going to be the one night of her life....

Effie waited a few moments, wondering when he would speak, and how he would say what he was going to say, remembering, with a smile, how shy and reserved he had always been. Then, catching sight of herself in a blurred mirror opposite, she gave a little exultant laugh. The transient beauty of expression which comes to every woman who is happy, softened, for an instant, the little hollows in her cheeks and temples, giving her once more almost the roundness of youth.... It seemed almost as if she were twenty again, and the prettiest girl in Westsea. In this very corner, only ten years or so ago, men had fallen down and worshipped; quarrelling with each other for the privilege of a dance; waiting humbly until it was her pleasure to go back to the ballroom.... What if she could carry the whole thing off, settle it out of hand with one of those frank audacities which a woman, sure of her beauty and charm, may sometimes permit herself?

She would never forget, she said to herself, that look on the colonel's face—that mixture of astonishment, disgust, and, yes, repulsion. But he had saved the situation from being entirely odious—at any rate for the moment—by his never−failing tact and charm of manner. With a heart of lead, she kept on smiling, as she walked down the barrack−like passage on his arm.... Yes, she would like a sandwich, and something to drink, though the sandwich nearly choked her when she tried to eat it; and the claret−cup was horribly sweet. It was just upon twelve now, but the girls, she knew, would want to stay till two at the very earliest. Making some excuse, she slipped into the cloak−room.

Colonel Simpson waited some time, thinking Effie would come out again.

'I must have missed her,' he thought, and then he lighted a cigar and strolled home to his hotel, wondering, as he stepped along the misty, rain−driven streets, how he could ever have thought seriously—even on a homeward−bound steamer—of such a girl as Effie Lauder.

With trembling hands and scarlet cheeks Effie put on her long cloak, her buttoned boots, and a knitted pink hood. Then she waited until she felt sure that he had gone from the door. The trains would not be running now, but it was only a seven minutes' walk. Once outside she began to run. A slight drizzle was falling, and the ends of the long roads, with their stucco terraces and smug gabled villas, were blurred and vague with sea−mist.

Breathlessly she reached her own door. There were lights upstairs, in the upper portion of the house, in the rooms occupied by Major Harkness and his wife and children.... Shadows moved hurriedly across the blinds. Poor Mrs. Harkness! Effie remembered, in a dull kind of way, that the doctor's carriage had been often at the door of late. Perhaps it might be to−night? She tried hard to think of Mrs. Harkness; anything was better than dwelling on what had happened at the end of that long drab passage. Though her brain seemed fizzing in her head, she was conscious of one thing—and that was the finality of what had occurred to−night.

The one luxury which Effie possessed was a small bedroom to herself, built in the garden, at the very end of the hall passage. It was passably damp and cold in winter, but a small gas−stove had been put in, which she used on cold nights. Effie locked the door, and lit the fire.

She sat down, her teeth chattering with her walk through the wet streets. Well, at any rate, the little bedroom, where she could be alone with her trouble, was nicer than the ballroom she had left.... It had been very stupid to−night, she kept repeating to herself, and she had been hungry and light−headed, and had said something silly to Colonel Simpson.... Odd, how she had always liked the man; liked him immensely, all the time on the steamer, and wondered how soon he would turn up again, and exactly what he would say when he asked her to marry him? For Effie had never doubted for an instant that this man—this prince among men—would ask her to be his wife....

Overhead, there were steps moving hurriedly to and fro. A bell rang, and Effie could hear the doctor going upstairs. Ah, then, it was to be to−night?

She stood up, and looked at herself in the glass. Every vestige of colour had left her cheeks and lips. An earthy−coloured mask with sunken eyes stared at her from the mirror. She was conscious of nothing now but a passionate pity for herself; always of a slightly morbid temperament, she allowed a wave of hypochondriasis to envelop her. She looked round the little room, with its damp−stained walls and shabby furniture, seeing a vista of drab years in which she would be only half alive. The little bed, too, in which she would wake up, morning after morning, year after year.... How she hated that waking hour; usually she woke with a start, with a curious foreboding of something evil.... What if—what if—she went to sleep—and simply did not wake in the morning?

The doctor was upstairs all night. The grave, questioning light of a winter dawn was peering through the drawn blinds of the narrow house as, wearied out, he left the sickroom and came downstairs.

A scared housemaid laid a dirty hand upon his arm. Would the doctor step along the passage to Miss Effie's room? There was a fearful smell of gas, and Miss Effie wouldn't answer when she knocked. She couldn't make her hear. It wasn't like Miss Effie, who was always civil−spoken, and oh, so kind. Perhaps she was ill, poor young lady, or something might have happened....

The doctor's shoulder, after a few efforts, thrust inward the flimsy door. There was a rush of gas into the passage. Every nick and cranny by which air could enter had been carefully filled up. Effie lay on the bed, silent, inert, still dressed ill her black ball−gown. The doctor made a brief examination.

'How old was she?' he said, in his professional tone. Already he used the past tense. He stooped, as he spoke, to pick up something underneath his foot. It was a slight gold chain, broken in several places. He found he had trodden too, all unwittingly upon a small Maltese cross.

'Ask the doctor to be good enough to step up again for a moment,' urged a shrill feminine voice on the stair—a voice which added, as if in reply to some question, 'Yes, it's a girl—a very fine little girl.'

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF DIANA

I

ABOUT fifteen years ago, when people in London still read poetry, a young girl was sitting at a writing−table in a room in Mayfair. She had just written an affectionate letter of refusal, had carefully sealed it with sea−green wax, and addressed it to William Forsyth, Esq. Then, with a sudden impulse, she tore it into fragments, and, leaning her two elbows on the desk, dropped her face into her upturned palms and stared out at the dull brick stable, topped with a leaden sky, which formed her daily vision of the outside world.

She was a slim, nervous−looking creature, with the wide, pale eyes of those who see spiritual things. At three−and−twenty Diana Bethune thought herself old and experienced. In reality, her innocence was that of a child, and for the last year or two she had lived under the slavery of a fixed idea. Diana's strange type of beauty had made her, at twenty, the fashion in a little set in London; a set in which famous poets dine, and great painters, who disdain the cheap successes of the Royal Academy, find inspiration for their work. At one such dinner−party, a slim white goddess in a sea−green gown, she had sat opposite the poet Astel Verlase. There had been little speech between them, for Diana Bethune had been awestruck, and the great Verlase was of the order of poets who are not altogether unmindful of the pleasures of the table.

'Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?' she had quoted under her breath to her neighbour, but Verlase had overheard the whispered compliment, and from that moment the girl had been under his influence. His was the kind of reputation which imposes on the imagination. Even to the unlettered, his name was already part of English speech. To a young girl enamoured of the writer's craft there was something almost intimidating in the thought of him; and yet gradually, after that night, she had become accustomed to the fact that he was actually interested in her, that he should lend her books, visit her occasionally in the street in Mayfair where she lived, and—more marvellous still—write her many letters. An orphan with enough to live upon, she had only a bookish uncle of whom to ask advice, and Robert Bethune was every whit as proud as his niece that the illustrious poet should sit at their table, write her letters, and take her intellectual training into his hands.

Verlase's next volume contained a sonnet−sequence about a certain 'Lily−maid with wide, calm eyes.' The little set in which the poet dined when he came to London quickly divined the truth. Tongues wagged about Diana, the younger poets came and sat at her feet, noting what the master admired, and piping minor lays about Verlase's Lily Maid. To them the affair was an idyll, and the existence of the poet's wife—a dipsomaniac, put away in a Home these many years past—only added piquancy to a romantic story. That the poet should have lived more than half a century, and that his love should still be in her teens, mattered nothing to his disciples, nor did it indeed to Verlase and Diana themselves. It was obviously the poet, not the man, whom she worshipped, for personally she had seen little of him. Verlase lived in Surrey with his children, and it was only now and again that he came to London to see a publisher, or attend a literary dinner. It struck her to−day with a strange irony that the man for whom she was refusing so devoted a lover as Forsyth had hardly been in her actual presence more than a score of times.

A portrait of the poet stood on the table, just beside her desk. She looked at it again as she fingered the torn fragments of the letter she had written to Forsyth. It was a beautiful head, that of Astel Verlase, with hair already grey, sorrowful eyes, and the full lips of a voluptuary.... How William Forsyth disliked him, resented his appropriation of Diana—William Forsyth, who had declared himself her lover and whose dismissal she had just written and as quickly torn up.

Leaning her little square chin on her hands, she thought of the two men. There was the writer she worshipped, with his strange eyes, contradicting his very human lips, his imposing, far−away manner, and his world−wide fame. To look at him was to realise the intoxicating thought that she—her insignificant self—had been much to this man whose name was ever on the lips of the English−speaking world; that she had inspired the famous sonnet−sequence; that she had become, indeed, part of his life. It was true that she rarely thought of him except as the great Verlase: an imposing individuality which had, in some strange, inexplicable way, become intermixed with her own; never as a man who might be her husband or her lover. Like all the world, she knew of the poet's unfortunate marriage, but her curious attachment was of so vague and spiritual a nature that the thought of his wife hardly troubled her.

There was no portrait of Forsyth on the table, but she saw him clearly, just as on that leafy June morning when

he had been introduced to her in the Row; could see his laughing, admiring eyes as they quickened their pace and galloped their horses, side by side under the umbrageous trees. Laughter, exercise, and open−air, a sense of physical well−being—these were the things she associated with her younger lover. But Diana had only known him a few months, and he had no such intellectual influence over her as the poet Verlase.

The grey brick wall and the patch of leaden sky held no answer to her questionings. The girl took up her pen and another sheet of note−paper.

' Dear William,' she began, and then she threw down her pen with a sudden burst of laughter. 'William looks ridiculous,' she thought, 'it suggests Shakespeare—or a coachman! Why do I always laugh when I think of him? There are so few people who make one feel gay. He is a dear,' she added thoughtfully, gazing at the blank sheet of letter−paper, 'and yet I am going to give him the greatest pain a woman can give the man who loves her. It is im−possible, I can't! He cares for me so. And I don't know, after all.... Suppose it were the best thing for every one?' pleaded an inward voice. Her gaze fell on the photograph at her elbow. The strange eyes seemed to look at her sternly, rebuking her woman's capriciousness, and exacting a disciple's homage.

The girl rose perplexed from the writing−table, and walked to the fireplace, where she crouched down in a favourite attitude on the fender−stool, letting the blaze scorch her pale cheek. Yes, she would write William Forsyth a little letter saying she had been taken by surprise, and asking for time to think. That, at any rate, would soften it. She would say nothing definite, nothing which would wound him, to−day. And she hated herself for this feminine subterfuge, for Diana was, in ordinary circumstances, transparently truthful. The girl was still crouching there when the door opened, and the butler announced, in a deeply deferential and impressive whisper, 'Mr. Astel Verlase!'

The great poet stood in the doorway, a trifle thinner than when she had last seen him some six weeks ago, but with the grand manner which imposed so much on every one who was privileged to meet him. Diana sprang up, blushing with pleasure and excitement, and ran forward, with both hands outstretched.

The butler retired, discreetly closing the door.

Verlase took both the little hands, hold− ing her with his curious gaze. Then he slowly raised one of them to his lips. It was characteristic of the man that he did not bend his head, but drew the white fingers up to his own level.

' My child!' he murmured. Diana dropped her eyes, and led him to an armchair by the fire. Then she took her old place again on the fender−stool, and waited, dutifully, for the great man to speak. Verlase paused, as if thinking of something painful. Presently he passed his hand over his forehead, and smiled his rather rare smile.

'My child?' he repeated gravely and questioningly.

Diana leant forward, fascinated by his look.

'Yes,' she said. 'What—is—it?'

'You must come to me now, Diana,' he said. 'It must be so.'

'What? I don't understand,' she stammered, frightened as if some calamity were about to befall her.

'She is dead,' he said, in a toneless whisper.

'Your wife?'

'Yes. A month ago now. We won't talk of it. She had, indeed, been dead to me for more than ten years. The children don't even know of it. They thought her gone years ago. She was unworthy of them—unworthy of me.'

'Ah! but how terrible it all sounds,' said the girl, with her quickly roused sympathy. 'Your wife is dead!'

'My child,' said Verlase, stroking back her pale hair, 'you shall teach me what a beautiful thing it is to be alive.'

II

THE musty fly containing Diana and her uncle rumbled up the hill.

It was a bleak March day, with no sign as yet of vernal budding. The whistling wind swept the pinkish−drab earth of the newly−turned fields, and against the wide, sad−coloured sky the shivering elms stretched their naked branches. A stray primrose or two only added to the desolateness of the scene. As yet, the birds were mute.

From the little Surrey railway station to the home of the poet was something near a mile. As they neared the house, Diana turned her head and looked back on to the red roofs of a Surrey village, then to a sweep of gorseland, and farther on to a line of blue hills which melted into the vague grey of the horizon. Diana gave a little sigh of relief. She was one of those women who are sensitive to outward things. Whatever the house was like, the outlook was superb. Unfortunately the house, which they lighted on suddenly at a turn of the road, revealed itself, primarily, as a gabled villa of that pseudo−Gothic style which sprang up over the land in the mid−Victorian era, with French windows opening, under an iron verandah, on to a prim gravelled terrace bordered with narrow, empty flower−beds, a foreground being supplied by clumps of speckled evergreens.

The poet came out to meet them, with a felt wide−awake in his hand. It had struck the young girl as a little strange that her lover should not have been at the station, but Verlase, who limped perceptibly, pleaded a slight indisposition. Indeed, he looked grayer and older in the searching outdoor light, for she had seen him only, hitherto, deceptively illumined by the pink−shaded wax−candles of London dinner−tables, or in the equally discreet shadows of her own drawing−room. Nevertheless, she had a little thrill as he pressed her hand, for did he not look more human, more approachable, with his worn look, and this background of smug British villadom, so different from anything she had ever pictured as his home?

There were other faces besides that of the poet: the three children, who lurked in the little hall, regarding their future step−mother with curious and somewhat astonished eyes. Ethelred—the boy—a pert lad of thirteen, gazed with naïve curiosity at the slim young lady who had undertaken to rule their home. Edgarda, the eldest girl, who was turned fourteen, had dust−coloured hair dragged back from a portentous−looking forehead, and already wore spectacles over her short−sighted eyes. The youngest, Ermyntrud, an unhealthy−looking child of eleven, eyed Diana with undisguised malice. The future Mrs. Verlase was fond of children, but she felt instinctively that it would be a difficult task to ingratiate herself with Ermyntrud.

'Are you going to be our new mother?' said Edgarda solemnly, advancing and hold− ing out her hand. Diana noticed with surprise that this self−contained child did not offer to kiss her.

'I—I hope so,' said Diana, blushing.

'I trust we shall be friends,' said Edgarda with some solemnity. 'You will not find me much trouble. The children,' with a disdainful glance at the two young ones, 'are occasionally tiresome. But I have studious habits. I have my hours for doing everything,' she continued, leading Diana into a small room painted with dull sage−green, while Astel Verlase stopped outside to speak to Mr. Bethune. 'Come and look at my study. These are my books of reference. Here is a slate, with the time marked out which I am to give to special subjects. At present I am studying Plato. My tutor comes at twelve. But father does not wish me to give so much time to Greek. He would rather I devoted myself to early English literature. I am preparing a monograph on the pre−Chaucerites.'

'Ah!' murmured the girl, 'I see you inherit your father's tastes.'

'Father says that my brain capacity is abnormal in so young a child,' said Edgarda modestly. 'You see I am very young. I have only just completed my fourteenth year.

'And so clever and studious already!' laughed Diana, amused at the young girl's solemnity. She bent to kiss her future step−daughter, but the child pretended not to see her gesture, and turned away.

' I trust we shall in no way interfere with each other's tastes and intellectual pursuits,' she said, leading Diana out again into the little hall.

'I say, are we to call you mother?' demanded Ethelred bluntly, hanging with all his weight on Diana's arm. It was his special way of showing his admiration, and he approved of his father's choice.

'Soon, perhaps—and if you will,' said the bride−elect, with a curious little thrill in her voice. Although the engagement was not yet announced, Verlase was making preparations for a speedy marriage, and in Lincoln's Inn many sheets of parchment were being covered with clerkly writings relating to the 'Lily Maid's' dowry. Robert

Bethune had been a little astonished at the business apti−tude, the curious display of caution which had been shown on this occasion by the famous author of the sonnet−sequence. Of this, however, as yet, the girl knew nothing.

An intensely feminine creature, with a strong maternal instinct, the boy's words made Diana thrill to her finger−tips. And so these strange children, so soon to be very near to her, would call her by that tenderest of all names!

'Ermyntrud wants to know if you've brought us any presents?' continued the boy with a snigger. 'She's an awful little pig, is Ermyntrud. You ought to have stuffed her with sweets if you want her to like you.'

'Oh, what a lie!' shouted the younger girl, seizing her brother by the wrist and twisting it viciously. 'You're a beastly story−teller. You are, you are, you are!' she screamed, working herself into a passion.

'Criky, what a temper we're in,' said Ethelred derisively, hopping on one foot to the other, with his hands in his pockets. The girl ended with a vicious scream, and ran upstairs, where she was heard banging−to a door.

'She's always like that,' said Ethelred calmly. 'You won't see her again to−day. She'll sulk, and she won't eat, and then father will get in a jolly wax with her—and oh, my eye, you must look out for squalls!'

'Then why put her out, my dear boy,' said Diana kindly, 'if you know that sort of thing vexes her?'

'Ugh! if you knew how beastly dull it is down here, with father taking care of his digestion all the time, and Edgarda poking over those beastly old books, and nothing for a chap to do that's worth doing—why, you'd like a row now and again, just to enliven things a little.'

'Don't you go to school?' said Diana, who was already feeling anxious. The vista of her home−life was beginning to look clouded.

'No fear! Father doesn't like schools. We have a tutor. He's got sandy hair, so we call him "Carrots." He's in love with his landlady's daughter in the village. We chaff him all the time. He's a bally fool. Oh, I say, Miss Diana, come and look at my lop−eared rabbits.'

The girl was dragged away.

She was kept out more than an hour in the bleak garden, inspecting rabbit−hutches. There was the pear−tree, too, in which—according to Ethelred's unsupported state− ment—he performed prodigious feats of climbing during the summer months; and the stable, in which stood a piebald pony, and the small governess−cart which the children were allowed to drive. There was no stabling for another horse—and riding was Diana's only passion. Her heart sank. A surly−looking man—half gardener, half coachman—came out and stared at the two. She was beginning to feel tired and chilled.

'Where is your father, Ethelred?' she asked, as they turned at last towards the house. The boy was still hanging with all his weight on her arm, which was numb with the cold March wind.

'Oh, father's lying down. He always does in the afternoon. I think he's going to write something quite soon,' said the younger Verlase, 'for he's been so jolly cross the last few days. Do you remember his last book?' continued the boy confidentially; 'that one with a lot of rot about a Lily Maid? My eye I didn't we all catch it about then! I hate poetry—don't you, Miss Diana?'

To which question Miss Bethune was beginning already to feel too dejected to reply.

At seven o'clock, dinner was served in a dining−room of modest dimensions, but hung with old tapestries and furnished with Early English furniture of the severest and most Saxon simplicity. The two elder children appeared, Edgarda taking the head of the table and blinking solemnly through her pince−nez. She looked pale and over−worked, in a dress of cinnamon−brown, fashioned like an Anglo−Saxon garment.

As for the poet, he always looked his best in evening dress, and Diana's spirits rose again as she sat and gazed at the hero of her dreams, trying to realise that she was here, under his own roof, sitting at his table, the companion of his children, about to be what she had never dreamed possible, and that was—his wife. But Verlase sat next to her, handsome enough, but with a peevish expression on his face which she had never seen there. She noticed that, when serving the soup, he took none himself. What could have annoyed him? Had **she** already done something which could vex him? She searched her conscience, but could think of nothing. She had even dressed herself in a gown which he had once told her that he liked.

And yet here was Astel Verlase drumming with one hand on the table, eating nothing, and saying no word. Robert Bethune started a discussion on a certain new poet whom the reviewers had lately discovered.

'I told you, Edgarda,' said the poet, interrupting in an irritable tone, 'never to allow the servants to forget to

place toast on the table beside my plate. Bread, as you are aware, I cannot touch. If you suffered in the same way in which I do, you would be more considerate of your father's health.'

An anxious, agitated parlourmaid hurried forward with the toast−rack, and Verlase, having helped himself to a dose of patent digestive medicine in a tablespoon, left the bottle beside his plate for the rest of the dinner. Mr. Bethune, in his bland way, pretended to take no notice; Diana blushed all over her face and slender throat, and gazed at her plate; Ethelred giggled audibly, and was reproved by an awful look through the shining pince−nez of the child at the head of the table. Diana felt glad when dinner was over.

The next morning Verlase took the girl upstairs to see the little sitting−room which was to be hers. Diana gave a comprehensive glance round the somewhat dingy−apartment, which was decorated in the style affected by Morris in those days, and then walked quickly to the window. Below lay the bold sweeping landscape, which had enchanted her on her way up from the station. There, at least, one's horizon opened out. Verlase stood beside her, gazing out, too, on the sweeping lines, the bold colouring of the Surrey hills. The girl slid her hand through his arm, and leant a little, with a tired gesture, for an instant against his shoulder. It was the first spontaneous proof of tenderness she had ever given him. He had always seemed so aloof, so detached, so unapproachable. But to−day she felt mentally weary, and anxious, in a way, for masculine sympathy.

From below, in the garden, came the sound of children's wrangling voices, and for an instant there was a scuffling, whirling vision of a boy and a girl in high combat. Then the struggling figures disappeared among the evergreens, and all was quiet again.

'The young life!' murmured the poet indulgently. He slid his arm round the girl and drew her to him with a peculiar smile. Diana issued from that embrace with the feelings of a terrified bird. She had not thought of Verlase as an ardent lover. The girl sat down, avoiding his eyes. She glanced round the room at the paper, with its meaningless apples meandering over a sage−green ground, at the faded peacock−blue curtains, and at the autotypes of simpering virgins which covered the walls.

'I shall have it done up for you, Diana,' said the poet, with a wave of his hand. 'Choose your style−your favourite colours.'

'I think I should like Empire!' said Diana with a sudden impulse. 'It is gay, don't you think, in a dull world? Why not,' she went on, gazing at the dolorous draperies, 'have little mirrors with fluted gilt frames, and a sofa or two with pretty striped brocades?'

Verlase frowned slightly, and murmured something about the 'meretricious in decoration,' but he did not dispute the point, and it was finally arranged that the poet and his future bride should run up to town in a couple of days' time and do most of their pre−nuptial shopping.

III

THE Tottenham Court Road on a windy March day is hardly an ideal place in which to nurse a waning affection. After two hours spent in different 'emporiums,' Diana began to view these preparations for her marriage with bewildered dismay. If she could only be alone, to think!

The east wind always affected the great poet's temper, and the wind was decidedly in the east to−day. As for Diana, she would have none of the imitation Empire mirrors which were brought out for her inspection. They were odious, she said, with their glaringly new gilt frames, and their foolish little eagles perched on a gimcrack vase. The sitting−room in Surrey seemed a long way off.... After all, would she ever really live in it? She ended by buying nothing, pleading a headache.

'You are looking fatigued, my poor child,' said Verlase, in his elderly, weary voice. 'We will drive straight to the Incorporated Stores in Long Acre. I have some purchases to make there, and we shall be able to have some lunch.'

