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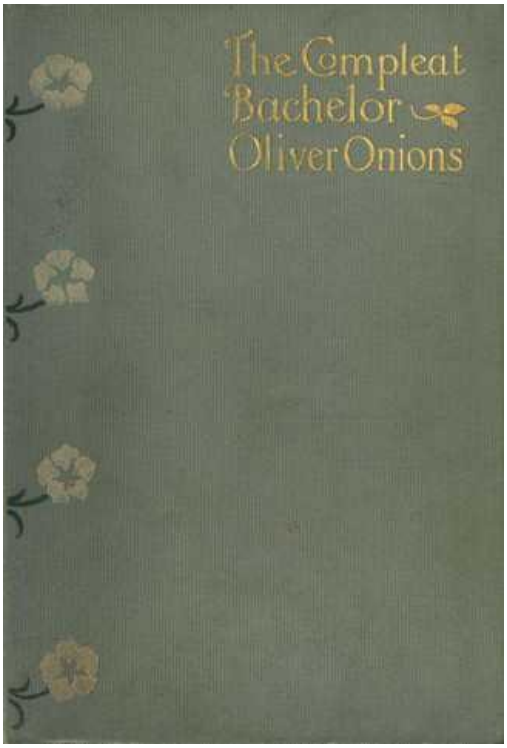

THE
COMPLEAT BACHELOR

'*When the Rain raineth and the Goose winketh,*
Little wots the Gosling what the Goose thinketh.'

THE COMPLEAT BACHELOR

BY

Oliver Onions

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TO
FRANK GELETT BURGESS

THESE UNPREMEDITATIONS WERE
AND ARE INSCRIBED

EPISODES.

I

SUGAR AND LEMON

“Perhaps, Rollo,” said my sister (Caroline Butterfield, spinster), “you would like to go on to your club, and call for me in an hour or so. There will only be women, I expect.”

“Carrie,” I replied, “your consideration does you credit; but no company that you may enter is too bad for me. I insist on accompanying you. It is my first duty as a brother.”

Carrie laughed.

“I believe you like it, Rol,” she said. “Molly Chatterton says Loring says you never go to a club if you can have tea with a married woman.”

“It is the one reward of a blameless reputation,” I replied; “but that Loring Chatterton should say so is rank ingratitude, considering his own ante-nuptial record. Rank ingratitude.”

We dismounted together at Millicent Dixon’s door, and were admitted to the hall. Carrie gave my necktie an attentive little tug, slapped my cheek (Carrie is justly proud of her middle-aged brother, and likes to show him off to advantage), and preceded me into Millie Dixon’s drawing-room. Some half-dozen ladies were engaged in the usual five-o’clock flirtation with tea and cake, and contributing to the feminine hum which didn’t subside in the least as we entered.

“He *would* come, Millie,” said Caroline, after a cross-over kiss on both cheeks, “but you can lean him up in a corner and give him some tea to keep him quiet.”

This from my own flesh and blood!

Millie Dixon gave me a laughing nod over her shoulder, and busied herself preparing the cup that should have the effect Carrie suggested. I sat down, and composed myself to listen to the restful chatter that was supposed not to interest me. Mrs. Loring Chatterton, at my side, was rippling gently on the subject of a School of Art Needlework Exhibition, while Carrie and Mrs. Carmichael talked Marshall and Snelgrove to Cicely Vicars and Mrs. Julian Joyce. I have no disdain for ladies’ babble—it is quite as entertaining as starting-price and stock-exchange gossip, and much prettier. But I couldn’t get Chatterton’s remark out of my mind.

“Cream or lemon, Mr. Butterfield?” called Miss Dixon from the other side of the room.

“Yes, if you please,” I answered absently, while Miss Dixon looked a deprecating query as to when I *should* be sensible. I roused, and turned to Mrs. Loring Chatterton.

“Where is Loring to-day?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied. “I told him I shouldn’t want him this afternoon, so he said he would count the dreary hours till joy returned. I expect he went to count them at some club.”

“Loring always was ardent,” I remarked, looking meditatively into my cup. “I seem to remember that kind of thing from Loring before. Long before you knew him, Mrs. Chatterton.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Butterfield?”

“Nothing, my dear Mrs. Chatterton,” I replied. “Nothing out of the way. But you don’t suppose that Loring had the good fortune to happen on the perfect gem without—what shall I say?—preliminary prospecting?”

Mrs. Chatterton and I are old friends. She laughed.

“Do you think you can make me inquisitive, Mr. Butterfield? I know all about that. Why, I made Loring tell me every——”

It was my turn to laugh.

“Then there is nothing more to say,” I answered. “Loring is my friend—he has claims upon me. He has, doubtless, given himself quite away, and half his bachelor friends into the bargain. I think I see him doing it. Isn’t that a pretty gown Carrie is wearing? I chose it for her.”

“Loring told me a great deal,” said Mrs. Chatterton musingly.

“The buttons are from her grandmother’s wedding-gown.”

“And he was so clumsy and boyish,” she continued.

Words were superfluous. I smiled.

“Anyway,” Mrs. Loring went on, “I don’t think it fair. Men have half a dozen flirtations before they are married their wives know nothing about.”

“And women, Mrs. Chatterton?” I asked.

“*Some* women, Mr. Butterfield, may not be scrupulous. But——”

The unfinished sentence was a *résume* of female virtue since the days of Penelope.

“What are you two so interested in?” cried Mrs. Carmichael from a remote sofa. I had just caught her eye.

Mrs. Loring placed her hand beseechingly on my sleeve, but I hardened my heart.

“We were recalling the time, Mrs. Kit,” I replied, “before your several husbands were enticed from the liberty of bachelor life; we were commenting on the change in them.”

“*You* should be able to appreciate the difference, Mr. Butterfield,” returned Mrs. Carmichael. “You are just where they left you years and years ago.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, “I have not been able to bury my memory in the wedding-service, nor forget my past in a honeymoon. I am still as unregenerate as, say, Kit Carmichael was before he met you.”

“You are a great deal worse,” returned Mrs. Kit.

“You refuse a very pretty compliment, Mrs. Carmichael,” I replied.

“Yes, at Kit’s expense. It was you who made Kit as bad as he was. He told me so.”

The perfidy of these married friends! Rol Butterfield, you have no use for them when they sacrifice you on their nuptial altars. Their eyes lost their singleness with their hearts, and your reputation has gone for a kiss. Well, you have your revenge on their wives, if you care to use it.

The spark of righteous war was kindled within me. I leaned forward, and spoke my speech with icy distinctness.

“So I am responsible for Carmichael’s past, am I, Mrs. Kit? Listen to me. There was not a more abandoned and desperately wicked trio in London than Kit Carmichael—your meek brother, Miss Dixon—and Loring—–”

Mrs. Chatterton endeavoured to stop me with a hot teaspoon laid on my hand, but I still testified.

“And Loring Chatterton. Not content with steeping their own souls in infamy, they must needs go afield, and corrupt the spotless name of one—oh, Carrie, Carrie, what your poor brother has suffered! And now to be told in his old—his middle—age that he did it all!”

Mrs. Kit and Cicely Vicars had put their heads together, and were endeavouring to put aside the damning testimony in mock admiration of the dramatic skill with which it was uttered. Cicely Vicars had best be very careful. I was to be leaned up in a corner and given tea, was I?

“Doesn’t Mr. Butterfield look well with the light behind him?” said Mrs. Vicars with a pretty gesture of her hand. Mrs. Vicars paints flowers, and asks her friends what they would really like for wedding presents.

“Mr. Butterfield may have the Light behind him, Mrs. Vicars,” I replied, “but he has no regrets for a misspent youth. Charlie Vicars wasted his youth most shamefully. Mornings in the park, with a young lady in a pink frock—is that not so, Mrs. Loring?”

I turned to her suddenly.

“It was a green frock,” said Mrs. Loring thoughtlessly; then turned quite pink. It was a pretty situation. Loring might have treasured that blush. I was avenged.

Millicent Dixon came to the rescue.

“Carrie, dear,” she said, “you are the only one who has any influence over that irrepressible man. Do gag him for a few minutes;” and passed over a plate of gaufrettes, which Carrie brought to me.

I held the plate to Mrs. Loring Chatterton, who, a reminiscence of fun still in her eyes, accepted the peace-offering with a warning shake of her head.

“Mr. Butterfield,” she said, “you never were anything but mischievous, and it’s my opinion you never will be. Oh, I wish I could get you off my hands. There are plenty of nice girls. Look at Millie there,” she whispered.

“Mrs. Loring,” I replied, “once upon a time there was a fox, who was caught in a trap, and had his tail cut off. After that—–”

“Ah well, I suppose you know your own mind. But, Mr. Butterfield”—she leaned over, and spoke quite low—“I believe you make out your young days—and Loring’s—to have been much worse than they were. Do you not, now?”

Mrs. Loring had a little beauty-spot on her conscience which she thought was a stain.

II

A HYPOTHETICAL CASE

Carrie and I were placidly surveying, from either end of my little dining-table, the creditable wreck we had made of a rather neat little dinner. Carrie never disdains this hour of the animal, at whatever table fortune shall place her; and when she does me the honour to dine with me, she generally pays me the compliment of evident enjoyment. It is a feature I admire in her.

I was making leisurely coffee arrangements with my latest bachelor acquisition, a pretty little silver and spirit affair, that did not necessitate rising from a comfortable seat; while my sister purred in soft content. I moved the shaded lamp aside to see her better—Carrie is a very presentable young woman; I thought her arms decidedly pretty.

"I think, Rol," she said, as I looked carefully to the coffee, "I think—we will not grace the theatre this evening. It's such a wet night, and I'm so comfy here."

I could hear the rain without getting up. It was a wet night; and she did look comfy.

"Very well, my dear sister," I replied. "As you please. It will save me a sovereign, unless you succeed in coaxing it out of me during the evening, which I have no doubt is your real motive."

"No, Rol, really I don't want——"

"Not enough, eh? Haven't got it, my dear—this is good coffee, Caroline,—I'm really as poor as Hooley. There, that's right. *Kümmel avec, n'est ce pas*, my dear?"

"Please. No, Rol, we'll sit here and be nice all the evening. I'll bring my writing in—may I?"

I was only half convinced it wasn't money; she was after something. Carrie's writing is her one affectation, with which exception she is as sane as would be expected of my sister.

I believe it was a modern comedy which was then occupying the years of her youth, and whose production was to be the crown of her old age. She worked at it intermittently, that is to say, when there were no calls to receive or to be made, when she could find nobody to take her to a theatre or a garden-party, when there were no women to gossip with, or men to fascinate—whenever, in short, she felt dull. But of late she had seemed to recover interest in it—had recast it, she said.

"Bring it in, by all means," I replied, "but bring a dictionary as well; I'm not absolute in spelling."

"Thank you, Rollo."

Why the deuce was she so uncommonly polite? She usually announced that she was going to spend the evening with me in much less considerate terms. I shook my head apprehensively.

When dinner was removed Carrie disappeared, and presently re-entered with an armful of comedy and a mouthful of quill pens. She made a clean sweep of my desk and settled herself with many quirks and little graces before the recast masterpiece. I gravely asked her permission to smoke, and she, smiling at the superfluity of the question, bowed a ceremonious assent; then got down to business, and chewed a pink knuckle in the stress of composition.

I put my feet upon a chair, lighted a cigar, and looked alternately at the fire and at Caroline. She made my room appear very comfortable, with her evening frock and pretty airs. She was an excellent housekeeper, and kept my half of our little flat almost as dainty as her own. We got along very cosily, Carrie and I—for a sister, she behaved very well indeed. She could have the sovereign if she wanted it; I only hoped it was no worse.

By and by Carrie looked up meditatively, started on a fresh knuckle, and then turned to me.

"What do men talk about after dinner, Rol, when the women have left?" she asked.

I looked at her curiously and smiled.

"No, Rollo," she said, "I don't mean—I mean, what do they talk about?"

"Oh!" I replied, "what do they *really* talk about, eh?"

"Yes. I want to put it in the play."

"You want to put it in the play? Let me see." I considered a moment. "Well, after the first grief at the loss of the ladies, their hands go instinctively to their hair, to feel how they have looked. If there is a mirror handy they flock to it. They then sit down, look wistfully at the empty chairs, and fold their hands patiently, to await the earliest moment that they may rejoin their bereft partners."

"Don't be absurd, Rol," answered Carrie. "I want to know. I've got a man here, who is to talk after dinner. He's in love with a girl he's been sitting next, and I want him to say pretty things about her."

Happy, happy innocence! dear simple Carrie! Should I be the one to destroy so sweet an illusion? Never!

I was intensely amused, but I replied thoughtfully:

"I should think in the first place it would depend a good deal on the man—and the girl. What are they like?"

"He's a soldier," said Carrie, looking timidly down at her manuscript. "That is, he has not seen any active service, but he's simply thirsting to do some brave deed that shall show her how he loves her."

"Yes," I said, much interested. "A carpet knight; how old?"

"He's about four-and-twenty, I believe; and he's not a carpet knight. He's very good, and clever, and noble. He's supposed to be dining at his married sister's, and has to entertain the men with brilliant talk."

If I didn't know that noble young soldier, I would never look on daylight again!

"Black hair?" I said.

“Yes,” replied Carrie promptly. “That is—I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet.”

I leaned back in my chair to recover from the shock. This, then, was what made her so loving to her brother. This was the “nice evening” we were to have. She had a secret which pricked her conscience. She was going to be nice to me for the time remaining. I might have known she didn’t visit Mrs. Loring Chatterton for nothing. A soldier to run off with my housekeeper! She had recast the play with a vengeance; I was to play the good brother’s part.

I shut my eyes.

“Well, Rol?” said Carrie. She had evidently not noticed my state. She didn’t know I knew.

“Let me think,” I replied, “let me think.”

I was not allowed to think; a tap at the door roused me, and two visitors were announced. In came Loring Chatterton, and the young brother-in-law himself. I had to admit he was a not unprepossessing young warrior.

“How do you do, Miss Butterfield?” came simultaneously from my two guests, while Carrie rose, putting aside her manuscript. I greeted them from my chair.

“I am afraid we interrupt your writing, Miss Butterfield,” said Loring, sitting down.

“Oh no, Mr. Chatterton,” Caroline replied. “As a matter of fact I was rather stuck when you came in.”

“Yes, Loring,” I interposed, “Carrie was rather stuck when you came in. Perhaps we shall be able to help her, eh, Bassishaw?”

“Delighted,” replied Bassishaw; “but I’m afraid, do you know, that I haven’t much of a head on me for that sort of thing, Miss Butterfield.”

“Rollo——” began Carrie.

“Oh, he’ll do, Carrie,” I replied. “Caroline wants to know, Bassishaw, what a young man, good, clever, and—let me see—was he noble, Carrie? Yes, I believe he was noble, and—a brilliant talker”—(I had him there)—“a brilliant talker, would say after dinner about the girl he thought he loved.”

Carrie was helpless. I had not given her away, and she did not dare to protest for fear of doing so herself. She had a secret—I also had a secret. I would keep the case strictly hypothetical.

“Well, Miss Butterfield,” began the hero who was thirsting to do some brave deed, “I’m hanged, do you know, if I know what he’d say. He’d talk a lot of piffle, wouldn’t he—oh, but he’s a brilliant sort of chap. He’d—oh, hang it, Loring, what would he say? I don’t know.”

I chuckled softly. I didn’t want to hear Loring; I wanted to hear the brilliant talker. It was for Carrie’s benefit.

“But if he really loved her,” I said, “and his eloquence came out in a torrent?”

“Oh, I see. Well, I expect he’d say she was a confounded nice girl—or something—pretty and all that, you know—and he’d row any chap who said she wasn’t; don’t you think, eh? But why the deuce should he say anything?”

Bassishaw was coming out of it with more credit than I thought. I laughed, and even Carrie had to laugh too.

“I think,” said Chatterton, “that’s about as much as he could say, unless he were an ass. I can’t imagine his saying much if you were there, Rollo.”

“No,” said Bassishaw. “You *are* a mischievous sort of Johnny, you know, Butterfield. You’re deuced hard on young chaps; you guy them awfully, you know. I expect you’ve forgotten all that.”

Thus unconsciously, was Bassishaw revenged. I was hard on young chaps. I had forgotten, you know. I was an old fossil, or something. But I had a sister, deuced nice girl, pretty, and all that. You have to keep in with Johnnies like that, you know.

One thing I must know. Did this plain-spoken young man of the sword care for Carrie? This was soon evident from his conciliatory manner toward me. No one ever goes out of the way to consider me unless he wants something. Bassishaw was most attentive.

“By the way, Butterfield,” he said after a while, “are you engaged for Tuesday afternoon? Because if you’re not, do you know, my folks are giving a sort of garden-party, or something. There’ll be lots of people of your sort”—(my sort!)—“coming—clever, and all that, you know; I thought you might care to come. I’ll get them to ask you, if you like. And Miss Butterfield, too; Chatterton here is coming, and he’ll look after you, you know, Butterfield. What do you say?”

I turned to Carrie.

“I think we might go, Rol,” she said. “I like to meet clever people.”

I thought a moment.

“I don’t know, Bassishaw,” I replied—“that I care to meet people of—er—my sort, much. But if Carrie cares to go, I’ll look after her. It may be of use to her—in a literary way. Thank you.”

I wouldn’t have missed that garden-party for a good deal.

III

A MILITARY MANŒUVRE

I had feigned to change my mind several times with regard to Bassishaw's garden-party, but Carrie had suddenly developed accentuated ideas on the subject of engagement-keeping.

"We promised, you know, Rol," she said, "and it would look so bad to run off. I don't suppose it will be much fun," she added candidly.

She was mistaken. It would be great fun.

On the way thither I entertained her blandly on the subject of unmarried life. I pointed out to her the advantages of a brother and sister living happily together, as, say, in our own case. I argued on the holy bonds of kinship, and congratulated her on having a brother who would devote the whole of his life to making her comfortable. How happy we were!

Carrie moved uneasily in her seat. She endeavoured to change the subject. Her conscience wrought within her—she was a guilty traitor, and deceiving the kindest of brothers. Had she been less in love, she might have suspected something, as I continued in the same strain; but such is not the way of youth. Her arts might have been transparent to me for months and months, yet she would at last break the great secret with most delicious gentleness, in stammers and blushes, and I would show a dramatic surprise and shock. We see other people's progress, but our own love affairs are always unguessed.

It was a great relief to Carrie when we arrived at the Bassishaws'. The strain was getting embarrassing. A straight military young figure had evidently been on the look-out for our conveyance, for he made several false starts, and almost supplanted the more ceremonious reception due from his mother. This little formality through, he pounced on us at once.

"How d'ye do, Miss Butterfield? Do, Butterfield?" he said warmly. "So glad you've come."

"Thank you," I replied. "I was rather afraid I'd have to let Carrie come alone, but I managed to arrange it."

A shade of regret was visible in his eyes, but he bore it nicely. He is "white," as Carmichael would have said.

"Of course," he said, "Miss Butterfield would have been all right, you know, but I'm glad you came too."

I believe he was. Saying so seemed to make him so.

