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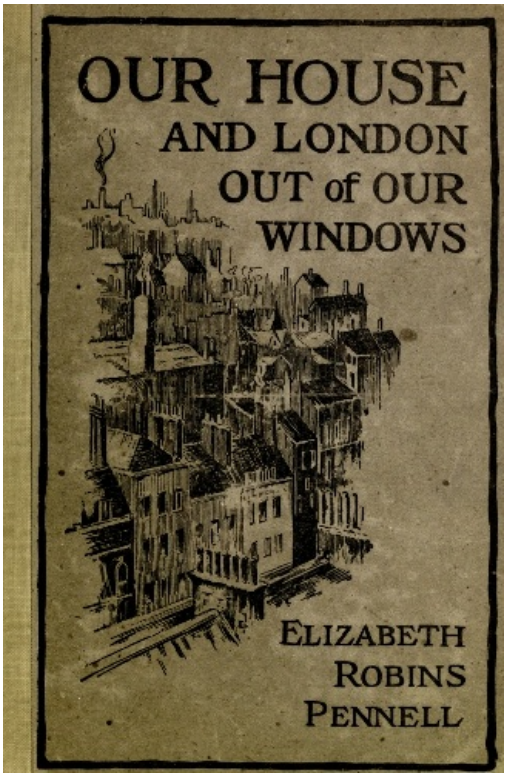

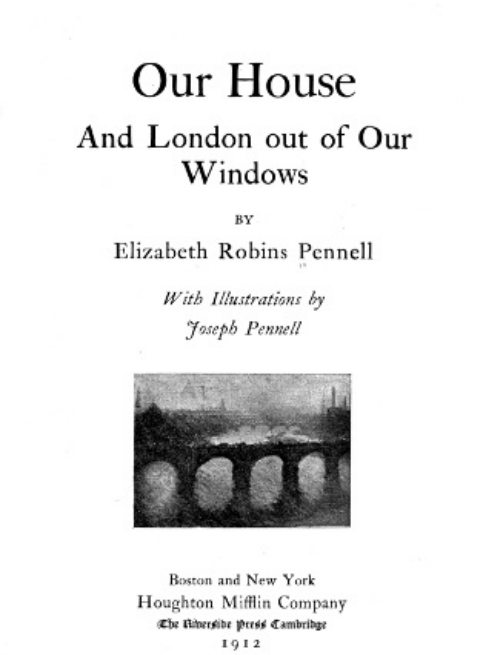
Our House

And London out of Our Windows

BY

Elizabeth Robins Pennell

With Illustrations by Joseph Pennell

Boston and New York
Houghton Mifflin Company
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1912

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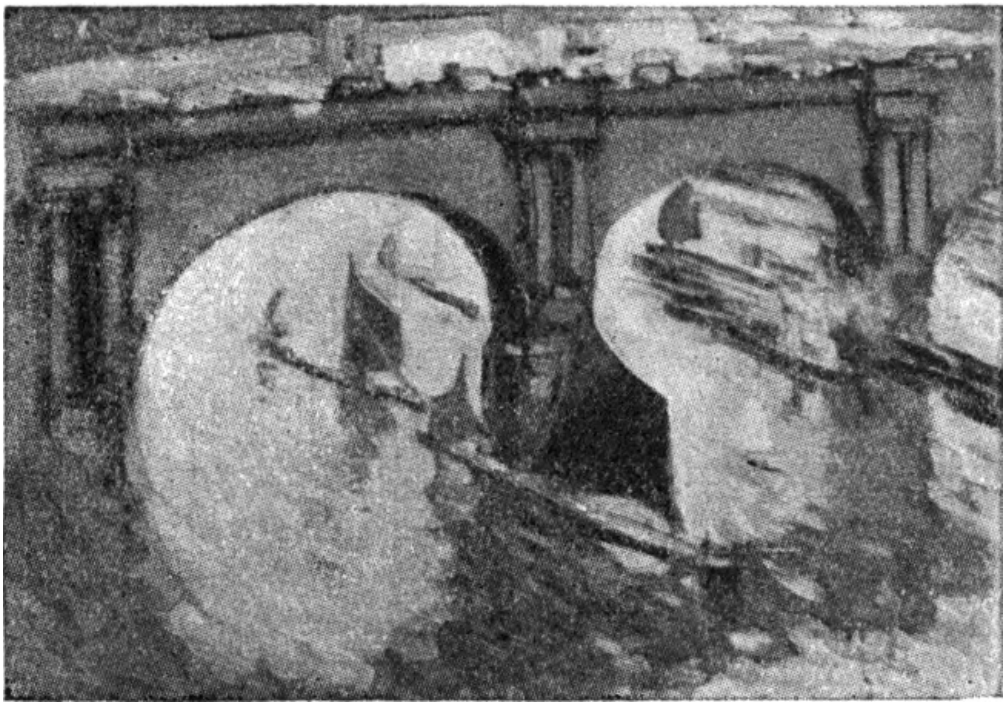
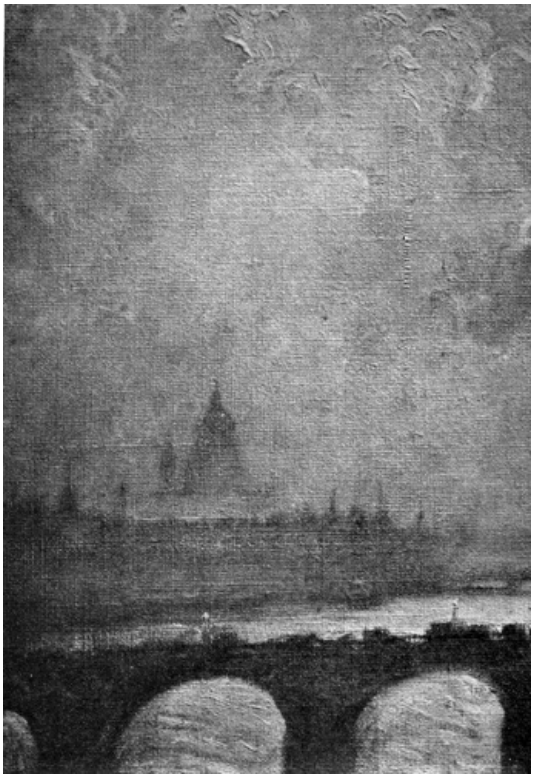


"Lines of black barges" (Waterloo Bridge)



Down to St. Paul's

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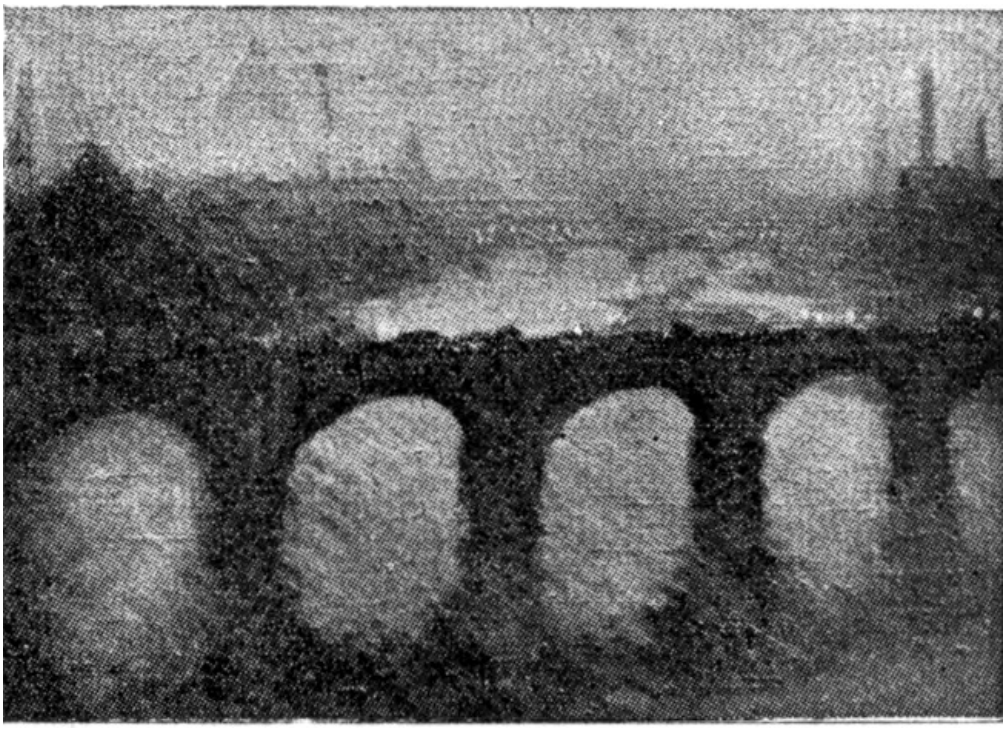
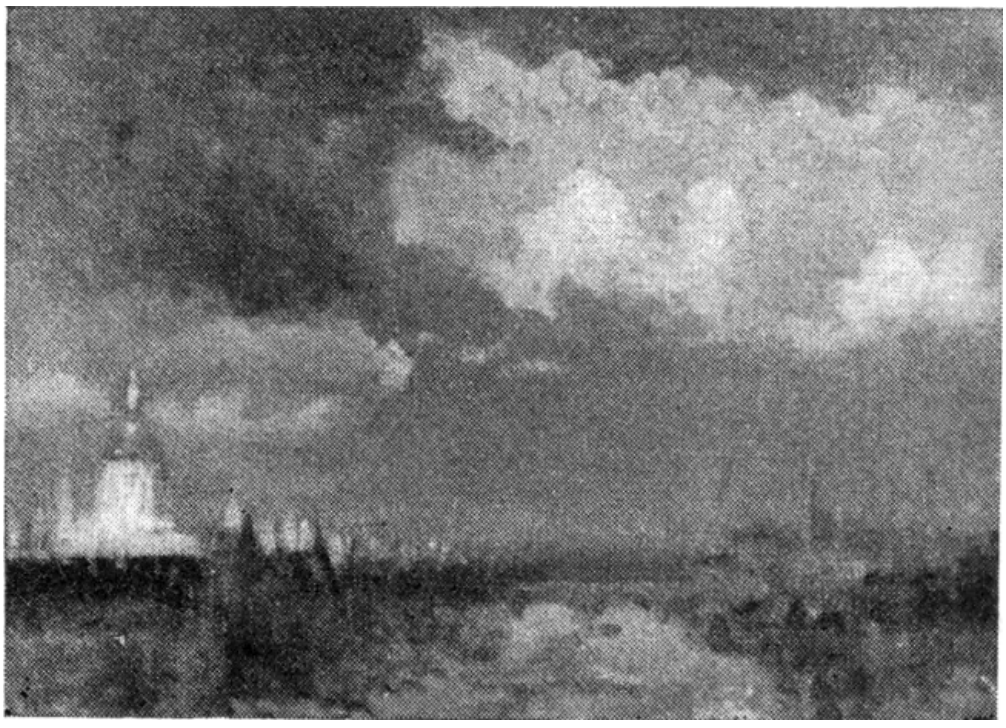
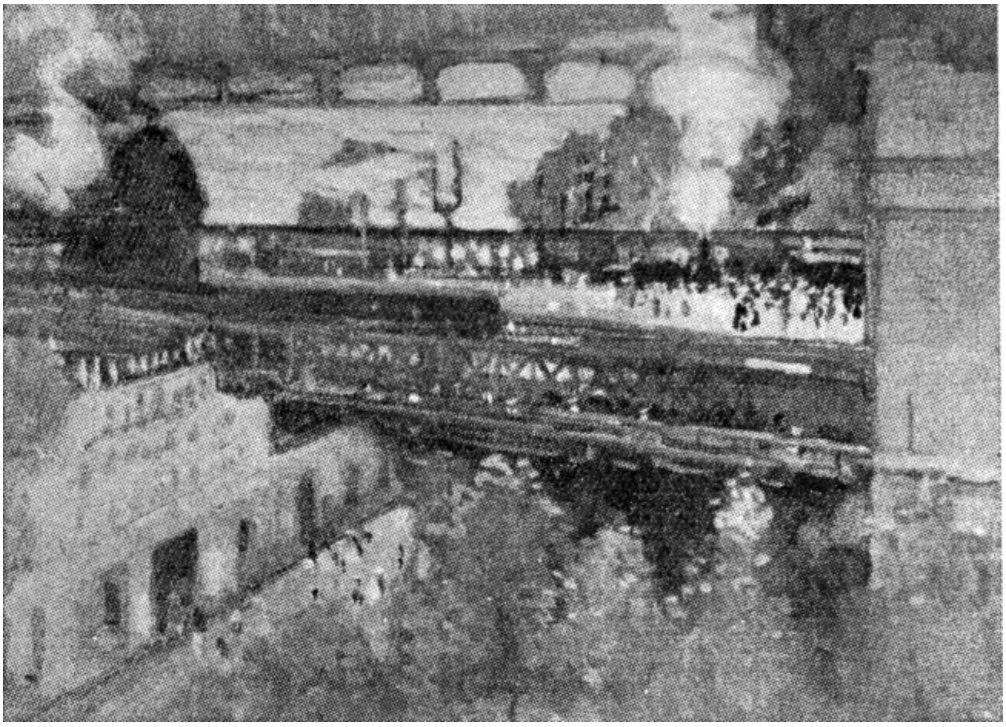


Waterloo Bridge

To
Augustine



"The big, low, heavy English clouds"



"There is movement and life" (The underground station and Charing-cross Bridge)

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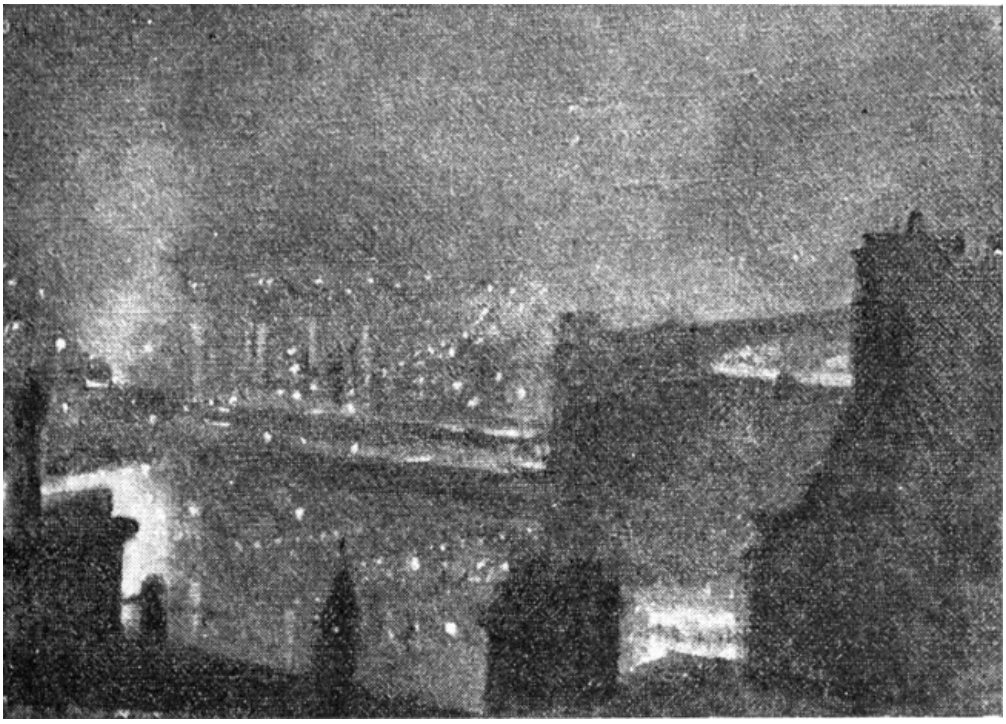

"At night myriads of lights come out"

List of Illustrations

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Introduction

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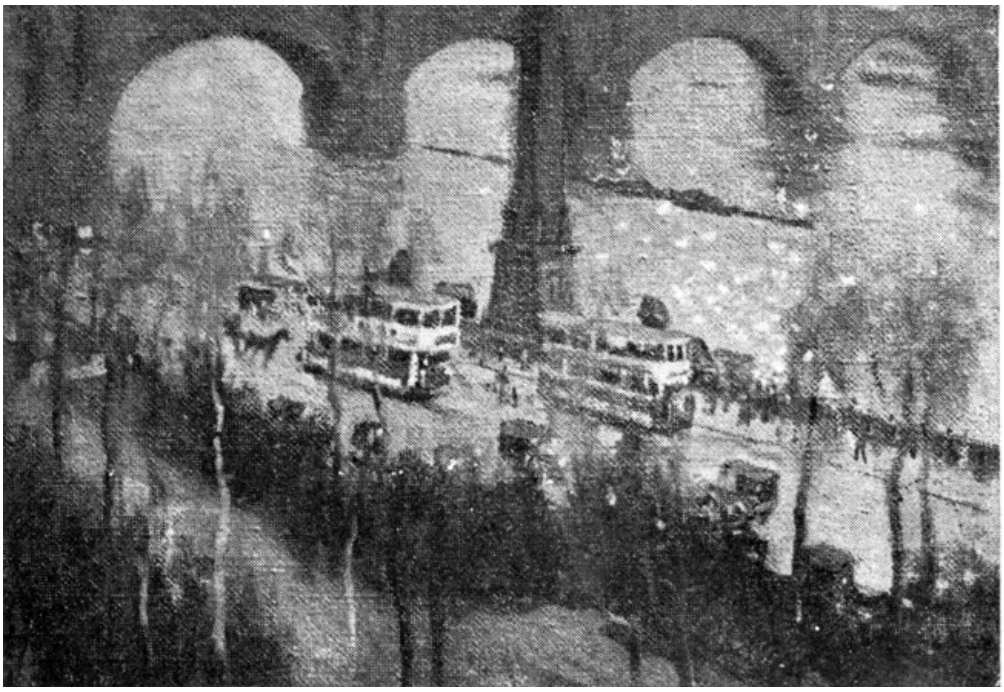
Our finding Our House was the merest chance. J. and I had been hunting for it during weeks and months, from Chelsea to Blackfriars, when one day, on the way to take a train on the Underground, we saw the notice "To Let" in windows just where they ought to have been,—high above the Embankment and the River,—and we knew at a glance that we should be glad to spend the rest of our lives looking out of them. But something depended on the house we looked out from, and, while our train went without us, we hurried to discover it. We were in luck. It was all that we could have asked: as simple in architecture, its bricks as time-stained, as the courts of the Temple or Gray's Inn. The front door opened into a hall twisted with age, the roof supported by carved corbels, the upper part of another door at its far end filled with bull's-eye glass, while three flights of time-worn, white stone stairs led to the windows with, behind them, a flat called [Pg xii] Chambers, as if we were really in the Temple, and decorated by Adam, as if to bring Our House into harmony with the younger houses around it. For Our House it became on that very day, now years ago. Our House it has been ever since, and I hope we are only at the beginning of our adventures in it. Of some of the adventures that have already fallen to our share within Our House, I now venture to make the record, for no better reason perhaps than because at the time I found them both engrossing and amusing. The adventures out of Our Windows—adventures of

cloud and smoke and sunshine and fog—J. has been from the beginning, and is still, recording, because certainly he finds them the most wonderful of all. If my text shows the price we pay for the beauty, the reproductions of his paintings, all made from Our Windows, show how well that beauty is worth the price.

'Enrietter

[Pg 1]



"IN WINTER THE GREAT WHITE FLIGHTS OF GULLS"

[Pg 2]

[Pg 3]

Our House
And London out of Our Windows

I

'ENRIETTER

Since my experience with 'Enrietter, the pages of Zola and the De Goncourts have seemed a much more comfortable place for "human documents" and "realism" than the family circle. Her adventures in our London chambers make a thrilling story, but I could have dispensed with the privilege of enjoying the thrill. When your own house becomes the scene of the story you cannot help taking a part in it yourself, and the story of 'Enrietter was not precisely one in which I should have wanted to figure had it been a question of choice.

[Pg 4]

It all came of believing that I could live as I pleased in England, and not pay the penalty. An Englishman's house is his castle only when it is run on the approved lines, and the foreigner in the country need not hope for the freedom denied to the native. I had set out to engage the wrong sort of servant in the wrong sort of way, and the result was—'Enrietter. I had never engaged any sort of servant anywhere before, I did not much like the prospect at the start, and my first attempts in Registry Offices, those bulwarks of British conservatism, made me like it still less. That was why, when the landlady of the little Craven Street hotel, where we waited while the British Workman took his ease in our chambers, offered me 'Enrietter, I was prepared to accept her on the spot, had not the landlady, in self-defence, stipulated for the customary formalities of an interview and references.

[Pg 5]

The interview, in the dingy back parlour of the hotel, was not half so unpleasant an ordeal as I had expected. Naturally, I do not insist upon good looks in a servant, but I like her none the less for having them, and a costume in the fashion of Whitechapel could not disguise the fact that 'Enrietter was an uncommonly good-looking young woman; not in the buxom, red-cheeked way that my old reading of Miss Mitford made me believe as inseparable from an English maid as a pigtail from a Chinaman, nor yet in the anæmic way I have since learned for myself to be characteristic of the type. She was pale, but her pallor was of the kind more often found south of

the Alps and the Pyrenees. Her eyes were large and blue, and she had a pretty trick of dropping them under her long lashes; her hair was black and crisp; her smile was a recommendation. And, apparently, she had all the practical virtues that could make up for her abominable cockney accent and for the name of 'Enrietter, by which she introduced herself. She did not mind at all coming to me as "general," though she had answered the landlady's advertisement for parlour maid. She was not eager to make any bargain as to what her work was, and was not, to be. Indeed, her whole attitude would have been nothing short of a scandal to the right sort of servant. And she was willing with a servility that would have offended my American notions had it been a shade less useful. [Pg 6]

As for her references, it was in keeping with everything else that she should have made the getting them so easy. She sent me no farther than to another little private hotel in another little street leading from the Strand to the river, within ten minutes' walk. It was kept by two elderly maiden ladies who received me with the usual incivility of the British hotel-keeper, until they discovered that I had come not for lodging and food, which they would have looked upon as an insult, but merely for a servant's character. They unbent still further at 'Enrietter's name, and were roused to an actual show of interest. They praised her cooking, her coffee, her quickness, her talent for hard work. But—and then they hesitated and I was lost, for nothing embarrasses me more than the Englishwoman's embarrassed silence. They did manage to blurt out that 'Enrietter was not tidy, which I regretted. I am not tidy myself, neither is J., and I have always thought it important that at least one person in a household should have some sense of order. But then they also told me that 'Enrietter had frequently been called upon to cook eighteen or twenty [Pg 7] breakfasts of a morning, and lunches and dinners in proportion, and it struck me there might not have been much time left for her to be tidy in. After this, there was a fresh access of embarrassment so prolonged that I could not in decency sit it out, though I would have liked to make sure that it was due to their own difficulty with speech, and not to unspeakable depravity in 'Enrietter. However, it saves trouble to believe the best, when to believe the worst is to add to one's anxieties, and as soon as I got home I wrote and engaged 'Enrietter and cheerfully left the rest to Fate.

There was nothing to regret for a fortnight. Fate seemed on my side, and during two blissful weeks 'Enrietter proved herself a paragon among "generals." She was prettier in her little white cap than in her big feathered hat, and her smile was never soured by the friction of daily life. Her powers as a cook had not been over-estimated; the excellence of her coffee had been undervalued; for her quickness and readiness to work, the elderly maiden ladies had found too feeble a word. There wasn't anything troublesome she wouldn't and didn't do, even to providing [Pg 8] me with ideas when I hadn't any and the butcher's, or green-grocer's, boy waited. And it was the more to her credit because our chambers were in a chaotic condition that would have frightened away a whole staff of the right sort of servants. We had just moved in, and the place was but half furnished. The British Workman still lingered, as I began to believe he always would,—there were times, indeed, when I was half persuaded we had taken our chambers solely to provide him a shelter in the daytime. My kitchen utensils were of the fewest. My china was still in the factory in France where they made it, and I was eating off borrowed plates and drinking out of borrowed cups. I had as yet next to no house-linen to speak of. But 'Enrietter did not mind. She worked marvels with what pots and pans there were, she was tidy enough not to mislay the borrowed plates and cups, she knew just where to take tablecloths and napkins and have them washed in a hurry when friends were misguided enough to accept my invitation to a makeshift meal. If they [Pg 9] were still more misguided and took me by surprise, she would run out for extra cutlets, or a salad, or fruit, and be back again serving an excellent little lunch or dinner before I knew she had gone. This was the greater comfort because I had just then no time to make things better. I was deep, beyond my habit, in journalism. A sister I had not seen for ten years and a brother-in-law recovering from nervous prostration were in town. Poor man! What he saw in our chambers was enough to send him home with his nerves seven times worse than when he came. J., fortunately for him, was in the South of France, drawing cathedrals. That was my one gleam of comfort. He at least was spared the tragedy of our first domestic venture.

Upon the pleasure of that fortnight there fell only a single shadow, but it ought to have proved a warning, if, at the moment, I had not been foolish enough to find it amusing. I had gone out one morning directly after breakfast, and when I came home, long after lunch-time, the British Workman, to my surprise, was kicking his heels at my front door, though his rule was to get [Pg 10] comfortably on the other side of it once his business at the public house round the corner was settled. He was more surprised than I, and also rather hurt. He had been ringing for the last ten minutes, he said reproachfully, and nobody would let him in. After I had rung in my turn for ten minutes and nobody had let me in, I was not hurt, but alarmed.

It was then that, for the first and last time in my knowledge of him, the British Workman had an inspiration: Why shouldn't he climb the ladder behind our outer front door,—we can "sport our oak" if we like,—get through the trap-door at the top to the leads, and so enter our little upper story, which looks for all the world like a ship's cabin drifted by mistake on to a London roof.

I was to remember afterwards, as they say in novels, how, as I watched him climb, it struck me that the burglar or the house-breaker had the way made straight for him if our chambers ever seemed worth burgling or breaking into. The British Workman's step is neither soft nor swift, but [Pg 11] he carried through his plan and opened the door for me without any one being aroused by his irregular proceedings, which added considerably to my alarm. But the flat is small, and my suspense was short. 'Enrietter was in her bedroom, on her bed, sleeping like a child. I called her:

she never stirred. I shook her: I might as well have tried to wake the Seven Sleepers, the Sleeping Beauty, Barbarossa in the Kyfhaüser, and all the sleepers who have slept through centuries of myth and legend rolled into one. I had never seen anything like it. I had never heard of anything like it except the trance which leads to canonization, or the catalepsy that baffles science. To have a cataleptic "general" to set off against the rapping nurse-maid of an acquaintance, who wanted me to take her in and watch her in the cause of Psychology, would be a triumph no doubt, but for all domestic purposes it was likely to prove a more disturbing drawback than untidiness.

However, 'Enrietter, when she appeared at the end of an hour, did not call her midday sleep by any name so fine. She had been scrubbing very hard—she suddenly had a faintness—she felt [Pg 12] dazed, and, indeed, she looked it still—the heat, she thought, she hardly knew—she threw herself on her bed—she fell asleep. What could be simpler? And her smile had never been prettier, her blue eyes never cast down more demurely. I spoke of this little incident later to a friend, and was rash enough to talk some nonsense about catalepsy. One should never go to one's friends for sympathy. "More likely drink," was the only answer.

Of course it was drink, and I ought to have known it without waiting for 'Enrietter herself to destroy my illusions, which she did at the end of the first fortnight. The revelation came with her "Sunday out." To simplify matters, I had made it mine too. 'Enrietter, according to my domestic regulations, was to be back by ten o'clock, but to myself greater latitude was allowed, and I did not return until after eleven. I was annoyed to see the kitchen door wide open and the kitchen gas flaring,—the worst of chambers is, you can't help seeing everything, whether you want to or [Pg 13] not. 'Enrietter had been told not to wait up for me, and excess of devotion can be as trying as excess of neglect. If only that had been my most serious reason for annoyance! For when I went into the kitchen I found 'Enrietter sitting by the table, her arms crossed on it, her head resting on her arms, fast asleep; and what makes you laugh at noon may by midnight become a bore. I couldn't wake her. I couldn't move her. Again, she slept like a log. In the end I lost my temper, which was the best thing I could have done, for I shook her with such violence that, at last, she stirred in her sleep. I shook harder. She lifted her head. She smiled.

"Thash a'right, mum," she said, and down went her head again.

Furious, I shook her up on to her unsteady feet. "Go to bed," I said with a dignity altogether lost upon her. "Go at once, and in the dark. In your disgusting condition you are not fit to be trusted with a candle."

'Enrietter smiled. "Thash a'right, mum," she murmured reassuringly as she reeled up the stairs before me. [Pg 14]

I must say for her that drink made her neither disagreeable nor difficult. She carried it off light-heartedly and with the most perfect politeness.

I had her in for a talk the next morning. I admit now that this was another folly. I ought to have sent her off bag and baggage then and there. But it was my first experience of the kind; I didn't see what was to become of me if she did go; and, as I am glad to remember, I had the heart to be sorry for her. She was so young, so pretty, so capable. The indiscretion of her Sunday out meant for me, at the worst, temporary discomfort; for her, it might be the beginning of a life's tragedy. Her explanation was ready,—she was as quick at explaining as at everything else. I needn't tell her what I thought of her, it seemed; it was nothing to what she thought of herself. There was no excuse. She was as disgusted as I could be. It was all her sister's fault. Her sister would make her drink a drop of brandy just before she left her home at Richmond. It was very wrong of her sister, who knew she wasn't used to brandy and couldn't stand it. [Pg 15]

The story would not have taken in a child, but as it suited me to give her another trial, it was easier to make-believe to believe. Before the interview was over I ventured a little good advice. I had seen too often the draggled, filthy, sexless creatures drink makes of women in London, and 'Enrietter was worth a better end. She listened with admirable patience for one who was already, as I was only too quickly to learn, so far on the way to the London gutter that there was no hope of holding her back, as much as an inch, by words or kindness.

The next Sunday 'Enrietter stayed in and went to bed sober. It was the day after—a memorable Monday—that put an end to all compromise and make-believe. I had promised to go down to Cambridge, to a lunch at one of the colleges. At the English Universities time enters so little into the scheme of existence that one loses all count of it, and I was pretty sure I should be late in getting home. I said, however, that I should be back early in the afternoon, and I took every latch-key with me,—as if the want of a latch-key could make a prison for so accomplished a young [Pg 16] woman as 'Enrietter! The day was delightful, the weather as beautiful as it can be in an English June, and the lunch gay. And afterwards there was the stroll along the "Backs," and, in the golden hour before sunset, afternoon tea in the garden, and I need not say that I missed my train. It was close upon ten o'clock when I turned the key in my front door. The flat was in darkness, except for the light that always shines into our front windows at night from the lamps on the Embankment and Charing Cross Bridge. There was no sign of 'Enrietter, and no sound of her until I had pulled my bell three or four times, and shouted for her in the manner I was taught as a child to consider the worst sort of form, not to say vulgar. But it had its effect. A faint voice answered from the ship's cabin upstairs, "Coming, mum."

"Light the gas and the lamp," I said when I heard her in the hall.

The situation called for all the light I could get. From the methodical way she set about lighting the hall gas I knew that, at least, she could not be reeling. Then she came in and lit the lamp, and I saw her. [Pg 17]

It was a thousand times worse than reeling, and my breath was taken away with the horror of it. For there she stood, in a flashy pink dressing-gown that was a disgrace in itself, her face ghastly as death, and all across her forehead, low down over one of the blue eyes, a great, wide, red gash.

Before I had time to pull myself together 'Enrietter had told her story,—so poor a story it showed how desperate now was her case. She had been quiet all morning—no one had come—she had got through the extra work I left with her. About three the milkman rang. A high wind was blowing. The door, when she opened it, banged in her face and cut her head open. And it had bled! She had only just succeeded in stopping it. One part of her story, anyway, was true beyond dispute. That terrible, gaping wound spoke for itself.

I did not know what to do. I was new in the neighbourhood, and my acquaintance with doctors anywhere is slight. But I could not turn her into the street, I could not even leave her under my own roof all night, like that. Something had to be done, and I ran downstairs to consult the old Housekeeper, who, after her half century in the Quarter, might be expected to know how to meet any emergency. [Pg 18]

More horrors awaited me in her room,—like Macbeth, I was supping full with horrors,—for she had another story to tell, and, as I listened, the ghastly face upstairs, with the gaping red wound, became a mere item in an orgy more appropriate to the annals of the Rougon-Macquarts than, I devoutly trust, to ours. I cannot tell the story as the Housekeeper told it. She had a trick of going into hysterics at moments of excitement, and as in all the years she had been in charge she had never seen such goings on, it followed that in all those years, she had never been so hysterical. She gasped and sobbed out her tale of horrors, and, all the while, her daughter, who was in *the* profession, sat apart, and, in the exasperating fashion of the chorus of a Greek play, kept up a running commentary emphasizing the points too emphatic to need emphasis. [Pg 19]

To tell the story in my own way: I was hardly out of the house when 'Enrietter had a visit from a "gentleman,"—that was the Housekeeper's description of him, and, as things go in England, he was a gentleman, which makes my story the more sordid. How 'Enrietter had sent him word the coast was clear I do not pretend to say, though I believe the London milkman has a reputation as the Cupid's Postman of the kitchen, and I recalled afterwards two or three notes 'Enrietter had received from her sister by district messenger,—the same sister, no doubt, who gave her the drop of brandy. Towards noon 'Enrietter and her gentleman were seen to come downstairs and go out together. Where they went, what they did during the three hours of their absence, no one knew, —no one will ever know. Sometimes, in looking back, the greatest horrors to me are the unknown chapters in the story of that day's doings. They were seen to return, about three, in a hansom. The gentleman got out, unsteadily. 'Enrietter followed and collapsed in a little heap on the pavement. He lifted her, and staggered with her in by the door and up the three long flights of stairs to our chambers. [Pg 20]

And then—I confess, at this point even now my anger gets the better of me. Every key for my front door was in my pocket,—women were still allowed pockets in those days. There was no possible way in which they could have got in again, had not that gentleman climbed the ladder up which I had watched the British Workman not so many days before, and, technically, broken into my place, and then come down the little stairway and let 'Enrietter in. A burglar would have seemed clean and honest compared to the gentleman housebreaking on such an errand. My front door was heard to bang upon them both, and I wish to Heaven it had been the last sound heard from our chambers that day. For a time all was still. Then, of a sudden, piercing screams rang through the house and out through the open windows into the scandalized Quarter. There was a noise of heavy things falling or thrown violently down, curses filled the air; as the Housekeeper told it to me, it was like something out of Morrison's "Mean Streets" or the "Police-Court Gazette," and the dreadful part of it was that, no doubt, I was being held responsible for it! At last, loud above everything else, came blood-curdling cries of "Murder! Murder! Help! Murder!" There was not a window of the many over-looking my back rooms that was not filled with terrified neighbours. The lady in the chambers on the floor below mine set up a cry of her own for the police. The clerks from the Church League and from the Architect's office were gathered on the stairs. A nice reputation I must be getting in the house before my first month in it was up! [Pg 21]

The Housekeeper, with a new attack of hysterics, protested that she had not dared to interfere, though she had a key, nor could she give it to a policeman without my authority—she knew her duty. The Greek Chorus repeated, without hysterics but with careful elocution, that the Housekeeper could not go in nor fetch the police without my authority—she knew her duty. And so, the deeds that were done within my four walls on that beautiful June afternoon must remain a mystery. The only record is the mark 'Enrietter will carry on her forehead with her to the grave. [Pg 22]

The noise gradually ceased. The neighbours, one by one, left the windows, the lady below disappeared into her flat. The clerks went back to work. And the Housekeeper crept into her rooms for the cup of tea that saves every situation for the Englishwoman. She had not finished when there came a knock at the door. She opened it, and there stood a gentleman—*the* gentleman—anyone could see he was a gentleman by his hat—and he told her his story: the third version of the affair. He was a medical student, he said. He happened to be passing along the Strand when, just in front of Charing Cross, a cab knocked over a young lady. She was badly

hurt, but, as a medical student, he knew what to do. He put her into another cab and brought her home; he saw to her injuries; but now he could stay no longer. She seemed to be quite alone up there. Her condition was serious; she should not be left alone. And he lifted his hat and was gone. But the Housekeeper daren't intrude, even then; she knew her place and her duty. She knew her [Pg 23] place and her duty, the Greek Chorus echoed, and the end of her story brought me to just where I was at the beginning. Upon one point the gentleman was right, and that was the condition of the "young lady" as long as that great wide gash still gaped open. The Housekeeper, practical for all her hysterics, sobbed out "The Hospital." "The Hospital!" echoed the Greek Chorus, and I mounted the three flights of stairs for 'Enrietter.

I tied up her head. I made her exchange the shameless pink dressing-gown for her usual clothes. I helped her on with her hat, though I thought she would faint before she was dressed. I led her down the three flights of stairs into the street, across the Strand, to the hospital. By this time it was well past eleven.

So far I hadn't had a chance to think of appearances. But one glance from the night-surgeon at the hospital, and it was hard to think of anything else. He did not say a word more than the case demanded, but his behaviour to me was abominable all the same. And I cannot blame him. There was I, decently dressed I hope, for I had put on my very best for Cambridge, in charge of a young [Pg 24] woman dressed anyhow and with a broken head. It was getting on toward midnight. The Strand was a stone's throw away. Still, in his place, I hope I should have been less brutal.

As for 'Enrietter, she had plenty of pluck, if she had no morals. She bore the grisly business of having her head sewn up with the nerve of a martyr. She never flinched, she never moaned; she was heroic. When it was over, the night-surgeon told her—he never addressed himself to me if he could help it—that it was a nasty cut and must be seen to again the next day. The right eye had escaped by miracle, it might yet be affected. What was most important at this stage was perfect quiet, perfect repose. It was essential that she should sleep,—she must take something to make her sleep. When I asked him meekly to give me an opiate for her, he answered curtly that that was not his affair. There was a chemist close by, I could get opium pills there, and he turned on his heel.

I took 'Enrietter home. I saw her up the three long flights of stairs to our chambers, the one little [Pg 25] stairway to her bedroom, and into her bed. I walked down the little stairway and the three long flights. I went out into the night. I hurried to the chemist's. It was past midnight, an hour when decent women are not expected to wander alone in the Strand, and now I was conscious that things might look queer to others. I skulked in the darkest shadows like a criminal. I bought the pills. I came home. For the fourth time I toiled up the three long flights of stairs and the one little stairway. I gave 'Enrietter her pills. I put out her light. I shut her in her room.

And then? Why, then, I hadn't taken an opium pill. I wasn't sleepy. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to find out. I did what I have always thought no self-respecting person would do. But to be mixed up in 'Enrietter's affairs was not calculated to strengthen one's self-respect. And without a scruple I went into the kitchen and opened every drawer, cupboard, and box, and read every letter, every scrap of paper, I could lay my hands on. There wasn't much all told, but it was [Pg 26] enough. For I found out that the medical student, the gentleman, was a clerk in the Bank of England,—I should like him to read this and to know that I know his name and have his reputation in my hands. I found out that 'Enrietter was his "old woman," and a great many other things she ought not to have been. I found out that I had not dined once with my friends that he had not spent the evening with her. I found out that he had kept count of my every engagement with greater care than I had myself. I found out that he had spent so many hours in my kitchen that the question was what time he had left for the Bank of England. And I found such an assortment of flasks and bottles that I could only marvel how 'Enrietter had managed to be sober for one minute during the three weeks of her stay with me.

