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# THE FOLLY OF EUSTACE.

By R. S. Hichens

1896

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### I.

Some men deliberately don a character in early youth as others don a mask before going to an opera ball. They select it not without some care, being guided in their choice by the opinion they have formed of the world's mind and manner of proceeding. In the privacy of the dressing-room, the candles being lighted and the mirror adjusted at the best angle for a view of self, they assume their character, and peacock to their reflection, meditating: Does it become me? Will it be generally liked? Will it advance me towards my heart's

desire? Then they catch up their cloak, twist the mirror back to its usual position, puff out the candles, and steal forth into their career, shutting the door gently behind them. And, perhaps till they are laid out in the grave, the last four walls enclosing them, only the dressing-room could tell their secret. And it has no voice to speak. For, if they are wise, they do not keep a valet.

At the age of sixteen Eustace Lane chose his mask, lit the candles, tried it on, and resolved to wear it at the great masquerade. He was an Eton boy at the time. One fourth of June he was out in the playing-fields, paying polite attentions to another fellow's sister, when he overheard a fragment of a conversation that was taking place between his mother and one of the masters. His mother was a kind Englishwoman, who was very short-sighted, and always did her duty. The master was a fool, but as he was tall, handsome, and extremely good-natured, Eustace Lane and most people considered him to be highly intelligent. Eustace caught the sound of his name pronounced. The fond mother, in the course of discreet conversation, had proceeded from the state of the weather to the state of her boy's soul, taking, with the ease of the mediocre, the one step between the sublime and the ridiculous. She had told the master the state of the weather—which, for once, was sublime; she wanted him, in return, to tell her the state of her boy's soul—which was ridiculous.

Eustace forgot the other fellow's sister, her limpid eyes, her open-worked stockings, her panoply of chiffons and of charms. He had heard his own name. Bang went the door on the rest of the world, shutting out even feminine humanity. Self-consciousness held him listening. His mother said:

"Dear Eustace! What do you think of him, Mr. Bembridge? Is he *really* clever? His father and I consider him unusually intelligent for his age—so advanced in mind. He judges for himself, you know. He always did, even as a baby. I remember when he was quite a tiny mite I could always trust to his perceptions. In my choice of nurses I was invariably guided by him. If he screamed at them I felt that there was something wrong, and dismissed them—of course with a character. If he smiled at them, I knew I could have confidence in their virtue. How strange these things are! What is it in us that screams at evil and smiles at good?"

"Ah! what, indeed?" replied the master, accepting her conclusion as an established and very beautiful fact. "There is more in the human heart than you and I can fathom, Mrs. Lane."

"Yes, indeed! But tell me about Eustace. You have observed him?"

"Carefully. He is a strange boy."

"Strange?"

"Whimsical, I mean. How clever he may be I am unable to say. He is so young, and, of course, undeveloped. But he is an original. Even if he never displays great talents the world will talk about him."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Lane in some alarm.

To be talked about was, she considered, to be the prey of scandalmongers. She did not wish to give her darling to the lions.

"I mean that Eustace has a strain of quaint fun in him—a sort of passion for the burlesque of life. You do not often find this in boys. It is new to my experience. He sees the peculiar side of everything with a curious acuteness. Life presents itself to him in caricature. I—— Well hit! Well hit indeed!"

Someone had scored a four.

The other fellow's sister insisted on moving to a place whence they could see the cricket better, and Eustace had to yield to her. But from that moment he took no more interest in her artless remarks and her artful open-worked stockings. In the combat between self and her she went to the wall. He stood up before the mirror looking steadfastly at his own image.

And, finding it not quite so interestingly curious as the fool of a master had declared it to be, he lit some more candles, selected a mask, and put it on.

He chose the mask of a buffoon.

From that day Eustace strove consistently to live up to the reputation given to him by a fool, who had been talking at random to please an avid mother. Mr. Bembridge knew that the boy was no good at work, wanted to say something nice about him, and had once noticed him playing some absurd but very ordinary boyish prank. On this supposed hint of character the master spoke. Mrs. Lane listened. Eustace acted. A sudden ambition stirred within him. To be known, talked about, considered, perhaps even wondered at—was not that a glory? Such a glory came to the greatly talented—to the mightily industrious. Men earned it by labour, by intensity, insensibility to fatigue, the "roughing it" of the mind. He did not want to rough it. Nor was he greatly talented. But he was just sharp enough to see, as he believed, a short and perhaps easy way to a thing that his conceit desired and that his egoism felt it could love. Being only a boy, he had never, till this time, deliberately looked on life as anything. Now he set himself, in his, at first, youthful way, to look on it as burlesque—to see it in caricature. How to do that? He studied the cartoons in *Vanity Fair*, the wondrous noses, the astounding trousers, that delight the cynical world. Were men indeed like these? Did they assume such postures, stare with such eyes, revel in such complexions? These were the celebrities of the time. They all looked with one accord preposterous. Eustace jumped to the conclusion that they were what they looked, and, going a step farther, that they were celebrated because they were preposterous. Gifted with a certain amount of imagination, this idea of the interest, almost the beauty of the preposterous, took a firm hold of his mind. One day he, too, would be in *Vanity Fair*, displaying terrific boots, amazing thin legs, a fatuous or a frenetic countenance to the great world of the unknown. He would stand out from the multitude if only by virtue of an unusual eyeglass, a particular glove, the fashion of his tie or of his temper. He would balance on the ball of peculiarity, and toe his way up the spiral of fame, while the music-hall audience applauded and the managers consulted as to the increase of his salary. Mr. Bembridge had shown him a weapon with which he might fight his way quickly to the front. He picked it up and resolved to use it. Soon he began to slash out right and left. His blade chanced to encounter the outraged body of an elderly and sardonic master. Eustace was advised that he had better leave Eton. His father came down by train and took him away.