We walked up the garden, I in the middle. Carrie received an occasional bow, but we didn't know many people there. This was young Bassishaw's excuse for conducting us personally, and he pointed out various people as "men you ought to know, you know, Butterfield." I betrayed no great desire for the acquaintanceship. I was not to be shaken off.

Bassishaw was piloting us into the most frequented parts. This young man was manœuvring, with more skill than I had given him credit for, to drop me. Carrie had my arm, and as Bassishaw stopped at the various groups I made surer of it by a little closing in of my elbow. He had the advantage of a tactician's knowledge, but I had the larger experience. He led us towards the base of operations, the refreshment tent, where he calculated to play on the natural interest I should take in the commissariat department. He gave me a hint of a private canteen—it was good strategy, I was very thirsty—but I held out. He showed a great desire to introduce me to personages, but I replied to his big guns with a harassing fire of conversational small-arms. He really did very well, and my respect for him increased. Personal strategy was his line, but I held him in the field of mental manœuvres.

He had pointed out some snowy-whiskered old general, and had held forth in his redundant way on the fascinating personality of the man. I made him a text for an army discourse.

"Do you know, Bassishaw," I said, "I cannot sufficiently admire you military men. You are the outposts of a nation, who make all that is happy and peaceful at home possible. You sacrifice yourselves on inaccessible Indian hills, you scorch under African suns, while all you love is left behind you in England. You do not marry—that is, the true soldier thinks it inconsistent with his duty,—and you leave all you care for to fight the battles of a less devoted society. It is self-sacrificing; and when you return, it is to a bachelor's old age, like the general there."

"Oh, I don't know, Butterfield," he replied. "Lots of our soldiers marry, you know."

I could feel Carrie's arm trembling on mine. I continued:

"That is another instance of their nobility. It makes their duty all the harder. They have to leave their wives, and worship them only in the ideal sense. They see them, perhaps, only once in ten years, unless they have risen to responsible posts. It is a great devotion."

"But, Rol," said Carrie timidly, "lots of women are glad to go abroad with their husbands, and—and nurse, and that kind of thing."

"Then," I replied, "they but unnerve the warrior in the hour of his trial. He does not fight for his country, but for his wife. No. It is the bachelor soldier who has my veneration."

"That's all very well, you know, Butterfield," protested the bachelor soldier uneasily, "but, confound it, it's hard enough without that. Hang it all," he broke out, "if you've got that fancy sort of thing in your head, why didn't you join the army yourself? You're a bachelor, you know, and it would be a jolly lot easier for you to be a hero than—the other poor beggars."

I smiled. "It is just as necessary that the soldier should have worthy people to defend," I replied. "No, Bassishaw, the soldier's watchword is singleness. He is as great a solitary as that other one, who devotes his life to writing. The soldier knows he is doing some good—the writer takes the risk."

“But writers often——” began Bassishaw.

“And soldiers——” said Carrie at the same time.

“Both cut themselves off in a voluntary abnegation,” I replied. “They scorn the smaller comforts; the one worships his art, the other his duty. Look at Loring and his wife, there. They look happy, and comfortable, and pretty; they have gentle, domestic pleasures. But they have no conception of the grandeur of duty. They do not know the stern joys of the warrior, they——”

I had been so rapt in my idea that for the moment my guard was down. The watchful foe took instant advantage of it. Unseen by me, he had quietly beckoned to Loring, who crossed over to us.

“Rollo,” he said, “my wife wants to speak to you a moment most particularly. She is waiting there.”

I was out-manœuvred—the ally had taken me in the flank. I couldn’t resist. I looked at them, and then at Mrs. Loring, who was waiting, tapping her toe with her parasol. There was no way out. I turned away, and, looking over my shoulder, saw the triumphant foe turn the corner of the greenhouse into the shrubbery, a road of the third class, impassable for artillery.

“Now, Mrs. Loring,” I said, smarting under my defeat; “I am glad to see you. What do you want?”

“Oh, Mr. Butterfield,” she returned effusively, “I’ve been wanting to speak to you all the afternoon. Isn’t it a lovely day?”

“It is a lovely day; a lovely day,” I replied. “I have been greatly struck by the beauty of the day.”

“It is perfect,” she said, endeavouring to gain time. “Oh, how nice it is to be young, Mr. Butterfield!”

“Mrs. Loring,” I answered severely, “did you send for me to tell me it was a lovely day, and that it was nice to be young?”

“Of course not,” she replied, much embarrassed. “I wanted—I wanted to talk to you. I wanted—oh, do help me, Loring.”

“Molly wanted to tell you, Rollo——” began Chatterton.

I silenced him with a peremptory wave of the hand.

“Molly wanted to tell me something I didn’t know,” I replied. “Molly wanted to tell me that I was blind and deaf and stupid, and that I couldn’t see what was under my nose. She wanted to tell me of afternoon appointments at her house, and Heaven knows what sort of carrying on. She wanted——”

“Well, you shouldn’t tease them so,” replied Mrs. Loring, illogical, after the manner of women, but staunch.

“Madam,” I said, “I am not so fatuous as to suppose that if two young persons intend to practise idolatry on one another, my wisdom and experience will stop them. But I have been plotted against, have been told nothing; and I am entitled to get what melancholy amusement I can out of the affair. You have spoiled my entertainment.”

I adjusted my hat to an angle suggestive of rectitude, and bowed myself away. I made for my hostess, and had myself presented to the general.

“You have a promising young strategist in our young friend Bassishaw,” I remarked.

“In what way?” he inquired.

“He has turned the flank of a superior force, and is in retreat with a hostage,” I replied.

When, half an hour afterwards, I again encountered the victorious enemy, they made straight for me. I received them with dignity.

“Rollo, dear,” began my sister, laying her hand affectionately on my sleeve, and coming very close to me, “we have something to say to you.”

Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Yes,” said Bassishaw. “You see it’s this way, Butterfield, I’ve asked Caroline to be my wife. I know it’s too bad not to have let you into it, but, hang it all, you don’t encourage a chap much, you know. You’re so deuced quizzy, you know. And, I say, Butterfield. That was all rot about soldiers not marrying, now, wasn’t it? I know you’re a good chap, Butterfield, and you’ll let me have Carrie, won’t you?”

I was afraid he was going to say I should not lose a sister but gain a brother; but he didn’t. My spirit was broken; I had no dramatic surprise left in me. Carrie looked up pleadingly, with a tiny little tear in one eye.

“It’s 'yes,’ isn’t it, Butterfield?” said Bassishaw. “You’re the only one to ask, you know. And if it isn’t 'yes,’ you know——”

Talented young man! He knew when to press a yielding foe. I sighed, and took an arm of each. I feebly tried to recover my old authority, but they talked laughingly across me, and I knew what sort of glances were passing behind my head. I was led captive to Chatterton and his wife. Action was better than insight after all.

IV

A CHILDREN’S PARTY

A good dinner in particular, and a comfortable sense of solvency in general, had thrown me into a half whimsical, half melancholy musing, from which I was roused by a small pair of hands placed over my eyes from behind, and a challenge to guess.

There was not the least possibility of it being any one other than it was, but I guessed “Jack Wharton,” and had my ears boxed. Jack Wharton is a large creature with fat fingers, and more rings on each of them than a Plantagenet sword has coronets—a well-meaning, meritorious kind of man, and my sister Carrie’s special aversion.

Carrie sat on the arm of my chair, and paid little feminine attentions to my hair, which she tried to make the most of—there is not so much of it as there once was. A certain tendency to early harvest in hair is a family trait, and I occasionally subdue the arrogance of my sister’s youth by reading to her from the health column of some family paper.

She patted down the last wisp, and addressed me.

“Do you know, Rol,” she said, “I have an idea.”

“I leap for joy, my dear,” I replied.

Carrie is used to me. She went on unheeding.

“Suppose—suppose we give a children’s party.”

I looked at her in surprise. A children’s party in my flat! What did she mean?

“Suppose we give a masked ball or a grandmother’s tea?” I suggested.

“Oh well, if you will be silly—” Caroline said, sitting straight up, and adjusting the lace frivolity on her wrists.

“But who on earth are you going to ask to a children’s party?” I asked.

“Oh, Rol,” she replied, “there are lots and lots of children. There’s Alice Carmichael’s nephew, Ted ——”

“Ted Carmichael is seventeen years old,” I remarked.

“And Nellie Bassishaw,” she continued.

“Nellie Bassishaw is fifteen, and old-fashioned at that,” I replied.

“Well, you must have some one to take charge of the children, you know, Rol. But there are heaps and heaps of nice children. There’s Molly Chatterton, and little Chris Carmichael, and lots of others. I do think it would be fun.”

“I daresay it would,” I replied. “And yourself and young Bassishaw would look after them and amuse them, I suppose?”

“Yes, Arthur says he’ll come and help,” she answered. I had evidently not been the first one to be considered.

“And Arthur will bring half a dozen young Bassishaws, younger than Nellie?”

“Why, yes, I expect he will. Why not?”

“And has Arthur ordered a magic-lantern?” I asked.

“Not yet,” replied Carrie. “That is, he *did* suggest a magic-lantern—children like magic-lanterns, you know, Rol.”

I was aware of it—other people than children like magic-lanterns. I leaned back and sighed; it was apparently all arranged.

“And what date did you say you had decided on?” I asked.

“The 17th,” replied my dutiful sister; “that is, if you’ll be a good brother, and let us use your rooms, Rol.”

“Oh, anything you like,” I answered resignedly. “I’ll clear out to the club and you can do as you please. Only, mind you,” I added, “I insist that there shall be children. I will not be turned out of my rooms for you and Bassishaw and all the Nellies and Teds of your acquaintance to play any magic-lantern racket.”

“Oh, you dear brother!” cried Carrie, blowing a kiss down the back of my collar. “But you mustn’t go out, Rol. We shall want you to help, you know. You can——”

“Manage the gas, perhaps?” I suggested.

“Oh, the magic-lantern man will do that,” she replied, laughing. “You can call the forfeits—you used to know a lot of forfeits, Rol—and pull crackers and things.”

And have sprawling youngsters climbing my back, and nurse them when they get cross, I thought. But it was of no use demurring before a determined young sister. I must make the best of it.

I was given due notice on the 16th, and cleared my papers away. At Carrie’s suggestion I also took down a print or two—children were so quick at noticing things, she said. Then I had the satisfaction of seeing a Christmas-tree placed in the corner devoted to my armchair, and of being able to look forward to a week or two of occasional pine-needles and grease-spots from toy candles whenever I wanted to read. A hairy man also came with a tool-bag, which he threw on my dining-table, and proceeded to make what seemed to me a radical alteration in my gas system, trailing flexible tubes across the floor, over which I scarcely dared to step. I took my hat and fled, leaving Carrie to do as seemed good to her.

Carrie had made me promise to assist, and at five o’clock we were at the top of the stairs receiving

our young guests. Arthur Bassishaw was there, of course—he had been about for the last two days, and had really, Carrie said, been invaluable. Every few minutes a nursemaid arrived with some pink-legged, fluffy little lump, muffled up to its bright eyes. Young Ted Carmichael brought my little friend Chris, who clasped my knees and demanded that I should be a dragon on the spot. Miss Nellie Bassishaw came with half a dozen little Bassishaws, casting a glance at Master Ted that made that young gentleman nervous about his gloves. Altogether by six o'clock some twenty small people were sitting round Carrie's table, with an attendant maid or two tall behind them, and the noise was just beginning.

Carrie, to do her justice, ordered young Bassishaw about as if he were her own brother, and he assisted with piled-up plates and staggering jellies in the most creditable manner. Master Ted Carmichael, however, was evidently divided in mind as to whether he should consider himself purely a guest, or whether his age qualified him for attendance on the kids, a perplexity in which his palpable devotion to Nellie did not help him much. Nellie was difficult to woo that evening, and was playing off a smaller schoolboy on her half-grown-up admirer in a way that I liked immensely. She has the germs of mischief in her, and is pretty into the bargain. Ted, therefore, moved in a state of unrest—now helping in ministering to younger needs, and now resuming his seat helplessly. There was a speck of something in my memory that made me feel for Ted.

The noise increased, and by the time Master Chris—a most depraved child—had thrust a handful of raisin-stalks and broken biscuits down the neck of the lady of five whom he had taken in, children were romping here and there, regardless of whispering nurses who reminded them they were still at table. They were swept into another room by Carrie, with stamping of sturdy legs and pulling of crackers. Ted tried to remain behind to be near his disdainful lady, but I brought him along. I was willing to help him.

I engaged Master Ted in conversation. The children, I said, would soon be playing games, and then we men would have a few minutes to ourselves—perhaps time for a cigar. He stiffened up in pleased pride, and the front of his first dress-suit expanded. He *was* grown up, then. He ventured the remark that kids were awful slow, but they had to be amused, he expected.

"Slow, do you think, Ted?" I asked. "Why, I find them most interesting. Look at Miss Nellie there." (She had just come in.) "She looks almost grown up, but any one can see she's the biggest child of the lot. Look at her with little Molly Chatterton—she thinks she's got a doll. Ah, Ted, girls like that are at a very awkward age."

"They *are* awkward," Ted admitted. "But Nellie, you know—Nellie's not so very—she was fifteen last —she's almost—oh, hang it, let's go out for a smoke."

We made for the balcony.

"Have a cigarette, Mr. Butterfield?" said Ted, proffering a small silver case.

"Thanks," I replied. "I think I'll have a cigar. Won't you have one of these? They're very mild."

Ted looked doubtfully at it, and shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said; "I don't often smoke cigars. I'm very fond of a pipe now and then—after breakfast, you know; but cigars are a little too much for me. Light?"

He held me a light, and puffed elegantly at his cigarette. Then continued thoughtfully:

"The worst of women is," he said, "they seem to grow up so awfully quick, you know. Why, Nellie Bassishaw there, you know—we used to be rather flames when we were young. A year or two since, that is. We're not so very old yet, you know, Mr. Butterfield," he added, with a slightly conscious laugh.

"Call me Butterfield," I said softly and encouragingly.

"I don't mind saying," he continued, "I was awfully stuck a while back. I used to walk round the house at nights, you know—darned silly, of course—and she used to drop me notes from her bedroom window. Of course you won't say a word to any of the men, but at one time she wanted me to elope."

"Indeed!" I said. "You surprise me. In that case I have greatly misjudged her. She is not so young as I thought she was."

"No, she's not really, Butterfield," he said eagerly. "She's awfully clever and grown up, and all that —that is, she was when we were so thick. Some time ago, you know."

I nodded. I didn't want to interrupt him.

"And she's going to have her hair up next birthday," he went on, "and then she'll be quite grown up. I'm a bit sorry it's all off."

He threw down the end of his cigarette, and looked round at the balcony window.

"No," I said, "it isn't time for the magic-lantern yet. Half an hour or so. And you're almost sorry it's all off?"

"Well, yes, in some ways," he replied. "Of course, I get about more than she does, you know. Men do see more life than girls, don't they, Butterfield? I went to a dance the other week, and of course Nellie can't go to dances yet. But the men were another set, you know, and the women—well, it's not much fun sitting out in a conservatory with strange women, is it?"

I reserved my opinion on the point, and he went on. He got very confidential, and by the time he had got through another cigarette he had my views as to whether it was possible to keep a surreptitious wife at Eton, whither he was to return shortly. I rather took to Master Ted, and decided that Carrie and Bassishaw should not have *all* the fun out of the magic-lantern. I would willingly have prolonged the talk, but Ted was glancing nervously at the window, and thought we really should go in—the youngsters would need looking after.

We went in, in time to catch them playing some game with a closed door and a piece of mistletoe. I saw no necessity for Carrie and Arthur Bassishaw joining in, but join in they did, while Miss Nellie

looked intelligently patronising. Ted was right—women did grow up quickly. As I took a seat beside her I heard Ted whisper to Carrie that her brother was a brick.

"I hope you are having a good time, Nellie?" I said.

Nellie tossed her curls.

"Of course, real dances are more in your line," I continued, "but you can spare an evening for the children now and then."

Nellie bit her lip; she felt the point keenly.

"I don't go to dances, Mr. Butterfield," she said stiffly.

"No?" I inquired blandly. "Well, some people *are* prejudiced against dancing. But I see no wrong in it myself. Do you regard dancing as frivolous?"

She had to make the humiliating confession.

"I don't know anything about it," replied Nellie, turning half away. "I am not allowed to go to dances."

"Dear me!" I said; "motives of health, doubtless?"

"No, I'm not considered old enough."

"Oh!" I said, in the tone of one who feels he has pushed his inquiries too far. "That is a pity. There is such fun at dances—sitting out, you know, and such things. You can't have such fun anywhere else."

Nellie looked a defiant "Couldn't she, though," and I considered my young friend Ted's affair as good as arranged. I heard her whisper to Bassishaw later that Mr. Butterfield was a beast.

Carrie came bustling up to ask me to help in the preparations for the magic-lantern; and shortly afterwards the light was down, and the great white circle shifting and quivering on the sheet, to the whispering anticipation of eager children. When, a few minutes later, I had taken Chris Carmichael on my knee, and the pictures had begun, certain quiet indications from the back told me that Master Ted was having a good time. I couldn't see the young monkeys at it, but I divined from the brooding peace in that direction that they were hand in hand. Hand in hand at least.

An hour later the place was quiet once more, and only Carrie, Bassishaw, and myself were left, gathered round the cold magic-lantern. I looked at it and shook my head. I had to do it three times before they noticed me.

"What is it now, Rol?" said Carrie.

"Sixteen next birthday," I said to myself.

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Used to drop him notes from her bedroom window," I mused.

"Oh, do shake him, Arthur."

Arthur shook me. I looked severely at them both.

"I suppose you know what you've done," I said, "you and your magic-lantern?"

They commenced a look of innocence, but I quelled them.

"If there is an elopement at your house shortly, Bassishaw," I said, "you can thank this children's party. Don't pretend you didn't see them."

"I'm afraid, Butterfield, do you know, that they are mischievous young beggars," replied Bassishaw; "but it's not our fault."

"Not your fault!" I said, with rather a touch of scorn, I think, in my voice; "not your fault! You bring overcharged adolescence together—you know the moral laxity of sixteen—you know the latent depravity of female sixteen especially—you provide them with a handy magic-lantern and every convenience—and it's not your fault! Well, I did my best to dissuade you; you have only yourselves to thank. I wash my hands of all consequences. Don't blame me."

It pleased me to throw the responsibility on someone else.

V

THE IDEAL IN PERIL

The Fainéant Club was going to the devil, which was unnecessary, considering the state of the weather. There was nobody about—including Wentworth Boyle. The magazines were uncut—cutting meant energy. The tape machine ticked out nothing but cricket scores, in which I am not interested. A waiter was sleeping in a chair in a remote corner, the only suggestion of coolness about the place. There was absolutely nothing to do. It was too hot to swear.

I went to the window and looked out. Piccadilly was a glaring Sahara. The rows of horses across the way were limp as chewed string, and lived for nothing but the next water-cart that should pass and drench their burning hocks. The trees bore spiritlessly their burden of dust; and the only energetic thing in sight was an impervious newsboy crying the fatalities of the heat-wave—a Song of Degrees.