I sent for a charwoman the next morning. She was of the type now rapidly dying out in London, and more respectable, if possible, than the Housekeeper. Her manner went far to restore my self-respect, and this was the only service I could ask of her, her time being occupied chiefly in [Pg 27] waiting upon 'Enrietter. In fairness, I ought to add that 'Enrietter was game to the last. She got up and downstairs somehow, she cooked the lunch, she would have waited on the table, bandaged head and all, had I let her. But the less I saw of her, the greater her chance for the repose prescribed by the night-surgeon. Besides, she and her bandaged head were due at the hospital. This time she went in charge of the charwoman, whose neat shabby shawl and bonnet, as symbols of respectability, were more than sufficient to keep all the night or day surgeons of London in their place. They returned with the cheerful intelligence that matters were much worse than was at first thought, that 'Enrietter's eye was in serious danger, and absolute quiet in a darkened room was essential, that lotions must be applied and medicines administered at regular intervals,—in a word, that our chambers, as long as she remained in them, must be turned into a nursing home, with myself as chief nurse, which was certainly not what I had engaged her for. [Pg 28]

I went upstairs, when she was in bed again, and told her so. She must send for some one, I did not care whom, to come and take her off my hands at once. My temper was at boiling-point, but not for the world would I have shown it or done anything to destroy 'Enrietter's repose and so make matters worse, and not be able to get rid of her at all. As usual, her resources did not fail her; she was really wonderful all through. There was an old friend of her father's, she said, who was in the Bank of England—I knew that friend; he could admit her into a hospital of which he

was a patron—Heaven help that hospital! But I held my peace. I even wrote her letter and sent it to the post by the charwoman. 'Enrietter's morals were beyond me, but my own comfort was not.

I do not know whether the most astonishing thing in all the astonishing episode was not the reappearance of the old friend of her father's in his other rôle of medical student. I suppose he did not realize how grave 'Enrietter's condition was. I am sure he did not expect anything less than that I should open the door for him. But this was what happened. His visit was late, the [Pg 29] charwoman had gone for the night, and I was left to do all 'Enrietter's work myself. He did not need to tell me who he was,—his face did that for him,—but he stammered out the wretched fable of the medical student, the young lady, and the cab. She was quite alone when he left her, he added, and he was worried, and, being in the neighbourhood, he called in passing to enquire if the young lady were better, and if there were now some one to take care of her. His self-confidence came back as he talked.

"Your story is extremely interesting," I told him, "and I am especially glad to hear it, because my cook"—with a vindictive emphasis on the cook—"has told me quite a different one as to how she came by her broken head. Now—"

He was gone. He threw all pretence to the winds and ran downstairs as if the police were at his heels, as I wished they were. I could not run after him without making a second scandal in the house; and if I had caught him, if I had given him in custody for trespass, as I was told afterwards [Pg 30] I might have done, how would I have liked figuring in the Police Courts?

Curiously, he did have influence with the hospital, which shall be nameless. He did get a bed there for 'Enrietter the next morning. It may be that he had learned by experience the convenience to himself of having a hospital, as it were, in his pocket. But the arrangements were by letter; he did not risk a second meeting, and I asked 'Enrietter no questions. For my own satisfaction, I went with her to the hospital: a long, melancholy drive in a four-wheeler, 'Enrietter with ghastly face, more dead than alive. I delivered her into the hands of the nurses. I left her there, a bandaged wreck of the pretty 'Enrietter who had been such an ornament to our chambers. And that was the last I saw of her, though not the last I heard.

A day or two later her sister came to pack up her belongings,—a young woman with a vacant smile, a roving eye, and a baby in her arms. I had only to look at her to know that she wasn't the sort of sister to force anything on anybody, much less on 'Enrietter. And yet I went to the trouble [Pg 31] of reading her a little lecture. 'Enrietter's morals were beyond me, but I am not entirely without a conscience. The sister kept on simpering vacantly, while her eyes roved from print to print on the walls of the dining-room where the lecture was delivered, and the baby stared at me with portentous solemnity.

Then, about three weeks after the sister's visit, I heard from 'Enrietter herself. She wrote with her accustomed politeness. She begged my pardon for troubling me. She had left the hospital. She was at home in Richmond, and she had just unpacked the trunk the sister had packed for her. Only one thing was missing. She would be deeply obliged if I would look in the left-hand drawer of the kitchen dresser and send her the package of cigarettes I would find there. And she was mine, "Very respectfully."

This is the story of 'Enrietter's adventures in our chambers, and I think whoever reads it will not wonder that I fought shy afterwards of the English servant who was not well on the wrong side of [Pg 32] forty and whose thirst could not be quenched with tea. The real wonder is that I had the courage to risk another maid of any kind. Women have been reproached with their love of gossiping about servants since time immemorial, and I do not know for how long before that. But when I remember 'Enrietter, I do not understand how we have the heart ever to gossip about anything else. What became of her, who can say? Sometimes, when I think of her pretty face and all that was good in her, I can only hope that the next orgy led to still worse things than a broken head, and that Death saved her from the London streets.

Trimmer [Pg 33]

"AND THE WONDER GROWS WITH THE NIGHT"

[Pg 34]

II

[Pg 35]

TRIMMER

Until I began my search for an elderly woman who never drank anything stronger than tea, I had supposed it was the old who could find nobody to give them work. But my trouble was to find somebody old enough to give mine to. The "superior domestics" at the Registry Offices were much too well trained to confess even to middle age, and probably I should be looking for my elderly woman to this day, had not chance led Trimmer one afternoon to an office which I had left without hope in the morning. As her years could supply no possible demand save mine, she was sent at once to our chambers.

To tell the truth, as soon as I saw her, I began to doubt my own wisdom. I had never imagined anybody quite so respectable. In her neat but rusty black dress and cape, her hair parted and brought carefully down over her ears, her bonnet tied under her chin, her reticule hanging on her [Pg 36] arm, she was the incarnation of British respectability; "the very type," the "old Master Rembrandt van Rijn, with three Baedeker stars," I could almost hear Mr. Henry James describing her; and all she wanted was to belong "beautifully" to me. But then she looked as old as she looked respectable,—so much older than I meant her to look,—old to the point of fragility. She admitted to fifty-five, and when mentally I added four or five years more, I am sure I was not over generous. Her face was filled with wrinkles, her skin was curiously delicate, and she had the pallor that comes from a steady diet of tea and bread and sometimes butter. The hands through the large, carefully mended black gloves showed twisted and stiff, and it was not easy to fancy them making our beds and our fires, cooking our dinners, dusting our rooms, opening our front door. We needed some one to take care of us, and it was plain that she was far more in need of some one to take care of her,—all the plainer because of her anxiety to prove her capacity for work. There was nothing she could not do, nothing she would not do if I were but to name it. "I [Pg 37] can cut about, mum, you'll see. Oh, I'm bonny!" And the longer she talked, the better I knew that during weeks, and perhaps months, she had been hunting for a place, which at the best is wearier work than hunting for a servant, and at the worst leads straight to the workhouse, the one resource left for the honest poor who cannot get a chance to earn their living, and who, by the irony of things, dread it worse than death.

With my first doubt I ought to have sent her away. But I kept putting off the uncomfortable duty by asking her questions, only to find that she was irreproachable on the subject of alcohol, that she preferred "beer-money" to beer, that there was no excuse not to take her except her age, and this, in the face of her eagerness to remain, I had not the pluck to make. My hesitation cost me the proverbial price. Before the interview was over I had engaged her on the condition that her references were good, as of course they were, though she sent me for them to the most [Pg 38] unexpected place in the world, a corset and petticoat shop not far from Leicester Square. Through the quarter to which all that is disreputable in Europe drifts, where any sort of virtue is exposed to damage beyond repair, she had carried her respectability and emerged more respectable than ever.

She came to us with so little delay that I knew better than ever how urgent was her case. Except for the providentially short interval with 'Enrietter, this was my first experience of the British

servant, and it was enough to make me tremble. It was impossible to conceive of anything more British. Her print dress, changed for a black one in the afternoon, her white apron and white cap, became in my eyes symbolic. I seemed, in her, to face the entire caste of British servants who are so determined never to be slaves that they would rather fight for their freedom to be as slavish as they always have been. She knew her place, and what is more, she knew ours, and meant to keep us in it, no matter whether we liked or did not like to be kept there. I was the Mistress and J. was the Master, and if, with our American notions, we forgot it, she never did, but on our slightest [Pg 39] forgetfulness brought us up with a round turn. So correct, indeed, was her conduct, and so respectable and venerable was her appearance, that she produced the effect in our chambers of an old family retainer. Friends would have had us train her to address me as "Miss Elizabeth," or J. as "Master J.," and pass her off for the faithful old nurse who is now so seldom met out of fiction.

For all her deference, however, she clung obstinately to her prejudices. We might be as American in our ways as we pleased, she would not let us off one little British bit in hers. She never presumed unbidden upon an observation and if I forced one from her she invariably begged my pardon for the liberty. She thanked us for everything, for what we wanted as gratefully as for what we did not want. She saw that we had hot water for our hands at the appointed hours. She compelled us to eat Yorkshire pudding with our sirloin of beef, and bread-sauce with our fowl,—in this connection how can I bring myself to say chicken? She could never quite forgive us for our [Pg 40] indifference to "sweets"; and for the daily bread-and-butter puddings and tarts we would not have, she made up by an orgy of tipsy cakes and creams when anybody came to dine. How she was reconciled to our persistent refusal of afternoon tea, I always wondered; though I sometimes thought that, by the stately function she made of it in the kitchen, she hoped to atone for this worst of our American heresies.

Whatever she might be as a type, there was no denying that as a servant she had all the qualities. She was an excellent cook, despite her flamboyant and florid taste in sweets; she was sober, she was obliging, she had by no means exaggerated her talent for "cutting about," and I never ceased to be astonished at the amount she accomplished. The fire was always burning when we got down in the morning, breakfast always ready. Beds were made, lunch served, the front door opened, dinner punctual. I do not know how she did it all, and I now remember with thankfulness our scruples when we saw her doing it, and the early date at which we supplied her with an [Pg 41] assistant in the shape of a snuffy, frowzy old charwoman. The revelation of how much too much remained for her even then came only when we lost her, and I was obliged to look below the surface. While she was with us, the necessity of looking below never occurred to me; and as our chambers had been done up from top to bottom just before she moved into them, they stood her method on the surface admirably.

This method perhaps struck me as the more complete because it left her the leisure for a frantic attempt to anticipate our every wish. She tried to help us with a perseverance that was exasperating, and as her training had taught her the supremacy of the master in the house, it was upon J. that her efforts were chiefly spent. I could see him writhe under her devotion, until there were times when I dreaded to think what might come of it, all the more because my sympathies were so entirely with him. If he opened his door, she rushed to ask what he wanted. A spy could not have spied more diligently; and as in our small chambers the kitchen door was almost [Pg 42] opposite his, he never went or came that she did not know it. He might be as short with her as he could, and in British fashion order her never to come into the studio, but it was no use; she could not keep out of it. Each new visitor, or letter, or message, was an excuse for her to flounder in among the portfolios on the floor and the bottles of acid in the corner, at the risk of his temper and her life. On the whole, he bore it with admirable patience. But there was one awful morning when he hurried into my room, slammed the door after him, and in a whisper said,—he who would not hurt a fly,—"If you don't keep that woman out of my room, I'll wring her neck for her!"

I might have spared myself any anxiety. Had J. offered to her face to wring her neck, she would have smiled and said, "That's all right, sir! Thank you, sir!" For, with Trimmer, to be "bonny" meant to be cheerful under any and all conditions. So long as her cherished traditions were not imperilled, she had a smile for every emergency. It was characteristic of her to allow me to [Pg 43] christen her anew the first day she was with us, and not once to protest. We could not bring ourselves to call her Lily, her Christian name, so inappropriate was it to her venerable appearance. Her surname was even more impossible, for she was the widow of a Mr. Trim. She herself—helpful from the beginning—suggested "cook." But she was a number of things besides, and though I did not mind my friends knowing that she was as many persons in one as the cook of the Nancy Bell, it would have been superfluous to remind them of it on every occasion. When, at my wits' end, I added a few letters and turned the impossible Trim into Trimmer, she could not have been more pleased had I made her a present, and from that moment she answered to the new name as if born to it.

The same philosophy carried her through every trial and tribulation. It was sure to be all right if, before my eyes and driving me to tears, she broke the plates I could not replace without a journey to Central France, or if in the morning the kitchen was a wreck after the night Jimmy, [Pg 44] our unspeakable black cat, had been making of it. Fortunately he went out as a rule for his sprees, realizing that our establishment could not stand the wear and tear. When he chanced to stay at home, I have come down to the kitchen in the morning to find the clock ticking upside down on the floor, oranges and apples rolling about, spoons and forks under the table, cups and saucers in pieces, and Jimmy on the table washing his face. But Trimmer would meet me with a

radiant smile and would put things to rights, while Jimmy purred at her heels, as if both were rather proud of the exploit, certain that no other cat in the world could, "all by his lone" and in one night, work such ruin.

After all, it was a good deal Trimmer's fault if we got into the habit of shifting disagreeable domestic details on to her shoulders, she had such a way of offering them for the purpose. It was she who, when Jimmy's orgies had at last undermined his health and the "vet" prescribed a dose of chloroform as the one remedy, went to see it administered, coming back to tell us of the "beautiful corpse" he had made. It was she who took our complaints to the Housekeeper [Pg 45] downstairs, and met those the other tenants brought against us. It was she who bullied stupid tradesmen and stirred up idle workmen. It was she, in a word, who served as domestic scapegoat. And she never remonstrated. I am convinced that if I had said, "Trimmer, there's a lion roaring at the door," she would have answered, "That's all right, mum! thank you, mum!" and rushed to say that we were not at home to him. As it happens, I know how she would have faced a burglar, for late one evening when I was alone in our chambers, I heard some one softly trying to turn the knob of the door of the box-room. What I did was to shut and bolt the door at the foot of our little narrow stairway, thankful that there was a door there that could be bolted. What Trimmer did, when she came home ten minutes later and I told her, "There's a burglar in the box-room," was to say, "Oh, is there, mum? thank you, mum. That's all right. I'll just run up and see"; and she lit her candle and walked right up to the box-room and unlocked and opened the door. [Pg 46] Out flew William Penn, furious with us because he had let himself be shut in where nobody had seen him go, and where he had no business to have gone. He was only the cat, I admit. But he might have been the burglar for all Trimmer knew, and—what then?

As I look back and think of these things, I am afraid we imposed upon her. At the time, we had twinges of conscience, especially when we caught her "cutting about" with more than her usual zeal. She was not designed by nature to "cut about" at all. To grow old with her meant "to lose the glory of the form." She was short, she had an immense breadth of hip, and she waddled rather than walked. When, in her haste, her cap would get tilted to one side, and she would give a smudge to her nose or her cheek, she was really a grotesque little figure, and the twinges became acute. To see her "cutting about" so unbecomingly for us at an age when she should have been allowed, unburdened, to crawl towards death, was to shift the heaviest responsibility to our shoulders and to make us the one barrier between her and the workhouse. We could not watch [Pg 47] the tragedy of old age in our own household without playing a more important part in it than we liked.

Her cheerfulness was the greater marvel when I learned how little reason life had given her for it. In her rare outbursts of confidence, with excuses for the liberty, she told me that she was London born and bred, that she had gone into service young, and that she had married before she was twenty. I fancy she must have been pretty as a girl. I know she was "bonny," and "a fine one" for work, and I am not surprised that Trim wanted to marry her. He was a skilled plasterer by trade, got good wages, and was seldom out of a job. They had a little house in some far-away mean street, and though the children who would have been welcome never came, there was little else to complain of.

Trim was good to her, that is, unless he was in liquor, which I gathered he mostly was. He was fond of his glass, sociable-like, and with his week's wages in his pocket, could not keep away from his pals in the public. Trimmer's objection to beer was accounted for when I discovered that [Pg 48] Trim's fondness for it often kept the little house without bread and filled it with curses. There were never blows. Trim was good, she reminded me, and the liquor never made him wicked,—only made him leave his wife to starve, and then curse her for starving. She was tearful with gratitude when she remembered his goodness in not beating her; but when her story reached the day of his tumbling off a high ladder—the beer was in his legs—and being brought back to her dead, it seemed to me a matter of rejoicing. Not to her, however, for she had to give up the little house and go into service again, and she missed Trim and his curses. She did not complain. She always found good places, and she adopted a little boy, a sweet little fellow, like a son to her, whom she sent to school and started in life, and had never seen since. But young men will be young men, and she loved him. She was very happy at the corset and petticoat shop, where she lived while he was with her. After business hours she was free, for apparently the responsibility [Pg 49] of being alone in a big house all night was as simple for her as braving a burglar in our chambers. The young ladies were pleasant, she was well paid. Then her older brother's wife died and left him with six children. What could she do but go and look after them when he asked her?

He was well-to-do, and his house and firing and lighting were given him in addition to high wages. He did not pay her anything, of course,—she was his sister. But it was a comfortable home, the children were fond of her,—and also of her cakes and puddings,—and she looked forward to spending the rest of her days there. But at the end of two years he married again, and when the new wife came, the old sister went. This was how it came about that, without a penny in her pocket, and with nothing save her old twisted hands to keep her out of the workhouse, she was adrift again at an age which made her undesirable to everybody except foolish people like ourselves, fresh from the horrors of our experience with 'Enrietter. It never occurred to Trimmer that there was anything to complain of. For her, all had always been for the best in the best of all [Pg 50] possible worlds. That she had now chanced upon chambers and two people and one dissipated cat to take care of, and more to do than ought to have been asked of her, was but another stroke of her invariable good luck.

She had an amazing faculty of turning all her little molehills into mountains of pleasure. I have

never known anything like the joy she got from her family, though I never could quite make out why. She was inordinately proud of the brother who had been so ready to get rid of her; the sister-in-law who had replaced her was a paragon of virtue; the nieces were so many infant phenomena, and one Sunday when, with the South London world of fashion, they were walking in the Embankment Gardens, she presumed so far as to bring them up to our chambers to show them off to me, and the affectionate glances she cast upon their expansive lace collars explained that she still had her uses in the family. There was also a cousin whom, to Trimmer's embarrassment, I often found in our kitchen; but much worse than frequent visits could be [Pg 51] forgiven her, since it was she who, after Jimmy's inglorious end, brought us William Penn, a pussy then small enough to go into her coat-pocket, but already gay enough to dance his way straight into our hearts.

Trimmer's pride reached high-water mark when it came to a younger brother who travelled in "notions" for a city firm. His proprietor was the personage the rich Jew always is in the city of London, and was made Alderman and Lord Mayor, and knighted and baroneted, during the years Trimmer spent with us. She took enormous satisfaction in the splendour of this success, counting it another piece of her good luck to be connected, however remotely, with anybody so distinguished. She had almost an air of proprietorship on the 9th of November, when from our windows she watched his Show passing along the Embankment; she could not have been happier if she herself had been seated in the gorgeous Cinderella coach, with the coachman in wig and cocked hat, and the powdered footmen perched up behind; and when J. went to the Lord Mayor's [Pg 52] dinner that same evening at the Guildhall, it became for her quite a family affair. I often fancied that she thought it reflected glory on us all to have the sister of a man who travelled in "notions" for a knight and a Lord Mayor, living in our chambers; though she would never have taken the liberty of showing it.

Trimmer's joy was only less in our friends than in her family, which was for long a puzzle to me. They added considerably to her already heavy task, and in her place, I should have hated them for it. It might amuse us to have them drop in to lunch or to dinner at any time, and to gather them together once a week, on Thursday evening. But it could hardly amuse Trimmer, to whose share fell the problem of how to make a meal prepared for two go round among four or six, or how to get to the front door and dispose of hats and wraps in chambers so small that the weekly gathering filled even our little hall to overflowing. There was always some one to help her on Thursdays, and she had not much to do in the way of catering. "Plain living and high talking" was [Pg 53] the principle upon which our evenings were run, and whoever wanted more than a sandwich or so could go elsewhere. But whatever had to be done, Trimmer insisted on doing, and, moreover, on doing it until the last pipe was out and the last word spoken; and as everybody almost was an artist or a writer, and as there is no subject so inexhaustible as "shop," I do not like to remember how late that often was. It made no difference. She refused to go to bed, and in her white cap and apron, with her air of old retainer or family nurse, she would waddle about through clouds of tobacco-smoke, offering a box of cigarettes here, a plate of sandwiches there, radiant, benevolent, more often than not in the way, toward the end looking as if she would drop, but apparently enjoying herself more than anybody, until it seemed as if the unkindness would be not to let her stay up in it.

More puzzling to me than her interest in all our friends was her choice of a few for her special favour. I could not see the reason for her choice, unless I had suspected her of a sudden passion [Pg 54] for literature and art. Certainly her chief attentions were lavished on the most distinguished among our friends, who were the very people most apt to put her devotion to the test. She adored Whistler, though when he was in London he had a way not only of dropping in to dinner, but sometimes of dropping in so late that it had to be cooked all over again. She was so far from minding that, at the familiar sound of his knock and ring, her face was wreathed in smiles, she seemed to look upon the extra work as a privilege, and I have known her, without a word, trot off to the butcher's or the green-grocer's, or even to the tobacconist's in the Strand for the little Algerian cigarettes he loved. She went so far as to abandon certain of her prejudices for his benefit, and I realized what a conquest he had made when she resigned herself to cooking a fowl in a casserole and serving it without bread-sauce. She discovered the daintiness of his appetite, and it was delightful to see her hovering over him at table and pointing out the choice bits in every dish she passed. She was forever finding an excuse to come into any room where he might [Pg 55] be. Altogether, it was as complete a case of fascination as if she had known him to be the great master he was; and she was his slave long before he gave her the ten shillings, which was valued sentimentally as I really believe a tip never was before or since by a British servant.

Henley was hardly second in her esteem, and this was the more inexplicable because he provided her with so many more chances to prove it. Whistler then lived in Paris, and appeared only now and then. Henley lived in London half the week, and rarely missed a Thursday. For it was on that evening that the "National Observer," which he was editing, went to press, and the printers in Covent Garden were conveniently near to our chambers. His work done, the paper put to bed, about ten or eleven he and the train of young men then in attendance upon him would come round; and to them, in the comfortable consciousness that the rest of the week was their own, time was of no consideration. Henley exulted in talk: if he had the right audience he would talk [Pg 56] all night; and the right audience was willing to listen so long as he talked in our chambers. But Trimmer, in the kitchen, or handing round sandwiches, could not listen, and yet she lingered as long as anybody. It might be almost dawn before he got up to go, but she was there to fetch him his crutch and his big black hat, and to shut the door after him. Whatever the indiscretion of the hour one Thursday, she welcomed him as cordially the next, or any day in between when

inclination led him to toil up the three long flights of stairs to our dinner-table.

Phil May was no less in her good graces, and his hours, if anything, were worse than Henley's, since the length of his stay did not depend on his talk. I never knew a man of less conversation. "Have a drink," was its extent with many who thought themselves in his intimacy. This was a remark which he could scarcely offer to Trimmer at the front door, where Whistler and Henley never failed to exchange with her a friendly greeting. But all the same, she seemed to feel the charm which his admirers liked to attribute to him, and to find his smile, when he balanced [Pg 57] himself on the back of a chair, more than a substitute for conversation, however animated. The flaw in my enjoyment of his company on our Thursdays was the certainty of the length of time he would be pleased to bestow it upon us. Trimmer must have shared this certainty, but to her it never mattered. She never failed to return his smile, though when he got down to go, she might be nodding, and barely able to drag one tired old foot after the other.

She made as much of "Bob" Stevenson, whose hours were worse than anybody's. We would perhaps run across him at a press view of pictures in the morning and bring him back to lunch, he protesting that he must leave immediately after to get home to Kew and write his article before six o'clock. And then he would begin to talk, weaving a romance of any subject that came up,—the subject was nothing, it was always what he made of it,—and he would go on talking until Trimmer, overjoyed at the chance, came in with afternoon tea; and he would go on talking until [Pg 58] she announced dinner; and he would go on talking until all hours the next morning, long after his last train and any possibility of his article getting into yesterday afternoon's "Pall Mall." But early as he might appear, late as he might stay, he was never too early or too late for Trimmer.

These were her favourites, though she was ready to "mother" Beardsley, who, she seemed to think, had just escaped from the schoolroom and ought to be sent back to it; though she had a protecting eye also for George Steevens, just up from Oxford, evidently mistaking the silence which was then his habit for shyness; though, indeed, she overflowed with kindness for everybody who came. It was astonishing how, at her age, she managed to adapt herself to people and ways so unlike any she could ever have known, without relaxing in the least from her own code of conduct.

Only twice can I remember seeing her really ruffled. Once was when Felix Buhot, who, during a long winter he spent in London, was often with us on Thursdays, went into the kitchen to teach [Pg 59] her to make coffee. The inference that she could not make it hurt her feelings; but her real distress was to have him in the kitchen, which "ladies and gentlemen" should not enter. Between her desire to get him back to the dining-room and her fear lest he should discover it, she was terribly embarrassed. It was funny to watch them: Buhot, unconscious of wrong and of English, intent upon measuring the coffee and pouring out the boiling water; Trimmer fluttering about him with flushed and anxious face, talking very loud and with great deliberation, in the not uncommon conviction that the foreigner's ignorance of English is only a form of deafness.

On the other occasion she lost her temper, the only time in my experience. It was a Sunday afternoon, and Whistler, appearing while she was out and staying on to supper, got Constant, his man, to add an onion soup and an omelet to the cold meats she had prepared, for he would never reconcile himself to the English supper. She was furious when she got back and found that her pots and pans had been meddled with, and her larder raided. She looked upon it as a reproach; [Pg 60] as if she couldn't serve Mr. Whistler as well as any foreign servant,—she had no use for foreign servants anyhow,—she would not have them making their foreign messes in any kitchen of hers! It took days and careful diplomacy to convince her that she had not been insulted.

I was the more impressed by this outbreak of temper because, as a rule, she gave no sign of seeing, or hearing, or understanding anything that went on in our chambers. She treated me as I believe royalty should be treated, leaving it to me to open the talk, or to originate a topic. I remember once, when we were involved in a rumpus which had been discussed over our dinner-table for months beforehand, and which at the time filled the newspapers and was such public property that everybody in the Quarter—the milkman, the florist at the Temple of Pomona in the Strand, the Housekeeper downstairs, the postman—congratulated us on our victory, Trimmer alone held her peace. I could not believe that she really did not know, and at last I asked her:— [Pg 61]

"I suppose you have heard, Trimmer, what has been going on these days?"

"What, mum?" was her answer.

Then, exasperated, I explained.

"Why yes, mum," she said. "I beg your pardon, mum, I really couldn't 'elp it. I 'ave been reading the pipers, and the 'ousekeeper she was a-talking to me about it before you come in, and the postman too, and I was sayin' as 'ow glad I was. I 'ope you and the Master won't think it a liberty, mum. Thank you, mum!"

I remember another time, when some of our friends took to running away with other friends' wives, and things became so complicated for everybody that our Thursday evenings were brought to a sudden end, Trimmer kept the same stolid countenance throughout, until, partly to prevent awkwardness, partly out of curiosity, I asked her if she had seen the papers.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, mum," she hesitated, "thank you, mum, I'm sure. I know it's a liberty, but you know, mum, they've all been 'ere so often I couldn't help noticing there was somethink. And [Pg 62] I'm very sorry, mum, if you'll excuse the liberty, they all was such lidies and gentlemen, mum."

And so, I should never have known there was another reason, besides the natural kindness of her heart, for her interest in our friends and her acceptance of their ways, if, before this, I had not happened to say to her one Friday morning,—

"You seem, Trimmer, to have a very great admiration for Mr. Phil May."

"I 'ope you and Master won't think it a liberty, mum," she answered, in an agony of embarrassment, "but I do like to see 'im, and they allus so like to 'ear about 'im at 'ome. They're allus asking me when I 'ave last seen 'im or Mr. Whistler."

Then it came out. Chance had bestowed upon her father and one of the great American magazines the same name, with the result that the magazine was looked upon by her brothers and herself as belonging somehow to the family. The well-to-do brother subscribed to it, the other came to his house to see each new number. Through the illustrations and articles they had [Pg 63] become as familiar with artists and authors as most people in England are with the "winners," and their education had reached at least the point of discovery that news does not begin and end in sport. Judging from Trimmer, I doubt if at first their patronage of art and literature went much further, but this was far enough for them to know, and to feel flattered by the knowledge, that she was living among people who figured in the columns of art and literary gossip as prominently as "all the winners" in the columns of the Sporting Prophets, though they would have been still more flattered had her lot been cast among the Prophets. In a few cases, their interest soon became more personal.

It was their habit—why, I do not suppose they could have said themselves—to read any letter Whistler might write to the papers at a moment when he was given to writing, though what they made of the letter when read was more than Trimmer was able to explain; they also looked out for Phil May's drawings in "Punch"; they passed our articles round the family circle,—a compliment hardly more astonishing to Trimmer than to us. As time went on they began to follow [Pg 64] the career of several of our other friends to whom Trimmer introduced them; and it was a gratification to them all, as well as a triumph for her, when on Sunday afternoon she could say, "Mr. Crockett or Mr. 'Arold Frederic was at Master's last Thursday." Thus, through us, she became for the first time a person of importance in her brother's house, and I suspect also quite an authority in Brixton on all questions of art and literature. Indeed, she may, for all I know, have started another Carnegie Library in South London.

It is a comfort now to think that her stay with us was pleasant to her; wages alone could not have paid our debt for the trouble she spared us during her five years in our chambers. I have an idea that, in every way, it was the most prosperous period of her life. When she came, she was not only without a penny in her pocket, but she owed pounds for her outfit of aprons and caps and dresses. Before she left, she was saving money. She opened a book at the Post Office Savings Bank; she subscribed to one of those societies which would assure her a respectable funeral, for [Pg 65] she had the ambition of all the self-respecting poor to be put away decent, after having, by honest work, kept off the parish to the end. Her future provided for, she could make the most of whatever pleasures the present might throw in her way,—the pantomime at Christmas, a good seat for the Queen's Jubilee procession; above all, the two weeks' summer holiday. No journey was ever so full of adventure as hers to Margate, or Yarmouth, or Hastings, from the first preparation to the moment of return, when she would appear laden with presents of Yarmouth bloaters or Margate shrimps, to be divided between the old charwoman and ourselves.

If she had no desire to leave us, we had none to have her go; and as the years passed, we did not see why she should. She was old, but she bore her age with vigour. She was hardly ever ill, and never with anything worse than a cold or an indigestion, though she had an inconvenient talent for accidents. The way she managed to cut her fingers was little short of genius. One or two were [Pg 66] always wrapped in rags. But no matter how deep the gash, she was as cheerful as if it were an accomplishment. With the blood pouring from the wound, she would beam upon me: "You 'ave no idea, mum, what wonderful flesh I 'as fur 'ealin'." Her success in falling down our little narrow stairway was scarcely less remarkable. But the worst tumble of all was the one which J. had so long expected. He had just moved his portfolios to an unaccustomed place one morning, when a letter, or a message, or something, sent her stumbling into the studio with her usual impetuosity, and over she tripped. It was so bad that we had to have the doctor, her arm was so seriously strained that he made her carry it in a sling for weeks. We were alarmed, but not Trimmer.

"You know, mum, it *is* lucky; it might 'ave been the right harm, and that would 'ave been bad!"

She really thought it another piece of her extraordinary good luck.

Poor Trimmer! It needed so little to make her happy, and within five years of her coming to us [Pg 67] that little was taken from her. All she asked of life was work, and a worse infirmity than age put a stop to her working for us, or for anybody else, ever again. At the beginning of her trouble, she would not admit to us, nor I fancy to herself, that anything was wrong, and she was "bonny," though she went "cutting about" at a snail's pace and her cheerful old face grew haggard. Presently, there were days when she could not keep up the pretence, and then she said her head ached and she begged my pardon for the liberty. I consulted a doctor. He thought it might be neuralgia and dosed her for it; she thought it her teeth, and had almost all the few still left to her pulled out. And the pain was worse than ever. Then, as we were on the point of leaving town for some weeks, we handed over our chambers to the frowzy old charwoman, and sent Trimmer down to the sea at Hastings. She was waiting to receive us when we returned, but she gave us only the ghost of her old smile in greeting, and her face was more haggard and drawn than ever.

For a day she tottered about from one room to another, cooking, dusting, making beds, and looking all the while as if she were on the rack. She was a melancholy wreck of the old cheerful, bustling, exasperating Trimmer; and it was more than we could stand. I told her so. She forgot to beg my pardon for the liberty in her hurry to assure me that nothing was wrong, that she could work, that she wanted to work, that she was not happy when she did not work. [Pg 68]

"Oh, I'm bonny, mum, I'm bonny!" she kept saying over and over again.

Her despair at the thought of stopping work was more cruel to see than her physical torture, and I knew, without her telling me, that her fear of the pain she might have still to suffer was nothing compared to her fear of the workhouse she had toiled all her life to keep out of. She had just seven pounds and fifteen shillings for her fortune; her family, being working people, would have no use for her once she was of no use to them; our chambers were her home only so long as she could do in them what she had agreed to do; there was no Workmen's Compensation Act in those days, no old-age pensions, even if she had been old enough to get one. What was left for a poor woman, full of years and pain, save the one refuge which, all her life, she had been taught to look upon as scarcely less shameful than the prison or the scaffold? [Pg 69]

Well, Trimmer had done her best for us; now we did our best for her, and, as it turned out, the best that could be done. Through a friend, we got her into St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Her case was hopeless from the first. A malignant growth so close to the brain that at her age an operation was too serious a risk, and without it she might linger in agony for months,—this was what life had been holding in store for Trimmer during those long years of incessant toil, and self-sacrifice, and obstinate belief that a drunken husband, a selfish brother, an empty purse, were all for the best in our best of all possible worlds.

She did not know how ill she was, and her first weeks at the hospital were happy. The violence of the pain was relieved, the poor tired old body was the better for the rest and the cool and the quiet; she who had spent her strength waiting on others enjoyed the novel experience of being waited on herself. There were the visits of her family on visiting days, and mine in between, to look forward to; some of our friends, who had grown as fond of her as we, sent her fruit and flowers, and she liked the consequence all this gave her in the ward. Then, the hospital gossip was a distraction, perhaps because in talking about the sufferings of others she could forget her own. My objection was that she would spare me not a single detail. But in some curious way I could not fathom, it seemed a help to Trimmer, and I had not the heart to cut her stories short. [Pg 70]

After a month or so, the reaction came. Her head was no better, and what was the hospital good for if they couldn't cure her? She grew suspicious, hinting dark things to me about the doctors. They were keeping her there to try experiments on her, and she was a respectable woman, and always had been, and she did not like to be stared at in her bed by a lot of young fellows. The nurses were as bad. But once out of their clutches she would be "bonny" again, she knew. Probably the doctors and nurses knew too, for the same suspicion is more often than not their reward; and indeed it was so unlike Trimmer that she must have picked it up in the ward. Anyway, in their kindness they had kept her far longer than is usual in such cases, and when they saw her grow restless and unhappy, it seemed best to let her go. At the end of four months, and to her infinite joy, Trimmer, five years older than when she came to us, in the advanced stage of an incurable disease, with a capital of seven pounds and fifteen shillings, was free to begin life again. [Pg 71]

I pass quickly over the next weeks,—I wish I could have passed over them as quickly at the time. My visits were now to a drab quarter on the outskirts of Camden Town, where Trimmer had set up as a capitalist. She boarded with her cousin, many shillings of her little store going to pay the weekly bill; she found a wonderful doctor who promised to cure her in no time, and into his pockets the rest of her savings flowed. There was no persuading her that he could not succeed where the doctors at the hospital had failed, and so long as she went to him, to help her would only have meant more shillings for an unscrupulous quack who traded on the ignorance and credulity of the poor. Week by week I saw her grow feebler, week by week I knew her little capital was dribbling fast away. She seemed haunted by the dread that her place would be taken in our chambers, and that, once cured, she would have to hunt for another. That she was "bonny" was the beginning and end of all she had to say. One morning, to prove it, she managed to drag herself down to see us, arriving with just strength enough to stagger into my room, her arms outstretched to feel her way, for the disease, by this time, was affecting both eyes and brain. Nothing would satisfy her until she had gone into the studio, stumbling about among the portfolios, I on one side, on the other J., with no desire to wring her neck for it was grim tragedy we were guiding between us,—tragedy in rusty black with a reticule hanging from one arm,—five years nearer the end than when first the curtain rose upon it in our chambers. We bundled her off as fast as we could, in a cab, with the cousin who had brought her. She stopped in the doorway. [Pg 72] [Pg 73]

"Oh, I'm bonny, mum. I can cut about, you'll see!" And she would have fallen, had not the cousin caught and steadied her.

After that, she had not the strength to drag herself anywhere, not even to see the quack. A week later she took to her bed, almost blind, her poor old wits scattered beyond recovery. I was glad of that: it spared her the weary waiting and watching for death while the shadow of the grim building she feared still more drew ever nearer. I hesitated to go and see her, for my mere presence stirred her into consciousness, and reminded her of her need to work and her danger if she could not. Then there was a day when she did not seem to know I was there, and she paid no

attention to me, never spoke until just as I was going, when of a sudden she sat bolt upright:—

"Oh, I'm bonny, mum, I'm bonny. You'll see!" she wailed, and sank back on her pillows.

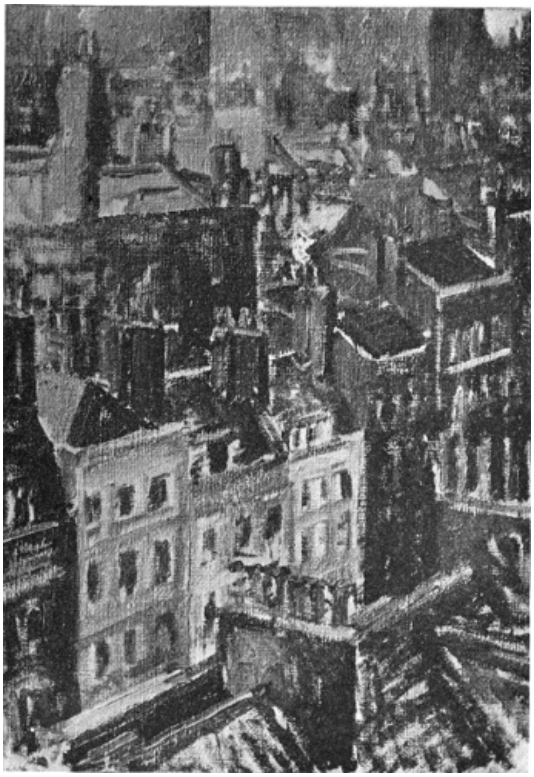
These were Trimmer's last words to me, and I left her at death's door, still crying for work, as if in the next world, as in this, it was her only salvation. Very soon, the cousin came to tell me that [Pg 74] the little capital had dribbled entirely away, and that she could not keep Trimmer without being paid for it. Could I blame her? She had her own fight against the shadow hanging all too close now over Trimmer. Her 'usband worked 'ard, she said, and they could just live respectable, and Trimmer's brothers, they was for sending Trimmer to the workus. They might have sent her, and I doubt if she would have been the wiser. But could we see her go? For our own comfort, for our own peace of mind, we interfered and arranged that Trimmer should board with her cousin until a bed was found in another hospital. It was found, mercifully, almost at once, but, before I had time to go there, the Great Release had come for her; and we heard with thankfulness that the old head was free from suffering, that the twisted hands were still, that fear of the workhouse could trouble her no more. Life's one gift to Trimmer had been toil, pain her one reward, and it was good to know that she was at rest.

The cousin brought us the news. But I had a visit the same day from the sister-in-law, the [Pg 75] paragon of virtue, a thin, sharp-faced woman of middle age. I said what I could in sympathy, telling her how much we missed Trimmer, how well we should always remember her. But this was not what she had come to hear. She let me get through. She drew the sigh appropriate for the occasion. Then she settled down to business. When did I propose to pay back the money Trimmer had spent on the doctor in Camden Town? I didn't propose to at all, I told her: he was a miserable quack and I had done my best to keep Trimmer from going to him; besides, fortunately for her, she was beyond the reach of money that was not owing to her. The sister-in-law was indignant. The family always understood I had promised, a promise was a promise, and now they depended on me for the funeral. I reminded her of the society to which Trimmer had subscribed solely to meet that expense. But she quickly let me know that the funeral the society proposed to provide fell far short of the family's standard. To them it appeared scarcely better than a pauper's. The coffin would be plain, there would be no oak and brass handles,—worse, there [Pg 76] would be no plumes for the horses and the hearse. To send their sister to her grave without plumes would disgrace them before their neighbours. Nor would there be a penny over for the family mourning,—could I allow them, the chief mourners, to mourn without crape?

