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Hutten zum Stolzenberg**

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HAPPY HOUSE

The BARONESS

VON HUTTEN

HAPPY HOUSE

BY

The BARONESS VON HUTTEN

AUTHOR OF "PAM," "PAM DECIDES," "SHARROW," "KINGSMEAD," ETC.



NEW YORK

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TO MISS LILY BETTS

MY DEAR LILY: *We three, one of us in a chair, and two of us upside down on the grass-plot, have decided that this book must be dedicated to you, in memory of how we did not work on it at Sennen Cove, and how we did work on it here. So here it is, with our grateful love, from*

*Your affectionate
Richard, and Hetty, and*

B. v. H.
PENZANCE

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HAPPY HOUSE

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CHAPTER I

Mrs. Walbridge stood at the top of the steps, a pink satin slipper in her hand, looking absently out into the late afternoon. The July sunlight spread in thick layers across the narrow, flagged path to the gate, and the shadows under the may tree on the left were motionless, as if cut out of lead.

The path was strewn with what looked like machine-made snowflakes, and a long piece of white satin ribbon had caught on the syringa bush on the right of the green gate, and hung like a streak of whiter light across the leaves. Someone inside the house was playing a fox-trot, and sounds of tired laughter were in the air, but the well-known author, Mrs. Walbridge, did not hear them. She was leaning against the side of the door, recklessly crushing her new grey frock, and her eyes were fixed on the gate in the unseeing stare of utter fatigue. Presently the music stopped and the sudden silence seemed to rouse her, for, with a deep sigh and a little shake of the head that was evidently characteristic, she turned and went slowly into the house.

A few minutes later a brisk-looking young man in a new straw hat came down the street and paused at the gate, peering up at the fanlight to verify his whereabouts. Number eighty-eight did not seem to satisfy him, but suddenly his eyes fell on the gate. On its shabby green were painted the words, very faded, almost undecipherable, "Happy House," and with a contented nod the young man opened the gate and went quickly up the steps. No one answered his ring, so he rang again. Again the silence was unbroken, but from somewhere far off he heard the sound of laughter and talking, and, peering forward into the little hall, he took a small notebook from his pocket and wrote a few words in it, whistling softly between his teeth. He was a freckled-faced young man with a tip-tilted nose, not in the least like the petals of a flower, and with a look of cheery cheekiness. After a moment he went into the passage and thrust his head into the open drawing-room door. The room was filled with flowers, and though the windows were wide open, it smelt close, as if it had already been full of people. The walls were covered with pink and white moiré paper, whose shiny surface was broken by various pictures. Watts's "Hope" in a gilt frame dominated the mantelpiece; a copy of "The Fighting Téméraire" faced it, and there were a good many photographs elaborately framed, grouped, like little families, in clusters. Between the windows hung an old, faded photogravure of "The Soul's Awakening," and "Alone at Last" revealed its artless passion over a walnut chiffonier laden with small pieces of china. The young man in the straw hat, which was now pushed far back on his sweat-darkened fair hair, stood in the middle of the room and looked round, scratching his head with his pencil. His bright eyes missed nothing, and although he was plainly a young man full of buoyant matter-of-factness, there was scorn, not unkindly, but decided, in his merry but almost porcine eyes as he made mental notes of his surroundings.

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"Poor old girl," he muttered. "Hang that 'bus accident. I wish I'd been here in time for the party ——" Then his shrewd face softened as the deeper meaning of the room reached him. It was ugly; it was commonplace, but it was more of a home than many a room his journalistic activities had acquainted him with. By a low, shabby, comfortable-looking arm-chair that stood near the flower-filled grate was a dark-covered table on which stood five photographs, all in shiny silver or leather frames. Mr. Wick stood over the table tapping his teeth softly with his pencil, and moving his lips in a way that produced a hollow tune. "So that's the little lot," he said to himself in a cheerful, confidential voice. "Three feminines and two masculines, as the Italians say. And very nice too. Her own corner, I bet. Yes, there's her fountain pen." He took it up and made a note of its make and laid it carefully down. There was a little fire-screen in the shape of a banner of wool embroidery on the table. "That's how she keeps the firelight out of her eyes when she's working in the winter. Poor old girl. What ghastly muck it is, too—— Good thing for her the public likes it. Now, then, what about that bell? Guess I'll go and have another tinkle at it." He started to the door, when it was pushed further open and the owner of the house came in. Mr. Wick knew at the first glance that it was the owner of the house. A fattish, middle-aged man in brand new shepherd's plaid trousers and a not quite so new braided morning-coat.

"Hallo! I—I beg your pardon——" the new-comer began, not at all in the voice of one who begs pardon. Mr. Wick waved his hand kindly.

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"Oliver Wick's my name," he explained. "I come from *Round the Fire* for an account of the wedding, but I got mixed up with a rather good 'bus smash in Oxford Street, and that's why I'm late."

"Oh, I see. Want a description of the wedding, do you? Clothes and so on? I'm afraid I'm not much good for that, but if you'll come into the garden I'll get one of my daughters to tell you. Some of the young people are still there, as a matter of fact."

Mr. Walbridge had stopped just short of being a tall man. His figure had thickened and spread as he grew older and his hips were disproportionately broad, which gave him a heavy, clumsy look. In his reddish, rather swollen face were traces of what had been great beauty, and he had the unpleasant manner of a man who consciously uses his charm as a means to attain his own ends.

"Come into the dining-room first and have a glass of the widow," he suggested, as he led the way down the narrow passage towards an open door at the back of the house.

Mr. Wick, who had no inhuman prejudice against conviviality, followed him into the dining-room and partook, as his quick eyes made notes of everything on which they rested, of a glass of warmish, rather doubtful wine.

"I suppose Mrs. Walbridge will give me five minutes?" the young man asked, setting down his glass and taking a cigarette from the very shiny silver case offered him by his host. Mr. Walbridge laughed, showing the remains of a fine set of teeth artfully reinforced by a skilled dentist.

"Oh, yes. My wife will quite enjoy being interviewed. Women always like that kind of thing, and, between you and me and the gate-post," he poured some champagne into a tumbler and drank it before he went on, "interviewers don't come round quite as they used in her younger days."

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Mr. Wick despised the novels of the poor lady he had come to interview, but he was a youth not without chivalry, and something in his host's manner irritated him.

"She has a very good book public, anyhow, has Violet Walbridge. You mustn't mind me calling her that. I shouldn't call Browning Mr. Browning, you know, or Victoria Cross Miss Cross."

Walbridge nodded. "Oh, yes, they're pretty stories, pretty stories, though I like stronger stuff myself. Just re-reading 'L'Assommoir' again. Met Zola once when I was living in Paris. Always wondered how he smashed his nose. Well, if you're ready, let's come down into the garden where the ladies are."

The garden of Happy House was a long narrow strip almost entirely covered by a grass tennis court, and bounded by a narrow, crowded, neglected herbaceous border. As he stood at the top of the steep flight of steps leading down to where the group of young people were sprawled about in dilapidated old deck-chairs or on the grass, Mr. Wick's quick eyes saw the herbaceous border, and, what is more, they understood it. It was a meagre, squeezed, depressed looking attempt, and the young man from Brondesbury knew instinctively that, whereas the tennis court was loved by the young people of the family, the wild and pathetic flowers belonged to the old lady he had come to interview. Somehow he seemed to know, as he told his mother later, quite a lot about Violet Walbridge, just through looking at her border.

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The sun was setting now, and a little wind had come up, stirring the leaves on the old elm under whose shade, erratic and scant, the little group were seated. Three or four young men were there, splendid, if rather warm, in their wedding garments, and several young women and girls, the pretty pale colours of their fine feathers harmonising charmingly with the evening. At the far end of the garden a lady was walking, with a blue silk sunshade over her shoulder. As the two men came down the steps Mr. Walbridge pointed to her.

"There's my wife," he said. "Shall I come and introduce you?"

"No, thank you. No, no, I'll go by myself," the young man answered hastily, and as he went down across the lawn he heard a girl's voice saying laughingly: "Reporter to interview Mrs. Jellaby." The others laughed, not unkindly, but their laughter lent to Mr. Wick's approach to Mrs. Walbridge a deference it might otherwise not have had. She had not heard him coming, and was standing with her back to him, her head and shoulders hidden by the delphinium-blue sunshade, and when she turned, starting nervously at the sound of his voice, he realised with painful acuteness that delphinium blue is not the colour to be worn by daylight by old ladies. Her thin, worn face, in which the bones showed more than in any face he had ever seen, was flooded with the blue colour that seemed to fill all the hollows and lines with indigo, and her large sunken eyes, on which the upper eyelids fitted too closely, must have been, the young man noticed, beautiful eyes long ago. They were of that most rare eye-colour, a really dark violet, and the eyebrows on the very edge of the clearly defined frontal bone were slightly arched and well marked over the temples. When he had told her who he was and his errand, she flushed with pleasure and held out her hand to him, and he, whose profession is probably second only to that of dentistry in its unpopularity, was touched by her simple pleasure.

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"My Chief thought the public would be interested in the wedding. He tells me this daughter—the bride, I mean—was the original of—of—one of your chief heroines."

Violet Walbridge led the way to an old, faded green garden seat, on which they sat down.

"Yes, she's the original of 'Rose Parmenter,'" she helped him out gently, without offence at his having forgotten the name. "I wish you had seen her. But you can say that she was looking beautiful, because she was—"

Mr. Wick whipped out his notebook and his beautifully sharpened pencil, contrived a little table of his knees, and looked up at her.

"'Rose Parmenter'—oh, yes. That's one of your best-known books, isn't it?"

"Yes, that and 'Starlight and Moonlight.' They sold best, though 'One Maid's Word' has done very well. That," she added slowly, "has been done into Swedish, as well as French and German. 'Queenie's Promise' has been done into six languages."

Her voice was very low, and peculiarly toneless, but he noticed a little flush of pleasure in her thin cheeks—a flush that induced him, quite unexpectedly to himself, to burst out with the information that a friend of his sister—Jenny *her* name was—just revelled in his companion's works. "Give me a box o' chocs," Kitty will say, "and one of Violet Walbridge's books, and I wouldn't change places with Queen Mary."

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Without being urged, Mrs. Walbridge gave the young man details he wanted—that her daughter's name was Hermione Rosalind; that she was the second daughter and the third child, and that she had married a man named Gaskell-Walker—William Gaskell-Walker.

"He belongs to a Lancashire family, and they've gone to the Lakes for their honeymoon." The author waved her thin hand towards the group of young people at the other end of the lawn. "There's the rest of my flock," she said, her voice warming a little. "The tall man who's looking at his watch is my other son-in-law, Dr. Twiss of Queen Anne Street, Cavendish Square. He married my eldest daughter, Maud, four years ago. Their little boy was page to-day. He's upstairs asleep now."

As she spoke one of the girls in the group left the others and came towards her and Wick.

"This is your daughter, too?" the young man asked, a little throb of pleasure in his voice.

"Yes, this," Mrs. Walbridge answered, taking the girl's hand, "is my baby, Griselda. Griselda, dear, this is Mr.—Mr.—"

"Wick," said the young man. "Oliver Wick."

"You've come to interview Mum?" Miss Walbridge asked, a little good-natured raillery in her voice.

The young man bowed. "Yes. I represent *Round the Fire*, and my Chief thought that the public would be interested in an account of the wedding——" His eyes were glued to the young girl's face. She was very small, and, he thought to himself, the blackest white girl he had ever seen; so dark that if he had not known who she was he might have wondered whether she were not the whitest black girl—her hair was coal-black and her long eyes like inkwells, and her skin, smooth as vellum, without a touch of colour, was a rich golden brown. She was charmingly dressed in canary-coloured chiffon, and round her neck she wore a little necklet of twisted strands of seed pearls, from which hung a large, beautifully cut pearl-shaped topaz.

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"I came to tell you, Mum," she went on, glancing over her shoulder at one of the upper windows, "that Hilary's awake and bawling his head off, and Maud wants you to go up to him."

Mrs. Walbridge rose and Wick noticed, although he could not have explained it, how very different were her grey silk draperies from the yellow ones of her daughter. She had, moreover, sat down carelessly, and the back of her frock was crushed and twisted.

"It's my little grandson," she explained. "He's always frightened when he wakes up. I'll go to him. Perhaps you'd like my daughter to show you the wedding presents, Mr. Wick."

Oliver Wick was very young, and he was an ugly youth as well, but something about him held the girl's attention, in spite of his being only a reporter. This something, though she did not know it, was power, so it was perfectly natural that the little, spoilt beauty should lead him into the house to the room upstairs where the presents were set forth. His flowery article in the next number of *Round the Fire* expressed great appreciation of the gifts, but there was no detailed account of them, and that was because, although he looked at them and seemed to see what he was looking at, he really saw nothing but Miss Walbridge's enchanting little face.

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"Do you ever read any of Mum's novels?" the girl asked him at last, as they stood by the window, looking down over the little garden into the quiet, tree-bordered road.

The young man hesitated, and she burst out laughing, pointing a finger of scorn at him.

"You've not?" she cried. "Own up. You needn't mind. I'm sure I don't blame you; they're awful rubbish—poor old Mum! I often wonder who it is *does* read them."

As she finished speaking, the door into the back room opened, and Mrs. Walbridge came out, carrying the little boy who had been crying. His long, fat legs, ending in shiny patent leather slippers, hung limply down, and his towsled fair head leant on her shoulder. He was dressed in cavalier costume of velvet and satin, and his fat, stupid face was blotted and blurred with tears. He looked so very large and heavy, and Mrs. Walbridge looked so small and old and tired that the young man went towards with his arms held out.

"Let me carry him down for you," he said. "He's too heavy——"

Griselda laughed. "My mother won't let you," she said gaily. "She always carries him about. She's much stronger than she looks."

Mrs. Walbridge didn't speak, but, with a little smile, went out of the room and slowly downstairs. Her daughter shrugged her shoulders.

"Mum's not only superannuated as to novels," she announced, smoothing her hair in front of a glass; "she's the old-fashioned mother and grandmother. She won't let us do a thing."

Her bright beauty had already cast a small spell on the young man, but nevertheless he answered her in a flash:

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"Do you ever try?"

She stared for a moment. In spite of his journalistic manner and what is really best described as his cheek, Oliver Wick was a gentleman, and the girl had instinctively accepted him as such. But at the abrupt, frank censure in his voice she drew herself up and assumed a new manner.

"Now that you've seen the presents," she said, in what he knew she thought to be a haughty tone, "I think I must get back to my friends."

He grinned. "Righto! Sorry to have detained you. But I haven't quite finished my talk with Mrs. Walbridge. I'm sure she won't mind giving me a few tips about her next book. Our people love that kind of thing—*eat* it."

He cast his eye about the pleasant sunny room, and then, as he reached the door, stopped.

"I suppose this is *your* room?" he asked, with bland disregard of her manner.

"What do you mean?"

"Well—different kinds of pictures, you know; brown wallpaper, and that's a good Kakemono. Hanabosa Iccho, isn't it?"

Miss Walbridge's face expressed surprise too acute to be altogether courteous.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I know it's a very good one. Mother bought it for Paul—that's my

brother—he's very fond of such things—for his birthday and at Christmas—his room is being painted, so some of his things are in here."

The young man looked admiringly at the grey and white study of monkeys and leaves.

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"I've got an uncle who collects them," he said, "and that's a jolly good one. I suppose that Mrs. Walbridge goes in for Japanese art too?"

"Poor mother!" The girl laughed. "She doesn't know a Kakemono from a broomstick. Paul found that one at some sale and asked her to give it to him."

They went slowly down the stairs, the girl's pretty white hand sliding lightly along the polished rail in a way that put all thought of Japanese art out of the young man's active mind. He was going to be a great success, for he had the conquering power of concentrating not only his thoughts but his feelings on one thing at a time; and for the moment the only thing in the world was Griselda Walbridge's left hand.

CHAPTER II

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Happy House was a big old house with rooms on both sides of the door, and a good many bedrooms, but it was old-fashioned in the wrong way, like a man's straw hat, say, of the early seventies. It was inconvenient without being picturesque. There was only one bathroom, and the passages were narrow. Most of the children had been born there, indeed all of them except Paul, for the prudent Mrs. Walbridge had bought it out of the proceeds of her first book, "Queenie's Promise"—a book that is even now dear to thousands of romantic hearts in obscure homes. Paul had been born in the little house at Tooting Bec, for there it was that the Great Success had been written. In those days might have been seen walking under the fine trees of the common, a little dowdy figure with a bustle and flowing unhygienic draperies, that was the newly married Mrs. Ferdinand Walbridge, in the throes of literary invention. But just before the birth of Maud Evelyn the removal had been made; the hastily gathered, inexpensive household gods had been carried by the faithful Carter Paterson to Walpole Road and set up in their over-large, rather dwarfing shrine. Those were the days of limitless ambition and mad, rosy dreams, when Ferdinand was still regarded by his young wife much in the way that Antony Trollope's heroines worshipped their husbands a short time before. The romantic light of the runaway match still hung round him and his extraordinary good looks filled her with unweakened pride.

They hung up Mr. Watts's "Hope," the beautiful and touching "Soul's Awakening" (which, indeed, bore a certain resemblance to Walbridge at that time), she arranged her little odds and ends of china, and her few books that her father had sent her after the half-hearted reconciliation following Paul's birth, and one of the first things they bought was a gilt clock, representing two little cupids on a see-saw. Mrs. Walbridge's taste was bad, but it was no worse than the taste of the greater part of her contemporaries of her own class, for she belonged body and soul to the Philistines. She hadn't even an artistic uncle clinging to the uttermost skirts of the pre-Raphaelites to lighten her darkness, and, behold, when she had made it, her little kingdom looked good to her. She settled down light-heartedly and without misgivings, to her quadruple rôle of wife, mother, housekeeper and writer. She had no doubt, the delicate little creature of twenty, but that she could "manage" and she had been managing ever since. She managed to write those flowery sentimental books of hers in a room full of crawling, experimental, loud-voiced babies; she managed to break in a series of savage handmaidens, who married as soon as she had taught them how to do their work; she managed to make flowers grow in the shabby, weed-grown garden; she managed to mend stair-carpets, to stick up fresh wallpapers, to teach her children their prayers and how to read and write; she managed to cook the dinner during the many servantless periods. The fate of her high-born hero and heroine tearing at her tender heart, while that fabulous being, the printer's devil, waited, in a metaphorical sense, on her doorstep. But most of all, she managed to put up with Ferdinand. She had loved him strongly and truly, but she was a clear-sighted little woman, and she could not be fooled twice in the same way, which, from some points of view, is a misfortune in a wife. So gradually she found him out, and with every bit of him that crumbled away, something of herself crumbled too. Nobody knew very much about those years, for she was one of those rare women who have no confidante, and she was too busy for much active mourning. Ferdinand was an expensive luxury. She worked every day and all day, believed in her stories with a pathetic persistence, cherishing all her press notices—she pasted them in a large book, and each one was carefully dated. She had a large public, and made a fairly large, fairly regular income, but there never was enough money, because Walbridge not only speculated and gambled in every possible way, but also required a great deal for his own personal comforts and luxuries. For years it was the joy of the little woman's heart to dress him at one of the classic tailors in Savile Row; his shirts and ties came from a Jermyn Street shop, his boots from St. James's Street, and his gloves (he had very beautiful hands) were made specially for him in the Rue de Rivoli. For many years Ferdinand Walbridge (or Ferdie, as he was called by a large but always changing circle of admiring friends) was one of the most carefully dressed men in town. He had an office somewhere in the city, but his various attempts at business always failed sooner or later, and then after each failure he would settle down gently and not ungratefully to a long period of what he called rest.

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When the three elder children were eight, six and three, a very bad time had come to "Happy House." Little had been known about it except for the main fact that Mr. Walbridge was made a

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bankrupt. But Caroline Breeze, the only woman who was anything like an intimate friend of the household, knew that there was, over and above this dreadful business, a worse trouble.

Caroline Breeze was one of those women who are not unaffectionately called "a perfect fool" by their friends, but she was a close-mouthed, loyal soul, and had never talked about it to anyone. But years afterwards, when the time had come for her to speak, she spoke, out of her silent observation, to great purpose. For a long time after his bankruptcy Ferdie Walbridge walked about like a moulting bird; his jauntiness seemed to have left him, and without it he wilted and became as nothing. During this three years Mrs. Walbridge for the first time did her writing in the small room in the attic—the small room with the sloping roof and the little view of the tree-tops and sky of which she grew so fond, and which, empty and desolate though it was, had gradually grown to be called the study; and that was the time when Caroline Breeze was of such great use to her. For Caroline used to come every day and take the children, as she expressed it, off their mother's hands.

In '94 Mrs. Walbridge produced "Touchstones," in '95 "Under the Elms" and in '96 "Starlight and Moonlight." It was in '98 that there appeared in the papers a small notice to the effect that Mr. Ferdinand Walbridge was discharged from his bankruptcy, having paid his creditors twenty shillings in the pound.

Naturally, after this rehabilitation, Mr. Walbridge became once more his charming and fascinating self, and was the object of many congratulations from the entirely new group of friends that he had gathered round him since his misfortune.

"Most chaps would have been satisfied to pay fifteen shillings in the pound," more than one of these gentlemen declared to him, and Ferdie Walbridge, as he waved his hand and expressed his failure to comprehend such an attitude, really almost forgot that it was his wife and not himself who had provided the money that had washed his honour clean.

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Caroline Breeze, faithful and best of friends, lived up three pairs of stairs in the Harrow Road, and one of her few pleasures was the keeping of an accurate and minute record of her daily doings. Perhaps some selections from the diary will help to bring us up to date in the story of "Happy House."

October, 1894—Tuesday.—Have been with poor Violet. Mr. Walbridge has been most unfortunate, and someone has made him a bankrupt. It is a dreadful blow to Violet, and poor little Hermy only six weeks old. Brought Maud home for the night with me. She's cutting a big tooth. Gave her black currant jam for tea. Do hope the seeds won't disagree with her....

Wednesday.—Not much sleep with poor little Maud. Took her round and got Hermy in the pram, and did the shopping. Saw Mr. Walbridge for a moment. He looks dreadfully ill, poor man. Told me he nearly shot himself last night. I told him he must bear up for Violet's sake....

A week later.—Went to "Happy House" and took care of the children while Violet was at the solicitors. She looks frightfully ill and changed, somehow. I don't quite understand what it is all about. Several people I know have gone bankrupt, and none of their wives seem as upset as Violet....

November 5th.—Spent the day at "Happy House" looking after the children. Violet had to go to the Law Courts with Mr. Walbridge. He looked so desperate this morning that I crept in and hid his razors. He dined at the King's Arms with some of his friends, and Violet and I had high tea together. She looks dreadfully ill, and the doctor says she must wean poor little Hermy. She said very little, but I'm afraid she blames poor Mr. Walbridge. I begged her to be gentle with him, and she promised she would, but she looked so oddly at me that I wished I hadn't said it.

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November 20th.—Violet has moved into the top room next the nursery to be nearer the children. I must say I think this is wrong of her. She ought to consider her husband. He looks a little better, but my heart aches for him.

February, 1895.—Violet's new book doing very well. Third edition out yesterday. She's getting on well with the one for the autumn. Such a pretty title—"Under the Elms." It's about a foundling, which I think is always so sweet. She's very busy making over the children's clothes. Ferdie (he says it is ridiculous that such an intimate friend as I am should go on calling him Mr. Walbridge) has gone to Torquay for a few weeks as he's very run down. Mem.—I lent him ten pounds, as dear Violet really doesn't seem quite to understand that a gentleman needs a little extra money when he's away. He was sweet about her. Told me how very good she was, and said that her not understanding about the pocket money is not her fault, as, of course, she is not quite so well born as he. He is very well connected indeed, though he doesn't care to have much to do with his relations. He's to pay me back when his two new pastels are sold. They are at Jackson's in Oxford Street, and look lovely in the window....

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November, 1895.—Violet's new book out to-day—"Under the Elms"—a sweet story. She gave me a copy with my name in it, and I sat up till nearly two, with cocoa, reading it. Very touching, and made me cry, but has a happy ending. I wish I had such a gift.

January 13th, 1896.—Just had a long talk with poor Ferdie. He is really very unlucky. Had his pocket picked on his way home from the city yesterday with £86 15s. 4d. in his purse. Does not wish to tell poor Violet. It would distress her so. He had bought some shares in some kind of mineral—I forget the name—and they had gone up, and he had been planning to buy her a new coat and skirt, and a hat, and lovely presents for all the children. He's such a kind man. He was even going to buy six pairs of gloves for me. The disappointment is almost more than he can bear. Sometimes I think Violet is rather hard on him. I couldn't bear to see him so disappointed, so I

am lending him £50 out of the Post Office Savings Bank. He's going to pay me six per cent. It's better than I can get in any other *safe* investment. He's to pay me at midsummer. *N.B.*—That makes £60.

February 12th, 1896.—Paul's birthday. Went to tea to "Happy House." Violet made a beautiful cake with white icing, and had squeezed little pink squiggles all over it in a nice pattern. She gave him a fine new pair of boots and a bath sponge. His daddy gave him a drum—a real one—and a large box of chocolates.

February 13th, 1896.—Ferdie came round at seven this morning to ask me to help nurse Paul. He was ill all night with nettle-rash in his throat, and nearly choked, poor little boy. I've been there all day. Susan told me Ferdie's grief in the night was something awful. It's a good thing Violet does not take things so to heart. Odd about the chocolate. It seems it's always given him nettle-rash.

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September 4th, 1896.—Darling Hermy's second birthday. Her mother made her a really lovely coat out of her Indian shawl. I knitted her a petticoat. Dear Ferdie gave her a huge doll with real hair, that talks, and a box of chocolates, which we took away from her, as Paul cried for some. Ferdie had quite forgotten that chocolates poison Paul. He was very wonderful this evening after the children had gone to bed. He had made some money (only a little) by doing some work in the city, and he had bought Violet a lovely pair of seed-pearl earrings. I suppose she was very tired, because she was really quite ungracious about them, and hurt his feelings dreadfully. There was also some trouble about the gas man, which I didn't quite understand. But afterwards, when I had gone upstairs to take a last look at the children, they had a talk, and as I came downstairs I saw him kneeling in front of her with his head in her lap. He has such pretty curly hair, and when I came in he came to me and took my hand and said he didn't mind my seeing his tears, as I was the same as a sister, and asked me to help influence her to forgive him, and to begin over again. It was very touching, and I couldn't help crying a little. I was so sorry for him. Violet is really rather hard. I suggested to her that after all many nice people go bankrupt, and that other women have far worse things to bear, and she looked at me very oddly for a moment, almost as if she despised me, though it can't have been that....

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September 30th, 1896.—Have been helping Violet move her things back into the downstairs room. Ferdie was so pleased. He brought home a great bunch of white lilac—in September!—and put it in a vase by the bed. I thought it was a lovely little attention.

July 4th, 1897.—A beautiful little boy came home this morning to "Happy House." They are going to call him Guy, which is Ferdie's favourite name. He was dreadfully disappointed it wasn't a little girl, so that she could be named Violet Peace. He's so romantic. What a pity there is no masculine name meaning Peace....

CHAPTER III

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Mr. Oliver Wick's ideas of courtship were primitive and unshakable. On one or two clever, ingenious pretexts he visited "Happy House" twice within the month after his first visit, in order, as he expressed it to himself, to look over Miss Walbridge in the light of a possible wife. That he was in love with her he recognised, to continue using his own language, "from the drop of the hat," "from the first gun." But although he belonged to the most romantic race under the sun, Mr. Wick was no fool, and whereas anything like a help-meet would have displeased him almost to the point of disgust, he had certain standards to which any one with claims to be the future Mrs. Oliver Wick must more or less conform. He didn't care a bit about money—he felt that money was his job, not the girl's—but she'd got to be straight, she'd got to be a good looker, and she'd got to be good-tempered. No shrew-taming for him—at least not in his own domestic circle.

One evening, shortly after his third visit to "Happy House," the young man was standing at the tallboys in his mother's room in Spencer Crescent, Brondesbury, tying a new tie over an immaculate dress shirt.

"I'm going to do the trick to-night," he declared, filled with pleasant confidence, "or bust."

Mrs. Wick, who looked more like her son's grandmother than his mother, sat in a low basket chair by the window, stretching, with an old, thin pair of olive-wood glove stretchers, the new white gloves that were to put the final touch of splendour to the wooer's appearance.

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She was a pleasant-faced old woman, with a strong chin and keen, clear eyes, and when she smiled she showed traces of past beauty.

"Well, of course," she said, snapping the glove-stretchers at him thoughtfully, "you know everything—you always did—and far be it from me to make any suggestions to you."

He turned round, grinning, his ugly face full of subtle likeness to her handsome one.

"Oh, go on," he jeered, "you wonderful old thing! Some day your pictures will be in the penny papers as the mother of Baron Wick of Brondesbury. Of course I know everything! Look at this tie, for instance. A Piccadilly tie, built for dukes, tied in Brondesbury by Fleet Street. What's his name—D'Orsay—couldn't do it better. But what were you going to say?"

She laughed and held out the gloves. "Here you are, son. Only this. I bet you sixpence she won't look at you. She'll turn you down; refuse you; give you the cold hand; icy mit—what d'you call it?"

And then, you'll come back and weep on my shoulder."

Mr. Wick, who had taken the gloves, stood still for a minute, his face full of sudden thought.

"She may," he said, "she may. I don't care if she does. I tell you she's lovely, mother. She'd look like a fairy queen if the idiots who paint 'em realised that fairies ought to be dark, and not tow-coloured. Of course she'll refuse me a few times, but her father'll be on my side."

"Why?"

"Because he's a rather clever old scoundrel, and he'll know that I'm a succeder—a getter."

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The old woman looked thoughtful. "I haven't liked anything you told me about *him*, Olly. But, after all, he has paid up, and lots of good men have been unfortunate in business."

The young fellow took up his dress-coat, which was new and richly lined, and drew it on with care.

"Oh, I'm not marrying into this family because I admire my future father-in-law," he answered. "I haven't any little illusions about him, old lady. It's his wife who's done the paying, or I'm very much mistaken. She's an honest woman—poor thing."

There was such deep sympathy in his voice that his mother, who had risen, and was patting and smoothing the new coat into place on his broad shoulders, pulled him round till he faced her, and looked down at him, for she was taller than he.

"Why are you so sorry for her?"

He hesitated for a moment, and his hesitation meant much to her.

"I don't know. She never says anything, of course. She seems happy enough, but I believe—I believe she's found him out—"

"God help her," Mrs. Wick answered.

The young man remembered this episode as he sat opposite his hostess at dinner an hour and a half later. The dining-room had been re-papered since he had drunk that glass of luke-warm wine in it the day of Hermione's wedding, and his sharp eyes noticed the absence of several ugly things that had been there then. Stags no longer hooted to each other across mountain chasms over the sideboard, and one or two good line drawings hung in their place.

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"How do you like it?" Griselda asked him. "Paul and I have been cheering things up a bit."

"Splendid," he replied promptly. "I say, how beautiful your sister is!"

Griselda's rather hard little face softened charmingly as she looked across the table, where the bride was sitting. Hermione Gaskell-Walker was a very handsome young woman in an almost classical way, and her short-sighted, clever-looking husband, who sat nearly opposite her, evidently thought so too, for he peered over the flowers at her in adoration that was plain and pleasing to see.

"They've such a jolly house in Campden Hill. His father was Adrian Gaskell-Walker, the landscape painter, and collected things."

Mr. Wick nodded, but did not answer, for he was busy making a series of those mental photographs, whose keenness and durability so largely contributed to his success in life. He had an amazing power of storing up records of incidents that somehow or other might come in useful to him, and this little dinner party, which he had decided to be a milestone on his road, interested him acutely in its detail.

By candlelight, in perfect evening dress, Ferdinand Walbridge's slightly dilapidated charms were very manifest. On his right sat an elderly lady about whom Mr. Wick's apparatus recorded only one word—pearls.

Next to her came Paul Walbridge, looking older than his twenty-nine years—thin, delicate, rather high shouldered, with remarkably glossy dark hair and immense soft, dove-coloured eyes. He looked far better bred, the young man decided, than he had any right to look; his hands, in particular, might have been modelled by Velasquez.

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"Supercilious——" Wick thought, and then paused, not adding the "ass" that had come into his mind, for he knew that Paul Walbridge was not an ass, although he would have liked to call him one.

Next Paul came the beautiful Hermione, with magnificent shoulders white as flour, and between her and her mother sat a man named Walter Crichell, a portrait painter, one of the best in the secondary school—a man with over-red lips and short white hands with unpleasant, pointed fingers.

"That fellow's a stinker," Wick decided, never to change his mind.

Next came the hostess, thin, worn, rather silent, in the natural isolation of an old woman sitting between two young men, each of whom had youth and beauty on his far side.

Then, of course, came Oliver himself and Grisel. Next to Grisel, Gaskell-Walker, the lower part of whose face was clever, but who would probably find himself handicapped by the qualities belonging to too high, too straight a forehead; and next him, consequently on the host's left, sat Crichell's wife. Young Wick could not look at her very comfortably without leaning forward, but he caught one or two glimpses of her face as Walbridge bent over her, and promised himself a good look in the drawing-room. She was worth it, he knew. A soft, velvety brown creature, a little

on the fat side, but rather beautiful. It was plain, too, that the old man admired her.

Mr. Wick studied his host's face for a moment as he thus completed his circle of observation, and so strong were his feelings as he looked at Mr. Walbridge that quite unintentionally he said "Ugh!" aloud.

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"What did you say?" It was Mrs. Walbridge who spoke—her first remark for quite a quarter of an hour—and in her large eyes was the anxious, guilty look of one who has allowed herself to wool-gather in public.

Wick started, blushed scarlet, and then burst out laughing at his dilemma.

"I didn't say anything," he answered. "I was only thinking. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Walbridge."

Her worn face softened into a kind smile, and he noticed that her teeth were even and very white.

"It is awful, isn't it," she said, "to—to get thinking about things when one ought to be talking? I'm afraid I'm very dull for a young man to sit next."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Walbridge," he protested, "when you know how they all lapped up that article I wrote about you."

She bridled gently. "It was a very nice article." After a minute she added anxiously, her thin fingers pressing an old blue enamel brooch that fastened the rather crumpled lace at her throat: "Tell me, Mr. Wick, do you—do you really think that—that people like my books as much as they used to?"

"You must have a very big public," he answered, wishing she had not put the question.

"Yes, I know I have, but—you see, of course I'm not young any more, and the children—they know a great many people, and bring some of them here and—I've noticed that while they are all very kind, they don't seem to have—to have really read my books."

"Don't they?" said Wick, full of sympathy. "Dear me!"

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She shook her head. "No, they really don't, and I've been wondering if—if it is that they're beginning to find me—a little old-fashioned."

What he wanted to say in return for this was: "But, bless your heart, you *are* old-fashioned, the old-fashionest old dear that ever lived!" What he did say was: "Well, I suppose lots of people think Thackeray and Dickens old-fashioned—" But when Grisel turned just then and fired some question at him, he felt a weak longing to mop his brow. It had been a narrow escape, and he would not have hurt the old lady's feelings for worlds. Something about this faded, exhausted-looking little old literary bee touched the young fellow in a quite new way.

"Gosh!" he thought; "now if it was mother, she wouldn't let people think her old-fashioned; she wouldn't *be* old-fashioned. My word, wouldn't she just sit up at night and write something to beat Wells, and Elinor Glyn, and the rest of them into a cocked hat!"

Grisel, in white—white that would have done very well, he thought, in Grosvenor Square or St. James's—was in her best mood that night, and as they talked he felt himself slipping lower and lower into the abyss—that pleasant abyss on the edge of which he had hovered so many times before without letting himself go.

It was then that the question of Bruce Collier's book rose. It was Crichell who brought up the subject, and as he described the book he enthusiastically waved his peculiarly white hands, which Mr. Wick thought, with some disgust, looked as if they were on the point of sprouting into horrid white tubers like potatoes in a dark cellar.

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"The finest book I've read for years," he declared. "Magnificent piece of work."

"Walter's quite mad about it," his wife put in, leaning forward and making motions with her hand and throat like those of a sunning pigeon. "He dined with us last night—Mr. Collier—and he's an extraordinary creature. Never touched a drug in his life, yet he knows all about it—and as for the other things—" she shrugged her shoulders and laughed. Her husband shook his fist at her.

"Now, Clara," he said, "curb that tongue of yours, my dear, or you'll shock Mrs. Walbridge. Have you read the book, Mrs. Walbridge, 'Reek'?"

The little writer shook her head. "No, I haven't very much time for reading. I've just read 'The Rosary.' What a delightful book it is!"

Grisel stretched her hand across Wick and took hold of her mother's.

"Never mind, darling, you shan't be teased, and you mustn't read 'Reek.' I shouldn't dream of allowing you to."

Walbridge, in whose handsome, swollen eyes a new little flame was showing, looked up from a whispered talk with Mrs. Crichell and smiled at his wife.

"No, darling," he agreed, "I can't have you reading such books. It would ruin your style. I'm sure Mr. Wick agrees with me, don't you, Mr. Wick? Mr. Wick is a great admirer of your books," he added in an insufferable way.

She didn't speak, but Wick saw her thin lips quiver a little, and hastened to answer:

"I'm only a business man, Mr. Walbridge, and know nothing at all about literature, but I know this much—I bet the chap who wrote 'Reek' would give his eye-tooth to have Mrs. Walbridge's sales!"

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Hermione Gaskell-Walker raised her heavy-lidded eyes and smiled at him gratefully, as she murmured, "Darling mum," and, stimulated by his success, Mr. Wick ended the conversation by saying firmly, as Mrs. Walbridge caught the eye of the pearl lady: "Filthy book, anyhow; not fit to be read by ladies——"

Some hours later a not very crestfallen young man sat in the small dining-room of 11, Spencer Crescent, Brondesbury, and ate poached eggs on toast—he was always ready for poached eggs—and announced to his dressing-gowned and beslippered mother that the lady of his choice had rejected him.

"Couldn't dream of it," he announced cheerfully, reaching for butter with his own knife in a way only permissible at such out-of-hour meals. "She pretended to be surprised, you know, and then, when that didn't work, she tried to assume that I was mad. Pretty little piece, she is, mother. Dimples in her lovely face she's got, and eyes like two little black suns, shining away——"

His mother coughed drily. "You don't seem remarkably cast down," she observed, rubbing her nose with her thumb—a broad and capable thumb, "and here was I wasting my tissue in an agony of fear about my broken-hearted boy."

He cocked his head as little snub-nosed dogs do, indeed, he all but cocked one ear, and his eyes twinkled.

"You and your tissue, indeed! You don't think I thought she was going to jump down my throat, do you? I'd hate a girl who took me first time. I like being refused—looks well. I hope she'll refuse me three or four times more." [Pg 39]

"If she could see you eat poached eggs in your shirt-sleeves, with all the varnish off your hair, she'd go on refusing you to the crack o' doom," retorted the old lady.

Then they went to bed, and in five minutes the rejected one was snoring comfortably.

CHAPTER IV

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"Roseleaves and Lavender," Violet Walbridge's last novel, was selling pretty well, but a few days after the dinner party the author left her house about half-past eleven, mounted a No. 3 bus, settled herself in the prow and travelled down to the Strand in answer to a rather pressing invitation from her publishers.

It was a fine October morning, with a little tang in the air, so windless that some early falling leaves left their boughs with an air of doubt and travelled very slowly, almost hesitatingly, towards the earth. All the smoke went straight up into the sky, and several caged birds on the route were singing loudly outside their windows. The bus was full of people, more or less all of them of the type who made Mrs. Walbridge's public, and there were, without doubt, several girls sitting almost within reach of her who would have felt it in the nature of an adventure to meet the author of "Queenie's Promise" and "One Maid's Word." It is interesting to think that there are fewer people who would genuinely thrill at the sight of George Meredith, if he were still alive, than would thrill at having met such a writer as Violet Walbridge. But no one knew who the little, dowdily dressed woman was, and her journey to Charing Cross was uneventful. God, who gives all mercies, gave the gift of vanity, and Mrs. Walbridge, although very humble-minded, was not without her innocent share in the consoling fault. More than once she had given herself the pleasure of telling some casually met stranger who she was. Once her yearly holiday at Bexhill had been given a glow of glory by the fact that she had by chance found the chambermaid at the little hotel, engrossed to the point of imbecility in "Starlight and Moonlight." Delicately, shyly, she had made known to the girl the fact of her identity, and the reverence, almost awe, of the poor ignorant servant in meeting the author of that splendid book had made her very happy for many hours. [Pg 41]

Another time a working man in a train had been quarrelling with his wife for the possession of a torn copy of "Aaron's Rod" (a book which Mrs. Walbridge privately considered a little strong), and as she got out of the train and the man handed her down her holdall, she had thrown the exciting information of her identity into his face and run for her life, feeling herself akin to Dickens, Miss Ethel M. Dell, Robert Louis Stevenson, and all the other great ones of the earth. But these splendid events had never been frequent, and of late years they had almost ceased to occur. And as the little lady got off the bus at Charing Cross and blundered apologetically into a tall, rosy-faced girl, who clutched *The Red Magazine* to her breast, she wondered wistfully if the girl would have been delighted if she had told her.

Messrs. Lubbock & Payne, publishers, had their offices in the Strand, and Mrs. Walbridge's appointment was for half-past eleven. She felt a little nervous and depressed as she went up in the lift, for Mr. Lubbock was a very imposing man, whose fine bay-windowed waistcoat always overawed her a little. However, it was probably the glory of the golden autumn day that had got [Pg 42]

on her nerves. She was always sad on such days, so she tried to look bold and successful as she passed Wheeler, the old clerk, Mr. Lubbock's right-hand man, whom she had known for a quarter of a century.

Wheeler, however, did not respond to her remarks about the weather as he had once done, and when she had waited nearly half an hour her depression had grown still greater, and she was finally ushered into the inner office with hands and feet icy with fear.

Harrison Lubbock, a large, abnormally clean-looking old gentleman, with a ruff of silky white hair round his polished scalp, greeted her kindly, but without enthusiasm.

"I've asked you to call, Mrs. Walbridge," he began at once with a pronounced glance at the clock, "on a little matter of business. Mr. Payne and I have been talking things over of late—business matters you understand—and we have come to the conclusion that there are one or two of our authors to whom a few words of advice might be of use." He paused, and she looked at him anxiously.

"I see," she said, her face growing a little paler. "I—I'm one of those authors?"

He bowed, and the soft folds of his beautifully shaved double chin dropped a little lower over his high collar.

"Yes, yes, quite so. You're a very old, shall I say, client?—of ours——"

She would have liked to reply that at that moment the word patient might be more applicable to her, but she dared not, and after a moment he went on:

"I think we may say that we are very old friends."

This was awful. She was no business woman, and she had little knowledge of the world, but even she knew that it meant danger, in an interview avowedly a business interview, when friendship was invoked. She stammered something, and he went on:

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"Your books have sold—sell—very well, on the whole. We have done our best for them, and, as you know, the cost of publishing and advertising—particularly advertising—has nearly doubled since the war."

Again he paused, and this time she bowed, being afraid to say that she knew conditions were such that her percentage on sales had gone down, while the sale price of her books had gone up to seven and six. She noticed Mr. Lubbock's sleeve-links; they were new ones and very neat, of gold and platinum. How she wished she could buy a pair like that for Paul! In the old days her envy would have been for Ferdie. Mr. Lubbock cleared his throat, fitted his fat finger-tips neatly together, and began to be sprightly.

"Amazing how the output of books of fiction has increased of late years, isn't it? Dear me, I can remember when 2250 would have been considered a big output, and now there are so many good writers, so many excellent writers, Mrs. Walbridge, that we are forced by competition and market conditions to bring out nearly three times that number. I wonder if you have kept up with the new writers," he went on after a pause, "Mrs. Levett, Joan Kelly, Austen Goodheart, and so on—and Wanda Potter. Wanda Potter's last book sold over a hundred thousand."

"I haven't read any of them, I'm afraid. I've so little time——" She tried to smile and felt as if her lips were freezing.

"Just so, just so; exactly what I was saying to Payne. 'Mrs. Walbridge is a very busy woman,' I said to Payne. 'She hasn't time—she can't be *expected* to have time—to read all these things, so it's quite natural that—that——'" He broke off, and taking up a little bronze figure of a poodle, that served as a paper weight, he examined it carefully for a moment. "I'm sure you understand what I mean, Mrs. Walbridge," he said at last.

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She was looking at the corner of his polished mahogany writing table; she was looking at two carefully jointed bits of wood, finely grained and smoothly welded together, but what she saw was "Happy House"; Ferdie and his new cedar cigar chest yawning to be filled; of an unpaid tailor's bill; of his annual cough (Ferdie coughed himself regularly to Torquay every autumn); she saw Paul and his new edition de luxe of Swinburne, and the Rowlandson "Horse Fair" he had taken her to see in King Street, St. James's—the "Horse Fair" that was to cost "only eighteen guineas." She saw the little sea-green frock that hung in the great Frenchman's window in Hanover Square, the little frock that would look so beautiful on Grisel. She saw a vision of a hecatomb of roasts of beef and saddles of mutton, and oysters, and burgundy, that she was longing to offer up to her family gods. She saw the natural skunk coat she had been planning to give to poor dear Caroline for Christmas. She saw the new bathroom, on which the men were already working, that was to be Grisel's. Then these things passed away, and the corner of the table again appeared, and Mr. Lubbock was saying, in that kind, dreadful voice of his: "I feel quite sure that you understand our position, Mrs. Walbridge, and, after all, the reduction is not of very great consequence."

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Before she could speak the telephone bell rang. He took up the receiver and bent forward, politeness and courtesy expressed in every line of his big figure as clearly as if the telephone had been a person he was speaking to.

"Oh—oh, yes, is that you, Payne?" she heard him say. "Yes, what an odd coincidence, she's here with me now!" and Mrs. Walbridge knew that it was no coincidence; that they had planned it all out between them, and for a moment she had a wild idea of flight. She would run and run down the narrow, dusty stairs and out into the street, and not hear any of it said. It seemed that she

could bear the reduction of her money, but that she could not bear it discussed by these two men who held not only her, but "Happy House" and everybody in "Happy House" in the hollow of their hands. But she dared not move, and presently Mr. Payne came in.