As they journeyed up to town, Mr. Lane lectured and exhorted, and Eustace looked out of the window. Already he felt himself near to being a celebrity. He had astonished Eton. That was a good beginning. Papa

might prose, knowing, of course, nothing of the poetry of caricature, of the wild joys and the laurels that crown the whimsical. So while Mr. Lane hunted adjectives, and ran sad-sounding and damnatory substantives to earth, Eustace hugged himself, and secretly chuckled over his pilgrim's progress towards the pages of *Vanity Fair*.

"Eustace! Eustace! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, father."

"Then what have you to say? What explanation have you to offer for your conduct? You have behaved like a buffoon, sir—d'you hear me?—like a buffoon!"

"Yes, father."

"What the deuce do you mean by 'yes,' sir?"

Eustace considered, while Mr. Lane puffed in the approved paternal fashion. What did he mean? A sudden thought struck him. He became confidential. With an earnest gaze, he said:

"I couldn't help doing what I did. I want to be like the other fellows, but somehow I can't. Something inside of me won't let me just go on as they do. I don't know why it is, but I feel as if I must do original things—things other people never do; it—it seems in me."

Mr. Lane regarded him suspiciously, but Eustace had clear eyes, and knew, at least, how to look innocent.

"We shall have to knock it out of you," blustered the father.

"I wish you could, father," the boy said. "I know I hate it."

Mr. Lane began to be really puzzled. There was something pathetic in the words, and especially in the way they were spoken. He stared at Eustace meditatively.

"So you hate it, do you?" he said rather limply at last. "Well, that's a step in the right direction, at any rate. Perhaps things might have been worse."

Eustace did not assent.

"They were bad enough," he said, with a simulation of shame. "I know I've been a fool."

"Well, well," Mr. Lane said, whirling, as paternal weathercocks will, to another point of the compass, "never mind, my boy. Cheer up! You see your fault—that's the main thing. What's done can't be undone."

"No, thank heaven!" thought the boy, feeling almost great.

How delicious is the irrevocable past—sometimes!

"Be more careful in future. Don't let your boyish desire for follies carry you away."

"I shall," was his son's mental rejoinder.

"And I dare say you'll do good work in the world yet."

The train ran into Paddington Station on this sublime climax of fatherhood, and the further words of wisdom were jerked out of Mr. Lane during their passage to Carlton House Terrace in a four-wheeled cab.

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"What an extraordinary person Mr. Eustace Lane is!" said Winifred Ames to her particular friend and happy foil, Jane Fraser. "All London is beginning to talk about him. I suppose he must be clever?"

"Oh, of course, darling, very clever; otherwise, how could he possibly gain so much notice? Just think—why, there are millions of people in London, and I'm sure only about a thousand of them, at most, attract any real attention. I think Mr. Eustace Lane is a genius."

"Do you really, Jenny?"

"I do indeed."

Winifred mused for a moment. Then she said:

"It must be very interesting to marry a genius, I suppose?"

"Oh, enthralling, simply. And, then, so few people can do it."

"Yes."

"And it must be grand to do what hardly anybody can do."

"In the way of marrying, Jenny?"

"In any way," responded Miss Fraser, who was an enthusiast, and habitually sentimental. "What would I give to do even one unique thing, or to marry even one unique person!"

"You couldn't marry two at the same time—in England."

"England limits itself so terribly; but there is a broader time coming. Those who see it, and act upon what they see, are pioneers; Mr. Lane is a pioneer."

"But don't you think him rather extravagant?"

"Oh yes. That is so splendid. I love the extravagance of genius, the barbaric lavishness of moral and intellectual supremacy."

"I wonder whether the supremacy of Eustace Lane is moral, or intellectual, or—neither?" said Winifred. "There are so many different supremacies, aren't there? I suppose a man might be supreme merely as a—as a—well, an absurdity, you know."

Jenny smiled the watery smile of the sentimentalist; a glass of still lemonade washed with limelight might resemble it.

"Eustace Lane likes you, Winnie," she remarked.

"I know; that is why I am wondering about him. One does wonder, you see, about the man one may possibly be going to marry."

There had never been such a man for Jane Fraser, so she said nothing, but succeeded in looking confidential.

Presently Winifred allowed her happy foil to lace her up. She was going to a ball given by the Lanes in

Carlton House Terrace.

"Perhaps he will propose to you to-night," whispered Jane in a gush of excitement as the two girls walked down the stairs to the carriage. "If he does, what will you say?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, darling, but surely——"

"Eustace is so odd. I can't make him out."

"That is because he is a genius."

"He is certainly remarkable—in a way. Good-night, dear."

The carriage drove off, and the happy foil joined her maid, who was waiting to conduct her home. On the way they gossiped, and the maid expressed a belief that Mr. Lane was a fine young gentleman, but full of his goings-on.

Jane knew what she meant. Eustace had once kissed her publicly in Jane's presence, which deed the latter considered a stroke of genius, and the act of a true and courageous pioneer.

Eustace was now just twenty-two, and he had already partially succeeded in his ambition. His mask had deceived his world, and Mr. Bembridge's prophecy about him was beginning to be fulfilled. He had done nothing specially intellectual or athletic, was not particularly active either with limbs or brain; but people had begun to notice and to talk about him, to discuss him with a certain interest, even with a certain wonder. The newspapers occasionally mentioned him as a dandy, a fop, a whimsical, irresponsible creature, yet one whose vagaries were not entirely without interest. He had performed some extravagant antic in a cotillon, or worn some extraordinary coat. He had invented a new way of walking one season, and during another season, although in perfect health, he had never left the house, declaring that movement of any kind was ungentlemanly and ridiculous, and that an imitation of harem life was the uttermost bliss obtainable in London. His windows in Carlton House Terrace had been latticed, and when his friends came there to see him they found him lying, supported by cushions, on a prayer-carpet, eating Eastern sweetmeats from a silver box.