Inside the big, dingy building they were jostled by a pushing, hurrying, semi−genteel crowd—pale, harassed, over−worked clerks, clergymen's wives, and nondescript people from distant suburbs, who bent over the counter to give addresses in a whisper: 'Upper Tooting,' 'Hornsey Rise,' 'Kilburn,' and the like. There were perspectives of plush frames, of gilt clocks, of Brummagem candlesticks, while round the glass doors, which swung incessantly to and fro, were cheap photogravures and framed oleographs after Eugène de Blaas. There was a never−ceasing tramp of ascending and descending feet. The atmosphere was stale and hot.

The two spent half an hour choosing an oil−stove. By this time there were black circles round Diana's eyes.

Verlase explained kindly that in future she need not tire herself. It would be sufficient if she came up to the Stores once in ten days or so, and spent an hour there. Of course the meat was superior to the meat they could get in a village butcher's shop, while as to medicines, everything was made up for the household at the chemical department.

They sat down at a dingy marble table in the refreshment room. Diana was too tired to eat. She gazed at the rows of profiles—of men in shabby overcoats, of women in meagre furs—hastily munching food. Here and there an anxious−looking hand was raised with a cup of tea or glass of milk. At the next table a family of children in woollen comforters were eating noisily. It was a scene of pathetic respectability, a leaf torn from the pages of half a hundred hopeless, humdrum lives.

Diana rose suddenly from the table, leaving her plate untouched.

'I must go home,' she entreated. 'I really don't feel well. It would be better for me to get back to Park Street. Will you call me a cab?' she said resolutely, astonished at her own decision. Never, she thought, had she desired anything so ardently as to escape from this place, from the man she was with, and to be alone in her own house with leisure to look her future in the face.

Seeing the girl's distress and altered looks, Verlase made no ado. At home she would have her maid to look after her, and, as he put her in the cab and pressed her hand tenderly, he told her that he should be at the station to−morrow to meet her, should she feel well enough to take a morning train.

The poet raised his hat, smiled a little sadly, and the cab rumbled away.

Diana slept soundly that night in her little amber and white bedroom, and in the morning, with the spring sunshine flooding her counterpane, the world seemed a gayer place. The weather had changed. The wind had dropped, and it was a soft spring morning. The maid brought in a letter with her tea. It was from William Forsyth. He had, he wrote, been very badly treated of late. He had seen nothing of her—had heard she was away, but meant to take his chance of finding her in on his way to the Row that morning. If the gods were kind Diana would ride with him once again, as they used to do. At any rate he would be with her at eleven.

At eleven! And it was ten now. She jumped out of bed, calling for her bath, and feeling unreasonably elated. 'Send round to the stables and say I shall want Flyaway at eleven; and get out my best habit,' cried the girl. 'No, not a sailor hat. I hate sailor hats and loose coats. I want to look smart, very smart; nicer than any one in the Row this morning. And you'll have to wave my hair, Sarah. It looks dreadful. I look a frump.'

She was standing, all ready, whip in hand, when Forsyth was announced. How charming, and young, and gay he looked in his riding dress, as he stood for an instant framed by the doorway, with his clean−shaven face

showing a ruddy brown against the clear white of his collar and tie. It must have been something in her eyes which made him step forward eagerly, after shutting the door and giving a cautious look round.

'How sweet you look,' he said, seizing her wrists and gazing at her steadily with tender eyes.

She dropped her lids, and murmured something unintelligible, and in an instant the young man had her in his arms.

'I—I have been making such a mistake,' she said presently in a repentant voice, gently disengaging herself.

'What about, my darling?'

'Oh, that—that letter I wrote to you. I didn't know then, that I—that we—'

'Didn't you? My other heart! I knew it all along. I was only waiting. Didn't you know I should wait?'

'But, William—'

'Billy!'

'Oh, Billy, then! Do you—do you really think we shall get on together?'

'I'm willing to risk it.'

'And we shall know lots of nice people, sha'n't we? Nice, silly, cosy people, I mean.'

'Oh, not the clever lot, eh?'

'N—no. And we shall be quite poor, sha'n't we, Billy?'

'Nine hundred a year between us. Genteel poverty, mitigated by Venetian glass and Norwegian silver (wedding presents, sweetheart!) and a cook whom we shall have trained. As for dresses, a dozen yards of Indian silk, and my girl looks like a goddess.'

'You're a stupid boy,' said Diana loftily. 'You know absolutely nothing about domestic economy.'

'I know I love you.'

Below, in the sunshiny Mayfair street, the horses were impatiently pawing the flags. Diana threw up the window, and a whiff of intoxicating spring air met their nostrils.

'I forgot,' said the girl suddenly. 'I've got to write a letter. Billy, I'm supposed to be—to be staying with Mr. Astel Verlase. I'll tell you all about it some day.'

Forsyth hardly heard her. He was admiring the delicious lines of her neck, and the little blond curls frothing round her collar, as she sat there busily scribbling at her desk.

'Have you told him to go to the devil, Di?' said the young man, lazily watching her through half−closed eyes. He was accustomed to tease her about imaginary adorers.

'He won't do that,' she said, as a vision crossed her mind of the Incorporated Stores. Then she folded, stamped, and addressed her letter.

'Now I am ready,' she said. He bent and kissed the flower−like mouth.

And the young man and the young girl were assailed by the subtle odour of spring as they stepped out together into the open air.

ITS OWN REWARD

'Walking, walking still, the feet are weary; the city is yet far off, a tent is erected by the roadside; say, who is to blame?

THE SÁKHIS OF KABIR.

I

'**AREN'T** men beasts!' cried Lily, banging the imitation−ivory brush in her hand on to the dressing−table. 'I'll pay them out some day, see if I don't!'

The girl, who did everything with a lavish hand, had turned on the two gas−lamps over the dressing−table at full tap, and the flaring lights revealed the strange likeness of the two sisters. They were young and curiously pretty. Each had an appealing, wistful look—a look that is often seen on the faces of young girls; a look which asks of Life its great secret. So obvious was the *rôe* for which Nature had intended the two Waltons, that the sight of either of them evoked a vision of a young mother caressing a little child. The sisters were of middle height. fair−skinned, and delicately round in the bust. Lily's mouth had firmer lines; there was more character in her face, and her eyes, now and again, had a curious expression, a look which was merely mischievous now, but which might develop, with increasing years, into a somewhat reckless audacity. These were the only apparent differences; looks and temperament were nearly identical.

'How are you going to do that?' demanded the younger girl gravely, from her hunched−up position on the bed. 'Seems to me it'll be hard enough to earn our own livings.' Their Aunt Charlotte, she reminded Lily, wanted ten shillings a week for their keep, and to−morrow morning they must go. It had all been so sudden that neither of them had had time to realise their position. And yet the father's bankruptcy, the drapery business in the hands of receivers, and then his quickly−following death from influenza—only six months after their mother had succumbed under an operation;—all had paled for Amy before the catastrophe of Frederick Johnson's desertion. It seemed ages ago now—and yet it was only three days—that he had written to say that, owing to changed circumstances, his parents were reluctantly obliged to withdraw their consent to the match. 'Their consent indeed!' cried Lily, on reading the letter; 'he means the £s.d. He's a sweep!' But Amy, womanlike, found excuses for her lover. Indeed, she talked of him and of their marriage continually.

'Oh, Lily, that white satin with the Honiton lace would have been sweetly pretty! Poor mother,' she went on with a toneless laugh, 'used to be always saying what pretty brides we'd make—long before my wedding day was as good as fixed at St. Thomas's. But that's all over now.'

'Yes. That's all over,' said Lily, a little brutally. 'But Mr. Rosenberg is going to help me,' she added, with sudden pink cheeks.

'Mr. Rosenberg!' murmured Amy distrustfully. She had never been sure why the smart young stockbroker, with his chambers in Jermyn Street, came out so often to Kilburn. What had he to do with their little world? True, he paid Lily a good deal of attention; but when a young man in their circle paid attention to a young woman, it meant only one thing, domesticity:—and of marriage Amy was pretty certain that Lily's admirer had said nothing. She remembered how her mother, up to the last, had always been of opinion that 'that Rosenberg meant no good, hanging about Lily, keeping better men off, and never coming to the point.' The late Mrs. Walton, indeed, had objected to Mr. Rosenberg from every point of view. She disliked him for being a foreigner, for driving showy ladies in his phaeton in the Park, for having a permanent stall at the Gaiety, and for going to Paris twice or thrice a year. 'Why,' she argued, 'couldn't Lily choose some nice young fellow in Tea at the Kilburn Cinderellas, as Amy had done?'

'Yes, he's been awfully, awfully kind ... I can't **tell** you. He's taken such an interest in all our affairs; he even made a little money—thirty pounds or so—on the Stock Exchange for me, with a five−pound note which I had by me. And he knows all the managers in London; he's going to get me a part—just a little one, at first, of course. Perhaps it will have to be in the provinces, to begin with.'

'You want to be an **actress**? Oh, Lily, don't. What would father and mother have said?'

This, then, was the outcome of Lily's surreptitious going to matinées when she was supposed to be drinking tea at Clapham or Norwood. Amy herself had never been in a theatre. The girls had been brought up in strict Dissenting principles.

'Can't help it now,' said the elder girl doggedly. 'Don't make a fuss.' Then, in a more soothing tone, she urged upon her sister the need for one of them to make money, painting the sordid monotony of life in Camden Town with Aunt Charlotte, and Amy's habitual delicacy, which made her what she called a 'port−wine−and−cod−liver−oil girl.' ' Leave it to me, you young silly,' she wound up, 'to make both our fortunes.'

And Amy, feeling that sleep, just now, was more important than argument, began to fold up her petticoats methodically, and then, slipping into bed with a little shiver and a repressed sigh, she closed her eyelids.

After that there was complete silence. But for a long time Lily moved restlessly about the room, gathering her personal treasures together. She had already found what she wanted for the moment—a cheap lodging for a week in Bloomsbury. The company in which Mr. Rosenberg had found her a tiny part was starting for the North in ten days' time. Once started in her theatrical career, she would soon be able to earn enough for them both. Instinctively, she was sure of her youth, her good looks, her charm.... All day long she had felt a hot glow of indignation at Frederick Johnson's treatment of her sister. She longed to revenge Amy, to see her married to some one richer, more 'gentlemanly' than Fred.... She saw herself a famous actress, rich, successful, able to dower the younger girl. All their recent troubles, especially Fred's defection, had roused the defiant note in her character.

Mechanically she went round collecting the things she meant to take with her—framed photographs of her father, mother, and sister; a bronze kitten playing a fiddle; a dried rose kept in a pink silk bag, given by some youthful sweetheart; some soiled ball−programmes, and, most precious of all, some twenty photographs, secretly accumulated one by one, of Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

When she had done, the girl was tired. It was a muggy autumn night, and the air was close. Crossing to the window, she threw up the sash, and the dank air streamed into the gas−laden room. A clock, with much deliberation, struck eleven.

Long after the last stroke had died away the elder girl stood there listening. What she heard was a low murmur, the aggregation of a thousand sounds, sinister in its persistency. It was the roar of London.

II

LIFE with Aunt Charlotte in Camden Town bore hardly on Amy. Miss Charlotte Walton was a thin−lipped, thrifty woman, who lived in a house giving on to a vista of railway arches. There were intermittent lodgers, as well as a continual fret about the minor domestic economies. Hardly a day passed, too, without scathing remarks being made about the absent Lily, who was now in Sunderland, in lodgings with another 'young lady' of the company, where they were busy rehearsing the Christmas pantomime. Lily had the fairy queen's part. Unfortunately, she had only twelve lines: but then her costume was dazzling. Later on she wrote that she was understudying the 'principal boy,' and then that she was out of the bill, owing to an obstinate cold on the chest. Amy wanted to go north at once, but she had no money, neither could she leave the situation which she had managed to get—that of under clerk in the office of a newly−floated company, where from nine in the morning till six at night the young girl sat addressing envelopes. On three evenings a week she made a hasty meal at an Aerated Bread Shop and went to have her typewriting lesson.

At home, in the little house in Camden Town, there was waiting for her, on other nights, her aunt's pinched visage hovering over a teapot and a herring. If she were ten minutes late there were sour looks. Often she was too tired to eat. The girl, being delicate, had been accustomed to abundant, nourishing food—to cups of chocolate, beef−tea, and basins of arrowroot when she went to bed. Her aunt's wrath seemed to be especially excited against her because she knew that her niece, in addition to 'putting on airs about her food,' was fretting about Frederick Johnson.

Indeed, Amy s 'disappointment' had proved more poignant, and even more lasting, than she had thought possible. And yet she could remember the time when the affection had all been on the side of the man, for Amy, when she met him, was at an age when admiration is more to a woman than passion; but by the time the approximate date of their marriage was fixed, it was the girl who enveloped her lover with an all−absorbing ardour.

And now, in the grey blurred streets, in crowded fusty omnibuses, alone at night in her draughty bedroom, she found herself continually thinking of the young man's sleek head and satisfied smile. She tried to picture, at all hours of the day and evening, what her lover was doing.... From half−past nine to half−past six he was, of course, in the City. She wondered if he still went to the Kilburn Town Hall dances. Perhaps—she secretly hoped—he played whist instead: he had talked of joining a small club. On Saturdays he always made one of the Willesden Harriers. They had paper−chases all the winter long. Once, when they were engaged, she had met him flying by, in a suburban lane, the type, to her, of an English athlete.

Starved in body and soul, the young girl clung to the memory of her one happiness. In all the hundreds of novels she had read, it was always argued that—for a woman, at least—one love was sufficient for a lifetime. She brooded on this in wakeful nights, and in the intervals of addressing prospectuses at the office. The company which she innocently helped to promote was one for the formation of Happy Homes in Manitoba; that somewhat intemperate region being represented, in glowing terms, as especially suitable for young couples about to marry. Amy sometimes wondered if it would be any use addressing one of the company's prospectuses to Fred: if he still cared enough for her to start a new life together in Canada; but this hope was sometimes doubled with a misgiving, which pulled at her very heart−strings, that Mr. Frederick Johnson was not one of those adventurous Britons who make pioneers—that he was, in a word, too fond of his easy City life, the bargains made over glasses of sherry, the suburban dances, the runs with the Willesden Harriers....

Meantime, January had come and gone, and for a month there had been no news of Lily. When the expected letter arrived, Amy hid it. The envelope bore a strange−looking foreign stamp, which turned out, on closer inspection, to be that of the principality of Monaco. Lily wrote in the highest spirits. Her dear little Amy was not to worry about her. She had been very ill at the lodgings in Sunderland, but Mr. Rosenberg had come up directly he had heard of it, had had her removed to the hotel, and had called in the two cleverest doctors in the town. They had ordered her south, and here she was at the grandest hotel in Monte Carlo. Adolph had been so good, so devoted; she didn't know how to thank him. He insisted she shouldn't work for a time; later on he would get her a part at a London theatre.... She was confident that it would all come right in the end; that once they got back to England they would be married. Anyhow, he was very good and devoted. Lily would never be able to repay

him.... They had been to Nice, where the shops were exquisite; but oh! so dear. She had got all French clothes now. She was a great success when she went to the gaming−tables. Adolph liked people to look at her.... And she was still, and always, her Amy's loving sister—Lily.

This letter marked a turning−point in the younger Walton's life. Up to now she had imagined that some day the two sisters would live together; that Lily would become a successful actress, and that she herself would scrape and save enough to help in a little home. Who knew? Perhaps some day Fred might have come back to her.... Concealing the letter from Aunt Charlotte, she went about her business all day with pinched, dry lips, and lack−lustre eyes. At the office, Amy addressed quite a tremendous number of 'Happy Home' prospectuses. Work had to be done, whatever happened. Bread had to be earned. Some earned it one way, some another. And then, while her pen travelled mechanically over the long envelopes, there were vague visions of that strange little place in the South of Europe to which Lily had been taken—the palms, the terraces hanging over a cobalt sea, the gaming−tables, and the ladies with outrageous hats.... Amy had seen pictures of Monte Carlo in illustrated papers, and, more highly coloured, in the grimy depths of the Underground Railway. ...It looked so pretty that she had a puritanical feeling that it was not right to go there.... No, much better go to cold, far−northern Manitoba, where men took their wives, and earned their bread by the sweat of their brow.... And yet Lily was always right; she was so strong, so determined, so resourceful; everybody at home had always looked up to Lily. And so it was that she felt neither shocked, nor sore, nor indignant; she had only an overwhelming desire to go and find comfort, consolation, and protection, as she had so often found it, in the arms of her lover. And this desire took possession of her when she had need of all th dignity, the self−repression, the self−renunciation which she could command.

At lunch−time she could swallow nothing. It was a Saturday, and the office shut at two. Usually, the child went home, but to−day she was strangely restless. An omnibus took her towards Kilburn, and then, mechanically, her steps led past the large shop—now turned into a Universal Store—past the square, smug−looking house with the garden where they used to play tennis; then on into the Willesden lanes, for a secret hope had mastered her. This was the day that the Harriers had their paper−chase. Perhaps she might catch sight of Fred.

The roads were damp and muddy. Through the bare branches of the elms was seen here and there a prim gabled villa, with dingy brick walls shutting in a dank garden. Farther on there were vistas of half−built terraces, and all the desolation of ragged, unfinished suburbs. She stopped in front of one of these half−built rows of houses. At one end of Beaconsfield Terrace there were gaping windows like empty eye−sockets, yellow planks in place of steps, mounds of brick, and milk−like pools of lime. Towards No. 15, however, the houses were finished: some were even occupied.... No. 21—that was to have been their home, hers and Fred's! How often they had come to look at it together!... She saw, with a nameless pang, that some one had taken the house. Yes, there were 'tapestry' curtains, a plant in the drawing−room window, and, higher up, a baby's fat, vacant face pressed against a pane....

Amy walked hastily away, her head bent. Life was very hard.

And then, at the turn of the road, the girl's heart began to thump beneath her jacket. A line of running figures, pink below, white above, came suddenly in view. Some looked furtively over their shoulders as they ran, their elbows working to and fro with the regularity of machines. Surely this one in front was Fred? He was so quick and strong; he was always the first—was not this his sleek brown head?

The Harriers were past in a flash, their rhythmical footfalls hardly sounding in the mud. They had gone, but there had been nothing to gladden the girl's longing eyes, or to fill her empty heart. Fred was not there. It was past seven o'clock when she got home, and the voice of Aunt Charlotte was raised in loud complaint as she pulled open the hall door.

'I can't make tea for you again. I've put three spoons in the pot already. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you ought. There's your bloater stone−cold. It's a per−fect sin, wasting good food.'

Amy, exasperated, turned suddenly upon her.

'You'll drive me crazy! You're always at me! Let me go!' shrieked the young girl, as Aunt Charlotte caught her by the arm. The elder woman stood amazed, as Amy rushed upstairs and banged her bedroom door. At any rate, whatever her faults, the child had always been sweet−tempered.

' The girl's going out of her mind!' said Miss Walton, with a certain air of triumph. Later on, however, as Amy did not come down again, her heart softened towards her niece; for all night long she could hear the distant sound of sobs—of sobs which were carefully deadened by a meagre pillow.

III

AMY only went once or twice to the little house in Brompton in which Lily was installed. It was difficult to avoid her aunt's questions, and moreover the younger girl would only go when she knew Mr. Rosenberg was away. Once, when she had trudged, after tea, most of the way there, she had seen the brougham emerging from the little garden as she came up to the gate. There was Lily, with her blond hair artificially waved, and wrapped in a cloak of yellow brocade and sables. Two semi−bald young men, who had obviously dined, were laughing as they bent towards her. It was a brief vision of flushed, complacent faces, of cigarette−smoke, of diamond studs, and fur−lined wraps half thrown open.

The young girl was so ashamed that she went home again without making a sign. After that, she would not go to Brompton. Lily had to meet her at an Aerated Bread Shop or in Kensington Gardens if she wanted to see her; but she was busy enough in these days, having a tiny part at a London theatre now. There were pictures of her in those weekly papers which exploit the chorus−girl, and she appeared as a 'Type of English Beauty' in some of the Regent Street windows. Sometimes Lily wrote, on heavily−scented paper, with a sprawling gilt monogram.... Everything was all right, she said, and Adolph was devoted; only the parents had been horrid about the question of marriage.... It would be all right in time, and then Amy might come to her. Meantime, wouldn't she accept a little ermine muff, or one of her frocks—the least showy of them?

But the younger Walton would accept nothing. She had become, during the year which followed her sister's journey to Monte Carlo, moody and desponding. Often she passed a whole evening without speaking. When she went to bed she sat, escaping from the sordid monotony of real life, devouring penny novelettes far into the night.

With the next new year her occupation threatened to cease. The Company for the Promotion of Happy Homes in Manitoba was about to be wound up, and the young girl had to find work elsewhere. She had learned typewriting and shorthand by now, and for the next few weeks Amy's childish face and shining hair were seen lurking in the entrances to City offices. Eventually she got a temporary engagement.

And soon she had a new anxiety. The early spring, with rumours of war, brought disaster in the particular market engineered by Mr. Rosenberg. Things became so bad that he was 'hammered' in the House, and then there was a sudden flight to Brussels, leaving the Brompton villa and other luxuries unpaid for. Lily was left behind; and Mr. Adolph Rosenberg, taking his financial talents to a foreign Bourse, did not return to London.

Amy flew, now, to the Brompton villa; but she found the place being sold up, and no trace of Lily. She wrote, however, soon, from Huddersfield, where she was performing in a successful musical comedy which had gone on tour. A little later there was a letter from Bradford. Lily had given up the stage—there was very little chance of getting on unless you had influence; and she had, as a matter of fact, accepted the post of housekeeper to an elderly gentleman, a retired woollen manufacturer, who had a lonely but 'magnificently appointed' house overlooking the moors.

Every evening now, to Aunt Charlotte's surprise, Amy sat scribbling letters. Sometimes she tore up everything she had written, but other times the letters were addressed, stamped, and posted the same night. A fixed idea had taken possession of her: all might yet be well, she thought, if she only explained matters to Fred.... She would tell him everything—how hard she worked, how unhappy she was in the dingy house in Camden Town, how she was starving for a little sympathy, a little love.... But no answers came to her letters. Perhaps he had gone away. Well, she would send post−cards. Some one would read them, and, in pity's sake, send them on. So Amy wrote now on post−cards. And every day, as she caught the omnibus to the City, or bent over the typewriting machine at the office, she hoped against hope for an answer. He couldn't have forgotten, she argued. They had been so much to each other; she could remember every one of his ardent phrases, the very sensation of his caresses.... No, no, it wasn't possible that he could have forgotten already.... Amy's eyes were sunken and flickering now; her lips drawn and parched. When the senior clerk spoke roughly to her—for she was forgetful in these days—she would straightway dissolve into tears. The senior clerk was disgusted: this was the result of employing girls in business offices, he said; for his part, he thought that women should be at home, attending to their household duties. And then, whistling a popular air, he would change his coat and hurry off to keep an appointment at a music hall.

One afternoon, while Amy was finishing her last week at the office, a prosperous−looking young gentleman with a sleek head rapped at Miss Walton's knocker, and, ringing the bell in addition, was hurriedly answered by

Aunt Charlotte herself. Mr. Frederick Johnson, who appeared somewhat sheepish and embarrassed, had called to make a complaint. Of course, he was naturally deeply sorry for all that had happened in the past, but if this annoyance of letters and post−cards did not cease, he would have, he declared with some irritation, to take measures to protect himself. The fact was, that he was—well, he was a married man now; had taken a house in Elgin Avenue, Harrow Road, and, as his wife was in delicate health, the doctor had expressly forbidden her to be annoyed or excited. In a word, Mr. Frederick Johnson was extremely sorry; but couldn't the past be buried, and Miss Amy Walton—to whom he wished every happiness—be induced to put it out of her mind?

