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LADY FREDERICK

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF HENRIK IBSEN
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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
21 Bedford St., W.C.

LADY FREDERICK

A COMEDY
In Three Acts

BY W. S. MAUGHAM

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
MCMXII

This play was produced at the Court Theatre on Saturday, October 26, 1907, with the following cast:

LADY FREDERICK BEROLLES	ETHEL IRVING
SIR GERALD O'MARA	EDMUND BREON
MR. PARADINE FOULDES	C. M. LOWNE
MARCHIONESS OF MERESTON	BERYL FABER
MARQUESS OF MERESTON	W. GRAHAM BROWN
CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE	ARTHUR HOLMES-GORE
ADMIRAL CARLISLE	E. W. GARDEN
ROSE	BEATRICE TERRY
LADY FREDERICK'S DRESSMAKER	FLORENCE WOOD
LADY FREDERICK'S FOOTMAN	CLAUDE VERNON
LADY FREDERICK'S MAID	INA PELLY
THOMPSON	REGINALD EYRE
A WAITER	HEATH J. HAVILAND

LADY FREDERICK

CHARACTERS

LADY FREDERICK BEROLLES
SIR GERALD O'MARA
MR. PARADINE FOULDES
MARCHIONESS OF MERESTON
MARQUESS OF MERESTON
ADMIRAL CARLISLE
ROSE
LADY FREDERICK'S DRESSMAKER
LADY FREDERICK'S FOOTMAN
LADY FREDERICK'S MAID
THOMPSON
A WAITER AT THE HOTEL SPLENDIDE

TIME: *The Present Day*
ACTS I and II—*Drawing-room at the Hotel Splendide, Monte Carlo.*
ACT III—*Lady Frederick's Dressing-Room.*

LADY FREDERICK

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE: *Drawing-room of the Hotel Splendide at Monte Carlo. A large, handsomely furnished room, with doors right and left, and French windows at the back leading to a terrace. Through these is seen the starry southern night. On one side is a piano, on the other a table with papers neatly laid out on it. There is a lighted stove.*

LADY MERESTON, *in evening dress, rather magnificently attired, is reading the papers. She is a handsome woman of forty. She puts down the paper impatiently and rings the bell. A servant answers. He has a French accent.*

LADY MERESTON.

Did Mr. Paradine Fouldes come this evening?

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

LADY MERESTON.

Is he in the hotel now?

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

LADY MERESTON.

Will you send some one up to his room to say I'm waiting to see him?

SERVANT.

Pardon, miladi, but the gentleman say 'e was on no account to be disturbed.

LADY MERESTON.

Nonsense. Mr. Fouldes is my brother. You must go to him immediately.

SERVANT.

Mr. Fouldes his valet is in the 'all. Will your ladyship speak with him?

LADY MERESTON.

Mr. Fouldes is more difficult to see than a cabinet minister. Send his servant to me.

SERVANT.

Very good, miladi.
[*Exit Servant, and presently* THOMPSON, Mr. Fouldes' *man, comes in*.

THOMPSON.

Your ladyship wished to see me.

LADY MERESTON.

Good evening, Thompson. I hope you had a comfortable journey.

THOMPSON.

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes always has a comfortable journey.

LADY MERESTON.

Was the sea calm when you crossed?

THOMPSON.

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes would look upon it as a great liberty if the sea was not calm.

LADY MERESTON.

Will you tell Mr. Fouldes that I should like to see him at once?

THOMPSON.

[*Looking at his watch.*] Excuse me, my lady, but Mr. Fouldes said no one was to disturb him till ten o'clock. It's more than my place is worth to go to him at five minutes to.

LADY MERESTON.

But what on earth's he doing?

THOMPSON.

I don't know at all, my lady.

LADY MERESTON.

How long have you been with Mr. Fouldes?

THOMPSON.

Twenty-five years, my lady.

LADY MERESTON.

I should have thought you knew how he spent every minute of his day.

[PARADINE *comes in. He is a very well-dressed man of forty-odd. Self-possessed, worldly, urbane. He is never at a loss or put out*

of countenance. He overhears LADY MERESTON'S *last words.*

FOULDES.

When I engaged Thompson I told him the first thing he must learn was the very difficult feat of keeping his eyes open and shut at one and the same time.

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Paradine, I've been waiting to see you for the last two hours. How tiresome you are.

FOULDES.

You may give me a kiss, Maud, but don't be rough.

LADY MERESTON.

[*Kissing his cheek.*] You ridiculous creature. You really might have come to see me at once.

FOULDES.

My dear, you cannot grudge me a little repose after a long and tedious journey. I had to repair the ravages to my person caused by twenty-seven hours in the train.

LADY MERESTON.

Don't be so absurd. I'm sure your person is never ravished.

FOULDES.

Ravaged, my dear, ravaged. I should look upon it as an affectation at my age if I were not a little upset by the journey from London to Monte Carlo.

LADY MERESTON.

I'll be bound you ate a very hearty dinner.

FOULDES.

Thompson, did I eat any dinner at all?

THOMPSON.

[*Stolidly.*] Soup, sir.

FOULDES.

I remember looking at it.

THOMPSON.

Fish, sir.

FOULDES.

I trifled with a fried sole.

THOMPSON.

Bouchées à la Reine, sir.

FOULDES.

They have left absolutely no impression upon me.

THOMPSON.

Tournedos à la Splendide.

FOULDES.

They were distinctly tough, Thompson. You must lodge a complaint in the proper quarter.

THOMPSON.

Roast pheasant, sir.

FOULDES.

Yes, yes, now you mention it, I do remember the pheasant.

THOMPSON.

Chocolate ice, sir.

FOULDES.

It was too cold, Thompson. It was distinctly too cold.

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Paradine, I think you dined uncommonly well.

FOULDES.

I have reached an age when love, ambition and wealth pale into insignificance beside a really well-grilled steak. That'll do, Thompson.

THOMPSON.

Very well, sir.

[*He goes out.*

LADY MERESTON.

It's too bad of you, Paradine, to devour a substantial meal when I'm eating out my very heart with anxiety.

FOULDES.

It seems to agree with you very well. I've not seen you look better for years.

LADY MERESTON.

For heaven's sake be serious and listen to me.

FOULDES.

I started immediately I got your telegram. Pray tell me what I can do for you?

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Paradine, Charlie's head over ears in love.

FOULDES.

It's not altogether an unexpected condition for a young man of twenty-two. If the lady's respectable, marry him and resign yourself to being a dowager. If she's not, give her five hundred pounds and pack her off to Paris or London or wherever else she habitually practises her arts and graces.

LADY MERESTON.

I wish I could. But who d'you think it is?

FOULDES.

My dear, there's nothing I detest more than riddles. I can imagine quite a number of fair ladies who would look without disdain upon a young marquess with fifty thousand a year.

LADY MERESTON.

Lady Frederick Berolles.

FOULDES.

By Jupiter!

LADY MERESTON.

She's fifteen years older than he is.

FOULDES.

Then she's not old enough to be his mother, which is a distinct advantage.

LADY MERESTON.

She dyes her hair.

FOULDES.

She dyes it uncommonly well.

LADY MERESTON.

She paints.

FOULDES.

Much better than a Royal Academician.

LADY MERESTON.

And poor Charlie's simply infatuated. He rides with her all the morning, motors with her all the afternoon, and gambles with her half the night. I never see him.

FOULDES.

But why should you think Lady Frederick cares two straws for him?

LADY MERESTON.

Don't be ridiculous, Paradine. Every one knows she hasn't a penny, and she's crippled with debts.

FOULDES.

One has to keep up appearances in this world. Life nowadays for the woman of fashion is a dilemma of which one horn is the Bankruptcy Court and the other—dear Sir Francis Jeune.

LADY MERESTON.

I wish I knew how she manages to dress so beautifully. It's one of the injustices of fate that clothes only hang on a woman really well when she's lost every shred of reputation.

FOULDES.

My dear, you must console yourself with the thought that she'll probably frizzle for it hereafter.

LADY MERESTON.

I hope I'm not wicked, Paradine, but to wear draperies and wings in the next world offers me no compensation for looking dowdy in a Paquin gown in this.

FOULDES.

I surmised she was on the verge of bankruptcy when I heard she'd bought a new motor. And you seriously think Charlie wants to marry her?

LADY MERESTON.

I'm sure of it.

FOULDES.

And what d'you want me to do?

LADY MERESTON.

Good heavens, I want you to prevent it. After all he has a magnificent position; he's got every chance of making a career for himself. There's no reason why he shouldn't be Prime Minister—it's not fair to the boy to let him marry a woman like that.

FOULDES.

Of course you know Lady Frederick?

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Paradine, we're the greatest friends. You don't suppose I'm going to give her the advantage of quarrelling with me. I think I shall ask her to luncheon to meet you.

FOULDES.

Women have such an advantage over men in affairs of this sort. They're troubled by no scruples, and, like George Washington, never hesitate to lie.

LADY MERESTON.

I look upon her as an abandoned creature, and I tell you frankly I shall stop at nothing to save my son from her clutches.

FOULDES.

Only a thoroughly good woman could so calmly announce her intention of using the crookedest ways to gain her ends.

LADY MERESTON.

[*Looking at him.*] There must be some incident in her career which she wouldn't like raked up. If we could only get hold of that....

FOULDES.

[*Blandly.*] How d'you imagine I can help you?

LADY MERESTON.

A reformed burglar is always the best detective.

FOULDES.

My dear, I wish you could be frank without being sententious.

LADY MERESTON.

You've run through two fortunes, and if we all got our deserts you would be starving now instead of being richer than ever.

FOULDES.

My second cousins have a knack of dying at the psychological moment.

LADY MERESTON.

You've been a horrid, dissipated wretch all your life, and heaven knows the disreputable people who've been your bosom friends.

FOULDES.

With my knowledge of the world and your entire lack of scruple we should certainly be a match for one defenceless woman.

LADY MERESTON.

[*Looking at him sharply.*] Common report says that at one time you were very much in love with her.

FOULDES.

Common report is an ass whose long ears only catch its own braying.

LADY MERESTON.

I was wondering how far things went. If you could tell Charlie of the relations between you....

FOULDES.

My good Maud, there were no relations—unfortunately.

LADY MERESTON.

Poor George was very uneasy about you at the time.

FOULDES.

Your deceased husband, being a strictly religious man, made a point of believing the worst about his neighbours.

LADY MERESTON.

Don't, Paradine; I know you didn't like one another, but remember that I loved him with all my heart. I shall never get over his death.

FOULDES.

My dear girl, you know I didn't mean to wound you.

LADY MERESTON.

After all, it was largely your fault. He was deeply religious, and as the president of the Broad Church Union he couldn't countenance your mode of life.

FOULDES.

[*With great unction.*] Thank God in my day I've been a miserable sinner!

LADY MERESTON.

[*Laughing.*] You're quite incurable, Paradine. But you will help me now. Since his father's death, the boy and I have lived a very retired life, and now we're quite helpless. It would break my heart if Charlie married that woman.

FOULDES.

I'll do my best. I think I can promise you that nothing will come of it.

[*The door is flung open, and* LADY FREDERICK *enters, followed by* MERESTON, *a young boyish man of twenty-two; by her brother*, SIR GERALD O'MARA, *a handsome fellow of six-and-twenty; by* CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE, ADMIRAL CARLISLE, *and* ROSE, *his daughter*. LADY FREDERICK *is a handsome Irish woman of thirty to thirty-five, beautifully dressed. She is very vivacious, and light-hearted. She has all the Irish recklessness and unconcern for the morrow. Whenever she wants to get round anybody she falls into an Irish brogue, and then, as she knows very well, she is quite irresistible.* CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE *is a polished, well-groomed man of thirty-five, with suave manners*. THE ADMIRAL *is bluff and downright*. ROSE *is a pretty ingénue of nineteen*.

LADY MERESTON.

Here they are.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Enthusiastically going to him with open arms.*] Paradine! Paradine! Paradine!

MERESTON.

Oh, my prophetic soul, mine uncle!

FOULDES.

[*Shaking hands with* LADY FREDERICK.] I heard you were at the Casino.

LADY FREDERICK.

Charlie lost all his money, so I brought him away.

LADY MERESTON.

I wish you wouldn't gamble, Charlie dear.

MERESTON.

My dear mother, I've only lost ten thousand francs.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*To* PARADINE FOULDES.] I see you're in your usual robust health.

FOULDES.

You needn't throw it in my face. I shall probably be very unwell to-morrow.

LADY FREDERICK.

D'you know Admiral Carlisle? This is my brother Gerald.

FOULDES.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Introducing.*] Captain Montgomerie.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I think we've met before.

FOULDES.

I'm very pleased to hear it. How d'you do. [*To* MERESTON.] Are you having a good time in Monte Carlo, Charles?

MERESTON.

A 1, thanks.

FOULDES.

And what do you do with yourself?

MERESTON.

Oh, hang about generally, you know—and there's always the tables.

FOULDES.

That's right, my boy; I'm glad to see that you prepare yourself properly for your duties as a hereditary legislator.

MERESTON.

[*Laughing.*] Oh, shut it, Uncle Paradine.

FOULDES.

I rejoice also to find that you have already a certain command of the vernacular.

MERESTON.

Well, if you can browbeat a London cabby and hold your own in repartee with a barmaid, it oughtn't to be difficult to get on all right in the House of Lords.

FOULDES.

But let me give you a solemn warning. You have a magnificent chance, dear boy, with all the advantages of wealth and station. I beseech you not to throw it away by any exhibition of talent. The field is clear and the British people are waiting for a leader. But remember that the British people like their leaders dull. Capacity they mistrust, versatility they cannot bear, and wit they utterly abhor. Look at the fate of poor Lord Parnaby. His urbanity gained him the premiership, but his brilliancy overthrew him. How could the fortunes of the nation be safe with a man whose speeches were pointed and sparkling, whose mind was so quick, so agile, that it reminded you of a fencer's play? Every one is agreed that Lord Parnaby is flippant and unsubstantial; we doubt his principles and we have grave fears about his morality. Take warning, my dear boy, take warning. Let the sprightly epigram never lighten the long periods of your speech nor the Attic salt flavour the roast beef of your conversation. Be careful that your metaphors show no imagination and conceal your brains as you would a discreditable secret. Above all, if you have a sense of humour, crush it. Crush it.

MERESTON.

My dear uncle, you move me very much. I will be as stupid as an owl.

FOULDES.

There's a good, brave boy.

MERESTON.

I will be heavy and tedious.

FOULDES.

I see already the riband of the Garter adorning your shirt-front. Remember, there's no damned merit about that.

MERESTON.

None shall listen to my speeches without falling into a profound sleep.

FOULDES.

[*Seizing his hand.*] The premiership itself is within your grasp.

LADY MERESTON.

Dear Paradine, let us take a stroll on the terrace before we go to bed.

FOULDES.

And you shall softly whisper all the latest scandal in my ear.

[*He puts on her cloak and they go out.*

LADY FREDERICK.

May I speak to you, Admiral?

ADMIRAL.

Certainly, certainly. What can I do for you?

[*While* LADY FREDERICK *and the* ADMIRAL *talk, the others go slowly out. Through the conversation she uses her Irish brogue.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Are you in a good temper?

ADMIRAL.

Fairly, fairly.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm glad of that because I want to make you a proposal of marriage.

ADMIRAL.

My dear Lady Frederick, you take me entirely by surprise.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Not on my own behalf, you know.

ADMIRAL.

Oh, I see.

LADY FREDERICK.

The fact is, my brother Gerald has asked your daughter to marry him, and she has accepted.

ADMIRAL.

Rose is a minx, Lady Frederick, and she's much too young to marry.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now don't fly into a passion. We're going to talk it over quite calmly.

ADMIRAL.

I tell you I won't hear of it. The boy's penniless.

LADY FREDERICK.

That's why it's so lucky you're rich.

ADMIRAL.

Eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

You've been talking of buying a place in Ireland. You couldn't want anything nicer than Gerald's—gravel soil, you know. And you simply dote on Elizabethan architecture.

ADMIRAL.

I can't bear it.

LADY FREDERICK.

How fortunate, then, that the house was burnt down in the eighteenth century and rebuilt in the best Georgian style.

ADMIRAL.

Ugh.

LADY FREDERICK.

And you'd love to have little grandsons to dandle on your knee.

ADMIRAL.

How do I know they wouldn't be girls?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, it's most unusual in our family.

ADMIRAL.

I tell you I won't hear of it.

LADY FREDERICK.

You know, it's not bad to have the oldest baronetcy in the country but one.

ADMIRAL.

I suppose I shall have to pack Rose off to England.

LADY FREDERICK.

And break her heart?

ADMIRAL.

Women's hearts are like old china, none the worse for a break or two.

LADY FREDERICK.

Did you ever know my husband, Admiral?

ADMIRAL.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

I was married to him at seventeen because my mother thought it a good match, and I was desperately in love with another man. Before we'd been married a fortnight he came home blind drunk, and I had never seen a drunken man before. Then I found out he was a confirmed tippler. I was so ashamed. If you only knew what my life was for the ten years I lived with him. I've done a lot of foolish things in my time, but, my God, I have suffered.

ADMIRAL.

Yes, I know, I know.

LADY FREDERICK.

And believe me, when two young things love one another it's better to let them marry. Love is so very rare in this world. One really ought to make the most of it when it's there.

ADMIRAL.

I'm very sorry, but I've made up my mind.

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, but won't you alter it—like Nelson. Don't be hard on Rose. She's really in love with Gerald. Do give them a chance. Won't you? Ah, do—there's a dear.

ADMIRAL.

I don't want to hurt your feelings, but Sir Gerald is about the most ineligible young man that I've ever come across.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Triumphantly.*] There, I knew we should agree. That's precisely what I told him this morning.

ADMIRAL.

I understand his place is heavily mortgaged.

LADY FREDERICK.

No one will lend a penny more on it. If they would Gerald would borrow it at once.

ADMIRAL.

He's got nothing but his pay to live upon.

LADY FREDERICK.

And his tastes are very extravagant.

ADMIRAL.

He's a gambler.

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes, but then he's so good looking.

ADMIRAL.

Eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm glad that we agree so entirely about him. Now there's nothing left but to call the young things in, join their hands and give them our united blessing.

ADMIRAL.

Before I consent to this marriage, madam, I'll see your brother——

LADY FREDERICK.

Damned?

ADMIRAL.

Yes, madam, damned.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now listen to me quietly, will you?

ADMIRAL.

I should warn you, Lady Frederick, that when I once make up my mind about a thing, I never change it.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now that is what I really admire. I like a man of character. You know, I've always been impressed by your strength and determination.

ADMIRAL.

I don't know about that. But when I say a thing, I do it.

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes, I know. And in five minutes you're going to say that Gerald may marry your pretty Rose.

ADMIRAL.

No, no, no.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now look here, don't be obstinate, I don't like you when you're obstinate.

ADMIRAL.

I'm not obstinate. I'm firm.

LADY FREDERICK.

After all, Gerald has lots of good qualities. He's simply devoted to your daughter. He's been a little wild, but you know you wouldn't give much for a young man who hadn't.

ADMIRAL.

[*Gruffly.*] I don't want a milksop for a son-in-law.

LADY FREDERICK.

As soon as he's married, he'll settle into a model country squire.

ADMIRAL.

Well, he's a gambler, and I can't get over that.

LADY FREDERICK.

Shall he promise you never to play cards again? Now, don't be horrid. You don't want to make me utterly wretched, do you?

ADMIRAL.

[*Unwillingly.*] Well, I'll tell you what I'll do—they shall marry if he doesn't gamble for a year.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, you duck. [*She impulsively throws her arms round his neck and kisses him. He is a good deal taken aback.*] I beg your pardon, I couldn't help it.

ADMIRAL.

I don't altogether object, you know.

LADY FREDERICK.

Upon my word, in some ways you're rather fascinating.

ADMIRAL.

D'you think so, really?

LADY FREDERICK.

I do indeed.

ADMIRAL.

I rather wish that proposal of marriage had been on your own behalf.

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, with me, dear Admiral, experience triumphs over hope. I must tell the children. [*Calling.*] Gerald, come here. Rose.

[GERALD *and* ROSE *come in.*

LADY FREDERICK.

I always knew your father was a perfect darling, Rose.

ROSE.

Oh, papa, you are a brick.

ADMIRAL.

I thoroughly disapprove of the marriage, my dear, but—it's not easy to say no to Lady Frederick.

GERALD.

It's awfully good of you, Admiral, and I'll do my best to make Rose a ripping husband.

ADMIRAL.

Not so fast, young man, not so fast. There's a condition.

ROSE.

Oh, father!

LADY FREDERICK.

Gerald is to behave himself for a year, and then you may marry.

ROSE.

But won't Gerald grow very dull if he behaves himself?

LADY FREDERICK.

I have no doubt of it. But dullness is the first requisite of a good husband.

ADMIRAL.

Now you must pack off to bed, my dear. I'm going to smoke my pipe before turning in.

ROSE.

[*Kissing* LADY FREDERICK.] Good-night, dearest. I'll never forget your kindness.

LADY FREDERICK.

You'd better not thank me till you've been married a few years.

ROSE.

[*Holding out her hand to* GERALD.] Good-night.

GERALD.

[*Taking it and looking at her.*] Good-night.

ADMIRAL.

[*Gruffly.*] You may as well do it in front of my face as behind my back.

ROSE.

[*Lifting up her lips.*] Good-night.
[*He kisses her, and the* ADMIRAL *and* ROSE *go out.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh lord, I wish I were eighteen.
[*She sinks into a chair, and an expression of utter weariness comes over her face.*

GERALD.

I say, what's up?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Starting.*] I thought you'd gone. Nothing.

GERALD.

Come, out with it.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my poor boy, if you only knew. I'm so worried that I don't know what on earth to do.

GERALD.

Money?

LADY FREDERICK.

Last year I made a solemn determination to be economical. And it's ruined me.

GERALD.

My dear, how could it?

LADY FREDERICK.

I can't make it out. It seems very unfair. The more I tried not to be extravagant, the more I spent.

GERALD.

Can't you borrow?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] I have borrowed. That's just it.

GERALD.

Well, borrow again.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've tried to. But no one's such a fool as to lend me a penny.

GERALD.

Did you say I'd sign anything they liked?

LADY FREDERICK.

I was so desperate I said we'd both sign anything. It was Dick Cohen.

GERALD.

Oh lord, what did he say?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Imitating a Jewish accent.*] What's the good of wathting a nithe clean sheet of paper, my dear lady?

GERALD.

[*Shouting with laughter.*] By George, don't I know it.

LADY FREDERICK.

For heaven's sake don't let's talk of my affairs. They're in such a state that if I think of them at all I shall have a violent fit of hysterics.

GERALD.

But look here, what d'you really mean?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, if you want it—I owe my dressmaker seven hundred pounds, and last year I signed two horrid bills, one for fifteen hundred and the other for two thousand. They fall due the day after to-morrow, and if I can't raise the money I shall have to go through the Bankruptcy Court.

GERALD.

By George, that's serious.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's so serious that I can't help thinking something will happen. Whenever I've got in a really tight fix something has turned up and put me on my legs again. Last time, Aunt Elizabeth had an apoplectic fit. But of course it wasn't really very profitable because mourning is so desperately expensive.

GERALD.

Why don't you marry?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my dear Gerald, you know I'm always unlucky at games of chance.

GERALD.

Charlie Mereston's awfully gone on you.

LADY FREDERICK.

That must be obvious to the meanest intelligence.

GERALD.

Well, why don't you have him?

LADY FREDERICK.

Good heavens, I'm old enough to be his mother.

GERALD.

Nonsense. You're only ten years older than he is, and nowadays no nice young man marries a woman younger than himself.

LADY FREDERICK.

He's such a good fellow. I couldn't do him a nasty turn like that.

GERALD.

How about Montgomerie? He simply stinks of money, and he's not a bad sort.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Surprised.*] My dear boy, I hardly know him.

GERALD.

Well, I'm afraid it means marriage or bankruptcy.

LADY FREDERICK.

Here's Charlie. Take him away, there's a dear. I want to talk to Paradine.

Enter PARADINE FOULDES *with* MERESTON.

FOULDES.

What, still here, Lady Frederick?

LADY FREDERICK.

As large as life.

FOULDES.

We've been taking a turn on the terrace.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*To* MERESTON.] And has your astute uncle been pumping you, Charlie?

FOULDES.

Eh, what?

MERESTON.

I don't think he got much out of me.

FOULDES.

[*Good-naturedly.*] All I wanted, dear boy. There's no one so transparent as the person who thinks he's devilish deep. By the way, what's the time?

GERALD.

About eleven, isn't it?

FOULDES.

Ah! How old are you, Charlie?

MERESTON.

Twenty-two.

FOULDES.

Then it's high time you went to bed.

LADY FREDERICK.

Charlie's not going to bed till I tell him. Are you?

MERESTON.

Of course not.

FOULDES.

Has it escaped your acute intelligence, my friend, that I want to talk to Lady Frederick?

MERESTON.

Not at all. But I have no reason to believe that Lady Frederick wants to talk to you.

GERALD.

Let's go and have a game of pills, Charlie.

MERESTON.

D'you want to be left alone with the old villain?

FOULDES.

You show no respect for my dyed hairs, young man.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've not seen him for years, you know.

MERESTON.

Oh, all right. I say, you're coming for a ride to-morrow, aren't you?

LADY FREDERICK.

Certainly. But it must be in the afternoon.

FOULDES.

I'm sorry, but Charles has arranged to motor me over to Nice in the afternoon.

MERESTON.

[*To* LADY FREDERICK.] That'll suit me A 1. I had an engagement, but it was quite unimportant.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then that's settled. Good-night.

MERESTON.

Good-night.

[*He goes out with* GERALD. LADY FREDERICK *turns and good-humouredly scrutinises* PARADINE FOULDES.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well?

FOULDES.

Well?

LADY FREDERICK.

You wear excellently, Paradine.

FOULDES.

Thanks.

LADY FREDERICK.

How do you manage it?

FOULDES.

By getting up late and never going to bed early, by eating whatever I like and drinking whenever I'm thirsty, by smoking strong cigars, taking no exercise, and refusing under any circumstances to be bored.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm sorry you had to leave town in such a hurry. Were you amusing yourself?

FOULDES.

I come to the Riviera every year.

LADY FREDERICK.

I daresay, but not so early.

FOULDES.

I've never surrendered so far to middle age as to make habits.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear Paradine, the day before yesterday, Lady Mereston, quite distracted, went to the post office and sent you the following wire: "Come at once, your help urgently needed. Charlie in toils designing female, Maud." Am I right?

FOULDES.

I never admit even to myself that a well-dressed woman is mistaken.

LADY FREDERICK.

So you started post-haste, bent upon protecting your nephew, and were infinitely surprised to learn that the designing female was no other than your humble servant.

FOULDES.

You'd be irresistible, Lady Frederick, if you didn't know you were so clever.

LADY FREDERICK.

And now what are you going to do?

FOULDES.

My dear lady, I'm not a police officer, but a very harmless, inoffensive old bachelor.

LADY FREDERICK.

With more wiles than the mother of many daughters and the subtlety of a company promoter.

FOULDES.

Maud seems to think that as I've racketted about a little in my time, I'm just the sort of man to deal with you. Set a thief to catch a thief, don't you know? She's rather fond of proverbs.

LADY FREDERICK.

She should have thought rather of: When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war. I hear Lady Mereston has been saying the most agreeable things about me.

FOULDES.

Ah, that's women's fault; they always show their hand. You're the only woman I ever knew who didn't.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a brogue.*] You should have avoided the Blarney Stone when you went to Ireland.

FOULDES.

Look here, d'you want to marry Charlie?

LADY FREDERICK.

Why should I?

FOULDES.

Because he's got fifty thousand a year, and you're head over ears in debt. You've got to raise something like four thousand pounds at once, or you go under. You've got yourself a good deal talked about during the last ten years, but people have stood you because you had plenty of money. If you go broke they'll drop you like a hot potato. And I daresay it wouldn't be inconvenient to change Lady Frederick Berolles into Lady Mereston. My sister has always led me to believe that it is rather attractive to be a Marchioness.

LADY FREDERICK.

Unlike a duchess, its cheap without being gaudy.

FOULDES.

You asked me why you might want to marry a boy from ten to fifteen years younger than yourself, and I've told you.

LADY FREDERICK.

And now perhaps you'll tell me why you're going to interfere in my private concerns?

FOULDES.

Well, you see his mother happens to be my sister, and I'm rather fond of her. It's true her husband was the most sanctimonious prig I've ever met in my life.

LADY FREDERICK.

I remember him well. He was president of the Broad Church Union and wore side-whiskers.

FOULDES.

But she stuck to me through thick and thin. I've been in some pretty tight places in my day, and she's always given me a leg up when I wanted it. I've got an idea it would just about break her heart if Charlie married you.

LADY FREDERICK.

Thanks.

FOULDES.

You know, I don't want to be offensive, but I think it would be a pity myself. And besides, unless I'm much mistaken, I've got a little score of my own that I want to pay off.

LADY FREDERICK.

Have you?

FOULDES.

You've got a good enough memory not to have forgotten that you made a blithering fool of me once. I swore I'd get even with you, and by George, I mean to do it.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] And how do you propose to stop me if I make up my mind that I'm going to accept Charlie?

FOULDES.

Well, he's not proposed yet, has he?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not yet, but I've had to use every trick and device I can think of to prevent him.

FOULDES.

Look here, I'm going to play this game with my cards on the table.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then I shall be on my guard. You're never so dangerous as when you pretend to be frank.

FOULDES.

I'm sorry you should think so badly of me.

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't. Only it was a stroke of genius when Nature put the soul of a Jesuit priest into the body of a Yorkshire squire.

FOULDES.

I wonder what you're paying me compliments for. You must be rather afraid of me.

[*They look at one another for a moment.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, let's look at these cards.

FOULDES.

First of all, there's this money you've got to raise.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well?

FOULDES.

This is my sister's suggestion.

LADY FREDERICK.

That means you don't much like it.

FOULDES.

If you'll refuse the boy and clear out—we'll give you forty thousand pounds.

LADY FREDERICK.

I suppose you'd be rather surprised if I boxed your ears.

FOULDES.

Now, look here, between you and me high falutin's rather absurd, don't you think so? You're in desperate want of money, and I don't suppose it would amuse you much to have a young hobbledehoy hanging about your skirts for the rest of your life.

LADY FREDERICK.

Very well, we'll have no high falutin! You may tell Lady Mereston that if I really wanted the money I shouldn't be such an idiot as to take forty thousand down when I can have fifty thousand a year for the asking.

FOULDES.

I told her that.

LADY FREDERICK.

You showed great perspicacity. Now for the second card.

FOULDES.

My dear, it's no good getting into a paddy over it.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've never been calmer in my life.

FOULDES.

You always had the very deuce of a temper. I suppose you've not given Charlie a sample of it yet, have you?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Not yet.

FOULDES.

Well, the second card's your reputation.

LADY FREDERICK.

But I haven't got any. I thought that such an advantage.

FOULDES.

You see Charlie is a young fool. He thinks you a paragon of all the virtues, and it's never occurred to him that you've rather gone the pace in your time.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's one of my greatest consolations to think that even a hundred horse-power racing motor couldn't be more rapid than I've been.

FOULDES.

Still it'll be rather a shock to Charlie when he hears that this modest flower whom he trembles to adore has....

LADY FREDERICK.

Very nearly eloped with his own uncle. But you won't tell him that story because you hate looking a perfect ass.

FOULDES.

Madam, when duty calls, Paradine Fouldes consents even to look ridiculous. But I was thinking of the Bellingham affair.

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, of course, there's the Bellingham affair. I'd forgotten it.

FOULDES.

Nasty little business that, eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

Horrid.

FOULDES.

Don't you think it would choke him off?

LADY FREDERICK.

I think it very probable.

FOULDES.

Well, hadn't you better cave in?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Ringing the bell.*] Ah, but you've not seen my cards yet. [*A servant enters.*] Tell my servant to bring down the despatch-box which is on my writing-table.

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

[*Exit.*

FOULDES.

What's up now?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, four or five years ago I was staying at this hotel, and Mimi la Bretonne had rooms here.

FOULDES.

I never heard of the lady, but her name suggests that she had an affectionate nature.

LADY FREDERICK.

She was a little singer at the Folies Bergères, and she had the loveliest emeralds I ever saw.

FOULDES.

But you don't know Maud's.

LADY FREDERICK.

The late Lord Mereston had a passion for emeralds. He always thought they were such pure stones.

FOULDES.

[*Quickly.*] I beg your pardon?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, Mimi fell desperately ill, and there was no one to look after her. Of course the pious English ladies in the hotel wouldn't go within a mile of her, so I went and did the usual thing, don't you know.

[LADY FREDERICK'S *man comes in with a small despatch-box which he places on a table. He goes out.* LADY FREDERICK *as she talks, unlocks it.*

FOULDES.

Thank God I'm a bachelor, and no ministering angel ever smoothes my pillow when I particularly want to be left alone.

LADY FREDERICK.

I nursed her more or less through the whole illness, and afterwards she fancied she owed me her worthless little life. She wanted to give me the precious emeralds, and when I refused was so heart-broken that I said I'd take one thing if I might.

FOULDES.

And what was that?

LADY FREDERICK.

A bundle of letters. I'd seen the address on the back of the envelope, and then I recognised the writing. I thought they'd be much safer in my hands than in hers. [*She takes them out of the box and hands them to* PARADINE.] Here they are.

[*He looks and starts violently.*

FOULDES.

89 Grosvenor Square. It's Mereston's writing. You don't mean? What! Ah, ah, ah. [*He bursts into a shout of laughter.*] The old sinner. And Mereston wouldn't have me in the house, if you please, because I was a dissolute libertine. And he was the president of the Broad Church Union. Good Lord, how often have I heard him say:

"Gentlemen, I take my stand on the morality, the cleanliness and the purity of English Family Life." Oh, oh, oh.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've often noticed that the religious temperament is very susceptible to the charms of my sex.

FOULDES.

May I look?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, I don't know. I suppose so.

FOULDES.

[*Reading.*] "Heart's delight".... And he signs himself, "your darling chickabiddy." The old ruffian.

LADY FREDERICK.

She was a very pretty little thing.

FOULDES.

I daresay, but thank heaven, I have some sense of decency left, and it outrages all my susceptibilities that a man in side-whiskers should call himself anybody's chickabiddy.

LADY FREDERICK.

Protestations of undying affection are never ridiculous when they are accompanied by such splendid emeralds.

FOULDES.

[*Starting and growing suddenly serious.*] And what about Maud?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well?

FOULDES.

Poor girl, it'd simply break her heart. He preached at her steadily for twenty years, and she worshipped the very ground he trod on. She'd have died of grief at his death except she felt it her duty to go on with his work.

LADY FREDERICK.

I know.

FOULDES.

By Jove, it's a good card. You were quite right to refuse the emeralds: these letters are twice as valuable.

LADY FREDERICK.

Would you like to burn them?

FOULDES.

Betsy!

LADY FREDERICK.

There's the stove. Put them in.

[*He takes them up in both hands and hurries to the stove. But he stops and brings them back, he throws them on the sofa.*

FOULDES.

No, I won't.

LADY FREDERICK.

Why not?

FOULDES.

It's too dooced generous. I'll fight you tooth and nail, but it's not fair to take an advantage over me like that. You'll bind my hands with fetters.

LADY FREDERICK.

Very well. You've had your chance.

FOULDES.

But, by Jove, you must have a good hand to throw away a card like that. What have you got—a straight flush?

LADY FREDERICK.

I may be only bluffing, you know.

FOULDES.

Lord, it does me good to hear your nice old Irish brogue again.

LADY FREDERICK.

Faith, and does it?

FOULDES.

I believe you only put it on to get over people.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Smiling.*] Begorrah, it's not easy to get over you.

FOULDES.

Lord, I was in love with you once, wasn't I?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not more than lots of other people have been.

FOULDES.

And you did treat me abominably.

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, that's what they all said. But you got over it very well.

FOULDES.

I didn't. My digestion was permanently impaired by your brutal treatment.

LADY FREDERICK.

Is that why you went to Carlsbad afterwards instead of the Rocky Mountains?

FOULDES.

You may laugh, but the fact remains that I've only been in love once, and that was with you.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Smiling as she holds out her hand.*] Good-night.

FOULDES.

For all that I'm going to fight you now for all I'm worth.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm not frightened of you, Paradine.

FOULDES.

Good-night.

[*As he goes out,* CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE *enters*.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Yawning and stretching her arms.*] Oh I'm so sleepy.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I'm sorry for that. I wanted to have a talk with you.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Smiling.*] I daresay I can keep awake for five minutes, you know—especially if you offer me a cigarette.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Here you are.

[*He hands her his case and lights her cigarette.*

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a sigh.*] Oh, what a comfort.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I wanted to tell you, I had a letter this morning from my solicitor to say that he's just bought Crowley Castle on my behalf.

LADY FREDERICK.

Really. But it's a lovely place. You must ask me to come and stay.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I should like you to stay there indefinitely.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a quick look.*] That's charming of you, but I never desert my London long.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Smiling.*] I have a very nice house in Portman Square.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Surprised.*] Really?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

And I'm thinking of going into Parliament at the next election.

LADY FREDERICK.

It appears to be a very delightful pastime to govern the British nation, dignified without being laborious.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Lady Frederick, although I've been in the service I have rather a good head for business, and I hate beating about the bush. I wanted to ask you to marry me.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's nice of you not to make a fuss about it. I'm very much obliged but I'm afraid I can't.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Why not?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, you see, I don't know you.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

We could spend the beginning of our married life so usefully in making one another's acquaintance.

LADY FREDERICK.

It would be rather late in the day then to come to the conclusion that we couldn't bear the sight of one another.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Shall I send my banker's book so that you may see that my antecedents are respectable and my circumstances—such as to inspire affection.

LADY FREDERICK.

I have no doubt it would be very interesting—but not to me.

[*She makes as if to go.*

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Ah, don't go yet. Won't you give me some reason?

LADY FREDERICK.

If you insist. I'm not in the least in love with you.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

D'you think that much matters?

LADY FREDERICK.

You're a friend of Gerald's, and he says you're a very good sort. But I really can't marry every one that Gerald rather likes.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

He said he'd put in a good word for me.

LADY FREDERICK.

If I ever marry again it shall be to please myself, not to please my brother.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I hope I shall induce you to alter your mind.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm afraid I can give you no hope of that.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

You know, when I determine to do a thing, I generally do it.

LADY FREDERICK.

That sounds very like a threat.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

You may take it as such if you please.

LADY FREDERICK.

And you've made up your mind that you're going to marry me?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Quite.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, I've made up mine that you shan't. So we're quits.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Why don't you talk to your brother about it?

LADY FREDERICK.

Because it's no business of his.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Isn't it? Ask him!

LADY FREDERICK.

What do you mean by that?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Ask him? Good-night.

LADY FREDERICK.

Good-night. [*He goes out.* LADY FREDERICK *goes to the French window that leads to the terrace and calls.*] Gerald!

GERALD.

Hulloa!

[*He appears and comes into the room.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Did you know that Captain Montgomerie was going to propose to me?

GERALD.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

Is there any reason why I should marry him?

GERALD.

Only that I owe him nine hundred pounds.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Aghast.*] Oh, why didn't you tell me?

GERALD.

You were so worried, I couldn't. Oh, I've been such a fool. I tried to make a *coup* for Rose's sake.

LADY FREDERICK.

Is it a gambling debt?

GERALD.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Ironically.*] What they call a debt of honour?

GERALD.

I must pay it the day after to-morrow without fail.

LADY FREDERICK.

But that's the day my two bills fall due. And if you don't?

GERALD.

I shall have to send in my papers, and I shall lose Rosie. And then I shall blow out my silly brains.

LADY FREDERICK.

But who is the man?

GERALD.

He's the son of Aaron Levitzki, the money-lender.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Half-comic, half-aghast.*] Oh lord!

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same as in ACT I. ADMIRAL CARLISLE *is sleeping in an armchair with a handkerchief over his face*. ROSE *is sitting on a grandfather's chair, and* GERALD *is leaning over the back*.

ROSE.

Isn't papa a perfectly adorable chaperon?

[*The* ADMIRAL *snores*.

GERALD.

Perfectly.

[*A pause.*

ROSE.

I've started fifteen topics of conversation in the last quarter of an hour, Gerald.

GERALD.

[*Smiling.*] Have you?

ROSE.

You always agree with me, and there's an end of it. So I have to rack my brains again.

GERALD.

All you say is so very wise and sensible. Of course I agree.

ROSE.

I wonder if you'll think me sensible and wise in ten years.

GERALD.

I'm quite sure I shall.

ROSE.

Why, then, I'm afraid we shan't cultivate any great brilliancy of repartee.

GERALD.

Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.

ROSE.

Oh, don't say that. When a man's in love, he at once makes a pedestal of the Ten Commandments and stands on the top of them with his arms akimbo. When a woman's in love she doesn't care two straws for Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not.

GERALD.

When a woman's in love she can put her heart on the slide of a microscope and examine how it beats. When a man's in love, what do you think he cares for science and philosophy and all the rest of it!

ROSE.

When a man's in love he can only write sonnets to the moon. When a woman's in love she can still cook his dinner and darn her own stockings.

GERALD.

I wish you wouldn't cap all my observations.

[*She lifts up her face, and he kisses her lips.*

ROSE.

I'm beginning to think you're rather nice, you know.

GERALD.

That's reassuring, at all events.

ROSE.

But no one could accuse you of being a scintillating talker.

GERALD.

Have you ever watched the lovers in the Park sitting on the benches hour after hour without saying a word?

ROSE.

Why?

GERALD.

Because I've always thought that they must be bored to the verge of tears. Now I know they're only happy.

ROSE.

You're certainly my soldier, so I suppose I'm your nursery-maid.

GERALD.

You know, when I was at Trinity College, Dublin——

ROSE.

[*Interrupting.*] Were you there? I thought you went to Oxford.

GERALD.

No, why?

ROSE.

Only all my people go to Magdalen.

GERALD.

Yes.

ROSE.

And I've decided that if I ever have a son he shall go there too.

[*The* ADMIRAL *starts and pulls the handkerchief off his face. The others do not notice him. He is aghast and astounded at the conversation.* LADY FREDERICK *comes in later and stands smiling as she listens*.

GERALD.

My darling, you know I hate to thwart you in any way, but I've quite made up my mind that my son shall go to Dublin as I did.

ROSE.

I'm awfully sorry, Gerald, but the boy must be educated like a gentleman.

GERALD.

There I quite agree, Rose, but first of all he's an Irishman, and it's right that he should be educated in Ireland.

ROSE.

Darling Gerald, a mother's love is naturally the safest guide in these things.

GERALD.

Dearest Rose, a father's wisdom is always the most reliable.

LADY FREDERICK.

Pardon my interfering, but—aren't you just a little previous?

ADMIRAL.

[*Bursting out.*] Did you ever hear such a conversation in your life between a young unmarried couple?

ROSE.

My dear papa, we must be prepared for everything.

ADMIRAL.

