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Possession

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Uniform with this Volume

**Angels & Ministers: Three Plays
of Victorian Shade & Character
by Laurence Housman**

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Possession

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A Peep-Show in Paradise

by Laurence Housman

Jonathan Cape

Eleven Gower Street, London

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[8]

Introduction

[9]

THIS play—originally intended to form part of *Angels and Ministers*—was separated on an after-thought as a concession to those who do not like to have their politics and their religion mixed. And, as the Victorian age was eminently successful in keeping the two apart, it is 'in keeping,' in another sense, with the Victorianism of the religion here portrayed that it should make its appearance under a separate cover.

As some of my critics seem anxious to trace the inspiration of these Victorian plays to an outside source, and are divided, as regards the historical section, between the *Abraham Lincoln* of Mr. John Drinkwater and the *Queen Victoria* of Mr. Lytton Strachey, may I assure them that my historical method of treating Kings and Queens 'intimately' was derived from my own play *Pains and Penalties*, published in 1911, and that my anthropomorphic theology is based upon the first book I ever wrote, *Gods and their Makers*, published in 1897. I do not think that *Possession* owes anything either to *Cranford* or the writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward.

Dramatis Personæ

JULIA ROBINSON	}	
LAURA JAMES	}	<i>Sisters</i>
MARTHA ROBINSON	}	
SUSAN ROBINSON		<i>Their Mother</i>
THOMAS ROBINSON		<i>Their Father</i>
WILLIAM JAMES		<i>Husband to Laura James</i>
HANNAH		<i>The family servant</i>

Possession

SCENE.—*The Everlasting Habitations*

It is evening (or so it seems), and to the comfortably furnished Victorian drawing-room a middle-aged maid-servant in cap and apron brings a lamp, and proceeds to draw blinds and close curtains. To do this she passes the fire-place, where before a pleasantly bright hearth sits, comfortably sedate, an elderly lady whose countenance and attitude suggest the very acme of genteel repose. She is a handsome woman, very conscious of herself, but carrying the burden of her importance with an ease which, in her own mind, leaves nothing to be desired. The once-striking outline of her features has been rounded by good feeding to a softness which is merely physical; and her voice, when she speaks, has a calculated gentleness very caressing to her own ear, and a little irritating to others who are not of an inferior class. Menials like it, however. The room, though over-upholstered, and not furnished with any more individual taste than that which gave its generic stamp to the great Victorian period, is the happy possessor of some good things. Upon the mantel-shelf, backed by a large mirror, stands old china in alternation with alabaster jars, under domed shades, and tall vases encompassed by pendant ringlets of glass-lustre. Rose-wood, walnut, and mahogany make a well-wooded interior; and in the dates thus indicated there is a touch of Georgian. But, over and above these mellowing features of a respectable ancestry, the announcing Angel of the Great Exhibition of 1851 has spread a brooding wing. And while the older articles are treasured on account of family association, the younger and newer stand erected in places of honour by reason of an intrinsic beauty never previously attained to. Through this chamber the dashing crinoline has wheeled the too vast orb of its fate, and left fifty years after (if we may measure the times of Heaven by the ticks of an earthly chronometer) a mark which nothing is likely to erase. Upon the small table, where Hannah the servant deposits the lamp, lies a piece of crochet-work. The fair hands that have been employed on it are folded on a lap of corded silk representing the fashions of the nineties, and the grey-haired beauty (that once was) sits contemplative, wearing a cap of creamish lace, tastefully arranged, not unaware that in the entering lamp-light, and under the fire's soft glow of approval, she presents to her domestic's eye an improving picture of gentility. It is to Miss Julia Robinson's credit—and she herself places it there emphatically—that she always treats servants humanly, though at a distance. And when she now speaks she confers her slight remark just a little as though it were a favour.

JULIA. How the days are drawing out, Hannah.

HANNAH. Yes, Ma'am; nicely, aren't they?

(For Hannah, being old-established, may say a thing or two not in the strict order. In fact, it may be said that, up to a well-understood point, character is encouraged in her, and is allowed to peep through in her remarks.)

JULIA. What time is it?

HANNAH *(looking with better eyes than her mistress at the large ormolu clock which records eternally the time of the great Exhibition)*. Almost a quarter to six, Ma'am.

JULIA. So late? She ought to have been here long ago.

HANNAH. Who, Ma'am, did you say, Ma'am?

JULIA. My sister, Mrs. James. You remember?

HANNAH. What, Miss Martha, Ma'am? Well!

JULIA. No, it's Miss Laura this time: you didn't know she had married, I suppose?

HANNAH (*with a world of meaning, well under control*). No, Ma'am. (*A pause.*) I made up the bed in the red room; was that right, Ma'am?

JULIA (*archly surprised*). What? Then you knew someone was coming? Why did you pretend, Hannah? [14]

HANNAH. Well, Ma'am, you see, you hadn't *told* me before.

JULIA. I couldn't. One cannot always be sure. (*This mysteriously.*) But something tells me now that she is to be with us. I have been expecting her over four days.

HANNAH (*picking her phrases a little, as though on doubtful ground*). It must be a long way, Ma'am. Did she make a comfortable start, Ma'am?

JULIA. Very quietly, I'm told. No pain.

HANNAH. I wonder what she'll be able to eat now, Ma'am. She was always very particular.

JULIA. I daresay you will be told soon enough. (*Thus in veiled words she conveys that Hannah knows something of Mrs. James's character.*)

HANNAH (*resignedly*). Yes, M'm.

JULIA. I don't think I'll wait any longer. If you'll bring in tea now. Make enough for two, in case: pour it off into another pot, and have it under the tea-cosy.

HANNAH. Yes, Ma'am.

(*Left alone, the dear lady enjoys the sense of herself and the small world of her own thoughts in solitude. Then she sighs indulgently.*)

JULIA. Yes, I suppose I would rather it had been Martha. Poor Laura! (*She puts out her hand for her crochet, when it is arrested by the sound of a knock, rather rapacious in character.*) Ah, that's Laura all over! [15]

(*Seated quite composedly and fondling her well-kept hands, she awaits the moment of arrival. Very soon the door opens, and the over-expected Mrs. James—a luxuriant garden of widow's weeds, enters. She is a lady more strongly and sharply featured than her sister, but there is nothing thin-lipped about her; with resolute eye and mouth a little grim, yet pleased at so finding herself, she steps into this chamber of old memories and cherished possessions, which translation to another and a better world has made hers again. For a moment she sees the desire of her eyes and is satisfied; but for a moment only. The apparition of another already in possession takes her aback.*)

JULIA (*with soft effusiveness*). Well, Laura!

LAURA (*startled*). Julia!

JULIA. Here you are!

LAURA. Whoever thought of finding you?

JULIA (*sweetly*). Didn't you?

