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HERE AND HEREAFTER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

LINDLEY KAYS
THE GIFTED FAMILY
THE EXILES OF FALOO

HERE AND HEREAFTER

BY

BARRY PAIN

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HERE AND HEREAFTER

MALA

I

It was Saturday night at the end of a hard week. I was just finishing my dinner when I was told that a man wished to see me at once in the surgery. The name, Tarn, was unknown to me.

I found a fair-haired man of thirty in a faded and frayed suit of mustard-colour, holding in his hand a broken straw hat. His face was rather fat and roundish; his build powerful but paunchy. The colour of face and hands showed open-air life and work. His manner was slow, apathetic, heavy. His speech was slow too, but it was the speech of an educated man, and the voice was curiously gentle.

"My wife's ill, doctor. Can you come?"

"I can. What's the matter with her, Mr Tarn?"

He explained. I do not regard child-bearing as illness, and told him so. I told him further that he ought to have made his arrangements and to have engaged a doctor and nurse beforehand.

"In her own country they do not regard it as illness either. The women there do not have doctor or nurse. She did not wish it. But, however, as she seemed to suffer—" [Pg 2]

"Well, well. We'll get on. Where do you live?"

"Felonsdene."

"Eight miles away and right up on the downs. Phew! Can I get my car there?"

"Most of the way at any rate—we could always walk the rest."

"We'll chance it. I'll bring the car round. Shan't keep you a minute, Mr Tarn."

I kept him rather longer than that. There were the lamps to see to, and I had directions to give to my servants. I did not take my driver with me. He had been at work since eight in the morning. When I re-entered the surgery I found Tarn still standing in just the same pose and place, as if he had not moved a hair's-breadth since I left him.

"Ready now," I said, as I picked up my bag.

He took out a pinch of sovereigns from his waistcoat-pocket, seven or eight of them.

"Your fee, doctor," he said.

"That can wait until I've done my work. Come along. Shall I lend you an overcoat?"

He thanked me but refused it, saying that he was used to all weathers. The night was fairly warm too. He sat beside me on the front seat. The first six miles were easy enough along a good road, and I talked to him as I drove. I omit the professional part of our conversation—the questions which a doctor would naturally put on such an occasion. [Pg 3]

"So your wife's a foreigner," I said. "What nationality?"

"She is a woman of colour—a negress."

It is true that all coloured people inspire me with a feeling of physical repulsion, and equally true that I can set all feelings of repulsion aside when there is work to be done.

"Ah!" I said. "And you live up at Felonsdene. To tell the truth, I didn't know anybody lived there. I remember the place—came on it two years ago or more when I was roaming over the downs. There was a farm-house all in ruins—and, let me see, was there a cottage? I didn't come upon anybody living there then. I remember that, because I was thirsty after my walk and couldn't get a drink."

"There was no one there then, and there is no cottage. We came last year. Part of the farm-house has been repaired."

"Well, you've struck about the loneliest spot in England. Who's your landlord?"

"Eh? It's mine—I bought it. Two acres and the farm-house. Had trouble to get it—a deal of trouble."

"And who's with your wife now?" I asked.

"Nobody. She's alone in the house."

"Well, that's not right," I said.

"We have no servants—do everything ourselves. The nearest house is a farmer's at Sandene, three miles away, and we've had no dealings with him. It couldn't be helped, and—she's different, you know. I was not long in coming to you. I caught the mail-cart as soon as I reached the road, and got a lift." [Pg 4]

"Still, I'm thinking—how am I to get on?"

"You'll find I can do anything a woman can do, and do it better. I am more intelligent and I have no nerves. You must pull up at the next gate, doctor. We strike across the downs there."

We had done the six miles, mostly up hill, in twenty-one minutes. Now we turned through the gate, along a turf track deeply rutted. Luckily the weather had been dry for the last fortnight. We crawled up to the top of the crest and then along it for a mile. I saw lights ahead in a hollow below. A dog barked savagely.

"That Felonsdene?" I asked.

"That's it. The descent is bad."

When I got to it I found that it was very bad. I stopped the engines.

"If we break our necks we shan't be much use," I said. "I'll leave the car here. There's nobody to run away with it."

"Shall we take a lamp?" he asked.

"Better."

He picked up my bag, unhitched one lamp, and extinguished the other, while I spread the rug over the seats. His ordinary slowness was deceptive. When he was actually doing something he was remarkably quick without being hurried. He was quick too in seeing a mechanical device—that was clear from the way he handled the lamps. We began the brief descent, and the dog barked more furiously than ever. [Pg 5]

"Is that dog loose?" I asked, as we neared the house.

"Yes," he said. "But he's educated. He'd kill a stranger who came alone; he won't touch you."

He gave a whistle and the barking stopped. The dog, an enormous black retriever, came running towards us; his eyes in the lamplight had a liquid trustfulness.

"Heel," said Tarn sharply, and the dog paced quietly behind him, taking no notice of me whatever.

We went through a yard surrounded by a wall of rough stone. By the light of the lamp I saw that the wall had been mended in places. There was a rough shed on the left, with crates and packing-cases under it. The front door was flush with the wall of the house. It was unlocked, and when Tarn opened it a bright light streamed out. Within was a small square hall, and I noticed that the light was incandescent gas.

Tarn saw that I had noticed it. "I put in a gas-plant," he said. "Will you come this way?" [Pg 6]

He took me into a great living-room. I should think it was about forty feet by twenty. There was a big open fireplace at the further end of the room. The floor was flagged, without rugs or carpets. The walls were the same inside as out, rough stone and mortar; there were three small windows high up in the walls. The windows were newly glazed, the walls had been repaired. There was very little furniture—three wooden windsor chairs, a couple of deal tables, and some cupboards made from packing-cases. There was no attempt at ornament or decoration of any kind, and there was no disorder. The scanty furniture was precisely arranged, nothing was left lying about, and everything was scrupulously clean. The timbers of the pointed roof seemed to me to be new. The room was very brightly lit, with more gas jets (of the cheapest description) than were needed.

What struck me most was the smell of the place—a smoky, greenish, sub-acid, slightly aromatic smell. I wondered if it could come from the great logs that smouldered in the fireplace, before which the retriever now stretched himself.

"Queer smell here," I said. "What is it?"

"It comes," he said, "from the smoke of juniper leaves."

"You don't burn those in the fireplace, do you?"

"No. I—I don't think you'd understand." [Pg 7]

The words were said gently, almost sadly, without offensive intention. But they annoyed me a little—I did not like to be told by this scarecrow that I could not understand.

"Very well," I said. "Now then, where's your wife?"

He pointed to a door at the further end of the room, on the right of the fireplace. "Through there," he said. "I—I don't know if you speak French."

"I do."

"Mala speaks French more easily than English. She lived for many years in Paris—was born there. You'll find in that room the things a chemist in Helmstone thought might be wanted. If you need anything else, or want my help in any way, I shall be here."

"Good," I said, and passed through the door he had indicated.

I must remember that I am not writing for doctors. All I need say of the case is that it was a good thing Tarn fetched me. It was a case where the intervention of a medical man was imperatively necessary. Otherwise all went perfectly well. The child was born in a little more than an hour after my arrival, a girl, healthy and vigorous, and as black as the ace of spades. Tarn did all that was required of him perfectly—quickly, but without noise or hurry, and with great intelligence.

Mala, his wife, seemed to me to be very young. She was a girl of splendid physique; her face, like [Pg 8] the face of every negress, repelled me. She showed affection for her child, and expressed her intention of nursing it herself, of which she seemed capable. This was all natural—more natural than normal unfortunately—but all the time I was conscious that I was attending a woman of morbid psychology. When I left her asleep, it was to join a man of morbid psychology in the great living-room.

"All well?" asked Tarn, as I entered.

"Quite. Both asleep." My body was tired, and I dare say I ought to have been sleepy myself, but my mind was awake and alert. The unusual nature of the experience may account for it. I sat down and gave him some instructions and advice about his wife, to which he paid close attention.

"Must you come here again?" he asked. I thought it a question that might have been better expressed.

"Yes," I said. "I don't want to pile up the visits, but I must do what's wanted."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that unless you were coming again in any case, I should have to make arrangements for fetching you if the need arose."

I laughed. "Arrangements? Well, you've nobody to send but yourself?"

"There's the dog."

"But he doesn't know where I live."

"I was meaning to teach him that to-morrow. I'd better do it in any case—one never knows what [Pg 9] may happen." He sighed profoundly.

"Teach him to fetch the doctor—eh? He must be a clever beggar. What do you call him?"

"He has no name. He's not a pet. You must take some refreshment before you go. Whisky?"

"Ah, a drop of whisky and a biscuit would be rather welcome. Thanks."

He brought out a jar of whisky, a gasogen of soda-water, and some large hard biscuits in their native tin.

"To your daughter's health," I said, as I raised my glass.

He suddenly put his glass down. "Farce," he said savagely. "But it's all farce—this—this fuss, She's born to die, isn't she? It's the common lot. She's hauled out of nothing by blind Chance, to be tossed back into nothing by blind Chance. Drink the health of the seaweed that the tide throws up on the shore and the tide sucks back again? No! Not I!"

The whole thing had been so strange that this outbreak did not particularly astonish me. "You'd be a happier man, Mr Tarn, and a more sensible man, if you would simply accept Nature as you find it. You can't alter it and you can't understand it. You're beating your head against a wall."

This ragged fellow took on an air of superiority that annoyed me. "Yes, yes," he said. "I've heard all that—and so often. It's the point of view of ordinary materialistic science. You are not a religious man." [Pg 10]

"Certainly," I said, "I don't pretend that I know what I do not know. Nor am I fool enough, Mr Tarn, to complain of what from insufficient data I am unable to understand. Put in other words, I am neither an orthodox believer nor an atheist. Do I understand that you are a religious man yourself?"

"The religion of Mala and her people is mine."

"Really? You turn the tables on the missionaries. Well, the theological discussion is interesting but it is often interminable; and I have work to do to-morrow. I must be getting on."

"I will come with you as far as the car. But first, doctor, the dog must learn that you are welcome here and that he is never to harm you. Call him and give him a bit of biscuit."

I called him. He looked up from his place before the fire but did not move. Then Tarn made a movement with his hand, and the dog got up, shook himself, and walked slowly towards me. He went all round me, sniffing. I held out the biscuit to him, and he looked away to his master and whined. Tarn nodded, and the dog immediately took the food from my hand.

"Yes," said Tarn, as if answering what I was thinking, "he has never been allowed to take food from any hand but mine. He will never forget you. You can come here at any hour of the day or night now with perfect safety. It's—it's the freedom of the city." [Pg 11]

As Tarn climbed with me up to the car, he spoke again on the subject of my fee. "I suppose I should not have offered it in advance," he said. "But it occurred to me that, as I never think about clothes, I looked very poor, and that the place where I have chosen to live also looked very poor. And you did not know me. As a matter of fact, I am bothered with far more money than I want."

"Ah!" I laughed. "I could do with a little worry of that sort."

As he fixed up the lamps he thanked me warmly for what I had done for Mala, and asked what time he might expect me on the morrow. I opened my pocket-book and looked at it by the light of the lamp. "Well, I've a light day to-morrow, barring accidents. I shall be here some time in the afternoon."

The drive home was accomplished without incident. I ran the car into the coach-house and went straight to bed. But for more than an hour I could not get to sleep. I was haunted by that man and his negress wife, building theories about them, trying to account for them. Just as I was dropping off I was awakened again by a smell of bitter smoke in my nostrils—the smell of burning juniper leaves. Then I recognised that the smell was a memory-illusion, and fell asleep in real earnest.

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II

I got back from my Sunday morning round before one. Helmstone was rather full of visitors that day, and there were many cars before the big hotel in the Queen's Road. As my man was driving slowly through the traffic I saw, a hundred yards away, Tarn striding along, in the same shabby clothes, with his retriever at his heel. He turned down a side-street, and I saw no more of him. On inquiry I found that he had not called at my house. He had merely been there, as he said, to give the dog his lesson.

I am a bachelor. I lunched alone on cold beef and beer, and I read the *Lancet*. I intended to remain materialistic and scientific, and not to be infected by that air of mystery and morbidity which seemed to hang round Tarn and his negress wife at Felonsdene. I had not been in practice for ten years without coming on strange occurrences before, and they had all lost their strangeness when the facts had been filled in. My after-luncheon visit to Felonsdene was of course professional, but if I had any chance I meant to satisfy an ordinary lay curiosity as well.

I drove myself, and the track across the downs looked worse in daylight than it had done by night. Still it seemed reasonable to suppose that what the car had done then it could do now. I could see more clearly now what had been done in the way of repairs to that ruined and long-deserted farm-house. The pointed roof over the big room where I had sat the night before had been mended and made weather-tight. The chimney-stack was new, and so were the window-casements. Adjoining the big room was a building of irregular shape that might possibly have contained three or four other rooms, roofed with new corrugated iron. One or two outbuildings looked as if they had been newly constructed from old materials. But that part of the farm-house which had originally been two-storied had been left quite untouched. Half the roof of it was down, the windows were without glass, and one saw through them the broken stairs and torn [Pg 13]

wall-paper peeling off and flapping in the brisk March breeze. On the grass-field beyond the court-yard two good Alderney cows were grazing. Most of the land looked neglected; but Tarn had no help and had everything to do himself. An orchard of stunted and miserable-looking fruit trees was sheltered by a dip of the land from north and east.

The dog barked furiously when he heard my car, and before I began the climb down to the farm-house I picked up two or three flints with intent to use them if he went for me. But all signs of hostility vanished when he saw me. He did not leap and gambol for joy, but he thrust his nose [Pg 14] into my hand and then walked just in front of me, wagging his tail, and looking back from time to time to see that I understood and was following him.

He led the way across the court-yard, through the open outer door, and across the hall to the door of the big room. He scratched at the door. From impatience I knocked and entered.

Tarn had fallen asleep before the fire in one of the windsor chairs. He was just rousing himself as I entered. He had taken off his coat and his heavy boots and wore felt slippers that had a home-made look. From the table beside him it appeared that he had lunched frugally on whisky, milk and hard biscuits.

"Sorry I was asleep," he said. "But the dog knew."

"Ah!" I said. "You'd a long walk this morning. I saw you at Helmstone."

"Yes. I told you."

"You should have come into my house for a rest. How's your wife getting on—had a good night?"

"It seems so. She has slept a long time. So has the child. I will find out if she will see you." He passed into the inner room.

If she had expressed any disinclination to see me I should have been extremely angry; also, I might have thought it right to disregard the disinclination. But Tarn reappeared almost directly and asked me to go in [Pg 15]

I found that all was going as well as possible both with her and with the child. She really was a splendid animal, unhurt either by excessive work or—as many modern mothers are—by a rotten fashionable life. With me she was reticent, almost sullen in manner; yet she seemed docile and had carried out my orders. The only difficulty was, as I had expected, to get her to remain in bed. With her child she showed white teeth in ecstasies of maternal joy. Before I had finished with her I heard the rain pattering on the iron roof of her room.

I went back into the great living-room. It was rather dark there, for the sky was heavily clouded and the windows, placed high up, gave but little light. The table had been cleared, and Tarn was not there. I sat down to wait for him, and the dog got up from the fire and came over to me and laid his head on my knee. He was an enormous and very powerful brute, as much retriever as anything, but evidently with another strain in his composition. I felt quite safe with him now, talked to him and patted him—attentions which he received gravely, without resistance but without any signs of pleasure.

Presently Tarn came in from outside. His hair was wet with the rain.

"I've taken up a tarpaulin," he said, "and thrown it over your car, doctor." [Pg 16]

"That's very good of you," I said. "I was just doubting if that rug of mine would be enough."

"It comes down heavily. You must remain here awhile, unless you have other patients whom you must see at once."

"No," I said. "This finishes my work for to-day, I hope. I always try to arrange for Sunday afternoon free, and I'm glad to accept your hospitality. No juniper smoke to-day."

"There has been—no occasion." He went on quickly to inquire about his wife and child. He was not a man who showed his emotions much, but he certainly left me with the impression that he was fond and proud of the child. He asked several questions about her as he went round the room, lighting the gas-jets. Then we sat before the log fire and lit our pipes.

"One's a little surprised to find gas in a place like this," I said.

"It makes less work than lamps. When one tries to be independent and do the work oneself that's a consideration. Besides, it gives more light, and people who live alone as we do need plenty of light. I'm afraid it must all seem rather puzzling."

"Well," I said, "I don't want to be curious."

"And I don't want to puzzle anybody, nor to enlighten anybody either. Still, you've done much for us—Mala says she would have died but for you. If you care for a very simple story you can have it." [Pg 17]

"Just as you like," I said. "But I should imagine that your story would be interesting."

"I do not think so. A little more than a year ago I was in Paris. Mala was also there. I met her through a friend of mine. I brought her to England and married her. You know how such a marriage is regarded here—how a woman of colour is regarded in any case. Very well,

Felonsdene was a place where we could live to ourselves."

He stopped, as if there had been no more to say.

"So far," I said, "you have told me precisely what one might have conjectured. How did it all happen? What were you doing in Paris—and Mala? Who was the friend? How did it come about?"

He spoke slowly, more to himself, as it seemed, than to me. "My friend was an English Catholic, an ex-priest, a religious man like myself. His mind gave way, and he is shut up in an asylum now. He took me to see Mala. Night after night. Sometimes it was miraculous—and sometimes nothing. When the performance went badly, the uncle beat her. We could stop that because it was only a question of money. I remember it all—settled after midnight at a *café* where we drank absinthe—the uncle with arms too long and very prognathous, like a dressed-up ape, pouncing on the bank-notes with hairy fingers and counting aloud in French, very bad French, not like Mala's. He was very old—a hundred years, he said—he cannot have been her uncle really. A great-uncle [Pg 18] perhaps. He was not a religious man at all. He kept patting the pocket where the bank-notes were. We put him in a fiacre, because he was drunk. We were out of Paris that night—my friend, and Mala, and myself. Next morning we crossed the Channel, and next night there was a riot at the theatre because Mala did not appear. Did I say where we went in England? I am not used to speaking so much, and it confuses me."

I was afraid he would stop again. "I don't think you mentioned the exact name," I said.

"Wilsing, my friend's own place. High walls, and lonely gardens, but too many servants—they all looked questions at us. Gardeners would touch their caps and look round after we had passed—you can imagine it. It was while we were at Wilsing that I married Mala. And shortly afterwards my poor friend had to be taken away. You see, doctor, he was a very earnest man, and very religious. He had gone too far along a new road, and he was horribly frightened but could not go back. It was too much for him. Mala and I had to go away also, of course. I remember hotels that would not take us in. We have been followed in the streets by jeering crowds. Even when I had found Felonsdene there was endless trouble before I could buy it. No tenant could be found for it [Pg 19] —there is some silly story that the place is haunted. Besides, the house was all in ruins, and too far from—from everything. And yet the owner would not sell."

He paused. "And in the end?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I got it in the end. I tempted him. Here we have arranged life as we wish it to be, and we practise our religion without molestation. There are consolations."

"The consolations of religion," I suggested.

Suddenly he put down his pipe and stood up erect. He stretched an arm out clumsily towards me. His eyes flashed under the bright gas-jets, and his nostrils quivered. He spoke in a low voice but with the most intense emphasis. "You don't know what you're saying. In our religion there are no consolations. There is only propitiation, and again propitiation, and always propitiation—the sacrifice of more and more as the end draws nearer." He swept his arm round and pointed at the door of his wife's room. "What consolation is there from the Power that there—in there, where you have been—linked love with life only to link life with death again? What consolation from the Power that has closed and sealed the door of knowledge?"

He sat down and remained silent. I was beginning to form some conclusions. [Pg 20]

"Then what consolations have you?"

"Linked to bitterness and yet something. For example—I have Mala."

"Your child also."

"Yes, the child too. For a little time perhaps."

There was again a pause. The rain had cleared now and I rose to go. "Mr Tarn," I said, "before I leave you I think it my duty as a doctor to tell you something."

"About Mala?" he asked eagerly.

"About yourself." He laughed contemptuously. "If you go on with your present manner of life I will not answer for the consequences. I think you are playing, and have been playing, a very dangerous game; the case of your own friend warns you how dangerous it is. This prolonged solitude is bad for you and bad for your wife. This pessimistic brooding over things you cannot understand—which you are pleased to call a religion—is worse still, especially if it is accompanied by any rites or ceremonies which might impress a morbid imagination. I'm not going to mince matters—if you don't give this up you'll lose your reason."

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Do not be so absurdly sensitive about the fact that you have married a negress. Be a man and not a baby. Go and live in some village and mix with your fellow-men. No novelty lasts more than three months. Before the end of that time your wife will excite no attention at all—the position [Pg 21] will be accepted. And if you can't find any better religion than the dismal rubbish that is poisoning your mind at present, then have none at all. It will be better for you."

"It is impossible to take your advice," he said stolidly.

"Why?"

"Because Mala and I are as we were made. We won't argue it."

"Please yourself. I've done my duty. Good-bye, Mr Tarn."

He told me that he was coming with me to the road. The very thin skin of turf on the hard rock of the crest of the hill would be so greasy that the wheels of my car would go round ineffectively and refuse to bite without his weight on the back axle. At the rutty descent on the other side he would get off and walk by the car to lend a hand if the wheels sank too deep in the mud there. His predictions happened exactly, and I was very glad of his help. At the road he left me; up on the hill his dog guarded the tarpaulin and waited for his return.

Certainly, in some simple practical matters the man was still showing himself sane and shrewd enough.

I dined that night with a bachelor friend in Helmstone who has a good reference library and a vast fund of curious information. He told me to what Power the smell of burning juniper was supposed to be agreeable. He also informed me that Wilsing was the Herefordshire seat of the Earl of Deljeon. [Pg 22]

"Poor beggar!" added my host.

"Deljeon?" I asked. "Why?"

"Oh, well—he's in an asylum, you know. And likely to stop there, so they say."

III

I happened in the course of the next week to hear of Tarn from another source.

Tarn had told me that his next neighbour was the farmer at Sandene, three miles away, and that they had had no dealings together. Now I knew little Perrot, the farmer at Sandene, very well. I had attended his robust and prolific wife on three natural occasions, I had seen the children through measles, I had done what I could for the chronic dyspepsia of his termagant aunt, I had looked after Perrot's knee when a horse kicked him. Perrot was a ferret-faced man, a hard man at a bargain and a very good man on a horse. Between farming and horse-coping he did very fairly well. He was the willing and abject slave of his wife and his numerous children. He was interested in medical matters, of which he had no knowledge whatever, and relished an occasional long word. So I was not surprised to receive a note from Perrot stating "our Gladys seems to have omphitis," that he would be glad if I could call, and that he was my obedient servant. Tommy, the brother of Gladys, took back my verbal answer that I would call that morning. [Pg 23]

Sandene resembles Felonsdene in that both are hollows in the downs, and resembles it in no other respect. Sandene is approached by a definite and well-made road. Its farm-house and little group of cottages have a cheerful and human look. The inhabitants are busy folk, but they find time to whistle and to laugh. Gladys Perrot, I found, was suffering from a diet of which the nature and extent had been dictated by enthusiasm rather than by judgment. I was able to say definitely that she would soon recover.

Perrot came in from trouble with a chaff-cutter to have a few words with me.

"So it's not omphitis?" he said with an air of relief.

"I should say it was a slight bilious attack. But I don't know what omphitis is."

"All I can say is that my poor grandmother died of it. Buried thirty-six hours afterwards—had to be. Makes one careful. That's why I sent Tom down. He had cake at your place, he said. If he asked for it, I shall have to pay him, to learn him manners." [Pg 24]

I acquitted Tom. "No," I said, "that was my old housekeeper—trying to make a job for me."

Perrot saluted the veteran joke heartily.

"I was up with your neighbours at Felonsdene the other day," I said.

"Ah!" said Perrot, grimly. "Man ill?"

"No. His wife's just got a baby."

"And you attended her. Very good of you. Vet's work I should have called that."

"You don't know them, do you?"

"Nor want. Not but what he and his dog did me a good turn once. If you like to take the message, sir, you can tell Tarn that Mr Perrot of Sandene would be glad to give him five sovereigns for that dog. So I would too, and not think twice about it."

"I'll tell him," I said. "What was the good turn?"

"I lost a couple of sheep. And that annoyed me, though they were marked and pretty sure to be

brought back some time. Still I was annoyed that night, you ask the missus if I wasn't."

"Like a bear with a sore head," said Mrs Perrot cheerfully.

"Well, at half-past nine I was just on going up to bed, when there came a great barking outside and a scratching at the door. It wasn't one of my dogs, I knew, though you may be sure they very soon chipped in. I went out, and there were my two sheep and Tarn's big dog with them. Those [Pg 25] sheep hadn't been hurried and scurried neither. They'd been brought in nicely. The dog wouldn't let me get near him. He was what might be called truculent, as some of the best of them are. He was away again before you could say knife."

"He's no sheep-dog," said Mrs Perrot. "Five pounds for the likes of him! What would you say if I talked like that?"

"To my mind," said Perrot, stolidly, "a sheep-dog is a dog that's clever and reliable at handling sheep, and I don't care what the breed is—I don't care if he's a poodle. Come to that, Tarn's dog looks like a cross between a retriever and a—a elephant. All the same, he'd be worth five sovereigns to me, and I'd back my judgment too. Tell you why. I expected there was somebody with the dog and I wanted to do the right thing—a drink for a master or sixpence for his man—and I gave a hulloa. There was nobody within call, for I went right out and looked. He'd been sent in by himself, and he'd made no mistake. That's no ordinary dog."

"No," I said, "he's not. I know him. He's rather a friend of mine."

"There—and the missus says he's more like some wild beast. Oh, they're all right when they've got to know you, dogs are." [Pg 26]

Perrot followed me out to the car. "There's rather a queer thing," he said, "but I know the medical etiquette—doctors aren't supposed to talk."

"Well," I said, "they're often supposed to talk, but they don't do it."

"Then you can't tell me anything about that—I don't know what to call it—tabernacle, perhaps—at Felonsdene."

"I've seen nothing of the kind, nor heard of it either. What do you mean?"

Perrot could only tell me what Ball had told him. Ball was a labourer whom Perrot employed. Late in the previous October, on a Saturday morning, Ball had gone in to Helmstone to deliver a horse that Perrot had sold, and drew his wages before he went. He rode the horse in and was to walk back. The purchaser of the horse gave Ball a pint. A friend whom he met by chance gave Ball a quart. A few minutes later Ball gave himself another quart, because he could afford it, and started for home. A carter who gave him a lift told him that he was drunk, and though Ball did not accept the theory completely he thought there might be something to be said for it. It seemed better to him to roam the downs for a couple of hours before he faced the inquisitorial glance of Mrs Ball. When he reached Felonsdene he sat down to rest under some gorse near the crest of the downs before tackling the three miles home to Sandene. He fell asleep, and when he woke, [Pg 27] shivering with cold, it was midnight. But he maintained that it was not the cold which woke him; it was music of a sort. There was a drum beating, not loud, but regularly. At intervals a woman's voice was heard singing. "Stopping short and then starting in again on it" was Ball's phrase to describe it. The sounds came from what looked like an outhouse; it had no windows, but light streamed out from the open door. And in the path of the light there was a grey smoke. He crept very quietly and cautiously down to a point from which he might see what was going on in there. The inside of the building was filled with the grey smoke, but through it he could see many lighted candles, candles as long as your arm, and a kneeling figure—he could not say whether it was man or woman—in a long red garment. The singing and drum-beating had stopped and all was quite still. Then Ball's foot slipped and sent stones rattling down. The next minute Ball was running for his life with, so he maintained, Tarn's dog after him.

As Ball got away, it may be believed that either the dog was chained, or that it was called off immediately by Tarn himself.

"I don't know what you make of it, sir, but it looks to me as if those Tarns were Romans," said Perrot. [Pg 28]

"Mr Perrot," I said, "it doesn't do to take much notice of what a fuddled man thinks he sees."

"Perhaps not," said Perrot. "Anyway, it gave Ball a good scare—he's been teetotal ever since and talks of joining the Plymouth Brethren."

Within a brief period from that day my visits to Felonsdene ceased; there was no longer any reason for them. Tarn accepted all that the law required; he registered the birth of the child and he had her vaccinated. The devotion of Mala and himself to that child was beyond all question.

I repeated the very good advice which I had already given him, but he refused to follow it. I think he considered that he had already said too much, and he quite obviously attempted to minimise it. He said that perhaps he had expressed himself too strongly. It was quite possible for a small family to live happily and cheerfully together even in so desolate a spot as Felonsdene. There was plenty to do. Mala had her baby and the house to look after. He had the outdoor work. If he wanted to see what the rest of the world was doing, he could always go into Helmstone; there were plenty of hotels there where he could get a drink and a game of billiards. When I told him

what Ball professed to have seen and heard he got rather angry. It was all a lie. Ball had never been near the place. But a few minutes afterwards he said: "I wish I'd let the dog get him." [Pg 29]

It was all intended to be very reassuring. But it was not candid and it was vaguely disquieting. It occurred to me to pay a visit one night secretly to Felonsdene to see if I could make out what was going on. But my practice in Helmstone was too heavy to leave leisure for nocturnal expeditions of that sort; besides, it was no business of mine.

Tarn paid my bill—he wanted to pay twice as much—and I regarded the incident as closed. If I were called in again I thought it likely that it would be to certify the lunacy of either Tarn or his wife.

But the incident was reopened a little less than a year later, and not in the way that I had expected.

IV

In the following January I took a partner in my practice. This was a step which I had long contemplated. I was a bachelor, making far too much money for my simple needs and working far too hard in order to accomplish it. I also wanted time for my investigations into the cause and treatment of a certain disease; these investigations have nothing to do with the story of Mala and her husband and would not interest laymen. I have no excuse but vanity for adding that they [Pg 30] subsequently brought me some reputation. My partner was a sound and able young man, much interested in his profession, and soon made himself liked and respected. My life became much easier and more comfortable.

In the March following, about four one morning, I was awakened by the barking of a dog in the street outside my house. Presently I heard him scratching at my door. I hurried down, switched on the lights, and opened the door. I had thought of damage to my paint and not of Tarn, of whom I had heard nothing for a long time. But it was Tarn's dog that lay on the pavement outside.

I supposed at first that somebody at Felonsdene was ill, and that the dog had been sent to fetch me. But the dog's appearance did not bear this out. He had evidently come much further than the distance from Felonsdene to my house. He got up when he saw me, but the poor brute was so exhausted that he could hardly stand, and he looked as if he had been starved for days. I called him into the house and got food for him; he ate ravenously. I waited to see if he would try to get out again, but he seemed perfectly content to remain where he was. Finally, he followed me upstairs to my own room, where he stretched himself on the hearth-rug and almost instantly fell asleep. I was just about to switch off the light and get back into my bed again when I noticed the [Pg 31] shining brass plate on the dog's collar. I bent down and examined it. On the brass plate, neatly engraved, were my own name and address. It looked as if the dog were to be mine in future. But why? What had happened?

The dog established definitely his relations with the rest of my household next morning. He took no notice whatever of anybody who left him alone. But he would allow nobody but myself to touch him. Even my partner, who understood dogs and was fond of them, had to confess himself beaten. He was taking the round that morning, and I intended to walk up to Felonsdene with the dog. But the poor brute was still so stiff and footsore that I decided after all to take the car. He sat beside me, and I rather think that he knew where he was going. But he showed no excitement when the car stopped, and made no attempt to rush off to the farm-house. He followed me quietly down the hill.

A saddled horse was tethered in the court-yard, and the outer door was open. In the hall stood Mr Perrot with a penny note-book and a stumpy pencil in his hand. He looked up as he heard my step, and greeted me with his usual heartiness.

"This is a surprise, Mr Perrot," I said. "I didn't expect to find you here. I was looking for Tarn."

"Afraid you won't find him, sir. They all cleared out yesterday morning. I've bought this place." [Pg 32]

"Bought it?"

"House and land, furniture and stock, everything except the dog and their clothes. It's a little speculation of mine, and looks like being a very good speculation too. I knew you were going to have the dog—he told me he meant him as a present to you, and according to Tarn I could never have done anything with him. Truculent—too truculent."

"I didn't know he was leaving. How did it come about?"

"Oh, he came round one morning three weeks ago, and asked me if I'd buy his place. I said I'd buy that or anything else if the price were right. And it was right enough because it was my own price; I came and went over everything and said what I'd give, and he never haggled. I paid my ten per cent. next day, and completed at the lawyer's in Helmstone afternoon before last."

"Tarn was there?"

"He was. What's more, we had a bottle of champagne wine at the Armada afterwards at his expense, and he drove me back to Sandene in his car."

"Car? I never knew he'd got one."

"Only had it two months, he said. It's a bigger one than yours, sir, and I expect he'll lose money on it. For he told me he shouldn't take it over to France with him, and they're bad things to sell. [Pg 33] Yes, I felt like one of the gentlefolk that afternoon—drinking champagne wine and sitting in a motor-car. He must be a warmer man than ever I supposed."

"How was he looking?"

"Well, he was quiet, and yet he was a bit excited, if you know what I mean. He'd new clothes on—oh, quite the thing. It's my belief that he's come into money unexpected, and that he and the two niggers—the wife and baby—are off on a jaunt together."

I did not share Perrot's belief, but I said nothing.

"In France they're not too particular, so I'm told," said Perrot. "I daresay niggers go down better there than they do here."

"Did you see the woman and her baby when you were here?"

"No, they weren't shown, and I didn't ask for them. I don't think they were in the house when I came, for I went into each room. But they must have come in by another way before I left, for I heard them in the next room to us. What's more, the baby was laughing and the woman was sobbing."

"What was she crying about?"

Perrot laughed. "Why, women will cry for anything. Toothache perhaps. Maybe he'd been giving her a bit of a dressing-down."

I did not agree with Perrot's conclusions, but again I made no comment. Perrot had to get on his [Pg 34] horse and ride back to Sandene. He confided to me that he'd got a tenant for Felonsdene already. Mrs Lane was going to live there with her married daughter and her son-in-law. Mrs Lane was Perrot's bad-tempered and dyspeptic aunt, and so far she had lived in Perrot's house at Sandene. "But I haven't got room for her any longer," said Perrot. "So she's taking her *exeatus*." I recommend *exeatus* to the philologist.

Perrot had ridden off, and I was half-way up the hill to my car, when the idea struck me that I should like to have a look at the building which had been used for the curious rites that Ball had described and I turned back again. I found the place; it stood apart from the house, and was boarded on the inside. That curious smell of bitter smoke still hung about it. At one end I could see that some sort of fitment had been removed, and there were splashes of candle-wax on the floor.

Coming out into the sunlight again, I noted that Tarn had done a little levelling and road-making to enable him to get his car into Felonsdene from the lower side of the hollow. This would give him a greater distance to go if he were driving to Helmstone, but by the shorter route which I had taken the approach was quite impracticable for a car.

And then, quite by chance, I noticed among the stunted trees of the orchard something white that [Pg 35] at a little distance looked not unlike a big milestone. As I entered the orchard the dog whined and lay down. I supposed that he was tired and left him there. A nearer view showed me a column about three feet square and about four feet in height, neatly built up of rough lumps of chalk. On the top of the column were a pile of ashes and charred wood. It was then that its resemblance to a sacrificial altar, such as I had seen pictured in an old illustrated Bible, first struck me. Among the ashes something gleamed and sparkled. I fished it out with a bit of stick. It was a small circlet of soft gold, evidently not European work, and might have served as a child's bangle. And my disturbance of the ashes had shown me other things.

I found an old wine-case in one of the sheds, and in this I placed all that I had found on the top of the altar. The lower part of the ashes and the top of the altar were still quite warm from the fire. I carried the case up to my car, sweating with the effort and my hurry. I put the case in the tonneau and covered it with a rug, and then, with the dog by my side, I went home as fast as I could drive.

My partner had returned from his round and joined me in my examination of what was in the case. Incineration had been imperfect and we had no doubt whatever. I could state confidently that on an altar in an orchard at Felonsdene the body of a young child had been burned, within [Pg 36] thirty-six hours of the time of my discovery, which was precisely twenty minutes past twelve on the morning of 29th March. I returned at once to my car and drove to the police-station, where I gave my information.

The number and the appearance of Tarn's car were well known. A white man travelling with a negress cannot go anywhere in England without being noticed. He and the woman had been in Paris before, and the man had admitted to Perrot, under circumstances which might have overcome his usual reticence, that he was going to France. The inspector who saw me felt sure that Tarn would be found, and the whole mystery cleared up, in a very short time.

Tarn and Mala were never found. They had been seen in the car in the very early morning of the 28th. The car itself was found at Melcombe Cliffs, an unimportant place on the coast about five miles from Helmstone. Inquiries at ports gave negative results; no negress accompanied by a

white man had gone by any of the boats; the only negress who had gone abroad bore no resemblance to Mala and was satisfactorily accounted for.

The coroner was extremely polite to me at the inquest on the remains of the child. He said that I had given my evidence in a most clear and open manner. I had mentioned circumstances which I [Pg 37] thought to be suspicious, and of course it was my duty to mention them. But still I had admitted fully—and he thought it a most important point—that both Tarn and his wife were devoted to the child. It made any theory that they had been guilty of the horrible crime of murdering the child seem very improbable. Tarn had married a negress and was very sensitive on the point; he lived alone; he hated any publicity. It seemed to him more likely that the child died suddenly, perhaps as the result of an accident, when Tarn and his wife were on the point of departure; and that sooner than face the publicity and inquiry, they had taken this quite illegal way of disposing of the body. Tarn was an educated man and he would know that what he had done was illegal. He would be anxious to avoid detection, and would probably change his plans in consequence. He was also a wealthy man; the abandonment of the motor-car would not mean very much to him. Inquiries had been made on the supposition that Tarn and his wife had gone to France; but they might have gone elsewhere. They might have shipped from Liverpool. A negress with the help of a thick motor-veil, a wig, and grease-paints might easily conceal her race for a little while. The absence of any evidence from people at Melcombe Cliffs and the neighbourhood seemed rather to point to this. Tarn was a gloomy man of rather morbid and religious temperament. He had [Pg 38] certainly said some extraordinary things, but the bark of a man of that type was generally worse than his bite. The cremation of the child's body was wrong and illegal, but the jury had nothing to do with that. There was really no evidence pointing to murder; on the contrary, they had heard that both parents were devoted to their child. An inconclusive verdict was given.