In my youth young ladies did not refer to things of that sort.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, I don't suppose they're any the worse for having an elementary knowledge of natural history. Personally I doubt whether ignorance is quite the same thing as virtue, and I'm not quite sure that a girl makes a better wife because she's been brought up like a perfect fool.

ADMIRAL.

I am old-fashioned, Lady Frederick; and my idea of a modest girl is that when certain topics are mentioned she should swoon. Swoon, madam, swoon. They always did it when I was a lad.

ROSE.

Well, father, I've often tried to faint when I wanted something that you wouldn't give me, and I've never been able to manage it. So I'm sure I couldn't swoon.

ADMIRAL.

And with regard to this ridiculous discussion as to which University your son is to be sent, you seem to forget that I have the right to be consulted.

GERALD.

My dear Admiral, I don't see how it can possibly matter to you.

ADMIRAL.

And before we go any further I should like you to know that the very day Rose was born I determined that her son should go to Cambridge.

ROSE.

My dear papa, I think Gerald and I are far and away the best judges of our son's welfare.

ADMIRAL.

The boy must work, Rose. I will have no good-for-nothing as my grandson.

GERALD.

Exactly. And that is why I'm resolved he shall go to Dublin.

ROSE.

The important thing is that he should have really nice manners, and that they teach at Oxford if they teach nothing else.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, don't you think you'd better wait another twenty years or so before you discuss this?

ADMIRAL.

There are some matters which must be settled at once, Lady Frederick.

LADY FREDERICK.

You know, young things are fairly independent nowadays. I don't know what they'll be in twenty years' time.

GERALD.

The first thing the boy shall learn is obedience.

ROSE. Certainly. There's nothing so hateful as a disobedient child.

ADMIRAL.

I can't see my grandson venturing to disobey me.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then you're all agreed. So that's settled. I came to tell you your carriage was ready.

ADMIRAL.

Go and put on your bonnet, Rose. [*To* LADY FREDERICK.] Are you coming with us?

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm afraid I can't. Au revoir.

ADMIRAL.

A tout à l'heure.

[*He and* ROSE *go out*.

GERALD.

Have you ever seen in your life any one so entirely delightful as Rose?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Only when I've looked in the glass.

GERALD.

My dear Elizabeth, how vain you are.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're very happy, my Gerald.

GERALD.

It's such a relief to have got over all the difficulties. I thought it never would come right. You are a brick, Elizabeth.

LADY FREDERICK.

I really think I am rather.

GERALD.

The moment you promised to arrange things I felt as safe as a house.

LADY FREDERICK.

I said I'd do my best, didn't I? And I told you not to worry.

GERALD.

[*Turning round suddenly.*] Isn't it all right?

LADY FREDERICK.

No, it's about as wrong as it can possibly be. I knew Cohen was staying here, and I thought I could get him to hold the bills over for a few days.

GERALD.

And won't he?

LADY FREDERICK.

He hasn't got them any more.

GERALD.

[*Startled.*] What!

LADY FREDERICK.

They've been negotiated, and he swears he doesn't know who has them.

GERALD.

But who could have been such a fool?

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know, that's just the awful part of it. It was bad enough before. I knew the worst Cohen could do, but now.... It couldn't be Paradine.

GERALD.

And then there's Montgomerie.

LADY FREDERICK.

I shall see him to-day.

GERALD.

What are you going to say to him?

LADY FREDERICK.

I haven't an idea. I'm rather frightened of him.

GERALD.

You know, dear, if the worst comes to the worst....

LADY FREDERICK.

Whatever happens you shall marry Rose. I promise you that.

[PARADINE FOULDES *appears*.

FOULDES.

May I come in?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Gaily.*] It's a public room. I don't see how we can possibly prevent you.

GERALD.

I'm just going to take a stroll.

LADY FREDERICK.

Do.

[*He goes out.*

FOULDES.

Well? How are things going?

LADY FREDERICK.

Quite well, thank you.

FOULDES.

I've left Charlie with his mother. I hope you can spare him for a couple of hours.

LADY FREDERICK.

I told him he must spend the afternoon with her. I don't approve of his neglecting his filial duty.

FOULDES.

Ah!... I saw Dick Cohen this morning.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Quickly.*] Did you?

FOULDES.

It seems to interest you?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not at all. Why should it?

FOULDES.

[*Smiling.*] Nice little man, isn't he?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Good humouredly.*] I wish I had something to throw at you.

FOULDES.

[*With a laugh.*] Well, I haven't got the confounded bills. I was too late.

LADY FREDERICK.

Did you try?

FOULDES.

Oh—yes, I thought it would interest Charlie to know how extremely needful it was for you to marry him.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then who on earth has got them?

FOULDES.

I haven't an idea, but they must make you very uncomfortable. Three thousand five hundred, eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

Don't say it all at once. It sounds so much.

FOULDES.

You wouldn't like to exchange those letters of Mereston's for seven thousand pounds, would you?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] No.

FOULDES.

Ah.... By the way, d'you mind if I tell Charlie the full story of your—relations with me?

LADY FREDERICK.

Why should I? It's not I who'll look ridiculous.

FOULDES.

Thanks. I may avail myself of your permission.

LADY FREDERICK.

I daresay you've noticed that Charlie has a very keen sense of humour.

FOULDES.

If you're going to be disagreeable to me I shall go. [*He stops.*] I say, are you quite sure there's nothing else that can be brought up against you?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Quite sure, thanks.

FOULDES.

My sister's very jubilant to-day. What about the Bellingham affair?

LADY FREDERICK.

Merely scandal, my friend.

FOULDES.

Well, look out. She's a woman, and she'll stick at nothing.

LADY FREDERICK.

I wonder why you warn me.

FOULDES.

For the sake of old times, my dear.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're growing sentimental, Paradine. It's the punishment which the gods inflict on a cynic when he grows old.

FOULDES.

It may be, but for the life of me I can't forget that once——

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Interrupting.*] My dear friend, don't rake up my lamentable past.

FOULDES.

I don't think I've met any one so entirely devoid of sentiment as you are.

LADY FREDERICK.

Let us agree that I have every vice under the sun and have done with it.

[*A* SERVANT *comes in.*]

SERVANT.

Madame Claude wishes to see your ladyship.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my dressmaker.

FOULDES.

Another bill?

LADY FREDERICK.

That's the worst of Monte. One meets as many creditors as in Bond Street. Say I'm engaged.

SERVANT.

Madame Claude says she will wait till miladi is free.

FOULDES.

You make a mistake. One should always be polite to people whose bills one can't pay.

LADY FREDERICK.

Show her in.

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

[*Exit* SERVANT.

FOULDES.

Is it a big one?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, no; only seven hundred pounds.

FOULDES.

By Jove.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear friend, one must dress. I can't go about in fig-leaves.

FOULDES.

One can dress simply.

LADY FREDERICK.

I do. That's why it costs so much.

FOULDES.

You know, you're devilish extravagant.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm not. I'm content with the barest necessities of existence.

FOULDES.

You've got a maid.

LADY FREDERICK.

Of course I've got a maid. I was never taught to dress myself.

FOULDES.

And you've got a footman.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've always had a footman. And my mother always had a footman. I couldn't live a day without him.

FOULDES.

What does he do for you?

LADY FREDERICK.

He inspires confidence in tradesmen.

FOULDES.

And you have the most expensive suite of rooms in the hotel.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm in such a dreadful mess. If I hadn't got nice rooms I should brood over it.

FOULDES.

Then, as if that weren't enough, you fling your money away at the tables.

LADY FREDERICK.

When you're as poor as I am, a few louis more or less can make absolutely no difference.

FOULDES.

[*With a laugh.*] You're quite incorrigible.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's really not my fault. I do try to be economical, but money slips through my fingers like water. I can't help it.

FOULDES.

You want a sensible sort of a man to look after you.

LADY FREDERICK.

I want a very rich sort of a man to look after me.

FOULDES.

If you were my wife, I should advertise in the papers that I wasn't responsible for your debts.

LADY FREDERICK.

If you were my husband, I'd advertise immediately underneath that I wasn't responsible for your manners.

FOULDES.

I wonder why you're so reckless.

LADY FREDERICK.

When my husband was alive I was so utterly wretched. And afterwards, when I looked forward to a little happiness, my boy died. Then I didn't care any more. I did everything I could to stupefy myself. I squandered money as other women take morphia—that's all.

FOULDES.

It's the same dear scatter-brained, good-hearted Betsy that I used to know.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're the only person who calls me Betsy now. To all the others I'm only Elizabeth.

FOULDES.

Look here, what are you going to do with this dressmaker?

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know. I always trust to the inspiration of the moment.

FOULDES.

She'll make a devil of a fuss, won't she?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, no; I shall be quite nice to her.

FOULDES.

I daresay. But won't she be very disagreeable to you?

LADY FREDERICK.

You don't know what a way I have with my creditors.

FOULDES.

I know it's not a paying way.

LADY FREDERICK.

Isn't it? I bet you a hundred louis that I offer her the money and she refuses it.

FOULDES.

I'll take that.

LADY FREDERICK.

Here she is.

[MADAME CLAUDE *enters, ushered in by the* SERVANT. *She is a stout, genteel person, very splendidly gowned, with a Cockney accent. Her face is set to sternness, decision to make a scene, and general sourness.*

SERVANT.

Madame Claude.

[*Exit* SERVANT. LADY FREDERICK *goes up to her enthusiastically and takes both her hands.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Best of women. This is a joyful surprise.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Drawing herself up.*] I 'eard quite by chance that your ladyship was at Monte.

LADY FREDERICK.

So you came to see me at once. That was nice of you. You're the very person I wanted to see.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Significantly.*] I'm glad of that, my lady, I must confess.

LADY FREDERICK.

You dear creature. That's one advantage of Monte Carlo, one meets all one's friends. Do you know Mr. Fouldes? This is Madame Claude, an artist, my dear Paradine, a real artist.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Grimly.*] I'm pleased that your ladyship should think so.

FOULDES.

How d'you do.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now, this gown. Look, look, look. In this skirt there's genius, *mon cher*. In the way it hangs my whole character is expressed. Observe the fullness of it, that indicates those admirable virtues which make me an ornament to Society, while the frill at the bottom just suggests those foibles—you can hardly call them faults—which add a certain grace and interest to my personality. And the flounce. Paradine, I beseech you to look at it carefully. I would sooner have designed this flounce than won the Battle of Waterloo.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Your ladyship is very kind.

LADY FREDERICK.

Not at all, not at all. You remember that rose chiffon. I wore it the other day, and the dear Archduchess came up to me and said: "My dear, my dear." I thought she was going to have a fit. But when she recovered she kissed me on both cheeks and said: "Lady Frederick, you have a dressmaker worth her weight in gold." You heard her, Paradine, didn't you?

FOULDES.

You forget that I only arrived last night.

LADY FREDERICK.

Of course. How stupid of me. She'll be perfectly delighted to hear that you're in Monte Carlo. But I shall have to break it to her gently.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Unmoved.*] I'm sorry to intrude upon your ladyship.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now what are you talking about? If you hadn't come to see me I should never have forgiven you.

MADAME CLAUDE.

I wanted to have a little talk with your ladyship.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, but I hope we shall have many little talks. Have you brought your motor down?

MADAME CLAUDE.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

That's charming. You shall take me for a drive in it every day. I hope you're going to stay some time.

MADAME CLAUDE.

That depends on circumstances, Lady Frederick. I 'ave a little business to do here.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then let me give you one warning—don't gamble.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Oh, no, my lady. I gamble quite enough in my business as it is. I never know when my customers will pay their bills—if ever.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Slightly taken aback.*] Ha, ha, ha.

FOULDES.

[*With a deep guffaw.*] Ho, ho, ho.

LADY FREDERICK.

Isn't she clever? I must tell that to the Archduchess. She'll be so amused. Ha, ha, ha, ha. The dear Archduchess, you know she loves a little joke. You must really meet her. Will you come and lunch? I know you'd hit it off together.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*More genially.*] That's very kind of your ladyship.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear, you know perfectly well that I've always looked upon you as one of my best friends. Now who shall we have? There's you and me and the Archduchess. Then I'll ask Lord Mereston.

MADAME CLAUDE.

The Marquess of Mereston, Lady Frederick?

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes. And Mr. Fouldes, his uncle.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Excuse me, are you the Mr. Paradine Fouldes?

FOULDES.

[*Bowing.*] At your service, madam.

MADAME CLAUDE.

I'm so glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fouldes. [*Unctuously.*] I've always heard you're such a bad man.

FOULDES.

Madam, you overwhelm me with confusion.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Believe me, Mr. Fouldes, it's not the ladies that are married to saints who take the trouble to dress well.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now we want a third man. Shall we ask my brother—you know Sir Gerald O'Mara, don't you? Or shall we ask Prince Doniani? Yes, I think we'll ask the Prince. I'm sure you'd like him. Such a handsome man! That'll make six.

MADAME CLAUDE.

It's very kind of you, Lady Frederick, but—well, I'm only a tradeswoman, you know.

LADY FREDERICK.

A tradeswoman? How can you talk such nonsense. You are an artist—a real artist, my dear. And an artist is fit to meet a king.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Well, I don't deny that I'd be ashamed to dress my customers in the gowns I see painted at the Royal Academy.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then it's quite settled, isn't it, Madame Claude—oh, may I call you Ada?

MADAME CLAUDE.

Oh, Lady Frederick, I should be very much flattered. But how did you know that was my name?

LADY FREDERICK.

Why you wrote me a letter only the other day.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Did I?

LADY FREDERICK.

And such a cross letter too.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Apologetically.*] Oh, but Lady Frederick, that was only in the way of business. I don't exactly remember what expressions I may have made use of——

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Interrupting, as if the truth had suddenly flashed across her.*] Ada! I do believe you came here to-day about my account.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Oh, no, my lady, I promise you.

LADY FREDERICK.

You did; I know you did. I see it in your face. Now that really wasn't nice of you. I thought you came as a friend.

MADAME CLAUDE.

I did, Lady Frederick.

LADY FREDERICK.

No, you wanted to dun me. I'm disappointed in you. I did think, after all the things I've had from you, you wouldn't treat me like that.

MADAME CLAUDE.

But I assure your ladyship....

LADY FREDERICK.

Not another word. You came to ask for a cheque. You shall have it.

MADAME CLAUDE.

No, Lady Frederick, I wouldn't take it.

LADY FREDERICK.

What is the exact figure, Madame Claude?

MADAME CLAUDE.

I—I don't remember.

LADY FREDERICK.

Seven hundred and fifty pounds, seventeen and ninepence. You see, I remember. You came for your cheque and you shall have it.

[*She sits down and takes a pen.*

MADAME CLAUDE.

Now, Lady Frederick, I should look upon that as most unkind. It's treating me like a very second-rate establishment.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm sorry, but you should have thought of that before. Now I haven't got a cheque; how tiresome.

MADAME CLAUDE.

Oh, it doesn't matter, Lady Frederick. I promise you it never entered my 'ead.

LADY FREDERICK.

What shall I do?

FOULDES.

You can write it on a sheet of paper, you know.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a look, aside to him.*] Monster! [*Aloud.*] Of course I can. I hadn't thought of that. [*She takes a sheet of paper.*] But how on earth am I to get a stamp?

FOULDES.

[*Much amused.*] I happen to have one on me.

LADY FREDERICK.

I wonder why on earth you should have English stamps in Monte Carlo?

FOULDES.

[*Handing her one.*] A penny stamp may sometimes save one a hundred louis.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Ironically.*] Thanks so much. I write the name of my bank on the top, don't I? Pay Madame Claude....

MADAME CLAUDE.

Now, it's no good, Lady Frederick, I won't take it. After all I 'ave my self-respect to think of.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's too late now.

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Sniffing a little.*] No, no, Lady Frederick. Don't be too 'ard on me. As one lady to another I ask you to forgive me. I did come about my account, but—well, I don't want the money.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Looking up good-humouredly.*] Well, well. [*She looks at the cheque.*] It shall be as you wish. There. [*She tears it up.*]

MADAME CLAUDE.

Oh, thank you, Lady Frederick. I look upon that as a real favour. And now I really must be getting off.

LADY FREDERICK.

Must you go? Well, good-bye. Paradine, take Madame Claude to her motor. Ada!

[*She kisses her on the cheek.*

MADAME CLAUDE.

[*Going.*] I am pleased to have seen you.

[PARADINE *offers his arm and goes out with*

MADAME CLAUDE. LADY FREDERICK *goes to the window, stands on a chair and waves her handkerchief. While she is doing this* CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE *enters.*

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

How d'you do?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Getting down.*] How nice of you to come. I wanted to see you.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

May I sit down?

LADY FREDERICK.

Of course. There are one or two things I'd like to talk to you about.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Yes?

LADY FREDERICK.

First I must thank you for your great kindness to Gerald. I didn't know last night that he owed you a good deal of money.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

It's a mere trifle.

LADY FREDERICK.

You must be very rich to call nine hundred pounds that?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I am.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a laugh.*] All the same it's extremely good of you to give him plenty of time.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I told Gerald he could have till to-morrow.

LADY FREDERICK.

Obviously he wants to settle with you as soon as ever he can.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Quietly.*] I often wonder why gambling debts are known as debts of honour.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Of course I realise that if you choose to press for the money and Gerald can't pay—he'll have to send in his papers.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Lightly.*] You may be quite sure I have no wish to bring about such a calamity. By the way, have you thought over our little talk of last night?

LADY FREDERICK.

No.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

You would have been wise to do so.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear Captain Montgomerie, you really can't expect me to marry you because my brother has been so foolish as to lose more money at poker than he can afford.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Did you ever hear that my father was a money-lender?

LADY FREDERICK.

A lucrative profession, I believe.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

He found it so. He was a Polish Jew called Aaron Levitzki. He came to this country with three shillings in his pocket. He lent half-a-crown of it to a friend on the condition that he should be paid back seven and six in three days.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm not good at figures, but the interest sounds rather high.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

It is. That was one of my father's specialities. From these humble beginnings his business grew to such proportions that at his death he was able to leave me the name and arms of the great family of Montgomerie and something over a million of money.

LADY FREDERICK.

The result of thrift, industry, and good fortune.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

My father was able to gratify all his ambitions but one. He was eaten up with the desire to move in good society, and this he was never able to achieve. His dying wish was that I should live in those circles which he knew only....

LADY FREDERICK.

Across the counter?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Precisely. But my poor father was a little ignorant in these matters. To him one lord was as good as another. He thought a Marquess a finer man than an Earl, and a Viscount than a Baron. He would never have understood that a

penniless Irish baronet might go into better society than many a belted earl.

LADY FREDERICK.

And what is the application of this?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I wanted to explain to you one of the reasons which emboldened me last night to make you a proposal of marriage.

LADY FREDERICK.

But surely you know some very nice people. I saw you lunching the other day with the widow of a city knight.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Many very excellent persons are glad to have me to dine with them. But I know quite well that they're not the real article. I'm as far off as ever from getting into those houses which you have been used to all your life. I'm not content with third-rate earls and rather seedy dowagers.

LADY FREDERICK.

Forgive my frankness, but—aren't you rather a snob?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

My father, Aaron Levitzki, married an English woman, and I have all the English virtues.

LADY FREDERICK.

But I'm not quite sure that people would swallow you even as my husband.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

They'd make a face, but they'd swallow me right enough. And when I asked them down to the best shoot in England they'd come to the conclusion that I agreed with them very well.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Still rather amused.*] Your offer is eminently businesslike, but you see I'm not a business woman. It doesn't appeal to me.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I only ask you to perform such of the duties of a wife as are required by Society. They are few enough in all conscience. I should wish you to entertain largely and receive my guests, be polite to me, at least in public, and go with me to the various places people go to. Otherwise I leave you entire freedom. You will find me generous and heedful to all your wishes.

LADY FREDERICK.

Captain Montgomerie, I don't know how much of all that you have said is meant seriously. But, surely you're not choosing the right time to make such a proposal when my brother owes you so much money that if you care to be hard you can ruin him.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Why not?

LADY FREDERICK.

D'you mean to say...?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I will be quite frank with you. I should never have allowed Gerald to lose so much money which there was no likelihood of his being able to pay, if I had not thought it earned me some claim upon your gratitude.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Shortly.*] Gerald will pay every penny he owes you to-morrow.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Blandly.*] Where d'you suppose he'll get it?

LADY FREDERICK.

I have no doubt I shall be able to manage something.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Have you not tried this morning, entirely without success?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Startled.*] What?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

You do not forget that you have sundry moneys of your own which are payable to-morrow?

LADY FREDERICK.

How d'you know that?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I told you that when I took a thing in hand I carried it through. You went to Dick Cohen, and he told you he'd parted with the bills. Didn't you guess that only one man could have the least interest in taking them over?

LADY FREDERICK.

You?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, God.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Come, come, don't be worried over it. There's nothing to be alarmed about. I'm a very decent chap—if you'd accepted me right away you would never have known that those bills were in my possession. Think it over once more. I'm sure we should get on well together. I can give you what you most need, money and the liberty to fling it away as recklessly as you choose; you can give me the assured and fixed position on which—my father's heart was set.

LADY FREDERICK.

And if I don't accept, you'll make me a bankrupt and you'll ruin Gerald?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I refuse to consider that very unpleasant alternative.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh! I can't, I can't.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Laughing.*] But you must, you must. When shall I come for your answer? To-morrow? I'll come with the bills and Gerald's I.O.U. in my pocket, and you shall burn them yourself. Good-bye.

[*He kisses her hand and goes out.* LADY FREDERICK *remains staring in front of her.* MERESTON *enters, followed by* LADY MERESTON *and* PARADINE.

MERESTON.

[*Going to her eagerly.*] Hulloa! I wondered what on earth had become of you.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a laugh.*] It's only two hours since I chased you away from me.

MERESTON.

I'm afraid I bore you to death.

LADY FREDERICK.

Don't be so silly. You know you don't.

MERESTON.

Where are you going now?

LADY FREDERICK.

I have rather a headache. I'm going to lie down.

MERESTON.

I'm so sorry.

[LADY FREDERICK *goes out.* MERESTON *stares after her anxiously, and makes a step towards the door.*

LADY MERESTON.

[*Sharply.*] Where are you going, Charlie?

MERESTON.

I never asked Lady Frederick if I could do anything.

LADY MERESTON.

Good heavens, there are surely plenty of servants in the hotel to get her anything she wants.

MERESTON.

Don't you think a drive in the motor would do her good?

LADY MERESTON.

[*Unable to control herself.*] Oh, I have no patience with you. I never saw such a ridiculous infatuation in my life.

PARADINE.

Steady, old girl, steady.

MERESTON.

What on earth d'you mean, mother?

LADY MERESTON.

Presumably you're not going to deny that you're in love with that woman.

MERESTON.

[*Growing pale.*] Would you mind speaking of her as Lady Frederick?

LADY MERESTON.

You try me very much, Charlie. Please answer my question.

MERESTON.

I don't want to seem unkind to you, mother, but I think you have no right to ask about my private affairs.

FOULDES.

If you're going to talk this matter over you're more likely to come to an understanding if you both keep your tempers.

MERESTON.

There's nothing I wish to discuss.

LADY MERESTON.

Don't be absurd, Charlie. You're with Lady Frederick morning, noon and night. She can never stir a yard from the hotel but you go flying after. You pester her with your ridiculous attentions.

FOULDES.

[*Blandly.*] One's relations have always such an engaging frankness. Like a bad looking-glass, they always represent you with a crooked nose and a cast in your eye.

LADY MERESTON.

[*To* MERESTON.] I have certainly a right to know what you mean by all this and what is going to come of it.

MERESTON.

I don't know what will come of it.

FOULDES.

The question that excites our curiosity is this: are you going to ask Lady Frederick to marry you?

MERESTON.

I refuse to answer that. It seems to me excessively impertinent.

FOULDES.

Come, come, my boy, you're too young to play the heavy father. We're both your friends. Hadn't you better make a clean breast of it? After all, your mother and I are interested in nothing so much as your welfare.

LADY MERESTON.

[*Imploring.*] Charlie!

MERESTON.

Of course I'd ask her to marry me if I thought for a moment that she'd accept. But I'm so terrified that she'll refuse, and then perhaps I shall never see her again.

LADY MERESTON.

The boy's stark, staring mad.

MERESTON.

I don't know what I should do if she sent me about my business. I'd rather continue in this awful uncertainty than lose all hope for ever.

FOULDES.

By George. You're pretty far gone, my son. The lover who's diffident is in a much worse way than the lover who protests.

LADY MERESTON.

[*With a little laugh.*] I must say it amuses me that Lady Frederick should have had both my brother and my son dangling at her skirts. Your respective passions are separated by quite a number of years.

MERESTON.

Lady Frederick has already told me of that incident.

FOULDES.

With the usual indiscretion of her sex.

MERESTON.

It appears that she was very unhappy and you, with questionable taste, made love to her.

FOULDES.

Do your best not to preach at me, dear boy. It reminds me of your lamented father.

MERESTON.

And at last she promised to go away with you. You were to meet at Waterloo Station.

FOULDES.

Such a draughty place for an assignation.

MERESTON.

Your train was to start at nine, and you were going to take the boat over to the Channel Isles.

FOULDES.

Lady Frederick has a very remarkable memory. I remember hoping the sea wouldn't be rough.

MERESTON.

And just as the train was starting her eye fell on the clock. At that moment her child was coming down to breakfast and would ask for her. Before you could stop her she'd jumped out of the carriage. The train was moving, and you couldn't get out, so you were taken on to Weymouth—alone.

LADY MERESTON.

You must have felt a quite egregious ass, Paradine.

FOULDES.

I did, but you need not rub it in.

LADY MERESTON.

Doesn't it occur to you, Charlie, that a woman who loves so easily can't be very worthy of your affection?

MERESTON.

But, my dear mother, d'you think she cared for my uncle?

FOULDES.

What the dickens d'you mean?

MERESTON.

D'you suppose if she loved you she would have hesitated to come? D'you know her so little as that? She thought of her child only because she was quite indifferent to you.

FOULDES.

[*Crossly.*] You know nothing about it, and you're an impertinent young jackanapes.

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Paradine, what can it matter if Lady Frederick was in love with you or not?

FOULDES.

[*Calming down.*] Of course it doesn't matter a bit.

LADY MERESTON.

I have no doubt you mistook wounded vanity for a broken heart.

FOULDES.

[*Acidly.*] My dear, you sometimes say things which explain to me why my brother-in-law so frequently abandoned

his own fireside for the platform of Exeter Hall.

MERESTON.

It may also interest you to learn that I am perfectly aware of Lady Frederick's financial difficulties. I know she has two bills falling due to-morrow.

FOULDES.

She's a very clever woman.

MERESTON.

I've implored her to let me lend her the money, and she absolutely refuses. You see, she's kept nothing from me at all.

LADY MERESTON.

My dear Charlie, it's a very old dodge to confess what doesn't matter in order to conceal what does.

MERESTON.

What do you mean, mother?

LADY MERESTON.

Lady Frederick has told you nothing of the Bellingham affair?

MERESTON.

Why should she?

LADY MERESTON.

It is surely expedient you should know that the woman you have some idea of marrying escaped the divorce court only by the skin of her teeth.

MERESTON.

I don't believe that, mother.

FOULDES.

Remember that you're talking to your respected parent, my boy.

MERESTON.

I'm sorry that my mother should utter base and contemptible libels on—my greatest friend.

LADY MERESTON.

You may be quite sure that I say nothing which I can't prove.

MERESTON.

I won't listen to anything against Lady Frederick.

LADY MERESTON.

But you must.

MERESTON.

Are you quite indifferent to the great pain you cause me?

LADY MERESTON.

I can't allow you to marry a woman who's hopelessly immoral.

MERESTON.

Mother, how dare you say that?

FOULDES.

This isn't the sort of thing I much like, but hadn't you better hear the worst at once?

MERESTON.

Very well. But if my mother insists on saying things, she must say them in Lady Frederick's presence.

LADY MERESTON.

That I'm quite willing to do.

MERESTON.

Good.

[*He rings the bell. A servant enters.*

FOULDES.

You'd better take care, Maudie. Lady Frederick's a dangerous woman to play the fool with.

MERESTON.

[*To the servant.*] Go to Lady Frederick Berolles and say Lord Mereston is extremely sorry to trouble her ladyship, but would be very much obliged if she'd come to the drawing-room for two minutes.

SERVANT.

Very well, my lord.

[*Exit.*

FOULDES.

What are you going to do, Maud?

LADY MERESTON.

I knew there was a letter in existence in Lady Frederick's handwriting which proved all I've said about her. I've moved heaven and earth to get hold of it, and it came this morning.

FOULDES.

Don't be such a fool. You're not going to use that?

LADY MERESTON.

I am indeed.

FOULDES.

Your blood be upon your own head. Unless I'm vastly mistaken you'll suffer the greatest humiliation that you can imagine.

LADY MERESTON.

That's absurd. I have nothing to fear.

LADY FREDERICK. *comes in.*

MERESTON.

I'm so sorry to disturb you. I hope you don't mind?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not at all. I knew you wouldn't have sent for me in that fashion without good cause.

MERESTON.

I'm afraid you'll think me dreadfully impertinent.

LADY MERESTON.

Really you need not apologise so much, Charlie.

MERESTON.

My mother has something to say against you, and I think it right that she should say it in your presence.

LADY FREDERICK.

That's very nice of you, Charlie—though I confess I prefer people to say horrid things of me only behind my back. Especially if they're true.

FOULDES.

Look here, I think all this is rather nonsense. We've most of us got something in our past history that we don't want raked up, and we'd all better let bygones be bygones.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm waiting, Lady Mereston.

LADY MERESTON.

It's merely that I thought my son should know that Lady Frederick had been the mistress of Roger Bellingham. [LADY FREDERICK *turns quickly and looks at her*; *then bursts into a peal of laughter*. LADY MERESTON *springs up angrily and hands her a letter.*] Is this in your handwriting?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Not at all disconcerted.*] Dear me, how did you get hold of this?

LADY MERESTON.

You see that I have ample proof, Lady Frederick.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Handing the letter to* MERESTON.] Would you like to read it? You know my writing well enough to be able to answer Lady Mereston's question.

[*He reads it through and looks at her in dismay.*

MERESTON.

Good God!... What does it mean?

LADY FREDERICK.

Pray read it aloud.

MERESTON.

I can't.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then give it to me. [*She takes it from him.*] It's addressed to my brother-in-law, Peter Berolles. The Kate to whom it refers was his wife. [*Reads.*] Dear Peter: I'm sorry you should have had a row with Kate about Roger Bellingham. You are quite wrong in all you thought. There is absolutely nothing between them. I don't know where Kate was on Tuesday night, but certainly she was not within a hundred miles of Roger. This I know because....

MERESTON.

[*Interrupting.*] For God's sake don't go on.

[LADY FREDERICK *looks at him and shrugs her shoulders*.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's signed Elizabeth Berolles. And there's a postscript: You may make what use of this letter you like.

MERESTON.

What does it mean? What does it mean?

LADY MERESTON.

Surely it's very clear? You can't want a more explicit confession of guilt.

LADY FREDERICK.

I tried to make it as explicit as possible.

LADY MERESTON.

Won't you say something? I'm sure there must be some explanation.

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know how you got hold of this letter, Lady Mereston. I agree with you, it is compromising. But Kate and Peter are dead now, and there's nothing to prevent me from telling the truth.

[PARADINE FOULDES *takes a step forward and watches her*.

LADY FREDERICK.

My sister-in-law was a meek and mild little person, as demure as you can imagine, and no one would have suspected her for a moment of kicking over the traces. Well, one morning she came to me in floods of tears and confessed that she and Roger Bellingham [*with a shrug*] had been foolish. Her husband suspected that something was wrong and had kicked up a row.

FOULDES.

[*Drily.*] There are men who will make a scene on the smallest provocation.

LADY FREDERICK.

To shield herself she told the first lie that came into her head. She said to Peter that Roger Bellingham was my lover—and she threw herself on my mercy. She was a poor, weak little creature, and if there'd been a scandal she'd have gone to the dogs altogether. It had only been a momentary infatuation for Roger, and the scare had cured her. At the bottom of her heart she loved her husband still. I was desperately unhappy, and I didn't care much what became of me. She promised to turn over a new leaf and all that sort of thing. I thought I'd better give her another chance of going straight. I did what she wanted. I wrote that letter taking all the blame on myself, and Kate lived happily with her husband till she died.

MERESTON.

It was just like you.

LADY MERESTON.

But Lord and Lady Peter are dead?

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes.

LADY MERESTON.

And Roger Bellingham?

LADY FREDERICK.

He's dead too.

LADY MERESTON.

Then how can you prove your account of this affair?

LADY FREDERICK.

I can't.

LADY MERESTON.

And does this convince you, Charlie?

MERESTON.

Of course.

LADY MERESTON.

[*Impatiently.*] Good heavens, the boy's out of his senses. Paradine, for Heaven's sake say something.

FOULDES.

Well, much as it may displease you, my dear, I'm afraid I agree with Charlie.

LADY MERESTON.

You don't mean to say you believe this cock-and-bull story?

FOULDES.

I do.

LADY MERESTON.

Why?

FOULDES.

Well, you see, Lady Frederick's a very clever woman. She would never have invented such an utterly improbable tale, which can't possibly be proved. If she'd been guilty, she'd have had ready at least a dozen proofs of her innocence.

LADY MERESTON.

But that's absurd.

FOULDES.

Besides, I've known Lady Frederick a long time, and she has at least a thousand faults.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With flashing eyes.*] Thanks.

FOULDES.

But there's something I will say for her. She's not a liar. If she tells me a thing, I don't hesitate for a moment to believe it.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's not a matter of the smallest importance if any of you believe me or not. Be so good as to ring, Charlie.

MERESTON.

Certainly.

[*He rings, and a* SERVANT *immediately comes in*.

LADY FREDERICK.

Tell my servant that he's to come here at once and bring the despatch-box which is in my dressing-room.

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

[*Exit.*

FOULDES.

[*Quickly.*] I say, what are you going to do?

LADY FREDERICK.

That is absolutely no business of yours.

FOULDES.

Be a brick, Betsy, and don't give her those letters.

LADY FREDERICK.

I think I've had enough of this business. I'm proposing to finish with it.

FOULDES.

Temper, temper.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Stamping her foot.*] Don't say temper to me, Paradine.

[*She walks up and down angrily.* PARADINE *sits at the piano and with one finger strums "Rule Britannia."*

MERESTON.

Shut up.

[*He takes a book, flings it at his head and misses.*

FOULDES.

Good shot, sir.

LADY FREDERICK.

I often wonder how you got your reputation for wit, Paradine.

FOULDES.

By making a point of laughing heartily at other people's jokes.

[*The* FOOTMAN *enters with the despatch-box, which* LADY FREDERICK *opens. She takes a bundle of letters from it.*

FOULDES.

Betsy, Betsy, for heaven's sake don't! Have mercy.

LADY FREDERICK.

Was mercy shown to me? Albert!

FOOTMAN.

Yes, miladi.

LADY FREDERICK.

You'll go to the proprietor of the hotel and tell him that I propose to leave Monte Carlo to-morrow.

MERESTON.

[*Aghast.*] Are you going?

FOOTMAN.

Very well, my lady.

LADY FREDERICK.

Have you a good memory for faces?

FOOTMAN.

Yes, my lady.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're not likely to forget Lord Mereston?

FOOTMAN.

No, my lady.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then please take note that if his lordship calls upon me in London I'm not at home.

MERESTON.

Lady Frederick!

LADY FREDERICK.

[*To* FOOTMAN.] Go.

[*Exit* FOOTMAN.

MERESTON.

What d'you mean? What have I done?

[*Without answering* LADY FREDERICK *takes the letters*. PARADINE *is watching her anxiously. She goes up to the stove and throws them in one by one.*

LADY MERESTON.

What on earth is she doing?

LADY FREDERICK.

I have some letters here which would ruin the happiness of a very worthless woman I know. I'm burning them so that I may never have the temptation to use them.

FOULDES.

I never saw anything so melodramatic.

LADY FREDERICK.

Hold your tongue, Paradine. [*Turning to* MERESTON.] My dear Charlie, I came to Monte Carlo to be amused. Your mother has persecuted me incessantly. Your uncle—is too well-bred to talk to his servants as he has talked to me. I've been pestered in one way and another, and insulted till my blood boiled, because apparently they're afraid you may want to marry me. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm not used to treatment of this sort; my patience is quite exhausted. And since you are the cause of the whole thing I have an obvious remedy. I would much rather not have anything more to do with you. If we meet one another in the street you need not trouble to look my way because I shall cut you dead.

LADY MERESTON.

[*In an undertone.*] Thank God for that.

MERESTON.

Mother, mother. [*To* LADY FREDERICK.] I'm awfully sorry. I feel that you have a right to be angry. For all that you've suffered I beg your pardon most humbly. My mother has said and done things which I regret to say are quite unjustifiable.

LADY MERESTON.

Charlie!

MERESTON.

On her behalf and on mine I apologise with all my heart.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Smiling.*] Don't take it too seriously. It really doesn't matter. But I think it's far wiser that we shouldn't see one another again.

MERESTON.

But I can't live without you.

LADY MERESTON.

[*With a gasp.*] Ah!

MERESTON.

Don't you know that my whole happiness is wrapped up in you? I love you with all my heart and soul. I can never love any one but you.

FOULDES.

[*To* LADY MERESTON.] Now you've done it. You've done it very neatly.

MERESTON.

Don't think me a presumptuous fool. I've been wanting to say this ever since I knew you, but I haven't dared. You're brilliant and charming and fascinating, but I have nothing whatever to offer you.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Gently.*] My dear Charlie.

MERESTON.

But if you can overlook my faults, I daresay you could make something of me. Won't you marry me? I should look upon it as a great honour, and I would love you always to the end of my life. I'd try to be worthy of my great happiness and you.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're very much too modest, Charlie. I'm enormously flattered and grateful. You must give me time to think it over.

LADY MERESTON.

Time?

MERESTON.

But I can't wait. Don't you see how I love you? You'll never meet any one who'll care for you as I do.

LADY FREDERICK.

I think you can wait a little. Come and see me to-morrow morning at ten, and I'll give you an answer.

MERESTON.

Very well, if I must.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Smiling.*] I'm afraid so.

FOULDES.

[*To* LADY FREDERICK.] I wonder what the deuce your little game is now.

[*She smiles triumphantly and gives him a deep, ironical curtsey.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Sir, your much obliged and very obedient, humble servant.

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THIRD ACT

SCENE: LADY FREDERICK'S *dressing-room. At the back is a large opening, curtained, which leads to the bedroom; on the right a door leading to the passage; on the left a window. In front of the window, of which the blind is drawn, is a dressing-table.* LADY FREDERICK'S *maid is in the room, a very neat pretty Frenchwoman. She speaks with a slight accent. She rings the bell, and the* FOOTMAN *enters*.

MAID.

As soon as Lord Mereston arrives he is to be shown in.

FOOTMAN.

[*Surprised.*] Here?

MAID.

Where else?

[*The* FOOTMAN *winks significantly. The* MAID *draws herself up with dignity, and with a dramatic gesture points to the door*.

MAID.

Depart.

[*The* FOOTMAN *goes out*.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*From the bedroom.*] Have you drawn the blind, Angélique?

MAID.

I will do so, miladi. [*She draws the blind, and the light falls brightly on the dressing-table.*] But miladi will never be able to stand it. [*She looks at herself in the glass.*] Oh, the light of the sun in the morning! I cannot look at myself.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*As before.*] There's no reason that you should—especially in my glass.

MAID.

But if 'is lordship is coming, miladi must let me draw the blind. Oh, it is impossible.

LADY FREDERICK.

Do as you're told and don't interfere.

[*The* FOOTMAN *enters to announce* MERESTON. *The* MAID *goes out.*

FOOTMAN.

Lord Mereston.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*As before.*] Is that you, Charlie? You're very punctual.

MERESTON.

I've been walking about outside till the clock struck.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm not nearly dressed, you know. I've only just had my bath.

MERESTON.

Must I go?

LADY FREDERICK.

No, of course not. You can talk to me while I'm finishing.

MERESTON.

All right. How are you this morning?

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know. I haven't looked at myself in the glass yet. How are you?

MERESTON.

A 1, thanks.

LADY FREDERICK.

Are you looking nice?

MERESTON.

[*Going to the glass.*] I hope so. By Jove, what a strong light. You must be pretty sure of your complexion to be able to stand that.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Appearing.*] I am.

MERESTON.

[*Going forward eagerly.*] Ah.

[*She comes through the curtains. She wears a kimono, her hair is all dishevelled, hanging about her head in a tangled mop. She is not made up and looks haggard and yellow and lined. When* MERESTON *sees her he gives a slight start of surprise. She plays the scene throughout with her broadest brogue.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Good-morning.

MERESTON.

[*Staring at her in dismay.*] Good-morning.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, what have you to say to me?

MERESTON.

[*Embarrassed.*] I—er—hope you slept all right.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Did you?

MERESTON.

I forget.

LADY FREDERICK.

I believe you slept like a top, Charlie. You really might have lain awake and thought of me. What is the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost.

MERESTON.

Oh no, not at all.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're not disappointed already?

MERESTON.

No, of course not. Only—you look so different with your hair not done.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a little cry.*] Oh, I'd forgotten all about it. Angélique, come and do my hair.

MAID.

[*Appearing.*] Yes, miladi.

[LADY FREDERICK *sits down at the dressing-table.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Now, take pains, Angélique. I want to look my very best. Angélique is a jewel of incalculable value.

MAID.

Miladi is very kind.

LADY FREDERICK.

If I'm light-hearted, she does it one way. If I'm depressed she does it another.

MAID.

Oh, miladi, the perruquier who taught me said always that a good hairdresser could express every mood and every passion of the human heart.

LADY FREDERICK.

Good heavens, you don't mean to say you can do all that?

MAID.

Miladi, he said I was his best pupil.

LADY FREDERICK.

Very well. Express—express a great crisis in my affairs.

MAID.

That is the easiest thing in the world, miladi. I bring the hair rather low on the forehead, and that expresses a crisis in her ladyship's affairs.

LADY FREDERICK.

But I always wear my hair low on the forehead.

MAID.

Then it is plain her ladyship's affairs are always in a critical condition.

LADY FREDERICK.

So they are. I never thought of that.

MERESTON.

You've got awfully stunning hair, Lady Frederick.

LADY FREDERICK.

D'you like it, really?

MERESTON.

The colour's perfectly beautiful.

LADY FREDERICK.

It ought to be. It's frightfully expensive.

MERESTON.

You don't mean to say it's dyed?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, no. Only touched up. That's quite a different thing.

MERESTON.

Is it?

LADY FREDERICK.

It's like superstition, you know, which is what other people believe. My friends dye their hair, but I only touch mine up. Unfortunately, it costs just as much.

MERESTON.

And you have such a lot.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, heaps. [*She opens a drawer and takes out a long switch.*] Give him a bit to look at.

MAID.

Yes, miladi.

[*She gives it to him.*

MERESTON.

Er—yes. [*Not knowing what on earth to say.*] How silky it is.

LADY FREDERICK.