(*They have managed to embrace: but Laura continues to have her grievance.*)

LAURA. No! not for a moment. I really think they might have told me. What brought you? [16]

JULIA. Our old home, Laura. It was a natural choice, I think: as one was allowed to choose. I suppose you were?

LAURA (*her character showing*). I didn't ask anyone's leave to come.

JULIA. And how are you?

LAURA. I don't know; I want my tea.

JULIA. Hannah is just bringing it.

LAURA. Who's Hannah?

JULIA. *Our* Hannah: our old servant. Didn't *she* open the door to you?

LAURA. What? Come back, has she?

JULIA. I found her here when I came, seven years ago. I didn't ask questions. Here she is.

(*ENTER Hannah with the tea-tray.*)

LAURA (*with a sort of grim jocosity*). How d'ye do, Hannah?

HANNAH. Nicely, thank you, Ma'am. How are you, Ma'am?

(*Hannah, as she puts down the tray, is prepared to have her hand shaken: for it is a long time (thirty years or so in earthly measure) since they met. But Mrs. James is not so cordial as all that.*)

LAURA. I'm very tired. [17]

JULIA. You've come a long way.

(*But Laura's sharp attention has gone elsewhere.*)

LAURA. Hannah, what have you got my best tray for? You know that is not to be used every day.

JULIA. It's all right, Laura. You don't understand.

LAURA. What don't I understand?

JULIA. Here one always uses the best. Nothing wears out or gets broken.

LAURA. Then where's the pleasure of it? If one always uses them and they never break—'best' means nothing!

JULIA. It is a little puzzling at first. You must be patient.

LAURA. I'm not a child, Julia.

JULIA (*beautifully ignoring*). A little more coal, please, Hannah. (*Then to her sister as she pours out the tea.*) And how did you leave everybody?

LAURA. Oh, pretty much as usual. Most of them having colds. That's how I got mine. Mrs. Hilliard came to call and left it behind her. I went out with it in an east wind and that finished me.

JULIA. Oh, but how provoking! (*She wishes to be sympathetic; but this is a line of conversation she instinctively avoids.*)

LAURA. No, Julia! . . . (*This, delivered with force, arrests the criminal intention.*) No sugar. [18]
To think of your forgetting that!

JULIA (*most sweetly*). Milk?

LAURA. Yes, you know I take milk.

(*Crossing over, but sitting away from the tea-table, she lets her sister wait on her.*)

JULIA. Did Martha send me any message?

LAURA. How could she? She didn't know I was coming.

JULIA. Was it so sudden?

LAURA. I sent for her and she didn't come. Think of that!

JULIA. Oh! She would be sorry. Tea-cake?

LAURA (*taking the tea-cake that is offered her*). I'm not so sure. She was nursing Edwin's boy through the measles, so of course *I* didn't count. (*Nosing suspiciously.*) Is this China tea?

JULIA. If you like to think it. You have as you choose. How is our brother, Edwin?

LAURA. His wife's more trying than ever. Julia, what a fool that woman is!

JULIA. Well, let's hope he doesn't know it.

LAURA. He must know. I've told him. She sent a wreath to my funeral, 'With love and fond affection, from Emily.' Fond fiddlesticks! Humbug! She knows I can't abide her.

JULIA. I suppose she thought it was the correct thing. [19]

LAURA. And I doubt if it cost more than ten shillings. Now Mrs. Dobson—you remember her: she lives in Tudor Street with a daughter one never sees—something wrong in her head, and has fits—she sent me a cross of lilies, white lilac, and stephanotis, as handsome as you could wish; and a card—I forget what was on the card. . . . Julia, when you died—

JULIA. Oh, don't Laura!

LAURA. Well, you did die, didn't you?

JULIA. Here one doesn't talk of it. That's over. There are things you will have to learn.

LAURA. What I was going to say was—when I died I found my sight was much better. I could read all the cards without my glasses. Do *you* use glasses?

JULIA. Sometimes, for association. I have these of our dear Mother's in her tortoise-shell case.

LAURA. That reminds me. Where is our Mother?

JULIA. She comes—sometimes.

LAURA. Why isn't she here always?

JULIA (*with pained sweetness*). I don't know, Laura. I never ask questions.

LAURA. Really, Julia, I shall be afraid to open my mouth presently!

JULIA (*long-suffering still*). When you see her you will understand. I told her you were coming, so I daresay she will look in. [20]

LAURA. 'Look in'!

JULIA. Perhaps. That is her chair, you remember. She always sits there, still.

(**ENTER** *Hannah with the coal.*)

Just a little on, please, Hannah—only a little.

LAURA. This isn't China tea: it's Indian, three and sixpenny.

JULIA. Mine is ten shilling China.

LAURA. Lor', Julia! How are you able to afford it?

JULIA. A little imagination goes a long way here, you'll find. Once I tasted it. So now I can always taste it.

LAURA. Well! I wish I'd known.

JULIA. Now you *do*.

LAURA. But I never tasted tea at more than three-and-six. Had I known, I could have got two ounces of the very best, and had it when—

JULIA. A lost opportunity. Life is full of them.

LAURA. Then you mean to tell me that if I had indulged more then, I could indulge more now?

JULIA. Undoubtedly. As I never knew what it was to wear sables, I have to be content with ermine.

LAURA. Lor', Julia, how paltry! [21]

(*While this conversation has been going on, a gentle old lady has appeared upon the scene, unnoticed and unannounced. One perceives, that is to say, that the high-backed arm-chair beside the fire, sheltered by a screen from all possibility of draughts, has an occupant. Dress and appearance show a doubly septuagenarian character: at the age of seventy, which in this place she retains as the hall-mark of her earthly pilgrimage, she belongs also to the 'seventies' of the last century, wears watered silk, and retains under her cap a shortened and stiffer version of the side-curls with which she and all 'the sex' captivated the hearts of Charles Dickens and other novelists in their early youth. She has soft and indeterminate features, and when she speaks her voice, a little shaken by the quaver of age, is soft and indeterminate also. Gentle and lovable, you will be surprised to discover that she, also, has a will of her own; but for the present this does not show. From the dimly illumined corner behind the lamp her voice comes soothingly to break the discussion.*)

OLD LADY. My dear, would you move the light a little nearer? I've dropped a stitch.

LAURA (*starting up*). Why, Mother dear, when did you come in? [22]

JULIA (*interposing with arresting hand*). Don't! You mustn't try to touch her, or she goes.

LAURA. Goes?

JULIA. I can't explain. She is not quite herself. She doesn't always hear what one says.

LAURA (*assertively*). She can hear me. (*To prove it, she raises her voice defiantly.*) Can't you, Mother?

MRS. R. (*the voice perhaps reminding her*). Jane, dear, I wonder what's become of Laura, little Laura: she was always so naughty and difficult to manage, so different from Martha—and the rest.