I remembered their willingness to let Trimmer die as a pauper in the workhouse. After all, she would have the funeral she had provided for. She would lie no easier in her grave for oak and brass handles, for plumes and crape. Her family had made use of her all her life; I did not see why I should help them to make use of her after her death, that their grief might be trumpeted in Brixton and Camden Town. I brought the interview to an end. But sometimes I wonder if Trimmer would not have liked it better if I had helped them, if plumes had waved from the heads of the horses that drew her to her grave, if her family had followed swathed in crape. She would have looked upon it as another piece of her extraordinary good luck if, by dying, she had been of service to anybody. [Pg 77]

I do not know where they buried her. Probably nobody save ourselves to-day has as much as a thought for her. But, if self-sacrifice counts for anything, if martyrdom is a passport to heaven, then Trimmer should take her place up there by the side of St. Francis of Assisi, and Joan of Arc, and St. Vincent de Paul, and all those other blessed men and women whose lives were given for others, and who thought it was "bonny." [Pg 78]

Louise [Pg 79]



"TUMBLED, WEATHER-WORN, RED-TILED ROOFS"

[Pg 80]

[Pg 81]

III

LOUISE

For the third time since we had taken our chambers, I was servantless, and I could not summon up courage to face for the third time the scorn which the simple request for a "general" meets in the English Registry Office. That was what sent me to try my luck at a French *Bureau* in Soho, where, I was given to understand, it was possible to inquire for, and actually obtain, a good *bonne à tout faire* and escape without insult.

Louise was announced one dull November morning, a few days later. I found her waiting for me in our little hall,—a woman of about forty, short, plump, with black eyes, blacker hair, and an enchanting smile. But the powder on her face and the sham diamonds in her ears seemed to hang out danger signals, and my first impulse was to show her the door. It was something familiar in the face under the powder, above all in the voice when she spoke, that made me hesitate. [Pg 82]

"Provençale?" I asked.

"Yes, from Marseilles," she answered, and I showed her instead into my room.

I had often been "down there" where the sun shines and skies are blue, and her Provençal accent came like a breath from the south through the gloom of the London fog, bringing it all back to me,—the blinding white roads, the gray hills sweet with thyme and lavender, the towns with their "antiquities," the little shining white villages,—M. Bernard's at Martigues, and his dining-room, and the Marseillais who crowded it on a Sunday morning, and the gaiety and the laughter, and Désiré in his white apron, and the great bowls of *bouillabaisse*....

It was she who recalled me to the business of the moment. Her name was Louise Sorel, she said; she could clean, wash, play the lady's maid, sew, market, cook—but cook! *Té—au mouins*, she would show *Madame*; and, as she said it, she smiled. I have never seen such perfect teeth in woman or child; you knew at a glance that she must have been a radiant beauty in her youth. A [Pg 83] Provençal accent, an enchanting smile, and the remains of beauty, however, are not precisely what you engage a servant for; and, with a sudden access of common sense, I asked for references. Surely, *Madame* would not ask the impossible, she said reproachfully. She had but arrived in London, she had never gone as *bonne* anywhere; how, then, could she give references? She needed the work and was willing to do it: was not that sufficient? I got out of it meanly by telling her I would think it over. At that she smiled again,—really, her smile on a November day almost warranted the risk. I meant to take her; she knew; *Madame* was kind.

I did think it over,—while I interviewed slovenly English "generals" and stray Italian children, dropped upon me from Heaven knows where, while I darned the family stockings, while I ate the charwoman's chops. I thought it over indeed, far more than I wanted to, until, in despair, I returned to the Soho *Bureau* to complain that I was still without a servant of any kind. The first [Pg 84] person I saw was Louise, disconsolate, on a chair in the corner. She sprang up when she

recognized me. Had she not said *Madame* was kind? she cried. *Madame* had come for her. I had done nothing of the sort. But there she was, this charming creature from the South; at home was the charwoman, dingy and dreary as the November skies. To look back now is to wonder why I did not jump at the chance of having her. As it was, I did take her,—no references, powder, sham diamonds, and all. But I compromised. It was to be for a week. After that, we should see. An hour later she was in my kitchen.

A wonderful week followed. From the start we could not resist her charm, though to be on such terms with one's servant as to know that she has charm, is no doubt the worst possible kind of bad form. Even William Penn, the fastidious, was her slave at first sight,—and it would have been rank ingratitude if he had not been, for, from the ordinary London tabby average people saw in him, he was at once transformed into the most superb, the most magnificent of cats! And we [Pg 85] were all superb, we were all magnificent, down to the snuffy, tattered old Irish charwoman who came to make us untidy three times a week, and whom we had not the heart to turn out, because we knew that if we did, there could be no one else foolish enough to take her in again.

And Louise, though her southern imagination did such great things for us, had not overrated herself. She might be always laughing at everything, as they always do laugh "down there,"—at the English she couldn't understand, at *Mizé Boum*, the nearest she came to the charwoman's name, at the fog she must have hated, at the dirt left for her to clean. But she worked harder than any servant I have ever had, and to better purpose. She adored the cleanliness and the order, it seemed, and was appalled at the dirt and slovenliness of the English, as every Frenchwoman is when she comes to the land that has not ceased to brag of its cleanliness since its own astonished discovery of the morning tub. Before Louise, the London blacks disappeared as if by magic. Our wardrobes were overhauled and set to rights. The linen was mended and put [Pg 86] in place. And she could cook! Such *risotto*!—she had been in Italy—Such *macaroni*! Such *bouillabaisse*! Throughout that wonderful week, our chambers smelt as strong of *ail* as a Provençal kitchen.

In the face of all this, I do not see how I brought myself to find any fault. To do myself justice, I never did when it was a question of the usual domestic conventions. Louise was better than all the conventions—all the prim English maids in prim white caps—in the world. Just to hear her talk, just to have her call that disreputable old *Mizé Boum ma belle*, just to have her announce as *La Dame de la bouillabaisse* a friend of ours who had been to Provence and had come to feast on her masterpiece and praised her for it,—just each and every one of her charming southern ways made up for the worst domestic crime she could have committed, I admit to a spasm of dismay when, for the first meal she served, she appeared in her petticoat, a dish-cloth for apron, and her sleeves rolled up above her elbows. But I forgot it with her delightful laugh at herself when I [Pg 87] explained that, absurdly it might be, we preferred a skirt, an apron, and sleeves fastened at the wrists. It seemed she adored the economy too, and she had wished to protect her dress and even her apron.

These things would horrify the model housewife; but then, I am not a model housewife, and they amused me, especially as she was so quick to meet me, not only half, but the whole way. When, however, she took to running out at intervals on mysterious errands, I felt that I must object. Her first excuse was *les affaires*; her next, a friend; and, when neither of these would serve, she owned up to a husband who, apparently, spent his time waiting for her at the street corner; he was so lonely, *le pauvre*! I suggested that he should come and see her in the kitchen. She laughed outright. Why, he was of a shyness *Madame* could not figure to herself. He never would dare to mount the stairs and ring the front door-bell.

In the course of this wonderful week, there was sent to me, from the Soho *Bureau*, a Swiss girl [Pg 88] with as many references as a Colonial Dame has grandfathers. Even so, and despite the inconvenient husband, I might not have dismissed Louise,—it was so pleasant to live in an atmosphere of superlatives and *ail*. It was she who settled the matter with some vague story of a partnership in a restaurant and work waiting for her there. Perhaps we should have parted with an affectation of indifference had not J. unexpectedly interfered. Husbands have a trick of pretending superiority to details of housekeeping until you have had all the bother, and then upsetting everything by their interference. She had given us the sort of time we hadn't had since the old days in Provence, he argued; her smile alone was worth double the money agreed upon; therefore, double the money was the least I could in decency offer her. His logic was irreproachable, but housekeeping on such principles would end in domestic bankruptcy. However, Louise got the money, and my reward was her face when she thanked me—she made giving sheer self-indulgence—and the *risotto* which, in the shock of gratitude, she insisted upon [Pg 89] coming the next day to cook for us.

But, in the end, J.'s indiscretion cost me dear. As Louise was determined to magnify all our geese, not merely into swans, but into the most superb, the most magnificent swans, the few extra shillings had multiplied so miraculously by the time their fame reached the *Quartier*, that *Madame* of the *Bureau* saw in me a special Providence appointed to relieve her financial difficulties, and hurried to claim an immediate loan. Then, her claim being disregarded, she wrote to call my attention to the passing of the days and the miserable pettiness of the sum demanded, and to assure me of her consideration the most perfect. She got to be an intolerable nuisance before I heard the last of her.

We had not realized the delight of having Louise to take care of us, until she was replaced by the Swiss girl, who was industrious, sober, well-trained, with all the stolidity and surliness of her

people, and as colourless as a self-respecting servant ought to be. I was immensely relieved when, after a fortnight, she found the work too much for her. It was just as she was on the point of going that Louise reappeared, her face still white with powder, the sham diamonds still glittering in her ears, but somehow changed, I could not quite make out how. She had come, she explained to present me with a ring of pearls and opals and of surpassing beauty, at the moment pawned for a mere trifle,—here was the ticket; I had but to pay, add a smaller trifle for interest and commission, and it was mine. As I never have worn rings I did not care to begin the habit by gambling in pawn tickets, much though I should have liked to oblige Louise. Her emotion when I refused seemed so out of proportion, and yet was so unmistakably genuine, that it bewildered me. [Pg 90]

But she pulled herself together almost at once and began to talk of the restaurant which, I learned, was marching in a simply marvellous manner. It was only when, in answer to her question, I told her that the *Demoiselle Suisse* was marching not at all and was about to leave me, that the truth came out. There was no restaurant, there never had been,—except in the country of Tartarin's lions; it was her invention to spare me any self-reproach I might have felt for turning her adrift at the end of her week's engagement. She had found no work since. She and her husband had pawned everything. *Tiens*, and she emptied before me a pocketful of pawn tickets. They were without a sou. They had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours. That was the change. I began to understand. She was starving, literally starving, in the cold and gloom and damp of the London winter, she who was used to the warmth and sunshine, to the clear blue skies of Provence. If the aliens who drift to England, as to the Promised Land, could but know what awaited them! [Pg 91]

Of course I took her back. She might have added rouge to the powder, she might have glittered all over with diamonds, sham or real, and I would not have minded. J. welcomed her with joy. William Penn hung rapturously at her heels. We had a *risotto*, golden as the sun of the *Midi*, fragrant as its kitchens, for our dinner. [Pg 92]

There was no question of a week now, no question of time at all. It did not seem as if we ever could manage again, as if we ever could have managed, without Louise. And she, on her side, took possession of our chambers, and, for a ridiculously small sum a week, worked her miracles for us. We positively shone with cleanliness; London grime no longer lurked, the skeleton in our cupboards. We never ate dinners and breakfasts more to our liking, never had I been so free from housekeeping, never had my weekly bills been so small. Eventually, she charged herself with the marketing, though she could not, and never could, learn to speak a word of English; but not even the London tradesman was proof against her smile. She kept the weekly accounts, though she could neither read nor write: in her intelligence, an eloquent witness to the folly of general education. She was, in a word, the most capable and intelligent woman I have ever met, so that it was the more astounding that she should also be the most charming.

Most astounding of all was the way, entirely, typically Provençale as she was, she could adapt herself to London and its life and people. Though she wore in the street an ordinary felt hat, and in the house the English apron, you could see that her hair was made for the pretty Provençal ribbon, and her broad shoulders for the Provençal fichu. *Té*, *vé*, and *au mouins* were as constantly in her mouth as in Tartarin's. Provençal proverbs forever hovered on her lips. She sang Provençal songs at her work. She had ready a Provençal story for every occasion. Her very adjectives were Mistral's, her very exaggerations Daudet's. And yet she did everything as if she had been a "general" in London chambers all her life. Nothing came amiss to her. After her first startling appearance as waitress, it was no time before she was serving at table as if she had been born to it, and with such a grace of her own that every dish she offered seemed a personal tribute. People who had never seen her before would smile back involuntarily as they helped themselves. It was the same no matter what she did. She was always gay, however heavy her task. To her even London, with its fogs, was a *galéjado*, as they say "down there." And she was so appreciative. We would make excuses to give her things for the pleasure of watching the warm glow spread over her face and the light leap to her eyes. We would send her to the theatre for the delight of having her come back and tell us about it. All the world, on and off the stage, was exalted and transfigured as she saw it. [Pg 93] [Pg 94]

But frank as she was in her admiration of all the world, she remained curiously reticent about herself. "My poor grandmother used to say, you must turn your tongue seven times in your mouth before speaking," she said to me once; and I used to fancy she gave hers a few extra twists when it came to talking of her own affairs. Some few facts I gathered: that she had been at one time an *ouvreuse* in a Marseilles theatre; at another, a tailoress,—how accomplished, the smart appearance of her husband in J.'s old coats and trousers was to show us; and that, always, off and on, she had made a business of buying at the periodical sales of the *Mont de Piété* and selling at private sales of her own. I gathered also that they all knew her in Marseilles; it was Louise here, Louise there, as she passed through the market, and everybody must have a word and a laugh with her. No wonder! You couldn't have a word and a laugh once with Louise and not long to repeat the experience. But to her life when the hours of work were over, she offered next to no clue. [Pg 95]

Only one or two figures flitted, pale shadows, through her rare reminiscences. One was the old grandmother, whose sayings were full of wisdom, but who seemed to have done little for her save give her, fortunately, no schooling at all, and a religious education that bore the most surprising fruit. Louise had made her first communion, she had walked in procession on feast days. *J'adorais ça*, she would tell me, as she recalled her long white veil and the taper in her hand. But she

adored every bit as much going to the Salvation Army meetings,—the lassies would invite her in, and lend her a hymn-book, and she would sing as hard as ever she could, was her account. Her ideas on the subject of the Scriptures and the relations of the Holy Family left me gasping. But [Pg 96] her creed had the merit of simplicity. The *Boun Diou* was intelligent, she maintained; *il aime les gens honnêtes*. He would not ask her to hurry off to church and leave all in disorder at home, and waste her time. If she needed to pray, she knelt down where and as she was, and the *Boun Diou* was as well pleased. He was a man like us, wasn't He? Well then, He understood.

There was also a sister. She occupied a modest apartment in Marseilles when she first dawned upon our horizon, but so rapidly did it expand into a palatial house in town and a palatial villa by the sea, both with cellars of rare and exquisite vintages and stables full of horses and carriages, that we looked confidently to the fast-approaching day when we should find her installed in the Elysée at Paris. Only in one respect did she never vary by a hair's breadth: this was her hatred of Louise's husband.

Here, at all events, was a member of the family about whom we learned more than we cared to know. For if he did not show himself at first, that did not mean his willingness to let us ignore [Pg 97] him. He persisted in wanting Louise to meet him at the corner, sometimes just when I most wanted her in the kitchen. He would have her come back to him at night; and to see her, after her day's hard work, start out in the black sodden streets, seldom earlier than ten, often as late as midnight; to realize that she must start back long before the sun would have thought of coming up, if the sun ever did come up on a London winter morning, made us wretchedly uncomfortable. The husband, however, was not to be moved by any messages I might send him. He was too shy to grant the interview I asked. But he gave me to understand through her that he wouldn't do without her, he would rather starve, he couldn't get along without her. We did not blame him: we couldn't, either. That was why, after several weeks of discomfort to all concerned, it occurred to us that we might invite him to make our home his; and we were charmed by his condescension when, at last conquering his shyness, he accepted our invitation. The threatened deadlock was thus settled, and M. Auguste, as he introduced himself, came to us as a guest for as [Pg 98] long as he chose to stay. There were friends—there always are—to warn us that what we were doing was sheer madness. What did we know about him, anyway? Precious little, it was a fact: that he was the husband of Louise, neither more nor less. We did not even know that, it was hinted. But if Louise had not asked for our marriage certificate, could we insist upon her producing hers?

It may have been mad, but it worked excellently. M. Auguste as a guest was the pattern of discretion. I had never had so much as a glimpse of him until he came to visit us. Then I found him a good-looking man, evidently a few years younger than Louise, well-built, rather taller than the average Frenchman. Beyond this, it was weeks before I knew anything of him except the astonishing adroitness with which he kept out of our way. He quickly learned our hours and arranged his accordingly. After we had begun work in the morning, he would saunter down to the kitchen and have his coffee, the one person of leisure in the establishment. After that, and again [Pg 99] in the afternoon, he would stroll out to attend to what I take were the not too arduous duties of a horse-dealer with neither horses nor capital,—for as a horse-dealer he described himself when he had got so far as to describe himself at all. At noon and at dinner-time, he would return from Tattersall's, or wherever his not too exhausting business had called him, with a small paper parcel supposed to contain his breakfast or his dinner, our agreement being that he was to supply his own food. The evenings he spent with Louise. I could discover no vice in him except the, to us, disturbing excess of his devotion to her. You read of this sort of devotion in French novels and do not believe in it. But M. Auguste, in his exacting dependence on Louise, left the French novel far behind. As for Louise, though she was no longer young and beauty fades early in the South, I have never met, in or out of books, a woman who made me understand so well the reason of the selfishness some men call love.

M. Auguste's manners to us were irreproachable. We could only admire the consideration he [Pg 100] showed in so persistently effacing himself. J. never would have seen him, if on feast days—Christmas, New Year's, the 14th of July—M. Auguste had not, with great ceremony, entered the dining-room at the hour of morning coffee to shake hands and wish J. the compliments of the season. With me his relations grew less formal, for he was not slow to discover that we had one pleasant weakness in common. Though the modest proportions of that brown-paper parcel might not suggest it, M. Auguste knew and liked what was good to eat; so did I. Almost before I realized it, he had fallen into the habit of preparing some special dish for me, or of making my coffee, when I chanced to be alone for lunch or for dinner. I can still see the gleam in his eyes as he brought me in my cup, and assured me that he, not Louise, was the artist, and that it was something of extra—but of extra!—as it always was. Nor was it long before he was installed *chef* in our kitchen on the occasion of any little breakfast or dinner we might be giving. The first time I caught him in shirt-sleeves, with Louise's apron flapping about his legs and the bib drawn over [Pg 101] his waistcoat, he was inclined to be apologetic. But he soon gave up apology. It was evident there were few things he enjoyed more than cooking a good dinner,—unless it was eating it,—and his apron was put on early in the day. In the end, I never asked any one to breakfast or dinner without consulting him, and his *menus* strengthened the friendliness of our relations.

After a while he ran my errands and helped Louise to market. I found that he spoke and wrote very good English, and was a man of some education. I have preserved his daily accounts, written in an unusually neat handwriting, always beginning "Mussy: 1 penny"; and this reminds me that not least in his favour was his success in ingratiating himself with William Penn,—or "Mussy" in

Louise's one heroic attempt to cope with the English. M. Auguste, moreover, was quiet and reserved to a degree that would not have discredited the traditional Englishman. Only now and then did the *Midi* show itself in him: in the gleam of his eye over his gastronomic masterpieces; in [Pg 102] his pose as horse-dealer and the scale on which the business he never did was schemed, —*Mademoiselle*, the French dressmaker from Versailles, who counted in tens and thought herself rich, was dazzled by the way M. Auguste reckoned by thousands; and once, luckily only once, in a frenzied outbreak of passion.

He was called to Paris, I never understood why. When the day came, he was seized with such despair as I had never seen before, as I trust I may never have to see again. He could not leave Louise, he would not. No! No! No! He raved, he swore, he wept. I was terrified, but Louise, when I called her aside to consult her, shrugged her shoulders. "We play the comedy in the kitchen," she laughed, but I noticed that her laughter was low. I fancy when you played the comedy with M. Auguste, tragedy was only just round the corner. With the help of *Mademoiselle* she got him to the station; he had wanted to throw himself from the train as it started, was her report. And in three days, not a penny the richer for the journey, he had returned to his life of ease in our [Pg 103] chambers.

Thus we came to know M. Auguste's virtues and something of his temper, but never M. Auguste himself. The months passed, and we were still conscious of mystery. I did not inspire him with the healthy fear he entertained for J., but I cannot say he ever took me into his confidence. What he was when not in our chambers; what he had been before he moved into them; what turn of fate had stranded him, penniless, in London with Louise, to make us the richer for his coming; why he, a man of education, was married to a woman of none; why he was M. Auguste while Louise was Louise Sorel—I knew as little the day he left us as the day he arrived. J. instinctively distrusted him, convinced that he had committed some monstrous crime and was in hiding. This was also the opinion of the French Quarter, as I learned afterwards. It seems the *Quartier* held its breath when it heard he was our guest, and waited for the worst, only uncertain what form that worst would take,—whether we should be assassinated in our beds, or a bonfire made of our [Pg 104] chambers. M. Auguste, however, spared us and disappointed the *Quartier*. His crime, to the end, remained as baffling as the identity of the Man in the Iron Mask, or the secret of Kaspar Hauser.

That he was honest, I would wager my own reputation for honesty, even if it was curious the way his fingers gradually covered themselves with rings, a watch-chain dangled from his waistcoat pocket, a pin was stuck jauntily in his necktie. Her last purchases at the *Mont de Piété*, pawned during those first weeks of starving in London and gradually redeemed, was Louise's explanation; and why should we have suspected M. Auguste of coming by them unlawfully when he never attempted to rob us, though we gave him every opportunity? He knew where I kept my money and my keys. He was alone with Louise in our chambers, not only many a day and evening, but once for a long summer.

We had to cycle down into Italy and William Penn could not be left to care for himself, nor could we board him out without risking the individuality of a cat who had never seen the world except [Pg 105] from the top of a four-story house. Louise and M. Auguste, therefore, were retained to look after him, which, I should add, they did in a manner as satisfactory to William as to ourselves. Every week I received a report of his health and appetite from M. Auguste, in whom I discovered a new and delightful talent as correspondent. "*Depuis votre départ*," said the first, "*cette pauvre bête a miaulé après vous tous les jours, et il est constamment à la porte pour voir si vous ne venez pas. Il ne commence vraiment à en prendre son parti que depuis hier. Mais tous ces soucis de chat* [for that charming phrase what would one not have forgiven M. Auguste?], *mais tous ces soucis de chat ne l'empêchent pas de bien boire son lait le matin et manger sa viande deux fois par jour.*" Nor was it all colour of rose to be in charge of William. "*Figurez-vous*," the next report ran, "*que Mussy a dévoré et abîmé complêtement une paire de bas tout neufs que Louise s'est achetée hier. C'est un vrai petit diable, mais il est si gentil qu'on ne peut vraiment pas le gronder pour cela.*" It was consoling to hear eventually that William had returned to normal pursuits. "*Mussy* [Pg 106] *est bien sage, il a attrapé une souris hier dans la cuisine—je crois bien que Madame ne trouvera jamais un aussi gentil Mussy.*" And so the journal of William's movements was continued throughout our absence. When, leaving J. in Italy, I returned to London,—met at midnight at the station by M. Auguste with flattering enthusiasm,—Mussy's condition and behaviour corroborated the weekly bulletins. And not only this. Our chambers were as clean as the proverbial new pin: everything was in its place; not so much as a scrap of paper was missing. The only thing that had disappeared was the sprinkling of gray in Louise's hair, and for this M. Auguste volubly prepared me during our walk from the station; she had dyed it with almost unforeseen success, he told me, so triumphantly that I put down the bottle of dye to his extravagance.

If I know M. Auguste was not a thief, I do not think he was a murderer. How could I see blood on the hands of the man who presided so joyously over my pots and pans? If he were a forger, my [Pg 107] trust in him never led to abuse of my cheque book; if a deserter, how came he to be possessed of his *livret militaire* duly signed, as my own eyes are the witness? how could he venture back to France, as I know he did for I received from him letters with the Paris postmark? An anarchist, J. was inclined to believe. But I could not imagine him dabbling in bombs and fuses. To be a horse-dealer, without horses or money, was much more in his line.

Only of one thing were we sure: however hideous or horrible the evil, M. Auguste had worked "down there," under the hot sun of Provence, Louise had no part in it. She knew—it was the reason of her curious reticences, of her sacrifice of herself to him. That he loved her was

inevitable. Who could help loving her? She was so intelligent, so graceful, so gay. But that she should love M. Auguste would have been incomprehensible, were it not in the nature of woman to love the man who is most selfish in his dependence upon her. She did all the work, and he had all the pleasure of it. He was always decently dressed, there was always money in his pocket, though [Pg 108] she, who earned it, never had a penny to spend on herself. No matter how busy and hurried she might be, she had always the leisure to talk to him, to amuse him when he came in, always the courage to laugh, like the little Fleurance in the story. What would you? She was made like that. She had always laughed, when she was sad as when she was gay. And while she was making life delightful for him, she was doing for us what three Englishwomen combined could not have done so well, and with a charm that all the Englishwomen in the world could not have mustered among them.

She had been with us about a year when I began to notice that, at moments, her face was clouded and her smile less ready. At first, I put it down to her endless comedy with M. Auguste. But, after a bit, it looked as if the trouble were more serious even than his histrionics. It was nothing, she laughed when I spoke to her; it would pass. And she went on amusing and providing for M. Auguste and working for us. But by the time the dark days of November set in, we were more [Pg 109] worried about her than ever. The crisis came with Christmas.

On Christmas Day, friends were to dine with us, and we invited *Mademoiselle*, the French dressmaker, to eat her Christmas dinner with Louise and M. Auguste. We were very staid in the dining-room,—it turned out rather a dull affair. But in the kitchen it was an uproarious feast. Though she lived some distance away, though on Christmas night London omnibuses are few and far between, *Mademoiselle* could hardly be persuaded to go home, so much was she enjoying herself. Louise was all laughter. "You have been amused?" I asked, when *Mademoiselle*, finally and reluctantly, had been bundled off by J. in a hansom.

"*Mais oui, mais oui*," M. Auguste cried, pleasure in his voice. "*Cette pauvre Mademoiselle!* Her life, it is so sad, she is so alone. It is good for her to be amused. We have told her many stories, *—et des histoires un tout petit peu salées, n'est-ce pas? pour égayer cette pauvre Mademoiselle?*" [Pg 110]

It was the day after the feast that Louise had to give in. She confessed she had been in torture while she served our dinner and *Mademoiselle* was there. She could hardly eat or drink. But why make it sad for all the world because she was in pain? and she had laughed, she had laughed!

We scolded her first. Then we sent her to a good doctor. It was worse than we feared. The trouble was grave, there must be an operation without delay. The big tears rolled down her cheeks as she said it. She looked old and broken. Why, she moaned, should this sorrow come to her? She had never done any harm to any one: why should she have to suffer? Why, indeed? Her mistake had been to do too little harm, too much good, to others, to think too little of herself. Now, she had to pay for it as one almost always does pay for one's good deeds. She worried far less over the pain she must bear than over the inconvenience to M. Auguste when she could no longer earn money for him.

We wanted her to go into one of the London hospitals. We offered to take a room for her where [Pg 111] she could stay after the operation until she got back her strength. But we must not think her ungrateful, the mere idea of a hospital made her desperate. And what would she do in a room *avec un homme comme ça*. Besides, there was the sister in Marseilles, and, in the hour of her distress, her sister's horses and carriages multiplied like the miraculous loaves and fishes, the vintages in the cellar doubled in age and strength. And she was going to die; it was queer, but one knew those things; and she longed to die *là-bas*, where there was a sun and the sky was blue, where she was at home. We knew she had not a penny for the journey. M. Auguste had seen to that. Naturally, J. gave her the money. He would not have had a moment's comfort if he had not, —the drain upon your own emotions is part of the penalty you pay for having a human being and not a machine to work for you,—and he added a little more to keep her from want on her arrival in Marseilles, in case the sister had vanished or the sister's fortunes had dwindled to their original proportions. He exacted but one condition: M. Auguste was not to know there was more [Pg 112] than enough for the journey.

Louise's last days with us were passed in tears,—poor Louise! who until now had laughed at fate. It was at this juncture that M. Auguste came out strong. I could not have believed he had it in him. He no longer spent his time dodging J. and dealing in visionary horses. He took Louise's place boldly. He made the beds, cooked all our meals, waited on us, dusted, opened the door, while Louise sat, melancholy and forlorn, in front of the kitchen fire. On the last day of all—she was not to start until the afternoon Continental train—she drew me mysteriously into the dining-room, she shut the door with every precaution, she showed me where she had sewed the extra sovereigns in her stays. M. Auguste should never know. "*Je pars pour mon long voyage*," she repeated. "*J'ai mes pressentiments*." And she was going to ask them to let her wear a black skirt I had given her, and an old coat of J.'s she had turned into a bodice, when the time came to lay her in her coffin. Thus something of ours would go with her on the long journey. How could she [Pg 113] forget us? How could we forget her? she might better have asked. I made a thousand excuses to leave her; Louise playing "the comedy" had never been so tragic as Louise in tears. But she would have me back again, and again, and again, to tell me how happy she had been with us.

"Why, I was at home," she said, her surprise not yet outworn. "*J'étais chez moi, et j'étais si tranquille.* I went. I came. *Monsieur* entered. He called me. '*Louise.*'—'*Oui, Monsieur.*'—'*Voulez-vous faire ceci ou cela?*'—'*Mais oui, Monsieur, de suite.*' And I would do it and *Monsieur* would say, '*Merci, Louise*,' and he would go. And me, I would run quick to the kitchen or upstairs to

finish my work. *J'étais si tranquille!*"

The simplicity of the memories she treasured made her story of them pitiful as I listened. How little peace had fallen to her lot, that she should prize the quiet and homeliness of her duties in our chambers!

At last it was time to go. She kissed me on both cheeks. She gave J. one look, then she flung herself into his arms and kissed him too on both cheeks. She almost strangled William Penn. She sobbed so, she couldn't speak. She clutched and kissed us again. She ran out of the door and we heard her sobbing down the three flights of stairs into the street. J. hurried into his workroom. I went back to my desk. I don't think we could have spoken either. [Pg 114]

Two days afterwards, a letter from M. Auguste came to our chambers, so empty and forlorn without Louise. They were in Paris. They had had a dreadful crossing,—he hardly thought Louise would arrive at Boulogne alive. She was better, but must rest a day or two before starting for the *Midi*. She begged us to see that Mussy ate his meals *bien régulièrement*, and that he "made the dead" from time to time, as she had taught him; and, would we write? The address was Mr. Auguste, Horse-Dealer, Hotel du Cheval Blanc, Rue Chat-qui-pèche-â-la-ligne, Paris.

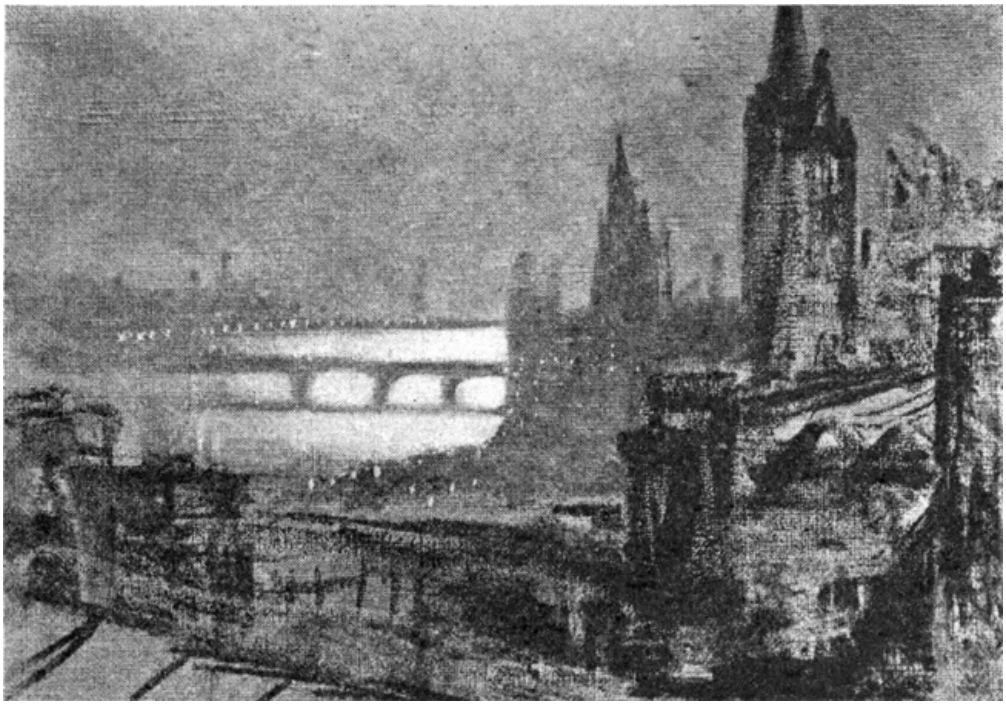
Horse-dealer! Louise might be at death's door, but M. Auguste had his position to maintain. Then, after ten long days, came a post-card, also from Paris: Louise was in Marseilles, he was on the point of going, once there he would write. Then—nothing. Had he gone? Could he go? [Pg 115]

If I were writing a romance it would, with dramatic fitness, end here. But if I keep to facts, I must add that, in about eight months, Louise and M. Auguste reappeared; that both were in the best of health and spirits, M. Auguste a mass of jewelry; that all the sunshine of Provence seemed let loose in the warmth of their greeting; that horse-dealing for the moment prospered too splendidly for Louise to want to return to us,—or was this a new invention, I have always wondered, because she found in her place another Frenchwoman who wept at the prospect of being dismissed to make room for her?

Well, anyway, for a while, things, according to Louise, continued to prosper. She would pay me friendly visits and ask for sewing,—her afternoons were so long,—and tell me of M. Auguste's success, and of Provence, though there were the old reticences. By degrees, a shadow fell over the gaiety. I fancied that "the comedy" was being played faster than ever in the Soho lodgings. And, of a sudden, the fabric of prosperity collapsed like a house of cards. She was ill again, and again an operation was necessary. There was not a penny in her pockets nor in M. Auguste's. What happened? Louise had only to smile, and we were her slaves. But this time, for us at least, the end had really come. We heard nothing more from either of them. No letters reached us from Paris, no post-cards. Did she use the money to go back to Marseilles? Did she ever leave London? Did M. Auguste's fate overtake him when they crossed the Channel? Were the Soho lodgings the scene of some tremendous *crime passionel*? For weeks I searched the police reports in my morning paper. But neither then nor to this day have I had a trace of the woman who, for over a year, gave to life in our chambers the comfort and the charm of her presence. She vanished. [Pg 116]

I am certain, though, that wherever she may be, she is mothering M. Auguste, squandering upon him all the wealth of her industry, her gaiety, her unselfishness. She couldn't help herself, she was made that way. And the worst, the real tragedy of it, is that she would rather endure every possible wrong with M. Auguste than, without him, enjoy all the rights women not made that way would give her if they could. She has convinced me of the truth I already more than suspected: it is upon the M. Augustes of this world that the Woman Question will eventually be wrecked. [Pg 117] [Pg 118]

Our Charwomen [Pg 119]



"UP TO WESTMINSTER"

[Pg 120]

IV

[Pg 121]

OUR CHARWOMAN

I took over the charwoman with our chambers, and a great piece of luck I thought it; for charwomen never advertise, and are unheard of in Registry Offices. It was certain I could not get into the chambers without one, and at that early stage of my housekeeping in London I should not have known where in the world to look for her.

Mrs. Maxfielde was the highly respectable name of the woman who had "done" for the previous tenant, and had she heard of Mr. Shandy's theory of names she could not have been more successful in adapting her person and her manner to her own. She was well over sixty, and thin and gaunt as if she had never had enough to eat; but age and hunger had not lessened her hold upon the decencies of life. Worthiness oozed from her. Victorian was stamped all over her,—it was in her black shawl and bonnet, in the meekness of her pose, in the little curtsy she bobbed [Pg 122] when she spoke. I remember Harold Frederic seeing her once and, with the intuition of the novelist, placing her: "Who is your old Queen Victoria?" he asked. Her presence lost nothing when she took off her shawl and bonnet. In the house and at work she wore a black dress and a white apron, surprisingly clean considering the dirt she exposed it to, and her grey hair was drawn tight back and rolled into a little hard knob, the scant supply and "the parting all too wide" painfully exposed to view. I longed for something to cover the old grey head that looked so grandmotherly and out of keeping as it bent over scrubbing-brushes and dustpans and the kitchen range, but it would have been against all the conventions for a charwoman to appear in a servant's cap. There is a rigid line in these English matters, and to attempt to step across is to face the contempt of those who draw it. The British charwoman must go capless, such is the unwritten law; also, she must remain "Miss" or "Mrs.," though the Empire would totter were the [Pg 123] British servant called by anything but her name; and while the servant would "forget her place" were she to know how to do any work outside her own, the charwoman is expected to meet every emergency, and this was in days when housekeeping for me was little more than a long succession of emergencies.

Mrs. Maxfielde was equal to all. She saw me triumphantly through one domestic crisis after another. She was the most accomplished of her accomplished class, and the most willing. She was never discouraged by the magnitude of the tasks I set her, nor did she ever take advantage of my dependence upon her. On the contrary, she let me take advantage of her willingness. She cleaned up after the British Workman had been in possession for a couple of months, and one of the few things the British Workman can do successfully is to leave dirt to be cleaned up. She helped me move in and settle down. She supported me through my trying episode with 'Enrietter. And after 'Enrietter's disappearance she saved me from domestic chaos, though the work and the hours involved would have daunted a woman half her age and outraged every trade-union in the [Pg 124] country. She arrived at seven in the morning, and I quickly handed over to her the key of the front door, that I might indulge in the extra hour of sleep of which she was so much more in need; she stayed until eight in the evening, or, at my request, until nine or later; and in between she "did" for me in the fullest sense of that expressive word. There were times when it meant "doing" also for my friends whom I was inconsiderate enough to invite to come and see me in my

domestic upheaval, putting their friendship to the test still further by inducing them to share the luncheons and dinners of Mrs. Maxfielde's cooking. Many as were her good points, I cannot in conscience say that cooking was among them. Hers might have been the vegetables of which Heine wrote that they were brought to the table just as God made them, hers the gravies against which he prayed Heaven to keep every Christian. But I thought it much to be thankful for that she could cook at all when, to judge from the amount she ate, she could have had so little [Pg 125] practice in cooking for herself. She did not need to go through any "fast cure," having done nothing but fast all her life. She had got out of the way of eating and into the way of starving; the choicest dish would not have tempted her. The one thing she showed the least appetite for was her "'arf pint" at noon, and that she would not do without though she had to fetch it from the "public" round the corner. I cannot say with greater truth that Mrs. Maxfielde's talent lay in waiting, but she never allowed anything or anybody to hurry her, and she was noiseless in her movements, both excellent things in a waitress. I cannot even say that in her own line of scrubbing she was above suspicion, but she handled her brushes and brooms and dusters with a calm and dignity which, in my troubles, I found very soothing. Her repose may have been less a virtue than the result of want of proper food, but in any case it was a great help in the midst of the confusion she was called to struggle with. There was only one drawback. It had a way of deserting her just when I was most in need of it. [Pg 126]

We are all human, and Mrs. Maxfielde was not without her weakness: she was afflicted with nerves. In looking back I can see how in character her sensibility was. It belonged to the old shawl and the demure bonnet, to the meekness of pose, to the bobbing of curtsies,—it was Victorian. But at the time I was more struck by its inconvenience. A late milkman or a faithless butcher would bring her to the verge of collapse. She would jump at the over-boiling of the kettle. Her hand went to her heart on the slightest provocation, and stayed there with a persistency that made me suspect her of seeking her dissipation in disaster. On the morning after our fire, though she had been at home in her own bed through all the danger of it, she was in such a flutter that I should have had to revive her with salts had not a dozen firemen, policemen, and salvage men been waiting for her to refresh them with tea. It was only when one of the firemen took the kettle from her helpless hand, saying he was a family man himself, and when I stood sternly over her that, like an elderly Charlotte, she fell to cutting bread and butter, and regained the calm and [Pg 127] dignity becoming to her. But I never saw her so agitated as the day she met a rat in the cellar. I had supposed it was only in comic papers and old-fashioned novels that a rat or a mouse could drive a sensible woman into hysterics. But Mrs. Maxfielde showed me my mistake. From that innocent encounter in the cellar she bounded up the four flights of stairs, burst into my room, and, breathless, livid, both hands on her heart, sank into a chair: a liberty which at any other time she would have regarded as a breach of all the proprieties. "Oh, mum!" she gasped, "in the cellar!—a rat!" And she was not herself again until the next morning.