Mr. Payne was a little, yellowish-pink man, who looked like a weazel. He had lashless and browless blue eyes, and his nose was sharp and his teeth looked very sharp. He was brisk and brusque in his manner, and he dashed at the subject of the smaller price for the next book with an abruptness that was only one degree more bearable than Mr. Lubbock's smoothness.

"Yes, yes," he declared, shaking hands rather violently. "I knew you understood, Mrs. Walbridge, didn't I, Lubbock? 'Mrs. Walbridge is a business woman,' I said, 'and of course she'll understand that the war has changed things very considerably, to say nothing of the—of the—ah—inevitable march of time.'"

"I was telling Mrs. Walbridge," Lubbock joined in, "that I thought it would be a good plan for her to read some of the new books. Haven't we got Wanda Potter's 'Rice Paper'? Excellent story, excellent—and sells well." He called up someone on the telephone, and smiling into it, working his rough eyebrows genially, he gave orders for someone named Briggs to get Miss Potter's last book for Mrs. Walbridge. "Wait a minute, George. What other ones would you suggest? Oh, yes, and Mr. Goodheart's 'New Odyssey.' Useful book that," to Mrs. Walbridge. "You take them, with our compliments, and just—just go through them—"

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Mrs. Walbridge had risen and stood before the table, her hands clutching very hard at her shabby leather bag.

Mr. Payne was about to speak, when something in her face stopped him. They had known her for years. They had treated her very well, and they had made a great deal of money out of her. But both of them felt at that moment that until then they had never quite known her. Her face was very white, and her immense hollow eyes were full of almost unbearable misery. But it was the bravery of her that struck them both.

"Do I understand," she said quietly, "that you mean that I am old-fashioned—too old-fashioned?" They did not answer, and she went on, not realising that they both felt that she had turned the tables on them. "You mean that my books don't sell so well as they did because they are not up to date, because I'm—old."

"Good gracious, Mrs. Walbridge," broke in Mr. Payne, with the horrid facetiousness of well-meaning vulgarity, "what an idea! We simply mean that because you are so busy you have not had time to—how shall I say it?—to keep exactly up to date. But a lady with your gifts and your great experience is not going to pretend that she finds any difficulty in changing this—"

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She bowed. "Thank you, Mr. Payne. I think I understand. My new book would have been ready in a few days, but if you can give me an extra fortnight, I'll go through it again and try to—modernise it a little."

Then she said good morning, and went quietly out.

Mr. Lubbock let himself heavily down into his swivel chair.

"Dear me," he said, being a man of unblemished vocabulary, "that was very unpleasant, Payne."

Mr. Payne lit a cigarette. "It was beastly," he retorted, blinking rapidly through the smoke. "Upon my word, it's quite upset me. Poor old thing! She'll never be able to do it, Lubbock. Never in this world. By God, it's quite upset me! I'll have a pint of champagne for my lunch."

Violet Walbridge had a little shopping to do. She had to go to Sketchley's to get some blouses that had been cleaned for Griselda; she went to Selfridges for a paper box of opened oysters for Paul, who was at home with a cold; and she had two bills to pay in Oxford Street. When these things were done, and she had bought a bunch of chrysanthemums from a flower-girl, she took her place near the kerb and waited for her bus. And then it was that the malicious gods struck her their final blow for that day. Two young women stood near her, laden with parcels, cheerfully talkative. One of them had been to a dance the night before; the other one's baby had a new tooth, a very remarkable tooth, it seemed, and both of them were in a state of pleasant turmoil and fret about frocks that they were having made. Mrs. Walbridge listened to them innocently, standing first on one foot and then on the other to rest herself, her various parcels hugged close under her arms, the oysters borne like a sacred offering in both hands.

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"Dear me," one of the young women said suddenly, "it's after one o'clock!"

Mrs. Walbridge started, for one o'clock was her lunch hour, and her husband was very particular about punctuality in others.

"I meant to pop in to the *Times* Book Club and get something to read," declared the mother of the baby with the new tooth, "but it's too late. Have you read that thing 'Reek'? I've forgotten who it's by—somebody new."

"No. I've been down for it for days and days, but I can't get it. I've read a splendid new book, though—Wanda Potter's 'Rice Paper'—awfully clever, and Joan Kelly's 'Ploughshares.'"

"I had an ulcerated tooth the other day," answered her friend, "and couldn't go out, and sent Winnie to Boots' with a list of books, and they were all out, so that nice red-haired girl—you know—picked out some herself and sent me, and guess what one of them was. Violet Walbridge's last

one—"Rosemary and Lavender"—or something——"

The other one laughed. "Oh, I know. 'Sage and Onions,' George calls it. *Awful* trash—can't stand her nowadays."

A bus arrived at that moment, and the two young women going on top, Mrs. Walbridge crept inside, and sat crushed between two large uncomfortable women, her face bent over the oysters.

"Sage and Onions," she kept repeating under her breath, "Sage and Onions'——"

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Ferdie was very much annoyed because she was late for lunch, and called her very selfish to be out parading the streets doing idiotic errands when she ought to be at home.

CHAPTER V

[Pg 50]

"Lord Effingham" was the book on which Mrs. Walbridge was at work, and she sat the greater part of the next three nights reading the books that Mr. Lubbock had given her, with a view to freshening up her nearly finished novel. She could not read during the day, because she had too much to do.

The plumbers had played havoc with the house in getting the new bathroom in, and the cook had to leave even more unexpectedly than cooks generally leave because her only sister was marrying and she had to go home and look after her mother. This domestic complication is familiar to many, but it didn't make it any easier for Mrs. Walbridge. Nor did things improve when Maud Twiss and her husband went for a second honeymoon to Ireland, leaving little Hilary at "Happy House."

Mrs. Walbridge loved her grandson; but he was a querulous, spoilt child, and at the best of times his presence was upsetting. Now, with no cook, with plumbers and the dreadful necessity of modernising "Lord Effingham," the little boy nearly drove her mad.

One morning, about four weeks after her interview with Mr. Lubbock, she was sitting in her little attic at the back of the house, surrounded by closely written sheets of foolscap into which she had red-inked her desperate efforts at enlivening—Lady Tryx, the heroine, had started on a new career of endless cigarettes and cocktails, and a hitherto blameless housemaid, who at first had been dismissed by an unkind countess on a charge of theft, was now burdened with an illegitimate baby; but even this failed to brighten up the dull level of decency that was so discouraging to the publishers. Violet Walbridge was a failure at illegitimacy and lawless passion, and, what was worse, she knew it.

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It was cold up in the attic, for there was no fireplace, and something had gone wrong with her oil-stove. Paul had promised to see to it before going to the City that morning, but he had forgotten, so his mother had to put an old flannel dressing-gown on over her ordinary clothes and wrap her aching feet in a shawl. Her hands were covered with red ink, for her cheap stylographic pen leaked, and her pretty black hair, wavy and attractively threaded with white, was tumbled and loose.

She was utterly discouraged and unhappy about the book. "Lord Effingham," with ridiculous perseverance, insisted on pursuing his so blightingly blameless career. Her effort had put the book, such as it was, completely out of shape, and she could have cried with despair as she sat there staring through the curtainless window at the sky. Her burden was so very great, and it made it worse, although she had always prided herself on keeping her secret, that no one knew how utterly dependent the whole household of "Happy House" was on her books.

Her husband had an office and regarded himself as a business man; Paul worked in a bank, and poor Guy had been called up and was in France. (He had been with some stockbrokers in the City.) But none of them had ever contributed anything serious to the upkeep of the house.

Paul's salary was small, and his mother considered that the poor boy really needed all that he made, because he was one of those people who are very dependent on beautiful surroundings. He was a poet, too, and had written some charming verse, most of which was still unpublished, but every line of which was carefully copied in a vellum covered book someone had sent to his mother one Christmas from Florence.

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Somehow that morning her mind was full of the now long absent Guy. Guy was the troublesome one. They were all tabulated in her mind—Hermione being the beauty, and Maud, "my eldest girl," while Paul was artistic.

There had been scrapes in Guy's early days (he was only twenty-one now). Certainly his tendencies had been inherited from his father—full grown cap-à-pie tendencies they were, sprung whole, it seemed, from Ferdie's brain, as Pallas Athene sprang from her father, Zeus's. The boy was fond of billiards and devoted to horses, and there had been a time—a very tragic time—when he had shown signs of being too fond of whisky and soda. But that was past. Twice he had been home on leave from the front, and he had undoubtedly improved in many ways.

A year ago there had been an Entanglement—(Mrs. Walbridge thought of it with a capital in her mind)—with a young Frenchwoman in Soho, but that too seemed to have died down and now that the war was certainly going to end before long—this dreadful war to which we in England had so dreadfully become accustomed—he would be coming back. She sighed, for Guy's return would

mean an even severer strain on her resources. He was rather a dandy and fond of clothes, but he had grown and expanded of late, and would need new things. [Pg 53]

She looked down with something very much like hatred at the impeccable "Lord Effingham," whose persistent virtue and the wholesome tendencies of whose female friends were such drawbacks to her living children.

She struggled on and wrote a few pages, realising that the interpolations she had made were as clumsy and damaging to her story as were the red ink words that expressed them to the fair sheets of her manuscript.

Presently she heard footsteps, and a familiar little cough, coming up the stairs. It was Ferdinand coming, she knew, for a talk with her about his visit to Torquay.

"Dear me, Violet, why can't you write downstairs like a Christian," he began fretfully, turning up his coat collar and plunging his hands into his trouser pockets. "All this affectation of needing quiet and solitude for such work as yours is simply ridiculous."

She glanced up at him without moving. "I'm sorry, Ferdie," she said gently, "but indeed it isn't affectation. I really can't work when people are going in and out, and poor little Hilary is so noisy."

"Poor little Hilary! Damn nonsense! I slept very badly last night, and had just got nicely off this morning about half-past nine, when he came into my room and waked me—wanted my boot-jack for a boat, little beast!"

"Oh, I *am* sorry—I told him he mustn't disturb you. I'd just gone down to show Jessie how to make the mince——"

"Jessie's cooking is abominable. I don't know why you haven't got someone by this time."

When Ferdie's indignation had died away, he began again.

"What I want to know is about my rooms at Torquay. Has Mrs. Bishop written?"

"Yes. Her letter came this morning. I've got it somewhere here"—she rummaged about, but failed to find the letter. "I must have left it downstairs. She says she can't let you have the front room, because some general has got it and is going to stay all winter."

"Damnation! Just the kind of thing that always happens to me."

The clear morning light, falling undiluted from the sky, seemed to expose his mean soul almost cruelly, and his wife turned her eyes hastily away. She had known him now, as he really was, for many years and yet somehow the memory of what he had once seemed to be, what he had been to her, in her loving imagination, came back to her with painful force, and smote her to the heart.

"She says there is a very nice room at the back——"

He rose impatiently, waving his beautiful hands, on which the veins were beginning to stand out ominously.

"Oh, of course, you *would* think it delightful for me to have a room at the back. Nobody but *you* ever *does* appreciate beauty, views or anything of that kind. When am I to go?"

"The room will be ready on Wednesday. But, listen, Ferdie, if you think you can't bear it, why don't you write to Mrs. Bishop yourself and ask her to look out something for you? You see, she knows you, so she'd take more pains than if I wrote——"

A smile that she knew and hated crept round his mouth. "Yes, that's possible, she might," he answered. "Nice little woman, Mrs. Bishop, and although she is only a boarding-house keeper, she knows a gentleman when she sees him." [Pg 55]

At the door he paused. "Well, I'll go and write to her. I suppose you've got some money, my dear? I paid my last cent to the income-tax man the other day. I'm sure you needn't have declared all that money to them, Violet——"

"I only told them the truth, Ferdie."

It was an old quarrel, this about the declaration to the income-tax people, and one in which he was always beaten, so, with a shrug, he went downstairs.

After a moment he called, his musical voice hoarse with the effort: "Violet—I say, Violet, have my new shirts come?"

"I—I didn't know you had ordered any, dear——"

"Oh, didn't you? No, I may have forgotten to tell you. Well, I did. Thought I might as well get two dozen while I was about it. Things are going up so."

There was a little pause and then she said, "I hope you got them at that nice place in Oxford Street?"

He had begun to whistle, but now he stopped and snarled out, "No, I didn't then. I suppose it's *my* business where I order my own shirts? I got them at my usual shirt-makers in Jermyn Street."

Mrs. Walbridge went quietly back into her little study and sat down.

That afternoon she went by Underground to Oxford Street and from there walked in a cold grey rain to Queen Anne Street, where her daughter, Mrs. Twiss, lived. Doctor Twiss lived in one-half of a roomy old house in Queen Anne Street. His waiting-room and his consulting-room were at the left of the door, those on the right belonging to a fashionable dentist—but the rest of his rooms were two flights upstairs, the dentist, who was a rich man, occupying the whole of the first floor.

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Mrs. Walbridge paused before she rang at the upstairs door, for she was very tired, and her usually placid thoughts seemed broken and confused. Maud was her eldest daughter and in some ways the most companionable, but she was a selfish woman and devotedly fond of her husband and little boy, so that she had scant room for anyone else in her life.

"If only Maud would be sympathetic," Mrs. Walbridge thought, as she finally rang.

"Mrs. Twiss is in the bedroom," the maid told her, "she ain't very well to-day. I think the sea voyage upset 'er."

Mrs. Walbridge nodded to her and went down the narrow rose-walled passage and knocked.

Mrs. Twiss was lying down on a divan at the foot of her bed, reading.

"Oh, Mum," she cried, without getting up, "how sweet of you to come so soon! How are you, all right? We've had the most glorious time—Moreton's put on four pounds and never looked better in his life."

Mrs. Walbridge sat down and looked round at the pleasant, familiar room. There were plenty of flowers about and piles of new books, and all the illustrated weeklies, and on a little Moorish table close to the divan stood a gilt basket full of chocolates.

"You seem to be having a comfortable afternoon, my dear."

Maud laughed.

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"I am. I expect we shall have a pretty bad time when we begin to count up—travelling is fearfully expensive now—Moreton had to send home for an extra fifty pounds. So we're taking it easy to-day. He's gone to the hospital, and we're dining at the Carlton and going to see 'Chu Chin Chow' to-night."

There was a little pause. Mrs. Walbridge was very unaccustomed to telling bad news; being told it was more in her line. But she was in such distress that she had thought she must tell Maud about Lubbock and Payne. It would have done her good just to talk it over. But now, when she tried, she found she could not.

"Caroline had taken Hilary to the Zoo when your telephone message came," she began, "or I would have brought him along. He's been very good, Maud, and his appetite is splendid. I got him a bottle of cod liver oil and malt, because I thought his little ribs stuck out a bit when I bathed him—"

"Oh, the pet! I'm longing to see him! We've brought him all sorts of presents. Oh, Mum, I was going to get you a sweet little bracelet of old Irish paste—you know—a thing in four little chains. But at the last minute Moreton found we had spent so much that I had to give him my last fiver. So you'll take the will for the deed, won't you?"

"Of course, darling, how sweet of you to think of it. I'm glad Moreton is so much better," Mrs. Walbridge began after a moment, "I hope he'll have lots of patients this winter."

Maud's fair face clouded. She was a big, handsome woman, though less shapely in her features than her sisters, and already showed signs of being very fat in a few years' time, although she was only twenty-eight.

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"I hope so, too," she grumbled. "Things are really awfully serious. I believe all the tradespeople put their prices up when they hear this address."

"I suppose it wouldn't—I suppose it wouldn't do for you to go and live in a cheaper house?" Mrs. Walbridge faltered.

Maud sat straight up in her horror and dropped a half-bitten chocolate on the floor.

"My goodness, mother, what a perfectly poisonous idea! Why, it would ruin Moreton after having begun here. *Of course* we can't."

She came and sat down on a stool near her mother and leaned her head on her mother's knees.

"I'm longing to see Hilary," she repeated, playing with a bit of her silk dressing-gown nervously. "And I have something to tell him, Mum—he'll—he'll be having a little sister in the spring."

Poor Mrs. Walbridge sat perfectly still for a moment, her hand on her daughter's silky brown hair. Another baby, another duty, another worry, and she would be the only one who would really suffer, although Maud and her gay, well-meaning young husband would talk a great deal about their responsibilities.

"Mum," Maud said coaxingly. "Darling, you've got a new book coming out, haven't you? Don't go and buy Paul any more of those nasty Japanese things; those monkeys make me sick anyhow. Be a lamb, and let me have a hundred pounds to see me through, will you?"

There was nothing particularly imploring in her voice, for she was quite used to asking favours of her mother, and repeated favours always turn into rights sooner or later. When her mother didn't answer, she screwed round on her stool and looked up.

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"Why, Mum," she cried, "what's the matter? Why do you look like that?"

Mrs. Walbridge kissed her. "Nothing, dear, I'm tired. I've been working very hard."

She rose and her big daughter scrambled to her feet, laughing merrily.

"Oh, you old pet! Was it working hard at it's psychological masterpiece? Anybody'd think you were what's-his-name, who wrote 'Elektra!'" She laughed again, pleasant, full-throated, musical laughter, that yet cut her hearer to her sore heart.

"Don't—don't laugh, dear," she said gently. "I know my bodes are awful rubbish, but——"

Mrs. Twiss stared and took another chocolate.

"Oh, darling," she murmured. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. We all *love* your books. Well, you'll let me have the hundred, won't you, pet? We're going to name her Violet."

The little sad face under the old-fashioned, pheasant-winged hat softened a little. "I'll do my best, dear," she said. "Now I must go. Give my love to Moreton."

CHAPTER VI

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It was about a week after Mrs. Walbridge's visit to Mrs. Twiss that Griselda went to the play with old Mrs. Wick and her son. Greatly to the girl's astonishment, Mr. Wick turned up two or three days after her decided rejection of him, and his manner had shown nothing of the traditional depression of the refused young man. Indeed, he seemed particularly gay, and had brought her some sweets—sticky balls rolled in wax paper, that he told her were the best sweets on earth.

"My mother made 'em," he said. "She's great at making things. These ones are a sort of nougat. You try one—you'll see——"

The uncouth looking sweetmeats were indeed delicious, and the two young people sat at the top of the stairs leading to the garden (for it was one of those odd, lost summer days that wander along through our island winters like lonely strayed children), and munched and talked, and talked and munched, in as friendly a way, Griselda thought, as if he had never mentioned marriage to her.

"I don't like your frock," he said suddenly, speaking with difficulty, for his mother's sweets were sticky. "You're too dark for blue. Makes you look yellow."

"Well, upon my word!" The girl was full of innocent airs and graces; little affectations blossomed all over her, and perhaps they were only the blossom of future graces. But somehow, this odd reporter person, as she called him to her mother, clutched at these premature flowerets like a black frost, and she found herself being as natural as a little boy with him.

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"You are polite," she remarked.

He smiled from ear to ear.

"No, I'm not. I'm very rude, but it's true. You ought to wear green and brown, or yellow or white. Imagine a buttercup dressed in blue serge!"

Everyone likes to talk about himself or herself, so for a moment Grisel enjoyed herself thoroughly, as they gravely discussed the different kinds of flowers that she might be said to resemble. Then he invited her to go to the play, and when she refused demurely, he chuckled with delight.

"Oh, now you think I'm the ignorant young man," he retorted. "You think I don't know that you couldn't go with me alone. (Of course, so far as that's concerned you *could*—all the smart girls, dukes' and earls' daughters, do)—but I have not invited you to. My mother's coming with us."

"Your mother?"

"Yes. Naturally she's anxious to meet you."

She looked at him innocently, her eyes like black-heart cherries with the sun on them.

"Why should your mother wish to meet me?"

"Oh," he answered. "Don't you realise that I'm an only son?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

He looked at her gravely, his flexible lips steady as iron. "Most mothers want to know the girl their son's going to marry, don't you think?"

Before she could help it, she laughed. "But her sons aren't going to marry me."

"No, but her son is. I am. Oh, yes," he went on before she could speak. "We shan't be married this winter, of course, but in the spring we shall. You may choose a nice month. It'll be a proud day for you, my dear, and jolly lucky you'll be to get me!"

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She rose and refused another sweet. "No thanks, we must go in now. I've got a lot to do. My father's not very well, and I may have to go down to Torquay to look after him if he doesn't get better."

"Miss Walbridge," he spoke in a voice that to her was quite new, and when she turned, looking at

him over her shoulder, something in the dignity of his face forced her to turn completely round and wait.

"Don't think me a perfect fool," he said. "I can't help teasing you. You—you're so little and so young. What I'd like to do would be to lift you up on my shoulder and run round and round the garden with you, and scare the life out of you, but I daren't do that, so I have to tease you. Besides, you know," he added very gravely, "it is true that I love you, and I mean you to marry me."

Mrs. Walbridge, who was in the dining-room packing some bottles of home-made beef-tea to send to Torquay, could not help overhearing the rest of this conversation. She never forgot it, or the young man's face as he finished speaking to Griselda, who suddenly seemed more responsible, more grown-up than her mother had ever seen her.

"Please don't say anything more about that, Mr. Wick," she said gently. "I like you very much—we all do, even my mother, who's so old-fashioned—but I can't possibly marry you."

The four young eyes stared into each other for what seemed a long time, and then he drew back courteously to let her pass. [Pg 63]

"I'll not say anything more about it for three months," he declared. "I promise you that."

Thus the arrangement about going to the play had been made, and when the evening came Mr. Wick drove up in a taxi and carried his prize off to the box at the theatre, where he had already installed his mother.

When Grisel came home she went up to her mother's room, slipping out of her frock and putting on her mother's shabby old dressing-gown, that she declared to be a perfect disgrace, and sat on the foot of the bed describing the adventures of the evening.

"She's a perfect old dear, Mum," the girl declared. "Very large, not exactly fat, you know, but big. Very little hair, brushed quite flat, and done up in a tiny bun at the back, and the most beautiful manners, like some old-fashioned duchess. Like an old duchess in one of your books, Mum—that kind—not like a *live* one—"

"I see," murmured Mrs. Walbridge. "How did you like the play?"

"Oh, it was very pretty. Mary Grey looked perfectly beautiful. She's such a dear, but I wish she had sung. *They* liked it awfully, but somehow I never understand Shakespeare's plays—never quite know what they are driving at, I mean. The place was packed, and I saw lots of people I know. The Murchisons were there, and Dickie Scotts, and that awful Pellaby woman, *covered* with pearls and jewels. Johnny Holden came up just as we were leaving, and told me that he had seen Guy. He's only just back. He said Guy's awfully fit, and has done some very good caricatures. He says there's going to be an armistice as sure as eggs is eggs. The Hun is a dead man according to him. And, oh, Mother, you'll never guess—Oliver Wick went out on the 28th of August, 1914, and was all through the Big Push and the retreat from Mons. Fancy his never telling us! Johnny mentioned it. He was wounded there—during the retreat. One of his fingers is quite stiff. I never noticed it, did you?"

Mrs. Walbridge shook her head. "No, I never did. So he's been out?"

"Yes, and he only had one leave all the time. He was invalided out last year—there's a bullet somewhere inside him still. His mother says she thinks it must be in his brain. She *does* adore him, Mum."

Mrs. Walbridge was silent, for she envied this other woman, not exactly her son, but her love for her son. Her own boys were very dear to her, but one quality was lacking in her love for them, and that was adoration. For although she was only a fourth-rate novelist, she had the sad gift of unswerving clear-sightedness, and no merciful delusion blinded her when she looked at her own children.

Grisel had stopped brushing her pretty hair, which lay like two wings over her young breast, framing her little quick face, and bringing out its vivid whiteness. She was sitting with the silver brush on her knees, and in her eyes brooded an unusually deep thought.

"You like him, my dear, don't you?"

The girl started. "Who? Oh, Oliver? No—I mean——" She rose and put the brush on the dressing-table. [Pg 65]

"How nice that you call him Oliver," commented her mother, in a matter-of-fact voice. "I like him, too. I think he's a delightful young fellow. So boyish, isn't he?"

Grisel came to the bed, her momentary embarrassment scattered to the winds by the sober sense of her mother's words.

"Yes, he's a dear," she said simply, "but his mother's a perfect pet, and she's coming to see us. You'll love her, Mum." At the door she turned. "Good-night, Mum darling. Don't worry about your old book. It's sure to come out all right. What did you say the name of it was?"

"Lord Effingham."

The girl stepped back in surprise at her mother's tone. "Why, good gracious, Mum, you spoke as if he were a real man and you hated him! I hope he isn't one of the modern horrors, like that dreadful man in 'Reek.'" She ran back to the bed and gave her mother a little stroke and shake. "I couldn't dream of allowing you to write horrid modern books about beastly real people," she said protectingly. Then she went to bed.

The next morning a telegram arrived from Torquay, saying that Mr. Walbridge was no better, and asking his wife to come down and look after him. She had expected just such a wire (for he was one of those people who always become ill when they are bored or lonely) and she had already arranged to send Grisel down.

The girl liked Torquay and had two or three friends there, and it would be a pleasant change for her. Besides, her mother thought, if things were going to be really bad, it would be better to have the children out of the way. [Pg 66]

So Grisel, much pleased, and not at all worried about her father, went off, and for several days after her departure Mrs. Walbridge worked uninterruptedly in the deserted drawing-room. The weather had changed, and it was intensely stormy and wet, so there was something pleasant in the shut-in feeling of the firelit room.

Paul, now the only one at home, was, of course, at the bank all day, and most evenings he either dined out or went out immediately after dinner. He was a silent man, very preoccupied with his own thoughts and possessed of the negative gift of taking no interest whatever in other people's affairs. He scorned curiosity with all his heart, and never suspected that curiosity is very often only an expression of human interest.

Of late, too, his mother had noticed he had been even more silent and absent-minded than ever, and she wondered if he was having a love affair. She dared not ask him, however, and so the long days and longer evenings passed in almost unending hard work for the little writing woman, and finally she arrived at a certain amount of success with the troublesome "Lord Effingham."

Her book was entirely changed. Such atmosphere as it had ever had she had destroyed, and, very proud of the illegitimate baby she had introduced into its innocent pages, she one night packed up the manuscript and ran out to a greengrocer in the neighbourhood, where lived an old man who sometimes did errands for her.

Old Mr. King was at home, and would be delighted to go round the next morning at half-past nine to take the very valuable parcel safely down to Messrs. Lubbock & Payne. [Pg 67]

She thanked the greengrocer's wife, who was the old man's daughter, and, putting up her umbrella, went out again into the wet.

It was a shiny black night, full of storm noises and unceasing rain, and when she reached "Happy House" Mrs. Walbridge stood for a moment under her umbrella, leaning against the little green gate, where the name was now almost illegible, and looked about her, breathing more freely in the thought that the book was done; for good or evil; that she had done her best by it, and that if it failed, it must just fail.

She felt more cheerful now that "Lord Effingham" was off her hands. Things *must* improve, she thought.

The political news was much better; the armistice might be signed any day, and perhaps when Guy came back he would, after all, be helpful to her.

Ferdie was better. She had had a letter that morning, and little Grisel was having a happy time with her friends. There was to be a dance, and she had written for her new white satin frock to be sent down.

"I must go to Swan & Edgars and get her a new pair of satin slippers," she thought, as she went up the steps, and opened the door with her latchkey. "Fancy the little minx dancing her last pair through the other night!"

She went down into the kitchen and made herself a cup of extra strong cocoa to drink in bed. Cocoa in bed with a book is a very cosy thing.

The boys had always thought her a frump, and Guy in particular hated her old black velvet evening gown, and, now that he had been in Paris and seen all the smart clothes, he would despise the black velvet gown more than ever. If only she could have some kind of a new evening frock. Grey would do. Iron grey would wear almost as well as black. She set down her cup of cocoa with a little sigh. Ridiculous to think about that kind of thing when she only had one hundred and eighty pounds in the bank. [Pg 68]

Then she read a few pages of "Thomas à Kempis," turned out her light, and lay still in the dark waiting for sleep.

Paul's room was a large one at the back on the second floor. It looked into the elm tree, and was very pleasant and quiet.

A few days after Mrs. Walbridge had sent the manuscript of "Lord Effingham" to her publishers, she was in Paul's room, helping him hang a new picture that he had picked up at a sale. His mother thought it a very ugly picture; in fact, she thought it not nice, but she said nothing, for her opinion was of no value to him, and she knew it.

It was a sunshiny day, and the naked boughs of the old tree stirred and made odd little noises as the east wind attacked it in gusts. The shadows of the branches danced across the dull green walls and made the gleams of light on the picture glasses die and come to life again in a way that gave the large room something the air of a glade in a wood.

Paul, in his shirt-sleeves, stood on a pair of steps hammering a nail into the exact spot in the wall that he had decided on after long measurement and reflection.

"I do hope you're wearing your thick Jaegers, darling," his mother said, as she took the hammer from him and held up the picture.

"Not yet," he said. "I'm going to put them on to-morrow." He hung up the picture and backed gravely off the ladder, looking up at it, a smile of pride and satisfaction softening his over-delicate, rather supercilious face. "A little gem, Mother, though you probably don't think so," he announced good-naturedly. "Bruce Collier wanted it. He's got a fine collection."

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"Bruce Collier," Mrs. Walbridge pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I've heard his name. Who is he, Paul?"

"The chap who wrote 'Reek.' Crichell was talking about him here one night in the summer. There's the book an the table. He gave it to me."

She picked the book up and opened it. "What beautiful paper," she said slowly, "and I love the print, Paul."

He nodded. "Oh, yes. Nares publishes him. Now I'm going to put the Kakemono here, Mother." He indicated a blank space on the wall near his writing-table. "Will you get it? You won't be sorry to have it out of the girls' room, will you?"

She went obediently towards the door, and at it she turned.

"You'll be surprised, dear, but, do you know, I have got quite used to those monkeys, and really like them now!"

He looked up from filling his pipe and smiled at her, his narrow face—a face of a type so often seen nowadays in very young men—too small-featured, too clean-cut, too narrow in the brow, too lacking in the big old British qualities, both good and bad, and yet full of uncreative cleverness—lighted by whimsical, not unkindly, astonishment.

"Violet Walbridge confesses to a passion for Honobosa Iccho," he declaimed, as if quoting a possible headline. "No, no, Mother darling, that won't do. You must stick to Marcus Stone. Trot along and get it, there's a dear."

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She trotted along and got it, and brought it back, carefully rolled on its stick.

"Grisel will be sorry to find it gone," she said, as he hung it on the nail and let it slowly slide down the wall. "She loves it."

"She loves it because Wick knew about the artist. Imitative little monkey, Grisel."

His mother stared at him. It was on her lips to say, "So are you—so are you an imitative monkey," for she realised that these new artistic tastes of his were derived from some model and not from any instinctive search for a peculiar kind of beauty. Instead she only said, referring to an old pet name of her own for her children, "Yes, one of God's apelets, and so are you, Paul."

He had backed to the far side of the room and stood surveying the effect of the Kakemono with much satisfaction.

"Yes, dear," he murmured, without listening to her. "That's very good, just there. The light catches it just right."

As he spoke, Jessie, the maid, came in, still straightening a hastily tied-on cap and apron.

"A gentleman downstairs to see you, sir."

Paul nodded.

"Oh, Mr. Crichell! We're going to the Grafton Galleries together to see that 'Moonlight in the Trenches' fellow's pictures."

"Please, Mr. Paul, it ain't Mr. Crichell." Jessie was still standing by the door.

"Oh, who is it?"

"I don't know, sir. Not at all a nice gentleman. I wouldn't leave him alone in the drorin'-room if I was you."

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The girl left the room, and Mrs. Walbridge sat down suddenly. Paul's face had changed, and she was frightened.

"Look here, Mother," he said, "I'm afraid it's a brute of a fellow on business. I told him I'd kill him if he came here, but"—the young man waved his long, nervous hands helplessly—"he's come, you see."

Her big hollow eyes were fixed on him with a strained, unwinking stare.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered, "what is it?"

He moved irresolutely towards the door, came back, took up his coat and then threw it on to the divan under the Rowlandson "Horse Fair."

"Look here, Mother," he said, "I must get him out of the house. Suppose you go and tell him—tell him that I'm not in. Perhaps you'd better say that I'm out of town."

"Is it a bill?" she asked tonelessly, without moving.

"No—that is—not exactly. The fact is, it's a money-lender. Alfred Brock put me on to a good thing in the City, and it—it went wrong somehow, so I borrowed fifty pounds of this chap—Somerset's his name—and I— But go and tell him I'm out. I'll explain it all to you afterwards," he broke off nervously.

She walked to the window and stood looking out, and he thought she was crying.

"Don't, Mother, please don't," he exclaimed. "It's quite all right. I shall have the money next week, and the brute's just got to wait, that's all."

But she was not crying, and that was not why she had turned her face from him. And what she saw, oddly enough, as she looked out into the empty boughs of the elm tree, was the face of old Mrs. Wick, whose picture young Wick carried in his pocket, and had once shown her. "What a happy woman, what a happy woman!" she was saying under her breath. After a pause she turned round.

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"I'll not say you're out, Paul, and I won't say you're away. I'll see the man, and I'll tell him you'll pay him next week."

Across his white face flashed the wild impatience of the man who, knowing that there is for his ailment only one remedy and that a desperate one, is offered some homely, perfectly inefficacious substitute.

"Don't be a——" he broke out. But she went downstairs without heeding him.

The man stood in the middle of the drawing-room, looking round at the homely furniture. Being what she was, Mrs. Walbridge had, of course, expected a florid and bediamonded Jew, instead of which the man was a stocky, red-faced, snub-nosed Englishman, who approached to her innocent ideal of a prize-fighter.

"Good morning."

At her voice he whirled round and about awkwardly.

"Sorry to trouble you, m'm, I'm sure," he began, grasping the situation with what to her seemed marvellous quickness. "Young gentleman had better come down hisself."

"My son——" she began.

But he waved her into silence with a small, roughcast looking hand.

"No good sayin' he's out of town, ma'am, or even spendin' the day on the river, 'cos he ain't."

Mrs. Walbridge looked at him, a slow wave of understanding creeping to her brain.

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"I wasn't going to tell you that my son is out, or away," she returned quietly. "He's upstairs. He's extremely sorry, but he will not be able to pay you your—your little account until next week."

The man stared at her in honest surprise, and then his red face melted into rather pleasant curves of irrepressible laughter.

"Well, I'll be—I'll be blowed!" he cried, slapping his knee. "Did he send you down to tell me that? My governor will laugh at that."

They talked, this ill-assorted pair, for about half an hour, and then the man left the house very quietly, bowing at the door with real respect to the lady who had so amused him. He had heard of Violet Walbridge all his life, and vaguely remembered having read "Queenie's Promise" when he was about sixteen, and had the mumps, and to think that she should be like this! Very much "blowed" and inclined to being damned, as he told his wife later, he disappeared out of Mrs. Walbridge's life.

She went upstairs, and found Paul walking up and down the room, smoking cigarettes furiously, his neglected pipe on the mantelpiece.

"Lord, Mother, what an age you've been!" he cried, petulantly. "Was it Somerset himself?"

"No, this man's name was Green. He tells me, Paul, that they have applied to you several times; that the money was due last week."

He nodded sulkily. "Yes, it was. If Alfred Brock hadn't been a fool, it wouldn't have happened. Brock shall never see a penny of my money again."

"He told me," his mother went on, her hand on the door handle, "that he knew you had a collection of pictures and things, and he—he was going to make you sell some of them."

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"The swine! Poor mother," he added carelessly, "a nasty half hour for you, I'm afraid. What did you say to him to make him go?"

Mrs. Walbridge looked curiously round the room as if she saw it for the first time. The Rowlandson, the Kakemono, the exquisite little Muirhead, the French pastel that shocked her;

the beautiful adjustable reading-chair, with its lectern-like bookrest; the fourteenth century Persian prayer rug; the odds and ends of good china on the mantelpiece. All these treasures, so dear to Paul, that she, in her innocence, had regarded as inexpensive whims, had received a new value through the odd medium of Mr. Green.

"I didn't say much to him, Paul," she answered slowly. "I—I paid him."

She went out and closed the door. The young man took a hasty step towards it, then hesitated and went back to his arm-chair. It was jolly decent of her. He'd thank her and give her a kiss for it at tea time. He must think of something graceful and appropriate to say. Meantime he was chilly and uncomfortable, so, leaning forward, he lit a match and set fire to the coal-heaped grate. "Jolly decent of mother," he thought, leaning back to watch the glowing of the fire. "Those absurd books of hers really are pretty useful, after all."

It was pleasant that evening to have a long letter from Grisel, and Mrs. Walbridge, who had been busy since Mr. Green's departure in getting off a basket of beef-tea, home-made potted meat, and red-currant jelly, to Torquay, and who had been bound by an old promise to take tea with poor Caroline, found the letter when she came in, and as Paul, after his hurried thanks, had gone out for the rest of the day and evening, she changed into her warm dressing-gown, and settled down to her supper tray in the drawing-room, with a pint of ale and a nicely browned sausage, and Grisel's letter.

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Grisel wrote a peculiarly delightful hand, each letter small and well-shaped, and nearly as clear as print. She was also fluent and had a certain gift for description, so that her letters were a real treat to her mother. This one, written on several sheets of beautiful pale grey paper with "Conroy Hall" in one corner, promised to be an unusually delightful one, for it contained, she saw, glancing through it, a full description of the ball at which her daughter had worn the new satin shoes she had sent her from Swan & Edgars.

"Darling Mum," Griselda began, "I haven't written for several days because I've been having such a good time that there wasn't a minute for anything except frivolling! You'll gather from this that the poor old Dad is better, and his headaches have gone. I don't think it was anything but liver myself. And he's been hob-nobbing with some old friends who have turned up at one of the big hotels—I forget which.

"I came here the day before yesterday to stay with Elsie, and I've never had such a good time in my life. Fred has put an awful lot of money into the place and furnished it splendidly, so it's really wonderful. He's like a little white rat, it's no good concealing that, but then he's like such a very NICE white rat, and he adores Elsie, and thinks nothing's too good for her. They've lived like fighting cocks all through the war. How they get the food I can't imagine! Of course, they make their own butter, and have swindled the Government like anything, which, of course, is great fun.

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"Elsie has just had a lot of new clothes from London, and really looks a dream, although she's as fat as a little pig. Of course, they've done a lot of entertaining of wounded for years now, otherwise I don't think they would have known there is a war. Elsie says she's awfully glad there's no Vere de Vere blood in Fred, or he would have minded things more. He really is a typical nouveau riche out of a novel (not one of your novels, darling).

"Did I tell you how glad I was that you've got 'Lord Effingham' into shape? It'll be a relief to your poor mind. I found 'From Sunlight to Shadow' in the library, and have been reading it, and I think it's perfectly sweet. I really did enjoy it very much. It reminded me of Rosa N. Carey. How I used to love her books when I was a kid!

"We have no men-servants here, but Fred's going to get a dozen or so as soon as the Armistice is signed. Meantime there are swarms of lovely footmanettes, too pretty for words, in violet frocks and lace caps and aprons. They all look as if George Grossmith had drilled them, somehow. One rather expects them to burst out into song, but they don't.

"Well, the ball was a great success. I'm writing in bed. It's after lunch. We danced till after five, and I was such a belle, Mum! All the girls down here seem to be six foot tall, and many of them have that new uniform-walk—I'm sure serving in different corps made the women's feet all spread; they are big and thick about the ankles, too—so I appeared as the old-fashioned Christmas pantomime fairy, done in white and gold. That's what Fred said. My frock really was as good as anybody's, you darling. Hundreds of beautiful youths rolled up to contend for the honour of a dance. It really was fun after the over-female parties we have been to lately, and I felt like Queenie, or that girl in 'Touchstones,'—the cruel one who broke hearts. Oh, Mother darling, what a noodle you are not to know that it's the man who does the heart-breaking nowadays!

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"Lady Sybil Ross was here with her twins. They looked just like partridge eggs, they're so speckly, but they're nice girls; but they treated me as if I was a little doll of some kind, as if they were surprised that I could talk and walk, being so small as I am. Fanny Ross has been engaged three times, and each time the man has been killed at the front. Isn't it awful? But I couldn't help laughing. There didn't seem to be any reason why she

should stop being engaged to one after the other for ever, and it doesn't seem to hurt her in the least.

"Father came last night, of course, and you would have been proud of him; he looked such a beautiful old pet. Of course, his diet and the water wagon have done wonders for his looks. His eyes are as clear as a child's—or were the first part of the evening, but rather fell off towards the end (off the water wagon, I mean!) Of course, he was quite all right, you know, but he was very genial and his eyes a bit swimmy. Poor old Dad.

"Did I tell you that Clara Crichell's here? She's staying with her mother, who has taken a house, and she and Dad had the time of their lives together. She's very pretty, but towards the end of the evening she looked rather like a squashed tomato, I thought. Seriously, I think she's quite crazy about father. I'm so glad you're old-fashioned, darling, and that I don't have to chaperon you too. A frisky young mother is an awful responsibility for a girl, and I should hate to have to ask anyone's intentions about my Mamma!

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"I've just had the most scrumptious lunch—heavenly sweetbreads in little paper boats, and eggs done in some wonderful French way, and grape-fruit salad, and a sweet little carafe like a scent-bottle, full of some divine white wine. I love having my meals in bed, and I adore having a maid to look after me. If I marry a rich man, never again as long as I live will I put on my stockings myself, I swear it!

"Well, I went to supper with an awfully nice boy (I forget his name), who urged me to marry him and share his pension as a 2nd Lieutenant. I've danced my new shoes to ribbons—war satin, of course—and the next evening frock I have must be black, darling. Lots of girls younger than I are wearing black, and it's so becoming.

"I had a ridiculous present from Oliver yesterday—four beautiful giant kippers tied up in blue ribbon. Of course, he thought I was at Mrs. Bishop's, but wasn't he a goose to send me kippers?

"By the way, I've a serious beau—a most charming old man, Sir John Barclay. He's perfectly delightful. Quite old and frightfully rich. Snow-white hair and the most lovely tenor voice. He's staying in the house, and, though I say it as shouldn't, is my slave. He sang 'The Banks of Allan Water' the other day, and made me cry. Such a sweet, young-sounding voice it is. He sent me the loveliest flowers this morning. Really, it looks very much as if he was going to offer himself and his worldly goods to me! I hope he doesn't, because he really is a dear, and he looks as if he might mind being hurt.

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"How are you, dearest? You must enjoy being all alone. Do eat enough; don't live on toast and tea, and don't let Jessie forget your hot bottle.

"Dearest love to you,

"GRISEL.

"P. S.—When you send me a new pair of slippers, please send me a pair of stockings too, as there are simply no soles left in my last pair."

CHAPTER VIII

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Mr. Wick, on his way to "Happy House" one very wet afternoon, in the beginning of November, gave way to pleasant dreams. He knew that the lady of his affections was still in Torquay, for he had had a letter from her, but she had bidden him go and see her mother, and collect one or two books that she wanted, and send them down to her.

"I'm rather worried about Mum," she had written, "without any particular reason. I wish you'd go and take a look at her and let me know if everything's all right."

Mr. Wick, who had had a serious conflict with his chief a few days before, and come out with streaming colours, was feeling very happy, in spite of the pouring rain and the dreadful uniformity of the wet-November-afternoon faces about him. He was one step farther on towards his goal, which was nothing less than becoming a great newspaper proprietor and running the political world from a swivel chair somewhere in Fleet Street. And it was very sweet to him to be sent in this intimate way by Griselda Walbridge to inspect and report on her mother.

And now, under the shelter of his dripping umbrella, he was finishing a book, which he had read conscientiously, though with incredible swiftness. Since his meeting with Griselda, he had taken the trouble to look through half a dozen of Mrs. Walbridge's books, and could see (for he was unconsciously a very good critic) what the secret of their success was.

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"Very slow," he explained to his mother. "Nothing much happens and there are the same people in all of them, with different names. She always has pretty names for the girls, and the men are usually swells. Kind of book a woman could read while she's knitting, or boiling the clothes, or bathing the baby, without either losing the thread of the story or scamping her work."

But this new book, he realised, had lost that easy quality. There were pages of undigested realism scattered through it; several of the stock characters were missing. There was, for instance, no

faithful old family butler, no sinuous foreign adventuress. (The innocence of Violet Walbridge's adventuresses was prodigious, in spite of the desperate epithets she showered on them) and there was a superfluous infant, nameless, and as unnecessary to the story as it was to his mother, whose presence was as inappropriate as that of Gaby Deslys at a Quaker meeting.

"That baby puts the lid on," the young man thought, stuffing the book in his mackintosh pocket and feeling in the other pocket for the safety of the treasure he had put there. "She'll bust the whole show if she goes on like that. She can't do the new stuff, and her old patients won't stand such strong doses as this."

As he got off the bus his mind was engaged with wondering whether Mrs. Walbridge had any fortune apart from her pen.

"Strikes me that Paul is something of an *objet de luxe*," he reflected, as he turned off Albany Street. "Bank clerks oughtn't to go messing about with stockbrokers, and that fellow Brock is a bad egg. When I've married Griselda, pretty pet, we shan't have very much to do with Master Paul. The other one, Guy, the soldier, looks a decent lad. I like that photograph." [Pg 83]

As he reached the house his pace slackened and over his shrewd journalistic face came an odd softening as if for a moment his very thoughts had stopped using slang. The green swing gate with its half effaced words touched him anew. The more he knew of Mrs. Walbridge and her family, the greater seemed the pathos of the name of her house.

"I suppose she named it that years ago when she was young," he thought gently. "I suppose she kept the paint fresh at first, and then later it didn't seem worth while."

A very modern product was this Oliver Wick—the kind of a man that could not have existed a quarter of a century ago, when young men were either gentlemen or cads, as the saying went. He had set out to make a great fortune and he was going to make it. He was conscious to his fingertips of his powers and his gift of observation and of managing inferior minds. His habitual language was a jargon composed of journalistic, sporting, and society slang, yet his mind was open to the most tender impressions, his sharp little eyes always ready to soften to a tear, and he loved and read poetry with avidity.

Now he stood for a moment in the pouring rain, touched to the quick by the pathos of the shabby little gate of the unsuccessful, overworked old novelist.

He found Mrs. Walbridge sitting by the fire in her expressionless drawing-room, reading. She was so engrossed in her book that, after a hurried greeting, she at once began to talk of it. [Pg 84]

"Oh, Mr. Wick," she cried, forgetting to ask him to sit down, which, however, he promptly did, "have you read this?"