A poor thing, but mine own. At least, I paid for it. By the way, have I paid for it yet, Angélique?

MAID.

Not yet, miladi. But the man can wait.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Taking it from* MERESTON.] A poor thing, then, but my hairdresser's. Shall I put it on?

MERESTON.

I wouldn't, if I were you.

MAID.

If her ladyship anticipates a tragic situation, I would venture to recommend it. A really pathetic scene is impossible without a quantity of hair worn quite high on the head.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, I know. Whenever I want to soften the hard heart of a creditor I clap on every bit I've got. But I don't think I will to-day. I'll tell you what, a temple curl would just fit the case.

MAID.

Then her ladyship inclines to comedy. Very well, I say no more.

[LADY FREDERICK *takes two temple-curls from the drawer.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Aren't they dears?

MERESTON.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

You've admired them very often, Charlie, haven't you? I suppose you never knew they cost a guinea each?

MERESTON.

It never occurred to me they were false.

LADY FREDERICK.

The masculine intelligence is so gross. Didn't your mother tell you?

MERESTON.

My mother told me a great deal.

LADY FREDERICK.

I expect she overdid it. There. Now that's done. D'you think it looks nice?

MERESTON.

Charming.

LADY FREDERICK.

Angélique, his lordship is satisfied. You may disappear.

MAID.

Yes, miladi.

[*She goes.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Now, tell me you think I'm the most ravishing creature you ever saw in your life.

MERESTON.

I've told you that so often.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Stretching out her hands.*] You are a nice boy. It was charming of you to say—what you did yesterday. I could have hugged you there and then.

MERESTON.

Could you?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my dear, don't be so cold.

MERESTON.

I'm very sorry, I didn't mean to be.

LADY FREDERICK.

Haven't you got anything nice to say to me at all?

MERESTON.

I don't know what I can say that I've not said a thousand times already.

LADY FREDERICK.

Tell me what you thought of all night when you tossed on that sleepless pillow of yours.

MERESTON.

I was awfully anxious to see you again.

LADY FREDERICK.

Didn't you have a dreadful fear that I shouldn't be as nice as you imagined? Now, come—honestly.

MERESTON.

Well, yes, I suppose it crossed my mind.

LADY FREDERICK.

And am I?

MERESTON.

Of course.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're sure you're not disappointed?

MERESTON.

Quite sure.

LADY FREDERICK.

What a relief! You know, I've been tormenting myself dreadfully. I said to myself: "He'll go on thinking of me till he imagines I'm the most beautiful woman in the world, and then, when he comes here and sees the plain reality, it'll be an awful blow."

MERESTON.

What nonsense! How could you think anything of the kind?

LADY FREDERICK.

Are you aware that you haven't shown the least desire to kiss me yet?

MERESTON.

I thought—I thought you might not like it.

LADY FREDERICK.

It'll be too late in a minute.

MERESTON.

Why?

LADY FREDERICK.

Because I'm just going to make up, you silly boy.

MERESTON.

How? I don't understand.

LADY FREDERICK.

You said I must be very sure of my complexion. Of course I am. Here it is.

[*She runs her fingers over a row of little pots and vases.*

MERESTON.

Oh, I see. I beg your pardon.

LADY FREDERICK.

You don't mean to say you thought it natural?

MERESTON.

It never occurred to me it might be anything else.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's really too disheartening. I spend an hour every day of my life making the best complexion in Monte Carlo, and you think it's natural. Why, I might as well be a dairymaid of eighteen.

MERESTON.

I'm very sorry.

LADY FREDERICK.

I forgive you.... You may kiss my hand. [*He does so.*] You dear boy. [*Looking at herself in the glass.*] Oh, Betsy, you're not looking your best to-day. [*Shaking her finger at the glass.*] This won't do, Betsy, my dear. You're very nearly looking your age. [*Turning round quickly.*] D'you think I look forty?

MERESTON.

I never asked myself how old you were.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, I'm not, you know. And I shan't be as long as there's a pot of rouge and a powder puff in the world. [*She rubs grease paint all over her face.*]

MERESTON.

What *are* you doing?

LADY FREDERICK.

I wish I were an actress. They have such an advantage. They only have to make up to look well behind the footlights; but I have to expose myself to that beastly sun.

MERESTON.

[*Nervously.*] Yes, of course.

LADY FREDERICK.

Is your mother dreadfully annoyed with you? And Paradine must be furious. I shall call him Uncle Paradine next time I see him. It'll make him feel so middle-aged. Charlie, you don't know how grateful I am for what you did yesterday. You acted like a real brick.

MERESTON.

It's awfully good of you to say so.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Turning.*] Do I look a fright?

MERESTON.

Oh, no, not at all.

LADY FREDERICK.

I love this powder. It plays no tricks with you. Once I put on a new powder that I bought in Paris, and as soon as I went into artificial light it turned a bright mauve. I was very much annoyed. You wouldn't like to go about with a mauve face, would you?

MERESTON.

No, not at all.

LADY FREDERICK.

Fortunately I had a green frock on. And mauve and green were very fashionable that year. Still I'd sooner it hadn't been on my face.... There. I think that'll do as a foundation. I'm beginning to feel younger already. Now for the delicate soft bloom of youth. The great difficulty, you know, is to make both your cheeks the same colour. [*Turning to him.*] Charlie, you're not bored, are you?

MERESTON.

No, no.

LADY FREDERICK.

I always think my observations have a peculiar piquancy when I have only one cheek rouged. I remember once I went out to dinner, and as soon as I sat down I grew conscious of the fact that one of my cheeks was much redder than the other.

MERESTON.

By George, that was awkward.

LADY FREDERICK.

Charlie, you are a good-looking boy. I had no idea you were so handsome. And you look so young and fresh, it's quite a pleasure to look at you.

MERESTON.

[*Laughing awkwardly.*] D'you think so? What did you do when you discovered your predicament?

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, by a merciful interposition of Providence, I had a foreign diplomatist on my right side which bloomed like a rose, and a bishop on my left which was white like the lily. The diplomatist told me risky stories all through dinner so it was quite natural that this cheek should blush fiery red. And as the Bishop whispered in my left ear harrowing details of distress in the East End, it was only decent that the other should exhibit a becoming pallor. [*Meanwhile she has been rouging her cheeks.*] Now look carefully, Charlie, and you'll see how I make the Cupid's bow which is my mouth. I like a nice healthy colour on the lips, don't you?

MERESTON.

Isn't it awfully uncomfortable to have all that stuff on?

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, my dear boy, it's woman's lot to suffer in this world. But it's a great comfort to think that one is submitting to the decrees of Providence and at the same time adding to one's personal attractiveness. But I confess I sometimes wish I needn't blow my nose so carefully. Smile, Charlie. I don't think you're a very ardent lover, you know.

MERESTON.

I'm sorry. What would you like me to do?

LADY FREDERICK.

I should like you to make me impassioned speeches.

MERESTON.

I'm afraid they'd be so hackneyed.

LADY FREDERICK.

Never mind that. I've long discovered that under the influence of profound emotion a man always expresses himself in the terms of the *Family Herald*.

MERESTON.

You must remember that I'm awfully inexperienced.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, I'll let you off this time—because I like your curly hair. [*She sighs amorously.*] Now for the delicate arch of my eyebrows. I don't know what I should do without this. I've got no eyebrows at all really.... Have you ever noticed that dark line under the eyes which gives such intensity to my expression?

MERESTON.

Yes, often.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Holding out the pencil.*] Well, here it is. Ah, my dear boy, in this pencil you have at will roguishness and languor, tenderness and indifference, sprightliness, passion, malice, what you will. Now be very quiet for one moment. If I overdo it my whole day will be spoilt. You mustn't breathe even. Whenever I do this I think how true those lines are:

"The little more and how much it is.
The little less and what worlds away."

There! Now just one puff of powder, and the whole world's kind. [*Looking at herself in the glass and sighing with satisfaction.*] Ah! I feel eighteen. I think it's a success, and I shall have a happy day. Oh, Betsy, Betsy, I think you'll do. You know, you're not unattractive, my dear. Not strictly beautiful, perhaps; but then I don't like the chocolate-box sort of woman. I'll just go and take off this dressing-gown. [MERESTON *gets up.*] No, don't move. I'll go into my bedroom. I shall only be one moment. [LADY FREDERICK *goes through the curtains.*] Angélique.

[*The* MAID *enters.*

MAID.

Yes, miladi.

LADY FREDERICK.

Just clear away those things on the dressing-table.

MAID.

[*Doing so.*] Very well, miladi.

LADY FREDERICK.

You may have a cigarette, Charlie.

MERESTON.

Thanks. My nerves are a bit dicky this morning.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, blow the thing! Angélique, come and help me.

MAID.

Yes, miladi.

[*She goes out.*

LADY FREDERICK.

At last.

[*She comes in, having changed the kimono for a very beautiful dressing-gown of silk and lace.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Now, are you pleased?

MERESTON.

Of course I'm pleased.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then you may make love to me.

MERESTON.

You say such disconcerting things.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] Well, Charlie, you've found no difficulty in doing it for the last fortnight. You're not going to pretend that you're already at a loss for pretty speeches?

MERESTON.

When I came here, I had a thousand things to say to you, but you've driven them all out of my head. Won't you give me an answer now?

LADY FREDERICK.

What to?

MERESTON.

You've not forgotten that I asked you to marry me?

LADY FREDERICK.

No, but you asked me under very peculiar circumstances. I wonder if you can repeat the offer now in cold blood?

MERESTON.

Of course. What a cad you must think me!

LADY FREDERICK.

Are you sure you want to marry me still—after having slept over it?

MERESTON.

Yes.

LADY FREDERICK.

You are a good boy, and I'm a beast to treat you so abominably. It's awfully nice of you.

MERESTON.

Well, what is the answer?

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear, I've been giving it you for the last half-hour.

MERESTON.

How?

LADY FREDERICK.

You don't for a moment suppose I should have let you into those horrible mysteries of my toilette if I'd had any intention of marrying you? Give me credit for a certain amount of intelligence and good feeling. I should have kept up the illusion, at all events till after the honeymoon.

MERESTON.

Are you going to refuse me?

LADY FREDERICK.

Aren't you rather glad?

MERESTON.

No, no, no.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Putting her arm through his.*] Now let us talk it over sensibly. You're a very nice boy, and I'm awfully fond of you. But you're twenty-two, and heaven only knows my age. You see, the church in which I was baptized was burnt down the year I was born, so I don't know how old I am.

MERESTON.

[*Smiling.*] Where was it burnt?

LADY FREDERICK.

In Ireland.

MERESTON.

I thought so.

LADY FREDERICK.

Just at present I can make a decent enough show by taking infinite pains; and my hand is not so heavy that the innocent eyes of your sex can discover how much of me is due to art. But in ten years you'll only be thirty-two, and then, if I married you, my whole life would be a mortal struggle to preserve some semblance of youth. Haven't you seen those old hags who've never surrendered to Anno Domini, with their poor, thin, wrinkled cheeks covered with paint, and the dreadful wigs that hide a hairless pate? Rather cock-eyed, don't you know, and invariably flaxen. You've laughed at their ridiculous graces, and you've been disgusted too. Oh, I'm so sorry for them, poor things. And I should become just like that, for I should never have the courage to let my hair be white so long as yours was brown. But if I don't marry you, I can look forward to the white hairs fairly happily. The first I shall pluck out, and the second I shall pluck out. But when the third comes I'll give in, and I'll throw my rouge and my poudre de riz and my pencils into the fire.

MERESTON.

But d'you think I should ever change?

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear boy, I'm sure of it. Can't you imagine what it would be to be tied to a woman who was always bound to sit with her back to the light? And sometimes you might want to kiss me.

MERESTON.

I think it very probable.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, you couldn't—in case you disarranged my complexion. [MERESTON *sighs deeply.*] Don't sigh, Charlie. I daresay I was horrid to let you fall in love with me, but I'm only human, and I was desperately flattered.

MERESTON.

Was that all?

LADY FREDERICK.

And rather touched. That is why I want to give a cure with my refusal.

MERESTON.

But you break my heart.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear, men have said that to me ever since I was fifteen, but I've never noticed that in consequence they ate their dinner less heartily.

MERESTON.

I suppose you think it was only calf-love?

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm not such a fool as to imagine a boy can love any less than a man. If I'd thought your affection ridiculous I shouldn't have been so flattered.

MERESTON.

It doesn't hurt any the less because the wounds you make are clean cut.

LADY FREDERICK.

But they'll soon heal. And you'll fall in love with a nice girl of your own age, whose cheeks flush with youth and not with rouge, and whose eyes sparkle because they love you, and not because they're carefully made up.

MERESTON.

But I wanted to help you. You're in such an awful scrape, and if you'll only marry me it can all be set right.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my dear, don't go in for self-sacrifice. You must leave that to women. They're so much more used to it.

MERESTON.

Isn't there anything I can do for you?

LADY FREDERICK.

No, dear. I shall get out of the mess somehow. I always do. You really need not worry about me.

MERESTON.

You know, you *are* a brick.

LADY FREDERICK.

Then it's all settled, isn't it? And you're not going to be unhappy?

MERESTON.

I'll try not to be.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'd like to imprint a chaste kiss on your forehead, only I'm afraid it would leave a mark.

[*The* FOOTMAN *comes in and announces* PARADINE FOULDES.

FOOTMAN.

Mr. Paradine Fouldes.

[*Exit.*

FOULDES.

Do I disturb?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not at all. We've just finished our conversation.

FOULDES.

Well?

MERESTON.

If any one wants to know who the best woman in the world is send 'em to me, and I'll tell them.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Taking his hand.*] You dear! Good-bye.

MERESTON.

Good-bye. And thanks for being so kind to me.

[*He goes out.*

FOULDES.

Do I see in front of me my prospective niece?

LADY FREDERICK.

Why d'you ask, Uncle Paradine?

FOULDES.

Singularly enough because I want to know.

LADY FREDERICK.

Well, it so happens—you don't.

FOULDES.

You've refused him?

LADY FREDERICK.

I have.

FOULDES.

Then will you tell me why you've been leading us all such a devil of a dance?

LADY FREDERICK.

Because you interfered with me, and I allow no one to do that.

FOULDES.

Hoity-toity.

LADY FREDERICK.

You weren't really so foolish as to imagine I should marry a boy who set me up on a pedestal and vowed he was unworthy to kiss the hem of my garment?

FOULDES.

Why not?

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear Paradine, I don't want to commit suicide by sheer boredom. There's only one thing in the world more insufferable than being in love.

FOULDES.

And what is that, pray?

LADY FREDERICK.

Why, having some one in love with you.

FOULDES.

I've suffered from it all my life.

LADY FREDERICK.

Think of living up to the ideal Charlie has of me. My hair would turn a hydrogen yellow in a week. And then to be so desperately adored as all that—oh, it's so dull! I should have to wear a mask all day long. I could never venture to be natural in case I shocked him. And notwithstanding all my efforts I should see the illusions tumbling about his ears one by one till he realised I was no ethereal goddess, but a very ordinary human woman neither better nor worse than anybody else.

FOULDES.

Your maxim appears to be, marry any one you like except the man that's in love with you.

LADY FREDERICK.

Ah, but don't you think I might find a man who loved me though he knew me through and through? I'd far rather that he saw my faults and forgave them than that he thought me perfect.

FOULDES.

But how d'you know you've choked the boy off for good?

LADY FREDERICK.

I took good care. I wanted to cure him. If it had been possible I would have shown him my naked soul. But I couldn't do that, so I let him see....

FOULDES.

[*Interrupting.*] What!

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Laughing.*] No, not quite. I had a dressing-gown on and other paraphernalia. But I made him come here when I wasn't made up, and he sat by while I rouged my cheeks.

FOULDES.

And the young fool thought there was nothing more in you than a carefully prepared complexion?

LADY FREDERICK.

He was very nice about it. But I think he was rather relieved when I refused him.
[*There is a knock at the door.*]

GERALD.

[*Outside.*] May we come in?

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes do.
Enter GERALD *and* ROSE *and the* ADMIRAL.

GERALD.

[*Excitedly.*] I say, it's all right. The Admiral's come down like a real brick. I've told him everything.

LADY FREDERICK.

What do you mean? Good-morning, dear Admiral.

ADMIRAL.

Good-morning.

GERALD.

I've made a clean breast of it. I talked it over with Rosie.

ROSE.

And we went to papa together.

GERALD.

And told him that I owed Montgomerie nine hundred pounds.

ROSE.

And we thought papa would make an awful scene.

GERALD.

Raise Cain, don't you know.

ROSE.

But he never said a word.

GERALD.

He was simply ripping over it.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Putting her hands to her ears.*] Oh, oh, oh. For heaven's sake be calm and coherent.

GERALD.

My dear, you don't know what a relief it is.

ROSE.

I saw Gerald was dreadfully worried, and I wormed it out of him.

GERALD.

I'm so glad to be out of the clutches of that brute.

ROSE.

Now we're going to live happily ever afterwards.

[*All the while the* ADMIRAL *has been trying to get a word in, but each time he is about to start one of the others has broken in.*

ADMIRAL.

Silence. [*He puffs and blows.*] I never saw such a pair in my life.

LADY FREDERICK.

Now do explain it all, Admiral. I can't make head or tail out of these foolish creatures.

ADMIRAL.

Well, they came and told me that Montgomerie had an I.O.U. of Gerald's for nine hundred pounds and was using it to blackmail you.

FOULDES.

Is that a fact?

LADY FREDERICK.

Yes.

ADMIRAL.

I never liked the man's face. And when they said his terms were that you were to marry him or Gerald would have to send in his papers, I said ...

FOULDES.

Damn his impudence.

ADMIRAL.

How did you know?

FOULDES.

Because I'd have said it myself.

GERALD.

And the Admiral stumped up like a man. He gave me a cheque for the money, and I've just this moment sent it on to Montgomerie.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Taking both his hands.*] It's awfully good of you, and I'm sure you'll never regret that you gave Gerald a chance.

ADMIRAL.

May I have a few words' private conversation with you?

LADY FREDERICK.

Of course. [*To the others.*] Make yourselves scarce.

FOULDES.

We'll go on the balcony, shall we?

ADMIRAL.

I'm sorry to trouble you, but it'll only take three minutes.
[GERALD *and* ROSE *and* FOULDES *go on to the balcony*.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*When they've gone.*] There.

ADMIRAL.

Well, what I wanted to say to you was this: I like Gerald, but I think he wants guiding. D'you follow me?

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm sure he will take your advice always.

ADMIRAL.

It's a woman's hand that he wants. Now if you and I were to join forces we could keep him out of mischief, couldn't we?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, I'll come and stay with you whenever you ask me. I love giving good advice when I'm quite sure it won't be taken.

ADMIRAL.

I was thinking of a more permanent arrangement. Look here, why don't you marry me?

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear Admiral!

ADMIRAL.

I don't think an attractive woman like you ought to live alone. She's bound to get in a scrape.

LADY FREDERICK.

It's awfully good of you, but....

ADMIRAL.

You don't think I'm too old, do you?

LADY FREDERICK.

Of course not. You're in the very prime of life.

ADMIRAL.

There's life in the old dog yet, I can tell you.

LADY FREDERICK.

I feel sure of that. I never doubted it for a moment.

ADMIRAL.

Then what have you got against me?

LADY FREDERICK.

You wouldn't like to commit polygamy, would you?

ADMIRAL.

Eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

You see, it's not a question of marrying me only, but all my tradespeople.

ADMIRAL.

I hadn't thought of that.

LADY FREDERICK.

Besides, you're Rose's father, and I'm Gerald's sister. If we married I should be my brother's mother-in-law, and

my step-daughter would be my sister. Your daughter would be your sister-in-law, and your brother would just snap his fingers at your fatherly advice.

ADMIRAL.

[Confused.] Eh?

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know if the prayer-book allows things like that, but if it does I think it's hopelessly immoral.

ADMIRAL.

Well, shall I tell them I've changed my mind and they can't marry?

LADY FREDERICK.

Then there'd be no reason for us to—commit the crime, would there?

ADMIRAL.

I hadn't thought of that. I suppose not.

LADY FREDERICK.

You're not cross with me, are you? I'm very much flattered, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

ADMIRAL.

Not at all, not at all. I only thought it might save trouble.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Calling.*] Gerald. Come along. [*They come in.*] We've had our little talk.

GERALD.

Everything satisfactory?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*With a look at the* ADMIRAL.] Quite.

ADMIRAL.

[*Gruffly.*] Quite.

LADY FREDERICK'S FOOTMAN *enters.*

FOOTMAN.

Captain Montgomerie wishes to know if he may see your ladyship.

LADY FREDERICK.

I'd forgotten all about him.

GERALD.

Let me go to him, shall I?

LADY FREDERICK.

No, I'm not afraid of him any longer. He can't do anything to you. And as far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter.

GERALD.

Then I'll tell him to go to the devil.

LADY FREDERICK.

No, I'm going to tell him that myself. [*To the* FOOTMAN.] Ask Captain Montgomerie to come here.

FOOTMAN.

Yes, miladi.

[*Exit.*

Lady Frederick.
[*Walking up and down furiously.*] I'm going to tell him that myself.

FOULDES.

Now keep calm, Betsy.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Very deliberately.*] I shall not keep calm.

FOULDES.

Remember that you're a perfect lady.

LADY FREDERICK.

Don't interfere with me. I ate humble pie yesterday, and it didn't agree with me at all.
[FOOTMAN *enters to announce* CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE, *who follows him, and immediately withdraws.*

FOOTMAN.

Captain Montgomerie.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

How d'you do.
[*He is obviously surprised to see the others.*

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Pleasantly.*] Quite a party, aren't we?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Yes. [*A pause.*] I hope you don't mind my coming so early?

LADY FREDERICK.

Not at all. You made an appointment for half-past ten.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I trust you have good news for me.

LADY FREDERICK.

Captain Montgomerie, every one here knows the circumstances that have brought you.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I should have thought it wiser for both our sakes not to make them too public.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Very amiably.*] I don't see why you should be ashamed because you made me a proposal of marriage?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I'm sorry you should think it a laughing matter, Lady Frederick.

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't. I never laugh at an impertinence.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Taken aback.*] I beg your pardon.

LADY FREDERICK.

Surely the receipt of my brother's letter was sufficient answer for you. After that you must have guessed there was no likelihood that I should change my mind.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

What letter? I don't understand.

GERALD.

I sent you a note this morning enclosing a cheque for the money I lost to you.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I've not received it.

GERALD.

It must be waiting for you at the hotel.

[CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE *pauses and looks meditatively at the assembled company*.

LADY FREDERICK.

I think there's nothing for which I need detain you longer.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Smiling.*] I don't think I've quite finished yet. Has it slipped your memory that the two bills fall due to-day? Allow me to present them.

[*He takes them out of his pocket-book.*

LADY FREDERICK.

I'm very sorry I can't pay them—at present.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I regret that I can't wait. You must pay them.

LADY FREDERICK.

I tell you it's impossible.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Then I shall get an order against you.

LADY FREDERICK.

That you may do to your heart's content.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

You realise the consequences. It's not very nice to be an undischarged bankrupt.

LADY FREDERICK.

Much nicer than to marry a rascally money-lender.

FOULDES.

May I look at these interesting documents?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Certainly. [*Blandly.*] I haven't the least wish to be offensive.

FOULDES.

[*Taking them.*] You fail lamentably in achieving your wish. Three thousand five hundred pounds in all. It seems hardly worth while to make a fuss about so small a sum.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

I'm in urgent need of money.

FOULDES.

[*Ironically.*] So rich a man as you?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Even a rich man may be temporarily embarrassed.

FOULDES.

Then be so good as to wait for one moment. [*He sits down at a table and writes a cheque.*] No sight is more affecting than that of a millionaire in financial straits.

LADY FREDERICK.

Paradine!

FOULDES.

[*Handing the cheque.*] Now, sir, I think that settles it. Will you exchange my cheque for those bills?

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

Damn you, I forgot you.

FOULDES.

You may not be aware that it's unusual to swear in the presence of ladies.

CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE.

[*Looking at the cheque.*] I suppose it's all right.

[PARADINE *goes to the door and opens it.*

FOULDES.

There is the window, and here is the door. Which will you choose?

[CAPTAIN MONTGOMERIE *looks at him without answering, shrugs his shoulders and goes out.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, Paradine, you are a brick.

GERALD.

I say it's awfully good of you.

FOULDES.

Nonsense. I've got a strong sense of effect, and I always cultivate the dramatic situation.

LADY FREDERICK.

I shall never be able to pay you back, Paradine.

FOULDES.

My dear, I'm not entirely devoid of intelligence.

ADMIRAL.

Well, well, I must be off to take my constitutional.

LADY FREDERICK.

And Rose and Gerald must take care of you. We shall all meet at luncheon.

ADMIRAL.

Yes, yes.

[*The* ADMIRAL, ROSE *and* GERALD *go out.* LADY FREDERICK *goes up to* PARADINE *and takes his hands.*

LADY FREDERICK.

Thanks awfully. You are a good friend.

FOULDES.

By George, how your eyes glitter!

LADY FREDERICK.

It's only belladonna, you know.

FOULDES.

I'm not such a fool as my nephew, my dear.

LADY FREDERICK.

Why did you do it?

FOULDES.

D'you know what gratitude is?

LADY FREDERICK.

Thanks for past favours and a lively sense of benefits to come.

FOULDES.

Well, yesterday you had my sister in the hollow of your hand. She gave you great provocation, and you burnt those confounded letters.

LADY FREDERICK.

My dear Paradine, I can't get over my own magnanimity. And what are the benefits to come?

FOULDES.

Well it might be five per cent. on the capital.

LADY FREDERICK.

I don't know why you should squeeze my hands all the time.

FOULDES.

But it isn't. Look here, don't you get awfully tired of racketting about?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, my dear friend, I'm sick to death of it. I've got half a mind to retire from the world and bury myself in a hermitage.

FOULDES.

So have I, and I've bought the lease of a little house in Norfolk Street, Park Lane.

LADY FREDERICK.

Just the place for a hermitage—fashionable without being vulgar.

FOULDES.

And I propose to live there quite quietly, and I shall just subsist on a few dried herbs, don't you know.

LADY FREDERICK.

But do have them cooked by a really good French chef; it makes such a difference.

FOULDES.

And what d'you say to joining me?

LADY FREDERICK.

I?

FOULDES.

You.

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, I *am* a success to-day. That's another proposal of marriage.

FOULDES.

It sounds very much like it.

LADY FREDERICK.

I've already had three this morning.

FOULDES.

Then I should think you've said "no" quite often enough.

LADY FREDERICK.

Come at ten o'clock to-morrow, and you shall see me make up.

FOULDES.

D'you think that would choke me off? D'you suppose I don't know that behind that very artificial complexion there's a dear little woman called Betsy who's genuine to the bottom of her soul?

LADY FREDERICK.

Oh, don't be so sentimental or I shall cry.

FOULDES.

Well, what is it to be?

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Her voice breaking.*] D'you like me still, Paradine, after all these years?

FOULDES.

Yes. [*She looks at him, her lips quivering. He stretches out his arms, and she, breaking down, hides her face on his shoulder.*] Now don't be an ass, Betsy.... I know you'll say in a minute I'm the only man you ever loved.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Looking up with a laugh.*] I shan't.... But what will your sister say?

FOULDES.

I'll tell her there was only one way in which I could save Charlie from your clutches.

LADY FREDERICK.

What?

FOULDES.

By marrying you myself.

LADY FREDERICK.

[*Putting up her face.*] Monster.
[*He kisses her lips.*]

THE END.

THE EXPLORER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

(*Uniform with this Volume*)

PLAYS:
A MAN OF HONOUR
LADY FREDERICK
JACK STRAW
MRS. DOT
PENELOPE

(*In Preparation*)
SMITH
THE TENTH MAN
GRACE
LOAVES AND FISHES

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

THE EXPLORER

A MELODRAMA
In Four Acts

By W. S. MAUGHAM

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
MCMXII

This play was first produced at the Lyric Theatre on Saturday, June 13, 1908, with the following cast:

Alexander Mackenzie	Lewis Waller
Richard Lomas	A. E. George
Dr. Adamson	Charles Rock
Sir Robert Boulger, Bt.	Owen Roughwood
George Allerton	Shiel Barry
Rev. James Carbery	S. J. Warmington
Captain Mallins	A. Caton Woodville
Miller	Charles Cecil
Charles	P. Digan
Mrs. Crowley	Eva Moore
Lady Kelsey	Mary Rorke
Lucy Allerton	Evelyn Millard

THE EXPLORER

CHARACTERS

Alexander Mackenzie
Richard Lomas
Dr. Adamson
Sir Robert Boulger, Bt.
George Allerton
The Rev. James Carbery
Captain Mallins
Miller
Charles
Lady Kelsey
Mrs. Crowley
Lucy Allerton

Time: *The Present Day.*

Scene: *The First and Third Acts take place at Lady Kelsey's house; the Second at Mackenzie's camp in Central Africa; and the Fourth at the house of Richard Lomas.*

THE EXPLORER

THE FIRST ACT

Scene: Lady Kelsey's *drawing-room in Mayfair. At the back is a window leading on to a balcony. On the right a door leads to the staircase, and on the left is another door. It is the sumptuous room of a rich woman.*

[Lady Kelsey *is seated, dressed in black; she is a woman of fifty, kind, emotional, and agitated. She is drying her eyes.* Mrs. Crowley, *a pretty little woman of twenty-eight, very beautifully dressed, vivacious and gesticulative, is watching her quietly. The* Rev. James Carbery, *a young curate, tall and impressive in appearance, ponderous and self-important, is very immaculate in a silk waistcoat and a large gold cross.*

CARBERY.

I cannot tell you how sincerely I feel for you in this affliction, Lady Kelsey.

LADY KELSEY.

You're very kind. Every one has been very kind. But I shall never get over it. I shall never hold up my head again.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Nonsense! You talk as if the whole thing weren't perfectly monstrous. Surely you don't for a moment suppose that your brother-in-law won't be able to explain everything away?

LADY KELSEY.

God forbid! But still, it's dreadful to think that at this very moment my poor sister's husband is standing in the felon's dock.

CARBERY.

Dreadful, dreadful!

LADY KELSEY.

If you only knew the agonies I've suffered since Fred was arrested! At first I couldn't believe it, I wouldn't believe it. If I'd only known such a thing was possible, I'd have done anything to help him.

CARBERY.

But had you any idea he was in difficulties?

LADY KELSEY.

He came to me and said he must have three thousand pounds at once. But I'd given him money so often since my poor sister died, and every one said I oughtn't to give him any more. After all, someone must look after his children, and if I don't hoard my money a little, George and Lucy will be penniless.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, you were quite right to refuse.

LADY KELSEY.

I thought it would only go in senseless extravagances as all the rest has gone, and when he said it was a matter of life and death, I couldn't believe it. He'd said that so often.

CARBERY.

It's shocking to think a man of his position and abilities should have come to such a pass.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Dear Mr. Carbery, don't draw the very obvious moral. We're all quite wretched enough as it is.

LADY KELSEY.

And two days later Lucy came to me with a white face to say that he had been arrested for forging a cheque.

CARBERY.

I only met him once, and I'm bound to say I thought him a most charming man.

LADY KELSEY.

Ah, that's what ruined him. He was always so entirely delightful. He could never say no to any one. But there's not an atom of harm in him. I'm quite certain he's never done anything criminal; he may have been foolish, but wicked never.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Of course he'll be able to clear himself. There's not the least doubt about that.

LADY KELSEY.

But think of the disgrace of it. A public trial. And Fred Allerton of all people! The Allertons were always so proud of their family. It was almost a mania with them.

MRS. CROWLEY.

For centuries they've cherished the firm belief that there was no one in the county fit to black their boots.

CARBERY.

Pride goeth before a fall.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Smiling.*] And proverbs before a clergyman.

LADY KELSEY.

They wouldn't give him bail, so he's remained in prison till now. Of course, I made Lucy and George come here.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You've been quite charming, Lady Kelsey, as every one knew you'd be. But don't think of these wretched weeks of suspense. Think only that Mr. Allerton has got his chance at last. Why, the trial may be over now, and he may this very minute be on his way to this house.

CARBERY.

What will he do when it's over? The position will be surely a little unpleasant.

LADY KELSEY.

I've talked it over with Lucy, and—I've made it possible for them all to go abroad. They'll need rest and quiet. Poor things, poor things!

CARBERY.

I suppose Miss Allerton and George are at the Old Bailey.

LADY KELSEY.

No, their father begged them to stay away. They've been in all day, waiting for the papers.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But who is going to bring you the news? Surely you're not going to wait for the papers?

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, no, Dick Lomas is coming. He's one of the witnesses for Fred, and my nephew Bobby Boulger.

MRS. CROWLEY.

And what about Mr. Mackenzie? He told me he would be there.

CARBERY.

Is that the great traveller? I thought I saw in the paper that he'd already started for Africa.

LADY KELSEY.

Not yet. He's going at the beginning of the month. Oh, he's been so good to us during this time. All our friends have been good to us.

CARBERY.

I shouldn't have thought there was much of the milk of human kindness to overflow in Alexander Mackenzie. By all accounts he dealt with the slave-traders in Africa with a good deal of vigour.

MRS. CROWLEY.

The slave-traders must be quaking in their shoes if they know he's starting out again, for he's made up his mind to exterminate them, and when Alec Mackenzie makes up his mind to do a thing, he appears to do it.

LADY KELSEY.

He has the reputation of a hard man, but no one could be more delightful than he has been to me.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I don't think I like him, but he's certainly a strong man, and in England just now every one's so weak and floppy, it's rather a relief to come across somebody who's got a will of iron and nerves of steel.

[GEORGE ALLERTON *comes in. He is a very young man, good-looking, though at the moment pale and haggard, with a rather weak face.*

GEORGE.

I thought Lucy was here. [*To* CARBERY *and* MRS. CROWLEY.] How d'you do? Have you seen Lucy?

MRS. CROWLEY.

I went to her room for a moment.

GEORGE.

What is she doing?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Reading.

GEORGE.

I wish I could take it as calmly as she does. An outsider would think there was nothing the matter at all. Oh, it's too awful!

LADY KELSEY.

My dear, you must bear up. We must all hope for the best.

GEORGE.

But there is no best. Whatever happens, it means disgrace and dishonour. How could he? How could he?

LADY KELSEY.

No one knows your father as I do, George. I'm sure he's never been anything but thoughtless and foolish.

GEORGE.

Of course he's not been actually criminal. That's absurd. But it's bad enough as it is.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You mustn't take it too much to heart. In another half-hour at the utmost your father will be here with everything cleared up, and you'll be able to go back to Oxford with a clear conscience.

GEORGE.

D'you think I can go to Oxford again when my father has been tried for forgery? No, no! No, no! I'd rather shoot myself.

LADY KELSEY.

My poor boy.... Where have you been all day?

GEORGE.

Heaven knows! I've walked through the streets till I'm dog-tired. Oh, the suspense is too awful. My feet carried me to the Old Bailey, and I would have given anything to go in and see how things were going, but I'd promised the Pater I wouldn't.

LADY KELSEY.

How did he look this morning?

GEORGE.

He was most awfully worn and ill. I don't believe he'll ever get over it. I saw his counsel before the case began. They told me it was bound to come all right.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Is there anything in the evening papers?

GEORGE.

I haven't dared to look. The placards are awful.

CARBERY.

Why, what do they say?

GEORGE.

Can't you imagine? "Gentleman charged with forgery." "County gentleman at the Old Bailey." And all the rest of it. Damn them! Damn them!

LADY KELSEY.

It may be all over by now.

GEORGE.

I feel that I shall never sleep again. I couldn't close my eyes last night. To think that one's own father....

LADY KELSEY.

For goodness' sake be quiet.

GEORGE.

[*Starting.*] There's a ring at the bell.

LADY KELSEY.

I've given orders that no one is to be admitted but Dick Lomas and Bobbie.

MRS. CROWLEY.

It must be finished by now. It's one or the other of them come to tell you the result.

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, I'm so frightfully anxious.

GEORGE.

Aunt, you don't think....

LADY KELSEY.

No, no, of course not. They *must* find him not guilty.

[*The* BUTLER *enters followed by* DICK LOMAS, *a clean-shaven dapper man, with a sharp face and good-natured smile. He is between thirty-five and forty, but slim and youthful. With him comes* SIR ROBERT BOULGER, LADY KELSEY'S *nephew, a good-looking, spruce youth of twenty-two*.

BUTLER.

Mr. Lomas, Sir Robert Boulger.

GEORGE.

[*Excitedly.*] Well, well? For God's sake tell us quickly.

DICK.

My dear people, I have nothing to tell.

GEORGE.

Oh!

[*He staggers with sudden faintness and falls to the floor.*

DICK.

Hulloa! What's this?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Poor boy!

[*They crowd round him.*

GEORGE.

It's all right. What a fool I am! I was so strung up.

DICK.

You'd better come to the window.

[*He and* BOULGER *take the boy's arms and lead him to the window.* GEORGE *leans against the balcony.*

CARBERY.

I'm afraid I must go away. Every Wednesday at four I read *Little Lord Fauntleroy* to forty charwomen.

LADY KELSEY.

Good-bye. And thanks so much for coming.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Shaking hands with him.*] Good-bye. A clergyman always helps one so much to bear other people's misfortunes.

[CARBERY *goes out, and in a moment* ROBERT BOULGER *comes back into the room.*

LADY KELSEY.

Is he better?

BOULGER.

Oh, much. He'll be all right in a minute. [LADY KELSEY *goes to the window, and he turns to* MRS. CROWLEY.] You are a brick to come here to-day, when they're all in such awful trouble.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*With a little hesitation.*] Did you really come away before the trial was ended?

BOULGER.

Why, of course. What did you think? You don't imagine they'll convict him?

MRS. CROWLEY.

It's too dreadful.

BOULGER.

Where is Lucy? I was hoping to get a glimpse of her.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I wouldn't trouble her to-day if I were you. I think she most wants to be left alone.

BOULGER.

I wanted to tell her that if I could do anything at all, she had only to command.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I think she knows that. But I'll give her the message if you like.... You're very devoted.

BOULGER.

I've been madly in love with her ever since I was ten.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Take care then. There's nothing so tedious as the constant lover.

[DICK *comes into the room and speaks to* ROBERT BOULGER.

DICK.

George is quite well now. He wants you to smoke a cigarette with him.

BOULGER.

Certainly.

[*He goes on to the balcony.*

DICK.

[*When* BOULGER *is gone.*] At least, he will the moment he sees you.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What do you mean by that?

DICK.

Merely that I wanted to talk to you. And Robert Boulger, being a youth of somewhat limited intelligence, seemed in the way.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Why did you leave the Old Bailey?

DICK.

My dear lady, I couldn't stand it. You don't know what it is to sit there and watch a man tortured, a man you've known all your life, whom you've dined with times out of number, in whose house you've stayed. He had just the look of a hunted beast, and his face was grey with terror.

MRS. CROWLEY.

How was the case going?

DICK.

I couldn't judge. I could only see those haggard, despairing eyes.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But you're a barrister. You must have heard his answers. What did he reply to all the questions?

DICK.

He seemed quite dazed. I don't think he took in the gist of his cross-examination.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But the man's innocent.

DICK.

Yes, we all hope that.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What d'you mean? There can be no doubt about that. When he was arrested Lucy went to him and begged him to tell her the exact truth. He swore that he wasn't guilty.

DICK.

Poor Lucy! She's borne up wonderfully. She'll stick to her father through thick and thin.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Abruptly.*] Mr. Lomas, you're trying to put me off. It's not fair to let Lucy buoy herself up with false hopes. She's absolutely convinced that her father will be acquitted.

DICK.

Well, in another half-hour we shall all know. When I left, the judge was just going to sum up.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Mr. Lomas, what is your opinion?

[*He looks at her steadily for a moment.*

DICK.

Were you very much surprised when you heard Fred Allerton was arrested?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Good heavens, I was overwhelmed!

DICK.

[*Dryly.*] Ah!

MRS. CROWLEY.

If you aggravate me I shall box your ears.

DICK.

When first I knew Fred he was a very rich man. You know that the Allertons are one of the oldest families in Cheshire?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Yes. I think Lucy's only failing is an inordinate pride in her family. She thinks it very snobbish to have any particular respect for a peer of the realm, but only natural to look up to persons of good family.

DICK.

Ah, you see, you and I who have a quite indecent lack of ancestors, can't realise what the cult of family may be. There are families in the remote parts of England—not very rich, not very clever, and not very good-looking—who would look askance at a belted earl who came to demand their daughter's hand in marriage. They have a natural conviction that they're the salt of the earth, and in their particular corner they rule more absolutely than half the monarchs in Europe. The Allertons were like that. But Fred somehow seemed to belong to a different stock. The first thing he did was to play ducks and drakes with his fortune.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But men ought to be extravagant. That's what they're there for.

DICK.

Women always took his side because he had an irresistible charm of manner.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I think George has, too, a little.

DICK.

I hope for Lucy's sake he will turn out a different man from his father. I wish he weren't so like him in appearance. At last Fred Allerton had squandered every penny, and he married Lady Kelsey's sister, one of the three rich daughters of a Liverpool merchant. But he ran through her money, too, gambling, racing, and so forth, and she died of a broken heart—adoring him still.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You're as well informed as an encyclopædia, Mr. Lomas.

DICK.

You see, I was made the trustee for the poor remains of Mrs. Allerton's fortune, and I know how Lucy has managed to keep all their heads above water. She's wonderful. Ever since she was a child she's held the reins in her own hands. She's stuck to her father, though Lady Kelsey implored her to leave him to his own foolish ways. She saw that George was decently educated. She hid from the world all the little shifts and devices to which she had to resort in order to keep up an appearance of decency.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I suppose you, too, think Fred Allerton little better than a scamp?

DICK.

My dear lady, when a man has had to leave his club because he plays cards too well, it's at least permissible to suppose that there's something odd about him.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Here's Lady Kelsey. For heaven's sake try and amuse her a little.

[LADY KELSEY *comes back into the room*.

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, Dick, I'm so full of my own troubles, I forgot to ask about yours. I'm so sorry to hear that you're ill.

DICK.

On the contrary, I'm in the very best of health.

LADY KELSEY.

But I saw in the papers that you were going to give up your seat in the House owing to ill-health.

DICK.

Of course, I'd forgotten. My heart is seriously deranged.

MRS. CROWLEY.

How dreadful! What is the matter with it?

DICK.

Can you ask? I've banged it about at your feet so long that its functions are excessively impaired. And it's beaten all my waistcoats out of shape.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Don't be so foolish. I was quite alarmed.

DICK.

I'm going to retire.

LADY KELSEY.

From the bar as well?

DICK.

From the bar as well. Henceforth I shall cultivate only such arts and graces as are proper to the man of leisure. My fellow men are a great deal too strenuous, and I propose to offer them the spectacle of a complete idler who demands from the world neither honours nor profit, but only entertainment.

MRS. CROWLEY.

D'you mean to say you're going to give up a large practice and a position which may be very important merely to gratify a foolish whim?

DICK.

I haven't time to work. Life is so much too short. A little while ago it occurred to me that I was nearly forty. [*To* MRS. CROWLEY.] D'you know the feeling?