After her day's work and her excitement in the course of it, it seemed as if Mrs. Maxfielde could have neither time nor energy for a life of her own outside our chambers. But she had, and a very full life it was, and with the details as she confided them to me, I got to know a great deal about "how the poor live," which I should have preferred to learn from a novel or a Blue Book. She had a husband, much older, who had been paralyzed for years. Before she came to me in the morning [Pg 128] she had to get him up for the day, give him his breakfast, and leave everything in order for him, and as she lived half an hour's walk from our chambers and never failed to reach them by seven, there was no need to ask how early she had to get herself up. For a few pence a friendly neighbour looked in and attended to him during the day. After Mrs. Maxfielde left me, at eight or nine or ten in the evening, and after her half hour's walk back, she had to prepare his supper and put him to bed; and again I did not have to ask how late she put her own weary self there too. Old age was once said to begin at forty-six; we are more strenuous now; but according to the kindest computations, it had well overtaken her. And yet she was working harder than she probably ever had in her youth, with less rest and with the pleasing certainty that she would go on working day in and day out and never succeed in securing the mere necessities of life. She might have all the virtues, sobriety, industry, economy,—and she had,—and the best she could hope was just to keep [Pg 129] soul and body together for her husband and herself, and a little corner they could call their own. She did not tell me how the husband earned a living before paralysis kept him from earning anything at all, but he too must have been worthy of his name, for now he was helpless, the parish allowed him "outdoor relief" to the extent of three shillings and sixpence, or about eighty cents a week; it was before old-age pensions had been invented by a vote-touting Government. This munificent sum, paid for a room somewhere in a "Building," one of those gloomy barracks with the outside iron stairway in common, where clothes are forever drying in the thick, soot-laden London air, and children are forever howling and shrieking. For everything else Mrs. Maxfielde had to provide. If she worked every day except Sunday, her earnings amounted to fifteen shillings, or a little less than four dollars, a week. But there were weeks when she could obtain only one day's work, weeks when she could obtain none, and she and her husband had still to live, had still to eat something, well as they had trained themselves, as so many must, in the [Pg 130] habit of not eating enough. Here was an economic problem calculated to bewilder more youthful and brilliant brains than hers. But she never complained, she never grumbled, she never got discouraged. She might fly before a rat, but in the face of the hopeless horrors of life she retained her beautiful placidity, though I, when I realized the full weight of the burden she had to bear, began to wonder less how, than why, the poor live.

Mrs. Maxfielde came in the early spring. By the time winter, with its fogs, set in, age had so far overtaken her that she could not manage to attend to her husband and his wants and then drag her old body to our chambers by seven o'clock in the morning. It was she who gave notice; I

never should have had the courage. We parted friends, and she was so amiable as not to deprive me of her problems with her services. When she could not work for me, she visited me, making it her rule to call on Monday afternoon; a rule she observed with such regularity that I fancied Monday must be her day for collecting the husband's income from the parish and her own from [Pg 131] private sources. She rarely allowed a week to pass without presenting herself, always appearing in the same Victorian costume and carrying off the interview with the same Victorian manner. She never stooped to beg, but her hand was ready for the coin which I slipped into it with the embarrassment of the giver, but which she received with enviable calmness and a little curtsy. The hour of her visit was so timed that, when her talk with me was over, she could adjourn to the kitchen for dinner and, under Augustine's rule, a glass of wine, which, though beer would have been more to her taste, she drank as a concession to the poor foreigner who did not know any better.

Before a second winter had passed, Mrs. Maxfielde was forced to admit that she was too old for anybody to want her, or to accept a post if anybody did. But, all the same, the paralytic clung to his shadow of life with the obstinate tenacity of the human derelict, and she clung to her idea of home, and they starved on in the room the parish paid for until it was a positive relief to me [Pg 132] when, after more years of starvation than I cared to count, she came to announce his death. It was no relief to her. She was full of grief, and permitted nothing to distract her from the luxury she made of it. The coin which passed from my hand to hers on the occasion of this visit, doubled in token of condolence, was invested in an elaborate crape bonnet, and she left it to me to worry about her future. I might have afforded to accept her trust with a greater show of enthusiasm, for, at once and with unlooked-for intelligence, the parish decided to allow her the same weekly sum her husband had received, and Mrs. Maxfielde, endowed with this large and princely income, became a parent so worthy of filial devotion that a daughter I had never heard of materialized, and expressed a desire to share her home with her mother.

The daughter was married, her husband was an unskilled labourer, and they had a large and increasing family. It is likely that Mrs. Maxfielde paid in more than money for the shelter, and that her own flesh-and-blood was less chary than strangers would have been in employing her [Pg 133] services, and less mindful of the now more than seventy years she had toiled to live. Perhaps her visits at this period were a little more frequent, perhaps her dinners were eaten and her wine drunk with a little more eagerness. But she refrained from any pose, she indulged in no heroics, she entertained me with no whinings, no railings against the ingratitude sharper than a serpent's tooth. However she got her ease, it was not in weeping, and what she had to bear from her daughter she bore in silence. Her Victorian sense of propriety would have been offended by a display of feeling. She became so pitiful a figure that I shrank from her visits. But she was content, she found no fault with life, and wealth being a matter of comparison, I am sure she was, in her turn, moved to pity for the more unfortunate who had not kept themselves out of the workhouse. Had she had her way, she would have been willing to slave indefinitely for her daughter and her daughter's children. But Death was wiser and brought her the rest she deserved so well and so little craved. [Pg 134]

A couple of years or so after the loss of her husband, and after she had failed to appear, much to my surprise, on three or four Mondays in succession, a letter came from her daughter to tell me that never again would Monday bring Mrs. Maxfielde to my chambers. There had been no special illness. She had just worn out, that was all. Her time had come after long and cruel days of toil and her passing was unnoted, for hers was a place easily filled,—that was the grisly thing about it. J. and I sent a wreath of flowers for the funeral, knowing that she would have welcomed it as propriety's crown of propriety, and it was my last communication with the Maxfielde family. I had never met the daughter, and I was the more reluctant to go abroad in search of objects of charity because they had such an inconsiderate way of seeking me out in my own kitchen. I was already "suited" with another old woman in Mrs. Maxfielde's place. I was already visited by one or two others. In fact, I was so surrounded by old women that Augustine, when she first came to the rescue, used to laugh with the insolence of youth at *les vieilles femmes de Madame*. [Pg 135]

My new old woman was Mrs. Burden. Had I hunted all London over, I could not have found a more complete contrast to Mrs. Maxfielde. She was Irish, with no respect for Victorian proprieties, but as disreputable looking an old charwoman as you would care to see; large and floppy in figure, elephantine in movement, her face rough and dug deep by the trenches of more than fifty winters, her hair frowzy, her dress ragged, with the bodice always open at the neck and the sleeves always rolled up above the elbows, her apron an old calico rag, and her person and her clothes profusely sprinkled with snuff. In the street she wrapped herself in a horrible grey blanket-shawl, and on top of her disorderly old head set a little battered bonnet with two wisps of strings dangling about. When I knew her better I discovered that she owned a black shawl with fringe, and a bonnet that could tie under the chin, and in these made a very fine appearance. But they were reserved for such ceremonial occasions as Mass on Sunday or the funeral of a friend, [Pg 136] and at other times she kept to the costume that so shamefully maligned her. For, if she looked like one of the terrible harpies who hang about the public house in every London slum, she was really the most sober creature in the world and never touched a drop, Mr. Burden, who drank himself into an early grave, having drunk enough for two.

I cannot remember now where Mrs. Burden came from, or why, when I had seen her once, I ever consented to see her again. But she quickly grew into a fixture in our chambers, and it was some eight or nine years before I was rid of her. In the beginning she was engaged for three mornings, later on for every morning, in the week. Her hours were from seven to twelve, during which time

my chief object was to keep her safely shut up in the kitchen, for no degree of pretending on my part could make me believe in her as an ornament or a credit to our house. It mortified me to have her show her snuffy old face at the front door, and I should never have dared to send her on the many messages she ran for me had she not been known to everybody in the Quarter; but once [Pg 137] Mrs. Burden was known it was all right, for she was as good as she was sober. Hers, however, was the goodness of the man in the Italian proverb who was so good that he was good for nothing. She was willing to do anything, but there was nothing she could do well, and most things she could not do at all. She made no pretence to cook, and if she had I could not have eaten anything of her cooking, for I knew snuff must flavour everything she touched. To have seen her big person and frowzy head in the dining-room would have been fatal to appetite had I ever had the folly, under any circumstances, to ask her to wait. Nor did she excel in scrubbing and dusting. She was successful chiefly in leaving things dirtier than she found them, and Augustine, whose ideal is high in these matters, insisted that Mrs. Burden spent the morning making the dirt she had to spend the afternoon cleaning up. There were times when they almost came to blows, for the temper of both was hot, and more than once I heard Mrs. Burden threaten to call in the [Pg 138] police. But the old woman had her uses. She was honesty itself, and could be trusted with no matter what,—from the key of our chambers, when they were left empty, to the care of William Penn, when no other companion could be secured for him; she could be relied upon to pay bills, post letters, fetch parcels; and she was as punctual as Big Ben at Westminster. I do not think she missed a day in all the years she was with me. I became accustomed, too, to seeing her about, and there was the dread—or conviction would be nearer the truth—that if I let her go nobody else in their senses would take her in.

Mrs. Burden did not improve with time. She never condescended to borrow qualities that did not belong to her. She grew more unwieldy and larger and floppier, a misfortune she attributed to some mysterious malady which she never named, but gloated over with the pride the poor have in their diseases. And she grew dirtier and more disorderly, continuing to scorn my objection to her opening the front door with the shoe she was blacking still on her hand, or to her bringing me [Pg 139] a letter wrapped in an apron grimier than her grimy fingers. Nothing would induce her not to call me "Missis," which displeased me more, if for other reasons, than the "Master" she as invariably bestowed upon J. She bobbed no curtsies. When, on Saturdays, coins passed from my hand to hers, she spat on them before she put them in her pocket, to what purpose I have not to this day divined. Her best friend could not have accused her of any charm of manner, but, being Irish, she escaped the vulgarity bred in the London slums. In fact, I often fancied I caught gleams of what has been called the Celtic Temperament shining through her. She had the warmth of devotion, the exaggeration of loyalty, the power of idealizing, peculiar to her race. She was almost lyrical in her praise of J., who stood highest in her esteem, and "Master good! Master good!" was her constant refrain when she conversed with Augustine in the language fitted for children and rich in gesture, which was her well-meant substitute for French. She saw him glorified, as the poets of [Pg 140] her country see their heroes, and in her eyes he loomed a splendid Rothschild. "Master, plenty money, plenty money!" she would assure Augustine, and, holding up her apron by the two corners, and well out from her so as to represent a capacious bag, add, "apron full, full, full!"

She had also the Celtic lavishness of hospitality. I remember Whistler's delight one morning when, after an absence from London, he received at our front door a welcome from Mrs. Burden, whom he had never seen before and now saw at her grimiest: "Shure, Mr. Whistler, sir, an it's quite a stranger ye are. It's glad I am to see ye back, sir, and looking so well!" Her hospitality was extended to her own friends when she had the chance. She who drank nothing could not allow Mr. Pooley, the sweep, who was her neighbour and cleaned our chimneys, to leave our chambers after his professional services without a drop of whiskey to hearten him on his sooty way. And, though you would still less have suspected it, romance had kept its bloom fresh in her heart. The summer the Duke of York was married I could not understand her interest in the wedding, as [Pg 141] until then she had not specially concerned herself with the affairs of royalty. But on the wedding-day this interest reached a point when she had to share it with somebody. "Shure, Missis, and I knows how it is meself. Wasn't I after marrying Burden's brother and he older than Burden, and didn't he go and die, God bless him! and leave me to Burden. And shure thin it's me that knows how the poor Princess May, Lord love her! is feeling this blessed day!"

Not only the memory, but her pride in it, had survived the years which never brought romance to her again. The one decent thing Burden did was to die and rid the world of him before Mrs. Burden had presented him and society with more than one child, a boy. He was a good son, she said, which meant that he spent his boyhood picking up odd jobs and, with them, odd pence to help his mother along, so that at the age when he should have been able to do something, he knew how to do nothing, and had not even the physical strength to fit him for the more profitable [Pg 142] kinds of unskilled labour. He thought himself lucky when, in his twentieth year, he fell into a place as "washer-up" in a cheap restaurant which paid eighteen shillings a week; and he was so dazzled by his wealth that he promptly married. His wife's story is short: she drank. Mercifully, like Burden, she did the one thing she could do with all her might and drank herself to death with commendable swiftness, leaving no children to carry on the family tradition. Mrs. Burden was once more alone with her son. Between them they earned twenty-eight shillings a week and felt themselves millionaires. Augustine, for some reason, went at this period once or twice to her room, over the dingy shop of a cheap undertaker, and reported it fairly clean and provided with so much comfort as is represented by blankets on the bed and a kettle on the hob. But after a bit the son died, the cause, as far as I could make out, a drunken father and years of semi-starvation; and Mrs. Burden had to face, as cheerfully as she could, an old age to be lived out in loneliness and in the vain endeavour to make both ends meet on eight shillings a week, or less if she lost [Pg 143]

her job with me.

She did lose it, poor soul. But what could I do? She really got to be intolerably dirty. Not that I blamed her. I probably should have been much dirtier under the same circumstances. But a time came when it seemed as if we must give up either Mrs. Burden or our chambers, and to give our chambers up when we had not the least desire to, would have been a desperate remedy. She had one other piece of regular work; when I spoke to her about going, she assured me that her neighbours had been waiting for years to get her to do their washing, and she would be glad to oblige them; and, on my pressing invitation, she promised to run in and see me often. At this new stage in our relations she showed a rare delicacy of feeling. Mrs. Maxfielde, no longer in my service, was eager to pay me visits, and her hand, if not held out to beg, was open to receive. Mrs. Burden did not keep her promise to come, she gave me no opportunity to know whether her hand was open in need or shut on plenty. She was of the kind that would rather starve than [Pg 144] publish their destitution. I might have preserved an easy conscience in her regard but for Mr. Pooley, the sweep. The first time he returned in his professional capacity after her departure and found himself deprived of the usual refreshment, he was indignant, and, in consequence, he was very gruff and short with me when I inquired after Mrs. Burden. She hadn't any work, not she, and he supposed, he did, that she might starve for all some people cared.

I could scarcely ignore so broad a hint, and I had her round that same morning, for her slum was close by. I learned from her that Mr. Pooley, if gruff, was truthful. She had no work, had not had any for weeks. She was in arrears to her landlord, her shawl with the fringe and her blankets were in pawn, she hadn't a farthing in her pocket. J., to whom I refer all such matters, and who was in her debt for the splendour of wealth with which she had endowed him, said "it was all nonsense,"—by "it" I suppose he meant this sorry scheme of things,—and he would not let her go without the money to pay her landlord, not only for arrears, but in advance, and also to redeem [Pg 145] her possessions. I do not think she was the less grateful if, instead of bobbing humbly, she spat upon the coins before her first "Shure and may God bless ye, Master." Nor was J. comfortable until provisions had followed her in such quantities that he would not have to be bothered by the thought of her starving to death, at any rate for some days. Even after that, she scrupulously kept away. Not Christmas, that in London brings everybody with or without excuse begging at one's door, could induce her to present herself. It was we who had to send for her, and, in a land where begging comes so easily, we respected her for her independence.

I doubt if she ever got more work to do. She never received outdoor relief, according to her because of some misunderstanding between the parish church and hers, for, being Irish, she was a devout Roman Catholic. I do not know how she lived, though perhaps they could have told me in her slum, nobody, they say, being as good to the poor as the poor themselves. But it was part of her delicacy to take herself off our hands and conscience within less than a year of her leaving [Pg 146] us, and to die in her room peacefully of pneumonia, when she might have made us uncomfortable by dying of starvation, or lingering on in the workhouse. Mr. Pooley, the sweep, brought this news too. She was buried decent, he volunteered; she had taken care of that, though as poor as you want to see. A good old woman, he added, and it was all the obituary she had. He was right. She was of the best, but then she was only one "of the millions of bubbles" poured into existence to-day to vanish out of it to-morrow, of whom the world is too busy to keep count.

After Mrs. Burden, I went to the *Quartier*—the French Quarter in Soho—for a charwoman. Had I been tempted, as I never was, to believe in the *entente cordiale*, of which England was just then beginning to make great capital, affairs in my own kitchen would have convinced me of the folly of it. Things there had come to a pass when any pretence of cordiality, except the cordial dislike which France and England have always cherished for each other and always will, had been given [Pg 147] up, and if I hoped to escape threats of police and perpetual squabbles on the subject of cleanliness, there was nothing for it but to adopt a single-race policy. When it came to deciding which that race should be, I did not hesitate, having found out for myself that the French are as clean as the English believe themselves to be. The *Quartier* could not be more French if it were in the heart of France. There is nothing French that is not to be had in it, from snails and *boudin* to the *Petit Journal* and the latest thing in *apéritifs*. The one language heard is French, when it is not Italian, and the people met there have an animation that is not a characteristic of Kensington or Bayswater. The only trouble is that if the snails are of the freshest and the *apéritifs* bear the best mark, the quality of the people imported into the *Quartier* is more doubtful. Many have left their country for their country's good. When I made my mission known, caution was recommended to me by *Madame* who presides *chez le patissier*, and *Monsieur le Gros*, as he is familiarly known, who provides me with groceries, and M. Edmond from whom I buy my [Pg 148] vegetables and salads at the *Quatre Saisons*. England, in the mistaken name of liberty, then opened her door to the riff-raff of all nations, and French prisons were the emptier for the indiscriminate hospitality of Soho, or so I was assured by the decent French who feel the dishonour the *Quartier* is to France.

Caution served me well in the first instance, for I began my experience in French charwomen with Marie, a little Bretonne, young, cheerful, and if, like a true Bretonne, not over clean by nature, so willing to be bullied into it that she got to scrub floors and polish brasses as if she liked it. She never sulked, never minded a scolding from Augustine who scolds us all when we need it, did not care how long she stayed over time, had a laugh that put one in good humour to hear it, and such a healthy appetite that she doubled my weekly bill at the baker's. Even Augustine found no fault. But one fault there was. She was married. In the course of time a small son arrived who made her laugh more gaily than ever, though he added a third to the family of a

[Pg 149]

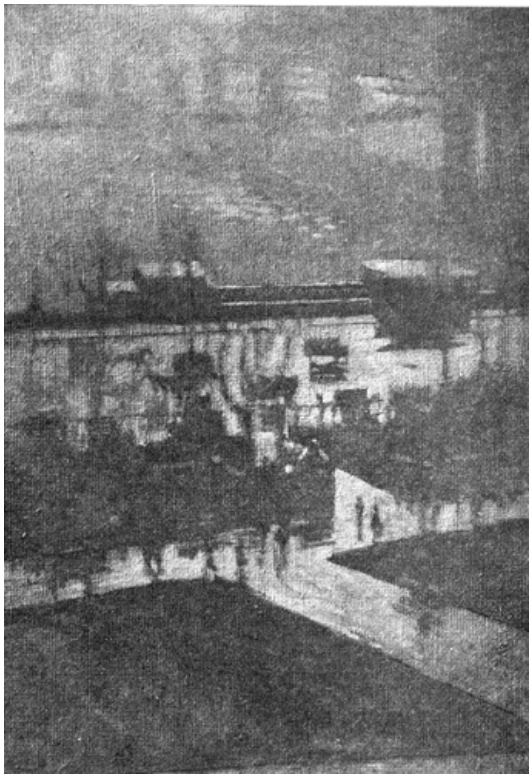
not too brilliant young man with an income of a pound a week, and I was again without a charwoman.

Marie helped me to forget caution, and I put down the stories heard in the *Quartier* to libel. But I had my awakening. She was succeeded by another Bretonne, a wild, frightened-looking creature, who, on her second day with me, when I went into the kitchen to speak to her, sat down abruptly in the fireplace, the fire by good luck still unlit, and I did not have to ask an explanation, for it was given me by the empty bottle on the dresser. Her dull, sottish face haunted me for days afterwards, and I was oppressed, as I am sure she never was, by the thought of the blundering fate that had driven her from the windswept shores of her own Brittany to the foul slums of London.

But I could not take over the mysteries and miseries of Soho with its charwomen; it was about as much as I could do to keep up with the procession that followed her. There was no variety of *femme de ménage* in the *Quartier* that I did not sample, nor one who was not the heroine of a tragedy or romance, too often not in retrospection or anticipation, but at its most psychological [Pg 150] moment. I remember another Marie, good-looking, but undeniably elderly, whose thoughts were never with the floor she was scrubbing or the range she was black-leading, because they were absorbed in the impecunious youth, half her age, with whom she had fallen in love in the fashion of to-day, and for whom she had given up a life of comparative ease with her husband, a well-paid *chef*. I remember a Marthe, old and withered, whose tales of want were so heartrending that Augustine lavished upon her all the old clothes of the establishment and all the "cold pieces" in the kitchen, but who, we learned afterwards, had a neat little bank-account at the *Crédit Lyonnais* and a stocking stuffed to overflowing in the bare garret where she shivered and starved. I remember a trim Julie, whose debts left behind in France kept her nose to the grindstone, but who found it some compensation to work for J.: she felt a peculiar sympathy for all artists, she said, for the good reason, which seemed to us a trifle remote, that her husband's mother had been foster-mother to *le grand maître, M. Detaille*. And there was a Blanche, [Pg 151] abandoned by her husband, and left with three small children to feed, clothe, and bring up somehow. And there were I have forgotten how many more, each with a story tragic or pitiful, until it came to Clémentine, and her story was so sordid that when I parted with her I shook the dust of Soho from off my feet, and imported from the Pas-de-Calais a little girl whose adventures I hoped were still in the future which, if I could manage it, would be postponed indefinitely. It may be true that every woman has one good novel in her life, but I did not see why I should keep on engaging charwomen to prove it. [Pg 152]

Clémentine

[Pg 153]



"WHEN THERE IS A SUN ON A WINTER MORNING"

[Pg 154]

V

[Pg 155]

CLÉMENTINE

She drifted in from the *Quartier*, but the slovenliness and shabby finery of her dress made it hard to believe she was French. It was harder to believe she was grown up when she began to talk, for her voice was that of a child, a high shrill treble, with a babyish lisp, losing itself in giggles. And she was so short, so small, that she might easily have passed herself off as a little girl, but for the marks experience had left upon her face. I suppose she was not much under thirty when she first came to me.

How cruel this experience had been she took immediate care to explain. With her first few words she confided to me that she was hungry, and, in my embarrassment on hearing it, I engaged her before it occurred to me to ask for references. Hunger does not exactly qualify a woman, however willing, for the rough work that must be done in a house, and that it is so surprising anybody ever [Pg 156] should be willing to do. I engaged her to scrub the floors, black the shoes, clean the fireplaces, polish the brasses,—to pass every morning, except Sunday, from seven to two, in fighting the London dirt for me, and struggling through all those disagreeable and tiresome tasks that not any amount of money would induce me to struggle through for myself.

As her duties were of a kind usually kept in the domestic background, and as she brought to them an energy her hunger had not prepared me for, an occasional *bon jour* when we met might have been the extent of my personal relations with her, had it not been for my foolish anxiety as to the state of her appetite. I had kept house long enough to understand the mistake of meddling with the affairs of my servants, but Clémentine, with her absurd little voice and giggle, seemed much less a servant than a child making believe to be one. Besides, I found that, though I can hear of unknown thousands starving in London without feeling called upon to interfere, it is another [Pg 157] matter to come face to face with a hungry individual under my own roof.

Augustine, who was then, as she is now, the prop and mainstay of our life, reassured me; Clémentine, it seemed, from the moment of her arrival, had been eating as voraciously as if she were bent not only on satisfying the present, but on making up for the past and providing against the future. She could not pass the interval between eight o'clock coffee and the noonday lunch without *un petit goûter* to sustain her. At all hours she kept munching bits of crust, and after the heartiest meal she would fall, famished, upon our plates as they came from the dining-room, devouring any odd scraps left on them, feasting on cheese-rinds and apple-parings, or, though I regret to have to record it, licking up the gravy and grease, if there was nothing better. Indeed, her condition was one of such chronic hunger that Augustine grew alarmed and thought a doctor should be consulted. I put it down to the long succession of her lean years, and before the facts convinced me that Clémentine was "all stomach and no soul," her appetite was a great deal on [Pg 158] my mind, and made me far more preoccupied with her than was wise.

My inquiries into the state of Clémentine's appetite were the reason for many conversations. I have no doubt that at first I encouraged her confidence, so unfailing was my delight in the lisping prattle, interrupted by giggles, with which they were made. Even J., who as a rule is glad to leave all domestic matters to me, would stop and speak to her for the sake of hearing her talk. And she was a child in so many other ways. She had the vanity as well as the voice of a little girl. She was pretty after a fashion, but it always amazed me that anybody who was so hungry could be so vain. When I am hungry I am too demoralized to care how I look. But Clémentine's respect for her appearance was, if anything, stronger than her craving for food. She would have gone without a meal rather than have appeared out of the fashion set by her London slum. Her hair might be half combed,—that was a question of personal taste,—but she could not show herself abroad unless it was brought down over her forehead in the low wave required by the mode of the moment, and [Pg 159] hidden at the back under a flat, overgrown jockey-cap fastened on with long pins. Her skirt might be—or rather was—frayed at the bottom, and her jacket worn to shreds, but she could never neglect to tie round her neck a bit of white tulle or ribbon, however soiled or faded. Nor could she be persuaded to run the shortest errand before this tulle or ribbon, taken off for work, had been tied on again, the low wave of hair patted well in place, and the jockey-cap stuck at the correct angle.

It was useless to try and hurry her. She did not care how urgent the errand was to us, her concern was entirely for what people in the street might think of her if any one detail of her toilet was neglected. Augustine, who for herself was disdainful of the opinion of *ces sales Anglais* and ran her errands *en cheveux* as if she were still in France, would scold and thunder and represent to Clémentine that people in the street had something better to do than to think of her at all. When Augustine scolds, I am always, to be honest, a little afraid. But Clémentine would listen giggling, and refuse to budge an inch until the last touch had been given to her hair and to her [Pg 160] dress. After working time she could not start for home until she had spent half an hour and more before the glass in the kitchen arranging her rags. In her own country her vanity would have been satisfied only by the extreme neatness and simplicity of her dress. In England she had borrowed the untidiness and tawdriness that degrade the English poor. But if the educated French, who ought to know that they are the most civilized people in the world, grow more English than the English when they become Anglicized at all, I could scarcely blame Clémentine for her weakness.

To one form of her untidiness, however, I objected though, had I known what was to come of my objection, I would have borne with worse in silence. She never wore an apron, and, in her stained and tattered dress, her appearance was disreputable even for a charwoman. She might be as slovenly as she chose in the street, that was her affair; but it was mine once she carried her

slovenliness inside my four walls, especially as in chambers servants at work are more apt to be stumbled across than in a house, and as it was her duty at times to open the front door. I spoke to her on the subject, suggesting the value of aprons, if only as defences. The words were scarcely out of my mouth than I would have given worlds to take them back again. For when Clémentine began to talk the difficulty was to stop her, and long before she finished explaining why she wore no aprons, I had learned a great deal more about her than I bargained for: among other things, that her previous places had been chiefly *chez les femmes*; that she wanted to give up working for them; that, after leaving her last place, she could get nothing to do in any *maison bourgeoise*; that she had no money and was very hungry,—what Clémentine's hunger meant she did not have to tell me; that her little Ernest was also hungry, and also *la vieille grandmère*; that her little Ernest was her son,—"*Oui, Madame, je serais franche, j'ai un fils mais pas un mari*"; that *la vieille grandmère* was an old woman she had taken in, partly to look after him, partly out of sheer shiftlessness; that they could not starve; and that—well—all her aprons were *au clou*. [Pg 161] [Pg 162]

This sudden introduction of her little Ernest was a trifle disconcerting, but it was none of my business how many people depended on Clémentine, nor how many of her belongings were in pawn. I had vowed never again to give sympathy, much less help, to anybody who worked for me, since I knew to my cost the domestic disaster to which benevolence of this sort may lead. I gave her advice instead. I recommended greater thrift, and insisted that she must save from her wages enough to get her aprons out of pawn immediately, though I left it to a more accomplished political economist than I to show how, with three to provide for, she could save out of what barely provided for one. However, she agreed. She said, "*Oui, Madame, Madame a raison*"; and for the next week or two I did my best to shut my eyes to the fact that she still went apronless.

At this juncture, her little Ernest fell ill; now that I had heard of him, he took good care that I should not forget him. For three days there was no sign of Clémentine; I had no word from her. [Pg 163] At the end of the first day, I imagined a horrid tragedy of starvation; by the second, I was reproaching myself as an accessory; by the evening of the third, I could stand it no longer, and Augustine was despatched to find out what was wrong. The child's illness was not very serious, but, incidentally, Augustine found out a good deal besides. Clémentine's room, in an unlovely Workmen's Building, was unexpectedly clean, but to keep it clean was the easier because it was so bare. Her bed, which she shared with her little Ernest, was a mattress on the floor in one corner, with not a sheet or a blanket to cover it; *la vieille grandmère* slept in a nest of newspapers in another corner, with a roll of rags for a pillow. Bedsteads, sheets, covers, had gone the way of the aprons,—they, too, were *au clou*. The thrift I had advised scarcely met so acute a case of poverty. I was not at all anxious to burden myself with Clémentine's destitution in addition to her hunger, and to get it out of my mind, I tried, with my usual generosity, to hand over the difficulty to J. I cannot say that he accepted it as unconditionally as I could have wished, [Pg 164] for if he was positive that something must be done at once, he had as little doubt that it was for me to discover the way of doing it.

What I did was simple, though I dare say contrary to every scientific principle of charity. I told her to bring me her pawn-tickets and I would go over them with her. She brought them, a pocketful, the next day, throwing them down on the table before me and sorting them as if for a game of cards, with many giggles, and occasional cries of "*Tiens!* this is my old blue apron"; or, "*Mon Dieu!* this is my nice warm grey blanket." Her delight could not have been greater had it been the apron or the blanket itself. All told, her debts amounted to no very ruinous sum, and I arranged to pay them off and give her a fresh start if, on her side, she was prepared to work harder and practise stricter economy. I pointed out that as I did not need her in the afternoon, she had a half day to dispose of, and that she should hunt for something to fill it. She promised everything I asked, and more, and I hoped that this was the last of my sharing her burdens. [Pg 165]

It might have been, but for her little Ernest. I do believe that child was born for no other end than my special annoyance. His illness was only the beginning. When he was well, she brought him to see me one afternoon, nominally that he might thank me, but really, I fear, in hope of an extra sixpence or shilling. He was five years old and fairly large and well developed for his age, but there could never have been, there never could be, a less attractive child. His face had none of the prettiness of his mother's, though all the shrewdness: in knowledge of the gutter he looked fifty. Then and afterwards, ashamed as I was of it, I instinctively shrank from him. Anywhere, except in the comic ballad, a "horribly fast little cad" of a baby is as tragic a figure as I care to encounter, and to me the little Ernest was all the more so because of the repugnance with which he inspired me. Clémentine made a great pretence of adoring him. She carried a sadly battered photograph of him in her pocket, and would pull it out at intervals when anybody was looking, [Pg 166] and kiss it rapturously. Otherwise her admiration took the form of submitting to his tyranny. She could do far less with him than he with her, and *la vieille grandmère* was as wax in his rough little hands. His mornings, while his mother was at work, were spent in the grimy London courts and streets, where children swarm like vermin and babies grow old in vice. In the afternoon, after she left our chambers, he dragged her through the *Quartier*, from shop to shop, she with her giggling "*Bon jour, M. Edmond*" or "*Comment ça va, Madame Pierre*"—for though we live in London we are not of it, but of France,—he with his hand held out for the cakes and oranges and pennies he knew would drop into it: a pair of the most accomplished beggars in London.

As time went on, and Clémentine did not find the extra work for her afternoons that she had promised to find, I realized that she would keep on wasting her free half day, and that he would go from bad to worse if he were not got away from her and out of the streets. I should have known better than to occupy myself with him, but his old shrewd face haunted me until I [Pg 167]

remonstrated with Clémentine, and represented to her the future she was preparing for him. If she could not take care of him, she should send him to school where there were responsible people who could. I suggested a charitable institution of some kind in France where he would be brought up among her people. But this she fought against with a determination I could not understand, until it came out that she had profited by the English law which forces a father to contribute to his illegitimate child's support, and from Ernest's she received weekly three shillings and sixpence. She much preferred to risk her little Ernest's morals than an income that came of itself, and she feared she could no longer claim it if he were beyond the reach of the English courts. She was as doubtful of the result if he were got into a charity school in England, for if he cost her nothing the father might not be compelled to pay. She could be obstinate on occasions, and I was in despair. But by some fortunate chance, a convent at Hampstead was heard of where the weekly charge would just be covered by the father's allowance, and as [Pg 168] Clémentine could find no argument against it, she had to give in.

I breathed freely again, but I was not to be let off so easily. It was simpler to get mixed up in Clémentine's affairs than to escape from them. At the convent, the nuns had learned wisdom, and they demanded to be paid weekly in advance. I must have waited until Judgment Day if I had depended upon Clémentine to be in advance with anything, and in self-defence I offered to pay the first month. But this settled, at once there was another obstacle to dispose of. A trousseau was required with the little Ernest, and he had no clothes except those on his back. I provided the trousseau. Then the little Ernest rebelled and refused to hear of school unless he was supplied with a top, a mechanical boat, a balloon, and I scarcely remember what besides. I supplied them. Clémentine, on her side, began to look harassed and careworn, and I never ventured to ask what conditions he exacted of her, but it was a relief to everybody when, after much shopping and innumerable coaxings and bribes and scenes, at last she got her little Ernest off her hands. [Pg 169]

But if he was off hers, she was more than ever on mine. He gave her a perpetual subject of conversation. There were days when I seemed to hear her prattling in the kitchen from the moment she came until the moment she left, and to a good deal of her prattle I had to listen. She made it her duty to report his progress to me, and the trouble was that she could never get through without confiding far more about her own, in the past as in the present. She might begin innocently with the fit of his new clothes, but as likely as not she would end with revelations of unspeakable horror. At least I could not find fault with Clémentine's confidences for their mildness or monotony. In her high, shrill, lisping treble, as if she were reciting a lesson, and with the air of a naughty girl trying to keep back her giggles, she would tell me the most appalling details of her life.

I had not dreamed that out of Zola or Defoe a woman could go through such adventures, or that, if she could, it would be possible for her to emerge a harmless charwoman doing the [Pg 170] commonplace work of a household which I flatter myself is respectable, for a few shillings a week. Of poverty, of evil, of shame, of disgrace, there was nothing she had not known; and yet as I saw her busy and happy over her scrubbing and washing and polishing in our chambers, I could have believed she had never done anything less guileless in all her thirty years. She had a curiously impersonal way of relating these adventures, as if they were no concern of hers whatever. The most dramatic situations seemed to have touched her as little as the every-day events in her sordid struggle for bread, though she was not without some pride in the variety of her experience. When Augustine warned her that her idleness was preparing for her a bed on the Embankment and daily food in a soup-kitchen, "*Eh bien?* why not?" she giggled; "I have been on the streets, I have been in prison, I have been in the workhouse, I have seen everything—*j'ai tout vu, moi!* Why not that too?"

With her, there was no shrinking from the workhouse, as with the respectable poor, "*Ce n'est pas fait pour les chiens*," she reasoned, and looked upon it as an asylum held in reserve. [Pg 171]

Her boast that she had seen everything was no exaggeration, her everything meaning the hideous side of life which those who see only the other try so hard to shut their eyes to. "What would you have?" she asked me more than once, "I was a bastard and a foundling"; as if with such a beginning, it would have been an inconsistency on her part to turn out any better than she was. That she had started life as a little lost package of humanity, left at the door of a house for *les enfants trouvés* not far from Boulogne, never caused her shame and regret. From a visit paid by her mother to the Institution during her infancy, there could remain no doubt of her illegitimacy, but it was a source of pleasure to her, and also of much agreeable speculation.

"How can I be sure," she said to me, "that, though my mother was a cook, my father might not have been a *préfet*, or even a prince?"

For practical purposes she knew no parents save the peasants who brought her up. The State in France, thrifty as the people, makes the children abandoned to it a source of profit to the hard- [Pg 172] working poor. Clémentine was put out to nurse. The one spark of genuine affection she ever showed was for the woman to whose care she fell, and of whom she always spoke as *ma mère*, with a tenderness very different from her giggling adoration of the little Ernest. Incessant labour was the rule in *ma mère's* house, and food was not too abundant, but of what there was Clémentine had her share, though I fancy the scarcity then was the origin of the terrible hunger that consumed her throughout her life. About this hunger her story revolved, so that, while she talked of the past, I could seldom get far away from it. She recalled little else of the places the Institution found for her as servant. The State in France is as wise as it is thrifty, and does not demoralize its foundlings by free gifts, but, when the time comes, makes them work,

appropriating their wages until it has been paid back the money they have cost it.

Clémentine went into service young. She also went into it hungry, and life became a never-ending struggle for food. In one place she was reduced to such straits that she devoured a dish of [Pg 173] poisoned meat prepared for the stray cats of the neighbourhood, and, though it brought her almost to death's door, she could still recall it as a feast. In another, a small country grocery store, she would steal down in the night, trembling with fear, to hunt for bits of candy and crackers, and, safe in bed again, would have to fight for them with the rats that shared her garret. And her tale of this period grew more miserable and squalid with every new stage, until she reached the dreadful climax when, still a child herself, she brought a little girl into the world to share her hunger. She had the courage to laugh when she told me of her wandering, half-starved, back to *la bonne mère*, who took her in when her time came, and kept the baby. She could laugh, too, when she recalled the wrath of *M. le Directeur* at the Institution, who sent for her, and scolded her, giving her a few sharp raps with his cane.

If to Clémentine her tragedy was a laughing matter, it was not for me to weep over it. But I was glad when she got through with this period and came to the next, which had in it more of pure [Pg 174] comedy than enlivened most of her confidences. For once she was of age, and her debt to the Institution settled in full, she was free not only to work for herself, but to claim a percentage of the money she had been making during the long years of apprenticeship; and this percentage amounting to five hundred francs, and Clémentine never having seen so much money before, her imagination was stirred by the vastness of her wealth, and she insisted on being paid in five-franc pieces. She had to get a basket to hold them all, and with it on her arm she started off in search of adventure. This, I think, was the supreme moment in her life.

Her adventures began in the third-class carriage of a train for Boulogne, which might seem a mild beginning to most people, but was full of excitement for Clémentine. She dipped her hands into the silver, and jingled it, and displayed it to everybody, with the vanity of a child showing off its new frock. The only wonder was that any of the five-franc pieces were still in the basket when she got to Boulogne. There they drew to her a group of young men and women who were bound [Pg 175] for England to make their fortunes, and who persuaded her to join them. Her head was not completely turned by her wealth, for she crossed with them on the *bâteau aux lapins*, which she explained as the cheapest boat upon which anything but beasts and vegetables could find passage. At Folkestone, where they landed, she had no difficulty in getting a place as scullery maid. But washing up was as dull in England as in France, a poor resource for anybody with a basketful of five-franc pieces. One of the young men who had crossed with her agreed that it was a waste of time to work when there was money to spend, and they decided for a life of leisure together. The question of marriage apparently did not enter into the arrangement. They were content to remain *des unis*, in M. Rod's phrase, and their union was celebrated by a few weeks of riotous living. The chicken their own Henry IV wished for all his subjects filled the daily pot, beer flowed like water, they could have paid for cake had bread failed; for the first time in her life [Pg 176] Clémentine forgot what it was to be hungry.