A sudden wave of feminine sympathy swept over the grim−featured old woman. She not only showed Mr. Johnson the door, but added 'a bit of her mind' to the lover who had behaved so unhandsomnely. But, as it turned out, it was not the wisest thing to do. A few weeks later, they were threatened with a summons before a police magistrate, which was only staved off by Aunt Charlotte's promises that nothing the child wrote should be posted. The news of Fred Johnson's marriage had no such sobering effect on the girl as that young gentleman had appeared to hope. As a matter of fact, she did not believe it, thinking that Aunt Charlotte had invented the whole thing to annoy her.

There was a perpetual farce kept up about the girl's correspondence.

'Post this letter for me, won't you? I feel too tired to go out to−day.'

'Yes, my dear. Give it to me.' Amy sank back on the hard cushions. Her work had stopped, and she had nothing to take her out of doors. Indeed, she hardly left the sofa now.

And presently, as the elder woman was hurrying along the sordid streets, she stopped on one of the bridges of the canal, and rested for a moment, gazing down into the slimy water below. Aunt Charlotte had softened during their trouble. She sympathised now with the girl who was with her, the niece who had not 'disgraced' her. She would see to it that the child had better food; John had always spoiled his girls ridiculously. Perhaps she ought to have meat twice a day. She would get her a cutlet for her supper, and some of the iron tonic which the chemist kept, ready−made, at the shop round the corner. She had become alarmed now, lest this young creature should not be able to pull through.... In her hand she still held the letter which Amy had given her. With a sigh she tore it into fragments, and let them fall, a fluttering white shower, down into the canal below.

Very quickly all trace of them had disappeared, and soon there was only the brown, oily expanse of the sluggish, turgid water−way, down which the barges moved stealthily along to distant midland cities.

But if Aunt Charlotte had nearly given up hope, she was reckoning without the resources of Lily.

One day in June there drove up, in a four−wheel cab, a handsome, matronly young lady in deep widow's weeds. Amy, with her pale face and scared eyes, fell, sobbing hysterically, into her elder sister's arms.

'My poor darling,' cried Lily, 'how seedy you look! You must come away with me. We'll go to Switzerland, and then to the Riviera. You'll love Cannes. In a few months you'll be quite well. I always knew best how to take care of you. My poor Amy, my sweet!'

'Are you—is he dead?' asked Amy, gently touching her sister's expensive crape−trimmed mantle. Lily, she said to herself triumphantly, was capable of anything; even of becoming a rich young widow.

'Yes,' she said, gravely. 'Poor Joseph died ten days ago. We were married shortly before. He has left me everything,' she added. 'He was very good to me.... Why, you look better already, darling, just seeing your old Lily again. We'll soon have her as pretty as ever, won't we, Aunt Charlotte?'

And Aunt Charlotte, who, like all women of the lower middle−class, was deeply impressed by the appearance of expensive widow's weeds, busied herself in getting out the best tea−things for this magnificent niece.

'I shall soon find a nice husband for her, once she's got her beautiful colour back,' rattled on Lily; it's all a question of good

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looks, and money—especially money,' added the black−robed lady, dryly.

Amy's eyes followed her in wondering admiration round the shabby little room. Now that Lily had come back, all would be right again. She wanted nothing else. Life, after all, was sweet.

'Do you ever see anything of Fred?' asked the elder sister presently.

'Fred married,' said Miss Walton, casting an anxious look in the direction of Amy. 'His wife died when the baby was born.'

'Oh,' said Lily sententiously. 'Well, he was never half good enough for Amy, but if she has any fancy for him still, why, it can be arranged,' she added, with the air of a princess.

'Oh, Lily! No, no. Let me go away with you, dear. I've been so dreadfully lonely, and I want to get well and strong.... Don't let's ever part again.... Let me go with you.'

A POLITICAL COMEDY

I

THOUGH an editor, he was human. The radiant vision confronting him seemed to illuminate the dingy newspaper office; and he remembered, after she was gone, how clean−cut her profile had appeared, outlined against the brown bricks of the houses on the opposite side of the Strand; the curious glance of her metallic−looking eyes, and even some details of her dress, such as the sumptuous ermine lining to her loose, half−open coat, and a great bunch of Neapolitan violets which permeated the atmosphere of the cheerless little room with their fragrance. Mr. Wentworth Johnson, in his editorial capacity, was accustomed to lady journalists in *pince−nez*, and navy serge, and the vision was sufficiently bewildering. He was an unimaginative Briton, with a short thick neck and watery blue eyes, and with a somewhat antique collection of British prejudices embedded under the thatch of his close−cropped, dust−coloured hair.

He objected, in the first place, to the presence of women in newspaper offices; their place, he used to say, was in the nursery, not in Fleet Street; and as a rule he got out of seeing them. Was there not a sub−editor, whose time was supposed to be at the disposal of lady journalists and women with grievances? It seemed incredible now, but he had even used an unparliamentary phrase when her card had been brought up; it must have been his good angel, he thought, who had whispered that, after all, perhaps he had better see this special intruder. How graceful, how good−looking she was! The editor of the *Evening Planet* was perhaps inclined to admire the budding floweret rather than the opened rose, and he took her for a girl of three−and−twenty. And the gods laughed softly among themselves as the lady took a chair opposite the editor.

'I thought,' she said, in a serious and rather sweet voice, in which there was now and again a little thrill, 'that I might venture to see you personally.'

The sound of her voice was so charming that he waited, smiling, until she spoke again. Across the narrow courtyard could be heard the whirr and thud of the printing machines, turning out the weekly edition of the *Planet*. It was a kind of ironical, remorseless sound, and made a curious accompaniment to their first interview.

'I hear from my friend Lady Winchcliffe that you know her very well, and might be able to help me '

'Ah! you know Lady Winchcliffe?' said the editor eagerly. Lady Winchcliffe was a great lady on the Liberal side, to whose parties, at Winchcliffe House, everybody of importance went. 'Perhaps I have already had the pleasure—Miss—er?'

'My name is "John Bathurst,"' she said, with a certain reserve, glancing at the card which she had already sent up, and which was now lying on the editor's desk with that somewhat misleading cognomen written thereon in a large, bold, feminine hand−writing.

'That is your *nom−de−guerre*?' said the editor, taking his snubbing nicely, and wondering if her book—for the radiant vision carried a slender volume in her hand —would prove to be a collection of neurotic verses?

'I thought it best to take a man's name,' she said shyly, 'because no woman is listened to if she writes upon public questions—at any rate, no woman whose name is unknown.... My little book,' she continued, 'is on the Free Trade question. I am all right in my statistics; I've been well primed in all that. You've no idea,' she went on, smiling, 'what I've been through. I've not only spent **weeks** in Leeds and Manchester, but I've been to endless dinner−parties there. They have the strangest way of talking; such a curious accent, you can hardly understand what they say.'

'Very disinterested of you, I'm sure,' said Mr. Johnson, leaning back, amused, in the editorial chair. 'And what line do you take?'

'Oh, Free Food for the people—the poor people, you know.'

'Well, I'm afraid the *Planet* doesn't quite take that line. We're Conservative, you see.'

And then, for a minute, he felt vaguely perplexed and annoyed. He had always hated these 'meddling women,' as he called them in his blunter moments. As a matter of fact, this preoccupation with politics bored and scandalised Mr. Wentworth Johnson. He neither understood nor approved of it. 'Hang it all,' he would say at his club, 'what do the women want? Haven't they got their kitchens and their nurseries, and don't they have chairs when we have got to stand up, and—and any amount of admiration—at any rate while they are young and pretty?'

But, oddly enough, these arguments were not put forward on the present occasion. To his astonishment, Mr. Wentworth Johnson found himself curiously anxious to say nothing of which this young politician might not

approve.

But was, after all, the *Evening Planet* irrevocably bound to the Tory cause? It had always been largely a literary paper; it received no subsidy from the Conservative party. Only the other day, he remembered an interview he had had with the proprietor, Mr. Julius Friedeberg, who, having had nothing from the Government which was in office—not even a beggarly knighthood, as he expressed it—was turning over in his mind whether he should not take up so popular a question as the Big Loaf and go boldly over to the Radicals. These considerations, of course, were not without their effect on the editor in his manner to John Bathurst. With newspaper proprietors—especially those like Mr. Julius Friedeberg—a man never knew quite what was going to happen....

'The *Planet* doesn't take that line,' she went on in her emotional voice, 'because it hasn't considered the awful importance of this question of free food. Think of the children—the little, starving children, and what it will mean to them? Why, they are only half alive as it is. I've made my book—it's only a pamphlet, of course—as picturesque and striking as I knew how. If it is taken up—if **you** take it up—it will wake people up to realities—it will at least make them think.'

'An Austrian lady—wasn't it?—wrote a book against War,' replied Wentworth Johnson, playing with a paper−knife as he watched her. 'It made a great sensation. Shortly after, the Tsar called the Hague Conference together. To−day, we are on the eve of a war between Russia and Japan. Your feminine ideals are hardly practical.'

'If it were not for women,' said John Bathurst reproachfully, 'there would be no ideals left at all.'

'Well, there is a moment, sometimes, when the public insists on them,' admitted Mr. Wentworth Johnson, in a strictly neutral and editorial manner. 'I'll see what can be done. The proprietor of the *Planet* will be here to−morrow. I'll consult him about your pamphlet, and see if the paper is going to take a definite line. And I will see that your book is sent to the proper quarter for review.'

'I'm so glad that I came,' said the lady joyously. She got up, feeling at home already, and moved forward slowly to the window, gazing out thoughtfully at the turmoil of the Strand—the ceaseless procession of crowded omnibuses, the shouting newsboys, the motley tide of humanity which swept up and down the street. Her air of leisure, her modishly−fashioned garments, the faint odour which escaped from her muff, made a curious contrast to the dreary surroundings, the monotonous bustle of the newspaper office.

Then she turned, stopping suddenly in front of the editorial desk; and, looking him appealingly in the face, she said abruptly: 'Oh, Mr. Johnson, I **do** want to have your opinion on my book. I hardly liked coming here to−day,' she went on, with an adorably shy little glance, 'for you know I've never been in a newspaper office before; but I wished so much that you might read it yourself—that I should have a real literary opinion on my work.'

He felt a curious little thrill all down his back—a thrill which he had somehow never experienced during his interviews with the *pince−nez* and the blue serges which came so often on weary and interminable quests. The appeal was inordinately flattering.

'Ah, how good of you! How can I thank you?' said 'John Bathurst,' blushing, when he gallantly announced his intention of reading her book that very night. She looked prettier than ever when she blushed, he noticed.

'You can thank me,' he said somewhat nervously, 'some other day, Miss—er—I beg your pardon−"Mr. Bathurst."'

Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

'Let it be like that,' she said. 'Call me "John Bathurst."'

'Very well,' said the editor. Already there was a link between this beautiful girl and himself. There was a kind of complicity—a guilty secret to be kept. Mr. Wentworth Johnson racked his brain to find a reason for detaining his visitor, even for a few minutes more. There were several people waiting to see him downstairs, for two or three times during the interview the office−boy had been up with cards; but yet he fidgeted about, calling her attention to one or two autograph copies of books by famous authors which were on the bookshelf, and to a signed photograph which stood on the dingy marble mantelpiece. How well−bred she looked, he thought, bending a little to look through her long tortoiseshell *lorgnette*, with her vaguely expensive air. And he wondered, though he gave no utterance to his thought, why such a pretty women should want to write political pamphlets. Pretty women, he imagined, in his brutal masculine way, had generally something better to do.

'I'll read the book to−night,' he reiterated, 'and if you can manage to call in to−morrow I shall be charmed to

talk it over with you. And of course I'll see that it falls into sympathetic hands.'

'Oh, thanks—thanks so much! I can't come to−morrow; but the day after, would that do? I'm afraid you'll think me all awful nuisance,' she added, with her enchanting smile; and then, extending her long, delicate, capable−looking hand, she bade him good−bye, and from her rustling silk skirts there escaped, as she stepped, head erect, down the gloomy office staircase, the delicate, yet intoxicating odour of iris.

II

WHEN she was gone, Mr. Wentworth Johnson walked thoughtfully back to his desk, answered half−a−dozen letters without thinking much what he was doing, saw the two or three people who had come about work or reviews, and finally corrected the proofs of a couple of articles. Then lie picked up the slender volume. He read on and on. It grew dark in the office, for the winter day had drawn in; and as he sat there, the gas−lamps in the Strand began to make blurred splashes of yellow in the deepening gloom. It was dark when he threw down the book, and the fire had burnt white in the grate. 'By Jove!' he muttered, 'it's effective.... It's very effective. Nothing of the Little Englander about it, either. She's struck the patriotic note, and it's just what the Radicals, lately, always seem to miss doing. A bit sentimental, of course—how women do wallow in sentiment!—but she's certainly made out a case. And what's more, her statistics aren't any more misleading, as far as one can judge, than statistics usually are.... I shall certainly see Friedeberg about it to−morrow.'

Two days later Wentworth Johnson sat waiting for her to come. He felt curiously eager to see her again, wondering what she would say, now that he had good news to tell her; if she would look him in the eyes again with her perverse smile, leaving behind her, when she went, the faint, indefinable odour of iris. Every time the office−boy came up with a card he started, wondering if she was actually below. But the morning dragged away, and 'John Bathurst' did not appear. He felt irritable and exasperated, and he told himself several times that it was the east wind—the east wind always got on his liver. And it was doubtless to avoid the inclemency of the streets that Wentworth Johnson stayed, contrary to his usual custom, at the office all the afternoon. She might have made a mistake, and thought that he meant the afternoon: he had been there two days ago when she had called at three o'clock. It would be preposterous, he reminded himself, to disappoint a lady.

The long afternoon wore away. Six o'clock struck, and 'John Bathurst' had not come. As he finally took up his hat and slipped his arms into his overcoat, the editor of the *Evening Planet* told himself that there were occasions on which it was preposterous to disappoint a man.

He left the office on foot, thinking he would walk part of the way home. Piccadilly was blocked with traffic, and at the Circus he had to wait with a dozen other people till the policeman ordered a halt in the stream of carriages and omnibuses. One by one the vehicles passed by, and then there flashed across his gaze a girl's clean−cut profile, clearly outlined against the dark blue lining of a brougham. The girl was all in white, with a sparkling jewel in her hair and a great bunch of La France roses tucked among her laces and furs. It was a delightful vision, but it did not, somehow, remove our hero's irritability.

The carriage moved on. He felt curiously annoyed—his annoyance was out of all proportion to the simple, commonplace events of the last two days. A lady had called about a review. Well, they constantly called about reviews, about a hundred matters connected with a newspaper. And yet, as he stepped along Piccadilly, his ill temper increased. 'John Bathurst' was in town, and apparently in perfect health, yet she had not come to hear his literary opinion on her book. Literary, political, or not, women were all the same: creatures of caprice, with perverse smiles and eyes which were made for deceit.

The editor had assumed his stiffest manner when the young author was an−nounced the next day. He had even allowed her to remain waiting downstairs in the grimy little anteroom for ten minutes, while he pretended to revise the proofs of a political article, a piece of diplomacy on his part which proved to be useless, for not only was 'John Bathurst' as charming as ever when she was finally ushered into the editorial sanctum, but he found that the corrections made during the time she had waited had all to be done over again.

'I was sorry you—you did not find it convenient to come yesterday,' he began, eyeing her a little askance as he played with a paper−knife.

'Ah! I thought I would spare you, Mr. Johnson,' she returned, with her brilliant smile. 'I didn't really think you would have had time to read the book.'

' I read it that very afternoon,' he muttered reproachfully. His stiffness vanished as he looked at her; the little face, with its appealing look, rising above the dark furs round her throat. He felt himself wondering how long she would stay, and if he should get on with her as well as on that first day of their meeting, and if they would become friends. There must be bewildering, intoxicating possibilities in a girl who could feel so intensely, who could express herself so picturesquely as the author of the pamphlet he held in his hand. A young woman who could

write a book like that was not likely to be conventional in the usual worldly way. He cursed himself for a fool at having kept her waiting ten minutes downstairs, when he might have been talk−ing to her, gazing into her strange eyes, bending with her over her book as it lay on the desk, as they picked out, together, the passages he meant to have quoted.

And to−day the interview was prolonged. The editor of the *Planet* had the best of news to give her. It was the autumn of 1903, when chaos reigned, even in Government circles, and it was a wise newspaper which knew its own policy.... And Mr. Julius Friedeberg, once a prop of the Unionist party, had, after reflection, resolved to follow the Duke, and throw in the weight of his journal's influence on the side of Free Food.

To−morrow a strong leader was to appear on the subject, and a review, with numerous quotations, from John Bathurst's pamphlet.

The whole affair made a mild autumn sensation. Most of the Liberal papers elected to find extraordinary talent in this young Mr. Bathurst, who was a recruit worth having in the Free Trade cause. Some of them insisted that the young man would go far; and it was even suggested, at the Liberal Clubs, that a safe seat ought to be found for him, and his election expenses paid. Nevertheless, no one had yet, strangely enough, met the pamphleteer in the flesh—no one except the editor of the *Planet*, who was determined, in spite of all chaff, to keep him anonymous. On the other hand, the editor could find out nothing about the personality of 'John Bathurst,' and though he saw her constantly for the next few weeks, she remained as elusive, as mysterious as on the first day of their meeting.

The pamphlet had made such a hit, boomed by the Planet, that John Bathurst had printed it in penny form. It had been largely sold, and largely distributed for nothing, and people went so far as to say that it had won a bye−election, towards the end of the month, for the Liberals. They were discussing this notable victory, in which an unknown Anglo−Indian, a Colonel Bloodgood, had been the successful candidate, when Wentworth Johnson made an attempt to penetrate her anonymity.

'But you are the only man in London who knows who I am!' she said: 'don't you feel proud?'

'Oh, I don't know who you are!' he said, in an injured voice.

She turned away her eyes as she met his insistent masculine glance.

'Ah, no—I forgot,' she said, playing with the little gold charms at her waist. There was self−reproach in her voice—the self−reproach of the coquette who is troubled with remorse.

'I only know you are—awfully sweet and charming—and enough to drive any man crazy,' he muttered, in a thick, troubled voice. He had played her game all through, he told himself, for he had 'given his paper dead away,' and there was no end to the chaff at the club. Was he to have no compensation?

In the pause which followed could be heard the thunder of the printing machines, turning out the weekly edition of his paper, suggesting, with its remorseless activity, its monotonous thud, the inexorableness, the irrevocableness of the printed word.

The narrow, metallic eyes almost closed, and with a little shrug she answered, 'Don't spoil it all. I—I am only "John Bathurst," a political pamphleteer, you know, not a woman. I could not come again,' she added reproachfully, 'if you—if you're going to talk like that. And how am I going to write that final letter—without your help?'

'I won't talk like that again,' he said humbly. He saw that he had made a premature move. 'Please come to−morrow,' "John Bathurst,"' he pleaded, crushing her cool, capable hand for an instant in his.

And 'John Bathurst' came.

III

A FEW evenings later, Mr. Wentworth Johnson was driving through the grey London streets in a chariot drawn by doves. Strictly speaking, his conveyance was only a hansom cab of the old type, with rattling windows and fusty cushions; but he was on his way to meet the author of the celebrated pamphlet in her capacity of woman, to meet her in private life—perhaps (who knew?) to take her in to dinner? For years he had not felt so strangely elated, so nervous, so little sure of himself. He wondered if it was the right thing for him to have asked Lady Winchcliffe to bring them together in society; for he was somewhat afraid of that lady's malicious smile, and to the last she had remained obstinate as to the identity of the now famous author. All that he had been able to find out from his hostess was the fact that 'John Bathurst' had lived most of her life in India, and had but lately returned.

She was not in the room when he came upstairs.

'"John Bathurst's" coming,' whispered Lady Winchcliffe; 'you shall take her in, if you're very good. We're only a small party—eight. But she's always incorrigibly late. I never knew a woman take longer to dress herself.'

He tried to join in the desultory talk round the fireplace, but his eyes wandered to the door.

'Colonel and Mrs. Bloodgood,' said the butler suddenly, in an abrupt voice; and 'John Bathurst,' dressed in something white and soft and innocent−looking, and followed by a middle−aged man with a crooked line of sunburn across his forehead, stepped forward into the room.

'Colonel and Mrs. Bloodgood: Colonel−and Mrs. Bloodgood!' And so she was married—married to the new member of parliament.... Curiously enough, he had never thought of such a contingency. His radiant vision was the legal property of a tall, middle−aged, military man, who looked as if he meant to take care of her.

The rest of the evening was all blurred and confused. He could remember summoning up a forced smile as he offered Mrs. Bloodgood his arm to go down to dinner; but the average Briton is not an adept at masking his feelings, and disappointment and jealousy made him appear gruff and morose.

Colonel Bloodgood's wife, on the contrary, was more than usually charming. Her smiling, perverse eyes met those of the editor at every sentence; there was no end to the pretty things she found to say. It was he, and he alone, she said, who had got her husband in; if the *Planet* had not taken up her little book, and made such a feature of its arguments, the election would never, she declared, have gone the way that it had. And more than once during the dinner those smiling eyes shot a look of intelligence at her husband across the table.

By the time the savouries were at his elbow, Wentworth Johnson had made up his mind that he would invent some excuse, and leave the house without rejoining the ladies in the drawing−room.

'What's it all about?' cried Lady Winchcliffe an hour later, when only the Bloodgoods were left with the cigarettes and the lemon squashes. 'What have you done to my poor Wentworth Johnson? He was positively green at dinner.'

'It's some of Jean's devilry,' said the Colonel admiringly, gazing at his young wife through a cloud of tobacco smoke. 'She's a regular little demon.'

But 'John Bathurst,' leaning over the table to pick a cigarette out of the box, protested, in her sweet, serious voice, in which there was a little thrill:

'I did it all for the Party. What did the *Planet* say about Free Trade, I ask you, before I began to go down to the office? A little feminine persuasion was needed to induce the paper to make up its mind,' she murmured, getting up and lighting her cigarette at the end of her husband's cigar. The two smiled at each other with an air of comradeship. 'If he's been silly, I really can't help it,' she concluded calmly, when the cigarette was thoroughly alight; 'one doesn't go about warning middle−aged editors of evening papers not to fall in love with one.'

'Oh, the game's never fair when you play,' said Lady Winchcliffe: 'I think it's a great shame.'

Later that night the editor of the *Planet* came down the steps of his club. He was in no better temper, though he had won several games of billiards and had drunk more than one whisky−and−soda. No chariot drawn by doves conveyed him homewards. He had determined to walk; the long tramp through the quiet, deserted streets might calm his irritated nerves. It was one o'clock when he put his latchkey into the front door of a red−brick house in Earl's Court. As he pressed the key the door flew open, pulled by some one behind, and there appeared in the dark passage the stout figure of a woman of thirty−five, in an untidy tea−gown. He followed her into the narrow

dining−room, after he had banged and locked the door.

'What on earth are you waiting up for? he said crossly. 'I told you never to do so. There's nothing a man dislikes so much as his wife waiting up for him.'

She picked up a little frock at which she had been sewing.

'Don't speak so loud, dear,' said the woman in a tired voice: 'baby's been so fretful. I'm afraid she's not well. It may be another tooth.'

'Oh, baby's unwell, is she?' he said, in a changed voice. 'Let me see her.' And together they went upstairs, and bent, with a lighted candle, over a child's cot.