It was on 27th March that the child was born; a year later precisely its body was burned. It may have been a coincidence; it may not. I, at any rate, have never been able to accept the coroner's comforting theory. I remember that negress too well, and the power that she and her horrible faith had over her husband. They loved their child, I believe. But in the propitiation of the Power of evil, the dearer the victim the more potent will be the sacrifice. They must have been insane in the end. And possibly the sea at Melcombe Cliffs still holds the secret of what became of them.

[Pg 39]

THE FEAST AND THE RECKONING

Mr Duncan Garth stood at his windows in park Lane and looked out. He was a man of forty-five, unusually tall and broad, with a strong, clean-shaven face.

"I should rather like," he said, "to buy Hyde Park."

His secretary, seated at a table behind him, chuckled.

"You are quite right, Ferguson," said Garth. "I can't buy Hyde Park or the National Gallery. But I presume I've got the money value of both. Wouldn't you say so, Ferguson?"

Ferguson was a slender young man. He looked far too young for the important post of secretary to Mr Garth, and much younger than he really was. His scrupulous care as to his personal appearance rather amused Garth, who was careless in such matters almost to the point of untidiness.

Ferguson lit a cigarette and reflected. "I should say not," he said. "Hyde Park alone, of course, you could buy, if it were for sale. I don't know what the National Gallery would figure out at, but silly people give absurd sums for paint and canvas nowadays, and there's any amount of it there. [Pg 40] You might be able to do them both, but I should doubt it."

"Well, I'm going to give a luncheon-party, anyhow."

"Yes," said Ferguson, drily, "you can afford to do that. Whom am I to ask?"

Garth consulted some memoranda on the back of an envelope. "I'm going to mix 'em up a bit," he said. "You remember that girl in the post-office yesterday?"

"The one who asked if you'd got any eyes in your head?"

"Yes. One should not, of course, hand in telegrams to the money-order department. There was something in the bitter fury of the woman that interested me. Naturally, I don't know her name and address, but I suppose you can get that."

"Of course," said Ferguson, making a shorthand note.

"Then I must have old Lady Longshore. I should like an actor-manager, too. Could you suggest?"

"Want him for his egotism?"

"Quite so," said Mr Garth. "Of course."

"Then you can't do better than Eustace Richards. A fluent talker. But you've met him."

"So I have," said Garth, "now I come to think of it. He will do admirably. Then I should like Archdeacon Pringle and his wife, and that chap I went to about my throat." [Pg 41]

"Let me see," said Ferguson—"that was Sir Edwin Goodchild, wasn't it? A good sort—I know him well. Any more?"

"Yes. Lots more. I want that man who sweeps the crossing just outside the club. He always seemed to me to be full of character. His name is Timbs, and I don't know his address. But in this case perhaps you'd better not write. See him personally. Could you get me a nice Suffragette?"

"Certainly," said Ferguson. "Any particular one?"

"No. Just an ordinary, plain Suffragette. Also the editor of *Happy Homes*. Likewise the Unconquerable Belgian. I don't know at which of the halls he's wrestling now, but you can find out."

"Suppose his trainer won't let him come?"

"My dear Ferguson, you know very well how to deal with a case like that. There are solid inducements that influence opinion."

"True. Would you like the girl who does my nails?"

"Your manicurist? Yes, that's an excellent idea. We shall also need a Cabinet Minister, a nice specimen of a modern gilded youth, and somebody prominent in the Salvation Army."

The list was finally made out. Ferguson looked at it reflectively. "I suppose you wouldn't ask me too," he said. "I wish to goodness you would!" [Pg 42]

"You can come if you've got any decent clothes," said Garth, sardonically. "Behave yourself decently, mind. Don't giggle."

"Right," said Ferguson. "This will be the day of my life. You know all your servants will give notice, of course. But that doesn't matter, you can get others."

"It might simplify things," said Mr Garth, "if I took some rooms at the Ritz and gave the luncheon there. Arrange that for me, will you?"

"Certainly. And the date?"

"You'll want a little time to get the gang together. Say four weeks from to-day."

Mr Ferguson needed all his tact to get them together. Lady Longshore, it is true, expressed herself as willing to meet anybody except her own relations. But Eustace Richards, on being told of the idea of the party, said quite frankly that he preferred to mix with his equals. "The devil of it is to find 'em," said Ferguson. Richards, still frank, admitted that in the present state of dramatic art there might be something in that. He decided to attend. A Suffragette was caught by the bait of the Cabinet Minister, who subsequently refused on hearing of the Suffragette. Sir Edwin Goodchild, the editor of *Happy Homes*, the manicure lady, and Colonel Harriet Stokes, of the Salvation Army, accepted at once. Mr Timbs, who swept the crossing outside the club, was [Pg 43] suspicious and took longer to decide. "Look 'ere, Mr Ferguson," he said, "is it strite? You aren't gettin' anythin' up for me, eh? I've got a good suit o' clothes, so far as that goes; one I've kept for funerals, so far. But I don't want to put that on for nothing. Barrin' sells, now, is it strite?" With renewed assurances Ferguson secured him. The lady of the post-office began with a direct refusal, which started in the third person and trailed off into the first. It said that she had not the honour of Mr Garth's acquaintance, and that she was at a loss to understand, and so on. Ferguson returned to the attack, and, metaphorically, dangled the Dowager Countess of Longshore before her. This failing, he changed his fly, and caught her with the Archdeacon. The Archdeacon had known her father, and seemed to Miss Bostock to guarantee everything. It was not absolutely fair, as the Archdeacon had a professional engagement in the North on that day, and had been compelled to refuse. Mrs Pringle, however, would be present, and, as Ferguson said in self-justification, Mrs Pringle was more archidiaconal than any archdeacon living. The Unconquerable Belgian accepted in a letter written by Mr Savage, his trainer. Mr Savage expressed a hope that the Unconquerable would not be pressed to drink, and that he would be able to get away for a professional engagement at four o'clock. [Pg 44]

On the day appointed, Lady Longshore was the first guest to be announced.

"Came early on purpose," she said. "This is to be a freak lunch, so Fergy says, and I want to get the hang of it."

"It's simplicity itself," said Garth. "You are going to meet people whom you have never met before. Conventions that would interfere with this are abandoned. You will not, for instance, sit next to me."

"Nor to me," added Mr Ferguson. "But bear up."

"Don't be a fool, Fergy, and tell me all about it."

Ferguson glanced at a plan of the table. "On your right hand, Lady Longshore, you will have Mr Timbs, who sweeps one of the principal crossings in St James's Street, on your left will be Mr Pudbrook, who edits that serviceable kitchen weekly, *Happy Homes*. But the table is oval, and we hope that the conversation will be general."

"Well, it's not half a bad idea. Let me look at the rest of 'em." She snatched the plan from the secretary's hand. "Thank Heaven, I haven't got Eustace Richards—these mummers make me angry. Here, who's this?"

Monsieur Renard had just been announced. [Pg 45]

"That," said Ferguson, in a low voice, "is Monsieur Renard, better known as the Unconquerable Belgian. You may have seen him on the stage."

"Quite a good deal of him—*même trop*," said the Countess.

In the meantime the Belgian extended a hand like a twenty-pound York ham. He was an enormous athlete, whose sweet temper had not yet been injured by his prolonged war with fat. He was of great simplicity, and his forehead ran back at a gentle slope from his eyebrows to the back of his head. Intelligent? *Mais que voulez-vous que je vous dise?* Can one have everything? His clothes were of the best quality and of the latest fashion. Let us be content.

Duncan Garth grasped some of the extended hand. "This is most kind of you, Monsieur Renard. We have all admired your prowess, and are delighted to have the chance to know you a little better."

The Belgian was slow and self-possessed. "Thank—you," he said.

"We shall have to behave ourselves," laughed Garth, "or you'll be throwing all of us out of the window."

"But no," said the Unconquerable, seriously. "That will not be so. My manager does not permit me to do anything of that kind, unless arranged with him." [Pg 46]

"It would be an excellent advertisement," said Garth. "Just you think it over." He turned to some new arrivals.

At this moment Ferguson laid a manicured hand on the Belgian's almighty arm. "Pardon me, Monsieur Renard, but the Countess of Longshore is most anxious that you should be presented to her."

"That is all right. I kom," said the placid wrestler.

The new arrivals were Miss Bostock of the post-office, Sir Edwin Goodchild of Harley Street, and Mr Pudbrook of *Happy Homes*. Miss Bostock was tailor-made, smooth-haired, rather hygienic about the boots, and wore pince-nez. She looked as if she would have been handsomer if she had been happier. Her voice shook a little as she responded to Mr Garth's most respectful salutation, but her nervousness was not too apparent.

"Is—is the Archdeacon here, Mr Garth?" she inquired. "He used to know my father slightly."

"The Archdeacon regrets—a conference at York. But that is Mrs Pringle just coming in. Let me take you up to her."

Sir Edwin Goodchild took Mr Garth's secretary aside. "I say, Fergy," he said, "what the deuce is all this?"

"This?" said Ferguson, innocently. "This is a private reception-room at the Ritz. Style, Louis Quinze or thereabouts. Through those folding doors, when at the appointed time they are opened, we enter the luncheon-room. There we eat huitres *Lucullus, consommé norvégienne, filets*—" [Pg 47]

"Now, don't talk nonsense."

"Nonsense, man? Considering I constructed the menu myself, I—"

"Yes, but the people. Look at that lot just come in."

"My poor lost sheep, I'll tell you just two things. Firstly, we are eccentric millionaires. Secondly, you will be seated at lunch between Colonel Harriet Stokes, of the Salvation Army, and Miss Paul, a manicure lady."

"Let me out. This is a nightmare."

"No, it's a fact, and I'll prove it to you by introducing to your kind attention Mr Pudbrook, the editor of *Happy Homes*. He somewhat interferes with your profession by giving remedies for black-heads and indigestion in his paper on alternate weeks. But don't let that prejudice you against him."

Certainly, the "lot" to which Sir Edwin referred looked strange enough in their present *entourage*. Mr Timbs wore a complete suit of black broadcloth, alleviated by new brown shoes, white socks, and a very large crimson silk handkerchief. His expression combined curiously the confident and the furtive. Those in his immediate neighbourhood were conscious of a blended [Pg 48]

fragrance of benzine and yellow soap. A white-faced woman with big eyes, severely uniformed, was in conversation with him, and Mr Timbs was choosing his language with unusual care. Miss Edith Stunt, the Suffragette, had faced meetings in Trafalgar Square, and had nothing more to fear. Her fanatical eyes looked round eagerly for an opportunity to say a good word. At present Duncan Garth was talking to Mrs Gust, a nicely-dressed lady, slightly mad. The death of her husband under treatment had not shaken her faith in Christian Science, any more than his life had shaken her belief in matrimony. Garth himself had discovered her, and had directed that she should be of the party.

Miss Vera Paul, the manicurist, was talking to Ferguson. She was a remarkably pretty girl, but there were many others who wished to speak to Ferguson. He handed her over to Mrs Pringle, and promised her that she should be next to him at luncheon. The Unconquerable Belgian bore down on Ferguson, carrying in his hand a copy of the menu, with which Ferguson had thoughtfully provided him. He tapped it with a heavy finger and said plaintively: "You excuse me. I cannot eat moch this food." Ferguson's suggestion of a porter-house steak was accepted. At the same moment Timbs approached him with care, as of one who stalked big game. [Pg 49]

"You'll keep your eye on me, sir," said Timbs. "You told me it was strite, and it's to you I looks. I don't want to do anything I didn't ought."

"My dear chap," said Ferguson, with candour, "we want you to do the things you didn't ought."

Timbs would have pursued the conversation, but he was put aside by Miss Edith Stunt, who wished to know if she would have an opportunity to say a few words to the company. And she was put aside by Harriet Stokes, who wished to know if she could send round a collecting-card. And Harriet Stokes was obliterated by Mr Pudbrook, who wished to know if he could get a few words on private business with Mr Garth.

Then came the arrival of the last guest. Mr Eustace Richards made a splendid entrance; he was a quarter of an hour late and gracefully apologetic. "An unexpected rehearsal, my dear fellow," he said to Garth in a clearly-articulated whisper that carried to every part of the room, "Royal command for next Friday. Quite unexpected. Gratifying, eh?"

The big folding-doors opened. Ferguson flew around with his plan of the table, showing people where they were to sit. So far Mr Eustace Richards had hardly glanced at the company. He did not look much at the audience when he was acting, and he was almost always acting. But now he murmured to Garth: "My dear fellow, you warned me—but what have you done?" [Pg 50]

"Don't quite know yet," said Garth, drily.

Mr Ferguson had his own little suite of rooms at the house in Park Lane. He dined at his club that night, and was back again by nine o'clock to check once more some figures of considerable importance. The work only took him a few minutes, and he was just finishing it when Duncan Garth entered, wearing the dinner-jacket and black tie of the domestic life.

"Hallo!" said Ferguson. "Thought you were dining at the Silchesters'."

"So I was," said Garth, dejectedly, "but I didn't." He selected a cigar from his secretary's cabinet.

"Cheaper for you, anyhow," said Ferguson. "His Grace meant to borrow money to-night."

"I'm not a fool," said Garth, wearily, "and I'm not lending money to the Duke of Silchester. How did you think it went this afternoon?"

"What? The lunch? Of course it was very, very funny."

"Or slightly tragic," said Garth, as he took an easy-chair. "Put people into new circumstances and you can always judge them. I've got a low opinion of the human race to-night, Fergy."

"But there were nice points," said Ferguson. "I like the self-centred, complete indifference of our [Pg 51]
friend Renard. He's a headless Hercules. I mean, his head is the only thing against him. It's a loss, too, that is easily excused. You saw how Lady Longshore, and Mrs Pringle, and Colonel Harriet Stokes of the Salvation Army were anxious to please that lump of beef."

"Of course I saw it. That's one of the reasons why I call the thing a tragedy. By the way, you can go over our list and draw a line through the Archdeacon and his wife."

"Certainly," said Ferguson. "Might one ask why?"

"Because I hate the type," said Garth. "Miss Bostock's father was a curate, had been at college with the Archdeacon, and knew him fairly well. Mrs Pringle snubbed Miss Bostock. She was afraid she could not remember all the curates that her husband might have happened to meet. She also snubbed Pudbrook. When she saw the nature of the party she would have left but for Lady Longshore, who, to do her credit, does not care one curse about anybody on this earth or elsewhere. She was almost affectionate to Timbs when Lady Longshore repeated his stories. She was quite nice to your manicurist girl. She recognised the charm of the Unconquerable Belgian. But she snubbed Miss Bostock and she snubbed Pudbrook. She admits the hopeless and snubs the hopeful. She is a mixture of the coward and the bully. I don't like it, and I've no more to do [Pg 52]

with it. Strike them off, Fergy. I shall feel happier when it's done."

Ferguson took down an alphabetical list, turned up the letter "P," and put a black ink cross where it was required. "I wonder what this has cost you," he said cheerfully.

"You paid the bill. Nothing, anyhow."

"The Salvationist got a subscription, and so did Mrs Gust. The Suffragette also hit you. I think you have promised to be manicured. Mr Pudbrook owns half his paper, and the printer owns the other half. They are not doing too well, and they are thinking of a limited company. You know best how far you have come into it. Eustace Richards, in spite of his jabber, has done no good with his last two things. He stayed with you for some time. If he was not suggesting that you should release him from the people who are financing him at present, then, of course, it's my mistake."

"You're a clear-sighted chap," said Garth, "and you've mentioned nothing which is very far out. There are even some things which you might have mentioned and have omitted. They don't really matter. I've done what was wanted. I've even shown Lady Longshore how to make the money she wants. But that's not what's worrying me." [Pg 53]

"Give it a name," said Ferguson.

The door opened. "A young person of the name of Bostock wishes to see you, sir," said the butler. "I have told her that you are not in the habit of seeing people at this time of the evening, but she seemed rather pressing."

"In here, please," said Garth.

"Let's see," said Ferguson, "Miss Bostock left before the show was over."

"She did," said Garth; "and I want to know why."

In the meantime the butler had returned to Miss Bostock with a totally different manner. So far as the rules went, he had made no mistake, but there were exceptions, of course. On sight, Miss Bostock was a young person. On further investigation she was a young lady whom Mr Duncan Garth wished to see, and that made a difference.

She entered the room with perfect composure, wearing the same clothes that she had worn at the luncheon-party.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have come," she said, "but there are things I want to say. I want to know why you did that."

"You'll sit down, won't you?" said Garth. "What is it precisely we are talking about?"

"Why did you give that luncheon? Why did you make me come to it? I refused at first, you know. [Pg 54] Then Mr Ferguson came to see me and persuaded me. He told me the Archdeacon was coming, and that seemed like a mutual acquaintance. I think if he had been there he wouldn't have been as rude to me as his wife was. I dare say, if I had told her I was a general servant, she would have been as sweet to me as she was to that half-drunken crossing-sweeper, or that Belgian brute, or some of the other people whom you ought not to have asked me to meet."

"Yes," said Mr Ferguson, cheerfully. "Lady Longshore also is very unconventional, isn't she?"

"I'm not speaking about that," said Miss Bostock, doggedly. "The rudeness of that lady to me is a small personal matter easily forgotten. It's the ghastly humiliation of the whole thing that makes me sick and savage."

There was a moment's silence. "Ferguson," said Garth, "there was that letter."

"Yes," said Ferguson, "I'll see to it," and passed out of the room.

"Now, then," said Garth. "What's the trouble, Miss Bostock?"

"The trouble is that the whole of us were merely a show got up for your amusement. You gave us a lunch that we might make fools of ourselves. Fish out of water are very absurd, aren't they? But it's cruel to take them out of water and to watch them dying, all the same. That luncheon-party [Pg 55] was the most brutal thing done in London to-day, and you were the brute who did it. What harm was I doing? Why did you drag me into it?"

"Five or six weeks ago," said Garth, "I met you for the first time. It was in the post-office. You asked me if I'd got any eyes in my head."

"I remember now," said Miss Bostock. "I ought not to have said it. I think the tick of the telegraph gets on my nerves. You were not the first, too, and the notices were up clear enough. Still, why couldn't you have reported me? That would have been the right way to punish me."

"No," said Garth, "I did not want to punish you. I distinctly liked the spirit and the temper with which you spoke to me. You will understand, perhaps, that I get rather too much of the other kind of thing. I had no wish whatever to humiliate you. I did wish to amuse myself. You may be glad to hear that I have not done it. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing now," said the girl, contemptuously.

"I think there is," said Garth, and rang the bell. He sent the servant to fetch Mr Ferguson.

"I say, Ferguson," said Garth, "can you tell me what the price of that luncheon was?"

"Eight shillings a head, exclusive of the wine, of course." [Pg 56]

"Let me see, Miss Bostock," said Garth, "I think you drank water."

"Yes, yes, I see it now," said Miss Bostock, eagerly. She fumbled clumsily at her pocket, and produced an emaciated purse. She took out half a sovereign. "There is your money. Can you give me change?"

Garth did not carry money. Ferguson handed Garth a florin, and Garth gravely handed it to Miss Bostock.

"Now I can breathe again," she said. "I am going now. Good-night."

Garth followed her out, along the corridor and into the hall. Servants were waiting at the door. A sign from Garth dismissed them. As he held the door open for her, she turned to him, hesitated, and then spoke.

"I thought at lunch to-day that the doctor was the only gentleman there. I—I am not so sure about it."

"If I were ten years younger," said Garth, "I think I should ask you to marry me. Good-night."

He stood watching her as she passed down the steps into Park Lane.

[Pg 57]

POST-MORTEM

I

After dining for the last time at his club, Evan Hurst returned at once to his flat in Jermyn Street. The greater part of his arrangements had already been made, and most of his things packed; but there were still a few details to settle, and he was to leave for the north early on the following morning.

Yet when he entered his room he did not proceed at once to letter-writing or to business of any kind. He flung himself down in an easy-chair. He felt unaccountably tired. All day he had had business to attend to, necessary no doubt for the carrying out of his somewhat wild and romantic scheme, none the less wearisome to a man of poetical temperament and of poor physique. He was a man of slight build, with fair and rather fluffy hair, a pretty, thin-lipped mouth, and plaintive blue eyes. To the world in general his lot would have seemed a fairly easy one. He had sufficient means of his own; and no one in any way depended upon him. His volume of poems, *Under the Sea*, published a year or two before, had excited a great deal of public attention and some controversy; what had seemed genius to one critic had seemed insanity to another. He was [Pg 58] not unpopular at his club although he was thought to be slightly ridiculous. It was not supposed that he had any trouble of any kind. Women, of whom in his poems he wrote with such knowledge and such fervency, had never really come much into his life.

As he lay there and smoked endless cigarettes, he admitted the truth to himself. It was vanity that was at the root of it. He had seen the talented and remarkable Evan Hurst dwindling down into nobody again. Once it was supposed that Evan Hurst was dead, dead by his own act, and leaving such strange communications behind him, interest would revive. People would speak again of *Under the Sea*, his unpublished poems would be produced, and there would be obituary notices. There would be, for a while at least, breathless interest in the poet and the suicide, and he, alive and not dead, under another name and acting another part, would read and enjoy it all. To carry out his scheme meant many sacrifices, but the fascination of it was too strong for him, and the success of it seemed to be certain.

His sensations were really very much those of a man who actually knows that he is about to die. He had withdrawn a large balance from his bank and transferred it to another bank in the name which he now intended to take, but it was essential if Evan Hurst were to die that he should leave [Pg 59] money behind him. That money he willingly sacrificed. It was enough if he retained for his new incarnation sufficient for a reasonable livelihood. It annoyed him far more to think that he must leave also his books, the collections, the furniture and the treasures of his Jermyn Street flat. They had all come together slowly, and all represented in a way his individuality. The scattering of them by public auction would be like the disintegration of death. He could imagine already the notice in the catalogue of a second-hand bookseller offering that exquisitely-bound set of Huysman's works, "containing the book-plate of the late Evan Hurst." There were prints and engravings that from long affection and study had given him almost a feeling as if he had had a part in their creation. The Durer, a splendid impression, would fetch fifty pounds at least. Men at the club would remember this evening. They would recall that Evan Hurst was there only a few days before his death, and that even then they had remarked how gloomy and silent he seemed to

be.

He laughed bitterly and aloud, flung down his cigarette and passed into his bedroom. There for a while he packed energetically, but soon he had to stop for a feeling of intense and almost painful weariness came over him again. After all there would be time to finish the packing in the morning. He decided to go to bed. [Pg 60]

On the following afternoon he left King's Cross for Salsay on the Yorkshire coast.

II

Salsay is a small fishing village that has not yet suffered from the curse of popularity. Evan Hurst put up at the one hotel in the place and constituted its one permanent visitor. Occasionally a commercial traveller would arrive one day and leave on the next, and would talk as much as possible to Evan Hurst. Evan Hurst, in return, would talk as little as possible, consistent with bare politeness, to the commercial traveller. Every morning he bathed from the shore before breakfast at a point at some considerable distance from the village. Here there was a small cave in the cliffs, a useful shelter if rain came on, and useful to Evan Hurst for other purposes; for it was here that gradually, bit by bit, he collected the slender outfit with which he was to begin the world in his new character on the day that Evan Hurst was supposed to commit suicide. His plan was simplicity itself. He would go out to bathe as usual, and he would not return. His clothes would be found on the shore, and in the pocket of his coat there would be a letter to the landlord of the hotel leaving no doubt whatever as to his intentions. In the meantime, in a little cave, he would have altered his appearance, put on different clothes, and from there struck out for the nearest railway station. In the evening he would be in Dover, and next day in Paris, without one tie left between what he had once been and what he was now going to be. [Pg 61]

He looked forward to the change with pleasurable excitement. It was something more than vanity after all. As Evan Hurst he had begun in a *rôle* which he was not competent to sustain; to have continued in it would have been to disappoint the public opinion of him. In a new part he could write as he liked; act as he liked; talk as he liked. There would be no preconceived opinion of him in the world; it would be all for him to make with the benefit of his experience of his past blunders.

He took immense care with the composition of that brief letter to the landlord. It ran as follows:—

> "Dear Sir,—It would be impossible to explain to you the reasons why I intend this morning to take my life, but undoubtedly some apology is due to you for any inconvenience which my death may cause you. I leave behind me at the hotel a quantity of money which will be more than sufficient to discharge my obligations to you. Nor have I any explanation to offer to the coroner and the British jury. These good people will return their usual verdict. Not to be interested in so extremely uninteresting a thing as my life has become, would be a clear proof to them of insanity. I shall swim out so long as my strength lasts, and the end will come under the sea.—Faithfully yours, [Pg 62]
>
> "Evan Hurst."

He did not quite like it now that he had finished it. The way in which he had introduced the title of his book seemed to him to be a little on the cheap side, but at any rate it was a letter which would call for a good deal of comment. He promised himself much amusing and interesting reading when the English papers reached Paris a few days later.

The morning came at last; grey, overcast, and misty, and more likely to turn to great heat than to rain. Evan Hurst looked at himself in the glass and laughed. He had spent some hours in his room the night before dyeing his fluffy hair. Unquestionably it was an improvement to his appearance. There was no danger that it would be observed on his leaving the hotel; for he wore his towels slung round his neck, and a broad-brimmed straw hat. As he walked towards the cave he now felt an unaccountable nervousness. True, but few people went that way, and even if they entered the cave his store of clothes was so carefully hidden that it was unlikely that anybody would find them. Still, there was just a chance, and it would be maddening if just at the last some trifle occurred to balk his scheme. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found everything just as he had left it. In less than half an hour the change was complete; the clothes of that fluffy poet, Evan Hurst, were disposed with a careful carelessness on the rocks above high-water mark, with the letter to the landlord in the pocket of the coat, and Evan Hurst, in his new incarnation, strode away in a blue serge suit, black felt hat, and black boots, carrying a small bag, which contained a change of linen and the articles of his toilet. The rest of his luggage was to be purchased in London. [Pg 63]

For the first mile or so his way lay along the beach, and he was careful to walk on the sand, where, in half an hour, the sea would obliterate his footprints. His feelings were at first those of amusement. In every little detail of his clothes he was so different from what he had ever been before. He speculated whether he would not perforce become quite a different kind of man under the clothes' influence. Already he felt himself a stouter person, readier to tackle the world and deal with it properly. His satisfaction was intense. He was still meditating on the subject when he reached the path up the cliffs; a perfectly easy and safe path with a few low rocks between him and it. As he clambered over the rocks, inconvenienced by the bag that he was carrying, he [Pg 64]

slipped and fell, and lay quite still.

The hours passed, and now the sun blazed. The waves had already touched one of the black boots. They crept up to the head and came back with a pinky stain. At last, when the figure was fully covered, it gave a sudden and ungainly movement, and for a little while floated with arms and legs shot out queerly like the limbs of a starfish. The black felt hat had drifted far away, and tossed about on the waves with absurdity. Then, slowly, the figure disappeared from sight.

[Pg 65]

THE GIRL WITH THE BEAUTIFUL HAIR

> [By my own unaided intelligence I chose the exactly right spot at the farther end of the orchard, and with my own hand I slung the hammock. Now that the day is hot and luncheon is over, I take my book and go thither to reap the fruits of my labour. And, behold, the hammock is already occupied with four large cushions and one small girl—a solemn and inscrutable girl who hears to the end a complaint of the cruelty and injustice of her trespass, and then says kindly that I may sit on the grass.
>
> "Thank you. I am glad you do not want all the grass as well."
>
> I do the best that I can with the grass, and open my book, and the voice from the hammock bids me to tell a story.
>
> "What, with no better audience than that?"
>
> It appears that this is the charm. She has never had a story all to herself before.]

There once was a girl who had very long and very beautiful hair.

(*As long as yours? Much longer and much more beautiful. And if you interrupt me again, I will stop this story, empty you out of the hammock, tie you to a tree, and teach you as much as I can remember of the French gender rules. Very well, then.*)

As I was saying—there once was a girl who had very long and very beautiful hair, and she knew it. Her sisters, who were as plain-spoken as sisters generally are, were in the habit of saying that [Pg 66] she was a perfect peacock. Her hair was very much the colour of a chestnut, and she took the greatest possible care of it. It was a rule of life with her, when she had nothing else to do, to brush her hair. Frequently also she brushed it when she had other things to do. She never would have it cut. She even refused a lock of it to her own mother. When she went out for walks with her sisters she listened attentively as people passed her, because sometimes they said things about her hair which she liked very much. Then she would try not to look pleased, and when a girl who is really pleased tries to look as if she did not care, she looks perfectly horrid. Her sisters remarked upon it.

Her father, who was a good and wise man, explained to her how wicked vanity was, especially vanity about one's hair. He showed her that personal attractions, especially if connected in any way with the hair, were worthless as compared with the intellectual and moral attributes. On the other hand, her mother took her to a photographer's and had her taken in fourteen different positions, and they all made such beautiful pictures that the photographer nearly committed suicide because he was not allowed to exhibit them in his shop window.

She reached the age at which every good Christian girl wishes to have long dresses and do her hair up into a lump, but this girl (whose name was Elsa, of course) would not have her hair done [Pg 67] up, and stamped with her foot and was rude to the governess. In the end, of course, Elsa had to submit, for it is very wicked for girls of a certain age to wear their hair down. But she became extremely ingenious. She had ways of doing that hair so that it would not stop up, but tumbled down unexpectedly and caused great admiration. She would then pretend to be confused and embarrassed. Now, when a girl who is not in the least confused and embarrassed tries to look so, she looks simply silly. Her sisters told her so. Every single girl friend she had, and many who were only acquaintances, had seen that hair in its native glory. Some of these raved about it to Elsa's sisters, and were surprised that the sisters did not share their enthusiasm.

"She has such a lot of it," the friends would say.

"She thinks such a lot of it," the sisters would answer.

Now, Elsa and her sisters were not the only girls in the world, and they did not know all the rest; consequently a girl called Kate came to them as something of a novelty. As she was called Kate, she was, of course, quite good. Katherine may be proud, and Kitty may be frivolous, but Kate is solid. If you ask me if Kate is clever, I reply that she is a good housekeeper. If you ask me if she is [Pg 68] pretty, I change the subject rapidly. There was nothing dazzling about this Kate. She was just Kate.

It is a sad truth that it is the people who are naturally the nicest to look at who take the greatest trouble to look nice. The woman who, so far as her face is concerned, makes the best of a bad job,

is very rare. Kate was not a beauty, but she was sensible and resigned. She dressed herself very quickly in things that wore well. It was her boast that she could do her hair without a looking-glass, and everybody who saw her hair believed it. But as it happened, when Kate met Elsa, a change came over her.

"Your hair is perfectly divine," she said to Elsa.

Elsa tried to be politely bored.

"So kind of you to say so," she said. "I get frightfully sick of my old wig myself. It's an endless bother."

"And you do it so beautifully," said Kate. "I do wish you'd give me some idea for my hair, so that it wouldn't look awful."

"It isn't awful at all," said Elsa, politely. "I don't think I should change the way of doing it if I were you."

Then she went into elaborate technical details and showed Kate that the thing was bad and that improvement was impossible. Of course, she did not use these words, and was sweetly delicate about it.

Now, that night, as Elsa was having her own hair brushed, a horrible suspicion came over her. She put it aside as a thing perfectly absurd. It might have been a trick of the looking-glass. It might have been her own imagination. It did not keep her awake for a moment. But next morning one of her sisters came into her room, looked at her, and said: "What an idiot you were to have your hair cut!" [Pg 69]

"I have not had it cut," said Elsa, furiously. "It's the same as it always was."

"Rubbish," said the sister. "It's three inches shorter at least."

"It's not," said Elsa; "and I wish you'd go away. I can't get on properly while you're hanging about talking."

The sister went away, and Elsa flew to the looking-glass. The cold morning light confirmed her suspicions of the night before. Her sister was perfectly right. Elsa's hair was undoubtedly three inches shorter.

That afternoon Elsa secretly and surreptitiously went to a great hair specialist. She had seen his advertisement, and she felt that here she might at any rate know the worst. He looked at her hair and said that it had become shorter from a shrinkage in the cells, owing to undue epithelial activity of the cranium. It was as well that she came to him when she did. As it was, if she would rub in a little of his relaxative she would have nothing to fear. He then sold her a fourpenny pot of pomatum for three guineas, washed his hands, and went home to tea. [Pg 70]

But the pomatum was quite ineffectual. Every day her hair seemed to be a little shorter and a little thinner. This was particularly the case when she had been behaving like a peacock or like a spiteful cat. It reached a point when all her friends who met her exclaimed: "Why, Elsa, what on earth have you done with your hair?"

Then she would smile sweetly and say: "Brushed it. What did you think?" But inwardly she was a mad woman.

About this time she saw the advertisement of the Indian hair doctor, and she thought she could but try. I do not think the man was really Indian, I know he was not really a doctor, and I fancy he did not know much about hair. But he said that Elsa's case was extremely grave, and that in another week she would have been entirely bald. She must take a course of scalp friction; twelve applications for three guineas the application. She took them; and at the end of the course her hair was nearly all gone, her temper was quite gone, her money was almost gone, and she did not want to see anybody or to do anything except die.

And then unwittingly she did what was best for herself. To escape the sweet sympathy of her friends and relations she went away all by herself to live in a little cottage in a forest. It is good for a girl who has been seeing too many people to live all by herself for a while. It is good for a girl who has been long in a crowded town to go away into the forest solitude. Your soul must go to the cleaner, just like your gloves. [Pg 71]

Now that there was no one to sympathise with her loss, and no one to attract by her beautiful hair even if she had still had it, she could begin to think of other things. And she thought about squirrels, and nuts, and blackberries, and sunsets, and streams that made silvery lines down the green hillsides. And every morning she went all by herself to a cottage two miles off and fetched milk for herself.

The old woman who kept the cows at this cottage was tall and old and always polite, but also she was always very sad. She had the face of one who never ceased to suffer. After Elsa had been two months in her cottage she suddenly saw that this woman had always looked really sad. The sadness of other people had never mattered to her in the least before; but now one day she asked the old woman why this was, and if there were anything that she might do for her.

Then the old woman said: "I have a daughter and she was very beautiful. None that saw her ever forgot how beautiful she was. And she fell ill of a strange disease so that her whole face became

loathesome. No one but I can bear to look on her, lest their dreams should be haunted for ever." [Pg 72]

"And she lives here, this poor daughter of yours?" asked Elsa.

"Yes; she lies in the room upstairs. They tell me that she will now soon be dead."

"I will come up and talk to her," said Elsa, "and help to nurse her, for you must often be away on your farm."

"No," said the old woman, "that is too much for you to do. I tell you that no one but myself can bear it. You must not see her."

"Look," said Elsa. And then she took off the big kerchief that she always wore over her head. "I had pretty hair once," she said, "and I have lost it all. I can bear anything, and I want to help you."

Then Elsa went upstairs into a room which was darkened, and even in that dim light she could see that this old woman's daughter, who was once very beautiful, had now become painful to behold. Elsa was frightened, but tried not to show it, and a girl who is frightened and tries not to show it, very frequently does not look nearly such a fool as she thinks. She remained there a long time, and when she came out her face was quite white, and she wanted to go back to her cottage and cry.

But every day after that until the end came she went to see the sick girl who loved and adored her. And the end came one afternoon quite quietly. And the old woman did not weep at that time, but she blessed Elsa and went out, for the cows were waiting to be milked, and that must not be [Pg 73] left.

Next morning when Elsa awoke it was very late, and the sun was streaming into her room. For a while she lay with her eyes closed, thinking over all that had happened. Each visit to the sick girl had been a separate terror to her, but now she grieved that the girl was dead, and wondered in her mind if there were none other for whom she might find something to do.

At last, since it was a shame to lie so late, she got up, and, behold, masses of beautiful chestnut-coloured hair fell far down over her white shoulders! She rubbed her eyes and said that she must be dreaming. But no, it had really happened. Her mirror echoed the truth. The glory of her pretty head had come back to it as strangely as it had gone. So that afternoon she mused what she would do as, sitting in the garden of her cottage, she made a wreath of white lilies.

And the next day she left her cottage in the wood and went back to her own home; and her sisters were all delighted to see her, and praised her beautiful hair, and were glad that it had grown again so quickly. Yet one of them said secretly to another: "Now she will be as vain and horrible as ever."

But, as it happened, she was not vain and horrible; she was really quite nice, so that the prince who married her loved her as much for the sweetness of her heart as for her angel's face and her beautiful long hair.

[Pg 74]

THE WIDOWER

The decision of Edward Morris to marry again was one of the few practical things of his record. He had married first at the age of eighteen without the knowledge of his parents. His wife died two years later. He had no children by her. At her death he was desolate.

He was as desolate, that is, as one can be at twenty. He was free from the annoying minor-poet habit of advertising his afflictions, but it was quite clear to himself that there was nothing more left. Yet it is idle for a man to say he will stop when Nature, his proprietor, says that he will go on. There is no comedy at ninety, and there is no tragedy at twenty. After he had deposited the remains of his wife in Brompton cemetery—she had a strong aversion to cremation and inwardly believed that it destroyed the immortal soul—he went off into the country, selecting a village where he knew nobody. Here he learned by heart considerable portions of the poems of Heine, neglected to return the call of the rector, and bored himself profusely. It must not be understood that he resented the boredom. That was what life was to be in future, a continuous dreariness. [Pg 75] After a brief stay in the village he went off to Paris to study art. At the time when he thought of giving himself to music all noticed his ability in painting. When he took to art they remembered that he had musical talent. A year later, when he returned to England to live the life of a hermit, to teach in song what he had learned in sorrow, some said that he was a lost artist, and some that he was a lost musician, and others that he was a well-defined case of dilettantism. It is, however, difficult to be a hermit in London. London has many tentacles; it puts them out and draws you into the liveliest part of itself. A claim of relationship, an old friendship, a piece of medical advice, a chance meeting—anything may become a tentacle. Almost before he knows it the misanthropical hermit is dragged from his shell and is writing that he has much pleasure in accepting her very kind invitation for the thirteenth, and wonders if that man in Sackville Street will be able to make him some evening clothes in time, his others being not so much clothes as a

relic of those pre-hermit days when his wife, his only love, still lived and took him out to dinners, and would have the glass down in the hansoms. The thought that he resented this last action at the time saddens him, but the acceptance is posted. He is drawn into the vortex.

