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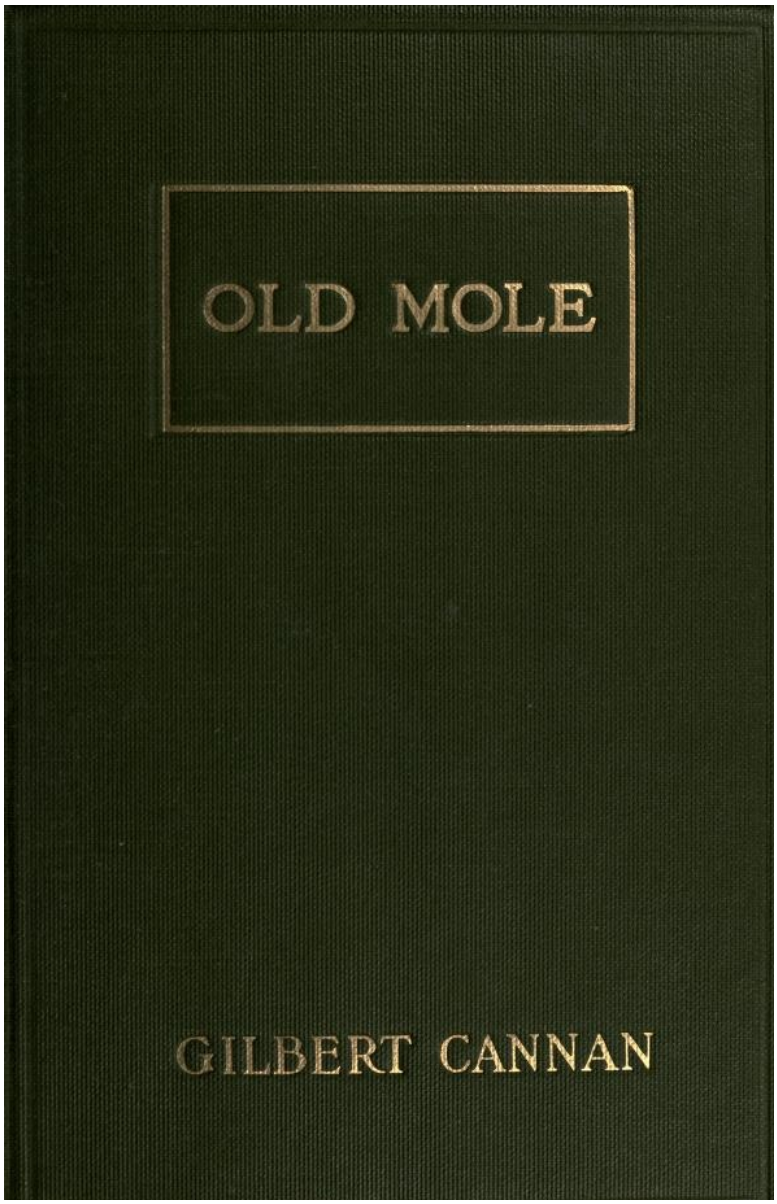

OLD MOLE

BEING THE SURPRISING ADVENTURES IN ENGLAND OF HERBERT JOCELYN BEENHAM, M.A., SOMETIME SIXTH-FORM MASTER AT THRIGSBY GRAMMAR SCHOOL IN THE COUNTY OF LANCASTER

BY
GILBERT CANNAN
AUTHOR OF "ROUND THE CORNER"

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON
1917

TO
MY WIFE

J'aime les fables des philosophes, je ris de celles des enfants, et je hais celles des imposteurs.

L'INGÉNU.

CONTENTS

I

PRELUDE

His star is a strange one! One that leadeth him to fortune by the path of frowns! to greatness by the aid of thwackings!

THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT

I

PRELUDE

A SENSITIVE observer, who once spent a week in theatrical lodgings in Thrigsby, has described the moral atmosphere of the place as “harsh listlessness shot with humor.” That is about as far as you can get in a week. It is farther than Herbert Jocelyn Beenham, M.A. (Oxon.), got in the twenty-five years he had given to the instruction of the youth of Thrigsby in its Grammar School—the foundation of an Elizabethan bishop. Ambition ever leads a man away from Thrigsby. Having none, H. J. Beenham had stayed there, achieving the sort of distinction that swelled Tennyson’s brook. Boys and masters came and went, but “Old Mole” still occupied the Sixth Form room in the gallery above the glass roof of the gymnasium.

He was called Old Mole because whenever he spied a boy cribbing, or larking, or reading a book that had no reference to the subject in hand, or eating sweets, or passing notes, he would cry out in a voice of thunder: “Ha! Art thou there, old mole?” Thrigsbian fathers who had suffered at his hands would ask their sons about Old Mole, and so his position was fortified by a sort of veneration. He was one of those [Pg 4] men who assume their definite shape and appearance in the early thirties, and thereafter give no clew to their age even to the most curious spinster’s inquisitiveness. Reference to the Calendar of his university shows that at the time of his catastrophe he cannot have been more than forty-eight.

He was unmarried, not because he disliked women, but from indolence, obstinacy, combativeness, and a coarse strain in him which made him regard the female body, attire and voice as rather ridiculous. With married women he was ceremonious and polite: with the unmarried he was bantering. When he had been twenty years at the school he began jocularly to speak of it as his bride, and when he came to his twenty-fifth year he regarded it as his silver wedding. He was very proud when his Form presented him with a smoker’s cabinet and his colleagues subscribed for a complete edition of the works of Voltaire bound in vellum. Best of all was the fact that one of his boys, A. Z. Panoukian, an Armenian of the second generation (and therefore a thorough Thrigsbian), had won a scholarship at Balliol, the first since he had had charge of the Sixth. At Speech Day, when the whole school and their female relatives and the male parents of the prize-winners were gathered in the John Bright Hall, the Head Master would make a special reference to Panoukian and possibly to the happy coincidence of his performance with the attainment of Mr. Beenham’s fourth of a century in the service of the pious and ancient foundation. It was possible, but [Pg 5] unlikely, for the Head Master was a sentimentalist who made a point of presenting an arid front to the world lest his dignity should be undermined.

It was with a glow of satisfaction that H. J. Beenham took out his master’s hood and his best mortar-board on the eve of Speech Day and laid them out in his bedroom. This was at five o’clock in the afternoon, for he had promised to spend the evening with the Panoukian family at Bungsall, on the north side of the city. It was a heavy July day and he was rather tired, for he had spent the morning in school reading aloud from the prose works of Emerson, and the afternoon had been free, owing to the necessity of a replay of the Final in the inter-Form cricket championship between his boys and the Modern Transitus. He had intended to illuminate the event with his presence, but Thrigsby in July is not pleasant, and so he had come out by an early train to his house at Bigley in the hills which overflow Derbyshire into Cheshire.

He sat with a glow of satisfaction as he gazed at his hood and mortar-board and thought of Panoukian. He was pleased with Panoukian. He had “spotted” him in the Lower Third and rushed him up in two and a half years to the Sixth. There had been an anxious three years during which Panoukian had slacked, and taken to smoking, and been caught in a café flirting (in a school cap) with a waitress, and had been content with the superficial ease and brilliance with which he had mastered the Greek and Latin classics and the rudiments of philosophy. There had been a [Pg 6] devastating term when Panoukian had taken to writing poetry, and then things had gone from bad to worse until he (Beenham) had lighted on the truth that Panoukian was stale and needed a fresh point of attack. Then he had Panoukian to stay with him at Bigley and turned him loose in French literature and, as a side issue, introduced him to Eckermann’s version of Goethe’s conversation. The boy was most keenly responsive to literature, and through these outside studies it had been possible to lead him back to the realization that Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Virgil and company had also produced literature and that their works had only been masquerading as text-books. . . . The fight was won, and F. J. Tibster of Balliol had written a most

gratifying letter of commendation of Panoukian's performance in the examination. This had yielded the greatest satisfaction to Panoukian *père*, and he had twice given Mr. Beenham lunch in the most expensive restaurant of Thrigsby's new mammoth hotel, and now, when Panoukian *fils* was to leave the wing of his preceptor, had bidden him to meet Mrs. Panoukian—an Irishwoman—and all the Miss Panoukians. The railway journey from Bigley would be hot and unpleasant, and to reach Bungsall it was necessary to pass through some of the most stifling streets in Thrigsby. After the exhaustion of the summer term and the examinations the schoolmaster found it hard to conquer his reluctance. Only by thinking of the cool stream in the Highlands [Pg 7] to which it was his habit to fly on the day after Speech Day could he stiffen himself to the effort of donning his dress clothes. (The Panoukians dressed in the evening since their Arthur had been embraced by Balliol and taken to the bosom of the Lady Dervorguilla.) He had a cold bath, and more than ever clearly he thought of the brown water of the burn foaming into white and creamy flecks over the rocks. How thoroughly, he thought, he had this year earned his weeks of peace and solitude.

He would catch the six-twenty-four. He had plenty of time and there would be a good margin in Thrigsby. He could look in at the Foreign Library, of which he was president, and give them his new selection of books to be purchased during the vacation. On the way he met Barnett, the captain of the Bigley Golf Club, and stayed to argue with him about the alterations to the fourteenth green, which he considered scandalous and incompetent. He told Barnett so with such heat and at such length that he only just caught the six-twenty-four and had to leap into a third-class carriage. It was empty. He opened the windows and lay at full length on the seat facing the engine. It was more hot and unpleasant than he had anticipated. He cursed Barnett and extended the malediction to Panoukian. It would have been more pleasant to spend the evening with Miss Clipton, sister and formerly housekeeper to a deceased bishop of Thrigsby, talking about her vegetable marrows. . . . Uncommonly hot. Deucedly hot. The train crawled so that there was no draught. He [Pg 8] went to sleep.

He was awakened by the roar of the wheels crossing Ockley viaduct. Ockley sprawls up and down the steep sides of a valley. At the bottom runs a black river. Tall chimneys rise from the hillsides. From the viaduct you gaze down into thousands of chimneys trailing black smoke. The smoke rises and curls and writhes upward into the black pall that ever hangs over Ockley. This pall was gold and red and apricot yellow with the light of the sun behind it. There were folk at Bigley who said there was beauty in Ockley. . . . It was a frequent source of after-dinner argument in Bigley. Beauty. For H. J. Beenham all beauty lived away from Thrigsby and its environment. Smoke and beauty were incompatible. Still, in his half-sleeping, half-waking condition there was something impressive in Ockley's golden pall. He raised himself on his elbow the better to look out, when he was shocked and startled by hearing a sort of whimper. Opposite him, in the corner, was sitting a girl, a very pretty girl, with a white, drawn face and her hands pressed together, her shoulders huddled and her face averted. Her eyes were blank and expressionless, and there was a great tear trickling down her nose. The light from the golden pall glowed over her face but seemed only to accentuate its misery and the utter dejection of her attitude.

"Poor girl!" thought the schoolmaster. "Poor, poor girl!" He felt a warm, melting sensation in the neighborhood of his breastbone; and with an impulsiveness [Pg 9] altogether unusual to him he leaned forward and tried to lay his hand on her. He was still only half awake and was wholly under the impulse to bring comfort to one so wretched. The train lurched as it passed over a point, and, instead of her hand, he grasped her knee. At once she sprang forward and slapped his face. Stung, indignant, shocked, but still dominated by his impulse, urged by it to insist on its expression, he seized her by the wrists and tried to force her back into her seat and began to address her:

"My poor child! Something in you, in your eyes, has touched me. I do not know if I can. . . . Please sit down and listen to me."

"Nasty old beast!" said the girl.

"I must protest," replied Old Mole, "the innocence of my motives." He still gripped her by the wrists. "Seeing you as I did, so unnerved, so——"

The train slowed down and stopped, but he did not notice it. He was absolutely absorbed in his purpose—to succor this young woman in distress and to show her the injustice of her suspicions. She by this time was almost beside herself with anger and fright, and she had struggled so violently—for he had no notion of the force with which he held her—that her hair had tumbled down behind and she had torn the seam of her sleeve and put her foot through a flounce in her petticoat.

He was thoroughly roused now, and shouted:

“You shall listen to me——”

“Let me go! Let me go!” screamed the girl. [Pg 10]

The train had stopped opposite a train going in the other direction. The door of the compartment was opened suddenly, and Beenham found himself picked up and flung into the far corner. Over him towered an immense form clad in parson’s clothes—the very type of vengeful muscular Christianity.

In the corner the girl had subsided into hysterical sobs. The parson questioned her.

“Do you know this man?”

“No . . . no, sir.”

“Never seen him before?”

“Never, sir. He—he set on me.”

“Do you prefer a charge against him?”

“Yes, sir.”

Beenham could hardly hear what they said, but he was boiling with indignation.

“I protest——” he said.

“Silence!” shouted the parson. “But for my timely intervention Heaven knows what would have happened. . . . Silence! You and men like you are a pest to society, impervious to decency and the call of religion. . . . Fortunately there is law in the country and you shall know it.”

With that he pulled down the chain above the windows. In a moment or two the scowling guard appeared. The parson described the horrible scene he had witnessed from the train, that was even now moving Londonward, his interference, and declared his intention of seeing that the perpetrator of so vile a deed should be hounded down. He requested the guard to telephone at the next station to the [Pg 11] Thrigsby police. A small crowd had collected. They hummed and buzzed with excitement, and fifteen men clambered into the compartment to assist the parson in his heroic defence of the young woman against the now fully awake and furious pedagogue. He tried to speak, but was shouted down: to move toward the parson, but was thrust back into his corner. Every one else had a perfectly clear-cut idea of what had happened. He himself was so busy emerging from his state of hallucination and trying to trace back step by step everything that had happened to produce the extraordinary eruption into what had been at Bigley an empty, ordinary, rather stuffy compartment in a railway train, that he could not even begin to contemplate the consequences or to think, rather, what they might all be moving toward. It was only as the train ran into Thrigsby, and he saw the name, that he associated it with that other word which had been on the parson’s lips:

“Police!”

There was a cold sinking in the pit of his stomach. Out of his hallucination came the remembrance that he had, with the most kindly and generous and spontaneously humane motives, used the girl with violence.—Police! He was given no time for thought. There was a policeman on the platform. A crowd gathered. It absorbed Beenham, thrust him toward the policeman, who seized him by the arm and, followed by the parson and the girl, they swept swiftly along the platform, down the familiar incline, the crowd swelling as they went, along an unknown street, squalid and [Pg 12] vibrant with the din of iron-shod wheels over stone setts, to the police station. There a shabby swing door cut off the crowd, and Beenham, parson, girl and policeman stood in the charge room waiting for the officer at the desk to look up from his ledger.

The charge was made and entered. The girl’s name was Matilda Burn, a domestic servant. She was prompted by the parson, who swept aside her reluctance to speak. Old Mole was asked to give his name, address and occupation. He burst into a passionate flow of words, but was interrupted and coldly reminded that he was only desired to give bare information on three points, and that anything he might say would be used against him in evidence. He explained his identity, and the officer at the ledger looked startled, but entered the particulars in slow writing with a scratchy pen. The parson and the girl disappeared. The officer at the ledger cleared his throat, turned to the accused, opened his mouth, but did not speak. He scratched his ear with his pen, stooped and blew a fly off the page in front of him, made a visible effort to suppress his humanity and conduct the affair in accordance with official routine, and finally blurted out:

“Do you want bail?”

Old Mole gave the name and address of his Head Master.

“You can write if you like.”

The letter was written, read by the officer, and despatched. There was a whispered consultation behind the ledger, during which the unhappy schoolmaster read through again and again a list of articles and dogs missing, and then he was led to the inspector’s room and given a newspaper to read. [Pg 13]

“Extraordinary!” he said to himself. Then he thought of the Panoukians and began to fidget at the idea of being late. He abominated unpunctuality. Had he not again and again had to punish young Panoukian for indulgence in the vice? The six-twenty-four had given him ample time. He pulled out his watch: Still twenty-five minutes, but he must hurry. He looked round the bare, dingy room vaguely, wonderingly. Incisively the idea of his situation bit into his brain. He was in custody—*carcer,* a prison. How absurd it was, rather funny! It only needed a little quiet, level-headed explanation and he would be free. The “chief” would confirm his story, his identity. . . . They would laugh over it. Very funny: very funny. A wonderful story for the club. He chuckled over it to himself until he began to think of the outcome. More than once he had served on a Grand Jury and had slept through the consideration of hundreds of indictments: a depressing experience for which the judge had rewarded him with nothing but compliments and an offer of a pass to view His Majesty’s prison. That brought him up with a jerk. He was in custody, charged with a most serious offence, for which he would be tried at the Assizes. It was monstrous, preposterous! It must be stopped at once. What a grotesque mistake! What an egregious, yet what a serious blunder! That officious idiot of a parson! [Pg 14]

The Head Master arrived. He glowered at his colleague and seemed very agitated. He said:

“This is very serious, most unfortunate. It is—ah—as well for the prestige of the school that it has happened at the end of term. We must hush it up, hush it up.”

Beenham explained. He told the whole story, growing more and more amazed and indignant as he set it forth. The Head Master only said:

“I form no opinion. We must hush it up. It must be kept out of the papers.”

Not a word more could be wrung from him. With a stiff back and pursed lips he nodded and went away. He returned to say:

“Of course you will not appear at Speech Day. I will write to you as soon as I have decided what had best be done.”

“I shall be at Bigley,” said Old Mole.

He was released on bail and told to surrender himself at the police court when called upon.

In a dream he wandered out into the street and up into the main thoroughfare, along which every day in term time he walked between the station and the school. Impossible to go to the Panoukians; impossible to return to Bigley. Suppose he had been recognized! Any number of his acquaintances might be going out by the six-forty-nine. He must have been seen! Bigley would be alive with it! . . . He sent two telegrams, one to the Panoukians, the other to his housekeeper to announce that he would not be back that night. [Pg 15]

He forgot to eat, and roamed through the streets of Thrigsby, finding relief from the strain of his fear and his tormented thoughts in observation. Dimly, hardly at all consciously, he began to perceive countless existences all apparently indifferent to his own. Little boys jeered at him occasionally, but the men and women took no notice of him. Streets of warehouses he passed through, streets of little blackened houses, under railway arches, under tall chimneys, past shops and theaters and music-halls, and waste grounds, and grounds covered with scaffolding and fenced in with pictured hoardings: an immense energy, the center of which was, surprisingly, not the school. He walked and thought and observed until he sank into exhaustion and confusion. In the evening, when the lamps were lit, the main streets were thronged with men and women idly strolling, for it was too hot for purpose or deliberate amusement.

Late, about eleven o’clock, he walked into his club. The porter saluted. In the smoke room two or three of his acquaintances nodded. No one spoke to him. In a corner was a little group who kept looking in his direction, so that after a time he began to feel that they were talking about him. He became acutely conscious of his position. There were muttering and whispering in the corner, and then one man, a tall, pale-faced man, whom he had known slightly for many years, arose from the group and came heavily toward him. [Pg 16]

“I want to speak to you a moment,” said the man.

“Certainly. Certainly.”

They went outside.

“Er—of course,” said the man, “we are awfully sorry, but we can’t help feeling that it was a mistake for you to come here to-night. You must give us time, you know.”

Beenham looked the man up and down.

“Time for what?” he replied acidly.

“To put it bluntly,” came the answer, “Harbutt says he won’t stay in the club if you stay.”

Beenham turned on his heel and went downstairs. At the door he met the Head Master coming in, who sourly expressed pleasure in the meeting.

“I shall never enter the club again,” said Beenham.

The Head Master paid no attention to the remark, took him by the arm and led him into the street. There they paced up and down while it was explained that the Chief Constable had been approached and was willing to suspend proceedings until a full inquiry had been made, if Beenham were willing to face an inquiry; or, in the alternative, would allow him twenty-four hours in which to disappear from Thrigsby. The Lord Mayor and three other governors of the school had been seen, and they were all agreed that such an end to Mr. Beenham’s long and honorable connection with the foundation was deplorable.

“End!” gasped Beenham. [Pg 17]

“The governors all expressed——” began the Head Master, when his colleague interrupted him with:

“What is your own opinion?”

“I—I——”

“What is your own feeling?”

“I am thinking of the school.”

“Then I am to suffer under an unjust and unfounded accusation?”

“The school——”

“Ach!——”

Impossible to describe the wonderful guttural sound that the unhappy man wrenched out of himself. He stood still and his brain began to work very clearly and he saw that the scandal had already begun to move so that if he accepted either of his chief’s alternatives and had the matter hushed up, or he vanished away within twenty-four hours, it would solidify, crystallize into conical form, descend and extinguish them. If, on the other hand, he insisted on a public inquiry, there would be a conflagration in which, though he might leave the court without a stain on his reputation—was not that the formula?—yet his worldly position would be consumed with possible damage to the institution to which he had given so many years of his life. His first impulse was to save his honor without regard to the cost or damage to others: but then he remembered the attitude of the men in the club, fathers of families with God knows what other claims to righteousness, and he saw that, though [Pg 18] he might be innocent as a lamb, yet he had to face public opinion excited by prejudice, which, if he dared to combat it, he would only have enflamed. He was not fully aware of the crisis to which he had come, but his emotion at the idea of severing his connection with the place that had been the central point of his existence spurred him to an instinctive effort in which he began to perceive larger vistas of life. Against them as background everything that was and had been was reduced in size so that he could see it clearly and bioscopically. He knew, too, that he was seeing it differently from the Head Master, from Harbutt, from all the other men who would shrink away from the supposedly contagious danger of his situation, and he admitted his own helplessness. With that his immediate indignation at the conduct of individuals died away and he was left with an almost hysterical sense of the preposterousness of the world in which out of nothing, a misconstruction, a whole mental fabric could be builded beneath the weight of which a normal, ordinary, respectable, hard-working, conscientious man could be crushed. And yet he did not feel at all crushed, but only rather excited and uplifted with, from some mysterious source, a new accretion of strength.

“I see the force of your argument,” he said to his chief. “I see the inevitability of the course you have taken. The story, even with my innocence, is too amusing for the dignity of an ancient foundation and our honorable profession of pedagogy.”—He [Pg 19] enjoyed this use of rhetoric as a relief to his feelings, for he was torn between tragedy and comedy, tears and laughter—“To oblige the Lord Mayor, the governors, and yourself, I will accept the generous offer of the Chief Constable. Good-bye. I hope you will not forget to mention Panoukian tomorrow.”

The Head Master pondered this for some moments and then held out his hand. Old Mole looked through him and walked on. He had not gone twenty yards when he began to chuckle, to gulp, to blink, and then to laugh. He laughed out loud, went on laughing, thumped in the air with his fist. Suddenly the laughter died in him and he thought:

"Twenty-five years! That's a large slice out of a man's life. Ended—in what? Begun—in what? To show—what is there? Ended in one sleepy, generous impulse leading to disaster. Twenty-five years, slumbered away, in an ancient and honorable profession, in teaching awkward, conceited, and, for the most part, grubby little boys things which they looked forward to forgetting as soon as they passed out into the world." And he had taken pride in it, pride in a possession which chance and the muddle-headed excitability of men could in a short space of time demolish, pride in the thought that he was half remembered by some hundreds of the citizens of that huge, roaring city from whose turmoil and gross energy he had lived secluded. He looked back, and the years stretched before him tranquil and monotonous and foolish. He [Pg 20] totted up the amount of money that he had drawn out of Thrigsby during those years and set against it what he had given—the use of himself, the unintelligent, mechanical use of himself. He turned from this unpleasant contemplation to the future. That was even more appalling. Within twenty-four hours he had to perform the definite act of disappearing from the scene. Beyond that lay nothing. To what place in the world could he disappear? He had one brother, a Chancery barrister and a pompous ass. They dined together once a year and quarreled. . . . His only sister was married to a curate, had an enormous family and small means. All his relations lived in a church atmosphere—his father had been a parson in Lincolnshire—and they distrusted him because of his avowed love for Lucretius and Voltaire. Certainly they would be no sort of help in time of trouble. . . . As for friends, he had none. His work, his days spent with crowds of homunculi had given him a taste for solitude and the habit of it. He had prided himself on being a clubbable man and he had had many acquaintances, but not, in his life, one single human being to whom in his distress he wished to turn. He had liked the crowds through which he had wandered. They had given him the most comforting kind of solitude. He was distressed now that the streets were so empty; shops, public-houses, theaters were closed. How dreary the streets were! How aimless, haphazard and sprawling was the town! How aimless, [Pg 21] haphazard and sprawling his own life in it had been!

A woman passed him and breathed a hurried salute. He surveyed her with a detached, though warmly humorous, interest. She was, like himself, outcast, though she had found her feet and her own way of living. With the next woman he shook hands. She laughed at him. He raised his hat to the third. She stopped and stared at him, open-mouthed. As amazed, he stared at her. It was the young woman of the train.

He could find nothing to say, nor she; neither could move. Feeling the necessity of a salute, he removed his hat, bowed, and, finding a direct approach impossible, shot off obliquely and absurdly.

"I had once a German colleague who was a lavish and indiscriminate patron of the ladies of a certain profession. He resigned. I also have resigned."

She said:

"I'm sorry," and, having found her tongue, added:

"Can you tell me the way to the Flat Iron Market. My aunt won't take me in."

"Are you also in disgrace?"

"Yes, sir. I was in service. It was the young master. I did love him, I did really."

"You had been dismissed when I met you in the train?"

"Yes, sir. They gave me a quarter of an hour to go, without wages, and they are sending on my box. My aunt won't take me in."

Again in her eyes was the expression of helplessness and impotence in the face of [Pg 22] distress that had so moved him, and once again he melted. He forgot his own situation and was only concerned to see that she should not come to harm or be thrown destitute upon a cold, a busy, harsh, and indifferent world. Upon his inquiry as to the state of her purse, she told him she had only a shilling, and he pressed half a sovereign into her hand. Then he asked her why she wished to find the Flat Iron Market, and she informed him she had an uncle, Mr. Copas, who was there. She had only seen him twice, but he had been kind to her mother when she was alive, although he was not respectable.

They were directed by a policeman, and as they walked Beenham gave her the story of his experience at the police station and how he had accepted the Chief Constable's ultimatum. And he employed the opportunity to complete his explanation of his extraordinary lapse from decorum.

“You can do silly things when you’re half awake,” said Matilda. “It’s like being in love, isn’t it?”

“I have never been in love.”

She shot a quick, darting glance at him and he blinked.

Flat Iron Market is a piece of waste land over against a railway arch. Here on Saturdays and holidays is held a traffic in old metal, cheap laces and trinkets, sweets and patent medicines, and in one corner are set up booths, merry-go-rounds, swing [Pg 23] boats, cocoanut shies, and sometimes a penny gaff. In the evening, under the flare and flicker of naphtha lamps, the place is thronged with artisans and their wives and little dirty wizened children, and young men and maidens seeking the excitement of each other’s jostling neighborhood.

Now, as Beenham and Matilda came to it, it was dark and deserted; the wooden houses were shrouded, and the awnings of the little booths and the screens of the cocoanut shies flapped in the night wind. They passed a caravan with a fat woman and two young men sitting on the steps, and they yawped at the sight of Beenham’s white shirtfront.

“Does Mr. Copas live in a caravan?” asked Beenham.

“It’s the theayter,” replied Matilda.

Picking their way over the shafts of carts and empty wooden boxes, they came to a red and gilt fronted building adorned with mirrors and knobs and scrolls, above the portico of which was written: “Copases Theater Royal,” in large swollen letters. At either end of this inscription was a portrait, one of Mrs. Siddons in tragedy, the other of J. L. Toole in comedy. Toole had been only recently painted and had been given bright red hair. Mrs. Siddons, but for her label, would only have been recognizable by her nose.

In front of this erection was a narrow platform, on which stood a small automatic musical machine surmounted with tubular bells played by two little wooden figures, a man and a woman in Tyrolian costume, who moved along a semi-circular cavity. In [Pg 24] the middle of the façade was an aperture closed in with striped canvas curtains. This aperture was approached from the ground by a flight of wooden steps through the platform.

“Please,” said Beenham, “please give my name as Mr. Mole.”

Matilda nodded and ran up the wooden steps and through the aperture. She called:

“It’s dark.”

When Mr. Mole followed her he found himself standing on the top of another flight of steps leading down into impenetrable gloom. He struck a light and peered into an auditorium of rough benches, the last few rows of which were raised above the rest. Matilda looked up at him, and he was struck by the beauty of the line of her cheek from the brow down into the neck. She smiled and her teeth flashed white. Then the match went out.

He lit another, and they moved toward the stage, through the curtains of which came a smell of onions and cheese, rather offensive on such a hot night. For the first time Beenham began to feel a qualm as to the adventure. The second match went out, and he felt Matilda place her hand on his arm, and she led him toward the stage, told him to duck his head, and they passed through into a narrow space, lit by a light through another curtain, and filled, so far as he could see, with scenery and properties.

“Have you been here before?” he said.

“When I was a little girl. I think it’s this way.” [Pg 25]

He stumbled and brought a great pole and a mass of dusty canvas crashing down. At once there was the battering of feet on boards, the din of voices male and female, and above them all a huge booming bass roaring:

“In Hell’s name, what’s that?”

Matilda giggled.

A curtain was torn aside, and the light filled the place where they were. Against it they could see silhouetted the shape of a diminutive man craning forward and peering. He had a great stick in his hand, and he bellowed:

“Come out o’ that! It’s not the first time I’ve leathered a man, and it won’t be the last. This ’ere’s a theater, my theater. It ain’t a doss house. Come out o’ that.”

“It’s me,” said Matilda.

“Gorm, it’s a woman!”

“It’s me, uncle.”

“Eh?”

“It’s me, Matilda Burn.”

“What? Jenny’s girl?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Well, I never! Who’s your fancy?”

“It’s Mr. Mole.”

The figure turned and vanished, and the curtain swung to again. They heard whisperings and exclamations of surprise, and in a moment Mr. Copas returned with a short ladder which he thrust down into their darkness. They ascended it and found themselves on the stage. Matilda was warmly embraced, while her companion stood [Pg 26] shyly by and gazed round him at the shabby scenery and the footlights and the hanging lamps over his head. He found it oddly exciting to be standing in such a place, and he said to himself: “This is the stage,” as in Rome one might stand and say: “This is the Forum.” This excitement and romantic fervor carried with it a certain helplessness, as though he had been plunged into a foreign land that before he had only dimly realized.

“This is the stage! This is the theater!”

It was a strange sensation of being detached and remote, of having passed out of ordinary existence into a region not directly concerned with it and subject to other laws. He felt entirely foreign to it, but then, also, under its influence, he felt foreign to his own existence which had cast him high and dry and ebbed away from him. It was like one of those dreams in which one startlingly leaves the earth and, as startlingly, finds security in the thin air through which, bodiless, one soars. There was something buoyant in the atmosphere, a zestfulness, and at the same time an oppressiveness, against which rather feebly he struggled, while at the same time he wondered whether it came from the place or from the people. Mr. Copas, the large golden-haired lady, the thin, hungry-looking young man, the drabbish young woman, the wrinkled, ruddy, beaming old woman, the loutish giant, the elderly, seedy individual, the little girl with her hair hanging in rat’s tails, who clustered round [Pg 27] Matilda and smiled at her and glowered at her and kissed her and fondled her.

To all these personages he was presented as “Mr. Mole.” When at length Mr. Copas and his niece had come to an end of their exchange of family reminiscence, the men shook hands with him and the women bowed and curtsied with varying degrees of ceremony, after which he was bidden to supper and found himself squatting in a circle with them round a disordered collection of plates and dishes, bottles, and enameled iron cups, all set down among papers and costumes and half-finished properties.

“Sit down, Mr. Mole,” said Mr. Copas. “Any friend of any member of my family is my friend. I’m not particular noble in my sentiments, but plain and straightforward. I’m an Englishman, and I say: ‘My country right or wrong.’ I’m a family man and I say: ‘My niece is my niece, right or wrong.’ Them’s my sentiments, and I drink toward you.”

When Mr. Copas spoke there was silence. When he had finished then all the rest spoke at once, as though such moments were too rare to be wasted. Matilda and Mr. Copas engaged in an earnest conversation and the clatter of tongues went on, giving Mr. Mole the opportunity to still his now raging hunger and slake the tormenting thirst that had taken possession of him. Silence came again and he found himself being addressed by Mr. Copas.

“Trouble is trouble, I say, and comes to all of us. For your kindness to my niece, [Pg 28] much thanks. She will come along of us and welcome. And if you, being a friend of hers, feel so disposed, you can come along, too. It’s a come-day-go-day kind of life, here to-day and gone to-morrow, but there’s glory in it. It means work and plenty of it, but no one’s ever the worse for that.”

It was a moment or two before Beenham realized that he was being offered a position in the troupe. He took a long draught of beer and looked round at the circle of faces. They were all friendly and smiling, and Matilda’s eyes were dancing with excitement. He met her gaze and she nodded, and he lost all sense of incongruity and said that he would come, adding, in the most courteous and elegant phrasing, that he was deeply sensible of the privilege extended to him, but that he must return to his house that night and set his affairs in order, whereafter he would with the greatest pleasure renounce his old life and enter upon the new. He was doubtful (he said) of his usefulness, but he would do his best and endeavor not to be an encumbrance.

“If you gave me the Lord Mayor of Thrigsby,” said Mr. Copas, “I would turn him, if not into a real actor, at least into something so like one that only myself and one other man in England could tell the difference.”

Mr. Mole found that he had just time to catch the last train home, and, after arranging for his return on the following day, he exchanged courtesies all round, was [Pg 29] shown out by a little door at the back of the stage, and walked away through the now empty streets. He was greatly excited and uplifted, and it was not until he reached the incline of the station that memory reasserted itself and brought with it the old habit of prudence, discretion, and common sense. He was able to go far enough back to see the little dusty theater and the queer characters in it as fantastic and antipodean, but when he came to the events of that evening the contrast was blurred and the world of settled habit and conviction was merged into the unfamiliarity of the stage and became one with it in absurdity. The thought of stepping back from his late experience into ordinary existence filled him with anger and hot resentment: the passage from the scene at the club and the interview with his chief to Mr. Copas’s company was an easy and natural transition, or so it seemed when he thought of Matilda.

He felt very defiant when he reached Bigley and half hoped that he might meet some of his acquaintances. They would go on catching the early train in the morning and the through train in the evening, while he would be away and free. Some such feeling he had always had in July of superiority over the commercial men who had but three weeks’ holiday in the year, while he had eight weeks at a stretch. Now he was to go away forever, and Bigley would talk for a little and then forget and go on cluttering about its families and its ailments and its inheritances and its church [Pg 30] affairs and its golf course and the squabbles with the Lord of the Manor. He met no one and found his house shut up, and it took him fully half an hour to rouse his man. By that time he had lost his temper and had no desire save to bully the fellow. Everything else was wiped out, and he wanted only to assert himself in bluster. In this way he avoided any awkward wondering whether the man knew, got out the information that he was going away, probably leaving Bigley, selling the house and furniture, and would write further instructions when he had settled down. He ordered and counter-ordered and ordered breakfast until he had fixed it at ten, and at last, after a round volley of oaths because the man turned to him with a question in his eyes, went upstairs to his room, rolled into bed, and slept as deeply as an enchanted knight beneath the castle of a fairy princess.

The next morning he went through his accounts, found that his capital amounted to nearly four thousand pounds, had his large suitcase packed with a careful selection of clothes and books, told his man he was going abroad, paid him three months’ wages in advance, apologized for his violence overnight, shook hands, went round the garden to say good-bye to his vegetable marrows and sweet peas, and then departed.

In Thrigsby he saw his solicitor (an old pupil), who was professionally sympathetic, but took his instructions for the sale of his house and furniture gravely and promised [Pg 31] to keep his whereabouts and all communications secret.

“It is a most serious calamity,” said the solicitor.

“Damn it all,” rejoined Old Mole, “I like it.” And he visited his bank. The manager had always thought Beenham “queer,” and received his rather unusual instructions without astonishment.

“You are leaving Thrigsby?”

“For good. Can’t think why I’ve stayed here so long.”

He drew a large sum of money in notes and gold and dined well and expensively at a musty, heavily carpeted commercial hotel. When the porter had placed his bag in a cab and turned for his instructions he gaped in surprise on being told to drive to the Flat Iron Market. Even more surprised were the frequenters of that resort when the cab drew up by the pavement and a well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman with gold spectacles descended and pushed his way through the crowd jostling and chattering under the blare and din of the mechanical organs and the flicker and flare of the naphtha lamps to the back of Copas’s Theater Royal, which he entered by the stage door. It was whispered that he was a detective, and he was followed by a buzzing train of men and women. Disappointed of the looked-for sensation, they soon dispersed and were swallowed up in the shifting crowd.

Groping through the darkness, he came to the greenroom—Mr. Copas’s word for it —and deposited his bag. On the stage, through a canvas curtain, he could hear the [Pg 32] thudding of feet and the bellowing of a great voice broken every now and then with cheers at regular intervals and applause from the auditorium. In a corner on a basket sat Matilda. She was wearing a pasteboard crown and gazing at herself in a mirror. As he dropped his bag she looked up and grinned.

“So you’ve come back? I didn’t think you would.”

“Yes, I’ve come back. The school has broken up.”

She removed her crown.

“Like to see the show? Uncle’s got ’em tonight.”

“Got? What has he got?”

“The audience.”

She led him to the front of the house, where they were compelled to stand, for all the benches were full, packed with sweating, zestful men and women who had paid for enjoyment and were receiving it in full measure.

In the “Tales out of School,” published after H. J. Beenham’s death by one of the many pupils who became grateful on his achieving celebrity, there is an admirable account of his first impression of the theater which can only refer to the performance of Mr. Copas in the Flat Iron Market. Till then he says he had always regarded the theater as one of those pleasures without which life would be more tolerable, one of those pleasures to face which it is necessary to eat and drink too much. The two [Pg 33] respectable theaters in Thrigsby were maintained by annual pantomimes and kept open from week to week by the visits of companies presenting replicas of alleged successful London plays. He had never attended either theater unless some one else paid. . . . Here now in this ramshackle Theater Royal, half tent, half booth, his sensations were very mixed. At first the shabby scenery, the poverty of the stage furniture, the tawdriness of the costumes of the players, filled him with a pitying sense of the ludicrous. The program was generous, opening with “Robert Macaire,” passing on to “Mary Queen of Scots,” and ending with a farce called “Trouble in the Home,” while between the pieces there would be song and dance by Mr. Fitter, the celebrated comedian. All this was announced on a placard hanging from the proscenium. . . . Mary Queen of Scots was sitting, crowned, on a Windsor chair at the back of the stage, surrounded with three courtiers. As Darnley (or it might be Bothwell), Mr. Copas was delivering himself of an impassioned if halting narration, addressed to the hapless Queen through the audience. He was certainly a very bad actor, so Beenham thought until he had listened to him for nearly five minutes, at the end of which a change took place in his mind and he found himself forced to accept Mr. Copas’s own view of the traffic of the stage. It was impossible to make rhyme or reason of the play, which showed the most superb disregard for history and sense. Apart from Mr. Copas it did not exist. He was its center and its circumference. It [Pg 34] began and ended in him, moved through him from its beginning to its end. The rest of the characters were his puppets. When he came to an end of a period Mary Queen of Scots would turn on one of three moods—the tearful, the regal, the noisily defiant; or a page would say, “Me Lord! Me Lord!”; or the lugubrious young man, dressed in priestly black, would borrow from another play and in a sepulchral voice declaim, “Beware the Ides of March.” The performance was an improvisation and in that art only Mr. Copas had any skill, unless he had deliberately so subdued the rest that he was left with his own passionate belief in himself and acting as acting to clothe the naked and deformed skeleton with flesh. Whatever the process of his mind he did succeed in hypnotizing himself and his audience, including Mr. Mole and Matilda, and worked up to a certain height and ended in shocking bathos so suddenly as to create surprise rather than derision. He believed in it all and made everybody else believe.

Matilda gave a sigh as the curtains were drawn and Mr. Copas appeared, bowing and bowing again, using his domination over his audience to squeeze more and more applause out of them.

“Ain’t it lovely?” said Matilda.

“It is certainly remarkable,” replied Mr. Mole.

“You’d never think he had a floating kidney, would you?”

“I would not.”

“It’s that makes him a little quick in his temper.” [Pg 35]

From the audience arose a smell of oranges, beer and peppermint, and there were much talk and laughter, giggling and round resounding kissing. No change of scene was considered necessary for the song and dance of Mr. Fitter, who turned out to be the lugubrious young man. He had no humor, but he worked very hard and created some amusement. Mr. Copas did not appear in the farce, which was deplorable and made Mr. Mole feel depressed and ashamed, so that for a moment his old point of view reasserted itself and he felt aghast at the undertaking upon which he was embarked. A moment or two before he had been telling himself that this was “life”—the talk and the laughter and the kissing; now he felt only disgust at its coarseness

and commonness. He was dejected and miserable, stripped even of the intellectual interest roused by Mr. Copas. The loutish buffoons on the stage with their brutal humors filled him with resentment at their degradation. Only his obstinacy saved him from yielding to the impulse to escape. . . . Matilda had grown tired of standing and had taken his arm. She laughed at nearly all the jokes. Her laughter was shrill and immoderate. He called himself fool, but he stayed.

He was warmly welcomed by Mr. Copas after the performance. His congratulations and praise were accepted with proper modesty.

"Acting," said Mr. Copas, "is a nart. There's some as thinks it's a trick, like performing dogs, but it's a nart. What did you think of Mrs. Copas?" [Pg 36]

The question was embarrassing. Fortunately no answer was expected.

"I've taught her everything she knows. She's not very good at queens, but her mad scenes can't be beat, can't be beat. My line's tragedy by nature, but a nartist has to be everything. . . . What's your line, Mr. Mole?"

"I don't know that I have a line."

Mr. Copas rubbed his chin.

"Of course. You *look* like a comic, but we'll see, we'll see. You couldn't write plays, I suppose? Not that there's much writing to be done when you give three plays a night, and a different program every night. Just the plot's all we want. Are you good at plots?"

"I've read a good deal."

"Ah! I was never a reader myself. . . . Of course, I can't pay you anything until I know whether you're useful or not."

"I've plenty of money, thanks."

Mr. Copas eyed his guest shrewdly.

"Of course," he said, "of course, if you were really keen I could take you in as a sort of partner."

"I don't know that I——"

"Ten pounds would do it."

In less than half an hour Mr. Mole was a partner in the Theater Royal and Mr. and Mrs. Copas were drinking his health in Dublin stout. They found him a bed in their lodgings in a surprisingly clean little house in a grimy street, and they sat up half the [Pg 37] night discussing plays and acting with practical illustrations. He was fascinated by the frank and childish egoism of the actor and enjoyed firing him with the plots of the Greek tragedies and as many of the Latin comedies as he could remember offhand.

"By Jove!" cried Copas. "You'll be worth three pounds a week to me. Iffyjenny's just the part Mrs. Copas has been looking for all her life. Ain't it, Carrie?"

But Mrs. Copas was asleep.

In the very early morning the Theater Royal was taken to pieces and stacked on a great cart. The company packed themselves in and on a caravan and they set out on their day's journey of thirty miles to a small town in Staffordshire, in the marketplace of which they were to give a three weeks' season. Mr. Copas drove the caravan and Mr. Mole sat on the footboard, and as they threaded their way through the long suburbs of Thrigsby he passed many a house where he had been a welcome guest, many a house where he had discussed the future of a boy or an academic problem, or listened to the talk of the handful of cultured men attracted to the place by its school and university. How few they were he had never realized until now. They had seemed important when he was among them, one of them; their work, his work, had seemed paramount, the justification of, the excuse for all the alleged squalor of Thrigsby [Pg 38] which he had never explored and had always taken on hearsay. That Thrigsby was huge and mighty he had always admitted, but never before had he had any sense of the remoteness from its existence of himself and his colleagues. It was Thrigsby that had been remote, Thrigsby that was ungrateful and insensible of the benefits heaped upon it. There had always been a sort of triumph in retrieving boys from Thrigsby for culture. He could only think of it now with a bitterness that fogged his judgment. His discovery of the Flat Iron Market made him conceive Thrigsby as a city of raw, crude vitality on which he had for years been engaged in pinning rags and tatters of knowledge in the pathetic belief that he was giving it the boon of education—secondary education. And there frothed and bubbled in his tired mind all the jargon of his old profession. In a sort of waking nightmare he set preposterous questions in interminable examinations and added up lists of marks and averaged them with a sliding rule, and blue-penciled false quantities in Latin verse. . . . And the caravan

jogged on. He looked back over the years, and through them there trailed a long monotonous stream of boys, who had taken what he had to give, such as it was, and given nothing in return. He saw his own futile attempts to keep in touch with them and follow their careers. They were not worth following. Nine-tenths of them became clerks in banks and offices, sank into mediocre existences, married, produced more boys. The mockery of it all! He thought of his colleagues, how, if they stayed, they [Pg 39] lost keenness and zest. How, if they went, it was to seek security and ease, to marry, to "settle down," and produce more boys. Over seven hundred boys in the school there were, and all as alike as peas in a pod, all being taught year in, year out, the same things out of the same books by the same men. His thoughts wound slowly round and round and the bitterness in him ate into his soul and numbed him. The caravan jogged on. He cared nothing where he was, whither he might be going, what became of him. Only to be moving was enough, to be moving away from the monotony of boys and the black overpowering vitality of Thrigsby.

It was not easy for Mr. Copas to be silent and he addressed his new partner frequently on all manner of subjects, the weather, the horse's coat, the history of Mr. Fitter, and all with such absorption that they had gone eight miles and were just passing out of Thrigsby into its southeast spur of little chimney-dominated villages before he awoke to the fact that he was receiving no attention.

"Dotty!" he said, with a click of his tongue, and thereafter he fell to conning new speeches for the favorite parts of his repertory. Slowly they crawled up a long slope until they rounded the shoulder of a low rolling hill, from whence the world seemed to open up before them. Below lay a lake, blue under the vivid sky, gleaming under the green wooded hills that enclosed it. Beyond rose line upon line of round [Pg 40] hummocky hills. The caravan stopped and with a jolt Mr. Mole came out of the contemplation of the past when he was known as H. J. Beenham, and sat gaping down at the lake and the hills. He was conscious of an almost painful sense of liberation. The view invited to move on and on, to range over hill after hill to discover what might lie beyond.

"What hills are those?" he asked.

"You might call them the Pennine Range."

"The backbone of England. That's a school phrase."

"You been asleep? Eh?"

"Not exactly asleep. Kind of cramped."

"You're a funny bloke. I been a-talking to you and you never listened."

"Didn't I? I'm sorry."

"We water the horses just here."

There was a spring by the roadside and here the caravan drew up. Mrs. Copas produced victuals and beer. Conversation was desultory.

"Can't do with them there big towns," said Mr. Copas, and Old Mole then noticed a peculiarity of the actor's wife. Whenever he spoke she gazed at him with a rapt stupid expression and the last few words of his sentences were upon her lips almost before they left his. It was fascinating to watch and the schoolmaster forgot the feeling of repugnance with which their methods of eating inspired him. He watched Mrs. Copas and heard her husband, so that every remark was broken up:

"Wouldn't go near them if it weren't for the——" [Pg 41]

"Money."

"Give me a bit of cheese and a mug of beer by the——"

"Roadside."

"But the show's got to——"

"Earn its keep."

"Earn its keep. I'm going to sleep. Them as wants to walk on can walk on."

Mr. Copas rose and went into the caravan and his wife followed him. The wagon had not yet caught them up.

"Shall we walk on?" said Matilda.

"If it's a straight road."

"Oh! There'll be signposts. We'll maybe find a wood."

So they walked on. She was wearing a blue print frock with the sleeves rolled up to her elbow. She had very pretty arms.

"I sha'n't stop 'ere long," she said.

“No? Why not?”

“It ain’t good enough. Nothing’s good enough if you stop too long at it. Uncle’ll never be any different.”

“Will any of us ever be different?”

“I shall,” she said, and she gave a queer little defiant laugh and her stride lengthened so that she shot a pace or two ahead of him. She turned and laughed at him over her shoulder.

“Come along, slowcoach.”

He grunted and made an effort, but could not catch her. So they moved until they [Pg 42] came to a little wood with a white gate in the hedges. Through this she went, he after her, and she flung herself down in the bracken, and lay staring up through the leaves of the trees. He stood looking down at her. It was some time before she broke the silence and said:

“Sit down and smell. Ain’t it good? . . . Do you think if you murdered me now they’d ever find me?”

“What a horrible idea?”

“I often dream I’ve committed a murder. They say it’s lucky. Do you believe in dreams?”

“Napoleon believed in dreams.”

“Who was he?”

“He was born in Corsica, and came to France with about twopence halfpenny in his pocket. He made himself Emperor before he was forty, and died in exile.”

“Still, he’d had his fling. I’m twenty-one. How old are you?”

“Twice that and more.”

“Are you rich or clever or anything like that?”

“No!” he smiled at the question. “Nothing like that.”

She sat up and chewed a long grass stalk.

“I’m lucky.” She gave a little sideways wag of her chin. “I know I’m lucky. If only I’d had some education.”

