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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PANTOMIME
SEE-SAW

TWOS AND THREES

BY
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PART I

CHAPTER I
"—TO BONDAGE OF GREAT DEEDS"

"That's a dangerous fellow, Stuart," remarked Baldwin Carr, who had unperceived entered the library, and, over his nephew's shoulder, read the title: "Thus Spake Zarathustra."

Stuart Heron laid down the ponderous volume of Nietzsche, and smiled up lazily at his juvenile uncle-by-marriage: "Oh, we're a depraved family! Not half an hour ago I caught Babs behind the drawing-room screen, reading Ella Wheeler Wilcox."

Baldwin looked startled. "Isn't that all right? I myself gave it to the child; the complete edition, bound in white vellum."

"We'll send old Nietzsche to be bound in white vellum, and rob him of his sting."

"And this man is just as bad"; Baldwin ignored his nephew's flippancy, and discontentedly flicked over the pages of Bernard Shaw's "Getting Married," which he had picked up from the floor beside the arm-chair. "They're both mad, stark staring mad, master and disciple."

"'Enter Nietzsche mad in white satin, Bernard Shaw mad in white linen!'" misquoted Stuart; "yes, we must decidedly send them to the binder's." [2]

Baldwin Carr had come that evening to Carlton House Terrace, to discuss a business problem with Stuart, who for three years had been a partner in the firm of Heron, Heron & Carr, Diamond Merchants. But, worried by the young man's pernicious choice of literature, he determined to let diamonds stand over for the moment, and, instead, make an attempt to "talk Stuart out of Nietzsche." In view of which intention, it was a pity that Babs had torn from her confession album the page on which Stuart had made shameful reply to the query: "Your Favourite Occupation?" with: "Pulling the leg of my youngest uncle." A glimpse at this might have disillusioned Baldwin of his belief that, near to Stuart in years, he was also near in understanding.

"You see, my boy," he began now, "these clever chaps, these would-be philosophers, they put ideas into your head."

"Yes," replied Stuart gently, "I think that is what they're after, the rogues!"

"Well, but philosophy is all very well if you don't take it seriously; just mug it up for Greats at Oxford, and so forth. But you seem inclined—you mustn't be offended, Stuart; we're talking as man to man, you know,—you seem inclined to apply it to everyday existence."

"Quite." Stuart offered the other a cigarette, and lit one himself; "I can't conceive of a greater insult to philosophy than to accept its logic, and refuse its practical utility."

"But, my dear lad, you surely wouldn't dream of setting up Nietzsche, of all people, as a standard for your actions. Why, if a nation did that, we'd have the world in pieces."

"I differ slightly from Nietzsche," quoth Stuart Heron; "he advocates the ruthlessness of the Overman towards the mob; I agree with the Overman theory, but I consider that his supremest ruthlessness ought to be directed towards himself. Nietzsche misses the value of asceticism." [3]

Baldwin said after a pause: "You'll get yourself, or other people, into a fine mess before you've done with all this. Why, wasn't it something of the kind that you were spouting when it was a question of your career?"

Stuart laughed:

"Yes. Something of the kind...."

His uncle paced the room uneasily; he could not forget that he had grave responsibilities of guardianship to discharge towards this young son of Graham Heron. Graham Heron, whose death had occurred when Stuart was a boy of fifteen, had founded the great diamond business, on which had been built up the family's immense fortune; had taken into partnership his elder and younger brothers, Derwent and Arthur, not so brilliant as himself; later, had admitted Baldwin Carr to the firm. Graham owned a personality which established him in general regard as head of the family, and his only son succeeded naturally to the same central position; more especially as Derwent's progeny were all girls, and Arthur elected to remain a bachelor. And when school and college reported one brilliant success after another for Graham's son, then Graham's brothers and Graham's widow foresaw a triumphant future in whatsoever public career the lad chose to follow up. Consideration of money there need never be; a steady flow of good luck continued to attend the firm of Heron and Carr; it seemed that the trio of diamond merchants could do no wrong. Stuart, struck by the Arabian-Nights'-like quality of their glittering trade, had nicknamed them: the Khalif, the Vizier, and the One-eyed Calendar; the last-named, unblessed by a sense of humour, was never clear why he should thus be linked to such eccentricities as almanacks and defective optics; but Stuart, even in his insolent schoolboy days, went idolized and uncensured. [4]

When he finally came down from Oxford, three years previously, it was to find his future stretching before his feet, a veritable slope of roses. He had been reading for the Bar, and Mrs. Heron already visioned him as the Lord Chief Justice.

“But I’m going to chuck the law,” said Stuart.

His Uncle Derwent reminded him that strings had already been pulled, enabling him to devil for Sir Blair Tomlinson, foremost barrister of the day; and that a more promising start could be assured to no man.

“Quite so,” Stuart agreed. And: “I’m going to chuck the law.”

The next few weeks proved but repetitions of this incident, under various guises. Stuart had but to mention a profession—army, navy, political, diplomatic; and Uncle Derwent or Uncle Arthur or Uncle Baldwin was able speedily to procure such influence in that particular quarter, as to ensure their nephew a clear path to the very summit of ambition. And Uncle Derwent or Uncle Arthur or Uncle Baldwin had but to mention such influence procured, and Stuart speedily abandoned all idea of that particular career. The climax was reached when, by way of a test, the young man averred longings for stage laurels; and Uncle Baldwin, two evenings later, strolled into the billiard-room in Carlton House Terrace, with the triumphant tidings that London’s leading actor-manager, Sir Michael Forrest—“I used to know him very well”—had avowed himself delighted to give Mr. Stuart Heron a part in the next big autumn production, and the under-study of juvenile lead.

“I told him what they said about your Greek performance in the O.U.D.S.,” finished Baldwin Carr.

“Exactly.” Stuart paused in the act of pocketing off the red. “And if I wanted to be a sandwich-man, you, or one of you, would get me an introduction to the very person who owned the identical pitch I had set my heart on perambulating.” Changing his tactics, he pocketed the red, viciously. [5]

“Well, but——” Uncle Baldwin liked to be literal, “what’s that got to do with it? You don’t want to be a sandwich-man, do you?” apprehensively.

“As much as anything else. Why not? It’s fatal to specialize.”

Derwent Heron laid his cue in the rack. “What’s amiss, my boy? Let us probe to the root of the matter, since we happen to be assembled in full force. Babs, my dear,” to his flapper daughter, marking for the players, “run away to your Aunt Elizabeth.”

Reluctantly Barbara obeyed, flinging Stuart a look of worship as she passed: “Lord, I am here an thou wantest me!” Youngest of a quartette, her sisters had carefully bred her in the Heron traditions.

He caught at her long russet plait: “Between ourselves, Babs,” in a whisper; “how much unearned increment have you been placing to my account?”

She flushed crimson: “Oh, Stuart, it isn’t cheating, is it? when it’s not for oneself.”

“I’ll consider the plea. How much?”

“Only ... seven.”

He laughed and released her. Then, strolling to the board, slid back his disc the requisite number. “Even in this,” he muttered.

“Out with it, Stuart,” from Uncle Arthur, erect on the hearthrug.

Arthur Heron, junior to the late Graham Heron, remained something of an enigma to the world at large, inasmuch as he very rarely spoke, but preferred to stand with his back to fireplaces; his head a little on one side, after the fashion of a benign canary; a huge cigar cocked from the left-hand corner of his mouth. When he occasionally did give vent to speech, his voice crackled thinly, like charred paper raked from the grate, so that strangers unfairly suspected him of laughing at them. In appearance he resembled a small-sized orange-pip that had lain too long in the sun, and burnt red instead of yellow. [6]

Derwent Heron, eldest of three brothers, was best summed up by the adjective “elaborate.” Perhaps to that, one might add “punctilious.” His speech was elaborate, and so was his neck-gear; and he was punctilious in his appointments, and in his manners, and the discharge of obligations. His tastes were certainly elaborate, particularly in entrées. Born punctiliously, he would probably die elaborately. He was a fine-looking old gentleman, upright, white-haired, kind-eyed; distinctive by the small pointed imperial he elected to wear.

Remained Uncle Baldwin, who actually and in point of birth was not a Heron at all, and therefore far more Heron than the Herons ever aspired to be. He had, indeed, been continually obliged to remind them of their Herondom and all it entailed, since nine years before, he had entered the family by his marriage with Eunice, only sister of Derwent, Graham and Arthur, and very much their junior.

Eunice had died eleven months after; thus forming so slight a link between her husband and the Herons, that the latter family were left vaguely wondering how they had come to be nourishing in their bosom this well-bred personage with instincts as sleek and groomed as his own head; in short, how he had happened!

Baldwin dwelt at Sonning; hibernated from September to May; and during the summer months found his vocation in following up river regattas in the umpire’s boat; whence, with the aid of field-glasses, he adjudicated in a fashion sufficiently impartial to fill Pallas herself with envy. He felt occasional qualms of uneasiness respecting his young nephew’s ability to keep intact the [7]

prestige of the name. Deep down in the heart of Baldwin may have lain buried a conviction that safer on his head than on Stuart's would have been poised the Heron crown; deeper still, perhaps, the unacknowledged and pardonable longing once and for all to kick the cub and put him in his proper place. But all of this, Baldwin was well aware, must be loyally suppressed.

"It seems to me, Stuart," he remarked, wounded at the reception of his intercession with Sir Michael Forrest, "that you have some ambition of which you haven't told us. If you were to own up, we would naturally give you all the assistance in our power."

"I know you would," Stuart interrupted, frowning heavily in the endeavour to express his meaning. "And that's just it. You've got too much assistance in your power. I want to achieve—and you bring me the achievement upon a golden salver. Whatever I mention, it's the same thing; influence, money, friends—and I'm lifted over all the rough places and deposited on the very summit of desire. What's left to me after that? Khalif, what's left?"

Derwent Heron made no reply to this direct appeal. He was looking over the double-sliding doors, at an arresting portrait of his brother Graham, to whom he owed everything; and who, strangely enough, had been wont to hold forth in just such an incomprehensible fashion. Was it not his, Derwent's, business to do all he could for the advancement and prosperity of Graham's son? unheeding any freaks and phases which the lad might have brought along from Oxford. He wished Arthur would speak. But then, Arthur never spoke. That came from being a bachelor, Derwent reflected unreasonably.

"Well," suggested Baldwin, filling up the pause, "if you're really keen on adventure, hardship, the philosophic-tramp business which is now the fashionable cult, there's no harm that I can see if you roughed it for a year or two." [8]

—"Dressed in a suit of rags from Clarkson's, along Broad Highways carefully laid with red carpet?" Stuart grinned. For a moment the leprechaun spirit bade him give up the attempt to lay bare the twists and turns of his mental asceticism; and instead, draw exquisite enjoyment from Baldwin's conception of a Walt Whitman-esque existence. Then the metaphysician rejected this outlet as cheap and easy; argued that there must be means whereby three grown men of moderate intellect could be convinced of anything, if sufficient trouble be taken. The metaphysician was always inclined to be very severe with the leprechaun; but in this case the leprechaun had the last word, whispering that it would be a glorious stunt if Khalif, Vizier and One-eyed Calendar, could indeed be forced to understanding by dint of sheer brilliant reasoning. And since Stuart was above all things a Stuntorian, he forthwith tackled the task.

"Read Kipling, any of you?"

They had all read Kipling. That is to say, Uncle Arthur had chuckled in secret over "Stalky and Co."; Uncle Derwent had seen and appreciated Forbes Robertson in the "Light that Failed," and Uncle Baldwin remembered, at the time of the Boer war, giving a guinea to a pretty girl who had declaimed the "Absent-minded Beggar."

"D'you know 'Diego Valdez'? It's in the 'Five Nations.'"

"No," from Derwent and Arthur. Baldwin, idly chalking cues for want of better employment, said that he might recognize it if he heard it.

Without preamble or apology, Stuart abruptly flung at them the bitter complaint of the Spanish Admiral:

[9]

> "The God of fair beginnings
> Hath prospered here my hand ..."

—Fair beginnings, indeed, for the son of the house of Heron. The oak-panelled walls, the expensive full-sized billiard-table, the scent of good cigars, the attentive faces of his three listeners, all seemed to shout this fact aloud.

> "To me my king's much honour,
> To me my people's love——"

The folding-doors slid open, admitting Mrs. Heron and Babs. Baldwin raised a quick hand of warning:

"Hush. Don't make a noise. Stuart's reciting."

"Damn it, Baldwin!" roared his nephew; "do you take this for a board school prize-giving?"

Softly Mrs. Heron withdrew, gliding the doors behind her, with infinite precautions not to jar them in the contact.

Stuart went on; bent slightly forward from his careless seat on the edge of the billiard-table; hands clasped between his knees; the green-shaded quadrangle of strong lights just above, biting out his features with uncompromising clarity. His tones were low and tight with the infinity of pain that underlay the next verses: Valdez recalling his old adventure days, when unknown, unfettered, he sailed in happy comradeship on the South Seas:

> "I dreamt to wait my pleasure
> Unchanged my Spring would bide;
> Wherefore, to wait my pleasure,
> I put my Spring aside.

Till first in face of fortune,
And last in mazed disdain,
I made Diego Valdez
High Admiral of Spain.”

And a faint mockery twitched the young man’s lips, as if drawing some secret analogy with the curse of good fortune following the Spaniard’s every movement.

“Then walked no wind ’neath Heaven
Nor surge that did not aid——”

Baldwin flicked a fine powder of chalk from his coat-sleeve, and fixed Stuart with the super-concentrated glare of one whose attention has wandered. It was difficult to tell what was the effect of the poem on the other two men, standing with faces in deepest shadow, well above the zone of illumination. [10]

“They wrought a deeper treason,
Led seas that served my needs;
They sold Diego Valdez
To bondage of great deeds.”

By a curious power he possessed of projection into the future, Stuart was able to glimpse himself, victim of a self-made great career, striving passionately to escape its easeful heaviness; regain the careless freedom, the stimulating longings of non-achievement. And he saw, too, with unerring clarity, how, step by step, he, even he, another Diego Valdez, might be spurred by inspiring eloquence, noble example, to such inevitable bondage.

“His will can loose ten thousand,
To seek their loves again—
But not Diego Valdez
High Admiral of Spain!”

Baldwin thought, relieved, that the ensuing pause marked the signal for opinions to be delivered:

“I must say, I don’t see that the fellow, Diego What’s-his-name, had much to grumble at.”

Stuart looked towards Derwent, who said, rather elaborately:

“It seems to me, my dear boy, that I detect an inconsistency, if I may be permitted to make the remark. With one breath you assure us that you desire to fight your battles without assistance to detract from the joy of victory; while in the verses you so—er—ah, yes, so effectively repeated, I take it that you were voicing a distaste for the responsibilities of high office consequent on victory?”

“It does sound as if there were a flaw,” Stuart admitted, overjoyed at having evoked a point sufficiently strong to put him on the defensive: “You might reconcile it this way, Khalif: I want to do; I don’t want to become.” [11]

Derwent enquired: “Then what are your plans? It strikes me as somewhat preposterous that you should be let work out your destiny from the very bottom of the ladder, like so many millions who have no alternative.”

“It wouldn’t do, either.” Stuart sprang from the table; and hands plunged deep in his pockets, head bent, paced moodily the length of the room. “Without the actual necessity, that would simply label me as a freak: the eccentric young millionaire who elects to work with the masses. However far I wrenched myself from your powerful wealth and influence, the mere fact of it would still prevent my struggles from being genuine. They’d be theatrical, neither more nor less. I’m damnably placed, Khalif,—and I want to be a Commissioner of Oaths!”

This last for Baldwin’s benefit, remarking with concern that his youngest uncle’s immaculately trousered leg had remained for a full twenty minutes unpulled.

“A—what?” Baldwin responded instantly. “Really, Stuart!”

“I’ve never been told the exact duties of a Commissioner of Oaths, but the title is alluring in its possibilities, in the red robust rakish twang of it. Think of being forever surrounded by an atmosphere of oaths; thundering oaths, villainous oaths, subtle sanguinary oaths,” Stuart raised eyes of sky-exalted innocence to meet Baldwin’s uneasy glare. “Hellish oaths,” he finished, gently as a child.

“Really, Stuart——” Mr. Carr had much to do to remember his allegiance. And Derwent Heron, noting signs of disturbance, hastily broke in with the subject of his meditations, before it was as ripe as he could have wished it.

“If you will permit me,” without which preamble he rarely opened speech, “I have a suggestion to offer; one which I never before submitted to you, my boy, as I assumed you were set on gaining laurels in some profession. Your many triumphs at Oxford accounting for this mistake on my part. Since it is not to be, how do you view the idea of a partnership in the business?” Impressive pause. And then the old man resumed in faintly ironic voice: “It would give you plenty to do, nothing to become,—unless it be Lord Mayor of London. And that evil can be circumvented with a little discretion and a sufficient stinginess on charity lists.” [12]

A flicker of surprised amusement in Stuart’s eyes. “A diamond merchant,” he murmured, ... “why

not? Khalif, Vizier and One-eyed Calendar—and now behold Camaralzaman! A bit fantastic, that's all there is against it."

Derwent heard. "If I may venture to prognosticate, you won't find much that is fantastic about the offices in Holborn. However, you needn't decide all at once; think the matter over. I need hardly say," with a glance that gathered in his partners, "that your father's son will be more than welcome; though I, for one, am disappointed, yes, certainly disappointed, that you have renounced burdens of a more glorious nature."

"After all," quoth Baldwin, "if we all shirked responsibility in that fashion, where would the world be?"

To which Arthur Heron, speaking for the first time: "To every Admiral his Spain. Baldwin's thinking of the regatta season."

"Uncle Arthur," Stuart cried exuberantly, "your scalp at least is mine, to nail at my belt!" with which expression of gratitude to the sole convert of his evening's eloquence, he crashed asunder the doors, and made an effective exit.

[13]

Baldwin was thinking of this scene, in the silence following his vain effort to turn Stuart from a discipleship of Nietzsche. From recognition of the fact that, in spite of philosophy, his nephew had not, after all, made such a bad diamond merchant, he suddenly remembered the object of his visit that evening:

"Look here, Stuart, what do you think of this Antoine Gobert business?"

"I think Antoine Gobert is a clever fraud."

"Sir Fergus Macpherson seems inclined to believe there may be something in it."

"What—that this fellow can actually manufacture diamonds indistinguishable from the real stone?"

"He thinks there may be something in it."

"A Scotchman has no right to believe in miracles," said Stuart carelessly; but a hard line had crept between his eyes; he had been buying stock heavily of late; and if this upstart foreigner should prove after all to be genuine in his avowals—

"Derwent spoke to Grey, and to Rupert Rosenstein. There seems to be an idea of paying Gobert a lump sum to keep him quiet, and then finance his experiments."

"Experiments! I tell you, Baldwin, the man's a swindler."

"Swindler or not, there'll be a big drop in the market if rumours get about."

"We can hold on."

Baldwin Carr looked doubtful, as he rose to go:

"I'm dining with Derwent, and I'll tell him what you say, but...."

Stuart accompanied him downstairs. The dinner-gong was drowning the house in sound, and the postman had just thundered at the door. The butler stepped forward with a letter on a salver. When Baldwin had gone, Stuart slit the envelope, and drew forth a dance invitation:

"'Madame Marcel des Essarts'—Mother, who's Madame Marcel des Essarts?" as Mrs. Heron, on [14]
the arm of her brother-in-law, Arthur Heron, came out of the drawing-room.

"Oh, don't you remember, Stuart? She used to visit me quite often when you were a schoolboy; a white-haired aristocratic old lady. And once or twice she brought her little granddaughter; such a pretty child, and so beautifully dressed, like a French doll, black hair and red lips and a waxen face——"

"And she wasn't allowed to play with the tortoise for fear it should get ferocious and spring at her! Yes, I remember. She's evidently sufficiently grown-up for the ball-room now."

"Merle des Essarts must be about twenty," remarked Mrs. Heron, helping herself to olives; "she has been abroad a great deal, I believe. If she is half as lovely as she promised to be, she ought to make a brilliant match."

Stuart smiled.

"What do you think of our wizard in diamonds, Arthur?"

[15]

CHAPTER II
A CHOICE OF HEROES

The same evening, two girls were huddled in a doorway of His Majesty's Theatre. They had drifted with the crowd down the stone steps leading from the Upper Circle, their brains struggling to return to reality from the world-that-is-not. Then a voice pierced bewilderment with the exclamation: "Why, it's raining!" and they emerged on to an unfamiliar back street, pavements dark mirrors of glistening wet, something sinister about the hovering gnome-like figures who sprang alive at their elbows, offering in hoarse voices to fetch a vehicle. And then umbrellas began to slide up before their owners had even quitted the shelter of the outjutting porch; umbrellas with nasty vindictive spikes. Other people rolled away in landaulettes and taxi-cabs. It was essentially one of those occasions which cry out for the luxury of male protection; for the authoritative voice to say: "stay where you are for the moment, while I look for the car." Then the beckoning summons, the dash to the kerbstone, an address given, a door slammed, the swift easy glide up the street: "Now we're all right," remarks the protective male, as he adjusts rug and window; "beastly night...."

Which is why Peter remarked suddenly, as they waited for one of the shadow-shapes to be faithful to the trust reposed in him: "We shall have to admit a man, Merle, because of the taxis. It's all right to be a shivering outcast when you get home and think about it. It's the present part [16] of the business I object to. What on earth possessed your grandmother to want the use of her own carriage to-night?"

"It's the birthday of an Ambassador," Merle explained apologetically; "and she so hates going in four-wheelers."

The crowd was thinning. Presently they would be the only two remaining in the doorway.

"It will be awful to be quite the last of all," the elder girl went on apprehensively. "They won't let us sleep in the theatre, I'm sure; not after the opera-glasses have been put away. And the backs of theatres aren't in London at all; they're in a horrible phantom neighbourhood of their own."

—"'Ere y'are, lidies!" Their wheeled deliverance was at hand.

Peter was spending the night with Merle. She always appreciated the moment, when, softly closing behind them the door of the house in Lancaster Gate, she attended to the bolts and locks, while Merle pierced the rich blackness with the rays of a small electric lantern, which was to guide them burglariously up the thickly carpeted stairs. It was good, remembering their shivering moments in No-Man's-Land, now to sprawl in luxury across the brocaded bed-cover, and watch Merle submit to the ministrations of the elderly French bonne, who maided Mademoiselle, and also had a great deal to say as to what was *comme il faut* for the latter's general deportment.

"Bonsoir, Nicole. Et merci bien."

"'Soir, Mesdemoiselles. And do not stay too long chattering; it is not good for the complexion." Nicole retired.

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Peter; "that I should live to own a friend who owns a maid. A maid *and* a dressing-gown. Can't you do something about it? You know, it's quite easy to pull off your [17] own stockings, once you've learnt how."

"Have you brought a comb this time?" Merle enquired with dangerous politeness.

"No, I haven't. 'Cos why? 'Cos mine has only seven teeth left in its head, and I daren't expose its nakedness to the eye of Nicole, since she *will* lay out the contents of my suit-case on the bed, as they do for the Lady Alice in novelette society house-parties."

She brushed fiercely at her tangle of curling fair hair, that was not long enough for the need of hairpins, nor short enough to lie smooth to her head.

"About the comb," she continued; "I always say: 'don't tell me they've forgotten to put it in again! That comes of letting Amy pack for me'—or Bertha or Marion or Pussy, or any other imaginary small sister I haven't got. It quite deceives Nicole; she sympathises, lends me your second-best, and I daresay wonders at the multiplicity of my mother's offspring."

Merle laughed, and turning out the electric lights cunningly fitted into the three-tiered gilt candelabra, switched on instead the tiny red lamp which stood beside her Second Empire bedstead.

"*Voilà!* The appropriate lighting for the traditional girlish-chatter-while-they-brush-their-hair. Are you serious in proposing to admit a man to our duet?"

"Quite, if we can find one to suit. I want to try a trio; it might be interesting."

"It might be dangerous," Merle supplemented. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands clasped about her knees, the tapestried canopy casting a deep shadow on her delicately-cut features, flawless as a profile on a cameo, colourless as ivory. Something of the French château yet lurked in her quaintly courteous manners; something of the French convent in the soft voice, in the heavy eyelids swift to drop as an overweary flower. The des Essarts were of pure Gallic stock, though their devotion to the Royalist cause had half a century before caused them to seek a [18] permanent dwelling in England. But Peter declared that Merle still carried about with her a permanent aura of white lilies in a cloister garden; that she should by rights always be clad in an Empire satin frock, high under the arms; and that if she followed her natural instincts, she would never enter or quit a room without a deep reverence.

She was certainly “of a loveliness,” as Nicole was wont to declare, morning and evening, like a Benediction.

“It might be dangerous,” Merle repeated thoughtfully.

“You mean, if one of us fell in love with him?”

“Or both.”

“‘The Man Who Came Between Them,’ or ‘The Eternal Triangle,’ 419th time of representation!” Peter flung round to face her companion, hands dramatically clutching at the toilet-table behind her.

“So, after all we’ve been to each other,” she declaimed, a long pause between each spitten word, “to let a man rupture our friendship!”

Merle took her cue instantly. She was accustomed to playing her part in whatever impromptu scene their conversation might evoke.

“We were fools,” bitter mockery curling her pretty lips; “if we hadn’t known beforehand—but we knew—we courted the danger. And it has worked itself out in the old old way.”

Peter crossed to the window, her back to the room, one hand holding back the velvet hangings, as she brooded out into the black dripping night.

“A man and two girls. What else could we expect? We’re only human beings, tho’ we did occasionally rise to immortality on the wings of swank.”

With an effort Merle retained her gravity: “Can’t we throw him out even now?” she pleaded.

But without turning, the other shook her head. “There would be a difference. Something [19]
smashed. It never looks the same after mending. And besides ... we’d miss the excitement.... Ner-no, Merle! once one admits the question of sex——”

“It’s ... rather a pity, though. Do you remember——” Merle broke off. In her voice lingered wistful regrets for the one-time careless happiness they themselves had set out to destroy. “I can’t make out,” she questioned, groping hopelessly, “when it all started, where, why. How we could have allowed it to go so far. If we hadn’t both clung to the pretence that nothing was wrong, we might have stopped it.”

And the harsh reply, so unlike Peter’s usual buoyant tones:

“Stopped his love of you, or my love for him,—which?”

Merle permitted herself an aside: “Oh, it’s to be that way, is it?”

“I think so,” and Peter also slipped for a moment out of the circle of limelight. “You, being the Beautiful One, are sure to come in an easy first. And I’d rather play the Unwanted Woman; it affords more scope for my histrionic abilities,” in proof of which, she continued her rôle in such a natural manner that Merle was not sure or not if the tragedy had been indeed resumed.

“I’m going. There’s no sense in dragging this on indefinitely. I shall want to come back and talk about it when I get to the foot of the stairs. It’ll be funny ...” a half-laugh here that might have been a sob, “funny to think of never coming back. We’ve rehearsed this sort of good-bye so often in jest—haven’t we?”

At which Merle flung herself back among the pillows, both hands pressed tightly to her forehead.

“Pax, Peter! pax! I give it up. You’ve twisted up a rehearsal inside a rehearsal, and I don’t know any more if I’m real. Peter, I give it up.”

Peter laughed; and returning from her bowed passage to the door, leapt on to the foot of the bed, [20]
drawing up both her legs beneath her, Turkish fashion.

“Now we can’t really quarrel, man or no man. This scene will act as a lightning-conductor, catch it on its way and render it harmless. Besides, anyhow we could never quarrel, because of your grandmother, not to mention my aunt; you know we would hear nothing but: ‘You never ask that charming Peter Kyndersley to tea, *chérie*, and you were once so fond of her’; and ‘There was a time when Merle des Essarts couldn’t be here enough’ (sniff), ‘I suppose you’ve had a tiff with her!’ A simply unbearable situation; in sheer self-defence we should have to combine forces again.”

Peter looked about her for a cigarette; then, remembering where she was, abandoned the search, and gave her whole attention to the subject in hand:

“To return to the man——”

“Is he to bring any qualifications besides a magnetic attraction for taxis?”

“Waiters,” promptly. “Knowledge of the exact shade of tone in which to address a waiter; neither jocose, nor frigid, nor yet deprecating.”

“Then suppose you station yourself near the buffet at our dance; and listen carefully to the demands for claret-cup.”

“Your dance!” snatching at the words; “Merle, you’ve hit on the exact setting for the introduction of our Extra Element of Excitement. When is it?”

“Next month. The invitations went out this morning.”

“And who’s coming? Men, I mean.”

“A hundred and twenty-two in all,” Merle murmured; “do you want their names? I’m sleepy.”

“Don’t be sleepy, then, while I’m playing at the Fates, and Destiny, and the Will of Heaven, all in one.” She reached out to the escritoire, and grabbed pencil and paper. “I’m going to make a [21] catalogue; fire away! You know these hundred and odd males; I don’t. Fling me the most likely ones, and I’ll run them through an informal examination. Such as: ‘will you play Pirates nicely?’ ‘do you mind damp socks?’ ‘can you talk nonsense earnestly, and of earnest matters nonsensically?’ Above all, ‘do you feel equal to the manipulation of a trio?’”

“I shall enjoy watching from afar the face of your partner, while you treat him to all that. Put down Justin Carruthers, for a start.”

Peter scribbled the name: “Special distinguishing marks?”

“Black waistcoat where other people elect to wear white, and a tendency to serious intentions. Logan Thane owns a country-seat with grapes and antlers, and will, if properly trained, stand up by a mantelpiece and slash with his riding-whip. Bertie Milligan, youthful and intense, now in the clutches of a designing female; the Oxford voice—and can use it to imitate ducklings. Grey Rubinstein, fat, and the son of a judge—but with possibilities of humour. Armand Drelincourt has just bought another motor-car. Always. And will tell you about his fatal temperament. Roy Clarke, a due sense of his own importance, and could be brought to develop a sense of ours; one-steps like seven devils. Mark St. Quentin——” Merle broke off the catalogue with a laugh; “you know Mark; he was the means of bringing us together; I don’t think we’ll place another responsibility upon his soul. José di Gasparis vibrates like a cinema when he dances; and the blacking of his shoes will come off on your satin ones. Won’t that do? I can’t think of any more.”

Peter had been scribbling furiously. She glanced with critical eye down the list.

“I’ll bring this with me on the 18th, though I can’t say the material is promising. I like Logan Thane best.” She mused awhile over the names. “Yes, Merle, I think it will be Logan Thane.” [22]

But Merle’s straight black lashes already shadowed her cheeks. She was, if anything, lovelier asleep than awake. Peter glanced at her with a certain whimsical tenderness—then crept in beside her, and switched off the crimson light.

“We do need the taxi-man,” was her last coherent thought; “she more than I. She’s more feminine. Or at least, she’s somehow allowed to show more feminine.”

Pepita Kyndersley lived with an aunt at Thatch Lane, some half an hour’s distance by rail from London. Her mother was dead. Her father, responsible for her name, a tenor ballad-singer; sometimes in evening-dress, at a private entertainment; oftener in a red hunting-coat with gilt buttons, at a pier concert. At all times, a disreputable but attractive personage, never to be mentioned by Peter’s aunt; treated by Peter herself, when she chanced to meet him twice or thrice in the year, with good-humoured and tolerant amusement, as from one man to another. Nor would she have found objection in attaching herself permanently to the “Idol of all the Capitals of Europe,” as the leaflets were wont to declare him after a tour of the watering-places between Margate and Beachy Head; such an erratic existence was not without its charms; but the Idol shook his head at her suggestion:

“I would not have the bloom brushed from your girlhood, my Pepita,” tenderly.

Peter laughed: “The ladies who find your voice so full of tears and your hair so full of wave, would lose some of their enthusiasm if they saw you forever accompanied by a grown-up daughter. Is that it?”

Bertram Kyndersley deprecated; met the said daughter’s eye—and slowly winked his own; an inexcusable loss of moral equilibrium, atoned for by the rich sobriety of his next remark: [23]

“You are a great comfort to me, my little girl. Your poor mother said you would be a comfort to me,” for by this manner of speech did he seek reminder of his surprising parenthood, a factor he was otherwise liable to forget, but to which he fondly clung for the sake of its unanswerable link with respectability. Then he borrowed her quarterly dress allowance, and went with it a-wooing.

So Peter dwelt with her mother’s elder sister at Thatch Lane. That is to say, they had bedrooms in the same house, and took their meals together. But Miss Esther Worthing’s universe consisted of herself, wearing a high linen collar and carrying an umbrella; surrounded by houses containing each a county family—particular county a matter of indifference; surrounded in turn by churches —orthodox, of course; English public schools, mostly Eton; the whole encircled by a high wall, beyond which dwelt foreigners, Jews, artists, and suchlike. Peter being distinctly suchlike, knew herself well beyond the wall, and was quite content to abide there. Occasionally she made concessions to her aunt by allowing herself to be exploited in county circles; county in this case consisting of Thatch Lane. She had exhausted the resources of Thatch Lane practically at the outset; wrung from the place and people all they contained of stimulation; zigzagged like a streak of lightning through the lives of the young men of the neighbourhood, finished them off before they were well aware of being started; remaining still avid for something that could wear out her marvellous brain and superb body; tear from her that bright defiant liberty she claimed as her chief right; someone who could tire her ... tire her? at times she felt more weariness for lack of battle than defeat could ever have brought in its train.

Particular occupation she had none; but took her days unlinked, in something of the true [24] vagabond spirit, each one for what it would bring her. Days that began with dawn and ended with darkness, and naught of connection between darkness and dawn. Neither did she own a knit

coterie of friends; but had picked up a random assortment, and darted in and out of their separate spheres of life, as the need or the careless fancy took her. So that there was a certain lack of rhythmic swing, of cohesion, in her twenty-three years, till she met Merle des Essarts.

They flashed together at a charity subscription dance in the Assembly Hall at Thatch Lane. Merle had been motored thither by some acquaintances, forced into an extensive purchase of tickets. Peter was on the committee; and had donned for the evening an appropriate voice and expression. For she took pride in her powers of outward adjustment to whatever part she was called upon to play, while able to regard her motley the while with amused and appreciative detachment.

They happened with their respective partners at the same supper-table.

Merle's partner cut his thumb.

"I wonder if I ought to bind it up."

"I shouldn't like blood-poisoning to set in."

"It's not worth making a fuss. I hate making a fuss."

"I'm not saying much about it, but as a matter of fact, I'm in considerable pain."

"Look, Miss des Essarts!"

Merle did not want to look, but the thumb of Mark St. Quentin was thrust upon her.

"It is bad, isn't it?" courteously.

Presently she was invited to look again; and again she took an intelligent interest. It was just sufficiently bad to spoil her entrée.

"I'm not saying much about it——"

"Let me tie it up for you," quoth Peter suddenly, noting the other girl's lack of appetite. [25]

Peter produced a dainty square of lawn and lace. Peter bent her boyish halo of hair in deep absorption over the injured member. And both her own partner and the victim supplied all the obvious patter about the "healing touch," and "it was worth while to have suffered," and "some people have all the luck," and (of course) "will you let me keep the handkerchief?"—unutterable meanings in the request.

"'When pain and anguish wring the brow,'" Merle murmured to her plate, as a very flushed ministering angel raised her head from the act of mercy.

Peter tossed her a look of indignation, and afterwards waylaid her in the corridor:

"See here," hotly, "I don't know who you are, but I made an ass of myself so that you should enjoy your sweetbreads, and then you rag me about it!"

"I'm sorry," Merle replied, very penitent. "And I am grateful to you, really. But you didn't see his ecstatic expression while you bound up the wound. Please forgive me—and let me replace the handkerchief."

Peter liked this girl with the curious foreign lilt in her accent, and the demure sense of humour. And when a few days later a half-dozen of finely embroidered handkerchiefs arrived, together with a formal invitation to take tea with the sender, she went with a foreknowledge of having at last discovered someone who could speak her peculiarly twisted language.

She found a French bonbon in an exquisite bonbonnière; she found a jewel in its pink-lined casket; she found a dainty little lady, guarded and cherished as is only a "jeune fille" of French extraction; exquisitely dressed; very much in the picture, whether in the Louis-Seize drawing-room, or the Empire boudoir, or on the front seat of her grandmother's roomy and old-fashioned [26] barouche. And buried deep beneath these ornamentations, she found more of herself than she ever thought to encounter in a fellow-being. So much of herself, that it was almost a shock to vanity.

They did not become Best Friends in the sense of choosing each other's hats, and walking with interlaced arms. They walked instead with interlaced lives. And from a series of vivid and incongruous patches, Peter now saw it possible to weave the pattern of her existence and Merle's, so that the minutes were linked to the hours, and the seasons pursued one another the round of the calendar, and every haphazard personage was given a meaning, and every group of persons. And they planned undertakings and carried them through always; and robbed fiction of adventure, to place that wild-haired lass in the setting of things-that-happen. Journeys did they plot, preceded by an elaborate structure of deception for the benefit of Miss Esther Worthing, and an entirely different édition de luxe to satisfy Madame des Essarts; thus necessitating great play for the exercise of their ingenuity. If one mood led them to revel in utterly childish delights, such as raising the golden-syrup spoon high above the plate, so as to let the shining liquid drop in coils and patterns upon the bread, a swift change of circumstances showed the twain in ultra-luxurious furs and ultra-spotless white kid gloves, setting forth solemnly, and with the moral support of a card-case, to "pay calls." They arranged imaginary "parties," one for the other; of which Merle's favourite showed stately Madame des Essarts playing a prominent part with Bertram Kyndersley of the Melting Eye; though Peter inclined more to a fanciful alliance she had promoted between the Sphinx and the Albert Memorial—with dire results to the white flower of a blameless statue's life.

Merle caught Peter's infectious trick of light brilliant patter-talk, so that the likeness between the

twain was marvellous to those who could not pierce beneath exterior resemblances. It was Peter who invariably started the vein of nonsense, Merle who capped it at the finish. Merle did not breathe the atmosphere as a matter of course; she had too long been nourished in hot-house solemnity, and her witticisms tumbled out with a surprised little lift in the voice, as if in astonishment at their escape from bondage. Nor could she ever learn sublime disregard of the feelings and conveniences of others, but would linger to propitiate the breathless fragments scattered by the swift onrush of Peter's imperial passage; continued, in spite of her friend's laughing remonstrances, to pay reverential homage to white hairs, and display a certain polite hauteur where persons of inferior station were in question. One jested, yes,—*mais pas avec les autres*! "You deserve to die on the guillotine," quoth Peter. [27]

But she gave in, notwithstanding her leadership, before the chill of Merle's little reserves. For—and here lay the sting of the matter—instinct would not lead her exactly to where these reserves lay hidden; she would stumble on them unawares, without the remotest notion for what reason just that particular mention or sally or point of view, should call forth in the other a mood resembling cold water, finely sprayed. Merle herself, thus argued Peter, could on occasions be as daringly demurely blasphemous, so why....

But Peter knew well enough that the careless years she had spent knocking about with her parents and their shoddy coarse-grained good-natured associates, had done their destroying work. It is always absurd to suppose, in the popular fashion, that whatever a girl's surroundings, her outlook can remain pure and flower-like and uncontaminated. Certain words had to be checked on her tongue; the itch for a cigarette was ever in her fingers; she was familiar with what she termed the "man-look," and recognized too soon the dawning of intentions that needed to be checked. Other traces there were: a cool disregard as to the state of undress in which circumstances might chance to discover her straight young limbs; meanings of the under-world that attached themselves to perfectly innocent phrases. Not a very profound under-world; just below the glazed surface. And experiences had been hers, squalid enough to give pleasure in the recollection, when balancing a fragile teacup at some opulent afternoon reception. [28]

These after-effects could hardly be considered serious; merely annoying to have perceptions so far blunted as to give no warning on the rare occasions when Merle's greater fineness was in danger. "I would not have the bloom brushed from your girlhood, my Pepita!"—it amounted to that, after all.

[29]

CHAPTER III
PLAYING AT GOD

"I think it is going to be Logan Thane," Peter decided, as she paused for a moment in the pleasing process of dressing for the dance, to stand bare-limbed before the fire, and feel its warmth run and leap and shiver over her skin; one of those luxuries to which memories of chill apartments and scrambled toilets now gave a zest and flavour. Peter liked equally the action of slowly drawing a cigarette from its silver case; the use of a bathroom, gleaming white tiles and silver taps and mist-wreaths dimming the mirror on the wall. Things which Merle took as a matter of course. Merle found her keenest enjoyment in escape for a whole day to Thatch Lane, to trespass over barbed-wire fencing in dank and thorny woods; discarding, for an old skirt and jersey of Peter's, the elaborately suitable-for-the-country raiment provided by Madame des Essarts. Madame's mental vision of these expeditions showed her granddaughter reclining upon a cushioned chair, in a very clean field, the while Miss Worthing's footman (non-existent) asked if she took sugar and milk, and Peter added solicitously: "You must put up with our picnic teas, Merle, dearest. Will you have some Devonshire cream on your home-baked bread?"

Ever since their conversation on the second-empire bedspread, a fortnight before, the two girls were almost hypnotically persuaded that the forthcoming ball was to furnish, as far as their scheme of things was concerned, some startling issue. During their intercourse of two and a half [30] years, the male element in its more serious form had been conspicuously and even unnaturally lacking. Peter was aware that this state of things could not possibly continue, in the case of two so magnetically alive. She had sought to forestall the Inevitable, by herself weaving in the thread. To-night she would choose its colour. To-night!... it was fun, playing at God.

Logan Thane fixed himself firmer and ever firmer in her imagination, while she put on her gold stockings and shoes, her bronze evening-dress, with its border of rich fur, and swathed gold sash. His name held possibilities; and she was not averse to the background of antlers and hothouse grapes, catalogued by Merle. She added to these, roses, and a sweet white-haired mother; picturing agreeably how the latter would describe Merle and herself as "quite at home in Thane Manor; running in and out all day; dear girls, both of them!"—Logan at this juncture tossed them an expressive smile from where he stood, as per arrangement, smiting his boot with a riding-whip.

And if he should fall in love with one or the other of them....

"It would be rough luck on Merle," mused Peter, drawing on her long white kid gloves.

Certainly Peter was divinely human!

Someone knocking at the door:

"Are you ready?" cries Jinny, aged fourteen; "the Lesters are here, and don't I just wish I was going too!"

Peter is staying the week-end with some twice-removed cousins in a Turnham Green boarding-house; a convenience of which she frequently availed herself, when evening pleasure-seeking made it impossible for her to catch the last train from Euston to Thatch Lane. The Lester boys [31] and their sister, friends of Merle, had offered to fetch her in their car and bring her home again.

"And so if we don't enjoy ourselves," proposes Rose-Marie, a nervous débutante, "we can keep to our own party...." The car moves slowly forward in a long queue.

Peter is not enthusiastic. Both the Lester boys are under twenty, and have pimples on their chins. She wishes—in the cloakroom now, and in the approved fashion letting her wrap fall languidly from her shoulders, to be caught by dexterous and silent attendants—that the thought of Merle hostess of this magnificence, did not remove her so very far from the Merle of their adventure days.

The staircase again, and conventional figures in black and white, struggling with their glove-buttons. Which of them is Logan Thane? "Wait for me," pleads Rose-Marie, still busy with her powder-puff. A burst of music from the ballroom, striking thrilling response from the tuned-up senses. Events moving with the swift unreality of a cinema. The ballroom swims forward and engulfs Peter with its hum of talk, rising and falling like waves on a flat beach; its light mellowed by blossoms; blossoms made translucent by light. Impression of a group just within the doorway; Merle's grandmother, from a mere solicitous voice in Lancaster Gate: "Es-tu fatiguée, chérie?" knuckles that tapped the door and a rustle that swept the staircase,—now materialized into diamonds, and Point d'Alençon, and dignified, almost royal, reception of the entering guests. Mademoiselle des Essarts, a little to her left, beauty in faint old-rose and lilac, silver-threaded; a tiny moon-shaped black patch below the lip; a bouquet of lilies of the valley. Mademoiselle des Essarts—"Elle est exquise," whisper the diplomats and the ambassadors and the consuls, beribboned and bearded, who surround Madame, and lend a contrast of French court circles to [32] the assembly of bostoning twentieth-century youth.

Mademoiselle des Essarts receives Miss Kyndersley with grave unsmiling courtesy, and introduces: "Mr. Milligan."

Is this the owner of a new motor-car, or a Designing Female? Desperately Peter tries to collect her whirling thoughts, while Merle, according to previous arrangement, detaches herself from other duties, to present one partner after another; names that sound familiar: "the son of a judge

... can imitate ducklings ... black waistcoat where others elect to wear white,"—easily distinguishable, this last; "a life-story ... serious intentions ... seven devils and a shoe-black" ... the descriptions on the list jostle each other, and form part of the brilliant kaleidoscopic blur which goes to make Peter's evening. She is beginning to enjoy the keen sense of expectancy with which she herself has infused the air. Light as the flutter of a peaseblossom, Merle blows across the polished floor: "Peter, have you a dance left? I want to introduce you——" no, the pink card is already scribbled over from top to bottom.

"Never mind; you can cut—let me see!" coolly Mademoiselle scans the names, and crosses off a harmless personage bearing the Oriental title of Otto Mann. "He's not important" ... and she presents Mr. Thane, who looks rather astonished at these unceremonious proceedings, but laughingly accepts number twenty-three, the last waltz but one.

"I believe you'll do!" thinks Peter exultantly. But nevertheless, she will give other unconscious candidates their chance. Her peculiar talent for playing up, body and soul, to whatever part be thrust upon her, can be exercised to its full in the swift coming and going, change and interchange of companionship, that is ballroom custom.

The first waltz stirs the air. The first skilful probing of the material with which she has to deal: [33] cue given: "Don't you find these affairs leave an empty feeling behind them?"... so be it, then; the Puritan maid—for ten minutes. And you, sir, what may be your demands? Can't be bothered with depths, or all that bally rot? Come then, we will e'en butterfly together.... And the music strikes up for the next one-step; Papillon bows and departs, and—who will come in his stead? Walk up! walk up, gentlemen all! Here are a variety of goods in one parcel: the Artistic Understanding; the Tantalizing Sphinx; Up-to-date Woman of the World, with trick of shoe and eyelash and epigram—this for the youth who will not be thought young; quickly alternating to the Clear-eyed Delightful Child: her first dance, and it's all such splendid fun! Almost can Thirty-nine, cynical, weary, and grizzled at the temples, be brought to say: "Little girl, you make the years fall from me...."

Peter wriggles happily. Who can denounce her conduct as unfair? Who, at a masquerade, music-led, rose-fragrant, expects to confront aught but fellow-masqueraders?... Here comes another—Aha! I recognize you, my friend; you are he who vibrates like a jelly in dancing, and—apprehensively she glances down at her gold shoes in danger from the kiss of Othello.

Take from Peter what you please, gentlemen all! not for your sakes, believe me that. For Peter's sake; for the glorification of her talents, and for the fun of it, and because you may take from Peter what you please, so it be not Peter. And she is safe enough, dodging mischievously from one disguise to another, rather wishing—through all the breathless shift and stir and glimmer—to meet for once her equal in skill and tactics. But it will come with the twenty-third waltz of the evening, promised to Antlers-and-Hothouse-Grapes; she has staged her climax cunningly, to [34] crown the end of masquerade.

Supper with Mark St. Quentin, who had two years previously sent her a dozen handkerchiefs, in lieu of the gory one, tenderly retained; thus making for the ministering angel a clear profit of seventeen handkerchiefs, reckoning Merle's half-dozen. He has spent this evening in being to Peter the cement which knits loose bricks together; watching her hungrily when she slides away in the embrace of another; slipping into the gap when a partner chances to be late; taking the first dance and the last dance and the supper-dance, and any extras she cares to give, and all the numbers she wishes to cut. Quite pleasant, the consciousness of Mark St. Quentin to fill with his stolid and persistent personality the tiniest chink and crevice which the intoxicating hours might otherwise have left empty. Nor is it difficult to supply him with the goods he wants: a solicitous reference to the episode of the thumb, and Peter is established as fragrant sweet-natured woman, thank Heaven, still surviving in a century of Suffragettes and kleptomaniacs—"And druggists," adds Mark St. Quentin; "Morphia, you know."

After-supper hours, bringing with them the usual flushed dishevelment, actual and spiritual. Blooms beginning to droop in the heat; prevailing carelessness as to the hieroglyphics actually scrawled on the programme; bold voices, mingling with the bandsmen's deeper notes, as they chorus to the popular encore, imperiously demanded. Lingerings on the stairs, and where softly-lit seclusion is provided for those who care to linger. Departure of the suave and elderly diplomats; Madame des Essarts must perforce wait, royalty unattended, till romping insatiable youth shall have drunk its fill. Her reflections on modern dancing, its antics and exaggerations, are such as to preclude description. She is pleased to note, however, that her granddaughter's [35] burnished dark head is still unruffled, her complexion unheated. "Elle est vraie des Essarts!"

Number twenty-one. Merle and Peter, skilfully guided where the throng is thickest, smile at one another in passing, eager, in the midst of enjoyment, for the mutual retrospection of the morrow. Comes the interval between twenty-two and twenty-three. Armand Drélincourt, for the third time in four hours, discourses with immense relish upon his fatal temperament. Peter listens attentively, but springs to her feet, interrupting the narrative at its most thrilling point, when the far-off tinkle of a bell reaches her ear: "Hadn't we better go down?" Having settled on Logan Thane as a piratical playmate, she is frankly excited at the prospect of number twenty-three.

He is not waiting near the door of the ballroom. Neither is he in the stream descending the stairs. Peter waits impatiently till he shall choose to end his flirtation behind some draped *portière*. Already the dancers are in full swing. Rose-Marie approaches: "Shall we go home now, Peter? Most people have left; it looks so bad to be among the last." And behold St. Quentin standing faithful as the painted sentinel of Herculaneum: "May I have the pleasure, Miss Kyndersley?"

"I'm booked already,—where *is* Logan Thane?"

“But your partner seems to have deserted you. Silly fellow; he doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

Peter privately agrees. It takes still three minutes to convince her that Logan Thane has undoubtedly cut his dances and gone home early; and then she lets St. Quentin reap the reward of his tireless vigil: “I shall be leaving after this one, so we may as well finish it instead of the next.” She has flushed richly and her eyes are dark with annoyance. Childishly, she wants Logan Thane to have a sense of all that might have been his, had he not succumbed to weariness.

“Peter,” Rose-Marie’s voice, plaintive now; “the car has been waiting over an hour already, and [36]
mother said——”

“All right.” Peter disengages herself from the infatuated St. Quentin, murmurs her thanks to her hostess, looks around in vain for Merle, and suffers herself to be led by Rose-Marie to the cloak-room.

Downstairs, a few stray couples, clinging still to the fringes of pleasure, boston stormily to the strains of “Gipsy Love.” The massed flowers on the walls hang heavier and heavier yet. Madame has yawned twice, daintily, behind her Pompadour fan. As the last notes die away, Merle dashes for the doorway, dragging her partner in her wake.

“Peter!—she hasn’t gone yet, has she, grandmaman?” She succeeds in waylaying Peter, cloaked and reluctant, on her passage down the main staircase.

“You mustn’t go. I want you to dance the next with Stuart.” Merle’s tone conveys all she dares put into it of meaning and entreaty. Peter shakes her head, indicating Rose-Marie, inclined to be fractious.

“Leave her to me. *Do* go on, Peter.”

Peter wavers; the ballroom, after good-byes have been spoken and wraps adjusted, becomes doubly a place of enchantment, if only because etiquette debars from re-entering.

She looks at Stuart Heron.

And he, for his part, tries to trace the connection between a tall girl in a bronze evening-cloak, and a picture which has forced itself irrelevantly upon his mental vision: picture of a Cavalier emerging from some dark doorway; backward-floating plume, and mantle carelessly flung; swagger and smile expressive of all that lurked in his quest of love and hazard, and peradventure of hazardous love....

“Go on, Peter,” urges Merle. “You’ll like him.”

Peter hesitates no longer; tosses aside her cloak; and permits Stuart to escort her back to the regions of light whence she had thought to be self-banished. The band is crashing out in true [37]
Bacchanalian frenzy the last waltz of all, the waltz of their release. Twenty years before, and it would have been: “After the ball is over,” with its cloying suggestions of regret and sentiment; but modern youth requires something at once more abandoned and more discordant.

Stuart speaks: “She said I was going to like you.”

“And she said I was going to like you.”

Then in earnest duet: “How we’re bound to hate each other!”

He is a little above medium height; their eyes are almost on a level. He cannot rid himself of the impression that whatever he says now, is likely to matter later on. And the entire contents of his brain have wandered round the corner, and sitting there, mock his futility.

“No,” contradicting his own statement. “I don’t think we shall hate each other; at least, not more than is necessary to preserve mutual interest.” Why are they hurrying the time, those fool musicians? How long can one decently sit out with a girl, after the last candle is extinguished, and a lackey is holding her cloak in readiness? Seven minutes, perhaps? He will have to give her in that seven minutes lightning indications of all that is in him worth her knowing; whet her curiosity, and at the same time satisfy his own. The undertaking is a breathless one.

“Who are you?” Peter queries, having in vain tried to fit him with some attributes of Merle’s catalogue. “I can’t place you at all, and——”

“And what?” he leaps in, for she has paused, and there is no time to pause; two more couples have ceased to dance, and are busy encircling Madame des Essarts with an aura of thanksgiving and farewell. “And what?”

“And Merle introduced you as if you mattered.”

“Merle was quite right. I do matter.” [38]

“Merle?”

“Why not? I’m a relic of her childhood.”

“It makes you sound like Stonehenge.”

“You strive rather after effect, don’t you?” He slings this at her, himself striving after effect.

“Of course. Would you have me display at once all the domestic virtues?”

“You haven’t any,” tauntingly. “Not one. Other girls can cook nothing but an omelette. You, I’m sure, can cook nothing at all. It must be a proud boast. I hate talking while I dance, don’t you?”

In silence they finish the waltz. Then Stuart sweeps her through a pair of velvet hangings, down two rooms, and to a sofa at the far end of a third, before she is well aware of his intentions. She

takes a sidelong survey of his outward marks: features that vie for room with his monocle and quickly-changing expression, giving an effect to his face of overcrowding; a mouth corner-tilted and impish, such as is sometimes perceived in a small street-arab, but mostly in a leprechaun, who can only be met hammering shoes on moor and crag by moonlight. She notes further that his jaw is lean, with the forward bent of a runner; and his head, which by dint of hard brushing and grooming gives at first an effect of conventional sleekness, is in reality a most rebellious and intricate affair, no hair growing in precisely the same direction as its fellow, but each insisting it will beat out like Bret Harte's pioneer, "a way of his own, a way of his own!"

From the distant ballroom, snatches of "God save the King" drift and die and are re-born, with an effect of inexpressible melancholy. And, sighing, Stuart relinquishes desire to show the girl all his sides before dawn—philosophical, tender, childish, manly, sporting, whimsical, or political,—resigns himself to proving merely that he is original.

"You can never get away from your likeness to a Reynolds' Angel," à propos of nothing; "because there are five of them, so that if the expression should miss one, it will hit the next; I'm sorry for you, of course, but there is nothing to be done about it. Do you live anywhere? Forgive me for these astounding acrobatics, but I'm so afraid you will be fetched by your nurse Rose-Marie; I heard you remark she was growing fractious." [39]

"I live in Thatch Lane with an aunt. My mother is dead, and my father unmentionable, to save you from the agonies of a tactless question."

... The bandsmen are dimly visible, packing away their mute instruments. A voice from the long-ago is calling faintly "Peter" ... hastily she covers the sound: "*What* are you? A stockbroker?"

"No," he too has heard, and speaks rather breathlessly; "do I make love like a stockbroker?"

"You haven't."

"I have, in my own subtle fashion. But I *can't* overleap the first stages in this Post-impressionist preliminary scamper of ours."

... "Pet-er! Pe-ter!" clearer now—and nearer.

"A stockbroker has but seven stages of love-making, and by these shall ye know him," laughs Peter.

"And I have a hundred and seven, and seven more after that, and by none of these shall ye know me."

"Do you always talk about yourself?"

"No," desperately; "I can talk about ever so many things: Cathedrals, and good form, and machinery, and how to make pins. Oh, and metaphysics. Particularly metaphysics. I took a double first at Oxford. I've no right to tell you, but I want you to know," with the first touch of boyishness that has as yet escaped the hard polished surface of his manner.

... "I can't think where she is," Merle replies courteously, two rooms off.

... "Pee-ee-eee-ter!"

—"Confound it! How can I be eloquent with that phantom female forever squawking like the poor cat i' the adage." [40]

Peter remarks, caring not a whit for Rose-Marie: "I'm sure that an adage is a medieval Scotch pantry, and that the cat was stealing the cream."

"The 'Cat and Adage' wouldn't be a bad public-house," Stuart reflects; "in case I shouldeverwanttobuilda—damn!" in an outburst of frenzied and polysyllabic fury, as a little procession, consisting of Merle, Rose-Marie, the two brothers of Rose-Marie, and Mark St. Quentin, advance with triumphant shoutings towards the truants' retreat.

His curses are overtopped by St. Quentin's pæans of victory:

"I told you I'd seen them come this way. You've given us a rare hunt, Miss Kyndersley." And the eldest and most pimply of the Lester twins shakes a playful finger:

"Bedtime, you know, Miss Peter. No good running away and hiding."

"Good night," Stuart turns abruptly away, not caring to form part of the returning procession across three rooms. Nor does he express any audible hopes of renewing an acquaintance so delightfully begun.

"Well?" Merle threw a world of mischievous expectancy into the interrogation, when Peter paid her promised visit at tea-time the following day.

Merle was lying on the couch, her back supported by many cushions, a silken wrap thrown lightly over her feet. For Madame des Essarts cherished the notion that constitutions of delicate birth were necessarily also of delicate health, to attain which desirable consummation, she kept a venerable and witty doctor in daily attendance, and reduced Merle on the slightest provocation from the vertical to the horizontal.

Peter tossed down her hat, and sank into a curly-legged arm-chair. [41]

"I wish this weren't such an impossible room," she grumbled; "what with gilt and tapestries and priceless china and painted ladies on the ceiling, I can hardly hear myself speak. It's the sort of room you can't take up and wrap round you. What we ought to do, Merle, is with the aid of a

ladder, a big apron, and a bottle of gum, cover the walls ourselves in brown paper, like those brave bright Bohemian bachelor girls in books."

"Well?" quoth Merle again, disregarding the Bohemian girls.

"And then the supreme insult of a central heating system, when every fibre of me yearns for firelight. How would it be to light a fire of sticks on the carpet? Would your grandmother mind?"

"Shouldn't think so," murmured Merle. "It's only Aubusson, and she's a reasonable woman, and you could always explain to her that you were being the Swiss Family Robinson."

"Or Robinson Crusoe. Why, do you suppose, are shipwrecked islanders always called Robinson? Is it something wild and primitive that lies in the name?"

"You know," Merle suggested gently, "it's not necessary to be quite so garrulous, to convince me that you want to hear about Stuart Heron."

Peter gave in: "Who is he?"

"A millionaire."

"That's a nuisance. Is he sensitive about it? No, he doesn't give me the impression of being sensitive about anything. He's hard and polished and invulnerable; Achilles without the heel."

"Three months' treatment, and you'll be crying aloud that he's all heel and no Achilles."

Nicole entered with the tea equipage, containing much of chased silver; and conversation was for a moment suspended. [42]

"Mademoiselle Peter should not have risen from bed to-day," severely. "She must surely be fatigued after so late an evening."

"I was one of those who left early," Peter mendaciously assured the old woman, of whom she stood in distinct awe.

"Nicole, you've forgotten the cream, and Mdlle. Peter is here. You know her love of cream is only equalled by her hatred of cows."

Nicole looked respectfully incredulous: "Surely not, Mademoiselle. But if it were not for the good kind cows, what would Mademoiselle put in her tea?"

"I *don't* put cows in my tea," Peter protested unhappily. And as Nicole, with many chucklings, withdrew, "Merle, why do you hold me up to scorn before your staff? And I want more about Stuart—Heron, did you say?"

"Awfully Heron. They all are. And quite indecently rich. He has a mother, and three uncles, and a married sister, and some cousins—pretty girls. Family existing for the worship of Stuart, sole son of the house of Heron. And all things bright and beautiful, all things great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Herons have them all. I don't know much more about them, except presents; they're for ever giving each other presents; costly trifles, such as a villa on the Riviera, or a Rolls-Royce motor, or a new hothouse, or a sackful of pink diamonds. Whenever you go there, Mrs. Heron is sure to say: 'Oh, let me show you the chocolate-coloured page-boy that Stuart gave me because he scored a goal at football'; or 'do help me think of a present for my brother-in-law, it's the anniversary of his wife's death. Last time I gave him twenty-four pairs of silk pyjamas sewn with seed-pearls; do you suppose he would like the Only Orinoco Orchid? I hear you can get it for five hundred guineas.'" [43]

"Don't be ridiculous, and pass the cake," laughed Peter. "Besides, all this doesn't explain Stuart."

"I don't know much about Stuart; of course I was taken there as a child, but then——" Merle's eyes grew large and wistful, "I wasn't a child; I was a French doll, in beautiful, expensive clothes, and not allowed to romp with the other children. So I suppose Stuart despised me. In fact, he told me as much last night; that since we've been grown-up he has avoided me for fear I should break. He's only three years down from Oxford."

"So young? I took him for about thirty."

"Twenty-five, I believe."

"He mentioned Oxford—isn't Nicole going to bring that cream?—but I doggedly refused to take notice. 'Varsity is the one subject I will not discuss with the initiated; I pronounce Magdalen as God meant it to be pronounced, mix up dons with proctors, and earn for myself undying contempt. So it's better left alone."

Nicole entered with the cream, and the intimation that Monsieur Heron desired to speak with Mademoiselle des Essarts on the telephone.

"The game commences in earnest," laughed Merle. "But I don't want to get up. You answer it, Peter."

Peter, nothing loath, ran downstairs to the boudoir, and replaced Madame des Essarts at the mouthpiece: "Hello!"

"Hello—look here," came Stuart's unmistakable tones from the other end; tones veiling with the typical Oxford accent a curious eagerness as of a dog forever worrying and shaking a bone. "Look here, how's my mother?"

"I'm not good at arithmetic."

"Your grandmother has asked me three times, and I feel I ought to have known. I said 'quite well, [44]

thanks,' but now I come to think of it, she isn't. Would it be the right thing to ring off, and ring up again to contradict the statement."

"It would be easier on the whole to cure your mother, and get it right that way."

"I say, it isn't Merle. It's you."

"Yes, it's me. Merle's lying down."

A pause. Then a chuckle from the other end.

"I trust you have recovered from the fatigues of the dance, Peter. I recollect that you were among the last to go."

She assured him politely that she was suffering from no ill-effects, and trusted he was the same. And she passed over the use of her Christian name.

"What are you talking about, you two girls? Irish-stew of the night before? Have I come in yet?"

"Perhaps you don't come in."

"I *am* coming in," something very like a threat in the assurance. "I'm in already. Well in. Merle told me about the projected Triumvirate."

Peter sped an indignant glance towards the absent Merle, for not informing her of this breach of faith; and a look of defiance at Stuart, who could not see it, for daring to laugh, which he wasn't.

"I'm afraid I had a purpose in 'phoning," he continued; "though it would be splendid to say I'd rung up for no reason whatever. Will you ask Merle if she'll come with me to a dance at the Cecil, next Tuesday evening, and bring her little friend."

Peter refused to rise to such a palpable throw. "Tickets?"

"I've got them. Four. Can you provide another male of some sort?"

"I'll ask Merle. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She returned to find Merle being cherished by her grandmother, so that a careful version of the foregoing invitation needed to be given: [45]

"Mr. Heron is making up a party, and hopes we will join him; and at the same time benefit a charity in which he is interested."

Madame des Essarts gave the scheme her gracious acquiescence. "He doubtless wishes to revenge himself for last night," she mused approvingly; "but it is a somewhat hurried courtesy." For there existed nothing in which she was so punctilious as in these social accounts of give and take; accounts which Merle insisted were as carefully noted and balanced as any butcher's or baker's. So much debit, so much credit; a nice perception of how many teas given went to cancel one luncheon taken. So now:

"If you are to invite another gentleman, *mon enfant*, it must be Mr. St. Quentin; you remember he motored us to Ranelagh." Madame touched Peter's cheek lightly with her hand, besought her not to tire Merle or herself with too much conversation, and rustled away, leaving in her train a faint swish and perfume. Whereupon Peter re-edited truthfully the duologue.

—"Merle, why did you tell him about the trio, and—and all that rot?"

"Rot?"

"He thinks so. He probably thinks it—oh, girlish!"

"He's going to count," said Merle. "And ... Peter——"

"What?"

"Three is a funny shape," the younger girl admitted slowly. "I think it might mean two and one. And I think, Peter, we shall have to settle, you and I, to be square with each other, in the triangle."

"What a ghastly geometrical figure: If the square ABCD standing on the base of the triangle XYZ——"

But Merle was not laughing. "We must agree to talk things out, and always get them clear, even if it should mean disloyalty to Stuart. Because I believe he's the strongest." [46]

Peter considered this a moment, while she emptied the cream-jug into her cup. "Yes," she decided at length. "But we'll tell him that you and I are going to keep the path unblocked between us. It will be fairer; and save him from blundering."

"He won't blunder," Merle prophesied. "And I think, too, that he's capable of calling a taxi."