Once in, Edward Morris had to explain to himself how he got there. Nobody else wanted any explanation. Nobody else knew that the first time he took his hostess in to dinner he looked down [Pg 76] the long table towards his host's right hand and remembered. His explanation to himself was that he did it to avoid comment. One could not wear one's heart on one's coat sleeve. One must go somewhere and must do something. One must unfortunately live, even when the savour of life has gone. So he lived, and in living the savour of life came back again.

It was on a muggy December evening that he accompanied Lady Marchsea and her eminent husband to a first-night performance. When the eminent man was grumbling at the draught, and Lady Marchsea was, with justification, admiring herself, her dress, and everything that was hers, Edward Morris looked up. Out of the gloom of the box above him a brown-faced girl with dark eyes, her chin leaning on her white gloves, bent forward and looked down.

Yet it was not till the end of the first act that he asked who she was and was told that she was nobody, but was apparently with the Martins, who were very, very dear friends, and would Mr Morris take her round? That was the beginning of it, and the end of it was his engagement to Adela Constantia Graham, who was nobody. Everybody who knew Adela Constantia knew that it was an excellent thing for her—a much wealthier man than she had any reason to expect. [Pg 77] Everyone who knew Edward Morris knew that it was the best thing for him. "Ballast," said Lady Marchsea, emphatically, "that is what marriage means to a man like Edward Morris. He needs ballast; something to make him concentrate himself and trust himself; something to encourage him and urge him on."

Her notions of the general uses of ballast were vague, but her conviction was sincere that Edward Morris, happily re-married, would achieve something in one, or possibly in all, of the arts. Her eminent husband said: "Nice sort of man, but no good really." But still he paid for the dinner-service with the sanctifying mark on the bottom of all the plates, which they forwarded to Edward Morris a short time before the wedding—the wedding which never took place.

About a week before the date fixed for that wedding it occurred to Edward Morris in a moment of leisure—he was naturally very busy at the time—that his first wife had been a jealous woman, and he wondered what she would have thought and said if she had been alive. He could laugh at the illogicality. If she had been alive there would have been nothing to think or to say. The haunting face with the chin pressed on the white gloves against the darkness at the back of the box would have been merely a face and nothing more, and would not have haunted. He collected his old [Pg 78] love-letters and burned them. Other little relics of his first wife he gathered together, had them placed in a box and deposited at his bankers. The old life was done; the new life was beginning. Yet one night as he stood in a darkened room with Adela Constantia in his arms the door opened with a little quick click some few inches. She stepped back from him, thinking it was a servant, and he turned white, thinking, in a moment of madness, that it was someone else; then he went to the door and opened it wider. No one was there.

The position of the widower who marries again is irritating to him if he be, as Edward Morris was, a man of nice feeling. He has to say, and to believe, that he loves as he never loved in his life before. Scraps of used romance must be whipped up out of his respectable past to set against the virginal fervour of the young woman who has just begun to love him. Yet he feels that all this is an insult to the dead—to the woman who loved him before. A man of the world has a happy habit of forgetting and of ignoring. He may marry for the second or third time quite easily. He takes nothing too seriously. He may order a new overcoat, but he does not feel that the coat will be worthless unless he swears and tries to believe that he never wore a coat like that before. Morris, [Pg 79] however, was a sentimentalist, and so he became irritated with himself. The next step inevitably followed. He became irritated with his dead wife. She had got her cold arms round his neck and was dragging him down and holding him back from the joyful development of his life.

When in London it was his custom to visit her grave in Brompton cemetery at regular intervals, once every month. During his engagement to Adela Constantia he made up his mind that this regular visit must be dropped. Some arrangement could be made to have the grave kept in decent order, but he could not go near it again. He remembered having been told a story of a widower who married again and went hand-in-hand with his second wife to stand by the grave of the first. It had been told him as something pathetic. He had never been able to see in it anything but a subject for a humorous paper; Guy de Maupassant would have done wonders with it. He settled the day when the last visit should be made. He selected an appropriate wreath, in which everlastings and dead leaves were symbolically interwoven. But that afternoon more than ever before his hatred to his dead wife grew within him. He recollected her strange belief with regard to cremation. Fire destroyed everything, even the immortal soul, and it seemed as if fire destroyed love too. He remembered that he had burnt her letters. As he drove down Regent [Pg 80] Street an old friend, a man whom he had not seen for some time, recognised him. He stopped the cab and his friend came up.

"Why do I never see you now?" said the friend. "But of course I know. Very much engaged aren't you? (That's not bad for an impromptu, by the way.) I suppose you are going there now?"

"No," said Morris, "as a matter of fact I am not."

"Well, you are evidently going somewhere, and you carry a big box with you with a florist's label on it, so all I can say is that if you are not going there you ought to be."

Edward Morris laughed, and to laugh was the last touch of horror.

"Well," the friend said, "if you are really not going to see Miss Graham I have no scruples in annexing you. Come round to the club for a game of billiards."

"Thanks," said Morris, "I am afraid I am very busy this afternoon."

However, he let himself be persuaded. The box containing the wreath was left in the charge of the hall-porter at the club. On the following day Morris despatched the wreath to Brompton cemetery by a messenger-boy, where the symbolical offering was deposited on the grave of Charles Ernest Jessop, who died at the age of two and a half, and of whose death or previous existence Morris was unaware. Messenger-boys are so careless. Morris never even attempted to [Pg 81] visit the cemetery again. It was not only anger, it was not only hatred; it was also fear that kept him away. He was assured in his own mind that the dead woman was awake again and was watching him jealously.

The moment when he had just awoken from sleep was always a horrible one for him. The fear of the dead woman was in his mind then and nothing else was very clear. He left the electric light on all night and, as a rule, slept fairly well and without any haunting or painful dreams. But the moment of waking was always a trial. He kept on expecting to see something that he never did see. He would not have wondered if, as he awoke, someone had touched his hand, or the electric light had been suddenly switched off.

Of course everybody noticed that he looked wretchedly ill. Adela Constantia was in despair about his health. There were things about him which were very queer; that he did not like dark rooms. That when he was talking to her he would suddenly look over his shoulder—at nothing. The comforting doctor told her that Morris has been very busy indeed with the preparation for his married life and, the doctor added, a lot of worry upsets the nerves. This is quite true.

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On his wedding morning he certainly looked much fitter to be buried than to be married. His best man gave him champagne and told him to hold his head up more. The bride made an adorable and pathetic figure; a beautiful young girl is always a pathetic figure on her wedding-morning. Her sisters fluttered around her, ready to cry at the right moments. Her father looked a little nervous and elated. He had had quite a long talk with Lady Marchsea, whose husband was kept away by the toothache. The ceremony went with its customary brilliance until that point when the bridegroom was required to say: "I, Edward, take thee, Adela Constantia." He said this in a loud voice, but he did not say "Adela Constantia"; he gave another name. There was a moment's pause, and while everybody was looking at everybody he fainted and fell.

At the inquest it was found that the blow on the head from the sharp edge of the stone step satisfactorily accounted for the death. All the evening papers had readable paragraphs headed "Tragic End to a Fashionable Wedding Ceremony."

And Adela Constantia married somebody else.

And the dead woman went to sleep again.

[Pg 83]

THE UNFINISHED GAME

At Tanslowe, which is on the Thames, I found just the place that I wanted. I had been born in the hotel business, brought up in it, and made my living at it for thirty years. For the last twenty I had been both proprietor and manager, and had worked uncommonly hard, for it is personal attention and plenty of it which makes a hotel pay. I might have retired altogether, for I was a bachelor with no claims on me and had made more money than enough; but that was not what I wanted. I wanted a nice, old-fashioned house, not too big, in a nice place with a longish slack season. I cared very little whether I made it pay or not. The Regency Hotel at Tanslowe was just the thing for me. It would give me a little to do and not too much. Tanslowe was a village, and though there were two or three public-houses, there was no other hotel in the place, nor was any competition likely to come along. I was particular about that, because my nature is such that competition always sets me fighting, and I cannot rest until the other shop goes down. I had reached a time of life when I did want to rest and did not want any more fighting. It was a free [Pg 84] house, and I have always had a partiality for being my own master. It had just the class of trade that I liked—principally gentlefolk taking their pleasure in a holiday on the river. It was very cheap, and I like value for money. The house was comfortable, and had a beautiful garden sloping down to the river. I meant to put in some time in that garden—I have a taste that way.

The place was so cheap that I had my doubts. I wondered if it was flooded when the river rose, if it was dropping to pieces with dry-rot, if the drainage had been condemned, if they were going to start a lunatic asylum next door, or what it was. I went into all these points and a hundred more. I found one or two trifling drawbacks, and one expects them in any house, however good—especially when it is an old place like the Regency. I found nothing whatever to stop me from taking the place.

I bought the whole thing, furniture and all, lock, stock and barrel, and moved in. I brought with me my own head-waiter and my man-cook, Englishmen both of them. I knew they would set the thing in the right key. The head-waiter, Silas Goodheart, was just over sixty, with grey hair and a wrinkled face. He was worth more to me than two younger men would have been. He was very precise and rather slow in his movements. He liked bright silver, clean table-linen, and polished glass. Artificial flowers in the vases on his tables would have given him a fit. He handled a [Pg 85] decanter of old port as if he loved it—which, as a matter of fact, he did. His manner to visitors was a perfect mixture of dignity, respect and friendliness. If a man did not quite know what he wanted for dinner, Silas had sympathetic and very useful suggestions. He took, I am sure, a real pleasure in seeing people enjoy their luncheon or dinner. Americans loved him, and tipped him out of all proportion. I let him have his own way, even when he gave the thing away.

"Is the coffee all right here?" a customer asked after a good dinner.

"I cannot recommend it," said Silas. "If I might suggest, sir, we have the Chartreuse of the old French shipping."

I overheard that, but I said nothing. The coffee was extract, for there was more work than profit in making it good. As it was, that customer went away pleased, and came back again and again, and brought his friends too. Silas was really the only permanent waiter. When we were busy I got one or two foreigners from London temporarily. Silas soon educated them. My cook, Timbs, was an honest chap, and understood English fare. He seemed hardly ever to eat, and never sat down to a meal; he lived principally on beer, drank enough of it to frighten you, and was apparently never the worse for it. And a butcher who tried to send him second-quality meat was certain of [Pg 86] finding out his mistake.

The only other man I brought with me was young Harry Bryden. He always called me uncle, but as a matter of fact he was no relation of mine. He was the son of an old friend. His parents died when he was seven years old and left him to me. It was about all they had to leave. At this time he was twenty-two, and was making himself useful. There was nothing which he was not willing to do, and he could do most things. He would mark at billiards, and played a good game himself. He had run the kitchen when the cook was away on his holiday. He had driven the station-omnibus when the driver was drunk one night. He understood book-keeping, and when I got a clerk who was a wrong 'un, he was on to him at once and saved me money. It was my intention to make him take his proper place more when I got to the Regency; for he was to succeed me when I died. He was clever, and not bad-looking in a gipsy-faced kind of way. Nobody is perfect, and Harry was a cigarette-maniac. He began when he was a boy, and I didn't spare the stick when I caught him at it. But nothing I could say or do made any difference; at twenty-two he was old enough and big enough to have his own way, and his way was to smoke cigarettes eternally. He was a bundle of nerves, and got so jumpy sometimes that some people thought he drank, though [Pg 87] he had never in his life tasted liquor. He inherited his nerves from his mother, but I daresay the cigarettes made them worse.

I took Harry down with me when I first thought of taking the place. He went over it with me and made a lot of useful suggestions. The old proprietor had died eighteen months before, and the widow had tried to run it for herself and made a mess of it. She had just sense enough to clear out before things got any worse. She was very anxious to go, and I thought that might have been the reason why the price was so low.

The billiard-room was an annexe to the house, with no rooms over it. We were told that it wasn't used once in a twelvemonth, but we took a look at it—we took a look at everything. The room had got a very neglected look about it. I sat down on the platform—tired with so much walking and standing—and Harry whipped the cover off the table. "This was the one they had in the Ark," he said.

There was not a straight cue in the rack, the balls were worn and untrue, the jigger was broken. Harry pointed to the board. "Look at that, uncle," he said. "Noah had made forty-eight; Ham was doing nicely at sixty-six; and then the Flood came and they never finished." From neatness and force of habit he moved over and turned the score back. "You'll have to spend some money here. My word, if they put the whole lot in at a florin we're swindled." As we came out Harry gave a [Pg 88] shiver. "I wouldn't spend a night in there," he said, "not for a five-pound note."

His nerves always made me angry. "That's a very silly thing to say," I told him. "Who's going to ask you to sleep in a billiard-room?"

Then he got a bit more practical, and began to calculate how much I should have to spend to make a bright, up-to-date billiard-room of it. But I was still angry.

"You needn't waste your time on that," I said, "because the place will stop as it is. You heard what Mrs Parker said—that it wasn't used once in a twelvemonth. I don't want to attract all the loafers in Tanslowe into my house. Their custom's worth nothing, and I'd sooner be without it. Time enough to put that room right if I find my staying visitors want it, and people who've been on the

river all day are mostly too tired for a game after dinner."

Harry pointed out that it sometimes rained, and there was the winter to think about. He had always got plenty to say, and what he said now had sense in it. But I never go chopping and changing about, and I had made my mind up. So I told him he had got to learn how to manage the house, and not to waste half his time over the billiard-table. I had a good deal done to the rest of the house in the way of redecorating and improvements, but I never touched the annexe.

The next time I saw the room was the day after we moved in. I was alone, and I thought it [Pg 89]
certainly did look a dingy hole as compared with the rest of the house. Then my eye happened to fall on the board, and it still showed sixty-six—forty-eight, as it had done when I entered the room with Harry three months before. I altered the board myself this time. To me it was only a funny coincidence; another game had been played there and had stopped exactly at the same point. But I was glad Harry was not with me, for it was the kind of thing that would have made him jumpier than ever.

It was the summer time and we soon had something to do. I had been told that motor-cars had cut into the river trade a good deal; so I laid myself out for the motorist. Tanslowe was just a nice distance for a run from town before lunch. It was all in the old-fashioned style, but there was plenty of choice and the stuff was good; and my wine-list was worth consideration. Prices were high, but people will pay when they are pleased with the way they are treated. Motorists who had been once came again and sent their friends. Saturday to Monday we had as much as ever we could do, and more than I had ever meant to do. But I am built like that—once I am in a shop I have got to run it for all it's worth.

I had been there about a month, and it was about the height of our season, when one night, for no
reason that I could make out, I couldn't get to sleep. I had turned in, tired enough, at half-past [Pg 90]
ten, leaving Harry to shut up and see the lights out, and at a quarter past twelve I was still awake. I thought to myself that a pint of stout and a biscuit might be the cure for that. So I lit my candle and went down to the bar. The gas was out on the staircase and in the passages, and all was quiet. The door into the bar was locked, but I had thought to bring my pass-key with me. I had just drawn my tankard of stout when I heard a sound that made me put the tankard down and listen again.

The billiard-room door was just outside in the passage, and there could not be the least doubt that a game was going on. I could hear the click-click of the balls as plainly as possible. It surprised me a little, but it did not startle me. We had several staying in the house, and I supposed two of them had fancied a game. All the time that I was drinking the stout and munching my biscuit the game went on—click, click-click, click. Everybody has heard the sound hundreds of times standing outside the glass-pannelled door of a billiard-room and waiting for the stroke before entering. No other sound is quite like it.

Suddenly the sound ceased. The game was over. I had nothing on but my pyjamas and a pair of slippers, and I thought I would get upstairs again before the players came out. I did not want to
stand there shivering and listening to complaints about the table. I locked the bar, and took a [Pg 91]
glance at the billiard-room door as I was about to pass it. What I saw made me stop short. The glass panels of the door were as black as my Sunday hat, except where they reflected the light of my candle. The room, then, was not lit up, and people do not play billiards in the dark. After a second or two I tried the handle. The door was locked. It was the only door to the room.

I said to myself: "I'll go on back to bed. It must have been my fancy, and there was nobody playing billiards at all." I moved a step away, and then I said to myself again: "I know perfectly well that a game *was* being played. I'm only making excuses because I'm in a funk."

That settled it. Having driven myself to it, I moved pretty quickly. I shoved in my pass-key, opened the door, and said "Anybody there?" in a moderately loud voice that sounded somehow like another man's. I am very much afraid that I should have jumped if there had come any answer to my challenge, but all was silent. I took a look round. The cover was on the table. An old screen was leaning against it; it had been put there to be out of the way. As I moved my candle the shadows of things slithered across the floor and crept up the walls. I noticed that the
windows were properly fastened, and then, as I held my candle high, the marking-board seemed [Pg 92]
to jump out of the darkness. The score recorded was sixty-six—forty-eight.

I shut the door, locked it again, and went up to my room. I did these things slowly and deliberately, but I was frightened and I was puzzled. One is not at one's best in the small hours.

The next morning I tackled Silas.

"Silas," I said, "what do you do when gentlemen ask for the billiard-room?"

"Well, sir," said Silas, "I put them off if I can. Mr Harry directed me to, the place being so much out of order."

"Quite so," I said. "And when you can't put them off?"

"Then they just try it, sir, and the table puts them off. It's very bad. There's been no game played there since we came."

"Curious," I said. "I thought I heard a game going on last night."

"I've heard it myself, sir, several times. There being no light in the room, I've put it down to a loose ventilator. The wind moves it and it clicks."

"That'll be it," I said. Five minutes later I had made sure that there was no loose ventilator in the billiard-room. Besides, the sound of one ball striking another is not quite like any other sound. I also went up to the board and turned the score back, which I had omitted to do the night before. Just then Harry passed the door on his way from the bar, with a cigarette in his mouth as usual. I [Pg 93] called him in.

"Harry," I said, "give me thirty, and I'll play you a hundred up for a sovereign. You can tell one of the girls to fetch our cues from upstairs."

Harry took his cigarette out of his mouth and whistled. "What, uncle!" he said. "Well, you're going it, I don't think. What would you have said to me if I'd asked you for a game at ten in the morning?"

"Ah!" I said, "but this is all in the way of business. I can't see much wrong with the table, and if I can play on it, then other people may. There's a chance to make a sovereign for you anyhow. You've given me forty-five and a beating before now."

"No, uncle," he said, "I wouldn't give you thirty. I wouldn't give you one. The table's not playable. Luck would win against Roberts on it."

He showed me the faults of the thing and said he was busy. So I told him if he liked to lose the chance of making a sovereign he could.

"I hate that room," he said, as we came out. "It's not too clean, and it smells like a vault."

"It smells a lot better than your cigarettes," I said.

For the next six weeks we were all busy, and I gave little thought to the billiard-room. Once or twice I heard old Silas telling a customer that he could not recommend the table, and that the [Pg 94] whole room was to be redecorated and refitted as soon as we got the estimates. "You see, sir, we've only been here a little while, and there hasn't been time to get everything as we should like it quite yet."

One day Mrs Parker, the woman who had the Regency before me, came down from town to see how we were getting on. I showed the old lady round, pointed out my improvements, and gave her a bit of lunch in my office.

"Well, now," I said, as she sipped her glass of port afterwards, "I'm not complaining of my bargain, but isn't the billiard-room a bit queer?"

"It surprises me," she said, "that you've left it as it is. Especially with everything else going ahead, and the yard half full of motors. I should have taken it all down myself if I'd stopped. That iron roof's nothing but an eyesore, and you might have a couple of beds of geraniums there and improve the look of your front."

"Let's see," I said. "What was the story about that billiard-room?"

"What story do you mean?" she said, looking at me suspiciously.

"The same one you're thinking of," I said.

"About that man, Josiah Ham?"

"That's it."

"Well, I shouldn't worry about that if I were you. That was all thirty years ago, and I doubt if [Pg 95] there's a soul in Tanslowe knows it now. Best forgotten, I say. Talk of that kind doesn't do a hotel any good. Why, how did you come to hear of it?"

"That's just it," I said. "The man who told me was none too clear. He gave me a hint of it. He was an old commercial passing through, and had known the place in the old days. Let's hear your story and see if it agrees with his."

But I had told my fibs to no purpose. The old lady seemed a bit flustered. "If you don't mind, Mr Sanderson, I'd rather not speak of it."

I thought I knew what was troubling her. I filled her glass and my own. "Look here," I said. "When you sold the place to me it was a fair deal. You weren't called upon to go thirty years back, and no reasonable man would expect it. I'm satisfied. Here I am, and here I mean to stop, and twenty billiard-rooms wouldn't drive me away. I'm not complaining. But, just as a matter of curiosity, I'd like to hear your story."

"What's your trouble with the room?"

"Nothing to signify. But there's a game played there and marked there—and I can't find the players, and it's never finished. It stops always at sixty-six—forty-eight."

She gave a glance over her shoulder. "Pull the place down," she said. "You can afford to do it, and [Pg 96] I couldn't." She finished her port. "I must be going, Mr Sanderson. There's rain coming on, and I don't want to sit in the train in my wet things. I thought I would just run down to see how you

were getting on, and I'm sure I'm glad to see the old place looking up again."

I tried again to get the story out of her, but she ran away from it. She had not got the time, and it was better not to speak of such things. I did not worry her about it much, as she seemed upset over it.

I saw her across to the station, and just got back in time. The rain came down in torrents. I stood there and watched it, and thought it would do my garden a bit of good. I heard a step behind me and looked round. A fat chap with a surly face stood there, as if he had just come out of the coffee-room. He was the sort that might be a gentleman and might not.

"Afternoon, sir," I said. "Nasty weather for motoring."

"It is," he said. "Not that I came in a motor. You the proprietor, Mr Sanderson?"

"I am," I said. "Came here recently."

"I wonder if there's any chance of a game of billiards."

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Table's shocking. I'm having it all done up afresh, and then—"

"What's it matter?" said he. "I don't care. It's something to do, and one can't go out." [Pg 97]

"Well," I said, "if that's the case, I'll give you a game, sir. But I'm no flyer at it at the best of times, and I'm all out of practice now."

"I'm no good myself. No good at all. And I'd be glad of the game."

At the billiard-room door I told him I'd fetch a couple of decent cues. He nodded and went in.

When I came back with my cue and Harry's, I found the gas lit and the blinds drawn, and he was already knocking the balls about.

"You've been quick, sir," I said, and offered him Harry's cue. But he refused and said he would keep the one he had taken from the rack. Harry would have sworn if he had found that I had lent his cue to a stranger, so I thought that was just as well. Still, it seemed to me that a man who took a twisted cue by preference was not likely to be an expert.

The table was bad, but not so bad as Harry had made out. The luck was all my side. I was fairly ashamed of the flukes I made, one after the other. He said nothing, but gave a short, loud laugh once or twice—it was a nasty-sounding laugh. I was at thirty-seven when he was nine, and I put on eleven more at my next visit and thought I had left him nothing.

Then the fat man woke up. He got out of his first difficulty, and after that the balls ran right for him. He was a player, too, with plenty of variety and resource, and I could see that I was going to [Pg 98] take a licking. When he had reached fifty-one, an unlucky kiss left him an impossible position. But I miscued, and he got going again. He played very, very carefully now, taking a lot more time for consideration than he had done in his previous break. He seemed to have got excited over it, and breathed hard, as fat men do when they are worked up. He had kept his coat on, and his face shone with perspiration.

At sixty-six he was in trouble again; he walked round to see the exact position, and chalked his cue. I watched him rather eagerly, for I did not like the score. I hoped he would go on. His cue slid back to strike, and then dropped with a clatter from his hand. The fat man was gone—gone, as I looked at him, like a flame blown out, vanished into nothing.

I staggered away from the table. I began to back slowly towards the door, meaning to make a bolt for it. There was a click from the scoring-board, and I saw the thing marked up. And then—I am thankful to say—the billiard-room door opened, and I saw Harry standing there. He was very white and shaky. Somehow, the fact that he was frightened helped to steady me.

"Good heavens, uncle!" he gasped, "I've been standing outside. What's the matter? What's happened?" [Pg 99]

"Nothing's the matter," I said sharply. "What are you shivering about?" I swished back the curtain, and sent up the blind with a snap. The rain was over now, and the sun shone in through the wet glass—I was glad of it.

"I thought I heard voices—laughing—somebody called the score."

I turned out the gas. "Well," I said, "this table's enough to make any man laugh, when it don't make him swear. I've been trying your game of one hand against another, and I daresay I called the score out loud. It's no catch—not even for a wet afternoon. I'm not both-handed, like the apes and Harry Bryden."

Harry is as good with the left hand as the right, and a bit proud of it. I slid my own cue back into its case. Then, whistling a bit of a tune, I picked up the stranger's cue, which I did not like to touch. I nearly dropped it again when I saw the initials "J.H." on the butt. "Been trying the cues," I said, as I put it in the rack. He looked at me as if he were going to ask more questions. So I put him on to something else. "We've not got enough cover for those motor-cars," I said. "Lucky we hadn't got many here in this rain. There's plenty of room for another shed, and it needn't cost much. Go and see what you can make of it. I'll come out directly, but I've got to talk to that girl in the bar first." [Pg 100]

He went off, looking rather ashamed of his tremors.

I had not really very much to say to Miss Hesketh in the bar. I put three fingers of whisky in a glass and told her to put a dash of soda on the top of it. That was all. It was a full-sized drink and did me good.

Then I found Harry in the yard. He was figuring with pencil on the back of an envelope. He was always pretty smart where there was anything practical to deal with. He had spotted where the shed was to go, and he was finding what it would cost at a rough estimate.

"Well," I said, "if I went on with that idea of mine about the flower-beds it needn't cost much beyond the labour."

"What idea?"

"You've got a head like a sieve. Why, carrying on the flower-beds round the front where the billiard-room now stands. If we pulled that down it would give us all the materials we want for the new motor-shed. The roofing's sound enough, for I was up yesterday looking into it."

"Well, I don't think you mentioned it to me, but it's a rare good idea."

"I'll think about it," I said.

That evening my cook, Timbs, told me he'd be sorry to leave me, but he was afraid he'd find the place too slow for him—not enough doing. Then old Silas informed me that he hadn't meant to [Pg 101] retire so early, but he wasn't sure—the place was livelier than he had expected, and there would be more work than he could get through. I asked no questions. I knew the billiard-room was somehow or other at the bottom of it, and so it turned out. In three days' time the workmen were in the house and bricking up the billiard-room door; and after that Timbs and old Silas found the Regency suited them very well after all. And it was not just to oblige Harry, or Timbs, or Silas that I had the alteration made. That unfinished game was in my mind; I had played it, and wanted never to play it again. It was of no use for me to tell myself that it had all been a delusion, for I knew better. My health was good, and I had no delusions. I had played it with Josiah Ham—with the lost soul of Josiah Ham—and that thought filled me not with fear, but with a feeling of sickness and disgust.

It was two years later that I heard the story of Josiah Ham, and it was not from old Mrs Parker. An old tramp came into the saloon bar begging, and Miss Hesketh was giving him the rough side of her tongue.

"Nice treatment!" said the old chap. "Thirty years ago I worked here, and made good money, and was respected, and now it's insults." [Pg 102]

And then I struck in. "What did you do here?" I asked.

"Waited at table and marked at billiards."

"Till you took to drink?" I said.

"Till I resigned from a strange circumstance."

I sent him out of the bar, and took him down the garden, saying I'd find him an hour or two's work. "Now, then," I said, as soon as I had got him alone, "what made you leave?"

He looked at me curiously. "I expect you know, sir," he said. "Sixty-six. Unfinished."

And then he told me of a game played in that old billiard-room on a wet summer afternoon thirty years before. He, the marker, was one of the players. The other man was a commercial traveller, who used the house pretty regularly. "A fat man, ugly-looking, with a nasty laugh. Josiah Ham his name was. He was at sixty-six when he got himself into a tight place. He moved his ball—did it when he thought I wasn't looking. But I saw it in the glass, and I told him of it. He got very angry. He said he wished he might be struck dead if he ever touched the ball."

The old tramp stopped. "I see," I said.

"They said it was apoplexy. It's known to be dangerous for fat men to get very angry. But I'd had enough of it before long. I cleared out, and so did the rest of the servants."

"Well," I said, "we're not so superstitious nowadays. And what brought you down in the world?" [Pg 103]

"It would have driven any man to it," he said. "And once the habit is formed—well, it's there."

"If you keep off it I can give you a job weeding for three days."

He did not want the work. He wanted a shilling, and he got it; and I saw to it that he did not spend it in my house.

We have got a very nice billiard-room upstairs now. Two new tables and everything ship-shape. You may find Harry there most evenings. It is all right. But I have never taken to billiards again myself.

And where the old billiard-room was there are flower-beds. The pansies that grow there have got funny markings—like figures.

[Pg 104]

SPARKLING BURGUNDY

In London a day in mid-August drew to its close. The air was motionless, the pavements were hot. Weary children came home with the perambulator from the sand-pit of Regent's Park or the playground of Kensington Gardens. Young men from the city wore straw hats and thronged the outside of motor-omnibuses. Oxford Street, that singularly striving street, was still striving, still exhibiting some of its numerous activities. Starting from a humble and Holborn origin, it lives to touch the lips of Park Lane, but it goes to Bayswater when it dies. It was still protesting that it was not tired and still crowded with traffic. Irregular masses of buildings and heavy dusty trees stood out darkly against a sky of fainting lettuce colour. Young Mrs Bablove noticed them as she came out of the Tube station, drawing her cloak round her unwonted evening-dress. "Yes," said her husband, as she called his attention to the effect. "Striking." It was scarcely a minute's walk from the station to the Restaurant Merveilleux, where they were to be the guests of Mr Albert Carver.

The Restaurant Merveilleux does its best. It has an arc-lamp and a medium-sized commissionaire. It bears its name proudly in gilt letters a foot and a half high. In the entrance are bay trees in [Pg 105] green tubs and a framed bill of our celebrated *diner du jour* at half-a-crown. Within are little tables brightly appointed and many electric lights. A mahogany screen is carved with challenging pine-apples and grapes, and against it is a table for six. Mr Carver had reserved this table. Yet somehow one gets the correct impression that this is a small eating-house under Italian proprietorship.

The occasion of the little dinner given by this bachelor and *viveur* was the engagement of Ada Bunting to Harold Simcox. Albert Carver had received much hospitality from Miss Bunting's parents. He had as nearly as possible got engaged to Miss Bunting himself, and now knew what the condemned man feels like who is unexpectedly reprieved. Miss Bunting and Mr Simcox were the guests of importance. She was lymphatic and pale-haired; her future husband was smaller and a shade shorter than she. He concentrated on politeness, and made anyone to whom he spoke feel like a possible customer. As for Mr and Mrs Bablove, Mr Albert Carver had always intended to ask them, if he ever asked anybody. He frankly admired young Mrs Bablove, and said so, and was slightly pleased when this created surprise and it was suggested that she was hardly his type. It seemed to imply that Mr Carver was a problem, and this was subtly flattering to Mr Carver—who, if a problem, was singularly soluble. It is true none the less that the women whom [Pg 106] Albert Carver admired were mostly fleshy and exuberant. Mrs Bablove looked like an angel who had gone into domestic service—a soul in servitude. She had to make a just-sufficient income suffice, and as she was devoted to her husband and her two little boys she did a good deal of work herself. She had a sweet and rather childish nature, was not without some true æsthetic perception, and under less stringent limitations might have developed further. Mr Bablove, a very quiet and prosaic man, who wore spectacles only when he was reading, made about the same income as Mr Carver. They both held responsible positions in the same firm. They both lived in the same street in the Shepherd's Bush neighbourhood. But Mr Bablove's income had to provide for a household, and Mr Albert Carver's income was all ear-marked for Mr Albert Carver. There was less splendour in Mr Bablove's house than in Mr Carver's wicked flat with the hookah (from the cut-price tobacconist) standing on the low inlaid table and the French photogravure of a bathing subject over the mantelpiece.

The remaining guest was Miss Adela Holmes. She was beautiful and looked Oriental. Her movements (after office-hours) were slow and very graceful. Her voice was soft and languorous; her eyes also spoke. During the day she was the third quickest typist in London, and ran her own [Pg 107] office strictly on business lines. Mr Carver in his light way would sometimes call her "Nirvana"; he was convinced that this was an Eastern term of endearment, and, though an allusion to her appearance, permissible in a platonic friend who had known her for years.

Mr Carver surveyed his little party with pleasure. It was not the celebrated half-crown dinner that was being served for this Lucullus; it was the rich man's alternative—the *diner de luxe* at four-and-six. Mr Carver always said that if he did a thing at all he liked to do it well. He was a man of middle stature and middle age. His hair was very black and intensely smooth. His face suggested a commercial Napoleon. He was dressed with some elaboration; pink coral buttons constrained his white waistcoat over a slight protuberance. Other diners at other tables were not so dressed—not dressed for the evening at all. One blackguard had entered in a suit of flannels and a straw hat. But other tables had not the profusion of smilax and carnations which graced the table reserved for Mr Carver's party. A paper simulation of chrysanthemums was good enough for the half-crowners. How could they expect the eager attendance given to Mr Carver's party? The frock-coated proprietor hovered near the mahogany screen. The head-waiter, at a side-table, took the neck of a bottle of sparkling burgundy between his dusky hands and caused it to rotate [Pg 108] vigorously in the ice-pail. This does not really make that curious wine any the worse. Another waiter handed up for Mr Carver's approval the *chef's* attempt to make a lobster look like a sunset on the Matterhorn.

"Looks almost too good to eat," said Adela Holmes, drowsily.

Mr Carver laughed joyously. "Think so, Nirvana? Well, we'll try it."

The wonder had not yet quite gone out of the soft brown eyes of Dora Bablove. This was luxury indeed. It was a new way of living that she had never known; in the course of her married life she had dined out very rarely, and never after this manner. Somehow she felt as if she was not Dora Bablove at all.

The proprietor made a suggestion to Mr Carver. "Good idea, signor," said Mr Carver. "You'd like an electric fan, Mrs Bablove, wouldn't you?"

It was done in a moment. An electric lamp was taken out, and something plugged in its place. A gentle whirr, with a hint of an aeroplane in it. A cool breeze that fluttered the pendent smilax.

"I think you're being very well looked after," said Mrs Bablove, timidly.

"You've got it," said Mr Carver, with conviction. "That's just the advantage of a little place like this. I'm here pretty often, and the signor knows me; and—oh, well, I daresay he thinks it worth his while to keep my custom. I assure you I get an amount of personal attention here that I never [Pg 109] get at the Ritz." As Mr Carver had never been to the Ritz this is credible.

"I like being looked after," said Mrs Bablove. "I like to think that so many people are taking so much trouble to please me."

"I should think—er—that that must always happen," said the polite Mr Simcox on her other side.

"Not a bit," laughed Dora. "As a rule, I take all the trouble. Ask Teddy if I don't."

But nobody asked Teddy. Mr Bablove was discussing palmistry with Miss Bunting, who thought there might be something in it, and with Miss Holmes, who was quite expert and offered to read his hand.

Mr Carver said, in his whimsical way, that he thought Mrs Bablove should drink and forget it. He watched her as she touched with her full lips the magenta foam in her glass. He had never seen Mrs Bablove in a low dress before; certainly she had a charm. The conversation grew animated. The question of London in August was settled. London empty? Not a bit of it. That was the old idea. Why, this year, with the House sitting, half the best people were still in London. You could walk through Mayfair and see for yourself.

Mrs Bablove was not deeply interested in the question. She knew that Teddy and Mr Carter would take their holidays just when the firm decided. She was more interested in the people in the room. The blackguard in the flannel suit had finished his lager and had attempted to light a [Pg 110] pipe; it had been politely explained to him that pipes were not permissible. At a little table in the corner were a man with a saturnine face and a very young girl in red. They drank champagne, talked low and confidentially, and paid no attention to anybody. Dora Bablove had strayed into a world previously unexplored by her.

More and more the conviction came on her that the Dora who was unwrapping the vine-leaf from the fat quail on her plate was not the Dora who had been married six years, who looked after her two little boys so well, who mended, and cleaned, and did rather clever things with the rest of the cold mutton. She was for the moment a woman untrammelled by circumstances. She delighted in it, enjoyed it desperately, and was half afraid of it. Had this Dora quite the same ideas about—well, about what was right?

The girl in red had lit a cigarette now, and she was getting rather angry with the man who was with her. Dora thought he was making her angry on purpose. She wondered why. She asked Mr Carver.

Mr Carver shook his head. A mistake to make the ladies angry—that was what he always thought. But some of them had tempers. Now—well, he mustn't say that.

"Oh, go on, you must," said Dora.

"Well, I was only going to say that appearances are deceptive. You look at first sight as if you had [Pg 111] the most placid nature in the world. But I think you could get angry, Mrs Bablove—very angry."

"Oh, no. Quite wrong. Whatever makes you think that?"

"There's a look in the eyes sometimes. Oh, I assure you it makes me very careful," laughed Mr Carver. "Frightens me. Now, really, Mrs Bablove, you must have a little yellow Chartreuse with your coffee."

But Mrs Bablove was resolute in her refusal. She did not care in the least about such things. She had drunk one glass of the sparkling burgundy, not to be out of the picture, and after that had sipped iced water. At the other end of the table "Nirvana" was saying that she didn't see why she shouldn't—two other women in the room had set the example. And with that she accepted a cigarette from Mr Bablove's silver case. The smoke wandered gently through the smilax plantation, and left hurriedly when it met the electric fan.

And now Mr Simcox had to take Miss Bunting home, for Miss Bunting lived in remote Wimbledon and in an early household, and the privilege of the latch-key was not accorded to her. Mr Simcox, who had not refused the yellow Chartreuse or anything else, was slightly flushed and more polite than ever. He assured his host that it had been the pleasantest evening of his life and he should never forget it. Even the lymphatic Miss Bunting had become quite animated. At the beginning of [Pg 112] the dinner they had maintained towards one another a pre-concerted air of dignified reserve, but

that was now quite broken down.

Mr Carver rose to see them to their cab. "And if anybody else tries to go," he said to the rest of his guests, "I shall lose my temper."

"Might have got a box at one of the halls if I'd thought about it," said Mr Carver on his return. It was a well-meant effort of the imagination. He might, but it would have been unlike him.

"Much pleasanter where we are," said Miss Holmes, languorously. "Performances always bore me."