LAURA. Lor', Julia! Is it as bad as that? Mother, 'little Laura' is here, sitting in front of you. Don't you know me?

MRS. R. Do you remember, Jane, one day when we'd all started for a walk, Laura had

forgotten to bring her gloves, and I sent her back for them? And on the way she met little Dorothy Jones, and she took her gloves off her, and came back with them just as if they were her own.

LAURA. What a good memory you have, Mother! I remember it too. She was an odious little thing, that Dorothy—always so whiney-piney.

JULIA. More tea, Laura?

(*Laura pushes her cup at her without remark, for she has been kept waiting; then, in loud tones, to suit the one whom she presumes to be rather deaf.*) [23]

LAURA. Mother! Where are you living now?

MRS. R. I'm living, my dear.

LAURA. I said 'where?'

JULIA. We live where it suits us, Laura.

LAURA. Julia, I wasn't addressing myself to you. Mother, where *are* you living? . . . Why, *where* has she gone to?

(*For now we perceive that this gentle Old Lady so devious in her conversation has a power of self-possession, of which, very retiringly, she avails herself.*)

JULIA (*improving the occasion, as she hands back the cup, with that touch of superiority so exasperating to a near relative*). Now you see! If you press her too much, she goes. . . . You'll have to accommodate yourself, Laura.

LAURA (*imposing her own explanation*). I think you gave me *green* tea, Julia . . . or have had it yourself.

JULIA (*knowing better*). The dear Mother seldom stays long, except when she finds me alone.

(*Having insinuated this barb into the flesh of her 'dear sister,' she takes up her crochet with an air of great contentment. Mrs. James, meanwhile, to make herself more at home, now that tea is finished, undoes her bonnet-strings with a tug, and lets them hang. She is not in the best of tempers.*) [24]

LAURA. I don't believe she recognised me. Why did she keep on calling me 'Jane'?

JULIA. She took you for poor Aunt Jane, I fancy.

LAURA (*infuriated at being taken for anyone 'poor'*). Why should she do that, pray?

JULIA. Well, there always was a likeness, you know; and you are older than you were, Laura.

LAURA (*crushingly*). Does 'poor Aunt Jane' wear widow's weeds? (*This reminds her not only of her own condition, but of other things as well. She sits up and takes a stiller bigger bite into her new world.*) Julia! . . . Where's William?

JULIA. I haven't inquired.

LAURA (*self-importance and a sense of duty consuming her*). I wish to see him.

JULIA. Better not, as it didn't occur to you before.

LAURA. Am I not to see my own husband, pray?

JULIA. He didn't ever live *here*, you know.

LAURA. He can come, I suppose. He has got legs like the rest of us.

JULIA. Yes, but one can't force people: at least, not here. You should remember that— [25]
before he married you—he had other ties.

(*Mrs. James preserves her self-possession, but there is battle in her eye.*)

LAURA. He was married to me longer than he was to Isabel.

JULIA. They had children.

LAURA. I could have had children if I chose. I didn't choose. . . . Julia, how am I to see him?

JULIA (*washing her hands of it*). You must manage for yourself, Laura.

LAURA. I'm puzzled! Here are we in the next world just as we expected, and where are all the—? I mean, oughtn't we to be seeing a great many more things than we do?

JULIA. What sort of things?

LAURA. Well, . . . have you seen Moses and the Prophets?

JULIA. I haven't looked for them, Laura. On Sundays, I still go to hear Mr. Moore.

LAURA. That's you all over! You never would go to the celebrated preachers. But I mean to. (*Pious curiosity awakens.*) What happens here, on Sundays?

JULIA (*smiling*). Oh, just the same.

LAURA. No *High Church* ways, I hope? If they go in for that here, I shall go out!

JULIA (*patiently explanatory*). You will go out if you wish to go out. You can choose your church. As I tell you, I always go to hear Mr. Moore; you can go and hear Canon Farrar. [26]

LAURA. Dean Farrar, I *suppose* you mean.

JULIA. He was not Dean in my day.

LAURA. He ought to have been a Bishop—*Archbishop*, I think—so learned, and such a magnificent preacher. But I still wonder why we don't see Moses and the Prophets.

JULIA. Well, Laura, it's the world as we knew it—that for the present. No doubt other things will come in time, gradually. But I don't know: I don't ask questions.

LAURA (*doubtfully*). I suppose it *is* Heaven, in a way, though?

JULIA. Dispensation has its own ways, Laura; and we have ours.

LAURA (*who is not going to be theologically dictated to by anyone lower than Dean Farrar*). Julia, I shall start washing the old china again.

JULIA. As you like; nothing ever gets soiled here.

LAURA. It's all very puzzling. The world seems cut in half. Things don't seem *real*.

JULIA. *More* real, I should say. We have them—as we wish them to be.

LAURA. Then why can't we have our Mother, like other things? [27]

JULIA. Ah, with persons it is different. We all belong to ourselves now. That one has to accept.

LAURA (*stubbornly*). Does William belong to *himself*?

JULIA. I suppose.

LAURA. It isn't Scriptural!

JULIA. It's better.

LAURA. Julia, don't be blasphemous!

JULIA. To consult William's wishes, I meant.

LAURA. But I want him. I've a right to him. If he didn't mean to belong to me, he ought not to have married me.

JULIA. People make mistakes sometimes.

LAURA. Then they should stick to them. It's not honourable. Julia, I mean to have William!

JULIA (*resignedly*). You and he must arrange that between you.

LAURA (*making a dash for it*). William! William, I say! William!

JULIA. Oh, Laura, you'll wake the dead! (*She gasps, but it is too late: the hated word is out.*)

LAURA (*as one who will be obeyed*). William!

(*The door does not open; but there appears through it the indistinct figure of an elderly gentleman with a weak chin and a shifting eye. He stands irresolute and apprehensive; clearly his presence there is perfunctory. Wearing his hat and carrying a hand-bag, he seems merely to have looked in while passing.*) [28]

JULIA. Apparently you are to have your wish. (*She waves an introductory hand; Mrs. James turns, and regards the unsatisfactory apparition with suspicion.*)

LAURA. William, is that you?

WILLIAM (*nervously*). Yes, my dear; it's me.

LAURA. Can't you be more distinct than that?

WILLIAM. Why do you want me?

LAURA. Have you forgotten I'm your wife?

WILLIAM. I thought you were my widow, my dear.

LAURA. William, don't prevaricate. I am your wife, and you know it.

WILLIAM. Does a wife wear widow's weeds? A widow is such a distant relation: no wonder I look indistinct.

LAURA. How did I know whether I was going to find you here?

WILLIAM. Where else? But you look very nice as you are, my dear. Black suits you.

(But Mrs. James is not to be turned off by compliments.)

LAURA. William, who are you living with?

[29]

WILLIAM. With myself, my dear.

LAURA. Anyone else?