Peter laughed:

"I'd forgotten the taxis; of course, they were the original means of bringing him in. But I rather wonder what he hopes to find."

[47]

CHAPTER IV
THE SHAPE OF THREE

The shape began to assert itself already on the way to the Cecil. Merle, Peter and Stuart discovered that their three-cornered talk flashed forth with uncommon swiftness and brilliancy, as if drawing inspiration one from the other; that a spirit and being came alive that belonged not to any two of them, nor yet to any one, but could only be borne of just that conjunction of three. So that they were palpitating with eagerness to continue exploration in the kingdom which their magical number had thrown open to them, when Mark St. Quentin, symbol of a world without meanings, met them, as arranged, in the ballroom.

As far as St. Quentin was concerned, the evening proved a failure, strongly reminding him of a phase in his rather lonely childhood, when elder brothers and sisters used to glory in the flaunting of their "secrets." Though of just what these miraculous "secrets" consisted he could never discover. Nor could he discover now what was the curious excitement that seemed to quiver in his alternate partners; and he was certainly baffled by the bewildering fashion of their talk. As well he might be; for Peter and Merle, dizzied by the constant change and interchange of male involved by quartette, occasionally allowed their separate manners to overlap, with merely amusing results when Stuart received the St. Quentin dregs, but absolutely fatal when St. Quentin was by mistake driven to cope with some startling turn of phrase that should have been [48] Stuart's portion.

They were being shockingly ill-bred, the three; not a doubt of it. But a hardness of heart and an oblivion of manners descends upon those who, on Tom Tiddler's Ground, are picking up gold and silver, towards those incapable of perceiving the alluring glitter; and St. Quentin was finally reduced to concentrate his hopes upon supper, which meal he fondly anticipated might "draw them all together a bit." Also, a man of little imagination, he ascribed the dreary void within him on contemplating the Tiddlerites, as due to hunger. So that when Stuart announced carelessly after the eighth dance: "Had about enough now, haven't we?" he so far forgot himself as to expostulate with some fervour:

"Oh, I say. But I thought we were stopping on for supper, anyway."

"So did I," replied Stuart. "But my partners seem rather anxious to get home."—Merle looked astonished, but understood that she was expected to play up to some dark sub-current of intention.

"Grandmaman did beg me not to be late," demurely. Which happened to be true.

"But Miss Kyndersley," St. Quentin turned with dying hopes to Peter; "won't you stay and have supper?"

"I'm afraid I can't, if Merle doesn't." Peter, not in the mood as yet to renounce gaiety, was inclined to be indignant with Stuart for his ill-disguised anxiety to quit.

"A jolly little supper," wailed the odd man out, seeing *pâté* and lobster slipping irrevocably through his fingers.

On the threshold of the hotel rose another slight discussion: "I'll see the ladies home; it's on my way," from Stuart.

"Oh, but——"

"It's on my way," firmly. And he had hailed a taxi, for which vehicles he certainly possessed [49] magnetic attractions, had helped in Merle and Peter, and had given the address at Lancaster Gate, before St. Quentin was allowed a chance to proffer services. As the latter stood beneath the awninged steps, watching the swift departure, every line of face and figure seemed to quiver forth in resentful unison: "A jolly little supper...."

The car shot round the corner. Stuart let down the window and leant out: "Drive to the Billet-doux," he commanded curtly, giving the name of a celebrated little French restaurant on the border-line between fashion and Bohemia.

Peter laughed, understanding; and because his methods amused her. But Merle gasped in some disturbance.

"Sorry," said Stuart. "But it was essential to get rid of him, wasn't it? I don't mean him personally, but any other existent fourth."

"But he was of our party," Merle rebuked him gravely, conscious of being alone in her defence of good manners.

"I think not," laughed Stuart; "merely a stage property."

They drew up before the quaint white hostelry in Soho; set off by its dark and murky surroundings, and proclaiming aloud its aloofness from these, by the ostentatious guardianship of two commissionaires.

Passing through the swing doors, Merle was caught up by the tumult of voices and ring of glass within; forgot to be prim and censorious; gave herself over entirely to the joy of this unexpected, and—as far as Madame des Essarts was concerned—forbidden truancy.

So they came for the first time to the Billet-doux, destined to prove one of the permanent backgrounds to their triangular career. And the austere and melancholy Spanish waiter who [50] assisted them to uncloak, did not for a moment guess how he was to be puzzled by the alternate

qualities and quantities of their future comings; merely noticed that the party seemed in excellent spirits, and that the gentleman spent commendably little time and breath in his selection of the supper. And here again the girls silently approved.

Peter leant forward across the table: “There’s something to be settled without further delay,” she announced, half in mockery, and withal letting a tinge of earnest invade her tones. “It’s tactless to mention it, but—you’re a millionaire, aren’t you?”

Stuart assented, very ashamed.

“We’ve agreed to forgive,” Peter went on, “on the condition that you let us forget. No chucking about of gold purses to the populace, mark you. As long as you never permit us to see more than two sovereigns at a time, our three-ship shall endure. But the rest of your vast fortune, and all your motor-cars and boot-trees, you must hide in mattresses and banks. Is that understood?”

“Can’t you make it guineas,” he pleaded unhappily. And in consideration of his quenched demeanour, they agreed to expand the limits by a florin.

“I suppose you had better know the worst,” he continued gloomily, helping them to varieties of sardines that, like Diogenes, dwelt mainly in tubs. “I’m a diamond-merchant.”

Merle burst out laughing. “Oh, Stuart, how comical! Do you wear a silk hat?”

“*And* a face to match. You must invade the offices one day, and see me in the act.”

“You take it seriously, then?”

“Desperately. Notice the absorbed face of a small boy playing at grown-ups; if he were laughing all the time, he wouldn’t be enjoying the game.”

“But if we really do bear down upon you, will you give us a sign that it’s all right? Because otherwise I’m terrified of the ‘business face.’” [51]

“One sign ye shall have, and no more. After that I’ll expect you to play also, and take proper interest in diamonds, and listen prettily to the Khalif,—it doesn’t matter about the One-eyed Calendar.”

And here Merle demanded explanations, which were midway interrupted by a wail of despair from Peter; she had somehow contrived to mix her implements so that whichever way she worked it, the fish-knife would be left for dessert. Stuart looked for enlightenment at Merle:

“Doesn’t she know? Has no one told her? Are we to pretend not to see?”

“She springs from the people,” Merle answered his aside. “The kind that wear curl-papers and barrows. I’ll tell you all about it when we’re alone.”

... Stuart and Merle, if only in jest; and Peter the outsider. Not for one moment could the flexible triangle retain its form.

“Let it be clearly understood,” broke in Peter, defiantly holding out the wrong glass, that wine might be poured into it, “that except for the benefit of Fernand, I refuse to be: ‘and your little friend also.’”

“Who is Fernand?” from Stuart.

Merle owned to an elder brother who dwelt in Paris. “Peter and I were once upon a time allowed to travel alone from England to the South of France, to join Grandmaman in Nice. *En route*, I gave Peter a party consisting of Fernand, and a first-class *wagon-lit*.”

“In juxtaposition?” murmured Stuart. Peter, for fear of Merle’s little reserves, flashed him a glance of warning. The shape had altered again.... Obviously it was impossible to keep intimacy of speech and spirit moving between more than two points; the idea was to spin it so swiftly from one to another and then on, as to give the appearance of all three simultaneously involved. [52]

Peter took up the narrative:

“Fernand Alfonso des Essarts, the essence of decorum and propriety, met us at the Gare du Nord, and escorted us across Paris. He carried a big box of chocolates for Merle, and a smaller one for her little friend also. He conveyed to Merle the compliments of all her unknown relatives in Paris; and she cast down her eyes, transformed to an embodiment of the virginal *jeune fille*, convent-fresh and dewy, and conveyed to him the compliments of all his unknown relatives in London. And they thanked each other separately for each one. In this wise did they continue to converse. He asked her if she were thirsty—‘And you also, Mademoiselle, you are thirsty?’ ‘And I also, Monsieur, I am thirsty,’ sez I, likewise convent-fresh and dewy. He displayed polite interest in her progress at the piano—‘And you also, Mademoiselle, you play the piano?’ ‘And I also, Monsieur, I play the piano.’—I don’t, by the way, Stuart; it’s quite all right. And Fernand surveyed his beautiful boots, and probably thought of his beautiful grisette, neglected that evening for the sake of these *embêtantes* young English misses. And with an inspiration he asked Merle if she had *mal-de-mer* in crossing—‘And you also, Mademoiselle, you had *mal-de-mer* in crossing?’ ‘And I also, Monsieur, I had *mal-de-mer* in crossing. Very!’ The word too much did it, and Fernand addressed me no more.”

“I hope the *wagon-lit* proved a compensation for your temporary effacement,” laughed Stuart.

He sat opposite them, as it were one pitted against two. And the girls marvelled anew that aught with the looks and costume and bearing of conventional man-about-town, eye-glass and knowledge of the wine-list, should yet have caught the melody of their pipes, and revealed in response his own nimble goat-legs. The proximity of the mirror which enlarged their number to [53]

six, lent a grotesque flavour to the scene, allowing each of the players the illusion of being at the same time spectator; placing the table, with its shining napery and silver, tumbled shimmer of whitebait, and dull red Burgundy in the glasses, outside and apart from reality. Stuart, catching at one moment the reflected eyes of his companions, toasted them silently in phantom wine ... and it needed a curious effort, a tug of the will, before they could recall their glances from the three puppets in looking-glass-land, to meet, each of them, their two companions in the flesh. The light and stir of the restaurant, the drifting brilliant figures from one crowded room to another, the gay groups, talking, laughing, were all, as it were, subordinated, like supers in a stage set. So the solicitous waiter, hovering, might have been stolen from some sinister Spanish masque of passion and hatred. From an outer chamber, drifted wailing snatches of violin-play. The ghost of Mark St. Quentin glided into the vacant seat to Peter's right. "A jolly little supper," he murmured reproachfully....

"Three coffees, black," Stuart ordered of the waiter; "And—green Chartreuse, both of you? I think so; three green Chartreuses." He did not consult their tastes, hoping to gauge them accurately by intuition, or else luck. He held a match to their cigarettes; and, reverting to the topic of their journey, suggested that a *wagon-lit* might be rather a nice domestic animal: "A tame red *wagon-lit* with trustful brown eyes. I wonder if my wife would let me keep one in the back-garden, among the washing."

Merle was overcome by a vision of the future wife of the diamond-merchant hanging up the diamond-merchant's pants on a clothes-line, every Monday morning.

"Just fancy," Stuart burst forth, "the indignity of having to ask permission before one could keep a fox-terrier or a *wagon-lit*. I can *not* understand the state of mind which leads a man to [54] marriage: the eternal sucking of the same orange, when there are thousands for his plucking."

His tone was of the lightest, but Peter understood that it veiled a warning. And she was conscious of a sudden rage that he should deem a warning necessary.

"Prince of Orange," she mocked him; "you probably waste your kingdom."

But he boasted: "Not so. For I am aware of the exact instant just before the juice is all spent and the skin will taste bitter in my mouth. And then I cast away my orange and gather another. There are so many in the grove that sometimes indeed I am tempted to leave one half-sucked, to try the flavour of the next. But I don't ... I don't."

Merle put in: "You are speaking symbolically."

"I am," smiling at her—his leprechaun smile.

"And what of the pips? do you swallow them in the process?"

"Rather than spit them, yes. I likewise suck silently, and with great haste, greediness and appreciation."

"I wonder," mused Peter, into her curling smoke-wreaths, "if the orange has any views on the subject...."

Stuart heard: "That depends on the thickness of its skin."

"Their rejected skins shall go to make your pathway to Hell. And the whole way ye shall slip ignominiously."

"Rather say I shall slide gloriously."

"And bump at the bottom?"

"There are great virtues, even in a bump at the bottom, to those who understand the art of swift recovery."

Peter mused on this, while remarking idly that the pale glint of Chartreuse held much more of [55] evil than the frank winking serpent-green of *crême-de-menthe*.

"Are you never natural?" she queried suddenly, recalling the man to joyous sparring, from his tender admiration of Merle's side-face, which, one among a thousand, really merited the higher appellation of profile.

"No, I don't think so. What am I, natural? or you, or anyone else? something that sleeps and eats and walks, and never enquires. Not of such stuff are born the Orange-Suckers, the Hairpin-Visionists."

"Hairpin-Visionists?" chorus of attracted femininity.

He explained: "If, whatever you are doing, you are able to project yourself into the future, and from that point look back again to the present, you can get your outlines clear, see where each step is leading you, obtain a sense of proportion and values on the incident. And that mental process follows the curves of an ordinary hairpin, starting at one of the points—then forward—and back again. D'you see?" he traced the diagram with his fingers on the table-cloth.

"Then you always live your life backwards, from some imaginary spot seven or eight months hence? What a grotesque looking-glass existence!"

"The Billet-doux is lowering its lights," remarked Stuart. And called for the bill. They had supped luxuriously, and drunken of wine that lay cradled in straw, a white muffler about its slender neck. So that the reckoning amounted to two pounds three and twopence. Stuart was about to fling down three pieces of gold—when he remembered....

Here was a quandary indeed.

Leaning across to Merle, he murmured in confidential and embarrassed tones: “I say, I’m rather short of cash; forgive the awful cheek—could you lend me half a crown?”

Very gravely she produced the coin: “It’s quite all right; please don’t bother about returning it.” [56] The notion of a Heron short of cash was truly delightful.

“Peter,” snuggling her head sleepily against the older girl’s shoulder, when they had taken their seats in the home-bound taxi. “Peter, are we going to like him? I believe we are.”

Peter looked at Stuart—and surprised a rather lorn and out-of-it expression on his face. There had been unconscious cruelty, perhaps even coquetry, in Merle’s gesture and appeal; emphasizing his position on the opposite seat; their snug drowsy security in the fortress he was attempting to storm from without.

“You realize that, don’t you?” said Peter, hammering upon the nail; “that Merle and I talk to each other; really talk. And that we’ll allow you no quarter.”

“Thank you for the danger-signal.” Stuart smiled, and ceased to resemble the lonely millionaire of fiction. The triangle for the moment was clearly isosceles: a short line connecting points X and Z at the base, while Y lay infinitely remote at the apex.

“It is going to be difficult,” thought Y exultantly.

For Stuart was nauseated by the rose-path.

And the pride of them was like wind sweeping through the hair. Pride of youth and good looks and active limb. Pride in their need of one another, and their power to stand alone withal. Most of all, pride of brain, that could leap from point to point, nor ever lose a foothold; propound subtlety upon subtlety, each of the three eager to give the corkscrew its final twist, till towards the seventh evolution they would laughingly give up, and slowly unwind again. Brains that could be adapted to any circumstances and any company; wring enjoyment from the most unpromising material; brains that forgot not, so that reference became a language, incomprehensible save to [57] those who had invented the cipher. Brains responsive, electric, in perfect working order. Pride of brain, surely as splendid a thing as the more usual pride of body that waits on youth.

The trio, definitely established, possessed a spirit of its own; its actions were wilful and indeterminate, and none could know its soul save by inspiration. It was built of cross-moods, cross-stimulations; and it owned no leader nor follower, but changed its several parts from moment to moment. A thing of fine complexity, the trio, that could adjust itself to the shock of any outside problem or weariness,—in fact, take unto and into itself these same problems and wearinesses, and make of them part of the whole, subjugated to its domination. And its god was the unknown, and its fear the Inevitable, and retrospect its recreation, and in the Hairpin Vision lay its safety, and in sex its slumbering danger.

The Spanish waiter, of a romantic disposition, took interest in the Señor and two Señoritas who came so frequently to the Billet-doux; and wondered when the former would begin to evince a preference. The Spanish waiter, only human, went so far as to rejoice in the sight of Peter and Stuart supping alone; since himself had begun to regard Merle with a more than waiterly eye. He was both puzzled and furious, two nights later, at the entrance of Stuart and Merle. And his bewilderment knew no bounds, when, having at last decided the Señoritas were at deadly enmity for their love of the capricious Señor, Peter and Merle shattered this most plausible theory by lunching together in perfect harmony of spirit. The Spanish waiter might stand as the first of a collection of persons convinced of the madness of the trio: collection of incidentals to their daily progress, such as railway-porters, policemen, telephone operators, grocers, boatmen, parents, rustics and Baldwin. Collection which Stuart proposed leaving to the Nation on his death: “each [58] individual to be labelled with date and circumstance concurrent with his or her initiation to the belief of our complete insanity.”

Peter found an instance: “Specimen 41: Respectable Old Gentleman. March 2nd, 1913. On accidentally catching sight of Trio solemnly smashing egg at the end of Euston.”

“You know,” said Merle, “I don’t think he would have been so bewildered if Stuart hadn’t explained to him that we always smash eggs at supreme moments of our career; that we regard it as a religious ceremony; and that our accompanying chant is taken from Scene I of Macbeth: “When shall we three meet again?”—ending:

> “Fare is fowl, and fowl is broke;
> Take the white and leave for us the yolk.”

“It was an impromptu effort,” the author apologized. “And then he didn’t see why the discovery of the End of Euston should be a supreme moment, even in the life of a lunatic.”

Peter could best have enlightened the Respectable Old Gentleman, to whom stations were stations, neither more nor less. Euston was her terminus for Thatch Lane; and on the many occasions that Stuart had accompanied her thither, they had taken to their hearts the grim portals and endless echoing approach, the labyrinth of platform and grey mystery of booking-hall, the infinite possibilities in its stretching regions and sinister corners. Very much less than station, when their whim was to treat it as a nursery of toys; and how much more than station,

when its oppressive personality foredoomed it as a backcloth for the day when their mood should be of tragedy. Peter and Stuart viewed Euston with respect; but regarded it nevertheless as [59] theirs by virtue of understanding, a kingdom into which even Merle could not stray.

In the balancing whereof—for Stuart was careful to dole even kingdoms and secrets with perfect equality and fairness—he and Merle were both Insiders of society, permitting them likewise to be Truants from society; a privilege Peter lacked, in that one cannot play truant from a stage one has never entered. But society, rumour-fed that the charming granddaughter of Madame des Essarts, and Heron, the fabulously wealthy young diamond-merchant, were of late to be seen frequently in company one of the other, society did approve of this most desirable union; and, furthermore, did seek to forward it by a system known as “throwing-together.” Merle and Stuart, meeting on the area-steps and by the back-doors of society, had no desire whatsoever for propinquity of the hall-portals and front drawing-room; so that Merle received with polite indifference the tidings that Stuart was to be present at some glittering function; and Stuart went so far as to refuse invitations to dinner-parties, carefully prepared with a view to placing him at Merle’s side during three solid hours of mastication.

Heron and des Essarts; riches and family; youth and beauty; it was an alliance altogether too suitable, and the parties involved felt it their bounden duty not to give it visible encouragement. “I—will—not—have you made easy for me,” Stuart muttered in his most clenched voice. Truants of society both, they enjoyed their truancy as much for what they left behind, as for what they went to seek.

Peter smiled sometimes, as she reflected how little of sordid niggling money worries, of harassing debts, of the snatching hour-to-hour existence that went on in the Bohemian underworld, was known to those who have a sufficiency of baths, and travel first-class as a matter of course. Perversely enough, she hugged to herself the memory of the few years she had spent on the [60] border-line between respectability and squalor; was glad they were hers alone, unshared by Merle or Stuart. Her one-world! ... had they each a one-world, she mused, as well as their two-world and their three-world?

She and Merle had not as yet succeeded in locating the heel of their Achilles. Stuart was hard and ruthless, that they had agreed in their many confabulations on the subject; quite without sympathy for weakness or sentiment of any kind. But signs had betrayed a vulnerable spot in him, tantalizingly indicated, vanished as soon as they attempted to follow up the trail. Childish he certainly was at times. Childish in the quick look he was wont to throw, angling for approbation, after the successful performance of what they were pleased to term a “stunt.” Childishly annoyed at any reference on their part to the kingdom as it stood before he entered it. Childishly petulant on an occasion when the girls took him adventuring in a part of the world unfamiliar to him, so that initiative fell for once into their hands. Childishly ill-mannered on another occasion, when Peter, partly in the spirit of mischief, sought to make a quartette of trio by the introduction of a new discovery in the male line. Then Stuart, even as he had done previously with Mark St. Quentin, uprose mightily in his wrath, and hurled the unoffending youth from the topmost battlements into the moat of blackness. Whereat the girls gave their officious Prætorian clearly to understand that with them alone lay the orders for entrance and ejection:

“You were disgustingly rude. You were worse; you hurt his feelings!——” A furiously indignant Merle, ivory burning to rose, eyes storm-grey. “You hurt him,” she repeated.

“It’s not a serious wound,” thus the culprit, coolly. “You shall go and put balm upon it, Merle. I believe you keep a balm factory for applying relief to the endless victims of my ‘disgusting [61] rudeness.’” He loved to tease Merle, who was soft-hearted.

“It sounds like margarine,” she cried, in distasteful reference to the balm. And the incident closed on a laugh.

But childishness was not weakness; nor could it account for those moments when he seemed mutely to plead to them for something. And then the memory would be swept away in a gale of swagger, loud crows of self-approval,—accompanied always by a twinkle in the unwindowed eye, that plainly betrayed amused knowledge of his own effrontery.

“Just where Stuart suffers,” remarked Peter to Merle, in a spasm of illumination, “is that his wings of swank will always be attributed to the uplifting effects of his money-bags, and condemned accordingly. Whereas I’m perfectly certain that without a penny he would still remain as magnificently and serenely confident. It’s in him, not in his pockets. But he’ll never get a chance to prove it. And he wears himself out in the invention of opportunities to wear himself out.”

“The qualities of a Stoic rotting in the bosom of a millionaire,” reflected the other girl. “He’s rather a dear,” she added with sudden inconsequence.

Peter surveyed her quizzically: “Quite sound as yet, are you? No bones broken?”

Merle felt herself: “Heart all right—thighs—ankles—shoulder-blades——Yes, thanks, I’m perfectly sound and rather happy. How are you?” politely.

Thus theirs was the advantage, to be able to make of him a subject for discussion. Stuart knew no such relief. His search for truth in this double she-encounter had of necessity to be a solitary quest. Nor did his previous she-encounters assist him one whit. He could rely on Merle and Peter to be thoroughly loyal to one another, and unblushingly disloyal towards him, which was baffling, by way of a beginning. They showed far cleverer than the sirens who had previously essayed to [62] lure his boat to destruction, save when he sought to compare them with females renownedly

intellectual, when by sheer perversity, the two would present themselves to his mental conception as capriciously feminine, exasperating in their swift changes of mood, in their demands upon him for the impossible, in their conscious and provoking mystery. No space of time to analyse them individually as separate Sphinxes for his unravelling. As yet they were still an undivided problem.

He knew they kept guarded and intact their innermost chambers of all. Well—did he not also retain his one-world? A world in which dwelt Stuart the metaphysician, who, stronger even than Stuart the leprechaun, recognized with dismay an ability to slip out of the trio and its pattern, its march-rhythm and its corkscrew wit; get glimpses of himself as a bit of a fool; of the whole edifice they had raised, as absurd, exaggerated; doubting whether such close comradeship with two girls, save with the outlook and excuse of pure masculinity, did not contain an element—yes, though he loathed the term, an element of the fantastic? In fact, when he could add himself to the collection that was to be left to the nation. But he limited these glimpses, as being contrary to the rules of the game; would have denied them himself altogether, had he not been convinced they added to the fun,—the fun of scrambling back, aware he had been outside, a truant from truancy! The metaphysician went in fear that the leprechaun would one day lose his scrambling abilities; that the intellect would predominate over the sense of worlds beyond the reach of facts. The metaphysician was wistfully envious of the leprechaun, who continued to kick up his heels in despite of disapproval.

There likewise dwelt in the one-world a Stuart Heron known to college friends, such as Oliver Strachey, who remembered him as the finest classical scholar of his year; and other men viewing [63] him solely in the light of a keen sportsman; a fellow good to knock about with; not much of a talker; inclined to be a bit shattering and explosive at times, but apologizing for these ebullitions by a great excess of heartiness afterwards; excess indeed, for Stuart was apt to over-emphasize his normality.

Remained Heron the diamond-merchant, who was perhaps negligible—perhaps also not.

April this year had stolen some of June's warm gold, so that devotees of the river could for once pay homage to tender mist of green, and mating bird-song. The trio had been afloat since early hours, before the sun had yet drunk all the diamond dew from the cobwebs, and Peter more than once apologized to Stuart for the continual reminders of his trade that sparkled from every grass-blade, every opening leaf.

Their boat had pushed first into all the locks, and shot first out, nose thrust between the slowly widening gates. They had discovered an island above the broken glinting shoulder of a weir; and, annexing it for their own, played Swiss Family Robinson thereon, with great contentment, save for some slight argument concerning the parts: "Little Franz for me," Peter declared, "because of the rides. Whatever wild animal they catch, be it ostrich or donkey or tortoise, Arab steed or earwig, there's always 'just room for our little Franz upon its back.' Franz has an easy time of it. His father makes him a quiverful of arrows, and 'off he trots, looking like a Cupid,' That's me. Stuart, you shall be the father."

"I've no vocation for impromptu sermons on the goodness of Heaven in permitting our pigs to find truffles," retorted Stuart. "And I want to be 'my wilful headstrong Fritz.' Merle shall be father—*and* mother."

Merle demurred. They always cast her for the "mother" parts, she complained, simply because [64] her hair chose to remain tidier than other people's. At which thrust, Peter renounced the entire game, and decided she wanted to play at hounds-among-the-undergrowth. Her companions looked puzzled.

"'The Hound of the d'Urbervilles'? Sleuth-hounds? Hounds of Low? of Ditch? Hounds of Heaven? Or just Faithful Hounds? Peter, please specify, and I might even play at being just one tiny little puppy bloodhound myself."

In the end Stuart was the entire pack, and Master of the Hounds to boot. And then they abandoned this new sport in favour of the Spanish Armada; sailed ignited fireships down a backwater, and roused volumes of sputtering and inarticulate wrath in the bosom of a mild man of peace whose skiff they had almost set in flames.

Now, subdued to a more twilit mood, they lie dark against the quenched amber and pearl of the sunset; and reviewing their April day, they find it good. Stuart, in ostentatious proof that he needs no rest from his Herculean labours with the pole, has allowed Peter to recline full-length in the punt, her head upon his knees, the while she lazily smokes a cigarette, and complains that his bones penetrate the thickness of four cushions, and hurt the back of her neck.

"Which proves that you are a Princess by birth," laughs Merle, squatting, a graceful Dryad, on the adjoining bank. "You remember the incident of the pea under the twelve mattresses?"

And now it is that Peter solemnly propounds the question, as to whether (*a*) consciousness of swank and swagger, and (*b*) consciousness of the irritation produced in others by swank and swagger, could or could not be held as mitigating circumstances for aforesaid swank and swagger?

"Mitigating circumstances? No, I think not," thoughtfully Merle raises a dusky purple grape to [65] her crimson lips. The colour-scheme thus presented might have been one of Dulac's exotic harmonies: blue-green shadow of the Quarry Woods behind; vivid blue jersey; bluish lights in the dense black of her hair. "I should rather say that the consciousness makes one accessory before

the fact."

Stuart joins in; "The form of the question might be altered to this: does my personality justify my swank?" impishly he grins down on the upturned face of Peter across his knees. He is very unlike a man at these minutes; gnome, pixie or hobgoblin might claim him brother.

Peter retorts: "That's a different thing altogether. And why limit the problem to yourself? I was talking generally."

"Deceive not thyself, my child. A long and careful study of the differences between male and female intellect has finally convinced me that the latter is incapable of generalities, of completely impersonal discussion. Follow the wriggling rivers of her speech backwards to their source, and you will discover the Subjective Sea. But do you know," with renewed earnestness; "I believe my personality *does* justify my swank. Otherwise you wouldn't put up with me as you do. And if it justifies my swank, then my swank is non-existent. Swank is a thing which proceeds from a misconception of one's status."

"Is his swank non-existent?" murmurs Merle to the swimming atoms in a last slanting sunray; "Oh, I trow not."

"'Swagger' is slightly different again." Stuart is enjoying himself immensely. "It is the outward and visible manifestation of the swank that resides in the soul. The 'agger' in fact. But your question respecting the mitigating circumstances of our consciousness thereof, is rot, my dear Peter. Because swagger *is* consciousness, to start with. Shall we paddle her home, Merle?" [66]

The haze of evening has crept up, white-footed, from the south. A Dryad moves from the bank, seats herself beside a Faun. The rhythmic dip and swirl of their paddles dies away into silence.

... And the pride of them was like wind sweeping through the hair; pride in their ability to maintain without disaster this strangely exhilarating friendship of one and two; flaunt it in the very face of the Inevitable.

[67]

CHAPTER V
DIAMONDS ARE TRUMPS

"I want to go a-maying," Peter announced. Nor was her ardour abated when Merle reminded her that April was still in its heyday.

"That makes no difference if the spirit of May-day be in me. The weather is a sheer intoxication, and calls for revelry. It's not your birthday by any chance, is it?"

"If you can wait three weeks——"

"I can't! I can't! I want to go a-maying."

Merle looked at her helplessly. "But one doesn't go a-maying in Regent Street," she protested; "if you mean garlands and queens. I'll crown you with hawthorn from Gerrard's, if you insist, but the expense will be enormous. Or we'll catch a cart-horse and plait its tail with red, white, and blue. *Or* I'll treat you to an ice-cream soda at Fuller's. You can choose between these rural delights."

"Where's Stuart?" Peter demanded suddenly. "I haven't seen or heard of him for about a week." One of Stuart's habits was the treatment of each curt farewell as final, leaving his companions in a pleasant state of uncertainty as to his next summons to fellowship. "Where's Stuart? P'raps it's *his* birthday. 'Tisn't mine, I know. Merle, what do you say to a grand un-birthday festival? Stuart shall take us into the country to toss cowslip balls. We'll rout him out from his Aladdin's Cave. Who wants diamonds in springtime, in springtime——"

"'The only pretty ring-time,'" Merle added. "So you're wrong about the diamonds." [68]

"We'll go and look at his pretty rings." Peter hesitated, came to a full-stop opposite one of Liberty's windows, a tawny riot of gold and amber and copper tints. "Perhaps we'd better not," she decided; "I hate the sort of female who can't leave a man alone in business hours. And I hate still more the ponderous business face with which he receives her pretty importunities."

"But Stuart!" laughed Merle. "You can surely trust Stuart enough to believe there is no City-spell on earth can hold him captive. Besides, he begged us to invade his premises one day and see him play at diamond-merchants. Don't you remember?"

"In a silk hat; so he did. Come along then." Peter wavered no longer, but hailed a Holborn 'bus, and followed by Merle, scrambled to the top. She was right about the weather: the warm air was a-stir with lilac promise, and passing faces gave evidence of spring-cleaning within, a more potent and magical spring-cleaning than ever achieved by mop and broom.

"I feel about six and a half," Merle confessed gaily, as with a delighted sense of exploration they spelt out "Heron and Carr, Diamond-merchants, first floor," among a bewilderment of brass plates, and mounted lightly the wide stone staircase.

"We want Mr. Stuart Heron, please," to the office boy who answered their summons; and again, "We want Mr. Stuart Heron," as a preoccupied clerk came slowly forward.

"Mr. Stuart?" The man looked reluctant. "Is it important?"

"Awfully important," said Peter gravely. She was wondering what would be the man's attitude if she explained that the youngest partner of the house was required for the purposes of an un-birthday celebration.

They were conducted through two or three apartments, containing nothing more thrilling than [69] cupboards and clerks, so that Merle assumed the jewels were kept in glittering caverns below; and then ushered into an anteroom, formal and luxurious, in which were already seated several applicants for royal favour, grave men and grey, all.

"I think Mr. Stuart is engaged. What name shall I say?" The confidential clerk appeared curiously disapproving of their presence.

"Got your card-case, Merle?"

Of course Merle had her card-case. And a card. And white kid gloves with which to present it. More than could be said for Peter.

Their guide withdrew, having first motioned the girls to deep leather arm-chairs, into which they sank and were obliterated. The silence of the room became thick and muffled. A clock ticked ponderously from the chimney-piece. The assembled veterans made no sound, with the exception of one who played nervously with his feet, advancing these by slow stages towards one another, and then scurrying them apart, as if fearful of being caught in the act. Peter watched him, fascinated. It was fully ten minutes before hurried steps approached the door....

There had been changes in the firm of Heron and Carr since Stuart entered it, three years before. Uncle Arthur had embraced the opportunity to retire from business. Derwent Heron was growing old, and absented himself frequently from the office: Baldwin—well, Baldwin at the best of times was useful mostly as an ornament. Thus it befell that a great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of the new partner. Nor was Stuart averse to this. He was right when he said that a game lost its value unless played in all seriousness. On the whole he made few mistakes, though his lucky star ran the risk, from overwork, of becoming somewhat frayed at the edges. Frequently [70] he deplored the difficulty of truly reckless gambling, with that officious orbit fore-dooming him ever to success. Of late, certain events had decided him to buy in a vast amount of stock, giving mostly bills in exchange. Then, like a bolt from the blue, one Antoine Gobert, from Venezuela,

made his sensational announcement: no less than the discovery of a cheap preparation for the making of diamonds. The days following this revelation were fraught with the greatest strain to the merchants in the trade. It was generally acknowledged that in the case of Heron and Carr the crash consequent upon proof of Gobert's integrity would resound loudest. It was unlucky for the youngest diamond-merchant in London that he should have been buying in with such rapidity and vigour. His elders shook their grey heads over Stuart, but consulted him notwithstanding, in this period of crisis; an unconscious tribute to certain brilliant strokes made by the firm within the past three years.

Gobert, having flung his bombshell, did not seem inclined to part too easily with the mysteries of his prescription. Rumour was busy, and prices fluctuated wildly. With difficulty was a panic averted. Stuart firmly declared the magician a fraud; continued to assert it contrary to the opinions of the majority, older men, men of deep experience. It was felt that some decisive step would have to be taken, before Gobert should make newspaper babble of his secret. Already journalism was on the scent; and once known, the romance of the thing would cause it to be gobbled greedily by the public. So the wizard was approached; discreetly sounded; finally, an offer made to him by Sir Fergus Macpherson, of the firm of Grey, Macpherson and Sons, well-known diamond-merchants. An offer of twenty thousand pounds for the purpose of private experiment; a slip of paper, containing the exact ingredients of the manufacture, to be placed, in [71] token of good faith, at the Bank of England. Gobert refused twenty thousand pounds. Not enough. Fifty thousand then? So be it, fifty thousand. The money was paid over, and the experiments started. Then, somehow a doubt of Gobert arose and grew. And that very day, April the 16th, it was finally decided that the envelope was to be opened, the miracle laid bare. If genuine—so much the worse for dealers in diamonds; so much the worse for Stuart Heron in particular. The issue would not have loomed in his eyes so stupendous, were it not that he felt his credit with Derwent and Arthur at stake. The firm had relied on his judgment. So that, sitting in earnest consultation with Sir Fergus and a certain Rupert Rosenstein, his mouth was set in sterner lines than his age warranted, and a deep frown lay between his eyebrows.

"Well, in that case, Sir Fergus——"

The confidential clerk entered noiselessly, and handed him a card: 'Miss Merle des Essarts.'

"Here?"

"Two young ladies, Mr. Heron. Said it was important."

"Oh—very well. Say that I'm coming at once."

But it was several minutes before Sir Fergus rose to take leave. And then there were so many matters that clamoured for his brain's attention; all overshadowed by a persistently recurring vision of a factory ... ten factories ... a thousand factories; men working; swarms of busy little figures; myriads of tiny white crystals the result of their labours,—the result of a few lines of writing that awaited the evening's examination. Glittering crystals, produced in such quantities as to flood the universe like dewfall ... pretty little crystals, but utterly valueless.

Stuart straightened his shoulders. No good anticipating the worst. He opened the door of the anteroom: "Ah, Digby, I wanted to see you,"—and he of the wandering feet looked gratified. [72]

Peter and Merle were waiting, rather impatiently, at the far end of the apartment. Some of their April joyousness had been swamped by the oppressive atmosphere surrounding them. The sunshine, creeping through the heavily curtained window, was merely metallic here. So that they greeted Stuart with relief.

"The face is perfect," laughed Peter. "All we expected, and more. And now please take it off. Or is it merely semi-detached?"

Stuart did not reply. Nor was there perceptible alteration in his demeanour. But Peter was too amused by his garments of black decorum, to note that to-day they were something more than skin-deep.

"But, oh, Stuart, where's the hat? You promised us the hat! Don't say you've left it in the hall?"

He turned to Merle; and though he spoke courteously, his thoughts seemed very far away.

"My clerk told me it was important. Are you in any trouble? Or—can I?"—he hesitated, obviously waiting an excuse for their presence. And Merle's cheeks began to burn.

"We—it isn't really important," she faltered. "I only—we thought——" oh, to be safely down the steps and out in the street! How could she say to this stranger: "We wanted you to come a-maying because it is April." The thrill of primroses in the air had dwindled to a pin-point of triviality.

"We wondered whether you would care to join us for a day in the country," she finished at last, lamely.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid it's quite out of the question to-day." He appeared to realize dimly that something more was expected of him. His eye fell on Digby, eager for attention. The confidential clerk entered: "You're wanted on the telephone, sir. Mr. Grey." "All right, Lewis; ask him to hold the line," alert response now in his voice; and he had already turned to the door, when he [73] remembered his visitors. "We must be going," said Merle quickly. He looked relieved. "Ah, then you'll excuse me, I know. We're rather rushed. Would you care to have a look round the place?"—he signalled to Lewis to wait, in case his services should be required as cicerone. "There's nothing much to see, though. No treasure-vaults," with a groping attempt to resume the language

of which he had so patently mislaid the cipher.

And Merle, likewise clutching at her rags of self-respect, responded with a forced laugh: “You don’t make the diamonds, then?”

“No,” Stuart’s tones were somewhat grim. “We don’t make the diamonds.” He paused. Then, with a quick “Good-bye,” went to answer the telephone summons. “I’ll see you directly, Digby,” thrown out on his way to the door. Baldwin Carr appeared at another entrance: “Has Macpherson gone, Stuart? Derwent wanted to speak to you——” “Right! when I’ve polished off Grey.” What *was* the matter with all these men, that the wrinkle lay so deep between their eyebrows?

Baldwin glanced in some surprise at the figures of Peter and Merle, standing irresolutely by the window. Then returned to his private office.

The confidential clerk showed them out. A swinging door presented them with a snatch of telephonic conversation: “Yes, it’s Mr. Stuart Heron—Yes—No, not till to-night, nothing definite—we think——” The door swung to, cutting off the rest.

On the stone steps, they came face to face with a little shrivelled man, head cocked to one side; Arthur Heron, had they known it; rat about to rejoin the sinking ship.

Out in the push and clamour of Holborn, Merle drew a long breath, put both hands up to her hot face: “I wonder if I shall ever grow cool again,” she said, rather tremulously. And: “I suppose we’ve made rather fools of ourselves.” [74]

“Don’t!” gasped Peter. Every time she recalled the blank look which had received her first eager speeches it was as if someone had dealt her a blow in the face. Oh, the stinging ignominy which lay in the remembrance of Merle and herself, two blushing incoherent little—idiots, intruding with froth and futility into the world of real things, solid things, things that matter, world of men. And Stuart could so easily have averted humiliation from their heads: one look, one word, to prove his recollection of the thousand intimacies that had lain between them.—“A day in the country ... I’m sorry—*Sorry!*” She ejaculated the word aloud in accents of such furious scorn, that Merle looked round startled. He should be sorrier still, soon! His fault, every bit; not for ejecting them, but for ever having dared invite them—to meet with that.

With a sense of rawness that cried out for solitude, Peter suddenly bade Merle good-bye:

“I’m going home. Do you mind?”

And sorrowful for the mood of April so rudely shattered, Merle shook her head and passed on.

[75]

CHAPTER VI
MERLE

Thus Merle's evening at Lancaster Gate was doomed to be a solitary one. For Madame des Essarts had sallied forth, in diamonds and dignity, to a banquet celebrating the arrival in office of a new Greek minister. The handsome old lady, with her social talents, her knowledge of foreign languages, her dainty pointed wit, the aura of martyrdom which clung to her enforced exile from the hated Republic of France—to which she could return whenever she pleased—was of the type that had, in ruffled and beruffled days, swayed kings and unmade ministers. Perhaps the secret of her lost art lay in the fact that she never for one moment forgot she was dealing with men, nor let them forget that she regarded them as such, lords and puppets. Not for Antoinette des Essarts the cheery comradeship, the quick sexless sympathy, the contempt of cajolery and intrigue, which distinguished the generation among which she now moved. And perhaps from her had come that ultra-feminine streak in Merle that expressed itself in the girl's attitude towards Stuart; something which held out an involuntary hand for support, yet shrank, at once disdainful and startled, from too rough-and-ready an intimacy; even though, with Peter, she might rejoice at what she deemed the whole-hearted freedom of the trio.

In her soft gown of *eau-de-nil*—for who, argues Madame des Essarts, who of the noblesse would appear by evening light save in silk attire and satin slipper?—she dined in lonely state; seated at [76] one end of vast acres of dinner-table, with ever at her elbow a silent personage bearing the chef's latest inspiration. Peter should by invitation have been keeping her company this night, and making exceeding merry over the ceremonial repast. And, it may be for the fiftieth time in the past two years, Merle des Essarts breathed devout thanks to the laughing young adventuress, who had brought her from regarding as unalterable essentials *eau-de-nil* and a French chef, Watteau and ambassadors, all the incidentals of Merle's quaintly formal setting, to the point of view that these were mere delightful ingredients in an ever-changing game of play; one costume, vastly becoming indeed, among a million in masquerade.

Yet to-night, lacking Peter, some of the old wistful regrets touched Merle with chilly fingers; followed her with ghostly trip into the little boudoir, grey and primrose, Lancret looped medallion-wise into the overmantel; whispered in lisping voices of a day that might possibly come when Dresden, with ribboned crook for sceptre, should again reign supreme in her life; pointed in light mockery to a picture that adorned the wall: Merle herself, aged eight, standing stiffly posed beside a sundial; hands busy with the ivory sticks of a painted fan; toes primly turned outwards; smooth, dark curls; high-waisted pink frock. One moment fixed indelibly to symbolize a whole childhood. And with whatever passionate zest she might play now, Merle knew, and hotly resented, that she could not make up for her cheated years of château and convent, of solitude and decorum and *il-ne-faut-pas*. To be sure, the latter phrase did not need to be said often; *la petite* Merle and her brother Fernand had been ever '*bien sage lui; et elle, un vrai petit ange*.' Of course she had! Who had taught her otherwise, before her twentieth birthday?

... An April shower of rain swept the panes, glowing sapphire-dark behind their primrose [77] hangings. A musical pattering shower, unreal as a lit boudoir and a girl's dreams....

—Crash! and an exquisite china clock lay shattered on the ground. A thin little chap, with freckled impertinent nose and pointed ears, looked up, startled, as Merle hastened to the rescue: "Couldn't help it; just wanted to see how it took to pieces."...

With wild hurrahs, a tangle of long legs and flying skirts whizzed down the banisters and landed in a heap at the foot.

Something delightful and sturdy, with dark red hair and blown-out cheeks, was marching to and fro on the polished drawing-room floor, waving flags and shouting....

Thus Merle drew from the Land of Corners, shadowy corners of the old house, dim unswept corners in her brain, dog-eared corners of forgotten picture-books, a whole host of children; ordinary, healthy, grubby youngsters, who would reduce the silent beautiful rooms to their proper state of scrum and chaos. Above all, naughty children; she collected the warm cosy naughtinesses that has never been hers; gloated over each separate deed of infamy; as if in offering to the prim sad-eyed daintily clothed image on the wall.

... Dick was for ever robbing orchards and being chased by irate farmers. But then how could he help it, this eldest son of hers, just entering that close-cropped hobnailed condition that betokens the schoolboy? And Merle liked to see his rough bullet-head buried in her lap, in moods of half-sullen contrition; would have kept it permanently there, had Dick been willing. Which he wasn't.

... Nobody-loves-me came wandering in from the garden. Nobody-loves-me was the ugly duckling, of whom visitors were wont to say: "Never mind, my dear; the Ugly Duckling grew to be a swan, [78] you know," a prophecy which comforted the sufferer not a whit. She was given to brooding, this particular infant; and possessed, in addition, Bad Habits: Bad Habits, such as Biting Her Nails. And, suddenly aware of the Bitten Nails, Merle generously handed over Nobody-loves-me to Peter, who lived next door, and who could therefore be freely endowed with undesirable progeny, "because anyway," reflected Merle, "they couldn't all be mine." And Dick and the Boy-girl, ringleaders both, kept her hands pretty full. Boy-girl it was who erstwhile slid the banisters; she, who climbed trees, and made ladders in her stockings—such as no young lady should—and blarneyed the cook; and once, by way of an experiment, cut short not only her own mane of hair, but also the straggly crop of Nobody-loves-me. The incarnation of swift and mischievous daring,

Boy-girl; but who could be angry with her long, when she brought her coaxing Irish charm to bear on the situation?

—Why Irish? Merle was not quite sure. She knew only that it was, undeniably, Irish charm. And finally solved the riddle by making the (shadowy) father of this swarming brood, a son of Erin.

The little-mother-to-her-sisters-and-brothers, gentle, smooth-haired and fond of her needle, to be found in every well-regulated family, Merle, on consideration, also presented as a free gift to Peter. Her own unacknowledged favourite was the funny little beggar with the puck-like ears, three-cornered nostrils set to catch the rain, and scientific mind; which latter prompted him invariably to take articles to pieces for the sake of seeing how they worked. And they never worked again. There were many, many costly rarities in the house, Merle remembered happily, that literally asked for his attentions.

Or did she after all more tenderly incline to the delicate child with clustering pale-gold hair? who [79]
nervously refused to sleep without a night-light; who believed in fairies, and cherished all sorts of quaint fanciful notions about the little angels—Merle pulled herself up with a start, realizing that here she had in wanton enjoyment created a veritable chee-ild! Unable to slaughter in cold blood anything so lately born, she compromised by ... giving it to Peter. For anyhow (in guilty argument) Peter's hair was of that peculiar pale-gold tint, and what more natural than that her offspring should inherit it?

Tumultuously alive now, all these ordinary healthy grubby youngsters; making walls within and sky without, resound with their whoops and coo-ees. A turbulent out-of-hand crew—Merle is rather afraid she is lacking in Proper Authority; in the balancing whereof, she endows the (shadowy) father with a "firm hand over the children," in addition to his Irish birth and other excellent qualities.

A few stray naughtinesses yet to be collected from chimney-corner and rafter and cellar; such as leaving all doors open,—except, in swift amendment, when Dick rather chooses to bang them. Somebody, probably the gardener, lodges a complaint that "they chairs be rotted through again, left h'out all night in the damp." And Nurse says it isn't her fault that the young ladies and gentlemen won't eat vegetables, since they will persist in stuffing chocolate just before their dinner; and Merle has much ado not to laugh, knowing, via some subtle instinct, that every secret opportunity is embraced to thrust tapioca, crusts, and spinach into the crevice between walls and cupboard; accumulated results only to be discovered at Spring-cleaning.

... Boy-girl dashes in to demand material for "dressing-up"; already she has helped herself pretty liberally; the polite request is an afterthought. The nurseries overflow with messy pets—nor does Puck ever remember to feed his guinea-pig. Nobody-loves-me has run away, for the third time in [80]
a fortnight, because the others don't want her to play with them. His sailor-suit very green and wet and messy from an afternoon's fishing in the pond, Copper-curls (his brothers call him Carrots) stumbles into the boudoir, trailing behind him tackle and weed and worm on the pale grey carpet. Drowsily he cuddles his firm little body against Merle's *eau-de-nil*; slips a very hot hand between her cool fingers; droops his mouth to the semblance of a celestial choir-boy's—so that she knows he has been very, very wicked, and requires forgiveness and absolution.

And now Stuart is standing before her, eyes full of trouble ... and the children tumble in quick confusion back to the Land of Corners....

Bewildered, Merle rubbed her eyes: "I didn't hear you come in"; the door had been open, and the thick velvet pile a muffler to approaching footsteps.

"Merle, am I going to be hurled from the battlements, for failing to observe the divinity of play?"

She made no reply, not quite sure whether his mood be not of mockery. And suddenly, with a quick and—for him—rather clumsy movement, he dropped onto his knees beside her chair, buried his head deep in her lap; so that it almost seemed as if Dick ... Merle let her fingers stray, half-fearfully, among the rebellion of rough brown hair. For in the blur of twilight and dreams and pattering rain, she could not as yet entirely separate her phantom visitants from the real ones.

"Why, your coat is wet." She bent forward to light the gas-fire in the grate. And with a gulp and a leap, the room was warm with a multitude of tiny blue tongues, licking and panting through their skull-like rings.

"I've been walking since five o'clock." He was silent for a moment. Then it came out, not in a grateful unburdening torrent, but in wrung jerky sentences, of which the last caught up and [81]
contained the whole hidden cause of pain:

"I was grown-up—didn't hear the call ... and I wasn't even aware of it."

Something wrong here which lay too deep for her understanding. Merle asked no questions; content to dry his coat; touch lingeringly his hair and shoulders; give him the comfort she dimly felt he most needed.

"It didn't matter, dear."

"You're not going to shut me out, you and Peter?"

"We couldn't do without you, Stuart."

"Thank you." A tightness in his voice seemed to have snapped at her tender assurance. His fingers, which had gripped and twisted at hers till she could have cried out with the pain, now slackened their pressure. For the moment, the girl had succeeded in exorcising the demons

which were so strangely tormenting his soul.

... A hush in the room. A hush so profound, that two little figures stirred restlessly in their corner, came tip-toeing hand-in-hand towards the door of the boudoir. But——

“It’s no good,” whispered Nobody-loves-me, as she tugged Puck backwards. “He’s still there.”...

Stuart looked up suddenly: “‘Wherefore to wait my pleasure, I put my Spring aside....’ I always knew it would be damnably easy—to slip beyond the pattern and never get back....” The demons were again at work within him. If only they would leave him in peace, just for a moment, mind and body.

“Stuart, don’t you ever get tired?” she cried pitifully.

He muttered: “Dead tired,” and closing his eyes, allowed himself to relax entirely to her [82] comforting touch, the soft coolness of her presence; as if establishing the memory of a second against which, in future turmoil and stress, he might lay his cheek, and find rest.

“Merle.”

“Yes, dear?”

He said nothing, but still pleaded; and bending down her face to his, she found their lips clinging together.

After he had gone, Merle sat awhile, wondering how much of what had passed must be told to Peter. Loyalty, and the compact they had made: whatever happened, to keep the path unblocked between them, demanded an exact account of events. But that compact had been formed in alliance against a hard and ruthless Stuart of their imaginings. Her instincts were all to protect the boy who had come to her in his trouble. He had come to her—the thought was charged with sweetness. And here she experienced a pang of pity for the girl, the other girl, who looked like being the one left out. But Peter’s anger at the morning’s episode had been hot; she would not have known how to handle him with the gloves his soreness demanded. Peter didn’t like gloves.

... For an instant, Merle contemplated treachery.

No. It was popularly supposed that two girls couldn’t be square with one another, where a man was in question. Hers to disprove the theory. A secret unshared by Peter would, moreover, be an insult to the spirit of the trio; the first menace to its continued existence. Merle hesitated no longer, but sat down at the escritoire, and wrote her letter; a letter which omitted nothing, not even the final embrace—though she winced at the thought that Peter might possibly misconstrue it to something more of man and woman, less of child. Then she rang the bell and gave orders for the missive to be taken at once to the post.

... Up the hushed staircase, and into the vast shadowy bedroom. Had Stuart’s head really lain on [83] her lap? Or was he but one of the fantastic crowd who had been abroad that night in Lancaster Gate; sliding the banisters, playing hide-and-seek in the passages, smashing the china—while the white-haired châtelaine of the house took wine with the King of the Hellenes’ minister.

[84]

CHAPTER VII
PETER

On reaching home, Stuart found Baldwin Carr awaiting him in the dining-room.

“Hullo! you’re a late visitor.”

“I thought you’d want to know,” said Baldwin, from whose brow the unwonted lines of anxiety had now been ironed away. “The whole business was a fake—and Gobert has vanished off the face of the earth.”

This was sensational. Stuart helped himself to a whisky and soda.

“What do you mean by fake? the envelope——”

“Empty, my boy. Blank bit of paper, that’s all. Jove! you should have seen the faces when it was opened. Old Rosenstein! Of course we smelt a rat, and sent round to Monsieur Antoine’s apartments. Not a sign of him. Left that morning, the landlady said; bag, baggage—and incidentally, our fifty thousand. Still, compared with what it might have cost us—well, what do you think of it?”

“I take off my hat to Gobert,” replied the other, with an amused chuckle; “fifty thou. isn’t too much to pay for the privilege of acquaintance with the swindler who can rob you of it.”

“Well—ah—I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. Pour me out a stiff one, Stuart, I’m just about done up. And then I must be off. Wanted to set your mind at rest first. Where have you been all these hours? Not that I blame you for bunking,”—Stuart smiled—“the strain was intolerable. I’d have escaped from the office myself, only I thought it hardly fair to Derwent.” [85]

Nor did his nephew seek to explain the real goad which had driven him forth to pace the streets from five o’clock that April afternoon.

Baldwin set down his glass: “Good night——” he paused. Something like emotion shook his voice. “We’ve pulled through,” he said. And Stuart, knowing the other was only recalled from adding: “we Herons,” by a consideration of facts, composed his face to lines befitting the occasion, and solemnly grasped the extended hand. Baldwin’s pulling may have been of a negative order, but of his pride in firm and family, no man could remain in doubt.

Stuart fell asleep that night lulled by memory of a sweet tremulous mouth, and dark eyes, deeply tender; of a blur of *eau-de-nil* in a setting of pale primrose and dim grey; of cool fingers quelling to peace all the hot turbulence that tormented him; of a soft voice saying: “We can’t do without you, Stuart....”

He awoke next day to the same memory, lashing him with whips of shame. The deadly panic which had resulted from his conduct of the preceding morning, panic of clogging with moral and mental fat, his vision of worlds beyond and his capacity for play, was as nothing compared to the revolt with which he now viewed his breakdown of the evening: the brimming to the surface of weak sentiment, to find solace in a girl’s caresses. Twice—twice in twelve hours to have lost control of himself; to have taken his hand from the tiller twice; to have twice resigned stage management to an unseen power, which derided, even while it swung him from “a sense of business responsibility” to an extreme of maudlin hysteria. Stuart did not spare himself in terms of abuse. And Merle had encouraged him to make an exhibition of himself; Merle had lent a sympathetic ear to his woes; asked no questions; flooded him with rosy forgiveness. Merle had made it easy for him—easy and comfortable; dried his coat.... Stuart smouldered and chafed, seeing the incident pictured in bright colours: “A Little Mother,” and framed on the nursery wall, valued supplement to a Xmas number. [86]

Why, in Heaven’s name, hadn’t she met him with conflict of some sort; mockery that might have braced him to action; instead of just allowing him to—slop. Verb which to Stuart expressed the apex of abomination.

A sense of justice reasserted itself. Merle was charming, no doubt of it; her response to his appeal a very idyll of fragrance and simplicity. As for his curt behaviour when the two girls had called on him in the office, well, Stuart was hardly sorry any more; save when the leprechaun recognized a glorious opportunity missed: to have proved himself able to cope with both situations in the appropriate spirit; with the light-hearted “come out to play,” in the midst of the almost unbearable tension consequent on the danger threatening the affairs of Heron and Carr.

—“Couldn’t have devised it better myself,” mused Stuart regretfully, as he gave Peter’s number to the telephone clerk.

Peter sprang out of bed, hearing the postman’s knock; and pattering barefoot downstairs, she drew from the box, Merle’s letter, in company of an oblong bill, and an envelope bearing St. Quentin’s by now familiar handwriting. Then, returning to her room, she seated herself on the edge of the bed; and, a pale-haired gleaner in the early sunshine, proceeded to examine her harvest.

The bill contained an intimation to the effect that Mr. Lazarus, tailor, was amazed that Miss Kyndersley should have ignored his repeated applications for payment, and could only suppose they had slipped her memory, as otherwise doubtless, etc. [87]

“I call that a delicate way of putting it,” reflected Peter, with thoughts all of sunny kindness towards Mr. Lazarus. “He’s trying to spare my feelings, bless him. He shall have free tickets for

dad’s next pier concert.”

Of paying there could be no question. Peter, true to the traditions of her caste, never settled her debts till actually threatened by the law; when she would hastily sell her silver hair-brushes, or borrow from her aunt, or pledge the half-of-her-next-year-but-one income; diminutive amount at best, inherited from her dead mother. She also had what she called her “submerged” periods, when by dint of forswearing the world for an entire fortnight, and working hard eight hours a day at colouring art postcards, she scraped together a sufficient sum to extricate her for a short while from the perpetual webs with which finance encumbered her pathway. Never yet had she been altogether free from pecuniary embarrassments; would indeed have missed the background of their mutterings, as those who have dwelt long by the sea cannot bear to be deprived of its eternal swish.

Mark St. Quentin, striving to mingle in equal proportions formality with infatuation, begged leave to visit her at Thatch Lane the following Sunday. Peter dimpled mischievously; she would wear a white dress, and playfully beg him to help lay the knives and forks for supper: “We have only one servant, you see; and treat you as quite one of the family”—and she dimpled again at the thought of Stuart’s disgust on anyone treating him as one of any family, anywhere.

Stuart ... a slight contraction of her bare toes, as she remembered how the said gentleman had incurred her displeasure. She wondered what his attitude was likely to be. Then opened Merle’s letter—and found out.

[88] Peter raised her head; gazed straight through the window, across garden and hedge and field, to where the Weald hunched its back against the sky. But her eyes missed the tender greens and misty blues of the landscape; could not share in the joy of the house on discovering it at last owned, after five gloomy months, a clear black shadow to lay upon the dew-wet grass.

For she was wondering how not to be jealous.

It was not the incident itself which rankled; but recognition of a fact that long ago had carried its conviction, though only now its results: Merle was allowed, by the unseen code, to be the more feminine of the twain. She, Peter, thrust willy-nilly into the bolder, more challenging position. Was it that she was born with a tilt to her soul, as well as to her nose and chin? She could not tell. But Stuart, gravitating to her for all stimulation, had nevertheless gone to Merle for comfort. And Peter wondered furthermore why she played up so persistently to the Laughing-Cavalier qualities, with which from the very first he had chosen to endow her. And, wondering, knew yet that she must continue boyish and defiant; though she, even as Merle, wanted how much to be tender to him in his present attire of sackcloth and ashes.

The getting-up gong sounded, and Peter returned to bed.

The breakfast-gong, half an hour later, led her to the bathroom; and another quite irrelevant gong saw her wrestling with stockings. Only when the gongs finally ceased from troubling, did she descend to the dining-room, there to find Aunt Esther deeply immersed in the “Daily Camera.”

“Peter, just look at these!”

[89] ‘These’ were startling pictorial presentments of Antoine Gobert, the notorious diamond wizard; flanked on the one side by Sir Fergus Macpherson, looking like a Jew, which he wasn’t; on the other, by an elderly and speckled Stuart: “youngest partner in the firm of Heron & Carr.” Below appeared sensational accounts of the shameful fraud which had been practised, and the scene which took place in a private room of the Bank of England, at 6.30 p.m. of the previous day, when the bubble was pricked.

Peter’s lip curled as she read. So that accounted for Stuart’s sudden mood of contrition. Easy enough to find time for being sorry, after the cause of anxiety had been removed. It required no Stuart Heron for that. Nor did she consider that the strain adequately accounted for his preoccupation of the morning. According to his own standards, he should be strung up to response at any moment, however inopportune. If he could be exacting, why, so also could she. Quite cured of her yearnings towards womanly tenderness, she tossed aside the paper, and helped herself to eggs and bacon.

“Well, well,” quoth Miss Esther, “I always say that foreigners aren’t to be trusted; and I’m sure it’s very nice and pleasant to think young Mr. Heron isn’t going to be a bankrupt after all. Of course he has rather more money than he knows what to do with; but still, it’s better in the hands of a gentleman than a rogue. And these things will get in the papers, and there you are! What can you expect? However, there’s no harm done; the Bank of England is too wide-awake for that. And,” an after-thought, “Heaven will punish the swindler, I’ve no doubt.”

Thus having, according to custom, neatly packed away the entire set of events within her own private and particular boundaries; reduced each participant, including Heaven and the Bank of England, to a height convenient for patting on the head, Miss Esther Worthing asked for the marmalade.

[90] The telephone bell rang. Peter dashed up the stairs, prepared to spurn still further into the dust the bowed and prostrate figure at the other end of the wire. Stuart’s cheery greeting, however, did not quite coincide with her expectations.

“Hullo! That you, Peter ... dear?” almost a sub-current of amusement in his tone. “What’s the attitude?”

“Bellicose,” was the spirited retort.

“Thought so. It would have been so much less obvious on your part, to have held out the hand of forgiveness.”

“You want a Briareus of forgiveness, it seems.”

“Oh. So you’ve heard from Merle.”

“Yes.”

Silence for a moment. Then:

“Doesn’t the fact that of my own accord I regained the sense of things—or rather the nonsense of things, doesn’t it all absolve me from your wrath?” still that slight mocking inflection. Peter thought how pleasant it would be to hurt him. Hurt him quite badly.

“Of your own accord?” she flung indignantly into the mouthpiece. “Why, I’ve seen the papers. Naturally, *after* your business troubles were so unexpectedly smoothed out, you had leisure to turn your attention to—minor matters.”

“As it happened,”—she could not complain now of too light a note in the icy incision of his speech, “I did not know that the Gobert thunderbolt had been averted, until I reached home after seeing Merle.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I did not know.”

“The envelope was opened towards half-past six, according to the Press.”

“I believe that’s correct.”

“And Merle writes that you turned up about nine o’clock.”

“To be exact, a quarter to nine.”

“And yet you knew nothing?”

“And yet I knew nothing.” [91]

Their speeches followed each other with the thud and rebound of a swift rally over the tennis-net.

“The evidence is against you.”

“I’m not on my defence. I merely state facts.”

Peter said very gently: “Do you expect me to believe them?”

“You will—later. At present you are merely laying yourself open to the unpleasant necessity of apologizing.”

“Apologizing?” she cried, hotly resenting this turning of the tables. “For what?”

“For calling me a liar.”

“I didn’t use the word.”

“Then use it—now.”

“You’re a liar, Stuart.”

She was unable to tell if his evident anger were assumed or genuine. But, if the latter, so much the better; she anticipated a pleasurable excitement from the unexplored territory beyond the limits of his tolerance.

He was speaking again. And Peter wished he would free his voice from its straining bonds of control.

“Quite right. I am a liar. A very plausible and rather dangerous liar. But, quite by accident, in the present instance I happen to be speaking the truth. When you’ve recovered from your attitude of scepticism, ring me up. Good-bye.”

Peter went for a walk. She walked hard for a couple of hours; avoided the plunging soil of pasture-land, in favour of hard country roads, where her feet met with a ringing resistance. On reaching a village, six miles distant from Thatch Lane, she entered without hesitation the local post-office.

... “Hullo!”

“Stuart.”

“Yes?”

“I discard my attitude.”

“From weakness?” [92]

“No. From conviction.”

“Good. Thank you.”

She rang off.

In this wise, the trio forfeited their first fine carelessness. Disintegration was imminent, though none could tell as yet which way it would manifest itself. Each of their words and actions, however trivial, took on a certain significance. For Stuart had heard in Peter’s voice the battle-

ring, and tingled to its challenge. For Peter had known an instant’s jealousy of Merle. For Merle had battled with the temptation to be disloyal towards Peter. For Stuart had twice in a day ceased to be master of his moods, and vowed by all his gods these moods should neither recur again. For Merle cherished the second of them as a memory sweeter than music. For Merle had been visited by an old ghost, and by a merry host of new ones. For Peter had definitely flung her cloak, tossed her plume, donned the disguise which Stuart mistook for nature. For all these follies and cross-follies are the outcome of certain fatal desires to go a-maying on a day of April!

CHAPTER VIII
STUART GOES A-STUNTING

The girls knew that Stuart's next act would be a carefully veiled apology to the spirit of the trio, for the moment he had been deaf to its call. Apology that would probably manifest itself in a deed of unwonted daring, originality and impudence, that none might suspect it of being an apology; deed which would firmly re-establish in the eyes of the twain his slightly shaken position. For though with Peter he had crossed swords in single combat, had known the pleasure of knocking from her grasp the weapon, the pleasure of stepping back to allow her to resume it,—not, most certainly, because he was a little gentleman, but because he preferred her blade in hand; for though with Merle he had walked awhile in a two-world too softly cushioned for his taste; yet with these things the spirit of the trio did not concern itself. Nor was it to be placated save by offering to the number three. So Peter and Merle were somewhat surprised when Stuart's expected fireworks tamely resolved themselves into a verbally conveyed invitation to spend the first week in May with his elder sister, married to an owner of vast estates in Devonshire.

"The orchards will all be in bloom, and ought to look rather fine," said Stuart; "by the way, did I mention that I'm invited as well? We can paint the place as red as we please; Dorothy and Ralph won't interfere with us much. Dorothy wanted to know if she need write to you both separately, but I said it would be all right."