"Ah, well, Nirvana," said Mr Carver, "so long as you're pleased—"

Miss Holmes turned again to Mr Bablove. His wife hoped that Teddy was not being too prosaic. From a word or two she caught she knew he was talking politics. But Miss Holmes did not look bored. Perhaps she was interested in politics too.

"Why do you call her Nirvana?" Mrs Bablove asked, dropping her voice a little. But the couple at the further end of the table were absorbed in their talk now and taking no notice of what the others were saying.

"Why do I call her Nirvana? Because she looks like a gipsy. She does, doesn't she?"

Mr Carver's fruity voice had also become discreet. [Pg 113]

"I don't know. I think she looks charming."

"Do you?" said Mr Carver. "I'd like to talk to you about that. Not now—presently." He knew the value of a slight hint of mystery. "Have a cigarette now, Mrs Bablove?"

"Thanks. I think I will."

"Why wouldn't you smoke before?" he asked as he lit the cigarette for her.

"Too many people. The room's nearly empty now. I'm not so brave as—Nirvana."

"I don't think you quite know what you are. You're full of possibilities."

"I like these cigarettes," said Dora. "Teddy gives me one sometimes, though I don't often smoke, but his are not quite so nice as these."

Mr Carver became informative on the subject of Turkish tobacco, but with the information he wove much which was personal. It appeared that it was Mr Carver's ambition to leave business and London and to spend the rest of his life in Japan.

"I thought you were devoted to London," said Mrs Bablove. "What you say rather surprises me."

"I surprise myself sometimes," said Mr Carver, darkly.

A little later all rose to go.

A hansom was waiting just outside, and Mr Carver began to organise briskly.

"Will you take Miss Holmes in that cab, Teddy? It's scarcely two minutes out of your way. I'll bring Mrs Bablove in the next cab." [Pg 114]

Mr Carver took it all for granted, and it was done as he suggested. The next cab was a taxi.

"We shall be home before them," laughed Dora as she got into the cab. "By the way, Mr Carver, what were you going to tell me about Nirvana?"

And presently Mr Carver was saying why Miss Holmes could not seem charming when Dora Bablove was present. He compared them in some detail. "I don't think you know enough about yourself," he said. "That delicious mouth of yours!"

When they reached Mrs Bablove's house Dora did not ask Mr Carver to come in. She thanked him and said good-night rather briefly. She switched on the light in the hall, ran upstairs to see that her two little boys were safely asleep, and came down to the dining-room to wait for her husband.

She poured out a glass of water and drank it. Then she sat quite still in the easy-chair with her head in her hands. What was she to do? What on earth was she to do? A man had kissed her on the lips—a man who was not her husband. She had let him do it. She thought—she hardly knew—that her lips had answered to his. Such a thing had never happened to her before. She was wide awake now. But surely in the cab she must have been half asleep. [Pg 115]

She had leaned back with her eyes half-closed, suffused with a pleasant warmth and tiredness, and had heard his caressing voice praising her as she had never before been praised. She had not guessed that he thought so much of her—that he admired her so much. Then as he spoke of the beauty of her hands, he took one of her hands in his. She knew what would come, and was without any power to prevent it. She had seen his face come near to her own and—no, she would tell the truth to herself. For a moment she had gone mad and let herself go completely. She had wanted to be kissed, and as she felt his lips upon her own her kiss had met his.

True, the next moment she had recovered herself; she chatted gaily, was merely amused when Mr Carver would have been sentimental, and would not let him get near her. Her one reference to what had happened was as the cab neared her own door. She said, "You know what you did when I had fallen asleep. Never try to do it again. And never speak of it to me. I couldn't forgive it twice, you know. To-night I've—I made some allowance for—well, here we are. I must get out."

She was not troubled about Mr Carver. She had told him that she was asleep, and had implied that he was under the influence of wine. She felt that she could always manage Mr Carver.

But what about Teddy? He must never, never know. It was one little slip, one moment of madness, and it would never happen again. It would be wicked to let Teddy know and to make him wretched. [Pg 116]

On the other hand, if she did not tell him, how was she to quiet the voice of conscience? What became of their mutual confidence? She felt that she could never be happy again until she had told all and been forgiven.

She took the thing tragically. She saw the whole of her own happiness and Teddy's happiness ruined by that one moment of madness and the future of the little boys seriously imperilled. She was just wondering who, in the event of a separation, would have the custody of the children, when she heard the sound of Teddy's hansom as it stopped at the door.

What on earth was she to do? She could never face him. She would just burst into tears and tell him everything.

But she found herself quite unable to carry out this decision. Teddy looked so cheerful. He talked more than usual. How had she liked it? A rare good dinner, it seemed to him. And she had been by far the prettiest woman there. He had felt proud of her.

She smiled sadly, and said that he was prejudiced. "And how did you get on with Miss Holmes?"

"Oh, all right. The trouble with her is that she's rather affected, and affectation is just one of those things that I can't stand." [Pg 117]

If only for one moment he would take his eyes off her. She felt distraught. She hardly knew what she was saying. She observed that sparkling Burgundy seemed rather a heady wine. He hastened to agree with her.

"I didn't take much of it. To tell the truth, it's not a wine I ever met before, and the taste seemed to me rather funny. I'd sooner have a whisky-and-soda any day."

"Have one now. Do. Why not? I'll run up to bed because I'm so tired. I daresay I shall be asleep by the time you come."

"Oh, I shan't be long," said Teddy, and Dora managed to get out of the room without being kissed.

The moment she had gone Teddy's cheerfulness vanished. He mixed himself a very stiff whisky-and-soda, and sipped gloomily, staring at the dead cigarette between his fingers.

Dora panted as she undressed. Tragedy seemed to be choking her. She hurried into bed. When Teddy came up she pretended to be asleep, but she got little sleep that night.

Two days had passed and Dora had not spoken. There were dark lines under her eyes, and she seldom smiled. Teddy, always kind, had been kinder to her than ever. He said complimentary things to her. Every evening he brought her fruit from the city, because she liked fruit; it was expensive fruit too. And every kind word or act seemed to cut her heart like a knife. She felt so unworthy of devotion. The position was unendurable, and on the third morning as they rose from breakfast she suddenly determined to end it there and then—to tell him everything and throw herself on his mercy. [Pg 118]

"I want to speak to you for a minute before you go to the city," she said. "Will you come into the drawing-room?"

"Very well," said Teddy.

In the drawing-room she found that she was shaking all over and had to sit down. She was thinking how she would begin, when she heard a hollow voice say, "Wait. You need say nothing." It was Teddy's voice.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a choked whisper.

"Do you think I haven't seen?" said Teddy, almost fiercely. "You guessed it somehow when I came into the house that night. I suppose a bad conscience gives itself away. I thought you knew when you asked me how I got on with Miss Holmes. These last two days you've been upset. You've not been yourself. And that of course made me certain you knew. Only let me tell you how I came to do it."

"Yes," said Dora, with great self-possession, "tell me that."

"Well, she was talking about the loneliness of her life. It was as much pity as anything. And the [Pg 119]

cab was going down a dark street at the time. Mind, I only kissed her once. And the moment I did it I—I was ashamed of myself. You don't know what I've been through."

Dora thought she did, but she said nothing.

"I swear that I care for no woman in the world but you, Dora. I'm awfully sorry I've hurt you like this. Can you ever forgive me?"

Dora rose, and placed both hands on his shoulders. "Could you have forgiven me," she said, "if I had let a man kiss me?"

He paused a moment. "Yes, Dora," he said, "I think so."

Her face was like the face of an angel. "Then, Teddy dear, I forgive you absolutely. We will never speak of this again. And it will never happen again, will it?"

"Never," said the repentant sinner, and kissed her.

Mrs Bablove sang happily as she helped to make the beds that morning.

And they never did speak of it again. Once, two years later—this was after poor Aunt Mary had been called to her rest and the Babloves had become prosperous in consequence—Teddy gave it as his opinion that there was only one sparkling wine worth consideration and that wine was champagne. Dora cordially agreed with him, but changed the subject rapidly.

[Pg 120]

THE ACT OF HEROISM

I

Do not go outside your part, for whatever part in life you may be cast. If you are Nature's low comedian, do not usurp the business of the hero. Hear the plain story of Alfred Smithers, who stood five foot eight, had sandy hair and an apologetic eye, earned four pounds a week by book-keeping, and was a good husband until by the merest chance he was led into the paths of heroism.

Chance plays the devil at times. Emily Trimmins, housemaid by profession and hysterical by nature, found that the postman was walking out with another lady. Consulting her recollection of penny romances she saw that suicide was clearly indicated. The relics of sense which distinguish hysteria from madness made her choose the manner of her suicide. She went up on to the Heath one afternoon and flung herself into a pond, in the presence of several philosophical male loafers, one emotional nursemaid, and two fat-headed children. Her last thought as she entered the water was which of the male loafers would pull her out again.

The first loafer said that was as silly an act as ever he saw, and he should be moving home. The second loafer observed that something ought to be done at once. The third called for help. The [Pg 121] fourth said the police were never there when they were wanted.

The emotional nursemaid sat down at once on the grass, removed her hat, unhooked her dress at the neck, fanned herself with a handkerchief, and said, "Oh! that *has* give me a turn!"

The two fat-headed children cried, "Ain't that funny? Nurse, make her come out and do it again. Nurse, ain't that funny? Nurse, make her come out and do it again." *Da capo.*

And at this moment chance—playing the devil as aforesaid—brought upon the scene Alfred Smithers, who had fished the pond and believed the depth nowhere exceeded three feet, who saw a policeman with a coil of rope under his arm rapidly approaching, who observed that he had an audience and was accordingly inspirited.

"Go in from where you are!" shouted the second loafer. "Don't waste time thinking abart it." Smithers removed his silk hat and frock-coat.

"That's couridge! That's a man!" screamed the emotional nursemaid.

That settled it. With a stentorian cry of "Stand back, there!" to the two fat-headed children—a cry which was not needed, but inserted by way of trimming—Smithers jumped feet foremost. There was a mighty splash. When it subsided, Smithers was observed standing in the pond, the water [Pg 122] reaching up to the terminals of his string-mended braces.

The two children rolled over and over on the grass in fits of inextinguishable laughter. It was a good afternoon; they had had nothing quite so good since the pantomime.

"Don't wait for her to come up," roared the second loafer. "Dive. That's what you've got to do."

"I know what to do all right," replied Smithers, who, as a matter of fact, didn't. He took one step forward, and incontinently vanished down a fifteen-foot hole, of the existence of which, though he had fished that pond, he had previously been unaware.

As he was going down the hole he met Emily Trimmins coming up. She paused and soldered herself firmly on to as much of Smithers as she could reach. He trod water very fast and very furiously, like a child stamping its feet on the nursery floor because it mayn't begin tea cake first. He lashed out hard and indiscriminately with both hands, and might have succeeded in scraping off most of the half-drowned lady, but that he found in his struggles they had both become entangled and tied together by a rope. He could remember no prayer but the grace after meat, which he repeated to himself fervently. Then he gave up. His breath exploded into the green jelly. He gave one more kick, and lost his interest in things. [Pg 123]

In the meantime the policeman, assisted by the loafers, was pulling hard at the other end of the rope, and brought to bank a job lot of mixed scarecrows. Those being sorted out on the grass proved to be one moiety Smithers and one moiety Trimmins. The treatment of the apparently drowned was then proceeded with energetically, to the great satisfaction of a considerable number of spectators. They had gathered in a moment.

Smithers came to himself, feeling ill but magnificent, and assured the policeman that he was all right. He was not much to look at at the moment, yet everywhere he felt the admiring gaze upon him. "Bravo!" exclaimed an old gentleman. A very chorus of bravos followed, in which the policeman and the doctor, who was busy with Emily Trimmins, joined enthusiastically. Oh, it was good. It was very joyous.

"You done splendid, sir," said the policeman; "the way you just managed to grab the end of the rope as you went down the hole to fetch her up was very smart. You must be pretty quick and neat with your hands, and pretty cool and collected too, for I daresay she give a lot of trouble when you got 'er."

"Well, you see," said Smithers, indulgently, "she'd quite lost her head."

"And yet you managed to get the rope under her armpits, tied a good knot, and wound the slack twice round yourself! And it couldn't have been done quicker if you had been on dry land, instead of under water and 'ampered by the woman." [Pg 124]

Emily Trimmins was by this time so far recovered as to be ripe for removal in a four-wheeler, with a policeman on the box. She did not look pretty. Her hair had come down, and something had happened to her nose. It was suggested that she had struck it in entering the water. Alfred Smithers remembered at an early stage of the struggle he had kicked something; it was not worth mentioning. He took, under advice, another drop of the brandy, and was driven home. The crowd cheered.

Mrs Smithers was a woman of some energy. Smithers was wrapped in hot blankets and tucked away in bed in no time. He had a hot-water bottle at his feet, and steaming rum-and-water at his head. Mrs Smithers sent a polite note to Messrs Garson & Begg to say why her husband would be unable to be at work as usual on the following day. She threw the story over the right-hand wall of the back-yard to Mrs Warboys, and over the left-hand wall to the widow of the late Charles Push. In twenty minutes the story was all over the terrace and had not shrunk. There was great excitement, and three separate houses hoped that Mrs Smithers would look in for a cup of tea, and would be glad if they could do anything to help. She accepted two of the invitations, and would visit the third house on the morrow, and would be obliged by the loan of a nutmeg, it being necessary to keep up an internal glow after prolonged struggle in cold water—the dare-devil had dived six times before he found the woman—and the patient otherwise being likely to take a chill in the vitals and die hurriedly. Then she decided to have the newspaper cuttings framed. The medal would go on the mantelpiece, under glass. [Pg 125]

Smithers lay upstairs, with the feeling that his head was a large lump of dough traversed by a steam-propelled roller, but satisfied that heroism and hot rum were both excellent. He was soon asleep.

Glory reached its flood on the following day. An offering was brought from the mother of Emily Trimmins—a box encrusted without with small shells and two pieces of looking-glass and lined with pink satin within. The slip of paper which accompanied it was inscribed—"A mother's tribute to her daughter's presserver" (*sic*). The newspapers on the whole did well, though the *Times* was quite outclassed in the race for news, having but two lines to the half column of the local organ. The magistrate cautioned Miss Trimmins with some severity, and handed her over to the care of her mother. He said that the loafers were not men. He referred to the intrepid courage, cool head, strength wedded with skill, of Alfred Smithers—one of the men of whom England had good cause to be proud. [Pg 126]

In the course of a week the postman had explained away the other lady and was *au mieux* with Emily Trimmins, who, so far as this story is concerned, may now take a seat at the back.

A considerable number of Smithers' friends were waiting, when the magistrate had finished, to have the pleasure of shaking hands with Smithers, and congratulating him, and so on.

And that night one of the men of whom England had good cause to be proud went home most painfully and uncompromisingly drunk.

II

Alfred Smithers, as he made his modest breakfast of a cup of tea and two liver pills next morning, explained to his wife that it had not been the drink so much as the reaction.

She said that he needn't have taken the reaction. She should overlook it this time and say no more, knowing what he was when not misled. But no amount of ironing would make that hat look anything again. He went to work feeling that the glory had been turned a little lower.

There were more newspaper cuttings, and later there was something on vellum. Smithers said rather bitterly that the Society seemed to do things on the cheap. A medal came at last, presented by the vicar on behalf of a few friends and local inhabitants. It was of silver and very [Pg 127] large. It was kept on the mantelpiece and shown to everybody who would look at it.

But the excitement was dying down. Glory was on the ebb. Mrs Smithers would sometimes allow two days to pass without alluding to the act of heroism. Smithers watched the ebbing of the tide with inward rage and with many vain efforts to stay it. The neighbourhood sickened slowly of conversations on the different ways of rescuing the drowning—conversations initiated by Smithers in order to lead to the case of the poor girl, Emily Trimmins. But he had eaten praise-poison, and no other diet was rich enough for him now. The neighbourhood wearying of him and hinting as much, he would slip the medal into his pocket on Saturday afternoons, get on his bicycle, and seek fresh fields. A little group and a bar-parlour sufficed. Whatever the group was discussing when Smithers first leaned his bicycle against the horse-trough outside, five minutes later they were listening while Smithers got in with "I remember once being on the Heath when some fool of a girl jumped into twenty feet of water. What did I do? Watched for the bubbles coming up and then dived. The devil of it was that there was a strong cross-current and—" etc. Later, the medal would be produced. Poor Alfred Smithers! Nature's low comedian, and yet smitten with a raging madness for the strut, the soliloquy, the limelight, the sympathetic music, [Pg 128] the roar of applause!

In his new part of hero he invented business that was not good. He began to be, as he phrased it, "master in his own house." He interfered in matters which were the special province of Mrs Smithers. He gave detailed instructions in domestic subjects of which he was completely ignorant, and brought upon himself ridicule. He was rude to Mrs Smithers, and said that she needed to be driven with a firm hand. He told the eight-pound general that his word was law, and she forthwith gave notice on the ground that she could put up with anything except haughtiness.

Mrs Smithers told him with some frankness that she was glad to see his back when he went to business of a morning, for he was more nuisance in a house than a cartload of monkeys.

At business he had got, as a rule, just enough sense not to try any heroism. He was a good book-keeper and he had got a good place and he knew it. One day, however, as his mind strayed for a moment to high things, he made a small blunder affecting a large sum, and the sum got on to the wrong side of the book and caused trouble. In due course Mr Peter Begg said, "Send me Smithers." The clerk who took the message said to Smithers, "You're going to get beans." And at this all the heroism in Smithers arose and boiled over, and he spluttered out that he thought it [Pg 129] would be rather the other way.

"Look here," said Mr Begg, "how do you come to make such an infernal fool of yourself as this, Smithers?" Smithers was now well alight.

"Kindly understand once for all that there are some expressions I don't permit to be used to me by any man."

Mr Begg gazed at Smithers pensively through his eye-glass and sighed. "Get out," he said, "I'll finish with you to-morrow morning. You may be sober by then. Get out, go on!"

Smithers got out, and a slight chill fell on him. Possibly he had gone too far. He was unusually civil to his wife at supper that night, and appeared somewhat preoccupied. After supper he asked his wife what she thought of Klondike.

"I wouldn't care to have much to do with it. Why?"

"Well, I had a few words with Begg to-day—Peter Begg, the old one. I was in the right, as it happened, but something I said seemed to sting him rather. I can't say how it will end. I've as good as promised to see him again to-morrow morning, but he may not meet my views. And you know how it is when either the senior partner's got to go or the book-keeper."

"You apologise and ask to be took on again," said Mrs Smithers, going right through the [Pg 130] elegancies of her husband's version and getting straight down to the bedrock facts. "That's what you'll do if you're not silly. You don't want to lose a good place."

"I don't know," said Smithers, with an air of melancholy, "same old drudgery day after day, and what's it all to come to? Nothing. I might strike it if we went to Klondike."

"You aren't going to no Klondike," said Mrs Smithers.

"I'm not sure it wouldn't be the right life for me. I'm naturally a man of action. I do the book-keeping well enough, but adventures and emergencies are more my line. You remember what the magistrate said when—"

"I remember how drunk you were that night."

"Little you know!" said Smithers, though conscious that the retort was somewhat vague. After some meditation he managed to supplement it as follows: "And little you care either—top button's been off my wescut for the last four days."

"You've got a tongue in your head to ask with, haven't you? Give it here and don't grumble."

And a little later Alfred Smithers, with a distinct chill on the heroism, went up to bed.

The chill was even more distinct when in the small hours of the morning Mrs Smithers shook him by the shoulder, awoke him, told him that there was a burglar in the kitchen, and asked him to go down. [Pg 131]

In the small hours of the morning one's vitality is low.

III

They had been unable to get any satisfactory sleep after the disturbance, and they breakfasted early. Mrs Smithers looked amused; Alfred Smithers looked conciliatory.

"I want you to understand how it was," he said pleadingly.

"I understand it all right. And how my poor sides do ache with laughing. 'Lock our door as quietly as you can,' you says, 'and don't make a sound,' you says, 'for,' you says, 'if he knows we've discovered him he'll have the lives of both of us.' Sounds funnier still when it's said over again by daylight. Oh, my poor sides!"

And even then Alfred Smithers did not become rebellious; on the contrary, in a mirthless and subservient way he smiled.

"I'm quite willing to own I blundered in what seems now rather a funny way. But it wasn't in the way you think, my dear. My dear Agnes, it really wasn't." [Pg 132]

"Tell your own story," said Mrs Smithers, with a victor's easiness.

"I was awoke sudden," said Smithers. "I don't suppose I was more than half awake, which accounts for the error of judgment. I'm a man, and not a machine. We all blunder at times. I own I made a mistake, and I can afford to laugh at it." He managed to jerk up another semblance of a smile. "At first I said that what you'd heard was a rat, and what you'd seen was a shadow. Then when you made me look through the corner of the blind, and I saw the end of the man's leg drawn inwardly through the downstairs window, I, being half asleep, supposed that it was a regular professional burglar. And if it had been that, my advice would have been correct. Professional burglars carry revolvers in their 'ip-pockets, and they'll shoot anybody—policeman or any man—to destroy evidence against them. Very well. What good was I unarmed against an armed burglar? Foolhardiness isn't courage. If you knew life as I know it you'd realise that. You didn't agree with my ideas, and, as I was half asleep, I own you were right; you said—"

Mrs Smithers took up the story triumphantly.

"I said it was stuff and nonsense, and so it was. Burglars don't come to a penny-farthing place like this; and if they did, they wouldn't wake up the house opening a window. Two drops of ile, a shove with the knife, and a wad o' paper to deaden the sound of the spring when it comes back." [Pg 133]

Smithers recovered himself sufficiently to ask how they put in the two drops of oil and the wad of paper.

"How should I know, not being a burglar myself? Anyhow, I was right. I said it was just some tramp new to the business, and hungry for a supper, and that he'd bolt as soon as he heard anybody moving. And didn't he?"

"Yes," said Smithers, "he did. I was just thinking of getting out of bed and following you down the stairs. But he bolted as soon as he heard our door open, and was out of the house before you were half-way down. That's my point. It was an error of judgment on my part, not a want of courage. It's a mercy he'd no time to take much."

"Well, 'e'd got the cold beef out, and precious little he'd have left of it. The bottle of beer he knocked over and broke in his hurry. The only thing he actually got away with was that—er—that medal."

At this point Mrs Smithers' face became dark and inscrutable.

"That's a sad pity," she added; "we shall miss it too, with that inscription, 'For Gallantry and Courage; Presented by a Few Admirers of Alfred Smithers.' But you'll inquire of the police, of course, and as likely as not you'll get it back. I believe I was right in saying you ought to have gone to the police there and then." [Pg 134]

"I believe you were," said Alfred, with alacrity. "It's no good going now, for the medal's certain to be in the melting-pot. Besides, I've no fancy for having the police in, interfering with my private business. And I think it would be just as well if we neither of us said a word about it."

"Oh, I must tell Mrs Warboys," said Mrs Smithers. "I wouldn't miss seeing her laugh over that story were it ever so. As for pore Mrs Push, when I come to the part when I put your boots on my

feet because yours squeaked louder, and you'd got your head under the bed-clothes, and I said—"

"Oh, look here," said Alfred, desperately, "I do wish you wouldn't. I'd really much rather not. It isn't often I ask for anything particular, but if that story's told it's almost certain to be taken up in the wrong way as far as it concerns me. I've made a blunder and I've lost my medal. Ain't that enough for you?"

"Then you've given up that Klondike idea," observed Mrs Smithers, with more consecutiveness than was immediately apparent.

"Certainly; oh, certainly! It was just a wandering notion that wouldn't stand thinking over. And I shall smooth old Peter Begg down all right. There will be a little give-and-take compromise on both sides. It only wants tactful handling. Garson & Begg have been very good friends to me, and [Pg 135] I'm not going to throw them over. I couldn't do it, even if you asked it."

"I don't ask it," said Mrs Smithers, drily. "Get that fixed right by to-night and I won't say nothing."

On his way to the City he reflected that it would indeed require tact. However, he entered Mr Begg's room and did his best.

"I've come," he said, "to apologise, sir, very humbly for the way I spoke yesterday. As you saw, I wasn't myself, sir."

"Then you *were* drunk?" said Mr Begg with mild interest.

"Oh, no, sir. At least it was more drugged. I'd suffered torments all day with toothache, and took a little laudanum for it, and that made me come over all anyhow. If I'd been myself I'd sooner have cut off my right hand—"

"That'll do," said Mr Begg. "No more need be said about it in that case. But when you are troubled with toothache again I should advise you either to take a little less laudanum *or to take a good deal more*. Now get on with your work."

Thus tact triumphed.

Mrs Smithers kept her word, and Mrs Warboys and the relict of the late Charles Push have missed a story which would undoubtedly have amused them. Smithers has returned to his natural [Pg 136] *rôle*. The newspaper cuttings have been replaced by a chromo which happened to fit the frame exactly, and the happiness is general.

[Pg 137]

SOME NOTES ON CYRUS VERD

The name of Cyrus Verd, once so frequently seen in the newspapers and heard in conversation, has now for many years past been rarely mentioned. The absolute retirement of the latter part of his life helped the public—always ready to forget—to forget him. A few weeks ago at the club I happened to say something or other about him, and a man who, as a rule, knows his world turned to me and asked who Cyrus Verd was. The obituary notice of him in the *Times* the other day may possibly have revived interest in what was really rather an extraordinary personality. But the notice was brief, and beyond names and dates said little more than that he was "an eccentric millionaire, who, at the age of forty-five, chose to surrender almost the whole of his wealth and live a life of comparative poverty. It is said that this step was the result of some curious religious convictions, but Cyrus Verd himself never in his lifetime offered any explanation of it."

The few notes which I propose to add, including as they do a personal reminiscence of the man, may possibly be of interest. A writer of fiction constantly arranges his problem to suit his solution [Pg 138] of it; it is perhaps beneficial, though somewhat humiliating, that he should occasionally turn his attention to the problems that real life sets him, and see how much more difficult it is to find the solution then.

Cyrus Verd came to England in his thirty-fourth year, an age at which many men are only at the commencement of their career. He had already made his fortune. I cannot say exactly how rich he was. Many newspaper paragraphs at the time gave estimates of his annual income—all different. I should say that the only man who really knew was Cyrus Verd himself. He owned steamships, railways, factories, mines, and enough land for a small nation. On his arrival in London many stories were told of his extravagance and eccentricity.

He was debating where he should reside, and a friend suggested that he should take or build a house in Park Lane.

"Where is Park Lane?" asked Cyrus Verd. He had been only two days in London.

"Runs along the east side of Hyde Park, in the most fashionable quarter. Your coachman would know it."

Verd went to look at it, and returned.

"Yes," he said, "it would be a fair site for a house—one house. But there seems to be some brick tenements there of some sort or other already. I suppose I could get those cleared away?" [Pg 139]

He made the attempt, and was very angry at first when he found that he could not "get those cleared away." But he soon grew more philosophical.

"Your people," he observed, "cling to their little homes, I guess."

He was always much disappointed at first if he found there was anything which he could not buy. He went over the National Gallery alone one morning; he was a judge of pictures, and occasionally he put a pencil cross on his catalogue. When he got downstairs again he said to the man who handed him his umbrella:

"My name's Cyrus Verd, and I'm at the Métropole. Write that down. Send me round the things I've marked on my list and my secretary will hand you the cheque."

This story was much exaggerated in the newspapers; it was said that he had offered to buy the entire National Gallery, building and all, as it stood. I cannot say whether or not there was any truth in the report which appeared about the same time, to the effect that he had endeavoured to buy the Crown jewels; but, as far as I can judge his character, it does not seem impossible.

At the same time it would be rash to attempt to judge his character only from such reports as these. The secretary of a well-known charitable institution made that mistake. He wrote to ask for a donation to the institution, and guaranteed that it should be acknowledged by public advertisement in four of the leading dailies. Cyrus Verd wrote back that he had much pleasure in accepting the offer, and enclosed fourpence in stamps. The acknowledgment appeared as promised, and once more made Cyrus Verd a common topic of conversation. [Pg 140]

But one of the strangest things that he did never got into the newspapers at all. He left, intentionally, ten pounds in gold on the seat of a railway carriage. On the following day he inquired at the Lost Property Office if the money had been brought back. He was told, with a smile, that it had not been brought back, and that there was no earthly probability that it ever would be. He repeated the experiment, and again failed to recover the money. He repeated it twenty times on different lines, and at last a carriage-cleaner found the money and brought it back. Cyrus Verd took the name and address of that carriage-cleaner, made inquiries about him and then sent for him.

"I don't see why I should reward you at all. It's the company's business. You're their servant, and such actions as yours increase the feelings of security and confidence in their passengers. Are you suited to a better position than you've got?" [Pg 141]

"Yes, I am," said the man, "I'm a steady man, and I've a talent for figures. I'm known for it among my mates."

"Call on the chairman of directors—here is his private address—give him my card, explain the circumstances, and tell him from me that he is to put you in a position of trust, with at least three times your present wages."

The man came back to say that the chairman had laughed at him—had said that he was not the man to whom the application should have been made, and that there was no chance of its being entertained in any case.

"I must go and see him myself then," said Cyrus Verd.

The chairman was not in a very good temper.

"Really, Mr Verd, you'll be asking me to carry your luggage next. It's no part of my duties as chairman of the directors to undertake business of this kind. What that man ought to have done —"

"He did what I told him. You can get this put through if you like. Will you?"

"Frankly, I won't. It creates a precedent. It—"

"One moment, sir. If you'll have a copy of Bradshaw brought in here I'll show you something."

Now, the chairman knew that Cyrus Verd was eccentric, and so he was not surprised. He did not respect eccentricity. But he respected capital; and he knew that Cyrus Verd had already—thanks to his capital—had some little games with railway companies. So he rang the bell, and a Bradshaw was brought. [Pg 142]

When the servant had gone Verd drew a penny blue chalk-pencil from his pocket. He opened the Bradshaw, unfolded the map, and, without saying a word, made certain marks upon it.

The chairman watched him closely, and his face changed. "Who's going to do it?" he gasped. Then he repented, as a man does repent when he has given himself away. "Parliament?" he said.

"That's all right," remarked Cyrus Verd, replacing his blue pencil. "I've asked. They daren't block it."

"It wouldn't pay," the chairman said, with an effort at the careless smile.

"That matters only to the man who runs it. Either way it would wreck your line—and you. As my time here is short, don't pretend that it wouldn't, because, of course, I know that you know that it would."

"Am I to understand," said the chairman, angrily, "that you come here to threaten me with this new line?"

"Well, I was talking about a carriage-cleaner. I want him rewarded. I want it done right away. When I want anything done I don't tell myself that I won't spend more than a couple of millions on getting it done." [Pg 143]

"Men like you ought not to be allowed to live. I tell you that plainly, Mr Verd."

"There are no men like me. Good-afternoon, then."

"Oh, wait, wait! The man deserves to be rewarded, only these things must be done in the regular way. If he will write to—"

"I'm going to no underlings," said Cyrus Verd, "and I'm in a hurry. Next time I mark that map, *those marks will stop there*!"

The chairman seemed suddenly to recollect something. "What was this about a carriage-cleaner? Oh, yes, it's irregular; but naturally you wouldn't understand. I'll see about it myself."

"When?"

"Within six weeks."

"Days?"

"Weeks."

"Then it shan't be days. It shall be within six hours—a position of trust and three times his present wages within six hours. The way you talk makes me tired. If you know enough to come in when it rains, I guess you'll drop this argument."

The chairman did drop it, and that same night the carriage-cleaner received the official intimation of his promotion.

[Pg 144]

Cyrus Verd was young, fabulously wealthy, and unmarried. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man. He was not exactly handsome, but he had that look of power which, in the eyes of women, does just as well. When he first came over he was the hope of many noble matrons with unmarried daughters. He afterwards became their despair; and this was in consequence of his marriage with Anna Fokes—a woman who had neither wealth nor high position—she had been a governess. She was remarkably beautiful, but her beauty was somewhat discounted by the fact that she had—or was said to have—a trace of negro blood in her veins. When this marriage was announced, a certain noble matron said a cruel thing to Cyrus Verd. She congratulated him sardonically on having no racial prejudices.

"I shall remember your kind words, countess," he said pleasantly.

Within a year the countess was a ruined woman. Evidence came to her husband's knowledge which led him to divorce her. This terrible fall was closely followed by the loss of a part of her private income. She was left without a friend in the world and with much reduced means—a disgraced woman. There were some who said that Cyrus Verd had "remembered those kind words"; but if he was responsible for her exposure and ruin he was careful not to let any evidence of his actions appear. [Pg 145]

It was seven years after his marriage that, as the *Times* obituary states, he gave up almost the whole of his property. He prepared a long list of relations and friends of himself and of his wife, and of certain charitable and religious institutions in which they were interested. He reserved for himself an annual income of five hundred pounds only, which to a man who had lived as a millionaire for years would be abject poverty. The remainder was divided among these relations, friends and institutions, and made over to them by deed of gift. Of course, many people said that he was mad. If he was, his wife was mad also, for the step that he took was planned by him with her, and she fully agreed to it.

Personally, I do not think he was mad. I had expected him to take that step, and I think I could produce evidence that in a private letter I actually foretold it. For it happened by chance that I came upon him when he was in the enjoyment of what he called his annual holiday, and it was significant.

It was in an out-of-the-way Welsh village, one year before his marriage. I was stopping there because it was out of the way chiefly—I had some work to do. Cyrus Verd was there in a caravan, and he was masquerading. He was "H. Jackson, photographer," a travelling photographer in a very small way of business, with show-cases of fly-blown photographs of posed rustics affixed to [Pg 146]

the outside of his caravan. He wore a shabby serge suit, much stained with chemicals, and a soft felt hat. He had not attempted to disguise his face; he had never allowed any portrait of himself to appear in any illustrated paper, shop window, or public gallery, and probably considered himself safe from recognition. But I had once been in the same drawing-room with Cyrus Verd, and he had been pointed out to me. He was not a man who could easily be forgotten. I never had the least doubt that the shabby man who stood touting for custom outside that caravan was Cyrus Verd.

I allowed him to photograph me. I remember that the price was seven shillings and sixpence for a dozen, and that he bothered me to take two dozen for fourteen shillings.

"No thanks, Mr Verd," I said.

He seemed to reflect for a moment, and then he asked me how I knew. I told him where I met him.

"It's my only enjoyment," he said. "You won't spoil it—everybody thinks I'm yachting."

"I won't spoil it," I said. "You might enjoy it always if you cared so much about it."

"No, I couldn't. Thank you. I am obliged to you."

"All right," I said. "Good-morning," and I moved off. He called me back again.

"You'll excuse me," he said, "but you've not paid for those photographs." [Pg 147]

"You haven't printed them yet."

"My rule is that payment must be made at the time of sitting."

"Well, I won't pay for a thing until I get it."

We squabbled about it, and finally came to a compromise. Then rather abruptly he asked me to come to supper with him that night.

"And I warn you," he said, "that I live solely on what I make by this photographic business."

Of course I went. We had supper in the caravan. It consisted of chops and potatoes, which Cyrus Verd cooked. He cooked better than he photographed. We drank beer, which Verd had fetched from the public-house in a jug. He had no servant with him, and did everything for himself. I jeered at him gently all through supper.

"It's very pretty," I said, "but it is play-acting. It's not genuine."

"It is absolutely genuine. I tell you that I love simplicity. Had I my choice, I would always go on like this, and I like the work too. In this little village I've already picked up enough orders to keep me busy for a week. Every year I have a month of this, and I look forward to it as I look forward to nothing else."

"What?" I said. "Do you think that this sort of thing proves that you love simplicity? It proves the absolute contrary—that you love variety. No one is compelled to live the life of a rich man against his will. If you live that life for eleven months in the year, and the life of a poor man for one month, you like to be rich eleven times as much as you like to be poor." [Pg 148]

"What you say," he said, "sounds plausible. But you don't know the circumstances. I am sorry I cannot offer you a cigar. 'H. Jackson, photographer,' cannot afford to smoke cigars."

"I have my own case here," I said.

I selected a cigar, lit it, put the case back in my pocket, and watched Cyrus Verd. The fragrance reached him. He grew uneasy. He rose, and began to put the supper things away in silence.

"Shall I help you?" I asked.

"No!" he said snappishly. He held out for about five minutes, and then said, "Give me one of those cigars."

He opened the case with trembling hands, and took no notice of my amusement at first. When his cigar was lit, and the first sigh of satisfaction was over, he appeared aggrieved, and asked me what I was laughing at.

"Go back and be a millionaire," I said. "You dress this part well, and"—glancing round the caravan—"it's very correctly staged; but you make the feeblest H. Jackson, peripatetic photographer, that ever disgraced the British drama."

"Listen," he said eagerly. "H. Jackson is a poor man. As a rule he smokes cheap shag in a clay. A gentleman comes along and offers him a cigar. H. Jackson jumps at the treat, of course. Where's the inconsistency?" [Pg 149]

"I didn't offer you a cigar. You asked for it. Cyrus Verd could do that, but H. Jackson could not."

"I've half a mind to pitch your beastly cigar out of the window!"

But he did not. He smoked that, and others, and talked delightfully. He had a fine sense of humour, and was willing enough to laugh at himself as a millionaire; but in the character of H.

Jackson he had an ardent belief in himself and a strong desire to be taken seriously.

After that, for a week, we always spent the evenings together. Gradually I guessed at the "circumstances" to which he had alluded. Near to the village was the country seat of a baronet, and Anna Fokes was governess to his children, and Cyrus Verd was in love with Anna Fokes. He had met her in the same place a year before. She and I knew who he really was; but no one else in the village did. Her method of procedure was simple. On the arrival of H. Jackson she took the baronet's children to be photographed; afterwards she called every day to see if the photographs were finished. He was, in fact, engaged to her before the night on which I first had supper with him. [Pg 150]

A week after my return to town I got a note from Cyrus Verd, asking me to dine with him and "assist at the funeral of H. Jackson." I accepted. We were alone, and the dinner was ridiculously magnificent. I congratulated him on his engagement, which that morning had been made public. He seemed in the best of spirits. After dinner he said:

"I am going to explain the death of H. Jackson. Money has power, and the novelty of possession is attractive. But any other kind of power is better worth while, and the novelty ceases."