THE FORTUNE OF FLORA

I

WHAT was the fortune of Flora? Nobody seemed to know, and what was more curious, nobody seemed to like to ask; yet it was impossible for a young couple to be more light−hearted on the eve of the adventure of matrimony. Laurie, it is true, was at the golden age of twenty−three, and had never allowed himself to be annoyed by a care or an unpaid debt in his jocund young life; while to mention that the bride−elect was an American of five−and−twenty, though she looked (and called herself) nineteen, is to say that her outlook on the world and its problems was as cheerful as is consistent with living in the twentieth century. The problem she had chiefly envisaged for the last five or six years was that of allying herself, matrimonially, with an Englishman of good family, and this ambition had been finally encompassed in the person of the Hon. Laurence Eversley, second son of Lord Worthing, met, only a few weeks before, on the steamer coming across. For Laurie's career at Oxford had stopped short of its final and most important stage, and it had been for painting his Dean's door what he described as a 'quite wonderful' shade of sealing−wax red, that he had been requested by the authorities to absent himself permanently from the banks of the Isis. But if Lady Worthing had been much incensed with Laurie over this untoward affair, Lord Worthing had only laughed, quoted the case of Shelley, and taken the classic course of sending his light−hearted son on a tour, to America. 'Perhaps they will teach him to "hustle" over there,' he remarked, 'or else he will pick up a girl with a pile of money.' Like most English people, Lord Worthing invariably used American locutions when speaking of our kinsmen over the Atlantic.

'It would be the usual vulgar way out of our difficulties,' her ladyship had said. She had never been particularly fond of her second son, all her sympathies being with the eldest, Littlehampton, who was in the army. 'What, indeed, do you suppose we shall ever do with the boy? As Liberals, we have no hope of anything from the Government. I do not think he **knows** how to work. Yes, I suppose Laurie had better marry an American heiress. After all, it has become quite a respectable profession for our sons. Look at the Warminsters. Why, the mortgage is actually off the place at last.'

So when Laurie had skipped into the drawing−room again some six months later, and announced his engagement to 'the most exquisite creature in the world, of fabulous wealth and the most deliciously unconventional manners,' his parents accepted the situation—and the prospective daughter−in−law, Miss Flora Dodge—with equanimity.

The wedding was hurried forward. Mr. Dodge, it appeared, could make but a brief stay on what he insisted on calling 'this side,' so the ceremony was to take place almost immediately. Lord Worthing, who had long ago had to get rid of his place in Sussex and the agricultural land appertaining thereto, occupied a gaunt and somewhat neglected house in the Cromwell Road, a region which Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge and his daughter evidently regarded as in the vortex of fashion. And in this passably forlorn mansion, which Laurie had somewhat profusely decorated with flowers for the occasion, the betrothal dinner was, at this moment, taking place.

There they sat, the two young people, side by side, radiant with their new honours and delighted to be the centre of attraction, the cynosure of all eyes. For Laurie was by no means the self−conscious young Englishman who cannot bear a fuss, and who looks upon the preliminary ceremonies of his wedding day with boredom and horror; on the contrary, he delighted in the prospect and took a personal interest in all the details of the coming rites.

'You can't be too careful about a wedding,' declared the bridegroom; 'the slightest mistake will ruin it. One should have a sense of decency, and above all, a sense of humour. Do you remember when Warminster married that peevish Sallie Vanderboken? As they were coming up the aisle, the choir actually sang "Fight the good fight with all your might!" I nearly died of suppressed giggling, and I was best man.'

He went into the question of the music minutely; he would not have an ugly parson. No bridesmaid was to be over sixteen, and they were to have long hair, which was to be worn floating round their young faces.

'It must be quite beautiful and quite gay,' declared Laurie. 'We will have a sort of bower of apple−blossoms at the chancel. Your white gown should be semi−opaque and mounted on palest pink. You will look like a blossom or a shell. You will be quite delicious! We shall both look charming,' he added, after a little pause. 'Quite young and radiant, the ideal bride and bridegroom.'

'Why, Laurie, you're just too queer for anything!' declared Miss Dodge. 'Where do you get your ideas? I guess

the girls in Milwaukee would stare if they could hear you...'

But indeed they were a remarkable young pair. Laurie was slim and pale, his features and hands a trifle effeminate−looking, but there was something rat−like in his tenacity and strength, both of which he was in the habit of carefully hiding under an elaborate air of dilettanteism. Once, coming out of a theatre, a cad had purposely hustled him, counting on his pensive expression and his pallor that he would not retaliate. But Laurie had not neglected the noble art at Oxford, and the fellow lay sprawling in the mud when our young gentleman had stalked imperturbably away.... The girl was of a more solid build, and had all the capability of her nation and sex. Flora was the new type of American girl, tall, active, and lithe. Canadian on her mother's side, she had eyes of Northern blue, an abundance of fair, silky hair, and a complexion of pink and white. She was dressed to−night in palest diaphanous blue, showing the whole of her beautiful shoulders; a blue snood was twisted in her hair, and she wore a priceless pearl necklace fastened round her white throat. It was impossible to look more elegant, more flower−like, or to exhale a more subtle air of wealth. The little blue frock had cost fifty guineas, she had given at least a sovereign for the bunch of real roses she wore tucked in her belt; her hair was dressed by an artist. The outside was indeed perfection. This young girl looked like a Greuze, but she had gone through Vassar with distinction. Only by her accent, together with her somewhat over−emphasised manner, her curiously Transatlantic air of deference to all things British, and especially to all aristocratically British things, did the bride−elect betray the fact that the fortunate place of her birth was Milwaukee. Like most Americans, she rarely spoke of money, and she had been characteristically shocked to hear one or two of Laurie's young friends—men in the Foot Guards or fashionable actors—announce to all and sundry that they were 'broke!' Every nation has its standard of propriety. To the Transatlantic mind, the British absence of reticence about money embarrassments is little short of indecent.

Laurie had seen to it that the dinner of his betrothal should be as imposing as possible. Some important people had been asked. Lady Worthing had on all the family diamonds—jewels which quite brightened up her somewhat rusty black lace frock—all the plate had been collected, and with a formidable array of wax candles and a profusion of flowers, a stranger might have thought that Lord Worthing and his family enjoyed all the freedom from anxiety which a fat rent−roll confers.

There is no doubt that Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge was impressed. He sat, of course, by Lady Worthing, and gazed with paternal pride at the handsome young daughter who was so soon to inhabit the ancestral halls of England.

The talk turned on the sort of house which the young people might take. Nothing had been settled as yet, and it had been decided that Laurie and Flora should pay a visit in the Cromwell Road after their marriage in order to 'look round' and find what they wanted. There was nothing ambiguous, to be sure, in what they wanted, the comedy of the situation lay in the fact that each of these young people hoped that the other one would provide the little house in Queen Anne's Gate which they both so ardently desired. The paternal mansion in the Cromwell Road had been painted and decorated some fifteen years ago, when London was still in the throes of the 'æsthetic' movement; but time, fog, and smoke had not made the yellow−green pomegranates on the walls any more delectable, nor added to the meagre attractions of the sage−coloured serge curtains, on which Lady Worthing, in her bygone enthusiasm, had embroidered a kind of hybrid apple in worsted.

Flora, gazing round, inquired of her future slave whether 'this was the latest style in London? She guessed she would like to have the last thing.'

Laurie laughed.

'Heavens! No,' he cried. 'We must be gay and sane—gay and sane like they were in the eighteenth century. I will not hang autotypes of Rossetti on my walls; a few Bartolozzis if you like, and some of the wonderful women of Rominey and Reynolds. We shall have little striped papers, of course, and **very** shiny, crackling chintzes.'

And Flora, who was staying at the Carlton, heaved a private sigh of relief. You never knew, with these English aristocrats, just what **was** the latest style. On the whole, the young lady preferred the appearance of the famous dining−room in Pall Mall. She would just **love** to have an all−white dining−room.

At the other end of the table, the voices in the little comedy had taken a more anxious tone. 'Bless the man,' said Laurie's anxious mother to herself, 'is he **never** going to say what he will do for the young people? Who, I wonder, does he think is going to pay the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick−maker? And Laurie always wants such a lot of candlesticks!'

'Our dear children,' suggested Lady Worthing to Mr. Dodge, 'must start delightfully, with everything pretty and

in good taste.'

'That's so,' assented Mr. Dodge, with a paternal smile. 'Though her mother and I,' he continued, gazing with pride at his lovely daughter, 'why, we just started on ten dollars a week in Milwaukee. We boarded right in the city. And I don't know as it isn't a good plan for young folks, anyway. Makes them kind of spry.' And to Lady Worthing's alarm, she could get nothing definite from him about what he meant to do for his daughter—and her son.

There was one guest at the dinner on whom none of this little comedy was lost, and that was Aunt Charlotte, Lady Worthing's eldest sister. Miss Mitchamore, who sat on Laurie's other hand, was an amused spectator of the whole intrigue. A spinster of original turn, with a handsome independence of her own (the two sisters had been co−heiresses, but Lady Worthing's fortune had long ago been swallowed up in her husband's embarrassments), Charlotte Mitcha− more had been a traveller all her life. In the States she had often met the type of American who was facing her. She knew that though he would let his daughter dress at Worth's, would cover her in jewels and take suites of rooms at Ritz's in Paris and at the Carlton in London, he would, in all probability, make no sort of legal settlement on his child on her marriage. Even if he were really wealthy—and there was no evidence that he was—he would be reluctant to make any definite promises as to income. Sometimes these curious Transatlantic parents were extraordinarily, fantastically generous. Sometimes they closed their pockets to prospective sons−in−law, and coolly advised them to earn their own living. In short, you could not count on them. And Charlotte Mitchamore, who was fond of Laurie, and had, indeed, been the chief means of his taking a six months' tour in the United States, wondered what would be the outcome of this match into which both sides seemed to be walking blindfold. She had hinted these things to her sister, but the hints had not been well received. Lady Worthing could not be brought to see the affair as it really was. For what with Littlehampton's debts, and the girls fast coming out, it was most desirable, she urged, that Laurie, poor boy, should be settled somehow.

And none of these doubts, it must be owned, assailed the bridegroom−elect. In all his jocund days, everything had always turned out all right. Why should not his marriage be as triumphant, as delightful as all his other experiences? At school, at college, he had always been a favourite. Laurie, with all his airy carelessness, had almost forgotten that he had been 'sent down'; or at the worst he only remembered it as an amusing episode in his career, in which a Don with a very red face and very white hair, who somehow suggested a Jack−in−the−Box, had got extraordinarily vexed and tried to say unpleasant things.... And, after all, it had turned out charmingly, for he had spent that May and June in London, and then he had gone to the States....

'The great thing is not to be afraid of marrying!' announced Laurie, as he surveyed the formidable array of presents spread out the day before his nuptials. 'Why, indeed, should one? Directly you marry, the whole of society at once takes a perfervid interest in you. They begin by loading you with presents, and they will probably end by supporting you, your wife and your family—especially if you have a large one. Whereas in the most exemplary bachelor or spinster, society takes no interest whatever. It is better to be charming than to be good,' added Laurie, pensively; 'and certainly, on the whole, if it comes to solid help, it is better to be married than to be single.'

II

THE first blow fell when they were still on their honeymoon in St. Petersburg, a city which they had chosen because Lord Worthing's first cousin was Ambassador there. A handsome cheque of Mr. Dodge's enabled them to enjoy it. They had danced at a ball in the vast, imposing saloons of the Winter Palace; they had been made the spoiled children of the British Embassy, where the bride's elegance and her husband's attractive manners had won them friends among the most amusing people in the Russian capital. Socially, the young Eversleys were a decided success. Flora, it must be owned, talked the French which is considered correct in Milwaukee; but Laurie, on the other hand, who had an uncanny gift for strange tongues, could boast a flow of quite Parisian idioms. They had sleighed and shopped in the Nevski Prospekt; Flora had laid in a formidable stock of turquoises in the Bazar, and Laurie had spent his mornings in the Hermitage, and his evenings in giving little dinner and supper parties in the restaurants on the islands; in short, they had had, as they both avowed, a beautiful time. Nothing amused Laurie more than to watch the shaggy, red−bloused, ever−smiling moujik; custom could not stale Flora's interest in the drovsky−driver's Noah's Ark costume, in his padded shoulders and waist, his long hair, and his voluminous pleated pelisse. They had taken a trip to Moscow, had been bumped and banged over the cobble−paved hills of the Holy City, had got their first glimpse of the Immemorial East in the sinister, harem−like rooms of the old Palace in the Kremlin, had wan− dered, astonished, through those magnificent modern arcades which put anything of tile same kind in Europe to the blush.

But it was when they were once more back in their pretty rooms in the Hôtel de France in St. Petersburg that Flora found, among a little crowd of bouquets from Russian admirers, a letter from Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge with the post−mark Milwaukee.

MY DEAR LITTLE GIRL (it ran)—I guess you will be sorry to hear that I have had real bad luck. The New Trust has done for the old man—for the present. I shall have to pay up all round, and I guess you'll have to make that cheque I gave you last just as long as you can. Luckily, you've got some of your father's grit; I can trust my poor Flora not to sit down and cry over spilt milk. I feel as mad as a hornet; I just mean to start a new combine against the Trust. You can bet the old man will hustle, some. There's hardly a cent now, but we may come up smiling yet. I'm just off to Chicago, on urgent business. My respects to Lord and Lady Worthing. I think you're a real lucky girl. They're nice folks, and they'll look after you.

—Your devoted father, CYRUS P. DODGE.

Young Mrs. Eversley folded this characteristic letter carefully, put it away, and then communicated the contents to her youthful partner in the adventure of matrimony. Two years older than her husband, she felt an almost maternal, or at least an elder−sisterly feeling towards the joyous and irresponsible youth whom she had undertaken to love, honour, and obey. And Laurie, as she afterwards told Miss Mitchamore, had behaved like a 'perfect angel.' He was knocking the top off an egg at breakfast, and his wife was eyeing this characteristically British performance with awe and admiration, when she summoned up courage to tell him that, from now onwards, she would have to look to him and to his family for her maintenance. Fortunately, as she told herself, a peer of the realm, in England, must be rich enough to support his children, a theory which showed our young lady's meagre acquaintance with European family arrangements.

There was just enough of the cheque left to take them back to London, and one windy and rainy night in February found a four−wheeled cab loaded with trunks and containing the happy pair drawing up at the Worthing mansion in the Cromwell Road.

But this, again, proved no abiding−place for this much−tried young couple. Two of the younger children had developed scarlatina; the house bristled with starched hospital nurses, the doctor's brougham stood at the door, and Laurie and his bride had to take refuge in a neighbouring hotel. Next morning Lady Worthing appeared. She

had only the worst of news to bring. Lord Littlehampton, it appeared, in the lightness of his heart, had entangled himself in some promise to a chorus−girl, and this young person, an Amazon of gigantic proportions and vivid colouring, proposed to resign her claim to his coronet only on payment of a substantial sum. At all costs, Lady Worthing announced her intention of raising the money.... As for herself and the children, they might go to some cheap spot in Normandy or the Ardennes; and for Laurie, she was convinced that Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge would provide.

To say that our poor hero was astounded at the untoward turn which things had taken is to convey but a faint impression of his feelings. Here he was, the gayest, the most insouciant of created beings, at twenty−three, a married man, with a penniless, opulent−looking bride, and at the odious necessity of finding the wherewithal to live. Could Fate have played him a crueller trick? There sat his Flora, a lovely, sumptuous vision in a *negligée* of Mechlin lace, eating candy and reading a French novel, while downstairs, in the dingy bureau, the manager was adding up a bill which Laurie saw no immediate prospect of paying.

But he was not easily depressed, nor did he ever forget his charming manners. Taking up his hat and cane, lie kissed his wife's fingers, and remarked carelessly—

'I think I shall go and see Aunt Charlotte. She always has **ideas** . She is a quite **wonderful** woman!' He slipped out, and, for the first time in his life—for Laurie had heretofore spent most of his time in hansoms−=−walked from South Kensington to the little house at the back of Knightsbridge, where Miss Mitchamore occasionally planted her weary feet.

He found his aunt smoking cigarettes in her morning−room, and reading a new work on Uganda, a country which she proposed to visit as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made. Already she had travelled a good deal in West Africa, and was understood to be on the friendliest terms with one or two dusky kings. Charlotte Mitcha− more had something of the outward appearance of an Oxford High Church curate, and as, on her travels, she usually wore a manly coat and skimpy skirt of drab tweed, it is possible that those black potentates had not yet realised that she belonged to the inferior sex.

Aunt Charlotte was sympathetic. She was fond—though not foolishly fond—of Laurie, and she detested Littlehampton. Also, she thought her sister a fool.

'What is to be done?' asked Laurie. 'Do, like a dear, have one of your **ideas**. You see,' he added, 'I'm only a half−educated boy! I've got taste, of course, but taste is only a drawback, unless you've capital to indulge it. That strange beast, the British Public, is always distrustful of any one who doesn't like what it likes.'

'True,' said Aunt Charlotte. 'The only thing for you to do,' she added, after a pause, in which she rather deliberately lit another cigarette, 'is to get some work.'

'Some work!' ejaculated Laurie, with naive surprise; 'how curious that sounds.... Yet I have heard that work is quite delightful—a sort of tonic—when once you get used to it! Shall I have to go in the Twopenny Tube every day, at a quarter to nine, and lunch at an A.B.C. shop?'

'Rubbish,' said Aunt Charlotte, 'you're not going to be made a martyr of. I have foreseen something of this kind,' she went on. 'I didn't like your marrying without any settlement—so I've just kept my weather eye open. Take that arm−chair, help yourself to a cigarette, and listen.'

The conference lasted an hour. Laurie stayed to lunch, and at three he was whisked away by his aunt in a motorcar.

Meanwhile, at home in the South Kensington hotel, the Honourable Mrs. Eversley was holding a conference with a person in whom she had cultivated confidence, and that was herself. Seeing the whole situation at a glance, she had no illusions left about peers of the realm and their capability of supporting the various members of their family.... The girl had thrown away her French novel on Laurie's departure, and, pushing back the fair hair from her capable−looking forehead with a gesture which recalled her father, she marched up and down the shabbily−carpeted room, thinking hard.... Half−an−hour later she dressed herself quietly in black, drove to the American Consul−General, and got the information which she desired.

When the young husband and wife met that night they both looked as pleased as if they had come into a fortune, though each was somewhat reticent.

'My child,' said Laurie, helping his wife to hock, 'figure to yourself that our cares are temporarily at an end. I have got something to do—a kind of business which I think I can manage. How charming you look; you must always wear heliotrope and pink when we dine alone.'

They went into lodgings next day—lodgings where Laurie insisted on pulling down all the oleographs and hanging the walls with a striped, flowery cretonne. He also brought his Oxford Chippendale furniture, his prints and books, and a number of white fur rugs. With a pink azalea bush in full bloom in one corner, the place looked pretty enough. And here they began married life.

The little comedy which ensued was sufficiently diverting. Laurie, who had remained quite vague on the subject of his 'work,' used to leave the house about half−past nine every morning. Directly he had turned the corner of the street, Flora put on her hat and ran to catch the omnibus. When they met at dinner, she was becomingly arrayed in one of her beautiful trousseau gowns, and had assumed an air of elaborate repose....

Before Miss Charlotte Mitchamore left for Uganda, she had had many private interviews with her niece by marriage, of whom, as she announced to all and sundry, she now thoroughly approved.

III

MEANWHILE, Laurie's devotion was complete—for he was a kind of being who, when he once takes up an idea, waxes more and more enthusiastic, even if that idea is marriage. Yet one wet day, as she was running along Dover Street under an umbrella, she caught, to her amazement, a glimpse of her husband in the vestibule of Froufrou's, the famous milliner's. A handsome woman, in summer finery, was eagerly talking to him, and she saw him come down with her to the door of the little brougham which was waiting. Yes, there he stood, laughing and chatting, at the carriage window, as if he were loth to tear himself away, while the fine rain beat down on his handsome head. What could it mean? Laurie professed to be hard at work all day—and certainly the boy always looked tired enough, when they both sat down, dressed, to their lodging−house dinner. Flora certainly never imagined that he had leisure to attend dames of high degree to their dressmakers in Dover Street.... For the first time since her marriage she felt uncertain of Laurie.

Young Mrs. Eversley was too **fine**, as well as too proud, to discuss this curious affair with her husband. She determined to be perfectly amiable as usual, to bide her time, and to see what would happen next. Laurie was just as gracefully affectionate as of old; his charming manners had never altered with their adverse fortunes, and what especially made her profoundly grateful to him was the fact that he never, by word, look, or tone, reproached her with the failure of Cyrus P. Dodge to provide her with a jointure. Flora had heard so much of the avariciousness of Englishmen in respect of dollars, that she was agreeably surprised, and wrote the most flattering accounts of the youthful Laurie home to Milwaukee. Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge was too much occupied in fighting his particular Trust to remember to send any more cheques to the lodgings occupied by his daughter and son−in−law.

Six months had gone by, and it was now high summer. With the beginning of July London was feverish with dissipation. The town seemed speckled with striped awnings and blatant with red baize; all night there was a ceaseless whirl of cabs, carriages, and motor broughams, and through the open windows of drawing−rooms came the monotonous sound of string bands playing the valse of the hour. All this, however, affected the young Eversleys very little. They accepted no invitations, for they had determined not to go out while their prospects remained so uncertain. It was much remarked that Flora even refused to be presented at Court, although Lady Worthing (now sojourning with her numerous family at Paramé) had several times suggested a suitable personage to introduce her daughter−in−law.

It was a sultry evening, and Laurie had not yet returned from his work. Flora herself was tired out, but the bedroom looked untidy—Laurie had a way of throwing his clothes about which was most exasperating—so she set about collecting the scattered garments, folding them up and putting them away in the chest of drawers. The little note which falls out of the marital pocket on such occasions did not fail now. It was small; it had an earl's coronet upon it, and it contained a few agitated phrases, many of the words being heavily underlined.... I do not claim for my heroine that she was more than human. Flora picked it up and read it.

DEAR LAURIE (it ran)−How **could** you disappoint me? I counted on you **absolutely**; the appointment was for four o'clock. It is cruel of you, and besides, this is not the first time it has happened.... Unless you can give me a satisfactory explanation (for I am not **accustomed** to be treated like this), I shall go to Dover Street no more.

GERTRUDE GORLESTON.

The note slipped from her fingers, and she stood absolutely bewildered, at a loss what to think. Gertrude Gorleston—the famous Lady Gorleston, a beauty whose reputation was world−wide, and whose face was almost as familiar in Milwaukee as in London.... Was **this** her rival? How could she hope to compete with such a personage? In a flash, she remembered that it was indeed the countess whom she had seen that day in Dover Street, with Laurie's sleek head half in, half out of her carriage door.... Was this how he spent his superfluous time? And then the difficulties of her situation began to dawn upon her. She was quite alone in London; owing to

their peculiar circumstances, she had made no friends; there was no one whose advice she could ask.... If Charlotte Mitchamore had been in England, she would indeed have gone to her for advice, but Miss Mitchamore by now was in Uganda.

Meanwhile, the latchkey was heard in the door, and the sound of Laurie's footstep was audible coming up the stair.... She must decide, and quickly.... If there was anything of which this astute young person disapproved it was having a 'scene' with a man, or appearing to upbraid him. For herself, she was determined always to assume the *beau rôle*. To appear in the light of a nagging, jealous wife was odious to her. She would have left him for good if it were necessary, but reproaches, she held, were feminine and absolutely futile. She thrust the note back into the pocket of the morning jacket from which it had fallen, slipped into her prettiest lace tea−gown, and awaited her erring spouse.

'Why, you look real scared, Laurie!' she cried; 'I guess you're just too tired for anything. Why, you're as white as a sheet.'

'I've had a shock, dear,' he said, slipping into the nearest chair, his lips twitching as he spoke. 'Aunt Charlotte—there—there is very bad news.'

'You don't mean to say she's dead?'

'She died of fever a week after she landed in Africa,' said Laurie sorrowfully.