"Dorothy—Ralph—Devonshire," echoed Merle, when she was alone with Peter; "what a picture it [94] conveys of flowered chintz and cream and low window-seats. I'm sure the tenants call her Mistress Dorothy, and she has calm grey eyes, and wears a fichu, and keys."

"Rather an inadequate costume," Peter murmured; "and I can't imagine a sister of Stuart with 'calm' anything. Shall we accept? My country boots are done for."

"Buy new ones."

"New ones always take weeks to tame. I'd rather tame a bull than boots. The Bull and Boot sounds like a public-house. I wish Stuart hadn't taught me to search for the hidden pub. in my most innocent phrases."

"It's rather a low habit," Merle agreed. "Yes, I think we'll visit Mistress Dorothy in Devon, if Grandmaman has no objections."

Grandmaman had no objections whatever, though the invitation came somewhat too informally for her notions of etiquette. She was also at a loss how Merle was to make adequate return to her hostess, and insisted on the girl packing the gift of a three-tiered satin bonbonnière among her evening frocks, by way of a beginning in the balancing of ledgers.

Peter bought her boots; gladdened Miss Esther's county soul by an entirely fabulous narrative relating to the ancient birth and lineage of Squire Ralph Orson of Orson Manor; and on the fifth of May, met her two fellow-travellers at Paddington. Stuart established her with Merle in a first-class carriage, with every possible luxury; for in detail-work he excelled, never allowing their schemes to be upset by a single hitch of the mechanical order. Then, to their astonishment, he begged leave to retire to a smoker.

"Aren't we looking our best?" Peter demanded of Merle, as the train quitted the platform, and the belt of his Norfolk coat vanished down the corridor. "Or is he trying to impress us with the fact [95] that for the future he intends to Lead a Man's Life?"

They saw nothing of him during the next few hours, not even in the luncheon-car. And towards three o'clock Peter declared they must be within that distance of Dawlish, the station for Orson Manor, when respectable people with rugs would begin strapping them:

"Not having any rugs, we'll compromise by washing our faces."

Merle leant out of the window, and took a deep breath of the sparkling air.

"Stuart didn't say it was near the sea," as the train ran alongside the broken silver line of wave. "Why, this *is* Dawlish! Peter, here we are—we——"

The engine gathered all its slumbering forces, and thundered at the speed of a mile a minute through the tiny station in its setting of bold red rock.

"It—hasn't—stopped," gasped Merle. Which was obvious, seeing that her slight figure against the window was flung from side to side by the reckless pace at which the express was pounding through Devon.

And: "Stuart, it hasn't stopped!" as that gentleman, with a pleasant smile, and still carrying his pipe, entered their compartment and sat down.

"No; this is the 'Cornishman.' It goes right through from Plymouth to Penzance."

"But your sister?"

"My sister is in bed with influenza. And anyway, she's not expecting you. I doubt if she knows of your existence."

He rose, and surveyed with a ferocious scowl his bewildered victims.

"I've abducted you!" quoth Stuart. "I've told you often enough that I was a pirate in disguise. You wouldn't believe me. You played with fire. Now you're abducted without the option of a fine. Open your mouths and scream, if you like; I don't mind."

Peter eyed him sternly: “You mean that the invitation was a hoax? You lured us from our homes on false pretences?” [96]

He was humming a tune from the “Pirates of Penzance,” and at the same time polishing his eye-glass. So he merely nodded assent.

Merle said quietly: “This will mean an awful row for me.”

“No, it won’t,” he reassured her; “because nobody need ever know. To all intents and purposes we’re staying at Orson Manor. Dorothy only comes to town about once every four years, and I’ll tip her the wink to play up. She’ll do it for me,” finished the lord of the house of Heron.

“But where are we going?”

“Haven’t the remotest notion. We’ll see when we get to Penzance. And I’ll let you both have a say in the matter, though it isn’t usual in cases of abduction.”

He stole a glance at Peter; her eyes were dancing, and the corners of her mouth tilted upwards. So that he knew he had pleased her. Though she merely said: “So that’s why you refused to travel in our company, is it?”

“I couldn’t stand your innocent chatter about Dorothy and Devon,” he confessed; “it’s weak, I own, but even a pirate has a heart that bleeds for prattling babes.”

“Yes, but look here: suppose Madame des Essarts and Mrs. Heron should come together. Your mother will know that we are not where we seem. They do meet, don’t they, Merle?”

Merle took fright at the notion. “Not often; they’re in different sets. Grandmaman moves mainly among consuls, you know. But they visit on At Home days. Oh, Stuart——”

“D’you take me for a bloomin’ amateur?” he demanded, “Haven’t I provided for every contingency? I sat me down and thought and thought and thought what one lady could be made to do, to mortally offend another. I repeat, to mortally offend another. All for the prevention of visits on At Home days. At last, I uprose, and put myrrh and frankincense upon my hair, and went unto my mother; and, ‘Mother dear,’ I said, soft as any cooing dove; ‘I can see you are harassed and beset. Would you like me to make out the list for your big reception next month?’ Fortunately, I’ve played the good son once or twice before, so my conduct couldn’t arouse the suspicions it deserved. Nay, she was touched almost to the point of tears. So I sat me down again at her desk, with lots of ceremonial and fuss—address-books heaped all round, a new ruler, and red ink, and a Bradshaw and Debrett and the telephone book; and made out a list of visitors, omitting the name of Madame des Essarts. Mark you this, Merle! Then I read the list aloud to my mother, including the name of Madame des Essarts. Mark you this also, Merle! Then my mother, well-pleased, handed to her private secretary the list, minus the name of Madame des Essarts. And Madame des Essarts, not receiving an invitation to the reception, will be mortally offended. And my mother, receiving no reply from Madame des Essarts, will likewise be mortally offended. Both mortally offended. The feud will probably extend over generations. Montague and Capulet. In consequence whereof, Merle and I will be forbidden to marry. And I’ll die for the love of a lady. ‘Lady, heyday, misery me——’” [97]

“Stuart,” Peter broke in upon his exuberant ditty, “you’re just nothing but a stage-manager. You’re not the sort of man for vagabondage. And your grand operatic abduction will be a failure. Recollect, you wouldn’t come with us a-Maying in April.”

“No,” he cried, stung to swift retort; “but who dares say that I have not made of you April fools in May!” [98]

The train swung over the Hamoaze and into Cornwall.

They stopped at the Land’s End, for the reason that the sea barred their further progress to the south and to the west. And they took three rooms at the Ocean Hotel, facing the sea to the south and to the west, because it was too late the night of their arrival to seek convenient caves, especially three caves of exactly the same dimensions, conditions essential to avoid jealousy and strife.

The Ocean Hotel stood on an isolation of headland, like some stone medieval fortress, frowning at the rocky imitation opposite, which ran far out into the Atlantic, and then piled itself up crag upon crag, an echo wrought in granite. Over the moors towards the sunset ran the coastguard’s path, white stones on the dark green, sheer up to an edge, lost in the drop on the further side. And over the moors towards the sunrise ran still the coastguard’s path, down an easy slope, looping a sinister crevasse, and as far as the stretching horizon line.

Peter awoke the next morning, possessed by a great lust for actual touch of the sea, where she had hitherto only enjoyed its sight and sound; and would hardly leave her companions time to wallow in the tubs of yellow cream which were a feature of their breakfast, in her impatience to run down the steep twisting path which she knew existed somewhere just outside....

But the land of Cornwall and the waves of Cornwall were not ready yet to be friends with the strangers; and all that day led them a mocking dance by crag and outjutting cape and promontory; over moor and round seven points, and never a downward way to the sea. Cast an evil spell upon the strangers, so that ever from two hundred feet below, the water beckoned them stealthily into cavernous velvet glooms; sang loudly of wonder and glory in the cold crash of breakers against the cliff; tormented them with glint of blue in its plum-darkness, hint of glittering green whenever the clouds above swirled aside to reveal patches of clear sky. For the [99]

strangers need not yet be shown what riot of colours were sheathed in scabbard of sullen grey. Peter could have dragged the elusive sun by main force into prominence, battered with fists of rage against the uncompromising fall of rock which baffled her, and mocked her, and drew her on with continual promise of a way to the sea round the next curve ... or perhaps the next ... or surely the next....

Stuart laughed at her impatience. It was a hard land, a good land; and he knew it, and did not talk about it, but was content to swing along over turf and bog and stone; aware of limitless space in which to tire his limbs. And once he came racing like a greyhound, past his comrades, towards a six-barred gate which lay ahead. Ran because his stride was swifter than any man's. Leapt the gate because his jump was cleaner than any man's. Then, without a run on the further side, vaulted back, and met the twain with a cry of "Mountebank!" in anticipation of how they would greet his prowess.

But under his amused self-condemnation, lay the disturbing knowledge that this desire to exhibit his utmost strength and skill was real, not assumed; desire born of the look of pleasure that, after each feat, would lurk in Peter's eyes, though her lips continued to mock his vanity. Stuart could have shaken her for this effect on him. He did not mind at all behaving childishly, but objected vehemently to thinking childishly.

Peter perched herself upon the gate; and airily told the sea that it was all a mistake, she had no desire whatever to reach it. And the sea in response threw out a sparkle of gold and a spurt of foam, so that the longing rose in her heart fiercer than ever.

[100] It was a gate padlocked and bolted, though it led to nowhere, and guarded nothing; and to the right and left of it lay open country; and to the immediate right and left, piled-up blocks of rough stone, for kindly assistance of those who would elude the padlocks. A mad gate in a mad country. And now the sun, thinking it had teased enough, broke in a pale dazzle on the grey land and sea; then, gaining strength, poured silver streams of light through a rent in the sky, lay in silver puddles and splashes on the water. The dark toneless granite piled itself into strange shapes of tower and turret, and all about the sea-birds wheeled and shrieked.

> ... "Magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn,"

murmured Stuart, prone beside Merle upon the turf. And she whispered back:

"One could almost persuade oneself—yes, look, Stuart! a face at those jagged rock-windows—light flying hair and haunted eyes and ... it's gone when you look again."

"That's Lyonnesse, yonder." Peter, from her seat on the topmost bar, indicated the wide shimmering tracts of grey and silver. "The sunken lands, you know. Cities and churches and meadows ... but they must have suffered some sea-change ... white bones and thick green water and the evil coil of seaweed. A dead land, now."

Stuart said musingly: "I see Lyonnesse more as the land where the dead wait till they are wanted again."

Peter smiled; so like Stuart, this glimpse of an afterwards as merely the rest which comes before a fresh bout of strenuous labour. Then couldn't he even conceive of complete and utter rest? "Where the dead wait till they are wanted again" ... she caught a fleeting glimpse of dim caverns, and a tiny figure stumbling in from the outside glare, and flinging down a torch, seized instantly by an upward-springing form, who bore it forth again; while the tired intruder stretched himself [101] in sleep....

Heigh-ho! how serious they all were. Peter looked around her, half-dazed by this long mental immersion in dark coral-caves. The sky had meanwhile deepened into blue, and all the buried colours of earth and water had leapt into being.

"Requires a dab of red in all that backcloth of green and black, doesn't it?" queried Peter idly; to break silence; "just for the sake of artistic effect."

"Whereabouts?"

"Oh, say against that ledge." She pointed half-way down an apparently inaccessible formation of cliff, jutting out at right angles to the land.

Stuart seized the scarlet cap from her head, before she was even aware of his intentions, and was almost directly over the edge of safety, and out of sight.

"Stuntorian!" murmured Peter ... but her hand dug deep into the turf, tore it up in great handfuls.

It was several minutes before they again caught sight of him, scrambling with all the agility appertaining to impossible schoolboy heroes, towards the spot indicated. His figure was reduced by distance and surroundings to absurdly small dimensions. He paused on reaching his goal, hung the patch of crimson on to the ledge of rock, waved gaily towards his far-off companions; then, cramming the cap again in his pocket, swung himself round a boulder apparently poised in mid-air, and out of their line of vision.

"We'd better turn back to meet him," quoth Merle, springing from her perch on the gate. "It's all right, Peter. Nothing can happen to Stuart, ever."

But Peter had just learnt of something extremely disturbing which had happened to herself. And venting her indignation at the discovery, upon the cause thereof, refused to fall sobbing upon his neck, when he met them on the homeward way, and carelessly returned her headgear. Nor did [102]

she take outward and visible notice of bleeding abrasions upon either knee, ostentatiously displayed. But Merle—feeling his recent performance ought really not to be encouraged—treated him to a sober lecture on foolhardiness, which lasted till Peter provided distraction by leaving her right leg, as far as the thigh, in a bog of black mud.

The sun was a level blaze of gold in their eyes, by the time they trudged up the last slope, and into their fortress. They were weary with a splendid weariness of limb; and drowsy with the strangeness of that strange land; and, moreover, wind-blown and wet and satiated of beauty. Peter entered her room, and closed the door; pulled down the blind to give respite from the outside world; plunged her hands in water, and cast off her shoes and stockings. Then flung herself on the narrow bed, where Merle presently joined her. And they ate of the expensive chocolates destined for Mistress Dorothy Orson, and were at peace.

... Somebody whistling, now loudly, now softly, up and down the passages and stairs. “Yo-ho! Yo-ho!”—it was Captain Hook’s celebrated ditty haunting the Ocean Hotel. Nearing their door, it paused on a plaintive up-note of enquiry. Peter took pity on the homeless wanderer, and before Merle could protest, called him in.

“I don’t think I’ve got an apartment of my own,” said Stuart, squatting contentedly on the floor, his head against Merle’s dark shower of loosened hair. “I slept somewhere, I suppose, but where is a mystery. They must have turned my room into a step-ladder or a revolving book-case; I shall hate sleeping to-night in a revolving book-case; one would get so giddy.” He glanced around him and broke into a chuckle: “What a setting for one of Zola’s most squalid bits of realism,” he remarked.

[103]

The room was small, with a dingy paper, and an unclothed gas-jet springing from the wall. The blind that shut out daylight, and dimmed the corners to mystery, was torn, and the cord flapped a perpetual complaint. The tin basin on the washstand stood unemptied of its dirty water. Two or three towels lay across the chairs; Peter’s muddy shoes and stockings straggled in abandoned fashion over the worn bits of carpet covering the oilcloth. The aspect of the two huddled bare-legged figures on the crumpled bed-spread, carried out Stuart’s simile with remarkable fidelity; and his own presence, combined with the dainty satin bonbonnière, added just those last touches of immorality without which no French novel is complete. Only their moods of serene happiness were rather at variance with the puppets of fiction, evil or perhaps merely hopeless, with which Zola might have peopled the dreary chamber.

“I think, as pirates, and considering Merle lives in Lancaster Gate and owns a maid, we deserve a better nursery than this,” suggested Peter.

“We’ll build one,” Stuart assured her swiftly. “Yes, of course we will. Nothing easier. We’ll build it to suit ourselves. A playroom——”

“A piratical playroom——”

“The perfect piratical playroom.”

[104]

CHAPTER IX
A PERFECT PIRATICAL PLAYROOM

Stuart began: “We shan’t care to be disturbed, so we’d better build under water. That stretch of river between Cliveden and Cookham would make quite a good ceiling. Nor will we take it on a repairing lease, but leave the Thames Conservancy responsible for damages.”

Merle at this juncture wanted to know how he saw the Thames Conservancy; in her eyes, it wore very bright blue with lots of gilt buttons, and was always sitting round a table.

“One person?” asked Peter curiously.

“Yes. One wide person that could be stretched all round the table and be joined with a button when it met itself.”

Stuart reminded them that, so far, the room consisted of a ceiling floating on a vacuum, and that if they dawdled so long over Thames Conservancies, they’d never get the walls up before dinner.

“It’s my dinner-hour now,” said Peter, thinking herself a British workman. And Merle remarked that putting up walls was a tough job, and she hadn’t got the right tools, and must fetch her mate.

“We can’t tell yet just how big the Room will need to be, so I vote for elastic-sided walls.”

“Like boots,” Peter murmured. Then roused herself to ask for the height of the Room.

Stuart looked worried, and confessed that he could never gauge heights without the assistance of a giraffe: “Not high heights.”

“A giraffe?” [105]

“I was once told that a giraffe measures twenty-five feet. So in my mind’s eye I always pile giraffe upon giraffe, until I get what I want. One giraffe, added to another ... and another....”

“There, there then, my beautiful,” Peter assured him soothingly, for the multiplicity of giraffe had caused a wild look to creep into his eyes; “you shall have a giraffe in the Room, of course you shall. Anyhow, Merle will want a domestic animal to cuddle on her lap. A giraffe will do nicely, besides being useful for measuring purposes.”

“We can tell the time by it, as well,” Stuart announced in eager defence of his pet. “The tide of the ceiling rises and falls about an inch every six hours; and when it falls, the animal’s head will be wet, and so he’ll always have a cold in his nose, and borrow all our handkerchiefs, and not return them. He says he can’t help it; people don’t realize what a struggle it is to keep one’s head below water.”

“But he’ll want a companion of some sort,” remarked Merle. And because she secretly hoped for a canary, she proposed a tortoise.

“What about a gift-horse? There’s something mysterious about a gift-horse, because nobody may look it in the mouth. No, not even a dentist.”

“But we will!” Stuart cried, in defiance of copy-book precept; “we’ll keep things in its mouth, for the sake of looking at them there; cigarette-cards and photograph albums.”

... A little wind flapped aside the blind, giving a momentary glimpse of sea-lapped rocks and battlements: a castle of enchantment aglow in the ebbing light. Merle immediately decided to have it transported to the Room, for her special use and benefit. Not to be outdone, Stuart and Peter ordered each a castle of like design and pattern; he stipulating, however, for a border of [106] Norfolk Broads in lieu of the Atlantic. And because his manner was wont to become suddenly absent and remote whenever he chanced to speak of his Sailing Paradise, they quickly granted him his desire, and changed the subject, lest he should elude them altogether.

Indeed, Peter was in a terrible tangle; for she had discovered that inside her castle was a room —*the* Room, in fact; and this Room in its turn held a castle, the same castle—which held another Room, containing a castle, which——

“Look here,” said Stuart firmly, recalling his mind from halyard and jib, “this must be attended to at once. It’s only a recurring decimal, and if we quickly put in the dot to stop the leakage, there’s no need that it should ever recur.”

Peter demanded carelessly: “Know anything about plumbing?”

Stuart scratched his head. And the girls looked mournfully one at the other.

“Now I ask you, what is the use of a male in the house?” and: “If it were a *real* man, of course——”

“Damn it!” he exploded. “If you’d wanted to marry a plumber, both of you, you might have mentioned it before the ceremony.” And he added sarcastically: “I daresay St. Quentin knows a lot about plumbing.”

“Or Baldwin,” suggested Merle, who had recently met Mr. Carr at a dinner-party, and derived from him a quantity of pure happiness.

Stuart recovered his good-humour in the joy of a fresh idea: “We’ll run St. Quentin and Baldwin together, and keep the essence in a sentry-box in the Room, for the performing of odd jobs. And we’ll call him—” here a rapid hunt for suitable nomenclature, “we’ll call him Squeith.”

"Combination of St. Quentin and Keith," commented Peter. "Very good if Baldwin's name happened to be Keith, but as it isn't——" [107]

"I'm not going to be put off by a little thing like that. Squeith has got personality. Squeith pleases me. And Squeith shall immediately be set to work on that recurring decimal."

It was perceived that even while they chattered, Room and castle had already recurred seven times, ending on a Room. And Peter said she would sleep in the last Room but one—the fifth, to be exact,—before the dot was put in.

"And then Squeith can take the animals for a run," quoth thoughtful little Merle, who remembered that giraffes and gift-horses require a certain amount of exercise. "He can put them on a leash if he likes."

Stuart grumbled: "He's sure to come home without them. Or they'll come home without him. Yes, it's no good frowning at me, Merle,—I *will* bully Squeith. You'd better have your Balm-for-Wounded-Feelings factory moved into the Room; 'Nothing but the Best Balm supplied. Beware of Counterfeit. We only use British Bull's-grease and Home-grown Sympathy.' I'll write your advertisements."

Whereat Peter exclaimed jealously that if Merle had a factory, she would have trains; she must have trains, instantly—"just as if I could ever live in a Room without trains. An Outer Circle line running the whole way round, close under the walls; with real tunnels and signal-boxes. And you can advertise your Balm inside the darkest tunnel, where it won't disturb the landscape. My railway shall start from Euston, of course——"

—"And end at Euston," Merle reminded her, laughing, "if it's a Circle railway."

"Quite right. The lines shall be laid for the purpose of taking passengers from Euston to Euston. I've always longed for just such a gloriously unpractical service of trains."

And here Stuart interposed with the offer of his almost forgotten *Wagon-lit*, the tame red *Wagon-lit* with trustful brown eyes, hitherto kept in the back garden among the washing. [108]

"Want a present too," Merle pleaded.

He gave her a clothes-line, so that she could be perpetually wringing out her soul, and hanging it up to dry. In return for which piece of impertinence, she presented him with a nice easy rack, which he could work himself, like a barrel-organ, by turning a handle; and thus practise for half an hour every morning after breakfast, the self-torture he so affected.

"He shall have an obstacle race as well," put in Peter lavishly; "running just inside my Outer Circle radius. With hurdles and barriers and sacks and barbed wire. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Stuart darling?"

"We should have to provide a barber to barb the wire. One can't buy it barbed."

"Very well; I don't mind a few shops. Just a barber and—and a post-office, because of bull's-eyes——"

"Stamps?" enquired Stuart anxiously.

"No. *Only* bull's-eyes. Why do you think I wanted a post-office?"

Merle thought that a Moonshade Shop might be useful: "It looks as if the moonshine in the Room were likely to be strong, and Peter and I must think of our complexions. Moonshades and paralunes." And she imagined them pretty filmy things, woven of dyed spider-webs, with opalescent handles and spikes.

Then they added to the row, a Railway Shop, which, combining butcher and baker and fishmonger in one, provided those peculiar comestibles to be met with at station-buffets and in dining-cars alone. In particular, there existed the notorious Railway-fish, white and sticky, of which large numbers should swim in a sunken tank in the Railway Shop, till such time as required for consumption.

Then, as if one shop bred another, it was discovered that these wary fish could not be caught save with a bent pin on a piece of string; thus involving the erection of a Bent-pin Shop. [109]

"Because in the usual farthing-change packets, they only give you straight pins," said Peter, knitting her brows; "and straight pins aren't a bit of good for Railway-fish."

"What about a pub. or two?" Stuart proposed carelessly.

Merle scented danger: "No, dear."

"Just one," he pleaded; "a nice little public-house bearing the sign: Private. There's the 'Cat and Adage,' been lying about since the evening we first met, Peter."

"Oh, if it comes to that," she bragged, "I've got plenty of pubs myself: The 'Benison,' for instance, inspired by A. C. Benson's life of Tennyson. That would be non-alcoholic, of course; with a permanent impression in the window, of birds dark against a peaceful sunset."

Stuart approved of the 'Benison.' "I like its nice rich ripe blessing-of-the-Archbishop-of-Canterbury flavour. And Squeith can patronize it for his morning glass of milk-and-soda. I've thought of another one——"

"*No*, Stuart!" Merle threw into her voice all the pent-up anguish of an inebriate's wife.

Stuart and Peter looked rebellious.

“I’m not going to have my nice tidy Room littered up with pubs.” Merle declared passionately. “You must keep them in the conservatory or the lumber-closet. I shall have quite enough dusting on my hands, as it is, what with three castles——”

“One of them recurring,” put in Peter.

“Yes, and two Eustons and the giraffe and a Norfolk Broad and a sentry-box and I don’t know what else. Whatever I shall do on Thursdays——”

“Thursdays?” [110]

“Thursdays?”

“The day the Room gets turned out,” Merle enlightened their double ignorance.

“Oh!”

“It seems rather a shame that Merle should be bothered with all that,” Stuart mused thoughtfully. “What about having a property Womanly-Woman to see to the dusting?”

Peter assented rather reluctantly; she was quite sure that the Womanly-woman would make her wear gloves. “Oh well! if she became at all obstreperous, we could always break her up, and re-form her as something else. An Ancient Retainer, say; or a Rabbit. These Plasticine figures are awfully useful.”

“There’d be a bit of Womanly-Woman over from a Rabbit; enough to make a tea-spoon, or a halo, or any domestic trifle of that description.”

“Then are we to have no real human people in the Room, except just ourselves?” Merle queried. “No—children?”

Stuart shook his head. “No children. Only childishness.” For he recognized, deep down in his heart, that real children would stigmatize the Room and all it contained, as “silly rot.” And demand bricks and Noah’s Arks and Tiddley-winks. And somehow the knowledge hurt; because he knew with what fatal ease he too could slide outside and say the same: “Silly rot—silly rot——” “It isn’t! Rot, if you like—not *silly* rot!”... but even now he was slipping.... “It isn’t! it isn’t—Peter....”

Peter guessed what was happening: “No, of course it isn’t,” quickly. And to divert him, contributed to the Room a sailing-boat, a rustic sailing-boat, stationary, and overgrown with ivy and clematis. And from the stern should depend a tiny toy sailing-boat, price sixpence halfpenny, which they could really sail on a piece of string. “And we’ll name it the ‘Strike-me-pink,’” cried [111] Peter fiercely.

“And paint it green,” added Stuart, feeling better. And then, in opposition, he offered a nautical summer-house, with decks, and ropes, and a burgee fluttering bravely from the mainmast.

The Room might by now be considered almost complete in its furnishings. With a Heaven-born inspiration, Merle placed in its exact centre a small bamboo table, rather rickety, on which reposed a vase of flowers.

“Don’t you think,” Peter demanded doubtfully, “that it looks a wee bit out of place among all those castles and animals and things?”

“Not at all;” Merle was inclined to be huffy. “Merely the feminine touch about the home;” and she considered the possibility of draping Euston with an antimacassar.

... Bit by bit, as the red ball of the sun quenched its fires in the chill Atlantic, so the dingy little number nine bedroom of the Ocean Hotel, grew darker and darker still. At last nothing could be descried save the grey outlines of the tin basin; a glimmer across the cracked looking-glass; on and around the bed, three figures, dimly sprawling.

But in their own Playroom, the trio disport themselves as lords and emperors. Boundless space is theirs; time without limit; while facts they prick and shrivel like toy-balloons.

Peter, astride of the engine which draws her *wagon-lit*, is whizzing round and round the Outer Circle, all the signals in her favour, that naught shall arrest her triumphant speed.

Merle, discovering that Stuart has, after all, succeeded in importing his private public-house, enters through its swing-doors, nothing loth to demand a strawberry-ice-cream soda. The while [112] Stuart dangles his legs from the notched parapet of his castle; and noting Squeith in the act of hailing the bell-buoy who sells the morning muffins, impishly frustrates all such traffic by a sudden alteration of the time to half-past five p.m.

“Tea is on the table,” he chants, a super-leprechaun; “and Squeith has missed the muffin-man again! Poor Squeith! for him *always* the muffin that is stale; for him it is always yesterday.”

“And for us?” cries Peter, making a trumpet of her hands, as she travels past at sixty miles an hour. And just catches his shouted reply, wind-borne: “For us it is always to-morrow!”

“But it can’t be to-morrow without a to-day, can it?” argues Merle, returning refreshed from the ‘Benison.’

“Why, yes; it can be the-day-after-to-morrow from yesterday!”

... The housemaid tapped, and entered with the hot water.

“Shall I light the gas, Miss?”

“Yes, please;” Peter’s voice seemed to come from very far away.

While the housemaid hunted for the matches, a figure rose nonchalantly from the floor, and stole out into the passage. So that the flare of light revealed merely two sleepy-eyed girls lying across the bed.

CHAPTER X
CARN TREWOOFA

Stuart solved the riddle which lay in the personality of Mine Host, by declaring that whereas in summer he followed the fair and guileless calling of hotel-keeper, in winter a bolder voice summoned him forth, and he threw off his disguises, and donned ear-rings, and became a Corsair. And indeed there was that about him of jolly rakish raffish swagger, a roll in his gait, and a ruddiness of visage, and withal a disposition to solemn winking of the left eye, and a tendency to be found in odd moments dancing strange dances the length of his own hall, which gave to such a suggestion a flavour of likelihood.

Moreover, the Corsair had surrounded himself by a bewildering bevy of females, whom he called variously his wife, his cousin, his housekeeper, his secretary, and his manageress; but who were obviously delicious yieldings of his six-months' piracy.

But the Ocean Hotel could produce no equally satisfactory solution to the problem of Merle, Peter, and Stuart; and the various possibilities in the way of marital, sentimental, immoral, or blood relationship, that their companionship entailed. Perceiving this, Stuart found gentle delight in preserving strict impartiality in the bestowal of his outward affections. The Spanish waiter at the Billet-doux would have known much in common with the Five Females of the Ocean Hotel. A climax was reached, when, under their assembled eyes, Peter entered the breakfast-room and [114] handed a tobacco-pouch to her lord and master, reminding him in bell-like tones that he had left it in her room. Whereat a shudder passed from guest to guest, and a horrified voice remarked with more virtue than grammar, "Guessed it was her—I mean, one can always tell!"

Then enter Merle with a book and a box of matches and a green felt slipper: "You must have left them in my room, Stuart ..." and Stuart affected great embarrassment,—and they were all three very happy and contented.

But when the visitors at the hotel complained of people who go from table to table before meals; deliberately and in the sight of all, pouring cream from smaller vessels into one gigantic bowl, thereafter placed upon their own table; then the Five Females did so persistently harass and beset the Corsair, that he became quite melancholy, and would sit all day long in the porch, gazing seawards, without even the heart to nudge Peter in the ribs as she passed him by; a delicate attention she sorely missed. For he liked the trio, perhaps recognizing in them the germs of piracy, and was loth to give them notice to quit.

"You know, I really believe we shall be slung out before to-morrow," laughed Stuart; "we're not a bit popular." They were at that moment topping for the first time the westward slope of moor. Not yet had they succeeded in finding their path to the sea. Peter had almost despaired of feeling the cool water swell and ebb about her ankles.

And then, suddenly, they saw Carn Trewoofa.

Carn Trewoofa lay tucked in a little cove, the green arm of the cliff flung protectingly around it, as who should say: "All right, dear; the nasty grim granite-land shan't touch you then!" And the toy fishing-village believed this, and was at peace, drowsy and tumbled in the warm sunshine.

A toy fishing-village. Patched roofs; thatched roofs; roofs both patched and thatched; wild and [115] abandoned young roofs, seemingly kept only in their places by heavy chains or great slabs of stone. Sturdy, ugly stone walls, defying the winds, that, despite protective arm, dealt sometimes roughly with toy villages. Dwellings of all shapes and sizes, impartial dwellings for lobster or fowl or human. Round windlass-tower, painted a startling white, presumably with what was left over from the coastguard stones. Wood and slate and tar. Overturned boats and baskets. Nets hung to dry; smocks dangling to dry; dogs and children spread to dry; and on a rough bench outside the lifeboat shed, a row of old salts, bearded and tough and stringy, and beyond the utmost limits of dryness, so that the sun could do to them no more.

A toy village, no doubt! The kind that one has longed to play with, ever since first meeting it in picture book. Nor did it beguile with false whispers, as had done the rest of the false land of Cornwall. For the coastguard's path ran straight down the cliff-side to the very doors of the first fowl-house; and the rocks and pools of the Atlantic trespassed so far into the heart of the village, that it was difficult to disentangle them. A way to the sea at last.... Merle and Peter ran shouting down and on and out, the length of a baby stone lug that curved into the water, thinking in its infant delusion, that it broke the force of the waves. And there, at the very furthest end, they turned and surveyed Carn Trewoofa, spread in a glimmer of gold before them. And they remarked the multitude of boats strewn drunkenly on the cobbled slope from the shore to the first cluster of huts; remarked the fleet of boats that rocked and swung on the vivid green of the bay; green that beyond the lug deepened and glowed to shadowed ultramarine. And they received a hint that somewhere was an inn; and somewhere else the twisted fragments of an ancient wreck; and all about were seagulls, swooping and balancing and shrieking. And well- [116] pleased with this latest and most complete piece of nursery-ware designed for their happiness, they turned their gaze outwards, there to be met by a rust-red sail passing swift as a dream over the broken white wave-crests; while a mile nearer to the horizon, a quaint clockwork lighthouse reared itself from a group of rocks, and made believe to guard the bay.

Then Merle rubbed her eyes, and turned to Peter, and asked if it were really all to be had for the price of two-and-eleven-pence-halfpenny? and might she please carry it home herself?

Stuart joined them on the lug. "They can't yarn," he said regretfully, jerking his thumb towards

the line of ancient salts. “I’ve tried them and they can’t. In fact, I believe they’re tin.”

“Detachable?” queried Peter.

“No; on a row. I daresay it would be possible to break one off from the end. But they’re too old and glazed to be taught much; we must start with the new generation, and teach the young idea how to salt. Perhaps if we sowed among them a few volumes of W. W. Jacobs—I say, come along and explore.”

They entered Carn Trewoofa softly, as if fearful it should break or melt or in some such magical fashion manifest its unreality. And, picking her way between rope and anchor and occasionally a stray doorstep where there was no door, Merle came to a correct conclusion regarding the origin of this wonder-corner: It was smell made concrete. Someone had waved a wand over a handful of the richly mingled prevailing odour of seaweed and sea, tar and fish and clover, straw and fowl, soil and stone and lobster-pot; muttered a few compelling words—and the result was Carn Trewoofa.

The trio were just able to add to their medley of impressions, the mad swirl of paths, seven to one hut, that none could tell its back nor yet its front; and the yet madder swirl of chickens, seventy [117] to one hen, and seven orphans to boot. Every ten yards traversed showed them a painted slab set in the wall, or in a door, or even on a roof; a slab and a slit and the word: Letters. They speculated what would happen if somebody failed to realize that this was a toy village, and posted real epistles in these alluring receptacles. “They are intended for all the letters one has never sent,” Stuart declared; “letters to my own feet, or to my great-uncle in Heaven; to the Times, and to a skylark, and to the Red King in Looking-glass Land.”

Likewise he discovered the national fisheress costume to be a cricket-cap; and counted no less than eight of these articles in the wearing. “Which proves that once, many years ago, a cricket team rounded the point in a pleasure steamer. And the Corsair lured them all to their destruction. But their caps were washed up on the shore, and worn ever since by the Women of Carn Trewoofa.—Nine! I’ll stalk the lot e’er yet I quit this spot.” He counted the tenth on the head of a buxom matron standing outside the “Longships” inn, and doing most effective things with two buckets and a pump.

She nodded pleasantly to the three, and asked them in raucous Cornish whether they were strangers in the land.

“Very,” responded Peter gloomily.

The wearer of the tenth cricket cap volunteered the information that she had rooms to let.

“At the inn!” gasped Merle.

“Nay; up-along yon villa. T’inn be nowt fur t’ young leddies.”

Smilingly she indicated a grey stone cottage standing high on its own steps, a few paces up the hill; its blind patient eyes looking steadily across the bay, past the toy fishing-fleet, to where sea and sky merged in a blue quivering haze.

They followed their guide into the tiny sitting-room of the “villa.” And there Peter cast herself with a sigh of voluptuous content upon a slippery slithery horsehair sofa; and Merle threw open [118] the lid of a wheezy harmonium—and broke it; and Stuart remained transfixed before two black ivory elephants, which stood upon the mantelpiece. And they each and all declared their intention of remaining in their new quarters, never again to return to the disapproving atmosphere of the Ocean Hotel.

Mrs. Trenner beamed. They did not realize then that her rosy good-humour concealed the will of a Napoleon. For Mrs. Trenner was the autocrat of Carn Trewoofa; its leader and counsellor; by virtue of her unfailing prosperity and the excellence of her cooking. She owned the inn, and property besides; and she owned her husband and son and husband’s brother’s wife and their offspring, even as she now owned Merle and Peter and Stuart. The sons and husbands of other women might drown at sea; not so Mrs. Trenner’s. The chickens of other women might cross the road and be run over on the occasion of the fortnightly visit of the butcher’s cart; never Mrs. Trenner’s chickens. Therefore she wore her cricket-cap jauntily. On her indeed had fallen some of the radiance of that Star of Good Fortune under whose mellow auspices Stuart had been born. She and Stuart became, in consequence, excellent friends, though the language they spoke was mutually uncanny and perplexing.

“I’m not going to budge from here,” quoth Peter again. “*J’y suis et j’y reste.* Isn’t that so, Mrs. Trenner?”

Mrs. Trenner hesitated: “Well, theere t’es,” she ejaculated at last; her favourite expression in moments of emergency.

Peter continued: “Merle shall go upstairs and feel the beds, and see if the mattress is clay soil, or whatever has to be done under those circs. And Stuart can return to the hotel and pack our suit-cases.”

Stuart demurred. He might cope with the Corsair, he said, were it not for the Five Females. So [119] they all returned to the hotel, telling Mrs. Trenner to have their dinner on the table that very evening. And they said this in all innocence, knowing nothing of the dinner, nor of what lay before them.

Before quitting Carn Trewoofa, Merle dashed through the tiny doorway marked “Mrs. Nanvorrow, Grocer,” just to see what lay hidden in its murky depths. She returned with a

pennyworth of peardrops, and a fearsome account of an old ancient crone sitting in the kitchen, surrounded on floor, ceiling and walls, by china; a frenzied orgy of china; a veritable Bacchanal of china; china that sprouted and multiplied and literally asked for the destroying bull. “She squawked at me like a parrot,” Merle related in awestruck whispers, “and called me ‘dearie.’” She paused impressively. They were trudging up the cliff-path towards the Coastguard Station.

—“And I’ve discovered the eleventh cap. It was on the Witch’s head.”

Then Stuart sat down, and reproached her bitterly. He didn’t want any of the caps now, he said, if he couldn’t be left to find them himself. And anyway, stalking cricket-caps was a man’s job, in the pursuance of which, he considered Merle both unladylike and officious. “It isn’t as if I were childish about things,” concluded Stuart.

Then he looked Peter full in the eyes; and she laughed aloud at his utter childishness, knowing of the man beneath; knowing he knew she was by now aware of it. And Merle laughed with her, unconscious as yet that two of the three were playing games no more.

“Are ye all reet?” demanded Mrs. Trenner, hovering round their three chairs.

“It’s a feast of Lucullus,” sighed Peter, eating fresh young crab. [120]

And Stuart, over an oozing pasty, declared that Mrs. Trenner must be a reincarnation of the cook primarily responsible for Epicurean philosophy.

“Well, theere t’es!” but Mrs. Trenner was obviously not satisfied. Then, nibbling at a saffron cake, Merle said gently, in words of one syllable: “The best I have yet ate, Mrs. Trenner.” And, wreathed in smiles, their landlady departed to the kitchen, there to retail to Maid Bessy, the one comprehensible bit of praise.

“Best she yet ate—thet’s what her said tu me, t’little leddy....”

“I foresee,” quoth Stuart, “that we shall have to leave to Merle the hectic chorus of praise which must inevitably accompany all our meals. Mrs. Trenner doesn’t appreciate our classic mode of expression, Peter.”

Peter moaned: “It’s awful; she gives us five times too much, and seems to take personal pride in our appetites. I daren’t leave a morsel. There’s something chubbily relentless about that woman. However, thank goodness there can be nothing more to come now.”

Mrs. Trenner entered; in one hand a plate of cheese-straws wherewith to break the camel’s back; in the other a bottle of Pond’s Extract.

“Are ye all reet?” she demanded, placing these upon the table. The three gazed, worried, at the Pond’s Extract. Was it local fashion to consume this with their cheese-straws?

“Mis’ Gurton, she thet hev t’ big room faacin’ this, she sent it over, thinkin’ ee might hev tired feet o’ nights, after walkin’,” volunteered Mis’ Gurton’s messenger. Then, hovering uncertainly awhile, in the difficulty of removing herself through the door, without assistant impetus, Mrs. Trenner shot forth: “Well, theere t’es”—and vanished.

“Evidently,” mused Peter, “one leaves Pond’s Extract in lieu of cards, up-along tu Carn Trewoofa. [121] I suppose we are bound by etiquette to return toothpaste or Dinneford’s Magnesia upon Mis’ Gurton. They seem inclined to be friendly here.”

Outside the little square of window, the sky-colour was fast being drained and sucked into the West; and over the line of moor, a pale lemon-coloured moon wound and unwound herself like a dancer amidst trailing wisps of cloud, lilac and tender pink. Swaying rhythmically from the fading glow of day to the lifeless pallor of evening, the little dark fleet of fishing-boats could be glimpsed in the bay.

Indeed, Carn Trewoofa was inclined to be friendly with the strangers.

—Stuart leapt the low wall, and made a dash for a group of sheds huddled in the farmhouse yard.

“Come along!” he cried; and helter-skelter, through the icy sting of rain, they followed his lead.

... Something enormous hurled itself impotently against the wooden door, as they slammed it behind them.

“It’s a pig. I saw it,” gasped Peter. Her hand fumbled for the latch, could not find it; small wonder, since it existed on the further side of the door. The latter opened inwards. Peter leant against it the full weight of her body: “Help! it’s big and black and bulging—and it’s coming in!”

“Let it,” quoth Stuart indifferently. “Who are we, to object to a respectable old sow?”

But Merle, sitting exhausted in the trough, avowed a firm refusal to share this harbour of refuge with aught whatsoever in the pork line. So Stuart took Peter’s place at the door; and she sank into the trough beside Merle, and through the dim light watched with breathless interest the [122] fierce encounter between man and beast, divided only by a thin partition of wood. Again and yet again did the ungainly monster hurl its quivering bulk to the assault, till the insecure building rocked and shook. Disgusted snortings and gruntings mingled pleasantly with the lash of the

rain, and the distant chime of church-bells from Carn Trewoofa, six miles to the south from this clump of moorland huts and farms.

“My—sympathies—are all—with—the—pig,” jerked out Stuart, holding his own against terrific odds. “After all, it *is* her sty. An English pig’s sty is her castle.”

Chorus of indignant assent from the pig.

And then Merle was suddenly seized by an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“Peter, it’s Sunday afternoon, first Sunday in the month; and our At Home day at Lancaster Gate. Did your little granddaughter’s frock come from Paris, *chère Madame? mais tout à fait charmante*.”

The pig rallied for yet a final onslaught. This time she was just able to inject a bristling snout....

Merle liked to feel that she was ‘making friends with the rustics.’ Nevertheless, sitting abreast of the low sea-wall, she looked somewhat astonished at the bearded veteran who slouched to her side; and, pointing to a picturesque abode covered by a round roof of mud, announced fiercely, and without any preamble, that it was to be razed to the ground, after he and his had dwelt therein for close on four hundred years.

“Taaken from me an’ destroyed, next Monday week. Iss. An’ me without a hoam tu put my foot in et.”

“There’s no place like home for putting one’s foot in it,” murmured Peter, in the background, to Stuart.

Merle heeded them not; she was busy sympathizing with the ‘peasant heart of England.’

“Fur why?” demanded the man, brandishing his stick. “Fur nowt. Bit o’ rain pourin’ through roof an’ in our beds. Mud isna slate.” [123]

“No, no, indeed,” cooed Merle. (“Do be quiet, Peter.”)

The veteran swung round, and indicated a timid-looking damsel standing a few yards off: “Yon’s my daughter. Yon’s t’ girl as gets fits.” His tone rang with such pride, that Stuart stepped forward and congratulated him heartily.

“How very sad for the poor girl,” Merle raised hyacinth wells of sympathy to the weather-beaten face above hers. (“Stuart!”)

“Eh, thet’s t’lass. She du get them moastly in chapel, she du.”

“Oh,” brightly, “then wouldn’t it be better if she never went to chapel?”

A gurgle of laughter from Peter. Merle turned her back yet more squarely upon her irrepressible companions.

“Ne’er can tell when she be gettin’ one o’ they fits. Scream, she du, an’ fling up her arms.” He regarded his talented offspring intently. “Seem tu me, she be gettin’ thet way now....”

Merle fled.

“Never mind, then,” Stuart teased her half an hour later. “She *shall* be remembered in the hearts of the people. She shall understand the simple joys and sorrows of the rude peasantry——”

“After all,” Peter finished consolingly, “you’re the only one of us who can make Mrs. Trenner understand what pudding we want for lunch.”

Merle cried, casting herself upon their beloved horsehair sofa:

“Oh, what a day! I’ve never been so happy—and never so gloriously disgracefully untidy!”

Then Peter and Stuart looked long upon her, and looked at each other and smiled. For despite her delusions to the contrary, Merle’s vaunted ‘untidiness’ merely succeeded in fitting her to her present frame, as surely as the central figure of a Cornish Riviera poster; a daintily clad mermaid was she, pale-faced and lissom, with eyes reflecting the stormier tints of the sea; delicate ankles; blue-green jersey, closely blown to the figure; hair waving in long strands, albeit not wispily, about her shoulders. [124]

“Merle’s appearance,” remarked Stuart, “is of the very few that can be trusted to look after itself for hours together. Now Peter’s physiognomy needs careful attention every five minutes; it burns and flushes and freckles; and her hair gets really untidy, not merely picturesquely ruffled; and her cap falls to the back of her head, and the buttons are off her skirt, and her neck is mottled mahogany, and oh, her jersey! how sagged and dragged and bagged it was——”

“But then, how it was cheap,” finished Peter.

“When are you two girls going home?” suddenly. “I’m off at to-morrow’s dawn. The call of diamonds. You’d better fix another day; we don’t want to look back on a long journey together, and a sulky, sooty arrival in London, as an ending to all this that we have had. It would be ungrateful.”

“O thou of the Hairpin Vision!” but Peter understood his mood. “When do we want to go, Merle?”

“Saturday is my birthday, and grandmaman is giving me a dinner-party of all the people I hate most. We may as well leave on Friday morning. It’s Wednesday to-day, isn’t it?” vaguely.

“Tuesday. By the way, what have you done about your letters home? Postmarks, I mean.”

“Carn Trewoofa is the nearest postal town to Orson Manor in Devonshire,” replied Merle. And Stuart sat down beside her on the sofa, and discoursed pleasantly on the lake of fire and [125] brimstone, till Mrs. Trenner appeared to introduce them to their lunch, in its raw and natural condition. After which, she retired to cook it. Even Carn Trewoofa is no stranger to certain conditions of etiquette.

... So they all three squatted upon the outermost rock, and waited to be Caught by the Tide.

Sitting thus, bare-legged, knees hunched up to the chin, hands clasped about the knees, eyes solemn with expectation, they might have served for an illustration to some children’s tale of adventure. Peter wore a floppy crimson cap on her pale tangle of hair. Merle’s two heavy black plaits hung uncrowned. They did not speak; only gazed outwards, to desolate seas beyond the seas that have an end; and waited ... patiently. The lapping of water was the only sound. A wee crab, a green crab, waddled crookedly forth to examine with interest the thirty toes dangling into his private pool.

A south-westerly breeze blew upon their tanned throats ... and the light began to ebb.

Seven days now had they tarried in Carn Trewoofa, and had not yet succeeded in being Caught by the Tide. Therefore shame was upon them.

For the waves of Cornwall said: “If we surround them, they will merely elude us. And if they elude us, they will regard our strength and our cunning as mere attributes in a game of play invented by themselves. They are not as others, these strangers in the land. So we will not be beguiled into an attempt to drown them. They shall return to their homes without the supreme wonder and glory of being Caught by the Tide.”

Thus the Waves of Cornwall.

... And when they had been fully nineteen minutes on the outermost rock of all, waiting ... patiently ... Peter said in a very small voice: “Do you think, oh, do you think, it can be because the [126] tide is going out?”

Stuart replied: “Peter, Peter, I didn’t like to say so before, but I am afraid it is indeed because the tide is going out.”

“If we were now in France, we would be Caught by the Tide.”

“But we are in Cornwall.”

... And sorrowfully they rose, and picked their way over the slippery boulders, towards the beckoning grey cottage that stood high on its own steps, a few paces up the hill.

The little south-westerly breeze was gaining in strength.

The little south-westerly breeze had become a south-westerly gale. It blew a great restlessness into Stuart that evening, so that he walked ceaselessly from window to door of the cottage, and at last suggested going forth to meet the elements squarely, and without the intervention of stone or glass.

Merle was drowsy from much scrambling, said she preferred to remain peacefully within.

“Come along, Peter.”

And from a lazy desire likewise to refuse the battle, the other girl quickened to something in his tones; without a word, threw on a heavy cloak; and, bare-headed, followed him through the village, and up the coastguard’s path to the crest of the cliff.

Here the wind caught them; not erratically, nor in gasping squally fashion, but a massed wall of wind, blowing steadily, straight and hard from across the sea, with never a swell nor yet a drop in the strength and sound of it. A mighty cleansing wind, causing every muscle and nerve of the body to be braced in resistance, without a second of rest or relaxation.

From far below, echoed the cold crash of breakers on the rocks. Far above, torn battalions of [127] cloud swirled witlessly across a shuddering moon. Along the cliff, white splashes that marked by day the coastguard’s path, now came and went like evil staring faces....

Stuart swung on, unfaltering; Peter followed as best she might. Once she stumbled. He stopped, and flung a guiding arm about her.

“I can walk alone,” said Peter.

“I know you can....” The tempest hurled his voice straight past her, and across the black stretch of moor. “And it’s because you can walk alone, that you’re going to walk with me now.”

They pressed forward, eluding carefully what they thought was bog-land, only to discover on

looking back, that they had been tricked by shadows. And shadows, again, resolved themselves into marsh-patches, yielding and treacherous. A fine rain sprayed their coats to a glitter. The moon had been beaten from her fields, leaving the world in a roar of darkness.... Once they halted abruptly on the verge of nothing, where the land had been eaten away. Once they followed the cliff that ran out sheer to a point, crested by dark shapes of granite, monsters thrown up æons ago by the waves.

Peter and Stuart stood motionless for several moments, rigid bodies thrusting at the wall of wind, that blew with never a drop nor yet a swell in the strength and sound of it; stripped from them all memory of a narrower stuffier world.

—“Tired?”

“Of the wind?”

“Of me, then?”

“I’ve never yet met the man who could tire me.”

“Never?”

“Never!”

With a laugh, he turned, strode back to the mainland. Then, facing suddenly round, met her scrambling down from the granite. Met her, and put his arms about her—this time neither in [128] support nor in guidance, but fiercely, and because of the thing that had lain crouching between them, now storm-whipped to sudden life. Her short hair beat and stung against his face. Their lips were stiff and crusted with salt. It was not a night for words. Once he spoke her name....

Later, swinging down the homeward path, they came upon sight of Carn Trewoofa, three or four stray lights splashing the darkness. It was good to know that one of these was from Merle’s lamp. Good to imagine her sitting in the battered arm-chair by the window, thinking of the other two in the turmoil outside.

Good to be the two in the turmoil outside.

[129]

CHAPTER XI
TWO—AND ONE OVER

Stuart's departure meant for Peter and Merle a period of twoness deliciously free from the tension of extreme demand which he made upon their minds and bodies alike. Mentally and physically, they allowed themselves now to flop; excluding long tramps and dangerous climbs; mooching for the most part in and about the village, or among the shallower rocks; hardly talking; secure in the friendship that took much for granted.

The morning before Carn Trewoofa was to see the last of them, they awoke to a drenching downpour, which beat sea and moor and sky to one sodden colourless pulp. All day long the rain descended sullenly; and towards evening Merle coaxed Mrs. Trenner to transfer live fire, leaping and flaming on a shovel, from her kitchen to their sitting-room grate. Then she and Peter drew up their arm-chairs, definitely abandoned all idea of making an effort, and allowed themselves to be lulled to that half-hypnotic state of coma produced by warmth within and rain without; hush unbroken save by the muffled boom of unseen breakers on the beach.

"Good thing he's gone," murmured Merle; "Stuart hasn't got a fire-light mood."

"How d'you know?"

"Instinct."

"I believe you're right," Peter conceded; "he can find pleasure in the rest he earns by utter exhaustion; none in just volupping."

"Good word." [130]

"Yes," said Peter, and proceeded to volupp, eyes half-closed, arms hanging over the side of the chair; too luxuriously lazy even to rise for a cigarette.

Dusk and the rain joined hands beyond the streaming squares of window. The moving world was very far away from Carn Trewoofa in its greyness. From the kitchen, two voices rose and fell in sing-song fashion; not seeming to belong to Mrs. Trenner or Bessy or any human shape; merely voices, monotonous, ceaseless, chanting.

Merle had since several minutes been watching Peter intently. All of a sudden she cried: "Don't!"

The other girl roused herself from reverie: "Don't what?"

"That sleepy-tiger look of yours. I hate it."

"Why?"

"It's so—replete."

Peter laughed. "Perhaps it has been fed and wants exercise."

"On a lead? Up and down the Park for twenty minutes every day? Oh, Peter, why haven't I too got a tiger to sit beside yours on the wall?"

"It doesn't sit on a wall," retorted Peter, who was inclined to take her tiger seriously.

"Darling, you know it's only a Nestlé's-Milk Advertisement Cat. The fat creamy one. We'll call it a tiger, if you like. It's a very fine cat."

Peter picked up the pair of sand-shoes which Stuart had left a-sprawl on the fender; and musingly fingered the torn soles: "Millionaire's footgear," she murmured scornfully; certainly they were in a disgracefully tattered condition. She pulled the two elephants from the mantelpiece, and laid one at rest in either shoe.... "Elephant cradles...."

"Are you talking in your sleep?" queried Merle.

"I was pondering the matter of Cheap Sentiment," lied Peter. "I've got whole Marshes of Cheap Sentiment in my being, which I dare not show, nor even countenance, but which are unmistakably spreading." [131]

Merle snuggled deeper into her arm-chair, and cooed encouragement: "Go on, Peter!"

"Just think," gently rocking the elephant cradles, "if I admitted Stuart to my passion for curly-haired small infants; told him that carols sung on frosty nights bring a lump to my throat; or that organ music makes me want to be good. Yes, it does, Merle—honest injun! And I like stroking somebody's hair in the firelight, and simply ache at times for the strong shoulder to lean on——"

"Try Stuart's," suggested Merle unkindly. And Peter shuddered.

"Shoulders! he's got ridges; they'd cut like a knife; and what isn't ridge is knobs. No, I meant the sort of shoulder, with that traditional Harris-tweed scent 'that ever afterwards brought his image with such cruel distinctness before her mental vision.' You understand, don't you?"

"Of course I do; *Pour qui prenez-vous moi?* But your marshes are specially bad. Tell me some more."

"Call of Spring," continued Peter, just letting the murmured words drop from between her lips; "and the scent of jasmine on a hot night."

"Tiger again?"

"Um."

Merle had an inspiration: "What about letting that tiger graze on the marshes?"

“Bad for it to graze anywhere,” said Peter grimly. “Then there’s the Marsh of ‘do-you-remember’ and ‘this-time-a-year-ago,’ deep slushy ones, both of them; particular favourites of mine. And the clash of bells on New Year’s Eve awakens feelings unutterable within me. So do soldiers marching past; and a cheering crowd. I’m attached to the house in which I was born. I keep [132] letters. I don’t mind Tennyson half as much as I pretend. And when I read about lonely children, I cry. And then I can cry at seeing myself cry—it’s a most pathetic sight!”

“Is all that genuine?” real concern now in her friend’s voice.

“Yes.... And sometimes, Merle, I just long to take the whole bag of tricks and fling them at Stuart’s head; it would be so good for him!” A half-smile tilted her lips, as she reflected how she had continually burlesqued to Stuart these same sentimental weaknesses, without once letting a hint escape that she shared in them.

The fire yawned audibly, and plopped a coal into the stillness. The sense of isolation was thick as cotton-wool.

—Crunch of footsteps up the path and on the steps. Then a loud and penetrating double knock. A dog leapt from the kitchen, barking furiously. Mrs. Trenner was heard unbolting to the intruder. The door flew open to great gusts of wind and rain. A gruff voice spoke for a moment. Retreating steps, closed door, a subdued whine from the dog ... and Mrs. Trenner brought in two sopping blurred letters that were the cause of so much sudden tumult. Then returned again to the kitchen. Silence swallowed the cottage with a gulp, and all was as before.

“Both from Stuart,” quoth Merle, handing one envelope to Peter; “how typical of him to break in with all that clamour.”

Her communication was the longer of the two, and took her several minutes to read; once or twice she laughed aloud at some brilliant flight of nonsense. At last, according to invariable custom, she tossed the scribbled-over sheets to Peter for inspection—“Here you are,” and held out her hand for the exchange....

Peter did not stir; her fingers clenched a little tighter on the letter which lay in her lap. Into her [133] eyes had crept again that look, brooding and replete, to which Merle had so objected.

... Merle withdrew her hand. Between the two girls lay the sensation of a moment dead.

One letter which could be shown—and one which couldn’t ... Merle understood now.

The journey up to London was an uncomfortable one. Peter and Merle avoided each other as much as possible. Never before had they been brought to a pass where open discussion was mutually barred. Once, Peter mentioned very casually that Stuart in his letter ... had summoned them on arrival to meet him straightway at the Billet-doux for dinner. Merle courteously acknowledged the invitation. If matters had been otherwise, she would have rejoiced exceedingly at the prospect of being hurled direct from their primitive abode in Carn Trewoofa, to the contrasting blaze and bustle of a London restaurant. But aware that the stunt had been arranged for Peter, not for herself, she wished fervently she could withdraw altogether, wondered how long she would instinctively be forced to obey the call of trio, dance to its elusive melody. How long?—Why, how long had she already been fooled to the belief that she was necessary to complete the figure of three? How long had this—thing—been growing?... The slow train drew up with a jerk at Exeter, and refused for thirty-five minutes to stir from beside the wet shining platform. Peter was restless; thudded with her foot against the ground. And Merle, knowing now the cause, resented her restlessness: “She can’t wait till she sees him again.”

After interminable jolts and stoppages, Paddington Station. Twenty to seven,—seven o’clock they were due at the Billet-doux. “What shall we do with our suit-cases?” “I’m taking mine to Euston waiting-room, ready to be picked up on my way home.” “Then I’ll leave mine at a convenient Tube [134] station; Oxford Circus will do.”... They were both thankful for the suit-cases.

A taxi hailed, and directions given. And whereas Merle, in the whirl through the lit crowded streets, grieved for the laughter missed, Peter was reproaching herself for an inexplicable wish to be doing all this alone; alone to be meeting Stuart at seven o’clock. She had not seen him since that night on the moors; he had slipped away the next morning before his companions were out of bed.

Her excitement grew. Merle looked at her, once, by the flashing arc of a street-lamp—then glanced quickly away again.

Outward circumstances were well in favour of a successful trio party. Memory of dark green moor and sun-splashed waves and all the details that went to make Carn Trewoofa,—and at the doors of the Billet-doux behold now Stuart in evening-clothes and silk hat and a man-about-town set to his eyeglass: “So glad you could come,” in the Oxford voice,—had he ever *really* shown them his bare grazed knees?

“We do look pirates,” exclaimed Peter, laughingly conscious of brown throat, and hair tangled to a web by the salt winds. And indeed, many heads were turned to gaze after the two girls in stained tweed skirts, jerseys and caps, threading their defiant way between the tables, in the wake of the exquisite dandy.

“The same places as at our first supper?” suggested Stuart.

They assented.

So the mirror reflected the three figures, as once before. And Merle thought hard of Da Vinci’s

masterpiece. She would have liked to ask if Peter were visited by the same idea, but remembered in time that the thread of intimacy had been snapped. Easy enough, now that her eyes were [135] opened, to see what had happened to the two grown-ups, for thus she contemptuously classified her comrades; and she imagined their secret evident in every look and word; their lightest remark tingling with electricity.

... Just this once she would still be faithful to the spirit of trio. But oh, how she longed to let them know that all this elaborate comedy of maintaining for her benefit a volley of nonsense talk, was merely insulting; her eyes were clear of dust.

"Do, for pity's sake, tell me some tales of Orson Manor, for the edification of grandmaman."

"What's the good?" from Peter; "you know that the very first time I come to lunch, I shall put my hoof in it up to the hilt."

Stuart repeated puzzled: "Do hoofs have hilts? do hilts have hoofs—hooves—hilts—I say, that's not a bad pub., the 'Hoof and Hilt.' Shall we put it in the Room, Merle?"

"We have seven already," she reminded him reproachfully.

... Grown-ups, grown-ups both of them! And what was the good of forcing the play? To allow love to happen, just like other grown-ups—Merle's lip curled. Not a man or woman in the assembled crowd but had at some time of their lives succumbed to this most ordinary passion. But the trio had boasted of their difference!... Grown-ups.

Stuart began to spin a marvellous tissue of absurdities relative to their supposed stay with his sister Dorothy in Devon. The Spanish waiter came and went with dishes. In the gleaming mirror, three marionettes talked and laughed and gesticulated, faithfully mimicking the originals at their side. At the side of the gleaming mirror, three pairs of eyes watched the marionettes, and [136] marvelled at their likeness to life. At the table and in the mirror, three ghosts were chanting a dirge for the playtime that was over. But Merle alone heard them.

... "It was such a grotesque nightmare," Peter was saying; "I was one side of the moon, and a cow the other. And every time the cow jumped over the moon, as cows will, I jumped as well, so as always to be on the other side of the moon to the cow. I'm not partial to cows. But it was a fearful strain, watching its face, and trying to guess from the expression exactly when it intended to jump."

"I should have thought the double motion would become mechanical at last, like the Flip-Flap. Did you know that Mrs. Trenner asked for my address before I left, that she might send me a lobster fresh from its native soil? And can you imagine my mother when it turns up? and the butler? I haven't the remotest notion how to account for it; Orson Manor is miles from the sea, and Dorothy *never* sends us lobsters."

Suddenly, from being especially flushed and talkative and brilliant, Peter dropped to a queer moodiness; mouth sullen; feet swinging rebelliously against the leg of the table. She wanted to be alone with Stuart—wanted it—wanted it. Merle's presence filled her with an intense exasperation. She tried at first to control these sensations; the knowledge that they were shared by Stuart would have gone far towards soothing them. But Stuart betrayed nothing of his point of view that night; from the mask of his features, he might have been totally unaware of aught unusual in the atmosphere. His manner to both girls was equally charming ... a skilled juggler, he tossed his ivory balls.

"I only succeeded once in drawing a salt into conversation," said Merle gravely; "I couldn't [137] understand a word of what he was talking about, except that it related mainly to whales. So I prattled intelligently in reply, of harpoons and blubber—oh, quite professional. Peter told me afterwards that he was referring to his summer holiday at Llandudno."

... "For God's sake, be quiet!" prayed Peter inaudibly. All these inanities—when she and Stuart might already be embarking on the perilous seas of their double adventure. Would this ghastly meal never be over? And then what lay in store? Would he contrive somehow to snatch a moment alone with her? Surely ... somehow.

Merle was also curious to see how they would rid themselves of her superfluous company. She was disliking Stuart just a little more than Peter. Her anger against the latter was mixed with a curious sympathy; if they ever came dispassionately to talk it over, she knew that each would prove perfectly familiar with the other's exact state of mind. But Stuart's acting, if it were indeed acting, was a shade more perfect than either of theirs.

"Have you a train to catch, Peter?" he asked nonchalantly. Her heart drummed thickly.

"Yes. The 9.40 from Euston."

He drew out his watch: "9.10. We've just time for liqueurs."

The girls drank their pale Chartreuse in silence, too tired, after the long tense day in the train, to make any further effort. Peter felt thankfully that the time of her deliverance was at hand.

“We’ll take Peter to Euston, and then I’ll see you home, Merle,” this in the porch, while they waited for the page-boy to summon a taxi.

Sharply Peter drew in her breath. What game was he playing? Merle ... fragile little fool! Surely for once she could be trusted to look after herself. [138]

“Do you think we can’t see through that?” shouted Merle’s pride to Stuart’s courtesy. But she choked down the longing to make a scene; her good breeding, put to the test, was proving itself no mere surface quality.

At Euston, he dashed off into the labyrinth to reclaim the suit-case and take Peter’s ticket. Nine-thirty-eight by the clock over the portals.

And now all of Peter was concentrated in the one consuming longing for a moment alone with him, before the nine-forty whirled her off to Thatch Lane. She had forgotten even what she wanted from him, what she expected the coveted moment to yield her. Only knew of a frantic desire to be quit of the third voice, the third presence....

Trio?... Peter hated the Trio.

—“Come along, quick. You’ll miss your train.” He hurried them down the stairs and through the gangway—then up again—past the barrier—on to the platform—in time to see the nine-forty steam slowly away.

Peter let escape a long quivering sigh. Reprieved for a while. There was still a chance.

“When’s the next to Thatch Lane?”

“Ten-thirteen, sir. Express. Number four platform.”

They crossed to number four. And if Peter dragged behind, Merle likewise dragged. And if Peter swung ahead—there was Merle still beside her. Or so it seemed to Peter’s overwrought fancy. And after about five minutes’ aimless waiting, she could bear it no longer, but strolled off by herself, down the dark lonely platform, till it sloped away to meet a gleaming maze of rails.

Footsteps in her wake. She mastered herself sufficiently not to turn, but triumph clamoured within her. He had understood, and followed, as she intended he should. The footsteps drew level. It was Merle. [139]

Merle had not noticed the direction Peter had taken; but discovering the accidental proximity, she tried as naturally as possible to break an awkward silence: “This was where we broke the egg, wasn’t it?”

For beyond anger and beyond pain, lurked within her an unspoken wish that Peter would not so far give herself away; fastidious recoil of girlhood from which the bloom had—not been brushed.