It was delightful while it lasted, and I do not believe that she ever regretted having had her fling when the chance came. But the basket grew lighter and lighter, and all too soon barely enough five-franc pieces were left in it to carry them up to London. There, naturally, they found their way to the *Quartier*. The man picked up an odd job or two, Clémentine scrubbed, washed, waited, did any and everything by which a few pence could be earned. The pot was now empty, beer ceased to flow, bread sometimes was beyond their means, and she was hungrier than ever. In the course of the year her little Ernest was added to the family, and there was no *bonne mère* in London to relieve her of the new burden. For a while Clémentine could not work; when she could, there was no work to be had. Nor could the man get any more jobs, though I fancy his hunt for them was not too strenuous. Life became a stern, bread-hunting sort of business, and I think at moments Clémentine almost wished herself back in the garret with the rats, or in the garden where dishes [Pg 177] of poisoned meat were sometimes to be stolen. The landlord threatened, starvation stared them in the face. Hunger is ever the incentive to enterprise, and Ernest's father turned Clémentine on the streets.

I must do her the justice to say that, of all her adventures, this was the one least to her liking. That she had fallen so low did not shock her; she looked upon it as part of the inevitable scheme of things: but left to herself, she would have preferred another mode of earning her living. After I had been told of this period of horrors, I could never hear Clémentine's high, shrill treble and giggle without a shudder, for they were then part of her stock-in-trade, and she went on the streets in short skirts with her hair down her back. For months she wallowed in the gutter, at the mercy of the lowest and the most degraded, insulted, robbed, despised, and if she attempted to rebel, bullied back to her shameful trade by a man who had no thought save for the few pitiful pence she could bring to him out of it. The only part of the affair that pleased her was the ending [Pg 178] —in prison after a disgraceful street brawl. She was really at heart an adventuress, and the opportunity to see for the first time the inside of the *panier à salade*, as she called the prison van, was welcomed by her in the light of a new and exciting adventure. Then, in prison itself, the dress with the arrows could be adjusted becomingly, warders and fellow prisoners could be made to laugh by her antics, and if she could have wished for more to eat, it was a great thing not to have to find the means to pay for what she got.

She was hardly out of prison when Ernest's father chanced upon a woman who could provide for him more liberally, and Clémentine was again a free agent. The streets knew her no more, though for an interval the workhouse did. This was the crisis when, with the shrewdness acquired

in the London slums, she learned something of the English law to her own advantage, and through the courts compelled the father to contribute to the support of his son. The weekly three shillings and sixpence paid for a room. For food she had to work. With prison behind her, she was afraid to ask for a place in respectable houses, and I should not care to record the sinks of [Pg 179] iniquity and squalid dens where her shrill treble and little girl's giggle were heard. Ernest was dumped down of a morning upon any friendly neighbour who would keep an eye on him, until, somehow or other, *la vieille grandmère* appeared upon the scene and Clémentine once more had two to feed and the daily problem of her own hunger to face.

Her responsibilities never drove her to work harder than was absolutely necessary. "We must all toil or steal," Carlyle says. But Clémentine knew better. She could have suggested a third alternative, for she had reduced begging to a fine art. Her scent was as keen for charitable associations as a pig's for truffles, and she could tell to a minute the appointed time of their alms-giving, and to a penny the value of their alms. She would, no matter when, drop regular work at the risk of losing it, to rush off after a possible charity. There was a *Société*—I never knew it by any other name—that, while she was with me, drew her from my kitchen floor or my luncheon dishes as surely as Thursday came round, and the clock struck one. Why it existed she never [Pg 180] made quite clear to me,—I doubt if she had an idea why, herself. It was enough for her that the poor French in London were under its special charge, and that, when luck was with her, she might come away with a loaf of bread, or an order for coals, or, if she played the beggar well, as much as a shilling.

She kept up a brisk correspondence with "*Madame la Baronne de Rothschild*," whose sole mission in life she apparently believed was to see her out of her difficulties. *La Baronne*, on one occasion, gave her a sovereign, Heaven knows why, unless as a desperate measure to close the correspondence; but a good part of it went in postage for letters representing why the bestowal of sovereigns upon Clémentine should become habitual. Stray agents, presumably from *la Baronne*, would pay me mysterious visits, to ask if Clémentine were a deserving object of benevolence, and I was exposed to repeated cross-examination in her regard. She made a point of learning the hours when the *chefs* left the kitchens of the big hotels and restaurants near the [Pg 181] *Quartier*, and also of finding out who among them might be looked to for a few odd pence for the sake of Ernest's father, at one time a washer of dishes, or who, after a *coup de vin* or an *absinthe*, grew generous with their money. She had gauged the depth of every tender heart in the *Quartier* and the possibility of scraps and broken meats at every shop and eating-place. And no one understood better how to beg, how to turn on the limelight and bring out in melodramatic relief the enormity of her need and destitution. The lisping treble, the giggle, the tattered clothes, *la vieille grandmère*, the desertion of the little Ernest's father, the little Ernest himself, were so many valuable assets. Indeed, she appreciated the value of the little Ernest so well that once she would have had me multiply him by twelve when she asked me to vouch for her poverty before some new society disposed to be friendly. If luck went against her, and nothing came of her begging, she was not discouraged. Begging was a game of chance with her,—her Monte Carlo or Little Horses,—and she never murmured over her failures, but with her faculty for making the [Pg 182] best of all things, she got amusement out of them as well as out of her successes.

In the face of these facts, I cannot deny that Clémentine's "character" was not exactly the sort most people expect when they engage a servant. But I would not turn adrift a mangy dog or a lost cat whom I had once taken in. And she did her work very well, with a thoroughness the English charwoman would have despised, never minding what that work was, so long as she had plenty to eat and could prepare by an elaborate toilet for every errand she ran. Her morals could do us small harm, and for a while I was foolish enough to hope ours might do her some good. I realize now that nothing could have improved Clémentine; she was not made that way; but at the time she was too wholly unlike any woman I had ever come in contact with, for me to see that the difference lay in her having no morals to help. She was not immoral, but unmoral. Right and wrong were without meaning for her. Her standards, if she could be said to have any, were comfort and discomfort. Virtue and vice were the same to her, so long as she was not [Pg 183] unpleasantly interfered with. This was the explanation of her past, as of her frankness in disclosing it, and she was too much occupied in avoiding present pain to bother about the future by cultivating economy, or ambition, or prudence. An animal would take more thought for the morrow than Clémentine. Of all the people I have ever come across, she had the most reason to be weary-laden, but instead of "tears in her eyes," there was always a giggle on her lips. "*La colère, c'est la folie*," she assured me, and it was a folly she avoided with marked success. Perhaps she was wise, undoubtedly she was the happier for it.

Unfortunately for me, I had not her callousness or philosophy,—I am not yet quite sure which it was,—and if she would not think for herself, I was the more disturbed by the necessity of thinking for her. It was an absurd position. There I was, positively growing grey in my endeavours to drag her up out of the abyss of poverty into which she had sunk, and there she was, cheerful and happy, if she could only continue to enjoy *la bonne cuisine de Madame*. I never knew her to make the slightest attempt to profit by what I, or anyone else, would do for her. I remember, when [Pg 184] *Madame la Baronne* sent her the sovereign, she stayed at home a week, and then wrote to me as her excuse, "*J'ai été rentière toute la semaine. Maintenant je n'ai plus un penny, il faut m'occuper du travail.*" I had not taken her things out of pawn before they were pawned again, and the cast-off clothes she begged from me followed as promptly. Her little Ernest, after all my trouble, stayed at the convent six weeks,—the month I paid for and two weeks that Clémentine somehow wheedled out of the sisters,—and then he was back as of old, picking up his education in the London streets. I presented her once with a good bed I had no more use for, and, to make space

for it, she went into debt and moved from her one room near Tottenham Court Road to two rooms and a higher rent near the Lower Marsh, and was robbed on the way by the man she hired to move her. When she broke anything, and she frequently did, she was never perturbed: "*Madame est forte pour payer*," or "*l'argent est fait pour rouler*," was her usual answer to my reproaches. [Pg 185] To try to show her the road to economy was to plunge her into fresh extravagance.

Nor did I advance matters by talking to her seriously. I recall one special effort to impress upon her the great misery she was preparing for herself by her shiftlessness. I had given her a pair of shoes, though I had vowed a hundred times to give her nothing more, and I used the occasion for a lecture. She seemed eager to interrupt once or twice, and I flattered myself my words were having their effect. And now what had she to say? I asked when my eloquence was exhausted. She giggled: "Would *Madame* look at her feet in *Madame's* shoes? *Jamais je ne me suis vue si bien chaussée*," and she was going straight to the *Quartier* "*pour éblouir le monde*," she said. When Augustine took her in hand, though Augustine's eloquence had a vigour mine could not boast of, the result was, if anything, more discouraging. Clémentine, made bold by custom, would turn a hand-spring or dance a jig, or go through the other accomplishments she had picked up in the slums. [Pg 186]

If I could discover any weak spot by which I could reach her, I used to think something might be gained, and I lost much time in studying how to work upon her emotions. But her emotions were as far to seek as her morals. Even family ties, usually so strong in France, had no hold upon her. If she adored her little Ernest, it was because he brought her in three shillings and sixpence a week. There was no adoration for her little girl who occasionally wrote from the Pas-de-Calais and asked her for money. I saw one of the child's letters in which she implored Clémentine to pay for a white veil and white shoes; she was going to make her first communion, and the good adopted mother could pay for no more than the gown. The First Communion is the greatest event in the French child's life; there could be no deeper disgrace than not to be dressed for it, and the appeal must have moved every mother who read it, except Clémentine. To her it was comic, and she disposed of it with giggles: "*C'est drôle quand même, d'avoir une fille de cet âge*," and funnier that she could be expected to pay for anything for anybody. [Pg 187]

But if her family awoke in her no sentiment, her "home" did, though it was of the kind that Lamb would have classed with the "no homes." The tenacity with which she clung to it was her nearest approach to strong feeling. I suppose it was because she had so long climbed the stairs of others that she took such complete satisfaction in the two shabby little rooms to which she gave the name. I had a glimpse of them, never to be forgotten, once when she failed to come for two days, and I went to look her up. The street reeked with the smell of fried fish and onions; it was filled with barrows of kippers and haddocks and whelks; it was lined with old-clothes shops; it was crowded with frowzy women and horribly dirty children. And the halls and stairs of the tenement where she lived were black with London smoke and greasy with London dirt. I did not feel clean afterwards until I had had a bath, and it was never again as easy to reconcile myself to Clémentine's daily reappearance in our midst. But to her the rooms were home, and for that reason she would have stayed on in a grimier and more malodorous neighbourhood, if such a [Pg 188] thing could be, in preference to living in the cleanest and freshest London workhouse at the rate-payers' expense. Her objection to going into service except as a charwoman was that she would have to stay the night. "*Je ne serais pas chez moi*"; and much as she prized her comfort, it was not worth the sacrifice. On the contrary, she was prepared to sacrifice her comfort, dear as it was to her, that she might retain her home. She actually went to the length of taking in as companion an Italian workman she met by accident, not because he offered to marry her, which he did not, but because, according to his representations, he was making twenty-five shillings a week and would help to pay the rent. "*Je serais chez moi*," was now her argument, and for food she could continue to work or beg. He would be a convenience, *voilà tout*. The Italian stayed a week. He lounged in bed all morning while she was at work, he smoked all afternoon. At the end of the week Clémentine sent him flying. "*Je suis bête et je mourrais bête*," was her explanation to me; but she was not *bête* to the point of adding an idle fourth to her burden, and, as a result, being [Pg 189] turned out of the home she had taken him in to preserve.

Clémentine had been with us more than two years when the incident of the Italian occurred, and by this time I had become so accustomed to her and to her adventures that I was not as shocked as perhaps I should have been. It was not a way out of difficulties I could approve, but Clémentine was not to be judged by my standards, and I saw no reason to express my disapproval by getting rid of her just when she most needed to stay. In her continually increasing need to stay, I endured so much besides that, at the end of her third year in our chambers, I was convinced that she would go on doing my rough work as long as I had rough work to be done. More than once I came to the end of my patience and dismissed her. But it was no use. In the course of a couple of weeks, or at the most three, she was back scrubbing my floors and polishing my brasses.

The first time she lost her place with me, I sympathized to such an extent that I was at some pains to arrange a scheme to send her to France. But Clémentine, clinging to the pleasures of life [Pg 190] in the Lower Marsh, agreed to everything I proposed, and was careful to put every hindrance in the way of carrying out my plans. Twice I went to the length of engaging another woman, but either the other woman did not suit or else she did not stay, and I had to ask Clémentine to return. On her side, she made various efforts to leave me, bored, I fancy, by the monotony of regular work, but they were as unsuccessful as mine to turn her off. After one disappearance of three weeks, she owned up frankly to having been again *chez les femmes* whose pay was better;

after a second, she said she had been ill in the workhouse which I doubted; after all, she was as frank in admitting that nowhere else did she enjoy *la bonne cuisine de Madame*, and that this was the attraction to which I was indebted for her fidelity.

It may have been kindness, it may have been weakness, it may have been simply necessity, that made me so lenient on these occasions; I do not attempt to decide. But I cannot blame Clémentine for thinking it was because she was indispensable. I noticed that gradually in small [Pg 191] ways she began to take advantage of our good-nature. For one thing there was now no limit to her conversation. I did not spend my time in the kitchen and could turn a deaf ear to it, but I sometimes wondered if Augustine would not be the next to disappear. She would also often relieve the tedium of her several tasks by turning the handsprings in which she was so accomplished, or dancing the jig popular in the Lower Marsh, or by other performances equally reprehensible in the kitchen of *une maison bourgeoise*, as she was pleased to describe our chambers. She never lost a chance of rushing to the door if tradespeople rang, or talking with the British Workmen we were obliged, for our sins, to employ. Their bewilderment, stolid Britons as they were, would have been funny, had not her manner of exciting it been so discreditable. She was even caught—I was spared the knowledge until much later—turning her handsprings for a select company of plasterers and painters. Then I could see that she accepted anything we might bestow upon her as her due, and was becoming critical of the value and quality of the gift. I can [Pg 192] never forget on one occasion when J. was going away, and he gave her a few shillings, the expression with which she looked first at the money and then at him as though insulted by the paltriness of the amount. More unbearable was the unfair use she made of her little Ernest.

La vieille grandmère, who had wandered by chance into her life, wandered out of it as casually, or so Clémentine said as an argument to induce me to receive that odious little boy into my kitchen during her hours of work; she had nobody to take care of him, she could not leave him alone. Here, happily for myself, I had the strength to draw the line. But when this argument failed, she found another far more harrowing. She took the opportunity of my stumbling across her in our little hall one day at noon to tell me that, as I would not let her bring him with her, she left him every day, carefully locked up out of harm's way, alone in her rooms. A child of seven, as he was then, locked up to get into any mischief he could invent, and, moreover, a child with a talent for mischief! that was too much, and I sent her flying home without giving her time to eat [Pg 193] her lunch or linger before the glass, and I was haunted for the rest of the day with the thought of all the terrible things that might have happened to him. Naturally nothing did happen, nothing ever does happen to children like the little Ernest, and Clémentine, dismayed by the loss of her lunch and the interference with her toilet, never ventured upon this argument a second time. But she found another almost as bad, for she informed me that, thanks to my interference, she was compelled to leave him again to run the streets as he would, and she hinted only too plainly that for whatever evil might befall him, I was responsible. Our relations were at this pleasant stage, and her little Ernest was fast developing into a monstrous Frankenstein wholly of my own raising, when one day she arrived with a new air of importance and announced her approaching marriage.

I was enchanted. I had not permitted myself to feel the full weight of the burden Clémentine was heaping upon my shoulders until now it seemed on the point of slipping from them, and never [Pg 194] were congratulations more sincere than mine. As she spared me none of her confidence, every detail of her courtship and her prospects was soon at my disposal. In the course of her regular round of the kitchen doors of the *Quartier* she had picked up an Englishman who washed dishes in a restaurant. He was not much over twenty, he earned no less than eighteen shillings a week, and he had asked her to marry him. She accepted him, as she had accepted the Italian, because he would pay the rent; the only difference was that her new admirer proposed the form of companionship which is not lightly broken. "*Cette fois je crois que cela sera vrai—que l'affaire ne tombera pas dans l'eau*," she said, remembering the deep waters which, in her recent affair, had gone over her head. "*Mon petit Anglais*"—her name for him—figured in her account as a model of propriety. He had a strict regard for morals. He objected to her working *chez les femmes*, and expressed his desire that she should remain in our service, despite the loss to their income. He condoned her previous indiscretions, and was prepared to play a father's part to her little Ernest. [Pg 195]

Altogether the situation was fast growing idyllic, and with Clémentine in her new rôle of *fiancée*, we thought that peace for us all was in sight. She set about her preparations at once, and did not hesitate to let me know that an agreeable wedding present would be house linen, however old and ragged, and a new hat for the wedding. I had looked for some preliminary begging as a matter of course, and I was already going through my linen closet to see what I could spare, when I caught Clémentine collecting wedding presents from me for which I had not been asked.

Until then I believed that, whatever crimes and vices might be laid at her door, dishonesty was not to be counted among them. I even boasted of her honesty as an excuse for my keeping her, nuisance as she was. I think I should have doubted her guilt if the report of it only had reached me. But I could not doubt the testimony of my own eyes when there was discovered, carefully packed in the capacious bag she always carried, one of my best napkins, a brand-new tea-cloth, [Pg 196] and a few kitchen knives and forks that could not have strayed there of themselves. I could see in the articles selected her tender concern for the comfort of her *petit Anglais* and her practical wish to prepare her establishment for his coming, and probably it showed her consideration for me that she had been content with such simple preparations. But the value of the things themselves and her object in appropriating them had nothing to do with the main fact that, after all we had done and endured, she was stealing from us. "We should wipe two words from our

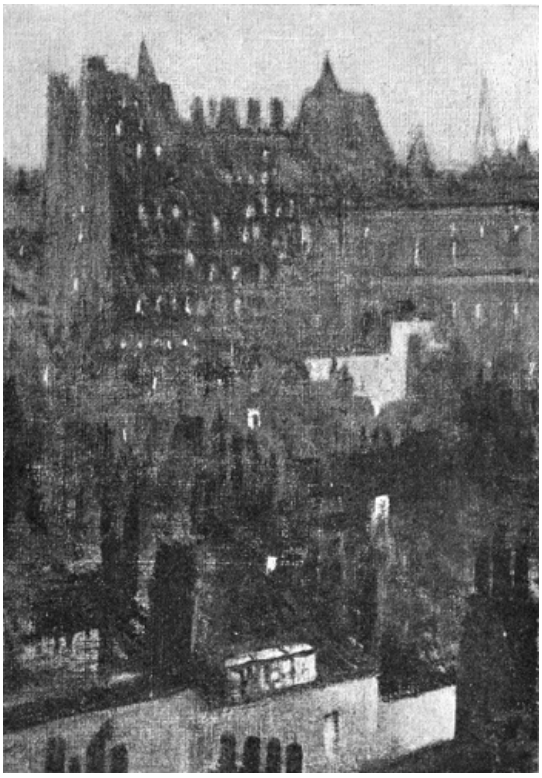
vocabulary: gratitude and charity," Stevenson once wrote. Clémentine wiped out the one so successfully that she left me with no use for the other. I told her she must go, and this time I was in good earnest.

To Clémentine, however, nothing could have seemed less possible. She could not understand that a petty theft would make her less indispensable, or that I would strain at a gnat after swallowing so many camels. Within a week she was knocking at our door and expressing her willingness to [Pg 197] resume her place in our chambers. She was not discouraged by the refusal to admit her, but a few days later, this time by letter, she again assured me that she waited to be recalled, and she referred to the desire of her *petit Anglais* in the matter. She affected penitence, admitting that she had committed *une "Bêtisse"*—the spelling is hers—and adding: "*avoir âgit ainsi avec des maîtres aussi bons, ce n'est pas pardonable. Je vous assure que si un jour je devien riche, ou peut être plus pauvre, que dans ma richesse, comme dans ma plus grande misère, je ne pourrais jamais oublier les bons maîtres Monsieur et Madame, car jamais dans ma vie d'orpheline, je n'aie jamais rencontré d'aussi bons maîtres.*" She also reminded me that she lived in the hope that *Madame* would not forget the promised present of linen and a hat. I made no answer. Another letter followed, penitence now exchanged for reproaches. She expostulated with me for taking the bread out of the mouth of her *petit innocent*—Ernest—the little innocent whom the slums had nothing more to teach. This second letter met the same fate as the first, but her resources were [Pg 198] not exhausted. In a third she tried the dignity of sorrow: "*Ma faute m'a rendu l'âme si triste*" and, as this had no effect, she used in a fourth the one genuine argument of them all, her hunger: "*Enfin il faut que je tâche d'oublier, mais en attendant je m'en mordrais peut être les poings plus d'une fois.*" I was unmoved. I had spent too much emotion already upon Clémentine; also a neat little French girl had replaced her.

She gave up when she found me proof against an argument that had hitherto always disarmed me. This was the last time she put herself at my service; though once afterwards she gave me the pleasure of hearing from her. Not many weeks had passed when I received a pictorial post-card that almost reconciled me to a fashion I deplore. The picture that adorned it was a photograph of an ordinary three-storey London house, the windows draped with lace curtains of a quality and design not common in the Lower Marsh. But the extraordinary thing about it was that in the open doorway—apronless, her arms akimbo, the wave of hair low on her forehead—stood Clémentine, [Pg 199] giggling in triumph. A few words accompanied this astonishing vision. "*Je n'oublierais jamais la bonne maison de Madame*" and the kind message was signed "Mrs. Johnson." Whether the eighteen shillings of her *petit Anglais* ran to so imposing a home, or to what she owed the post-card prominence usually reserved for the monuments of London, she did not condescend to explain. Probably she only wanted to show that, though she had achieved this distinction, she could be magnanimous enough to forget the past and think of us kindly.

That was the last I ever heard from Clémentine, the last I hope I ever shall hear. The pictorial post-card told me the one thing I cared to know. She did not leave me for a bed on the Embankment by night and a round of the soup-kitchens by day. If ever she does see life in this way and so completes her experience, the responsibility will not be mine for having driven her to it. [Pg 200]

The Old Housekeeper [Pg 201]



"A WILDERNESS OF CHIMNEY-POTS"

[Pg 202]

VI

[Pg 203]

THE OLD HOUSEKEEPER

No housekeeper could have been more in place than the little old white-haired woman who answered our ring the day we came to engage our windows, and, incidentally, the chambers behind them. She was venerable in appearance and scrupulously neat in her dress, and her manner had just the right touch of dignity and deference, until we explained our errand. Then she flew into a rage and told us in a tone that challenged us to dispute it, "You know, no coal is to be carried upstairs after ten o'clock in the morning."

Coal was as yet so remote that we would have agreed to anything in our impatience to look out of the windows, and, reassured by us, she became the obsequious housekeeper again, getting the keys, toiling with us up the three flights of stairs, unlocking the double door,—for, as I have said, there is an "oak" to "sport,"—ushering us into the chambers with the Adam mantelpieces and [Pg 204] decorations and the windows that brought us there, dropping the correct "Sir" and "Madam" into her talk, accepting without a tremor the shilling we were ashamed to offer, and realizing so entirely our idea of what a housekeeper in London chambers ought to be, that her outbreak over the coal we had not ordered, and might never order, was the more perplexing.

I understood it before we were settled in our chambers, for they were not really ours until after a long delay over the legal formalities with which the English love to entangle their simplest transactions at somebody else's expense, and a longer one in proving our personal and financial qualifications, the landlord being disturbed by a suspicion that, like the Housekeeper's daughter, we were in *the* profession and spent most of our time "resting," a suspicion confirmed by the escape of the last tenant, also in *the* profession, with a year's rent still to pay. And then came much the longest delay of all over the British Workman, who, once he got in, threatened never to get out. In the mean while we saw the Housekeeper almost every day. [Pg 205]

We did not have to see her often to discover that she was born a housekeeper, that she had but one thought in life, and that this was the house under her charge. I am sure she believed that she came into the world to take care of it, unless indeed it was built to be taken care of by her. She belonged to a generation in England who had not yet been taught the folly of interest in their work, and she was old-fashioned enough to feel the importance of the post she filled. She would have lost her self-respect had she failed in the slightest detail of her duty to the house. From the first, the spotless marvel she made of it divided our admiration with our windows. The hall and front steps were immaculate, the white stone stairs shone, there was not a speck of dust anywhere, and I appreciated the work this meant in an old London building, where the dirt not only filters through doors and windows, but oozes out of the walls and comes up through the floors. She did not pretend to hide her despair when our painters and paperers tramped and [Pg 206] blundered in and out; she fretted herself ill when our furniture was brought up the three flights of her shining stairs. Painters and paperers and the bringing up of furniture were rare incidents in the life of a tenant and had to be endured. But coal, with its trail of dust, was an endless

necessity, and at least could be regulated. This was why, after her daily cleaning was done, she refused to let it pass.

Once we were established, we saw her less often. Her daily masterpiece was finished in the morning before we were up, and at all times she effaced herself with the respect she owed to tenants of a house in which she was the servant. If we did meet her she acknowledged our greeting with ostentatious humility, for she clung with as little shame to servility as to cleanliness; servility was also a part of the business of a housekeeper, just as elegance was the mark of *the* profession which her daughter graced, and the shame would have been not to be as servile as the position demanded.

This daughter was in every way an elegant person, dressing with a fidelity to fashion which I [Pg 207]
could not hope to emulate, and with the help of a fashionable dressmaker whom I could not afford to pay. She was "resting" from the time we came into the house until her mother left it, but if in *the* profession it is a misfortune to be out of work, it is a crime to look it, and her appearance and manner gave no hint of unemployment. In an emergency she would bring us up a message or a letter, but her civility had none of her mother's obsequiousness; it was a condescension, and she made us feel the honor she conferred upon the house by living in it. She was engaged to be married to a stage manager who for the moment seemed to be without a stage to manage, for he spent his evenings with her in the Housekeeper's little sitting-room, where photographs of actors and actresses, each with its sprawling autograph, covered the walls, crowded the mantelpiece, and littered the table. I think the Housekeeper could have asked for nothing better than that they should both continue to "rest," not so much because it gave her the pleasure of their society as
because it was a protection to the house to have a man about after dark until the street door was [Pg 208]
closed at eleven. Had it come to a question between the house and her daughter, the daughter would not have had a chance.

The Housekeeper, for all her deference to the tenants, was a despot, and none of us dared to rebel against her rule and disturb the order she maintained. To anybody coming in from the not too respectable little street the respectability of the house was overwhelming, and I often noticed that strangers, on entering, lowered their voices and stepped more softly. The hush of repose hung heavy on the public hall and stairs, whatever might be going on behind the two doors that faced each other on every landing. We all emulated her in the quiet and decorum of our movements. We allowed ourselves so seldom to be seen that after three months I still knew little of the others except their names on their doors, the professions of those who had offices and hung up their signs, and the frequency with which the Church League on the First Floor drank
afternoon tea. On certain days, when I went out towards five o'clock, I had to push my way [Pg 209]
through a procession of bishops in aprons and gaiters, deans and ordinary parsons who were legion, dowagers and duchesses who were as sands on the stairs. I may be wrong, but I fancy that the Housekeeper would have found a way to rout this weekly invasion if, in the aprons and gaiters, she had not seen symbols of the respectability which was her pride.

What I did not find out about the tenants for myself, there was no learning from her. She disdained the gossip which was the breath of life to the other housekeepers in the street, where, in the early mornings when the fronts were being done, or in the cool of summer evenings when the day's work was over, I would see them chattering at their doors. She never joined in the talk, holding herself aloof, as if her house were on a loftier plane than theirs, and as if the number of her years in it raised her to a higher caste. Exactly how many these years had been she never presumed to say, but she looked as ancient as the house, and had she told me she remembered
Bacon and Pepys, who were tenants each in his own day, or Peter the Great, who lived across the [Pg 210]
street, I should have believed her. She did not, however, claim to go further back than Etty, the Royal Academician, who spent over a quarter of a century in our chambers, and one of whose sitters she once brought up to see us,—a melancholy old man who could only shake his head, first over the changes in the house since Etty painted those wonderful Victorian nudes, so demure that "Bob" Stevenson insisted that Etty's maiden aunts must have sat for them, and then over the changes in the River, which also, it seemed, had seen better days. Really, he was so dismal a survivor of an older generation that we were glad she brought no more of his contemporaries to see us.

For so despotic a character, the Housekeeper had a surprisingly feminine capacity for hysterics, of which she made the most the night of the fire. I admit it was an agitating event for us all. The Fire of London was not so epoch-making. Afterwards the tenants used to speak of the days "Before the Fire," as we still talk at home of the days "Before the War." It happened in July, the [Pg 211]
third month of our tenancy. J. was away, and, owing to domestic complications, I was alone in our chambers at night. I do not recall the period with pride, for it proved me more of a coward than I cared to acknowledge. If I came home late, it was a struggle to make up my mind to open my front door and face the Unknown on the other side. Once or twice there was a second struggle at the dining-room door, the simple search for biscuits exaggerating itself into a perilous adventure. As I was not yet accustomed to the noises in our chambers, fear followed me to my bedroom, and when the trains on the near railroad bridge awoke me, I lay trembling, certain they were burglars or ghosts, forgetting that visitors of that kind are usually shyer in announcing themselves. Then I began to be ashamed, and there was a night when, though the noises sounded strangely like voices immediately outside my window, I managed to turn over and try to sleep again. This time the danger was real, and, the next thing I knew, somebody was ringing the front door-bell and
knocking without stopping, and before I had time to be afraid I was out of bed and at the door. It [Pg 212]
was the young man from across the hall, who had come to give me the cheerful intelligence that

his chambers were on fire, and to advise me to dress as fast as I knew how and get downstairs before the firemen and the hose arrived, or I might not get down at all.

I flung myself into my clothes, although, as I am pleased to recall, I had the sense to select my most useful gown, in case but one was left me in the morning, and the curiosity to step for a second on to the leads where the flames were leaping from the young man's windows. As it was too late to help himself, he was waiting, with his servant, to help me. A pile of J.'s drawings lay on a chair in the hall,—I thrust them the young man's outstretched arms. For some incomprehensible reason J.'s huge *schube* was on another chair,—I threw it into the arms of the young man's servant, who staggered under its unexpected weight. I rushed to my desk to secure the money I was unwilling to leave behind, when a bull's-eye lantern flashed upon me and a [Pg 213] policeman ordered me out. Firemen—for London firemen eventually arrive if the fire burns long enough—were dragging up a hose as I flew downstairs, and the policeman had scarcely pushed me into the Housekeeper's room, the young man had just deposited the drawings at my feet, and the servant the *schube*, when the stairs became a raging torrent.

I had not thought of the Housekeeper till then; after that there was no thinking of anything else. My dread of never again seeing our chambers was nothing to her sense of the outrage to her house. Niobe weeping for her children was not so tragic a spectacle as she lamenting the ruin of plaster and paint that did not belong to her. She was half-dressed, propped up against cushions on a couch, sniffing the salts and sipping the water administered by her daughter, who had taken the time to dress carefully and elegantly for the scene. "Oh, what shall I do! Oh, what shall I do!" the Housekeeper wailed as she saw me, wringing her hands with an abandonment that would [Pg 214] have made her daughter's fortune on the stage.

Her sitting-room had been appropriated as a refuge for the tenants, and this sudden reunion was my introduction to them. As the room was small, my first impression was of a crowd, though in actual numbers we were not many. The young man whose distinction was that the fire originated in his chambers, and myself, represented the Third Floor Front and Back. The Architect and his clerks of the Second Floor Front were at home in their beds, unconscious of the deluge pouring into their office; the Second Floor Back had gone away on a holiday. The Church League of the First Floor Front, haunted by bishops and deans, duchesses and dowagers, was of course closed, and we were deprived of whatever spiritual consolation their presence might have provided. But the First Floor Back filled the little room with her loud voice and portly presence. She had attired herself for the occasion in a black skirt and a red jacket, that, for all her efforts, would not meet over the vast expanse of grey Jaeger vest beneath, and her thin wisps of grey hair were drawn up [Pg 215] under a green felt hat of the pattern I wore for bicycling. I looked at it regretfully: a hat of any kind would have completed my costume. I complimented her on her fore-thought; but "What could I do?" she said, "they flurried me so I couldn't find my false front anywhere, and I had to cover my head with something." It was extraordinary how a common danger broke down the barrier of reserve we had hitherto so carefully cultivated. She had her own salts which she shared with us all, when she did not need them for the Housekeeper, whom she kept calling "Poor dear!" and who, after every "Poor dear!" went off into a new attack of hysterics.

The Ground Floor Front, a thin, spry old gentleman, hovered about us, bobbing in and out like the little man in the weather-house. He was in the insurance business, I was immediately informed, and it seemed a comfort to us all to know it, though I cannot for the life of me imagine why it should have been to me, not one stick or stitch up there in our chambers being insured. The Ground Floor Back was at his club, and his wife and two children had not been disturbed, as in [Pg 216] their chambers the risk was not immediate, and, anyway, they could easily walk out should it become so. He had been promptly sent for, and when a message came back that he was playing whist and would hurry to the rescue of his family as soon as his rubber was finished, the indignation in the Housekeeper's room was intense. "Brute!" the Housekeeper said, and after that, through the rest of the night, she would ask every few minutes if he had returned, and the answer in the negative was fresh fuel to her wrath.

She was, if anything, more severe with the young man whose chambers were blazing, and who confessed he had gone out toward midnight leaving a burning candle in one of his rooms. He treated the fire as a jest, which she could not forgive; and when at dawn, he decided that all his possessions, including account-books committed to his care, were in ashes, and that it was useless to wait, and he wished us good-morning and good-by, she hinted darkly that fires might be one way of disposing of records it was convenient to be rid of. [Pg 217]

Indignation served better than salts to rouse the Housekeeper from her hysterics, and I was glad of the distraction it gave her for another reason: without it, she could not long have remained unconscious of an evil that I look back to as the deadliest of all during that night's vigil. For, gradually through her room, by this time close to suffocation, there crept the most terrible smell. It took hold of me, choked me, sickened me. The Housekeeper's daughter and the First Floor Back blanched under it, the Housekeeper turned from white to green. I have often marvelled since that they never referred to it, but I know why I did not. For it was I who sent that smell downstairs when I threw the Russian *schube* into the arms of the Third Floor Front's servant. Odours, they say, are the best jogs to memory, and the smell of the *schube* is for me so inextricably associated with the fire, that I can never think of one without remembering the other.

The *schube* was the chief treasure among the fantastic costumes it is J.'s joy to collect on his [Pg 218] travels. His Hungarian sheepskins, French hooded capes, Swiss blouses, Spanish berêts, Scotch

tam-o'-shanters, Dalmatian caps, Roumanian embroidered shirts, and the rest, I can dispose of by packing them out of sight and dosing them with camphor. But no trunk was big enough to hold the Russian *schube*, and its abominable smell, even when reinforced by tons of camphor and pepper, could not frighten away the moths. It was picturesque, so much I admit in its favor, and Whistler's lithograph of J. draped in it is a princely reward for my trouble. But that trouble lasted for eighteen years, during which time J. wore the *schube* just twice,—once to pose for the lithograph and once on a winter night in London, when its weight was a far more serious discomfort than the cold. Occasionally he exhibited it to select audiences. At all other times it hung in a colossal linen bag made especially to hold it. The eighteenth summer, when the bag was opened for the periodical airing and brushing, no *schube* was there; not a shred of fur remained, the cloth was riddled with holes; it had fallen before its hereditary foe and the moths [Pg 219] had devoured it. For this had I toiled over it; for this had I rescued it on the night of the fire as if it were my crowning jewel; for this had I braved the displeasure of the Housekeeper, from which indeed I escaped only because, at the critical moment, the policeman who had ordered me downstairs appeared to say that the lady from the Third Floor Back could go up again if she chose.

The stairs were a waterfall under which I ascended. The two doors of our chambers were wide open, with huge gaps where panels had been, the young man's servant having carefully shut them after me in our flight, thinking, I suppose, that the firemen would stand upon ceremony and ask for the key before venturing in. A river was drying up in our hall, and the strip of matting down the centre was sodden. Empty soda-water bottles rolled on the floor, though it speaks well for London firemen that nothing stronger was touched. Candles were stuck upside down in our hanging Dutch lamp and all available candlesticks, curtains and blinds were pulled about, chairs [Pg 220] were upset, the marks of muddy feet were everywhere. I ought to have been grateful, and I was, that the damage was so small, all the more when I went again on to the leads and saw the blackened heap to which the night had reduced the young man's chambers. But the place was inexpressibly cheerless and dilapidated in the dawning light.

It was too late to go to bed, too early to go to work. I was hungry, and the baker had not come, nor the charwoman. I was faint, the smell of the *schube* was strong in my nostrils, though the *schube* itself was now safely locked up in a remote cupboard. I wandered disconsolately from room to room, when, of a sudden, there appeared at my still open front door a gorgeous vision,—a large and stately lady, fresh and neat, arrayed in flowing red draperies, with a white lace fichu thrown over a mass of luxuriant golden hair. I stared, speechless with amazement. It was not until she spoke that I recognized the First Floor Back, who had had time to lay her hands not only on a false front, but on a whole wig, and who had had the enterprise to make tea which she [Pg 221] invited me to drink with her in Pepys's chambers.

The Housekeeper and the Housekeeper's daughter were already in her dining-room, the Housekeeper huddled up in a big armchair, pillows at her back, a stool at her feet. Like her house she was a wreck, and her demoralization was sad to see. All her life, until a few short hours ago, she had been the model of neatness; now she did not care how she looked; her white hair was untidy, her dress half-buttoned, her apron forgotten; and she, who had hitherto discouraged familiarity in the tenants, joined us as a friend. She was too exhausted for hysterics, but she moaned over her tea and abandoned herself to her grief. She could not rally, and, what is more, she did not want to. She had no life apart from her house, and in its ruin she saw her own. Her immaculate hall was defaced and stained, a blackened groove was worn in her shining stairs, the water pouring through the chambers in the front, down to her own little apartment, had turned them all into a damp and depressing mess. Her moans were the ceaseless accompaniment to our [Pg 222] talk of the night's disaster. Always she had waited for the fire, she said, she had dreaded it, and at last it had come, and there was no sorrow like unto hers.

After the first excitement, after the house had resumed, as well as it could, its usual habits, the Housekeeper remained absorbed in her grief. Hitherto her particular habit was to work, and she had been able, unaided, to keep the house up to her immaculate standard of perfection. But now to restore it to order was the affair of builders, of plasterers and painters and paperers. There was nothing for her to do save to sit with hands folded and watch the sacrilege. Her occupation was gone, and all was wrong with her world.

I was busy during the days immediately "after the fire." I had to insure our belongings, which, of course, being insured, have never run such a risk again. I had to prepare and pack for a journey to France, now many days overdue, and, what with one thing or another, I neglected the [Pg 223] Housekeeper. When at last I was ready to shut up our chambers and start and I called at her rooms, it seemed to me she had visibly shrunk and wilted, though she had preserved enough of the proper spirit to pocket the substantial tip I handed over to her with my keys. She was no less equal to accepting a second when, after a couple of months I returned and could not resist this expression of my sympathy on finding the hall still stained and defaced, the stairs still with their blackened groove, the workmen still going and coming, and her despair at the spectacle blacker than ever.

The next day she came up to our chambers. She wore her best black gown and no apron, and from these signs I concluded it was a visit of state. I was right: it was to announce her departure. The house, partially rebuilt and very much patched up, would never be the same. She was too old for hope, and without the courage to pick up the broken bits of her masterpiece and put them together again. She was more ill at ease as visitor than as housekeeper. The conversation languished, although I fancied she had something particular to say, slight as was her success in [Pg 224]

saying it. We had both been silent for an awkward minute when she blurted out abruptly that she had never neglected her duty, no matter what it might or might not have pleased the tenants to give her. I applauded the sentiment as admirable, and I said good-by; and never once then, and not until several days after she left us, did it dawn upon me that she was waiting to accept graciously the fee it was her right in leaving to expect from me. The fact of my having only just tipped her liberally had nothing to do with it. A housekeeper's departure was an occasion for money to pass from the tenant's hand into hers, and she had too much respect for her duty as housekeeper not to afford me the opportunity of doing mine as tenant. It was absurd, but I was humiliated in my own eyes when I thought of the figure I must cut in hers, and I could only hope she would make allowance for me as an ignorant American.