He glanced at the book. "Yes, it's the book Mr. Crichell talked about that night at dinner here." After a second he added a little awkwardly, "I—I wouldn't read it if I were you, Mrs. Walbridge."

She closed the book and drew back in her chair with a little flush.

"I—I've nearly finished it. Everyone's been talking about it, and I found it in my son's room."

He was silent for a moment, for he did not know quite what to say to her, to this old lady whose literary stockpot produced such a harmless and uniform brew.

"Reek" was not important enough to be called strong meat; it was just a thoroughly nasty book whose author dwelt lovingly on obscene side-issues of ordinary life, and in whose three hundred odd pages of closely printed matter there was not a word, nor even a suggestion that could help or even cheer for a moment any conceivable reader.

"Disgusting rubbish," he declared after a moment. "My old mother read the first chapter and marched down with it in the tongs and put it in the kitchen fire." He chuckled at the vision of the old lady's slow progress down the narrow passage, with the tongs held straight out before her. "That showed my young sister Jenny what *she* thought of it!" He paused and then went on very quickly, with a little flicker of colour in his thin, white face, "You won't let Grisel read it?"

Mrs. Walbridge shuddered. "Dear me, no. Not that she would understand it," she added slowly. [Pg 85]

There was a pause and the young man watched the firelight playing over the hollowed, haggard face with the deeply-lined white brow, and the tired violet eyes. It came to him suddenly how very pretty she must have been in her youth—her youth, so long ago, and before he was born (he was twenty-six). And then she said slowly, in a hesitating voice:

"It's such a stupid book. It's so badly put together and the people aren't real."

If a six months' old baby had sat up in its cradle and quoted Plato to him the young journalist could not have been more surprised. That Violet Walbridge, of all people on earth, should criticise the construction of a novel by Bruce Collier! Bruce Collier, who was undoubtedly the head of the new school of writers, and about whom most serious critics wrote columns in the morning papers. He stared at her in frank, almost open-mouthed astonishment, and she went on without apparently noticing his emotion, and speaking modestly, but with a sureness that he had never observed in her before.

"You see, if Swithin Cleveland had been in the ruins that time—you know—he could not possibly have written that letter to Sophia."

"Why couldn't he?" stammered Wick.

For a few minutes he listened to her soft, rather unmodulated voice, as she unfolded her ideas to him, and then suddenly he jumped up and slapped his knee.

"By Jove," he shouted, "you're right, you're right, Mrs. Walbridge, and not one of them—the critics I mean—has seen it!"

He tramped up and down the room, talking rapidly, brandishing his arms in a characteristically ungraceful, but expressive way. [Pg 86]

"Why don't you write an article about it? I'll make my chief print it in one of his decent papers. Not that—not that," he broke off stammering hopelessly, "*Round the Fire* isn't very good in its way, you know—but I mean in *Cosmos* or *The Jupiter*."

Mrs. Walbridge laughed softly. "Don't apologise for *Round the Fire*," she said. "I think I know exactly what it is."

He sat down again. The wind was whipping against the window with a delightful crackling noise. The corner by the homely hearth in the dim, inexpressive drawing-room was very pleasant in its way, and he liked, he very greatly liked, the old-fashioned lady in the shabby grey gown—the lady whom, if he had to stop the stars in their courses to accomplish it, was going to be his mother-in-law. He had always liked Mrs. Walbridge; he had always known that she held qualities that in a mother-in-law would be shining ones, but she had a personality a little too like this drawing-room of hers, too like the old mirror that hung over the mantelpiece and was a little cloudy, a little obscure, and now, behold, something had breathed on the mirror and it had cleared! Like a flash he saw the future. Himself England's greatest newspaper king, in a great, fine, romantic old house somewhere—St. James's Square for choice, failing that, Manchester Square might do—and by his side was his lovely little blackest white girl, and beside her, in subdued grey velvet and lace, the perfect mother-in-law, perfect because, not only had she been capable of producing a wife fit for the greatest man in England, and of being herself gently and quietly and modestly impressive, but she possessed that great blessing to a man in the position that he would be in, a keenly critical mind, and the mind would be, he felt, in a way his, because he had discovered it. He was sure that no one in her household or among her friends even suspected Mrs. Walbridge of such an astonishing possession. [Pg 87]

"Look here," he said at the end of half an hour or so, when they had discussed Mr. Collier's rather putrescent masterpiece pretty thoroughly, "I suppose Grisel's told you that I mean to marry her?"

"She's told me that you'd asked her."

"Oh, that's nothing," he waved his hand impatiently, "asking her, I mean. I have asked her two or three times, just for the sake of form, you know. But she's got to do it sooner or later. I'm in no hurry."

"Dear me," murmured his hostess, a little frightened by the novelty of his point of view.

"Yes. You mustn't think me cheeky or—dashing, you know," he protested gravely. "I'm not really. I only mention it now to you so that you would understand what I'm going to say."

"Yes?" She spoke very gently, and her eyes were kind and benign.

"I was going to ask you," he said, his manner suddenly changing to one that impressed her, unconsciously to both of them. "I was going to ask you if you don't think you could do something to modernise your style a little. Just from the business point of view, I mean."

He saw her wince, but kept on, with benevolent ruthlessness.

"I've been reading over some of your books since I met you, and I like 'em, and I quite see the reason for their popularity." He broke off shortly, and asked her, his head cocked on one side, his lips pursed fiercely: "How are your sales now, compared to what they were, say, ten years ago?" [Pg 88]

Mrs. Walbridge took up the poker and bent over the fire. He knew she was doing it to hide her face, and moved slightly so that he could keep on looking at her, for he meant to have the truth, and knew that this truthful lady would not hesitate to lie to him on this occasion.

"About the same, I think," she said in an undertone, poking the fire destructively.

He took the poker out of her hand, and by pointing it at her, forced her slowly back into her chair.

"Oh, come now," he protested. "Honour bright—man to man, you know—*business*—"

There was a pause, after which she said: "Well, then, if you put it like that, no! my sales have been growing less for some years now, slowly, until—until quite lately. My last book was really almost a failure. Don't," she added, clasping her thin hands and bending forward a little, "don't mention this to Grisel, will you? They none of them know. I—I didn't like to worry them."

The young man rose and walked to the window, saying: "Oh, hell!" under his breath.

"Of course I won't tell Grisel," he almost shouted from between the lace curtains; "but doesn't your husband know?"

"Oh, no—no. They none of them do. It would only worry them, you know."

"It must worry you, doesn't it?"

Neither of them noticed that the young man, who might so well have been one of her younger children, was behaving quite as if he were what he had destined himself to be, a powerful and [Pg 89]

experienced king of journalism. And she, who had written books while he was crawling on his nursery floor, sat before him with folded hands, answering his questions with the simplicity and lack of reserve of a child. For once he had broken her barriers down, he realised how the poor thing was relieved and glad to talk about her troubles.

Thus it came that she told him all about that dreadful interview with Messrs. Lubbock & Payne, and of her struggles with "Lord Effingham."

"I've modernised it," she said, with hopefulness that made him want to cry, "but it didn't seem very good to me. But then I don't suppose one's ever a very good judge of one's own work——"

"Then one ought to be," he thrust in brutally. "Every man and every woman ought to be the best judge of his or her work. Any other kind of talk's nonsense. You ought to know your best book. Don't you? Because if you don't, I can tell you."

She trembled as she looked up at him. "I know you're going to say 'Queenie's Promise,'" she said feebly.

He shook his head. "Well, it isn't, then. It's the 'Under Secretary.' I read that through from start to finish in the Underground the other day, and it's—it's got the makings of a real good story."

At this moment the door opened, and Jessie brought in the tea, and by doing so changed these two bewitched people back to their real selves, and the millionaire newspaper king found himself once more only a young reporter, and the trembling literary aspirant at his feet became, as at the wave of a wand, again the tired, once mildly successful old novelist, his hostess and potential mother-in-law.

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They were both embarrassed for a few minutes, and then, as they drank their tea, Mrs. Walbridge found herself, to her great though gentle surprise, telling him what she instinctively called the story of her life.

"My father was a solicitor," she said, "in Lincoln's Inn, and we lived in Russell Street. It's a boarding-house now. I went past it the other day on my way to the Tube, and it brought it all back so clearly! My mother died when I was a child, and one of my aunts brought me up. She was very old-fashioned, and rather an invalid, so as a child I saw hardly anyone but her and my nurse, and once in a long while my father. For years I never read anything but Miss Yonge's books, and Edna Lyall's, and *The Girl's Own Paper*. My aunt was very particular about my books."

"She must have been," growled the young man, trying to eat his toast silently, so that he could hear.

"I never went to school, but had a series of governesses, all very sad women. Most governesses seem to be sad, don't they? And all oldish, and not in very good health. I was allowed to read Sir Walter Scott's poems, and one or two of Dickens as I grew older. But I never liked Dickens; he writes about such common people. I loved Bulwer, and my aunt allowed me to read several of his. My aunt died when I was sixteen, and six months after her death my father went to Mexico on business, which would have made him a very rich man if it had turned out as he hoped. One of my old governesses came to stay in the house while he was gone. Her name was Miss Sweet, and I liked her because she was sentimental and had a soft voice, and wasn't at all particular about dates. Then it was that I wrote my first book—or not quite then, for I was nearly eighteen, but my father was still away."

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She hesitated for a moment. She was allowing her voice more scope since the gloom had thickened in the quiet room. The young man did not move, for he feared to disturb her.

"It was a caretaker in the next house which had long been empty that put the idea into my head. She was an old woman with a niece, who lived with her, and the niece was very pretty. The story was a dreadful one—a tragedy, and the girl committed suicide. I can't quite tell you," the quiet voice went on, "what it meant to an ignorant girl, sheltered as I was, to be plunged into the midst of such horrors. Poor old Mrs. Bell waked us up in the middle of the night when it happened, and I went alone, as Miss Sweet had a bad attack of asthma."

She shuddered, and reaching to the back of a chair, took from it and wrapped round her shoulders a little old red shawl. On and on went the quiet voice, telling the story with a kind of neat dexterity and absence of the overburdening adjectives common to such narration.

Wick was amazed and filled with pity at the thought of what life had been to this woman to reduce her powers to the deadly level of the tales that she poured out regularly every autumn.

"It was a dreadful business, as you see, but somehow after the first it didn't frighten or upset me much, though it made poor Miss Sweet quite ill. Afterwards we went down to Lulworth Cove for a change, and it was while we were down there that I wrote the book. I was very happy then. Your work," she added, with a touch of innocent vanity, "not being creative, you may not realise what writing a book really is, but it's very wonderful. I used to sit on the rocks and scribble away by the hour. I think it was very good too, and I was proud of it. And the day after we got home, in the autumn—we had been called back by a telegram saying that my father had reached Liverpool—I packed up the manuscript on the dining-room table and addressed it to Mr. Murray. Someone had spilt a little black currant jam on the tablecloth, and as I arranged the pages I managed to smear a little of it across the title, and I remember getting cold water and a bit of cotton-wool and washing it off, and then drying it before the kitchen fire, and mending the spoilt letters with a very fine pen, so that it would look nice. 'Hannah' was the name of it. Not a very good title, but that was the way it came to me," she added softly, and her voice trailed away into silence.

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The darkness increased suddenly, and the firelight made a lake of colour on the hearthrug, the

only colour left in the room.

"Well," Wick asked hoarsely, "did John Murray publish it?"

She laughed. "John Murray never saw it. I left it on the hall table that night, and was going to register it myself in the morning. When my father came in late he noticed it, and opened it."

"Well——?"

Somehow he never forgot the feel of the room at that moment, or the chill sound of the next words as they fell on his waiting ears.

"He burnt it." After a little while she went on: "He was horrified by it. I suppose it was not very proper, written by a young girl, and he had never known that I understood about such things, but of course I did, after the adventure of poor Kitty Bailey. Ring the bell, will you, Oliver? It's growing very dark."

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He rang, and while the lamp was being brought he knelt on the old hearthrug and mended the fire. In a few moments the crude, unlovely room was piteously bright, and the mystery had flown.

"Weren't you very angry?" Wick asked, as the door closed on the maid.

"I? Oh, no. It was he who was angry—my father. I think he was too hard on me, but it didn't matter very much. It was probably very badly written, though at the time I thought it was good."

Wick held out his hand. "Well, I must be off. Thank you so much for telling me, Mrs. Walbridge. Did you go on writing at once then?"

Her thin, small-boned hand quivered in his as she answered:

"Oh, no. I didn't write again until—until after my marriage."

They stood looking very kindly at each other, the old woman and the young man, and then she said suddenly, as he took up his hat and stick:

"I don't know why I told you, except, perhaps, that it happened, the burning of 'Hannah,' I mean, thirty-five years ago to-day. I was thinking about it before you came."

As he hurried through the rain towards the 'bus, the young man counted back.

"That makes her fifty-two," he said. "I thought she was older than that."

As he squeezed into the crowded interior of "everybody's carriage," as de Amicis calls it, a feeling of great pity swept over him. "How it must have hurt," he thought, "for her to remember it like that."

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CHAPTER IX

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The Gaskell-Walkers returned from their very long honeymoon a few days later and spent the night at Happy House, their own house being not quite ready for them.

It having rained without ceasing for a week at the Lakes, the young man had taken his bride to North Devon, where he had hired a car and they had spent a delightful time tearing over the country as fast as they could go, which happened to be Mr. Gaskell-Walker's higher form of enjoyment. He had made notes of the distance traversed each separate day, and to Mrs. Walbridge's bewildered mind, it seemed as if they had been nowhere, but had spent their time going from or to different places. However, her pretty daughter was in blooming health, and displayed her airs and graces in an artless and becoming way like some pretty bird. Wracked with worry, almost unbearably anxious about her new work, on which subject her publishers had maintained a silence which looked ominous. Mrs. Walbridge gave herself up to delight for a few hours in watching the happiness of these young people and hearing their comfortable plans for the future. She had never seen the house in Campden Hill, but Hermione had been taken there shortly before her wedding, and was delighted with everything about it. The drawing-room was apparently the only drawing-room in London that was over twenty feet long, and the art treasures, about which the young woman talked vaguely, but with immense satisfaction, seemed to be various and valuable.

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"There is a whole room full of Chinese dragons," Gaskell-Walker told her at dinner, "wicked-looking, teathy devils of all sizes. I used to be awfully frightened of them when I was a kid."

"And the loveliest Indian screens, mother, you know, that dull, crumbly-looking wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl."

Mrs. Walbridge had no idea of the exact income of her son-in-law, but she knew that the young couple intended to keep three servants and that Billy was partner in a fairly prosperous, though new, stockbroking firm in Throgmorton Street. He was not so sympathetic to her as Maud's husband. Moreton Twiss was young and full of boyish high spirits and a kind of innocent horse-play, that even the arrival of Hilary had in no wise quieted; and for some reason his untidy black hair and twinkling eyes were dearer to her than the correct smartness of the more conventional Gaskell-Walker.

Gaskell-Walker was ten or twelve years older than the other man, although he had married the younger daughter, and being extremely short-sighted, he wore pince-nez, without which his

mother-in-law had never seen him. She was one of those people who prefer eyes to be unglazed. However, everything pointed to happiness being in store for Hermy, for she and her husband were very much in love with each other, he rather more than she was, which her mother felt to be as things should be. And the little dinner was very pleasant, Paul being at his best, which was very good, so good that he rarely produced it for family use, and Hermy, being a daughter for any mother's eyes to rest upon with pride, in her pretty sapphire-blue frock, with the charming diamond pendant her husband had given her for her wedding present, blinking on her lovely bosom.

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"What news from Guy?" the bride asked, as they lingered in the old-fashioned way over their walnuts and port.

"I had a beautiful letter from him only this afternoon. I am going to show it to you. He's very well and seems to have made some nice friends amongst the officers."

Gaskell-Walker laughed. "Trust Master Guy to make friends," he said, cracking a nut with care, his over-manicured nails flashing as he did so. "Easier to make than to keep them in his case."

"Like the Governor," commented Paul carelessly.

"Children, children," Mrs. Walbridge glanced with anxious eyes from the one to the other, "I do wish you wouldn't speak of your father so—or Guy either, Paul, if you don't mind."

Gaskell-Walker bowed courteously. "I am sorry, Mrs. Walbridge," he answered, plainly meaning what he said, "I was only chaffing. We always tease the brat about his new intimate friends, and I didn't mean to say a word against him."

"Is father really better?" Hermione put in, smiling at her mother over the top of her glass. "I hear he is carrying on anyhow with Clara Crichell. Who was it told us so, Billy?"

"Oh, shut up, Hermy," put in Paul with a glance at his mother, who, however, had paid no attention to the remark.

It was a peculiarity of Mrs. Walbridge's children that, while each one of them individually was capable of hurting her a dozen times a day, not one of them could bear one of the others to inflict the slightest scratch on her.

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"The kid's having a grand time," Paul went on to his sister, "with Fred and Elsie Ford. Balls and dinners every night and adorers by the dozen, so Archie Pratt told me. He had been down there—he's a cousin of Elsie's, you know. He says the kid's the success of the place. Seemed rather smitten himself, I thought."

"I loathe Archie Pratt," murmured Hermione, "he smells of white rose and is always talking about biplanes and monoplanes."

"He is an A1 airman," put in her husband, "they say he is down for a D. S. O. for that Italian business. By the way, Paul, I hear the Armistice is most certainly going to be signed next week."

Paul nodded. "Yes, according to the paper it is, but some of these duffers will probably put it off."

"No. I have it pretty straight. It really is going to be. The Hun cannot possibly hold out any longer. It's funny the way they cling to that figure-head of the Kaiser. But his nerve seems to be completely broken. He won't be able to stick it out."

Mrs. Walbridge pushed back her chair. "Guy says they expect it to be signed on Monday or Tuesday—the French expect it, I mean."

"What is Guy going to do then?" asked Gaskell-Walker, as he opened the door.

His mother-in-law looked at him vaguely. "Do? I don't know. I suppose he'll go back to the City. Mr. McCormick promised to take him back, but I don't know—he hasn't said anything about it. I'll get his letter."

They went upstairs to the girl's room, for Paul had long since established his æsthetic inability to sit in "the mausoleum," as he called the drawing-room, and there, among the pretty modern knick-knacks and pictures, the mother read her soldier son's letter.

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It was a good letter, unoriginal and typical in its lack of grumbling and rather artificial cheerfulness. The writer called his friends and comrades by odd nicknames, vegetable and otherwise; he gave the details of the food, and the delights of sleeping in a bed once more after eighteen months of trench life. Then at the last there was something over which Mrs. Walbridge hesitated for a moment—something which was plainly very important to her. Billy Gaskell-Walker got up.

"I'll just go down and get a cigar out of my coat pocket," he said kindly.

But Mrs. Walbridge stopped him. "No, no, Billy, don't go," she said, "I'd like you to hear because you are going to be brothers now." She could not tell him that it was Paul before whom she had hesitated to read the more intimate part of the letter.

Paul sat at the far end of the room, reading a newspaper, his smoothly brushed hair gleaming over the back of Grisel's favourite chair.

"Of course, you know that Guy has been rather foolish," his mother went on after a pause, putting on her spectacles again. "But he is only twenty-one, after all, and that's not so very old, is it?"

Curiously enough the stranger, the man who was nothing to her or to her boy by blood, understood her better and was closer to her at that moment than either her son or her daughter.

Gaskell-Walker drew his chair a little nearer and took his cigarette out of his mouth, a queer little unpremeditated act of homage which she noticed and for which she was grateful.

"A man of twenty-one," he said slowly, "is not a man at all, he's only a child, and Guy is so good-looking, he's so full of what women call charm——" he broke off with an expressive shrug, and after smiling gratefully at him, and lowering her voice a little that she might not disturb Paul's study of the *Evening Standard*, his mother-in-law went on with the letter, reading in a low, moved voice: [Pg 100]

"Dear old Mum, I shall be awfully glad to get back. I've been thinking quite a lot lately and I can see better than I used to what a selfish young cub I've always been to you. Of course, it's your own fault that we're all such pigs. You've been too good to us!"—That, the reader broke off to say, "is ridiculous.—'But then I've just sort of taken everything for granted. It's been part of nature that you should sit up in the little garret room, slaving away at writing books to do things and buy things for us. It never struck me before that you don't have much of a time, but it does now, and when I come back I'm going to try to be a little more decent to you. It isn't that I didn't love you——'" Her voice fell still lower and she shot another nervous glance at the back of Paul's immovable head. *"I always did—we all do, of course. It's just possible that we're all selfish without meaning to be and I've been the worst, because, of course, Paul has been working for years and has no time to do very much, and it's different with the girls. But I'd give something nice now, when I think about it all out here, if I hadn't always been such a hound about going upstairs for you and down to the kitchen and little things like that. Your poor old feet must have been pretty tired sometimes chasing about doing things for us, and in future I'm going to do the chasing."* [Pg 101]

"Bless him," put in Hermione lazily, "he's a good child. We must kill the fatted calf for him when he comes home. Billy, we'll have a beautiful party——."

Gaskell-Walker nodded. "Bravo, Brat," he approved gently. "We mustn't tease him any more. Perhaps," he added thoughtfully, "I might get him a job in Throgmorton Street. Don't think much of McCormick, anyway."

"There's a little more," went on Mrs. Walbridge, who had not listened to this conversation, but was bending over her letter, partly, it struck her son-in-law, to hide her eyes, "it's about—about that poor girl—you know."

Paul turned round in his chair and rested his chin on its black satin back.

"Francine, you mean"—he laughed with a little sneer, "what about her? The youth seems to be making his soul in earnest, but I have my doubts as to whether the lady will be satisfied with the rôle he offers her."

"Oh, shut up, Paul, you're a cat," Hermione almost snapped, in her unusual vehemence. "Unless, I am very much mistaken you liked the girl yourself till the Brat came along and wiped your eye."

"Shut up, you two. Go on, Mrs. Walbridge," interrupted Gaskell-Walker. "The girl's no worse than most young fellow's first adventure. Go and chew your bone on the mat, you two, if you've got to squabble. I want to hear what the Brat says."

After a pained look at her elder son, Mrs. Walbridge went on with the letter, Paul walking ostentatiously indifferent to the piano and turning over the music on top of it as she did so. [Pg 102]

"I know you have been worried to death about my silly scrape with that girl, but it really wasn't so bad as you all thought. I can't tell you about it in a letter, but I will when I see you and then you'll see that I wasn't quite such an ass as most people imagined. Anyhow, I straightened it all out the best way I could before I went back after my last leave, and I know you'll be glad to hear that I didn't treat her badly." That's all he said about her. Then he asks about his bullfinch—we've not told him it died—and sends his love to everyone." Her voice shook a little as she read on. "Tell old Paul I'm awfully glad to hear he's doing so well, and hope he'll soon be able to get out of that cursed bank. I wish he'd write to me, letters are a great boon out here. Give the girls each a kiss and tell Billy that a little stick won't do Mrs. Hermy any harm, when she goes through her manners at home!" Isn't it a very nice letter, Billy?"

"It is indeed, Mrs. Walbridge, there's good stuff in the Brat, and for one, I'm going to do my best to help it come out. He'll have a good time at our house—we both like entertaining, and I've done pretty well this year, and it'll be nice for him to have a cheery place to go to, full of young people. We must get some pretty flappers to amuse him, Hermy, and then he won't want to go wasting his time in silly places."

Paul turned. "I rather think," he drawled, "that we haven't, in spite of all these virtuous plans, heard the last of the excellent Francine. Good-night, Gaskell-Walker." He left the room, closing the door very softly behind him. [Pg 103]

"I do wish," snapped Hermy, "that Paul would slam the door when he's furious, like a Christian. That cat-footed way of his drives me mad."

A little later Mrs. Walbridge accompanied her guests to their room, where everything had been prepared for them with the most minute and loving care.

"There's the cold milk, Billy, on your side, and Hermy's hot milk is in the thermos. The windows

are open at the top about a foot. Is that right?"

Hermione kissed her mother, who, after a minute's hesitation, kissed her again.

"That's poor little Guy's kiss," the elder woman said. "Oh, Hermy, I'm so glad he's coming home."

Mrs. Walbridge then held out her hand to her son-in-law. "Good-night. Billy, it's nice having you here. You've been very kind about Guy. It has made me happy."

Gaskell-Walker peered closely into her face, for he had taken his glasses off. He was a selfish man, and not particularly tender-hearted, selfishness after forty having a tendency to grow a thick membrane over the feelings. But something in her face touched him.

"Good-night, dear Mrs. Walbridge," he said gently. "Will you allow your new son-in-law to kiss you good-night?" And he bent and kissed her on her soft cheek.

CHAPTER X

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At half-past seven on the morning of Armistice Day Caroline Breeze, who was an early waker, but a late riser, was sitting up in bed reading. Her small, high up flat was very comfortable, and the good old woman had only to cross the room to light her gas-ring and prepare her morning tea. This she had done half an hour before, and was now propped up against many pillows with a pleasantly furnished tea-tray on her lap, bread and butter in one hand, which she dipped shamelessly into her tea, as she read, with avid, dreamy eyes, a new novel.

Miss Breeze was about sixty, and of irredeemable plainness, being the victim of that cruel form of indigestion that makes the nose red and the eyes watery. Her sparse grey hair, the front part of which was by day covered by a front of grey glossiness with but few pretences at concealment, that now hung, carefully brushed, on the foot of her bed like a bloodless and innocently come by war trophy, was screwed up on top of her big square head. She wore a little flannel jacket of the wrong shade of pink; her eiderdown, her window curtains, her wallpaper were pink, all too, of that pathetically wrong shade, but being comfortably colour blind, or taste blind, she knew nothing of this, and regarded her room as a bower of beauty and charm. The book she was reading was intensely interesting; there was in it a most cruelly treated companion, a revolting lap-dog that had to be taken for walks in the park, and a handsome nephew who ground his teeth in moments of emotion, and had designs on Rosamund (that was the governess's name). So engrossed was the good lady that presently she allowed her bit of bread and butter to soak too long in the tea, and as she raised it to her mouth it disintegrated, and fell with a horrid splash on her jacket.

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"Oh, dear, how disgusting!" the old lady said aloud, laying down her book and removing the tea-soaked and buttery bread with a knife. "I do hope it's going to end all right."

When she had rubbed the front of her jacket vigorously with her napkin, she took up the book, and with a furtive air turned to the last page. This habit of looking at the end before she got to it was one of which Miss Breeze was very ashamed, but she was so tender-hearted that when she saw in the story any signs of possible tragedy, she really could not resist taking a hasty glance at the ending, just to see if things were all right. If they were she went back to the tale with undisturbed zest, and undiminished excitement over the intervening troubles of the heroine. But if the author had been so foolish as to allow death or misunderstanding to blight the life of her heroine, Caroline Breeze closed the book and never opened it again.

She had just resumed her reading, when a ring came at her door. The postman did not ring, and she did not receive telegrams, so she was startled, and sat staring owl-like through her glasses towards the door. The ring was repeated, followed by a quick tapping of ungloved fingers on the panel, and she heard a voice:

"Let me in, Caroline, it's only me."

"Good gracious. It's Violet!"

Slipping the tray from her knees to the little bamboo table at the side of the bed, Miss Breeze wrapped the eiderdown round her, and scuttled across and opened the door. She kissed her guest and they both went back into the warm bedroom; for the fire in the little drawing-room would not be lit until just before Miss Breeze got up, and lying in bed in the morning was her one self-indulgence.

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"My dear, take your hat off and sit down in the comfortable chair. Whatever has brought you here at this hour?"

"Trouble," answered Mrs. Walbridge simply, doing as she was told. "I want you to do something for me, Caroline, it's a favour. I've very little time, so I can't explain. I must have some money."

"Money!" Miss Breeze had known Mrs. Walbridge for many years, but she had never suspected that her friend had money troubles.

"Yes, I must have some at once, and I want you to—to pawn these for me."

Opening her bag, she took out a little old case into which she had crowded her two or three old-fashioned diamond rings, and two pairs of earrings, one of seed pearls, the other of pale sapphires clumsily set in diamond chips and thick gold.

Caroline Breeze had never been inside a pawnshop in her life, but she did not protest against the horrid errand.

"I'll get up at once and go," she said. "What do you think they ought to give me?"

Mrs. Walbridge, who was very pale, and whose eyes looked larger and more sunken than ever, shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "I haven't the slightest idea," she said.

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"What's that book?" she added sharply, the crimson cover of her friend's novel catching her eyes.

Miss Breeze's face, already so red and white in the wrong places, turned a deep bluish colour of extreme embarrassment. "Oh, it's—it's just a book," she stammered, laying her hand on it. "I—I thought I'd like to read it, just to see if it really is good."

Mrs. Walbridge, who had risen, held out her hand.

"Let me see it, Caroline," she said quietly, and Miss Breeze gave it to her. "I thought so—Beryl J. Bell. I've seen it advertised. Jones & Hayward advertise a great deal. Is it—is it good?"

Mrs. Walbridge's voice shook a little, and Caroline Breeze turned her eyes away.

"Nothing extra," she answered in a voice that tried to be indifferent. "I suppose they spend a lot of money in advertising her."

Forgetting her hurry, Mrs. Walbridge sat down again and looked eagerly through the book. There was a long silence, a flutter of pages being the only noise in the quiet room. Caroline Breeze's faithful heart ached for her friend, and in her wisdom she said nothing. But Mrs. Walbridge spoke after she had closed the book and laid it down on the bed.

"I suppose you know," her voice was very quiet and the colour had died away from her face, leaving the shadows and lines in it deeper than ever. "I suppose you know that 'Lord Effingham' is—a failure?"

Caroline made a dreadful grimace, rumpling up her nose and protruding her thick lips two or three times rapidly, a way she had when she was embarrassed or distressed.

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"Oh, no," she protested, "not a failure. I've noticed that the critics don't seem to like it *quite* so much as the others, but——"

"Don't. It's a failure, Caroline, and it's right that it should be. I tried to change it, to make it more modern, and I've spoiled it completely. It's neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring."

"Oh, Violet!" Poor Miss Breeze's watery eyes overflowed a little, the tears did not fall, but spread awkwardly, scantily, over her ruffled cheeks, and made her plain face even plainer. "I love your books, and I love this one too. If they had let you alone it would have been sweet."

"Yes, but they didn't let me alone, and they were right not to. They weren't unkind, they were right."

There was something innocently pathetic in the little figure by the bed. The plain old felt hat was on one side of her head, and in the strengthening morning light she looked a really old woman—an unhappy, hopeless old woman.

"I'm old-fashioned, Caroline—out of date. That's what it is. These new people—that woman for instance, Beryl J. Bell—she's young, she believes in her books, her mind isn't tired like mine. I know." She rose and moved nervously about the room, speaking in a quick undertone. "I've always known that my books aren't very good of course—not like Hichens, I mean, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and Arnold Bennett—but they were good of their kind, and people did like them, I know they did. I've had letters from people I've never even heard of, showing how much they liked them, and how they had helped them. But now they're old-fashioned even among old-fashioned ones. That's it." She stood still to utter the saddest of cries. "I'm old, Caroline. I'm old."

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Poor Caroline Breeze burst into loud snuffling sobs, and rising from her bed, her skimpy nightgown clinging to her bony legs, she embraced her poor friend, and tried to comfort her with love and lies. Violet Walbridge did not cry. She was never a tearful woman, and at this moment was far past such a show of feeling.

"Get back into bed, dear. You'll catch cold," she said gently, patting her friend's bony shoulder. "I must go now or they'll miss me. Come to lunch when you've been to the pawnshop. It's good of you to go. I know I ought to go myself, but somehow I can't, with my own things, and I thought it would not be so bad for you, because you can *tell* the man that it's for a friend."

This idea she cherished, poor innocent lady, as one of great originality, and to Miss Breeze as well it appeared valuable. But even now, grieved as she was for her friend, it never occurred to the faithful Caroline that the financial situation of "Happy House" could possibly be one of more than temporary tightness.

Mrs. Walbridge never talked of money matters and for all Miss Breeze knew might have a regular income quite apart from her books. So the kind old maid's assumption was that one of the boys had got into a scrape, and that Mrs. Walbridge wished to help him without her husband's knowledge. For, in spite of the fact that Ferdie Walbridge, on the strength of having once paid back ten pounds of his original loan from Miss Breeze, had on several occasions borrowed further small sums of her, to avoid, he said, bothering poor Violet about trifles, Caroline still cherished her pristine belief that husbands were superior beings, who ought not to be troubled by small matters by their wives.

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As the friends parted Caroline ventured one question. "There's another book sold to Lubbock &

Payne, isn't there? On that last contract, I mean."

Mrs. Walbridge shook her head. "No, this is the last of the three. I—I dare say I shall hear from them shortly."

Caroline Breeze went back to her room, and dressed and prepared to go on her, to her, so strange and adventurous errand.

No one saw Mrs. Walbridge come home, and the morning dragged along with its usual round of dull duties, until about half past ten, when Miss Breeze arrived, her long queer figure, in her tight-fitting jacket edged with strips of shabby mink, and her oddly rakish hat decorated with a scrap of gold lace and a big bunch of pink roses.

"I've been, dear," she burst out eagerly, as she came into the attic room, where her friend sat at her work-table, "and I've got fifty-two pounds. Isn't it splendid?"

Mrs. Walbridge's face fell. "Oh, thanks—that's very good," she said, "and I'm so grateful to you, Caroline."

"It wasn't a bit like what I had expected," Miss Breeze explained, unbuttoning her jacket, and pulling out her cherished lace frill. "I rather thought there would be little pens, you know, like the ones in Dickens, with a young man leaning across a counter. But it was exactly like a shop and there was a very nice little back room, and such a polite man, a Christian. He said the diamonds were very good, but small, and he didn't seem to believe me when I told him it was for a friend. Wasn't it odd of him?"

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Mrs. Walbridge nodded. She had taken up a pencil and was making some notes on an old envelope, "twenty-six, thirty-six," she murmured. "Are they really signing the Armistice to-day?" she asked a moment later, looking up.

"Yes, I think so. The streets are crowded, everybody seems to be waiting for something. I don't see why they don't sign the peace at once, and not waste time over an armistice; it would be far simpler."

Mrs. Walbridge rose. "Let's go downstairs, dear," she said.

But at that moment a sudden ringing of bells filled the air—bells from all sides, bells big, bells small, bells musical and bells harsh. The two women stared at each other.

"That must be it," Miss Breeze cried. "I thought they were going to fire off cannon."

Mrs. Walbridge went to the little window and opened it. The sun was shining, and the sky was as clear as if they looked at it from some empty moor. She stood and looked up.

"Thank God," she said. "Now all the sons and brothers and lovers will be coming home—those who are left—"

"And husbands," agreed Miss Breeze, clasping her hands.

As the cannon began to roar, Violet Walbridge turned and looked at her friend with a curious expression in her fine eyes. "And husbands," she added softly.

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While the two women were having their simple lunch the house door burst open and Griselda came running in, glowing with colour and happiness, looking the picture of youth and beauty, in a little close-fitting fur cap and stole of the same kind of fur. The Fords had motored her up to town to see the celebrations and to go to a ball at one of the big hotels that night.

"Oh, mother," she cried, "aren't you glad it's over—the war, I mean?"

She sat down at the table, and leaning her chin in her hand, watched the two women as they pecked at their bread and cheese.

"Aren't you surprised to see me? We only came up on the spur of the moment. Fred said it was a historical event, and we ought not to miss it, and he telephoned through and got rooms. The prices are perfectly fearful, but he really doesn't care what he spends. So here we are. They sent me up here in the car."

"Where," asked her mother, in an odd, dry little voice, "did you get those furs?"

Griselda, who had taken off the stole, glanced down at it carelessly. "Oh, this. Elsie gave it to me. Fred gave her some heavenly sables the other day, so she didn't want these any more."

"I gave you my beaver set."

The girl glanced curiously at her mother's face. "I know you did, dear, and it's very nice, of course. But beaver doesn't suit me, and besides it's very old fashioned."

Mrs. Walbridge started at the last word, and her wedding ring struck sharply against a glass.

"Old fashioned?" she said. "Yes, I suppose it is. Well, come upstairs, dear, and take your things off in my room. Jessie's turning yours out to-day, but it'll be ready in a little while."

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Griselda caught up her stole and threw it round her shoulders. "Oh, I'm not staying," she explained carelessly. "We're at the Ritz. It's only for two or three days, so I thought I wouldn't—upset things here—and besides, Elsie wanted me. Sir John Barclay is motoring her and me back on the day after to-morrow—"

"Who is Sir John Barclay?" asked Miss Breeze interestedly. Grisel laughed.

"Try to bear it, Caroline," she said, "but he's not young and handsome; he's old. *Very nice*," she added, patronisingly, "but really old. White hair and all that. Isn't it a pity, for he's as rich as Cræsus—copper in Africa it is, and sheep and cows in South America. I wish he'd adopt me as a favourite grandchild." As she spoke a long, throaty honk of a motor horn was heard. "That's Peters. I promised Elsie I wouldn't be late, and he's reminding me. We're lunching at the Carlton with Sir John, so I really *mustn't* be late. Good-bye, dears."

She kissed both the women and they all three walked to the hall door together.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," the girl went on, as she opened the door. "Dad says he's going to stay on for another fortnight. He says his health's better, but really and truly he's having the time of his life and is a thoroughly gay old dog. Oh, yes, and he wants you to send him some new pajamas—only two or three pairs, and you're not to send him mauve ones. Rather naughty of him to be so particular, isn't it?"

"Griselda!" Mrs. Walbridge's voice was very stern, and the girl made a funny little face as she ran down the path.

They watched her get into the big car, and waved their hands to her as it bore her quietly away. [Pg 114]

The two women went back into the house and sat down in the drawing-room. The fire had gone out during the excitement of the morning, and the room looked more than ever unlovely and uninhabited. Mrs. Walbridge stood for a moment gazing down at the five photographs.

"Dear Grisel is having a splendid time, isn't she?" asked Caroline warmly. "How nice for her to have such rich friends."

Mrs. Walbridge did not answer. Her eyes were still fixed on the pictures of her five children.

CHAPTER XI

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A week later Mrs. Walbridge received a letter from her publishers. It was a very kind letter, for, after all, publishers are human beings, and Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne were really sorry to hurt their poor little client.

"Pon my word, it really makes me feel quite miserable," Mr. Lubbock had told his partner, with perfect sincerity, as they drew up a rough draft of the letter for Miss Borlays, their most confidential secretary, to type.

Mr. Payne nodded in agreement. "Poor old thing, it'll be an awful blow, and I half suspect," he added, "that she supports that rascally, good-looking husband of hers by her earnings."

"There are a lot of children, too, Payne. I've forgotten how many, but a great many," added Mr. Lubbock, smoothing his impeccable waistcoat. "Poor little woman. I wish we didn't have to do it. Of course, she has grown absolutely out of date, and this last book is disastrous, positively disastrous."

However, after some discussion, the two men decided, for the sake of old times and long friendship, to accept one more book from Mrs. Walbridge.

"We'll buy outright," Lubbock suggested. "What do you say? Give her a cheque for five hundred pounds and let her deliver the manuscript when she likes. That'll let her down a bit easier."

Mr. Payne nodded. "Five hundred pounds is a lot of money," he protested feebly. "We shan't sell as many copies either after this last mess. However, we'll do it." [Pg 116]

When they had finished the rough draft and sent it in to the efficient Miss Borlays, the two men went out to lunch, and had a bottle of Clos Vogeot to console themselves, both for what was practically a gift of a large sum of money, and also for their sincere sympathy with that poor little superannuated scribbler. After his third glass of the excellent and mellowing wine, Mr. Lubbock even recalled to his friend how very pretty Mrs. Walbridge had been twenty years ago.

"I remember thinking I had never seen such eyes in my life," the good gentleman murmured reminiscently, "and I was only just married in those days, too."

The letter was less of a blow to Mrs. Walbridge than might have been expected, for, when faced with absolute ruin, an unexpected five hundred pounds comes very nearly like manna from heaven. Her relief when she had cashed the cheque and actually had the notes folded away in her shabby little old bag was so great that she had to struggle to keep the tears from her habitually tearless eyes. She did not go straight home from the bank, and restraining herself with a violent effort from rushing in to thank Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne—a course which she knew would be extremely distressing to them both—she did an unjustifiable but very forgivable thing. She went to Peter Robinson's and spent twenty-seven pounds nineteen and sixpence on a muff and stole for Griselda. This she had sent straight to her daughter, and, sitting at the counter in the shop, she wrote a little letter on a bit of paper out of one of her notebooks. [Pg 117]

"My darling," she said, in her beautiful, clear writing, "*here's a little present for you. I can't bear you to accept things from anyone but me. Explain to Elsie Ford, and I'm sure she'll understand your asking her to take back the beautiful furs she so kindly wanted to give you.*"

"When are you coming back? I don't want to cut your pleasure short, but you've been away for a long time now, and I miss you. Oliver came to see me yesterday, and he has a box for 'Roxana,' and wants you and me and a friend of his, a young man, to go with him on Thursday. Guy will be coming back any day now, and Christmas is near—and in fact I want my baby very badly.

"Your loving mother,
"VIOLET WALBRIDGE."

This note she pinned on the muff, and herself folded the soft paper over it as it lay in the box. The girl who had sold it to her was very sympathetic and pleasant, and promised that it should go off that very day. When these things were accomplished, Mrs. Walbridge went on to Campden Hill, where she was lunching with Hermione.

Hilltop Road, Campden Hill, is a blind alley, beautifully quiet, with grass growing between the cobble-stones that pave it. It is a quiet, sunny, tree-sheltered place, with five or six engardened houses on either side, the smallest of which belonged to the Gaskell-Walkers. Even now, in November, a few scraggy roses and some brown-edged hydrangeas still garnished the sodden garden, and Mrs. Walbridge noticed with pleasure, as she went up the path, that the painters were evidently out. The door and windows glittered steadily in the glory of new bottle-green paint, and the windows themselves had lost the hollow-eyed look incidental to houses where the housemaids are not yet settled down to a religious respect for their blinds.

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She was a little late for lunch, but Maud was the only other guest, and, as Maud was very hungry, they had not waited for her, and she found them sitting cosily over curried eggs in the pretty dining-room. She had not seen Maud for about a fortnight, and was pleased to find her looking well and rosy. Hilary was at the seaside with his Grannie Twiss, and Maud and Moreton, she was told, had been having a high old time doing the theatres.

"We are praying," the young wife added pleasantly, "for bubonic plague, or cholera, or something. Poor Moreton's only had three patients since we got back, and one of them only had neuralgia from his tooth, and Moreton had to send him across the passage to Mr. Burton to pull out a few. That," she added, reaching for the salt, "was rather bitter."

Hermione, looking radiantly pretty in her smart trousseau coat and skirt, was full of simple news about her husband and her house and their plans.

"Billy's not forgotten his promise about the Brat," she said, after a while. "He's asked Mr. Browning, his partner, you know, and he says he thinks they could make some kind of a place for him—for Guy, I mean."

"That's very kind of him. I haven't heard from Guy for over a week. I suppose he'll be coming any day now, bless him."

Then she was asked and told news of Paul, and this information was given and accepted rather coldly, for Paul was not a favourite with his brother and sisters, and their interest was only conventional.

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"I believe he did rather well in something; I forget what, copper or something, last week," Mrs. Walbridge explained. "He's bought a lovely teapot with flowers all over it, and a picture—a water-colour of Venice that he says will be worth double what he paid for it in a few years."

"Grisel's having a grand time," one of the young women exclaimed towards the end of the lunch. "Elsie Ford is jolly good to her."

Her mother's delicate eyebrows stirred a little ruefully. "I don't like this new custom of taking presents from one's friends," she said.

"Nonsense, mother. Everybody does it, and Elsie's so rich it doesn't matter to her what she gives away. Do you remember how we despised her for marrying Fred Ford, Hermy?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes; he was dreadful in those days, wasn't he? There wasn't a decent 'o' in him. Real cockney."

"She's toned him down a lot, though," put in the other, "and he has a trick of picking up smart slang—really *good* slang, you know—that makes him quite possible. When's the kid coming home, mum?"

"A few days before Christmas. I had a letter from her yesterday. They are doing a lot of motoring, which, of course, Grisel loves. There's an old gentleman named Barclay who is very kind to her," she said.

Hermione Gaskell-Walker burst out laughing. "You'll be having the kind old gentleman for a son-in-law if you don't look out, you innocent old pet," she said, lighting her coffee machine, and blowing out the match. "Elsie told me—I met her the other day in Harrod's when she came up for that special performance at His Majesty's—that the old man was crazy about the kid, and," she added with satisfaction, "rolling—simply rolling."

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Her mother looked bewildered. "Rolling—?"

"In money, dear. He's extremely rich—cattle, I think, in Argentina. She always was the best-

looking of the three of us, so it's only fair she should make the best match."

Maud interrupted her indignantly. "Best match, indeed! An old man like that. How sickening of you, Hermy. I wouldn't give up Moreton for all the millionaires in the world."

Mrs. Walbridge patted her hand. "That's right, dear," she murmured, and Mrs. Gaskell-Walker looked a little ashamed of herself.

"You needn't think I'm not fond of Billy, for I am. He's absolutely perfect. I was only speaking from the worldly point of view, and it would be funny if the kid should burst out into a title, and millions, while Moreton is hunting illusive patients, and Billy worrying himself dead on the Stock Exchange."

After lunch Mrs. Walbridge was taken over the house, which was very comfortable and full of things that she supposed must be beautiful, although to her they were for the most part grotesque, if not ugly. The mattresses, and such homely appurtenances, were oldish, she found, and rather shabby, but everything downstairs was imposing, and that, Hermione thought, was the chief thing.

"By the way, mother," the young wife burst out as they came down the steep staircase, "what about that Wick man? There's not going to be any trouble with him, I hope?" [Pg 121]

"Trouble?"

"Yes, with Grisel, I mean. Billy took a fancy to him rather, and asked him to come and see us, so he turned up the other Sunday for supper. He's very nice. We both liked him, but there's something very odd about him, don't you think?"

Maud laughed. "It's only that he says all the things that most people only think."

"I like him," Mrs. Walbridge announced firmly. "I like him very much. Did he say anything to you about Grisel, Hermy—or to Billy?"

"No, not exactly. But when he talked about the future, and he always does talk about the future (I never knew anyone who seemed to have less use for the past, or even the present), he seemed to assume that she would always be there, with him, I mean."

"He's asked her to marry him, and she's refused him."