She received merely a look in response to her remark. Then, without speaking, they turned and walked back to Stuart, who, absorbed in a study of the ownerless motor-cars that eccentrically bestrew Euston, had apparently not noticed their absence.

Peter said: “You and Merle had better not wait. My train won’t be in for another twenty minutes.”

“Oh, very well. You’ll be all right, won’t you? I expect Merle is fagged; she’s looking awfully white. Good night. It’s been rather a successful evening, hasn’t it?”

The two girls allowed their eyes to meet in a brief flash of understanding, sympathy even. Then Peter’s hardened again to antagonism.

“Good night, Stuart. Good night, Merle.”

“Good night.”

She was alone. And Euston was in a forbidding mood; one of those vast black moods which tend to shrink the individual to the size of a thimble.

Ten—fifteen minutes. The express thundered in. Peter stepped into a vacant compartment and sat staring dully at the framed views on the wall opposite.... So it had never really happened, their fight with the wind, and the rain-blurred letter afterwards. Never really happened, or he would have made one sign to show he remembered. She dreaded the blank journey, and dreaded the blank night to follow, wondering for what length of time her nerves would continue to throb, throb and pant like the engine of the ten-thirteen. And now a shudder in the wheels beneath her, and the train began to move ... faster and faster.... [140]

Someone ran alongside, leapt on to the footboard, tore at the handle of the door. And:

“I told the man to drive like Hell!” said Stuart.

“Oh, Lord!” reflected Stuart the following morning; “I believe I was dramatic.”

Not alone this, but having perpetrated the abominable crime of a “dramatic moment,” he now planned no deliberate attempt to destroy it. Which was significant.

“Oh Lord!” reflected Peter the following morning; “I believe I was neurotic.”

She was now perfectly normal and serenely happy. The sky streamed sunshine, and she wanted to pick daffodils. Also her recollections of the evening before were extremely hazy, beyond a

disgusted impression that she had behaved rather badly.

“What on earth could have been the matter with me?” she splashed herself with cold water, and put on her best shoes and stockings, by way of signalling her change of mood. Then came to the comfortable conclusion that perhaps Merle had noticed nothing. Why, it was the child’s birthday to-day. They would have a celebration; perhaps Stuart——

Mature consideration decided that, on the whole, trios had better be suspended for a while, since their effect upon her temperament was so demoralizing. No matter! she and Merle would foot it happily in their two-world; that was still intact. She would not give up Merle, nor yet Stuart, nor yet anybody. One-world, two-world, three-world; and the Room and playtime and friendship and [141] tigers and daffodils—she would keep them all. Why not?

Thus Peter in the train which took her that afternoon to Euston, and on the ’bus which bore her down Oxford Street.

... And she was very sorry she had been cross last night, and Merle must forgive her, and be radiantly happy as well. Why not? Who could fail to rejoice, when the earth was thrilling and teeming and bursting with the knowledge that she and Stuart were going to be in love. And they would go on going to be, till the fateful day of have-been. The actual state of love Peter determined to skip; it was too smug and settled; too lacking in divine discontent. Thus Peter on the doorstep of the house in Lancaster Gate. And she startled Madame des Essarts by singing the Pirate’s Chorus the whole way up the broad and decorous staircase:

> “Come, sail with me ercross ther sea,
> Ercross ther dork Lergoon——”

She knocked at Merle’s door.

“Come in.”

“Hullo!” cried Peter in buoyant voice.

Merle, doing nothing in particular, was standing at the dressing-table, heaped high with dainty expensive presents, and notes, and telegrams; tokens whereby might be gathered that Mademoiselle des Essarts was twenty-two.

Mademoiselle des Essarts did not return her friend’s greeting.

“Hullo!” The repetition in a somewhat more subdued tone.

“Did Stuart catch the train?”

“How did you know?” Peter queried, astonished.

“I heard him tell the driver to hurry, the instant he had deposited me on my doorstep. ‘Drive like Hell!’ was his exact expression, I think.”

“Yes ... he just turned up in time;” a distinctly subdued voice now. There was something ominous [142] about Merle’s lovely little face; and Peter was not quite so sure about keeping the two-world intact.

“I say—Merle—was I a beast yesterday?”

“Dear me, no; you were delightful.” It might have been the grandmother speaking in those tones of frozen hauteur. Then suddenly: “You’re in love with each other, aren’t you?”

Peter tossed off her hat and coat. “Don’t be—crude.”

“Crude!” the other blazed forth; “perhaps you think you weren’t crude—last night.”

“Last night was a mood; and I apologize. I’m quite normal again.”

“Naturally. He caught the train.”

“Merle,” Peter’s eyes were deep and troubled; “you mustn’t say that sort of thing. You. You said it as if you meant it; as if——”

“As if what?”

“As if you were jealous,” Peter blurted out.

“I am. Oh—not of Stuart; he doesn’t count in this, except that I dislike him for daring to interfere, after all we’ve been to each other.”

The speech seemed to awake an echo in the room. Peter was faintly conscious of just such another scene as this, though when and where she could not remember.

“Need he interfere?” she said at last, haltingly. Then: “I say, we’re not quarrelling, are we?”

Merle smiled: “Yes, I believe we are.” Then her look shadowed once more. “Do you think I’m going through again what I sat through at that horrible supper? The knowledge of being in the way; unwanted; seeing between you two that secret current of understanding, and all the while having to pretend I was unaware of it. The trio is dead—dead—dead. And it’s not I who have [143] killed it. It’s you and Stuart. We found the most wonderful playtime that ever was—but you had to drag in love, like any other two people of opposite sex.”

Peter crossed to the window, her back to the room: “It might equally well have been Stuart and you.”

“For me, the point lies in the fact that it wasn’t.”

“You’d have acted the same. A man and two girls—what else could we expect, admitting him?”

In the dignified street below, a long line of lights sprang into a sudden curve of brilliance athwart the dusk. With one hand, Peter held aside the tapestried hangings ... and the touch brought with it great floods of memory. Echoes?—she had traced back the echoes now. This quarrel had been rehearsed. The Inevitable had recoiled with ironic effect on those who had dared mock it with burlesque.

She wondered at what point Merle would remember the pretence drama they had perpetrated of jealousy and farewell, when the question was first raised of admitting a third to their union. But Merle was blinded by a royal rage, would see nothing clearly till she had delivered herself of the pent-up storm of emotion:

“We were to have been so different; we three. Oh, how could you spoil it? I’ve seen thousands look at each other as you looked at one another last night—but where am I to find the games and the nursery again? Real children can’t play as we did ... and you and Stuart have fallen in love!” Her delicate features quivered with scorn for the two who could not keep it up; who had dropped from the kingdom of magic strange and new, to an old, old kingdom of magic; old as the hills and the seas and the oldest road.

Peter said never a word. She was afraid to speak, for fear of again treading on the heels of that former occasion. It was too absurd that they should thus be repeating themselves, in the very same setting, and neither able to laugh at it. [144]

“And we knew.” Merle went on, in performance of just that which Peter dreaded; “if we hadn’t known beforehand—but we knew, and courted the danger; we did it ourselves——”

“Don’t!” from Peter ... and she walked sharply away from that—that damnable window.

Then it struck Merle. “Oh, I see. Yes, it is rather funny.” She laughed drearily. “The scene ought to go well, considering we’ve played it before. A pity the parts are reversed. You preferred the rôle of Unwanted Woman, as giving more scope to your histrionic powers.”

“Look here,” pleaded Peter; and, hands outspread against the toilet-table behind her, she faced Merle squarely; “this sort of sparring isn’t worthy of us. For Heaven’s sake, let’s try and get a sane grip of the business.”

“In exactly that position?” murmured Merle, who had not slept as well as Peter, and was inclined to be relentless.

Desperately Peter dropped her hands; and wondered if there were one place in the whole room that she had not by farce made untenable.

“Can’t we throw him out even now?” but while she spoke, she knew it impossible.

“Pleasant companion you’d be under those circumstances,” remarked the half-bitter, half-mocking accents that sounded so strange from Merle. As if weary of conflict, she seated herself on the edge of the bed; the tapestried canopy casting a deep shadow on the pale cameo of her face.

“All over, Peter.” She held out her hand, with a gesture almost friendly. “You can’t keep the two of us, my dear, so stop thinking you can. Stuart can give you all that I give you, and his manhood into the bargain. So you’re all right. But if I did consent to stay in, I’d be aware all the while of a great chunk in your life that you were keeping hidden from me. And we’d be constantly hitting on allusions, and backing away from them, and being tactful,—and it would all be very feverish and very uncomfortable. What we’ve had has been too complete to spoil by compromise. It’s over, Peter.” [145]

“It isn’t over,” Peter retorted fiercely. “I won’t have it over!” And she pushed hard at the Inevitable.

“Can you give up Stuart?”

“No,” softly.

“Peter, that wonderful type of friendship doesn’t exist, where the one left out rejoices at the good fortune of the other. If *I* had tumbled into Paradise with some man, could you have listened to my exuberant confidences, and been noble about them?”

And again Peter said softly, “No.”

Merle lay back among the pillows, hands clasped behind her head.... At any moment she might cry: “*Pax*, Peter, *pax*!”...

“I can’t bear to be the one who lags, for whom allowances must be made, passion suppressed. There’s nothing to be done, Peter; we’ve quarrelled, and we’re going to part for ever. Humiliating, isn’t it? I wonder just how we got here.”

“Playing at God,” muttered Peter savagely; and slung her cloak around her shoulders, rammed her hat on to her head. She felt she could not stand much more. Every bit of her was aching to throw strong arms about the slight figure lying on the elaborate brocade bedspread; hold her tight, in defiance of the ridiculous notion that anything could possibly arise between them, with which their boyish brains and sense of humour and glorious intimacy would be unable to cope.—And then arose memories of last night ... one must pay for these little primitive displays. With fatal clarity, she saw Merle’s point of view. Not for the victor to insult by generosity, to dictate terms of peace; according to their code, Peter, as top-dog, was powerless to make overtures; she must simply acquiesce. [146]

“If—when ... the other thing is done with——?” she began.

“Not even then. It would never look the same....”

(Peter bit her lip, anticipating with sickening exactitude the end of the sentence.)

... “Even after mending,” finished Merle. And a spasm of anger shook the other girl from head to foot: Merle must be selecting these particular phrases on purpose!

But it was this same nightmare sense of stepping again in her own footprints, that took Peter draggingly to the door. And: “I shall want to come back and talk about it when I get to the foot of the stairs,” she said, obedient to phantom promptings.

Merle made reply: “Of course. So will I.”

The ghost of a sham farewell had completed its subtle revenge. There was no more to be said. So Peter went.

On the steps of the house at Lancaster Gate, the knowledge returned, like the flutter of banners in the sunshine, that for her the world still contained Stuart.

... Quite irrelevantly, it also struck her that she had omitted to wish Merle many happy returns of the day.

CHAPTER XII
THE CASKET LINED WITH PINK

It was such a very large room. And the child left over wanted badly to cry, because her toys had all been broken, because it was her birthday, because Peter had gone. But who could possibly cry in such a very large room, that unwound itself and escaped at the corners, whenever she tried to seek comfort in tucking the walls close about her like an eiderdown quilt. She could have cried in a little room, quite easily; but this regal apartment was Second Empire—somebody important had slept here once.

Nicole knocked and entered: “It is time for Mademoiselle to dress. Is Mademoiselle completely rested?” beaming, she exhibited an elaborate bouquet, white lilac and lilies of the valley, that had just been sent by a middle-aged admirer from the Legation.

Madame des Essarts trailed in, to discuss in what costume Merle would shine to the best advantage, at the dinner-party given in her honour that evening.

“The apricot ninon? What do you think, Nicole?”

Nicole was in favour of a quaint old-rose brocade, which suited Mademoiselle *à merveille*. Merle was invited to take part in the discussion. She could have indicated a startling preference for a sea-faded jersey and cap ... but she said that she preferred the brocade. Her grandmother laid cool fingers, heavily beringed, upon her head.

“Mignonne, we must call in *ce bon* Docteur Dufour again; you are slightly feverish. The excitement of your fête, is that it?”

[148] Merle smiled. A doll had returned to its elaborate wrappings; a bon-bon was replaced in its satin casket; a jewel laid back in its nest of cotton-wool. Merle smiled: Yes, she was excited because it was her birthday. Nice things always happened on one’s birthday, was it not so? And murmuring benignly an epigram on *la jeunesse*, Madame departed to put herself in the hands of the coiffeur.

Merle lay back among the pillows, and watched Nicole laying out silk stockings and embroidered shoes; soft underwear; a string of pearls; a handkerchief edged in fine old lace; Nicole, drawing the curtains, fetching hot water.... “Good Heavens! that I should own a friend who owns a maid. You know it’s quite easy to pull on your stockings, once you’ve learnt the way”—How long would the memory of Peter’s mischievous remarks entangle themselves like alien threads through the dainty artificial pattern that must henceforth be woven only in dim pastels and misted silver?

“Mademoiselle is now ready for me to arrange her hair?” Ablutions performed, Merle slipped around her a silk kimono. The monogrammed tortoise-shell hair-brushes stood at hand on the panelled dressing-table; the room was deliciously warm, and fragrant with the scent of white lilac. Merle had enjoyed with all her heart this parade of luxury and ceremonial when it had stood as contrast to her secret life of adventure with Peter; their stolen days, their long tramps—oh, it had been fun, while roughing it, to remember Nicole and the waiting casket lined with pink.

But now the casket stood for all there was; the tortoise-shell toilet-service had to be taken seriously; and Merle’s eyes, looking back at her from the oval mirror, were wide and frightened with the knowledge that one could not laugh alone.

[149] Mademoiselle des Essarts, in old-rose brocade and pearls, stands beside Madame in the Louis salon, and, with charming self-possession, helps to receive the entering guests. And now they have all arrived: well-known figures in foreign ministerial circles; courteous and urbane old gentlemen wearing decorations; brilliant and polished young gentlemen from the various embassies; the two daughters of the new Consul (invited because they were of Merle’s age); the elegant wives of numerous consuls; the white-haired Marchese di Salvador, whose rule it is never to make a remark that is not unpleasant; finally, a middle-aged member of the Legation, tall, kindly, and distinguished, his head already beflecked with grey: Jean Raoul Théodore, Comte de Cler, who so admires Mademoiselle des Essarts, and is enchanted to find that he is to lead her down to dinner.

General conversation round the table is mostly of a political nature, and carried on in foreign languages, the assembled company slipping with ease from one tongue to another. Merle’s partner considerately leaves her alone, remarking with instinctive delicacy that the charming child beside him is troubled, and not in a mood to talk. But presently le Vicomte d’Alençon turns from a spirited contest with the Marchese, to Merle on his other side, and enquires if she has received many gifts in celebration of the day which seventeen years ago was responsible for such a beautiful and talented addition to the world. His tone is sugary and indulgent, as to a petted child. She blushes and deprecates, correcting his mistake—“Twenty-two? *Ma non è possibile!*”—and watches him return with unmistakable relief to his argument with the Marchese.... “I agree with you, *mon ami*, he should never have been put in responsible office; I will see what can be done....”

[150] Undoubtedly fascinating to insiders, this game of diplomacy. Merle would not be averse to be admitted as equal to the intricacies of wire-pulling, instead of being tossed an occasional sugar-plum to keep her quiet; but she realizes that these people are justified in thrusting her outside of their world—why is she not in her own? The universe is a series of cosy cubicles, but dreary for the strays who wander beyond the drawn curtains.... She sends a swift thought to the Room, the Perfect Piratical Playroom. Will it be sub-let, now that two of its owners are grown-up? And she imagines a grave discussion with Peter and Stuart on the subject of a suitable tenant, who would

be kind to the giraffe, and keep on Squeith as included in the inventory, and....

—Twinkling the pear-shaped emeralds in her ears, the wife of the new Consul asks deferentially of her hostess if her little granddaughter will be allowed to spend a week-end at their country-seat: "My two girls here are of her age, I believe; and they would be so delighted, *chère* Madame."

Madame is also delighted, and vouches enthusiastically for Merle's delight. And the two daughters murmur their double delight, and wish Merle were not so beautiful, and continue to coquette with the young gentlemen from the embassies.

"But lately one never sees *cette méchante petite*," shrills the widowed sister-in-law of Madame; "she neglects *la vieille tante* shamefully."

"Merle is so much with her special friend," Madame explains in apology; "Peter Kyndersley—a sweet girl; they are inseparable. Even now they have but just returned from a visit to Devonshire."

"Ah, she must indeed have enjoyed that,"—they are talking *at* Merle, not to her—"And how well she is looking."

"The fresh air," says Madame; and turns the subject. Youth has received sufficient attention for the moment.

... Dancing before Merle's eyes, a sudden vision of a tea-party of nice young girls, to celebrate her last year's natal day, and the arrival of Peter in the rôle of Inseparable Friend, bearing the present of a particularly hideous work-basket: "*Dearest* Merle, *so* many happy returns of the day. Just a *little* remembrance for your birthday; oh, a mere nothing, but I always say it's the *spirit* and not the *gift* that matters!" A murmur of approbation here from grandmother, aunts, and visitors—and Merle, meeting the wicked twinkle in Peter's eye, controls herself with difficulty. [151]

—Last year.

And again: "We can't quarrel really," laughed Peter, "because of your grandmother. One would hear nothing but: 'You never ask that charming Peter Kyndersley to tea, *chèrie*, and you were once so fond of her.'..."

Well, that will have to be gone through as well.

The table is one blaze and glitter; the light falling on the Salviati vases; wine trembling and reflecting in the long-stemmed glasses; vivid splashes of fruit and flowers; flash of epigram from one lip to another. The Marchese is in great form to-night.... "Oh, *là là*!" and peals of laughter—

... Peter ... Peter....

The other two will not miss the games so intensely; they had played because it was their nature to play, as now they loved because it was their nature to love. But Merle had played for all her wasted years of Château and Convent; played for the prim little maiden with her toes turned out, who hung in a frame on the wall of the boudoir; played for all the children of all the world who had not the chance to play enough....

"But you are grown-up. Grown-ups cannot play."

"We did! we did!"

"Are you sure? Were *they* playing—all the time?"

Had they indeed ever played, all three of them together? Yes; Merle saw clearly now when the change had occurred; when the pendulum, vibrating equally between herself and Peter, had swung completely over. It was after the April night when Stuart had come to her in his trouble, and she had given him comfort. [152]

"But he asked for it—I only gave him what he asked for."

Just so, my dear. Just so.

—"Merle! *chèrie!*"

Merle starts guiltily from her absorption; becomes aware of Monsieur le Vicomte d'Alençon, as the oldest present, making a few appropriate remarks in her honour. He tugs his white imperial; bows gracefully in the direction of the so charming granddaughter of their so delightful hostess—

And now they are all clinking and drinking to the good health and good fortune of Mademoiselle des Essarts!

"It's Merle's birthday," said Peter, facing Stuart over their particular table at the Billet-doux.

"Then we'll drink to Merle's good health," Stuart replied.

Glasses raised—eyes meeting steadily over the rims—meeting steadily—kindling to flame—

By the time the circular stems again touch the table-cloth, Merle is forgotten.

END OF PART I

[153]

PART II

CHAPTER I
HAIRPIN VISION

Stuart said: “Everything’s worth dying for, or else nothing would be worth living for.”

“You mean,” Peter queried, “that dying and living are of equal unimportance?”

“Equal importance.”

They were seated side by side upon a luggage-truck, in a deserted vaulty corner on the outskirts of Euston. In front of them were ranged battalions of empty luggage-trucks, standing stiffly at attention. From far away rolled in waves the hollow reverberating echoes that are part of a great terminus. All about them, enormous stone pillars stood sentinel, their tops presumably lost in a murky infinity; but robbed of majesty by the absurd fretwork of vine-leaves that encircled their base.

The occupants of this draughty suburb were not so much waiting for a train to convey Peter to Thatch Lane, as awaiting the moment they themselves should be seized by desire for a train; when, strolling forth to investigate, they usually found the very article just about to leave the platform. Such was the never-waning influence of Stuart’s star, in which, by dint of her proximity, Peter had assumed a share, with the same ease as she would have displayed coming under another’s umbrella.

—“Of equal importance,” Stuart maintained, reverting to their argument; “if death be essential [154] for the completion of a moment, no person ought to let their rubbishy life stand in the way. The moment’s the thing. To walk about attaching such a tremendous weight to the value of the-breath-in-my-body, and none at all to the fun which can be extracted from ignoring it, is the unbalanced attitude of all people who have no sense of form.”

Peter was straining to follow him; she could almost hear her brain creak with the effort.

“If by the hairpin vision, you glimpse an act as needing for completion the sacrifice of your life, you’d give it?”

“Every time. By way of proving the vital importance of the act. And if all were to throw themselves more recklessly into the impersonal spirit of formation, we’d be done with age and illness, with fears and frets and muddle and blind gropings. Hanging-on is the evil. I’d like to make a pool, a Greatest Common Factor, into which each man is ready at all times to chuck his life for the sake of living, snap the thread for the sake of the pattern.”

“H’m. It’s superb, but does it hold water? The gift of supreme selflessness——”

“Supreme priggishness! ’Tisn’t that. It’s to a fellow’s personal advantage to see just where he’s going, where to stop, where to snap. The vision demands certain sacrifice, of course.” Stuart chuckled. “I’m pleased with the notion of offering myself as a burnt-offering to myself,” he declared; “such a compliment!”

Peter chanted: “And they could not find an ox nor an ass, nor a signpost nor a manservant, nor diamonds nor decanters, nor pork nor porridge, worthy to be sacrificed to the supreme master of all, son of the house of Heron. Then himself uprose, and stripped him of his braces and other adornments of the flesh——”

But the metaphysician was again in the ascendant; leprechaun had but drummed an instant with [155] shaggy heels, to make sure of not being forgotten.

“Peter, we must know when to cut, you and I. There’ll come the moment, inevitably; and if we don’t act in time, it will be done for us, and just too late.”

“When the last juice is out of the orange,” she quoted.

“And the taste of the skin is already bitter in the mouth.” He considered her steadfastly: “I wonder if you are up to it,” he mused; “it would be rather a magnificent stunt, really and truly to cheat the gods of their aftermath. Could you, Peter? You devil, I believe you could ... I’m not sure that I want you defiant enough for that.”

Thus Stuart to the conception of Peter which he had built from his own desire and from the cavalier tilt of her head. And seeing clearly his Portrait-of-a-Lady; battle-eager and brain-clear and courageous; glorying in freedom from all bondage; a lady with mockery on her lips, and sudden moods of tenderness in her soul, as of mist veiling softly a shining sword; swift in recovery after defeat; tempered at all times to fine adjustment of the spirit to circumstance and adventure; and withal a lady mysterious and unexpected, but of bodily hardihood like to a man’s; and, above everything, able to stand alone and without him;—seeing all this, and finding the portrait attractive, she had played up to it; at first for fun; then because it came as natural to do so as not; then for his sake; finally, because she could no more extricate herself.

One effort indeed she had made in the latter direction: “Stuart, has it ever struck you that you have mixed the oranges in your basket? and when you think to be employed with mine, it is your own you are busily sucking all the while.”

He laughed, not grasping the significance of what she said. “What of it?”

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“Well—no wonder you approve of the flavour!”

“You’re a dentist, Peter!” he cried then, exasperated; “you bring forth the hidden molars of my mind, molars of which I myself am not even aware, and dangle them on your nasty little pincers, saying: ‘Look, this is yours!’ It’s a horrid, a most reprehensible trick.”

She abandoned the attempt at revelation; continued to respond to his conception of her: never to tell him when she was tired; never to own that she had need of him; never to let him see her afraid; never to ask his help in trouble. Herein lay the primary rules to be observed. And she had learnt from him actually to enjoy the utmost limits of strain; found exhilaration in the knowledge that after all, she was top-dog in the silent battle, since she had so successfully restrained her real nature from proclaiming to him its hidden wants and weaknesses. Top-dog—a pity that this superiority must be for ever kept secret, when one considered how he would be annoyed at the information.

Nevertheless, she doubted if her powers were capable of this final test, complete severance at the topmost summit of happiness, in avoidance of descent on the further side. This was super-girl he demanded now. Perversely, she experienced a hatred of his talk of evanescence and the separation to come; wished to hear the old foolish “for-ever-an’-ever” on his lips, the old mad belief in immortality of love, which her reason rejected so scornfully. Were they a pair of fools too clever for love? Peter questioned silently of the luggage-trucks. Beyond the fading rails, beyond the last red-eyed signal-box, a train-whistle hooted derisively.

“Stuart, if we went on without use of the shears, what do you see in store for us?”

Resting his chin on his hands, he gazed beyond the towering pillars, as if in the attempt to throw a loop around the future and pull it into his line of vision.

“Knowledge of each other, worst of all. Knowledge that is bound to widen, and each day lick up a [157]
little more of the unknown territory, till none remains. I shall fight hard not to know you, Peter; not to anticipate your attitude, or expect your unexpectedness, or follow too confidently and without trepidation your mental twists and turns. But it’s a losing fight. And one day we shall experience a sensation of things commonplace, the tingle gone from them.”

“We won’t tell....”

“No, we won’t tell; we’ll try and whip up by artificial means. I might marry you in that mood—from a sort of desperation at having pushed beyond desire. There are no hills and no stars in the country that lies beyond desire. I think, seeing it, one of us will make a half-hearted attempt to break. But too late to glory in the break; it will merely be odious and necessary, with the past already spoiled, and the future rather bleak; a break complicated by entanglements and—oh, other people! So we shall drift together again, as a matter of habit, somewhat ashamed of ourselves——”

Peter was seeing it now: “You will begin to take me for granted, and not strain to please me. And I—I might possibly become exacting——”

“That phase would pass as well. We should grow older, more comfortable, wonder what the uneasiness had all been about, and the sense of loss. Impulse would slip away and topsy-turvydom and conceit”—Stuart waxed pathetic at the contemplated loss of his insufferable bumptiousness,—“and, sane together, we will wonder we could ever have been mad together. If I must age to sanity, damn it! I’ll face the process alone.”

“You won’t remember ... but I shall, on anniversaries. I hate dates, but I can’t break them of their meaning—that’s my sex coming through. Anniversaries ... when I shall have known you a year—two years—three—Stuart, I’m frightened of the years; I want to be meeting you again for the first time.”

“We haven’t come to that yet. But when we do—the world may label me a brute or you a jilt; they [158]
may expect you to cling, or me to reproach; they may talk of the steady affection which grows and subsists upon a durable basis of mutton-fat,—but when we touch top, Peter, as we two shall do simultaneously, because we are level, then it’s: ‘Thanks for what you’ve given me, and good-bye,’ proudly and cleanly. I never thought I should meet the genius of life who could do that.” And he repeated softly his tribute: “You are a genius of life, Peter....”

Then, fearful of an imposed descent from the clear heights, he gave a rapid exhibition of his own unprompted skill at banister-sliding: “Eleven times two is twenty-two!” he recited, awestruck, catching sight of figures roughly scrawled in white chalk on the pillars opposite; “eleven times three is thirty-three! O, far-reaching hand of education——”

“Not so far,” laughed Peter, following him down with remarkable celerity; “eleven times eleven is *not* a hundred and eleven, well, not usually! and our unknown mathematician seems himself to have had doubts on the subject, for he has broken off at that juncture of reckoning.”

Stuart evoked a touching image of the Self-Improving Porter, hoping one day to be a County Councillor; and stealing away from his soulless burden of trundling, to practise his tables in stillness and solitude upon the props of Euston.

“Euston more than any other place will be a home of ghosts, after we have finally torn ourselves asunder,” remarked Peter, as they strolled through dim archways into the circular booking-hall. “You, of course, can avoid the building; but unless I contrive to alight always at Kilburn, which will be inconvenient, my raw wounds will be kept well salted.” She glanced down at the sprawling silent figures from which the wooden benches were never free; phantom figures for ever waiting [159]
for some phantom train; never moving, never asking,—indissoluble adjuncts to the mystery of

Euston. “I will not consent to have my feelings lacerated in chance fashion,” she declared; “I’m going to take you now, and solemnly lay you, as a hen lays eggs, in different portions of the building; so that in years to come I shall know exactly at what points to wince with a sudden pain. If we arrange our own exists, we will also premeditate our own agonies.”

Peter had not yet learnt to refrain from playing at God.

So thrice they sought to trespass in the gallery which, close up to the smoke-black ceiling, ringed the hall. And were twice ejected by a sympathetic stoker; and once by a policeman, who smiled not nor scowled when Stuart quoted to him art and Lucullus in argument against the law, but said simply and stolidly, “Maybe, sir, but them’s my orders,” which is the essential condition of mind for a policeman, and one to be encouraged, ranking him in excellence beside the Self-Improving Porter. And they sought for the elusive platform, from which trains are rumoured to depart on Sundays, but which on all other days lies beyond platform nine, and beyond the world, and beyond space; drifting formless platform to which the evil familiars of Euston occasionally lure a harmless passenger-train, then to chuckle at the bewildered victims of their devilry. And they found also the platform of a thousand milk-cans; and a model steamship in a glass case, reported to perform marvellous feats at the insertion of one penny, but which, clutching Stuart’s penny to its iron breast, stirred not from tranced sleep; thinking doubtless: he is a millionaire and can well spare it. And they planned to hold a Roman feast on a great scale, in the bathroom at Euston; weary sooty travellers to be lured inside and plunged forthwith into cooling floods of [160]
water, and given stale sandwiches to eat, and a third-class ticket to Willesden, gratis with every bar of soap. Finally, they entered Euston through seven different portals, beheld it from seven different aspects, all fearsome with the clankings and throbbings of metal, and the oblique approach of red goblin eyes from the outside glooms.

And Peter said that her train was due, and that the premises were now quite sufficiently imbued with sad sweet memories hereafter as ghosts to haunt her.

“It would be rather funny if my aching heart should turn inartistic and refuse to perform.”

“Oh, if we can’t cheat Ladye Art, at our age!” he leant against the door of the carriage, and lit a cigarette; “she belongs to the first stages of consciousness. I put out my tongue at Art. A man with the artistic sense of things, would never again take you home by train to Thatch Lane, after having once done it so successfully; ‘for fear of spoiling things,’ he would say.”

The guard passed along the line of doors, his passage punctuated by heavy slams.

“But you——” she mocked.

“But I, Peter, can be artistic, and also cheat Art by being inartistic;” he placed a tentative foot upon the step, and she anticipated his evident intentions by a careless: “I don’t need you with me to-night.”

—“And then cheat myself by being re-artistic!” he ran alongside the moving train, and secured the door-handle by a deft turn of the wrist. “And I had no intention of coming with you, Peter. Good night!”

... Peter hated him. It struck her that the most poignant ghost of all, and one where she had no hand in the manufacture, would run for ever abreast of a moving train; leap on to the footboard: “I told the man to drive like Hell!”... leap from the footboard: “I had no intention of coming with you——”

And here were the ends of Euston, where the trio had chanted their triumphant ritual; where [161]
Peter had once taken her tiger a-walking, and Merle had followed her. Merle....

Blackness now, save for a few splashed lights among a dark huddle of roofs. Then open country.

Yes, she hated Stuart. He might have known that she did rather want him to come. He *had* known——

Peter smiled. She was mentally framing a letter to him, of which this was the opening phrase: “If you had no intention of coming, why, oh why, did you hold in your hand *two* first-class tickets to Thatch Lane, when you returned from the booking-office?”

It was just as well, Peter decided, to keep cultivated and alert one’s powers of observation.

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CHAPTER II
A PRODIGAL FATHER

Alighting at the tiny station of Thatch Lane, she was immediately lapped around with a cool bath of air, refreshing as water after the dust and turmoil of a day in London. She walked quickly along the tree-lined road; each house a sleeping mystery divided from the next by a dimness of hedge and garden. Occasionally a light-pricked window; footfall of an invisible passer-by; long echoing shriek from the railway line, as the train in a rushing curve was seen cleaving the fields.

Peter halted beneath a solitary lamp-post, swung open a white gate on her left, passed up the neat gravel path of Bloemfontein, and, bringing forth her latchkey, was just about to let herself in, when she became aware of a blurred bundle, somewhat darker than the darkness, squatting on the steps.

“Hullo!”

“Hullo!” responded the bundle forlornly.

“Have you lost your way?”

“N-no, but there’s nobody to open to us.”

Peter had not looked upon the huddled form in the light of an evening caller: “I’m sorry, I thought you were a beggar—No, I don’t mean that—but it’s awfully dark, isn’t it?” with a quick attempt to retrieve her blunder. “But who are you?”

“Oh, please, I’m Chavvy!”

Came a heavy step upon the gravel. A looming figure returned from what had evidently been a tour of exploration round the back premises:

“No luck, my dear. All bolted, even the pantry window. We shall just have to wait.” [163]

“Father!” exclaimed Peter, relieved from her equal fear of burglars or eccentric demigods, which latter she recollected were in the habit of occasionally week-ending with unsuspecting mortals.

“That you, Peter? Hooray, hooray! Can you let us into this infernal house? we’ve been knocking since half an hour,” Bertram Kyndersley sounded not a whit depressed by the occurrence.

“Aunt Esther is out. But cook had no right to leave the house alone.” Peter inserted the key, and opened to a square hall, blue-papered, with pleasant glimpses beyond of a gas-lit dining-room, its table spread with wine and fruit, with seed-cake and cress sandwiches.

“Aren’t you coming in, Chavvy?” the man spoke impatiently, of a sudden convinced that something was wrong with a universe that permitted to his daughter a latchkey, while himself was forced to nocturnal prowlings and pantry windows.

“May I—Pierrot?”

“Good God, yes!” he helped the bundle to its feet, and brought it into the hall. Peter, who from the high plaintive tones had expected to see a child, was astonished when Chavvy resolved itself into a girl some four or five years older than herself; though stunted in growth, and with dark hair scattered loosely about the shoulders. She wore an odd assortment of what looked like rags, but taken separately, proved a faded green jersey, a brown muffler, scanty red skirt, coloured stockings gaping with huge holes, shoes likewise ornamented, and a Neapolitan red fishing-cap that didn’t match the skirt.

Bertram too had a threadbare appearance, though his waist-line had considerably increased its girth of late, and his eye seemed to have melted more than was good for it. Nothing could detract, however, from a certain picturesqueness which clung about him like an aroma, and he [164] met Peter’s mildly wondering gaze with his old jaunty smile.

“This is my wife, Peter!”—and waited to be cursed or blessed, as fortune decreed.

Chavvy took an impulsive step forward, both hands held out: “Please ... we are so tired and cold and hungry ... and—and I promise never to come between you and Pierrot!”

“Pierrot?” Peter felt that this sobriquet bestowed upon her slightly obese parent, added the last absurd touch of unreality to the situation:

Pierrot and Chavvy—the doorstep vigil—tired and cold and hungry—the prodigal and the play-actress—certainly a snowstorm was lacking, but Miss Esther on her return home might be trusted to supply this last essential.

Nevertheless, with all her artificial appeal, there was about poor little third-rate Chavvy something genuinely pathetic, though one felt instinctively that this was her favourite adjective and ought not to be encouraged; genuinely pathetic in the north-east, where she saw herself attractively pathetic in the south-west. Peter was irresistibly reminded of the touring road-companies she had known in her pre-Bloemfontein days; their jargon, their manners, and careless bonhomie. And in this spirit she bade her stepmother heartily welcome.

“Come in, both of you; cut all explanations, they don’t matter much, any old way! And help yourselves to whatever you want in the food line. I say, though, you’re shivering,—half a jiff, while I light a fire! Rather eccentric in June—Auntie’s hair will stand on end when she sees. Yes, that’s right, off with your jersey and cap, sling them anywhere ... what pretty hair you’ve got.” Peter talked very fast, concealing intense amusement at her father’s latest escapade, and uncaring that the trimly conventional dining-room was being transformed as if by magic to a fair [165]

replica of cheap theatrical lodgings: Chavvy squatting on the hearthrug, her sharp white features lit by the wavering flames, the while she peeled a tangerine and carelessly littered the skin in the fender; jersey, cap and muffler tossed anyhow on the floor; firescreen (hand-painted with lilies) upset; Bertram lounging in an arm-chair, his boots half-way up the mantelpiece, and spilling wherever most convenient the ash of a particularly foul-smelling cigar; a glass of port streaming its contents across the white cloth, and dripping slowly from the table's edge; crumbs on every plate; Peter herself astride the table, listening to irrelevant anecdotes of shoddy people whose names she did not even know, and delighting at the taint of vulgarity within her which woke so very naturally to the prevailing atmosphere.

—"By the way," she interrupted a stirring narrative of how one Billy Devereux—such a dear boy—had been slung out of work because the leading lady—vain old beast—had bestowed his rôle and her affections upon a youth with longer eyelashes than Billy's,—"by the way, dad, are you stopping?"

Bertram drew from his pocket a shilling, a threepenny bit and a halfpenny:

"'Tis the very last shilling
That with me would stay,"

in a tenor voice of exceeding charm;

"All its charming companions
Have faded away——"

"And therefore I have come to seek shelter beneath your aunt's roof; dwelling amidst so much luxury, she will surely not begrudge me my cup of cold water," and he sipped appreciatively at the port wine.

"And were she in the cauld blast
My plaid should shelter her"

he warbled anew. "Not that she's ever likely to be in a cauld blast, old skinflint stick-by-the-fire!" [166] in soft parenthesis.

Peter said no more. Bertram, reduced to sudden penury, had once before returned in this fashion, but never yet with a wife. Miss Esther did not approve of her brother-in-law. Miss Esther, bright and chirrupy from an evening's well-bred enjoyment, was now heard in the front garden, thanking Mr. Lorrimer, an elderly widower inclined to be attentive, for his kindness in seeing her home:

"You won't refuse to come in for a glass of something and a sandwich? Nothing prepared, you know, nothing prepared; just pleasantly informal,"—innocent of what lay in store for her of pleasant informality.

Miss Esther was extremely short-sighted, and her first impression of the three figures round the fire at the far end of the room, was of Peter and her two young friends, Merle and Stuart. Then her cordial expression froze to antagonism, as advancing towards the male outline, the blur of face shaped itself into the features of her disreputable relative. Bertram, responding to suggestion, became instantly the impudent scaramouch she had always seen in him.

"Hullo, Essie! Pleased to see me? No—you'd rather not be kissed? Just as you like. Chavvy, hither and be introduced."

Chavvy came shrinkingly forward. Miss Esther, not daring to guess with what Bertram had here invaded the sanctity of her home, bowed stiffly; and presented Bertram to Mr. Lorrimer and Mr. Lorrimer's daughter Myrtle:

"My brother-in-law."

"My wife," said Bertram, explaining Chavvy.

Resulting in a fictitious assumption throughout Thatch Lane, that Miss Worthing's younger sister —not a bit like her to look at—had turned up unexpectedly—"and Esther doesn't seem a bit pleased! Such an odd little thing, my dear, almost not quite a lady." [167]

Which rumour was to cause Miss Esther Worthing a great deal of future annoyance. At present she had only room for one supremely outraged sentiment: that it was not county etiquette to cast your second wife upon the bosom of your deceased first wife's sister.

"Cook's lying in a scarlet sleep under the kitchen dresser," Peter indiscreetly announced, having been in quest of more glasses. "That's why she didn't open to them."

"Oh, dear me, how very tiresome; I hope you hadn't to wait long." Admirably the mistress of the house rose to the occasion, to the traditions of caste, and to the height of her linen collars. "But anybody who knows anything about servants will know also what a problem it is," this to Chavvy, by way of a suitable conversational opening. Peter, her aunt noticed with satisfaction, was for the moment concentrating attention on the Lorrimers.

Chavvy laughed with birdlike gaiety: "Why, I've knocked about as long as I can remember in 'digs.'; and jolly well waited on myself, unless I could afford to tip the slavey. You mustn't ask me about servants."

"Are you on the stage, Mrs.—er——?" threw in Myrtle Lorrimer. "How sweet! I once took part in

a Greek tableau, and wore sandals and filleted hair."

"Sure you don't mean filleted plaice?" interrupted her father, whom Thatch Lane had encouraged as a wit.

"Don't be silly, father," pettishly.

"And don't you be pert, young lady."

Bertram watched the pair closely and made a few mental notes on the art of being a father, an accomplishment wherein he was liable to grow rusty during his long intervals of absence from Peter. Miss Esther was still dutifully laughing at Mr. Lorrimer's joke; and Chavvy, more at home [168] now the talk had swung nearer her zone of comprehension, replied eagerly to Myrtle:

"Yes, just think, I played my first part when I was only nine: Wally, in 'Two little Vagabonds.' And I used to cry my heart out every night in the consumptive bit at the end—have you seen it?—where he says: 'Don't forget Wally, who was your little son for ... for a week!'"

"How sweet!" cried Myrtle Lorrimer again; "how I should love to see you act!"

"I'll act for you now, if you like." Accustomed to the society of touring pros, who would open the floodgates of their genius at the slightest inducement, and usually without, Chavvy placed a chair to represent Sydney Carton; and, minus all preliminary hesitations, treated the assembled company to scenes from the life of Little Mimi, her most successful rôle.

... "Oh, Mr. Carton, if only you would not drink so much——"

Bertram indifferently reached his hand for the decanter. Peter, at that moment more niece of Worthing than daughter of Kyndersley, squirmed uneasily at this embarrassing exhibition of histrionics, and wished Chavvy were a canary in a cage, that somebody might throw a cloth to quench her.

... "I fear nothing while I hold your hand. I shall fear nothing when I let it go...."

"Very nice," said Miss Esther frigidly, "what an excellent memory," when Chavvy had slowly and with drooping head mounted an imaginary guillotine, and thus signified the performance at an end. Myrtle clapped feebly. Her father muttered, "Ha—hum—yes, Dickens. All very well in its proper place!" which was emphatically with pages uncut upon an English gentleman's bookshelf. And Little Mimi, aware suddenly that she was a stranger among the Philistines, fled to Bertram's [169] side, and, looking frightened, laid her cheek against his hand.

Peter thought, "I'm sure somebody told her once that she had eyes like a trapped fawn or a jugged hare or something of that sort." Chavvy's appearance gave rise to any amount of zoological speculation.

The Lorrimers rose to go. This type of entertainment was not what they expected to find at Bloemfontein, and they were quite unreasonably disappointed in Miss Worthing. With lowered prestige, that lady returned from the hall to her transfigured dining-room.

"Are you spending the night here, may I ask, Bertram?"

"We are spending many nights here, Esther," he assured her gravely. And added in conversational tone: "If you turn us out, we shall starve."

Where was the man's proper pride, Miss Esther wondered disapprovingly. Well, well, she supposed it was her duty to put them up for a day or two. One couldn't let people starve; it wasn't done; and really, that impossible little person in the red cap looked nothing but skin and bone. Miss Esther offered to show the bride to her room. And added a silent determination to draw special attention to the cake of soap on the washstand.

"Run along, Chavvy," quoth Chavvy's lord and master.

She hung back and pouted. Then went slowly forward to meet hostility, awaiting her at the threshold.

"Won't you," she faltered, "won't you try to love me just a little?"

Upon this she made her exit. The door closed behind the twain, leaving Miss Esther's reply to the imagination.

Peter crossed to the fireplace, lit a cigarette, and stood looking down upon the man in the arm-chair. Noted with pity that the topmost hairs of his head were thinning considerably. Otherwise [170] his florid good looks seemed in no danger from the years. With a certain shock of surprise, she realized how akin they were, he and she; adventurers both, play-actors both; though, lacking her burden of pride, his passage through the world was even more divinely unhampered.

"Hadn't you better tell me all about it?" she suggested.

When Bertram's reply came, it was still tinged with borrowed reflections from Mr. Lorrimer, Parent.

"I've been a good deal by myself, my dear girl; you don't seem to realize what the loss of your poor mother meant to me. And you, who might have been a solace and a companion, you preferred to live here in comfort and luxury. I was—lonely. And when this child Chavvy crept into my life, I let her remain, to fill the gap my daughter might have filled."

Peter thought it over. "No," she said at length, very gently, "I don't think that will do. Try again."

The dark upward-springing moustache was not sufficient to conceal a responsive grin on

Bertram’s lips. With considerable ease, he shed his garments of hypocrisy.

“’Pon my word, Peter, I dunno exactly how it happened.”

“Who and what is Chavvy?”

Chavvy, it transpired, was one of those people who have no sober appellation, but answer to such names as Kiddy or Babe or Rags or Little Pal, according to taste. She was also alone in the world. “A weird child, yet with something strangely attractive about her,” would have been Chavvy as visualized by Chavvy. Garments, whatever their previous origin, on her looked oddly tattered. Fancifully she dwelt in a kingdom of dreams and Pierrots and red, red roses and beating-rain-against-the-window-panes,—all the paraphernalia appertaining to quaintness. Actually she dwelt in the fourth or fifth or sixth stratum below normal level of the stage profession; a tangle of veins [171] spreading well beneath the surface; unknown territory save to those who are of it and in it and can never rise above it; underworld of touring companies; fit-up companies; pantomime, concert, and entertainment parties; sketches and repertory and pageant. Comprising intimate acquaintance with the smaller towns, the smaller theatres, the smallest halls; of what audiences will take what type of play and at what season. Underworld where each member has an infallible instinct for ‘dates,’ for ‘something to be had,’ and good-naturedly pass the word from one to the other. Where all names are familiar: “I knew him three years ago in Nottingham; we played together in ‘The Bells’”—drifting friendships, drifting memories, drifting lives; yet all inseparably woven together. London the improbable El Dorado of impossible chances. A glamourless battered underworld, yet from which none of their volition could entirely sever themselves. An occasional one of its members dropped to depths unmentioned and unquestioned; or else was incongruously pitchforked into spheres outside, as now Chavvy and Bertram.

They had met that summer at Blackpool; Chavvy playing ‘Cigarette’ in a very makeshift version of ‘Under Two Flags’; Bertram warbling sentimental ballads in the Masked Quartette of seaside singers. In need of admiration and dalliance, as a burnt child needs the fire, he found Chavvy interesting; alternately teased and pitied her; and told her the story of his life, the latter pastime a never-ending source of pleasure and fount of imagination. Her brain stuffed up with plaintive little Pierrot-poems, she found the man more than interesting; and listened wide-eyed to the story of his life, thinking the while how wonderful it was that he should so obviously be in want of her, poor, shabby....

—“In fact,” said Peter, “she called you Pierrot, and immediately you *were* Pierrot. There, O my [172] father, you have inherited my very worst tendencies. How did you come to marry her?”

“Scoundrelly manager bunked, and left the whole company in the lurch, with three weeks’ salary owing. And she seemed to sort of cling to me. Masked Quartette did rotten badly. We hung on till our united loose cash was all spent, and then in extremity I bethought me of Esther. I decided it would be quite nice if Chavvy and I came to live with Esther. And I assumed the old lady would prefer us to be married.”

“On the whole,” mused Peter, “I believe you assumed correctly.”

“And so we fixed it up. And—and here we are. Going to scold me?”

“Not as long as you guarantee my stepmother will neither starve me, beat me, nor send me to gather firewood. Come along, dad, we’re supposed to keep early hours here.”

He pulled a grimace. “Can’t see myself sticking it for long. I’ll run up to town to-morrow and see if there’s anything doing in concert parties. I suppose you can lend me my fare and a bit over?”

“As broke as that?”

“You can take it from me, my daughter,” turning to face her, as they mounted the stairs, “that the prodigal would not have returned for his fatted calf while there was the least remnant of a husk left to him.”

—Miss Esther met them on the landing. “There is the spare-room, Bertram; it adjoins mine, so please do not chatter with your wife after half-past ten o’clock. I will give you a face towel and a hand towel. Do not use the bell-rope on any account. And breakfast is at nine precisely,—we are very punctual people here.”

[173]

CHAPTER III
"WE TRAVEL LIGHT"

Bertram was beginning to tire of Chavvy. Aunt Esther was beginning to tire of Bertram. And Mr. Lazarus, tailor, was quite obviously beginning to tire of Peter and her persistent lack of response to his demands for payment. Peter was just rather tired. She could not pay Mr. Lazarus; and Chavvy had conceived for her an unnecessarily clinging affection: "After all," she was wont to remark wistfully, "we are girls together."... Peter were not sure if it were legitimate to girl with one's stepmother. Furthermore, her father and her aunt made her their headquarters of separate complaint. And withal at any moment might come a summons from Stuart, a letter from Stuart, a challenge from Stuart, demanding that she must be constantly and supremely on the alert. For his siege of her was carried on in the spirit of who would say: "Yield you shall—but yield if you dare!"

At present he was following up a period of furious and feverish need of her, when meeting after meeting failed to quench the thirst that was upon them, by a prolonged outburst of silence. An outburst in that it lacked all of relaxation or flatness; insisted every moment of every day that it was on both sides a silence pregnant of meaning—though whether of self-torment or of defeat or of bomb-manufacture neither could tell; a silence awaiting hourly shatterment. Peter felt once or twice that Stuart was mutely pleading with her to break it, or else allow him to break it, but now [174] it amused her to exact mercilessly from him the quality of superman which himself had thrust her into exacting.

"I want to speak to you, my daughter." In such ponderous fashion did Bertram one Sunday's noon, call Peter aside into the trim quadrangle of garden. He was addicted to airing his fatherhood in front of Miss Esther and Chavvy, as though challenging them to go and do likewise if they could,—"and it isn't easy," disregarding a few minor facts of co-operation, "it isn't easy to have had a splendid girl like that, all by oneself, and to have brought her up to be a credit!"

So now he laid emphasis on the appellation 'my daughter,' causing Miss Esther to toss her head, as she remarked: "Special afternoon Service at three o'clock, Peter, my dear, should you feel inclined to come," signifying that she, more than Bertram, was responsible for the girl's welfare and up-bringing.

"Do you want me too, Pierrot?" pleaded Chavvy, always alarmed at the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with her husband's sister-in-law.

"No," snapped Pierrot; "stay where you are."

—"I can't make out," he confided in Peter, as they strolled towards the garden-seat, "why those two don't get on better; there's a fuss every single time I run up to town."

"You've been up every single day," she reminded him gently. As, indeed, her pocket had good cause to know.

Bertram, misliking her accents of reproof, remembered his original intention in calling her aside:

"The—ah—young gentleman who seemed to occupy a great deal of your attention, Peter; I've been making enquiries, and he appears to be in a fairly sound position. He hasn't called here lately, I've noticed; I hope," with tender concern, "that he isn't making a fool of my little girl?"

Peter gazed helplessly at the speaker; then bubbled over with joyous laughter. [175]

"What would you do if that were the case, daddy, dear?"

Bertram ignored both the question and the laughter. "I should like to know," he persisted, "what his intentions may be?"

"As strictly dishonourable as even you could wish—Pierrot!" mocked his undutiful child.

"Oh, damn!—Sorry, Peter; but do I look like a Pierrot?"

"More like an organ-grinder; you're disgracefully shabby."

"I know," ruefully; "and my dress-suit is much too tight, supposing I wore it in the mornings."

"I don't think that Aunt Esther would approve of that."

"Well, I'll run in to Lazarus to-morrow, and see if he'll rig me up a suit on spec."

"Mr. Lazarus," murmured Peter, "has just got out a summons against me. I wouldn't go to Mr. Lazarus, if I were you."

"Lord!" Bertram exclaimed in genuine sympathy. "I'm awfully sorry, Peter, old girl; I was just going to ask you to lend me a fiver. I wonder if I could borrow a ten-pound-note from anyone, and lend you a fiver to pay Lazarus; then he might make me that suit without pressing for payment, and I'd be five pounds to the good." He brightened considerably at the prospect of five pounds to the good, and, jingling the imaginary coins in his pocket, evidently considered that he had now solved the financial problem with as much ease as he had previously disposed of his daughter's love affairs. He turned to his own matrimonial aspects: "Chavvy will be perfectly happy with you and Esther, I suppose. The tour will only be for the rest of the season."

"What tour?" [176]

"Didn't I tell you? I'm booked with the 'Troubadours' from the first of July; next Monday. A month at Maidenhead, then a fortnight of Hastings, wind up at Bournemouth. Got it through young Tommy Weekes; he has cancer of the throat, and mayn't sing in the open,—or anywhere else, I

should imagine, poor Tom, except in the heavenly choir—and for that he don't sing the right kind of song. Being able to strum on the mandoline settled it for me, and jolly thankful I was, too." He spoke quickly, feeling the impending disapproval.

"You're leaving Chavvy here?"

"Yes," defiantly.

"It's hardly fair, dad; she'll be miserable. 'Tisn't her sphere."

"I'm not going to tour with a wife," muttered Bertram. "Where's the fun, Peter? And she hangs round me—oh, you've seen!"

True that Chavvy was of an ivy-like disposition. And even a Pierrot will turn if sufficiently Pierretted upon.

"I couldn't have stood this infernal tidiness a day longer," continued Bertram gaily, his momentary depression lifted at the prospect of freedom. "'Pon my word, Peter, I dunno how you've put up with it all these years. I'd lift you out, if I could; take you along with me. I wonder—perhaps you could hold a tambourine, or something," doubtfully.

"Thanks," said Peter, really grateful; "but I don't think I'll do that, it's too difficult. Besides, the tidiness is only surface, and doesn't worry me much. But it's a shame to leave Chavvy planted in the midst of it."

"My dear, to her it's the height of luxury, after all the hardships she's undergone; clean towels every week, a bath every night, nice society, what more can she want?" Bertram had not the faintest idea of being illogical. And try as she would, Peter was unable to detach herself from his [177] point of view. It was, after all, merely a repetition of Stuart's creed, to cease sucking when the orange was dry. But then, spoke justice, one must not marry the orange.

A puff of wind which had been toying with some odd scraps of paper on the lawn, now lifted the largest of these and deposited it at Peter's feet. She recognized a fragment of the plaintive storyettes which Chavvy was in the habit of scribbling, and afterwards, in the pride of her heart, showing to Peter. So the girl felt no present scruples in reading:

... "Who wear the white-and-black Moon Livery, must sooner or later go forth to look for new loves. So Pierrot went ... and Pierrette was very lonely—oh, very lonely! Harlequin came to passionately woo her, and many other suitors, but she sent them all away from her quaint Little Red House, thinking that Pierrot would return.... Pierrot did not return. The crimson rose that he had dropped at her feet in leaving, withered, but still she found sweetness in its Crushed Perfume.

"Autumn came and Autumn went....

"And Winter....

"Night after night Pierrette crouched in front of the fire, waiting for the footsteps that never came; dreaming into the ruddy hollows of the coals all her sad little memories of the sunshine and carnival that Had Been.

"... One evening when the rain and hail and wind shook the windows, Pierrette saw the petals of her rose drop one by one to the ground, and gathering them into her hand she cried impatiently that she too wouldn't wait any longer, and ran to cast the faded token of a faded love on to the Rubbish-heap at the end of her little garden of lilies.

"... Hark! a sound of sobbing through the darkness. Across the Rubbish-heap lay a glimmer of white! ... ragged, wet, tired, Pierrot had crept home.... And, forgiving all, she crouched down [178] beside him, drew his head into her lap.... 'Pierrot,' she whispered, '*I knew you would come back.*'..."

Thus far Peter was able to read. The author's style was well imbued with the Pierrot-germ just then rampant in the air; yet here was sufficient at least to show that Chavvy did not expect fidelity from her husband, was preparing herself to be forlornly patient through the long days of waiting. Peter chided herself as a brute for the involuntary wish that Chavvy could go and do it all somewhere else.

Suddenly she saw Bertram and his wife as ludicrous caricatures of herself and Stuart; he in his desire to cut free whenever he pleased; and she—no, at all events she would not wait for Stuart to come back to her through wind and rain. Thirteen days now his silence had endured; Peter cast an anxious look towards the rubbish-heap round the corner of the house—and at the same moment the gate clicked, and Stuart sauntered towards them across the lawn; his appearance so eminently matter-of-fact and prosperous as at once to relieve her of alarm.

"Hullo, Peter. Come for a tramp?"

She departed to don thick boots. A 'tramp' with Stuart, she knew from previous experience, meant that whatever stood in their direct line of march, must simply and without question be ignored. One did not go backwards or roundabout or half-way. One went through and on. If a mountain blocked the path, one went over it; if a rushing torrent, then into it; if a board with "trespassers will be prosecuted"—well, of course, that was as good as an invitation; one had to consider if it were not mere self-indulgence to follow the call. Time ceased to exist; climatic conditions were just accepted; ultimate destination remained a negligible quantity until one established an ultimate destination by arriving there; and safety of limb was not for an instant [179]

weighed in the balance against the possibility of surmounting an eight-foot barrier interlaced with barbed wire, and an enraged bull waiting on the further side. These little country strolls with Stuart gave Peter an insight into his religion of ignoring life itself in favour of life's lightest moment.

Therefore she donned thick boots and an unquestioning spirit, wondering the while whether the first might not be regarded as rather a contradiction to the second.

Meanwhile, left to entertain Stuart in the garden, Bertram borrowed his ten pounds.

"*Pax?*" said Peter tentatively, as they swung up the road towards the Weald.

"Certainly *pax*, or I shouldn't have come."

"You gave in first."

"I did," with quiet triumph; "you'd never have given in, Peter; you're a bit of a coward that way."

"*I'm* a coward because I'd never have given in?" cried the girl, who in the thirteen days' interim had almost forgotten how to tread in looking-glass land.

"Of course. I suddenly had enough of the fray, wanted to see you, chucked over the entire edifice of silence, and came. You'd have stuck to your guns, not dared abandon them. Coward!"

She dashed back: "So you simply abstain from indulgence as long as abstinence itself is the indulgence. I always thought your asceticism was a distorted form of vice."

He laughed across the broad sun-slashed road, to where she plodded in solitary anger.

"Won't you join me in my ditch, Peter?" seductively; "it's a very nice ditch."

No reply.

"Peter. I did have to come. That's rather a triumph for you, isn't it? I couldn't keep away any longer."

She stamped her foot: "I won't have my sword returned to me in that fashion. And you know [180]
perfectly well it wasn't cowardice; that I can't call you back, ever, in case you might be gone for good."

"Do you mean to say," in blank astonishment, "that if it were for good, you'd have let me walk out in that casual fashion?"

"'According to the letter of the bond,'" she quoted.

He kicked the sodden leaves with his heel; picked up a stick and swished it at the air; burst forth at length: "Hang it, Peter! I showed you the exit-door once, and you've kept your eye glued to it ever since. Forget it, can't you?"

"It was an insult ever to point it out. Because there was no need for it. I wouldn't have tugged."

"I know that—now," his accents were almost humble; "but you see, Peter, there have been other she-encounters, and … and they didn't know about the door. So I suppose I grew mistrustful."

"Worse than that. You grew careful."

"Yes. I'm sorry. Please, Peter, join me in my ditch."

So she laughed, and crossed the road to his side. And a little further up the hill, they found a tinker in the ditch, and tried to make him talk like the tinkers of J. M. Synge and Jeffrey Farnol and Borrow and Hilaire Belloc, and other welkinistic writers. But this was Just a tinker; a man of no conversation and apparently no philosophy. So in disgust they left him; and, climbing a stile, struck out across the Weald, sweet with the hot sweet smell of trodden fern; before them in the East a threatening pall of cloud hung low and grey over the landscape; and behind them, where they could not see it, the sun flooded the same landscape in slanting gold, which gave a curiously sinister effect to the whole. Then a steep descent plunged them head foremost into a labyrinth of bushes; netted undergrowth, which they were compelled to butt through darkly, with snapping of [181]
twigs and branches to mark each outward step; till at last, scratched and torn and out of breath, they stood in the lane on the further side.

Stuart swung himself over a formidable gate which barred the further end of the lane, and waited for Peter to follow. After one or two attempts, she saw it was beyond her accomplishment.

"I give it up, Stuart,—no, I'm hanged if I do!" impetuously, meeting his quizzical look.… Then drew back: "I'm not so afraid of you but that I can own to being beaten," she said.

He had remounted the gate in order to assist her, and now paused to deliberate, a leg on either side the topmost bar: "I wonder if I ought to make you do it, after that."

Gravely Peter waited, while he hovered on the verge of a blunder.

"No!" and dropping to her side, he quietly raised the wooden latch, and stood aside for her to pass through.

"If I'd noticed that it opened!" she laughed. "Stuart, I've found your tombstone epitaph at last."

"Which is?"

"'He took the line of most resistance.'"

Stuart dwelt on her with a slow warm look, more of man in it than he was wont to show. His hand rested lightly upon her shoulder:

“Tired?”

She had never yet answered ‘yes’ to this query, and wondered what mood it would arouse in him should she do so. Supposing she *were* tired? tired of the pilgrimage, of conflict, of the rain beating fresh and cold upon her face....

A few yards ahead stood a little group, consisting of a man, a woman, a perambulator, and two children. The man wore a bowler hat, and the woman a fussy dress of bright blue cloth, obviously reserved for Sunday wear; one child was distinguished from the other by a tippet of dirty [182] imitation ermine. Otherwise they both had sticky mouths, and both were complaining loudly. The man lifted them in turn from the perambulator, and dandled them: “Shall daddy wheel the pram then?” and loud crows of assent.

Seen thus, the man in the bowler had the appearance of one fettered to the texture of a dream, a dream whence all the radiance had been soaked. In the wide spaces of sky and land and rain, the whole turn-out had an inexpressibly dingy look, that caused Stuart and Peter, with an upward rush of spirits, to feel like Hermes and Artemis walking the earth. He dropped his hand from her shoulder, and side by side, untouching, they flashed past the man and the woman and the two children and the perambulator. And Stuart said again: “Tired, Peter?” no longer wishing, as in the first instance, that her answer might be ‘yes.’ “No,” she rang back at him; and they smiled at one another, and swung on.

Towards evening, an unexpected bend of the road brought them home. It was Stuart’s habit to leave Peter at the gate, without jarring by extraneous chatter what they had found of magic in their day. But Miss Esther, anxiously watching for them from beneath a large umbrella, willed otherwise; insisted that Stuart should not depart without his tea, “And you run straight upstairs and get into some dry clothes, Peter, my dear; Mr. Heron will excuse you.”

Rather glumly, Stuart followed his hostess into the dining-room, where tea was informally spread upon the big table. The prevailing atmosphere struck in him the same note of drabness as had the incident of the perambulator. Among these people he was regarded as Peter’s ‘young man,’—well, not quite as bad as that; Peter’s ‘admirer,’ who came to visit her on Sundays, and took her [183] for a walk, and brought her home to tea, and——

“Milk and sugar, Mr. Heron?”

“We used to sometimes squeeze lemon into tea, a Russian boy and I,” volunteered Chavvy, who was bravely hiding a heart that ached, Bertram having that afternoon confessed his plans; “he had such melancholy eyes, and his father was a convict,” attempting by this recital to rouse her Pierrot to some sort of jealousy. “They call it sayonara,” she added, in somewhat incorrect explanation of the tea.

Miss Esther said that she had no patience with heathen habits, and that everybody knew they were only imitations of honest English tea-drinking, which was quite good enough for her, thank you, without squeezing ‘sayonara’ into her cup. “Though I daresay you’ll call me narrow-minded, Mr. Heron,” drawing Stuart into the conversation, that he might not feel shy.

Animated by an Encyclopædic spirit very foreign to his nature, Stuart explained drily the difference between ‘samovar’ and ‘sayonara’—“which happens to be Japanese for ‘farewell.’”

“That’s just as bad,” pronounced Miss Esther. While Chavvy murmured in timid apology for her error: “I was thinking of Port Arthur,” and subsided altogether.

Stuart looked up, relieved, at Peter’s entrance—then bit his lip in annoyance. She had changed into a thin crêpe frock; he felt sure it was her ‘best,’ donned for his benefit. As a matter of fact, Peter’s garments had been soaked through, and this particular dress was quickest and easiest for her to fasten unaided; but, thoroughly jarred by his surroundings, he chose to see her too tainted by Suburbanism.

Miss Esther filled and refilled cups; sent Peter for more hot water; maintained a flow of lofty but gracious chatter, thinking privately the while that not often had she to entertain so leaden a tea- [184] party; why, the Lorrimers’ Saturday tea-and-tennis institution held a hundred times as much of innocent mirth. But, then, Mr. Lorrimer himself was sufficient of a humorist to make any party ‘go.’

Stuart she considered ‘difficult.’ All young men were more or less so, but she had a method of taming their barbarism never known to fail: on their second introduction to Bloemfontein she would say carelessly: “Now please remember that you can smoke all over the house here—no forbidden ground,” and having found the key to their mysterious masculinity, would watch them in grateful enjoyment of their privilege: “They appreciate it, poor fellows; of course at home they’re never allowed it”—and: “You spoil them, Esther,” usually the conclusion of these remarks.

But Stuart failed to respond to treatment. Notwithstanding he had smoked a horrid black pipe up and down the stairs and in Miss Esther’s own sitting-room—yet here he sat morose and glum as any stranger, not a patch in manners on that nice Mr. St. Quentin who sometimes came.

Indeed, it was curious to observe how Miss Worthing’s personality, the least arresting of any present, reduced every other member to a polite and stricken level of uncommunicativeness. Miss Esther, in her own setting, and all her convictions securely buttoned in waterproof, dominated Stuart and Bertram, Peter and Chavvy, to the entire extinction of their own

turbulence; so that presently the two men were exchanging decorous views on the political situation, while Peter and Chavvy, like acolytes, supported Miss Esther with seed-cake and bread-and-butter.

“If you have finished, Peter, you can take Mr. Heron into the drawing-room. I told them to light a fire, although this is the end of June, but then I always say be warm when you are cold and never mind the time of year.”