“That’s not much good to you.”

“It makes you speak prop’ly.” [Pg 43]

That was a view of education never before presented to him. Certainly the sort of education he had doled out had done little to amend the speech of his Thrigsbian pupils.

“Is that all you want—to speak properly?”

“Yes. You speak prop-properly.”

“Nothing else.”

“There is a difference between gentlemen and others. I want to have to do with gentlemen.”

“And ladies?”

“Oh! I’ll let the ladies look after theirselves.”

“*Them*selves.”

“Themselves.”

She flushed at the correction and a dogged sulky expression came into her eyes. She nibbled at the grass stalk until it disappeared into her mouth. For a moment or two she sat plucking at her lower lip with her right finger and thumb. Through her teeth she said:

“I *will* do it.”

Contemptuously, with admirable precision, she spat out the grass stalk against the trunk of a tree.

“Did you ever see a lady do that? You never did. You’ll see me do things you’ve never seen a lady do. You’ll see me—— But you’ve got to teach me first. You’ll teach me, won’t you? . . . You won’t go away until you’ve taught me? You won’t go away?”

“You’re the most extraordinary young woman I ever met in my life.”

“Did you come to uncle because of me?” [Pg 44]

“Eh?”

He stared at her. The idea had not presented itself to him before. She was not going to allow him to escape it.

“Did you come to uncle because of me?”

He knew that it was so.

“Yes,” he said. “Hadn’t we better go?”

“Not yet.”

She was kneeling beside him mischievously tickling the back of his hand with a frond of bracken.

“Not yet. Do you remember what you said to me that night?”

“No. What did I say?”

“You said you’d never been in love.”

“No more I have.”

“Come along then.”

The caravan hove in sight as they reached the gate. She joined Mrs. Copas inside, and he, Mr. Copas, on the footboard. He was filled with a bubbling humor and was hard put to it not to laugh aloud. He had no clear memory of the talk in the wood, but he liked the delicious absurdity of it.

“In love?” he said to himself. “Nonsense.”

All the same he could not away with the fact that he had a new zest and pleasure in contemplating the future. Thrigsby and all its works fell away behind him and he was glad of his promise to teach the girl. . . . One girl after hundreds of boys! It had been one of his stock jests for public dinners in Thrigsby that the masters of the Grammar School and the mistresses of the High School should change places. No [Pg 45] one had ever taken him seriously until now Fate had done so. Of course it could not last, this new kind of perambulatory school with one master and one pupil; the girl was too attractive; she would be snapped up at once, settle down as a wife and mother before she knew where she was. In his thoughts he had so isolated himself with her that old prejudices leaped up in him and gave him an uncomfortable sense of indiscretion. That, however, he placated with the reminder that, after all, they were chaperoned by Mrs. Copas.

“That’s a fine girl, your niece,” he said to Mr. Copas.

“Aye. A handsome bit o’ goods. She says to me, she says, ‘I want to be a nactress, uncle,’ she says. And I says: ‘You begin at the bottom, young lady, and maybe when you’re your aunt’s age you’ll be doing the work your aunt does.’ They tell me, Mr. Mole, that in London they have leading ladies in their teens. I’ve never seen the woman who could play leads under forty. . . . Good God! Hi! Carrie! Tildy!”

Mr. Mole had fallen from the footboard, flat on his face in the road.

When he came to himself he thought with a precision and clarity that amounted almost to vision of his first arrival at Oxford, saw himself eagerly, shyly, stepping [Pg 46] down from the train and hurrying through the crowd of other young men, eager and shy, and meeting school acquaintances. He remembered with singular acuteness the pang of shame he had felt on encountering Blazering who was going to Magdalen while he himself was a scholar of Lincoln. He pursued the stripling who had been himself out of the station and up past the gaol, feeling amazingly, blissfully youthful when he put up his hand and found a stiff beard upon his chin. Gone was the vision of Oxford, gone the sensation of youth, and he realized that he was in bed in a stranger’s room, which, without his glasses, he could not see distinctly. There was a woman by his bedside, a stout woman, with a strong light behind her, so that he could not distinguish her features. It was a very little room, low in the ceiling. The smell of it was good. It had one small window, which was open, and through it there came up the hubbub of voices and the grinding beat and blare of a mechanical organ that repeated one tune so quickly that it seemed always to be afraid it would not have time to reach the end before it began again. The woman was knitting. He tried to remember who she might be, but failing, and feeling mortified at his failure, he consoled himself with the reflection that he was ill—ill-in-bed, one of the marked degrees of sickness among schoolboys. How ill? He had never been ill in his life.

“Can I have my spectacles?” he said.

“Oh!” The knitting in the woman’s hands went clattering to the floor. “Lor’! Mr. [Pg 47] Mole, you did give me a start. I shall have the palpitations, same as my mother. My mother had the palpitations for forty years and then she died of something else.”

“If I had my spectacles I could see who it is speaking.”

“It’s Mrs. Copas. Don’t you know me, Mr. Mole?”

“I—er. I . . . . This is your house?”

“It’s lodgings, Mr. Mole. You’ve been sick, Mr. Mole, you have. Prostrated on your back for nearly a week, Mr. Mole. You did give us all a turn, falling off the caravan like that into the King’s high road. You’d never believe the pool of blood you left in the road, Mr. Mole. But it soon dried up. . . .”

He began to have a glimmering, dimly to remember, a road, a caravan, a horse’s tail, dust, a droning voice behind him, but still the name of Copas meant nothing to him.

“Copas! Copas!” he said to himself, but aloud.

Mrs. Copas produced the spectacles and placed them on his nose. Then she leaned over him in his bed and in the loud indulgent voice with which the unafflicted humor the deaf, she said:

“Yes! Mrs. Copas. Matilda’s aunt. *You know.”*

That brought the whole adventure flooding back.

Matilda! The girl who wanted to speak properly, the girl whom he had found in the smelly little theater. No! Not in the theater! In the train! He writhed and went hot, and his head began to throb, and he felt a strange want of coördination among the various parts of his body. [Pg 48]

“I’m afraid,” he said, “I’m afraid I *am* ill.”

“There! There!” said Mrs. Copas. “We’ll soon pull you round. I’m used to the nursing; not that Mr. Copas is ever ill. He says a nartist can’t afford to be ill, but we had a comic once who used to have fits.”

“It’s very good of you. I must have been an incubus. I’m sure I must be taking you away from the theater.”

“We’ve got a new tune on the organ and we’re doing splendid business. Mr. Copas *will* be glad to hear you’ve asked for your spectacles. . . . Doctor says you mustn’t talk.”

And, indeed, he had lost all desire to do so. His head ached so that he could not keep his eyes open, nor think, nor hear anything but a confused buzz, and he sank back into the luxury of feeling sorry for himself.

Nothing broke in upon that sensation until suddenly the organ stopped. That startled him and set him listening. In the distance, muffled, he could hear the huge booming voice of Mr. Copas, but not what he said.

“Nice people,” he thought. “Nice kind people.”

There were three medicine bottles by his bed-side. They suddenly caught his eye and he gazed at them long and carefully. One was full and two were half empty. Their contents were brown, reddish, and white.

“I must be very ill,” he said to himself mournfully. There darted in on him a feeling of fun. “No one knows! I am ill and no one knows. Not a soul knows. They won’t know. They won’t ever know.” [Pg 49]

That seemed to settle it. “They” sank away. He hurled defiance after them, opened, as it were, a trap-door in the past, and gloated over the sight of “them” hurtling down and down. He felt better after that. The pain in his head was almost gone. His bed seemed to be floating, drifting, turning on the tide, while it was moored to Mrs. Copas. He gazed at her and saw in her the comfortable, easy, hovering present. He had only to cut the painter to drift out into the wide future. When he opened his mouth to tell Mrs. Copas that he remembered her perfectly she laid her finger on her lips and said “Ssh!” and when he insisted on grunting out a word, she smacked the back of her fat hand roguishly and cried:

“Naughty!”

At that he giggled helplessly and went on giggling until he was near crying.

“Histrionics!” said Mrs. Copas, and gave him brandy.

Matilda appeared at the door and was pushed out. At that Mr. Mole, who had seen her, began to weep and sobbed like a disappointed child, and went on sobbing until Matilda was allowed to come in and sit by his side. She sat on the bed, and he stopped his sobbing as abruptly as a horse will come to a standstill after a mad sunset gallop. Mrs. Copas left them. [Pg 50]

Matilda sat stroking her cheek and gazing at him. She cocked her head on one side and said:

“Glad you’re better, but I don’t like men with beards. Napoleon didn’t have a

beard.”

“How do you know?”

“I bought a book about him for a penny. I like Josephine.”

“I don’t know much about it, but I always felt sorry for her.”

“She gave as good as she got. That’s why I like her. . . . I had a part to do to-night.”

“A long part?”

“No. I just had to say to uncle, ‘Won’t you give her another chance?’ His erring wife had just returned to him.”

“Did you do it well?”

“No. Uncle said no one who wasn’t at the back of the stage could hear me.”

“Oh! Did you like it?”

“Yes. I felt funny like.”

Mr. Mole coughed. Matilda stopped.

“What did I say?”

“Funny like.”

“Don’t people say that?”

“It is unusual.”

“Oh!”

“I wasn’t a bit nervous. Uncle says that’s a bad sign. He says I looked all right, though I’m sure I was an object with that paint stuff on my face and the red all in the wrong place. Aunt wouldn’t let me do it myself. . . . You will cut your beard off?” [Pg 51]

“I don’t know. I might like it.”

She handed him a mirror, and mischief danced in her eyes as she watched his disconcerted expression. “Bit of a surprise, eh?”

He could find nothing to say. Impossible for him to lay the mirror down. For years he had accepted a certain idea of his personal appearance—ruddy, heavy-jowled, with a twinkle behind spectacles surmounted by a passably high forehead that was furrowed by the lines of a frown almost deliberately cultivated for the purposes of inspiring terror in small boys delinquent. Now, in the sharpened receptivity of his issue from unconsciousness, his impression was one of roundness, round face, round eyes, round brow, round head (balder than he had thought)—all accentuated by the novelty of his beard, that was gray, almost white. Age and roundness. Fearful of meeting Matilda’s gaze, he went on staring into the mirror. Her youth, the fun bubbling up in her, reproached him, made him feel defenceless against her, and, though he delighted in her presence, he was resentful. She had so many precious qualities to which he could not respond.

“I ’spect I must go now,” she said.

“Yes. I’m rather tired.”

She took the mirror from him, patted his hand, and soothed him, saying:

“You’ll soon be up and doing, and then you’ll begin to teach me, won’t you?” [Pg 52]

“How would it be if you came and read to me every evening before the play? Then we could begin at once.”

“Shall I?” She warmed to the plan. “What shall I read?”

“You might read your book about Napoleon.”

“Oh! Lovely!”

Mrs. Copas returned to give him his medicine and to tuck him up for the night.

“What day is it?” he asked.

“Saturday.”

“Are there any letters for me?” He remembered then that there could be none, that he was no longer his old self, that an explosion in his affairs had hurled him out of his old habitual existence and left him bruised and broken among strangers.

“I would like,” he said, “to shave to-morrow.”

“Yes, yes,” replied Mrs. Copas, humoring him. “I’m in the next room if you want anything. Doctor said you was to have as much sleep as you could get. Being Saturday night, and you an invalid, Mr. Copas bought you some grapes and sponge-cake, and he wants to know if you’d like some port wine. We thought it ’ud make you sleep.”

He expressed a desire for port, and she bustled into the next room and came back with a tumblerful. He was, or fancied he was, something of a connoisseur, and he propped himself up and sipped the dark liquid, and, as he was wont, rolled it round [Pg 53] his tongue. It tasted of ink and pepper. He wanted to spit it out, but, blinking up at Mrs. Copas, he saw the good creature beaming at him in rapt indulgence, and could not bring himself to offend her. With his gorge rising he sipped down about a third of the tumbler's contents and then feebly, miserably held it out toward her.

"A bit strong for you?"

He nodded, drew the bed-clothes up over his shoulders and feigned sleep. The light was put out and he heard Mrs. Copas creep into the next room. Sleep? The fiery liquor sent the blood racing and throbbing through his veins. The palms of his hands were dry and hot, and his head seemed to be bulging out of its skin. His ears were alert to every sound, and to every sound his nerves responded with a thrill. He could hear footsteps on the cobbles of the street outside, voices, hiccoughs, a woman's voice singing. These were the accompaniment to nearer sounds, a duet in the next room, a deep bass muttering, and a shrill argumentative treble. The bass swelled into anger. The treble roared into pleading. The bass became a roar, the treble a squeak. It was exciting, exasperating. In his bed Beenham tossed from side to side. He did not want to listen to their altercation, but sleep would not come to him. The bass voice broke into a crackling; then spluttering, furious sounds came. The treble squealed pitifully. Came the thud and smack of a fist on flesh and bone, a gasp, a whine, a whimper, another thud and smack, and growls from the bass, then silence. [Pg 54] . . .

Sick at heart Old Mole lay in his bed staring, staring into the darkness, and the blood in him boiled and bubbled, and his skin was taut and he shivered. He had heard of men beating their wives, but as one hears of the habits of wild animals in African forests; he had thought of it as securely as here in England one may think of a man-eating tiger near an Indian village. Now, here, in the next room, the thing had happened. Manliness, that virtue which at school had been held up as the highest good, bade him arise and defend the woman. In theory manliness had always had things perfectly its own way. In practice, now, sound sense leaped ahead of virtue, counted the cost and accurately gauged the necessity of action. In the first place to defend Mrs. Copas would mean an intrusion into the sanctuary of human life, the conjugal chamber; in the second place, in spite of many familiar pictures of St. George of Cappadocia (subsequently of England), it would be embarrassing to defend Mrs. Copas in her night attire; in the third place, the assault had grown out of their altercation of which he had heard nothing whatever; and, lastly, it might be a habit with Mr. and Mrs. Copas to smite and be smitten. Therefore Old Mole remained in his bed, faintly regretting the failure of manliness, fighting down his emotion of disgust, and endeavoring to avoid having to face his position. In vain: shunning all further thought of the miserable couple in the next room, he was driven back upon [Pg 55] himself, to his wretched wondering:

"What have I done?"

He had thrown up his very pleasant life in Thrigsby and Bigley, a life, after all, of some consequence, for what? . . . For the society of a disreputable strolling player who was blind with conceit, was apt to get drunk on Saturday nights, and in that condition violently to assault the wife of his bosom. And he had entered into this adventure with enthusiasm, had seen their life as romantic and adventurous, deliberately closing his eyes to the brutality and squalor of it. Thud, whack! and there were the raw facts staring him in the face.

There came a little moaning from the next room: never a sound from the bass: and soon all was still, save for the mice in the skirting board and occasional footsteps on the cobbles of the street outside.

No sleep came to Old Mole until the pale light of dawn crept into his room to show him, shivering, its meanness and poverty. It sickened him, but when in reaction he came to consider his old mode of living that seemed so paltry as to give a sort of savor to the coarseness of this. . . . Anyhow, he reflected, he was tied to his bed, could not take any action, and must wait upon circumstance, and hope only that there might not be too many violent shocks in store for him.

Mrs. Copas bore the marks of her husband's attentions: a long bruise over her [Pg 56] right eye and down to the cheek-bone, and a cut on her upper lip which had swelled into an unsightly protuberance. Her spirit seemed to be entirely unaffected, and she beamed upon him from behind her temporary deformities. When she asked him if he had slept well, he lied and said he had slept like a top.

She brought him hot water, razor, brush and soap, and he shaved. Off came his beard, and, after long scrutiny of his appearance in the mirror and timid hesitation, he removed the moustache which had been his pride and anxiety during his second

year at Oxford, since when it had been his constant and unobtrusive companion. The effect was startling. His upper lip was long and had, if the faces of great men be any guide, the promise of eloquence. There was a new expression in his face, of boldness, of firmness, of—as he phrased it himself—benevolent obstinacy. His changed countenance gave him so much pleasure that he spent the morning gazing into the mirror at different angles. With such a brow, such an upper lip, such lines about the nose and chin, it seemed absurd that he should have spent twenty-five years as an assistant master in a secondary school. Then he laughed at himself as he realized that he was behaving as he had not done since the ambitious days at Oxford when he had endeavored to decide on a career. Ruefully he remembered that in point of fact he had not decided. With a second in Greats he had taken the first appointment that turned up. His history had been the history of thousands. One thing only he had [Pg 57] escaped—marriage, the ordinary timid, matter-of-fact, sugar-coated marriage upon means that might or might not prove sufficient. After that, visiting his friends' houses, he had sighed sentimentally, but, with all the eligible women of his acquaintance—and they were not a few—he had been unable to avoid a quizzical tone which forbade the encouragement of those undercurrents upon which, he had observed, middle-aged men were swept painlessly into matrimony. . . . Pondering his clean-shaven face in the mirror he felt oddly youthful and excited.

In the evening Matilda came as she had promised, with the book, which proved to be that Life of Napoleon by Walter Scott which so incensed Heine. The sun shone in at the window upon the girl's brown hair, and as she opened the book the church bells began to ring with such an insistent buzzing that it was impossible for her to read. As he lay in bed Old Mole thought of Heine lying in his mattress-grave, being visited by his *Mouche,* just such another charming creature as this, young and ardent, and by her very presence soothing; only he was no poet, but a man dulled by years of unquestioning service. He gazed at Matilda as he could not recollect ever having gazed at a woman, critically, but with warm interest. There was a kind of bloom on her, the fragrance and graciousness that, when he had encountered it as a young man, had produced in him a delicious blurring of the senses, an almost [Pg 58] intoxication wherein dreadfully he had lost sight of the individual in the possession of them, and considered her only as woman. Now his subjection to the spell only heightened his sense of Matilda's individuality and sharpened his curiosity about her. Also it stripped him of his preoccupation with himself and his own future, and he fell to considering hers and wondering what the world might hold for her. . . . Like most men he had his little stock of generalizations about women, how they were mysterious, capricious, cruel, unintelligent, uncivilized, match-making, tactless, untruthful, etc., but to Matilda he could not apply them. He wanted to know exactly how she personally felt, thought, saw, moved, lived, and he refused to make any assumption about her. This curiosity of his was not altogether intellectual: it was largely physical, and it grew. He was annoyed that he had not seen her come into the room to mark how she walked, and to procure this satisfaction he asked her to give him a glass of water. He watched her. She walked easily with, for a woman, a long stride and only a very slight swing of the hips, and a drag of the arms that pleased him mightily. As she gave him the glass of water she said:

"You do look nice. I knew you would, without that moustache."

She had a strong but pleasant North-Country accent, and in her voice there was a faint huskiness that he found very moving, though it was only later, when he analyzed the little thrills which darted about him in all his conversations with her, [Pg 59] that he set it down to her voice. . . . She resumed her seat by the foot of his bed with her book in her hand, and his physical curiosity waxed only the greater from the satisfaction he had given it. He could find no excuse for more, and when the bells ceased he took refuge in talk.

"Where were you born, Matilda?"

"In a back street," she said. "Father was a fitter, and mother was a dressmaker, but she died, and father got the rheumatism, so as we all 'ad—had—to work. There was——"

"Were." She blushed and looked very cross.

"Were three girls and two boys. Jim has gone to Canada, and George is on the railway, and both my sisters are married, one in the country, and one in Yorkshire. I'm the youngest."

"Did you go to school?"

"Oh! yes. Jackson Street, but I left when I was fourteen to go into a shop. That was sitting still all day and stitching, or standing all day behind a counter with women coming in and getting narked——"

"Getting what?"

“Narked—cross-like.”

“I see. So you didn’t care about that?”

“No. There is something in me here”—she laid her hand on her bosom—“that goes hot and hard when I’m not treated fair, and then I don’t care a brass farthing what ’appens.”

She was too excited as she thought of her old wrongs to correct the last dropped aitch, though she realized it and bit her lip. [Pg 60]

“I been in service three years now, and I’ve been in four places. I’ve had enough.”

“And what now?”

“I shall stop ’ere as long as you do.”

Something in her tone, a greater huskiness, perhaps, surprised him, and he looked up at her and met her eyes full. He was confused and amazed and startled, and his heart grew big within him, but he could not turn away. In her expression there was a mingling of fierce strength, defiance, and that helplessness which had originally overcome him and led to his undoing. He was frightened, but deliciously, so that he liked it.

“I didn’t know,” she said, “that uncle drank. Father drank, too. There was a lot in our street that did. I’m not frightened of many things, but I am of that.”

He resented the topic on her lips and, by way of changing the subject, suggested that she should read. She turned to her book and read aloud the first five pages in a queer, strained, high-pitched voice that he knew for a product of the Board School, where every variance of the process called education is a kind of stiff drill. When she came to the end of a paragraph he took the book and read to her, and she listened raptly, for his diction was good. After he had come to the end of the first chapter she asked for the book again and produced a rather mincing but wonderfully accurate copy of his manner. She did not wait for his comment but banged the book shut, threw it on the bed, and said: [Pg 61]

“That’s better. I knew I could do it. I knew I was clever. . . . You’ll stop ’ere for a bit when you’re better. You mustn’t mind uncle. I’ll be awfully nice to you, I will. I’ll be a servant to you and make you comfortable, and I won’t ask for no wages. . . .”

“My dear child,” replied Old Mole, “you can’t possibly have enjoyed it more than I.”

She was eager on that.

“Did you really, really like it?”

“I did really.”

So began the education of Matilda. At first he drew up, for his own use, a sort of curriculum—arithmetic, algebra, geography, history, literature, grammar, orthography—and a time-table, two hours a day for six days in the week, but he very soon found that she absolutely refused to learn anything that did not interest her, and that he had to adapt his time to hers. Sometimes she would come to him for twenty minutes; sometimes she would devote the whole afternoon to him. When they had galloped through Oman’s “History of England” she declined to continue that study, and after one lesson in geography she burned the primer he had sent her out to buy. When he asked her where Ipswich was she turned it over in her mind, decided that it had a foreign sound and plumped for Germany. She did not seem to mind in the least when he told her it was in England, in the Eastern Counties. . . . On the other hand, when he procured their itinerary for the next few months from Mr. Copas and marked it out on the map for her, she was keenly interested and he seized on the occasion to point out Ipswich and, having engaged her attention, all the county towns of England and Scotland. [Pg 62]

“Where were you born?” she asked.

He found the village in Lincolnshire.

“And did you go to a boarding-school?”

He pointed to Haileybury and then to Oxford. From there he took her down the river to London, and told her how it was the capital of the greatest Empire the world had ever seen, and how the Mother of Parliaments sat by the river and made decrees for half the world, and how the King lived in an ugly palace within sight of the Mother of Parliaments, and how it was the greatest of ports, and how in Westminster Abbey all the noblest of men lay buried. She was not interested and asked:

“Where’s the Crystal Palace, where they play the Cup-tie?”

He did not know where in London, or out of it, the Crystal Palace might be, and

she was delighted to find a gap in his knowledge. On the whole she took her lessons very seriously, and he found that he could get her to apply herself to almost any subject if he promised that at the end of it she should be allowed to read. . . . [Pg 63] Teaching under these circumstances he found more difficult than ever he had imagined it could be. In his Form-room by the glass roof of the gymnasium he had been backed by tradition, the ground had been prepared for him in the lower Forms; there was the whole complicated machinery of the school to give him weight and authority. Further, the subjects of instruction were settled for him by the Oxford and Cambridge Examination Board. Now he was somewhat nettled to find that, though he might draw up and amend curricula, he was more and more forced to take the nature and extent of his teaching from his pupil, who, having no precise object in view, followed only her instinct, and that seemed to bid her not so much to lay up stores of knowledge as to disencumber herself, to throw out ballast, everything that impeded the buoyancy of her nature.

They were very pleasant hours for both of them, and in her company he learned to give as little thought to the future as she. At first, after he recovered, he fidgeted because there were no letters. Day after day passed and brought him no communication from the outside world. Being a member of many committees and boards, he was used to a voluminous if uninteresting post. However, he got used to their absence, and what with work in the theater and teaching Matilda he had little time for regret or anxiety. He had been up from his bed a whole week before he bought a newspaper, that which he had been in the habit of reading in his morning [Pg 64] train. It was dull and only one announcement engaged his attention; the advertisement of the school setting forth the fees and the opening date of the next term—September 19. That gave him four weeks in which freely to enjoy his present company. Thereafter surely there would be investigation, inquiry for him, the scandal would reach his relatives and they would—would they not?—cause a search for him. Till then he might be presumed to be holiday-making.

Meanwhile he had grown used to Mr. Copas's manner of living—the dirt, the untidiness, the coarse food, the long listlessness of the day, the excitement and feverishness of the evening. Mrs. Copas's disfigurements were long in healing, and when he was well enough he replaced her at the door and took the money, and sold the grimy-thumbed tickets for the front seats. He sat through every performance and became acquainted with every item in Mr. Copas's repertory. With that remarkable person he composed a version of "Iphigenia," for from his first sketch of the play Mr. Copas had had his eye on Agamemnon as a part worthy of his powers. Mr. Mole insisted that Matilda should play the part of Iphigenia, and Mrs. Copas was given Clytemnestra wherewith to do her worst. . . . The only portion of the piece that was written was Iphigenia's share of her scenes with Agamemnon. These Old Mole wrote out in as good prose as he could muster, and she learned them by heart. Unfortunately they were too long for Mr. Copas, and when it came to performance— [Pg 65] there were only two rehearsals—he burst into them with his gigantic voice and hailed tirades at his audience about the bitterness of ingratitude in a fair and favorite daughter, trounced Clytemnestra for the lamentable upbringing she had given their child, and, in the end, deprived Iphigenia of the luxury of slaughter by falling on his sword and crying:

"Thus like a Roman and a most unhappy father I die of thrice and doubly damned, self-inflicted wounds. By my example let all men, especially my daughter, know there is a canon fixed against self-slaughter."

He made nonsense of the whole thing, but it was wonderfully effective. So far as it was at all lucid the play seemed to represent Agamemnon as a wretched man driven to a miserable end by a shrewish wife and daughter.

Much the same fate attended Mr. Mole's other contribution to the repertory, a Napoleonic drama in which Mr. Copas figured—immensely to his own satisfaction—as the Corsican torn between an elderly and stout Marie Louise and a youthful and declamatory Josephine. Through five acts Mr. Copas raged and stormed up and down the Emperor's career, had scenes with Josephine and Marie Louise when he felt like it, confided his troubles and ambitions to Murat when he wanted a rest from his ranting, sacked countries, cities, ports as easily and neatly as you or I might pocket the red at billiards, made ponderous love to the golden-haired lady of the Court, [Pg 66] introduced comic scenes with the lugubrious young man, wept over the child, dressed up as L'Aiglon, whom he called "Little Boney," banished Josephine from the Court, and died on the battlefield of Waterloo yielding up his sword to the Duke of Wellington, represented by Mr. Mole, his first appearance upon any stage, with this farewell:

"My last word to England is—be good to Josephine."

It was the Theater Royal's most successful piece. The inhabitants of that little Staffordshire town had heard of the Duke of Wellington and they applauded him to

the echo. Every night when they played that stirring drama, after Mr. Copas had taken his fill of the applause, there were calls for the Duke, and Mr. Mole would appear leading Josephine by the hand.

At the top of their success Mr. Copas decided to move on.

“In this business,” he said, “you have to know when to go. You have to leave ’em ripe for the next visit, and go away and squeeze another orange. I said to Mrs. Copas, the night you came, that you looked like luck. You’ve done it. If you’ll stay, sir, I’ll give you a pound a week. You’re a nartist, you are. That Wellington bit of yours without a word to say—d’you know what we call that? We call that ’olding the stage. It takes a nartist to do that.”

Mr. Mole took this praise with becoming modesty and said that he would stay, for the present. Then he added: [Pg 67]

“And about Matilda?”

“She’s my own niece,” replied Mr. Copas, “but I don’t mind telling you that she’s not a bit o’ good. She ain’t got the voice. She ain’t got the fizzikew. When there’s a bit o’ real acting to be done, she isn’t there. She just isn’t there. There’s a hole where she ought to be. I’m bothered about that girl, I am, bothered. She doesn’t earn her keep.”

“I thought she was very charming.”

“Pretty and all that, but that’s not acting. Set her against Mrs. Copas and where is she?”

Mr. Mole’s own private opinion was that on the stage Mrs. Copas was repulsive. However, he kept that to himself. Very quietly he said:

“If Matilda goes, I go.”

Mr. Copas looked very mysterious and winked at him vigorously. Then he grinned and held out a dirty hand.

“Put it there, my boy, put it there. What’s yours?”

Within half an hour he had coaxed another ten pounds out of Mr. Mole’s pocket and Matilda’s tenure of the part of Josephine was guaranteed.

At their next stopping-place, on the outskirts of the Pottery towns, disaster awaited the company. A wheel of the caravan jammed as they were going down a hill and delayed them for some hours, so that they arrived too late in the evening to give a performance. Mr. Copas insisted that the theater should be erected, and lashed his assistants with bitter and blasphemous words, so that they became excited and flurried and made a sad muddle of their work. When at last it was finished and Mr. Copas went out himself to post up his bills on the walls of the neighborhood, where of all places he regarded his fame as most secure, he had got no farther than the corner of the square when he came on a gleaming white building that looked as though it were made of icing sugar, glittering and dazzling with electric light and plastered all over with lurid pictures of detectives and criminals and passionate men and women in the throes of amorous catastrophes and dilemmas. He stopped outside this place and stared it up and down, gave it his most devastating fore-and-aft look, and uttered one word: [Pg 68]

“Blast!”

Then unsteadily he made for the door of the public-house adjoining it and called for the landlord, whom he had known twenty years and more. From the platform of the theater Mrs. Copas saw him go in, and she rushed to find Mr. Mole, and implored him to deliver her husband from the seven devils who would assuredly possess him unless he were speedily rescued and sent a-billposting.

Mr. Mole obeyed, and found the actor storming at the publican, asking him how he dare take the bread from the belly and the air from the nostrils of a nartist with a lot o’ dancing dotty pictures. With difficulty Mr. Copas was soothed and placated. He had ordered a glass of beer in order to give himself a status in the house, and the publican would not let him pay for it. Whereupon he spilled it on the sanded floor and stalked out. Mr. Mole followed him and found him brooding over a poster outside the “kinema” which represented a lady in the act of saving her child from a burning hotel. He seized his paste-pot, took out a bill from his satchel, and covered the heads of the lady and her child with the announcement of his own arrival with new plays and a brilliant and distinguished company. [Pg 69]

When he was safely round the corner he seized his companion by the arm and said excitedly:

“Ruining the country they are with them things. Last time I pitched opposite one o’

them, when they ought to have been working my own company was in there watching the pictures."

"I have always understood," replied Mr. Mole, "that they have a considerable educational value, and certainly it seems to me that through them the people can come by a more accurate knowledge of the countries and customs of the world than by reading or verbal instruction."

Mr. Copas snorted:

"Have you *seen* 'em?"

"No."

"Then talk when you have. I say it's ruining the country and pampering the public. Who wants to know about the countries and customs of the world? What men and women want to know is the workings of the human heart." [Pg 70]

Unexpectedly Mr. Mole found himself reduced to triteness. The only comment that presented itself to his mind was that the human heart was a mystery beyond knowing, but that did not allow him to controvert the actor's dictum that no one wanted to know about the countries and customs of the world, and he wondered whether the kinematograph did, in fact, convey a more accurate impression of the wonders of the world than Hakluyt or Sir John Mandeville, who did, at any rate, present the results of their travels and inventions with that pride in both truth and lying which begets style.

He determined to visit the kinematograph, and after he and Mr. Copas had completed their round and made it possible for a large number of the inhabitants of the Potteries to become aware of their existence, he returned to the Theater Royal and fetched Matilda. They paid threepence each and sat in the best seats in the middle of the hall, where they were regaled with a Wild West melodrama, an adventure of Max Linder, a Shakespearean production by a famous London actor, a French drama of love and money, and a picture of bees making honey in their hive. Matilda liked the bees and the horses in the Wild West melodrama. When Max Linder climbed into a piano and the hammers hit him on the nose and eyes she laughed; but she said the French drama was silly, and as for the Shakespearean production she said:

"You can't follow the play, but I suppose it's good for you." [Pg 71]

"How do you mean—good for you?"

"I mean you don't really like it, but there's a lot of it, and a lot of people, and the dresses are lovely. It doesn't get hold of you like uncle does sometimes."

"Your uncle says the kinemas are ruining the country."

"Oh! He only means they're making business bad for him."

"Your uncle says you'll never make an actress, Matilda."

"Does he?"

(Some one behind them said "Ssh!"

"Ssh yourself," retorted Matilda. "There ain't nothing to hear.")

"Does he?" she said. "What do *you* think?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about it."

For the first time he noted that when he was with Matilda his brain worked in an entirely novel fashion. It was no longer cool and fastidiously analytical, seizing on things and phenomena from the outside, but strangely excited and heated, athletic and full of energy and almost rapturously curious about the inside of things and their relation one with another. For instance, he had hitherto regarded the kinematograph as a sort of disease that had broken out all over the face of the world, but now his newly working mind, his imagination—that was the word for it—saw it as human effort, as a thing controlled by human wills to meet human demands. It did not satisfy [Pg 72] his own demand, nor apparently did it satisfy Matilda's. For the rest of the audience he would not venture to decide. Indeed he gave little thought to them, for he was entirely absorbed by the wonder of the miracle that had come to him, the new vision of life, the novel faculty of apprehension. He was in a state of ferment and could not sort his impressions and ideas, but he was quite marvelously interested in himself, and, casting about for expression of it all, he remembered stories of seeds buried for years under mighty buildings in cities and how when the buildings were pulled down those seeds put forth with new vigor and came to flower. So (he said to himself) it had been with him. Excitedly he turned to Matilda and said:

"About this acting. Do you yourself think you can do it?"

"I'm sure I can."

“Then you shall.”

The lights in the hall went up to indicate the end of the cycle of pictures.

All that night and through the next day his exaltation continued, and then suddenly it vanished, leaving him racked by monstrous doubts. His mind, the full exercise of which had given him such thrilling delight, seemed to become parched and shriveled as a dried pea. Where had been held out for him the promise of fine action was now [Pg 73] darkness, and he sank deeper and deeper into a muddy inertia. Fear possessed him and brought him to agony, dug into his sides with its spur, drove him floundering on, and when out of the depths of his soul he strove to squeeze something of that soaring energy that had visited him or been struck out of him (he knew not which it was) he could summon nothing more powerful to his aid than anger. He wept tears of anger—anger at the world, at himself, and the blind, aimless force of events, at his own impotence to move out of the bog, at the folly and obstinacy which had led him to submit to the affront that had been put upon him by men who for years had been his colleagues and comrades. His anger was blown to a white heat by disgust when he looked back and counted the years he had spent in fatted security mechanically plying a mechanical profession, shut out by habit and custom from both imaginative power and the impotence of exhaustion. He raged and stormed and blubbered, and he marveled at the commotion going on within him as he pursued his daily tasks, read aloud with Matilda, argued with Mr. Copas, took money at the door of the theater in the evening, sat among the dirty, smelling, loutish audience. In his bitterness he found a sort of comfort in reverting to his old bantering attitude toward women, to find it a thousand times intensified. More than half the audience were women, poor women, meanly dressed, miserably corseted; the fat women bulged and [Pg 74] heaved out of their corsets, and the thin women looked as though they had been dropped into theirs and were only held up by their armpits. There they sat, hunched and bunched, staring, gaping, giggling, moping, chattering, chattering . . . Ach! They were silly.

And the men? God save us! these sodden, stupid clods were men. They slouched and sprawled and yawned and spat. Their hands were dirty, their teeth yellow, and their speech was thick, clipped, guttural, inhuman. . . . Driven on by a merciless logic he was forced into consideration of himself. As he sat there at the end of the front row he turned his hands over and over; fat, stumpy hands they were, and he put them up and felt the fleshiness of his neck, the bushy hair growing out of his ears, and he ran them along his plump legs and prodded the stoutness of his belly. He laughed at himself. He laughed at the whole lot of them. And he tried to remember a single man or a single woman whom he had encountered in his life and could think of as beautiful. Not one.

He turned his attention to the stage. Copas was almost a dwarf, a strutting, conceited little dwarf, pouring out revolting nonsense, a hideous caricature of human beings who were the caricatures of creation. He said to himself:

“I must get out of this.”

And he found himself using a phrase he had employed for years in dealing with small boys who produced slovenly work and wept when he railed at them: [Pg 75]

“Tut! Tut! This will never do!”

At that he gasped. He was using the phrase to himself! He was therefore like a small boy in the presence of outraged authority, and that authority was (words came rushing in on him) his own conscience, his own essence, liberated, demanding, here and now, among men and women as they are, the very fullness of life.

He had not regained his mood of delight, but rather had reached the limit of despair, had ceased blindly and uselessly to struggle, but cunningly, cautiously began to urge his way out of his despond. Whatever happened, he must move forward. Whatever happened, he must know, discover, reach out and grasp.

And he blessed the illumination that had come to him, blessed also the blackness and misery into which, incontinently, he had fallen. He submitted to exhaustion and was content to await an accretion of energy.

Thereafter, for a little while, he found himself more akin to Mr. Copas, drank with him, cracked jokes with him, walked with him and listened to his talk. He began to appreciate Mrs. Copas and to understand that being beaten by a man is not incompatible with a genuine affection and sympathy for him. He speculated not at all, and more than ever his instruction of Matilda became dependent upon her caprice.

Her uncle now gave her a salary of five shillings a week and upon her first [Pg 76] payment she went out and bought a cigar for her mentor. She gave three half-pence for it and he smoked it and she wore the band on her little finger. To guard against

such presents in the future he bought himself a box of fifty Manilas.

Mrs. Copas began to sound him as to his resources. Losing patience with his evasions she asked him at last bluntly if he were rich. He turned his cigar round his tongue and said:

"It depends what you mean by rich."

"Well," she replied cautiously, feeling her ground, "could you lay your hands on fifty pounds without selling anything?"

"Certainly I could, or a hundred."

"A hundred pounds!"

Her eyes and mouth made three round O's and she was silenced.

Both were astonished and both sat, rather awkwardly, adjusting their financial standards. She took up her knitting and he plied his cigar. They were sitting on boxes outside the stage door in the warm August sunlight. She gave a discreet little cough and said:

"You don't . . . you didn't . . . have a wife, did you?"

"No. I have never had a wife."

"Think of that now. . . . You'd have a house-keeper maybe?"

"A married couple looked after me."

"Well, I never! Well, there's never any knowing, is there?" [Pg 77]

He had learned by this time that there was nothing at all behind Mrs. Copas's cryptic utterances. If there were anything she could arrive at it by circumlocution, and in her own good time would make it plain. Her next remark might have some connection with her previous train of thought or it might not. She said in a toneless, detached voice:

"And to think of you turning up with our Matilda. And they do say how everything's for the best. . . . It's a pity business is so bad here, isn't it?"

Business was very bad. The faithful few of the district who always patronized Mr. Copas year after year attended, but they amounted to no more than fifty, while the young people were drawn off by the kinematograph. They even sank so far as to admit children free for three nights in the hope that their chatter would incite their parents to come and share the wonders they had seen. On the fourth night only four old women and a boy paid for admission.

The situation was saved by a publican on the other side of the square who, envious of his rival's successful enterprise with the kinematograph, hired the theater for a week's boxing display, by his nephew, who was an ex-champion of the Midlands with a broken nose and reputation.

That week was one of the most miserable depression. Mr. Copas drank freely. Mrs. [Pg 78] Copas never stopped chatting, the company demanded their salaries up to date, accepted a compromise and disappeared, and the ex-champion of the Midlands took a fancy to Matilda. He followed her in the streets, sent her half-pounds of caramels, accosted her more than once and asked her if she did not want a new hat, and when she snubbed him demanded loudly to know what a pretty girl like her was doing without a lad. Chivalrously, not without a tremor, Mr. Mole offered himself as her escort in her walks abroad. They were invariably followed by the boxer whistling and shouting at intervals. Sometimes he would lag behind them and embark upon a long detailed and insulting description of Mr. Mole's back view; sometimes he would hurry ahead, look round and leer and make unpleasant noises with his lips or contemptuous gestures with his hands.

Matilda had found a certain spot by a canal where it passed out of the town and made a bee-line across the country. There was a bridge over a sluice which marked the cleavage between the sweet verdure of the fields and the soiled growth of the outskirts of the town. It was a lonely romantic spot and she wished to visit it again before they left. She explained to her friend that she wanted to be alone but dared not because of her pursuer, and her friend agreed to leave her on the bridge and to lurk within sight and earshot.

They had to go by tram. The boxer was twenty yards behind them. They hurried [Pg 79] on, mounted the tram just as it was starting, and congratulated themselves on having avoided him. When they reached the bridge there he was sitting on the parapet, whistling and leering. Matilda flamed scarlet and turned to go. Boiling with fury Old Mole hunched up his shoulders, tucked down his head (the attitude familiar to so many Thrigsbians), and bore down on the offender. He grunted out:

“Be off.”

“ ’Ave you bought the bally bridge?”

And he grinned. The coarseness and beastliness of the creature revolted Mr. Mole, roused him to such a pitch of furious disgust, that he lost all sense of what he was doing, raised his stick, struck out, caught the fellow in the chest and sent him toppling over into the pool. He leaned over the parapet and watched the man floundering and splashing and gulping and spitting and cursing, saw his face turn greeny white with hard terror, but was entirely unmoved until he felt Matilda’s hand on his arm and heard her blubbering and crying:

“He’s drowning! He’s drowning!”

Then he rushed down and lay on his stomach on the bank and held out his stick, further, further, as far as he could reach, until the lout in the water clutched it. The boxer had lost his head. He tugged at the stick and it looked for a moment as though there would be two men in the water. It was a question which would first be exhausted. Grayer and grayer and more distorted grew the boxer’s face, redder and [Pg 80] redder and more swollen Old Mole’s, until at last the strain relaxed and Matilda’s tormentor was drawn into shallow water and out on to the bank. There he lay drenched, hiccoughing, spitting, concerned entirely with his own discomfort and giving never a thought either to the object of his desires or his assailant and rescuer. At last he shook himself like a dog, squeezed the water out of his sleeves, sprang to his feet and was off like a dart along the towpath in the direction of the tall fuming chimneys of the town.

Matilda and Old Mole walked slowly out toward the setting sun and in front of them for miles stretched the regiments of pollarded willows like mournful distorted human beings condemned forever to stand and watch over the still waters.

“Life,” said Old Mole, “is full of astonishments. I should never have thought it of myself.”

“He was very nearly drowned,” rejoined Matilda.

“It is very singular,” said he, more to himself than to her, “that one’s instinct should think such a life worth saving. A more bestial face I never saw.”

“I think,” said she, “you would help anybody whatever they were like.”

She took his arm and they walked on, as it seemed, into the darkness. Until they turned, neither spoke. He said:

“I am oddly miserable when I think that in a fortnight the school will reopen and I [Pg 81] shall not be there. I suppose it’s habit, but I want to go back and I know I never shall.”

“I don’t want never to go back.”

“Don’t you? But then you’re young and I’m rather old.”

“I don’t think of you as old. I always think of you as some one very good and sometimes you make me laugh.”

“Oh! Matilda, often, very often, you make me want to cry. And men don’t cry.”

A little scornfully Matilda answered:

“*Don’t* they!”

Through his mournfulness he felt a glow of happiness, a little aching in his heart, a sort of longing and a pleasant pride in this excursion with a young woman clinging to his arm and treating him with sweet consideration and tenderness.

“After all,” he thought, “it is certainly true that when they reach middle age men do require an interest in some young life.”

So, having fished out a theory, as he thought, to meet the case, he was quite content and prepared, untroubled, to enjoy his happiness.

He did thoroughly enjoy his happiness. His newly awakened but unpracticed imagination worked like that of a sentimental and self-cloistered writer who, having no conception of human relationships, binds labels about the necks of his personages —Innocent Girlhood, Middle-aged Bachelorhood, Mother’s Love, Manly Honor, English Gentleman—and amuses himself and his readers with propping them up in [Pg 82] the attitudes meet and right to their affixed characters. Except that he did not drag the Deity into it, Old Mole lived perfectly for a short space of time in a neatly rounded novelette, with himself as the touching, lamb-like hero and Matilda as the radiant heroine. He basked in it, and when on her he let loose a flood of what he thought to be emotion she only said:

“Oh! Go on!”

True to his sentimentality he was entirely unconscious of, absolutely unconcerned

with, what she might be feeling. He only knew that he had been battered and bewildered and miserable and that now he was comfortable and at his ease.

The appointed end of all such things, in print and out of it, is marriage. Outside marriage there is no such thing as affection between man and woman (in that atmosphere passion and desire do not exist and children are not born but just crop up). True to his fiction—and how many men are ever true to anything else?—Old Mole came in less than a week to the idea of marriage with Matilda. It was offensive to his common sense, so repugnant indeed that it almost shocked him back into the world of fact and that hideous mental and spiritual flux from which he was congratulating himself on having escaped. He held his nose and gulped it down and sighed:

"Ah! Let us not look on the dark side of life!"

Then he asked himself:

"Do I love her? She has young dreams of love. How can I give her my love and not shatter them?" [Pg 83]

And much more in this egoistic strain he said, the disturbance in his heart, or whatever organ may be the seat of the affections, having totally upset his sense of humor. He told himself, of course, that she was hardly the wife for a man of his position, but that was only by way of peppering his emotions, and he was really rather amazed when he came to the further reflection that, after all, he had no position. To avoid the consternation it brought he decided to ask Matilda's hand in marriage.

As it turned out, to the utter devastation of his novelette, it was his hand that was asked.

He bought Matilda a new camisole. He had heard the word used by women and was rather staggered when he found what it was he had purchased. Confusedly he presented it to Innocent Girlhood. She giggled and then, with a shout of laughter, rushed off to show Mrs. Copas her gift. He did not on that occasion stammer out his proposal.

He took her for three walks and two tram-drives at fourpence each, but she was preoccupied and morose, and gave such vague answers to his preliminary remarks that his hopes died within him and he discussed the Insurance Act and Lancashire's chances of defeating Yorkshire at Bradford. Moreover, Matilda was pale and drawn and not far from being downright ugly, far too plain for a novelette at all events. He [Pg 84] felt himself sliding backward and could hear the buzz and roar of the chaos within himself, and the novelette was unfinished and until he came to the last jaunting little hope in the future, the last pat on the back for the hero, the final distribution of sugar-plums all round, there would be no sort of security, no sealed circle wherein to dwell. He felt sick, and the nausea that came on him was worse than the fear and doubt through which he had passed. He was like a man after a long journey come hungry to an inn to find nothing to eat but lollipops.

When they returned from their last tram-drive they had supper with Mr. and Mrs. Copas, who discussed the new actors whom they had engaged, as only two of the old company were willing to return. The new comic had acted in London, in the West End, had once made his twenty pounds a week. They were proud of him, and Mr. Copas unblushingly denounced the Drink as the undoing of many a nartist. Very early in the evening, before any move had been made to clear the plates and dishes away, Matilda declared herself tired, and withdrew. Mr. Copas went on talking and Mrs. Copas began to make horrible faces at him, so that Old Mole, in the vagueness of his acute discomfort, thought mistily that perhaps they were at the beginning of an altercation, which would end—as their altercations ended. However, the talk went on [Pg 85] and the grimaces went on until at last Mr. Copas perceived that he was the object of them, stopped dead, seized his hat and left the room. Mrs. Copas beamed on Mr. Mole. She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. They were bare to the elbow and fat and coarse and red. She went on beaming, and nervously he took out a cigar and lit it. Mrs. Copas leaned forward and with a knife began to draw patterns with the mustard left on the edge of a plate.

"We'll be on the move again soon, Mr. Mole."

"I shall be glad of that."

"What we want to know, what I want to know and what Mr. Copas wants to know is this. What are you going to do about it?"

"I . . . I suppose I shall go with you."

“You know what I mean, Mr. Mole. Some folk ain’t particular. I am. And Mr. Copas is very careful about what happens in his theater. If it can’t be legitimate it can’t be and there’s nothing more to be said. . . . Now, Mr. Mole, what are you going to do?”

“My good woman! I haven’t the least idea what you are talking about. I have enjoyed my stay with you. I have found it very instructive and profitable and I propose to——”

“It’s Matilda, Mr. Mole. What’s done is done. We’re not saying anything about that. Some says it’s a curse and some says it’s the only thing worth living for. Matilda’s my own husband’s niece and I’ve got to see her properly done by whether you’re offended with a little plain speaking or not, Mr. Mole.” [Pg 86]

She had now traced a very passable spider’s web in mustard on the plate.

“If you need to be told, I must tell you, Mr. Mole. Matilda’s in the way.”

No definite idea came to Mr. Mole, but a funny little throb and trickle began at the base of his spine. He dabbed his cigar down into half a glass of beer that Mr. Copas had left.

“We’ve talked it out, Mr. Mole, and you’ve got to marry her or pay up handsome.”

