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GOSSAMER

By G. A. Birmingham

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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XV.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI.](#)

CHAPTER I.

“For that mercy,” said Gorman, “you may thank with brief thanksgiving whatever gods there be.” We were discussing, for perhaps the twentieth time, the case of poor Ascher. Gorman had reminded me, as he often does, that I am incapable of understanding Ascher or entering into his feelings, because I am a man of no country and therefore know nothing of the emotion of patriotism. This seems a curious thing to say to a man who has just had his leg mangled in a battle; but I think Gorman is quite right about his fact I went out to the fight, when the fight came on, but only because I could not avoid going. I never supposed that I was fighting for my country. But Gorman is wrong in his inference. I have no country, but I believe I can understand Ascher quite as well as Gorman does. Nor am I sure that I ought to be thankful for my immunity from the fever of patriotism. Ascher suffered severely because at a critical moment in his life a feeling of loyalty to his native land gripped him hard. I have also suffered, a rending of the body at least comparable to Ascher’s rending of the soul. But I have not the consolation of feeling that I am a hero.

I have often told Gorman that if he were as thorough-going as he pretends to be he would call himself O’Gorabhain or at the very least, O’Gorman. He is an Irishman by birth, sympathy and conviction. He is a Member of Parliament, pledged to support the cause of Ireland, and this in spite of the fact that he has brains. He might have been a brilliant, perhaps even a successful and popular novelist. He wrote two stories which critics acclaimed, which are still remembered and even occasionally read. He might have risen to affluence as a dramatist. He was the author of one single-act play which made the fortune of a very charming actress ten years ago. He has made a name for himself as a journalist, and his articles are the chief glory of a leading weekly paper. But the business to which he has really devoted himself is that of an Irish patriot. He says amazingly foolish things in public and, in private, is always quite ready to laugh at his own speeches. He is a genuine lover of Ireland, an inheritor of that curious tradition of Irish patriotism which has survived centuries of disappointed hopes, and, a much stranger thing, has never been quite asphyxiated by its own gases.

I happen to belong to that unfortunate class of Irishmen whom neither Gorman nor any one else will recognise as being Irish at all. I owned, at one time, a small estate in Co. Cork. I sold it to my tenants and became a man of moderate income, encumbered with a baronetcy of respectable antiquity and occupied chiefly in finding profitable investments for my capital. By way of recreation I interest myself in my neighbours and acquaintances, in the actual men and women rather than in their affairs. No definition of the Irish people has yet been framed which would include me, though I am indubitably a person—I take “person” to be the singular of people which is a noun of multitude—and come of a family which held on to an Irish property for 300 years. My religion consists chiefly of a dislike of the Roman Catholic Church and an instinctive distrust of the priests of all churches. My father was an active Unionist, and I have no political opinions of any sort. I am therefore cut off, both by religion and politics, from any chance of taking part in Irish affairs. On the other hand I cannot manage to feel myself an Englishman. Even now, though I have fought in their army without incurring the reproach of cowardice, I cannot get out of the habit of looking at Englishmen from a distance. This convinces me that I am not one of them.

I am thus—Gorman is quite right about this—a man of no country. But I understand Ascher as well as Gorman does; though I take a different view of Ascher’s ultimate decision.

I met Gorman first on board a Cunard steamer in the autumn of 1913.

I was on my way to Canada. My excuse, the reason I gave to myself for the journey, was the necessity of looking into the affairs of certain Canadian companies in which I had invested money. There were rumours current in England at that time which led me to suspect that the boom in Canadian securities had reached its height and was about to subside. I did not really believe that I was likely to find out anything of value by stopping in an hotel at Montreal or travelling in a train to Vancouver. But I was tired of London and thought the trip might be pleasant. I went to Canada by way of New York, partly because the big Cunarders are comfortable steamers, partly because I find New York an agreeable city. I have several friends there and I like the life of the place—for a fortnight at a time. I do not know whether I should like it for a longer time because I have never had money enough to live in New York for more than a fortnight. As a regular place of residence it might be too stimulating for me; but I shall probably never know how I should feel about it at the end of six weeks.

It was Gorman who took the initiative on board the steamer. I do not think that I should ever have made his acquaintance if he had not forced himself on me. He accosted me, introduced himself, carried the acquaintance through to an intimacy by sheer force of personality, and ended by inducing me to like him. He began his attack on me during that very uncomfortable time just before the ship actually starts. It is never possible to settle down to the ordinary routine of life at sea until the screw begins to revolve. There is an hour or two, after the passengers have embarked, which is disquieting and fussy. Mail bags, so I understand, are

being put on board. Stewards, carrying cabin trunks, swarm in the corridors. Passengers wander restlessly about or hurry, with futile energy, from place to place. Pushing men hustle each other at the windows of the purser's office, under pretence of expecting letters or despatching telegrams. Women passengers eye other women passengers with suspicion and distrust. It is very interesting to notice how people who scowl at each other on the first day of a voyage exchange cards and promise to pay each other visits after six days as fellow travellers. At the end of another six days—such is the usual unfortunate experience—the cards are lost and the promises forgotten. A poet and, following him, a novelist have compared human intercourse to the “speaking” of ships that pass in the night. They would have found a more forcible, though perhaps less poetic, illustration of their idea in the friendships formed by passengers in the same steamer. They are intimate, but they are as a rule utterly transitory. However I have no right to complain. The friendship which Gorman forced on me has lasted eighteen months and shows no sign yet of wearing thin.

He caught me in the smoking room. I had settled down quietly in a comfortable chair, and was wondering, as I always do in that smoking room, at the grain of the wood in the panel above the fireplace. There was no one else in the room except a steward who hovered near the door which leads to the bar. Experience has taught me that the smoking room, the most populous part of the ship during the voyage, is generally empty during the two hours before the start. I thought I should have the place to myself. I was half way through my cigar and had failed to decide whether the panel is a fake or a natural curiosity when Gorman entered. He is a big man and fat. He is clean shaved and has bushy grey eyebrows. Heavy rolls of skin hang down from his jaws. He wears an unusually large gold signet ring. His appearance is not attractive. He sat down beside me and addressed me at once.

“Sir James Digby?” he said.

That is my name. I admitted it by nodding.

“I was glancing over the passenger list,” he said, “and saw you were on board. The purser told me you were up here somewhere. My name's Gorman, Michael Gorman.”

The name gave me no information beyond the fact that the speaker was an Irishman. There must be several thousand Gormans in Ireland and I could not remember that I was acquainted with any one of them. I nodded again.

“I don't suppose you remember me,” said Gorman, “but you used to see me pretty frequently once, about twenty-five years ago. My father kept the only shop in Curraghbeg, and you used to come in and buy sweets, a penny worth at a time. You were a small boy then. I was a bit older, fifteen or sixteen perhaps.”

Curraghbeg is a miserable village standing in the middle of the tract of land which used to be my property. It is close to Curraghbeg House, where my father kept up such state as befitted an Irish gentleman of his day. I believe I was born there. If I thought of any place in the world as home I suppose it would be Curraghbeg; but I have no feeling for the place except a mild dislike. The House is now a nunnery, in better repair, but almost certainly more gauntly hideous than when I owned it. The village, I expect, is still as sordid as when I saw it last. I remembered Gorman's shop, a dirty little public house, where sacks of flour, tea and sugar candy were sold, as well as whisky and emigration tickets. I also remembered my father's opinion of Gorman, old Dan Gorman, the father of the man beside me. He was “one of the worst blackguards in the county, mixed up with every kind of League and devilment.” Those were the days when the land agitation was at its height and Irish gentlemen—they were fighting for their existence as a class—felt rather strongly about the leaders of the people.

Of any younger Gorman I had no recollection whatever. Nor did I at that moment, or for some time afterwards, connect the son of the ruffianly old publican with the journalist and politician of whom I had heard a good deal.

“Funny thing,” he said, “running into you like this. Let's have a drink of some sort.”

He snapped his fingers to attract the attention of the steward.

I am not, I fear, thoroughly modernised. Though I like American social life I have never been able to accept the theory of the wickedness of class distinctions. As a political system democracy seems to me extraordinarily foolish, but I would not go out of my way to protest against it. My servant is, so far as I am concerned, welcome to as many votes as he can get. I would very gladly make mine over to him if I could. I do not suppose that it matters much in reality whether laws are made by dukes or cornerboys, but I like, as far as possible, to associate with gentlemen in private life. I was not prepared to sit drinking with the son of old Dan Gorman if I could help it.

I intended to say so, as politely as such a thing can be said. The man's face made me pause. He was looking at me with a curious smile, half innocent, half whimsical. His eyes expressed friendliness of a perfectly simple, unaffected kind. I realised that he was not a snob, that he was not trying to push himself on me for the sake of my position and title, the position of a disinherited Irish landlord and a title which, for all any one could tell by hearing it, might be the reward of a successful provincial doctor. I realised also, with an uncomfortable shiver, that he understood my feeling and was slightly amused at it. It struck me suddenly that I, and not Gorman, was the snob.

The steward stood at his elbow.

“Whisky and soda?” said Gorman. “We are still in English waters. Or shall I say cocktails, as we're on our way to America?”

I am a temperate man and have made it a rule not to drink before luncheon. But I was so much ashamed of my first feeling about Gorman that I thought it well to break my rule. I should, under the circumstances, have considered myself justified in breaking a temperance pledge, on the principle, once explained to me by an archdeacon, that charity is above rubrics. I gave my vote for whisky and soda as the more thorough-going drink of the two. A cocktail is seldom more than a mouthful. Gorman gave the order.

“Don't you think,” he said, “that it would be rather a good plan for us to sit together at meals? I'll make arrangements with the steward and have a table reserved for us in the upper saloon. I can manage it all right. I often cross on this boat and everybody knows me.”

Again he looked at me and again smiled in his fascinating childlike way.

"I'm A-1 at ordering meals," he said, "and it really does make a difference on these ships if you know how to get the best that's going."

That was the one attempt he made to justify himself in forcing his company on me. But it was not the hope of better dinners, though I like good dinners, which led me to agree to his proposal. I was captivated by his smile. Besides, I had not, so far as I knew, a single acquaintance among the passengers. I should be better off with Gorman as messmate than set down beside some chance stranger who might smile in a disagreeable way, or perhaps not smile at all.

"Very well," I said. "You arrange it."

"It would be pleasant," he said, "if we could get hold of a couple of other interesting people, and make four at our table."

I do not deny that Gorman is an interesting person, but I did not see what right he had to put me in that select class. I could only hope that the other interesting people would regard me as he did. He pulled a passenger list out of his pocket and turned over the pages.

"What about the Aschers?" he said.

He handed the list to me. There was a pencil mark opposite the name of Mr. Carl Ascher. Immediately below it was "Mrs. Ascher and maid."

"I don't know him," I said. "Who is he? Has he done anything particular?"

"Heavens above!" said Gorman. "Who is Ascher! But perhaps you don't recognise him apart from the rest of the firm. Ever heard of Ascher, Stutz & Co.?"

I recognised the name then. Ascher is a banker, one of those international financiers who manage, chiefly from London offices, a complicated kind of business which no ordinary man understands anything about, a kind of foreign business which for some reason very few Englishmen undertake.

"If the man's a millionaire," I said, "he won't care to dine with us—and he's probably a Jew—not that I've any particular prejudice against Jews."

"He's not a Jew," said Gorman. "He's an Englishman. At least he's as English as any man with a name like that can be. I expect he'll jump at the chance of feeding with us. We're the only people on board the least likely to interest him."

I admire Gorman's splendid self-confidence, but I do not share it. I shrank from seeking the friendship of a millionaire.

"He has his wife with him," I said. "Perhaps she——"

I meant to suggest that Mrs. Ascher might not care to be thrown with a couple of stray men of whom she knew nothing. Gorman thought I meant something quite different.

"She's an American," he said, "or was before she married Ascher. I hear she goes in for music and pictures and literature and all that sort of thing, which may be boring. But I daresay we shan't see very much of her. She'll probably be seasick the whole time."

I have often wondered where Gorman gets all his astonishingly accurate information about people whom he does not know. He was very nearly right about Mrs. Ascher. She was seasick for four out of the six days of our voyage.

"Anyhow," he went on, "we must put up with her if we want to get hold of the husband. And I should like to do that. I've never had a chance before of being intimate with one of the big bugs of finance. I want to know what it is that those fellows really do."

When Gorman put it to me that way I withdrew all my objections to his plan. I very much want to know "what those fellows really do." I am filled with curiosity and I want to know what every kind of fellow really does. I want to have a long talk with a Parisian dressmaker, one of the men who settles what shape women are to be for the next six months. I want to get at the mind of a railway manager. I want to know how a detective goes about the job of catching criminals. Of course I want to understand international banking.

"Besides," said Gorman, "a millionaire is a very useful kind of man to know."

Millionaires are useful acquaintances because there is always a chance of getting money from them.

"Don't count on me as a bridge player," I said. "I'm no good at the game and never play for high points. You wouldn't win anything worth while with me as one of the party."

"I wasn't thinking of bridge," said Gorman.

He was not. He was thinking, I fancy, of his brother. But we did not get to Gorman's brother for more than a week.

Having got my consent, Gorman went off to "set" Ascher. I use the word "set" deliberately, for Gorman, when bent on getting anything done, reminds me of a well-trained sporting dog. He ranges, quarters the ground in front of him and finally—well, he set me as if I had been a grouse. He set Ascher, I have no doubt, in the same way.

I did not think it likely that he would secure the Aschers. Millionaires are usually shy birds, well accustomed to being pursued by all sorts of ordinary men. They develop, I suppose, a special cunning in avoiding capture, a cunning which the rest of us never achieve. However Ascher's cunning was no use to him in this case. Gorman is an exceedingly clever dog.

The trumpet, bugle, cornet, or whatever the instrument is which announces meals at sea, was blaring out its luncheon tune when Gorman returned to me. He was in high triumph. He had captured the Aschers, reserved the nicest table in the upper saloon and secured the exclusive service of the best table steward in the ship. I think he had interviewed the head cook. I began to appreciate Gorman's qualities as a travelling companion. His handling of the servants of the Cunard Company during the voyage was masterly. I never was so well looked after before, though I always make it a practice to tip generously.

Gorman proposed that we should have another whisky and soda before going down to luncheon. He is a

genial soul. No churl would want to drink two glasses of whisky in the early part of one day. When I refused he looked disappointed.

On the way down to luncheon he asked the lift boy how his mother had got over her operation. It would never have occurred to me that the lift boy had a mother. If I had thought the matter out carefully I might have reached the conclusion that there must be or at one time have been a mother for every lift boy in the world. But Gorman did not reason. He simply knew, and knew too that this particular lift boy's mother had been in a Liverpool hospital, a fact which no method of reasoning known to me would have enabled him to arrive.

The lift boy loved Gorman. His grins of delight showed that. Our table steward, a very competent young man, adored him. The head cook—I judged by the meals we had sent up to us—had a very strong personal affection for Gorman. I do not wonder. I am myself fond of Gorman now. So is Ascher. Mrs. Ascher goes further still. She respects and admires Gorman. But Mrs. Ascher is a peculiar woman. She respects people whom the rest of us only like.

CHAPTER II.

We saw very little of Ascher and nothing at all of his wife during the first two days of our voyage. My idea was that they stayed in their cabins—they had engaged a whole suite of rooms—in order to avoid drifting into an intimacy with Gorman and me. A millionaire would naturally, so I supposed, be suspicious of the advance of any one who was not a fellow millionaire. I was mistaken. Ascher was simply seasick. When he recovered, two days before Mrs. Ascher raised her head from the pillow, he showed every sign of wanting to know Gorman and had no objection to dining with me.

In the meanwhile I found out a great deal about Gorman. He was delightfully unreserved, not only about his own past, but about his opinions of people and institutions. Old Dan Gorman had, it appeared, married a new wife when he was about sixty. This lady turned Michael, then a young man, out of the house. He bore her no ill will whatever, though she deprived him in the end of his inheritance as well as his home. For several years he "messed about"—the phrase is his—with journalism, acting as reporter and leader writer for several Irish provincial papers, a kind of work which requires no education or literary talent. Then he, so to speak, emerged, becoming somehow, novelist, playwright, politician. I have never made out how he achieved his success. I do not think he himself knows that. According to his own account—and I never could get him to go into details—"things just happened to come along."

He was entirely frank about his opinions. He regarded landlords as the curse of Ireland and said so to me. He did not seem satisfied that they are innocuous, even when, being deprived of their estates, they are no longer landlords. I do not like being called a curse—hardly any one does—but I found myself listening to the things which Gorman said about the class to which I belong without any strong resentment. His treatment of us reminded me of Robbie Burns' address to the devil. The poet recognised that the devil was a bad character and that the world would be in every way a brighter and happier place if there were no such person. But his condemnation was of a kindly sort, not wholly without sympathy. He held out a hope that "ould Nickie Ben" might still "hae some stake"—stake in the country I suppose—if he would take thought and mend. The reformation would have to be a drastic one, nothing less than a complete change of his habits, character and opinions. But such a thing was not wholly impossible. That was very much what Gorman thought about me.

Next to Irish landlords Gorman disliked financiers more than any other people in the world. He did not, by his own confession, know anything about them; but he had got into touch with a group of journalists in London which specialises in abuse of the class. Gorman repeated all the stock arguments to me and illuminated the subject with some very well worn apologues.

"A financier," he said, "is a bloated spider, which sits in a murky den spinning webs and sucks the life-blood of its victims."

I wondered how Ascher would like this kind of talk if he ever joined our party.

There was not, of course, the same note of personal bitterness in Gorman's condemnation of financiers which I noticed in his attacks on landlords. He had learned to hate my class during the impressionable years of childhood. He had only found out about financiers when he was a grown man. And no one, not even a convert to a new faith, ever believes anything with real intensity except what he was taught before he was eight years old. But it was not to be expected that Ascher would be as patient as I was, even if the abuse with which Gorman assailed his class lacked something of the conviction with which he attacked me.

I asked Gorman one evening why, holding the opinions he did, he had chosen as his table mates a banker and an unrepentant landlord. He had a whole shipload of passengers to choose from, most of them, no doubt believers in democracy, some of them perhaps even socialists, the kind of socialists who travel first class on crack Cunard steamers. He seemed surprised at the question and did not answer me at once. An hour or so after we had passed away from the subject he returned to it suddenly and explained that it was necessary to distinguish between individuals and the classes to which they belong. A class, so I understood, may be objectionable and dangerous in every way though the men who form it are delightful.

"Take the Irish priests, for instance," he said. "The minute we get Home Rule, we'll——"

He paused significantly.

"Deal with them?" I suggested.

He nodded with an emphasis which was positively vicious.

"All the same," he said, "there are lots of priests whom I really like, capital fellows that I'd be glad to dine with every day in the week—except Friday."

Apparently he was glad to dine with Ascher and me every day in the week, including Friday.

"There's no sense," he said, "in refusing to talk to a man just because you don't like his opinions."

I agreed. I even offered proof of my agreement. I was at that moment talking to Gorman and I certainly did not like his opinions.

When Ascher joined us at dinner on the third evening of our voyage, he turned out to be a very quiet, gentle little man with no outward sign of great wealth about him. He drank nothing but Perrier Water which was a surprise and, I fancy, something of a disappointment to Gorman. He expected Ascher to order champagne and was quite ready to take his turn in paying for the wine. Ascher smoked half a cigarette after dinner and another half cigarette before he went to bed. Gorman confided to me that millionaires and half-crown cigars had always been associated in his mind before he met Ascher. To me the most surprising thing about the man was the low opinion he had of himself and his own abilities. He was deferential to Gorman and even seemed to think what I said worth listening to. He knew all about Gorman's two novels and his play. He had read many of Gorman's newspaper articles. He used to try and make Gorman talk about literature and art. Gorman, being a man of great intelligence, hates talking about literature, and suspects that any one who accuses him of art is poking fun at him. Ascher took both literature and art quite seriously. He evidently thought that men who write books belong to a superior class. As a matter of fact Ascher has far more brains than any author I have ever met; but he does not know this.

Ascher lay down without protest under all the outrageous things which Gorman said about financiers. His extreme meekness seemed to stimulate Gorman.

"No qualities," said Gorman, "are required for success as a financier except a low kind of cunning and a totally unscrupulous selfishness."

Ascher seemed to agree with him. I wanted to point out that considering the very large number of men who are cunning and the general prevalence of selfishness the number of successful financiers is surprisingly small. But Gorman did not give me a chance of speaking.

"Political life in every modern state," said Gorman, "is poisoned, poisoned at its source by the influence of the great financial houses. Democracy is in shackles. Its leaders are gagged. Progress is stopped. Politics are barren—" He delivered this oration at dinner one night, and when he came to the barrenness of politics he knocked over Ascher's bottle of Perrier Water with a sweep of his hand "and it is the subtle influence of the financiers, the money kings, what the Americans used to call the Gold Bugs, which is responsible for the mischief."

Ascher assented with a sort of wavering smile.

"The proof of what I say," said Gorman, "is to be found in the well-known fact—"

I interrupted him at this point. He had cited his well-known fact to me several times. The son of a Liberal Cabinet Minister married the daughter of a well-known Conservative who had been a Cabinet Minister. It may be my stupidity but I cannot see how that union proves that financiers control politics. I am not, and never shall be either a money king or a gold bug, but in mere dread of hearing Gorman produce his well-known fact again I took up the task of defending the class to which Ascher belongs.

"After all, Gorman," I said, "you ought to be a little grateful. You know perfectly well that there wouldn't be any politics if financiers and other capitalists did not pay for them."

"That's just what I say," said Gorman.

"No," I said. "That's not what you say. You say that financiers poison politics. But there's the greatest difference between paying for a performance and poisoning the performers. Take a theatre for instance—"

"Talking of theatres," said Gorman, "there's a rattling good circus going on in New York at present. I'll take you two men to see it some night."

But I was not going to let Gorman ride away in this manner from an argument in which he was being worsted.

"Do let me finish what I am saying," I said. "All your Parliaments and legislative assemblies are simply national theatres kept up for the amusement of the people. Somebody has to put up the money to keep them going. The ordinary man won't do it. You can't even get him to vote without hypnotising him first by means of a lot of speeches and newspaper articles and placards which stare at him from hoardings. Even after you've hypnotised him you have to drag him to your polling booth in motor cars. He wouldn't go if you didn't. As for paying for your show, you know perfectly well that there'd be no money for the running of it if it weren't for a few financiers and rich men."

One of Gorman's most delightful characteristics is that he bears no malice when an argument goes against him.

"Begad, you're right," he said. "Right all the way along. At the present moment I'm on my way to America to get money for the Party. There's a man I have my eye on out in Detroit, a fellow with millions, and an Irishman. I mean to get a good subscription out of him. That's why I'm on this ship."

"Curious," I said. "I'm after money too. I have some investments in Canadian railway shares—nothing much, just a few thousands, but a good deal to me. I'm a little uneasy—"

I looked at Ascher. A man in his position, the head of one of the great financial houses, ought to be able to give very good advice about my shares. A word from him about the prospects of Canada generally and the companies in which I am interested in particular, would be very valuable to me. Gorman was also looking inquiringly at Ascher. I daresay a tip on the state of the stock market would be interesting to him. I do not know whether party funds are invested or kept on deposit receipt on a bank; but Gorman is likely to have a few pounds of his own. Ascher misinterpreted our glances. He thought we wanted to know why he was going to America.

"The condition of Mexico at present," he said, "is causing us all some anxiety. My partner in New York wants to have a consultation with me. That's what's bringing me over."

"Ah!" said Gorman. "I rather respect those Mexicans. It's pleasant to hear of wealthy men like you being hit

sometimes.”

“It’s not exactly that,” said Ascher. “As a firm we don’t lose directly whatever happens in Mexico. What we have to consider is the interest of our customers, the people, some of them quite small people, who went into Mexican railways on our advice. Banking houses don’t put their money into investments. That’s not our business. But banking is a very dull subject. Let’s talk of something else.”

He turned to me as he spoke.

“You were speaking just now,” he said, “about the necessity of putting up money for the support of theatres. If we are to have any real dramatic art in England—”

Banking is a fascinatingly interesting subject compared to art; but Ascher does not think so, and Ascher had taken hold of the conversation. He appealed to Gorman as a man whose services to literature and drama had never been properly recognised. He appealed to me as a member of a cultured class. Neither of us was sympathetic or responsive. Gorman knows that he has never rendered any service to literature at all, that he wrote novels because he wanted money in the days before a grateful country paid him £400 a year for walking round the lobbies of the House of Commons, that he tumbled into his play by accident and made money out of it because a very charming lady was more charming than usual in the part he wrote for her.

Gorman—this is one of the advantages of being an Irishman—has no illusions about himself. I have none about my class. It is not cultured and does not want to be.

When Ascher had smoked his half cigarette we left the dining saloon and went to our special corner in the lounge. Ascher talked on till nearly ten o’clock about art and drama and music as if they were the only things of any interest or importance in the world. Then he went to bed. Gorman and I agreed that art, drama, and music are of very little importance and less interesting than anything else. Gorman’s weekly articles, quite the best things of their kind then being published, are all about art, so he has a perfect right to express his opinion. What we wanted to hear Ascher talk about was money.

“I’ve always wanted to know what high finance really is,” I said. “It seems a pity not to be able to find out now we’ve got a man who understands it.”

“I’ll take him in hand to-morrow,” said Gorman. “There’s no use our having him to dine with us and looking after him all the way across if we don’t get anything out of him.”

Gorman’s words were cryptic. I wanted to get knowledge—the sort of knowledge which would satisfy my curiosity—out of Ascher; chiefly knowledge though I would not have refused a little inside information about Canadian affairs. Gorman might very well want something more. He might want a subscription to the funds of his party. I hoped he would not get it; either out of Ascher or out of the man at Detroit of whom he spoke. I am not a member of any political party but I hate that to which Gorman belongs. If I were attached to a party and if Gorman’s friends joined it in a body, I should leave it at once. My opinion, so far as I have any opinion, is that what Ireland wants is to be let alone. But if the Irish Nationalist Party were to adopt a policy of deliberately doing nothing and preventing other people from doing anything I should not support it. I should then search about for something revolutionary and try to insist on carrying it out. Nothing would induce me to be on the same side as Gorman and his friends. Such is the nature of an Irish gentleman.

I lay awake for a long time that night, smoking cigarettes in my berth and meditating on the fact that, of the three of us I was the one who was going to America for purely selfish purposes. Gorman was trying to get money for his party, for his own ultimate advantage no doubt, but in the first instance the money was not for himself but for a cause. And Gorman is a politician, a member of a notoriously corrupt and unscrupulous professional class. Ascher was taking a long journey in order to devise some means of rescuing his clients’ property from the clutches of a people which had carried the principles of democracy rather further than is usual. And Ascher is a financier. No one expects anything but enlightened greed from financiers. I belong by birth and education to an aristocracy, a class which is supposed to justify its existence by its altruism. There was no doubt a valuable lesson to be learned from these considerations. I fell asleep before I found out exactly what it was.

Gorman did as he promised. He took Ascher in hand next day. He made the poor man walk up and down the deck with him. There is nothing on shipboard more detestable than that tramp along the deck. Only the strongest minded man can avoid counting his steps, making an estimate of yards, and falling into the bondage of trying to walk a fixed number of miles. Conversation and even coherent thought become impossible when the mind is set on the effort to keep count of the turns made at the end of the deck. I am sure that Ascher did not enjoy himself; but Gorman kept him at it for more than an hour. I watched them from the deck chair in which I sat, rolled up very comfortably in my rug. At one o’clock, when we ought to have gone down to lunch, Gorman stopped opposite my chair. He proclaimed his success jubilantly.

“We’ve been talking about finance,” he said, “high finance. Pity you wouldn’t join us.”

Ascher bowed towards me. Gorman described Ascher’s manners as foreign. I daresay they are. There is a certain flavour of formal courtesy about them which Englishmen rarely practise, of which Irishmen of my generation, partly anglicised by their education, have lost the trick.

“Sir James would only have been bored,” said Ascher.

“Not he,” said Gorman, “he’s just as keen as I am to know what bankers do with money.”

“It’s a dull trade,” said Ascher, “very dull. Some day I shall give it up and devote the rest of my time to—”

“Don’t say art,” said Gorman.

Ascher opened his eyes and looked at Gorman with a mild kind of wonder.

“Of course,” he said, “I can never be an artist. I haven’t got the temperament, the soul, the capacity for abandon. But I might find enjoyment, the highest pleasure, in understanding, in appreciating, perhaps even in encouraging—”

“Sort of Mecenas,” said Gorman. “I wonder if Mecenas was a banker. He seems to have been a rich man.”

“He was a descendant of kings,” I said, “but that’s no reason why he shouldn’t have made money.”

“Anyhow,” said Gorman, “you’d find art just as dull as banking if you went in for it systematically.”

"But artists——!" said Ascher, "genuine artists! Men with inspiration!"

"Selfish conceited swine," said Gorman.

"Well," I said, "you ought to know. You're an artist yourself. Ascher told me so yesterday."

"I remember your two novels," said Ascher, "and I recognised in them the touch, the unmistakable touch."

"Let's go down to lunch," said Gorman.

He left the deck as he spoke. Even Gorman does not like to stand self-convicted of being a selfish conceited swine. Ascher laid his hand on my arm as we went down to the saloon.

"What a brilliant fellow he is," he whispered. "I never realised before how magnificently paradoxical your Irish minds are. That pose of abject self depreciation which is in reality not wholly a pose but a vehement protest against the shallow judgment of a conventionalised culture——"

Ascher's language was a little confusing to me, but I could guess at what he meant. Gorman appeared to him to be an unappreciated Oscar Wilde, one of those geniuses—I am bound to admit that they are mostly Irish—who delude the world into thinking they are uttering profound truths when they are merely outraging common sense.

It would be going too far perhaps to say that Ascher fawned on Gorman during luncheon. He certainly showed his admiration for him very plainly.

During the afternoon we talked finance again. Ascher did it because he wanted to please Gorman. I listened and learned several things which interested me very much. I got to understand, for instance, why a sovereign is sometimes worth more, sometimes less, when you try to exchange it for dollars or francs; a thing which had always puzzled me before. I learned why gold has to be shipped in large quantities from one country to another by bankers, whereas I, a private individual, need only send a cheque to pay my modest debts. I learned what is meant by a bill drawn on London. It took me nearly half an hour to grasp that. Gorman pretended to see it sooner than I did, but when he tried to supplement Ascher's explanation with one of his own he floundered hopelessly.

It was while we were at tea that afternoon that Mrs. Ascher put in an appearance for the first time. She was a tall, lean woman, with dark red hair—Gorman called it bronze—and narrow eyes which never seemed quite open. Her face was nearly colourless. I was inclined to attribute this to her long suffering from seasickness, but when I got to know her better I found out that she is never anything but pallid, even when she has lived for months on land and has been able to eat all she wants. The first thing she did after we were introduced to her was to put her hands up to her ears and give a low moan, expressive of great anguish. Ascher explained to us that she was very musical and suffered acutely from the ship's band. I made up my mind definitely that she was not the sort of woman I like. Gorman, on the other hand, took to her at once. He could not stop the band, but he led the lady away to a distant corner of the writing room.

For the rest of the voyage Gorman devoted himself to her. I do not mean to suggest that he flirted with her either frivolously, or with yearning artistic seriousness. Gorman enjoys the society of women and is never long happy without it, but I do not think he cares for love-making in any form. Besides he spent most of his time in her company watching her playing Patience. Owen Meredith wrote a poem in which he glorified the game of chess as an aid to quiet conjugal love-making. But so far as I know no one has suggested that Canfield—it was Mrs. Ascher's favourite kind of Patience—has ever been used as an excuse for flirtation. No woman, not even if she has eyes of Japanese shape, can look tenderly at a man when she has just buried a valuable two under a pile of kings and queens in her rubbish heap.

The result of Gorman's devotion to the lady was that I was left to improve my acquaintance with her husband. The more I talked to Ascher the better I liked him. His admiration for his wife's sensitiveness to sound was very touching. I am convinced that he knew a great deal more about music than she did and appreciated it more. But her sudden outbursts of petulance when the band played seemed to Ascher a plain proof that she had the spirit of an artist. He confided in me that it gave him real pleasure to see her and Gorman together because, as artists, they must have much in common. Ascher has a very simple and beautiful nature. No one with any other kind of nature could put up with Mrs. Ascher as a wife.

Mere simplicity of soul and beauty of character would not, I am afraid, have kept me at Ascher's side for the rest of the voyage. Virtue, like the innocence of the young, is admirable but apt to be tiresome. What attracted me most to Ascher was his ability, the last thing he recognised in himself. When he found out that I was interested in his business he talked to me quite freely about it, though always with a certain suggestion of apology. There was no need for anything of the sort. He revealed to me a whole world of fascinating romance of which I had never before suspected the existence. Some day, perhaps, a poet—he will have to be a great poet—will discover that the system of credit by means of which our civilisation works, deserves an epic. Neither the wanderings of Ulysses nor the discoveries of a traveller through Paradise and Purgatory make so splendid an appeal to the imagination as this vastly complex machine which Ascher and men like him guide. The oceans of the world are covered thick with ships. Long freight trains wind like serpents across continents. Kings build navies. Ploughmen turn up the clay. The wheels of factories go round. The minds of men bend nature to their purposes by fresh inventions. Science creeps forward inch by inch. Human beings everywhere eat, drink and reproduce themselves. The myriad activities of the whole wide world go profitably on. They can go on only because the Aschers, sitting at their office desks in London or New York, direct the purchase or sale of what are but scratches with a pen on bits of paper.

There is, no doubt, another way of looking at the system. The ships, the kings, the mighty minds, the common men, are all of them in bondage to Ascher and his kind. He and his brother financiers are the unseen rulers, the mysteriously shrouded tyrants of the world. This system of credit, which need not be at all or might be quite other than it is, has given them supreme, untempered power, which they use to the injury of men. This is Gorman's view. But is it any less romantic than the other? An epic can be written round a devil as greatly as round a hero. Milton showed us that. What is wanted in a poet's theme is grandeur, either fine or terrible. Ascher's grip upon the world has surely that.

CHAPTER III.

We landed in New York and to my satisfaction I secured the rooms I usually occupy. They are in a small hotel off Fifth Avenue, half way between the streets which boast of numbers higher than fifty, and those others which follow the effete European customs of having names. It is one of the paradoxes of New York that the parts of the city where fashionable people live and spend their money are severely business-like in the treatment of streets, laying them out so as to form correct parallelograms and distinguishing them by numbers instead of names, as if terrified of letting imagination loose for a moment. Down town where the money is made and the offices of the money makers are piled one on top of another, the streets are as irregular as those of London or Paris, and have all sorts of fascinatingly suggestive names. My hotel stands in the debatable land between the two districts. Fashionable life is ebbing away from its neighbourhood. Business is, as yet, a little shy of invading it. The situation makes an appeal to me. I may be, as Gorman says, a man of no country, but I am a man of two worlds. I cling to the skirts of society, something of an outsider, yet one who has the right of entry, if I choose to take the trouble, the large amount of trouble necessary to exercise the right. I am one who is trying to make money, scarcely more than an amateur among business men, but deeply interested in their pursuits. This particular hotel seems to me therefore a convenient, that is to say a suitable place of residence for me. It is not luxurious, nor is it cheap, but it is comfortable, which is perhaps the real reason why I go to it.

I gave Gorman my address before I left the ship, but I did not expect him to make any use of it. I thought that I had seen the last of him when I crossed the gangway and got caught in the whirlpool of fuss which eddied round the custom house shed. I was very much surprised when he walked in on me at breakfast time on the second morning after our arrival. I was eating an omelette at the time. I offered him a share of it and a cup of coffee. Gorman refused both; but he helped himself to a glass of iced water. This shows how adaptable Gorman is. Hardly any European can drink iced water at or immediately after breakfast during the first week he spends in America. I do not take to the stuff till I have been there about a fortnight. But Gorman, in spite of his patriotism, has a good deal of the cosmopolitan about him. Strange foods and drinks upset him very little.

"Doing anything this evening?" he asked. "If not will you spend it with me? Ascher has promised to come. We're going to a circus and on for supper afterwards. You remember the circus I mentioned to you on the steamer."

I hesitated before I answered. I suppose I looked a little astonished. That Gorman should propose an evening out was natural enough. I should not call him a dissipated man, but he has a great deal of vitality and he likes what he calls "a racket" occasionally. What surprised me was that a circus should be his idea of dissipation. A circus is the sort of entertainment to which I send my nephew—a boy of eleven—when he spends the night with me in London on his way to school. My servant, a thoroughly trustworthy man, takes him there. I pay for the tickets. Gorman, Ascher, and I were three grown men and we could not boast of a child among us to serve as an excuse for going to a circus.

"It's quite a good show," said Gorman.

I tried to think of Ascher at a circus. I failed to picture him, a man educated up to the highest forms of art, gazing in delight while a lady in short petticoats jumps through a hoop from the back of a galloping horse. I had not been at a circus for about thirty years, since my tenth birthday indeed, but I do not believe that the form of entertainment has changed much since then. The clowns' jokes—I judge from my nephew's reports—are certainly the same as they were in my time. But even very great improvements would not make circuses tolerable to really artistic people like Ascher.

"I've got free passes for the best seats," said Gorman.

He had mistaken the cause of my hesitation. I was not thinking of the cost of our evening's amusement.

"You journalists," I said, "are wonderful. You get into the front row every time without paying, whether it's a coronation or a funeral. How did you manage it this time?"

"My brother Tim is connected with the show. I daresay you don't remember him at Curraghbeg. He was fifteen years younger than me. My father married a second time, you know. Tim is my half-brother."

I did not remember Gorman himself in Curraghbeg. I could not be expected to remember Tim who must have been still unborn when I left home to join the Army.

"Tim has the brains of our family," said Gorman. "His mother was a very clever woman."

I never heard Gorman say anything worse than that about his step-mother, and yet she certainly treated him very badly.

"You're all clever," I said. "Your father drove mine out of the country and deprived him of his property. It took ability to do that. You are a Member of Parliament and a brilliant journalist. Timothy—I hardly like to speak of him as Tim—owns a splendid circus."

"He doesn't own it," said Gorman.

"Well, runs it," I said. "I expect it takes more brains to run a circus than to own one."

"He doesn't exactly run it," said Gorman. "In fact he only takes the money at the door. But he has brains. That's why I want Ascher to meet him. I didn't ask Mrs. Ascher," he added thoughtfully, "though she hinted for an invitation, rather made a set at me, in fact."

"Give her my ticket," I said. "I don't mind a bit. I'll buy another for myself in a cheap part of the house, and join you at supper afterwards. You ought not to disappoint Mrs. Ascher."

"I don't want Mrs. Ascher this time. She'd be in the way. She's a charming woman, of course, though she does bore me a bit about music and talks of her soul."

"Good Heavens!" I said. "You haven't been discussing religion with her, surely. I didn't think you'd do a thing like that, Gorman. You oughtn't to."

"Never mentioned religion to her in my life. Nothing would induce me to. For one thing I don't believe she has any."

"You're a Roman Catholic yourself, aren't you?"

"Well," said Gorman, "I don't know that I can say that I am exactly; but I'm not a Protestant or a Jew. But that's nothing to do with it. Mrs. Ascher doesn't talk about her soul in a religious way. In fact—I don't know if you'll understand, but what she means by a soul is something quite different, not the same sort of soul."

I understood perfectly. I have met several women of Mrs. Ascher's kind. They are rather boastful about their souls and even talk of saving or losing them. But they do not mean what one of Gorman's priests would mean, or what my poor father, who was a strongly evangelical Protestant, meant by the phrases.

"We are not accustomed to souls like hers in Ireland. We only go in for the commonplace, old-fashioned sort."

Gorman smiled.

"She wouldn't be seen with one of them about her," he said. "They're vulgar things. Everybody has one."

"Soul or no soul," I said, "you ought to invite Mrs. Ascher to your party. Why not do the civil thing?"

"I'll do the civil thing some other time. I'll take her to a concert, but I don't want her to-night."