WILLIAM. Off and on I have friends staying.

LAURA. Are you living with Isabel?

WILLIAM. She comes in occasionally to see how I'm getting on.

LAURA. And how are you 'getting on'—without me?

WILLIAM. Oh, I manage—somehow.

LAURA. Are you living a proper life, William?

WILLIAM. Well, I'm *here*, my dear; what more do you want to know?

LAURA. There's a great deal I want to know. But I wish you'd come in and shut the door, instead of standing out there in the passage.

JULIA. The door *is* shut, Laura.

LAURA. Then I don't call it a door.

WILLIAM *(trying to make things pleasant)*. When is a door not a door? When it's a parent.

LAURA. William, I want to talk seriously. Do you know that when you died you left a lot of debts I didn't know about?

WILLIAM. I didn't know about them either, my dear. But if you had, it wouldn't have made any difference.

LAURA. Yes, it would! I gave you a very expensive funeral.

[30]

WILLIAM. That was to please yourself, my dear; it didn't concern me.

LAURA. Have you no self-respect? I've been at my own funeral to-day, let me tell you!

WILLIAM. Have you, my dear? Rather trying, wasn't that?

LAURA. Yes, it was. They've gone and put me beside you; and now I begin to wish they hadn't!

WILLIAM. Go and haunt them for it!

(At this Julia deigns a slight chuckle.)

LAURA *(abruptly getting back to her own)*. I had to go into a smaller house, William. And people knew it was because you'd left me badly off.

WILLIAM. That reflected on me, my dear, not on you.

LAURA. It reflected on me for ever having married you.

WILLIAM. I've often heard you blame yourself. Well, now you're free.

LAURA. I'm *not* free.

WILLIAM. You can be if you like. Hadn't you better?

LAURA *(sentimentally)*. Don't you see I'm still in mourning for you, William?

WILLIAM. I appreciate the compliment, my dear. Don't spoil it.

[31]

LAURA. Don't be heartless!

WILLIAM. I'm not: far from it. *(He looks at his watch.)* I'm afraid I must go now.

LAURA. Why must you go?

WILLIAM. They are expecting me—to dinner.

LAURA. Who's 'they'?

WILLIAM. The children and their mother. They've invited me to stay the night.

(Mrs. James does her best to conceal the shock this gives her. She delivers her ultimatum with judicial firmness.)

LAURA. William, I wish you to come and live here with me.

(William vanishes. Mrs. James in a fervour of virtuous indignation hastens to the door, opens it, and calls 'William!' but there is no answer.)

(Julia, meanwhile, has rung the bell. Mrs. James stills stands glowering in the door-way when she hears footsteps, and moves majestically aside for the returned penitent to enter; but alas! it is only Hannah, obedient to the summons of the bell. Mrs. James faces round and fires a shot at her.)

LAURA. Hannah, you *are* an ugly woman.

JULIA *(faint with horror)*. Laura!

[32]

HANNAH *(imperturbably)*. Well, Ma'am, I'm as God made me.

JULIA. Yes, please, take the tea-things. *(Sotto voce, as Hannah approaches.)* I'm sorry, Hannah!

HANNAH. It doesn't matter, Ma'am. *(She picks up the tray expeditiously and carries it off.)*

(Mrs. James eyes the departing tray, and is again reminded of something.)

LAURA. Julia, where is the silver tea-pot?

JULIA. Which, Laura?

LAURA. Why, that beautiful one of our Mother's.

JULIA. When we shared our dear Mother's things between us, didn't Martha have it?

LAURA. Yes, she did. But she tells me she doesn't know what's become of it. When I ask, what did she do with it in the first place? she loses her temper. But once she told me she left it here with *you*.

(The fierce eye and the accusing tone make no impression on that cushioned fortress of gentility. With suave dignity Miss Robinson makes chaste denial.)

JULIA. No.

LAURA *(insistent)*. Yes; in a box.

JULIA. In a box? Oh, she may have left anything in a box.

LAURA. It was that box she always travelled about with and never opened. Well, I looked in it once (never mind how), and the tea-pot wasn't there.

[33]

JULIA *(gently, making allowance)*. Well, I *didn't* look in it, Laura.

(Like a water-lily folding its petals she adjusts a small shawl about her shoulders, and sinks composedly into her chair.)

LAURA. The more fool you! . . . But all the other things she had of our Mother's *were* there: a perfect magpie's nest! And she, living in her boxes, and never settling anywhere. What did she want with them?

JULIA. I can't say, Laura.

LAURA. No—no more can I; no more can anyone! Martha has got the miser spirit. She's as grasping as a caterpillar. *I* ought to have had that tea-pot.

JULIA. Why?

LAURA. Because I had a house of my own, and people coming to tea. Martha never had anyone to tea with her in her life—except in lodgings.

JULIA. We all like to live in our own way. Martha liked going about.

LAURA. Yes. She promised *me*, after William—I suppose I had better say 'evaporated' as you won't let me say 'died'—she promised always to stay with me for three months in the year. She never did. Two, and some little bits, were the most. And I want to know where was that tea-pot all the time?

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JULIA *(a little jocosely)*. Not in the box, apparently.

LAURA *(returning to her accusation)*. I thought you had it.

JULIA. You were mistaken. Had I had it here, you would have found it.

LAURA. Did Martha never tell *you* what she did with it?

JULIA. I never asked, Laura.

LAURA. Julia, if you say that again I shall scream.

JULIA. Won't you take your things off?

LAURA. Presently. When I feel more at home. (*Returning to the charge.*) But most of our Mother's things are here.

JULIA. Your share and mine.

LAURA. How did you get mine here?

JULIA. You brought them. At least, they *came*, a little before you did. Then I knew you were on your way.

LAURA (*impressed*). Lor'! So that's how things happen?

(*She goes and begins to take a look round, and Julia takes up her crochet again. As she does so her eye is arrested by a little old-fashioned hour-glass standing upon the table from which the tea-tray has been taken, the sands of which are still running.*) [35]

JULIA (*softly, almost to herself*). Oh, but how strange! That was Martha's. Is Martha coming too? (*She picks up the glass, looks at it, and sets it down again.*)

LAURA (*who is examining the china on a side-table*). Why, I declare, Julia! Here is your Dresden that was broken—without a crack in it!

JULIA. No, Laura, it was yours that was broken.

LAURA. It was *not* mine; it was yours. . . . Don't you remember *I* broke it?

JULIA. When you broke it you said it was mine. Until you broke it, you said it was yours.

LAURA. Very well, then: as you wish. It isn't broken now, and it's mine.

JULIA. That's satisfactory. I get my own back again. It's the better one.

(*ENTER Hannah with a telegram on a salver.*)

HANNAH (*in a low voice of mystery*). A telegram, Ma'am.

(*Julia opens it. The contents evidently startle her, but she retains her presence of mind.*)

JULIA. No answer.