I was in a fermenting state of discontent. The season had only just begun, and there were at least six weeks of this to look forward to—six weeks of hot, breathless theatres, and daily martyrdoms on the Row. The season was confounded rot. I had half a mind to throw the whole thing up. I went to the writing-table, wrote a complaint to the committee on the iced drinks, murmured the prayer for rain, and returned to the window.

Why did the women look so cool when the men were in such a state of collapse? Millicent Dixon had just driven past, looking as fresh as a buttercup. I saw Millie Dixon twice a week on an average, and she always did look fresh. Yet she must be eight-and-twenty.

I determined to walk, if I could do so without risking a sunstroke. The first parasol of my acquaintance that passed should be my refuge, provided the bearer were not too stout. I am stoutish myself.

A white gown was tripping—tripping!—towards the club window, which, from a certain trick of carriage, should belong to Mrs. Loring Chatterton. I calculated my time carefully, and stepped from the club awning to the shelter of the sunshade. Mrs. Loring is slight.

“My dear Mr. Butterfield, how do you do?”

“Thank you, my dear lady,” I replied; “with a little basting I shall do to a turn.”

“Oh! isn’t it?” she said. “I never knew such heat in May. You must feel it terribly, Mr. Butterfield.”

Now, I am not so stout as all that. Thirteen four, for a bachelor approaching forty, and of personable height, is no extravagant riot of flesh.

“I admit to a certain warmth,” I replied; “but when your own, permit me to say, somewhat meagre presence has ripened to a more generous noontide, perhaps *you* will resent any ostentatious sympathy on the subject.”

Mrs. Loring laughed. She always refused to take my dignity seriously. To her I am not Rollo Butterfield, LL.D. (ceased to practise), but Mr. Butterfield, who may be allowed to see the children in bed, should he wish it, and who is sacrificed on the altar of intimacy to take in to dinner nervous schoolgirls, and act as escort and general convenience in shopping expeditions.

“Well,” said Mrs. Loring, “I don’t think you ought to mind at your time of life. Let me see, how much older than Loring are you?”

“Mrs. Loring Chatterton, perhaps you prefer to walk to Wilton Place alone?”

“It *must* be rather hard on you,” said this incorrigible lady, laughing.

I looked at the sunshade and at the glare that shone mercilessly on my patent leathers. Decision of action was never my strong point, and the firmest principles will soften at ninety-two in the shade. I capitulated. Compromise beneath a parasol was better than dignity in the sun.

We walked along. By the exercise of much ingenuity in mapping out a track that should consist of the maximum of shade, by the strategic use of large vans and the skirting of a person with a huge umbrella, whose shadow was as that of a great rock in a thirsty land, we arrived at Wilton Place, and, in response to Mrs. Loring’s invitation to come and have tea, I followed her in.

Mrs. Loring’s drawing-room was cool as a cloister. I foundered on to a sofa and closed my eyes, while my hostess, as a last impertinence, vapourised me in passing with a tiny scent fountain, and left me in a luxury of dim light.

Such a retreat, at my time of life, was very soothing. My meridian was pretty near the full, and I had a right to a drowsy siesta before facing again the afternoon glow whose level rays would decline to the long evening. I lazily watched a fly that was spinning a soft drone in the twilighted room, and blinked through my half-closed eyes at the few white splashes of sunlight on the floor, vivid in the subdued tone. Bowls of flowers cooled the air with perfume, and the Genius of Rest brooded over the place. The afternoon with its business would come, no doubt; but for the present this was my oasis.

Mrs. Loring reappeared in a tea-gown whose gossamer frothed daintily about her neck. She looked the pink of freshness—and yet she was within three years of thirty. I took a kind of pleasure in the thought. Loring was a lucky man.

A tray was brought in, and this attentive lady fluttered round the little silver urn, and ministered to my *paresse* with tea and lemon. I grew humorously melancholy, and lapsed into gentle vistas of reminiscence. I believe I sighed.

Mrs. Loring mentally referred the sigh to corpulence, for she came over with tea, and said, “There, poor man. That will cool you.”

I half rose from my reclining posture, and shook my head as I took the cup.

“No, madam,” I said, “tea-leaves cannot allay the dust of memory. I sigh for what once was, for what might have been now. I sigh for Ten Years Back. Do you ever sigh for Ten Years Back?”

From the puzzled way in which she looked at me, she evidently did not.

“Ten years back,” I continued, “you and I were yet young.”

She tried to look wrinkled.

“Ten years back you were interested in painting, and visited the National Gallery. Millie Dixon was also interested in painting and also visited the National Gallery. Loring Chatterton didn’t give a hang for painting, yet he dragged me round to the National Gallery. I paid the sixpences.”

“Anyway you were always glad enough to see Millie Dixon; you didn’t do it out of pure self-sacrifice.”

“The National Gallery,” I continued, not heeding the interruption, “is one of the great storehouses of the world’s art. It is the pride of a great nation. *I* went there for purposes of study; but how did *you* profit by it? You used it for rubbing shoulders and squeezing hands.”

“I know how you profited by it,” said Mrs. Loring, laughing. “You used to study the water-colours down-stairs, and you got locked in one day. Millie Dixon, by the way, got locked in too.”

“Millie Dixon always *had* foresight,” I said musingly.

“But you never painted, and Millie Dixon did.”

“In spite of your insinuation, Mrs. Loring, I never ascertained that. Her complexion——”

“Then you ought to have done. Here are you two still hanging on in the same position as ten years ago. *I* gave Millicent a month if she knew her business. Loring and I didn’t take so long. I am disappointed in you. I’m sure it’s not Millie’s fault.”

That was hardly fair. Millie had never thrown herself at me.

“If you’d made love to Millicent,” she went on, “you’d not have been a lonely fat old bachelor, living in a horrid flat, and wasting your time at clubs and race meetings.”

“Mrs. Loring Chatterton,” I replied, “if I’d made love to Millicent I should have been just as—mature of outline, and should still have been a bachelor. It is my gift. I was born a bachelor. I should have said, 'Miss Dixon, if you love me, let me remain a bachelor.’ She would have said, 'As a bachelor you first loved me; be always my own bachelor.’ It is, alas! my single talent. I was made for singleness.”

“Rubbish! You know you like Millicent.”

“Dear madam, I like all ladies—as a garden of flowers, yet I cannot bring myself to pluck one.”

“Then why do you sigh for ten years back?”

That is the worst of women—they have a way of being suddenly logical when no one expects it of them. Mrs. Loring is a charming woman, but I must be careful. One or two lapses into sentiment like this, and she will have me married to Miss Dixon before I know where I am. But my weakness was over. I pulled myself together.

A burning white spot of sunshine had been slowly crossing the floor in my direction, had mounted the sofa, and was threatening to disturb my repose. It brought back the hot streets and the stifling club, and was invading my sanctuary with vivid glare. I was moving along out of its way when a bell rang.

“Oh! and the tea’s cold!” said Mrs. Loring, with the first thought of a hostess. “I’ll have to get some more in.”

Miss Millicent Dixon entered unannounced.

“My Dear Molly,” cried Miss Dixon, “if you love me, give me some tea. How do you do, Mr. Butterfield? Do you know, Moll, I have been rushing about for two mortal hours trying to find a wedding present for Madge Beaumont, and I haven’t got one! Do help me—Mr. Butterfield——”

“Oh, don’t ask him,” Mrs. Loring struck in; “Mr. Butterfield’s been getting sentimental. Between ourselves, Millie, he came dangerously near to a lucid interval. He’s been sighing over a misspent life, and wishing he were years younger.”

“Is it announced yet, Mr. Butterfield?” inquired Millicent mischievously. “Who is she?”

“Promise to tell Millie before any one else, Mr. Butterfield,” said Mrs. Loring.

The machinating married woman! No bachelor is safe with her. I said nothing.

“Then it is true!” said Miss Dixon, “and I shall need two wedding presents. Mr. Butterfield, the unassailable bachelor! I shall give you *Paradise Lost*, Mr. Butterfield.”

“Ladies,” I answered, “you are unfair. You catch me in a weak moment, suffering from sunstroke, and accuse me of good resolutions. Does my previous bad character go for nothing? May I not have a half-hour’s weakness without hearing of it again? It is my first offence. Oh, how difficult is the true Bachelor Ideal!”

“Then you are not engaged, Mr. Butterfield?” said Millicent.

“Not to my knowledge, Miss Dixon. I admit to a certain wavering. If it comes again I will take you into my confidence; in the meantime we will discuss Miss Beaumont’s wedding present.”

We went into committee on the subject. I was still the Compleat Bachelor.

But I had presentiments.

VI

A CORNER IN TREACLE

I could not help smiling as I rang Mrs. Kit Carmichael's bell. It wanted a good hour to calling time, and I was sure to arrive in that embarrassing period of the afternoon when morning attire is being exchanged for the tea-gown, and the indiscreet visitor is left to meditate on the hollowness of social obligations in an empty drawing-room. It is an hour I take a peculiar delight in. I like to see the piano before Schubert's songs have replaced the thumbed exercise-book, and to divine midday practisings, scarcely over, by young ladies lanky in stocking, with surreptitious chewing-gum in their pockets. It has still the charm that "going behind" had for me in my early theatrical days.

I had made some masculine pretext for leaving Carrie behind, and she was to follow later. I had a small reason of my own for wishing to see Mrs. Kit alone.

Mrs. Kit's maid admitted me. That young person always seems inclined to laugh when she sees me. I swear I have never encouraged her.

The drawing-room door was opened to me, but I walked past it, beckoned by a distant sound of childish romping, and a young mother's call of "Come here, Chris." I made all the noise in my approach that pretended stealth demanded; I am delicate in my freedom.

Now, that is a part that needs a nice discrimination in the true performing of it. Intimacy has no severer test. Show me the indiscreet bachelor friend whose title falls short, be it only by a syllable, of the full warranty, and I will show you a man who shall wait for invitations, and to whom the fiery sword of "not at home" shall be displayed. The young wife in particular is apt to be touchy.

My approach had been heard, and a subdued scuffling subsided as I entered the half-open nursery door. Mrs. Kit had a maid, and had at one time kept a nurse; but the nurse had gracefully relinquished the engagement on finding she had *two* children in charge, the grown-up one scarcely more manageable than the chubby little imp who bore his father's name. Consequently, Master Christopher occupied a good deal of his mother's time, and was in a fair way for being spoiled.

This young gentleman of four hailed me with a shout, and childish glee in his scantiness of garment; while his mother, rosy and bright with romping, did her best to look crossly on my intrusion. Mrs. Carmichael always keeps up an appearance of formality, even with me.

"Mr. Butterfield, how dare you come into my nursery!"

"Mrs. Carmichael," I replied, "I came to have a talk with your son in the matter of a certain giant in whom we are both interested. Perhaps you yourself would care——"

"Chris shall not hear any story till he has his pinafore on. It is as well you are a bachelor, Mr. Butterfield. You would spoil the best child in the world."

"Unless I am mistaken, Mrs. Kit," I answered, "you yourself were playing the part of a bear when I entered. Does one hunt bears without a pinafore?"

"I am his mother, and have to amuse him—judiciously!" returned Mrs. Carmichael. "You don't know what a responsibility children are, Mr. Butterfield."

"I appreciate your feelings, madam," I replied. "I remember in my youth I kept white mice. Now, white mice——"

"White fiddlesticks," said Mrs. Kit. "A bachelor has absolutely no idea of what trouble children are. They take the whole of your time—they are constantly to be watched—you never know what mischief they are up to."

"I kept *four* white mice, Mrs. Carmichael, with power to add. You have only one——"

"Oh, but Chris *is* so mischievous! He's so full of spirits. Scarcely an hour since he *nearly* broke his neck trying to climb a handrail, under the impression it was a beanstalk—that was one of *your* stories, Mr. Butterfield,—and last night he managed to get Simple Simon into his prayers."

I shook my head.

"An inherited irreligious tendency," I replied. "He's probably got that from his father. I remember Kit——"

"Rubbish! It's just pure animal spirits. Chris is getting so big and strong—*and* noisy," she added, as Chris broke away with the shout of pagan infancy.

"In that case, Mrs. Carmichael," I answered, "a reducing diet of cinder-tea, judiciously administered ——"

"Cinder-tea? What do *you* know about cinder-tea?—Chris, put your arm through here—a bachelor talking about cinder-tea!"

The arrogance of these young married ladies! They are all alike. You may have seen scores of such pretty innocents installed in their first establishments. You may have known their existences from the time they played peg-top with their brothers to their perky airs over their first long frocks. You may have given them away amid rice and slippers at the rate of two a year, when their bridal blushes almost made your task superfluous. You may have known them from teething-ring to trousseau, from measles to marriage; and yet in the first wonder of a new baby life you will be told that you are an ignorant old bachelor, and that you know nothing of household affairs!

But I was not disposed to take any such talk from Mrs. Kit Carmichael. I was too old a friend of Carmichael's, and could always make her tingle with curiosity by an artful hint of pre-nuptial reminiscence. Besides which, she herself was too much in my power. Distinctly, I had a right to rebuke her. I leaned back, and questioned her with forensic severity.

“Mrs. Carmichael,” I said, “you are young, but that is no excuse for ingratitude. Five years ago my advice was not superfluous. Whose experience was it selected you this little house, when Kit’s mind was too full of love to distinguish such details as sanitary arrangements?”

“I believe you gave some advice on the subject, Mr. Butterfield,” she retorted, “and we had workmen about the place for six months.”

I waived the thanklessness of the last phrase, and continued with dignity.

“Who put you through an exhaustive course of salads, Mrs. Carmichael?”

“Well, you *were* rather useful in the matter of salads,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Who gave you lessons in the refinements of black coffee?” I continued, warming in a righteous cause.

“My coffee was not bad,” Mrs. Kit returned, on her defence.

I magnanimously put aside criticism of her coffee, and went on with a wave of my hand.

“To whom did you come for counsel on distemper and wall decoration and tapestry hanging? Who told you to cast on at the bottom in mending stocking knees? Who explained to you the principle of the chimney draught, the law of ventilation, and the mechanics of the picture-cord? Answer me, Mrs. Carmichael.”

She combed Master Chris’s hair vigorously and made no response. I saw the victory of a just rebuke within my grasp. I made one more thrust.

“And, finally, Mrs. Carmichael, have you made the treacle puffs you promised for my next visit?”

She yielded.

“Oh, I am *so* sorry, Mr. Butterfield, but they were a failure. I put them into the oven, and all the treacle ran, and made, oh, such a mess!”

I leaned back with the magnanimity of a conqueror, and in that moment lost the battle. Carrie stood in the doorway.

“Treacle puffs, Rollo!” she said. “Of course they run if you forget the bread crumbs. I told you that!”

I was betrayed by her I called sister! A light came into Mrs. Kit’s eyes.

“Did *you* give him those recipes, Carrie?” she asked.

“Of *course* I did, Alice, and told him to be *sure* to tell you about the bread crumbs. And he *didn’t*! Oh, Rollo”—she turned to me—“and you asked me if they would be sure to run *without* the bread crumbs!”

I was lost. Mrs. Carmichael rose, and put aside the brush and comb.

“So, Mr. Butterfield,” she said. “I begin to see. You laid a trap for me. You got Caroline to coach you in things before coming to see me, and edited the recipes! Let me remember. You told me, did you not, that brown sugar improved poached eggs?”

“Mrs. Carmichael——” I began. She silenced me with a gesture.

“You advised me, did you not, that maccaroni should be kept in a dark place for fear it should sprout?”

“That, Mrs. Carmichael, was on the authority of the *Times*. You surely——”

Again the peremptory finger reduced me to dumbness.

“And you stepped in after all my blunders, and airily set me right! Mr. Butterfield, you are an unspeakable deception!”

That was my thanks. Carrie and I might conspire to do good by stealth—I might go out of my way to gather hints on pastry—and because, forsooth, this woman’s execution was not equal to the brilliance of the idea, I was to be branded as a fraud! The brown sugar was an original notion; and if, forsooth, like the *Great Eastern*, it turned out unmanageable in practice, that did not detract from the boldness of the conception. Women are so conservative; they lack the true inventor’s spirit.

I looked helplessly round the room. I was overpowered at the ease with which people will impute to one a base motive rather than go out of the beaten track to find a good one. How they give themselves away!

I turned and apostrophised Master Christopher.

“My poor, unwitting little boy! For you, too, the time shall come when ingratitude shall be your portion. You are a bachelor yourself—you drink cinder-tea, but the day shall arrive when you shall be told you know less about it than the hand that pours it out. Play while you can. Your least word is heeded now; but afterwards you shall cry wisdom in the nursery and shall not be regarded.”

Chris saw somehow that he was the subject of remark, and now, trimly toileted and elaborately combed, was ready for a story grim in giant and spiced with goblin. His mother, laughing at my apostrophe, made a chubby fleshy fold in the childish cheek that was pressed against her own, and looked at me in a way that admitted my capacity in fairy lore, if it discounted my more practical qualifications.

“Now, Chris,” she said, “Mr. Butterfield is going to tell you just a short story, and I’m going to receive my callers. Don’t be long, Mr. Butterfield. Come, Caroline.”

She vanished, and I entered the magic land of giants.

VII

THREE’S COMPANY

I had been told nothing about it, but I would have wagered my boot-trees that Carrie and Bassishaw had had a tiff. In the first place, Carrie had invited me to accompany them to the opera when she knew that my acceptance was possible, which was contrary to her usual practice. My presence on such occasions had of late been not indispensable; and these young people had gone about together with an aggressive air of sufficiency in each other’s company that had insulated them from my attentions and led me to muse on the thanklessness of youth.

“Are you going out with Arthur this evening, my dear?” I had asked.

“Well, yes, Rollo,” she had replied diffidently, “Arthur particularly wanted to take me to St. James’s Hall.”

“It is a refining entertainment. I haven’t heard Moore and Burgess for a long time. I think I’ll come with you.”

My sister evaded the main point, and countered on the inessential.

“It’s not Moore and Burgess,” she replied. “It’s a ballad concert.”

“'On the banks of the Wabash far away,’” I answered. “A simple sentiment would suit me exactly this evening. Yes, I think I’ll come, thank you, Caroline.”

“I should like you to, Rol, dear, you know; but your cold——”

Of course, my cold; I didn’t know I had one, but they had made a chronic asthmatic of me lately.

“And besides, Rol, Mr. Chatterton said he might call this evening. I’m awfully sorry, dear; but can you come to-morrow to the Globe matinée?”

They knew my prospective engagements better than I knew them myself. There was a trifling foolish committee meeting toward to-morrow, and with that I had to be content.

But a tiff is the Compleat Bachelor’s opportunity, and in the invitation to *Tristan* I spied entertainment.

Carrie had sunk gently on my knee, and had placed a small finger through a buttonhole of my coat. Bassishaw had just called, dressed with the immaculate precision of one who has made up his mind to sulk in his stall, and had taken up a book on jurisprudence which I kept conscientiously on my table, an imposing reminiscence of my younger days. He watched Carrie furtively over the top of it.