MRS. CROWLEY.

No, of course not. Don't be so uncivil.

DICK.

By the way, how old are you?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Twenty-nine!

DICK.

Nonsense! There's no such age.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I beg your pardon, upper parlourmaids are always twenty-nine.

DICK.

For years I've spent eight hours a day meddling with silly persons' silly quarrels, and eight hours more governing the nation. I've never been able to spend more than half my income. I'm merely working myself to death in order to leave a fortune to my nieces, two desperately plain girls with red noses.

LADY KELSEY.

But what are you going to do?

DICK.

Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'll try my hand at big game shooting, if Alec will take me on this expedition of his. I've always thought shooting would be an agreeable pastime if partridges were the size of well-grown sheep and pheasants a little larger than a cow.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then the breakdown in your health is all humbug?

DICK.

Absolute humbug. If I were to tell the truth people would shut me up in a lunatic asylum. I've come to the conclusion that there's only one game in the world worth playing, and that's the game of life. I'm rich enough to devote myself to it entirely.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But you'll get bored to death.

DICK.

Not I! Why, I'm growing younger every day. My dear Mrs. Crowley, I don't feel a day more than eighteen.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You certainly look quite twenty-five.

DICK.

I haven't a white hair in my head.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I suppose your servant plucks them out every morning.

DICK.

Oh, very rarely. One a month at the outside.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I think I see one on the left temple.

DICK.

Really! How careless of Charles! I must speak to him.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Let me pluck it out.

DICK.

I shall allow you to do nothing so familiar.

[GEORGE *comes hurriedly into the room*.

GEORGE.

There's Alec Mackenzie. He's just driven up in a cab.

DICK.

He must have come from the trial. Then it's all over.

LADY KELSEY.

Quick! Go to the stairs, or Miller won't let him up.

[GEORGE *runs across the room and opens the door*.

GEORGE.

[*Calling.*] Miller, Miller, Mr. Mackenzie's to come up.

[LUCY ALLERTON, *hearing a commotion, comes in. She is older than George, a tall girl, white now, with eyes heavy from want of sleep. She has lived in the country all her life, and has brought up to London a sort of remoteness from the world. She is beautiful in a very English manner, and her clear-cut features are an index to a character in which the moral notions are peculiarly rigid. Self-control is a quality which she possesses in a marked degree, and one which she enormously admires in others*.

LUCY.

Who is it?

GEORGE.

It's Alec Mackenzie. He's come from the trial!

LUCY.

Then it's finished at last. [*She shakes hands with* DICK.] It's so good of you to come.

BOULGER.

You're perfectly wonderful, Lucy. How can you be so calm?

LUCY.

Because I'm quite sure of the result. D'you imagine I'd doubt my father for a moment?

DICK.

Oh, Lucy, for heaven's sake don't be so sure. You must be prepared for everything.

LUCY.

Oh, no, I know my father. D'you think I've not studied him during these years that I've looked after him? He's a child, with all a child's thoughtlessness and simplicity. And God knows, he's weak. I know his faults better than any one, but it would be impossible for him to do anything criminal.

[*The* BUTLER *enters, followed by* ALEC MACKENZIE.

ALEC *is a tall, wiry man, well-knit, with dark hair and a small red moustache and beard, cut close to the face. He is about five-and-thirty. He has great ease of manner, and there is about him an air as though he were accustomed that people should do as he told them.*

BUTLER.

Mr. Mackenzie!

GEORGE.

Is it finished? For God's sake tell us quickly, old man.

LUCY.

Why didn't father come with you? Is he following?

ALEC.

Yes, it's all over.

LADY KELSEY.

Thank goodness. The suspense was really too dreadful.

GEORGE.

I knew they'd acquit him. Thank God!

DICK.

[*Looking at* ALEC'S *face.*] Take care, George.

[*Suddenly* LUCY *goes up to* ALEC *and looks at him. An expression of horror distorts her features.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

Lucy, what is it?

ALEC.

I don't know how I am going to tell you.

LUCY.

You say the trial was over when you came away?

ALEC.

Yes.

LUCY.

The jury had given their verdict?

GEORGE.

Lucy, what are you driving at? You don't think...?

ALEC.

Your father asked me to come and break it to you.

GEORGE.

He's not dead?

ALEC.

Perhaps it would be better if he were.

LUCY.

They found him guilty?

ALEC.

Yes.

GEORGE.

[*With a groan of despair.*] Oh! But it's impossible.

LUCY.

[*Putting her hand on his arm.*] Ssh!

LADY KELSEY.

My God, my God! I'm thankful that his wife is dead.

LUCY.

I'm awfully stupid, but if he was innocent, how could they find him guilty? I don't know what you mean.

ALEC.

I am afraid it's very clear.

LUCY.

There must be some horrible mistake.

ALEC.

I wish there were.

GEORGE.

[*Breaking down into tears and sinking into a chair.*] Oh, God! What shall I do?

LUCY.

Don't do that, George. We want all our calmness now.

GEORGE.

Don't you see they all expected it? It was only you and I who believed in his innocence.

LUCY.

[*To* ALEC.] Did you hear the evidence?

ALEC.

Yes.

LUCY.

And you followed it carefully?

ALEC.

Very.

LUCY.

What impression did it leave on your mind?

ALEC.

What can it matter how it affected me?

LUCY.

I want to know.

DICK.

Lucy, you're torturing us all.

LUCY.

If you had been on the jury would your verdict have been the same as theirs?

ALEC.

I should have been obliged to judge according to my conscience.

LUCY.

I see. And you have no doubt that he was guilty?

ALEC.

Don't ask me these horrible questions.

LUCY.

But it's very important. I know that you are a perfectly honest and upright man. If you think he was guilty, there is nothing more to be said.

ALEC.

The case was so plain that the jury were not out of the box for more than ten minutes.

LUCY.

Did the judge say anything?

ALEC.

[*Hesitatingly.*] He said there could be no doubt about the justice of the verdict.

LUCY.

What else?... [*He looks at her without answering.*] You had better tell me now. I shall see it in the papers to-morrow.

ALEC.

[*As though the words were dragged out of him.*] He called it a very mean and shameful crime, worse than another man's because your father was a gentleman of ancient family and bore a name of great honour.

DICK.

[*To* MRS. CROWLEY.] These judges have a weakness for pointing a moral.

LUCY.

And what was the sentence? [*A pause.*] Well?

ALEC.

Seven years' penal servitude.

GEORGE.

Oh, God!

DICK.

My dear girl, I can't tell you how sorry I am.

LADY KELSEY.

Lucy, what is it? You frighten me.

LUCY.

Try and bear up, George. We want all the strength we've got, you and I.
[MRS. CROWLEY *puts her arms round* LUCY *and kisses her.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, my dear, my dear!

LUCY.

[*Disengaging herself.*] You're all very kind, and I know you sympathise with me....

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Interrupting her.*] You know that we'll do everything we can to help you.

LUCY.

It's so good of you. There's really nothing that any one can do. Would you all mind leaving me alone with George?

We must talk this over by ourselves.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Very well. Mr. Lomas, will you put me into a cab?

DICK.

Certainly. [*To* LUCY.] Good-bye, dear, and God bless you.

LUCY.

[*Shaking hands with him.*] Don't worry too much about me. If there's anything I want, I'll let you know.

DICK.

Thanks.

[*He goes out with* MRS. CROWLEY.

ALEC.

May I speak to you for a few minutes alone?

LUCY.

Not now, Mr. Mackenzie. I don't want to seem rude, but ...

ALEC.

[*Interrupting.*] I know, and I wouldn't insist unless it were a matter of the most urgent importance.

LUCY.

Very well. George, will you take Aunt Alice to her room? I shall want you in a moment.

GEORGE.

Yes.

LUCY.

[*To* LADY KELSEY.] Won't you lie down and try and sleep a little? You must be dreadfully exhausted.

LADY KELSEY.

Ah, don't think of me now, dear. Think of yourself.

LUCY.

[*Smiling.*] It's purely selfish. It eases me a little to fuss about you.

GEORGE.

I'll wait in the smoking-room, Lucy.

LUCY.

Do!

[GEORGE *and* LADY KELSEY *go out.*

ALEC.

I think your self-command is wonderful. I've never admired you more than at this moment.

LUCY.

You make me feel such a prig. It's not really very strange if I keep my head, because I've had an immensely long training. Since I was fifteen I've been alone to care for George and my father.... Won't you sit down?

ALEC.

I can say what I want in a very few words. You know that in a week I start for Mombassa to take charge of the expedition in North-East Africa. I may be away for three or four years, and I shall be exposed to a certain amount of danger. When I left Africa last time to gather supplies, I determined I would crush those wretched slave-traders, and now I think I have the means to do it.

LUCY.

I think you are engaged on a very great work.

ALEC.

I don't know whether you ever noticed that—that I cared more for you than for any one in the world. But with the long journey in front of me I didn't think it was right to say anything to you. It wasn't fair to ask you to bind yourself during my long absence. And there was always the risk that a stray bullet might put an end to me. I made up my mind that I must wait till I returned. But things have changed now. Lucy, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me before I go?

LUCY.

No, I can't do that. It's very generous of you, but I couldn't.

ALEC.

Why not? Don't you know that I love you? It would help me so much if I knew that you were waiting for me at home.

LUCY.

I must look after my father. I shall go and live near the—prison, so that I can see him whenever it's possible.

ALEC.

You can do that as well if you're my wife.... You have before you a very difficult and trying time. Won't you let me help you?

LUCY.

I couldn't. Heaven knows, I'm grateful to you for offering to marry me on this day of my bitter humiliation. I shall never forget your great kindness. But I must stand alone. I must devote myself to my father. When he's released I must have a home to bring him to, and I must tend him and care for him. Ah, now he wants me more than ever.

ALEC.

You're very proud.

LUCY.

[*Giving him her hand.*] Dear friend, don't think hardly of me. I think I love you as much as it's possible for a woman to love a man.

ALEC.

Lucy!

LUCY.

[*With a smile.*] Did you want me to tell you that in so many words? I admire you, and I trust you. I should be very happy if George could grow into so brave and honest a man as you.

ALEC.

They're very modest crumbs with which you want me to be satisfied.

LUCY.

I know in your heart you think I'm right. You would never seek to dissuade me from what I'm convinced is my duty.

ALEC.

Can't I do anything for you at all?
[*She looks at him for a moment intently. She rings the bell.*

LUCY.

Yes, you can do me the greatest possible service.

ALEC.

I'm so glad. What is it you mean?

LUCY.

Wait, and I'll tell you. [*The* BUTLER *enters.*] Ask Mr. George to come here, please.

BUTLER.

Very well, Miss.

[*He goes out.*

LUCY.

I want you to help me.

[GEORGE *comes in.*

GEORGE.

Yes, Lucy?

LUCY.

I want to give into your charge what I love most in the world.... George, have you thought at all what you're going to do now? I'm afraid you can't go back to Oxford.

GEORGE.

No, I don't know what's to become of me. I wish I were dead.

LUCY.

An idea has just come to me. I'm going to ask Mr. Mackenzie to take you with him to Africa. Will you go?

GEORGE.

Yes, yes! I'd do anything to get away from England. I daren't face my friends—I'm too ashamed.

LUCY.

Ah, but it's not to hide yourself that I want you to go. Mr. Mackenzie, I daresay you know that we've always been very proud of our name. And now it's hopelessly dishonoured.

GEORGE.

Lucy, for God's sake ...

LUCY.

[*Turning to him.*] Now our only hope is in you. You have the opportunity of achieving a great thing. You can bring back the old name to its old honour. Oh, I wish I were a man. I can do nothing but wait and watch. If I could only fill you with my courage and with my ambition! Mr. Mackenzie, you asked if you could do anything for me. You can give George the chance of wiping out the shame of our family.

ALEC.

Do you know that he will have to suffer every sort of danger and privation, that often he will be parched by the heat, and often soaked to the skin for days together? Sometimes he'll not have enough to eat, and he'll have to work harder than a navvy.

LUCY.

Do you hear, George? Are you willing to go?

GEORGE.

I'll do anything you want me to, Lucy.

ALEC.

And you know that he may get killed. There may be a good deal of fighting.

LUCY.

If he dies a brave man's death, I have nothing more to ask.

ALEC.

[*To* GEORGE.] Very well. Come with me, and I'll do my best for you.

LUCY.

Ah, thanks. You are really my friend.

ALEC.

And when I come back?

LUCY.

Then, if you still care, ask your question again.

ALEC.

And the answer?

LUCY.

[*With a little smile.*] The answer, perhaps, will be different.

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

SCENE: ALEC MACKENZIE'S *tent in North-East Africa. It is night. The place is dimly lighted. There is a little camp bed in one corner with a mosquito net over it. There are two or three folding chairs, some tin cases, and a table. On this a gun is lying.*

DICK *is seated with his head on his hands, leaning on the table, fast asleep.* DR. ADAMSON, *the surgeon of the expedition, comes in. He is a large-boned brawny fellow with a Scotch accent. He looks at* DICK *and smiles.*

DOCTOR.

Hulloa, there! [DICK *starts up and seizes the gun. The* DOCTOR *laughs.*] All right. Don't shoot. It's only me.

DICK.

[*With a laugh.*] Why the dickens did you wake me up? I was dreaming—dreaming of a high-heeled boot and a neat ankle, and the swish of a white lace petticoat.

DOCTOR.

I thought I'd just have a look at your arm.

DICK.

It's one of the most æsthetic sights I know.

DOCTOR.

Your arm?

DICK.

A pretty woman crossing Piccadilly at Swan and Edgar's. You are a savage, my good doctor, and a barbarian. You don't know the care and forethought, the hours of anxious meditation, it has needed for her to hold up that well-made skirt with the elegant grace which enchants you.

DOCTOR.

I'm afraid you're a very immoral man, Lomas.

DICK.

Ah, my dear fellow, at my time of life I have to content myself with condemning the behaviour of the younger generation. Even a camp bed in a stuffy tent with mosquitoes buzzing all around me has allurements greater than those of youth and beauty. And I declare for all women to hear that I am proof against their wiles. Give me a comfortable bed to sleep in, plenty to eat, tobacco to smoke, and Amaryllis may go hang.

DOCTOR.

Well, let's look at this wound of yours. Has it been throbbing at all?

DICK.

Oh, it's not worth bothering about. It'll be all right to-morrow.

DOCTOR.

I'll put a clean dressing on all the same.

DICK.

All right. [*He takes off his coat and rolls up his sleeve. His arm is bandaged, and during the next speeches the* DOCTOR *puts on a dressing and a clean bandage.*] You must be pretty well done up, aren't you?

DOCTOR.

Just about dropping. But I've got a deuce of a lot more work before I turn in.

DICK.

The thing that amuses me is to remember that I came to Africa thinking I was going to have a rattling good time.

DOCTOR.

You couldn't exactly describe it as a picnic, could you? But I don't suppose any of us knew it would be such a tough job as it's turned out.

DICK.

My friend, if ever I return to my native land, I will never be such a crass and blithering idiot as to give way again to a spirit of adventure.

DOCTOR.

[*With a laugh.*] You're not the sort of chap whom one would expect to take to African work. Why the blazes did you come?

DICK.

That's precisely what I've been asking myself ever since we landed in this God-forsaken swamp.

DOCTOR.

The wound looks healthy enough. It'll hardly even leave a scar.

DICK.

I'm glad that my fatal beauty won't be injured.... You see, Alec's about the oldest friend I have. And then there's young Allerton, I've known him ever since he was a kid.

DOCTOR.

That's an acquaintance that most of us wouldn't boast about.

DICK.

I had an idea I'd like Bond Street all the better when I got back. I never knew that I should be eaten alive by every kind of disgusting animal by night and day. I say, Doctor, do you ever think of a rump steak?

DOCTOR.

When?

DICK.

[*With a wave of the hand.*] Sometimes, when we're marching under a sun that just about takes the roof of your

head off, and we've had the scantiest and most uncomfortable breakfast possible, I have a vision.

DOCTOR.

D'you mind only gesticulating with one arm?

DICK.

I see the dining-room of my club and myself sitting at a little table by the window looking out on Piccadilly, and there's a spotless tablecloth, and all the accessories are spick and span. An obsequious servant brings me a rump steak, grilled to perfection, and so tender that it melts in the mouth. And he puts by my side a plate of crisp, fried potatoes. Can't you smell them?

DOCTOR.

[*Laughing.*] Shut up!

DICK.

And then another obsequious servant brings me a pewter tankard, and into it he pours a bottle, a large bottle, mind you, of foaming ale.

DOCTOR.

You've certainly added considerably to our cheerfulness.

DICK.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] I've often been driven to appease the pangs of raging hunger with a careless epigram, and by the laborious composition of a limerick I have sought to deceive a most unholy thirst.

DOCTOR.

Well, last night I thought you'd made your last joke, old man, and that I had given my last dose of quinine.

DICK.

We were in rather a tight corner, weren't we?

DOCTOR.

This is the third expedition I've gone with Mackenzie against the slave-raiders, and I promise you I've never been so certain that all was over with us.

DICK.

Funny thing death is, you know. When you think of it beforehand, it makes you squirm in your shoes, but when you've just got it face to face, it seems so obvious that you forget to be afraid. It's one of my principles never to be impressed by a platitude.

DOCTOR.

It's only by a miracle we escaped. If those Arabs hadn't hesitated to attack us just those ten minutes we should have been wiped out.

DICK.

Alec was splendid, wasn't he?

DOCTOR.

Yes, by Jove! He thought we were done for.

DICK.

What makes you think that?

DOCTOR.

Well, you see, I know him pretty well. He's been a pal of yours for twenty years in England, but I've been with him out here three times, and I tell you there's not much about a man that you don't know then.

DICK.

Well?

DOCTOR.

Well, when things are going smoothly and everything's flourishing, he's apt to be a bit irritable. He keeps rather to himself, and he doesn't say much unless you do something he doesn't approve of.

DICK.

And then, by Jove, he comes down on one like a thousand of bricks. It's not for nothing the natives call him Thunder and Lightning.

DOCTOR.

But when things begin to look black, his spirits go up like one o'clock. And the worse they are, the more cheerful he is.

DICK.

It's one of his most irritating characteristics.

DOCTOR.

When every one is starving with hunger, and dead tired, and soaked to the skin, Mackenzie fairly bubbles over with good-humour.

DICK.

When I'm in a bad temper, I much prefer every one else to be in a bad temper too.

DOCTOR.

These last few days, he's been positively hilarious. Yesterday he was cracking jokes with the natives.

DICK.

[*Dryly.*] Scotch jokes. I daresay they sound funny in an African dialect.

DOCTOR.

I've never seen him more cheerful. I said to myself: By the Lord Harry, the chief thinks we're in a devil of a bad way.

DICK.

Thank Heaven, it's all over now. We've none of us had any sleep for three days, and when I once get off, I don't mean to wake up for a week.

DOCTOR.

I must go and see the rest of my patients. Perkins has got a bad dose of fever this time. He was quite delirious a while ago.

DICK.

By Jove, I'd almost forgotten. How one changes out here! Here am I feeling happy and comfortable and inclined to make a little jest or two, and I've forgotten already that poor Richardson is dead and Lord knows how many natives.

DOCTOR.

Poor chap, we could ill spare him. The fates never choose the right man.

DICK.

What do you mean by that?

DOCTOR.

If we had to lose some one, it would have been a damned sight better if that young cub had got the bullet which killed poor Richardson.

DICK.

George Allerton?

DOCTOR.

He wouldn't have been much loss, would he?

DICK.

No, I'm afraid he wouldn't.

DOCTOR.

Mackenzie has been very patient with him. I wonder he didn't send him back to the coast months ago, when he sacked Macinnery.

DICK.

Poor George, everything has been against him.

DOCTOR.

Some men have got natures so crooked that with every chance in the world to go straight they can't manage it. The only thing is to let them go to the devil as best they may.

DICK.

Alec was bound to give him another chance. [ALEC MACKENZIE *comes in.*] Hulloa, Alec! Where have you been?

ALEC.

I've been going the round of the outlying sentries.

DICK.

All serene?

ALEC.

Yes. I've just seen a native messenger that Mindabi sent to me.

DOCTOR.

Anything important?

ALEC.

[*Curtly.*] Yes. How's the arm, Dick?

DICK.

Oh, that's nothing. It's only a scratch.

ALEC.

You'd better not make too light of it. The smallest wound has a way of being troublesome in this country.

DOCTOR.

He'll be all right in a day or two.

ALEC.

How are the others?

DOCTOR.

They're going on pretty well on the whole. Perkins, of course, will be down for some days longer. And some of the natives are rather badly hurt. Those devils have got explosive bullets.

ALEC.

Any one in great danger?

DOCTOR.

No, I don't think so. There are two men who are in rather a bad way, but all they want is rest.

ALEC.

I see.

DICK.

I say, have you had anything to eat lately?

ALEC.

[*With a laugh.*] Good Lord! I quite forgot. I wonder when the dickens I had some food last.

DICK.

[*Smiling.*] You've had nothing to-day, have you?

ALEC.

No, I don't think so. Those Arabs kept us so confoundedly busy.

DICK.

You must be devilish hungry.

ALEC.

Now you mention it, I think I am. And thirsty, by Jove! I wouldn't give my thirst for an elephant tusk.

DICK.

And to think there's nothing but tepid water to drink!

DOCTOR.

I'll go and tell the boy to bring you some food. It's a rotten game to play tricks with your digestion like that.

ALEC.

[*Gaily.*] Stern man, the doctor, isn't he? It won't hurt me once in a way. And I shall enjoy it all the more now.

DOCTOR.

[*Calling.*] Selim!

ALEC.

No, don't trouble. The poor chap's just turned in, dropping with sleep. I told him he might till I called him. I don't want much, and I can easily get it myself. [*He goes to a case and takes out a tin of meat and some ship's biscuits.*] It's rather a nuisance that we've not been able to get any game lately.

[*He sets the food down before him, sits down, and begins to eat.*

DICK.

[*Ironically.*] Appetising, isn't it?

ALEC.

Splendid!

DICK.

You have all the instincts of the primeval savage, Alec. It enrages and disgusts me.

ALEC.

[*With a laugh.*] Why?

DICK.

You take food for the gross and bestial purpose of appeasing your hunger. You have no appreciation for the delicacies of eating as a fine art.

ALEC.

The meat's getting rather mouldy, isn't it?

DICK.

Damnable! It's been a source of great anxiety to me in England.

ALEC.

What is he talking about now?

DICK.

I was going on with the thread of my observations, which you interrupted with the entirely obvious remark that the tinned meat was getting mouldy.

ALEC.

I apologise profusely. Pray go on!

DICK.

I was about to observe that even in England you will eat the most carefully ordered meal with an indifference which is an outrage to decency. Indeed, you pay less attention to it than here, because at all events you do notice that the meat is mouldy. But if any one gives you a good dinner, you notice nothing. I've given him priceless port, Doctor, and he drank it as though it were cooking sherry.

DOCTOR.

I confess it is lamentable. But why is it a source of anxiety to you?

DICK.

What on earth is to happen to him in his old age?

ALEC.

Explain yourself, my friend. Clearly but with as much brevity as possible.

DICK.

The pleasure of eating is the only pleasure that remains to the old. Love—what is love when you lose your figure, and your hair grows thin? Knowledge—one can never know everything, and the desire passes with the fire of youth. Even ambition fails you in the end. But to those who have lived wisely and well, there remain three pleasures every day of their lives: their breakfast, their luncheon, and their dinner.

ALEC.

[*With a laugh.*] I wouldn't worry about my old age if I were you, Dick.

DICK.

Why?

ALEC.

Because I think it's ten to one that we shall all be dead to-morrow morning.

DOCTOR.

What?

[*There is a slight pause while both men stare at him.*

DICK.

Is this one of your little jokes, Alec?

ALEC.

You have often observed that I joke with difficulty.

DOCTOR.

But what's wrong now?

ALEC.

You'll neither of you sleep in your beds to-night. Another sell for the mosquitoes, isn't it? I propose to break up the camp and start marching as soon as the moon goes down.

DICK.

I say, it's a bit thick after a day like this. We're all so done up that we shan't be able to go a mile.

ALEC.

Nonsense, you will have had two hours' rest.

DOCTOR.

But some of those fellows who are wounded can't possibly be moved.

ALEC.

They must!

DOCTOR.

I won't answer for their lives.

ALEC.

We must take the risk. Our only chance is to make a bold dash for it, and we can't leave the wounded here.

DICK.

I suppose there's going to be a deuce of a row?

ALEC.

[*Grimly.*] There is.

DICK.

Your companions seldom have a chance to complain of the monotony of their existence, Alec. What are you going to do now?

ALEC.

At this moment, I'm going to fill my pipe.

[*There is a pause while* ALEC *fills and lights his pipe*.

DICK.

I gather from the general amiability of your demeanour that we're in a rather tight place?

ALEC.

Tighter than any of your patent-leather boots, my friend.

DICK.

[*Gravely.*] Have we any chance of getting through, old man?

ALEC.

[*Lightly.*] Oh, I don't know. There's always a chance.

DICK.

Don't grin at me in that irritating fashion.

ALEC.

You must wish you were treading the light fantastic toe in a London ball-room, Dick.

DICK.

Frankly I do.... I suppose we're going to fight again?

ALEC.

Like Kilkenny cats.

DICK.

[*Briskly.*] Well, at all events that's some comfort. If I am going to be done out of my night's rest, I should like to take it out of some one.

ALEC.

If things turn out all right, we shall have come near finishing the job, and there won't be much more slave-raiding in this part of Africa.

DICK.

And if things don't turn out all right?

ALEC.

Why, then I'm afraid the tea-tables of Mayfair will be deprived of your scintillating repartee forever.

DICK.

Well, I've had a very good time in my life. I've loved a little, I've looked at some good pictures, read some thundering fine books, and I've worked and played. If I can only account for a few more of those damned scoundrels before I die, I shouldn't think I had much to complain of.

ALEC.

[*Smiling.*] You're a philosopher, Dick.

DICK.

Doesn't the possibility of an extremely unpleasant demise tempt you to a few appropriate reflections?

ALEC.

I don't know that it does. I'm a bit of a fatalist, and my theory is that when my time comes nothing can help me, but at the bottom of my heart I can't resist the conviction that I shan't die till I let myself.

DOCTOR.

Well, I must go and put things in order. I'll bandage those fellows up, and I hope they'll stand the jolting.

ALEC.

What about Perkins?

DOCTOR.

Lord knows! I'll try and keep him quiet with chloral.

ALEC.

You needn't say anything about striking camp. I don't propose that any one should know till a quarter of an hour before we start.

DOCTOR.

But that won't give them time.

ALEC.

It must. I've trained them often enough to get on the march quickly.

DOCTOR.

Very well.

[GEORGE ALLERTON *comes in as the* DOCTOR *is on the point of going*.

GEORGE.

Can I come in?

ALEC.

Yes ... Doctor!

DOCTOR.

Hulloa!

ALEC.

You might stay a minute, will you?

DOCTOR.

[*Coming back.*] Certainly.

ALEC.

Didn't Selim tell you that I wanted to speak to you?

GEORGE.

That's why I've come.

ALEC.

You've taken your time about it.

GEORGE.

I say, could you give me a drink of brandy? I'm awfully done up.

ALEC.

[*Shortly.*] There's no brandy left.

GEORGE.

Hasn't the doctor got some?

ALEC.

No!

[*There is a pause.* ALEC *looks at him slowly*.

GEORGE.

Why are you all looking at me like that? You look as if you were going to try me for something.

DICK.

Nonsense! Don't be so nervous.

ALEC.

[*Abruptly.*] Do you know anything about the death of that Turkana woman?

GEORGE.

No! How should I?

ALEC.

Come now, you must know something about it. Last Tuesday you came into camp and told me the Turkana were very excited.

GEORGE.

[*Unwillingly.*] Oh, yes! I remember something about it. It had slipped my memory.

ALEC.

Well?

GEORGE.

I'm not very clear about it. The woman had been shot, hadn't she? One of our station boys had been playing the fool with her, and he seems to have shot her.

ALEC.

Have you made no inquiries as to who the man was?

GEORGE.

[*In a surly way.*] I haven't had time. We've all been worked off our legs during these three days.

ALEC.

Do you suspect no one?

GEORGE.

I don't think so.

ALEC.

Think a moment.

GEORGE.

The only man who might have done it is that big scoundrel whom we got on the coast, the Swahili.

ALEC.

What makes you think that?

GEORGE.

He's been making an awful nuisance of himself, and I know he was running after her.

ALEC.

I understand she complained about him to you?

GEORGE.

Yes.

ALEC.

Do you think that would be enough evidence to punish him on?

GEORGE.

He's a thorough blackguard, and after all, if one does make a mistake, he's only a nigger.

ALEC.

You'll be surprised to hear that when the woman was found she wasn't dead.

[GEORGE *gives a movement of consternation.*

ALEC.

She didn't die for nearly an hour.

GEORGE.

[*After a short pause.*] Was she able to say anything?

ALEC.

She accused you of having shot her.

GEORGE.

Me?

ALEC.

It appears that *you* were playing the fool with her, and when she got angry you took out a revolver and fired point blank. Presumably that she should tell no tales.

GEORGE.

It's a stupid lie. You know what they are. It's just like them to tell an absurd lie like that. You wouldn't believe a parcel of niggers rather than me, would you? After all, my word's worth more than theirs.

ALEC.

[*Taking from his pocket an exploded cartridge.*] This was found about two yards from the body. As you see, it's a revolver cartridge. It was brought to me this evening.

GEORGE.

I don't know what that proves.

ALEC.

You know just as well as I do that none of our natives has a revolver. Besides ourselves only two or three of the servants have them.

[GEORGE *becomes white with fear, he takes out his handkerchief and wipes his face*.

ALEC.

[*Quietly.*] Will you give me your revolver?

GEORGE.

I haven't got it. I lost it in the skirmish this afternoon. I didn't tell you as I thought you'd be annoyed.

ALEC.

I saw you cleaning it less than an hour ago.

GEORGE.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Perhaps it's in my tent, I'll go and see.

ALEC.

[*Sharply.*] Stop here.

GEORGE.

[*Angrily.*] You've no right to talk to me like that. I'm sick to death of being ordered about. You seem to think I'm a dog. I came out here of my own free will, and I won't let you treat me as if I were a servant.

ALEC.

If you put your hand to your hip pocket, I think you'll find your revolver there.

GEORGE.

I'm not going to give it to you.

ALEC.

[*Quietly.*] D'you want me to come and take it from you myself?

[*The two men stare at one another for a moment. Then* GEORGE *slowly puts his hand to his pocket. He lakes out the revolver and suddenly aims at* ALEC. DICK *beats up his arm as he fires, and the* DOCTOR, *springing forward, seizes him round the waist*. ALEC *remains still*.

DICK.

[*During the struggle.*] You young blackguard!

GEORGE.

Let me go, damn you!

ALEC.

You need not hold him.

[*They leave go of* GEORGE, *who sinks cowering into a chair*. DICK *hands the revolver to* ALEC. *He silently fits into a chamber the cartridge that had been brought to him.*

ALEC.

You see that it fits. Hadn't you better make a clean breast of it?

GEORGE.

[*Cowed.*] Yes, I shot her. She made a row, and the devil got into me. I didn't know I'd done anything till she screamed and I saw the blood.... What a fool I was to throw the cartridge away! I wanted to have all the chambers charged.

ALEC.

Do you remember that two months ago I hanged a man to the nearest tree because he'd outraged a native woman?

GEORGE.

[*Springing up in terror.*] You wouldn't do that to me, Alec. Oh, God, no, Alec, have mercy on me. You wouldn't hang me. Oh, why did I ever come to this damned place?

ALEC.

You need not be afraid. I'm not going to do that. In any case I must preserve the native respect for the white man.

GEORGE.

I was half drunk when I saw that woman. I wasn't responsible for my actions.

ALEC.

The result is that the whole tribe has turned against us. The chief is my friend, and he sent a message to tell me he couldn't hold them in. It's from him I got the cartridge. It wouldn't be so serious, only the best fighting part of our

forces are the Turkana, and we must expect treachery. They've stirred up the neighbouring tribes against us, and all the work we've been doing for a year is undone. That's the explanation of the Arabs' attack three days ago.

GEORGE.

[*Sullenly.*] I knew it was all my fault.

ALEC.

The natives have made up their minds to join the slave-traders, and we shall be attacked on all sides to-morrow. We can't hold out against God knows how many thousands.

GEORGE.

D'you mean you'll all be killed?

ALEC.

If we remain here there's no escape.

GEORGE.

[*In a whisper.*] What are you going to do to me, Alec?

[ALEC *walks up and down the tent.*

ALEC.

[*Presently.*] I think you might go and see your patients now, doctor.

DOCTOR.

Very well.

DICK.

Shall I go too, Alec?

ALEC.

No, you can stay here. But don't open your mouth till you're spoken to.
[THE DOCTOR *goes out.*

GEORGE.

I'm sorry I did that silly thing just now. I'm glad I didn't hit you.

ALEC.

It doesn't matter at all. I'd forgotten all about it.

GEORGE.

I lost my head, I didn't know what I was doing.

ALEC.

You need not trouble about that. In Africa even the strongest people are apt to get excited and lose their balance.
[ALEC *re-lights his pipe, and there its a very short pause.*

ALEC.

Did you ever know that before we came away I asked Lucy to marry me?

GEORGE.

I knew you cared for her.

ALEC.

She asked me to bring you here in the hope that you would regain the good name of your family. I think that is the object she has most at heart in the world. It's as great as her love for you. The plan hasn't been much of a success, has it?

GEORGE.

She ought to have known that I wasn't suited for this kind of life.

ALEC.

I saw very soon that you were weak and irresolute. But I hoped to make something of you. Your intentions seemed good enough, but you never had the strength to carry them out.... I'm sorry if I seem to be preaching to you.

GEORGE.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, d'you think I care what any one says to me now?

ALEC.

[*Gravely, but not unkindly.*] Then I found you were drinking. I told you that no man could stand liquor in this country, and you gave me your word of honour that you wouldn't touch it again.

GEORGE.

Yes, I broke it. I couldn't help it; the temptation was too strong.

ALEC.

When we came to the station at Muneas you and Macinnery got blind drunk, and the whole camp saw you. I ought to have sent you back to the coast then, but it would have broken Lucy's heart.

GEORGE.

It was Macinnery's fault.

ALEC.

It's because I thought he was to blame that I sent him back alone. I wanted to give you another chance. It struck me that the feeling of authority might have some influence on you, and so when we came to the lake I left you to guard the ferry. I put the chief part of the stores in your care and marched on. I needn't remind you what happened then.

[GEORGE *looks down sulkily, and in default of excuses keeps silent*.

ALEC.

I came to the conclusion that it was hopeless. You seemed to me rotten through and through.

GEORGE.

[*With a little laugh.*] Like my father before me.

ALEC.

I couldn't believe a word you said. You did everything you shouldn't have done. The result was that the men mutinied, and if I hadn't come back in the nick of time they'd have killed you and looted all the stores.

GEORGE.

You always blame me for everything. A man's not responsible for what he does when he's down with fever.

ALEC.

It was too late to send you back to the coast then, and I was obliged to take you on. And now the end has come. Your murder of that woman has put us all in deadly peril. Already to your charge lie the deaths of Richardson and almost twenty natives. Tribes that were friendly have joined with the Arabs, and we're as near destruction as we can possibly be.

GEORGE.

What are you going to do?

ALEC.

We're far away from the coast, and I must take the law into my own hands.

GEORGE.

[*With a gasp.*] You're not going to kill me?

ALEC.

Are you fond of Lucy?

GEORGE.

[*Brokenly.*] You—you know I am. Why d'you remind me of her now? I've made a rotten mess of everything, and I'm better out of the way. But think of the disgrace of it. It'll kill Lucy.... And she was hoping I'd do so much.

ALEC.

Listen to me. Our only chance of escaping from the confounded fix we're in is to make a sudden attack on the Arabs before the natives join them. We shall be enormously outnumbered, but we may just smash them if we can strike to-night. My plan is to start marching as if I didn't know that the Turkana were going to turn against us. After an hour all the whites but one, and the Swahilis whom I can trust implicitly, will take a short cut. The Arabs will have had news of our starting, and they'll try to cut us off at the pass. I shall fall on them just as they begin to attack. D'you understand?

GEORGE.

Yes.

ALEC.

Now I must have one white man to head the Turkana, and that man will run the greatest possible danger. I'd go myself, only the Swahilis won't fight unless I lead them.... Are you willing to take that post?

GEORGE.

I?

ALEC.

I could order you, but the job's too dangerous for me to force it on any one. If you refuse, I shall call the others together and ask some one to volunteer. In that case you will have to find your way back alone as best you can to the coast.

GEORGE.

No, no! Anything rather than the shame of that.

ALEC.

I won't hide from you that it means almost certain death. But there's no other way of saving ourselves. On the other hand, if you show perfect courage at the moment the Arabs attack and the Turkana find that we've given them the slip, you may escape. If you do, I promise nothing shall be said of all that has happened here.

GEORGE.

All right. I'll do that. And I thank you with all my heart for giving me the chance.

ALEC.

I'm glad you've accepted. Whatever happens you'll have done a brave action in your life. [*He holds out his hand to* GEORGE, *who takes it.*] I think there's nothing more to be said. You must be ready to start in half an hour. Here's your revolver. Remember that one chamber's empty. You'd better put in another cartridge.

GEORGE.

Yes, I'll do that.

[*He goes out.*

DICK.

D'you think he has any chance of escaping?

ALEC.

If he has pluck he may get through.

DICK.

Well!

ALEC.

To-morrow we shall know if he has that last virtue of a blackguard—courage.

DICK.

And if he hasn't, it's death you're sending him to?

ALEC.

Yes. It's death!

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

SCENE: *A smoking-room at* LADY KELSEY'S, *leading by an archway into a drawing-room at the back. On the right is a glass door which leads into the garden. On one side is a sofa; on the other a table with cigarettes, matches, whiskey, sodas, etc.*

LADY KELSEY *is giving a dance, and the music of the Lancers is heard vaguely from the ball-room as the curtain rises.* MRS. CROWLEY *and* SIR ROBERT BOULGER *are sitting down.* LADY KELSEY *comes in with the* REV. JAMES CARBERY.

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, you wretched people, why aren't you dancing? It's too bad of you to hide yourselves here!

MRS. CROWLEY.

We thought no one would find us in the smoking-room. But why have you abandoned your guests, Lady Kelsey?

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, I've got them all comfortably settled in the Lancers, and I'm free to rest myself for a quarter of an hour. You don't know what agonies I've been suffering the whole evening.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Good gracious me! Why?

LADY KELSEY.

I'm so afraid Alec Mackenzie will come.

BOULGER.

You needn't worry about that, Aunt Alice. He'll never venture to show his face.

LADY KELSEY.

I didn't know what to do. It was impossible to put the dance off. It's too dreadful that these horrible revelations should....

CARBERY.

[*Supplying the word.*] Transpire.

LADY KELSEY.

Yes, transpire on the very day I've at last persuaded Lucy to come into the world again. I wish Dick would come.

BOULGER.

Yes, he'll be able to tell us something.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But will he?

CARBERY.

Wherever I go people are talking about Mr. Mackenzie, and I'm bound to say I've found nobody who has a good word for him.

BOULGER.

[*Bitterly.*] Humpty-dumpty's had a great fall.

CARBERY.

I wonder if I might have a cigarette?

MRS. CROWLEY.

I'm sure you might. And if you press me dreadfully, I'll have one, too.

BOULGER.

Don't press her. She's already had far too many.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Well, I'll forego the pressing, but not the cigarette.

CARBERY.

[*Handing her the box and giving her a light.*] It's against all my principles, you know.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What *is* the use of principles except to give one an agreeable sensation of wickedness when one doesn't act up to them?

[DICK *comes in as she speaks.*

DICK.

My dear lady, you're as epigrammatic as a dramatist. Do you say such things from choice or necessity?

LADY KELSEY.

Dick!

BOULGER.

Dick!

MRS. CROWLEY.

Mr. Lomas!

CARBERY.

Ah!

[*The four exclamations are simultaneous.*

DICK.

This enthusiasm at my appearance is no less gratifying than unexpected.

LADY KELSEY.

I'm so glad you've come at last. Now we shall get at the truth.

BOULGER.

[*Impatiently.*] Well?

DICK.

My dear people, what *are* you talking about?

BOULGER.

Oh, don't be such an ass!

MRS. CROWLEY.

Good heavens, didn't you read the *Times* this morning?

DICK.

I only came back from Paris to-night. Besides, I never read the papers except in August.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] When there's nothing in them?

DICK.

Pardon me, I'm an eager student of the sea-serpent and the giant gooseberry.

LADY KELSEY.

My dear Dick, it's too shocking. I wish I'd had the courage to write and ask Mr. Mackenzie not to come. But since you both came back from Africa a month ago he's been here nearly every day. And he's been so good and kind to us, I couldn't treat him as though there was no doubt the story was true.

BOULGER.

There can't be the least doubt about it. By George, I should like to kick him.

DICK.

[*Dryly.*] My dear chap, Alec is a hardy Scot and bigger than you, so I shouldn't advise you to try.

BOULGER.

I was engaged to dine with him to-night, but I wired to say I had a headache.

LADY KELSEY.

What will he think if he sees you here?

BOULGER.

He can think what he jolly well likes.

LADY KELSEY.

I hope he has the sense to stay away.

CARBERY.

I think you're pretty safe now, Lady Kelsey. It's growing late.

DICK.

Will some one kindly explain?

MRS. CROWLEY.

D'you mean to say you really don't know—seriously? After all, you were with him.

LADY KELSEY.

My dear Dick, there are two columns of fiery denunciation in this morning's *Times*.

[DICK *is a little startled, but at once collects himself*.

DICK.

Oh, that's only the reaction. That's nothing. Since he arrived in Mombassa, after three years in the heart of Africa, he's made almost a triumphal progress. Of course, it couldn't last. The reaction was bound to come.

BOULGER.

[*Looking at him steadily.*] The article is signed by a man named Macinnery.

DICK.

[*Calmly.*] Alec found Macinnery half starving at Mombassa, and took him solely out of charity. But he was a worthless rascal, and he had to send him back.

BOULGER.

He gives ample proof for every word he says.

DICK.

Whenever an explorer comes home, there's some one to tell nasty stories about him. People forget that kid gloves are not much use in a tropical forest, and grow very indignant when they hear that a man has used a little brute force to make himself respected.

LADY KELSEY.

Oh, my dear Dick, it's much worse than that. First poor Lucy's father died....

DICK.

You're not going to count that as an overwhelming misfortune? We were unanimous in describing that gentleman's demise as an uncommonly happy release.

LADY KELSEY.

But Lucy was heart-broken all the same. And when her life seemed to grow a little more cheerful, came her brother's tragic death.

DICK.

[*Abruptly, to* MRS. CROWLEY.] What is it exactly?

MRS. CROWLEY.

The long and short of it is that Mr. Mackenzie was the cause of George Allerton's death.

DICK.

Lucy's brother was killed by the slave-traders.