(*EXIT Hannah.*)

JULIA. Laura, Martha is coming! [36]

LAURA. Here? Well, I wonder how she has managed that!

(*Her sister hands her the telegram, which she reads.*)

'Accident. Quite safe. Arriving by the 6.30.' Why, it's after that now!

JULIA (*sentimentally*). Oh, Laura, only think! So now we shall be all together again.

LAURA. Yes, I suppose we shall.

JULIA. It will be quite like old days.

LAURA (*warningly, as she sits down again and prepares for narrative*). Not *quite*, Julia. (*She leans forward, and speaks with measured emphasis.*) Martha's temper has got very queer! She never had a very good temper, as you know: and it's grown on her.

(*A pause. Julia remains silent.*)

I could tell you some things; but— (*Seeing herself unencouraged*) oh, you'll find out soon enough! (*Then, to stand right with herself*) Julia, am I difficult to get on with?

JULIA. Oh well, we all have our little ways, Laura.

LAURA. But Martha: she's so rude! I can't introduce her to people! If anyone comes, she just runs away.

JULIA (*changing the subject*). D'you remember, Laura, that charming young girl we met at Mrs. Somervale's, the summer Uncle Fletcher stayed with us? [37]

LAURA (*snubbingly*). I can't say I do.

JULIA. I met her the other day: married, and with three children—and just as pretty and young-looking as ever.

(*All this is said with the most ravishing air, but Laura is not to be diverted.*)

LAURA. Ah! I daresay. When Martha behaves like that, I hold my tongue and say nothing. But what people must think, I don't know. Julia, when you first came here, did you find old friends and acquaintances? Did anybody recognise you?

JULIA. A few called on me: nobody I didn't wish to see.

LAURA. Is that odious man who used to be our next-door neighbour—the one who played on the 'cello—here still?

JULIA. Mr. Harper? I see him occasionally. I don't find him odious.

LAURA. *Don't you?*

JULIA. It was his wife who was the— She isn't here: and I don't think he wants her.

LAURA. Where is she?

JULIA. I didn't ask, Laura.

(Mrs. James gives a jerk of exasperation, but at that moment the bell rings and a low knock is heard.) [38]

JULIA *(ecstatically)*. Here she is!

LAURA. Julia, I wonder how it is Martha survived us. She's much the oldest.

JULIA *(pleasantly palpitating)*. Does it matter? Does it matter?

(The door opens and in comes Martha. She has neither the distinction of look nor the force of character which belongs to her two sisters. Age has given a depression to the plain kindness of her face, and there is a harassed look about her eyes. She peeps into the room a little anxiously, then enters, carrying a large flat box covered in purple paper which, in her further progress across the room she lays upon the table. She talks in short jerks and has a quick, hurried way of doing things, as if she liked to get through and have done with them. It is the same when she submits herself to the embrace of her relations.)

LAURA. Oh, so you've come at last. Quite time, too!

MARTHA. Yes, here I am.

JULIA. My dear Martha, welcome to your old home! *(Embracing her.)* How are you?

MARTHA. I'm cold. Well, Laura. [39]

(Between these two the embrace is less cordial, but it takes place.)

LAURA. How did you come?

MARTHA. I don't know.

JULIA *(seeing harassment in her sister's eye)*. Arrived safely, at any rate.

MARTHA. I think I was in a railway accident, but I can't be sure. I only heard the crash and people shouting. I didn't wait to see. I just put my fingers in my ears, and ran away.

LAURA. Why do you think it was a railway accident?

MARTHA. Because I was in a railway carriage. I was coming to your funeral. If you'd told me you were ill I'd have come before. I was bringing you a wreath. And then, as I tell you, there was a crash and a shout; and that's all I know about it.

LAURA. Lor', Martha! I suppose they'll have an inquest on you.

MARTHA *(stung)*. I think they'd better mind their own business, and you mind yours!

JULIA. Laura! Here we don't talk about such things. They don't concern us. Would you like tea, Martha, or will you wait for supper?

MARTHA *(who has shaken her head at the offer of tea, and nodded a preference for supper)*. You know how I've always dreaded death. [40]

JULIA. Oh, don't, my dear Martha! It's past.

MARTHA. Yes; but it's upset me. The relief, that's what I can't get over: the relief!

JULIA. Presently you will be more used to it.

(She helps her off with her cloak.)

MARTHA. There were people sitting to right and to left of me and opposite; and suddenly a sort of crash of darkness seemed to come all over me, and I saw nothing more. I didn't feel anything: only a sort of a jar here.

(She indicates the back of her neck. Julia finds these anatomical details painful, and holds her hands deprecatingly; but Laura has no such qualms. She is now undoing the parcel which, she

considers, is hers.)

LAURA. I daresay it was only somebody's box from the luggage-rack. I've known that happen. I don't suppose for a minute that it was a railway accident.

(She unfurls the tissue paper of the box and takes out the wreath.)

JULIA. Why talk about it?

LAURA. Anyway, nothing has happened to these. 'With fondest love from Martha.' H'm. Pretty!

JULIA. Martha, would you like to go upstairs with your things? And you, Laura? [41]

MARTHA. I will presently, when I've got warm.

LAURA. Not yet. Martha, why was I put into that odious shaped coffin? More like a canoe than anything. I said it was to be straight.

MARTHA. I'd nothing to do with it, Laura. I wasn't there. You know I wasn't.

LAURA. If you'd come when I asked you, you could have seen to it.

MARTHA. You didn't tell me you were dying.

LAURA. Do people tell each other when they are dying? They don't *know*. I told you I wasn't well.

MARTHA. You always told me that, just when I'd settled down somewhere else. . . . Of course I'd have come if I'd known! (*testily*).

JULIA. Oh, surely we needn't go into these matters now! Isn't it better to accept things?

LAURA. I like to have my wishes attended to. What was going to be done about the furniture? (*This to Martha.*) You know, I suppose, that I left it to the two of you—you and Edwin?

MARTHA. We were going to give it to Bella, to set up house with.

LAURA. *That's* not what I intended. I meant you to keep on the house and live there. Why couldn't you?

MARTHA (*with growing annoyance*). Well, *that's* settled now! [42]

LAURA. It wasn't for Arabella. Arabella was never a favourite of mine. Why should Arabella have my furniture?

MARTHA. Well, you'd better send word, and have it stored up for you till doomsday! Edwin doesn't want it; he's got enough of his own.

LAURA (*in a sleek, injured voice*). Julia, I'm going upstairs to take my things off.

JULIA. Very well, Laura.

(And Laura makes her injured exit.)

So you've been with Edwin, and his family?

MARTHA. Yes. I'm never well there; but I wanted the change.

JULIA. You mean, you had been staying with Laura?

MARTHA. I always go and stay with her, as long as I can—three months, I'm supposed to. But this year—well, I couldn't manage with it.