“Please, Rol,” she said, the finger working detrimentally through the buttonhole. “You know you love *Tristan*, and Jean and Edouard——”

“But three cannot listen to *Tristan*,” I replied. “Whose hand am I to——”

She came closer, and a mute look in her eyes said that an Irrevocable Destiny had made of her life a Blighted Tract.

“But my cold, Caroline?” I asked consumptively.

“Oh, Rollo, you shall have hot rum directly you come in, and I’ll nurse you. *Do* come.”

I acceded with secret joy, on the condition of being spared the remedy she suggested.

“Then we will dine out,” I added.

We did so, in a gloomy depression of spirits that was eminently desirable. Carrie’s humor was not improved by the sight of a man at the next table, apparently chastely-minded, but who took chutney to a grilled steak. She has an instinct for dietetic refinements, and looks on culinary barbarity as worse than untruthfulness.

I had to do most of the talking, which I did, I think, in a naïve unconsciousness of the summer cloudlet that loomed glowering over the party. I spoke of youth. I said, Heaven forgive me, that it was the happiest period of life; that when the heart smiled in love the skies had a blueness; and much more of the same kind. Bassishaw grunted remarks on the Transvaal prospect, and for Carrie’s benefit muttered something about shipment of troops and leave-taking at Waterloo.

“I’m going to see about my kit to-morrow,” he added, and drank three liqueurs recklessly. Three liqueurs is a great compliment to the girl you love; four the very abandonment of careless devilry.

Carrie tried feebly to show unconcern as to their effect on his constitution, and I took coffee in huge enjoyment.

Bassishaw tipped the waiter with imprudent extravagance, hailed a passing hansom cabby —“Passing, not passing handsome,” I ventured to observe, but got no response—and magnanimously bowed Carrie and myself into the cab, saying he would follow. I told Carrie on the way that I could not have wished a more desirable brother-in-law.

At the opera I modestly took the end stall of the three, but Carrie moved me along. She then settled herself listlessly on my right, while Bassishaw, who had arrived, glowered at the side-drums on my left.

He was utterly indifferent to the entrance of the conductor, and the overture to *Tristan* evidently brought no peace to his soul. He fumed unholily, and threw himself about in his seat in a way that drew a remonstrating remark from an ardent Vaaagnerite on his left. At the end of the first act he went out for a cigarette, apologising with formality as Carrie gathered up her gown to allow him to pass. Carrie’s pretty neck bowed a graceful aloofness. When his straight back disappeared behind the curtain, my sister throwing a slanting glance to see if he turned round, I sought her eyes, and leaned over, speaking softly.

“Was it about your writing, my literary little sister?” I asked.

She assented with a little gulp.

"Tell me, my dear," I said, turning my back on the Vaaagnerite next Arthur's empty seat, who was talking the cult rather stridently.

She told me in pure innocence of the Conflict between Literature and Love. She spoke of the Devotion to Work and the Sacredness of a Mission. The dear little soul was going to enlighten the peoples!

"And I asked Arthur's opinion," she said, her breast rising.

Never till then had I realised the forgetfulness of love.

Arthur's opinion on literature!

"And what did Arthur say, Caroline?" I asked, composing myself as best I could.

"He said he didn't want women to be clever, and they had no business to be. He thought they only ought to be pretty, and I was only inking my fingers. Then I told him what George Eliot said, and he said I'd been reading *Half Hours with the Best Authors*."

"And then you quarrelled?"

"Ssh—yes."

Arthur entered at this moment, and stumbled back to his seat. The Vaaagnerite broke off Götterdammerung at the third syllable, and I fancy Arthur had trodden on his toes. I had great sympathy with Arthur. I particularly liked his views on the art question; but he would have to unbend to this poor little child on my right.

She had turned her head on her shoulder during the love duet, and I could not see her face. I held out my hand for her opera-glasses, and raised them to my eyes. The lenses were wet with tears—I suspected it. I quietly passed them on to Bassishaw, with the message still moist upon them. It is only once in a lifetime you see *Tristan* through such a medium.

The next interval Bassishaw did not smoke, but remained in his stall. He had heard the love duet, too. I turned to him.

"That was wonderful music, Bassishaw," I said.

"Yes," he replied. "Do you know, Butterfield, I think it's awful fine, by Jove. I can understand Johnnies doing that kind of thing, you know."

"Quite so," I answered. "To the Artist-Soul"—(I capitalised the words pompously with my voice)—"to the Artist-Soul, creation is not a choice, but a need. The French realise that in their word *besogne* ——"

He was not listening, and broke in:

"You know, Butterfield, a Johnny must have a darned useful brain-box on him to do that—that sort of thing. It made me feel no end queer. There's an awful lot in it, don't you think?"

Poor Bassishaw thought he understood the music, but it was the opera-glasses that had fetched him. He went on:

"It's darned funny that a chap should do that instead of drill and depôt work, you know, Butterfield. You know, I always thought too confounded much of curves and trajectory, and all that stuff. I always thought a chap was a bit of a muff who fooled with music and verses and all that, do you know."

The confession was not without a touch of the pathetic, but I maintained a diplomatic silence.

After a thoughtful pause he continued:

"Do you think, Rollo—do you think—would—would Carrie ever do anything of that sort?—I—I—mean, something that makes a chap feel—oh, hang it, you know what I mean."

What could I say? My little sister was looking very miserable—abstract truth is all very well—I temporised.

"Well, Bassishaw, it can't be done without trying. You've got to stick at it. The continual *enfantement*——"

"I know," he interrupted, "sort of keep it up steady, like these gunnery Johnnies. It must be darned hard. Do you know, Butterfield," he said, dropping his voice suddenly, "Carrie and I—we've had a kind of—nothing, you know—but—a bit of a split."

"You surprise me," I replied.

"Yes, we have, really; and I think I was a bit of a brute."

He rambled in explanations, which I punctuated with "Dear, dear." Carrie laid her hand on my sleeve, and I turned to her.

"Rol," she whispered, "do send Arthur for some coffee. I want to talk to you."

Arthur was despatched to find a waiter, and I attended Carrie's pleasure while she twisted her fingers nervously through the opera-glasses.

"Rol," she said, "I'm so unhappy."

"The Wings of Sorrow have brushed your life and left it an Arid Waste," I replied sententiously, hugely amused. She didn't divine the raillery.

"But surely, Rol, the heart is ripened through suffering," she replied unconsciously.

"Yes," I replied. "The Separation of Souls is not Eternal. Those we love are severed from us in the flesh, but in Heaven——"

She looked suspiciously, but my face was very grave. The waiter appeared with coffee, and Arthur resumed his seat, this time without apology. He was anxious to make it up, but I didn't offer him my seat. I wanted to see the particular kind of *finesse* he would adopt, so lay low and watched him.

The music recommenced, and Caroline, by some inattentiveness, retained her coffee cup, which I

believe she mentally identified with Isolde's love potion. Bassishaw was revolving ways and means, but the cup hint was not obvious to him. Isolde began the Liebestod song, while the head of the Vaaagnerite beyond Arthur was sunk in his hands, possibly not to see the corpulent heroine, whose presence was somewhat disturbing to the music. The Wagner hush was over all.

It was broken by Bassishaw. Unable to solve the difficulty, he cut the knot. His hand came over my knee, and took the hand of Caroline that was hanging in limp appeal nearest him. She turned her face away, but allowed the hand to remain. It was all over, and I leaned back to commune with my thoughts, and to adjust my mind to the prospect of being once more a superfluity.

"I say, Butterfield, old chap," Bassishaw whispered to me, "do you mind changing places? This is rather awkward, you know."

"It is conspicuous," I replied, "but commendably frank. I rather admire your way of doing these things, Bassishaw. But we can't change now. You'll have to wait your opportunity of giving me the slip in the foyer—I've no doubt you'll attempt it."

It would do them no harm to wait a while.

VIII

A VETERAN RECRUIT

Millicent Dixon's uncle, Col. Elliott Coke, invalided from some remote Afghan frontier station whose name on the map was utterly out of proportion to the inconsiderableness of the place, was in London. I met him at the Bassishaws' when Arthur, in tones of infinite respect, had pointed out to my notice a small, keen face, curried by Indian suns, with moustaches out of which both the colour and the moisture had been grilled years and years before.

"I say, Rollo," Bassishaw had whispered, "do you know who that is? That's Col. Coke."

"It's a good name," I observed. "Who's he?"

"Who's he? I say, Rollo! Why, he's the best authority on hill batteries and jungle skirmishes in India! Led an attack on some darned place or other in—I forget the date. V. C. Went through the Afghan war, you know—got about a hundred and fifty clasps."

"Indeed?" I said. "Present me."

Arthur had presented me to his hero almost apologetically, and I had since improved the acquaintance considerably.

I gathered from the Colonel that the Afghan frontier was not overrun with European ladies to any great extent, and certainly the little man's manner on being transported to a place where a full numerical half of the population (and a much larger proportion in every other respect) consisted of women, was very pleasant to watch. The luxury of seeing them was almost enough for him, and when it came to the intimacies of conversation the little warrior's embarrassment was as delightful as young Ted Carmichael's.

"Gad, Butterfield," he said, as we threaded Piccadilly one evening, "this is home, you know! It's like one big family—you feel as if you can speak to any of them!"

The Colonel's observation was perhaps truer than he had any idea of; but I couldn't dash his boyish pleasure.

"Yes," I replied. "I almost envy you the delight, Coke, of having the full measure all at once. It is to you what tiger-shooting would be to me, did my tastes run in that direction."

"Gad," he replied (he seldom replied without "Gad"), "it's marvellous! And all with faces as white as my own, Butterfield!"

I smiled, looking at the piece of tropical cookery he called white, but let him run on.

"Do you know," he said, "there was Powell's wife, and poor Jack Dennis's widow, and the adjutant's sister; and, by Gad, except for a *dahi* that Powell kept (Powell's wife was never strong), there wasn't another woman, Butterfield, in the whole damned station! And Winifred Dennis didn't amount to much. But here——"

He never seemed to get accustomed to it. Had a London fog stamped the metropolitan complexion indelibly and universally black, Coke would have given a sigh, as knowing that his glimpse was too good to have lasted, and returned to his old order of things. The rustle of a silk skirt was an unstaled wonder to him; and the contrast between what he called the "real European baby-ribbon sort of thing" and the "infernal blouse and puggaree business" never failed to entertain him.

With Miss Dixon he was soon on good terms, but with most other ladies, Mrs. Loring Chatterton first of all, his diffidence was marked. His chivalrous devotion was Quixotic, but most of them would have bartered it, I am sure, for a more work-a-day and less punctilious style of attention. Mrs. Loring, indeed, said so.

"I don't know where he got his style of conversation from," she remarked, "but he is absolutely embarrassed when I present him to a woman. How do you account for it, Mr. Butterfield?"

"It is not," I replied, "that he is deficient in physical bravery. I can only account for it on the supposition of instinct. He knows your propensities, Mrs. Loring, and would possibly die as he has lived, a blameless bachelor."

"But it's just the same with the married women," she returned. "What is there to be afraid of in Alice Carmichael?"

"I decline to be invidious, Mrs. Loring," I replied. "He gets along well enough with Millicent Dixon."

"They are related," she replied, somewhat inconclusively.

"I am afraid it is a *non sequitur*," I answered. "Friendship generally varies inversely as the square of the distance of the relationship."

"I wonder what we could do?" she said, half to herself. "Do you think Mrs. Gervase would do him any good?"

The wicked, wedded creature! Emily Gervase, a youthful widow, was Cicely Vicars's sister. I drew myself up with dignity.

"Mrs. Loring," I said, looking full at her, "I wonder that you do not tremble! What is it you would do? Has Col. Coke, of a score of Indian hill fights, the bearer of honourable scars of war and climate, not earned his peace? Would you, now that his body is broken on the outposts of an Empire for your protection, harrow the boyish soul within it? No, madam. On me, if you will, you may exercise your arts; but if you once submit that venerable head to the machinations of Emily Gervase—I expose you."

"Exercise arts on you!" she retorted. "You're too fond of it; and I *shall* be—nice—to the Colonel, in spite of you, Mr. Butterfield."

She kept her word. She indulged her undoubted gifts for being "nice" to people in a series of

variations, the theme of which was always the same—the development of the Colonel's intimacy with Mrs. Gervase. Mrs. Loring's methods were old enough to me—I knew them by heart; but to the maiden soul of the Colonel they came as a revelation of female unselfishness.

"Do you know, Butterfield," he said to me one evening, "I'm beginning to think Mrs. Chatterton is no end of a fine woman, by Gad! She's loyal, by Gad! The way she stands by that little friend of hers, Mrs. Gervase—you know her"—(I nodded)—"why, it's just what a man would do!"

"Then you have met Mrs. Gervase, Coke?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "the other evening. She's infernally shy, by Gad! Quiet, you know. That's what I like about an Englishwoman here. Now, Powell's wife, and the regimental women——"

"Exactly; were not shy. And what do you think of Mrs. Gervase?"

"Well, you know,"—the little man looked at me with a comical air of worldly knowledge that was a joy to see,—"she was awfully quiet, Butterfield—only looked at you; but *I* brought her out, by Gad! And she's intelligent, too, when you once get her talking."

"You succeeded in making her talk, then?" I asked with an irony that was for my private satisfaction, and meant nothing to him.

"Yes," he replied, "after I'd—played her a bit, you know. And that woman, Butterfield, displayed an intelligence, by Gad, on transport, and commissariat, and mobilisation that was simply little short of marvellous! Marvellous, by Gad!"

"She's a clever woman, I believe," I answered. "She asked you how often you had been wounded, I suppose?"

"She *did* ask me that," he admitted; "but women haven't got to hear about that kind of thing, you know, Butterfield. You've got to keep 'em at arm's length in such matters—kind of——"

"Exactly. Play them a bit. I congratulate you, Colonel, on having—er—brought out Mrs. Gervase."

"Oh," he replied, "she's only a child, of course, widow or no widow; but she'll make a fine woman, Butterfield."

I would have given much that Emily Gervase should have heard herself set down a child. The Colonel, unconsciously, had in his hand the opportunity for complete and sweeping revenge.

It was my fortune to be present when Mrs. Gervase, doubtless after deep consideration, made the next move. We were to call on Mrs. Charlie Vicars—or rather, Coke was to call, and persuaded me along with him.

"Mrs. Chatterton said you wouldn't mind, Butterfield," he said; "and, by Gad, I can't keep two of them going."

"You undervalue yourself, Coke," I said. "But I'll come."

And so we found ourselves in the æstheticism of Mrs. Vicars's drawing-room. That lady found means to entertain me, while Coke applied himself to the creation of a conversational warmth that should induce the unfolding of the timid bud by his side.

"Col. Coke seems to have taken quite a fancy to Emily, Mr. Butterfield?" said Mrs. Charlie interrogatively.

"It is a pretty sight, Mrs. Vicars," I replied. "The scarred veteran in the evening of his life, his grim battles behind him, returning to take a younger generation on his knee——"

Mrs. Vicars looked round in alarm.

"—And to tell of fights in which their fathers were engaged——"

"Col. Coke is not so old as that, Mr. Butterfield. He can't be much older than you," she interrupted.

"He is young enough to be Emily's father," I admitted, "and perhaps a little too juvenile to be her grandfather. Coke is fifty."

"He doesn't look it, Mr. Butterfield."

"He looks it, Mrs. Vicars, and you know it. Let us talk about something else. How is Master—Percival, is his name to be?"

The young gentleman in question had known the light of day for exactly three weeks, and was the commencement of Cicely Vicars's family. I had been presented to him in his cot some days before, but beyond mutual celibacy, there was little as yet in common between us, and the conversation had flagged.

"Yes," Mrs. Vicars responded, "he's to be called Percival; and oh, Mr. Butterfield, he's to be christened in a week, and I wondered——"

She hesitated.

"I already stand sponsor to an embarrassing extent, Mrs. Vicars," I replied. "I never ascertained precisely to what the position pledged me, but I have an uncomfortable sense of responsibility to which I do not feel inclined to add."

"But, Mr. Butterfield, those were—other people's children—not mine."

She turned a supplicating eye on me. It runs in the family.

"Naturally," I replied. "It would be a big burden, in these days of small families, for any one person. But no, Mrs. Vicars. Perhaps on a future occasion——I have it!" I added.

"You have what?"

"Coke's your man, Mrs. Vicars. Come."

I rose, and assisted her to rise also. She hung back, but I brought her along. It was the very thing! We approached the couple. The Colonel was holding forth on the dialects of the North-Western Provinces.

“Coke!” I said. He looked up.

“Accept my felicitations. You are to stand godfather to Mrs. Vicars’s little boy next week.”

Coke blushed a vivid gamboge, and stopped dead.

“Gad!” he stammered. “Wha—what’s that, Butterfield?”

“Sponsor, my dear Coke,” I returned, “at the investiture of a fellow-man with a name. You’re just the man.”

Things were whirling round Coke. He grasped the edge of the sofa with both hands, and looked blankly at us.

“Me!” he gasped, “me! at a christening! What the devil—me a godfather! No, I’m damned if I can!”

“My dear Coke,” I answered, “calm yourself. Of course you can—you must! A man with the Victoria Cross cannot get out of these things so easily. Look at me—a baker’s dozen at least.”

“Gad,” he replied, wiping his brow, “I’d rather get the Cross again.”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “It’s a duty. Somebody did it for us, and we keep up the tradition. Besides, it’s unlucky to have to ask twice.”

I had no authority for this last statement, but it seemed to go. Coke leaned back for ease in breathing.

“But I’ve never done anything of the kind,” he almost whispered. “I shall shake like a recruit. I shan’t know what to do—I shall get mixed up with the bridesmaids——”

The Colonel’s notions as to the procedure of christenings were undoubtedly vague. I looked at Mrs. Gervase.

“This is not a wedding,” I said, “but a christening. That’s all right, Coke. You shall wear your uniform and grasp the hilt of your sword all the time. You’ll do.”

“But—but—hang it, Butterfield, what about the family? You’ll pardon me, ladies, but I—you are the only members I am happy enough to know.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Vicars, “there’s only mother, Colonel. I forgot you hadn’t met her. You shall to-morrow. You do promise?”

The Colonel was evidently looking for flaws in the position, but seemed to find none. He rose, as unhappy a little soldier as ever wore a medal.

“Well, ladies,” he said, “I would rather have shot Afghans for you for twelve months than undertake this—this post. If I break down you mustn’t blame me. I’ll do my best.”

And with a sigh he pulled his white moustaches nervously, and we begged leave to go.

Now, my only object in all this was a half-whimsical protest, such as is permissible against what was evidently in the minds of both these ladies—the matching of Mrs. Gervase with a man easily twenty years her senior. The position of godfather to a succeeding generation, apart from the edification of seeing such a man as Coke in such a capacity, was much more suitable than any wedding so uneven, and I had allowed myself to hint as much. But Coke himself, as he afterwards told me, had carried the thing a good deal further.

It was in the smoke-room of the Fainéant Club that I heard its conclusion. The ceremony was over, and Coke was composing his nerves with green Indian cigars. He had sat meditatively watching the smoke for some time, when he suddenly looked up and caught my eye.

“Well, Butterfield,” he said, “I got it over; but, by Gad, never again! They shall call 'Deserters’ next time for me!”