Flora burst into tears. 'She was the best and kindest woman I ever knew,' she cried, 'my **only** friend on this side. It's just too dreadful for anything. Oh my, oh my!' And these two young people, who were both sincerely attached to Miss Mitchamore, were drawn more closely together in their grief.

Yet Flora could not altogether forget Lady Gorleston's letter, and as they sat by the open window, in the summer dusk, after dinner, she said, as if with a sudden impulse:

'Laurie, what do you do all day?' Her husband looked surprised, but he answered simply and with perfect courtesy, 'I "create" gowns and superintend the trying on, at Froufrou's, in Dover Street. It was poor Aunt Charlotte's quite wonderful inspiration.'

Laurie, to this day, never can understand why his wife threw her arms round his neck and gave him what she was wont to call 'an American hug.' 'Oh, you dear! You're just too perfect for anything. My! Fancy your settling down to that. And say,' she added, as a new light seemed to illuminate her brain, 'doesn't—er—Lady Gorleston dress entirely at Froufrou's?'

'She does,' replied Laurie, without any enthusiasm in his voice, 'and a confounded nuisance she is. Always fussing, always having alterations. She has got it into her head now that **I** must be at every fitting.... If not, there's a devil of a row.'

'I see,' said Flora profoundly, with the memory of a certain note in her mind. '"I counted on you absolutely; the appointment was for four o'clock...."' Well, thank goodness, she was not a jealous woman. Meanwhile, she felt in the mood for confidences.

'Well, Laurie, I'm going to tell you something. You thought that we weren't going to have any holiday this summer, because of—well, you know why. Now I want to tell you that I've not been idle, either. I've just been keeping the books and seeing customers at a photographer's in Baker Street, and here's my half−year's salary, £75. I never shall forget poor Aunt Charlotte's delight when I told her I'd got a situation. Why, she just hugged me. Wasn't she a dear?'

'You are a wonderful woman!' declared Laurie with conviction—'a quite wonderful woman!'

But there were more surprises in store for our young couple. When Miss Mitchamore's will was opened, it was found that, with the exception of some legacies for scientific research, she had left the whole of her comfortable fortune to 'her dear nephew Laurence and his wife Flora, because they are plucky young people who know how to face ill−luck, who are not afraid to work, and who don't go about whining.'

The house in Queen Anne's Gate is theirs now, with all its gay and sane appurtenances. And Flora, who firmly believes in Cyrus P. Dodge and his ability to circumvent the Trust, exhibits a pathetic belief—not shared by Laurie, who has, however, hopes of succeeding to the title—that she will still come into her own phantom fortune.

MLLE. MANKOVICH

I

IT was a somewhat old−fashioned apartment, which had evidently not been changed since the mid−Victorian epoch, for it had steel engravings of Landseer's pictures on the crimson walls, prie−Dieu chairs in Berlin−woolwork, and a bust of Clytie on a tall bookshelf. One sees many such rooms in great country seats, which descend in strict entail from father to son. Through the window was revealed a smudged vista of park lands swathed in white wadding, out of which a giant oak loomed here and there. A bright fire gave the only light.

A young man, who had the air of being thoroughly at home, had one foot on the fender, one elbow on the mantelpiece, and a cigarette between his lips, at which he puffed meditatively while he listened to the story of the young woman at his side. Bronzed, thick−set, clean−shaven, and more than a trifle stolid of aspect, he was precisely the kind of person to whom his intimate friends will always pour out their difficulties. Moreover, what you told to Frank Chester did not become the property of the town. He had received so many unrevealed confidences in his time that he was sometimes called The Silent Tomb.

The woman at his elbow, though she had the clear eyes and healthy skin of one who spends her summer days on yachts and her winter days in the hunting−field, had no pretensions to beauty. She wore her straight brown hair short, and affected austere collars. Just now she stood fidgeting with the Dresden shepherds and Japanese ivories on the mantel−shelf as she made her little confession.

'If I could only get him away from her for a time!' she muttered: 'if I were sure that they wouldn't meet for a year. Peter would forget her—most men wouldn't remember Venus Anadyomene herself after a few months' separation.'

Why Lord St. Ambrose was called Peter no one ever quite knew, except that it began at Eton, where there was a consensus of opinion that his real name of Percival was manifestly unsuited to so popular and easy−going an individual. At any rate, it was as Peter that he was always spoken of by the many people who were attached to him, among whom, I may as well explain at once, was his lawful wife, Mary.

'Eve Mankovich ain't precisely a Venus Anadyomene,' remarked Frank meditatively.

'Oh, you know what I mean. Don't pretend to be stupid, Frank. She's much more dangerous than a great beauty. And then I always mistrust those half−foreign women. They generally have the vices of both countries, and none of the virtues! And they do dress so exquisitely,' added Lady St. Ambrose, gazing down rather ruefully at her own British gown of blue serge, short in the skirt and somewhat antiquated in regard to cut.

Frank's eyes followed those of his hostess.

'You never did do yourself justice,' said he, 'and a woman can make anything of herself nowadays. Touching those boots, now—' he added, with one of his rare smiles.

Lady St. Ambrose laughed, and the two looked at each other as people look who have a genuine friendship for each other.

'Oh, it's too much bother,' she answered. 'Peter must take me as the Lord made me, or not at all. Give me a cigarette, Frank, and some better advice than that.'

'Does he see her often?' inquired Chester, as he struck a match for the lady's cigarette.

'Not very often, of course, since last season, when Peter, to my intense surprise, suddenly took to going to evening parties. You know how much she went out, and what a fuss people made about her. These half−foreign people have so much more chance than English girls. Her grandmother was all right, I believe—an Irishwoman of good family—but her father was a Bulgarian or a Roumanian, or something queer in the East of Europe. For myself, I thought the thing absurdly overdone.'

'So did many people,' muttered Frank. 'But is anything more amazing than these sudden affections which London takes to young persons from Heaven knows where?'

Lady St. Ambrose sniffed. 'If they were well−bred English girls London wouldn't look at them,' she said. 'Do you think my Janie will ever be made a fuss of when she comes out? I shall be lucky if I marry her to one of those dull boys of Lord Gravesend's.'

'Janie being of the mature age of seven, we will return, for the present, to Peter,' said Chester. 'How often has he seen her since July?'

'I don't know exactly, but all this autumn he's developed a curious fondness for running up to town and doing a

theatre. Some one saw him in a box with her at the St. James's. Of course, she had a chaperon with her.'

Frank Chester pondered a while, and then, seemingly intent on kicking back into its place a burning log which threatened to fall on to the domestic hearth, he said, quietly:

'If I were in your place, Mary, I should ask her down here.'

'Down here!' cried his hostess, aghast. 'Have her here at Mount St. Ambrose, where they will see each other every day, and all day long?'

'Just so,' said Frank, 'that's the cure for these cases—slight cases of infatuation, not dangerous to life, but very tiresome while they last. Let Peter see Mlle. Mankovich every day. That's all the advice I've got to give,' he added a little curtly, seeing an obstinate refusal in Lady St. Ambrose's face. 'You can take it or leave it. I'm sure it's the only way.'

Tea and lamps interrupted any further discussion, and the entrance of Janie, which partook of the nature of a whirlwind, stopped Mary's thoughts from dwelling on her conjugal misfortunes for a while. Muffins were a forbidden article of food to the Honourable Jane, yet muffins, it seemed, that young lady was determined to have. Her father made his appearance in the midst of the hubbub raised, and immediately handed the dish to his child. Lord St. Ambrose was a long, loose−limbed man, with handsome blue eyes and an altogether inadequate chin, who had never been known to deny himself—or any one else—anything. He was a Whig by family tradition, and a Radical because he honestly wanted every one to have a fair chance. He looked the pink of good−nature, and wore an ancient shooting−coat and very dirty boots.

His wife, who watched the little scene with a detached air, said suddenly: 'Peter, I'm thinking of asking that charming Mlle. Mankovich down for Christmas, and I hope she'll stay on for our ball. They're so stick−in−the−mud about here. We really want some one fresh and smart and amusing, don't we?'

Lord St. Ambrose flushed with pleasure. 'Oh yes, certainly, if you wish it,' he said, trying to appear indifferent. To further this illusion he reached for the cream−jug, into which he peeped, and, finding it empty, essayed a pantomime of disgust and disappointment, which moved his daughter to the most extravagant hilarity.

'I've drunk it all, father! An' I shall be so dreffully ill, an' I'm perfeckly sure you'll have to send for Dr. Potts!'

'You are a disgrace to an ancient and honoured name,' said Frank, sternly, 'and no more shall you be god−daughter of mine'; and amid the squeals and protestations of Janie, who was now formally condemned to the nursery, these three people were all intensely conscious that a new phase of the little drama had, by Lady St. Ambrose's sudden decision, definitely begun.

II

MLLE. MANKOVICH, when she appeared in these typically English surroundings, and with an essentially English house−party, aroused doubts in her hostess's mind as to the wisdom of having taken Frank Chester's advice. Up to now Lady St. Ambrose had met the girl only in the rush of the season, had caught glimpses of her—her white shoulders surrounded by black coats—at evening crushes, where black coats were rare; had watched her selling useless objects with amazing success at modish bazaars; and had seen her, a marble−pale personage with eyes of dark Irish blue, half−hidden by a curtain in some great lady's box at Covent Garden. For the first time, in the intimacy of country−house life, Lady St. Ambrose realised how at once alluring and sympathetic her guest from the remote East of Europe could be, for Mary was a person who never belittled another woman's attractions once she was convinced of their potency. Mlle. Mankovich had a fascinating dash of ugliness; she was of an amazing pallor, and the contour of her face was a shade too square and flat for beauty; but the pose of her head, the shape of her shoulders, and her lissom waist were all extraordinarily attractive.

It was not that Lady St. Ambrose disliked her: there was something at once appealing and alluring in her eyes of dark, changing blue, and her manner was the perfection of dignity. When, in the evening, her shoulders emerging from a gown of sable gauze or velvet—for Eve Mankovich never wore anything but black—the girl made her appearance in the drawing−room just before dinner, she generally succeeded in 'wiping out,' as Frank Chester put it, every other woman in the room, including the merely pretty and the merely dressy.

'It's personality, I suppose,' explained Frank. 'If you had your eyes shut, you'd know whether that girl was in the room or not. It's a rum thing. Look at Janie. She never leaves her.'

To every one's surprise, Janie had at once conceived a violent affection for the attractive foreigner, and as she was apt to be exaggerated in all her doings, clung to Mlle. Mankovich most of the day, and was not to be parted from her. This was all the more strange, as Frank Chester pointed out, because Mlle. Eve never supplied her with edibles of any kind. And yet the child, with her high spirits, her love of bright colours, noise, and gaiety, attached herself to this girl with her black gown, her sweet, sad face, and her eminently detached manner. Such a disinterested affection had not been known in the brief career of the Honourable Janie. It was true that Mlle. Eve could tell Russian folk−lore stories of the most poignant interest, and sang strange, Slav songs to the accompaniment of a one−stringed guzla; but other people, Mary St. Ambrose remembered, had essayed to entertain Janie with fairy tales and banjoes, and had left that young person profoundly indifferent.

As for Peter, his wife was the first to see—for she had unusually keen intuition in these matters—that the devotion, such as it was, was all on her husband's side.

In no wise did this strange young woman show herself perturbed or even gratified by her host's attentions. She even had a habit, as Lady St. Ambrose quickly observed, of gazing through his head while he was talking earnestly to her; and, though she had a way of sitting apart with him and holding him in close converse, no one could say that she had the appearance of discussing topics of a personal nature. Mlle. Mankovich was the least self−conscious of beings.

As for Frank, as the week went on, his infatuation was manifest. Personally, he hardly mentioned her, but the whole atmosphere of Mount St. Ambrose seemed to be by this time permeated with the presence of Mlle. Mankovich, so that the mere naming of names seemed somehow unnecessary. And though he did not talk to the girl a quarter as much as most of the men in the house, he seemed to follow her every movement, and he pondered over her phrases like one to whom certain words suggest disquieting visions and unattainable ideals. During that week Lady St. Ambrose and Frank Chester never discussed the strange guest.

One afternoon, at tea−time, Frank and Mlle. Eve had not come in. It was not a day for lingering outside, and the other guests congratulated themselves on being indoors as they warmed themselves at the big log−fire and helped themselves to hot cakes. Lord St. Ambrose was obviously fidgety.

'Not fit for a tramp to be out,' he said, glancing at the clock. 'Nice climate we live in—eh, Lady Leavenworth?'

The lady addressed sniffed. 'Your foreign young friend will catch her death of cold, I should think,' she remarked, with a certain air of triumph. Her ladyship had a daughter still on her hands, and Frank Chester was an eminently desirable bachelor.

Lord St. Ambrose frowned and changed the conversation. But every one had gone upstairs to dress for dinner

by the time the two culprits had got back.

'Dear Frank,' whispered Lady St. Ambrose, 'where on earth did you take Mlle. Mankovich this atrocious day?'

'I can't tell you exactly, Mary,' he said, after a moment's hesitation. 'At least, not now. You'll know by and by right enough. It was—something very important. She had to meet some one.'

'To meet some one?' she asked wonderingly. And for the first time, during their whole lives, something intangible seemed to have stept between these two.

For her friend and confidant had not answered. 'You, too, Frank!' murmured Mary St. Ambrose to herself as she went dejectedly upstairs.

III

THE night of the ball at Mount St. Ambrose brought about the crisis which every one somehow felt was in the air.

Mary stood at the door, anxious for the success of her party, and receiving all her guests with that reassuring grip of the hand which was so characteristic of her. And Mlle. Eve Mankovich—though nothing would induce her to dance—was indisputably the most attractive woman present. The girl stood apart, her dark head outlined against a mantelpiece banked with pink azaleas, with a little crowd of men surrounding her. She wore black, as usual, much to Janie's distress, for the child had insisted on helping her friend to dress for the ball.

'Are you in mournin', Mlle. Eve?' demanded the child, as she leaned on the dressing−table with both her elbows, devouring the fascinating one with her eyes. 'Why you always wear black?'

'In mourning, Janie?' said Mlle. Mankovich, clasping a row of pearls round her wonderful throat. 'Yes—I am. I shall wear black till—well, when you are a big girl, perhaps sooner, you may see me in white, in rose−colour. I shall wear white when the Morning comes,' she added softly, bending down to kiss the adoring little face raised to hers. Before she had finished dressing, a telegram had arrived for her, and it was with a grave, detached air that she had gone down, in her glittering black gown, to dinner.

Now she stood rather silent, watching the dancers with a strange expression on her mobile face. It was as if the skipping, jumping crowd of country beauties and men in pink was hardly real; the chatter, the laughter, the blare of the band sounded strange even to Chester, who was only watching her face with its curiously concentrated expression....

Mlle. Mankovich would not dance, and neither did Lord St. Ambrose, so it was perhaps natural that the two should, towards the end of the evening, spend a considerable time together in the great winter garden, which had been made inviting with basket chairs among the palms and camellias.

She had, indeed, just vacated her chair and re−entered the ballroom, accompanied by her host, when Frank and Mary came in at the other end. They sauntered along slowly to where the other two had been sitting, and, the two chairs being placed intimately near, sat down in them and began to talk.

'There's a bit of paper under your chair, Frank,' said Lady St. Ambrose. 'Pick it up. I do hate an untidy conservatory. How often have I told McTaggart I will have everything in perfect order!'

Chester bent down, routed under his chair, and tossed a piece of folded paper on to his hostess's lap.

'If it's a billet−doux, you'd better take the responsibility of finding out. Sentiment ain't in my line,' he said.

'But—it's a cheque!' muttered Lady St. Ambrose. 'I wonder—oh, Frank!' She handed it to him without a word.

It was a cheque for £1000, made payable to Eve Mankovich, and signed by Lord St. Ambrose.

'It is just as I feared,' she said, after a moment's silence. 'This woman—oh, it is infamous!'

To her surprise, Frank flushed up as if his own honour had been impugned.

'Don't judge her hastily, for God's sake!... I know it can be explained, but I have not the right to tell you. I have sworn to secrecy. I will fetch Mlle. Mankovich, Mary, and she will tell you herself.... Come into your own little room. We can't talk here, people will overhear us. Come.'

Mary St. Ambrose stood, dazed, by the fire in the homely little old−fashioned room. with its unromantic, mid−Victorian surroundings, clutching in her hand the tell−tale cheque, when Frank appeared with Mlle. Eve.

Lady St. Ambrose raised her honest, dog−like eyes, and surveyed the alluring creature who stood, perfectly composed, before her.

'I think, mademoiselle,' she said coldly, handing her the cheque, 'that you dropped something just now in the conservatory.'

A wonderful smile lit up the strange girl's face as she came forward, and, without a trace of embarrassment, took the incriminating slip of paper from her hostess's hand.

'Ah, but I am stupid,' she said, softly; 'I dropped the cheque. To−night I am as one distracted.... There is so much to do; I have to think of everything. Ah, Lady Ambrose, this is your husband's contribution to my fund—your good, your noble, your generous husband's gift. It is for my people—for my people!' she cried, pressing the piece of paper to her lips. 'Listen, dear Lady St. Ambrose, you are a sweet, a generous woman, and you will understand. I start for Rhodopia to−morrow morning. The time is ripe, the hour is at hand. The rising is

all prepared—all that we wanted was money.... And, *mon Dieu*, what has not been given me for the cause while I am here in England! How many English Liberals have given—but with a generosity—to our fund!... Some have promised to come and fight—have they not, Mr. Chester?' she added, with a smile. 'It is January now, but when the first leaves uncurl in the valleys, then will the men of Rhodopia rise against the Ottoman. English money we have, and Bulgarian sympathy to back us. My father was killed in the lines before Plevna, three months after I was born. Do you think we Slavs ever forget? I have worked for this rising ever since I was a child—in Petersburg, where I was brought up, in Paris, in England.... Rhodopia will yet be a free Slav nation. It is for these dreams, look you, that it is worth while to be alive!'

Lady St. Ambrose made an impulsive movement forward, put out her hand, with perfect loyalty, to her strange guest:

'My dear, I wish you *bon voyage* and good luck!' she said, with a voice full of emotion.

The girl bent low over her hostess's hand and kissed it.

'To−morrow morning, quite early, I must start,' she said. 'I shall be very sorry to go. It is restful, it is home−like here,' she added. 'Out yonder there will be blood and tears.... The telegram I had to−night was in cypher. It was from Boris Sarafoff. The man I went to meet the other day, dear Lady St. Ambrose, was a special agent of the Macedonian Committee. We are in close connection, of course, with both Bulgaria and Macedonia.... Rhodopia, my beautiful, unhappy country, will yet be a free nation.... Good−bye, God bless you, dear people.'

Eve Mankovich and Frank Chester clasped hands in the doorway like two loyal friends who understand each other.

'When the leaves uncurl in the valleys, Mr. Chester?' she said, gravely.

And Frank nodded.

Left alone in the little smug, mid−Victorian room, Mary St. Ambrose stood looking thoughtfully into the fire. 'It's all a piece of folly,' she said to herself. 'They won't succeed. And yet it's a piece of divine folly.'... And Frank was going, too. Yes, Frank would go. He was just one of those stolid, silent, obstinate creatures who, once they make up their minds, would push through a stone wall.... And Peter? She wondered, in a dazed sort of way, what he would be like after Mlle. Mankovich's departure. This girl, with her strange eyes, her sombre gowns, and her disquieting dreams, had somehow made their smug, contented, jog−trot life seem ridiculous.... Out yonder, in the near East, one had a vision of clashing swords, of bloody sunsets, of triumphant dawns.... Here, in this fat midland shire, in a park swathed in mist, in a mansion handed down in orderly succession from father to son, what did they know of these mad heroisms, of these forlorn hopes?

She looked around the little room, which spoke so eloquently of tame conventions and uninspired ideals.... The bust of Clytie, with its puerile prettiness; the Landseer pictures, in which stags and dogs were depicted with the expression of human beings; the prie−Dieu chairs in Berlin−woolwork, on which no one had ever been known to pray....

'She will go away, and she will never come back,' thought Mary. 'I wonder if Peter will be unhappy.... And Frank? Well, I have lost my friend Frank too!'

THE KIDNAPPING OF PHIL ALTAMORE

I

I DON'T say that I altogether approved of the kidnapping of Phil Altamore, yet who shall say that this somewhat desperate adventure was not justified in the end? The way of it was this.

The English Quay in St. Petersburg on a September afternoon is, so far as Society is concerned, a tolerably deserted spot. Therefore, when I beheld Mrs. Jack Ormesby—Mrs. Jack, whom I suspected to be in Norway, in the Mediterranean, or even in Alaska—driving along at break−neck speed in a shabby droshky past the Winter Palace, I must confess to feeling, in addition to enraptured, a trifle surprised. It was, however, the business of Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy not to be surprised at anything—especially at what happened in Russia.

Meanwhile the lady was making desperate efforts to attract the coachman's attention. I ran after her, shouting in Russian to the fellow, and at length he pulled up.

'Thanks awfully, Kenneth,' said Mrs. Jack, in her deep−toned, enthusiastic voice, as composedly as if she had met me the day before. 'These Noah's Ark creatures seem to be imbeciles. They don't understand French, German, or English—nor even that primitive method of communication, a violent dig in the back with a parasol.'

'Their backs are stuffed, dear lady. You mustn't expect them to feel anything there,' said I. 'But where on earth did you drop from?'

'I didn't drop from earth. I came by water. There's the yacht,' explained the lady, waving towards a dazzling white craft moored out in mid−Neva. 'I've kidnapped a boy, Kenneth.'

'The deuce you have!' said I. 'How old? In long clothes? And are you going to adopt him?'

'Well, I'm almost old enough to be this child's mother. He's twenty−two.'

I whistled thoughtfully.

'Twenty−two, dear lady! That's rather a different matter, eh? Won't there be some other woman, as well as the young gentleman's mamma, who may reasonably object?'

'That's just it,' nodded Mrs. Ormesby. 'There is a young woman—a dreadful young woman, and he was to have been married to her this very morning at St. Martin's−in−the−Fields. Have you ever noticed, Kenneth,' she went on, impressively, 'that most of the insane, ridiculous marriages—marriages which have Disaster written across them from the very beginning—are celebrated at St. Martin's−in−the−Fields?'

'Most marriages are ridiculous,' said I, with a shrug, 'if you think about them candidly. Why was this one going to be worse than the others?'

'Ah, you don't understand,' sighed Mrs. Jack. 'But get in, and tell him to drive anywhere I can buy the boy some collars.'

There is very little room in a Russian droshky for two, and we must have looked tolerably confidential as we sped along the Quay and through the great square towards the Nevski Prospekt.

'Well,' said I, admiring the lady's handsome profile (I've always regretted not having seen more of Joan since Jack Ormesby died), 'go on. Confess your crime. The secrecy of the Chancellerie shall engulf it for ever. The Chief's away in Finland—fishing on the Lakes. I'm in charge at present.'

'It's Phil Altamore, the poet,' said my charming companion. 'A boy of genius. Another Shelley!'

'And you're afraid of another Harriet Westbrook?' I inquired. Somehow or other, the thing was beginning to bore me. I knew of old that Mrs. Jack was essentially a woman of emotions and caprices, but, hang it all! a man prefers those emotions and caprices to be concerned with himself.

'I've no official information about the young gentleman,' said I, in my most ambassadorial manner. 'But now I think of it, some of the weekly papers have been booming him a bit of late. But he hasn't left Oxford yet, has he?'

'He left,' she said, 'when he was just twenty−one. The air of the place was too damp. It didn't agree with him.'

'Sounds uncommonly like bein' sent down.'

Mrs. Ormesby sniffed.

'But how did you bring it off?' I asked. anxious to change the conversation. 'In what manner did you tear him from the arms of his expectant bride?'