Marry! His first thought was in terms of the novelette, but those terms would not embrace Mrs. Copas or her present attitude. His first glimpse of the physical fact was through the chinks of his sentimental fiction, and he was angry and hurt and disgusted. Then, the fiction never having been rounded off, he was able to escape from it—(rare luck in this world of deceit)—and he shook himself free of its dust and tinsel, and, responding to the urgency of the occasion, saw or half-saw the circumstances from Matilda’s point of view. Mentally he swept Mrs. Copas aside. The thing lay between himself and the girl. Out of her presence he could not either think or feel about it clearly. Only for himself there lay here and now, before him, the opportunity for action, for real, direct, effective action, which would lift him out of his despond and bring his life into touch with another life. It gave him what he most needed, movement, uplift, the occasion for spontaneity, for being rid, though it might [Pg 87] be only temporarily, of his fear and doubt and sickness of mind. Healthily, or rather, in his eagerness for health, he refused to think of the consequences. He lit another cigar, steadying himself by a chair-back, so dazzled was he by the splendor of his resolution and the rush of mental energy that had brought him to it, and said:

“Of course, if Matilda is willing, I will marry her.”

“I didn’t expect it of you, being a gentleman,” returned Mrs. Copas, obliterating her spider’s web, “and, marriage being the lottery it is, there are worse ways of doing it than that. After all, you do know you’re not drawing an absolute blank, which, I know, happens to more than ever lets on.”

Mr. Mole found that it is much easier to get married in life than in sentimental fiction. He never proposed to Matilda, never discussed the matter with her, only after the interview with Mrs. Copas she kissed him in the morning and in the evening, and as often in between as she felt inclined. He made arrangements with the registrar, bought a special license and a ring. He said: “I take you, Matilda Burn, to be my lawful wedded wife,” and she said: “I take you, Herbert Jocelyn Beenham, to be my lawful wedded husband.” Mrs. Copas sat on the registrar’s hat, and, without any other incident, they were made two in one and one in two.

In view of the approaching change in his condition he had written to his lawyer [Pg 88] and his banker in Thrigsby, giving orders to have all his personal property realized and placed on deposit, also for five hundred pounds to be placed on account for Mrs. H. J. Beenham.

The day after his wedding came this letter from the Head Master:

“My Dear Beenham:—I am delighted that your whereabouts has been discovered. All search for you has been unavailing—one would not have thought it so easy for a man to disappear—and I had begun to be afraid that you had gone abroad. As I say, I am delighted, and I trust you are having a pleasant vacation. I owe you, I am afraid, a profound apology. If there be any excuse, it must be put down to the heat and the strain of the end of the scholastic year. I was thinking, I protest, only of the ancient foundation which you and I have for so long served. The Chairman of the Governors, always, as you know, your friend, has denounced what he is pleased to call my Puritanical cowardice. The Police have made inquiries about the young woman and state that she is a domestic servant who left her situation in distressing circumstances without her box and without a character. I do apologize most humbly, my dear Beenham, and I look to see you in your place at the commencement of the approaching term.”

Old Mole read this letter three times, and the description of his wife stabbed him

on each perusal more deeply to the heart. He tore the sheet across and across and [Pg 89]
burned the pieces on the hearth. Matilda came in and found him at it: and when she spoke to him he gave no answer, but remained kneeling by the fender, turning the poker from one hand to the other.

“Are you cross with me?” she said.

“No. Not with you. Not with you. Not with you.”

“You don’t often say things three times.”

She came and laid her hands on his shoulders, and he took them and kissed them, for now he adored her.

In the evening came a knock at the front door. Mr. Mole was at the theater arranging for a new play with which to reopen when the boxing season, which had been extended, was over. The slut of a landlady took no notice, and the knock was repeated thrice. Matilda went down and opened the door and found on the step a short, plump, rotund, elegant little man with spectacles and a huge mustache. He asked for Mr. Beenham, and she said she was Mrs. Beenham. He drew himself up and was very stiff and said at the back of his throat:

“I am your husband’s brother.”

She took him upstairs to their sitting-room, and he told her how distressed he was at the news that had reached him and to find his brother living in such a humble place. He added that it was a serious blow to all his family, but that, for his part, the [Pg 90]
world being what it was and life on it being also what it was, he hoped that all might be for the best. Matilda let him have his say and tactfully led him on to talk about himself, and he told her all about his practice at the Chancery Bar, and the wine at his club, and his rooms in Gray’s Inn, and his collection of Battersea china, and his trouble with the committee of his golf club, and his dislike for most of his relations except his brother Herbert, who was the last man in the world, as he said, he had ever expected to go off the rails. She assured him then that Herbert was the best and kindest of men, and that it would not be her fault if their subsequent career did not astonish and delight him. She did not drop a single aitch, and, noticing carefully his London pronunciation, she mentally resolved to change her broad a’s and in future to call a schoolmaster a schoolmarster. . . . Their conversation came abruptly to an end, and she produced a pack of cards and taught him how to play German whist. From that he led her to double-dummy Bridge, and they were still at it when his brother returned. Matilda was scolded for being up so late, kissed, by both men, and packed off to bed.

Whisky was produced. Said brother Robert:

“Well, of all the lunatics!”

“So you’ve been shocked and amazed and horrified. Do the others know?”

“Not yet. . . . I thought I’d better see you first.”

“All right. Tell them that I’m married and have become a rogue and a vagabond.” [Pg 91]

“You’re not going on with this?”

“I am.”

“Don’t be a fool. Your wife’s perfectly charming. There’s nothing against her.”

“That’s had nothing to do with it. I’m going on for my own satisfaction. I’ve spent half my life in teaching. I want to spend the rest of it in learning.”

“From play-actors? Oh! come!”

“My dear Robert, life isn’t at all what you think it is. It isn’t what I thought it was. I’m interested. I’m eager. I’m keen. . . .”

“And mad. . . .”

“Maybe. But I tell you that life’s got a heart to it somewhere, and I’m going to find my way to it.”

“Then you’re not going back?”

“Never: neither to the old work, nor to the old kind of people.”

“Not even when I tell you that Uncle Jocelyn is dead at last and has left us each ten thousand! Doesn’t that make any difference, H. J.?”

H. J. received this intelligence almost with dismay. It took him back into the family councils, the family speculations as to Uncle Jocelyn’s will, the family squabbles over Uncle Jocelyn’s personal effects and their distribution, the family impatience at Uncle Jocelyn’s unconscionable long time in dying. And the vision of it all irritated and weighed heavily on him. Often in Thrigsby he had said to himself that when Uncle [Pg 92]

Jocelyn died he would retire. And now Uncle Jocelyn was dead and he found his legacy rather a bewilderment than a relief. It was such a large sum of money that it made him fall back into his old sense of the grotesque in his relations with Mr. Copas and his galley, just when he was congratulating himself on being able to enter on his new life with real zest and energy.

"No," he said, "that makes no difference. I shall stay where I am."

"If there is ever any trouble," replied Robert, "I shall be only too glad to help."

"Thank you."

Robert tapped at his mustache and said:

"I suppose being married won't interfere with your golf."

"I'm afraid it will." This came very tartly.

"Er. . . . Sorry."

That had flicked Robert on the raw. He had been feeling indulgent toward his demented brother until his more than doubtful attitude toward ten thousand pounds. When that was followed with the renunciation of golf he was genuinely distressed and went away muttering behind his mustache:

"I give it up. I give it up. 'Pon my honor. *Non compos,* don't y'know, *non compos."*

Nothing would induce Old Mole to visit Thrigsby again, and his solicitor had to send a clerk down with documents for his signature. When all the legal threads were [Pg 93] tied up he told Matilda the extent of his fortune, and how he had been asked to return to his position at the school.

"Are you sorry?" she asked.

"No."

"You sha'n't ever be, for me. Will you read to me now?"

And he read the first two acts of "King Lear."

"That isn't the play you were reading the other day. The one about Venice and the man who was such a good soldier."

He had begun "Othello," but it had filled him with terror, for it had brought home to him the jealousy that was gnawing at his heart, creeping into his bones. Delivered from sentimentality by his surrender to his own generous impulse, sanded over as he was by years of celibacy, he had day by day more swiftly yielded to this woman whom he had taken for his wife, and had arrived at a passion torn, knotted, and twisted by jealousy of that other whom he had never known, whose child now waxed in her womb and brought her to long periods of almost self-hypnotized inward pondering, so that, though she was all grace, all tenderness and gratitude toward him, she was never his, never, even in their most pleasant moments, anything but remote. The agonies through which he passed made him only the more determined to be gentle with her, and often when he took her hand and pressed it, and she gave him not the pressure in return for which he hoped and so longed, he would be unable to bear it [Pg 94] and would go out and walk for miles and cry out upon the injustice of the world. And then he would think that perhaps she loved him, perhaps it was an even greater torture to her to have this other between them; surely if that were so it must be keener suffering for her since it was her doing and her folly and not his. And he would hate the stain upon her, give way before the violence of his hatred, and call her unworthy and long with a sick longing for purity, an ideal mating, the first kindling in both man and woman so that each could be all to the other, wholly, with never so much as a thought lost in the past, never so much as the smallest wear and usage of anterior desire. . . . He would persuade himself that she did not love him at all; that she and the old bawd had entrapped him by sordid and base cunning. And those were the worst hours of all. But when he was with her and she gave him her smile or some little sudden friendly caress he would feel comforted and very sure of her and of the future when they would both forget, and then both his hatred and his longing for a perfect world would fall away from him and he would see them as absurd projections of those contrasts which arise and haunt the half-comprehending mind. And he would tell himself that all would be well; that they would be happy in the child which would be his also, for the love he had for her. And his jealousy would return.

Therefore he read "King Lear," and the pity of it purged him, though he was not [Pg 95] without feeling that he, too, was cast out upon the barren places of the earth to face the storm and meet disaster. Feeling so he said to Matilda:

"Money and material things seem to have nothing to do with life at all. Here am I with you, whom I love. . . ."

“Do you?”

“I love you.”

“Thank you.”

“With you, and no possible anxiety as to the future, and yet I seem to myself to be on the very brink of explosion and disaster.”

“Dear man, I wish you wouldn’t think so much.”

“I must think, or my feelings swamp me.”

She thrilled him by taking his hand, and she said:

“Do you know what I want?”

“No. You shall have it.”

“I want to make you happy.”

That was the most definite assurance of her feeling for him she had as yet given him. It soothed his jealousy, made it easier for him to conquer it, but presently it laid him open to a new dread. The time for her confinement was drawing on, and he began to think that out, too; the violence and bloodiness of birth haunted him, the physical pain it entailed, the possibility of its being attended by death. She had promised him happiness, and she might die! He became over-scrupulous in his treatment of her and worried her about her health so that she lost her temper and said:

“After all, it’s me that’s got to go through with it, and *I* don’t think about it.” [Pg 96]

That brought him up sharp, and he held his peace and watched her. Truly she did not think about it. She accepted it. It was to her, it seemed, entirely a personal matter, perfectly in the order of things, to be worried through as occasion served. It might go well, or it might go ill, but meanwhile there were the things of the moment to be attended to and the day’s pleasure to be seized. He was humbled and a little envious of her. For a little while he indulged in an orgy of self-reproach, but she only laughed at him and told him that when she had so much cause for feeling depressed he might at least comfort her with the sight of a cheerful face. He laughed, too, and told himself he was a selfish ass and that she was made that way and he was made another, and that perhaps men and women are made so, men thinking and women accepting, or perhaps they only become so in the progress of their lives.

Matilda’s baby came four months after their marriage. It was still-born.

II

MARRIAGE

Sie war liebenswürdig und er liebte sie: aber er war nicht liebenswürdig und sie liebte ihn nicht.

[Pg 99]

II

MARRIAGE

MATILDA kept her promise and made her husband happy. She reduced him to that condition wherein men and women believe that never has the world been visited by such love and that they will go on loving forever and ever. This she achieved by leaving his affections to look after themselves and concentrating all her energies on seeing that he was properly fed and clothed, had the requisite amount of sleep and just enough cosseting to make him wish for more, which he did not get. She left the ordering of their coexistence in his hands, and he, being happy, span a cocoon of charming fancies about it, and showed little disposition to change. Therefore they continued with Mr. Copas and became acquainted with the four quarters of England and the two or three kinds of towns which in vast numbers have grown on it, like warts on the face of Oliver Cromwell. Bemused by the romance of love and the sense of well-being that its gratification brings, he observed very little and thought less, and he did not perceive that he was falling into a routine as dispirited as that in which he had gone round and round out of adolescence into manhood and out of [Pg 100] manhood into middle age. Such is the power of love—or rather of a certain very general over-indulged variant of it—that it can lift a man out of space and time and set him drifting and dreaming through a larger portion of his allotted span than he can afford to lose. As there is a sort of peace in this condition, it is highly prized: indeed, it passes for an ideal, being as material as a fatted pig into whose sides you can poke your finger, as into a cushion; it has the further merit that it needs no effort to attain, but only a fall and no struggle. Old Mole fell into it and prized it and told himself that life was very good. When he told his wife that life was very good she said that it was a matter of opinion and it depended what you happened to want.

“What do you want?” he asked.

She thumped her chest with the odd little teasing gesture that was perhaps most characteristic of her, and said:

“Something big.”

“Aren’t you content?”

“Oh, yes. But I want to know, to find out.”

He stretched his legs and, with a beautiful sense of enunciating wisdom, he remarked:

“There is nothing to know, nothing to find out. Here are we, a man and a woman, fulfilling the destiny of men and women, and, for the rest, happy enough in the occupation to which circumstances and our several destinies and characters have brought us. I am perfectly happy, my dear, most surprisingly happy when I look back [Pg 101] and consider all things. I have no ambition, no hopes, and, I fancy, no illusions; most happily of all, I have no politics. I did not make the world and I do not believe that I can undo anything good or evil which, for the world’s purposes, is necessary to be done. . . .”

He had developed a habit of talking and did not know it. She had taken refuge in silence and was aware of it.

Once she asked him if he did not feel the want of friends.

“Friends?” he answered. “I want nothing while I have you.”

She made no reply and he was left hurt, because he had expected appreciation of his entire devotion.

She was happy, too, but more keenly than he, for she was a little dazed by her astounding luck, and behind her pleasure in him and his unfailing kindness and consideration lay the sting of uneasiness and the dread that the comfort of such charming days could not last. Ignorant, untaught, unprepared, love had been for her a kiss of the lips, a surrender to the flood of perilous feeling, a tampering with forces that might or might not sweep you to ruin: a matter of fancy, dalliance, and risk. She had fancied, dallied, dared, and when she had thought to be swept to ruin—and that swift descent also had had its sickening fascination—she had been tumbled into this security where love was solid, comfortable, omnipresent, and apparently all [Pg 102] providing. She was perpetually amazed at her husband and chafed only against herself because she could not share his complacency. It was easy for her to assimilate his manners and to take the measure of his refinement. With talk of her

brothers and sisters she would lead him on to tell of his family, and especially of the women among whom he had spent his boyhood, and she would contrast herself with them and rebel against everything in herself that was not harmonious with their atmosphere. And she found it increasingly difficult to get on with her aunt, Mrs. Copas.

The new comic, John Lomas, was a great success. He was a fat little man in the fifties with a thorough knowledge of his business, which was to make any and every kind of audience laugh. A wonderful stock of tricks he had, tricks of voice, of limbs, of gesture, of facial expression, nothing but tricks, inexhaustible. He cared about nothing in the world but what he called "the laugh," and when he got one he wanted another, and always had a quip or a leer or a cantrip to get it. But he was a rascal and a drunkard, and had lost all sense of the fitness of things and always went on too long until his audience was weary of him. Therefore he had come down and down until he found an appetite to feed that was gross enough to bear with his insistence. . . . He said—it may have been true—that he had played before the King of England, and he was full of stories of the theaters in London, the real nobby theaters where [Pg 103] the swells paid half a guinea for a seat and brought their wives and other people's wives in shining jewels and dresses cut low back and front. He had played in every kind of piece, from the old-fashioned kind of burlesque to melodrama, drama, and Shakespeare, and he had never had any luck, but had always been on the point of making a fortune. "Charley's Aunt," he said, had been offered to him, and he had taken an option, but at the last moment his backers failed him. "And look at the money that had made and was still making." His first stage of intoxication was melancholy, and then he would weep over the mess he had made of his life and grow maudlin and tell how badly he had treated the dear little woman who had been his wife so that she had left him and gone off with a bloody journalist. When that mood passed he would grow excited and blustering, and brag of the slap-up women he had had when he was making his thirty pounds a week. His most intimate confessions were reserved for Matilda, for he despised Copas because he had never known anything better than a fit-up. And of Mr. Mole he was rather scared.

"I don't know," he would say to Matilda. "I don't know what it is, but your guv'nor ain't one of us, is he now?"

And when Matilda agreed that Mr. Mole was different he called her a silly cuckoo for not making him take her to London and the Continong to have a high old time.

He could play the piano in a fumbling fashion, and he used to sing through the [Pg 104] scores of some of the old pieces he had been in, with reminiscences of the players who had been successful in them and full histories of their ups and downs and their not unblemished lives, all with a full-throated sentimentality that made every tale as he told it romantic and charming. Broken and rejected by it as he was, he worshiped the theater and gloried in it, and the smell of the grease paint was to him as the smell of the field to a Jewish patriarch.

One day he insisted that Matilda should sing, and he taught her one of the old coon songs that had haunted London in the days of his prosperity. At first she was shy and sang only from her throat, and he banged out the accompaniment and drowned her voice and told her that really no one would hear her but the conductor. She must sing so that she could feel as if her voice was a little bigger than herself. The phrase seized her imagination, and she tried again. This time she produced a few full notes and then had no breath left to compass the rest. However, he was satisfied, and said she'd do for the chorus all right.

"And some of those gels, mark you," he said, "do very well for themselves, in the way of marriage, and out of it."

He taught her to dance, said she had just the feet for it. "Not real slap-up dancing, of course, but the sort you get in any old London show; the sort that's good enough with all the rest—and you've got that all right, my dear—and not a bit of good [Pg 105] without it."

The development of these small accomplishments gave her a very full pleasure, greater confidence in herself, and a feeling of independence. She took a naïve and childish pride in her body from which these wonders came. They gave her far keener delight than "the acting" had ever done, but she never connected them with her ambition. They were a purely personal secret treasure, an inmost chamber whither she could retire and let go, and be expansively, irresponsibly herself.

Toward the end of the first year of their marriage, in the harsh months of the close of the year, they were for six weeks in a city that sprawled and tumbled over the huge moors of Yorkshire. It rained almost continuously, and it was very cold, but in that city, which almost less than any other of the industrial purgatories of the kingdom appreciates art and the things of the mind, they prospered. John Lomas got

his fill of laughter, and, the kinematograph being no new thing there, the theater weathered that competition.

Matilda wrote to her sister, Mrs. Boothroyd, whose husband was employed at the municipal gasworks, and sent her a pass. She gave her news: how she was married and happy and enjoying her work with her uncle. The Boothroyd family only knew of Matilda's disaster and nothing of her subsequent history. Mr. Boothroyd, who was a deacon at his chapel, forbade his wife to take any notice of the letter, and she obeyed him, but, when he was on the night shift at the works, she made use of the pass. [Pg 106]

The program consisted of Mr. Mole's "Iphigenia," and a farce introduced into the repertory by John Lomas from what he could remember of a successful venture at the old Strand Theater in London. Matilda appeared in both pieces. She was so successful that Mrs. Boothroyd, who sat in the front row, swelled with pride, and, as she clapped her hands, turned to her neighbor:

"Isn't she good? And so pretty, too! Whoever would have thought it? But there always was something about her. She's my sister, you know."

"Indeed? Then I am pleased to meet you. She is my wife."

"Well, I never! . . ."

Mrs. Boothroyd seized Old Mole by the hand and shook it warmly, while she giggled with excitement. She bore a faint resemblance to Matilda, but looked worn, had that pathetic, punctured appearance which comes from overmuch child-bearing. Throughout the rest of the performance she only glanced occasionally at the stage and devoted her attention to scanning her brother-in-law's appearance. At the close of the second piece she said:

"I *am* glad. It would never ha' done for her to 'ave a young 'usband. She was always the flighty one."

This sounded ominously to Old Mole, who for more than a year now had been young with Matilda's youth, and so comfortably accustomed to it that he never dared in thought dissever himself from her. He rejoined that his sister-in-law would be glad to know that Matilda was settled down. [Pg 107]

They went behind and found her hot and flustered, painted, and half out of the gipsy dress in which she had made her last appearance. When she saw Mrs. Boothroyd she gave a cry of delight, rushed to her and flung her arms round her neck and kissed her.

"Didn't Jimmy come, too?"

"No; Jimmy was at the works, and couldn't come."

Matilda asked after all the Boothroyd children and her own brothers and sisters, and all their illnesses and minor disasters were retailed. Mr. and Mrs. Copas came in and embraced Bertha Boothroyd, whom they had not seen since she was a little girl, and when she said how proud she was of Matilda they replied that she had every reason to be. John Lomas appeared with stout and biscuits, and the occasion was celebrated. Warmed by this conviviality, Mrs. Boothroyd invited them all to tea with her on the next day but one, then, alarmed at the thought of what she had done, gave a little frightened gasp, was pale and silent for a few moments, and at last said she must be home to give Jim his supper when he came back.

She kissed and was kissed. Her disquietude had blown the high spirits of the party. When she had gone Matilda said: [Pg 108]

"Jim's a devil. Bertha's had a baby every year since she was married, and he thinks of nothing but saving his own soul."

Next day came a note from Bertha saying she was afraid her little house would not accommodate the whole party, but would Matilda bring her husband. "Is Mr. Mole an actor?" she asked. "I told Jim he wasn't."

Bertha's address was 33 June Street. It was a long journey by tram, and then Matilda and her husband had to walk nearly a mile down a monotonous road intersected with little streets. The name of the road was Pretoria Avenue, and on one side the little streets were called after the months of the year, and on the other after the twelve Apostles. The Boothroyds therefore lived in the very heart of the product of the end of the nineteenth century. Their front door opened straight on to the street, they had a little yard at the back, and their house consisted of eight rooms. The parlor door was unlocked for the visit, and, amid photographs of many Boothroyds, testimonials to the worthiness of James Boothroyd and his Oddfellows' certificate, tea was laid, none of your proper Yorkshire teas, but afternoon tea with

thin bread and butter. Five little Boothroyds in clean collars and pinafores were placed round the room, and stared alternately at the cake on the table and their aunt [Pg 109] and their new uncle. Old Mole endeavored to avoid their gaze, but the room seemed full of round staring gray eyes, and when he considered the corpulent American organ that took up the whole wall opposite the fireplace, he was astonished that so many people could be crammed into so small a space. Then he estimated that there were at least sixty other exactly similar houses in the street, that from January to December there were streets in replica, not to mention those on the other side of the road which were named from John to—surely not to Judas? He remembered then that one street was called Paul Street. . . . Dozens and dozens of houses, each with its Boothroyd family and its American organ. Dejectedly he told himself that these were the poor, until, glancing across at Matilda, he remembered that it was from such a house, among dozens of such houses, that she had come. That thought colored his survey, and he reminded himself, as nearly always he was forced to do when considering her actions or any episode in her history, that his own comfortable middle-class standards were not at all proper to the consideration of the phenomena of mean streets. Desperately anxious to make himself pleasant to Matilda's sister, he asked heavily:

"Are these all——?"

She was in such a flutter that she did not leave him time to finish his sentence, took him to be referring to the children, and said: "Yes, they were all hers, and there [Pg 110] were two more in the kitchen."

With more tact Matilda cut the cake and gave a piece to each of the five children. Mrs. Boothroyd said she was spoiling them, and Matilda retorted:

"If they're good children you can't spoil them."

And the children giggled crumbily and presently they sidled and edged up to their aunt and began to finger her and pluck at her clothes. Seeing his wife so set Old Mole off on an entirely new train of thought and feeling, and he began to contrast the Copas atmosphere with this domestic interior. Very queerly it gave a sort of life to that crusted old formula that had, with so many others, gone by the board in his eruption from secondary education, wherein it was laid down that a woman's place is her home. He could never, without discomfort, apply any formula to Matilda, but to see her there, with the bloom on her, in her full beauty, with the five little children at her knees, made this idea so attractive that he was loath to relinquish it: nor did he do so until Matilda asked if she might see the house, when she and Mrs. Boothroyd and the five children left him alone with the ruins of the cake and the American organ.

He was profoundly uneasy. He had not exactly idealized the Copas theater and all its doings, but he had come to them on the crest of a violent wave of reaction and had been apt to set them against and above everything in the world that was solid and stolid and workaday. It had been enchanted for him by Matilda, and she had in [Pg 111] June Street set an even more potent spell upon him and wafted him not into any kingdom of the imagination, but into the warm heart of life itself. In the Copas world he had made no allowance for children: in June Street, in dull industrial respectability, children were paramount. They surrounded Matilda and set him, in his slow fashion, tingling to the marvel of her. His response to this miracle took the form of a desire to open his pockets to the children. He took out a handful of money, and had selected five shillings when the door opened and a man entered, a dark, white-faced, thin-lipped man, with dirty hands and an aggressive jut of the shoulders.

"Ye've been tea-partying, I see," said the man.

Old Mole explained his identity. The man put his head out of the door and yelled to his wife. She returned with Matilda, but the children did not come. James Boothroyd ignored the visitors to his house and said to his cowering wife:

"You'll clean up yon litter an' you'll lock t'door. What'll neighbors say of us? I don't know these folk. You'll lock t'door and then you'll gi' me me tea in t'kitchen."

There was no sign of anger in the man. He had taken in the situation at a glance and was concerned only to bring it to the issue he desired. His relations by marriage were spotted by a world which he shunned as darkest Hell, and he would have none of them.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Old Mole led his wife out into June [Pg 112] Street. He was filled only with pity for Bertha.

Said Matilda: "Didn't I tell you he was a devil?"

Later in their lodging he asked her:

"Are all the men in those streets like that?"

"If they're religious, they're like that. If they're not religious they're drunk. If

they're not drunk you never know when they're going to leave you. That's the sort of life I came out of and that's the sort of life I'm never going back into if I can help it."

"You won't need to, my dear."

"You never know."

With which disquieting assurance he was left to reflect that she seemed to have been as much upset by her visit to June Street as himself. He was tormented by a vision of England, this little isle, the home of heroes and great men, groaning beneath the weight of miles of such streets and sinking under the tread of millions of men like James Boothroyd. Lustily he strove for a cool, intellectual consideration of it all, a point from which the network of the meanish streets of the cities of England could be seen as justifiable, necessary, and unto their own ends sufficient, but, seen from the Copas world, they were repulsive and harsh; viewed through Matilda they were touched with magic.

They were both unsettled and passed through days of irritation when they came perilously near to quarreling. In the end they made it up and found that they had [Pg 113] conquered new territory for intimacy. On that territory they discussed their marriage, and he told her that he would like her to have a child. She burst into tears, and confessed that after her calamity the doctor had told her it was very improbable she ever would. He was for so long silent on that, being numbed by the sudden chill at his heart, that she took alarm and came and knelt at his side and implored him to forgive her, and said that if he did not she would go out on to the railway or into the canal. Then he, too, wept, and they held each other close and sobbed out that the world was very, very cruel, but they must be all in all to each other. And he said they would go away and settle down in some pretty place and live quietly and happily together right away from towns and theaters and everything. She shook her head, and, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, she said: No, she did not want to be a lady; at least, not that sort of a lady. He made many suggestions, but always her mind flew ahead of his, and she had constructed some horrid sort of a picture of the existence it would entail. At last he gave it up and said he supposed if there was to be a change it would come of its own accord.

It came.

Mrs. Copas, quite suddenly and for no apparent reason, decided that she was middle-aged, entirely altered her style of dressing and doing her hair, and, as the [Pg 114] outward and visible sign of the advent of her maturity, set her heart on a black silk gown. She cajoled and teased and bullied her husband, but in vain. He was replenishing the theatrical wardrobe and could not be led to take any interest in hers. She pursued Mr. Mole with hints and flattery, but he could not or would not see her purpose. He had decided that Matilda should be dressed in a style more befitting his wife than she had adopted heretofore, and was spending many happy and weary hours in the shops patronized by the wives of clerks and well-to-do tradespeople. Incidentally he discovered a great deal about what women wear and its powerful influence over their whole being. In her new clothes Matilda was more dignified, more handsome, more certain of herself, and she gained in grace. . . . Mrs. Copas took to haunting their lodgings and was nearly always there when a new hat or a new jacket came home from the shops. She would insist on Matilda's trying them on, and would go into loud ecstatic praise and long reminiscences of the fine garments she had had when she was a young woman, and Mr. Copas was the most attentive husband in the world.

An old peacock without its tail is a sorry sight, and the young birds scorn him. Matilda did not exactly scorn her aunt, but her continued presence was an irritant. She was not yet at her ease in the possession of many fine clothes and was entirely set on gaining the mastery of them and of the accession of personality they brought. Mrs. Copas was a clog upon this desire, and therefore when, after many hints and [Pg 115] references, she came suddenly to the point and asked pointblank for a loan of four pounds wherewith to buy a black silk gown, Matilda flushed with anger and exasperation and replied curtly that her husband was not made of money.

"No, dearie, I know, but I'd so set my heart on a black silk gown."

And the towsled old creature looked so pathetic and disappointed that Matilda was on the point of yielding; but indeed she was really alarmed at the amount of money that had been spent—more than twenty pounds—and she followed up her reply with a firm No.

Mrs. Copas took it ill, and set herself to making things unpleasant for Mr. Mole and his wife. She had control of affairs behind scenes and also of the commissariat, and it was not long before she had provoked a quarrel. Matilda told her she was a

disagreeable old woman; to which she hit back with:

“Some women don’t care how they get husbands.”

Following on that there was such a sparring and snarling that in the end Mr. Copas declared that his theater was not big enough for the two of them, and that Matilda must either eat her words and beg her aunt’s pardon or go. As the most injurious insults had come from her aunt, Matilda kicked against the injustice of this decree and flounced away. She said nothing to her husband of what had taken place. They were at the beginning of December, and already the hoardings of the town were covered with announcements of the approaching annual pantomime at the [Pg 116] principal theater, together with the names of the distinguished artistes engaged. Matilda dressed herself in her very smartest and for the first time donned the musquash toque, tippet and muff she had been given. They were the first furs she had ever possessed, and she felt so grand in them that she was shy of wearing them. When she had walked along several streets and seen herself in a shop window or two, they gave her courage for her purpose, and she told herself that she was, after all, as good as anyone else who might be wanting to do the work, set her chin in the air, went to the theater, and asked to see the manager. The doorkeeper had instructions not to turn away anything that looked promising and only to reject those who looked more than thirty-five and obviously had no chance of looking pretty even behind the footlights. He did not reject Matilda. She was shown into the manager’s presence, stated her wishes and accomplishments and experience. The manager did not invite her either to sing or to dance, but asked her if she minded what she wore. She had seen pantomimes in Thrigsby, and she said she did not mind.

“All right, my dear,” said the manager, who was good looking, young, but pale and weary in expression. And Matilda found herself engaged for the chorus at one pound a week.

She told Lomas first, and he was delighted. When it came to her husband she found it rather difficult to tell him, was half afraid that he would forbid her to pursue [Pg 117] the adventure, and half ashamed, after his great kindness, of having acted without consulting him. However, she was determined to go on with it and to uproot him from the Copas theater. She began by telling him of her quarrel with her aunt.

“I thought that was bound to happen,” he said.

“Yes. It came to that that uncle said I must go. What do you think I’ve done?”

“Bought a new dress?”

“No. Better than that.”

“Made friends with the Lord Mayor?”

“Funny! No.”

“What have you done, then?”

“I’ve got an engagement at the theater, the real, big theater where they have a proper stage, and a stage door and a box office, and a manager who wears evening dress.”

“Indeed? And for how long?”

“It may be for ten weeks and it may be for thirteen. It was fifteen last year.”

“And what am I to do?”

She had not thought about him and was nonplussed. However, he needed very little cajoling before he gave his consent to her plan, and she told him that if he got bored he could easily go away by himself and come back when he wasn’t bored any longer. Inwardly he felt that the difficulty was not going to be so easily settled as all that, but he was on the whole relieved to be rid of Mr. Copas, who had arranged to move on as soon as the pantomime opened to the distraction of the public and the devastation of his business. When Mr. Mole announced his intention of remaining the actor was affronted and refused to speak to him again. Matilda said, a little maliciously, that he was afraid of being asked for the money he owed them, and that was her parting shot after Mrs. Copas, who got her own back with the loud sneer in Mr. Mole’s presence:

“There’s not many married women would wear tights and not many husbands would let ’em.”

Old Mole gasped, and looked forward with dread to the first performance of the pantomime. He was spared the indignity of tights, for the fifty women in the chorus were divided into “girls” and “boys,” in accordance with their size, and Matilda was a “girl.” She took her work very seriously, put far more energy into it than she had ever done into “Iphigenia” or “Josephine.” The theater, one of the largest in England, awed her by the size of its machinery, and she was excited and impressed by all the talk and gossip she heard of the doings of the theaters and the halls. She disliked

most of her colleagues in the chorus, and of the principals only one was not too exalted to take notice of her. This was a young actor named, professionally, Carlton Timmis (pronounced Timms), who played the Demon King. He was very attentive and kind to her, and when she asked if she might introduce him to her husband he was obviously dismayed, but expressed himself as delighted. He was a rather beautiful young man and very romantic, and he and Old Mole found much to talk of together. [Pg 119]

“You can’t think,” said Timmis, “what a relief it is to meet a man with a soul. Among all those idiots one is parched, withered, dried up.”

And much the same thought was in Old Mole’s mind. Looking back he was astonished that he could for so long have tolerated the unintelligent society in which he had been cast. Timmis had decided, if erratic, opinions, and he loved nothing better than gloomily to grope after philosophical conceptions. Being very young and unsuccessful, he was pessimistic and clutched eagerly at everything which encouraged him in his belief in a world blindly responding to some mysterious law of destruction. Old Mole was inclined toward optimistic Deism and materialism, and they struck sparks out of each other, Timmis moving in a whirl of nebulous ideas, and his interlocutor moving so slowly that, by contrast, he seemed almost rigid.

“Take myself,” Timmis would say. “Can there be any sense in a world which condemns me to play the Demon King in an idiotic pantomime, or indeed in a world which demands, indulges, encourages, delights in such driveling nonsense as that same pantomime?”

“There is room for everything in the world, which is very large,” replied Old Mole.

“Then why are men starved, physically, morally and spiritually?”

“The universe,” came the reply, between two long puffs of a cigar, “was not made for man, but man was made for the universe.” [Pg 120]

(This was an impromptu, but Old Mole often recurred to it, and indeed declared that his philosophy dated from that day and that utterance.)

“But why was the universe made?”

“Certainly not from human motives and not in terms of human understanding. To hear you talk one would think the whole creation was in a state of decomposition.”

“So it is. That is its motive force, an irresistible rotting away into nothing. I don’t believe anything but decomposition could produce that pantomime.”

“The pantomime is so small a thing that I think it impossible for it to be visibly affected by any universal process. It is simply a human contrivance for the amusement of human beings, and you must admit that it succeeds in its purpose.”

“It has no purpose. It succeeds in spite of its stupidity by sheer force of the amiable cleverness of an overpaid buffoon and the charm and physical attractions of two or three young women.”

Old Mole was forced to admit the justice of this criticism, and to drive it home Timmis recited the eight lines with which in the cave scene he introduced the ballet:

[Pg 121]

Now Sinbad’s wrecked and nearly drowned, you see.
He thinks he’s saved, but has to deal with me.
I’ll wreck him yet and rack his soul as well—
A shipwrecked sailor suits my purpose fell.
I’ll catch his soul and make it mine for aye
And he’ll be sorry he ever stepped this way.
But who comes here to brave my cave’s dark night?
Aha! Oh, curse! It is the Fairy Light.

Matilda had been listening to them, and she said:

“Doesn’t she look lovely when she comes on all in white? Such a pretty voice she has, too.”

“You like the pantomime, my dear?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Could you say why?”

“It’s pretty and gay, and it’s wonderful to hear the people in that great big place laughing and singing the choruses.”

“You see, Timmis, the pantomime has justified its existence.”

“But what on earth has it got to do with Sinbad?”

“Nothing. Why should it? Sinbad is an Eastern tale. The pantomime is an English institution. It reflects the English character. It is heavy, solid, gross, over-colored, disconnected, illogical and unimaginative. On the other hand, it is humorous,

discreetly sensual, varied and full of physical activity. It affords plenty to listen to and nothing to hear, plenty to look at and nothing to see, and it is like one of those Christmas puddings which quickly make the body feel overfed and provide it with no food."

"Anyhow," said Matilda, "it's a great success, and they say it will run until after Easter." [Pg 122]

It did so: the tunes in it were whistled and sung in the streets, the comedians' gags became catchwords, the principal buffoon kicked off at a charity football match, and, upon inquiry, Old Mole found that clerks, schoolboys and students visited the theater once a week, and that among the young sparks of the town, sons of mill-owners and ironmasters, there was considerable competition for the favors of the chorus ladies. Some of these phenomena he remembered having observed in Thrigsby, and at least one of his old pupils had come to grief through a lady of the chorus and been expelled by his affrighted family to the Colonies. By the end of the fifth week he was thoroughly sick of it all, and he began to agree with Timmis that the success of the show was very far from justifying it. It was so completely lacking in character as to be demoralizing. His third visit left him clogged and thick-witted, as though he had been breathing stale air. It was a poison: and if it were so for him, what (he asked himself) must it be for young minds and spirits? . . . And yet Matilda throve in it. She liked the work and she now liked the company, who, being prosperous, were amiable, and they liked her. Most of all, she loved the independence, the passage from the solid, safe, warmly tender atmosphere with which her husband surrounded her to the heat, the rush and the excitement of the theater. When he left her at the stage door [Pg 123] she would give a shrug of the shoulders that was almost a shake, give him a swift parting smile that he always felt might have been given to a stranger, and with a quick gladness dart through into the lighted passage. . . . Before many weeks had passed she had letters, flowers, presents, from unknown admirers. He asked Timmis if there was any harm in them, and the actor replied that it was the usual thing, that women had to look after themselves in the theater, and that these attentions pleased the management. They pleased Matilda: she laughed at the letters, decorated their rooms with the flowers, and left the presents with the stage doorkeeper, who annexed them. Old Mole definitely decided that he disliked the whole business and began to think enviously of James Boothroyd, who was religious and a devil, but did at least have his own way in his own house. To achieve that the first thing necessary was to have a house, and he half resolved to return to his old profession—not considering himself to be fit for any other. But he never rounded the resolution and he never broached his thoughts to Matilda. He told himself that by Easter it would be all over and they would go away, perhaps abroad, see the world. . . . Then he realized that apart from Matilda he had no desires whatever, that his affections were entirely engaged in her, and that, further, he was spasmodically whirled off his feet in a desire that was altogether independent of his will, obedient only to some profound logic either of his own character or of the world outside him, to mark and consider [Pg 124] the ways of men. Rather painfully he was aware of being detached from himself, and sometimes in the street, in a tram, he would pull himself up with a start and say to himself:

"I don't seem to be caring what happens to me. I seem to be altogether indifferent to whatever I am doing, to have no sort of purpose, while all these men and women round me are moving on with very definite aims."

Deliberately he made the acquaintance of men teaching in the little university of the place and in its grammar school. He saw himself in them. He could talk their language, but whereas to them their terms were precise and important, to him they were nothing but jargon. . . . No: into that squirrel cage he would not go again. They seemed happy enough and pleased with themselves, but, whereas he could enter fully into their minds, the new regions that he had conquered for himself were closed to them. They complained, as he had done in Thrigsby, of the materialism of their city, and in moments of enthusiasm talked of the great things they could do for the younger generation, the future citizens of the Empire, if only some of the oozing wealth of the manufacturers could be diverted to their uses. But the city had its own life, and they were no more a part of it than he had been of Thrigsby. . . . When they had cured him of his discontent he was done with them, and took refuge in books. He bought in a great store of them and fumbled about in them for the threads of [Pg 125] philosophy he was seeking. He procured stimulation, but very little satisfaction, and he was driven to the streets and the public places. Very secret was the life of that city. Its trades were innumerable. Everything was manufactured in it from steel to custard powder. It owed its existence to the neighboring coalfields, its organization to a single family of bankers whose interests were everywhere, in almost every trade, in the land, in the houses, in the factories, in the supply of water and lighting, and everywhere their interests were trebly safeguarded. The city lived only for the creation of wealth and by it. With the distribution of wealth and the uses it was put to

it had no concern; nor had its citizens time to consider them. Their whole energies were absorbed in keeping their place in the markets of the world, and they were too exhausted for real pleasure or domestic happiness. When Old Mole considered the life of that city by and large, James Boothroyd appeared to him as its perfect type. And yet he retained his optimism, telling himself that all this furious energy was going to the forging of the city of the future.

"The bees," he said, "build the combs in their hives, the ants the galleries in their hills, and men their sprawling cities, and to everything under the sun there is a purpose. Let me not make the mistake of judging the whole—which I cannot see—by the part."

He had reached this amiable conclusion when Carlton Timmis entered his room, [Pg 126] sat down by the table and laid a bulky quarto envelope on it. He was agitated, declined the proffered cigar, and broke at once into the following remarkable oration:

"Mr. Mole, you are one of the few men I have ever met who can do nothing with dignity and without degradation. Therefore I have come to you in my distress to make a somewhat remarkable request. And it is due to you and to myself to make some explanation."

He seemed so much in earnest, almost hysterical, and his great eyes were blazing with such a fervor that Old Mole could not but listen.

"My real name," said Timmis, "is Cuthbert Jones. My father is a small shopkeeper in Leicestershire. He is a man, so far as I can discover, devoid of feeling, but with a taste for literature and—God knows why, at this time of day!—the philosophy of the Edinburgh school. He had a cruel sense of humor and he made my mother very unhappy. He encouraged me to read, to write, to think, to be pleased with my own thoughts. It amused him, I fancy, to see me blown out with my own conceit, so that he might have the pleasure of pricking my bladder-head and then distending it again. For weeks together I would have his praise, and then nothing but the most bitter gibes. I had either to cling to my conceit to keep my head above water or sink into the depths of misery and self-distrust. I devoured the lives of illustrious men and [Pg 127] attributed their fame to those qualities in them which I was able to find in myself. I sought solitude, avoided companions of my own age, and I was always desperately, wretchedly in love with some one or other. I really believed myself to be a genius, or rather I used to count over my symptoms and decide one day that I was, the next that I was not. All this roused my father to such a malicious delight, and with his teasing he made my life so intolerable that at last I could stand it no longer, and I ran away. I walked to London, and then, after applying in vain for work at the newspaper offices, I obtained a situation in a theater as a call boy. I could not possibly live on what I earned, and should have been in a bad way but for a kind creature, a dresser, who lodged me in her house, took my wages in return, and allowed me pocket money and money for my clothes. I wrote to my father and received an extraordinary letter in which he applauded my action and expressed his belief that nothing could prevent a man of genius from coming to the top. 'It is as impossible to keep a bad man up as to keep a good man down,' he said. I have neither gone down nor up, Mr. Mole. As I have grown older I have slipped into one precarious employment after another. No one pays any attention to me, no one, except yourself, has ever troubled to discover my thoughts on any subject, and often, when I have been inclined to think myself the most miserable of men, I have found correction in the memory of my boyish belief in my genius. . . . Such changes of fortune as I have had have come to me through [Pg 128] women. All the kindness I ever received came through them, and every disaster that has crushed me has arisen through my inability to stop myself from falling in love with them. . . . You will understand what I mean when I talk of the life of the mind. That life has always been with me, and it has perhaps been my only real life. I have had great adventures in it. I have aimed and wrestled and struggled toward a goal that has many times seemed to me immediately attainable."

He paused and brushed back his hair, and his eyes set into an expression of extraordinary wistful longing and into his voice came a sweetness most musical and moving.

"There is, I believe, a condition within the reach of all men wherein the selfish self is shed, the barrier broken down between a man and his vision and purpose, so that his whole force can be concentrated upon his object and his every deed and every thought becomes an act of love. I have many a time come within reach of this condition, but always just when I seemed most sure I have toppled over head and ears in love with some woman, whom in a very short space of time I despised and detested. When I met you I was uplifted and exalted and come nearer to my goal than ever before, and now, more fatuously, more idiotically than ever, I am in love. . . . I give it up. I am forced to the conclusion that I am one of those unhappy beings who are condemned to live between one state and the other, to be neither a slave bent on [Pg 129]

eating, drinking, sleeping and the grosser pleasures, nor a free man satisfying his every lust and every desire, by the way, only the more sturdily and mightily to go marching on with the great army of friends, lovers and comrades. . . . In short, Mr. Mole, I am done for."

"Well, well." Old Mole was aware of the entire inadequacy of this either as comment or as consolation, but he was baffled by the self-absorption which had gone to the making of this elaborate analysis: and yet he had been stirred by the Demon King's vision of the possibilities of human nature and roused by the words "every deed and every thought an act of love." There was a platonic golden idealism about it that lifted him back into his own youth, his own always comfortable dreams, and, contrasting himself with Timmis (or Jones), he saw how immune his early years had been from suffering. Timmis might be done for, but if anyone was to blame it was his malicious, erratic father. Then, with his mind taking a wide sweep, he saw that there could be no question of blame or of attaching it, since that father had also had a father who perhaps suffered from something worse than Edinburgh philosophy. There could be no question of blame. The world was so constructed that Timmis (or Jones) was bound to be out of luck and to fail, just as it seemed to be in the order of creation that he himself, H. J. Beenham, should be comfortable and beyond the reach of the cares most common to mankind. There were fat kine and lean kine, and, come what may, the lean kine would still light upon the meager pasture. [Pg 130]

There be fat men and lean men, but men have this advantage over kine, that they can understand and help each other.

So Old Mole nursed his knee and told himself that Timmis was obviously sincere in believing himself to be done for, and therefore for all practical purposes he was done for, and there was no other useful course to pursue than to listen to what further he might have to say, and then, from his point of view, to consider the position and see if there were not something he had overlooked in his excited despair.

Timmis concluded his tale, and nothing had escaped him. His own opinion of his moral condition must be accepted: as to his material state, that could not possibly be worse. He had loved, wooed and won a lady in the chorus upon whom the manager had cast a favorable eye and the light of his patronage. There had been a scene, an altercation, almost blows. Timmis's engagement ceased on the spot, and, as he said, he now understood why actors put up with so much insult, insolence and browbeating on the part of their managers. He had three shillings in his pocket with which to pay his rent and face the world, and he was filled with disgust of women, of the theater, of himself, and would Mr. Mole be so kind as to lend him fifty pounds with which to make a new start in a new country; he believed that in fresh surroundings, thousands of miles away from any philosophy or poetry, or so-called art, he could descend to a lower level of existence, and perhaps, without the intervention of another disastrous love affair, redeem his false start. He was not, he said, asking for something for nothing—no man born and bred in England could ever bring himself to ask for or to expect that!—he was prepared to give security of a sort which only a man of intelligence and knowledge of affairs would accept. He had brought a play with him in typescript. It was called "Lossie Loses." In his time Timmis had written many plays, and they were all worthless except this one. Most of them were good in intention but bad in performance: he had burned them. This was bad in intention but good in execution, and one of these days it would become a considerable property. An agent in London had a copy, he said, and he would write to this man and tell him that he had transferred all his rights to Mr. Mole. He then produced a pompous little agreement assigning his property and stating the consideration, wrote his name on it with a large flourishing hand, and passed it over with the play to his friend in need. After a moment's hesitation, during which he squashed his desire to improve the occasion with a few general remarks, Old Mole thought of the unlucky creature's three shillings and of the deliverance that fifty pounds would be to him, and at once produced his checkbook and wrote out a check. [Pg 131]

No man has yet discovered the art of taking a check gracefully. Timmis shuffled it into his pocket, hemmed and ha'd for a few seconds, and then bolted. [Pg 132]

Old Mole took up his play and began to read it. It did not interest him, but he could not put it down. There was not a true emotion in it, not a reasonable man or woman, but it was full of surprising tricks and turns and quiddities, was perpetually slopping over from sugary tenderness to shy laughter, and all the false emotions in it were introduced so irrelevantly as never to be thoroughly cloying, and indeed sometimes to give almost that sensation of delighted surprise which comes truly only from the purest and happiest art. Not until it was some moments out of his hands did Old Mole recognize the thing in all its horrid spuriousness. Then he flung it from him, scowled at it, fumed over it, and finally put it away and resolved to think no more about it or of Carlton Timmis.

That night when he met Matilda she was in high delight. The "second girl" was ill;

her understudy had been called away to the sick bed of her only surviving aunt, and she had been chosen to play the part at a matinée to see if she could do it. Her name would not be on the program, but she would have ten lines to speak and one verse in a quartet to sing, and a dance with the third comedian. Wasn't it splendid? And couldn't they go and have supper at the new hotel just to celebrate it? All the girls were talking about the hotel, and she had never been to a real restaurant.