JULIA. Is she so much more difficult than she used to be?

MARTHA. Of course, I don't know what she's like here.

JULIA. Oh, she has been very much herself—*poor* Laura!

MARTHA. I know! Julia, I know! And I try to make allowances. All her life she's had her own way with somebody. Poor William! Of course I know he had his faults. But he used to come and say to me: 'Martha, I *can't* please her.' Well, poor man, he's at peace now, let's hope! Oh, Julia, I've just thought: whatever will poor William do? He's here, I suppose, somewhere? [43]

JULIA. Oh yes. He's here, Martha.

MARTHA. She'll rout him out, depend on it.

JULIA. She has routed him out.

MARTHA (*awe-struck*). Has she?

JULIA (*shaking her head wisely*). William won't live with her; he knows better.

MARTHA. Who will live with her, then? She's bound to get hold of somebody.

JULIA. Apparently she means to live here.

MARTHA. Then it's going to be me! I know it's going to be me! When we lived here before, it used to be poor Mamma.

JULIA. The dear Mother is quite capable of looking after herself, you'll find. You needn't belong to Laura if you don't like, Martha. I never let her take possession of *me*.

MARTHA. She seems never to want to. I don't know how you manage it.

JULIA. Oh, we've had our little tussles. But here you will find it much easier. You can vanish.

MARTHA. What do you mean? [44]

JULIA. I mean—vanish. It takes the place of wings. One does it almost without knowing.

MARTHA. How do you do it?

JULIA. You just wish yourself elsewhere; and you come back when you like.

MARTHA. Have *you* ever done it?

JULIA (*with a world of meaning*). Not yet.

MARTHA. She won't like it. One doesn't belong to one's self, when she's about—nor does anything. I've had to hide my own things from her sometimes.

JULIA. I shouldn't wonder.

MARTHA. Do you remember the silver tea-pot?

JULIA. I've been reminded of it.

MARTHA. It was mine, wasn't it?

JULIA. Oh, of course.

MARTHA. Laura never would admit it was mine. She wanted it; so I'd no right to it.

JULIA. I had a little idea that was it.

MARTHA. For years she was determined to have it: and I was determined she shouldn't have it. And she didn't have it!

JULIA. Who did have it?

MARTHA. Henrietta *was* to. I sent it her as a wedding-present, and told her Laura was never to know. And, as she was in Australia, that seemed safe. Well, the ship it went out in was wrecked—all because of that tea-pot, I believe! So now it's at the bottom of the sea! [45]

JULIA. Destiny!

MARTHA. She searched my boxes to try and find it: stole my keys! I missed them, but I didn't dare say anything. I used to wrap it in my night-gown and hide it in the bed during the day, and sleep with it under my pillow at night. And I was so thankful when Henrietta got married; so as to be rid of it!

JULIA. Hush!

(*RE-ENTER Mrs. James, her bonnet still on, with the strings dangling, and her cloak on her arm.*)

LAURA. Julia I've been looking at your room in there.

JULIA (*coldly*). Have you, Laura?

LAURA. It used to be our Mother's room.

JULIA. I don't need to be reminded of that: it is why I chose it. (*Rising gracefully from her chair, she goes to attend to the fire.*)

LAURA. Don't you think it would be much better for you to give it up, and let our Mother come back and live with us?

JULIA. She has never expressed the wish.

LAURA. Of course not, with you in it.

JULIA. She was not in it when I came.

LAURA. How could you expect it, in a house all by herself? [46]

JULIA. I gave her the chance: I began by occupying my own room.

LAURA (*self-caressingly*). I wasn't here then. That didn't occur to you, I suppose? You seem to forget you weren't the only one.

JULIA. Kind of you to remind me.

LAURA. Saucy.

JULIA. Martha, will you excuse me?

(Polite to the last, she vanishes gracefully away from the vicinity of the coal-box. The place where she has been stooping knows her no more.)

LAURA *(rushing round the intervening table to investigate)*. Julia!

(Martha is quite as much surprised as Mrs. James, but less indignant.)

MARTHA. Well! Did you ever?

LAURA *(facing about after vain search)*. Does she think that is the proper way to behave to me? Julia!

MARTHA. It's no good, Laura. You know Julia, as well as I do. If she makes up her mind to a thing—

LAURA. Yes. She's been waiting here to exercise her patience on me, and now she's happy! Well, she'll have to learn that this house doesn't belong to *her* any longer. She has got to accommodate herself to living with others. . . . I wonder how she'd like me to go and sit in that pet chair of hers? [47]

JULIA *(softly reappearing in the chair which the 'dear Mother' usually occupies)*. You can go and sit in it if you wish, Laura.

LAURA *(ignoring her return)*. Martha, do you remember that odious man who used to live next door, who played the 'cello on Sundays?

MARTHA. Oh yes, I remember. They used to hang out washing in the garden, didn't they?

LAURA *(very scandalously)*. Julia is friends with him! They call on each other. His wife doesn't live with him any longer.

(Julia rises and goes slowly and majestically out of the room.)

LAURA *(after relishing what she conceives to be her rout of the enemy)*. Martha, what do you think of Julia?

MARTHA. Oh, she's— What do you want me to think?

LAURA. High and mighty as ever, isn't she? She's been here by herself so long she thinks the whole place is hers.

MARTHA. I daresay we shall settle down well enough presently. Which room are you sleeping in?

LAURA. Of course, I have my old one. Where do you want to go? [48]

MARTHA. The green room will suit me.

LAURA. And Julia means to keep our Mother's room: I can see that. No wonder she won't come and stay.

MARTHA. Have you seen her?

LAURA. She just 'looked in,' as Julia calls it. I could see she'd hoped to find me alone. Julia always thought *she* was the favourite. I knew better.

MARTHA. How was she?

LAURA. Just her old self; but as if she missed something. It wasn't a *happy* face, until I spoke to her: then it all brightened up. . . . Oh, thank you for the wreath, Martha. Where did you get it?

MARTHA. Emily made it.

LAURA. That fool! Then she made her own too, I suppose?

MARTHA. Yes. That went the day before, so you got it in time.

LAURA. I thought it didn't look up to much. *(She is now contemplating Emily's second effort with a critical eye.)* Now a little maiden-hair fern would have made a world of difference.

MARTHA. I don't hold with flowers myself. I think it's wasteful. But, of course, one has to do it.

LAURA *(with pained regret)*. I'm sorry, Martha; I return it—with many thanks. [49]

MARTHA. What's the good of that? I can't give it back to Emily, now!

LAURA *(with quiet grief)*. I don't wish to be a cause of waste.

MARTHA. Well, take it to pieces, then; and put them in water—or wear it round your head!