"Perhaps," I said, "your brother's circus is a little—shall we say Parisian? I don't think you need mind that. Mrs. Ascher isn't exactly a girl. It would take a lot to shock her. In fact, Gorman, my experience of these women with artistic souls is that the riskier the thing is the better they like it."

That is, as I have noticed, one of the great differences between a commonplace, so to speak, religious soul and a soul of the artistic kind. You save the one by keeping it as clean as you can. The other seems to thrive best when heavily manured. It is no disparagement of the artistic soul to say that it likes manure. Some of the most delicious and beautiful things in the world are like that, raspberries for instance, which make excellent jam, roses about which poets write, and begonias. I knew a man once who poured bedroom slops into his begonia bed every day and he had the finest flowers I ever saw.

"Gorman," I said, "did it ever occur to you that Mrs. Ascher's soul is like a begonia?"

"Bother Mrs. Ascher's soul!" said Gorman. "I'm not thinking about it. The circus is a show you might take a nun to. Nobody could possibly object to it. The reason I headed her off was because I wanted to talk business to Ascher, very particular business and rather important. In fact," here he sank his voice to a confidential whisper, "I want you to help me to rope him in."

"If you've succeeded in roping him into a circus," I said, "I should think you could rope him into anything else without my help. Would you mind telling me what the scheme is?"

"I'm trying to," he said, "but you keep interrupting me with silly riddles about begonias."

"I'm sorry I mentioned begonias. All the same it's a pity you wouldn't listen. You'd have liked the part about manure. But never mind. Go on about Ascher."

"My brother Tim," said Gorman, "has invented a new cash register. He's always inventing things; been at it ever since he was a boy. But they're mostly quite useless things though as cute as the devil. In fact I don't think he ever hit on anything the least bit of good till he got this cash register."

"Before we go further," I said, "what is a cash register?"

"It's a machine used in shops and cheap tea-places for——"

"I know now," I said. "It has keys like a typewriter. That's all right. I thought for a moment it might be a book, a ledger, you know. Go on."

"Well, Tim's machine is out and away the best thing of its kind ever seen. There's simply no comparison between it and the existing cash registers. I've had it tested in every way and I know."

I began, so I thought, to see what Ascher was to be roped into.

"You want money to patent it, I suppose," I said.

But that was not it. Gorman had scraped together whatever money was necessary to make his brother's invention secure in Europe and America. He had done more, he had formed a small private company in which he held most of the shares himself. He had manufactured a hundred of the new machines and was prepared to put them on the market.

"Ah," I said. "Now I see what you're at. You want more capital. You want to work the thing on a big scale. I might take a share or two myself, just for the sake of having a flutter."

"We don't want you," said Gorman. "The fewer there are in it the better. I don't want to have to divide the profits with a whole townful of people. But we might let you in if you get Ascher for us. You have a lot of influence with Ascher."

I had, of course, no influence whatever with Ascher. But Gorman, though he is certainly a clever man, has the defects of his class and his race. He was an Irish peasant to start with and there never was an Irish peasant yet who did not believe in a mysterious power which he calls "influence." It is curious faith, though it justifies itself pretty well in Ireland. In that country you can get nearly anything done, either good or bad, if you persuade a sufficiently influential person to recommend it. Gorman's mistake, as it seemed to me, lay in supposing that influence is equally potent outside Ireland. I am convinced that it is no use at all in dealing with a man like Ascher. If a big financial magnate will not supply money for an enterprise on the merits of the thing he is not likely to do so because a friend asks him. Besides I cannot, or could not at that time, boast of being Ascher's intimate friend. However Gorman's mistake was no affair of mine.

"If Ascher goes in at all," I said, "he'll do it on a pretty big scale. He'll simply absorb the rest of you."

"The fact is," said Gorman, "I don't want Ascher to join. I don't want him to put down a penny of money. All I want him to do is to back us. Of course he'll get his whack of whatever we make, and if he likes to be the

nominal owner of some bonus shares in our company he can. That would regularise his position. The way the thing stands is this."

I had finished my breakfast and lit a cigar. Gorman pulled out his pipe and sat down opposite to me. I am not, I regret to say, a business man, but I succeeded in understanding fairly well what he told me.

His brother's cash register, if properly advertised and put on the market, would drive out every other cash register in the world. In the long run nothing could stand against it. Of that Gorman was perfectly convinced. But the proprietors of the existing cash registers would not submit without a struggle.

Gorman nodded gravely when he told me this. Evidently their struggles were the very essence of the situation.

"What can they do?" I said. "If your machine is much better than theirs surely——"

"They'll do what people always do on these occasions. They'll infringe our patents."

"But the law——"

"Yes," said Gorman, "the law. It's just winning law suits that would ruin us. Every time we got a judgment in our favour the case would be appealed to a higher court. That would happen here and in England and in France and in every country in the world civilised enough to use cash registers. Sooner or later, pretty soon too—we should have no money left to fight with."

"Bankrupt," I said, "as a consequence of your own success. What an odd situation!"

"Now," said Gorman, "you see where Ascher comes in."

"I do. But I don't expect he'll spend his firm's money fighting speculative law suits all over the world just to please you."

"You don't see the position in the least. There'll be no law suits and he won't spend a penny. Once it's known that his firm is behind us no one will attempt to touch our patent. People aren't such fools as to start playing beggar-my-neighbour with Ascher, Stutz & Co. The whole world knows that their firm has money enough to go on paying lawyers right on until the day of judgment."

"I hope to goodness," I said, "that we shan't meet lawyers then."

Gorman smiled. Up to that point it had been impossible to move him from his desperate earnestness, but a joke at the expense of lawyers is sure of a smile under any circumstances. With the possible exception of the mother-in-law joke, the lawyer joke is the oldest in the world and like all well tested jokes it may be relied on.

"There won't be any lawyers then," said Gorman. "They'll go straight to hell without the formality of a trial."

This seemed to me to be carrying the joke too far. I have known several lawyers who were no worse than other professional men, quite upright and honourable compared to doctors. I should have liked to argue the point with Gorman. But for the moment I was more interested in the future of the new cash register than in the ultimate destiny of lawyers.

"If you get Ascher to back you," I said, "and your patents are safe, you'll want to begin making machines on a big scale. Where will you get the money for that?"

"You haven't quite caught on yet," said Gorman. "I don't want to make the things at all. Why should I? There would have to be a large company. I have neither time nor inclination to manage it. Tim hasn't that kind of brains. Besides it would be risky. Somebody might come along any day with a better machine and knock ours out. People are always inventing things, you know. What I want is a nice large sum of hard cash without any bother or risk. Don't you see that the other people, the owners of the present cash registers, will have to buy us out? If our machine is the best and they daren't go to law with us they must buy us out. There's no other course open to them. What's more, they'll have to pay pretty nearly what we ask. In fact, if we put up a good bluff there's hardly any end to the extent to which we can bleed them. See?"

I saw something which looked to me like a modernised form of highway robbery.

"Is that sort of thing common?" I said.

"Done every day," said Gorman. "It's business."

"Well," I said, "there's one justification for your proceedings. If half what you say about your brother's invention is true the world will get the benefit of a greatly improved cash register. I suppose that's the way civilisation advances."

"The world be damned," said Gorman. "It'll get nothing. You don't suppose the people who buy us out are going to start making Tim's machine. They can if they like, of course, once they've paid us. But it will cost them hundreds of thousands if they do. They'd have to scrap all their existing plant and turn their factories inside out, and in the end they wouldn't make any more profit than they're making now. No. They'll simply suppress Tim's invention and the silly old world will go on with the machines it has at present."

"Gorman," I said, "you gave me to understand a minute or so ago that you went in for the old-fashioned kind of soul, the kind we were both brought up to. I'm not at all sure that I wouldn't rather have Mrs. Ascher's new kind, even if it——"

"Don't start talking about begonias again," said Gorman.

"I wasn't going to. I was only going to say that even plays in which nothing happens and grimy women say indecent things—that's art you know—seem to me better than the sort of things your soul fattens on."

"I don't see any good talking about souls," said Gorman. "This is a matter of business. The other people will crush us if they can. If they can't, and they won't be able to if Ascher backs us, they'll have to pay us. There's nothing wrong about that, is there? Look at it this way. We've got something to sell——"

"Cash registers," I said. "But you don't propose to sell them."

"Not cash registers, but the right to make a certain kind of cash registers. That's what we're going to sell. We could sell it to the public, form a company to use the rights. It suits us better for various reasons to sell it to these people. It suits them to buy. They needn't unless they like. But they will like. Now if we want to sell and they want to buy and we agree on the price where does anybody's soul come in?"

"There is evidently," I said, "a third kind of soul. The original, religious kind, the artistic kind, and what we may call the business soul. You have a mixture of all three in you, Gorman."

"I wish you'd stop worrying about my soul and tell me this. Are you going to help to rope in Ascher or not? He'll come if you use your influence with him."

"My dear fellow," I said. "Of course I'm going to help. Haven't you offered me a share of the loot?"

"I thought you would," said Gorman triumphantly. "But what about your own soul?"

"I haven't got one," I said.

I used to have a sort of instinct called honour which served men of my class instead of a soul. But Gorman and Gorman's father before him and their political associates have succeeded in abolishing gentlemen in Ireland. There is no longer the class of gentry in that country and the few surviving individuals have learned that honour is a silly superstition. I am now a disinterested spectator of a game which my ancestors played and lost. The virtue desirable in a spectator is not honour but curiosity. I wanted very much to see how Ascher would take Gorman's proposal and how the whole thing would work out. I promised to sit through the circus, to attend the supper party afterwards and to do the best I could to persuade Ascher to join our robber band.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Ascher is not the woman to miss an entertainment she desires merely because she lacks an invitation. She arrived at the door of the circus in a taxicab with Ascher. Gorman and I were there and when he first saw Mrs. Ascher he swore. However he was forced to give her some sort of welcome and he did it pretty well, though I fear Ascher might have noticed a note of insincerity in his voice. But that was only at first. Gorman's temper changed when we reached our seats and Mrs. Ascher threw off her cloak.

She was wearing an evening gown of the most startling design and colour. I should have said beforehand that a woman with a skin as pallid as that of a corpse and so little flesh that her bones stick up jaggedly would be wise to avoid very low dresses. Mrs. Ascher displayed, when she took off her cloak, as much skin and bone as she could without risking arrest at the hands of the police. Her gown, what there was of it, was of a vivid orange colour and she wore emeralds round her neck. If the main object of wearing clothes is, as some philosophers maintain, to attract attention, then Mrs. Ascher understands the art of dress. She created a sensation. That was what pleased Gorman. He is a man who likes to be the centre of interest wherever he is, or if that is not possible, to be attached to the person who has secured that fortunate position. Mrs. Ascher attracts the public gaze wherever she goes. I have seen people turn round to stare at her in the dining room of the Ritz in New York and at supper in the Carlton in London. The men and women who formed the audience in Gorman's circus were unaccustomed to daring splendour of raiment. They actually gasped when Mrs. Ascher threw off her cloak and Gorman felt glad that she had come.

She said a few words to me about the delight which an artist's soul feels in coming into direct contact with the seething life of the people, and she mentioned with appreciation a French picture, one of Degas' I think, which represents ballet dancers practising their art. Then she and Gorman settled down in two of the three seats reserved for us. Ascher and I retired modestly to the back of what I may call the dress circle. After a while when the performance was well under way, Gorman's brother came in. I suppose the greater part of his evening's work was done and he was able to leave the task of dealing with late comers to some subordinate clerk. He looked a mere boy, younger than I expected, as he stood at the end of the row of seats trying to attract his brother's attention. Gorman was so much occupied with Mrs. Ascher that for some time he did not notice Tim. I had time to observe the boy. He had fair hair, and large, childlike blue eyes. He was evidently nervous, for he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He kept pulling at his tie, and occasionally patting his hair. He was quite right to be uncomfortable about his hair. It was very untidy and one particular lock stood out stiffly at the back of his head.

Gorman saw him at last and immediately introduced him to Ascher and to me. But Tim was far too nervous to sit down beside us. He crept after his brother and took a chair, three seats beyond Gorman, away from Mrs. Ascher. She spotted him directly and insisted on his sitting beside her. She is a woman who likes to have a man of some sort on each side of her. Tim Gorman was little more than a boy but he was plainly frightened of her. I suppose that gave zest to the sport of annexing him. Besides, his eyes are very fine, and, if souls really shine through eyes, showed that he was refreshingly innocent. I expect, too, that there was something piquant in the company of the clerk who takes the money at the door of a second-rate entertainment. Mrs. Ascher has often told me that she is more interested in life than in anything else, even art. She distinguishes between life and real life. Mine, I gather, is not nearly so real as that of a performer in a travelling circus. I do not know why this should be so, but I have no doubt that it is. Mrs. Ascher is not by any means the only person who thinks so. Tim Gorman's life was apparently real enough to attract her greatly. She paid him the compliment of talking a good deal to the boy, though she was far too clever a woman to let the elder brother feel himself neglected.

A learned horse had just begun its performance when Tim Gorman entered. It went on for some time picking out large letters from a pile in front of it and arranging them so as to spell out "yes" or "no" in answer to questions asked by a man with a long whip in his hand. The animal used one of its front hoofs in arranging the letters, and looked singularly undignified. Ascher sat quite still with an air of grave politeness. I tried to get him to tell me what he thought of the learned horse but could get nothing out of him. Long silences make me uncomfortable. I felt at last that it was better to talk nonsense than not to talk at all.

"I suppose," I said, "that learned men look almost as grotesque to the angels as learned horses do to us. I can fancy Raphael watching a German professor writing a book on the origin of religion. He would feel all the

while that the creature's front paw was meant by nature for nobler uses."

"Yes," said Ascher, "yes. Quite so."

He spoke vaguely. I think he did not hear what I said. Or perhaps the learned horse struck him differently. Or his mind may have been entirely occupied with the problem of Mexican railways so that he could pay no attention either to the learned horse or to me. If so, he was wakened from his reverie by the next performance.

A company of acrobats in spangled tights, three men and one young woman, took possession of the arena. At first they tumbled, turned somersaults, climbed on each other's shoulders and assumed attitudes which I should have said beforehand were impossible for any creature with bones. Then a large net was stretched some six feet from the ground and several trapezes which had been tied to the roof were allowed to hang down. The acrobats climbed up by a ladder and swung from one trapeze to another. The business was commonplace enough, but I became aware that Ascher was very much interested in it. He became actually excited when we reached the final act, the climax of the performance.

The programme, at which I glanced, spoke of "The Flying Lady." The woman, her spangles aglitter in a blaze of lime light, did indubitably fly, if rushing unsupported through the air at some height from solid ground is the essence of flying. Two of the men hung on their trapezes, one by his hands and the other by his legs. They swung backwards and forwards. The length of the ropes was so great that they passed through large arcs, approaching each other and then swinging back until there was a long space between them. The young woman, standing on a third trapeze, swung too. Suddenly, at the upward end of a swing, just as her trapeze hung motionless for an instant, she launched herself into the air. The man on the next trapeze came swinging towards her. She caught him by the feet at the very moment when he was nearest to her. He swung back and she dangled below him. When he reached the highest point of the half circle through which he passed, she was stretched out, making with him a horizontal line. At that moment she let go and shot, feet foremost, through the air. The man who hung head downwards from the next trapeze came swiftly towards her and caught her by the ankles. The two swung back together and at the end of his course he let her go. The impulse of his swing sent her, turning swiftly as she flew, towards a ladder at the end of the row. She alighted on her feet on a little platform, high up near the roof of the building. There she stood, bowing and smiling.

The people burst into a shout of cheering. Ascher leaned forward in his seat and gazed at her. The two men still kept their trapezes in full swing. The third man, standing on a platform at the other end of the row, set the remaining trapeze swinging, that from which the woman had begun her flight. A minute later she flung herself from the platform and the whole performance was repeated. I could hear Ascher panting with excitement beside me.

"A horribly risky business," I said, "but wonderful, really wonderful. If one of those swings were a fraction late— But of course the whole thing is exactly calculated."

"Yes, yes," said Ascher, "calculated, of course. It's a matter of mathematics and accurate timing of effort. But if it were worked by machinery, with lay figures, we should think nothing of it. Somebody would do sums and there would be nothing particular in it. The wonderful thing is the confidence. The timing of the swings might be all right; but if the woman hesitated for an instant, or if one of the men felt the slightest doubt about the thing's coming off—if they didn't all feel absolutely sure that the hands would be there to grasp her at just the proper moment—it's the perfect trust which the people have, of each other, of the calculations—Don't you see?"

I began to see that Ascher was profoundly moved by this performance. I also began to see why.

"It's like—like some things in life," I said, "or what some things ought to be."

"It's like what my life is," said Ascher. "Don't you see it?"

"I should be rather stupid if I didn't see it, considering the trouble you took to explain the working of international credit to me for two whole days."

"Then you do understand."

"I understand," I said, "that you are that woman. Your whole complex business is very like hers. It's the meeting of obligations exactly at the end of their swing, the fact that at the appointed moment there will be something there for you to grasp."

"And the confidence," said Ascher. "If the bankers in any country doubt the solvency of the bankers in another country, if there's the smallest hesitation, an instant's pause of distrust or fear, then international credit collapses and—"

He flung out his arm with a gesture of complete hopelessness. I realised that if anything went wrong between bankers in their trapeze act there would be a very ugly smash.

"And in your case," I said, "there's no net underneath."

The girl and the three men were safe on firm ground again. They were bowing final acknowledgments to the cheering crowd. I suppose they do the same thing every night of their lives, but they were still able to enjoy the cheering. Their faces were flushed and their eyes sparkled. They are paid, perhaps pretty well paid, for risking their lives; but the applause is the larger part of the reward.

"Also," I said to Ascher, "nobody cheers you. Nobody knows you're doing it."

"No. Nobody knows we're doing it. Nobody sees our flights through the air or guesses the supreme confidence we bankers must have in each other. When anybody does notice us it's—well, our friend Gorman, for instance."

Gorman holds the theory that financial men, Ascher and the rest, are bloated spiders who spend their time and energy in trapping the world's workers, poor flies, in gummy webs.

"And of course Gorman is right in a way," said Ascher. "I can't help feeling that things ought to be better managed. But—but it's a pity that men like him don't understand."

Ascher is wonderful. I shall never attain his mental attitude of philosophic tolerance. I do not feel that

Gorman is in any way right about the Irish landlords. I felt, though I like the man personally, that he and his friends are deliberately and wickedly perverse.

"Some day," said Ascher, "something will go wrong. A rope will break, or a man will miss his grip, and then people in one place will be starving, while people somewhere else have food all round them rotting in heaps. Men will want all sorts of things and will not be able to get them, though there will be plenty of them in the world. Men will think that the laws of nature have stopped working, that God has gone mad. Hardly any one will understand what has happened, just that one trapeze rope has broken, or that one man has lost his nerve and missed his grip."

"She might have fallen clear of the net," I said, "and come down on the audience."

"When we slip a trick," said Ascher, "it will be on the audience that we shall come down; and the audience, the people, will be bruised and hurt, won't in the least know what has happened."

Gorman—I suddenly recollected this—had an adventure in finance to propose. If Ascher goes into the scheme I shall have an opportunity of watching an interesting variant of the trapeze act. We shall get the people, who own the existing cash registers on the swing and then hold them to ransom. We shall set our small trapeze oscillating right across their airy path and decline to remove it unless they agree to part with some of the very shiniest of their spangles and hand them over to us for our adornment. I wondered how Ascher, who is so deeply moved by the perils of his own flights, would like the idea of destroying other people's confidence and upsetting their calculations.

I looked down and saw that Gorman had left his seat. Mrs. Ascher had been making good progress with Tim. The boy was leaning towards her and talking eagerly. She lay back in her seat and smiled at him. If she were not interested in what he was saying she succeeded very well in pretending that she was. All really charming women practise this form of deception and all men are taken in by it if it is well done. Mrs. Ascher does it very well.

When the net was cleared away and the trapezes slung up again in the roof, we had a musical ride, performed by six men and six women mounted on very shiny horses. Mrs. Ascher, of course, objected strongly to the music. I could see her squirming in her seat. Ascher did not find the thing interesting and began to fidget. It was, indeed, much less suggestive than either the learned horse or the acrobats. You cannot discover in a musical ride any parable with a meaning applicable to life. Nothing in the world goes so smoothly and pleasantly. There are always risks even when there are no catastrophes, and catastrophes are far too common. Ascher probably felt that we were out of touch with humanity. He kept looking round, as if seeking some way of escape.

Fortunately Gorman turned up again very soon.

"I hope you won't mind," he said, "but I have changed the arrangement for supper. Mrs. Ascher," he nodded towards the seat in which she was writhing, "wants to meet the Galleotti family. They're not a family, you know, and of course they're not called Galleotti. The woman is a Mrs. Briggs, and the tallest of the men is her husband. The other two are no relation. I don't know their names, but Tim will introduce us."

I looked at my programme again. It was under the name of the Galleotti Family that the acrobats performed.

"That will be most interesting," I said.

"I'm afraid it won't," said Gorman. "People like that are usually quite stupid. However Mrs. Ascher wanted it, so of course I made arrangements."

Mrs. Ascher evidently wanted to see life, the most real kind of life, thoroughly. Not contented with having the doorkeeper of a cheap circus sitting, so to speak, in her lap all evening, she was now bent on sharing a meal with a troupe of acrobats.

"It's rather unlucky," Gorman went on, "but Mrs. Briggs simply refuses to go to the Plaza. I had a table engaged there."

"How regal of you, Gorman!" I said.

"You'd have thought she'd have liked it," he said. "But she made a fuss about clothes. It's extraordinary how women will."

"You can hardly blame her," I said; "I expect the head waiter would turn her out if she appeared in that get-up of hers. Very absurd of him, of course, but——"

I was not conscious that my eyes had wandered to Mrs. Ascher's dress until Gorman winked at me. Fortunately Ascher noticed neither my glance nor Gorman's wink. I had not thought of suggesting that Mrs. Briggs' stage costume was no more daring than what Mrs. Ascher wore.

"Of course," said Ascher, "she wouldn't come to supper in tights. It's her other clothes she's thinking of. I daresay they are shabby."

I could understand what Mrs. Briggs felt. Gorman could not. I do not think that any feeling about the shabbiness of his coat would make him hesitate about dining with an Emperor.

"I hope you won't mind," he said to Ascher, "but we're going to rather a third-rate little place."

Gorman had evidently meant to do us well in the way of supper, champagne probably. He may have had the idea that good food would soften Ascher's heart towards the cash register scheme, but Mrs. Ascher's insistence on meeting the Galleotti family spoiled the whole plan. We could not talk business across Mrs. Briggs, so it mattered little what sort of supper we had.

Mrs. Ascher left her seat and joined us. Tim, looking more nervous than ever, followed her at a distance.

"Take me out of this," she said to me. "Take me out of this or I shall go mad. That dreadful band!"

She spoke in a kind of intense hiss, and I took her out at once, leaving the others to collect our hats and coats and to hunt up the Galleotti family. When we reached the entrance hall she sank into a seat. I thought she was going to faint and felt very uncomfortable. She shut her eyes and murmured in a feeble way. I bent down to hear what she was trying to say, and was relieved to find that she was asking for a cigarette. I gave her one at once. I even lit it for her as she seemed very weak. It did her good. When she had inhaled three or

four mouthfuls of smoke she was able to speak quite audibly and had forgotten all about the horror of the band. Her mind went back to the Galleotti family.

"Did you notice the muscular development of those men?" she said. "I don't think I ever saw more perfect symmetry, the tallest of the three especially. The play of his shoulder muscles was superb. I wonder if he would sit for me. I do a little modelling, you know. Some day I must show you my things. I did a baby faun just before I left London. It isn't good, of course; but I can't help knowing that it has feeling."

The tallest Galleotti probably has feeling too, of a different kind. I expect he would have refused Gorman's invitation to supper if he had known that he was invited in order to give Mrs. Ascher an opportunity of studying his muscular development at close quarters. Perhaps he had some idea that he was to be on show and did not like it. Instead of wearing his spangled tights he came to supper in a very ill-fitting tweed suit, which completely concealed his symmetry. The other two men were equally inconsiderate. Mrs. Briggs wore a rusty black skirt and a somewhat soiled blouse. Mrs. Ascher was disappointed.

She showed her annoyance by ignoring the Galleotti Family. This was rather hard on Gorman, who had invited the family solely to please her and then found that she would not speak to them. She took a chair in a corner next the wall, and beckoned to Tim Gorman to sit beside her. Tim was miserably frightened and dodged about behind the tallest of the Galleottis to avoid her eye. I expect her manner when the band was playing had terrified him. I felt certain that I should be snubbed, but, to avoid general awkwardness, I took the chair beside Mrs. Ascher.

I tried to cheer her up a little.

"Just think," I whispered, "if Mr. Briggs looks so commonplace in every-day clothes, other men, even I perhaps, might be as splendid as he was if we put on spangled tights."

I had to whisper because Mr. Briggs was near me, and I did not want to hurt his feelings. Mrs. Ascher may not have heard me. She certainly did not answer; I went on:

"Thus there may be far more beauty in the world than we suspect. We may be meeting men every day who have the figures of Greek gods underneath their absurd coats. It's a most consoling thought."

It did not console Mrs. Ascher in the least; but I thought a little more of it might be good for her.

"In the same way," I said, "heroic hearts may be beating under the trappings of conventionality and great souls may——"

I meant to work the idea out; but Mrs. Ascher cut me short by saying that she had a headache. There was every excuse for her. She wanted to see the muscles of Mr. Briggs' shoulders and she wanted Tim Gorman to sit beside her. Double disappointments of this kind often bring on the most violent headaches.

The supper party was a failure. The Galleotti men would talk freely only to Tim Gorman and relapsed into gaping silence when Ascher spoke to them. Mrs. Briggs would not speak at all, until Gorman, who has the finest social talent of any man I ever met, talked to her about her baby. On that subject she actually chattered to the disgust of Mrs. Ascher, who has no children herself and regards women who have as her personal enemies. We had sausages and mashed potatoes to eat. We drank beer. Even Ascher drank a little beer, though I know he hated it.

Not a word was said about Tim's cash register until the Galleotti family went away and the party broke up. Then Gorman suddenly sprang the subject on Ascher. Mrs. Ascher, having snubbed me with her headache story, at last captured Tim Gorman. She spoke quite kindly to him and tried to teach him to help her on with her cloak, a garment which Tim was at first afraid to touch. I heard her, when Tim was at last holding the cloak, asking him to sit for her in her studio. Tim has no very noticeable physical development, but he has very beautiful eyes. Mrs. Ascher may have wanted him as a model for a figure of Sir Galahad. Her interest in the boy gave us a chance of talking business.

It was not a chance that I should have used if I had been Gorman. It seemed to me foolish to lay a complicated scheme before a man who has just been severely tried in temper by unaccustomed kinds of food and drink. However, Gorman set out the case of the cash register in a few words. He did not go into details, and I do not know whether Ascher understood what was expected of him. He invited Gorman to bring Tim and the machine to the bank next day and promised to look into the matter. Gorman, still under the delusion that influence matters, insisted on my being one of the party. He described me as a shareholder in the company. Ascher said he would be glad to see me, too, next day. My impression is that he would have agreed to receive the whole circus company rather than stand any longer in that grimy restaurant talking to Gorman.

CHAPTER V.

Gorman called for me at my hotel next morning at 9 o'clock.

"Time to start," he said, "if we're to keep our appointment with Ascher."

I was still at breakfast and did not want to start till I had finished.

"Do you think," I said, "that it's wise to tackle him quite so early? Most men's tempers improve as the day goes on,—up to a certain point, not right into the evening. Now I should say that noon would be the very best hour for business of our kind."

But Gorman is very severe when he is doing business. He took no notice whatever of my suggestion. He pulled a long envelope out of his pocket and presented it to me. It contained a nicely printed certificate, which assured me that I was the owner of one thousand ordinary shares in the New Excelsior Cash Register Company, Ltd. The face value of the shares was five dollars each.

"I did not mean to take quite so many shares," I said. "However, I don't mind. If you will work out the rate of exchange while I finish my coffee, I'll give you an English cheque for the amount."

Gorman laughed at the proposal.

"You needn't pay anything," he said. "All we want from you is your name on our list of directors and your influence with Ascher. Those shares will be worth a couple of hundred dollars each at least when we begin our squeeze and you don't run the slightest risk of losing anything."

The owning of shares of this kind seems to me the easiest way there is of making money. I thanked Gorman effusively and pocketed the certificate.

We went down town by the elevated railway, and got out at Rector Street. Tim Gorman met us at the bottom of the steps which lead to the station. He was carrying his cash register in his arms. We hurried across Broadway and passed through the doors of a huge sky-scraper building. I thought we were entering Ascher's office. We were not. We were taking a short cut through a kind of arcade like one of the covered shopping ways which one sees in some English towns, especially in Birmingham. There was a large number of little shops in it, luncheon places, barbers' shops, newspaper stalls, tobacconists' stalls, florists' stalls, and sweet shops, which displayed an enormous variety of candies. We were in the very centre of the business part of the city, a part to which women hardly ever go, unless they are typists or manicure girls. Above our heads were offices, tiers and tiers of them. I wondered why there were so many florists' shops and sweet shops. The American business man must, I imagine, have a gentle and childlike heart. No one who has lost his first innocence would require such a supply of flowers and chocolate at his office door.

There were lifts on each side of this arcade, dozens of them, in cages. Some were labelled "Express" and warned passengers that they would make no stop before the eleventh floor. I should have liked very much to make a journey in an express lift, and I hoped that Ascher's office might turn out to be on the 25th or perhaps the 30th floor of the building. I was disappointed. Gorman hurried us on.

We emerged into the open air and found ourselves in a narrow, crooked street along which men were hurrying in great numbers and at high speed. On both sides of it were enormously tall houses. There was just one building, right opposite to us, which was of English height. It was not in the least English in any other way. It was white and very dignified. Its lines were severely classical. It had tall, narrow windows and a door which somehow reminded me of portraits of the first Duke of Wellington. The architect may perhaps have been thinking of the great soldier's nose. Gorman walked straight up to that door.

"Here we are," he said.

"Surely," I said, "this Greek temple can't be Ascher's office?"

"This is the exact spot."

"Tell me," I said, "do we take off our shoes at the threshold or say grace, or perform some kind of ceremonial lustration? We can't go in just as we are."

Gorman did not answer me. He went through the door, the terribly impressive door, without even bowing. There was nothing for me to do but follow him. Tim followed me, nursing his cash register as if it had been a baby, a very heavy and awkwardly shaped baby.

We passed into the outer office. At the first glance it seemed to me like a very orderly town. It was built over with small houses of polished mahogany and plate glass. Through the plate-glass fronts—they were more than windows—I could see the furniture of the houses, rolltop desks of mahogany, broad mahogany tables, chairs and high stools. All the mahogany was very highly polished. The citizens of this town flitted from one glass-fronted house to another. They met in narrow streets and spoke to each other with grave dignity. They spoke in four languages, and English was the one used least. From the remoter parts of the place, the slums, if such a polished town has slums, came the sound of typewriters worked with extreme rapidity. The manual labourers, in this as in every civilised community, are kept out of sight. Only the sound of their toil is allowed to remind the other classes of their happier lot. Some of the citizens—I took them to be men of very high standing, privy counsellors or magistrates—held cigars in their mouths as they walked about. These cigars are badges of office, like the stripes on soldiers' coats. No one was actually smoking.

Gorman was our spokesman. He explained who we were and what we wanted. We were handed over to a clerk. I suppose he was a clerk, but to me he seemed a gentleman in waiting of some mysterious monarch, or—my feeling wavered—one of the inferior priests of a strange cult. He led us through doors into a large room, impressively empty and silent. There for a minute we left while he tapped reverently at another door. The supreme moment arrived. We passed into the inmost shrine where Ascher sat. My spirit quailed.

Every great profession has its own way of hypnotising the souls of simple men. Indeed I think that professions are accounted great in accordance with their power of impressing on the world a sense of their mysteriousness. Ecclesiastics, those of them who know their business, build altars in dim recesses of vast buildings, light them with flickering tapers, and fill the air with clouds of stupefying incense smoke. Surgeons and dentists allow us fleeting glimpses of bright steel instruments, very strangely shaped. It is contrived that we see them in a cold, clear light, the light of scientific relentlessness. There is a suggestion of torture, not brutal but exquisitely refined, of perfected pain, achieved by the stimulation of recondite nerves of very delicate sensibility. Lawyers wear archaic robes and use a strange language in their mysteries, conveying to us a belief that Justice is an ancient witch whose evil eye can be averted only by the incantation and grotesque posturing of her initiate priests. But I am not sure that financiers do not understand the art of hypnotic suggestion best of all. I have worshipped in cathedrals, sweated cold in operating theatres, trembled before judges, but there is something about large surfaces of polished mahogany and very soft, dimly coloured turkey carpets which quells my feeble spirit still more completely.

There was a heavy deadening silence in Ascher's private office, and our voices, when they broke it, sounded like the cheeping of ghosts. There was an odour more oppressive than the smell of incense or the penetrating fumes of iodoform. Some one, many hours before, must have smoked a very good cigar in the room, and the scent of it lingered. The doors of huge safes must have been opened. From the recesses of these steel chambers had oozed air which had lain stagnant and lifeless round piles of gold bonds and rich securities for years and years. The faint, sickly odour of sealing wax must have been distilled from immense sticks of that substance and sprinkled overnight upon the carpets and leather-seated chairs. I breathed and my very limbs felt numb.

But certain souls are proof against the subtlest forms of hypnotism. Gorman had escaped from the influence of his church. He would flip a sterilised lancet across a glass slab with his finger and laugh in the face of the surgeon who owned it. He walked with buoyant confidence into Ascher's office. My case was different. I stood and then sat, the victim of a partial anaesthetic. I saw and heard dimly as if in a dream, or through a mist. Poor Tim trembled as he laid his cash register down on one of Ascher's mahogany tables. I could hear the keys and bars of the machine rattling together while he handled it.

Ascher spoke through a telephone receiver which stood at his elbow. Another man entered the room. We all shook hands with him. He was Stutz, the New York partner of the firm. Then Ascher spoke through the receiver again, and another man came in.

With him we did not shake hands, but he bowed to us and we to him. He was Mr. Mildmay. He stood near the door, waiting for orders.

Tim Gorman unpacked his machine and exhibited it. I have not the remotest idea what its peculiar virtues are, but Tim believed in them. His nervousness seemed to pass away from him as he spoke about his invention with simple-minded enthusiasm. Love casts out fear, and there is no doubt that Tim loved every screw and lever of the complicated mechanism.

Mr. Mildmay left his place near the door and came forward. His deferential manner dropped off from him. He revealed himself as a mechanical expert with a special knowledge of cash registers. He and Tim Gorman pressed keys, twisted handles and bent together in absorbed contemplation over some singular feature of the machine's organism. Gorman, the elder brother, watched them with a confident smile. Ascher and Stutz sat gravely silent. They waited Mildmay's opinion. He was the man of the moment. A few minutes before he had bowed respectfully to Ascher. In half an hour he would be bowing respectfully to Ascher again. Just then, while he handled Tim Gorman's machine, he was Ascher's master, and mine of course. They were all my masters.

The inspection of the machine was finished at last. Tim stood flushed and triumphant. The child of his ingenious brain had survived the tests of an expert. Mildmay turned to Ascher and bowed again.

"It's a wonderful invention," he said. "I see no reason why it should not be a commercial success."

"Perhaps, Mr. Mildmay," said Ascher, "you will study the subject further and submit a report to us in writing."

Mr. Mildmay left the room. I had no doubt that he would report enthusiastically on the new cash register. Mechanical experts do not, I suppose, write poetry, but there was without doubt a lyric in Mildmay's heart as he left the room. Tim packed the thing up again. Now that the mechanical part of the business was over, he relapsed into shy silence in a corner. His brother took out a cigarette and lit it. I would not have ventured to light a cigarette in that sanctuary for a hundred pounds. But Gorman is entirely without reverence.

"Well," he said, "there's no doubt about the value of the invention."

"We shall wait for Mr. Mildmay's report," said Ascher, "before we come to any decision; but in the meanwhile we should like to hear any proposal you have to make."

"Yes," said Stutz, "your proposals. We are prepared to listen to them."

Stutz seemed to me to speak English with difficulty. His native language was perhaps German, perhaps Hebrew or Yiddish or whatever the language is which modern Jews speak in private life.

"The matter is simple enough," said Gorman. "Our machine will drive any other out of the market. There's no possibility of competition. The thing is simply a dead cert. It can't help going."

"A large capital would be required," said Stutz, "a very large capital."

"Yes," said Gorman, "a very large capital, much larger than I should care to see invested in the thing. I may as well be quite frank with you gentlemen. At present the patents of my brother's invention are owned by a small company in which I am the chief shareholder. If we ask the public for a million dollars and get them—I don't say we can't get them. We may. But if we do I shall be a very small shareholder. I shall get 5 per cent, or 6 per cent, or perhaps 10 per cent, on my money. Now I want more than that. I'm speaking quite frankly, you see. I believe in frankness."

He looked at Ascher for approval. Stutz bowed, with an impassive face. On Ascher's lips there was the ghost of a mournful little smile. I somehow gathered that he had come across frankness like Gorman's before and had not altogether liked it. Gorman went on. He explained, as he had explained to me, the plan he had made for forcing the owners of existing cash registers to buy his company out. At last he got to the central, the vitally important point.

"All we want, gentlemen, is your backing. You needn't put down any money. Your names will be enough. I will make over to you such bonus shares as may be agreed upon. The only risk we run is lawsuits about our patent rights. You understand how that game is worked. I needn't explain."

It was evident that both Ascher and Stutz understood that game thoroughly. It was also plain to me, though not, I think, to Gorman, that it was a game which neither one nor other of them would be willing to play.

"But if we have your names," said Gorman, "that game's off. It simply wouldn't pay. I don't want to flatter you, gentlemen, but there isn't a firm in the world that would care to start feeing lawyers in competition with Ascher, Stutz & Co."

"That is so," said Stutz.

"And your proposal?" said Ascher.

"If they can't crush us," said Gorman, "and they can't if you're behind us, they must buy us. I need scarcely say that your share in the profits will be satisfactory to you. Sir James Digby is one of our directors. There are only four others, and three of them scarcely count. There won't be many of us to divide what we get."

I felt that my time had come to speak. If I was to justify Gorman's confidence in me as an "influence," I must say something. Besides Ascher was looking at me inquiringly.

"I'm not a business man," I said, "and I'm afraid that my opinion isn't worth much, but I think——"

I hesitated. Ascher's eyes were fixed on me, and there was a curiously wistful expression in them. I could not understand what he wanted me to say.

"I think," I said, "that Gorman's plan sounds feasible, that it ought to work."

"But your own opinion of it?" said Ascher.

He spoke with a certain gentle insistency. I could not very well avoid making some answer.

"We are able to judge for ourselves," he said, "whether it will work. But the plan itself—what do you think of it?"

"Well," I said, "I'm a modern man. I have accepted all the ideas and standards of my time and generation. I can hardly give you an opinion that I could call my own, but if my father's opinion would be of any use to you — He was an old-fashioned gentleman, with all the rather obsolete ideas about honour which those people had."

"He's dead, isn't he?" said Gorman.

"Oh, yes," I said. "He's been dead for fifteen years. Still I'm sure I could tell you what he'd have said about this."

"I do not think," said Stutz, "that we need consider the opinion of Sir James Digby's father, who has been dead for fifteen years."

"I quite agree with you," I said. "It would be out of date, hopelessly."

"But your own opinion?" said Ascher, still mildly insistent.

"Well," I said, "I've been robbed of my property—land in Ireland, Mr. Stutz—by Gorman and his friends. Everybody says that they were quite right and that I ought not to have objected; so, I suppose, robbery must be a proper thing according to our contemporary ethics."

"And that is your opinion of the scheme?" said Ascher.