But he soon began to tire of this deliberate imprisonment, and to reduce buffoonery to a modern science. His father was a rich man, and he was an only child. Therefore he was able to gratify the supposed whims, which were no whims at all. He could get up surprise parties, which really bored him, carry out elaborate practical jokes, give extraordinary entertainments at will. For his parents acquiesced in his absurdities, were even rather proud of them, thinking that he followed his Will-o'-the-wisp of a fancy because he was not less, but more, than other young men. In fact, they supposed he must be a genius because he was erratic. Many people are of the same opinion, and declare that a goose standing on its head must be a swan. By degrees Eustace Lane's practical jokes became a common topic of conversation in London, and smart circles were in a perpetual state of mild excitement as to what he would do next. It was said that he had put the latchkey of a Duchess down the back of a Commander-in-Chief; that he had once, in a country house, prepared an apple-pie bed for an Heir-apparent, and that he had declared he would journey to Rome next Easter in order to present a collection of penny toys to the Pope. Society loves folly if it is sufficiently blatant. The folly of Eustace was just blatant enough to be more than tolerated—enjoyed. He had by practice acquired a knack of being silly in unexpected ways, and so a great many people honestly considered him one of the cleverest young men in town.

But, you know, it is the proper thing, if you wear a mask, to have a sad face behind it. Eustace sometimes felt sad, and sometimes fatigued. He had worked a little to make his reputation, but it was often hard labour to live up to it. His profession of a buffoon sometimes exhausted him, but he could no longer dare to be like others. The self-conscious live to gratify the changing expectations of their world, and Eustace had educated himself into a self-consciousness that was almost a disease.

And, then, there was his place in the pages of *Vanity Fair* to be won. He put that in front of him as his aim in life, and became daily more and more whimsical.

Nevertheless, he did one prosaic thing. He fell in love with Winifred Ames, and could not help showing it. As the malady increased upon him his reputation began to suffer eclipse, for he relapsed into sentiment, and even allowed his eyes to grow large and lover-like. He ceased to worry people, and so began to bore them—a much more dangerous thing. For a moment he even ran the fearful risk of becoming wholly natural, dropping his mask, and showing himself as he really was, a rather dull, quite normal young man, with the usual notions about the usual things, the usual bias towards the usual vices, the usual disinclination to do the usual duties of life.

He ran a risk, but Winifred saved him, and restored him to his fantasies this evening of the ball in Carlton House Terrace.

It was an ordinary ball, and therefore Eustace appeared to receive his guests in fancy dress, wearing a powdered wig and a George IV. Court costume. This absurdity was a mechanical attempt to retrieve his buffoon's reputation, for he was really very much in love, and very serious in his desire to be married in quite the ordinary way. With a rather lack-lustre eye he noticed the amusement of his friends at his last vagary; but when Winifred Ames entered the ballroom a nervous vivacity shook him, as it has shaken ploughmen under similar conditions, and for just a moment he felt ill at ease in the lonely lunacy of his flowered waistcoat and olive-green knee-breeches. He danced with her, then took her to a scarlet nook, apparently devised to hold only one person, but into which they gently squeezed, not without difficulty.

She gazed at him with her big brown eyes, that were at the same time honest and fanciful. Then she said:

"You have taken an unfair advantage of us all to-night, Mr. Lane."

"Havel? How?"

"By retreating into the picturesque clothes of another age. All the men here must hate you."

"No; they only laugh at me."

She was silent a moment. Then she said:

"What is it in you that makes you enjoy that which the rest of us are afraid of?"

"And that is——"

"Being laughed at. Laughter, you know, is the great world's cat-o'-nine-tails. We fear it as little boys fear the birch on a winter's morning at school."

Eustace smiled uneasily.

"Do you laugh at me?" he asked.

"I have. You surely don't mind."

"No," he said, with an effort. Then: "Are you laughing to-night?"

"No. You have done an absurd thing, of course, but it happens to be becoming. You look—well, pretty—yes, that's the word—in your wig. Many men are ugly in their own hair. And, after all, what would life be without its absurdities? Probably you are right to enjoy being laughed at."

Eustace, who had seriously meditated putting off his mask forever that night, began to change his mind. The sentence, "Many men are ugly in their own hair," dwelt with him, and he felt fortified in his powdered wig. What if he took it off, and henceforth Winifred found him ugly? Does not the safety of many of us lie merely in dressing up? Do we not buy our fate at the costumier's?

"Just tell me one thing," Winifred went on. "Are you natural?"

"Natural?" he hesitated.

"Yes; I think you must be. You've got a whimsical nature."

"I suppose so." He thought of his journey with his father years ago, and added: "I wish I hadn't."

"Why? There is a charm in the fantastic, although comparatively few people see it. Life must be a sort of Arabian Nights Entertainment to you."

"Sometimes. To-night it is different. It seems a sort of Longfellow life."

"What's that?"

"Real and earnest."

And then he proposed to her, with a laugh, to shoot an arrow at the dead poet and his own secret psalm.

And Winifred accepted him, partly because she thought him really strange, partly because he seemed so pretty in his wig, which she chose to believe his own hair.

They were married, and on the wedding-day the bridegroom astonished his guests by making a burlesque speech at the reception.

In anyone else such an exhibition would have been considered the worst taste, but nobody was disgusted, and many were delighted. They had begun to fear that Eustace was getting humdrum. This harlequinade after the pantomime at the church—for what is a modern smart wedding but a second-rate pantomime?—put them into a good humour, and made them feel that, after all, they had got something for their presents. And so the happy pair passed through a dreary rain of rice to the mysteries of that Bluebeard's Chamber, the honeymoon.