How deep I sunk in her esteem, there was no means of knowing. I do not think she could endure to come to her house as a stranger, for she never returned. Neither did any news of her reach us. I cannot believe she enjoyed the inactive existence with her daughter to which she had retired, and I should be astonished if she bore it long. In losing her house she had lost her interest in life. Her work in the world was done. [Pg 225] [Pg 226]

The New Housekeeper [Pg 227]

THE SPIRE OF ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS

[Pg 228]

VII [Pg 229]

THE NEW HOUSEKEEPER

It had taken years for the Old Housekeeper to mature, and I knew that in the best sense of the word she could never be replaced. But the knowledge did not prepare me for the New Housekeeper.

Mrs. Haines was a younger and apparently stronger woman, but she was so casual in her dress, and so eager to emulate the lilies of the field, as to convince me that it was not in her, under any conditions, to mature into a housekeeper at all. It expressed much, I thought, that while the Old Housekeeper had always been "the Housekeeper," we never knew Mrs. Haines by any name but her own. The fact that she had a husband was her recommendation to the landlord, who had been alarmed by the fire and the hysterics into which it threw the Old Housekeeper, and now insisted upon a man in the family as an indispensable qualification for the post. The advantage might have been more obvious had Mr. Haines not spent most of his time in dodging the tenants and helping them to forget his presence in the house. He was not an ill-looking nor ill-mannered man, and shyness was the only explanation that occurred to me for his perseverance in avoiding us. Work could not force him from his retirement. Mrs. Haines said that he was a carpenter by trade, but the only ability I ever knew him to display was in evading whatever job I was hopeful enough to [Pg 230]

offer him. Besides, though it might be hard to say what I think a carpenter ought to look like, I was certain he did not look like one, and others shared my doubts.

The rumour spread through our street—where everybody rejoices in the knowledge of everything about everybody else who lives in it—that he had once been in the Civil Service, but had married beneath him and come down in the world. How the rumour originated I never asked, or never was told if I did ask; but it was so evident that he shrank from the practice of the carpenter's trade that once we sent him with a letter to the Publisher—who shares our love of the [Pg 231] neighbourhood to the point, not only of publishing from it, but of living in it—asking if some sort of place could not be found for him in the office. It was found, I am afraid to his disappointment, for he never made any effort to fill it, and was more diligent than ever in keeping out of our way. If he saw us coming, on the rare occasions when he stood at the front door, or the rarer when he cleaned the gas-bracket above it, he would run if there was time, or, if there was not, turn his head and stare fixedly in the other direction that he might escape speaking to us. As the months went on, he was never caught cleaning anything or doing anything in the shape of work, except sometimes, furtively, as if afraid of being detected in the act, shutting the front door when the clocks of the neighbourhood struck eleven. He was far less of a safeguard to us than I often fancied he thought we were to him.

Mrs. Haines was sufficiently unlike him to account for one part of the rumour. She was coarse in appearance and disagreeable in manner, always on the defensive, always on the verge of flying [Pg 232] into a temper. She had no objection to showing herself; on the contrary, she was perpetually about, hunting for faults to find; but she did object to showing herself with a broom or a duster, a pail or a scrubbing-brush in her hands. I shuddered sometimes at the thought of the shock to the Old Housekeeper if she were to see her hall and stairs. We could bring up coal now at any hour or all day long. And yet Mrs. Haines tyrannized over us in her own fashion, and her tyranny was the more unbearable because it had no end except to spare herself trouble. Her one thought was to do nothing and get paid for it. She resented extra exertion without extra compensation. We never had been so bullied about coal under the old régime as we were under hers about a drain-pipe with a trick of overflowing. It might have drowned us in our chambers and she would not have stirred to save us; but its outlet was in a little paved court back of her kitchen, which it was one of her duties to keep in order, and she considered every overflow a rank injustice. She held the tenants in turn responsible, and would descend upon us like a Fury upbraiding us for our [Pg 233] carelessness. It would never have surprised me had she ordered us down to clean up the court for her.

I must in fairness add that when extra exertion meant extra money she did not shirk it. Nor was she without accomplishments. She was an excellent needlewoman: she altered and renovated more than one gown for me, she made me chair-covers, she mended my carpets. During the first years she was in the house she never refused any needlework, and often she asked me for more. She would come up and wait for me at table on the shortest notice. In an emergency she would even cook me a dinner which, in its colourless English way, was admirable. There is no denying that she could be useful, but her usefulness had a special tariff.

It was also in her favour that she was a lover of cats, and their regard for her was as good as a certificate. I came to be on the best of terms with hers, Bogie by name, a tall ungainly tabby, very much the worse for wear. He spent a large part of his time on the street, and often, as I came or [Pg 234] went, he would be returning home and would ask me, in a way not to be resisted, to ring her door-bell for him. Sometimes I waited to exchange a few remarks with him, for, though his voice was husky and not one of his attractions, he had always plenty to say. On these occasions I was a witness of his pleasure in seeing his mistress again, though his absence might have been short, and of her enthusiasm in receiving him. Unquestionably they understood each other, and cats are animals of discrimination.

She extended her affection to cats that did not belong to her, and ours came in for many of her attentions. Our Jimmy, who had the freedom of the streets, often paid her a visit on his way out or in, as I knew he would not have done if she had not made the time pass agreeably; for if he, like all cats, disliked to be bored, he knew better than most how to avoid the possibility. One of his favourite haunts was the near Strand, probably because he was sure to meet his friends there. It was a joy to him, if we had been out late in the evening, to run across us as we returned. With a fervent "mow" of greeting, he was at our side; and then, his tail high in the air, and singing a [Pg 235] song of rapture, he would come with us to our front door, linger until he had seen us open it, when, his mind at rest for our safety, he would hurry back to his revels. We considered this a privilege, and our respect for Mrs. Haines was increased when he let her share it, even in the daytime. He was known to join her in the Strand, not far from Charing Cross, walk with her to Wellington Street, cross over, wait politely while she bought tickets at the Lyceum for one of the tenants, cross again, and walk back with her. He was also known to sit down in the middle of the Strand, and divert the traffic better than a "Bobby," until Mrs. Haines, when everybody else had failed, enticed him away. He deserved the tribute of her tears, and she shed many, when the Vet kindly released him from the physical ruin to which exposure and a life of dissipation had reduced him.

William Penn showed her the same friendliness, but from him it was not so marked, for he was a cat of democratic tastes and, next to his family, preferred the people who worked for them. He [Pg 236] had not as much opportunity for his civilities as Jimmy, never being allowed to leave our chambers. But when Mrs. Haines was busy in our kitchen, he occupied more than a fair portion of her time, for which she made no reduction in the bill. William's charms were so apt to distract

me from my work that I could say nothing, and her last kindness of all when he died—in his case of too luxuriant living and too little exercise, the Vet said—would make me forgive her much worse. According to my friend, Miss Repplier, a cat "considers dying a strictly private affair." But William Penn's death-bed was a public affair, at least for Augustine and myself, who sat up with him through the night of his agony. We were both exhausted by morning, unfit to cope with the problem of his funeral. Chambers are without any convenient corner to serve as cemetery, and I could not trust the most important member of the family to the dust-man for burial. I do not know what I should have done but for Mrs. Haines. It was she who arranged, by a bribe I would willingly have doubled, that during the dinner-hour, when the head-gardener was out of the way, [Pg 237] William should be laid to rest in the garden below our windows. She was the only mourner with Augustine and myself,—J. was abroad,—when, from above, we watched the assistant gardener lower him into his little grave under the tree where the wood-pigeons have their nest.

If I try now to make the best of what was good in Mrs. Haines, at the time she did not give me much chance. Grumbling was such a habit with her that, even had the Socialists' Millennium come, she would have kept on, if only because it removed all other reason for her grumbles. Her prejudice against work of any kind did not lessen her displeasure with everybody who did not provide her with work of some kind to do. She treated me as if I imposed on her when I asked her to sew or to mend or to cook, and she abused the other tenants because they did not ask her. This indeed was her principal grievance. She could not see why they were in the house if it were not to increase her income, and she hated the landlord for having led her to believe they would. She paid me innumerable visits, the object of which never varied. It was to borrow, which she did [Pg 238] without shame or apology. She never hesitated in her demands, she never cringed. She ran short because the other tenants were not doing the fair and square thing by her, and she did not see why she should not draw upon me for help. One inexhaustible debt was the monthly bill for her furniture, bought on the instalment system and forfeited if any one instalment were not met. I do not remember how many pounds I advanced, but enough to suggest that she had furnished her rooms, of which she never gave me as much as a glimpse, in a style far beyond her means. I could afford to be amiable, for I knew I could make her pay me back in work, though my continual loans did so little to improve her financial affairs that after a while my patience gave out, and I refused to advance another penny.

It was not until the illness of her husband, after they had been in the house for some two years, that I realized the true condition of things behind the door they kept so carefully closed. The illness was sudden, so far as I knew. I had not seen Mr. Haines for long, but I was accustomed to [Pg 239] not seeing him, and curiously, when Mrs. Haines's need was greatest, she showed some reluctance in asking to be helped out of it. Her husband was dying before she appealed to anybody, and then it was not to me, but to Mrs. Burden, my old charwoman, who was so poor that I had always fancied that to be poorer still meant to live in the streets or on the rates. But Mrs. Haines was so much worse off, that Mrs. Burden, in telling me about it, thanked Our Lady that she had never fallen so low. It was cold winter and there was no fire, no coal, no wood, behind the closed door. The furniture for which I had advanced so many pounds consisted, I now found out, of two or three rickety chairs and a square of tattered carpet in the front room, a few pots and pans in the kitchen. In the dark bedroom between, the dying man lay on a hard board stretched on the top of a packing-box, shivering under his threadbare overcoat, so pitiful in his misery and suffering that Mrs. Burden was moved to compassion and hurried home to fetch him the blankets from her own bed and buy him a pennyworth of milk on the way. [Pg 240]

When the tenants knew how it was with Mrs. Haines and her husband, as now they could not help knowing, they remembered only that he was ill, and they sent for the doctor and paid for medicine, and did what they could to lighten the gloom of the two or three days left to him. And they arranged for a decent burial, feeling, I think, that a man who had been in the Civil Service should not lie in a pauper's grave. For a week or so we wondered again who he was, why he kept so persistently out of sight; after that we thought as little of him as when he had skulked, a shadow, between his rooms and the street door on the stroke of eleven.

Hitherto everybody had been patient with Mrs. Haines, for the London housekeeper, though she has not got the tenants as completely in her power as the Paris *concierge*, can, if she wants, make things very disagreeable for them. Now that she was alone in the world, everybody was kind to her. The landlord overlooked his announced decision "to sack the pair," and retained her [Pg 241] as housekeeper, though in losing her husband she had lost her principal recommendation. The tenants raised a fund to enable her to buy the mourning which is often a consolation in widowhood. Work was offered to her in chambers which she had never entered before, and I added to the tasks in ours. The housekeepers in the street with families to support must have envied her. She had her rooms rent free, wages from the landlord, plenty of extra work, and though this might not seem affluence to people who do not measure their income by pence or scramble for the odd shilling, it was wealth in housekeeping circles.

Mrs. Haines, however, did not see her position in that light. She had complained when work was not offered to her, she complained more bitterly when it was. Perhaps her husband had had some restraining influence upon her. I cannot say; but certainly once he was gone, she gave up all pretence of controlling her temper. She would sweep like a hurricane through the house, raging and raving, on the slightest provocation. She led us a worse life than ever over the drain-pipe. [Pg 242] She left the house more and more to take care of itself, dust lying thick wherever dust could lie, the stairs turned to a dingy grey, the walls blackened with London smoke and grime. Once in a while she hired a forlorn, ragged old woman to wash the stairs and brush the front-door mat, for

in London, more than anywhere else, "poverty is a comparative thing," and every degree has one below to "soothe" it. No matter how hard up Mrs. Haines was, she managed to scrape together a few pennies to pay to have the work done for her rather than do it herself. The greater part of her leisure she spent out of the house, and when I passed her door I would see pinned up on it a bit of paper stating in neat, even elegant, writing, "Apply on the First Floor for the Housekeeper," or "Gone out. Back in ten minutes"; and hours, sometimes days, later the same notice would still be there. She became as neglectful of herself as of the house: her one dress grew shabbier and shabbier, her apron was discarded, no detail of her toilet was attended to except the frizzing of her coarse black hair. All this came about not at once, but step by step, and things were very bad [Pg 243] before J. and I admitted, even to each other, that she was a disgrace to the house. We would admit it to nobody else, and to my surprise the other tenants were as forbearing. I suppose it was because they understood, as well as we did, that at a word to the landlord she would be adrift in London, where for one vacant post of housekeeper there are a hundred applications. To banish her from our own chambers, however, was not to drive her to the workhouse, and I called for her services less and less often.

There was another reason for my not employing her to which I have not so far referred, the reason really of her slovenliness and bad temper and gradual deterioration. I shut my eyes as long as I could. But I was prepared for the whispers that began to be heard, not only in our house, but up and down our street. What started them I do not know, but the morning and evening gatherings of the housekeepers at their doors were not held for nothing, and presently it got about that Mrs. Haines had been seen stealing in and out of a public-house, and that this [Pg 244] public-house was just beyond the border-line of the Quarter, which looked as if she were endeavouring to escape the vigilant eyes of our gossips. Then, as invariably happens, the whispers grew louder, the evidence against her circumstantial, and everybody was saying quite openly where her money disappeared and why she became shabbier, her rooms barer, and the house more disreputable. It leaked out that her husband also had been seen flitting from public-house to public-house; and, the game of concealment by this time being up, it was bluntly said that drink had killed him, as it would Mrs. Haines if she went on as she was going.

I had kept my suspicions to myself, but she had never come to our chambers at the hour of lunch or dinner that there was not an unusual drain upon our modest wine-cellar. I could not fancy that it was merely a coincidence, that friends dining with us were invariably thirstier when she waited or cooked; but her appearance had been the invariable signal for the disappearance of our wine at a rate that made my employment of her a costly luxury. I never saw her when I could declare [Pg 245] she had been drinking, but drink she did, and there was no use my beating about the bush and calling it by another name. It would have been less hopeless had she occasionally betrayed herself, had her speech thickened and her walk become unsteady. But hers was the deadliest form of the evil, because it gave no sign. There was nothing to check it except every now and then a mysterious attack of illness,—which she said defied the doctor though it defied nobody in the house,—or the want of money; but a housekeeper must be far gone if she cannot pick up a shilling here and a half-crown there. I was the last of the old tenants to employ her, but after I abandoned her she still had another chance with a newcomer who took the chambers below ours, and, finding them too small to keep more than one servant, engaged her for a liberal amount of work. She bought aprons and a new black blouse and skirt, and she was so spruce and neat in them that I was encouraged to hope. But before the end of the first week, she was met on the stairs coming down from his room to hers with a bottle under her apron; at the end of the second [Pg 246] she was dismissed.

I hardly dare think how she lived after this. With every Christmas there was a short period of prosperity, though it dwindled as the tenants began to realize where their money went. For a time J. and I got her to keep our bicycles, other people in the house followed suit, and during several months she was paid rent for as many as six, keeping them in the empty sitting-room from which even the rickety chairs had disappeared, and where the floor now was thick with grease and stained with oil. If we had trunks to store or boxes to unpack, she would let us the same room for as long as we wanted, and so she managed, one way or the other, by hook or by crook. But it was a makeshift existence, all the more so when her habits began to tell on her physically. She was ill half the time, and by the end of her fourth year in the house, I do not believe she could have sewed or waited or cooked, had she had the chance. She had no friends, no companions, save her cat. They were a grim pair, she with hungry, shifty eyes glowing like [Pg 247] fires in the pallor of her face, he more gaunt and ungainly than ever: for a witch and her familiar they would have been burnt not so many hundred years ago.

Then we heard that she was taking in lodgers, that women with the look of hunted creatures stole into her rooms at strange hours of the night. Some said they were waifs and strays from the "Halls," others that they were wanderers from the Strand; all agreed that, whoever they were, they must be as desperately poor as she, to seek shelter where the only bed was the floor. Much had been passed over, but I knew that such lodgers were more than landlord and tenants could endure, and I had not to be a prophet to foresee that the end was approaching.

It came more speedily than I thought, though the manner of it was not left to landlord and tenants. Christmas, her fifth in the house, had filled her purse again. Tenants were less liberal, it is true, but she must have had at least five or six pounds, to which a turkey and plum pudding had been added by our neighbour across the hall, who was of a generous turn. She had therefore [Pg 248] the essentials of what passes for a merry Christmas, but how much merriment there was in hers I had no way of telling. On holidays in London I keep indoors if I can, not caring to face the

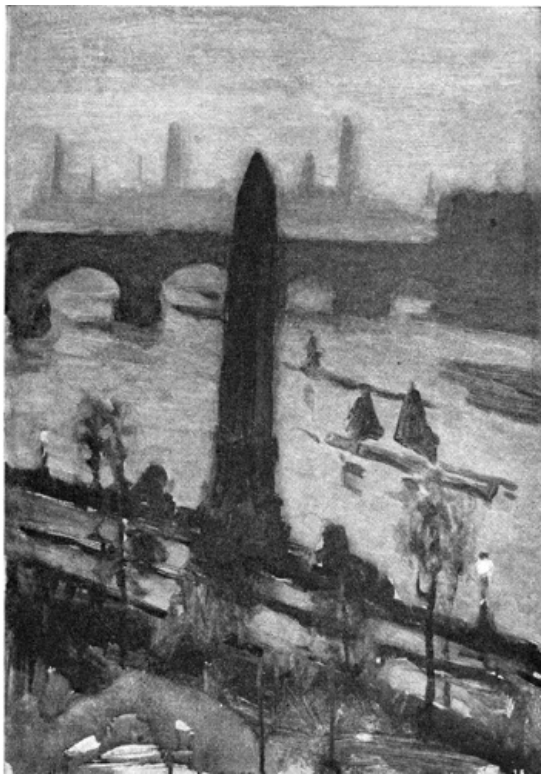
sadness of the streets or the dreariness of house-parties, and I did not go downstairs on Christmas Day, nor on Boxing Day which is the day after. Mrs. Haines, if she came up, did not present herself at our chambers. I trust she was gay because, as it turned out, it was her last chance for gaiety at this or any other season. In the middle of the night following Boxing Day she was seized with one of her mysterious attacks. A lodger was with her, but, from fright, or stupidity, or perhaps worse, called no one till dawn, when she rang up the housekeeper next door and vanished. The housekeeper next door went at once for the doctor who attends to us all in the Quarter. It was too late. Mrs. Haines was dead when he reached the house.

Death was merciful, freeing her from the evil fate that threatened, for she was at the end of everything. She went out of the world as naked as she came into it. Her rooms were empty, there was not so much as a crust of bread in her kitchen, in her purse were two farthings. Her only clothes were those she had just taken off and the few rags wrapped about her for the night. Destitution could not be more complete, and the horror was to find it, not round the corner, not at the door, but in the very house, and, worse, to know that it deserved no pity. As she had sown, so had she reaped, and the grave was the kindliest shelter for the harvest. [Pg 249]

The day after, her sister appeared, from where, summoned by whom, I do not know. She was a decent, serious woman, who attended to everything, and when the funeral was over, called on all the tenants. She wanted, she told me, to thank us for all our kindness to her sister, whom kindness had so little helped. She volunteered no explanation, she only sighed her regrets. She could not understand, she said.

Nor could I. No doubt, daily in the slums, many women die as destitute. But they never had their chance. Mrs. Haines had hers, and a fair one as these things go. Her tragedy has shaken my confidence in the reformers to-day who would work the miracle, and, with equal chances for all men, transform this sad world of ours into Utopia. [Pg 250]

Our Beggars [Pg 251]



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE FROM OUR WINDOWS

[Pg 252]

VIII [Pg 253]

OUR BEGGARS

I know our Beggars by their ring. When the front door-bell is pulled with insolent violence, "That," I say to myself, "is a Beggar," and I am usually right.

Ours are not the Beggars of whose decay Elia complained; though he could not have believed that the art of begging was in any more danger of being lost than the art of lying. His sort have still their place at the crowded crossing, at the corners of streets and turnings of alleys—they are

always with us. I rarely go out that I do not meet the cripple who swings himself along on his crutches through the throngs at Charing Cross, or the blind man who taps his way down the Strand, or the paralytic in her little cart close to St. Martin's, and I too should complain were they to disappear. These are Beggars I do not mind. They have their picturesque uses. They carry [Pg 254] on an old tradition. They are licensed to molest me, and their demands, with their thanks when I give and their curses when I do not, are the methods of a venerable and honoured calling. Besides, I can escape them if I choose. I can cross the street at the approach of the cripple, I can dodge the blind man, I can look away as I pass the paralytic, and so avoid the irritation of giving when I do not want to or the discomfort of hearing their opinion of me when I refuse. But to our Beggars I do object, and from them there is no escape. They belong to a new species, and have abandoned the earlier methods as crude and primitive. They make a profession neither of disease nor of deformity, but of having come down in the world. They scorn to stoop to "rags and the wallet," which they have exchanged for a top hat and frock coat. They take out no license, for they never beg in the streets; instead, they assault us at our door, where they do not ask for alms but claim the gift, they call a loan, as their right. They are bullies, brigands, who would thrust the virtue of charity upon us, and if, as the philosopher thinks, it is a test of manners to receive, they [Pg 255] come out of it with dignity, for their fiction of a loan saves them, and us, from the professional profuseness of the Beggar's thanks.

It was only when I moved into chambers in the Quarter that they began to come to see me. Hitherto, my life in London had been spent in lodgings, where, if I was never free from Beggars in the form of those intimate friends who are always short of ten pounds to pay their rent or ten shillings to buy a hat, it was the landlady's affair when the Beggars who were strangers called.

Chambers, however, gave me a front door at which they could ring and an address in the Directory in which they could find out where the door was; and had my object been to make a study of them and their manners, I could not have hit upon a better place to collect my material.

Not that Beggars are encouraged in the Quarter, where more than one society devoted to their scientific suppression has, or has had, an office, and where the lady opposite does not wait for science, but sends them flying the minute she catches them in our streets. The man who loafs in [Pg 256] front of our club, and who opens cab-doors for members, and as many more as he can capture, might be mistaken for a Beggar by anybody who did not know the Quarter, but we who do know it understand that he is loafing by special appointment. The small boy who has lately taken to selling his single box of matches on our Terrace does so officially, as the brass label on his arm explains. And nothing could be more exceptional than the cheerful person who the other day reeled after the Publisher and myself into one of our houses where there is an elevator—for to elevators we have come in the Quarter—the thin end of the modern wedge that threatens its destruction—and addressed the Publisher so affectionately as "Colonel" that we both retreated into the elevator and pressed the button for the top floor.

But the Beggars we keep off our streets, we cannot keep from our front doors. J. and I had hardly settled in chambers before we were besieged. People were immediately in need of our help who up till then had managed without it, and to our annoyance they have been in need of it ever since. [Pg 257] They present themselves in so many different guises, by so many different methods, that it is impossible to be on our guard against them all. Some sneak in with the post, and our correspondence has doubled in bulk. Dukes, Earls, Marquises, Baronets, favour us with lithographed letters, signing their names at the bottom, writing ours at the top, and demanding our contribution to charities they approve, as the price of so amazing a condescension. Ladies of rank cannot give their benevolent balls and banquets unless we buy tickets, nor can they conceive of our dismissing their personal appeal. Clergymen start missions that we may finance them, bazaars are opened that we may fill the stalls with the free offering of the work by which we make our living, and albums are raffled that we may grace them with our autographs. We might think that the post was invented for the benefit of people whose idea of charity is to do the begging and get us to do the giving. Many of our Beggars like better to beg in person: sometimes as nurses with tickets to sell for a concert, or as Little Sisters of the Poor—whom I welcome, [Pg 258] having preserved a sentiment for any variety of cap and veil since my own convent days; sometimes as people with things to sell at the biggest price, that we would not want at the lowest, or with patent inventions that we would not take as a gift, and who are indignant if we decline to be taxed for the privilege of not buying or subscribing. But the most numerous of our Beggars, the most persistent, the most liberal in their expectations, are the men, and more occasionally the women, who, having come down in the world, look to us to set them up again, and would be the first to resent it if our generosity ran to any such extravagant lengths.

Their patronage of the Quarter is doubtless due, partly to its being close to the Strand, which is an excellent centre for their line of business; partly to a convenient custom with us of leaving all street doors hospitably open and inscribing the names of tenants in big gilt letters on the wall just inside; partly to the fact that we are not five minutes from a Free Library, where they can [Pg 259] agreeably fill their hours of leisure by the study of "Who's Who," "The Year's Art," and other books in which publishers obligingly supply the information about us which to them is as valuable an asset as a crutch to the cripple or a staff to the blind. Provided by the Directory with our address, they may already know where to look us up and how to establish an acquaintance by asking for us by name at our door; but it is this cramming in the facts of our life that enables them to talk to us familiarly about our work until acquaintance has ripened into intimacy and the business of begging is put on a personal and friendly footing. Great as is the good which Mr. Carnegie must have hoped to accomplish by his Free Libraries, even he could have had no idea of

the boon they might prove to Beggars and the healthy stimulus to the art of begging which they develop.

In the beginning our Beggars had no great fault to find with us. Their frock coats and top hats, signs of real British respectability, carried them past the British porter and the British servant. When they crossed our threshold, some remnant of the barbarous instinct of hospitality [Pg 260] compelled us to receive them with civility, if not with cordiality. We never went so far as, with the Spaniard, to offer them our house and all that is in it, another instinct warning us how little they would mind taking us at our word; nor did hospitality push us to the extreme of being hoodwinked by their tales. But in those days we seldom let them go without something, which was always more than they deserved since they deserved nothing. If there is such a thing as a Beggar's Bædeker, I am sure our chambers were specially recommended in earlier editions. In justice, I must confess that they gave us entertainment for our money, and that the very tricks of the trade were amusing—that is, while the novelty lasted. We liked the splendid assurance of their manner; the pretended carelessness with which a foot was quickly thrust through the opening of the door so they could be shut out only by force; the important air with which they asked for a few minutes' talk; the insinuating smile with which they presumed that we remembered them; their cool assumption that their burden was ours, and that the kindness was [Pg 261] all on their side for permitting us the privilege of bearing it. And we liked no less their infinite trouble in inventing romances about themselves that Munchausen could not have beaten, their dramatic use of foggy nights and wild storms, their ingenuity in discovering a bond between us, and their plausibility in proving why it obliged us to meet their temporary difficulties which were never of course of their own making. Nor could we but admire their superiority to mere charity, their belief in the equal division of wealth, their indifference as to who did the work to create the wealth so long as they did not do it themselves, and their trust in the obligation imposed by a craft in common. Had they bestowed half the pains in practising this craft that they squandered in wheedling a few shillings from us on the strength of it, they must long since have been acknowledged its masters.

The first of our Beggars, whom I probably remember the better because he was the first, flattered me by introducing himself as a fellow author at a time when I had published but one [Pg 262] book and had won by it neither fame nor fortune. What he had published himself he did not think it worth while to mention, but the powers of imagination he revealed in his talk should have secured his reputation in print. I have rarely listened to anybody so fluent, I could not have got a word in had I wanted to. It never seemed to occur to him that I might not be as bent upon listening to his story as he upon telling it. He made it quite a personal matter between us. I would understand, he said, and the inference was that nobody else could, the bitterness of his awakening when the talented woman whom he had revered as the kindliest of her sex betrayed herself to him as the most cruel. For long, in her Florentine villa, he had been Secretary to Ouida, whom he found so charming and considerate that he could only marvel at all the gossip about her whims and fancies. Then, one morning, he was writing a letter at her dictation and by oversight he spelt disappointment with one p, a trifling error which, as I knew, any gentleman or scholar was liable to. She flew into a rage, she turned him out of the villa without hearing a word, she [Pg 263] pursued him into the garden, she set her dogs—colossal staghounds—on him, he had to run for his life, had even to vault over the garden gate, I could picture to myself with what disastrous consequences to his coat and trousers. And she was so vindictive that she would neither send him his clothes nor pay him a penny she owed him. He had too fine a sense of gallantry to go to law with a lady, he dared not remain in Florence where the report was that he went in danger of his life. There was nothing to do but to return to England, and—well—here he was, with a new outfit to buy before he could accept the admirable position offered to him, for he had not to assure me that a man of his competency was everywhere in demand; it was very awkward, and—in short—he looked to me as a fellow author to tide him over the awkwardness. I can laugh now at my absurd embarrassment when finally he came to a full stop. I did not have to wait for his exposure in the next number of "The Author" to realize that he was "an unscrupulous impostor." But I was [Pg 264] too shy to call him one to his face, and I actually murmured polite concern and "advanced" I have forgotten what, to be rid of him.

Out of compliment to J., our Beggars pose as artists no less frequently than as authors. If the artist himself, when accident or bad luck has got him into a tight place, likes best to come to his fellow artist to get him out of it, he is the first to pay his debts and the first debt he pays is to the artist who saw him through. But this has nothing to do with our Beggars who have chosen art as an unemployment and with whom accident or bad luck is deliberately chronic. They look upon art as a gilt-edged investment that should bring them in a dividend, however remote their connection with it. According to them, an artist entitles all his family, even to the second and third generation, to a share in J.'s modest income, though J. himself is not at all of their manner of thinking. Grandsons of famous wood-engravers, nephews of editors of illustrated papers, cousins of publishers of popular magazines, fathers of painters, brothers, sons, and uncles of every sort of [Pg 265] artist, even sisters, daughters, and aunts who take advantage of their talent for pathos and "crocodile wisdom of shedding tears when they should devour,"—all have sought to impress upon him that the sole reason for their existence is to live at his expense. He may suggest meekly that he subscribes to benevolent institutions and societies founded for the relief of artists and artists' families in just their difficulties. They are glib in excuses for making their application to him instead, and they evidently think he ought to be grateful to them for putting him in the way of enjoying the blessing promised to those who give.

The most ambitious reckon their needs on a princely scale, as if determined to beg, when they

have to, with all their might. One artist, distinguished in his youth, writes to J., from the Café Royal where, in his old age, he makes a habit of dining and finding himself towards midnight ridiculously without a penny in his pocket, an emergency in which a five-pound note by return of messenger will oblige. Another, whose business hours are as late, comes in person for a "fiver," [Pg 266] his last train to his suburban home being on the point of starting and he as ridiculously penniless, except for a cheque for a hundred pounds just received from a publisher, which he cannot change at that time of night. The more humble have so much less lavish a standard that half a crown will meet their liabilities, or else a sum left to the generosity of the giver. A youth, frequent in his visits, never aspires above the fare of a hansom waiting below, while a painter of mature years appears only on occasions of public rejoicing or mourning when there is no telling to what extent emotion may loosen the purse strings. Some bring their pictures as security, or the pictures of famous ancestors who have become bewilderingly prolific since their death; some plead for their work to be taken out of pawn; some want to pose in a few days, and these J. recommends to the Keeper of the Royal Academy; and some are so subtle in their argument that we fail to follow it. We are still wondering what could have been the motive of the excited little man who burst in upon J. a few days ago with a breathless inquiry as to how much he charged for painting polo [Pg 267] ponies for officers, and who bolted as precipitately when J. said that he knew nothing about polo, and had never painted a pony in his life. But for sheer irrelevance none has surpassed the American whom, in J.'s absence, I was called upon to interview, and who assured me that, having begun life as an artist and later turned model, he had tramped all the way from New Orleans to New York and then worked his way over on a cattleship to London with no other object in view than to sit to J. If I regret that my countrymen in England borrow the trick of begging from the native, it is some satisfaction to have them excel in it. When I represented to the model from New Orleans that J., as far as I could see, would have no use for him, he was quite ready to take a shilling in place of the sitting, and when I would not give him a shilling, he declared himself repaid by his pleasant chat with a compatriot. He must have thought better of it afterwards and decided that something more substantial was owing to him, for three weeks later his visit was followed by a letter:— [Pg 268]

> Madam,—I know how sorry you will be to hear that since my little talk with you I have been dangerously sick in a hospital. The doctors have now discharged me, but they say I must do no work of any kind for ten days, though an artist is waiting for me to sit to him for an important picture. They advise me to strengthen myself with nourishing food in the meanwhile. Will you therefore please send me
>
> 3 dozen new-laid eggs
> 1 lb. of fresh butter
> 1 lb. of coffee
> 1 lb. of tea
> 2 lbs. of sugar
> 1 dozen of oranges.
>
> Thanking you in advance,
> I am, Madam,
> Gratefully yours.

There are periods when I am convinced that not art, not literature, but journalism is the most impecunious of the professions, and that all Fleet Street, to which the Quarter is fairly convenient, must be out of work. It is astonishing how often it depends upon our financial [Pg 269] backing to get into work again, though dependence could not be more misplaced, for a certain little transaction with a guileless youth whose future hung on a journey to Russia has given us all the experience of the kind, or a great deal more than we want. As astonishing is the number of journalists who cherish as their happiest recollections the years they were with us on the staff of London, New York, or Philadelphia papers for which we never wrote a line. One even grew sentimental over the "good old days" on the Philadelphia "Public Ledger" with J.'s father who, to our knowledge, passed his life without as much as seeing the inside of a newspaper office. But the journalist persisted until J. vowed that he never had a father, that he never was in Philadelphia, that he never heard of the "Ledger": then the poor man fled. Astonishing, too, is the count they keep of the seasons. Disaster is most apt to overtake them at those holiday times when Dickens has taught that hearts are tender and purses overflow. For them Christmas spells catastrophe, and it has ceased to be a surprise to hear their ring on Christmas Eve. As a rule, a [Pg 270] shilling will avert the catastrophe and enable them to exchange the cold streets for a warm fireside, hunger for feasting, though I recall a reporter for whom it could not be done under a ticket to Paris. The Paris edition of the "New York Herald" had engaged him on condition that he was in the office not later than Christmas morning. He was ready to start, but—there was the ticket, and, for no particular reason except that it was Christmas Eve, J. was to have the pleasure of paying for it.

"Why not apply to the 'New York Herald' office here?" J. asked.

The reporter beamed: "My dear sir, the very thing, the very thing. Why didn't I think of it before? I will go at once. Thank you, sir, thank you!"

He was back in an hour, radiant, the ticket in his hand, but held tight, so that just one end showed, as if he was afraid of losing it. "You see, sir, it was the right tip, but I must have some coffee at Dieppe, and I haven't one penny over. I can manage with a shilling, sir, and if you would [Pg 271]

be so kind a couple more for a cab in Paris."

He did not know his man. J. would go, or rather he has gone, without breakfast or dinner and any distance on foot when work was at stake. But the reporter was so startled by the suggestion of such hardships for himself that he dropped the ticket on the floor, and before he could snatch it up again J. had seen that it was good not for Paris, but for a 'bus in the Strand.

I wish I had been half as stern with the assistant editor from Philadelphia. I knew him for what he was the minute he came into the room. He was decently, even jauntily dressed, but there hung about him the smell of stale cigars and whiskey, which always hangs about those of our Beggars who do not fill our chambers with the sicklier smell of drugs. Nor did I think much of his story. He related it at length with elegance of manner and speech, but it was a poor one, inviting doubt. The card he played was the one he sent in with a well-known Philadelphia name on it, and he strengthened the effect by his talk of the artist with whom he once shared rooms at Eleventh and [Pg 272] Spruce streets. That "fetched me." For Eleventh and Spruce streets must ever mean for me the red brick house with the white marble steps and green shutters, the pleasant garden opposite full of trees green and shady on hot summer days, the leisurely horse-cars jingling slowly by,—the house that is so big in all the memories of my childhood and youth. If I can help it, nobody shall ever know what his having lived in its neighbourhood cost me. I was foolish, no doubt, but I gave with my eyes open: sentiment sometimes is not too dearly bought at the price of a little folly.

Were Covent Garden not within such easy reach of the Quarter I could scarcely account for the trust which the needy musician places in us. Certainly it is because of no effort or encouragement on our side. We have small connection with the musical world, and whether because of the size of the singers or the commercial atmosphere at Baireuth, J. since we heard "Parsifal" there will not be induced to go to the opera anywhere, or to venture upon a concert. Under the circumstances, [Pg 273] the most imaginative musician could not make believe in a professional bond between us, though there is nothing to shake his faith in the kinship of all the arts and, therefore, in our readiness to support the stray tenor or violinist who cannot support himself. But imagination, anyway, is not his strong point. He seldom displays the richness of fancy of our other Beggars, and I can recall only one, a pianist who had grasped the possibilities of "Who's Who." His use of it, however, went far to atone for the neglect of the rest. With its aid he had discovered not only that we were Philadelphians, but that Mr. David Bispham was also, and he had to let off his enthusiasm over Philadelphia and "dear old Dave Bispham" before he got down to business. There his originality gave out. His was the same old story of a run of misfortunes and disappointments—"it could never have happened if dear old Dave Bispham had been in town"—and the climax was the dying wife for whom our sympathy has been asked too often for a particle to be left. The only difference was that she took rather longer in dying than usual, and the pianist returned to report her [Pg 274] removal from the shelter of a friend's house to the hospital, from the hospital to lodgings, and from the lodgings he threatened us with the spectacle of her drawing her last breath in the gutter if we did not, then and there, pay his landlady and his doctor and his friend to whom he was deeply in debt. We were spared her death, probably because by that time the pianist saw the wisdom of carrying the story of her sufferings to more responsive ears, though it is not likely that he met with much success anywhere. He was too well dressed for the part. With his brand-new frock coat and immaculate silk hat, with his gold-mounted cane and Suède gloves, he was better equipped for the *jeune premier* warbling of love, than for the grief-stricken husband watching in penniless desolation by the bedside of a dying wife.

The Quarter is also within an easy stroll for actors who, when their hard times come, show an unwarranted confidence in us, though J., if anything, disdains the theatre more than the opera. They take advantage of their training and bring the artist's zeal to the rôle of Beggars, but I have [Pg 275] known them to be shocked back suddenly into their natural selves by J.'s blunt refusal to hear them out. One, giving the aristocratic name of Mr. Vivian Stewart and further describing himself on his card as "Lead Character late of the Lyceum," was so dismayed when J. cut his lines short with a shilling that he lost his cue entirely and whined, "Don't you think, sir, you could make it eighteenpence?" The most accomplished in the rôle was a young actor from York. He had the intelligence to suspect that *the* profession does not monopolize the interest of all the world and to pretend that it did not monopolize his own. He therefore appeared in the double part of cyclist and actor. He reminded J. of a cycling dinner at York several winters before at which both were present. J. remembered the dinner, but not the cyclist, who was not a bit put out but declaimed upon "the freemasonry of the wheel," and anticipated J.'s joy as fellow sportsman in hearing of the new engagement just offered to him. It would be the making of him and his reputation, but—no bad luck has ever yet robbed our Beggars of that useful preposition—*but*, it depended upon [Pg 276] his leaving London within an hour, and the usual events over which our Beggars never have control, found him with ten shillings less than his railway fare. A loan at this critical point would save his career, and to-morrow the money would be returned. His visit dates back to the early period, when our hospitality had not out-grown the barbarous stage, and his career was saved, temporarily. After six months' silence, the actor reappeared. With his first word of greeting he took a half sovereign from his waistcoat pocket and regretted his delay in paying it back. *But*, in the mean while, much had happened. He had lost his promising engagement; he had found a wife and was on the point of losing her, for she was another of the many wives at death's door; he had found a more promising engagement and was on the point of losing that too, for if he did not settle his landlady's bill before the afternoon had passed she would seize his possessions, stage properties and all, and again events beyond his control had emptied his pockets. He would return the ten shillings, *but* we must now lend him a sovereign. And he was not merely surprised but [Pg 277] deeply hurt because we would not, and he stayed to argue it out that if his wife died, and his

landlady kept his possessions, and the engagement was broken, and his career was at an end, the guilt would be ours,—it was in our power to make him or to mar him. He was really rather good at denunciation. On this occasion it was wasted. He did not get the sovereign, but then neither did we get the half sovereign which went back into his waistcoat pocket at the end of his visit and disappeared with him, this time apparently forever.