[185] The drawing-room fire was the outcome of a brief skirmish which had once occurred between Peter and her aunt, when the former had carelessly announced her intention of taking Stuart up to her attic for the viewing of some book.

“My dear, with your bed in it!”

“Oh, I’ll lead him very carefully past the bed,” laughed Peter. “After all, it’s my den, as well as bedroom.”

Miss Esther stiffened: “Out of the question, Peter. Even if you placed a screen around it——” doubtfully.

Peter declared that the screen around the bed would add the same suggestion of immorality that Venus acquired by her fan.

So now Miss Esther emphasized warningly the drawing-room fire.

Stuart pushed back his chair, and sauntered from the room in Peter’s wake. He felt Chavvy’s eyes upon them, dark and wistful—“you two will be together when I shall be, oh, so alone,” the unspoken comment; and he believed Bertram to be smiling complacently upon the back of his son-in-law-to-be. And there he wronged Bertram, who muttered: “I don’t like the fellow; too damned superior!” and this in spite of the ten pounds.

Standing with his elbow on the drawing-room mantelpiece, Stuart surveyed Peter moodily; she looked content enough, content with the hideous prim room, with the fire, the cushions at her back, the approval floating up like incense from the dining-room below. And he was seeing her in contact with homely familiar things; had marked her press the bell for the maid to bring hot water; heard her answer Miss Esther’s enquiries about their walk—“Yes, thanks, very nice; where? oh, just roundabout——” Artemis linked to the trivial details of everyday; Artemis at Bloemfontein; she seemed leagues of distance away from him.

[186] “What’s up?” queried Peter, lazily thrusting at the silence between them. She too was secretly irritated: why couldn’t he be restful, after their long wet tramp? why always that atmosphere of tautness? Merle had once said “Stuart has no firelight mood.”... For the first time since their quarrel, Peter regretted Merle; would gladly have had her there in place of Stuart, “Just to volupp,” thinking of the cottage at Carn Trewoofa, the rainfall, that last long dozing talk, broken by the entrance of the two letters....

It was a pity, and rather absurd too, that she should not have been able to keep Stuart and Merle.

—“What’s up?”

“Nothing. I’m going, that’s all.”

She raised her eyebrows in delicate scorn, but made no further comment. Nor did she move when she heard the door close behind him.

“He needn’t have been afraid,” with a finer appreciation of his mood than he had given her credit for.

Miss Esther looked up sharply from her knitting, at the rush of feet on the stairs outside, a slammed door, a gate swinging wide on its hinges.

“It’s Mr. Heron. And he has gone. How very strange, without saying good-bye. And what is Peter about, not to see him off? Dear me, foolish young people, they must have quarrelled.”

“He will come back,” murmured Chavvy, in concordance with her leitmotif.

Not yet, reflected Stuart rebelliously, as the train bore him from Thatch Lane. Barely six weeks since that night in Cornwall,—surely the shears need not yet be employed. But having started at such extreme tension, it was utterly impossible that their love should be of long endurance. He had felt the first slackening this evening; the first desire to be quit of her presence; the first distaste at any of her actions. He must disengage her from the background of orderly respectability; search in his mind for the scene wherein he would most desire to place her image; [187] could not visualize any sort of setting ... merely a scamper of wind, and a voice—his own voice—saying authoritatively to someone: “Get her out of irons, you ass! you must get a way on before you turn her at the bank....”

That was it—exactly it! they had got their boat into irons, he and Peter; must get a way on before they rushed ahead or—turned at the bank. In either case, get a way on.

He would take her sailing.

And casting about for a means of accomplishing his wish in accordance with the conventions—Stuart was not in favour of that ‘splendid unconventionality’ usually ending in a muddle, whereof Young Bohemia delights to prate—he bethought him of Nigger Strachey. Nigger had a wife, which just now would come in handy, though Stuart had hitherto rather resented her entrapping of his friend. It brought home to him strongly the lurking danger that besets all men. Strachey

had been as sturdily opposed to marriage as Stuart himself; and then, queerly, it had befallen him. So Stuart walked warily, mistrustful of the crafty huntress who hid in the dark, and then pounced. His fear of marriage was the most unsubtle of all his qualities; an elementary fear, of the kind that offers food for music-hall comedians, and inspired Bernard Shaw to the writing of "Man and Superman." Peter knew of his fear, and hated it as she might hate a gaoler, because it checked her from spontaneously revealing all that she felt for him.

The idea of taking Peter sailing utterly possessed Stuart; and he went straight from Euston to Strachey's rooms in Chelsea.

"Look here, Nigger, have you still got that bungalow at Potter Heigham?"

"The one you gave me for a wedding-present? Yes. Most unpractical gift I had. Looked to you for a nice bit of Dresden, or at least a plated tea-service." [188]

"I want you and your wife to invite me up for a week's sailing; day after to-morrow; and bring whom I like."

"Do," grunted Nigger; "delighted. Need we be there?"

"Yes."

"Um!" Strachey removed the pipe from his mouth and expressed his disturbance by a long and doubtful whistle. "My wife——" he began ponderously.

"Oh, that's all right.... What do you take me for?"

"My mistake," said Nigger, slowly masticating the new aspect. Oliver Strachey's mind matched his face, in that it presented a great dark bulk occasionally illuminated by a flash of white. His quick grin was as unexpected as the rare streaks he displayed of wit or humour; and his cumbersome: "I don't quite follow your meaning, Heron," a great pleasure to his young comrade, who liked to watch Nigger's massive and reliable mentality at work upon his own twisted acrobatics. The two men were never confidential; never gave mutual good advice; were ignorant each of the other's troubles; disagreed on all abstract topics; and had thrice in company faced death by wave and wind. All of which made for entirely satisfactory comradeship. So that now Oliver asked no questions about the proposed visit to Norfolk, and merely commented:

"Got stacks of work on hand. Still, I could do it in Norfolk as well as here. What I'm wondering is if my wife will care to go?"

"Hang your wife," Stuart was about to say; then recollected in time that men are absurdly prone to touchiness on the subject of their domestic partners. Especially when as doggedly in love as Oliver. It was just as well to have restrained himself, as Aureole Strachey just then came into the room. She walked swayingly up to Stuart, and remarked in a heavy-lidded voice: [189]

"I dreamt that your uncle was dead. Is he?"

As an entrance, quite effective.

"I don't think so," said Stuart, surprised. "Which? Baldwin?" hopefully.

Aureole did not know. But she was insistent about the death. So to settle the matter one way or another, Stuart telephoned home:

"Hullo ... that you, Mater?... Any of the uncles dead?... No, you needn't scream, darling—I haven't heard anything; just a passing curiosity.... Morbid? well, perhaps!... You saw them at dinner. All quite healthy?... Good!" He rang off, and reassured Aureole: "They're not dead, any of them."

Aureole remained unconvinced. The soft full curves of her mouth, resemblance of which she was vainly trying to coax from a Greuze to a Rossetti, drooped sulkily at the corners. She had no acquaintance with Stuart Heron, save from her wedding-day, when she had not much liked him. "He—gives me nothing," she had complained to her husband; "he—means nothing." And Nigger had made no reply, save by one of his dazzlingly incongruous smiles, which all Aureole's provoked questionings could not compel him to explain.

But to-night there seemed a possibility that Stuart would give her more. He scrutinized her intently for a moment, from her copper hair, carelessly caught up with a single jade hairpin, down to her temperamental feet; and, inspired by these, shot out at her a sudden:

"The pavements are stifling you. You should be walking among reeds—always among reeds!"

Nigger had quitted the room in quest of tobacco; so Aureole was able to blossom forth emotions which, inexplicably to herself, she pruned when her husband was by. [190]

"Sand," she breathed. "Miles and miles of shining sand. Desert sand. I always adored walking on sand at Broadstairs. Stretches of yellow sand as far as the horizon. I'm a Pagan, you know!"

Stuart knew. He had gathered as much from her first entrance. But sand was no good to him. He wanted to arouse an all-consuming interest in reeds.... There were a great many reeds in Norfolk. For the next ten minutes he plied her Paganism with such consummate skill that she met her husband on his return to the room, with the frantic request to be taken the very next day to their bungalow on the Broads, or she would assuredly perish—of paving-stones.

"I—just want to go. I can't tell you why. Something is calling me—something with a swish in it. I —just want to go."

So the expedition was definitely arranged for the ensuing Tuesday; suspecting the 'something with a swish in it' to have been Stuart, Oliver was yet somewhat amazed that his capricious lady

should choose to quit town before the season's shutters had closed down. However, relations between them had been a little strained during the past few weeks, owing to the effect on her of a belated reading of the "Doll's House," in conjunction with an occult acquaintance who had informed her that she was the Empress Faustina reincarnated, and must not be thwarted in aught she did, since she was in this phase working out Karma. Not keen on Karma, Oliver now hoped, manlike, that the fresh air would make all the difference in the world towards restoring marital harmony.

"The 'Tyke' in decent repair?"

"Believe so. I haven't sailed since I'm married."

Stuart's grunt was expressive of many things.

"The 'Tyke'?" cried Aureole. "What a horrid name! It shows how much imagination you men have, left to yourselves," in languid disdain. [191]

Stuart promised her that she should re-christen the boat. And after fixing the final arrangements, took his leave.

"Even chances on 'Tiger Queen' or 'Serpent o' the Nile,' I should imagine." Thus he speculated on the re-naming of the 'Tyke,' as he walked towards Grosvenor Square.

But Aureole decided that night on 'Faustina,' in deference to her own pleasingly lurid, though unfortunately forgotten past.

He wrote to Peter: "Meet me Tuesday, Liverpool Street, ten-fourteen. We're out for a week's sailing on the Norfolk Broads. Never mind about the moralities; I've arranged for those. Throw overboard other people's objections—and your own. Don't wonder if you ought to indulge me by giving in; we'll have no battle here,—you've just to come, and leave the rest to me. Bring as little luggage as possible—we travel light."

She replied briefly.

"All right"; and then in a postscript: "Were you being symbolical about the luggage?"

To which his answer:

"You—dear! No, of course not. Damn symbolism! I was thinking of porters."

[192]

CHAPTER IV
WILD DUCK

“Garden-party weather,” grumbled Stuart. “S’pose they think they’re doing us a favour; one doesn’t want a breeze for sailing,—oh, no! Strawberries and cream and a band on the lawn, that’s all the day’s fit for.”

Oliver lumbered indoors to work: “Call me when the wind gets up.” And Peter announced her intention of going out in the dinghy.

“Shall I come with you?” queried Stuart lazily, from where he stretched on the grass at Aureole’s side.

“No.”

Instantly he sprang to his feet and followed her down to the bank, fell determination in his countenance.

“Go back, Stuart,” she whispered; “you can’t leave Aureole alone; she’s our hostess.”

He protested: “Hang it! *I* gave her the bungalow.”

“Untie the rope!” Without heeding his complaints, she sprang into the dinghy, where it floated beside ‘Faustina,’ née ‘Tyke’; and stood upright, scull in hand, looking up at her comrade on the bank, with the coolly indifferent air of being perfectly well able to dispense with his companionship. Her white flannel shirt, flung open to show the tanned throat; the clean line where her hair sprang upwards from the neck; the alert poise of her figure, seemed all to have gathered up and expressed the personality of the background: water quivering in the sunlight, dazzling white canvas of sails, short bright green grass of the banks, masts and ropes slicing and [193] interslicing against a china-blue sky. Peter resembled an adventurer setting forth in silence to find the beginning of the world. Aureole, exotically reclining with hands clasped behind her head, had more the appearance of one who had found the end of the world and was prepared to talk about it. Stuart flung her a discontented look over his shoulder.

“Is this a morning to waste with an amateur cocotte telling me she’s a Pagan?” he demanded, still holding in the dinghy.

Peter merely laughed, and, with an adroit movement, pushed away into midstream.

As Stuart walked slowly back to his hostess, he knew there was nothing he wanted so much as to be alone with Peter on the Broads. Certainly he had gone to a vast deal of trouble in bringing hither Mr. and Mrs. Strachey, for the sake of the proprieties. He was prepared to go to an equal amount of trouble in ridding himself of them. Nor would the charge of inconsistency have disturbed him a whit.

Meanwhile, Aureole had been deriving a quantity of fresh ideas from the contemplation of Stuart and Peter, and their treatment one of the other. She had never before seen love in conflict, and it struck her as attractive. An attempt to engage Oliver in a similarly slippery and perplexing wrestle of wills merely sufficed to augment his loving consideration; when Aureole was capricious, then Aureole had to be humoured, was the burden of his thoughts. From considering him a tyrant, a bully, and a gaoler, which was her last attitude but one, she veered round to the belief that she had married a poor-spirited creature. The germ within her, born of Nora Helmer’s rebellion, was feeding nicely and growing healthily plump, the past three days in Norfolk.

Aureole broke silence with a sudden: “Mr. Heron, do you think I’m happy?”

“No,” replied Stuart guardedly. And waited for more. [194]

“*She* is!” Aureole let her eyes follow the disappearing craft that contained Peter. Then: “A man takes you for granted when you are once married to him. He pampers your body and neglects your soul.”

Stuart said: “You mean he pampers your soul as well as your body. A soul needs no pampering; it wants fresh air, and an occasional touch of the whip.” And he added musingly: “I’m a Pagan, you see!”

She made bitter reply: “Oliver is—just a man. That’s the difference.”

She had a way of half dropping her eyelids, and, after a pregnant silence, shooting forth an unexpected audacity, calculated to shatter the well-bred restraints of convention to a thousand fragments. Stuart had caught the trick, and found himself unable to refrain from using it upon her now:

“Why not ... leave him?”

And for a while no sound but the scream and plash of a water-fowl on the opposite bank.

“Have you read Ibsen?” queried Stuart with disconcerting acuteness—considering that he had seen her for three days past with the “Doll’s House” in her hand.

Aureole murmured: “She went out to find herself and to earn his respect....” No need of a superfluity of words when talking to this man; his grasp at her meanings was almost uncanny. And she thought with distaste of Oliver’s “I—don’t—quite—follow,” whenever she let fall a subtlety. Nor did it ever occur to her that Nigger Strachey, who had taken a first at Oxford, was perfectly capable of following her to any lengths that were worth his while, and merely made her explain her special type of profundity in the faint hope that thus she would attain to a sense of

what it lacked.

Aureole's soft lips were mysteriously smiling; but she merely said in light tones: "You are a bad counsellor, Mr. Heron. Why don't you persuade me to obey my husband and be content with my lot?" [195]

"Not much fun in that, is there?" he replied; and would have enlarged further on the stuntorian point of view which lay in breaking away from a husband because he refused to contradict you. But remembering Aureole lived three twists further down the corkscrew than himself, he substituted a reflective: "I wouldn't mind being present at the scene when you came together again."

Her eyes, large and velvety brown as pansies, began to sparkle. "So you anticipate a stormy reconciliation, do you?"

Stuart said with a graveness that rebuked her flippancy: "Do you love him so little as to remain always apart?"

She drooped her head; truth to say, she was exceedingly fond of her stolid square-backed husband. "If I returned to him——"

"You'd have achieved your purpose then. Nigger needs a volcanic eruption before he would realize anything, least of all you. But once the knowledge came to him, he'd need an earthquake to dislodge it again. His mind isn't elastic, you see. It's for you to provide the eruption. If you don't——" Stuart paused to extract matches and cigarette from his pocket.

"If I don't?——"

"Oh, well, if you don't, I've no doubt your husband will continue faithful and attached——"

"Oh!" Aureole dug her shapely heel—too high for sailing purposes—deep into the grass.

"And will keep you nicely sheltered from draughts"—he had struck his match; the flame wavered and went out. Again he attempted the process, with the same result.

"Thank the Lord!" with sudden buoyancy.

"What is it?" [196]

"Wind!" And loudly summoning Oliver from the house, Stuart strode towards the boat.

Aureole could have wished the wind to have waited. She was preparing to announce in her most irrelevant manner: "Do you know ... when I touch a kitten, I suddenly feel as if I must kill it. Crush it to death. Just because it's small and soft, and I love it." This could not fail to be productive of interesting discussion about primitive feelings; and how we are really all savages at heart; and the things that cause us separately to feel most savage at heart. But you cannot shout forth statements of this description to a man who is climbing to the masthead, unfurling sails, swearing at ropes, and generally disporting himself in a thoroughly joyous and normal fashion.

The three set sail, and picked up Peter swishing her dinghy between armies of tall reeds. She came aboard, and under Stuart's curt directions, sailed 'Faustina' in a light breeze, as far as the bridge. The feel of the tiller she had thoroughly grasped by now, but was still dependent on superior orders for manipulation of the mainsail. She resented the necessity for blind obedience; resented the inexperience standing between her and initiative; wished passionately to be master of that insolent canvas which now swelled adoring response to the lordship of wind.

At first, the Broads had merely impressed her with their utter absence of fuss. Wide waters, and blue skies pulled down to meet their edges; here and there an upspringing windmill; landscape dropping flatly away below the water level; a merry impression, arising from the frequent bends and twists of the stream, that ships can go a-sailing across field and meadow; racing clouds and racing shadows; music of bottles that rolled and clinked in the locker; sound of rushes whispering uneasily; scurry and plunge of a water-rat; an overwhelming interest developed in the wind, its [197] character and vagaries, to the exclusion of all intellectual pursuits; the urgent necessity to use strong language, and to wear as little as possible, and drink yellow ale stabbed by the sunshine, and sleep anywhere, and eat everywhere,—these then were the essentials of Sailing. These; and concealed within and beyond these, the hidden gift, which Peter knew could not be hers until she had torn away the veils of ignorance that kept her from mastery of that exasperating expanse of white canvas. Except the necessary technicalities, Stuart had told her nothing. She must grope until she found. Meanwhile, she steered them into the putty....

"What the Hell are you doing?" with a lusty roar, Stuart leapt Aureole, shoved Peter to one side, seized tiller and sheet, and just saved the keel from running aground. Then sunnily, and with no recollection of the expletive that had passed his lips, he relinquished his post, and asked for cigarettes.

"There's nothing I admire more," murmured Peter, intensely amused; "than a truly manly man."

Stuart did not hear. His major portion was inside the locker. But Aureole did. And she thought she had rarely witnessed aught so fine as this virile comradeship between man and girl.

"Nigger! cigarettes!"

A mere voice from before the mast, where he squatted and smoked with the imperturbability of a Buddha, Oliver replied: "In the locker."

"Where d'you think I've been the last ten minutes? There's nothing in the locker but matches."

"That's right," acquiesced the voice. "Heard a legend that people who sail always forget matches.

Destroyed the legend."

"You have, with forty-eight boxes of wax vestas, and not a single tin of Gold-Flake among 'em. You've got your pipe all right, I suppose?" with fine sarcasm.

"Thanks. Yes." [198]

"I say, Mrs. Strachey, do you mind feeling for a cigarette-tin under your feet, along the lee-scuppers?"

After long and obliging search, Aureole produced the pressed-beef, whereof Stuart, resigning himself to circumstances, proceeded heartily to eat.

"What is to be, must be. Not so close to the wind, Peter; that's better, that's a jolly useful luff"; the result of a lucky guess on the part of the pilot. "All the same, you'd better resign the helm to Nigger; lot of shallows just about here."

They were drawing near the spreading waterways of the Sounds. Oliver took Peter's place. The wind was still exasperatingly light, needing experience to extract from it all the possible pace. Oliver seemed uneasy. Presently he suggested anchoring for lunch.

Peter enquired: "Do we sail over the edge or into the hayfield?" the latter extending low on their right, so that it really seemed as if they could sail straight on and in among the haycocks; while on their other side sky and water closed sharply together, with beyond them a drop over the very edge of the world.

They chose the hayfield, as being more homely and conducive to good appetite; moored the 'Faustina' fore and aft; and recalled Aureole from her rapt contemplations of nature: "'And O! That greener green, that bluer blue!'"

Her brown eyes were very dewy, and her throat was infinitely whiter than Peter's; she was all sinuous curves and melting harmonies of tint. And very good to look at, Stuart reflected,—if only she wouldn't describe the scenery!

"By the way, Nigger, are you aware that you've been sailing on the wrong jibe?"

"Didn't want to knock out my wife's brains."

Aureole looked up sharply: "You could have told me to move, couldn't you?"

"You looked very comfortable, my dear." [199]

A hot spurt of anger flushed Aureole's creaminess. "If Peter had been in the way of a jibe," she said in a carefully controlled voice, "Mr. Heron would have—sworn at her. He has sworn at her twice to-day."

"Heron's not a gentleman," decreed his friend, with unusual promptness of speech.

"Perhaps not, but he's at least a man."

Stuart looked embarrassed. And Oliver became dimly aware that his wife was really enraged with him.

"Diddums, spitfire?" tentatively.

She burst forth: "You can't treat me in the spirit of equality, of give-and-take. No! I'm a petted little soft thing, who mustn't be inconvenienced or she'll cry; so you're chivalrous, and sail on the wrong jibe, and—and think yourself a fine fellow. You don't understand, do you, that there's nothing, no, nothing on earth I want so much as to be properly sworn at!"

"I'm sorry," he apologized for not having sufficiently damned her. As a result of a moment's consideration, he remarked placidly: "Blast you, Aureole, pass the mustard," with an air of having thus fulfilled all that was required of him.

Aureole did not pass the mustard. But said very quietly, in tones eloquent of suppressed meaning: "You will discover that it is not always wise to play the fool, *mon ami*!"... and an echo from a far-away world of shams and introspections and problem plays, mingled strangely with the impatient music overhead; for the wind, with the perversity of winds, had elected to blow fresh and hard from the instant they moored the boat; and like the crack of whips was the sound of the sail flapping against restraint.

"Wild-duck paste, Mrs. Strachey?" demanded Stuart, scattering her preoccupation.

If Oliver had apprehended a tithe of what lay beneath her reply, he would not have continued [200] hammering so contentedly at the glass tongue.

"Wild duck.... Yes, indeed I will have wild duck."

"'Crosse and Blackwell's Wild Duck,'" Stuart read from the tin in passing it. "It has a pathetic tone, as if it were their pet, their only wild duck; the one that Crosse caught in the grounds with a butterfly net, and Blackwell pounded into paste, and Crosse wept and said he never loved a dear gazelle to glad him with its soft black eye——"

Stuart was talking hectically; there was a look in Aureole's soft brown eye, meditating upon the nebulous-tinted mess smeared upon her bread, that positively alarmed him. "I don't mind symbolism as a rule; but when it comes to symbolism in potted paste——"

Aureole smiled all the way home; a smile beside which Mona Lisa's celebrated grimace paled to inanity. But the two men, beating in a foul wind and against the tide, had no time to spare from 'Faustina,' who was certainly behaving a great deal more like a Tyke than a lady.

On arrival at the bungalow, Aureole announced that she had run short of stores, and must walk down to the village before she could provide them with supper.

“I’ll go with you, dear.”

“I prefer to go alone.”

Oliver shrugged his shoulders, and without further ado, sat down to write letters.

After a couple of hours’ labour, he looked at the time. Then he called aloud his wife’s name. Then he searched the bungalow. Finally, he strode to the foot of the lawn; in the well of the boat, a curve of obstinate back denoted that Stuart, since their return home, had been absorbed by a trifling defect of leakage, while Peter reluctantly held a candle to him.

“Can I speak to you, Heron?”

“One moment,” in smothered tones. [201]

Oliver waited ten, patiently. Then Peter said, “Come up, Stuart!” and blew out the candle. Whereat, dirty and tousled, he arose from the depths, and was exceeding wrathful.

“What did you want to do that for?”

“Your pal asked to speak to you.”

“My wife’s gone,” explained Oliver in bewildered tones.

And Stuart sat down suddenly and exclaimed: “Good Lord! Wild Duck!”

“I—don’t—quite—follow,” uttered in Oliver’s most phlegmatic manner. Stuart’s reception of his tidings struck him as neither respectful nor efficient.

“How long has she been gone?” queried Peter practically. “She went down to the village, I thought.”

“Yes. Village seven minutes’ distance. She went at twenty to six. Now it’s past eight. I don’t suppose for an instant,” continued Oliver, “that she proposes to stop away longer than a few hours, for the purpose of annoying me; I believe I wasn’t in favour,” with a slight smile. “She has played this kind of trick before. High spirits, that’s all. But it’s getting dark, and I wondered whether we hadn’t better go out with lanterns.”

“Lanterns, indeed! I tell you, Strachey, it’s the Wild Duck. Don’t look at me in that—that bovine fashion. Has she taken your pistols?”

“Why should she?” helplessly.

“Wild Duck!” chanted Stuart with monotonous reiteration.

The sun had long since been blotted greyly from the west. Pennons of ragged mist fluttered wraithlike about the fading banks; waved and drifted and dissolved in streamers over the colourless tracts of water. The blasphemous mumblings of an ancient and invisible fisherman rose and fell in cadences upon the uncanny silence. An hour before, and the reeds had still been [202] tipped with the sun’s gold. An hour later, and blackness would be warm and velvety, interrupted by chirps and rustlings, stir among the rushes, and the brush of unseen wings. But at this between-hour, phantoms were abroad; and melancholy stole over the souls of Peter and Oliver; melancholy deepened by Stuart’s strange repetition of ‘Wild Duck! Wild Duck!’ term which now held a gloom and menace it had altogether lacked at lunch that afternoon.

“Perhaps you’ll explain your reference, Stuart?”

“Ibsen—and the Doll’s House—when Nora went out to find her soul. You refused to swear at her this afternoon, and I thought something bad would come of it. And then the wild duck put it into her head to take your pistols and go to sacrifice something ... with vine-leaves in her hair.—No, that’s Hedda Gabler! Oh, well, there’s an impossible husband in that, too!”

‘Pistols’ were even more sinister than wild ducks. Oliver said, “You imply that my wife has committed suicide?”

They could not clearly see his face in the half-light. Stuart leapt in with a hasty and matter-of-fact “Of course not. Don’t be absurd. She thinks you need—oh, startling into a keener realization of her personality, and this is her way of doing it.”

“But you said she hadn’t merely gone for a walk?”

“No.”

“You mean, I shall never see her again?”

“No—yes——” exasperated. “Can’t you get something between a mere walk and never-again?”

Oliver couldn’t. The weight of his opinion had crashed heavily from one extreme to the other; as Stuart had remarked, he was at all times difficult to move, either forwards or backwards.

“If she’s not coming back,” argued Oliver, “she must have left me for good. And if she has firearms with her, then I’d better follow. It all looks to me very silly.” And with a commendable [203] absence of flurry, his broad back loomed up the garden, and disappeared into the bungalow.

“Peter,” whispered Stuart, when they were alone; “haven’t you yet discovered the secret of the Broads?”

She was an instant silent, as if listening for a reply to his question. Then it flashed across her in the phrase of his letter.

“We travel light.”

“That’s it—we travel light. All luggage too heavy for the rack, to be thrown on to the rails.”

“Are you speaking symbolically?”

He said, “No, of course not. Damn symbolism!... I’m speaking of Aureole and Oliver.”

The latter emerged from the bungalow, and called out something about ‘London.’ Stuart walked quickly to meet him:

“Look here, old man, she may lie low for a week or two, but believe me, there’s no earthly reason for you to get feverish about it.” And then the notion of Strachey being feverish struck him as inexpressibly comic.

“I’m not. But I’m catching the eight-forty-one to town. She has probably gone home. I don’t care to think of her messing about with revolvers, even to impress me.”

The pistol idea had established itself firmly; Stuart saw that it was hopeless to attempt removing it before the eight-forty-one started.

“Good-bye.” Oliver had evidently forgotten about Peter.

“Good luck!” and Stuart returned to the boat.

“I like Nigger Strachey,” Peter decided, squatting on the rail of the ‘Faustina.’ “Stuart, how far are you concerned in this affair?”

He defended himself hotly, immensely fortified and upheld by the moral consciousness of being in the wrong.

“Fancy accusing me of being directly responsible for the whim of a neurotic woman.” [204]

“I don’t. Now tell me how you are indirectly responsible—oh, it’s no good, my lad! That rigmarole of ducks and pistols gave you away—to me, at least.”

“It wasn’t my usual style, I admit,” laughed Stuart. And owned to the morning’s conversation with Aureole, when he had spurred rebellion into action. “It won’t do either of ’em any harm, you know; prevent ’em from getting sluggish. Any sort of stir to matrimony;—why,” with fierce indignation, “they might even have come to think themselves happy, if I hadn’t shown them they weren’t.”

“Philanthropist,” softly from the girl beside him in the dimness.

“All the same, I wonder where she can have gone, and what she has done; plenty of spirit there, and character too, if only she weren’t such a wild—goose!”

“Why did you do it?”

Stuart leaned against the boom and faced her squarely.

“I could pretend it’s too late to catch the eight-forty-one,” he said. “Or you could pretend not to know that it’s breaking rules to remain up here alone with me. But we won’t pretend, either of us. The situation is not accidental—they were in the way, and I got rid of them. I wanted one day of sailing by ourselves, that’s all.”

He went on, “We can take ‘Faustina’ up as far as the ‘Windmill,’ put up there for the night, and leave for London to-morrow evening,—or we’ll catch the eight-forty-one now. There’s still time.”

She repeated musingly, “We won’t pretend——”

“No. You can trust me, Peter. It’s just for the sailing. But other people, if they get to know, won’t believe that. It’s a question of how much other people are to count?”

Peter sprang from her perch into the well, and began to untie the cords which held together the [205]
waterproof covering of the mainsail. He laid his hand over her moving fingers, and looked at her interrogatively. She laughed, mocking his sudden solemnity:

“You see ... I’m a Pagan!—oh, it’s all right, Stuart; we’ll take another day on the Broads, in spite of other people. Who was it counselled me to travel light?”

He smiled. But merely said, as he re-tied the knot her impetuosity had loosened, “No wind; and the stream against us. I shall have to row.”

Peter took the tiller. Some twenty minutes later, between the plash and lift of his oars, her ear caught the distant shriek of a train-whistle. And she knew the eight-forty-one to London had just left the station.

[206]

CHAPTER V
THE WORLD WASHED CLEAN

Peter awoke, and, listening intently, heard nothing beyond a faint lapping of water. Yet she felt impelled to leave her bed and scramble up to the high narrow window-seat. She had no idea of the time, but it must have been very early morning; the breeze was chill and aloof that struck upon her throat, as she leant out, an intruder upon silence.

A white vapour lay lightly as forgetfulness over river and bank and boathouse. On the opposite shore, a tangle of masts and ropes lay sketched like a dream upon a blown and tousled sky. A luminous gash in the east widened suddenly, and silvered all the mist; then closed again with cloud. The very river ceased its patient clamour for the sea; and colour had died in the night, leaving its wraith of grey to tell the tale. Grey that shone, and grey that was thin and dreary, and grey that pearled and paled to white. Peter had a strange fancy that she would not have been suffered as an on-looker had not her own eyes held their depth of grey, and her hair a whisper of the baulked sunrise. It was her day: she mused on what it might be trailing in its reluctant wake. Her day, grey and white and pallor of gold. And she wondered why all of her life that went before should be mist-shrouded in forgetfulness.

Her eyelids drooped heavily; she returned to bed, and at once fell asleep.

Stuart awoke her by hammering blows upon her door. She went again to the window before she opened to him. A bright blue sky now; trim red roof of boathouse and ferryhouse and bungalow, [207] warm in the clear sunshine; screaming, cackling, chattering chorus of waterfowl; a sail, left hoisted overnight, flung its broken dance upon the water, sparkling and rioting between its clumps of emerald-green reeds. The world washed clean of mystery and evil alike. Peter slid open her door a few inches.

“Hallo! you’re in full rig.”

“Rather. I say, this is a ripping house, all its clocks have stopped, and I’ve left my watch down at the bungalow, so we’ll never know what time it is. Good morning, Peter.”

“Good morning, Stuart; I want some cherries.”

“While you dress?”

“While I dress.”

“But, my dear, I don’t think the greengrocer has called.”

“You’ll find a bagful of white-hearts in the locker of the boat.”

He brought them to her; firm hard cherries, cold and fresh to the lips as the dew stabbing its little balls of light from every grass-blade. Presently she joined him in the hall; a grandfather clock groaned three sepulchral strokes as she descended the wooden stairway.

“Don’t believe it,” Stuart warned her; “just hold tight to the fact that before last night was yesterday, and after next night will be to-morrow; no more is necessary. Come for a walk.”

They rattled back the heavy door-bolts, and wandered for what seemed a long space of time along unfamiliar paths and across drenching grass, without meeting anything more awake to its responsibilities than a slowly creaking windmill. Then returned to the inn. Still no movement of life. The door stood ajar as they had left it. The hands of the grandfather clock were dallying eccentrically in the regions of half-past eleven.

“This is getting serious,” Stuart complained, rousing terrific thunders upon the gong. “Where is [208] the traditional tiller of the soil? Where is the buxom hostess astir before cockcrow? Where, principally, is cockcrow?”

“The cocks of the neighbourhood have been warned that a superhuman crower of crows has come to dwell among them. Therefore they are silent and abashed.”

“I’d be ashamed, if I were a cock, not to put up a little competition. All hail! here’s what was once a waiter!”

The half-dressed, yawning apparition that, mop and bucket in hand, uprose from the lower regions, stared aghast at the mention of breakfast; muttered “Not for an hour or two, anyways”; and began without enthusiasm to sweep the dining-room.

“We’d better go for another walk,” suggested Peter; “something tells me we have got up too early.”

Lying in a burning field of rye and poppies, he held her hands, and said: “It seems the most natural of all things that we should be here together and alone.”

“I know,” disappointedly. “I don’t feel a bit as wicked as I should. But you *do* think I’m bold and bad, don’t you, Stuart?”

“I think you’re just most awfully bold and bad,” heartily.

“And—and—of course I can’t expect you to feel the same respect for me as before,” wistfully seeking reassurance.

“Well, of course, naturally, a fellow never looks on a girl quite like before, after—I mean, well—there’s always something gone, isn’t there? I mean, a fellow wouldn’t like his sister to meet a girl who—hang it, Peter, you know quite well what I mean!”

Then he laughed, and moved closer, among the stiff yellow stalks broken by their intrusion. “It’s tremendously all right, isn’t it, dear?”

“I’m afraid so,” she confessed. “I’ve been waiting all the time for the sudden misgiving that tells me I should not have stayed. But it hasn’t come.” [209]

Stuart sympathized over the nuisance of an essential mood missing. “It spoils the set, and one can’t play demon patience any longer, and—come home to breakfast!” suddenly springing up. His nerves, though the girl was not aware of it, had been playing demon patience on their own all through the night, and were in consequence rather jumpy.

By dint of sitting like two mutes in the dining-room, and looking steadily reproachful while the waiter continued to sweep it out, they at last goaded him into serving them with breakfast.

“And now,” striding across the garden towards ‘Faustina,’ “now we’ll get under way. A long day, and a strong day, and a day spent together.” Stuart broke into rollicking song:

> “The sail’s aloft, the wind’s awake,
> The anchor streams the bow,
> The stays are trim, the guns are grim—
> O Captain, where art thou?”

It was late afternoon when the wind, for the first time since their stay in Norfolk, really found itself; and Peter became of a sudden definitely aware of Sailing. Beating up Bure to Acles, the sheet fairly taut in her one hand and the tiller somewhat restive in the other, she grew to joy in the swish of the reeds against the bows, as she swung the boat round, and let the boom lurch over; in the jerk of the rope, as she controlled its rattling passage through the blocks, with already her eye straining forward for the crucial moment at the further bank. She did not notice, in this new intoxication of pace and mastery, that Stuart had ceased to give directions ... when suddenly, gripped by a strong puff of wind, the sail leapt sideways, the water sang up over the lee rail; and Peter, taken by surprise, would have been hurled to the floor of the boat, had she not just in time flung up her heels and braced them against the opposite scuppers; nor did she let go of the sheet, which tore like some live thing at her palms. [210]

“All right,” said Stuart calmly. “Blowing up a bit fresh. Shall I take her?”

“No.” And now she understood sailing right enough: this thing which demanded of her every atom and particle of strength she possessed, and some she did not consciously possess until that time. A darkness crept across the sky, and the wind’s whistle had an ominous note. More and more the boat heeled to meet its own disappearing shadow; till it seemed as if one could not for an instant longer retain that tilted position in the lifting scuppers.

—“We’ve got to beat it,” cried Stuart; “don’t let ’em get to windward of you!” And then only she saw that they were being furiously raced by another craft, with larger canvas than their own, and a shouting crew of men. Stuart was excited—a race always brought out all the child in him.

“You can make the next corner if you’re careful, and then she’ll run!”

The ‘Tyke,’ emphatically now the ‘Tyke’ and not ‘Faustina,’ did indeed luff the corner, and scudded ahead straight and clean with the galloping motion of a greyhound. Peter’s blood was romping; her hand felt as though cut in two where sawn by the rope; shoulders and knees and wrists, no part of her that did not throb and ache and cry aloud for release from this straining torture—torture that she would not have forgone for a lifetime of ease and pettiness and mild enjoyment. For she was conquering the wind, and gaining on the other boat, and never before had water been so near or the world so far.

“We ought to reef, but we won’t!” Stuart’s voice sang in triumphantly with the roar and whip of the waves. “More sheet, Peter, or she’ll carry away. Not much—no, none at all, and chance it! By Heaven, it’s great!” [211]

Peter’s entire soul and body were bracing themselves in resistance against the push of the tiller. Her teeth fastened firmly into her lower lip. She had not known one could so hate an inanimate bar. Inanimate? possessed rather of seven kicking devils.... And then she saw the bridge ahead; and Stuart announced with gentle pleasure: “We’ve won,” and slipped into her place, and turned the ‘Tyke’ downstream. The defeated crew called out a hearty word of appreciation; Peter smiled at them; lit a cigarette; and, soaked by the churned-up spray, her hands stiff and bleeding, subsided on to the floor of their vessel, whereof she watched in passive admiration Stuart’s perfect handling.

“I now propose,” he said, “that we should feast our victory while under way, which in itself is a battle of some stubbornness. In other words, Peter, you shall collect what there is of lunch from among the tarpaulins and suit-cases littering this most disorderly tub, and minister to my needs while I cling to my post at the wheel:

> “An’ I never left my post, sir, for the cappen ’e bid me stay,
> Tho’ me ’ands were frozen an’ cut, sir, an’ me face was stiff wi’ the spray;
> But me thirteen children are dead, sir—an’ there’s nobody left to care,
> So I stayed, like Casabianca, on the fighting ‘Téméraire’!”

It was no easy matter, with the deck tilted at an angle of 30°, to find the requisite bread and meat and ale, plates and forks and bottles. It struck Peter that sunset was a curious hour for lunch; as still more curious that the sun should set at all on this day which had begun so long ago. It was a

lurid and tempestuous sky, jagged across by untidy streaks of black, the whole swimming canopy overhead as it were being sucked and drawn by red relentless fingers into the very heart of the western turmoil. [212]

“Stuart, there’s no glass.”

“Must be.”

“*Isn’t*,” crossly.

“A tin mug, then?”

“Nothing but a flower-pot—will that do? Why do you keep flower-pots on board? Is it that you may grow nasturtiums while becalmed?”

“A flower-pot will hold the beer all right, if you keep your thumb in the hole at the bottom, all the while I drink.”

Peter refused. “I’m not your squaw.” And Stuart related with reproachful emphasis the story of the little boy in Holland who had not minded plugging a hole with his thumb all through the weary night, to save his country from inundation. Nevertheless, Peter was not incited to emulation.

All this while they were running before a powerful wind, sail and water ablaze with crimson, the same red glow splashing their faces and their hands, and touching with magic all the level shores. A bottle was hurled into the scuppers, crashed into fragments; and triumphantly the breeze hummed through the straining cordage.

It struck Peter that sunset was a good time for lunch.

“Hullo! here are the mortal remains of the wild-duck paste.” And they both laughed, thinking of the immortal remains, bearing fruit in Aureole’s heart.

“Not that I think wild ducks do bear fruit as a rule; too reminiscent of a hen laying a melon. Peter, unless you are playing at Tantalus, or rather the gods who tantalized Tantalus, you might hold the bread a few inches nearer my lips.”

Passing St. Bennetts, the wind dropped somewhat, the clouds piled themselves out of sight, and the sky paled to a lake of clear light green wherein the round red ball of the sun hung motionless, striped by the darkening reeds. [213]

Stuart hailed a cabin-boat with seven men on board, all lustily singing.

“Hi! what’s the time?—excuse me, Peter, but it had to be done.”

“Half-past six,” they wove their reply into the strains of ‘John Peel.’

“We shall make it, easily, and with half an hour to spare, wind or no wind.”

Peter looked enquiring.

“The eight-forty-one. You wanted to get home to-night, didn’t you?”

All day long a glittering mist had lain lightly as forgetfulness on speech and memory. The reminder dropped mournfully as a premonition. The sun sank yet lower, staining the very roots of the tall green spears fringeing the waters. And the boatload ahead ceased from their jovial ditty, gripped by the conventional melancholy of evening.

“Wait a minute,” prophesied Peter; “they’ll sing—what do you bet, Stuart? I say: ‘Swanee River.’”

She was very near the mark in her guess. As the last ruddy segment dipped under the horizon, a haunting haunted melody floated backwards upon the sighing day:

> “Look out, for the Goblin Man,
> That Ragtime Goblin Man!
> Run, run, just as fast as you can....”

“The darlings!” murmured Peter. “They’ll repeat it eight times, and then the ass of the party will start for the ninth time, and John will tell him to shut up.”

John was a Voice from the Cabin, and evidently the strong man of the party, as one could hear him being constantly consulted, in tones both supplicating and respectful.

But the plaintive tune, drawn out thinner and ever thinner as the larger boat drew away, was working potent havoc upon Peter’s carefully guarded Marshes of Cheap Sentiment. Noting this, Stuart summoned her to the helm: “Come and take her. We shall probably jibe round the next bend,” and buried his head in the locker. [214]

Peter wondered rather irritably if he did this on purpose whenever a jibe loomed ahead. She had no affection for the jibe. It held for her an agonizing moment, after she had hauled in the sheet, when she became a blank as to which way the tiller should be rammed, in squaring the sail anew. Up till now, Heaven had been with her, but this time Heaven looked unpropitious—perhaps because the sun had set.

Heaven elected at the critical moment to send her a strong gust of wind, the last they had in stock that day. It spun the boom crashing to leeward, before Peter had time to do anything at all. Followed a delirious instant when it struck her she ought to manipulate the tiller—and did it, with dire effect. She was aware that Stuart had come out of the locker, that the water was rushing up from behind to meet her, and that the boat was evilly tilting her downwards to meet the water

with an evident after-intention of turning turtle over her drowning body. She did not call to Stuart, even then, instinctively certain that he was doing something useful in emergencies, and might be trusted to save her afterwards. All this in the space of time it takes a boat to turn over upon its side and drift at right angles to the river, the sail sagging flatly upon the surface of the stream. An invisible weight to balance Peter's, was obviously preventing 'Faustina' from accomplishing a complete somersault.... Stuart had scrambled like lightning over the rail and flung himself upon the keel. Then he looked around for Peter, and was relieved to find her clinging with both hands to the opposite side of their improvised see-saw.

"Can you hang on?" he queried cheerfully. [215]

She replied in like tones, "How long?"—and suppressed her inner doubts.

"Till we float ashore. I can't do anything while I'm on the keel, and mustn't move off it. How much of you is immersed?"

"Up to the knees."

The boat hovered about uncertainly in midstream. There was no one in sight, and no sound but the breeze shivering the rushes. A fish leapt shining from the water, and plunged again into a circle of ripples. From round the next bend still drifted snatches of the 'Ragtime Goblin Man'; evidently John had not yet spoken. Some distance over the land, yet not so far but that they should distinctly have heard the throb and clangour, a train passed in a linked blur of lights; passed noiselessly, like a phantom train. Peter, watching it, wished passionately that she might hear it whistle, as reassurance that she herself was real, and not a pictured castaway upon a badly drawn bit of wreckage.

At last they floated into a mud-bank; and were able thence to wade ashore.

Peter waited for Stuart to display extreme anxiety as to her degree of wetness, to burst into pæans of praise on her bravery and calmness in the face of danger, and finally to mutter with white young jaws, "I shall never forgive myself—never!"

Stuart said curtly: "Shivery? No? That's all right; d'you feel equal to giving me a hand with the sail? We must lug it up somehow,"—happily convinced that by thus increasing the wind to the shorn lamb, he was treating the lamb in the spirit it most desired.

And as they tugged and hauled in the dim light at that most obstinate of all foes, a water-logged sail, Peter played up gallantly to his call upon that other Peter; the one she had carefully cut according to his measurements. Round her lips hovered a rather tremulous smile at the manner [216] in which she was thus for a second time required to pay for her audacity in playing at God.

—And yet, was it payment, after all? With a little thrill of exultant surprise, Peter realized that the Peter of her disguises could not be a mere lay figure, since she had not discarded them in actual moment of peril and when thrown completely off her guard. Why then, they had become in very truth a part of her being; she was indeed Stuart's Portrait-of-a-Lady, complete in all its essentials; she had stood the test....

There was far more actual fun to be had from standing ankle-deep in mud, with a spectral wind flapping her wet skirt against her knees, while she pitted her strength viciously against a tangle of wet rope, than from the use of her feminine privileges—Was there?... The old Peter hollowed into the mist a momentary fancy of a warm glowing interior—soft colours—soft cushions—warmth and ease and the dry slippery touch of silk upon her flesh—the abandoning of all effort to the stronger male who realized and joyed in her greater fragility....

"Peter, I want you! Hold this"—Stuart's voice, confident and imperative. And the mist curled itself greyly over her pictured fancy of chintz and rugs and warming-pans, of sentiment beside red caves of firelight, and withal of a lover who was not a leprechaun.

—"Coming!" for a while they worked grimly, neither speaking.

Stuart paused in his labours, threw a tarpaulin on the bank, seated himself thereon, and invited Peter to do likewise. Then, in a sudden access of chivalry, he wrapped around her his own oilskins, thereby giving her more than ever the appearance of a battered stowaway, and consented for a moment to dwell on their quondam peril. Nay, he even came to her to be fed, in an engaging manner all his own:

"It was a long way from the locker to the keel," reminiscently. [217]

She said not a word.

"I was fairly quick, I think. Didn't fumble, did I?"

Still no reply.

"Peter," imploringly.

Then she gave in, and was bad for him: "You were magnificent, Stuart."

His crow was fervent but subdued. The atmosphere not being conducive to any sound above a whisper.

"Now we'll just bale out the tub, set it on its hind legs, hoist sail, and be off. She didn't ship much water; dryest capsize I've ever done. A beautiful capsize, really; Peter, I'm glad we capsized; it will have a pleasant look, viewed from to-day a year hence."

"Pleasant, but passing strange," she murmured, gazing on the gaunt ribbed outline of their marooned vessel. "'It was the Schooner "Hesperus," that all on the shore lay wrecked——'"

“‘The skipper’s daughter had hold of the tiller. So what could you expect?’” finished Stuart.

She surveyed him reproachfully. “Is that—generous?”

“Do you want me to be generous?—Good Lord,” with sudden heat, “do you think I’d pay any other girl on earth the compliment of not fussing round her wet feet ... especially when I so much want to,” he added under his breath. Then returned quickly to his labours on the boat.

Peter was glad that she had not hearkened to the insistent pratings of the other Peter. Glad that Stuart guessed nothing of their existence.... The pictured fire-red interior had acquired a sudden cheapness, viewed in the light of his last speech. Her face burnt at the idea that he should ever know that these easy longings had even for a moment found their entrance. After all, and undoubtedly, this, her present plight, was far more fun; though she was cold beyond all hope of [218] warmth, and tired past all desire for rest,—far more fun ... lean restless ways of fun that he had taught her; strange, slippery ways as the way to the moon, and as unprofitable.

—“Peter! Quick—here!”

[219]

CHAPTER VI
THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE ORANGE

It was not long before the well had been baled, the gaff run up, and a very wet mainsail flapped in mournful abandon against the mast. Then Stuart pushed off with the quant-pole, while Peter curled herself among the regions of his feet; from the general ooziness she suspected she was sitting in about two inches of water, but by now it seemed more natural to be wet than dry, and she made no efforts towards the latter state. The mists brushed her cheek with clammy fingers; naught of clothing but was damp and cumbersome to the body; the water had insinuated itself into matches and cigarettes, had gurgled into the locker, and soaked into the comestibles. Water-logged, they crept on and on with the tide through the murky twilight, a faint saffron stain in the west betokening where once had rioted the banners of the setting sun. From time to time a light flashed warmly from a house-boat on the banks, or cheery but muffled voices told of sails being laboriously tucked away for the night, masts lowered, clinking crockery washed up for a late meal. Theirs was the only vessel still adrift. Huddled in her big cloak, Peter watched the darkness eating up either shore, while the river took on unfamiliar curves and windings, seemed to branch off into two—ten rivers, all beckoning different ways. And once she called out sharply, “Look ahead!” that Stuart should swing the ‘Tyke’ clear of a gigantic looming ship, three tiers of sails, and a ghostly figurehead. “Why?” And he steered straight through the ship with its three tiers of [220] sails. Peter said no more, not quite trusting what further tricks her sight might choose to play. She crouched still further into the well, content to see naught but the edge of sail against the dense pall of sky, and dimly, where Stuart sat, an outline of bare neck and slouched hat and lean nervous hand upon the tiller. It all went to make perfection: the timeless blue day spent in big spaces, limbs stiff from their perilous tussle, and now the sodden boat, and the shadows, and Stuart beside her. She put out a chill hand to feel if he were indeed solid substance; touched his knee, felt him start and tingle—she could not see the hot rush of blood into his face.

Suddenly he swerved the bows towards a forest of pale reeds; they bent apart to the sliding passage of the boat, then closed up in its wake. The keel ran aground. Stuart let drop the mainsheet; it rattled lazily along its blocks, and was still. The sail drooped forward, fell back again.

... She lay suffocated in a darkness of kisses, that stole her breath away, and her powers of resistance; robbed her of all knowledge save of desire beating itself out upon her lips and her throat and her eyes; upon the lids she drooped for evasion, upon the hands she put up to protect her, upon the hair she tumbled forward, and upon her neck when she turned her head. And then again fiercely upon her mouth, compelling her to be passive, compelling her to response. And through the pain and through her weariness, sang a strain of rejoicing that he should treat her thus; that their brains and their mockery and their intellect should yet have been all blotted to naught in a whirling storm of passion.

... He had drawn a little away. She raised herself; pushed back her hair with the bewildered gesture of a child. Her throat ached as if someone had attempted to strangle her, and her mouth felt stung and bruised. Then Stuart bent towards her, took her in his arms: “Lie still, dear” ... and [221] for the first time Peter lay still; mind and body and soul, still.

It was over, the endless strain of winning and keeping the man; the endless effort of playing-up. He loved her with a great finality of love. She could—lie still.

A shaft of blackness pierced light. And Peter became aware that this very moment which had brought her belief in the endurance of his love, was the moment long foretold when they must consent to end it. Love’s consummation—both had agreed that nothing less must follow.

Did Stuart know?... And suddenly his hands slackened completely their hold on her—then tightened again to an almost intolerable grip. He too had realized the door of exit.

But it was absurd, for an elusive unproven theory, to renounce a thing at its perfection; Peter had doubted always if she would be big enough for that. And now love had proven so much bigger than she had anticipated.

She would risk the descent on the further side. Though the Hairpin Vision shone full and steady as limelight upon the future, she was yet willing to take all the hazard of lessening love, so she might keep love. Keep it in whatsoever form he wished, free or bound. Stuart would not employ the shears alone, without her co-operation. If she willed, she might use the moment to entangle him with a thousand threads, beyond all hope of breaking away. Why shouldn’t she? Since he had made her need of him so great, he must pay his share. And of what avail to set aside the temptation, since then he would never know it had existed?

With a great stirring of anger, Peter looked up at him. His face was turned away, still set in desire, but now not for her. It was the supremest desire of a man whose star had granted him his every wish; desire for renunciation. Young Fortunatus pursuing the winds of sorrow. [222]

Her anger waned and died to tenderness. This was not the ruthless orange-sucker of her first imaginings. She alone knew how rigidly and untiringly his asceticism had striven to keep its leanness against that terrible perversity of ease which threatened to engulf him. And she could help him. By her and because of her had actually come his chance of a sacrifice worth while—oh, yes, she understood; and she could, if she chose, be sufficiently big to allow it him. Came a rush of pride like a sonorous North-Easter humming through the shrouds: No other girl could have kept up with him as far—she was not going to fail at the last ... he had once called her a genius of

life.

His eyes met hers, a question in them. And she laughed. “We’ve had a good run before the wind, Stuart.” Heard the triumphant fling of his reply, “And we’re not going aground in the putty now.”

He unlinked his arms; took up the quant-pole; pushed back to mid-stream. Within a few minutes they were at the landing-stage; a sharp walk brought them to the station platform: Eight thirty-six—and the train left at eight forty-eight. “Not bad,” remarked Stuart; “considering our day of uncounted hours.”

There was just time for Peter to send off a wire to her cousins in Turnham Green, bidding them reserve her a room that night; she would arrive in London too late for the further journey to Thatch Lane. Then, with a shaking roar, the train plunged into the station, barely waited to gulp its few passengers, and thundered southwards. Peter found that her fellow-travellers regarded her with astonished eyes, and departed to view herself. The results of sun and wind, of immersement in the water, and those few after-moments among the reeds, exceeded her wildest expectations. It took half an hour’s unsteady labour before looking-glass and washstand-basin, [223] before she might lay the least claim to respectability. She was relieved to find, however, that her flaming cheeks and lit eyes and lips dark as wine were not at all reminiscent of the girl about to be forsaken by her lover. She was tremendously exultant that her body should have stood the strain of the day, as her soul had stood its close. And she had never walked so lightly as up the crowded dining-car to rejoin Stuart at its far end.

“Metamorphosis?”

“Only from the waist upwards,” she displayed her boots, still caked with a large portion of Bure’s shores.

They were both in brilliant form, bandying their shafts to and fro over that jolted meal. Liverpool Street came as a shock. They continued to jest in the taxi which bore them with uncanny rapidity to the boarding-house in Merton Crescent. The chauffeur mistook the number; halted with a jerk several houses before the squat complacent little red-brick building where Peter was to pass the night. They alighted, and Stuart paid and dismissed the man. They waited, listening, as if it were of importance that not a throb of the vanishing wheels should elude their concentration. Then in silence they walked up to the iron gate of number seventy-four, stood stock-still facing one another. There was a sickly dazzle of light behind the Venetian blinds of the window level with the street; somebody was watching them through the chinks. Not that it mattered in the slightest degree. Peter’s head was tilted well up, and she was smiling. Far away, that old discarded Peter clung tightly to her lover, pleaded with him not to go; Peter eyed the shadow in contempt—she had no more use for it.

“We won’t meet again.”

“No.”

As they had planned it, without lingering or reproach.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” said Stuart. He did not even touch her; yet she winced and braced [224] herself beneath his look as she had done perforce when his actual grip had tightened.

—“Hullo!”

The front door of the house was suddenly flung wide open, and Peter’s flapper cousin Jinny, flanked by a whole bevy of young people, flocked through the aperture, bore down upon her with boisterous greeting. And now steps and doorway and silent street were a-swarm with marionette-shapes, whose shrill cries and exclamations drowned the beat of Stuart’s retreating steps.…

Peter was hauled indoors—she could almost hear her face click as she adjusted it to the suddenly altered conditions.

“Come along in, do; we’re kicking up no end of a shindy! I say, won’t your friend join as well?”

And then the red-plush drawing-room, with red-plush music tinkling from a cheap piano, and air thick with gas and seed-cake, and Cousin Constance, Jinny’s mother, saying with interpolation of stuffy and affectionate kisses: “These young folk are behaving disgracefully, my dear; but there, it’s Saturday evening, and I hope you ain’t too tired to join them.”

On Peter’s other side, a frivolous girl of thirty-six waggled a plump forefinger, “I saw you saying good-bye to your young man! I believe you must have quarrelled—he didn’t even kiss you good night.”

Next, she was introduced to the mild gentleman whom she had met there before—“So don’t you pretend to be hoity-toity, Miss Peter,”—and to the irresistibly humorous Tommy Cox, whom she hadn’t met there before, and who said straight away, “Now tell me this, if you can: could you make a Maltese Cross?”—and to Luke Johnson, the boy from next door,—while the landlady, who was also a friend of Cousin Constance, kept up a running fire of questions connected somehow [225] with coffee: “Some people like it better with milk, and some people like it without; some people take two lumps of sugar, and some like one, so all you’ve got to do, Peter, dear, is to tell me how you like it best. Some people.…” The saga began all over again.

It seemed to Peter that this final necessity for playing-up was rather in the nature of an extra on the bill. But that strange new part of her for which Stuart was responsible, could not cease abruptly with his exit, but went on a little while mechanically rotating in obedience to the hand that had set it in motion. So she skilfully dodged her cousin’s kisses; accepted the thick cup of muddy lukewarm coffee; answered the riddle about the Maltese Cross; gaily averred that she was

not a bit tired, and quite ready for “high jinks”; and allowed herself to be drawn into a rowdy game of musical chairs.

Crushing memory below the surface, she sprang to the head of the scuffling line awaiting the music’s signal to start—

> “You made me love you,
> I didn’t want to do it,
> I didn’t want to do it,”

round and round the empty line of chairs—then a cry, and a mix-up, and shouts of “He’s out!” A chair removed from the row. The music started once more.

Only eight combatants left—seven—six—Peter could not contrive to get left out; a chair seemed ever ready to embrace her, as the jovial pianist ceased from play. She felt the urgent need of sleep leaking noiselessly into her being. Her limbs refused any more to obey the call upon them. Almost she abandoned the struggle, beat an ignominious retreat in the middle of the game. An echo of Stuart spurred her on as with whips: “It’s a glorious stunt, Peter! don’t give in before the end.”—Yes, but need she listen, since he was not to count any more? Willy-nilly, his training outlasted him; she made a forward dash for a seat, this time out of reach, determined she would be in at the death, as a votive offering to the lord of all stunts, great and small. [226]

And now there were only three jigging round to the endless tune.

> “And all the time you knew it,
> I guess you always knew it,
> You made me——”

Silence, then a noisy outburst from the spectators lining the walls: “You’re out, Miss Tomkyns! his lap don’t count as a seat, you know.” Giggling, Miss Tomkyns withdrew from the contest. Remained Peter and the objectionable Tommy.

“Now then, Peter, beat him. It’s up to you—show old Tommy what girls are made of!” Jinny literally danced with excitement. And Cousin Constance at the piano started once more to strum, with the evident intention of prolonging the agony.

Ah! that renewal of the chorus was too vigorous to be genuine. The end was at hand. Peter, on the back side of the chair, turned suddenly and faced Tommy, who was so amazed at this change of tactics that he facetiously flung out one leg after another along the ground, Russian-ballet fashion. At this juncture, as anticipated, the tune halted abruptly in the middle of a bar—and with a slight movement Peter had occupied her throne before he could recover his balance.

And she smiled, a provocative ‘there-you-are’ smile, not intended for her clapping enthusiastic spectators.

“Bravo, Peter! you’re a sport! Shame, Tommy, to be beaten by a girl!”

“And now to bed, every man Jack of you,” cried Mrs. Thorpe, who since five minutes had been listening with dread to the impatient tip-tap on the ceiling, of a best-bedroom boarder afflicted with insomnia.

“She cheated, twisting round like that, instead of goin’ straight on,” grumbled Tommy, in the hall. Like a great many humorous gentlemen, he could not take a beating. [227]

And Peter turned on the stairs to remark tauntingly, “There, there, Master Tommy, never mind. We’ll say that you won, shall we?”

“I’ll make you pay for that, young lady!” Only half in earnest, but stung nevertheless by the laughter of his friends, he made a rush for his tormentor. She broke away from him, ran with dangerous swiftness to the room she usually occupied. She could hear Tommy panting at her heels; his breath, stale with cheap tobacco, on the back of her neck. “Go it, Tommy boy!” urged his companions from below. Peter clenched her hands; ‘pay for that’—she had a very clear idea how the Tommies of this world exact payment. She would *not* be kissed to-night, not ... again.

Putting on a spurt, she gained her room, crashed the door in his face, and turned the key in the lock. Tommy called through one or two witticisms, and strolled away to be consoled by his pals. Then Jinny knocked a final ‘good night’ and did Peter want anything? Peter wanted nothing. So Jinny too departed. A whispered exchange of banter on the landings; a loud guffaw; a flurry of feet.... Silence now in the house. Peter’s day was over, grey and white and pallor of gold. It had been a very long day. She was logged with sleep, as a water-logged boat that can no longer crawl for heaviness. Eyelids tumbling, fingers purely mechanical. Nothing was remembered, nothing existed save her longing for bed. Bed was a tangible thing and mattered very much. She was just aware, through formless drifting clouds whirling her mind to stupor, that it was just as well she should be physically so dead beat.

Light turned out, and head plunged among the pillows. It was sand that was weighing her down; heavy yellow sand; she could hear it trickling into the crevices and chinks and joints of her body; hear it like water among the reeds ... hear herself falling asleep. [228]

And knew that before dawn she would awake, purged of her merciful weariness. Wake to the knowledge of a world without Stuart.

[229]

CHAPTER VII
FORTUNATUS

If Stuart had been a poor man, and forced to continue drudgery whatever his troubles of love, he would have wrested a certain comfort from the obligatory effort. But placed as he was, it would have been mere childishness to deceive himself with an assumption that he was not perfectly free to absent himself from Holborn for as long a period as he pleased. Derwent had taken a needed holiday in May, directly following the prick of Gobert's balloon, and was now back again at his post. Baldwin ran up most days from Sonning, except when solemnities of regatta nailed him to the spot. Business was at its slackest; and Stuart could no more persuade himself that he was morally necessary, than that his attendance was compulsory.

In no mood for make-believe, beset by a bitter craving for what he had denied himself, by a still more bitter doubt as to whether his had not been a fool's action, he set out for the Haven, where he could at least be sure of solitude while he fought the matter through.

The Haven is marked somewhere in the neighbourhood of Poole. Actually, it is in the neighbourhood of nowhere. A man walks into the Haven perhaps at set of sun, finding it always a little beyond the point where he is desirous the walk be ended, so that he walks into the Haven tired and with lagging step. On one side of him the sea shines a ghostly grey; not breaking in waves, nor tossing in a glitter of foam, nor making any sound whatever; but flowing, flowing, in slantwise ripples towards the land. And when he is accustomed to the sight of it on his one side, [230] he is gradually aware of a stealthy lapping on his other side, beyond the sand-banks sown with coarse grass. There also is the sea, flowing in slantwise ripples towards the land, so that he loses all sense of east or west. For his further confusion, either horizon is bestrewn with hazy tongues of land, floating strips of island; and on either horizon, tumbling silent seas lick their way among the nebulous shores. The sun dips red and round, and the moon rises round and red; so that for an instant of bewilderment the sun might be the moon and the moon might be the sun; and both sun and moon hang loosely, midway between sky and ocean, having no link with either. The only thing permanent is an old hulk embedded in the stretches of flat white sand; and thither the traveller is impelled to climb; for the sand has an untrodden look; and there lies a strange fascination, when leaning against the slimy sides of the wreck, in gazing backwards at his solitary footprints marking the way he came.

On the extreme edge of the Haven, men have built an hotel, thinking thereby to give the spot a prosperous and populated appearance. And thrice a week a creaking motor-bus deposits there its load of sightseers, who drink a lot of tea on the blank terrace, and swarm over the waste of garden, and onto the primitive wooden jetty, whence boats are supposed to start for a tour of the islands lightly pencilled in the haze. But the boats are never visible; and presently the sightseers depart in their bus; and the Haven continues to take no interest either in the barren grey hotel nor yet in the babbling tea-drinkers.

In the surrounding oozes of dark green, are rooted shapeless forms, that might be whales, but are mostly bungalows. One of these was presented to Stuart by his brother-in-law Ralph Orson, on the occasion of the latter's marriage. "Might come in useful when you are sailing in these [231] parts," quoth Orson, apologizing for the poorness of the gift.

There was very little of sailing in its more graceful phases round about the Haven. Occasionally the tide brought up slow-moving barges, piled high with wood or coal or bricks; these surmounted by the tiny dark figures of men hoisting a clumsy bulk of canvas against the sky, pushing frantically at giant pole or tiller, which by comparison reduced the human to ant-size. The white skimming sail would have been here a strange anomaly, and the supple curve of pleasure boat. With grimness tempered to mystery by their flying streamers of smoke, the black trading-vessels alone ruffled the even slant of the water, flowing, rippling, landwards to the Haven.

Here then, Stuart passed the days following his renunciation of Peter. He was disappointed that the detached exultation of spirit was absent, that should have rewarded the man with will strong enough to perpetrate a theory. Exultation?—so far was it removed, that at first he had to summon every atom of force he possessed, to prevent himself from dashing theory onto the rubbish-heap, and setting it alight, burnt-offering to the common human love of a man for a maid. Just at the moment when all his powers of reasoning and thought and logic were most desperately needed, they turned traitor; ran away; returned to mock him: "Prig! pedant! cad!" No end to the insulting epithets they volleyed at the stunned and cowering leprechaun; and then ran again, too fast for pursuit or argument.

"If that's all you have to give me, then, curse you, I might have taken the warmer thing!" thus leprechaun, from the depths of want, to the hiding metaphysician.