## II.

Winifred anticipated this honeymoon with calmness, but Eustace was too much in love to be calm. He was, on the contrary, in a high state of excitement, and of emotion, and the effort of making his ridiculous speech had nearly sent him into hysterics. But he had now fully resolved to continue in his whimsical course, and to play for ever the part of a highly erratic genius, driven hither and thither by the weird impulses of the moment. That he never had any impulses but such as were common to most ordinary young men was a sad fact which he meant to most carefully conceal from Winifred. He had made up his mind that she believed his mask to be his face. She had, therefore, married the mask. To divorce her violently from it might be fatal to their happiness. If he showed the countenance God had given him, she might cry: "I don't know you. You are a stranger. You are like all the other men I didn't choose to marry." His blood ran cold at the thought. No, he must keep it up. She loved his fantasies because she believed them natural to him. She must never suspect that they were not natural. So, as they travelled, he planned the campaign of married life, as doubtless others, strange in their new bondage, have planned. He gazed at Winifred, and thought, "What is her notion of the ideal husband, I wonder?" She gazed at him, and mused on his affection and his whimsicality, and what the two would lead to in connection with her fate. And the old, scarlet-faced guard smiled fatuously at them both through the window on which glared a prominent "Engaged" as he had smiled on many another pair of fools—so he silently dubbed them. Then they entered Bluebeard's Chamber and closed the door behind them.

Brighton was their destination. They meant to lose themselves in a marine crowd.

They stayed there for a fortnight, and then returned to town, Eustace more in love than ever.

But Winifred?

One afternoon she sat in the drawing-room of the pretty little house they had taken in Deanery Street, Park Lane. She was thinking, very definitely. The silent processes of even an ordinary woman's mind—what great male writer would not give two years of his life to sit with them and watch them, as the poet watches the flight of a swallow, or the astronomer the processions of the sky? A curious gale was raging through the town, touzling its thatch of chimney-pots, doing violence to the demureness of its respectable streets. Night was falling, and in Piccadilly those strange, gay hats that greet the darkness were coming out like eager, vulgar comets in a dim and muttering firmament. It was just the moment when the outside mood of the huge city begins to undergo a change, to glide from its comparative simplicity of afternoon into its leering



complexity of evening. Each twenty-four hours London has its moment of emancipation, its moment in which the wicked begin to breathe and the good to wonder, when "How?" and "Why?" are on the lips of the opposing factions, and only the philosophers who know—or think they know—their human nature hold themselves still, and feel that man is at the least ceaselessly interesting.

Winifred sat by the fire and held a council. She called her thoughts together and gave audience to her suspicions, and her brown eyes were wide and rather mournful as her counsellors uttered each a word of hope or of warning.

Eustace was out. He had gone to a concert, and had not returned.

She was holding a council to decide something in reference to him.

The honeymoon weeks had brought her just as far as the question, "Do I know my husband at all, or is he, so far, a total stranger?"

Some people seem to draw near to you as you look at them steadily, others to recede until they reach the verge of invisibility. Which was Eustace doing? Did his outline become clearer or more blurred? Was he daily more definite or more phantasmal? And the members of her council drew near and whispered their opinions in Winifred's attentive ears. They were not all in accord at the first. Pros fought with cons, elbowed them, were hustled in return. Sometimes there was almost a row, and she had to stretch forth her hands and hush the tumult. For she desired a calm conclave, although she was a woman.

And the final decision—if, indeed, it could be arrived at that evening—was important. Love seemed to hang upon it, and all the sweets of life; and the little wings of Love fluttered anxiously, as the little wings of a bird flutter when you hold it in the cage of your hands, imprisoning it from its wayward career through the blue shadows of the summer.

For love is not always and for ever instinctive—not even the finest love. While many women love because they must, whether the thing to be loved or not loved be carrion or crystal, a child of the gods or an imp of the devil, others love decisively because they see—perhaps can even analyze—a beauty that is there in the thing before them. One woman loves a man simply because he kisses her. Another loves him because he has won the Victoria Cross.

Winifred was not of the women who love because they are kissed.

She had accepted Eustace rather impulsively, but she had not married him quite uncritically. There was something new, different from other men, about him which attracted her, as well as his good looks—that prettiness which had peeped out from the white wig in the scarlet nook at the ball. His oddities at that time she had grown thoroughly to believe in, and, believing in them, she felt she liked them. She supposed them to spring, rather like amazing spotted orchids, from the earth of a quaint nature. Now, after a honeymoon spent among the orchids, she held this council while the wind blew London into a mood of evening irritation.

What was Eustace?

How the wind sang over Park Lane! Yet the stars were coming out.

What was he? A genius or a clown? A creature to spread a buttered slide or a man to climb to heaven? A fine, free child of Nature, who did, freshly, what he would, regardless of the strained discretion of others, or a futile, scheming hypocrite, screaming after forced puerilities, without even a finger on the skirts of originality?

It was a problem for lonely woman's debate. Winifred strove to weigh it well. In Bluebeard's Chamber Eustace had cut many capers. This activity she had expected—had even wished for. And at first she had been amused and entertained by the antics, as one assisting at a good burlesque, through which, moreover, a piquant love theme runs. But by degrees she began to feel a certain stiffness in the capers, a self-consciousness in the antics, or fancied she began to feel it, and instead of being always amused she became often thoughtful.

Whimsicality she loved. Buffoonery she possibly, even probably, could learn to hate.

Of Eustace's love for her she had no doubt. She was certain of his affection. But was it worth having? That depended, surely, on the nature of the man in whom it sprang, from whom it flowed. She wanted to be sure of that nature; but she acknowledged to herself, as she sat by the fire, that she was perplexed. Perhaps even that perplexity was merciful. Yet she wished to sweep it away. She knit her brows moodily, and longed for a secret divining-rod that would twist to reveal truth in another. For truth, she thought, is better than hidden water-springs, and a sincerity—even of stupidity—more lovely than the fountain that gives flowers to the desert, wild red roses to the weary gold of sands.