"Really? He doesn't seem much cast down by it. I never saw a more cheery person in my life. Billy says he'll be a great success some day."

Maud went part of the way home with her mother, and asked her again for the loan. Mrs. Walbridge hesitated.

"I don't quite see how I can, dear," she said behind her muff, for they were in a bus. "My—my last book has not sold quite so well as the others."

Maud nodded. "I've seen some of the notices. Awfully sorry, dear. By the way, why don't you try to brighten up your style a little? They're awfully sweet and all that, but they are a little old-fashioned, you know." [Pg 122]

"I—I tried to brighten up 'Lord Effingham,'" her mother faltered, and Maud laughed with kindly meant amusement that cut deep.

"'Lord Effingham' really was the limit. That baby was most shocking. We blushed for you, Moreton and I. Moreton says he thinks you don't read enough of the new stuff. Oh, I don't mean really good stuff, like Wells and May Sinclair and that lot, but the second-rate ones that sell so well—Mrs. Llovitt and Austen Goodheart, and so on. This Bell woman, too—what's her name?—Beryl J. Bell. I don't think her book is really better than yours, but every second person one meets is reading it."

Before they parted she returned again to the question of the loan.

"If you possibly can you'll let me have it, won't you? We really are rather at our wits' end. Everyone is so dreadfully healthy just now, and the rent is pretty bad—quarter-day coming. I do want some pretty things for little Violet. I should hate her to wear Hilary's left-offs."

A little smile, that was almost whimsical, touched Mrs. Walbridge's flexible lips.

"My children all wore each other's left-offs," she said softly, "and it didn't seem to hurt them. Grisel looked very sweet in your long robes. However, I'll see what I can do, darling, and I *can* let you have twenty-five—only don't mention it to Paul, will you?"

She changed buses at Oxford Circus, and after waiting a long time on the corner, she gave up trying to force her way into the overcrowded buses (for she hadn't the gift of crowds) and walked home. It was nearly tea-time when she reached Happy House, and after a hasty cup of tea she went up to her little attic study and sat down to work. [Pg 123]

When Paul came home at dinner-time he was not unreasonably annoyed to find his mother still writing.

"Do come down," he called. "Dinner's on the table, and I'm hungry."

When she appeared, he looked with distaste at her ruffled hair and ink-stained finger.

"Really, mother," he exclaimed irritably, "I do think you might manage to be in time for meals. It's disgusting to a man to get home and have to wait for his food."

"I shan't be a minute, dear," she said. "I must just wash my hands and brush my hair."

"Oh, bother your hands and your hair; come along. I'm going to the play—gallery—with Bruce Collier, to the Coliseum, so I shan't have to dress, but I've very little time."

Mrs. Walbridge was a careful housekeeper, but things will go wrong sometimes in every house, and this was one of those occasions for her. She had a new cook whom she ought, she knew, to have superintended, but the call of her book had been too loud and she had forgotten all about dinner. The soup was lumpy and luke-warm, and the leg of mutton quivering and purple. Paul watched it as she cut the first slice (she always did the carving), and threw down his napkin angrily.

"Raw meat—that's really too much! I'll go to the club and get a sandwich."

Tears rose to her eyes. "Oh, Paul, I *am* sorry, very sorry," she cried, "and I don't wonder you're annoyed, but don't go. Let me make you a Welsh rabbit."

He shook his head and rose. "No, no. I'd rather go."

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"I—I—it was my fault," she went on. "I got so interested in my book that I utterly forgot dinner."

At the door he turned and looked back at her pitilessly.

"Your book! If your books were worth while there'd be some excuse for artistic absent-mindedness, but considering the stuff you turn out, I shouldn't think such mundane details as soup and mutton need be so infinitely beneath you."

Mrs. Walbridge sat still for several minutes, staring at the closed door, a strange look on her pale face. Presently she rose, the look in her eyes intensifying, almost solidifying, to one that would immeasurably have astonished her son if he could have seen it. Lighting a lamp, she went quickly upstairs to her little writing room, and, unfastening the buttons of her right sleeve, freeing her wrist, she took up her pen and began to write. Day had begun to light her square of sky when she crept down quietly to bed the next morning.

CHAPTER XII

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A few days before Christmas Ferdinand Walbridge and his youngest daughter came home. It, was over two months since his wife had seen him, and she was very much struck by his look of health and youth.

"The sea air has done you a world of good, Ferdie," she commented gently.

He shot a quick glance at her out of marvellously cleared and unswollen eyes.

"Torquay agrees with me," he answered shortly; "always did."

Then he told her with genuine pleasure—for, like so many men with whom selfishness is almost a disease, he liked spending money, and was rather generous than otherwise—that he had made a good thing from a tip in copper, given him by a friend in Torquay.

"Sir John Barclay," he explained. "Grisel will have written you about him."

She nodded. "Oh, yes. The kind old gentleman."

"Exactly, the kind old gentleman." He laughed. "He and I are very friendly, and, as I say, he put me on to this thing, and I cleared a couple of hundred pounds."

She was about to ask him if he couldn't manage some of the quarterly bills with part of the money, when he cut the ground from under her feet by taking from his pocket five five-pound notes and handing them to her.

"That's just a little present for you, old girl," he said, "to help you out with Christmas."

Before she had finished thanking him, the house door had banged behind him.

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Grisel had not arrived yet, as she was coming by car with the Fords, who were spending Christmas at the Savoy, and Mrs. Walbridge ran out and bought some flowers to decorate the girl's room.

She had not forgiven Paul for the episode of the underdone mutton. He had hurt her many times before, but he had never so thoroughly disgusted her, and her indignation, that she knew to be justified and fair, was in an odd way a strength to her. She had worked for hours every day on her new book, and was behindhand in consequence with her Christmas plans, but Grisel must have flowers. She spent nearly three pounds of the twenty-five her husband had given her at the beautiful shop in Baker Street, and then, because she was afraid of crushing them, took a taxi home, and was met by a look of cold raillery by Paul, who was letting himself into the house with his latchkey as she drove up.

"I hope Lubbock & Payne are paying you well for the new masterpiece," he said, as she came up the steps laden with flowers. He was surprised at the look she gave him in return.

"Your father made me a present this morning," she said quietly, "and if I choose to buy flowers with some of it that doesn't concern you, my dear Paul."

Up in the girls' room (as the upstairs sitting-room was still called, although only one girl was left) she had half an hour of real pleasure, filling vases with water and arranging flowers to the best advantage. She was passionately devoted to the pretty things, but for many years now had had to give up buying them, or trying to keep growing things in the house. Growing plants need care and time, and Mrs. Walbridge had little leisure for such delightful attentions.

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But now Grisel was coming home, so she felt perfectly satisfied in spending such an enormous sum of money as nearly three pounds on adorning the girl's room.

Her husband had not known at what time the Fords and their guest would reach London. They would, no doubt, lunch on the way, and as Sir John Barclay was coming up with them, they would probably stop to explore any old churches they might pass. He had a passion for routing about in chilly, romantic old churches.

"Fond of arches, and architecture, and flying buttresses and things," he added, with the pleasant disdain of one to whom those chaste joys make no appeal.

So, when the flowers were arranged, and the blinds drawn down, and the fire lit, Mrs. Walbridge went to her own room and put on her only afternoon dress. It looked very shabby, she thought, as she stood in front of the glass. It had never been much of a frock, and she had worn it and worn it and worn it. It was of black silk, of some thin, papery kind that looked cracked in a strong light, and the sleeves were very old-fashioned, with something wrong about the shoulders. She sighed a little, and then gave her pretty curly hair a last smooth of the brush and went downstairs.

She was a little anxious lest one of the children might notice the absence of her rings, and the seed pearl earrings, which, being one of her husband's very few gifts, were a part of her immemorial gala attire; she was almost sure that he would notice their absence, and she felt that she would die with shame if any of them knew about the pawning.

The new cook had produced some unexpectedly tempting-looking cakes, and Jessie, much elated by her reinstatement as a one-job woman, was waiting in all the glories of new cap and apron, to open the door to Miss Griselda, while the mistress, in the dreary drawing-room, sat down by the fire to wait for her daughter.

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She was lost in thought over her new book, which was engrossing her very deeply. She heard a sudden knocking on the glass panel of the house door, and jumped up and ran to open the door, flinging out her arms and crying:

"Oh, my darling!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Walbridge. I like being called your darling. You might kiss me too, if you don't mind. It's Christmas time."

Oliver Wick laughed cheerfully as the little lady started back in fright. "That's what I call a nice warm welcome," the young man went on, following her into the hall and hanging up his hat.

"Then she hasn't come? May I come in and wait? I've really come to see her, you know, but I've got a very decent excuse—a note from my mother, saying how delighted we shall be to dine with you on Christmas Eve." He produced a letter and followed his hostess into the drawing-room, carrying something that looked like a small hatbox with great care.

Mrs. Walbridge read the note and expressed her satisfaction at its contents.

"What have you got in that box," she added.

"Flowers for Grisel," he answered promptly. "Beauties. Just look." He raised the lid of his box and showed her an enormous bunch of closely packed Parma violets. "Aren't they lovely?" he asked, beaming with pleasure, "and won't she love them?"

"She will indeed. Let's go upstairs and put them in water, shall we?"

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And thus it was that when Griselda Walbridge reached home after having stayed nearly two months with the Freddie Fords at Conroy Hall, Torquay, she found Mr. Wick awaiting her with a curious air of belonging to the household as much, or even more, than she did.

"You're fatter," he said, looking at her critically, his small eyes shut as if she were a picture and he an expert, "and you've got that nasty red stuff on your lips. Oh, fie!"

Mrs. Walbridge watched them happily, as she leant back in Hermione's favourite old chair by the fire. There was something in this friendly, busy youth that she loved. He gave her a safe feeling, and she decided, as she watched his sparring with her daughter, that she would be glad to see Grisel safely married to him. He was poor, she knew, but she had unconsciously accepted his own ideas about his future, and knew that his poverty was merely a temporary thing, and that he was headed straight for power and wealth. Besides, power and wealth were not things that she had ever greatly valued.

Grisel was thinner, she went on thinking. She looked taller in her beautifully fitting chestnut brown skirt and chiffon tan blouse. The girl had changed. She looked more grown up, more of what her mother innocently characterised as "a society girl." Her manner, too, was different. She seemed at once a little bored and excited about something.

She had opened her dressing-case and taken out a variety of little belongings and was darting about the room like, her mother thought, a swallow, settling these things in their old places. A handsomely framed photograph of her father (his gift on her last birthday) she put on the mantelpiece, and turned with a little laugh.

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"Isn't Dad looking splendid," she said. "He's been motoring a lot, you know, and it's done him a

world of good."

"Oh, I didn't know he went with you," her mother observed, surprised. Grisel took a little silver and enamel cigarette box out of her pocket and put it on the table.

"He didn't go with us," she answered carelessly. "The Crichells had their car, you know, and he and Clara used to knock about a bit."

"Surely, my dear, you don't call Mrs. Crichell by her Christian name?"

"Don't I? I call everybody by their Christian names—everyone does. The old ones hate being 'Miss-ed'—reminds them of their age, you see. Even Elsie's mother hated being called Mrs. Hulbert, but, of course, I wouldn't call her Pansy! She really *is* old. Must be as old as you, dear, though I must say she doesn't look it."

Oliver Wick glanced quickly at Mrs. Walbridge, but looked away in relief, for he saw that she was untouched by the girl's careless remark, and he realised with a pang of satisfaction that her sensitiveness lay far from such matters as age and looks.

"Did you see much of that Mrs. Crichell?" he asked, as she sat down and lit a cigarette. She laughed.

"Yes. I know you hate her, but she's really not so bad, and Mr. Crichell and she entertained a good deal. They had an awfully nice house there."

"I don't hate her," said Oliver Wick quietly, "but she's vulgar, and too idle and empty-headed to be much good, or happy. Women like that are always on the edge of making beasts of themselves, even if they don't do it."

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"Oh, a Daniel come to judgment!" she jeered. "You seem very wise, this afternoon."

"Yes," he answered drily. "I'm always rather sage on Saturdays. Friday's pay day, you know, at my shop, and nothing makes a man feel so wise as money in his breeches pocket. You," he added, "have, on the contrary, gained chiefly in folly, I should say."

She laughed. "Have I? I'm not at all sure of that."

There was something thoughtful in her voice and face, and her mother looked at her wonderingly.

Oliver's face was imperturbable. "Who's the man?" he asked, and she actually jumped, so that her cigarette fell out of her amber holder to the floor.

"What d'you say?" she asked, as she picked up the cigarette. "Who was the what?"

"Man—the man you're contemplating marrying?"

All that there was of the new and the strange in Griselda seemed to her mother to flower in her answer to the young man's question.

She threw back her head and laughed, her pretty throat shown to the best advantage as she did so. Then coolly looking at Wick from under her lashes in a consciously attractive way, she drawled:

"I'm not going to tell you his name, though you're perfectly right, oh shrewd young knight of the fountain pen."

Wick was shrewd, but he was also very young, and Mrs. Walbridge felt a little pang of pain as she saw how white he had grown and what a smitten look had come to his face. After a second he rallied, and lit a cigarette, but he had been badly hurt, and his face showed it as he said, with a laugh:

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"That's a phase all attractive young girls go through—trying to make up their minds to marry some rich man they don't like, before they have the sense to settle down with the handsome object of their true affections."

"The object being you, I suppose?" she retorted.

"Grisel, Grisel," her mother protested gently. "You really go too far, my dear."

The girl laughed. "Poor mother. You're longing to tell me it isn't womanly, aren't you? But it's very kind of you to have brought me the violets, Oliver, and I'm glad to see you, and all that——" She held out her hand carelessly, with something of the air of a stage queen, "but I'm dining out, and must have a talk with mother before I dress, so I'm afraid you must go now."

He rose at once, apologising nervously and sensitively for having stayed too long, and Mrs. Walbridge went down to the door with him. He was very slow in getting into his coat, and she purposely did not look at him. She knew he was suffering, and she had an absurd feeling that he was hers, that she had written him—that she knew exactly what he was going through, and what he was going to do.

Then he opened the door and turned round, grinning broadly and holding out his hand.

"She got the first one in that round, didn't she?" he asked. "Never mind, I'll get her yet, the young minx! Oh, my word," he added, relapsing suddenly into helpless, conscious pathos: "What a little beauty she is! My knees feel like wet tissue paper."

Before she could speak he had bent and kissed her (for though he was not very tall, he was taller than she), and was gone into the darkness.

The Christmas Eve dinner party was rather a large one. Hermione and her husband could not come, as they were obliged to dine with relations of the Gaskell-Walkers. But the Twiss's were there, and Mr. and Mrs. Crichell, and Paul and the Wicks, and, to Griselda's joy, the great Bruce Collier honoured them with his presence. She knew that this condescension was due to his having once met her coming out of the house when he was on his way to see Paul.

Walbridge had, as usual, helped by spending all his available money on things of a showy and convivial nature. The quarterly gas bill was still unpaid, and he was having serious trouble with his tailor, but he had sent in a case of champagne, and a box of the best cigars money could buy, and all sorts of impressive, though unnecessary dainties, such as caviare, *pâté de foie*, brandied cherries, oysters and so on, besides a fifteen-pound turkey, which quite put out of joint, as Grisel expressed it, "the pope's nose of the poor little eleven-pounder mother had bought for the occasion."

Ferdie had been very fussy and tiresome ever since he came back from Torquay, and at the last minute, distrustful of the new cook's powers, he had insisted on getting a woman in for the Christmas Eve dinner. The permanent cook wept all day, and went through the usual procedure of reproaches and threats, but she finally quieted down, by the help of a bottle of port, and the dinner really was excellent.

At the last minute the table had had to be redecorated, because Ferdie had been seized with a desire to have orchids. Mrs. Walbridge sat patiently by and watched him remove her time-honoured design of holly and mistletoe and smilax, and then arrange the lovely purple and mauve things that she now saw for the first time in her life without a shop front between her and them. She dared not ask the price; she dared not offer to help him, for he was extraordinarily irritable, and in spite of his look of renewed health and youth, moved to violent invective by the slightest word or suggestion. She watched him now as he darted from side to side of the table trying the effect of the different clear-glass vases, full of the expensive flowers that his wife privately thought so much less lovely than roses or sweet peas.

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He was looking very handsome, and had certainly renewed his youth in a way that made her feel, as she raised her eyes to the glass that always hung opposite his place at table, that she looked older and more dowdy than ever. And yet there was something in his face that displeased her, and seemed to give her an odd kind of warning. After a while she rose and went quietly to the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked sharply.

"I'm going up to write a little."

"Oh, rubbish! Go down to the kitchen and make sure that everything's all right. That's far more important."

"I've been down to the kitchen," she answered gently, with something in her eyes that disconcerted him. "Everything is all right, and as you are going to arrange the seats I'm going to write for a while."

She went upstairs and closed the door, and sat down before her work-table, where her lamp always stood nowadays filled and trimmed, with a box of matches by its side.

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Old Mrs. Wick, rather imposing in grey, with some fine lace, and a cap, and a handsome old brooch of Irish paste and black enamel, necessarily sat on Ferdie Walbridge's right at dinner. Mrs. Crichell, very handsome in jade green velvet, sat on his left, as she had sat, Oliver remembered, from his place on Mrs. Walbridge's left, that night in the early autumn, when he had first dined at the house.

Oliver was very proud of his old mother, and with good reason, for her plain, strong face was by far the most arresting, apart from the mere fact of superficial beauty, at the table. His little sister too, whose soft red hair foamed over her head like scarlet soap-suds, bore the proximity of three very good-looking young women remarkably well. She was plainly by far the most intelligent of the four, and once or twice when the celebrated Mr. Collier laid down the law with even more than his usual cocksureness, little Jenny dashed in, as her delighted brother thought, and wiped the floor with him. He was a pretentious, posing man, Mr. Collier, disposing of such writers as Thomas Hardy and Meredith with a few words of amused contempt.

"Hardy has talent," he said, screwing his glass in his eye, and studying Griselda's charming face with relish. "Of course, he writes well, but he's very old-fashioned, and far too long-winded. There's not one of his books that would not be better for a little judicious paring down."

"And who," put in Jenny Wick's high, clear voice, "whom do you suggest as a parer?"

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Collier glared at her, and Paul who, for some reason, had hardly taken his eyes off his red-headed *vis-à-vis*, gave a sudden laugh, although he had had no intention of doing so.

"I like your sister," Maud Twiss said pleasantly, turning to Oliver, and speaking in an undertone. "She's a dear little thing."

"Isn't she," he answered, "very like me, don't you think?"

And Maud, who knew him less well than the other members of the family, was a little disconcerted, and blushed. She looked very handsome when she blushed, and Crichell leant across the table to her, waving those white hands of his in the way that was so singularly distasteful to Wick. Once more the young man was reminded of things sprouting in dark places, and then his quick imagination improved on this crude vision, and he seemed to catch a glimpse of blind sea-worms writhing in some sunless cavern.

"When are you going to sit to me, Mrs. Twiss?" the painter asked. But Twiss, who sat the other side of Jenny, leant over and answered for his wife.

"Never, Mr. Crichell. She's no time for portraits."

Paul, who disliked his younger brother-in-law, sneered at this, and Maud saw him.

"I saw you yesterday, Paul," she said, without lowering her voice. "You didn't see me, did you?"

He turned to her with a little snarl. "Yesterday? No, I didn't."

"I thought not. I was lunching at the Piccadilly Grill with Elynor Twiss."

Paul didn't answer, but he turned to Mrs. Wick and made some unimportant remark to her. The old lady was amused by the situation, and she did not like Paul, whereas Maud struck her as a kind, pretty young woman who ought to be aided and abetted in her attack on a disagreeable, pettish-minded brother.

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"No," she returned, in her sonorous voice, "I never did. Do you often go to the Piccadilly Grill, Mr. Walbridge? I was there with Oliver the other day."

Paul was furious. He didn't mind bear baiting, but he did object to being the bear, and Oliver, who knew his mother and her wicked ways, and who had also caught a pained look in Mrs. Walbridge's eyes, leaned across Maud and made a sign to the old lady. The sign consisted of slipping the forefinger of his right hand down into his collar and giving it a jerk as if he felt a little breathless. Mrs. Wick laughed. She loved teasing, but this was an old signal used only when Oliver felt that she really had gone far enough. So she nodded good-humouredly at her son and let the subject of the Piccadilly Grill drop.

After that the dinner went on pleasantly enough, and Mrs. Walbridge saw with pleasure that Ferdie really seemed to be enjoying himself. Mr. Walbridge, like everybody else, had the qualities of his defects, and he was a very good host.

Mrs. Wick was old and plain, and did not interest him in the least, but she was his guest, and he was charming to her—charming, that is, as far as a man may be said to be charming to a woman who is not at all charmed by him. Pretty Mrs. Crichell, on his left, talked a good deal to Moreton Twiss, who admired and took pleasure in her beauty, as every man ought always to admire and take pleasure in the beauty of any pretty woman. To do them justice, most of them do.

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Grisel, of all the people at the table, seemed the least amused, Wick thought. Mr. Collier plainly admired her, but she seemed to derive less satisfaction from this circumstance than might have been expected, and he knew that she had never liked Crichell, who sat on her right. When her brilliant little face was in repose, it had a new look of fatigue and boredom. Wick watched her constantly throughout dinner, for he was hampered by no wish to conceal his admiration, and he came to the conclusion that she was not only preoccupied, but worried about something. He wondered if Walbridge knew the cause of this worry, for the girl turned more than once towards her father, and looked at him in a way that puzzled her observer.

They went upstairs for coffee, the girls' sitting-room being not only larger and pleasanter than the drawing-room, but the piano also being there, and when the men had come in and Oliver made a bee-line for Grisel, he found that she looked even more nervous and tired than he had thought.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Tired. Besides it's very warm in here."

"Come and sit by the window."

She obeyed him listlessly, and they sat down in the window seat that looked down over the little path leading round the house to the kitchen door.

"I do wish," the girl burst out suddenly, "that mother wouldn't have the Crichells here."

He stared at her. "But I thought you liked her. Why do you call her by her Christian name if you don't?"

"I don't say I don't like her. I saw you looking at his hands at dinner. Aren't they beastly?"

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"Horrid. Has he done anything—anything you don't like?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. But I—I wish they hadn't come."

As she spoke Wick's sister began to play, something very modern, of which he could make neither head nor tail. But she played brilliantly, and with what seemed almost unequalled facility, although he knew what hours of daily hard work went to its perfection.

Grisel leant back in her corner, and shut her eyes for a minute. She was really pale, and looked seriously troubled and puzzled. He turned and watched the listening group round the fire. Mrs. Crichell lay back in a low chair, her beautiful arms hanging loose over its sides. She was really

lovely, the young man thought—as lovely, that is, as a woman of forty could possibly be, and Mr. Collier evidently agreed with him, for his eyes were fixed on her. Crichell had taken up a magazine, folded back the last page, and was rapidly sketching Maud Twiss, who sat looking away from him and did not see what he was doing. Twiss had gone to the telephone and Paul stood near the piano, watching Jenny, as her red head bobbed funnily over the keys as she played.

Mrs. Walbridge had left the room, and Walbridge stood leaning against the door in a pose often drawn by du Maurier in the eighties.

"I say," Wick whispered to Grisel, hoping to make her laugh, "your father is most awfully good-looking. Perfectly splendid to-night, isn't he?"

She gave a little pettish start. "Oh, do be quiet," she snapped. "If you knew how sick and tired I was of having father's good looks drummed into me——" [Pg 140]

She rose and marched over to the chair her mother had left, and sat down, staring at her father, as if she disliked him intensely.

Wick sat still, feeling very much injured, for, after all, most girls would like to hear their father praised—at least, most pretty girls. Of course, if she had been plain, he reflected gravely, one could understand her being so shirty.

As Jenny stopped playing, Mrs. Walbridge came back into the room, and approached Mrs. Crichell.

"I'm so sorry," she said kindly, "but someone has just telephoned to your husband from his mother's house and asked if he's not going on there."

Mrs. Crichell unfurled her fan, which was of black feathers like some big wing. "Dear me, how tiresome!" she said. "He's having such a good time, sketching Maud, and she doesn't even see him. Walter," she called.

Crichell turned. "Yes?"

She gave him the message, and he rose without any comment. "You'll let me take this magazine with me, Mrs. Walbridge?" he asked.

Maud turned and stared at him. She was a little annoyed, but plainly thought the matter not worth making a fuss about, and Mrs. Crichell rose and took up her gloves, and gave herself a little shake more than ever like a sleek pigeon that has been sitting in the sun.

"Oh, need you go too?" Mrs. Walbridge asked, hospitably.

She hesitated. "No—I don't know—Walter, what d'you think?" [Pg 141]

"I think," he said coldly, "you might as well stay where you are. My mother is not well," he explained to his hostess, "and she's quite alone."

Ferdie Walbridge came forward. "Have a whisky and soda before you go, old man," he said warmly. "I'll bring Mrs. Crichell home in a taxi. We want her to sing for us; we couldn't think of letting her go yet."

Crichell stood with his back towards Oliver Wick, and he had clasped his hands behind him in a way he had. Wick did not catch what he said in reply to this remark, but noticed his hands move, and again thought of the writhing of the unpleasant sea-worms.

When her husband had gone, Mrs. Crichell sang, accompanying herself; or rather she cooed little Spanish and Mexican ballads, the words of which no one present could understand, although their meaning was made fairly clear by the extreme eloquence of her face and gestures.

"That's very clever," old Mrs. Wick commented to Moreton Twiss who sat near her.

"It's very nearly wonderful," the old woman insisted gently.

Twiss looked at her, his good-looking, blue-chinned face rather critical. "Oh, well, if you admire it," he said, "I've nothing more to say. Personally I don't. In fact," he added, confidentially, leaning forward, "I can't bear the woman, so probably I'm unfair to her singing."

Later in the evening Jenny Wick accompanied Paul, as he sang some old ballads full of a kind of academic gruesomeness. He had, singularly, a delightfully warm baritone voice, and sang well. His rendering of "Lord Edward My Son" was extremely fine, and little Jenny Wick was delighted, and they arranged to meet during the holidays so that she might show him a lot of queer Basque songs that her father had collected years ago. [Pg 142]

Mrs. Wick and Mrs. Walbridge had a long talk before the evening was over, and though they were intensely reserved women in different ways, the observant Oliver saw with delight that their attitude showed promise of a real friendship.

When he said good-night to Mrs. Walbridge, he invited her to kiss him, but this she refused to do, patting his cheek instead.

It was late, and the Twisses and Mr. Collier had gone long since. Mrs. Wick and her daughter and son left at the same time that Mrs. Crichell and Mr. Walbridge started out on their hunt for a taxi, for none had been on the rank when they telephoned.

The Crichells lived in Hamilton Terrace, so the walk would not be very long, and when finally at the corner a belated taxi did draw up and showed signs of being willing to accept a fare, Mrs. Crichell refused to take it.

"I really live only just round the corner," she said kindly to the old woman, "and it's a long way to Baker Street. Do take it, Mrs. Wick."

So the three Wicks said "Good-night," and got into the taxi, and the other two walked on.

"Well, mother," the young man asked, putting an arm round each of his companions as he sat bodkin between them, "did you enjoy your evening?"

"I did, son," she returned. "What a queer world it is! To think that all of us will be just a handful of churchyard mould, somewhere, in a few years' time."

Jenny burst out laughing. "And may I ask which of the guests to-night struck you as being particularly mouldy?" [Pg 143]

But Mrs. Wick was serious. "Don't try to be funny, Jenny," she answered gravely. "It really struck me that it is strange, when you come to think of it, how important we all feel, and what rubbish we all are." After a minute she added, with apparent irrelevance, "That Violet Walbridge of yours is a fine, brave little soul, Olly. I like her."

"I knew you would. And what," the young man added, "did you think of your future daughter-in-law?"

"She's very pretty, but—you'll be annoyed with me for saying so—but I should like her better if she were more like her mother."

The young man gave her a little squeeze. "Her mother's twice the woman she is, of course. But then, on the other hand," he added, "she's young, and has plenty of time to improve."

The cab had stopped at Baker Street Station, and as he jumped out and turned to help the old lady, he added, "You wouldn't like me to marry Mrs. Walbridge, even if she was free, would you? She really *is* a little too old for me!"

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 144]

The day after Christmas—a day spent by the "Happy House" people at Campden Hill, where, also, Maud and her husband and little Hilary were present—Violet Walbridge achieved the business talk with her husband that she had had in her mind ever since his return, and which, in some way difficult to define, he seemed to be trying to escape. It was late, in the afternoon of Boxing Day, and the others had gone to a matinée, and he was to dine with the Crichells and go to a play in the evening. He was resting. He seemed to rest a good deal lately, she noticed, and when she had asked Grisel that morning if it seemed to her to mean that he was not feeling quite well, the girl had surprised her by laughing in a new, harsh way, and giving her a hasty, unexpected kiss.

"It's only a beauty cure, darling," she said. "Can't you see that? He takes more care of his looks nowadays than any woman, except perhaps Clara Crichell."

"How do you mean, dear?" For Mrs. Walbridge was singularly ignorant about such matters, and in all her life had used no more subtle cosmetic than ordinary cold cream, and water and soap.

"Clara! My goodness, I've seen her having it done. A woman comes to her every morning of her life—a Mrs. Bryant here in town, and a Frenchwoman at Torquay, and they rub grease into her face and knead it and flap it with wet cotton wool, and tap it with litch bags full of dried leaves and herbs soaked in something. Oh, it's a wonderful business." The girl tossed her head with the contempt of her nineteen years for such devices. "I don't like her much, mother," she added, suddenly, with a change of voice, turning to the glass and doing something to her smooth hair. [Pg 145]

Mrs. Walbridge nodded. "I know. I don't think I like her much either. But she's very pretty. People enjoy meeting her, and your father seems to have taken a fancy to her."

Griselda had said no more, but when the lady's name came up on Boxing Day between Ferdie and herself, Violet Walbridge remembered what her daughter had said. Her husband had had a sleep, she knew, but when she heard him moving about over her head, as she sat in the drawing-room sewing, she rose, folded her work and went upstairs. He was sitting in front of the dressing-table pouring some yellow liquid over his hair with one hand, while, with the other, he rubbed. The room smelt of orange flowers.

"Ferdie," she began, sitting down near him, "I want to have a little talk with you."

He frowned and set down his bottle. "Oh, dear me," he protested. "I do wish you'd let me alone. This is holiday time. No one wants to talk business at Christmas."

But she was firm, and put on her glasses, and opened the little notebook she had brought with her. "I'm sorry," she said, "but we really must settle matters. I'm sure I don't like it any more than you do, Ferdie, and, besides, what I have to say is—is very unpleasant, and difficult for me."

He stopped rubbing his wavy hair, which stood up tumbled all over his head, giving him an absurdly boyish, helpless look. "Don't tell me this cook's going to leave!" [Pg 146]

She shook her head. "No, it's worse than that. I've been worried for a long time now, but I didn't like to trouble you, because you weren't well—and then—the holidays, and Grisel coming home, and all. But I really can't put it off any longer."

So she told him, as he sat there at her little old dressing-table wrapped in a fine, new, brocaded

dressing-gown, that he had bought, he said, in Torquay, but which, nevertheless, she had seen, in folding it that morning, had been made by Charvet in Paris. He looked (although the simile didn't occur to her) like a rather battered Greek statue—rather injured and scratched old statue, not quite free from mould, and the effects of damp and sun, but the lines of him were splendid, and the late afternoon light very favourable.

She told him—and after the first he listened without comment—about the gradual decrease of her sales, and her slowly coming to realise that this was the result not only of the change in the taste of the younger generation, but of her own basic old-fashionedness.

"I tried, you know, to brighten up my style in 'Lord Effingham,' and I failed."

He looked at her oddly, as he sat with his chin on his breast. "I know," he said, not unkindly. "I was sorry about that. Of course, we're none of us as young as we used to be, Violet."

She was considered by her family to be unobservant, because she rarely mentioned the little things she saw, but she had always seen a good deal, and now she did not miss the satisfied little glance he gave to his face in the mirror. He felt, she knew, that he himself was the exception to that horrid rule about growing older, and for a moment she felt the ageing woman's exasperation at the greater stability of men's looks. Her exasperation, however, was very mild, and quite kindly.

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Then she showed him Messrs. Lubbock & Payne's letter, and explained about the five hundred pounds.

"How much have you got left of that?" he asked.

"Exactly two hundred. There was the quarter's rent, and the man called twice about the gas, so I had to pay him, and the piano bill came, and then there were your pyjamas, and Melton came himself about your last suits, and was really rather unpleasant, so I paid him twenty pounds on account. Then there was a little matter in which I had to help one of the boys."

She waited, expecting him to make some disagreeable remark about her eternal ability and willingness to go to the boys' rescue, but to her surprise he said nothing, and sat with folded arms, listening in silence.

"Grisel had to have one or two things," she went on, after a moment, "and then I wanted to help Maud get her things for the new baby, and Guy wanted ten pounds, poor boy. I've written it all down here. I'll leave it with you, Ferdie. And then Christmas, you know, was rather expensive, and I don't," she added honestly, "seem very clever at getting things cheap." Still he didn't answer, and something in his silence gave her a little sensation of fear. "Are you listening?" she asked timidly.

He rose and walked about the room, the tassels of his dressing-gown trailing after him, his head down. She had expected him to scold, even to rail at her, and she had gathered up her courage to meet such a scene, but this queer silence, and the unmistakable look of pity in his face were harder to bear than any amount of reproaches or anger would have been.

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She suddenly felt very old, and very tired, and very helpless. She had been independent and self-reliant for over a quarter of a century, ever since, in fact, she had first found out what her handsome husband really was. But now at this crisis she wanted—she longed for some kind, strong person to take the reins out of her weary hands and drive the coach for her for a while.

"You mean then," he said at last, "that if this new book fails, you—you won't be selling any others?"

She hesitated. "If this one should be good they *might* make another contract," she said. "I don't know. I'm afraid it's very bad, although it seems to come to me easily and quickly."

"But what are you going to do?" he asked, turning round and looking at her, still with that grave, disconcerting kindness that seemed so far off, as if it had nothing to do with him. She made a little gesture with her hands.

"I don't know, Ferdie. What do *you* think we had better do?"

"I think," he began slowly—then his face cleared. "There's the telephone bell," he cried. "It's—it's a man about a speculation. I'll just go down and see." He hurried downstairs. When he came back he was smiling, and had an almost silly aspect of happiness.

She caught her breath. What if, after all, now, when she had failed, Ferdie was going to be successful and make up for all her years of struggle! "Is it all right?" she asked.

"All right? Oh, yes." He sat down again and began to comb his hair, parting it with infinite care, skilfully avoiding, she noticed, the thin place at the crown.

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"I'll think all this over, my dear," he said hastily, as the clock struck half-past six. "I must dress now. We're dining early. By the way, I hope you aren't encouraging any nonsense with that journalist fellow—with Grisel, I mean."

"Oliver Wick? I shouldn't know how to encourage or discourage," she answered, "even if I wanted to do either. Times have changed since our day, Ferdie."

"My God, yes; they have indeed!" he agreed. "But there must be no nonsense about her marrying that boy. I thought she seemed a little lackadaisical and dull since we got back, and I heard her talking to him on the telephone this morning. It would be a great pity to throw her away on a little nobody like him." This was one of his ducal moments, and she never protested against his assumption that he belonged to the great ones of the earth. So she said nothing, and when he had

come back from turning on the water in the bathroom, she got up, knowing that he wished to be alone.

"Do you think—do you think you can think of something?" she asked, as she reached the door. "I was wondering if you would mind if we let the house and moved to some cheaper one."

"No, no, no," he burst out. "We'll do nothing of the kind. That's perfectly impossible."

A little touched by his unexpected vehemence, she smiled back at him.

"I didn't know you cared so much for poor old 'Happy House,'" she said.

"Run along, my dear girl. I must dress. Don't bother your head. Things will turn out all right. If I'm not very much mistaken, Sir John Barclay is going to ask Grisel to marry him. If he does, she'll be the luckiest girl alive."

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Mrs. Walbridge stared at him, her face a sudden, distressing red. "Oh, Ferdie! But he's an old man!"

Walbridge, who had reached the bathroom door, drew himself up, playing shoulders and chest, and his fine, big, muscular throat. "Nonsense! He's only fifty-four. *I'm* fifty-four!"

She nodded and said no more. He was fifty-five, but that didn't matter one way or the other, she felt.

As she went downstairs the telephone again rang and she answered it. It was Grisel, apparently in a great hurry.

"Mother, darling, I've just met Oliver, and he says he's coming to the house this evening—and I don't want to see him."

"Why, dear?" her mother asked, looking gently and kindly at the telephone.

"Well—I can't go into it on the telephone—I'm telephoning you from the Underground. Sir John Barclay is here. He was at the play too, you know, and I'm dining with him. Yes, alone. Yes I *am*, mother. No, I don't have to dress, we're going to a grill-room somewhere. Oh, please don't fuss!" The girl's voice was irritable and sharp. "Do you understand? Tell Oliver I can't get back."

"I shall tell him," Mrs. Walbridge said firmly, "that you're dining with Sir John Barclay."

Grisel made a little inarticulate sound, and then her mother heard her sigh impatiently. "All right. Just as you like. It doesn't matter, but for goodness' sake don't let him stay late. I must go now, darling. You'll make it all right, won't you? Good-bye."

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She rang off, and her mother stood looking at the telephone as if it were a human being, as most people have found themselves doing at one time or other.

She dined alone, not even seeing Walbridge before he slipped out while she was in her attic-room writing. Very soon after dinner Oliver arrived, and although he said little and insisted on being very merry, telling her some ridiculous stories, she had an unhappy evening. She had tried to avoid telling him where Grisel was, but it had been impossible, for there was something uncanny about him, he was such a good guesser, and as soon as she had explained that Griselda was out, he had known all about it.

"Dining with Sir John Barclay, I suppose, in some grill-room," he said shortly.

"Yes. He seems," she added, "to be a charming old gentleman."

"Oh, the devil! Old gentleman indeed!" he went on, without apologising. "I saw him to-day as they came out of the theatre. I knew where they were going, you see, and managed to get round there just as the play was out. He's a fine-looking man, and a gentleman, and I'd like to wring his neck."

"Surely," she said, not insincerely, for her husband's impressions were, she knew, not always very accurate, "why shouldn't an old man—for he is old compared to Grisel—like to take a pretty girl out to dinner?"

Wick cocked his head on one side, and deliberately shut one eye in a way that would have been vulgar if he had been vulgar himself.

"No, no, Mrs. Walbridge, that won't do, that won't do at all," he said, in a way that made her laugh. "You know as well as I do that Grisel's a minx. She's trying to make up her mind to marry Sir John Barclay because he's rich and she doesn't want to see me because——" he broke off suddenly and his voice changed to one of great softness, "she's almost half in love with me already."

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Mrs. Walbridge clasped her hands and looked at him nervously. "I don't think that's fair," she said, "to say that about a young girl."

"Oh, my hat! Anything's fair to a man who's fighting for his life—and that's me. Oh, yes. I know it sounds absurd and anyone but you would laugh at me. But I *am* fighting for my life, and what's more," he said with finality, rising as if to emphasise his speech, "I'm going to win. I'm going to get her. She's a spoilt, selfish, mercenary little minx, but I love her and I'm going to change her into an angel."

Mrs. Walbridge did not like to have her baby called mercenary, and spoilt, and selfish. Perhaps she liked it less for knowing that it was true, but the young man swept away her protests by further invective, and finally she was bound to admit that the girl's long stay with the rich and luxury-loving Fords had not done her any good. Wick smiled, and looked at the clock.

"Done her good! It's nearly ruined her. Most men would give her up in disgust since she's been back this time—but not me. I'll go now, or she'll be coming in."

They shook hands and as he got to the door he looked round with a comical groan. "If only," he said, "if only she wasn't so easy to look at."

CHAPTER XV

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Griselda, during several days, was hardly at home at all. The Fords were still in town; she had lunched one day in Queen Anne Street, the next at Campden Hill, and nearly every night the Fords fetched her to take her to a play or a party.

Mrs. Walbridge could, of course, have forced the girl into a confidential talk, but she was not of the kind who do force people to talk against their will, and it was very plain to her that her daughter was avoiding her, although the girl was oddly enough at the same time full of little sudden bursts of affection and unusually generous in the matter of little passing hugs and kisses for her mother.

Mrs. Walbridge was less troubled than she otherwise would have been by this preoccupation of her daughter, owing to the fact that she herself was very much taken up with the new book she was writing. She had made several attempts, for she felt weighed down with gratitude to her publisher in sending her the cheque before the book was written, and she had rather lost sight of the fact that this, kind though it was, was in reality a *douceur* to sweeten the hard fact of her dismissal from their list of authors. She had begun and destroyed several novels before she got really started, and now this new one was filling her mind day and night, although she felt grave doubts as to whether it was going to be good. It was dreadful to her to reflect that the book might turn out as much of a failure as "Lord Effingham" had been, and thus cause pecuniary loss to Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne. So she worked day and night, her pen flying over the paper in a way that roused Paul's grave doubts as to the results of her labour.

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"You can't possibly write a book that way, mother," the young man said one day when he had come up to her study to have her mend a glove that he had split. "You ought to see the way Collier writes. Works for hours over one bit, and weighs every word."

Mrs. Walbridge said nothing, for it would not have been any good, she thought. She did not express her conviction that the result of Mr. Bruce Collier's word-weighting was hardly worth while, but, as she stitched at the glove, the young man, who was in a good mood, went on, not unkindly, to encourage her, as he expressed it, to take more pains with her work. He did not know that her contract with Lubbock & Payne had come to an end, with no prospect of renewal. She had not again referred the matter to her husband, and he had not mentioned the subject to her. She was living in the curious isolation of a writer engaged in congenial work. She was deliberately allowing her mind to rest from pecuniary cares for a few days, in order that her novel might progress satisfactorily.

"You ought to work regularly," Paul explained. It was Sunday morning, and he looked very smart, turned out as he was for a luncheon party after church parade. "Collier does. And I met Miss Potter, who writes about mediæval Constantinople—her books sell enormously—and she told me that she writes as regularly as she eats her meals—two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. That's what keeps her brain so fresh."

Mrs. Walbridge, who had read one of the books in question and did not consider it remarkable for mental freshness, stitched silently, and bit off the thread with her sharp little teeth.

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"My dear boy," she said, "when you were children I wrote every afternoon for four solid hours. I couldn't write in the morning because I had to help make the beds, and do the marketing, and wash and dress you all, and get some of you off to school and others out for a walk with either poor Caroline, or Fanny Perkins. Then I had to cook your father's lunch myself, because he always had a delicate stomach; and when was I to do any work in the morning to keep my brain fresh?"

Paul was surprised. His mother so rarely defended herself, and he felt under the mild humorousness of her manner, a distinct appreciation of the fact that he had made rather a fool of himself by his admonition. Feeling more like a son, and less like a superior being than he had felt for some years, he drew on the gloves with a little laugh.

"I daresay you are right," he admitted. "I didn't realise all that. But whatever you did in those days you're certainly not writing like that on this book. Twice now when I've come in very late I've seen the light under this door, and you're looking very tired."

She *was* very tired, and her eyes filled with tears at the unexpected sign of interest.

"Will you be back to lunch? Oh, no. You told me you wouldn't. I'll walk over and get Caroline. A little fresh air will do me good."

He frowned. "Where's Grisel? I've not seen her for days. Doesn't she ever stay in nowadays?"

"She's lunching at the Henry Twisses with Moreton and Maud."

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"And where's father?" He glanced sharply at her as he spoke. She took up her pen and pulled a hair off its nib.

"I think he said he was lunching with the Crichells."

"No, he's not. Crichell went to Birmingham yesterday about his one-man show."

"Did he?" she said indifferently. "I wasn't really listening. Tell Jessie to call me at twelve, will you? I lose track of time," she added apologetically, "when I'm shut away up here."

The young man went out, and she settled down again to her work. The holidays were nearly over, and her book was approaching its end.

"I do hope," she said, as Jessie called her and she went down to dress for going to fetch Caroline Breeze, "I do hope it'll be good."

The house was very quiet. It struck her as she went downstairs, with her jacket and hat on, that it was quieter than a house ought to be with two young people living in it. She longed suddenly for Guy—her naughty boy. He was troublesome, but he was pleasantly noisy, and though he had no voice like Paul, she liked hearing him sing, and even whistle, as he went up and down the stairs, and his untidy hats and gloves in the hall looked friendly and hearty somehow.

She met Miss Breeze as she turned off Albany Street, and they walked back together.

"I've seen nothing of you lately," Miss Breeze complained pleasantly. "I was thinking in church this morning—during the sermon that is—that I should be glad when the holidays are over."

"It's more my book than the holidays. Oh, Caroline, I'm so worried about it."

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Miss Breeze, who was rather pathetically dressed for church in all her best clothes, looked anxiously down at her friend.

"Dear me, Violet, I do hope you've not been trying to write one of those horrid modern books. Mrs. Barker lent me several the other day, and I do think it's quite wrong to write such books. I read two of Rosa Carey's after them, just to take the taste out of my mouth."

Mrs. Walbridge shook her head. "Oh, no, of course I wouldn't do such a thing as that. But I'm afraid it isn't anything like so good as my best books, although I must say I'm enjoying writing it." She frowned in a puzzled way. "If only it could be good, and Mr. Lubbock would make a new contract with me!"

The two friends walked quietly on in the mild winter morning, discussing the probability of the new book pleasing Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne. It never occurred to Miss Breeze to ask to be allowed to look at the manuscript, nor to Mrs. Walbridge to suggest reading a part of it aloud to her. Mrs. Walbridge had never read one word of her own work aloud to a soul since the very early days in Tooting Bec, when she sat on a sofa with her, as yet, unchipped Greek god beside her, and read him the most sentimental bits of "Queenie's Promise."