"Yes," I said. "I hope I've made myself clear. I think we are justified in pillaging when we can."

"You Irish," said Ascher, "with your intellects of steel, your delight in paradox and your reckless logic!"

Stutz was not interested in the peculiarities of the Irish mind. He went back to the main point with a directness which I admired.

"This is not," he said, "the kind of business we care to do."

"Mr. Gorman," said Ascher, "we shall wait for Mr. Mildmay's report on your brother's invention. If it turns out to be favourable, as I confidently expect, we may have a proposal to lay before you. Our firm cannot, you will understand, take shares in your company. That is not a bank's business. But I myself, in my private capacity, will consider the matter. So will Mr. Stutz. It may be possible to arrange that your brother's machine shall be put on the market."

"But your proposal," said Stutz obstinately. "It is not the kind of business we undertake."

The interview was plainly at an end. We rose and left the room.

Tim Gorman did not understand, perhaps did not hear, a word of what was said. He followed us out of the office nursing his machine and plainly in high delight. Curiously enough, the elder Gorman seemed equally pleased.

"We've got them," he said when we reached the street. "We've got Ascher, Stutz & Co quite safe. I don't see what's to stop us now."

My own impression was that both Ascher & Stutz had definitely refused to entertain our proposal or fall in with our plans. I said so to Gorman.

"Not at all," he said. "You don't understand business or business men. Ascher and Stutz are very big bugs, very big indeed, and they have to keep up appearances. It wouldn't do for them to admit to you and me, or even to each other, that they were out for what they could get from the old company. They have to keep up the pretence that they mean legitimate business. That's the way these things are always worked. But you'll find that they won't object to pocketing their cheques when the time comes for smashing up Tim's machine and suppressing his patents."

I turned, when I reached the far side of the street, to take another look at Ascher's office. I was struck again by the purity of line and the severe simplicity of the building. Two thousand years ago men would have had a statue of Pallas Athene in it.

CHAPTER VI.

I spent a very pleasant fortnight in New York among people entirely unconnected with the Aschers or Gorman. I was kept busy dining, lunching, going to the theatre, driving here and there in motor cars, and enjoying the society of some of the least conventional and most brilliant women in the world. I only found time to call on the Aschers once and then did not see either of them. They were stopping in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and the young man in the office told me that Mrs. Ascher spent the whole of every day in her studio. Her devotion to art was evidently very great. She could not manage to spend a holiday in New York without hiring a studio. I inquired whether any members of the Galleotti family were sitting for her, but the hotel clerk did not know that. He told me, however, that Mr. Ascher was in Washington. Gorman always says that the strings of government in modern states are pulled by financiers. Ascher was probably chucking at those which are fastened to the arms and legs of the President of the United States, with a view to making that potentate dance threateningly in the direction of Mexico. I am sure that Ascher does this sort of thing very nicely and kindly if indeed he does it at all. He would not willingly destroy the self-respect even of a

marionette.

Of Gorman I saw nothing more before I left New York. I think he went off to Detroit almost immediately after our interview with Ascher and Stutz. Gorman is not exactly the man to put his public duties before his private interests, but I am sure the public duties always come in a close second. Having settled, or thought he had settled, the affair of the cash register, he immediately turned his attention to that wealthy motor man in Detroit from whom he meant to get a subscription. The future of the Irish Party possibly, its comforts probably, depended on the success of Gorman's mission. And a party never deserved comfort more. The Home Rule Bill was almost passed for the third and last time. Nothing stood between Ireland and the realisation of Gorman's hopes for her except the obstinate perversity of the Ulster men. A few more subscriptions, generous subscriptions, and that would be overcome.

After enjoying myself in New York for a fortnight I went to Canada. I did not gather much information about the companies in which I was interested. But I learned a good deal about Canadian politics. The men who play that game out there are extraordinarily clear-sighted and honest. They frankly express lower opinions of each other than the politicians of any other country would dare to hold of the players in their particular fields. In the end the general frankness became monotonous and I tired of Canada. I went back to New York, hoping to pick up someone there who would travel home with me by way of the West Indies, islands which I had never seen. I thought it possible that I might persuade the Aschers, if they were still in New York, to make the tour with me. There was just a chance that I might come across Gorman again and that he would be taken with the idea of preaching the doctrines of Irish nationalism in Jamaica. I called on the Aschers twice and missed them both times. But the second visit was not fruitless. Mrs. Ascher rang me up on the telephone and asked me to go to see her in her studio. She said that she particularly wanted to see me and had something very important to say.

I obeyed the summons, of course. I found Mrs. Ascher clad in a long, pale-blue pinafore. Over-all is, I believe, the proper name for the garment. But it looked to me like a child's pinafore, greatly enlarged. It completely covered all her other clothes in front and almost completely covered them behind. I recognised it as the sort of thing a really earnest artist would wear while working. Her hair was hanging in loops and wisps about her head, a disorder which was effective with dark-red hair. Her hands were damp and dirty. Her face was smudged here and there, as if, in moments of artistic travail, she had pressed her muddy fingers against her forehead and chin. The room had very little furniture in it, but there were several tables, large and small. On these stood what seemed to me shapeless lumps of various sizes, swathed in damp rags. They reminded me a little of the shrouded objects on the tables of dissecting rooms after the students have gone home. There was the same suggestion of mutilated human forms. Mrs. Ascher saw me looking at them.

"Some of my little things," she said, "but nothing finished. I don't know why it is, but here in New York I find it very difficult to finish anything."

"You're not singular in that," I said. "The New York people themselves suffer in exactly the same way. There isn't a street in their city that they've finished or ever will finish. If anything begins to look like completion they smash it up at once and start afresh. It must be something in the air, a restlessness, a desire of the perfection which can never be realised."

Mrs. Ascher very carefully unwrapped a succession of damp rags from one of the largest of her lumps which was standing on a table by itself. I have, since then, seen nurses unwrapping the bandages from the wounded limbs of men. The way they did it always reminded me of Mrs. Ascher. The removal of the last bandage revealed to me a figure about eighteen inches high of a girl who seemed to me to be stretching herself after getting out of bed before stepping into her bath.

"Psyche," said Mrs. Ascher.

I had to show my admiration in some way. The proper thing, I believe, when shown a statue by a sculptor, is to stroke it with your fingers and murmur, "Ah!" I was afraid to stroke Psyche because she was certainly wet and probably soft. A touch might have dented her, made a dimple in a wrong place. I dared not risk it. It became all the more necessary to speak.

The first thing I thought of was a quotation from Edgar Allan Poe.

"I pacified Psyche and kissed her," I murmured, "and tempted her out of the gloom."

I said the lines in what I am convinced is the proper way, as if they were forced from me, as if I spoke them to myself and did not mean them to be heard. I do not think Mrs. Ascher knew them. I fear she suspected me of making some sort of joke. I hastened to redeem my character.

"Psyche," I said, "the soul."

I was right so far. Psyche is the Greek for the soul. I ventured further.

"The human soul, the artistic soul."

Mrs. Ascher appeared to be absolutely hanging on my words. I plunged on.

"Aspiring," I said, "reaching after the unattainable."

I would not have said, "hoping for a yawn" for anything that could have been offered me; but the young woman who stood for Mrs. Ascher's Psyche must have longed for that relief. The attitude in which she was posed suggested yawning all the time, and we all know how fatal it is to think of a yawn.

"Quite unfinished," said Mrs. Ascher with a sigh.

"The fault of New York," I said. "When you get home again——"

I hesitated. I did not wish to commit myself to a confession of ignorance, and I do not know whether a damp, soft Psyche can be packed up and transported across the Atlantic to be finished in London.

"But the aspiration is there," I said, "and you owe that to New York. The air, the very same air which forbids completion, is charged with aspiration. We all feel it. The city itself aspires. Since the great days when men set out to build a tower the top of which should reach unto heaven, there has never been such aspiration anywhere in the world. Look at the Woolworth Building."

I was maundering and I knew it. Mrs. Ascher's statuette was very nice and graceful; a much better thing

than I expected to see, but there was nothing in it, nothing at all in the way of thought or emotion. There must be hundreds of people who can turn out clay girls just as good as that Psyche. Somehow I had expected something different from Mrs. Ascher, less skill in modelling, less care, but more temperament.

"There's nothing else worth showing," she said, "except perhaps this. Yes, except this."

She unwrapped more bandages. A damp, pale-grey head appeared. It was standing in a large saucer or soup plate. At first I thought she had been at John the Baptist and had chosen the moment when his head lay in the charger ready for the dancing girl to take to her mother. Fortunately I looked at it carefully before speaking. I saw that it was Tim Gorman's head.

"He sat to me," said Mrs. Ascher, "and by degrees I came to know him very well. One does, one cannot help it, talking to a person every day and watching, always watching. Do you think—?"

"I think it's wonderful," I said.

This time I spoke with real and entire conviction. I am no expert judge of anything in the world except perhaps a horse or a bottle of claret, but I was impressed by this piece of Mrs. Ascher's work. Tim Gorman's fine eyes were the only things about him which struck me as noticeable. No artist can model eyes in clay. But Mrs. Ascher had got all that I saw in his eyes into the head before me—all and a great deal more. She had somehow succeeded in making the lips, the nostrils, the forehead, the cheek-bones, express the fact that Tim Gorman is an idealist, a dreamer of fine dreams and at the same time innocent as a child which looks out at the world with wonder. I do not know how the woman did it. I should not have supposed her capable of even seeing what she had expressed in her clay, but there it was.

"You really like it?"

She spoke with a curious note of humility in her voice. My impulse was to say that I liked her, for the first time saw the real good in her; but I could not say that.

"Like it!" I said. "It isn't for me to like or dislike it. I don't know anything about those things. I am not capable of judging. But this seems to me to be really great."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Ascher, "and this time you are sincere."

She looked at me quite gravely as she spoke. Then a smile slowly broadened her mouth.

"That's not the way you spoke of poor Psyche's aspiration," she said, "you were laughing at me then."

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. The woman had understood every word I said to her, understood what I meant as well as what I wanted to convey to her, two very different things. She was immensely more clever than I suspected or could have guessed.

"Mrs. Ascher," I said, "I beg your pardon."

"You were quite right," she said. "That other thing isn't Psyche. It's just a silly little girl, the model—There wasn't anything about her that I could see, nothing but just a pretty body."

So she dismissed my apology and turned to Tim Gorman's head again. She ran her finger lightly round the rim of the saucer.

"What shall I do with this?" she said. "What is his head to stand on, to rise from? I was thinking of water-lily leaves, as if the head were emerging—"

I felt that I owed Mrs. Ascher some frankness in return for my first insult to her intelligence. Besides, I was moved. I was, as I had not been for years, emotional. Tim Gorman's head gripped me in a curious way.

"Good God, Woman," I said, "anything in the world but that! Wrap up that chorus girl of a Psyche in leaves if you like. Sprinkle rose petals over her or any other damned sentimentalism. But this man is a mechanic. He has invented a cash register. What in the name of all that's holy has he got to do with water-lily leaves? Put hammers round his head, and pincers, and long nails."

I stopped. I realised suddenly that I was making an unutterable fool of myself. I was talking as I never talked in my life before, saying out loud the sort of things I have carefully schooled myself neither to feel nor to think.

"After all," said Mrs. Ascher, "you have an artist's soul."

I shuddered. Mrs. Ascher looked at me and smiled again, a half-pitiful smile.

"I suppose I must have," I said. "But I won't let it break loose in that way again. I'll suppress it. It's—it's—this is rather an insulting thing to say to you, but it's a humiliating discovery to make that I have—"

Mrs. Ascher nodded.

"My husband always says that you Irish—"

"He's quite wrong," I said; "quite wrong about me at all events. I hate paradoxes. I'm a plain man. The only thing I really admire is common sense."

"I understand," she said. "I understand exactly what you feel."

She is a witch and very likely did understand. I did not.

"Now," she said. "Now, I can talk to you. Sit down, please."

She pulled over a low stool, the only seat in the room. I sat on it. Mrs. Ascher stood, or rather drooped in front of me, leaning on one hand, which rested, palm down, on the table where Tim Gorman's image stood. I doubt whether Mrs. Ascher ever stands straight or is capable of any kind of stiffness. But even drooping, she had a distinct advantage over me. My stool was very low and my legs are long. If I ventured to lean forwards, my knees would have touched my chin, a position in which it is impossible for a man to assert himself.

"I am so very glad," she said, "that you like the little head."

I was not going to be caught again. One lapse into artistic fervour was enough for me. Even at the risk of offending Mrs. Ascher beyond forgiveness, I was determined to preserve my self-respect.

"I wish you wouldn't take my word for it's being good," I said. "Ask somebody who knows. The fact that I like it is a proof that it's bad, bad art, if it's a proof of anything. I never really admire anything good, can't bear, simply can't bear old masters, or"—I dimly recollected some witty essays by my brilliant fellow-

countryman Mr. George Moore—"I detest Corot. My favourite artist is Leader."

Mrs. Ascher smiled all the time I was speaking.

"I know quite well," she said, "that my work isn't good. But you saw what I meant by it. You can't deny it now, and you know that the boy is like that."

"I don't know anything of the sort. I don't know anything at all about him. The only time I ever came into touch with him he was helping his brother to persuade Mr. Ascher to go into a doubtful—well, to make money by what I'd call sharp practice."

"I don't think he was," said Mrs. Ascher. "The elder brother may have been doing what you say; but Tim wasn't."

"He was in the game," I said.

I spoke all the more obstinately because I knew that Tim was not in the game, I was determined not to be hysterical again.

"I've had that poor boy here day after day," said Mrs. Ascher, "and I really know him. He has the soul of an artist. He is a creator. He is one of humanity's mother natures. You know how it is with us. Something quickens in us. We travail and bring to the birth."

Mrs. Ascher evidently included herself among the mother natures. It seemed a pity that she had not gone about the business in the ordinary way. I think she would have been happier if she had. However, the head of Tim Gorman was something. She had produced it.

"That is art," she said dreamily, "conception, gestation, travail, birth. It does not matter whether the thing born is a poem, a picture, a statue, a sonata, a temple—"

"Or a cash register," I said.

The thing born might apparently be anything except an ordinary baby. The true artist does not think much of babies. They are bourgeois things.

"Or a cash register," she said. "It makes no difference. The man who creates, who brings into being, has only one desire, that his child, whatever it may be, shall live. If it is stifled, killed, a sword goes through his heart."

It seemed to me even then with Mrs. Ascher's eyes on me, that it was rather absurd to talk about a cash register living. I do not think that men have ever personified this machine. We talk of ships and engines by the names we give them and use personal pronouns, generally feminine, when we speak of them. But did any one ever call a cash register "Minnie" or talk of it familiarly as "she"?

"He thinks," said Mrs. Ascher, "indeed he is sure—he says his brother told him—"

"I know," I said. "The machine isn't going to be put on the market at all. It is to be used simply as a threat to make other people pay what I should call blackmail."

"That must not be," said Mrs. Ascher.

Her voice was pitched a couple of tones higher than usual. I might almost say she shrieked.

"It must not be," she repeated, "must not. It is a crime, a vile act, the murder of a soul."

Cash registers have not got souls. I am as sure of that as I am of anything.

"That boy," she went on, "that passionate, brave, pure boy, he must not be dragged down, defiled. His soul —"

It was Tim Gorman's soul then, not the cash registers, which she was worrying about. Having seen her presentation of the boy's head, having it at that moment before my eyes, I understood what she meant. But I was not going to let myself be swept again into the regions of artistic passion to please Mrs. Ascher.

"Well," I said, "it does seem rather a shady way of making money. But after all—"

I have mentioned that Mrs. Ascher never stands upright. She went very near it when I mentioned money.

She threw her head back, flung both her arms out wide, clenched her fists tightly, and, if the expression is possible, drooped backwards from her hips. A slightly soiled light-blue overall is not the garment best suited to set off the airs and attitudes of high tragedy. But Mrs. Ascher's feelings were strong enough to transfigure even her clothes.

"Money!" she said. "Oh, Money! Is there nothing else? Do you care for, hope for, see nothing else in the world? What does it matter whether you make money or not, or how you make it?"

It is only those who are very rich indeed or those who are on the outer fringe of extreme poverty who can despise money in this whole-hearted way. The wife of a millionaire—the millionaire himself probably attaches some value to money because he has to get it—and the regular tramp can say "Oh, money? Is there nothing else?" The rest of us find money a useful thing and get what we can of it.

Mrs. Ascher let her arms fall suddenly to her sides, folded herself up and sat down, or rather crouched, on the floor. From that position she looked up at me with the greatest possible intensity of eye.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "You're thinking of my husband. But he hates money just as much as I do. All he wants is to escape, to have done with it, to live peaceably with me, somewhere far away, far, far away from everywhere."

Her eyes softened as she spoke. They even filled with water, tears, I suppose. But she seemed to me to be talking nonsense. Ascher was making money, piling it up. He could stop if he liked. So I thought. So any sensible man must think. And as for living somewhere far, far away, what did the woman want to get away from? Every possible place of residence on the earth's surface is near some other place. You cannot get far, far away from everywhere. The thing is a physical impossibility. I made an effort to get back to common sense.

"About Tim Gorman's cash register?" I said. "What would you suggest?"

"You mustn't let them do that hateful thing," she said. "You can stop them if you will."

"I don't believe I can," I said. "I'm extraordinarily feeble and ineffectual in every way. In business matters

I'm a mere babe."

"Mr. Gorman will listen to you," she said. "He will understand if you explain to him. He is a writer, an artist. He must understand."

I shook my head. Gorman can write. I admit that. His writing is a great deal better than Mrs. Ascher's modelling, though she did do that head of Tim. I do not hail Gorman's novels or his plays as great literature, though they are good. But some of his criticism is the finest thing of its kind that has been published in our time. But Gorman does not look at these matters as Mrs. Ascher does. I do not believe he ever wrote a line in his life without expecting to be paid for it. He would not write at all if he could find any easier and pleasanter way of making money. There was no use saying that to Mrs. Ascher. All I could do when she asked me to appeal to Gorman's artistic soul was to shake my head. I shook it as decisively as I could.

"And my husband will listen to you," she said.

"My dear lady! wouldn't he be much more likely to listen to you?"

"But we never talk about such things," she said. "Never, never. Our life together is sacred, hallowed, a thing apart,

*'Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
Which men call earth.'*

It surprised me to hear Mrs. Ascher quote Milton. I did not somehow expect to find that she knew or liked that particular poet. I am nearly sure he would not have liked her.

"We cannot desecrate our union," she said, "by talking about money."

The subject to be discussed with Ascher was plainly not money, but Tim Gorman's soul. Money only came incidentally. However, there was no use arguing a point like that. There was no use arguing any point. I gave in and promised to see Ascher about the matter. I prefer Ascher to Gorman if I have to persuade any one to act midwife at the birth of a cash register. Gorman would be certain to laugh. Ascher would at all events listen to me courteously.

"To-morrow," said Mrs. Ascher.

"Certainly," I said. "To-morrow, quite early."

Mrs. Ascher uncoiled herself and rose from the floor. I struggled to my feet rather stiffly, for my stool was far too low. She took my hand and held it. I feared for a moment that she meant to kiss it.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you again and again."

I took a long walk after I left the studio. I wanted to assimilate a new fact, to get my mental vision into focus again.

Ever since I thought about things at all, I have regarded the "artist" outlook upon life as a pose, and the claim to artistic temperament as an excuse for selfishness and bad temper in private life. Mrs. Ascher had convinced me that, in her case at least, the artist soul is a reality. She was hysterical and ridiculous when she talked to me, but she was sincere. She was not posing even when she crumpled herself upon the floor and looked like a sick serpent. She was in simple earnest when she mouthed her lines about money, money. There might be, probably were, several other people in the world like Mrs. Ascher, might even be many others. That was the new fact which I wanted to digest.

I reflected that I myself was kin to her, had in me, latent and undeveloped, an artist's soul. I had felt the thing fluttering when I lost my self-control and talked flamboyantly about the head of Tim Gorman. It was necessary that I should keep a firm grip on myself. I belong to a class which has lost everything except its sanity. I think it is true of the Irish aristocracy that even its period of greatest glory, even when Grattan was waving his arms and shouting "Esto Perpetua!", it remained sane. I have nothing else left of what my forefathers bequeathed to me, but I still have this temperament. A man clings desperately to the last remnants of his heritage.

The artist's soul is a reality. I admitted that. But it is also a disease. I had learned to believe in it as a man learns to believe in influenza when his temperature runs up to 104 degrees and his bones ache furiously. But there is a difference between admitting the existence of a disease and deliberately cultivating the germs of it.

I crossed 5th Avenue at 32nd Street in great peril of my life, for the traffic at that point is as wild as the emotions of the artistic soul.

It came into my mind that quite possibly the thrills and throbs which Mrs. Ascher enjoys, of which I myself had a brief and mild experience, are not only real, but worth while. There may after all be something greater in the world than common sense. I fell to dreaming of what life might be like to the man who refused to take it as it is, who insisted on seeing above him, not silly little twinkling stars, but great worlds coursing through the infinite spaces of eternity. I ran into a boy carrying books, while I was thinking about eternity. His books were scattered over the pavement and I hurt my knee. I decided that my faint longing for what Mrs. Ascher would call "higher possibilities" is a temptation, something to be conquered. I finished my meditation with a "Retro Satanus", and returned to my hotel for luncheon, confident that I should come out victor in my struggle.

Ascher has certainly far more determination and force of character than I have; but he does not seem able to break himself of the habit of making money. His wife says that he hates doing it and wants to stop. But he goes on doing it. He has formed a habit of making money, and habit is almost unconquerable. It was plainly the path of wisdom for me to check my tendency towards art at the very beginning, not to allow the habit of feeling artistically, indeed of feeling at all, to form itself.

CHAPTER VII.

I had no idea of breaking the promise I made Mrs. Ascher; but I felt a certain hesitation about entering again the Holiest of Holies in the office of Ascher, Stutz & Co. I was a little afraid of Stutz, who seemed to me a severe man, very little tolerant of human folly. Still I would have faced Stutz without shrinking, especially in a good cause. What I really disliked was the idea of suggesting a business policy to Ascher. The man was immeasurably my superior in natural ability and in experience. I felt that I should be guilty of insolence if I offered him any advice, and of something worse than insolence if I insisted on my advice being taken. Yet it was just this which Mrs. Ascher expected of me, and I did not want to disappoint her.

It is true that I was a shareholder in the New Excelsior Cash Register Company. I may have been a director. Gorman said something about my being a director. I had accepted the office, pledged beforehand to the approval of Gorman's policy and therefore had no right to intervene. What claim had I to insist on Ascher's doing this or that? I should not feel myself justified in calling on an archbishop and insisting on drastic alterations in the Apostle's Creed. Ascher is at least an archbishop, possibly a patriarch, or even a cardinal, in that truly catholic church which worships Mammon.

But I had promised.

I went to the office next morning, early. Having forgotten to make an appointment with Ascher beforehand I had to wait some time before I saw him. I sat in the large anteroom through which I had passed when I first visited the office with Gorman. Through the glass door I was able to see the public office outside where men went busily to and fro.

I understood just enough about this business of Ascher's to be able to read romance, the romance which was certainly there, in the movements of the quiet men who passed and repassed before my eyes, or bent with rarely lifted heads over huge ledgers, or turned over with deft fingers piles of papers in stuffed filing boxes. These men were in touch with the furthest ends of the earth. Coded telegrams fluttered from their hands and went vibrating across thousands of miles of land or through the still depths of oceans, over unlighted tracts of ooze on the sea-bottom. In London the words were read and men set free pent up, dammed streams of money. In Hongkong the words were read and some steamer went out, laden, from her harbour. Gold was poured into the hands of tea-planters in Ceylon. Scanty wages in strange coins, dribbled out to factory workers in Russian cotton mills. Gangs of navvies went to work laying railway lines across the veldt in Bechuanaland. There was no end to the energy controlled, directed by these cable messages, nor any bounds to the field of their influence. Somewhere in Ireland a farmer would go home along a desolate road, crossing brown bogs, thirsty and disconsolate, his lean beasts unsold at a fair where buyers were scarce or shy. What did he know of Ascher or Ascher know of him? Yet the price which he might take or must refuse for those hardly reared bullocks of his depended at the end of a long chain, on what the Aschers in their office said and did.

Perhaps hardly one of all the busy men I watched quite knew what he was doing. They juggled with figures, made précis of the reports of money markets, dissected and analysed the balance sheets of railway companies, decoded messages from London or from Paris, transcribed formulae as abstract, as remote from tangible things as the x and y of algebraic equations. These men all worked—the apologue of the quadratic equation held my mind—moving their symbols here and there, extracting roots, dissolving close-knit phrases into factors, cancelling, simplifying, but always dealing with symbols meaningless, unreal in themselves. Behind them was Ascher, Ascher and I suppose Stutz, who expressed realities in formulae, and, when the sums were done, extracted realities from the formulae again, achieving through the seemingly sterile processes new facts, fresh grasp of the things which are, greater power to deal with them. They knew and understood and held the whole world in leading strings, delicate as silk, invisible, impalpable, but strong.

The door of Ascher's private office opened and a man passed out. I glanced at him. He was a clean-shaved, keen-eyed, square-jawed man, the type which American business methods have produced, a man of resource and quick decision, but a man, so I guessed, who dealt with things, and money only as the price of things, the reward of making them. He lacked, so I felt, something of the fine spirituality of Ascher, the scientific abstraction of the man who lives in a rarer atmosphere of pure finance.

A clerk at my elbow invited me to leave my place and take my turn with Ascher.

I could not bring myself to plunge straightway into my business. I began by pretending that I had no real business at all.

"Any chance," I asked, "of our being travelling companions again? I am leaving New York almost at once."

"I'm afraid not," said Ascher. "I've a great deal to do here still."

"Those Mexican affairs?"

"Those among others."

"The Government here seems to be making rather a muddle of Mexico," I said.

Opinion on this subject was, so far as I knew, nearly unanimous among business men. Every one who owned shares in Mexican companies, every one who had invested hopefully a little while before in Mexican railways, every one who had any kind of interest in Mexico was of the same opinion about the inaction of the American Government.

"I think it is a muddle," said Ascher, "but the idea in the minds of the men who are making the muddle is a fine one. If only the world could be worked on those principles——"

"But it can't."

"Not yet," said Ascher. "Perhaps never. Yet the idea on which the Government in Washington proceeds is a noble one. Respect for constitutional order should be a greater thing as a principle of statesmanship than obvious expediency."

The man's unnatural detachment of view worried me. It was the same when Gorman blared out his stereotyped abuse of financiers, his well-worn clichés about money kings and poison spiders. Ascher agreed

with him. Ascher, apparently, had some approval for the doctrinaire constitutionalism of university professors turned diplomats. I could not follow him to those heights of his.

"I was thinking," I said, "of going home by way of the West Indies."

"Yes? You will find it very agreeable. I was there in 1903 and remember enjoying myself greatly."

"I wish you and Mrs. Ascher would come too. It would be much pleasanter for me if I had you with me."

"It's very kind of you to say so; but——"

"Besides," I said, "I should see so much more. If I go by myself I shall step from a steamer into an hotel and from an hotel into a steamer. I shall be forced to buy a Baedeker, if there is a Baedeker for those regions. I shall be a tourist of the ordinary kind. But if I travelled with you I should really see things."

Ascher took up the telephone receiver.

"If you like," he said, "I can give you letters of introduction to our correspondents wherever you go. They are bankers, of course, but you will find them intelligent men."

He summoned a clerk.

"If you give me an idea of your route——" he said.

"At present," I said, "my plans are very vague. I haven't settled anything. Perhaps you will give me your advice."

He drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write.

"You ought to see the work at Panama," he said. "It is very interesting and of course of immense importance. Certainly you must see that. Afterwards——"

He scribbled on his sheet of paper, making lists of place names and adding notes about ways of travelling.

"If you go further south still——" he said. "I don't recommend the Amazon, a huge river of course, but unless you are interested in rubber or entomology. The insect life I believe——"

"I'm interested in everything," I said, "even insects which bite."

"Well, Para, perhaps, then south again. The South American ports are worth seeing."

A clerk entered while he was speaking. Ascher handed him the list he had written.

"Look out the names of our agents in these places," he said, "and have letters of introduction made out to them for Sir James Digby."

The clerk left the room and I thanked Ascher warmly. It seemed to me that he was taking a great deal of trouble for which he could expect no kind of reward. He waved my gratitude aside.

"I think," he said, "that our agents will be able to make your trip interesting for you. They can tell you what you want to know about the trade and the natural wealth of the places you visit. They will put you in the way of finding out the trend of political feeling. It is their business to know these things, and in visiting new countries—new in the sense that they have only lately felt the influences of our civilisation—it is just these things that you will want to know. If you were going to Italy, or Egypt, or Greece——"

Ascher sighed. I felt that he would have preferred Italy to Brazil if he had been travelling for pleasure.

"Ah, there," I said, "an artist or a scholar would be a better friend to have than a banker."

"Even there," said Ascher, "the present and the future matter more than the past, perhaps. But are you tied at all by time? The tour which I have indicated will take some months."

"I am an idle man," I said. "I shall go on as long as your introductions last, gathering knowledge which will not be the slightest use to me or any one else."

"I had better provide you with a circular letter of credit," said Ascher. "It is never wise to carry considerable sums about in your pocket."

We had got to money, to business in the strictest sense of the word. My opportunity had plainly come for attacking the subject of the cash register. Yet I hesitated. A banker ought to be the easiest man in the world to talk business to. There is no awkwardness about the subject of toothache in a dentist's parlour. He expects to be talked to about teeth. It ought to have been an equally simple thing to speak to Ascher about the future of a company in which we were both interested. Yet I hesitated. There was something in his manner, a grave formality, which kept me miles away from him. I thanked him for the promise of the letter of credit and then sat silent for a minute.

"By the way," said Ascher, "I have just had a visit from a man on business in which you are interested."

"Was that the man who passed me in the anteroom before I was shown in here?"

"Yes. He came to talk to me about Gorman's new cash register. He was not an accredited agent, you will understand. He did not profess to represent anybody. He was not empowered to treat with us in any way, but——"

Ascher smiled faintly.

"I understand," I said, "a sort of informal ambassador who could easily be disowned if anything he said turned out to be inconvenient. In politics men of that sort are very useful; but I somehow had the idea that business methods are more straightforward."

"All negotiations," said Ascher, "whether in politics or business are carried on in much the same way. But before I go into his suggestions I had better tell you how the matter stands. Mildmay sent us his report and it was entirely favourable to the new machine. I think the invention is likely to turn out a valuable property. We have made inquiries and find out that the patent rights are duly protected here and in all the chief European countries. In fact——"

"It was really that and not my travels which I came to talk to you about to-day. I may take it that we have got a good thing."

"We think so," said Ascher, "and our opinion is confirmed by the fact that we are not the only people who think so. If I am right about the man who visited me this morning we have very good evidence that our

opinion is sound. The men who are in the best position to know about cash registers, who are most interested in their future—”

“The makers of the existing machines?”

“Exactly. That is to say, if I am right about my visitor.”

“But how did they—how could any one know about Tim Gorman’s invention?”

Ascher shrugged his shoulders.

“Surely,” I said, “Gorman can’t have been such a fool as to talk to newspaper reporters.”

“We need not suppose so,” said Ascher. “My experience is that anything worth knowing always is known. The world of business is a vast whispering gallery. There is no such thing as secrecy.”

“Well,” I said, “the main point is that this man did know. What did he want?”

“He wanted us to sell the patent rights,” said Ascher. “What he said was that he had a client—he posed as some kind of commission agent—who would pay a substantial sum for them.”

“That is just what Gorman said would happen once it was understood that your firm is behind the new company.”

“Gorman is—well, astute. But you understand, I am sure, that we cannot do that kind of business.”

“I always had a suspicion,” I said, “that Gorman’s scheme was fishy.”

“I do not say fishy,” said Ascher. “Gorman’s plan is legitimate, legitimate business, but business of an unenlightened kind. What is wrong with Gorman is that he does not see far enough, does not grasp the root principle of all business. We have a valuable invention. I do not mean merely an invention which will put money into the pocket of the inventor and into our pockets. If it were valuable only in that way Gorman would be quite right, and our wisest course would be to take what we could get with the least amount of risk and trouble, in other words to accept the best price which we could induce the buyers to give us. But this invention is valuable in quite another way. The new machine, if we are right about it, is going to facilitate the business of retail sellers all over the world. It will save time, increase accuracy, and, being cheaper, make its way into places where the old machines never went.”

“Ah,” I said, “curiously enough I looked at the matter in that way when Gorman first mentioned it to me. I said that the world ought to get the benefit of this invention.”

Ascher nodded.

“I see that,” I went on. “I understand that way of looking at it. But surely that’s altruism, not business. Business men don’t risk their money with the general idea of benefiting humanity. That isn’t the way things are done.”

“I agree,” said Ascher. “It’s not the way things are done or can be done at present, though there is more altruism in business than most people think. Even we financiers—”

“I know you subscribe to charity,” I said, “largely, enormously.”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Ascher. “But we need not go into that. I believe that business is not philanthropy, finance is not altruism.”

“Then why—?” I said. “On strict business principles, altruism apart, why not take what we can get out of Tim Gorman’s invention and let the thing itself drop into the dustheap?”

“On business principles,” said Ascher, “on the strictest business principles, it would be foolish to do that. From time to time men hit on some improvement in the way of making things or in the way of dealing with things after they are made, that is to say in business methods. Every such improvement increases the wealth of the world, tends to make everybody richer. This invention which we have got hold of is a small thing. It’s only going to do a little, a very little to make the world richer, but it is going to do something for it is going to lessen the labour required for certain results and therefore is going to increase men’s power, a little, just a little. That is why we must make the thing available, if we can; in order to add to the general wealth, and therefore to our own wealth. Those are business principles.”

Ascher paused. I had nothing to say for a moment. Business principles as he explained them were not the business principles I was accustomed to, certainly not the business principles on which Gorman acted. After a minute’s silence Ascher went on.

“The mistake which is most often made in business,” he said, “is to suppose that we grow rich by taking riches from other men, or that nations prosper by depriving other nations of prosperity. That would be true if riches consisted of money, and if there were just so much money and no more in the world. Then business and finance would be a scramble, in which the roughest and strongest scrambler would get most. But that is not so.”

“Isn’t it?” I said. “I should have thought that business just is a scramble.”

“No,” said Ascher, “it is not. Nations grow rich, that is to say, get comfort, ease, and even luxury, only when other nations are growing rich too, only because other nations are growing rich.”

“The way to grow rich,” I said, “is to make other people rich. Is that it? It sounds rather like one of the—what do you call them?—counsels of perfection in the Gospel.”

“Perhaps it is a religious truth too,” said Ascher. “I don’t know. I have never studied religion. Some day I think I shall. There must be a great deal that is very interesting in the New Testament.”

“Confound you, Ascher! Is there anything in heaven or earth that you don’t look at from the outside, as if you were some kind of superior epicurean god?”

“I beg your pardon. I ought not to have spoken in that way. You are, no doubt, a Christian.”

“Of course I am—in—in a general way.”

“I have often thought,” said Ascher slowly, “that I should like to be. But from the little I know of that religion—”

“I expect you know as much as I do,” I said.

"It must be," said Ascher, "very hard to be a Christian."

I was not going to discuss that point with Ascher. It was bad enough to have an artistic soul awakened in me by Mrs. Ascher. I could not possibly allow her husband to lead me to the discovery that I had the other kind of soul. Nor was it any business of mine to work out harmonies between Christian ethics and the principles of modern banking. I detest puzzles of all kinds. It is far better, at all events far more comfortable, to take life as one finds it, a straightforward, commonplace affair. I have the greatest respect for Christianity of a moderate, sensible kind and I subscribe to the funds of the Church of Ireland. But when it comes to practical matters I find myself in agreement with Wordsworth's "Rob Roy,"

*The good old rule
Sufficeth me, the simple plan,
That they should take who have the power
And they should keep who can.*

So long, of course, as one does not do anything shady. I do not like lying or theft.

Ascher sat looking at me as if he expected me to tell him exactly how hard it is to be a Christian. I made a determined effort to get back again to cash registers.

"Tim Gorman's invention will get its chance then?"

"Yes. If we can manage it the thing will get its chance. It will be made and, I think, people will use it."

"Mrs. Ascher will be very pleased to hear that."

"Ah," said Ascher. "Is she interested? But I remember now. Young Gorman has been sitting to her. She would naturally be interested in him."

"Her idea," I said, "is that Tim Gorman is producing a baby, with all the usual accompaniments of that difficult business, labour, you know, and pain. She regards you as the doctor in attendance, and she thinks it would be exceedingly wrong of you to choke the little thing."

Ascher looked at me quite gravely. For a moment I was afraid that he was going to say something about the paradoxical brilliance of the Irish mind. I made haste to stop him.

"That's Mrs. Ascher's metaphor," I said, "not mine. I should never have thought of it. I don't know enough about the artistic soul to appreciate the feelings of people who give birth to cash registers. But the idea is plain enough. Tim Gorman will be bitterly disappointed if he does not see girls in cheap restaurants putting actual shillings into those machines of his."

"From my wife's point of view," said Ascher, "and from mine, too, that ought to be an important consideration. It's the artist's feeling; but business and art—unfortunately business and art—"

"I don't see why they shouldn't kiss and be friends," I said. "They're not nearly such irreconcilable enemies as business and religion. Now that those two have lain down together like a lion and a lamb—I don't quite see how they do it, but in that new philosophy of yours it seemed quite a simple matter—there's no real reason why art shouldn't come in too."

But Ascher shook his head. He did not seem hopeful of a marriage between art and business. He knows a good deal about both of them, far more, by his own confession, than he knows about religion.

CHAPTER VIII.

Ascher was very generous to me in the matter of letters of introduction. A large bundle of them arrived at my hotel two days after I paid my visit to his office. There must have been fifty or sixty of them altogether. I sent for an atlas and found that I had a friend ready made for me in every port of any importance in the West Indies and on the east coast of South America as far down as Buenos Aires, and in a good many places inland. I was fascinated by the idea of such a tour; but it was plainly not an excursion to be undertaken without care and consideration. I lingered in New York for a fortnight, buying some additional clothes, getting together a few books on the South American republics, and working out steamboat routes.

I saw young Tim Gorman. He called on me, sent by Mrs. Ascher, to thank me for my good offices. I deserved no thanks; but on the general principle of taking what I could get I allowed the boy to pour gratitude all over me.

"I think," I said, "you ought to do fairly well out of the thing, financially, I mean."

"I don't care about that," said Tim, "at least not exactly. I—I—" he hesitated for a moment and then blurted out, "I don't particularly want to be rich."

"That," I said, "is precisely how you ought to feel at your age, but when you get to be forty—I'm forty, so I know—you'll probably be glad enough to have some money."

"I want some money now," said Tim. "Do you think I could get—? How much do you think I'll get out of my cash register?"

"Well," I said, "it's hard to name an exact figure, but it will be something pretty substantial."

"One thousand dollars?" said Tim anxiously.

"A great deal more than that. If Mr. Ascher makes the arrangements he contemplates you'll get a great deal more."

I had only the vaguest idea what Ascher meant to do, and could make no kind of guess at how much Tim would ultimately get, but I felt pretty safe in promising two hundred pounds.

"Do you think I could get it at once?" said Tim. "Or even five hundred dollars? I think I could manage with five hundred dollars. The fact is—"

"You want to get out of that circus," I said. "I don't wonder. It must be a very tiresome job."

"Oh, no. I don't mind the circus. It's rather a nuisance of course moving about, and we always are moving. But I have plenty of time to myself. It isn't to get away from the circus that I want the money. The fact is that I'm making some experiments."

"Another invention?" I said. "What a prolific creature you are! No sooner have you perfected a cash register than you start—"

"Oh, I've been at this for some time, for years. I believe I've hit on a dodge— I say, do you know anything about Movies?"

The word, though common on our side of the Atlantic now, was at that time peculiar to the American language.

"Cinematographs?" I said. "I've seen them of course. You have them in your circus, haven't you, as part of the show?"