We are scarcely in as great favour as we were with our Beggars. Their courage now is apt to ooze from them at our door, which is no longer held by a British servant, but by Augustine, whom tradition has not taught to respect the top hat and frock coat, and before whom even the prosperous quail. She recognizes the Beggar at a glance, for that glance goes at once to his shoes, she having found out, unaided by Thackeray, that poverty, beginning to take possession of a man, attacks his extremities first. She has never been mistaken except when, in the dusk of a [Pg 278] winter evening, she shut one of our old friends out on the stairs because she had looked at his hat instead of his shoes and mistrusted the angle at which it was pulled down over his eyes. This blunder, for an interval, weakened her reliance upon her own judgment, but she has gradually recovered her confidence, and only the Beggars whose courage is screwed to the sticking-point, and who sharpen their wits, succeed in the skirmish to get past her. When they do get past it is not of much use. The entertainment they gave us is of a kind that palls with repetition. An inclination to listen to their stories, to save their careers, to set them up on their feet, could survive their persecutions in none but the epicure in charity, which we are not. The obligation of politeness to Beggars under my roof weighs more lightly on my shoulders with their every visit, while J., as the result of long experience and to save bother, has reduced his treatment of them to a system and gives a shilling indiscriminately to each and all who call to beg—when he happens [Pg 279] to have one himself. In vain I assure him that if his system has the merit of simplicity, it is shocking bad political economy, and that every shilling given is a shilling thrown away. In vain I remind him that Augustine, shadowing our Beggars from our chambers, saw the man who came to us solely because of the "good old days" in Philadelphia stop and beg at every other door in the house; that she detected one of the numerous heart-broken husbands hurrying back to his dying wife by way of the first pub round the corner; that she caught the innocent defendant in a lawsuit, whose solicitor was waiting downstairs, pounced upon by two women instead and well scolded for the poor bargain he had made. In vain I point out that a shilling to one is an invitation to every Beggar on our beat, for by some wireless telegraphy of their own our Beggars always manage to spread the news when shillings are in season at our chambers. But J. is not to be moved. He has an argument as simple as his system with which to answer mine. If, he says, the Beggar is a humbug, a shilling can do no great harm; if the Beggar is genuine, it may pay for a [Pg 280] night's bed or for the day's bread; and he does not care if it is right or wrong according to political economy, for he knows for himself that the Beggar's story is sometimes true. The visits of Beggars who once came to us as friends are vivid in his memory.

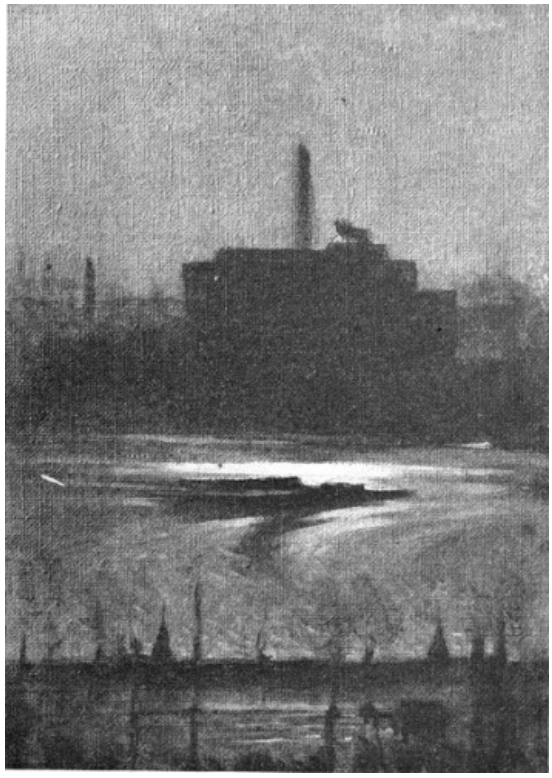
They are, I admit, visits not soon forgotten. The chance Beggar in the street is impersonal in his appeal, and yet he makes us uncomfortable by his mere presence, symbol as he is of the huge and pitiless waste of life. Our laugh for the bare-faced impostor at our door has a sigh in it, for proficiency in his trade is gained only through suffering and degradation. But the laugh is lost in the sigh, the discomfort becomes acute when the man who begs a few pence is one at whose table we once sat, whom we once knew in positions of authority. He cannot be reduced to a symbol nor disposed of by generalizations. Giving is always an embarrassing business, but under these conditions it fills us with shame, nor can we help it though oftener than not we see that the shame is all ours. I am miserable during my interviews with the journalist whom we met when he [Pg 281] was at the top of the ladder of success, and who slipped to the bottom after his promotion to an important editorship and his carelessness in allowing himself to be found, on the first night of his installation, asleep with his head and an empty bottle in the wastepaper basket; but he seems to be quite enjoying himself, which makes it the more tragic, as, with hand upraised, he assures me solemnly that J. is a gentleman, this proud distinction accorded by him in return for the practical working of J.'s system in his behalf. It is a trial to receive the popular author who won his popularity by persevering in the "'abits of a clerk," so he says, when he left the high office stool for the comfortable chair in his own study, and whose face explains too well what he has made of it; but it is evidently a pleasure to him, and therefore the more pitiful to me, when he interrupts my mornings to expose the critics and their iniquity in compelling him to come to me for the bread they take out of his mouth. Worst of all were the visits of the business man,—I am glad I [Pg 282] can speak of them in the past,—though he himself never seemed conscious of the ghastly figure he made, for when his visible business vanished he had still his wonderful schemes.

He was a man of wonderful schemes, but originally they led to results as wonderful. When we first knew him he ruled in an office in Bond Street, he had partners, he had clerks, he had a porter in livery at the door. He embarked upon daring adventures and brought them off. He gave interesting commissions, and he paid for them too, as we learned to our profit. He had large ideas and a wide horizon; he shrank from the cheap and popular, from what the people like. He was not above taking the advice of others upon subjects of which he was broad-minded enough to understand and to acknowledge his own ignorance, for he spared himself no pains in his determination to secure the best. And he was full of go; that was why we liked him. I look back to evenings when he came to dinner to talk over some new scheme, and when he would sit on and talk on after his last train—his home was in the suburbs—had long gone and, as he told us [Pg 283] afterwards, he would have to wait in one of the little restaurants near Fleet Street that are open all night for journalists until it was time to catch the earliest newspaper train. He would drop in at any odd hour to discuss his latest enterprise. We were always seeing him, and we were always delighted to see him, enthusiasm not being so common a virtue in the Briton that we can afford

not to make the most of it when it happens. We found him, as a consequence, a stimulating companion. I cannot say exactly when the change came; why it came remains a mystery to us to this day. Probably it began long before we realized it. The first symptoms were a trick of borrowing: at the outset such trivial things as a daily paper to which he should have subscribed, or books which he should have bought for himself. Then it was a half crown here and a half crown there, because he had not time to go back to the office before rushing to the station, or because he had not a cab fare with him, or because of half a dozen other accidents as plausible. We might not have given a second thought to all this but for the rapidity with which the half [Pg 284] crowns developed into five shillings, and the five into ten, and the ten into a sovereign on evenings when the cab, for which we had to take his word, had been waiting during the hours of his stay. We could not help our suspicions, the more so because that indefinable but rank odour of drugs, by which our Beggars too frequently announce themselves, grew stronger as the amount of which he was in need increased. And very soon he was confiding to us the details of a quarrel which deprived him of his partners and their capital. Then the Bond Street office was given up and his business was done in some vague rooms, the whereabouts of which he never disclosed; only too soon it seemed to be done entirely in the street. We would meet him at night slinking along the Strand, one of the miserable shadows of humanity whom the darkness lures out of the nameless holes and corners where they hide during the day. At last came a period when he kept away from our chambers altogether, sending his wife to us instead. Her visits were after dark, usually towards midnight. She called for all sorts of things,—a week's rent, medicine [Pg 285] from the druggist in the Strand, Sunday's dinner, her 'bus fare home, once I remember for an umbrella. She was never without an excuse for the emergency that forced her to disturb us, and she was no less fine than he in keeping up the fiction that it was an emergency, and that business prospered though removed from Bond Street into the Unknown. I think it was after this loan of an umbrella that he again came himself, nominally to return it and incidentally to borrow something else. I had not seen him for several months. It might have been years judging from his appearance, and I wished, as I still wish, I had not seen him then. In the Bond Street days he had the air of a man who lived well, and he was correct in dress, "well groomed" as they say. And now? His face was as colourless and emaciated as the faces from which I shrink in the "hunger line" on the Embankment; he wore a brown tweed suit, torn and mended and torn again, with a horrible patch of another colour on one knee that drew my eyes irresistibly to it; his straw hat [Pg 286] was as burned and battered as days of tramping in the sun and nights of sleeping in the rain could make it. He was the least embarrassed of the two. In fact, he was not embarrassed at all, but sat in the chair where so often he had faced me in irreproachable frock coat and spotless trousers, and explained as in the old days his wonderful schemes, expressing again the hope that we would second him and, with him, again achieve success. He might have been a prince promising his patronage. And all the while I did not know which way to look, so terrible was his face pinched and drawn with hunger, so eloquent that staring patch on his knee. That was several years ago, and it was the last visit either he or his wife ever made us. I cannot imagine that anything was left to them except greater misery, deeper degradation, and—the merciful end, which I hope came swiftly.

It is when I remember the business man and our other friends, fortunately few, who have followed in the same path that I am unable to deny the force of the argument by which J. defends his system. It may be that all our Beggars began life with schemes as wonderful and ideas as [Pg 287] large, that their stories are as true, that the line between Tragedy and Farce was never so fine drawn as when, stepping across it, they plunged into the profession of having come down in the world. [Pg 288]

The Tenants [Pg 289]



THE LION BREWERY

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IX

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THE TENANTS

It is impossible to live in chambers without knowing something of the other tenants in the house. I know much even of several who were centuries or generations before my time, and I could not help it if I wanted to, for the London County Council has lately set up a plaque to their memory on our front wall. Not that I want to help it. I take as much pride in my direct descent from Pepys and Etty as others may in an ancestor on the Mayflower or with the Conqueror, while if it had not been for J. and his interest in the matter we might not yet boast the plaque that gives us distinction in our shabby old street, though, to do us full justice, its list of names should be lengthened by at least one, perhaps the most distinguished.

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I have never understood why Bacon was left out. Only the pedant would disown so desirable a tenant for the poor reason that the house has been rebuilt since his day. As it is, Pepys heads the list, and we do not pretend to claim that the house is exactly as it was when he lived in it. He never saw our Adam ceilings and fireplaces, we never saw his row of gables along the River front except in Canaletto's drawing of the old Watergate which our windows still overlook. However, except for the loss of the gables, the outside has changed little, and if the inside has been remodelled beyond recognition, we make all we can of the Sixteenth-Century drain-pipe discovered when the London County Council, in the early throes of reform, ordered our plumbing to be overhauled. Their certified plumber made so much of it, feeling obliged to celebrate his discovery with beer and in his hurry forgetting to blow out the bit of candle he left amid the laths and plaster, that if J. had not arrived just in time there would be no house now for the plaque to decorate. Pepys, I regret to say, waited to move in until after the Diary ended, so that we do not figure in its pages. Nor, during his tenancy, does he figure anywhere except in the parish accounts, which is more to his credit than our entertainment.

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Etty was considerate and left a record of his "peace and happiness" in our chambers, but I have no proof that he appreciated their beauty. If he liked to walk on our leads in the evening and watch the sun set behind Westminster, he turned his back on the River at the loveliest hour of all. It was his habit as Academician to work like a student at night in the Royal Academy Schools, then in Trafalgar Square,—an admirable habit, but one that took him away just when he should have stayed. For when evening transformed the Thames and its banks into Whistler's "Fairyland" he, like Paul Revere, hung out a lantern from his studio window as a signal for the porter, with a big stick, to come and fetch him and protect him from the robbers of the Quarter, which had not then the best of reputations. Three generations of artists climbed our stairs to drink tea and eat muffins with Etty, but they showed the same ignorance of the Thames, all except Turner, who thought there was no finer scenery on any river in Italy, and who wanted to capture our windows from Etty and make them his own, but who, possibly because he could not get them, never painted the Thames as it was and is. One other painter did actually capture the windows on the first floor, and, in the chambers that are now the Professor's, Stanfield manufactured his

[Pg 294]

marines, and there too, they say, Humphry Davy made his safety lamp.

We do not depend solely upon the past for our famous tenants. Some of the names which in my time have been gorgeously gilded inside our vestibule, later generations may find in the list we make a parade of on our outer wall. For a while, in the chambers just below ours, we had the pleasure of knowing that Mr. Edmund Gosse was carrying on for us the traditions of Bacon and Pepys. Then we have had a Novelist or two, whose greatness I shrink from putting to the test by reading their novels, and also one or more Actors, but fame fades from the mummer on the wrong side of the footlights. We still have the Architect who, if the tenants were taken at his valuation, would, I fancy, head our new list. [Pg 295]

He is not only an architect but, like Etty,—like J. for that matter,—an Academician. He carries off the dignity with great stateliness, conscious of the vast gulf fixed between him and tenants with no initials after their name. Moreover, he belongs to that extraordinary generation of now elderly Academicians who were apparently chosen for their good looks, as Frederick's soldiers were for their size. The stoop that has come to his shoulder with years but adds to the impressiveness of his carriage. His air of superiority is a continual reminder of his condescension in having his office under our modest roof. His "Aoh, good-mornin'," as he passes, is a kindness, a few words from him a favour rarely granted, and there is no insolent familiar in the house who would dare approach him. Royalty, Archbishops, University dignitaries are his clients, and it would seem presumption for the mere untitled to approach him with a commission. His office is run on dignified lines in keeping with the exalted sphere in which he practises. A parson of the Church of England is his chief assistant. A notice on his front door warns the unwary that "No [Pg 296] Commercial Travellers need Apply," and implies that others had better not.

William Penn is probably the only creature in the house who ever had the courage to enter the Academic precincts unbidden. William was a cat of infinite humour, and one of his favourite jests was to dash out of our chambers and down the stairs whenever he had a chance; not because he wanted to escape,—he did not, for he loved his family as he should,—but because he knew that one or all of us would dash after him. If he was not caught in time he added to the jest by pushing through the Academician's open door and hiding somewhere under the Academic nose, and I am certain that nobody had a keener sense of the audacity of it than William himself. More than once a young assistant, trying to repress a grin and to look as serious as if he were handing us a design for a Deanery, restored William to his family; and once, on a famous occasion when, already late, we were starting for the Law Courts and the Witness-box, the Architect relaxed so far as to pull William out from among the Academic drawing-boards and to smile as he presented [Pg 297] him to J. who was following in pursuit. Even Jove sometimes unbends, but when Jove is a near neighbour it is wiser not to presume upon his unbending, and we have never given the Architect reason to regret his moment of weakness.

Whatever the Architect thinks of himself, the other tenants think more of Mr. Square, whose front door faces ours on the Third Floor. Mr. Square is under no necessity of assuming an air of superiority, so patent to everybody in the house is his right to it. If anything, he shrinks from asserting himself. He had been in his chambers a year, coming a few months "after the fire," before I knew him by sight, though by reputation he is known to everybody from one end of the country to the other. Not only is there excitement in our house when the police officer appears on our staircase with a warrant for his arrest for murder, but the United Kingdom thrills and waits with us for the afternoon's Police Report. In the neighbourhood I am treated with almost as much respect as when I played a leading part in the Law Courts myself. The milkman and the postman [Pg 298] stop me in the street, the little fruiterer round the corner and the young ladies at the Temple of Pomona in the Strand detain me in giving me my change as if I were an accessory to the crime. What if the murder is only technical, Mr. Square's arrest a matter of form, his discharge immediate? The glory is in his position which makes the technical murder an achievement to be envied by every true-born Briton. For he is Referee at the Imperial Boxing Club, and therefore the most important person in the Empire, except, perhaps, the winning jockey at the Derby or the Captain of the winning Football Team. The Prime Minister, Royalty itself, would not shed a brighter lustre on our ancient house, and there could be no event of greater interest than the fatal "accident" in the ring for which Mr. Square has been so many times held technically responsible.

In his private capacity Mr. Square strikes me as in no way remarkable. He is a medium-sized man with sandy hair and moustache, as like as two peas to the other men of medium height with sandy hair and moustache who are met by the thousand in the Strand. He shares his chambers [Pg 299] with Mr. Savage, who is something in the Bankruptcy Court. Both are retiring and modest, they never obtrude themselves, and either their domestic life is quiet beyond reproach, or else the old builders had the secret of soundless walls, for no sound from their chambers disturbs us. With them we have not so much as the undesirable intimacy that comes from mutual complaint, and such is their amiability that William, in his most outrageous intrusions, never roused from them a remonstrance.

I am forced to admit that William was at times ill-advised in the hours and places he chose for his adventures. He often beguiled me at midnight upon the leads that he might enjoy my vain endeavours to entice him home with the furry monkey tied to the end of a string, which during the day never failed to bring him captive to my feet. By his mysterious disappearances he often drove J., whose heart is tender and who adored him, out of his bed at unseemly hours and down into the street where, in pyjamas and slippers, and the door banged to behind him, he became an [Pg 300] object of suspicion. On one of these occasions, a policeman materializing suddenly from nowhere

and turning a bull's-eye on him,—

"Have you seen a cat about?" J. asked.

"Seen a cat? Oi've seen millions on 'em," said the policeman. "Wot sort o' cat?" he added.

"A common tabby cat," said J.

"Look 'ere," said the policeman, "where do you live any'ow?"

"Here," said J., who had retained his presence of mind with his latch-key.

"Aoh, Oi begs your parding, sir," said the policeman. "Oi didn't see you, sir, in the dim light, sir, but you know, sir, there's billions o' tabby cats about 'ere of a night, sir. But if Oi find yours, sir, Oi'll fetch 'im 'ome to you, sir. S'noight, sir. Thank e' sir."

When the kitchen door was opened the next morning, William was discovered innocently curled up in his blanket. And yet, when he again disappeared at bedtime a week or two later, J. was again up before daybreak, sure that he was on the doorstep breaking his heart because he could [Pg 301] not get in. This time I followed into our little hall, and Augustine after me. She was not then as used to our ways as she is now, and I still remember her sleepy bewilderment when she looked at J., who had varied his costume for the search by putting on knickerbockers and long stockings, and her appeal to me: "*Mais pourquoi en bicyclette?*" Why indeed? But there was no time for explanation. We were interrupted by an angry but welcome wail from behind the opposite door, and we understood that William was holding us responsible for having got himself locked up in Mr. Square's chambers. We had to wake up Mr. Square's old servant before he could be released, but it was not until the next morning that the full extent of his iniquity was revealed. A brand-new, pale-pink silk quilt on Mr. Square's bed having appealed to him as more luxurious than his own blanket, he had profited by Mr. Square's absence to spend half the night on it, leaving behind him a faint impression of his dear grimy little body. Even then, Mr. Square remained as [Pg 302] magnanimously silent as if he shared our love for William and pride in his performances.

All we know of Mr. Square and Mr. Savage, in addition to their fame and modesty, we have learned from their old man, Tom. He is a sailor by profession, and for long steward on Mr. Savage's yacht. He clings to his uniform in town, and when we see him pottering about in his blue reefer and brass buttons, Mr. Savage's little top floor that adjoins ours and opens out on the leads we share between us looks more than ever like a ship's quarter-deck. He is sociable by nature, and overflows with kindliness for everybody. He is always smiling, whatever he may be doing or wherever I may meet him, and he has a child's fondness for sweet things. He is never without a lemon-drop in his mouth, and he keeps his pockets full of candy. As often as the opportunity presents itself, he presses handfuls upon Augustine, whom he and his wife ceremoniously call "Madam," and to whom he confides the secrets of the household.

It is through him, by way of Augustine, that we follow the movements of the yacht, and know [Pg 303] what "his gentlemen" have for dinner and how many people come to see them. At times I have feared that his confidences to Augustine and the tenderness of his attentions were too marked, and that his old wife, who is less liberal with her smiles, disapproved. Over the *grille* that separates our leads from his, he gossips by the hour with Augustine, when she lets him, and once or twice, meeting her in the street, he has gallantly invited her into a near public to "'ave a drink," an invitation which she, with French scorn for the British substitute of the café, would disdain to accept. To other tributes of his affection, however, she does not object. On summer evenings he sometimes lays a plate of salad or stewed fruit at our door, rings, runs, and then from out a porthole of a window by his front door, watches the effect when she finds it, and is horribly embarrassed if I find it by mistake. In winter his offering takes the shape of a British mince-pie or a slice of plum pudding, and, on a foggy morning when she comes home from market, he will bring her a glass of port from Mr. Square's cellar. He is always ready to lend her [Pg 304] a little oil, or milk, or sugar, in an emergency. Often he is useful in a more urgent crisis. In a sudden thunder-storm he will leap over the *grille*, shut our door on the leads, and make everything ship-shape almost before I know it is raining. He has even broken in for me when I have come home late without a key, and by my knocking and ringing have roused up everybody in the whole house except Augustine. Mrs. Tom, much as she may disapprove, is as kindly in her own fashion; she is quite learned in medicine, and knows an old-fashioned remedy for every ailment. She has seen Augustine triumphantly through an accident, she has cured Marcel, Augustine's husband, of a quinsy, and she rather likes to be called upon for advice. She is full of little amiabilities. She never gets a supply of eggs fresh from the country at a reasonable price without giving me a chance to secure a dozen or so, and when her son, a fisherman, comes up to London, she always reserves a portion of his present of fish for me. I could not ask for kindlier neighbours, and they are the only friends I have made in the house. [Pg 305]

I was very near having friendship thrust upon me, however, by the First Floor Back, Mrs. Eliza Short. She is an elderly lady of generous proportions and flamboyant tastes, "gowned" elaborately by Jay and as elaborately "wigged" by Truefitt. The latest fashions and golden hair cannot conceal the ravages of time, and, as a result of her labours, she looks tragically like the unwilling wreck of a Lydia Thompson Blonde. I may be wrong; she may never have trod the boards, and yet I know of nothing save the theatre that could account for her appearance. The most assiduous of her visitors, as I meet them on the stairs, is an old gentleman as carefully made up in his way, an amazing little dandy, whom I fancy as somebody in the front row applauding rapturously when Mrs. Eliza Short, in tights and golden locks, came pirouetting down the stage. I

should have been inclined to weave a pretty romance about them as the modern edition of Philemon and Baucis if, knowing Mrs. Short, it did not become impossible to associate romance of any kind with her. [Pg 306]

Our acquaintance was begun by my drinking tea in her chambers the morning "after the fire," of which she profited unfairly by putting me on her visiting-list. She was not at all of Montaigne's opinion that "incuriosity" is a soft and sound pillow to rest a well-composed head upon. On the contrary, it was evident that for hers to rest in comfort she must first see every room in our chambers and examine into all my domestic arrangements. I have never been exposed to such a battery of questions. I must say for her that she was more than ready to pay me in kind. Between her questions she gave me a vast amount of information for which I had no possible use. She told me the exact amount of her income and the manner of its investment. She explained her objection to servants and her preference for having "somebody in" to do the rough work. She confided to me that she dealt at the Stores where she could always get a cold chicken and a bit of ham at a pinch, and the "pinch" at once presented itself to my mind as an occasion when the old dandy was to be her guest. She edified me by her habit of going to bed with the lambs, and [Pg 307] getting up with the larks to do her own dusting. The one ray of hope she allowed me was the fact that her winters were spent at Monte Carlo. She could not pass me on the stairs, or in the hall, or on the street, where much of her time was lost, without buttonholing me to ask on what amount of rent I was rated, or how much milk I took in of a morning, or if the butcher sent me tough meat, or other things that were as little her business. I positively dreaded to go out or to come home, and the situation was already strained when Jimmy rushed to the rescue. Elia regretted the agreeable intimacies broken off by the dogs whom he loved less than their owners, but I found it useful to have a cat Mrs. Short could not endure, to break off my intimacy with her, and he did it so effectually that I could never believe it was not done on purpose. One day, when she had been out since ten o'clock in the morning, she returned to find Jimmy locked up in her chambers alone with her bird. That the bird was still hopping about its cage was to me the most mysterious feature in the whole affair, for Jimmy was a splendid sportsman. After his prowls in [Pg 308] the garden he only too often left behind him a trail of feathers and blood-stains all the way up the three flights of our stairs. But if the bird had not escaped, Mrs. Short could hardly have been more furious. She demanded Jimmy's life, and when it was refused, insisted on his banishment. She threatened him with poison and me with exposure to the Landlord. For days the Housekeeper was sent flying backwards and forwards between Mrs. Short's chambers and ours, bearing threats and defiances. Jimmy, who knew as well as I did what was going on, rejoiced, and from then until his untimely death never ran downstairs or up—and he was always running down or up—without stopping in front of her door, giving one unearthly howl, and then flying; and never by chance did he pay the same little attention to any one of the other tenants.

Mrs. Short does not allow me to forget her. As her voice is deep and harsh and thunders through the house when she buttonholes somebody else, or says good-bye to a friend at her door, I hear [Pg 309] her far more frequently than I care to; as she has a passion for strong scent, I often smell her when I do not see her at all; and as in the Quarter we all patronize the same tradesmen, I am apt to run into her not only on our stairs, but in the dairy, or the Temple of Pomona, or further afield at the Post Office. Then, however, we both stare stonily into vacancy, failing to see each other, and during the sixteen years since that first burst of confidence, we have exchanged not a word, not as much as a glance: an admirable arrangement which I owe wholly to Jimmy.

With her neighbours on the other side of the hall, Mrs. Short has nothing in common except permanency as tenant. Her name and the sign of the Church League faced each other on the First Floor when we came to our chambers; they face each other still. Her golden wig is not oftener seen on our stairs than the gaiters and aprons of the Bishops who rely upon the League for a periodical cup of tea; her voice is not oftener heard than the discreet whispers of the ladies who attend the Bishops in adoring crowds. But Jimmy's intervention was not required to maintain [Pg 310] the impersonality of my relations with the League. It has never shown an interest in my affairs nor a desire to confide its own to me. Save for one encounter we have kept between us the distance which it should be the object of all tenants to cultivate, and I might never have looked upon it as more than a name had I not witnessed its power to attract some of the clergy and to enrage others. Nothing has happened in our house to astound me more than the angry passions it kindled in two of our friends who are clergymen. One vows that he will never come to see us again so long as to reach our chambers he must pass the League's door; the second reproaches us for having invited him, his mere presence in the same house being sufficient to ruin his clerical reputation. As the League is diligently working for the Church of which both my friends are distinguished lights, I feel that in these matters there are fine shades beyond my unorthodox intelligence. It is also astounding that the League should inflame laymen of no religious tendencies whatever to more violent antagonism. Friends altogether without the pale have taken [Pg 311] offence at what they call the League's arrogance in hanging up its signs not only at its front door, but downstairs in the vestibule, and again on the railings without, and they destroyed promptly the poster it once ventured to put upon the stairs, assuring us that theirs was righteous wrath, and then, in the manner of friends, leaving us to face the consequences.

For myself I bear no ill-will to the League. I may object to the success with which it fills our stairs on the days of its meetings and tea-parties, but I cannot turn this into a pretext for quarrelling, while I can only admire the spirit of progress that has made it the first in the house to do its spring-cleaning by a vacuum cleaner and to set up a private letter-box. I can only congratulate it on the prosperity that has caused the overflow of its offices into the next house, and so led indirectly to the one personal encounter I have referred to. A few of the rooms were to let, and

J.'s proposal to set up his printing-press in one of them involved us in a correspondence with the Secretary. Then I called, as by letter we were unable to agree upon details. The League, with a display of hospitality that should put the Architect to shame, bids everybody enter without knocking. But when I accepted this Christian invitation, I was confronted by a tall, solemn-faced young man, who informed me that the Secretary was "engaged in prayer," and I got no further than the inner hall. As I failed to catch the Secretary in his less professional moments, and as his devotions did not soften his heart to the extent of meeting us halfway, we quickly resumed the usual impersonality of our relations. [Pg 312]

I cannot imagine our house without the Church League and Mrs. Eliza Short, the Architect and Mr. Square. Were their names to vanish from the doors where I have seen them for the last sixteen years, it would give me the same sense of insecurity as if I suddenly looked out of my window to a Thames run dry, or to a domeless city in the distance. With this older group of tenants, who show their respect for a house of venerable age and traditions by staying in it, I think we are to be included and also the Solicitor of the Ground Floor Front. He has been with us a short time, it is true, but he succeeded our old Insurance Agent whom nothing save death could have removed, and for years before he lived no further away than Peter the Great's house across the street, where he would be still, had it not been torn down over his head to make way for the gaudy, new, grey stone building which foretells the beginning of the end of our ancient street. The Solicitor cloisters himself in his chambers more successfully even than the Architect or the Church League, and I have never yet laid eyes on him or detected a client at his door. [Pg 313]

I wish the same could be said of our other newcomers who, with rare exceptions, exhibit a restlessness singularly unbecoming in a house that has stood for centuries. In the Ground Floor Back change for long was continued. It was the home of a Theatrical Agent and his family, and babyish prattle filled our once silent halls; it was the office of a Music Hall Syndicate, and strange noises from stranger instruments came floating out and up our stairs, and blonde young ladies in towering hats blocked the door. Then a Newspaper Correspondent drifted in and drifted out again; and next a publisher piled his books in the windows, and made it look so like the shop which is against the rules of the house that his disappearance seemed his just reward. [Pg 314]

After this a Steamship Company took possession, bringing suggestions of sunshine and spice with the exotic names of its vessels and the far-away Southern ports for which they sailed,—bringing, too, the spirit of youth, for it employed many young men and women whom I would meet in couples whispering on the stairs or going home at dusk hand in hand. Tender little idyls sprang up in our sober midst. But the staff of young lovers hit upon the roof as trysting-place at the luncheon hour, running races and playing tag up there, and almost tumbling through our skylight. Cupid, sporting overhead with wings exchanged for hob-nailed boots, was unendurable, and I had to call in the Landlord's Agent. He is the unfortunate go-between in all the tenants' differences and difficulties: a kind, weary, sympathetic man, designed by Nature for amiable, good-natured communication with his fellow men, and decreed by Fate and his calling to communicate with them constantly in their most disagreeable moods and phases. Half my fury evaporated at sight of his troubled face, and I might have endured the races and games of tag could I have foreseen that, almost as soon as he put a stop to them, the Steamship Company would take its departure. [Pg 315]

The Professor who then came in is so exemplary a tenant that I hope there will be no more changes in the Ground Floor Back. He is a tall, ruddy, well-built man of the type supposed to be essentially British by those who have never seen the other type far more general in the provincial town or, nearer still, in the East of London. He is of middle-age and should therefore have outgrown the idyllic stage, and his position as Professor at the University is a guarantee of sobriety and decorum. I do not know what he professes, but I can answer for his conscientiousness in professing it by the regularity with which, from our windows, I see him of a morning crossing the garden below on his way to his classes. His household is a model of British propriety. He is cared for by a motherly housekeeper, an eminently correct man-servant, and a large hound of dignified demeanour and a sense of duty that leads him to suspect an enemy in everybody who passes his master's door. His violence in protesting against unobjectionable tenants like ourselves reconciles me to dispensing with a dog, especially as it ends with his bark. It was in his master's chambers that our only burglar was discovered,—a forlorn makeshift of a burglar who got away with nothing, and was in such an agony of fright when, in the small hours of the morning, he was pulled out from under the dining-room table, that the Professor let him go as he might have set free a fly found straying in his jam-pot. [Pg 316]

The Professor, as is to be expected of anybody so unmistakably British, cultivates a love for sport. I suspect him of making his amusements his chief business in life, as it is said a man should and as the Briton certainly does. He hunts in the season, and, as he motors down to the meet, he is apt to put on his red coat and white breeches before he starts, and they give the last touch of respectability to our respectable house. He is an ardent automobilist, and his big motor at our door suggests wealth as well as respectability. This would have brought us into close acquaintance had he had his way. Sport is supposed to make brothers of all men who believe in it, but from this category I must except J. at those anxious moments which sport does not spare its followers. He was preparing to start somewhere on his fiery motor bicycle, and the Professor, who had never seen one before, wanted to know all about it. J., deeper than he cared to be in carburettors and other mysterious matters, was not disposed to be instructive, and I think the Professor was ashamed of having been beaten in the game of reserve by an American, for he has made no further advances. His most ambitious achievement is ballooning, to which he owes a [Pg 317]

fame in the Quarter only less than Mr. Square's. We all watch eagerly, with a feeling of proprietorship, for the balloons on the afternoons when balloon races and trials start from the [Pg 318] Crystal Palace or Ranelagh. I have caught our little fruiterer in the act of pointing out the Professor's windows to chance customers; and on those days I am absorbed in the sporting columns of the afternoon paper, which, at other times, I pass over unread. He has now but to fly to complete his triumph and the pride of our house in him.

Restlessness also prevails in the Second Floor Back, and as we are immediately above, we suffer the more. Hardly a tenant has remained there over a year, or a couple of years at most, and all in succession have developed a talent for interfering with our comfort. First, an Honourable occupied the chambers. His title was an unfailing satisfaction to Mrs. Haines, the Housekeeper, who dwelt upon it unctuously every time she mentioned him. I am not learned in Debrett and Burke and may not have appreciated its value, but he might have been Honourable ten times over and it would not have reconciled me to him as neighbour. He was quite sure, if I was not, that he was a great deal better than anybody else, and he had the Briton's independent way of asserting [Pg 319] it. He slammed behind him every door he opened, and when the stairs were barricaded by himself, his friends, or his parcels, and we wanted to pass, he failed to see us as completely as if we had been Mr. Wells's Invisible Man. He went to the City in the morning and was away all day, even an Honourable being sometimes compelled to pretend to work. But this was no relief. During his absence his servants availed themselves of the opportunity to assert their independence, which they did with much vigour. When they were not slamming doors they were singing hymns, until Mrs. Eliza Short from her chambers below and we from ours above, in accord the first and only time for years, joined in protest, and drove Mrs. Haines to the unpleasant task of remonstrating with an Honourable.

The Honourable who had come down from the aristocracy was followed by a *Maître d'Hôtel* who was rapidly rising in rank, and was therefore under as urgent necessity to impress us with his importance. Adolf was an Anglicized German, with moustaches like the Kaiser's, and the swagger [Pg 320] of a drum-major. He treated our house as if it was the dining-room under his command, locking and unlocking the street door, turning on and out the lights on the stairs at any hour that suited him, however inconvenient to the rest of us. He littered up the hall with his children and his children's perambulators and hobby-horses, just where we all had to stumble over them to get in or out. Nobody's taxi tooted so loud as his, not even the Honourable's door had shut with such a bang. Augustine's husband being also something in the same profession, they both despised the Adolfs for putting on airs though no better than themselves, while the Adolfs despised them for not having attained the same splendid heights, and the shaking of my rugs out of the back windows was seized upon as the excuse for open warfare. Augustine said it was there they should be shaken according to the law in Paris, which she thought good enough for London. Mrs. Adolf protested that the shaking sent all the dust into her rooms. Augustine, whose English is small and what there is of it not beyond reproach, called Mrs. Adolf "silly fou," which must have been [Pg 321] annoying, or harangued her in French when Mrs. Adolf, who could not understand, suspected an offence in every word.

Mrs. Adolf wrote to the Agent, to the Landlord, to me; she declared she would summons me to the County Court. Between letters she watched at her window for the rugs, and there both her servant and her charwoman made faces at Augustine, who has a nice sense of justice and a temper that does not permit her, with Elizabeth Bennet's father, to be satisfied by laughing in her turn at those who have made sport of her. I trembled for the consequences. But at the critical moment, Adolf was promoted to the more splendid height of Manager and a larger salary; the taxi was replaced by a motor-car of his own; Mrs. Adolf arrayed herself in muslin and lace for the washtub, in nothing less elegant than velvet for the street, and they left our old-fashioned chambers for the marble halls and gilded gorgeousness of the modern mansion.

Of the several tenants after the Adolfs, I seem to remember little save the complaints we [Pg 322] interchanged. I tried my best to do as I would be done by and to keep out of their way, but accident was always throwing us together to our mutual indignation. There was the Bachelor whose atrocious cook filled our chambers with the rank odours of smoked herring and burnt meat, and whose deserted ladylove filled the stairs with lamentations. There was the young Married Couple into whose bathtub ours overflowed. There was the Accidental Actress whose loud voice and heavy boots were the terror not only of our house, but of the street, whose telephone rang from morning till night, whose dog howled all evening when he was left alone as he usually was, and whose rehearsals in her rooms interrupted the work in ours with ear-piercing yells of "Murder" and "Villain."

I cannot recall them all, so rapidly did they come and go. We began to fear that the life of the tenant was, as Tristram Shandy described the life of man, a shifting from sorrow to sorrow. We lived in an atmosphere of fault-finding, though when there was serious cause for complaint, not a [Pg 323] murmur could be wrung from the tenant below or, for that matter, from a tenant in the house. All, like true Britons, refused to admit the possibility of interests in common, and would not stir a hand, however pressing the danger, so long as they were not disturbed. If our chambers reeked with smoke and the smell of burning wood, they accepted the information with calm indifference because theirs did not. Nor did it serve as a useful precedent if, as it happened, smoke and smell were traced again to a fire, smouldering as it had been for nobody knew how long, in the cellar of the adjoining house, separated from ours only by the "party wall" belonging to both: that ingenious contrivance of the builder for creating ill-will between next-door neighbours. They declined to feel the bannisters loose under their grasp, or to see the wide gap opened in the same

party wall after the fall of the roof of Charing Cross Station had shaken the Quarter to its foundations and made us believe for a moment that London was emulating Messina or San Francisco. And I must add, so characteristic was it, that the Agent dismissed our fears as idle, [Pg 324] and that the Surveyor, sent at our request by the County Council, laughed us to scorn. But we laughed best, for we laughed last. A second Surveyor ordered the wall to be pulled down as unsafe and rebuilt, and the Agent in the end found it prudent to support the bannisters with iron braces.

When, after these trials and tribulations, Mr. Allan took the Second Floor Back we thought the Millennium had come. He was a quiet man, employed in the morning, so we were told, in writing a life of Chopin, and in the evening, as we heard for ourselves, in playing Chopin divinely. The piano is an instrument calculated to convert an otherwise harmless neighbour into a nuisance, but of him it made a delight. He was waited upon by a man as quiet, whose consideration for the tenants went to the length of felt slippers in the house, who never slammed doors nor sang, who never even whistled at his work. An eternity of peace seemed to open out before us, but, as they say in novels, it was not to be. Our confidence in Mr. Allan was first shaken by what I still think [Pg 325] an unjustified exhibition of nerves. One night, or rather one early morning, a ring at our door-bell startled us at an hour when, in my experience, it means either a fire or an American cablegram. It was therefore the more exasperating, on opening the door, to be faced by an irate little man in pyjamas and smoking jacket who wanted to know when we proposed to go to bed. Only after J.'s answer "when we are ready," did we know it was Mr. Allan by his explanation that his bed was under the room where we were walking about, that the floor was thin, and that he could not sleep. J. would not enter into an argument. He said the hour was not the most appropriate for a criticism of the construction of the house which, besides, was at all hours the Landlord's and not his affair, and Mr. Allan had the grace to carry his complaint no further. It may have occurred to him on reflection that it was not our fault if he had chosen a room to sleep in just below the room we used to sit and see our friends in.

Had I borne malice, I should not have had to wait long for my revenge, nor to plan it myself. Not [Pg 326] many days later, Mr. Allan's servant, watering the flowers on the open balcony at Mr. Allan's window, watered by mistake the new Paris bonnet of the lady of the Ground Floor Back who was coming home at that very minute. Under the circumstances few women would not have lost their temper, but few would have been so prompt in action. She walked straight upstairs to Mr. Allan's chambers, the wreck in her hand. The servant opened to her knock, but she insisted upon seeing the master.

"I have come, Allan, to tell you what I think of the conduct of your servant," she said, when the master appeared. "Yes, I call you Allan, for I mean to talk to you as man to man," which she proceeded to do.

I did not hear the talk, but it was almost a week before I heard the piano again. Poor Mr. Allan! And this proved a trifle to the worse humiliation he was soon to endure.