Stuart waited, just holding in check the suffering which cried out for some alleviating action on his part ... (he might so soon be in town—at Euston—Thatch Lane—"Come out, Peter"—and in the [232] crushed sweet smell of bracken on the Weald, laugh, and kiss her mouth, and kiss again; and laughing, damn the Hairpin Vision to beyond eternity, where it rightly belonged—all this, so soon) ... Stuart waited. He would at least give metaphysics a chance.

He strove to collect his ideas of yore; but they rattled about in his head like dried peas in a box, implements wherewith stageland strives to imitate a rainfall. Meanwhile, round the shadow-side of the embedded hulk, he stumbled one night upon a pair of lovers clinging silently together, symbol of unthinking passion, utterly happy in the belief that their momentary divinity was

immortal. Ordinary lovers—Stuart turned sharply away, across the tract of dead white sand, cursing as he ran; cursing his destructive brain and his vision and his asceticism,—all that had been given him unasked, to set him apart from those shapes—*from that shape* on the shadow-side of the hulk. Damn it! yes, damn it! One paid for too godlike a use of the shears. Damn it ... he threw himself face downwards on the sand.

The metaphysician stirred from lethargy, and spoke; reminding him that he had seen the sequel to the idyll in the shadow-shape of the hulk; reminding him of a certain dingy group round a perambulator: “They had hung on, and lost the vision.”

Stuart retorted: “They had also forgotten the vision, so what did it matter?”

“Would you wish to forget?”

“Yes,” desperately. Any sort of rest rather than for ever be self-tormented as now.

And then there was the thought of what Peter might be enduring. The orange-sucker had never before stayed to consider the orange. When Merle had dropped from the trio, though perfectly aware of what was impending during that last supper-party, Stuart had made no after-movement [233] in any way to help her. The trio had inexorably to come to an end. The one left over must butt through her crisis without whining. Male or female, it was all the same. When a like hour visited him, he would require neither sympathy nor yet props; certainly not mercy.

All very well, these relentless standards, applied to Merle. But they refused to apply themselves with like success to Peter. Stuart did not know why. But he told himself that he had behaved like a cad to Peter, anyone would say so. For the next space of time, his strongest temptation was to take refuge in the outward appearance of his conduct—certainly caddish in the extreme—and behind this fence, skulk backwards to his desire: “And make the only amends a gentleman can, considering how he has treated the girl.”

But that wouldn’t do. He knew, and Peter knew, that what had prompted him to break with her was very far removed from mere caddishness; and he couldn’t now with any consistency start regulating his conduct with an eye to the world’s approval.

A prig, then? a fanatic?—Let him but vilify in some recognized term of opprobrium what he had done, and he must perforce find himself an excuse to retract. Would a prig have set a girl to care for him, and then desert her for the sake of a vision which in turn deserted him? Prigs do not stand upon their heads, but levelly and beautifully upon their feet. He was too bad and too mad to merit the epithet of prig. Fanatic, certainly. And what was fanatic, closely examined, but word-covering for anyone sufficiently clear in belief to prove his theory by deed instead of mouthing it abroad for others so to do? Theory would be a mere word, cold and empty of significance, if the discoverer thereof were not willing to apply it as touchstone to matters vitally concerning himself.

No escape then, by road of cad, prig, or fanatic. Had Peter been sufficiently unattainable in [234] worldly status, he could have spent a lifetime striving to win her, without any self-reproach whatsoever to mar his ultimate victory. But Fortunatus might claim his princess when he willed.... So no princess for Fortunatus....

> —“They wrought a deeper treason,
> Led seas who served my needs;
> They sold Diego Valdez
> To bondage of great deeds....”

What a fool, what a fool he had been to imagine he could elude his bondage by merely choosing an inglorious profession! This then was how they had at last contrived to outwit him: giving him, in addition to all worldly advantages, clarity of vision and power of brain; letting him build up from these a working ideal,—and then trapping him in a situation where he must in the very use of it forfeit all happiness. Because he saw ahead, because he gloried in the seeing,—oh, they had wrought their treason cunningly, “led seas who served my needs”; the two in the shadow-side of the hulk were kept in no such bondage. Stuart was a genius of life—he might not go back to Peter. He had lashed Peter to be a genius of life—she might not call to him. They could both see their vision of love dimmed by time—so they might not pursue it to the dimming. And meanwhile the two in the shadow-side of the hulk lay lip to lip, bodies crushed together, believing their little moment immortal. “They sold Diego Valdez....”

And here the stuntorian, up till now silent, gave a sudden leap, and flung out a hand to pull Stuart from the mire: “Just go back to her. Get above your own theory, and kick it out of the way. What a stunt—if you are big enough!”

“If you are big enough,” insinuated the stuntorian.

Metaphysician silenced him with a laconic “Cheat.”

No escape for Fortunatus. He knew, if for one moment he ceased battling, how contentment would lap him round, and smooth him, and oil him, and blur his vision of mist to a thickness of [235] mutton-fat. He knew. And must practise knowledge on a flesh-and-blood love, not cherish it as a dry-as-dust theory. No escape for Stuart. The lovers, still locked into one shape, still murmuring brokenly to each other, passed in the dark so close that they brushed against him where he lay; where he lay and in biting scorn challenged God for once to take the initiative, not make him do it *all* himself, always.

No rest for Fortunatus. Leprechaun was now active enough; squibbing and somersaulting to

impress the metaphysician, who with brilliant argument upheld the ascetic, who alternately cursed and wrestled with the man. The man had but a poor chance; though he still continued to argue, as thus:

If he and Peter had indeed thrust forwards and on, in the mortal blindness unmercifully denied to them, could the gradual transformation of magic to disappointment, thence to habit, slacking into uninspired content,—all that he and she had visioned, sitting on a luggage-truck at Euston; could these things be indeed worse than his present turmoil of longing?

Yes! all three shouting now in chorus, leprechaun and metaphysician and ascetic. Yes! For this was sharp and keen—and quick. Even though each second weighed an eternity, he was yet conscious that, viewed from the distance of years, the time would seem a short black tunnel cutting through into the day. While to lose the pulsing sense of her walk, her voice, her touch; to drop instinctive knowledge of her pleasure or her sorrow; to cease from battling with her, for the joy of the after-rest; to exchange passionate uncertainty for placid possession; to happen no more on moments of chance magic, and not to miss them; for strain to depart, and youth, and memory of youth and strain, and then envy of youth, so that ashore on the putty they should not even [236] begrudge fiercely the exhilaration of a run before the wind—

A thousand times rather lie as now, with body writhing into the dry white sand, and every nerve craving for love lost. A thousand times rather fling “Peter!” into the unresponsive silence, and blaspheme at her steady defiance in not calling him back; defiance he, not God, but he again had put into her. A thousand times rather be stabbed through and through by single recollections. Yes, a thousand times rather Hell than Heaven, since from Hell one still could rise, but from Heaven there was no more ascent to the heavens.

END OF PART II

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PART III

CHAPTER I

"FOR HE HAD GREAT POSSESSIONS"

Thus, gradually, belief was restored to Stuart, and faith in the vision, and the vision itself. And then came a quickening pride in the thought of Peter, battling through to the same issue; Peter, erect and balanced, with that half-smile of scorn upon her lips; more his mate than ever now, since with equal strength and without bitterness, they could each stand alone, walk alone, guarding strange memories.

Twenty-four hours of squally weather tempted him to put out to sea in his racing yacht. Blown half across the Channel, he met with terrific resistance beating back through a flying scud of wind and spray, all reefs in, and rail deep under water. Nor did he for one second think of relinquishing his hold upon life, nor of adjuring the ocean, in approved fashion, to let him seek oblivion in its coolness.

Reaching home, he slept, and did not dream. Slept sound and hard. The next night he again saw the lovers wandering amid that renewed tranquillity which succeeds tempest. Though the sight of them still stirred him to pain, the taint of envy had departed; and he smiled, as, passing, he caught the inevitable question whispered:

"And when did you first begin to love me, Letty?"

[238] Stuart reflected with amused contempt that the answer could not fail to be: "I think I must have loved you always, dear heart...." He wondered what would happen if he followed the impulse to warn them whither they were straying in their blindness, tell them the use of the shears—then laughed, imagining the reception his harangue would receive: the male muttering: "Some crazy loon!" and drawing closer the girl, who would murmur, her lips against his neck: "He doesn't *know*, does he, dearest?"

But though the notion called forth a healthy self-ridicule in the man who didn't know, a throb within him of common humanity, which he had hitherto believed dormant, was queerly uneasy for all the sightless lovers of all the world, stumbling on towards disillusion. He felt like a diver who from drowning depths had rescued a pearl, brought it up in his hand—"And was looking about for the swine," finished Stuart's sense of humour, also reawakened.

Nevertheless, the uneasiness dogged him, and the impatience. The philosophy of the shears was now indisputably his; not from the far-off speculations of a dreamer, but by claim of pain and payment. He had animated theory with blood-sacrifice, so that theory had become a live thing, a truth which he had no right to retain, which must be flung to the world. After that, let the world take it or leave it, as they willed; his part would be done. They would probably leave it.... And again he burnt with a fiery impatience somehow to pierce that thick denseness of spirit overlying mankind like a pall; so that nine-tenths have lost grip of their own lives, and the remaining tenth have too firm a grip on other people's; and most are unseeingly miserable, but some benumbed in happiness; and all without wings.

[239] Stuart did not feel any vocation for the platform nor the pulpit; neither had he any desire to throw his theories on to paper and thus propagate them among the unenlightened. It struck him that what he needed was a disciple; some young enthusiast who, believing in him devoutly and to the extent of imitation in all things, would also zealously spread his creed by eloquent tongue and by diligent pen. All prophets had their disciples; a disciple was a necessary adjunct to the master. Stuart was inclined to think himself modest in only seeking one fervent youth to squat at his feet. Most of the old Greek philosophers had founded a whole school. Perhaps that would follow in time. Meanwhile, let him but find some intelligent lad, tumultuously unhappy, restless and miserable and knowing not what he craved, and it ought to be a matter of ease to convert him to the Hairpin Vision, the Essential Renunciation, the Necessity of Conflict, and the Art of Ceasing to Suck the Orange before the Orange Runs Dry of Juice.

—From the shadow-side of the hulk against which Stuart leant, enumerating his ethics to the stars, a long-drawn-out sigh quivered through the air; then a low and satisfied grunt; both sounds expressive of the mood in man, when, having reached a fatuity of content too great for words, he has to resort to animal noises in which to relieve his feelings. Stuart strolled round, and stood gazing down at a reclining figure upon the sand, figure which he recognized as one-half of the lovers who had so often shattered his evening calm.

"Where's Letty?"

"Hullo!" in languorous slumberous surprise. Then, raising a thatch of ruffled auburn hair and an exceedingly flushed face, the young man enquired: "I say, have you got a match on you? I was just thinking there was nothing on earth left for me to want, when I discovered that I couldn't light up."

[240] Stuart looked disgusted: was this a thing for a fellow's star to send a fellow, in answer to fellow's wish for a disciple? this creature who had nothing left on earth to desire except a match. In silence he proffered his box; it was not worth while to withhold it.

"Letty's mother had a sick headache to-night," gurgled Sebastian Levi, in answer to the query first spoken. He was not so richly communicative as a rule; but to-night he was rather beyond

himself with a father's consent just won to his engagement, and several glasses of wine tossed down in celebration thereof; followed by one ecstatic embrace of his betrothed, a rush at fifty miles an hour through the warm sea-scented air, and much solitary starlight imbibed from the dim flat shores of the Haven. So, from drowsy oblivion of his fellow-man, he became suddenly eager and willing to talk:

"We've often run out here before, Letty and I. It's quiet. And it's only twenty minutes by car. I say, how did you know about Letty? I suppose you must have seen us."

"I have occasionally noticed an indistinguishable blur or two," replied Stuart, sitting down upon a black and moss-grown spar, and lighting his own cigarette. "The blur being to-day shrunken to half its size, I subtracted one from two, and asked you where she was. And thus the mystery is explained."

"That's a pity. Mishtries should never be explained. Who would have the veil lifted from the immortal mishtry of love? Or would I seek now to know intimately why the gods are so good to me, in giving me my heart's desire, and all my other desires, and a match for my cigarette into the bargain? Unquestioningly I accept their—benign—partiality——" Sebastian lingered slowly and carefully over the last words, and, safely completed, stretched grateful arms towards the heavens. Then, looking at these same arms rather amazedly, as if in doubt as to what they were doing in that eccentric position, let them drop again. "I love you, Letty!" he murmured to some vision of his radiant imaginings; then brought his gaze earthwards, back to Stuart: "Thanks for [241] the match," pleasantly.

Stuart shrugged his shoulders: "Lacking the match, there might have been some hope for you; as it is," he turned away, "—good night."

"Don't go," pleaded Sebastian, unruffled by the other's abrupt censure. "It was only my nonsense just now; I was working off steam. But I can talk quite soberly if you'll stop to hear me."

"You're not in a fit state to talk at all. You're thick; plastered with honey and treacle. Your grin is seraphic; your rhapsodies are fatuous. You don't even resent my abominable rudeness. Why don't you?"

"Why should I? I like you tremendously. And of course I'm s'raphic. 'There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest but in his motion like an angel sings still choiring to the young-eyed cherubims!' That's what my father was to-night—a young-eyed cherubim. So was her father. So was Letty. She's accepted me. Her father has accepted me. My father has accepted her. Everybody has accepted everybody, and everybody has gulped down an enormous amount of champagne. Hence Mrs. Johnson's headache. But I'm glad Letty couldn't come out to-night—I've had too much—I couldn't stand any more—I'm dizzy. When I say I couldn't stand any more, I mean it meta—meta——" Sebastian lost the thread of his discourse, repeated solemnly "meta ——" ... and then re-found it in a different but equally satisfactory direction: "I met her on the hill between Boscombe and Bournemouth. Our fathers had been neighbours years ago, and fell into each other's arms. So there's no family opposition; we needn't wait interminably for the wedding. My father,—he's Levi, the big Universal Stores in Holborn—you know—he's taking me into [242] partnership with a tremendous screw. Which will leave me plenty of time for writing——"

"Writing?"

"I'm a poet," modestly.

"And what thin trickle of curds-and-whey verse do you imagine can be born in leisure hours, while in unctuous enjoyment of a tremendous screw?"

"Better verse than if I were a starving rhymester, peddling my sweated wares, with chilblains on all my toes. I don't believe in the uses of adversity?"

"No?"

—"And to-morrow," spouted Sebastian, unheeding the ironic syllable, "to-morrow I buy her the most wonderful ermine in all the regions of snow, to wrap round her throat when I whirl her by night to this desolate shore. That's poetry, isn't it?—when I whirl her by night to this desolate shore!—Lord, man! her throat is softer and whiter than foam ... when she lifts her head to the moonlight—when she lifts her head to look at me—she's such a little wee thing—then the curve of it makes me delirious ... as perfect as the curve of that wave—look! before it breaks. Her throat——"

"Would you mind," broke in Stuart very politely, "not talking about throats?"

The lad glanced at him—then quickly away. "I'm sorry," he jerked out.

"And as for what you are pleased to consider the partiality of the gods towards you," continued Stuart, goaded to an inexplicable heat of anger; "let me tell you that you merely figure as their sport. I can't conceive of a greater sign of disfavour than to be thus loaded with gifts. In time you will come to regard the love which has been yours so easily, as a matter of course, as something which has always been there. The wealth that you have gained without effort, will cause you presently to fold fat podgy hands over your smug waistcoat, too richly embroidered for good [243] taste, and give thanks that you are not as other men——"

"You're wrong there," interrupted Sebastian, even his placidity giving way beneath this unforeseen attack; "I mean to do a lot of good with my money——"

"And what can be more unpardonably priggish than to do anybody good without doing yourself any harm thereby? It's like Father Xmas; I never believed in the bountiful generosity of Father

Xmas; his sacks were too swollen, and his coat too heavily trimmed—like the waistcoat of your future obesity. Oh, yes, you will be a good man, and a generous man, and a prig, and probably an alderman, and certainly Lord Mayor, and perhaps also High Admiral of Spain. And you'll forget that Letty's throat was white as foam, and curved like the curve of a wave,—because Letty will be yours, throat and all, whenever you want her. You'll never know fun, hard perilous fun, because you'll never seek peril; you'll say that you have too many responsibilities, as a husband and a citizen and a philanthropist, to expose yourself unnecessarily. You'll never be splendidly weary with battle, nor yet know the leanness of spirit which comes from desire unfulfilled, nor will you grow breathless with the exhilaration of a race against your own luck. The best things you are bound to miss forever, my fortunate young friend, because the gods have thought them beyond you—and have sent you instead prosperity, domestic happiness, the course of true love running indecently smooth. And therefore it is that I regard you as damned, body and soul, and you regard me as a lunatic——"

"Not at all, confound your insolence!" Sebastian had sprung to his feet during the tirade. From somnolence to loquacity, and thence to truculence, were easy transitions in his present mood; and not once did the absurdity strike him of this sudden quarrel with a total stranger, on the dim moon-washed sands of the Haven: "not a bit of it. I look upon you merely as one of those [244] meddlesome people who have become embittered by poverty and frustration, and can't see other people happy. The fox, you'll remember, said the grapes were sour."

"Your shot is wide of the mark; as it happens, I've only just succeeded in quenching my star, which was most obstreperously luminous. And for the Lord's sake, spare me fable in argument——"

And thereupon, something queer happened ... Sebastian stepped forward, and seized Stuart in a wrestler's grip, and attempted to throw him down. In and out of a clear patch of moonlight they swayed, in and out of the black shadow of the hulk, silently, like clockwork marionettes. Their build and strength were about equal, but Stuart was the cooler of the twain, and just held his own, wondering the while what was the exact remark of his that had so infuriated his young opponent. To and fro, in and out of the sharp white moonrays—till, by a slippery dexterous movement, Stuart succeeded in flinging aside Sebastian, who stumbled, and fell, and rose again, covered with a glittering powder of sand, and stood uncertain whether or not to renew the bout. And then it would seem that he saw the other's features clearly, for the first time; for he exclaimed in quite a different tone from what he had yet used:

"Why, it's Heron of Balliol, isn't it?"

"Yes. But how——?" Stuart found it disconcerting, having met and insulted a nameless spirit in ghostland, to be suddenly, and by this same spirit, accosted as Heron of Balliol.

"They pointed you out to me last year, when you came up for the Greek plays. You were the big classical man of your time, weren't you? They still talk about your double first."

Stuart looked pleased. "Which was your college?"

"Magdalen. I'm only just down. I say, may I run over again one evening for a talk? My name's [245] Levi, Sebastian Levi. I'm staying at the Boscombe Hotel."

"Certainly; delighted; perhaps you'll introduce your fiancée." And it was a pity that no one was by to twinkle amusement at the well-bred decorum which had descended upon the antagonists.

"That's my bungalow, the one that looks like an inverted whale."

"Don't you find it dull?"

"Passably. I sail a good bit. Care to join me next time the wind's foul enough?"

"I've never done any sailing; but if I shan't be in the way——"

"Not at all; you shall be passenger." Carefully ignoring their fantastic behaviour of a few moments back, they strolled together across the shore, and over the sand-dunes, to where the lamps of Sebastian's two-seater trembled athwart the road.

"Feel equal to taking the wheel? because if not——"

Sebastian laughed rather shamefacedly. "Oh, I'm not as bad as that. Would you mind starting her?" he climbed to his seat.

Stuart swung the crank. "Here, you'd better take my matches; I'm nearer home than you," he tossed the box into the moving car.

"Thanks awfully. Good night!"

"Good night."

As he listened to the dwindling hum of the engine, Stuart let his thoughts wander again to the matter of discipleship. He had marked how swiftly the boy's sleepy content had been stung to passionate retort; he was responsive, then; and evidently not lacking in brains; altogether of the right stuff. Stuart reflected further that it would be a far more creditable job to drag a convert from a bed of roses than from a ditch of nettles.

And Sebastian, crashing homewards along silent unwinding roads, was conscious of a beating [246] excitement, totally unlike his lulled lotus-dream of the past summer nights. Strange phrases had Heron spoken to him ... "I've only just succeeded in quenching my star." "You will never know the best things of all—the gods thought them beyond you."... Strange phrases—and no one to warn a lover on the danger of having his brain massaged.

CHAPTER II
FOLLOW-MY-LEADER!

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All the next day, Sebastian Levi walked about with a throbbing head, and could not decide if he were suffering from the after-affects of ecstasy, wine, or metaphysics. Certainly his thoughts dwelt most persistently on the third of these, and this even while Letty's petal-soft lips were quivering, half-shyly, in expectation of his eager kisses. Now he was swept by a flood of rage, recollecting Heron's contempt of him; now he hated himself for his own Bacchic confidences; then again and yet again he revolved in his mind those few dropped sentences which hinted so arrestingly at a new way of thought—a new way of life. What did the fellow mean by his remark to the effect that he had quenched his star, which was too luminous? Did one then quench a star instead of following it? And why? Why? What result could possible ensue from such an act of madness?...

Sebastian's father, Ned Levi, was of that species known as the strictly agnostic Jew. He neither went to Synagogue, nor did he keep the picturesque Jewish holidays. He did not tactlessly allude to himself, in company, as "the Chosen of the Lord." He did not wear enormous flashing diamonds in his shirt-front, nor yet gesticulate over-violently, nor control, spider-fashion, the entire financial affairs of Great Britain. Likewise he ate ham with relish; and so naturally did bacon and eggs form the staple breakfast dish, that the partaking of them was not in the least degree a daily defiance. He was a little unostentatious man, with light-red hair and moustache grizzling untidily to grey, a quiet taste in clothes, and nothing to stamp him Israelite save a slight lift at the bridge of the nose, a kindly concern for the fortunes of even his most distant cousins, and a keenness of business acumen which had led him from a small grocery shop in the East End, to the massive and celebrated stores in High Holborn.

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He had married, when his success was already established, a wife very much his superior in birth; a quiet sensible girl, with poverty-stricken parents,—strictly agnostic Christians. The two had vied generously in their readiness to embrace the other's faith; and ended by leaving the matter for ever unsettled, and marrying at the registrar's.

Sebastian was brought up very successfully to no religion at all, and an open mind that accepted with equal tolerance his Christian relations of gentle birth, and his more vivid and less reputable Jewish kindred. He was a good-looking lad,—or would have been, had not his auburn hair and dark eyes given him an aspect curiously flamboyant; and amusing,—or would have been, save for what seemed in him a tendency to show off, but was in reality a lack of confidence, an inability to get both feet planted firmly on the ground.

Also, ineradicable result of mixed caste and class, Sebastian held very few neat safely-rooted opinions of his own, and was liable to be dangerously fascinated by daring ideas; especially by ideas that were rather too far off for his attainment, but which held him by a certain remote splendour. He was all response and no initiative. He never got near enough to an idea to perceive its flaws; he never got right through an idea, and beyond it, and so free of it. He strained upwards, and clung on,—or let go, and thudded to the ground. Sometimes, accidentally, he broke things in his fall; and then he sorrowed over them exceedingly; and sickening of his intellectual scrapes, would steep himself in aught that required no assistance of the brain. It was one of these reactions that sent him spinning into the arms of Letty Johnson.

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Letty—well, what was Letty? Letty had soft brown hair, which on Sundays was crowned by a hat of one feather. Thus she knew her Sundays. And thus her mother knew how costerdom was differentiated from the rich good taste of prosperous folk who lived in a nice house with a bedroom more than they needed, down Turnham Green way. One feather, and no more. And a velveteen costume in winter. And thin low-necked blouses, winter and summer. And shoes with big pom-poms. And, perhaps, little gilt side-combs, studded with blue stones, perfectly unobtrusive. Thus the outward and visible Letty,—on Sundays. Week-days hardly mattered.

On the table beside Letty's bed, might be found the Sir Walter Scott birthday-book, a paper novelette, and "Indian Love-lyrics," by Laurence Hope. Inside Letty's head existed a quantity of far-fetched romance, the jumbled remnants of a High School education, and an uncertain sort of liking for the company of one Balaam Atkins, bank-clerk, who came very often to Turnham Green for supper.

Round and about Letty, Mrs. Johnson maintained an atmosphere of careful and deliberate laxity. Often the good lady was heard to declare that if Letty cared to go on the stage, no objections would be raised. Letty's correspondence was always blandly ignored. Letty might spend whole days on the river at Richmond with a 'jolly party,' and if she came home after ten o'clock with all of the party dispersed except her immediate companion,—that was only to be expected of twentieth-century youth, remarked Mrs. Johnson to her husband. Indeed, Letty was given far more latitude than she needed, and walked quite placidly in a small area of liberty, wasteful of the wider spaces thrown open by her twentieth-century parents. Just occasionally, when his wife's vigilance relaxed, Mr. Johnson would forget how tolerant he was, and break out in a row most refreshingly in the style of old-fashioned paterfamilias. But he was always made to atone afterwards for these aberrations, by taking his daughter to a play emphatically 'for the adult mind only.' Such performances bored Letty and bewildered her father; but Mrs. Johnson had given forth the watchword of the household: Be Broad-minded! and hers was the ruling spirit.

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Therefore, also, Letty took lessons in fencing. "Though I don't see what she's to *do* with it?" said

Mrs. Baker doubtfully to Mrs. Johnson.

Letty owned for live stock, a girl-friend, Violet Baker, who had been engaged to a fellow since two-and-a-half years; a Persian kitten; and a younger brother, Luke; she also occasionally remembered a God, imploringly or in gratitude, when the world went very wrong with her, or else very right.

And Letty was exceedingly pretty.

And thus are comprised her total assets. Till, on a summer holiday at Bournemouth, Sebastian Levi came along. Whereat she surrendered to him her all, including the one feather of which he disapproved, including her faint liking for the bank-clerk, and very certainly including her girl-friend's fellow, who, on Letty's return to Turnham Green, was to suffer fatally by comparison with the tall pale-faced auburn-haired Sebastian; suffer even unto extinction.

"... Because a man's star leads him eventually to places too comfortable for the lean spirit to rejoice in...." Sebastian's musings on metaphysics were interrupted by Letty, as she swung beside him, where he sat upon the garden-roller. None of the other boarders at the Farme would [251] venture near that especial portion of the grounds; it was known as the "little lovers' solitude." "Little lovers" the pair had been nicknamed for their apple-green youth. Twenty-two and nineteen; a swing and a garden-roller; blue sky patching the thick green shade; a girl's voice, hushed for the very breathlessness of love, speaking of white satin ... myrtle-leaves ... Sebastian ought to have been very happy. Yet for him perfection was already chilled to something less of permanence than yesterday's warm eternities; and:

"Surely, Letty," he broke in, "you won't want all that display and fuss when we marry?"

Her head drooped. It was when Sebastian spoke thus loftily, that her father's favourite remark: "We're as good as other folk, my girl, if we like to consider other folk as good as us. And that's logic," seemed somehow inadequate. She felt that her lover stooped to her with ineffable condescension, and she hastened to sacrifice to him:

"Would you rather I didn't wear a white frock, Sebastian? Would you rather I wore pink, or—or something quieter?" and she bade a mute farewell to all pretty silent dreams of herself looking like a picture in the "Lady's Pictorial"; of the gleaming elaborate gown, to be worn afterwards, shorn of its train, at subscription dances and private parties; then dyed black for more matronly whist-drives; filmy veil that should be lain aside and cherished in lavender and memories, perhaps one day shown to her daughter ... Letty sighed, and swung herself faster and faster yet, breaking through the slanting sun-shafts, that slipped together again in her wake, and were broken anew as the board flew back.

"Would you prefer us to have a quiet wedding, Sebastian? with no presents or bridesmaids or cake? Father said something about grand doings and not minding the expense, but——"

He pulled her from the advancing swing into his arms; the narrow seat dangled back empty of [252] occupant.

"Never mind your father, Letty; he doesn't understand. Our wedding shall be such a tiny one that there will be only just room in it for you and me and the parson; it shall happen in some grey country church, the sun streaming through its windows like youth reviving in an old heart——"

"I call that beautiful," interrupted Letty softly.

"And you shall wear just whatever you like best. But to me you are prettiest in a certain grass-green cotton frock, and a floppety light-blue hat, because then you look like bluebells in a larch-wood"—thus he caressed her, and teased her, and spoke the romantic nonsense her soul delighted in. And thus she was blissfully content—till Willy Percival rolled his ball into their Paradise zone, and came to fetch it, his mother in apologetic pursuit: "Willy doesn't know yet where he isn't wanted," archly; involving much blushing and dimpling and deprecation on the part of Letty, and a rigid "Not at all" from Sebastian, mightily displeased.

"Can't you stop these people from buzzing and chaffing?" he demanded irritably, when Mrs. Percival had withdrawn her offspring.

And again Letty beat back a wistful impulse to confide in him how all this was really and truly an essential part of the rose-coloured thrill of "being engaged"; how immensely she gloried in the questions and chaff; how any mention of his name, coupled meaningly with hers, caused her to hold her blossom head inches higher with pride; how like music were her father's jokes on the subject; how she had been overwhelmed in delicious confusion when the blotting-pad, which was common property at the Farme, was discovered scribbled over and over with the mysterious names: Mrs. S. Levi; Letty Levi; and then, unaccountably: Letty Lovell.

And remembering this, Letty resolved now to unburden herself of a weighty proposition that [253] hitherto she had not dared lay before Sebastian, lest it might rub against an unknown rawness in him. She could never quite disabuse herself of the notion that all Jews, even her splendid lover, are necessarily over-sensitive and forever on the wince. "Because I don't see how they can ever quite forget that they are Jews," would have been word-translation of her subconscious thought.

"Sebastian," she caught hold of a lapel of his coat, and snuggled nearer to him, while the garden-roller gave an ominous lurch, "what do you think about changing your name before we get married? would you mind very much?"

"Rather a bother for nothing," he rejoined lazily. "But if you're set on it, darling,—what

aristocratic title have you prepared for me?”

“Lovell!” ... breathlessly she hung on his decision, blue-grey eyes fixed attentively on his face. “Sebastian Lovell!” she repeated, dangling the combined effect in front of him, as a child might dangle a toy.

“Think I could live up to it?”

“Now you’re being a naughty boy, and teasing me.—But really, Sebastian, I’ve thought it all over seriously, and I chose ‘Lovell’ because it also begins with an ‘L.’ Of course, they say: change the name and not the letter, change for the worse and not for the better; but I believe that’s only for a girl marrying a man. And, anyhow, superstition is only ignorance. And perhaps—no, let me finish, Sebastian, because I’m awfully in earnest about this,—perhaps your father won’t mind, because Lovell is very like Levi, really; it has the ‘v’ in the middle, and all!”

“I’ll place the consideration of the v-in-the-middle before my venerable parent this very night,” laughed Sebastian. And: “I love you!” he whispered, into the sun-warmed web of her hair. “Letty, [254]
you’re adorable; I love you!” seeking by these means to stifle within him a certain sense of disloyalty; which increased, when, on the morning after, she deplored almost tearfully the break-up of the fine weather: “It’s *our* weather, Sebastian; the weather you told me you loved me in; and it’s got no right to finish so quickly, before you’ve finished telling me.”—But Sebastian was glad of the tempestuous change.... “Care to join me next time the wind’s foul enough?”... He and Stuart set sail together that very afternoon.

They were away for three days. Sebastian had anticipated much stimulating discussion while sailing; his host holding forth, one hand idly resting upon the tiller; himself, the passenger, listening, stretched full length in the lazy sunlight, his pipe in his mouth, the waves lapping gentle accompaniment against the bows of the boat. But Stuart talked very little upon the voyage, and that mostly in curt vigorous language concerning canvas and harbours, and the evil behaviours of the same. He was quite a different being to the eccentric metaphysician of the Haven. Also, though he treated his guest with excellent politeness for the first few hours of companionship, he accepted heartily the boy’s embarrassed offer to “be of assistance” in the management of the boat; and thenceforward plunged him into an existence resembling equally a monkey’s and a cabin-boy’s; involving much perilous swarming, and unknotting, and a process known as ‘reefing’; much battling with drenched ropes and stubborn tiller against obstinate and treacherous winds. A persistently clouded sky overhead; very little to eat, and that uneatable; hard salt breathless days; evenings spent in small water-side inns; Heron exchanging bewildering technicalities with others just arrived in port. Then an uncomfortable lumpy bed, smelling inexplicably of seaweed, and offering but little rest to a stiff and aching body;—“Glad to turn in, [255]
eh, Levi?”—decidedly Sebastian was disappointed of the long intimate conversations, explaining riddles which had haunted him ever since his first fantastic meeting with Stuart Heron.

He brought back with him to Bournemouth a great astonishment at being yet alive, hope which he had forfeited many times in each single hour. Also, acute memory of an instant when presence of mind had prompted him to haul at the right sheet in an emergency, and Stuart had favoured him with a sudden curly smile, peculiarly his own, and a brief word of approval. And now Sebastian underwent sensations of weary flatness and depression, inhabiting once more the luxurious suite of rooms engaged by his father at the Boscombe Hotel. He debated all the while what thing he could do to win again that quick smile from Stuart. He wanted that man’s approval —more than aught else he wanted it—would force it somehow, no matter by what extravagance of action. He believed Stuart despised him, and the thought cut like rain-rods in a north-easterly. “If he doesn’t despise me, then why won’t he tell me more about his—his ideas?”

But on no subsequent visit to the Haven, was Stuart to be drawn. “My creed is the wrong sort for an engaged young man; better leave it alone. By the way, you promised that I should see your fiancée.”

“You’ll see her to-morrow, if you’re anywhere about. The whole Menagerie are swarming over in the excursion bus, to view this interesting spot. Letty and her mother and father will be with them. No, not me, thanks; I couldn’t stand three solid hours of the Earwig and the Cabbage-rose.” Sitting on the window-sill of the bungalow, mournfully jabbing tobacco into his pipe, he favoured Stuart with a vivid account of the ‘Menagerie,’ as he chose to term the boarding-house wherein his beloved dwelt.

“It’s a ramshackle building stuck among pine-trees, a mile or two out of Bournemouth; and the [256]
proprietress—landlady—hostess—whatever you call her, has no more idea than Adam of management. She advertised in the papers, by way of an original start: ‘Charming home-like residence for the summer months; croquet, tennis, and private bathing-hut; terms moderate; run on Bohemian lines!’ That last statement fetched the victims. Such a crew!”

“Which of your prospective family-in-law was attracted by the Bohemian lines?” queried Stuart, enjoying the recital.

It transpired that Mrs. Johnson had caught sight of the advertisement, and had remarked to her husband, one breakfast time, “Matthew, we are getting into a Groove. What we want, what Letty wants, is Bohemian society. The best Bohemians, naturally. Here’s our chance. I’ve heard they take liqueur in their morning tea, instead of milk and sugar, like Christians!” Mr. Johnson had here stated firmly that nothing would induce him to do that; and Letty had further propounded: “whether they’ll like the sort of people *we* are?” And her father had replied with his favourite remark: “We’re as good as other folks, my girl, if we like to consider other folks as good as us. And that’s logic!”

“So they all came; except the young brother, Luke, who went off on his own,” finished Sebastian, somewhat sulkily. He resented being made to talk, when he so itched to hear what the other had to say. And he believed Stuart was being purposely provoking and reticent.

“And what about the Earwig and the Cabbage-rose?”

“It’s a General and his wife. He’s brown, and about eighty; hobbles and shakes; a shrivelled little chap with beady eyes. She’s enormous and pink, with bulging petals, as if she’d been left out too [257] long in the rain; some of the petals have fallen, and the rest are loose. She skits and sirens, and wears her evening-gowns too low. Now I ask you, Heron, don’t you consider she’s a bad influence for Letty? I do.”

Stuart pondered the matter: “I don’t think you can call a woman a bad influence because her outside petals are falling from her shoulders. However, I’ll have a look to-morrow, and judge for myself.”

But by the morrow he had forgotten the impending intrusion; and it was a mere accident that when the Menagerie trooped noisily on to the little wood and iron jetty, Stuart should just have been at its foot; unroping his skiff from among a welter of palings and steps, anchors and chains and beams, rust-eaten and weed-green. His trousers were rolled thigh-high over his bare legs; he wore an old blue sweater, and a sou’wester protected the back of his neck from the sun. Standing up to his knees in water, he glanced up in some curiosity, mingled in equal proportions with indifference. The various members of the party were easily enough distinguishable by Sebastian’s word-pictures: Here the Earwig and the Cabbage-rose; she in a large leghorn hat, waving a sunshade, and calling to Stuart in shrill tones: “Ferry! Hi, Ferry!” There, Archie Mowbray, the very spit of a Kipling subaltern; avowing, when questioned on the subject, that he ‘had no patience with Kipling.’ Besides him, the untidy girl of his adoration, Ethel Wynne, her blouse agape where it lacked buttons, her fingers stained with nicotine. And—yes, that must be ‘Maddermerzell,’ disturbingly piquante French governess of a small boy, who, Stuart surmised impartially, would in five seconds be headlong in the water, and require saving. And there Mrs. Percival, for eleven months of the year most respectable of British matrons that ever wore a hair-net, now, by some strange seizure of rejuvenescence, making a giggling fool of herself with the [258] doggish husband of another matron, not rejuvenated, and therefore icy of eye. That pretty little maiden in white, with soft hair shadowed to brown beneath her big burnt-straw sun-hat, Stuart had no difficulty in recognizing as Letty, the other ‘little lover’ from the shadow-side of the hulk; Letty, looking demure, as she hugged the secret of how well *she* knew these shores—by moonlight.

Stuart pushed off vigorously; then, leaning on his oars, looked up again to see if he could pick out Mr. Johnson from among the chattering gesticulating crowd. The Cabbage-rose was still desperately hailing the boat: “Hi! Boy! Ferry! we’re coming with you!”

“Not if I know it,” muttered Stuart; quite determined that the Haven should not see him again till cleared of the Menagerie. Then a graceful figure, auburn-haired and supple, thrust a way to the front of the jetty, and cried, in tones sufficiently supplicating to melt glaciers into torrents:

“Mr. Heron! Oh, Mr. Heron!”

“Aureole Strachey!” With a few powerful strokes, he brought the boat back to the palings, roped it securely, then plunged again into the water, and waded ashore. Aureole flew down the jetty, and met him on the sand:

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you; of all people in the world, you! you who awoke my sleeping—but let’s get away from these gorillas!” indicating with distaste the Cabbage-rose, who was approaching with the evident fell intent of an introduction. “How I hate them all, directly I come again in contact with someone from the old life.” Then, as Stuart drew her hastily in an opposite direction, “Have you—do you know where Oliver can be?” sinking her voice to a whisper.

“Oliver is in America, looking for you.”

“But how silly of him. Why is he looking for me in America? It’s such a big place—it would take [259] him years to find me, even if I were there. And I’m not. I wouldn’t have gone to a place where it would be so difficult to be found.”

Stuart looked puzzled: “But he wrote to me a few days after the—um—episode on the Broads, saying he had returned to the house in Chelsea, hoping you were there; that you had been, and gone again, with all your luggage, and left a note for him——”

“‘Good-bye; I am a pilgrim for the land of freedom!’” quoted Aureole readily. “You told me, don’t you remember, that he would certainly follow me, and that we’d have a perfectly lovely scene together, and that he’d never neglect my individual femininity again. And if he has deserted me, and gone to America, then it’s your fault.” She drooped her full crimson lips reproachfully at Stuart; who, disliking this reminder of his disgraceful machinations, made heated reply:

“He *did* follow you. If you say you are bound for the Land of Freedom, and then come to Bournemouth, I can hardly be blamed, can I?”

“I—I meant freedom of the soul,” murmured Aureole, and her eyes filled slowly with tears. It had been a shock to hear that her husband was so far away.

Then Stuart began to laugh: “If you *will* be subtle with Nigger, and talk about Pilgrims and Lands of Freedom, naturally his thoughts lumber off on a wild-goose chase in the direction of the ‘Mayflower’ and ‘Hail Columbia.’” Mentally he substituted ‘wild-duck chase,’ but refrained from being unkind aloud, because Aureole was weeping unrestrainedly now, and he felt compelled to

cheer her to the best of his ability. “Never mind. I’ll write to him directly he sends some address, and tell him to come home. Meanwhile, you’re quite comfortable in the menag——at the boarding-house, aren’t you? Or why not move to the hotel? you can use me as Oliver’s banker, till he turns up, you know.” [260]

“I can’t move to any hotel,” she flared at him. “It’s *my* boarding-house. Mine. And it’s in such a horrid m-m-muddle!”

Stuart sat down on a hillock of sand: “D’you mean to tell me that you were responsible for that advertisement?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to earn his respect; show that I could stand by myself, be free of him and the world and everybody—except Nature. I’m a Pagan.”

“But, my dear child,—no, don’t cry!—Pagans don’t run boarding-houses.”

“It’s a private hotel.”

“Well, even private hotels. Not usually.”

But Aureole felt she had been censured sufficiently by this young man, who had taken such a vivid interest in her wayward personality, when, in London, he had urged her to Norfolk, by a vision of her swaying form: ‘always among reeds’.... And then again had urged her away from Norfolk by much adroit talk on the subject of Ibsen, and pampered souls, and earthquakes. So that from him she had hoped for more sympathetic understanding of her movements and motives:

“I wish you had let us alone. People shouldn’t interfere between a husband and wife. Oliver and I were in perfect harmony before you meddled and sent him to America. And, anyway, what I do now is no business of yours. I’m surrounded by adventurers and harpies, and losing hundreds of pounds a week, if you want to know. And when Oliver arrives, you can tell him of my ruin and misery, and how you gibed at it all; you, whom he thought a staunch and faithful friend!” After which passionate denunciation, which scorched the tears in her eyes to brown points of flame, she walked swiftly away from him, in the direction of the adventurers and harpies awaiting her upon the jetty. [261]

“I believe she’s right,” murmured Stuart. Perhaps he ought not to have tampered with matrimony as he had done. But he was so truly convinced that every married couple ought to be well stirred up at least once a year, to prevent them from setting into a mould. And what is the good of conscientious convictions unless you conscientiously induce others to act up to them?

And anyway, he was hardly to be blamed if Nigger so absurdly misread a cryptic allusion to the land of freedom!

It was the after-dinner hour at the Boscombe Hotel; and Sebastian Levi, pacing up and down the thickly carpeted lounge, listening to the tinkle and silken swish all about him, watching the waiters move to and fro with the coffee-services, threading a deft way between the visitors in evening-dress, felt impatiently that this was all an unreal stage set, as: ‘Curtain rises on hotel lounge, luxuriously furnished; guests grouped about, with natural appearance of animated talk.’ Felt that the only realities lay with a solitary figure, black and wiry against the pale shadow-land of his chosen retreat; Stuart Heron, probably at that moment pacing the ghostly wind-blown shores of the Haven, even as he, Sebastian, now paced in the hot artificial glare of his prison-house—so he termed it!—and wished, in a tumult of divine discontent, that he were now beside Stuart, re-living in talk one of their strenuous battling hours at sea, when every nerve was strained taut to catch the racing tide into harbour.

Sebastian wondered if he wanted to order the car, and drive over to The Farme—and Letty?... Not just yet.... Something trembled on the verge of decisive action....

Suddenly he went quickly from the lounge into the smoking-room: [262]

“Can I speak to you privately, father?”

Mr. Levi, senior, looked his surprise. He was enjoying a late whisky and soda, and a mild political chat with some middle-aged cronies, and rather regretted leaving these amusements.

“Why, yes, my boy,—if it won’t keep till the morning.”

“No, it won’t keep.” Sebastian spoke breathlessly; his hair was ruffled as by many winds; his dark eyes flamed with strange fires, as he noted the numerous podgy somnolent figures showing dimly a-sprawl in the thick smoky atmosphere; ten-thousand-a-year figures!—Sebastian attempted to express his attitude towards them by violently slamming the smoking-room door behind him ... but it was padded, and refused to close otherwise than in a fashion both hushed and respectful; respectful to ten-thousand-a-year within.

“Well, Sebastian, and what is this very important matter that won’t keep? Anything connected with your poor mother’s pearls for Letty? Is that it, you grasping rogue? And what will your sisters say to that, when they are grown-up enough to know that pearls are pearls? hey?” Mr. Levi switched on the lights of their private sitting-room, and took up his stand in front of the empty fireplace. “Hey?” he repeated, quite prepared to yield the pearls. He was fond of little Letty.

Sebastian moved restlessly up and down the room; crossed abruptly to the window and flung it open, knocking over a tall palm on its stand as he did so. The breeze flapped the curtains far out into space. This was better....

"I just wanted to tell you, sir, that your offer of a junior partnership in the business, and fifteen hundred a year to begin with, is an extremely generous one——"

"Go on," said Mr. Levi, frowning a little. How much more did the young beggar expect, at twenty-two? [263]

"But I don't want it. I don't want any allowance. I'd rather be without."

His father surveyed him during an instant of blank astonishment. The waiter entered with the whisky-and-soda Levi had ordered to be sent up after him, from the smoking-room. He tossed off the remainder of the glassful, and offered his son a drink.

"No, thanks," coldly. He was anxious for the storm to break upon him, anxious to begin suffering his martyrdom. This dalliance with whisky, therefore, struck him as a needless compromise.

"And what does Miss Letty say to this, hey?" Levi had no idea what was at the bottom of the boy's startling renunciation of ease and luxury; but he had been warned that young men sometimes pick up odd phases at Oxford—debts or old editions or Hedonism. Sebastian had always been of an excitable and impulsive temperament; a *liquid* temperament. This phase, whatever it was, would not last long. Mr. Levi twinkled indulgently from the hearthrug:

"What does little Miss Letty say to it all?"

"I—I haven't told Letty yet."... What would Stuart say, how would Stuart look, when told of this shattering tribute to his influence?...

"You can't marry on nothing a year, you know that, don't you? pretty little Letty-birds need pretty little warm nests built for them."

"Oh"—the lad twitched impatient shoulders. Stuart had not mentioned how asceticism could be made to work in with love. He must be questioned presently on the subject.

"Don't be a fool, Sebastian," advised his father suddenly; "Come, what's it all about?"

The quick change from levity to kindliness, touched the boy almost to the point of explaining what were the ideals that had induced him to strip himself so dramatically of the world's goods. [264] And yet—how to put into words that uncomfortable stinging creed which he hated, and which yet held his brain as in a sort of vice, fascinated his thoughts to the exclusion even of Letty? And then that weak longing to impress Heron, prove that he understood his doctrines to the point of sacrifice—damn Heron! perhaps now he would condescend to talk to his disciple, instead of making polite enquiries *re* Letty's health. And, finally, that glimpse of an after-dinner hour in the well-furnished, well-warmed, well-appointed smoking-room—conflict of winds carefully shut out—doors that would not bang—waiters who walked noiselessly—conversation on stocks and shares and politics, carefully calculated not to excite the torpid brain.... Oh, Lord! would he grow, or rather dwindle, thus, if he went into his father's business and accepted chunks of his father's income? Was he started on that way, the night he had prattled so absurdly of his happiness to Stuart?... *Damn* Stuart! always the point swung back to that imperturbable gentleman. And how could a fellow explain to Levi, of The Stores, High Holborn, the bewildering and topsy-turvy morality of the shears? Sebastian plunged—fatally:

"It's just because of myself, father. It isn't that I feel in the least that I oughtn't to be enjoying my income because other people have less. But I think—I know I'm better without your money."

The effect of his speech was electrical. Quite suddenly, Ned Levi began to bellow.

"So that's it, is it? And I'm to sit here and thank you for the honour, am I? Well, you can go—anywhere; do anything; I don't care. I've done with you. If my money isn't good enough, you needn't touch it. Want a purer sort of gold, do you? I knew this was bound to happen some day. That's what one has a son for." And still muttering incoherent commands to Sebastian to get out [265] of his sight, the agitated old man himself lumbered from the room, his hand trembling, his grey eyelashes stiff with rage. Sebastian's unfortunate phrasing had hit his father on a dread quite unsuspected; dread that one day his only son, born to the best of everything, would be ashamed of the way the Levi wealth had been amassed; ashamed of trade; ashamed of his humble parentage.

—"But it seemed to me the boy was all right, when he got engaged to Johnson's girl. No la-di-da notions about him then. And now he'd rather do without money, than touch mine that was made in honest trade. Suppose he thinks I cheated it out of people's pockets; sold inferior stuff, and got swollen on it. Well, it don't matter—it don't matter..." brooding on to-night's culmination of all his fears. If his wife had been alive—he could have had it all out with her, all his bitterness and disappointment; and she would have said in her sensible way: "Never mind, Ned; the boy doesn't know what he's talking about; he'll come round all right,—he's a good lad, really."... But his wife was dead. And his two daughters—he had heard them flippantly remarking to visitors that they were "bringing up dad in the way all parents should go!"—not much consolation to be had from Editha and Ivy. Ned Levi, in his loneliness, wondered if it ever struck the strange hard young people of modern times, how very little fun it was to be a parent.

Sebastian had no idea that his thrice-twisted motives could have been misconstrued by his father to aught so simple as a shrinking from wealth earned in trade. He was even unaware that he had

hurt his father—thought he had merely made him angry. He determined, standing on the hotel steps, and letting great gusts of clean air lift the hair from his heated forehead, that both Letty and her father were entitled to hear without delay what he had done. Then, and then only, would he allow himself to tell Stuart—and his heart raced madly for an instant, as it struck him he might still have time to get over to the Haven this very night. [266]

“Do you want the small car, sir?” queried the liveried porter respectfully.

“Yes—no——” Sebastian remembered that a too frequent use of his father’s automobile was hardly compatible with his recent hotly spoken resolutions. He walked a few quick steps along the sea-front ... then returned, and ordered the two-seater. There would be no possibility of reaching the Haven unless he drove. And, after all, “once more doesn’t count.”

—“We needn’t ask who *that* is!” chirped the Cabbage-rose, when the throbbing of an engine was heard outside the Farme. “I don’t suppose it’s a visitor for *us*, do you, Mrs. Strachey?”

Letty blushed, and ran to meet Sebastian. A few moments later, with a puzzled air, she fetched in her father from the garden. Sebastian wanted to speak to him. “No, Pups, I don’t a bit know why.” Mrs. Johnson, from a deep-rooted conviction that men could not be trusted to be broad-minded without a woman to guide them, joined the conclave unasked. The quartette had the dining-room to themselves.

... “Decided not to accept your father’s allowance?” repeated Mr. Johnson incredulously. “Why ever not?”

And again the disciple was confronted by the difficulty of explaining the creed of the master, to apparently unsympathetic listeners. He stole a glance at Letty, and felt braced by her answering smile. Her blue eyes were no longer bewildered—they shone at him like stars.

“It’s a man I know,” Sebastian started rather lamely, “who has put me in the way of—well—of thinking rather differently about life. About wealth that isn’t striven for, and—and things one gets too easily.” [267]

“I like argerment,” Mat Johnson put in briskly. “I’m quite a good one for argerment. Now what I say about what you say he says, is this: unless we don’t mind taking things easily from other folk, other folk will take them easily enough from us. And that’s logic.”

“But that would be nothing to do with me; that would be their concern, and their loss of the—oh, of the fun of striving, don’t you see, sir?” Sebastian was afraid he was making out rather a poor case for the defence. “It’s with the effect of easy achievement on me personally that my friend is concerned. He says I’m in danger of growing fat.”

Matthew Johnson, himself inclined to corpulence, took the allusion as a personal affront, and was coldly silent, while Mrs. Johnson interrupted indignantly: “I’m sure you have an elegant figure, Sebastian; hasn’t he, Letty?”

Letty said nothing; only smiled softly, as at some misty golden thought.

“You introduce me to this pal of yours, Levi,” continued Mr. Johnson, recovering his good-humour, and tilting back his chair at the ceiling; “and we’ll tackle the matter together. I daresay he’s young, and maybe I can put him right on one or two bits. And as for you, run back to your dad and tell him you’ve thought better of that fifteen hundred quid a year, and that you’ll pocket it with many thanks. See?” and the note of rising authority on the last syllable drew from Sebastian a quick:

“Yes, I see. But I won’t. That would be rather stupid and inconsistent, wouldn’t it? After I had so definitely refused either to go into the business or accept the cash.”

“Oho! you’ve refused the partnership in the business as well, have you? And how, may I ask, d’you mean to support my daughter when you’re married? Or is your Mightiness going to refuse her too?” [268]

Sebastian held his head very high, as he replied that nothing in the world would induce him to give up Letty.

“And how d’you mean to keep her, eh?” repeated his future father-in-law, stubbornly.

Mrs. Johnson detected trouble brewing; and clinched matters, so she thought, by a brilliant compromise:

“Couldn’t you take half of what your father offers you, Sebastian? I’m sure seven hundred and fifty pounds a year is quite as much as any wife needs to start on. Isn’t it, Letty?”

“Taking half would be exactly the same as taking all,” retorted Sebastian, desperate now of forcing understanding.

“You’re wrong there, my lad. It ’ud be just less than fifteen hundred quid by one half of fifteen hundred quid, which is seven fifty. But there’s to be no halves about this business, mother; d’you mark me, Letty? Are you attendin’, Sebastian Levi? I’m not going to have my girl waitin’ about the best years of her life for a young fool who didn’t know when he was well off. I like your father; we were neighbours once, he and I; and I liked you well enough till now, though not a patch on him. But unless you come to me in a week or two with all these taradiddles biffed out of your head—then biff goes the wedding!” Mr. Johnson rose to his feet, and in time-honoured fashion whacked at the table with his clenched fist. “And meantime you’re not to see so much of her, either. Come along, mother; come along, Letty”; summoning his women-folk from the room, he marched forth. Mrs. Johnson followed meekly; her laborious tolerance shrivelled to nothing at

this first hot blast from the actual furnace of ‘advanced ideas.’

Sebastian caught at Letty’s hands, as she passed him—

“Letty?” [269]

“It’s all right, dear; I do understand.”

“Really?” he was surprised at her emphasis.

“Really and truly. Good night ... darling,” scarcely breathing the last word, she slipped out of his arms and vanished. Left him, marvelling....

The car and the road again, and the buffeting masses of wind. Sebastian’s exhilaration, dashed somewhat by his two recent interviews with unresponsive middle-age, whipped itself anew to a tremendous height. For now he was clear of worldly burdens; stripped like a runner for the great race; and with the discovery new upon him of just how easy of accomplishment were the things that had never before entered into the range of normal possibility. The quest of spiritual adventure.... And the Haven rushing nearer and nearer, as sombre patches of pine-gloom, spectral open spaces, tore helter-skelter in the opposite direction. Soon he would be telling Heron—and the older man would flash him that quick curly grin of approval.... Now the flat oozing stretches of mud, and the glimmer of a sluggish tide, far out towards the horizon.—And now all brakes jammed on—the car ceased to hum, and stood immovable, but still vibrating from the reckless pace at which it had been driven.

Sebastian leapt down the sand-banks, on to the beach; found Stuart musing, bare-headed, at the door of the bungalow; evidently quite oblivious of wind and tempest. And now, in actual presence of his idol, a sudden diffidence swept over the boy. This Stuart Heron, while stimulating the most fanatical exploits in others, yet contrived himself to retain an atmosphere entirely ordinary. Flushing scarlet, and rather breathless, Sebastian dashed into his recital:

“I’ve been wanting to tell you, Heron, how immensely I admired your ideas—about renunciation—and all that; how they struck me as fine—and clean ... like star-spaces ... when everybody else is [270] so beastly, and grabs at things, money and—and furniture, the heavy tangible articles that block out the view and the air.... I’m expressing myself horribly badly, I know, but you’ve rather knocked the stuffing out of me lately; just lately, when I was smuggest. And anyway, I don’t want only to jaw; anybody can do that. So I turned it about—your philosophy, creed, religion, whatever you like to call it,—chewed it, and worried over it, and cursed you up and down.... And to-night I chucked up my whole future as it was mapped out for me; told the Guv’nor that I wouldn’t take his fifteen hundred a year; take it, and loll on it as if it were a sofa of cushions. Chucked up my partnership in the business; and, I suppose, all chances of a comfortable marriage just yet. Chucked it all up....”

He stopped. The impetus which had carried him so far, gave out suddenly. He was still a bit dazed as to the actual reasons which had inspired his recent startling performances; was just conscious of a mighty upheaval in his affairs, overwhelming changes starting on the morrow. For the present, tired out, he craved only to hear the surge of praise due to him—

“Chucked it all up,” he pleaded....

Stuart shifted his pipe into the corner of his mouth. His gaze was still bent outwards to the sluggish line of tide on the horizon.

“Rather a theatrical proceeding, surely?”

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CHAPTER III
"RUN ON BOHEMIAN LINES!"

Sebastian owned a hundred pounds per annum, bequeathed him by legacy; which sum Stuart had induced him to retain:

"I agree with you it would be far more effective to renounce that as well, and confront the world as the penniless son of the rich Ned Levi. But it isn't done, my lad; if it were, I shouldn't be trading in diamonds. Theatricality is only a species of fat. If you strip yourself because it gives opportunity for your dramatic faculties, you're feeding hard, all the time; feeding on the astounded faces of your friends, on your own ringing accents, on the picturesque contrast of your life as it was yesterday to what it will be to-morrow. You mustn't be picturesque, Levi, your tawny locks are against you as it is. Your forty bob a week will ensure you a pleasantly mediocre existence in a furnished bed-sitting-room."

Sebastian looked worried; he wished Stuart would not exhibit so many mental acrobatics. Last week he could have sworn the man was preaching total renunciation of all worldly goods, in order to make the struggle as strenuous as possible. Now he had doubled and twisted again to something entirely different. And beyond all the inconsistencies, Sebastian glimpsed a splendid consistency, a paramount truth, but, as usual, too high up for him to do aught but cling to it by the finger-tips. And seemingly he had blundered already.

"I've given up my room at the hotel, and I think I'll go to the Farme for the rest of August and [272] September," he announced tentatively; "it's not expensive, and I shall be near Letty." He might have added: "and near you."

—"And it will be quiet for writing," he continued.

"What do you intend to write?"

"I want to throw your theory of the shears into a book; in fact, all your theories." Sebastian tried to make the announcement without blushing, and failed miserably.

"Volume of ethical essays? Treatise on metaphysics?—Good Lord, man,"—a horrible thought struck Stuart—"surely you're not going to butcher me to make a book of minor verse?"

"No, I hardly regard you as a lyrical subject," retorted Sebastian, with some show of spirit,—he wasn't always going to let himself be badgered by Heron! "The novel is the best form of literature for wide circulation,—and, after all, we do want the truth to reach the masses. I've got the title fixed already: 'Shears,' by Sebastian Levi, dedicated to Stuart Heron,—if I may?" with a return to the old shyness.

Stuart offered no active opposition, but he felt doubtful. Perversely, ever since the advent of his keen young disciple, he himself had been less keen. He was not sure now if indeed he wanted a disciple?... It was agony to watch Sebastian doing *his* stunts—and doing them badly! This Jewish boy was too responsive, too enthusiastic, too flexible altogether; he tempted Stuart to do his worst—and Stuart was uncomfortably aware of just how bad his worst could be. He longed for firmer material against which to pit himself.... And this sent his thoughts flying to Oliver Strachey in America—and to Oliver's wife in Bournemouth. He felt more guilty over that affair than he cared to acknowledge; and wondered once or twice if he ought not himself to take in hand the [273] muddle at the Menagerie, pending Nigger's return. So now he enjoined Sebastian to let him know just how chaotic were Aureole's affairs, morally and financially.

Sebastian had decided to ignore Mr. Johnson's commands to see less of his daughter. Without previous word to Letty, he arrived at the Farme, in quest of a room, late the following afternoon; and found the place deserted, save in the square-flagged hall, a couple of rather forlorn persons standing beside a pile of dusty luggage.

"We've been waiting over half an hour," explained the plain prim female of the pair; "I sent Mrs. Strachey a card when to expect us, but I suppose it got mislaid in the post. There are no servants anywhere. And Bertie gets such cold feet, travelling," indicating her pallid young companion. "When I pulled the bell-rope, it came off in my hands. Do you suppose she will charge much for the damage? Is she like that?"

Sebastian's reassurances were drowned in the hoot of a motor-horn, and a chorus of laughing chatter. Through the wide windows and through the open door, a miscellaneous crowd swarmed into the hall, and paused abruptly at sight of the strangers.

"Aureole, forward please, and serve," remarked somebody flippant. And Aureole stepped apologetically from the throng, striving to smooth her tawny hair, loosened under the motor-veil.

"You must forgive me; of course I've muddled dates again. It's Mrs. Gilchrist and her husband, isn't it?"

"No," contradicted the prim girl, "it's Miss Fortescue and her brother. I wrote you were to expect us this evening. You are Mrs. Strachey, I suppose?"

"Yes,—but—but you said you couldn't come till the end of September," stammered their hostess. Whereupon Miss Fortescue produced Mrs. Strachey's own letter, bidding them welcome on the [274] fifteenth of August; damning evidence before which the culprit remained merrily unabashed.

"I am a goose! Let's run round and see where I can put you. It was a shame to let you wait; we were picnicking. Did you ring?... Oh, I see! It doesn't matter in the least; we're breaking things all day long here. Mr. Mowbray, do be an angel, and help Ada carry up these trunks; you are so

strong."

Mr. Mowbray, a stolid bronzed young man, evidently in the army, signified his willingness to act as porter. And then Sebastian, who had noted with relief the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson from the party, broke off his conversation with Letty, and, drawing Aureole aside, asked her if she could find him a room anywhere. "Because I'd like to move in at once."

She scrutinized him intently ... then her gaze flickered to Letty.

"Yes. I see. You are feeling the pull—the strain. She is the moon, and you the tide ... it draws and draws ... I understand, Mr. Levi." She motioned him to follow her up the wooden stairway which rose from the centre of the hall. Miss Fortescue and Bertie had preceded them, and: "This is the rummest boarding-house I've ever known," the latter was heard whispering to his dazed sister, as Aureole and Sebastian approached them.

Not aware of aught unconventional in her reception of the Paying Guest, Aureole stopped on the first landing; and, frowning with a sort of reproach at the various unresponsive doors, said she believed that all those rooms were full.—"You see, I thought you would be Mr. and Mrs. Gilchrist; and then I expected you the day before yesterday."

"And where would you have put me if I had been Mrs. Gilchrist the day before yesterday?" queried the prim girl from the Midlands, trying to cope with the situation.

"Here," their hostess ran lightly down a flight of steps branching into a wing of the rambling old [275] building; and displayed an enormous double bedroom. "Perhaps—perhaps you two young men wouldn't mind sharing?" hopefully. "I should have to put you in an extra washstand, naturally. You can have Mr. Mowbray's."

Sebastian, rather enjoying matters, wondered of what other necessities the long-suffering Mowbray was to be deprived. All the same, if he was to write, he would want a room to himself; and this he made clear to Aureole, who looked worried,—and enquired irrelevantly of Miss Fortescue:

—"Would you like a cup of tea in the mornings?" She assumed an expression of portentous gravity, as though she had recollected something: "It's extra, *of course*."

Miss Fortescue agreed: "Oh, of course!" glad to find this symptom of dawning sanity in their most incompetent landlady. "Will you show me my room, please," she added firmly.

"I suppose you'd better have this one," said Aureole, very reluctant. "It's meant for two, ..." she pondered the matter, gazing absently at Sebastian; who, uncertain of the exact plight into which the advertised "Bohemian lines" were about to plunge him, again reiterated his plaintive request for a single room.

Then Aureole dived into her bag, and brought forth a crumpled sheet of paper, which, opened out, proved to be a blend between a map of the house, a time-table, and a fever-chart.

"Let me see: Miss Bruce is leaving on the twenty-second, but Mr. Vyvyan Leclerc comes in on the twenty-first to take her room, so *that* won't do."

Quite obviously it would not do, in more senses than one.

Aureole continued poring over the much-bescribbled, much-erased paper:

"The dairy room is empty for three days; the Lloyds left in a temper over the breakfasts. You [276] could start there, Mr. Levi. And then perhaps for a week or two I could get you a room in a cottage near by—only ten minutes' walk. And after that, little Verney is away for a week-end; he wouldn't mind if you slept in his bed as long as you don't disturb his moralities."

"His—what?" from Sebastian. The prim girl turned pink.

"His morality plays. He's mad about them; and has a cardboard model fixed up, with all the puppet characters.—That would bring us to about the beginning of September, wouldn't it? Oh, well, somebody is sure by then to have lost patience with me, and quitted, and left a room vacant. So that's all right, isn't it?" and she raised wistful brown velvet eyes to Sebastian, who replied gravely:

"Mrs. Strachey, you have again mistaken identity. I am a Jew, indeed, but *not* the Wandering Jew."

"You're not satisfied with the arrangements?" disappointed. She puckered her brows yet again over the fever-chart. "Would you mind sleeping in an attic?"

His imagination leapt. "I should like nothing better."

They all four trooped upstairs to inspect. The Farme was a sprawling mansion of two storeys only. From the second, a narrow twisting staircase, not unlike a ladder, led to what were, once upon a time, granaries.

"This is the best of them," Aureole threw open a door.

The attic revealed fully satisfied Sebastian's "theatrical instinct," as Stuart would have called it. Here his book could be written. Here, in shadowy company of Chatterton and Francis Thompson, he could be Starving-Genius-in-a-Garret; lord of his four walls.

"This will do splendidly, thanks," he informed Aureole.