“Yes?” I said inquiringly.

“Yes,” he replied. “It was this way, Butterfield. I called on Mrs. Vicars next day, and met her mother, and, by Gad, Butterfield”—the Colonel threw his cigar away in his excitement, and faced full round on me—“it was little Cissie Munro, who threw me over before I left, thirty years ago! By Gad”—he sank back in his chair—“you could have pulled my shoulder-straps off! I knew her in a minute. I didn’t know whether she was living or dead, Butterfield. I’m used to my friends dying—and there, by Gad, she turns up! My stars, it beats all!”

It was certainly a coincidence.

“And the awkward part of the whole thing was—I don’t mind telling *you*, Butterfield—that I’d all but taken a fancy to that quiet little daughter of hers, Mrs. Gervase. Well, I was all at sea; the whole thing was too infernally odd. It didn’t seem right, somehow, that I should be thrown over by one woman, make love to her daughter, and be godfather to what might have been my own grandchild, by Gad; and I was in no end of a mess. Don’t you think so?”

I admitted the questionableness of the proceeding.

“Well, I could not get out of the confounded christening—thanks to you, Butterfield,—but as to Mrs. Gervase, that was another matter. I can help that. And she’s a good little woman, too,” he added, “if she were not so infernally modest, by Gad.”

“I think it is, perhaps, better, Coke,” I replied.

IX

THE ETHICS OF ANGLING

I don't quite know how Mrs. Loring came to pick the Gibsons up. They were not what Carrie termed "quite nice people"; in what respect it was easy to see and difficult to say. Their jewellery was unexceptionable, and barely ostentatious; their manners passed the presentation standard, if falling a little short in the nicer requirements of the *tête-à-tête*. They did not offend in the matter of "Mr." and "Esq.," but sniffed somewhat of "R. S. V. P." Mrs. Gibson, too, insisted on the forms of chaperonage in a way that was rather more than a passing bow to custom, and which suggested the possibility of her having learned the necessity in a different school from that of Mrs. Loring Chatterton. They had money.

"What do you think of the Gibsons, Rol?" Carrie had said to me; "*I* don't like them."

"I would rather introduce them to my relatives than to my friends," I replied.

It was pretty evident to me after a short acquaintance with the Gibsons that they were disposed to make much of me. Carrie noticed the same thing, and spoke her mind on the subject with the freedom of engaged youth.

"Mrs. Gibson's a horrid woman, Rol, and it's my opinion she wants you to marry Miss Gibson."

"Caroline," I replied, "I applaud your concern, yet cannot blame Mrs. Gibson. She can see virtue where others see but corpulence. Besides, I consider Miss Gibson rather pretty."

"I'm sure she's not pretty," retorted Caroline, and proceeded to enlighten me on matters interesting and feminine.

Mamma played the only game she knew very skilfully. Her only mistake was in the inapplicability of the means, which was not her fault. Indeed, I feel almost apologetically responsible myself, seeing the line worked so thoroughly, and mused instructively on the devotion of a mother to her child's prospects.

Miss Gibson was accomplished, and expensively finished. As I had remarked to Carrie, she was decidedly pretty, and would talk Ibsen to you with her face in profile. She displayed an obtrusive girlhood that was not always as modest as its intention, and this pose of maidenhood in bud was apparently the one designed to net me.

Mrs. Gibson gave a *musicale*, to which I persuaded Carrie with difficulty. She had evidently talked things over with Mrs. Loring, for that lady appeared also, and I was greatly gratified at the concern with which they watched me. I decided to give them all the entertainment they desired. They talked with an obvious intention of interesting me and keeping me apart from Miss Gibson. I was surprised to see so little strategy in a married woman.

Miss Gibson was running a risk of palsying her hand in a vibrant mandolin solo, and producing music suggestive of the dotted line of a wheel-pen. I heard Carrie whisper to Mrs. Loring something about "St. Vitus's Waltz," for which I reproved her, considering whose house she was in. I then addressed Mrs. Loring.

"Somehow, Mrs. Loring," I said, "one thinks more of English maidenhood as one advances in life. There is something in the unsophisticated rosebud——"

Mrs. Loring nodded significantly, implying there was a good deal in the unsophisticated rosebud, but I waited my time; I had a bolt in store for her.

Miss Gibson had finished the solo in a tinsel diminuendo, the intent of which was to enchain the soul a while longer in the regions to which it had been raised. I rose and crossed over to her. She was untangling herself from a mesh of coloured mandolin ribbons that *would* catch in the ruching of her corsage.

"They're *such* a nuisance, Mr. Butterfield; I shall cut them off, I think."

I smiled at the unintentional suggestion, and assisted her in the extrication, glancing across at Mrs. Loring's disapproving face. Miss Gibson sat down and made room for me beside her. She twined the mandolin ribbons among her fingers, and Mrs. Gibson moved further away.

"Are you leaving town soon, Mr. Butterfield?" inquired the unsophisticated rosebud engagingly.

It was a better opening than I had looked for; I took advantage of it.

"I had meditated going down into the country for a little fishing shortly," I replied; "probably in a week or two."

"You are fond of fishing, are you not, Mr. Butterfield?" she inquired, tying a knot in a red ribbon.

"It's a pleasure," I answered, "as much of the mind as of the body. I know of nothing more exciting than the suspense of the first nibble. The angler, male or female, has peculiar joys and fears of which the layman knows nothing."

"Oh, I should *so* love it!" replied Miss Gibson, glancing down at a small shoe that protruded from the lacy hem of her skirts. I followed her glance, and knew in my soul that Mrs. Loring and Carrie were watching me.

"The first nibble taken," I continued, warming to my work, "all the *finesse* of playing your victim commences. There is a wide difference between hooking your fish and landing him. He must be humoured and coaxed, or you lose him, bait and all."

I took one of the ribbons in my hand.

"It must be most annoying to have all your trouble for nothing, is it not, Mr. Butterfield?"

"You follow me perfectly," I replied, "especially when you have made sure of your fish. Often enough

you have chosen the wrong fly, or your line has been seen by the fish; and he is a shy thing, a very timid creature."

She laid groundbait for me by dropping her fan. I nibbled again, and returned it to her.

"The fish, too, becomes cunning with age; and you must not play a middle-aged trout as a boy does a minnow. Believe me, Miss Gibson, he is not easily caught, if he is worth the landing."

Mrs. Gibson passed with a smile, but did not disturb the situation. I rose to get Miss Gibson an ice, and resumed my seat near her. She placed the mandolin on the other side, adjusted her gown, and diminished the distance between us by an inch. Again her fan dropped, and as we both stooped to pick it up our hands touched.

Honestly, I acquit Miss Gibson of intention.

"Yet another method of landing your trout," I continued, "is by what is called 'tickling'; but then your fish must be asleep, and it cannot fairly be classed as sport."

"But surely, Mr. Butterfield," said Miss Gibson, playing me with her eyes, "fishing must be very cruel? Fancy the poor thing with the hook!—doesn't it hurt?"

"I believe," I returned, "they rather enjoy it, Miss Gibson; particularly what is called the soft-mouthed kind of fish."

"How very curious!" said the credulous rosebud, somewhat absently. She evidently took my remarks on the subject as so much natural history, and was interested in them only as such. She glanced at the mandolin ribbons, and I saw her revolving means of supplementing the line by the net. She made a fresh cast.

"And how long do you expect to be away, Mr. Butterfield?"

Mrs. Loring and Carrie were approaching; but Mrs. Gibson, who had not apparently been watching, intercepted them, and dammed the stream adroitly. Carrie was placed at the piano, and the preserve maintained inviolate. Mrs. Loring talked sweetly to her hostess, with one eye on me.

"I could not say," I replied. "Until my friends yearn for me back again, I suppose."

She made the response elementary, and shortened her line.

"But your friends will be sorry to lose you at all," she replied, with a soft sparkle under her lashes. "I'm sure mother will."

"Indeed?" I answered. "My friends conceal their desire for my presence with most generous consideration. I am allowed great liberty."

"Oh, Mr. Butterfield, how can you say so?"

I ought not to have done it. I reproach myself for it. But the temptation! Miss Gibson was really nice, if not "quite nice." It was unfair; but I am of no stronger fibre than my fellow-men. As I leaned forward, I knew that the landing-net was ready, and the gaff poised. I sought her eyes, and spoke low.

"Shall *you* be sorry to lose me, Miss Gibson?"

The colour rose faintly on her cheek. She hesitated, her eyes cast down. She had not fallen in love with me. It was the mother's doing.

Help came from outside. Mrs. Gibson blinked her vigilance for one short moment. Carrie crowded the last few bars of music into an accelerando that would have harrowed the soul of the composer, and she and Mrs. Loring were upon us.

"Oh, Miss Gibson," said Carrie, with a sweetness of expression that astonished me, considering the real state of her feelings, "do please play again. Rollo and I must go very shortly, and we should so love to hear you. Won't you, dear?"

"We cannot possibly leave without," implored Mrs. Chatterton.

Nothing was possible but compliance, and Miss Gibson took her seat near the piano.

Mrs. Loring and Caroline mounted determined guard over me, one on each side, but didn't speak. It was not until we were on the way home that the storm broke.

"Rollo Butterfield," said Mrs. Loring icily, "I'm deeply surprised at you."

"And why, my dear Mrs. Loring?" I asked blandly.

"Did you propose to that—that Gibson girl?"

"Proposal, Mrs. Loring," I replied, "is an excitement that would be of more general indulgence but for the risk of acceptance. It is a valuable sensation, and I greatly regret its attendant danger."

"You have no more perception than a child. Don't you know that those people are doing all they can to catch you? I never saw anything so shameless."

She had asked for it, and she should have it.

"Mrs. Loring," I replied slowly and distinctly, "your ingenuousness charms me. You call Mrs. Gibson's conduct shameless: yet you yourself would empty half the bachelors' clubs in London. I forget precisely the number of years it is since you first endeavored to curtail my own celibate freedom, but I believe you have devoted no small part of your attention to my poor case."

"Millie Dixon is different," she retorted.

Of course Millicent was different, but I held her to the logic.

"We are not discussing Millicent, but the ethics of angling. I am surprised that you should not recognise your own position in the matter. You do not want me to be more precise?"

"I don't want you to be anything but moderately sane," she returned. "If you can't see the difference between the Gibsons and Millicent Dixon——"

She left me to conclude the sentence for myself. Mrs. Loring Chatterton was in a bad temper, and evaded the argument pettishly. I turned to Caroline.

“Has my little sister anything to say?” I asked, in a “come one come all” tone.

She hadn’t. She cuddled her face against my shoulder, and pulled nervously at her glove fingers.

“But, Rol, dear,” she said anxiously, “what *were* you and Miss Gibson talking about?”

I took her hand.

“Nothing, Caroline,” I replied, “but a few observations on the trout, his habits, and the method of his capture.”

“Exemplifying the fact,” Mrs. Loring struck in crossly, “that he is a cold-blooded creature.”

Mrs. Loring scored a bye.

X

AN UNDRESS REHEARSAL

Millicent Dixon had called on me unexpectedly, soaked from neck to ankle. I had been watching the vertical downpour from my window—long, heavy slate-pencils of water, that rebounded from the pavement in a mist a foot high,—and listening to the hurrying runnels that sluiced the gutters. It was full, uncompromising rain, and it thrashed steadily from the invisible cullender that had been a sky an hour ago. Millicent stood before me with her hand on the door, half vexed, but laughing out of her sodden garments.

"Now don't sit there looking at me, Mr. Butterfield," she exclaimed, as I admired at her plight with eyes half closed; "get me some things."

I considered weightily.

"I have in the house at present," I replied, "several morning suits, a Norfolk jacket, evening wear, pink silk——"

She tapped impatiently with her foot, shaking a sliver of little drops from the hem of her gown.

"Or perhaps fishing attire would be——?"

"Don't be ponderous. Where's Caroline?"

"Caroline, Miss Dixon, is out with Arthur, and will doubtless return in much the same state of rainwater as yourself."

She disappeared towards Carrie's quarters, her dress making a wet slap on the door as she whisked round. I rose to prepare brandy during her absence.

It should be mentioned that I was confined to my room with a slight attack of rheumatism, which my considerate friends persisted in regarding as gout. As a matter of fact the affection was purely muscular, and I indignantly repudiated the fuller flavour of the alleged complaint. My portliness must not be confounded with decadence.

Disconsolately enough, I had been fingering and sorting old letters, turning out drawer after drawer of forgotten trifles, and feeling none the younger in consequence. It was borne in upon me that I had a history, or some record of trivialities that passed as such; and these little drifted relics of the past had curiously discounted the glamour of what was going to happen to-morrow. Except for the unexpected shower, I should probably have been left to this melancholy occupation all day; and Millicent's forced visit was very welcome.

She reappeared in garments of Caroline's, passable in style, but with marked qualifications in the fit. She tops Caroline by three inches. I had often wondered idly where that three inches was accounted for, and how it was distributed. I knew now.

I surveyed her critically.

"Shoulders not bad," I remarked, walking round her, while she stood at a laughing attention for kit inspection. "Waist—turn round—hm!—an inch and a half at most; all right so long as you don't lean forward. Skirt—ah, the skirt—well, well, I'm past such things. Really, it's not bad for an improvisation."

"I couldn't find Carrie's slippers," she said, putting forward a small foot.

The skirt had already revealed the silk-clad toes. I got her a particularly large pair of my own, brought her the brandy, which she drank like a sensible woman of twenty-eight, placed her an armchair near the fire, and resumed my own seat. Then I sought her eyes.

"It was most thoughtful of you, Miss Dixon, to remember an invalid, and to pay such a welcome call. I appreciate it. In the rain, too."

Irony was wasted on this shameless woman. She looked at me boldly, and laughed.

"I assure you, Mr. Butterfield," she replied, "the last thing I thought of when I left home was coming to see you. But oh, the rain! Look at it now."

I was conscious of the fresh smell of wet pavement from where I sat—the window was open. The wheels of a hansom went past with a watery swish, the horse's hoofs slapping clear in the deserted street, and the stones shone with a cleanness that they had not known for a month.

"At any rate," I said magnanimously, "you're here for an hour or two. It's not going to stop yet. You may as well make a virtue of entertaining me."

She bowed mockingly.

"It is I who am entertained," she replied. "You have helped me in a watery dilemma. I am in your home. I wear your——"

I stopped her. They were not mine. They were Caroline's.

"Slippers," she continued, crossing them on the fender. "I think I'll take Caroline's place while she's gadding about with Arthur."

Again I stopped her. She was not in Caroline's shoes.

"Besides, Miss Dixon," I added, "are you not a little premature in offering to be a sister to me?"

"Never mind," she replied, laughing; "call it housekeeper, if you like."

"The imputation," I answered, "is monstrous. I am a respectable bachelor, and never had such a thing. And if I had, she would have appeared before me in a fitting state—not a misfitting one."

"Then we'd better make it sister after all," she returned, "and my first duty is to demand what you were doing when I came in."

I glanced at the half-sorted piles of notes, cards, ancient invitations, mementoes, and the hundred other matters which had doubtless been of more or less importance in their day, and shrugged my shoulders.

"I know," said Miss Dixon, "it is rather dreadful. Seems like reading some one else's letters. Let me help you."

She put out her hand for the nearest packet. I placed my own firmly on hers.

"Miss Dixon," I said slowly, "who are you that you would plunge thus recklessly into the tied-up part of a now reformed bachelor? That particular bundle is least of all fit for a sister's perusal."

"If Caroline neglected her duty," she retorted, "that is no reason why I should do the same. I want to see them."

"You had better take these instead," I returned, pushing towards her a tray of wedding cards.

"I insist."

"You insist?" I replied, in the tone of one speaking to a naughty child. "How old are you, Miss Dixon?"

She laughed.

"I think I am a good deal older than you, Rollo, in this respect; I don't keep letters as I did when I was a sentimental schoolgirl. I destroy *that* kind." And she nodded towards the bundle.

"Indeed?" I said. "And why did you not tell me sooner? That would have been valuable information to me at one time."

"And why?"

"I might have written a good deal more than I did."

"You never wrote anything unfitted for my sheltered youth," she replied, quietly smiling, and burrowing one foot deeper into the cavernous recesses of a slipper.

"I don't post all I write," I corrected, "but I have written things that would have amazed a Bassishaw—and thought twice about it."

"Bassishaw doesn't say much in his letters," she said musingly. She and Caroline were very good friends, and there had doubtless been a good deal of inter-feminine confidence between them.

"But why don't you post them?"

"Oh," I replied offhand, "they are experiments. It is another way of keeping a diary. Perhaps, after all, you may see them if you care to. They are merely studies in moods."

I untied the packet.

"Here you are," I continued. "Arthur Bassishaw, Esq., on the occasion of his engagement to Caroline. Good advice—but a little too late. It wouldn't have been taken, anyway, from what I know of His Omnipotent Youthfulness. Never posted."

"It might have been worth while to post it for the sake of reply," Millicent returned smiling; "you'd have had something badly written, but very ardent."

I shook my head.

"Bassishaw's sword would be a good deal mightier than his pen," I replied. "To see him in the throes of composition is a felicity I have hitherto missed. Now here's another: to Caroline, on the same occasion. That, Millicent, cost me some trouble to write, and I am afraid it showed it—I have only one sister, you know. Unposted."

"That was rather nice of you, Rollo," she said.

"I should only have given myself away," I returned. "Now this, to Mrs. Bassishaw, is one of two—the other one was posted. It was a hard alternative. I sent the usual nice thing; Mrs. Bassishaw would understand that. This"—I tapped the envelope—"would have appeared difficult to a widow still young, and still in the running with her own son."

Millicent nodded. There were reasons for Mrs. Bassishaw's conduct which her relatives approved and her friends condoned.

"These," I continued, turning over two or three, "are small ebullitions that served their end in leaving me in a better temper; and in one at least of them I evaded a state of mind in which I was feeling very sorry for myself. It is a good game, don't you think?"

"Excellent," she returned, "from the point of view of your future biographer. I suppose you have one eye on the memoir-writer, Rollo. Is your statue to be equestrian?"

I waived reply magnanimously, and went on.

"Here is one to Mrs. Loring Chatterton; and not unconnected with it, one to yourself."

"One to me?" she inquired, looking up. "Why to me? What mood did that exemplify?"

"I think, Millicent," I replied, "that I must have felt rather a regard for you that evening."

She bowed ironically.

"It is nice to be thought well of," she replied, "even if the regard does stop at the posting point. It was a wet night, I suppose; or the servants had gone to bed?"

"The fires of the heart, Millicent," I answered, in pompous periods, at which she only laughed, "are not quenched by rain. Yon gutters that run so musically could no more——"

"'Oh, Captain Shaw!'" she sang softly, "'type of true love kept under——'"

I leaned back, tapping the letter with the ends of my fingers, and signified my willingness to wait until her operatic fervour should have spent itself.

"It must have been ferverish," she said, still laughing. "Did it take you long to write?"

"About eight years, Millicent," I replied.

“And not to be posted after all? Never mind; I suppose I shall see it in the biography. I declare I’m almost curious, Rollo. Tell me, is it——?” She paused, and looked fairly and quietly at me, with an odd smile on her lips.