"Also," I observed, "time flies, and one must not judge by appearances."

"Yes, I quite understand what you would imply. I am talking platitudes. I guess, if the platitude happens to be the truth that doesn't matter. The actual enjoyment to be obtained from money must soon go, and can only be renewed in the enjoyment of another. I marry a poor woman who has worked in a subservient position; in her enjoyment I shall enjoy again. Wealth, and the power it gives, will be so new and attractive to her that I may safely calculate on a fair period of very decent second-hand enjoyment; consequently, H. Jackson may die."

"Wait," I said, "your wife's enjoyment will cease in the end, and yours with it. What then?"

"Some women have a special gift for enjoying wealth for ever," he said meditatively. "But you are right; Miss Fokes has not that gift. Then—then—there will be a revival of H. Jackson, or something very like it, perhaps in a less crude form." [Pg 151]

This practically ended my acquaintance with Cyrus Verd. At first I still saw him occasionally, but I could not afford to know millionaires, and told him so. Afterwards, at the time when he renounced his wealth, I was away from England.

I can see, of course, that a practised author might make something of a character—a consistent whole—out of Cyrus Verd. I only give notes of what came to my knowledge, and confess that I have not the imagination requisite to connect them, supplement them, and give them that air of probability which is always found in the best fiction, and so seldom in real life.

[Pg 152]

THE FOUR-FINGERED HAND

Charles Yarrow held fours, but as he had come up against Brackley's straight flush they only did him harm, leading him to remark—by no means for the first time—that it did not matter what cards one held, but only when one held them. "I get out here," he remarked, with resignation. No one else seemed to care for further play. The two other men left at once, and shortly afterwards Yarrow and Brackley sauntered out of the club together.

"The night's young," said Brackley; "if you're doing nothing you may as well come round to me."

"Thanks, I will. I'll talk, or smoke, or go so far as to drink; but I don't play poker. It's not my night."

"I didn't know," said Brackley, "that you had any superstitions."

"Haven't. I've only noticed that, as a rule, my luck goes in runs, and that a good run or a bad run usually lasts the length of a night's play. There is probably some simple reason for it, if I were enough of a mathematician to worry it out. In luck as distinct from arithmetic I have no belief at all." [Pg 153]

"I wish you could bring me to that happy condition. The hard-headed man of the world, without a superstition or a belief of any kind, has the best time of it."

They reached Brackley's chambers, lit pipes, and mixed drinks. Yarrow stretched himself in a lounge chair, and took up the subject again, speaking lazily and meditatively. He was a man of thirty-eight, with a clean-shaven face; he looked, as indeed he was, travelled and experienced.

"I don't read any books," he remarked, "but I've been twice round the world, and am just about to leave England again. I've been alive for thirty-eight years, and during most of them I have been living. Consequently, I've formed opinions, and one of my opinions is that it is better to dispense

with superfluous luggage. Prejudices, superstitions, beliefs of any kind that are not capable of easy and immediate proof are superfluous luggage; one goes more easily without them. You implied just now that you had a certain amount of this superfluous luggage, Brackley. What form does it take? Do you turn your chair?—are you afraid of thirteen at dinner?"

"No, nothing of that sort. I'll tell you about it. You've heard of my grandfather—who made the money?" [Pg 154]

"Heard of him? Had him rubbed into me in my childhood. He's in Smiles or one of those books, isn't he? Started life as a navvy, educated himself, invented things, made a fortune, gave vast sums in charity."

"That is the man. Well, he lived to be a fair age, but he was dead before I was born. What I know of him I know from my father, and some of it is not included in those improving books for the young. For instance, there is no mention in the printed biography of his curious belief in the four-fingered hand. His belief was that from time to time he saw a phantom hand. Sometimes it appeared to him in the daytime, and sometimes at night. It was a right hand with the second finger missing. He always regarded the appearance of the hand as a warning. It meant, he supposed, that he was to stop anything on which he was engaged; if he was about to let a house, buy a horse, go a journey, or whatever it was, he stopped if he saw the four-fingered hand."

"Now, look here," said Yarrow, "we'll examine this thing rationally. Can you quote one special instance in which your grandfather saw this maimed hand, broke off a particular project, and found himself benefited?" [Pg 155]

"No. In telling my father about it he spoke quite generally."

"Oh, yes," said Yarrow, drily. "The people who see these things do speak quite generally as a rule."

"But wait a moment. This vision of the four-fingered hand appears to have been hereditary. My father also saw it from time to time. And here I can give you the special instances. Do you remember the Crewe disaster some years ago? Well, my father had intended to travel by the train that was wrecked. Just as he was getting into the carriage he saw the four-fingered hand. He at once got out and postponed his journey until later in the day. Another occasion was two months before the failure of Varings'. My father banked there. As a rule he kept a comparatively small balance at the bank, but on this occasion he had just realised an investment, and was about to place the result—six thousand pounds—in the bank, pending re-investment. He was on the point of sending off his confidential clerk with the money, when once more he saw the four-fingered hand. Now at that time Varings' was considered to be as safe as a church. Possibly a few people with special means of information may have had some slight suspicion at the time, but my father certainly had none. He had always banked with Varings, as his father had done before him. However, his faith in the warning hand was so great that instead of paying in the six thousand he withdrew his balance that day. Is that good enough for you?" [Pg 156]

"Not entirely. Mind, I don't dispute your facts, but I doubt if it requires the supernatural to explain them. You say that the vision appears to be hereditary. Does that mean that you yourself have ever seen it?"

"I have seen it once."

"When?"

"I saw it to-night." Brackley spoke like a man suppressing some strong excitement. "It was just as you got up from the card-table after losing on your fours. I was on the point of urging you and the other two men to go on playing. I saw the hand distinctly. It seemed to be floating in the air about a couple of yards away from me. It was a small white hand, like a lady's hand, cut short off at the wrist. For a second it moved slowly towards me, and then vanished. Nothing would have induced me to go on playing poker to-night."

"You are—excuse me for mentioning it—not in the least degree under the influence of drink. Further, you are by habit an almost absurdly temperate man. I mention these things because they have to be taken into consideration. They show that you were not at any rate the victim of a common and disreputable form of illusion. But what service has the hand done you? We play a regular point at the club. We are not the excited gamblers of fiction. We don't increase the points, and we never play after one in the morning. At the moment when the hand appeared to you, how much had you won?" [Pg 157]

"Twenty-five pounds—an exceptionally large amount."

"Very well. You're a careful player. You play best when your luck's worst. We stopped play at half-past eleven. If we had gone on playing till one, and your luck had been of the worst possible description all the time, we will say that you might have lost that twenty-five and twenty-five more. To me it is inconceivable, but with the worst luck and the worst play it is perhaps possible. Now then, do you mean to tell me that the loss of twenty-five pounds is a matter of such importance to a man with your income as to require a supernatural intervention to prevent you from losing it?"

"Of course it isn't."

"Well, then, the four-fingered hand has not accomplished its mission. It has not saved you from anything. It might even have been inconvenient. If you had been playing with strangers and winning, and they had wished to go on playing, you could hardly have refused. Of course, it did not matter with us—we play with you constantly, and can have our revenge at any time. The four-fingered hand is proved in this instance to have been useless and inept. Therefore, I am inclined [Pg 158] to believe that the appearances when it really did some good were coincidences. Doubtless your grandfather and father and yourself have seen the hand, but surely that may be due to some slight hereditary defect in the seeing apparatus, which, under certain conditions, say, of the light and of your own health creates the illusion. The four-fingered hand is natural and not supernatural, subjective and not objective."

"It sounds plausible," remarked Brackley. He got up, crossed the room, and began to open the card-table. "Practical tests are always the most satisfactory, and we can soon have a practical test." As he put the candles on the table he started a little and nearly dropped one of them. He laughed drily. "I saw the four-fingered hand again just then," he said. "But no matter—come—let us play."

"Oh, the two game isn't funny enough."

"Then I'll fetch up Blake from downstairs; you know him. He never goes to bed, and he plays the game."

Blake, who was a youngish man, had chambers downstairs. Brackley easily persuaded him to join the party. It was decided that they should play for exactly an hour. It was a poor game; the cards ran low, and there was very little betting. At the end of the hour Brackley had lost a sovereign, [Pg 159] and Yarrow had lost five pounds.

"I don't like to get up a winner, like this," said Blake. "Let's go on."

But Yarrow was not to be persuaded. He said that he was going off to bed. No allusion to the four-fingered hand was made in speaking in the presence of Blake, but Yarrow's smile of conscious superiority had its meaning for Brackley. It meant that Yarrow had overthrown a superstition, and was consequently pleased with himself. After a few minutes' chat Yarrow and Blake said good-night to Brackley, and went downstairs together.

Just as they reached the ground-floor they heard, from far up the staircase, a short cry, followed a moment afterwards by the sound of a heavy fall.

"What's that?" Blake exclaimed.

"I'm just going to see," said Yarrow, quietly. "It seemed to me to come from Brackley's rooms. Let's go up again."

They hurried up the staircase and knocked at Brackley's door. There was no answer. The whole place was absolutely silent. The door was ajar; Yarrow pushed it open, and the two men went in.

The candles on the card-table were still burning. At some distance from them, in a dark corner of the room, lay Brackley, face downwards, with one arm folded under him and the other stretched [Pg 160] wide.

Blake stood in the doorway. Yarrow went quickly over to Brackley, and turned the body partially over.

"What is it?" asked Blake, excitedly. "Is the man ill? Has he fainted?"

"Run downstairs," said Yarrow, curtly. "Rouse the porter and get a doctor at once."

The moment Blake had gone, Yarrow took a candle from the card-table, and by the light of it examined once more the body of the dead man. On the throat there was the imprint of a hand—a right hand with the second finger missing. The marks, which were crimson at first, grew gradually fainter.

Some years afterwards, in Yarrow's presence, a man happened to tell some story of a warning apparition that he himself had investigated.

"And do you believe that?" Yarrow asked.

"The evidence that the apparition was seen—and seen by more than one person—seems to me fairly conclusive in this case."

"That is all very well. I will grant you the apparition if you like. But why speak of it as a warning? If such appearances take place, it still seems to me absurd and disproportionate to suppose that they do so in order to warn us, or help us, or hinder us, or anything of the kind. They appear for [Pg 161] their own unfathomable reasons only. If they seem to forbid one thing or command another, that also is for their own purpose. I have an experience of my own which would tend to show that."

THE TOWER

[Pg 162]

In the billiard-room of the Cabinet Club, shortly after midnight, two men had just finished a game. A third had been watching it from the lounge at the end of the room. The winner put up his cue, slipped on his coat, and with a brief "Good-night" passed out of the room. He was tall, dark, clean-shaven and foreign in appearance. It would not have been easy to guess his nationality, but he did not look English.

The loser, a fair-haired boy of twenty-five, came over to the lounge and dropped down by the side of the elderly man who had been watching the billiards.

"Silly game, ain't it, doctor?" he said cheerfully. The doctor smiled.

"Yes," he said, "Vyse is a bit too hot for you, Bill."

"A bit too hot for anything," said the boy. "He never takes any trouble; he never hesitates; he never thinks; he never takes an easy shot when there's a brilliant one to be pulled off. It's almost uncanny."

"Ah," said the doctor, reflectively, "it's a queer thing. You're the third man whom I have heard say that about Vyse within the last week."

[Pg 163]

"I believe he's quite all right—good sort of chap, you know. He's frightfully clever too—speaks a lot of beastly difficult Oriental languages—does well at any game he takes up."

"Yes," said the doctor, "he is clever; and he is also a fool."

"What do you mean? He's eccentric, of course. Fancy his buying that rotten tower—a sweet place to spend Christmas in all alone, I don't think."

"Why does he say he's going there?"

"Says he hates the conventional Christmas, and wants to be out of it; says also that he wants to shoot duck."

"That won't do," said the doctor. "He may hate the conventional Christmas. He may, and he probably will, shoot duck. But that's not his reason for going there."

"Then what is it?" asked the boy.

"Nothing that would interest you much, Bill. Vyse is one of the chaps that want to know too much. He's playing about in a way that every medical man knows to be a rotten, dangerous way. Mind, he may get at something; if the stories are true he has already got at a good deal. I believe it is possible for a man to develop in himself certain powers at a certain price."

"What's the price?"

"Insanity, as often as not. Here, let's talk about something pleasanter. Where are you yourself going this Christmas, by the way?"

[Pg 164]

"My sister has taken compassion upon this lone bachelor. And you?"

"I shall be out of England," said the doctor. "Cairo, probably."

The two men passed out into the hall of the club.

"Has Mr Vyse gone yet?" the boy asked the porter.

"Not yet, Sir William. Mr Vyse is changing in one of the dressing-rooms. His car is outside."

The two men passed the car in the street, and noticed the luggage in the tonneau. The driver, in his long leather coat, stood motionless beside it, waiting for his master. The powerful headlight raked the dusk of the street; you could see the paint on a tired woman's cheek as she passed through it on her way home at last.

"See his game?" said Bill.

"Of course," said the doctor. "He's off to the marshes and that blessed tower of his to-night."

"Well, I don't envy him—holy sort of amusement it must be driving all that way on a cold night like this. I wonder if the beggar ever goes to sleep at all?"

They had reached Bill's chambers in Jermyn Street.

"You must come in and have a drink," said Bill.

[Pg 165]

"Don't think so, thanks," said the doctor; "it's late, you know."

"You'd better," said Bill, and the doctor followed him in.

A letter and a telegram were lying on the table in the diminutive hall. The letter had been sent by messenger, and was addressed to Sir William Orlsey, Bart., in a remarkably small hand-writing. Bill picked it up, and thrust it into his pocket at once, unopened. He took the telegram with him into the room where the drinks had been put out, and opened it as he sipped his whisky-and-soda.

"Great Scot!" he exclaimed.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said the doctor.

"I hope not. I suppose all children have got to have the measles some time or another; but it's a bit unlucky that my sister's three should all go down with it just now. That does for her house-party at Christmas, of course."

A few minutes later, when the doctor had gone, Bill took the letter from his pocket and tore it open. A cheque fell from the envelope and fluttered to the ground. The letter ran as follows:

> "DEAR BILL,—I could not talk to you to-night, as the doctor, who happens to disapprove of me, was in the billiard-room. Of course, I can let you have the hundred you want, and enclose it herewith with the utmost pleasure. The time you mention for repayment would suit me all right, and so would any other time. Suit your own convenience entirely. [Pg 166]
>
> "I have a favour to ask of you. I know you are intending to go down to the Leylands' for Christmas. I think you will be prevented from doing so. If that is the case, and you have no better engagement, would you hold yourself at my disposal for a week? It is just possible that I may want a man like you pretty badly. There ought to be plenty of duck this weather, but I don't know that I can offer any other attraction.—Very sincerely yours,
>
> "EDWARD VYSE."

Bill picked up the cheque, and thrust it into the drawer with a feeling of relief. It was a queer invitation, he thought—funnily worded, with the usual intimations of time and place missing. He switched off the electric lights and went into his bedroom. As he was undressing a thought struck him suddenly.

"How the deuce," he said aloud, "did he know that I should be prevented from going to Polly's place?" Then he looked round quickly. He thought that he had heard a faint laugh just behind him. No one was there, and Bill's nerves were good enough. In twenty minutes he was fast asleep. [Pg 167]

The cottage, built of grey stone, stood some thirty yards back from the road, from which it was screened by a shrubbery. It was an ordinary eight-roomed cottage, and it did well enough for Vyse and his servants and one guest—if Vyse happened to want a guest. There was a pleasant little walled garden of a couple of acres behind the cottage. Through a doorway in the further wall one passed into a stunted and dismal plantation, and in the middle of this rose the tower, far higher than any of the trees that surrounded it.

Sir William Orlsey had arrived just in time to change before dinner. Talk at dinner had been of indifferent subjects—the queer characters of the village and the chances of sport on the morrow. Bill had mentioned the tower, and his host had hastened to talk of other things. But now that dinner was over, and the man who had waited on them had left the room, Vyse of his own accord returned to the subject.

"Danvers is a superstitious ass," he observed, "and he's in quite enough of a funk about that tower as it is; that's why I wouldn't give you the story of it while he was in the room. According to the village tradition, a witch was burned on the site where the tower now stands, and she declared that where she burned the devil should have his house. The lord of the manor at that [Pg 168] time, hearing what the old lady had said, and wishing to discourage house-building on that particular site, had it covered with a plantation, and made it a condition of his will that this plantation should be kept up."

Bill lit a large cigar. "Looks like checkmate," he said. "However, seeing that the tower is actually there—"

"Quite so. This man's son came no end of a cropper, and the property changed hands several times. It was divided and sub-divided. I, for instance, only own about twenty acres of it. Presently there came along a scientific old gentleman and bought the piece that I now have. Whether he knew of the story, or whether he didn't, I cannot say, but he set to work to build the tower that is now standing in the middle of the plantation. He may have intended it as an observatory. He got the stone for it on the spot from his own quarry, but he had to import his labour, as the people in these parts didn't think the work healthy. Then one fine morning before the tower was finished they found the old gentleman at the bottom of his quarry with his neck broken."

"So," said Bill, "they say of course that the tower is haunted. What is it that they think they see?"

"Nothing. You can't see it. But there are people who think they have touched it and have heard [Pg 169] it."

"Rot, ain't it?"

"I don't know exactly. You see, I happen to be one of those people."

"Then, if you think so, there's something in it. This is interesting. I say, can't we go across there now?"

"Certainly, if you like. Sure you won't have any more wine? Come along, then."

The two men slipped on their coats and caps. Vyse carried a lighted stable-lantern. It was a frosty moonlit night, and the path was crisp and hard beneath their feet. As Vyse slid back the bolts of the gate in the garden wall, Bill said suddenly, "By the way, Vyse, how did you know that I shouldn't be at the Leylands' this Christmas? I told you I was going there."

"I don't know. I had a feeling that you were going to be with me. It might have been wrong. Anyhow, I'm very glad you're here. You are just exactly the man I want. We've only a few steps to go now. This path is ours. That cart-track leads away to the quarry where the scientific gentleman took the short cut to further knowledge. And here is the door of the tower."

They walked round the tower before entering. The night was so still that, unconsciously, they spoke in lowered voices and trod as softly as possible. The lock of the heavy door groaned and [Pg 170] screeched as the key turned. The light of the lantern fell now on the white sand of the floor and on a broken spiral staircase on the further side. Far up above one saw a tangle of beams and the stars beyond them. Bill heard Vyse saying that it was left like that after the death in the quarry.

"It's a good solid bit of masonry," said Bill, "but it ain't a cheerful spot exactly. And, by Jove! it smells like a menagerie."

"It does," said Vyse, who was examining the sand on the floor.

Bill also looked down at the prints in the sand. "Some dog's been in here."

"No," said Vyse, thoughtfully. "Dogs won't come in here, and you can't make them. Also, there were no marks on the sand when I left the place and locked the door this afternoon. Queer, isn't it?"

"But the thing's a blank impossibility. Unless, of course, we are to suppose that—"

He did not finish his sentence, and, if he had finished it, it would not have been audible. A chorus of grunting, growling and squealing broke out almost from under his feet, and he sprang backwards. It lasted for a few seconds, and then died slowly away.

"Did you hear that?" Vyse asked quietly. [Pg 171]

"I should rather think so."

"Good; then it was not subjective. What was it?"

"Only one kind of beast makes that row. Pigs, of course—a whole drove of them. It sounded as if they were in here, close to us. But as they obviously are not, they must be outside."

"But they are not outside," said Vyse. "Come and see."

They hunted the plantation through and through with no result, and then locked the tower door and went back to the cottage. Bill said very little. He was not capable of much self-analysis, but he was conscious of a sudden dislike of Vyse. He was angry that he had ever put himself under an obligation to this man. He had wanted the money for a gambling debt, and he had already repaid it. Now he saw Vyse in the light of a man with whom one should have no dealings, and the last man from whom one should accept a kindness. The strange experience that he had just been through filled him with loathing far more than with fear or wonder. There was something unclean and diabolical about the whole thing that made a decent man reluctant to question or to investigate. The filthy smell of the brutes seemed still to linger in his nostrils. He was determined that on no account would he enter the tower again, and that as soon as he could find a decent excuse he would leave the place altogether. [Pg 172]

A little later, as he sat before the log fire and filled his pipe, he turned to his host with a sudden question: "I say, Vyse, why did you want me to come down here? What's the meaning of it all?"

"My dear fellow," said Vyse, "I wanted you for the pleasure of your society. Now, don't get impatient. I also wanted you because you are the most normal man I know. Your confirmation of my experiences in the tower is most valuable to me. Also, you have good nerves, and, if you will forgive me for saying so, no imagination. I may want help that only a man with good nerves would be able to give."

"Why don't you leave the thing alone? It's too beastly."

Vyse laughed. "I'm afraid my hobby bores you. We won't talk about it. After all, there's no reason why you should help me?"

"Tell me just what it is that you wanted."

"I wanted you if you heard this whistle"—he took an ordinary police-whistle down from the mantelpiece—"any time to-night or to-morrow night, to come over to the tower at once and bring a revolver with you. The whistle would be a sign that I was in a tight place—that my life, in fact, was in danger. You see, we are dealing here with something preternatural, but it is also something material; in addition to other risks, one risks ordinary physical destruction. However, I [Pg 173] could see that you were repelled by the sight and the sound of these beasts, whatever they may

be; and I can tell you from my own experience that the touch of them is even worse. There is no reason why you should bother yourself any further about the thing."

"You can take the whistle with you," said Bill. "If I hear it I will come."

"Thanks," said Vyse, and immediately changed the subject. He did not say why he was spending the night in the tower, or what it was he proposed to do there.

It was three in the morning when Bill was suddenly startled out of his sleep. He heard the whistle being blown repeatedly. He hurried on some clothes and dashed down into the hall, where his lantern and revolver lay all ready for him. He ran along the garden path and through the door in the wall until he got to the tower. The sound of the whistle had ceased now, and everything was horribly still. The door of the tower stood wide open, and without hesitation Bill entered, holding his lantern high.

The tower was absolutely empty. Not a sound was to be heard. Bill called Vyse by name twice loudly, and then again the awful silence spread over the place.

Then, as if guided by some unseen hand, he took the track that led to the quarry, well knowing what he would find at the bottom of it. [Pg 174]

The jury assigned the death of Vyse to an accident, and said that the quarry should be fenced in. They had no explanation to offer of the mutilation of the face, as if by the teeth of some savage beast.

[Pg 175]

THE FUTILITY OF WILLIAM PENARDEN

"Let the great book of the world be your principal study."

CHESTERFIELD.

General Penarden, C.B., married late in life, and had one son, who was intended by General Penarden to follow his father's profession, to be V.C., and D.S.O., and to be a bright and shining light. As the intentions of destiny did not precisely agree with the intentions of General Penarden, it is, perhaps, just as well that the old man died when William, his son, was a boy of six. He was thus saved some disappointment.

But even in those brief years he was not saved all disappointment. He made, grimly, a list of the different things of which the child was frightened, and it was a very long list. Many, of course, were things of which any child is frightened; many others came into a doubtful category; the fear would have been excusable, perhaps, in a girl. There was left a residue which was all wrong and quite inexplicable. The General, though disappointed, did not despair. He quoted instances of brave men who had had a timid childhood. His optimistic programme was that his son should have it all knocked out of him by the paternal hand, by the severe discipline of a public school, and by experience of dangers. Familiarity of them would breed contempt, and all would yet be well. On the day before his death from apoplexy he imagined to himself despatches in which his son's name figured brilliantly. [Pg 176]

The General had married a woman much younger than himself. She was beautiful and she was bored. She came of a decaying race. The brilliant vices and wild extravagances of her eighteenth-century forefathers had ended with the usual and prosaic sequel of tainted blood and fallen fortunes. Possibly there were few things that bored this tired London woman more than her son William. She remembered to talk about him a little to her friends; she had the best possible care taken of him by the best possible servants; she gave him expensive presents on the days appointed. But she did not want to be with him very much. When she was with him she either spoiled him or bullied him, and more often she bullied him. At the age of twelve, William, at a preparatory school which he hated, was bidden to write an essay on the subject of war. He wrote childishly, and with many faults of punctuation and spelling, to the effect that war was the wickedest thing in the world, and that a soldier's profession was the most inhuman and abominable. By chance the essay came into his mother's way, and she laughed till she cried over it. He was not a pretty boy, and he could never be admirable, but there seemed to be some chance that he might, at least, be quaint. At the age of fourteen he made to his mother a profound observation, to wit, that though for many long years past he himself had been getting older and older, she had never changed one little bit. For this she kissed him; he might have found her in a mood when she would have struck him for it. [Pg 177]

It was quite clear by this time that he was not to be a soldier. The weakness of his physique supported the firmness of his wishes in this respect. He could have never passed the doctor. At

his public school, which he hated even more than the preparatory school, medical certificates freed him to some extent from compulsory games. He was a muff at all games, and he was no great scholar; yet he was less unpopular at school than might have been expected. He had no pretensions whatever, and he was very obliging. He would do anything for anybody. He had the fatal gift of imagination, and a few eccentricities that amused other boys. Boys treat with good humour that with which they are amused. There was, for instance, a certain short cut, a footpath across some fields, in common use by the boys, which William Penarden resolutely refused to take. He gave no reasons, but he said that he could not take that path. So he went all the way round, and was frequently late, and from that came trouble. But he remained obstinate. It was [Pg 178] one of the things that pleased the other boys. "Mad as a hatter," they would say, and quote his dislike of the field-path in proof.

It was during his first term at Cambridge that he heard from his mother that she intended to marry again. She had not aged at all, except to the most careful observer and to her own maid, and even her own maid did not know everything. It was, perhaps, rather remarkable that she had not re-married before, but she had always preferred the admiration of the many to the devotion of one, and, by the terms of the late General's will, her re-marriage made her son much richer and herself much poorer. It may have occurred to her that this prolonged struggle with age could not be carried on indefinitely. As for the money, she was marrying a wealthy baronet, and knew how to take care of herself. It was true that he was a sportsman who hated London, and that she would have to live for the most part in the country. But the things which are supposed to amuse had bored her so long that she had begun to wonder if she could not be amused by the things that are supposed to bore. Then there was always the resource of foreign travel. She knew a doctor who could generally be counted upon to order her to the place to which she wished to go.

William was not much surprised by the news, and he wrote the kindest of letters to his mother. [Pg 179] He was really an extremely kind young man. He had already met many characters of doubtful probity. None of them had ever asked him to lend money; he had always anticipated them by the offer of a loan. On the occasions when his mother got to hear of this she had been unfailingly very, very mad with him. At present, William was quite ready to accept the situation, but the situation was not quite ready to accept William. He was not much of a sportsman, and his new father said candidly that he could see nothing in the boy. Lady Quyne, formerly Mrs Penarden, became suddenly serious and flagrantly moral on the subject of William's career. She spelt career with a capital letter in her letters to him; she pronounced it in italics in her talk. It was true that it was not necessary for him to make an income, but no good ever came of idleness. She had, by the way, made an exhaustive trial of it herself for the last twenty years, and was, therefore, in a position to speak. She suggested politics and the Diplomatic Service; he had no taste for either. Above all, she emphasised the bad effect which a prolonged homelife had upon a young man. Before he took his degree—it was a pass degree—he had learned to interpret this correctly, and spent very little of his vacations at home. He had made friends who found him amiable and liked him to visit them occasionally. Sometimes he travelled. When he was at home he did not see very [Pg 180] much of his mother. There were always other visitors staying in the house. Sir Charles Quyne was pessimistic on the subject of William. "He can play the piano a bit," he said, "and he can drive the car. And there is not one other solitary damned thing that he can do. I wish to goodness he would get married."

William did not get married, but he kept out of the way, which, after all, was almost as good. Further, to please his mother, he said that he proposed ultimately to become a candidate for Parliament. In the meantime, he would like to devote two or three years to serious preparation. Lady Quyne observed that he could cram up all that a Member needed to know in two or three weeks, but did not remonstrate further. William took a riverside cottage and a small flat in London. He went from one to the other as the mood took him, and as a rule made the journey on his motor-car. He liked driving the car, but it was rather a fearful pleasure. He was, perhaps, the most cautious driver extant, and the secret amusement of his hireling chauffeur. When William went from his cottage to his flat in town, he made the chauffeur take the wheel when they approached London. William did not like driving through thick traffic at any time, and did not like driving by night at all. [Pg 181]

One Saturday night in June, Dolling, the chauffeur, received an unexpected visit from a long-absent brother. The visitor arrived just at the moment when he and his master were about to start for London in the car. Timidity and amiability struggled in the breast of William Penarden, and amiability won.

"I shan't want you, Dolling," he said, "I can manage it all right by myself."

Mr Dolling was sure that it was very kind of him. It was a bright moonlight night, with deep, bothering shadows.

William started slowly. He already felt nervous. How would it be if he gave up the London idea altogether? He could telegraph in the morning to the friend whom he was to have met. He turned off from the London road, where a circuit of two or three miles would bring him back to his cottage again. There was a dark stretch of road here, trees on either side almost meeting overhead. Beyond, the road lay white and open. William went into his third speed as he emerged from the darkness. At that moment a black figure shot out from the hedge into the road right across the way of the car. In a moment or two William had jammed on the brakes, and the car stood still, with the engines racing. Had he touched the man or not? It seemed to him to be a long while before he could force himself to look round and see. When he did so, he saw the black [Pg 182]

figure lying motionless on the road in the bright moonlight.

"Are you hurt?" William called hoarsely. All was silent. With great care William turned his car round in the road and crawled up alongside. He could see now that it was the figure of a man, raggedly dressed, absolutely motionless. The hat had fallen off, and the moonlight made the thick, white hair brilliant.

"Are you hurt?" William asked again. He stared hard to see if he could detect the slightest movement. There was none. He listened intently, stopping his engines. The whole night seemed to him full of the silence of the dead.

He knew perfectly well what he ought to do, but sheer panic had hold of him. He touched the switch and his engines started again. For once in his life he drove recklessly, and he drove to London. There would be ample evidence that he had been intending to go to London when he started, and there would be no reason why he should ever have taken his car on the road where the dead body would be found. No one had seen him; no suspicion could attach to him.

Long before he reached London, the drunken tramp, whom William supposed that he had killed, sat up. The car had never touched him. He had fallen in the road and had been slightly stunned. He rubbed his aged and disreputable head and grumbled to himself that this was what came of [Pg 183] those sanguinary motors. Then he walked home, kicked his wife, and slept the sleep of the just.

The price that William Penarden was to pay for his cowardice was heavy enough. He was never to know that he had not even touched the man. Coincidence was already busy to convince him that he had killed that man, and to keep the terror of it fresh in his mind for the remaining two years of his life.

He came back from London by train on Sunday afternoon. He told Dolling that he was ill, and that he did not feel up to driving the car. Dolling could fetch it back from the garage on Monday. Dolling looked remarkably serious. He did not know if his master had heard of it, but a terrible thing had happened not three miles away from them. A man had been found dead in the road on Saturday night, and it was supposed that he had been knocked down by a motor-car. It was not the London road; it was just where—

William Penarden stopped him abruptly and savagely. It was all true, then, and not the dream that he had hoped to find it.

Yes, it was true enough, but it was another man and another car. The hoary reprobate who had been dazzled by the head-lights of Penarden's car, and had stunned himself in his fall, was now no worse than he usually was after his usual Saturday night. [Pg 184]

For many weeks Penarden carefully avoided the newspapers. He was afraid of what he would find there. After that came a feeling of security, but never a moment's peace. That brilliant white hair in the moonlight wove itself into the fabric of his dreams. That black figure lurched ever before his car, till Penarden had a nervous breakdown and gave up motoring. When he got a little better, the chief question in his mind was how long he could stand it, how long it would be before his mind gave way and in his ravings he let loose his secret. Morose, nervous, ill, he saw no one. For a long time he travelled. Change of scene was an opiate. It put the day of madness a little further off.

The poor man did his best. The political career was now definitely given up. Lady Quyne spoke with a sigh to the more intimate part of her circle of her son's incurable idleness. On his return to England he had yielded to archæology; it was a subject which had always interested him, and he looked to it now to take his mind off. He journeyed from one cathedral city to another, asking erudite questions, making rubbings of brasses, and always haunted.

In the course of his wanderings in quest of the quaint he stopped at a provincial town, the normal serenity of which was in a state of temporary interruption owing to some reliability trials of [Pg 185] motors being held in its neighbourhood. Penarden drove to the hotel which the railway porter impressed upon him was the only one likely to have accommodation for such as himself, and asked for a room. The clerk announced mournfully that "only No. 54 was unoccupied, and—well—before offering it to the gentleman he had better see the manager."

That official saw the class of man he was dealing with, and regretted deeply that he had no other room. But the reliability trials were on, and his resources were strained to the uttermost. It was all that he had to offer, and it was on the top floor of an annexe, the decoration of which was not yet completed. The painters' step-ladders and planks still lingered in the corridor. The view from the window was obstructed by a mean building scarcely eight feet away. True, the mean building had been condemned and was to come down; and the decorations would be finished and the workmen would be out in a fortnight; but in the meantime—

Well, in the meantime, William Penarden did not care much in what room he failed to get to sleep, and he accepted the bedroom that was offered. He even managed to sleep in it, until in the early hours he was aroused by the waiter (in dress trousers and the jacket of his pyjamas), who told him that the building opposite was well alight, and that they hoped that the annexe would [Pg 186] not catch, the wind being favourable to them, but that Mr Penarden had better get down at once and bring his travelling bag with him.

"Right," said Penarden, and sent the waiter to wake up the others. Then he dressed quickly, and looked out of his window down to the alley beneath. The fire brigade had not yet arrived. Two policemen were doing their best to keep the narrow alley clear. An ugly old woman, in violent hysterics, was screaming, "They're up there!" and a man was trying to quiet her. Then Penarden gave a great sigh of relief, for here was the chance of expiation. He took the longest of the planks that the painters had left and ran it through his own window so that it dropped on a window-ledge of the burning house opposite. As a rule, he had no head at all for heights, but now he felt perfectly unperturbed. He did not attempt to walk along the plank, for he was not giving a circus exhibition, but he began to work himself along it slowly in a sitting position, taking great care not to jolt the end of it off the window-ledge opposite. An authoritative voice below shouted to him to go back. He went on. He reached the window opposite and flung it open. A volley of black and stifling smoke poured forth and he nearly fell. Then he climbed into the room, and the last that was seen of him was that he stood at the window, taking off his coat to put it over his head before [Pg 187] he could go further. He was not seen again alive.

And, as his mother, Lady Quyne, observed, it was all so absolutely futile. The people in the house had already got out, and he had let himself be guided by the hysterical raving of some chance woman in the crowd. So he annoyed her almost as much in death as he had done in life. But it is possible that his death, horrible though it was, was for him of an extreme happiness.

[Pg 188]

THE PATHOS OF THE COMMONPLACE

He was a middle-aged man when he first came to the town. He had taken an appointment as clerk to a firm of solicitors, and he was happy in that appointment, regarding it as a step upwards. He was small in stature and wild in manner. His eyes had a hesitating look in them, and he pressed his thin lips tightly together, as though to counterbalance his look of hesitation and make himself appear rather firm. He found himself furnished apartments in a house that was one of a row on the very outskirts of the great town. They were two rooms at the top of the house, small and shabbily furnished, looking out on a piece of waste land at the back. On this piece of waste land there was one large tree growing. At the time when he first took the rooms he was talkative and told the landlady all about himself.

"My name is Peters. You see, I've just got a step upwards rather, by being appointed clerk to Grantham & Flynders. Formerly, I used to keep the books for Flynders's cousin, who's a grocer in a small way at Melstowe—oh, quite a comparatively small way."

"Really now," said Mrs Marks, a good woman, but not always logical; "and then for this Flynders to give himself those airs—and his cousin no more than that! Ah! I've many a time said that half [Pg 189] the world doesn't know who the other half's relations are!"

"So it is!" replied Peters. "I may say—I think I may say—that I've done a good deal for Flynders's cousin. He's taken my advice more than once, notably in an extension of the counter-trade in effervescents during the hot weather, and he's found it pay him. Well, *he* knew that I could do a good deal better than I was doing. I'd taught myself things, you see. There was shorthand now. At Melstowe my shorthand was, if it's not to use too strong a term, going to rot, simply going to rot—in a grocery and general, there's no use for it. I pointed that all out to Flynders's cousin, and he—being good-natured and seeing what I was—got me this berth with this Flynders himself. So I left Melstowe, and I left Flynders's cousin—left him, thanks to me, doing to my certain knowledge some gross more in the lemonade than he had ever done in the past." Peters paused, and looked proud of himself. "Mind," he went on, rather weakly, "I'm telling you all this not from any—any desire to tell anyone anything, but because I may be giving up these rooms in two or three years, or even less. You see, I've taken one of those steps upwards that may lead to anything. In a post like mine you just work yourself up and work yourself up. Starting with what I may call family influence, and having rather a strong natural turn, I may be made managing clerk in no time; [Pg 190] then, perhaps, Flynders dies, and I'm took in. 'Grantham & Peters' wouldn't sound bad. Only then, of course, I shouldn't keep these rooms—I should be taking a house of my own."

Mrs Marks considered this, not unjustly, to be a little wild. But it was cheaper always to humour a lodger; and she mostly chose the cheapest. "Then you'd be getting married," she said.

"Under the circumstances I should ask Flynders's cousin's second daughter to—to—"

"To consider it," suggested the landlady.

"To *re*-consider it," said Peters, sadly and correctively. He had a nervous anxiety to get away from the subject. He glanced out of the window. "I call that a pleasant lookout," he said. "Being high up, and that sycamore touching the window nearly, it ain't unlike Zaccheus."

"That's no sycamore, Mr Peters. It's a plane."

"I don't know about such things. I ain't a talker as a rule. It may be that I'm a bit excited at entering on a new sp'ere, a sp'ere from which much may be hoped. Not for worlds would I have 'em know in the office that I've got ambitions—oh, no!"

The landlady moved to the door. "Will there be anything else now?"