"I must get you up a bed from somewhere," she remarked thoughtfully. "I wonder...." [277]

She said no more. But Sebastian suspected that Mr. Mowbray was doomed.

“And what about my brother?” demanded Miss Fortescue.

Without waiting to hear Bertie’s fate, which he foresaw as hopeless, Sebastian returned to the hotel, and broke the news of his impending departure to his father, who received it in grim silence.

Then he made his usual evening pilgrimage to the Haven, and laid before Stuart his impressions of the state of affairs at the Farme.

It was evident that the management of the boarding-house was proving rather too much for Aureole; and she ran it in a fashion that certainly marked a new and eccentric era in that particular line of business. The boarders were compounded of three separate strata; members from her own social and artistic circle, such as Archie Mowbray, little Verney, and Ethel Wynne, who were there by way of a lark, and to “give Aureole a leg-up”; respectable folk, like the Johnsons and the Fortescues, and others from the Midlands and the suburbs of London, who usually departed after their first day, spreading a report of “heathenish goings-on”; unless they stayed on, because secretly fascinated by the difference between this bizarre establishment and the more usual article. Finally, the Doubtfuls, with profession a trifle misty and laughter a shade too loud. Aureole would fain have rid herself of some of these, but did not quite know how to set about it. She relied on her visitors for sympathy and assistance in a manner that was wholly disarming; would send one to the town for butter, if she ran out of the commodity; beg another to lend his cherished motor-car for the common weal; would relate confidentially how the cook had just left—“so we must put up with a scratch dinner, isn’t it tiresome?” Or, taking a guest for [278]
companion on a shopping expedition, would question casually: “Do you like salmon?” and, on receiving an affirmative reply, order eighteen shillings’ worth to be sent immediately to the Farme for lunch. Nor did she think it necessary ever to rise from her slumbers till noon; with the result that breakfast, unsuperintended, resembled a steeplechase more than anything in the world; each person with a separate fad, entering at a separate time, calling for separate food—or sometimes merely grabbing; wandering to and fro from the kitchen; sounding bells,—occasional outbursts of rage, when Aureole’s foggy ideas of quantity had misled her on the near side. Nevertheless, her very helplessness aroused a dormant quality of chivalry in the boarders, so that they put up with an astonishing amount of discomfort and incapacity, flattered to find themselves treated in the spirit of an accidental society house-party. The great amusement was to watch the bewildered entry of new-comers; mark their slow emancipation from the set state of mind which expected to find a framed copy of rules, hours, and terms, on their bedroom wall; expected, indeed, to find a bedroom wall, which rarely existed till Aureole, in collaboration with the fever-chart, would discuss who could with impunity be ejected to make place. Idle to speculate how often Archie Mowbray had travelled with his polo-boots and hair-brushes.

About a week after the advent of Sebastian, chaos reached its supreme height. Aureole, deeply in debt, found the weather too warm for effort, and decided to let things rip. They ripped. A great many problems she solved by simply staying in bed; others, less adjustable, reduced her to the verge of angry tears. Ada, invaluable housemaid, bethought herself to give notice. Aureole would dearly like to have done the same.

“Que diable fais-je donc dans cette galère?” she demanded impatiently of Letty, as they [279]
undressed together in the bathing-hut.

“Je ne say pas,” replied Letty, in careful High School French.

“Sir James and Lady Merridik are due this evening. Thank goodness, I’ve got quarters for them, at least. Facing north, to be cool—or was it a south aspect they wanted, because of the cold? He’s an Indian judge, so he’s sure to feel the climate, but I forget which way they feel it. *Tant pis!*” Aureole slipped into a most becoming bathing-dress, tied a black silk handkerchief round her flaming curls, and lounging against a miscellaneous heap of deck-chairs, wet and dry towels, tumbled garments both masculine and feminine, shrimping-nets, spades, and greengages, she watched Letty, in the earlier stages of disrobing. This wooden bathing-shed, given exclusively for the use of the Farme, was a little separate chaos of its own, a sort of annexe to the major chaos. While some undressed in it, some waited to undress, and some, already undressed and in the water, were awaiting their opportunity to come out till those undressing were in the water, when the first set would dash in and encounter in the doorway those who were waiting to undress. The men of the party were supposed to take their dip earlier, before breakfast, when the sea was iciest, or directly after, and risk apoplexy. But the laggards usually contrived to overlap, and their drippings made the shed untenable before the turn of the ladies. Add to all this a defective latch, which allowed the door to swing open if directly leant against, the demands of the little Percival boy, who throughout the morning was in shrill need of spade or pail or buns or fishing-net; add a large earwig colony inhabiting the chinks between the boards;—and it will be understood that the Farme bathing-shed was hardly a spot to choose for confidential conversation.

Nevertheless, Aureole remarked suddenly: “Why has Mr. Levi quarrelled with his father—and [280]
yours?”

Letty bent to tie up her sandals. “Sebastian has given up all his money.”

“Yes. It was a queer thing to do. Why?”

Letty evaded the point: “He doesn’t know I know why.”

“But you do.”

“Yes, I do.”

Willy Percival hammered at the door, which instantly gave way. “Oooo-oo!”—Letty caught up a towel and huddled it close, looking like a water-nymph taken unawares by a mortal.

“Please, may I have my pail?”

Aureole tossed it through the aperture.

“No. The other one. The coloured one.”

“Run away, Billikins, and don’t bother.”

“Aren’t you *nearly* ready?” came a heartrending chorus from outside, accompanied by the chattering teeth of some blue-faced individual longing to get dry.

“Yes, very nearly, Mr. Fortescue.—Why?” repeated Aureole to Letty, struggling in a chaste attempt to don her red serge white-anchored costume, before letting slip the rest of her garments.

“Because ... but you won’t tell? he doesn’t know I’ve guessed.”

Aureole smiled loftily. “Go on. I don’t tell things. But I’m interested. He’s a curious type.”

“It’s a Test,” whispered Letty, in a hopeless tangle of on and off, scarlet knickers and lawn camisole, and hair in light brown clouds over her shoulders.

“Test? Of your father, you mean?” and Aureole knit her brows.

“No. Of me. You see, he was much richer than us, and I suppose he got it into his head that I loved him for his money and not for himself. So he’s given it all up. When he thinks he has proved me enough, when he sees it makes no difference, he’ll take it back again.” [281]

Letty stood upright now, fully robed for her plunge; and before the speckled little square of looking-glass which hung on the wall, tried to tie her hair into a red and white spotted handkerchief. “When he has proved me enough,” she whispered to her glowing reflection.

Aureole clasped her hands round one shapely knee, and pondered the matter:

“It’s romantic, of course. Ultra-romantic for this century. But then he’s a Renaissance type. Denys l’Auxerrois—have you read Pater? And ... yes, it suits him. I believe you’re right. You have rather a wonderful instinct about matters concerning him, haven’t you? wonderfully simple and direct ... piercing through complexities to the crystalline heart. Now I, I—”

“Aure-*ole*! Aure-*ole*! the tide will be too high unless you hurry up. And there are two frozen corpses on your doorstep.” Thus Ethel Wynne, compassionating the shivering spectres of Fortescue and Mowbray.

Aureole, who just had settled into her favourite attitude for lengthy discussion of her peculiar temperament: prone on her back, hands clasped behind her head, scrambled now to her feet, rather annoyed at the interruption.

“It’s their own faults. The arrangement was for the men to bathe directly after breakfast. Come along!” she held out her hand to Letty, and they ran together down the beach.

Sir James and Lady Merridik drove up in a cab that evening, at the hour when the miscellaneous members of the household were gathered in the hall before dinner. A second cab, piled high with luggage, followed up the drive a moment later; Mr. and Mrs. Durward-Jones, their two children, dog, and governess, had weeks ago booked the very first-floor front double bedroom into which [282] Mowbray and the cabman were now lugging Lady Merridik’s multitudinous boxes. Mrs. Durward-Jones meant to have that room; so did Lady Merridik. Lady Merridik was shrill and flippant; Mrs. Durward-Jones deep-toned and abusive. The stairway, congested by boxes, formed the main scene of battle. The clamour was deafening, aided by the performance of Fritz, the waiter, upon the gong, and the barks of the Durward-Jones dog. Finally, both ladies turned to Aureole, demanding what she intended to do in the matter. Glancing wildly about her for a means of escape, Aureole flung herself upon the chest of an apparition whose face was suddenly illumined by the lantern swinging in the porch.

—“Oh, please, please, Mr. Heron, take me away!”

Stuart took her to the theatre, immediately, and without paying the slightest heed to the raging debate. The next morning at breakfast, Lady Merridik appeared, blandly smiling. There was no sign of the Durward-Jones party.

“Always best to let these things adjust themselves by natural means,” remarked Stuart to Aureole.

“Natural means?”

“Survival of the fittest. Now look here, Mrs. Strachey, what about letting me treat the whole Menagerie in the same fashion; sling out all the harpies and adventurers, square the landlord—till how long have you rented the Farme? End of October?—and set detectives on Oliver’s track to bring him home to Chelsea to look after you.”

Aureole shook her head. “It would be no good slinging everyone out; there are dozens more coming in. And they’d all bring lawsuits and breach-of-promise acts against me, because I *did* let them the rooms.”

“Then I’ll hunt round for a competent manageress, instal her with a salary, and you can leave whenever you like.”

[283]

“Do you think I’d touch your money?” she flashed at him proudly.

“But——”

“Besides, I won’t have a horrid prying person here, who will see what a mess everything is in; see that I’ve *failed*....”

Stuart walked about the empty breakfast-room, hands in his pockets, pondering deeply. Conscience had driven him to reconnoitre, and now the same conscience informed him very clearly that he could not allow his friend’s wife to continue her present burlesque of management, unprotected, accumulating enormous debts. One owed something to one’s pals; Stuart hid a rather special affection for the imperturbable Nigger Strachey. But if Aureole refused to smash the establishment, and refused to have a manageress,—well then, what was he to do?

—“Stay here, and control matters yourself,” suggested Aureole, divining and answering his thoughts. With a mischievous glint beneath her heavy eyelids, she added, “I don’t mind *you* knowing the worst; after all—you’re responsible!”

And as it really seemed the only solution to the problem, Stuart consented.

Speculation ran riot as to the identity of the mysterious stranger. Later in the day, Aureole introduced him as: “My husband’s friend” without further explanation. The husband’s friend became a scowling and unpopular permanency. He marvelled how he came thus to be saddled with the white elephant of Aureole’s folly; nevertheless, there seemed no way of shaking off the boarding establishment till the 31st of October, or till Oliver’s return. He at once wrote to Oliver, care of the latter’s bank, trusting that there the address would have been forwarded.

Aureole he alternately bullied and consoled, quite in the spirit of a working partner; and she, relying peacefully on his competence, forgave him for missing this excellent opportunity of being [284] in love with her. Almost forgave him.

A couple of rigid old maids disbelieved the “husband’s friend” story, and left at once. Stuart found this annoying. Neither did he like it when the fussy little man from Shropshire pointed out items on his bill incorrectly charged to him: “I do *not* have a bath every morning, Mr.—ah—Heron.”

Stuart went in search of Aureole. “How many baths has Mr. Kibble had this week?”

“How should I know?” virtuously indignant. “Ask his wife.”

“We’ve put him down six, but he says he has only had one. He must have had more. How does one control these things?”

“Oh, knock off the extra half-crown from the bill, and chance it!” laughed Aureole.

Stuart returned to his fuming interlocutor: “We have decided to believe in your integrity rather than in your cleanliness,” he said suavely, counting out Mr. Kibble’s change. Mr. Kibble left immediately, with his wife and child.

Least of all Stuart liked it when it devolved upon him to give Vyvyan the boot.

“Vyvyan” had booked his room since a considerable time, though letters perpetually postponed the day of his arrival. Somehow or other, his unknown personality had captured the imagination of the female portion of the boarding-house. They gathered from his correspondence with Aureole, that he was comparatively young, unwedded, owned a motor-car, and was at present travelling on the Continent. An attractive list of hints from which to draw deductions. Archie Mowbray and Bertie Fortescue began already to suffer from spasms of jealousy, when Aureole, who since the advent of Stuart was not allowed any more to take her breakfast in bed, read aloud [285] a telegram to say “Vyvyan” might that afternoon be expected.

“At last we shall have a young man in the house,” quoth Ethel Wynne; which was cruel to Mowbray, who loved her; and to eighteen-year-old Bertie. Sebastian could not of course be counted, being manifestly Letty’s property. And Stuart wore a pencil behind his ear, by way of protection, to intimate that he was to be viewed in a business capacity only.

Bertie’s sister entered the breakfast-room, and enquired of everybody how they had slept, and asked everybody with a cold if their cold was better, and passed the salt, and placed herself carefully between her brother and the Ostend-Plage Girl, whom she suspected of sirenic intentions. The Ostend-Plage Girl, who never passed salt, and who wore a soiled creation of white serge and light blue pom-poms, promptly upset the equilibrium of Bertie’s sister, by announcing: “I quite intend to fall in love with Vyvyan, don’t you, Aureole?”

“I believe he is going to mean something,” murmured Aureole.

Stuart grunted.

“What! no mackerel left *again*?” from the Disagreeable Female, whose name nobody ever seemed to know.

Letty offered hers: “I haven’t touched it yet; do, please, take it. I’m not hungry.” And Mrs. Percival looked archly at Sebastian: “Not hungry? dear me! now I wonder why that is!”

Mrs. Johnson exchanged significant glances with her husband. She had only been able to keep him from an open row with Sebastian, by frequent allusions to Letty’s loss of appetite:—“and what it would be like if you forbade her to see him, Matthew——” “So tactful of the fellow to come and plant himself under the same roof, directly after I’ve told him not to call so often, isn’t [286]

it?” but he restrained his smouldering wrath, nevertheless. Letty was his pet, and he hated to see her leaving her food; good food, that he had paid for.

The talk veered round again to Vyvyan; and the Cabbage-rose skittishly proposed making him an apple-pie bed: “We always used to have no end of that sort of fun when I stayed at Lyn House—Lord Burchester’s place, that is.” She broke off her reminiscences to throw the Earwig a solicitous: “Johnny, dearest, is no one looking after you?”

The Earwig mumbled, and spilt the milk. He was a very ancient and decrepit Earwig. And Ethel Wynne, who sat beside him, sprang up with an unnecessarily quick: “Oh, am I in your place? So sorry. Do come here and look after your husband yourself!”

The Ostend-Plage Girl broke into smothered giggles.

“My egg isn’t fresh,” said the Disagreeable Female. And looked relentlessly at Stuart; who afterwards privately relieved his feelings to Sebastian, by a prolonged outburst on the evils of boarding establishments:

“I tell you what, Levi,—it’s a most villainous contrivance of civilization, to pack stray people together under one roof, as you would cats into a home; each little group at table with their separate wine or beer or Apollinaris, not passing the bottle in good fellowship, but sticking labels on it, for its safer preservation. Chance companions are the finest to be had, on the road or at the inn, that I maintain. But this compulsory herding, this miserly meaningless thin-blooded—— How’s the book getting on?”

“Nearly half-way through.”

“Rather quick work, isn’t it?”

“I must pelt ahead with it while I’m in the mood. I won’t show it to you till it’s complete, though.”

“Right!” Stuart was glad of the reprieve.

“He’s come!” announced Ethel Wynne, that afternoon. She had sighted a motor-car outside the [287]
house. A quiver of excitement thrilled the group gathered for tea under the lime trees, as Aureole walked away to welcome Vyvyan, on the threshold of the hall.

Vyvyan did not at once enter. He had first to seek a room near by for his cousin-once-removed. That is, unless Mrs. Strachey could manage.... No? Ah, well, doubtless they would find something. She had been so ill, the cousin, and had come down to Bournemouth for some fresh air. Mrs. Strachey would excuse him for an hour?... He appeared at dinner, a florid person, with an ingratiating smile under his auburn moustaches, and a debonair manner with the ladies. He was sure he would enjoy his stay at the Farme; had been looking forward to it immensely. A charming fellow; even Bertie’s sister succumbed to his fascinations. But Aureole was curiously frigid. After dinner, Vyvyan ran round to see if his cousin-once-removed were all right; she had been so ill! He was seen taking her for a little walk along the esplanade.

The same evening, Aureole had an earnest confabulation with her partner.

“We can’t have that sort of thing in the house,” with the demure severity of a Quakeress.

“Hang it all! what am I to say to him?”

“Just tell him to go. And to remove his cousin—for the second time.”

“It’s deuced awkward,” growled Stuart.

“Not from one man to another. *He*’ll understand.”

Then Stuart exploded his wrath: “Comes of comic advertisement! The fellow naturally thought ... Bohemian lines! you see where they lead to!”

Aureole walked away, with her head in the air.

Vyvyan received his *congé* with protestations of astonishment and regret at having unwittingly
offended Mrs. Strachey. His manner at lunch the next day, was tinged with gentle reproach. [288]
Aureole wore an apron, and her rebellious hair was gathered into a bun, by way of signifying that her Bohemianism had limits. An air of strain hung over the meal. By the evening, Vyvyan the debonair, Vyvyan, the fairy prince so eagerly awaited, Vyvyan had gone. So had his cousin—twice removed.

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CHAPTER IV
IL TROVATORE

Aureole was beset by a fear that her ejection of Vyvyan had somewhat impaired her claims to Bohemianism, as set forth by the advertisement. Wherefore it was one evening that she suddenly bethought herself to invite the 'Troubadours' to the Farme.

The Troubadours were a singing quartette who performed thrice weekly in the Pavilion Gardens. Their national costume consisted of a darkly flung cloak, a slouched hat, and a mask; occasionally the cloak was abandoned, showing beneath it a garb of gay-hued tatters: further atmosphere was imparted by a beribboned guitar. Therefore some slight confusion existed as to whether the Troubadours were intended to be grandees of Spain, or else those light-hearted medieval wanderers trolling their ballads of praise to the Kings of France—who usually retaliated by hanging the ballad-monger. Either way, the effect was picturesque enough, on the improvised wooden platform, lit by the few flickering footlights, and encircled by a dark band of trees. The tenor of the quartette possessed a really melodious voice; his songs were mostly of the Arab-Gipsy variety; type that perpetually invite a lady to come forthwith and be wooed in some spot where she is not, preferably a gondola, a caravan or a desert. He presented rather a fine romantic figure, singing thus, head flung back, hazel-green eyes half-closed, voice languorous with passion.

"That man has suffered," whispered Aureole to Archie Mowbray. Who made reply: "Oh, I dunno. Think he's a gentleman, then?" [290]

"It's just possible to suffer without being a gentleman," with fine scorn. To which Archie protested uneasily: "Oh, I dunno."

The party from the Farme numbered six: Letty, the Cabbage-rose, Ethel Wynne, and little Verney being also present. Sebastian had retired to find inspiration in the attic, directly after dinner, as was now his wont; he had told Letty he was engaged on the production of a masterpiece of fiction; and she, rejoicing in his genius, had bidden him recite the words by which the book was to be dedicated to her,—which assumption produced an awkward silence.

"There's plenty of time for that," he had said at last, feebly. "It may never be published, you know."

But of course it would be published, cried Letty; and without complaint sacrificed her evenings with him. Though it would have been bliss to have had him here, beside her, in the warm darkness.

A final duet was warbled from the stage, while the tenor of the troupe went among the dim blur of faces in the audience, holding a silver tray, and showering jests and gallantries in return for the shillings that clattered thereon. This necessary part of the performance always sent hot waves of shame surging up Aureole's neck, for the fancied anguish of soul the man underwent during his pilgrimage of degradation. The jokes were doubtless a poor and threadbare garment to cover naked pride,—Aureole shut her eyes tightly, with the result that her shilling dropped beside the tray and onto the parched grass. The man paused to grope for it, exchanging the while grave witticisms with the donor. Bertram Kyndersley knew no such writhings as Aureole attributed unto him; being indeed mainly concerned with the amount of the evening's takings, in his capacity of treasurer to the Troubadours. [291]

"Under my feet, perhaps," remarked Aureole; and Bertram made swift reply: "Impossible, Lady Auburn-hair; they could hardly cover the coin; it would peep out at the edges."

Whereupon Aureole became extremely friendly with this particular Troubadour, and laughingly bade him serenade her window at dawn, since he could utter such fair impromptus.

"Alas and alack! and in all Hampshire how am I to find my lady's window?"

"If I let fall that secret, will you let fall your mask?" Aureole looked meaningly at the strip of black velvet which concealed the upper portion of his face.

"Give me but a chance!" And with that the Troubadour passed on, between the benches, and back to the platform.

Aureole began to scribble feverishly on the back of her programme, which she then folded into a note.

"Take this round to the tenor of the quartette," she commanded little Verney; "hurry up, or they'll be gone," for the spectators were already beginning to stir and disperse in the darkness, and the flaming footlights had one by one been extinguished. Verney obediently went. The missive ran as follows:

> "Will you not stay your caravan an hour or two, and with your companions, give me the pleasure of your company this evening at my house by the pine trees? *Sans cérémonie*—for are we not fellow-gipsies on the highway of Art?
>
> "Lady Auburn-hair.
>
> "P.S—Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse."

Tim Jones, Ferdinand Wagge, Billy Dawson, and Bertram Kyndersley, reading this effusion behind their shabby drapery of green baize which did duty for a curtain, were mightily amused at the fellow-gipsies on the highway of Art; and in the hope that the house by the pine trees might at [292]

least be productive of decent whisky and cigars, fervidly accepted the invitation.

“S’pose the postscript is her telegraphic address?” hazarded Billy Dawson, knitting his brows. “More like the ’phone number,” from Ferdinand Wagge.

Meanwhile, Aureole, sparkling with the double consciousness of having vindicated her Bohemianism, and at the same time acted in a way which would thoroughly annoy Stuart, was being championed by Letty and the Cabbage-rose, against the disapproval of Archie Mowbray, whose attitude was so consistently characteristic of the British subaltern, as to be almost untrue to life.

“It doesn’t do, y’know. Really, Mrs. Strachey, it’s deuced cheek of me to interfere, but to mix privately with those singing chaps——”

“They’re as good as we are,” flashed Letty. And the Cabbage-rose interpolated: “Of course they are, delightful fellows! It was a splendid idea to invite them; so unconventional; and I do so love their dear little peepy masks. Do, Mr. Verney, go round again and beg them not to change their costumes.”

The good-natured hunchback went, chuckling to himself. On the way home—a taxi and Verney’s motor-car proving sufficient to accommodate their own party in mixed proportion with the four Troubadours—Aureole had time to hope Stuart would be in bed. He was; and so were all the remaining boarders, save Bertie and the Ostend-Plage Girl, who were discovered in the kitchen, drinking champagne and eating dressed crab. This inspired Aureole with a fresh idea:

“Ye must spread your own feast,” she cried, medievally. “Ransack cellars, larders and pantry, and bring forth all ye find. Ho, revellers, to the groaning board!—We’ll make a midnight picnic of it.”

[293] Thereafter, a helter-skelter of laughter and rummaging, and clatter of forks on the flagged floor, and little shrieks of delight from the Cabbage-rose, and an occasional agonized: sh-sh-sh, from Aureole, fearing to wake the more respectable portion of her household; dreading the sudden appearance of Stuart, exquisite in pyjamas and monocle, his face screwed into an expression of formidable politeness; and his tone holding all there was of Archie Mowbray’s insular disapproval, and, in addition, a blend of “my husband’s friend,” a sound man in diamonds, and the Balliol undergraduate,—all of which traits had developed to the entire exclusion of pirate and leprechaun, since he had taken over management of the Farme.

Ferdinand Wagge went solemnly to and fro from the cellar, each time a pair of bottles under his arm. Tim Jones and Ethel Wynne collaborated over the mixing of the mayonnaise salad. And Letty, finding a bowl of cream, suddenly suggested a dish of fruit from the kitchen-garden.

“Oh, splendid! there are dozens of late raspberries, I saw them this morning. Dark? Never mind; I’ll take my own light,” and laughing at the absurdity of the notion, Aureole snatched a candle, and stepped out into the garden, calling on someone to follow with a plate.

The night was sultry and moonless, as the Troubadour pursued the tremulous flicker of light across the shadowy lawn, and through an archway cut into the wall. Beyond lay an almost solid blackness; only the passage of the candle to reveal on either side pale dangling shapes of apple and pear: the orchard; thence a twisting path that led round the conservatories to the fruit-garden. He paused, opened a glass door ... the answering gush of perfume crept into his veins, heavy as a bee that sways in a foxglove. He had lost sight of the woman’s figure in its gleaming sheath of satin—no, there the prick of candle light, and there Aureole, tempting enough as she [294] swept the flame up and down the line of raspberry canes; hair tumbled duskily against her shining pallor of neck, eyes brilliant with the search; body swaying towards her companion each time she pattered the ripe crimson berries on to the plate.

“Can’t you come nearer? I’ve just dropped two beauties,” reproachfully.

The Troubadour never resisted temptation. He pressed forward between the bushes; slipped an arm round her, murmured a caressing word, had kissed her full on the lips before she was even aware of his movements. With realization, she repelled the man swiftly. Bertram was startled—let her go, a move very much against his principles. The raspberries lay spilt on the earth between them. Scorning to run, she walked by his side, without speaking, back to the house. He was amused, yet slightly indignant, at this unwonted response to his gallantries: “After all, it isn’t as if she were still in her teens!”—and Billy Dawson, observant beggar, would notice the empty plate, and ask sly questions. Aureole, her heart thudding like a drum, and the blood raging at her lips where he had touched them, was wondering how much it all meant to him? What would be the outcome? Furiously angry, all of a sudden, with Oliver, for not being at hand to protect her from this type of outrage; furiously angry at the loss of dignity implied by the bruised stung sensation on her mouth,—mouth which nevertheless would persist in curving dangerously, provocatively, at the corners. ... She laughed aloud, laughed contempt for her husband, defiance at her ‘husband’s friend,’ laughed a welcome to the temperament which had lain too long between lavender.

Encouraged, Bertram kissed her again, quickly, before they quitted the shadows of the orchard and Aureole struck him, for his insolence, but mostly because she wanted to see the hurt pride blaze in his Spanish eyes, and because she hoped he would try and strangle her for the blow. She [295] was avid of sensations this night.

“Oh Lord!” muttered Bertram, rather disconcerted. Then, in tender reproach: “You spill my shillings, Lady Auburn-hair, and you spill the raspberries, and now you spill my blood, which isn’t redder than they—I mean, less red....”

They re-entered the lit hall; Aureole glanced furtively at his mouth, to see if his accusations were

justified: an infinitesimal dot of scarlet had welled on the lower lip. But it was she, not he, who had tasted blood....

The next meeting between Aureole and Bertram happened four days later, hot noontide, in one of the declivities of the cliff that sloped so gently to the sea. Bertram did not hesitate an instant at repeating his offence. Sooth to say, he had almost forgotten it was a repetition; had certainly forgotten the reception which had met his previous overtures. He came to Aureole as natural and fresh in gallantry as though she were his first love for the first time seen. That this state of mind could be at all possible, never occurred to the woman, who herself forever playing with emotion, yet most remarkably gave credit to the other party for a fierce, lasting, and genuine passion. Assuming that the man's interim had been spent in brooding over his dismissal, then what excellent courage, what doggedness of persistence, nay, what true measure of desire he showed in thus returning undaunted to the charge.... Aureole rebelled—continued to rebel—yielded. The Troubadour was surprised by her acquiescence, into fervour keener than he usually displayed in his passing errantry of light love. They met again. And again. Her vanity had been damaged by Stuart's refusal to 'come and play.' If he had responded ever so slightly, ever so harmlessly, instead of viewing her so determinedly in the light of "rather a little fool, but Nigger's wife, so I s'pose I must do my best for her,"—who knows, she might have kept out of mischief elsewhere; but he had lashed her by his rigid imperturbability to a very demon of defiance. The origin of her severance from Oliver, her initiative in the matter, was for Aureole completely lost in the mists of long-agone; she genuinely viewed herself as a deserted wife, forlorn, neglected, forgotten, her youth wasting to middle-age.... And when a cloaked man, a masked man, comes along, trolling gaily his ballads of love, is one to let him pass for the sake of Oliver, forsooth? or because one is frightened of Stuart Heron?

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—"She called you Pierrot, and immediately you *were* Pierrot!" thus had remarked Bertram's daughter, Peter, on a certain occasion when he had been endeavouring to explain to her the incident of one Chavvy. Equally, she might now have paraphrased the situation; "She saw you a Troubadour, and immediately you *were* a Troubadour!" Bertram could no more help responding to suggestion, than mercury to the weather. And he troubadoured most excellently; liked the rôle, with its flavour of ripening vineyards, and southern roads white in the sunshine; snatched intrigues of the court, alternating with the careless give-and-take of wayside kisses. It was picturesque, yet virile; and altogether more suited to his years and girth than had been Pierrot. He basked in Aureole's admiration; her abstinence from awkward questioning was a divine trait in womankind; she was radiantly attractive in this, her wilful leap towards the sun. Bertram loved her; he was quite sure he did.

And she would not have been Aureole had she not attached all importance to the trappings of her romance: the delicious sense of secrecy and guilt; the elaborate excuses enabling her to retire early to her room; thence to slip out through the low side window, on to the cliff, to the belt of pine trees amidst whose lean and swaying shadows the Troubadour would be waiting to keep tryst, those nights when no performance took place at the Pavilion Gardens. Yet more cunning machinations were required to induce some of the boarding-house party to attend the concerts of the quartette, that she might sit there, among the vague people who had not been held in his arms; and hear him sing for her—yes, for her—his ballads of the tavern and the caravan and the desert.

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Once indeed, shattering her sense of his eternal presence, he warbled gaily, as they paced the dark cliff edge:

> "Sister, my sister, O fleet sweet swallow,
> Thy way is long to the sun and south,
> But I, fulfilled of my heart's desire,
> Shedding my song upon height, upon hollow,
> From tawny body and sweet small mouth,
> Feed the heart of the night with fire!"

And she cried disappointedly:

"You mean, when summer is over, you will go to your South?"

(South, where all Troubadours live!)

And he, unheeding that Thatch Lane lay on the London and North-Western Railway, gave careless acquiescence. "I never stop long in any one place. We are birds of passage, Lady Auburn-hair, and when summer is over we will sing our songs in other lands."

We? Our?—so what had been to her a thrilling pastime, he, deluded Troubadour, had actually meant? He had been building dreams of continuing their golden idyll in other lands? Aureole replied, in curiously vibrant tones:

"Once—I struck you—for suggesting—less than that."

Bertram, still humming, could not remember what was the direful suggestion he had just inadvertently let fall; but supposing it to have been for a caress, as were usually his demands, he merely stated with a mirthless laugh—not caring to risk again the sting of Aureole's little fingers:

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"Then I must continue to exist without,—somehow," added in a lower tone of pain.

Aureole had since three years been striving to teach Oliver this language, which came so naturally to the man beside her. To “work up a scene” with her husband had held as much—or as little—intoxication, as going to a ball, in a blouse and skirt, at eleven o’clock of a November morning. Aureole had an insatiable greed for ‘powerful’ scenes; she took dalliance seriously, inasmuch as she always saw herself as a coquette with a heart of stone, scratching at hearts of flesh to see how they bled. “I’m a beast!” she that night adjured her image in the looking-glass—since without a looking-glass impassioned monologues sound never very convincing. “Oh, I *am* a beast. I don’t care a damn for him, and he thinks I do care; he thinks I’m—coming.” During the month of September, the vision of her Troubadour, a lonely swallow to the South, became almost too poignant to be born.

Summer was dropping her days as faintly and imperceptibly as the first faintly yellowing leaves from the trees. A sense of depression, of the closing-down of the year, drifted over the Farme. Some of the visitors were leaving; as entities they did not matter; but as a symbol of evanescence, their departure affected Aureole with profound melancholy. The Troubadour Quartette sang no more of an evening in the Pavilion Gardens. Bertram rented a room in the town, and lingered on; but at any moment, she felt, the call of the South might peal too clearly for him; and then, with or without her, he too would depart.

With or without her.

Climax was heralded by poisoned fish....

Stuart went nearly every day now to his business in High Holborn, returning to Bournemouth in [299]
time for dinner in the evening. On a certain Friday, he was met in the hall by the Cabbage-rose, who informed him in sprightly tones:

“We shall be *tête-à-tête* for dinner to-night, Mr. Heron.”

On the grounds that some things are too bad to be true, Stuart did not at once grasp the prospect:

“Where’s everybody, then?”

“All ill!” announced the Cabbage-rose triumphantly; and some of her evening-dress fell off.

“All?”

“My poor Johnny has been terribly bad, and so has Mrs. Percival. And, if you listen, you will hear Sir James groaning. There was mackerel for breakfast this morning, and it can’t have been quite good. I took a boiled egg, and you, of course, had gone off to town before the fish came, so you see we are sole survivors!” she adjusted a slippery shoulder-strap, and trilled with laughter at the compromising situation.—Then her face fell, as she spied the Disagreeable Female marching down the stairs.

“I’m better. Not well, but better. I’ve had no food and no attention all day, so I trust there’s a substantial dinner. Good evening, Mr. Heron; I wish to complain of the fish we had for breakfast to-day. We’ve all been seriously indisposed. One has to eat mackerel or nothing, because there was only one egg, and naturally we couldn’t *all* have that,” and here she glared at the Cabbage-rose. “I believe I am voicing the dissatisfaction of all the visitors here, Mr. Heron, when I say that I consider it your duty to be at home during the day to control these matters.—Ah! there is the gong, thank goodness. Even if you are running a second boarding establishment in London, it can
hardly warrant neglect of us. Please pass the potatoes. I am bound to say that matters were [300]
improved during the fortnight you had entire control.”

Stuart bowed: “You overwhelm me.”

“Mustard, please. And as for Mrs. Strachey, I cannot say she ever struck me as a very competent person; but since she spends her days running about with that very disreputable beach-performer—in my time they blacked their faces, so that one might know they weren’t gentlemen,—she has let everything go to rack and ruin.”

“Oh, but he’s hardly what you’d call a nigger,” put in the Cabbage-rose. “He has one of those nice olive complexions, you know; and he has sung before all the crowned heads of Europe. Certainly, dear Mrs. Strachey is making herself rather conspicuous——”

But the Disagreeable Female continued stonily: “I am purposely calling your attention to the scandal, Mr. Heron, as if she is also deceiving you, who pass yourself off as her husband’s friend——”

“Pardon me, I *am* her husband’s friend. And both he and I have implicit confidence in Mrs. Strachey’s choice of acquaintances; so that there’s no need at all for scandal. If you’ve any more complaints to make about the *food*, I shall be pleased to listen.”

The Disagreeable Female, quelled for the moment, merely suggested that Stuart should bring two dozen eggs every day from London, as they seemed to be scarce in Bournemouth “And not fresh. We *all* like eggs,” and again her eye roamed towards the Cabbage-rose.

But in spite of his championship of Aureole, Stuart’s principles of morality were severely outraged by this account of her flirtation. Defiance of the standing social and domestic code, was in his eyes only permissible to what he termed free-lance adventurers, like himself, Peter, or
Sebastian. But Aureole was a wife; and, moreover, his pal’s wife. Running about all day with—an [301]
organ-grinder, was it? It would not be too much to state that Heron of Balliol, Heron of Heron & Carr, was genuinely shocked.—“It isn’t done!” Besides which, he had obstinately determined that

Aureole should eventually be handed over, as far as possible undamaged, to her husband. He had written several letters to Oliver, at the latter's bank and office, hoping that either of these would receive an address to which to forward correspondence. Pending his arrival, Aureole must be kept spotless as snow. Very worried at the new development in his responsibilities, Stuart tackled her the following evening:

"How are the invalids? Anybody dead?"

"They're all up, except Mr. Johnson. He had it worst. Stuart, will I have to pay the doctor for all of them? The old cat says I'm liable." The old cat was the Disagreeable Female.

"Indeed you are. Why don't you examine fish when it comes in?"

"I don't care for the smell. I ... just don't care for it. And I was out."

"Where?"

Aureole smiled; a slow mutinous smile. "You grow more like Oliver every day."

"I hope so," quoth Stuart virtuously; "he's a better man than I am. Wouldn't it be as well to see in future that your guests aren't poisoned as well as starved?"

"Dear man, it would bore me."

He strove to be moderate: "Quite so. But you've only five weeks still to run here, and confound it, Aureole! surely it's more fun to get through a stodgy job decently and with credit, than just bungle it. Even if you hate it, it's more fun."

"Our ideas of fun differ," she laughed, impenitent. And then Stuart realized with horror that she was looking remarkably pretty. He knew enough of neurotic women to be assured that they did not sparkle and bloom unless danger was imminent. He did not know enough of them to refrain [302]
from making a mistake in his next remark:

"I've reason to believe your husband will be here shortly. He won't be over-pleased to fork out, among other things, for thirteen doctor's bills on attending thirteen bilious attacks."

"Damn doctors!" she stamped her foot viciously. "Damn bilious attacks and fish and boarding-houses and husbands and ... and you...." She fled to Bertram, awaiting her among the pines. A soft drizzling moisture filled the air. In the garden she passed Sebastian and Letty, whose mission it seemed to leave themselves lying about to act as goads in critical moments.—"Damn lovers...."

—"Lady Auburn-hair, this is almost our good-bye. In a very few days——"

"You must go? Is that it?" the chill in the air crept into her very soul.

"Not that I must go, but that I must not stay," parried Bertram, skilfully implying unutterable things. Sooth to say, he was weary of troubadouring.

South ... South ... he on his lonely voyage to the sun; and she remaining to examine fish at the door ... colder drearier days ... Oliver coming back to scold her ... other lovers, two and two and two ... and romance, masked and cloaked, abandoning her for ever?...

"Non ti scordar di me!" he throbbed forth suddenly, in his passionate tenor. "Non ti scordar di me!"

And Aureole replied: "Ask me again, Troubadour, as you asked me once ... and perhaps—perhaps I will come with you."

After her departure, Bertram still sat on the damp bench beneath the trees, gazing helplessly before him. He found himself pledged, he knew not how, and, ten days hence, he knew not why, [303]
to a journey South, he knew not where. He believed he had been guilty of describing, in vivid spirited narrative, some such adventure across the water; because—deuce take it! with the reputation of a troubadour, a traveller, a pedlar of songs, a lover of fair women, a comrade of lords and beggars alike, he could hardly leave acquiescence at a tame: "Yes. Let's. How jolly," when she proposed their hazardous plunge together into the unknown. Well, he had still, as result of a successful summer tour, some thirty odd pounds in his pocket, and a store of faithful attachment in his heart. As to their ultimate destiny, when love and the thirty pounds were exhausted,—that was a problem too deep for a mazed troubadour, sitting disconsolately beneath a dripping pine tree. Floating in the vague backwaters of his mind was the supposition that, at worst, he could always take Aureole to Miss Esther Worthing—his sister-in-law—and leave her there. After all, Esther had made Chavvy very welcome. Meanwhile ... Bertram's inflammable heart had certainly landed him in some awkward situations of late; he didn't know what women were coming to, when one willy-nilly married you, and another ran away with you! He wondered if it would ever be his lot to meet with a nice modest girl, content with a few kisses and endearments; a girl like his daughter Peter!

—"Lord! I wonder what Peter would say to this mess. *When* did I promise? *What* did I ask? I'm hanged if I can remember...."

Stuart came to the conclusion that it was no good plunging into this affair before it had reached its zenith. Just at present there was nothing to get at. It was best as rapidly as possible to hasten the ultimate climax, which he strongly believed would be a romantic elopement, and then, somehow, smash it!

So, in furtherance of these plans, he came to Aureole; and meekly, as though in atonement for his [304]

former surliness, placed his sailing-yacht at the disposal of herself and her visitors.

“I’ve brought it over from the Haven, and it’s lying anchored at the foot of the Chine. If at any time you care to use it, old Dan Truefitt will act skipper; he’s perfectly trustworthy; and he has my orders.”

It struck Aureole how delightfully ironical it would be to employ Stuart’s boat—just Stuart’s boat—for the means of transport, when she and Bertram escaped from the old to the new. At present, her chiefest joy in the prospect of the elopement, was in contemplating Stuart’s reception of the tidings. And if the latter should come to him flavoured by the final audacity of *his* property as the vehicle of sin——!

“Thank you, Stuart,” demurely; “it’s very thoughtful of you; and it’s so difficult, now that the real summer weather is over, to keep everyone amused. We play coon-can, of course. But there’s something more virile about sailing, isn’t there?”

“Much more virile,” he agreed. And wondered if his bait had been swallowed. At all events, he must assume it had. He calculated that the pair would not make their flight by day, both for practical reasons of concealment, and from a sense of atmosphere. On the other hand, Aureole would scarcely wait for the arrival of her ‘gaoler’ from town, by the 7.40 train every evening. Between six and seven, then, the twilight hour, he fixed as the time when two cloaked figures might be expected at the foot of the Chine, where the boat lay at anchor. At this spot, therefore, in the shadow of the cliff, Stuart waited secretly, patiently, every evening between six and seven o’clock. Baldwin demanded frequently why he left the office so early; and confided to Arthur Heron that he believed Stuart to be mixed up in “some affair with a woman.”

—“Would you advise me to move in the matter?” [305]

“No,” replied Uncle Arthur, always inclined to be taciturn.

“Not find out who she is? and call on the female? and attempt to square her?”

“No.”

“Well then, shall I tackle Stuart? Remind him what he owes to the name? Set forth, from experience, how helpless a young fellow can be in the hands of a clever adventuress? Tell him——”

This time the other man answered at greater length: “My God, no.”

And Baldwin left it at that.

“I should say it would be very soon now,” reflected Stuart, on the ninth day of waiting. This he deduced from Aureole’s demeanour; she being quite incapable of restraining herself from inscrutable smiles, eyes dream-laden, spurts of brilliantly hectic conversation, bouts of feverish consideration for others, speech and comment pregnant with triple meanings, and other indications of a swiftly approaching crisis; all of which Stuart found extremely useful. He had no notion of exactly how he was to effect the *débâcle*, but trusted for his inspiration to that solemn moment when, about to embark, the guilty couple should hear the shuffle of footsteps in the sand, and, turning, gaze into his accusing eyes.... “Is this prophetic sight, or did I ever read about it?” mused Stuart.

He paid Aureole the compliment of not for a moment believing that she was taking her fun all this while in a squalid furtive fashion, attempting to blend outward respectability with hidden romance. No; decidedly she had the courage of her emotional caprices; this had been proved by her prompt flight from Norfolk, directly she had convinced herself that it was necessary for her soul’s development and for the stimulation of Oliver’s after-marriage courtship.—“She’ll burn her boats right enough—little fool!” Stuart muttered; “and I hope it will be to-night.” He was [306] beginning to find his shadowy watches both wearisome and chilly.

“But, sweetheart, I *can’t* sail a yacht,” cried the Troubadour in despair, when Aureole unfolded her latest scheme.

“You can row, then; and we’ll reef the sails—tie them up in a bundle. It’s a pity ... but yet ... plash of oars on the calm still water....”

Bertram hoped it would indeed be calm still water. He did not care to disturb her imagination by mere facts,—but he had no liking for the sea. He asked if he were expected to row all the way to France, to Provence, golden land of minstrelsy, which she had chosen as their first background for unending and virile scenes of love.

Aureole sighed. “It’s a pity,” she repeated. “However, we’ll row along the coast to Poole, and hire a man, a strange fierce-eyed man, to sail the boat across the Channel. And then, after landing us, he shall sail her back again”—and she added, in a vicious undertone,—“to Stuart Heron!”

To Stuart Heron, crouching far back in an indentation hollowed out of the cliff, the events of that night were swift and improbable as scenes reeled off the film. The white line of wave hissed and broke with exactly that sound; and the twilight had sucked the background of all colour save lifeless greys; clearly etched against the pale sky, rose the mainmast of the boat; beside it, the tall figure of a man stood immovable, wrapped in heavy folds of cloak, his face blurred by the deepening shadows. The white line of wave hissed and broke. Then, quite tiny at first, but gradually growing to life-size, a woman’s figure fled down the winding road of the Chine. The

man stepped forward to meet her, held her for a moment silently in his arms, then drew her along the shore to the boat. They gesticulated with sharp little movements. Another figure stole [307] out of hiding; crept towards the couple, whose backs were turned to him. His steps were noiseless on the sand. So that still no sound shattered the picture, save of the white line of wave that monotonously hissed and broke....

All this, Stuart watched with mingled amusement and interest. His was the stealthy shape which might have been a spy among conspirators, a Customs Officer amid smugglers, an Indian with a tomahawk, or the hero to the rescue.

—Then he spoke, casually:

“Going for a sail? Can I be of any use?”

Aureole did not shriek. She swayed slightly, recovered herself, looked at the intruder steadily, and said: “You ... beast!”

He smiled. “Oh, yes, I think the breeze is strong enough.” Then he turned to meet full-face the eyes of—Bertram Kyndersley. “You? the devil!”

Bertram betrayed no surprise at the sudden apparition. He was already a stricken man this night. Aureole’s wishes he had carried out in a dazed mazed sort of fashion, still not sure how he came to be involved in this medieval escapade. He had eloped before; but sensibly,—never like this. He was just aware that for one who had troubadoured not wisely but too well, there were no honourable means of withdrawal. Wondering whether for the rest of his life he would be doomed to carry a guitar, without its case, exposed to the mockery of all men; whether, once at sea, he would ever again be able to induce a demoniacal boat shorewards; whether his little store of gold would vanish in a single night, and leave him a beggar in Provence; wondering all this, he yet acquiesced to his fate; and even, when the string was pulled, said: “Lady Auburn-hair,” passionately, and added a few lyrical snatches expressive of his enamoured condition.

So that Stuart Heron, from whom he remembered once borrowing ten pounds in the garden of [308] Bloemfontein, now took his place quite naturally as part of the scenery imported by Aureole; for what purpose Bertram knew not, and cared not; while things were happening to him, they might as well happen one way as another. And when Stuart, having unroped the boat, said: “Would you mind sitting to windward, Mr. Kyndersley?” then he obediently sat in the spot indicated, beside Aureole; and alternately watched Stuart in a deft manipulation of sheets, and the waves that split in a white lather of fury along the bows.

“Not the weather I’d have chosen to take you for a pleasure-trip,” remarked the skipper to his passengers, when he had finally got her running with dangerous speed before the wind. “However——” he shrugged his shoulders, implying it was their choice, not his.

Presently a silence fell upon Bertram, different from the numb passivity of his bearing hitherto; a more pregnant sort of silence, eloquent of a thousand words unspoken....

“Care to smoke?” enquired Stuart, with brutal courtesy. He made fast the sheet, and lit a cigarette. Then, ruthlessly, held the shielded flame for Bertram; that instant of light showed him —many things! All his previous indignation with Aureole was now shifted to Aureole’s partner in crime: Bertram Kyndersley—who was a father—Peter’s father—Why, the man must be an arrant scoundrel! Aureole, Stuart observed thankfully, dumb with scorn and hatred and apprehension, was yet being spared the worst; she was a good sailor. Hitherto she had bravely maintained the pretence that this was merely a delightful half-hour’s excursion on the water; but now she leant forward, and demanded tensely:

“What are you going to do with us?”

“Where were you bound for?” replied Stuart.

“Does that matter ... now?”—a guitar slid suddenly between them, fallen from a limp hand, and [309] bounded against the rail.

Stuart said, eyes fixed upon the slant of the sail: “This man has a wife.” His speech was bound to be curt, for the increasing wind broke up every sentence as it fell from the salt-stiff lips, and tossed the words sportively hither and thither.

“This man has a wife.”

“It’s not true!” cried Aureole.

And Bertram muttered something about “man to man” and “code of honour”—

“Oh, honour!” Stuart did some malicious act which caused the bows to dip slowly into the trough of a wave, then suddenly rear, and roll over sideways with a lurch; “why should I be bound in honour to uphold you in your dishonourable acts, because you happen to be of my sex? Where’s your honour where Chavvy is concerned? little Chavvy, yours by right of England’s sacred laws, and by her unwavering love! It’s men like you,” continued Stuart Heron, “who wreck the sanctity of the home and violate the sanctity of the heart”—seeing that Bertram was perforce not attending to his eloquent harangue, he addressed himself to Aureole: “I’ve told you the truth, Aureole; and I can prove it to be the truth. You’ve come into his arms only over the body of another woman. Even now, she’s waiting patiently for his return; she—damn! the wind’s changed!” ... and only just in time the sheet was unlashed and pulled in.... “About ship!” he roared. Aureole obeyed instantly; but Bertram, not at home in nautical phraseology, had to be lugged forcibly from the drenched scuppers.

Stuart went on: “And, in the same way, brutally, remorselessly, he would desert you, when he got tired of the episode; and you would be stranded, an outcast from respectability, a derelict of life, without a single fighting weapon left; your looks raddled and faded”—he felt he might as well pile [310] it on while he was about it,—“no money, no hope, your husband alienated, your faith shattered,—all for the sake of a man who should be labelled *dangerous!* for everyone with whom he comes in contact, to see and beware!”

A ray of moon pierced the drifting clouds, and showed him Aureole, huddled on the seat, a woebegone little figure, with wisps of soaked veil and hair blown flat on to her pinched white face; not a trace left of the flare and defiant glow with which she had started on her pursuit of love *à la* troubadour. And he became suddenly human, and very sorry for her, and rather embarrassed at his former rant and rhetoric.

“Never mind, dear; we’re tacking landwards now; and not a soul need ever know the facts of this. If anyone asks, you’ve been for a spin with a tomfool skipper who didn’t know dirty weather when he saw it. I expect Mr. Kyndersley can be trusted to keep his mouth shut,” with a scathing glance at the second of the romantic pair, who, at the moment, was emphatically not fulfilling these expectations.

They landed at the same spot where they had previously embarked. Stuart was eager to get Aureole home; he saw she was on the verge of a breakdown; and recognizing perhaps the new note of solicitude and pity in his tones, she seemed to cling to him. Without a word of farewell, they left Bertram standing on the shore; carrying in one hand a smashed guitar, with the other hand striving to gather closer about his shivering figure, the sodden folds of his cloak. It was not till his two companions were finally gulped by the darkness, as they passed up the winding road of the Chine, that his bewildered consciousness was slowly illumined by recognition of his freedom.

“Did you have any luggage?” Stuart demanded of Aureole, as he supported her up the drive of the [311] Farme.

“No—yes; only a small bag; it’s still in the boat.”

“Then what——?”

“Bertram was going to buy me all I wanted.”

Stuart wondered if his ten-pound note, as well as his boat, was to have been pressed into service for the elopement.

They found the hall deserted; from behind the dining-room door could be heard sounds indicative of dinner progressing within.

“Excellent; nobody need see you; go up to your room, and put on something dry; and I’ll have hot soup sent up to you, and tell them to light you a fire.”

Aureole bestowed on him a wan smile of gratitude, and droopingly went upstairs. Stuart gave the necessary orders; then, not caring either to join the rest of the company, or change his wet clothes, remained fidgeting restlessly about the hall. Like Bertram, he was feeling “strangely disturbed in his innards,” though from different causes. Bertram ... how diabolically the man’s eyes, in spite of the puffiness beneath, had recalled Peter’s.... “Infernal old reprobate!” muttered Stuart; “one would think he might have a sense of decency, with a grown-up daughter.”

Peter ... Stuart swore softly as he meandered from staircase to window, from dining-room door to front door.

Presently the latter opened, and Oliver Strachey walked in.

“Hullo, Nigger!”

“Hullo. Where’s my wife?”

“In her room,” replied Stuart, with deep inner thankfulness that this should be so.

“Which room?” Oliver prepared to mount.

“First floor, second on the left. And go easy; she’s a bit nervous to-night; I took her for a sail, and it upset her.”

“So I should think; in this weather. What a crazy old slogger you are! Your first letter was [312] forwarded to me ages ago; so, knowing Aureole was all right with you, I stopped on in New York, and did some business.”

“Um.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Second door on the left.”

Oliver ran up the stairs, two at a time, and vanished.

“Nice old mess-up it might have been, but for me,” reflected Stuart complacently. “And I wonder if that’s going to be something on my credit side of the ledger, at last. *Who* pulled ’em out?—little Tommy Stout!”

—But who put ’em in?... Stuart remembered suddenly his debit account; and ceased to crow.

A sad little Pierrette crouched in front of the fire. Pierrot had gone away. Would he ever come back? Pierrette had waited so long.

The wind lashed and sobbed at the windows. Up the street crept the solitary figure of a man. Outside the house he paused, cast away a phantom cloak and mask—(oh, the infinite relief!) and donned a phantom skull cap and white frill. Metamorphosis easily effected.

Pierrette opened to the knock at the door. And, with a cry of joy, held out both hands to welcome in the truant.

“I knew you would come home, Pierrot,” quoth Chavvy.

CHAPTER V
WORSHIPPERS ALL

The end of September saw the Johnsons back again in their Turnham Green residence, named, somewhat misleadingly: “Town House.” Thus it was an easy matter for Mr. Johnson to say, wherever he might chance to spend his summer holidays: “Mother, this time next week we’ll be in our Town House!” airily creating out of his harmless little vanity, a whole host of shooting-boxes, country mansions, river bungalows, and Riviera villas. Mrs. Johnson would smile tolerantly; she encouraged originality, even in her husband.

Sebastian Levi took a room near by, where he wrote the final chapters of his book, and impatiently awaited the return of Stuart from Bournemouth, that the whole might receive his sanction and benediction. A fortnight afterwards, and he was summoned one evening to Carlton House Terrace; and in an apartment which was curiously ordinary for the shrine of so exalted a being, found Stuart sprawling in a low shabby arm-chair, and poking at the smouldering coals with his foot.

“Hullo, Levi, how’s—let me see, I’ve forgotten the name——”

“‘Shears,’” supplemented Sebastian excitedly; “I’ve got it with me.”

“No, you ardent flame-headed lover. Letty. How’s Letty?”

“Letty’s all right, except the days when she has to starve herself to make her father receive me. I say, Heron,” looking about him, “what a queer sort of room—for you.” [314]

“What’s queer about it?”

“Well, mainly that it isn’t queer at all, I suppose; it might be anybody’s study.” And Sebastian thought with a smothered sigh, of the suite of apartments he had renounced in his father’s house in Hampstead. He had attained so exactly the effects his artistic eye desired, beautiful subdued effects of lighting and drapery. Editha and Ivy had been nothing like as successful in their more blatant furnishings.

“What do chairs and tables matter?” queried Stuart calmly.

“But don’t you want to impress your personality——?”

“On a firescreen? no, I’d choose something softer than that.” But though a gleam in Stuart’s eye betokened plainly what was the “something softer” he had chosen, Sebastian, turning over the leaves of his precious manuscript, and awaiting a desirable opening to introduce it into the conversation, noticed nothing.

“How’s the Menagerie? Have you left it to muddle on by itself?”

“No; Mr. Strachey returned from America last week, and I resigned management. I don’t think he was keen on bearing the burden, but they’ve only got the place for a month still.”

“Is Aureole very fond of him?” Sebastian wondered in a fever of impatience when Stuart was going to ask him about “Shears.”

Stuart smiled, as at some secret joke. “Just at present she’s the very model of a meek and devoted wife.” Then, at last, held out his hand towards the bundle on Sebastian’s knees. “Finished? Let’s have a look?”

“No—I say—if it won’t bother you——” But Stuart was already at the first page, on which was inscribed the dedication: [315]

“To
Stuart Heron
In thanks
For all that he took from me
And all that he gave to me.”

He threw the young author an embarrassed look. “I don’t know, really, that I did take anything; you flung down,—that’s rather different.”

“I’m flinging down now—this book!” cried Sebastian, much happier than his companion when emotion was to the fore. “It’s yours, every line of it; your thoughts, your creed, your visions and ideals. It’s—well, I owed you something really big, and this was the best I could do. The very best.” His tone pleaded, but at the same time boasted his achievement.

Stuart began to read. Presently it dawned upon him that this was a very bad book. The style, at first, held recollections of Sebastian’s Oxford days; it echoed, somewhat pretentiously, the polished laboured phrasing of Walter Pater. Then, uncertainly, it began to jerk and flicker; to pass from one key into another; to offend by a great many flaunting passages of which the writer was obviously proudest. It soon became apparent that the hero, a flashy young man in the worst possible taste, was intended for a loving presentment of Stuart himself, drawn by a blind worshipper, and consequently now giving the writhing original a few of the most poignant moments he had ever thought to endure.

“My God!” he muttered once or twice.

Moreover, Sebastian had apparently just fallen short of the main idea—idea of the Shears and the Hairpin Vision; glimpsed it at moments and then lost it again, so that it carried no conviction, and was merely far-fetched and misty. [316]

In short, when he had turned twenty pages, Stuart would have given much never to have owned a creed, nor yet a disciple; that he should live to see the one so perverted, and the other sitting opposite him with dumbly questioning gaze. “Well? ... well? ...” it seemed to say.

Stuart laid aside the scribbled-over sheets. “I can’t possibly go on reading while you sit there and hang out your tongue at me, Levi; I’m not strong-minded enough. You’d better leave the book behind for me to finish.”

And so, cravenly, he postponed the evil hour of criticism. And afterwards wrote a letter which was a diplomatic miracle; ending:

—“You will understand that the book and all it contains has affected me more profoundly than I can express in words—just yet. Perhaps when it is published, and I can get a better perspective, I shall be able to say more of what I feel....”

Not having seen the vicious contortions of Stuart’s features as he penned these sentences, Sebastian was for the nonce satisfied.—“When it is published”—how devoutly he longed for this consummation of his labours. To lay at Stuart’s feet a pile of scribbled paper was comparatively nothing; but to be the means of spreading the master’s word throughout the British Isles, in a bound volume of sturdy print, containing the master’s name at the beginning, for all to reverence and comment upon,—this, surely, was a worthy tribute, sufficient to win the “well done!” that the disciple so burningly coveted. Sebastian’s desire to publish was completely unselfish; he was proud of his book only inasmuch as it reflected Stuart; thirsted for fame merely that the rays might fall on Stuart’s head. The utmost he wished for himself was sufficient recognition of the Vision Splendid, that men might say, men and his father and the Johnsons: “I thought young Levi [317] mad at the time, to have chucked such excellent worldly prospects; but now I marvel how right he was, how much clearer was his sight than ours, how quickly responsive was his soul to what has taken us three-hundred-and-sixteen pages of solid reading to recognize!”... He could not quite hear Mr. Johnson uttering these precise words, but a homely vernacular would be forgiven for the sake of lofty sentiment. At present Sebastian was only received at Town House on sufferance; and trifling matters, such as the parlour left empty for him and Letty during four hours or so, were not arranged as willingly as might have been the case had the young man still been in possession of his fifteen hundred a year. Letty herself, however, compensated him richly for her parents’ unkindness. She grew ever prettier, ever more yielding, ever more necessary for Sebastian’s peace of mind and body. Ned Levi’s humble birth and ancestry had implanted a strain in the boy which found curious pleasure in his fiancée’s slightly common turn of phrase, her occasional lack of refinement in taste and clothes, her childish unpretentious longings, her tiny little vulgarisms. These were never sufficiently strident to jar him; they merely gave him a sense of returning to rest after a long journey; cessation of a cry in him that no riches or dissipations or intellectual strivings could ever thus lull to silence. Moreover, Letty clung to him; and he knew she believed herself clinging to a rock; supposition soothing to his own inner doubts.

The one thing in her that puzzled him was her continual reference to a near future when, as a matter of course, they should be as wealthy as before his renunciation of wealth. It could not be that she depended for this on his book, which, he had explained to her many times, was not a money-making proposition. And once, when he had laughingly asked if she proposed robbing [318] Aladdin’s Cave or the Bank of England, for the fulfilment of her plans, she laid both hands on his shoulders, and demanded wistfully:

“Aren’t you sure *yet*, Sebastian?”

“Sure of what, sweetheart?”

She sighed, and turned away her head. Perhaps he had decided for a year-long test; if so, she must just be patient.—The door opened to admit Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Baker, mother of that Violet who even now contemplated breaking off her engagement because Letty’s Sebastian had ‘a lovely mouth and jaw,’ and her own Ernie a receding chin. But Mrs. Baker bore no malice for this; her nature was soft as sponge, and formless as the garments which dripped and cascaded from indiscriminately outjutting portions of her figure; garments without end or beginning; rather dirty garments, of a period unknown to history.

“Disturbin’ your billing and cooing, are we?” she cried genially; “there, it’s a shame! But I only wanted to be introduced to your friend, Letty, my dear.” She beamed on Sebastian, noted at once that he was a Jew, and kindly resolved not to mention the fact that her late husband had been a parson. Then she changed her mind, and instead of tactfully skirting the subject of Sebastian’s misfortune—which, poor boy, was probably an accident and not his fault—she decided to refer to It exactly as if It didn’t matter, and thus put him entirely at his ease. So she started:

“And where are these young folk going to have the knot tied, Frances Johnson? At a registrar’s, I suppose,—as it can’t be done in Church. So nice ... dear things ...” wheezily.

Letty and her mother looked at one another. “Now that’s funny!” exclaimed Mrs. Johnson; “I never thought of that.”

“Thought of what?” asked Sebastian.

“Why, that you couldn’t be married in a church.”

“But a Synagogue is a sweet place,” put in Mrs. Baker; “though of course it wouldn’t do for Letty. [319] But I’m sure the Hebrew ceremony is beautiful, even if one can’t understand a word of it, because they pronounce it upside down, don’t they? I remember going once to see a Jewish girl we knew get married; such a good-looking girl ... dear thing ... Laura Silberstein; did you know her, Mr.——?”

“Levi,” supplemented Sebastian gravely, wishing it had been something worse.

“And I remember too that the white flowers and the satin tent and that lovely singing made me feel—I told Mr. Baker afterwards—quite as religious and miserable as if I’d been to one of our own weddings. And he had no objection at all, and said I might certainly go again every time the younger sisters married; there were eight Silberstein girls, you see. And he told me to take Violet next time. Mr. Baker liked us always to be nice to Jews; he was very particular about that.”

Sebastian had a happy moment picturing Mr. Baker being particular about it. He was sorry Mr. Baker was dead.

“And did the other seven poor girls get married?” Letty enquired earnestly, very sorry for them because they could not all or any marry Sebastian.

“Only one; Pearl, the youngest; and she married a High Church gentleman, and got quickly baptised, and it was held at St. George’s, Hanover Square. And that time,” Mrs. Baker concluded triumphantly, “my husband would *not* let me attend. He said Jews were delightful and clever people *in* their faith, but disapproved of them marrying out of it.”

... Then she realized the horror of her mistake.

Letty slipped her fingers into Sebastian’s arm, and looked defiantly at the purpling Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Johnson said hurriedly:

“Of course they are quite wonderfully clever; such a head for business. That’s why we’re so sorry, [320]
Sebastian, that you gave up your partnership at the Stores.”

“What is Mr. Levi doing then?” queried Mrs. Baker faintly. And Letty trumpeted forth that Sebastian had written a book.

“Oh, but then he must have quite wonderful brains; now I like that; yes, I like people to have brains... dear things ...” and Mrs. Baker nodded and smiled several times to show her tolerance, while, in the same key, Mrs. Johnson carried on:

“Yes, I must say that personally I don’t object to even a woman with a man’s brain; we hear a lot about it spoiling her charm, but *I* think a girl can be both feminine and intellectual, don’t you, Milly?”

Mrs. Baker said: “Yes, indeed, and sporting too. They say that hockey is bad for the figure, but I like a fine open-air girl ... dear healthy things. Though of course I admire the dainty type as well, *and* the clever woman who wears glasses.”

And Mrs. Johnson wound up this display of the boundless broadness of mind existing among Turnham Green matrons, by a magnificent declaration that *she* believed a girl could be brainy without wearing glasses! There is no knowing to what Rabelaisian extent the conversation might have widened, had not Luke burst in, with a gruff demand for tea; and dragging in his wake the fifteen-year-old flapper from the boarding-house next door:

—“Don’t look at me, Mrs. J. I’m sky blue with cold; this horrid kid kept me standing hours and hours listening to a stupid old man on a tub at a street-corner. I declare, I wish I’d gone biking with Tommy Cox; he asked me to come on his carrier.”

“Pity you didn’t, then,” growled Luke, eyes fixed on Sebastian.

Jinny tossed back the curly brown hair which lapped her shoulders; an enormous black bow stood out pertly from the nape of her neck. She wore a blue woolly tam-o’-shanter, a string of green [321]
glass beads round her bare throat, a striped flannel shirt, a green serge skirt, very short to show her high brown boots, and a brooch of her school badge and motto.

“I say, may I stop to tea?” she asked of Mrs. Johnson, ignoring Luke.

“Certainly, Jinny; it won’t be ready till five o’clock,—but some of us can wait in the dining-room.”

Mrs. Baker instantly apprehended Mrs. Johnson’s sympathetic intentions towards Letty and Sebastian, and with great alacrity went to the door.

“Come on, Jinny, dear; how’s your mother, this sudden cold snap? ... ah, bless them ... sweet things ... young things ...” this last in a diminishing purr of benediction.

“Oh, she’s all right, thanks. Not much sense in going in to tea till tea’s there, is it?—Oh, I see! All right!” Jinny grinned at Letty, and followed in the wake of the two ladies. “Come along, Luke.”

“In a minute.” Luke had planted himself on the parlour sofa, with the obvious intention not to budge.

“*Now*, you boss-eyed mule. They want to be alone together; they don’t want you.” Jinny conveyed to him their probable intentions when quit of the crowd, by an expressive pantomime of eating with *spoons*.