It is hard not to feel generous when you have given away fifty pounds, and Old [Pg 133]
Mole yielded. They had oysters and grilled kidneys, and they drank champagne. Matilda had never tasted it before and she made a little ceremony of it. It was so pretty (she said), such a lovely color, and the bubbles were so funnily busy. He drank too much of it and became amorous. Matilda was wonderfully pretty and amusing in her excitement, and he could not take his eyes off her.

"Tell me," he said, "do you really like this life?"

"I love it. It's something like what I've always wanted to be. In some ways it's better and some ways it's worse."

"I don't see much of you now."

"You like me all the better when you do see me."

"We're not getting on much with your education."

"Education be blowed."

He was distressed and wished she had not said "be blowed." She saw his discomfort and leaned forward and patted his hand.

"Don't you fret, my dear. There's a good time coming."

But unaccountably he was depressed. He was feeling sorry he had brought her. There was a vulgarity, a sensuousness in the glitter and gilt of the restaurant that sorted ill with what in his heart he felt and was proud to feel for Matilda. He was sorry that she liked it, but saw, too, that she could not help but be pleased since to her it was all novel and dazzling. Hardest of all to bear, he was forced to admit that [Pg 134]
he had no immediate alternative to lay before her.

They drove home in a taxi, and she caressed him and soothed him and told him he was the dearest, kindest, gentlest and most considering husband any girl could have the luck to find. And once again, ominously, he was struck by the strangeness of the word husband on her lips. For a short while he was haunted by the figure of Timmis, with his disgust of women even while he loved one of them. But he shook away from that and told himself that if there was something lacking in his relations with his wife the fault must lie with him, for he at least had a certain scale of spiritual values, while she had none, nor, from her upbringing, could she have had the opportunity of discovering any in herself or her relations with those about her.

She said he thought too much, but without thought, without passionate endeavor, how could marriage fail to sink into brutish habit? Was that too fastidious? Since there is an animal element in human life, were it not as well to deal with it frankly and healthily on an animal level? That offended his logic. There could be no element in life that was not harmonious with every other element. The gross indulgence of sex had always been offensive to him, a stupid protraction of the heated imprisonment of adolescence, a calamity that must result in arrested development. Marriage had forced him to think about these things, and he was determined, so far [Pg 135]
as in him lay, to think about them clearly, without dragging in literature, or sentiment, or prejudice. In marriage, admittedly, lay the highest spiritual relationship known, or ever to be known, to human beings. In marriage, obviously, the body had its share. If the body's share were regarded as separate from the rest, as an unfortunate but not unpleasant necessity, then, being separate, how could it be anything but a clog upon the full and true union? It was impossible for him to think of sex as a clot in the otherwise free mating of souls, and, indeed, his experience assured him that the exercise of his sex gave him not only the most wonderful deliverance from physical obsessions, but also from the uneasy and unprofitable brooding of the mind.

But he was uneasy and anxious in his marriage, came to believe that it was because his wife was content with so little when he desired to give her so much more, and blamed himself for his apparent inability to set forth his gift of emotion and human fellowship in terms that she could understand.

He went to see her play her part in the pantomime and suffered agonies of nervousness for her. She delivered her ten lines without mishap, sang her part in the quartet inaudibly, and her dance in the duet was applauded so loudly that at last the conductor tapped his little desk, and Matilda came tripping forth again with her comedian, bowed, kissed her hand, and went through the movements—absurd, banal,

pointless as they were—with a shy grace and a breathless, childish pleasure that were charming. He was swept into the collective pleasure of the audience and clapped his hands with them and felt that the Matilda there on the stage was not his Matilda, but a creature belonging to another world, of whose existence he was aware, while nothing in his world could have any influence or any bearing on her whatsoever. . . . He would meet her at the stagedoor, and she would be his Matilda, while the other remained behind, as it were, inanimate in her charmed existence. Both were infused with life from the same source of life; the essence passed from one to the other, and therefore there was not one Matilda but three Matildas. [Pg 136]

He lost himself in this mystic conception and was timely rescued by her meeting him as he passed through the vestibule. She took his arm and hugged it and asked him if he liked it.

“Wasn’t it good getting an encore? That dance has only been encored six times before.”

He told her how nervous he had been.

“I wasn’t a bit nervous once I was on, but in the wings it was awful.”

She said she wanted to take him behind the scenes so that he could see what a real theater was like. They passed through the stagedoor and along narrow, dusty passages, up steep flights of stone stairs, she chatting gaily in spite of the frequent notices enjoining silence, and every now and then they were stopped and Matilda was embraced by male and female alike, and all the women said how glad they were, and the men said: “good egg” or “top hole.” Suddenly out of the narrow, dusty ways they came upon the stage, huge and eerie. There was only a faint light, the curtain was up, and there were tiny women in the auditorium dropping white cloths from the galleries and shrouding all the seats. Never had Old Mole had such a sense of emptiness and desolation. A man’s voice came from far up above the stage, and it sounded like a thin ghostly mocking. There was a creaking and a rasping, and a great sheet of painted canvas descended, the wings were set in place, and a flight of stairs was wheeled up and clamped: the scene was set for the opening of the pantomime. Suddenly the lights were turned on. Matilda began to hum the opening bars of the overture. Old Mole blinked. He was nearly blinded. The colors in the scenery glowed in the light. He had the most alarming sense of being cut off from his surroundings, of being projected, thrust forward toward the mysterious, empty auditorium with its shrouded seats and the little women bustling up and down in it. Almost irresistibly he was impelled to shout to them, to engage their attention, to make them look at him. His mind eased and a thrill of importance ran through him: never had he seemed to himself to bulk so large. He was almost frightened: the immense power of the machinery, the lighted stage and the darkened auditorium alarmed and weighed crushingly upon him. [Pg 137]

“It’s like a vault,” said Matilda, “with no one in front. But when it’s full, on a Saturday night, hundreds and hundreds of faces, it’s wonderful.” [Pg 138]

To him it was not at all like a vault, but like an engine disconnected from its power. The mind abhors a vacuum, and he was striving to fill the emptiness all about him, thronging the auditorium with imaginary people, and struggling to occupy the magic area of light in which he stood. In vain: he was impotent. He felt trapped.

“Let us go,” he said.

On the stairs they met the manager.

“Hullo, Tilly,” he said. “You’re a good girl.”

“Thanks.”

Old Mole hated the young man, for he was common and loose in manner and in no way worthy of the enchanted Matilda or of the marvelous organism, the theater, in which she seemed to live so easily and freely.

His thoughts were much too confused for him to impart them to her, and he was vastly relieved when they left the theater and she became his Matilda.

That night he read to her. He had been delighting in “Lucretius,” and he had marked passages, and he turned to that beginning:

“Iam iam non domus accipiet te læta, neque uxor Optima. . . .”

He translated for her:

“ ‘Now no more shall a glad home and a true wife welcome thee, nor darling children race to snatch thy first kisses and touch thy heart with a sweet silent content; no more mayest thou be prosperous in thy doings and a defence to thine own; alas and woe!’ say they, ‘one disastrous day has taken all these prizes of thy life away from thee’—but thereat they do not add this, ‘and now no more does any longing for these things assail thee.’ This did their thought but clearly see and their [Pg 139]

speech follow they would deliver themselves from much burning of the heart and dread. ‘Thou, indeed, as thou art sunk in the sleep of death, wilt so be for the rest of the ages, severed from all weariness and pain.’ . . .

“Yet again, were the nature of things to utter a voice and thus with her own lips upbraid one of us, ‘What ails thee, O mortal, that thou fallest into such vain lamentation? Why weep and wail at death? For has thy past life and overspent been sweet to thee, and not all the good thereof, as though poured into a cracked pitcher, has run through and perished without joy, why dost thou not retire like a banqueter filled with life, and, calmly, O fool, take thy sleep? But if all thou hast had is perished and spilled and thy life is hateful, why seekest thou yet to add more which shall once again all perish and fall joylessly away? Why not rather make an end of life and labor? For there is nothing more that I can contrive and invent for thy delight; all things are the same forever. Even were thy body not yet withered, nor thy limbs weary and worn, yet all things remain the same, didst thou live on through all the [Pg 140] generations. Nay, even wert thou never doomed to die’—what is our answer?”

“Don’t you believe in God?” asked Matilda.

It came like a question from a child, and he had the adult’s difficulty in answering it, the doubt as to the interpretation that will be put upon his reply.

“I believe,” he said slowly, “in the life everlasting, but my life has a beginning and an end.”

“And you don’t think you go to Heaven or Hell when you’re—when you’re dead?”

“Into the ground,” he said.

Matilda shivered, and she looked crushed and miserable.

“Why did you read that to me?” she said at last. “I was so happy before. . . . I’ve always had a feeling that you weren’t like ordinary people.”

And she seemed to wait for him to say something, but his mind harped only on the words: “For there is nothing more that I can contrive and invent for thy delight,” and he said nothing. She rose wearily and took her hat and coat and the musquash collar that had been her pride, and left him.

For hours he sat over the fire, brooding, flashing occasionally into clear logical sequences of thought, but for the most part browsing and drowsing, turning over in his mind women and marriage and the theater and genius, the authentic voice of the nature of things, the spirit of the universe that sweeps into a man’s brain and heart and burns away all the thoughts of his own small life and fills him with a music that rings out and resounds and echoes and falls for the most part upon deaf ears or upon [Pg 141] ears filled only with the clatter of the marketplace or the sweet whisperings of secret, treacherous desires. And he thought of the engines in that city, day and night, ceaselessly humming and throbbing, weaving stuffs and forging tools and weapons for the clothing and feeding of the bodies of men: the terrifying ingenuity of it all, the force and the skill, the ceaseless division and subdivision of labor, the multiplication of processes, the ever-increasing variety of possessions and outward shows and material things. But through all the changes in the activities of men, behind all their new combinations of forces “all things are the same forever and ever. . . .” He remembered then that he had hurt Matilda, that she had resented his not being “like ordinary people,” resented, that is, his acceptance of the unchanging order of things, his refusal to confuse surface change with the mighty ebb and flow of life. It was, he divined, that she had never reached up to any large idea and had never conceived of any life, individual or general, outside her own. To her, then, the life everlasting must mean *her* life, and he regretted having used that phrase. She was concerned, then, entirely with her own existence—(and with his in so far as it overlapped hers)—and life to her was either “fun” or something unthinkable. . . . . It seemed to him that he was near understanding her, and he loved her more than ever, and a rare warmth flooded his thoughts and they took on a life of their own, were bodied forth, and in a [Pg 142] sort of ecstasy, thrilling and triumphant, he had the illusion of being lifted out of himself, of soaring and roaming free and with a power altogether new to him, a power whereof he was both creator and creature, he saw out of his own circumscribed area of life into another life that was no replica of this, but yet was of the same order, smaller, neater, trimmer, concentrated, and distilled. There was brilliant color in it and light and shade sharply distinct, and everything in it—houses, trees, mountains, hills, clouds—was rounded and precise: there was movement in it, but all ordered and purposeful. The sun shone, and round the corner there was a selection of moons, full, half, new, and crescent, and both sun and moon could be put away so that there should be darkness. As for stars, there were as many as he chose to sprinkle on the sky. . . . At first he could only gaze at this world in wonder. It sailed before him in a series of the most dignified evolutions, displaying all its treasures to him; mountains bowed and clouds curtseyed, and Eastern cities came drifting into view, and ships and islands; and there were palaces and the gardens of philosophers,

sea beaches whereon maidens sang and mermaids combed their hair; and there were great staircases up and down which moved stately personages in silence, so that it was clear there was some great ceremony toward, but before he could discover the meaning of it all the world moved on and displayed another aspect of its seemingly endless variety. And he was sated with it and asked for it to stop, and at last with a [Pg 143] mighty effort he became more its creator than its creature, and, as though he had just remembered the Open Sesame, it stayed in its course. It stayed, and in a narrow, dark street, with one flickering light in it, and the brilliant light of a great boulevard at the end of it, he saw an old white-bearded man with a pack on his back and a staff in his hand. And the old man knew that he was there, and he beckoned to him to come into the street. So he went and followed him, and without a word they turned through a little dark gateway and across up a courtyard and up into a garret, and the old man gave him a sack to sit on and lifted his packet from his back and out of it built up a little open box, and hung a curtain before it. Old Mole settled on his sack and opened his lips to speak to the old man, but he had disappeared.

The curtain rose.

[Pg 144]

III

INTERLUDE

I may have lost my judgment and my wits, but I must confess I liked that play. There was something in it.

THE SEAGULL

[Pg 147]

III

INTERLUDE

Go now, go into the land
Where the mind is free and the heart
Blooms, and the fairy band
Airily troops to the dusty mart;
And the chatter and money-changing
Die away. In fancy ranging,
Let all the inmost honey of the world
Sweeten thy faith, to see unfurl'd
Love's glory shown in every little part
Of life; and, seeing, understand.

BY a roadside, at the end of a village, beneath the effigy of a god, sat a lean, brown old man. He had no covering for his head and the skin of the soles of his feet was thickened and scarred. In front of him were two little boxes, and on his knees there lay open a great book from which he was reading aloud in an unknown tongue.

From the village there came a young man, richly clad and gay, attended by two slaves. He saluted the effigy of the god and asked the old man what he might be reading. The old man replied that it was the oldest book in the world and the truest, and when he was questioned about the boxes he said that one of them contained [Pg 148] riches and the other power. The young man looked into them and saw nothing. He laughed and spoke to one of his slaves, saying the old and the poor must have their fancies since there was nothing else for them, and, upon his orders, the slave filled the boxes with rice, and at once there sprung up two mighty trees. The slaves fled howling and the young man abased himself before the effigy of the god and stole away on his knees, praying. The old man raised his hands in thanksgiving for the shade of the trees, lifted them out of the boxes, and once more arranged them before him.

In the wood hard by arose the sound of high words and out upon the road, brawling and storming, tumbled two youths, comely and tall and strong. They stopped before the old man and appealed to him.

"Our father," said he who first found breath, "is a poor man of this village, and I am Peter and my brother is Simon. Two days ago, on a journey, we saw the picture of the loveliest maiden in the world. We do not know her name, but we are both determined to marry her, and there is no other desire left in us. We have fought and wrestled and swum for her, but can reach no conclusion. I will not yield and he will not yield. Is all our life to be spent in wrangling?"

The old man closed his book and replied:

"The loveliest maiden in the world is Elizabeth, daughter of the greatest of emperors. If you are the sons of poor men how can you ever hope to lift eyes to her? [Pg 149] Look now into these boxes and you shall be raised to a height by which you shall see the Emperor's daughter and not be hidden in the dust of her chariot."

They looked into the boxes, and Simon saw in the one a piece of gold, but Peter looked as well into the other, and in it he saw the face of his beloved princess and had no thought of all else. Simon asked for the first box and Peter for the second, and they received them and went their ways, Simon to the village and Peter out into the world, each gazing fascinated into his box.

"To him who desireth little, little is given," said the old man. "And to him who desireth much, much is given; but to neither according to the letter of his desire."

By the time he reached his village Simon had five gold pieces in his pocket, and as soon as he took one piece from the box another came in its place. He lent money to every one in the village at a large rate of interest and was soon the master of it. There began to be talk of him in the town ten leagues away and there came men to ask him for money. He moved to the town and built himself a big house, and it was not long before he began to look to the capital of the country.

When he moved to the capital he had six houses in different parts of the country, racehorses, picture galleries, mines, factories, newspapers, and he headed the list of subscribers to the hospitals patronized by the Royal Family. At first, in the great city, [Pg 150] he was diffident and shy among the illustrious personages with whom he fraternized, but it was not long before he discovered that they were just as susceptible to the pinch of money as the carpenter and the priest and the bailiff and the fruiterer in his village. It was quite easy to buy the control of these important people without their

ever having to face the unpleasant fact. More than one beautiful lady, among them a duchess and a prima donna of surpassing loveliness, endeavored to cajole him and to discover his secret. In vain; he could not forget the Princess Elizabeth, and now ambition spurred him on. He was wearying of the ease with which fame and position and the highest society could be bought, and began to lust for power. With his native peasant shrewdness he saw that society consisted of the People, of persons of talent and cunning above them, of the descendants of persons of talent and cunning left high and dry beyond the reach of want, of ornamental families set at the head of the nations, of a few ingenious minds who (so far as there was any direction) governed the workings and interlockings of all the parts of the whole. They had control of all the sources of money except his box, and he determined, to relieve his boredom and also as a means of reaching his Princess, to pit his power against theirs.

He was never ashamed of his mother, and she came to stay with him once a year for a week, but she never ceased to lament the loss of her other son, Peter, from [Pg 151] whom no word had come. One night she had a dream, and she dreamed she saw Peter lying wounded in a thicket, and she knew perfectly where it was and said she must go to find him. Simon humored her and gave her money for a long voyage. She went back to her own village and out upon the road until she came to the effigy of the god, for this was the only god she knew, and she prayed to him. The old man appeared before her and told her to go to her home, for Peter would return to her before she died. At this she was comforted, and went home to her husband and sent Simon back his money, because she was afraid to keep so large a sum in the house.

It was said in the capital that the land of the greatest of emperors was the richest of all countries, but the people were the stupidest and had no notion of its wealth. The financiers were continually sending concessionaires and adventurers, but they came away empty-handed. Simon had now paid his way into the royal circle, and for defraying the debt on the royal stable had been ennobled. He suggested to the King that he should send an embassy to invite the greatest of emperors and his daughter to pay a visit to the capital to see the wonders of their civilization.

The embassy was sent, the invitation accepted, and the Emperor and the Princess arrived and their photographs were in all the illustrated papers. They did not like this, for in their own country only one portrait of the Emperor was painted, and that was the life work of the greatest artist of the time. The Princess was candor itself, [Pg 152] and said frankly what she liked and what she did not like. She liked very little, and after she had been driven through the capital she sent for the richest man in the country, and Simon was brought to her. He bowed before her and trembled and told her that all his wealth was at her service. So she told him to pull down all the ugly houses and the dark streets and to make gardens and cottages and to give every man in them a piece of gold.

“They will only squander it,” said Simon.

“Let them,” replied the Princess Elizabeth. “Surely even the most miserable may have one moment of pleasure.”

“In your country are there no poor?”

“There are no rich men. There are good men and bad men, and the good are rewarded, and honored.”

As she ordered, so it was done, and the poor blessed the Princess Elizabeth, but the financiers muttered among themselves, and they arranged that one of their agents should go to the Emperor’s country, stir up sedition, and be arrested. Then they announced in their newspapers international complications, said day after day that the national honor was besmirched, and demanded redress. The Emperor and the Princess Elizabeth hurriedly left the capital and returned to their own country. Simon had declared his admiration for the Princess and she had snubbed him. His newspapers added to the outcry, and he ordered a poet to write a national song, [Pg 153] which became very popular:

We ain’t a fighting nation,
But when we do, we do.
We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the cash,
We’ve got the soldiers, too.

So look out there and mind your eye,
We’re out to do, we’re out to die,
For God and King and country.

But in the Emperor’s country all the songs were in praise of the Princess Elizabeth, and when she heard that ships of war were on the seas and huge vessels transporting soldiers, she consulted with the Minister and gave orders for all weapons to be buried and for all houses to be prepared to receive the guests and the

great hall of the palace to be made ready for a banquet.

Her Minister was Peter, and she delighted in his wisdom and never wearied of listening to the tale of his adventures, how in his quest he had been cheated, and robbed, and beaten, and cast into prison, and scourged, and bastinadoed, and incarcerated for a lunatic, and mocked and despised, nearly drowned by a mountain torrent, all but crushed by a huge boulder that came crashing down a hillside and carried away the tree beneath which he was sleeping; and how all these afflictions did but intensify his vision of that which he loved, so that the pain and the terror of them fell away and he was left with the glorious certainty of being near his goal. He [Pg 154] did not tell her what that was because it was very sweet to serve her, and he knew that she was proud and had rejected the hands of the greatest and handsomest princes of her father's dependencies. It was very pleasant for him to see her emotion as he told his tale, and when she almost wept on the final adventure, how, as he neared her father's city, he was set upon by a band of peasants, who believed him to be a blasphemer and a wizard because of his box, and left for dead, and how he awoke to find her bending over him, then he could scarcely contain himself, and he would hide his face and hasten from her presence.

He had a little house in one of her private parks, and whenever she was in any difficulty she came to consult him, for his sufferings had made him sensible, and his devotion to a single idea gave him a nobility which she found not in her other courtiers.

It was he, then, who advised the cordial reception of the hostile armies, for he had observed, in the numerous assaults of which he had been the victim, that when he hit back he only incensed his adversary and roused him to a madder pitch of cruelty. Also he had lived among soldiers and knew them to be slaves of their bellies and no true servants of any cause or idea. Therefore, he gave this counsel, and it was followed, and the army was disbanded, and the citizens prepared their houses and decorated the city against the coming of the army. When they arrived, all the populace turned out to see them, and the generals and captains were met by the [Pg 155] chief men, the poets, and the philosophers, and the scholars, and made welcome. There were feasting and fireworks, and the harlots devoted themselves to the service of the country, and by night a more drunken army was never seen. Their guns and ammunition were thrown into the harbor, and next day they were allowed to choose whether they would return to their own country or stay and become citizens of this. Nine-tenths of the soldiers chose to stay, many of them married and made honest women of the devoted creatures who had been their pleasure, and thus the causes of virtue and peace were served at once. The soldiers and their wives were scattered up and down the country, work was found for them, and both lost the rudeness and brutality induced by their former callings.

The other tenth returned to their own country. Simon and the financiers heard their galling story and told the people that a glorious victory had been won and the nation's flag, after horrible carnage, planted over yet another outpost of the Empire. There was immense enthusiasm. Shiploads of Bibles were sent out, and a hundred missionaries from the sixty-five different religious denominations.

Peter's advice was sought, and he ordered a cellar to be prepared. The Bibles were stored in this, and the missionaries were set to translate them back into the original languages. They had got no further than the twentieth chapter of Genesis when they [Pg 156] declared their willingness to be converted to the religion of the country; but there was no professed religion, for, when the Princess had asked Peter what her father could best do to serve his subjects and make his name blessed among them, he had replied:

"Let him abolish that which most engenders hypocrisy. Let him establish the right of every man to be himself. Let there be good men and bad men—since there must be good and bad—but no hypocrites. Let him withdraw his support from that religion which maintains priests, superstition and prejudice, and it will topple down. Faith is an act of living, not a creed."

At first the Emperor was afraid that if the State religion toppled he would come crashing down, but he could deny his daughter nothing, and he withdrew his support. In less than a year there was not a sign of the professed religion, and no one noticed its absence. There was a marked improvement in the behavior of the people and their good sense, which made it possible for Peter's advice to be followed in dealing with the foreign army. There was a notable decrease in crime, and litigation became so infrequent that half the Courts of Justice were closed, and the Attorneys and Advocates retired into the country or adopted the profession of letters. With the money released by the disestablished religion and the reduced Courts of Justice the Emperor founded universities and schools and set apart money to endow maternity and medicine, saying: "We have all money enough for our pleasure, but it is when the [Pg 157] shadow of a natural crisis comes over us that we are in need."

The Princess was loud in praise of her Minister, and the people and the men of letters declared that the Emperor really was the greatest ruler the world had ever seen. The Emperor swallowed it all as a good monarch should, but Peter was overcome with tenderness for his Princess, and, dreading lest he should betray his secret, he asked her leave to depart for a while, and betook him to his own country and his village to see his mother.

She lay upon her deathbed and was very feeble. Simon had sent her some calf's-foot jelly, but was too deeply engaged to come. Peter sat by her bedside and told her about his Princess, and she patted his hand and laughed merrily, and said:

"You always were a bonny liar, laddie. Kiss me and take my blessing."

Peter kissed her and took her blessing, and she died.

He went to the roadside where he had come by his box and his vision, but the old man was not there, the trees were cut down, and the effigy of the god had rotted away and only the stump of it was left. He planted an acorn in the place to mark the beginning of his joy in life, but, knowing that the act of breathing is prayer enough, he decided to go away and think no more about his good fortune or his bad fortune, or the profit he had drawn from both. He sighed over the thousands of miles that separated him from his Princess, and decided each day to reduce them by at least thirty. [Pg 158]

The news of the war had only just reached that part of the country, and he heard men talking of the glorious victory. At first he was alarmed, but when he heard more he laughed and told the men the truth. They took and ducked him in the horse pond for a spy and a traitor, and when he crawled out they thrashed him with whips until they had cut his clothes in ribbons and his flesh into weals. Then they put him in the old stocks and left him there for a day and a night. He was cold and hungry, and his bones ached, but when he found himself near to counting his miseries and wishing himself dead, then he took out his box and gazed at the image of the Princess and said to it:

"Yet will I live to serve you. My life is nothing except it go to sustain the wonder of yours."

So he bore this calamity, as he had borne so many others, for her sake.

He had no other clothes, and when he was released he patched and mended his suit and made his way, working and singing for his bread, to the capital. There he inquired after his brother, and men looked awed as they pronounced his name, and they all knew his house and the names of his racehorses, but of the rest they could tell very little. Peter went to the magnificent house, ragged as he was, and asked to see his brother. Two lackeys and a butler opened the door, and they lifted their noses at him. The butler said his lordship had brothers and fathers and cousins coming to see him all day long, but Peter persisted, and was told he might be his lordship's brother, but his lordship was away on his lordship's yacht and no letters were forwarded. [Pg 159]

Having no other interest in the capital, Peter set out on his return, and when he came to the frontier of the fortunate land that had nursed his Princess he was greeted with tidings that made his heart sink within him. A handsome stranger told him that the Emperor had enclosed the commons and great tracts of forest, and prospected the whole country for coal and oil and metals and precious stones, and how the poets and the philosophers and the scholars were cast down from their high places, and, most lamentable of all, how the Princess was imprisoned because she would not marry the new Emperor of Colombia, who had arrived in his yacht with untold treasures, and how her private parks were taken for menageries, racecourses and football grounds. Peter buried his head in his arms and wept.

With the stranger he journeyed toward the capital. Over great tracts of the country there hung black clouds of smoke; new cities meanly built, hastily and without design, floundered out over the hills and meadows; pleasant streams were fouled; sometimes all the trees and the grass and plants and hedgerow bushes were dead for miles; and in those places the men and women were wan and listless and their poverty was terrible to see: there were tall chimneys even in the most lovely valleys, and in them were working pregnant women and little children, and Peter asked the stranger whose need was satisfied by their work. [Pg 160]

"There are millions of men upon the earth," answered the stranger, "and what you see is industrial development. It drives men to a frenzy so that they know not what they do."

And when they came to the capital they found the frenzy at its height. It was no longer the peaceful and lovely city of Peter's happiness; gone were the gardens and groves of myrtle and sweet-scented laurel; gone the beautiful houses and the noble streets; tall buildings of a bastard architecture, of no character or tradition, towered

and made darkness; huge hotels invited to luxury and lewdness; the Emperor's ancient palace was gone, and its successor was like another hotel, and in the avenue, where formerly the most gracious and distinguished of the citizens used to make parade amid the admiration and applause of their humble fellows, was now a throng of foreigners and vulgarians, Jews, Levantines, Americans, all ostentation and display. . . . Beneath the splendor and glitter linked a squalor and a sordid misery that called aloud, and called in vain, for pity. And in the outskirts were again the chimneys and the factories with the machines thudding night and day, and round them filth and poverty and disease. . . . The priests were back in their place to give consolation to the poor, who were beyond consolation, and the Courts of Justice were housed in the largest building in the world. At every street corner newspapers were sold. [Pg 161]

In a new thoroughfare driven boldly through the most ancient part of the city and flanked absurdly with common terraces of houses, they found a thin crowd standing in expectation. The two Emperors were to go by on their way to open the new Technical College and Public Library. They passed swiftly in an open carriage, and a faint little cheer went up, so different from the vast roar that used to greet the Emperor and the Princess in all their public appearances. The Emperor looked haggard and nervous, as though he were consumed with a fever, but the Emperor of Colombia was fat as a successful spider. Peter gasped when he saw him, for he was Simon. But he said nothing, and they passed on.

Saddest sight of all were the prosperous, well-fed women gazing with dead eyes into the shop windows wherein were displayed fashionable garments and trinkets, overwhelming in their quantity.

Preferable to that was the avenue with the Jews and the Levantines and the Americans. Thither with the stranger Peter returned, and he met a poet, lean and disconsolate, who had been his intimate friend. They three talked together, and the poet asked if there were no power to cool the heat and reduce the frenzy in the blood of the inhabitants of the country. Said the stranger:

"There is a power which makes the earth a heaven; a power without which the life of men is no more than the life of tadpoles squirming in a stagnant pond." [Pg 162]

Peter said the power must be Love: the poet declared it was Imagination.

"Love in itself," said the stranger, "is a human, comfortable thing; with the light of imagination, love is the living word of God in the heart of man."

And behold the stranger stood before them, an angel or genius clad all in white with wings of silver that rose above him and beat to flight, and away he soared to the sun. And the poet raised his head, and in a loud voice declaimed musical words, and Peter sobbed in his joy, but the Jews and the Levantines and the Americans had seen nothing, and wearily they drove and walked along the avenue, scanning each other in sly envy.

Hard and bitter was the lot of the people, and their loyalty to the Emperor was shaken. There were none now to bless his name, none to call him the greatest of rulers, and only the priests praised him for his wisdom in yielding to the tide of progress. There was little happiness anywhere: the old superstitions and prejudices were restored to currency, the tyranny of public opinion was enthroned again, and books were written and plays performed to fortify its authority.

Every day Simon sent the Princess richer presents and messengers to crave the boon of an audience; but the Princess made no reply and would never leave her apartments. Every day she used to stand at her window and gaze in the direction where Peter's country lay and pray for his return. One day her ape was with her, and [Pg 163] he chattered excitedly and hurled himself into the sycamore tree that grew beneath her window. He returned in a moment with an empty box. She looked into it and saw the image of Peter, as he was, ragged and unhappy, but with adoration in his eyes. Then she could no longer dissemble, but, with happy tears, she confessed to herself that she loved him. . . . Next day she walked in her garden, and on the other side of the little stream marking its boundary she saw Peter. They told their love, and he swore to deliver her and not to see her again until he had done so. With a brave heart she wished him Godspeed and threw him back his box, in which she had concealed three kisses and a lock of her hair.

For forty days and forty nights did Peter remain in solitude, wrestling with himself and cogitating how he might best accomplish the salvation of his adored Princess and the country that was dearer to her even than himself. Step by step he followed Simon's career from the time when he had chosen the box with the piece of gold to the golden ruin he had brought upon thousands of men. Then he resolved to send his own box to his brother; nay, himself to take it. He procured gorgeous apparel, and immense chests, and camels and horses and elephants, disguised a hundred and fifty of his friends in Eastern apparel, and in this array presented himself at the Summer

Palace, where his brother was lodged. The doors were opened to him, and he was passed on from lackey to lackey until he found himself in his brother's presence. Simon greeted him cordially and asked for his news, and how he had fared. [Pg 164]

"I have all my desires," said Peter. "I have fulfilled my destiny, and I am come to give you my box. It has served me well."

Greedily Simon snatched the box and opened it to see what treasure it might contain. He saw no image of beauty therein, but only himself, and the vision of his own soul crushed by the weight of his possessions, and the pride died in him and all the savage lusts to gratify which he had plotted and schemed and laid waste, and he groaned:

"All my power is but vanity and my hopes are in the dust. I am become a monster and unworthy of the Princess Elizabeth."

His words rang through the Palace, and his servants and those who had called themselves his friends fell upon his possessions and divided them and fled from the country. So deserted, he embraced Peter and vowed that his brother's love was now a greater treasure to him than all he had sought in his folly. They took counsel together and decided that they had best persuade the greatest of emperors to grant his people a Parliament so as to avert the imminent revolution. They did that, but it was too late. Peter's procession through the streets to the Summer Palace had alarmed the people with the dread of another Imperial visitor as injurious as the last, and they had made barricades in the streets, and sacked the great hotels, and [Pg 165] dragged the Emperor and all his counsellors and courtiers into the stews and there slaughtered them. The Princess Elizabeth was released and loyally acclaimed, and it was only on her intercession that Peter and Simon were spared. She granted the people a Parliament, and the Courts of Justice were taken for its House, and she opened and prorogued it in the regal manner.

After a year of mourning, during which the wisest of laws were framed for the control of the mines and the factories and all the sources of wealth, and land and water were made all men's and no man's property, and the children were trained to believe in the revealed religion of love as the living word of God in the heart of man, then the Princess announced her marriage with her Minister and adviser, Peter, the son of a poor man, and they lived happily with their people, and all men loved and praised Peter, and Peter praised and worshiped the Princess Elizabeth. They lived to a ripe old age, gathering blessings as they went, and they had sixteen children.

But Simon returned to his own country and his village, taking with him the two boxes. Out of the one he never took another piece of gold, and into the other he never looked until he was at peace with himself and knew that he could gaze upon his soul undismayed. When he looked into it he saw Peter and the Princess and their children, for all his love was with them. Then he went out upon the road, and beneath an enormous oak tree he found the lean, brown old man with his great book on his [Pg 166] knees, reading aloud. He laid the boxes at his feet and bowed to him and said:

"It is well."

The old man bowed, and, turning a page in his book, he read:

"It is well with the world. Man frets his peace in his little hour on this earth, whereof he is and whereto he returns; but it is well with the world."

The curtain fell. The little theater disappeared, and all that he had seen and heard in it buzzed in Old Mole's head, and the colors whirled and a flood of emotion surged through his body, and the spell of it all was upon him. He shifted uneasily upon the sack on which he was seated, and there came a rent in it. Inside it was a corpse, and, when he peered at it in horror, he knew that it was himself.

The enchantment broke, and, shivering and very cold, he fell back into the world of familiar things, the room in the lodging house, with the fire out, and above his head, in the first floor front, lay Matilda, sleeping. He went up to her, and she lay with her hair back over her pillow and her hand under her cheek, and he said:

"I will live to serve you. For my life is nothing except it go to sustain the wonder of yours."

Old Mole was much astonished at this effort of his imagination, and later on wrote and rewrote it many times, but what he wrote was no more than the pale echo of [Pg 167] what he had heard, the faded copy of what he had seen. When he came to analyze and diagnose his condition he concluded that the vivid impressions produced on his unexercised receptive mind had induced a kind of self-hypnotism in which he had been delivered up to the power of dreams subject peculiarly to the direction of his logical faculty. He could not remember having eaten anything that would account for

it.

IV

TOYS

Worte! Worte! Keine Thaten!
Niemals Fleisch, geliebte Puppe,
Immer Geist und keinen Braten,
Keine Knödel in der Suppe.
ROMANCERO

IV

TOYS

WHEN the pantomime came to an end (as it did before a packed house, that cheered and cheered again and insisted on speeches from the comedians and the principal boy and the principal girl, and went on cheering regardless of last trains and trams and closing time) Matilda was told that, if she liked and if she had nothing better to do, she could return again next year. She declared her pleasure at the prospect, but inwardly determined to have something a great deal better to do. She had drawn blood from the public and was thirsting for more of it. Her condition was one with which Old Mole was destined to become familiar, but now he was distressed by her excitement, insisted that she was tired (she looked it), and decided on a holiday. She would only consent on condition that he allowed her to take singing lessons and would pay for them. Still harping on economy—for she could not get the extent and fertility of his means into her head—she pitched on Blackpool because she had a sort of cousin there who kept lodgings and would board them cheap. He tried to argue with her, and suggested London or Paris. But London had become to her the heaven [Pg 172] to which all good “professionals” go, and Paris was very little this side of Hell for wickedness, and her three months in the theater had had the curious result of making her set great store by her estate as a married woman. To Blackpool they went and were withered by the March winds and half starved by Matilda’s cousin, who despised them when she learned that they were play actors. They were miserable, and for misery no worse setting could be found than an empty pleasure city. They frequented the theater, and very quickly Matilda made friends with its permanent officials and arranged for her singing lessons with the conductor of the orchestra, who was also organist of a church and eked out a meager living with instruction on the violin, ’cello, piano, organ, flute, trombone, tympani, voice production and singing—(all this was set forth on his card, which he left on Old Mole by way of assuring himself that all was as it should be and he would be paid for his trouble). Matilda had four lessons a week, and she practiced most industriously. “It was not,” said her instructor, “as though she were training for op’ra, but just to get the voice clear and refine it. . . .” He was very genteel, was Mr. Edwin Watts, and he did more for her pronunciation in a week than Old Mole had been able to accomplish in a year and more. His gentility discovered the gentleman in his pupil’s husband, and he invited them to his house, and gave them tickets for concerts and the Tower and a series of organ recitals he was giving in his church. He was a real musician, [Pg 173] but he was alone in his music, for he had an invalid wife who looked down on his profession and would admit none of his friends to the house, which she filled with suites of furniture, china knickknacks, lace curtains and pink ribbons. The little man lived in perpetual distrust of himself, admired his wife because he loved her, and submitted to her taste, regarding his own as a sort of unregenerate longing. Neither Old Mole nor Matilda were musical, but, when his wife was out to tea with the wife of the bank manager or the chemist, Watts would invite them to his parlor and play the piano—Bach, Beethoven, Chopin—until they could take in no more and his music was just a noise to them. But there was no exhausting his capacity or his energy, and when they were thoroughly worn out he used to play “little things of his own.” He was very religious and full of cranks, a great reader of the advertisements in the newspapers, and there was no patent medicine, hair restorer, magnetic belt, uric acid antidote that he had not tried. He was proud of it, and used to say:

“I’ve tried ’em all except the bust preservers.”

It was precisely here that he and Old Mole found common ground. With his new mental activity Old Mole had become increasingly sensitive to any sluggishness in his internal organs and began to resent his tendency to fleshiness. He and Mr. Watts had immense discussions, and the musician produced remedies for every ailment and symptom.

Matilda said they were disgusting, but Old Mole stuck to it, smoked less, ate less, [Pg 174] took long walks in the morning, and attained a ruddiness of complexion, a geniality of manner, a sense of wellbeing that helped him, with surprising suddenness, to begin to enjoy his life, to delight in its little pleasures, and to laugh at its small mischances and irritations. With a chuckling glee he would watch Matilda in her goings out and her comings in, and he preferred even her assiduous practicing to her absence. He was amazed at the swiftness with which, on the backward movement of time, his past life was borne away from him, with his anxieties, his unrest, his bewilderment, his repugnance in the face of new things and new people. He found that he was no longer shy with other men, nor did he force them to shyness. He lost much of his

desire to criticize and came by a warm tolerance, which saved him from being conscious of too many things at once and left him free to exist or to live, as the case might be. He felt ready for anything.

When, therefore, Matilda announced that Mr. Watts had procured her an engagement with a No. 2 Northern Musical Comedy Company, touring, “The Cinema Girl” and “The Gay Princess,” he packed up his traps, told himself that he would see more of this astonishing England, and went with her. She had two small parts and was successful in them. And now, when she was in the theater, he no longer skulked in their lodgings nor divided her existence into two portions—his and the theater’s, but went among the company, joined in their fare and jokes and calamities, played [Pg 175] golf with the principal comedian and the manager, and saw things with their eyes. This was easy, because they saw very little. They liked and respected him, and soon discovered that he had money. Matilda’s lot was made comfortable and her parts were enlarged. Neither she nor her husband attributed this to anything but her talent, and it made them very happy. Her name was on the program, and they cut out all the flattering references to her in the newspapers and pasted them into a book, and it were hard to tell which read them the oftener, he or she. He felt ready for everything, expanded like a well-tended plant; but with his unrest had gone much of his sympathy and the tug and tear of his heart on the sight of misery. He watched men now as they might be dolls, pranked up and tottering, flopping through their daily employments, staggeringly gesticulating through anger and love, herding together for pleasure and gain, and when both were won (or avoided), lurching into their own separate little houses. In this mood it pleased him to be with the dolls of the theater, because they were gayer than the rest, farded, painted, peacocking through their days. He caught something of their swagger, and, looking at the world through their eyes, saw it as separate from himself, full of dull puppets, bound to one place, caught in a mesh of streets, while from week to week he moved on. The sense of liberty, of having two legs where other men were shackled, was potent enough to [Pg 176] carry him through the traveling on Sundays, often all day long, with dreary waits at empty, shuttered stations, and blinded him to the small miseries, the mean scandals, the jealousies, rivalries and wounded sensibilities which occupied the rest of the company. . . . There was one woman—she was perhaps forty-five—who sat opposite to him on three consecutive Sundays. She played, in both pieces, the inevitable dowager to chaperone the heroine; she was always knitting, and, with brows furrowed, she stared fixedly in front of her; her lips were always moving, and every now and then she would nod her head vigorously, or she would stop and stare desperately, and put her hands to her lips and her heart would leap to her mouth. At first Old Mole thought she was counting the stitches; but once, in the train, she laid aside her knitting and produced a roll of cloth and cut out a pair of trousers. Her lips went more furiously than ever, and suddenly her eyes stared and she held out her hand with the scissors as though to ward off some danger. Old Mole leaned across and spoke to her, but she was so taken up with her own thoughts that she replied:

“Yes, it’s better weather, isn’t it?” jerked out a watery smile and withdrew into herself. When Old Mole asked Matilda why the woman counted her stitches even when she was not knitting, and why, apparently, she dropped so many stitches when she was, Matilda told him that the woman had lost her voice and her figure and could make very little money, and had a husband who was a comedian, the funniest fellow [Pg 177] in the world off the stage, but when he was “on” all his humor leaked away, and though he worked very hard no one laughed at him, and he, too, made very little money. They had six children, and all the time in the train the woman was making calculations. She often borrowed money, but that only added to her perplexity, because she could not bear not to pay it back.

This story almost moved Old Mole, but his mood was too strong for him, and the woman only came forward to the foreground of the puppet show, a sort of link between the free players, the colored, brilliant dolls, and the drab mannikins who lived imprisoned in the background.

His was a very pleasant mood to drift in and lounge and taste the soothing savor of irony, which dulls sharp edges and tempers the emphasis of optimism or pessimism. It seems to deliver the soul from its desire for relief and sops its hunger with a comfortable pity. But it is a lie. Old Mole knew it not for what it was and hugged it to himself, and called it wisdom, and he began to write a satire on education as he had known it in Thrigsby. He reveled in the physical labor of writing, in the company of his ideas as they took shape in the furnace of concentration, and what he had intended to be a short pamphlet grew into an elaborate account of his twenty-five years of respectable and respected service, showing the slow submergence of the human being into the machine evolved for the creation of other machines. . . . He [Pg 178] was weeks and months over it. The tour did not come to an end as had been anticipated, but was continued through the holiday months at the seaside resorts. They returned to Blackpool in August, and then he finished his work and read it to

Edwin Watts. The musician had an enormous reverence for the printed word, and had never met an author before. His emotionalism warmed up and colored the dryness and bitterness of Old Mole's tale, and he saw in it only a picture of suppression and starved imagination like his own. He applauded, and Old Mole was proud of his firstborn and determined to publish it. In his early days he had revised and prepared a book of Examination Papers in Latin accidence for a series, and to the publisher he sent his "Syntax and Sympathy." It had really moved Edwin Watts, and he composed in its honor a sonata in B flat, which he dedicated "To the mute, inglorious Miltons of Lancashire." It was played on the pier by a municipal band, but did not immediately produce any ebullition of genius.

When Old Mole told Matilda that he had written a book she asked:

"Is it a story?"

"A sort of story."

"Has it a happy ending? I can't see why people write stories that make you miserable."

"It's a wonderful book," said Edwin Watts.

And Old Mole said:

"I flatter myself there are worse books written."

When Watts had gone Matilda said: [Pg 179]

"If it's not a nice book I couldn't bear it."

"What do you mean—you couldn't bear it?"

"If it's like that Lucretius you're so fond of I'd be ashamed."

In the intoxication that still endured from the fumes of writing he had been thinking that the book was not incomparable with "De Rerum Natura," something between that and the Satires of Juvenal.

In a few weeks his manuscript returned with a polite letter from the publisher declining it, desiring to see more of Mr. Beenham's work, and enclosing his reader's report. It was short:

" 'Syntax and Sympathy' is satire without passion or any basis of love for humanity. There is nothing more damnable. The book is clever enough. It would be beastly in French—there is a plentiful crop of them in Paris; in England, thank God, with our public's loathing of cleverness, it is impossible."

The author burned letter and report, and at night, when Matilda was at the theater, buried the manuscript in the sands.

If there be any man who, awaking from a moral crisis, finds himself withered by the fever of it and racked with doubt as to his power to go boldly and warmly among his fellowmen without being battered and bewildered into pride or priggishness or cold egoism or thin-blooded humanitarianism, let him go to Blackpool in holiday time. There he will find hundreds of thousands of men, women and children; he will hear [Pg 180] them, see them, smell them, be jostled and chaffed by them. He will find them in and on the water, on the sands, in the streets, in the many public places, shows and booths, in the vast ballrooms, straggling and stravading, smoking, drinking, laughing, guffawing, cracking coarse jokes, singing bawdy and patriotic songs with equal gusto, making music with mouth-organs, concertinas, cornets; young men and maidens kissing and squeezing unashamed, and at night stealing out to the lonely sands; old men and women gurgling over beer and tobacco, yarning over the troubles that came of just such lovemaking in their young days; and all hot and perspiring; wearing out their bodies, for once in a way, in pleasure, gross pleasure with no savor to it nor lasting quality, but coarse as the food they eat, as the beds they lie on, as the clothes they wear; forgetting that their bodies are, day in, day out, bent in labor, forgetting the pinch and penury of their lives at home, forgetting that their bodies have any other than their brutish functions of eating, drinking, sleeping, excretion and fornication. . . . Old Mole watched it all, and, true to his ironical mood, he saw the mass in little, swarming like ants; in the early morning of the great day these creatures were belched forth from the black internal regions of the country, out upon the seashore; there they sprawled and struggled and made a great clatter and din, until at the end of the day they were sucked back again. Intellectually it interested him. It was a pageant of energy unharnessed; but it was all loose, unshaped, [Pg 181] overdone, repeating itself again and again, so that at last it destroyed any feeling he might have had for it. He saw it through to the end, to the last excursion train going off, crammed in every compartment, with tired voices singing, often quite beautifully,

in harmony.

Matilda had refused to go out with him. She came home very late from the theater, and said she had been helping the knitting woman cut out some clothes. He asked her if she had ever seen the crowds in the pleasure city. She looked away from him, and with a sudden, almost imperceptible, gesture of pain replied:

“Once.”

He knew when that was, and with a tearing agony the old jealousy rushed in upon him and with a brutality that horrified him, that was whipped out of him, to the ruin of his self-control, he ground out:

“Yes. I know when that was.”

Her hand went tugging up to her breast and she said with passionate resentment:

“You ought never to say a thing like that to me.”

His blood boiled into a fury and he turned on her, but she was gone. He wrestled with himself, toiled and labored to regain his will, the mastery of his thoughts and his feelings. The jealousy died away, but no other emotion came to take its place. He regained his will, saw clearly again, but was more possessed by his irony than before. He was no longer its master, no longer drifting comfortably, but its slave, whirled [Pg 182] hither and thither at its caprice—and it was like a hot gusty wind blowing in him before a storm. All the color of the world was heavy and metallic, but it was painted color, a painted world. He was detached from himself, from Matilda, and he and she passed into the puppet show in the miserable liberty of the gaily painted dolls: free only in being out of the crowd, sharing none of the crowd’s energy, having no part in any solidarity.

He made himself a bed on the hard horsehair sofa in their room and lay hour by hour staring at the window panes, listening to the distant thud and thunder of the sea, watching for the light to come to make plain the window and show up the colors of the painted world.

In the morning they avoided each other, and she spent the day with the knitting woman, he with Edwin Watts, and, when, at night, she returned from the theater, he was asleep. It was the first time they had strangled a day, and it lay cold and dark between them. He admitted perfectly that he was at fault, but to say that he was sorry was a mockery and an untruth. He was not sorry, for he felt nothing.

They bore the burden of their sullen acquiescence in silence into the third day, and then she said:

“If you want me to go, I’ll go.”

“No! No! I’ll go.”

Silence had been torture, but speech was racking. They were at the mercy of [Pg 183] words, and there was an awful finality about the word *go* which neither desired and yet neither could qualify. . . . Plainly she had been weeping, but that exasperated him. She, at any rate, had found an outlet, and he had discovered none. And all the time he was haunted by the futility, the childishness of it all.

“Where will you go?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not. But some one must look after you.”

He muttered unintelligibly.

Was he—was he coming back? Of course he was. He would let her know.