The wind roared again, howling to poor, shuddering Mayfair, and there came a step outside. Eustace sprang in upon Winifred's council, looking like a gay schoolboy, his cheeks flushed, his lips open to speak.

"Dreaming?" he said.

She smiled.

"Perhaps."

"That concert paralyzed me. Too much Beethoven. I wanted Wagner. Beethoven insists on exalting you, but Wagner lets you revel and feel naughty. Winnie, d'you hear the wind?"

"Could I help it?" she asked.

"Does it suggest something to you?"

He looked at her, and made his expression mischievous, or meant to make it. She looked up at him, too.

"Yes, many things," she said—"many, many things."

"To me it suggests kites."

"Kites?"

"Yes. I'm going to fly one now in the Park. The stars are out. Put on your hat and come with me."

He seemed all impulse, sparkling to the novelty of the idea.

"Well, but——" She hesitated.

"I've got one—a beauty, a monster! I noticed the wind was getting up yesterday. Come!"

He pulled at her hand; she obeyed him, not quickly. She put on her hat, a plain straw, a thick jacket, gloves. Kite-flying in London seemed an odd notion. Was it lively and entertaining, or merely silly? Which ought it to be?

Eustace shouted to her from the tiny hall.

"Hurry!" he cried.

The wind yelled beyond the door, and Winifred ran down, beginning to feel a childish thrill of excitement. Eustace held the kite. It was, indeed, a white monster, gaily decorated with fluttering scarlet and blue ribbons.

"We shall be mobbed," she said.

"There's no one about," he answered. "The gale frightens people."

He opened the door, and they were out in the crying tempest. The great clouds flew along the sky like an army in retreat. Some, to Winifred, seemed soldiers, others baggage-waggons, horses, gun-carriages, rushing pell-mell for safety. One drooping, tattered cloud she deemed the colours of a regiment streaming under the stars that peeped out here and there—watching sentinel eyes, obdurate, till some magic password softened them.

As they crossed the road she spoke of her cloud army to Eustace.

"This kite's like a live thing," was his reply. "It tugs as a fish tugs a line."

He did not care for the tumult of a far-off world.

They entered the Park. It seemed, indeed, strangely deserted. A swaggering soldier passed them by, going towards the Marble Arch. His spurs clinked; his long cloak gleamed like a huge pink carnation in the dingy dimness of the startled night. How he stared with his unintelligent, though bold, eyes as he saw the kite bounding to be free.

Eustace seemed delighted.

"That man thinks us mad!" he said.

"Are we mad?" Winifred asked, surprised at her own strange enjoyment of the adventure.

"Who knows?" said Eustace, looking at her narrowly. "You like this escapade?"

"Yes," she answered.

"My mask!" he thought, secretly longing to be quietly by the fire sipping tea and reading *Punch*. "She loves that."

They were through the trees now, across the broad path, out on the open lawns.

"Now for it!" he shouted, as the wind roared in their faces.

He paid out the coils of the thin cord. The white monster skimmed, struggled near the ground, returned, darted again upward and outward, felt for the wind's hands, caught them and sprang, with a mad courage, star-wards, its gay ribbons flying like coloured birds to mark its course. But soon they were lost to sight, and only a diminished, ghost-like shadow leaping against the black showed where the kite beat on to liberty.

Eustace ran with the wind, and Winifred followed him. The motion sent an exultation dancing through her veins, and stirred her blood into a ferment. The noises in the trees, the galloping music of the airs on their headlong courses, rang in her ears like clashing bells. She called as she ran, but never knew what words. She leaped, as if over glorious obstacles. Her feet danced on the short grass. She had a sudden notion: "I am living now!" and Eustace had never seemed so near to her. He had an art to find why children are happy, she thought, because they do little strange things, coupling mechanical movements, obvious actions that may seem absurd, with soft flights of the imagination, that wrap their prancings and their leaps in golden robes, and give to the dull world a glory. The hoop is their demon enemy, whom they drive before them to destruction. The kite is a great white bird, whom they hold back for a time from heaven. Suddenly Winifred longed to feel the bird's efforts to be free.

"Let me have it!" she cried to Eustace, holding out her hands eagerly. "Do let me!"

He was glad to pass the cord to her, being utterly tired of a prank which he thought idiotic, and he could not understand the light that sprang into her eyes as she grasped it, and felt the life of the lifeless thing that soared towards the clouds.

For the moment it was more to her—this tugging, scarce visible, white thing—than all the world of souls. It gave to her the excitement of battle, the joy of strife. She felt herself a Napoleon with empires in her hand; a Diana holding eternities, instead of hounds, in leash. She had quite the children's idea of kites, the sense of being in touch with the infinite that enters into baby pleasures, and makes the remembrance of them live in us when we are old, and have forgotten wild passions, strange fruitions, that have followed them and faded away for ever.

How the creature tore at her! She fancied she felt the pulsings of its fly-away heart, beating with energy and great hopes of freedom. And suddenly, with a call, she opened her hands. Her captive was lost in the night.

In a moment she felt sad, such a foolish sorrow, as a gaoler may feel sad who has grown to love his prisoner, and sees him smile when the gaping door gives him again to crime.

"It's gone," she said to Eustace; "I think it's glad to go."

"Glad—a kite!" he said.

And it struck her that he would have thought it equally sensible if she had spoken, like Hans Andersen, of the tragedies of a toy-shop or the Homeric passions of wooden dolls.

Then, why had he been prompted by the wind to play the boy if he had none of the boy's ardent imagination?

They reached Deanery Street, and passed in from the night and the elements. Eustace shut the door with a sigh of relief. Winifred's echoing sigh was of regret.