"Yes. That's what set me thinking about them. I've always felt that the next step in perfecting the cinematograph would be doing away with the screen, putting the figures on the stage, that is to say reflections of them, so that they would actually move about backwards and forwards instead of on a flat surface. You understand?"

When I was a boy there was a popular entertainment known as "Pepper's Ghost." What appeared to be a real figure moved about before the eyes of the audience, was pierced by swords and otherwise ill-treated without suffering any inconvenience. The thing was worked by some arrangement of mirrors. Tim evidently had a plan for combining this illusion with the cinematograph.

"Don't you think," he said, "that it would be a great thing?"

"It would be a perfectly beastly thing," I said. "The cinematograph is bad enough already. If you add a grosser realism to it—"

Tim looked at me. I am nearly sure that there were tears in his eyes.

"That's just what Mrs. Ascher thinks," he said.

"I daresay she does. She probably regards the cinematograph as a sin against art. What you propose would be an actual blasphemy."

"Oh," said Tim, "that's exactly what she said. Blasphemy! Do you really think so too? I wouldn't go on with my experiments if I thought that. But I don't believe you can be right. I—I went round to see Father Bourke. That was after Mrs. Ascher said it was blasphemy and I really wanted to know. Father Bourke is one of the priests at St. Gabriel's. I consulted him."

"Well," I said, "what did he tell you?"

"He said it was all right and that I needn't bother about what Protestants said was blasphemy. They don't know. At least Father Bourke seemed to think they couldn't know."

"You go by what Father Bourke says and you'll be safe."

I should particularly like to hear Father Bourke and Mrs. Ascher arguing out the subject of blasphemy together. They might go on for years and years before either of them began to understand what the other meant by the word. But it would be little less than a crime to involve the simple soul of Tim Gorman in the maze of two separate kinds of casuistry.

"In any case," I said, "I don't take Mrs. Ascher's view of the matter. I don't agree with her."

"I don't see," said Tim, "how cinematographs can be blasphemies so long as there aren't any pictures of religious things. I'm sure it must be all right and I can go on with what I want to do. If I can succeed in making the figures stand out from one another, as if they were really there—"

"You'll add a new terror to life," I said. "But that needn't stop you doing it if you can."

"I think I can," he said eagerly. "You see it's the next thing to be done. The cinematograph is perfect up to that point. It must make a new start if it's to go any further. I should like to be the man who makes the next step possible. What's wanted now is—is—"

"The illusion of distance."

"That's it. That's what I mean. It's a matter of optics. Just making a few adjustments, and I think I see the way to manage it."

"If you do," I said, "you'll make an immense fortune. The world will pay anything, absolutely anything to the man who provides it with a new torture. It's an odd twist in human nature—though I don't know why I should say that. Oddness is really the normal thing in human nature."

"But I want a thousand dollars," said Tim, "or five hundred dollars at the very least. I must try experiments."

"If you ask your brother—" I said.

"Michael isn't nice to me about it," said Tim. "He isn't nice at all. When I asked him for a thousand dollars he said he'd get it for me on condition that I allowed him to manage my cash register in his own way. But I won't do that. I know what he wants to do."

"His idea," he said, "is to let your invention lapse."

"I know. The machine will never be made. But I want it to be made. I want to see it working everywhere all over the world. You see I'm always travelling about with the circus, sometimes in America, sometimes in England. We go to a lot of different towns. We go to all the big towns there are. I want to be able to go into shops everywhere, in every town in the world and see my machine there. Don't you understand?"

"Perfectly," I said. "Mrs. Ascher explained the whole position to me thoroughly. It's the artist's soul in you."

A look of puzzled annoyance came over the boy's face. His forehead wrinkled and his fine eyes took an expression of painful doubt as they met mine.

"Mrs. Ascher says things like that," he said, "and I don't know what she means. I am not an artist. I never

learned to draw, even; at least not pictures. I can do geometrical drawing, of course, and make plans of machines; but that's not being an artist. I can't paint. Why does she say I am an artist?"

"That," I said, "is one of her little mannerisms. You will have to put up with it."

Tim uses the word artist in a simple old-fashioned way, very much as Father Bourke uses "blasphemy." There is a good deal to be said for their practice. People like Mrs. Ascher ought to invent new terms when they want to express uncommon thoughts. They have no right to borrow words like "artist" and "blasphemy" from common speech in order to set them parading about the world with novel meanings attached to them. It is not fair to people like Tim Gorman and his Father Bourke. It is not fair to the words themselves. I should not like to be treated in that way if I were a word. I cannot imagine anything more annoying to a respectable, steady-going word than to be called upon suddenly to undertake work to which it is not accustomed. The domestic housemaid is perfectly right in resisting any effort to make her do new kinds of work. Her formula, "It's not my place," used when she is asked to make a slice of toast, is unanswerable. Why should words be worse treated than housemaids? It is the business of "artist" to stand for the man who paints pictures in oils. "Blasphemy" describes aggravated breaches of the third commandment. What right had Mrs. Ascher or any one else to press them into new services? There ought to be a strong trade union among words.

"And now," said Tim, "she says I'm not an artist after all because I want to make movies more real. And she's angry with me. She turned me out of her studio because I wouldn't promise not to. Of course, I wouldn't promise such a thing. I think I see how it can be done. The great difficulty is to secure an exact adjustment of the mirrors. There are other difficulties. There's the awkwardness of transparent figures crossing in front of each other. Also——"

"My dear boy," I said, "don't explain the thing to me. I am totally incapable of understanding anything connected with mechanics, optics or hydrostatics."

I can make as good an attempt as most men at replying intelligently to Mrs. Ascher even when she talks of "values," atmospheres, feeling and sympathy, though her use of these familiar words conveys only the vaguest ideas to my mind. I can, after a period of intense mental effort, understand what Ascher means by exchanges, premiums, discounts and bills, though he uses these words in unfamiliar ways. But I am defeated utterly by the man who talks about escapements, compensating balances and clutches. I suspected that Tim Gorman would pelt me with even more recondite scientific terms if I let things go on.

"You may take my word for it," I said, "that you'll get a thousand dollars and more, in the end; but you may have to wait for it. In the meanwhile keep on thinking out your plan for doubling the horrors of our places of popular entertainment."

That was all I could do for Tim Gorman. I do not think that he deserved more than cold comfort and disagreeable advice. I might have given him, or lent him, a little money, if he had been at work on a really useful invention, something which would benefit humanity. There are lots of such things waiting to be invented. There ought to be some way of stabbing a man who insists on ringing you up on the telephone at unreasonable hours and saying tiresome things. We cannot claim to be civilised until we have some weapon for legitimate self defence attached to every telephone, something which could be operated easily and swiftly by pressing a button at the side of the receiver. It is not necessary that the man at the other end of the wire should be struck dead, but he ought to suffer severe physical pain. If Tim Gorman would turn his inventive genius in that direction, I should not hesitate to advance money to him, even to the half of my possessions.

I called on Mrs. Ascher again before I left New York. I wanted to hear her version of the misunderstanding with Tim. I went, of course, to the studio, not to the hotel. Mrs. Ascher is at her best in the studio. Besides I was much more likely to find her there than anywhere else.

She was hard at work when I entered on a figure, at least two feet high, of a man of very fine muscular development. I glanced at it and then asked where Tim Gorman's head was.

"You know," I said, "that I admired that piece of work greatly."

Mrs. Ascher waved her hand towards a table in the darkest corner of the room.

"It's not finished," she said, "and never will be. I've lost all interest in it. If you like it take it away. I'll give it to you with pleasure."

I found poor Tim, not even swathed in wet bandages, among a litter of half finished fauns and nymphs and several attempts at a smooth-haired dog. Mrs. Ascher had done very little work at him since I saw him before. She had, in pursuance of her own idea, turned half the saucer on which the head stood into a mat of water-lily leaves. The other half—and I felt gratified when I saw this—was worked up into an unmistakable hammer and a number of disproportionately large nails. Tim's face and head still expressed lofty idealism in the way which had fascinated me when I first saw the thing. But Mrs. Ascher had evidently neglected some necessary precaution in dealing with her material. The neck—and Tim's neck is an unusually long one—had collapsed. A jagged crack ran half round it close under the right ear. The left side of the neck was curiously crumpled. The head leaned rakishly towards the water-lily side of the saucer.

I remember hearing once of an irreverent choir boy. At a Christmas party, a sort of feast of an Abbot of Unreason held in the less sacred parts of the cathedral precincts, the brat decorated the statue of an Archbishop with a pink and blue paper cap taken from a cracker. The effect must have been much the same as that produced by the subsidence of Tim Gorman's neck.

"Do you really mean to give it to me?" I said. "I should like to have it very much. I should set it up on my writing table and call it 'Disillusion.' But do you think it will collapse any more?"

"Has it collapsed? I suppose it did not dry properly."

Mrs. Ascher did not even look at it.

"Oh," I said, "the present effect, the cynical contempt for the original noble spirituality, is the result of an accident? What tricks circumstances play on us! A slight irregularity in drying and a hero becomes a clown. The case of 'Imperial Caesar dead and turned to clay' is not so bad as that of an idealist whose neck has cracked."

"I'm dreadfully disappointed in that boy," said Mrs. Ascher. "Will you forgive me if I do not talk of him?"

Even now I cannot bear to."

She sighed heavily, showing how much she felt the loss of Tim's soul. Then she turned to me with one of those bright smiles, one of those charmingly bright smiles, which are the greatest achievements of serious women. Very religious women, women with artists' souls and the intenser suffragists have these bright smiles. They work them up, I suppose, so as to show that they can be as cheerful as any one else when they choose to try.

"Come and see what I'm doing now," she said.

I looked very carefully at the man's figure in front of her.

"This," she said, "is manhood, virility, energy, simple strength, directness, all that this poor neurotic world is yearning for, the primal force, uncomplex, untroubled, just the exultation of the delight of being."

"It reminds me faintly of some one," I said, "the head and face, I mean; but I can't quite fix the likeness."

She clapped her hands with delight.

"You see it," she said, "I am so glad. It's not meant to be a mere likeness. I need not tell you that. Still I'm glad you see that it resembles him. I am working to express his soul, the mere features, the limbs, are nothing. The being which burns within, that is what I am trying to express. But the fact that you see the external likeness makes me feel more sure that my interpretation of the physical features is the right one."

"Surely," I said, "it's not Gorman, the other Gorman, the elder Gorman, Michael!"

"Yes," she said.

"Has he been sitting for you?" I asked.

I stopped myself just in time. I was very nearly saying "sitting to you like that?" The figure on which she was at work was entirely undraped. I do not suppose that Mrs. Ascher would have been the least embarrassed even if I had said "like that." The artist's soul scorns conventions. But I should have felt awkward if she had answered "Yes."

"Not exactly sitting to me," she said. "He just comes here and talks. While he talks I catch glimpses of his great, buoyant, joyous soul and fashion the poor clay to express it."

"I did not know he was back in New York," I said.

"Oh, yes, he has been here a week, perhaps more. To me it seems as if he had been here for ever."

I could not even guess at what she meant by that so I did not try to answer her.

"I wonder he didn't look me up," I said.

"Ah," said Mrs. Ascher, "he has had no time. That abundant, restless energy of his is for ever pressing out into fresh activities."

I gathered, more from her tone than from her actual words that only an effete, devitalised creature would call on me. A man of abundant energy would naturally sit half the day in Mrs. Ascher's studio, while she made a fancy body for him in damp clay.

She clasped her hands and gazed with rapt intensity at the statue of Gorman's soul.

"His patriotism!" she said. "After living in that atmosphere of nebulous cosmopolitanism which is what we hypercivilised people have created in the world, it is everything to get back to the barbaric simplicity of the old love for country."

"Did he happen to mention," I asked, "whether he succeeded in wheedling five thousand dollars out of that Detroit man?"

Mrs. Ascher did not hear that; or if she did chose to ignore it.

"The splendid destiny of Ireland," she said, "has been to escape age after age the malarial fever of culture. The Romans never touched her shores. The renaissance passed her by. She has not bowed the knee to our modern fetish of education. You and I have our blood diluted with——"

Gorman must have been at his very best while he talked to Mrs. Ascher. He had evidently made a kind of whirlpool of her mind. Her version of his philosophy of history and politics seemed to me to be going round and round in narrowing circles with confusing speed. The conception of the Romans as apostles of the more malarial kinds of culture was new to me. I had been brought up to believe—not that any one does believe this as an actual fact—that Ireland was once and to some extent still is, an island of Saints and Scholars. I did not obtain any very clear idea of what Mrs. Ascher's blood was diluted with, but there must have been several ingredients, for she went on talking for quite a long time. When she stopped I made a protest on behalf of my country.

"We're not so backward as all that," I said. "We have a Board of National Education and quite a large number of technical schools. In the convents they teach girls to play the piano."

Mrs. Ascher shook her head slowly. I gathered that she knew much more about Irish education than I did and regarded it as unworthy even of serious contempt.

"Dear Ireland!" she said, "splendid Ireland!"

I suppose Gorman must have been talking to her about fairies, the dignified, Celtic kind, and the dear dark head of Kathaleen ni Houlihan. Gorman is capable of anything. However as my country was being admired I thought I might as well get a little of the credit for myself.

"I am an Irishman," I said.

Mrs. Ascher looked at me with withering scorn.

"You," she said, "you—you—you are——"

She was evidently in difficulties. I helped her out as best I could.

"An Irish gentleman," I said.

"An alien," she replied, "a stranger in the land you call your own."

"That," I said, "is just what I say, put more forcibly and picturesquely."

Then Gorman came in, without knocking at the door. I was very glad to see him. In another minute Mrs. Ascher and I would, perhaps, have quarrelled. Gorman saved us from that catastrophe. I do not think I ever understood before that moment the secret of Gorman's charm. He came into that studio, a place charged with the smell of damp clay, like a breeze from a nice green field. He was in a thoroughly good temper. I suspect that he hurt Mrs. Ascher's hand when he shook it.

"I've just been looking at Mrs. Ascher's statue of your soul," I said. "Splendid muscles in the calves of its legs. You must be enormously proud of them."

Gorman, under pretence of seeking a place in which to put his hat, turned his back on Mrs. Ascher for a minute. As he did so he deliberately winked at me.

Some day I mean to get Gorman in a private place, "away from everywhere," as Mrs. Ascher would say. When I get him there I shall ask him two questions and insist on having an answer. First I shall ask him why he devotes himself to Mrs. Ascher. He is not in love with her. We Irish have not many virtues, but we can boast that we seldom make love to other men's wives. Besides, Mrs. Ascher is not the kind of woman who allows strange men to make love to her. She is, in essentials, far less emancipated than she thinks. It is just possible that he finds her responsive to his fondness for the more flamboyant kinds of rhetoric. Gorman really likes talking about Ireland as an oppressed and desolated land. It is easy enough to move large audiences to enthusiasm by that kind of oratory. It is not so easy, I imagine, to get single, sympathetic listeners in private life. Mrs. Ascher apparently laps up patriotic sentiment with loud purrs. That may be why Gorman likes her. The next thing I mean to ask him is what he means by patriotism. I can understand quite easily what Irish patriotism meant ten years ago. Gorman's friends wanted my land, a definite, tangible thing. I wanted it myself. But now they have got the land, and yet Gorman goes on talking patriotism. It is not as if he had no sense of humour. Gorman sees the absurdity of the things he says just as plainly as I do. The ridiculous side of his own enthusiasm is never long absent from his consciousness; yet he goes on just the same. I wish I understood how he manages it.

CHAPTER IX.

Now that my leg has been smashed up hopelessly, by that wretched German shell, I shall never ride or shoot again. I have to content myself with writing books to occupy my time, a very poor form of amusement compared to tramping the fields after partridge. I suppose it is inevitable that a man in my position should indulge in regretful memories. My mind goes back now and then to certain days in my boyhood and I find myself picturing scenes through which I shall not move again.

There are fields stretching back from the demesne which used to be mine. In the autumn many of them were stubble fields and among them were gorse covered hills. I used to go through them with my gun and dogs in early October mornings. There were—no doubt there still are—though I shall not see them—very fine threads of gossamer stretching across astonishingly wide spaces. The dew hung on them in tiny drops and glittered when the sun rose clear of the light mist and shone on them. Sometimes the threads floated free in the air, attached to some object at one end, the rest borne about by faint breaths of wind, waved to and fro, seeking other attachment elsewhere. Some threads reached from tufts of grass to little hummocks or to the twigs which form the boles of elm trees. Others still, with less ambitious span, went only from one blade of grass to another or united the thorns of whin bushes. The lower air, near the earth, was full of these threads. They formed an indescribably delicate net cast right over the fields and hills. I used to see them glistening, rainbow coloured when the sun rays struck them. Oftener I was aware of their presence only when my hands had touched and broken them or when they clung to my clothes, dragged from their fastenings by my passing through them.

I have no idea what place these gossamer threads occupy in the economy of nature. I find it difficult to believe that the life of the fields and gorse hills and young plantations would be either better or worse if there were no such thing as gossamer. But I am no longer contented with my ignorance. I mean to find out all that is known about gossamer, and satisfy myself of the truth of the tradition that the threads are spun by tiny spiders, though surely with very little hope of snaring flies.

I spent six months making the tour which Ascher planned for me. I returned to London in the spring of 1914, full of interest in what I had seen and learned. I intend some day to write a book of travels, to give an account of my experiences. I shall describe the long strip of the world over which I wandered as a landscape on a quiet autumn morning, netted over with gossamer. That is the way it strikes me now, looking back on it all. Ascher and men like him have spun fine threads, covering every civilised land with a web of credit, infinitely complex, so delicate that a child's hand could tear it.

A storm, even a strong breeze comes, and the threads are dragged from their holdings and waved in wild confusion through the air. A man, brutal as war, goes striding through the land, and, without knowing what he does, bursts the filaments and destroys the shimmering beauty which was before he came. That, I suppose, is what happens. But the passing of a man, however violent he is, is the passing of a man and no more. Even if a troop of men marches across the land their marching is over and done with soon. They have their day, but afterwards there are other days. Nature is infinitely persistent and gossamer is spun again.

I remember meeting, quite by chance, on a coasting steamer on which I travelled, a bishop. He was not, judged by strict ecclesiastical standards, quite entitled to that rank. He belonged to some American religious organisation of which I had no knowledge, but he called himself, on the passenger list, Bishop Zacchary Brown. He was apostolic in his devotion to the Gospel as he understood it. His particular field of work lay in the northern part of South America. He ranged, so I understood, through Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela. He was full of hope for the future of these lands, their spiritual future. I had long talks with him and discovered that he regarded education, the American form of it, and commerce, the fruit of American

enterprise, as the enemies of superstition and consequently the handmaids of the Gospel.

He wanted to see schools and colleges scattered over the republic in which he was interested. He wanted to see these lands heavily fertilised with capital.

"If you have any spare money," he said, "put it into——"

I think he said fruit farming in Colombia. Whatever the business was—I forgot at the time to make a note of the particulars—he promised that it would develop enormously when the Panama Canal was opened. The advice may have been perfectly sound; but I do not think it was disinterested. Bishop Zachary Brown was not anxious about my future or my fortune. He did not care, cannot have cared, whether the Panama Canal made me rich or not. Nor did it seem to him an important thing that the fruit trade of South America should develop. What he cared for was his conception of religion. He saw in the inflow of capital the way of triumph for his Gospel, the means of breaking up old careless, lazy creeds, the infusion of energy and love of freedom. Ascher, so I conceived the situation, was to stretch his threads from Calvary to the grapefruit trees of Cartagena.

At Bahia I was introduced to a Brazilian statesman. I met him first at the house of one of Ascher's banker friends. We talked to each other in French, and, as we both spoke the language badly, understood each other without much difficulty. It is one of the peculiarities of the French language that the worse it is spoken the easier it is to understand. A real Parisian baffles me completely. My Brazilian statesman was almost always intelligible.

He was interested in international politics, the international politics of the western hemisphere. I found that he was distrustful of the growing power of the United States. He suspected a policy of Empire, a far-reaching scheme of influence, if not actual dominion, centred in Washington. He regarded the Monroe Doctrine as the root from which such an extension of power might grow. It was no business of mine to argue with him, though I am convinced that the citizens of the United States are of all peoples the least obsessed by the imperial idea. I tried, by looking sympathetic, to induce him to develop his theory. In the end I gathered that he hoped for security from the imperial peril through the increase of wealth and therefore power in the South American republics.

"Our natural resources," he said, "are enormous, but undeveloped. We cannot become strong in a military sense. We cannot possess fleets with which to negotiate——"

I should have said "threaten" instead of "negotiate" for that was plainly what he meant. But statesmen have to be careful in their use of words.

"—Unless we can obtain capital with which to develop our wealth. The great money-lending countries, England and France, ought in their own interests to pour capital into our republics. The return, in the end, would be enormous. But more important still, they would establish a balance of power in the western world. Why do not your financiers understand?"

Again Ascher. Battleships are to be towed across the ocean, from the ship yards of the Clyde to these far-off seas, at the ends of the gossamer threads which Ascher spins. The Gospel and international politics are caught in the same web. I seemed to see Diocletian the Emperor and Saint John, who said, "Love not the world," doing homage together to the power of capital, leading each other by the hand through the mazes of the system of credit.

I saw beautiful scenes, wide harbours where stately ships lay anchored, through whose shining gates fleets of steamers trudged. I never escaped from the knowledge that the gossamer threads stretched from mast to mast, a rigging more essential than the ropes of hemp and wire. I saw the lines of steel on which trains go, stretched out across vast prairies, and knew that they were not in reality lines of steel at all but gossamer threads. I saw torrents made the slaves of man, the weight of falling water transmuted into light and heat and force to drive cars swiftly through city streets; but all the wheels and giant masses of forged steel were tied together by these same slender threads which Ascher spun in the shrine of that Greek temple of his, Ascher and his fellow bankers.

Always the desire was for more capital. There was room for thousands of ships instead of hundreds. There were whole territories over which no trains ran. There was potentiality of wealth so great that, if it were realised, men everywhere would be raised above the fear of want. A whole continent was crying out to Ascher that he should fling his web across it, join point to point with gossamer, in Amazonian jungles, Peruvian mountain heights, Argentine plains and tropical fruit gardens.

I met and talked with many men whose outlook upon life was profoundly interesting to me. Those whom I came to know best were Englishmen or men of English origin. Some of them had built up flourishing businesses, selling the products of English factories. Some acted as the agents of steamboat companies, arranging for freights and settling the destinations of ships which went voyaging. Some grew wheat or bred cattle. Like all Englishmen whose lot is cast in far countries they retained their feeling for England as a home and became conscious as Englishmen in England seldom are, of love for their own land. Like all Englishmen they grumbled ceaselessly at what they loved.

They spoke with contempt of everything English. They abused English business methods and complained that Germans were ousting Englishmen from the markets of the world. They derided English Government and English statesmanship, ignoring party loyalties with a fine impartiality. They decried English social customs, contrasting the freedom of life in the land of their adoption with the convention-bound ways of their home. Yet it always was their home. I felt that, even when their contempt expressed itself in the bitterest words.

Whatever their opinions were or their affectations, however widely their various activities were separated, these men were all consciously dependent on the smooth working of the system of world-wide credit.

They were Ascher's clients, or if not Ascher's, the clients of others like Ascher. They were in a sense Ascher's dependents. They were united to England, to Europe, to each other, by Ascher's threads. Whether they bred cattle and sold them, whether they grew corn, whether they shipped cargoes or imported merchandise, the gossamer net was over them.

I returned to London with these impressions vivid in my mind, perhaps—I tried to persuade myself of this—

too vivid. I had travelled, so I argued, under the shadow of a great banker. I had gone among bankers. It was natural, inevitable, that I should see the world through bankers' eyes. Perhaps credit was not after all the life blood of our civilisation. I failed to convince myself. The very fact that I could go so far under the shadow of a bank proves how large a shadow a bank throws. The fact that Ascher's correspondents brought me into touch with every kind of man, goes to show that banking has permeated, leavened life, that human society is saturated with finance.

In a very few months, before the end of the summer which followed my home-coming, I was to see the whole machine stop working suddenly. The war god stalked across the world and brushed aside, broke, tore, tangled up, the gossamer threads. Then, long before his march was done, while awe-struck men and weeping women still listened to the strident clamour of his arms, the spinners of the webs were at work again, patiently joining broken threads, flinging fresh filaments across unbridged gulfs, refastening to their points of attachment the gossamer which seemed so frail, which yet the storm of violence failed to destroy utterly.

CHAPTER X.

I reached home early in May and underwent an experience common, I suppose, to all travellers.

The city clerk, returning after a glorious week in Paris, finds that his family is still interested in the peculiarities of the housemaid, the Maud, or Ethel of the hour. To him, with his heart enlarged by nightly visits to the Folies Bergères, it seems at first almost impossible that any one can care to talk for hours about the misdeeds of Maud. He knows that he himself was once excited over these domestic problems, but it seems impossible that he ever can be again. Yet he is. A week passes, a week of the old familiar life. The voluptuous joys of Parisian music halls fade into dim memories. The realities of life, the things on which his mind works, are the new lace curtains for the drawing-room window, the ridiculous "swank" of young Jones in the office, and the question of the dismissal of Maud the housemaid.

I found London humming with excitement over Irish affairs and for a while I wondered how any one could think that Irish affairs mattered in the least. Fresh from my wanderings over a huge continent Ireland seemed to me a small place. It took me a week to get my mind into focus again. Then I began once more to see the Home Rule question as it should be seen. South America and Ascher's web of international credit sank into their proper insignificance.

I met Malcolmson in my club a week after my return. He very nearly pulled the buttons off my waistcoat in his eagerness to explain the situation to me. Malcolmson has a vile habit of grabbing the clothes of any one he particularly wants to speak to. If the subject is only moderately interesting he pulls a sleeve or a lappet of a coat. When he has something very important to say, he inserts two fingers between the buttons of your waistcoat and pulls. I knew I was in for something thrilling when he towed me into a quiet corner of the smoking room by my two top buttons.

I have known Malcolmson for nearly twenty years. He was adjutant of my old regiment when I joined. He was senior Major when I resigned my commission. He became colonel a few years later and then retired to his place near Belfast, where he has practised political Protestantism ever since. I have never met any one more sincere than Malcolmson. He believes in civil and religious liberty. He is prepared at any moment to do battle for his faith. I do not know that he really deserves much credit for this, because he is the sort of man who would do battle for the love of it, even if there were no faith to be fought for. Still the fact remains that he has a faith, rather a rare possession.

When he had me cornered near the window of the smoking room, he told me that the hour of battle had almost come. Ulster was drilled, more or less armed, and absolutely united. Rather than endure Home Rule Malcolmson and, I think, a hundred thousand other men were going to lay down their lives. It took Malcolmson more than an hour to tell me that because he kept wandering from the main point in order to abuse the Government and the Irish Party. Of the two he seemed to dislike the Government more.

Irish politics are of all subjects the most wearisome to me; but I must admit that Malcolmson interested me before he stopped talking. I began to wish to hear what Gorman had to say about the matter. I could not imagine that he and his friends contemplated a siege of Belfast, to rank in history alongside of the famous attempt to starve Derry.

There was no difficulty about getting hold of Gorman. In times of furious political excitement he is sure to be found at the post of duty, that is to say, in the smoking room of the House of Commons. I wrote to him and invited him to dine with me in my rooms. It would have been much more convenient to give him dinner at one of my clubs. But I was afraid to do that. I belonged to two clubs in London and unfortunately Malcolmson is a member of both of them. I do not know what would have happened if he had found himself in the same room with Gorman. The threatened civil war might have begun prematurely, and Malcolmson is such a determined warrior that a table fork might easily have become a lethal weapon in his hands. I did not want to have Gorman killed before I heard his opinion about the Ulster situation and I disliked the thought of having to explain the circumstances of his death to the club committee afterwards. There is always an uncertainty about the view which a club committee will take of any unusual event. I might very easily have been asked to resign my membership.

Gorman accepted my invitation, but said he would have to be back in the House of Commons at 9 o'clock. I fixed dinner for half past seven, which gave me nearly an hour and a half with Gorman, more time than Malcolmson had required to state his side of the case.

But Gorman was very much more difficult to deal with. He was not inclined to discuss Home Rule or the Ulster situation. He wanted to talk about Tim's cash register, and, later on, about the new way of putting cinematograph pictures on the stage.

"I have been wandering about since I saw you last," I said, "and I've been in all sorts of strange places. I've lost touch with things at home. Hardly ever saw an English newspaper. I want you to tell me——"

"Interesting time you must have had," said Gorman. "Run across the trail of our friend Ascher much? I expect you did."

Gorman very nearly sidetracked me there. I was strongly tempted to tell him about the impression which Ascher's gossamer had made on me.

"The slime of the financier," said Gorman, "lies pretty thick over the world. You've seen those large black slugs which come out in summer after rain, big juicy fellows which crawl along and leave a shiny track on the grass. They're financiers."

"Yes," I said, "quite so. But tell me about Home Rule."

"It's all right. Can't help becoming law. We have it in our pockets."

"This time next year," I said, "you'll be sitting in a Parliament in Dublin."

"There'll be a Parliament in Dublin all right this time next year; but I'm not sure that I'll be in it. After all, you know, Dublin's rather a one-horse place. I don't see how I could very well live there. I might run over for an important debate now and then, but—— You see I've a lot of interests in London. I suppose you've heard about the new Cash Register Company and what Ascher's done."

"Not a word. Do I still hold those shares of mine?"

"Unless you've sold them you do, but they'll be very little good to you. Ascher has simply thrown away a sure thing. We might have had—well, I needn't mention the sum, but it was a pretty big one. I had the whole business arranged. Those fellows would have paid up. But nothing would do Ascher except to put in his spoon. I'm blest if I see what his game is. He has one of course; but I don't see it."

"Perhaps," I said, "he wants to have your brother's invention worked for what it's worth."

"Rot," said Gorman. "Why should he? I expect he has some dodge for squeezing us out and then getting a bigger price all for himself; but I'm damned if I see how he means to work it. These financial men are as cunning as Satan and they all hang together. We outsiders don't have a chance."

"What about Ulster?" I said. "I was talking to a man last week who told me——"

"All bluff," said Gorman. "Nothing in it. How can they do anything? What Ascher says is that he wants the old company to take up Tim's invention and work it. There's to be additional capital raised and we're to come in as shareholders. Ascher, Stutz & Co. will underwrite the new issues and take three and one-half per cent. That's what he says. But, of course, that's not the real game. There's something behind."

"Doesn't it occur to you that there may be something behind the Ulster movement too?"

"No. What can they do? The Bill will be law before the end of July."

"They say they'll fight."

"Oh," said Gorman, "we've heard all about that till we're sick of the sound of it. There's nothing in it. The thing's as plain as anything can be. We have a majority in Parliament and the bill will be passed. That's all there is to say. I wish to goodness I saw my way as plainly in the cash register affair."

Gorman's faith in parliamentary majorities is extremely touching. I suppose that only politicians believe that the voting of men who are paid to vote really affects things. I doubt whether men of any other profession have the same whole-hearted faith in the efficacy of their own craft. Doctors are often a little sceptical about the value of medicines and operations. No barrister, that I ever met, thinks he achieves justice by arguing points of law. But politicians, even quite intelligent politicians like Gorman, seem really to hold that human life will be altered in some way because they walk round the lobbies of a particular building in London and have their heads counted three or four times an hour. To me it seemed quite plain that Malcolmson would not bate an ounce of his devotion to civil and religious liberty even if Gorman's head were counted every five minutes for ten years and Gorman were paid a thousand a year instead of four hundred a year for letting out his head for the purpose. Why should Malcolmson care how often Gorman is counted? There is in the end only the original Gorman with his single head.

"Anyhow," said Gorman, "I'm keeping in with Mrs. Ascher."

He winked at me as he said this. I like Gorman's way of adding explanatory winks to his remarks. I should frequently miss the meaning, the full meaning of what he says if he did not help out his words with these expressive winks. This time he made me understand that he had no great affection for Mrs. Ascher, regarded her rather as a joke which had worn thin; but hoped to pick up from her some information about her husband's subtle schemes. I knew his hopes were vain. In the first place the Aschers do not talk business to each other and she knows nothing of what he is doing. In the next place Ascher had no underhand plot with regard to the cash register. He was acting in a perfectly open and straightforward way. But Gorman cannot believe that any one is straightforward. That is one of the drawbacks to the profession of politics. The practice of it destroys a man's faith in human honesty.

"How's Tim?" I asked. "Last time I saw him he was in great trouble because Mrs. Ascher said he was committing blasphemy."

"Tim's in England," said Gorman. "I was rather angry with him myself for a while. If he had followed my advice about the cash register——. But Tim always was a fool about money, though he has brains of a sort, lots of them."

"Still working with that circus?"

"Oh, dear no. Left that months ago. He got some money. No, I didn't give it to him. I fancy it must have been Ascher. Anyhow he's got it. He's down in Hertfordshire now, living in a barn."

"Why? A barn seems an odd place to live in. Draughty, I should think."

"He wanted space," said Gorman, "a great deal of space to work at his experiments. I'm inclined to think there may be something in this new idea of his."

"The living picture idea? Making real ghosts of the figures?"

"That's it. And, do you know, he's getting at it. He showed me some perfectly astonishing results the other day. If he pulls it off——"

"You won't let Ascher get hold of it this time," I said.

Gorman frowned.

"I wouldn't let Ascher touch it if I could help it, but what the devil can I do? We shall want capital and I suppose Ascher is no worse than the rest of them."

By "them" Gorman evidently meant capitalists in general and financiers in particular.

"That's the way," he said. "Not only do these scoundrels control politics, reducing the whole system of democracy to a farce——"

"Come now," I said, "don't blame the capitalists for that. Democracy would be a farce if there never was such a thing as a capitalist."

"Not content with that," said Gorman, "they keep an iron grip upon industry. They fatten on the fruits of other men's brains. They hold the working man in thrall, exploiting his energy for their own selfish greed, starving his women and children——"

Gorman ought to keep that sort of thing for public meetings. It is thoroughly bad form to make speeches to an audience of one. I must say that he seldom does. I suppose that his intimate association with Mrs. Ascher had spoiled his manners in this respect. She encouraged him to be oratorical. But I am not Mrs. Ascher, and I saw no reason why I should stand that kind of thing at my own dinner table.

"But the day is coming," I said, "when organised labour will rise in its might and claim its heritage in the fair world which lies bathed in the sunlight of a nobler age."

Gorman looked at me doubtfully for an instant, only for a single instant. Almost immediately his eyes twinkled and he smiled good-humouredly.

"You ought to go in for politics," he said. "You really ought. I apologise. Can't think what came over me to talk like that."

I cannot resist Gorman when he smiles. I felt that I too owed an apology.

"After all," I said, "you must practise somewhere. I don't blame you in the least; though I don't profess to like it. No one can do that sort of thing extempore and if it happens to suit you to rehearse at dinner——"

"Nonsense," said Gorman. "There's not the slightest necessity for practice. I could do it by the hour and work sums in my head at the same time. Any one could."

Gorman is modest. Very few people can make speeches like his, fortunately for the world.

"All the same," he said, reverting abruptly to the starting point of his speech, "it's a pity we have to let Ascher into this new cinematograph racket; but we can't help it. In fact I expect he's in already."

"Lending money to Tim for experiments?"

"He wouldn't do that," said Gorman, "unless he'd made sure of his share of the spoil afterwards."

"Gorman," I said, "why don't you make a law to suppress Ascher. You believe in making laws, and, according to your own showing, that would be a very useful one."

Gorman gave me no answer. I knew he could not, because there is no answer to give. If laws had any effect on life, as Gorman pretends to believe, he would make one which would do away with Ascher. But he knows in his heart that he might just as well make a law forbidding the wind to blow from the east. Instead of taking any notice of my question he pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "I must be off to the House at once. An important division has been arranged for a quarter past. Just ask your man to call a taxi, will you?"

"Why go?" I said. "If the division is arranged the result will be arranged too."

"Of course it is," said Gorman. "You don't suppose the Whips leave that to chance."

"I must say you manage these things very badly. Here you are smoking comfortably after dinner, not in the least inclined to stir, and yet you say you have to go. Why don't you introduce a system of writing cheques? 'Pay the Whip of my Party or bearer 150 votes. Signed Michael Gorman, M. P.'"

"That's rather a good idea," said Gorman. "It would save a lot of trouble."

"The cheque could be passed in to some sort of clearing house where a competent clerk, after going over all the cheques, would strike a balance and place it to the credit of your side or the other. That would be the Government's Majority, and you wouldn't have to go near the House of Commons at all except when you wanted to make a speech. I don't think you need go even then. You might make your speeches quietly in your own home to a couple of reporters."

"It would simplify parliamentary life enormously," said Gorman, "there's no doubt of that. But I don't think it would do. I don't really. The people wouldn't stand it."

"If the people stand the way you go on at present they'll stand anything."

"I wish," said Gorman, "that you'd ring for a taxi." I rang the bell and five minutes later Gorman left me. He had not told me anything about Home Rule, or how his party meant to deal with a recalcitrant Ulster. He seemed very little interested in Ulster. Yet Malcolmson was indubitably in earnest. I felt perfectly sure about that.

CHAPTER XI.

I intended to call on the Aschers as soon as I could after I returned to London. I owed Ascher some thanks

for his kindness in providing me with letters of introduction for my tour. However, they heard that I was home again before I managed to pay my visit. I daresay Gorman told them. He sees Mrs. Ascher two or three times a week and he must get tired talking about Ireland. A little item of gossip, like the news of my return, would come as a relief to Gorman, and perhaps even to Mrs. Ascher, after a long course of poetic politics mixed with art.

I had a note from Mrs. Ascher, in which she invited me to dinner.

"Very quietly," she said. "I know my husband would like to have a talk with you, so I shall not ask any one to meet you. Please fix your own night. We have no engagements this week."

I got the note on Monday and fixed Wednesday for our dinner. I could not think that Ascher really wanted to talk to me. I did not see what he had to talk to me about; but I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to tell him about my tour and to give him some idea of the effect which my glimpse at his business had produced on my mind. I also wanted to find out what he thought about Irish affairs. I had heard a good deal more talk about the Ulster situation. Malcolmson got at me nearly every day, and several other men, much more level-headed than Malcolmson, seemed to regard the situation as serious. I heard it hinted that the Army would not relish the idea of shooting the Ulstermen. I understood the feeling. If I were still in the Army I should not like to be told to kill Malcolmson. He was my brother officer at one time, and I found him a good comrade. The same feeling must exist among the rank and file. Northeast Ulster was, at one time, a favourite recruiting ground for the Guards. Malcolmson's volunteer army was leavened with old Guardsmen, reservists, many of them quite well known to the men still serving in the Brigade.

I could not, of course, expect Ascher to be much interested in Irish affairs. Ireland is the one country in the world over which financiers have not cast their net, possibly because they would catch next to nothing there. So we, who escaped the civilisation of Roman law, almost escaped the philosophy of the mediaeval church, were entirely untouched by the culture of the Renaissance, remained a kind of Gideon's fleece when the dew of the industrial system of the 19th century was moistening Europe, are now left untouched by the new civilisation of international finance. Yet Ascher, if not personally interested in our destiny, has a cool and unprejudiced mind. His opinion on Irish affairs would be of the greatest interest to me. I was not satisfied with Gorman's reading of the situation. Nor did I feel sure that Malcolmson, though he was certainly in earnest, quite understood what a big thing he was letting himself in for.

The Aschers live near Golders Hill, a part of London totally unknown to me. They have a large old-fashioned house with a considerable amount of ground round it. Some day when Ascher is dead the house will be pulled down and the grounds cut up into building plots. In the meanwhile Ascher holds it. I suppose it suits him. Neither he nor Mrs. Ascher cares for fashionable life, and a Mayfair address has no attraction for them. The few artistic and musical people whom they wish to know are quite willing to go to Hampstead. Every one else who wants to see Ascher, and a good many people do, calls at his office or dines with him in a club. Ascher knows most of the chief men in the political world, for instance, but even Prime Ministers are not often invited to the house at Golders Hill. If Ascher really controls them, as Gorman says, he does so without allowing them to interfere with his private life.