He went to Paris and stayed in his old hotel in the Rue Daunou. The exhilaration of the journey, the spirit of amusement that is in the air of the city of light, buoyed him up for a couple of days. He dined skillfully and procured the glow of satisfaction of a bottle of fine wine, sought crowds and the curious company of the boulevards, but as soon as he was alone again his inflation collapsed and he took pen, paper and thick paintlike ink and wrote his first letter to her. He began “my love,” crossed that out and substituted “my dearest,” tore up the sheet of paper and began “my dear.” He pondered this for a long time and wrote his initials and circles and squares on the paper, as it dawned on him that for the first time for nearly thirty years—well over twenty, at any rate—he was writing a love letter, that it had to be written, and that the last series upon which he had embarked was no sort of model for this. He chewed [Pg 184] the ends and ragged threads of folly of his twenties and was astonished at the small amount of truth and genuine affection he could find in them, wondered, too, what had become of the waters of the once so easily tapped spring of ardor and affection. It seemed to him that he could mark the very moment of its subterranean plunge. It had been, had it not, when he had made his fruitless effort to escape from Thrigsby, when he had applied—in vain—for the Australian professorship. Then he had shut

and locked the door upon himself, and he remembered clearly the day, at the beginning of term, when he had, with glowing excitement and a sort of tragical humor, saluted his Form Room as his lasting habitation. . . . Once more he scratched H. J. B. on the paper before him, but saw it not, for clearly in his mind was the vision of Matilda, lying in her bed with her hair thrown back over her pillow and her hand beneath her cheek, and the whiteness of her throat and the slenderness of her arms, the scent of her hair. . . . His heart was full again. He took another sheet of paper, and, with no picking of phrases, he wrote:

"My little one. Are there still the marks of your tears on your cheeks? There are still the bruises of my own obstinacy upon my barren old heart. I am here, miles away from you, in another country, but I am more with you than I have ever been. What a burden I must have been upon you! It must have been that I must selfishly have felt that. One would suffer more from being a burden than from bearing a [Pg 185] burden. (And you said: 'Who will look after you?' I think that rasped my blown vanity more than anything.) One would suffer more, I say, if one were a withered, parched, tedious old egoist, as I am. Tell me, are there still the marks of your tears on your cheeks? I cannot bear not to know. I love you. Now I know that I love you. If this world were fairyland, you would love me. But this world is this world. And it is the richer, as I am, by my love for you.

H. J. B."

As feverishly and feather-headedly as a boy he skimmed upon the air to post this letter, and as he slipped it into the box he kissed the envelope, and as he did so he was overcome by a sense of the delicious absurdity of his love, of all love, and he bowed low and gravely to the Opera House and said:

"You are a pimple on the face of the earth, my friend, but my love is the blood of its veins."

He packed his bag before he went to bed, was up very early in the morning, and, as soon as a certain shop in the Rue de la Paix was opened, went in and bought a necklace of crystals and emeralds. He was in London by six o'clock and half an hour later in the northern express. He reached Blackpool before his letter. The company and Matilda were gone. It was Sunday. The theater was closed and he had lost his card of the tour. Watts did not know. He never knew anything. Companies came and went and he stayed, as he said with his weak, watery smile, "right there," only thankful that their damnable tunes were gone with them. Old Mole cursed him for an [Pg 186] idiot and hunted up the stage doorkeeper, whose son was callboy and knew everything. He routed them out of bed, got the information he needed, and was off again as fast as a cross-country train could carry him.

He broke in on Matilda as she was at breakfast, rushed at her boisterously. Through the long hours in the crawling train, with the dawn creeping gray, opal, ripe strawberry, over moors and craggy hills, he had contrived the scene, played a game of Consequences with himself, what he said to her and what she said to him, but Matilda peered at him and in a dull, husky voice said:

"Oh! It's you."

And fatuously he stood there and said:

"Yes."

She was pale and weary and there were deep marks under her eyes. She said:

"You didn't leave me any money. It was important. We got here last night and then they told us there'd be no last week's salary. They didn't pay us on Friday. We traveled on Sunday as usual, and when we got here they told us. Some one in London's done something. Enid"—that was the name of the knitting woman—"Enid looked awful when they told us, quite ill. I went home with her, and I've been up with her all night. She didn't sleep a wink, but went on counting and counting out loud, like she used to do to herself in the train. . . . I've been up with her all night, but it wasn't any good, because in the morning, when the dawn came, she got up and [Pg 187] walked about and went into the next room, and when I went after her she was dead. And if I'd only had a little money. . . . She was a good woman and the only friend I had, and she killed herself."

He sat by her side and took her hand and soothed her.

"But, my dear child, you had plenty of money of your own in the bank, and your own checkbook."

"I didn't know I was to spend that. It was in the bank. You never told me what to do with the book."

And to find something to say, to draw her thoughts off the miserable tragedy, he explained to her the mysteries of banking, how, when you have more money than you can spend—she had never had it and found that hard to grasp—you pay it into your

account and it is entered into a book, and how, if it is a great deal more than you can spend, you lend it to the bank and they pay you interest for it and lend it to other people. She began to grasp it at last and to see that the money was really hers and she would be putting no injury nor affront upon the bank by asking for some of it by means of a check. Then she said:

“Have we a lot of money in the bank?”

“Not an enormous quantity, but enough to go on without selling out.”

“What does that mean?”

He tried to explain the meaning of investments, of stocks and shares, but that was [Pg 188] beyond her capacity and her immediate interest. She had begun to think practically of her money, and she said:

“Some of these people have nothing at all.”

And she made him show her how to write a check, and they hunted up all the poorer members of the company—those who had any money were already gone in search of work—and she gave them all enough to pay their rent and for their journey to their homes. Then she wrote to Enid’s husband and gave him all sorts of messages that had not been entrusted to her, said that thirty-five shillings had been found in Enid’s purse and sent that amount to him.

They stayed for the inquest, and Enid’s husband came. He said what a good wife she had been to him, and what cruel times they had been through together, and how he couldn’t believe it, and it wasn’t like her to do such a thing, and she would have been another Florence St. John if she hadn’t married him, and he hadn’t got the name of a Jonah. “S’elp me God!” he said, “she was the right stuff on and off the stage, and them as hasn’t had cruel times and been a Jonah won’t ever understand what she’s been to me.” Through his incoherence there shone a beauty of dumb, humble and trusting love that now triumphed over death as it had triumphed over the monotonous, degrading slips and deprivations of life. Before it Old Mole bowed his head and felt a sort of envy, a regret that he, too, had not had cruel times and been a Jonah.

Clumsily he tried to tell Matilda how he felt, but she could hardly bear to talk of [Pg 189] Enid and closed every reference to her with:

“If I had known I could have saved her. I ought to have known.”

Even worse was it when he gave her the necklace.

From the scene of the disaster they had moved to a little fishing village on the Yorkshire coast where they lodged in the cottage of a widow named Storm, perched halfway up a cliff, and from the windows they could see right over the North Sea, smooth as glass, with the herring fleet dotted like flies on its gleaming surface. Here, he thought, they could overcome their difficulties and relax the tension brought about by that last dark experience. There would be health in the wide sea and the huge cliffs and the moorland air. But it was the first time Matilda had been out of the crowd, and the peace and the emptiness induced brooding in her.

When he gave her the necklace she took it out of its white satin and velvet case and fingered it and let the light play on it. Then it seemed to frighten her, and she asked how much it had cost. He told her.

“It seems a sin,” said she, and put it back in its case.

That night she received his letter and then only she seemed to understand why he had given her the necklace, and she came and patted his shoulder and kissed the top of his head. She began to talk of Enid, how she never complained and never said an unkind word of anybody, and how proud she was of two little trinkets, a brooch and a [Pg 190] bangle, given her by her husband, which she said she had never pawned and never would.

“The world seems upside down,” said Matilda.

“No. No,” he protested. “It is all as it should be, as it must be. My dear child, I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I hurt you, made things hard for you. I was seeing the world all wrong. Men and women seemed only toys. . . .”

“But Enid used to say, you can’t expect anything from people when they have to think of money all day long.”

“When did she say that?”

“When her husband was out so long and didn’t write to her.”

“Did she love him very much?”

“Yes.”

“And I love you.”

“Yes. But. . . . It’s so different.”

He looked at her and she met his gaze. In her eyes there was a strength, a determination, a depth that were new to her. It stimulated him, braced him, and he felt that something was awakened in her, something that demanded of him, demanded, insisted. He was ashamed of his letter, ashamed that he had given her the necklace, ashamed that when she demanded of him the glory of life he had thought no higher than to give her pleasure.

So he was flung back into torment, and where before he saw humanity and its infinite variety as smaller than himself, now, with full swing to the opposite pole of [Pg 191] exaggeration, he saw it as immeasurably larger and superior, full of a mighty purpose, ebbing and flowing like the sea, while, perched above the fringe of it, he cowered.

He concealed his distress from her. He was not so far gone but he could delight in the scents and sounds of the country, and he would tramp away over the moors or along the cliffs by himself, lie in the heather and smoke and watch the clouds, real, full-bellied clouds, lumbering and far off shedding a gray gauze of rain. He would fill his lungs with the keen air and return home hungry to sup on plain cottage fare or delicious herrings fresh from the sea.

One night, to please him, Matilda wore the necklace. It was pathetically out of place on her cheap little blouse, incongruous in their surroundings, the stiff, crowded fisherman’s parlor.

It was that decided him. There must be an end of drifting. Sink or swim, they must endeavor to take their place in the world. They would go to London. If among the third-rate mummers who had been their company for so long Matilda could so wonderfully grow and expand, what might she not, would she not, do among gentler, riper souls? And, for himself, he would seek out a task. There must be in England men of active minds and keen imaginations, men among whom he could find, if not the answers to, at least an interest in, the questions that came leaping in upon him. They would go to London and make a home, and Matilda should be the mistress of it. [Pg 192] She should live her own life, and he his, and there would be an end of the strain between them, and the beginnings of the most fruitful comradeship.

Once again the immediate execution of his plans was frustrated. A strike was declared on the railways of Great Britain, and it became impossible for them to move, for they were on a branch line. Letters and newspapers were brought nine miles by road and there was no lack of food. The newspapers for a week devoted four columns to the story of the strike, then three columns, then two, then one. A little war broke out in the Persian Gulf. That dominated the strike, which lasted three weeks, and ended in the intervention of the Government, with neither the companies nor the men yielding.

The village had its Socialists, the postman and the fish buyer, and, in the beginning of it, they talked excitedly of a general strike; the dockers would come out and the carters; every port would be closed, transport at a standstill; the miners would lay down their tools, and such frightful losses would be inflicted on the capitalists that they would be unable to pursue their undertakings. They would be taken out of their hands and worked by the laborers for the laborers, and then there would be the beginnings of justice upon the earth and the laborers would begin to enjoy the good things of the world. Old Mole asked them what they meant by the good things of the world, and the answer was strangely Hebraic—a land flowing with [Pg 193] milk and honey, where men labored for six days (eight hours a day) and rested the seventh day, and had time to talk and think. They set an enormous value on talking and thinking, and all their enthusiasm was for “settling questions.” The land would be “settled,” and education, and housing, and insurance, and consumption, and lead poisoning. Each “question” was separated from every other; each existed apart from everything else, and each had its nostrum, the prescription for which was deferred until the destruction of the capitalists, and the liberation of the middle classes from their own middle classishness—(for these Socialists detested the middle classes even more than the capitalists)—had placed the ingredients in their hands. The “questions” had to be settled; the capitalists had created them, the middle classes, like sheep, accepted them; the “questions” had to be settled once for all, and therefore the capitalists had to be ruined and the middle classes squeezed in their pockets and stomachs until they surrendered and accepted the new ordering of the world in justice, brotherhood, and equality. Already the strike was doing damage at the rate of hundreds and thousands a week, and they had caught the bulk of the middle classes in their holidays, and thousands of them would be unable to get back to their work.

In the thick of it Old Mole, to satisfy himself, walked over to that town which is

advertised as the Queen of Watering Places. There were thousands of the middle classes on the sands. Their children were sprawling on sand castles and dabbling in the thin washings of the sea. Fathers and mothers were lounging in deck chairs, sleeping under handkerchiefs and hats and umbrellas; grandmothers were squatting in charge of their grandchildren. Some of them were reading about the strike in the newspapers. At teatime the beach was cleared as though all human beings had been blown from it by a sea breeze. An hour later it was thickly thronged and the pierrots in their little open-air theater were playing to an enormous audience. The strike had prolonged their holiday; they were prepared to go on in its monotony instead of in the monotony of their work and domestic life. They were quite contented, dully acceptant. There were no trains? Very well, then; they would wait until there were trains. Respectable, well-behaved, orderly, genteel people do not starve. . . . And they were right. [Pg 194]

However, it set Old Mole thinking about his own means, the independence which he owed to no virtue nor talent, nor thrift of his own, but to a system which he did not understand, to sources which in the intricacies of their journey to himself were impossible to follow. Of the many enterprises all over the world, in the profits of which he had his share, he knew nothing at all. The reports that were sent to him were too boring or too technical to read. The postman and the fish buyer assured him that he was living upon the underpaid and overtaxed labors of thousands of unhappy men and women. He had no reason for disbelieving them, but, on the whole, his sympathies were with the middle-classes, his attitude theirs; that respectable, well-behaved, orderly, genteel people do not starve. Not that he classed himself with them; he disliked the memory of his colleagues at Thrigsby, of the men at the golf club at Bigley more than anything, and at this time he was not moderate in his dislikes. He warmed to the enthusiasm of the Socialists, but was exasperated by the manner in which, after having made a clean sweep of everything except themselves and their kind, they could produce no constructive idea, but only a thin cerebral fluid, done up in different colored bottles as in a pharmacy. Just at the point when he found himself beginning to dream of a world of decent, kindly, human beings delivered (as far as possible) from their own folly and the tyrannies bred from it, they left humanity altogether and gloated hectically over their “questions.” [Pg 195]

If that were Socialism, he would have none of it; he preferred money. He told them so, and found that he had uttered the most appalling blasphemy. They said that Socialism was a religion, the religion that would save the world.

Said Old Mole:

“There have been Hebraism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, Christianity, the worship of Isis and Osiris, the worship of the Bull, the Cat, the Snake, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Phallus; there have been prophets without number and martyrs more than I can say, saints for every day in the year and more, and none of them has saved the world. More than that, I will go so far as to say that none of them has done as much to raise the standard of living as money.” [Pg 196]

“Damn it all,” said the fish buyer, “I’m not talking about superstitions. I’m talking about ideas.”

“Money also is an idea,” replied Old Mole, “and it is as generally misunderstood as any other.”

He was beginning to be rather excited, for he felt that he was getting the better of the argument, and would not allow himself to see that he had floundered on to the debater’s trick of shunting his opponents on to unfamiliar country. They had gone up and down one stretch of line, between two points—capitalism and labor—for so long, without looking on either side of them, that it needed only a very slight adjustment or transposition of terms to reduce them to a beating of the void. They clung to their point, and the postman at last said triumphantly:

“But money isn’t a religion; Socialism is—the religion, the only religion of the working classes of this country. They’ve had enough of the next world; they want a bit o’ this for a change.”

“So do I,” returned Old Mole, “all of it. I say that money is an idea, perhaps the only practicable idea in the world at present. It isn’t a religious idea simply because men as a whole are not religious. It has the advantage over your Socialism that it is a part of life as it is, while your religion, as you call it, is only a straining after the future life, an edifice without a foundation, for to bring about its realization you have to hew and cut and shape human nature to fit into the conditions of your fantasy. If I wanted to be a prophet, which I don’t—I should base my vision on money. There would be some chance then of everybody understanding it and really taking it into his life. If you could make money a religious idea—that is, make money a thing which men would respect and revere and abuse as little as possible—you would very likely produce something—deeds, not words and questions.” [Pg 197]

“Don’t you call the strike ‘doing something’?” cried the fish buyer.

“We shall see,” replied Old Mole.

The postman filled his cutty and laughed:

“Don’t you see,” he said to the fish buyer, “that he is pulling your leg?”

So, convinced of their superiority, they abandoned the discussion.

His tussles with these Jeremiahs of the Yorkshire village gave Old Mole the confidence he needed, and the exultant glow of a sharpening of the wits, which are like razors, most apt to cut the wielder of them when they are most dull. He tortured himself no more with his failure to satisfy Matilda, but laid all his hopes in the future and the amusing life in London that he wished to create for her. Intensely he desired her to develop her own life, to grow into the splendid creature he now saw struggling beneath the crust of ignorance and prejudice and shyness and immaturity that [Pg 198] hemmed her in. There was such beauty in her, and he had failed to make it his, a part of himself, and in his blundering efforts to teach her, to lead her on to the realization and gift of herself, he had wounded her even when he most adored her. . . . The dead woman, Enid, had been more to her than he had ever been. He saw that now. She had known in that woman’s lift something that was not in her own, and she desired it; how much it was painful to see. She never looked for it in him, but gazed in upon herself in a sort of pregnancy of the soul. And, like a pregnant woman, she must be satisfied in her whimsies, she must have her desires anticipated, she must be given the color and brightness of life, now before her sensitiveness had passed away for want of fair impressions. These she had been denied in the young years of her life. She must have them. . . . She must have them. . . .

She accepted his proposal to go to London without enthusiasm. She thought over it for some time and at last she said:

“Yes. It will be best for you. I don’t want you to go away again.”

And the night before they left, when the train-service was restored, she took out the necklace as she was undressing and tried it on, and looked at herself in the mirror and said:

“I’d like to wear this in London. But I shall want an evening dress, sha’n’t I?”

She smiled at him. His heart overflowed and colored the workings of his mind with [Pg 199] a full humor. He thought:

“If there be ideas, how better can they be expressed than in terms of Matilda?”

[Pg 200]

V

IN THE SWIM

Whoever has an ambition to be heard in a crowd must press, and squeeze, and thrust, and climb, with indefatigable pains, till he has exalted himself to a certain degree of altitude above them.

A TALE OF A TUB

[Pg 203]

V

IN THE SWIM

THEY stayed at first in one of the hotels designed to give provincials bed and breakfast for five shillings, for visitors to London do not mind in how much they are mulcted in pursuit of pleasure, but resent the payment of an extra farthing for necessaries. They were high up on the fifth floor and could see right over many roofs and chimneys to the dome of St. Paul's. They saw the sights and lunched and dined in restaurants, and went by river to Greenwich, by tram to Kew, and Old Mole was forced to admit that it is possible to fall short of a philosophic conception of happiness and yet to have a very amusing time. It was Matilda's ambition to go to every theater in London. She found it possible to enjoy everything, and therefore he was not bored.

Sheer physical exhaustion brought their pleasure-seeking to an end, and they set about finding a habitation. On their arrival Old Mole had written to his brother, but had had no reply. At last a scrubby clerk arrived with a note:

"So glad you have come to your senses. Come to lunch, 1.15.—R. B."

[Pg 204] They went to lunch in Gray's Inn, and after so much frequenting of public places it was deliciously peaceful to sink into private armchairs among personal belongings and a goodly company of books. Robert was very genial and kissed Matilda and delivered her over to his laundress for the inevitable feminine preparations for a meal. While she was away he told Old Mole that he had taken silk, and was retiring from the Bar, and building himself a house at Sunningdale, for the links, and was looking out for a suitable tenant. If Old Mole liked to keep a room for him he could have the place practically as it stood, on a two-thirds sharing basis. . . . It were hard to find, in London, a pleasanter place. The windows looked out onto the rookery, the rooms were of beautiful design and proportion, and there were eight of them altogether distributed over two floors, communicating by a charming oak-balustraded staircase.

"I've lived here for thirty years," said Robert, "and I'd like it kept in the family."

Old Mole was delighted. It saved all the vexation and discomfort of finding and furnishing a house, and here, ready-made, was the atmosphere of culture and comfort he was seeking and inwardly designing for the blossoming of Matilda.

Robert beamed on her when she came in, and said:

"We've made a plan."

She was properly excited.

"Yes. You're going to live here."

[Pg 205] "Here? . . . Oh!" And she looked about among the pictures and the old furniture and the rich curtains and hangings, and timidly, shyly, as though she were not certain how they would take it, adopted them.

They made her sit at the head of the table and placed themselves on either side of her, and, as Robert poured her out a glass of wine (Berncastler Doktor), he said:

"You know, the old place has always wanted this."

"Wanted—what?" asked Matilda. "I think it's perfect."

"A charming hostess," said Robert, with an elaborate little bow of courtliness.

A fortnight later saw Robert installed at Sunningdale and the Beenhams in occupation of his chambers. They shared only the dining-room; Old Mole had the upstairs rooms and Matilda those downstairs. It was his arrangement, and came from reaction against the closeness in which they had lived during the long pilgrimage from lodging to lodging.

Once a fortnight Robert engaged Old Mole to play golf with him, and he consented because he desired to give Matilda as full a liberty as she could desire. In the alternate weeks Robert came to stay for two nights and occupied his room next to Old Mole's. He would take them out to dinner and the theater, and after it the brothers would sit up yarning until the small hours, and always the discussion would begin by Robert saying:

[Pg 206] " 'Pon my honor, women are extraordinary!" And then, completely to his own satisfaction, he would produce those generalizations which, in England, pass for a

knowledge of human nature, and Old Mole would recognize them as old companions of his own. They were too absurd for anger, but Robert's persistence would annoy him, and he would say:

"When you live with a woman you are continually astonished to find that she is a human being."

"Human," answered Robert, sweetening the sentiment with a sip of port, "with something of the angel."

"Angel be damned," came in explosive protest, "women are just as human as ourselves, and rather more so."

"Ah!" said Robert, with blissful inconsequence, "but it doesn't do to let 'em know it."

Robert's contemptuous sentimentalization of women so bothered Old Mole that he sought to probe for its sources. Among the books in the chambers were many modern English novels, and he found nearly all of them, in varying formulæ, dealing axiomatically with woman as an extraneous animal unaccountably attached to the species, a creature fearfully and wonderfully ignorant of the affairs of the world, of her own physical processes, of the most elementary rules of health, morality, and social existence, capricious, soulless, unscrupulous, scheming, intriguing, concerned wholly and solely with marriage, if she were a "good" woman, with the destruction of [Pg 207] marriage if she were "bad"; at best being a sort of fairy—(Robert's "angel")—whose function and destiny were to pop the sugarplum of love into the mouths of virtuous men. The most extreme variant of this conception was to be found in the works of Robert Wherry, who, in a syrupy medium, depicted women as virginal mothers controlling and comforting a world of conceited, helpless little boys. Wherry was enormously successful, and he had many imitators, but none of them had his supreme audacity or his canny belief in the falsehood which was his only stock in trade. The trait of Wherry was upon all the novels in Robert's collection. Even among the "advanced" novels the marks of the beast were there. They advanced not by considering life, but by protest against Wherry. They said, in effect, "Woman is not a mother, she is a huntress of men, or a social worker, or a mistress—(the conscious audacity in using that word!)—or a parasite, or a tyrant"; and one bold fellow said, "She has breasts"; he said it not once, but on every fifth page in every book. Old Mole found him even more disgusting than Wherry, who at least, in his dexterity, might be supposed to give pleasure to young girls and foolish, inexperienced persons of middle age—(like Robert)—and no great harm be done.

To protect himself against the uncleanness of these books he took down "Rabelais," which Robert kept tucked away on his highest shelf. And when he had driven off the torpor in his blood and thoughts induced by the slavishness of Robert's [Pg 208] modern literature, he told himself that it was folly to take it seriously:

"There have always been bad books," he said. "The good survive in the love of good readers. Good taste is always the same, but vicious taste is blown away by the cleansing winds of the soul."

All the same, he could not so easily away with modern literature, for he was suffering from the itch to write, and had already half-planned, being, like every one else, subject to the moral disease of the time, an essay on Woman. Wherry and the rest brought him up sharp: they made him very angry, but they made him perceive in himself many of the distressing symptoms he had found in them. He gave more thought to them, and, though he knew nothing of how these books were written, or of the conditions under which literature was at that time produced and marketed, he came to see these men and women as mountebanks in a fair, each shouting outside a little tent. "Come inside and see what Woman is like." And some showed bundles of clothes, with nobody inside them; and some showed life-size dolls; and some showed women nude to the waist; and some showed women with bared legs; and some showed women in pink fleshings; and some showed naked women who had lost their modesty, and therefore could not be gazed upon without offence.

He pondered his own essay, and recognized that its subject was not Woman, but Matilda. In that gallery he could not show her, nor could he, without shame, display [Pg 209] her to the public view. And therein, it seemed to him, he had touched the secret of all these lewd exhibitions. The displayers of them, in their impatient haste to catch the pennies of the public, or admiration, or whatever they might be desiring, were presenting, raw, confused and unimagined, their own unfelt and uncogitated experience, or, sometimes, an extension of their experience, in which, by an appalling logic, while they limned life as they would like to live it, they were led to the limits of unreason and egoistic folly. In presentation or extension, only those shows had any compelling force in which egoism was complete and entire lack of feeling relieved the showmen of fine scruples or human decency. Where shreds of decency were left they only served to show up the horrible obscenity of the rest.

Looking at it in this light—and there seemed no other way of correlating this literature with human life—Old Mole was distressed.

"It is bad enough," he thought, "when they make a public show of their emotions, but when they parade emotions they never had, that is the abomination of desolation."

Matilda read some of them. She gulped them down at the rate of two in an evening, but when he tried to discuss them with her she had nothing to say about them. To her they were just stories, to be read and forgotten. He tried to persuade himself that she was right, at any rate more sensible than himself, but could get no [Pg 210] further than the admission of the fact that she had no feeling for literature and would just as soon read a cash-made piece of hackwork as a masterpiece. That led him back to the subject of his essay and woman's indifference to ideas and idealism. He had been considering it as a general proposition, but he was forced to admit that it was in truth only Matilda's indifference to his own ideas, and he was not at all sure but she possessed something much more valuable, a power to assimilate ideas when they had taken flesh and become a part of the life that is lived. He knew that he was using her as a test, a touchstone, and through her he had learned to tolerate many things which his reason scouted. As a practical criterion for life and living (two very different things, as he was beginning dimly to perceive)—she was very valuable to him, but it was when he passed on to the things of art and found himself faced with the need of getting or begetting clear conceptions of phenomena, in his search for the underlying, connecting and resolving truth, that she failed him. She said he thought too much. Perhaps he did, but it was a part of his way of living, and he could not rest content with his relation with her, except he had also his idea of her. It was a relief to him, and he felt he was greatly advanced along the road by which he was traveling when he found her in the National Gallery among the five singing women of the *Nativity* of Piero della Francesca. That discovery gave her an existence in the world of art. He told her about the picture and took her to see it. [Pg 211]

"Good Lord!" she said. "Is that what you think I'm like?"

She had thrilled to London. She used to say she would like to go back into the provinces just to have again the pleasure of arriving at the station and coming out into the roar of the traffic and the wonderful London smell. The shops had bowled her over. Cities she had known where there was one street of elegant shops, towns where there might be one shop whose elegance lifted it high above all the rest, but here there were miles and miles of them. She discovered them for herself, and then took her husband to see the magical region of Oxford Street and Regent Street. In Bond Street they saw a necklace just like hers, and a most elegant young man went into the shop and the necklace was taken out of the window. She saw hats and coats and tailor-mades that she bought "in her mind," as she said, for she was still scared of money, and he could not induce her to be anything but frugal. (She would walk a mile to save a penny bus fare.) . . . When they went into Gray's Inn and Robert removed his curtains and some of his furniture, she asked if she might buy some of her things herself, and they visited the great stores. She quickly lost her awe of them, and when she had drawn two or three checks for amounts staggering to her who had lived all her life cooped in by a weekly financial crisis, she applied her mind [Pg 212] to the problem, and did many little sums on scraps of paper to reassure herself that she had not shaken the bank's faith in her stability and honesty. It ceased to be a miracle to her, but she hated drawing checks to herself, for cash vanished so easily and unaccountably, while for checks made payable to tradespeople she always had something to show. In this state of mind she decided, and, as something momentous, announced her decision to buy an evening dress. It was no light undertaking. A week passed before she found the material, and when she had bought it—(for in her world you always had dresses "made up")—she was doubtful of her taste, and as dubious of Old Mole's. She bought the *Era* and looked up the address of the second girl in the pantomime, who remained to her the smartest woman of her acquaintance. Curiosity as to the address in Gray's Inn brought the "second girl" flying to her aid; she was delighted to be of use and undertook to show Matilda the ins and outs of the shops and "the dear old West End." She gave counsel as to trimming, knew of an admirable dressmaker near Hanover Square, "ever so cheap." The dressmaker also sold hats, and Matilda bought hats for herself and her friend. The dressmaker also sold opera cloaks, and Matilda bought an opera cloak. The dress and the cloak necessitated, enforced, finer stockings, shoes, gloves than any Matilda possessed, and these also she purchased. . . . When all these acquisitions came home she laid them out on her bed and gazed at them in alarm and pleasure. It was the middle of the afternoon, but [Pg 213] she changed every stitch of her clothing and donned everything new, the dress and the opera cloak, the necklace, and, as she had seen the ladies do in the theater, she wore a ribbon through her hair. In this guise Old Mole surprised her. He was ravished by her loveliness, but was so taken aback by all these secret doings, so

tickled by her simplicity, that he laughed. He laughed indulgently, but he sapped her confidence, reduced all her pleasure to ashes, and there were tears, and she wished she had never come to London, and she knew she was not good enough for him, but he need not so plainly tell her so nor scorn her when she tried to make herself so: other women had pretty clothes, women, too, who were hard put to it to make a living.

He soothed her and said if she would wear her silks and fine array he would take her out next time Robert came.

“I don’t want to go out with Robert.”

“Why not?”

“If I’m not good enough to know your sister, I’m not good enough to know your brother.”

“That isn’t reasonable.”

She was ruffled and hot, and in her heart annoyed with him for coming in on her like that, for she had planned to take him by surprise on their first evening’s pleasuring. She did not want to be soothed, and preferred sparring.

“Your sister’s in town, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen her?” [Pg 214]

“No.”

“You have.”

“I have not.”

He knew why she was sparring; he knew that to disappoint a woman in the vanity of her clothes is more immediately dangerous than to treat her with deliberate insult or cruelty, but he was exacerbated by her unfair onslaught on Robert, and he was sore at the attitude taken toward him by his family. Robert had done his best, but the rest were implacable; they would not admit his right to his own actions independent of their opinion. Not content with holding their opinion, they communicated it to him in the most injurious letters, written at intervals most nicely calculated for his annoyance. To a philosopher in search of tolerance and an open mind all this had been ruffling.

The quarrel blew over. Matilda dried away her tears, and he begged her pardon and promised to give her another evening dress finer even than that, made at a real, smart, fashionable, expensive dressmaker’s. . . . Shyly and diffidently they entered a famous house in Albemarle Street and were told that without an introduction the firm could not make for madam. A splendid cocotte in glorious raiment swept by them and out into the street. She had a little spaniel in her arms and a silver-gray motorcar was awaiting her. Into this she mounted and was whirled away. With something of both contempt and envy the stately young woman who had received them gazed after [Pg 215] this vision of wealth and insolence. Old Mole and Matilda felt very small and crept away.

Old Mole said:

“The wealth of London is amazing. A man would need at least ten thousand a year to amuse himself with a woman like that.”

Matilda said:

“A creature like that!”

And a little later she said:

“I think I’ll wait for my dress.”

However, she had not to wait, for Old Mole gave the story to Robert, who, with a nice sense of the fitness of things, told his sister that he wished to buy a dress for a friend of his, and, armed with her introduction, he and Matilda went and ordered a gown at an establishment even more exclusive than that in Albemarle Street. This establishment was so select that only the most indubitably married or otherwise guaranteed ladies were served; one there obtained the French style without the suspicion of French Frenchness.

The quarrel blew over, but the sensibilities of both were rasped, and they were cautious and wary with one another, which is perhaps the greatest trial of the blessed state of matrimony. He labored to be just to her, to endeavor to understand her. She was, he confessed, in a difficult position, lifted above her kind—though it was inconceivable that she could ever have met the fate or assumed the condition of her sister, Mrs. Boothroyd—and not adopted into his. He was self-outlawed, driven [Pg 216] out of the common mind of his class, and, so far as he could see, of his country, into

his own, and therein he had as yet discovered no habitation, not even a site whereon to build. She could not share his adventures and sorrows, and, except himself and Robert, had no companionship. He asked her if she had no acquaintance in London, and she confessed to the “second girl,” Milly Dufresne. He proposed that she should ask Miss Dufresne to dinner to provide the occasion for the wearing of her new gown. She said she did not suppose he would care for Miss Dufresne, but he protested that her friends were of course his and he was only too delighted that she had a companion of her own sex and age.

The day was fixed (her birthday), the dinner ordered and arranged, a man hired for the evening to do the waiting. Without a word being said, it was assumed that there should be the ceremony due to the necklace and the French (style) gown.

As he considered all these preparations, Old Mole thought amusedly that they were not at all for Miss Dufresne and Robert (who had been invited), but rather a homage paid to their possessions, and, searching within himself for the causes of the comfort and satisfaction he felt, he found that this dinner was the first action which had brought them into harmony with the London atmosphere. Ethically there was nothing to be said for such a pretence at hospitality; but as submission to the æsthetic pressure of their surroundings, as expedience, it was quite wonderfully [Pg 217] right. It was the thin end of the wedge, the first turn of the gimlet in the boring of the bunghole of the fat barrel of London existence; and, if it were their fate to become Londoners, they were setting about it with sufficient adroitness. He was only afraid that Miss Dufresne would lead him back into the atmosphere of the theater from which he was so relieved to have escaped. The theater that he had known was only an excrescence on English life, a whelk or a wen on its reputable bald head. He had perched on it like a fly, but his concern, his absorbing concern, was to get at the brains inside that head and the thoughts inside the brain.

On the morning of the day fixed for the dinner Robert wired that he could not come, and Old Mole was left with the awful prospect of tackling Miss Dufresne alone. His recollection of her was of a most admirably typical minx with an appetite for admiration and flattery that had consumed all her other desires.

“Lord save us!” he said. “I was baffled by that type as a young man; what on earth can I do with it in my fifties?”

And in his heart he was fearful of spoiling Matilda’s pleasure. This dread so oppressed him that, finding her flurried and irritable with the work of preparation, he decided to absent himself, to lunch at Robert’s club, of which he had just been elected a member, and to soothe himself with a walk through Whitehall and the parks in the afternoon.

As he walked—it was a fine spring day with the most beautiful changing lights and [Pg 218] a sweet breeze—he congratulated himself on the wisdom of having come to London. Marriage might be difficult—there was no warrant, Scriptural or other, for expecting it to be easy—but at least in London there was interest. There was not the unrelieved sordidness of other English cities. There was a tradition, some attempt to maintain it, graciousness, a kind of dignity—it might be the dignity of a roast sirloin of beef, but dignity it certainly was—here and there traces of manners, and leisure not altogether swamped by luxury. Coming from Thrigsby was like leaving the racket of the factory for the elegant shop in which the finished articles were sold. He liked that simile, and there he left his speculations concerning London. He was not at his ease in this kind of thinking; a thought was only valuable to him when it was successfully married to an emotion to produce an image. For London he could find no image, and when he thought of England he was taken back to his most vivid emotion, that when in the caravan with Copas they had breasted the hill and come in view of the Pennine Range: but this was a mere emotion mated with no thought. As for the Empire, it simply had no significance. It was a misnomer, or rather, a name given to an illusion, or, at best, a generalization. It was certainly not an entity, but only the impossible probability of a universally accepted fiction. He could not accept it, nor could he accept the loose terminology of the politicians. For this reason he could never now read the newspapers except for the cricket and football news in which his interest [Pg 219] was maintained by habit.

Less and less was he interested in things and ideas that were not immediately human, and therefore fluid and varying in form and color as clouds and trees in the wind and birds in the air—and human beings on the earth. Rigid theory and fixed conceptions actually hurt him; they were detached, dead, like windfall fruit rotting on the ground, and everywhere, in books, in the newspapers, in public speeches, he saw them gathered up and stored, because it was too much trouble to take the ripe fruit from the tree, or to wait for the hanging fruit to ripen, or because (he thought) men walk with their eyes to the ground, even as he had done, and see nothing of the beauty above and around them. And, thinking so, he would feel an impulse to arise and shout and waken men, but then, regretfully, he would admit that he was too old

to surrender to this impulse, and would think too much before he spoke, and would end by prating like Gladstone or roaring like Tom Paine.

It seemed to him that the character of London was changed or changing. He delighted especially in the young men and women, who walked with a new swagger, almost with freedom, and adorned themselves with gay, bold colors. The young women especially were limber in their movements, marvelously adroit in dodging their hampering garments. Their bodies were freer. They had not the tight, trussed appearance of the young women of his own day and generation. He delighted especially in the young women of London. They gave him hopefulness. [Pg 220]

He was pleased to see that the young men delighted in them, also. They walked with their arms in the arms of the young women in a fine, warm comradeship, whereas, in his day, and not so long ago neither, the girls had placed a timid little hand in the arms of their swains and been towed along in a sort of condescension. It pleased him to see the young men frankly, and in spite of themselves and their dignity and breeding, give the proper involuntary salute to passing youth and beauty. . . . As he sat in St. James's Park a deliciously pretty girl passed by him, and she repeated nothing of the full homage he paid her, but then came a tall young man, sober and stiff, in silk hat and tail coat. They passed, the young man and the young woman: a lifting of the shoulders in the young man, a tilt of the head in the young woman, a half-smile of pleasure, and they went their ways. The young man approached Old Mole. He gave a little start and up went his hand in the old school salute. Old Mole rose to his feet.

"My dear fellow. . . ."

It was A. Z. Panoukian.

He said:

"Well, sir——"

They sat down together. Panoukian bore the old expression which had always overcast his face when there were discoverable laches in his conduct, and Old Mole felt himself groping for the mood of jocular severity with which he had been wont to meet that expression. [Pg 221]

"Well, sir, I never thought——"

Old Mole found the formula:

"Panoukian, what have you been up to?"

"Well, sir, I'm jolly glad to have met you, because I didn't know what you might have heard."

"Pray, Panoukian, forget that I was ever your schoolmaster. I am no longer an academic person, though there are distressing traces of my old profession in my outlook."

Panoukian had heard the story, and a grin spread across his face. That made things easier. He plumped out a full confession and personal history.

He had been a rank failure at Oxford. He had no one but himself to blame, of course. Perhaps he had not given the place a fair trial, but at the end of his fourth term he had decided that it was no use going on, and removed himself. It was partly, he thought, that he could not endure Tibster, and partly that he had lost all power of concentrating on his work.

"I don't know," he said, "but at school there was always something to work for, to get to Oxford. When I got there I seemed to shoot ahead of it, to see beyond it, and in the place itself I could find nothing but Tibster and the Tibsterian mind, cut off from the world outside and annoyed because that world has a voluptuousness which is not in its own little box. I think I changed physically, grew a new kidney or another lobe of the brain. Anyhow, the world shrank and I became very large and unwieldy, and there was nothing positive in my existence except my dislike of Tibster." [Pg 222]

"Did you smoke a great deal?" asked Old Mole.

"Only after the crisis."

"Did you make a verse translation of the Odyssey?"

"Only the first four books."

"I imagine, if you had taken your symptoms to Tibster, he would have put you right. The university has that effect on sensitive undergraduates, especially on non-Public School men. A sudden growth, a swift shooting from boyhood into the beginnings of manhood. It is very touching to watch; but Tibster must have seen it happen so often that it would be difficult for him to notice that it was happening to you more violently than usual."

“I never thought of it from Tibster’s point of view.”

“My dear Panoukian, I am only just beginning to see your affairs from your point of view, or, indeed, to admit that you have a point of view at all. . . . I hope it was not a great disappointment to your father.”

Panoukian said his father had died during his second term. He had been attached to his father and was with him at the end, and perhaps that was what began the crisis. The business had gone to his brothers, but he was left enough to live on, and that was how he came to be in London. For the time being he was acting as [Pg 223] secretary, unpaid, to Tyler Harbottle, M. P. for North Thrigsby and an old friend of his father’s. Old Mole remembered Harbottle, a butter merchant in Thrigsby and president of the Literary Society, the Field Society, the Linnæan Society, the Darwin Club, the Old Fogies, and the Ancient Codgers, and formerly a member of the Art Gallery Committee, and, in that capacity, provocative of the outcry on the purchase of a picture by so advanced and startling a painter as Puvis de Chavannes. He asked Panoukian how he liked the House of Commons, and Panoukian said it was full of Tibsters with soap and chemicals and money on their brains instead of Greek and Latin and book philosophy.

“Harbottle is a Tibster, with a little nibbling mind, picking here and there, not because he is hungry, but because he is afraid some one else will get the pieces if he doesn’t. I went to him because I wanted to work; but it isn’t work, it’s just getting in other people’s way. And there are swarms of Harbottles in the House. I sometimes think that the whole of politics is nothing but Harbottling. It would be all very well to have the brake hard on if the country were going to Hell, but when it is a matter of a long, stiff hill it is heartrending.”

And with a magnificent gesture he swept all the Tibsters and Harbottles away. Old Mole found his enthusiastic, sweeping condemnation very refreshing. There was youth in it, and he was beginning to value youth above all things. Above wisdom and experience? At least above the caution of inexperience. [Pg 224]

Clearly Panoukian was prepared to go on talking, to leave Harbottle to go on nibbling without his aid, but Old Mole had begun to feel a chill, and rose to go. Panoukian was also going toward the India Office—Harbottle was corresponding with the Secretary about two Parsees who had been refused their right of appeal to the Privy Council—and so far they went together. As they parted Old Mole remembered Matilda’s dinner party and Miss Dufresne. Panoukian seemed an excellent buffer. He invited him, and from the eagerness with which the invitation was accepted he surmised that Panoukian was rather lonely in London. Then he felt glad that he had asked him.

The party was very successful. Matilda was delighted to have another male, and that a young one, to admire her fine feathers, and Panoukian was obviously flattered and deliciously alarmed to meet a real live actress who confirmed him in his superstitious notions of the morals of the stage by flirting with him at sight. He was not very skilful in his response, but a very little subjugation was enough to satisfy Miss Dufresne: she only needed to know that she could an she would. He was very shy, and, with him, shyness ran to talkativeness. With Matilda he was like a schoolboy; his attitude toward her was a softening and rounding with chivalry of his attitude toward Old Mole. He hardly ever spoke to her without calling her Mrs. [Pg 225] Beenham: “Yes, Mrs. Beenham”—“Don’t you think so, Mrs. Beenham?”—“As I was saying to your husband, Mrs. Beenham. . . .” When he left he summoned up courage to ask Old Mole if he would bring Mrs. Beenham to tea with him. He lived in the Temple and had a wonderful view of St. Paul’s and the river. Old Mole promised he would do so, and asked him to come in whenever he liked.

“It’s awfully good of you,” said Panoukian, and with that he went off with Miss Dufresne, who had engaged him to see her into a taxi. Matilda stood at the head of the stairs and watched them go down.

“Good night, dearie,” called Miss Dufresne, and Panoukian, looking up, saw Matilda bending over.

“Good night, Mrs. Beenham,” he cried.

Matilda, returning to the study, said:

“What a nice voice that boy has got.”

“I used to expect great things of Panoukian,” said Old Mole, “but then neither he nor I had seen beyond Oxford.”

“Is he very clever?”

“He used to have the sort of cleverness schoolmasters like. It remains to be seen whether he has the sort of cleverness the world needs. He is very young.”

“Not so *very* young.”

“Like your party?”

“Oh, yes.”

“You looked very pretty.”

“Thank you, sir.” [Pg 226]

“Good girl. What about bed?”

But she was loth to move. She began several topics, but soon dropped them. At last she plunged:

“Millie’s going into a new piece. It’s a real play this time. It’s about the stage and there are to be a lot of chorus girls in it. She says she could get me in easily.”

Old Mole took this in silence.

“I won’t go if you don’t like it,” she said.

“Have you said you would go?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Do you want to?”

“What else is there for me to do?”

Indeed, what was there? He was saddened and angry at the use of the argument. He had wanted her to feel free, to come and to go, so long only as she treated him with frankness, and here he had so far failed that she had made arrangements to return to the theater and then asked for his *post facto* consent. What was it that kept her in awe of him? Not his thoughts of her, nor his feeling for her, so far as he knew either. . . . He kissed her good night and sat sadly brooding over it all: but it was too difficult for him, and he was tired and his humor would not come to his aid. He sought refuge in books, but they yielded him none, and at last Panoukian’s phrase recurred to him:

“Perhaps,” he said, “perhaps I am a Harbottler in marriage, nibbling at love. God help me if I am.”

He thought surely he had reached the worst. But Fate is inexhaustibly ingenious. [Pg 227] He was to have his bellyful of Harbottling.

Among his letters on the morning after the party he found one, the envelope of which bore in print the name of Langley Brown, Literary and Dramatic Agent, 9 Coventry Street, W. This letter informed him that Mr. Henry Butcher, of the Pall Mall Theater, proposed to immediately produce—(the split infinitive is Mr. Langley Brown’s)—a play called “Lossie Loses,” by Carlton Timmis, the rights of which Mr. Brown believe to be in Mr. Beenham’s hands. And would Mr. Beenham call on Mr. Brown, or, if not, write to give his consent, when the contract would be drawn up and the play produced.

He had almost forgotten Carlton Timmis. The letter had been forwarded through his banker. He stared at it, turned it over and over, read it again. It seemed to be an authentic document. He handed it to Matilda. She said with awe:

“Mr. Butcher!”

And, with unconscious imitation of the humor of the English Bench, Old Mole asked:

“Who is Mr. Butcher?”

This was shocking ignorance. For twenty years and more Mr. Henry Butcher’s name had been in the newspapers, on the hoardings, and his portrait, his wife’s portrait, his baby’s portrait, his dog’s portrait, his horse’s portrait had appeared in [Pg 228] the magazines, and his commendation of a certain brand of cigarette had for the last ten years been used by the makers as an advertisement. For all that, his name and personality had not penetrated Old Mole’s consciousness.

“Did you buy the play?” asked Matilda.

“I lent him fifty pounds, and he left it with me. I had no very clear idea as to his intention.”

“Is it a good play?”

“You shall read it.”

He unearthed it with some difficulty and gave it to her. She read it and wept over it.

“Is it a good play?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s a lovely part.”

He went to see Mr. Brown, a flashy little Cockney who peppered him with illustrious literary names and talked about everything but the business in hand. Old Mole asked where Timmis might be, and Mr. Brown said he had heard from him only once, and that from a place called Crown Imperial, in British Columbia.

“A good fellow, Timmis, but cracked. Impatient, you know. I never can make young writers see that they’ve got to wait until the old birds drop off the perch before their masterpieces can come home to roost.”

“Is ‘Lossie Loses’ a masterpiece?” asked Old Mole innocently.

“Between ourselves,” replied the agent, “I don’t think there’s much in it. But Mr. Butcher has been having a lean period lately and wanted something cheap, and thought he’d try a new author.” [Pg 229]

He produced the contract. Old Mole read it through in a sort of dream and signed it. He was shown out with a hearty handshake, and that very evening he received from Mr. Brown a check for ninety pounds—a hundred in advance of royalties less 10 per cent. commission. He was disconcerted. There was some uncanny wizardry in it that, by merely walking into an office and signing a paper, one could at the end of the day be the richer by ninety pounds with never a stroke of work done for it. His first impulse was to give the check to Matilda, but, on reflection, he decided to give her forty and to keep the fifty for Timmis if he could be found. He looked up Crown Imperial, British Columbia, on the map and in the gazetteer, but there was no mention of it, and, concluding that it must be a new place, he wrote to Timmis there in the hope of catching him. When he had posted his letter he remembered that Timmis might have dropped his stage name, and wrote another letter to Cuthbert Jones. Then he brushed the play from his mind.

Within a fortnight it was impossible to walk along any of the main thoroughfares of London without seeing the words “Lossie Loses,” with the name of Mr. Henry Butcher in enormous letters, and the name of Carlton Timmis in very small print.

For the first night Old Mole received, with Mr. Butcher’s compliments, a ticket for Box B. Panoukian and Robert came to dinner. Matilda wore her first evening dress and the opera cloak, a red ribbon in her hair, and graced the front of the box with the three men behind her. [Pg 230]

There is a certain manner appropriate to a seat in the front of a box—a consciousness that is not quite self-consciousness, a certain setting back of the shoulders, a lifting of the head, a sort of shy brazenness, an acceptance of being part of the show, and, for all the pit knows, a duchess. Matilda had caught it to perfection and turned a dignified profile to the opera glasses directed upon her. Panoukian pointed out the political personages in the stalls, and, being a great reader of those glossy photographic papers, which are perhaps the most typical product of the time, was able to recognize many of the literary and artistic celebrities of the moment. Actresses glided fussily to their seats, smiling acknowledgment to the applause of the groundlings. There was a bobbing up and down, a bowing and a smiling, a waving of programs and fans from acquaintance to acquaintance, a chatter and hum of many voices that drowned the jigging overture, and went droning on into the first few moments of the play.