BOULGER.

Mackenzie sent him into a confounded trap to save his own dirty skin.

LADY KELSEY.

And the worst of it is that I think Lucy is in love with Mr. Mackenzie.
[BOULGER *makes a slight movement, and for a moment there is an uncomfortable pause*.

CARBERY.

I saw him this evening in Piccadilly, and I almost ran into his arms. It was quite awkward.

DICK.

[*Frigidly*.] Why?

CARBERY.

I don't think I want to shake the man's hand. He's nothing short of a murderer.

BOULGER.

[*Savagely*.] He's worse than that. He's ten times worse.

LADY KELSEY.

Well, for heaven's sake be polite to him if he comes to-night.

CARBERY.

I really couldn't bring myself to shake hands with him.

DICK.

[*Dryly*.] Don't you think you'd better wait for evidence before you condemn him?

BOULGER.

My dear fellow, the letter in the *Times* is absolutely damning. Interviewers went to him from the evening papers, and he refused to see them.

DICK.

What does Lucy say of it? After all, she's the person most concerned.

LADY KELSEY.

She doesn't know. I took care that she shouldn't see the paper. I wanted to give her this evening's enjoyment unalloyed.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Take care, here she is.
[LUCY *comes in*.

LADY KELSEY.

[*Smiling and reaching out her hand*.] Well, darling?

LUCY.

[*Going to* LADY KELSEY.] Are you growing very tired, my aunt?

LADY KELSEY.

I can rest myself for the time. I don't think any one else will come now.

LUCY.

[*Gaily.*] You faithless woman, have you forgotten the guest of the evening?

LADY KELSEY.

Mr. Mackenzie?

LUCY.

[*Bending over her.*] My dear, it was charming of you to hide the paper from me this morning....

LADY KELSEY.

[*Startled.*] Did you see the letter? I so wanted you not to till to-morrow.

LUCY.

Mr. Mackenzie very rightly thought I should know at once what was said about him and my brother. He sent me the paper himself this evening.

BOULGER.

Did he write to you?

LUCY.

No, he merely scribbled on a card: "I think you should read this."

BOULGER.

Well, I'm damned!

LADY KELSEY.

What did you think of the letter, Lucy?

LUCY.

[*Proudly.*] I didn't believe it.

BOULGER.

[*Bitterly.*] You must be blinded by your—friendship for Alec Mackenzie. I never read anything more convincing.

LUCY.

I could hardly believe him guilty of such an odious crime if he confessed it with his own lips.

BOULGER.

Of course, he won't do that.

DICK.

Did I ever tell you how I made acquaintance with Alec? In the Atlantic—about three hundred miles from land.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What a perfectly ridiculous place for an introduction.

DICK.

I was a silly young fool in those days, and I habitually played the giddy goat. In the course of which, I fell overboard and was proceeding to drown when Alec jumped in after me. It was an incautious thing to do, because he very nearly got drowned himself.

LUCY.

That's not the only heroic thing he's done.

DICK.

No, it's one of his hobbies to risk his life to save unnecessary and useless people. But the funny thing is that ever since he saved mine, he's been quite absurdly grateful. He seems to think I did him an intentional service and fell into the water on purpose to give him a chance of pulling me out.

LUCY.

[*With a long look at* DICK.] It's very kind and good of you to have told that story.

[*The* BUTLER *comes in and announces* ALEC MACKENZIE.

BUTLER.

Mr. Mackenzie.

ALEC.

[*Blandly.*] Ah, I thought I should find you here, Lady Kelsey.

LADY KELSEY.

[*Shaking hands with him.*] How d'you do? We've just been talking of you.

ALEC.

Really?

LADY KELSEY.

It's so late, we were afraid you wouldn't come. I should have been dreadfully disappointed.

ALEC.

It's very kind of you to say so. I've been at the Travellers', reading various appreciations of my own character.

LADY KELSEY.

[*Somewhat embarrassed.*] Oh, I heard there was something about you in the papers.

ALEC.

There's a good deal. I really had no idea the world was so interested in me.

LADY KELSEY.

It's charming of you to come to-night. I'm sure you hate dances!

ALEC.

Oh, no, they interest me enormously. I remember, one of the Kings of Uganda gave a dance in my honour. Ten thousand warriors in war-paint. I assure you it was most impressive.

DICK.

My dear fellow, if paint is the attraction you really need not go much farther than Mayfair.

ALEC.

[*Pretending for the first time to notice* BOULGER.] Ah, there's my little friend Bobbie. I thought you had a headache?

LADY KELSEY.

[*Quickly.*] I'm afraid Bobby is dreadfully dissipated. He's not looking at all well.

ALEC.

[*Good-humouredly.*] You shouldn't keep such late hours, Bobbie. At your age one wants one's beauty sleep.

BOULGER.

It's very kind of you to take an interest in me. My headache has passed off.

ALEC.

I'm very glad. What do you use—Phenacetin?

BOULGER.

It went away of its own accord—after dinner.

ALEC.

[*Smiling.*] So you resolved to give the girls a treat by coming to Lady Kelsey's dance? How nice of you not to disappoint them! [*He turns to* LUCY *and holds out his hand. They look into one another's eyes. She takes his hand.*] I sent you a paper this evening.

LUCY.

It was very good of you.

[CARBERY *comes forward and offers his arm.*

CARBERY.

I think this is my dance, Miss Allerton. May I take you in?

ALEC.

Carbery? I saw you in Piccadilly just now! You were darting about just like a young gazelle. I had no idea you could be so active.

CARBERY.

I didn't see you.

ALEC.

I observed that you were deeply interested in the shop windows as I passed. How are you?

[*He holds out his hand, and for a moment* CARBERY *hesitates to take it. But* ALEC'S *steady gaze compels him.*

CARBERY.

How d'you do?

ALEC.

[*With an amused smile.*] So glad to see you again, old man.
[DICK *gives an audible chuckle, and* CARBERY, *reddening, draws his hand away angrily. He goes to* LUCY *and offers his arm.*

BOULGER.

[*To* MRS. CROWLEY.] Shall I take you back?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Do!

LADY KESLEY.

Won't you come, Mr. Mackenzie?

ALEC.

If you don't mind I'll stay and smoke just one cigarette with Dick Lomas. You know I'm not a dancing man.

LADY KELSEY.

Very well.
[*All go out except* ALEC *and* DICK.

DICK.

I suppose you know we were all beseeching Providence you'd have the grace to stay away to-night?

ALEC.

[*With a smile.*] I suspected it, I confess. I shouldn't have come only I wanted to see Lucy. I've been in the country all day, and I knew nothing about Macinnery's letter till I saw the placards at the station.

DICK.

Macinnery proposes to make things rather uncomfortable, I imagine.

ALEC.

[*With a smile.*] I made a mistake, didn't I? I ought to have dropped him in the river when I had no further use for him.

DICK.

What are you going to do?

ALEC.

It's not easy to clear myself at a dead man's expense. The earth covers his crime and his sins and his weakness.

DICK.

D'you mean to say that you are going to sit still and let them throw mud at you?

ALEC.

When George was dead I wrote to Lucy that he died like a brave man. I can't now publish to the whole world that he was a coward and a rogue. I can't rake up again the story of her father's crime.

DICK.

[*Impatiently.*] Surely, that's absolutely quixotic.

ALEC.

No, it isn't. I tell you I can't do anything else. I'm bound hand and foot. Lucy has talked to me of George's death, and the only thing that has consoled her is the idea that in a manner he had redeemed his father's good name. How can I rob her of that? She placed all her hopes in George. How could she face the world with the knowledge that her brother was rotten to the core, as rotten as her father.

DICK.

It seems awfully hard.

ALEC.

Besides, when all is said and done, the boy did die game. Don't you think that should count for something? No, I tell you I can't give him away now. I should never cease to reproach myself. I love Lucy far too much to cause her such bitter pain.

DICK.

And if it loses you her love?

ALEC.

I think she can do without love better than without self-respect.
[LUCY *comes in with* MRS. CROWLEY.

LUCY.

I've sent my partner away. I felt I must have a few words alone with you.

DICK.

Shall I take Mrs. Crowley into a retired corner?

LUCY.

No, we have nothing to say that you can't hear. You and Nellie know that we're engaged to be married. [*To* ALEC.] I want you to dance with me.

ALEC.

It's very good of you.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Don't you think that's rather foolish, Lucy?

LUCY.

[*To* ALEC.] I want to show them all that I don't believe that you're guilty of an odious crime.

ALEC.

They've said horrible things about me?

LUCY.

Not to me. They wanted to hide it from me, but I knew they were talking.

ALEC.

You'll grow used to hearing shameful things said of me. I suppose I shall grow used to it, too.

LUCY.

Oh, I hate them.

ALEC.

Ah, it's not that I mind. What torments me is that it was so easy to despise their praise, and now I can't despise their blame.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Smiling.*] I believe you have some glimmerings of human nature in you after all.

LUCY.

When you came to-night, so calm and self-possessed, I admired you as I'd never admired you before.

ALEC.

It's easy enough to command one's face. I learnt to do that in Africa when often my life depended on my seeming to have no fear. But in my heart ... I never knew that I could feel so bitter. And yet, after all, it's only your good opinion that I care for.

LUCY.

I've trusted you implicitly from the first day I saw you.

ALEC.

Thank God for that! To-day is the first time I've wanted to be assured that I was trusted. And yet I'm ashamed to want it.

LUCY.

Ah, don't be too hard upon yourself. You're so afraid of letting your tenderness appear.

ALEC.

The only way to be strong is never to surrender to one's weakness. Strength is merely a habit like everything else. I want you to be strong, too. I want you never to doubt me whatever you may hear said.

LUCY.

I gave my brother into your hands, and told you that if he died a brave man's death I could ask for no more.

ALEC.

I should tell you that I've made up my mind to make no answer to the charges that are made against me.
[*There is a very short pause, while he looks at her steadily.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

But why?

ALEC.

[*To* LUCY.] I can give you my word of honour that I've done nothing which I regret. I know that what I did was right with regard to George, and if it were all to come again I would do exactly as I did before.

LUCY.

I think I can trust you.

ALEC.

I thought of you always, and everything I did was for your sake. Every single act of mine during these four years in Africa has been done because I loved you.

LUCY.

You must love me always, Alec, for now I have only you. [*He bends down and kisses her hand.*] Come!
[*He gives her his arm and they walk out.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

I feel as if I should rather like to cry.

DICK.

Do you really? So do I.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Don't be so silly.

DICK.

By the way, you don't want to dance with me, do you?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Certainly not. You dance abominably.

DICK.

It's charming of you to say so. It puts me at my ease at once.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Come and sit on the sofa and talk seriously.

DICK.

Ah, you want to flirt with me, Mrs. Crowley.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Good heavens, what on earth makes you think that?

DICK.

It's what a woman always means when she asks you to talk sensibly.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I can't bear a man who thinks women are in love with him.

DICK.

Bless you, I don't think that. I only think they want to marry me.

MRS. CROWLEY.

That's equally detestable.

DICK.

Not at all. However old, ugly, and generally undesirable a man is, he'll find a heap of charming girls who are willing to marry him. Marriage is still the only decent means of livelihood for a really nice girl.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But, my dear friend, if a woman really makes up her mind to marry a man, nothing on earth can save him.

DICK.

Don't say that, you terrify me.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You need not be in the least alarmed, because I shall refuse you.

DICK.

Thanks, awfully. But all the same I don't think I'll risk a proposal.

MRS. CROWLEY.

My dear Mr. Lomas, your only safety is in immediate flight.

DICK.

Why?

MRS. CROWLEY.

It must be obvious to the meanest intelligence that you've been on the verge of proposing to me for the last month.

DICK.

Oh, I assure you, you're quite mistaken.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then I shan't come to the play with you to-morrow?

DICK.

But I've taken the seats, and I've ordered an exquisite dinner at the Carlton.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What have you ordered?

DICK.

Potage Bisque... [*She makes a little face.*]
Sole Normande... [*She shrugs her shoulders.*]
Wild Duck.

MRS. CROWLEY.

With an orange salad?

DICK.

Yes.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I don't positively dislike that.

DICK.

And I've ordered a soufflé with an ice in the middle of it.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I shan't come.

DICK.

I shouldn't have thought you kept very well abreast of dramatic art if you insist on marrying every man who takes you to a theatre.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Demurely.*] I was very nicely brought up.

DICK.

Of course, if you're going to make yourself systematically disagreeable unless I marry you, I suppose I shall have to do it in self-defence.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I don't know if you have the least idea what you're talking about. I'm sure I haven't!

DICK.

I was merely asking you in a rather well-turned phrase to name the day. The lamb shall be ready for the slaughter!

MRS. CROWLEY.

Couldn't you infuse a little romance into it? You might begin by going down on your bended knees.

DICK.

I assure you that's quite out of fashion. Lovers, nowadays, are much too middle-aged, and their joints are creaky. Besides, it ruins the trousers.

MRS. CROWLEY.

At all events, there can be no excuse for your not saying that you know you're utterly unworthy of me.

DICK.

Wild horses wouldn't induce me to make a statement which is so remote from the truth.

MRS. CROWLEY.

And, of course, you must threaten to commit suicide if I don't consent.

DICK.

Women are such sticklers for routine. They have no originality.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Very well, have it your own way. But I must have a proposal in due form.

DICK.

Only four words are needed. [*Counting them on his fingers.*] Will you marry me?

MRS. CROWLEY.

That is both clear and simple. I reply in one: No!

DICK.

[*As though he were not sure that he had heard correctly.*] I beg your pardon?

MRS. CROWLEY.

The answer is in the negative.

DICK.

You're joking. You're certainly joking.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I will be a sister to you.

DICK.

Do you mean to say you deliberately refuse me?

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Smiling.*] I promised you I would.

DICK.

[*With much seriousness.*] I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Puzzled.*] The man's mad. The man's nothing short of a raving lunatic.

DICK.

I wanted to see if you were really attached to me. You have given me a proof of esteem which I promise you I will never forget.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Laughing.*] You're a perfect idiot, Mr. Lomas!

DICK.

It's one of my cherished convictions that a really nice woman is never so cruel as to marry a man she cares for.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You're much too flippant to marry anybody, and you're perfectly odious into the bargain.
[*She goes out.* DICK, *chuckling, lights a cigarette*. ALEC *comes in and lies down lazily on the sofa*.

ALEC.

Why, Dick, what's the matter? You look as pleased as Punch.

DICK.

My dear fellow, I feel like the Terrible Turk. I've been wrestling, and I thought I was going to have a fall. But by the display of considerable agility I've managed to keep my legs.

ALEC.

What *do* you mean?

DICK.

Nothing. It's merely the gaiety of forty-two.
[BOULGER *comes into the room, followed immediately by* MALLINS *and* CARBERY. *He starts slightly when he sees* ALEC, *but then goes over to the table on which is the whiskey*.

MALLINS.

May we smoke here, Bobby?

BOULGER.

Certainly. Dick insisted that this room should be particularly reserved for that purpose.
[*The* BUTLER *comes in with a small silver salver, and takes up one or two dirty glasses*.

DICK.

Lady Kelsey is the most admirable of all hostesses.

ALEC.

[*Taking a cigarette from his case.*] Give me a match, Bobby, there's a good boy. [BOULGER, *with his back turned to* ALEC, *takes no notice. He pours himself out some whiskey.* ALEC *smiles slightly.*] Bobby, throw me over the matches!

BOULGER.

[*With his back still turned.*] Miller!

BUTLER.

Yes, sir?

BOULGER.

Mr. Mackenzie is asking for something.

BUTLER.

Yes, sir!

ALEC.

You might give me a light, will you?

BUTLER.

Yes, sir!
[*The* BUTLER *takes the matches to* ALEC, *who lights his cigarette.*

ALEC.

Thank you. [*Complete silence is preserved till the* BUTLER *leaves the room.*] I perceive, Bobbie, that during my absence you have not added good manners to your other accomplishments.

BOULGER.

If you want things, you can ask the servants for them.

ALEC.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Don't be foolish, Bobbie!

BOULGER.

Would you be so kind as to remember that my name is Boulger?

ALEC.

[*Smiling.*] Perhaps you would like me to call you Sir Robert?

BOULGER.

I should prefer that you would call me nothing at all. I have absolutely no wish to know you.

ALEC.

Which shows that your taste is as bad as your breeding.

BOULGER.

[*Angrily, walking up to him.*] By God, I'll knock you down!

ALEC.

You could hardly do that when I'm already lying on my back.

BOULGER.

Look here, Mackenzie, I'm not going to let you play the fool with me. I want to know what answer you have to make to all these charges that have been brought against you.

ALEC.

Might I suggest that only Miss Allerton has the least right to receive answers to her questions? And she hasn't questioned me.

BOULGER.

I've given up trying to understand her attitude. If I were she, it would make me sick with horror to look at you. Since this morning you've rested under a direct accusation of causing George's death, and you've said nothing in self-defence.

ALEC.

Nothing.

BOULGER.

You've been given an opportunity to explain yourself, and you haven't taken it.

ALEC.

Quite true.

BOULGER.

Are you not going to deny the charge?

ALEC.

I'm not.

BOULGER.

Then I can only draw one conclusion. There appears to be no means of bringing you to justice, but at least I can refuse to know you.

ALEC.

All is over between us. And shall I return your letters and your photograph?

BOULGER.

I'm not joking.

ALEC.

It's singular that though I'm Scotch and you are English I should be able to see how ridiculous you are, while you're quite blind to your own absurdity.

DICK.

Come, Alec! Remember he's only a boy.

BOULGER.

[*To* DICK LOMAS.] I'm perfectly able to look after myself, and I'll thank you not to interfere. [*To* ALEC.] If Lucy's so indifferent to her brother's death that she's willing to keep up with you, that's her own affair ...

DICK.

[*Interrupting.*] Come, Bobbie, don't make a scene.

BOULGER.

[*Furiously.*] Leave me alone, confound you!

ALEC.

Do you think this is quite the place for an altercation? Wouldn't you gain more notoriety if you attacked me in my club or at Church parade on Sunday?

BOULGER.

It's mere shameless impudence that you should come here to-night. You're using these wretched women as a shield, because you know that as long as Lucy sticks to you there are people who won't believe the story.

ALEC.

I came for the same reason as yourself, dear boy. Because I was invited.

DICK.

Now then, Bobbie, shut up!

BOULGER.

I shan't shut up. The man's got no right to force himself here.

DICK.

Remember that you're Lady Kelsey's nephew.

BOULGER.

I didn't ask him. D'you think I'd have come if I knew he was going to be here? He's acknowledged that he has no defence.

ALEC.

Pardon me, I acknowledge nothing and deny nothing.

BOULGER.

That won't do for me. I want the truth, and I'm going to get it. I've got a right to know.

ALEC.

[*Beginning to lose his temper.*] Don't make an ass of yourself, Bobby.

BOULGER.

By God, I'll make you answer!
[*As he says this he goes up to* ALEC *furiously, but* ALEC. *with a twist of his arm, hurls him back.*

ALEC.

I could break your back, you silly boy.
[*With a cry of anger* BOULGER *is about to spring at* ALEC *when* DICK *gets in the way.*

DICK.

Now then, no scenes. And you'll only get the worst of it, Bobby. Alec could just crumple you up. Take him away, Mallins. Don't stand there like a stuffed owl, Carbery.

BOULGER.

Let me alone, you fool!

MALLINS.

Come along, old chap.

BOULGER.

[*To* ALEC.] You damned skunk!

DICK.

Now then, be off with you. Don't make a silly ass of yourself.
[BOULGER, MALLINS *and* CARBERY *go out.*

DICK.

Poor Lady Kelsey! To-morrow half London will be saying that you and Bobby had a stand-up fight in her drawing-room.

ALEC.

[*Furiously.*] The damned cubs!

DICK.

The position is growing confoundedly awkward!

ALEC.

They lick my boots till I loathe them, and then they turn against me like a pack of curs. Oh, I despise them—these silly boys who stay at home wallowing in their ease while men work. Thank God, I've done with them all now. They think one can fight one's way through Africa as easily as one walks down Piccadilly. They think one goes through hardships and dangers, illness and starvation, to be the lion of a dinner-party in Mayfair.

DICK.

My dear Alec, keep calm.

ALEC.

[*With a visible effort containing himself completely, with studied nonchalance.*] D'you think that I look wildly excited?

DICK.

[*Ironically.*] I don't think butter would melt in your mouth.
[DICK *and* ALEC *go out into the garden. In a moment* BOULGER *comes in with* LADY KELSEY.

BOULGER.

Thank heaven, there's nobody here.

LADY KELSEY.

I think you're dreadfully foolish, Bobby. You know how Lucy resents any interference with her actions.

BOULGER.

Won't you sit down? You must be dreadfully tired.

LADY KELSEY.

Why won't you wait till to-morrow?

BOULGER.

I feel that it ought to be settled at once.
[LUCY *appears*.

LUCY.

Did you send for me, my aunt? Mr. Carbery said you wanted to speak to me here.

LADY KELSEY.

Yes, I gave him that message.

BOULGER.

I asked Aunt Alice to beg you to come here. I was afraid you wouldn't if I asked you.

LUCY.

[*Lightly.*] What nonsense! I'm always delighted to see you.

BOULGER.

I wanted to speak to you about something, and I thought Aunt Alice should be present.

LUCY.

Is it so important that it can't wait till to-morrow?

BOULGER.

I venture to think it's very important.

LUCY.

[*Smiling.*] I'm all attention.
[*He hesitates for a moment, then braces himself to the ordeal.*

BOULGER.

I've told you often, Lucy, that I've been in love with you for as many years as I can remember.

LUCY.

Surely you've not snatched me from the unwilling arm of my partner in order to make me a proposal of marriage?

BOULGER.

I'm perfectly serious, Lucy.

LUCY.

[*Smiling.*] I assure you it doesn't suit you at all.

BOULGER.

The other day I asked you again to marry me, just before Alec Mackenzie came back.

LUCY.

It was very charming of you. You mustn't think that because I laugh at you a little I'm not grateful for your affection.

BOULGER.

Except for that letter in this morning's *Times*, I should never have dared to say anything to you again. But that changes everything.

LUCY.

I don't understand what you mean.

BOULGER.

[*After a little pause.*] I ask you again if you'll be my wife? When Alec Mackenzie came back I understood why you were so indifferent to me, but you can't marry him now.

LUCY.

You have no right to talk to me like this.

BOULGER.

I'm the only man who's related to you at all, and I love you with my whole soul.

LADY KELSEY.

I think you should listen to him, Lucy. I'm growing old, and soon you'll be quite alone in the world.

BOULGER.

I don't ask you to care for me. I only want to serve you.

LUCY.

I can only repeat that I'm very grateful to you. I can never marry you.

BOULGER.

[*Beginning to lose his temper again.*] Are you going to continue to know Mackenzie? If you'll take the advice of any unprejudiced person about that letter, you'll find that he'll say the same as I. There can be no shadow of doubt that Mackenzie is guilty of a monstrous crime.

LUCY.

I don't care what the evidence is. I know he can't have done a shameful thing.

BOULGER.

But have you forgotten that it's your own brother he killed? The whole country is up in arms against him, and you are quite indifferent.

LUCY.

[*Much moved.*] Oh, Bobbie, how can you be so cruel?

BOULGER.

If you ever really cared for George at all, you must wish to punish the man who caused his death.

LUCY.

Oh, why d'you torment me? I tell you that he isn't guilty. It's because I'm convinced of that ...

BOULGER.

[*Interrupting.*] But have you asked him?

LUCY.

No.

BOULGER.

He might give you the truth.

LUCY.

I couldn't do that.

BOULGER.

Why not?

LADY KELSEY.

It's very strange that he should insist on this silence.

LUCY.

Do you believe that story too?

LADY KELSEY.

I don't know what to believe. It's so extraordinary. If the man's innocent, why doesn't he speak?

LUCY.

He knows I trust him. I couldn't cause him the great pain of asking him questions.

BOULGER.

Are you afraid he couldn't answer them?

LUCY.

No, no, no!

BOULGER.

Well, just try. After all, you owe as much as that to the memory of George.

LADY KELSEY.

I think it's very unreasonable, Lucy. He knows we're his friends. He can count on our discretion.

LUCY.

I believe in him implicitly. I believe in him with all the strength I've got.

BOULGER.

Then, surely it can make no difference if you ask him. There can be no reason for him not to trust you.

LUCY.

Oh, why don't you leave me alone?

BOULGER.

Ask him point blank. If he refuses to answer you ...

LUCY.

[*Hastily.*] It would mean nothing. Why should he answer? I believe in him absolutely. I think he's the greatest and most honourable man I've ever known. I care more for his little finger than for the whole world. I love him with all my heart. And that's why he can't be guilty of this horrible crime. Because I've loved him for years, and he's known it. And he loves me. And he's loved me always.

[ALEC *and* DICK *stroll in from the garden*.

LUCY.

Alec, Alec, I want you! Thank God, you've come!

ALEC.

[*Going to her quickly.*] What is it?

LUCY.

Alec, you must tell them now about you and me.

[ALEC *looks at* LUCY *for a moment, and then turns to* LADY KELSEY.

ALEC.

I think perhaps we ought to have told you before, Lady Kelsey. But we wanted to enjoy our little secret by ourselves.

LADY KELSEY.

I'm afraid to understand.

ALEC.

I have asked Lucy to be my wife, and she....

LUCY.

[*Interrupting him.*] She said she would be honoured and deeply grateful.

LADY KELSEY.

[*Greatly embarrassed.*] I hardly know what to say.... How long have you been engaged?

LUCY.

Won't you tell me you're pleased, my aunt? I know you want me to be happy.

LADY KELSEY.

Of course, I want you to be happy. But I—I....

[BOULGER *turns on his heel and walks out.*

DICK.

[*Offering his arm to* LADY KELSEY.] Wouldn't you like to go back to the drawing-room?

[*She allows herself to be led away, helplessly.*
ALEC *and* LUCY *are left alone.*

ALEC.

[*With a smile.*] I don't think our announcement has been received with enthusiasm.

LUCY.

You're not angry with me, ALEC?

ALEC.

Of course not. Everything you do is right and charming.

LUCY.

I shall really think I'm a wonderful person if I've taught you to pay compliments.

ALEC.

I'm so glad to be alone with you. Now, at all events, people will have the sense to leave us by ourselves.

LUCY.

[*Passionately.*] I want your love. I want your love so badly.

ALEC.

[*Taking her in his arms.*] My darling!

LUCY.

[*Clinging to him.*] The moment I'm with you I feel so confident and happy.

ALEC.

Only when you're with me? [LUCY *looks at him for an instant. He repeats the question in a caressing voice.*] Only when you're with me, darling?

LUCY.

Why d'you think I made you tell them we were engaged?

ALEC.

You took me by surprise.

LUCY.

I had to tell them. I couldn't keep it back. They made me suffer so dreadfully.

ALEC.

The brutes! Tell me what they did.

LUCY.

Oh, they said horrible things about you.

ALEC.

No more than that?

LUCY.

It's nothing to you. But to me.... Oh, you don't know what agony I endure. I'm such a coward! I thought I was so much braver.

ALEC.

I don't understand you.

LUCY.

I wanted to burn my ships behind me. I wanted to reassure myself. [ALEC *makes a slight movement away from her, but she holds him back anxiously.*] Forgive me, dear. You don't know how terrible it is. I stand so dreadfully alone. Every one is convinced that you caused poor George's death—every one but me. [ALEC *looks at her gravely, without speaking.*] I try to put the thoughts out of my head, but I can't—I can't. That letter in the *Times* looks so dreadfully true. Don't you see what I mean? The uncertainty is more than I can bear. At the first moment I felt so absolutely sure of you.

ALEC.

And now you don't?

LUCY.

I trust you just as much as ever. I know it's impossible that you should have done a shameful thing. But there it stands in black and white, and you have nothing to say in answer.

ALEC.

I know it's very difficult. That is why I asked you to believe in me.

LUCY.

I do, Alec—with all my soul. But have mercy on me. I'm not so strong as I thought. It's easy for you to stand alone. You're iron, but I'm a weak woman.

ALEC.

Oh, no, you're not like other women. I was proud of your unconquerable spirit.

LUCY.

It was easy to be brave where my father was concerned, and George, but you're the man I love, and it's so different. I don't know any more how to stand alone.

[ALEC *looks at her, thinking, but does not reply for a moment.*

ALEC.

Do you remember that only an hour ago I told you that I'd done nothing which I wouldn't do again? I gave you my word of honour that I could reproach myself for nothing.

LUCY.

Oh, I know. I'm so utterly ashamed of myself. But I can't bear the doubt.

ALEC.

Doubt! You've said the word at last.

LUCY.

I tell every one that I don't believe a word of these horrible charges, and I repeat to myself: I'm certain, I'm certain that he's innocent. And yet at the bottom of my heart there's a doubt, and I can't crush it.

ALEC.

Is that why you told them we were engaged to be married?

LUCY.

I wanted to kill that gnawing pain of suspicion. I thought if I stood up before them and cried out that my trust in you was so great, I was willing to marry you notwithstanding everything, I should at least have peace in my own heart.

[ALEC *walks up and down. Then he stops in front of* LUCY.

ALEC.

What is it precisely you want me to do?

LUCY.

I want you to have mercy on me because I love you. Don't tell the world if you choose not to, but tell me the truth. I know you're incapable of lying. If I only have it from your own lips I shall believe, I want to be certain, certain!

ALEC.

Don't you realise that I would never have asked you to marry me if my conscience hadn't been quite clear? Don't you realise that the reasons I have for holding my tongue must be of overwhelming strength?

LUCY.

But I am going to be your wife, and I love you, and you love me.

ALEC.

I implore you not to insist, Lucy. Let us remember only that the past is gone and we love one another. It's impossible for me to tell you anything.

LUCY.

Oh, but you must now. If any part of the story is true, you must give me a chance of judging for myself.

ALEC.

I'm very sorry, I can't.

LUCY.

But you'll kill my love for you. The doubt which lurked at the bottom of my soul now fills me. How can you let me suffer such maddening torture?

ALEC.

I thought you trusted me.

LUCY.

I'll be satisfied if you'll only tell me one thing: only tell me that when you sent George on that expedition you didn't know that he'd be killed. [ALEC *looks at her steadily.*] Only say that, Alec. Say that's not true, and I'll believe you.

ALEC.

[*Very quietly.*] But it is true.

[LUCY *does not answer, but stares at him with terrified eyes.*

LUCY.

Oh, I don't understand. Oh, my dearest, don't treat me as a child. Have mercy on me! You must be serious now. It's a matter of life and death to both of us.

ALEC.

I'm perfectly serious.

LUCY.

You knew that you were sending George into a death-trap? You knew he couldn't escape alive?

ALEC.

Except by a miracle.

LUCY.

And you don't believe in miracles?

ALEC.

No.

LUCY.

Oh, it can't be true. Oh, Alec, Alec, Alec! Oh, what shall I do?

ALEC.

I tell you that whatever I did was inevitable.

LUCY.

Then if that's true, the rest must be true also. Oh, it's awful. I can't realise it. Haven't you anything to say at all?

ALEC.

[*In a low voice.*] Only that I've loved you always with all my soul.

LUCY.

You knew how much I loved my brother. You knew how much it meant to me that he should live to wipe out my father's dishonour. All the future was centred on him, and you sacrificed him.

ALEC.

[*Hesitatingly.*] I think I might tell you this. He had committed a grave error of judgment. We were entrapped by the Arabs, and our only chance of escape entailed the almost certain death of one of us.

[*An inkling of the truth seizes* LUCY, *and her face is suddenly distorted with horror. She goes up to him impulsively. Her voice trembles with emotion.*

LUCY.

Alec, Alec, he didn't do something—unworthy? You're not trying to shield him?

ALEC.

[*Hoarsely.*] No, no, no!

LUCY.

[*With a gasp of relief, almost to herself.*] Thank God! I couldn't have borne that. [*To* ALEC, *hopelessly.*] Then I don't understand.

ALEC.

It was not unjust that he should suffer for the catastrophe which he had brought about.

LUCY.

At those times one doesn't think of justice. He was so young, so frank. Wouldn't it have been nobler to give your life for his?

ALEC.

Oh, my dear, you don't know how easy it is to give one's life. How little you know me! Do you think I should have hesitated if my death had been sufficient to solve the difficulty? I had my work to do. I was bound by solemn treaties to the surrounding tribes. It would have been cowardly for me to die. I tell you, my death would have meant the awful death of every man in my party.

LUCY.

I can only see one thing, that you took George, George of all others.

ALEC.

I knew at the time that what I did might cost me your love, and though you won't believe this, I did it for your sake.

[*At this moment* MRS. CROWLEY *enters with* SIR ROBERT BOULGER. *She has a cloak on.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

I was just coming to say good-night. Bobby is going to drive me home. [*She suddenly notices* LUCY'S *agitation.*] What on earth's the matter?

[LADY KELSEY *and* DICK LOMAS *come in.* LADY KELSEY *looks at* LUCY *and then goes up to her impulsively.*

LADY KELSEY.

Lucy, Lucy!

LUCY.

[*Brokenly.*] I'm no longer engaged to Mr. Mackenzie. He can't deny that what is said about him is true.

[*They look at him in astonishment, but he makes no movement.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*To* ALEC.] Haven't you anything to say at all? You must have some explanation to offer?

ALEC.

No, I have none whatever.

DICK.

Alec, old man, have you realised all that this means?

ALEC.

Quite. I see now that it was inevitable.

LUCY.

[*With a sudden burst of furious anger.*] You killed him! You killed him as surely as if you'd strangled him with your own hands.

[ROBERT BOULGER *goes to the door and flings it open.* ALEC *gives* LUCY *a look, then slightly shrugs his shoulders. He walks out without a word. The moment he has gone* LUCY *sinks down and bursts into passionate tears.*

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT

SCENE.—*A library in the house of* DICK LOMAS *in Portman Square.*
DICK *and his* VALET. DICK *is putting flowers into a vase.*

DICK.

Has Mr. Mackenzie come in?

CHARLES.

Yes, sir. He's gone to his room.

DICK.

I expect Mrs. Crowley and Miss Allerton to tea. If any one else comes I'm not at home.

CHARLES.

Very well, sir.

DICK.

And if a caller should ask at what time I'm expected back, you haven't the least idea.

CHARLES.

Very well, sir.

DICK.

We shall want breakfast at eight to-morrow. I'm going down to Southampton to see Mr. Mackenzie off. But I shall be home to dinner. How about those cases in the hall?

CHARLES.

Mr. Mackenzie said they were to be sent for this afternoon. They're only labelled Zanzibar. Is that sufficient, sir?

DICK.

Oh, I suppose so. Mr. Mackenzie will have given the shippers all directions. You'd better bring the tea at once. Mrs. Crowley is coming at four.

CHARLES.

Very well, sir.

[*He goes out.* DICK *continues to arrange the flowers, than goes to the window and looks out. He comes back. The door is opened by* CHARLES, *who announces* MRS. CROWLEY.

CHARLES.

Mrs. Crowley.

DICK.

[*Going towards her eagerly and taking both her hands.*] Best of women!

MRS. CROWLEY.

You seem quite glad to see me?

DICK.

I am. But where is Lucy?

MRS. CROWLEY.

She's coming later.... I don't know why you should squeeze my hands in this pointed manner.

DICK.

What an age it is since I saw you!

MRS. CROWLEY.

If you bury yourself in Scotland all the summer, you can't expect to see people who go to Homburg and the Italian lakes.

DICK.

Heavens, how you cultivate respectability!

MRS. CROWLEY.

It's a sensitive plant whose vagaries one has to humour.

DICK.

Aren't you delighted to be back in town?

MRS. CROWLEY.

London's the most charming place in the world to get away from and to come back to. Now tell me all you've been doing, if I can hear it without blushing too furiously.

DICK.

My behaviour would have done credit to a clergyman's only daughter. I dragged Alec off to Scotland after that horrible scene at Lady Kelsey's, and we played golf.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Was he very wretched, poor thing?

DICK.

He didn't say a word. I wanted to comfort him, but he never gave me a chance. He never mentioned Lucy's name.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Did he seem unhappy?

DICK.

No. He was just the same as ever, impassive and collected.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Really he's inhuman.

DICK.

He's an anomaly in this juvenile century. He's an ancient Roman who buys his clothes in Savile Row. An eagle caged with a colony of canaries.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then he's very much in the way in England, and it's much better for him that he should go back to Africa.

DICK.

This time to-morrow he'll be half-way down the channel.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I'm really beginning to think you're a perfect angel, Mr. Lomas.

DICK.

Don't say that, it makes me feel so middle-aged. I'd much sooner be a young sinner than an elderly cherub.

MRS. CROWLEY.

It was sweet of you to look after him through the summer and then insist on his staying here till he went away. How long is he going for this time?

DICK.

Heaven knows! Perhaps for ever.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Have you told him that Lucy is coming?

DICK.

No. I thought that was a pleasing piece of information which I'd leave you to impart.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Thanks!

DICK.

She's only coming to indulge a truly feminine passion for making scenes, and she's made Alec quite wretched enough already. Why doesn't she marry Robert Boulger?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Why should she?

DICK.

Half the women I know merely married their husbands to spite somebody else. It appears to be one of the commonest causes of matrimony.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*With a quizzical look at him.*] Talking of which, what are you going to do when Mr. Mackenzie is gone?

DICK.

Talking of the weather and the crops, I propose to go to Spain.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Opening her eyes wide.*] How very extraordinary! I thought of going there, too.

DICK.

Then, without a moment's hesitation, I shall go to Norway.

MRS. CROWLEY.

It'll be dreadfully cold.

DICK.

Dreadfully. But I shall be supported by the consciousness of having done my duty.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You don't think there would be room for both of us in Spain?

DICK.

I'm convinced there wouldn't. We should always be running against one another, and you'd insist on my looking out all your trains in Bradshaw.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I hope you remember that you asked me to tea to-day?

DICK.

Pardon me, you asked yourself. I keep the letter next to my heart and put it under my pillow every night.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You fibber! Besides, if I did, it was only on Lucy's account.

DICK.

That, I venture to think, is neither polite nor accurate.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I don't think I should so utterly detest you, if you hadn't such a good opinion of yourself.

DICK.

You forget that I vowed on the head of my maternal grandmother never to speak to you again.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, I'm always doing that. I tell my maid that time she does my hair badly.

DICK.

You trifled with the tenderest affection of an innocent and unsophisticated old bachelor.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Is that you by any chance?

DICK.

Of course, it's me. D'you think I was talking of the man in the moon?

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Looking at him critically.*] With the light behind, you might still pass for thirty-five.

DICK.

I've given up youth and its vanities. I no longer pluck out my white hairs.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then how on earth do you occupy your leisure?

DICK.

For the last three months I've been laboriously piecing together the fragments of a broken heart.

MRS. CROWLEY.

If you hadn't been so certain that I was going to accept you, I should never have refused. I couldn't resist the temptation of saying "No" just to see how you took it.

DICK.

I flatter myself that I took it very well.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You didn't. You showed an entire lack of humour. You might have known that a nice woman doesn't marry a man the first time he asks her. It's making oneself too cheap. It was very silly of you to go off to Scotland as if you didn't care.... How was I to know that you meant to wait three months before asking me again?

DICK.

I haven't the least intention of asking you again.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then why in heaven's name did you invite me to tea?

DICK.

May I respectfully remind you, first, that you invited yourself ...

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Interrupting.*] You're so irrelevant.

DICK.

And, secondly, that an invitation to tea is not necessarily accompanied by a proposal of marriage.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I'm afraid you're lamentably ignorant of the usages of good society.

DICK.

I assure you it's not done in the best circles.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*With a little pout.*] I shall be very cross with you in a minute.

DICK.

Why?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Because you're not behaving at all prettily.

DICK.

D'you know what I'd do if I were you? Propose to me.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, I couldn't do anything so immodest.

DICK.

I have registered a vow that I will never offer my hand and heart to any woman again.

MRS. CROWLEY.

On the head of your maternal grandmother?

DICK.

Oh no, far more serious than that. On the grave of my maiden aunt, who left me all my money.

MRS. CROWLEY.

What will you say if I do?

DICK.

That depends entirely on how you do it. I may remind you, however, that first you go down on your bended knees.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, I waived that with you.

DICK.

And then you confess you're unworthy of me.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Mr. Lomas, I am a widow. I am twenty-nine and extremely eligible. My maid is a treasure. My dressmaker is charming. I am clever enough to laugh at your jokes, and not so learned as to know where they come from.

DICK.

Really you're very long-winded. I said it all in four words.

MRS. CROWLEY.

So could I if I might write it down.

DICK.

You must say it.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But what I'm trying to make you understand is that I don't want to marry you a bit. You're just the sort of man who'll beat his wife regularly every Saturday night.... You will say yes if I ask you, won't you?

DICK.

I've never been able to refuse a woman anything.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I have no doubt you will after six months of holy matrimony.

DICK.

I never saw any one make such a fuss about so insignificant a detail as a proposal of marriage.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Dick. [*She stretches out her hands, smiling, and he takes her in his arms.*] You really are a detestable person.

DICK.

[*With a smile, taking a ring from his pocket.*] I bought an engagement ring yesterday on the off chance of its being useful.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Then you meant to ask me all the time?

DICK.

Of course I did, you silly.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Oh, I wish I had known that before. I'd have refused you again.

DICK.

You absurd creature.

[*He kisses her.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Trying to release herself.*] There's somebody coming.

DICK.

It's only Alec.

[ALEC *comes in.*

ALEC.

Hulloa!

DICK.

Alec, we've made friends, Mrs. Crowley and I.

ALEC.

It certainly looks very much like it.

DICK.

The fact is, I've asked her to marry me, and she....

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Interrupting, with a smile.*] After much pressure—

DICK.

Has consented.

ALEC.

I'm so glad. I heartily congratulate you both. I was rather unhappy at leaving Dick, Mrs. Crowley. But now I leave him in your hands, I'm perfectly content. He's the dearest, kindest old chap I've ever known.

DICK.

Shut up, Alec! Don't play the heavy father, or we shall burst into tears.

ALEC.

He'll be an admirable husband because he's an admirable friend.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I know he will. And I'm only prevented from saying all I think of him and how much I love him, by the fear that he'll become perfectly unmanageable.

DICK.

Spare me these chaste blushes which mantle my youthful brow. Will you pour out the tea ... Nellie?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Yes ... Dick.

[*She sits down at the tea-table and* DICK *makes himself comfortable in an arm-chair by her side*.

ALEC.

Well, I'm thankful to say that everything's packed and ready.

MRS. CROWLEY.

I wish you'd stay for our wedding.

DICK.

Do. You can go just as well by the next boat.

ALEC.

I'm afraid that everything is settled now. I've given instructions at Zanzibar to collect bearers, and I must arrive as quickly as I can.

DICK.

I wish to goodness you'd give up these horrible explorations.

ALEC.

But they're the very breath of my life. You don't know the exhilaration of the daily dangers—the joy of treading where only the wild beasts have trodden before. Oh, already I can hardly bear my impatience when I think of the boundless country and the enchanting freedom. Here one grows so small, so despicable, but in Africa everything is built to a nobler standard. There a man is really a man; there one knows what are will and strength and courage. Oh, you don't know what it is to stand on the edge of some great plain and breathe the pure keen air after the terrors of the forest. Then at last you know what freedom is.