The house and its appointments impressed me greatly. The architecture was Georgian, a style familiar to any one who has lived much in Dublin. It gave me a feeling of spaciousness and dignity. The men who built these houses knew what it was to live like gentlemen. I can imagine them guilty of various offences against the code of Christian morality, but I do not think they can ever have been either fussy or mean. There is a restlessness about our fashionable imitations of the older kinds of English domestic architecture. Our picturesque gables, dormer windows and rooms with all sorts of odd angles, our finicky windows stuck high up in unexpected parts of walls, our absurd leaded diamond panes and crooked metal fastenings, all make for fussiness of soul. Nor can I believe that people who live under ceilings which they can almost touch ever attain a great and calm outlook upon life.

There was nothing "artistic" about Ascher's house. This surprised me at first. I did not, of course, expect that Mrs. Ascher would have surrounded herself with the maddening kind of furniture which is distinguished by its crookedness and is designed by men who find their inspiration by remembering the things which they see in nightmares. Nor did I think it likely that she would have crammed her rooms with those products of the east which are imported into this country by house furnishers with reputations for aestheticism. I knew that she had passed that stage of culture. But I did expect to find the house full of heavily embroidered copes of mediaeval bishops, hung on screens; candlesticks looted from Spanish monasteries, standing on curiously carved shelves; chairs and cabinets which were genuine relics of the age of Louis XV.; and pictures by artists who lived in Italy before the days when Italians learned to paint.

I found myself in a house which was curiously bare of furniture. There were a few pictures in each of the rooms I entered, modern pictures, and I suppose good, but I am no judge of such things. There were scarcely any ornaments to be seen and very few tables and chairs. My own feeling is that a house should be furnished in such a way as to be thoroughly comfortable. I like deep soft chairs and sofas to sit on. I like to have many small tables on which to lay down books, newspapers and pipes. I like thick carpets and curtains which keep out draughts. I would not live in Ascher's house, even if I were paid for doing so by being given Ascher's fortune. But I would rather live in Ascher's house than in one of those overcrowded museums which are the delight of very wealthy New York Jews. I should, in some moods, find a pleasure in the fine proportions of the rooms which Ascher refuses to spoil. I could never, I know, be happy in a place where I ran the risk of dropping tobacco ashes on thirteenth century tapestry and dared not move suddenly lest I should knock over some priceless piece of china.

We ate at a small table set at one end of a big dining-room, a dining-room in which, I suppose, thirty people could have sat down together comfortably. There was no affectation of shaded lights and gloomy, mysterious spaces. Ascher had aimed at and achieved something like a subdued daylight by means of electric lamps, shaded underneath, which shone on the ceiling. I could see all the corners of the room, the walls with their pictures and the broad floor across which the servants passed. The dinner itself was very short and simple. If I had been actually hungry, as I am in the country after shooting, I should have called the dinner meagre. For a London appetite there was enough, but not more than enough. I might, a younger and more vigorous man

would, have got up from the table hungry. But the food was exquisite. The cook must be a descendant of one of those artists whom Lord Beaconsfield described in "Tancred," and he has found in Ascher's house a situation which ought to satisfy him. Ascher does not care for sumptuousness or abundance; but he knows how to eat well. We had one wine, a very delicately flavoured white Italian wine, perhaps from Capri, the juice of some rare crops of grapes in that sunny island.

"We found ourselves in a little difficulty," said Ascher, "when you fixed on to-night for your visit to us."

"I hope," I said, "that I haven't lit on an inconvenient evening. Had you any other engagement?"

I was eating a very small piece of fish when he spoke to me, and was trying to guess what the sauce was flavoured with. It occurred to me suddenly that I might have broken in upon some sort of private anniversary, a day which Ascher and his wife observed as one of abstinence. There was, I could scarcely fail to notice it, a sense of subdued melancholy about our proceedings.

"Oh, no," said Ascher, "but on Wednesdays we always have some music. I was inclined to think that you might have preferred to spend the evening talking, but my wife——"

He looked at Mrs. Ascher. I should very much have preferred talk to music. It was chiefly in order to hear Ascher talk that I had accepted the invitation.

"I know," said Mrs. Ascher, "that Sir James likes music."

She laid a strong emphasis on the word "know," and I felt that she was paying me a nice compliment. What she said was true enough. I do like music, some kinds of music. I had heard for the first time the night before a song, then very popular, with a particularly attractive chorus. It began to run through my head the moment Ascher mentioned music. "I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it." I liked that song. I was not sure that I should like the Aschers' music equally well. However, I had no intention of contradicting Mrs. Ascher.

"I'm passionately fond of music," I said.

Ascher is a singularly guileless man. I cannot imagine how any one so unsuspecting as he is can ever have succeeded as a financier, unless indeed people are far honest about money than they are about anything else. I do not think Mrs. Ascher believed that I am passionately fond of music. Her husband did. The little shadow of anxiety which had rested on his face cleared away. He became almost cheerful.

"To-night," he said, "we are going to hear some of the work of——"

He said a name, but I utterly failed to catch it. I had never heard it before, and it sounded foreign, very foreign indeed, possibly Kurdish.

"——," said Ascher, "is one of the new Russian composers."

I heard the name that time, but I can make no attempt, phonetic or other, to spell it. I suppose it can be spelled, but the letters must be given values quite new to me. The alphabet I am accustomed to is incapable of representing that man's name.

"I daresay you know him," said Mrs. Ascher.

I strongly suspected that she was trying to entrap me. I have never been quite sure of Mrs. Ascher since the day she discovered that I was talking nonsense about the statuette of Psyche. Sometimes she appears to be the kind of foolish woman to whom anything may be said without fear. Sometimes she displays most unexpected intelligence. I looked at her before I answered. Her narrow, pale-green eyes expressed nothing but innocent inquiry. She might conceivably think that I had already made a careful study of the music of the new Russian composer. On the other hand, she might be luring me on to say that I knew music which was to be played in her house that night for the first time. I made up my mind to be safe.

"No," I said, "I never even heard of him."

Then Ascher began to talk about the man and his music. He became more animated than I had ever seen him. It was evident that Russian music interested Ascher far more than finance did; that it was a subject which was capable of wakening real enthusiasm in him. I listened, eating from time to time the delicate morsels of food offered to me and sipping the delicious wine. I did not understand anything Ascher said, and all the names he mentioned were new to me; but for a time I was content to sit in a kind of half-conscious state, hypnotised by the sound of his voice and the feeling that Mrs. Ascher's eyes were fixed on me.

Not until dinner was nearly over did I make an effort to assert myself.

"I was talking to Gorman the other day," I said, "about Irish affairs and especially about the Ulster situation. I have also been hearing Malcolmson's views. Malcolmson is a colonel and an Ulsterman. You know the sort of views an Ulster Colonel would have."

Ascher smiled faintly. He seemed no more than slightly amused at the turn Irish affairs were taking. After all neither international finance nor Russian music was likely to be profoundly affected by the Ulster rebellion. (Malcolmson will not use the word rebellion, but I must. There is no other word to describe the actions he contemplates.) No wonder Ascher takes small interest in the matter. On the other hand, Mrs. Ascher was profoundly moved by the mention of Ulster. I could see genuine passion in her eyes.

"Belfast," she said, "stands for all that is vilest and most hateful in the world. It is worse than Glasgow, worse than Manchester, worse than Birmingham."

Belfast is, no doubt, the main difficulty. If there were no Belfast the resistance of the rest of Ulster would be inconsiderable. I admired the political instinct which enabled Mrs. Ascher to go straight to the very centre of the situation. But, in all probability, Gorman gave her the hint. Gorman does not seem to understand how real the Ulster opposition is, but he has intelligence enough to grasp the importance of Belfast. What puzzled me first was the extreme bitterness with which Mrs. Ascher spoke.

"What has Belfast ever given to the world?" she asked.

"Well," I said, "ships are built there, and of course there's linen. I believe they manufacture tobacco, and ——"

"That," said Ascher, "is not quite what my wife means. The gifts which a city or a country give to the world must be of a more permanent kind if they are to be of real value. Ships, linen, tobacco, we use them, and in

using we destroy them. They have their value, but it is not a permanent value. Ultimately a city will be judged not by its perishable products, but by——”

“Art,” said Mrs. Ascher.

I might have known it. Mrs. Ascher would be sure to judge cities, as she judges men, by their achievement in that particular line. I was bound to admit that the reputation of Belfast falls some way short of that of Athens as a centre of literature and art.

“Or thought,” said Ascher, “or criticism. It is curious that a community which is virile and fearless, which is able to look at the world and life through its own eyes, which is indifferent to the general consensus of opinion——”

“Belfast is all that,” I said. “I never knew any one who cared less what other people said and thought than Malcolmson.”

“Yet,” said Ascher, “Belfast has done nothing, thought nothing, seen nothing. But perhaps that is all to come. The future may be, indeed I think must be, very different.”

Ascher will never be a real leader of men. His habit of seeing two sides of every question is an incurable weakness in him. Mrs. Ascher does not suffer in that way. She saw no good whatever in Belfast, nor any hope for its future.

“Never,” she said, “never. A people who have given themselves over to material things, who accept frankly, without even the hypocrite’s tribute to virtue, the money standard of value, who ask ‘Does it pay?’ and ask nothing else—— Have you ever been in Belfast?”

“Yes,” I said, “often. The churches are ugly, decidedly ugly, though comfortable.”

Mrs. Ascher shuddered.

“Comfortable!” she said. “Yes. Comfortable! Think of it. Churches, comfort! Irredeemable hideousness and the comfort of congregations as a set-off to it.”

Mrs. Ascher panted. I could see the front of her dress—she wore a very floppy scarlet teagown—rising and falling rapidly in the intensity of her passion. I understood more or less what she felt. If God is at all what we think He is, sublime, then there is something a little grotesque about requiring a cushioned pew, a good system of heating and a nice fat footstool as aids to communion with Him. Yet I am not convinced that man is incapable of the highest emotion when his body is at ease. Some degree of physical comfort seems to be required if the excursions of the soul are to be successful. I cannot, for instance, enjoy the finest kinds of poetry when I am very thirsty; nor have I ever met any one who found real pleasure in a statue when he had toothache. There is something to be said for the theory of the sceptical bishop in Browning’s poem, that the soul is only free to muse of lofty things

“When body gets its sop and holds its noise.”

“The whole Irish question,” said Mrs. Ascher, and she spoke with the most tremendous vehemence, “is a struggle not between political parties—what are political parties?”

“Rotten things,” I said. “I quite agree with you there.”

“Not between conceptions of religion—— What is religion but the blind gropings of the human soul after some divine perfection vaguely guessed?”

That is not what religion is in Ireland. There is nothing either dim or vague about it there, and nobody gropes. Every one, from the infant school child to the greatest of our six archbishops, is perfectly clear and definite in his religious beliefs and suffers no doubts of any kind. That is why Ireland is recognised everywhere as an island of saints. But of course Mrs. Ascher could not be expected to know that.

“It is a struggle,” she said, getting back to the Irish question as the subject of her sentence, “between a people to whom art is an ideal and a people who have accepted materialism and money for their gods, an atheist people.”

It has been the great misfortune of my life that I have never been able to escape from the Irish question. It was discussed round my cradle by a nurse whom my parents selected for her sound Protestant principles. The undertaker will give his views of the Irish question to his assistant while he drives the nails into the lid of my coffin. I should not have supposed that any one could have hit on an aspect of it wholly new to me. But Mrs. Ascher did. Never before had I heard the problem stated as she stated it.

“That,” I said, “is an extraordinarily interesting way of looking at it. The only difficulty I see is——”

“It is true,” said Mrs. Ascher.

That was precisely my difficulty. It was not true. I went back to my recollections of old Dan Gorman, a man as intensely interested in the struggle as ever any one was. I remembered his great pot belly, his flabby skin, his whisky-sodden face. I remembered his grasping meanness, his relentless hardness in dealing with those in his power. The most thoroughly materialised business man in Belfast has more spirituality about him than old Dan Gorman ever had. Nor did I believe that his son, Michael Gorman, would have accepted Mrs. Ascher’s account of his position. He would have winked, humourously appreciative of an excellent joke, if any one had told him that he was a crusader, out to wrest the sacred sepulchre of art from the keeping of the Saracens of Ulster.

I did not, of course, attempt to reason with Mrs. Ascher. There is nothing in the world more foolish than trying to reason with a woman who is possessed by a cause. No good ever comes of it. But Mrs. Ascher is quite clever enough to understand a man even if he does not speak. She felt that I should have been glad to argue with her if I had not been afraid. She entered on a long defence of her position.

She began with the Irish Players, and the moment she mentioned them I knew what she was going to say.

“The one instance,” she said, “the single example in the modern world of peasant art, from the soil, of the soil, redolent, fragrant of the simple life of men and women, in direct touch with the primal forces of nature itself. There is nothing else quite like those players and their plays. They are the self-revelation, of the

peasant soul. From the whitewashed cabins of the country-side, from the streets of tiny, world-forgotten villages, from the islands where the great Atlantic thunders ceaselessly, these have come to call us back to the realities of life, to express again the external verities of art."

That is all very well. I agreed with Mrs. Ascher thoroughly about the art of Synge's plays, and Lady Gregory's and Yeats', and the art of the players. But it is merely silly to talk about the soil and whitewashed cottages, and self-revelation of peasant souls. Neither the dramatists nor the players are peasants or ever were. They are very clever, sometimes more than clever, members of the educated classes, who see the peasants from outside just as I see them, as Mrs. Ascher would see them if she ever got near enough to what she calls the soil to see a peasant at all.

When Mrs. Ascher had finished with the Irish Players she went on, still in a white heat of excitement, to the attempt to revive the Irish language.

"Where else," she said, "will you find such devotion to a purely spiritual ideal? Here you have a people rising enthusiastically to fight for the preservation of the national language. And its language is the soul of a nation. These splendid efforts are made in defiance of materialism, without the remotest hope of gain, just to keep, to save from destruction, a possession felt instinctively to be the most precious thing of all, far above gold and rubies in price."

"The only flaw in that theory," I said, "is that the people who still have this most precious possession don't want to keep it in the least. Nobody ever heard of the Irish-speaking peasants taking the smallest interest in their language. The whole revival business is the work of an English-speaking middle class, who never stop asking the Government to pay them for doing it."

That was the second occasion on which I came near quarrelling with Mrs. Ascher. Yet I am not a man who quarrels easily. Like St. Paul's friends at Corinth, I can suffer fools gladly. But Mrs. Ascher is not a fool. She is a clever woman with a twist in her mind. That is why I find myself saying nasty things to her now and then. I suppose it was Gorman who taught her to be an Irish patriot. If she had been content to follow him as an obedient disciple, I should have put up with all she said politely. But, once started by Gorman, she thought out Ireland for herself and arrived at this amazing theory of hers, her artistic children of light in death grips with mercantile and manufacturing materialists. No wonder she irritated me.

Ascher saved us from a heated argument. Dinner was over. He had smoked his half cigarette. He rose from his chair.

"I expect Mr. Wendall is waiting for us," he said to Mrs. Ascher.

Her face softened as he spoke. The look of fanatical enthusiasm passed out of her eyes. She got up quietly and left the room. Ascher held the door open for her and motioned me to follow her. He took my arm as we passed together down a long corridor.

"Mr. Wendall," he said, "is a young musician who comes to play to us every week. He is a man with a future before him. I think you will enjoy his playing. We are going to the music room."

We went through a small sitting-room, more fully furnished than any other in Ascher's house. It looked as if it were meant to be inhabited by ordinary human beings. It was reserved, so I learned afterwards, for the use of Ascher's guests. We ascended a short flight of stairs and entered the music room. Unlike the dining-room it was only partially lit. A single lamp stood on a little table near the fireplace, and there were two candles on a grand piano in the middle of the room. These made small spots of light in a space of gloom. I felt rather than saw that the room was a large one. I discerned the shapes of four tall, curtainless windows. I saw that except the piano and a few seats near the fireplace there was no furniture. As we entered I heard the sound of an organ, played very softly, somewhere above me.

"Mr. Wendall is here," said Ascher.

He led me over to the fireplace and put me in a deep soft chair. He laid a box of cigarettes beside me and set a vase of spills at my right hand. I gathered that I might smoke, so long as I lit my tobacco noiselessly, with spills kindled in the fire; but that I must not make scratchy sounds by striking matches. Mrs. Ascher sank down in a corner of a large sofa. She lay there with parted lips and half-closed eyes, like some feline creature expectant of sensuous delight. The light from the lamp behind her and the flickering fire played a strange game of shadow-making and shadow-chasing among the folds of her scarlet gown. Ascher sat down beside her.

The organ was played very softly. I found out that it was placed in a gallery above the door by which we had entered. I saw the pipes, like a clump of tall spears, barely discernible in the gloom. There was no light in the gallery. Mr. Wendall was no doubt there and was able to play without seeing a printed score. I supposed that he was playing the music of the new Russian composer. Whatever he played he failed to catch my attention, though the sounds were vaguely soothing. I found myself thinking that Mrs. Ascher had no right to be furiously angry with the people of Belfast for making their churches comfortable. This was her form of worship, and never were any devotees more luxuriously placed than we were. If her soul can soar to spiritual heights from the depths of silken cushions, surely a linen-draper may find it possible to pray in a cushioned pew.

I was mistaken about the music I was listening to. Mr. Wendall was only soothing his nerves with organ sounds while he waited for us. When he discovered our presence he left the gallery and descended to the room in which we sat, by a narrow stairway. No greeting of any kind passed between him and the Aschers. He went straight to the piano without giving any sign that he knew of our presence. I lit a cigarette and prepared to endure what was in store for me.

At first the new Russian music struck me as merely noisy. I found no sense or rhythm in it. Then I began to feel slightly excited. The excitement grew on me in a curious way. I looked at the Aschers. He was sitting nearly bolt upright, very rigid, in a corner on the sofa. She lay back, as she had lain before, with her hands on her lap. The only change that I noted in her attitude was that her fists were clenched tightly. Mr. Wendall stopped playing abruptly. There was a short interval of silence, through which I seemed to feel the last chord that was struck vibrating in my spine.

Then he began to play again. Once more the feeling of excitement came on me. I am far from being a Puritan, but I suppose I have inherited from generations of sternly Protestant ancestors some kind of moral prejudice. I felt, as the excitement grew intenser, that I had discovered a new, supremely delightful kind of sin. There came to my memory the names of ancient gods and goddesses denounced by the prophets of Israel: Peor and Baalim, Milcom, Moloch, Ashtaroth. I knew why the people loved to worship them. I remembered that Milton had rejoiced in the names of these half-forgotten deities, and that Milton loved music. No doubt he, too, understood this way of sinning and, very rightly, he placed the gods of it in hell. Wendall, at the piano, stopped and began again. He did this many times. His music was loud sometimes, sometimes soft, but it did not fail to create the sense of passionate deliciousness and, for a time, a longing for more of it.

After a while my senses grew numb, sated I suppose. I looked over at the Aschers. She still lay as she had lain at first, but her fists were no longer clenched. All her muscles seemed to be relaxed. Ascher had crept over close to her. He lay back beside her, and I saw that he held one of her hands clasped in his. His eyes were fixed intently on hers, and even as I watched I saw her lids droop before his gaze. She gave a long, soft sigh of satisfaction.

I realised that Ascher and his wife were lovers still, though they had been married for a score or more of years. That strange emotion, which touches human life with romance for a year or two and then fades into a tolerant companionship, had endured with them. In some way altogether unknown to me the music and all the art in which they delighted had the power of stimulating afresh or re-creating again and again the passion which drew them together. Under the influence of art they enjoyed a mystical communion with each other, not wholly spiritual, but like all mysticism, a mixture of the physical, the ecstasy of contact, actual or imagined, with yearnings and emotions in which the body has no part.

I suppose the music had its effect on me, too, gave me for a few moments a power of sympathy not usually mine. I understood Ascher as I had never understood him before. I knew that the man I had hitherto seen, austere, calm, intellectual, the great financier whom the world sought, was a man with a mask before his face; that accident and the excitement of the music had enabled me to see the face behind the mask. I understood, or supposed I understood, Mrs. Ascher, too. All her foolish fine phrases and absurd enthusiasms were like cries in which tortured creatures find some kind of relief from pain, or the low, crooning laughter of a young mother with her baby at her breast. They were the inevitable, almost hysterical gaspings of a spirit wrought upon over highly and over often by the passion of romantic love. A mask hid the man's face. The woman was not strong enough to wear it.

CHAPTER XII.

It is difficult now, in 1915, to regard the things which happened during the first half of last year as events in any proper sense of the word. But at the time they excited us all very much, and we felt that the whole future of the country, the empire, perhaps of the human race, depended on how the Government met the crisis with which it was faced. It seems curious that we could have believed such a thing, but we did.

I remember quite distinctly the circumstances under which I first heard the news of the protest made by certain cavalry officers against what they supposed to be the Government's policy in Ulster. I am not, thank God, called upon to pass a judgment on that very tangled business, or to give any opinion about the rights or wrongs of either side. I do not even profess to know the facts. Indeed I am inclined to doubt whether there were any facts. In affairs conducted mainly by politicians there seldom are facts. There are statements, explanations, pledges and recriminations in great abundance; but facts are not to be discovered, for the sufficient reason that they are not there. What happened or seemed to happen was described as a plot, a mare's nest, an aristocratic conspiracy, an assertion of principle, a mutiny, a declaration of loyalty, and a newspaper scare, according to the taste of the person who was speaking. The safest thing to call it, I think, is an incident.

I went down to the club at twelve o'clock, intending to smoke a cigar and look at the picture papers before luncheon. I found Malcolmson in the outer hall. His head was bent over the machine which reels off strips of paper with the latest news printed on them. The machine was ticking vigorously, and I knew by the tense attitude in which Malcolmson was standing that something very important must have happened. My first impulse was to slip quietly past and get away to the smoking room before he saw me. I like Malcolmson, but he is tiresome, particularly tiresome when there is important news. I crossed the hall cautiously, keeping an eye on him, hoping that he would not look round till I was safe.

Malcolmson has reached that time of life at which a man's neck begins to bulge over his collar at the back, forming a kind of roll of rather hairy flesh, along which the starched linen marks a deep line from ear to ear. I noticed as I passed that Malcolmson's neck was far more swollen than usual and, that it was rapidly changing colour from its ordinary brick red to a deep purple. The sight was so strange and startling that I stopped for a minute to see what would happen next. I have never heard of a man's neck bursting under pressure of strong excitement, but Malcolmson's looked as if it must break out in some way. While I was watching, the machine suddenly stopped ticking and Malcolmson turned round. His face was nearly as purple as his neck. His moustache, always bristly, looked as if it was composed of fine wires charged with electricity. His eyes were blazing with excitement.

"Come here, Digby," he said. "Come here and read this."

He caught up the paper which the machine had disgorged and allowed it to hang across his hands in graceful festoons. There seemed to me to be a great deal of it.

"I wish you'd tell me about it," I said. "I hate reading those things. The print is so queer."

I knew that Malcolmson would tell me about it whether I read it for myself or not. There was no use getting a double dose of the news whatever it was.

"The damned Government's done for at last," said Malcolmson triumphantly, "and Home Rule's as dead as a door nail."

"Good," I said. "Now we shall all be able to settle down. How did it happen? Earthquake in Dublin? But that would hardly do it. Cabinet Ministers committed suicide unanimously?"

"The Army," said Malcolmson, "has refused to fire on us. I knew they would and they have."

"Were they asked to?" I said.

"Asked to!" said Malcolmson. "They were told to, ordered to. We've had our private information of what was going on. We've known all about it for a week or more. Belfast was to be bombarded by the Fleet. Two brigades of infantry were to cross the Boyne and march on Portadown. The cavalry, supported by light artillery, were to take Enniskillen by surprise. We were to be mowed down, mowed down and sabred before we had time to mobilise. The most infamous plot in modern times. A second St. Bartholomew's massacre. But thank God the Army is loyal. I cross to-night to take my place with my men."

An ill-tempered, captious man might have suggested that Malcolmson ought to have taken his place with his men—a regiment of volunteers I suppose—a little sooner. According to his own account, the peril had been real a week before, but was over before he told me about it. The Government which had planned the massacre was dead and damned. The Army had refused to carry out the infamous plot. It seemed a mere piece of bravado, under the circumstances, to take up arms. But I knew Malcolmson better than to suppose that he wanted to swagger when swaggering was safe. His mind might be in a muddled state. Judging by the way he talked to me, it was very muddled indeed. But his heart was sound, and no risk would have daunted him.

"Let's have a glass of sherry and a biscuit," I said. "You'll want something to steady your nerves."

But Malcolmson, for once, for the only time since I have known him, was unwilling to sit down and talk. His train, supposing that he took the quickest route to Belfast, did not leave Euston till 8 or 9 o'clock at night; but he felt that he must be up and doing at once. He fussed out of the club, and for some time I saw no more of him.

I waited until the hall porter had cut up the slips of paper which fell from the clicking machine and pinned the bits to the notice boards. Then I read the news for myself. These machines are singularly unintelligent. They mix up the items of news in a very irritating way. Sometimes a sheet begins with the assassination of a foreign prime minister, breaks off suddenly to announce the name of a winning horse, goes back to the prime minister, starts a divorce case abruptly and then gives a few Stock Exchange quotations. I hate news which comes to me in this disjointed way, and never attempt to learn anything from the machine until the hall porter has edited the sheets. He cuts them up, gets all the racing news on one board, the Stock Exchange and the Divorce Court on another and makes a continuous narrative of political news, assassinations, picturesque shipwrecks and such matters on the largest and most prominent of the notice boards.

I found when I did read that Malcolmson had built up a lofty structure on a very small foundation. Something had evidently happened among the soldiers stationed at the Curragh Camp; but the first account telegraphed over from Ireland left me in grave doubt. It was a question whether the men had actually been told to shoot Malcolmson and refused to obey orders; or had been asked, politely, if they would like to shoot Malcolmson and said they would rather not. The one thing which emerged with any sort of clearness was that Malcolmson would not be shot. This made my mind easy. I went into the dining-room and had some luncheon.

Early in the afternoon I collected six evening papers, three belonging to each side. I found the Unionist writers unanimous on two points. The Army had saved the Empire and the Government would be obliged to resign. The Liberal scribes took another view of the situation. According to them the Army had been seduced from its loyalty by the intrigues of fascinating and fashionable Delilahs, but the will of the people must, nevertheless, prevail. Newspaper writers on the Liberal side are far more intelligent than their opponents. It was a stupid thing, in the early part of 1914, to talk about saving the Empire. No one at that time cared anything about the Empire. Very few people believed that it existed. It was worse than stupid to suggest that the Government would resign. The country was utterly weary of General Elections and was planning its summer holiday. Public sympathy was hopelessly alienated by that kind of talk. On the other hand, the fashionable Delilah story was a brilliant invention. There is nothing dearer to the heart of the English middle classes and working men than the belief that every woman with a dress allowance of more than £200 a year is a courtesan. The suggestion that these immoral Phrynes were bartering their charms for power to thwart the will of the people was just the sort of thing to raise a tempest of enthusiasm.

Almost anything might have happened if the Government had had the courage to follow up its advantage. Fortunately—from Malcolmson's point of view—it did not venture to shut up all women of title, under fifty years of age, in houses of correction; a course which would have convinced the general public that Home Rule was a sound thing. It spent a fortnight or so contradicting everybody who said anything, including itself, and then apologised for being misunderstood.

However, that anti-climax was still some way off.

I stuffed the three Liberal papers into my pocket and went to call on Lady Kingscourt. She is the only peeress I am intimate with who moves in really fashionable circles and is both rich and beautiful. It would have been interesting to hear what she said when I pointed out to her that she had been seducing subalterns. She was not at home when I reached her house. The butler told me that she had gone to a bazaar got up to raise funds for the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association, in itself a suspicious circumstance. If I were Lady Kingscourt and my character was attacked as hers was, I should keep clear of any charity with the word soldier in its name. I was sorry to miss her, though I scarcely expected that she would have tried to fascinate me. It is a good many years since I resigned my commission.

The next person I thought of seeing was Gorman. It was nearly five o'clock, so I went to the House of Commons.

Gorman, when I found him, seemed very much pleased to see me, and was in a hospitable mood. He took me to a room, which must have originally been meant for a cellar, and gave me tea.

"I've been ringing you up on the telephone all day," he said, "and couldn't get you. Where have you been?"

"Down at the club," I said, "talking to Malcolmson about the plot—what you'd call the situation I suppose. You can hardly be expected to admit that there is a plot. Now, do tell me what you think about the situation."

"Damn the situation!" said Gorman.

"That," I said, "seems the sensible view to take. Is it the one usually held? Is that what they're saying up there?"

I pointed to the ceiling with my thumb. Somewhere above my head, it might be supposed, statesmen with furrowed brows were taking anxious counsel together for the safety of the nation, retiring now and then when utterly exhausted, to damn the situation in private rooms.

"Some of them are a bit fussed," said Gorman. "Silly asses! But it isn't that wretched business that I wanted to speak to you about."

"Good gracious! Do you mean to say that you can talk of anything else? that you didn't ring me up to tell me what will happen?"

"Nothing will happen," said Gorman. "Two or three muddled-headed young fools at the Curragh will get court-martialled. That's all. What I wanted to see you about is this new invention of Tim's. There's really something in it."

"Gorman," I said. "You're fiddling while Rome is burning. How can you reconcile it to your conscience to play with cinematographs when a horrible conspiracy is threatening life and liberty?"

"Surely," said Gorman, "you don't really believe that we plotted, as they call it, to murder people in Belfast?"

"I don't know whether you did or not," I said. "But that's not the conspiracy I'm alluding to. Look here."

I pulled out of my pocket the three papers which I had meant for Lady Kingscourt and showed Gorman the articles about the fashionable ladies seducing soldiers.

"You can't expect our side," I said, "to sit down under this kind of thing without a struggle. We shall make counter accusations. I shall do it myself if nobody else does. I'm warning you beforehand, Gorman, so that you won't be surprised when you find your character in rags."

Gorman looked at his watch.

"I know you like talking that sort of nonsense," he said, "and I don't mind listening, not a bit; but just let me ask you this before you start. Will you come down with me this evening and see Tim's invention? If you will I'll order a motor from Harrod's or somewhere, and we'll run down after dinner. There's no use going in broad daylight, for we can't see the thing properly till after dark."

"I shall be delighted," I said.

"Very well. Excuse me a moment while I go and get on the 'phone to engage the motor."

I waited, feeling a little sore. I daresay I do talk nonsense and like talking it, but no politician who ever lived has a right to tell me so. I intended to greet Gorman when he returned with the proverb about living in glass houses and throwing stones. He came back, smiling radiantly. My ill-humour passed away at once.

"Now," he said, "go on with what you were telling me."

"I pointed out to you," I said, "that duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, and other abandoned women of that kind have been flirting with military officers in such a way as to interfere with the governing of this country in accordance with the principles of democracy."

"Is that what they say?" said Gorman.

He picked up one of the papers which I had laid on the table and satisfied himself that the thing was really in print.

"Well," he said, "they had to say something. I daresay people will believe them. The English are an extraordinarily credulous race, fools in fact. That's why I'm a Home Ruler."

"You must remember," I said, "that I'm a Unionist."

"Are you? Speaking confidentially, now, are you really?"

"My father was," I said, "and I don't like to see these things in print about the party without making some kind of reply. What I'm thinking of doing is writing a sort of circular letter to all the papers on our side and saying that to my certain knowledge you and Mrs. Ascher have been using undue and unfair influence over each other for the last six months. If it's wrong for a woman to talk politics to a soldier it must be much more wrong for one to talk art to a politician."

"Mrs. Ascher," said Gorman, "is an extraordinary woman. The more I see of her, the less inclined I am to be surprised at anything she says or does. She's tremendously keen just now on Home Rule and Ireland generally."

"That is amazing," I said.

"It isn't in itself," said Gorman, "but the way she gets at it is. I mean that theory of hers about——"

"Yes. I know. She will insist on thinking that you and everybody else on your side are artists."

"And yet," said Gorman, "I can't persuade her to look at Tim's new invention."

Mrs. Ascher's prejudice against cinematographs, improved or unimproved, was certainly strong. I found it hard to understand exactly how she felt. She found no difficulty in regarding Gorman, a devoted politician, as a hero. When she had no objection to the form of entertainment with which he provided the public, it was difficult to see why she kicked against moving pictures. I should have thought that the performances at Westminster were considerably more vulgar, certainly far less original and striking, than the things shown on the cinematograph.

Gorman and I dined at Scott's, chiefly on lobsters, at seven o'clock, an uncomfortably early hour. We had a

twenty-five-mile drive before us to reach the farm, somewhere in the depths of Hertfordshire, where Tim was making his experiments. The drive was a very pleasant one. The first part of it lay along one of the great artery roads which lead from the centre of London to the North. The evening was fine and warm without being stuffy, one of those evenings which are the peculiar glory of the early English summer. It seemed to me that many thousands of people were passing along that road towards the country. Parties of laughing boys and girls pedalled northwards on bicycles, swerving in and out through the traffic. Stout, middle-aged men, with fat, middle-aged women beside them, drove sturdy ponies, or lean, high-stepping horses, in curious old-fashioned gigs. Motor cyclists, young men with outstretched chins and set faces, sped by us, outstripping our car. Others we passed, riders who had side cars attached to their cycles, young men these, too, but soberer, weighted with responsibility. They had their wives in the side cars, wives who looked little more than girls, though many of them held babies in their arms, and one now and then had a well-grown child wrapped in rugs at her feet.

"Life!" said Gorman, waving his cigar comprehensively towards the moving crowds. "Wonderful thing life! Keeps going on. Don't know why it should, but it does. Nothing seems to make any difference to it."

"Not even your politics," I said. "Curious thing, isn't it, how little all that fuss of yours matters? It doesn't make any difference which of your parties is in power. All this goes on just the same. That young fellow—there, the one who didn't quite break his neck at the lamp post—would go down to his office to-morrow exactly as he always does, if every member of the House of Commons dies in the night. You see that girl with the baby—the one on our left—she'd have had that baby just the same if the Long Parliament were still sitting. None of your laws could have made her have that baby, or stopped her. You are simply fussing in an unimportant way, raising silly little clouds of dust which will settle down again at once. She's keeping the world going and she probably doesn't even know the name of the Prime Minister."

"That's all very well," said Gorman, "but we're seeing that these people get their rights, their fair share of what's going. If it wasn't for us and the laws we pass, the rich would grow richer and richer while these men and women would gradually sink into the position of slaves. I'm not a socialist. I don't believe in that theory; but capitalists have had things far too much their own way in the past."

"Ascher!"

"Oh, Ascher! I like Ascher, of course, personally; but speaking of him as a typical member of a class, he's simply a parasite. All financiers are. He ought to be abolished, wiped out, done away with. He fulfils no useful function."

Our motor sped along. A cycle with a side car just kept pace with us for a while. A nice, clean-shaven, honest-looking young fellow was in the saddle. His girl-wife sat beside him in the basket-work slipper which he dragged along. It was her baby which I had pointed out to Gorman a moment before.

"Perhaps," I said, "they have had tinned peaches for tea."

"Very likely," said Gorman, "just the sort of thing they would have. I know that class. Lived among them for years. He comes home at half past six. She has put on a clean blouse and tidied her hair so that he'll kiss her, and he does. Then he kisses the baby, probably likes doing that, too, as it's the first. Then he has a wash and she brings in the tea. Bread and butter for her with a pot of marmalade, an egg—at this time of year certainly an egg—for him."

"And tinned peaches."

"Eaten with teaspoons out of saucers," said Gorman, "and they'll enjoy them far more than you did that lobster salad at Scott's."

"I'm sure they will. And that is just where Ascher comes in."

"I don't see it," said Gorman, "unless you mean that they'd be eating hothouse peaches if there were no Aschers."

I did not mean that. I am, indeed, pretty sure that if there were no Aschers, if Gorman succeeded in abolishing the class, neither the city clerk, nor his pretty wife, nor any one else in England would eat hothouse peaches. There would not be any. I am inclined to think that if Ascher were done away with there would not even be any tinned peaches. Tinned peaches come from California. Somebody grows them there. That man must be kept going, fed, clothed sufficiently, housed, while the peach trees grow. He must be financed. Somebody else collects the peaches, puts them into tins, solders air-tight lids on them, pastes labels round them. He works with borrowed money. Somebody packs the tins in huge cases, puts them in trains, piles them into ships, despatches them to London, getting his power to do these things in some mysterious way from Ascher.

"While she washes up the cups and saucers," said Gorman, "he brings round that motor cycle."

"Paid for," I said, "in monthly instalments."

"Probably," said Gorman, "with a deposit of £25 to start with."

"It's Ascher," I said, "who makes that possible."

"It's Ascher," said Gorman, "who makes that necessary. If it were not for Ascher's rake-off, the tax he levies on every industry, the machine could be bought right out for the original £25 and there would be no instalments to be paid."

Possibly. But the tires of the machine were made of rubber. I remembered my visit to Para, the broad, steaming Amazon, the great ships crawling slowly past walls of forest trees, the pallid white men, the melancholy Indians. It may be possible to devise some other means of getting the precious gum from the Brazilian forest; but at present the whole business is dependent on Ascher.

We left that motor cycle behind us at last and sped faster along a stretch of road where the traffic was less dense.

"You notice," said Gorman, "the way London is swallowing up the country. That was once a rural inn."

I had observed what Gorman pointed out to me. Here and there along the road, a mile or so apart from each other, we came on old buildings, a group of cottages, a farm house, an inn. These were solidly built after

the good old fashion. It had seemed wasteful to pull them down. The waves of the advancing tide of London reached them, passed them, swept beyond them, left them standing.

"Quite a few years ago," said Gorman, "those houses stood in the middle of fields, and the people who lived in them ate the food that grew at their doors."

"No tinned peaches," I said, "no bicycles."

"And no Ascher," said Gorman.

"Well," I said, "we can't go back."

"In Ireland," he said, "we needn't go on. If we can only get clear of this cursed capitalistic civilisation of England—that's what I mean by being a Home Ruler."

"You think," I said, "that we should be too wise to accept the yoke of Ascher, to barter our freedom for tinned peaches."

"We'll get the tinned peaches, too."

"No, you won't. If you have civilisation—and that includes a lot of things besides tinned peaches, tobacco for instance, Gorman. If you want a cigar you'll have to put up with Ascher. But I daresay you'd be better without it. Only I don't think I'll live in your Ireland, Gorman."

We passed away from London in the end, got out beyond the last tentative reachings of the speculative builder, into country lane-ways. There were hedges covered with hawthorn, and the scent of it reached us as we rushed past. Gorman threw away a half-smoked cigar. Perhaps he wanted to enjoy the country smells. Perhaps he was preparing himself for life in the new Ireland which he hoped to bring into being.

We reached the barn in which Tim Gorman lived, at about nine o'clock. He was waiting for us, dressed in his best clothes. I knew they were his best clothes because they were creased all over in wrong places, showing that they had been packed away tightly in some receptacle too small to hold them. It is only holiday clothes which are treated in this way. Besides putting on this suit, Tim had paid us the compliment of washing his face and hands for the first time, I imagine, for many days.

He shook hands with me shyly, and greeted his brother with obvious nervousness.

"I have everything ready," he said, "quite ready. But I can't promise— You may be disappointed— I've had endless difficulties— If you will allow me to explain—"

"Not a bit of good explaining to us," said Gorman. "All we're capable of judging is the results."

Tim sighed and led us into the barn.

It was a large, bare room, ventilated—no one could say it was lit—by three or four unglazed openings in the wall. These Tim blocked with hay so as to exclude the lingering twilight of the summer evening.