Old Mole’s memory of it was hazy, but sufficiently alive to quarrel with some of the impressions he now had of it and to enable him to distinguish between the work of the actors and the work of the author. The play was worse and better than he had thought. In his recollection it was not so entirely unscrupulous in its appeal to the surface emotions, nor so extraordinarily adroit in sliding off into a dry, sly and perfectly irrelevant humor just at the moment when those base appeals looked as though they were going to be pushed so far as to offend even the thickest sensibilities. Each curtain was brought down with a neat, wistful little joke, except at the end of the third act, when, in silence, Lossie, the little unloved heroine of the play, prepared to cook the supper for the husband who had just left her. In the fourth act he came back and ate it, so that all ended happily. The atmosphere was Lancashire, and the actors spoke Scots, Irish, Belfast, Somerset, and Wigan, but that did not seem to matter. The actress who played Lossie spoke with a very good Thrigsby accent, and her performance was full of charm. She had a fine voice and knew how to use it, and her awkwardness of gesture suited the uncouthness with which the Lancashire folk were endowed. She and the sad little jokes carried all before them, and there was tremendous applause at the end of each act and the close of the play. [Pg 231]

Mr. Henry Butcher made a grateful little speech, and, looking toward Old Mole's box, said the author was not in the house. All eyes were turned toward the box, and the shouting was renewed.

Entirely unconscious of the attention and interest they were arousing, the party escaped. Robert was hungry and insisted on having oysters. As they ate them they [Pg 232] discussed the play. Robert and Matilda were enthusiastic, Old Mole was dubious and depressed, and Panoukian contemptuous.

"I've seen worse," he said, "but nothing with quite so much effrontery. It was like having your face dabbed with a baby's powder puff. I felt all the time that in a moment they would have a child saying its prayers on the stage. But they never did, and there was extraordinary pleasure in the continual dread of it, and the continual sense of relief. And every now and then they made one laugh. I believe it will succeed."

It succeeded. The critics unanimously agreed that the new play had charm, and, said one of them: "It is with plays, as with women; if they have charm, you need look no further. All London will be at Lossie's feet."

At the end of the first week Old Mole received a check for one hundred and ten pounds; at the end of the second a check for one hundred and twenty-five. He sent two cablegrams to Carlton Timmis and Cuthbert Jones at Crown Imperial, British Columbia. No answer. Timmis (or Jones) had disappeared.

Money poured in.

The play was bought by cable for America, and five hundred pounds passed into Old Mole's account. It became almost a horror to him to open his letters lest they should contain a check.

Worst of all, the newspapers scented "copy." A successful play, a vanished author, [Pg 233] no one to claim the fame and fortune lying there. One paper undertook to find Carlton Timmis. It published photographs of him, scraps of biography and anecdotes, but Timmis remained hidden, and the newspapers yelled, in effect, "Where is Timmis? The public wants Timmis. Wireless has tracked a murderer to his doom, surely it cannot fail to reveal the whereabouts of the public's new darling?" Another journal found its way to the heart (*i.e.,* the box office) of the theater and asked in headlines, "*Is Butcher Paying Royalties*?" Butcher wrote to say that he was paying royalties to the owner of the play, whose name was not Carlton Timmis. And at last a third newspaper announced the name of the beneficiary of the play—H. J. Beenham. Gray's Inn was besieged. Old Mole was in despair and declared that they would have to pack up and go away until the uproar had died down, but, more sensibly, Matilda invited a journalist in, gave him a drink, and told him the little there was to tell. The next check was for a hundred and eighty pounds.

Money poured in.

Five companies were sent out with "Lossie Loses" in America, three in England, and the play was given in Australia and South Africa. It was also published. Money poured in. It came in tens, in hundreds, in thousands of pounds. It became a purely automatic process, and Old Mole quickly lost interest in it and ceased to think about it. He told himself that it would soon come to an end, that such a violent eruption of [Pg 234] gold could not last very long, and his attention was engrossed by its effects.

In his own mind it had brought about no moral crisis like that of his first catastrophe, but, insensibly, it had altered his point of view, given him a sense of security that was almost paralyzing in its comfort. All his old thoughts had been in self-protection against the people with whom he had come in contact, people to whom he was a stranger, different from themselves, and therefore suspect. But now in London when he met new people they bowed before him, put themselves out to ingratiate him, almost, it seemed, though he hated to think so, to placate him. His name was known. He was Mr. Beenham, and was somehow responsible for "Lossie Loses," which everybody had seen and the public so loved that three matinées a week were necessary, and there were beginning to be Lossie collars and Lossie hats and Lossie muffs and Lossie biscuits and Lossie corsets. . . . And his sister had called on Matilda and removed that source of bitterness. And at the club men sought his acquaintance. He had letters from more than one of his old colleagues at Thrigsby and several of his former pupils sought him out. A few of them were distinguished men—a doctor, a barrister, a journalist, the editor of a weekly literary review. They invited him to their houses, and he was delighted with the ease and grace with which Matilda bore herself and was more than a match for their wives, and became friendly with one or two of them. They moved among people whose lives were easy and [Pg 235] smooth-running in roomy, solidly furnished houses, all very much like each other in style and taste. The people they met at these houses in South Kensington and

Hampstead were almost monotonously alike. At the doctor's house they met doctors, at the barrister's solicitors and more barristers, at the editor's journalists and writers. They were different only in their professions: those apart, they were as alike as fossil ammonites in different strata: and they all "loved" "Lossie Loses." The women were very kind to Matilda and invited her to their tea parties and "hen" luncheons. She read the books they read and began to have "views" and opinions, and to know the names of the twentieth century poets; she picked up a smattering of the jargon of painting and music just as she caught the trick of being smart in her dress, and for the same reason, because the other women had "views" and opinions and talked of music and painting and were smart in their dress. The eruption of gold into their lives had blown her desire to return to the theater into the air. She was fully occupied with dressing, buying clothes, ever more clothes, and arranging for the hospitality they received and gave.

Her husband was amazed at the change in her. It was as startling as the swift growth of a floundering puppy into a recognizable dog. It was not merely a matter of pinning on clothes and opinions and a set of fashionable ideas: there was real growth in the woman which enabled her to wear these gewgaws with ease and grace so that [Pg 236] they became her and were an ornament, absurd it is true, but so generally worn—though rarely with such tact—that their preposterousness was never noticed in the crowd. She was gayer and easier, and she seemed to have lost the tug and strain at her heart. Often in the daytime she was dull and listless, but she never failed to draw upon some mysterious reserve of vitality for the evening.

He was sometimes alarmed when he watched the other women who had not her freshness, and saw how some of them had ceased to be anything but views and opinions and clothes. But he told himself that she was not tied, as the rest were, by their husband's professions, to London, and that they could always go away when they were tired of it. . . . He was often bored and exhausted, but he put up with it all, partly because of the pleasure she was finding in that society, and partly because he felt that he was getting nearer that indeterminate but magnetically irresistible goal which had been set before him on—when was it?—on the night when his thoughts had taken form and life and he had been launched into that waking dreamland. With that, even the most violent happenings seemed to have very little to do; they were almost purely external. One might have a startling adventure every day, and be no nearer the goal. One might have so many adventures that his capacity to enjoy them would be exhausted. There was, he felt sure, as he pondered the existence of these professional people and saw how many of them were jaded by habit, but were carried [Pg 237] on by the impetus of the habits of their kind, so that they were forever seeking to crowd into their days and nights far more people, thoughts, ideas, books, æsthetic emotions than they would hold—there was somewhere in experience a point at which living overflowed into life and was therein justified. So much seemed clear, and it was that point that he was seeking. In his relationship with Matilda, in his love for her, he had striven to force his way to it. The violence of his meeting with her, the brutality of his breach with his old existence, had, by reflex action, led him to violence and brutality even in his kindness, even in his attempted sympathy.

That seemed sound reasoning, and it led him to the knowledge that Matilda had plunged into the life of the professional people with its round of pleasures and functions, its absorption in tailors and mummers and the amusers of the people, its entire devotion to amusement, as a protection against himself. It was an unpleasant realization, but amid so much pleasantness it was bracing.

Money poured in. "Lossie Loses" was visited by all the Royal Family. When it had been performed two hundred and fifty times the Birthday Honors list was published and Henry Butcher was acclaimed "our latest theatrical knight." He gave a supper party on the stage to celebrate the two occasions; and he invited Mr. and Mrs. Beenham.

There were present the Solicitor-General, Mr. Justice Sloppy, the three celebrated [Pg 238] daughters of two dukes, the daughters-in-law of three Cabinet Ministers, a millionaire, two novelists, five "absolutely established" dramatists, three dramatic critics, nine theatrical knights, the ten most beautiful women in London, the Keeper of the Coptic Section of the South Kensington Museum, Tipton Mudde, the aviator, and Archdeacon Froude, the Chaplain of the Actors' Union. There were others who were neither named nor catalogued in the newspaper (Court and Society) next day. As Mr. Justice Sloppy said, in the speech of the evening: "For brains and beauty he had never seen anything like it. . . ." The toasts were the King, Sir Henry Butcher, Lossie, and the Public, and there, as Panoukian remarked when the feast was described to him, you have the whole thing in a nutshell, the topnotch of English philosophy, the expression of the English ideal, lots of food, lots of drink, lots of talk, of money, of people, and then a swollen gratitude—"God bless us every one." And

Panoukian then developed a theory that England, the English character, had reached its zenith and come to flower and fruit in the genius of Charles Dickens. Thereafter was nothing but the fading of leaves, the falling of leaves, the drowsing into hibernation. He was excited by the idea of falling leaves to describe the intellectual and moral activity of the country. It would seem to explain the extraordinary predominance of the Harbottles, who were so thick upon every English institution [Pg 239] that Vallombrosa was nothing to it.

Old Mole met Tyler Harbottle again, and, allowing for Panoukian's youthful exaggeration, had to admit the justice of his estimate. Harbottle was very like a falling leaf, blown hither and thither upon every gust of wind, dropping, skimming, spinning in the air, but all the time obeying only one impulse, the law of gravity, which sent him down to the level of the ground, the public. Seeing nothing but the public, nothing beyond it, hoping for nothing but a comfortable resting place when at last he came to earth, Harbottle was under the illusion that the winds that tossed him came from the public, and when they blew him one way he said, "I will go that way," and when they blew him another he said, "I will go this." He was a Unionist Free Trader in theory and by label: in practice he was an indefatigable wirepuller. By himself he was unimportant, but there were so many of him and his kind that he had to be placated.

Old Mole met all the Harbottles. After Sir Henry Butcher's party he and Matilda were squeezed up into a higher stratum of society. Tipton Mudde took Matilda up in his monoplane and thereafter their whole existence grew wings and flew. They now met the people of whom their professional acquaintances had talked. The triumph of "Lossie Loses" continued: it was said the play would beat the record of "Our Boys." Money poured in, and almost as bewildering was the number of invitations—to vast [Pg 240] dinner parties, to at homes, to drawing-room meetings, to boxes at the Opera, to luncheons at the luxurious hotels, to balls, to political receptions, to banquets given to celebrate honors won or to mark the end of a political campaign, or to welcome an actor-manager home from Australia. Whenever a Harbottle pulled out a plum from the pie than the subtler Harbottles buzzed like flies around it and arranged to eat and drink and make merry or at least to make speeches.

For a time it was very good fun. Old Mole and Matilda did as the Harbottles did. They had so many engagements that they were compelled to buy a motorcar and to engage a chauffeur. Without it Matilda could never have found time to buy her clothes. She went to the dressmaker patronized by all the female Harbottles, but the dressmaker made for an old-fashioned duchess, who adhered to the figure of the nineties and refused to be straight-fronted. The female Harbottles fled from this horrid retrogression and made the fortune of an obscure little man in Chelsea.

It was good fun for a time, and Old Mole was really interested. Here on the top of English life, its head and front—for the great-leisured governing classes no longer governed; they had feudal possessions but not the feudal political power—was a little world whizzing like a zoetrope. You might peep through the chinks and the figures inside it would seem to be alive, but when you were inside it there were just a number of repetitions of the same figures in poses disintegrated from movement. The [Pg 241] machine whizzed round, but what was the force that moved it? Impossible to enter it except by energy or some fluke that made you rich enough or famous enough for there to be flattery in your acquaintance. True, Old Mole only saw the figures inside the machine arranged for pleasure. They were workers, too, but their pleasure was a part of their work. Lawyers who were working eighteen hours a day could find time to visit three great entertainments in an evening; politicians after an all-night sitting in the House could dine out, see two acts of the Opera, or the ballet, or an hour or so of a revue, and then return to the division Lobbies; actors, after two performances in the day, could come on to a reception at midnight and eat caviare and drink champagne. There were very few of whom it could be said that the rout was the breath of their nostrils; but all continued in it, all accepted it as a normal condition of things, as the proper expression of the nation's finest energies. Impossible to avoid it, furtherance of ambition and young devotion to an ideal both led to it. . . . Pitchforked into it so suddenly, with so many vivid impressions after wanderings, Old Mole felt how completely it was cut off from the life of the country, because from the inside and the outside of the machine things looked so entirely different. He had to go no further than his own case. On all hands he heard it said so often that "Lossie Loses" was a wonderful play—"so delicate, so fanciful, so full of the poetry of common things"—that it needed only a very little weakening of his critical faculty for [Pg 242] him to begin to believe it and greedily to accept the position it had given him. As it was, knowing its intrinsic falsehood and baseness, he marveled that people of so much intelligence could be bemused by success into such jockeying of their standards. But he began to perceive that there were no standards, neither of life nor of art. There could not be, for there was no time for valuation, just as there was no time for thinking. Here and there he found an ideal or two, but such wee, worn,

weary little things, so long bandied about among brains that could not understand them and worried into a decline by the shoddy rhetorical company they had been forced to keep. Arguing from his own case, Old Mole came to the conclusion that the whole whirligig had come about from a constant succession of decent ordinary mortals having been, like himself, the victims of an eruption of gold which had carried them, without sufficient struggle or testing of imagination or moral quality, to an eminence above their fellows, upon which, in their bewilderment, they were conscious of nothing but a dread of falling down. In that dread, sharing no other emotion, they clung together fearfully, met superficially, were never content unless they were meeting superficially, creating flattery and even more flattery to cover their dread. And, as they were forever gazing downward into the depths from which they had been raised, it was impossible for them to see more than a yard or so further than their own feet. Fearful of taking a false step, they never moved; their [Pg 243] minds curled up and went to sleep. They could create nothing, and could only imitate and reproduce. They had abandoned the dull habits of the middle class and yet were the slaves of middle-class ideas. There were very charming people among them, but they accepted good-humoredly that England had nothing better to offer. They had pleasant houses in Town and in the country, delightful and amusing people to visit them, to keep them from boredom, and they asked no more.

Old Mole studied the history of England, the railway frenzy, the growth of the manufacturing districts, the foundation of the great shipbuilding yards, the immense eruption of gold that had swept away the old, careless, negligent, ruling squires, and set in their place those who could survive the scramble. And the scramble had never ceased; it had been accepted as the normal state of things. The heat and excitement of the rout gave the illusion of energy, which, being without moral direction, was pounced upon by the English desire for comfort and the appearance of solidarity, the mania for having the best of everything in the belief that it will never be bettered. So against the inconveniences of an antiquated system of laws, a mean and narrow code of morals, the consequences of their own reckless disregard of health in the building of the great cities of industry, in the payment of those who labored in them, they padded themselves in with comfort, more and more of it.

"Almost," said Old Mole, "I am persuaded to become a Jew, to sweat the sweaters, [Pg 244] pick the profits, rule the world in honor of the cynical Hebrew god who created it, and live in uneasy triumph in the domestic virtues and worship of the flesh uncrucified."

Once you have been drawn into the machine it is very difficult to get out of it. Old Mole struggled, but money and invitations came pouring in. "Lossie Loses" survived two holiday seasons. During the second the actress who played Lossie went away on her vacation, and Matilda, urged on by Butcher, with whom she had become friendly, played the part, was successful, and gave the piece a new spurt of vitality. It was not a brilliant performance, but then a brilliant performance would have killed the play. The play needed charm, Matilda had it, and, by this time, among so many expertly charming women, she had learned how to manipulate it. Her appearance on the stage extended her popularity among her distinguished acquaintances, but subtly changed her status, and she had to learn how to defend herself. Her life became more exciting and she expanded in response to it. She distressed Old Mole by talking about her adventures, and he began to think it was really time to go.

They went abroad for several months, to Paris, Florence, Rome, Sicily, Algiers, but as they stayed in luxurious and expensive hotels they might almost as well have stayed in London. Old Mole discovered nothing except that the eruption of gold must [Pg 245] have been universal and that the character of the English nation had found its most obvious expression in its stout, solid, permanent telegraph poles.

They returned to London, and Matilda accepted a small part in a new play by a famous dramatist, who had borrowed "Lossie" from the "greatest success of the century," called her "Blendy," and set her to leaven the mixture he had produced after the two years' hard work fixed as the proper quantum by Henrik Ibsen.

More success.

And Old Mole, feeling that he was now beyond all hope of escape, since he was suffering from a noticeable fatty degeneration of the will, had argued with Matilda, but she had had her way, for he could find no rejoinder to her plea that it was "something to do."

He refused to leave Gray's Inn. She was tired of it; said the rooms were cramped, but he clung to it as an anchorage.

There was a steadying of their existence. She took her work seriously, and rested

as much as possible during the day. In the evenings he missed her, and he detested having his dinner at half-past six. But the discomfort was a relief and gave him a much needed sharpening of the wits. Every night he met her at the theater and made more acquaintances in it. He applied his theory of the eruption of gold to them, and, studying them for that purpose, was amazed to find how little different they were [Pg 246] from Mr. Copas and the miserable John Lomas. Copas had been untouched by the eruption. These men, and particularly Henry Butcher and Matilda's manager, were Copas varnished and polished. Beneath the varnish they were exactly the same; self-important, self-centered, entirely oblivious of life outside the theater, utterly unheeding of everything outside their profession that could not be translated into its cant and jargon, childishly jealous, greedy of applause, sensitive of opinion, boys with the appetites and desires of grown men, human beings whose development had been arrested, who, in a healthy society, would be rogues and vagabonds, or wandering adventurers, from sheer inability to accept the restrictions and discipline imposed by social responsibility. They were cruelly placed, for they were in a position needing adult powers, having audiences night after night vaster than could be gathered for any divine or politician or demagogue; they had to win their own audiences, for no theater was subsidized; and when they had won them they were mulcted in enormous sums for rent; they were sucked, like the other victims of the eruption, into the machine, the zoetrope, and being there, in that trap and lethal chamber of spontaneity, they had to charm their audiences, with nothing more than the half-ideas, the sentimental conventions, the clipped emotions of their fellow sufferers. They were squeezed out of their own natures, forced into new skins, could only retain their positions by the successful practice of their profession, and were forced [Pg 247] to produce plays and shows out of nothing, being robbed both of their Copas-like delight in their work and of their material for it. Their position was calamitous and must have been intolerable without the full measure of applause and flattery bestowed on them.

Clearly it was not through the theater that Old Mole could find the outlet he was seeking.

He turned wearily from its staleness, and told himself, after long pondering of the problem, that he had been mistaken, that he had been foolishly, and a little arrogantly, seeking in life the imaginative force, the mastery of ideas and human thoughts and feelings that he had found in literature. Life, maybe, proceeds through eruption and epidemic; art through human understanding and sympathy and will. . . . That pleased him as a definite result, but at once he was offended by the separation, yet, amid so much confusion, it was difficult to resist the appeal of so clean and sharp a conception. It lost the clarity of its outline when he set it against his earlier idea of living brimming over into life. . . . There were then three things, living, life and art, a Trinity, three lakes fed by the same river. That was large and poetic, but surely inaccurate. For, in that order, the lakes must be fed by a strange river that flowed upward. . . . Anyhow, it was something to have established the three things which could comprise everything that had penetrated his own consciousness, three things which were of the same essence, expressions of the same force. Within the action [Pg 248] and interaction there seemed to be room for everything, even for Sir Henry Butcher, even for Tyler Harbottle, M.P.

He had arrived at the sort of indolent charity which, in the machine, passes for wisdom and sanity, the unimaginative tolerance which furs and clogs all the workings of a man's mind and heart. It is not far removed from indifference. . . . In his weariness, the exhaustion and satiety of the modern world, he measured his wisdom by the folly of others, and in his satisfaction at the discrepancy found conceit and thought it confidence. He began to write again and returned to his projected essay on Woman, believing that he had in his idea disentangled the species from Matilda. He was convinced that he had risen above his love for her, to the immense profit of their relationship, which had become more solid, settled and pleasurable. As he had planned when they came to London, so it had happened. They had gone their ways, seemed for a time to lose sight of each other, met again, and were now—were they not?—journeying on apace along life's highway, hailing the travelers by the road, aiding the weary, cracking a joke and a yarn with those of good cheer, staying in pleasant inns.

"Something like a marriage!" thought he. "Life's fullest adventure."

And he measured his marriage against those of the men and women in the machine; sour captivity for the most part, or a shallow, prattling and ostentatious [Pg 249] devotion.

His essay on Woman was only a self-satisfied description of his marriage. Out of the writing of it came no profit except to his vanity. Preoccupied with questions of style, he pruned and pared it down, refashioned and remodeled it until at last he could not read it himself. Having no convenient sands in which to bury it, he gave it

to Panoukian to read.

Panoukian was in that stage of development (which has nothing to do with age) when a man needs to find his fellows worshipful and looks for wonders from them. He was very young, and kindness from a man older than himself could bowl him over completely, set his affections frothing and babbling over his judgment, so that he became enslaved and sycophantish, and prepared, mentally if not physically, to stand on his head if it so happened that the object of his admiration could be served by it. He was in a nervous state of flux, possessing small mastery over his faculties, many of which were only in bud; his life was so little his own, was so shapeless and unformed that there could be no moderation in him; his admirations were excessive, had more than once landed him in the mire, so that he was a little afraid of them, and to guard against these dangers sought refuge in intolerance. To prevent himself seeing beauty and nobility and being intoxicated by them, he created bugbears for himself and hated them, and was forever tracking them down and finding their marks in the moot innocent persons and places. He was very young, mightily in love with [Pg 250] love, so that he was forever guarding himself from coming to it too early and being fobbed off with love cheapened or soiled. His passion was for “reality,” of which he had only the most shapeless and uncommunicable conception, but he was always talking about it with fierce denunciations of all the people who seemed to him to be deliberately, with criminal folly, burking it. For this reality his instinct was to preserve himself, and he lived in terror of his loneliness driving him to headlong falls from which he might never be able to recover. He was a full-blooded, healthy young man and must have been wretchedly unhappy had it not been that people, in their indolent, careless way, were often enough kind to him to draw off some of his accumulated enthusiasm in an explosive admiration and effusive, though tactfully manipulated, affection. Old Mole was kinder to him than anyone had ever been except his father, but then his father had had no other methods than those of common sense, while in Old Mole there was a subtlety always surprising and refreshing. Also Old Mole was prepared almost indefinitely, as it seemed, to listen to Panoukian’s views and opinions and rough winnowing of the wheat from the chaff of life, so far as he had experienced it.

Panoukian therefore read Old Mole’s manuscript with the fervor of a disciple, and found in it the heat and vigor which he himself always brought to their discussions. The essay, indeed, was like the master’s talk, cool and deliberate, broken in its [Pg 251] monotony by comical little stabs of malice. The writing was fastidious and competent. Panoukian thought the essay a masterpiece, and there crept a sort of reverence into his attitude toward its author. This was an easy transition, for he had never quite shaken off the rather frightened respect of the pupil for the schoolmaster. Then, to complete his infatuation, he contrasted Old Mole with his employer, Harbottle.

And Old Mole was fond of Panoukian. At first it was the sort of amused tenderness which it is impossible not to feel on the sight of a leggy colt in a field or a woolly kitten staggering after a ball. Then, by association and familiarity, it was enriched and became a thing as near friendship as there can be between men of widely different ages, between immaturity and ripeness. It saved the situation for both of them, the young man from his wildness, the older from the violent distortion of values which had become necessary if he were to move easily and comfortably in the swim. Above all, for Old Mole, it was amusing. For Panoukian nothing was amusing. In his intense longing for the “reality” of his dreams he hated amusement; he detested the vast expenditure of energy in the modern world on making existence charming and pleasant and comfortable, the elaborate ingenuity with which the facts of life were hidden and glossed over; he despised companionable books, and fantastical pictures and plays, luxurious entertainments, magazines filled with [Pg 252] advertisements and imbecile love-stories, kinematographs, spectacular football, could not understand how any man could devote his energies to the creation of them and retain his sincerity and honesty. He adored what he called the English genius, and was disappointed and hurt because the whole of English life was not a spontaneous expression of it, and he found one of his stock examples in architecture. He would storm and inveigh against the country because the English architectural tradition had been allowed to lapse away back in the dark ages of the nineteenth century. He had many other instances of the obscuring or sudden obliteration of the fairest tendencies of the English genius, and to their mutual satisfaction, Old Mole would put it all down to his theory of the eruption of gold.

Nearly all Panoukian’s leisure was spent at Gray’s Inn or out with Old Mole and Matilda, or with them on their visits to those of their friends to whom they had introduced him. He was good-looking, well built, easily adept at ball-games—for he possessed a quick, sure eye—and his shy frankness made him likeable. The charm of English country life would soften his violence and soothe his prejudices, but only the more, when he returned to London, would he chafe against the incessant pursuit of material advantages, the mania of unselective acquisition, the spinning and droning

of the many-colored humming-top.

From the first moment he had been Matilda's slave, and no trouble was too great, no time too long, no task too tedious, if only he could yield her some small service. [Pg 253] He would praise her to Old Mole:

"She is so real. Compare her with other women. She does all the things they do, and does them better. She takes them in her stride. She can laugh with you, talk with you, understand what you mean better than you do yourself, give you just the little encouragement you need, and you can talk to her and forget that she is a woman. . . . You don't know, sir, what an extraordinary difference it has made in my life since I have known you two."

That would embarrass Old Mole, and he found it impossible to say anything without jarring Panoukian's feelings. Therefore he would say nothing, and later he would look at Matilda, watch her, wait for her smile, and wonder. Her smile was the most surprising, the most intimate gift he ever had from her. Often for days together they would hardly see each other and, when they met, would have little to say, but he would watch until he could meet her gaze, win a smile from her, and feel her friendliness, her interest, and know that they still had much to share and were still profoundly aware of each other. He would say to her sometimes:

"I don't see much of you nowadays."

She would answer:

"But you are so interested in so many things. And I like my life."

And in the gentle gravity with which she now spoke to him, which was in every gesture of her attitude toward him, he would discern a fuller grace than any he had [Pg 254] hoped to find in her. She was so trim and neat, so well disciplined, so delicate and nice in all she did; restrained and subtle but with no loss of force. Even her follies, the absurd modish tricks she had caught in the theater and among the women who fawned on her, seemed no impediment to her impulse should the moment come for yielding to it. She was no more spendthrift of emotion and affection than she was of money, and, almost, he thought, too thorough in her self-effacement and endeavor to be no kind of burden upon him.

"I am so proud of you!" he would say.

And she would smile and answer:

"You don't know, you never will know, how grateful I am to you."

But her eyes would gaze far beyond him, through him, and light up wistfully, and he would have a queer discomfortable sensation of being a sojourner in his own house. Then he would think and puzzle over Panoukian's rapturous description of her. She was discreet and guarded: only her smile was intimate; her thoughts, if she had thoughts, were shy and never sought out his; demonstrative she never was. She led a busy, active life, the normal existence of moneyed or successful women in London, and she was distinguished in her efficiency. She had learned and developed taste, and was ever transforming the chambers in Gray's Inn, driving out Robert and installing in every corner of it the expression of her own personality. After the first [Pg 255] dazzling discovery of the possibilities of clothes she had rebelled against the price charged by the fashionable dressmakers and made her own gowns. Robert used to twit her about her restlessness, and declared that one week when he came he would find her wearing the curtains, and the next her gown would be covering the cushions. Old Mole used to tease her, too, but what she would take quite amiably from Robert she could not endure from him.

"I thought you'd like it," she would say.

"But, my dear, I do like it!"

"Then why do you make fun of me?"

And sometimes there would be tears. Once it came to a quarrel, and after they had made it up she said she wanted a change, and went off to stay with Bertha Boothroyd. In two days she was back again with the most maliciously funny description of Jim's reception of her and his absolute refusal to leave her alone with Bertha lest she should be contaminated. Then she was gay and light-hearted, glad to be back again and more busy than ever, and when Panoukian came to see them she teased him out of his solemnity and earnestness almost into tears of rage. She told him he ought to go to Thrigsby and work, find some real work to do and not loaf about in London, in blue socks and white spats, waiting until he was old enough to be taken seriously.

He went away in the depths of misery, and she said to Old Mole:

"Why don't you find him something to do?" [Pg 256]

"I? How can I find him. . . ?"

“Don’t you know that you are a very important person? You know everybody who is anybody, and there is nobody you can’t know if you want to. Think of the hundreds of men in London who spend their whole lives struggling to pull themselves up into your position so that in the end they may have the pleasure of jobbing some one into a billet.”

“That,” said Old Mole, “is what Panoukian calls Harbottling.”

She made him promise to think it over, and he began to dream of a career for Panoukian, a real career on the lines of Self-Help.

In his original pedagogic relation with Panoukian he had blocked out for him an ascent upon well-marked and worn steps through Oxford into the Home Civil Service, wherein by the proper gradations he should rise to be a Permanent Under-Secretary and a Knight, and a credit to the school. To the altered Panoukian and to Old Mole’s changed and changing mind that ambitious flight was now inadequate. Panoukian was undoubtedly intelligent. Old Mole had not yet discovered the idea that could baffle him, and he was positively reckless in his readiness to discard those which neither fitted into the philosophy he for the moment held nor seemed to lead to a further philosophy at which he hoped to arrive. Every day Panoukian became more youthful and every day more breathlessly irreverent. Nothing was sacred to him: he insisted on selecting his own great men, and Old Mole was forced to admit that there [Pg 257] was some wisdom in his choice. He read Voltaire and hated organized religion; Nietzsche and detested the slothfulness and mean egoism of the disordered collection of human lives called democracy; Butler and quizzed at the most respected and dozing of English institutions; Dostoevsky and yearned out in a thinly passionate sympathy to the suffering and the diseased and the victims of grinding poverty. He was not altogether the slave of his great men: after all they were dead; life went on and did not repeat itself, and he (Panoukian) was in the thick of it, and determined not to be crushed by it into a cushioned ease or the sodden insensibility of too great misery.

“My problem,” he would say, “is myself. My only possible and valid contribution to any general problem is the effective solution of that. In other words, can I or can I not become a human being? If I succeed I help things on by that much; if I fail, I become a Harbottle and retard things by that much. Do you follow me?”

Old Mole was not at all sure that he did, but he found Panoukian refreshing, for there was in him something both to touch the affections and excite the mind, and in his immediate surroundings there was very little to do as much. There were men who talked, men who did little or nothing else; but they lacked warmth, they were Laputans living on a floating island above a land desolate in the midst of plenty. Among such men it was difficult to conceive of Panoukian finding a profitable [Pg 258] occupation. Take him out of politics, and where could he be placed? For what had his education fitted him? Panoukian had had every kind of education. He had begun life in an elementary school, passed on by his own cleverness to a secondary school, and from that to the university where contact with the ancient traditions of English culture, manhood and citizenship had flung him into revolt and set him thinking about life before he had lived, braying about among philosophies before he had need of any. There was a fine stew in his brain, a tremendous array of ideas beleaguering Panoukian without there being any actual definite Panoukian to beleaguer. Certainly Old Mole could not remember ever having been in such a state himself, nor in any generation subsequent to his own could he remember symptoms which could account for the phenomenon. He had to look far to discover other Panoukians. They were everywhere, male and female. He set himself to discover them; they were in journalism, in science, in the schools of art, on the stage, writing wonderfully bad books, producing mannered and deliberately ugly verse, quarreling among themselves, wrangling, detesting each other, impatient, intolerant, outraging convention and their affectionate and well-meaning parents and guardians, united only in the one savage determination not to lick the boots of the generation that preceded them. When they could admire they worshiped; they needed to admire; they wanted to admire all men, and those men whom they found unadmirable they [Pg 259] hated.

It was all very well (thought Old Mole) for Matilda with her cool common sense to say that Panoukian must do something. What could he do? His only positive idea seemed to be that he would not become a Harbottle; and how better could he set about that than by living among the species with the bitterness of his hatred sinking so deep into his soul that in the end it must become sweetness? In theory Panoukian was reckless and violent; in practice he was affectionate and generous, much too full of the spasmodic, shy kindness of the young to fit into the Self-Help tradition. Indeed, it was just here that the Panoukians, male and female, were so astonishing. For generations in England personal ambition had been the only motive force, the sole measure of virtue, and it was personal ambition that they utterly ignored. They were

truly innocent of it. Upon that axis the society in which they were born revolved. They could not move with it, for it seemed to them stationary, and it was abhorrent to them. Their thoughts were not the thoughts of the people around them. They could neither speak the old language nor invent a new speech in which to make themselves understood. Virtue they could perceive in their young hunger for life, but virtue qualified by personal ambition and subserving it they could not understand. They were asking for bread and always they were offered stones. . . . Old Mole could not see what better he could do than be kind to Panoukian, defend him from his solitude [Pg 260] and give him the use of the advantages in the "swim" of London which he had no mind himself to employ.

One of the few definite and tangible planks in Panoukian's program was a stubborn conviction that he must have an "idea" of everything. It was, he insisted, abominable to live in London unless there was in his mind a real conception of London.

"You see," he would say, "it would be charming and pleasant to accept London as consisting of the Temple, the House and Gray's Inn, with an imperceptible thread of vitality other than my own to bind them together. We've had enough of trying to make life charming and pleasant. All that is just swinish rolling in the mud. Do you follow me? We've had enough. We were begotten and conceived and born in the mud, and we've got to get out of it; and, unless you see that mud is mud, you can't see the hills beyond, and the clear rivers, and the sky. Can you?"

"No, you can't," said Old Mole, groping about in his incoherence, and speaking only because Panoukian was waiting for a shove into his further speculations.

"I mean, London may be all in a mess, which it is, but if I haven't a clear idea of the mess I can't begin to mop it up, and I can't begin on it at all until I've cleaned up the bit of the mess that is in myself, can I? I mean, take marriage, for instance."

"By all means, take marriage."

"Well, you're married and I'm not, but it isn't a bit of good screaming about [Pg 261] marriage unless your own marriage is straightened out and,—you know what I mean? —understood, is it? . . ."

So he would go on, whirling from one topic to another—marriage, morals, democracy, the will to power,—thinking in sharp contrasts, sometimes hardly thinking, but feeling always. Vaguely, without objects, catching himself out in some detestable sentimentality, admitting it frankly and going back again over his whole argument to pluck it out. Panoukian was to himself a weedy field, and with bowed back and stiffened loins he was engrossed in stubbing it. It was exhausting to watch him at it, and when, as sometimes happened, Old Mole saw things through Panoukian's eyes he was disquieted. Then there seemed no security in existence; civilization was no longer an achievement, but a fluid stream flowing over a varied bed—rock, pebbles, mud, sand; society was no establishment, but a precarious, tottering thing, a tower of silted sands with an oozy base, blocking the river, squeezing it into a narrow and unpleasant channel. In the nature of things and its law the river would one day gather unto itself great waters and bear the sands away. . . . Meanwhile men strove to make the sand heap habitable, for they were born on it, lived and died on it, and never looked beyond. Their whole lives were filled with dread of its crumbling, their whole energies devoted to building up against it and against the action of wind and rain and sun. They built themselves in and looked not [Pg 262] out, and made their laws by no authority but only by expediency. And the young men, in their vitality too great for such confinement, knew that somewhere there must be firm ground, and were determined to excavate and to explore. And Old Mole wished them well in the person of Panoukian.

That young man set himself to discover London. He was forever coming to Gray's Inn with exciting tales of streets discovered down by the docks or in the great regions of the northern suburbs. He set himself to walk from end to end of it, from Ealing to West Ham, from Dulwich to Tottenham, and he vowed that there were men really living in it, and he began to think of the democracy as a real entity, to be exalted at the thought of its power. Old Mole demurred. The democracy had no power, since it knew not how to grasp it. Its only instrument was the vote, which was the engine of the Harbottles, the nibblers, the place-seekers, the pleasure-hunters, those who scrambled to the top of the sandy tower, where in the highest cavern there were at least air and light and only the faintest stench from the river's mud. Here there was so much divergence between Old Mole and Panoukian that they ceased to talk the same language, and Old Mole would try another tack and reach the stop-gap conclusion that the difference came about from the fact that Gray's Inn was very comfortable, while Panoukian's chambers in the Temple were bleak and

bare. That was unsatisfactory, for Panoukian would inveigh against comfort and vow, as indeed was obvious, that no one had yet devised a profitable means of spending a private income of thirty thousand a year. After reading an economic treatise he came to the conclusion that the whole political problem resolved itself into the wages question. Old Mole hated problems and questions. They parched his imagination. His whole pleasure in Panoukian's society lay in the young man's power to flood ideas with his vitality. He argued on economic lines and gradually forced the young man up to the spiritual plane and then gave him his conception of society as a sand heap. That fired Panoukian. Was it or was it not necessary for human beings to live upon shifting ground, with no firm foothold? And he said that the great men had been those who had gone out into the world and brought back tales of the fair regions contained therein. [Pg 263]

"They have dreamed of fair regions," said Old Mole, "but no man has ever gone out to them."

"Then," said Panoukian, "it is quite time some one did."

Matilda came in on that, caught the last words, and asked hopefully:

"What is it you are going to do?"

"He is going," said Old Mole, "to discover the bedrock of life and live on it."

"Is that all?" Matilda looked disappointed. "I hoped it was something practical at last."

The two men tried to carry on the discussion, but she closured it by saying that she wanted to be taken out to dinner and amused. Panoukian flew to dress himself in ordered black and white, and Matilda said to Old Mole: [Pg 264]

"The trouble with you two is that you have too much money."

"That, my dear, is the trouble with almost everybody, and, like everybody else, we sit on it and talk."

"It would do you both a world of good to have some real hard, unpleasant work."

"I can't agree with you. For twenty-five years I had real, hard, unpleasant work five days in the week, and it profited neither myself nor anybody else. I went on with it because it seemed impossible to leave it. It left me, and my life has been a much brighter and healthier thing to me. Panoukian is young enough to talk himself into action. I shall go on talking forever."

And he went on talking. Matilda produced a workbox and a pile of stockings and began darning them. They sat one on either side of the fireplace, and in the chimney sounded the explosive coo of a pigeon.

"My dear," said Old Mole, "you know, I believe in Panoukian. I believe he will make something of himself. I fancy that when he is mature enough to know what he wants he will be absolutely ruthless in making for it."

"Do you?"

Matilda rolled a pair of stockings up into a ball and tossed them into a basket on the sofa some yards away. It was a neat shot, and Old Mole admired the gesture with which she made it, the fling of the arm, the swift turn of the wrist. [Pg 265]

"I do," he said. "Until then there can be no harm in his talking."

"No. I suppose not. But you do go on so."

Panoukian returned. Matilda made ready, and they set out. Old Mole took them up to the Holborn gate and watched them walk along toward Chancery Lane. It was a July evening. He watched them until they were swallowed up in the hurrying crowd, the young man tall and big, towering above Matilda small and neat. He saw one or two men in the street turn and look at her, at them perhaps, for they made a handsome couple. He admired them and was moved, and a mist covered his spectacles. He took them off and wiped them. Then, kindling to the thought of a quiet evening to end in the excitement of their return, he walked slowly back under the windows flaring in the sunset.

"Truly," he said, "the world is with the young men. There can be no pleasanter task for the middle-aged than to assist them, but, alas! we can teach them nothing, for, as the years go by, there is more and more to learn."

He sat up until half-past one with the chamber growing ever more chill and empty, and his heart sinking as he thought of accidents that might have befallen them. He was asleep on their return and never knew its precise hour. They gave a perfectly frank and probable account of their doings: dinner at a grill-room, a music-hall, [Pg 266]

supper at a German restaurant, and then on to an At Home at the Schlegelmeiers', where there had been a squash so thick that once you were in a room it was impossible to move to any of the others. They had been wedged into the gallery of the great drawing-room at Withington House, where the principal entertainment had been a Scotch comedian who chanted lilting ballads. It was this distinguished artist's habit to make his audience sing the chorus of each song, and it had been diverting to see duchesses and ladies of high degree and political hostesses singing with the abandon of the gods at an outlying two-shows-a-night house:

Rolling, rolling in the heather,
All in the bonny August weather,
There was me and Leezy Lochy in the dingle,
There was Jock and Maggie Kay in the dell,
For ilka lassie has her laddie,
And ilka laddie has his lassie,
And what they dae together I'll na tell,
But Leezy, Leezy Lochy in the dingle,
Is bonny as the moon above the heather.

Matilda sang the song all through and made Old Mole and Panoukian troll the chorus. There were a freshness and warmth about her that were almost startling, full of mischief and sparkling fun. She teased both the men and mysteriously promised [Pg 267] them a great reward if they could guess a riddle.

"My second is in woman but not in man, my first is French, I have two syllables, and you'll never guess."

"Where did you get it?" asked Panoukian.

"I made it up."

So they tried to guess and soon confessed themselves beaten. Then she told them that the second half of the riddle was *sense*, because she never knew a man who had it; and the first half was *non* and together they made *nonsense*, because she felt like it.

Her mood lasted for five days. Panoukian came in every evening—(she was rehearsing for a new play, but only in the daytime)—and they frolicked and sang and burlesqued their own solemn discussions. On the sixth day her high spirits sank and she was moody and silent. She forbade Panoukian to come in the evening. He came at teatime, and she stayed out. One day Old Mole had tea with Panoukian. They walked in the Temple Gardens afterward, and Panoukian blurted out:

"I don't know if your wife has told you, sir, but after we left the Schlegelmeiers' it was such a glorious night, and we were so glad to be in the air again, that we took a taxi and drove down to Richmond and came back in the dawn. There wasn't any harm in it, as you and I see things, but I've been thinking it over and come to the conclusion that you ought to know."

A sudden anger took possession of Old Mole, and he retorted: [Pg 268]

"Of course, if there were any harm in it, you wouldn't tell me."

"Hang it all, sir. You haven't any right to say that to me."

"No, no. Quite right. I haven't. No. I beg your pardon. I'm glad to see you such friends. She isn't very good at making friends. Acquaintances come and go, but there seem to be very few people whom she and I can share."

"I have the profoundest respect for her," said Panoukian. "As we were coming back in the dawn she told me all her life. The things she has suffered, the misery she has come through."

And they fraternized in their sympathy for Matilda. Panoukian gave an instance of her early sufferings. She had never told it to her husband, and he returned to Gray's Inn puzzled and uneasy, to find her sitting idle, doing nothing, with no pretence at activity. He was tender with her, and asked if she might be ill. She said no, but she had been thinking and wanted to know what was the good of anything. She said she knew she never could be like the other women they knew; it wasn't any good, they seemed to feel that she was different and hadn't had their education and pleasant girlhood, and they only wanted her because they thought she was a success. He told her that he wanted nothing less than for her to be like the other women, that he never wanted her to live in and be one of the crowd, but only to be herself, her own [Pg 269] brave, delightful self.

"That's what Arthur says." (They had begun to call Panoukian *Arthur* during their few days of high spirits.) "He says you've got to be yourself or nothing. And I don't understand, and thinking makes it so hard. . . ." She did not want him to speak. She said, "You still love me? You still want me?"

And there came back to him almost the love of their wanderings, the old desire with its sting of jealousy.

For three days after that she never once spoke to him.

It seemed she wrote to Panoukian, for he appeared again on her last night before the opening of the new play, and was there when she returned from the dress rehearsal. She shook hands with him, made him sit by the fireplace opposite Old Mole, took up some sewing, and said:

"Now talk."

After some diffidence Panoukian began, and they came round to "Lossie Loses," the last weeks of which had at length been announced. It would have run for two years and two months. Panoukian's theory of its success was that people were much like children, and once they were pleased with a story wanted it told over and over again without a single variation.

"The public," said Matilda, "are very funny. When they don't listen to you, you think them idiots; when they do, you adore them and think them wonderful." [Pg 270]

"I have never felt anything but contempt for them for liking 'Lossie Loses,' " said Old Mole.

"But then," put in Panoukian, "you did not write it. If you had, you would be persuaded by now that it is a masterpiece. That is how Harbottles are made: they attribute their flukes to their skill and insist on being given credit for them."

"I often wonder," said Old Mole, "what the man who wrote it thinks about it. He must surely know by now."

"He must be dead." Matilda swept him out of consideration with her needle. "I don't believe any man would have let it go on so long and not come forward."

Panoukian examined the ethical aspect of the situation, and from that they passed to the discussion of morals, whether there was in fact any valid morality in England, or simply those things were not done which were unpleasant in their consequences. The Ten Commandments were presumably the basis of the nation's morality, since they were read publicly in places of worship every Sunday (though the majority of the adult population never went near any place of worship). How many of the Commandments were closely observed, how many (in the general custom) met with compromise, how many neglected? Murder and the more obvious forms of theft were punished; deliberate and wicked fraud, also, but at every turn the morality had been modified, its bad admitted to be not always and altogether bad, its good equally [Pg 271] subject to qualification. It had been whittled and chipped away by non-observance until practically all that was left was a bad consisting of actions which were a palpable nuisance to society, with never a good at all.

"Either," said Panoukian, "the Jewish morality has never been suitable for the Western races or they have never been intelligent enough to grasp its intention or its applicability to the facts of life and the uses of society."

"I wish you wouldn't use so many long words," said Matilda.

But Panoukian rushed on:

"I can't believe in the justice of a morality which is based on the idea of punishment. It is inevitable that such a system should set a premium on skill in evading consequences rather than on right action."

"I believe," said Old Mole, "in tolerance, you can't begin to hold a moral idea without that."

"Right," said Matilda, "is right and wrong is wrong. I always know when I'm doing right and when I'm doing wrong."

"But you do it all the same?" asked Panoukian.

"Oh, yes."

"And so does every healthy human being. So much for morality."

"Don't you believe that people are always punished?" asked Old Mole.

"Certainly not. There are thousands of men who go scot free, and so sink into self-righteousness that more than half their faculties atrophy, and not even the most [Pg 272] disastrous calamity, not even the most terrible spiritual affliction, can penetrate to their minds."

"That," said Old Mole, "is the most horrible of punishments and seems to me to show that there is a moral principle in the universe. I find it difficult to understand why moralists are not content to leave it at that, but I have observed that men apply one morality to the actions of others and another to their own. The wicked often

prosper, and the righteous are filled with envy and pass judgment, wherein they cease to be righteous."

"My father," said Matilda, "was a very bad man, but I was fond of him. My mother was a good woman, and I never could abide her."

"It is all a matter of affection," quoth Panoukian with more than his usual emphasis.

"I agree," muttered Old Mole.

And all three were surprised at this conclusion. They were uneasily silent for a moment or two, when Panoukian departed. Then Matilda rose and came to her husband and held out her hand. He took it in both his and looked up at her.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night."

"Until to-morrow."

And slowly the smile he loved came to her face. Warmed by it and encouraged, he said:

"Is anything worrying you?"

The smile disappeared.

"No. Nothing. I'm beginning to think about things, and you. It's all so queer. . . . Good night." [Pg 273]

And she was gone.

He attended the first night of the new play. Matilda had a larger part, and one very short scene of emotion, or, at least, of what passed for it in the English theater of those days, that is to say it was a nervous and sentimental excitement altogether disproportionate to the action, and not built into the structure of the play, but plastered on to it to conceal an alarming crack in the brickwork. Matilda did very well and only for a moment let the scene slip out of the atmosphere of gimcrackery into the air of life. She did this through defective technique, but that one moment of genuine feeling, even in so false a cause, was so startling as to whip the audience out of its comfortable lethargy into something that was so near pleasure that they could not but applaud. It was an artistic error, since it was her business to be as banal and shallow as the play, which had been made with great mechanical skill so that it required only the superficial service of the actors, and, unlike the candle of the Lord, made no attempt to "search out the inward parts of the belly." In her part Matilda had to discover and betray in one moment her love for the foppish hero of the piece, and being, as aforesaid, wanting in her technical equipment, drew, for the purpose of the scene, on her own imagination, and that which—though she might not know it— [Pg 274] had possession of it. The audience was startled into pleasure, Old Mole into something like terror. There was in the woman there on the stage a power, a quality, an essence—he could not find the word—on which he had never counted, for which he had never looked, which now, he most passionately desired to make his own. He knew that it was not artistry in her, his own response to it had too profoundly shaken him; it was living fire, flesh of her flesh, and marvelously made her, for the first time, kin and kind with him. And he knew then that he had been living on theory about her, and was so contemptuous of it and of himself that he brushed aside all thought of the past, all musings and speculations, and was all eagerness to join her, to tell her of the amazing convulsion of himself, and how, at last, through this accident, he had recognized her for what she was. . . . He could not sit through the rest of the play. Its artificiality, its inane falsehood disgusted him. He went out into the brilliantly lighted streets and walked furiously up and down, up and down, and on. And the men and women in the streets seemed small and mechanical, utterly devoid of the vital principle he had discerned in his wife's eyes, voice, gesture, as she played her part. They were just a crowd, mincing and strutting, bound together by nothing but the capacity to move, to place one leg before another and proceed from one point to another of the earth's surface. He had that in common with them, but nothing else: nothing that bound him to them. (So he told himself, and so truly he thought, for he [Pg 275] was comparing a moment of real experience with a series of impressions made on him by his surroundings.) He walked up and down the glittering streets, streaked with white and yellow and green and purple lights, and the commotion in him waxed greater. . . . When he returned to the theater Matilda was gone, and had left no message for him.