"A little tea, if it's not too much trouble," said Peters. "I have a partiality for tea." [Pg 191]

"You shall have it," said Mrs Marks. She did a good deal with the manner and the tone of the voice. Peters vaguely understood that all this was exceptional, and must not occur again; he must not make a practice of taking up Mrs Marks's precious time by sheer garrulousness; and he must not get into the habit of ordering tea or anything else that he wanted—he must wait until it was brought to him spontaneously. He began to unpack his few belongings and put them away neatly. He had a picture—an engraving that he had purchased, ready framed, in Melstowe. It represented David playing before Saul. He hung it over the mantelpiece. Beneath stood a partly-decayed model of a Swiss mountain and châlet, protected by a glass case.

When everything was tidy Peters sat down and drank his tea, and thought about his ambitions.

Now, Mr Peters, as will have been gathered, was as ignorant as a child of the manner in which promotion takes place in a solicitor's office, and of the fact that he had no chance whatever. He was conscientious and patient, and could do mechanical work; he was quite regular. Some men can do a thing one day which they cannot do on the next, but Peters was never unexpected. He was invariable in his merits, and in his incompetence. With him Nature had drawn a line, and said, "Peters, you are never going beyond that." [Pg 192]

His disappointment dawned very slowly upon him. He found that a solicitor's office was not what he had supposed it to be. Neither Grantham nor Flynders was at all by way of being intimate with him; in fact, they rarely spoke to him, except to dictate a letter; it was the managing clerk who told him what to do, and he always did it as well as he could, and that was never very well, nor very badly. Sometimes he thought with regret of the nearly social terms upon which he had been with Flynders's cousin; Flynders's cousin had taken his advice about the lemonade. Now he was not on social terms with anybody. He was not good at making friends. He did not get on very well with the other clerks. They were not serious; they played practical jokes upon him, which he took, as a rule, with his accustomed mildness; once or twice he lost his temper, and then he was undignified but very funny.

His position was not in any danger. He was careful, methodical, punctual. It was only that his step upwards had been the last step that he was able to take in that direction. He had found his level. In the first few months of his appointment he had purchased a large law-book second hand. He picked that one because it was so very cheap, and it was so very cheap because it was also so very obsolete; but Peters did not know this. He studied his book, without entirely understanding it, by the light of an evil-smelling lamp in the long evenings. When his disappointment had finally [Pg 193] dawned upon him, he took the book back to the second-hand bookseller and tried to get him to purchase it again; but that was of no use. It had taken the second-hand man some years to sell that book once, and he did not feel inclined to recommence the struggle. So Peters put it up on a shelf and did his best to forget it. Now he read Mrs Marks's newspaper (she obliged him with the loan of it) in the evening. On one occasion another clerk lent him something described as a regular spicy novel. Peters read a few pages, but he did not like it, and gave it back.

He began to be sorry that on his first arrival he had been so confidential with his landlady; he had given her a false impression, and he must correct it. So one day he mentioned to her that he had relinquished the notion of a partnership.

"Ah, yes," she said. She had quite forgotten about it, but one must verbally humour lodgers. Besides, she had an apposite observation to make. "I've often remarked," she said, "that if we *could* all have everything we wanted, there wouldn't be enough to go round."

Peters felt a little lonely. One day was very much like another. He always went to bed at the same time, and always rose at the same time. His life seemed to be going on by machinery with himself left out of it. He had a fancy that it was the plane tree which woke him in the morning; its boughs [Pg 194] touched lightly against his window sometimes when the wind blew. He was rather attached to that tree. In the summer it looked so cool and pleasant. There was a door at the back of the house, leading on to that piece of waste land, and he would have liked to have gone outside and sat under the tree in the hot weather. But he doubted if he had any right to use that back door. He had a right to his two rooms and to the front door and staircase which led to them; but he was doubtful about the back door. On one or two occasions he had inadvertently exceeded his rights, and Mrs Marks had seemed to him rather put out. As a matter of fact, Mrs Marks was very well satisfied with him. He was a good lodger, gave no trouble, and paid his book punctually; he rarely rang, never seemed to mind if the bell was not answered, went to church twice every Sunday, and was a credit to the house. He was an economical man, and was putting by a little money. He had a small sum of his own—£20 a year—that his father had left him, or, as he preferred to call it, a certain private income independent of his salary. The days went on; the old tree looked in at his window and seemed interested in him, and he was interested in the tree, noting the way it took the seasons. Otherwise there was nothing, and it was rather lonely. [Pg 195]

And then one day Mrs Marks brought him a piece of news. Her little niece, Elsa, was coming to spend a holiday with her. She thought she would mention it, because there were some lodgers who objected to children.

Of course Peters was delighted to say that he did not object to children at all. "Oh, and about that back door, Mrs Marks," he added. "I've sometimes thought I'd like to make use of it, so as to sit out under that tree of a warm evening."

"Most certainly, Mr Peters, and no need to ask either."

Under the plane tree Peters found a thin girl, with a white dress, black stockings, yellow hair, and a large doll. He gazed at her mildly.

"Are you Elsa?"

"Yes. Are you the lodger?"

"Yes." He paused for want of ideas, and added that it was a fine Saturday afternoon.

She had much more self-possession than he had. She looked at him critically. "Were you going to sit out here, lodger?"

"I had been thinking of it."

"Well, do it then."

He sat down beside her, and said that she had a nice doll.

"Yes; its name is Mrs Markham. I'm giving her up, because I'm nearly nine, and it's silly to keep on with dolls when you're nearly grown up. I used to have six dolls, and I've given them all up except Mrs Markham. She'll have to go too." [Pg 196]

"I say, how do you play with dolls?"

"You pretend things. Can you do that?"

"Bless you, yes!" said Peters, cheerfully. "I can pretend anything you like. What shall it be?"

"Let's pretend it's night."

"All right. It's night. And what do you do then?"

"Well, if it's night, of course we must put Mrs Markham to bed. I've got her nightdress in my pocket." She pulled it out and smoothed it on her knee. "Now, I must undress her." But she did not do it; she sat quite still, humming a little tune, while Peters watched her with interest.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"I'm waiting," she said, with some severity, "for you to look the other way. I can't undress Mrs Markham while you're staring at her."

Peters blushed, apologised, and looked the other way. Presently he was told that he might turn round again; Mrs Markham was properly attired, and asleep, with her head supported by part of a brick.

"Capital!" exclaimed Peters.

"Hush!" said Elsa, reproachfully. "It doesn't seem as if you could pretend very well. Mrs Markham's asleep, and so we must speak in whispers. Now, what are you, besides being a lodger?" [Pg 197]

"I'm a clerk to a firm of solicitors," Peters replied, in the repressed and husky voice enjoined upon him.

"That all?"

"I'm afraid so. I had expected to be one of the firm, but there are difficulties. It seems to be usual for a solicitor to be articled, and I doubt if the firm will see its way to—"

Elsa yawned and interrupted. "That'll do. This isn't any good. Let's play at something else. Can't you think of *anything*?"

Peters had an idea. He passed a small confectioner's shop on his way from business, and he had observed and remembered a label in the window.

"Look here, Elsa, do you think you could manage a liquorice jujube?"

Elsa looked down at the grass and waggled one foot nervously; her eyes seemed to get larger.

"Yes, thank you," she said demurely, "I think I could."

So they went off to the confectioner's shop. Peters cross-examined the woman behind the counter almost imperiously as to the presence of deleterious mineral colouring matter in the desired sweetmeat. The woman answered him with cold confidence: [Pg 198]

"The liquorice jujube takes its colour from the liquorice, which is a vegetable and wholesome."

Then the purchase was made, and they sauntered back—Elsa slowly becoming sticky, and Peters

smiling abundantly.

Peters was lonely no longer while Elsa's holiday lasted. As a rule she made suggestions, and he acted upon them. She wanted to know why he never went on the river; so one afternoon he took her. A man from the boat-house rowed them.

"Why don't you row yourself?" asked Elsa.

"Because," Peters answered, as he ran the boat's nose hard into a thorn bush, "I have to steer. Mind your head—I took that a little too close."

The man from the boat-house backed them out. Similar incidents had occurred frequently since Peters took the lines. At the boatman's suggestion he now relinquished them.

In the course of her holiday Mrs Markham, so Elsa said, died; she was buried under the plane tree. Peters dug the grave with his pocket-knife and a portion of a broken tea-cup. When the funeral service was over Peters produced a toy cricket set, and proposed a game. Elsa went in, and Peters bowled. After an hour and a half she retired hot; she was not out. Peters had bowled her twice, but on each occasion the ball was disqualified by the umpire. Elsa was the umpire. On [Pg 199] the first occasion he had forgotten to say play, and on the second he had bowled faster than the rules of cricket permitted. Peters did not get an innings—that was characteristic of him.

On Sundays Peters took Elsa to church. She refused to go more than once a Sunday, because her father went only once; if she went twice, she explained, it would be like saying that her father was a bad man; and he was a very good man. Peters asked her what prayers she said night and morning.

"I used to have special ones," she said, "but I've forgotten them. Besides, I'm too old for them; they were baby things. Now I say any colic out of the prayer-book. They're all good."

"I don't think that's quite right," said Peters.

"Pa," she observed, with subtle relevancy, "used to say that all s'listers were liars."

"Well, I'm *not* a solicitor," Peters objected triumphantly.

He remembered two prayers for morning and evening that he had learned when he was a boy. He copied them out in an exquisite hand, with Old English titles, on a sheet of tinted cardboard. Then he ruled a frame round them—three thin red lines within a broad black line. He was proud of his work. He presented it to Elsa. The wayward Elsa chose to be pleased with it, and owned [Pg 200] that Peters wrote better than she did. She took the card away to her room at once—"to try them," she explained.

Peters found himself very dull indeed when Elsa had gone. He thought it over, and concluded that he was a man who needed companionship. One night he wrote a long letter—not a love-letter—to Flynders's cousin's second daughter, and posted it; he got no reply, and a few months afterwards he read in Mrs Marks's newspaper the announcement that Flynders's cousin's second daughter had married the curate.

"She was always one for social success," Peters reflected.

He wrote to Elsa, and she also did not answer—she had explained to him that he must not expect it, because she disliked writing letters. He sent her every year a birthday card (with a present), a Christmas card (also with a present), and a valentine. She sent him, so far as he knew, nothing at all; but one year he received a very ugly valentine, an insulting valentine. He thought that it must have come either from Elsa or from that young clerk who had lent him the really spicy novel.

One day that young clerk seemed almost friendly to Peters. "You're a lonely old chap," he said to him in the luncheon hour. "Why don't you buy a dog? It would be a companion to you." Peters [Pg 201] thought it rather a good idea. As it happened, the young clerk had one that he wanted to sell; he described it as a faithful, pure-bred, sweet-tempered fox-terrier. It's name was Tommy. Peters bought it, and its kennel was located under the plane tree.

Tommy liked almost everyone except Peters. He would follow anyone except Peters. If he was in the mood to snap at anybody, he preferred to snap at Peters. Mrs Marks (under a special pecuniary arrangement) agreed to wash the dog. But she soon pleaded for the use of a muzzle on those occasions.

"For the way that dog turns against anything in the shape of soap and water is pretty nigh human. Instink, they calls it."

Peters thought that muzzles were inhuman, and said that he would wash the dog himself. The first time he tried Tommy bit him in three places, and escaped before the operation was over. He bolted into the street, ran away, and never came back.

So Peters was quite alone. Mrs Marks was too busy to talk to him. Elsa did not come back. But

the old plane tree did not seem to mind him.

As the years went on Peters found that he got old very quickly. One of the effects of age, in his case, was a violent pain in the chest, which came on after any great exertion or if he walked fast uphill. He went for a holiday—a week at Hunstanton—but it did not seem to do him much good. But when he came back he heard glorious news. Elsa was coming again for a few days. [Pg 202]

"Now, I'm glad," said Peters. "I always liked the child. Such bright ways she had! We shall soon be playing cricket together again."

"Why, you forget, Mr Peters," said Mrs Marks. "Elsa's near seventeen now. Besides, you're too much of an invalid to think of running about. You've aged." Mrs Marks herself did not age; she was one of those hard, wiry women that are capable of looking forty for twenty years.

Elsa looked very pretty. She still wore her hair down, but her dresses were much longer. She had a very superior manner, and did not seem particularly glad to see Peters. She took one of the liquorice jujubes that he offered her. But she explained that she did not care about that sort now; she only liked the best chocolates. "You can't get them here. If you want to give me anything, Mr Peters, there's a blouse (two-and-eleven) in Higginson's window that would do me nicely."

He looked a little bewildered, but he bought her the blouse, and it did her very nicely indeed—so nicely that she thought it was a pity that she was not to be photographed in it. "We might be photographed together," she said alluringly; "I shouldn't want more than two copies—cabinets." [Pg 203]

This was better. Peters was pleased that she wanted him to be photographed with her. The photographer placed her on a rustic stile, with Peters standing by her side. He smiled widely and with feeling, as he looked at her. She shook her head impatiently. "Oh, this won't do!" she said, "your grinning puts me out. Besides, you shake the stile. I wish you'd stand away and let me be done alone. Then you can have yourself took afterwards."

So Peters stood away meekly. But on the whole he did not think it worth while to have himself taken afterwards.

The two copies arrived, and satisfied Elsa. "Though I've known myself look better," she said. One copy was for herself, and the other she destined for a particular friend. Peters had bought a plush frame, supposing that she had intended to give him one copy; well, that did not matter; he could order a third from the photographer. In the meantime he was required to pack up the photograph for the particular friend.

"It would travel safer," he said, "if you packed it between a couple of pieces of card."

Elsa looked thoughtful. "I've got an old bit in my writing-case," she said. "Go and fetch it, Mr Peters." [Pg 204]

He hunted through the writing-case, but could not find it.

"Well, I know it's there, anyhow," she retorted. "I kept it, knowing it would come in some day. It's got those prayers on it that you wrote out for me when I was here before."

"Oh, yes, I saw that. I didn't think—"

"Well, never mind, I'll go and get it myself; torn in half, it will just do. It will puzzle my friend, though—he's not one of the praying sort."

Peters was guilty of looking somewhat despondent as he moved away; this made Elsa rather angry. "You needn't look so glum," she said; "you didn't expect me to keep it all my life, and have it buried with me—silly old card—did you?"

"One thing I will say," Mrs Marks observed, after Elsa had gone, "is that she does brighten up a house. And I hope her looks mayn't be a snare to her. She has one young admirer already, and she a mere child! She's promised to come again next year. I hope you'll get on better with her then. You seemed more stand-offish this time—you've no complaint against her?"

"Oh, no! certainly not."

"You're not looking well, Mr Peters. You'll excuse my mentioning it, but you want a doctor."

Peters shook his head slowly, but owned to a touch of something—probably liver. It was Sunday evening, and he had been intending to go to church as usual. But he changed his mind. He did not feel up to it. He sat under the plane tree and thought about Elsa as she used to be before she grew up. [Pg 205]

He knew that old tree well now, knew every twist of the branches, every kink of the bark. In an unreasoning way he loved the tree. It had never repulsed him; it had always been there for him.

Mrs Marks was right. Peters did want a doctor. He took to fainting when he was at work at the office. He apologised for it to the senior partner, who had found him unconscious, and promised

that it should not occur again. But it did. One morning he was summoned to the senior partner's private room. Grantham and Flynders were both there. They told him that he had been for many years a faithful servant to them, and that now—when he was past work—they wanted to mark their sense of his services. He was not to come to the office any more, but they named a sum which would be paid him by way of pension for the rest of his life. And they advised him to see a doctor.

Peters could not understand it, and it had to be explained to him again. Then he tried to thank them. He felt proud and tremulous. He had been praised—it was years since anybody had praised him. He walked home and told Mrs Marks about it. He was not to work any more. Grantham & [Pg 206] Flynders had praised him very highly. And he had a pension. And Mrs Marks congratulated him, and said that he deserved his luck. And finally Peters broke down and wept.

Peters spent most of his days, doing absolutely nothing, stretched on the grass under the plane tree. He had grown rather queer in one or two points. Mrs Marks could not make him believe that the strip of land was to be built over, and that the tree would have to come down. He did not argue about it. He merely said, "They shall not cut that tree down. I shall see about it."

"Now that *is* silly, Mr Peters. The tree *will* come down before they begin to build."

"No, it will not," said Peters.

One day, while Peters was lying under the tree, a party of men came and took measurements, and cut lines in the turf, but they did not attempt to touch the tree. Peters chuckled.

But next morning he was awakened by a sound of sawing. A party of labourers had come early, and were at work on the tree, sawing off the heavy lower boughs. Peters leant half out of the window in his night-shirt and shook his fist at them. He was wild with excitement.

"Leave my tree alone!" he screamed. [Pg 207]

The men stopped work for a minute. Two of them laughed. One of them shouted up to him:

"Hold your row, you old fool! It ain't your tree."

"It *is* mine," cried Peters. "I shall come down to you and stop you. I'm coming now." Then he fell back on the bed fainting.

Mrs Marks was much alarmed, and—whether Peters liked it or not—insisted on having a doctor.

When the doctor came downstairs she met him in the passage. "Well, sir?" she said.

"I can do nothing—might have done if I'd been called in years ago. It's the heart. He can't last long. Don't let him be excited, and I'll send you something to give him for these fainting attacks."

Mrs Marks was a hard woman, but she wiped her eyes with her apron. "He's been here so long, you see," she explained.

Peters protested against the doctor. It was a foolish expense, if he was certain to die.

"I've got a little put by—yes, that's true. But it's all to go to Elsa, you see, and I don't want any of it wasted."

The blinds were drawn in order that he might not be excited by seeing the felling of the tree; but he could hear the work going on, though he pressed his thin hands to his ears.

As the sun shone in at his window one morning, and he lay awake in bed, a big, swift shadow [Pg 208] swept across the blind, and then came a deafening crash.

Peters half raised himself in bed, one hand on his heart. His voice came in a whisper, "My God!"

He sank quite gently back again on the bed, and did not move.

[Pg 209]

THE NIGHT OF GLORY

It was half-past six at night when she came down from the workrooms and out into the street. She was an intensely anæmic girl, neatly dressed, thin, tired. Given better health, she would not have been unattractive; given a better way of life, she would have had better health.

A gentleman of forty-five crossed the street towards her, raised his hat, and said, "You're late to-night."

She took absolutely no notice, and slightly quickened in her pace.

"Please do not hurry," he said. "I have so much to say to you." Then she turned round on him and was very furious. If he bothered her any more she would hand him over to the police.

"Pray don't misunderstand me," said the gentleman, plaintively; "I would not insult you or treat you with anything but the greatest respect on any account."

"Then what on earth do you want?" she said rather irritably.

"I will put it as briefly as I can. I happen to be very wealthy. I can enjoy nothing—the day for that has gone past for me. I wish for one night to see somebody else enjoy something. It had to be somebody who did not usually spend money freely; somebody who worked hard; somebody who [Pg 210] had refinement and education. I thought, and I still think, that I have found all these things in you. Will you come with me? Dinner, a theatre or a music-hall, a little supper at the Carlton, and then my brougham shall drive you home. You will be rendering me the greatest possible service."

She was a girl that was quite used to taking care of herself. If she had not much confidence in him, she had great confidence in herself. She could, at any rate, test it, and abandon the experiment when it pleased her.

"But," she said, "I have no proper dress for that kind of thing."

"You know what the proper dress would be?"

"Of course I do. It's my business."

"Very well, then, the rest is simple. You will go immediately and get all that you require in that way—dress, gloves, everything. Do not think about money, merely exercise the excellent taste which you show in your present costume. If the dress gives you the least pleasure, I know that it will give me much more. I shall be your debtor."

"It is like a fairy tale," she said.

"My brougham is here, and at your service."

The electric brougham slid noiselessly up to them. They got in.

In the brougham she watched him nervously, sideways. Yes, he was forty-five. His dark hair was [Pg 211] grey on the temples; there was a melancholy cruelty in his thin-lipped mouth; but the greenish eyes, strong and searching, were not the eyes of one who had out-lived himself.

"I can't understand," she said. "What do you mean? You can't enjoy anything?"

"Almost that. I am, unfortunately, one who must have novelty. There are many women to whom I have given pretty toys and suppers at the Carlton. That—well, that was another affair. This is quite different. To-night I give for no other motive than to bring enjoyment to you. You see? I shall enjoy it second-hand. Tell me all about the dress."

She laughed. "Oh! you wouldn't understand if I did. I am going to Lambert's. One of the ladies there is a great friend of mine. Lucky that I am stock size, isn't it?"

"Very," said the man, with enthusiasm. He had not the faintest notion what stock size meant.

When the brougham stopped at Lambert's she seemed a little troubled. "Half an hour is the least time I can possibly be," she said. "You won't like waiting."

"Like it? It will be a luxury to me. Nobody has dared to make me wait for twenty years. You shall do it. Your foot is on my neck. Seriously, I have one or two little things to do myself. In the [Pg 212] meantime"—he handed her a roll of notes—"get everything you want and pay for it."

She was fully three-quarters of an hour away, but she was a very transfigured maiden when the commissionaire opened the door of the brougham for her. Excitement, or a touch of rouge, had put a little colour into her pale face. Her dark hair was beautiful, and becomingly dressed. For the rest, all was perfect, from that shapely head down to the white satin shoes.

"Will this do?" she said eagerly.

"It is superb. You are transformed."

"That's quite true," she said. "I don't seem to myself to be the same kind of person. I don't think the same way. Oh! please, it didn't take nearly all that money. Look, I have got it here somewhere." She fumbled under her cloak.

"Oh! please don't bother," said her companion. "You may want it later for something or other. See what I have been doing to fill in time."

He took from its box an old ivory fan exquisitely painted, and handed it to her.

"That fan," he said, "belonged once to a princess, a daughter of George the Third. She was his favourite daughter, and it was her death which finally dethroned his reason. Take it; you also are a princess to-night."

"I cannot thank you—I cannot even begin to thank you. It is like a most heavenly dream coming true." [Pg 213]

"Pray don't speak of thanks. It is I who am indebted to you for being pleased. I have bought another little toy for you as well."

He opened a case, containing a necklace of pearls, a single row. Not of great size, but well matched and graduated.

"I am afraid," he said, "that this has no romantic history. The best I can imagine is that the diver who brought the pearls was snapped in two by a shark."

"The best?" she cried. "That is the worst! That is horrible! Oh! but what a lovely necklace!"

"Then," said the man, "he was not snapped in two by a shark. He amassed great wealth in the pearl fishery business, retired from it, married a wife, had seventeen children, and was very, very happy."

"Seventeen seems a lot," said the girl.

"To-night you have only to command. The poor man had but two. May I put the necklace on for you?"

She hesitated. After all, why be a fool? "Of course, if you like," she said.

He fastened the snap quickly and deftly. "That is the way pearls look best," he said.

She rubbed her eyes.

"Oh! don't do that," said the man.

She laughed. "I was trying to wake up," she said.

"Don't wake up. But as we now know one another so well shall we say what our names are?" [Pg 214]

"Well, your lordship," said the girl, a little timidly, "my name is Appleby—Marion Appleby."

"Not 'your lordship'; Lord Alcester, please."

Presently she had recovered from the shock of the introduction, and was eating iced Cantaloup melon. She looked pleased with the world. She tasted everything, and drank a very little champagne.

His lordship dined principally on dry toast and old brandy. He was evidently well known and appreciated in the restaurant.

"Tell me all about yourself," he said to her. "What is your ordinary day like?"

"That is what I'd like to forget just now," she said. "We live in Fulham, and it's a big family. Father's a very highly-educated man and speaks three languages. He is a clerk in a very good position; but still, you see, there are so many of us, and mamma's health isn't good. I am up early every morning seeing to the children, and there is my own work all day, and those workrooms are awful in the summer; then there is the walk back, or sometimes a 'bus if I am very tired, and after that there is always something to do about the house before I go to bed."

"Any holidays?"

"Oh! yes. We have our fortnight at the sea every summer. Father says that is not a luxury but a necessity, and he'd save in almost any way sooner than give that up. I believe he's right, too; you'd hardly know me after a fortnight at Margate, if the weather's been good. I get tanned, but I [Pg 215] don't freckle. That's luck, isn't it?"

"It is the luckiest thing in the world. Waiter, I want a box at the Frivolity to-night; see about it, please. If there is no box to be had I will not take stalls, I will go somewhere else. And, Miss Appleby, what do you suppose a day of my life is like?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"It is far harder work than yours, and much duller. Believe me, my child, there is no toil so hard or so absolutely uninteresting as the toil that one goes through in order to enjoy one's self. In August, when I go North for the shooting, I still enjoy a little pleasure—at any rate, the life there is not too actively disgusting. But the London season—and I would far sooner die than miss any London season—is, if I may use the expression, unmitigated hell."

"I think," the girl said, "that I could be happy if I were you."

"Undoubtedly—for six months; not always. This is really the only pleasant evening that I have spent this summer."

"What made you think of it? Why did you choose me?"

"An all-merciful Providence that did not desire that I should slit my throat out of sheer boredom [Pg 216] made me think of it. I waited, and I saw the rest of your companions pass out from the shop. Not one of them would have suited me. Frankly, they are all a little vulgar, and, which is far worse, a little uninteresting. You, on the other hand, are quite charming. You possess a fascination peculiar to yourself."

"What is it?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"You are very good, and you have a potentiality of being very bad. If you had been very bad, with a potentiality of being very good, you would also have fascinated me. I like potentiality in others, for there is none in myself. I shall never be any better and I could not be any worse, and I don't care two straws either way. Let's talk about something more interesting than myself. What? Oh! the box at the Frivolity. Very well, shall we go, my child, or would you like to change your mind and go to something else?"

It was quite late that night when he put her carefully into his brougham, shook hands with her, refused to hear a word of thanks, and gave the coachman the address in Fulham to which he was to take her.

Five years had done a good deal. They had nearly, but not quite, killed Lord Alcester. This winter night, bent, wizened, wrapped in furs, and leaning heavily on his stick, he crawled slowly along Piccadilly on his way from one club to another. [Pg 217]

An ungloved hand touched his arm, and a hoarse woman's voice said, "Half a moment, my lord."

He gave her one quick glance from under his heavy eyebrows. Those eyes were not dead yet.

"It won't do," said Lord Alcester.

The girl laughed bitterly. "I thought you might like to look at your work," she said. "You were the ruin of me five years ago."

"My good woman," said Lord Alcester. "If I stopped in Piccadilly to talk to all the women who think I have been the ruin of them, it would stop the traffic. Let me go, please."

She still clung to his arm. "Just half a moment," she said. "The work-girl whom you gave a pretty dress to, and a string of pearls, and a fan that once belonged to a princess. You remember?"

"Good God!" said Lord Alcester. "Where can we talk?"

She laughed again, the same bitter laugh, and surveyed her reflection in a shop-window.

"Yes," she said, "a box at the Frivolity wouldn't do for me now, would it? Here, I know of a place, if you'll follow me."

"All right," said Lord Alcester. "Walk slowly."

She led him by side-streets into back-streets. The little public-house was very quiet, discreet, sinful and unsavoury. She pushed her way through to a little room behind the bar. [Pg 218]

"Now then," she said.

With difficulty Lord Alcester dragged off his heavy fur coat and flung himself down on the crimson velveteen.

"What a godless hole this is," he said. "What are you going to have?"

"Glass of port," she said promptly.

"You haven't taken to spirits yet?"

"I keep that for the mornings. Shall I ring the bell?"

He nodded. The waiter who entered looked curiously from one to another. Lord Alcester had a firm, quiet, impressive manner.

"You will bring me," he said, "a bottle of the best port you have and a small bottle of soda-water. Make up that fire."

"I never said a bottle," said the woman. "Are you going to drink the rest?"

"I am going to drink the soda-water. Don't talk about that. Sit down by the fire. Warm your hands and tell me about yourself."

It was not until she had finished her first glass of port that she began on the subject. "There is no more to say than what I said before," she said. "You were my ruin."

"I remember that night very distinctly. I never made love to you. I never tried to kiss you. I never treated you with any less respect than I would have treated a woman of my own class. What are you talking about? What is all this nonsense?" [Pg 219]

"No nonsense at all. How did you think it would be when I got home that night with fifty pounds' worth of new clothes, and my pearl necklace, and a story of a theatre and supper afterwards? Do you think they would believe my word at home? They said they did; I have got a temper, and they daren't say anything else; but they let me see very well that they didn't believe me. I wasn't going to stand it. Next morning at breakfast, when they were all full of the thing, I gave them some straight talking, and then I cleared out."

"Am I responsible for the heat of your temper and the straightness of your talking?"

"You might have guessed how it would be with me. Did you think that after one night of glory like that I was going back to perpetual drudgery? I'd seen life as it might be, and I'd been given a bad name. I'd only got to deserve it."

"How much did you get for the pearl necklace?"

"Three hundred and fifty."

"Then you were swindled."

"I know that, of course. I told them so. What did it matter? It was all gone in a few weeks. I can tell you I made money fly in those days. That's all past. I've lost what little good looks I ever had, haven't I?" [Pg 220]

"Quite," said Lord Alcester, mercilessly. "You drink, you see," he added.

The girl put down her glass and fumbled desperately for a dirty little handkerchief with her face screwed awry. She dabbed at her eyes and shook with sobs.

"Stop that," said Lord Alcester. "You are making the devil of a row. Look here, come to business."

"I might have been good," she moaned. "If I had never met you I might have been good."

Lord Alcester was writing something on one of his visiting-cards. He stepped over to her and touched her on the shoulder. "Can you read that address?" he said.

"Yes," she said between her sobs. "Lincoln's Inn Fields. Solicitors, I suppose?"

"Quite so," said Lord Alcester, as he struggled back into his coat again. "They'll give you a pound a week as long as you live. Call for it on Saturday mornings. I could also give you plenty of good advice, but I won't. Are you coming?"

She glanced at the decanter by her side. "Not quite yet," she said. "I think I'll just—"

"Oh! I see," said Lord Alcester, contemptuously. "Good-night, then."

Out in the street he stopped the first hansom that he saw. The man had often driven him before.

"What will you take," he said to the man, "to drive this cab to eternal smash? Drive it, for instance, down the Duke of York's steps?" [Pg 221]

The cabman smiled patiently. "Which club did you say, my lord?" Lord Alcester gave the address of his club and got into the cab.

[Pg 222]

AN IDYLL OF THE SEA

The repellent mid-day meal grew to its untidy close in a frowsy boarding-house in one of the less-pleasing back streets of Sefton-on-Sea. Mr Sigismund Porter had eaten so remarkably little that he might almost have won an approving smile from the hawk-eyed proprietress. As a rule, Mr Porter was a young man who liked value for his money, but to-day there was something on his mind, a gloomy resolution which destroyed his appetite.

"I am going," he said to himself, "to put my cards down on the table. I am going to own up, and to act on the square, and to be chucked for doing it, and to leave this blighted place to-morrow."

In his small bedroom at the very top of the house he arrayed himself with his usual scrupulous care. He wore a pair of the yellowest boots in Sefton-on-Sea, waistcoat and trousers of grey flannel, a dark blue smoking-jacket of the reach-me-down or Edgware Road order, and a straw hat adorned with the bewitching colours of the Advance Guard Cycling Club. His necktie was of the palest saffron, saving for such stains as it had acquired by natural wear and tear. He surveyed himself in the looking-glass and was satisfied.

Considering that he was really rather a nice-looking young man, he was a pretty bad sight. He had dark, wavy hair, and a girl had once said that he had the most pathetic eyes in Brixton. He lived at Brixton, and so did the girl. That was now merely an incident in the dead past. [Pg 223]

He selected one of those cigarettes the principal characteristic of which is that you get an amazing amount of them for threepence. He shut the case with a snap—a real silver case which gave him pleasure—and so he went forth jauntily. He was going to his doom, of course, and he knew that he was going to his doom. But as his way to his doom lay along the sea-front, it was as well for the present to keep up appearances. From the sea-front he reached the pier, cast down his penny at the turnstiles, and walked up to the further end of it to a secluded seat behind the little pavilion where they let the entertainments loose. There he waited, leaning forward with his rather weak chin on the handle of his walking-stick. For a moment the wicked thought flashed across him that there was no necessity for him to put his cards down on the table, that he might as well have played the game out to the end. He cast the temptation from him. He would lose the

girl, of course, but there was the very devil in it. He would rather lose her fairly than leave her with the glittering but untrue portrait of himself that she must now possess. [Pg 224]

He looked up and saw the girl herself walking towards him.

"Walks like a queen," he said to himself. "Walks as if she'd bought the whole place, and could pay for it—and she gets thirty bob a week from a Dover Street milliner. You couldn't hardly believe it." Then he arose and lifted his absurd hat.

The girl shook hands with him frankly. She was simply and quietly dressed, but perhaps her profession gave her advantages there.

"Good afternoon, Mr Porter," she said. "You are getting splendid weather for your last day here." She was a pretty girl with enigmatical eyes, and her voice was softer and pleasanter than the voice of Mr Sigismund Porter.

"Yes," said Mr Porter, gloomily, "the weather's a bit of all right, I suppose, if the weather were everything."

"But the weather is quite a good deal, isn't it?" said the girl, cheerfully. "You wouldn't enjoy your run on your motor-car up to the Lakes if it came on wet."

"There ain't going to be any run," said the young man.

"What? But what about your friends—Colonel Raynes and Lord Daybrooke? You can't disappoint them."

"I shan't," he said bitterly. "They won't be disappointed, because they don't exist. I haven't got [Pg 225] any colonels and lords amongst my friends. It was all lies and brag. For that matter, I haven't got any friends except one girl, and she's just going to give me the chuck for taking her in."

"I see," said the girl, thoughtfully. "Would you mind very much if we left this disgusting, vulgar little pier and walked along by the sands? They begin to make music of sorts here directly, and it will be quieter out of the crowd."

The thought flashed into his mind that it was hardly worth while to pay a penny for the pier and leave it at the end of five minutes, for his mind was perforce economical. But money questions at the moment seemed too sordid.

"All right," he said. "Considering the way I've carried on—I may say the rotten way I've carried on—it's pretty decent of you to hear the story out. I suppose I could kick up some sort of an excuse."

"Perhaps I could find the excuses for you," said the girl, as they went down together on to the beach. "You are not really stopping at the Grand, then?"

"No, I'm not. I've been stopping at the cheapest and muckiest boarding-house in the place, and in a mortal funk all the time lest you should see me going in and out. Well, that's all over, at any rate. You know the worst now. The way it started was that I wanted to impress you a bit. I wanted to make myself out one of the lucky ones. I wanted to seem a superior class to you altogether. [Pg 226] And that's the damned funny thing about it, if you'll excuse my swearing. All the time that I was bragging about motor-cars, and you were talking about the stuffy workrooms, you were the superior class to me, and I was the dirt under your feet. Looking back on it, I can't think how I came to make such a fool of myself. Your superior, indeed! Why, even on the outside facts I'm not that, for I only make twenty-eight bob to your thirty, and I haven't got your chance of a rise."

"I think I see how it all happened," said the girl. "It was all very natural. I was sorry you told me those fibs, but I was not half as sorry then as I am glad now when you've taken them back again."

"Hold on," said the man. "I mean, just half a moment, if you don't mind. You said you were sorry when I began blowing about my position and all that. You knew, then?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I knew all the time. And all the time I was rather thinking that you wouldn't go on with it."

The young man stared at her hard. "You beat me altogether," he said. "I can't make head or tail of it. Of course, you've had opportunities of picking up style in your work, and there's no manner of doubt that you've got it. Well, I've known other girls who worked at a milliner's who have done the same. What beats me is that you've got that way of thinking. That's where they slip up. They [Pg 227] say it all right, but what they say is all wrong. It's the same here, for the matter of that," he added gloomily.

"Now I want to talk to you," said the girl. "We are out of the crowd here. Let's sit down. I've got to apologise to you too, you know. I've told you lies, too. I never worked for a milliner in my life. I've got a motor-car and more money than I want, and I am stopping at the very hotel where you said you were."

"I take it," said the young man, quietly, "that this is about the last straw. If you'll permit one question, miss, that being the case, why on earth did you ever let me speak to you?"

"We will both be honest now," said the girl. "I saw you several times, and always alone. You did not seem to be having a particularly happy holiday. I saw that you wanted to talk to me. The book that I left on the seat gave you your chance, but I did not leave my book there on purpose. I had

not even made up my mind at the moment when you brought it to me what I would do. When you began to talk, I saw that right at the back of all the talk you were quite a good young man. You always treated me properly and with respect."

"The man's not been born yet who would dare do anything else." [Pg 228]

The girl laughed. "Well, I was inclined to like you. I don't value what you call the outside facts so very, very much. I rather like doing something unconventional, if it is not actually wrong. I thought it would please you if I let you meet me sometimes."

"That's rather a mild way of putting it."

"It pleased me too. At the back of everything that was wrong in you there were such lots and lots of good. I don't want you to look on it as simply an idle experiment on my part. Perhaps there was a slight shade of that in it, and I am rather ashamed of it. But it was chiefly that I wanted you to have a rather happier time here."

"I believe all that," said Mr Porter, "and I did have a happier time here. But think how I've got to pay for it afterwards. There's the contempt you must have felt for me—that's a nice sort of thing to have in your mind when you can't sleep at night! By God!" he burst out with sudden ferocity, "you lied worse than I did. You did more harm."

"Now you talk like a man," she said. "But you're mistaken on one point. There was never any contempt. All the time I was thinking that in your circumstances I should probably have been sorely tempted to do exactly as you did. Think of that when you can't sleep."

"That isn't everything," said the young man, jabbing holes in the sand with his stick. [Pg 229]

"Isn't it?" said the girl. "What's the rest?"

"Thanks," said the young man, bitterly, "but I'm not going to make a fool of myself again. You go and become what you pretended to be. Come to me as a thirty-bob-a-week girl, working for a milliner, then I'll tell you the rest fast enough. Now I'm going to say 'Good-bye' to you."

"I think I see," said the girl. "That could never have been in any circumstances. But because I want you to know that I'm a friend to you, good-bye." She held out both her hands to him. "And remember this." Then she put her face up to his and kissed him.

In a moment she was gone.

The young man remained standing there. "And," he said to himself, "one ought to go straight up to heaven in a chariot of golden fire."

[Pg 230]

THE MAGIC RINGS

Part I.—Netta, the Make-Believer

Netta's father one day picked her up, swung her into the air, and put her down on the top of the high Italian cabinet in the hall. "There, you little slut," he said, "what does the world look like from up there?"

"Quite different; you wouldn't know it. The pictures look so queer—upside down; and the staircase isn't the same—or anything. Can't you come up too?"