LAURA. Ten beautiful wreaths my friends sent me. They are all lying on my grave now! A pity that love is so wasteful! Well, I suppose I must go now and change into my cap. (*Goes to the door, where she encounters Julia.*) Why, Julia, you nearly knocked me down!

JULIA (*ironically*). I beg your pardon, Laura; it comes of using the same door. Hannah has lighted a fire in your room.

LAURA. That's sensible at any rate.

(*EXIT Mrs. James.*)

JULIA. Well? And how do you find Laura?

MARTHA. Julia, I don't know whether I can stand her.

JULIA. She hasn't got quite—used to herself yet.

MARTHA (*explosively*). Put that away somewhere!

(*She gives an angry shove to the wreath.*)

JULIA. Put it away! Why?

MARTHA (*furiously*). Emily made it; and it didn't cost anything; and it hasn't got any maiden-hair fern in it; and it's too big to wear with her cap. So it's good for nothing! Put it on the fire! She doesn't want to see it again. [50]

JULIA (*comprehending the situation, restores the wreath to its box*). Why did you bring it here, Martha?

MARTHA (*miserably*). I don't know. I just clung on to it. I suppose it was on my mind to look after it, and see it wasn't damaged. So I found I'd brought it with me. . . . I believe, now I think of it, I've brought some sandwiches, too. (*She routs in a small hand-bag.*) Yes, I have. Well, I can have them for supper. . . . Emily made those too.

JULIA. Then I think you'd better let Hannah have them—for the sake of peace.

MARTHA (*woefully*). I thought I was going to have peace here.

JULIA. It will be all right, Martha—presently.

MARTHA. Well, I don't want to be uncharitable; but I do wish—I must say it—I do wish Laura had been cremated.

(*This is the nearest she can do for wishing her sister in the place to which she thinks she belongs. But the uncremated Mrs. James now re-enters in widow's cap.*)

LAURA. Julia, have you ever seen Papa, since you came here?

JULIA (*frigidly*). No, I have not.

LAURA. Has our Mother seen him? [51]

JULIA. I haven't— (*About to say the forbidden thing, she checks herself.*) Mamma has *not* seen him: nor does she know his whereabouts.

LAURA. Does nobody know?

JULIA. Nobody that I know of.

LAURA. Well, but he must be somewhere. Is there no way of finding him?

JULIA. Perhaps you can devise one. I suppose, if we chose, we could go to him; but I'm not sure—as he doesn't come to us.

LAURA. Lor', Julia! Suppose he should be—

JULIA (*deprecatingly*). Oh, Laura!

LAURA. But, Julia, it's very awkward, not to know where one's own father is. Don't people ever ask?

JULIA. Never, I'm thankful to say.

LAURA. Why not?

JULIA. Perhaps *they* know better.

LAURA (*after a pause*). I'm afraid he didn't lead a good life.

MARTHA. Oh, why can't you let the thing be? If you don't remember him, I do. I was fond of him. He was always very kind to us as children; and if he did run away with the governess it was a good riddance—so far as she was concerned. We hated her.

LAURA. I wonder whether they are together still. You haven't inquired after *her*, I suppose? [52]

JULIA (*luxuriating in her weariness*). I—have—not, Laura!

LAURA. Don't you think it's our solemn duty to inquire? I shall ask our Mother.

JULIA. I hope you will do nothing of the sort.

LAURA. But we ought to know: otherwise we don't know how to think of him, whether with mercy and pardon for his sins, or with reprobation.

MARTHA (*angrily*). Why need you think? Why can't you leave him alone?

LAURA. An immortal soul, Martha. It's no good leaving him alone: that won't alter facts.

JULIA. I don't think this is quite a nice subject for discussion.

LAURA. Nice? Was it ever intended to be nice? Eternal punishment wasn't provided as a consolation prize for anybody, so far as I know.

MARTHA. I think it's very horrible—for us to be sitting here—by the fire, and— (*But theology is not Martha's strong point*). Oh! why can't you leave it?

LAURA. Because it's got to be faced; and I mean to face it. Now, Martha, don't try to get out of it. We have got to find our Father.

JULIA. I think, before doing anything, we ought to consult Mamma.

LAURA. Very well; call her and consult her! You were against it just now. [53]

JULIA. I am against it still. It's all so unnecessary.

MARTHA. Lor', there *is* Mamma!

(*Old Mrs. Robinson is once more in her place Martha makes a move toward her.*)

JULIA. Don't, Martha. She doesn't like to be—

MRS. R. I've heard what you've been talking about. No, I haven't seen him. I've tried to get him to come to me, but he didn't seem to want. Martha, my dear, how are you?

MARTHA. Oh, I'm—much as usual. And you, Mother?

MRS. R. Well, what about your Father? Who wants him?

LAURA. I want him, Mother.

MRS. R. What for?

LAURA. First we want to know what sort of a life he is leading. Then we want to ask him about his will.

JULIA. Oh, Laura!

MARTHA. I don't. I don't care if he made a dozen.

LAURA. So I thought if we all *called* him. *You* heard when I called, didn't you? Oh no, that was William.

MRS. R. Who's William?

LAURA. Didn't you know I was married?

MRS. R. No. Did he die? [54]

LAURA. Well, now, couldn't we call him?

MRS. R. I daresay. He won't like it.

LAURA. He must. He belongs to us.

MRS. R. Yes, I suppose—as I wouldn't divorce him, though he wanted me to. I said marriages were made in Heaven.

A VOICE. Luckily, they don't last there.

(*Greatly startled, they look around, and perceive presently in the mirror over the mantelpiece the apparition of a figure which they seem dimly to recognise. A tall, florid gentleman of the Dundreary type, with long side-whiskers, and dressed in the fashion of sixty years ago, has taken up his position to one side of the ormolu clock; standing, eye-glass in eye, with folded arms resting on the mantel-slab and a stylish hat in one hand, he gazes upon the assembled family with quizzical benevolence.*)

MRS. R. (*placidly*). What, is that you, Thomas?

THOMAS (*with the fashionable lisp of the fifties, always substituting 'th' for 's'*). How do you

do, Susan?

(*There follows a pause, broken courageously by Mrs. James.*)

LAURA. Are *you* my Father?

THOMAS. I don't know. Who are *you*? Who are all of you? [55]

LAURA. Perhaps I had better explain. This is our dear Mother: her you recognise. You are her husband; we are your daughters. This is Martha, this is Julia, and I'm Laura.

THOMAS. Is this true, Susan? Are these our progeny?

MRS. R. Yes—that is—yes, Thomas.

THOMAS. I should not have known it. They all look so much older.

LAURA. Than when you left us? Naturally!

THOMAS. Than *me*, I meant. But you all seem flourishing.

LAURA. Because we lived longer. Papa, when did you die?

JULIA. Oh! Laura!

THOMAS. I don't know, child.

LAURA. Don't know? How don't you know?

THOMAS. Because in prisons, and other lunatic asylums, one isn't allowed to know anything.