“It is,” I replied, returning her gaze. “Would you care to read it, Millicent?”

She rose and went to the window. A cold grey light that heralded the passing of the shower filled the room. The heavens were relenting, and already a corner of the leaden pall had lifted. Millicent would probably take the opportunity to leave.

“Would you care to read it?” I repeated, looking over my shoulder.

She faced round suddenly.

“No, Rollo,” she said, “I should not.”

“You are probably right,” I replied. “Proposal is a venerable formality; but the inevitable scene——”

She walked back from the window and stood before me, dignified in her heterogeneous attire and perfectly serious.

“I thought you knew better than that, Rollo,” she said. “I don’t think there would be any scene, and, anyway, I’m not in my first season, you know.” She smiled the same queer smile. “But if you think that I should be interested in such a matter merely as an—experiment in mood—you wrong me, Rollo; and if, on the other hand, I am to take it in the plainer sense, I should like something less warmed up and out of date. You can hardly call it fervid, can you?”

I admired Millicent in that moment. I rose and took her hand.

“Millicent,” I said, “I accept your rebuke. There is nothing further to be said—just now; but soon ——”

She laughed her accustomed laugh, the same old Millicent again.

“I shall be perfectly willing to consider any representations you may have to make on the subject, Rollo, provided they are forwarded in the ordinary course. Will you ring for tea?”

XI

QUEEN OF LOVE AND BEAUTY

From what I was able to gather, the course of young Ted Carmichael's love was highly meritorious in its constancy. His affection was a solid, reliable fact, and, to me, correspondingly uninteresting. His father, I remembered, had, years before, wooed little Alice Chatterton on much the same lines, between which two it had been what their friends called an "understood thing," since the first bashful glances of adolescence. In both cases this trait was regarded as a highly commendable faithfulness, and invested with the usual attributes of true and undying love; but to me it had less of this positive quality than appeared, and argued rather a certain paucity of invention in the finer relations of amorous adventure. It was admirable, but the case was settled from the beginning, and offered little field for speculation, even its incidental tiffs and mischances being in their rise and end perfectly accountable. In the case of the son, his three terms at Eton, coming when they did, might have resulted in a break from this monotonous routine of laudable love; his father had been hopeless from the start.

But Miss Nellie Bassishaw bade fair for freer flights. During the occasional intervals of my seeing her she seemed to grow in sections and to develop in seasons, and now, emancipated from the last suggestion of governess, was gowned and coifed beyond the limit of girlhood. True, her neck still showed a whitish celery colour from the unhabitual exposure, and in the management of her feet and skirt the last trace of the tomboy was disappearing; but she displayed beneath an eminently suitable hat glances that promised in the near future a hundred roguishnesses and mischiefs. If anything could shake Ted's devotion, Miss Nellie, I decided, had it.

Young Ted called on me one afternoon for no reason at all that I could discover during the first half-hour of his visit. He was clad *point-devise*, bore his gloves and cane with admirable instinct, and looked as fresh and trim a youth as ever received the half-motherly kiss of a widow. I greeted him with pleasure.

"And the match, Ted?" I asked, when he had sat down; "how do you feel?"—Ted was the youngest member of the Eton eleven, which was to meet Harrow in the annual match at Lord's in a day or two.

A troubled look crossed his face.

"I don't feel a bit up to it, Butterfield," he replied. "I shall go and mess the confounded thing, I know I shall. A fellow who's playing cricket shouldn't have anything on his mind—that is——"

He paused, and flushed half angrily.

"Anything wrong?" I asked in an offhand tone.

"No," he replied—an affirmative "no,"—"nothing that matters."

"Only?" I prompted.

"Only this," he answered with another flush, "that women oughtn't to have anything to do with cricket."

"From my experience," I returned, "they are invariably proud to see their sons playing."

"Sons!" he replied. "Oh, it isn't that—I know my mother is all right. But it doesn't matter—much," he concluded, in a tone that was *not* intended as a hint to let the matter drop.

"Ah, I see," I replied sympathetically. "Sorry, Ted. Of course, that does make a difference. When you said 'women,' I thought for a moment you——Yes, it's very awkward. To know that in such a crowd two eyes are aching with anxiety that you should acquit yourself well must be extremely trying to the nerves. I should try to forget it."

He fidgeted with his gloves, and then turned sharp round.

"And suppose they were not anxious?" he retorted. "Suppose they didn't care whether you came off or not? Hang it, Butterfield," he continued, "you can imagine what it's like—they think because a fellow hasn't a moustache—it's enough to make a fellow go and drink rotten stuff. I shan't stand it."

It was Nellie. I got it all out of him. He had evidently come to tell me. The rude health of public school life had not knocked the fancy out of him, and he had come back to find her grown up and with a tendency to be interested in men ten years her senior. How he had managed to get into the first eleven and to remain in love was to me one of the mysteries of constancy.

"But I thought you would have forgotten almost, Ted," I said, in the maturity of our confidence. "It's a year since you went away."

"A fellow never forgets," he replied sulkily. "It's the girls who forget. Could you?"

I passed the point, and speculated on the validity of pledges on eternity.

"And she has—pardon me—snubbed you?" I inquired, after a while.

"Well, no," he rejoined dubiously, "it isn't quite that; but she always seems to have engagements or something. She must always 'be going now,' and she's altered so. I told her so, and she said we were silly then; and if I muff this match it will be worse than ever."

I couldn't help thinking that if I had organised the female mind I should have done it more consistently; but then there would probably have been no comedy in the world. I was willing to help Ted all I could, and advised a spontaneous gaiety in her presence—Ted shook his head—or failing that, a desperate counter-movement with a married woman; a notion he also rejected.

The only suggestion Ted had to make was that I should go to the match, contrive to sit next to Miss Nell, and—what, he didn't say; a delicate reserve I admired.

"You're a good chap, you know, Butterfield," he added. "I've told lots of our fellows what a good

chap you are. Harrop major says so too—he met you once, you know, Butterfield."

I fear I had forgotten Harrop major in the multiplicity of my affairs, but I was properly touched. I smiled at my own goodness.

"Well, thanks awfully, Butterfield"—he rose to go—"it's awfully good of you really. You're a brick."

"Thanks, Ted," I returned. "I hope you'll come off all right in the match."

His lips twitched queerly; I forbore to press the alternative contingency, and he took his leave.

My duty, apparently, was to keep an eye on Miss Nell, to diagnose her condition when Ted went in to bat, to mark how, as should befall, his success or failure was received, and to exercise a discretionary supervision over the state of her heart as revealed by the vicissitudes of the game. It was doubtful of what precise use I should be, but—it was interesting, and Ted was a pleasant-mannered youth.

It was peculiarly interesting in view of the fact that the Carmichaels were a cricketing family. Now the purely abstract part of the game was a cult to which I had never aspired, my only interest being in such personal cases as that of my young friend Ted. I was convinced that the progress of Carmichael senior's love, if it had had a progress, was accelerated by the fact that he had, in *his* Eton match, made fifty on a wet wicket; and the question whether a similar performance on the son's part would please Nellie, or whether Nellie would be merely pleased to see Ted pleased with himself, was a speculation which I followed into the nicer nuances.

Our party accounted for a considerable segment of bench space, the apex of which, I contrived it, consisted of Miss Nell and myself. We were backed by tiers of Carmichaels, Chattertons, and Bassishaws, and penetrated wedge-wise into half a division of Eton younglings, with close-cropped hair and large ears, which looked frank admiration at Nellie. One keeper of the public manners with freckles and an even greater extent of white collar than the rest cuffed his neighbour for saying that she was stunning. Nellie heard and laughed. She sat provokingly upright, and shot enfilading glances to left and right beneath the brim of a hat remarkably adapted to such proceedings. A pretty, slim thing she was, and the careless white flash between her lips unsettled Ted considerably, who was paying uneasy flying visits.

"I think the Harrow boys *look* nicer," she said, with a look of illicit pleasure from the shade of that eminently suitable hat; and Ted left with ill-feigned unconcern. I remembered my mission, and leaned towards her.

"Nellie," I said, "do you consider that an encouraging remark to a young man whose happiness depends on his playing a straight bat and keeping his head cool?"

"Oh, Ted's all right," she returned with, I was pleased to observe, a touch of shame; "besides, what does it matter? It's only a game."

She might have had her answer from the group of Eton juvenility surrounding us, which broke into excited babble.

"Yes, you can." "No, you can't." "You can't be caught off your pads. Fat lot you know about cricket." "Silly ass." And so forth.

"But, Mr. Butterfield," she said after a moment, "he will be so unbearable if he makes a lot of runs. He's important enough already at being in the eleven."

She stooped and spoke to young Eton on her right, who blushed at the distinction, but answered with bashful coldness.

"Besides," she continued, "they say his average is thirty, and I'm sure I don't care who wins."

Luckily this treasonable utterance was unheard by the Eton boys, with whom sentiment and cricket hung in highly disproportionate balance. I was satisfied, at least, that if it came to the worst she would be sorry for Ted.

Now, Eton batted first, and there was little talk in our strongly prejudiced quarter. Ted Carmichael, I gathered from my neighbours, was to go in "third wicket down." He had made a last visit—this time from a different entrance—but had avoided Nell, sitting next to Bassishaw instead, who had not tried to talk to him. Then he had disappeared.

I knew in my soul what was going to happen. Ted's nervousness at his first match, and the condescending interest of Miss Nellie Bassishaw, could only have one result; and I was so busy speculating on the mysteries of this dread fatality that hems us so remorselessly about, that I forgot the scene for a moment, and was startled back by the juvenile clamour. The inevitable had happened.

"Oh!" "Oh, I say!" "What a trimmer!" "Just on the bails!" "First ball!" "—broke from the off!" "It didn't—it was a straight ball." "Four for fifty-three."

Ted was out, for a duck.

I glanced at the slender white figure trailing a fruitless bat towards the pavilion, and adjusted the knees of my trousers. I commented mentally on the pattern, and waited.

She did not speak, but absently pulled off a glove. The Carmichaels behind slowly resumed their talk, and the Eton boys, after marking their scoring cards, took up the current of the game. True liberals, with them the issue transcended the individual.

Still she did not speak, but folded and unfolded the gloves. I glanced up, and that eminently becoming hat did not seem the same, so inseparably had it been connected with the lurking ambuscade of eyes. Miss Nell was visibly shaken.

I leaned towards her.

"It's only a game, Nellie——" I began. She interrupted me with a look.

"Please don't be mean, Mr. Butterfield. I know what you think—you think it's all my fault."

I was silent for Ted’s sake, and she continued slowly:

“I don’t see why men should think so much of cricket. It makes them so——”

“So unbearable when they come off,” I replied. “But he must have been very nervous, Nellie, whether or no. You couldn’t help that. Your encouragement would probably have disturbed him just as much as your—as not. That is the double influence of woman on the man of action—neither her smiles nor her frowns help him in the least. Her approval is pleasant when it’s all over, but I’m afraid the presence of the Queen of Love and Beauty has unhorsed many a gallant youth before to-day. He makes the mistake in——”

“In having anything to do with them?” she queried with pretty cynicism.

I leaned back.

“No. In being a man of action,” I returned.

There was a sudden turn and hush among the Eton boys. Ted reappeared, and they were awed in the presence of a great grief. He sat down next to me with the hard look of one who asks no sympathy, folded his hands, and stared at his shoes. The Eton boys whispered.

“And they play me for my batting,” he said, so softly that I scarcely heard. “I’m a bat—a bat. I’m here to make runs.”

The Weltschmerz had sunk into his soul. I was about to say something, but checked myself as Nellie bent forward.

“Ted,” she said, “I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault.”

I folded my arms, looking before me. Ted did not move an inch.

“I was horrid,” she continued, “and I pretended——”

She stopped, conscious of the significance of what she was about to say. She had pretended to be unconscious of her empire over his heart, and was now retracting. Miss Nellie is the modern girl, with whom proposal is unnecessary.

Ted cut her short with the brutality of male desperation.

“All right, Nellie,” he said curtly. “It’s not your fault. I drank brandy.”

This was a surprise to me. Brandy steadies the nerves, but it is a remedy not recommended by the captains of cricket elevens, and his boyish devilry, as training, was as reprehensible as it was in the spirit of the comedy. But Nellie saw further than Ted.

“Oh, Ted,” she said humbly, “and that is my fault too. I made you angry. Will you forgive me?”

It has always seemed to me that when a pretty, half-tearful creature asks you if you will forgive her, the question is beside the mark, the forgiveness not depending on whether you will or not. You are not willing; you would much rather not; but—you do precisely as Ted did; he squeezed her ungloved hand across my knee, and an Eton boy sniggered.

I don’t know why I should have experienced a sensation as near akin to jealousy as I can locate it. I pursued the moral labyrinth for a time, and, getting no nearer, was fain to come to earth.

“And the next innings, Ted——” Nellie was saying.

Alas! What then? What, in Ted’s words, had women, even Queens of Love and Beauty, to do with cricket? More subtle in their influence than the forbidden brandy, why do not the captains demand that their followers shall be bachelors unattached? Ted was too blessedly happy to know; certainly too happy to be let alone. I spoke for his own good.

“The next innings,” I remarked, “will exemplify the second stage of the female relation to the man of action.”

I don’t think either of them took the trouble to understand.

XII

A MODERN SABINE

"Ah, that's the trouble. We're all far too complex nowadays."

"We live in a complex age," I returned profoundly.

"True, very true," he replied, and twisted the ribbon of his eyeglass round one finger. "Very little is left that is simple and primitive and beautiful."

I favoured him with the cosmic shrug of his cult, and said nothing eloquently. The understanding was complete.

Cicely Vicars's "evening" was ground I had not hitherto explored, and I had marked for my own at once the young man drooping mincingly over the piano. He was smooth and fair, inclined to premature stoutness, and looked remotely. Mrs. Vicars informed me that he was a playwright, a dramatic critic, and a Fashion; that he promised brilliant things, and that the name under which he wrought was Eleanor Macquoid. She added that he had intuition beyond his years.

Now people went to Mrs. Vicars's "evening" for intellectual intercourse and the exchange of ideas—an object in which they would not be balked. Carrie had said as much to me.

"You ought to come, Rol," she had remarked on one occasion. "It's so—it's awfully new, Rol, really."

"Indeed?" I had said. "In what way is it particularly—pardon me—up to date?"

"Oh," she replied, "it's so *real*, Rollo." Then, reassuringly, "They don't talk about the soul, you know—you needn't be afraid of that. It's—it's instinct. The soul is quite too old, you know."

"A full season behind," I assented gravely. "And so the soul, *chez* Mrs. Vicars, is superseded in favour of the dilettante animal? Is that so, my sister?"

"Yes," she agreed doubtfully, and added, "Of course there are outsiders."

It turned out, as Caroline had said, to be Instinct, Primal Sanity, and the Elemental Paganism, and very prettily put I heard it. No one was *blasé*. They said so. They were enthusiastic. My young man declared it with an animation that brought him near to spilling the liqueur carefully poised on his knee. He spoke of the keen joy of living, delicately and epigrammatically, digressing to observe that he preferred Indian cigarettes to Brazilian, and adding that after all there was nothing like the great rough kindnesses of the Mother Earth. Cicely Vicars's gathering was indisputably in the vanguard of the latest cry.

Mr. Eleanor Macquoid seemed to take to me, for he spoke almost immediately of "people who understand." I was evidently admitted on sight to the mystery, and improved the occasion accordingly. I examined my finger nails—I had seen him do so—and dropped my pearls of wisdom nonchalantly, as not expecting they would be gathered up.

He was talking softly, and almost sleepily, on the picturesqueness of Mass and Brute Bulk.

"There is something quite Titanic," he said, "in the conception of a world where nothing was as yet ruled and squared out for us; where everything was vague and shifting."

"It is an especially gigantic thought," I replied appreciatively. "The insistence nowadays of the Social Nexus——"

I paused, and he nodded comprehendingly at the cue.

"Yes," he replied, "that also is true. Ah, if it were only possible to escape from the bewildering system into the clean fields and the rain-washed heather——"

"To evade the ever-present Self, and to take refuge in the great unhewn passions?" I queried gently.

"Exactly," he replied, again carefully contemplating his nails, "to know again the crude and volcanic life. Everything is tertiary in these days—we have no primaries. Nothing rude or red."

I forbore to challenge the remark as to rudeness, and agreed that from my observation it hardly appeared to be an age of epics. He approved, passing his hand over his sleek, clean hair.

"And yet," he continued, judicially weighing each word, and turning to the nails of the other hand, "and yet—why? Why should we, the heirs of the centuries, be in reality the slaves of them? Why should we not love, for instance, as the rugged, forgotten ones loved? Why should we love through the post-office and by chaperonage—through engagements and marriages? Why should we not——"

He forbore to say what, and sighed, apparently for the days when he might have loved with a stone axe in untracked forests and through rivers in flood. I offered him a cigarette.

He lighted it, and gazing before him as though he were culling a nascent thought from the smoke, went on slowly and prophetically.

"Nevertheless," he said, more softly than ever, "the strong man shall come; and when he shall appear—the man for whom we are waiting—the man who shall break the bonds and go back—back ——"

It was a characteristic of most of his sentences that he finished them by watching the films of smoke before him. This time he made a remarkably perfect smoke ring. I thought of Caroline, and wondered what she was doing in such a *milieu*.

I was fain to speak.

"And what form of creative expression do you adopt, Mr. Macquoid?" I asked gracefully.

He replied with a modest diffidence:

"The drama. One is but a mouthpiece—a medium; yet the speech from living lips with the living person before the eyes——"

“You are doubtless right,” I replied; “words are unconvincing; things must be seen to be believed.”

He noticed nothing, and proceeded to speak of the modern French chansonette.

Now Caroline, I remembered, had, before her engagement, accounted for a large portion of her time in putting together the materials for a comedy, which, however, she had since discontinued under the somewhat exclusive demands of courtship. I had never been privileged to see the work in question, but understood that a knotty proposal scene had, coincidentally, been abandoned precisely at the time that she could, had she wished, have given it an autobiographical interest. Bassishaw’s love, besides interrupting the course of art, bade fair to cut it off altogether just when it would have given the true note that the stage, it is declared, is aching for. But even young authors have scruples in making their own affairs public, and so Caroline had willed it.

Nevertheless, it could do Caroline no harm to meet Mr. Eleanor Macquoid; and Mr. Macquoid himself could do no less than accept resignedly the latter-day limitations of love in the presence of my sister. After all, Mrs. Vicars’s salon was for the interchange of ideas.

“My sister,” I remarked, “is interested in the drama, and has herself half-realised aspirations in the way of comedy.”

Mr. Macquoid would be charmed; and I presented him. I was called away for a few moments by Mrs. Vicars. By the time I returned Mr. Macquoid was talking, his remarks being apparently directed to the point at which Caroline’s comedy had been relinquished.

“It is difficult,” he observed, with a polite interest, “to know what to do with one’s young leads nowadays. I suppose they must love—the Philistine still clings to the conventional love-theme—but it is all so stale. In the old days it was different.”