At one end of the building was a stage, built, I thought, of fragments of packing cases. It was very hard to be sure about anything, for we had nothing except the light of two candles to see by, but the stage looked exceedingly frail. I should not have cared to walk across it. However, as it turned out, that did not matter. The stage was used only by ghosts, the phantoms which Tim created, and they weighed nothing. Tim himself, when it became necessary for him to adjust some part of his apparatus, crept about underneath the stage.

At the other end of the barn was an optical lantern, fitted with the usual mechanism for the exhibition of films. Half way down the room was a camp bedstead, covered with one brown blanket. Tim invited us to sit on it.

"It doesn't often break down," he said.

"If it breaks down at all," said Gorman, "I'll not risk it. I'd rather sit on the floor."

Gorman is a heavy man. I think he was right to avoid the bed. I sat down cautiously on one end of it. The middle part looked more comfortable, but I felt more secure with the legs immediately underneath me.

"It's all right," said Tim, "quite all right. I fixed it just before you came in."

That bed, a tin basin and two very dirty towels were the only articles of household furniture in the place. I suppose Tim had his meals with the farmer who owned the barn. No inspired artist, toiling frenziedly with a masterpiece in a garret, ever lived a more Spartan life than Tim Gorman did in that barn. Whatever money he had was certainly not spent on his personal comfort. On the other hand, a good deal of money had been spent on tools and material of various kinds. Packing cases stood piled together against the walls. The straw in which their contents had been wrapped littered the floor. I discerned, as my eyes got used to the gloom, a quantity of carpenters' tools near the stage, and, beside them, a confused heap of the mysterious implements of the plumber's trade.

While I was looking round me and the elder Gorman was wriggling about on the floor, Tim worked the lantern behind our backs. The thing, or some part of it, hissed in an alarming way. Then it made a whirring noise and a bright beam of light shot across the room. A very curious thing happened to that light. Instead of splashing against the far wall of the barn, exhibiting the cracks and ridges of the masonry, it stopped at the stage and spread itself in a kind of irregular globe. We sat in the dark. Across the room stretched the shaft of intense light, making the dust particles visible. Then, just as when a child blows soap bubbles through a tube, the light became globular.

"Put out the candles," said Tim.

They stood, flaming feebly, on the floor between Gorman and me. I extinguished them. Tim's machine gave a sharp click. Figures appeared suddenly in the middle of the globe of light. A man, then two women, then a dog. I do not know, and at the time I did not care in the least, what the figures were supposed to be saying or doing. It was sufficient for me that they were there. I saw them, not as flat, sharply outlined silhouettes, but as if they had been solid bodies. I saw them with softened outlines, through two eyes instead of a monocle. I saw them surrounded by an atmosphere.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" said Gorman. "Tim, turn on that running girl. I want Sir James to see how you get the effect of her going further and further away."

The running girl was the best thing accomplished by the old cinematograph. I never witness her race

without a certain feeling of breathlessness. But Tim's girl ran far better. She was amazingly real. When she had finished her course, Gorman struck a match and lit the candles again.

"That'll do, Tim," he said. "We've seen enough."

"I'd like to show you the horses," said Tim. "I think the horses galloping are the best thing I've got."

"We'll take your word for the horses," said Gorman. "Shut off that light of yours and stop the whizzing noise. I want to talk." He turned to me. "Well?"

"It's marvellous," I said.

"There's money in it," said Gorman. "Piles and piles of money. The only question is, Who's to get it?"

"Tim," I said, "is the one who deserves it."

"Tim will get his share whatever happens. The real question is, How are we to prevent Ascher grabbing all the rest?"

Tim had finished quieting his machine and came over to us.

"Michael," he said, "I want £100."

"What for?"

"I want more mirrors. The ones I'm using aren't perfect. I must have others."

"The ones you have," said Gorman, "are good enough for the present. When we get a bit further on and see how this business is going to be managed, we may get you other mirrors."

"Very well," said Tim, "I'll ask Ascher for the money. He'll give it to me. I'd have asked him a week ago only you made me promise not to take any more money from him without telling you."

"If you take money from Ascher," said Gorman, "he'll simply collar your whole invention. You'll find in the end that it will be his, not yours. He'll get every penny that's made out of it, and then he'll tell you that you owe him more than you can pay. I've told you all along that that's what will happen if you go borrowing from Ascher."

"I don't care," said Tim, "so long as I get it perfected I don't care what happens."

"Damn!" said Gorman.

There was some excuse for him. Tim's attitude was hopelessly unpractical.

"Don't you see," said Tim, "that this is a wonderful thing? It's one of the greatest things that any one has done for a long time. It's a new thing."

The note of weak obstinacy which was in his voice when he first spoke had died out of it. He was pleading with his brother as a child might beg for something from a grown-up man.

"That's exactly what I do see," said Gorman.

"Then why won't you let me perfect it? It doesn't matter—sure, you know yourself, Michael, that it doesn't matter what happens if only I get it right."

I thought for a moment that the boy was going to cry. He pulled himself together with a sort of choked sob and then suddenly flashed into a rage.

"I will ask Ascher for the money," he said. "I will, I will. Damn you, Michael! I'll give it all to Ascher, everything I have. Everything I ever invent. I'll tell him all I've found out. I'll make it his."

Then with another swift change of mood the boy turned to me and began to plead again.

"Tell him to give me the money," he said. "Or make him let me ask Ascher for it. He'll do it if you speak to him. I don't want to quarrel with Michael. I don't want to do anything he says is wrong. But I must have that money. Don't you see I must? I can't get on without it?"

"Listen to me, Tim," I said; "if I give you the £100 you want——"

"I could manage with £100," said Tim. "But it would be much better if I had £150."

"A hundred," I said, "and no more. If I give it to you, will you promise to bring that apparatus of yours up to London and exhibit your results to a few friends of mine there?"

"Yes, I will. Of course I will. May I order the new mirrors to-morrow and say that you'll pay for them?"

"You may. But remember——"

"Oh, that will be all right," said Tim. "As soon as ever it is perfected——"

"Perfect or imperfect," I said, "you've promised to show it off when I ask you to."

Gorman and I drove home together. At first he would do nothing except grumble about his brother's childish obstinacy.

"Can't understand," he said, "how any man with brains can be such a fool."

Then when he had worked off the fine edge of his irritation he began to thank me.

"It was good of you, very," he said, "to put down the money. I'd have done it myself, if I could have laid my hand on the amount he wanted. But just at this moment I can't. All the same I don't see what good that £100 is going to do. The thing's perfect enough for all practical purposes already. I saw nothing wrong with it."

"Nor did I."

"Then what the devil does he want to do with it? If the thing works all right, what's the sense of tinkering with it?"

"That's the artistic soul," I said, "never satisfied, always reaching upwards towards the unattained. It's the same with Mrs. Ascher."

"Of all the damned idiocies," said Gorman, "that artistic soul is the damnedest."

I said nothing more for several minutes. I knew it would take Gorman some time to recover from the mention of the artistic soul. When I thought he had regained his self-possession I went on speaking.

"My idea," I said, "is to hire a small hall, and to invite a number of well-off people to see Tim's show. You'll want money in the end, you know."

"Not much," said Gorman. "A few thousands will be enough. It isn't as if we had to manufacture anything."

"If you get what you want," I said, "in small sums from a number of people, you'll be able to keep control of the thing yourself, and you needn't be afraid of Ascher. Not that I believe Ascher would swindle, you. I think Ascher's an honest man."

"Ascher's a financier," said Gorman. "That's enough for me."

CHAPTER XIII.

I never suspected Malcolmson of the cheap kind of military ardour which shows itself in the girding on of swords after the hour of danger is past. He is the kind of man who likes taking risks, and I have not the slightest doubt that if he had really known beforehand that the Government was "plotting" to invade Ulster he would have been found entrenched, with a loaded rifle beside him, on the north bank of the Boyne. What I did think, when he left London suddenly to place himself at the head of his men, was that he had been a little carried away by the excitement of the times; that he was moved, as many people are, when startling events happen, to do something, without any very distinct idea of what is to be done. But even that suspicion wronged Malcolmson. Either he or some one else had devised an effective counterplot; effective considered as a second act in a comic opera. Perhaps I ought not to say comic opera. There is a certain reasonableness in the schemes of every comic opera. Our affairs in the early part of 1914 were moving through an atmosphere like that of "Alice in Wonderland." The Government was a sort of Duchess, affecting to regard Ulster as the baby which was beaten when it sneezed because it could if it chose thoroughly enjoy the pepper of Home Rule. The Opposition, on the other hand, with its eye also on Ulster, kept saying in tones of awestruck warning, "Beware the Jabberwock, my son." Malcolmson seemed to be a kind of White Knight, lovable, simple-minded, chivalrous, but a little out of place in the world.

However, Malcolmson and his friends, considered as characters in "Alice in Wonderland," were effective, far more effective than the poor White Knight ever was. They bought a lot of guns somewhere, perhaps in Hamburg. They hired a ship and loaded her with the guns. They sailed her into Larne Harbour and said to the Government, "Now, come on if you dare."

The Government, having previously issued a solemn proclamation forbidding the importation of arms into Ireland, took up the attitude of Mr. Winkle and said it was just going to begin. It rolled up its sleeves and clenched its fists and said for the second time and with considerable emphasis that it was just going to begin, Malcolmson danced about, coat off, battle light in eye, and kept shouting: "Come on!" The Government, taking off its collar and tie, said: "Just you wait till I get at you."

Gorman took a sane, though I think incorrect, view of the situation.

"The English people," he said, "are hopeless fools. It's almost impossible to deal with them. They are actually beginning to believe that Ulster is in earnest."

"Well," I said, "that's only fair. They've been believing that you're in earnest for quite a long time now. Ulster ought to have its turn."

Gorman, though a politician, is essentially a just man. He admitted the truth of what I had said. He went further. He admitted that Malcolmson's coup was exceedingly well conceived.

"It's just the sort of thing," he said, "which appeals to Englishmen. Reason is wasted on them."

"Don't be too hard on the English," I said. "It's the same everywhere in the world. Government through the people, of the people, by, with, from, to and for the people, is always unreasonable."

"It's the theatrical which pays," said Gorman. "I didn't think those fellows in Belfast had brains enough to grasp that fact, but apparently they have. I must say that this gun-running performance of theirs is good. It has the quality which Americans describe as 'punch.' It has stirred the popular imagination. It has got right across the footlights. It has fetched the audience."

"Awkward situation for you," I said.

"We'll have to do something," said Gorman.

"Arrest the ringleaders? Imprison Malcolmson?"

"Lord, no. We may be fools, but we're not such fools as that."

"Still," I said, "he's broken the law. After all, a party like yours in close alliance with the Government of the country must do something to maintain the majesty of the law."

"Law be damned," said Gorman. "What the devil does law matter to us or the Government either? What we've got to consider is popular opinion."

"And that," I said, "seems to be setting against you. According to the theory of democracy as I understand it, you're bound to go the way popular opinion is blowing you. You can't, without gross inconsistency, start beating to windward against it."

"Winds sometimes change," said Gorman.

"They do. This one has. It was all in your favour a fortnight ago. Now, what with your 'plot' and this really striking little episode in Larne——"

"The art of government," said Gorman, "consists in manipulating the wind, making it blow the way it's wanted to. What we've got to do is to go one better than the Ulster men."

"Ah," I said, "they imported rifles. You might land a shipload of large cannons. Is that the idea?"

"They needn't necessarily be real cannons. I don't think our funds would run to real cannons. Besides, what good would they be when we had them? But you've got the main idea all right. Our game is to pull off something which will startle the blessed British public, impress it with the fact that we're just as desperate as

the other fellows.”

“What about the police?” I said. “The police have always had a down on your side. It’s a tradition in the force.”

“The police aren’t fools,” said Gorman. “They know jolly well that any policemen who attempted to interfere with our coup, whatever it may be, would simply be dismissed. After all, we’re not doing any harm. We’re not going to shoot any one. We’re simply going to influence public opinion. Every one has a right to do that. By the way, did I mention that my play is being revived? Talking of public opinion reminded me of it. It had quite a success when it was first put on.”

Gorman is charming. He never sticks to one subject long enough to be really tiresome.

“I’m delighted to hear it,” I said. “I hope it will do even better this time.”

“It ought to,” said Gorman. “We’ve got a capital press agent, and, of course, my name is far better known than it was. It isn’t every day the public gets a play written by a Member of Parliament.”

“Where is it to be produced?” “The Parthenon. Good big house.”

The Parthenon is one of the largest of the London Music Halls. Gorman’s play was, I suppose, to take its place in the usual way between an exhibition of pretty frocks with orchestral accompaniment and an imitation of the Russian dancers.

“I shall be there,” I said, “on the first night. You can count on my applause.”

It occurred to me after Gorman left me that the revival of his play offered me an excellent opportunity of entertaining the Aschers. Ascher had been exceedingly kind to me in giving me letters of introduction to all the leading bankers in South America. Mrs. Ascher had been steadily friendly to me. I owed them something and had some difficulty about the best way of paying the debt. I did not care to ask them to dinner in my rooms in Clarges Street. My landlord keeps a fairly good cook, and I could, I daresay, have bought some wine which Ascher would have drunk. But I could not have managed any kind of entertainment afterwards. I did not like to give them dinner at a restaurant without taking them on to the theatre; and the Aschers are rather superior to most plays. I had no way of knowing which they would regard as real drama. The revival of Gorman’s play solved my difficulty. I knew that Mrs. Ascher regarded him as an artist and that Ascher had the highest respect for his brilliant and paradoxical Irish mind. After luncheon I took a taxi and drove out to Hampstead. I owed a call at the house in any case and, if Mrs. Ascher happened to be at home, I could arrange the whole matter with her in the way that would suit her best.

Mrs. Ascher was at home. She was in the studio, a large bare room at the back of the house. Gorman was with her.

I saw at once that Mrs. Ascher was in a highly emotional condition. I suspected that Gorman had been talking to her about the latest wrong that had been done to Ireland, his Ireland, by the other part of Ireland which neither he nor Mrs. Ascher considered as Ireland at all. On the table in the middle of the room there was a little group on which Mrs. Ascher had been at work earlier in the day. A female figure stood with its right foot on the neck of a very disagreeable beast, something like a pig, but prick-eared and hairy. It had one horn in the middle of its forehead. The female figure was rather well conceived. It was appealing, with a sort of triumphant confidence, to some power above, heaven perhaps. The prick-eared pig looked sulky.

“Emblematic,” said Gorman, “symbolical.”

“The Irish party,” I said, “trampling on Belfast.”

“The spirit of poetry in Ireland,” said Mrs. Ascher, “defying materialism.”

“That,” I said, “is a far nicer way of putting it.”

I took another look at the spirit of poetry. Mrs. Ascher was evidently beginning to understand Ireland. Instead of being nude, or nearly nude, as spirits generally are, this one was draped from head to foot. In Ireland we are very particular about decency, and we like everything to have on lots of clothes.

“But now,” said Mrs. Ascher, tragically, “the brief dream is over. Materialism is triumphant, is armed, is mighty.”

I looked at Gorman for some sort of explanation.

“I’ve just been telling Mrs. Ascher,” he said, “about the gun-running at Larne.”

“The mailed fist,” said Mrs. Ascher, “will beat into the dust the tender shoots of poesy and all high imaginings; will crush the soul of Ireland, and why? Oh, why?”

“Perhaps it won’t,” I said. “My own idea is that Malcolmson doesn’t mean to use those guns aggressively. He’ll keep quite quiet unless the soul of poetry in Ireland goes for him in some way.”

“We can make no such compromise,” said Mrs. Ascher. “Art must be all or nothing, must be utterly triumphant or else perish with uncontaminated soul.”

“The exclusion of Ulster from the scope of the Bill,” said Gorman, “is the latest proposition; but we won’t agree to it.”

“Well,” I said, “it’s your affair, not mine. I mean to stay in London and keep safe; but I warn you that if the spirit of poesy attempts to triumph utterly over Malcolmson he’ll shoot at it. I know him and you don’t. You think he’s a long-eared pig, but that ought to make you all the more careful. Pigs are noted for their obstinacy.”

“What we’ve got to do,” said Gorman, “is devise some way of countering this new move. Something picturesque, something that newspapers will splash with big headlines.”

I do not think that Mrs. Ascher heard this. She was looking at the upper part of the window with a sort of rapt, Joan of Arc expression of face. I felt that she was meditating lofty things, probably trying to hit on some appropriate form of self-sacrifice.

“I shall go among the people,” she said, “your people, my people, for I am spiritually one of them. I shall go from cottage to cottage, from village to village, walking barefooted along the mountain roads, dressed in a peasant woman’s petticoat. They will take me for one of themselves and I shall sing war songs to them, the

great inspiring chants of the heroes of old. I shall awake them to a sense of their high destiny. I shall set the young men's feet marching, thousands and thousands of them. I shall fill the women's hearts with pride."

Then, for the first and only time since I have known him, Gorman's patience gave way. I do not blame him. The thought of Mrs. Ascher as an Irish peasant, singing street ballads outside public houses, would have upset the temper of Job.

"That's all very well," he said, "but the other people have the guns."

"We must have guns, too," said Mrs. Ascher, "and shining swords and long spears tipped with light. Buy guns."

With a really impressive gesture she dragged the rings from the fingers, first of one hand, then of the other, and flung them on the ground at Gorman's feet. Even when working in her studio Mrs. Ascher wears a great many rings.

"Buy. Buy," she said.

She unclasped the necklace which she wore and flung it down beside the rings. It was a pearl necklace, but not by any means the handsomest pearl necklace she owned.

"More," she said, "you must have more."

She pranced out of the room, stepping high, like an actress taking a part in one of Shakespeare's plays or a well-bred carriage horse.

"Gorman," I said, "you're not going to take her wedding ring, are you? I don't think you ought to. Ascher's really fond of her and I'm sure he wouldn't like it."

"I wish to goodness," said Gorman, "that she wouldn't behave in this wild way. If she wants to subscribe to the party funds why doesn't she write a cheque instead of shying jewellery at me? I should certainly be arrested on suspicion if I went to try and pawn those things. Nobody would believe that she gave them to me."

He picked up the rings as he spoke and laid them in a row on the table.

"If we don't get her stopped," he said, "she'll have everybody laughing at us."

"Laughing at you, Gorman, not at me. I've nothing to do with the poetic soul of Ireland. It's your property."

"The English have no real sense of humour," said Gorman.

"They've got quite enough to see this joke," I said. "An owl would giggle if it saw Mrs. Ascher going barefoot about Ireland and you following her round carrying a long spear tipped with light in your hand."

"We must stop her," said Gorman. "Oh, damn! Here she is again."

Mrs. Ascher came in carrying a large morocco leather covered box, her jewel case, I suppose. She was a little calmer than when she left us but still very determined.

"Take this," she said. "Take all there is in it. I give it gladly—to Ireland."

Gorman looked at the jewel case and then pulled himself together with an effort.

"Mrs. Ascher," he said, "your gift is princely, but——"

"I give it freely," said Mrs. Ascher.

"And I shall receive it," said Gorman, "receive it as the gift of a queen, given with queenly generosity. I shall receive it when the hour comes, but the time is not yet."

Gorman rising to an occasion is a sight which fills me with admiration. That promise of a time to come was masterly. I should never have thought of it; but of course it came more easily to Gorman than it would to me. He is a politician and accustomed to draw cheques on rather distant futures.

"Our people," said Gorman, "are as yet unprepared, not ready to face the crisis of their destiny. Keep these." Gorman laid his hand on the jewel box as if giving it a sort of benediction, consecrating its contents to the service of Ireland. "Keep these as a sacred trust until the hour is upon us."

I very nearly applauded. Mrs. Ascher seemed a little disappointed.

"Why not now?" she said. "Why should we delay any longer?"

"We must trust our leaders," said Gorman. "They will tell us when the time for action comes."

That would have been good enough for any ordinary constituency. It did not satisfy Mrs. Ascher. I saw her looking a little doubtfully at Gorman. She is a curious woman. She uses the very finest kind of language herself; but she always gets suspicious when any one else talks about sacred trusts and things of that kind. The fact is, I suppose, that she means what she says, lives, as well as talks, finely. Gorman and I do not—quite.

I felt that Gorman needed and deserved a little help. He had done well enough so far, but he scarcely understood how near to the edge of Mrs. Ascher's credulity he had gone.

"What Mr. Gorman means," I said, "is that you must have men, organised, you know, and drilled, before you can give them guns. Just at present there are very few volunteers in Mr. Gorman's part of Ireland. He's going to enroll a lot more. When he has them he'll ask you for a subscription for the gun fund."

I did not think that Mrs. Ascher was really satisfied. In the light of subsequent events I found out that she certainly was not. But she said no more at the moment and made no further effort to press her jewel case on Gorman. I did not feel that the moment was a good one for giving her the invitation I had planned. It is impossible, without something like indecency, to invite a woman to dinner in a restaurant while she is meditating a barefooted pilgrimage through the wild places of Holy Ireland.

Gorman and I left the house together. I hired a taxi to take us home so that we could talk comfortably.

"Extraordinary woman," I said.

"Very, very. But don't let's talk about her. That was rather a good idea of yours. May be something in it.

"I didn't know I had an idea," I said. "Are you sure you're not mixing me up with Mrs. Ascher? She has lots."

"Not at all," said Gorman. "It was you who suggested organising the National Volunteers."

There was at that time in Ireland a small number of extreme patriots who rather admired Malcolmson because they thought he was going to fight against England, and despised Gorman because they knew he was not. These men had enrolled themselves in a semi-military organisation and called themselves the National Volunteers. Gorman and his friends did their best to suppress them and kept all mention of their existence out of the English papers as far as possible. It surprised me to hear him speak in a casual way of organising these declared enemies of his.

"You can't do that," I said. "Those fellows hate you like poison, worse than Malcolmson does. They're—well, I should call them rebels. They certainly won't do what you tell them."

"Oh, yes, they will, if treated properly. My idea is to flood the organisation with reliable men, fellows we can trust. When we've got a majority of our own people enrolled we'll tell them to elect their own leaders, democratic idea. Army choosing its own officers. Sure to catch on."

"Sure to, and then?"

"Oh, then they'll elect us. See? Every member of Parliament will be a colonel. We needn't drill or anything; but there's nothing to prevent our saying that we have 200,000 trained men. The Ulster fellows have gone no trumps on their 100,000—"

"I should be inclined to say gone No Home Rule."

Gorman grinned.

"Gone no something," he said, "and we double them. I expect that will set English opinion swinging round again."

"It ought to," I said, "but why bother about all these preliminaries? Why put everybody in Ireland to the trouble of enrolling themselves in a new organisation and electing officers and all that? It's just as easy to say you have 200,000 trained men before being made a colonel as afterwards."

"You don't understand politics," said Gorman. "In politics there must be a foundation of some sort for every fact. It needn't be much of a foundation, but there must be some."

"Hard on the Irish people," I said, "being put to all that trouble and bother just to make a foundation."

"Not at all," said Gorman. "They'll like it. But I hope to goodness that fanatic woman won't insist on our buying guns. It would be the devil and all if the fellows I'm thinking about got guns in their hands. You simply couldn't tell what they'd do. You'll have to try and keep Mrs. Ascher quiet."

"I'm going to ask her to dine with me and go to see your play," I said. "That may distract her mind from guns for a while."

"You use your influence with her," said Gorman. "I've the greatest belief in influence."

He has.

CHAPTER XIV.

That evening I wrote my invitation to the Aschers. They immediately accepted it, expressing the greatest pleasure at the prospect of seeing Gorman's play again.

I arranged to have dinner at the Berkeley and ordered it with some care, avoiding as far as I could the more sumptuous kinds of restaurant food, and drawing on my recollection of the things Ascher used to eat when Gorman ordered his dinner for him on the Cunard steamer. With the help of the head waiter I chose a couple of wines and hoped that Ascher would drink them. As it turned out he preferred Perrier water. But that was not my fault. No restaurant in London could have supplied the delicate Italian white wines which Ascher drinks in his own house.

We dawdled over dinner and I lengthened the business out as well as I could by smoking three cigarettes afterwards, very slowly. I did not want to reach the Parthenon in time for the musical display of new frocks. I could not suppose that Ascher was interested in seeing a number of young women parading along a platform through the middle of the theatre even though they wore the latest creations of Paris fancy in silks and lingerie. I knew that Mrs. Ascher would feel it her duty to make some sort of protest against the music of the orchestra.

Gorman had told me the hour at which his play might be expected to begin and my object was to hit off the time exactly. Unfortunately I miscalculated and got to the theatre too soon. The last of the young women was waving a well-formed leg at the audience as we entered the box I had engaged. I realised that we should have to sit through a whole tune from the orchestra before the curtain went up again for Gorman's play. I expected trouble and was pleasantly surprised when none came. Mrs. Ascher had a cold. I daresay that made her slightly deaf and mitigated the torture of the music.

She sat forward in the box and looked round at the audience with some show of interest. The audience looked at her with very great interest. Her clothes that night were more startling than any I have ever seen her wear. A young man in the stalls stared at her for some time, and then, just when I thought he had fully taken her in, bowed to her. She turned to Ascher.

"Who is that?" she said. "The man in the fifth row, three seats from the end, yes, there. He has a lady with him."

I saw the man distinctly, a well-set-up young fellow with a carefully waxed, fair moustache. The way his hair was brushed and something about the cut of his clothes made me sure that he was not an Englishman. The lady with him was, quite obviously, not a lady in the old-fashioned sense of the word. She seemed to me the kind of woman who would have no scruples about forming a temporary friendship with a man provided he

would give her dinner, wine, and some sort of entertainment.

Ascher fumbled for his pince-nez, which he carries attached to a black silk ribbon. He fixed them on his nose and took a good look at the young man.

"Ah," he said, "my nephew, Albrecht von Richter. You remember him. He dined with us two or three times when we were in Berlin in 1912. I did not know he was in London."

I somehow got the impression that Ascher was not particularly pleased to see his nephew Albrecht. Ascher was not looking very well. I had not seen him for some time, and I noticed even at dinner that his face was pale and drawn. In the theatre he seemed worse and I thought that the sudden appearance of his nephew had annoyed him. The young man whispered something to his companion and left his seat. The orchestra was still thrashing its way through its tune and there seemed no immediate prospect of the curtain going up.

A few minutes later there was a tap at the door of our box and Von Richter came in. Mrs. Ascher held out her hand to him. He bent over it and kissed it with very pretty courtesy. He shook hands with Ascher who introduced him to me.

"Captain von Richter—Sir James Digby."

Von Richter bowed profoundly. I nodded.

"Have you been long in London?" said Ascher. "You did not let me know that you were here."

"I arrived here this afternoon," said Von Richter, "only this afternoon, at five o'clock."

He spoke English remarkably well, with no more than a trace of foreign accent.

"I've been in Ireland," he said, "for six weeks."

"Indeed!" said Ascher. "In Ireland?"

He was looking at his nephew without any expression of surprise, apparently without any suggestion of inquiry; but I could not help noticing that his fingers were fidgeting with the ribbon of his pince-nez. Ascher, as a rule, does not fidget. He has his nerves well under control.

Mrs. Ascher was frankly excited when she heard that Von Richter had been in Ireland.

"Tell me," she said, "all about Ireland. About the people, what they are saying and thinking."

"We are all," I said, "tremendously interested in Irish politics at present."

"Alas!" said Von Richter, "and I can tell you nothing. My business was dull. I saw very little. I was in Dublin and Belfast, not in the picturesque and beautiful parts of that charming country. I was buying horses. Oh, there is no secret about it. I was buying horses for my Government."

It is certainly possible to buy horses in Dublin and Belfast; but I was slightly surprised to hear that Von Richter had not been further afield. Any one who understood horse-buying in Ireland would have gone west to County Galway or south to County Cork.

The band showed signs of getting to the end of its tune. Von Richter laid his hand on the door of the box.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" said Ascher.

"Unfortunately," said Von Richter, "I leave London early to-morrow morning. Back to Berlin and the drill yard." He kissed Mrs. Ascher's hand again. "We poor soldiers have to work hard."

"Perhaps," I said, "you can join us at the Carlton after the play. Mr. and Mrs. Ascher have promised to have supper there with me. If you are not engaged——?"

I glanced at the lady in the stalls. I was not going to ask her to supper.

"I shall be delighted," said Von Richter. "I have no engagement of any importance."

The lady in the stalls was evidently the sort of lady who could be dismissed without trouble.

"Good," I said, "we leave directly this play is over; but you may want to see the rest of the performance. The dancing is good I am told. Join us at the Carlton as soon as you're tired of this entertainment."

Von Richter slipped away. The curtain went up almost immediately.

Gorman came in to receive our congratulations as soon as his play was over. I asked him to join our supper party but he had an engagement of his own, a supper at the Savoy. I do not blame him. The lady who acted the principle part in his play had been very charming. She deserved any supper that Gorman could give her.

We reached the Carlton very early, long before the rush of supper parties began. Von Richter joined us as we sat down at the table. He was an intelligent, agreeable young man with plenty of tact. He listened and was apparently interested while Mrs. Ascher poured out her hopes and fears for Ireland's future. When she came, as she did in the end, to her own plan of buying guns for the Nationalist Volunteers Von Richter became almost enthusiastic.

"You Americans," he said. "You are always on the side of the oppressed. Alone among the nations of the earth you have a pat for the head of the bottom dog."

Von Richter's English is not only correct, it is highly idiomatic. Mrs. Ascher bridled with pleasure. It pleased her to think that she was patting the bottom dog's head. I did not remind her that in the group which she had just modelled the Spirit of Irish Poetry, for whose benefit she intended to buy guns, had got its foot firmly planted on the pig. That animal—and I still believed it to represent Belfast—was the one which a tender-hearted American ought to have patted.

"Perhaps I may be able to assist you," said Von Richter, "I know something of rifles. That is my trade, you know. If I can be of any help—there is a firm in Hamburg——"

He was glancing at Ascher as he spoke. He wondered, I suppose, how far Ascher was committed to the scheme of arming Gorman's constituents. But Ascher did not appear to be listening to him. He had allowed me to pour out some champagne for him and sat fingering the stem of his glass without drinking.

No one was eating or drinking much. I proposed that we should leave the supper room and have our coffee in the hall outside. I felt slightly uncomfortable at the turn the conversation was taking. Mrs. Ascher was very much in earnest about Ireland. Von Richter, I suppose, really knew where to buy guns. I entirely agreed with Gorman that the distribution of firearms in Ireland was a most undesirable thing.

"I always think," I said, "that one of the things to do in London is to watch the people going in and out of the supper room here. There is nothing quite like it anywhere in the world. It is the best example there is of the pride of life, 'superbia vitae.' I forget the Greek words at the moment; but a bishop whom I happen to know once told me that they mean the exultation of living. You know the sort of thing—gems and glitter, colour, scent, beauty, stateliness, strength. 'The pride of heraldry, the pomp of power.'"

I made way for Mrs. Ascher and followed her as she moved among the tables towards the staircase at the end of the room. Von Richter hooked his arm in Ascher's and spoke a few sentences to him rapidly in German. He spoke without making any attempt to lower his voice. He evidently did not think it likely that any one within earshot, except Ascher, would understand German. We reached the hall and secured comfortable seats, from which we could watch the long procession of men and women which was already beginning to stream towards the supper room. I ordered coffee, brandy and tobacco, cigars for Von Richter and myself, a box of cigarettes for Mrs. Ascher. Ascher refused to smoke and did not touch his brandy.

Our little party divided itself into halves. I do not know how it happened but Von Richter managed to get himself placed beside Mrs. Ascher in such a way that his back was partly turned to me. General conversation became impossible. Von Richter and Mrs. Ascher talked to each other eagerly and somehow seemed to get further away from Ascher and me. They were still discussing the landing of guns in Ireland, in Connaught, I think. After a while I could no longer hear what they said. Ascher began to talk to me.

A party, two young women and one older one with three men behind them, passed us and ascended the staircase to the supper room.

"There is something very fine," said Ascher, "about the insolence of well-bred Englishwomen. You see how they walk and how they look, straight in front of them. It is not an easy thing to walk well across a long brightly lighted space with many eyes watching." I am not sure that I like Ascher's word "insolence." I recognise the quality which he intended to describe, which is, I think, the peculiar possession of English women of a certain class; but I should not call it insolence.

Another party fluttered past us, a man and a woman.

"There," said Ascher, "is a French woman. She is Madame de Berthier, the wife of one of the Ministers in the last Government, a very prominent woman in Paris. I know her pretty well, but even if I did not know her I should recognise her as French. You see that she is conscious all the time that she is a woman and therefore that men's eyes are on her. She does not escape from that consciousness. If a German lady were to pass us we should see that she also is sex conscious; but she would be aware that she is *only* a woman, the inferior of the men with her. The Englishwoman does not admit, does not feel, that she has any superiors and she can walk as if she did not care whether people looked at her and admired her or not. Even the American woman cannot or does not do that. She wants to please and is always trying to please. The Englishwoman is not indifferent to admiration and she tries to please if she thinks it worth while. But she has learnt to bear herself as if she does not care; as if the world and all that is in it were hers of right."

Two men—one of them almost forty years of age, the other much younger—walked slowly up the hall looking to right and left of them. They failed to find the friends whom they sought. The elder spoke a few words and they sat down opposite to us, probably to wait until the rest of their party should arrive. "The men of your English upper classes," said Ascher, "are physically very splendid, the sons of the women we have been looking at are sure to be that. They possess a curious code of honour, very limited, very irrational, but certainly very fine as far as it goes. And I think they are probably true to it."

"I should have said," I replied, "that the idea of honour had almost disappeared, what used to be called the honour of a gentleman."

"You do not really think that," said Ascher. "Or perhaps you may. In a certain sense honour has disappeared among your upper classes. It is no longer displayed. To the outsider it is scarcely noticeable. It is covered up by affectation of cynicism, of greed, of selfishness. To pose as cynical and selfish is for the moment fashionable. But the sense of honour—of that singular arbitrary English honour—is behind the pose, is the reality. Look at those two men opposite us. They are probably—but perhaps I offend you in talking this way. You yourself belong to the same class as those men."

"You do not offend me in the least," I said. "I'm not an Englishman for one thing. Gorman won't let me call myself Irish, but I stick to it that I'm not English. Please go on with what you were saying."

"Those men," said Ascher slowly, "are probably self indulgent. Their morality—sex morality—is most likely very low. We may suppose that they have many prejudices and very few ideas. They—I do not know those two personally. I take them simply as types of their class. They are wholly indifferent to, even a little contemptuous of art and literature. But if it happened that a duty claimed them, a duty which they recognised, they would not fail to obey the call. I can believe for instance that they would fight, would suffer the incredible hardships of a soldier's life, would endure pain and would die, without any heroics or fuss or shouting. Men of my class and my training could not do those things without great effort. Those men would do them simply, naturally."

"Ascher," I said, "I have a confession to make to you. I understand German. I happen to know the language, learned it as a boy." Ascher looked at me curiously for a moment. I do not think that he was much surprised at what I said or that my confession made him uneasy.

"Ah! You are thinking of what my nephew said to me as we left the supper room. You heard?"

"Yes," I said, "I felt like an eavesdropper, but I couldn't help myself. He spoke quite loudly."

"And you understood?"

As a matter of fact I had not understood at the moment. Von Richter said very little, and what little he said concerned Ascher's business and had nothing to do with me. He told Ascher to move very cautiously, to risk as little as possible, to keep the money of his firm within reach for a few months. That, as well as I can remember, was all he said; but he repeated it. "Your money should be realisable at a moment's notice."

"You understood?" said Ascher, patiently persistent.

"I don't understand yet," I said, "but what you have just said about Englishmen being capable of fighting

has put thoughts into my mind. Did Captain von Richter mean—?”

“He meant to warn me,” said Ascher, “that what I have always looked forward to with horror and dread is imminent—a great war. You remember a talk we had long ago in New York; the night we were at the circus and saw the trapeze swingers. Well, if my nephew is right, the whole delicate balance of that performance is going to be upset. There will be a crash, inevitably.”

“And you?”

Ascher smiled faintly.

“For me as well as for the others,” he said. “The fact that my affairs are greater than those of most men will only make my fall the worse.”

“But you have been warned in time.”

“I scarcely needed the warning. I was aware of the danger. My nephew only told me what I knew. His warning, coming from him, an officer who stands high in the German military service—it confirms my fears, no more.”

“But you can save yourself and your business,” I said. “Knowing what is before you, you can—you need not lend money, accept obligations. You can gradually draw out of the stream of credit in which your fortune is involved, get into a backwater for a while. You have time enough. I am expressing myself all wrong; but you know what I mean.”

“I know. And you think I ought to do that?”

“There is no ‘ought’ about it,” I said. “It is the natural thing to do.”

“You were a soldier once. I think you told me so.”

I nodded.

“Suppose,” said Ascher, “that this warning had come to you then, while you were still a soldier. Suppose that you had known what your brother officers did not know, or the men under you, that war was coming, you would have resigned your commission. Is it so?”

“No,” I said, “I shouldn’t.”

“It would have been, from my point of view—for I am a coward—it would have been the natural thing to do.”

“It wouldn’t have been natural to me,” I said. “I couldn’t have done it. I don’t know why, but I couldn’t. I’m not professing to be particularly brave or chivalrous or anything of that sort. But to resign under those circumstances—! Well, one doesn’t do it.”

“Nor do I know why,” said Ascher, “but I cannot do it either. It is, you see, the same thing. I must, of course, go on; just as you would have felt yourself obliged to go on. The warning makes no difference.”

The idea that a banker feels about his business as a soldier does about his profession was new to me. But I understood more or less what Ascher meant. If he had that kind of sense of obligation there was clearly no more to be said about the point.

“And England?” I said. “Is she to be in it?”

“Who knows? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I hope not. The disaster will be far less terrible if England is able to remain at peace.”

“Tell me this,” I said, “or if I am impertinent, say so, and I shall not ask again. What was Captain von Richter doing in Ireland?”

“I do not know. I can only guess.”

“Not buying horses?”

“I do not suppose he went there to buy horses though he may have bought some. He went to see, to learn, to understand. That is what I guess. I do not know.”

“He has probably made up his mind,” I said, “that in the course of the next couple of months England will find herself with her hands full, so full with Irish affairs that it will be impossible for her to act elsewhere. A civil war in Ireland—”

“My nephew,” said Ascher, “is not very clever. He may think that. He is, I believe, an excellent soldier. But if he were a banker I should not employ him to find out things for me. I should not rely on the reports he brought me. He lacks intelligence. Very likely he believes what you have said.”

“But you don’t?”

“No. I do not. I do not believe that Irish affairs will be in such a state that they will determine England’s action. You see I have the privilege of knowing Gorman.”

“You don’t know Malcolmson,” I said, “and he’s a most important factor in the problem. He’s like your nephew, an excellent soldier, but lacking in intelligence. You don’t realise what Malcolmson is capable of.”

“I do not know Colonel Malcolmson personally,” said Ascher. “I am right, am I not, in styling him *Colonel* Malcolmson?”

“Yes. He retired some years ago as Colonel of my old regiment”

“Does a man retire from his loyalty,” said Ascher, “when he retires from his regiment? Will your friend give up his honour because he has given up his command? Will he aid the enemies of England?”

“Of course,” I said, “if you put it to Malcolmson in that way— He’s a positive fanatic on the subject of loyalty. But he doesn’t know, he doesn’t understand. He hasn’t had the warning that your nephew has just given you.”

“You are an Irishman,” said Ascher, “and you ought to know your countrymen better than I do. But it will surprise me very much if England finds herself hampered by Ireland when the crisis comes.”

It was Von Richter who broke up our party. He pleaded the necessity for early rising next morning as his excuse for going away before the hour at which the law obliges people to stop eating supper in restaurants. I

wondered whether he and Mrs. Ascher had made a satisfactory plan for running guns into Galway. According to Ascher it did not make much difference whether the Irish peasants had rifles in their hands or not. It was soothing, though humbling, to feel that, guns or no guns, Volunteers or no Volunteers, Ireland would not matter in the least.

CHAPTER XV.