The two women had a long quiet day together, and then, as no one came in at supper time, they had a boiled egg and a cup of tea apiece, and went out for a little walk in the dark, a mild pleasure to which Mrs. Walbridge was rather attached, although she had been very seldom able to gratify it, owing to the little trammels of family life. It gave her an indefinable pleasure to see the lights behind drawn curtains, and to catch an occasional glimpse of a cosy fire through forgotten windows; she liked to see people—happy, chattering people—opening their own house door with keys and going into the shelter and comfort of their own homes. There was a clear, poetic little thrill for her in a sight that exasperate many people—that of humble lovers bare-facedly embracing at street corners. Even overfed old ladies leading frightful pugs and moth-eaten Scotch terriers seemed to ring a little bell in her heart, but these, of course, were faces of the morning. However, there were several openings of doors that happened opportunely that evening for her benefit, and one charming picture of three white-shod, white-frocked children racing down a high flight of steps screaming with rapture at meeting their father who, when his hat was knocked off by their onslaught, revealed a bald and shining head, and a fat plebeian face, but whom the children obviously adored. The little Walbridges had never greeted their father in this way, and she rather envied the protesting mother, who stood at the top of the steps.

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"It's very pleasant walking at night," the kind Caroline, who really hated it, exclaimed, as this particular door closed on the happy family. And Mrs. Walbridge gave her arm a little squeeze and did not speak.

Caroline's tall and gaunt and forbidding person was yet shy and full of old-fashioned tremors. It caused her real fear to be out alone after nightfall, so Mrs. Walbridge accompanied her to her door, and went back to "Happy House" alone. She had forgotten her key, and so knocked on the panels of the door with her knuckles. Someone was in the drawing-room and was, she thought, sure to hear her. No one did hear at first, and, after a moment, she knocked again. Presently the door opened and Griselda let her in. The girl had been crying, and her usually smooth hair was untidy and damp-looking. But when they were in the drawing-room, and before her mother could ask her what was the matter, she burst into a little laugh.

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"Well, mother dear, you must give me your blessing, for I'm engaged to be married."

Mrs. Walbridge sat down and took off her glasses. She knew that the girl was on the verge of an uncontrollable breakdown, and it was her nature to discourage uncontrollable breakdowns.

"Are you, my dear?" she asked quietly. "Of course you've my blessing. I suppose it's Sir John Barclay. Haven't I had two daughters married before, and don't I know the signs?" Her little joke did its duty, and quieted Griselda.

"But you've never even seen him—Sir John—John I mean."

"I've heard about him from your father, and from Mrs. Ford. They say he's charming."

The girl rose and began to smooth her hair before the glass.

"He is," she said. "He's a darling. Oh, I forgot to show you this," and she held out her little left hand on which hung a huge ruby in a ring far too big for her. "It's got to be made smaller," she said. "Not the ruby, but the ring," and she laughed, and the laugh sounded more natural this time.

Mrs. Walbridge rose and kissed her. "Well, my dear," she said, "it'll be very funny to hear you called 'my Lady,' but I don't mind confessing to you that I think Sir John, however nice he may be, is a very lucky man. Come along, let's have a cup of cocoa."

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Both maids were out, so they went down into the quiet, clean kitchen, lit the gas-ring, and had a little feast such as they had had many times before.

Violet Walbridge had described hundreds of sentimental scenes between newly engaged girls and their mothers, but she did not herself behave in the least as one of her characters would have done, for, instead of provoking a scene, and confidences and tears, and a display of back hair, such as she had been rather fond of in her novels, she carefully avoided all reference to the signs of tears on her daughter's face, and they talked only of the most matter of fact aspects of the engagement. Sir John was going to Argentina as soon as the authorities would let him, it seemed, and wanted the wedding to be in September, immediately after he returned.

"I was awfully afraid," the girl added naïvely, "that he was going to marry me now, and take me with him to South America."

Her mother sipped her cocoa reflectively, and did not raise the question of the exact meaning of the word afraid.

"Oh, no," she said, "much nicer in every way to wait till he comes back. I think your father will be pleased; he seems to like him very much."

"Ye-e-e-s." Grisel looked up quickly from her ring, which she was twisting round her finger in the lamp light. "Oh, yes. Father will be pleased."

"They are great friends, aren't they?" her mother asked, as the clock struck half-past ten.

Grisel hesitated. "Well, I don't know that they are great friends," she said in a thoughtful voice. "Sir John is very different from father, you know. He's very dignified and rather stern, and he couldn't bear the Crichells. But father likes him, anyhow——"

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"Well, come along, dear, we must get to bed. I don't know where anyone in the household is, but they've got keys, of course."

"Poor mother, you've been alone all day." There was sudden compunction in Grisel's voice as they went up the dark stairs to the ground floor.

"Oh, no. I haven't. I've not been alone at all," the mother answered gaily. "Caroline came to lunch and stayed all the afternoon. I just walked home with her——"

She would have liked to go into her child's bedroom with her on that important evening of her life, and help her undress, and even brush her hair, as one of the mothers in her own books would have done. But though she was old-fashioned herself, she knew that her daughter was not. So they kissed on the landing, and separated for the night without any further display of sentiment. But it was a long, long time before Violet Walbridge slept that Sunday. At half-past twelve she crept out and saw the light still burning in Grisel's room, and at two she did the same thing. Finally, knowing that she could not sleep, she put on her dressing-gown and padded softly upstairs in her old felt slippers to the room in the attic, and, having lit her lamp, did two hours hard work, while the winter sky was gradually drained of its darkness, and the clear grey that is neither darkness nor light took the place of the night, to give way slowly, as if reluctantly, to the morning.

She wrote rapidly, her face white and sharp, bent over the paper. She had forgotten now her sad conviction of the book's worthlessness. Words came out in a torrent, as if independently of herself, and her hand struggled to keep up with her ideas. She knew that this was the wrong way to write—that the great novelists whom she so admired worked carefully, measuring their words, weighing each one as if it was a pearl—her own facility having always been like that of an older child telling tales by the fire to the little ones. She had connected the mediocrity of her work with this fatal ease of narration. She had been scorned kindly (for one of her troubles had never been that horrid one of envy and bitterness in the minds of others) for this effortless facility, and she knew it. But now she could no more have held back for what she called polishing her phrases than a little brook in full freshet forcing itself into a pool. On and on she wrote, forgetting fatigue, forgetting her troubles, forgetting everything but the fate of the people she was describing, and at last, just as the clock struck five, her pen wrote "finis" to her twenty-third novel, and laid itself down. She sat for a moment staring at the paper, suddenly very tired, and conscious that her feet were numb with cold. She went to the window and looked out into the livid unfriendly light, and then, stuffing the manuscript into the drawer of her table, she crept downstairs.

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As she went back to her room, it occurred to her that she had not heard Ferdie come in. He had slept on a camp bed in his dressing-room since his return, because of his cough, which, he said, troubled him a good deal at night.

She opened his door softly. He lay there asleep, with the growing daylight falling on his face. She stood for a moment, looking at him, wondering that she had not heard him come in, reproaching

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herself mildly for her indifference to him, and deliberately recalling him as he had been in the old days, when she first knew him.

How handsome he had been! She remembered the day—it was in winter too—when she had crept downstairs in the old house in Russell Street, and joined him in a musty, smelling, old "growler," that took them to the train for High Wycombe, where they had been married before lunch. Poor Ferdie! He had failed her utterly; she had suffered, and suffered silently; but as she looked at him there as he slept, her eyes filled with tears. He looked very lonely, very pathetic somehow, and helpless. The thin place shone out from his tumbled hair, and for a moment she was gripped by the helpless pathos of the briefness of life, of the inexorable march gravewards of every human being. Poor Ferdie, she thought again, as she went sadly back to bed.

She had no doubt failed him, too, and now they were both old.

CHAPTER XVI

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As Mrs. Walbridge went down to breakfast the next morning, she was conscious of a hope that Paul would not be too pleased about his sister's engagement. She had not stopped to analyse her feeling, but it was not an unkind one. For Paul to be greatly pleased, would, she knew, mean that the worst side of his nature was touched by the event. So it was with some relief that she found the young man and his sister in the dining-room quarrelling.

"It's disgraceful," he declared, as she opened the door. "He's nearly old enough to be your grandfather."

Mrs. Walbridge's heart gave a thump of pleasure at this speech, not that she dreamed of his words having any influence on Grisel, but because honest indignation over an abstract right or wrong was very rarely roused in her son.

"Paul, Paul," she said gently, as she rang the bell and sat down behind the old-fashioned, acorn-topped, silver-plated tea equipage. "Good-morning, children."

Grisel kissed her and sat down at her place near the door, the chair with its back to the fire had always been Paul's.

"My romantic brother feels that I am wasting my young life in marrying Sir John Barclay," she declared, laughing lightly.

Paul grunted, and unfolded the morning paper. "There are plenty of men who aren't beggars. I *do* call it disgusting of Grisel to marry an old man simply because he's rich." [Pg 165]

He looked younger and softer in his unexpected anger, and his mother's eyes rested on him with an odd expression of surprised relief. "He's right in theory, you know, darling," she agreed, turning to the girl. "Everybody'll say the same thing."

Grisel gave her ring a twist, and said nothing till the door had closed on the maid. Then she helped herself to butter. "Oh, I know. Crabbed age and youth—but Sir John—John, I mean—isn't crabbed—that's just the point. He's a perfectly charming man, and everyone says so, mother, and he's ever so young in some ways. He's worth," she added, with an odd little flush of humility, "worth a dozen of me."

"Nobody denies that," put in Paul, taking his tea from his mother. "You're a useless little baggage enough, everyone knows that. And I shouldn't say a word if there was any chance of you even really liking him, to say nothing of—of—" He broke off, and added gravely, as if he were making use of words that he feared, "of loving him."

His mother stared at him. "Why, what *do* you mean, Paul? You're being very rude, and it's wrong of you. Of course Grisel likes Sir John, and—and many women have loved husbands much older than themselves," she added shamefacedly, aware of her own duplicity, for she was a devoted believer in the union of youth to youth, and the growing old together of happy married couples. Whence she drew this romantic belief it would be hard to say, for the experience had certainly not come her way, and as it happened several of her married friends had come to grief. But it was her belief, and probably one of the secrets of the popularity of her books, for in her heyday people liked pleasant stories about pleasant people, who suffered, of course, through the machinations of the wicked, but who made their way steadily, through floods of tears, to the safe shores of the old-fashioned happy ending. [Pg 166]

"I suppose the old fellow wears a padded coat and stays," Paul went on, less angry now, and settling down to a solid enjoyment of tormenting his little sister.

"Ass! He's only fifty-two, and isn't a bit that kind."

"What kind?"

"Oh, well, trying to be young. A stale beau. He seems a mere boy, for instance, in some ways, beside father."

Paul scowled and said nothing. His mother had noticed several times of late that there was some kind of dissension between him and his father, but they had never been very friendly, no house being big enough for two absolutely selfish men, and their interests had always clashed. But during the last few weeks this antagonism had seemed to quicken into something more definite,

and Mrs. Walbridge wondered vaguely, as she ate her breakfast, what it meant.

Grisel, who was pale, was yet too young to bear in her face any ugly traces of her sleepless night, and she went through the meal with a kind of resolute gaiety. She was full of her own affairs, and declared her intention of ringing up the girls as soon as she had finished eating, and telling them the news.

"Maud and Moreton will be delighted," she declared. "They liked him so much that night, and he's giving Billy some kind of work, something in the City, that Billy says will be awfully useful to him, because Sir John is so well known. Billy and Hermy were frightfully pleased. Wasn't it kind of him?—of Sir John, I mean."

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"Oh, now she's experiencing the joys of patronage," commented Paul, spreading strawberry jam on his toast. "She'll be getting us all little jobs, mother. Oh, hell!"

He was not a young man who used bad language, and his mother was surprised as well as shocked at it. But before she could remonstrate the door opened, and Ferdie came in, pale and tired-looking, with heavy eyes and nervous twitching of his eyebrows, that boded evil things for his companions.

Grisel looked at him sharply, and Paul, turning, fixed his eyes so unswervingly on his father's face that his father snapped at him.

"What the deuce are you glaring at?"

"You," said the young man, coolly. "It's no good, Guv'nor, you can't keep it up at your time of life. You'll be as plain as the rest of us if you go on like this."

His words were not so offensive to his mother as they would have been to most women, as addressed by son to father, for Ferdie Walbridge's character was such that though his children undoubtedly had a certain pride in him because of his good looks, and a kind of affection that was not empty of pity, he had never, even when they were very little children, inspired the least fear or even respect in them.

She looked, however, anxiously from one to the other of the three faces round the table, and was relieved when Grisel, with a little determined air of excitement, held out her left hand, and waved it under her father's swollen, surly eyes.

"Look at that, oh beau sabreur," she cried, "and behold the future Lady Barclay, and rejoice."

"Hallo, hallo!" His boorishness disappeared like a flash, and a surprising amount of boyish beauty and delight rested on his face for a moment, like the light from a passing torch. He kissed her and murmured a few words of delight and sympathy, and taking up his cup walked about the room, sipping tea and talking to himself as much as to the others.

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"Good girl, good girl—you'll be very happy—Sir John Barclay's a fine man. I knew it. I saw it coming! I'm not surprised. Violet, what did I tell you? Well, are you proud of your baby, old woman?"

He gave his wife a rough thump on the back as he passed her chair. "He's a baronet too. Delightful fellow, delightful." He stopped short, drawing himself up and preening in the way that was half infuriating and half pathetic. "Fancy his being *my* son-in-law with that white hair!"

Mrs. Walbridge really could not bear him when he did that, so she rose, ashamed of her feeling of disgust, and went out of the room.

Presently she heard the door slam, and knew that Paul had left. So, after her daily interview with the cook, she went up to her study, and sat down to think. Sir John Barclay would be coming to-day to see her, and the interview would be a difficult one for her, for she was ashamed of her daughter's decision; she was a bad liar, and she had always shunned with a kind of fastidious pain, the sight of an old man in love with a young girl. Then, too, there was Oliver, and her intimate knowledge of him. Poor Oliver! He would be coming, and he would have to be told, and his queer face would have that dreadful look of pain in it, and then he would laugh and be ridiculous, and that would be still worse. She wished Ferdie would say something to her about their business affairs, but he hadn't said a word. He seemed able to put troublesome thoughts clean away out of his mind, but she couldn't. What was to become of them all? If only this book would please Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne!

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She heard the telephone bell ring faintly, and opening the door after a moment heard the sound of Grisel's voice a little high and unnatural, it seemed to her.

"He's the greatest dear," the girl was saying. "I knew you and Moreton would be glad."

Mrs. Walbridge closed the door, and sat down. She was so used to moulding events in her novels that it seemed to her intolerable and almost ridiculous that in real life, in this matter of her little daughter, for instance, events so obstinately refused to be moulded. She ought to be able to make Oliver Wick suddenly rich enough to snatch her away from this monstrous old man, who coveted her youth and beauty. Unconsciously Mrs. Walbridge had fallen into the language of her novels—and love should triumph among roses in the last chapter. But now she could do nothing. Grisel had made her choice, and the old monster was to triumph. Her only comfort in this dreary reverie was that Paul, selfish, hard Paul, should unconsciously have taken sides with her in her hatred of the marriage. She had never understood Paul. He was to her not so much like a closed book as like a book written in a foreign language of which she knew only a word or two here and there. She had expected him to be pleased, because of Sir John Barclay's riches, and lo and behold he was as displeased as she was, and full of a regret that, though bitterly expressed, was, she knew,

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based on a genuine sentimental disapproval of mercenary marriages.

After a while she opened the drawer of the table and took out the manuscript, and, more in the hope of forgetting for a while about Grisel than for anything else she began to read it. How flat it was! How dull! The people were all unnatural; their language silly and vulgar. Her face settled into lines of utter misery as she read. Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne would never publish such stuff. She heard a clock strike once or twice as she sat reading. The sound conveyed nothing to her. On and on she read, and when finally the page with "finis" caught her eye she realised that it must be late, and started up guiltily. Her misery was too deep for tears, but as she closed the door on the failure she spoke aloud to herself. "Written out," she said slowly. "That's what it is. I'm old, and I'm written out."

Early that afternoon a woman who lived on the same landing as Miss Breeze, came to "Happy House" with a note.

Caroline was in bed with a bad go of asthma, and would Violet come to see her? Mrs. Walbridge went to the girls' room, where Griselda was writing notes, and told her.

"Poor Caroline! I suppose I ought to go, dear, but I don't want to miss Sir John when he comes."

Grisel, who had been very gay and full of laughter all day, looked up sombrely.

"Oh, he won't be here before tea-time, I should think," she said. "He's very busy, you know. Besides, father's in. Don't stay long. It'll be all right."

"Writing letters, are you?" her mother asked foolishly.

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She nodded. "Yes. Ever so many people I've got to tell, of course. Looks so silly written down. 'I know you will be glad to hear,' 'I'm sure you will be surprised when I tell you'"—she jabbed viciously at a clean sheet of paper with her pen, sending a spray of ink across it.

"Have you written to Oliver Wick?"

"No, I haven't. He's such a goose. I thought perhaps you would write to Mrs. Wick."

"You must write and tell him at once, daughter," Violet Walbridge said sternly, and Grisel did not answer.

Caroline Breeze thought her friend looked very tired, and though she didn't say so, very plain, when she came in to her bedroom, a small bunch of asters in her hand. Miss Breeze had been ill, but felt better now, and was sitting up in bed smoking a medicated cigarette, the smell of which was very dreadful to Mrs. Walbridge. To her surprise, the sentimental Caroline was rapturous with delight over the news of the engagement. Darling Grisel, she was sure, would be very happy. "Better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave," she cried.

"No young man wanted her to be his slave," protested Mrs. Walbridge, with mild horror.

"That Oliver Wick did." Caroline had never liked the young Mr. Wick, Violet knew, because, plain and unalluring old woman that she was, she resented the young man's lack of beauty. He failed in every way to come up to her standard of a lover, and Grisel, of all the "Happy House" children, having been her special care and pet, she felt that she had a kind of right to object to such an unattractive and penniless young man venturing to approach the girl, who was nearer to her than any young thing in the world.

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"She'll pay for dressing, too, Grisel will," Caroline declared, shaking her head vigorously, and inhaling the thick yellow smoke from her cigarette. "Where are they going to live? I suppose he'll be getting her a house in one of the swell squares. Berkeley Square would be my choice," she added. "By the way, Violet, it's a splendid name, Barclay. I wonder if he's any relation to—isn't there an earldom of that name?"

Violet shook her head. "I'm sure I don't know," she said indifferently. "I do wish he was younger. Why, he's older than I am, Caroline!"

"Fudge and nonsense! Fifteen years younger, to all intents and purposes. Besides, Ferdie told me one day that he has magnificent health. That always makes a difference, to say nothing of his money," she added vaguely. "It'd be lovely to have someone in the family with plenty of money."

"It won't make much difference to us," commented Mrs. Walbridge.

"No, of course not, but still—oh, Violet, I do hope they'll like the book! By the way, I was reading a paper yesterday about a girl who got a prize in some competition. She only got the fourth prize, and it was a hundred pounds! Why don't you try for one of them?"

Mrs. Walbridge was humbled-minded, but she had her pride. "I saw that thing. It was some rubbish that they print in pale blue paper covers—scullery maid's romance!"

Caroline bridled. "I'm sure I didn't mean to offend you. As far as that's concerned, there are a lot of competitions, and some very good writers write for them. Harbottle's offering a thousand pounds for a good novel, to start off his new five shilling edition."

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But Mrs. Walbridge was not to be beguiled into paths of speculative dalliance. "I'm writing my book, as you know, for Lubbock & Payne," she said, "and even if I had a chance of winning a prize, which I haven't, it wouldn't be honest to offer my book to anybody else."

The talk then turned again to Grisel and her prospects.

Somehow, although her dear old friend had done her best to cheer her up, it was with a very flagging heart that Mrs. Walbridge reached "Happy House" at tea-time.

She was afraid to face in her own mind the latent fear she had about Oliver Wick. But she was tired, and could not put him resolutely out of her mind, and she looked a very weary, faded little creature, on the very verge of old age, as she toiled up the steps and opened the door.

Voices upstairs in the girls' room. She went up a few steps and listened. Yes, there was a man's voice she had never heard before. Sir John Barclay had come.

For a moment she thought of going to her own room and putting on her afternoon dress. She knew how shabby she looked; she had on her oldest hat, for the afternoon had looked threatening, and she had not touched her hair since the early morning. Then, with a little sigh, she went straight on. It wouldn't matter to this prospective bridegroom that his lovely little sweetheart's mother was a dowdy old woman; and she was tired, and wanted a cup of tea more than anything in the world. So, without pausing, she opened the door and went in.

Maud and Hermy were both there, and they were all sitting round the tea-table at which Grisel, very flushed and excited and pretty, presided. The stranger sat with his back to the door. She had only time to see that it was a straight, broad, strong back, surmounted by a well-shaped head, covered with thick white hair, when the girls saw her and rose in a little covey, fluttering towards her with cries of excitement and affection.

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"Oh, mother, isn't he delightful?" Maud whispered as she kissed her, and Hermione's face expressed real unselfish sympathy and happiness. And then Grisel, taking her by the hand, smiled over her shoulder.

"Come, John," she said, "this is mother."

The big man stood still in the middle of his advance, a puzzled, queer look in his face, which even looked, she noticed, a little pale.

"Isn't it," he began, and broke off. Then he came up to her and held out his hands. "Surely," he said, slowly, "you used to be Miss Violet Blaine?"

"Yes." She was staring at him with utter amazement, so strange was his manner, and the three young women were also staring.

"What do you mean, John?" Griselda burst out, after a pause that seemed interminable. "What's the matter?"

Then the man laughed, gave himself a little shake and taking Mrs. Walbridge's hand, bent and kissed it with a grace that proved that he had lived long in some Latin country.

"Nothing's the matter," he said, in a pleasant deep voice, "except that I knew your mother over thirty years ago, and I hadn't realised that you were her child."

They all sat down, the three girls chattering in amazed amusement and amused amazement. The two elders said little, and then, when Mrs. Walbridge had been given her cup of tea and drunk a little of it, she looked up with her big clear eyes at the man who was going to marry her daughter.

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"It seems very rude," she said gently, "but you know I don't remember you! Are you quite sure you are not mistaken?"

"Why, how can he be, Mum, when he knew your name?" laughed Hermione. "Do tell us about it, Sir John."

Barclay crossed his knees and folded his arms. He was a man with a fine, smooth shaven face of the kind that might belong equally well to either a very fine actor or a judge. His light blue eyes had a fair and level gaze, and his finest feature, his mouth, was strong and benevolent, with well-set corners, and firmness without harshness.

"It's quite natural," he said to Mrs. Walbridge, "that you should not remember me. We met just before I went to the Argentine, as it was then called, thirty-one years ago, at the house of some people named Fenwick, near High Wycombe. You were staying in the house, and my father was the dean of the parish, and the Fenwick boys and girls were my best friends. We had a picnic to Naphill, and danced, and we drove on a brake to Chalfont St. Giles to see Milton's house. Now do you remember?"

A deep, beautifying flush swept across the face under the deplorable old hat. "I remember the picnic perfectly. A bottle of cold tea got broken and ruined somebody's frock, do you remember? And I remember Milton's house, but," she shook her head a little embarrassed but truthful, "I'm awfully sorry, but I can't remember you."

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There was a little pause, during which his fine face did not change.

"You were very preoccupied, I think," he added. "You weren't particularly happy at the time, and I was only a long-legged loon of a boy of twenty-one. But I remember," he went on, "I've always remembered."

"Well, then, darling, you won't mind having Sir John as a son-in-law, will you?"

It was Hermione who spoke. She was always the readiest of speech, being the least fine of feeling of the three girls, and the slight strain that lay on them all merged away at her commonplace words.

Sir John took his leave a few minutes later, and as he shook hands with Mrs. Walbridge, he

looked down at her very kindly, very gently. The three others had gone into the bedroom on purpose to leave the two elders alone a moment.

"She's very young, you know," Violet Walbridge said, without preliminary.

"I know. I shall never forget that." And she felt as she went to her own room that he had made her a solemn and very comforting promise.

CHAPTER XVII

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To Mrs. Walbridge's surprise and relief, Oliver Wick made no sign for several days, although she herself had written to his mother on some pretext and mentioned the engagement in a casual reference that she regarded as very dishonest, though necessary, and probably useful. The morning of New Year's Eve an answer to her note had come from old Mrs. Wick, and she read it several times.

"Dear Mrs. Walbridge,—Thanks very much for your note telling me of the engagement. I am sure you will be glad to know that that queer son of mine is not coming to 'Happy House' at present. He's very unhappy, less I think because he has given up hope of marrying Grisel, than because he is disappointed in her for becoming engaged to a man he is convinced she does not love. I can tell you this quite frankly because he is so fond of you that I am sure you know him well and will understand.

"He is as much like a fussy old mother as a lover in his attitude towards your daughter. He does so resent her knowing and liking people he despises, such as that poor Mr. and Mrs. Ford, for instance, and the Crichells. I met Mrs. Crichell the other day at the Leicester Galleries. She's certainly very pretty, but as I saw from your face that you dislike her, I don't mind telling you that I do too. There's something very unpleasant about her. However, it's very rude of me to abuse your acquaintances, so I'll stop.

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"Jenny will be seeing your son New Year's Day, as she's going to accompany him in some songs at Mrs. Gaskell-Walker's, so we hope to hear good news of you all then.

*"Yours sincerely,
"FRANCES WICK."*

Oliver carried out his intention, and nothing was seen of him at "Happy House" for some time. Things went very smoothly. Grisel seemed happy, and Sir John's devotion to her seemed to her mother exactly what it should have been—neither slavish nor domineering, without that touch of patronage, so often seen in old men, however much they may be in love, towards their young sweethearts. He had never again referred to their early acquaintance, and Mrs. Walbridge was conscious of a sincere regret that, do what she would, she could not recall him as a youth to her memory.

He was very kind to every one of the family, and Walbridge very often lunched with him at his Club in the City, and spoke vaguely of good things he had been put on by his prospective son-in-law. Walbridge never lost sight of the joke of his (Ferdinand Walbridge) being father-in-law to a man of Barclay's age. But he seemed very disposed to make every possible use of Barclay's experience and kindness.

One day, towards the end of January, Mrs. Walbridge sat by the fire in the drawing-room, working hard at her new book. It was bitterly cold, so cold that she had been obliged to come down from her study in the attic.

Guy, who had been detained in Paris on some regimental business, greatly to his own disgust, had written that he was coming back in a few days, and Mrs. Walbridge's feelings as she sat there in the quiet house, more nearly approached happiness than she had felt for a long time. Griselda, who had been lunching with Maud at her mother-in-law's house, had not come in, and apparently a long, quiet afternoon was before Mrs. Walbridge. Her new book, after all, was going on fairly well, and Mr. Payne had written her a very kind letter in reply to her explanation about her failure with the other one, and he had given her an extension of time that promised to make the completion of "Rosemary" an easy matter. She wrote on and on, and then suddenly, in the middle of her work, and rather to her disappointment, Sir John Barclay was announced by the proud Jessie.

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"I'm afraid I'm disturbing you," he said kindly, sitting down by the fire and warming his hands. "Are you working on your book? I've just had news calling me to Scotland. Where's Grisel?"

She explained, saying that Grisel had gone to Maud. "You're sure to find her there."

He nodded. "All right. I'll go and take her out to dinner, and she can take me down to the station, and then Smith can drive her home." He looked at his watch. "It's only half-past four. You're sure I'm not disturbing you? Would you rather have me go?"

"Oh, no. Ring the bell and I'll give you some tea. Yes, I'm working at my book," she went on. "I've got to get it done as soon as I can; the publishers want it."

He looked very kind and interested as he sat there, his handsome head turned towards her, his strong hands held up to the fire—so kind, that suddenly she found herself telling him about her

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other book, "Lord Effingham"—the failure.

"I'd worked so hard at it," she said, "and it seemed to go well—although I never liked it much; it wasn't a very nice book. And then when I read it through I saw how hopelessly bad it was."

He pleased her by accepting her verdict without flattery and contradiction.

"Perhaps you were too tired. You seem to me to have a great many different duties——"

She shook her head. "No, I wasn't tired, and I've always been used to writing in a hugger-mugger kind of way," she added, with a simple vanity that touched him. "I could always concentrate."

"Who are your publishers?" he asked after a moment. "Oh, yes, good men—good men. I'm not much of a novel reader myself, but of course I know their name."

And then to her own surprise she told him the tragedy of the expired contract. He listened attentively, his whole mind fixed on her story. When she had finished he put one or two shrewd questions to her, and reflected over her answers, after which he said: "I may as well tell you that I knew this before, Mrs. Walbridge."

She started.

"Oh, did you? Do you know them—Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Payne, I mean?"

"No. Your husband told me several weeks ago."

Something in his face betrayed to her his distaste either at Walbridge's confidence or the manner in which it had been made, and she flushed faintly. For Ferdie had, she knew, often disgusted people.

He looked at her thoughtfully, and then to her surprise his face changed, and with a very young smile he broke out: "After all, you've changed very little!" [Pg 181]

"Oh, Sir John! I'm an old woman," she protested sincerely, "and I was only a child then."

He nodded.

"I know. The outside of you has changed, of course, but you're much the same in other ways. For instance, you are still worrying to death about something—that business of the book, I suppose—just as you were then. I remember one day in the vicarage garden we had been playing tennis, I tried to persuade you, silly young cub that I was, to confide in me."

"Oh," she cried suddenly, clasping her hands, "didn't you wear a red blazer—red and white stripes? And hadn't you some ridiculous nickname?"

"Good. You've remembered. I am glad." He threw his head back and laughed, and she liked the shine of his white teeth in the firelight. "Of course I had. They called me 'Scrags.'"

She was silent for a little while, and he knew that she was seeing again the shabby old rectory garden with its roses and hollyhocks, and its lumpy tennis lawn, and himself, the youth in the scarlet blazer.

"It was my old school blazer," he told her in a gentle voice, not to interrupt too much the current of her thoughts. "I remember it was too short in the arms, and I was rather ashamed of it. I thought," he added whimsically, "that you might laugh at it."

"I?" The gentle astonishment in her eyes amused him.

"Yes, you. Some day I'll tell you about it, but not now. I've a piece of good news for you," he added. "Your husband and I had a long talk this morning, and as his present business arrangements seem rather unsatisfactory, and as I happen to need a—kind of partner in one of my little business concerns, I've persuaded him to take the position. It's nothing very brilliant," he went on hurriedly, frightened by the change in her face. "Only five hundred a year, but he seems to think he would prefer it to this present work he is doing——" [Pg 182]

The look she turned on him was astonishingly like a look of anger, and for some reason it delighted him in its contrast to her husband's easy gratitude. He hated scenes, and was not very well versed in the ways of women, but for reasons of his own his heart sang as she rose.

"I understand very little about business," she said coldly. "But it's very kind of you to give a position to my husband. I think, if you will excuse me, I will leave you now. I am sure Grisel will be back here soon, and I've a seamstress upstairs."

Instead of going to fetch her, he waited there over an hour for Grisel, walking up and down the room, and without visible impatience.

When his little sweetheart arrived she ran upstairs for a warmer coat for they were going to motor. She was gone some time and when they were in the car and he had tucked her luxuriously up in a big rug of flexible dark fur she explained to him why she had kept him waiting.

"It was poor mother. Something's upset her. She was crying—actually crying. I don't think I've ever seen my mother cry before. There she was, face down on her bed, just howling like a child——"

He winced. "You must learn, dearest," he said gently, "not to tell me things I have no business to know."

She looked up at him through her long lashes and laughed wickedly. "Perhaps if you try long enough," she returned, "you'll make a lady of me." [Pg 183]

But his face remained grave. "Your mother," he said, "is a splendid woman, my dear. I've a very

great admiration for her."

Griselda loved her mother; most girls do love their mothers, but this homage, from a man she admired and respected so much, surprised her.

"Mother? Little old Mum?" she repeated naïvely. "She's a dear, of course——"

Barclay looked down at her.

"You'll think me an awful old fogey," he said slowly, "but I do seriously wish, my little dear, that you would show a little more—well, understanding, for your mother—to her, I mean."

"Oh, it's *you* who don't understand," she returned as gravely as he. "I understand, we all do, a great deal more about mother than she could bear to know. Father's always been a beast, but we have to pretend to her that we don't know it——"

They drove on, a little closer together mentally than they had ever been before. Griselda had been very sweet, very womanly, for that short moment, and she, for her part, had, for a brief time, been able to regard him less as the old man she was going to marry for his money, than as a kind and companionable contemporary.

Meantime Mrs. Walbridge had another guest. She had gone up to her writing room, and was working on her new book, when Jessie announced that Mr. Crichell was in the young ladies' room.

"Mr. Crichell?"

"Yes, m'm, and he's in a great hurry."

"Didn't he ask for master?"

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"No, m'm," the girl returned with decision, "he asked for you, quite partic'lar, m'm."

It struck Mrs. Walbridge as odd that Crichell should have asked for her, for she hardly knew him. But she smoothed her hair and turned down her sleeve, calling out to Jessie as she went to bring up some more tea.

"Not for me, Mrs. Walbridge," Crichell began, hearing her last words. "No tea, thanks. I've come on a—very unpleasant errand."

She saw that he was very much disturbed, his sleek face being blurred by queer little dull red patches. Sitting down by the fire she motioned him to do the same. But he remained standing, his short legs far apart, his hands behind his back.

"What I have to say will be painful to you," he went on hurriedly. "But it's no worse for you than it is for me. In fact, not so bad, for you must have had some kind of an idea——"

He broke off, seeing from her face that she had even now no notion of what he was driving at.

"I don't understand at all," she said quietly. "Do sit down, Mr. Crichell."

"It's no good beating about the bush," he resumed, still standing. "It's just this. I'm—I'm going to divorce my wife, and Walbridge will be co-respondent."

"Walbridge?" she repeated stupidly, staring at him with what he viciously called to himself, the face of an idiot. "My husband?"

"Yes, your husband—and my wife's lover. Pretty little story, isn't it?" As she was about to speak, he went on, purposely lashing himself, it struck her, into a fury. "I've suspected something for a long time. Haven't you?"

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She shook her head. "No." But as she spoke she remembered certain half-forgotten little happenings that might have roused her curiosity had she been more interested in her husband.

"Now don't tell me it isn't true, because it is," he snapped, again interrupting her as she was about to speak.

She was very sorry for him, and looked at him compassionately as he stood there twisting and waving his white hands.

"I'm not going to tell you it isn't true, Mr. Crichell," she answered gently. "I suppose it is, and I'm very, very sorry for you."

Swamped as he was by hurt egotism, he did not fail to observe the peculiarity of her attitude.

"Very kind of you," he muttered, at a loss. "I—I am sorry for you, too. In fact, we're in rather a ridiculous position, you and I, aren't we?" His loud laugh was very shrill, and she held up her hand warningly.

"Hush."

Then he sat down and told her the story. How for months, ever since the late summer, in fact, he had noticed a change in his wife.

"She always had a lot of boys buzzing about and it never occurred to me to suspect Walbridge. I—why he's twenty years older than I am—or near it. I came up and down to town a good deal, and knew they used to see a good deal of each other, but, as I say, the fact of his age blinded me, damn him! Then, a week ago, that night here, I—I caught them looking at each other, and when I got back from seeing my mother—(it was Clara, by the way, who told my mother where we were going to be, and put her up to telephoning for me), I took the trouble to find out what time she had got home, and found that he had come back with her and stayed till three o'clock."

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Mrs. Walbridge started. That was the morning when she had stood by her husband's bedside watching him as he lay asleep.

"So after that—my God, it's only a week ago!—I kept my eyes open, and to-day I found these."

He pulled a bundle of letters out of his breast pocket, and tossed them into her lap. The letters were tied with a piece of yellow ribbon, and taking hold of them by the ribbons, Mrs. Walbridge held them out to him.

"I don't want to see them," she said.

"You'd better—to convince you."

"But I am convinced."

He rose solemnly, and put the letters back into his pocket.

"Then I'll not detain you any longer. I thought I'd better come and tell you myself."

At the door he turned.

"Dirty trick, wasn't it? Seen enough of women to know better. But I trusted her——"

They stared at each other for a moment, and then he came back into the room.

"I'm very sorry for you, too," he said awkwardly. "You take it so quietly that I rather forgot——"

She laughed a little. "Perhaps," she said, "you'll think better of it—of divorcing her. There are so many things to be considered, Mr. Crichell."

But at this his fury rose again, and he shouted that nothing in heaven or earth would prevent his divorcing her. "And you'll have to do the same," he added, almost menacingly.

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"Why should I divorce my husband?"

"Surely you don't want him after this?"

"I want him," she replied very slowly, as if feeling for the right words, "exactly as much as I've wanted him for many years, Mr. Crichell."

As she spoke they heard the rattle of a latchkey in the front door.

"That's Ferdie," she said hastily. "Oh, you won't have a quarrel with him, will you?"

"No. I've already seen him—I've nothing more to say. How can I get out without meeting him?"

With pathetic knowledge of her husband, she bade him stay where he was.

"I'll tell him you're here, and he'll go into the dining-room."

At the foot of the stairs she met Walbridge taking off his coat, a curiously boyish look in his face. "Ferdie," she said quietly, "Mr. Crichell's in the girls' room."

With a little smile of almost bitter amusement, she watched him as he tiptoed into the dining-room and closed the door.

When Crichell had gone she joined her husband. He was smoking and walking up and down, a glass of whisky and soda in his hand.

"Well," he began at once, with the little nervous bluster of the man who doubts his own courage, "I suppose he's told you."

"Yes, he's told me," and then she added, without seeing the strangeness of her words. "I'm so sorry."

He stared, and then, with a little laugh of relief, drained his glass and set it down.

"It had to be," he announced with visible satisfaction at the romantic element of the situation.

"But I'm sorry, too, Violet, very sorry. I've fought long and hard."

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She looked at him with a little gleam in her eyes that arrested his attention, although he told himself it could not possibly be a gleam of amusement.

"No, Ferdie," she said, "I don't think you fought long and hard. I don't think you fought at all."

Looking pitifully like a pricked balloon, he dropped into a chair and gripped the edge of the dining-room table.

"What do you mean, Violet? *Really!*" he murmured, with the indignation of a sensitive man confronted with a feminine lack of delicacy.

"Oh, I don't want to hurt your feelings, Ferdie, and no doubt you do feel extremely romantic. But it would save time if you didn't try to be romantic with me. You see, I know you very well."

Before he could gather his wits together to answer her, she had gone on quietly:

"I won't tell you what I think of your treating Mr. Crichell in this way, after accepting his hospitality all winter. It would not do any good, and it wouldn't interest you. But I am wondering if you couldn't persuade him, in some way, not to make a scandal. Don't interrupt me. Wait a minute. It will be so dreadful for her—for Mrs. Crichell, I mean. How could you have been so careless as to let him find out?"

Walbridge leant across the table towards her, his face almost imbecile in his open-mouthed amazement.

"Do you—do you know what you are talking about?" he stammered. "Are you sane at all? I never

heard of such a thing in my born days."

"Oh, yes, I'm sane enough. But I don't want the children to know. It's an awfully bad example for Guy; he'll be home in a day or two. Just think, he's only twenty-one, and he doesn't know—I mean he thinks—oh, yes, it would be awful if there was a scandal."

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Ferdinand Walbridge made a great effort and managed to scramble to his feet, mentally as well as physically.

"My dear," he said, modulating his beautiful voice with instinctive skill, "you don't understand. This is not an amourette. I *love* Clara Crichell. It is the one wish of my life to make her—to marry her."

For many years her indifference to her husband had been so complete, so unqualified by anything except a little retrospective pity, that he had never dreamed of the thoroughness of her knowledge of him. She had never cared to let him know; she had been busy, and it had not seemed worth while, and now she found difficulty in making him understand her position, without unnecessarily hurting his feelings.

"But you can't marry her," she said slowly. "There's *me*."

"Surely you'll not be so wicked as to ruin our lives," he went on, secretly, she knew, rather enjoying himself, "because of an old-fashioned, obsolete prejudice? What's divorce nowadays? A mere nothing."

"I know," she said wearily, for she felt suddenly very tired. "Most people think so, but I don't."

"But you don't mean to say that you want a man who no longer loves you?"

It was nearly six o'clock, and the room was lighted only by firelight. In the charitable gloom Walbridge looked very handsome, and the attitude he instinctively struck was not unbeautiful theoretically. She looked at him for a moment.

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"My dear Ferdie," she said at last, "I can't talk any more now because Hermy and Billy and Mr. Peter Gaskell-Walker are dining with us at half-past seven, and I've several things to see to. And as to your loving me, you know perfectly well that you've not loved me for nearly thirty years."

He was too utterly baffled to find a word in reply, and by the time he could speak she had left the room.

As he dressed for dinner, having unsuccessfully tried to get into her room, he reflected with sincere self-pity that it was small wonder he had fallen in love with a beautiful, sympathetic woman like Clara. Violet was plainly not quite sane. He gave a vicious jerk to his tie as he reached this point.

"Why, damn it all," he muttered, "she doesn't seem to care a hang!"

CHAPTER XVIII

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All this happened on a Thursday, and on the following Wednesday Mrs. Walbridge went out quietly, and sent a telegram to Oliver Wick's office, asking him to come and see her that evening. She was to be alone—alone, it seemed to her distracted mind, for the first time for weeks. For every day and all day some one or other of her family had been with her, trying to persuade her to do the thing her soul detested—to divorce her husband.

Maud was very vehement. Her indignation with her father knew no bounds, and Moreton Twiss agreed with his wife. He was a quick-witted man, with a good gift of words, that he poured out unmercifully over the poor little lady, until she felt literally beaten to death.

"It's perfectly disgusting of him," Maud interrupted once. "I should think you would loathe the sight of him. I'm sure I do."

But Mrs. Walbridge did not loathe the sight of her husband. That is, she did not loathe him appreciably more than she had done for years. They might say what they liked. Billy Gaskell-Walker, too, to her amazement, broke into the most hideous, strange language the moment the subject of his father-in-law came up—called him all the names under the heavens. But nothing made any difference. Paul might sneer and make his most razorlike remarks about his father and the lady whom he wished to make their stepmother; Grisel might cry and beg her mother for her sake to put her father clean away.

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"It's like a bad rat, or something," the girl said in her high fastidiousness. "He makes the house unpleasant."

But rail, scorn, revile as they might, Mrs. Walbridge had her standpoint, and stuck to it. She did not believe in divorce, and she wasn't going to divorce her husband. What was more, after three days of exasperated wrangling discussion, she surprised them all by bidding them be quiet.

They were having tea, all of them, in the girls' room. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, and the two sons-in-law and Paul were drinking whisky and soda. Mrs. Walbridge, looking very small in the corner of the big sofa, suddenly sat bolt upright and looked angrily round at them.

"Oh, hold your tongues, all of you," she cried in a voice of authority. "You mustn't speak of him like that. I won't have it. He's my husband, not yours. Poor fellow!"

They all stared at her as if she had taken leave of her senses, which, indeed, one or two of them privately believed she must have done.

"Oh, mother, how can you?" It was naturally Griselda, the baby, who dared defy her. "You don't seem to realise what an utter beast he's been, and how we all loathe him for treating you—yes, *you*—like this."

"Poor fellow, indeed! Have a little pride, mother," suggested Paul, as if he had said "have a little marmalade." But she didn't waver.

"Yes, poor fellow. I'm extremely sorry for him. You none of you seem to realise what a pitiful thing it is for an old man, the father of a family of grown-up children, to be making such a ridiculous spectacle of himself." [Pg 193]

Literally aghast, they stared, first at her, then at each other, and in the silence she marched in triumph out of the room. Her misery was very great, in spite of the queerness of her attitude, for she felt keenly the pathos of her utter detachment of attitude, and her mind was thrown back violently into the old days thirty years before, when she had loved him, when she had believed in him, and defied and given up her whole little world for his sake.

Poor Sir John Barclay still remembered her unhappiness and preoccupation in the old days that summer at High Wycombe, but she had not told him she had been suffering because she had been sent to the country by her furious father to get her away from Ferdinand Walbridge. He did not know how she had hoped against hope that Walbridge would, by some means, find out where she was and get a letter to her, or manage to see her. She had almost forgotten these things herself, until this business of Clara Crichell had brought them back to her memory. It was a tragic, heart-breaking thing, she felt, that an honest, romantic, deep love such as hers had been for the beautiful young man her father had so detested, could ever die so utterly as hers had.

It was dreadful to her, and seemed a shameful thing, that she could feel no pang of jealousy or loneliness in the knowledge that her husband, her companion for thirty years and the father of her five children, was prepared to give up these children, his home life and her companionship for another woman. Instead of what she believed would have been normal emotions, she was conscious of a deep sorrow that he had been such a fool as to fall in love with a woman of Mrs. Crichell's type, for she knew with uncanny clearness exactly what Mrs. Crichell was. If only he had fallen in love with someone who might possibly make him happy, someone who was companionable and ambitious! But this woman, she knew, was so like himself in her laziness, mental vacuity and self-centred one-sidedness, that they were bound to destroy each other. [Pg 194]

The whole family had assumed that her sole reason for refusing the divorce was a semi-religious objection to that institution. It was true that, although she was not a religious woman, her innate respect for the forms of the church gave her the greatest possible horror of the divorce court, but she knew, though none of the others seemed to suspect it, that if Clara Crichell had been a different kind of woman, one with whom she could, so to speak, trust her poor, faulty Ferdie, her objections would have been bound to give way, in the course of time, to the combined wishes of her family and friends. And she was afraid to utter this instinctive fear of Mrs. Crichell because, although she knew little of real life, she had an uncanny knowledge of the mental workings of the men and women in books, who are, after all, more or less, like human beings; and she felt that she could not bear to be misunderstood, as she was certain to be if she uttered one word of personal objection to Mrs. Crichell. They would all think she was jealous, and she would be unable to persuade them that she was not.

Oliver found her pacing up and down her drawing-room in her afternoon gown, which she had forgotten to fasten down the back, and which showed a pathetic strip of merino petticoat. [Pg 195]

"Something's wrong with your back here," he said. "Shall I hook it up? I often fasten Jenny's new-fangled things, and they hook up to her neck. Well, here I am, Mrs. Walbridge, *à la disposition di Usted*."

One of his useful little gifts was a way of keeping in mind, and reproducing with impeccable inflection, little once-heard scraps of foreign languages, and somehow it comforted the worried woman to hear him talking so much in his usual manner; in spite of Grisel's engagement, his world had not turned over.

"Have you—have you heard anything about us lately?" she began nervously, as they sat down, and she nodded at his battered old cigarette case, held interrogatively up to her.

"Yes," he answered abruptly, his manner changing. "I hear that Grisel has a string of pearls, and is growing very fond of her aged suitor."