From the angle of Caroline’s chin I saw that it was anything but stale to her, and that the remark was unfortunate. She was evidently of opinion that the subject of love, however much used, had had anything but adequate treatment, and that in one or two important respects she was in a position to direct a new light on the literary treatment of it.

“What do you mean, Mr. Macquoid?” she asked.

“Merely,” he replied casually, “that there is so little dash and—and high-handedness about our modern methods of love-making. You get your couples together, and they talk in the same weary way—the same old flat talk, talk, talk——”

I smiled at the description as applied to Bassishaw, whose fluency was not remarkable, and Caroline looked coldly before her.

“You refer to the stage, Mr. Macquoid?” she asked.

“I refer to modern love-making,” he replied rashly. “We have no romantic methods left. It has become a business and a bore. When we do get it out it’s one kiss and thank Heaven it’s over.”

Caroline looked emphatic contradiction. I interposed.

“The Roman soldiery, it is related,” I said, “being once in want of wives——”

Caroline interrupted me quickly.

“I think, Mr. Macquoid,” she returned, “that people love just as passionately nowadays as they ever did.”

He might have seen what was the matter, but he was on his own subject, and went blindly at it.

“True,” he replied, “true. But the surroundings, the circumstances, the littleness of everyday life—they crush it out. We love by rule and etiquette, at social functions and in gas-lit drawing-rooms.”

I looked at Caroline for a confirmation of Bassishaw’s methods, but the personal equation was too much for her contemplation of the artistic side of the question.

“Of course we do, Mr. Macquoid,” she returned, waiving, it seemed to me, the part that had to do with the gas. “What else can we do?”

Eleanor Macquoid raised his eyebrows and shoulders in a deferential gesture that was supposed to explain the way.

“The wind still blows,” he said, “the rain, the open air——”

“The parks,” I suggested, “are already——”

“—but,” he continued, “we wear frock-coats and carry umbrellas. We marry, and our children resume the same hopeless round. There is no romance, no poetry, no heroism in it. We become engaged for a certain period to please our friends, and marry out of consideration for one another. We have no impulse, no real instinct. We have no—no militant love.”

He seemed to receive a fresh start from the last phrase, and, alas! ruined himself irretrievably.

“Why,” he exclaimed, “even those to whom we might look for a vigorous expression of it—those who lead lives of adventurous excitement—our soldiers and sailors—are just as bad. As you remarked, Mr. Butterfield, the Roman soldiers——”

The social system might be attacked, disintegrated, and shown wanting in the eyes of amateur modern paganism; the spirit of the age might be arraigned and condemned by twenty juries of the advanced salons; modish culture might stalk hock-deep in the wreckage of civilisation; but—to Caroline the prestige of the army was vested in the person of Bassishaw. Bassishaw’s mode of love-making had been compared to its disfavour with the practices of Roman legions.

She raised her head disdainfully without glancing at the unconscious Mr. Eleanor Macquoid, spoke half over her shoulder, and condemned a great nation in Bassishaw’s defence.

“I don’t think very highly, Mr. Macquoid, of the Romans. I think that when they—that on that occasion at least—they were horrid, and—and—unnecessarily rough, and that nice people would never have done it. It may make good pictures, but one would rather be a pleasant person than an

unpleasant picture. And I don’t care a bit what anybody says; soldiers are just as good as—anybody else.”

And better, beyond comparison better, her shoulders seemed to say as she turned away. Macquoid shifted his other elbow to the piano, and then looked at me.

“I am afraid, Mr. Butterfield, that I have not been able to help your sister much in the play. After all, the real impulse must come from within.”

“It is,” I replied, “a pleasing reticence when the real impulse stays there. The self-sacrifice imposed by art is not necessarily a sacrifice of one’s self.”

“Very true,” he answered approvingly, and took coffee.

XIII

POT LUCK

"Do you know, Butterfield," Bassishaw said, "I don't know how you get along—that is—get along, you know—as you do."

The remark didn't seem particularly illuminating, but he had been silent for ten minutes, and this appeared to be the result of his cogitation.

"No?" I said encouragingly.

"Well, you know what I mean," he replied. "I mean how you manage—in the way you do, you know; never to—you've never—hang it, Butterfield, why don't you get married?"

"Oh!" I answered, "I see. Of course. I didn't quite catch the idea at first. Of course. Why don't I get married."

"Yes," he replied, much relieved. "You—you should, you know. It's the finest thing in the world—being engaged, that is. You've no idea, really, Butterfield."

He seemed quite eager about it. I put my feet comfortably on the fender, and waited for him to expand. He kept his eyes on the fire.

"You know," he went on slowly, "you'll feel awfully lonely and all that—soon, that is—when Caroline goes, I mean."

Matchmaking is never a man's line; he draws back at the very intimate point he should press home. Arthur did his best. Mrs. Loring had probably been talking to him.

"I shall miss her very much," I replied, "very much indeed; but to whom do you propose to marry me?"

He seemed rather abashed, and a trifle impatient.

"Don't be an ass," he said.

I could not be certain, owing to the firelight, that he blushed, but I chanced it. I didn't object to these palpable attempts to marry me to Millicent Dixon; but it was disparaging to my intelligence that I should be supposed not to notice them. Anyway, the male element was a new feature in the alliance.

"And do you think that she and I would be a well-matched pair?" I asked.

He professed a hypocritical ignorance as to whom I meant. I laughed.

"Mrs. Loring," I answered, "can give you points, Arthur. You would apparently marry me on general principles. She particularises."

We were waiting for Caroline and Millicent. Millicent and Bassishaw were dining with us that evening, and Bassishaw had lately, I knew, been a good deal perturbed on my account. More than once he had timidly suggested that a woman's hand in a place made all the difference, you know, and I had caught him glancing round my rooms with something of a disparaging valuation of their contents when he should take Caroline away. His friendly concern, in itself, was deserving of my gratitude—but with this qualification, that I don't believe he was above suspecting that I should take to drink in the imminent solitude of my bereft apartments.

I was extracting from him the fervent declaration that I couldn't imagine how splendid It—being engaged—made you feel, and that to know that there was One upon whom et-cetera et-cetera For Ever, when Millicent and Caroline entered. We rose to greet them.

"How do you do, Millicent?" I said. "I'm glad to see you."

"Heaven!" she replied, "let me come near the fire. I'm as cold as a seminary breakfast. How do you do, Arthur? What a blessed blaze! Don't go away, Arthur."

Bassishaw had gone over to the table, where Caroline was making the last unnecessary arrangements, and was having his flower pinned on.

"Oh! his circulation's all right," I remarked. "We were once like that," and Millicent, looking over her shoulder, laughed at me, and said:

"The dear infants!"

Dinner was served, and we took our places. I faced Caroline, while Millicent, who was still chilly, and didn't mind the fire at her back, looked over the flowers at Bassishaw; an arrangement as can be diagrammatically proved, offering facilities for between-deck pressing of feet on a diagonal plan, and which appeared to suit my young sister admirably. I gave her an amused glance, which Millicent intercepted, and Carrie tried, unsuccessfully, to look as if she hadn't done it.

"Never mind him, Carrie," Millicent said reassuringly. "He's an envious old man, who's wasted his youth, and he's getting cynical. His failing years won't permit him to do such things himself, and his conscience begins to hurt him."

This was the woman without whom, in Bassishaw's opinion, my abode fell short of completeness.

"My failing years, Miss Dixon," I returned, "bring with them a certain charity; nevertheless, allow me to point out your reason for condoning such practices."

"Which is——?" she queried.

"That you are quite capable of doing the same thing yourself."

She laughed, and Bassishaw looked puzzled.

"Oh, I'm not tottering to my fall yet," she retorted. "I have all sorts of little surprises in my blood."

"You forbid reply, Miss Dixon," I answered. "You take refuge in a position where man can only maintain a respectful and incredulous silence. A woman's years——"

“——are——?” she challenged.

“——and an income-tax return——”

“I am beneath your roof, Mr. Butterfield,” she replied, with the dignity of St. James’s comedy.

Caroline evidently disapproved strongly. She caught my eye.

“I don’t think you’re a bit nice this evening, Rollo,” she said. “If I were Millicent”—she straightened her back—“I wouldn’t dine with you. Don’t take any notice of him, Millie dear.”

“Perhaps,” I replied, “the disparity in years is too great. Think so, Bassishaw?”

I looked round the flowers at him. He seemed rather embarrassed, and said nothing. I filled Millicent’s glass, and turned to her.

“What do you think Bassishaw was saying to me just before you came in?”

I received a kick. Bassishaw, behind the flowers, was very red indeed.

“Heaven forbid that I should guess!” Millicent replied. “Men are frail creatures.”

“He was speaking,” I continued, “of women as a domestic institution. No home, he said, was complete without one. Considered decoratively, she gave an air of brightness——”

Bassishaw must have been as busy in his pedipulations as an organist, for Caroline peremptorily held out her glass to be replenished. I continued:

“As a companion, he said, much could be forgiven her. And she had admirable managing gifts.”

Millicent bowed across the flowers.

“The sex thanks you, Arthur,” she said. “It is quite the proper point of view for a young man. As for this belated bachelor,”—myself—“he never did, nor ever will, think rightly on the subject.”

Bassishaw looked at me reproachfully.

“I didn’t mean—what you think I meant,” he said uncomfortably.

“Forgive me. You meant much more than I say I think you meant.”

“I meant—I meant——” he replied; and then, apologetically, “well, you *are* getting on, you know, and you’ve missed so much, really, Rollo. If you *like* being alone——A man who’s never—you don’t mind my saying it?—well, he doesn’t know, that’s all.”

Bassishaw subsided rather incoherently, but applied himself to his plate with conviction. I looked at Millicent, who glanced sidelong fun under her lids.

“What you say is perfectly convincing as a proposition, Arthur,” she remarked. “The man who’s Never—never does know; but the application is another matter. From report, there were hopes for Rollo Butterfield that he has failed to justify. He flirted notoriously.”

“Thank you, gracious lady,” I replied complacently, leaning back at my ease. “That is the name the world gives it.”

“Your conduct with Dolly Hemingway was shameless.”

“Marriage would certainly have been an illogical conclusion,” I admitted.

“And Violet Mellish told me herself——”

“Dear little Vi,” I approved. “Her conversation never did lack the relish of revelation. You must not suppose, Arthur, that I have not had the normal past that my years would guarantee. You appear to think so.”

Bassishaw didn’t seem to see it at all. He fumbled with his fork.

“I expect you’ve had your fancies, of course,” he replied. “But I don’t mean just fancies—that’s only flirting.”

The man who cannot flirt never sees that the power to do so is a gift of the gods. Arthur held by negative constancy.

“Flirtation,” I replied, “is not the simple affair you think, Arthur. It is not necessarily a matter of twilights and conservatories, and does not even always demand privacy. For a flirtation with zest there is nothing like having an audience. Is that not so, Millicent?”

“Spare me the revelation of my ignorance,” Millicent returned, moving her chair an inch or two from the now importunate fire, and looking over her shoulder. “It is possible.”

“The only requisites are a woman, a secret, and as many spectators as have not the use of their eyes,” I continued; “those granted, you may riot in innuendo, and your reputation go scatheless. It is the very button on the cap.”

Bassishaw could think of nothing more original to say than that it was playing with edged tools. Carrie was directing the removal of plates; I devoted my attention to Millicent.

“I had one very serious fancy, though, Millicent,” I remarked. “Shall I tell you?”

“I trust it is not unfit for the children,” she replied, looking this time beneath the flowers at Bassishaw. “The knowledge of good and evil from your point of view might not be of advantage to them.”

Caroline looked round curiously.

“Oh, Rollo, what was that?” she said. “You never told me.”

“No?” I inquired incredulously. “And you my sister, too! Ah, well, it was this. Summer mornings, at seven, I used to go across the fields with a bathing-towel; on my return I was generally met by—I never mentioned her name.”

“It would be indiscreet,” said Millicent.

“Discretion,” I answered, “is the better part of flirtation. They were lovely mornings, and there was a stile—a rather high stile—a distinct opportunity.”

I looked carefully away from Millicent, and turned to Bassishaw.

“Yes?” he said appreciatively. “And what happened?”

“I fancy,” I continued, “that she always met me on my side of the stile, so that we always had to get over it.”

Bassishaw seemed to approve the strategy.

“Nice girl?” he asked.

“She combined,” I replied, “the harmlessness of the dove with the wisdom of the serpent, for she used to feel tired when we got there, and rest. There was just room for two.”

Caroline was interested.

“And when was this, Rollo?” she asked.

“My dear Carrie,” I returned, “you had just begun German; you were at school. Well, this woman of mine would pull a flower to pieces, or light a cigarette for me, or some such foolishness. She knew the exact distance at which her hair would touch my face if it were a little tumbled. And so on.”

Millicent made the criticism that the least she could have done under the circumstances was to have sprained her ankle.

“And who was it?” Carrie asked eagerly.

The woman who presumed to condemn my carrying-on with Dolly Hemingway and Violet Mellish sat smiling in frank innocence. She, whose ignorance of such matters was to be scrupulously respected, sat with unconsciousness on her brow, and gave graceful attention to my story. She, who had called me a belated bachelor, who had spoken of my failing years and my perspective of hesitating singleness, and, above all, whose memory needed no hint as to what I was going to say, dissembled without a quiver.

“Who was it?” Caroline repeated.

“The name is the least essential part of the affair,” I replied. “We are concerned with the stile.”

“Yes, the stile,” Millicent said. “What happened?”

“Were she to ask me herself, I should only whisper,” I returned.

She leaned back and laughed outright. “You are too considerate on her account to make the story very interesting,” she remarked. “I swear I could finish it better myself. One day you tried to kiss her.”

Millicent had chosen the hazardous line of safety. She had told the truth.

I stole a glance at her under cover of the flowers.

“I tried not to,” I replied.

“And she was angry.”

“She did her best to be angry.”

“She was.”

“Till the next morning,” I answered.

“And then you begged her pardon?”

“I did nothing of the kind. I was not so young as all that.”

“But, at least, you were sorry?” Millicent suggested.

“Not from that day to this,” I replied. “It was too perfect.”

Millicent moved her chair a little further, and, as she did so—it might have been done purposely—you never can tell with Millicent—her foot touched mine gently; and as it remained there a moment, I felt more like Bassishaw than I would have cared to admit. She has since told me, I don’t mind saying, that I have good eyes; be that as it may, the mischief in her own was for a second tempered to an expression that—was nobody’s business but mine. I felt tempted to forswear my theory, and to regret the presence of an audience.

She rose gaily.

“This is all very well,” she said, “but it is a bad thing to have the fire at your back. Be good enough to put the screen up, Arthur.”

Arthur did so.

“But the story,” Caroline persisted impatiently—she wanted to get to the reconciliation with tears. “How does the story go on?”

“It went on,” I replied, “in much the same way. It is not quite finished yet.”

She looked a virtuous reproof.

“I am surprised, Rollo,” she said, “that you should have behaved in so indiscreet a fashion. I think that on that occasion it was just as well there *was* nobody there. *I* should be exceedingly sorry to witness any such proceeding. It would make me extremely uncomfortable.”

I laughed, and stroked my little sister’s hair.

“What liqueur will you take, Millicent?” I asked.

XIV

THE THINGS THAT ARE CÆSAR'S

Almost the whole of my female acquaintance seemed to be gathered in my rooms, and seemed, moreover, to be doing its collective best to persuade me of the superfluity of my presence. The occasion was the eve of Caroline's wedding, and the natural interest I myself took in the event paled before the engrossing fascination it appeared to have for these ladies. The company consisted largely of Mrs. Loring Chatterton; but she was ably supported by the remainder of her particular set and half a dozen supernumerary bridesmaids, not one of whom—with the exception, perhaps, of a quiet little creature who sat apart and said nothing—but would willingly have turned me out of house and home had she dared, as a person who could perfectly well be dispensed with. From the whispered conversations and secret conferences around me I was rigidly excluded, which I regretted the more as I felt I should have taken a peculiar pleasure in them.

"My good man," said Mrs. Loring, striding over my feet with an armful of bridesmaids' frippery, "what a lot of room you take up! You are sure you have no engagement this evening?"

"Nothing of importance, Mrs. Loring," I replied, looking up from an entry-book of bridal gifts I was curiously scanning, with mental notes of my own. "You may consider me entirely at your disposal. My duty is here to-night of all nights; and when you and Mrs. Carmichael can spare Caroline, I also have certain advice to give her not inappropriate to the occasion."

"Don't you think you'd better go and give Arthur the benefit of your wisdom?" she rejoined.

"Alas," I replied, "it is too late—he cannot draw back now. He must take the inevitable consequences of engagement. He has made his bed——"

"I see no reason for your being indelicate, Mr. Butterfield," answered Mrs. Chatterton; and she rustled away, dignity in flounces.

Never had my flat known such wealth of plate and tissue-paper. Had Jupiter, in wooing Danaë, adopted a silver currency, he could scarce have crowded more lavishly the Grecian tower. Ladies slipped in and out of the miscellaneous collection with feminine calculations and judgments, which I noted in secret joy, estimating, apparently, the whole affair in its comparison with previous functions. And above all, and more insistent from their very quietness, were heard the mysterious confabulations.

I crossed over to Mrs. Carmichael and Caroline. "Well, little sister," I said, glancing at Mrs. Carmichael, "and what unspeakable things has Mrs. Kit been telling you now?"

"Oh, Rollo," she replied, placing her hand pleadingly on my sleeve, "she hasn't. Please don't tease me to-night, dear. I am not a bit happy. I almost wish I was not going to be married."

"Then she has?" I returned. "Mrs. Kit, how could you? But there—you're all alike. They're not in the least interested in you, Carrie, my dear. It's just a wedding. A woman and a bridecake——"

"What do you know about it?" Mrs. Carmichael said disdainfully.

"Madame," I replied, "the exultation of your sex in all that pertains to a wedding is barely fit for the contemplation of a bachelor. Cannot you disguise your interest in some seemly manner?"

"If you'll arrange these cards," she retorted, "instead of concerning yourself with things of no moment to you, you'll be of much more service. *Will* you be so good as to label these presents—and with as little talk as is convenient to you?"

This to me, mind, in my own house! I looked to Caroline to espouse my cause and to resent the outrage on my feelings; but she merely looked plaintively. With a sigh, which Mrs. Kit, calling after me, qualified as "avoirdupois," I tried Mrs. Vicars, who was fluttering round the other end of the glittering table, arranging the nuptial tribute in symphonic harmonies of the Kensington amateur order. Mrs. Vicars is æsthetic at a street's length, and, as Millicent Dixon had once spitefully said, wears her art upon her sleeves for Jays to laugh at. She was placing her own offering, something in plush and oil colour, modestly, shrinkingly, all but out of sight.

I was saying something about the spiritual reality of which all this external show was but the outward symbol, when she cut me off.

"Oh, Mr. Butterfield," she said, "why *did* Cissie Bingham give Caroline a *green* fan?"

"Possibly, Mrs. Vicars," I replied, "for the same order of reason that causes a miller to wear a white hat."

"But a green one—how horrid! Look at her complexion!" And she bent the trifle coquettishly round her chin, with a well-studied sparkle over the top of it—a lesson in feminine Arts and Crafts.