Gorman's play achieved a second success. The Parthenon was crammed every night, and it was the play, not the pretty dresses or the dancing, which filled the house. Gorman made money, considerable sums of money. I know this because he called on me one morning in the middle of July and told me so. He did more. He offered me a very substantial and quite unanswerable proof that he felt rich.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd like to pay you whatever you've spent on this new invention of Tim's."

"I haven't spent anything," I said. "I've invested a little. I believe in Tim's new cinematograph. I expect to get back every penny I've advanced to him and more."

This did not satisfy Gorman. He got out his cheque book and a fountain pen.

"There was the hundred pounds you gave him to buy looking glasses," he said. "You didn't give him more than that, did you?"

"Not so much," I said. "The bill for those mirrors was only £98-7-6; and I made the man knock off the seven and sixpence as discount for cash. I'm learning to be a business man by degrees."

Gorman wrote down £98 on the cover of his cheque book.

"And the hire of the hall?" he said. "What will that come to?"

I had hired a small hall for the exhibition of Tim's moving picture ghosts. I had invited about a hundred people to witness the show. Gorman himself, a brother of the inventor, had promised to preside over the gathering and to make a few introductory remarks on the progress of science or anything else that occurred to him as appropriate to such an occasion. But I could not possibly allow him to pay for the entertainment.

"My dear Gorman," I said, "it's my party. The people are my friends. At least some of them are. The invitations have gone out in my name. You might just as well propose to pay for the tea I mean to offer them to drink as for the hire of the room in which I am going to receive them."

"Will £150 cover the whole show?" said Gorman.

"If you insist on heaping insults on my head," I said, "I shall retire into a nursing home and cancel all the invitations."

"You're an obstinate man," said Gorman.

"Very. In matters of this kind."

"All the same," said Gorman, "I'll get rid of that money. I don't consider it's mine. I ought to have paid for Tim, and I would, only that I hadn't a penny at the time."

"If you like to give £150 to a charity," I said, "that's your affair."

"That," said Gorman, "would be waste. I rather think I'll give a party myself."

He slipped his cheque book back into his pocket.

"Invite me to meet the lady who acts in your play," I said.

"Miss Gibson?" said Gorman. "Right. Who else shall we have?"

"Why have anybody else?"

"There are difficulties," said Gorman, "about the rest of the party. You wouldn't care to meet my friends."

"Oh, yes, I would."

"No, you wouldn't. I know you. You don't consider Irish Nationalists fit to associate with. We're not respectable."

That was putting it too strongly; but it is a fact that I do not know, or particularly want to know, any of Gorman's political associates.

"And your friends," said Gorman, "wouldn't know me."

Again Gorman was guilty of over-statement; but my friends are, for the most part, of conservative and slightly military tastes. They would not get on well with Gorman.

"I'll think it over," said Gorman, "and let you know."

Two days later I got my invitation. Gorman, in the excitement of sudden great possessions, had devised an expensive kind of party. The invited guests were Mr. and Mrs. Ascher, Miss Gibson, Tim and myself. We were to voyage off from Southampton in a motor yacht, hired by Gorman, to see the Naval Review at Spithead. We were to start at ten o'clock from Waterloo station in a saloon carriage reserved for our party.

"We have to be back in time for Miss Gibson to go to the theatre," Gorman wrote, "so we must start early. I believe the show is to be worth seeing. British Navy at its best. King there. Royal salutes from Dreadnoughts. Rank, fashion and beauty in abundance."

The week was to be one of exciting festivities. Gorman had fixed his party for the day before my exhibition of Tim's new invention.

I was shaving—shortly after eight o'clock on the morning of Gorman's party—when my servant came into my room.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, "but there's a young man waiting in the hall, says that he wants to see you."

It seemed odd that any one should want to see me at that hour.

"Who is he?" I said.

"Don't know, sir. Gives his name as Gorman. But he's not our Mr. Gorman."

"It may be Tim," I said. "Does he look as if he had an artistic soul?"

"Couldn't say, sir. Might have, sir. Artists is very various. Doesn't seem to me, sir, as if his man looked after his clothes proper."

"Must be Tim," I said. "Show him in."

"In here, sir?"

"Yes. And have an extra kidney cooked for breakfast."

Tim came in very shyly and sat down on a chair near the door. He certainly did not look as if his clothes had been properly cared for. He was wearing the blue suit which I suspected was the best he owned. It was even more crumpled and worse creased than when I saw it down in Hertfordshire.

"I hope you don't mind my coming here," he said. "I didn't like to go to Mr. Ascher, and I was afraid to go to Michael. He'd have been angry with me."

"Has anything gone wrong with your apparatus? Smashed a mirror?"

Tim brightened up at the mention of his apparatus.

"Oh, no," he said. "That's all right. In fact I've been able to improve it greatly. You remember the trouble I had with the refraction from the second prism. The adjustment of the angles—— The way the light fell——"

I could not, especially before breakfast, argue about prisms.

"If your machinery's all right," I said, "what's the matter with you?"

"It's this party of Michael's," he said. "I forgot all about it till yesterday afternoon."

"Well, you remembered it then. If you'd forgotten it till this afternoon it would have been a much more serious matter."

"But," said Tim, "Michael told me to get some new clothes. He said he'd pay for them, which was very kind of him. But when I got up to London the shops were shut. I hurried as much as I could, but there were one or two things I had to do before I started. And now I'm afraid Michael will be angry. He said most particularly that I must be well dressed because there are ladies coming."

"Stand up," I said, "and let me have a look at you."

Poor Tim stood up, looking as if he expected me to box his ears. There was no disguising the fact that his costume fell some way short of the standard maintained by Cowes yachtsmen.

Tim surveyed himself with a rueful air. He was certainly aware of the condition of his clothes.

"If I could even have got a ready made suit," he said, "it might have fitted. But I couldn't do that. I didn't get to London till nearly ten o'clock. There was a train at four. I wish now that I'd caught it. It was only a few minutes after three when I remembered about the party and I might have caught that train. But I didn't want to leave just then. There were some things that I had to do. Perhaps now I'd better not go to the party. Michael will be angry if I don't; but I expect he'll be angrier if I go in these clothes. I think I'd better not go at all."

He looked at me wistfully. He was hoping, I am sure, that I might decide that he was too disreputable to appear.

"No," I said, "you can't get out of it that way. You'll have to come."

"But can I? You know better than I do. I did brush my trousers a lot this morning—really. I brushed them for quite half an hour; but there are some mark——"

He held out his right leg and looked at it hopelessly.

"Stains, I suppose," he said.

"You'd be better," I said, "if you had a tie."

Tim put his hand up to his neck and felt about helplessly.

"I must have forgotten to put it on," he said. "I have one, I know. But it's very hard to remember ties. They are such small things."

"Take one of mine," I said, "and put it on before you forget again."

"Anything else?" said Tim.

"I don't think," I said, "that there's anything else we can do. My clothes wouldn't fit you. I might lend you a pair of boots but I doubt if you'd get them on. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get yours cleaned. Take them off."

I do not think that my servant liked cleaning Tim's boots. But he did it and I daresay it was good for him.

I was a little anxious about the meeting between Mrs. Ascher and Tim. When they parted in New York she was deeply vexed with him and I could not think it likely that a woman as devout as she is would readily forgive a man who had been guilty of blasphemy. On the other hand she had very graciously accepted my invitation to be present when the new invention was shown off. She might, of course, only wish to hear the other Gorman making a speech; but she might have forgotten Tim's offence, or changed her mind about its heinousness. In any case Tim's clothes would make no difference to her. Miss Gibson might think less of him for being shabby. But Mrs. Ascher was quite likely to prefer him in rags. Many people regard unkemptness as a sign of genius; which is, I daresay, the reason why poets seldom wash their necks.

I need not have troubled myself about the matter. Mrs. Ascher took no notice of Tim. She was sitting in the saloon carriage when we reached the station and was surrounded with newspapers. She greeted me with effusion.

"Isn't it glorious?" she said. "Splendid. We have shown them that we too can do daring things, even the sort of things in which they take a special pride. The practical things which the world boasts of, which we artists

are not supposed to be able to do at all."

"I haven't seen a paper this morning," I said. "Has any one assassinated the Prime Minister?"

"Look!" she said.

She held out one of the newspapers towards me. I did not have to take it in my hand to see the news. I could have read the headlines from the far side of the platform.

"Steam yacht lands guns on Galway Coast. National Volunteers muster to receive Arms. Coastguards Paralysed. Police Helpless. Crushing Reply to Ulster Lawlessness."

That, of course, was a Liberal paper. There was a Unionist paper open on the floor at my feet. Its statement of the facts was almost identical; but its interpretation was different. Instead of regarding the incident as a lesson in loyalty to Malcolmson it said:

"Act of Rebellion in Connaught. Civil War Breaks Out."

"In the broad light of day," said Mrs. Ascher, "at noon. Without an attempt at concealment. Now, now at last, Ireland has asserted herself, has shown that the idealism of the artist is a match for the sordid materialism of the worshippers of efficiency."

I looked round for Gorman. I wanted to see how he was taking the news. He was on the platform, talking seriously, I fear sternly, to Tim; no doubt about his clothes. Ascher was standing near them; but was not, I think, listening to Gorman. He had the air of patient politeness which is common with him on pleasure parties and excursions of all kinds.

"I can't help hoping," I said, "that they haven't got any ammunition. It sounds an unkind thing to say, but—I'm not much of a patriot, I know, but I've just enough love of country in me to dislike the idea of Irishmen shooting each other."

"Oh," said Mrs. Ascher, "there would be no risk of that if—if men like you—the natural leaders—would place yourselves at the head of the people. Think—think—"

I did think. The more I thought the less inclined I felt to agree with Mrs. Ascher. It seemed to me that if I took to paralysing coastguards and reducing policemen to helplessness there would be considerably more risk of shooting than if I stayed quietly in London. The proper leaders of the people—proper though perhaps not natural—are the politicians. The only risk of real trouble in Ireland rose from the fact that men like Malcolmson—natural leaders—had done what Mrs. Ascher wanted me to do, put themselves at the head of the people. If they had been content to leave the question of Home Rule to the politicians it could have been settled quietly. Gorman, for instance, has an instinct for stopping in time. Malcolmson and men like him confuse games with real affairs. I might turn out to be just as bad as Malcolmson if I took to placing myself at the head of the people. Besides I do not like the people.

Gorman came in with Miss Gibson and I was introduced to her. She seemed a nice, quiet little girl, and smiled rather shyly as we shook hands. She sat down beside Mrs. Ascher and refused the cigarette which was offered her. She did not in the least correspond to my idea of what a leading lady in a popular play should be. However I had not much opportunity just then of forming an opinion of her. Gorman, having settled the two ladies, took Ascher and me to the far end of the carriage. The train started.

"That's a damned silly performance," said Gorman, "landing those guns in Galway."

"I should have thought," I said, "that you'd have been pleased. You were talking to me the other day about the necessity for pulling off some coup of a striking and theatrical kind by way of diverting the sympathy of the English people from Ulster."

"But this," said Gorman, "is a totally different thing. I happen to know what I'm talking about. The fellows who've got these guns are wild, irresponsible, unpractical fools. They've been giving us trouble for years, far more trouble than all the Unionist party put together. They don't understand politics in the least. They've no sense. They're like—like—" he looked round for some comparison, "in some ways they're rather like Tim."

"Dreamers," I said.

"Exactly," said Gorman. "They ought to be writing poetry."

"Lofty souls," I said, "idealists. Just exactly what Mrs. Ascher thinks you are."

"Take the case of Tim," said Gorman. "You'll hardly believe it but—just look at his clothes, will you?"

Tim was standing by himself in the middle of the carriage. He looked forlorn. He was too shy, I imagine, to sit down beside Mrs. Ascher or Miss Gibson, and too much afraid of his brother to join our group. We had every opportunity of studying his clothes.

"And I told him to buy a new suit," said Gorman.

"That," I said, "is just the kind of man that Mrs. Ascher believes in. She was saying to me a few minutes ago that there is nothing more sordid and detestable than the worship of efficiency in practical matters."

The mention of Mrs. Ascher's name recalled Gorman to a sense of his duties as a host. The two ladies were not getting on very well together. I imagine that Mrs. Ascher was too much excited by her Irish news to care for talking about the Naval Review we were going to see, and that was a topic which would inevitably suggest itself to Miss Gibson. Miss Gibson, though anxious to be polite, was not likely to know or care anything about Ireland. Gorman left us and joined them.

"Well," I said to Ascher, "what do you think of this performance in Galway?"

"Have you read the newspapers?" he said.

"The headlines," I replied. "I couldn't very well help reading them."

Ascher stepped across the carriage and picked up one of the papers from the floor. It was the one which declared that civil war had broken out in Ireland.

"I wish," he said, "that I knew exactly the measure of my nephew's intelligence."

"Captain von Richter?" I said.

"Yes. He may—almost anything is possible with a man like him. He may believe that."

Ascher pointed to the words, "Civil War."

"I don't think you need worry about that," I said. "Whatever Malcolmson and his lot may do those fellows in Galway won't fight. Gorman and the priests will stop them. You can always count on the politicians and the priests. They'll prevent anything really serious. The Connaught Celt will never start a civil war; at least not unless he gives up his religion and takes to hanging Members of Parliament. He's a splendid fighting man—none better—but he won't run the risk of losing his soul for the sake of a battle. He must be told he ought to fight by some one whose authority he recognises. That's where we're safe. All the authorities are against violence."

"I have no doubt you are right," said Ascher. "No civil war will be started in the way these papers suggest. I am not anxious about that. It is impossible. But I am anxious lest it should be believed possible by men who do not understand. My nephew, for instance. He will not know what you know. He may believe—and those over him in Berlin—they will not understand. They may think that the men in Ireland who have got the guns will use them. They may even have had something to do with supplying the guns. That is where the danger lies. A miscalculation—not in Ireland—but elsewhere."

I did not like to ask whether Mrs. Ascher's enthusiasm for the cause of Ireland had led her to finance the Galway gun-running. Nor did I care to question Ascher about his suggestion that Von Richter had something to do with buying and shipping that cargo or the other which was landed at Larne. Ascher seemed disinclined to discuss the matter further. We joined Gorman and the two ladies at the far end of the carriage, picking up Tim on our way.

Gorman was sitting beside Miss Gibson. He was leaning forward, pointing with outstretched hand to the country through which the train was passing.

"This is the playground of England," he said. "Here the rich and idle build themselves beautiful houses, plant delightful gardens, live surrounded by a parasitic class, servants, ministers to luxury; try to shut out, succeed to a great extent in shutting out all sense and memory of real things, of that England where the world's work is done, the England which lies in the smoky hinterland." He waved his hand with a comprehensive gesture towards the north. "Far from all the prettinesses of glorified villadom."

"I do think," said Miss Gibson, "that Surrey and Hampshire are sweetly pretty."

Miss Gibson may be regarded, I suppose, as one of England's toys. It was only natural that she should appreciate the playground. It was, so she thought, a district very well suited to the enjoyment of life. She told us how she had driven, in the motor of a wealthy member of Parliament, through the New Forest. From time to time she had spent week-ends at various well-appointed villas in different parts of the South of England, and, as a nice-minded young woman should, had enjoyed these holidays of hers. She frankly preferred the playground to that other, more "real" England which Gorman contrasted with it, the England of the midlands, where the toilers dwelt, in an atmosphere thick with smuts.

Mrs. Ascher, of course, took quite a different view. It filled her with sadness to think that a small number of people should play amid beautiful surroundings while a great number—she dwelt particularly on the case of women who made chains—should live hard lives in hideous places. Mrs. Ascher is more emotional than intellectual. The necessity for consistency in a philosophy of life troubles her very little. As a devout worshipper of art she ought to have realised that her goddess can only be fitly honoured by people wealthy enough to buy leisure, that the toiling millions want bread much more than they want beauty. I have no quarrel with the description of the life of Birmingham as more "real"—both Gorman and Mrs. Ascher kept using the word—than the life of the Isle of Wight. Nor should I want to argue with any one who said that beauty and art are the only true realities, and that the struggle of the manufacturing classes for wealth is a striving after wind. But I felt slightly irritated with Mrs. Ascher for not seeing that she cannot have it both ways.

Gorman, of course, was simply trying to be agreeable. I pointed out—when I succeeded in seizing a place in the conversation—that if Gorman's theory were applied to Ireland Belfast would come out as a reality while Cork, Limerick, and other places like them would be as despicable as Dorsetshire.

"Wicklow," I said, "is the playground of Ireland, and it returns nothing but Nationalist members to Parliament. You ought not to go back on your own side, Gorman."

Mrs. Ascher shuddered at the mention of Belfast and would not admit that it could be as "real" as Manchester or Leeds.

Miss Gibson broke in with a reminiscence of her own. She told us that she had been in Belfast once with a touring company, and thought it was duller on Sunday than any other city in the British Isles.

Gorman, after winking at me, appealed to Ascher on the subject of Belfast's prosperity. In his opinion the apparent wealth of that city is built up on an insecure foundation of credit. There is no solidity about it. The farmers of the south and west of Ireland, on the other hand, have real wealth, actual savings, stored up in the Post Office Banks, or placed on deposit, in other banks, or hoarded in stockings.

Ascher was most unwilling to join in the discussion. He noticed, as I did, that Miss Gibson's attention was wandering. In the end, goaded by Gorman, he said that some one ought to teach the Irish farmers to invest their savings in high class international stocks and bonds. He added that £1 notes kept in drawers and desks are not wealth but merely frozen potentialities of credit.

After that, conversation, as might be expected, became impossible for some time, although Ascher apologised humbly.

Gorman restored us to cheerfulness by opening a parcel and handing round two enormous boxes of chocolates. One box was settled on the seat between Miss Gibson and Tim. They ate with healthy appetites and obvious delight. When we reached Southampton that box was nearly empty and neither of them seemed any the worse. The other box lay on Mrs. Ascher's knee. She and I and Gorman did our best, but we did not get through the top layer. Ascher only took one small chocolate and, when he thought no one was looking, dropped it out of the window.

The motor yacht which Gorman had hired for us turned out to be a swift and well-found ship with a small

cabin and possibilities of comfort in a large cockpit aft. We sped down Southampton Water, one of a whole fleet of pleasure vessels large and small. A racing cutter stooped under the pressure of a fresh westerly breeze, to leeward of us. We slipped close past a little brown sailed yawl, steered by a man in white flannels. Two laughing girls in bright red caps sat on the coachroof cabin top. An arrogant white steam yacht, flying the ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron, sliced her silent way through the water behind us. Shabby boats with stained, discoloured sails and chipped paint bore large parties seaward. The stiff front of Netley Hospital shone white in the sun. The conical buoy at the entrance of Hamley river bent its head shorewards as the strong tide swept past it. From the low point beneath Calshott Castle a flying machine rose suddenly, circled round in a wide sweep and then sped swiftly eastwards towards Spit-head. In the roads off Cowes we could discern many yachts at anchor. One of the Hamburg-American lines crept cautiously up the Solent. A belated cruiser, four-funneled, black and grim, on her way to join the Fleet, followed the huge German steamer. The waters of the Solent tumbled in irregular white-topped waves, tide and wind opposed to each other, struggling for mastery.

Gorman hauled luncheon baskets from the cabin. He set Tim and me to open them. The look of a ham which Tim thoughtlessly asked her to hold while he unpacked the dish belonging to it, finished Mrs. Ascher. Our boat was rolling quite appreciably. She retired to the cabin. Even the glass of champagne with which Gorman hurriedly provided her failed to enable her to eat. Miss Gibson fortunately was unaffected. She ate everything that was offered to her and in the course of the afternoon finished Mrs. Ascher's box of chocolates.

Before we stopped eating we caught our first sight of the Fleet. The ships lay in three long, straight lines off Spithead; battleships, cruisers, lean destroyers, submarines. A hydroplane raced past us, flinging showers of spray and foam high on each side of her. Two naval aeroplanes, their canoe-shaped floats plainly visible, hovered and circled overhead. Pleasure boats were everywhere, moving in and out among the motionless ironclads. A handsome barque-rigged yacht, some very rich man's summer home, came slowly towards us, her sails furled, using auxiliary steam power.

We swiftly approached the Fleet. Already the vast bulk of the battleships oppressed our spirits. We looked up from the cockpit of our dancing pleasure boat and saw the huge misshapen iron monsters towering over us, minatory, terrible. We swept in and out, across the sharp bows, under the gloomy sterns of the ships of the first line. Ascher gazed at them. His eyes were full of sorrow, sorrow and a patient resignation.

"Your protection," I said. "Because those ships are there, because they are black and strong, stronger than any other ships, because men everywhere are afraid of them, because this navy of England's is great, your net of commerce and credit can trawl across the world and gather wealth."

"Protection," said Ascher. "Protection and menace. This Navy is only one of the world's guarantees of peace, of peace guaranteed by fear. It is there as you say, and the German Army is there; that men may fear them and peace be thus made sure. But can peace be secured through fear? Will not these navies and armies some day fulfil the end of their being, rend all our nets as they rush across the seas and desolate the lands? They are more menace than protection."

Gorman was standing with his back to us. His elbows were resting on the slide of the roof above the steps which led to the cabin. His chin was on his hands and he was staring at the ships. Suddenly he turned.

"The world's great delusion," he said. "Hypnotised by the governing classes the workers are everywhere bearing intolerable burdens in order to provide statesmen and kings with these dangerous toys. Men toil, and the fruits of their toil are taken from them to be squandered on vast engines whose sole use is to destroy utterly in one awful moment what we have spent the painful effort of ages in building up."

He swept his hand out towards the great ship under whose shadow we were passing.

"Was there ever plainer proof," he said, "that men are mad?"

Miss Gibson sat beside me. While Ascher spoke and while Gorman spoke, she held my glasses in her hand and watched the ships through them. She neither heard nor heeded the things they said. At last she laid the glasses on my knee and began to recite Kipling's "Recessional." She spoke low at first. Gradually her voice grew stronger, and a note of passion, tense and restrained, came into it. She is more than a charming woman. She has a great actress' capacity for emotion.

We moved through waters consecrate, and she expressed for us the spirit which hovered over them. Here English guns raked the ships of Spain. Here, staggering homewards, shot-riddled, came the frigates and privateers of later centuries, their shattered prizes under their lee. Through these waters men have sailed away to fight and conquer and rule in India and in many distant lands. Back through these waters, some of them have come again, generation after generation of them, their duty done, their adventuring over, asking no more than to lay their bones at last in quiet churchyards, under the shadow of the cross, near the grey walls of some English church.

Miss Gibson's voice, resonant, passionate, devout, lingered on the last syllables of the poem.

"The imperial idea," I said, "after all, Gorman, it has its greatness."

Then Tim spoke, shyly, eagerly.

"I wonder," he said, "if they would let us go on board one of the submarines. I should like to see— Oh, there are a lot of things I should like to see in any of those ships. They must be nearly perfect, I mean mechanically. The steering gear, for instance—"

His voice trailed off into silence.

"What a pity," said Miss Gibson, "that the King can't be here. I suppose now there'll be no royal salutes fired and we shan't see his yacht."

"All Mr. Gorman's fault," I said. "If he had not nagged on in the way he has about Home Rule, the King would be here with the rest of us. As it is he has to stay in London while politicians abuse each other in Buckingham Palace."

"That conference," said Gorman, "is an unconstitutional manoeuvre of the Tory party."

"What's it all about?" said Miss Gibson.

"The dispute at present," I said, "centres round two parishes in County Tyrone and because of them a public holiday is being spoiled. All Mr. Gorman's fault."

CHAPTER XVI.

It must have been the novelty of the thing which brought people flocking to the hall I hired for the exhibition of Tim Gorman's new cinematograph. I was aware, in a vague way, that my invitations had been very generally accepted; but I made no list of my expected guests, and I did not for a moment suppose that half the people who said they were coming would actually arrive. I have some experience of social life and I have always found that it is far easier to accept invitations than to invent plausible excuses for refusing them. I do not consider that I am in any way bound by my acceptance in most cases. Dinners are exceptional. It is not fair to say that you will dine at a house unless you really mean to do it. But the givers of miscellaneous entertainments, of dances, receptions, private concerts and such things are best dealt with by accepting their invitations and then consulting one's own convenience. That is what I thought people were doing to me.

I had no reason to expect any other treatment. I was not offering food or wine in large quantities or of fine kind. I was not a prominent figure in London society. My party was of no importance from a political or a financial point of view and I could scarcely expect the scientific world to take a cinematograph seriously. Yet I found myself the host of a number of very distinguished guests, many of whom I did not even know by sight.

Three Cabinet Ministers arrived, looking, as men immersed in great affairs ought to look, slightly absent-minded and rather surprised to find themselves where they were. They were Cabinet Ministers of a minor kind, not men in the first flight. I owed their presence to Gorman's exertions in the House of Commons. He told me that he intended to interest the Government in Tim's invention on the ground that it promised an opportunity of popularising and improving national education. I had a seat kept for Ascher beside the Cabinet Ministers. I did not suppose that he would particularly want to talk to them, but I was sure that they would like to spend the evening in the company of one of our greatest financiers.

No less than five members of the Royal Society came, bringing their wives and a numerous flock of daughters. They were men of high scientific attainments. One of them was engaged in some experiments with pigs, experiments which were supposed to lead to important discoveries in the science of eugenics. I cannot even imagine why he came to see a cinematograph. Another of them had written a book to expound a new theory of crystallisation. I have never studied crystallisation, but I believe it is a process by which particles of solid matter, temporarily separated by some liquid medium, draw together and coalesce. My scientists and their families afforded a good example of the process. They arrived at different times, went at first to different parts of the hall, got mixed up with all sorts of other people, but long before the entertainment began they had drawn together and formed a solid block among my guests.

Two Royal Academicians, one of them a well-known portrait painter, arrived a little late. They were men whom I knew pretty well and liked. They have urbane and pleasant manners, and are refreshingly free from affectations and fads. In my opinion they both paint very good pictures. I introduced them to Mrs. Ascher; but this, as I should have known if I had stopped to think, was a mistake. Mrs. Ascher regards the Royal Academy as the home of an artistic anti-Christ and Academicians as the deadliest foes of art. Not even the suave courtesy of my two friends saved them from the unpleasant experience of hearing the truth about themselves. Mrs. Ascher was not, of course, bluntly rude to them, and did not speak with offensive directness. She poked the truth at them edgewise, the truth that is, as she saw it.

The church did not support me very well. I distinctly remember inviting six bishops. Only one came and he was Irish. However, he wore silk stockings and a violet coat of aggressively ecclesiastical cut, so he looked quite as well as if he had had a seat in the House of Lords. I introduced him to the eugenic pig breeder, but they did not seem to hit it off together. After a few remarks, probably about the weather, they separated. The eugenicist is rather a shaggy man to look at. That may have prejudiced the bishop against him. I imagine that most bishops feel shagginess to be embarrassing.

Lady Kingscourt brought a large party, chiefly women in very splendid attire. There were, I think, eight of them altogether, and they had only one man with them, a subaltern in a Guards regiment. He slipped away almost at once, telling me as he passed out, that he wanted to telephone to a friend and that he would be back in a few minutes. I do not think he came back at all. He probably went to his club. I do not know what was said to him the next day by the ladies he deserted. I thanked Lady Kingscourt for coming. I really think it was very good of her to come. She had fair warning that Gorman was going to make a speech and she knew that all Gorman's political friends, probably Gorman himself, regarded her as an abandoned woman who played fast and loose with the morals of military officers and undermined their naturally enthusiastic loyalty to Liberal Governments. By way of acknowledgment of my quite sincere thanks Lady Kingscourt squeezed my hand.

"I always make a point," she said, "of encouraging any movement for the good of the masses. They are such deserving dear things, aren't they?"

It is impossible to guess at what Lady Kingscourt thought we were doing; but her heart was warm and kind. If ever class hatred comes to play an important part in English life it will not be the fault of the aristocracy. I doubt whether any labourer would sacrifice his evening's leisure to encourage a movement for the good of Lady Kingscourt. Nor would the kindest Socialist speak of women of the upper classes as "deserving dear things." The nicest term used by progressive people to describe these ladies is "parasites," and they often, as we had just been learning, call them worse names than that.

Lady Kingscourt and her party represented the highest layer of fashionable life. I had, besides her, a large number of women of slightly dimmer glory who were yet quite as finely dressed as Lady Kingscourt, and

were, I am sure, equally eager for the good of the masses. My hall, not a very large one, was well filled before nine o'clock. I had every reason to congratulate myself on the success of my party, so far. It remained to be seen whether Gorman would make a good speech and whether Tim's ghosts would exhibit themselves satisfactorily. Between the speech and the ghosts my guests would have an opportunity of drinking tea and champagne cup, handed round by twelve nice looking girls wearing black and white dresses, hired out to me (both the girls and the dresses) for the evening by the firm which had undertaken to manage the refreshments.

According to my time table Gorman ought to have begun his speech at nine o'clock. Instead of doing so he came to me and whispered that he would give late comers ten minutes law.

"Nothing more unpleasant for an audience," he said, "than having their toes trodden on by people who come in late, just as they are beginning to get interested in what is going on."

Nothing, I imagine, is more unpleasant for a speaker than to have his audience looking round to see who the newcomers are, just as he is beginning to warm to his subject. I gathered from his anxiety about the audience, that Gorman intended to make a great effort. I looked forward to his speech. Gorman, at his best, is really a very fine speaker.

At ten minutes past nine Gorman mounted the platform, the narrow strip of platform left for him in front of the pits occupied by Tim's apparatus. The clatter of general conversation ceased, and the Cabinet Ministers, sitting in the front row with Ascher, clapped their hands. The rest of the audience, realising that applause was desirable, also clapped their hands. Gorman bowed and smiled.

Then my elbow was jerked sharply. I looked round and saw Jack Heneage. Jack is a nice boy, the son of an old friend of mine. I have known him ever since he first went to school. About six months ago his father and I between us secured a very nice appointment for the boy, a sort of private secretaryship or something of that sort. I understood at the time that Jack's business was to run messages for an important man's wife; and that the appointment would lead on to something good in the political world. I was surprised to see him standing beside me for I had not asked him to my party and he was not wearing evening clothes. Jack would never go anywhere, willingly, unless he were properly dressed.

"Sit down," I said, "and don't talk. Mr. Gorman is just going to make a speech."

"Is Ascher here?" said Jack.

"He is; in the front row."

"Thank God. I've been chasing him all over London. Office, club, private house, tearing round in a taxi for hours. My Chief wants him."

"Your chief can't get him now," I said. "Not for half an hour, perhaps three quarters. Gorman isn't likely to stop under three quarters. Till he does you can't get Ascher."

"I must," said Jack. "I simply must. It's—it's frightfully important."

Gorman began his speech. I did not hear what he said because I was trying to restrain Jack Heneage, but the audience laughed, so I suppose he began with a joke. Jack shook off my hold on his arm and walked right up to the front of the hall. I saw Gorman scowling at him but Jack did not seem to mind that in the least. He handed a note to Ascher. Gorman said something about the very distinguished audience before him, a remark plainly intended to fill in the time while Jack and Ascher were finishing their business. Ascher read the note, rose from his seat and came towards me. Everybody looked at him and at Jack who was following him. Gorman repeated what he had said about the distinguished audience.

"I find," Ascher said to me, "that I am obliged to leave you. I am very sorry."

"I have a taxi outside," said Jack, pushing Ascher towards the door.

Ascher lingered, looking at me wistfully. "I may not be able to return," he said. "If I cannot will you bring my wife home? The car will be here and can drive you back to your rooms afterwards."

I was a little surprised at the request. Mrs. Ascher is, I should think, pretty well able to take care of herself.

"I think we ought to start, sir," said Jack Heneage, taking Ascher by the arm.

"Perhaps," said Ascher to me, "if you are kind enough to see my wife home you will wait in my house till I get back. I may have something to say to you. It is possible that I shall reach the house before you do, but I may be late. I do not know. Will you wait for me?"

"Won't you come on, sir?" said Jack.

I noticed, then, that Jack was excited and nervous. I do not ever remember having seen him excited or nervous before, not even when he went in second wicket down in the Eton and Harrow match with seventy runs to make and an hour left to play. I held Ascher's coat for him and watched them get into the taxi together.

When I got back to the hall Gorman was well into his speech and had captured the attention of his audience. I was able to pick up the thread of what he was saying almost at once. He was discoursing on the arts of peace, contrasting them with the arts of war. In past ages, so Gorman said, the human intellect had occupied itself mainly in devising means for destroying life and had been indifferent to the task of preserving it. Gunpowder was invented long before the antitoxin for diphtheria was discovered. Steel was used for swords ages before any one thought of making it into motor cars. These were Gorman's illustrations. I should not have thought that motor cars actually preserve life; but Gorman is a good orator and a master in the art of concealing the weak points of his argument. His hearers were quite ready to ignore the mortality statistics of our new motor traffic. The pig-breeding scientist led a round of applause.

Gorman developed his theme. The intellect of the modern world, he said, was not only occupied with the problems of preserving life, but was bent on making life more convenient and happier, especially the life of the toiling masses of our people. The mediaeval world built cathedrals, fine castles, Doge's palaces and such things. We have supplied mankind with penny postage stamps. Which, Gorman asked, is the greater achievement: to house a Doge or two in a building too big for them or to enable countless mothers—sorrowing and lonely women—to communicate by letter with the children who had left the maternal home?

After dwelling for some time on the conveniences Gorman passed on to speak of the pleasures of modern life. He said that pleasures were more important than work, because without pleasures no work could be really well done. When he reached that point I began to see how he meant to work up to the cinematograph and Tim's invention. I tried to get a glimpse of Mrs. Ascher's face. I wanted to find out how she was taking this glorification of Tim's blasphemy against art. Unfortunately I could only see the back of her head. I moved along the side of the hall as much as I dared in the hope of getting a sight of her face from some angle. I failed. To this day I do not know whether Mrs. Ascher admired Gorman's art as an orator enough to make her forgive the vile purpose for which it was used.

When I began to listen to the speech again Gorman had reached his peroration.

The arts of war, he said, were the natural fruits of the human intellect in a society organised on an aristocratic basis. The development of the arts of peace and pleasure followed the birth of democracy. Tyrants and robber barons in old days loved to fight and lived to kill. The common, kindly men and women of our time, the now at length sovereign people, lived to love and desire peace above all things.

"The spirit of democracy," said Gorman, "is moving through the world. Its coming is like the coming of the spring, gentle, kindly, gradual. We see it not, but in the fields and hedgerows of the world, past which it moves, we see the green buds bursting into leaf, the myriad-tinted flowers opening their petals to the sunlight. We see the lives of humble men made glad, and our hearts are established with strong faith; faith in the spirit whose beneficence we recognise, the spirit which at last is guiding the whole wide world into the way of peace."

I gathered from these concluding remarks that all danger of war had passed from the horizon of humanity since the Liberal Government muzzled the House of Lords.

Gorman did not mention this great feat in plain words. He suggested it in such a way that the Cabinet Ministers in front of him understood what he meant, while Lady Kingscourt and her friends thought he was referring to a revolution in China or Portugal or the establishment of some kind of representative government in Thibet. Thus every one was pleased and Gorman climbed down from the platform amid a burst of applause.

Lady Kingscourt clapped her pretty hands as loudly as any one. Her husband is a territorial magnate. Her brothers are soldiers. But she is prepared to welcome democracy and universal peace as warmly as any of us. Perhaps what attracted her in Gorman's programme was the prospect of a great increase in the pleasures of life.

We drank tea, ate sandwiches, cheered our hearts with champagne cup, chattered loudly, and, the men of the party, stretched our legs for half an hour. Then we settled down again to gape at Tim's moving figures. The new mirrors were well worth the money I spent on them. The thing worked better, far better, than when I saw it in the barn. I think the audience was greatly pleased. Everybody said so to me when the time came for escape from the hall.

Mrs. Ascher and I drove back to Hampstead together. I told her how Ascher had left the hall and that it might be late before he got home. She sat silent beside me and I thought that she was wondering what had happened to her husband. Just before we reached the house she spoke, and I discovered that she had all the time been thinking of something else, not Ascher's absence.

"I was wrong," she said, "in condemning the cinematograph and this new invention. It is—at present it is vile beyond words, vile as I thought it; but I see now that there are possibilities."

"May I tell Tim that?" I said. "It would cheer him greatly. The poor boy has never really got over what you said to him in New York, about blasphemy, you know."

"You may tell him," said Mrs. Ascher, "that his invention is capable of being used for the ends of art; that he has created a mechanical body and that *we*, the artists, must breathe into it the breath of life."

We reached the house.

"I am coming in, if I may," I said. "Mr. Ascher asked me to see him to-night if possible. I promised to wait for him even if he does not get home till very late."

"I shall not sit up with you," said Mrs. Ascher. "I want to be alone to think. I want to discover the way in which art is to take possession of mechanics, how it is to inspire all new discoveries, to raise them from the level of material things up and up to the mountain tops of beautiful emotion."

"I shall tell Tim that," I said. "He'll be awfully pleased."

Mrs. Ascher held my hand, bidding me an impressive good-night.

"There is a spirit," she said, "which moves among the multitudinous blind gropings of humanity. It moves all unseen and unknown by men, guiding their pitiful endeavours to the Great End. That End is Duty. That spirit is Art. To recognise it is Faith."

The Irish bishop who attended my party is a liberal and highly educated churchman. He once told me about a Spirit which moves very much as Mrs. Ascher's does. Its aim was goodness and the bishop called it God. His definition of faith was, except for the different object, precisely Mrs. Ascher's.

Gorman propounds a somewhat similar philosophy of life, and occasionally talks about faith in the same rapt way. I do not suppose that he actually holds the faith he preaches, certainly not as Mrs. Ascher and the bishop hold theirs. No Irishman is, or ever can be, a Liberal after the English fashion; but Gorman does talk about the spirit of democracy and says he looks forward to its guiding Humanity to a great end, universal peace.

I made my way into Ascher's study, wondering how long I should have to wait for him.

I wondered where he was and what he was doing. Who sent Jack Heneage to search for Ascher? I could not remember whose private secretary Jack was. Mrs. Ascher was thinking of art and beauty, the bishop, no doubt about God and goodness. Gorman was turning over in his mind nice new phrases about democracy and peace. What was Ascher doing?

CHAPTER XVII.

Ascher's servant followed me into the study. He placed a little table beside the chair on which I sat. He set a decanter of whisky, a syphon of soda water and a box of cigars at my elbow. He brought a reading lamp and put it behind me, switching on the electric current so that the light fell brightly over my shoulder. He turned off the other lights in the room. He asked me if there were anything else he could do for me. Then he left me.

A clock, somewhere behind me, chimed. It was a quarter to twelve. I poured out some whisky and lit a cigar. I sat wondering what Ascher was doing. The clock chimed again and then it struck. It was twelve o'clock. It was a clock with a singularly mellow gong. The sounds it made were soft and unaggressive. There was no rude challenge in its assertion that time was passing on, but the very gentleness of its warnings, a gentleness deeply tinged with melancholy, infected me with a strange restlessness. When for the third time its chiming broke the heavy silence of the room, I rose from my chair. The gloom which surrounded the circle of light in which I sat weighed on my spirits. I touched a switch and set the lights above the fireplace shining.

Over the mantelpiece hung a picture, a landscape painting. A flock of sheep wandered through a misty valley. There were great mountains in the background, their slopes and tops dimly, discernible through a haze. The haze and the mist wreaths would certainly soon clear away, dispersed by a rising sun. The whole scene would be stripped of its mystery. The mountain sides, the valley stream and the grazing sheep would be seen clear and bare in the merciless light of a summer morning. The painter had chosen the moment while the mystery of dawn endured. I felt that he feared the passing of it, that he shrank from the inevitable coming of the hour when everything would be clear and all the outlines sharp, when the searching sun would tear away the compassionate coverings, when nature would appear less beautiful than his heart hoped it was. It was with this picture, with this and one other, that Ascher chose to live.