'Well, Kenneth, you see it was like this. Poor dear Phil, I could see, was in despair. This Rosalba girl—or rather woman, for the creature's ten years older than he is—got hold of him when he was all infant—an infant of nineteen. The Altamores, who are Suffolk people, you know, sent Phil over to Paris to rub him up a bit, and she

captured him in the Quartier Latin, where they met in one of those amazing studios. She said she had been a governess, a companion. I fancy she was singing English songs at some of the *cafés chantants* .'

'Ah, the lady is a singer?'

'She thinks she is! Well, some sort of promise was extorted from this unfortunate boy three years ago; and this year Miss Rosalba—that is the preposterous name by which she calls herself—has come to England, descended on Philip, and demanded his hand. Naturally the poor boy, who has been rather spoilt in London, had forgotten all about her.'

'That was awkward,' I murmured; 'one should at least cultivate a memory for one's matrimonial engagements.'

'Don't talk rubbish, Kenneth. Of course he remembered the engagement, poor little wretch. It was the woman he had forgotten.'

'Naturally,' said I. 'But tell me, was he willingly abducted?'

'Not at all. He didn't know an abduction was taking place! The boy had been coming to me nearly every day. As things closed round him, I could see how the whole affair was preying on his mind. His people, of course, were furious. Phil is the eldest son, they have a lovely place, and his mother had, I believe, an excellent match in hand for him.... One night he told me the whole story of this dreadful entanglement. He even brought her one day to see me. She is quite impossible.'

'And you advised him, of course, to break the thing off, and offer the lady a handsome sum down?'

'He wouldn't hear of it. He said it would be odious, dishonourable. The marriage was settled, the wedding−day fixed. So I took the affair into my own hands. I had arranged to go a cruise on the White Witch, and the yacht lay at Tilbury, victualled, manned, the captain aboard, ready to start. I told Phil I was going away for some months to the Mediterranean. I begged him to come down to Tilbury and dine on the yacht the night before we started. It was to be a little farewell party.'

'And he came?'

'While we were at dinner, the captain had orders to slip anchor, and run down the river. We never stopped till we got to Kronstadt this morning.'

'That was smart,' said I; 'but I suppose you know you can be had up for abducting an infant?'

'Rubbish!' snapped Mrs. Jack. 'He's twenty−two.'

'Where is Altamore now?' I demanded.

'In the white saloon, without a collar, reading Andersen's *Fairy Tales*,' replied his hostess, with conscious pride.

'He must feel depressed, poor devil. You couldn't imprison a man more effectually than by depriving him of a clean collar.'

'Oh, Phil's not like commonplace men. The dear boy! He wouldn't notice if he had a collar on or not. Why, he wanted to come with me just now. As a matter of fact, he can't land, for he hasn't got a pass− port. They made a great to−do at Kron−stadt. Collars are a mere detail.'

Nevertheless, his abductress, when I had convoyed her into the smartest men's haberdasher's on the Nevski, was considerably exercised to find the exact shape and size to suit her poet. But helping a charming woman to choose articles of wearing apparel for another young man palls after twenty minutes or so. I was glad when we got out.

'Of course you'll come back and dine on the White Witch,' said Mrs. Jack. 'I've got one or two pleasant people on board, and I want to introduce you to Philip. We're just out there, by the Nikolai Bridge.'

We were whirled back. Petersburg, I was glad to see, was looking its best. The Winter Palace, though imposing enough, is not, in the early autumn, a particularly cheerful−looking habitation, with all its windows economically smeared with white−wash, to exclude the light and air. Yet, now, in the September sunset, as I pointed it out to my traveller, it had a magnificence which, though temporary, was impressive enough. As we stepped into the yacht's steam−launch at the foot of the Nikolai Bridge, that one stone and iron structure among the many rough log−bridges which cross the big river, it was a brilliantly coloured scene—more suggestive of the gorgeous East than of the frozen North—which met my English traveller's eyes.

As we steamed out into mid−stream and looked back at the city, Mrs. Jack grew enthusiastic. The Winter Palace had turned a deep rose, the whiter buildings had taken on a pinkish hue, and the glittering monster golden dome of St. Isaac's was ablaze in the sunset. On the farther shore there were the gilt and green towers of the

Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. There was colour, vivid colour everywhere. Every house had its coating of pink or yellow, its roof of red or green.

'It's magnificent!' she said, pausing at the top of the gangway and turning to look at the brilliant spectacle.

As we stood there, a pale boy, with long, lankish hair and sensitive lips, glided out from a doorway, and slipped his hand into Mrs. Jack's. She held it fast, in a protecting and maternal way. I guessed at once it was the future Shelley.

'This, Kenneth,' said the lady with pride, 'this is Mr. Philip Altamore.'

II

ON closer acquaintance, Mr. Philip Altamore revealed himself as one of the most silent individuals I have met in the course of a tolerably wide experience of men. His silence, however, was imposing enough; more imposing, somehow, than the elaborate eloquence of other people. He simply said nothing at all. His eyes followed Mrs. Jack all over the ship. It was obvious that he regarded her as his guardian angel; he had the air of gratitude towards his abductress which a woman shows to a man who has saved her life.... The name of Rosie Rosalba never passed his lips. He seemed like a creature who is recovering from a dangerous illness. He had the eyes of a beautiful woman—a woman in a Burne−Jones picture—and he had, in addition, the fantastic, caressing ways of a child. I loathe effeminate men, yet there was something curiously pathetic about this boy which made you like him in spite of everything.

Nevertheless, I couldn't help thinking that Mrs. Jack had got herself and her poet into a tight corner. After all, he was of age, and if he had promised to marry somebody, why, short of her being his own grandmother, he was morally bound to do so. As an Embassy official, I declined to have anything to do with the matter. All I could do was to fix it up about his missing passport with the Chief of Police. Moreover, it annoyed me to see Mrs. Jack—Mrs. Jack, who used to have at least a liking for me, two years ago, at Carlsbad—taking such an interest in this lanky−haired youth. I couldn't help chaffing her all that week, when I was made to do courier, and trot the whole party round to do the sights. There are strangely constituted persons, it would seem, who like going over palaces; and for these Petersburg must be a veritable Paradise. Mrs. Ormesby was one of these. She spared me nothing. Good Lord! the amount of ground we must have travelled that week; miles of the Winter Palace and miles of the Hermitage.

'Better let 'em marry, and fight it out like the rest of them,' said I, one afternoon in the Hermitage, when she had been bewailing the curious apathy of her poet.

'Impossible!' she cried; 'now I've kidnapped him, I'm going to carry the thing through.'

'It's all a mistake, dear lady. A happy poet! Who ever heard of such a thing? It's unnatural. You're taking the man's bread out of his mouth. What on earth is he to write about, if he's quite comfortable like you and me, and other reasonable mortals? Besides, if he doesn't make a preposterous marriage, like most other poets, where do the biographers come in? Think of the many estimable middle−class gentlemen who have supported wives and families entirely on the—er—the little moral eccentricities of Byron and of Shelley?'

But Mrs. Jack was getting angry. 'Don't be a fool, Kenneth. I'm half afraid, when he wakes up out of his dream, that the boy will go back, and do what he calls the "honourable" thing.'

'Or she might follow him here?' I suggested airily. I was getting rather sick of Mr. Philip's amorous affairs.

'The gods forbid!' cried she, marching, with a true Briton's delight, towards the famous Sir Joshua in one of the smaller rooms of the Palace.

Nevertheless, it was this absolutely unforeseen catastrophe which came to pass.

Naturally enough, Mrs. Ormesby wanted to meet some Russians, but natives are not easy to catch in Petersburg in September. They are apt to be at Aix−les−Bains, at Marienbad, at Trouville; anywhere, in short, except in their own country. The Princess Kalitsine, however, was at her country house, within reach, and a judiciously worded note brought her to town to spend a few days with our English party. Sonia, to be sure, has Anglomania in a marked degree. She drives a high−stepping cob in an English dogcart, wears London tailor's clothes, and a stiff sailor hat slanting over her long, grey−green eyes, those Slav eyes which are so enchanting to the initiated. The Princess and Mrs. Jack got on at once, or pretended to, after the manner of well−bred women, which, after all, comes to the same thing in the end. One or two young men were available also, though I was not so sure whether they would be such a success as the Princess Sonia. You can generally rely on the Eternal Feminine for social purposes. Who was it that declared that Woman has no country?

Well, one night I was to give these people dinner in a music−garden in the Islands, a suburb of Petersburg, where you can drive for an hour or more through woods of silver birch, past the summer palaces of princes and the wooden châlets of merchants; over little bridges, past gardens laid out in English fashion, or ornamented with coloured drolls after the Swedish mode, and be amid green trees all the time. The place is dotted with restaurants and cafés, where the gilded youth of Petersburg make merry of a night, and where the Russian gipsies dance their

wild dances, and sing their queer, half−sad songs.

Everything seemed propitious. The night was fine and wonderfully warm. The gardens, to be sure, were a trifle dull and empty, for your Russian prefers rather to sup than to dine *al fresco*; and, till eleven or so, I did not expect many people to be there.

I gave them a Russian dinner; vodki and caviare, soup with pasties and sour cream, and cigarettes served between the courses.

Even Philip Altamore woke up a bit. The Princess had taken an immense fancy to the boy Sonia is learned about the Eliza− bethan period, and will quote you sonnets of Spenser by the yard), and those two, after dinner, wandered away to hear the Russian part−songs. Mrs. Jack did not want to hear them; she said it was quite enough to see the performers—in the distance. It is true that to eyes accustomed to the open−air music halls of Paris the scene must have looked odd enough. On a huge cavernous open−air stage, lighted by wan electric lights, there was placed a circle of singularly ill−favoured ladies. One and all were dressed in nun−like gowns of sombre black wool, which enveloped them from neck to wrist, nor had they pandered to the public by adding fictitious roses to their pale faces, or gold to their dun−coloured hair.

'Good gracious!' said Mrs. Jack, 'do they hire the inmates of charitable institutions out here to sing at music halls?' They were performing, I could hear, a mournful Russian part−song, and the principal singer, who was habited in a high black silk dress, was struggling in vain to rouse the enthusiasm of the audience. As usual, they were listened to by rows of bored and pale−faced citizens, who neither clapped nor applauded.

'When it is over, the audience will go on sitting there, in absolute silence, waiting for further developments,' I hastened to explain. 'In point of solemnity (at any rate in public and when he is sober) your Russian is an Oriental.'

'Must be a trifle discouraging for the artists,' murmured the lady.

I took a chair nearer.

'You have made me very happy coming to−night like this, Mrs. Jack,' I began in my most impressive manner.

'Oh, it's been charming.... And it seems so far, so very far, from St. Martin's−in−the−Fields!'

'Beastly hole!' said I, taking the shapely hand that hung nearest my chair, and kissing its soft suede covering, gently, respectfully, in Russian fashion. When I raised my eyes slowly to see how the lady received my homage, I was mortified to see that she was totally oblivious of the whole tender proceeding. Her eyes were fixed in an incredulous stare, her lips were slightly parted. I looked in the direction in which she was gazing, and saw two unmistakable Englishwomen bearing straight down upon us.

'My Heavens! It's Rosie Rosalba!' gasped Mrs. Jack.

III

IT was an odious moment. If there's one thing that makes a man feel deucedly nervous, it is the possibility of an encounter between two irate women.

All this time Miss Rosalba was descending inexorably upon us, an avenging figure, a bride in search of a bridegroom who has been rapt from her encircling arms.

Miss Rosie Rosalba was long and lean, with a bright natural colour, and unnaturally bright hair. I don't say she wasn't good−looking. Mrs. Jack always maintained that she was hideous. She was dressed in showy shop−clothes, wore a gigantic hat with many feathers, and had the air of a young woman who has pushed, shoved, and fended for herself with varying fortune since she was fifteen. Her companion was a nondescript little woman of fifty or thereabouts.

I hardly dared look. I certainly didn't want to listen to what followed. The injured young lady was voluble, and I was conscious that she was demanding of Mrs. Jack (naturally enough, poor girl) what she had done with the bridegroom−elect, and how, after the banns had been put up and the wedding−day fixed, she had had the face to spirit him away? The young lady, moreover, laid stress on the trouble she had had, the expense she had been put to in following up the trail, tracking them to Petersburg, and the difficulty she had experienced in reaching the White Witch, and finding out our whereabouts that very evening. But above all, she demanded, as her right, the young poet.

Mrs. Jack's coolness was nothing short of amazing, considering that she was clearly in the wrong. Sitting comfortably in her chair, with the girl raving and fuming over her, she merely urged, in her deep, sympathetic voice, the inadvisability of such a marriage, and even pointed out, with considerable tact, how it would put an end to Miss Rosalba's own interesting artistic career.

But even this neat point had no effect on our young lady. The crisis, to be sure, was brought about by the sudden apparition of Philip and the Princess Kalitsine, who were walking towards us down the gravel path, their heads close together. They made the prettiest picture:—the beautiful pale blonde Princess in her trailing lace skirts and her shady straw hat; Philip, looking more animated than I had ever seen him before, with one hand laid lightly on her arm as he quoted a favourite line of poetry.

Miss Rosalba rushed forward and seized his arm.

'Philip!' she cried, 'my Philip!'

Great poet or not (and afterwards he became very famous), I shall always maintain that Philip Altamore at this juncture looked a bit of a fool. There he stood, silent as usual, gazing at the three women's faces who surrounded him. I, perhaps, was the only one who saw that he seemed to move instinctively towards the Princess.

It was then that Miss Rosalba turned and suddenly met the calm scrutiny of our Russian guest.

'*Mon Dieu*!' said Sonia, '*cette petite Rosa*.' What brings you here, of all places?' she went on in English, and in a voice of unmistakable disgust.

It was quite evident to all of us that Miss Rosalba's high colour was natural, for it had faded quite away and left her cheeks a drabbish−white. That she was taken by surprise, as well as frightened, was perfectly obvious.

And then, to the dismay of our little group, Miss Rosalba began to sob. Some Russians were gathering round. We were in for a disagreeable scene. There was only one thing to be done, or the story would be all over Petersburg. Although I had vowed a hundred times not to be mixed up in this idiotic affair, I was constrained to take the girl apart, tell her who I was, and invite her to come to the Embassy next day, when some arrangement might be come to. Then I put the two women into a droshky and bade the driver take them to the hotel at which they were staying. It was evident, however, that Miss Rosalba was quite at home in Petersburg.

The Princess Kalitsine drove back with the much−disputed poet to the Quay. She had been invited to sleep on board that night.

'It's the very devil,' said I to Mrs Jack, as we tucked ourselves into a droshky. 'The Princess and Miss Rosalba seem to know each other, and Sonia isn't keen on claiming the acquaintance. What can it all mean?'

'The Princess Kalitsine,' said Mrs Jack with conviction, 'will tell me to−morrow morning. It's something damaging to that young woman's character, and she wouldn't say it before Phil—or you.'

'That's likely enough,' said I. 'Sonia's such a good sort.'

But after all, as it was I who was deputed to settle this disagreeable affair, the ladies took me into their confidence.

'As for this young person,' said the Princess Kalitsine at our council of war in the cabin, 'I may as well tell you, my dear friends, that I had to dismiss her from my service some five or six years ago.'

'Your service?'

'She was the English governess to my baby Xenia. I have a husband— *enfin*, the Prince is not too austere. This little Rosa was quite impossible to have in the house. There was my brother, too. You know Vladimir, Kenneth—how impressionable he is, and how he adores *les Anglaises*? In England, of course, your husbands, your brothers, they are perfect, are they not? With us, we must take precautions.'

'Phew!' said I. 'Have you any proofs?'

'Proofs? I have every proof. Letters from this girl—attempts at extorting money—'

'That pretty well settles the matter,' said I, 'though she may turn nasty, still.'

'Offer her,' said Mrs. Jack, 'at least five hundred pounds. I'm sure his mother will give it cheerfully.' And this was what was finally settled when we had talked the affair over at length. But Phil Altamore had to be told. I don't know whether it was timorousness or diplomacy, but we both, with hearty accord, begged the Princess Sonia to tell the whole story to Phil.

'At any rate,' said Mrs. Jack, when the Princess had left the cabin, 'if she tells Phil the truth, he won't even want to marry the Rosalba girl—'

'Well, he ain't talkative,' I said thoughtfully. 'I wonder what the deuce he does want?'

'At present,' she said delightedly, 'he seems to want to see a good deal of that charming Sonia Kalitsine.'

'A Russian Princess may be worse for him, in the end, than an English hussy.'

'But he can't marry her,' said Mrs. Jack triumphantly, as we both emerged on deck, and saw the Princess and Altamore pacing the milky−white boards in close confabulation. Was she telling him the unpleasant story, I wondered, or rather, with feminine tact, arranging it so as not to wound his masculine egotism?

When the time came for the momentous interview at the Embassy, I found that I had, in Miss Rosie Rosalba, an uncommonly sharp young person to deal with. It was a bit awkward, to be sure (and I wouldn't trust the Third Secretary), that Her Majesty's *chargé d'affaires* in a great European capital should be arguing with and cajoling a dismissed nursery−governess. She did not attempt to deny the Princess Sonia's version of her past history, but maintained, impudently enough, that it had nothing to do with Phil Altamore's promise of marriage. Heaven knows what shifty attorney she had consulted before she started, but Miss Rosalba talked glibly enough of letting all London know how Mrs. Ormesby had stolen her lover away from her.

'I call it kidnapping, and nothing else,' she declared.

'So do I,' I replied suavely. 'You've described the case exactly. Only, as the victim of the outrage doesn't seem to want to be given up, let me implore you, my dear young lady, to accept this little cheque for £500, and let the matter be settled. If the Princess Kalitsine,' I added, 'gave her evidence in a court of law, you would never get any damages from an English jury. Five hundred pounds, on the other hand, will not only amply repay any expenses you may have been put to, but will be useful in your career. You will allow me, will you not, to send and book your passage on the steamer to Hull to−morrow?'

This, indeed, was a course which I urgently pressed, as the Chief was coming back at once from the Lakes. Some important despatches had arrived from London, and he would be back to−morrow morning. What, indeed, was I to do, when the Chief appeared, with Miss Rosie Rosalba?

It was late when I boarded the White Witch, and found Mrs. Jack and her guests playing poker in the saloon. Two, how−ever, were missing.

'She's taken the money, and she's going back to England to−morrow,' I gasped, sinking on to a divan and mopping my brow.

'So you've settled it, Kenneth? Good. We'll leave to−morrow for Stockholm,' declared Mrs. Jack. 'And never any more do I interfere in any one's love affairs.

'You're going to−morrow?' I said in dismay. 'And where do I come in?'

'Get leave and come after us. I can't stay in St. Petersburg any longer. There's been nothing but worry and bother here.'

'Seems to me,' I said gloomily (for I detest ingratitude in woman), 'that you're taking your worry and bother

with you. Where's Altamore?' I added impressively.

'Reading *Aglavaine et Sélysette* to the Princess Sonia!' laughed Mrs. Jack. 'And we're not going to take him with us. He's going on a visit to the Kalitsine's country place.'

Hang the boy! I thought. As if it wasn't bad enough to have Mrs. Jack maundering about him, now I should hear about him all the winter from the Princess Kalitsine and her set.... Well, well, if I got leave to go to Stockholm, who knows what might happen? If Mrs. Jack said 'yes,' who knows if I mightn't have a rise in the diplomatic service, and even get Athens or Copenhagen?

Next day, before the yacht sailed, there was a little gathering by the Nikolai Bridge to see the Princess and her guest off. Our last view of Philip Altamore was typical, indeed, of that young man's subsequent career.

The Princess Sonia's three−horsed carriage, with its gay−coloured rosettes and trappings, its magnificent coachman in his voluminous robe and his low−crowned hat, was waiting on the Quay to drive them down to the Kalitsine's country place. Seated by the side of his lovely hostess, screened from the September sun by her rose−coloured parasol, he was finally whirled away in a cloud of fluttering ribbons, in a sea of tempestuous petticoats.

WHEN PURFLEET WENT TO THE WAR

I

IT was admitted on all hands that Purfleet was a good sort, and that Lady Purfleet, as far as that went, was a good sort also; why they did not get on better their genially tolerant world could never quite make out. Jack and Bibi, the two children, if occasionally a trifle outspoken with their parents, were pronounced jolly little chaps, especially Bibi, the girl, whose fat legs, aureole of flaming hair, and caustic remarks on men and things made the joy of the Purfleets' immediate circle. On the whole, this young lady—a Cockney by birth—preferred London and the staircase of the Purfleets' house in Curzon Street as a field of observation from which to view the human comedy. At Valeham Royal, as she very justly observed, there were either no people at all for her to criticise or to ingratiate herself with, or else, from October to December, a succession of middle−week visitors who were grumpy and preoccupied at breakfast, who disappeared in checks of fearful and wonderful size all day, and who talked of nothing but the poor, sleek, bleeding birds which were heaped up in the gun−room towards evening.

In Curzon Street, on the other hand, what endless surprises in the way of new acquaintances did not the possession of a pretty and modish mother ensure! What a procession of beautiful young men, with shining boots, and Russian violets in their coats, mounted the narrow London staircase, and, if one could evade one's nurse effectually, what joys might not a foggy London afternoon contain! Though her whole heart was given to her father, Bibi was aware that, as an item of London society, the tall, long−backed mother, who wore her clothes so superbly, was much the more shining social success of the two. And the child, with her modern and almost morbid love of approbation, was a small piece chipped off the solid block of Lady Purfleet's egotism. So this winter, when, like the last, Valeham Royal was shut up, and the master of the house was away with the local Yeomanry in South Africa, Bibi attached herself passionately to two or three of the wearers of shiny boots and Russian violets, to whom she would confide alarming details of her father's martial prowess.

Finding herself alone in the boudoir with a new admirer, a small, short−sighted man with a pink face and a pince−nez, Bibi, who was busily constructing a fort with the aid of some tin tacks, held forth: 'Father's at the war. He's fighting ever so hard! Father killed a Boer, all his own self, with his pistol.'

'How interesting,' murmured the little man, adjusting his pince−nez and surveying the daughter of so patriotic a sire.

'An' I know what. I b'lieve father's killed thousands of 'em. Could you kill a Boer?' demanded the child, with much interest.

'Dear me! I don't know, I'm sure. I never tried,' tittered the little man.

'Why didn't you go to the war?' asked Bibi presently, bending over her fort, and hammering with a fat fist. 'You **oughter** gone. Jack would have gone, only they won't have boys. An' you're not a boy, although you look so funny and pink. You **oughter** gone to the war.'

'Bibi!' murmured Lady Purfleet. appearing in the doorway, a vision of white lace and dark furs; 'what rubbish are you talking? Say good−night to the Duke, and run upstairs to the nursery.' And presently Bibi was borne, expostulating violently, away.

One may as well say at once that Lady Purfleet, always a little bored and detached, except when it was a question of her own looks, favoured none of these swains beyond bounds. She had to have her little court, a sufficiency of adorers to swing incense before her loveliness, a phalanx of solid worshippers to show that she was courted among women: this much she owed to herself. Venetia Purfleet had always been a beauty, and she had hardly known a time, even when she was in the schoolroom, when the spectacle of swaying censers had not met her approving gaze. For the rest, she was a good−hearted woman, and, if she had not lived in the vapidest set in town, she might have developed long ago into a real human being. Whether she ever succeeded in doing so we shall presently see.