"He's not an aged suitor, and you mustn't call him one."

"Well, then, her gay young spark. It doesn't really matter, and she's not really happy, and I know it, and so do you."

"Oh, Oliver, please don't make me unhappy about that. Things are bad enough without Grisel's coming to grief."

He pricked his ears. "What do you mean—things are bad enough? What's happened? I'm not going to worry you. I'm sorry—"

"It's about—it's about Mr. Walbridge. I don't quite know how to tell you."

Oliver looked hastily round the room. "Oh, no, he's not here. He went away yesterday morning." [Pg 196]

"Gone away? Good heavens! Has he been losing money?"

"No; he has no money," she answered simply. "It's much worse than that. It's—it's about a lady."

He gave a long whistle. "By golly! Is it, though? Then I'll bet it's that over-ripe woman who sat next him at dinner—the painter's wife."

"Yes, it is. They have fallen in love with each other."

The young man threw his cigarette in the fire in his excitement.

"No! They can't have. Why, bless me, he's an old man—I beg your pardon. But he isn't *young*, is he?"

"That doesn't matter. He's fallen in love with her and Mr. Crichell's found out."

"My hat! The man with the nasty fingers."

"Yes. And they're all after me—not a soul stands up for me, Oliver. So that's why I sent for you. I thought perhaps you would."

"Of course I will. You want someone to see you through divorcing him. Well, I'm your boy. Have you got a solicitor? And—excuse me speaking so plainly—have you got proofs?"

She laughed forlornly at his mistake. "Oh, my dear, you've got it all wrong. It's the other way about. It's they that want me to divorce him and I—I won't."

His face changed. He looked at her with surprise and commiseration in his eyes.

"Oh, I see," he said quietly. "I didn't understand."

He felt that it would be indecorous for him to ask this old lady, as he considered her, whether she really cared for the husband he had always found so unpleasant, but he could in no way account for her refusing to take the obvious course. [Pg 197]

She saw his perplexity and went straight to the point. "You see," she said, "I know what you are thinking, but I've known Mr. Walbridge for a long time, and I know that he couldn't possibly be happy with a woman as selfish and self-centred as Mrs. Crichell."

"Then you want him to be happy?" He spoke very gravely, his voice sounding like that of a man very much older than himself.

She was grateful to him for not showing any surprise at her attitude.

"Oh, yes. I should like him to be happy. You're too young to understand, Oliver. I hope you never will understand. But I'm not at all angry with him, and I've always disliked Mrs. Crichell very much."

"So have I. Couldn't bear her, and neither could my mother. But why did you send for me, Mrs. Walbridge? I'll do any mortal thing for you, but the better I understand, the more useful I shall be."

"Oh, I just want you to stand up for me when they all attack me, and try to make me divorce him."

"I see. I certainly think the choice ought to be yours. But," he added, "I don't agree with you. I—I think you're making a mistake. By the way, has the lady any money?"

"Oh, yes, she's quite well off."

There was a pause, at the end of which he said, "Well, I—it beats me. Why do you suppose she wants him?" Then he added, feeling that he had failed in tact, in thus speaking of the man who, after all, was his companion's husband, and whom she wanted, in her queer way, to help. "Well, it beats me."

"Mr. Walbridge has always been considered a very handsome man," she said, in a voice of complete clarity and explanation. And then the door opened and Griselda came suddenly in, wrapped in a big fur-collared velvet cloak. [Pg 198]

"Oh!" she exclaimed, on seeing Wick. "I didn't know anyone was here. They all went on to the opera," she said, sitting down and letting her cloak slip back, "and my head ached—I think I've a cold coming on—so I got a taxi and came home. How are you, Oliver, and how is your mother? I saw Jenny the other day, but I was in a taxi and she didn't see me."

"They're both well, thanks," he answered. "It's a long time since I saw you, young lady."

"Yes, it is."

There was a pause, and Mrs. Walbridge glanced anxiously from one to the other of the two painstakingly indifferent faces.

"No letters, mother?" the girl asked.

"Yes, there are two for you. One from Sir John."

"Good, I'll go and get them." She held out her hand to Oliver. "Then I'll go on up to bed. I really do feel rather bad. Good-night."

He held her hand closely. "You're a nice young minx," he told her, laughing. "I suppose you think I ought to congratulate you on your engagement."

"It's a matter of complete indifference to me whether you do or not."

"Grisel, Grisel!" put in her mother.

Still he held her hand, his critical eyes looking her up and down.

"Good-night," she said again, trying to withdraw her hand.

"You're losing your looks," he declared. "You're too thin, and your eyes are sunk into your head. It won't do, Grisel. You'll have to give in. You used to be the prettiest thing alive, and unless you own up to your old gentleman and confess to me that you can't live without me, you'll soon have to join the sad army of the girls who aren't so pretty as they feel." [Pg 199]

She was furiously angry—so angry that she could not speak, and when he suddenly let go her hand, she stumbled back and nearly fell. She left the room without a word, and he sat down and hid his face for a moment in his hands.

Mrs. Walbridge was indignant with him, but somehow she dared not speak, and after a minute he rose.

"I'll go now," he said. "I'm done. Little brute!"

"I'm so sorry for you," she said, which was quite different from what she had meant to say.

"I know you are, and I deserve it; I deserve everybody's pity. But damn it all," he added, with sudden brightness, pushing back the strands of straight dun-coloured hair that hung down over his damp forehead, "I'll get her yet."

She went with him to the door, and they stood on the step in the bitter cold of the still night.

"You'll stand by me then? You'll believe," she added earnestly, laying her hand on his sleeve, "that I'm not just being a cat; that I really am doing what I know will be best for him in the long run?"

"If you suddenly spat at me and scratched my eyes out and ran up the wall there, and sat licking your fur, I shouldn't believe you were a cat. But, mind you, Mrs. Walbridge, I think you are making a great mistake. What on earth will you do with him about the house in this frame of mind?" [Pg 200]

"Oh, don't make it any harder for me. I know that I'm right."

They parted very kindly, and she went back into the house, knowing that he would, as she expressed it, take sides with her. But something of the virtue of her resolution seemed to have gone out of her, for, young as he was, she respected his shrewdness and his instinct, and it depressed her to know that he disapproved of her determination.

The next evening, Wick dined with the Gaskell-Walkers in Campden Hill. He was the only guest, and Hermione told him at once that they had sent for him in order to talk over this disgusting business of her father's. When Gaskell-Walker had laid before him the combined reasons of the whole tribe for wishing for the divorce, Wick sat down his glass and looked at his host.

"I agree with every word you've said," he answered, without unnecessary words. "It's a great mistake, but I know why she's doing it."

"That's more than any of *us* knows," mourned Hermione. "I feel that I never wish to look my father in the face again."

"Oh, that's going too far," the young man protested. "He's an awful old scoundrel, of course, but still, there are plenty more like him."

Before they parted, Wick uttered a word of wisdom. "She won't give in to you, or any of you, or to me," he said. "There's nothing so obstinate in this world as a good woman fighting for a principle, and the fact that the principle is perfectly idiotic has no bearing on the case. But your mother's an old-fashioned woman, Mrs. Gaskell-Walker, and she's written so many sentimental stories that her whole mind is coloured by them. If you can get Mrs. Crichell to go to your mother and grovel and tear her hair and cry, your mother would divorce your father." Then he went his way. [Pg 201]

"By Jove!" Gaskell-Walker said to his wife. "I believe he's right. Stout fellow! I'll put your father up to this. I'll look him up at lunch at Seeley's to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX

[Pg 202]

Mrs. Walbridge never told any of her children what it was that made her so suddenly decide, two days after her interview with Oliver Wick, to do as her husband begged her, and give him his freedom, as he invariably called it. Freedom is a prettier word than divorce, and he had a natural instinct for eliminating ugly words from his life, although he had never been very particular about steering clear of the deeds to which the words fitted.

"Very well, Ferdie," she said to him, the Sunday morning when he came to get his clothes and various little belongings. "You shall have it, your freedom. I'll give it to you."

In his muddle-headed gratitude, he nearly kissed her. She drew back, an irrepressible smile twitching at her lips. He was such a goose!

"I think," he said, "you had better get Gaskell-Walker to manage things for you. It—it might be rather awkward for Paul. You see, we can't have *her* name brought into it"—there was actual reverence in his voice at the words—"and I'll have to take certain steps."

"Oh, I know," she said quietly. "She told us yesterday. Don't have any more in the papers than

you can help, will you?" she added, "it's all so horrid."

"Oh, her name won't be mentioned at all—thanks to your kindness," he added, a little grandiloquently.

She looked at him with a queer expression. "I wasn't thinking of her name. I was thinking of ours —yours and mine, and the children's, Ferdinand." [Pg 203]

He winced when she called him Ferdinand. It reminded him of some earlier, painful scenes in their life, when she had been unable to pronounce the shorter version of his name.

He rose and walked up and down the ugly room. "I hope you believe," he began, clearing his throat, "that I'm very sorry about all this. Such things are always unpleasant, but I assure you, Violet, that it—it was stronger than I."

"We needn't go into that. Have you enough money to live comfortably till your marriage?"

He nodded. "Oh, yes. I signed my papers with Barclay the day he went away, you know, and have been at the office every day. I—I intend," he went on, groping for words, "to give you half of my salary; that's two hundred and fifty a year, and I thought perhaps if you moved into a smaller house,—there will only be you and Guy then, and he'll soon be earning something—that—that you might manage to get on all right."

She nodded. "Oh, yes, I shall manage." She didn't add that up to this she always had managed to keep, not only herself, but, for the greater part of their married life, him as well.

"I'm sorry about that business of your books," he resumed, with another awkward pause, during which he took a cigarette out of a very beautiful new gold case, which he hurriedly stuffed back into his pocket. "I hope this new one will be a success. I do, really, Violet."

She looked at his nervous, heated face with a queer, incongruous pity that seemed to her almost undignified.

"I'm sure you do, Ferdie," she answered kindly. "There's no reason on earth why you should not wish me well. I certainly wish you every happiness." [Pg 204]

He was relieved and grateful at her lack of resentment, but at the same time it piqued him a little. He felt that it was not altogether normal of her to take things quite like this. He looked at her curiously, and her face seemed old, very plain, linked as it was to his memory of Clara Crichell's luscious beauty. He was very sorry for her, not only for being that most contemptible of creatures, an old woman without charm, but also because she was losing him.

They parted in the most friendly way, after he had telephoned for a taxi and laden it with his various boxes and bags.

"Where shall I send your letters?" she asked.

"Oh, you mustn't know where I am," he declared nervously, "or they'll bring in collusion. Gaskell-Walker will do it all for you." He paused on the step, looking up at the house into which, thirty years ago, they had come together, full of hopes and plans, and across his still beautiful, degenerate face there swept a little cloud of sentimental regret. "Life's a queer thing, isn't it?" he murmured, taking off his hat and standing bare-headed.

She nodded. "Yes, it is." Then she added quickly, "Never mind, Ferdie, it's all right. The children will come round after a bit. It's natural they should be annoyed just at first."

"If ever there's anything I can do for you," he added, incongruously, "after this business is over, of course, you'll let me know, won't you?"

He went his way, and she stood looking after him. It was all remarkably odd, but perhaps oddest of all was that he had failed to understand at the end of all these years, how little she could miss him; that it had always been she that had taken care of him, and that therefore that it was he who would miss the prop for the loss of which he was conventionally compassionating her. [Pg 205]

For several days after this, nothing at all happened, and the attention of her little world was turned towards Hermione, whose mother-in-law had unexpectedly died, leaving her an attractive, though not very valuable, collection of old jewelry. The inspection and re-designing of these treasures came as a real boon to the whole family.

"I feel as if my mind had been washed again after this nasty business of father's," Maud Twiss declared, after two or three days of excitement. "I think Hermy's wrong to have those opals set that way, but then they're her's and not mine, so it doesn't matter. What a pity the old lady had such a passion for cameos—they don't suit Hermy at all—but I'd give my head for that star sapphire."

It was the 12th of February, and Maud had arrived first of the little group of people invited to dine at "Happy House" in honour of Paul's birthday.

Mrs. Walbridge had not felt much inclined for any festivities, but Paul for some reason insisted on a little party, and the atmosphere being cleared by the progress of the regular proceedings towards the divorce, the others had backed him up. Sir John Barclay was still away, and Moreton Twiss had been obliged to go to an annual Club dinner, but the Wicks were coming, and Paul had added various delicacies to the menu in a way that was so like his father, that his mother was a little saddened by it. Paul too, she knew, would always be able to spend money on things that pleased him, and she foresaw that he would never have a penny for dull details like gas bills or cooks. He even brought in an armful of flowers, and Maud, who had a new tea-gown garment for the occasion, arranged them for him, in the very vases his father had bought to hold his orchids [Pg 206]

the night of the Christmas Eve party. It seemed years ago, Mrs. Walbridge thought, and yet it was only about seven weeks.

Grisel had objected strongly to the Wicks being invited. She pretended to be very annoyed with Oliver for what she called his idiotic and underbred behaviour that night when she had come in after the dinner-party.

"He's sure to be tiresome again, mother. His peculiar brand of humour doesn't happen to appeal to me." But when Mrs. Walbridge had suggested to Paul that the Wicks were not absolutely necessary to his birthday party he declared pettishly that there wouldn't be any party if it wasn't for Jenny Wick. She was the best accompanist he had ever had, and an extremely nice girl—not a bit like her cub of a brother.

Grisel might, of course, have dined out, but, like many other families, although they quarrelled with each other, and did not particularly like each other, the Walbridges yet hung together in a helpless, uncongenial kind of way, and always remembered and mildly recognised each other's birthdays.

Grisel came downstairs while Maud was putting the last touches to the red and white roses that had been Paul's choice. The girl had a new frock of black, with heavy gold embroidery, and though very pale and heavy-eyed, her beauty was undeniably growing, as the baby curves left her face and what can only be called the elegance of its bony structure became more apparent. Her jaw-bone was a thing of real beauty, and the likeness of her brow to her mother's was very great.

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"Oh, Grisel, what a love of a frock!" Maud cried, kissing her. "Where *did* you get it?"

"Greville and Ross. Glad you like it."

Maud settled the last Jacquemenot in its place, and put her arm round her sister's waist. "Let's go into the drawing-room," she said. "I'd hate going upstairs. Never, never again shall I have another baby."

"You look beautiful, Maud," the girl assured her earnestly. "It suits you somehow."

"Nonsense! But what's the matter with *you*, dear? You look tired out."

"Yes, I've been making a fool of myself. Three dances in the last five days."

"When's John coming home?"

They sat down on the uncomfortable sofa under the gilt mirror, and Griselda leant back against a non-existent cushion, and sat up with a little scowl.

"Oh, he will be back in a day or two, thank goodness. Oh, Maud, I have missed him so; you have no idea," she insisted, "how much I have missed him!"

Before her marriage Maud Twiss, who, after all, was nine years older than Grisel, had been rather jealous of her little sister's greater charm and beauty. But since she had been married her feelings had changed and the sisters had grown towards each other a little. Hermione had always been more selfish than Maud, and, besides, she and Grisel had much the same hair and profiles, so the youngest girl had always been inclined to like the eldest one best. They sat there on the sofa discussing things in general, but avoiding two subjects—the divorce and Oliver Wick. Fortunately the Gaskell-Walkers arrived before the Wicks, and shortly after the arrival of Jenny and Oliver, Bruce Collier turned up with a young Frenchman as fifth man.

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Everyone had some kind of present for Paul, who accepted them with extreme seriousness and regarded himself—most unusual in a young Englishman—as the legitimate centre of attraction of the evening. Paul had a disconcerting way, for all his disagreeable mannerisms and selfishness, of doing certain things that reminded his mother almost unbearably of his babyhood and little boyhood. And this evening, as he stood, as pleased as possible, at the little table where all his presents were spread out, she wondered if the others were as struck as she was by the incongruity of his manner. Red-headed little Jenny Wick, who stood near her, read her thoughts.

"Isn't he funny," the girl said in an undertone, shaking her fat silk curls and wrinkling up her snow-white but befreckled little nose. "He's just like a baby. I wish I had brought him a rattle."

"They're all like babies," murmured Mrs. Walbridge absently, her eyes fixed on space. "Every one of them."

"Have you heard the news?" the girl asked, mysteriously, drawing her hostess a little to one side, under pretence of looking at a picture near the mantelpiece.

"News! No, what news?" Poor Mrs. Walbridge started, for, at the present crisis in her life, all news seemed to point towards her own domestic trouble.

Jenny looked very wise. "He'll be telling you himself, no doubt, but I don't mind telling you first. It's Oliver."

Mrs. Walbridge looked at young Wick, who was talking, with every appearance of complete happiness, to Hermione, with whom he was very good friends. "What is it?" she asked. "I've not seen him for nearly a fortnight."

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"I know. He's been very busy. The fact is he's engaged to be married, and we see hardly anything of him, mother and I."

Mrs. Walbridge felt the ground rock under her feet. How could it be possible that Oliver Wick was engaged when only a few nights ago he had sat before her in the room downstairs shaken to the heart by misery about Grisel? "Are you—are you *sure*?" she faltered.

Jenny laughed. "Well, I ought to be. We hear nothing but Dorothy from morning till night—that is, whenever we *do* see him, he talks of nothing else. And isn't it ridiculous, her name's Perkins?"

"Dorothy Perkins! That is a coincidence. I'm sure I hope they'll be very happy. Does your mother like her?" the poor lady murmured, trying to get her bearings.

"Oh, we've never seen her, mother and I. She lives at Chiswick and her mother's an invalid, so she hardly ever leaves her. We've seen her picture, though, and she's lovely."

Dinner was announced at that moment, and Mrs. Walbridge, never as long as she lived, could remember one thing about the meal, except that young Latour, who sat next to her and knew not a word of English, had the most beautiful manners she had ever seen in her life, and really almost made her believe—almost, but not quite—that the few remaining crumbs of her schoolgirl French that she was able to scrape together and offer him, were not only comprehensible but eloquent. He was a very small young man with black hair, so smooth and glossy that it looked like varnish, and a long, long white nose, sensitive nostrils and bright darting eyes like those of an intelligent bird. Bruce Collier, who prided himself on his perfect French, tried at first to translate the conversation of the young man and his hostess to each other, but "Mossioo Latour," as Mrs. Walbridge laboriously called him, waved aside his offered aid with a cigarette-stained, magnanimous hand.

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"Mais non, mais non, mêlez vous de vos affaires, mon cher," he protested, "Nous nous entendons parfaitement bien, n'est-ce pas, Madame Vollbridge?"

And Mrs. Walbridge nodded and said, "Oh oooo." She said "oh oooo" many times, also "Je ne say pas" and "N'est-ce pas." And she loved the young man for his painstaking courtesy. But after a while he drifted naturally into a more amusing dialogue with Hermione, whom he obviously admired very much, and Mrs. Walbridge was left to her confused realisation of the utter perfidy of man. Oliver Wick engaged! She would have been burnt at the stake for her belief in the reality of his love for Griselda; yet there he was, radiantly happy, chattering and joking with everyone in turn, and no doubt, the mother thought, with most unjust and inconsequent anger, the picture of that Dorothy Perkins in his pocket. And she looked at Griselda's over-tired, nervous little face and hated Oliver Wick.

The Wicks, who were spending the night with some friends in the neighbourhood, were the last to leave, for Jenny and Paul (who had sung a great deal and unusually well during the evening) had some new songs to try. So after all the others had gone, the two went to the piano and set to work on seriously trying over some rather difficult music of Ravel and some of the more modern Russians.

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Mrs. Walbridge, Grisel, and Oliver sat by the fire, Oliver extremely busy roasting chestnuts, which he offered in turn to his hostesses on an ash-tray. He was squatting in front of the grate, laughing and jesting with every appearance of an almost silly satisfaction with life, and when at last, even Mrs. Walbridge refusing to eat any more burnt chestnuts, he rose with a sigh and sat down between them.

"What a delightful evening," he said. "That's a lovely gown, Grisel. I don't think I ever saw you look better."

"Thanks," she murmured.

"When's Sir John coming back?"

She started and looked at him in surprise; it was the first time that he had mentioned Sir John's name that evening.

"He'll be back the day after to-morrow."

"You must be awfully glad," he said sympathetically.

There was a little pause while the music rose to a loudness greater than was comfortable as a background to conversation. Then he said gently, "I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself the last time I saw you, Grisel. I meant it, you know. I was perfectly serious—puppy love, you know! Heavens, how I must have bored you! Well, it's all over now and I've made my manners. And now," he added with a look of proud shyness in his face, "I've got something to tell you."

"Yes?" Grisel murmured.

"It's this. I—I'm engaged to be married to the sweetest girl in all the world."

The words seemed vaguely familiar to Mrs. Walbridge, and then she realised that she had written them often.

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"Her name is Perkins, isn't it?" said Mrs. Walbridge kindly, but with ludicrous effect.

"Mother!" said Grisel sharply.

Wick took a leather case from his pocket. "Here's her picture," he said. "You're the very first people I've shown it to, except my dear old mother and my little sister."

This, too, seemed vaguely familiar to the novelist. Indeed, she had a feeling that none of the conversation was true—that she was writing it in one of her own books.

Grisel took the photograph and held it towards her mother; they looked at it together.

"Oh, she's beautiful!" Mrs. Walbridge cried in amazement.

He nodded. "Isn't she? And this picture isn't half good enough. You see, her colouring is so

wonderful!"

"She's lovely," Grisel said slowly, "simply lovely. I think I've seen her somewhere, too."

He took the photograph and gazed at it in dreamy ecstasy.

"If you ever had," he said, "you couldn't possibly forget her." Then he added shyly to Mrs. Walbridge, "Isn't it wonderful that such a girl could ever have looked at a fellow like me?"

Paul's beautiful voice, so utterly unlike himself, rose and fell softly in a charming song of Chausson's about lilacs, and there was a little silence for a minute.

"Mrs. Perkins is an invalid," Oliver went on at last, when he had put the picture away in his left-hand breast pocket, "so my poor girl hardly ever leaves her. She's a most devoted daughter."

"H'm!"

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"I beg your pardon?" he asked turning deferentially to Grisel.

"Oh, no—I didn't say anything. Do tell us more about the Perkins family," she said with a grand air.

"About the father and mother? Oh, there isn't much to tell. Except that they have managed to produce Dorothy. The father's a painter—a very bad painter. A charming old man. Looks like William de Morgan; big forehead, you know—white hair. They are very poor, but of course that doesn't matter."

Mrs. Walbridge was beginning to feel more comfortable, and shook her head in unqualified assent.

"Of course it doesn't, as long as you—love each other."

"Ah!" the young man murmured, his voice ringing unmistakably true, "I love the girl all right."

"She'll value your constancy, I should think," Griselda drawled, "ridiculous creature that you are."

He gazed at her humbly.

"You're quite right to laugh at me," he returned, "I did make a perfect fool of myself about you, but, after all, I'm not so very old, you know."

"How can you be sure," she asked, trying to look like a dowager, "that you really *do* love now? I should think that you'd be a little nervous about it."

The music had ceased, and his sister came forward.

"Come along, Olly, we must be off. It's frightfully late."

She began to roll up her music, and Wick answered Griselda's question.

"I'm perfectly sure," he said gravely, "that I've found my girl—what poets call my mate. And I shall love her till I die." [Pg 214]

"I hope you will, I'm sure," put in Mrs. Walbridge warmly, to cover Grisel's unkind air of distance. And when she had let the Wicks out of the door with Paul, she hurried upstairs to reprove her daughter for her unsympathetic manner, but Griselda had gone to bed.

CHAPTER XX

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Early the next morning old Mrs. Wick, who also had been spending the night in town with the friends where her children were staying, was gratified, while she was still in bed, by a visit from her son, who burst into the room apparently more than delighted with himself and the way his particular world was wagging.

"A most beautiful party, mother," he exclaimed, wrapping himself up in her eiderdown, for his pyjamas were old, and worn, and chilly. "And the wretch looked lovelier than ever."

"I hope you aren't going to backslide, Oliver," she said severely, taking her spectacles out of their old case and putting them on so that she might look at him over their tops.

"Oh, dear no, but I don't mind owning to you, mother, that if it wasn't for Dorothy, I *might* be in danger! She used to be a fairy princess, but now she's a princess of ideal royalty. Such a beautiful gown—worth, I'm sure, twenty-five guineas, and a little string of lovely pearls—*his* gift, and the big ruby. I shall never," he added thoughtfully, "be able to dress poor Dorothy like that."

His mother regarded him suspiciously.

"Oh, go on," she said, "with your Dorothy."

He rose, and did a few steps of the "Bacchanal à la Mordkin," whistling the music through his teeth. "Speak not, oh aged one," he then cried, striking an attitude, "with disrespect of the moon-faced and altogether irreproachable Dorothy." [Pg 216]

Mrs. Wick shook her head. "I'm really sorry for you, Oliver," she said. "You're so silly, and as to your Dorothy Perkins, I believe her name's Harris."

He grinned. "Well, perhaps it is. After all, there's very little difference between Perkins and Harris. And it's done the trick. Oh, mother, you should have seen me! I was an absolute gem of

half-shamefaced love-sickness."

"I don't see why you had to tell all that rubbish to Jenny and me," the old woman protested, a little offended, rubbing her nose with her thumb.

"But of course I had to! Jenny's seeing that soft idiot of a Paul every day, and would be sure to give it away." He chuckled. "I saw her whispering it as a great secret to the old lady and she was so surprised she never ate a bit of dinner—it was a good dinner, too."

"You're a rascal," his mother declared comfortably, "and you deserve to have her marry twenty old gentlemen."

He sat down, his face suddenly grave.

"Ah no, mother. All's fair in love and war. I haven't yet made up my mind which of the two this is, but it's one. She's a pig-headed little brute, my lovely love is, and as obstinate as a mule. She's made up her mind to marry this man and be rich and comfortable, and I don't think anything on earth could have stopped her, except—" he grinned wickedly, "just this—jealousy. She nearly died with jealousy before my eyes. Ah, if you could have heard her! 'Please tell us more about the Perkins family,'" he mimicked, "and her little chin went further and further in the air. She hated me like hell!—but, oh, she loved me!"

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A maid knocked at the door and brought in a little round tray with a cup of tea on it.

"Your tea's in your room, sir," she said. And then he sent her to bring it to him.

"I want you to go and see them, mother. You aren't to go and tell Jenny, mind you, that—that her name's Harris, but I want you to go to 'Happy House'—what a name for it, by the way!—and tell them all sorts of things about the Perkins. Don't forget that they live at Chiswick, and that the old man's an unsuccessful artist—miniatures," he added thoughtfully, "is his line, and Mrs. Perkins is an invalid.

"Yes, I know. You told us that. What's the matter with her? Heart disease, I suppose."

"Not at all. Stomach. She never digests anything except—what do you call it—koumiss. Yes, she lives on koumiss."

"When are you going away, Oliver?" the old lady asked presently, between two sips of what is to Britons closer to nectar than any other liquid on earth.

"Either to-night or to-morrow. And oh, I forgot, don't say anything to them—the 'Happy House' people, I mean—about me and my doings."

"Why, don't they know about Sparks?"

"Nope. They don't know anything about what has been happening lately. They think I'm still the penniless reporter. That's very important, too. It's the penniless reporter Miss Minx has got to propose to, *not* the latest and favourite discovery of the Great Chief."

"I don't think that's quite fair," his mother said. "After all, it's a great deal to expect any girl to marry a young man who is penniless as well as a nobody."

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"But I'm not a nobody, and I'm going to be a very big somebody, and she ought to *know* that I shall be a success. Did the girl think," he added angrily, waving his arm, "that I would let her starve, or send her on the stage to keep me? No. She ought to have understood, and now she's got to be punished."

She felt, this wise and clever old hen, that this hatchling of hers was not even an ordinary barnyard duck, that he was a wild, alien bird, capable of almost any flight.

"Well, my dear, your description of Dorothy Perkins has rather made my mouth water," she declared, as he rose and took a look out of the passage to see if he could nip back unobserved to his room (he had forgotten to bring his dressing-gown). "Such a lovable, home-keeping, devoted daughter you made her!"

"Exactly. Where I was canniest though," he returned, "was when I made her perfectly lovely as well. That little brute would never believe in a *plain* girl."

"But where did you get the photograph? It really is exceptionally lovely."

"I bought her at a photographers in Birmingham, when I was there the week before last. I had to take the man out to lunch to persuade him to sell it. She's an Irish girl—was governess to some rich Jew in Edgbaston, and she married a vet. in the army, and has gone to Egypt, so it's as safe as a church. Now mind, mother," he bent over and kissed her, and gave her a little hug, "mind you don't give it away to Jenny. I shall be back in about a week, and you must keep the flag flying for me while I'm away."

"All right, dear, I will. I don't like telling lies, but I do it very well when I want to. Any brothers and sisters—the Perkins's, I mean?"

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"No. Only child. I'm going to lunch to-day," he said, "with some of our *other* editors—ahem! I see myself being very chummy with the editor of the *English Gentleman*. Oh, Lord!"

"Yes, dear. Wait a minute, Olly. Just suppose," his mother said, looking at him seriously over her glasses, "just suppose that things did go wrong, and that after all she married Sir John Barclay."

He stood still, put his hand on the door, an almost grotesque figure in his faded pink and white striped flannel pyjamas.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "It would be pretty bad, mother; worse than you think." After a pause he shook his head and opened the door wide. "It isn't going to happen," he said, "and I'm not going to weaken myself by looking at the bad side of things." Then he went out and she heard his door close.

An hour later, as Oliver went downstairs to breakfast, the telephone bell rang and, as he was expecting a call from the office, he answered it. The thing buzzed for a minute and then he heard a voice say, "Is—is that Mr. Catherwood's house?"

Putting his hand over the receiver and turning his head well away, the young man answered in a loud and fervid whisper, "Yes, you blessed lamb, you little darling devil, it *is* Mr. Catherwood's house!" Then he took his hand away and said in an affected voice, "Yes, moddom."

"I have tried three Catherwoods in the book," continued the voice, struggling wittily nervous hesitation. "I don't know the Christian name of the one I am looking for, but is there a Mr. Wick staying there?"

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"Yes, moddom."

"Will you please call him to the phone. Tell him it's Miss Griselda—I mean Miss Walbridge—Bridge—B-r-i-d-g-e."

Dancing with joy, his voice perfectly steady, he pretended to misunderstand her. "Miss Burbridge, moddom?"

"No, no—oh," and a little troubled sigh chased the laughter from his face.

"I'll call him," he said, almost forgetting himself and adding "moddom" spasmodically. Then after a moment he spoke in his own voice. "Hallo, what is it? Is it you, Grisel?"

"Yes, oh Oliver, I *have* had such a time getting you. Listen, we're in awful trouble. Guy's dying in Paris and they have telegraphed for mother to come. The telegram came late last night. She's never been out of England in her life and hasn't the slightest idea how to travel and—and Paul won't be able to go; he couldn't get a pass now the Peace Conference is on—a friend of his tried last week in almost the same circumstances, and he couldn't—"

"I know, I know."

"Mother wants you to come round and tell her about things. Paul will go to the Foreign Office for her, but she knows you know Paris well, and then you can tell her about getting there—trains, and so on, on the other side of the channel. Will you come?"

He came perilously near forgetting the Perkins's at that moment.

"I'll come at once. Perhaps you'll give me some breakfast?"

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"Oh, yes, anything. Do come."

Then he added, "What a pity Sir John isn't here. He would have been a great comfort to you now."

"Yes," vaguely, "wouldn't he? Oh, we're all so frightened about Guy."

"What's the matter with him, do you know?" he asked, as Mr. Catherwood came downstairs and nodded to him through the banisters. Grisel explained that it was pneumonia following on "flu," and he heard her blow her poor little nose.

Promising to come round at once, he went and explained to his host, and ten minutes later jumped out of his taxi and ran up the steps of "Happy House."

Grisel and Mrs. Walbridge were at breakfast, but Paul had hurried off straight to the house of some minor Foreign Office official whom he happened to know. Mrs. Walbridge already had her hat on, he noticed, and anything more helpless and pathetic than her haggard, tear-stained, bewildered face Oliver thought he had never seen in his life. She kissed him absent-mindedly as if he had been a son, and he sat down and Grisel plied him with food.

Grisel, who had been crying (for she and Guy were nearly of an age and had always been fond of each other), said, "You never saw him—he is such a dear! Oh, it's too cruel to have fought all through the war, and now—"

"Hush, hush," he said, patting her wrist with a fine imitation of brotherly detachment, "give the poor boy a chance. Who sent the telegram?"

"A nurse."

"H'm. Where is he?"

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"He's at a private hospital. The telegram's in mother's bag."

As she spoke, the maid brought in the letters, and Grisel looked through them listlessly. One, addressed in firm, bold writing to herself, Wick knew instinctively must come from Sir John. There was only one for Mrs. Walbridge, and as Grisel handed it to her mother she said:

"Don't open it, dear. I'm sure it's only a bill." Mrs. Walbridge did not even look at it.

"What time does the train start," she asked impatiently. "Oliver, you must help me. I've never been out of England, and I can't speak French."

Grisel opened her letter and read it through indifferently. "John will be back to-morrow night."

"Oh, then you'll be all right, darling," Mrs. Walbridge returned. "You'd better go and stay with Hermy. Or would you rather have Miss Wick come and stay with you here?"

"I don't want anyone to come and stay with me, and I don't want to go to Hermy's. I shall stay here, where I belong. Oh, mother, mother, if only we knew—if only we *knew*."

She bent down over the table and burst into tears, crying into her poor little handkerchief, that Wick saw had already received more than its share of moisture. He took a nice clean handkerchief from his own pocket, and gave it to her.

"Take this," he said kindly. "It's got some Florida water on it too."

She took it, between a laugh and a moan, and buried her face in its happy folds. Then he took out a notebook and his famous fountain pen, and began to scribble.

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"Are you writing notes down for me?" Mrs. Walbridge asked. "Put down all the little things. Remember that I know absolutely nothing about travel. Oh, if only Paul could have gone with me."

He noticed that neither of them had mentioned, or apparently so much as given a thought to the absent husband and father.

"Paul couldn't get a permit, as you said on the telephone. Things have tightened up worse than ever now that the Peace Conference has really begun."

Mrs. Walbridge nodded. "I know."

He rose and put his pen in his pocket. "I must be off now," he said. "I've several things to do. Can you arrange to go by the one-thirty train?"

"Yes. Paul rang up this Mr. White, and he said he would manage to pull it through."

"Good." The young man went to the desolate little woman and put his hand on her shoulder. "Cheer up, Mrs. Walbridge," he said. "Lots of people pull through pneumonia, and I believe Guy's going to. I have a kind of feeling that he is."

She smiled at him, a little consoled, as one often is by just such foolish hopefulness.

"If only there wasn't that Conference," she said, beautifully disregarding the world's interests, "then Paul could come with me."

"Well, Paul can't, but—now, listen to me—I can, and I'm going to."

She stared at him. "To the station, you mean?"

"No, I don't. I mean to Paris. Now you mustn't keep me. I've got a thousand things to do, but I'll be here in a taxi at twelve o'clock. Shall I get the tickets?"

"Oh, yes, do. Oh, how good you are!" In her relief and gratitude she leant her head against his shoulder and cried a little. Grisel looked on, very pale and tense. "Can—can you leave Miss Perkins?" she asked forlornly.

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For a moment he trembled on the brink of abject confession. Then he girded up his loins.

"Oh, yes," he said. "She'll quite understand. Very understanding girl. I—I'll ring her up from the office."

"If—if you'd like to ring her up from here"—Grisel's voice shook a little, and he bent his face over Mrs. Walbridge's jaded hat to hide a smile of triumph that he could not repress—"mother and I will be upstairs in my room—with the door shut."

"No, thanks. I've got to get to the office anyhow, and I'll ring her up from there."

CHAPTER XXI

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Guy Walbridge did not die. He was very ill, and many weeks passed before his mother could bring him back to England; but after the first part of her stay in Paris he was out of danger, and her letters, particularly those she wrote to Caroline Breeze, showed that she was having a happy time. One of these letters had perhaps better be given, as it explains a good many things. She went to Paris on the 13th of February. This letter was written the first Tuesday in March, and was dated at a boarding-house in the Rue St. Ferdinand. One evening after dinner Grisel, to whom Caroline had brought the letter in the afternoon, according to directions in it, read it aloud to Oliver and Jenny Wick and Sir John Barclay, as they sat round the fire in the girls' room.

"She really seems to be having a good time," Grisel began, taking the thin sheets out of the envelope and throwing the end of her cigarette into the fire. "I'm glad too. She needed a change."

Barclay smiled at her. "Isn't it," he asked, "the first change your mother has ever had?"

She nodded. "Yes. I know you think we're awful, the way we treat her, John," she added, "but she never wanted to go away. I think her best holidays have always been when we were all off staying somewhere, and she had the house to herself."

"I don't," commented Jenny Wick, with a shrewd little grimace. "I think she likes best to have you one at a time—all to herself."

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Oliver said nothing. It was the second time that he had been to the house since his return, but the first in which he had been there quite in this way—*en famille*—for the two brothers-in-law were there on the other occasion, and there had been things about the journey to Paris that he had not

cared to tell them.

"Well, never mind that," he said. "Go on with the letter."

"MY DEAR CAROLINE,—The first part's about—oh, about Caroline's landlady's twins—not very interesting. Let me see. Oh, here we are: '*We've been for a long drive in the Bois de Boulogne. You've no idea how different it is from Hyde Park, but it's very nice, just the same.*'"

"Speaks the Islander," from Wick.

"*It is very cold here, colder, I think, than London, but it's clear and sunny. I feel very well, and in the last few days I have begun to get fatter; you'll be surprised to hear, Caroline, that I've had to let out my afternoon dress. I got a very nice piece of—*' Oh, I won't read this."

"Yes, do," shouted Oliver. "I want to know what she got a nice piece of."

"*Of lace at the Galleries Lafayette, and a little woman here has made me a fichu that quite brightens up the old black satin.*' Isn't she a dear? '*I went to Notre Dame this morning. It's beautiful, and I like the homely way poor people come in and say their prayers for a few minutes and then go out again. There were two market baskets full of vegetables just inside the door this morning, and a flower-girl burning candles before a statue. Of course it's idolatrous, but it's a very pretty custom.*'"

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Oliver laughed. "Imagine one of the Piccadilly Circus flower-girls strolling in for a moment's spiritual comfort to Westminster Abbey!"

"*I bought some very nice scones at a little shop near the Louvre, and Guy did enjoy them with his tea. But guess what they cost, my dear. Fifty centimes apiece—sixpence! The prices here are perfectly dreadful. Oh, I bought E. V. Lucas's "Wanderer in Paris," and go out for a couple of hours every day, when Guy doesn't want me, with it, and it's very delightful. Paris must have changed very much, and no one could call it gay now, and I never saw such deep mourning in my life. Half the women are in black, real old-fashioned widows' weeds, not like our war widows' little ballet skirts.*

"*It's quite as east-windy and dusty as London, and the taximen are perfect fiends. They say that the family of anyone killed by a vehicle is obliged to pay for obstructing the traffic. Of course if this is true, it explains why they drive so fast.*'"

Sir John laughed. "This, I take it, is the novelistic imagination of which we hear so much."

"*Thanks very much for sending me "Haycocks" and "Bess Knighthood." I've read "Haycocks," and like it very much in some ways, but as for "Bess Knighthood," how could it have taken that prize? Fancy getting a thousand pounds for such a book! I saw it at Brentano's, and the man told me everybody was reading it. I think it's rather a cruel book, and I don't believe any family could really be quite so horrid.*'"

Grisel looked up. "That's true. They were perfect brutes, weren't they? Poor old Mum! I suppose she's a little jealous. I loved it myself!"

"It's going to be dramatised. Did I tell you, Grisel?" Wick lighted a cigarette as he spoke. "It'll make a splendid play. I never heard of the author before, did you? E. R. East. Man or woman?"

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"Oh, woman, of course. No, I don't think I ever heard of her before. What a wonderful thing," Grisel added, "to get a thousand pounds prize just for writing a story."

"Just for writing a story." Wick grinned. "Philistine!"

"Oh, mother speaks about that—listen:

"*Do you remember that day, Caroline dear, when you wanted me to write a book for the competition? Just imagine "Sunlight and Shadow" or "One Maid's Word" being judged by the Committee that awarded that thousand pounds!*'"

"Poor mother. I mustn't forget to tell her when I write that Mr. Payne wrote a very nice letter about her new book. It's coming out in a few days. I do hope it'll be a success, poor darling. You know, it's a dreadful thing, John, but I can't get through a book of mother's nowadays."

"Can't you, my dear?"

"No. They *are* about such dull people. I wish I liked them, because she must know I don't."

"Oh, she's used to that," he answered. "Paul is remarkably frank about it. But go on; finish the letter."

The next page was devoted to a description of the famous pictures and statues which Mrs. Walbridge was making a point of seeing. It was plainly a surprise to her that this had turned out to be not altogether an unpleasant fulfilment of duty.

"*I really love some of the pictures,'* she explained naïvely, '*and I almost forgot to come home for lunch the day I went to the Luxembourg. Some day I shall try to make time to go to the National Gallery.*'"

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Wick groaned. "Oh—oh dear! She's like a child," he said. "Why, do you know, she positively trembled with excitement when the train stopped and she first noticed one of those long, straight roads edged with poplars—the kind that are always in illustrated magazines. She even thought the fisher wives with their caps picturesque. I'm going to take her on some sprees in London when she gets back. We're going to the Tower together, and she wants to see the Cathedral at St. Albans."

"*There's a lady in the house,*" Grisel began again, after an unamiable glance at the young man, "*who's been buying clothes to go to South America with. Yesterday I went with her to two or three dressmakers, and the things really are lovely, Caroline. Of course they seem very young, and one or two of this Mrs. Hammerton's would have looked to me childish on Grisel, but it's the fashion here, and they certainly do wear their clothes better than we do. I've got a lovely hat for Grisel—black. (All the prettiest hats seem to be black.) And Hermy will be delighted with an evening frock I have got for her. Maud's box went off the other day. You never saw such darling little things in your life. I wish I could be home to help nurse her, but Dr. Butler won't let Guy come back for a long time yet, and he wants us to go to Cannes at the end of next week. Doesn't it seem odd that I should be travelling about like this at my time of life? I wonder if the Mediterranean really is as blue as people say! I wish Oliver was going to be here. I rather dread the journey, although Guy really speaks good French now.*" [Pg 230]

"*I wish, my dear, you would go and see Ferdie and look over his things. It would be perfectly safe for you to go, as you aren't one of the family. I had a very nice letter from him the other day—about Guy, of course—but he seems to feel it rather difficult to look after his own underclothes, and so on. I don't suppose he has a whole sock to his name—*"

Grisel broke off and looked round her audience. "Isn't that just like Mum?" she said. "I suppose she'll be mending Mrs. Crichell's—no, Mrs. Walbridge's—things by this time next year."

"I saw Crichell to-day," said Sir John gravely. "The case is down one of the first in the Trinity term. They've got all the evidence and so on. Ugh! What a beastly business it is! The woman ought to be whipped; and as for your father, my dear—" He broke off, and Grisel laughed.

"Oh, go on. Don't spare father. I'm sure I don't mind what you say about him. Paul saw him dining somewhere with the—lady who has sold herself as scapegoat. I should think there would be a good deal of money in that kind of job nowadays. Quite an idea!" she added flippantly.

"Oh, shut up, Grisel." It was Jenny who spoke.

But Grisel sat with the letter on her lap. An idea had occurred to her—an idea that would have occurred to anyone less self-engrossed than she many weeks before.

"John," she burst out, "is father still in that office of yours?"

"Yes."

"But—but how can he stay? Wouldn't you rather have him go?" [Pg 231]

Barclay came back to his chair. "No," he said quietly. "I prefer to have him stay."

"But—" She flushed and rose. "But how can he stay and take your money when you feel about him as you do?"

"It's quite all right, my dear. Business is one thing and friendship another."

But she over-rode his words. "Nonsense! You only gave him a job—well, it's a kind of charity now that you're no longer friends."

"Nonsense, Grisel." It was Wick who spoke. "You don't seriously think that Sir John would have given your father the job unless he knew he was going to be useful? Business men don't do that kind of thing. Isn't that right, sir?"

Barclay bowed his head. "Yes. It is your father's knowledge of French that is of value to me. His domestic difficulties have made no change in that."

Grisel had forgotten all about little Jenny, with whom she was not very intimate, and went on rapidly, her pride aflame.

"Is he going to stay on in your—in your employ, then, after his marriage to that disgusting woman?"

"I hope so. You forget," Barclay added in a grave voice, "that if your father were not working he would be unable to continue to support your mother and—" he hesitated a little "you."

She shivered and went to the fire. "I see. Yes, I see," she murmured. Then she picked up the letter again, and read them a detailed account of what the doctor had told her mother about Guy's condition. The letter ended by asking Miss Breeze to take it to "Happy House," as the writer was too busy to set it all down a second time. [Pg 232]

Grisel folded it up, and put it back into the envelope.

"My mother had a note from her," Wick remarked, "two or three days ago, it was. And she sent Jenny two pairs of gloves. I like to think," he added, "of her there in Paris running about with the E. V. Lucas under her arm, seeing things she has always heard of. She also," he added, "wrote a charming note to Miss Perkins."

"Did she? Has Miss Perkins written to her?"

He nodded. "Yes. She was awfully touched by the letter. So was Mrs. Perkins. Your mother's promised to go and see them as soon as she gets home."

Grisel smiled with a touch of condescension. "By the way, as she's so confined to the house by her mother's health, you might take me to see her one afternoon. Or—or Sir John would let us go in the car."

Sir John nodded. "Any day you say, my dear."

Wick was terrified for a moment, and then agreed to the proposal with becoming enthusiasm.

"That *would* be kind of you," he answered. "I've been longing to suggest it, but didn't quite like to."

She looked at him sideways, and he saw her knuckles whiten.

"When can you go?" he went on, pursuing his advantage with a beaming face. "Could you go to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid I've got to go to Derby," Sir John put in. "I'm motoring two men down on rather important business."

"And on Friday," Grisel added hastily, "I've an engagement."

"What about Saturday?" he insisted, thoroughly enjoying himself.

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"Saturday I'm going to be with Maud all day."