DICK.

The boundless plain of Hyde Park is enough for me, and the aspect of Piccadilly on a fine day in June gives me quite as many emotions as I want.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But what will you gain by it all, now that your work in East Africa is over, by all the dangers and the hardships?

ALEC.

Nothing. I want to gain nothing. Perhaps I shall discover some new species of antelope or some unknown plant. Perhaps I shall find some new waterway. That is all the reward I want. I love the sense of power and mastery. What do you think I care for the tinsel rewards of kings and peoples?

DICK.

I always said you were melodramatic. I never heard anything so transpontine.

MRS. CROWLEY.

And the end of it, what will be the end?

ALEC.

The end is death in some fever-stricken swamp, obscurely, worn out by exposure and ague and starvation. And the bearers will seize my gun and my clothes and leave me to the jackals.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Don't. It's too horrible.

ALEC.

Why, what does it matter? I shall die standing up. I shall go the last journey as I have gone every other.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Without fear?

DICK.

For all the world like the wicked baronet: Once aboard the lugger and the girl is mine!

MRS. CROWLEY.

Don't you want men to remember you?

ALEC.

Perhaps they will. Perhaps in a hundred years or so, in some flourishing town where I discovered nothing but wilderness, they will commission a second-rate sculptor to make a fancy statue of me. And I shall stand in front of the Stock Exchange, a convenient perch for birds, to look eternally upon the various shabby deeds of human kind.

[*During this speech* MRS. CROWLEY *makes a sign to* DICK, *who walks slowly away and goes out.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

And is that really everything? I can't help thinking that at the bottom of your heart is something that you've never told to a living soul.

[*He gives her a long look, and then after a moment's thought breaks into a little smile.*

ALEC.

Why do you want to know so much?

MRS. CROWLEY.

Tell me.

ALEC.

I daresay I shall never see you again. Perhaps it doesn't much matter what I say to you. You'll think me very silly, but I'm afraid I'm rather—patriotic. It's only we who live away from England who really love it. I'm so proud of my country, and I wanted so much to do something for it. Often in Africa I've thought of this dear England, and longed not to die till I had done my work. Behind all the soldiers and the statesmen whose fame is imperishable, there is a long line of men who've built up the Empire piece by piece. Their names are forgotten, and only students know their history, but each one of them gave a province to his country. And I, too, have my place among them. For five years I toiled night and day, and at the end of it was able to hand over to the Commissioners a broad tract of land, rich and fertile. After my death England will forget my faults and my mistakes. I care nothing for the flouts and gibes with which she has repaid all my pain, for I have added another fair jewel to her crown. I don't want rewards. I only want the honour of serving this dear land of ours.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Why is it, when you're so nice really, that you do all you can to make people think you utterly horrid?

ALEC.

Don't laugh at me because you've found out that at heart I'm nothing more than a sentimental old woman.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Putting her hand on his arm.*] What would you do if Lucy came here to-day?

[ALEC *starts, looks at her sharply, then answers with deliberation.*

ALEC.

I have always lived in polite society. I should never dream of outraging its conventions. If Miss Allerton happened to come, you may be sure I should be scrupulously polite.

MRS. CROWLEY.

Is that all? Lucy has suffered very much.

ALEC.

And do you suppose I've not suffered? Because I don't whine my misery to all and sundry, d'you think I don't care? I'm not the man to fall in and out of love with every pretty face I meet. All my life I've kept an ideal before my eyes. Oh, you don't know what it meant to me to fall in love. I felt that I had lived all my life in a prison, and at last Lucy came and took me by the hand and led me out. And for the first time I breathed the free air of heaven. Oh God! how I've suffered for it! Why should it have come to me? Oh, if you knew my agony and the torture!

[*He hides his face, trying to master his emotion.* MRS. CROWLEY *goes to him and puts her hand on his shoulder.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

Mr. Mackenzie.

ALEC.

[*Springing up.*] Go away. Don't look at me. How can you stand there and watch my weakness? Oh God, give me strength.... My love was the last human weakness I had. It was right that I should drink that bitter cup. And I've

drunk its very dregs. I should have known that I wasn't meant for happiness and a life of ease. I have other work to do in the world. And now that I have overcome this last temptation, I am ready to do it.

MRS. CROWLEY.

But haven't you any pity for yourself, haven't you any thought for Lucy?

ALEC.

Must I tell you, too, that everything I did was for Lucy's sake? And still I love her with all my heart and soul....

DICK *comes in*.

DICK.

Here is Lucy!

[CHARLES *comes in and announces* LUCY.

CHARLES.

Miss Allerton!

[*She enters, and* DICK, *anxious that the meeting shall not be more awkward than need be, goes up to her very cordially*.

DICK.

Ah, my dear Lucy. So glad you were able to come.

LUCY.

[*Giving her hand to* DICK, *but looking at* ALEC.] How d'you do?

ALEC.

How d'you do? [*He forces himself to talk.*] How is Lady Kelsey?

LUCY.

She's much better, thanks. We've been to Spa, you know, for her health.

ALEC.

Somebody told me you'd gone abroad. Was it you, Dick? Dick is an admirable person, a sort of gazetteer for polite society.

DICK.

Won't you have some tea, Lucy?

LUCY.

No, thanks!

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*Trying on her side also to make conversation.*] We shall miss you dreadfully when you're gone, Mr. Mackenzie.

DICK.

[*Cheerfully.*] Not a bit of it.

ALEC.

[*Smiling.*] London is an excellent place for showing one of how little importance one is in the world. One makes a certain figure, and perhaps is tempted to think oneself of some consequence. Then one goes away, and on returning is surprised to discover that nobody has even noticed one's absence.

DICK.

You're over-modest, Alec. If you weren't, you might be a great man. Now, I make a point of telling my friends that I'm indispensable, and they take me at my word.

ALEC.

You are a leaven of flippancy in the heavy dough of British righteousness.

DICK.

The wise man only takes the unimportant quite seriously.

ALEC.

[*With a smile.*] For it is obvious that it needs more brains to do nothing than to be a cabinet minister.

DICK.

You pay me a great compliment, Alec. You repeat to my very face one of my favourite observations.

LUCY.

[*Almost in a whisper.*] Haven't I heard you say that only the impossible is worth doing?

ALEC.

Good heavens, I must have been reading the headings of a copy-book.

MRS. CROWLEY.

[*To* DICK.] Are you going to Southampton to see Mr. Mackenzie off?

DICK.

I shall hide my face on his shoulder and weep salt tears. It'll be most affecting, because in moments of emotion I always burst into epigram.

ALEC.

I loathe all solemn leave-takings. I prefer to part from people with a nod and a smile, whether I'm going for ever or for a day to Brighton.

MRS. CROWLEY.

You're very hard.

ALEC.

Dick has been teaching me to take life flippantly. And I have learnt that things are only serious if you take them seriously, and that is desperately stupid. [*To* LUCY.] Don't you agree with me?

LUCY.

No.

[*Her tone, almost tragic, makes him pause for an instant; but he is determined that the conversation shall be purely conventional.*

ALEC.

It's so difficult to be serious without being absurd. That is the chief power of women, that life and death are merely occasions for a change of costume: marriage a creation in white, and the worship of God an opportunity for a Paris bonnet.

[MRS. CROWLEY *makes up her mind to force a crisis, and she gets up.*

MRS. CROWLEY.

It's growing late, Dick. Won't you take me round the house?

ALEC.

I'm afraid my luggage has made everything very disorderly.

MRS. CROWLEY.

It doesn't matter. Come, Dick!

DICK.

[*To* LUCY.] You don't mind if we leave you?

LUCY.

Oh, no.

[MRS. CROWLEY *and* DICK *go out. There is a moment's silence.*

ALEC.

Do you know that our friend Dick has offered his hand and heart to Mrs. Crowley this afternoon?

LUCY.

I hope they'll be very happy. They're very much in love with one another.

ALEC.

[*Bitterly.*] And is that a reason for marrying? Surely love is the worst possible foundation for marriage. Love creates illusions, and marriages destroy them. True lovers should never marry.

LUCY.

Will you open the window? It seems stifling here.

ALEC.

Certainly. [*From the window.*] You can't think what a joy it is to look upon London for the last time. I'm so thankful to get away.

[LUCY *gives a little sob and* ALEC *turns to the window. He wants to wound her and yet cannot bear to see her suffer.*

ALEC.

To-morrow at this time I shall be well started. Oh, I long for that infinite surface of the clean and comfortable sea.

LUCY.

Are you very glad to go?

ALEC.

[*Turning to her.*] I feel quite boyish at the very thought.

LUCY.

And is there no one you regret to leave?

ALEC.

You see, Dick is going to marry. When a man does that, his bachelor friends are wise to depart gracefully before he shows them that he needs their company no longer. I have no relations and few friends. I can't flatter myself that any one will be much distressed at my departure.

LUCY.

[*In a low voice.*] You must have no heart at all.

ALEC.

[*Icily.*] If I had, I certainly should not bring it to Portman Square. That sentimental organ would be surely out of place in such a neighbourhood.

LUCY.

[*Gets up and goes to him.*] Oh, why do you treat me as if we were strangers? How can you be so cruel?

ALEC.

[*Gravely.*] Don't you think that flippancy is the best refuge from an uncomfortable position. We should really be much wiser merely to discuss the weather.

LUCY.

[*Insisting.*] Are you angry because I came?

ALEC.

That would be ungracious on my part. Perhaps it wasn't quite necessary that we should meet again.

LUCY.

You've been acting all the time I've been here. D'you think I didn't see it was unreal when you talked with such cynical indifference. I know you well enough to tell when you're hiding your real self behind a mask.

ALEC.

If I'm doing that, the inference is obvious that I wish my real self to be hidden.

LUCY.

I would rather you cursed me than treat me with such cold politeness.

ALEC.

I'm afraid you're rather difficult to please.

[LUCY *goes up to him passionately, but he draws back so that she may not touch him.*

LUCY.

Oh, you're of iron. Alec, Alec, I couldn't let you go without seeing you once more. Even you would be satisfied if you knew what bitter anguish I've suffered. Even you would pity me. I don't want you to think too badly of me.

ALEC.

Does it much matter what I think? We shall be so many thousand miles apart.

LUCY.

I suppose that you utterly despise me.

ALEC.

No. I loved you far too much ever to do that. Believe me, I only wish you well. Now that the bitterness is past, I see that you did the only possible thing. I hope that you'll be very happy.

LUCY.

Oh, Alec, don't be utterly pitiless. Don't leave me without a single word of kindness.

ALEC.

Nothing is changed, Lucy. You sent me away on account of your brother's death.

[*There is a long silence, and when she speaks it is hesitatingly, as if the words were painful to utter.*

LUCY.

I hated you then, and yet I couldn't crush the love that was in my heart. I used to try and drive you away from my thoughts, but every word you had ever said came back to me. Don't you remember? You told me that everything you did was for my sake. Those words hammered at my heart as though it were an anvil. I struggled not to believe them. I said to myself that you had sacrificed George coldly, callously, prudently, but in my heart I knew it wasn't true. [*He looks at her, hardly able to believe what she is going to say, but does not speak.*] Your whole life stood on one side and only this hateful story on the other. You couldn't have grown into a different man in one single instant. I came here to-day to tell you that I don't understand the reason of what you did. I don't want to understand. I believe in you now with all my strength. I know that whatever you did was right and just—because you did it.

[*He gives a long, deep sigh.*

ALEC.

Thank God! Oh, I'm so grateful to you for that.

LUCY.

Haven't you anything more to say to me than that?

ALEC.

You see, it comes too late. Nothing much matters now, for to-morrow I go away.

LUCY.

But you'll come back.

ALEC.

I'm going to a part of Africa from which Europeans seldom return.

LUCY.

[*With a sudden outburst of passion.*] Oh, that's too horrible. Don't go, dearest! I can't bear it!

ALEC.

I must now. Everything is settled, and there can be no drawing back.

LUCY.

Don't you care for me any more?

ALEC.

Care for you? I love you with all my heart and soul.

LUCY.

[*Eagerly.*] Then take me with you.

ALEC.

You!

LUCY.

You don't know what I can do. With you to help me I can be brave. Let me come, Alec?

ALEC.

No, it's impossible. You don't know what you ask.

LUCY.

Then let me wait for you? Let me wait till you come back?

ALEC.

And if I never come back?

LUCY.

I will wait for you still.

ALEC.

Then have no fear. I will come back. My journey was only dangerous because I wanted to die. I want to live now, and I shall live.

LUCY.

Oh, Alec, Alec, I'm so glad you love me.

THE END

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TO
GERALD KELLY

"Ich übersah meine Sache und wusste

wohin ich wollte."

ECKERMANN, *Gespräche mit Goethe*.

GENERAL PREFACE

...For Clisthenes, son of Aristonymus, son of Myron, son of Andreas, had a daughter whose name was Agarista: her he resolved to give in marriage to the man whom he should find the most accomplished of all the Greeks. When therefore the Olympian games were being celebrated, Clisthenes, being victorious in them in the chariot race, made a proclamation; "that whoever of the Greeks deemed himself worthy to become the son-in-law of Clisthenes, should come to Sicyon on the sixtieth day, or even before; since Clisthenes had determined on the marriage in a year, reckoning from the sixtieth day." Thereupon such of the Greeks as were puffed up with themselves and their country, came as suitors; and Clisthenes, having made a race-course and palæstra for them, kept it for this very purpose. From Italy, accordingly, came Smindyrides, son of Hippocrates, a Sybarite, who more than any other man reached the highest pitch of luxury, (and Sybaris was at that time in a most flourishing condition;) and Damasus of Siris, son of Amyris called the Wise: these came from Italy. From the Ionian gulf, Amphimnestus, son of Epistrophus, an Epidamnian; he came from the Ionian gulf. An Ætolian came, Males, brother of that Titormus who surpassed the Greeks in strength, and fled from the society of men to the extremity of the Ætolian territory. And from Peloponnesus, Leocedes, son of Pheidon, tyrant of the Argives, a decendant of that Pheidon, who introduced measures among the Peloponnesians, and was the most insolent of all the Greeks, who having removed the Elean umpires, himself regulated the games at Olympia; his son accordingly came. And Amiantus, son of Lycurgus, an Arcadian from Trapezus; and an Azenian from the city of Pæos, Laphanes, son of Euphorion, who, as the story is told in Arcadia, received the Dioscuri in his house, and after that entertained all men; and an Elean, Onomastus, son of Agæus: these accordingly came from the Peloponnesus itself. From Athens there came Megacles, son of Alcmæon, the same who had visited Crœsus, and another, Hippoclides, son of Tisander, who surpassed the Athenians in wealth and beauty. From Eretria, which was flourishing at that time, came Lysanias; he was the only one from Eubœa. And from Thessaly there came, of the Scopades, Diactorides a Cranonian; and from the Molossi, Alcon. So many were the suitors. When they had arrived on the appointed day, Clisthenes made inquiries of their country, and the family of each; then detaining them for a year, he made trial of their manly qualities, their dispositions, learning, and morals; holding familiar intercourse with each separately, and with all together, and leading out to the gymnasia such of them as were younger; but most of all he made trial of them at the banquet; for as long as he detained them, he did this throughout, and at the same time entertained them magnificently. And somehow of all the suitors those that had come from Athens pleased him most, and of these Hippoclides, son of Tisander, was preferred both on account of his manly qualities, and because he was distantly related to the Cypselidæ in Corinth. When the day appointed for the consummation of the marriage arrived, and for the declaration of Clisthenes himself, whom he would choose of them all, Clisthenes, having sacrificed a hundred oxen, entertained both the suitors themselves and all the Sicyonians; and when they had concluded the feast, the suitors had a contest about music, and any subject proposed for conversation. As the drinking went on, Hippoclides, who much attracted the attention of the rest, ordered the flute-player to play a dance; and when the flute-player obeyed, he began to dance: and he danced, probably so as to please himself; but Clisthenes, seeing it, beheld the whole matter with suspicion. Afterwards, Hippoclides, having rested awhile, ordered some one to bring in a table; and when the table came in, he first danced Laconian figures on it, and then Attic ones; and in the third place, having leant his head on the table he gesticulated with his legs. But Clisthenes, when he danced the first and second time, revolted from the thought of having Hippoclides for his son-in-law, on account of his dancing and want of decorum, yet restrained himself, not wishing to burst out against him; but when he saw him gesticulating with his legs, he was no longer able to restrain himself, and said: "Son of Tisander, you have danced away your marriage." But Hippoclides answered: "Hippoclides cares not." Hence this answer became a proverb. (HERODOTUS VI. 126, *Cary's Translation*.)

THIS PLAY WAS FIRST PERFORMED BY THE STAGE SOCIETY AT THE IMPERIAL THEATRE ON FEBRUARY 22, 1903, WITH THE FOLLOWING CAST:

BASIL KENT	H. GRANVILLE BARKER
JENNY BUSH	WINIFRED FRASER
JAMES BUSH	O. B. CLARENCE
JOHN HALLIWELL	DENNIS EADIE
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ACT I—*Basil's lodgings in Bloomsbury*.
ACTS II AND IV—*The drawing-room of Basil's house at Putney*.
ACT III—*Mrs. Murray's house in Charles Street*.

A MAN OF HONOUR

THE FIRST ACT

SITTING-ROOM OF BASIL'S LODGINGS IN BLOOMSBURY.

In the wall facing the auditorium, two windows with little iron balconies, giving a view of London roofs. Between the windows, against the wall, is a writing-desk littered with papers and books. On the right is a door, leading into the passage; on the left a fire-place with arm-chairs on either side; on the chimney-piece various smoking utensils. There are numerous bookshelves filled with books; while on the walls are one or two Delft plates, etchings after Rossetti, autotypes of paintings by Fra Angelico and Botticelli. The furniture is simple and inexpensive, but there is nothing ugly in the room. It is the dwelling-place of a person who reads a great deal and takes pleasure in beautiful things.

BASIL KENT *is leaning back in his chair, with his feet on the writing-table, smoking a pipe and cutting the pages of a book. He is a very good-looking man of six-and-twenty, clean-shaven, with a delicate face and clear-cut features. He is dressed in a lounge-suit.*

[*There is a knock at the door.*

BASIL.

Come in.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Did you ring, sir?

BASIL.

Yes. I expect a lady to tea. And there's a cake that I bought on my way in.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Very well, sir.

[*She goes out, and immediately comes in with a tray on which are two cups, sugar, milk, &c.*

BASIL.

Oh, Mrs. Griggs, I want to give up these rooms this day week. I'm going to be married. I'm sorry to leave you. You've made me very comfortable.

MRS. GRIGGS.

[*With a sigh of resignation.*] Ah, well, sir, that's lodgers all over. If they're gents they get married; and if they're ladies they ain't respectable.

[*A ring is heard.*

BASIL.

There's the bell, Mrs. Griggs. I dare say it's the lady I expect. If any one else comes, I'm not at home.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Very well, sir.

[*She goes out, and* BASIL *occupies himself for a moment in putting things in order.* MRS. GRIGGS, *opening the door, ushers in the new-comers.*

MRS. GRIGGS.

If you please, sir.

[*She goes out again, and during the next few speeches brings two more cups and the tea.*

[MABEL *and* HILDA *enter, followed by* JOHN HALLIWELL. BASIL *going towards them very cordially, half stops when he notices who they are; and a slight expression of embarrassment passes over his face. But he immediately recovers himself and is extremely gracious.* HILDA MURRAY *is a tall, handsome woman, self-possessed and admirably gowned.* MABEL HALLIWELL *is smaller, pretty rather than beautiful, younger than her sister, vivacious, very talkative, and somewhat irresponsible.* JOHN *is of the same age as* BASIL, *good-humoured, neither handsome nor plain blunt of speech and open.*

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

MABEL.

Look pleased to see us, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

I'm perfectly enchanted.

HILDA.

You *did* ask us to come and have tea with you, didn't you?

BASIL.

I've asked you fifty times. Hulloa, John! I didn't see you.

JOHN.

I'm the discreet husband, I keep in the background.

MABEL.

Why don't you praise me instead of praising yourself? People would think it so much nicer.

JOHN.

On the contrary, they'd be convinced that when we were alone I beat you. Besides, I couldn't honestly say that you kept in the background.

HILDA.

[*To* BASIL.] I feel rather ashamed at taking you unawares.

BASIL.

I was only slacking. I was cutting a book.

MABEL.

That's ever so much more fun than reading it, isn't it? [*She catches sight of the tea things.*] Oh, what a beautiful cake—and two cups! [*She looks at him, questioning.*]

BASIL.

[*A little awkwardly.*] Oh—I always have an extra cup in case some one turns up, you know.

MABEL.

How unselfish! And do you always have such expensive cake?

HILDA.

[*With a smile, remonstrating.*] Mabel!

MABEL.

Oh, but I know them well, and I love them dearly. They cost two shillings at the Army and Navy Stores, but I can't afford them myself.

JOHN.

I wish you'd explain why we've come, or Basil will think I'm responsible.

MABEL.

[*Lightly.*] I've been trying to remember ever since we arrived. You say it, Hilda; you invented it.

HILDA.

[*With a laugh.*] Mabel, I'll never take you out again. They're perfectly incorrigible, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*To* JOHN *and* MABEL, *smiling.*] I don't know why *you've* come. Mrs. Murry has promised to come and have tea with me for ages.

MABEL.

[*Pretending to feel injured.*] Well, you needn't turn me out the moment we arrive. Besides, I refuse to go till I've had a piece of that cake.

BASIL.

Well, here's the tea! [MRS. GRIGGS *brings it in as he speaks*. *He turns to* HILDA.] I wish you'd pour it out. I'm so clumsy.

HILDA.

[*Smiling at him affectionately.*] I shall be delighted.

[*She proceeds to do so, and the conversation goes on while* BASIL *hands* MABEL *tea and cake*.

JOHN.

I told them it was improper for more than one woman at a time to call at a bachelor's rooms, Basil.

BASIL.

If you'd warned me I'd have made the show a bit tidier.

MABEL.

Oh, that's just what we didn't want. We wanted to see the Celebrity at Home, without lime-light.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] You're too flattering.

MABEL.

By the way, how is the book?
Basil.
Quite well, thanks.

MABEL.

I always forget to ask how it's getting on.

BASIL.

On the contrary, you never let slip an opportunity of making kind inquiries.

MABEL.

I don't believe you've written a word of it.

HILDA.

Nonsense, Mabel. I've read it.

MABEL.

Oh, but you're such a monster of discretion.... Now I want to see your medals, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] What medals?

MABEL.

Don't be coy! You know I mean the medals they gave you for going to the Cape.

BASIL.

[*Gets them from a drawer, and with a smile hands them to* MABEL.] If you really care to see them, here they are.

MABEL.

[*Taking one.*] What's this?

BASIL.

Oh, that's just the common or garden South African medal.

MABEL.

And the other one?

BASIL.

That's the D.S.M.

MABEL.

Why didn't they give you the D.S.O.?

BASIL.

Oh, I was only a trooper, you know. They only give the D.S.O. to officers.

MABEL.

And what did you do to deserve it?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] I really forget.

HILDA.

It's given for distinguished service in the field, Mabel.

MABEL.

I knew. Only I wanted to see if Mr. Kent was modest or vain.

BASIL.

[*With a smile, taking the medals from her and putting them away.*] How spiteful of you!

MABEL.

John, why didn't you go to the Cape, and do heroic things?

JOHN.

I confined my heroism to the British Isles. I married you, my angel.

MABEL.

Is that funny or vulgar?

BASIL.

[*Laughing.*] Are there no more questions you want to ask me, Mrs. Halliwell?

MABEL.

Yes, I want to know why you live up six flights of stairs.

BASIL.

[*Amused.*] For the view, simply and solely.

MABEL.

But, good heavens, there is no view. There are only chimney-pots.

BASIL.

But they're most æsthetic chimney-pots. Do come and look, Mrs. Murray. [BASIL *and* HILDA *approach one of the windows, and he opens it.*] And at night they're so mysterious. They look just like strange goblins playing on the house-tops. And you can't think how gorgeous the sunsets are: sometimes, after the rain, the slate roofs glitter like burnished gold. [*To* HILDA.] Often I think I couldn't have lived without my view, it says such wonderful things to me. [*Turning to* MABEL *gaily.*] Scoff, Mrs. Halliwell, I'm on the verge of being sentimental.

MABEL.

I was wondering if you'd made that up on the spur of the moment, or if you'd fished it out of an old note-book.

HILDA.

[*With a look at* BASIL.] May I go out?

BASIL.

Yes, do come.

[HILDA *and* BASIL *step out on the balcony, whereupon* JOHN *goes to* MABEL *and tries to steal a kiss from her.*

MABEL.

[*Springing up.*] Go away, you horror!

JOHN.

Don't be silly. I shall kiss you if I want to.
[*She laughing, walks round the sofa while he pursues her.*

MABEL.

I wish you'd treat life more seriously.

JOHN.

I wish you wouldn't wear such prominent hats.

MABEL.

[*As he puts his arm round her waist.*] John, some body'll see us.

JOHN.

Mabel, I command you to let yourself be kissed.

MABEL.

How much will you give me?

JOHN.

Sixpence.

MABEL.

[*Slipping away from him.*] I can't do it for less than half-a-crown.

JOHN.

[*Laughing.*] I'll give you two shillings.

MABEL.

[*Coaxing.*] Make it two-and-three.

[*He kisses her.*

JOHN.

Now come and sit down quietly.

MABEL.

[*Sitting down by his side.*] John, you mustn't make love to me. It would look so odd if they came in.

JOHN.

After all, I am your husband.

MABEL.

That's just it. If you wanted to make love to me you ought to have married somebody else. [*He puts his arm round her waist.*] John, don't, I'm sure they'll come in.

JOHN.

I don't care if they do.

MABEL.

[*Sighing.*] John, you do love me?

JOHN.

Yes.

MABEL.

And you won't ever care for anybody else?

JOHN.

No.

MABEL.

[*In the same tone.*] And you will give me that two-and-threepence, won't you?

JOHN.

Mabel, it was only two shillings.

MABEL.

Oh, you cheat!

JOHN.

[*Getting up.*] I'm going out on the balcony. I'm passionately devoted to chimney-pots.

MABEL.

No, John, I want you.

JOHN.

Why?

MABEL.

Isn't it enough for me to say I want you for you to hurl yourself at my feet immediately?

JOHN.

Oh, you poor thing, can't you do without me for two minutes?

MABEL.

Now you're taking a mean advantage. It's only this particular two minutes that I want you. Come and sit by me like a nice, dear boy.

JOHN.

Now what have you been doing that you shouldn't?

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] Nothing. But I want you to do something for me.

JOHN.

Ha, ha! I thought so.

MABEL.

It's merely to tie up my shoe. [*She puts out her foot.*]

JOHN.

Is that all—honour bright?

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] Yes. [JOHN *kneels down.*]

JOHN.

But, my good girl, it's not undone.

MABEL.

Then, my good boy, undo it and do it up again.

JOHN.

[*Starting up.*] Mabel, are we playing gooseberry—at our time of life?

MABEL.

[*Ironically.*] Oh, you are clever! Do you think Hilda would have climbed six flights of stairs unless Love had lent her wings?

JOHN.

I wish Love would provide wings for the chaperons as well.

MABEL.

Don't be flippant. It's a serious matter.

JOHN.

My dear girl, you really can't expect me to play the heavy father when we've only been married six months. It would be almost improper.

MABEL.

Don't be horrid, John.

JOHN.

It isn't horrid, it's natural history.

MABEL.

[*Primly.*] I was never taught it. It's not thought nice for young girls to know.

JOHN.

Why didn't you tell me that Hilda was fond of Basil! Does he like her?

MABEL.

I don't know. I expect that's precisely what she's asking him.

JOHN.

Mabel, do you mean to say you brought me here, an inoffensive, harmless creature, for your sister to propose to a pal of mine? It's an outrage.

MABEL.

She's doing nothing of the sort.

JOHN.

You needn't look indignant. You can't deny that you proposed to me.

MABEL.

I can, indeed. If I had I should never have taken such an unconscionably long time about it.

JOHN.

I wonder why Hilda wants to marry poor Basil!

MABEL.

Well, Captain Murray left her five thousand a year, and she thinks Basil Kent a genius.

JOHN.

There's not a drawing-room in Regent's Park or in Bayswater that hasn't got its tame genius. I don't know if Basil Kent is much more than very clever.

MABEL.

Anyhow, I'm sure it's a mistake to marry geniuses. They're horribly bad-tempered, and they invariably make love to other people's wives.

JOHN.

Hilda always has gone in for literary people. That's the worst of marrying a cavalryman, it leads you to attach so much importance to brains.

MABEL.

Yes, but she needn't marry them. If she wants to encourage Basil let her do it from a discreet distance. Genius always thrives best on bread and water and platonic attachments. If Hilda marries him he'll only become fat and ugly and bald-headed and stupid.

JOHN.

Why, then he'll make an ideal Member of Parliament.

[BASIL *and* HILDA *come into the room again*.

MABEL.

[*Maliciously.*] Well, what have you been talking about?

HILDA.

[*Acidly.*] The weather and the crops, Shakespeare and the Musical Glasses.

MABEL.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] Oh!

HILDA.

It's getting very late, Mabel. We really must be going.

MABEL.

[*Getting up.*] And I've got to pay at least twelve calls. I hope every one will be out.

HILDA.

People are so stupid, they're always in when you call.

MABEL.

[*Holding out her hand to* BASIL.] Good-bye.

HILDA.

[*Coldly.*] Thanks so much, Mr. Kent. I'm afraid we disturbed you awfully.

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands with her.*] I've been enchanted to see you. Good-bye.

MABEL.

[*Lightly.*] We shall see you again before you go to Italy, shan't we?

BASIL.

Oh, I'm not going to Italy now, I've changed all my plans.

MABEL.

[*Giving* JOHN *a look.*] Oh! Well, good-bye. Aren't you coming, John.

JOHN.

No: I think I'll stay and have a little chat with Basil, while you tread the path of duty.

MABEL.

Well, mind you're in early. We've got a lot of disgusting people coming to dinner.

HILDA.

[*With a smile.*] Poor things! Who are they?

MABEL.

I forget who they are. But I know they're loathsome. That's why I asked them.

[BASIL *opens the door, and the two women go out.*

JOHN.

[*Sitting down and stretching himself.*] Now that we've got rid of our womankind let's make ourselves comfortable. [*Taking a pipe out of his pocket.*] I think I'll sample your baccy if you'll pass it along.

BASIL.

[*Handing him the jar.*] I'm rather glad you stayed, John. I wanted to talk to you.

JOHN.

Ha! ha!

[BASIL *pauses a moment, while* JOHN *looks at him with amusement. He fills his pipe.*

JOHN.

[*Lighting his pipe.*] Nice gal, Hilda—ain't she?

BASIL.

[*Enthusiastically.*] Oh, I think she's perfectly charming.... But what makes you say that?

JOHN.

[*Innocently.*] Oh, I don't know. Passed through my head.

BASIL.

I say, I've got something to tell you, John.

JOHN.

Well, don't be so beastly solemn about it.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] It's a solemn thing.

JOHN.

No, it ain't. I've done it myself. It's like a high dive. When you look down at the water it fairly takes your breath away, but after you've done it—it's not so bad as you think. You're going to be married, my boy.

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] How the deuce d'you know?

JOHN.

[*Gaily.*] Saw it with mine own eyes. I congratulate you, and I give you my blessing. I'll get a new frock-coat to give the lady away in.

BASIL.

You?... [*Suddenly understanding.*] You're on the wrong tack, old man. It's not your sister-in-law I'm going to marry.

JOHN.

Then why the dickens did you say it was?

BASIL.

I never mentioned her name.

JOHN.

H'm! I've made rather more than an average ass of myself, haven't I?

BASIL.

What on earth made you think...?

JOHN.

[*Interrupting.*] Oh, it was only some stupid idea of my wife's. Women are such fools, you know. And they think they're so confoundedly sharp.

BASIL.

[*Disconcerted—looking at him.*] Has Mrs. Murray...?

JOHN.

No, of course not! Well, who the deuce are you going to marry?

BASIL.

[*Flushing.*] I'm going to marry Miss Jenny Bush.

JOHN.

Never heard of her. Is it any one I know?

BASIL.

Yes, you knew her.

JOHN.

[*Searching his memory.*] Bush ... Bush.... [*With a smile.*] The only Jenny Bush *I've* ever heard of was a rather pretty little barmaid in Fleet Street. Presumably you're not going to marry her.

[JOHN *has said this quite lightly, not guessing for a moment that it can have anything to do with the person* BASIL *proposes to marry. Then, since* BASIL *makes no answer*, JOHN *looks at him sharply: there is a silence while the two men stare at one another.*

JOHN.

Basil, it's not the woman we used to know before you went out to the Cape?

BASIL.

[*Pale and nervous, but determined.*] I've just told you that you used to know Jenny.

JOHN.

Man alive, you're not going to marry the barmaid of the "Golden Crown"?

BASIL.

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Jenny *was* a barmaid at the "Golden Crown."

JOHN.

But, good Lord, Basil, what d'you mean? You're not serious?

BASIL.

Perfectly! We're going to be married this day week.

JOHN.

Are you stark, staring mad? Why on earth d'you want to marry Jenny Bush?

BASIL.

That's rather a delicate question, isn't it? [*With a smile.*] Presumably because I'm in love with her.

JOHN.

Well, that's a silly ass of an answer.

BASIL.

It's quite the most obvious.

JOHN.

Nonsense! Why, I've been in love with twenty girls, and I haven't married them all. One can't do that sort of thing in a country where they give you seven years for bigamy. Every public-house along the Thames from Barnes to Taplow is the tombstone of an unrequited passion of my youth. I loved 'em dearly, but I never asked 'em to marry me.

BASIL.

[*Tightening his lips.*] I'd rather you didn't make jokes about it, John.

JOHN.

Are you sure you're not making an ass of yourself? If you've got into a mess, surely we can get you out. Marriage, like hanging, is rather a desperate remedy.

[BASIL *is sitting down and moodily shrugs his shoulders.* JOHN *goes up to him, and putting his hands on his friend's shoulders looks into his eyes.*

JOHN.

Why are you going to marry her, Basil?

BASIL.

[*Springing up impatiently.*] Damn you, why don't you mind your own business?

JOHN.

Don't be a fool, Basil.

BASIL.

Can't I marry any one I choose? It's nothing to you, is it? D'you suppose I care if she's a barmaid?

[*He walks up and down excitedly, while* JOHN *with steady eyes watches him.*

JOHN.

Basil, old man, we've known each other a good many years now. Don't you think you'd better trust me?

BASIL.

[*Setting his teeth.*] What d'you want to know?

JOHN.

Why are you going to marry her?

BASIL.

[*Abruptly, fiercely.*] Because I must.

JOHN.

[*Nodding his head quietly.*] I see.
[*There is a silence. Then* BASIL, *more calmly turns to* JOHN.

BASIL.

D'you remember Jenny?

JOHN.

Yes, rather. Why, we always lunched there in the old days.

BASIL.

Well, after I came back from the Cape I began going there again. When I was out there she took it into her head to write me a letter, rather ill-spelt and funny—but I was touched that she thought of me. And she sent some tobacco and some cigarettes.

JOHN.

My maiden aunt sent you a woollen comforter, but I'm not aware that in return you ever made her a proposal of marriage.

BASIL.

And so in one way and another I came to know Jenny rather well. She appeared to get rather fond of me—and I couldn't help seeing it.

JOHN.

But she always pretended to be engaged to that scrubby little chap with false teeth who used to hang about the bar and make sheep's eyes at her over innumerable Scotch-and-sodas.

BASIL.

He made a scene because I took her out on one of her off-nights, and she broke it off. I couldn't help knowing it was on my account.

JOHN.

Well, and after that?

BASIL.

After that I got into the habit of taking her to the play, and so on. And finally...!

JOHN.

How long has this been going on?

BASIL.

Several months.

JOHN.

And then?

BASIL.

Well, the other day she wired for me. I found her in the most awful state. She was simply crying her eyes out, poor thing. She'd been seedy and gone to the doctor's. And he told her ...

JOHN.

What you might really have foreseen.

BASIL.

Yes.... She was quite hysterical. She said she didn't know what to do nor where to go. And she was in an awful funk about her people. She said she'd kill herself.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] Naturally she was very much upset.

BASIL.

I felt the only thing I could do was to ask her to marry me. And when I saw the joy that came into her poor, tear-stained face I *knew* I'd done the right thing.

[*There is a pause.* JOHN *walks up and down, then stops suddenly and turns to* BASIL.

JOHN.

Have you thought that you, who've never needed to economise, will have to look at every shilling you spend? You've always been careless with your money, and what you've had you've flung about freely.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] If I have to submit to nothing worse than going without a lot of useless luxuries, I really don't think I need complain.

JOHN.

But you can't afford to keep a wife and an increasing family.

BASIL.

I suppose I can make money as well as other men.

JOHN.

By writing books?

BASIL.

I shall set to work to earn my living at the Bar. Up till now I've never troubled myself.

JOHN.

I don't know any man less fit than you for the dreary waiting and the drudgery of the Bar.

BASIL.

We shall see.

JOHN.

And what d'you think your friends will say to your marrying—a barmaid?

BASIL.

[*Contemptuously.*] I don't care two straws for my friends.

JOHN.

That's pleasant for them. You know, men and women without end have snapped their fingers at society and laughed at it, and for a while thought they had the better of it. But all the time society was quietly smiling up its sleeve, and suddenly it put out an iron hand—and scrunched them up.

BASIL.

[Shrugging his shoulders.] It only means that a few snobs will cut me.

JOHN.

Not you—your wife.

BASIL.

I'm not such a cad as to go to a house where I can't take my wife.

JOHN.

But you're the last man in the world to give up these things. There's nothing you enjoy more than going to dinner-parties and staying in country houses. Women's smiles are the very breath of your nostrils.

BASIL.

You talk of me as if I were a tame cat. I don't want to brag, John, but after all, I've shown that I'm fit for something in this world. I went to the Cape because I thought it was my duty. I intend to marry Jenny for the same reason.

JOHN.

[*Seriously.*] Will you answer me one question—on your honour?

BASIL.

Yes.

JOHN.

Are you in love with her?

BASIL.

[*After a pause.*] No.

JOHN.

[*Passionately.*] Then, by God, you have no right to marry her. A man has no right to marry a woman for pity. It's a cruel thing to do. You can only end by making yourself and her entirely wretched.

BASIL.

I can't break the poor girl's heart.

JOHN.

You don't know what marriage is. Even with two people who are devoted to one another, who have the same interests and belong to the same class, it's sometimes almost unbearable. Marriage is the most terrible thing in the world unless passion makes it absolutely inevitable.

BASIL.

My marriage is absolutely inevitable—for another reason.

JOHN.

You talk as if such things had never happened before.

BASIL.

Oh, I know, they happen every day. It's no business of the man's. And as for the girl, let her throw herself in the river. Let her go to the deuce, and be hanged to her.

JOHN.

Nonsense. She can be provided for. It only needs a little discretion—and no one will be a ha'porth the wiser, nor she a ha'porth the worse.

BASIL.

But it's not a matter of people knowing. It's a matter of honour.

JOHN.

[*Opening his eyes.*] And where precisely did the honour come in when you...?

BASIL.

Good heavens, I'm a man like any other. I have passions as other men have.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] My dear Basil, I wouldn't venture to judge you. But I think it's rather late in the day to set up for a moralist.

BASIL.

D'you think I've not regretted what I did? It's easy enough afterwards to say that I should have resisted. The world would be a Sunday School if we were all as level-headed at night as we are next morning.

JOHN.

[*Shaking his head.*] After all, it's only a very regrettable incident due to your youth and—want of innocence.

BASIL.

[*With vehement seriousness.*] I may have acted like a cur. I don't know. I acted as I suppose every other man would. But now I have a plain duty before me, and, by God, I mean to do it.

JOHN.

Don't you realise that you've only one life and that mistakes are irreparable? People play with life as if it were a game of chess in which they can try this move and that, and when they get into a muddle, sweep the board clear and

begin again.

BASIL.

But life is a game of chess in which one is always beaten. Death sits on the other side of the board, and for every move he has a counter-move. And for all your deep-laid schemes he has a parry.

JOHN.

But if at the end Death always mates you, the fight is surely worth the fighting. Don't handicap yourself at the beginning by foolish quixotry. Life is so full. It has so much to offer, and you're throwing away almost everything that makes it worth the trouble.

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] Jenny would kill herself if I didn't marry her.

JOHN.

You don't seriously think she'd do that. People don't commit suicide so easily, you know.

BASIL.

You've thought of a great deal, John—you've not thought of the child. I can't let the child skulk into the world like a thief. Let him come in openly and lawfully. And let him go through the world with an honest name. Good heavens, the world's bad enough without fettering him all his life with a hideous stigma.

JOHN.

Oh, my dear Basil ...

BASIL.

[*Interrupting.*] You can bring forward a thousand objections, but nothing alters the fact that, under the circumstances, there's only one way open to a man of honour.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] Well, it's a way that may do credit to your heart, but scarcely to your understanding.

BASIL.

I thought you'd see at once that I was doing the only possible thing.

JOHN.

My dear Basil, you talk of pity, and you talk of duty, but are you sure there's anything more in it than vanity? You've set yourself up on a sort of moral pinnacle. Are you sure you don't admire your own heroism a little too much?

BASIL.

[*With a good-natured smile.*] Does it look so petty as that in your eyes? After all, it's only common morality.

JOHN.

[*Impatiently.*] But, my dear chap, its absurd to act according to an unrealisable ideal in a world that's satisfied with the second-rate. You're tendering bank-notes to African savages, among whom cowrie shells are common coin.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] I don't know what you mean.

JOHN.

Society has made its own decalogue, a code that's just fit for middling people who are not very good and not very wicked. But Society punishes you equally if your actions are higher than its ideal or lower.

BASIL.

Sometimes it makes a god of you when you're dead.

JOHN.

But it takes precious good care to crucify you when you're alive.
[*There is a knock at the door, and* MRS. GRIGGS *comes in.*

MRS. GRIGGS.

Some more visitors, Sir.

BASIL.

Show 'em in. [*To* JOHN] It's Jenny. She said she was coming to tea.

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] Oh, the cake was for her, was it? Would you like me to go?

BASIL.

Not unless you choose. Do you suppose I'm ashamed?

JOHN.

I thought, after all you've told me, you might not care for me to see her.
[JENNY BUSH *and her brother* JAMES *come in. She is very pretty, with delicate features and a beautiful complexion: her fair hair is abundant and very elaborately arranged. She is dressed smartly, rather showily. It is the usual type of barmaid, or tea-girl, a shade more refined perhaps than the common run. Her manners are unobjectionable, but not those of a gentlewoman.* JAMES *is a young man with clean-shaven face and a sharp expression. He is over-dressed in a very horsey manner, and is distinctly more vulgar than his sister. He talks English with a cockney accent, not invariably dropping his aitches, but only now and then. He is over cordial and over genial.*

JENNY.