As I sat with a book by my lamp one evening before dinner, shrieks from his chambers and a crash of crockery sent me rushing to the door and out upon the landing, with Augustine at my [Pg 327] heels. Old Tom and his wife arrived there simultaneously, and, looking cautiously over the bannisters, I saw an anxious crowd looking up as cautiously from the hall on the Ground Floor. The shrieks developed into curses intermingled with more riotous crashing of china. The Housekeeper, urged by the crowd below, crept all unwilling to Mr. Allan's door and knocked. The door was flung open, and, before she ventured to "beg pardon but the noise disturbed the other tenants," Mr. Allan's hitherto well-behaved servant greeted her with a volley of blood-curdling epithets and the smash of every pane of glass in the upper panel of the door, and down she fled again. He bolted out after her, but looking up and catching a glimpse of Tom, peacefully sucking a lemon-drop, he became so personal that Tom and his wife retreated hastily, and for the first time the smile faded from the old man's face. In a moment's lull I heard Mr. Allan's voice, low and entreating, then more curses, more crashes. I should not have thought there was so much glass and crockery to be broken in the whole house. [Pg 328]

Presently a policeman appeared, and then a second. The door was open, but the servant was busy finishing up the crockery. Mr. Allan spoke to them, and then, like a flash, the servant was there too.

"I dare you to let them come in!" he yelled, so loud he could be heard from the top to the bottom of the house. "I dare you to let them come in! I dare you to give me in charge! I dare you! I dare you!"

And Mr. Allan did not dare, that was the astonishing part of it. And he never lost his temper. He argued with the policemen, he plead with the servant, while one group on our landing and another on the Ground Floor waited anxiously. The policemen did not desert us but stood guard on the Second Floor, which was a reassurance, until gradually the yells were lowered, the crashes came at longer intervals, and at last, I suppose in sheer exhaustion, the servant relapsed into his usual calm, Mr. Allan "sported his oak," and I learned how truly an Englishman's home is his castle.

The Housekeeper spent the evening on the stairs gossiping at every door. There was not much to [Pg 329] learn from her. A mystery was hinted—many mysteries were hinted. The truth I do not know to this moment. I only know that before the seven days of our wonder were over, the Agent, more careworn than ever if that were possible, made a round of visits in the house, giving to each

tenant an ample and abject apology written by Mr. Allan. At the end of the quarter, the Second Floor Back was again to let.

We should have parted with Mr. Allan less light-heartedly could we have anticipated what was in store for us. He was no sooner gone than the Suffragettes came in.

I have no quarrel on political grounds with the Suffragettes. Theoretically, I believe that women of property and position should have their vote and that men without should not, but I think it a lesser evil for women to be denied the vote than for the suffrage to become as universal for women as for men, and to grant it on any other conditions would be an indignity. I state the fact to explain that I am without prejudice. I do not argue, for, to tell the truth, shocking as it may be, [Pg 330] I am not keen one way or the other. Life for me has grown crowded enough without politics, and years have lessened the ardour for abstract justice that was mine when, in my youth, I wrote the "Life of Mary Wollstonecraft," and militant Suffragettes as yet were not. Ours are of the most militant variety, and it is not their fault if the world by this time does not know what this means. Even so, on general principles, I should have no grievance against them. Every woman is free to make herself ridiculous, and it is none of my business if my neighbours choose to make a public spectacle of themselves by struggling in the arms of policemen, or going into hysterics at meetings where nobody wants them; if they like to emulate bad boys by throwing stones and breaking windows, or if it amuses them to slap and whip unfortunate statesmen who, physically, could easily convince them of their inferiority. But when they make themselves a nuisance to me personally I draw the line. And they are a nuisance to me.

They have brought pandemonium into the Quarter where once all was pleasantness and peace. [Pg 331] Of old, if the postman, the milkman, a messenger boy, and one or two stray dogs and children lingered in our street, we thought it a crowd; since the coming of the Suffragettes, I have seen the same street packed solid with a horde of the most degenerate creatures in London summoned by them "to rush the House of Commons." They have ground their hurdy-gurdies at our door, Heaven knows to what end; vans covered with their posters have obstructed our crossing; motor-cars adorned with their flags have missed fire and exploded in our street; and they have had themselves photographed as sandwiches on our Terrace. Our house is in a turmoil from morning till night with women charging in like a mob, or stealing out like conspirators. Their badges, their sandwich boards, their banners lie about in our hall, so much in everybody's way that I sympathized with the infuriated tenant whom I caught one night kicking the whole collection into the cellar. They talk so hard on the stairs that often they pass their own door and come on to ours, bringing Augustine from her work and disturbing me at mine, for she can never open to [Pg 332] them without poking her head into my room to tell me, "*Encore une sale Suffragette!*" In their chambers they never stop chattering, and their high shrill treble penetrates through the floor and reaches us up above. The climax came with their invasion of our roof.

This roof, built "after the fire," is a modern invention, designed for the torture of whoever lives underneath. It is flat, with a beautiful view to be had among the chimney-pots and telephone wires; it is so thin that a pigeon could not waddle across without being heard by us; and as it is covered with gravel, every sound is accompanied by a scrunching warranted to set the strongest nerves in a quiver. We had already been obliged to represent to the Agent that it was not intended for the Housekeeper's afternoon parties or young people's games of tag, that there were other, more suitable places where postmen could take a rest, or our actress recite her lines, or lovers do their courting amid the smuts. Our patience, indeed, had been so tried in one way or another that at the first sound from above, at any hour of the day or night, J. was giving chase to [Pg 333] the trespassers, and they were retreating before the eloquence of his attack. It was in a corner of this roof, just above the studio and in among wood-enclosed cisterns, that the Suffragettes elected to send off fire-balloons, which, in some way best known to themselves, were to impress mankind with the necessity of giving them the vote. The first balloon floated above the chimney-tops, a sheet of flame, and was dropping, happily into the Thames, when J., straight from his printing-press, in blouse, sleeves rolled up, arms and hands black with ink, a cap set sideways, was on the roof, and the Secretary of the Militants and a young man in the brown suit and red tie that denote the Socialist, in their hands matches and spirits of wine, were flying downstairs. I was puzzled to account for their meekness unless it was that never before had they seen anybody so inky, never before listened to language so picturesque and American. J., without giving them time to take breath, called in the Landlord's Agent, supported by the Landlord's Solicitor, and [Pg 334] they were convinced of the policy of promising not to do it again. And of course they did.

A week later the Prime Minister was unveiling a statue, or performing some equally innocent function in the garden below our windows, when the Suffragettes, from the roofs of near woodsheds, demanded him through a megaphone to give Votes to Women. We followed the movement with such small zest that when we were first aware something out of the common was going on in the Quarter, the two heroines were already in the arms of policemen, where of late so much of the Englishwoman's time has been spent, and heads were at every window up and down our street, housekeepers at every door, butchers' and bakers' boys grouped on the sidewalk, one or two tradesmen's carts drawn up in the gutter, battalions of police round the corner. The women no doubt to-day boast of the performance as a bold strike for freedom, and recall with pride the sensation it created.

At this point I lost sight of the conflict on the roof below, for, from the roof above, a balloon shot [Pg 335] upwards, so high that only the angels could have read the message it bore. The familiar scrunching, though strangely muffled, was heard, and J., again in blouse and ink, was up and away on a little campaign of his own. This time he found six women, each with a pair of shoes at

her side and her feet drawn up under her, squatting in a ring behind the cisterns, bending over a can of spirits of wine, and whispering and giggling like school-girls.

"It won't go off," they giggled, and the next minute all chance of its ever going off was gone, for J. had seized the balloon and torn it to tatters.

"You have destroyed our property," shrieked a venerable little old lady, thin and withered, with many wrinkles and straggling grey hair.

He told her that was what he had intended to do.

"But it cost ten shillings," she squeaked in a tremor of rage, and with an attempt at dignity, but it is as hard to be dignified, as Corporal Trim found it to be respectful, when one is sitting squat upon the ground.

A younger woman, golden-haired, in big hat and feathers, whom the others called Duchess, demanded "Who are you anyhow?" And when I consider his costume and his inkiness I wonder he had not been asked it long before. [Pg 336]

"You can go downstairs and find out," he said, "but down you go!"

There was a moment's visible embarrassment, and they drew their stocking feet closer up under them. J., in whom they had left some few shreds of the politeness which he, as a true American, believes is woman's due, considerately looked the other way. As soon as they were able to rise up in their shoes, they altogether lost their heads. The Housekeeper and the Agent, summoned in the mean time, were waiting as they began to crawl down the straight precipitous ladder from the roof. In an agony of apprehension, the women clutched their skirts tight about them, protesting and scolding the while. The little old lady tried to escape into our chambers, one or two stood at the top of the stairs, cutting off all approach, the others would not budge from our narrow landing. A telegraph boy and a man with a parcel endeavoured to get past them and up to us, but they would not give way an inch. Finally in despair, J. gently collected them and pushed them down the stairs towards their own door. [Pg 337]

"We will have you arrested for assault!" the little old lady shrieked.

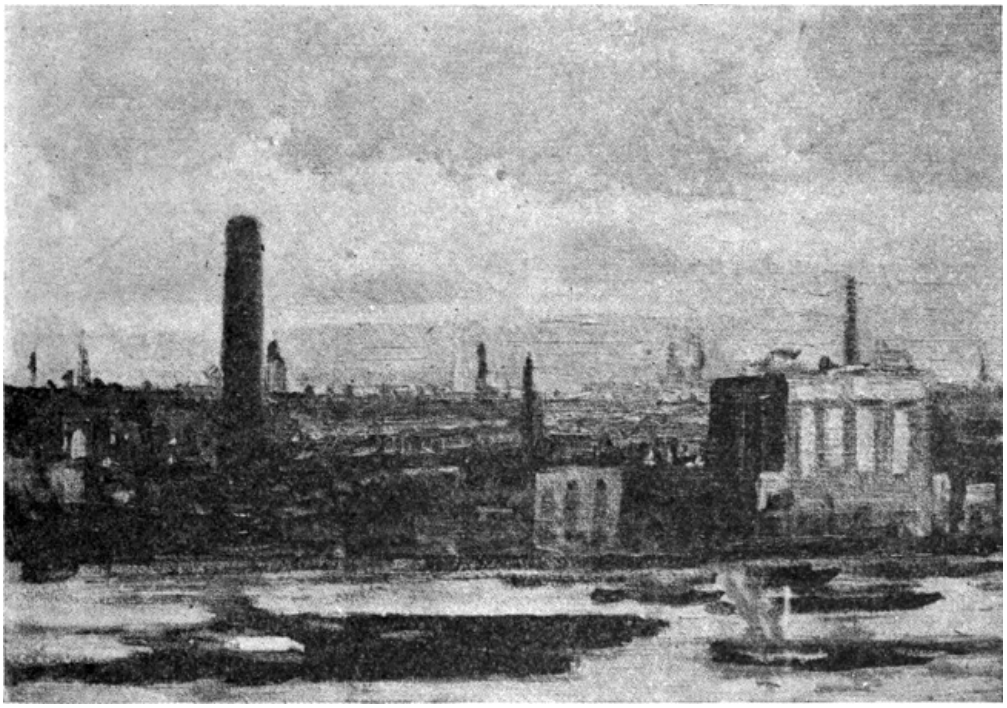
"We charge you with assault and battery," the golden-haired lady re-echoed from below.

And we heard no more, for at last, with a sigh of relief, J. could get to our door and shut out the still ascending uproar.

But that was not the end of it. If you can believe it, they were on the roof again within an hour, getting themselves and their megaphone photographed, for the fight for freedom would not be half so sweet without the publicity of portraits in the press. And we were besieged with letters. One Suffragette wrote that an apology was due,—yes, J. replied, due to him. A second lectured him on the offence given to her "dear friend, the Duchess," for to become a Suffragette is not to cease to be a snob, and warned him that the Duchess—who was the golden-haired lady and may have had the bluest blood of England in her veins, but who looked more like one of the Gaiety girls, from whom the stock of the British nobility has been so largely replenished—and the Duke intended to consult their Solicitor if regret were not expressed. And the Landlord's Agent called, and the Landlord's Solicitor followed, and a Police Inspector was sent from Scotland Yard for facts,—and he reprimanded J. for one mistake, for not having locked the door on the inside when they were out,—and the insurance people wanted to know about the fire-balloons, and everybody with any possible excuse came down upon us, except the police officer with the warrant to arrest J. for assault and battery. [Pg 338]

It is all over now. If the Suffragettes still hatch their plots under our roof, they are denied the use of it for carrying them out. They leave us in peace for the moment, the quiet which is the charm of an old house like ours has returned to it, and outwardly the tenants cultivate the repose and dignity incumbent upon them as the descendants of Bacon and Pepys and the inheritors of a great past.

The Quarter [Pg 339]



OPPOSITE TO SURREY

[Pg 340]

X

[Pg 341]

THE QUARTER

My windows command the Quarter, and what they do not overlook, Augustine does.

Some people might think there could not be much to overlook, for the Quarter is as quiet and secluded as the Inns of Court. J. is forever boasting that if he is in London he is not of it, and that he lives the simple life, with Charing Cross just round the corner. The "full tide of existence" sweeps by, seldom overflowing into the Quarter, which is one of the most difficult places in all the town to find for those who do not know the way. Only two streets lead directly into it from anywhere, and they lead directly nowhere out of it again; nor do the crowds in the near Strand as much as see the dirty courts and dark alleys which are my short cuts, much less the underground passages which serve the same purpose,—the mysterious labyrinth of carpenters-shops and [Pg 342] warehouses and vast wine-cellars, grim and fantastic and unbelievable as Ali Baba and the whole Arabian Nights, burrowed under the Quarter and approached by tunnels, so picturesque that Géricault made a lithograph of one when he was in London, so murderous that to this day they are infested with police who turn a flashing bull's-eye upon you as you pass. Altogether, the Quarter is a "shy place" full of traps for the unwary. I have had friends, coming to see me for the first time, lose themselves in our underground maze; I have known the crowd, pouring from the Strand on Lord Mayor's Day, get hopelessly entangled in our network; as a rule, nobody penetrates into it except on business or by chance.

But for all that, there is a good deal to see, and the Quarter, quiet though it may be, is never dull as I watch it from my high windows. To the front I look out on the Thames: down to St. Paul's, up to Westminster, opposite to Surrey, and, on a clear day as far as the hills. Trains rumble across the bridges, trams screech and clang along the Embankment, tugs, pulling their line of black [Pg 343] barges, whistle and snort on the river. The tide brings with it the smell of the sea and, in winter, the great white flights of gulls. At night myriads of lights come out, and always, at all hours and all seasons, there is movement and life,—always I seem to feel the pulse of London even as I have its roar in my ears.

To the east I look down to streets of houses black with London grime, still stately in their old-fashioned shabbiness, as old as the Eighteenth Century, which I have read somewhere means the beginning of the world for an American like myself.

To the west I tower over a wilderness of chimney-pots, for our house is built on the edge of a hill, not very high though the London horse mistakes it for an Alpine pass, but high enough to lift our walls, on this side sheer and cliff-like, above an amazing collection of tumbled, weather-worn, red-tiled roofs, and crooked gables sticking out at unexpected angles, that date back I am not to be bullied by facts into saying how far, and that stretch away, range upon range, to loftier houses [Pg 344] beyond, they in their turn over-shadowed by the hotels and clubs on the horizon, and in among them, an open space with the spire of St. Martin-in-the-Fields springing up out of it, dark by day, a white shadow by night,—our ghost, we call it.

And most wonderful of all is the expanse of sky above and around us, instead of the tiny strip

framed in by the narrow street which is the usual share of the Londoner. We could see the sun rise every morning behind St. Paul's, if we were up in time, and of course if there was a sun every morning in London to rise. Over the river, when fog and mist do not envelop it as in a shroud, the clouds—the big, low, heavy English clouds—float and drift and scurry and whirl and pile themselves into mountains with a splendour that might have inspired Ruskin to I do not know how many more chapters in "Modern Painters" had he lived in the Quarter. Behind our collection of tumbled roofs and gables awry, the sun—always provided there is a sun—sets with a dramatic gorgeousness that, if it were only in any remote part of the world, the Londoner would spare [Pg 345] himself no time nor trouble to see, but that, because it is in London, remains a spectacle for us to enjoy by ourselves. And the wonder grows with the night,—the river, with its vague distances and romantic glooms and starlike lights, losing itself in mystery, and mystery lurking in the little old streets with their dark spectral mass of houses, broken by one or two spaces of flat white wall, and always in the distance the clubs and hotels, now castles and cathedrals, and the white tapering ghost pointing heavenward. With so stupendous a spectacle arranged for my benefit, is it any marvel that much of my time is spent at my windows? And how can I help it if, when I am there, I see many things besides the beauty that lured us to the Quarter and keeps us in it?

Hundreds of windows look over into mine: some so far off that they are mere glittering spots on a rampart of high walls in the day-light, mere dots of light at dusk; some as carefully curtained as if the "Drawn Blinds" or "Green Shutters" of romance had not stranger things to hide from the curious. But others are too near and too unveiled for what goes on behind them to escape the [Pg 346] most discreet. In what does go on there is infinite variety, for the Quarter, like the Inns of Court, is let out in offices and chambers, and the house that shelters but one tenant is the exception, if indeed it exists.

All these windows and the people I see through them have become as much a part of my view as the trains and the trams, the taxis and the tugs. I should think the last days of the Quarter were at hand if, the first thing in the morning, I did not find the printer hard at work at his window under one of the little gables below; or if, the last thing at night, I missed from the attic next door to him the lamp of the artist, who never gets up until everybody else is going to bed; or if, at any hour I looked over, people were not playing cards in the first-floor windows of the house painted white, or frowzy women were not leaning out of the little garret windows above, or the type-writer was not clicking hard in the window with the white muslin curtains and the pot of flowers, or the manicurist not receiving her clients behind the window with the staring, new yellow blinds. [Pg 347] I should regret even the fiery, hot-tempered, little woman who jumps up out of the attic window immediately below us, like a Jack-in-the-box, and shakes her fist at us every time Augustine shakes those unfortunate rugs which are perpetually getting us into trouble with our neighbours. I should think the picture incomplete if, of an evening, the diners out were to disappear from behind the windows of the big hotel, though nothing makes me more uncomfortably conscious of the "strangely mingled monster" that London is, than the contrast between them lingering over the day's fourth banquet, and the long black "hunger line" forming of a winter morning just beside Cleopatra's Needle and waiting in dreary patience for the daily dole of bread and soup.

I cannot imagine the Quarter without actors and actresses in possession of dozens of its windows, the attraction to them less the associations with Garrick than the convenient proximity to the principal theatres; or without the Societies, Institutes, Leagues, Bureaus, Companies, [Pg 348] Associations, and I know not what else, that undertake the charge of everything under the sun, from ancient buildings to women's freedom; or without the clubs, where long-haired men and Liberty-gowned women meet to drink tea and dabble in anarchy; where more serious citizens propose to refashion the world and mankind, and, incidentally, British politics; where, in a word, philanthropists of every pattern fill the very air of the Quarter with reform, until my escape from degenerating into a reformer despite myself seems a daily miracle, and the sham Bohemianism of the one club willing to let the rest of the world take care of itself becomes almost a virtue.

It is probably the seclusion, the cloistral repose, of the Quarter that attracts the student and the scholar. Up at my windows, the busy bee would be given points in the art of improving each shining hour. In every direction I turn I am so edified by the example of hard work that I long for the luxury of being shocked by idleness.

Behind the window I look down into at right angles from the studio, the Scientist in white apron, [Pg 349] surrounded by bottles and retorts and microscopes, industriously examines germs from morning till midnight, oblivious to everything outside, which for too long meant, among other things, showers of soft white ashes and evil greasy smoke and noxious odours sent by the germs up through his chimneys into our studio; nor could the polite representations of our Agent that he was a public nuisance rouse him from his indifference, since he knew that the smoke was not black enough to make him one technically. It was only when J. protested, with an American energy effective in England, that the germs ceased to trouble us and I could bear unmoved the sight of the white-aproned Scientist behind his window.

In the new house with the flat roof the Inventor has his office, and I am sure it is the great man himself I so often see walking gravely up and down among the chimney-pots, evolving and planning new wireless wonders; and I am as sure that the solemn St. Bernard who walks there too is his, and, in some way it is not for me to explain, part of the mysterious machinery [Pg 350] connecting the Quarter with the rest of the world.

Plainly visible in more rooms than one, bending over high drawing-tables not only through the day but on into the night, are many Architects, with whom the Quarter has ever been in favour

since the masters who designed it years ago made their headquarters in our street, until yesterday, when the young man who is building the Town Hall for the County Council moved into it, though, had the County Council had its way, there would be no Quarter now for an Architect to have his office in. Architectural distinction, or picturesqueness, awakes in the London official such a desire to be rid of it that, but for the turning of the worm who pays the rates, our old streets and Adam houses would have been pulled down to make place for the brand-new municipal building which, as it is, has been banished out of harm's way to the other side of the river.

Busier still than the Architects are the old men who live in the two ancient houses opposite mine, where the yellow brick just shows here and there through the centuries' grime, and where [Pg 351] windows as grimy—though a clause in the leases of the Quarter demands that windows should be washed at least once a month—open upon little ironwork balconies and are draped with draggled lace-curtains, originally white but now black. I have no idea who the old men are, or what is the task that absorbs them. They look as ancient as the houses and so alike that I could not believe there were three of them if, every time I go to my dining-room window, I did not see them all three in their chambers, two on the third floor, to the left and right of me, one on the floor below about halfway between,—making, J. says, an amusing kind of pattern. Each lives alone, each has a little table drawn up to his window, and there they sit all day long, one on an easy leather chair, one on a stiff cane-bottomed chair, one on a hard wooden stool,—that is the only difference. There they are perpetually sorting and sifting papers from which nothing tears them away; there they have their midday chop and tankard of bitter served to them as they work, and there they [Pg 352] snatch a few hasty minutes afterwards to read the day's news. They never go out unless it is furtively, after dark, and I have never failed to find them at their post except occasionally on Sunday morning, when the chairs by the tables are filled by their clothes instead of themselves, because, I fancy, the London housekeeper, who leaves her bed reluctantly every day in the week but who on that morning is not to be routed out of it at all, refuses to wake them or to bring them their breakfast. They may be solicitors, but I do not think so; they may be literary men, but I do not think that either; and, really, I should just as lief not be told who and what they are, so much more in keeping is mystery with the grimy old houses where their old days are spent in endless toiling over endless tasks.

If the three old men are not authors, plenty of my other neighbours are, as they should be out of compliment to Bacon and Pepys, to Garrick and Topham Beauclerk, to Dr. Johnson and Boswell, to Rousseau and David Copperfield, and to any number besides who, in their different days, belonged to or haunted the Quarter and made it a world of memories for all who came after. I [Pg 353] have authors on every side of me: not Chattertons undiscovered in their garrets, but celebrities wallowing in success, some of whom might be the better for neglect. Many a young enthusiast comes begging for the privilege of gazing from my windows into theirs. I have been assured that the walls of the Quarter will not hold the memorial tablets which we of the present generation are preparing for their decoration. The "best sellers" are issued, and the Repertory Theatre nourished, from our midst.

The clean-shaven man of legal aspect who arrives at his office over the way as regularly as the clock strikes ten, who leaves it as regularly at one for his lunch, and as regularly in the late afternoon closes up for the day, is the Novelist whose novels are on every bookstall and whose greatness is measured by the thousands and hundreds of thousands into which they run. He does not do us the honour of living in the Quarter, but comes to it simply in office hours, and is as scrupulously punctual as if his business were with briefs rather than with dainty trifles lighter [Pg 354] than the lightest froth. No clerk could be more exact in his habits. Anthony Trollope was not more methodical. This admirable precision might cost him the illusions of his admirers, but to me it is invaluable. For when the wind is in the wrong direction and I cannot hear Big Ben, or the fog falls and I cannot see St. Martin's spire, I have only to watch for him to know the hour, and in a household where no two clocks or watches agree as to time, the convenience is not to be exaggerated.

My neighbour from the house on the river-front, next to Peter the Great's, who often drops in for a talk and whom Augustine announces as *le Monsieur du Quartier*, is the American Dramatist, author of the play that was the most popular of the season last year in New York. I should explain, perhaps, that Augustine has her own names for my friends, and that usually her announcements require interpretation. For instance, few people would recognize my distinguished countryman, the Painter, in *le Monsieur de la Dame qui ne monte jamais les escaliers*, or the delightful Lady Novelist in *la Demoiselle aux chats*, or—it is wiser not to say [Pg 355] whom in *le Monsieur qui se gobe*. But I have come to understand even her fine shades, and when she announces *les Gens du Quartier*, then I know it is not the American Dramatist, but the British Publicist and his wife who live in Garrick's house, and who add to their distinction by dining in the room where Garrick died.

The red curtains a little further down the street belong to the enterprising Pole, who, from his chambers in the Quarter, edits the Polish Punch, a feat which I cannot help thinking, though I have never seen the paper, must be the most comic thing about it. In the house on one side, the author who is England's most distinguished Man of Letters to-day, and who has become great as a novelist, began life as an architect. From the house on the other side, the Poet-Patriot-Novelist of the Empire fired, or tried to fire, the Little Englanders with his own blustering, knock-you-down Imperialism, and bullied and flattered them, amused and abused them, called them names they would not have forgiven from any other man living and could not easily swallow from him, [Pg 356]

and was all the while himself so simple and unassuming that next to nobody knew he was in the Quarter until he left it. The British Dramatist close by, who conquers the heart of the sentimental British public by sentiment, is just as unassuming. He is rarely without a play on the London stage, rarely without several on tour. He could probably buy out everybody in the Quarter, except perhaps the Socialist, and he can lose a little matter of sixteen thousand pounds or so and never miss it. But so seldom is he seen that you might think he was afraid to show himself. "You'd never know 'e was in the 'ouse, 'e's that quiet like. Why, 'e never gives no trouble to nobody," the Housekeeper has confided to me. He shrinks from putting his name on his front door, though by this time he must be used to its staring at him in huge letters from posters and playbills all over the world. Perhaps it is to give himself courage that he keeps a dog who is as forward as his master is retiring, and who is my terror. I am on speaking terms with most of the dogs of the Quarter, but with the Dramatist's I have never ventured to exchange a greeting. I happened to [Pg 357] mention my instinctive distrust, one day, to a friend who has made the dog's personal acquaintance.

"He eats kids!" was my friend's comment. Then he added: "You have seen dozens of children go up to the Dramatist's room, haven't you?"

"Yes," I answered, for it was a fact.

"Well, and have you ever seen one come down again?" And if you will believe it, I never have.

A door or so from the Dramatist, but on the opposite side of the street, the Socialist's windows face mine. I cannot, with any respect for truth, call him unassuming; modesty is not his vice. It is not his ambition to hide his light under a bushel,—or rather a hogshead; on the contrary, as he would be the first to admit, it could not flare on too many housetops to please him. When I first met him, years before we again met in the Quarter, the world had not heard of him, but he was quite frank in his determination that it should, though to make it hear, he would have to play a continuous solo on his own cornet, until he impressed somebody else with the necessity of [Pg 358] blowing it for him. Besides, he has probably never found other people as entertaining as himself, which is an excellent reason why he should not keep himself out of his talk and his writing,—and he is talking and writing all the time. His is a familiar voice among the Fabians, on public platforms, and at private meetings, and for a very little while it was listened to by bewildered Borough Councillors. He has as many plays to his credit as the British Dramatist, as many books as the Novelist, and I recall no other writer who can equal him in the number and length of his letters to the press. As he courts, rather than evades, notice, I doubt if he would be embarrassed to learn how repeatedly I see him doing his hair and beard in the morning and putting out his lights at night, or how entirely I am in his confidence as to the frequency of his luncheon parties and the number of his guests. Were I not the soul of discretion I could publish his daily *menu* to the world, for his kitchen opens itself so aggressively to my view that I see into it as often as into my own. [Pg 359]

For that matter, I have under my inspection half the kitchens in the Quarter, and the things I witness in them might surprise or horrify more than one woman who imagines herself mistress in her own house. I have assisted at the reception of guests she never invited; I understand, if she does not, why her gas and electric-light bills reach such fabulous figures; I could tell her what happens when her motor-car disappears round the corner,—for, seedy and down-at-heel as the Quarter may appear, the private motor is by no means the exception among the natives. Only the other day, when the literary family, who are as unsuspicious as they are fond of speed, started in their motor for the week-end, they could have got no further than the suburbs before the cloth was laid in their dining-room, their best china, silver, and glass brought out, flowers, bottles, and siphons in place, and their cook at the head of their table "entertaining her friends to luncheon." The party were lingering over the fruit when suddenly a motor-horn was heard in the street. There was a look of horror on all their faces, one short second of hesitation, and then a wild leap [Pg 360] from the table, and, in a flash, flowers, bottles, and siphons, china, glass, and silver were spirited away, the cloth whisked off, chairs set against the wall. As the dining-room door closed on the flying skirt of the last guest, the cook looked out of the window, the horn sounded again, and the motor was round the corner in the next street, for it was somebody else's, and the literary family did not return until Monday.

The Socialist, who deals in paradox and the inconsequent, also has his own car. Now that Socialism is knocking at our doors, the car tooting at his, come to fetch him from his town house to his country house or off to the uttermost ends of the earth, toots reassurance into our hearts. Under such conditions we should not mind being Socialists ourselves. However, he does make one protest against Individualism in which I should not care to join him, for he goes shares in his personality and has perpetrated a double in the Quarter,—a long lean man, with grizzled red hair and beard, who is clothed in brown Jaegers, whose face has the pallor of the vegetarian, and who [Pg 361] warns us of the manner of equality we may expect under the Socialist's régime. I dread to think of the complications there might be were the double not so considerate as to carry a black bag and wear knee-breeches. A glance at hands and legs enables us to distinguish one from the other and to spare both the inconvenience of a mistaken identity. The double, like the old men opposite, remains one of the mysteries of the Quarter. Nobody can explain his presence in our midst, nobody has ever spoken to him, nobody can say where he comes from with his black bag in the morning, where he goes with it in the evening, or even where he stops in the Quarter. I doubt if the Socialist has yet, like the lovers in Rossetti's picture, met himself, for surely no amount of Socialism could bear the shock of the revelation that must come with the meeting.

If many books are written in the Quarter, more are published from it, and the number increases at a rate that is fast turning it into a new Paternoster Row. I am surrounded by publishers: [Pg 362] publishers who are unknown outside our precincts, and publishers who are unknown in them save for the names on their signs; publishers who issue limited editions for the few, and publishers who apparently publish for nobody but themselves; and, just where I can keep an eye on his front door, *the* Publisher, my friend, who makes the Quarter a centre of travel and a household word wherever books are read, and uses his house as a training-school for young genius. More than one lion now roaring in London served an apprenticeship there; even Mr. Chatteron passed through it; and I am always encountering minor poets or budding philosophers going in or coming out, ostensibly on the Publisher's affairs, but really busy carrying on the Quarter's traditions and preparing more memorial tablets for its overladen walls. The Publisher and his wife live a few doors away, where they are generously accumulating fresh associations and memories for our successors in the Quarter. To keep open house for the literary men and women of the time is a fashion among publishers that did not go out with the Dillys and the [Pg 363] Dodsleys, and an occasional Boswell would find a note-book handy behind the windows that open upon the river from the Publisher's chambers.

Associations are being accumulated also by the New York Publisher, who, accompanied by his son, the Young Publisher, and by his birds, arrives every year with the first breath of spring. It is chiefly to artists that his house is open, though he gives the literary hallmark to the legacy of memories he will leave to the Quarter. I cannot understand why the artist, to whom our streets and our houses make a more eloquent appeal than to the author, has seldom been attracted to them since the days when Barry designed his decorations in the "grand manner" for our oldest Society's lecture-hall, and Angelica Kauffmann painted the ceiling in Peter the Great's house, or since the later days when Etty and Stanfield lived in our house. Now and then I come across somebody sketching our old Watergate or our shabby little shops and corners, but only the youth in the attic below has followed the example given by J., whose studio continues the exception in [Pg 364] the Quarter: the show-place it ought to be for the beauty of river and sky framed in by the windows.

But to make up for this neglect, as long a succession of artists as used to climb to Etty's chambers visit the New York Publisher in the quiet rooms with the prints on the walls and the windows that, for greater quiet, look away from our quiet streets and out upon our quieter backs and gables. Much good talk is heard there, and many good stories, and by no means the least good from the New York Publisher himself. It is strange that, loving quiet as he does, he should, after the British Dramatist, have contributed more to my disquiet than anybody in the Quarter: a confession for which I know he will think I merit his scorn. But the birds it is his fancy to travel with are monsters compared to the sparrows and pigeons who build their nests in the peaceful trees of the Quarter, and I am never at ease in their company. I still tremble when I recall the cold critical eye and threatening beak of his favourite magpie, nor can I think calmly of his raven whom, in an access of mistaken hospitality, I once invited to call with him upon William Penn. [Pg 365] William had never seen a live bird so near him in his all too short life, and what with his surprise and curiosity, his terror and sporting instincts, he was so wrought up and his nerves in such a state that, although the raven was shut up safe in a cage, I was half afraid he would not survive the visit. I have heard the New York Publisher say of William, in his less nervous and more normal moments, that he was not a cat but a demon; the raven, in my opinion, was not exactly an angel. But thanks to the quality of our friendship, it also survived the visit and, in spite of monstrous birds, strengthens with the years.

It is not solely from my windows that I have got to know the Quarter. Into my Camelot I can not only look, but come down, without webs flying out and mirrors cracking, and better still, I might never stir beyond its limits, and my daily life and domestic arrangements would suffer no inconvenience. The Quarter is as "self-contained" as the flats advertised by our zealous Agent who manages it. Every necessity and many luxuries into the bargain are to be had within its [Pg 366] boundaries. It may resemble the Inns of Court in other ways, but it does not, as they do, encourage snobbishness by placing a taboo upon the tradesman. We have our own dairy, our own green-grocer, our own butcher, though out of sympathy with Augustine I do my marketing in Soho. At one corner our tobacconist keeps his shop, at another our tailor. If my drains go wrong I call in the local plumber; when I want a shelf put up or something mended I send for the local carpenter; I could summon the local builder were I inclined to make a present of alterations or additions to the local landlord. I but step across the street if I am in need of a Commissioner of Oaths. I go no further to get my type-writing done. Were my daily paper to fail me, the local gossip of the Quarter would allow me no excuse to complain of dearth of news; the benevolent would exult in the opportunity provided for benevolence by our slums where the flower-girls live; the energetic could walk off their energy in our garden where the County Council's band plays on [Pg 367] summer evenings. There is a public for our loungers, and for our friends a hotel,—the house below the hill with the dingy yellow walls that are so shiny-white as I see them by night, kept from time immemorial by Miss Brown, where the lodger still lights himself to bed by a candle and still eats his meals in a Coffee Room, and where Labour Members of Parliament, and South Kensington officials, and people never to be suspected of having discovered the Quarter, are the most frequent guests.

The Quarter has also its own population, so distinct from other Londoners that I am struck by the difference no further away than the other side of the Strand. Our housekeepers are a species apart, so are our milkmen behind their little carts. Our types are a local growth. Nowhere else in London could I meet anybody in the slightest like the pink-eyed, white-haired, dried-up little old

man, with a jug in his hand, whom I see daily on his way to or from our public-house; or like the middle-aged dandy who stares me out of countenance as he saunters homeward in the afternoon, a lily or chrysanthemum, according to the season, in one hand and a brown paper bag of buns in [Pg 368] the other; or like the splendid old man of military bearing, with well-waxed moustache and well-pointed beard, whose Panama hat in summer and fur-lined cloak in winter have become as much fixtures in the Quarter as our Adam houses or our view of the river, and who spends his days patrolling the Terrace in front of our frivolous club or going into it with members he happens to overtake at the front door,—where his nights are spent no native of the Quarter can say. Nor is any other crowd like our crowd that collects every Sunday evening as St. Martin's bells begin to ring for evening service, that grows larger and larger until streets usually empty are packed solid, and that melts away again before ten. It is made up mostly of youths to whom the cap is as indispensable a symbol of class as the silk hat further west, and young girls who run to elaborate hair and feathers. They have their conventions, which are strictly observed. One is to walk with arms linked; a second, to fill the roadway as well as the pavement, to the despair of taxicabs and [Pg 369] cycles endeavouring to toot and ring a passage through; a third, to follow the streets that bound the Quarter on three sides and never to trespass into others. How the custom originated, I leave it to the historian to decide. It may go back to the Britons who painted themselves blue, it may be no older than the Romans. All I know with certainty is that the Sunday evening walk is a ceremony of no less obligation for the Quarter than the Sunday morning parade in the Row is for Mayfair.

We are of accord in the Quarter on the subject of its charm and the advantage of preserving it,—though on all others we may and do disagree absolutely and continually fight. I have heard even our postman brag of the beauty of its architecture and the fame of the architects who built it more than a century and a half ago, and I do not believe as a rule that London postmen could say who built the houses where they deliver their letters, or that it would occur to them to pose as judges of architecture. Because we love the Quarter we watch over it with unceasing vigilance. We are always on the look-out for nuisances and alert to suppress them. In fact, if not in name, [Pg 370] we constitute a sort of League for the Prevention of Dirt and Disorder in the Quarter. There is a distinct understanding that, in an emergency, we may rely upon one another for mutual support, which is the easier as we all have the same Landlord and can make the same Agent's life a martyrdom until the evil is remedied. The one thing we guard most zealously is the quiet, the calm, conducive to work. We wage war to the death against street noises of every kind. No "German Band" would invade our silent precincts. The hurdy-gurdy is anathema,—I have always thought the Suffragettes' attempt to play it through our streets their bravest deed. If we endure the bell of the muffin man on Sunday and the song of the man who wants us to buy his blooming lavender, it is because both have the sanction of age. We make no other concession, and our severity extends to the native no less than to the alien. When, in the strip of green and gravel below my windows, the members of our frivolous Club took to shooting themselves with blank [Pg 371] cartridges in the intervals of fencing, though the noise was on the miniature scale of their pistols, we overwhelmed the unfortunate Agent with letters until a stop was put to it. When our Territorials, in their first ardour, chose our catacombs for their evening bugle-practice, we rose as one against them. Beggars, unless they ring boldly at our front doors and pretend to be something else, must give up hope when they enter the Quarter. For if the philosopher thinks angels and men are in no danger from charity, we do not, and least of all the lady opposite, to whom alms-giving in our street is as intolerable as donkeys on the green were to Betsy Trotwood. One of my friends has never dared to come to see me, except by stealth, since the day she pounced upon him to ask him what he meant by such an exhibition of immorality, when all he had done was to drop a penny into the hand of a small boy at his cab-door, and all he had meant was a kindly fellow feeling, having once been a small boy himself.

We defend the beauty of the Quarter with equal zeal. We do what we can to preserve the [Pg 372] superannuated look which to us is a large part of its charm, and we cry out against every new house that threatens discord in our ancient harmony. Excitement never raged so high among us as when the opposite river banks were desecrated by the advertiser, and from shores hitherto but a shadow in the shadowy night, there flamed forth a horrid tout for Tea. We had endured much from a sign of Whiskey further down the river,—Whiskey and Tea are Britain's bulwarks,—but this was worse, for it flared and glared right into our faces, and the vile letters which were red and green one second and yellow the next ran in a long line from top to bottom of the high shot-tower. In this crude light, our breweries ceased to be palaces in the night, our *campanili* again became chimneys. Gone was our Fairyland, gone our River of Dreams. The falling twilight gave a hideous jog to our memory, and would not let us forget that we lived in a nation of shopkeepers. The Socialist, part of whose stock-in-trade is perversity, liked it, or said he did,—and I really [Pg 373] believe he did,—but the other tenants were outraged, and an indignation meeting was called. Four attended, together with the Solicitor and the Agent of the estate, and the Publisher, who took the chair. It was of no use. We learned that our joy in the miracle of night might be destroyed forever, but if we could prove no physical harm, legal redress would be denied to us, and our defiance of the Vandal must be in vain. And so there the disgraceful advertisement remains, flaring and glaring defiance at us across the river. When the Socialist gets tired of it, he goes off to his country place in his forty-horse-power motor-car, but we, in our weariness, can escape only to bed.

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