"No; I'm afraid."

"Did you know there were two—no, three—big rings up here on the top of the cabinet? You can't see them from down below. May I bring them down?"

"If you like."

They were three disused wooden curtain rings, very dusty.

"How did they get there?" asked Netta.

"That," said her father, "is one of the things that I do not know; ask somebody else."

So she asked her mother, her governess, her nurse, and all the servants. They also did not know. They supposed that somebody must have put them there some time. Netta went back to her father and obtained permission to have those rings for her own. She carried them out into the [Pg 231] garden into a secluded place under a weeping ash. There she examined the rings very carefully, and thought about the mystery which surrounded them. When she took them upstairs she showed them to her nurse.

"These are the magic rings," she said.

"Are they, indeed, now?" said the nurse, used to being interested, fictitiously, but at the shortest

notice, in anything childish.

On the next day Netta felt the need of a temple. The romance of the rings was growing rapidly. Invested with a mysterious origin and properties not yet fully defined, but vaguely magical, they required to be enshrined in a temple. For one night they had put up with the shelter of the toy-cupboard. But in view of their character they were now to have a place apart. Netta went to her father and asked him if he had an empty box that he could spare.

"Would a cardboard box do?"

"Yes. It ought to be pure white, though."

The pure white cardboard box was found and given to her. This became the temple. Netta placed the three magic rings in it, and called her brother, who was a year older than she, and at that time rather a pious little prig.

"Would you like to see what's in that box, Jimmy?"

"I don't much mind." [Pg 232]

"It's a temple, and I don't think I shall let you. I certainly shan't let *everybody*."

"You ought to let me see, because I'm your brother."

"Well, first of all I must write your name inside the lid. Everyone who is allowed to see into the temple is going to be written down there. You're not to look until I've done it." She wrote the name as neatly as she could with a long new pencil, beautifully pointed. "Now you can look," she said.

"It isn't anything at all. It's only three old rings."

"Yes, but they're magic rings."

"Pooh! They can't do anything."

"Can't they?" said Netta with immense indifference, as she replaced the lid. She sat on the table, swinging her slim legs, and hummed provokingly.

"I *know* they can't do anything," Jimmy repeated.

Netta looked away from him, up at the flies circling on the white ceiling. Her eyes grew big and meditative. She continued humming.

"Well," said Jimmy, desperately, "what *can* they do?"

"Every night when you're in bed and asleep, and when everybody else is in bed and asleep, they can come out of the temple and run about. They run up walls and along the roofs of houses. And they can fly, too. They fly just like—like flies."

"I don't believe it. You're being a liar, and you know where liars go to. You ought to be punished." [Pg 233]

"I'm not being a liar. I might be a make-believer, perhaps, but I shan't say if I am. Nobody knows where those rings came from. Papa himself doesn't know."

"I shall go and ask him this minute myself." Jimmy walked firmly to the door, paused, and added, "And lying is the same as make-believing."

He found his father, and asked him if he knew where those rings that Netta had came from.

"No," said his father, "I told her I didn't."

Jimmy was disappointed. "Lying and make-believing are the same thing, aren't they?" he said.

"Not at all the same thing." This was yet another disappointment. Later in the day Jimmy went to Netta and said that she really ought to give him one of those rings as he was her brother. She refused. He then asked if he might look inside the temple at them again. Once more he was refused.

"It is not a good thing," said Netta, gravely, "to look at them too much in one day."

"It seems as if I couldn't do anything or have anything, or play at anything," said Jimmy, gloomily. Netta, being tender-hearted, relented, and allowed him to look once more.

Netta had girl-friends of her own age. They were Dorothy, and Cecilia Vane, and Rose Heritage. Netta told them about the magic rings, and they were all deeply impressed. [Pg 234]

A ritual sprang up. Netta was the priestess and Rose Heritage was the under-priestess. It became necessary always to wave a green leaf slowly over the temple before opening it. Every morning the magic rings were taken out and placed for a few minutes in a basin of pure water. Then they were dried and put back again in the temple. Dorothy Vane, who read deeply, suggested amulets, and they were made at once. Each girl wore round her neck a gold thread—it had come off a box of crackers—and to the thread was attached a small square of white cardboard, on which three circles had been drawn. Netta and Rose had amulets on which the circles were drawn in red chalk. Dorothy and Cecilia had to be content with black ink. But it was understood that after a certain time Dorothy would be raised to the position of under-priestess, and then she also would

have the red-chalk privilege. The amulets were to be worn under the dress, and to be shown to no one. The secrecy observed was tremendous. Nobody was to know anything. When engaged with the magic rings, Christian names were forbidden. Netta was addressed as the priestess and Rose as the under-priestess; Dorothy was called One and Cecilia Two. Of course, Two was the least honourable position. It had been assigned to Cecilia because, owing to her sweet and gentle disposition, she consented to take it—which none of the other three would have done. Jimmy was [Pg 235] by unanimous vote left out of it altogether. They would ask him if he would not go and play in the garden, like a kind boy, because they had some private secrets to talk about; and if he came suddenly into the room where they were they hid things hurriedly and talked ostentatiously about the weather. This maddened Jimmy. Sometimes he said that he knew all about it, and at other times pointed out to Netta that the claims of their relationship required that she should tell him all about it, and at other times that he did not want to know. Occasionally he threatened to throw the temple and the magic rings (he called them "old curtain-rings," but that was only his offensiveness) into the duck-pond. He did not do it. The devotees were four in number, and he was only one, and foolhardiness is not courage. "Anyhow," he said, "if you weren't doing wrong, you'd let me into it, and so you're certain to be punished. I have got secrets of my own and mine are not wrong, but I shan't say anything about them." But he prevailed nothing.

The legends about the magic rings grew rapidly in number and in strength. Their origin was now accounted for. They had been hoops belonging to the fairies, and they had undergone trundling so willingly and beautifully that the fairies had set them free and given them magical powers. This aetiological myth was, like the rest, given out by big-eyed Netta, the make-believer, and [Pg 236] received with wonderment and satisfaction by her followers. The magic rings always lived a day on ahead; what is merely Monday to us was Tuesday to them. Reports of their nocturnal wanderings were received from time to time. They frequently went to the moon. They could fly like flies, it will be remembered. Once they went to the Star of Dolls. This star is inhabited by dolls only, and they can talk. A penny exercise book was procured (the generous and sweet-tempered Cecilia defraying the total expense), and in it the myths were written out, together with certain rules to be observed. It was called the "Volume of the Magic Rings," and the under-priestess had charge of it just as the priestess had charge of the temple. Letters passed freely between the four girls. I give the one which was the beginning of the end:

> "Dearest Priestess,—When you bring the temple with you to tea on their Thursday wich is our Wensday, mind to bring two handkercheeves, and one of them must be clean. This is important. I have something to show you. I hope you tell Jimy nothing.—Your loving
>
> "Under-Priestess."

The other girls had received similar instructions. Cecilia had been told to bring her musical-box as well. They all met in Rose's schoolroom, and at first she did not explain her instructions fully. [Pg 237]

"I've got a splendid thing," she said. "First of all, when I say 'Go,' you must all run after me at once, bringing the things with you, and then when we get there I'll tell you the rest."

Rose's governess was with them at tea, but afterwards she made ready to go out into the garden, suggesting that they should come too.

"May we wait a little and then come?" asked Rose. "We want to play in the house first."

"Very well," said Miss Stagg. "Don't get into any mischief."

The moment she had gone Rose said "Go!" In single file, with Rose leading, they ran down a long passage and into the spare bedroom at the end of it.

"Now, then," said Rose, "first of all, we tie clean white handkerchiefs on our heads." It was done. "Now, come and look."

In the spare room there was a very large toilet-table. It was hung all round with pink chintz with thin white muslin over it. When you got under the table the world was shut out by these curtains, and the light came through them in a holy, pink, subdued glow. It was a charming and secluded spot, and here Miss Rose had placed all ready two small coloured candles and a box of matches, and the lid of a box piled high with rose petals, and the green leaf essential to the opening of the temple. All agreed that it really was as splendid as she had said. A conference was held, and the [Pg 238] ritual decided. The candles were lighted, and placed one on each side of the temple. The green leaf was waved, the temple opened, and the magic rings taken out. At this point the musical-box was to begin to play. The Priestess had assigned the turning of the musical-box to Two, because, after all, it was her own musical-box, and she had so few privileges. So Two was radiant. The magic rings were to be covered over with the rose petals, left there until the music ceased, and then replaced in the temple. Then everybody was to say, "O magic rings!" three times, and the candles were to be extinguished. The programme was never concluded, because, in the middle of it, Rose's governess, Miss Stagg, came and caught them.

It was Miss Stagg's opinion that they were very naughty, wicked, irreverent children, and that they ran a risk of burning the house down. The first accusation was untrue, but the latter had something in it.

The four children wandered out into the garden, a dejected group. Cecilia was the only one who had actually cried though, and they had all comforted her as well as they could.

"I do hate Miss Stagg," said Rose. "This is the end of the magic rings."

Netta, the make-believer, rose to the occasion with a new myth.

"The magic rings have been insulted. They do not like that. I don't like being insulted myself, and if it had been *my* governess I should have answered back. Well, I know what the magic rings will do now." [Pg 239]

"What?"—breathlessly, from all.

"They will go away. To-night I shall put them in their temple in their usual place. But to-morrow all of you come in the morning after lessons, and you'll see—they'll be gone! They will go right away by themselves, perhaps to the moon and perhaps to the Star of Dolls."

Miss Stagg thought it her duty to inform Mrs Heritage, who heard the story gravely, and thanked her, but repeated it brilliantly, amid a good deal of merriment, to the make-believer's father, when she dined at his house that night.

"Ah!" he said, "I must manage a mysterious disappearance for those rings."

When next morning Netta and her companions opened the temple the rings were not there, but in their place was a slip of paper, on which the word "Good-bye" was written. Not one of the four was more astonished than Netta herself. "It's really happened. I wasn't *sure* it would, you know."

"I shall tell Miss Stagg," said Rose, triumphantly.

"I wonder if we really were wicked," said Cecilia, with a troubled look in her angel-eyes. "I didn't mean to be."

They never solved the mystery; gradually they forgot it.

[Pg 240]

Part II.—Further off from Heaven

Forty years passed, and but two of the people of this story were left alive—Rose Heritage and Netta. Rose Heritage had become Lady Mallard, lived in a big house in the country, and had a grown-up family. Netta lived alone in a small house in West Kensington. The two never corresponded, and heard nothing of each other now. The friendship had never been violently broken off. It had perished from time and separation, as friendships will.

Of the others, Cecilia was the first to die. As a child her nurses had said that she was too good to live. As a girl of eighteen she seemed too beautiful to live. It was a beauty so spiritual, so unearthly, that to see it was to feel that it was claimed elsewhere. Netta's father had died with the complaint on his lips that physical pain had so far destroyed his sense of humour that he got no more pleasure out of leading articles. Jimmy had gone into the army, spent his own share of his father's property and most of Netta's, and finally redeemed by a gallant death a life that had been remarkably extravagant and bad.

Netta's hair was grey; her face was worn and ascetic. But one would have said rightly that she must have been a handsome woman in her time. She had never married. At seventeen she had been in love with a man whom she could not marry, a hopeless affair, and horrible enough for her while it lasted. It lasted three years. It was all forgotten now, or only the vague memory of a bad dream. Jimmy had been a care to her, too; she never knew while he lived what might not be the next news that she would hear of him. She had become a learned, lonely woman now, had taken the degree of doctor of medicine, practised a little, and wrote very often. She wrote mostly on her own special subject, but occasionally for less technical and more widely-read journals. [Pg 241]

She had been writing for one of them, this afternoon, in her poorly-furnished study upstairs. It was growing dark, and her reading-lamp by her side was lit; but she had not yet had the curtains drawn, and through the windows she could see the white snow falling slowly into the dirty street. She had stopped writing in the middle of a sentence:

"And, whether the sentimentalist—"

She had flung down her pen impatiently. She had been teased all day by an effort to remember something—to explain what was after all a perfectly trivial thing. In turning over a cupboardful of papers, which had belonged to her father and been left practically untouched ever since they had been sent to her house, she had come across three old curtain rings carefully tied together. A label was attached to them, and on it was written—the ink was faded and yellow—"Netta, the Make-Believer." Underneath were a few words of Greek. She remembered vaguely that when she was a child there was something about curtain-rings—she had played with them, possibly. But if that was all, why had her father thought it worth while to keep them? What was it exactly that she used to do with those rings? [Pg 242]

These silly questions would keep coming into her head and distracting her attention from her work. She shivered a little—the room was chilly—and took up her pen again. She wrote:

"And, whether the sentimentalist believes it or whether he does not, this religious passion which he admires so vastly in his nuns and martyrs is but a perversion of an instinct which—"

Once more she paused. The room was really too cold. Looking round, she saw that the fire was

almost out. She was accustomed to do things for herself, and she set to work to revive it at once. She opened the cupboard where she generally kept a few sticks for the purpose, but this afternoon there was none there. The curtain-rings lay on her writing-table, still tied together. Why, of course, they would do as well.

In a few minutes the fire was blazing brightly She warmed her hands at it, gazing abstractedly into the red embers. Then she went back to her work and wrote rapidly until the article was finished.

[Pg 243]

THE UNSEEN POWER

Winter walked restlessly about the room as he told his story. He was a slender young man, with very smooth hair worn rather too long, a gold-mounted pince-nez, and an expression which showed that vanity was not wholly absent from his composition. It was the story of a haunted house. The man who owned it, and was now unable to let it, had asked Winter to investigate.

"And the whole point of it is that you've got to come along and help me," he concluded.

"Thank you," said Mr Arden, "but I will not go."

Arden was a man of fifty, white-haired, thin, heavily lined.

"Well, why not?" said Winter, peevishly. "I want to know why not. It seems to me it would be rather interesting. You can choose any night you like, and—"

Arden waved the subject away with one hand. "It's useless to talk about it," he said, "I'm not going."

"But what do you mean?" said Winter. "You are not going to tell me that you're superstitious or afraid?" [Pg 244]

"I should say," said Arden, "that I am what you would call superstitious. You, I presume, are not."

"Emphatically not," said Winter.

"Nor afraid?"

"Nor afraid," Winter echoed.

"Then why don't you go alone?" said Arden.

Winter murmured of sociability; it was no great fun to sit up all night by one's self. Besides, in the detection of a practical joke, which was probably all that it was, two would be better than one. Arden must see for himself that—

Arden broke in impetuously. "Look here," he said. "Stop wandering about the room and sit down. I'll tell you why I won't come. Did you ever hear of Minnerton Priory?"

"Of course I've heard about it. I don't know the whole story, and I don't suppose anybody does. A man lost his life over it, didn't he?"

"Two men lost their lives. I was the third man. Now, you know why I won't play with these things any more."

"Tell me about it," said Winter. "I've only heard scraps here and there, and reports are always inaccurate. So you were actually one of them. I should never have guessed it."

"I will tell you the story if you wish. Will you have it now, or will you wait till you have finished your investigation of the house at Falmouth?" [Pg 245]

"I will hear it now," said Winter.

This is the story that Arden told.

"In 1871 my aunt, Lady Wytham, bought Minnerton Priory. The place had been uninhabited for the best part of half a century, and was in very bad repair. It was cheap and it was picturesque, and both cheapness and picturesqueness appealed to Lady Wytham. Of the original Priory there was very little left standing. Frequent additions had been made to it at different periods, and the general effect of the place when I first saw it was rather grim and queer. Lady Wytham was very energetic, had the place surveyed, and in a few months had got her workmen down there. In one wing of the house a secret chamber had been found. It was on the ground floor, and it was a small room of perhaps twelve feet square. There was one window to it, placed very high up, and this window had been built up on the outside. Opposite to the window was a small fireplace, and the only entrance to the room was from the big dining-hall. The hall was panelled, and one of the panels formed the door into the secret chamber. I believe this kind of thing is fairly common in

old houses dating back to the times of religious and political trouble, when hiding-places were constantly wanted. [Pg 246]

"The builders had not been at work many months at the Priory before there was trouble. I cannot say exactly what it was. It began with the unbricking of the little window in the secret chamber. I know that the men refused point-blank to do any work whatever in the great dining-hall. Many were dismissed and new hands were taken on, but the trouble still persisted, till finally Lady Wytham herself went down to interview the clerk of works and a foreman or two. On the following day she wrote to me. She said that an idiotic story was being told with reference to the newly-discovered chamber of Minnerton Priory, and she was anxious to have it satisfactorily knocked on the head. Would I, and any friends that I might care to bring down, spend a few nights in the secret chamber? It would probably be very uncomfortable, but she would send over furniture and a servant to wait on us. The postscript explained that the servant would not sleep in the house.

"The idea rather appealed to me, but being, unlike yourself, a little nervous over the business, I determined to take a couple of men down with me. One of them was an intimate friend of mine, Charles Stavold, a good-natured giant, but a useful man in a row. He and I talked it over together, and finally selected as the third man a young doctor, Bernard Ash. Ash was a remarkably brilliant young man, and we looked to him to supply the brains of the trio. If any [Pg 247] practical joke were attempted he would be quite certain to find it out, and both Stavold and myself were quite sure that some practical joke would be attempted. Minnerton Priory lies in a very conservative county. The rustics of the village were quite capable of resenting Lady Wytham's intrusion into the Priory. It had always been uninhabited in their father's time, and that would be quite reason enough to determine them that it should not be inhabited now. There were some objections to our choice. Ash led an extremely dissipated life, and Stavold and myself were a little inclined to doubt his nerves. This doubt, by the way, was not justified by results.

"We reached Minnerton in the afternoon. A large staff of men was busy at work at the place, but the only person in or anywhere near the great dining-hall was Lady Wytham's servant, Rudd. She could not have sent us a better man. He could turn his hand to anything. He had already unpacked the beds and other furniture that had been sent and put them in place, and was at present engaged on getting dinner for us. We went through the dining-hall and into the secret chamber.

"'This won't do,' said Ash at once.

"'What don't do?' asked Stavold.

"'Why, there's no furniture in here of any kind. One can't sleep on these stone flags.' [Pg 248]

"'Are we going to sleep in here?' I asked.

"'One of us is,' he said.

"I called up Rudd and gave my directions. He brought mattresses and made up a bed on the floor. Then we went round and examined the walls carefully, for, as Ash observed, where there is one trick panel there may be another. But we could find nothing that seemed in any way suspicious.

"We came back into the great hall, and sat down there and talked the thing over. It was now growing dusk. Already the tapping and hammering of the workmen had ceased, and we had heard them laughing as they passed the window on their way home. Right away at the other end of the hall came the chink of plates and the hiss of a frying-pan where Rudd was busy with his preparations. He had brought four big lamps with him, and these he now lit, but there seemed to be something impenetrable about the darkness of this vast room. The light was still dim, with masses of dark shadow waving in the far corners and in the vaulted roof above us.

"'Who's going to sleep in the haunted chamber?' Stavold asked.

"'I am,' said Ash.

"We squabbled about it, and finally decided to toss for it. Ash had his own way. He was to sleep there that night, Stavold was to sleep there the second night, and I myself was left the third night. By this time we had little doubt that we should be at the bottom of the mystery. [Pg 249]

"Rudd gave us an excellent dinner, and had shown wisdom in his choice of the wine which he had brought with him. The wine made glad the heart of man, and before dinner was over we were treating the whole thing more as an amusing kind of spree than as a serious investigation. At ten o'clock Rudd inquired at what hour we should like breakfast in the morning, and asked if there was anything further he could do for us that night.

"'Aren't you going to stop and see the ghost, Rudd?' I asked.

"'I think not, sir,' he said quietly. 'Her ladyship had arranged, sir, that I should sleep at the inn.'

"So we let him go, and I had a curious feeling that with him went the most competent man of the four. Perhaps the same idea had occurred to Ash.

"'He's a perfect wonder,' said Ash. 'Fancy being able to turn out a dinner like that here, with no proper appliances of any kind. I don't call it cooking; I call it conjuring tricks.'

"'Perhaps you'll see some more conjuring tricks a little later,' said Stavold, grimly.

"After dinner we played poker for an hour or so and then turned in. One of the lamps was left burning in the big hall, and Ash took a candle with him into the secret chamber. But he did not [Pg 250] propose to leave it lighted. It wouldn't be playing the game, he said.

"Some time after I had got into bed I could hear Ash tapping on the panels and trying them again, and I could see the light under the door. Stavold was already heavily sleeping. I knew nothing more till I was awakened by him early on the following morning. Rudd had already returned, and was preparing breakfast. Naturally our first move was to the secret chamber. We opened the panel door and went in. Ash's clothes were lying on the only chair in the room. The bed had been slept in, but there was no one there now. I noticed that the two candlesticks had also vanished. For a moment or two neither of us spoke, and then I asked my companion what he made of it.

"'That's all right,' he said, 'Ash woke early, and has slipped down to the river in his pyjamas to get a swim. It's ten to one we find him there.'

"It was not impossible, but I was surprised that he had not awakened either of us in passing through the hall. We picked up our towels and went down to the river. We called and got no answer, but we had not at this time begun to be anxious. Possibly after his bath he had gone off for a stroll through the plantations. We took a long swim, lit our pipes, and walked up to the house. The workmen were busy now on the new part far away from the big hall. In the hall itself [Pg 251] we found breakfast laid for three.

"'Dr Ash has come back then?' I said to Rudd.

"Rudd looked puzzled. 'I have not seen him this morning, sir.'

"'Drowned himself?' I suggested to Stavold.

"'Not a bit of it. Why should he? This is a little practical joke of Ash's. We'll see if he doesn't get tired of it before we do. Hunger will bring him back at lunch-time.'

"Late in the afternoon he had not returned, and we sent word up to the police-station. The police-station sent us the usual idiot, who made his notes and did his best to look as if he knew what to do. We spent the rest of the day in searching for Ash with no success. At ten o'clock we gave it up, and Rudd went back to the inn. We did very little talking, and I had some curious and inexplicable feelings as I sat there in the silence. My tobacco pouch lay on the table at arm's length, and I found myself thinking that I might have an impulse to take it up in my hand but that as I did not want the pouch at the moment I should resist the impulse. Then my hand shot right out to the pouch, gripped it, and shook it.

"'What the devil are you doing?' said Stavold.

"I flung the pouch down and got up from my chair. 'Dropping off to sleep, I fancy,' I said. [Pg 252]

"'You didn't look it.'

"'Well, I ought to know, oughtn't I? Help me to drag another bed into that chamber there. We'll see it through together to-night.'

"'Oh, no, we won't,' said my companion. 'If we did that we should leave this hall here for the use of the practical jokers, if there are any. You will sleep here to-night. I shall take my turn in the secret chamber; only, if I can help it, I shan't sleep.'

"'I wonder where on earth Ash is,' I said.

"'We don't know and it won't improve our nerves to imagine. Yours seem a bit jumpy anyhow. We've done all we can to find him. Leave it at that.'

"I did not expect to sleep that night, yet sleep came to me in fits. I had wakened many times, and at last I determined that I might as well get up. In half an hour the grey dawn would be beginning. I remembered that Stavold had told me that he did not mean to go to sleep. I whistled softly as I slipped on my clothes, so that he might hear that I was moving about and join me. As he did not come I listened at the door of the chamber and heard no sound. In a moment I was standing inside it with the lamp shaking in my hand. The room was exactly as we had found it the morning before. There was nobody there. The bed had been slept in, and was now empty. The [Pg 253] clothes lay on the chair. The candlestick had gone. I was horribly frightened.

"I did not wait for Rudd to come back. I went on to the village police-station at once and told my story. There was no doubt that this was a serious matter, and before breakfast-time an inspector had arrived from Saltham. Accompanied by a serjeant and myself he came over to the Priory and into the dining-hall.

"'I think I'll take a look round by myself first,' he said. 'You can wait here.' He went into the chamber, and I could hear his heavy boots on the flags and the useless tapping on the walls. I was confident that nothing could be found there. There were a few minutes of silence, and he opened the door and said, 'Will you come in here, Mr Arden?'

"I went in and saw that the bed had been pulled out from its usual place in the corner. He pointed to a large flagstone which the bed had covered.

"'I should like to show you, sir, a curious optical effect there is in this room. Would you mind standing on that flagstone there?'

"I came round the bed to it, and my foot had just touched it when I was jerked backwards and fell to the floor.

"'Beg your pardon, sir,' said the inspector behind me. 'I had to satisfy myself that you didn't know of the trap. See here.' [Pg 254]

"He knelt down beside the big flagstone and touched it lightly with his fingers. It was exactly balanced by a big iron pin through the centre, and it now swung open, showing a dark shaft going far down into the earth.

"'You mean that they are down there?' I said.

"'Not a doubt. Each of them, as is only natural, tried the floor as well as the walls, and moved the bed for the purpose. That finished them. It's the merest chance that I didn't go down the shaft myself.'

"'Well,' I said, 'the sooner we go down there the better. Where can we get a rope?'

"The inspector picked up a small tin match-box and emptied out the matches into the palm of his hand. 'Listen,' he said. He flung the box down the shaft. We listened, and listened, but heard no sound. 'See?' he said. 'That's deep. No use to get a rope there. Anyone who fell down there is dead. That's been a well, I should say.'

"I was angry with the man's cock-surety, and said that I was going down in any case. A rope was brought and attached to a lighted lantern. The lantern was lowered, and in a few yards went out. The experiment was tried again and again, and each time the lantern was extinguished by the foul air. It was hopeless. No human being could have lived for five minutes down there. [Pg 255]

"I rose from the floor, put on my coat, and turned to the inspector. 'This explains nothing,' I said. 'On the morning that Dr Ash was missed I went in here with Mr Stavold, and we found the bed placed as it had been the night before, immediately over this trap. If Dr Ash fell down it how did he put the bed back after him? The same thing applies to Mr Stavold; again the bed was left over the trap.'

"'They did not move the bed back again, but somebody else did.'

"'Who?'

"'That is what I hope to find out to-night? Are you yourself willing to sleep to-night in the big hall alone?'

"'Certainly. I don't exactly see what the idea is.'

"'Never mind about that. It may come to nothing. One can but try. You say that Rudd locked the door to this hall when he went out at night?'

"'Yes. A modern lock had been fitted, and the door locked itself as soon as it was shut. It could only be opened from the outside with a latch-key.'

"'And no one but yourself, that you know of, had a key?'

"'No one that I know of.'

"'Very well. I have a few things to see after. I must speak to this man Rudd. I shall see you again before nightfall.' [Pg 256]

"I spent a horribly long day. I had to telegraph to the relatives of my two friends. I sent Rudd for books, and tried in vain to read. Rudd was aware that the police had a suspicious eye upon him and was in a state of suppressed fury. While Rudd was away I again examined the inner chamber. The window was too high up to be reached by anyone within the room, and too closely barred to admit of anyone passing through it. The chimney was equally impassable. No vestige of hope was left to me. At ten o'clock the inspector came in and told me that he had given up for the night. He looked thoughtfully towards the whisky decanter. I gave him a drink and mixed one for myself. Then he said good-night and went off.

"I had not expected to sleep, but an insurmountable drowsiness came over me. I flung myself down on the bed as I was, without undressing, hoping that in this way I should wake again in an hour or so.

"When I woke the room was brightly lighted. The inspector, two of his men, and Rudd himself were all there. I was startled.

"'What's the matter? What's up?' I said.

"'Nothing much,' said the inspector, 'but I know who put the bed back in its place.'

"'Who was it?' [Pg 257]

"'It was yourself, sir. You did it in your sleep. It had occurred to me that this was just possible, and I had a man watching through the window of the room.'

"'It is impossible,' I said. 'I should know something of it. I am sure I have been here ever since you left me. Your man must have made a mistake.'

"'My man made no mistake,' said the inspector, drily, 'for my man happened to be myself. You came in, set the lamp down, pushed the bed over to one corner, and then went to the chair, where you seemed to be folding up imaginary clothes.'

"The bodies were recovered two days later, and the whole story of course got into the papers. I was away from England for some years after that. It was one of the things that one wishes to forget. You ask me to take part in another of these investigations. In all probability there is nothing to investigate but a practical joke, or a chance noise, or something equally explicable, but you will understand that I will not take the risk that there may be something else."

"But, my dear Arden," said Winter, balancing the pince-nez in his hand, "there is nothing whatever in the story that you have told me. What could be more natural than that your two friends should examine the floor, should do so with too little care, and should reap the consequences? The repeated dream is itself quite natural; I should imagine there are few people who have not had it. At the most it is a coincidence that the dream, accompanied by somnambulism, should have come three nights in succession, but there is nothing supernatural there." [Pg 258]

"Never mind that word supernatural. Do you think there is anything inexplicable? You are forgetting that the bed in that chamber had been slept in both nights. The sleeper had been awakened by some sound. What was it? What drew him to the trap-door? What was it that took possession of my will and my body so that my own personality was as blotted out as if I had been dead? But," he added, impatiently, "I do not want to convince you. When you are brought in touch, as I have been, with the unseen power you will be convinced. As your friend, I hope you never will be."

[Pg 259]

A BRISK ENGAGEMENT

He stepped out of the fashionable bazaar into the crowded street, where the July sun flashed on the ugly and beautiful and on the grey background. He was a young man with the face of a dreamer, but his hair was properly cut and he was as well and cleanly turned out as if he had been a soldier. He wore in his buttonhole a red rose; it was not his habit to decorate himself florally, but these things happen at bazaars; some pretty fool-girl had sold it to him. And Lady Mabel Silverton, who is not pretty but a dear sweet creature, had sold him iced coffee and drunk it for him—she would do anything for a charity—and bothered him to come and sing one Saturday night to her darling factory-girls, who would be so very, very grateful. The hum of many nicely-toned voices and the passionate waltz of the Mauve Hungarians still blended and swam in his ears. He still seemed to smell the scent of the smouldering incense sticks on the stall where Mrs Bunningham Smythe, clad in an Oriental robe of thoroughly Western impropriety, sold penny "Turkish Amulets" at ten shillings apiece to those young men who were sufficiently fond of her for the purpose. He was stupid with it all. He left it, and the long string of carriages at the doors, and wandered out into the Park. And he chose the more deserted part of the Park. [Pg 260]

Yes, it was no worse than anything else, as his cousin had said when she had bothered him into going. But the young man was mildly, temporarily, and uncomplainingly bored with most things. There was too much sugar in the cup; he found the taste sickly. This London world in which he lived was too luxurious, too idle, and worked too hard at being too idle. He was weary of the mechanical metallic frivolity of smart people, frivolity without one touch of sincerity and earnestness to give it contrast and effect. It was the end of the season, and he would soon be away in the country—only to find London in the country. There would be the same people with the same bad habits, merely transplanted to a scene which did not suit them.

He stood still and looked around him. There was a man with a crowd before him in the distance by the Marble Arch; he waved his arms and lectured violently. Children chased one another across the grass. Down the path towards him came a girl who held herself well. A tramp under the trees roused himself from slumber, and began slowly and painfully to put on his boots. And the young man thought it would make the very pleasantest holiday if he could change with somebody—even with the tramp under the trees for a few hours and get rid of himself. He chanced to remember that rose in his coat, and did not like it. He raised his hand to take it out. And the girl whose graceful carriage he had noticed stepped shyly up to him. [Pg 261]

"It is you then? It must be," she said, in rather a frightened voice.

In a flash he saw that the girl mistook him for somebody else, and—since chance willed it—decided to be for a while that somebody.

"Certainly, it is," he said. "I do hope I have not kept you waiting."

This was more interesting than private theatricals. But even as he spoke it struck him that it would be easier if he knew who he was supposed to be.

She was charming, he thought, and not foolish; the face was full of life and expression. He noted that she looked at him and away from him in quick flashes, as if trying to hide a surprised curiosity.

"No," she said, "I have only just come. I think we are both a few minutes before the time."

"You did not seem quite—well, quite sure of it when you recognised me."

She laughed, showing her pretty teeth. "You did not seem to be looking out for me." [Pg 262]

"I was—but in the wrong direction."

"Yes, of course you didn't know which way I should come. And then I thought you looked rather too splendid for a solicitor's clerk. You don't mind my saying that?" she added rapidly.

(So he was a solicitor's clerk in his new impersonation; this was useful information.) "Not in the least. We put on our nicest clothes for these occasions. My firm expects me to keep one good suit—to wear when I have to go and see wealthy and important clients—to—er—take their instructions." (He felt that this was a happy touch; he was falling quite easily into his part). "And, if I may say so, that must be quite your prettiest dress."

She glanced downward at it. She raised her eyebrows, and there was a quaint prettiness in the wilful twist of her lips. She seemed perplexed. "I don't think so," she said.

"And what made you decide that it was really I?"

"You were standing there just at the spot we arranged, and just at the time we arranged. You were wearing the red rose, and you raised your hand as if to call my attention to it. It was beyond mistake. But why did you say in your letter that you were of medium height? You are tall."

"Slightly over medium height, perhaps. I should hardly say tall."

"In many ways you are not what I expected. These preconceived ideas of people are always wrong. But indeed you don't look the part at all." [Pg 263]

"Really?"

"No," she said. "I should have taken you for a man of leisure—wealthy—rather bored with life—clever perhaps—certainly selfish." And she would have taken him for very much what he was.

"I will plead guilty to the last item. And now, what shall we do?"

"Do? Just as we arranged of course. We can stroll through the Park for half an hour—talk—make each other's acquaintance. And then I shall see if in any way I can help you in your work and make your life happier."

"Suppose," said the young man, "we change the programme a little. Let me take you down to Bond Street and give you some tea there."

The look of surprise became almost suspicion. She hesitated for a moment. "Very well," she said. "That will be charming."

They had reached the Park gate. The young man stopped a hansom and they got in.

"You are extravagant," she said. "We might have taken a 'bus or the Tube. We might even have walked."

The young man reminded himself that he was now a solicitor's clerk. "True," he said. "But it is only a shilling fare. And Saturday afternoon is our holiday, you know." [Pg 264]

"I shall insist on paying half the cab and half everything."

"That must be just as you wish. But if you do it will be a disappointment for me. And it is really not a very serious matter, even for me."

She seemed to think this over. Lady Mabel met them in her victoria, and the young man saluted her.

"Very well," said the girl, suddenly. "I won't pay for anything at all."

"Thanks so much," said the young man.

"But all of this," said the girl, much as if she had been speaking to herself, "is not in the least like what I had expected."

At the shop in Bond Street he took her upstairs to a table in a secluded corner.

"You seem to know your way about this place," she said, as she unbuttoned her gloves.

"I was here once on business. And I never forget places."

"Five times since we left the Park we have met people that you knew."

"Yes. Queer coincidence, isn't it?"

"And they were all wealthy-looking people."

"Clients," he said dreamily. "All clients." Then, with an awakening interest, "Will you have tea or coffee?" [Pg 265]

"Tea, please. And they all smiled and bowed to you just as if they had been your personal friends."

"Well, you know, it's like this. I've had to deal with them in some very important family matters—dark secrets. They possibly have the feeling that it is better to be on good terms with me—that I shall be more careful not to talk about their secrets, you know."

Even as the young man said it he was aware of the remarkable feebleness of it. So apparently was the girl.

"But I thought solicitors never talked about their clients' business," she said.

"They don't. Of course. Certainly not. But then I'm not a solicitor; I'm only a clerk. Still, it's a mistaken feeling; I've often wondered how it gets to be so common."

The young man felt that the game, though interesting, was becoming difficult. He reflected that at any minute people who knew him might come in and insist on talking to him. And then—the girl would discover everything and never forgive him. And the more he saw of her the more he wanted to be forgiven when the game came to its end.

He was unable to place her exactly. She was not a typist. She seemed too educated to be a governess. It was even more certain that she was not a fashionable London woman. She might possibly be a student of one of the arts. She was a little imperious in her way, yet she had the [Pg 266] kindest and friendliest eyes. She was transparently good, and he guessed that unconventionality was unusual with her. She had not spoiled its effect for herself by making it commonplace. And who on earth was this solicitor's clerk whom this charming person had meant to meet, and why had she been going to meet him? It occurred to the young man that he would like to wring the neck of that clerk (whom he was at present fraudulently under-studying) for his infernal impertinence.

"Now," said the girl, "I want you to tell me why you wrote in the first instance?"

This was a facer. He chanced it. "But I think you know," he said; and it turned out very well.

"Yes, I do, more or less. I know you read my verses, and that you then wrote to me at the office of the paper and said the kindest things."

The young man shook his head. "They were less than the truth," he said.

"But, after all, the idea in the verses—the kindred souls that Fate keeps strangers to each other—that's not a new idea. You must have seen something of the kind scores of times before."

"If I had seen it before I did not remember it. I certainly had not seen it treated in that way. Your poem seemed to come to me like a message." This for a young man who had not read one word of [Pg 267] the poem was distinctly good—or, if you prefer it, distinctly bad.

"Well, when you wrote the first letter had you any idea of writing the second, the one in which you asked me to meet you?"

"I had to see how you would take it. I know it was great presumption on my part to hope for anything of the kind; it was most good of you to come."

"I wondered how long it would be before you thanked me."

"A thousand pardons. I see little society, of course. I am shy and awkward. I never say the right thing."

"But you are not shy and awkward. You are not at all what I expected. I have your second letter here. Listen. I leave out the part where you speak of your loneliness."

"There are few lives," said the young man, sorrowfully, "more solitary than that of a solicitor's clerk. You don't know." Nor, for that matter, did he.

"Then the letter goes on: 'If you could make it convenient to spare me a few moments of your valuable time—'"

"Did I really say that?"

"Of course you did. Here it is."

"These business forms ring in one's head. They get into one's blood. One uses them unconsciously [Pg 268] and inelegantly."

"I will read on: 'If you could make it convenient to spare me a few moments of your valuable time I should like to have a go at telling you my story. Sympathy in my case has generally been conspicuous by its absence, but I think I could depend on the author of "The Strangers." I am rather a doleful sort, I am afraid, but I daresay you don't care for larking about any more than I do.'"

He had to hear that letter through to the end, and there was a good deal more of it. He had made himself responsible for the personality of a man who described himself as rather a doleful sort,

said that he did not care for larking about, and spoke of a thing being conspicuous by its absence. And there was not even the possibility of protest. He had to accept it. He could not even groan out loud. The punishment for yielding to sudden impulses was heavy indeed.