He shrugged his shoulders. "There you are! Always busy. But I do want you to meet Doll. I'm sure you'll like her. She's awfully interested in you. I think," he added fatuously as his downright little sister stared at him in amazement approaching open-mouthed astonishment, "she was inclined to be—well, it sounds ridiculous, but girls are all alike—to be a little jealous of you just at first, Grisel. But of course that's all right now."

Grisel tossed her head. "I should think so," she retorted.

Sir John watched them with a puzzled look in his clear eyes. Their talk seemed to him to be in surprisingly bad taste. He had noticed before that the subject of Miss Perkins seemed to bring out in them both a quality that he could not define, but that he greatly disliked, and it was odd that Grisel at such moments displeased him far more than young Wick. He was a clear-sighted man who had seen a good deal of the world, and of course it had not escaped him that Wick must only very recently have been in love with Grisel, for sometimes he had caught in the young man's eyes a look that was at least reminiscent of a stronger feeling than Miss Perkins might have approved of. He felt a mild curiosity about Miss Perkins, whose photograph he had seen, and whose beauty was undeniable, and he remembered that the last time Wick had been at the house he had dropped on the floor, and left, a fat letter in a delicate grey envelope, addressed in a pretty hand, and that Grisel, who had found it, remarked, as he propped it up against a brass candlestick: "Chiswick postmark. Miss Perkins, of course."

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Barclay reflected, as he walked home that night, that if it were not for Miss Perkins he should feel extremely sorry for young Wick. He liked the boy. He liked him for his initiative and general air of success. Incidentally he knew through a friend who was high up in the hierarchy in Fleet Street, of which the head was a man whom Oliver called his Chief, of this youth's recent and rapid promotion, and the confidential position to which he had been raised over the heads of dozens of more experienced and older men. He had said nothing of these things at "Happy House," and so far as he could judge Oliver was regarded there still as the unimportant, though pushful reporter, who had been sent to write up Hermione's wedding in the previous July. Why the young man was concealing his remarkable advance Barclay had no idea. But he did not consider it his business to tell what he knew, and even Wick himself had no idea of his rival's information. "The beautiful Miss Perkins," the elder man thought, as he walked along in the bright moonlight, "will be My Lady before she has been married five years, or I'm very much mistaken."

Meantime, Wick, who now had a room in a little blind alley off Fleet Street, was toiling upstairs thoroughly tired in every sense. He had expected Miss Perkins to effect a quicker revolution than she had been able to do. He was overworked, for the great man who had taken him in hand was testing him at every point, and things were not being made easy for him; that was not the great man's way. He had, moreover, to contend with the very natural jealousy of a good many men at the office, over whose resentful heads he had been promoted, and their protests were none the less bitter because they were forced to be silent ones. Criticism of the Chief's plans, or even whims, were not tolerated in Fleet Street. Wick found his work hampered and retarded in every possible way, but he was too clever to speak a word of protest during his rare but fruitful interviews with the "Boss," whose eyes twinkled as he asked him each time that they met: "Well, Mr. Wick, things going well, I hope?" And Wick, knowing that he knew (for he knew everything), that things were being made damnably hard for him, invariably answered with a corresponding twinkle and a pugnacious tightening of the lips: "Top-hole." But now, after this second evening he had spent at "Happy House" since his return from Paris, he was worn out and discouraged, and he sat down on the edge of his bed, the moonlight pouring in through the uncurtained window, and allowed his face to drop and line without restraint.

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"I'll go and see mother to-morrow," he said aloud, "and tell her all about it. She'll set me right, if I'm settable. The only decent thing in the whole world is that Mrs. Walbridge is having the time of her life in Paris, bless her! What a stupid letter!" He took a letter from his pocket and tossed it on to the dressing-table. "I wonder what they would say if they could read mine! Ah, well."

As he got into bed and blew out his candle, he groaned heavily. "Damn Miss Perkins," he said.

One day in early May Sir John Barclay, who had been lunching at "Happy House," managed to slip as he went down the steps into the garden and tore the tendons away from one of his ankles. Grisel telephoned for the doctor, who bound it up and gave Sir John, who was suffering acute pain, a quietening draught of some kind, and went away leaving Grisel and her lover in the dismal drawing-room alone together.

"Did it hurt much?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded, "Yes, ridiculously. It is odd how a little injury like that can hurt so much more than a good many serious ones." After a moment he added, looking thoughtfully at her as she moved about setting the room to rights, "It is exactly the same with mental pain, too, my dear. Ever noticed that?"

"What do you mean?" She turned at the door, grasping the basin of cold water in which the bandages had been wetted.

"I mean that some little annoyance or disappointment," he went on slowly, feeling his way, "often causes one more real discomfort than a big blow would."

She nodded listlessly. "I suppose so. I'll be back in a minute, John."

The strengthening spring sunshine fell through a window full on his face as he waited for her to come back, and there was something very thoughtful and a little sad in his strong blue eyes. In spite of his white hair he looked very young for his years, and his face, finely modelled and dignified, held a look of mental clarity and freshness, that, combined with its dominant expression of quiet energy, was very striking. But a heat wave had been hovering over London for the last three days and the humid warmth had tired everyone, and even he looked a little fagged.

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As Grisel came back and drew together the hideous lace curtains that the doctor had wrenched to the ends of the poles, he said gently:

"This heat is exhausting you, my dear. You look fagged and worn."

"Why not say hideous at once?" she laughed, with a little edge in her voice and her slim hands moving restlessly as she sat down.

"For two reasons, the first is that you are not looking or never could look hideous; the second that I am too old and too old-fashioned for the brutal frankness that seems so popular nowadays." After a moment he added quietly, "I leave that kind of downrightness to younger men—such as Oliver Wick."

She started. "Oliver Wick's manners are perfectly abominable, and they seem to get worse. The beautiful Miss Perkins does not appear to have a very good influence on him."

John Barclay's blue eyes did not waver from her face.

"And yet," he said, "there is no doubt, at least to my mind, that the young man is very much in love."

"Oh, he's *always* very much in love," she retorted, the edge in her voice sharpening. "Why, it is only nine months ago that he was making a perfect fool of himself about—about a friend of mine."

Barclay nodded. "Yes, I gathered from something his mother said that the young lady with the floral name has not the advantage of being his first love. I suppose the girl—the other girl," he took a cigarette case from his pocket and lit a cigarette, "didn't care about him."

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Grisel rose. "Oh, give me a cigarette. Care about him? I should think she didn't. He bored the life out of the poor girl with his scenes—and—and," she struck a match, "his absurd white face."

"Dear me, I should have called him rather brown," commented Sir John mildly. "Quite a brown young man, I should have said."

"Oh, yes, but he used to turn white, and all those hideous lines in his face used to look suddenly so sharp and—and so deep."

"Very emotional he must be. You knew the young lady well, then?"

Grisel shot a quick glance at him. "Yes—yes, I did. She was a friend of mine. She has—she is in South America now."

"I see. But we are digressing. What I started to say was that as you are looking so tired, and as it is so frightfully hot, and as my foot is going to make me pretty useless for a few days, suppose we go for a little motor tour?"

Her face brightened, "Oh yes, let's. Couldn't we go to the sea, John, I—I think the sea up north somewhere would brace me—I mean all of us up and make us feel better."

"Good! What do you think of Yorkshire, Whitby or Robinhood Bay? Could you start to-morrow?"

She flushed with pleasure and came over and kissed his forehead, at which he smiled a little sadly in his growing wisdom.

"We can get Caroline to go with us," the girl resumed, sitting down on the sofa and smoothing the shawl which she had spread over his bandaged foot. "Poor old Caroline, she never gets any pleasure, and she will love it."

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"I think perhaps you had better ring up Jackson" (he gave the number) "and tell him to get the car ready for a long run to-morrow; and if you and Paul don't mind, and will put me up to-night, you might tell Jackson to send Bob up with my clothes and things. It would not hurt this foot to be

perfectly quiet till we start, and Bob can make the compresses, and bandage it, as well as any doctor."

After a little pause she answered, "Yes, that would be splendid. You can have mother's room, and Bob can sleep in—in the dressing-room. Shall I go and tell Caroline?"

"No, go and telephone." He repeated the number. "Better get Jackson at once. By the way, Miss Perkins' young man will be coming in this afternoon, won't he?"

She nodded, "Yes, oh dear, I had forgotten. He and Jenny are coming to dinner. Paul has a lot of new Russian music—"

Barclay sat there and listened to her pretty voice at the telephone, the thoughtful look in his face deepening though not saddening, and when she came back he asked her abruptly if she thought Paul and Jenny Wick were falling in love with each other.

She stood in a pool of sunlight on the other side of the mantelpiece, twisting the ruby on her finger. She had grown a little thin during the hot weather, and her slight, graceful figure looked almost too unsubstantial in the little dove coloured frock.

"Paul and Jenny?" she murmured, "I don't know, John, I have been wondering myself."

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"Would you—would you like it if they did?" he asked.

"I don't know. I like Jenny very much; she is too good for Paul, really."

He nodded, "Yes, I see what you mean, but on the other hand she draws out the very best that there is in the boy."

"Paul is not a boy, he's thirty."

"Thirty is boyhood to fifty-three," he answered smiling. "I like the little lady with her edible looking curls, and her music is *real* music, based on the best things in her; music is no good at all when it is built only on the emotions. Of course, if they do marry, the energetic journalist would be almost a member of the family—he and his wife."

Grisel laughed and gave a comic shiver. "Oh dear, oh dear, then I should have to live cheek and jowl with perfection; it would be dreadful."

"By that time, dear," he said gravely, "you and I will not be living exactly cheek and jowl with anyone at 'Happy House.'"

"No, no, of course not. I was only thinking"—she broke off a little confused, and he laughed.

"Oh, John," she said, "you are such a dear and I am so fond of you! You always make everything so much nicer—and so much easier to bear."

As she spoke Jessie came in with the tea tray, and when she had gone out, and Grisel was pouring out the tea with sudden gaiety and high spirits, Barclay went on as if they had not been interrupted:

"That sounds almost as if you had things to bear."

Her eyes darkened. "Well, haven't I? After all, it's not very pleasant to have one's own father make such a ridiculous fool of himself as my father is doing. I suppose you saw that article in the *Express* yesterday?"

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He nodded, "Yes, a very decent little article; the papers have behaved very well on the whole, considering that he is, well—your mother's husband."

She looked at him blankly and then understood. "Oh, mother's books you mean! Yes, I suppose that does make it a little better known, the divorce business, I mean—poor mother!"

"Why poor mother, Grisel?"

"The books, you know," she returned vaguely, stirring her tea. "They—they are so awful, John."

"Are they?"

She nodded. "Yes. So old-fashioned and sentimental and utterly unreal. I have not been able to get through one for years."

"Haven't you?" he answered reflectively. "I read one the other day, and, thanks I suppose to my own old-fashionedness and sentimentality, I quite liked it."

"Not really! What was it?"

"It was called, I think, 'The Under Secretary.'"

She nodded, "Yes, that's one of the best ones, and you know it used to be very popular. The later ones are awful, and, oh, John," the girl's beautiful face was filled with real sympathy, "'Lord Effingham' was perfectly dreadful—you know she tried to modernise it—you never read such hopeless stuff in your life."

"Yes, I looked at that one day somewhere. It struck me as being very pathetic, Grisel."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose so, but then lots of other writers have changed with the times—advanced I mean—only mother seems to have stuck back in the eighties somewhere. It is not so much that her stories are bad," she went on with an air of disinterested criticism that rather jarred on her hearer, "it is the way she tells them that is so—so hopelessly out of fashion. Why just look at Marjory Brendon, and Miss Thirsk and Eugene and Olive Parker, their books are just as hopeless as mother's from a *literary* point of view, but they sell like anything because

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they're modern."

"Yes, I am not much of a novel reader," he said, "and when I do read a novel I like the old ones, Dickens and Thackeray and so on, but I must say I do not see much of the modern ones that are considered literary. The two or three I have struck have been either deadly dull in their wealth of utterly unattractive details, or so filthy that they ought to be burnt; that book Paul lent me, for instance, 'Reek,' is not fit for any decent young woman to read."

Grisel nodded, "Yes, it is horrid. I began it, but mother wouldn't let me finish it. I love 'Haycocks,' don't you?"

He shook his head. "No. Of course it is beautifully written, but people with such undeveloped minds and such lack of knowledge of anything except turnips and sheep, don't interest me."

"That is the one my mother likes. Yes, I know what you mean about the turnips," the girl added thoughtfully, "but I suppose it is a perfect picture of the lives of such people. It is selling splendidly. I like 'Bess Knighthood' better, only I don't believe any family could be so horrid to each other. Yet it is told in an odd, attractive way. Mother couldn't bear it, yet it got the 1,000 dollar prize. 'Young Bears at Play' was the book I liked best of all. Oliver gave us those two, and I laughed till I was limp over it. Betterton is a funny man."

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They talked on and on very pleasantly, very cosily, and as the draught given him by the doctor began to take effect Barclay's eyes grew heavy and his voice gradually softer; finally his head fell back against the pillow and he slept.

Grisel sat for some time looking at him in his unconsciousness, and it seemed to the girl that she was really seeing for the first time this man who was to be her husband. She studied his face closely; its well marked eyebrows and strong serene mouth; a good face it was, she saw, the best of faces. And then she gave a little shiver and rose, for somehow the intimacy of the little scene was painful to her.

After a minute she went quietly out of the room and down into the garden. A little wind had risen as the sun began to go down, and the leaves in the big elm tree were stirring with small, brisk sounds, as if they, too, felt better for the coolness. The sky was unusually bright in its hard blueness, and the two lilac bushes, one purple and the other white, that had been gently grilling all day, sent out strong waves of sweetness as they swayed in the freshening air. Grisel Walbridge sat down on the steps and gazed out across the garden. One or two of the earlier rose bushes were starred with half-open buds, and a patch of some intensely yellow flower in one of the pathetic herbaceous borders caught her eye—so yellow it was that it looked like a pool of concentrated light—an altar of sunshine, the girl thought absently. Then her mind went back to the sleeping man in the drawing-room. "How handsome he looked," she said to herself resolutely. "How kind his face is, and how strong. I certainly am a very lucky girl." Yet somehow she seemed to know better than ever before what it was she was really doing in marrying this kind powerful man. Strong and placid and handsome as he undoubtedly was, the relaxation of sleep had revealed one thing very clearly to her. His face was as smooth, and more unlined than that of many much younger men whom she knew—the flesh looked firm and sound, and the muscles were shapely and did not sag, but she moved restlessly and leaning her head against the handrail on which a climbing rose had swung its first clumps of thick pink blossom. "He's old," she said, "old." In her security of perfect solitude she had, without knowing it, spoken aloud, and Oliver Wick, who had come down the passage noiselessly, on rubber-soled tennis shoes, heard her, without her having heard him, and for several minutes he stood in the doorway quite motionless, his white flannelled figure sharply outlined against the inner darkness, his tennis racquet in his hand, listening, as it seemed to him, to the repeated echo of her words. They seemed to go on for a long time, the words, "He is old—he is old."

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Presently he tiptoed back into the house and a moment later came bounding out into the sunshine very noisily, so noisily that she turned with an irritated frown, and on her seeing who it was her frown deepened. "Oh, it is you," she said ungraciously, "I thought you were coming to *dinner*, you and Jenny."

"We are; Jenny is spending the night with Mrs. Gaskell-Walker, and I am at the Catherwoods."

"I see. Will you come upstairs? Sir John is asleep in the drawing-room. He has sprained his ankle and is asleep."

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Wick expressed proper regret at the accident, but declined to go in.

"I have a message for you," he went on, sitting down, pulling up the knees of his trousers, "from Dorothy. She's awfully sorry to have missed you on Tuesday."

"Yes, I was sorry too, but I thought you quite understood that I was going to tea with Hermione."

He shook his head. "No, I muddled it somehow, fool that I am. And about Monday, I am afraid it is no good after all, for she is going to Birmingham to see her grandmother, who is ill. She had a wire while I was there last night."

"Oh, I am sorry," Grisel said stiffly, picking a cluster of pink roses and smelling them. "I hope the old lady will soon be better."

Mr. Wick had apparently great faith in the recuperative powers of his betrothed's grandmother.

"Oh, she'll be all right; they are a splendidly healthy family, the Wandsworths. It is her *mother's* mother, you see."

Grisel looked at him. "Mrs. Perkins herself does not seem to be like the rest of them, then," she

suggested maliciously.

He did not flinch. "No, poor thing, she's the exception that proves the rule. She's always bemoaning it. However, they are trying massage now, a peculiar kind of massage and dumb-bells, and I really believe it is going to do her good."

Grisel nodded indifferently. "I hope so, I am sure. Have you been playing tennis?"

"Yes, Joan Catherwood and I had four sets. She beat me hollow, too. How pretty these roses are!" [Pg 246]

She nodded. "Yes, aren't they; I love them." Then she stroked her cheek with a pretty cluster as if it had been a powder puff.

Wick picked a bunch and smelt it.

"Lovely things," he murmured in a rather maudlin voice. "I am glad you like them, Grisel."

"Glad? Why?"

His small eyes looked at her reproachfully.

"My dear girl," he said, "don't you understand, don't you realise why they are my favourite flowers?"

She stared for a moment and then rose impatiently.

"Oh, of course, 'Dorothy Perkins,'" she said shortly. "Come along in, it's too hot here."

As he followed her, Mr. Wick treated himself to a silent chuckle, and kicked over the edge of the veranda the clump of roses she had dropped.

CHAPTER XXIII

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Caroline Breeze's diary at this time contained several items that bear on the history of that year at "Happy House." Miss Breeze had indeed been glad to chaperon Griselda to Yorkshire, and the journey and short stay there was to her delightful in every respect.

"Sir John," she wrote on one occasion, "is the most chivalrous man, his manners are perfectly beautiful. One would think by his politeness to me that it must be me he was engaged to (which, of course, in point of years might be considered more suitable), and not Grisel at all. He behaves as if she was not exactly a daughter, but a niece he was very fond of."

In another place she gives way to reflection about Grisel herself. "A very much spoiled girl. I suppose her winter with the Fords at Torquay has turned her head a little, for I am sure she never used to be so changeable and hard to please. She is almost fretful sometimes and dear Sir John is so patient with her. He is a wonderful man. He seems to have taken a great fancy to that tiresome Mr. Wick, and he has invited him down here for Sunday. (This was written at Whitby.) I am sorry he is coming and so is Grisel. She told me yesterday that he bores her to death. It rather surprises me, for he never struck me as exactly a bore."

Then a little later she describes the visit.

"Mr. Wick has been to Weston-super-Mare to see Miss Perkins, who is there with some friends, after nursing her grandmother. Grisel was quite cross with him and although, of course, one sympathises with the young man's raptures about his sweetheart, I must admit he rather rubs her in—Miss Perkins, I mean." [Pg 248]

"Sir John seems very much interested in Miss Perkins, and, if she had come to Scarborough as she intended at first, he was going to take us over in the car to see her. I am quite sorry her friends decided to go to Weston-super-Mare instead, for I should love to see her. They are going to be married in November, and really Mr. Wick's expression when he talks about her is very nearly ridiculous."

A week later the diary goes on:

"We are going back to-morrow, for Paul has had a wire from dear Violet, saying they are leaving Cauterets and coming to Paris on their way home. I shall be glad to see Violet, it seems years since she went. Oliver is going to bring them back from Paris, where he has gone in connection with the signing of the Peace. Miss Perkins has written a charming letter to Grisel; she must be a lovely girl."

"Grisel and Sir John are to be married in October, as he has to go to the Argentine at the end of that month and she wants to go with him. I hope the change will do her good, for she really looks ill and doesn't seem at all herself."

Mr. Wick about this time writes to his mother from Paris.

"It was wildly successful, but I nearly broke down a dozen times, sometimes into a roar of laughter and sometimes into tears of pity. She does so hate my poor Dorothy, mother, she is as jealous as a Turk and so in love with me that I wonder everyone in the world doesn't see it, but they don't. I rather had some doubts about Sir John once or twice, he is no fool, and I have caught him looking at me in a rather understanding way. He displays an almost suspicious interest in my young woman. I made a little slip and had her headed for Scarborough, but I saw in his eyes a plan for driving us all over

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there to see her, so I had Billy Barnes wire me from Birmingham that their plans were changed and I packed them all off to Weston-super-Mare, a place that I am sure Dorothy would enjoy if she really existed.

"There is only one thing, mother dear, that disturbs me at all, and that is Sir John Barclay. He is a splendid old fellow and I am afraid he is going to be upset over our marriage. However, that can't be helped, and after all a man of his age has no real right to romance! That belongs to us"—and so on and so on.

On the morning after her return Grisel came downstairs to find a telegram just being handed in at the door. It was addressed to her and announced that her mother and brother would arrive that night. It was from Wick, dated Paris. She was a little late that morning, and Paul had nearly finished his breakfast when she opened the dining-room door.

"They are coming to-night, Paul," she said. "This wire has just come from Oliver."

Paul slew a wasp on the edge of his jam-baited plate and then took the telegram.

"Good!" he said. "I shall be glad to see them, and Guy will like those new songs of mine; we must get Jenny to come in to-morrow night and I will sing them."

She sat down.

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"You like Jenny very much, don't you?" she asked gently.

He looked up, his clever face, sometimes so highly repellent, almost tender.

"Jenny is a dear," he declared, "she is the best accompanist I have ever had and her taste of music is perfect."

Grisel, who had poured out her coffee, leaned her chin on her clasped hands and looked at him thoughtfully.

"It is not only the music, you know," she said, "I think it is her kindness that I like so much. Although she is so little and quick, her mind always seems to jump towards the nice things in people instead of like us—we always jump towards the faults. Instinctively, we seem to, don't we, Paul?"

He was silent for a moment, apparently studying with deep interest the remains of the wasp on his plate.

"Yes, I suppose we do. You and I and Hermione certainly do. We get that from our beautiful father, no doubt. Mother and Maud are different, but then, of course Jenny Wick has had a great pull in her mother. Mrs. Wick is a fine old—" he paused, and added gravely, "*fellow*. That's what she is like, a fine old man, whereas our father was always like a spoilt, and—*not* fine—woman. By the way," he suddenly felt in his pocket. "I had a letter from father last night. He seems to be in trouble of some kind."

"He would." Grisel answered indifferently. "Perhaps Clara Crichell is sick of him; I should think she would be by this time."

Paul tossed the letter to her across the table.

"All she ever saw in him was his looks," he answered, "and he is looking particularly handsome just now—or was three weeks ago. Barclay keeps him pretty busy and he is on the water wagon, so as far as his beauty goes he is flourishing like a rose."

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Grisel opened the letter, which was written in pencil on a half sheet of paper.

"Dear Paul," it said, "let me know when your mother is coming back, as I must see her. What on earth is she doing in Paris so long? They say everything is frightfully expensive there now.

"Thanks for sending me my bathing suit, I have had one or two good swims and feel the better for them. I have been trying to find new rooms. This is an awful hole I am in, but London is so full of those beastly Colonials and Americans that I cannot get in anywhere.

"Is Grisel all right? I saw her sitting in Sir John's car in front of Solomons the other day, but she did not see me. I WAS ON A BUS. I thought she looked seedy. Do write and tell me the news, and mind you let me know as soon as you know when your mother and Guy are coming back; it really strikes me as very odd her galloping about France like this at her age.

*"Your affectionate father,
"FERDINAND WALBRIDGE."*

"Characteristic, isn't it?" Paul asked.

She nodded. "Yes, very. Something has happened to upset him. Wouldn't it be awful, Paul," she added, unconscious of any oddity in her speech, "if Clara chucked him after all and we had to take him back!"

"Take him back, indeed!"

"Yes, mother would, you know, if he came to grief."

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He rose. "Not while I'm alive, she won't," he said, with the amazing firmness of the powerless.

"Well, I must be off. I will send up some flowers if I can find any that are not a guinea a bloom." He hesitated and turned at the door. "Will you ring up Jenny and say they are coming, or shall I? They might dine instead of to-morrow——"

"You don't want Jenny here the first night they are back, do you?"

"Well, yes; to-morrow would be better, of course, but I have just remembered that I have an engagement to-morrow. Mother likes Jenny—she's never in anybody's way—and it will cheer Guy up to hear some music after his journey."

He went out, leaving his sister smiling over the peculiar and highly characteristic logic of his last speech. How like Paul! She knew that Oliver Wick would be sure to come straight to "Happy House" with his charges, because there was luggage to be seen to and carried up, and a thousand little matters to be settled before he went off to Brondesbury, so it would be after all only natural for him to stay and have a bit of dinner before he went on to Brondesbury, and as for Jenny, she was staying, as she so often did, with Joan Catherwood.

Barclay, who was going away in a day or two, was to have taken her out to dinner, but she rang him up at his office and asked him to dine at "Happy House" instead, he being, as she told herself with decision, one of the family. She gave the number and after the usual delay a voice from the office answered her.

"Hallo, yes, you wish to speak to Sir John. Who is it, please?"

Grisel started, for it was her father's voice speaking to her.

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"It is Miss——" she began nervously, and then making a face at herself, she went on, "It is Grisel, father. Is John there?"

Ferdie Walbridge's soft voice had an unmistakable thrill in it as he spoke again.

"Oh, it is you, dear! How are you, Grisel, and when is mother—I mean your mother—coming home?"

"They are coming to-night; Paul had a wire this morning from Mr. Wick."

There was a little pause and she could almost see her father's beautiful, self-indulgent face sharpen for a moment with surprise. He had a way at such moments of catching his underlip sharply back with his white teeth, and inflating his nostrils. This she knew he was doing now.

"To-night! Dear me, I hope they will have had a good crossing." Then he added pitifully, "Dear me, Grisel, is it not—strange—that I should not be there when they come?"

Grisel laughed. "Well, really, father!" she said.

"Oh, I know, I know. Of course, it is all my own fault," he was playing on his voice now, and it was very pleasant to hear, although she despised him for doing it. "But when you are my age, my child, you will know that habit is a great thing and that old ties are not easily broken."

"I know that already," she snapped, "I thought it was you who didn't."

After a pause, feeling that he was about to become lyrical, she cut him short by asking pleasantly:

"How are—the Crichells?"

There was a pause and then he nobly replied:

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"Poor Crichell, for whom I am very sorry, is coming back to-day. He has been in Scotland and—er—Mrs. Crichell——"

"Oh, don't mind me, father, call her Clara," she interrupted, conscious of and quite horrified by her own bad taste, and yet somehow unable to keep back the words.

"Thank you, my dear. *Clara* is staying with some friends in Herefordshire."

"Well," she went on with a change of tone, "will you tell John I am here, and want to speak to him?"

Again she could almost see her father gazing at her with noble reproach.

"I will tell him," he said with magnificent rhythm and throb in his voice, "I will tell him, my child, that you are here——"

Then, knowing that he would add "God bless you," she snatched the receiver from her ear and held it against her hip so as not to hear the words.

During the morning Caroline Breeze came in to see how her recent travelling companion felt after their journey. The summer winds and sun that had been so kind to Griselda, painting her delicate face with mellow brown and dusky crimson, had attacked poor Caroline's plain old countenance with unkind vehemence. Her lashless eyes looked red and raw, like Marion's nose in Shakespeare, and her thin and unusual cartilaginous nose was not only painted scarlet, but highly varnished as well and there were two little patches on her cheeks that were peeling; but the good creature had no envy or even the mildest resentment at fate in her long, narrow body. She was delighted to see the girl looking brighter, and happier, and gave vent to a curious noise, nearly like a crow, over the news of the arrival.

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"Oh dear," she kept repeating, rubbing her dry hands together with a rough scrape, "I shall be glad to see Violet—I *shall* be glad to see Violet," and then she went down into the kitchen to undertake all the more tiresome errands that must be done in order to achieve a really brilliant reception for the travellers.

Grisel was busy all day in a pleasant, unwearying manner. She filled her mother's room with flowers out of the garden and arranged those sent by Paul in the glasses for the table.

In the afternoon Jenny Wick arrived, with a basket of green peas that had been sent to her mother by a friend in the country and that Mrs. Wick had sent on as a little present to the "Happy House" people.

Late in the afternoon the cook, who was Grisel's devoted slave, being very busy with some elaborate confections in the kitchen, the two girls sat on the back steps where the Dorothy Perkins roses would, before long, be in their full glory, and shelled the peas, each with a big blue check apron over her frock.

"I guess this is the first time that ruby has ever shelled peas," Jenny exclaimed after a while. "It *is* a beauty, Grisel."

Grisel nodded, and her utter indifference struck the other girl.

"Funny," she remarked shrewdly, "how easily one gets used to things. You were nearly off your head about that ruby at first, weren't you, and now you don't care a bit about it."

"Oh, yes I do. It is very beautiful, but—well, that's just as you say. One does get used to things— some things that is," she added sombrely. [Pg 256]

Jenny, whose little cream-coloured face was peppered all over with large pale freckles, like the specks in *eau de vie de Dantzic*, added a handful of peas to the pan, that glittered like silver in the bright sun.

"It's grand that people do get used to things," she reflected, screwing up her little nose, "almost as good as getting *over* things. Oh, Grisel, do you remember how miserable poor Olly used to be about you?"

"Nonsense! He thought he was, but he wasn't, really."

"You don't know. He was frightfully unhappy. Mother and I were worried to death——"

Grisel laughed. "Poor fellow. But anyhow it didn't last very long, did it?"

"No, but it would have done," Jenny agreed with a shrewd shake of her curls, "if Dorothy had not come along."

"We were going over to see 'Dorothy,' if she had come to Scarborough."

"Yes, it was tiresome, their going to that other place. Oliver has been having such fun in Paris choosing an engagement ring for her; he has got a beauty, he says, a very old one. An emerald with diamonds around it."

The two girls were intimate enough for Grisel to be able without rudeness to exclaim at the obvious expensiveness of this choice.

"Yes, of course, it is," Jenny agreed, "but naturally he would want to give her something worth while."

Grisel glanced at her big ruby and went on shelling peas.

CHAPTER XXIV

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The various preparations for the dinner that night turned out, however, to be more or less in vain, for the travellers were delayed and did not reach the house until nearly ten o'clock. Dinner had been arranged for eight, and when half past eight had struck Grisel rang and sent word to cook that they would not wait any longer.

"The cook," she explained to Sir John, "is a sensitive soul and very particular about having *her* things ruined by waiting."

Sir John laughed. "Well, I am glad, for my part I'm hungry. The sea air has given me a furious appetite."

Little Jenny Wick looked at him thoughtfully. She did not think him looking well and her bright eyes revealed the thought.

He smiled down at her. "I know what you are thinking, Miss Jenny," he said, as if speaking to a child. "The heat has fagged me a little, but I'm really very well. How is your mother?" he added, for he and old Mrs. Wick had struck up a great friendship and more than once he had taken her for long rides in his car by himself.

Although she was the mother of so young a girl as Jenny, Mrs. Wick was several years older than her new friend, and treated him rather in an elder-sisterly way that had a great charm for him whose people had been dead for years, and who at "Happy House" was so very much the elder of everyone.

So now he was glad to hear that Mrs. Wick was well, and looking forward to seeing him before long. [Pg 258]

"We must have a long spin some day before I go away," he answered. "I always enjoy a talk with your mother."

Jenny nodded. "So does she with you, Sir John."

"She's so glad Olly is coming back she doesn't know what to do with herself," the girl added, giving a little shake in a bird-like way to her pretty frilly frock, as she rose to go in to dinner. "The way she prefers that boy to me is simply scandalous."

Barclay laughed. "You look ill-treated. I suppose," he added as they crossed the hall *en masse*, "Miss Perkins will be very glad, too, if she is back yet, that is from Weston-super-Mare!"

"Yes, she and her mother and father are at Bury St. Edmunds now, with some relations of Mr. Perkins. Mother went down the other day and spent a couple of nights, but they could not put me up."

The dinner was rather silent, for everyone was disappointed by the non-arrival of the travellers. Paul, who was in good form and the happy temper that Jenny Wick's presence always produced in him, did most of the talking, for he was intensely interested in a lot of new songs, Russian and Spanish, that he had just got and, with the naïvete that was in his case, as it so often is, only a form of selfishness, he assumed that everyone else was as deeply interested as he was.

Grisel, who had not seen her lover that day until he arrived rather late for dinner, told him in a low voice of her talk with her father on the telephone.

"He really was upset about something," she added at the end of the story. "Of course, he was not so upset as he seemed, but there *is* something wrong, I'm sure. I believe mother would take him back if Clara Crichell did not marry him after all."

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"What on earth makes you think that she won't marry him?" he asked, puzzled. "No woman alive would go through all this business of the divorce and the publicity unless she really cared for the man."

Grisel shrugged her thin shoulders. "Oh, well, I don't know. You see, we know him so well that I suppose we instinctively fear she may have got to know him and—and—not liked what she has learnt."

It struck Barclay as a very sad thing for a man that his own daughter should judge him in this unrancorous but pitiless way.

"I rather like your father, you know," he said slowly, "in some ways. He is very much nicer away from home than he is in it."

"He must be," she answered, with the charity of utter indifference. "He must be charming somewhere, and he certainly isn't when he is here!"

"It struck me the last time I saw him," Barclay went on slowly, "that he was not—very happy. I suppose he misses your mother."

Grisel stirred, and he hastened to explain.

"Oh, yes, I mean just that—misses your mother. She has taken care of him for years, you know, and I don't imagine Mrs. Crichell would be as patient with his moods and vagaries as your mother has always been."

Then suddenly the memory of her father in his less pleasant phases swept over Grisel, and her face was grim and tight as she answered:

"No, and I hope she isn't! His hot milk last thing at night, and his four grades of underclothing, and his trouser-pressing machines, and his indigestion! His hot bottles in the middle of the night every time he's dined too well, and poor mother poking around in the kitchen heating kettles on the gas-ring! Oh, no, Mrs. Crichell won't much *like* that side of her beau sabreur, as she calls him."

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After dinner, as they walked in the garden, Sir John told her that he had met Walter Crichell that morning.

"The poor wretch looks miserably unhappy," he said. "Those white hands of his look—look shrunken in their skin—rather as if he had kid gloves on."

Grisel shuddered. "Ugh! his hands are loathsome! After all," she added a moment later, staring at a rose-bush, "there is no reason why the poor wretch should be hurt like this just because he has horrid hands! Oh! John," she cried, catching his arm almost as if she were frightened, "what an awful lot of misery there is in the world."

He covered her small hand with his big, strong, brown one.

"Yes, dear, there is. A great deal of it is inevitable and has to be borne, but the other kind—the kind that can be avoided—ought always, I think, to be avoided. It is right that it *should* be avoided."

She loosed his arm and looked up at him as they walked on.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when people find they have made mistakes—and everyone does find that once in a while—I think that no consideration of pride or advantage ought to stand in the way of open confession and restoration."

There was a little pause.

"You are thinking about mother and father. You mean that if Mrs. Crichell finds she has been

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mistaken, she ought to say so and go back to her husband, even though people laughed at her for it."

"No, I was not thinking of the Crichells or your father."

The great heat had gathered masses of thick, quilted-looking clouds over London, and nervous little spurts of wind startled the trees every now and then and stirred the heavy-headed roses. The air smelt of dust and drying vegetation.

Grisel looked up. "There's going to be a storm," she said. "Shall we go in?"

"If you like, dear; but the storm won't break yet awhile. Though," he stood looking up at the sky for a moment, his thick white hair moving, she thought, just as the leaves on the trees moved in the spasmodic wind, "there is going to be one."

They went slowly into the drawing-room, although the others were upstairs, and Paul's beautiful voice was already heard trying one of the new songs.

"Let's stay here," he suggested. "It's cooler on this side of the house, and I don't feel inclined for music to-night."

"Neither do I," she said, "but Paul does, so we shall have it! Yes, it is cool in here. Give me a cigarette, John, will you?"

He did so, and they sat in almost unbroken silence, smoking. Presently the door-bell rang, and voices were heard outside.

"That's Moreton and Maud," Griselda explained, without rising. "They have motored up from Burnham Beeches to see Guy."

"You ought to go up to them, oughtn't you?" he asked gently.

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"No; they will be all right, and they'll love hearing the songs, and Paul will tell them we are in the garden." Again they were silent.

The air was extremely oppressive in spite of the rising wind, and Grisel's head ached faintly. Every now and then one of the long lace curtains would blow into the room and writhe about as if reaching for something, to sink back listlessly into its place.

"How heavy the scent of those lilacs is," the girl said after a while, glancing at a big bowl of them on the table, and Barclay raised his head suddenly, with a new look in his face.

"Yes; that brings back to me a story that I've been thinking of telling you. I think I will tell you now, Grisel," he said. "Something that happened in my youth. My father was a parson, and there were six of us children. My mother died when I was about eight, and an old aunt of ours, my father's sister, came and lived with us and brought us up. She was a good woman, absolutely without imagination, and she looked rather like Miss Breeze. When I think of my Aunt Susan I always see her behind a kind of barricade of baskets full of mending of all kinds. She spent the greater part of her life with a boy's stocking drawn up over her left arm and a needle full of wool in her right hand. She did her best by us, poor woman, but she bored us, every one, and I suppose she could not have been very wise about our health, because before I left home four of us had died, two—the twins, who had never been very strong—of pneumonia, and the other two of diphtheria. It is not very interesting, but it explains just a little the way I felt that day——" He broke off.

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"I was just twenty-one," he went on, smiling at her, "an awkward colt of a boy, too big for my clothes, and too hungry for my father's income, and one day my sister Celia, the only other one of us who lived to grow up——"

"I know—the one who died in New Zealand."

"Yes. Well, one day Celia and I went up to Coops Hall, our nearest neighbours, some people named Fenwick, to plan tennis. It was a day like yesterday, very sunny and hot, and it must have been about this time of the year, because the white lilacs—a great clump of them of which Mrs. Fenwick was very proud—were in full bloom, and the air thick with their scent."

He glanced at the bowl on the table as he spoke.

"I remember perfectly well how I felt as we came up the incline of the lawn to the tulip trees where two or three hammocks were slung and where the Fenwick girls and their brother were sitting. That is one of the moments in my life of which I can still always recapture the very *feel*." After a moment he went on. "She was standing, leaning on a croquet mallet, with her sideface towards me. Her left profile, which was always better than the right—and still is for that matter ——" He smiled, his face singularly sweetening at the thought.

"But, John!" the girl cried in amazement, "you romantic old thing, you are telling me a love story!"

He looked at her gravely. "I am, my dear. The only love story I ever had until I met you."

She shrank back in her big chair as if drawing away from a too close physical touch, and he went on.

"She wore a blue and white striped dress, as it used to be called in those days, bunched up at the back over a bustle, and, oh dear me, how her hair shone in the sun! It was rather a saintly face," he went on after a moment, "but the hair was the hair of a siren, full of waves and tendrils, and bewitching high lights and shades. Well, I was introduced to her, and we played croquet together, and then we had tea. And that was all. Did you ever read a little poem, 'There is a lady

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sweet and kind'?"

She shook her head. "No, John. You know I don't like poetry much."

"Well, listen. I don't remember the exact words, but it's like this:

"There is a lady sweet and kind,
Was never face so pleased my mind;
I did but seeing her pass by,
And yet I loved her until I die.

"Cupid has wounded and doth range
Her country and she my love doth change;
But change the earth and change the sky,
But still will I love her till I die.'

"Well, my dear, I was exactly like that romantic youth. For over a quarter of a century my mind remained perfectly true to the memory of that sad-faced girl in the garden. She came once to my father's rectory, and we played tennis, and after that I didn't see her again for over thirty years."

Grisel watched him with wide, fascinated eyes, as if he was someone she had never seen before. She was trying to do what is so hard for a young person to do—look back into an old person's youth and really see that youth face to face.

"Why was she unhappy?" she asked as he paused and very slowly lit another cigarette.

"Oh, that, too, was a romance. Hers, just as she was mine. She had been sent to the Fenwicks to try to distract her mind and draw her away from a young man to whom she was attached." [Pg 265]

"Did you ever tell her that you had fallen in love with her?"

"Good heavens, no! I was not a lover. I was a worshipper, and she was so beautiful, so perfect ——" He broke off. "Ah, my dear, that's the kind of love that's worth having."

She watched him, her face changing to one of less detached curiosity.

"Dear me, John," she said, "you alarm me, for this kind of love is certainly not what you give me."

She laughed, but he looked at her very seriously.

"No," he said, "it is not. I give you the best I have got, but it is not much for a young creature like you."

She flushed, and her face contracted for a second.

"Oh, I hope you don't think I am ungrateful," she stammered.

He shook his head. "No, it is only that I'm wondering if it was not wrong of me to persuade you to accept—so little."

"But, John, I——"

"Wait a moment, Grisel. I have been thinking about this for a long time now, and this seems the right moment to say it. Hallo! it's raining!" he broke off, looking out of the window.

"It has been raining for a long time," she said dully. "Go on, please."

The air, quickened by the quiet rush of water, came in refreshingly at the window, and the music upstairs had ceased, so that the silence was very perfect.

"I think," Barclay went on, looking at her with a reassuring smile, "that it is my duty to advise you to think it all over again—everything." [Pg 266]

"Oh, John," she faltered, "this is my fault. It is because I have been dull and moody. You think I'm ungrateful. You *must* think I am, but, indeed, I am not."

"Any marriage that is based on gratitude," he said sharply, leaning forward in the gloom, "is bound to go smash. I mean exactly what I say, Grisel: you must think it all over again. I have told you the truth; you know just how I feel, and, of course, you have known all along that you do not love me as"—he rose and came slowly towards her—"as, say, Miss Perkins presumably loves Wick."

She stood facing him with quickened breath. "Miss Perkins has nothing to do with it, John," she said with a quiet dignity that touched him. "If you wish to break our engagement, I—I am quite willing to let you do so, of course, but *I* don't wish to break it." She turned and went out of the room.

He went to the window and stood looking out into the delightful rain; he could smell fresh leaves and revived flowers; the very smell of wet dust was pleasant.

For a long time he stood there, going over in his mind the scene that had just passed. It struck him as very odd that Grisel had not guessed that the girl in his story had been her mother. He could not, in his well-balanced middle age, realise the savage strength of her youthful egotism. It seemed strange to him, but it was very plain, that the only interest in his story lay, to her, in the fact that it explained why he had not much left to give her—*her*. The story itself seemed to her, he could see, as remote as if its actors had been contemporaries of Noah. It was too far off for her to feel it. Quite different, however, it had been when he mentioned Miss Perkins' name. Half anxiously he had hoped by mentioning Miss Perkins to precipitate the crisis that he felt to be on its way, but nothing happened. His gun had missed fire. [Pg 267]

"I shall have to have a talk with Mrs. Walbridge," he said to himself at last as the clock struck half-past nine. "Something has got to be done, poor little thing—" Then he went upstairs and joined the others.

CHAPTER XXV

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When the taxi drew up at the gate, Maud and Paul and Grisel ran downstairs.

Moreton Twiss, who was reading and smoking in the corner, did not come to the window, and Barclay and Jenny leaned out in the wet, watching the little scene of greeting in the glistening band of light from the open door.

Finally the house door was banged, and the taxi drove away.

"Shall we go down?" Jenny asked, dancing with excitement. "I do so want to see Guy!"

"I think we had better wait where we are. If they want us they will come up here or send for us. Look here, Miss Wick," Barclay went on, struck by a sudden idea, "I am worried about Grisel. What do you think of her?"

Jenny, whose face was contradictory in that it was at once the face of an elf, and of a very practical modern girl, sat down on the back of a chesterfield and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I have been wondering," she said after a pause, "if you noticed it too."

"Oh, then you *have* seen?"

"Seen? Why, of course. I have never seen anyone change so in my life. Everybody says she looks so much better for being at the sea, but she does not. That's nothing but sunburn, and she is as thin as a herring and as nervous"—she broke off, looking round for a simile—"as a wild cat. I was speaking to my brother about her only the other day."

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"Ah!" Something in Sir John's voice struck her, and again she looked at him penetratingly. "What did your brother say?" he went on, meeting her gaze. "He strikes me as a pretty shrewd fellow."

"He is—or ought to be—but since he became engaged he seems unable to think of anyone but his blessed Dorothy. He said he thought Grisel looked very well and seemed extremely happy."

Sir John was silent for a moment, but the peculiarity of his expression did not escape his observant companion.

"He was very keen on Grisel himself at one time, you know, Oliver was," she added, "but they always fight nowadays. Of course, she is not perfect like his Dorothy, but I don't mind telling you, Sir John, that if it wasn't for *you* I should be very sorry that he ever met Dorothy."

"Do you think Grisel could ever have—come to care for your brother?"

Barclay's voice was very quiet and kind, but the girl hesitated for a moment, eyeing him in a perplexed way before she answered.

"Oh, I am sure I don't know! Rather stupid to talk about it to *you*, anyway. I suppose—"

"I don't see that at all, and I should really rather like to know your opinion," he added slowly, "of my defeated rival." After a pause: "I mean, what do you think would have happened if *he* had been the successful one?"

"Well, then," Jenny said, weighing her words and obviously striving for the exact expression of her thoughts, "I do not think they would have got on very well if—if you had not come along. You see," she explained as she smiled in an encouraging way, "Oliver is as clever as the Old Nick. He is so silly sometimes, and talks in such an idiotic way that lots of people think he must be a fool, but he isn't; and although he was so in love with Grisel—and you can hardly believe it now, from the way he drivels about Dorothy Perkins—but he was in love with Grisel—there was never any of the 'love is blind' business about him. He always saw right through her."

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"Poor little thing!" Barclay murmured with a laugh. "Anyway, she refused him!"

"Oh, yes; but he used to go for her about things and tease the life out of her. That, of course, was good for Grisel. She gets too much flattery. I do hope," the intelligent little creature went on, so earnestly that there seemed nothing ridiculous in her assumption of equality of knowledge and years with her companion, "that you are not going to spoil her, Sir John!"

"I hope not. So you think that an occasional wiggling does her good."

"Rather! It does us *all* good. I know *I* get on a high horse every now and then, and start galloping off, and then Master Oliver cracks his whip, and down we come in the dust, and I know it is good for me."

He liked her, liked her thoroughly, with her mixture of music and sharpness; above all, he liked her for not apologising for her perfectly fair criticism of her friend. He was a man who inclined to be very impatient of unnecessary apologies.

"Well, well," he said, as, in answer to a message brought up by Jessie, they went downstairs. "Miss Perkins seems to have played a rather important part in all our lives, doesn't she? I am afraid my poor Grisel could never compete with her in the matter of womanly perfection."