He found her in her bed, with the light on, reading. She had undressed hastily and her clothes were littered about the room in an untidiness most unusual with her. She stuffed what she was reading under her pillow.

“You didn’t wait for me,” he said.

“No. I didn’t want to see anybody. I rushed away before the end.”

“Anything wrong?”

“I hate the theater. I hate it all, the people in it, the blinding lights, the painted scenery, the audience, oh! the audience! I don’t ever want to go near it again. It’s just playing and pretending. . . .”

“The piece was certainly nothing but a pretence at drama.”

“Oh! Don’t talk about it.”

“But I want to know what has upset you.”

“I can’t tell you. I don’t know myself. I only know that I’m miserable, miserable. Just let me be.”

He had learned that when she was ill or out of sorts or depressed she never had any desire left in her but to curl up and hide herself away. At such times the [Pg 276] diffidence inherent in her character seemed wholly to master her, and there was no rousing her to a better grace. He withdrew, his exaltation dampened, and repaired to his study, where in the dark at his desk in the window he sat gazing out into the night, at the few lighted windows of the Inn, and the bruise-colored glow of the sky. He could think only of her and now it seemed to him that he could really lose himself and live in her, and through her come to love. He remembered how, when she was rehearsing, he had asked how she was progressing, and she had replied: “I shall never get it. Either the part’s all wrong or I am.” And that evening she had “got it,” reached what the author had been fumbling after, the authentic note of human utterance, the involuntary expression of love. It had alarmed himself: how devastating must it then have seemed to her! It was almost horrible in its irrelevance. It came from neither of them and yet it was theirs, but not for sharing. It had driven her, like a beast on a stroke of illness, to hide away from him, but through her and only through her could he approach it. The abruptness of its outburst, its geyser-like upward thrust, made it alone seem natural and all their life of habit artificial and shabby; how much more then the stale and outworn tricks of the theater! He approached it, worshiping, marveling at the sense of release in his soul, and knew that, with the power it gave him, he had bitten through the crust of life, whereat he had been nibbling and gnawing with his mind and picking with the [Pg 277] chipped flints of philosophies. And he was awed into humility, into admission of his own impotence, into perception, clear and whole, of the immensity of its life’s purpose, of its huge force and mighty volume bearing the folly and turbulence of mind and flesh lightly on its bosom, so that a man must accept life as to be lived, can never be its master, but only its honorable servant or its miserable slave. He had then the sense of being one with life, from which nothing was severed, not the smallest bubble of a thought, not the least grain of a desire, of possessing all his force and a boundless reserve of force, and he whispered:

“I love.”

And the mighty sound of it filled all the chambers of his life, so that he was rich beyond dreams.

He laid his head in his arms and wept. His tears washed away the stains of memory, the scars and spotted dust upon his soul, and he knew now that he had no longer to deal with an idea of life, but with life itself, and he was filled with the desperate courage of his smallness.

For a brief space after a storm of summer rain the world is a place of glowing color, of flowing, harmonious lines. So it was now with Old Mole, and he discovered the charm of things. His habitual life went on undisturbed, and he could find pleasure even in that. His love for Matilda reduced him to a sort of passiveness, so that he asked nothing of her, gave her of himself only so much as she demanded, and [Pg 278] was content to watch her, to be with her, to feel that he was in no way impeding her progress.

She showed no change save that there was a sort of effort in her self-control, as though she were deliberately maintaining her old attitude toward him. She never made any further allusion to her avowed hatred of the theater, and returned to it as though nothing had suffered. He told himself that it was perhaps only a mood of exhaustion, or that, though she might have passed through a crisis, yet it was possible for her to be unaware of it, so that its effects would only gradually become visible and very slowly translated into action. After all, she was still very young, and the young are mercifully spared having to face their crises. . . . When he went to see her play her part again she had mastered her scene by artistry; the almost barbaric splendor of her outburst was gone; she had a trick for it, and her little scene became,

as it was intended to be, only a cog in the elaborate machinery by which the entertainment moved.

This time Panoukian was with him, and denounced the piece as an abomination, a fraud upon the public—(who liked it immensely)—and he produced a very ingenious, subtle diagnosis of the diseases that were upon it and submitted it to a thorough and brutal vivisection, act by act, as they sat through it. Old Mole was astonished to find that Panoukian's violence annoyed him, offended him as an injustice, and, though he [Pg 279] did not tell him so, saw clearly that he was applying to the piece a standard which had never for one moment been in the mind of the author, whose concern had been to the best of his no great powers to contrive an amusing traffic which should please everybody and offend none, supply the leading actors with good and intrinsically flattering parts, tickle the public into paying for its long-continued presentation, and so pay the rent of the theater, the formidable salary list, and provide for the satisfaction of his pleasures, the caprices of his extremely expensive wife, and his by no means peculiar mania for appearing in the columns of the newspapers and illustrated journals; pure Harbottling; but it had nothing at all to do with what Panoukian was talking about, namely, art. It was certainly all out of drawing and its moral perspective was all awry, but it was hardly more fantastical and disproportionate than Panoukian's criticism. It was entirely unimportant: to apply a serious standard to it was to raise it to a level in the mind to which it had no right. Of the two, the author and Panoukian, he was not sure but Panoukian was the greater fool. However, extending his indulgence from one to the other, he let the young man talk his fill, and said nothing. He had begun to treasure silence.

He loved the silent evenings in Gray's Inn, where he could sit and smoke and chuckle over the world's absurdity, and ponder the ways of men so variously revealed to him in the last few years, and gloat over his own happiness and dream of [Pg 280] the days when Matilda should have come to the full bloom of her nature and they would perfectly understand each other, and then life would be a full creation, as full and varied, as largely moving as the passing of the seasons. He had delightful dreams of the time when she would fully share his silence, the immense region beyond words. He was full of happiness, gummy with it, like a plum ripe for plucking —or falling.

In his fullness of living—the very top, he told himself, of his age, of a man's life—he found it easy to cover paper with his thoughts and memories, delightful and easy to mold them into form, and to amuse himself he began a work which he called "Out of Bounds," half treatise, half satire on education, dry, humorous, mocking, in which he drew a picture of the members of his old profession engaged in hacking down the imaginations of children and feeding the barren stumps of their minds with the sawdust of the conventional curricula. He was very zestful in this employment, perfectly content that Matilda should be even less demonstrative than before, telling himself that she was wrestling with the after effects of her crisis and would turn to him and his affection when she needed them. He made rapid progress with his work.

"Lossie Loses" came to an end at last, and he counted the spoils. He had gained many thousands of pounds—(the play was still running in America)—a few amusing acquaintances, a career for his wife, and an insight into the workings of London's [Pg 281] work and pleasure which he would have found it hard to come by otherwise. He chuckled over it all and flung himself with fresh ardor into his work.

After the hundredth performance of her play Matilda declared that she was tired, and wanted a rest, and she threw up her part. She came to him and said she wished to go away.

"Very well. Where shall we go?"

"I want to go alone."

And she waited as though she expected a protest from him. For a moment she gazed at him almost with pleading in her eyes, and then she governed herself, stood before him almost assertively and repeated:

"Alone."

In the aggression he felt the strain in her and told himself she was wanting to get away from him, to break the habit of their life, to come back to him fresh, to advance toward him, reach up to the prize he held in his hands. He told himself that to break in upon her diffidence might only be to thicken the wall she—(he said it was she)—had raised between them. He said:

"Won't you mind?"

"No. I want to be alone."

"Where will you go then?"

"I don't know. Anywhere. By the sea, I think."

He suggested the Yorkshire coast, but she said that was too far and she didn't like the North.

"Oh! No!" he said. "Want to forget it?"

She passed that by. [Pg 282]

He took down a map, and she looked along the south coast and pitched on a place in Sussex, because it was far from the railway and would therefore be quiet. He left his work, wired to the hotel for rooms, sat and talked to her as she packed, saw her off the next morning and returned to his work, rejoicing in the silence and emptiness of the chambers.

He sent her letters on to her without particularly noticing their superscription. On the third day a letter came for her, and he recognized the handwriting as Panoukian's. He sent that on. When his work went swimmingly and his pen raced he wrote to her, long, droll, affectionate epistles: when his work hobbled then he did not write and hardly gave a thought to her. She wrote to him in her awkward hand with gauche, conventional descriptions of the scenery amid which she was living. He read them and they gave him fresh light on education. He was reaching the constructive part of his work, and it began to take shape as an exposition of the methods by which the essential Matilda might have been freed of the diffidence and self-distrust which hemmed her in. That brought him to feminism, and he imagined a description of women in Trafalgar Square screaming in a shrill eloquence for deliverance from the captivity into which they had been cast by the morals of the sand heap. He was keenly interested in this scene, and, as he had sketched it, was not sure that he had the topography of the Square exact.

One evening, therefore, he dined at his club, meaning to walk home by the Square [Pg 283] and the Strand. He was drawn into an argument and did not set out before ten o'clock. It was one of those nights when heavy clouds lumber low over the city and absorb the light, break the chain of it so that the great arcs are like dotted lanterns, and behind them buildings loom. He turned down Parliament Street to get the full effect of this across the Square, and then came up across and across it, carefully observing how the great thoroughfares lay in relation to the Nelson Column. As, finally, he was crossing to the Strand he was almost dashed over by a taxicab, drew back, looked up, saw his wife gazing startled out of the window. He stared at her, but she did not recognize him and seemed to be entirely absorbed in the fright and shock of the avoided accident. He followed the car with his eyes. It had turned sharply in the middle of the road to pass into the southward stream of traffic. He saw it slow down and draw up outside a huge hotel, and hurried after it. The porter came out and opened the door. Matilda stepped to the pavement, and after her Panoukian. They passed in through the revolving door of the hotel just as he reached the pavement. The porter staggered in with Matilda's portmanteau.

Old Mole lunged forward on an impulse. He reached the door and glared through the glass. The hall was full of people, there was a great coming and going. He could see neither Matilda nor Panoukian. He turned and walked very slowly down the steps [Pg 284] of the hotel. There were four steps. He reached the pavement and was very careful not to walk on the cracks. At the edge of the pavement he stopped and stared vacantly up at the Nelson Column. Small and black against the heavy clouds stood the statue, and almost with a click Old Mole's brain began to think again, mechanically, tick-tocking like a clock, fastening on the object before his eyes, and clothing it with associations.

"Nelson—Romney—Lady Hamilton—Lady Hamilton—Emma—Nelson's enchantress —Nelson," and so on all over again. . . . The action of his heart was barely perceptible, a slow beat, a buzzing at his ears. "Nelson—Romney——"

He stood gazing up at the statue. The clouds behind it moved and gave it the appearance of moving. It was very certain that the sword moved. . . . "England expects. . . ." He gazed fascinated. A little crowd gathered. Men and women stood around and behind him and gazed up. He was aware of them, and he said:

"Idiots."

But he could not move. The crowd spread over the pavement and blocked the way. A policeman appeared and moved them on. He jostled Old Mole.

"Move on, there. You're causing an obstruction."

Old Mole stared at him stupidly.

The officer spoke to him again, but made no impression. Old Mole stared at the hotel as though he were trying to remember something about it, but he did not move. [Pg 285] The officer hailed a taxi, bundled him into it, and drove with him to the police station. In the charge room there was confabulation, and Old Mole gaped round him: the furniture, the large men in uniform swam mistily before him. One of the men approached him sympathetically, and he heard a voice say:

“Can’t make nothink of it, sir.”

His brain fastened on that as expressing something that it was trying to get clear. He felt a slight relaxation of the numbness that was upon him.

Another voice said:

“What’s your name?”

“Name?” said Old Mole.

The man in front of him said:

“The Inspector says: What’s the name?”

“Panoukian,” said Old Mole.

VI

OUT OF IT

When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

[Pg 289]

VI

OUT OF IT

THE name acted as an aperitive on Old Mole's faculties, he opened his eyes and mouth very wide and ate his breath like a fish, and began eloquently to apologize to the policemen for the trouble he had given them. He diagnosed his condition as a brief suspension of the reasoning faculties, a perfectly normal affliction to which all men were liable. The policemen listened to him stolidly and exchanged slow, heavy winks, as to say that they had indeed drawn a strange fish out of the sea of London. Their prize was soon able to give a coherent account of himself, and they let him go with no worse than a request to pay the cost of the cab in which he had been brought.

There was heavy rain when he reached the streets. The people were coming out of the theaters and halls, scurrying along under umbrellas, darting for cover, wrestling their way into cabs and omnibuses and Tube stations. The streets were like black mirrors, or deep sluggish rivers, with the lights drowned in them. The people were all hurrying to get out of the rain. Old Mole was indifferent to it, and more acutely than ever was he visited by the sense of having nothing in common with them. By [Pg 290] sheer force of numbers they presented themselves to his mind as obscene. At one point he was caught in a crowd and so offended by the smell of warm flesh, wet clothes and heated india rubber that he was for a moment possessed by a desire to strike the nearest man. He restrained himself and walked on. In front of him there were a brace of marketable women profiting by the weather to display their legs up to their knees. His mind raced back to the Puritanism in which he had been nurtured, and he was filled with the Antonine heated horror of women. . . . All the way home he was beset with sights and scenes that accentuated his disgust.

It was not until he reached Gray's Inn that he was faced with the pathetic absurdity of his situation, and then he found it unthinkable. There was not an object in the chambers but cried aloud of Matilda. She had made the place beautiful, changed its tone from masculine to feminine, and she was there though she was absent. It was very grim and horrible; like coming on the clothes of a beloved creature of whose death he had been told. He played with the idea of death voluptuously. She was dead, he told himself; his own end was not far off. The shadow of it was over the place. He went from room to room, fingering her possessions, touching the stuffs and garments he had last seen in her hands. He opened her wardrobe and thrust his hands among her soft gowns. He stood by her bed and patted the pillow and smoothed the coverlet. He caught sight of himself in her mirror [Pg 291] and told himself that he could see her face, too. And she was very young, too young to be dead: and he was startlingly, haggardly old. Surely the end could not be far off.

He went from room to room, picturing her in each as he had last seen her.

He pushed his mood of horror to its extremity so that he was nigh sick with it.

All night in his study he prowled round and round. He locked himself in, locked the outer door, locked all her rooms and pocketed the keys. She would not, she should not, come back. No one should enter. The obscenity of the streets clung to him and he could see his situation in no other light. All his life he had regarded the violation of marriage as a thing so horrible that it could only happen among monsters and therefore so remote from himself as to find no place in his calculations. There was a certain side of human life which was settled by marriage. Outside it was obscenity, from the poison of which marriages were impregnably walled in. The walls were broken down; a filthy flood swamped the fair city of his dreams, and for a short while he was near mad with thoughts of lust and jealousy and revenge. He knew it but could not away with it. There was an extraordinary pleasure, a giddy delight in yielding to the flood, giving rein to the long penned up forces of the animal in him, and breaking into childish, impotent anger.

Slowly he lingered, and he began to imagine, to invent, what others would think of [Pg 292] him—Robert, his sister, his acquaintances at the club, and there was a sort of pleasure in the writhing of his vanity. He despised himself for it, but he wallowed in it. Never before had he seen such a quantity of mud and its appeal was irresistible.

When at last he crawled out of it he sat in rueful contemplation of himself and went back to the cause of it all: the averted accident in Trafalgar Square, the hotel door swinging—the low-hanging clouds, the crowd, the Nelson statue. . . . Nelson: Emma. And Old Mole laughed: after all, there were distinguished precedents, Sir William Hamilton, most of the friends of Julius Cæsar, Hans von Bülow, George II. The thing had happened even in Thrigsby, but there it had been only a tale to laugh

at, with pitying condemnation for the husband and a sudden, irrepressible envy of the lover; envy, neither more nor less; he felt gratified at the honesty of this admission, though not a little surprised at it. It was like a thin trickle of cold water upon his fever, invigorating him, so that he struggled to break through the meshes of sentimentality in which he had been caught. He broke free, and to his astonishment found himself sitting at his desk and turning over the closely written sheet which he had left on the blotting pad. He corrected a serious mistake in the topography of Trafalgar Square and went on writing. . . . The outcry of the women against the moral atmosphere of the sand heap reached up to a noble eloquence in which were declared their profound pity and sympathy for the men trapped in sensuality and [Pg 293] habitual vice. They declared their ability to think of men as suffering human beings, wounded and deformed by ignorance and prejudice, and asked only for the like true chivalry from men. He drained the vat of his ideas dry, and, at last, at five o'clock in the morning, exhausted, he went to bed.

He awoke to a sense of novelty and unfamiliarity in his surroundings and in himself, welcomed the new day with the thankfulness of health, splashed lustily in his bath, jovially slapped his belly as he dried himself, and chuckled at its rotundity, regarded it as a joke, the private particular joke of middle age. Almost it seemed as though his body had a separate personality of its own, certainly it had many adventures, many inward happenings of which he was not aware, a variety of processes beyond his discernment. That amused him mightily. . . . He remembered the horrors of the night. It must have been a nightmare! Of course, a nightmare was often followed with a feeling of health and a grotesque humor!

There were three letters on his breakfast table. One was from Matilda, posted the day before at the Sussex village. She said she was well, though the weather was bad, and she was getting rather more loneliness than she had bargained for. She sent her love and hoped he was happy without her. He tore up the letter and burned it, and turned back the thoughts and memories it had summoned forth. He applied himself [Pg 294] hungrily to his breakfast and took careful note of the process of eating, trying to discover why it should be pleasant and why, slowly, it should take the zest off his appetite for the day's doings.

"Queer," he thought, "how little interest we take in the body. It might be an unfailing source of entertainment. It is not so certain neither that it is not wiser than the mind."

All day he harped on thoughts of the body and was fiercely busy scrubbing his own clean of the base ideas of the night. He was fairly rid of them at last toward evening, but his mind was in a horrid confusion, and he was rather alarmed at the hard appearance of actuality taken on by his body. It blotted everything else out. He saw it in the masked light and shade of dirt and cleanliness. From that he went on to the other seeming opposites—life and death, love and hate, vice and virtue, light and darkness—found so many of them that he was semi-hypnotized and sank into an unthinking contemplation. There was good and there was bad, two points, in the catenary of which he was slung as in a hammock, with the void beneath. . . . Life as an exact equation was an impossible, appalling idea; but he could not break free from it. He could not escape from the trite dualism of things. . . . From the stupor of ideas he returned to his body and found in that the same tyranny of the number two: he had two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, two lungs, two kidneys. It comforted him greatly to reflect that he had only one heart, one nose, one mouth. [Pg 295]

"Bah!" he said, "I am making a bogey of my own shadow."

And he resolved to take a Turkish bath before dining at the club. He did so, and was baked and kneaded and pummeled and lathered back into a tolerable humor, and, as he lay swathed in warm towels and smoking an excellent cigar, he faced the situation, yielded to it, let it sting and nip at his heart, and was so racked with its pain that he could form no clear idea of it, nor struggle, but only lie limp and pray to God, or whatever devil had let such furies loose upon him, that the worst might soon be over before he was betrayed into any brutal or foolish act. He was amazed to find that his vanity had been slain: it had died in the night of shock, so he diagnosed it. No longer was he concerned with what other people would think of himself. The cruel pain twinged the sharper for it, and he saw that vanity is a protective crust, a shell grown by man to cover his nakedness. . . . His general ideas were clear enough: and the amusement of them served to distract him in his agony. It tickled him to think of a Turkish bath in Jermyn Street as the scene of such a mighty sorrow, and said:

"So much the better for the Turkish bath. It becomes the equal of Troy or Elsinore or the palace of Andromache, and nobler, for mine is a real and no poet's tragedy. It is a true tragedy, or, my vanity being dead, I should not bother my head about it. . . . Is my vanity dead? I have shed it as a crab his claw or a lizard his tail. It will grow [Pg 296] again."

He sank deep into pain until it seemed to him he could suffer no more, and then he went over to his club and dined fastidiously—a crab (to inspect its claw), a quail, and a devil on horseback, with a bottle of claret, very deliberately selected in consultation with the head waiter. Throughout his meal he read the wine list from cover to cover and back again, and thought how closely it resembled the Thrigsby school list. It contained so many familiar names that he was put out at its not including Panoukian's, and of Panoukian slowly he began to think: at first sleepily and in the gross content of his good dinner, as a wine, heady, sparkling, inclined to rawness, too soon bottled, or too soon uncorked, he could not be certain which. Then he thought of Panoukian as a man, and a savage anger burst in upon him, and he thought of Panoukian's deed as the atmosphere of the club dictated he should think of it. Panoukian had acted dirtily and dishonorably: he should be hounded out, hounded out. Panoukian had wormed himself into his (Old Mole's) affections and trust, to betray both. He had shown himself a cad, a blackguard, a breaker of the laws of hospitality and good society. . . . There was a solid plumpness in this conception of Panoukian that pleased Old Mole almost sensually, gave him the same sort of mouth-watering anticipation as the breast had done of the quail he had just eaten. He had Panoukian nicely dished up, brown, done to a turn: he would poise the knife for one [Pg 297] gloating moment, plunge it in, and cleave the ripe morsel from breast to back. Panoukian had been cooked by his own actions: he deserved the knife and the crunch of teeth. Old Mole, like many another good man wronged, felt ogreish. . . . He began in his head (and with the aid of the wine in his head) to compose letters to Panoukian, commencing "Sir" or "Dear Sir," or, without approach, plunging into such a sentence as: "No matter how public the place, or how painful to myself, I shall, when I next meet you, be obliged to thrash you."

And he gloated over the thoughts of thrashing Panoukian: mentally chose the stick, a whippy cane; the fleshy portion of Panoukian's anatomy under the tails of his too-much-waisted coat. He rejoiced in the scene. It might be in the House, under the eyes of all the Harbottles: or, better still, in the Temple before the grinning porters.

He was brought to himself by a crash and a tinkle. He had waved his fork in the air and knocked over his last glass of claret. The head waiter concealed his annoyance in fatherly solicitude and professional business, and suggested another half-bottle. Weakly Old Mole consented, and while he was waiting, after collecting his thoughts, found that they had left Panoukian and come to Matilda. Her image was blurred: his love had become sorrow and a creeping torment, and the torment was Matilda, the blood in his veins, inseparable from himself. And because she was inseparable Panoukian became so, too. There could be no gain in thrashing Panoukian: that was [Pg 298] just blustering nonsense; "defending his honor" was the phrase. Idiots! He looked round at the other diners. What was the good of defending that which was lost? What was there to defend? You might as well ask a sea captain whose ship had been blown up by a mine why on earth he did not use his guns. . . . Further, honor was a word for which he could find no precise meaning. It was much in vogue in the theater, from Copas to Butcher. A woman's honor apparently meant her chastity. A man's honor, in some very complicated way, seemed to be bound up in the preservation of woman's, as though she herself were to have no say in the matter. No; honor would not do: it was only a red herring trailed across the scent.

Next came the cause of morality, which demanded the punishment of offenders. To his consternation he found himself thinking of the affair impersonally, pharisaically, inhumanly, detaching himself from Matilda, thrusting her violently away, giving her a dig or two with the goad of self-righteousness, and swelling at the neck with conscious rectitude. Why? . . . She must suffer for her sins.

Sin? *Sünde, pécher.* He thought of it in three or four languages, but in all it created an impression of overstatement and, more, of bad taste. He had lived for so long with a warm, intimate idea of Matilda that he resented the intrusion of morality, bidding him stand above her, judge and condemn. It might be simpler, the easiest [Pg 299] attitude to adopt—a suit of ready-made mental clothes, reach-me-downs—but it was uncomfortable, cold, and, most astonishing of all, degrading. It was to be impersonal in a desperately personal matter. *Ça ne va pas.*

Du bist wie eine Blume.
So rein und schön und hold . . .

Like nearly every lover who has any acquaintance with the German language, he had tagged Heine's verses on to his beloved. He clutched at them now. They were still apt. He used them as a weapon with which to drive back the cause of morality, but he was still very far from the mastery of himself and the affair—*l'affaire Panoukian.* He was the victim of a fixed idea—the taxicab, the hotel door swinging round, the low-hanging clouds, the Nelson statue. . . . George II had caused the death of Königsmarck, but his sympathies had never been with George II; besides that was

a monarch, and not even the success of “Lossie Loses” and his acquaintance with half the Cabinet would enable him with impunity to procure the death of Panoukian. Apart from the defence of honor and the cause of morality, what do men do in the circumstances?

He was to receive instruction. . . .

In the reading room he picked up an evening newspaper. It was pleasant to hold a tangible object in his fingers and to pass into the reported doings of the great and [Pg 300] the underworld. He had heard gossip of the final catastrophe of a notoriously wretched marriage. The divorce proceedings were reported in the paper. The husband—Old Mole knew him slightly and did not like him—gave evidence to show himself as a noble and generous creature, near heartbroken, and the woman, whom his selfishness had driven into a desperate love, as light or hysterical. It was such a distortion of the known facts, such an audacious defiance of the knowledge common to all polite London, that Old Mole was staggered. He read the report again. One sentence of the evidence was almost a direct appeal for sympathy. Knowing the man, he could picture him standing there, keeping his halo under his coat-tails and donning it at the right moment. It was theatrical and very adroit.

“Bah!” said Old Mole. “He is groveling to the public, sacrificing even his wife to the many headed.”

And his sympathies were with the woman. At least she had shown courage, and the man had lied and asked for admiration for it: so honor was defended and the cause of morality served.

A little knot of men in the room were discussing the case. Their sympathies were with the man.

“If a woman did that to me,” said the nearest man, “I’d thrash her, I would. Thank God, I’m a bachelor.”

“I don’t know what women are coming to,” said a fat little man, as cosily tucked into his chair as a hazel nut in its husk. “They seem to think they can do just as they [Pg 301] please.”

A tall thin man said:

“It all began with the bicycle. Women have never been the same since bicycles came in.”

“It wouldn’t have been so bad,” said the fat little man, “if they’d cut and run.”

And Old Mole repeated that sentence to himself.

“What I can’t understand is,” said the first speaker, who seemed the most indignant, “why he didn’t shut her up until she had come to her senses. After all, we are all human, and that is what I should have done. If women won’t regard the sacredness of the home, where are we?”

“Surely,” said Old Mole, incensed into speaking, “it depends on the home.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” retorted the nearest man with some heat. “It does not. In these matters you can’t make exceptions. Home is home, and there is no getting away from it. If a woman grows sick of her home it is her own fault and she must stick to it, dree her own weird, as the Scotch say. Destroy the home and society falls to the ground.”

And Old Mole, sharpened by argument, replied:

“Society is no more permanent than any other institution. Its existence depends entirely on its power to adapt itself to life. It is certainly independent of the innumerable sentimental ideas with which men endeavor to plaster up the cracks in its walls, among which I must count that of home.”

The three men gaped at him. He continued:

“Home, I conceive, has a meaning for children. It is the place in which they grow [Pg 302] up. We make homes for our young as the birds make nests for theirs. When the children go forth then the home is empty and is no longer home. Men are no longer patriarchs and no more do they gather the generations under one roof-tree. . . . In the case under discussion there were no children, therefore there was never a home to defend or regard as sacred. Man and woman alike had placed themselves in a false position. What further they had to suffer we do not know. We know that the man took refuge in the closest egoism, and the woman finally in the restless adventure of which we know no more than has been reported to a newspaper by a dull and mechanical shorthand writer. My own view is that, where there are no children, society at large is not interested. Society is only interested in any marriage in so far as it will provide children to ensure its continued existence. Once children are born it is interested to see that they are fed, clothed and educated. (How effectively our present society pursues that interest you may easily observe if you will visit East or

South London.) Beyond that its interference, explicit or covert, seems to me to be an unwarrantable intrusion into the privacy of the human soul. No one of us here is in a position to judge of the affair which is the occasion of your argument, and . . . and . . . I beg your pardon for interfering with it."

He rose and passed out the room, leaving three very surprised clubmen behind him. But none of them could be more surprised than himself: surprised and relieved he was. He had been sickened at the idea of a woman being delivered up to the chatter of idle tongues, and in the violence of his distress had come by an absolute certainty that any dignified issue to his present affection could only come through an unprejudiced and unsentimental consideration of the whole facts. It was not going to be easy; but, dear God, he wanted something difficult, something really worth doing to counteract his misery. When he thought of himself and the ache at his heart he was blinded with tears and could see the facts only from one angle—his own. [Pg 303]

Du bist wie eine Blume,
So rein und schön und hold . . .

Seen from that angle, Matilda was reduced in stature, distorted, ugly, mean. But he had loved her, loved her, and must still have the truth of her: more than ever before he needed to understand her. The beauty and delight and youth he had enjoyed in her must not go down in bitterness.

One saying he took away with him from the club:

"It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd cut and run."

Perhaps, he thought to himself, they had "cut and run." And for him it became worse, to think that she had gone, without a word, with never a complaint, just gone. He remembered the night when she had said she was miserable, when he had found her in her bed, after the play, with her room in a litter. And he fell to thinking of the trials he must have put upon her, probing for all the possible offences, secret, subtle, unsuspected, of body and soul that might be laid at his door. There were many that he could think of, but his darkest hours came then when he perceived the fine balance, the perilous poise of married life, the imperceptible dovetailing of interests and habits and humors, the regions beyond perception where souls meet. Its nice complications were almost terrifying: at thousands of points men and women might fail, offend each other, crush each other, destroy, never dreaming of the cause, never, at the time, marking the effect. For such an adventure there need be heroism: to break, when even failure and offence and mutual exasperation bind, strength and courage superhuman or despairing. And men judge! And condemn! They measure this subtlest and most searching relationship with opinions and dull compromise and rules. [Pg 304]

He was tortured with the thought of all the injuries he might have done her, and he invented more, invented burdens that he had never put upon her to account for her going away from him, with never a word. For three days he lived in this torment, winding about and about from general to particular and back again by the most circuitous route, a *Rundreise* with the current morality for Baedeker. And every now and then the obsession would stab home to his heart—the hotel door swinging, the flat infidelity. Once, when the pain was so mortal that he could contain himself no longer, he wrote to her at the hotel. He posted the letter. That was on the second day. On the third he was in an agony. No answer came. [Pg 305]

On the fourth day a telegram arrived from the Sussex village and an hour later she, brown, healthy, with a grand swing in her walk, a new depth of bosom, a squarer carriage of the shoulders; a rich bloom on her. She kissed his cheek.

He stared and stared at her. He looked for change in her.

"You!"

"Didn't you get my telegram?"

"Oh! yes."

"I'll take my things off, and we'll have some tea."

She left him. He stood at the head of the little stairs leading down to her apartments, and he trembled and was near weeping. In her room he could hear her singing to herself, happily, blithely as a bird, with a full note that caught at his heart. She seemed to sing no song, but a melody, young and joyous with a full summer gaiety. The sun shone through the staircase window upon his hand where he clutched the balustrade. He was gripping it so tight that the veins stood out and the skin on his knuckles was white. A tear fell on his hand and he looked down at it. It was a plump, podgy, puckered middle-aged hand.

He whisked back into his room as he heard her door open. [Pg 306]

They had tea, and he could not take his eyes off her. She thought he looked ill and pulled down. On his desk she saw the pile of his papers.

“You’ve been writing,” she said. “You’ve been overdoing it. It’s never safe to leave a man alone.”

“Yes,” he replied. “I have written a good deal.”

“Is it a story?”

“No. Not exactly a story.”

“Is it finished?”

“No. I doubt if it will ever be finished now.”

She began to talk of the theater. She had been wired for to resume her part, as her understudy was proving unsatisfactory. Further she had had two offers. One to appear in a new musical comedy, the other of a part in a play to be produced at a little “intellectual” theater for eight matinées. She felt inclined, she said, to accept both. It would mean very hard work, but it would be experience, and it was flattering to be noticed by the superior persons of the stage. And she asked his advice. He thought it might be too much for her to have so much rehearsing and to play in the evening as well. That she brushed aside. She was feeling splendid, strong enough to act a whole play.

“You are becoming a regular Copas,” he said.

She laughed; he, too, and they plunged into reminiscences of the old days.

“I sometimes think,” he said, “that those were the happiest months of my life.”

“Nonsense. There’s always more and more in front.” [Pg 307]

“For you.”

She went off into peals of laughter, for she had just remembered the encounter with the prize-fighter. Her sturdy gaiety simply swept him off his feet, and he could only follow in the train of her mood. They made so merry that they lost count of the time, and she suddenly sprang to her feet with a cry and scurried away, dinnerless, not to be late at the theater.

“I ought to have told her,” he said to himself. “I ought to have said: ‘I know.’ . . . But how fine she looked! How happy she must be!”

Happy? There was something in her mood beyond happiness: a zestful strength, a windiness that seemed to blow through every cranny of her soul, whipping the blood in her veins, so that she could not pause for states and conditions of the spirit, nor check herself to avoid unhappiness in herself or others. She was like a ship in full sail, bending to the wind, skimming over tossing seas. She was gallant. She was what he had always hoped she might become. There was in her such a new flood of vitality that he felt ashamed at the thought of bidding her pause to submit to his inquisition. Impossible to check her flight, cruel suddenly to present her with the meanness of what she had done while she was still glowing with its splendor.

He had caught something of her glow, and now he wrestled to break free of rules of conduct and moral codes, and he began, at last, to consider his problem in terms [Pg 308] of flesh and blood. There were three points of view to be mastered: three lives knotted together in a tangle and the weakest strand would be broken.

He felt hopeful. There would be a fight for it, and to that he thrilled. He had the exaltation of one on the brink of great discovery.

He went to fetch her from the theater. The stagedoor lay at the back in an alley joining two great thoroughfares. As he entered the alley from one end he saw Matilda and Panoukian leave by the other, and he had his arm in hers. Old Mole turned, with the fluttering sense of an escape, glad not to have met them. And when he had controlled himself he was amused to think that they could not have dreaded the encounter more than he.

He took a long walk to delay his return, and when he reached the chambers they were in darkness. He crept softly down the little stairs and tried her door. It was locked.

In a moment’s panic he thought that this time she had really “cut and run,” and he was almost stunned with his terror of it. It was too soon, too soon: it would be disastrous; he would be left without understanding, to the mercy of the obsession; he had not all the threads in his hands; until he had, it would be rash folly to snap. He stood against her door, with his ear to the panel, holding his breath, straining to hear. There were explosive noises in the house. From the room he could catch [Pg 309] nothing for them. Closer and closer he pressed to the door, his ear against the panel.

He lurched and the panel creaked. Silence. He heard her stir in her bed.

She was there! That was all he wanted to know. On tiptoe he crept away. . . . She was there! He would yet gather all the threads and then he or she would snap. One or other would be broken.

What had he then? The evidence of his own eyes. Was that not enough? It was enough for prescribed remedies, to which he could not resort without revenge, for which he had not now the least desire. What his eyes had seen was so isolated, so severed from the rest of his life as to be monstrous and injurious. By itself it was damnable harlotry. (There was a sort of boyish satisfaction in fishing out the words of a grosser age with which to bespatter it and make it even more offensive to pure-mindedness.) But, as he loved the woman, it could not stand by itself. He was in it, too. Actions cannot be judged by themselves. There must have been an antecedent conspiracy of circumstance and fault to lead to such misdemeanor.

With a tight control of himself he could now almost think of it without jealousy (hardly any of that was left but the quick, shallow jealousy of the brute), but he could not think of it without passion, and through that he could discern its inherent passion and, faintly, respond to it. That put an end to all mean suspicions of a conspiracy against himself, or of cowardly contriving to enjoy stolen fruit and leave no trace. . . . [Pg 310] She had locked the door against him. So much was definite, and he had a sort of envying admiration for her that she could be precise while he was still floundering and groping for understanding. . . . Certainly he had never seen her so sure of herself.

But then, if she were so sure, why did she not “cut and run.” Then it would not be so bad. For a flash he saw the thing with the eyes of a fat clubman; the passion in him ebbed and he lost grip, and blundered into a mist. A lunge forward cleared him. She was sure of herself, so sure that she was giving no thought to her position except as it immediately presented itself. The new factor in her life called for no change, and everything she had was enriched by it, her possessions, her work, even her domestic life. It must all seem to her clear gain, and therefore she was sure. She loved her love, and everything that had led to it, and therefore she was sure.

From that flight upward Old Mole came to the sensation of falling. He was possessed by a prevision, felt that in a moment he would see all things plain, would know exactly what was going to happen. He strained forward, felt sleep overcoming him, struggled against it, and fell asleep.

Then Matilda was busy all day rehearsing, and, during the little time he had with her, she talked the slang and gossip of the theater. Once she asked after the work, and he read a little of it to her, and she liked it and he plucked up courage to go on [Pg 311] with it. She laughed at his cuts at women and admitted that he had thrust home at more than one of her own foibles. He had written part of a chapter on the *Theater as Education.* She could make nothing of that. The theater to her was a place in which you played “parts,” sometimes good and sometimes bad, and you were always waiting for the supreme, all-conquering “part” to turn up. She did what she was asked to do to the very best of her ability; that was her work and she did not look beyond it. The flattering side of London, its pleasures, fashions and functions had fallen into the background and she gave it just the attention which her interest seemed to demand. It never struck her as strange that she should be given no more of a play than her own part to read, and if she had been given the play would probably not have read it. She learned her part, movements and gestures, cues during rehearsal, and never watched any scene in which she did not appear.

By her part in the “intellectual” play she was mystified. None of her Copas or Butcher tricks were in the least suited to it. She had an enormous part to learn: all talk, gibes at marriage, and honor, and wealth, and domesticity, all the fetishes of the theater in which she was beginning to find her footing. The manager of the theater was his own producer; he had chosen her because she looked the part, “the rising temperament,” he called it, and he added to her bewilderment with the invention of elaborate detail to break the flood of talk, and, in the absence of action, to bind the [Pg 312] play together. Everyone in that theater spoke of the play with awe, so she concealed her perplexity and brought it to Old Mole.

“There are no scenes in it,” she said. “No cues. Nothing you can take hold of. I say my lines: the other people in the play don’t seem to take any notice of them, but just go on talking. I suppose it’s very clever, but it isn’t acting. I don’t believe even my uncle could do anything with it.”

He recommended her to read the play, and she procured a copy from the author. When she had read it she said:

“I know why nothing happens in it. There isn’t a soul in it who cares about

anybody else. It's all teasing. They can't do anything else because they don't care. And they have nothing really to talk about, so I suppose that's why they discuss the Poor Law Commission, and the Cat and Mouse Bill, and the Social Evil and all sorts of things I never heard of."

Old Mole read it, and found it clever, amusing, but sterilizing and exhausting, and, in its essence, he could not find that it was very different from "Lossie Loses" or the contrivances of the Butcher repertory. It was just as unimaginative. It had come into existence, not from any spiritual need, but entirely to rebut Butcherdom. Butcherdom shadowed it. The author in writing his play seemed first of all to have thought what would happen in a Butcher entertainment in order to decide on something different. [Pg 313] He had not moved from Butcher back to life, but had run from Butcher down a blind alley. And the result was an almost brilliant hotchpotch with a strong savor of hatred and contempt and the tartness of isolation. Contempt for Butcher might be its strongest motive, but alone it could not account for it. Old Mole sought loyally for the best, but could find nothing nobler than the desire for admiration. The author was not scrupulous, nor was he ingenious; his bait for reputation was the ancient and almost infallible trick of measuring his cleverness by the stupidity of others.

It lacked theatrical effectiveness and therefore it was impossible to get its meaning or even a drift of it into Matilda's head. She learned her lines like a parrot, delivered them like a parrot—(thoroughly to the satisfaction of the producer)—looked charming in her expensive gowns and attracted the notice of the critics. The author told an interviewer that his play was a masterpiece of its kind, and that Matilda was one of the most remarkable actresses on the English stage. The piece ran for its eight matinées and was then heard of no more, but to Old Mole it had much value. It set him wondering. The stage had nothing to show but the false emotions of Butcherdom and the absence of emotion of the "intellectuals." The theater must express the life of the country or it could not continue to exist, as it indubitably did. There was always a new playhouse being built. Money was poured into the theater through the stagedoor and through the box-office, but its best efforts were shown in childish fancy. It was at [Pg 314] its healthiest and least odiously pretentious in the presentation of melodrama, with its rigid and almost idiotic right and wrong, its stupid caricature of the workings of the human heart. If it had a tradition, melodrama was its only representative. The plays of Shakespeare were melodrama in the hands of a man of genius. Without genius the national drama was heavy and lumpish, stolidly clinging to unquestioned and untested values, looking for no higher rewards in life than riches and public esteem.

It was astonishing to Old Mole that he could be so deeply interested in these things. He had expected to be absorbed in his sorrow and the problem of handling it. Then he found that he was testing the two theaters, the Butcherish and the "intellectual," by the passion that had flamed into his heart through his love for Matilda at the moment when it had been outraged. In neither was there a spark to respond to his fire. The Butcher theater was a corpse; the intellectual theater that same corpse turned in its grave. And it amused him to imagine how his case would be handled in them; in the one it would be measured by rule of thumb—the eternal triangle, halo'd husband, weeping wife, discomfited lover, or, if violent effects were sought for, the woman damned to an unending fall, the two men stormily thanking their vain and shallow God they were rid of her; in the other it would be talked out of court, husband and wife would never rise above a snarl, and lover would go on [Pg 315] talking; in both men and women would be cut and trimmed to fit in with a formula. In the one the equation would be worked out pat; in the other it would go sprawling on and on like the algebraic muddle of a flurried candidate in an examination who has omitted a symbol and gone on in desperate hope of a result.

Old Mole had discarded formulæ. He was dealing with a thing that had happened. Judgment of it, he said, was futile. The issue of it depended not on himself alone. As its consequences unfolded themselves he must apply the test of passion, grasp and, so far as possible, understand, and let passion burn its way to an outlet.

Familiarity with this mystery, straining on from day to day, soon made it possible for him to accept the surface happenings of life without resentment.

For her part in the musical comedy Matilda took singing and dancing lessons, so that she was out all day and every day. She was to receive a salary twice as large as any she had yet earned, and would be financially independent even though she indulged her extravagance, than which nothing was less probable. In all the working side of her life he took a very comfortable pride. If she was not altogether his creation, at least he had helped her to shape herself, and it was a delight to see her character taking firm lines. And, as he watched her, he thought of the current sentimental prating of motherhood and its joys and its concomitant pity of men debarred from them, the absurdity of the segregation of the sexes: as if love were not [Pg 316]

in its essence creative; as if it had not begun to create before it reached consciousness; as if men could only take the love of woman, as in a pitcher, to spill it on the ground; as if love were not always beyond giving and taking, reaching out and out to create, lifting half-formed creatures into Being. . . . By the side of the other two theaters the musical comedy stage seemed almost to shine in candor, and he was glad that Matilda—the Matilda of his creation—should pass into it to charm the chuckle-heads out of their dullness.

She passed into it gleefully and he was able to separate her from that other Matilda in whom there was a passion at grips with his. He was certain now that it was passion and no vagary, for, day by day, under her working efficiency, she gained in force, and warmth and stature.

For five weeks Panoukian had made no appearance in Gray's Inn. Then one day he came with a fat Newfoundland puppy, a present for Matilda. She was out. Old Mole received him.

"Hullo!"

"How do! sir."

They stood looking at each other, Old Mole holding the door back, Panoukian hesitating on the threshold with the puppy in his arms.

Old Mole thought:

"I will speak to him. I will tell him what I think of him. I will make him feel what he is."

He said: [Pg 317]

"Come in."

"Are you alone?" asked Panoukian.

"Yes. Come in."

They entered Old Mole's study, Panoukian first.

"She said she wanted a dog, so I brought her this."

Panoukian put the puppy on the floor, walked over to the cigarette box and helped himself.

Old Mole opened his mouth to speak, but it was dry and he could make no sound. He ran his tongue over his lips. At last he shot out:

"Panoukian!"

Panoukian was pulling the puppy from under the bookcase. He turned and faced Old Mole with his schoolboy expression of wondering what now might be his guilt. He looked so young that none of the words with which Old Mole was preparing to crush him—scoundrel, traitor, villain, blackguard—was anything but inept. He was just engagingly, refreshingly young; younger than he had ever been, even as a boy. The discontent, the hardness and strain of revolt had faded from his eyes; they were clear and bright. He was as fresh as the morning. Plainly he had no thought beyond the puppy and the pleasure he had hoped to bring with it, and was startled by the harshness of the pedagogic note in Old Mole's exclamation, startled into shyness.

Old Mole's determination crumbled away: his laudable resolve was whisked away from him. He excused himself with this:

"I have no right to speak to him before I have come to an understanding with her." [Pg 318]

There was embarrassment between them, the awkwardness of master and pupil. To bridge it he said:

"It is a long time since you have been to see us."

Directly he had said it he knew that he had contributed to their deception, but while he was seeking a means of withdrawal Panoukian pounced on his opportunity and dragged their three-cornered relationship back to the old footing: and Old Mole could not altogether disguise his relief.

"Yes," he said. "I've been so busy. Old Harbottle is running a private ball, and there's been a tremendous lot of work up and down the country."

"Up and down the country," repeated Old Mole.

"Yes. Harbottle's beginning to listen to what I say. I've been giving him some telling questions lately, and he's already cornered the Front Bench twice. . . . The old idiot is beginning to discover the uses of impersonal unpopularity as an instrument of success. He would never have taken the plunge by himself, and he's very grateful to me."

"So you are beginning to do something?"

“You can’t do much in politics. I used to think you could. You can’t do first-rate things, but I’m beginning to realize that it’s a second-rate job.” He grinned. “The odd thing is that, since I realized that, I’m getting quite to like old Harbottle. He’s second-rate. He doesn’t know it, of course, because he hasn’t the least notion of what a first-rate man is like. He is perfectly cast-iron second-rate. Most surprising of all is [Pg 319] that I am beginning to see that every man has the right to be himself—subject, of course, to every other man’s right to kick him for it.”

“Eh?”

Old Mole was startled. Tolerance was the last thing he expected from Panoukian; it was entirely out of keeping with his boyishness. He waited for more, but nothing came; and this was the most astonishing of all, for there Panoukian sat, boyish, glistening with youth, enunciating a maxim of tolerance, and actually relishing silence. Panoukian, having nothing more to say, was content to say nothing! . . . It was too bad. Almost it seemed that he had gone through all his misery for nothing. He had striven to master his situation only at every turn to be met with the triumph of the unexpected. He had decided to start by seeing the affair from Matilda’s point of view and Panoukian’s, and now, ludicrously, maddeningly, they had both changed, and both, apparently, were being intent on showing an amicable front to him. They were—and he writhed at the thought—they were trying to spare his feelings.

An admirable maxim that! Panoukian, of course, had every right to be Panoukian; *ergo,* if needs must, to change into another Panoukian. The young man’s placid, contented, comfortably absorbed silence was exasperating.

“Panoukian!” said Old Mole.

Panoukian groped out of his silence. [Pg 320]

“Yes, sir.”

(Ludicrously boylike he looked, all wide-eyed, deliberate innocence.)

“There is a passage in Montaigne which, I think, excellently illustrates the observation you made some time ago. It is over there at the end of the bookcase.”

Panoukian rose and strolled over to the shelf indicated, his back toward Old Mole, who sprang to his feet, strode, breathing heavily, glared fixedly at the round apex of the angle of Panoukian and lunged out in a lusty kick. The young man pitched forward, righted himself, and swung round, with his hand soothing the coat-tail-covered portion of his body.

“Why the Hell did you do that?” he grunted.

“To illustrate your maxim,” said Old Mole, “and also to relieve my feelings.”

“If you weren’t who you are and what you are,” retorted Panoukian sharply, “I should knock you down.”

To that Old Mole could not find the apt reply, and once again, ruefully, he was forced to see that he had been betrayed into an absurdity. In that moment he hated Panoukian more than anyone he had ever known. He had been whirled by the unexpectedness of Panoukian into throwing away his one flawless weapon, his dignity, and without it he was powerless. Without it he could not even draw on the prescribed attitudes and remedies for gentlemen in his position. All the same he was [Pg 321] thoroughly pleased to have caused Panoukian pain, and hoped he would be forced to take his meals from the mantelpiece for a day or two.

They stood glaring at each other, both wondering what would happen next. Panoukian retired gracefully from the conflict by stooping to pick up the puppy. Old Mole snorted, grabbed his hat, and stumped away and out of the chamber.

The callousness of Panoukian! The effrontery! That he should dare to show his face, and such an unabashed, innocent face! Where was that conscience which makes cowards of us all? . . . At any rate, thought Old Mole, after being kicked Panoukian would not venture to appear again. But was that so sure? Was it so certain that his unpremeditated act of violence would jolt Panoukian’s conscience into activity? Having swallowed the indignity of his position, would he not the more easily be able to digest affront and insult and humiliation? How if the kick had not settled the affair Panoukian?