[*Going up to* BASIL.] I'm awfully late, I couldn't come before.

JAMES.

[*Jocosely.*] Don't mind me. Give 'im a kiss, old tart.

JENNY.

Oh, I brought my brother Jimmie to see you.

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

JAMES.

Nicely, thanks. Pleased to make your acquaintance.

JENNY.

[*Looking at* JOHN *and suddenly recognising him.*]
Well, I never! If that isn't old John Halliwell. I didn't expect to see you. This is a treat.

JOHN.

How d'you do?

JENNY.

What are you doing here?

JOHN.

I've been having a cup of tea with Basil.

JENNY.

[*Looking at the tea-things.*] D'you always drink out of three cups at once?

JOHN.

My wife has been here—and her sister.

JENNY.

Oh, I see. Fancy your being married. How d'you like it?

JOHN.

All right, thanks.
[BASIL *pours out a cup of tea, and during the following speeches gives* JENNY *milk and sugar and cake.*

JAMES.

People say it wants a bit of gettin' used to.

JOHN.

Mr. Bush, you're a philosopher.

JAMES.

Well, I will say this for myself, you'd want to get up early in the morning to catch me nappin'. I didn't catch your name.

JOHN.

Halliwell.

JAMES.

'Alliwell?

JOHN.

[*Emphasising the H.*] Halliwell.

JAMES.

That's what I say—'Alliwell. I knew a fellow in the meat trade called 'Alliwell. Any relation?

JOHN.

I don't think so.

JAMES.

Fine business 'e 'ad too. There's a rare lot of money to be made out of meat.

JOHN.

I dare say.

Jenny.

[*To* JOHN.] It *is* a long time since I've seen you. I suppose you've quietened down now you're a married man. You were a hot 'un when you was a bachelor.

JAMES.

[*Facetiously.*] Don't make 'im blush, Jenny. Accidents will 'appen in the best regulated families. And boys will be boys, as they say in the Bible.

JOHN.

I think I must be off, Basil.

JAMES.

Well, I'll be toddlin' too. I only come in just to say 'ow d'you do to my future brother-in-law. I'm a fellow as likes to be cordial. There's no 'aughtiness about me.

BASIL.

[*Politely, but not effusively.*] Oh; won't you stay and have some tea?

JAMES.

No, thanks. I'm not much of an 'and at tea; I leave that to females. I like something stronger myself.

JENNY.

[*Remonstrating.*] Jimmie!

BASIL.

I have some whisky, Mr. Bush.

JAMES.

Oh, blow the Mister and blow the Bush. Call me Jimmie. I can't stand ceremony. The way I look on it is this. We're both of us gentlemen. Now, mind you, I'm not a fellow to praise myself. But I will say this: I am a gentleman. That's not self-praise, is it?

JOHN.

Dear me, no. Mere statement of fact.

JAMES.

Well, as I was saying, I know I'm a gentleman. It's a thing you can't 'elp, so what's the good of being proud about it? If I meet a chap in a pub, and he invites me to have a drink, I don't ask him if he's a Lord.

BASIL.

But you just take it.

JAMES.

Well, you'd do the same yourself, wouldn't you?

BASIL.

I dare say. But will you have a drink now?

JAMES.

Oh, bless you, I know what it is to be engaged. I don't want to disturb you canary-birds. Me and 'Alliwell 'll go and have a gargle round the corner. I see you've got a public nice and 'andy. [*To* JOHN.] I suppose you're not above goin' in there now and again, eh?

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] He came into the "Golden Crown" every day of his life, and chance it!

JOHN.

I'm afraid I'm in a great hurry.

JAMES.

'Ang it all, one's always got time to have a drop of Scotch in this life.

BASIL.

[*To* JAMES, *handing him the box.*] Well, take a cigar with you.

JAMES.

[*Taking and examining one.*] If you are so pressing. Villar y Villar.... What do they run you in a hundred?

BASIL.

They were given to me, I really don't know what they cost. [*He lights a match.*] Won't you take the label off?

JAMES.

Not if I know it. I don't smoke a Villar y Villar every day, but when I do, I smoke it with the label on.

JENNY.

[*Laughing.*] Jimmie, you are a caution!

JOHN.

[*Shaking hands with* JENNY.] Good-bye and—my best wishes.

JENNY.

Thanks. You didn't expect I'd marry Basil when I used to mix cocktails for you in the "Golden Crown," did you?

JAMES.

Come on, 'Alliwell. Don't stop there gassing. You'll only disturb the canary-birds. So long, old tart, see you later. Ta-ta, Basil, old man.

BASIL.

Good-bye—Jimmie.
[JOHN HALLIWELL *and* JAMES *go out*, JENNY *goes up to* BASIL *impulsively.*

JENNY.

Kiss me. [*He kisses her, smiling.*] There! Now I can sit down quietly and talk. How d'you like my brother?

BASIL.

Oh—I hardly know him yet. He seems very amiable.

JENNY.

He's not a bad sort when you know him. He's just like my mother.

BASIL.

[*Raising his brows.*] Is he? And—is your father like that too?

JENNY.

Well, you know, Pa hasn't had the education that Jimmie's had. Jimmie was at a boarding-school at Margate.

BASIL.

Was he?

JENNY.

You were at a boarding-school, too, weren't you?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Yes, I was at Harrow.

JENNY.

Ah, you don't get the fine air at Harrow that you get at Margate.

BASIL.

Shall I put down your cup?

JENNY.

[*Placing it on a table.*] Oh, thanks, it's all right. Come and sit by me, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Seating himself on the arm of her chair.*] There.

JENNY.

[*Taking his hand.*] I'm so glad we're alone. I should like to be alone with you all my life. You do love me, don't you, Basil?

BASIL.

Yes.

JENNY.

Much?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Yes.

JENNY.

I'm so glad. Oh, I don't know what I should do if you didn't love me. If you hadn't been kind to me I should have thrown myself in the river.

BASIL.

What nonsense you talk.

JENNY.

I mean it.
[*He passes his hand affectionately over her hair.*

JENNY.

Oh, you *are* so good, Basil. I'm so proud of you. I shall be so proud to be your wife.

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] Don't think too well of me Jenny.

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] I'm not afraid of that. You're brave and you're clever and you're a professional man, and you're everything.

BASIL.

You foolish child.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] I can't tell you how much I love you.

BASIL.

I'll try with all my might to be a good husband to you, Jenny.

[*She flings her arms round his neck and they kiss one another.*

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

AN INTERVAL OF ONE YEAR ELAPSES BETWEEN ACTS I. AND II.

The drawing-room in Basil's house at Putney. In the wall facing the auditorium there is a door leading from the passage. On the right two doors lead into bedrooms, and opposite these is a bay window. The same pictures and plates decorate the walls as in the preceding Scene; the writing-table is between the side doors. JENNY'S *influence is noticeable in the cushions in the wicker-work arm-chairs, in the window curtains and portières of art serge, and in the huge chrysanthemums of the wall paper*.

[JENNY *is sewing while* JAMES BUSH *is lounging in one of the arm chairs*.

JAMES.

Where's his lordship this afternoon?

JENNY.

He's gone out for a walk.

JAMES.

[*With a malevolent laugh.*] That's what he tells you, my dear.

JENNY.

[*Looking up quickly.*] Have you seen him anywhere?

JAMES.

No, I can't say I 'ave. And if I 'ad I wouldn't boast about it.

JENNY.

[*Insisting.*] What did you mean then?

JAMES.

Well, whenever I come here he's out for a walk.... I say, old tart, could you oblige me with a couple of sovereigns till next Saturday?

JENNY.

[*Pained to refuse.*] Oh no, Jimmie, I can't manage it. Basil made me promise I wouldn't let you have any more.

JAMES.

What! He made you promise that?—Ugh, the mean skinflint.

JENNY.

We've lent you so much, Jimmie. And ma's had a lot, too.

JAMES.

Well, look here, you can manage a sovereign, can't you? You needn't say anything about it.

JENNY.

I can't really, Jimmie. I would if I could. But we've got a rare lot of debts worrying us, and the rent will be coming along next week.

JAMES.

[*Sulkily.*] You can't lend it me because you won't. I should just like to know what Basil spends his money on.

JENNY.

He's had a bad year—it's not his fault. And I was so ill after the baby died, we had to pay the doctor nearly fifty pounds.

JAMES.

[*With a sneer.*] Well, it was a wonderful fine thing you did when you married him, Jenny. And you thought you done precious well for yourself, too.

JENNY.

Jimmie, don't!

JAMES.

I can't stick 'im at any price, and I don't mind who knows it.

JENNY.

[*Impetuously.*] I won't have you say anything against him.

JAMES.

All right—keep your shirt in. I'm blowed if I know what you've got to stick up for him about. He don't care much about you.

JENNY.

[*Hastily.*] How d'you know?

JAMES.

Think I can't see!

JENNY.

It's not true. It's not true.

JAMES.

You can't get round me, Jenny. I suppose you 'aven't been crying to-day?

JENNY.

[*Flushing.*] I had a headache.

JAMES.

I know those sort of headaches.

JENNY.

We had a little tiff this morning. That's why he went out.... Oh, don't say he doesn't care for me. I couldn't live.

JAMES.

[*With a laugh.*] Go along with you. Basil Kent ain't the only pebble on the beach.

JENNY.

[*Vehemently.*] Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie, sometimes I don't know which way to turn, I'm that unhappy. If the baby had only lived I might have kept my husband—I might have made him love me. [*The sound is heard of a door being closed.*] There's Basil.

JAMES.

Good luck to 'im.

JENNY.

Oh, Jimmie, take care not to say anything to make him angry.

JAMES.

I'd just like to give 'im a piece of my mind.

JENNY.

Oh, Jimmie, don't. It was my fault that we quarrelled this morning. I wanted to make him angry, and I nagged at him. Don't let him see that I've said anything to you. I'll see—I'll see if I can't send you a pound to-morrow, Jimmie.

JAMES.

[*Defiantly.*] He'd better not start patronising me, because I won't put up with it. I'm a gentleman, and I'm every bit as good as he is—if not better.

[BASIL *comes in, notices* JAMES, *but does not speak.*

JAMES.

Afternoon, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Indifferently.*] You here again?

JAMES.

Looks like it, don't it.

BASIL.

[*Quietly.*] I'm afraid it does.

JAMES.

[*Becoming more aggressive as the conversation proceeds.*] Are you? I suppose I can come and see my own sister?

BASIL.

I suppose it's inevitable.

JAMES.

Well?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Only I should be excessively grateful if you'd time your coming with my—with my going. And *vice versa*.

JAMES.

That means you want me to get out, I reckon.

BASIL.

You show unusual perspicacity, dear James.

JAMES.

And who are you with your long words, I should like to know?

BASIL.

[*Blandly.*] I? A person of not the least importance.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] Well, I wouldn't put on so much side if I was you.

BASIL.

I observe that you have not acquired the useful art of being uncivil without being impertinent.

JAMES.

Look 'ere, I'm not going to stand this. I'm as good as you are any day.

BASIL.

That is a fact I should never dream of contradicting.

JAMES.

[*Indignantly.*] Then what 'ave you got to turn up your nose about, eh? What d'you mean by sneerin' and snarlin' at me when I come here?

JENNY.

[*Nervously.*] Jimmie, don't!

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] You're very eloquent, James. You should join a debating society.

JAMES.

Yes, go on. That's right. You seem to think I'm nobody. I should just like to know why you go on as if I was I don't know what.

BASIL.

[*Abruptly.*] Because I choose.

JAMES.

You can bet anything you like I don't come 'ere to see you.

BASIL.

[*Smiling acidly.*] Then I have at least something to be thankful for.

JAMES.

I've got a right to come here as much as anybody. I come to see my sister.

BASIL.

Really, that's very thoughtful of you. I was under the impression you generally came to borrow money.

JAMES.

Throw that in my face now. I can't 'elp it if I'm out of work.

BASIL.

Oh, I haven't the least objection to your being out of work. All I protest against—and that very mildly—is that I should be expected to keep you. How much did you want to-day?

JAMES.

I don't want your dirty money.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] Have you already tried to borrow it from Jenny?

JAMES.

No, I 'aven't.

BASIL.

And she refused, I suppose.

JAMES.

[*Storming.*] I tell you I don't want your dirty money.

BASIL.

Well, then, we're both quite satisfied. You seemed to think that because I married Jenny I was bound to keep the whole gang of you for the rest of your lives. I'm sorry I can't afford it. And you will kindly tell the rest of them that I'm sick and tired of forking out.

JAMES.

I wonder you don't forbid me your house while you're about it.

BASIL.

[*Coolly.*] You may come here when I'm not at home—if you behave yourself.

JAMES.

I'm not good enough for you, I suppose?

BASIL.

No, you're not.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] Ah, you're a pretty specimen, you are. You mean skinflint!

BASIL.

Don't be abusive, James. It's rude.

JAMES.

I shall say what I choose.

BASIL.

And please don't talk so loud. It annoys me.

JAMES.

[*Malevolently.*] I dare say you'd like to get me out of the way. But I mean to keep my eye on you.

BASIL.

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

JAMES.

You know what I mean. Jenny has something to put up with, I lay.

BASIL.

[*Containing his anger.*] You'll have the goodness to leave the relations between Jenny and myself alone—d'you hear?

JAMES.

Ha, that's touched you up, has it? You think I don't know what sort of a feller you are. I can just about see through two of you. And I know a good deal more about you than you think.

BASIL.

[*Contemptuously.*] Don't be foolish, James.

JAMES.

[*Sarcastic.*] A nice thing Jenny did when she married you.

BASIL.

[*Recovering himself, with a smile.*] Has she been telling you my numerous faults? [*To* JENNY.] You must have had plenty to talk about, my love.

JENNY.

[*Who has been going on with her sewing, looking up now and then uneasily.*] I haven't said a word against you, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Turning his back on* JAMES.] Oh, my dear Jenny, if it amuses you, by all means discuss me with your brother and your sister and your father and your mother, and the whole crew of them.... I should be so dull if I had no faults.

JENNY.

[*Anxiously.*] Tell him I've not said anything against him, Jimmie.

JAMES.

It's not for want of something to say, I lay.

BASIL.

[*Over his shoulder.*] I'm getting rather tired, brother James. I'd go, if I were you.

JAMES.

[*Very aggressively.*] I shan't go till I choose.

BASIL.

[*Turns round, smiling blandly.*] Of course, we're both Christians, dear James; and there's a good deal of civilisation kicking about the world nowadays. But, notwithstanding, the last word is still with the strongest.

JAMES.

What d'you mean by that?

BASIL.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Merely that discretion is the better part of valour. They say that proverbs are the wealth of nations.

JAMES.

[*Indignantly.*] That's just the sort of thing you'd do—to 'it a feller smaller than yourself.

BASIL.

Oh, I wouldn't hit you for worlds, brother James. I should merely throw you downstairs.

JAMES.

[*Making for the door.*] I should just like to see you try it on.

BASIL.

Don't be silly, James. You know you wouldn't like it at all.

JAMES.

I'm not afraid of you.

BASIL.

Of course not. But still—you're not very muscular, are you?

JAMES.

You coward!

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Your repartees are not brilliant, James.

JAMES.

[*Standing at the door for safety's sake.*] I'll pay you out before I've done.

BASIL.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] James, I told you to get out five minutes ago.

JAMES.

I'm going. D'you think I want to stay 'ere? Good-bye, Jenny, I'm not going to stand being insulted by any one. [*He goes out slamming the door.*]

[BASIL, *smiling quietly, goes to his writing-table and turns over some papers*.

BASIL.

The only compensation in brother James is that he sometimes causes one a little mild amusement.

JENNY.

You might at least be polite to him, Basil.

BASIL.

I used up all my politeness six months ago.

JENNY.

After all, he is my brother.

BASIL.

That is a fact I deplore with all my heart, I assure you.

JENNY.

I don't know what's wrong with him.

BASIL.

Don't you? It doesn't matter.

JENNY.

I know he isn't a Society man.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] No, he wouldn't shine at duchesses tea-parties.

JENNY.

Well, he's none the worse for that, is he?

BASIL.

Not at all.

JENNY.

Then why d'you treat him as if he was a dog?

BASIL.

My dear Jenny, I don't.... I'm very fond of dogs.

JENNY.

Oh, you're always sneering. Isn't he as good as I am? And you condescended to marry me.

BASIL.

[*Coldly.*] I really can't see that because I married you I must necessarily take your whole family to my bosom.

JENNY.

Why don't you like them? They're honest and respectable.

BASIL.

[*With a little sigh of boredom.*] My dear Jenny, we don't choose our friends because they're honest and respectable any more than we choose them because they change their linen daily.

JENNY.

They can't help it if they're poor.

BASIL.

My dear, I'm willing to acknowledge that they have every grace and every virtue, but they rather bore me.

JENNY.

They wouldn't if they were swells.

[BASIL *gives a short laugh, but does not answer; and* JENNY *irritated, continues more angrily.*

JENNY.

And after all we're not in such a bad position as all that. My mother's father was a gentleman.

BASIL.

I wish your mother's son were.

JENNY.

D'you know what Jimmie says you are?

BASIL.

I don't vastly care. But if it pleases you very much you may tell me.

JENNY.

[*Flushing angrily.*] He says you're a damned snob.

BASIL.

Is that all? I could have invented far worse things than that to say of myself.... [*With a change of tone.*] You know, Jenny, it's not worth while to worry ourselves about such trifles. One can't force oneself to like people. I'm very sorry that I can't stand your relations. Why on earth don't you resign yourself and make the best of it?

JENNY.

[*Vindictively.*] You don't think they're good enough for you to associate with because they're not in swell positions.

BASIL.

My dear Jenny, I don't in the least object to their being grocers and haberdashers. I only wish they'd sell us things at cost price.

JENNY.

Jimmie isn't a grocer or a haberdasher. He's an auctioneer's clerk.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] I humbly apologise. I thought he was a grocer, because last time he did us the honour of visiting us he asked how much a pound we paid for our tea and offered to sell us some at the same price.... But then he also offered to insure our house against fire and to sell me a gold mine in Australia.

JENNY.

Well, it's better to make a bit as best one can than to.... [*She stops.*]

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Go on. Pray don't hesitate for fear of hurting my feelings.

JENNY.

[*Defiantly.*] Well, then, it's better to do that than moon about like you do.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] Really, even to please you, I'm afraid I can't go about with little samples of tea in my pocket and sell my friends a pound or two when I call on them. Besides, I don't believe they'd ever pay me.

JENNY.

[*Scornfully.*] Oh no, you're a gentleman and a barrister and an author, and you couldn't do anything to dirty those white hands that you're so careful about, could you?

BASIL.

[*Looking at his hands, then up at* JENNY.] And what is it precisely you want me to do?

JENNY.

Well, you've been at the Bar for five years. I should have thought you could make something after all that time.

BASIL.

I can't force the wily solicitor to give me briefs.

JENNY.

How do other fellows manage it?

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] The simplest way, I believe, is to marry the wily solicitor's daughter.

JENNY.

Instead of a barmaid?

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] I didn't say that, Jenny.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] Oh no. You didn't say it, but you hinted it. You never say anything, but you're always hinting and insinuating—till you drive me out of my senses.

BASIL.

[*After a moment's pause, gravely.*] I'm very sorry if I hurt your feelings. I promise you I don't mean to. I always try to be kind to you.

[*He looks at* JENNY, *expecting her to say something in forgiveness or in apology. But she, shrugging her shoulders, looks down sullenly at her work, without a word, and begins again to sew. Then* BASIL, *tightening his lips, picks up writing materials and goes towards the door*.

JENNY.

[*Looking up quickly.*] Where are you going?

BASIL.

[*Stopping.*] I have some letters to write.

JENNY.

Can't you write them here?

BASIL.

Certainly—if it pleases you.

JENNY.

Don't you want me to see who you're writing to?

BASIL.

I haven't the least objection to your knowing all about my correspondence.... And that's fortunate, since you invariably make yourself acquainted with it.

JENNY.

Accuse me of reading your letters now.

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] You always leave my papers in such disorder after you've been to my desk.

JENNY.

You've got no right to say that.

[BASIL *pauses and looks at her steadily*.

BASIL.

Are you willing to swear that you don't go to my desk when I'm away to read my letters? Come, Jenny, answer that question.

JENNY.

[*Disturbed but forced by his glance to reply.*] Well, I'm you're wife, I have a right to know.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] You have such odd ideas about the duties of a wife, Jenny. They include reading my letters and following me in the street. But tolerance and charity and forbearance don't seem to come in your scheme of things.

JENNY.

[*Sullenly.*] Why d'you want to write your letters elsewhere?

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I thought I should be quieter.

JENNY.

I suppose I disturb you?

BASIL.

It's a little difficult to write when you're talking.

JENNY.

Why shouldn't I talk? D'you think I'm not good enough, eh? I should have thought I was more important than your letters.

[BASIL *does not answer*.

JENNY.

[*Angrily.*] Am I your wife or not?

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] You have your marriage lines carefully locked up to prove it.

JENNY.

Then why don't you treat me as your wife? You seem to think I'm only fit to see after the house and order the dinner and mend your clothes. And after that I can go and sit in the kitchen with the servant.

BASIL.

[*Moving again towards the door.*] D'you think it's worth while making a scene? We seem to have said all this before so many times.

JENNY.

[*Interrupting him.*] I want to have it out.

BASIL.

[*Bored.*] We've been having it out twice a week for the last six months—and we've never got anywhere yet.

JENNY.

I'm not going to be always put upon, I'm your wife and I'm as good as you are.

BASIL.

[*With a thin smile.*] Oh, my dear, if you're going in for women's rights, you may have my vote by all means. And you can plump for all the candidates at once if you choose.

JENNY.

You seem to think it's a joke.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh no, I promise you I don't do that. It's lasted too long. And God knows where it'll end.... They say the first year of marriage is the worst; ours has been bad enough in all conscience.

JENNY.

[*Aggressively.*] And I suppose you think it's my fault?

BASIL.

Don't you think we're both more or less to blame?

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] Oh, I'm glad you acknowledge that you have something to do with it.

BASIL.

I tried to make you happy.

JENNY.

Well, you haven't succeeded very well. Did you think I was likely to be happy—when you leave me alone all day and half the night for your swell friends that I'm not good enough for?

BASIL.

That's not true. I hardly ever see any of my old friends.

JENNY.

Except Mrs. Murray, eh?

BASIL.

I've seen Mrs. Murray perhaps a dozen times in the last year.

JENNY.

Oh, you needn't tell me that. I know it. She's a lady, isn't she?

BASIL.

[*Ignoring the charge.*] And my work takes me away from you. I can't always be down here. Think how bored you'd be.

JENNY.

A precious lot of good your work does. You can't earn enough money to keep us out of debt.

BASIL.

[*Good-humouredly.*] We are in debt. But we share that very respectable condition with half the nobility and gentry in the kingdom. We're neither of us good managers, and we've lived a bit beyond our means this year. But in future we'll be more economical.

JENNY.

[*Sullenly.*] All the neighbours know that we've got bills with the tradesmen.

BASIL.

[*Acidly.*] I'm sorry that you shouldn't have made so good a bargain as you expected when you married me.

JENNY.

I wonder what you do succeed in? Your book was very successful, wasn't it? You thought you were going to set the Thames on fire, and the book fell flat, flat, flat.

BASIL.

[*Recovering his good temper.*] That is a fate which has befallen better books than mine.

JENNY.

It deserved it.

BASIL.

Oh, I didn't expect *you* to appreciate it. It isn't given to all of us to write about wicked earls and beautiful duchesses.

JENNY.

Well, I wasn't the only one. The papers praised it, didn't they?

BASIL.

The unanimity of their blame was the only thing that consoled me.

JENNY.

And one of them advised you to study an English grammar. And you're the fine gentleman who looks down on poor things like us!

BASIL.

I often wonder if the reviewer who abuses you for a printer's error realises what pleasure he causes the wife of your bosom.

JENNY.

Oh, I've learnt to know you so well this last six months—since the baby died. You've got no cause to set yourself up on a pedestal.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] My dear Jenny, I never pretended to be a golden idol.

JENNY.

I know what you are now. And I was such a fool as to think you a hero. You're merely a failure. In everything you try you're a miserable failure.

BASIL.

[*With a slight sigh.*] Perhaps you're right, Jenny.

[BASIL *walks up and down; and then, stopping, looks at her for a moment meditatively.*

BASIL.

I sometimes wonder whether we shouldn't be happier—if we lived apart.

JENNY.

[*With a start.*] What d'you mean?

BASIL.

We don't seem able to get on very well. And I see no chance of things going any better.

JENNY.

[*With staring eyes.*] D'you mean to say you want to separate?

BASIL.

I think it might be better for both of us—at least for a time. Perhaps later on we might try again.

JENNY.

And what'll *you* do?

BASIL.

I should go abroad for a while.

JENNY.

With Mrs. Murray. Is that it? You want to go away with her.

BASIL.

[*Impatiently.*] No. Of course not.

JENNY.

I don't believe it. You're in love with her.

BASIL.

You've got no right to say that.

JENNY.

Haven't I? I suppose I must shut my eyes and say nothing. You're in love with her. D'you think I've not seen it in these months? That's why you want to leave me.

BASIL.

It's impossible for us to live together. We shall never agree, and we shall never be happy. For God's sake let us separate and have done with it.

JENNY.

You're sick of me. You've had all you want out of me, and now I can go. The fine lady comes along, and you send me away like a housemaid. D'you think I can't see that you're in love with her? You'd sacrifice me without a thought to save her a moment's unpleasantness. And because you love her you hate me.

BASIL.

It's not true.

JENNY.

Can you deny that you're in love with her?

BASIL.

You're simply mad. Good heavens, I've done nothing that could give you the least cause to be jealous.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] Will you swear that you're not in love with her? Swear it on your honour?

BASIL.

You're mad.

JENNY.

[*With growing excitement.*] Swear it. You can't. You're simply madly in love with her.

BASIL.

Nonsense.

JENNY.

Swear it. Swear it on your honour. Swear you don't care for her.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I swear it ... on my honour.

JENNY.

[*Scornfully.*] It's a lie!... And she's just as much in love with you as you are with her.

BASIL.

[*Seizing her wrists.*] What d'you mean?

JENNY.

D'you think I haven't got eyes in my head? I saw it that day she came here. D'you suppose she came to see me? She despises me. I'm not a lady. She came here to please *you*. She was polite to me to please *you*. She asked me to go and see her to please *you*.

BASIL.

[*Trying to compose himself.*] It's absurd. She was an old friend of mine. Of course she came.

JENNY.

I know that sort of friend. D'you think I didn't see the way she looked at you, and how she followed you with her eyes? She simply hung on every word you said. When you smiled, she smiled. When you laughed, she laughed. Oh, I should think she was in love with you; I know what love is, and I felt it. And when she looked at me I know she hated me because I'd robbed her of you.

BASIL.

[*Unable to contain himself.*] Oh, what a dog's life it is we lead! We've been both utterly wretched. It can't go on—and I only see one way out.

JENNY.

That's what you've been brooding over this last week, is it? Separation! I knew there was something, and I couldn't find out what it was.

BASIL.

I do my best to hold myself in, but sometimes I feel it's impossible. I shall be led to saying things that we shall both regret. For Heaven's sake let us part.

JENNY.

No.

BASIL.

We can't go on having these awful quarrels. It's too degrading. It was a horrible mistake that we ever married.

JENNY.

[*Horror-stricken.*] Basil!

BASIL.

Oh, you must see that as well as I. We're utterly unsuited to one another. And the baby's death removed the only necessity that held us together.

JENNY.

You talk as if we only remained together because it was convenient.

BASIL.

[*Passionately.*] Let me go, Jenny. I can't stand it any more. I feel as if I shall go mad.

JENNY.

[*Full of pain and anguish.*] It's nothing at all to you.

BASIL.

Jenny, I did my best for you a year ago. I gave you all I had to give. It was little enough in all conscience. Now I ask you to give me back my freedom.

JENNY.

[*Distracted.*] You only think of yourself. What is to become of me?

BASIL.

You'll be much happier. It's the best thing for both of us. I'll do all I can for you, and you can have your mother and sister to live here.

JENNY.

[*With a cry of grief and passion.*] But I love you, Basil.

BASIL.

You!! Why, you've tortured me for six months beyond all endurance. You've made all my days a burden to me. You've made my life a perfect hell.

JENNY.

[*Gives a long groan of horror and dismay.*] Oh!

[*They stand facing one another, when the housemaid*, FANNY, *comes in*.

FANNY.

Mr. Halliwell.

[JOHN *comes in*. JENNY, *after taking his hand, sinks down on a chair, paying no attention to the following conversation; she stares in front of her, quite distraught*. BASIL *tries with all his might to appear calm and natural*.

BASIL.

Hulloa, what are you doing in these parts?

JOHN.

How d'you do, Mrs. Kent? I've been having an early lunch at Richmond, and I thought I'd just drop in on my way back. As it was Saturday afternoon I thought I might find you.

BASIL.

I'm sure we're delighted to see you. [JOHN *gives a side-glance at* JENNY, *and slightly raises his eyebrows*.] But you've only just come in time, because I've got to go up to town. We might travel up together.

JOHN.

Certainly.

JENNY.

Where are you going, Basil?

BASIL.

To Chancery Lane, to see my agent on business.

JENNY.

[*Suspiciously.*] On Saturday afternoon? Why, he won't be there.

BASIL.

I have an appointment with him.

[JENNY *does not answer, but is obviously unconvinced.* JOHN, *somewhat embarrassed, exerts himself to make conversation.*

JOHN.

I was thinking as I came along that one must lead quite an idyllic existence in the suburbs—with the river—and one's little garden.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] And the spectacle of the fifty little houses opposite all exactly like one another.

JOHN.

And the quiet is perfectly enchanting.

BASIL.

Oh, yes. The only vehicles that disturb the peaceful seclusion are the milk-cart and the barrel-organs. It's quite idyllic.

JENNY.

I think it's a very nice neighbourhood. And you get such a superior class of people here.

BASIL.

I'll just go and change. [*Looking at his watch.* There's a train at 4.15.

JOHN.

All right, hurry up.

[BASIL *goes out of the room.* JENNY *at once springs to her feet and goes towards* JOHN. *She is distracted and hardly knows what she says.*

JENNY.

Can I trust you?

JOHN.

What d'you mean?

[*She stares into his eyes, doubting, trying to see whether he will be willing to help her.*

JENNY.

You used to be a good sort. You never looked down on me because I was a barmaid. Tell me I can trust you, John. There's no one I can speak to, and I feel if I don't speak I shall go off my head.

JOHN.

What is the matter?

JENNY.

Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?

JOHN.

Of course.

JENNY.

On your oath?

JOHN.

On my oath.

JENNY.

[*After a momentary pause.*] Is there anything between Basil and Mrs. Murray?

JOHN.

[*Aghast.*] No. Certainly not.

JENNY.

How d'you know? Are you sure? You wouldn't tell me, if there was. You're all against me because I'm not a lady.... Oh, I'm so unhappy.

[*She tries to restrain her tears, she is half-hysterical.*
JOHN *stares at her, surprised,*
at a loss for words.

JENNY.

If you only knew what a life we lead! He calls it a dog's life, and he's right.

JOHN.

I thought you got on so well.

JENNY.

Oh, before you we've always kept up appearances. He's ashamed to let you know he regrets he ever married me. He wants to separate.

JOHN.

What!

JENNY.

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, don't look so surprised. You're not an utter fool, are you? He proposed it to-day before you came in. We'd been having one of our rows.

JOHN.

But what on earth is it all about?

JENNY.

God knows!

JOHN.

It's nonsense. It can only be a little passing quarrel. You must expect to have those.

JENNY.

No, it isn't. No, it isn't. He doesn't love me. He's in love with your sister-in-law.

JOHN.

It's impossible.

JENNY.

He's always there. He was there twice last week and twice the week before.

JOHN.

How d'you know?

JENNY.

I've followed him.

JOHN.

You followed him in the street, Jenny?

JENNY.

[*Defiantly.*] Yes. If I'm not ladylike enough for him, I needn't play the lady there. You're shocked now, I suppose?

JOHN.

I wouldn't presume to judge you, Jenny.

JENNY.

And I've read his letters, too—because I wanted to know what he was doing. I steamed one open, and he saw it, and he never said a word.

JOHN.

Good heavens, why did you do it?

JENNY.

Because I can't live unless I know the truth. I thought it was Mrs. Murray's handwriting.

JOHN.

Was it from her?

JENNY.

No. It was a receipt from the coal merchant. I could see how he despised me when he looked at the envelope—I didn't stick it down again very well. And I saw him smile when he found it was only a receipt.

JOHN.

Upon my word, I don't think you've got much cause to be jealous.

JENNY.

Oh, you don't know. Last Tuesday he was dining there, and you should have seen the state he was in. He was so restless he couldn't sit still. He looked at his watch every minute. His eyes simply glittered with excitement, and I could almost hear his heart beating.

JOHN.

It can't be true.

JENNY.

He never loved me. He married me because he thought it was his duty. And then when the baby died—he thought I'd entrapped him.

JOHN.

He didn't say so.

JENNY.

No. He never says anything—but I saw it in his eyes. [*Passionately clasping her hands.*] Oh, you don't know what our life is. For days he doesn't say a word except to answer my questions. And the silence simply drives me mad. I shouldn't mind if he blackguarded me. I'd rather he hit me than simply look and look. I can see he's keeping himself in. He's said more to-day than he's ever said before. I knew it was getting towards the end.

JOHN.

[*With a helpless gesture.*] I'm very sorry.

JENNY.

Oh, don't you pity me, too. I've had a great deal too much pity. I don't want it. Basil married me from pity. Oh, I wish he hadn't. I can't stand the unhappiness.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] You know, Jenny, he's a man of honour.

JENNY.

Oh, I know he's a man of honour. I wish he had a little less of it. One doesn't want a lot of fine sentiments in married life. They don't work.... Oh, why couldn't I fall in love with a man of my own class? I should have been so much happier. I used to be so proud that Basil wasn't a clerk, or something in the City. He's right, we shall never be happy.

JOHN.

[*Trying to calm her.*] Oh, yes, you will. You mustn't take things too seriously.

JENNY.

It isn't a matter of yesterday, or to-day, or to-morrow. I can't alter myself. He knew I wasn't a lady when he

married me. My father had to bring up five children on two-ten a week. You can't expect a man to send his daughters to a boarding-school at Brighton on that, and have them finished in Paris.... He doesn't say a word when I do something or say something a lady wouldn't—but he purses up his lips, and looks.... Then I get so mad that I do things just to aggravate him. Sometimes I try to be vulgar. One learns a good deal in a bar in the City, and I know so well the things to say that'll make Basil curl up. I want to get a bit of revenge out of him sometimes, and I know exactly where he's raw and where I can hurt him. [*With a laugh of scorn.*] You should see the way he looks when I don't eat properly, or when I call a man a Johnny.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] It opens up endless possibilities of domestic unhappiness.

JENNY.

Oh, I know it isn't fair to him, but I lose my head. I can't always be refined. Sometimes I can't help breaking out. I feel I must let myself go.

JOHN.

Why don't you separate, then?

JENNY.

Because I love him. Oh, John, you don't know how I love him. I'd do anything to make him happy. I'd give my life if he wanted it. Oh, I can't say it, but when I think of him my heart burns so that sometimes I can hardly breathe. I can never show him that he's all in the world to me; I try to make him love me, and I only make him hate me. What can I do to show him? Ah, if he only knew, I'm sure he'd not regret that he married me. I feel—I feel as if my heart was full of music, and yet something prevents me from ever bringing it out.

JOHN.

D'you think he means it seriously when he talks of separation?

JENNY.

He's been brooding over it. I know him so well, I knew there was something he was thinking over. Oh, John, I couldn't live without him. I'd rather die. If he leaves me, I swear I'll kill myself.

JOHN.

[*Walking up and down.*] I wish I could help you. I don't see anything I can do.

JENNY.

Oh, yes, there is. Speak to your sister-in-law. Ask her to have mercy on me. Perhaps she doesn't know what she's doing. Tell her I love him.... Take care. There's Basil. If he knew what I'd said he'd never speak to me again.

[BASIL *comes in, dressed in a frock-coat; with a tall hat in his hand.*

BASIL.

I'm ready. We've just got time to catch the train.

JOHN.

All right. Good-bye, Mrs. Kent.

JENNY.

[*Keeping her eyes fixed on* BASIL.] Good-bye.

[*The two men go out.* JENNY *runs to the door and calls out.*

JENNY.

Basil, I want you a moment, Basil!

[BASIL *appears at the door*.

JENNY.

Are you really going to Chancery Lane?

[BASIL *makes a movement of impatience and goes out again without answering*.

JENNY.

[*Alone*.] Oh, well, I'm going to see that for myself. [*Calling to the* MAID.] Fanny!... Bring my hat and my jacket. Quick!

[*She runs to the window and looks out at* BASIL *and* JOHN *going away*. FANNY *appears with the clothes*. JENNY *hurriedly puts them on*.

JENNY.

[*As* FANNY *is helping her*.] What time is it?

FANNY.

[*Looking up at the clock*.] Five minutes past four.

JENNY.

I think I can catch it. He said 4.15.

FANNY.

Will you be in to tea, mum?

JENNY.

I don't know. [*She runs to the door and rushes out.*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

THE SAME AFTERNOON.

[*A luxuriously furnished drawing-room at* MRS. MURRAY'S *house in Charles Street, Mayfair. Everything in it is beautiful, but suggests in the owner good taste rather than originality.*]

[HILDA *is seated near a tea-table, elaborately gowned, and with her is* MABEL. MR. ROBERT BRACKLEY *is sitting down, a stout, round-faced man, clean-shaven and very bald; about forty; he is attired in the height of fashion, in a frock-coat, patent-leather boots and an eye-glass. He talks very quickly, in a careless frivolous fashion, and is always much amused at what he says.*]

MABEL.

What is the time, Mr. Brackley?

BRACKLEY.

I shan't tell you again.

MABEL.

How brutal of you!

BRACKLEY.

There's something unhealthy in your passion for information. I've already told you five times.

HILDA.

It's very unflattering to us who've been doing our little best to amuse you.

MABEL.

I can't imagine what's happened to John. He promised to fetch me here.

HILDA.

He's sure to come if you'll only wait patiently.

MABEL.

But I hate waiting patiently.

HILDA.

You shouldn't have let him out of your sight.

MABEL.

He went to Putney after luncheon to see your friend Mr. Kent. Have you seen him lately?

HILDA.

John? I saw him at the Martins yesterday.

MABEL.

[*Slyly.*] I meant Mr. Kent.

HILDA.

[*Indifferently.*] Yes. He called the other day. [*To change the conversation.*] You're unusually silent, Mr. Brackley.

BRACKLEY.

[*Smiling.*] I have nothing whatever to say.

MABEL.

That's usually when clever people talk most.

HILDA.

Are you doing anything now?

BRACKLEY.

Oh yes, I'm writing a play in blank verse.

HILDA.

You brave man. What is it about?

BRACKLEY.

Cleopatra.

HILDA.

Dear me! Shakespeare wrote a play about Cleopatra, didn't he?

BRACKLEY.

I daresay. I haven't read it. Shakespeare bores me. He lived so long ago.

MABEL.

Of course there are people who read him.

BRACKLEY.

Are there? What do they look like?

HILDA.

[*Smiling.*] They bear no distinctive mark of their eccentricity.

BRACKLEY.

The English are so original.

MABEL.

I think I shall go and ring up the flat. I wonder if John has gone straight home.

BRACKLEY.

Do. I'm growing very uneasy about him.

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] You absurd creature.

[*She goes out.*

HILDA.

You talk more nonsense than anyone I ever met.

BRACKLEY.

That's my stock in trade. You don't imagine people would read my poems if they knew that I was sober, industrious, and economical. As a matter of fact I lead the virtuous life of a clergyman's daughter, but not a reviewer would notice me if he knew it.

HILDA.

And the little things that the indiscreet read of in the papers....

BRACKLEY.

Are merely another proof of my passion for duty. The British public wants its poets to lead romantic lives.

HILDA.

Are you ever serious?

BRACKLEY.

May I come to lunch with you on Thursday?

HILDA.

[*A little surprised.*] Certainly. But why on Thursday?

BRACKLEY.

Because on that day I intend to ask you to marry me.

HILDA.

[*With a smile.*] I'm sorry, I've just remembered that I'm lunching out.

BRACKLEY.

You break my heart.

HILDA.

On the contrary, I provide you with the materials for a sonnet.

BRACKLEY.

Won't you marry me?

HILDA.

No.

BRACKLEY.

Why not?

HILDA.

[*Amused.*] I'm not in the least in love with you.

BRACKLEY.

People who propose to marry should ask themselves if they can look forward with equanimity to breakfasting opposite one another for an indefinite number of years.

HILDA.

You're very unromantic.

BRACKLEY.

My dear lady, if you want romance I'll send you my complete works bound in vellum. I've ground out ten volumes

of romance to Phyllis and Chloe and heaven knows who. The Lord save me from a romantic wife.

HILDA.

But I'm afraid I'm hopelessly romantic.

BRACKLEY.

Well, six months of marriage with a poet will cure you.

HILDA.

I'd rather not be cured.

BRACKLEY.

Won't you be in to luncheon on Thursday?

HILDA.

No.

[*The* BUTLER *comes in*.

BUTLER.

Mr. Halliwell, Mr. Kent.

[BASIL *and* JOHN *appear, and at the same moment* MABEL *comes in from the room in which she has been telephoning*.

MABEL.

[*To* JOHN.] Wretched creature! I've been trying to ring you up.

JOHN.

Have I kept you waiting? I went down to Chancery Lane with Basil.

[JOHN *turns to shake hands with* HILDA *and* BRACKLEY, *while* BASIL, *who has said how d'you do to* HILDA, *comes down to speak to* MABEL. *The conversation between* MABEL *and* BASIL *is in an undertone*.

BASIL.

How d'you do. You must scold me for keeping John so long.

MABEL.

I didn't really want him, you know.

BASIL.

[*Pointing with his head to* BRACKLEY.] I say, who is that?

MABEL.

Robert Brackley. Don't you know him?

BASIL.

The poet?

MABEL.

Of course. They say he'd have been given the Laureateship if it hadn't been abolished at Tennyson's death.

BASIL.

[*Tightening his lips.*] He's rather a low blackguard, isn't he?

MABEL.

Heavens, what's the matter with him, poor man? He's Hilda's latest celebrity. He pretends to adore her.

BASIL.

Don't you remember the Grange case that he was mixed up in?

MABEL.

[*In tones of surprise.*] But, my dear Mr. Kent, that was two years ago.

HILDA.

Mr. Kent, I want to introduce you to Mr. Brackley.

BASIL.

[*Going up.*] How d'you do.

[JOHN *comes down to his wife*.

MABEL.

Wretched creature!

JOHN.

I say, Mabel, is Basil often here?

MABEL.

I don't know. I met him here last week.

JOHN.

Why the Dickens does he come? He's got no business to.

MABEL.

You brought him yourself to-day.

JOHN.