It seemed a listless world—the world inside a lighted London house, dominated by a pale butler with black side-whiskers and endless discretion. But Eustace did not feel it so. Winifred knew that beyond hope of doubt as she stole a glance at his face. He had put off the child—the buffoon—and looked for the moment a grave, dull young man, naturally at ease with all the conventions. She could not help saying to herself, as she went to her room to live with hairpins and her lady's-maid: "I believe he hated it all!"

From that night of kite-flying Winifred felt differently towards her husband. She was of the comparatively rare women who hate pretence even in another woman, but especially in a man. The really eccentric she was not afraid of—could even love, being a searcher after the new and strange, like so many modern pilgrims. But pinchbeck eccentricity—Brummagem originalities—gave to her views of the poverty of poor human nature leading her to a depression not untinged with contempt.

And the fantasies of Eustace became more violent and more continuous as he began to note the lassitude which gradually crept into her intercourse with him. London rang with them. At one time he pretended to a strange passion for death; prayed to a skull which grinned in a shrine raised for it in his dressing-room; lay down each day in a coffin, and asked Winifred to close it and scatter earth upon the lid, that he might realize the end towards which we journey. He talked of silence, long and loudly—an irony which Winifred duly noted—sneered at the fleeting phantoms in the show of existence, called the sobbing of women, the laughter of men, sounds as arid as the whizz of a cracker let off by a child on the fifth of November.

"We should kill our feelings," he said. "They make us absurd. Life should be a breathing calm, as death is a breathless calm."

The calm descending upon Winifred was of the benumbing order.

Later he recoiled from this coquetting with the destroyer.

"After all," he said, "which of us does not feel himself eternal, exempt from the penalty of the race? You don't believe that you will ever die, Winifred?"

"I know it," she said.

"Yes, but you don't believe it."

"You think knowledge less real than belief? Perhaps it is. But I, at least, hope that some day I shall die. To live on here for ever would be like staying eternally at a party. After all, when one has danced, and supped, and flirted, and wondered at the gowns, and praised the flowers, and touched the hand of one's hostess, and swung round in a final gallop, and said how much one has enjoyed it all—one wants to go home."

"Does one?" Eustace said. "Home you call it!"

He shuddered.

"I call it what I want it to be, what I think it may be, what the poor and the weary and the fallen make it in their lonely thoughts. Let us, at least, hope that we travel towards the east, where the sun is."

"You have strange fancies," he said.

"I! Not so strange as yours."

She looked at him in the eyes as she spoke. He wondered what that look meant. It seemed to him a menace.

"I must keep it up—I must keep it up," he murmured to himself as he left the room. "Winifred loves fancies—loves me for what she thinks mine."

He went to his library, and sat down heavily, to devise fresh outrages on the ordinary.

His pranks became innumerable, and Society called him the most original figure of London. The papers quoted him—his doings, not his sayings. People pointed him out in the Park. His celebrity waxed. Even the Marble Arch seemed turning to gaze after him as he went by, showing the observation which the imaginative think into inanimate things.

At least, so a wag declared.

And Winifred bore it, but with an increasing impatience.

At this time, too, a strange need of protection crept over her, the yearning for man's beautiful, dog-like sympathy that watches woman in her grand dark hour before she blooms into motherhood. When she knew the truth, she resolved to tell Eustace, and she came into his room softly, with shining eyes. He was sitting reading the Financial News in a nimbus of cigarette smoke, secretly glorying in his momentary immunity from the prison rules of the fantastic. Winifred's entry was as that of a warder. He sprang up laughing.

"Winnie," he said, "I think I am going to South Africa."

"You!" she said in surprise.

"Yes; to give acrobatic performances in the street, and so pave the way to a position as a millionaire. Who ever heard of a man rising from a respectable competence to a fortune? According to the papers, you must start with nothing; that is the first rule of the game. We have ten thousand a year, so we can never hope to be rich. Fortune only favours the pauper. I am mad about money to-day. I can think of nothing else."

And he began showing her conjuring tricks with sovereigns which he drew from his pockets.

She did not tell him that day. And when she told him, it was without apparent emotion. She seemed merely stating coldly a physical fact, not breathing out a beautiful secret of her soul and his, a consecrated wonder to shake them both, and bind them together as two flowers are bound in the centre of a bouquet, the envy of the other flowers.

"Eustace," she said, and her eyes were clear and her hands were still, "I think I ought to tell you—we shall have a child."

Her voice was unwavering as a doctor's which pronounces, "You have the influenza." She stood there before him.

"Winifred!" he cried, looking up. His impulse was to say, "Wife! My Winifred!" to take her in his arms as



any clerk might take his little middle-class spouse, to kiss her lips, and, in doing it, fancy he drew near to the prison in which every soul eternally dwells on earth. Finely human he felt, as the dullest, the most unknown, the plainest, the most despised, may feel, thank God! "Winifred!" he cried. And then he stopped, with the shooting thought, "Even now I must be what she thinks me, what she perhaps loves me for."

She stood there silently waiting.

"Toys!" he exclaimed. "Toys have always been my besetting sin. Now I will make a grand collection, not for the Pope, as people pretend, but for our family. You will have two children to laugh at, Winnie. Your husband is one, you know." He sprang up. "I'll go into the Strand," he said. "There's a man near the Temple who has always got some delightful novelty displaying its paces on the pavement. What fun!"

And off he went, leaving Winifred alone with the mystery of her woman's world, the mystic mystery of birth that may dawn out of hate as out of love, out of drunken dissipation as out of purity's sweet climax.

Next day a paragraph in the papers told how Mr. Eustace Lane had bought up all the penny toys of the Strand. Mention was again made of his supposed mission to the Vatican, and a picture drawn of the bewilderment of the Holy Father, roused from contemplation of the eternal to contemplation of jumping pasteboard, and the frigid gestures of people from the world of *papier-mache*.

Eustace showed the paragraph to Winifred.

"Why will they chronicle all I do?" he said, with a sigh.