"A fan, Mrs. Vicars," I replied, "may be used either for flirtation or concealment—before marriage. Afterwards, only for the latter. In either case the appropriateness——"

"I think you are very horrid, Mr. Butterfield," she answered, preening the openwork effervescence of her corsage and turning her shoulders to me in pique. "I believe Mrs. Bassishaw wants you."

I tried my luck with Mrs. Bassishaw, Arthur's mother. Mrs. Bassishaw is a comely widow, as young as is compatible with having a son on the eve of marriage, and still possessing what her friends call "excellent chances." She made a place for me by her side.

"You and I will be less in the way in this corner, Mr. Butterfield," she said, "and we can watch the young people. Doesn't this make you feel terribly old? I declare I feel myself ageing already."

She passed her hand over her glossy hair.

"I also feel it keenly, Mrs. Bassishaw," I replied.

“And only think, Mr. Butterfield,” she continued, “should—should you become an uncle, I shall be a grandmother! Oh, I do hope they’ll be comfortable—and happy!”

“I have not a doubt, Mrs. Bassishaw,” I answered, “that they will be exceedingly comfortable—and becomingly happy.”

“Only that?” she inquired.

“Is not that a good deal?” I replied.

“They are, I believe, made for each other; but I do not expect anything epic from either of them, nor will they, so far as I can see, mark the beginning of an æon in the annals of matrimony.”

“You are very hard on them, Mr. Butterfield—poor things!” she answered—apparently because I had not granted them the beginning of an æon. Thus does one suffer for principle! I rose to interview an automatic reporter from a fashion paper, whom Mrs. Loring handed over to me with a request to be good enough to take the thing seriously. I told him that the presents were numerous and costly, including—here followed a list; and crossed over to a knot of frolicking bridesmaids that was gabbling millinery in one corner.

These young ladies had apparently a good deal to say; and prominent among the chatter could be heard Miss Nellie Bassishaw’s voice declaring that something or other of hers was of a poorer quality of silk than some one else’s; which was always the way, she remarked, with a grown-up toss of the head, when one bought six gowns at the same shop. Miss Flo Bassishaw and another maid were talking simultaneously, the one saying that the organist was sure to play the march too soulfully for it to be of much use as walking music, and the other that old——(a respected friend of mine) could afford to give cheap salad bowls now that he had married all his daughters. And above all, and to an extent that was an enlightenment even to me, the pairing arrangements for the breakfast were discussed with a freedom and pointedness that took entire precedence of any other significance the occasion might have. In this theme again Miss Nellie revelled.

“I don’t care,” she said, “I shall ask Carrie. He’s not a bit too old; and I *have* met him before—you haven’t. I’m not going to be bored to death by Jack Somers, and have to do all the talking myself; and that’s my decision,” she said irrevocably.

“We shall have *our* hair up to-morrow, too,” returned Flo, with the spiteful familiarity of a younger sister, “and I shall hear every word you say, because I shall be on the other side.”

“I don’t know why they ask such a crowd,” another half-blown bud of sixteen joined in. “I expect Rollo Butterfield went to school with most of them—they’re old enough.”

And fat enough—and dull enough—and bald enough—the poise of her chin seemed to say. I admired her confidence.

“And what about——?” a nod of Miss Nellie’s head gave the direction to my eyes. I looked, and saw apparently unheeded by the noisy group, the pretty, timid creature I had remarked once or twice before, an imported cousin of somebody’s, condemned to wear pink because it suited the rest. She was out in the cold; but something in the abstracted quietness of her pose told me it was perhaps as much from choice as from the passing-over of her companions.

“Oh,” Miss Flo replied, “she can go somewhere near Rollo Butterfield—she’ll be less awkward near him than with anybody else. And then Jack Somers.”

Seeing myself so allotted, I thought it well to make the acquaintance beforehand of the maid for whose conversational flow I was to be responsible. I skirted the group, and sat down by her.

“I see you’re taking a short rest from your duties, Aggie,” I remarked. “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Butterfield,” she answered shyly. “I think it’s all lovely.”

“The dresses and things?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, turning grey eyes upon me. “Mr. Bassishaw and the wedding—and Caroline. The presents don’t matter much, do they, Mr. Butterfield?”

I looked around in some doubt.

“I don’t know, Aggie,” I returned. “Every one appears to think a good deal of—that sort of thing—except you—and me. I think we shall be friends, Aggie.”

“Thank you, Mr. Butterfield.” The grey eyes looked into some middle distance that I could not follow. “Caroline does look nice,” she added, making an admission that for some reason did not seem easy to her. “But, of course, she’s your sister, and brothers do not think of that. Young brothers, I mean.”

“Your brothers are young, then, Aggie?”

“Yes; and they say no one will ever want to marry *me*; but that is when I won’t be tied to a table for them to fight about—an imprisoned princess, you know. It doesn’t matter—now,” she added, half to herself, and apparently forgetful of my presence.

“And you don’t like—all this?” I inquired, designating the surrounding bustle with my hand.

“No,” she replied in the same half-musing tone. “*We* shouldn’t have wanted bridesmaids and things, you know.—Of course”—she momentarily remembered my position—“it’s all lovely; but we should just have gone away somewhere and not have had anybody but perhaps a maid. We shouldn’t have wanted anyone else, you know; and we should have lived there ever so long. That would have been nice.”

She was scarcely talking to me; but I replied:

“It is the ideal wedding, Aggie, although it is only for the few—there are relations and people. I trust you will make a success of it. I hope you will allow *me* to make you a present, though?”

She raised her head again with the same remote look. I noticed a fine gold chain round her neck, the end of which disappeared in her bosom.

“It won’t ever be quite the same,” she replied. “Perhaps some day I shall have forgotten——”

I looked at the chain and spoke quietly.

“Is that——?”

“Yes,” she replied, her hand going softly to her breast. “I cut it out of a group, but he didn’t give it to me. You don’t mind if I don’t show it to you, do you, Mr. Butterfield? You don’t know what it is to lose anybody—like that.”

“You forget I am losing a sister, Aggie,” I answered. She thought a moment, and then made a sudden resolve. She spoke softly and almost mechanically.

“I think I will tell you, Mr. Butterfield. I wouldn’t tell”—she looked round—“any one else, but—I trust you, Mr. Butterfield. I haven’t given Caroline my present yet—I haven’t made up my mind. I’ve got two, a handkerchief case, and—this. I could give her the handkerchief case—anybody can give handkerchief cases—or the other. Anybody wouldn’t give the other. I can’t keep it, Mr. Butterfield. Look.”

She glanced round, and drew the small locket from her neck and opened it. It was Bassishaw’s portrait, a poor, ragged production, cut out, as she had said, from some larger picture. I half glanced at it, understanding without looking.

“It is worth more than a handkerchief case,” she continued, speaking very low, “and I know Caroline would value it more, if I told her. If anybody did that to me I should—I should love them. Wouldn’t you, Mr. Butterfield?”

I made no reply. Poor Aggie! She was only sixteen, and would get over it; but it was real to her, and she was very brave. She went on:

“And that’s why I don’t like all these things, Mr. Butterfield. What would you do?”

Mrs. Carmichael was signalling for me across the room. I rose and took Aggie’s hand.

“My dear,” I replied, “you have a truer instinct in these things than I. Whatever you do will be right, I know; and a fat, blundering man would spoil it. We sit together at breakfast to-morrow. I’m very glad.”

And, in response to Mrs. Carmichael’s imperious summons, I left her and plunged again into the general bewilderment.

Shortly afterwards I heard Mrs. Vicars’s voice.

“Oh, look, Caroline, what a *sweet* handkerchief case Agnes there has given you!”

XV

SETTLING DAY

Caroline was married, and with a decent tear had left for a month's sweet lunacy under blue skies and on Mediterranean terraces. I had bestowed an appropriate valediction at Victoria Station to the accompanying exhalation of steam, the slamming of doors, and the waving of a green flag, and had returned to my flat.

It had not appeared quite the same to me. I had peeped into the little room that had been so long her own, and a sense of emptiness and unfamiliarity had struck me, leaving little desire to make friends with it. My own rooms were structurally unchanged; but a corded and labelled trunk, left to be called for after the bridal trip, seemed to occupy the whole place to my utter exclusion, and unsettled me greatly. I perceived that virtue had gone out from these lifeless shells of apartments; and my feline attachment to the building itself was not sufficiently strong to reconcile me to an immediate resumption of the old order of things. On the whole, I did not waste much sentiment over the matter, but spoke a word in Mrs. Loring's ear, received an invitation from some friends of hers in the country, left my chairs in canvas and my blinds in full mourning, and made haste to lawns and trim, clipped hedges till I should summon resolution to face the fresh conditions.

This gave Mrs. Loring, a certain opportunity which, as I had foreseen, she was little likely to waive, and which also suited my mood admirably.

Overhead the rooks were holding their sage, sustained conference, and I, I believe, nodding gravely and judicially, when an undefined sense of intruding mortals caused me to blink through my lashes. Mrs. Loring and Millicent were slowly crossing the lawn in my direction, their white gowns dipping from orange to grey and grey to orange as they traversed the belts of light. Mrs. Loring was talking; this, be it said, was Mrs. Loring's supreme opportunity.

I had no wish to listen; it was forced on my passive ears.

"I suppose," she was saying, "now that Caroline's gone, he must. I know that Cicely Vicars told me you can do what you like with a man who feels a little bit sorry for himself, Millicent. *She did.*"

This seemed somehow to concern me. I had doubtless felt somewhat low, but had no idea I had showed it so plainly as that. Anyway, Cicely Vicars doubtless knew. Millicent replied:

"I don't think it's fair, Mollie, to talk like that. Rollo Butterfield isn't a fool; and I daresay Charlie Vicars isn't such a fool as he was—then."

Thank you, dear lady.

"He isn't a fool," Mrs. Loring replied; "but I do call it criminal—simply criminal—that a man who is getting older and—fatter—every week should keep putting off and putting off for no reason at all except that he's ashamed to give in after so long. It's rank breach of promise. *I* know Rollo Butterfield."

These were hard words to hear of one's self. Apparently Mrs. Loring's one desire was that that presence of mine—fat, hang her impudence!—should hold decently together through a marriage service, and run to seedy corpulence immediately afterwards for all she cared. But Millicent vindicated me nobly.

"If Rollo Butterfield, Mollie, was prepared to marry me to keep me in countenance with all the people we know, I'd never let him propose to me—which he hasn't done, by the way. But you don't understand him a little bit. He's not much fatter, my dear, saving your presence, than Loring; and, any way, he'll be a young man when Loring's—you understand me. And you can't say very much more to me on the subject, Mollie."

"You'll have to propose to him yourself, then, Millie," said Mrs. Loring, with a worldly shrug.

"I should not be afraid to do that," Millicent retorted defiantly.

"I should like to be there when it happened." Mrs. Loring's tone expressed the most offhand incredulity in the affair being ever definitely settled. There was a silence as they approached and discovered my presence.

Now, I had never been in the least resentful of Mrs. Loring Chatterton's self-arrogated responsibility for my welfare and Millicent's—it had always been too open and frank to be regarded as interference. But in that moment she had given me a hint that I felt half inclined to act upon. Suppose she really were there when it happened?

I rose to meet them.

"Welcome, dear ladies," I said. "You almost caught me napping. I believe I have been dreaming, and seemed to hear voices."

I looked at Millicent, and thought she understood; but it did not occur to Mrs. Loring that I might have overheard.

"You dream a good deal nowadays, Mr. Butterfield, don't you?" she said, somewhat acidulously.

"I fear, Mrs. Loring," I replied, "that I have lately done it to an extent that is almost criminal."

She was still unenlightened, but I saw that Millicent guessed. I made places for them on either side of me, but Mrs. Loring hesitated, standing. No chance is too trivial for a matchmaker.

"Sit down, Mrs. Loring," I said, making myself comfortable just out of the sun.

She sat down. I continued:

"I have been watching the sunset here all alone. It is a lovely evening. You and Loring have doubtless been sitting hand in hand, waiting for the twilight? No? The surroundings seem to call for

that kind of thing somehow, don't you think?"

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Mr. Butterfield. I have hopes of you even yet. The evening certainly inspires such—such things—providing they are strictly *en règle*."

"Most decidedly," I assented; "that must always be understood. I admit that it is a delicate matter—that there are times when even the most permissible caress becomes unseasonable, just as at others an unseasonable one is almost permissible. But as a general rule such proceedings must be, as you say, strictly *en règle*."

"I find you in a most reasonable mood this evening, Mr. Butterfield," she approved, with a glance at Millicent. "Dreaming evidently does you good. Pray continue."

I acknowledged her encouragement, and went on.

"It must be taken for granted, first of all, that the endearment is a *bonâ fide* guarantee, in which case publicity is not only unnecessary, but impertinent. A third person, for instance, could not possibly take the slightest interest in it."

"It would be highly unbecoming," she assented.

"Quite so," I replied half absently; "and that is where the kindly interest of, say, the married chaperone fails. In the moment that her presence becomes most necessary, it becomes superfluous. Is not that so?"

"If you mean, Mr. Butterfield, that I——" she said, making a movement as if to rise.

"My dear Mrs. Loring," I replied, "we are discussing a perfectly abstract question; you appear to be able to deal only with a concrete case."

"Then," she retorted, "the sunset has done you less good than I thought. An abstract case on an evening like this!"

And her eyes appeared to fill with pity for Millicent. That lady looked up, but said nothing.

"It is on such evenings, Mrs. Loring," I returned, "that nothing but the presence of the chaperone divides the abstract from the concrete."

"Then you *do* mean——" she said almost impetuously.

"Does it occur to you, Mrs. Loring," I replied, "that you are speaking with remarkable freedom?"

Mrs. Loring was in a difficult position. To stay was to nullify the opportunity, and to postpone indefinitely (so she thought) the consummation of her disinterested endeavours. To leave, on the other hand, was a hint so pointed that even she felt it might give rise to an embarrassment that would defeat its own ends. I pointed this out to her—of course, in an entirely abstract way; and Millicent, I was pleased to see, regarded the comedy with an amused coolness that had in it very little sympathy for Mrs. Loring Chatterton and her methods. She looked up laughing.

"It would be rather a difficult position for any chaperone to be placed in," she said mischievously. "Wouldn't it, Mollie?"

Mollie was rather at a loss.

"A chaperone's is a difficult position altogether, Millie," she said, "and it means considerable self-sacrifice on the part of the one who undertakes it."

"It is a thankless office," I replied; "but in the case of impetuous youth I suppose it is necessary. Hot blood, Mrs. Loring, must be watched."

She was getting puzzled, and evidently losing her hold on the situation. "After all," she answered doubtfully, "when one has confidence in people perhaps it doesn't matter so much."

"It is dangerous," I warned her. "When young recklessness takes the bit between its teeth and plunges headlong into a course of matrimony"—Millicent smiled at the description as applied to ourselves—"some calmer ruling is almost essential. Personally, I think that at all proposals an appointed authority should conduct the ceremonies. One cannot manage such affairs alone."

She didn't quite catch the suggestion. "It is perfectly unnecessary," she replied.

"Indeed?" I asked. "And suppose the affair hung fire, and the proposal never came at all? Imagine the sorrow of the Goddess outside the Machine! I almost think she has a right to insist on personal supervision."

"I think you are talking a great deal of nonsense," she replied.

"Then, Mrs. Loring, you fail to follow me. Take a case, say, in which the woman proposes—I suppose you will admit the possibility—the man might be a fool—or dilatory—or getting fat——"

Mrs. Loring Chatterton turned suddenly on me, looked me up, down, widthwise, and through, and found no speech. I returned her look, and Millicent broke into unrestrained laughter. The light that came to the Goddess outside the Machine was too much for her coherence.

"Rollo Butterfield—and you, too, Millicent Dixon!—Millicent—Mr. Butterfield, how dare you, sir? You listened? I didn't say it!"

"You didn't say—what, Mrs. Loring?" I asked.

"Oh, don't take the trouble to feign innocence! I always thought, Mr. Butterfield—! I never—stop laughing, Millicent, this is not a farce—I didn't think, Mr. Butterfield, that you would *use*, at least, anything you heard in so discreditable a manner!"

"Mrs. Loring," I answered, "I did not listen. I was dreaming—dreaming does me good—and I heard the rooks calling, and several other things, quite against my will. Besides," I added, "if you will consider a moment, don't you think I was too deeply concerned in your—friendly aspersions—not to have some kind of right in them? I wish to put the thing euphoniously, you understand, Mrs. Loring, but—haven't you interested yourself too long in what concerns me first of all, to take up any position of outraged propriety now?"

I awaited her reply, my eyes on her face. I should have been sorry to fall out with Mrs. Loring; I had had too much amusement out of her to take her too seriously, and I recognized that meddling was too harsh a word for her conduct. For a full minute she sat looking straight in front of her, and then smiled. All was well.

"I'm sorry for you, Millicent," she said. "For the first time I have doubts as to your happiness with this—creature. I may yet have to repent that ever I gathered you both under my wing. Rollo Butterfield, you think I'm laughing, but I'm not. I haven't forgiven you."

"You reserve your forgiveness, Mrs. Loring, till no further evasion is possible. You are still, permit me to remind you, premature."

I looked at Millicent, whose face expressed the greatest relish for the whole scene. Millicent understood, and cared as little for Mrs. Loring's presence as I did myself. A new recklessness took possession of me; so long as she knew, I didn't give a schoolgirl's kiss what happened. Mrs. Loring was making uneasy motions, and had attempted several false starts, with the object of leaving us alone. I took Millicent's hand, imprisoned it in both my own, and looked squarely at Mrs. Loring. She sat spellbound, fascinated, a wedding guest who could not choose but hear.

"Millicent——" I said, and paused.

"Rollo——" she replied.

Mrs. Loring made another attempt to break away.

"Sit in the middle, Mrs. Loring," I said, and we made the rearrangement. I turned again to Millicent.

"Mrs. Loring says you are to propose to me, Millicent."

"Mrs. Loring says you would be ashamed to give in after so long, Rollo."

"You are afraid, Millicent, that I shall say it's sudden?"

"I am not afraid of anything that you will say. Or do," she added, as I took her hands across Mrs. Loring.

"Then," I replied, "I have the honour to ask you, Miss Dixon——"

This was too much for Mrs. Loring. She burst through our hands, and stood, trembling, staring, lost, hysterical. Then fled.

When the moon, a timid *débutante* in a faint sky, rose behind the clipped boxhedge, we were still in the arbour, Millicent and I. One of her hands shone with an unaccustomed jewel—it had been my mother's ring—and her other was in my personal and private keeping.

"I believe, Rollo," she said, "that you are still little more than a boy."

"Millicent," I replied, "I realise less now than ever the prospect of being grown up. I am merely grown out—though scarcely more so than Loring," I added.

She laughed at the recollection.

"And you didn't mind proposing to me?" I said.

"I *shouldn't* have minded proposing to you, Rollo, had you not——"

"Did I propose to you, then, Millicent?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she replied. "Perhaps Mollie had her wish after all."

Anyway, it didn't make much difference.

THE END.

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3. In page 124, a paragraph break was removed to be consistent with the style of the book.

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