MRS. R. A lunatic asylum! Oh, Thomas, what brought you there?

THOMAS. A damned life, Susan—with you, and others.

JULIA. Oh, Laura, why did you do this?

MARTHA. If this goes on, I shall leave the room. [56]

LAURA. Where are those *others* now?

THOMAS. Three of them I see before me. You, Laura, used to scream horribly. When you were teething, I was sleepless. Your Mother insisted on having you in the room with us. No wonder I went elsewhere.

MARTHA. I'm going!

THOMAS. Don't, Martha! You were the quietest of the lot. When you were two years old I even began to like you. You were the exception.

LAURA. Haven't you any affection for your old home?

THOMAS. None. It was a prison. You were the gaolers and the turnkeys. To keep my feet in the domestic way you made me wool-work slippers, and I had to wear them. You gave me neckties, which I wouldn't wear. You gave me affection of a demanding kind, which I didn't want. You gave me a moral atmosphere which I detested. And at last I could bear it no more, and I escaped.

LAURA (*deaf to instruction*). Papa, we wish you and our dear Mother to come back and live with us.

THOMAS. Live with my grandmother! How could I live with any of you?

LAURA. Where *are* you living?

THOMAS. Ask no questions, and you will be told no lies.

LAURA. Where is *she*? [57]

THOMAS. Which *she*?

LAURA. The governess.

THOMAS. Which governess?

LAURA. The one you went away with.

THOMAS. D'you want her back again? You can have her. She'll teach you a thing or two. She did *me*.

LAURA. Then—you have repented, Papa?

THOMAS. God! why did I come here?

MRS. R. Yes; why did you come? It was weak of you.

THOMAS. Because I never could resist women.

LAURA. Were you really mad when you died, Papa?

THOMAS. Yes, and am still: stark, staring, raving, mad, like all the rest of you.

LAURA. I am not aware that *I* am mad.

THOMAS. Then you are a bad case. Not to know it, is the worst sign of all. It's in the family: you can't help being. Everything you say and do proves it. . . . You were mad to come here. You are mad to remain here. You were mad to want to see me. I was mad to let you see me. I was mad at the mere sight of you; and I'm mad to be off again! Goodbye, Susan. If you send for me again, I shan't come!

(*He puts on his hat with a flourish.*)

LAURA. Where are you going, Father?

[58]

THOMAS. To Hell, child! Your Hell, my Heaven!

(*He spreads his arms and rises up through the looking-glass; you see his violet frock-coat, his check trousers, his white spats, and patent-leather boots ascending into and passing from view. He twiddles his feet at them and vanishes.*)

JULIA. And now I hope you are satisfied, Laura?

MARTHA. Where's Mamma gone?

JULIA. So you've driven her away, too. Well, that finishes it.

(*Apparently it does. Robbed of her parental prey, Mrs. James reverts to the next dearest possession she is concerned about.*)

LAURA. Martha, where is the silver tea-pot?

MARTHA. I don't know, Laura.

LAURA. You said Julia had it.

MARTHA. I didn't say anything of the sort! You said—you supposed Julia had it; and I said—suppose she had! And I left it at that.

LAURA. Julia says she hasn't got it, so you *must* have it.

MARTHA. I haven't!

LAURA. Then where is it?

MARTHA. I don't know any more than Julia knows.

LAURA. Then one of you is not telling the truth. . . . (*Very judicially she begins to examine the two culprits.*) Julia, when did you last see it? [59]

JULIA. On the day, Laura, when we shared things between us. It became Martha's: and I never saw it again.

LAURA. Martha, when did you last see it?

MARTHA. I have not seen it—for I don't know how long.

LAURA. That is no answer to my question.

MARTHA (*vindictively*). Well, if you want to know, it's at the bottom of the sea.

LAURA (*deliberately*). Don't talk—nonsense.

MARTHA. Unless a shark has eaten it.

LAURA. When I ask a reasonable question, Martha, I expect a reasonable answer.

MARTHA. I've given you a reasonable answer! And I wish the Judgment Day would come, and the sea give up its dead, and then— (*At the end of her resources, the poor lady begins to gather herself up, so as once for all to have done with it.*) Now, I am going downstairs to talk to Hannah.

LAURA. You will do nothing of the kind, Martha.

MARTHA. I'm not going to be bullied—not by you or anyone.

LAURA. I must request you to wait and hear what I've got to say.

MARTHA. I don't want to hear it.

[60]

LAURA. Julia, are we not to discuss this matter, pray?

(*Julia, who has her eye on Martha, and is quite enjoying this tussle of the two says nothing.*)

MARTHA. You and Julia can discuss it. I am going downstairs.

(Mrs. James crosses the room, locks the door, and, standing mistress of all she surveys, inquires with grim humour.)

LAURA. And where are you going to be, Julia?

JULIA. I am where I am, Laura. I'm not going out of the window, or up the chimney, if that's what you mean.

(She continues gracefully to do her crochet.)

LAURA. Now, Martha, if you please.

MARTHA *(goaded into victory)*. I'm sorry, Julia. You'd better explain. I'm going downstairs.

(Suiting the action to the word, she commits herself doggedly to the experiment, descending bluntly and without grace through the carpet into the room below. Mrs. James stands stupent.)

LAURA. Martha! . . . Am I to be defied in this way?

JULIA. You brought it on yourself, Laura.

LAURA. You told her to do it!

[61]

JULIA. She would have soon found out for herself. *(Collectedly, she folds up her work and rises.)* And now, I think, I will go to my room and wash my hands for supper.

(As she makes her stately move, her ear is attracted by a curious metallic sound repeated at intervals. Turning about, she perceives, indeed they both perceive, in the centre of the small table, a handsome silver tea-pot which opens and shuts its lid at them, as if trying to speak.)

JULIA. Oh, look, Laura! Martha's tea-pot has arrived.

LAURA. She told a lie, then.

JULIA. No, it was the truth. She wished for it. The sea has given up its dead.

LAURA. Then now I *have* got it at last!

(But, as she goes to seize the disputed possession, Martha rises through the floor, grabs the tea-pot, and descends to the nether regions once more.)

LAURA *(glaring at her sister with haggard eye)*. Julia, where *are* we?

JULIA. I don't know what you mean, Laura. *(She reaches out a polite hand.)* The key?

(Mrs. James delivers up the key as one glad to be rid of it.)

LAURA. What is this place we've come to?

[62]

JULIA *(persuasively)*. Our home.

LAURA. I think we are in Hell!

JULIA *(going to the door, which she unlocks with soft triumph)*. We are all where we wish to be, Laura. *(A gong sounds.)* That's supper. *(The gong continues its metallic bumbling.)*

(Julia departs, leaving Mrs. James in undisputed possession of the situation she has made for herself.)

CURTAIN

[63]

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[64]

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