"Would you rather they did not?"

"Oh, if it amuses them," he answered. "To amuse the world is to be its benefactor."

"No, to comfort the world," was Winifred's silent thought. .

To her the world often seemed a weary invalid, playing cards on the coverlet of the bed from which it longed in vain to move, peeping with heavy eyes at the shrouded windows of its chamber, and listening for faint sounds from without—soft songs, soft murmurings, the breath of winds, the sigh of showers; then turning with a smothered groan to its cards again, its lengthy game of "Patience." Clubs, spades, hearts, diamonds—there they all lay on the coverlet ready to the hands of the invalid. But she wanted to take them away, and give to the sufferer a prayer and a hope.

At this period she was often full of a vague, chaotic tenderness, far-reaching, yet indefinite. She could rather have kissed the race than a person.

And so the days went by, Winifred in a dream of wonder, Eustace in the toy-shops.

Until the birthday dawned and faded.

All through that day Eustace was in agony. He did not care so much for the child, but he loved the mother. Her danger tore at his heart. Her pain smote him, till he seemed to feel it actually and physically. That she was giving him something was naught to him; that she might be taken away in the giving was everything. And when he learnt that all was well, he cried and prayed, and thought to himself afterwards, "If Winifred could know what I am like, what I have done to-day, how would it strike her?"

She did not know; for when at length Eustace was admitted to her room, he trained himself to murmur, "A girl, that's lucky because of all the dolls. The Pope sha'n't have even one now."

Winifred lay back white on her pillow, and a little frown travelled across her face. If Eustace had just kissed her, and she had felt a tear of his on her face, and he had said nothing, she could have loved him then as a father, perhaps, more than as a husband. His allusion to the supposed Papal absurdity disgusted her at such a time, only faintly, because of her weakness, but distinctly, and in a way to be remembered.

She recovered; but just as the child was beginning to smile, and to express an approbation of life by murmurous gurglings, an infantile disease gripped it, held it, would not release it. And Winifred knelt beside it, dead, and thought, with a new and vital horror, of the invalid world playing cards upon the drawn coverlet of its bed. Baby was outside that chamber now, beyond the curtained windows, outside in sun or shower that she could not see, could only dream of, while the game of "Patience" went on and on.

### III.

The death of the child meant more to Winifred than she would at first acknowledge even to herself. Almost unconsciously she had looked forward to its birth as to a release from bondage. There are moments when a duet is gaol, a trio comparative liberty. The child, the tiny intruder into youthful married life, may come in the guise of an imp or of a good fairy: one to cloud the perfect and complete joy of two, or one to give sunlight to their nascent weariness and dissatisfaction. Or, again, it may be looked for with longing by one of two lovers, with apprehension by the other. Only when it lay dead did Winifred understand that Eustace was to her a stranger, and that she was lonely alone with him. The "Au revoir" of two bodies may be sweet, but the "Au revoir" of two minds is generally but a hypocritical or sarcastic rendering of the tragic word "Adieu." Winifred's mind cried "Au revoir" to the mind of Eustace, to his nature, to his love, but deep in her soul trembled the minor music, the shuddering discord, of "Adieu." Adieu to the body of child; adieu more complete, more eternal, to the soul of husband. Which good bye was the stranger? She stood as at cross-roads, and watched, with hand-shaded eyes, the tiny, wayward babe dwindling on its journey to heaven; the man she had married dwindling on his journey—whither? And the one she had a full hope of meeting again, but the other—

After the funeral the Lanes took up once more the old dual life which had been momentarily interrupted. Had it not been for the interruption, Winifred fancied that she might not have awakened to the full knowledge of her own feelings towards Eustace until a much later period. But the baby's birth, existence, passing away, were a blow upon the gate of life from the vague without. She had opened the gate, caught a glimpse of the

shadowy land of the possible. And to do that is often to realize in a flash the impossibility of one's individual fate. So many of us manage to live ignorantly all our days and to call ourselves happy. Winifred could never live quite ignorantly again.

To Eustace the interruption meant much less. So long as he had Winifred he could not feel that any of his dreams hung altogether in tatters. Sometimes, it is true, he contemplated the penny toys, and had a moment of quaint, not unpleasant regret, half forming the thought, Why do we ever trouble ourselves to prepare happiness for others, when happiness is a word of a thousand meanings? As often as not, to do so is to set a dinner of many courses and many wines before an unknown guest, who proves to be vegetarian and teetotaler, after all.

"What shall I do with the toys?" he asked Winifred one day.

"The toys? Oh, give them to a children's hospital," she said, and her voice had a harsh note in it.

"No," he answered, after a moment's reflection; "I'll keep them and play with them myself; you know I love toys."

And on the following Sunday, when many callers came to Deanery Street, they found him in the drawing-room, playing with a Noah's ark. Red, green, violet, and azure elephants, antelopes, zebras, and pigs processed along the carpet, guided by an orange-coloured Noah in a purple top-hat, and a perfect parterre of sons and wives. The fixed anxiety of their painted faces suggested that they were in apprehension of the flood, but their rigid attitudes implied trust in the Unseen.

Winifred's face that day seemed changed to those who knew her best. To one man, a soldier who had admired her greatly before her marriage, and who had seen no reason to change his opinion of her since, she was more cordial than usual, and he went away curiously meditating on the mystery of women.

"What has happened to Mrs. Lane?" he thought to himself as he walked down Park Lane. "That last look of hers at me, when I was by the door, going, was—yes, I'll swear it—Regent Street. And yet Winnie Lane is the purest—I'm hanged if I can make out women! Anyhow, I'll go there again. People say she and that fantastic ass she's married are devoted. H'm!" He went to Pall Mall, and sat staring at nothing in his Club till seven, deep in the mystery of the female sex.