"Now," she went on, "you see what I mean when I say that you do not at all match with the Samuel Pepper who wrote that letter."

His name was Samuel Pepper then! It was almost too much. This, he felt, would be a lifelong lesson to him. He had to say something. "But," he pleaded, "few people write and speak in just the same way." [Pg 269]

"That is not my point. You write to me as a humble pleader for a favour."

"Naturally."

"When you meet me, you take something very much like the air of an amused social superior."

"I hope not!" exclaimed the young man with real sincerity. He struggled mentally after a correct Samuel Pepper attitude. "It was quite unintentional, and no disrespect meant. I suppose on a Saturday out, when I come up West, I get a bit above myself and my station. But I never meant to presume." He felt that this had the right Pepperian touch of humble commonness. "In the office or at home—"

"You mean in the Guildford Street boarding-house?"

"Quite so. It's the only London home I've got. In the office or at home I'm quite a different person."

"Oh, please! I don't mention the difference in manner because I care twopence about it, but to point out an inconsistency which puzzles me—perhaps I should say which did puzzle me at first. And why have you not told me that story that you wished me to hear. Why is it that you have not even referred to it?"

"Ah," said the young man, "how often one gets to the verge of a confession and then shirks it! [Pg 270] Believe me, it is not an easy story for me to tell. Perhaps even it would be better for me to bear my burden alone."

"Very well. And those poems that you have written—you wished to show them to me, to get my opinion and see if I could help you towards publication."

"My fatal shyness! You, a writer yourself, must know what that is!" He felt that he was quite lost, and that the girl was getting angry, and he wished he could think of some way out of it.

"So I am not to have your verses or your story. But I think I will trouble you to hear a little of my story. You are not Samuel Pepper. With my experience of story-writing I ought to have seen that that was a make-up name, to suit the part of a solicitor's clerk. There is no Samuel Pepper. Your letters then were not genuine. They were very well done; as an artist I congratulate you. The thing that puzzles me is that you could not keep it up better when you had trapped me into meeting you. You cannot act a bit. You have not even dressed the part. You have not even taken the trouble to put a few verses in manuscript in your pocket. I will tell you why you succeeded in deceiving me in your letters. I live with my family, and I write stories and verses. I know they are not very good, but the money that I get for them is a consideration, and I hope with practice to do [Pg 271] better. You touched my vanity, it is not often that anybody takes any notice of my work. And you appealed to my compassion. That part of your letter where you spoke of your loneliness among the people at the boarding-house seemed to me to be quite simple and unaffected. It made some impression on me. I was interested in what you said about your writing, and I remembered what a struggle I had at first myself; I thought I could help you. I felt safe because I trusted to your timidity and your sense of the difference between us, so cleverly conveyed in your letters. That was why you were able to trap me; and it will teach me in future not to be vain or kind-hearted. I don't know why you wanted to do it. You have had your joke, perhaps, or you have won your bet. You won't make the mistake of supposing that you have made my acquaintance, or of writing to me again. Now, I am going."

So that was it; she had taken a firm feminine intelligent grasp of the wrong end of the stick. She had also caught up her gloves. Her eyes were filled with tears of rage, and he felt very bad indeed. If he had asked her to stop she would have hurried away all the quicker; he could see that.

"Our meeting was a chance one," he said. "I know nothing of Pepper or his letters except what you have told me. You mistook me for the man you were going to meet. I am sorry I did not [Pg 272] correct your mistake since it has pained you. Otherwise I should have been very glad of it."

She sat down again, bewildered. "Chance?" she said.

"Pure chance. I shouldn't like to say much for my taste this afternoon, but really I don't make bets or jokes of that kind. I was at a silly bazaar in Hill Street this afternoon for a few minutes, and some idiot sold me this rose. I don't wear flowers, and I was on the point of taking it out of my coat when you spoke to me. The other man probably arrived after we had gone; you remember you said that we were a few minutes before the time."

The girl leaned her elbow on the table and her head on her hand and looked at him intently. "It is

too amazing," she said. "I think you are telling me the truth now. But how am I to know? You have not behaved well. You have deceived me." There were perplexed pauses between her sentences.

"I tried to deceive you, with the intention of undeceiving you in the end. You must own that I failed and that the humiliation is mine. But it is true that I have behaved badly; and it is true that I am sorry for it."

"Why did you do it? I can't think why."

"Do you remember your first impression of me?"

"Perfectly." [Pg 273]

"I am not clever, but in other respects you were about right. I was tired of everything and particularly tired of myself. It was a sudden whim. I began it in order to get away from myself."

"But why did you go on with it?"

"I went on with it to be with you."

She looked away from him, and there was a quick flush of colour in her cheeks. "Anyhow," she said, "the mistake is at an end now. I must be going." But she did not speak very resolutely.

"Will you forgive me before you go?"

"Why should I forgive you?"

"Because," said the young man, with some audacity, "I have done you a very great service."

Her eyebrows were interrogative.

"Yes, I have stopped you from meeting this Pepper person. I know your motives. I don't believe in the vanity at all. It is natural to be pleased when one's work is praised; I'm always pleased if anybody likes my music. I do believe that you were actuated solely by your kindness of heart and nothing else. But you were doing an indiscreet thing, and I feel sure from his letters that this man would have misunderstood it. Even if he had not shown presumption in his manner to you, I am sure he would have talked you over afterwards at his disgusting boarding-house and with his fellow-clerks. Why did he propose a meeting at all? Why could he not have submitted his doggerel to you by post, if you were kind enough to look at it for him? Why did he suggest this red rose [Pg 274] nonsense if he had not got some romantic ideas in his stupid head? The man's impertinence simply staggers me."

She smiled a little. "You are right perhaps. It was indiscreet. But you are too hard on him."

"I don't think so. I want you to promise me you will not meet him. You can write and say that you have changed your mind; he can post his verses to you, if you want to let him down easily."

"Very well. I think that would be best, though I don't know why I should promise you. Good-bye."

"Already?"

"I live away at Surbiton. I have a train to catch."

"Am I forgiven?"

"Yes; quite."

"Then let me at least take you as far as Waterloo."

She said nothing. But they went to Waterloo together, and in the cab they explained quite a number of things about themselves to each other. He also got into the train with her, and they had the carriage to themselves. And there he told her that he loved her and wished to marry her, and he did it far more beautifully than a bare record of the facts can suggest. [Pg 275]

She tried to speak three times and failed. So he understood her perfectly.

And some few minuter after they had exchanged their hearts' love, they also exchanged their names and addresses.

Lady Mabel Silverton says that it is a perfectly ideal marriage. The world thinks that he might have done much better for himself. He is inclined to agree with Lady Mabel. His wife would say that she agreed with the world; but I should doubt her sincerity.

[Pg 276]

HASHEESH

I

The season was nearly at its end. On the terrace of Shepherd's were many groups, German, American and English, stopping for a few days in Cairo on their way home. In the street in front of the terrace the hawkers displayed their wares—panpipes, fly-whisks, images of the Sphinx, picture post-cards, matches. One offered for sale an inlaid table that he carried on his head. Another handed up an old flint-lock pistol, heavily mounted in silver, for the inspection of a pretty girl from Cincinnati. Every now and then a carriage drove up, and a party of tourists passed up the steps, followed by a dragoman laden with kodaks, and dust cloaks, and bazaar purchases. The bright sunlight flooded a scene of brilliant colours.

At one of the tables—next to that where the pretty girl from Cincinnati was sipping her tea—sat three men of different ages. Mr Nathaniel Brookes, a man of some sixty years and rather distinguished appearance, was discussing total prohibitions with Dr Henson-Blake. The doctor [Pg 277] was a man of wiry build, with the face of a hawk, and that indescribable look which comes only of strength and experience. The third man listened and fidgeted. From babyhood he had been precocious and preferred to associate with those who were older than he was. In consequence he sometimes had to sit, as now, rather on the outside of the association. He smoked endless cigarettes and drank something which was cold and not good for him out of a long glass in which the ice tinkled pleasantly. He was a fair-haired young man whom the sun had merely freckled. He wore a single eye-glass, but did not always dare to use it. When you had got to the bottom of his failings you found fundamentally by no means a bad sort of man, by name Percival Lake. This was his first year in Egypt. Both Brookes and the doctor had known Egypt for many years.

It was Brookes who was speaking. "The Fellaheen should be allowed to dig," he said, "and it should be made well worth their while to dig."

"But they do," said the doctor. "They all of them do it in the summer, and they always have done."

"Yes," said Brookes. "Prohibitions which are too strict are always evaded. It's the same thing with hasheesh. But what I mean is that if we succeed in stopping the Fellaheen from digging, the working European Egyptologist will find very little. The native will take care of that, and this is a [Pg 278] case where the native has knowledge that the European can get only from him."

"That's possible," the doctor agreed.

"What's that about hasheesh?" the young man asked. "I thought it was the kind of drug that one came across frequently in stories, and rarely in chemist's shops, and nowhere else."

"Nominally," said Brookes, "there is no hasheesh in Egypt. It is not allowed. It is contraband. I forget how many tons of it were seized last year, and I should be sorry to say how much managed to get through."

"Then the natives really use it?"

"Of course they do. There is a common type in all races which requires a nerve alterative and will have it. If religion or sentiment or custom shuts out alcohol, then it will be opium or hasheesh. Egypt goes for hasheesh."

"And the prohibition is of no use?" asked Lake.

"I wouldn't say that," Brookes replied grimly. "If a native has a quarrel with his neighbour, he can —and sometimes does—sow cannabis Indica on his neighbour's land and then report him for growing illegal stuff as soon as the crop comes up. That is useful. Speaking seriously, the prohibition may lessen the amount of hasheesh consumed, and undoubtedly has raised its price considerably—vices are the monopoly of the rich. All the same, I had a boy working on my [Pg 279] dahabeeah last year who was an excellent fellow. This year he was impossible, and I had to sack him. That was hasheesh."

"And what is the effect of it?"

"Ask the doctor."

"If you take enough and take it long enough," said Dr Henson-Blake, "the effect is insanity. The given percentage in the asylums is fairly high, and should perhaps be higher. They don't admit that they smoke hasheesh or have ever smoked it if they can help it, and it cannot always be spotted."

"But what is the immediate effect?"

"A sense of *bien étre*, of the absence of all worry. Sometimes there are delusions. The typical smoker generally gets an excessive vanity—swelled head—and becomes very quarrelsome. That is why Brookes had to sack that boy of his."

"All the same," said Lake, "I should very much like to try it."

"If I thought you meant that—" the doctor began, with the suspicion of a sneer.

Lake was rather angry. "I can assure you I am not talking for effect. There are some people who don't, you know."

"All right," said the doctor, unperturbed. "Keep your hair on. I've got some tobacco prepared with

hasheesh upstairs. It is some that I had to confiscate. I'll give you a pipeful and you can try it after dinner. Smoke it in your own room, though—not downstairs." [Pg 280]

"Leave it alone," growled Brookes.

"Thanks very much," said Lake to the doctor. "I'll come up with you now and get it."

The three men rose. As they did so the pretty girl from Cincinnati stepped up to the doctor.

"Say, doctor—listen to me. Am I to give that man five dollars and a half for this?"

The doctor took the scarab in his hand and examined it.

"No, Miss Jocelyn," he said.

"Why not? I call that a dandy scarab. White amethyst. Genuine antique."

"It is not white amethyst and I know the man who made it—the day before yesterday. If you want it for a toy, ten piastres is an outside price. The man will take that."

"My!" exclaimed Miss Jocelyn. "Thank you vurry much," and she returned to her negotiations.

The three men passed through into the hall.

II

After dinner, Brookes and Dr Henson-Blake went off to see a friend at the Savoy. They left with grim half-chaffing injunctions to young Lake to take care of himself. Lake, a little sulky, settled himself in one corner of the hall to smoke a cigarette before his experiment. [Pg 281]

And suddenly Miss Jocelyn, whom he did not know, came up to him.

She was a dark girl, pale-skinned and red-lipped. She had a little of that jaunty, almost slangy American air of being able to take care of herself. But she also carried the impression that this air was superficial, and underneath it there might be poetry of a rather volcanic order. She sat down quietly on the other side of the table, and said:

"Do you not know me, Mr Lake?"

Lake said that at any rate he was charmed to have the privilege of making her acquaintance.

"But," she went on, "I want you to behave just as if you had known me for some time. My Aunt Esmeralda is watching us from away back, and she's pretty 'cute. Don't smile too much. Offer me a cigarette or order some coffee for me, as if it were an ordinary thing that you had often done before for me. Don't look at me all the time—look away now and then. I'll tell you why I'm doing this directly."

Lake did his best to act the part, and to take things more simply. He was consumed with curiosity, and for that reason he said, as he lighted her cigarette, "It is so nice of you to do this—to take pity on my loneliness—that I feel the reason why does not matter at all. I am unquestioningly contented with things as they are." [Pg 282]

"I just want to tell you. I know Dr Henson-Blake—we were on the tourist boat together. He's playing it low down on you. That tobacco he gave you is ordinary tobacco. He wants to make you say afterwards that you got a lot of funny sensations out of it, and then he'll say there was no hasheesh in it at all, and just laugh at you. You needn't ask me how I know, but it's the truth."

"I believe you. The possibility of it had occurred to me. Well, I have only to tell him that I got no sensations at all, and that's all over with this little joke."

"Yes," said Miss Jocelyn, "but you can get back on him. That's better."

"How?"

"Spin him a long story. Tell him you smoked it and it gave you visions. Then when he's finished with his laugh, give him his tobacco back again to prove that you knew his game all the time."

"Excellent." He took from his pocket a little box in which the tobacco was placed, put it in one of the hotel envelopes and sealed it and dated it. "But the triumph must be yours," he said.

She leaned forward seriously. "Listen to me. You don't want to mention my name—you don't even know it, but I'm Irene Jocelyn. I've put confidence in you. See, he's not got to know that I've had anything to do with it. You promise me that?" [Pg 283]

"Certainly. But I'm puzzled. Why do you come along to save me from making myself ridiculous? It's very kind of you. I'm very glad you've done it. But why?"

She hesitated and blushed slightly. "For myself, perhaps."

It seemed promising; he was emboldened. "What a pity I have wasted my time by not meeting you before? Have you been long in Cairo?"

"A few days," she said absent-mindedly. "My!" she exclaimed. "If I don't go back to my Aunt Esmeralda right now, there's going to be a deal of trouble. I'll say good-night to you, Mr Lake."

He was rather staggered. "Good-night," he said. "But I hope this is not the last time—"

"It depends. Mind that when he's about you don't know me."

He watched her as she went up the hall. Her bright smile came off very easily. She looked a little tired and hunted.

That night he could come to no satisfactory explanation. He could only decide to do exactly as he had been told, and await events. In the meantime the girl's face haunted him, and always as it had been when she did not know that he could see her—always with that tired and hunted look. [Pg 284] What had been her story? What was inside her heart and mind? What cards was she playing? Why had she spoken to him? The questions were endless. His interest in her, strangely powerful, kept him for long awake.

III

The little farce was played out with great success next morning. Lake told a beautiful story, and did it the better because Irene Jocelyn, breakfasting alone at the next table, was listening intently. After smoking the hasheesh he had heard the Sphinx talking. Then a black and limitless ocean had broken over it, and out of the ocean a strange white woman had crept and cut herself with a gold-handled knife.

"Good," said the doctor, with dry triumph. "And the more interesting because you have never had any hasheesh at all."

"No?" asked Lake. "I thought that would be it." He tossed the envelope across to the doctor. "You'll find your tobacco inside—how do you give it that green colour? I think the score is with me."

The doctor was angry, the more so because Brookes was undisguisedly amused at the failure. But he made one shrewd guess. "If I had mentioned the thing to a solitary soul I should have been [Pg 285] certain that it had been given away to you. As it is, I can't see how you came to think of it for yourself. It's quite unlike you."

IV

For the next two days Irene Jocelyn successfully avoided young Lake, and thereby drove him to the verge of madness. It even occurred to him to play a bold stroke and ask the doctor to introduce him. But he had the reasonable conviction that that introduction would do him more harm than good with this strange girl. He grew to hate Henson-Blake; it was evident that while he was there Irene would not speak. He invented excuses to get him out of the way.

On the third day she came up to him in the hall with hand outstretched. "I just want to say good-bye to you, Mr Lake," she said. "We leave this afternoon."

"Won't you tell me anything before you go? I can find no reason why you should have interested yourself in my defence. Still less can I find any reason why you should have avoided me ever since?" [Pg 286]

"But I wasn't interested in you. You're not—what do you say?—not on in this act. Didn't I tell you that I was doing it for myself?"

"Yes. You are clever—you found out the doctor's trick."

"I know him. I told you that I met him on the tourist boat. I knew what he would do."

"I am stupid—for I also knew him, and did not find out. I'm not vain enough, believe me, to suppose that you did this for love of me."

She laughed and snapped her fingers.

"I wish to God you had!" he added, and the tone and simplicity of the words carried conviction. She changed her manner. She became serious.

"What was done, not for love of you, was done for hate of somebody else! Can't you imagine a woman wanting to hit back, and too proud to let it be known that she wants to hit at all? Can't you imagine her hungering and thirsting to see a certain man fail, if only in some little thing, just for once? Can't you—Oh, you don't want the whole humiliating story, do you?"

"No, no. I'm sorry. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Only you know—that is not for hate of a man. If you hated, there might be a chance for those who loved."

She shook her head and turned away. A minute later he heard her laughing, and talking her best [Pg 287] American to a group of hotel acquaintances.

And this is perhaps the primary reason why Percival Lake did ultimately take to hasheesh in sober earnest. His friends have ceased to speak of him. Dr Henson-Blake is interested in the case.

[Pg 288]

THE GARDENER

Seven years to-day have I been in this place, and I am beginning to ask myself whether it is not time that I made a move. When I come to think of it, in my last place I had ten under me, and here it's but three men and a boy, and I always have said and always shall say that a boy is worse than nothing. In some ways I might be sorry to leave. There is work which I have begun here, and which I should be sorry to see pass into other hands to be made a muddle of. Still, as my father used to say, if you don't respect yourself, nobody is going to respect you, and I'm in two minds whether I ought to put up with such language as I had to-day.

"It's all damned carelessness," he said. "You know how particular I am about those Blenheims, and I'd sooner have lost anything in the garden. It isn't because you can't do it. I've always been proud of my melons before. It's just because you've got careless and don't care a curse how much you neglect your work. Most men would have given you the sack at once, and you shall have it from me if ever I find anything of this kind again." [Pg 289]

That's what he said. And in one way it's all true enough. That lot of melons should have been shut up at the right time, and I've lost 'em in consequence. But it's the first time I've lost anything like that all the years I've been here, and I don't know that I feel inclined to put up with it. Here am I, a single man of good character. There may be some as can teach me a little about my business, and I'm always willing to learn; but I've never found 'em yet. I can show as good testimonials as anybody, and I'm not likely to be long out of a berth. Even if I was, it wouldn't much matter; for, not being a fool, like Townes, I haven't got a wife and six children to keep, and I've been able to put by money.

One of those Townes children walked back with me as I came from my work to-day. It was the one they call Hilda. She's a pretty enough child, but nothing like what Townes thinks. The way that man talks about them, as if they were a set of angels, makes me laugh. Thank God, I've none of my own to make a fool of myself about. It's lucky for Townes, too, that I'm not a married man, for otherwise I should have had the lodge and he wouldn't, and the lodge is a lot better than anything he could afford out of his wages.

About half-past eight to-night Townes came round to the cottage to see me, and pulled out a rabbit from under his coat. [Pg 290]

"I don't know whether you'd care about anything in this way, Mr Adam," he said. "It's a nice fat young rabbit."

"Where did you get that, Townes?" I said.

He gave a sheepish kind of grin. "Well," he said, "there's plenty of them about, aren't there? I count they're more a pest than anything else. Anyway, one rabbit more or less won't matter to 'em up at the House. It's not as if rabbits were game."

"I don't know nothing about that, Townes, and I don't care nothing, either. I won't have it. As you've got it, you'd better take it back to your wife; and if I find you getting any more, you'll get the sack as sure as my name's Stephen Adam."

"All right, Mr Adam," he said. "That shall be as you say, of course. I thought perhaps, rabbits not coming into your province, you wouldn't mind. Then I wanted to call round too, to say how much obliged I am to you."

"What for?" I said.

"About those melons. There was a holy row about it, wasn't there? I don't deny it. You told me yourself to shut those lights, and I said I would. How I came to miss it I can't think. Something or other must have got into my head."

"It's a pity, Townes, that a bit of sense don't get into your head sometimes." [Pg 291]

"Well, there it was, anyhow. We heard the governor laying into you about it, and not a word did you say about it's being anybody's fault but your own. Of course the governor thinks a lot of you, and he'd put up with a thing in you which he'd give me the sack for right off. Still, I do take it as being very kind—"

"You can hold your tongue, Townes. I've got no kindness for such as you—wasting hours of skilled work by your damned wool-gathering forgetfulness."

"The fact of the case is that I'd got that child Hilda a bit on my mind at the time. The missus thought she was sickening for the measles."

"Well, she wasn't. What would it have mattered if she had been? All children have the measles, don't they? Do you think yours have got to be so blessed superior? That's no excuse at all. As for the kindness, it was simply justice. If I choose to give an order to an idiot, then it's only fair that I should suffer for it."

"I don't know that I've forgotten much before, Mr Adam."

"No, my boy, you haven't. And you'd better not forget much again if you want to keep your place. Just you let it be a lesson to you. And if you must be the father of six squalling brats, keep 'em out of your mind during work-hours. The truth is, Townes, that you think too much of those children of yours. I'm sure I don't know what they'll come to. You'll spoil 'em. Your own wife told me only [Pg 292] the other day that you spoilt 'em."

Townes gave that stupid grin of his again. "Anyhow," he said, "I don't go buying chocolates for 'em in the village."

"Well," I said, "you can get about your business. I want to read my paper, and I'm not one of those that sit up half the night."

I wonder if Hilda told him about those sweets, or if he found her eating them and then guessed. It was a fool of a thing for me to do, and I shan't do it again. That's the way you lose your authority over the men under you, by being a bit too familiar, and then of course they shirk their work and you get blamed for it.

The governor was pretty civil to-day, and after all, I don't know as I want to change at my time of life. There's a lot of half-finished work about the place still and some of it'll take a long time to get exactly to my liking.

I can't make things out. We did a lot better than we expected at the Horticultural, and the governor behaved handsomely by me, as he always does. But he's not as cheerful as usual. I see him wandering about the garden by himself, just as if he'd got something on his mind. He's sold his hunters, and I want to know what for. It's given out that he finds he's getting too old for it. [Pg 293] Looks to me more like something in the cutting-down way. I had a word with the cook up at the House, and she's of the same way of thinking. It's not only the hunters. She says there's less ordered and less entertaining done, and one of the maids has been turned off. If he's lost money, I wonder how he's lost it. It's not betting or gambling, for he was never that sort. I should say it was some investment gone wrong. I'm glad I took my father's advice there and put my savings into Consols. It may not bring in much, but the money is always there. The fact of the case is that these gentlefolk never ought to touch business at all. There are plenty of solicitors and such to look after it for them. A gentleman isn't meant to do anything except amuse himself, and when he interferes with other things he is going out of his station in life and acting foolishly. This is particularly the case when a gentleman tries to talk as if he knew anything about gardening. I was looking round the place to-day, and I should be sorry to leave it—in fact, I doubt if I should be able to make myself comfortable anywhere else. Three weeks ago, when there was that row about the melons, I did think of going. But that was a fit of temper, and with me a fit of temper's soon over. I believe I'd sooner work for half the wages than go. And if the governor says anything to me about cutting down, I don't know as I shan't hint at something of the kind. He's cut down in [Pg 294] the stable and in the house, and it won't surprise me if the garden has the next turn. I may be wrong. He's always very keen about his garden, and I fancy he'd as soon spend money on that as anything.

Had to give that fool Townes a bit of the rough side of my tongue. I found one of his children, the one they call Hilda, up on Sunley Hill, and they've got measles in those cottages there, as he well knows. Of course he had to make his excuse. He couldn't always be looking after them, and there were such a lot of them, and he knew his missus was hard at it all day. That last part's true. I had to promise that child Hilda something if she wouldn't go Sunley Hill way any more, but it's all against my better judgment. What I ought to have done was to have given her a good dressing-down and frightened her a bit. Seems a queer thing that a man who knows how to handle men and keep them in their place shouldn't know how to treat a child. All I can say is that it's the last time I shall make that mistake. Otherwise I don't know that I can say much against Townes. He's at his work smart and early every morning, which is what I like; and he doesn't loiter about. I hate a man who stands like a statue, with one foot on his spade, when he thinks nobody is looking at him. What's more, he takes a real interest in his work. He's not an educated man, as I am, and [Pg 295] he's never had my advantages, but I will say for him that he's as willing to learn as anybody can want. In fact, I sometimes wonder if I'm not spoiling my own game by teaching him a bit too much. I must be on the lookout about that.

It's just exactly what I thought. One of Townes' kids has got the measles. It's the one they call Hilda; and that's a very stupid name, to my mind, to give to the daughter of a working gardener. Of course Townes is about half off his head, and that's a bad thing, for he never had too much sense at any time. I told him yesterday, as I've told him before, that all children have measles, and the sooner they have 'em the sooner it's over, and the better it is every way. Then he says the

child's rare bad, and the doctor wouldn't come twice a day if he didn't think so. As I told him, the doctor comes twice a day to make his bill a bit bigger. I suppose doctors are on the make, same as gardeners and everybody else. Why wasn't Townes in any club? He says he shall be now. He's always shutting the stable door after he's lost the horse. That's the way things happen. I've been in a club for years, and never had any occasion for a doctor at all. I looked in at the lodge yesterday to give Hilda what I had promised, having first of all found out that she had kept her [Pg 296] word and had not been up to Sunley Hill again. Otherwise I shouldn't have gone in. As it was, it was of no use, as she was too bad to eat what I'd brought, and was a bit light-headed. She didn't seem to recognise me; and, queerly enough, that was almost a kind of disappointment. I felt quite angry with the child. As she couldn't take what I'd promised, and I found there were one or two other little things that were wanted, I got them instead. I believe in acting fairly by everybody, even if it's only one of Townes' brats. I went in again to-day, and this time she knew me. That speaks for itself, and shows that she must be getting better. I've had the measles myself or I wouldn't have taken the risk.

Had to complain to Townes to-day about his half starving himself. He said that he'd had a good deal of expense lately, and money was a bit short, and he had to save where he could. I told him, as I've told him twenty times, not to act like a fool. If a man doesn't eat, he can't work. If a man is paid to work, and doesn't work, he's swindling his boss. As I'm here to see, amongst other things, that Townes doesn't swindle the governor, I had to make some sort of an arrangement with him. I've told him we'll settle about the interest later. Strictly speaking, I ought to make it pretty stiff, for Townes isn't Consols by a long way. Now I'll go off for a stroll and my evening pipe. Possibly I [Pg 297] may look in at the lodge. In that case I think I'll leave the pipe till afterwards, as the child may not like it.

That brat of Townes' is better—ever so much better. In another week she'll be about, all over the place, and worrying the life out of me, same as usual. I did get a little peace and quietness when she was ill. Townes, of course, is as pleased as Punch, but I very soon knocked that out of him. I asked him how he thought he was going to support his children when they were a bit bigger on the wages that he got. I told him he was fit to be a head-gardener now, and asked him if he was content to be second all his life. He said, as things were at present, he didn't like to chuck a sure thing for what was only a chance. He's got no more enterprise than a dead dog. That's the curse of children. They hang round you like a dead weight, and you never get on at all. Thank Heaven, I've none of my own.

I will say this for myself, that I can generally foresee what's going to happen. I'm not one of those that has to look at a newspaper to know what the weather's going to be. It was the stables first, and then it was the house, and I said at the time it would be the garden next. The governor came along to me this morning with a sort of melancholy smile on his face, and talked to me just as [Pg 298] openly and frankly as if I'd been a gentleman like himself.

"Adam," he said, "I've lost a lot of money lately. Been swindled out of it. I daresay you heard?"

"I'd heard nothing definite, sir. I'm sure I'm very sorry to hear it now."

"Well," he said, "what I came to tell you is that you'll have to get along with one man less in the garden. I think Green will be the one to go."

"Well, sir," I said, "I don't know if I might venture on a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"I was going to say that Green's wages don't amount to very much in the year, not as compared with mine. If I might suggest, I think you might do a lot worse than to let me go and make Townes the head man here, with, say, a small rise. That'd save a lot of money, and I know you'd find Townes satisfactory."

"Does he know enough about it?"

"To speak plainly, by this time he knows as much about it as I do. He's one of the cleverest and smartest men I ever had under me, and he's a beggar to work as well. He's never done one single thing wrong since he's been here."

"What about yourself, Adam? I thought you were attached to the place. I didn't think you'd ever want to leave my service." [Pg 299]

"No, sir, I've been very well suited here. But then, you see, it all fits in. I could take a rather bigger place. Before I came here I'd ten men under me. And I should feel quite comfortable if Townes was taking on the work, for he knows how things ought to be done."

So it's all settled. Townes has got a grin on him that would reach from here to London, and would keep on thanking me all day if I didn't tell him to shut his head and get on with his work. I may be leaving, but so long as I am here I'll see proper order kept.

That kid of his, the one they call Hilda, isn't pleased at all. She says that if I go she'll come with me.

I wish to God she would.

[Pg 300]

THE SCENT

There was no one but myself in the smaller of the two smoking-rooms when he entered. I had picked up an evening paper, and was boring myself with it for a few minutes in front of the fire, before going on to bore myself somewhere else. He walked rapidly to the fireplace and rang the bell, and then turned abruptly to me.

"Hullo! How are you! Didn't know you were here." Then he caught sight of the evening paper in my hands and asked me for God's sake to put that thing down. I put it down and asked him what was the matter. He was very pale and had just the appearance of a man whose nerves were suffering from over-strain.

"I must tell you," he said abruptly. "I'm glad I found you. It's the most perfectly—"

He stopped there because the waiter who answered the bell had just entered. He ordered some brandy and resumed again.

"You will laugh your head off by the time I have finished my story, ghastly though it is. You won't believe a word of it. See here." [Pg 301]

He picked up the paper which I had thrown down, opened it rapidly, and handed it to me with his finger on one particular paragraph. The paragraph referred to an inquest on a somewhat commonplace suicide in Soho. The suicide, an Italian judging by his name, had flung himself from a window on the first floor, and had broken his neck on the pavement. Evidence was given by those who knew him that he had been very queer in his manners of late, and the usual verdict had been returned.

"Well?" I said.

"It's God's mercy that I wasn't a witness at that inquest."

"What does it matter?" I replied. "I suppose you saw the accident. You are required to go and say that; it doesn't hurt you. Nobody thinks any the worse of you. It may be a little tiresome, but there is nothing to bring you to this condition, even if you had really given evidence, which it seems you haven't."

The waiter brought the brandy. He drank it, ordered another, and continued more quietly.

"I am afraid I have let the thing prey on my mind a little. I confess that I have had a shock. The story is not at all what you imagine. I did not witness the accident; it was only within the last two hours that I heard of it, but I know how it was that it happened." [Pg 302]

He paused. I selected another cigar, lit it, and said nothing. He continued:

"You know me well enough to know my interest in anything which is a little out of the way. I will even run some slight risk to meet and talk with a man who is not as other men are, or, better still, a woman who is not as other women are. I have a fancy for human curiosities; I should like to take a museum and collect them."

"Yes," I said, "I know that. You will get yourself into trouble one of these days."

He went on speaking.

"About a week ago I went down Wardour Street and saw an Italian looking in at a shop window. I did not know that he was an Italian at the time. The national characteristics were not very strongly marked in him. He was quite well dressed, rather like a well-to-do young City man. His head was abnormal. The breadth from the end of the eyebrow to the ear was enormous. His eyes were not of the same colour; his skin was like parchment; he continually moved the tip of his nose. His nostrils opened and shut. He looked to me to be a very queer beast indeed, and I meant to talk to him.

"After a while he went into a restaurant. I waited ten minutes and then went in after him. I sat down at the same table, and, by way of opening a conversation, knocked over his glass of claret, breaking the glass. Then, of course, I apologised and ordered a waiter to replace it. He at once [Pg 303] countermanded the order, and turned to me, saying in excellent English, 'Pray do not trouble. I had quite finished with it.'

"'But,' I said, 'you must let me. Your glass was untouched.'

"'Yes,' he said, 'but I never drink it.'

"I looked amazed. 'I could explain,' he added, 'but it is a little difficult to understand, and it would

bore you.'

"'The only things that I care about,' I replied, 'are the things which are not ordinary, and are a little difficult to understand. Unless you are a dipsomaniac, triumphing over temptation, I fail to see why you should order wine which you have no intention of drinking.'

"'Your explanation is wrong,' he replied. 'I ordered the claret because I wanted to smell it.'

"As he seemed to find that conclusive, I observed that even that did not clear the thing up.

"'You must know,' he said a little impatiently, 'that with some people the scents of different objects have curious results. The possibilities implied in the sense of smell are enormous. In most people they are undeveloped; in very few are they at all understood. The connection between a scent and a memory has been noticed. I have seen a woman who smelt wallflowers for the first time for ten years burst into tears. The scent of eau de Cologne is supposed to be refreshing, and [Pg 304] that of ammonia to be vivifying, and that of ether sickening. No scent possesses the very curious attraction for a human being that valerian does for the lower animals.'

"'The whole art of obtaining a new sensation by the use of scents is absolutely unknown to most people. Most women divide scents vaguely into opaque and transparent; most virtuous women prefer the transparent. But that is really as far as they have gone. As for the effect of those scents which are not pleasant to anybody, and therefore are generally called by an unpleasant name, there seems to be no knowledge at all.'

"'I knew a case,' I said, 'of a gardener who had to work in a hothouse filled with lilies-of-the-valley. He fainted away.'

"My Italian friend took up the story.

"'And when he recovered consciousness he was angry and entreated to be put back again?'

"'Yes,' I said, 'but how did you know it?'

"'Because I know the effect of different scents.'

"I was more fascinated than ever, and made him talk for a long time. Several times he seemed to be hesitating whether or not to tell me something, and I urged him on. It came at last. He had got a secret. He had invented a scent and was assured of the marvellous power of it, but not of the whole of its effects, afterwards or immediate. These he was investigating. 'And,' he added [Pg 305] impressively, 'it gives one an entirely new way of living.'

"'I wish,' I said, 'that you were a poor man wanting money with which to carry on your experiments. If I offered to finance you perhaps you would let me witness some of them. I love nothing better than to see something new.'

"'I do not want any money,' he answered laughing. 'My workshop is near here, and I will show it to you if you care to take the risk of coming.'

"'I will come,' I replied, 'with pleasure.'

"And we both walked out together. He took me up a side-street, and then up a precipitous staircase to the first floor of a dingy-looking house. He had three large rooms there, opening into one another. He made me wait in the first, which was somewhat poorly furnished as a library, and he went through into the others. After about ten minutes he came back and fetched me through the second room, where a lot of things were cooking over tiny little spirit lamps, and into the third. The third was furnished as the first, but it was much more luxurious. He opened a corner cupboard and took down an ordinary glass stopper bottle, unlabelled and containing a colourless liquid.

"'That is it,' he said smiling; 'that is what makes all things new.' [Pg 306]

"Of course by this time I knew he was cracked, but I asked him how.

"'After frequent inhalations of this scent,' he said, 'one loses all sense of limitations or conditions. One believes that one can walk straight through a brick wall, or fly in the air, or live in the year one, or in the year two million, or in any intervening year. One is sure that he can do anything which it occurs to him that he would like to do. One has a feeling of complete omnipotence, and that means a feeling of complete happiness. No one conscious of a limitation can be completely happy. At present the effects are very transient, but I may be able to improve upon that.'

"'One moment,' I said. 'This scent does not really remove limitations and conditions.'

"'Subjectively, yes, objectively, no; but that matters little. Nothing can be unreal to us at the time that we fully believe it to be real. It is because the effects are illusive that I now refrain from experimenting with myself unless there is someone in the room with me. It is a hard struggle to keep off it. Frankly, I was very glad when you suggested that you should come here. Now, watch me.'

"He removed the stopper, and for perhaps two minutes continued to inhale the perfume. Then he put the stopper back again in the bottle and set it down on the table by his side. He did not change in appearance in the least. Half-jokingly I asked him if he could now write stories like Mr [Pg 307] Rudyard Kipling.

"'Better,' he said, 'infinitely better. They are nothing. I will show you one very short thing.'

"He took paper, pen and ink, and covered one sheet with feverish haste. Then he handed it to me with an air of triumph. It was absolute nonsense from beginning to end, and absolutely incoherent. There were phrases in it which we had used in our conversation, phrases which he might have seen in advertisements on hoardings, two or three lines of a song which is very popular just now, the whole strung together anyhow. I looked over it.

"'Capital,' I said; 'and can you fly?'

"'Of course.' He got up and opened the window. I let him climb up on the ledge, where a nervous man would certainly have fallen. I saved him only just in time, and he was angry with me. As I told him unfortunately I was not able to fly and wished for his company, he sat down and talked rubbish about the things which he said he could do for about five minutes. Then he stretched himself and yawned.

"'It has passed off now,' he said. I had a long argument with him, but it was of no use. He would not give up the bottle and he would not promise to leave it alone in the future, and he would not tell me what he called it. To irritate him I said that the whole thing was a fraud from beginning to [Pg 308] end; the bottle contained water, and nothing else. I picked it up, took a long sniff at it, and went out.

"In the street a moment later I called a cabman and told him to drive to Downing Street. I wanted to show Lord Salisbury the means of destroying any nation. I had the power of destroying any nation, and I wished to use it for the benefit of England. Long before the cab reached Downing Street I also stretched my arms and yawned, and knew that the effect had gone off. I drove back to my chambers.

"To-day I read of the suicide. He had tried to fly and he did it because I suggested it to him when he was in that state the other day. It was my fault, really."

He picked up his second glass of brandy and began sipping it. He talked it over for a long time, but he would not contradict himself or be shaken in any way.

It is at any rate perfectly true that at the sale of the suicide's property he made some large purchases. I found that out afterwards from the auctioneer.

He is living abroad now.

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[1]

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