Although she had not given many outward manifestations of anxiety, it is certain that Lady Purfleet had felt her husband's absence. They had parted, it is true, without emotion on either side. Only the week before he sailed he had made, as she remembered with a smile, a ridiculous fuss about some man or other; whether it was Lord Parkhurst or Jimmie Chorley she couldn't quite remember, but, at any rate, the thing was quite absurd, and she wasn't going to be dictated to as to whom she should receive or whom she should not. Nevertheless, she had thought of her husband often since then, just as she saw him last, in his unbecoming khaki, detraining his troops at

Southampton, his face rather set and white beneath his slouch hat and feathers....

And what things had happened since then! Purfleet had been at Paardeberg, and in Ian Hamilton's march. He had got through his attack of enteric with marvellous rapidity, and all this autumn he had been one of those in hot pursuit of Christian de Wet. He did not write often—he had never been much of a letter−writer—and Lady Purfleet, on her side, was apt to conduct her correspondence by means of the electric telegraph.

And so things stood when Lady Purfleet first met Adrian Venn.

II

LOOKED at from the strictly impartial point of view, Sir Adrian Venn was not much more attractive than her absent husband, but then, as it was sagely observed in society, the Governor of the Semilina Islands had not the disadvantage of being Lady Purfleet's legitimate lord. Then, again, he was only to be in England for a short time longer (he had already spent ten months of his year's absence), and every one knows how an approaching departure hastens to a crisis affairs of this delicate and precarious nature. Sir Adrian was a man of forty−two, who was understood to have had a past of a devastating, if somewhat sentimental, nature. With the broad, well−developed brow and longish hair of the typical literary person, he tempered this untoward appearance to the world of Mayfair by dressing admirably, and retaining a certain indolence of manner acquired by ten years in the Tropics. Some twelve months ago he had published a little volume entitled *On the Reefs,* a little volume which had pleased the critics, and also, by some curious chance, had reached a considerable circulation among people in society.

It was patent that the author had not only suffered deeply, but had solaced himself with cultivating the most amiable of styles. This *cri du coeur* from the Pacific became the rage. When a young man was in doubt if he might present anything more compromising than a bouquet to the temporary lady of his heart, he solved the difficulty by walking into Bumpus's and despatching a copy of *On the Reefs* . It is true that the book in itself was almost as much a declaration of passion as a diamond chain would have been, but that, no doubt, added to its vogue. When Jimmie Chorley had felt uncommonly sentimental, one day after a pensive, wet afternoon with Lady Purfleet. he, on the recommendation of a man at the club who was understood to read books, had sent the languorous volume to Curzon Street. And Lady Purfleet had at once declared herself of the cult of Adrian Venn.

It was Bibi, to be sure, who first annexed this minor celebrity. At no more romantic a place than a modish restaurant did Lady Purfleet and her admirer first meet.

It was a dismal enough November day outside, but Prince's was crowded with pretty women in wide−opened ermine collars, and with gardenias thrust in their toques. Bibi, who had insisted on being taken out to lunch, was chaperoning her mother and two adoring young gentlemen at a small table; but the child, who had her own ideas of how she should amuse herself, presently got up and wandered round to where Mrs. Levada, an old favourite of hers, was entertaining a little party of five men and one woman.

Bibi, at ease as usual, took the chair proffered her by the most distinguished−looking person of the party, and at once entered into conversation.

'My name's Bibi,' she announced; 'wot's yours?'

'Adrian Venn,' said the stranger, smiling amiably on this queer baby with the Venetian curls and the brown saucer−eyes.

'Gi' me a bit of your pear!' she demanded, stretching out a fat hand. 'Oh, tha−anks! That's my muvver, over there. Isn't she pretty?—the one by the window.'

Sir Adrian Venn looked across the room with the eyes of a connoisseur.

'I congratulate you on your choice of a parent,' he said, with much gravity.

'Oh! you **are** funny,' declared Bibi, screwing up her shoulders. 'Well, I like father best. He's at the war, you know. Those **are** stupid boys lunching with us. That's the Duke of Rochdale, that funny little pink man. I like Jimmie Chorley best. So does muvver. He sends me lots of sweets.'

'There seems to be some competition,' murmured Venin to his hostess. 'And I don't wonder.... Would it be possible to be presented to this beautiful lady?'

'Why, my dear man, she's probably dying to know you,' declared Mrs. Levada. 'She adores your book. Come over with me now. Bibi, you are the only unaffected person left in London. Be careful, above all things, never to become conventional. But, in the meantime, I can see by the expression in your mother's eye that you are shortly destined to the chaste seclusion of the nursery.'

And so, with Bibi hanging amicably on his arm, the author of *On the Reefs* was piloted across and introduced to Lady Purfleet.

Generally somewhat stolid and expressionless, Venetia exhibited the unusual spectacle of a pretty flush of excitement when Venn's name was mentioned to her. His eyes never left her face. Only a few words seemed to

pass, but before they said good−bye he had been asked to Curzon Street. He called the next day, and after that, as Mrs. Levada declared, you could not go to the house without treading on the distinguished young Governor of the Semilina Islands.

III

IT looked, at the first blush, as if Curzon Street was to prove as perilous an experience for the Governor as his palm−bedecked rock in the Pacific. For, unlike every one else in London, he and Lady Purfleet took each other quite seriously. Venn soon seemed to have some curious influence over Lady Purfleet. Women, it is true, were easily taken in by him, and he had at his fingers' ends all the resources of the literary *poseur*. Accustomed to the limited vocabulary of the smart young men in London, Venetia was carried away by his grave eloquence; his rather deliberate manner, his searched−for phrases, impressed her strangely. And to a man who had spent ten years on an island in the Pacific, it was not to be wondered at that Lady Purfleet—exquisitely modern, with her superficial air of intelligence and the atmosphere of high fashion which she carried always with her—as an astral body is said to surround a physical one—it was small wonder that this beautiful woman carried him off his feet.

And so one day in early December the inevitable crisis came.

Up to now Lady Purfleet had had no difficulty in keeping her admirer well in hand, but time was passing, the day loomed out when His Excellency would have to go back to his Islands. Dark, fatal, melancholy, Sir Adrian leant with his arm on the mantelpiece in Lady Purfleet's boudoir and gazed steadily at her. His passion, at any rate, had grown to be something real, and the woman whom he held with his eyes suddenly realised this at last.

She moved uneasily in her low chair. It was strange, she thought, how this man had always imposed himself upon her, and how much more difficult he was to 'manage' than any of her younger admirers. Jimmie, Lord Parkhurst, the Duke of Rochdale, it is true, were all men under twenty−eight, and it is only under eight and after twenty−eight that the male creature is generally unmanageable....

Venn knew when to be silent, and he chose to be silent at this crisis. His eyes turned moodily on to the fire. There was a long pause, during which there was no sound but a cinder dropping on the hearth and the patter of rain outside.

Ever since they had come up from lunch he had been urging her to fix a day when she would come and have tea at his rooms. A small collection of water−colours, which he had himself painted, of the islands, and a chapter of his new book, which he was to read to her, formed the excuse. It would be so sweet, he urged, to see her in his own home....

And gradually his will, his intense desire, seemed to impose itself upon her. As women do, she deceived herself, trifled with the truth.... What harm would there be, after all? It would just be to go to his rooms.... How she would love to see all his pretty things, to realise the surroundings in which he lived—and wrote. At last she spoke:

'If I looked in to−morrow, about four,' she said softly, 'would you be in?'

Sir Adrian flushed up. Then he bent over her hand and kissed her on the wrist. 'I shall not go out,' he murmured. 'I can send to Covent Garden and fill the place with flowers. It will be exquisite to sit and dream about you all the day.'

But the gods had decreed—perhaps in the interests of English literature—that the amatory experiences of Sir Adrian Venn should never be those of commoner and less sensitive souls.... This day, indeed, was destined to be a day of many emotions....

The pregnant silence which followed was broken by the raucous voice of a newsboy shouting the war news up and down the dusky, quiet street. They could hear the front door opened and closed, eager talk, the children chattering and tramping on the stairs.

'The evening paper, my lady,' said the butler, advancing respectfully with something pink on a silver tray. 'Wonderful news about his lordship, my lady.'

As Lady Purfleet came forward and took the newspaper, sounds of whooping were heard on the stairs, and the martial tramping of little feet. Then the door was flung open, and Jack and Bibi, draped in Union Jacks, and blowing tin trumpets, marched in. The boy was waving a sixpenny sword, and Bibi was suffocating with suppressed excitement.

'Oh, muvver!' panted the child, flinging her fat arms round Lady Purfleet's neck, 'it says—father's a—a—hero!'

Venetia had grown quite white, and she stumbled a little as she rushed to the window, newspaper in hand. It was a brief telegram from Lord Roberts, announcing a brilliant little feat of arms of the Imperial Yeomanry. Quite

an insignificant band of them had held a small town against the raiding Boers at immense odds. Lord Purfleet, who was in command, had ridden out with a dozen men and captured a pom−pom on an adjacent kopje. He had held the town for four days until reinforcements had arrived. All South Africa was ringing with the plucky and brilliant feat. Unfortunately, Purfleet, riding back from his captured kopje, had been wounded in the arm by an explosive bullet.

His wife dropped the paper. She felt sick and faint. Her eyes dropped to the hand which Adrian Venn had held, to the wrist which he had dared to caress....

'All right, mother!' said the voice of Jack, which sounded far away; 'don't faint, dear. Father's all right; it's only his **arm** , don't you see, dearest.'

'Oh, I **do** love father so, more'n ever now he's a hero!' sighed Bibi, who had the true feminine worship of success.

Sir Adrian stood there, at a loss what to say, what face to put upon this untoward situation.... What, after all, would this exquisite creature do? What would be her decision? He could hardly leave the house suddenly at this crisis which was half joyful, half harrowing for Lord Purfleet's wife, who, with all her faults, had the aristocrat's pride in the prowess of her masculine belongings. Though she did not speak to or look at him, Sir Adrian felt instinctively that everything had altered between them. Was it to be temporary, or for good?

A carriage stopped at the door, and in a minute Mrs. Levada was shown in.

'It's too wonderful!' exclaimed the lady; 'I always thought Purfleet would do something plucky. And the poor dear is wounded! Of course you'll go to him, Venetia?'

'Go—to him?' repeated Lady Purfleet, who had sunk down into an arm−chair.

'My dear, everybody's been out, at least to Cape Town, who's had their husband or son wounded. It's been a perfect procession of women. Of course you'll catch the next steamer,' said Mrs. Levada decisively, her glance taking in the reproachful, worn face of Venn. A woman realises these dangerous situations instinctively. She made up her mind to urge Lady Purfleet to catch the Wednesday steamer.

'Yes, I shall go,' said Venetia. 'To−morrow, did you say? I suppose I can catch the mail at Plymouth.... Would you mind, Sir Adrian, helping me with Bradshaw?'

To this day Adrian Venn wonders how even the most beautiful and sensitive−looking women can manage to be so brutal....

In a few minutes all the turmoil, the change, the shifting skies of a long journey were already parting them. Vague grey spaces, tossing waves, and infinite stretches of ocean seemed to be between them.... The lovely little room in which they sat, warm, scented, pale with exquisite brocades and glinting with gilded furniture, was only a temporary spot where he, Adrian Venn, was poring over the railway time−table to find a train which would part him for ever from this beloved woman.... He could already hear the shrill whistle of the express which would take her westwards; in imagin−ation he could see the great three−funnelled steamer belching out smoke as it swept down Channel towards the far South....

'There is a train at 3.55 to−morrow, Lady Purfleet,' he said significantly.

For an instant their eyes met.

'That will do. I daresay my maid will get me ready in time,' she murmured, dropping her eyes under his insistent gaze.

'At 3.55, then. Will you permit me to be at the station?' he said deferentially, as he took his hat.

'The whole of my family will probably be there,' she answered, with an attempt at a smile; 'all sorts of cousins and aunts. We're terribly devoted—on occasions like this. I'm afraid I must say good−bye. And you won't be here when I—when we get home?'

'I shall be in the Pacific.'

'Then−good−bye.'

He filled his eyes with her before he turned to go, trying to etch her likeness definitely on his brain.... It would have to suffice for so long, that last look. It was all that he was to have to carry into exile—into exile at the other side of the world.

'THE WORLD'S SLOW STAIN'

I

'**I**'**M** going to marry a man who jilted me ten years ago.'

She stood up, facing him, instinctively taking the attitude in which she had been told, often enough, that she looked best. A woman of thirty—perhaps over—who was vaguely supposed to be twenty−six, Adela Buller was getting a little hard−looking now, but she wore her clothes with an air. She had on a simple, well−made dress, but the effect was spoiled by the quantity of rings which covered her fingers; rings with little hearts depending from them, rings with mysterious inscriptions, and rings of strange design.

Gilbert Vincent gazed at the two little plump hands resting on the empty chair facing him, and smiled a dubious smile. He had a fat, white face, which expressed nothing in repose. When he smiled, people had a brief vision of unclean things.

'It's a subtle form of revenge,' he said, after a constrained pause. 'Though I didn't know you wanted to marry.'

'Well, I do.'

'Why? I thought you had come to the conclusion that it was much more agreeable not to be tied; to let us all adore you. For you know we are **all** devoted...' said Vincent, in the soft, half−amused voice in which, in his capacity of successful dramatist, he was permitted to make the most outrageous statements. 'I am sure,' he went on, with a curiously un−English movement of his small white hands, 'if I were a woman, nowadays, I should think so.'

'Yes, you're all devoted enough,' admitted Adela, with candour. She never took the trouble to be anything but candid with Gilbert Vincent. She had known him too long. 'But, all the same, one doesn't care to *afficher* oneself too much.'

'Oh, as for that, who cares much about anything? You don't mean to tell me you're going to turn prudish?'

'I was a nice girl once. It's a hundred years ago; but I was really!'

'Were you ever "nice"?' said Vincent. 'A nice girl like one reads of in books? I can't believe you ever belonged to that variety of the British bore.'

Adela laughed a rather unpleasant laugh. 'No, I don't think I was ever a bore,' she said, crossing to the mantelpiece and taking up a Japanese ivory, which she twisted about and examined on all sides as she spoke. 'But I was a good girl, with deep feelings, and ideals, and all that sort of thing.... I—I imagined that men were ... decent, you know, and that the women who were treated unfairly were the exceptions, and that it was their own fault, generally, if they were. I did not know that women were stuffed with idiotic theories from their very childhood, and that all my life I should suffer, suffer, suffer, for what I had been taught then. We are not told,' she went on with rising excitement, 'what life is, what it all means, or how to play the game. We are like children to whom a pack of cards is thrown, and who are set down to play a strange game with men who are confirmed gamblers. The rules are never told us, so that we blunder helplessly along, and unless we cheat out− rageously, or mark the cards, there's small chance of our winning. And what's so funny is, that most "good" men like us to be like that, ignorant, silly, helpless—even cheats. They think it pretty.'

'I believe you're right,' said Vincent, with languid surprise. This was a new phase of Adela Buller, of whom he always had vague visions, in which he saw her forming one of quartette suppers at the Carlton, of hearing of her 'running over to Paris' (she had been especially fond, of late years, of that particular form of dissipation so dear to the Londoner), of seeing her, in an exaggerated 1840 gown which slipped off her white shoulders, reciting suggestive little poems in French to a small audience of young men.

He got up, and, leaning one elbow on the mantelpiece, watched her with a new curiosity. Her eyes were strangely bright—had she been putting belladonna into them again, he wondered? He could see the pulse in her wrist beating furiously against the dark blue vein.... Vincent hoped devoutly she was not going to have a *crise de nerfs* . What excellent 'copy' she would make; what a capital **type** she would be on the stage; the young lady who is for ever hovering on the brink, but who has 'kept straight' all the same. Really, he must make an exhaustive study of Adela.

'Poor little girl!' he said softly, watching her as she tried to balance the fat Japanese divinity on his head. 'And so you're going to take your revenge by marrying him. Well, it's not a bad way, either. Who was the fool the other night at the club who was saying that your modern woman wasn't complex at all—only hysterical? By Jove, and

who's the lucky beggar?'

'Anthony Mellingham. He wrote from Mexico. I haven't seen him, you know, for seven or eight years. He's made some money, I believe, and apparently he's got remorse! It seems curious now, how I loved that man—ten years ago.'

'Then all's for the best in the best of all possible worlds,' said Vincent, with his dubious smile. 'When are you going to see him? To−night?'

'Oh no, to−morrow morning. I look so worn at night.... But in a cotton frock, in the morning, with my hair done rather neatly.... That's how they like to come back and find a woman, don't they?' said Adela, with the drawl which had become habitual to her. There was a world of weariness, of disillusionment in her tone.

'Well, he's a lucky man,' repeated Gilbert, taking her dimpled hand and giving it a lengthened pressure.

'Don't do that—it bores me.'

'What am I to give you for a wedding present? Another ring?'

'Oh, anything. No, not a ring. I—I—hate them. I'm never going to wear rings any more.

'Except the fatal one,' said Vincent, retreating. 'By the bye,' he asked, exhibiting his curious smile on the first step of the staircase, turning back as he did so to take in every detail of the pretty woman he was leaving, 'what's he like?'

'Fairish; rather good−looking, rather stupid.'

'Oh, then it's the fellow you did in that novel you wrote?'

'What, that idiotic thing? Oh, I don't know! I've forgotten all about it,' said Adela peevishly. 'I only wrote the thing because I was—miserable. And nobody would have bought it, only it was a one−and−sixpenny book printed the wrong way up.'

'It had a success,' said the dramatist, in the strictly indifferent tone of one artist to another.

'Have **I** ever had a success?' said Adela wearily.'

'Curious girl, but only one of a new species,' said Vincent to himself as he made his way down the Kensington street. 'She's all right, I daresay, but she wouldn't like us to think so.... She calls it "dull" of a woman not to have had emotional experiences, and wouldn't thank you if you altered your conversation to spare her blushes.... Yet she can be very sweet, very attractive; and she is curiously feminine—for a modern type. She knows enough to be *très femme* when she wants to be really charming. And, by Jove, she **can** be charming! It's extraordinary how fond one can be of her—at times, and in certain moods.... I wonder,' he asked himself, as he stopped to light a cigar, 'if it is possible I shall feel it if Adela really were to marry?'

II

ADELA BULLER sat waiting for her lover. Every now and then she got up, fidgeting about, now to throw into a drawer some audacious French novel which challenged the eye with its yellow cover, now to put into the background the signed photograph of a famous comedian, again to slightly lower the blind which let in the glaring July sunshine, and then to give one final look into the glass.

Adela had an artistic sense of the eternal fitness of things. She looked her part to perfection. Her face had undergone careful massage at the hands of her maid, so that, for the moment, the cheeks had regained something of the roundness, the freshness of youth, and she had insisted on Sarah brushing out the artificial waves of her hair. The lilac cotton gown showed, without insisting on, the plump lines of her figure; her pretty hands were absolutely bare.

'Mr. Mellingham,' said the servant, and Anthony entered, revealing himself, after these ten years, as a not ill−looking man of thirty−six, burnt almost to bronze colour, so that he made a somewhat incongruous appearance in his brand−new London clothes. For the rest, his blue eyes were placed slightly too close together, and there was a curious mixture of sensuality and caution in his face. The latter quality had become accentuated in the course of eight years' knocking about in Mexico. Both tendencies had always existed deep down in his nature, and had accounted for the everyday tragedy of his having loved Adela, and yet having ridden away.

He stepped forward, glancing tentatively round the room.

'Adela!' he said, putting his arms round her, and turning her face upwards so that their lips could meet.

Heavens! How horrible it was, she thought.... He had so completely passed out of her life during the last eight years, that this embrace seemed well−nigh as outrageous as that of a stranger. As he kissed her, she remembered the caresses, the passionate words of other men.... How many—how many had there been since they had seen each other? It could never be the same again; she was not the same woman; Time had besmirched her, year by year, with his horrible, corroding finger. Ah, if she could only have died then—when Tony went away.

'Why, you're looking as young and pretty as when I left,' he declared, his spirits rising. 'Hanged if I don't think you're better−looking. And you have cared about me a little bit all this time, Adela?' he went on anxiously. 'You haven't let any of those other fellows snap you up?'

'Marry me, do you mean?'

'Why, of course.'

'N—no. I must have been a young person of exemplary fidelity,' she said, smiling. 'For no one, as far as I remember, has even wanted to marry me.'

'Oh, that's all rot—a pretty girl like you, too. But you were always so horribly proud. How jolly it is in London, with the Park, and the theatres, and all that sort of thing. I say, we'll have some fun together, won't we? And then, at the end of the month, we'll get turned off in proper style, and then we can go to Scotland. Hang it, Adela, I've waited long enough.'

They looked at each other, and the ludicrousness of his phrase made them both laugh. Anthony Mellingham felt more comfortable. Adela had been looking so serious—although uncommonly pretty—ever since he had arrived. He had marvelled how little she had changed. Well, girls weren't like men; they hadn't got to rough it, they didn't lead the lives that men did.... Nowadays, girls, when they were hipped or disappointed, took up bridge or started a hat−shop. He won−dered if Adela had started a hat−shop?

Well, bygones must be bygones; he had come back now, having made enough out there to live comfortably at home. What he wanted, he told himself, was a nice little place in Dorsetshire or Sussex, where he could get a bit of hunting in the winter, and of which Adela, who was always a handy girl, with lots of notions about things, could do the honours to the few friends he still possessed in England. If he had behaved badly all those years ago, he was sorry for it, especially as his eye dwelt agreeably on the rounded lines of Adela's figure, on her soft blonde hair, and her little bare plump hands. By Jove! she was just the nice−looking, amiable, simple−minded little woman he wanted. There had been a girl on the steamer, coming home, who had reminded him immensely of Adela. She might have been ten years younger, but there was no essential difference. He and she, he remembered with a smile, had had an uncommonly good time together.

Before Anthony left, which was not till after luncheon, they had made half a hundred projects; but what struck

Adela as the strangest, most unlikely project of all, was that the wedding was to take place at the end of the month.

III

ALL the rooms in the little house in Kensington were filled to overflowing. It had been an early wedding, and the young couple were to catch the two o'clock train to Edinburgh. The rooms were stifling, and through the open door of the microscopic dining−room came a potent mingling of odours, comprising, among others, those of hothouse flowers, of champagne, of anchovy sandwiches, and of heated humanity, together with a brief vision of black coats struggling round a buffet, the rest of the room being filled with the pale, clear tones of women's summer dresses. Viewed from above, the headgear of the ladies resembled a flower−bed in full bloom. The drawing−room was chiefly filled with aunts and cousins of the bride (for Anthony Mellingham had no relations, and he had so far lost sight of his old friends that Gilbert Vincent had been, somewhat unwillingly, forced to officiate as best man)—aunts and cousins who surged tearfully round that self−possessed young lady, pressing damp kisses on a cheek which had been touched ever so slightly with powder. The bridegroom was downstairs drinking champagne with all and sundry, in radiant spirits, and wearing already the checked suit in which he was to travel. Adela's little boudoir was too high up to be made use of in the scurry of a wedding, and so the copper lamps, the silver−plated bacon−dishes, and the etchings after Leader, which always loom so largely in marriage offerings, were set out in the little room at the end of the hall passage.

Gilbert Vincent, his face pale with a pallor which was uncanny−looking, paced the little room upstairs in which he had spent so many hours of his life. He had often enough waited there for Adela, for she was of the order of unpunctual women, and he was waiting for her now.

Though he had professed himself amused, even delighted, with Miss Buller's prospective husband during the many theatre and river parties which had been got up during the last month, he felt curiously injured to−day, when she was at last separated from him for good.... Indeed, Vincent hardly realised it now. How could Adela Buller do anything so trite as to turn British matron? The thing was preposterous—it was worse, it was inartistic. He had been accustomed to drop in when he liked and read her scenes from his new plays (he was a man who was curiously dependent on feminine sympathy), even to make love to her when he felt so inclined, and here was Adela the legal property of a blundering, idiotic British Philistine, who stared when he propounded one of his elaborate aphorisms. Well, anyhow, she had promised to see him for a few moments alone, on her way upstairs to put on her travelling−dress. Deuce take her, why didn't she come? In a minute, he must jump into a hansom and drive to Euston, where he was to see to the tickets and procure for the bridal pair a carriage to themselves.