I didn't. He insisted on coming—when I said I had to fetch you.

MABEL.

Perhaps he came to see me.

JOHN.

Fiddledidee! I think you ought to speak to Hilda about it.

MABEL.

My dear John, are you mad? She'd jump down my throat.

JOHN.

Why does she let him hang about her? She must know she's turning his silly head.

MABEL.

I daresay she wants to prove to him that he showed very bad taste a year ago. It is rather annoying when you're attached to a young man that he should go and marry somebody else.

JOHN.

Well, I don't think she's playing the game, and I shall tell her so.

MABEL.

She'll snub you awfully.

JOHN.

I don't care.... Look here, you make a diversion so that I can get hold of her.

MABEL.

How?

JOHN.

[*Dryly.*] I don't know. Exercise your invention.

MABEL.

[*Going towards the others.*] Hilda, John is clamouring for some tea.

HILDA.

[*Coming down.*] Why on earth can't he help himself?

JOHN.

My native modesty prevents.

HILDA.

That's quite a new trait in you.

[HILDA *sits down and pours out tea for* JOHN. *He looks at her silently.*

HILDA.

You've been lunching at Richmond?

JOHN.

Yes.... Then I went on to Putney.

HILDA.

You've been making quite a day of it.

JOHN.

[*Taking the cup.*] I say, old gal—you're not going to make a fool of yourself, are you?

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes.*] Oh, I hope not. Why?

JOHN.

I thought it might have slipped your memory that Basil was married about a year ago.

HILDA.

[*Freezing.*] What on earth d'you mean? [*Calling*] Mabel.

JOHN.

One moment.... You can give me a little conversation, can't you?

HILDA.

I'm afraid you're going to bore me.

JOHN.

[*Good-humouredly.*] I assure you I'm not.... Isn't Basil here rather often?

HILDA.

I wonder you haven't learnt to mind your own business, John.

JOHN.

Don't you think it's rather rough on that poor little woman in Putney?

HILDA.

[*With a suspicion of contempt.*] I went down to see her. I thought she was vulgar and pretentious. I'm afraid I can't arouse any interest in her.

JOHN.

[*Gently.*] She may be vulgar, but she told me her love was like music in her heart. Don't you think she must have suffered awfully to get hold of a thought like that?

HILDA.

[*After a pause, changing suddenly both voice and manner.*] And d'you think I've not suffered, John? I'm so unhappy.

JOHN.

Do you really care for him?

HILDA.

[*In a low voice hoarse with passion.*] No, I don't care for him. I worship the very ground he treads on.

JOHN.

[*Very gravely.*] Then you must do as you think best.... You're playing the most dangerous game in the world. You're playing with human hearts.... Good-bye.

HILDA.

[*Taking his hand.*] Good-bye, John. You're not angry with me because I was horrid.... I'm glad you told me about his wife. Now I shall know what to do.

JOHN.

Mabel.

MABEL.

[*Coming forward.*] Yes, we really must be going. I've not seen my precious baby for two hours.

HILDA.

[*Taking both her hands.*] Good-bye, you happy child. You've got a precious baby, and you've got a husband you love. What can you want more?

MABEL.

[*Flippantly.*] I want a motor-car.

HILDA.

[*Kissing her.*] Good-bye, darling.

[MABEL *and* JOHN *go out.*

BRACKLEY.

I like this room, Mrs. Murray. It never seems to say to you: now it's really time for you to go away, as some drawing-rooms do.

HILDA.

[*Recovering her serenity.*] I suppose it's the furniture. I'm thinking of changing it.

BRACKLEY.

[*With a smile.*] Upon my word, that almost suggests that I've outstayed my welcome.

HILDA.

[*Gaily.*] I shouldn't have said that if I didn't know that nothing would induce you to go till you wanted to.

BRACKLEY.

[*Rising.*] You know me like your glove. But it really is growing monstrous late.

HILDA.

You mustn't go till you've told me who the fair charmer was I saw you with at the play last night.

BRACKLEY.

Ah, the green-eyed monster!

HILDA.

[*Laughing.*] Don't be so absurd, but I thought you'd like to know her yellow hair was dyed.

[BASIL *looks over the pages of a book, somewhat annoyed that* HILDA *takes no notice of him.*

BRACKLEY.

Of course it was dyed. That was just the charm of it. Any woman can have yellow hair naturally: there's no more credit in that than in having it blue or green.

HILDA.

I've always wanted to make mine purple.

BRACKLEY.

Don't you think women ought to be artificial? It's just as much their duty to rouge their cheeks and powder their noses as it is for them to wear nice frocks.

HILDA.

But I know many women who wear horrid frocks.

BRACKLEY.

Oh, those are the others. I treat them as non-existent.
Hilda.
What do you mean?

BRACKLEY.

There are only two sorts of women in the world—the women who powder their noses and the others.

HILDA.

And who are they if you please?

BRACKLEY.

I haven't examined the matter very carefully, but I understand they are clergymen's daughters by profession.

[*He shakes hands with her.*

HILDA.

It's so nice of you to have come.

BRACKLEY.

[*Nodding at* BASIL.] Good-bye.... May I come again soon?

HILDA.

[*Looking at him quickly.*] Were you serious just now, or were you laughing at me?

BRACKLEY.

I've never been more serious in my life.

HILDA.

Then perhaps I shall be in to luncheon on Thursday after all.

BRACKLEY.

A thousand thanks. Good-bye.

[*He nods to* BASIL *and goes out.* HILDA *looks at* BASIL *with a smile.*

HILDA.

Is that a very interesting book?

BASIL.

[*Putting it down.*] I thought that man was never going away.

HILDA.

[*Laughing.*] I suspect he thought precisely the same of you.

BASIL.

[*Ill-temperedly.*] What an ass he is! How *can* you stand him?

HILDA.

I'm rather attached to him. I don't take everything he says very seriously. And young men ought to be foolish.

BASIL.

He didn't strike me as so juvenile as all that.

HILDA.

He's only forty, poor thing—and I've never known a coming young man who was less than that.

BASIL.

He's a young man with a very bald head.

HILDA.

[*Amused.*] I wonder why you dislike him!

BASIL.

[*With a jealous glance, icily.*] I thought he wasn't admitted into decent houses.

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes.*] He comes here, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*Unable to restrain his ill-temper.*] Don't you know that he's been mixed up in every scandal for the last twenty years?

HILDA.

[*Good-humouredly, seeing that* BASIL *is merely jealous.*] There must be people in the world to provide gossip for their neighbours.

BASIL.

It's no business of mine. I have no right to talk to you like this.

HILDA.

I wonder why you do it?

BASIL.

[*Almost savagely.*] Because I love you.

[*There is a little pause.*

HILDA.

[*With a smile, ironically.*] Won't you have some more tea, Mr. Kent?

BASIL.

[*Going up to her, speaking with a sort of vehement gravity.*] You don't know what I've suffered. You don't know what a hell my life is.... I tried so hard to prevent myself from coming here. When I married I swore I'd break with all my old friends.... When I married I found I loved *you*.

HILDA.

I can't listen to you if you talk like that.

BASIL.

D'you want me to go?

[*She does not answer for a moment, but walks up and down in agitation. At last she stops and faces him.*

HILDA.

Did you hear me tell Mr. Brackley to come on Thursday?

BASIL.

Yes.

HILDA.

He's asked me to be his wife. And on Thursday I shall give him an answer.

BASIL.

Hilda!

HILDA.

[*Earnestly.*] It's you who've driven me into it.

BASIL.

Hilda, what are you going to say to him?

HILDA.

I don't know—perhaps, yes?

BASIL.

Oh, Hilda, Hilda, you don't care for him?

HILDA.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] He amuses me. I dare say we should get on very well together.

BASIL.

[*Passionately.*] Oh, you can't. You don't know what you're doing. I thought—I thought you loved me.

HILDA.

It's because I love you that I shall marry Mr. Brackley.

BASIL.

Oh, it's absurd. I won't let you. You're making us both utterly wretched. I won't let you sacrifice our happiness. Oh, Hilda, I love you. I can't live without you. At first I tried to resist seeing you. I used to pass your door and look up at your windows; and the door seemed as if it were waiting for me. And at the end of the street I used to look back. Oh, how I used to want to come in and see you once more! I thought if I saw you just once, I should get over it. And at last I couldn't help myself. I'm so weak. Do you despise me?

HILDA.

[*Almost in a whisper.*] I don't know.

BASIL.

And you were so kind I couldn't help coming again. I thought I did no harm.

HILDA.

I saw you were unhappy.

BASIL.

I should think I was unhappy. For months I've dreaded going home. When I saw my house as I walked along I almost turned sick. You don't know how fervently I've wished that I'd got killed in the war. I can't go on.

HILDA.

But you must. It's your duty.

BASIL.

Oh, I think I've had enough of duty and honour. I've used up all my principles in the last year.

HILDA.

Don't say that, Basil.

BASIL.

After all, it's my own fault. I brought it on myself, and I must take the consequences.... But I haven't the strength, I don't love her.

HILDA.

Then don't let her ever find it out. Be kind to her, and gentle and forbearing.

BASIL.

I can't be kind and gentle and forbearing day after day, for weeks, and months, and years.

HILDA.

I thought you were a brave man. They wouldn't have given you that medal if you'd been a coward.

BASIL.

Oh, my dearest, it's not hard to risk your life in the midst of battle. I can do that—but this needs more strength than I've got. I tell you I can't endure it.

HILDA.

[*Tenderly.*] But it'll get better. You'll get used to one another, and you'll understand one another better.

BASIL.

We're too different. It's impossible for it to get better. We can't even go on as we have been. I've felt that the end was coming.

HILDA.

But try—try for my sake.

BASIL.

You don't know what it is. Everything she says, everything she does, jars upon me so frightfully. I try to restrain myself. I clench my teeth to prevent myself from breaking out at her. Sometimes I can't help it, and I say things that I'd give anything to have left unsaid. She's dragging me down. I'm getting as common and vulgar as she is.

HILDA.

How can you say that of your wife?

BASIL.

Don't you think I must have gone through a good deal before I could acknowledge to myself what she was? I'm chained to her for all my life. And when I look into the future—I see her a vulgar, slatternly shrew like her mother, and myself abject, degraded, and despicable. The woman never tires in her conflict with the man, and in the end *he* always succumbs. A man, when he marries a woman like that, thinks he's going to lift her up to his own station. The fool! It's she who drags him down to hers.

HILDA.

[*Much disturbed, rising from her seat.*] I wanted you to be so happy.

BASIL.

[*Going towards her.*] Hilda!

HILDA.

No—don't.... Please!

BASIL.

If it weren't for you I couldn't have lived. It was only by seeing you that I gathered courage to go on with it. And each time I came here I loved you more passionately.

HILDA.

Oh, why did you come?

BASIL.

I couldn't help it. I knew it was poison, but I loved the poison. I would give my whole soul for one look of your eyes.

HILDA.

If you care for me at all, do your duty like a brave man—and let me respect you.

BASIL.

Say that you love me, Hilda.

HILDA.

[*Distracted.*] You're making our friendship impossible. Don't you see that you're preventing me from ever having you here again?

BASIL.

I can't help it.

HILDA.

I ought never to have seen you again. I thought there was no harm in your coming, and I—I couldn't bear to lose you altogether.

BASIL.

Even if I never see you again, I must tell you now that I love you. I made you suffer, I was blind. But I love you with all my heart, Hilda. All day I think of you, and I dream of you in the night. I long to take you in my arms and kiss you, to kiss your lips, and your beautiful hair, and your hands. My whole soul is yours, Hilda.

[*He goes towards her again to take her in his arms.*

HILDA.

Oh, no, go away. For God's sake, go now. I can't bear it.

BASIL.

Hilda, I can't live without you.

HILDA.

Have mercy on me. Don't you see how weak I am? Oh, God help me!

BASIL.

You don't love me?

HILDA.

[*Vehemently.*] You know I love you. But because of my great love I beseech you to do your duty.

BASIL.

My duty is to be happy. Let us go where we can love one another—away from England, to a land where love isn't sinful and ugly.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, let us try to walk straight. Think of your wife, who loves you also—as much as I do. You're all the world to her. You can't treat her so shamefully.

[*She puts her handkerchief to her eyes, and* BASIL *gently takes away her hand.*

BASIL.

Don't cry, Hilda. I can't bear it.

HILDA.

[*In broken tones.*] Don't you understand that we could never respect ourselves again if we did that poor creature such a fearful wrong? She would be always between us with her tears and her sorrows. I tell you I couldn't bear it. Have mercy on me—if you love me at all.

BASIL.

[*Wavering.*] Hilda, it's too hard. I can't leave you.

HILDA.

You must. I *know* it's better to do our duty. For my sake, dearest, go back to your wife, and don't let her ever know that you love me. It's because we're stronger than she that we must sacrifice ourselves.

[*He leans his head on his hands, and sighs deeply. For a while they remain in silence. At last, with another sigh, he gets up.*

BASIL.

I don't know any longer what's right and what's wrong. It all seems confused. It's very hard.

HILDA.

[*Hoarsely.*] It's just as hard for me, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Broken-hearted.*] Good-bye, then. I dare say you're right. And perhaps I should only make you very unhappy.

HILDA.

Good-bye, my dearest.

[*He bends down and kisses her hands. She stifles a sob. He goes slowly to the door, with his back turned to her; and then* HILDA, *unable to endure it, gives a groan.*

HILDA.

Basil. Don't go.

BASIL.

[*With a cry of joy.*] Ah! Hilda.

[*He clasps her passionately in his arms.*

HILDA.

Oh, I can't bear it. I won't lose you. Basil, say you love me.

BASIL.

[*In a madness of joy.*] Yes. I love you with all my heart.

HILDA.

I could have borne it if you'd been happy.

BASIL.

Now *nothing* can separate us, Hilda. You belong to me for ever.

HILDA.

God help me! What have I done?

BASIL.

If we lose our souls, what does it matter? We gain the whole world.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, I want your love. I want your love so badly.

BASIL.

Will you come with me, Hilda? I can take you to a land where the whole earth speaks only of love—and where only love and youth and beauty matter.

HILDA.

Let us go where we can be together always. We have so short a time; let us snatch all the happiness we can.

BASIL.

[*Kissing her again.*] My darling.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, Basil.... [*She starts away.*] Take care!

[*The* BUTLER *comes in.*]

BUTLER.

Mrs. Kent.

[JENNY *enters hurriedly, as he gives her name.*
The BUTLER *at once goes out.*

BASIL.

Jenny!

JENNY.

I've caught you.

BASIL.

[*Trying to be urbane—to* HILDA] I think you know my wife.

JENNY.

[*In a loud angry voice.*] Oh, yes, I know her. You needn't introduce me. I've come for my husband.

BASIL.

Jenny, what are you saying?

JENNY.

Oh, I don't want any of your Society shams. I've come here to speak out.

BASIL.

[*To* HILDA.] Would you mind leaving us alone?

JENNY.

[*Also to* HILDA, *passionately.*] No, I want to speak to you. You're trying to get my husband from me. He's *my* husband.

BASIL.

Be quiet, Jenny. Are you mad? Mrs. Murray, for God's sake leave us. She'll insult you.

JENNY.

You think of her, you don't think of me. You don't care how much I suffer.

BASIL.

[*Taking her arm.*] Come away, Jenny.

JENNY.

[*Shaking him off.*] I won't. You're afraid to let me see her.

HILDA.

[*Pale and trembling, conscience-stricken.*] Let her speak.

JENNY.

[*Going up to* HILDA *threateningly.*] You're stealing my husband from me. Oh, you.... [*She is at a loss for words violent enough.*

HILDA.

I don't want to make you unhappy, Mrs. Kent.

JENNY.

You can't get round me with polite words. I'm sick of all that. I want to speak straight.

BASIL.

[*To* HILDA.] Please go. You can do no good.

JENNY.

[*Still more vehemently.*] You're stealing my husband from me. You're a wicked woman.

HILDA.

[*Almost in a whisper.*] If you like I'll promise you never to see your husband again.

JENNY.

[*With angry scorn.*] Much good your promises will do me. I wouldn't believe a word you said. I know what Society ladies are. We know all about them in the City.

BASIL.

[*To* HILDA.] You *must* leave us alone.

[*He opens the door, and she goes out, looking away from him.*

JENNY.

[*Savagely.*] She's frightened of me. She daren't stand up to me.

BASIL.

[*As* HILDA *goes.*] I'm so sorry.

JENNY.

You're sorry for her.

BASIL.

[*Turning on her.*] Yes, I am. What d'you mean by coming here and behaving like this?

JENNY.

I've caught you at last.... You liar! You dirty liar! You told me you were going to Chancery Lane.

BASIL.

I have been to Chancery Lane.

JENNY.

Oh, I know you have—for five minutes. It was only an excuse. You might just as well have come here straight.

BASIL.

[*Angrily.*] How dare you follow me?

JENNY.

I've got a right to follow you.

BASIL.

[*Unable to contain himself.*] What d'you want here?

JENNY.

I want you. D'you think I didn't guess what was going on? I saw you come in with Halliwell. Then I saw him go out with his wife. Then another man went out, and I knew you were alone with her.

BASIL.

[*Sharply.*] How did you know?

JENNY.

I gave the butler a sovereign, and he told me.

BASIL.

[*Looking for a word to express his contempt.*] Oh, you ... you cad! It's only what I should have expected you to do.

JENNY.

And then I waited for you, and you didn't come. And at last I couldn't wait any longer.

BASIL.

Well, you've finished it now.

[JENNY *catches sight of a photograph of* BASIL, *standing on a table*.

JENNY.

[*Pointing to it.*] What's she got your photograph here for?

BASIL.

I gave it to Mrs. Murray before I was married.

JENNY.

She's got no right to keep it there.

[*She takes the photograph and flings it violently on the floor.*

BASIL.

Jenny, what are you doing?

[JENNY *digs her heel into it savagely, viciously*.

JENNY.

[*Hissing the words.*] Oh, I hate her. I hate her.

BASIL.

[*Striving to contain himself.*] You drive me perfectly mad. You'll make me say things that I shall regret all my life. For Heaven's sake, go.

JENNY.

I shan't go till you come with me.

BASIL.

[*Beside himself.*] I choose to remain.

JENNY.

What d'you mean?

BASIL.

Look here, until to-day I swear to you before God that I've never done anything or said anything that you couldn't have known. Do you believe me?

JENNY.

I don't believe that you're not in love with that woman.

BASIL.

I don't ask you to.

JENNY.

What!

BASIL.

I said, until to-day I've been absolutely faithful to you. Heaven knows, I've tried to do my duty. I've done all I could to make you happy. And I've struggled with all my might to love you.

JENNY.

Say it out if you've got anything to say, I'm not afraid to hear.

BASIL.

I don't wish to deceive you. It's best that you should know what has happened.

JENNY.

[*Scornfully.*] Now for another thumping lie.

BASIL.

This afternoon I told Hilda I loved her.... And she loves me too.

JENNY.

[*With a cry of rage.*] Oh!

[*She hits at his face with her umbrella, but he wards the blow, and, snatching the umbrella from her, throws it away.*

BASIL.

You've brought it on yourself. You made me too unhappy.

[JENNY, *panting and bewildered, stands helpless, trying to control herself.*

BASIL.

And now it's the end. The life we led was impossible. I tried to do something that was beyond my power. I'm going away. I can't and I won't live with you any longer.

JENNY.

[*Frightened at herself and at what he says.*] Basil, you don't mean that?

BASIL.

I've struggled against it for months. And now I'm beaten.

JENNY.

You've got me to count with. I won't let you go.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] What more d'you want? Isn't it enough that you've ruined my whole life?

JENNY.

[*Hoarsely.*] You don't love me?

BASIL.

I never loved you.

JENNY.

Why did you marry me?

BASIL.

Because you made me.

JENNY.

[*In a whisper.*] You never loved me—even at the beginning?

BASIL.

Never.

JENNY.

Basil!

BASIL.

It's too late now to keep it in. I must tell you and have done with it. *You've* been having it out for months—now it's my turn.

JENNY.

[*Going up to him and trying to put her arm round his neck.*] But I love you, Basil. I'll make you love me.

BASIL.

[*Shrinking from her.*] Don't touch me!

JENNY.

[*With a movement of despair.*] I really think you loathe me.

BASIL.

For Heaven's sake, Jenny, let us finish with it. I'm very sorry. I don't wish to be unkind to you. But you must have seen that—that I didn't care for you. What's the good of going on humbugging, and pretending, and making ourselves utterly wretched?

JENNY.

Yes, I've seen it. But I wouldn't believe it. When I've put my hand on your shoulder, I've seen that you could hardly help shuddering. And sometimes when I've kissed you, I've seen you put out all your strength to prevent yourself from pushing me away.

BASIL.

Jenny, I can't help it if I don't love you. I can't help it if I—if I love some one else.

JENNY.

[*Dazed and cowed.*] What are you going to do?

BASIL.

I'm going away.

JENNY.

Where?

BASIL.

God knows.

[*There is a knock at the door.*

BASIL.

Come in.

[*The* BUTLER *enters with a note, which he gives to* BASIL.

BUTLER.

Mrs. Murray told me to give you this note, Sir.

BASIL.

[*Taking it.*] Thank you.

[*He opens and reads it as the* SERVANT *goes out of the room, then looks up at* JENNY, *who is anxiously watching him.*

[*Reading.*] "You may tell your wife that I've made up my mind to marry Mr. Brackley. I will never see you again."

JENNY.

What does she mean?

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] Isn't it clear? Some one has asked her to marry him, and she means to accept.

JENNY.

But you said she loved you.

[*He shrugs his shoulders without answering.*
JENNY *goes up to him imploringly.*

JENNY.

Oh, Basil, if it's true, give me another chance. She doesn't love you as I love you. I've been selfish and quarrelsome and exacting, but I've always loved you. Oh, don't leave me, Basil. Let me try once more if I can't make you care for me.

BASIL.

[*Looking down, hoarsely.*] I'm very sorry. It's too late.

JENNY.

[*Despairingly.*] Oh, God, what shall I do? And even though she's going to marry somebody else, you care for her better than any one else in the world?

BASIL.

[*In a whisper.*] Yes.

JENNY.

And even if she does marry that other man she'll love you still. There's no room for me between you. I can go away like a discharged servant.... Oh, God! oh, God! what have I done to deserve it?

BASIL.

[*Touched by her utter misery.*] I'm very sorry to make you so unhappy.

JENNY.

Oh, don't pity me. D'you think I want your pity now?

BASIL.

You had better come away, Jenny.

JENNY.

No. You've told me you don't want me any more. I shall go my own way.

BASIL.

[*Looks at her for a moment, hesitating; then shrugs his shoulders.*] Then good-bye.

[*He goes out, and* JENNY, *looking after him, passes her hand wearily over her forehead.*

JENNY.

[*With a sigh.*] He's so glad to go.... [*She gives a little sob.*] They've got no room for me.

[*She takes up from the floor the photograph on which she stamped, and looks at it; then sinks down, burying her face in her hands, and bursts into a passion of tears.*

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT.

THE NEXT MORNING.

[*The scene is the same as in the Second Act, the drawing-room at Basil's house in Putney.* BASIL *is sitting at the table, with his head in his hands. He looks tired and worn; his face is very white, and there are great black lines under his eyes. His hair is dishevelled. On the table lies a revolver.*

[*A knock at the door.*

BASIL.

[*Without looking up.*] Come in.

[FANNY *enters.*]

FANNY.

[*Subdued and pale.*] I came to see if you wanted anything, sir.

BASIL.

[*Looking up at her slowly, his voice is dull and hoarse.*] No.

FANNY.

Shall I open the windows, Sir? It's a beautiful morning.

BASIL.

No, I'm cold. Make up the fire.

FANNY.

Wouldn't you like a cup of tea? You ought to 'ave something after not going to bed all night.

BASIL.

I don't want anything.... Don't worry, there's a good woman.

[FANNY *puts coals on the fire, while BASIL listlessly watches her.*

BASIL.

How long is it since you sent the telegrams?

FANNY.

I took them the moment the office was opened.

BASIL.

What's the time?

FANNY.

Well, sir, it must be 'alf-past nine by now.

BASIL.

Good Heavens, how slowly the hours go. I thought the night would never end.... Oh, God, what shall I do?

FANNY.

I'll make you a strong cup of tea. If you don't 'ave something to pull you together—I don't know what'll 'appen to you.

BASIL.

Yes, make it quickly, I'm thirsty.... And I'm so cold.

[*A ring at the front door is heard.*

BASIL.

[*Jumping up.*] There's some one at the door, Fanny. Hurry up.

[*She goes out, and he follows her to the door of the room.*

BASIL.

Fanny, don't let any one up beside Mr. Halliwell. Say I can see no one. [*He waits for a moment, anxiously.*] Is that you, John?

JOHN.

[*Outside.*] Yes.

BASIL.

[*To himself.*] Thank God!

[JOHN *comes in.*

BASIL.

I thought you were never coming. I begged you to come at once.

JOHN.

I started immediately I got your wire.

BASIL.

It seems hours since the girl went to the post-office.

JOHN.

What's the matter?

BASIL.

[*Hoarsely.*] Don't you know? I thought I had said it in my telegram.

JOHN.

You simply wired that you were in great trouble.

BASIL.

I suppose I thought you'd see it in the papers.

JOHN.

What on earth d'you mean? I've not seen a paper. Where's your wife?

BASIL.

[*After a pause, almost in a whisper.*] She's dead.

JOHN.

[*Thunderstruck.*] Good God!

BASIL.

[*Impatiently.*] Don't look at me like that. Isn't it plain enough? Don't you understand?

JOHN.

But she was all right yesterday.

BASIL.

[*Dully.*] Yes. She was all right yesterday.

JOHN.

For goodness sake tell me what you mean, Basil.

BASIL.

She's dead.... And she was all right yesterday.

[JOHN *does not understand. He is greatly distressed, and does not know what to say.*

BASIL.

I killed her—as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands.

JOHN.

What d'you mean? She's not really dead!

BASIL.

[*In agony.*] She threw herself into the river last night.

JOHN.

How awful!

BASIL.

Haven't you got something more to say than how awful? I feel as if I were going mad.

JOHN.

But I can't understand! Why did she do it?

BASIL.

Oh—yesterday we had an awful row ... before you came.

JOHN.

I know.

BASIL.

Then she followed me to ... to your sister-in-law's. And she came up and made another scene. Then I lost my head. I was so furious, I don't know what I said. I was mad. I told her I'd have nothing more to do with her.... Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it.

[*He breaks down and hides his face in his hands, sobbing.*

JOHN.

Come, Basil—pull yourself together a bit.

BASIL.

[*Looking up despairingly.*] I can hear her voice now. I can see the look of her eyes. She asked me to give her another chance, and I refused. It was so pitiful to hear the way she appealed to me, only I was mad, and I couldn't feel it.

[FANNY *comes in with the cup of tea, which* BASIL *silently takes and drinks*.

FANNY.

[*To* JOHN.] He ain't slept a wink all night, sir.... No more 'ave I, for the matter of that.

[JOHN *nods, but does not answer; and* FANNY, *wiping her eyes with her apron, leaves the room*.

BASIL.

Oh, I'd give everything not to have said what I did. I'd always held myself in before, but yesterday—I couldn't.

JOHN.

Well?

BASIL.

I didn't get back here till nearly ten, and the maid told me Jenny had just gone out. I thought she'd gone back to her mother's.

JOHN.

Yes?

BASIL.

And soon after a constable came up and asked me to go down to the river. He said there'd been an accident.... She was dead. A man had seen her walk along the tow-path and throw herself in.

JOHN.

Where is she now?

BASIL.

[*Pointing to one of the doors.*] In there.

JOHN.

Will you take me in?

BASIL.

Go in alone, John. I daren't, I'm afraid to look at her. I can't bear the look on her face.... I killed her—as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands. I've been looking at the door all night, and once I thought I heard a sound. I thought she was coming to reproach me for killing her.

[JOHN *goes to the door, and as he opens it,* BASIL *averts his head. When* JOHN *shuts the door after him, he looks at it with staring, frightened eyes, half mad with agony. He tries to contain himself. After a while* JOHN *comes back, very quietly.*

BASIL.

[*Whispering.*] What does she look like?

JOHN.

There's nothing to be afraid of, Basil. She might be sleeping.

BASIL.

[*Clenching his hands.*] But the ghastly pallor....

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] She's happier than she would ever have been if she'd lived.

[BASIL *sighs deeply.*

JOHN.

[*Seeing the revolver.*] What's this for?

BASIL.

[*With a groan of self-contempt.*] I tried to kill myself in the night.

JOHN.

H'm!

[*He takes the cartridges out and puts the revolver in his pocket.*

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, don't be afraid, I haven't got the pluck.... I was afraid to go on living. I thought if I killed myself it would be a reparation for her death. I went down to the river, and I walked along the tow-path to the same spot—but I couldn't do it. The water looked so black and cold and pitiless. And yet she did it so easily. She just walked along and threw herself in. [*A pause.*] Then I came back, and I thought I'd shoot myself.

JOHN.

D'you think that would have done any one much good?

BASIL.

I despised myself. I felt I hadn't the right to live, and I thought it would be easier just to pull a trigger.... People say it's cowardly to destroy oneself, they don't know what courage it wants. I couldn't face the pain—and then, I don't know what's on the other side. After all, it may be true that there's a cruel, avenging God, who will punish us to all eternity if we break His unknown laws.

JOHN.

I'm very glad you sent for me. You had better come back to London, and stay with me for the present.

BASIL.

And d'you know what happened in the night? I couldn't go to bed. I felt I could never sleep again—and then, presently, I dozed off quite quietly in my chair. And I slept as comfortably—as if Jenny weren't lying in there, cold and dead. And the maid pities me because she thinks I passed as sleepless a night as she did.

[*A sound of voices is heard outside, in altercation.*
FANNY *comes in.*

FANNY.

Please, sir, Mr. James.

BASIL.

[*Angrily.*] I won't see him.

FANNY.

He won't go away, I told 'im you was too ill to see anybody.

BASIL.

I won't see him. I knew he'd be round, curse him!

JOHN.

After all, I suppose he has a certain right to come here—under the circumstances. Hadn't you better see what he wants?

BASIL.

Oh, he'll make a scene. I shall knock him down. I've suffered too much through him already.

JOHN.

Let *me* see him. You don't want him to make a fuss at the inquest.

BASIL.

I've been thinking of that. I know the stories he and his people will make up. And the papers will get hold of it, and every one will blackguard me. They'll say it was my fault.

JOHN.

D'you mind if I have a talk to him? I think I can save you from all that.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders, impatiently.*] Do whatever you like.

JOHN.

[*To* FANNY.] Show him up, Fanny.

FANNY.

Yes, sir.

[*She goes out.*

BASIL.

Then I shall go.

[JOHN *nods, and* BASIL *goes out by the door next to that of the room in which* JENNY *is lying.* JAMES BUSH *appears*.

JOHN.

[*Grave and cold.*] Good morning, Mr. Bush.

JAMES.

[*Aggressively.*] Where's that man?

JOHN.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] It's usual to take one's hat off in other people's houses.

JAMES.

I'm a man of principle, I am; and I keep my 'at on to show it.

JOHN.

Ah, well, we won't discuss the point.

JAMES.

I want to see that man.

JOHN.

May I ask to whom you're referring? There are so many men in the world. In fact, it's very over-crowded.

JAMES.

Who are you, I should like to know?

JOHN.

[*Politely.*] My name is Halliwell. I had the pleasure of meeting you at Basil's rooms in Bloomsbury.

JAMES.

[*Aggressively.*] I know that.

JOHN.

I beg your pardon. I thought you were asking for information.

JAMES.

I tell you I want to see my brother-in-law.

JOHN.

I'm afraid you can't.

JAMES.

I tell you I will see 'im. He's murdered my sister. He's a blackguard and a murderer, and I'll tell him so to his face.

JOHN.

[*Sarcastic.*] Take care he doesn't hear you.

JAMES.

I want him to hear me. I'm not frightened of him. I should just like to see him touch me now. [*He sidles viciously to* JOHN.] H'm, you tried to keep me out, did yer? Said I couldn't come to my sister's 'ouse—and kept me waitin' in the 'all like a tradesman. Oh, I'll make you all pay for this. I'll get my own back now. Measley set of West End curs, that's all you are.

JOHN.

Mr. Bush, you'll be so good as to keep a civil tongue in your mouth while you're here—and you'll talk less loudly.

JAMES.

[*Scornfully.*] Who says so?

JOHN.

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I do.

JAMES.

[*Less decisively.*] Don't you try and bully me.

JOHN.

[*Pointing to a chair.*] Won't you sit down?

JAMES.

No, I won't sit down. This ain't the 'ouse that a gentleman would sit down in. I'll be even with 'im yet. I'll tell the jury a pretty story. He deserves to be strung up, he does.

JOHN.

I can't tell you how extremely sorry I am for what has happened.

JAMES.

Oh, don't try and get round me.

JOHN.

Really, Mr. Bush, you have no reason to be indignant with me.

JAMES.

Well, I don't think much of you, any 'ow.

JOHN.

I'm very sorry. Last time we met I thought you a very amiable person. Don't you remember, we went and had a drink together?

JAMES.

I don't say *you*'re not a gentleman.

JOHN.

[*Taking out his cigar-case.*] Won't you have a cigar?

JAMES.

[*Suspiciously.*] Look here, you're not trying to bluff me, are you?

JOHN.

Certainly not. I wouldn't dream of such a thing.

JAMES.

[*Taking a cigar.*] Larranaga.

JOHN.

[*With an acid smile.*] Nine pounds a hundred.

JAMES.

That's one and nine apiece, ain't it?

JOHN.

How quickly you reckon!

JAMES.

You must be pretty oofy to be able to afford that.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] It does inspire respect, doesn't it?

JAMES.

I don't know what you mean by that. But I flatter myself I know a good cigar when I see it.

[JOHN *sits down, and* JAMES BUSH, *without thinking, follows his example.*]

JOHN.

What d'you think you'll get out of making a row at the inquest? Of course, there'll be an inquest.

JAMES.

Yes, I know there will. And I'm lookin' forward to it, I can tell you.

JOHN.

I wouldn't have said that if I'd been you.

JAMES.

[*Quite unconscious of the construction that may be put on his last words—full of his own grievances.*] I've 'ad something to put up with, I 'ave.

JOHN.

Really?

JAMES.

Oh, he's treated me shockin'! He simply treated me like dirt. I wouldn't 'ave stood it a minute, except for Jenny's sake. *I* wasn't good enough for 'im, if you please. And the way he used to look right through me as if I wasn't there at all—Oh, I'll be even with 'im now.

JOHN.

What are you going to do?

JAMES.

Never you mind. I'm going to make it hot for 'im.

JOHN.

D'you think that'll do you any good?

JAMES.

[*Springing up.*] Yes. And I mean to....

JOHN.

[*Interrupting.*] Now sit down, there's a good chap, and let's have a little talk about it.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] You're trying to bamboozle me.

JOHN.

Nonsense.

JAMES.

Oh, yes, you are. Don't try to deny it. I can see through you as if you was a pane of glass. You people in the West End—you think you know everything.

JOHN.

I assure you....

JAMES.

[*Interrupting.*] But I've had a City training, and you can lay anything you like there ain't no flies on me.

JOHN.

We're both men of the world, Mr. Bush. Will you do me a great favour as a—friend?

JAMES.

[*Suspiciously.*] That depends on what it is.

JOHN.

It's merely to listen to me quietly for two or three minutes.

JAMES.

I don't mind doing that.

JOHN.

Well, the fact is—Basil's going away, and he wants to get rid of the furniture and the house. What d'you think it's worth, as an auctioneer?

JAMES.

[*Looking round.*] It's a very different business what a thing's worth, and what it'll fetch.

JOHN.

Of course, but a clever man like you....

JAMES.

Now then, no bluff. I tell you it won't work with me.... D'you include plate and linen?

JOHN.

Everything.

JAMES.

Well, if it was well sold—by a man as knew his business....

JOHN.

If you sold it, for instance?

JAMES.

It might fetch a hundred pounds—it might fetch a hundred and fifty.

JOHN.

That wouldn't be a bad present to make to any one, would it?

JAMES.

No. I think I can agree with you there.

JOHN.

Well, Basil thought of giving the entire contents of the house to your mother and sister.

JAMES.

To tell you the truth, it's no more than he ought to do.

JOHN.

The condition is, of course, that nothing is said at the inquest.

JAMES.

[*With a sneer.*] You make me laugh. D'you think you can gag me by giving a houseful of furniture to my mother?

JOHN.

I had no such exalted opinion of your disinterestedness, Mr. Bush. I come to you now.

JAMES.

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

JOHN.

It appears that you owe Basil a good deal of money. Can you pay it?

JAMES.

No.

JOHN.

Also it appears that there was some difficulty with your accounts in your last place.

JAMES.

That's a lie.

JOHN.

Possibly. But altogether I fancy we could make it uncommonly nasty for you if you made a fuss. If dirty linen is going to be washed in public—there's generally a good deal to be done on both sides.

JAMES.

I don't care. I mean to get my own back. If I can only get my knife into that man—I'll take the consequences.

JOHN.

On the other hand—if you won't make a fuss at the inquest, I'll give you fifty pounds.

JAMES.

[*Jumping up indignantly.*] Are you trying to bribe me?

JOHN.

[*Calmly.*] Yes.

JAMES.

I would 'ave you know that I'm a gentleman, and what's more, I'm an Englishman. And I'm proud of it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I've never 'ad any one try and bribe me before.

JOHN.

[*Indifferently.*] Otherwise you would, doubtless, have accepted.

JAMES.

I've got more than half a mind to knock you down.

JOHN.

[*With a slight smile.*] Come, come, Mr. Bush, don't be ridiculous. You'd far better keep quiet, you know.

JAMES.

[*Scornfully.*] What do you think fifty pounds is to me?

JOHN.

[*With a sharp look.*] Who spoke of fifty pounds?

JAMES.

You did.

JOHN.

You must have mistaken me. A hundred and fifty.

JAMES.

Oh! [*At first he is surprised, then, as the amount sinks into his mind, grows doubtful.*] That's a very different pair of shoes.

JOHN.

I don't ask you to say anything untrue. After all, it's not worth while for a man of the world like you—a business man—to give way to petty spite. And we don't want to have any scandal. That would be just as unpleasant for you as for us.

JAMES.

[*Undecided.*] There's no denying that she was hysterical. If he'd only treated me like a gentleman, I shouldn't have had anything to say.

JOHN.

Well?

JAMES.

[*With a foxy, keen glance at* JOHN.] Make it two 'undred, and I'll say done.

JOHN.

[*Firmly.*] No. You can take a hundred and fifty, or go to the devil.

JAMES.

Oh, well, 'and it over.

JOHN.

[*Taking a cheque out of his pocket.*] I'll give you fifty now and the rest after the inquest.

JAMES.

[*With a certain admiration.*] You're a sharp 'un, you are.

[JOHN *writes out the cheque and gives it to* JAMES BUSH.

JAMES.

Shall I give you a receipt? I'm a business man, you know.

JOHN.

Yes, I know; but it's not necessary. You'll tell your mother and sister?

JAMES.

Don't you fear. I'm a gentleman, and I don't go back on my friends.

JOHN.

Now I think I'll say good morning to you. You can understand that Basil isn't fit to see any one.

JAMES.

I understand. So long.

[*He stretches out his hand, which* JOHN *shakes gravely.*]

JOHN.

Good morning.

[FANNY *comes in by one door as* JAMES BUSH *goes out by another.*]

FANNY.

Good riddance to bad rubbish.

JOHN.

Ah, Fanny, if there were no rogues in the world, life would really be too difficult for honest men.

[FANNY *goes out, and* JOHN *walks to the door and calls.*]

JOHN.

Basil—he's gone.... Where are you?

[BASIL *comes out of the room in which is lying Jenny's body.*]

JOHN.

I didn't know you were in there.

BASIL.

I wonder if she forgives me?

JOHN.

I wouldn't worry myself too much if I were you, Basil, old man.

BASIL.

If you only knew how I despise myself!

JOHN.

Come, come, Basil, you must make an effort....

BASIL.

I've not told you the worst. I feel such a cad. There's one thought that's been with me all night. And I *can't* drive it away. It's worse than anything else. It's too shameful.

JOHN.

What *do* you mean?

BASIL.

Oh, it's so despicable. And yet it's too strong for me.... I can't help thinking that I'm—free.

JOHN.

Free?

BASIL.

It's treachery to her memory. But you don't know what it is when your prison door is opened. [*As he speaks he grows more and more excited.*] I don't want to die. I want to live, and I want to take life by both hands and enjoy it. I've got such a desire for happiness. Let's open the windows, and let the sunlight in. [*He goes to the window and flings it open.*] It's so good just to be alive. How can I help thinking that now I can start fresh? The slate is wiped clean, and I can begin again. I *will* be happy. God forgive me, I can't help the thought. I'm free. I made a ghastly mistake, and I suffered for it. Heaven knows how I suffered, and how hard I tried to make the best of it. It wasn't all my fault. In this world we're made to act and think things because other people have thought them good. We never have a chance of going our own way. We're bound down by the prejudices and the morals of everybody else. For God's sake, let us be free. Let us do this and that because we want to and because we must, not because other people think we ought. [*He stops suddenly in front of* JOHN.] Why don't you say something? You stare at me as if you thought me raving mad!

JOHN.

I don't know what to say.

BASIL.

Oh, I suppose you're shocked and scandalised. I ought to go on posing. I ought to act the part decently to the end. *You* would never have had the courage to do what I did, and yet, because I've failed, you think you can look down on me from the height of your moral elevation.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] I was thinking how far a man may fall when he attempts to climb the stars.

BASIL.

I gave the world fine gold, and their currency is only cowrie-shells. I held up an ideal, and they sneered at me. In this world you must wallow in the trough with the rest of them.... The only moral I can see is that if I'd acted like a blackguard—as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done—and let Jenny go to the dogs, I should have remained happy and contented and prosperous. And she, I dare say, wouldn't have died.... It's because I tried to do my duty and act like a gentleman and a man of honour, that all this misery has come about.

JOHN.

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I think I should put it in another way. One has to be very strong and very sure of oneself to go against the ordinary view of things. And if one isn't, perhaps it's better not to run any risks, but just to walk along the same secure old road as the common herd. It's not exhilarating, it's not brave, and it's rather dull. But it's eminently safe.

[BASIL *scarcely hears the last words, but listens intently to other sounds outside.*

BASIL.

What's that? I thought I heard a carriage.

JOHN.

[*A little surprised.*] Do you expect any one?

BASIL.

I sent a wire to—to Hilda at the same time as to you.

JOHN.

Already?

BASIL.

[*Excited.*] D'you think she'll come?

JOHN.

I don't know. [*A ring is heard at the front door.*

BASIL.

[*Running to the window.*] There's some one at the door.

JOHN.

Perhaps it's occurred to her also that you're free.

BASIL.

[*With the utmost passion.*] Oh, she loves me, and I—I adore her. God forgive me, I can't help it.

[FANNY *comes in.*

FANNY.

If you please, sir, the Coroner's officer.

THE END.

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