From his own uneasiness and almost shame Old Mole knew that it had not, that possibly it might have only the effect of crystallizing the change of relation between himself and Panoukian, of obliterating the tie of affection, of equalizing matters, of slackening the rein on Panoukian, of releasing him from every other claim upon his affection, except the violent outpouring of love which had swept him into disregard [Pg 322] for convention, and honor, and the cause of morality. If there be degradation in violence, it affects the kicker as well as the kicked. Old Mole found himself very near

understanding Panoukian. Clearly he had come to the chambers on an impulse. Matilda had desired a dog, he had seen the very dog, and come racing with it. Encountering Old Mole for the first time since the eruption in their affairs, he had carried the scene through with an admirable candor. There was no shiftiness in him, nor slyness: that would have been horrible, the sure indication of a beastly intrigue. No: either Panoukian was so possessed by his emotions, by the joy of what was probably his first full affair of the heart, that he could give no thought either to his own position or Matilda's or her husband's; either that or he was so intent on his passion, so absorbed by it, as to be lifted beyond scruples or thought of impediment, and was tearing away like a bolting horse, regardless of the cart behind or the cart's occupants. In either case Old Mole felt that he had something definite to deal with, genuine feeling and no farded copy of it. And he felt sorry for the kick and wished he could withdraw it.

The very next day Panoukian came to dinner at half-past six. Matilda brought him. They had met by chance in the Strand, and she had persuaded him to come back with her.

The meal was to all appearances like hundreds of others they three had had together. Old Mole sat at the head of the table, with Matilda on one side of him, [Pg 323] Panoukian on the other, and he watched them. They did not watch him. They grinned at each other like happy children, and made absurd jokes and teased, and their most ordinary remarks seemed to have a secret and profound meaning for them. Sometimes they explained their references to Old Mole, and then it was always "We"—Panoukian said: "We," Matilda: "Arthur and I" . . . and beneath all their talk there seemed to be a game, but a game in all seriousness, of fitting their personalities together. Every now and then, when they were filled with a bubbling consciousness of their wealth, they would throw a scrap to Old Mole out of sheer lavishness and babyish generosity. But other thought for or of him they had obviously none. They were not embarrassed by his presence, nor, to his amazement, was he by theirs. Only he was distressed, when they threw him a scrap of their happiness, to find that he knew not what to do with it, and could only put it away for analysis.

"I analyze and analyze," he thought, "and there are they with the true gold in their hands, hardly knowing it for precious metal."

Oh, yes! They were in love, and they had no right to be in love, and it was his duty to put an end to it.

But how?

He could only say: "This woman is my wife. I forbid her to explore any region of life which I cannot enter. She has no entity apart from me; her personality can find [Pg 324] no food except what I am able or choose to provide for her."

That was impossible, for it was not true.

More humanly he might say:

"I can understand that you love each other. But I cannot condone the selfishness it has led you to, or the secrecy. . . ."

There he stopped. There was no secrecy. They were disguising nothing. They did not tell him because their intimacy was, as yet, so preciously private an affair that it could not bear talking of; and he bowed to that and respected their reticence.

Matilda went to tidy her hair and he was left alone with Panoukian. They could find nothing to say to each other. The minds of both were full of the woman. Without her they fell apart, each into his separate world. And Old Mole knew that the issue of the adventure lay with her, and he knew that Panoukian looked for no issue and was living blindly in the present. He felt sorry for Panoukian.

The evening papers were thrust through the door. Panoukian fetched them and gave them to his host. The largest event of the day was the grave illness of Sir Robert Wherry.

"Dear, dear," said Old Mole.

"I shouldn't have thought he was human enough to be ill," said Panoukian.

"It is ptomaine poisoning, set up by a surfeit of oysters."

"There'll be a terrific funeral. He was the greatest of Harbottlers. He loved the [Pg 325] public and his love was requited."

And Old Mole thought of that other Harbottler who had so loved the public that he had trampled his wife in the mud to retain its esteem.

Matilda returned:

"Who's coming to the theater with me?" she said, and her eyes lighted on Panoukian and she gave him a smile more profound, more subtle, more tenderly

humorous than any she had ever bestowed on Old Mole. Both men rose. Old Mole reached the door first. With graceful generosity Panoukian bowed, yielded his claim, kissed Matilda's hand, and took them to the door. Old Mole went first. Halfway down the stairs Matilda turned:

"Oh! Arthur," she said, "the puppy's a perfect darling."

As coarse men take to drink, or philandering, or tobacco, to relieve the strain of existence, so Old Mole took to work. His "Out of Bounds" (Liebermann, pp. 453, 7*s.* 6*d.* net) is a long book, but it was written, revised, corrected in proof and published within six months. It was boomed, and lay, unread, on every one's drawing-room table. He received letters about it from many interesting personages, and from his sickbed Robert Wherry gave it his pontifical blessing. The Secretary of State for Education asked Old Mole to dinner, and declared sympathy with the criticism of the prevailing system, but shook his head dubiously over the probability of his department taking any intelligent interest in it. [Pg 326]

"I quite agree," he said, "that you ought to get at children through their imaginations, but imagination isn't exactly a conspicuous quality of government departments."

"Then I don't see how you can govern," said Old Mole.

"We don't," said the Secretary of State. "We take orders, like everybody else, but we are in a position to pretend that we are giving them. A government department is a great wheel going round very, very slowly, shedding regulations upon the place beneath. Every now and then, when none of the permanent officials is looking, an intelligent man can slip a real provision into the feeder and trust to luck for its finding the right need and the right place. . . . But it is not often we have the advantage of such thoroughly informed criticism, Mr. Beenham. The country is lamentably little interested in education, considering how much it has suffered from it."

"I have suffered from it."

He was amused by his celebrity. Every little group had a cast for him, but none of their bait attracted him in the least. He preferred to swim in his own waters, leisurely, painfully in the wake of Panoukian and Matilda. They at least knew where they were going, were possessed by an immediate object. Where all the politicians and scribes were looking away from their own lives toward a reorganized society based on a change in humanity, a change not in degree but in kind, Panoukian and Matilda were changing, growing, responding to natural necessity. They were loving, loving themselves, loving life, their bodies, their minds, everything that body and mind could apprehend. [Pg 327]

"There is no social problem," said Old Mole, "there is only the moral problem, and that is settled by the act of living, or left in a greater tangle by the refusal to live."

One night as he returned home from a dinner at a literary and artistic club he stood at the head of the little stairs looking down into the darkness. He was filled with regret for the past that had contained so much pleasantness and appalled by the vision of the future stretching on without Matilda, for it would be without her though she stayed under his roof. Between the theater and the other she gave so much that she had very little left for him—so little: gentleness and kindness and consideration, things which it were almost kinder not to give. It were best, he thought, that she should go and make her own life, with or without the other. She had her career, her work: friends she would always make, acquaintances she could always have in abundance. . . . And yet she stayed. He had felt dependent on her for the solution, for the proof, as it were, that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. But she stayed. There must then be something that she treasured in her life with him. . . . And he was curious to know what it might be. Almost before he was aware of it he was down the little stairs and at her door, listening, and he was chilled with pity. She was weeping, and smothering the sound of it. [Pg 328]

"Poor child!" he thought.

And he tapped lightly at her door. No sound. Again he tapped. She came then.

"I heard you," he said. "It was more than I could bear."

She led him into her room and made him sit on her bed as she slithered into it again. She would not have the light turned on.

"I couldn't bear you to be unhappy. You have been so happy."

“Yes,” she said.

“Do you want to go?” he asked.

“I’m afraid.”

At first he thought she meant she was afraid of the tongues of the many, but that fear could be no more than superficial. Hers was deep. It seemed to shake her as an angry wind a tree.

“Well, well,” he said.

She reached out in the darkness for his hand. In silence she pressed his hand, and then:

“You never know,” she said.

It was all she could tell him, that she was suffering. He said:

“There is nothing to fear,” and in silence he pressed her hand.

“You *have* been good to me.” [Pg 329]

There was a knell in the words. They were the epitaph of their life together.

“I think,” he said, “that, if we were so foolish as to tot up the gains on either side, mine would be the greater.”

Again she pressed his hand.

“I’m not a bit like Josephine really, am I?”

“My dear child.” He was very near tears. “My dear child, not a bit.”

So he left her.

What was she afraid of? His judgment of her? That had come up as a dark rain-heavy cloud. But it had passed without shedding its waters. Now, yielding to the tenderness and pity she had just roused in him, he was led to an inly knowledge of her. She was afraid of her love, afraid of her own devouring absorption in it. (Something of the kind he had known himself, in early days with her.) So she clung to material things, to the existence they had together builded, to his own proven kindness, and, as she clung, only the fiercer burned the flame within her, flickering destruction to everything she cherished. Sooner or later she must yield. He saw that, but also he knew that to precipitate the severance might be forever to condemn her to her dread, so that she would be withered with it. But if, of her own despair, or fierce ecstasy, or sudden illumination of the inmost friendliness of what she feared, came surrender, then would she win through to the ways of brightness, and be mistress of her own life and love. He had passed his own alternative, an easy choice; [Pg 330] he could see on to hers, a more grinding test. He shuddered for her, and, knowing its peril, made no move to help.

Often he would absent himself from the chambers for days together. The atmosphere was too explosive, the strain too great. She would see him to the door and kiss his cheek, and her eyes would say:

“Perhaps I shall be gone when you come back. You understand?”

And he would turn his eyes away because they said too much.

But she did not go.

For many weeks she did not see her lover. Old Mole knew that because she was home earlier from the theater and was rarely out in the afternoon, and spent much time in writing—she who could never write without an effort—letters, the charred fragments of which he found in the hearth. Then she was restless and frantically busy:

Ruefully he would think:

“Idiots! They are trying to give it up for me.”

What if they did give it up? He began excitedly to persuade himself that they would redeem their fault, find nobility in self-sacrifice. But that would not do. He was too wary a guardian of his egoism. That would not do. They had nothing to gain from it. They could give him back nothing. They had taken nothing from him. What she had been to her lover was something which she had never been, never could be, to [Pg 331] him. . . . That was how he now phrased it to himself. His love had fashioned her, shaped her, made her lovely: it had needed another love to breathe life into her. And, warming into life, she was afraid of life.

He saw Panoukian in the street. Lean the young man was, and drawn, and pale, prowling: a figure of thin hunger, famished and desperate. He saw Old Mole and

swerved to avoid him, but he was not quick enough, and his arm was squeezed with a timid friendliness. He gave a nervous start, butted forward with his head and snarled:

"Go to Hell!"

And he broke away and wriggled like an eel into the crowd.

"God help us!" said Old Mole, "for we are making pitiable fools of ourselves. The vulgar snap and quarrel would be better than this. . . . No, it would not."

It was painfully amusing to him to see Matilda's face in the picture-postcard shops. The photographers had touched her up into a toothy popular beauty, blank, expressionless, fatuous. It was the woman's face with the woman painted out: just a mask, signifying nothing, never a thought, never a feeling, never a desire, and not a spark of will. To thousands of young men it would serve as an ideal of womanhood, and they would slop their calfish emotions over it; they would go to see her in the theater, covet her with mealy lasciviousness. What a filthy business was the theater! [Pg 332] He wished to God he had never let her enter it, and told himself things would have been very different then. But would they? What had he given her to hold her? What ultimately had he given her? Tenderness and little kindnesses, indulgence and fondling: but those were only so many trinkets, little flowers plucked in the hedgerows and passed to the fair companion. But finally, finally, what had he given her? And bitterly he said:

"Instruction. . . . A damned ugly word."

She had been his pupil, he her master. At every step he had instructed her, not tritely as a Mr. Barlow, but he had been Barlowish, and that was bad. He had never admitted her to equality. How could he? He had never admitted himself to equality with his inmost self. He had always, as it were, instructed himself, set out upon the crowded way of life with mnemonic precepts, and gathered more and more of them, so that he had never, after childhood, drawn upon his innate knowledge, that was more than knowledge. Without its use his life had, for convenience, been split up into parts more and more, with passing years, at variance with each other. And when the time came to give his life he was no longer master of it. He could lend this and that and the other part; lend, in usury, for only a life can be given. . . . He had brought her to suffering: the much he had given her, the pleasantness and ease, making her only the more intimately feel her need of the more he might have given. He had brought [Pg 333] her to suffering and through her suffering he was beginning to learn.

When he thought of her suffering he was tempted to say to her—perhaps not in words—"You will not go. I will. I will leave you free." But that would be to lay her under another obligation, and once more to instruct. The thing was beyond good and evil now: they three were passing through the inmost fire of life. Absurdly he thought of the three Hebrews of the Bible and of an old rhyme his nurse had been used to gabble at him and Robert when they were little boys:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,
Shake the bed,
Make the bed,
And into bed you go.

For a moment or two, like a proper Englishman, he sighed for the happy state of childhood. Then he shook that off.

"Bah!" he said. "We sacrifice the whole of our lives to the ideas implanted in us during the first foolish years of them."

Sir Robert Wherry lay adying. He had never been able to resist an obituary. Never an illustrious man died but Wherry rushed into print, preferably in the *Times* newspaper, with reminiscence and lamentation. So, as he lay adying, he composed many obituaries of himself. There were reporters at his door waiting upon his [Pg 334] utterances. They came as regularly as the bulletins. As each might be his last, it was carefully framed to rival Goethe's or Nelson's or the Earl of Chatham's final words. Three of them began: "We men of England . . ." one "My mother said . . ." two with the word "Love . . ." and once, remembering William Blake, he raised his head and prated of angels. Last, with the true inspiration of death, faithful to himself and the work of his life, he turned and smiled at his nurse and his wife and daughter and said: "Give my love to my public." So he died, and there were tears in thousands of British homes that night.

His death crowded every other topic to the back pages of the newspapers. There were columns of anecdotes and every day brought a fresh flood of tributes from

divines, lecturers, novelists, dramatists, publicists of all kinds. One newspaper sent this reply-paid telegram to Old Mole:

Please send thirty-six words on Wherry.

Having no other use for the printed form, Old Mole filled it in thus:

He sold sugar.—Beenham.

His tribute was not printed.

There arose a mighty quarrel as to whether or no Wherry should be buried in Westminster Abbey. The Poets' Corner was crowded. Only an indubitable immortal should have the privilege of resting his bones there. The voices of the nation stormed in argument. Were the works of Wherry literature? Men of acknowledged greatness had found (comparatively) obscure graves. Was there not a risk? . . . There was no risk, said the other side. The heart of the nation had been moved by Wherry, the life of the Empire had been made sweeter because Wherry had lived and written. [Pg 335]

Lady Wherry was consulted. A picture of her appeared, with a black-edged handkerchief in front of her face, in the illustrated morning papers. And under it was printed her historic reply:

"Bury him by all means——"

Emotion cut short her words.

The argument was finally taken for decision to high places. Those in them had read the works of Wherry and, like the smallest servant in a suburban garret, had been moved to tears by them.

It was arranged. The Dean and Chapter bowed to the decision.

There was to be a procession. All the celebrities were invited, and, as one of them, Old Mole was included. None was omitted. Never a man who had so much as thrust his nose into the limelight was left out.

In the music-halls it was announced on the kinematograph screens that special films would be presented of the funeral of Sir Robert Wherry, and the audiences applauded.

Old Mole was in the forty-fifth carriage, with Sir Henry Butcher and the actress who had created "Lossie," now an actress-manageress. There were kinematograph operators at every street corner, and Tipton Mudde, the aviator, had received a special dispensation from the Home Secretary allowing him to fly to and fro above the procession and to drop black rosettes into the streets. [Pg 336]

It was a wet day.

In the Abbey Old Mole was placed in the north transept, and he sat gazing up into the high, mysterious roof where the music of the great organ rolled and muttered. Chopin's Dead March was played and Sir Henry Butcher muttered:

"There comes the bloody heart-tear."

An anthem was sung. Wherry's (and Gladstone's) favorite hymn, "O God, our help in ages past." Apparently there was some delay, for another hymn was sung before the pallbearers and the private mourners came creeping up the nave.

There was silence. The Psalms were sung.

Old Mole heard a reedy, pleasant voice:

". . . For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal shall put on immortality: then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . ."

Behind him he heard a droning voice:

". . . A solemn and impressive ceremony. There'll be sermons preached on it on Sunday. We have offered a prize for the best sermon in my paper, 'People and Books.' It was in 'People and Books' that Robert Wherry was first discovered to be a great man. We printed his first serial. I never thought he would reach the heights he did. . . ." [Pg 337]

The reedy voice was raised in a toasty fullness:

"Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, as a flower: he fleeth as it were a shadow and never continueth in one stay."

Through the words came the droning voice:

"He was slow in the beginning. He had doubts and was fool enough to want to

plague the public with them. The public wants certainties. It wants winners. I told him that he might have doubts, but they were his own private affair and that it was foolish to commit them to writing. I had ado to make him heed me, but he did heed me, and he got so that he couldn't fail. It wasn't in him to fail. He could think just the exact nothing that the public thinks a month or two before they begin to think it themselves. He was fine for religion and home life and young love and all that, but you had to keep him off any serious subject. He knew that, after a time. He knew himself very well, and he would take infinite trouble. He had no real sense of humor, but he learned how to make jokes,—little, sly jokes they were, shy things as though they were never sure of being quite funny enough. It took him years to do it, but he could do it. There've been a million and a half of his books sold. We'll sell fifty thousand this week. . . . Man! I tell ye, I've had a hard fight for it. I've had thirty press agents up and down the country, working day and night, sending in stuff from [Pg 338] the moment he was ill. I was with him when he ate the oysters. I had sick moments when I thought the newspapers weren't going to take it up. I put the proposition to the kinematograph people and their interest carried it through. It was a near thing. The Dean hadn't read the man's works. I had to find some one above the Dean who had. . . . I helped to make Robert Wherry what he was. I couldn't, in decency, fail to give my services to his fame and procure him the crowning glory of . . ."

Old Mole, straining forward, heard the reedy voice:

". . . We give Thee hearty thanks for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world. . . ."

Sick at heart, Old Mole edged into the aisle and crept out into the air, gratefully drawing in great breaths of it, and thanking the Lord for His mercy in leaving the sky above London and suffering the winds to blow through it and the rain to fall upon it.

In his chambers he found a thin brown man, grave and dignified and dried by the sun.

"You don't know me, Mr. Beenham?" he said.

Old Mole scanned him.

"No. I can't say I do."

"Cuthbert Jones. You may remember. . . ."

Carlton Timmis!

"Sit down, sit down," said Old Mole. "I *am* glad to see you. I wrote to you, wired to [Pg 339] you at a place called Crown Imperial."

"A dirty hole."

"You heard about your play?"

"Only six weeks ago. In Shanghai. I picked up an old illustrated paper. There was a portrait of Miss Burn in it. I hear she is a success. . . . I was told there is a company touring the China coast with the play."

"It is still being performed," said Old Mole. "It has been translated into German, French, Italian, Russian, Hungarian, Dutch, Japanese. . . ."

"Not into Chinese, I hope."

"Why not?"

"Because I live in China."

"You haven't come back, then?"

"To see my father, that is all. As soon as he heard I was thousands of miles away nothing would satisfy him but I must come and see him. He is very ill, I believe, and as I grow older I find that I like to think of him and am, indeed, fond of him. I want to hear him talk Edinburgh philosophy again."

"Your play, up to date, has made sixty-four thousand pounds."

The brown man sat up in his chair and laughed.

"It has all been carefully invested and will very soon have grown into seventy thousand. I have had the use of it for two years. I propose now that we go over to the bank and execute a transfer."

"No, thank you."

"No? You must. You must." [Pg 340]

"No, thank you. I have brought home three hundred pounds to support my father in his old age. I require nothing for myself. I am perfectly happy. I am a teacher of English in a Chinese government school two hundred miles from the railway, with no

telegraph or telephone. I have a wife, a Chinese, who is a marvelous housekeeper, a most admirable mother, as stupid as a cow, and she resolutely refuses to learn English. I have not been able altogether to shake off my interest in the theater, but the traveling Children of the Pear-tree Garden give me greater pleasure than I ever had from any English company in or out of the West End. They are sincere. They are rascals, but they love their work. . . .”

“But the play, and the——”

“. . . Money. . . . If I were you, Mr. Mole, I should drop it over Waterloo Bridge. I came today to return you your fifty pounds, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful. I am glad—and sorry—that you have been repaid so plentifully.”

He could not be prevailed on to take a penny, and presently they stopped arguing about it, and Timmis instructed Old Mole in the ways of the Chinese, how they were a wise people who prized leisure above all things, and so ordered their lives as to preserve the simplicity of the soul, without which, it is clear, the brain must be overwrought and dislocated through its vain efforts to do the work of the mind. He drew such a charming picture of Chinese life that Old Mole, with the folly of London [Pg 341] etched upon his brain, could not but applaud his decision to return. They talked of many things and wagged their heads over the strange chances of life, and they parted the richer by each other’s respect and admiration and friendly wishes.

And Old Mole returned to the strain of his existence. Impossible, he thought, to stay in London. Equally impossible to retain so huge a sum of money. It would go on swelling like a tumor, and, like a tumor, it would create a stoppage either in his own life or in someone’s else. Had it not already done so? Had it not played its part in the tragi-comedy that was not yet come to its climax? Had it not raised him to an absurd height, blown him out into a caricature of himself, pulled out his nose, goggled his eyes, given him a hunch back and a pot belly, forced him into overfeeding, overdrinking, over-talking, into writing a ridiculous, pontifical, instructive book, choked his humor and played the very devil with his imagination? He pondered this question of the money and at last he had an inspiration. He went down over Blackfriars Bridge and into the slums of Southwark. In a foul street he called at a house and asked how many people there might be living in it. He was told twenty-three: four families. In another there were thirty-one. In another he was asked in by the woman, and there was a corpse on the bed, and there were three children eating bread and jam for their dinner on the table only a yard from it, and the woman was [Pg 342] clearly going to have another child. He asked the name of the landlord of that house, and next day sought him out. He bought the house: he went on buying until he had the whole row, then the whole street, then the next street and the next, and the next, until his money was all gone but ten thousand pounds. Then he gave orders for all the foul houses to be pulled down and a garden to be made. . . . He was told that it would be impossible—that he would have to get permission from the Borough Council, and the County Council, and Parliament.

“Can’t I do what I like with my own?” he said.

“It’s a question,” said the rent collector who had taken him under his wing, “whether the Council can afford to do without the rates. If you pull the houses down, sir, you’ll only make the overcrowding worse, because they must live somewhere, sir, and, bless you, they don’t mind it. They’re born in it and they die in it. You and I, sir, don’t like the smell, but they don’t never notice it.”

But Old Mole stuck to it and the houses were pulled down and a garden was made, and he said not a word about it to a soul. It was only a very little garden because, though he had bought many houses, he could not buy the land on which all of them were built because it was very dear.

Almost best of all he liked the destructive part of the undertaking. Pulling down houses was in his mood and sorted with his circumstances. From his own house he had set his face.

He had received a letter from Panoukian: [Pg 343]

“DEAR SIR,—You have eyes in your head and must have seen what I have been at no pains to conceal from you. I have lived through weeks of torture now and would live through many more if there were anything to be gained. I have been led to write this by the enclosed letter, which I can show you, I think, without betrayal. *Ich kann nicht mehr.* . . . This may be a shock to you, no doubt it will cause you much pain, but I believe you have the humanity to attempt to understand and to believe me when I say that I was never, in my heart, more your friend than I am now. I think it is for you to help in so much suffering.”

The enclosed letter was from Matilda. Old Mole’s eye clouded as he read it:

“My dear, I can’t let you go. I can’t, I can’t. I’ve tried so hard, I have. It isn’t wrong to love like that. I can think of nothing else. He’s been so kind, too. But I’m spoiling your life. I can love you, my dear, but I’m not the woman you ought to have. I can love you, my dear, but I’m not young and sweet like you ought to have. All this thinking and suffering has made me hard in my heart, I think. There’s such a lot between me and you, my dear. I could fight through it with you, but that would be so hard on you. It’s not as if he was a bad man, but he’s so kind. He always understands, but not like you, my darling: he only understands with his mind. I’ve tried not to write to you and to make it easy for you, but I can’t not write to you now. I must, even if it’s for the last time. I love you.”

It was an untidy, blotched scrawl. Never had Old Mole seen such a long letter from Matilda. Very carefully he folded it up and placed it in his pocketbook. [Pg 344]

He went down to her room, and, as he knew he would, found her boxes packed, her wardrobe, her drawers, empty. The puppy, now a tolerable dog, was gazing ruefully at her trunks, ominous of departure.

She came in, was startled to see him, recovered herself, and smiled at him.

“Will you come with me?” he said.

She followed him upstairs.

“I have something to show you.”

He led her to his room. On the floor were his bags, hatbox, rug, packed, strapped and labeled.

“I am going,” he said. “The puppy will not mind my going.”

VII

APPENDIX

A LETTER FROM H. J. BEENHAM TO A. Z. PANOUKIAN, M.P.

"For two years it was the fashion among the English to cut out the appendix; but the fashion died and appendices are now retained."

OBSERVATIONS AMONG THE ENGLISH, BY C. L. HUNG (BRETZELFRESSER COMPANY, HONG KONG AND NEW YORK).

[Pg 347]

VII

APPENDIX

CAPRAIA.

MY DEAR PANOUKIAN,

So you have become a politician! I had hoped for better things.

It is ten years now since I left England, so that I can write to you without the prickly heat of moral prejudice. It is a year since I saw you in Venice, you and her. She had her arm in yours and you did not see me. You saw nothing but her, and she saw nothing but you, and it was clear to me that you were enjoying your tenth honeymoon, which is, surely, a far greater thing than the first, if only you can get to it. You came out of St. Mark's, you and she, and I was so close that I could have touched you. I shrank into the shadow and watched you feed the pigeons, and then you had tea on the sunlit side of the Piazza and then you strolled toward the Rialto. I took a gondola to the station and fled to Verona, for I could have no room in your tenth Eden. Verona is the very place for a bachelor, which, I there discovered, I have never ceased to be. Verona belongs to Romeo and Juliet, and no other lovers may do more than pass the day there, salute and speed on to Venice. But a bachelor may stay there many days: he will find an excellent local wine, good cigars built round straws, passable food, and the swift-flowing Adige wherein to cast his thoughts. This I did, with a blessing or two to be conveyed to you in Venice. I hope you received them. [Pg 348] The Adige bears thoughts and blessings and sewage with equal zest to his goal, as I would all men might do.

I stayed for a month in Verona and I remember little of it but some delicious plums I bought in the marketplace and ate in the amphitheater, spitting the stones down into the arena with a dexterity I have only seen equaled by Matilda in the days of my first acquaintance with her. That is far back now, but there is not a moment of it all that I do not like to remember, and there in the amphitheater I told myself the whole adventure as a story from which I was detached. It moved me more than the house of Juliet, more than all the sorrows of the Scaligers, for it is a modern story and, as Molière said, *"Les anciens sont les anciens et nous sommes les gens d'aujourd'hui."*

Aujourd'hui! To-day! That is the marvel, that out of the swiftly moving, ever changing vapor which is life we should achieve anything so positive. To-day never goes. There is a thing called yesterday, but that is only the dust-bin at the door into which we cast our refuse, our failures, our worn-out souls. There is a thing called to-morrow, but that is the storehouse of to-day, bursting with far better things, emotions, loves, hopes, than those we have discarded. But into to-day the whole passionate force of the universe is poured, through us, through all things, and therefore to-day is marvelous.

Here in Italy there is some worship of to-day. There are times and times when it is enough to be alive; and there are times when the light glows magically and the whole body and being of a man melt into it, thrill in worship, and then, however old he be, however burdened with Time's tricks of the flesh, in his heart there are songs and dancing.

In England we cling to the past, we never know to-day, we never dare open the [Pg 349] storehouse of tomorrow, for we are all trained in the house of Mother Hubbard. I have loved England dearly since I have lived away from her. I can begin, I think, to understand. She is weary, maybe; she has many hours of boredom. She is, alas, a country where grapes grow under glass, where, I sometimes think, men do not grow at all. She is a country of adolescents; her sons seem never to be troubled by the difficulties which beset the adult mind; they rush ahead, careless of danger because they never see it; their lives hang upon a precarious luck: they are impelled, not, I believe, as other nations fancy, by greed or conceit, but by that furious energy which attends upon the adolescent hatred of being left out of things. A grown man can tolerably gauge his capacity, but the desires of a youth are constantly excited by the desires of others; he must acquire lest others obtain; he must love every maiden and yield to none; he must be forever donning new habits to persuade himself that he is more a man than the grown men among whom enviously he moves. He is filled with a fevered curiosity about himself, but never dares stay to satisfy it, lest he should miss an opportunity of bidding for the admiration and praise of others which he would far rather have than their sympathy. Sympathy he dreads, for it forces him back upon himself, brings him too near to seeing himself without excitement. . . . So far, my observations, carefully selected, take me.

There have been grown men in England, wonderful men, men all strength and sympathy and love, with powers far surpassing the intelligence of other races: but mark how the English treat them. They set them on a pinnacle, give them the admiration they despised, take none of their sympathy, raise horrible statues to their memory, and, to protect themselves against their thought, the mighty force of truth [Pg 350] in their souls, breed dwarfish imitations of them, whom they adore and love as men can only love those of their own moral race. No other country less deserves to have great men, and no other country has gotten greater. This astonishing phenomenon has produced that complacency which is the only check on the fury of England's adolescent energy. Without it, without the Brummagem dignity in which such complacency takes form, she would long ago have rushed to her destruction. With it she has a political solidity to which graver and more intelligent nations can never aspire.

But I should not talk politics to a politician. Nothing, I think you will agree, can reconcile conceptions bred in the House of Commons with those begot outside it. It has never yet been accomplished, and I gather, from the few English journals I see, that the attempt to do so is all but abandoned.

I am writing to you to-day because I wished to do so in Verona, but was there too deep in an emotional flux to be able to write anything but bad poetry or a crude expression of sympathy, which, as it would have been gratuitous, must have been offensive. To-day, in Livorno (which our sailors have chewed with their tobacco into Leghorn), I found among my papers a letter written to you by Matilda nearly twelve years ago. It belongs to you and I send it.

Yesterday in Livorno I found a marionette show and that set me thinking of England and the theater and many other subjects which used to absorb me during the hectic years of my life when I dwelt in Gray's Inn. And I wished to communicate with England and could find no one to whom I am so nearly attached as you. I was engaged to visit Elba, and was there this morning, but was so distressed with the [Pg 351] thought of the extreme youthfulness of England's treatment of the great Napoleon that I left my party and crossed over to Capraia, which you will find on the map, and here, under the hot sun, with a green umbrella over my bald head, I am writing. I can see Elba. With my mind's eye I can see England, and, indeed, when soberly I turn the matter over, I conclude that her treatment of Napoleon has not been nearly so shameful as her treatment of Shelley or Shakespeare. Shelley wrote one play; it has never openly been acted. Shakespeare wrote many plays; they have been Butchered, reduced from the dramatic to the theatrical.

The marionettes stirred me greatly. The drama they played was familiar—husband, wife, and lover—the treatment conventional, though the dialogue had the freshness of improvisation. It was often bald as my head, and in the more passionate moments almost heartbreakingly inarticulate. It was a tragedy; the husband slew the lover, the wife stabbed herself, the husband went mad, and they lay together in a limp heap, while from the street outside—where, I felt sure, there were gay puppets carelessly strolling—came the most comic, derisive little tune played upon a reed. (It must have been a reed, for it was most certainly puppet and no human music, and, for that, only the more stirring.) The whole scene is as living to my mind as any experience of my own, and, indeed, my own adventures in this life have been illuminated by it. In the English theater I have never seen a performance that did not thicken and obscure my consciousness. I could not but contrast the two, and you find me sitting on an island striving to explain it.

In the first place the performance of these marionettes compelled my whole-hearted interest because the play was detached from life, was not palpably unreal [Pg 352] under the artificial light, and therefore could begin to reflect and be a comment upon life in a degree of success dependent, of course, upon the mind behind it. It was a common but a simple mind, skilled in the uses of the tiny theater, versed in its tradition, and always nice in its perception of the degrees of emotion proper to be loosed for the building up of the dramatic scenes. It was not truly an imaginative mind, not a genuinely dramatic mind, but it was thoroughly loyal to the imagination which has created and developed the theater of the marionettes. Except that the showman had a marked preference for the doll who played the husband, the balance of the play was excellently maintained, and the marionettes did exactly as they were bid. Thus between the controlling mind of the theater, the mind in its tradition, and my own there was set up a continuous and unbroken communication, and my brain was kept most exaltingly busy drawing on those forces and passions, those powers of selection and criticism which make of man a reasoning and then a dramatic animal. You may be sure that I fed the drama on the stage with that other drama, through which you and I floundered so many years ago. I longed to cry out to the husband that he should think less of himself and what the neighbors would say and more of his wife, who, being between two men, enamored of one and dedicated to the other, was in a far worse plight than himself, who was torn only between his affection and

his pride. But tradition and convention and his own brainless subservience to his passion were too strong for him, and he killed the lover; would have killed the woman, too, but she was too quick for him. I wept, I assure you. I was sorrowful. Judge, then, of my relief and delight when the curtain rose again and those same [Pg 353] three puppets, with others, played the merriest burlesque, a starveling descendant, I fancy, of the *commedia dell' arte.* Where before they had surrendered to their passions, now my three puppets played with them at nimble knucklebones. The passion was no less genuine, but this time they were its masters, not its slaves, they had it casked and bunged and could draw on it at will. My lady puppet coquetted with the two gentlemen, set them wrangling for her, wagering, dicing, singing, dancing, vying with each other in mischievous tricks upon the town, and at last, owing, I suspect, to the showman's partiality, she sank into the husband puppet's arms and the lover puppet was propelled by force of leg through the window. (Pray, my dear Panoukian, admire the euphemism to spare both our feelings.) And now I laughed as healthily and heartily as before I wept. . . . Now, said I to myself, in England I should have been tormented with a picture, cut up by the insincerity of the actors into "effective" scenes and episodes, of three eminently respectable persons shaking themselves to bits with a passion they had never had; or, for comedy, there would have been the ribaldry of equally respectable persons twisting themselves into knots in their attempts to frustrate the discovery of a mis-spent night. Now, thought I, this brings me near the heart of the mystery. There are few men and women born without the kernel of passion. There are forty millions of men and women in the British Isles; what do they do with their passion? What, indeed—let us be frank—had I done with my own?

Now do you perceive why I am writing to you?

First of all, let us agree that boyhood is the least zestful part of a man's life. His existence is not then truly his own, he is a spectator; he is absorbed in gazing upon the great world which at a seemingly remote period he is to enter. Then he is [Pg 354] apprenticed, initiated by the brutal test of a swift growth and physical change; easily he learns the ways, the manners, the pursuits of men; the conduct of the material world, the common life, is all arranged; he has but to slip into it. That is easy. But his own individual life, that is not so easy. He soon perceives, confusedly and mistily, that into that he can only enter through his passion, through its spontaneous and inevitable expression. He knows that; you know it. I know it. They are a miserable few who do not know it. But in England he can find none to share his knowledge. He is left alone with his dread, with so much sick hope thrust back in him, for want of a generous salute from those who have gone before, that it rots away in him and eats into his natural faith. He asks for a vision of manhood and is given a dull imitation of man, strong, silent, brutal, and indifferent. He must admire it, for on all sides it is admired. As a child he has been taught to babble of gentle Jesus; as a youth he finds that same Jesus turned—by the distorting English atmosphere—into a hard Pharisee, blessing the money changers. His passion racks his bones and blisters his soul. His inmost self yearns to get out and away, to spend itself, to find its due share in the ever-creating love. He dare not so much as whisper his need, for none but shameful words are given him to express it. "All's well with the world," he is told. "All's wrong with myself," he begins to think. In other men, older men, he can find no trace of passion, only temper and lewdness, with a swagger to both. They bear both easily. His passion becomes hateful to him; he begins to chafe against it, to spurn it, to live gaily enough in the common life, to choke the vision of his own life. So it has been with you, with me, with all of us.

There are works of art, it is true. Grown men understand them; adolescents hate [Pg 355] them, for works of art reveal always the fulfilment of passion; they begin to flower at the point to which passion has raised the soul; they are the record and the landmarks of its after-journeyings, its own free traveling. To the soul in bondage all that is but babble and foolish talk, just as, to the adolescent, the simplicity of the grown man is folly. That a man should believe in human nature—as he must if he believes in himself—is, in adolescent eyes, suspect. . . . Have you not heard intelligent Englishmen say contemptuously of a man that he is an idealist, as who should say idiot?

Passion leads to idealism, to belief that there is a wisdom greater than the wisdom of men, a knowledge of which the knowledge of men is but a part, a pulse in the universe by which they may set the beat of their own.

What do the English do with their passion? They strangle it.

What did I do with my own? I let it ooze and trickle away. I accepted my part in the common life, and of my own life preserved only certain mild delights and dull passive joys, which became milder and duller as the years went by. I was engaged in educating the young. I shudder to think of it now. When I think of the effect those years, and that curriculum, had upon my own mind I turn sick to imagine the harm it

must have done to the young, eager minds—(the dullest child's mind is eager)—entrusted to my care by their confiding, worthy, and adolescent parents. It is a horror to me to look back on it, and I look back as little as may be.

But to-day, in the security of glorious weather, the impregnable peace of my island slung between blue sea and sky, I can look back with amused curiosity, setting my [Pg 356] infallible puppets against the blustering half-men whom I remember to have inhabited those portions of England that I knew. I do not count myself a freeman, but one who has escaped from prison and still bears the marks of it in his mind; it is to rid myself of those marks that I am thus wrapt in criticism, and not to condemn the lives of those who are left incarcerated. Impossible to condemn without self-condemnation. No doubt they are making the best of it. . . . I find that I cannot now think of anything in the world as separate from myself; the world embraces all things, and so must I; but to do so comfortably I must first understand everything that is sufficiently imaged to be within the range of my apprehension. Neither more nor less can I attempt. If more, then I am plunged in error and confusion; if less, then am I the captive of my own indolence, and such for the greater part of my life I have been.

When I look back on my experience in London I cannot but see that I never became a part of it, never truly lived in its life. That may have been only because a quarter of a century spent as an autocrat among small boys is not perhaps the ideal preparation for living in a crowd, a herd without a leader, in which there is no rule of manners but: Be servile when you must, insolent when you can. Possibly the majority are so bred and trained that such a flurry and scurry seem to them normal and inevitable. I am sure very many are convinced that without intrigue and wirepulling they cannot get their bread, or the position which will ensure a continued supply. There they certainly are; wriggling and squirming and pushing; they like it; they make no move to get out of it; their existence is bound up in it and they fight to preserve it without looking further. They will tell you that they are assisting "movements," but they are only following fashions. . . . What movement are you in? [Pg 357]

Matilda, I gather, is a fashion. I never knew her follow anything but her own desire, and as her desires are human and reasonable she has risen by the law of gravity above the rout, above the difficulties of her own nature, above any incongruities that arise between her individuality and the conventions of the common life of England. And of course she rises above the work she has to do, the idiotic songs written for her, the meaningless dances devised to sort with the pointless tunes. And when she suffers from the emptiness of it all, she has you, and she has the memory of myself to guard her against the filthy welter from which she sprang. She used me—(you will let her read this)—and I am proud to have served her.

There are many people like Matilda, comedians and entertainers, who develop a certain strength of personality in their revolt against the conditions of their breeding. It is impossible to educate them. Their intentions are too direct. . . . Not all of them succeed, or have the luck to become the fashion. You are one of them yourself, my dear Panoukian, and in the days when I was living with you two I used excitedly to think that there was a whole generation of them; that the young men and women of England were at last insisting on growing out of adolescence. Sometimes I felt very sure of it, but I was too sanguine. Life does not act like that; there are no sudden general growths. There are violent reactions, but they are soon swallowed up in the great forward flow.

"Comedians and entertainers" I said just now. You are all that, all you public characters. You depend upon the crowd, you are too near them. You are in dread of falling back, and also you are aware that the size of a man can only be gauged at a [Pg 358] distance, and you have to contend with the charlatan. A better comedian you may be, but he has not your scruples, your sensitiveness, and is therefore more dexterous at drawing the crowd's attention. . . . Again I turn with relief to my puppets; they have no temptation to insincerity; they obey the strings, play their parts, and are put back into their boxes. They need no bread for body or mind. They have no life except the common life of the stage, no individuality and no torturing need of fulfilling it.

But you comedians—writers, actors, politicians, divines—are raised above the common life by the degree in which you have developed your individual lives, including your talents, by work, by energy, sometimes deplorably by luck. The validity of your claims is tested by your ability to break with the common life, and pass on to creation and discovery which shall bring back into the common life power to make it more efficient.

I must define. By the common life I mean the pooling of energy which shall provide all members of the community with food, clothing, house room, transport, the necessaries of existence, and such luxuries as they require. Its concern is entirely material. Where it governs moral, ethical, and spiritual affairs it is an injurious infringement, and cannot but engender hypocrisy. How can you pool religion, or

morality, without degrading compromise? The world has discarded kingcraft and priestcraft and come to mobcraft. That will have its day. Mobcraft is and cannot but be theatrical. In a community of human beings who are neither puppets nor men there is a perpetual shuffling of values among which to live securely there is in all relations an unhealthy amount of play-acting;—take any husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, lover and lover, or, Panoukian, schoolmaster and pupil. [Pg 359] Life is then too like the theater for the theater to claim an independent existence. And that, I think, is why there is no drama in England. That is why the play-actors have columns and columns in the newspapers devoted to their doings, their portraits in shops and thoroughfares, their private histories (where presentable or in accordance with the public morality of the common life) laid bare.

That view of English life so freezes me that I lie back under my umbrella and thank God for the Italian sun.

Has it always been so in England? I think not. Garrick was a self-respecting, if a conceited, individual. He believed in his work and he had some dramatic sense. The theater had no credit then; even his genius could not raise it to the level of English institutions. But his genius made him independent, and still the theater was parasitic upon the Court. Subsequently the English Court, which, never since Charles II, had taken any genuine interest in it, repudiated the theater which then had healthily to struggle for its existence. I fancy that in Copas—(Matilda's uncle)—I found the last genuine survivor of the race of mummers of which Henry Irving was the last triumphant example. They strangled the theater with their own personalities, for only by the strength of their personalities could they force themselves upon the attention of an England huddled away in dark houses, grimly, tragically, in secrecy, play-acting. With every house a playhouse, how can the theater be taken seriously? With so much engrossing pretence in their homes, men have no need of professional mummers; with a fully developed Nonconformist conscience, an Englishman can be [Pg 360] his own playwright, mummer, and audience. He grudges the money paid to professional actors, despises any contrivance they can show him, spurns the whole affair as a light thing, wantonness, a dangerous toy that may upset the valuations by which he arrives at his own theatrical effect.

There was a time when the Englishman's home was his theater. My own home was like that: year in, year out there was a tremendous groveling before God, and a sweaty wrestling with the Devil, and a barometrical record of prowess in both was kept. Human relations sneaked in when no one was looking, took the stage when the curtain was down; I was lucky, and on the whole had a good time in spite of the show, which, I am bound to say, I thoroughly enjoyed. My father was a very fine man at the groveling and the wrestling (and knew it), but in his human relations he was awkward, heavy, and blundering in the very genuine tenderness which he could not always escape;—and I think he knew that, too, poor wretch.

There must be fewer such homes now, but still an enormous number. God and Devil are not so potent, but the habit of posturing remains, has been handed down and carried over into human relations—(at least God and Devil did protect us from that!)—so that there is not one, not the most intimate and sacred, but is made subtly the occasion of self-indulgence, easy, complacent, and devastating; the epidemic disease consequent on the airless years from the Reform Bill to the South African War—(you will remember the histrionics before, during and after that tragedy of two nations). The old English home—theatrical and oleographic—has been destroyed by it, and I rejoice as I rejoice to hear that the Chinese women are abandoning the folly [Pg 361] of stunting their feet. We used to stunt the soul, the affections, human passions. Unbind the China woman's feet and she suffers agonies, so that she cannot walk. Thus it has been with us; we have suffered mortal agonies; we have been saved from madness by the inherited theatrical habit, by which we have shuffled through the human relationships enforced by our natural necessities and the inconsiderate insistence upon being born of the next generation. We have shuffled through them, I say, and we have made them charming, but we have not yet—shall we ever?—made them beautiful. There has been no true song in our hearts, only songs without words *à la* Mendelssohn, nor yet a full music in our blood. We have imitated these things, from bad models, drawn crude sketches of them. I, for instance, play-acted myself into marriage; when it came to getting out of it, play-acting was of no avail, though even for that emergency, as you know, the English game has its rules. . . . I could not conform to them, and in that I believe I shared in the general experience of the race. I was pitchforked out of the old theatricality into the new and found it ineffective. That must be happening every day, in thousands, perhaps in millions, of cases. . . . I feel hopeful, and yet unhappy, too, for my experience came to me too late. I have been able to discard; but, for the new life—*vita nuova*—I have not wherewith to grasp, to take into myself, to make my own. Even here on this island, in this country of light, I do not seem to myself to be fully alive, but am an outsider, a spectator,

even as I was when a small boy, and I shall go down into this warm earth hardly riper than I was when I was born, nurtured only by one genuine experience and that negative. But for that I am thankful. It has made it possible for me to ruminate, if not to act, to rejoice in the possession of my uncomely and unwieldy body, to be content with that small fragment of my soul which I have mastered. [Pg 362]

(It is really delightful to be writing to you again. It brings you before me, as a boy, a little piping boy; as a posturing and conceited youth—do you remember the cruel snub inflicted on you by Tallien, the French master? I had sent you to him with a message, and he said: “Tell Mr. Beenham I will take no message from his conceited puppy.” You! A prefect!—as a heated and quite too Stendhalian young man. It is charming.)

But I am rueful when I reflect that I solved my difficulty, which, after all, was a portion of the English difficulty, by leaving England. I should have stayed; fought it out; wrestled through with it until the three of us were properly and in all eyes established in that new relation to which inevitably we should have come. I was too old. I was too much under the habit of thinking of consequences; too English, too theatrical to believe that life does not deal in neat and finished endings. I could see nothing before me but the ugly conventional way of throwing mud at the woman and bringing you to an unjust and undeserved ruin, or the way most pleasing to my sentimentality, of withdrawing from the scene and leaving you to make the best of it; as, no doubt, you have done, since you are both successful personages and well in the limelight, and able to go triumphantly from honeymoon to honeymoon.

Are there children? I hope there are children!

And there begins my real difficulty. Not that I care about legitimacy. No reasonable child will ask more than to be conceived in a healthy body, born in a clean atmosphere, and bred in a decently ordered home. But if there are children you should not be separated. Perhaps you are not. Perhaps I have been long enough absent for your world to forget my existence. But I have my doubts. I too much dread the English atmosphere not to feel that it must have been too strong for you, and you will have accepted your parts in the play. [Pg 363]

But, if there are children, there should be no play-acting in their immediate surroundings, in the love that brought them into being.

How I wish you could have seen my marionettes! We should then have an emotional meeting point. As it is, I seem to be dancing round and round you almost as agilely as though I were with you in England, in the thick of polite London. That surely is what you need, on your thickly populated island, a point at which the lower streams of thought can converge, so that your existence may more resemble a noble estuary than a swampy delta.

You will see that I am sane enough to be thinking more of your (possibly non-existent) children than of you. There are two clear ideas in my head, and they desire each other in marriage—the idea of children and the idea of the theater. But, alas! I fear it is beyond me to bring them together. I cannot reach beyond my marionettes, which are, after all, only the working models of the theater I should like to conceive, and, having conceived, to create and set down in England as a reproach to the clumsy sentimental play-acting of English life. That would, I believe, more powerfully than any other instrument, quell the disease. If you had a theater which was a place of art it would lead you on to life, and you would presently discard the sham morals, imitation art, false emotions, and tortuous thoughts with which you now defend yourselves against it.

I have written much under my umbrella. I hope I have said something. At least, with this, I shake you by the hand and we three puppets dance on through the merry burlesque which our modern life will seem to be to the wiser and healthier generations who shall come after us. [Pg 364]

The old are supposed to be in a position to advise the young. I have learned through you, and yet I may give you this counsel: “If ever you find yourself faced with a risk, take it.” Love, I conclude, is a voyager, and it is our privilege to travel with him; but, if we stay too long in the inn of habit, we lose his company and are undone.

Yours affectionately,

H. J. BEENHAM.

Transcriber's Note

Images of the source text used in this transcription are available through the Internet Archive. See:

archive.org/details/oldmolebeingsurp00cannrich

The British first edition published by Martin Secker was used to confirm specific readings (e.g., hyphenation) of the source text. Images of this edition are also available through the Internet Archive. See:

archive.org/details/oldmolebeingsurp00canniala

The following change was noted:

- p. 207: or a parasite, or a tyrant;—A closing quotation mark was inserted between "tyrant" and the semicolon.

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