There was the rustling of a silk train, and Adela was in the room.

'It **is** good of you. I—I wanted to see you, before you went, Adela,' he murmured, detaining her with both hands.

'Well, what is it?'

'I daresay it's ridiculous, but I feel quite sentimental.'

'**You** sentimental! O Heavens!' She brushed past him to the looking−glass, where she began to fumble with the diamond pin which fastened her bridal veil.

'It **is** ridiculous,' admitted Vincent, with a wave of his white hands, 'but these things occur. You're—you're not going to throw me over altogether?' he went on, surprised, himself, at the agitation in his voice. 'You won't give me up?'

'Give you up?'—with a shrug. 'How do you mean? We have been friends—nothing more.'

'Friends!' said the man. She resented his sneer.

'Listen, once for all, Gilbert. You and I say good−bye to−day for good. I'm not going to see you, I'm not going to see any of the set I've been in for the last few years. I hate, I loathe the whole worldly lot.... For Heaven's sake, give me a chance.... I—I—oh, don't speak to me any more as long as I live.'

He had a vision of her disappearing up the narrow little staircase, a foam of white tulle and shimmering satin. Then he looked round the room. Presently he smiled his singularly unpleasant smile. What had he agitated himself about this particular woman for?... All that she had said to him just now meant nothing—except exasperated nerves.... She was essentially a comedian, and she evidently thought it part of her *rôle* as bride to talk in such a fashion on her wedding day.... Sooner or later, she would come back to him; he would sit in her boudoir, read her a scene from his new play, make love to her when he felt inclined.... But the husband? Well, he had better know at

once that he hadn't married a Philistine, that he would never be able to turn Adela, after all these years, into the conventional British wife. Why, she was not only clever, she was something of an artist. There was that bitter little story of hers which he had helped her to write, in which she had hit off Mellingham to the life; now that he knew Anthony, he saw how merciless the character−drawing was. And of course, like all amateurs, and most women−novelists, she had drawn on her own experience.... Vincent smiled as he remembered how well some of those love scenes, the 'riding away' of the lover, and the subsequent career of the heroine had been done.... His eye fell on a row of narrow booklets. *A Man of Pleasure*, by Andrew Burn; there it was. It struck him suddenly, what a dramatic effect you could get by making a young husband read his bride's version of his life.... If Vincent could only be there to see! Well, the sooner Mr. Anthony Mellingham knew, the better. He slipped the thin little calico−covered novelette into his pocket, and, running downstairs, made his way to Euston.

The Scotch express flew northwards, bearing the married pair in a carriage by themselves. The blue cushions were littered with yellow leather bags, with newspapers, with tea−baskets, while, carefully wrapped in a Scotch plaid, Adela lay dozing with her back to Anthony. He took out his watch. Not ten o'clock yet; it would be a whole hour before they arrived in Edinburgh. No wonder Adela was tired out, he thought; there was that idiotic fussation of the morning—all the excitement, and all those people staring at her. And Adela, as he remembered, had always been rather a shy, modest little woman.... Knowing she didn't mind smoke, he lit a cigarette, and, leaning back on the cushions, congratulated himself on his having 'done the right thing' by her, after all.... Perhaps she had taken him a bit too seriously, all those years ago; at any rate, it was hardly his fault that he had been obliged to leave England. Adela hadn't a penny of her own, and he possessed, at the time of their love affair, exactly three hundred a year.... Well, it had all come right now. He thought of his banking account with complacence, and determined that there was literally nothing on earth to prevent their being as jolly a couple as he knew of.

There was a yawning yellow bag in front of him, containing silver flasks, even−ing newspapers, and novels. He dipped his hand in, and drew one out. A small, narrow volume, bound in calico, printed, according to the fashion of a few years ago, in a sort of column. *A Man of Pleasure*, by Andrew Burn. Who was the author? He had never heard of him. Oh, by Jove, this was the book that Vincent had slipped into his bag at the station, telling him it was A1. Well, Vincent was a dramatist, or a literary chap of sorts, and he ought to know.

Anthony Mellingham opened the book and began to read. The train rattled northwards, shaking the occupants of the carriage from side to side like inanimate objects. Adela did not move. The yellow lamplight fell straight on to Mellingham's curly yellow hair. Any one who had been watching him as he read on and on would have seen, first a perceptible creasing up of the line between his brows; then that his face had deepened into a copper colour through the bronze; finally, that his mouth seemed to have transformed itself into an ugly slit. He wore no moustache, so that the expression of the lips was plainly visible. The happy bridegroom seemed to have aged ten years in that hour.

The monotonous thud and whirl of the flying train made a strange accompaniment to his reading. No one, he saw at a glance, could have written the book but the sleeping woman opposite him. His very words had been repeated, and there was even a love scene—the one in which they had said farewell—which she had described with curious fidelity: yes, there was the boat−house at Wargrave, filled with cool, green twilight, the flopping of the river against the boats, the rain which fell in a white sheet outside. And he, Anthony Mellingham, the 'Man of Pleasure' of the book, had been carefully painted as an insufferable cad and egoist.

And she had married him.

The express stopped with a jerk on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Adela sat up, startled. Opposite her was her husband, with his changed face. The book fell from his hand. In an instant she had guessed the whole odious situation. Her face grew haggard, the deep circles which fatigue had scooped round her eyes were accentuated by the vertical rays from the carriage lamp. There was something faded yet hard, weary yet worldly, in the whole woman's personality.

Husband and wife gazed steadily at each other without a word. No word was needed, for in that look there passed, like a sword−thrust, the vision of an eternal rancour.

'I suppose we shall be able to get something decent to eat?' said the bride, pretending to yawn.

He turned his eyes away as he answered: 'I believe Vincent telegraphed to the Palace about supper.'

'THE SWEET O' THE YEAR'

INDOORS, in the austere northern light of the studio, one hardly realised that the trees on the boulevard were all a−flutter in their pale green garments; that outside, all over Paris, the amazing fairy−tale of spring was being told. The only vernal sound which the painter could hear as he worked was the monotonous cooing of a pair of ringdoves, whose cage hung at the end of the passage, at an open door which gave on a strip of sun−flooded court. Intermittently he could hear, too, the shuffling of a pair of feet—feet which pottered about in the aimless way of the old and tired. The familiar sound brought up a vision of Virginie, the woman who swept out the studio, kept the models from the door, and made him an excellent *tisane* when he was out of sorts. Yes, Virginie certainly had her uses, although she was old, and shrivelled, and unsightly. The young man hummed a love−song of Chaminade's as he stepped away from his picture, screwing up his eyes the better to judge of the values. Poor, bent old Virginie, with the failing memory, the parchment skin, and the formless lips! He was sorry for women, especially for old women. Being a Frenchman, he had an innately tender regard for the sex.

'The world is made for men,' he said to himself; '*tiens*, I am glad I was born a man.'

And all the while Virginie, busy among her pots and pans at the end of the passage, was thinking about her master. She was proud of his talent, of his success, above all, of his youth and good looks. She rejoiced that, although M. Georges was barely thirty, he was already *hors concours* at the Salon, that he could afford so big a studio. The young men made more money nowadays.... Why, it was a finer atelier than **he** used to have—the greatest painter of his day in France, the famous Victor Gérault.

The stove had not yet been lighted, and, in spite of the sunshine outside, it was chilly in the kitchen, where Virginie was scouring the pans. At seventy−five, after a lifetime of anxiety and of toil, of rising at the dawn, of scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, washing—at seventy−five one has no longer much warmth in one's veins. And then the tepid spring sunshine only made her feel dizzy; she had a cough which troubled her, and queer pains in her bones.... 'Maybe,' she nodded to herself, 'that it is not for long that I am here. Poor M. Georges!'

An imperious ring at the outer bell made her hurry to the door. Her face fell as she encountered a fantastic hat loaded with lilac, a pair of handsome eyes, and a triumphant smile. She began to grumble.

'M. Georges was at home, yes. But he was busy. He was hard at work on a picture. The background of a portrait which must be finished this week. Could not mademoiselle call again?'

'Ah, but he will see me,' declared the Lilac Hat, pushing by, and leaving a pungent odour of chypre behind her as she passed, with her rustling silk linings and her over−powering air of femininity. Virginie shuffled after her to the studio door.

'Mlle. Rose,' she announced.

The young man threw down his palette and brushes, and turned, his face alight.

As Virginie went back alone down the narrow passage, there was a moment's silence in the atelier, broken, at last, by the murmur of soft, happy voices.

'*Tas de saletés*,' grumbled Virginie, 'she'll not let him do any more work to−day.' A strange spasm of jealousy seized her. The little incident—though she had witnessed it once or twice before—seemed to accentuate to−day her own senility, her failing powers, her rapid detachment from life. It reminded her, too, of things that had occurred half a century ago.... Suddenly the old woman felt a lump in her throat, a curious, choking sensation. She stepped to the window and pushed it open.

Outside a light easterly wind was shaking an almond−tree in full blossom, making a fluttering pink cloud against the clear April sky. The ringdoves in their wicker cage were cooing in an amorous ecstasy....

Presently, with her heavy step, she turned into the cupboard which served her for a bedroom. In one corner stood a locked box, dusty with disuse, at which she fumbled nervously with a rusty key. Then, with palsied, trembling fingers, she drew out a yellowish packet of letters, tied with a ribbon which had once, possibly, been rose−coloured.

The door of the studio was flung open, and the swish of silken petticoats and a girl's high−pitched laugh announced that Mlle. Rose was taking her departure.... It seemed to Virginie's listening ears as if M. Georges, on this radiant spring afternoon, could not bear to let her go. 'Dearest,' she could hear him urging, 'won't you dine with me to−night? Say you will! Voisin's at seven, and afterwards we'll drive in the Bois. See, it's going to be an

exquisite evening! You must send a telegram to the theatre to say you are ill and cannot dance.'

'Yes, yes,' answered the childish voice. 'To say that I am ill. It will be delicious! I shall put on my pink dress, and my little toque with the pink roses. You can't imagine how charming it is, the little toque. And do you like my hair done like a madonna or like a nymph?' And Virginie, half blotted out already in the twilight of her meagre bedroom, could hear the young man's answer, and the delighted, bewildered tones of his voice: 'Yes, parted, like a madonna. You must wear pink roses, and pink shoes, and bring that great feather fan—'

'I'll have my hair waved!' came the triumphant, satisfied answer. 'Good−bye, dearest. In an hour I'll be back. Don't forget me while I am away.'

She heard him accompany the young girl to the cab which was waiting at the door, and noted his light step as he strode back to the studio, humming a valse air as he went. How restless M. Georges seemed this after−noon.... She could hear him walking about the atelier, turning over this canvas and that, cleaning up an old palette.

When she came in with a load of wood, and knelt down, with difficulty, before the fireplace, he had flung himself on to the sofa and had lit a cigarette.

'I thought I had better make up the fire,' said Virginie, on her knees at the hearth. 'I supposed that monsieur would make as much use of the light as he could. But monsieur will probably not do any more work to−day?'

'N—no,' said Georges from the sofa. 'Probably not.'

'It's always the way; once a man is interrupted at his work, the day's gone. I've seen enough of it in my time, I can tell you...' grumbled Virginie, pulling down the iron screen over the fire with a clatter.

'Always the same old story, eh, Virginie?' came a contented voice from the sofa.

'Always!' muttered the old servant.

'Lazy brutes, we artists, aren't we? Well, don't be hard on women.... Why,' he added, in a teasing voice, after a moment's pause, 'I shouldn't wonder if **you** were a pretty woman once?'

She had risen, with difficulty, from the floor, and stood facing him, with colourless eyes and gnarled hands.

'A pretty woman!' she muttered wistfully; and then, in a more defiant tone, 'Well, monsieur has often seen my portrait!'

'Your portrait, *ma pauvre vieille*?' said Georges, with languid interest. He was choosing another cigarette as he spoke. 'And where have I seen this wonderful likeness?'

'Why, in the Luxembourg Gallery, M. Georges. They say it will be in the Louvre in a year. Ah, I did not always sweep studios and open doors. I was pretty once, M. Georges! I was a model. **He** chose me for his "Psyche."'

'The "Psyche"!' The picture which, it was known, was to be hung in the Louvre as pendant to Ingres' 'La Source'! Could it be possible, and did not life contain such ironical tragedies as this?

The Master had painted Virginie in that world−famous picture, and he, the Master's youngest pupil, had let her drudge and toil in his kitchen, all unwittingly, for years.... He sprang from the sofa, and laying his hands on her shrunken shoulders, murmured reproachfully, 'And you never told me all this time?'

'Ah, that is all more than fifty years ago now—more than fifty years. *Dame*! One forgets. My memory isn't what it was.... My head feels dizzy this weather, and I don't remember things as I used to.... Yes, yes, I was a very pretty girl, Monsieur Georges. At fifteen, down in Auvergne, there was a miller's son who—'

'Tell me about Victor Gérault,' urged Georges quietly, leading her to the sofa. The young man made her sit down, and then, with the filial courtesy of a Frenchman, he knelt, smiling, before her.

Agitated and pale, she passed her hand across her forehead. 'Yes, yes, the Master. Let me think; yes, he was always very fond of me, was M. Victor. He always said I was a very pretty girl. It was my hands especially that he thought so beautiful,' she added, with a sudden tone of vanity.

'Your hands, Virginie?' said Georges gravely, taking her withered and knotted fingers in his.

'Ah, they are spoiled with hard work now, M. Georges. Ah, *mon Dieu*! When one is already seventy−five, and has had a life of anxiety and of toil.... When one has risen at the dawn for fifty years, when one has scrubbed and swept, and worked and washed, for half a century, why, look you, it is impossible to have pretty hands, is it not, M. Georges?'

'*Ma pauvre vieille*,' said the young man tenderly.

'Everything passes and is forgotten,' said Virginie, nodding her head, and blinking a little at the bright firelight. The logs had caught now, and the flames were leaping up the chimney. How good it was to sit on the sofa once

more, just like a lady, and have her dear M. Georges kneeling there, smiling, with a question in his eyes. Presently she began fumbling in her pocket. 'There is something,' she began nervously, 'which I should like you to have. You've always been so good to me, M. Georges.'

'My poor Virginie! It's you who've always spoiled me; nursed me when I was ill—looked after me like a mother.'

Carefully drawing a packet of yellowish letters from her pocket, she handed them to him with a shaking hand.

'Yes, yes, I should like you to have them, to take care of them after I am dead. Who is to keep them? And then you, too, are an artist. Who knows if, some day, you may be as great as him?'

'As great as whom?' asked Georges, smiling indulgently as he took the discoloured packet and untied the faded pink ribbon. They were dingy folded sheets of paper, which had once been fastened by wafers, and which bore the dates of April and May 1847. Running his eye across some of the yellow pages, covered with faded ink, he glanced at the signature. 'Why, they are priceless!' he cried. 'Love−letters from Victor Gérault? Where, in Heaven's name, did you get them, Virginie?'

'But they are mine!' she said eagerly. 'Yes, yes, M. Victor wrote them to me. Ah, but I did not always sweep studios and open doors.... I was pretty once, M. Georges. I was his model. He chose me for his "Psyche." M. Victor was very fond of me.... *Dame*! that is all more than fifty years ago now,' she muttered, stooping, with the patient humility of the poor, to pick up some of the yellow sheets which had fallen to the ground.

He knelt down, too, and helped to collect the letters.

'But read them, M. Georges!' A rosy flush of belated feminine pride had crept over her shrunken cheeks. 'He used to say the most beautiful things; hie used to write the most lovely letters.... *Tiens*, you think because I am only an old woman now—nothing but a wrinkled, ugly old woman—that I have never been loved? You read what he used to say, and you will see that **I** too—'

The young man began to read aloud the letter he held in his hand. It was an intimate revelation of the heart of him whom the younger generation called the Master.

'PARIS, May 1, 1847.—I want to tell you again how your eyes haunt me, and how I delight in your beauty....'

She stood there timidly, as he read aloud, with her seamed face, and her little, faded eyes fixed on her master. A white cap was tied beneath her shrivelled chin; a loose camisole covered her shrunken chest; a meagre petticoat revealed her bony ankles.

'Your beauty, which is so strangely complex, for it has not only a child's sweetness, but a woman's seduction. Ay, you are indeed an exquisite creature....'

'Yes, yes. Indeed an exquisite creature!' repeated Virginie. 'That is just like M. Victor.'

He raised his eyes and looked at the familiar figure of Virginie.... All at once the bent, unsightly form seemed invested with the sweetness, the purity, the dignity of the young girl; round her head, with its sparse white hair, there rested, for an instant, the aureole of the woman who is beloved.

'I was like a man asleep, and you, Virginie, have awakened me. Whether you wish it or no, you will be for ever my inspiration, my dream, my reward.'

A feeble smile of satisfied vanity flickered over the old woman's face. She nodded her head as he went on reading, her knotted hands twisted nervously together. Time, with his corroding finger, had seared and branded her out of all semblance of a woman. She represented nothing but the long, the inexorable degradation of life.

'Nothing will ever make me forget the unearthly beauty of your face, nor the hours we have passed together.'

The young man laid the letter down. His eyes had filled with tears; he could hardly see the words.

'And so the Master—loved you?' he said gravely, with a touch of deference in his voice. 'Tell me about it, Virginie—'

'Yes, I must try and recollect how it used to be, M. Georges.' And then, after a pause, she went on querulously, 'I can't remember things as I used to, and it's all such a long, long time ago.... But I can recollect the time when I first stood for the "Psyche"! Ah, it was a shabby little studio he had, up at Montmartre, for, look you, the young men didn't make so much money fifty years ago; they hadn't such fine ateliers as this, I can tell you.... Nor dressed−up young ladies like **that** (nodding at the door) coming in to see them. No, no, M. Victor was poor. He had quarrelled with his family because he wished to be a painter.... All the same, it was gay enough in that studio up at Montmartre! we used to have a dish of macaroni, a bottle of thin red wine—but—we were happy!'

'Happy with Victor Gérault,' said the young man wonderingly. 'That must have been an experience indeed!'

'Then came the day of his success at the Salon,' went on the old woman, getting animated and excited. 'I tell you, there has never been anything like it. You young men don't know. There are so many clever people nowadays.'

'You mean so few people with genius!' said Georges sadly.

Like all the disciples of Gérault, he had heard the legend of the 'Psyche.' No one could get near it at the Salon; there were crowds in front of it all day long. People still read the critiques which Alfred de Musset and Théophile Gautier had written, in contemporary journals, about this masterpiece, in which there had been revived some of the sincerity, the fervour, and the inexpressible grace of the Renaissance.... And the strange, the inexorable irony of life had decreed that the model of the 'Psyche,' withered out of all semblance of a woman, should stand there before him, in the meagre dress of the humble; worn out, at last, in his service; the scourer of his kitchen, the meek servitor of his caprices.... And those shrunken arms and throat, that attenuated body, had made the fame, perhaps the immortality, of a great painter!

How strange, he thought, that Gérault—that great, unhappy man—should have left her to come to want. Yet the story was simple enough. On the day of his success had come a reconciliation with his family, and with it the last of the young people's happiness. With the strain and the excitement of his work and his sudden success, the health of Gérault had broken down, and he had been hurried away by his parents to their château in Touraine. Before he returned to Paris, they had arranged a marriage for him—one on which his mother had set her heart. Virginie had not disputed the arrangement. It was right, it was natural, she said, that he should marry.... She had had all the curious humility, the astounding courage of the poor. The girl had left Paris for a time, and had refused to see him again.

'But I have heard that he was never happy with his wife?' said Georges, with a movement of impatience.

'It may be, I do not know,' she answered simply. 'I never saw him again. *Tiens*! when one is a woman, and one has been very, very happy, and—and—it is all over—one has to learn to forget. I left Paris for many years. Now and again I heard from him, but after a little while that ceased. Life is like that.... It is hard for women. One is very happy, and then, **pouf**! it is all over, and one must ask no questions! One must not ask why.... And women live long, M. Georges. In spite of their sorrows, they live long....'

Emotional and easily moved, the young man gave way to a charming impulse. Bending down, he took her fingers and demanded deferentially, 'May I salute the hand, madame, that the Master delighted to honour?'

An impatient, agitated ring at the bell made them start. 'Sit here,' he said kindly; 'I will go.'

In another instant there had burst into the room a radiant apparition in pink. With her flower−crowned head, her tumultuous silk skirts, and the great bunch of real roses thrust in her belt, the young dancer seemed the very incarnation of wayward, alluring youth.

'Do I look nice, dear?' she demanded breathlessly, throwing off her coat.

'Superb!' said the young man, seizing her two wrists and devouring her with his eyes.

The two young people, absorbed in each other, had forgotten the presence of Virginie.

'Have I made myself beautiful enough?' she asked, patting her hair. 'You see, as I passed the *coiffeur's*, I popped in my head and said, "For Heaven's sake, be amiable, come and do my hair, Alphonse! It's an affair of state—everything depends on it." And he said, " *Bien*, mademoiselle, count upon me!" and he took up his curling−tongs and flew after me. I told him I was going to dine with the most adorable of his sex....'

'Oh!' answered Georges, with a movement of impatience.

'And then, just as I was dressed,' she chattered on, taking no notice, 'in came Marcel, with these roses. Lovely, aren't they? But I had to bundle him out. He's always in the way when he isn't wanted. Came to congratulate me on my success in the piece last night, talked a lot of nonsense, and said you were hopelessly in love with me. As if I wanted Marcel to tell me that! And, Georges dear,' she went on, laughing, 'I'm dying of hunger. That's another symptom. It is absurd; one has either no appetite at all or else one feels absolutely starving. Let's go, let's go at once. I want to make the most of my holiday. Dinner first, *très−cher*; and then a drive in the Bois! I feel so sentimental already—I shall adore that drive in the Bois. Come, Georges, make haste—help me on again with my coat. Be very careful with the sleeves....'

She bent her head, for a moment, with a cat−like caress, on his shoulder, as he carefully patted and tucked the rosy gauze into the coat−sleeves. As he stood, with this exquisite young girl in his arms, he could see the bent figure of the old studio−sweeper as she passed, mumbling and nodding, out of the room, to be swallowed up in

the vague shadows of the passage.

'Sapristi! mais ce n'est pas amusant—la vie!' he thought; but in another moment, with the ferocious egotism of youth—and especially of youth in love—he had almost forgotten her.

By and by, when the studio had been empty some time, and even the odour of chypre had evaporated, Virginie crept back again and began painfully putting things to rights. It must all look straight and tidy for M. Georges, she told herself, when he came back.... Outside, there was already something of the cold serenity of evening in the still, primrose−coloured sky. The ringdoves were silent, huddled together in their wicker cage, their beaks tucked beneath their wings. Across the courtyard a fresh but hoarse young voice could be heard singing a light song of the quarter.

Virginie looked around. M. Georges had taken the letters and placed them in the drawer of an inlaid cabinet. But presently. as she stooped about, picking up brushes and painting rags, she found a length of faded ribbon.

It was the ribbon which had tied the precious love−letters—the ribbon which had once been rose−coloured.

'They will not want that,' she muttered, and she thrust it into her meagre camisole.

With sundown it was becoming cold. The fire had gone out, the big room wa growing glacial, and it was filled, too, with vague and sinister shadows.

'Yes, the old feel chilly in April,' she mumbled, gathering her little shawl round her shoulders—'*dame*, the old feel chilly in the spring.'

THE END