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"Oh, I don't suppose Dorothy is as bad—as *good*—as Oliver thinks," the girl laughed. "No girl ever was, but still—"

The first thing that met Sir John's eyes as he opened the dining-room door was Oliver Wick's face. Oliver sat opposite him, and as Jenny went into the room Barclay stood for a moment watching the scene of greeting and exclamations and introductions, and it struck him that there was something very odd in Wick's face as he, too, looked on after kissing his sister.

The young man looked at once triumphant and touched, and in an odd way, despite the triumph, hurt.

Barclay's impression that something very strange was going on in the room strengthened as he advanced to the table. Then Mrs. Walbridge, whose back had been towards him, and over whose chair Jenny was leaning, turned and held out her hand. Barclay stared almost open-mouthed, then he fell back a step, glanced sharply at Wick, whose complexity of expression had simplified, he saw, to one of sheer pride of achievement and delight.

It was, indeed, Mrs. Walbridge whose hand her old adorer now held in his, but it was an entirely new Mrs. Walbridge. A beautifully dressed, much younger, shyly self-possessed woman, whose faint blush of pleasure in his plainly-shown surprise gave her an oddly reminiscent look of the girl in the garden of so many years ago.

Her hair, which since he had found her again had been carelessly smoothed back, and dulled from lack of care, now shone almost with the old lustre, and its bewitching curliness was made the highest use of. Her metamorphosis was so complete and so striking that it would have been foolish to try to ignore it, and he found himself saying simply as he released her hand:

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"I never should have known you, Mrs. Walbridge." She laughed and bade him sit down.

"I know," she said, "Paul hardly *did* know me as I got out of the cab, did you, Paul?"

"No," the young man answered, "I was never so surprised in my life."

"It is all Oliver's doing," she went on, as she began her interrupted dinner. "He would have it. Wait till you see some of the things he has bought me, Maud! He went to all the dressmakers with me, and was so fussy about my hats that I nearly threw them in his face." But her smile at the young man across the table was a very loving one.

He beamed back at her in a way that struck the new-comer as being enviable. He himself felt suddenly very old, very isolated. Violet Walbridge's husband had been a dismal failure, and her children were selfish, and spoilt, and not one of them, he had always thought, really appreciated her, but here was this queer journalistic young man whose odd gifts were certainly more than intelligence and might easily be the youthful growth of genius, plainly loving and understanding her like the most perfect of sons. Barclay envied her.

"I did," Oliver was saying. "With my own hand I did it. With my little bow and arrow I killed cock sparrow of British clothes and unselfish indifference! Wait till you see the evening dress we got. My word! And there's a tea-gown. We had a most unseemly scene over that tea-gown; nearly came to blows, didn't we, *petite mère*?"

She laughed. "I shall never dare wear it; it's the most unrespectable looking garment. I only got it to make him stop talking." She went on, turning to Griselda. "He talked the two saleswomen nearly into collapse, and the *premier vendeuse* went and got Madame Carlier herself. His words flowed, and flowed, like a dreadful, devastating river, and they were all nearly drowned."

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"So you got the tea-gown as a plank to save them," Oliver grinned. "Some day when we are married, Grisel"—Grisel, started violently, and after a momentary pause, during which he bit his lip, he went on in an injured voice, "What is the matter? *Aren't* you going to be married? I certainly am! I was going to say, when we are *all* married I can tell my wife about our dreadful scenes in the lingerie shop and *chez la corsetière*. Oh, la, la!"

"Oh, la, la."

Mrs. Walbridge blushed scarlet, and whispered to Maud, who sat next her, that he had really been dreadful over her night gowns. "The girl who served us laughed till she was black. I really don't know *what* she thought we were!"

Guy, who was more like his mother than any of the others, and who looked, despite his serious illness, particularly fit and well, now took up the tale and went on with it.

"He is an awful fellow, really, is Wick, and I can only hope his real mother has more fight in her than mine."

"She's mine, too, yours is," Wick interrupted, his voice steady, but his eyes bright. "She has adopted me, and I have adopted her."

"How will Miss Perkins like this new relationship and all that it entails?" Barclay asked, looking away from Mrs. Walbridge for the first time for several minutes.

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"Oh, she'll be delighted! She's *longing* to meet Mrs. Walbridge and all of them, particularly, of course," he added politely, "Grisel."

For some reason everyone at the table turned and looked at Griselda. She was leaning back in her chair, her face clearly alarmingly white, and her nose looked pointed.

Paul, who sat next to her, took hold of her hand.

"What is the matter," he asked roughly.

She moved a little and forced herself to speak. "It's my head. I have felt rather bad all day, haven't I?" she added, turning to Barclay with pathetic eagerness.

He rose. "Yes, dear, your head was bad before dinner, even. Come, I'll take you out into the air."

Paul opened the door and Grisel and Barclay went out, and the others heard the veranda door open and close behind them.

"Grisel looks like the very deuce," nodded Guy gruffly. "Can't think what you have all been dreaming of to let her get into such a state."

"It really has been frightfully hot," Jenny Wick said explanatorily. "I've felt like a rag all day, and Grisel isn't nearly so strong as I am."

Mrs. Walbridge looked anxiously at her eldest daughter.

"How do *you* think she is, Maud?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders. "She certainly looks bad enough to-night, but, of course, I have seen very little of her—our being down at Burnham Beeches—what do you think, Moreton?"

The young doctor hesitated for a moment. "It is her nerves," he said. "She strikes me as being a bit upset about something. Most probably, poor kid, it's this affair about—about her father." [Pg 275]

Young Wick had stopped eating, and was rolling a bit of bread absently between his thumb and first finger. His fair eyebrows were twisted into an odd frown and his mouth was set.

Mrs. Walbridge rose. "I'm going to see if she is all right," she declared anxiously, but Paul put out a detaining hand.

"Don't, mother, John will look after her. He'll see that she is all right. Don't worry, she is a bit run down, but that is nothing. I think I know something that will put everything straight," he added. "I should have waited for him to tell you himself, but as you are worried he won't mind my telling you now. You know how anxious he has been to get back to Argentina?"

"Yes."

"Well, he had a letter to-night from some big official, saying that they would let him go the moment peace is signed. Peace will certainly be signed this week, and he will get off I should think next week, and I believe—mind you, I don't know, only think—that he is going to ask Grisel to marry him at once and go out with him."

"That's a very good plan," declared Moreton Twiss with all the authority of the doctor, "the sea journey would put her to rights, better than anything in the world. Splendid."

"Did he tell you he was going to suggest this?" Mrs. Walbridge asked in a faltering voice. "Oh, Paul, I don't want her to go so soon."

"Nonsense, mother, you must not be selfish," returned Paul, briskly. "I was very late getting back to-night, and he picked me up at the corner in his car and showed me the letter. He didn't exactly suggest it, in fact, I rather think it was I who asked him if he would not be wanting her to marry him at once under the circumstances, but I'd like to bet £5 on his doing it at this moment out there in the rain." [Pg 276]

As he spoke they heard the outside door closing again, and after a moment Barclay came into the dining-room alone.

"Grisel has gone upstairs," he said. "Her head is pretty bad. She may come down later."

They all went up to the girls' room, and shortly after the Twiss' and the Wicks who were spending the night with the Catherwoods, left, and the rain having ceased, Paul walked back with them.

When they had gone Mrs. Walbridge, Sir John and Guy sat on for a while in the pleasant, flower-filled room, and presently Mrs. Walbridge asked Guy to leave her alone with Sir John, and the young man said "Good-night," and went out.

Mrs. Walbridge sat very slim and graceful-looking in her new clothes, and, what was still more remarkable, her new bearing, on the black chesterfield, and Barclay walked up and down the room restlessly, his hands behind him, his head sunk thoughtfully on his breast.

Neither of them spoke for a long time, and then Mrs. Walbridge broke the silence.

"Sir John," she began abruptly, "I do hope you are not going to want to take Grisel back with you to South America next week?"

He turned. "So Paul has told you?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. That is why I told him."

"He thought—he thought you might be asking her to marry you at once—while you were on the veranda I mean." [Pg 277]

He shook his head. "No, I didn't mention it to her." Then he went on very deliberately, looking her straight in the face, "Mrs. Walbridge, I do not wish to marry your daughter."

As soon as she had grasped that she really had heard the words, she sprang to her feet, years younger in her anger.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

He smiled sadly. "Don't be angry, I have the greatest possible esteem and admiration for Grisel."

"But you do not wish to marry her?"

"No! I do not."

In those few short days of long ago he had never seen Violet Blaine angry, and since he had found her again she had seemed so timid, so flattened by life, that he had been unable to conceive of her in any mood but that of her daily one of gentle unobtrusive hopelessness; and now, as she blazed at him, standing there with clenched hands and shortened breath, he suddenly felt twenty years younger, as if all sorts of recent things had been only a dream, and that this—this only, was real.

He looked at her with such plain-to-be-seen satisfaction and admiration, that she was startled and drew back, losing her bearings, and then he spoke.

"You and I," he said, "are too old to do anything but speak plainly to each other; affectations and pretty little pretences are part of the pageant of youth; we have no right to them. So I will be quite short in telling you what I have to say. Grisel is a delightful girl as well as a most beautiful one, but I made a mistake in asking her to marry me. I do not wish to marry her; I do not love her."

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Again her righteous anger blazed up to his curious gratification and delight, but he went on doggedly.

"I have been trying this afternoon to make her break off the engagement, but I have failed, so I shall have to do it myself."

"But it is outrageous, abominable! You have no right to treat my daughter so."

"I have no right," he said, "to treat any woman in the world with less than entire honesty, and least of all your daughter."

Something in his voice penetrated through her anger into her mind and mitigated her glance a little as she answered:

"What do you mean? Why least of all my daughter?"

There was a little pause, then his simple words fell very quietly on the silence. "Because," he said, "for over thirty years I have loved you."

She could not answer for a moment so deep was her amazement, and then, as so often is the case, she could only repeat his words.

"Loved me!"

"Yes, you. I have never married, never in my life used the word love to any woman until I met Grisel, and that was because you were always there in my memory, and there was no room for anyone else."

"But I did not even remember you!"

"No! And you have no idea," he added, smiling sadly, "how after thirty years those words of yours—'that you did not remember me'—hurt me. Well, there you are. Such as I am I have been absolutely faithful to my boyish love for you."

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So many different feelings were struggling in her mind that her face was tremulous with varied fleeting expressions. Her beautiful deep eyes were wet, and her lips looked fuller and red, more like the lips of a girl than they had done for years.

"When I met her at Torquay," he went on, looking away from her with delicacy, "I had no idea she was your daughter. I had never even heard your married name, but something in her, particularly a trick she has with her hands, and then the shape of her ears, always recalled you, and I encouraged myself, deliberately encouraged myself, to fall in love with her. I very nearly succeeded too," he added smiling. "Who could not? Such a charming child."

There was a little pause. It had begun to rain again and the soft pattering sound on the windows filled the air.

"Then I came here and saw you. You, as the years had made you—as the years of Ferdinand Walbridge had made you," he added, with sudden firmness.

She looked up still with the odd air of youth in her face. "Poor Ferdie," she murmured, "he never meant it, you know."

"They never do," he answered dryly. "The very worst husbands are those who did not mean it."

"Well, then," he went on, after a moment, "I had a good deal of thinking, one way and another, and it struck me that if I could make her happy it would make you happy as well. And I tried."

"Oh, you have, you have; you have been so good," she interrupted, clasping her hands. "It's only that she is not very well."

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He shrugged his shoulders. "Surely you must see," he asked slowly, "what is the matter with her?"

"Then there *is* something the matter with her?"

"Of course there is. Why, look at her," he rejoined roughly. "She nearly fainted under your very noses out of sheer misery to-night, and not one of you saw the reason."

She stared at him, her lips moving faintly, and at last she said:

"What was the reason?"

"Wick, young Wick. She is madly in love with him, and he is worth it."

A worldlier woman or a less wise one might have suspected that Barclay was using young Wick as a means to help him out of an irksome engagement, but Mrs. Walbridge knew.

"So I was right," she murmured thoughtfully. "I had begun to think I was wrong." Then she started, clenching the arms of her chair hard.

"Oh, dear," she cried, "what about Miss Perkins?"

He laughed. "That's the question; what about Miss Perkins? There *is* something about her; some mystery, I mean. But never mind that now. The point is this. Grisel has practically refused to break off her engagement with me, so I shall just have to screw up my courage and break mine with her. A nasty job."

"You must not mention Oliver to her. It would not be fair, because of Miss Perkins."

He looked at her curiously. "You don't mean to say that you still think that Wick cares a button about Dorothy Perkins or anyone else except Grisel?"

"But if he doesn't—oh, how dreadful it all is—why is he engaged to her?"

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"That I don't know. I shall know by this time to-morrow." He looked at his watch. "It is only eleven now. I wonder," he went on slowly, "if I could get him on the telephone? May as well get it over at once."

She told him the number, and acting on certain instructions of his went to Grisel's room while he was telephoning. The girl was sitting by the window still dressed, but with her hair plaited in a long tail down her back, which gave her an odd effect of being a child dressed in some one else's clothes. "My head was so bad," she explained. "I have been brushing my hair."

"Good, I am glad you have not gone to bed, darling, for John is still here and wants to see you in a little while."

"Oh, mother, it's so late."

Mrs. Walbridge kissed her smooth, black, old-fashioned, silky hair. "I know, dear, but he has had an important telegram, and wishes to speak to you about it. Oh, look, it has stopped raining, and the moon is coming out!"

She stood for a while looking out into the delicate gleams of the rain-soaked garden, and then said gently:

"Grisel, darling, have you seen Miss Perkins yet?"

"No, but he—he showed me the ring he has got for her."

"Yes, I saw it, too. I think that the girl who marries Oliver," the mother went on, pitifully conscious of the futility of searching for the most painless words, "will be very, very happy."

Grisel nodded without speaking.

"You see, in Paris, and travelling with him, I—I have got to know him so well. He—he is a splendid fellow, Grisel, under all his nonsense."

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"I know, mother," the girl's voice was very low, and very gentle.

After a moment Mrs. Walbridge went on, going to the back of her daughter's chair, and stroking her little head with smooth, regular movements.

"Sometimes I have wished, dear, that you—that you could have cared for him."

"I!" The girl broke away from her gentle hand and faced her. "What if I *had* cared for him? Thank God I didn't; but what if I had? A splendid kind of love *that* was to *trust*—would have been—I mean. Why it was only a week after—after that time in the drawing-room when he looked so awful—*not* a week after that, that he was engaged to this beast of a Perkins girl. I—I hate him," she cried, suddenly breaking down with an unreserved voice that at once frightened and relieved her mother.

Kneeling by the window she cried, cried as her mother knew she had not done for years, her little shoulders shaking, her forehead on the window sill.

"Hush, dear, you must not cry. Better wash your face and sniff some camphor. Remember John will be wanting to see you in a few minutes."

Violet Walbridge had forced herself to speak coldly and in a voice devoid of sympathy, and the effect of this manœuvre showed in the girl's rising almost at once and darting into the bathroom. Her mother heard the roaring of the cold water and stood for a moment listening. Then, without a word, she went back to Barclay.

CHAPTER XXVI

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"Have you any idea why I asked you to come back, Wick?"

Oliver Wick, who had been told to sit down opposite Sir John, looked up at him for a long minute. The young man's face was white, and seemed suddenly to have grown thin, but in his still excitement his eyes were oddly lucent. At last he answered:

"Well, sir," he said, his voice so tense that while it did not tremble it vibrated a little. "I do not know exactly *why*, but I think I know what it's about."

"Good. Then we need not waste any time."

The clock struck as he spoke, and Barclay, who was smoking a cigar, waited until the silence was undisturbed before saying quietly, "It's about Griselda Walbridge."

Wick murmured, "I thought as much."

"I want," Barclay went on, watching the young face very closely, "your help in a matter of great importance both to Grisel and to me."

"I'd do a great deal for you, sir. I'd do anything in the world—for—Griselda."

"I am glad to hear you say that. Well, what steps would you advise me to take in order to—to break off my engagement to Griselda?"

The hot red leaped to Wick's face, and he started violently, but he did not speak for a time; his surprise was unblemished by his having had any suspicion that the interview was going to take this turn, and for a moment he was incapable of sane speech. When he could find his voice it was to exclaim blandly, "Why do you ask me?"

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"Because," the older man answered in a perfectly even voice, "I know that she loves you."

Wick rose. "Oh, you know that!"

"I do, and because of this I have suggested to her that perhaps, when she did me the honour of accepting me, she—she made a mistake."

A sudden grin, as disconcerting as it was irresistible, appeared on the young man's face, and they both waited for it to disappear much as they might have waited for the withdrawal of an intruding stranger.

"Oh, no, she didn't make any mistake," Wick broke out when he could again control his facial muscles. "She knew perfectly well when she accepted you; knew—that—well, sir"—he proceeded boldly, yet with a very charming deference—"that she loved me."

"Surely she never told you this?" Barclay's voice was stern.

"Oh, bless my soul, no never; in fact," the grin again quivered on his lips for a second, "she did some pretty tall lying about it, poor little minx."

"I see. Then, to be brief, you have known all along that I was bound to be disappointed?"

"Yes, sir." Wick's brightly shining, smiling eyes met his fairly and squarely. "You see, she meant to marry you and did her best, but—well, I knew she would break down in the end."

"Neither of you seem," the elder man said, but with a hint of dryness in his voice, "to have considered my feelings much."

But Wick protested, "Oh, yes, we did—I mean to say *I* did. I thought a lot about you at one time and another, sir."

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"And to what conclusions did these—reflections—lead you?"

Wick, who was still standing, took out his cigarette case and snapped it thoughtfully several times.

"To this," he returned at last, "that though I was really sorry for you, it just could not be helped."

"I see, youth must have its day."

"Yes, or 'every dog' is better. What I mean is that really, you know, normally, your day for that particular form of happiness ought to have been, well—before we—Griselda and I, were even born."

There was so much odd gentleness in the way he voiced his ruthless theory that Barclay was touched.

"You are not far out there," he answered unemotionally, "only my day never did come. It was a kind of false dawn—and then—ah, well, it is rather late, so suppose we get to business. As matters stand at present, this young lady happens to be engaged not to you, but to me, and what is more, she—she has practically refused to break the engagement, so it is left to me. And this," he added cheerfully, "is a little hard on me, don't you think?"

"I do. Do you want me to do it for you?"

"No. I want to hear your ideas about the matter. For example, what would you suggest as a good first step?"

Wick thought for a moment. "I don't quite see the first step, but the *end* is perfectly clear."

"Yes?"

"She must propose to me." The young man's voice was full of confidence, and he appeared to be unconscious of the absurdity of his suggestion.

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"Grisel—Grisel to propose to you? Nonsense, Wick!"

"But she must. Look here, Sir John." Wick, who had sat down, leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and spoke very earnestly.

"You know nothing about me, sir, so, if you don't mind, I'd better tell you a little. You see, they—the Walbridges—think that I am still the little Fleet Street reporter I was when they first knew me, but—I am not. For several months"—he talked on, explaining his position with a modest pride that pleased his hearer.

"So I am actually speaking to the editor of a London newspaper!" Sir John at last smiled kindly.

"Yes. *Sparks* is a rotten paper, but his making me editor of it is only a trick of the chiefs to find out what I am made of, so I don't mind. He's a sly old devil, long sighted and crafty, and he has, so to speak, laid me wide open and is now poking about in my in'ards to find out all about me." He laughed. "Lord, how the old man is sweating, trying to tire me out, and I get fresher and fresher! Oh, yes," he went on after another chuckle, "I am his latest YOUNG MAN and I have got better works than most of them and I am bound to succeed all right. So that's that." His mouth set, and he was silent for a moment, plainly looking into the future. "And by the time I am your age, Sir John," he said slowly, "I shall be what Fleet Street calls a 'Great Man.' I shall also be a multi-millionaire. Miss Minx will never starve."

"Yes, but you forget that she is still engaged to me."

Wick's eyes lost their far-off look.

"So she is," he admitted, "so she is. Guess I am going on a bit too fast. However," he went on with an air of conclusiveness, "she can't very well marry you if you don't want her, and you don't. So let's get on." He had rumbled his fine mouse-coloured hair, which stood up ludicrously, and he now tried to smooth it down, which made it more absurd than before.

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Sir John watched him with a smile. "Well, now that we understand each other," the older man began, "suppose you tell me something else. I think I am not wrong in assuming that you—love Griselda?"

He had been half afraid to put the question, not that he doubted the gist of the reply, but that he shrank from a possible awkwardness or unbeautiful expression of it. He had been wrong.

Wick dropped his hands and turned to him his symmetrical face excited and bold looking, his eyes blooming with youth and love.

"Yes," he said with dignity, "I do. And——"

"You believe that her love for you is big enough to bring her to the point of—of—well—foregoing the thing for whose sake she accepted me?"

"Of course I do, but—you can see for yourself that she has not been happy. I have made it just as hard for her as I possibly could, too. I have not told her about *Sparks*, or the chiefs taking a shine to me, or my rise in salary. I—I wanted her to have a bad time, I—I wanted the little wretch to feel what she was going to give up in giving up you, and all your things, just for me. For the penniless, obscure kid I was at first."

"And you think that she will do this now?"

"Yes, poor little thing, oh, yes, she will!" He mused for a moment and then his face sharpened again and he added testily, "But I won't ask her to."

"You mean that she must ask you?" Barclay spoke more gently. "Well, when she has asked you to marry her—what are you going to do about poor Miss Perkins?"

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Wick literally bounced to his feet, as if the name had been a bomb dropped into the room.

"Oh, Miss Perkins—Miss Perkins," he repeated almost idiotically.

"Yes. This is bound to be something of a blow to her." Barclay's face was very grave, but there was a slight quiver in his voice.

Oliver Wick had, just then, no ear for slight quivers.

"I—oh, she'll be all right," he murmured feebly.

"You mean that she won't mind?"

"Oh, no, she won't mind. She's a remarkably sensible girl——" then he burst into a roar of laughter. "Look here, Sir John," he gasped, "it's no good, I have a horrible confession to make to you. I shall have to murder Miss Perkins!" Again he shouted with childish, almost painfully loud laughter, and Sir John laughed with him.

At last Sir John wiped his eyes. "I take it you will be able to kill the lady without much bloodshed?" he asked. "I—I have been suspecting as much."

The moon was flooding the rain bejewelled garden with light as Griselda Walbridge came down the steps. She walked slowly, as if her little feet were heavy, and her smooth dark head was bent. At the foot of the steps she stopped and looked around. "John," she called softly, "John, are you there?"

No one answered, and she shrank back against the rose-festooned handrail. The moonlight was very bright, but the shadows were black and solid-looking, and it was later, too, than she had

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ever been alone in the garden.

In the silence she turned and looked up the steps to the open house door. Her mother had told her that Barclay was waiting for her in the garden and now where was he, she wondered. In the clear light her small face, a little hard in reality, looked unusually child-like and spiritual. She stared up at the sky, and across the garden, and then, thinking that Barclay for some reason had not waited for her after all, walked slowly along across the tennis lawn.

She was dressed in true sapphire blue, the best colour of all for moonlight, and presently she stopped by a rose tree and pulled a deep red rose, her big ruby glowing as she tugged at the tough stem and then, emboldened and soothed by the perfect quiet, she went slowly on, holding the rose against her cheek.

Near the old bench where her mother and Oliver had sat on Hermione's wedding day, she started back frightened and then gave a nervous little laugh.

"Oh, here you are," she cried.

The owner of the cigarette came out of the shadow, and again she cried out, this time in a very different voice, "Oh, it is *you*."

"Yes, it is me," Wick answered britannically. "Oh, Grisel, Grisel, do look at that moon——"

He drew her hand through his arm and thus old-fashionedly linked they stood in silence for a moment.

Then she said, "Where is—Sir John? Mother said he was here waiting for me."

Wick stared at the moon a moment longer and then said quietly:

"Grisel, I love you!"

"Oliver, you are crazy!"

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"No, sit down on the bench."

"Thanks, I'd rather not, I must go in——"

"Sit down——"

"No, thanks."

"Grisel, sit down."

"No."

"Grisel, sit down!"

Grisel sat down, and he sat beside her.

"Did you hear what I said a minute ago?" he went on quietly.

"Not being deaf, I did. What they call lunal madness, I suppose." Her voice shook, but her tone was one of awful hauteur.

"Lunar, no such word as lunal. Grisel, I love you."

"Really," she protested, "I must go in."

"Grisel, I——"

"I," she broke out furiously, "you say that again and I shall—yell."

"Yell then, it will do you good. Yell like hell. And you love me."

She sprang to her feet. "I don't. What an abominable thing to say. How—how——"

"How dare I? Easy. Almost as easy as looking at you, my pretty. Grisel, we love each other."

She burst into nervous, shrill laughter, and then suddenly stopped.

"I cannot help laughing, you are such an idiot," she said, "but I am very angry. Have you forgotten that I am—engaged to John——"

"John be damned."

Helpless tears crowded into her eyes and her throat swelled suddenly. "How hateful you are."

"I am not hateful, darling. I am your true love."

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"Oh, Oliver," she cried in despair, her feelings so varied, and so entangled, that she could not straighten them out. "What about Dorothy Perkins?"

"Dorothy Perkins is a flower."

"A—a what?"

"A *flower*. I mean to say, she is a creeper."

"Oliver," she laid her hand on his arm and peered anxiously into his face. "What is the matter with you? Aren't you well?"

"Yes, dear, I am well, but she *is* a creeper." He stretched out his arm and pointed. "There she is on the steps." Then he saw that she was really alarmed for his sanity.

"Grisel, darling, that rose, that rose climbing on the steps, is the only Dorothy Perkins I know."

"But——"

"No, it is true. I—I made her up, my little darling."

"How could you make her up?" she wailed. "You could not make up a girl!"

"But she isn't a girl, sweetheart. I invented her, to make you jealous."

Suddenly Grisel broke down and their great moment was upon them. When she had cried herself into exhausted quiet in his arms he wiped her eyes on his handkerchief.

"Oh, I—I *have* hated her so, Oliver. But—whose was the photograph then?"

He explained.

"But *Jenny* talked about her, and even your mother."

"Of course, that's what mothers are for."

Suddenly she sat up and smoothed her hair. "Oh, dear me, what—what will poor John say?"

Wick stiffened. Now came the test. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, when I tell him. Poor John!"

He stuffed the damp handkerchief back into his pocket, and lit a cigarette.

"When you tell him what?"

"Why, about us."

Wick very deliberately puffed at his cigarette. "I don't think I would mention it," he said.

"Oliver, what do you mean?"

He rose, and walked up and down in front of her.

"I mean that because I just lost my head and made a fool of myself there is no reason that that splendid old fellow should be—worried."

"Worried!" she almost screamed. "I don't understand you."

"Well, I mean, my dear, that because—I behaved like a cad and—and kissed a girl who is going to marry another man—a man a thousand times my superior in every way—there is no reason for *his* being troubled by knowing about it. I am ashamed of myself, and I beg your pardon, and I am sure you will forgive me."

The pallor made her in the moonlight look almost unearthly, and he was obliged to bend his eyes resolutely away from her, during the pause that ensued.

"Then you—then you meant nothing by it?" she stammered.

"No. At least—oh, well—of course you know that I love you, but I quite agree with you that to marry a penniless young beggar like me would be madness—"

She was so amazed, so honestly horrified by his cynical cold-bloodedness that for a moment she could not speak.

"How—how can I marry him after *that*?" she gasped.

"Oh, quite easily, dear. You forgive me, and I will forgive you and we will both blame—the moon," he waved his hand, "and the roses," and then she broke down.

"I can't, I can't," she wailed, "you know I can't. Oh, Oliver, if you love me you must marry me."

Wick, though deeply stirred, held his ground.

"I don't see any *must*," he said morosely, and at last his triumph came.

"But you will, won't you?" she cried. "Oh, Oliver, you will marry me?"

At about this time Mrs. Walbridge and Sir John Barclay sat together in the girls' room. Mrs. Walbridge's eyes, strangely youthful-looking, fixed thoughtfully on her companion. They had had a long talk, and now, at the end of it, she put a question to him.

"But you," she said gently, "are you sure you will not be unhappy, John?"

And he said, his grave face full of serenity, "Yes. I have always known that I was too old for her, you know, Violet—I suppose I may call you Violet now?"

In the moonlight her little blush gave her face a marvellous look of girliness, and his eyes shone as he looked at her.

"Your—your divorce case is on for Wednesday, isn't it," he asked after a little pause.

"Yes. I suppose they will be married in six months time? Oh, John, I hope so—poor Ferdie, he—he doesn't bear trouble very well. I do hope it will be all right."

They talked on, and he told her that he should not stay long in South America, that in November he would come back to London for good.

"Oh, I am so glad," she answered. "I am very glad. For I shall be a little lonely later on. Griselda will go very soon, and Paul really cares for little Jenny, and I hope—of course I shall have Guy for a while—I must tell you about Guy, John—the war has—taught him such a lot. He is changed enormously. Do you know, he and I are better friends than I have ever been with any of the

others? I am so thankful—but still, he is young, and of course will be full of his own interests, and I shall be glad to have you near—one of my own age—but will you *like* living always in London?"

Barclay nodded. "Yes, I shall always live in London. Somewhere not too far from—here."

CHAPTER XXVII

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It was one o'clock when Mrs. Walbridge at last found herself alone. She was very tired, but so happy and excited that she did not want to go to bed, and after walking restlessly about the girls' room, and the drawing-room, living over again the happenings of the last few crowded hours, she went softly up two flights of stairs and opened the door of her little study.

It was many weeks since she had sat there at the old table, and the moonlight revealed a thick layer of dust over the inky blotting-paper and the cheap, china ink-stand. Noiselessly she opened the window and stood looking out at the night. She had always loved the quiet, dark hours and the mystery and purity of night had all her life made a strong appeal to her imagination. The millions of people who lay helpless and innocent in sleep; the rest from scheming and struggle; the renewal of strength; and the ebbing towards dawn of enfeebled life. The very fact that some of the great thoroughfares of London were being washed—laved she mentally called it—and purified from their accumulation of ugly unhygienic filth; all these things made night a time of beauty and romance to this writer of sentimental rubbish. It seemed, she had always thought, to make the sin-defiled old world young and innocent again for a few hours, and this night was to be an unforgettable one to her.

Guy had come back finer, and with greater promises of nobility than ever before. Grisel had finally come—been dragged—to her senses, and would worthily fulfil her womanhood with Oliver, whom Mrs. Walbridge told herself she loved nearly as much as she loved her own sons. In reality she loved the young journalist far more than even Guy, but this she did not, and never was, to know.

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She went on counting her blessings. Maud's baby was lovely, and strong, and patients were really beginning, if not exactly to flock at least, to come in decent numbers to Moreton Twiss. Hermione was enjoying what to her mother seemed an almost unparalleled social success, among people innocently believed by Mrs. Walbridge to be of very high society indeed; little Jenny Wick seemed to like Paul, and if she married him he seemed to stand a very good chance of improving in every way, of becoming kinder and less selfish.

Thus, standing in the moonlight, Mrs. Walbridge thankfully reviewed the many good things in her life.

"To be sure," she thought, her face clouding, "it was very sad about Ferdie, it was a dreadful, almost tragic thing that their old life, however trying and disappointing it had been to her, should have been broken in this way. Like many other women she felt that, though her husband was a bad one he was, because he had been the lover of her youth and was the father of her children, a thing of odd pathos and even value to her. He was like," she thought, "a bit of china—a bowl or a jug—bought by her in her youth, and though she had been deceived in thinking it genuine and though it was cracked all over, she yet preferred to keep it than to lose it."

Carrying on the simile, the divorce case seemed to her like a public sale, in which all the blemishes and cracks of her poor jug would be exposed to indifferent observers.

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All this she felt very sharply, but at the same time there was an immense relief that never again would Ferdie live under the same roof with her, that she would never again have to listen to his boasting, to hear his plausible, usually agreeable lies, to endure his peevish reproaches when things went wrong. Never again, she told herself with an odd little smile, need she have fried liver for breakfast. Ferdie cherished for fried liver a quite impossible ideal of tenderness and juiciness, and every Sunday morning for a quarter of a century she had come downstairs praying that the liver might be all right this time. And it never was all right. No, she would never have fried liver on her table again.

Then she thought about Paris. Paris, once Guy was out of danger, had been wonderful in its freedom from household cares, its lack of responsibility to anyone. At first she had hardly been able to believe that no one would ask her where she was going, and instantly suggest her not going there, but somewhere else. And then Cannes! One of her favourite literary devices had always been to send the heroines to the Sunny South.

She had written lavishly of the tropical heat, the incredible blueness of the quiet sea, of the wealth of flowers in that vague bepalaced land, but the reality (although the sea was not quite so blue as she had expected it to be) overwhelmed her. The best of all had been the gentle, balmy laziness that gradually wrapped her round and enveloped her, the laziness that even an occasionally sharp, dusty wind could not dispel.

Best of all she had had no duties. Not one. And she had sat on her balcony in a comfortable cane rocking-chair, by the hour. "I just sat, and sat, and sat," she thought, leaning against the window sill. "How beautiful it was." And, now that her regret about her cracked jug had been softened by time, and mitigated by the variety of new joys that had come to her, she could henceforth, in a more decorous British way, go on sitting.

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Paul would, of course, continue to bully her and to nag, but if, as she hoped, little Jenny cared enough about him to marry him, he would turn his bullying and nagging attentions, in a very modified way, to her. It was, Mrs. Walbridge reflected innocently, right that a man should give up tormenting his mother once he had a wife of his own. And little red-headed Jenny could, she thought with a smile, look after herself.

As for Mrs. Crichell—once she, too, was Mrs. Ferdie, *she* would no doubt look after herself. It was a rather startling thought, that of two Mrs. Ferdies! "I suppose I shall be Mrs. Violet?"

The clock on the stairs struck again, and Mrs. Violet started. "Good gracious," she murmured aloud, "how dreadfully late it is."

She looked round the little room once more, recalling the hundreds of hours she had sat there grilling in summer; freezing in winter, working on her books, and then with a queer little smile she went downstairs. She told herself resolutely as she went that this was perfectly ridiculous; that she *must* go to bed but she didn't want to go to bed, and, moreover, she suddenly realised that she was hungry.

In her excitement she had eaten very little dinner, and after locking the front door she ran down into the kitchen. After a hurried examination of the larder, and experiencing a new and what she felt to be un-British distaste for cold mutton, she decided to scramble some eggs. Lighting the gas-ring, she broke three eggs into a yellow bowl, and began to beat them briskly with a silver fork.

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The kitchen was a pleasant place, newly painted and whitewashed, and a row of highly flourishing pink and white geraniums garnished the long low window. Really, a *very* nice kitchen, its mistress mused happily.

When she had whipped the eggs enough, she set the table, spreading a lace tea-cloth on one end of it, and reaching down a plate and a cup and saucer from the rack. She was smiling now, for there was to her gentle spirit of adventure something rather romantic in this solitary, very late meal.

"I do not know," she said as she set the saucepan on the ring and dropped a big bit of butter into it, "whether it is supper or breakfast."

Then a sudden idea came to her. She set the saucepan on the table and flew to the larder, whence, after a hurried search, she brought back two large fine tomatoes. She had always been extremely fond of scrambled eggs with tomatoes, but Ferdie loathed tomatoes, and Paul had inherited his distaste for them, so she had long since renounced this innocent gluttony. Now Ferdie had gone, and Paul was asleep, and there was nothing on earth to prevent her having "Spanish eggs," as she called them. She turned the savoury mess, very much peppered and salted, out on to two slices of buttered toast, and sat down with the teapot at hand, to enjoy herself.

"I will—I will tell John about this," she reflected gaily. "He'll laugh."

She had been so busy up to this, since he had told her, that she had hardly had time to think about it, but now, as she ate, she went back over their talk together. It seemed to her very wonderful that such a man should have cared for her, and her mind was full of pathetic gratitude to him for what she did not at all realise he must often have regarded as a perfect nuisance.

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Here she had been, she thought, struggling along at "Happy House" with Ferdie and the children, losing her youth, and her hopes, and her looks, and there—somewhere—anywhere—had been that fine, handsome, successful man, loving her! It was most wonderful. "I hope, though," her thoughts went on as she began on her delicious hot eggs, "that he didn't *mean* anything by what he said about the divorce—and his always living somewhere near—us."

She had written nearly two dozen very sentimental novels, and was an adept at happy endings, but she blushed in her solitude at the thought that Barclay might possibly be contemplating for her and him anything so indecorous as in their case it would be, as such a happy ending.

"Oh, no, I am sure he didn't—but how wonderful it would be to have him for a friend. For the boys too, with his fine character and his cleverness." Oh, yes, she was going to be very proud of him, and the fragrance of the old romance would always hang over their friendship. And then suddenly she blushed hotly, and laid down her fork.

"Violet Walbridge," she said severely, precisely as she would have made one of her own heroines in like case apostrophise herself, "you are not being honest. You know that he *did* mean something. You know that he will—not now, of course, but after a long, long time—ask you—to be his wife." Feeling very wicked, and very shy, she faced the question for a moment, and then took a long drink of tea—a long draught of tea her heroine would have called it—"but if he does," she decided, her eyes full of tears, "it won't be for ages, and I need not decide now. I can tell him when the time comes that—that—" as she reached this point her eyes happened to fall on a pot of white paint that was standing on a shelf in the corner. Cook, she supposed, had been painting something in the scullery and the pot had been forgotten. Her face changed.

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It was very odd. She had been meaning for years to have the words "Happy House" renewed on the gate, but the irony of the name had somehow forced her into putting it off, and for a long time now she had been dating her letters just 88, Walpole Road, and not using the name at all; the romantic, foolish name, it had come to look to her now. She rose with a smile, and reached down the pot, and stood stirring the thick paint with the brush.

"Now," she thought, "it really *is* 'Happy House'—or it's going to be"—and she would have the

words there again.

Refreshed by the tea and food, she felt less than ever inclined for bed and, laughing aloud at her own folly, she decided that she would paint the words on the gate herself.

The moon was still shining, yet it was too early for any prying eye to see her, and it would, she thought, with that novelist's imagination of hers—the thing without which not even the worst novel could possibly be written—be a romantic and splendid ending to the most wonderful day in her life.

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Opening the area door softly she crept up the steps with the pot and brush in her hand, and went down the flagged path. The moon was paling and the shadows lay less distinctly on the quiet road, but the general gloom seemed greater. Not a soul was in sight; not a sound broke the sleepy stillness; not a light shone in any window. Opening the gate, and closing it again to steady it, Mrs. Walbridge, forgetting her beautiful frock, knelt down on the pavement and set to work. The poor old words, last renewed, she remembered the day Paul came of age, when Ferdie had given one of his characteristic parties, were nearly obliterated.

Very carefully the thankful little woman worked, her heart singing. Darling Grisel, how happy she had looked when she left her lying in bed, the big ruby gone from her finger, and the little old emerald bought in Paris for Miss Perkins, in its place. It was really wonderful how well everything was turning out! Paul and Jenny had certainly advanced a good deal in their friendship during her absence. Jenny must marry him, oh dear, and Mrs. Crichell *must* marry Ferdie, too. John, dear, wise romantic John thought she would, and, after all, she thought, as her brush worked, poor Ferdie had lots of good qualities really, and she, Violet, had always been too dull, too staid for him.

"Clara Crichell liked entertaining, and really has great talents as a hostess and I always was dreadful at parties." She dipped the brush in again and began on the "y." "He is one of those people for whom success is really good," she went on; "who knows but that he may turn out very well as the husband of a rich woman, poor Ferdie——"

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"Violet!" She started and ruined the "H" in "House." Poor Ferdie stood before her.

"Ferdie, is it you?" she cried stupidly, still kneeling.

"Yes, of course it is me," he snapped crossly. "What on earth are you doing out here in the middle of the night?"

Scrambling to her feet she answered anxiously, "I—I am just painting. But why are you here?"

"Let's go into the house and I will tell you," he said. "I have come home, Violet!"

Half an hour later Ferdinand Walbridge sat in the kitchen of "Happy House," drinking tea and eating scrambled eggs—without tomatoes. He had on a velvet jacket of Paul's, for he was cold, and the glass out of which he had drunk a stiff brandy and soda still stood on the table. Beside him sat his wife, her face full of troubled sympathy.

"Enough salt?" she asked presently.

He nodded. "The food at the Rosewarne is beastly, it has played the very deuce with my digestion ____"

"Did you have hot water every morning?"

"No, it was luke warm half the time and made me feel sick."

He went on eating in silence, and she studied his face. That he should look ill, and unhappy, did not, after what he had told her, surprise her much; what did strike her was his look of age. She had often seen him when he was ill, but this was the first time that his face not only showed his real age, but looked actually older. The lines in it seemed deeper, and his eyes, under heavy suddenly wrinkled lids, lustreless and watery. He had cried a good deal of course, she reflected pitifully, but never before had his easy tears made his eyes look like that.

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"I do think," he murmured resentfully, "that you might have remembered that I like China tea."

"I did remember, Ferdie, but there is not any in the house. You know all the rest of us prefer Ceylon."

He grunted and went on eating. "Poor china jug," she thought, "his cracks were very apparent now."

"Oh, Ferdie," she broke out, "I am really awfully sorry for you."

He looked up, his haggard face a little softened.

"Yes, I believe you really are, Violet, and I can tell you one thing, Clara wouldn't be if she was in your shoes."

She didn't answer, for she really did not know what to say about Clara—Clara, who had behaved so cruelly to poor Ferdie.

"She is a woman," he burst out, "with no heart, absolutely none."

"Perhaps she—perhaps she is sorry for Mr. Crichell," she suggested timidly.

He laughed. "Sorry? Not she. I tell you it is the legacy that has done it. The legacy. She always could twist Crichell around her little finger, and the very minute she heard the news, off she went to him and made up. You mark my words, the greater part of that legacy will be hanging round her neck before very long."

"But, Ferdie, she can't be as bad as that. No woman could. People often make mistakes, you know, and she may have found that—that—after all, her heart was really his."

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He rose and stared at her rudely. "Like one of the awful women in your novels! I tell you, it was the legacy that did it. Perfectly revolting, because, after all," he added with an odious, fatuous laugh, "all other things being equal, it's *me* she loves. Why, I never saw a woman—" he broke off, seeming to realise suddenly the bad taste of his attitude. "But that's not the point," he went on, nervously—"the point is this—"

She drew a long breath and clenched her hands in her lap to fortify herself for the coming scene. Nothing, she knew, not even the real suffering he had been through, could induce Ferdie to forego a dramatic scene.

"Hum," he cleared his throat violently and Mrs. Walbridge, instinctively true to her wifely duty, answered:

"Yes, Ferdinand?"

"Well," he made a little gesture with his handsome hand, which struck her as being not quite so clean as usual. "I have done wrong, and—I beg your pardon." His voice was sonorous and most musical, and as he finished speaking he dropped his head on his breast in a kind of splendid compromise between the attitude of shame and a court bow.

"I—I forgive you, Ferdie, of course, I forgive you," but she knew that he had not yet got his money's worth out of the situation.

"Violet," he began again—and then as if for the first time, he looked at her, not as a refuge, or a feather-bed, or a soothing draught, but as a woman. "Why, what—" he stammered, staring, "what have you been doing with yourself? You look—different somehow. You look years younger, and—and where did you get that gown?" To her dismay he ended on a sharp note of suspicion.

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"I bought it in Paris," she answered quietly.

"Bought it? Why, it is worth twenty guineas, if it's worth a penny! Violet, I—I hope you have not been—forgetting that you are my wife, while I have been away?"

She nearly laughed, he was so ridiculous, but her deep eyes filled with tears over the pathos of it.

"Listen, Ferdie," she said gently, "you need not worry about me. I am an old woman now and I have always been a good woman. I bought this dress, and several others, in Paris, with money that I got as a prize for a book."

He stared at her stupidly with his blood-shot eyes.

"Yes, a book you have probably read. It's called 'Bess Knighthood.'"

"You—you didn't write 'Bess Knighthood!'"

"Yes, I did. After 'Lord Effingham' was such a failure, I just—just sat down and wrote 'Bess Knighthood.' I don't know how I did it—it went so fast I could hardly remember it, when it was done." A wan smile stirred her lips, which seemed to have lost their recent fullness and looked flat and faded, "but I got the prize."

"Oh." He looked annoyed, and she realised at once that he felt injured, for it had always given him a pleasant feeling of superiority to laugh at her looks, and now he could laugh no more.

"Yes," she resumed, drawing herself up a little in her pride, "and I have not spent very much—I have got nearly five hundred pounds left, so if you need some, Ferdie—"

The early day was by now coming in over the geraniums, and in its wan light, each of them thought how ruinous the other looked.

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Walbridge gazed at his wife. "You are fagged out," he said pompously. "It is very late, I think we had better go upstairs," and without a word she followed him up into the hall.

"One of your old pyjama suits is in the dressing-room chest-of-drawers," she said, as he went on up the front stairs, leaning heavily on the handrail. "I—I have one or two things to do, Ferdie."

He turned, looking down, dominating her even now in her miserable triumph.

"All right," he said, "I—I will sleep in the dressing-room. Don't be long, Violet," and Ferdinand Walbridge went to bed.

Mrs. Walbridge took up the pot of paint and the sprawling brush from where they were lying on the pavement and looked at the words on the gate. "Happy" stood out neatly, but the "H" in "House" was obliterated by a great splash, and the remaining letters, untouched by the fresh paint, looked by contrast more faded and faint than ever.

"Dear me," she thought, "what a mess." And then, because she was a tidy woman, as well as to avoid questions and conjectures, she rubbed off the smear of paint as well as she could with one of the new Paris handkerchiefs, and resumed her interrupted task.

In a few moments her work was done, and the words she had chosen for the new house thirty years ago showed out once more distinctly on the green gate. She rose to her knees, too tired for thought, sensible only of a violent longing for sleep; to-morrow, she knew, she must think. She must think about the turn things were taking; about the coming back of her husband, and the resumption of the old daily routine; of Ferdie's fretfulness, of liver for breakfast, and, most of all, she must think about Sir John Barclay.

"Poor John," she thought, giving a last look at the words on the gate, "and poor Ferdie. Oh, how tired I am——" she went into the house and shut the door.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAPPY HOUSE ***

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