And he went again to Deanery Street to see whether the vision of Regent Street was deceptive, and came away wondering and hoping. From this time the vagaries of Eustace Lane became more incessant, more flamboyant, than ever, and Mrs. Lane was perpetually in society. If it would not have been true to say, conventionally, that no party was complete without her, yet it certainly seemed, from this time, that she was incomplete without a party. She was the starving wolf after the sledge in which sat the gay world. If the sledge escaped her, she was left to face darkness, snow, wintry winds, loneliness. In London do we not often hear the dismal howling of the wolves, suggesting steppes of the heart frigid as Siberia?

Eustace grew uneasy, for Winifred seemed eluding him in this maze of entertainments. He could not impress the personality of his mask upon her vitally when she moved perpetually in the pantomime processions of society, surrounded by grotesques, mimes, dancers, and deformities.

"We are scarcely ever alone, Winnie," he said to her one day.

"You must learn to love me in a crowd," she answered. "Human nature can love even God in isolation, but the man who can love God in the world is the true Christian."

"I can love you anywhere," he said. "But you——" And then he stopped and quickly readjusted his mask which was slipping off.

From that day he monotonously accentuated his absurdities. All London rang with them. He was the Court Fool of Mayfair, the buffoon of the inner circles of the Metropolis, and, by degrees, his painted fame, jangling the bells in its cap, spun about England in a dervish dance, till Peckham whispered of him, and even the remotest suburbs crowned him with parsley and hung upon his doings. All the blooming flowers of notoriety were his, to hug in his arms as he stood upon his platform bowing to the general applause. His shrine in *Vanity Fair* was surely being prepared. But he scarcely thought of this, being that ordinary, ridiculous, middle-class thing, an immoderately loving husband, insane enough to worship romantically the woman to whom he was unromantically tied by the law of his country. With each new fantasy he hoped to win back that which he had lost. Each joke was the throw of a desperate gamester, each tricky invention a stake placed on the number that would never turn up. That wild time of his career was humorous to the world, how tragic to himself we can only wonder. He spread wings like a bird, flew hither and thither as if a vagrant for pure joy and the pleasure of movement, darted and poised, circled and sailed, but all the time his heart cried aloud for a nest and Winifred. Yet he wooed her only silently by his follies, and set her each day farther and farther from him.

And she—how she hated his notoriety, and was sick with weariness when voices told her of his escapades, modulating themselves to wondering praise. Long ago she had known that Eustace sinned against his own nature, but she had never loved him quite enough to discover what that nature really was. And now she had no desire to find out. He was only her husband and the least of all men to her.

The Lanes sat at breakfast one morning and took up their letters. Winifred sipped her tea, and opened one or two carelessly. They were invitations. Then she tore, the envelope of a third, and, as she read it, forgot to sip her tea. Presently she laid it down slowly. Eustace was looking at her.

"Winifred," he said, "I have got a letter from the editor of *Vanity Fair*."

"Oh!"

"He wishes me to permit a caricature of myself to appear in his pages."

Winifred's fingers closed sharply on the letter she had just been reading. A decision of hers in regard to the writer of it was hanging in the balance, though Eustace did not know it.

"Well?" said Eustace, inquiring of her silence.

"What are you going to reply?" she asked.

"I am wondering."

She chipped an eggshell and took a bit of dry toast.

"All those who appear in *Vanity Fair* are celebrated, aren't they?" she said.

"I suppose so," Eustace said.

"For many different things."

"Of course."

"Can you refuse the editor's request?"

"I don't know why I should."

"Exactly. Tell me when you have written to him, and what you have written, Eustace."

"Yes, Winnie, I will."

Later on in the day he came up to her boudoir, and said to her:

"I have told him I am quite willing to have my caricature in his paper."

"Your portrait," she said. "All right. Leave me now, Eustace; I have some writing to do."

As soon as he had gone she sat down and wrote a short letter, which she posted herself.

A month later Eustace came bounding up the stairs to find her.

"Winnie, Winnie!" he called. "Where are you? I've something to show you."

He held a newspaper in his hand. Winifred was not in the room. Eustace rang the bell.

"Where is Mrs. Lane?" he asked of the footman who answered it.

"Gone out, sir," the man answered.

"And not back yet? It's very late," said Eustace, looking at his watch.

The time was a quarter to eight. They were dining at half-past.

"I wonder where she is," he thought.

Then he sat down and gazed at a cartoon which represented a thin man with a preternaturally pale face, legs like sticks, and drooping hands full of toys—himself. Beneath it was written, "His aim is to amuse."

He turned a page, and read, for the third or fourth time, the following:

"Mr. Eustace Lane.

"Mr. Eustace Bernhard Lane, only son of Mr. Merton Lane, of Carlton House Terrace, was born in London twenty-eight years ago. He is married to one of the belles of the day, and is probably the most envied husband in town.

"Although he is such a noted figure in society, Mr. Eustace Lane has never done any conspicuously good or bad deed. He has neither invented a bicycle nor written a novel, neither lost a seat in Parliament, nor found a mine in South Africa. Careless of elevating the world, he has been content to entertain it, to make it laugh, or to make it wonder. His aim is to amuse, and his whole-souled endeavour to succeed in this ambition has gained him the entire respect of the frivolous. What more could man desire?"

As he finished there came a ring at the hall-door bell.

"Winifred!" he exclaimed, and jumped up with the paper in his hand.

In a moment the footman entered with a note.

"A boy messenger has just brought this, sir," he said.

Eustace took it, and, as the man went out and shut the door, opened it, and read:

*"Victoria Station.*

*"This is to say good-bye. By the time it reaches you I shall have left London. Not alone. I have seen the cartoon. It is very like you. Winifred."*

Eustace sank down in a chair.

On the table at his elbow lay *Vanity Fair*. Mechanically he looked at it, and read once more the words beneath his picture, "His aim is to amuse."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FOLLY OF EUSTACE \*\*\*

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