I moved round the room, turning on yet other lights. Over Ascher's writing desk hung a full length portrait of a woman, of Mrs. Ascher, but painted many years ago. I have no idea who the artist was but he had seen his sitter in no common way. The girl, she was no more than a girl when the picture was painted, stood facing me from the canvas. She was dressed in a long, trailing, pale green robe. Her hands were folded in front of her. Her head was a little thrown back, so that her neck was visible. Her skin, even then in the early days of her womanhood, was almost colourless. The red colour of her hair saved the picture from deathly coldness, contrasting sharply with the mass of pale green drapery and the pallid skin.

I have never thought of Mrs. Ascher as a beautiful woman or one who at any time of her life could have been beautiful. But the artist, whoever he was, had seen in her a singular alluring charm. I cannot imagine that I could ever have been affected by her even if I had seen her as the artist did, as no doubt Ascher did. I like normal people and common things. I should have been afraid of the woman in the picture. I am in no way like Keats' "Knight at Arms." I should simply have run away from the "Belle Dame sans merci," and no amount of fairy songs or manna dew would have enabled her to have me in thrall. But I could understand how Ascher, who evidently has a taste for that kind of thing, might have been fascinated by the morbid beauty of the girl in the picture. I could understand how the fascination might become an enduring thing; a great love; how Ascher would still be drawn to the woman long after the elfishness of girlhood passed away. The soul would still remain gleaming out of those narrow eyes.

The clock chimed close beside me. It was a quarter to one. I sat down again, poured out more whisky and lit a fresh cigar. I left all the lights in the room shining. I was determined to drag myself back to the commonplace and to cheerfulness.

I took a book from the table beside me. It was evidently a book which Ascher had been reading. A thin ivory blade lay between the pages, marking the place he had reached. The book was a prophetic forecast of the State of the future, a record of one of those dreams of better, calmer times, which haunt the spirits of brave and good men, to which cowards turn when they are made faint by the contemplation of present evil things. I read a page or two in one part of the book and a page or two in another. I read in one place a whole chapter. I discerned in the author an underlying faith in the natural goodness of man. He believed, his whole argument was based on the belief, that all men, but especially common men, the manual workers, would gladly turn away from greed and lust and envy, would live in beauty and peace, naturally, without effort, if only they were set free from the pressure of want and the threat of hunger. The evil which troubles us, so this dreamer seemed to hold, is not in ourselves or of our nature. It is the result of the conditions in which we live, conditions created by our mistakes, not by our vices. I wondered if Ascher, with his wide knowledge of the world, believed in such a creed or even cherished a hope that it might be true. Do men, in fact, become saints straightway when their bellies are full?

It is strange how childish memories awaken in us suddenly. As I laid down Ascher's book there came to me a picture of a scene in my old home. We were at prayers in the dining-room. My father sat at a little table with a great heavy Bible before him. Ranged along the wall in front of him was the long line of servants, the butler a little apart from the others as befitted the chief of the staff. My governess and I sat together in a corner near the fire. My father read, in a flat, unemotional voice, read words which he absolutely believed to be the words of God. "Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Well, that is a different creed. To me it seems more consonant with the facts of life. Man as he is can neither enter into nor create a great society nor enjoy peace which comes of love. Hitherto the new birth of the Spirit, which bloweth where it listeth, has been for a few in every generation. The hour of rebirth for the mass of men still lingers. Will it ever come—the time when all the young men see visions and all the old men dream dreams?

I stirred uneasily in my chair and looked up. I had not heard him enter the room, but Ascher stood beside me.

"I am glad you are here," he said. "I hoped you would be; but I am very late."

"Yes," I said, "you are very late. It is long after midnight. Where have you been? What have you been

doing?"

Ascher sat down opposite to me, and for some time he did not speak. I made no attempt to press my questions. If Ascher wanted to talk to me he would do so in his own time and in the way he chose. I supposed that he did want to talk to me. He had asked me to his house. He had bidden me wait for him.

"I have no right," said Ascher at last, "to trouble you with my difficulties. I ought to think them out and fight them out for myself; but it will be a help to me if I can put them into words and feel that you are listening to me."

He paused for so long that I felt I must make some reply to him, though I did not know what to say.

"I don't suppose I can be of any use to you," I said, "but if I can——"

"Perhaps you can," said Ascher. "You can listen to me at least. Perhaps you can do more. It is a large call to make upon your friendship to treat you in this manner, but—I am in some ways a lonely man."

I have always, since the day I first met him, liked and respected Ascher. When he spoke about his loneliness I felt a sudden wave of pity for him. It seems a strange thing to say, but at that moment I had a strong affection for the man.

"What I partly foresaw and greatly dreaded has come," he said. "I am certain now that war is inevitable, a great war, almost perhaps in the end quite worldwide."

"And England?" I said, "is England, too——?"

"Almost inevitably."

"Germany?" I said.

Ascher nodded.

I was throbbing with excitement. For the moment I felt nothing but a sense of exultation, strangely out of harmony with the grave melancholy with which Ascher spoke. I suppose the soldier instinct survives in me, an inheritance from generations of my forefathers, all of whom have worn swords, many of whom have fought. We have done our part in building up the British Empire, we Irish gentlemen, fighting, as Virgil's bees worked, ourselves in our own persons, but not for our own gain. There is surely not one battlefield of all where the flag of England has flown on which we have not led men, willing to fall at the head of them. It seems strange now, looking back on it, that such an emotion should have been possible; but at the moment I felt an overmastering sense of awful joy at Ascher's news.

"I cannot tell you where I have been to-night," said Ascher, "nor with whom I have been talking. Still less must I repeat what I have heard, but this much I think I may say. I was sent for to give my advice on certain matters connected with finance, to express an opinion about what will happen, what dangers threaten in that world, my world, the world of money."

"There'll be an infernal flurry on the Stock Exchange," I said. "Prices will come tumbling down about men's ears. Fellows will go smash in every direction."

"There will be much more than that," said Ascher. "The declaration of war will not simply mean the ruin of a few speculators here and there. You know enough about the modern system of credit to realise something of what we have to face. There will be a sudden paralysis of the nerves and muscles of the whole world-wide body of commercial and industrial life. The heart will stop beating for a short time—only for a short time I hope—and no blood will go through the veins and arteries."

Ascher spoke very gravely. Yet, though I had spent months watching the workings of his machine, I could not at the moment share his mood. The war fever was in my blood.

"I should change my metaphor," said Ascher. "It is not a case of a body where the heart pumps blood into the arteries, but of springs which make brooks, brooks which flow into streams, which in their turn feed great rivers. Now those springs will be frozen. In a million places of which you and I do not even know the names, credit will be frozen suddenly. There will be no water in the brooks and streams. The rivers will run dry."

Ascher had asked for my sympathy. I did my best to give it.

"It's a tremendous responsibility for you," I said, "and men like you. But you'll pull through. The whole thing can't collapse, simply can't. It's too big."

"Perhaps," said Ascher, "perhaps. But it is not that side of the matter which I wish to speak to you about. You will forgive me if I say that you can hardly understand or appreciate it. What I want to say to you is something more personal. I want"—Ascher smiled wanly—"to talk about myself."

"You stand to lose heavily," I said. "I see that."

"I do not know," said Ascher, "whether at the end of a week I shall own one single penny in the world. I may very well have lost everything. But if that were all I should not trouble much. Merely to lose money—but——"

He stopped speaking, and for a long while sat silent. The clock behind me chimed again. It was half past two.

"I suppose," said Ascher, "that you have always thought of me as an Englishman."

"To tell you the truth," I said, "I've never thought whether you are an Englishman or not. I wasn't interested. I suppose I took it for granted that you were English."

"I am a German," said Ascher. "I was born in Hamburg, of German parents. All my relations are Germans. I came over to England as a young man and went into business here. My business—I do not know why—is one to which Englishmen do not take readily. There are English bankers of course, but not very many English financiers. Yet my particular kind of banking, international banking, can best be carried on in England. That is why I am here, why my business is centred in London, though I myself am not an Englishman. I am a German. Please understand that. My brother is a general in the German Army. My sister's sons are in the German Army and Navy. My blood ties are with the people from whom I came."

I realised that Ascher was stating a case of conscience, was perhaps asking my advice. It seemed to me that there was only one thing which I could advise, only one possible course for Ascher to take. Whatever

happened to his business or his private fortune he must be true to his own people. I was about to say this when Ascher raised his hand slightly and stopped me.

"I want you to understand," he said, "my blood ties are with the people from whom I came; but I am now wholly English in my sympathies. I see things from the English point of view, not from the German. I am sure that it will be a good thing for the world if England and her Allies win, a bad thing if Germany is victorious in the war before us. Yet the blood tie remains. Who was the Englishman who said, 'My country, may she always be right, but my country right or wrong'? It seems to me a mean thing to desert my country now, even although I have become a stranger to her. Is it not a kind of disloyalty to range myself with her enemies?"

Again Ascher paused. This time I was less ready to answer him.

"I have also to consider this," he went on, "and here I get to the very heart of my difficulty. I have lived most of my life here, and I have built up my business on an English foundation. I have been able to build it up because I had ready made for me that foundation of integrity which your English merchants have established by centuries of honest dealing. Without that—if the world had not believed that my business was English, and therefore stable, I could not have built at all or should have built with much greater difficulty. My bank is English, though I, who control it, am not. If I go back to my own people now, now when it seems treachery to desert them, the whole machinery of the vast system of credit which I guide will cease to work, will break to fragments. Of my own loss I say nothing, indeed I think nothing. But what of the other men, thousands of them who are involved with me, whose affairs are inextricably mixed with mine, who have trusted not me, but my bank, trusted it because it is an English institution? And it is English. Have I the right to ruin them and to break up my bank, which belongs to your nation, of which in a sense I am no more than a trustee for England? You understand, do you not? My bank is just as certainly of English birth as I am of German birth. Yet it and I are one. We cannot be divided. What am I to do?"

Ascher was asking questions; but I did not think that he was asking them of me. I felt that it was my part to listen, not to answer. Besides what could I answer? Ascher had given me a glimpse of one of those intolerable dilemmas from which there is no way of escape. The choice between right and wrong, when the nobler and baser parts of our nature are in conflict, is often very difficult and painful. But there are times—this was one of them—when two of the nobler, two of the very noblest of our instincts, are set against each other. When we can only do right by doing wrong at the same time, when to be loyal we must turn traitors.

When Ascher spoke again he seemed to have drifted away from the subject of the coming war, the financial catastrophe and his own trouble. I did not, for some time, guess where his words were leading.

"I have been a very careful observer of English life," he said, "ever since I first came to this country, and no class in your nation has interested me more than you minor gentry, the second grade of your aristocracy."

"Often spoken of as the squirearchy," I said. "It is generally supposed to be the most useless and the least intelligent part of the community. It is rapidly disappearing, which, I daresay, is a fortunate thing."

"Your greater nobility," said Ascher, "is modernised, is necessarily more or less cosmopolitan. It has international interests and is occupied with great affairs. It has been forced to accept the standard of ethics in accordance with which great affairs are managed. Your merchants and manufacturers have their own code, by no means a low one, and their theory of right and wrong. Between these two classes come the men with lesser titles or no titles at all, families which spring from roots centuries deep in the soil of England, men of some wealth, but not of great riches. They have their own standard, their code, their peculiar touchstone for distinguishing fine conduct from its imitation, their ethic."

"Yes," I said, "I can understand your being interested in that. It is a survival of a certain antiquarian value. It is the quaintest standard of conduct imaginable, totally unreasonable and inconsistent. But it exists. There are some things which a gentleman of that class will not do."

"Exactly. These men—may I say you, for it is you I am thinking of. You have your sense of honour."

I never was more surprised in my life than I was when Ascher said that to me. Nothing that I have ever said or done in his company could possibly have led him to suppose that I am a victim of that outworn superstition known as the honour of a gentleman.

"You have an instinct," said Ascher, "inherited through many generations, a highly specialised sense, now nearly infallible, for knowing what is honourable and what is base. I do not know that any of my countrymen have that sense. I am sure that the class to which I belong has not. We look at things in a different way."

"A much better way," I said, "more practical."

"Yes, more practical. Better perhaps in the sense of being wiser. But I have a wish, an odd fancy if you like, to see things your way, to guide my conduct according to your standard of honour."

As well as I could make out Ascher was asking me to decide for him on which horn of his infernal dilemma he was to impale himself, and to base my decision on a perfectly absurd and arbitrary set of rules for conduct, none of which could by any possibility be made to apply to a situation like his.

"My dear Ascher," I said, "I can't possibly judge for you."

"You could judge if it were your own case," he said. "You could certainly judge then. Have you ever in your life been in the smallest doubt, even for a moment, about the way of honour, which it is?"

"That is all very well," I said; "I quite admit I do know that. I generally do the other thing, but I know what I ought to do according to the ridiculous standard of my class. But I don't know what you ought to do. That's a different thing altogether."

"Because I am not of your class? not a gentleman?"

"Don't talk nonsense," I said. "There aren't any gentlemen left. The species is extinct. The very name of it is vulgarised. You're as near being one as anybody I know. And that has nothing to do with it. Gentleman or not, you've got to decide for yourself. No man living can do it for you."

"Your class would decide for me if I belonged to it," said Ascher. "The collective wisdom of your class, the class instinct. It would make me certain, leave me in no doubt at all, if only I belonged to it, were one of you. The choice I have to make——"

Ascher paused.

"It's a nasty choice to have to make. You've got to be disloyal either way you go. That's what it comes to."

"There is no other way," said Ascher sadly, "no third way."

"Not that I can see."

There was, in fact, a third way, though I did not see it at the time. Mrs. Ascher discovered it. I heard of it two days later.

CHAPTER XVIII.

No one has greater respect and admiration for Ascher than I have. I respect his ability. I admire his cool detachment of mind and his unflinching feeling for justice. I recognise in him a magnanimity, a certain knightliness which is very rare. But it is vain to pretend that I can ever regard Ascher as an intimate friend. I am never quite comfortable in his company. He lacks something, something essential. He lacks a sense of humour.

No one in England—no one I suppose in Europe—wanted to make jokes during that critical week which followed my interview with Ascher. The most abandoned buffoon shrank from jesting when every morning brought a fresh declaration of war by one great power on another. But even under such circumstances the sense of the ridiculous survives—a thing to be carefully concealed—in those who are fortunate enough to possess it. Ascher has no sense of the ridiculous. He sees men and women clad in long, stately robes moving through life with grave dignity like Arab chiefs or caliphs of Bagdad. He sees their actions conditioned and to some extent controlled by the influences of majestic inhuman powers, the genii of eastern tales, huge, cloud-girt spirits of oppressive solemnity. In reality most people wear motley all day long and the fairy powers are leprechauns, tricky, irresponsible sprites, willing enough to make merry with those who can laugh with them; but players of all Puck's tricks on "wisest aunts telling saddest tales."

I sometimes think that it is Ascher's chivalry, his fine knightliness, which has killed his sense of humour. I cannot suppose that Sir Galahad found any delight in the quips of fools. His owl-like eyes, large with the wonder of Holy Grails, looked stupidly on faces wrinkled with merriment. King Arthur could never have talked as he did to Guinevere—Tennyson is my authority for the things he said—if he had not had in him the soul of an earnest member of a league for the sympathetic study of social problems. Ascher is as chivalrous as any member of King Arthur's fellowship, and humour, if he ever had the sense of it, is dead in him. But perhaps he was born without it and is by nature hopelessly serious because he is a German. For the Germans never seem to be able to appreciate the fact that the grandiose is invariably comic, and that nothing in the world is more difficult than to stand toes to the line of the high heroic without stepping across it into the region of the ridiculous. I think of Wagner's "Parsifal," of Nietzsche's "Zara-thrusta," of the Kaiser Wilhelm's amazing "Weltauf-fassung," and it seems to me that such things could not be in any nation where one single man knew how to laugh.

If Ascher had in him the faintest glimmering of a sense of humour he would never have appealed to me, choosing the silent and ghostly middle of the night for the performance, to decide his point of honour for him. What am I that he should imagine me capable of settling high questions of that kind? An expatriated Irishman, a dispossessed landlord, a man without one high ambition, a mere mocker of enthusiasm of every kind. No one, unless he were absolutely blind to the ridiculous, would have consulted me on such a subject as the honour of a gentleman.

Yet, in her total lack of humour, Mrs. Ascher is as bad as her husband is. If such a thing were possible I should say that she is worse. There is, at all events, less excuse for her. She is not knightly, not very knightly, though she did champion the cause of poor, oppressed Ireland. She is an American, not a German, and the Americans pay high honour to their humourists. Perhaps she has lived too long with Ascher. Perhaps she has devoted herself too much to art and her steady contemplation of the sublime has killed her sense of the ridiculous. At all events it is dead. She has no humour now.

It is almost impossible to imagine that any woman would have been capable of calling in Gorman and me as advisers and helpers at a critical moment of her life. Yet that is what Mrs. Ascher did.

We obeyed the summons of course, both of us.

Gorman got there first. I found him seated opposite Mrs. Ascher in the large drawing-room of the house in Hampstead. Mrs. Ascher is lacking in humour, but she has a fine sense of dramatic propriety. Great decisions can only be come to fittingly, mighty spiritual tragedies can only be satisfactorily enacted, in spacious rooms. And there must be emptiness. Knicknacks and pretty ornaments kill high emotion. The chamber of a dainty woman, the room which delicate femininity has made its own, will suit a light flirtation, the love-making of a summer afternoon, but deep passion is out of place in it.

I walked cautiously across a wide space of slippery floor in order to shake hands with Mrs. Ascher. I saw that Gorman was sitting in a huge straight-backed chair with heavily carved elbow rests. It was the sort of chair which would have suited a bishop—in the chancel of his cathedral, not in his private room—and a major excommunication might very suitably have been delivered from it.

"I am in great trouble," said Mrs. Ascher, "and I have asked you two to come to me because you are my friends. I was right to call you, was I not?"

She looked at Gorman and then at me, evidently expecting us to make a confession of friendship for her. Gorman wriggled in a way that made me think the carving of the chair must be sticking into him somewhere. But he did not fail Mrs. Ascher.

"You were right," he said with deep feeling, "altogether right."

I was not going to be outdone by Gorman.

"A friend," I said, "'must bear a friend's infirmities.'"

The quotation was not wholly happy, but Mrs. Ascher seemed to like it. She smiled gratefully.

"My husband," she said.

I knew it must be her husband's affairs which were troubling her.

"He is in a very difficult position," I said. "I had a long talk with him the other night. It seems to me that he has to choose between—"

Gorman interrupted me.

"He's in an infernally awkward hole," he said. "The English people will lose their tempers to a certainty, not at first perhaps, but as soon as anything goes against them. When they do they'll make things damnably unpleasant for any one who's suspected of being German or even remotely connected with Germany. That's the sort of people the English are. And Ascher is just the man they'll fasten on at once. They'll hunt him down."

Mrs. Ascher looked at Gorman while he spoke. Her face expressed a quiet dignity.

"That is not the difficulty," she said. "What people say or think of us or do to us does not matter. We live our own lives. We can always live them, apart from, above the bitter voices of the crowd."

"All the same," said Gorman, "it will be unpleasant. It will be a great deal worse than merely unpleasant. If I were Ascher I should get on the safe side at once. I should give a thumping big subscription—£50,000 or something that will attract attention—to some popular fund. I should offer to present the War Office with half a dozen aeroplanes to be called 'The Ascher Flying Fleet'; or a first-rate cannon of the largest size. A good deal can be done to shut people's mouths in that sort of way."

"You do not understand," said Mrs. Ascher.

She turned to me, evidently hoping that I would explain Ascher's real difficulty to Gorman. I hesitated for a moment. It was plain to me that though Gorman did not appreciate the reality of the spiritual crisis, he did understand something which had escaped me and, so far as I knew, had escaped Ascher also. I had a vivid recollection of the unenviable position of men suspected of lukewarm patriotism during the Boer War. In the struggle we were then entering upon popular passion would be far more highly excited. The position of the Aschers in England might become impossible.

Gorman with his highly developed faculty for gauging the force and direction of popular opinion understood at once and thoroughly the difficulties that lay before Ascher. What he did not understand was the peculiar difficulty which Ascher felt. I responded to Mrs. Ascher's glance of appeal and tried to explain things to Gorman.

"Ascher," I said, "is pulled two ways. His country is pulling him. That's the call of patriotism. You ought to understand that, Gorman. You're a tremendous patriot yourself. But if he goes back to his country now he absolutely ruins his business. That means a lot more than merely losing his money. It means more even than losing other people's money, the money of the men who trusted him. It means that he must be false to his commercial honour. You see that, don't you, Gorman? And there doesn't seem any way out of the dilemma. He has got to go back on his patriotism or on his honour. There is no other course."

I looked at Mrs. Ascher for approval. I had stated her husband's dilemma clearly, I believed fairly. Gorman could hardly fail to understand. I thought Mrs. Ascher would have been pleased with me. To my amazement she acknowledged my efforts with a burst of indignation.

"Oh," she cried, "you do not understand, either of you. You do not even begin to understand. I suppose you cannot, because you are men and not women. You men! All of you, my husband, too, though he is far above the rest of you—but even he! You concern yourselves about things which are nothing. You argue about phantoms and discuss them as if they were realities. And all the time you miss the things which are. You think"—she spoke directly to Gorman and her voice expressed the utmost scorn—"you think about reputation, the way men babble about each other and will babble about us. Why should we care? Even if we were afraid of what men say there are places in the world to which the voices of Europe cannot reach. There are islands in the sea where the sun shines and palm trees grow, to which the talk of men who dwell in cities never comes."

I recollected the desire which Mrs. Ascher had once expressed to me of getting "far, far away from everywhere." She evidently hoped to be able to try that experiment.

She turned from Gorman and faced me.

"You talk," she said, "about honour and patriotism. What are they? Words, just words. It is only you men, slaves of your own conventions, who take them for realities. We women know better. You go about life imagining that your limbs are bound with fetters. They are bound with delusions. We women know. Love and beauty are real. Nothing else is. All your fine words are like the flags under which your dupes go out to die; fluttering rags to us whose eyes are open. You talk—oh, so finely you talk—about the shadows your own imaginings cast, and you end in being afraid of them. You talk—you dare to talk to me of money—"

This was a totally unjust accusation. I had not talked about money. I had more sense than to mention money to a woman in Mrs. Ascher's frame of mind.

"I have money enough of my own," she said. "He and I want very little. What do we care for except just to love each other and to see beautiful things and to escape from all this nightmare of blood and hate and horror and hideousness?"

I felt helpless. Mrs. Ascher had undoubtedly hit on a new solution of the problem. She proposed that Ascher should impale himself not on one or other, but on both horns of the dilemma, be false to every kind of honour and loyalty. It was, I suppose, possible for Ascher to pack a bag and take to flight, simply to disappear, leaving everything behind him. He and she might go to some valley in the Rocky Mountains, to some unknown creek on the Californian coast, to some island in the South Pacific. If she were right about honour and faithfulness and patriotism, if these are, after all, only idols of the tribe, then she and Ascher might be

very happy. They would have all that either of them required.

I looked at Gorman. He shrugged his shoulders, helpless as I was. Mrs. Ascher began to plead with us in a way that was very strange to listen to.

"Life is so short," she said. "Already most of it is gone from us. We have only a few years more, he and I. Why should we be miserable? There is happiness waiting for us. There is nothing between us and happiness except words, honor, patriotism, right, wrong. These are words, only words. They are gossamer threads which we break as we go, break without feeling them if only we go boldly. Will you not help me? Tell him that what I say is true. He will listen to you because you are men; and you know in your hearts that I speak what is true, that I have hold upon reality."

There was a moment's silence after she stopped speaking. Before either Gorman or I attempted to make any answer Ascher himself came into the room. I certainly did not expect to see him. Mrs. Ascher was, I am sure, as much surprised as I was. It was about twelve o'clock and at that hour Ascher is always in his office. He crossed the room quietly. He greeted Gorman and me without a sign that our presence was unexpected or unwelcome. He went to his wife and took her hand in his. She clung to him, looking up into his face. She knew at once that he had something very important to say to her.

"You have decided?" she said.

Ascher's eyes met hers. His face seemed to me full of tenderness and pity. He held her hand tightly. He bowed his head, a silent "yes" to the question she asked.

"To leave it all and come with me?" she said; "away, away."

Ascher did not speak; but she knew and I knew that his decision was not that.

The scene was very painful. I felt that I had no right whatever to witness it. Gorman, I am sure, would have been glad to escape. But it was very difficult for us to get away. Neither Ascher nor his wife seemed, conscious of our presence. We stood helpless a little apart from them. Gorman, with that unfailing tact of his, did, or tried to do the only thing which could have relieved the intolerable tension. He made an effort to get us all back to the commonplace.

"You're in a devil of an awkward situation, Ascher," he said. "A good deal seems to me to depend on whether you are a naturalised British subject or not. If you have been naturalised you ought to be able to pull through, though it won't be pleasant even then."

"I have not been naturalised," said Ascher. "I never thought of it."

"That's a pity," said Gorman. "Still—in the case of a man in your position I daresay it can be managed even now. I'll use my influence. I know most of the members of the Cabinet pretty well. I can put it to them that, from an English point of view, considering the tremendous importance of your business, considering the financial collapse which would follow—oh, we'll be able to manage."

"Thank you," said Ascher, "but that purely legal aspect of the matter does not at the moment strike me as the most important or the most pressing. No doubt it is important and your kindness will be helpful. But just now I cannot speak about that. There is, you see, my country and the loyalty I owe to it. I do not seem to escape from that obligation by a process of law. I may legalise, but do I really justify, treachery to the claim of patriotism?"

I have always felt,—felt rather than known,—that there is a queer strain of mysticism in Gorman. His arid common sense, his politics, his rhetoric, his tricky money-making, are the outside, visible things about him. Behind them, deep down, seldom seen, is a strange, emotional love for his country. When Ascher spoke as he did about the claim of patriotism Gorman understood. The innermost part of the man was reached. Without hesitating for an instant, without consideration or debate, Gorman leaped to a solution of the problem.

"Loyalty to your country comes first," he said; "it must. Everything else goes by the board. I did not know you felt that way about Germany; but since you do there is no more to be said. Go back to your own country of course. You can't help yourself."

I have no doubt that Gorman meant exactly what he said. If he had been in Ascher's position, if once the issue became quite plain to him and the tangle of political alliances were swept away, he would have thrown all his interests and every other kind of honour to the wind. He would have sacrificed his business, would if necessary have parted with his wife; he would have been loyal to the land of his birth, entirely contemptuous of any other call or any claim.

Mrs. Ascher clung tightly to her husband's arm. "Words," she said, "words, only words. You must not listen to him."

Ascher felt for her hands again, grasped them and held them pressed close against him. He turned from Gorman to me.

"And you," he said, "what are you going to do?"

The question took me by surprise. I had no difficult decision to make. My course was in clear daylight. Besides, it did not matter to any one what I did.

"You, yourself," said Ascher again. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh," I said, "I'm going back to my regiment. I suppose they'll take me. Anyhow I shall offer myself."

"And fight?" said Ascher.

"Well, yes. I suppose I shall fight. This war won't be over in a week. I'm pretty sure to get my turn. Yes, I shall almost certainly fight."

"Why?" said Ascher. "What will you fight for?"

It was Gorman who answered the question. He had recovered from his brief outburst, and had become the normal Gorman again.

"The war," he said, "is for the liberation of Europe. It is a vast struggle, an Armageddon in which the forces of reaction, absolutism, tyranny, a military caste are ranged against democracy. It is their last appearance upon the stage of history. Vindicated now, the principles of democracy—"

"If you think," I said, "that I'm going out to fight for the principles of democracy, you're making a big mistake. There's nothing in the world I dislike more than that absurd democracy of yours."

"Then why?" said Ascher, mildly persistent. "Why are you going to fight?"

"Well," I said, "I don't want to say anything offensive about your people, Ascher. The Germans have a lot of fine qualities, but if they were to win this war, if they were to succeed in imposing their civilisation and their mentality on us all, if they were to Germanise the world, the sense of humour would perish from among men. Nobody would any longer be able to laugh. We—we should find ourselves taking governments and officials seriously. Just imagine! To live under a bureaucracy and not to see that it was funny! Surely it's worth while fighting for the right to laugh."

"You Irish!" said Ascher. "Even in times like this your love of paradox——"

"Don't say it," I said. "If you can possibly help it don't say that. I admit that I brought it on myself and deserve it. I apologise. That is not my real reason for going back to my regiment. I only gave it to you because I don't know what my real reason is. It's not patriotism. I haven't got any country to be patriotic about. It's not any silly belief in liberty or democracy. I don't know why I'm doing it. I just have to. That's all."

"Noblesse oblige," said Ascher. "Your honour as a gentleman."

I shuddered. Ascher—there is no other way of putting it—is grossly indecent. A woman has a sense of modesty about her body. It would be considered an outrage to strip her and leave her stark naked in the middle of the room. I cannot see why a man should not be credited with some feeling of modesty about his soul. I detest having my last garments plucked from me in public. Complete spiritual nudity causes me very great embarrassment.

"You can put it that way if you like," I said. "The plain fact is I can't help myself. I must go back to my regiment. I have no choice."

"I have come to see," said Ascher, "that I have no choice either. There is such a thing, though perhaps Mr. Gorman will not believe me—there is such a thing as the honour of a banker. It compels me."

He put his arm round his wife's waist as he spoke. Still holding her hands in one of his, he led her from the room. Her head drooped against his shoulder as they went out.

"I suppose that means," said Gorman, "that he's going to stick it out and see the thing through. It will be infernally awkward for him. I don't think he realises how nasty it will be. He hasn't considered that side of it."

"A man doesn't consider that side of things," I said, "when he's up against it as Ascher is."

"Well, I'll do my best about the naturalisation papers. That'll be some help."

"It's very hard to be sure," I said, "but I'm inclined to think that Ascher is right."

"He's utterly wrong," said Gorman. "A man's country ought to come first always. You don't understand that because you're denationalised; because, as you say yourself, you have no country. But it's true, whether you understand it or not."

"When I think of that business of his," I said, "the immense complexity of it, the confidence of thousands of men in each other, all resting at last on a faith in the integrity of one man, or rather of a firm—the existence of such a business, world-wide, international, entirely independent of all ties of race, nationality, language, religion, in a certain sense wider than any of these—it's a great, human affair, not English nor German, not the white man's nor the yellow man's, not Christian nor Buddhist nor Mohammedan, just human. Ascher owes some kind of loyalty to a thing like that. It's a frightfully complicated question; but on the whole I think he is right."

Gorman was not listening to me. He had ceased, for the time, to be interested in Ascher's decision. I tried to regain his attention.

"Ascher says," I said, "that there is such a thing as the honour of a banker, of a financier."

That ought to have roused Gorman to a contradiction; but it did not.

"Do you think," he said, "that we could get them to take on Tim in any job connected with flying machines? This war will knock all his inventions into a cocked hat. He will simply be left, and he has a real turn for mechanics. If he got messing about with aeroplanes he might do something big, something really valuable. But I don't know how to go about getting that sort of job for him. I'm not in with military people. Look here, you've a lot of influence with the War Office——"

"No," I said. "None."

"Nonsense. You must have. A word from you—— I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll work Ascher's naturalisation papers for him, and you get Tim taken on by the Army Flying Corps people."

"Perhaps," I said, "you'd like me to get you a Staff appointment while I'm at it."

"Oh, no," said Gorman. "I'm not a soldier, I'm a Member of Parliament. My job is——"

Gorman hesitated. For a moment I thought that he was in real doubt, was actually wondering what place he ought to take, what work he ought to do.

"Yes," I said. "You. Now, what is your idea for yourself?"

Gorman drew himself up to his full height, squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest.

"My place," he said, "is in the great council of the Empire."

I gasped.

"Good Lord!" I said. "You don't really think—you *can't* think, that your silly old Parliament is going to matter now; that you politicians will be allowed to go on talking, that there will be divisions in the House, and elections and all that foolishness."

Gorman, still heroically erect, still enormously swelled in chest, winked at me with careful deliberation. I was immensely relieved.

"Thank God," I said. "For a moment I thought you really meant it—all that great-council-of-the-Empire business, you know. It would have been a horrible disappointment to me if you had. I've come to have a high

regard for you, Gorman, and I really could not have borne it. But of course I ought to have known better. You couldn't have believed in that stuff, simply couldn't. Nobody with your intelligence could. But seriously, now, I should like to know—I'm sure you won't mind telling me— What are you going to do? Your party, I mean. It seems to me you're in rather a hole. The Irish people will expect you to take the regular line of backing the enemy."

"The Irish people be damned," said Gorman; "our game is to support the Government."

CHAPTER XIX.

I look back on the time I spent soldiering—soldiering under war conditions—as a curious blank in an otherwise interesting and amusing life. From the day on which I rejoined my regiment until the day, about five months later, when I escaped from the hospital in which I was incarcerated, my mind stopped working altogether. I took no interest whatever in any of the things which used to excite me, which are now, I am thankful to say, beginning to amuse me again. Politicians, I believe, pranced about with fascinating agility. I did not care to look at them. Newspaper proprietors demanded the immediate execution of one public man after another. I do not believe I should have cared if a guillotine had been set up in Piccadilly Circus and a regular reign of terror established. I lost sight of Gorman. The Aschers faded from my memory.

I spent three months or so in camp with my old regiment. I worked exceedingly hard. I ate enormously. I slept profoundly. I attained an almost incredible perfection of physical health. I ceased to think about anything. My experience of the business of actual fighting was brief. I had little more than a month of it altogether. Then they sent me home with a shattered leg. I worked harder than ever when I was at the Front. I was often very uncomfortable. I remained amazingly healthy. I suffered at last a good deal of physical pain. I did not think at all, even about the progress of the war.

I date my awakening again to the interests of life from the day when Gorman paid me his first visit. I was convalescent and had made myself fairly comfortable in a cottage near Guildford. I had got rid of the last of a long series of nurses. My leg had ceased to cause me any active annoyance, but I was beginning to find myself a good deal bored and not a little depressed. When Gorman walked in I was not, just at first, particularly glad to see him.

"Let me congratulate you," he said.

"On being alive? Is that a blessing?"

I had been brooding over the fact that I was lame for life. Gorman's breezy cheerfulness rather jarred me.

"Of course it's a blessing to be alive," said Gorman, "but I wasn't thinking of that. What I was congratulating you on was being a hero. D.S.O., isn't it? Tell me all about it, won't you?"

I have been given the right of appending those three letters to my name, so I suppose I must have avoided the worst kinds of blundering and incompetence. But I have no recollection of doing anything to deserve the honour. I fear I answered Gorman rather ill-temperedly.

"There's nothing whatever to tell," I said. "I just crawled about in a trench, generally muddy. Everybody else did exactly the same."

Gorman is still the same man he always was, amazingly tactful and sympathetic. He realised at once that I hated talking about the war and was in no mood for recounting my own experiences. Instead of pressing me with silly questions until he drove me mad, he dropped the subject of my D.S.O. and began to babble agreeably about other things.

"Politics," he said, "have got into a frightful state. In fact there are hardly any politics at all. We haven't had a decent rag since the war began. We all sit round cooing at each other like beastly little green lovebirds in a cage. It can't last long, of course. Sooner or later somebody's bound to break out and try to bite; but for the present Parliament's the dulllest place in Europe."

I began to feel slightly interested.

"I remember hearing," I said, "that you Nationalists promised not to cheer for the Germans."

"We did more than that," said Gorman. "We rallied to the Empire at the very start and have kept on rallying ever since. It felt odd at first, but you get used to anything in time, even to being loyal. You'd have been surprised if you'd heard me singing, 'God Save the King' in Dublin last week."

"Did you really?"

"Twice," said Gorman, "on two consecutive days."

A world in which such things could happen might, I began to feel, be worth living in after all. I smiled feebly at Gorman. He responded with a delicious wink.

"What's happened to Home Rule?" I said.

"For the present it's hung up; a case of suspended animation; our idea is that if we're thoroughly loyal now the English people will be so grateful to us——"

"But they'll be just as grateful to the Ulstermen," I said. "They're loyal, too, I suppose."

"That's the difficulty, of course," said Gorman. "But what else could we do? If we'd allowed the Orangemen to make a corner in loyalty at the present crisis——"

"Crisis!" I said. "How that word brings it all back to me? Are we still going through a crisis? Fancy the word surviving!"

"It's about the only part of our old political system which does survive. The rest's gone, hopelessly."

Gorman sighed, and I began to feel depressed again: But Gorman is not the man to sorrow long, even over

the decay of the British Constitution. He dropped the unpleasant subject and started fresh.

"Tim," he said, "has been rather a disappointment to me. He hasn't invented a single thing since the war began."

"I should have thought," I said, "that this would have been his opportunity."

"So it is. The country's simply crying out for inventions. Aerial torpedoes, traps for submarines, wireless methods of exploding the enemy's ammunition, heaps of things of that sort. Tim might scoop up an immense fortune and be made a baronet. But instead of inventing—and he could if he chose—the young fool is flying about somewhere and dropping bombs on German railways. I'm inclined to think it was a mistake putting Tim into the Flying Corps at all. I wonder if we could get him out again. Do you know any one you could write to about him?"

"No," I said, "not a soul."

"Pity," said Gorman. "A little personal influence helps a lot in things of this sort, and a letter from you——"

I thought it time to change the subject.

"The Aschers?" I said. "Ever see them now?"

"I met her in the Park on Sunday. She's Red Crossing. Had on the most elaborate costume you ever saw. Imagine a nurse's uniform brought up to the standard of the highest art, or perhaps I ought to say an artistic dress with the red cross for motif. She told me that she expects to go to the Front next week."

"Thank God she didn't go sooner! She might have nursed me if she'd been there in time."

"She'd have done it all right," said Gorman. "I hear she's a splendid organiser in spite of her clothes. Always was a remarkable woman, though you didn't care for her. There's been a lot of trouble about Ascher."

"Did he go bankrupt?"

"Oh, dear no. Quite the contrary. All that financial part of the business was well managed and there wasn't any serious smash-up. They say that Ascher helped a lot, in fact that it was very largely his advice which the Government took. All the same a lot of people turned on him afterwards, in spite of all I did to get him naturalised. They wanted to imprison him; but that was absurd. It's all very well to round up ordinary Germans, barbers, waiters and people of that sort, and put them in concentration camps. But you can't imprison a man who's worth millions. That sort of thing isn't done in any civilised state."

"Besides," I said, "Ascher didn't deserve it."

"Of course not. But that wouldn't have saved him. In fact that has nothing whatever to do with the matter. Popular opinion ran very strongly against Germans, whether naturalised or not. And things were beginning to look very nasty for Ascher. However, we managed all right."

"How?"

"Oh," said Gorman, "in the usual way. Diverted it."

"Gorman," I said, "I'm afraid I'm getting stupid. Fighting must have muddled my brain. I don't quite follow you. What did you divert?"

"Popular opinion," said Gorman. "We turned it away from Ascher, started everybody hunting a fresh hare. It wouldn't have done to imprison Ascher, really wouldn't, for a lot of reasons; so we all began making speeches about beer. Temperance, you know; I made one myself. Then everybody forgot about Ascher and things settled down."

"Politics aren't as dead as you said they were, Gorman. You politicians——"

"It's all very well sneering at politicians, and I don't mind your doing it, not a bit, especially as you're wounded. But if it hadn't been for us politicians—— Tell me this now, is there anybody else in the country who can divert popular opinion from an awkward subject?"

I do not suppose there is. But I did not care to argue about it.

"Do you think," I said, "that Ascher ever regretted his decision?"

"What decision? Oh, to stay in England? No. I don't think he ever has. He's done pretty well for himself in spite of any little trouble there's been. I should say he's no worse off than he was."

"I wasn't thinking of the matter from a business point of view," I said.

"From every other point of view," said Gorman, "he was wrong. A man ought not to go back on his country under any circumstances whatever."

"I don't agree with you," I said.

"His conscience," said Gorman, "if financiers have consciences which I doubt——"

"Some day," I said, "when I'm a bit stronger, we'll argue the whole thing out."

We have argued it out, since then, twenty times at least. We are no nearer reaching a conclusion than we were.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GOSSAMER ***

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