“Shut it! We’re not all such babies for jam.”

“I didn’t say a word about jam,” exasperated by his denseness. “And I’m jolly sure I shan’t come to tea with you again.”

Luke growled something inarticulate; and Jinny, head high in air, marched out and banged the door. Luke’s coolness hurt her sometimes. She wore his ring on the third finger of her left hand—a ring from an expensive cracker,—and he escorted her to school every morning, on the way to his own; not infrequently he carried her satchel; when both their machines were in repair, they [322]
biked; but this was not often. He was a year older than she; a hobbledehoy youth of sixteen;

rather spotty about the face; and with a taste in ties, that, starting in a bout of violent enthusiasm, had suddenly stopped, before it emerged from the crude-colour stages to something really tasteful. He was surly in the company of ladies; and when his mother spoke to him, always mumbled his replies; though it was owing to her advanced views that on his sixteenth birthday he was given a latchkey: “Show the boy he’s free to come and go about the house as he likes, Matthew, and he’ll never break out as he would if he was too much kept in.” But as Mat Johnson could not be prevailed upon at the same time to raise his son’s pocket-money to more than sixpence a week, there seemed indeed very small chance for Luke to break out. Once or twice he had hung about at the end of his street till the house was locked up at half-past ten, for the pride of letting himself in at five-and-twenty to eleven; but that was all. Dating from his sister’s engagement, however, a subtle change had passed over him; he was seen to read, instead of the cricket or football papers he had been wont to patronize, a two-sheet Socialist rag, named, with misleading mildness: “Mine and Yours,”—and containing mostly threatening references to “Yours.” Also, though he rarely spoke to Sebastian, he evinced a dogged preference for that young gentleman’s company; and very often, as now, would sit in gloomy silence in the same room as the twain; and refuse to move till Letty actually ordered him forth. She hated doing this, as it looked as if she “wanted Sebastian alone,” which in its turn rather looked as if she “wanted Sebastian to kiss her.” Which she did. But it was inconsiderate of Luke to force her to the tacit admission.

“Can you make out why he’s so odd with Sebastian, mother?”

“Letty, dear,” solemnly, “have I ever tried to force my children’s confidence? Everything they tell me is of their own free will,”—and indeed, it was extremely little. [323]

The tea-bell freed the couple in the parlour from the infliction of Luke’s scrutiny. Jinny ignored her chum throughout tea, by way of punishment for his defection. And when the last rock-cake had been consumed, declared she had to be going: “I’ve got piles of arith., and a four-page comp. for Monday, and Ma won’t let me work Sundays because of the old tabby-cats in the house and what they’ll say. Good-bye, Mrs. J. I’ve had a scrumptious tea.”

Luke followed her into the hall.

“You’d better run along back to the parlour,” she informed him crushingly.

“Why?”

“You seem to find the Levi man better company than me.”

“Jinny, I like you better than any other girl”; he fumbled for her hand. Since months he had tried to substitute ‘love’ for ‘like,’ but somehow Jinny made it so hard for a fellow; she was always laughing or snubbing him.

“Thanks; I’m honoured.”

Luke kicked the umbrella-stand. “One must be polite—the Guvnor’s such a beast to him—and he’s going to be my brother-in-law…. I don’t care a hang about him, really.”

“Who would you like best for Letty’s sister-in-law?” Jinny demanded, casually swinging her bulging satchel of books.

“Who would *I* like for *Letty’s* sister-in-law?”

Jinny waited a bit. “Well—slowcoach?”

“I don’t see what on earth you mean,” he said, pondering the matter. And he hadn’t found her hand yet.

“Bright boy!” she taunted him, and leaping the three steps, tore up the three of the next house, and vanished through the open front door. [324]

An hour afterwards, Luke said: “Oh!” It had dawned upon him.

That evening, before retiring to bed, he banged at Letty’s door, and, not waiting for permission, slouched into her room. Quickly she covered up some mysterious occupation at the writing-table.

“Hullo, what’s up?”

“Nothing.” Luke stood by the mantelpiece, and closely examined likenesses of Violet Baker, Michael Mordkin, and Sebastian. Letty, really alarmed by his uncanny behaviour, came up behind him, and slipped an arm around his shoulders. “What is it, old boy?”

“Nothing.”

“Luke, have you been betting?”

“Not such a fool.”

She waited, head snuggled against his arm. Presently he said, with great difficulty: “That fellow of yours, Letty——”

“Sebastian?”

“Haven’t got more than one, have you?”

“Of course not,” indignantly she straightened herself. And he blurted out:

“Look here—did he really—I mean, why was he such an ass about his money?”

Letty re-seated herself at the writing-table, and propping her short round little chin on her hands, smiled pensively down at the blotting-paper, and made no reply.

“Do you know what made him do it?” Luke persisted.

“How should I?”

But he seemed unable to leave the subject, now he had embarked upon it. “You don’t seem to mind much.”

“I don’t mind one bit.” [325]

“Pater’s mad about it. He’s always thinking of money.” Luke, having to provide neither for the household nor yet for himself, was duly contemptuous. “But I’ve never *met* a fellow who chucked away a fortune—till now,” he muttered, sitting astride of the writing-table. His sister peered mischievously up into his face:

“You like Sebastian, don’t you, Luke?”

“Oh, I dunno about liking him,” hastily; “I think he’s a bit off his chump, that’s all.” But as the rustics gaped and marvelled at the lunacy of Don Quixote, so hobbledehoy regarded with bewildered admiration his future brother-in-law.

“—But as long as you’re not crying your eyes red over it all——”

“What would you have done, if I had been, Luke?” Letty enjoyed teasing her wretched young brother.

“Oh ... spoken to him, I suppose,” edging towards the door. “’Night, Letty.”

“Luke, supposing he was—oh, just playing a game; and one day came and said: ‘I’m as rich as I was before!’”

“Wouldn’t build on that if I were you. Chaps don’t play those silly sort of games. Good night.”

And: “I know why, right enough,” reflected Luke, in the passage; “but I wasn’t going to tell her. By gum, though! fancy a fellow actually doing it....”

In Luke’s pocket, a column of “Mine and Yours,” marked in red pencil, discoursed eloquently on the Utopian conditions to be attained by mankind, when those unfairly in possession of unearned increment, should voluntarily fling their wealth into a common pool, that it might be divided into equal shares for all. The discourse wound up, with unconscious humour, by the remark:—“But alas! only we who are willing to share our sixpences have as yet seen the light; those with pounds [326] weighing down their pockets, turn their faces stubbornly away. And we labour on....”

Luke re-read all this, carefully; hallucination pointing with her forefinger along the printed lines. —“By gum!” he muttered again. And his eyes were those of a disciple who has at length sighted the master....

[327]

CHAPTER VI
"TO TEST HER LOVE"

"Of course I know why," reflected Letty; "but I wasn't going to tell him."

But it was the need to express the joyous and amazing romance of this which Sebastian had done, and the rejection of each confidant in turn as "not able to understand," that had prompted Letty to cover so many sheets of paper with her round schoolgirlish handwriting, and to head these scrawlings with the title: "To Test Her Love," A Story. By Lettice Johnson.

The hero of her tale, one Geoffrey Challoner of Challoner Park, becomes enamoured of Mavice, a village maiden; and is goaded by the sneers of his wicked cousin Jasper (—"You fool! she loves you only because you are the Lord Geoffrey!"—) into putting her love to the test by pretending to the discovery of hidden papers whereby Jasper (of the younger branch of the family) is proved master of Challoner Park in his stead, and he a mere pauper. Affairs at this juncture grow complicated; as Mavice, unshaken in her love for Geoffrey, is yet forced to jilt him, without giving a reason, in favour of Jasper, who most unfortunately holds in his power the honour of Cyril, Mavice's younger brother, a weakling and a craven. With a bitter: "You were right, Jasper; and I a fool to think any girl, even the fairest, free from worldly motives!" Geoffrey departs for the populous Bush, leaving Jasper in unlawful possession of Challoner Park and Mavice's broken heart.

Letty was now engaged in a general clearing-up and adjustment of the circumstances of her [328]
novelette. Mavice and Geoffrey must be brought together; and the heroine must have occasion to vow, with brimming eyes: "Love you though you are poor, Geoffrey?—I would love you if you came to me scorned by the whole world,—old and ugly and in rags. Geoffrey, you believe me, don't you?" Then his great speech, beginning: "Oh, my darling, how could I ever doubt that your love would stand the test...." Letty scribbled the subsequent scene, her cheeks aflame, her fingers trembling so that it was a matter of difficulty to guide the pencil. One day, yes, one day, Sebastian would come to her, and say: "Oh, my darling, how could I ever doubt...?"

She had never before experienced the fascination of setting on paper, fragments of her own life, of glorifying characters with whom she had actually come in contact. To be sure, Luke had needed a little doctoring before he was altogether fit to take his place as Cyril Derincourt; but Sebastian accorded so perfectly with the Lord Geoffrey, that Letty was able to derive more voluptuous pleasure from the impassioned duets of her fancy, than ever from those actually enacted. Sebastian in the flesh was sometimes a little too fervent, too realistic even, for timid girlhood; or else incomprehensibly remote; but Geoffrey never by any chance made a remark that Mavice could not entirely understand. So Letty wrote with her heart, unhampered by literary standards, literary judgment; knowing naught of those over-intellectualized circles wherein Geoffrey and Mavice, Jasper and Cyril, and the alluring adventuress Esmée de Courcy (lately added), would meet with laughter and contempt. Letty wrote on, her evenings stabbed through and through by this secret excitement,—till, reading over the completed story, it struck her, with
happy surprise, as not a whit less convincing or enthralling than all those other tales which had [329]
fed her imagination since flapper days: the "White Heather" Novelette Series; the "Silver Chimes" Complete Novel, published every Tuesday; the Myrtle Library; the Pink-and-Blue Boudoir Supplement; fiction in coloured paper covers, stacked, crumpled and torn, behind her bed-valance.

"I wonder," brooded Letty, as she affixed a wobbling signature to the manuscript, "if Sebastian would be pleased to see me in print...."

To her, the be-all and end-all of literature was to "get into print"; written stuff was of absolutely no value otherwise. This secret of hers was swelling rather too big to be borne alone; Violet Baker was, under many vows, admitted to Letty's confidence. Violet was shorthand-typist to a firm of solicitors, and volunteered to type, in her spare moments, "To Test Her Love," which she considered a veritable masterpiece.

"What made you think of it, I don't know?"—And on this point Letty continued to keep silence. Her sole fear was that her achievement would mysteriously rob her of feminine charm; place her in the same category as those "clever girls," "gifted women," "the kind men don't like." In which case, Letty decided, her talent should at once, definitely, and for ever, be abandoned.

Finally, after much deliberation of choice, the type-script was dispatched to the Editress of "Silver Chimes." After a little delay, came a letter offering five guineas for full and complete rights in the fortunes of Geoffrey, Mavice, Cyril, Esmée, and Jasper.

"That means they're going to print it!" Letty flew across the road to Violet Baker.

"Vi, they're going to print it!"

Her tidings were not received with the acclamation she expected. "Oh, everything's all right for you," came muffled from the depths of a damp pocket-handkerchief.

"Toothache?" queried Letty sympathetically. [330]

"No, Ernie."

"Not—not dead?"

... Presently Letty, her joy somewhat damped, went tiptoeing back to Town House. It seemed appropriate to tiptoe, for though Ernie was not dead, Violet had sent him about his business. The frequent comparison between his profile and Sebastian's, his manners and Sebastian's,

Sebastian's 'romantic air'—and Ernie's, had done their fell work. And now for Letty to come rushing in with Fame in a typewritten oblong envelope, and because of it expect Violet to go capering round the dining-room,—well, it was rather too much to ask even of Real Friendship.

"You jolly well get everything," complained Violet bitterly; "you've got the looks, and all the fuss made over you, and a fellow who can say all the speeches, and now you've got this too. And I was idiot enough to type it for you, and give old Tomkyns the page about where Jasper plots with Esmée de Courcy, instead of a letter about somebody's insurances, and he hopping mad. You get everything." Violet again immersed herself in the handkerchief, and Letty departed, very, very sorry, but rather resentful that having 'everything' she should therefore have to do without Violet. "But I understand about Ernie," she mused, sitting down to reply to the Editress. If Sebastian had not come along, would not she, Letty, with all her advantages and prettiness, probably have drifted into a sort of engagement with Balaam Atkins? very much of the Ernie type, but older, and with slightly more jut to his jaw. And then they would all have been cosy together, and even Luke would probably not have snubbed Jinny so frequently as he did now. The advent of Sebastian had completely demoralized this corner of Turnham Green.

With an effort, Letty managed to keep the secret of her letter from the family; she wanted [331]
Sebastian to be the first to hear about it. Three days later, at tea-time, she spied him walking dejectedly up the road. She was alone in the dining-room; her mother was out, and Luke not yet home from school.

"Hurrah! we can have tea together, just us two; what a darling you are to come to-day,—and I've got something too frightfully exciting to tell you ... your hands are frozen; why don't you wear gloves, you bad boy?" joyfully she welcomed him, chafed his cold fingers with her warm palms, hung about him like a solicitous kitten. But still he didn't speak. And, just on the verge of pouring forth her great news, Letty stopped, struck by the tragedy in his face.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried piteously.

"They've rejected it."

Then the pall descended upon her also. The Book. They had rejected it. There was no more to be said. And for the second time she was baffled of an elated audience for her own triumph. How dared she presume tell him of a tale accepted, when his great work had been refused.

"The beasts!" she cried, with quivering lips.

"Don't be silly, Letty!" but whatever consolation she had attempted would have been wrong. He was in that mood. "Of course, they can't take everything that gets offered to them. My stuff's not good enough, that's all. They—they wrote it wasn't good enough," he finished, asking again for that sympathy which he flung back when it came. He had been divided by the pride which bade him keep his shame to himself, and a childish longing for solace and encouragement and the presence of someone who believed in him. Not sure yet which need was the stronger, he announced his defeat casually, as though it hardly affected him, hotly resented Letty's correct assumption that his world lay shattered; and then, almost boasting the humiliation, showed her a [332]
note from the publisher's reader, who had kindly taken the trouble to point out how and why his work was not marketable, instead of merely enclosing the formal slip: "—unable to make an offer." "You fail to convince," was the phrase which left most sting.

"So you see I'm a failure, Letty. Not a publisher will look at the book. This fellow knows what he's talking about." Sebastian refused the muffins she tendered him.

"You mean—it will never get into print, you don't think?"

"Never. But it isn't that; it's—Heron."

"Your friend?" She remembered the two had been a great deal together, at the Farme.

He nodded, too full of bitterness to speak. Why was it that all his burnt-offerings, like Cain's, were doomed to be beaten, sullen fumes, along the earth, instead of mounting in steady columns of smoke, upwards to their destination? That he might be worshipping false gods, did not for a moment present itself as a possible solution; Sebastian's loyalty was convinced the sacrifices were at fault, not the altar. The book was Stuart's book, for Stuart, of Stuart, to Stuart,—the whole declension. The author had sweated his share, and now the publishers withheld theirs, and all the accomplished labour was in vain. It was maddening—

"I wanted it out!" Sebastian broke out, aloud.

"He wanted it in print, of course he did," passionately Letty shared his mutinous sorrow. And when he had gone, and she was in her room, changing into an evening blouse, she fingered the letter she had not had the courage to show him; all her joy gone from the anticipation of her story in print, since thus it would only serve to point a contrast.

"I've half a mind not to send it," picking up that other letter into which was folded her eager acceptance of the five-guinea offer.

"I wish it was him instead of me," wistfully. For one does not lightly say 'no' to an Editress of [333]
"Silver Chimes"; not if one is Letty Johnson.

She stood uncertain, an envelope in either hand....

"Supposing.... After all, it was his idea and not mine, about pretending to be poor, and all that.... Almost, really, it's as if I'd stolen it. Then supposing...."

Supposing what? That she should put his name, instead of hers, to the novelette? That she should

surprise him by showing him a story by Sebastian Levi, in print, as he so much wanted to be? Just to make up for that other disappointment. Well, supposing you did, Letty? Nobody need ever know that Sebastian hadn't written it, except Violet Baker; and she could be pledged to silence.

"I will!" resolved Letty, her grey-blue eyes clouded to seriousness beneath the tumbling fringe of her hair. "I'll go and see the Editress myself."

This was rather a tremendous undertaking. But the notion of being in a position to offer Sebastian the very thing he deemed lost to his desire, so inflated Letty's courage, that she hardly faltered when the next day seeking an interview with—"your *real* friend and cousin, the Editress," as the energetic little woman signed "Cousin Belle's Chat with Her Girls," which appeared every week on the last page of "Silver Chimes."

—"You want to publish your little tale with a *nom-de-plume*? Why, certainly. We have one lady who always writes for us under the name: Joyella; and My Girls like her touch immensely."

Letty groped in vain after some association of ideas between "Joyella" and a sale-of-underwear catalogue that she had seen in her mother's hand that morning. Then gave up the search, and listened to what the Editress was saying in praise of "To Test Her Love."

"We'll have to alter it in several places, of course; you've had no experience, I can see that; but [334] what we liked about your characters, Miss Johnson, was that you wrote as if you felt them. My girls always know the difference. And that's why, when a high-class authoress comes along with her nose in the air and offers to scribble me something in her spare time, I know it will be no good. I tell her so, straight out. One can't write for My Girls with one's nose in the air. They recognize sincerity when they see it. You've got the sincere touch, Miss Johnson; My Girls are sure to take to you." She brought forth her Girls as if they were a compact little jury; she herself the judge; and Letty, or Joyella, or the authoress writing with nose in air, the prisoners on trial.

"Now, under what name do you want us to publish?" Miss Symes drew her pencil through Lettice Johnson, and looked up from the manuscript, with an encouraging smile. Every line and angle and inflection proclaimed her as orthodox Church of England. It was rather a bad moment for Letty.

"Sebastian——" she paused. Miss Symes wrote it down. "Yes?" with pencil poised.

Almost, now, at the eleventh hour, Letty said "Lovell," and spoilt everything....

"Sebastian Levi," in a whisper.

"Sebastian——? I beg your pardon, I didn't catch it?"

Desperately, Letty repeated "Levi," in tones that nervousness had rendered far louder and more resonant than she had intended them.

Still showing her teeth, though the brightness had departed from her smile, the Editress added "Levi." Then put down the pencil.

"Forgive me, but does that strike you as a very attractive pseudonym? Have you a special reason?"

"It was my mother's name—before she married——." Letty felt the eyes of My Girls, that terrible [335] army of girls taking in "Silver Chimes" regularly every Tuesday, fixed upon her in scornful disapproval. Their imaginary stare quite obliterated all conscientious pangs concerning Mrs. Johnson, who, despite broadmindedness, might quite conceivably have resented being thus publicly branded an Israelite.

Miss Symes made an ineffectual effort to convert Letty to "Beryl Hope Feversham," invented by herself for the next "Silver Chimes" contributor in search of a pleasant sounding *nom-de-plume*. But Letty clung to the thought of Sebastian's ecstasy, seeing his name above the published novelette, and remained obdurate.

"To Test Her Love," by Sebastian Levi, was to be published three weeks hence; November the twenty-second fixed as the important date.

And on Tuesday, November the twenty-second, Letty dashed down the road before breakfast, to the little newspaper shop at the corner, and bought three copies of the journal in the bright mauve cover, wreathed about with silver bells swung in diverse directions by a fantastic wind; in and out of the bells were threaded the words: "To Test Her Love," by Sebastian Levi; in the centre of the page was inset a medallion, containing presentments of Geoffrey with blazing eyes confronting Mavice with bowed head, who was supported by a malignant Jasper; Cyril skulking on the extreme left of the picture, and Esmée de Courcy triumphant on the extreme right. Beneath this pleasing illustration stood the letter-press: "Mavice! speak! Are you indeed engaged to him, or shall I strike him down as a liar?" (see page 23).

Letty bore her treasures home, secreted in her muff; Sebastian was to be the first to see; she had arranged to meet him for a walk and tea that very afternoon. But one copy of "Silver Chimes" she slipped into an envelope, sought a name among the h's in the telephone book, addressed the [336] envelope to: "Stuart Heron, Esq., Heron, Heron & Carr, High Holborn," and posted it forthwith. She knew the beautiful friendship which existed between the two men,—"like me and Violet, before she turned so horrid—oh well, I s'pose she's miserable, and can't help it, but still,"—knew also that when Sebastian was shown the current issue of "Silver Chimes" his first thought would be to exhibit it to Stuart, just as his first disappointment when the book was refused, was on Stuart's account. Letty wanted to be able to state she had forestalled him—"Mr. Heron is perhaps reading it now, this very minute,—and oh, Sebastian! what do you think he'll say?"

Her day passed in a dreamy mauve-hued blur, with a clangour of bells in the air. At four o'clock Letty donned her new winter costume of royal-blue velveteen, her golden fox-furs, and a blue plush picture-hat; and again with something tightly clasped inside her muff, almost danced out of the house into the drizzling gloam beyond. Sebastian was waiting for her where the No. 9 'buses stop on their way to Richmond. His plan was to walk across the Park, and have a late tea at some window overlooking the pale mist-sodden river. Letty would have preferred a cosier programme; she assented, reluctantly, to the top of the 'bus, "if you promise to keep the umbrella held over my hat, Sebastian,"—but cancelled the walk across Richmond Park: "Horrid, in the dark, with the leaves all messy and slippery, and the trees like ghosts——"

—"And the world smelling damp, and reeking damp, and dripping damp, and we the only people warm in it! Why, Letty, you'd enjoy it!"

"But we shouldn't be warm."

"We would, if I held you close enough; Letty...."

"But my shoes!" she showed him her footgear, to prove the impossibility of his proposals. All this under the pallid stream of light from the lamp-post, at the corner where they lingered for their 'bus. [337]

"Will I never teach you not to wear pneumonia-soles, you little vanity-child?" sighed Sebastian. But the lifted folds of the skirt had afforded a pleasant glimpse, nevertheless; and he wished he could afford the privacy of a taxi, that he might caress her rounded slenderness at will. It was noble, but inconvenient, to be forever short of cash. However, they were the only passengers on the outside of their lurching chariot; and afterwards the only two in the snug brightly lit tea-room which formed one of a labyrinthine cluster underground, each holding four rose-tiled tables, and a rose-gowned waitress. The latter took Sebastian's order, and vanished.

"Now..." thought Letty—and produced "Silver Chimes." Without a word of comment, so fraught was the moment with tense expectation, she pushed the copy across the table. Sebastian picked it up, wondering, and read aloud: "'To Test Her Love,' by *Sebastian Levi*...? Why, w-w-what on earth——?" he stammered. His eye fell on the illustration; then in silent bewilderment he flicked over a few of the pages. Letty watched him, her fingers curled tightly round the edge of the table. The lines of his mouth hardened. He spoke harshly:

"Is it a joke? Who put my name to this drivel?"

And the dancing joy in her eyes was quenched in a rush of tears. As before from anticipation, so now from disappointment, she remained mute.

"Answer me, Letty? Who put my name to this?"

"I did," almost inaudibly.... But why was he so cross? Was it that his integrity recoiled from the notion of claiming credit for work not his own? Yes, it must be that. For the moment, she had forgotten his use of the term: drivel.

"But it *is* yours, really and truly, Sebastian. The idea is yours, all about the Test, and pretending not to be rich, and everything. I'd never have thought of it. I only did the writing part because—because you were so busy with your book. But it's quite, quite fair that your name should be on the cover." [338]

"You wrote this?"

"Yes." A tinge of pride in her assent. Had not the Editress said the tale was good? "Yes, indeed I did. Are you surprised?"

(Or was he already beginning to think her unwomanly?)

The waitress appeared with the tea-things, which she rattled down on the table. Sebastian buried himself anew in the histories of Geoffrey and Mavice, while Letty poured out the tea, and nibbled at a cress sandwich; furtively gleaming at him from under her eyelashes.

"Aren't you hungry, Sebastian?"

He made no reply; went on reading. He had as a boy devoured a great many "penny dreadfuls" of the blood-and-thunder type; but this was his first experience of girls' cheap sentimental fiction. It was a revelation. Now he understood one or two curious ingredients which had hitherto always puzzled him in the composition of Letty.—But what did she mean by saying that his was the original idea of Lord Geoffrey Challoner's utterly inane proceedings? Then, slowly, that dawned on him as well. He shoved aside "Silver Chimes," so that it fell on the dusty floor.

"Letty, did you think it was by way of a test, a test of you, that I gave up my income?"

"Wasn't it?"

"My God, no!"

"Then why——"

"You wouldn't understand why," grimly; "it won't translate into novelette terms."

Letty stretched out her hand for a cream-cake, pink and chocolate. It fell from her shaking fingers on to her skirt. She gazed hopelessly at the stain. It was all of a piece with this hateful afternoon, to spoil every one of her illusions, and her new costume into the bargain. [339]

"I expect my hat's all spotted by the rain, too," she reflected dreamily. And he had called her story "drivel."... With a quick spurt of anger at his lofty denunciation, Letty cried:

“The Editress said I had the sincere touch, so there!”

He saw how he had hurt her, and was sorry; but felt at the same time the futility of attempting to explain the cause of his annoyance.

“Oh, well—eat up your cakes, dear; I don’t suppose anyone who matters will ever buy this particular rag. Lord, though,” half under his breath, “if Stuart had seen it!”

“I sent him a copy this morning,” Letty threw out defiantly. She was in the naughty mood of a child, who, seeking to please most, has somehow only earned a scolding, and is in consequence rightly sore and resentful.

... In the ghastly silence which followed her announcement, another party entered the room, and noisily disposed themselves at the adjoining table. The waitress entered to take their order, and Sebastian beckoned her to bring him his bill. The homeward journey was accomplished by train, in a moist overfull compartment, where Sebastian had to give up his seat to a lady, and Letty sat huddled in a corner, frightened at the dire effect of her action, and repeating to herself again and again: “I don’t care; he’s hateful; I don’t care a bit.”

Still without a word, beyond a brief “good night,” he left her at the gate of Town House, and set out for Carlton House Terrace. He had little doubt as to what sort of a ribald reception awaited him there. Not much mercy to be expected from Stuart. All Sebastian’s most sensitive portions [340] were already screaming and wincing in protest. He had so desired to present Stuart with a dignified bound volume, setting forth in fervent but lucid phrasing, an abstract ideal,—and now, instead, this unspeakable novelette! The incident was grotesque; it had degraded to farce all his high aspirations. It was no good shirking his visit; the matter had to be explained. Sebastian walked ever faster, in mingled exasperation and dread. Arrived at his destination, he was shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Heron, Stuart, Mr. Arthur Heron, and a pretty flapper in white, whom he had met once before at the house, were assembled, before dinner. Stuart was lounging in front of the fire-place, and evidently engaged in chaffing the child, when Sebastian was announced.

—“You see, Babs, by your passionate public assertions that I was your idea of a perfect gentleman, you very definitely proved yourself no lady. One isn’t passionate, in society. I really don’t know, after this, what we can do with you! what do you think, mother?... Hullo, Levi!” he bestowed on the new-comer a slow fiendish smile that confirmed Sebastian’s worst anticipations. Babs at once enlisted his sympathies in her cause:

“Mr. Levi, I heard someone, at a party, saying a horrid thing about Stuart; and of course I stuck up for him. And now he says I’ve committed a breach of etiquette, and the Queen, when she gets to hear of it, will strike my name from the presentation lists, the year after next. *Do* say it isn’t true!”

“My dear, you really ought to be accustomed by now to your cousin’s teasing.—You’ll dine with us, of course, Mr. Levi?” Mrs. Heron extended a thin ringed hand, smiling graciously. She looked very handsome, in her low-necked black gown, and her single row of wonderful pearls.

“I’m afraid it’s impossible.” Sebastian longed for these invitations, but invariably, by some [341] perverse twitch of the nerves, refused them when they came. He and Stuart went into the latter’s study. Conspicuous on the table lay a booklet bound in a mauve paper cover, wreathed about with silver bells.

“I haven’t quite finished your story yet,” said Stuart, caressing it lovingly; “it has made me a very happy man, Levi!”

“And me a deuced miserable one,” growled Sebastian, flinging himself into an arm-chair.

“That, my lad, is because you have caused Esmée de Courcy to appear at noon, in Regent Street, wearing a *décolletée* toilet of yellow sequins. Such riotous rollicking literary excesses are bound to result in your present reaction of soul.”

“Oh, shut up!” miserably. Stuart was sitting on the table, the novelette on his knees. Leaning forward, Sebastian snatched it away, and flung it into the fire.

“There are thousands more on the market,” chortled Stuart; “I intend to forward a copy to Magdalen; for an original exploit of one of Oxford’s sons, I think it deserves to stand in the College chronicles.”

Sebastian writhed. “Don’t be indecent, Heron,” in a feeble appeal to the other’s better nature. An appeal totally unfruitful of results.

“Surely, Levi, you didn’t send me your masterpiece in the erroneous supposition that I would take it up tenderly and treat it with care?”

“I didn’t send it to you at all.”

“No, I guessed you hadn’t sufficient guts for that! Whom have I to thank, then, for my moments of rich ripe pleasure?”

“Letty.”

“God bless Letty. Did she write it, by the way?”

“You—you *didn’t* think I wrote it, did you? Heron, you didn’t?” Sebastian’s dark mournful eyes implored satisfaction on this one point, at least.

“As a matter of fact, it’s not at all unlike your style.” [342]

“What the Hell do you mean by that?” Sebastian sprang to his feet, knocking his shins against the brass coal-box. “My book——”

—“Is no book, any more than Letty’s maiden effort is a book. They’re both—what shall I call ’em? —Gory Exhibitions!” And having his victim completely down and at his mercy, Stuart proceeded forthwith to pummel him; showing thereby—despite Babs’ defence—a most lamentable lack of all gentlemanly instincts. But he had not forgiven his disciple for butchering his ideas; nor for sickening him with his own creed, as had been the case ever since Sebastian’s over-enthusiastic conversion.

—“You both write in blood, instead of in ink; upon my word, your style is like a pirate’s oath. No attempt at restraint or form. Form’s everything—colour nothing. One should write from the vantage-point of a god,—at least of a judge; aloof, impersonal, detached. But you take a bath every time, in what you’re pleased to call your inspiration: wallow, and splash, and breathe heavily, and yelp in your ecstasies, and wriggle in your agonies, all over the pages. I even suspect you of putting things down for the ‘sheer joy’ of unburdening yourself. And there we have the greatest evil. A book should be thought, crystallized into truth, hard as rock, stripped of all extraneous fungus, and with some clear purpose to serve in publication, whether of good or evil. But if you must have your attacks of luxurious hysteria,—for Heaven’s sake, man, keep ’em private. Suppress them. Suppress the ‘Sprawls of Sebastian’—‘Sebastian Spills Himself,’ as the stuff shouts to be called.”

“You needn’t worry any further,” Sebastian said, with very stiff lips, and a weary battered bewilderment as to what he had done, that ever since a certain night of August he should be [343] exposed to these onslaughts; “because the book’s been refused.”

“Excellent!”

“And it was for you—not at all for the ‘sheer joy of unburdening,’—just for you....” But Sebastian kept these reflections to himself. And Stuart continued consolingly:

“But Letty’s story is no better than yours, for all that; it’s equally highly coloured and shapeless, but in a more marketable key.”

“Thank you.”

“Dear old man, don’t gaze at me as if I had you on the rack. I’m trying to help you. I suppose you’ve behaved like a brute to the little girl, over this business?”

“I’m going to break with her, that’s all!” suddenly Sebastian recovered from the temporary paralysis of speech, and, striding about the room, vehemently poured forth his determination: “Yes, I am. We’re not made for each other. She doesn’t understand—anything. And I get hopeless over stupidity; it numbs me. She shouldn’t have done this thing and even now she can’t see why. She doesn’t see why I gave up living at home—nor why the book meant so much to me. It won’t do—it would never do—it must end now, now!... I’m like you, Heron, I must be free of everything, especially of love, the warm, clinging, hampering fingers of love; I’m growing more and more like you——”

“Nonsense; you can’t possibly grow like me, because I’m not there; not permanently. You can grow like your father, or the Albert Memorial, anything fixed and solid,—but you can’t grow like the spot where I stood a minute ago before I began to run.”

“I’m going to break with Letty,” Sebastian repeated doggedly.

“And you think you’re doing a fine thing by it?” Stuart twisted round on the table, and scornfully [344] eyed his young prototype. “It’s rather easy, isn’t it, to break off with love because just at this moment you happen to be fed up with it. There’s no merit in that,—merely self-indulgence again. But try breaking-off with love when you want it most, when it’s fairest, most devilishly alive. Try breaking off, not because you’re annoyed with the girl, childishly pettishly annoyed,—but for the sake of keeping love unsated, and the memory of love like a sword-blade. Break off with love, because self-denial maintaineth the soul lean, and whetteth desire, and—oh, because if you can do that, and also guard your tongue from overmuch cursing when directly afterwards a smug couple dog your footsteps wherever you walk, and perform for your benefit,—then there’s very little else can affect you, ever. You’re master, then. At the height is the time to break with any credit, my lad, not half-way down the slope.”

Sebastian broke in: “But that’s cruel—inhuman—as a god might behave. No man alive would do it.” His heart was beating thickly; he could not tell why.

“Think not?” Stuart rose, stood against the chimney-piece, dropping the ash of his cigarette into the fire. And he said slowly: “I never told you about Peter, did I?”...

Sebastian stormed out of the room, down the stairs, into the hall. The dinner-gong was drowning the house in sound. The postman had just thundered at the door. Sebastian wanted to get away—away from this new brutality of idea which terrified him because he knew it would ultimately overtake him. It was revolting ... revolting, he repeated, smashing behind him the iron gates of the drive,—this deliberate murder of love to which Stuart had just confessed. Revolting in the same way as would have been the sight of a monk engaged in self-laceration. There was nothing [345] splendid about it,—no, nothing at all! between clenched teeth Sebastian thus informed the wet glittering pavements.

And he was going back to Letty, straight back, driven by the fear of what he might have been

induced to do to her ... if he were not quite determined to the contrary.

Back to Letty. The Johnsons' maid, opening the door to him, said: "Miss Letty's just going to bed, sir, she's not very well."—And there she was, on the stairs, dragging her feet a little, as if tired out.

"Letty!"

She came down to him then, and laid her arms against his breast; and he bowed his head on to the soft warm skin of them, murmuring that he was sorry—so sorry——

"I hoped you'd be pleased, Sebastian. I thought you wanted to get into print. I did so hope you'd be pleased."

"I'm a beast, Letty.—No, don't move, darling—not for a minute—let me go on telling you—I'm a surly ungrateful brute ... but I love you——"

She raised her lips for his kiss.

Stuart, following Sebastian's headlong rush from the room, reached the hall just as the heavy oak doors crashed behind his impetuous young devot. Shrugging his shoulders, the master of the house turned to enter the dining-room; the butler waylaid him, offering a letter on a silver tray:

"The post has just come in, sir."

It seemed to Stuart that once before he had stood, as he stood now, with the echoes of the dinner-gong still vibrating through the hall, and in his hand an envelope, addressed in just this same thin pointed writing.... He drew forth the white and silver of a wedding invitation: [346]

"Madame Marcel des Essarts requests the pleasure of Mr. Stuart Heron's company at the marriage of her granddaughter Merle with Jean Raoul Théodore, Comte de Cler, at St. George's, Hanover Square, and afterwards at 63 Lancaster Gate."

—So Merle was to be married. He had almost forgotten Merle; that exquisite little lady whom for a while he and Peter had taught to become a child and a pirate and a romp; whom they had crinkled out of serene composure into delicious laughter; whom they had dragged from an atmosphere of hothouse vigilance into the keen airs and fleet sweet liberty. Stuart speculated as to whether, after this lapse of time, aught remained in Merle of his influence. One spot rubbed forever bare of the polish, perhaps; one nerve that would always be restless; one memory that could just occasionally sting her from content. He would go to Merle's wedding, if only to see what sort of a fellow was this Jean Raoul Théodore, Comte de Cler.—"Sure to be a stumor ..." it was a queer thing, but Stuart suspected most men to be stumors, who gathered up his litter of orange-peel.

"I wonder if I did her any good?"...

Mrs. Heron came out of the drawing-room, her hand on Arthur Heron's arm; Babs following.

"Just think, Stuart: Merle des Essarts is going to be married." They passed into the dining-room. "I've just had the invitation. I believe that Madame des Essarts and I are not on particularly good terms; she neither came to my last big At Home, nor answered the card, nor called afterwards. However.... This Comte de Cler is a most distinguished man. A diplomat. I know him slightly. Much older than the girl, of course; but such charming manners. Isn't it suitable?"

She asked the question rather anxiously, not quite sure if the son of the house of Heron had not once himself deigned to cast an eye towards la maison des Essarts. [347]

"Merle would be a delightful acquisition in the highest ambassadorial circles," Stuart assented warmly.

But he still suspected Jean de Cler of being a stumor.

[348]

CHAPTER VII
JOHNSONESE

Luke was with Jinny at the cake-shop.

“Have another?” said Jinny.

He hesitated. It was her birthday, and she had been tipped, and was treating him. This would have seemed a natural proceeding a year ago, when he would have crammed himself to the utmost limits of her capital. But Luke was growing up; and though not sufficient of a man to forbid the lady to pay, was yet not sufficient of a boy unquestioningly to accept the fifth cream bun. Therefore he compromised with himself: he would ask her to state exactly her financial position; if it exceeded half a crown, he would eat that bun, and be damned to delicate considerations and social etiquette. But if less—

“How much cash have you got, Jinny?”

“Four and six,” promptly; “half a crown from Uncle Will, and two bob from old Simmons. But of course you’ve already eaten some of that.”

“Well, and so’ve you.”

“I’ve only had three, three twopennies—that’s sixpence; you’ve had four.”

“The shortcake’s a penny.”

“Sevenpence, then. And a lemonade each. And two—three sticks of chocolate cream;” Jinny did rapid mental calculations—she was top of her form in arithmetic—and announced two and elevenpence as still remaining from her four and six, after expenses were deducted. Whereat Luke, much relieved, took his fifth cake, satisfied that he had solved the difficulty in fashion befitting a man of the world. [349]

“We’re going to invite you to our Christmas dinner,” he remarked, his mouth full.

“How topping! Who else?”

“The old Baker woman, and Vi. Balaam Atkins,—he’s mashed on Letty, you know. Granpa and Aunt Lou—Granpa’s good for a present, anyway. Oh, and your precious Tommy Cox!”

“Hurrah! He’s spiffing fun. Ever heard him imitate turkeys gobbling?”

“No, and I don’t want to. And I don’t suppose he’d find it difficult. He’s to be lugged in for Vi Baker; she’s supposed to have a broken heart, or some such tommy-rot——”

“And your mother thinks that *Tommy’s rot* will cheer her up?” Jinny exploded into giggles at her own wit; “I say, Luke, did you hear? I said——”

“Oh, keep your hair on! I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Sour grapes! you wouldn’t have thought of it yourself. But won’t Letty’s fellow be there?”

“Sebastian? Oh, rather; didn’t I count him? I say,” Luke leant forward confidentially across the rickety green tin table, “you know how snarky Pater was about him? Well, two mornings ago he had a letter from old Levi—I heard him tell Mater about it—and ever since, he’s simply oiled himself all over Sebastian. And I believe he’s come to see him this afternoon.”

“Who’s come to see who, stupid?”

“Old Levi. He’s frightfully rich. Come to see Pater.”

“Then why isn’t Sebastian frightfully rich? Has he quarrelled with his dad?”

“Secret,” said Luke shortly. “Come along, let’s be off.”

“No—wait—tell me, Luke. Do. I won’t tell, honest Injun. You might, Luke, because it’s my birthday.” [350]

“As if that was a reason,” scorning her femininity. “Besides, you’ll blab.”

“No, I won’t.” And she added: “You might tell me, Luke,—I’m paying for your tea.”

Luke was not offended; indeed, he thought she had put forth a fairly strong argument.

“Well, when he got sort of engaged to Letty, his Guv’nor was going to make him partner at the Stores, and start him on fifteen hundred quid a year.” He repeated the sum impressively. And Jinny gasped:

“My hat!”

“He’s chucked it,” finished Luke, still more impressively.

“My *hat*! Whatever for?”

“Because he’s a Socialist.”

“What difference does that make?”

Luke embarked on an explanation of the first principles underlying the code of equality; threw in a few cutting sentences regarding the palpable unfairness of “one law for the rich and another for the poor”; and wound up by reading his companion a column from the current issue of “Mine and Yours.”

“But that’s all balmy bosh,” was Jinny’s comment.

"*Is* it?" huffily. "As it happens, I'm a Socialist myself."

"*You* are? Crumbs! Why?"

Luke fumbled in vain for words with which to express the queer gleam which had penetrated the murkiness of his schoolboy soul; soul hitherto stamped solely with football scores, surliness, and Jinny; with cheap cigarettes and brandyballs; canings, ink, and the "usual beastliness" of everything. Thereunto had lately to be added the astounding novelty of someone who sacrificed material advantages for the sake of an abstract idea; and the blended beauty and absurdity of the [351] proceeding had uplifted Luke to a queer sense of gladness that such a miracle should actually take place within his ken; had even inspired him with an inarticulate desire to imitate ... somehow. His shyness had never permitted him to confide in Sebastian; otherwise he might have received another shock on hearing that in this case Socialism was not the motive of renunciation. Sebastian, for his part, might have found some difficulty in translating into Johnsonese the twisted asceticism of Stuart Heron.

But Luke only dogged in boorish silence his sister's betrothed. And Sebastian thought his future brother-in-law rather an uncouth lad, with whom he could never have anything in common.

In the meantime, Luke realized the impossibility of laying before Jinny the wonder of a share-and-share-alike community, while she was very importantly calling for the bill, and clinking her coins on to the table; especially as he had absently overstepped his self-imposed limit, and eaten twopence off the half-crown.

"Come on!" cried Jinny, catching up her hockey-stick, and marching out of the shop. She had played in a match that afternoon, and won it, three goals to one. And, re-living her victory, she had forgotten all about Luke's recent outburst. He followed her into the High Street, and thence round the corner into the quiet road running at right angles, and ending abruptly in a high wall which shut off the railway embankment. Luke slouched past the gate of Town House.

"Hi!" shouted Jinny, who had halted at the boarding establishment next door; "have you eaten so much as to forget your own address, fathead?"

"No ... walk with me as far as the wall, Jinny?"

"Why ever?"

"Oh, I dunno; needn't if you don't want to."

She yielded. The constant vituperations with which she adorned her speech, were merely used in defence, as the porcupine shoots its quills. She laboured under a fifteen-year-old delusion that [352] rudeness is the equivalent of wit. But she was very fond of Luke. In fact, in spite of her many assertions to the contrary, her inmost heart preferred him to the redoubtable Tommy Cox.

"Well, what now?" she demanded, in softer tones than usual, as they leant up against the wall.

He looked at her; her curls were tumbled about her neck; her face was a warm blur through the humid mists of a late afternoon in December. Sebastian had been especially devoted to Letty during the last fortnight, and the prevailing atmosphere of sentiment and tenderness had infected Luke. He felt now that he wanted something more of his girl than repartee.... Suddenly he plunged forward; his lips missed her mouth, but landed somewhere in the dim hollow of her throat.

... "Jinny!"

A train thundered along the bank overhead, shook the wall, passed in a rush of light, leaving in its wake a long-drawn-out plaintive whistle....

Then Jinny pulled herself away: "Oh, crumbs! don't be sloppy!" she cried, and ran swiftly down the road, clattering her hockey-stick along the pavement.

Luke, for very shame, remained rooted to the spot long after he had heard the door of number twenty-seven bang behind her.

Mr. Johnson saw his guest off at the front door. Then, with the air of a man completely satisfied, went into the parlour to report to his wife.

"Did you ask him if he wanted tea, Matthew?"

Her husband smiled broadly. "He had a drink and a cigar, my dear."

"One of your good cigars?"

Mr. Johnson nodded; and she knew therefore that all was well, and that she might safely ask [353] questions. "What did he say about Sebastian? Did he tell you the reason——?"

"That he did."

"Well?"

"Ned Levi told me in confidence, Frances."

"Well?" brushing aside this trifling objection.

"There is nothing to prevent a public engagement as soon as ever you like," said Mr. Johnson with dignity; "and nothing to prevent 'em getting married as soon as *they* like. *I* don't know what

we've been waiting for."

"We've been waiting for your consent, Mat," gently.

"They have it; oh, they have it." Mr. Johnson's voice blessed the absent pair.

"And what does Sebastian's father say about Sebastian not taking his money?" asked Mrs. Johnson, returning to the charge.

And having let five minutes elapse since his promise of secrecy, Mr. Johnson felt he might now with honour let the cat out of the bag:

"The cub got it into his head, at Oxford or some such place, that he wouldn't take money that had been made in trade. It may be that some other young snob told him that the Stores swindled pence out of people's pockets. Comes of sending your son to Oxford. And you wanted Luke to go there."

"I believe it's a good place in its way, Mat," Mrs. Johnson said, tolerating Oxford.

"Ned Levi thinks the boy can't fail to come round all right when he's married to a sensible girl. That's why he's anxious to hurry on the wedding."

"But meanwhile they can't live on nothing, Mat. They can't live on Sebastian's hundred a year."

"I'm allowing 'em four hundred a year, just to keep 'em going."

"But—Matthew——" Mrs. Johnson was completely astounded at her husband's sudden magnificent disposal of half his income. [354]

He winked at her; a slow and prodigious wink: "Ned Levi's money, my dear; every cent of it. But not a word to Sebastian."

Thus the plot stood revealed.

"I'm a great one for argerment," continued Mr. Johnson; "and I said to him: 'Levi' I said, him and me being old pals, 'Levi' I said, 'trade's as good as any profession if we in trade like to consider any profession as good as us; and that's logic. But since your jackanapes seems set against takin' trade-money, what's to prevent him refusing mine?' Eh? That's what I said."

"And what is, Mat?"

"What is what?"

"To prevent him refusing yours?"

"It won't be mine. It'll be Ned Levi's."

"Yes, but what's to prevent Sebastian refusing it, whoever of you it comes from?"

But Mr. Johnson seemed to think Sebastian was already "coming round."

"I've noticed him different since a couple of weeks. More easy-like and anxious to please. Only he's too proud to go galloping straight back to the Stores and say: 'Please, sir, I was an ass, give me my partnership and fifteen hundred per annum.' He'll say it by degrees. And half of the whole boiling is his when Ned dies. Not but that Ned's as young as I am, but he looks tired and worn, poor fellow; sort of wistful round the eyes when he said: 'Johnson, it isn't your dowry to your daughter he'll object to; it's only my help he won't take; so it must reach him through a back door.' But Sebastian Levi's a good match for our girl, Frances, even if he's gone temporary mad; now that I know his father's not set against him, as I was afraid."

Mrs. Johnson began: "I was wondering——" and relapsed into silence. [355]

He encouraged her: "Speak up, old lady."

"Whether we mightn't announce the wedding officially at our Christmas dinner. Half the people don't even know Letty's engaged."

"Have it your own way."

"Yes, but I was wondering——"

"You'll hurt yourself with wondering so much," remarked Mr. Johnson facetiously.

"About inviting Mr. Levi. You see, he's a Jew."

"What of it? *I* don't mind."

"Nor do I. But *does* one, to a Christmas dinner?"

"Why not?... Oh! Ah!..." slowly in Mr. Johnson's brain, an atmosphere of holly, plum-pudding, gifts, and jocularity, cleared away, to reveal for an instant the event for which the festival stood as symbol.

"Ah. Um."

Mrs. Johnson folded up her work. "I'm going over to consult Millicent Baker; she knows more about Jews than we. I shouldn't like to do the wrong thing about it, and hurt his feelings."

Mrs. Baker, when the problem was formally laid before her, delivered judgment against. "He might not be able to eat the food. If it isn't cooked Kosher. Of course, if you want to put yourself out——"

"I couldn't possibly ask that much of Cook. When we're twelve sitting down as it is. And I don't think my father would care about a—what do you call it?—Kosher plum-pudding. It doesn't sound

convivial, does it?" doubtfully.

"And yet, Sebastian's father has a right to be present, hasn't he? Even if it makes extra trouble." Mrs. Baker hovered uncertainly; the rich Ned Levi, she knew, was a widower; Mr. Baker had been in his grave since fourteen years.

"What I'm most afraid of," Mrs. Johnson confessed, "is that he'll feel bound to ask us back to one [356] of *his* religious festivals,—that funny one where the Jews go up on the roof and eat pineapple."

"Dear things," murmured Mrs. Baker.

"I approve highly of all these picturesque customs," explained the other lady, painstakingly. "But not for myself. Pineapple in large quantities disagrees with me. Especially the tinned kind. And I believe they have to sit cross-legged."

Then Mrs. Baker, who on questions of etiquette was really invaluable, suggested the brilliant compromise that Mr. Levi, senior, should be invited to dine at Town House on Boxing Day.—"Or on the day after Boxing Day, to make it quite safe."

"That wouldn't be Christmas, really Christmas, at all any more, would it?" Considerably easier in her mind, now that the vexed question was settled, Mrs. Johnson returned home again; having first arranged that on the occasion of Mr. Levi's visit, Mrs. Baker should "just drop in," and aid in his entertainment, on the strength of her experience at Laura Silberstein's wedding.

Letty stopped in front of a giant notice-board, which signified: "To Be Let Or Sold."

"Want to shee inside dat house," she announced, in coaxing baby language. "Oo, please, Sebastian, want to shee inside." She tugged imperiously at his hand.

Behind the murky strip of garden, black windows glimmered faintly in a spectral building.

"Darling baby," Sebastian replied, responding to her whim, "don't you know that a big bogey-man lives behind that door, and you'll hear his bones rattle through the letter-box?"

But Letty only tugged the harder, up the damp gravel path. "One can never tell," stopping and [357] facing him, her blue eyes very serious, her soft curls clinging to cheek and forehead, in little wet tendrils, "how soon we may want a house, now that father has grown nice to you."

She might equally well have said: "Now that you've grown nice to me." For never had she and Sebastian been so happy together, not even in their first days of courtship, as since their quarrel and reconciliation a fortnight ago. He no longer oppressed her with his moody fits, nor snubbed her when she strove to intrude on his remoteness; he even let her minister to one of his headaches, to her great content; moreover, he seemed possessed by a real lover's craving for her constant companionship; and the note in his voice when he spoke her name, filled her with a tremulous wish to cry and laugh, both at the same time.

—How could she know he was being hounded day and night by an idea, and that he was striving to place her between the idea and himself? striving to stifle his eyes and ears with her, to cram himself with her, to the exclusion of all else. How should she guess that he dared not love her little, lest her presence should prove too feeble for its purpose; dared not love her much, because of the hard bite in a man's voice saying: "At the height is the time to cut with any credit, my lad!"... Why, then the more he loaded Letty with his tenderness, the nearer he brought their passion to the height where——But he dared not love her less, nor yet more.

Sebastian had not been near Stuart, since the latter had, hornet-wise, stung his brain to a veritable madness of thought. Stung, and stung again, and left the sting within. Sebastian hated Stuart,—and Lord! how one *could* hate a man who was capable of such ruthless brutality as to treat love like some luxuriant but dangerous growth; cut it away for the sake of ... of what? This was where Sebastian always lost the idea; could sense it, indeed, far-off, taunting him for his lack [358] of understanding:

"You're not big enough. Not big enough."

"He's not human. Not human," the boy would shout in reply.

He had perpetual nightmares of killing Stuart; actually hacking at him with a knife; searching for some vulnerable spot. But the blade would rebound against a hard invisible resistance.... The nightmare recurred again and again, tiring Sebastian, wearing him to tatters, with its frenzied futility.

—"Ooo! light a match, Sebastian; it's so dark," cried Letty, as the front door yielded to her timid pressure.

The blue flicker betrayed the interior of the house as quite new, smelling strongly of paint, completely devoid of furniture; the walls unpapered; the floors sonorous to the tramp of feet. Some boards and pails lying about, and a candle-end stuck into a bottle on the chimney-piece, betokened that the workmen were still employed there during the daytime.

"Well?" said Sebastian, watching with considerable amusement, as Letty, candle in hand, peeped into all the bare echoing apartments, evidently seeing in them far more than was apparent to the male eye. "Will it do for us? Which is to be my study?"

Solemnly she led him into what might have been a fair-sized cupboard.

“I protest!” cried Sebastian wrathfully. “You’re just a tyrant. *This* shall be my study.” And he planted himself firmly in the very largest room of all.

“The drawing-room, of course,” Letty contradicted, her voice holding vistas of many ‘At Home days.’ “And I can’t have your dirty boots all over the pink carpet. Oh, Sebastian, let’s pretend, a bit in each room, that we’re already living here; just to see what you’re like in a house of your own.”

They began their game in a phantom-ridden dining-room; at an imaginary breakfast-table. [359]

“Lettice,” angrily, “this is the fifth bill I’ve had for rose chintz. You’ve had enough rose chintz to make a canopy for Hampstead Heath.”

“Oh, Sebastian, and I’ve only covered three tiny little cushions for your study. I do think you’re ungrateful.”

“I’ve told you sixty times I won’t have cushions in my study.”

“I’m only trying to make you comfortable.”

... A Vision, fading into the cold blue frosts that lay beyond comfort or cushions.... He had chosen. Not for him, the Vision. Another man had been stronger, pursued it and held it....

“Now you’re working hard at your desk,” commanded Letty, passing into the room behind. “And I come in and disturb you. I want to test your temper.”

“Seek not to know what the gods have in their mercy hidden,” laughed Sebastian, giving her the candle; she went into the passage, and shut the door on him; for an instant he was alone in the thick blackness.

... But he liked these stark naked rooms with their wide wash of window. What sort of an appearance would they present when furnished in a blend of Johnsonese and his own æstheticism? Letty, he knew, liked cheerful colours and a litter of knick-knacks—hateful word, knick-knacks—one would fall over them—they stood on rickety tables. He was beginning also to dislike his own previous notions about schemes and harmonies of decoration. They spread a cloying smoothness over his mind, fretting for harsher salter relief.... The idea was catching him again, here in the draughty dark.... In a panic he stumbled to the door, calling out her name: “Letty! Letty!”...

She entered with the candle:

“Darling, I’m so sorry to disturb you, but dinner is getting cold on the table. Sarah rang the gong [360] three times,” reproachfully.

He remembered the game, then; and with an affectation of irritability, consigned Sarah and the gong both to the devil.

“Sebastian, you really must not use such language, even if you are busy.” She came up behind him, and put her arms round his neck. “Say you’re sorry!”

“You’ve smudged the page.”

“Say you’re sorry!”

—The game led them upstairs, to the bedrooms.

“Now it’s my turn to be inside,” suggested Letty. “You’ve come home late, oh, horribly late; and I’ve been waiting up for you.”

“I seem to have a pretty rotten character altogether in this show,” Sebastian objected. “What about you coming home late?”

“Wives don’t,” said Letty and a lovely colour flooded her face at the word she had unwittingly let slip.

He smiled. “Don’t they? All right, then we’ll both be coming home late; I refuse to be a prodigal, for you to bully me. We’ve been out together, Letty darling, and you’re dead tired; I think I have to carry you upstairs.” He strode ahead, and placed the candle on the window-sill of the front first-floor room. Then, his hands free, returned for his burden.

“Sebastian, you’re crushing me....”

“Let me undress you, you sleepy baby. Sit down while I pull the combs out of your hair ... what soft light masses ... like burying one’s hands in a snow-drift only it’s warm ... warm. Did you enjoy yourself, dancing with me to-night?”

“It was glorious; I’d rather waltz with you than anyone, Sebastian.”

“Even though I’m only your husband?”

A hush. While the spearhead of flame spun fantastic humped shadows over the ceiling.

... “What are you doing?” her voice was low as a lullaby. [361]

“Taking off your absurd shoes, sweet. No, you’re not to do a thing for yourself; what am I here for?”

“To love me,” she murmured.

“To love you, Letty? Oh, Letty, it’s good to come home like this, to our own house. Drowsy little girl, you can shut your eyes now—now——”

—And now the room had miraculously furnished itself; long mirrors reflecting the silver on the toilet-table; great dark flowers patterned on the walls; in a recess, the shadowy blue gleam of a satin quilt, the twinkle of brass knobs.... The whole drear abode seemed suddenly astir with movement, as though their duet had quickened to life each chamber as they passed through. Somebody was singing overhead—empty hearths had burst into a glow—footsteps ran up and down the lit stairs—

“Letty!”

... Gone, that bleak vision which had tormented him. Vision which sometimes took the shape of a lean figure running, always running, against the wind. Triumphantly Sebastian recognized that it had lost its power with him; he had succeeded in shutting it out—shutting it out, please God, for always....

“Letty! Letty!”

Her name was the talisman; and her fragrance....

—“Sebastian dear, it’s time to go home, isn’t it? I’m just a wee bit cold.”

So they left behind them the empty house; and very close together, walked back to Turnham Green. As they drew near the gate of Town House, a familiar figure loomed in sight from the opposite direction.

“Hullo, Luke; been climbing the railway bank again?”

“No,” disgustedly; he had forsworn these childish pastimes fully two years ago. “I was just hanging about. Mater’s gone over to the Baker woman; I saw her cross the road.” [362]

“Here she is,” cried Letty, as Mrs. Johnson joined them, with a cheery: “Well, children, had a nice afternoon, all of you? Coming in to have a bit of supper with us, Sebastian?”

He hesitated. “Mr. Johnson——”

“He’ll be delighted,” his wife promised. And indeed, Mr. Johnson’s amiability over the roast mutton was a thing to be remembered. The visit of Mr. Levi, senior, was not mentioned; but the marvelling lovers were informed they might fix their wedding-day for the near future, and formally announce the date at dinner on Christmas Day.

“Four o’clock,” Mrs. Johnson reminded Sebastian. “We always start dinner at four on Christmas day, and go on just as long as ever we like.”

“And don’t you take much breakfast, my boy,” put in Mr. Johnson; “just nibble at a bit o’ dry toast. For I warn you, you’ll need every bit of your appetite later on.”

[363]

CHAPTER VIII
THE DISCIPLE

"Christmas comes but once a year,
When it comes it brings good cheer!"

Granpa Cubitt's sally was received with hearty cheers. And Luke whispered to Jinny: "He's only starting now; you don't know Granpa. He can make verses about anybody, jump up and make 'em. You'll see."

"*Does* it, though?" questioned Tommy Cox, à propos of Christmas and good cheer. The invited guests, complete in number, had been waiting in the drawing-room since five minutes to four,—and now it was eight minutes past, and no dinner had as yet been announced. "I tell you what," continued Tommy disconsolately; "I believe Mrs. J. has humbugged us over turkey and plum-pudding; and brought us all here to starve us to death, just to show there's no ill-feeling. Oooo! Muvver! Don't want to be a skelington!" And he plumped himself down on the sofa, and with knuckles screwed into his eyes, pretended to floods of bitter weeping.

Granpa whispered to Letty: "What is that young man's name, my dear?"

"Tommy Cox, Granpa."

Rising to his feet, Granpa pointed with one finger towards the blubbering youth; and, lifting the other hand to enjoin silence, delivered himself of his first impromptu of the evening:

"Little Tommy Cox-o
Crying for his Oxo!
What shall we give him?
A Xmas box-o!"

"Now then, you young ladies, there's a chance for you!" [364]

Amid shouts of laughter, and "Bravo, Granpa!" Jinny ran forward, and with all her strength, smote Tommy upon the ear.

"A Xmas box-o!" she chanted triumphantly. And was only delivered from Tommy's vengeance, by the timely appearance of Mrs. Johnson in the doorway. With quiet exaltation, she trumpeted forth the single word:

"Dinner."

At once a hush fell upon the company. A hush of relief and expectation and a sense of the solemn rite unto which they were summoned. Mr. Johnson led the way to the dining-room, Aunt Lou panting upon his arm. Granpa followed with Mrs. Baker; and there ensued a real difficulty in getting them past the threshold, above which dangled a large bunch of mistletoe. Mrs. Johnson had purposely thrown the two together, as Milly Baker never took offence at a bit of fun, "and really, with father, you never know what he'll be up to!" The next pair, Tommy Cox and Vi Baker, were a carefully-thought-out blend of merriment and sorrow; Vi had taken to drooping her head and refusing comfort, since she had given Ernie the chuck, and—"If Tommy can't cheer her up, I don't know who can!" reflected the hostess of the occasion. Sebastian and Letty were coupled as a matter of course; and Luke and Jinny. Mrs. Johnson herself brought up the rear with Balaam Atkins, who under a neatly dressed and well-bred exterior, concealed a heart that still beat faithfully for Letty. He did not know yet that she was formally betrothed to another; and Mrs. Johnson was sorry for him, aware that the blow would descend within the hour; she determined to make it her business that he should eat a good meal, believing that trouble always falls hardest on an empty stomach.

A thrill and a gasp ran round the assembly at first sight of the festive board, decorated profusely with holly and evergreens, and connected with the chandelier by trails of smilax. Red and blue and green crackers glittered in upright threes, like small bivouac fires; or lay scattered flat between the plentiful dishes of almonds and raisins and chocolates. On every lady's name-card, Letty had tastefully painted a spray of holly, with a suitable sentiment attached; and on every gentleman's, a robin redbreast. The glistening napkins were folded into boat-shapes, each beside a formidable array of glasses and tumblers, expressive of much conviviality to come. A miniature fir tree occupied the proud position of centre-piece, gaily bedecked with flags. Mrs. Johnson had spent much care and time on the arrangement of her table, and wore an expression of majestic geniality while her guests applauded, and, still with that touch of awe upon them, slid into their appointed places. [365]

The soup was brought in, and doled out. Then arose a squeal from Jinny:

"Oo-er! my shoe!" she had been attempting to attract the attention of Luke, who, through some shuffling of seats, sat opposite instead of beside her. In an instant, Tommy Cox was underneath the table, disporting himself mightily among the slippers easily detachable, and continually bringing one up in his mouth, for Jinny's inspection—"No, Tommy, no; mine's a bronze one; that's Vi's!" And giggles from a rapidly brightening Violet Baker: "Well, I never! You have a sauce! Put it back where you found it, this very minute."

Granpa cleared his throat impressively:

"Young man, you are much too bold,
You'll have the lady catching cold!"

"How you do it, all of a sudden like that, beats me," said Mrs. Baker admiringly. "Why, you're quite a poet." [366]

Bang! went the first cracker, between Aunt Lou and her brother-in-law Mr. Johnson. And "Hooray!" cried Luke and Jinny in unison, taking this for permission to demolish the bivouacs, and start pulling across the table.

"Not till dessert, Luke. Put those crackers back at once. Matthew, I'm ashamed of you, setting such an example."

"I can't wait! I can't wait!" bellowed Tommy the Humorist, holding a cracker to each eye, and squinting through, to find out what was inside.

"There's beef for whoever wants it," announced the carver, flourishing the knife over a prime large turkey.

Half-way through his portion of the bird—and a well-heaped-up portion too,—Granpa thought it about time that Sebastian and Letty should be brought into prominence. Enjoining silence, as he always did before casting his pearls, he sipped his claret, coughed and choked several times, waggled an arch and shining head, and spouted:

> "I can see a red-haired lover
> Who's squeezing his best girl's hand under the table cover.
> I do not think I've need to name him,
> And all I can say is: I don't blame him."

"Granpa! how can you?" cried Letty, confused and blushing; "I wasn't,—I mean, he wasn't."

"Bless them ... dear innocent things ..." murmured Mrs. Baker, smoothing down the front of her prune-coloured silk wrappings and excrescences and fermentations. She was fearfully and wonderfully clad, this Xmas Day. Aunt Lou eyed her with suspicion. Aunt Lou considered Granpa not too old to make an old fool of himself. She was the only spinster daughter, a rosy bouncing lady, who wasn't likely to stand a stepmother being put over *her*.

Sebastian laughed hilariously at Granpa's joke; and continued laughing, even after the general mirth had died down. Letty thought she'd never seen him so lively; no, nor yet so handsome, dark eyes flaming in a dead-white face, lips wine-red and feverish, hair a ruffled auburn halo. "He's like a god; he's glorious," thought Letty; and turned, girl-like, to Balaam Atkins on her other side, that she might compare him disparagingly with Sebastian. [367]

Mr. Atkins murmured: "I don't blame him either, Miss Letty,"—and suddenly she felt sorry for her discarded swain, who really was just the sort of man to have made her happy, with his neat normal ideas, and neat clothes, and neat bank-balance, and neat fair features. Sebastian might have resembled a god, but Balaam Atkins was simply a cut-out model of a good husband ... and did not contrast so very unfavourably after all.

With the entrance of the lit plum pudding, flanked on one side by the mince-pies, on the other by a very yellow trifle (not free from a faint suspicion of Bird's custard powder), the last traces of restraint disappeared from the party. Jinny, quite forgetting such everyday things as manners, quite forgetting she wore her best pink dress with the Irish lace collar, sprang on to her chair, waved her spoon, and clamoured to be served first, before the leaping fires went out. Indulgently, because she was the youngest present, her wish was granted.

"Greedy pig!" cried Luke. And: "Jea-lous!" sang back Jinny, emulating the fire-eater's celebrated act.

A few minutes later: "Mrs. Baker's got the *twins*!" shrieked Tommy Cox, in an ecstasy of delight, snatching from that lady's plate the linked china dolls, and dangling them aloft for the world to see.

"I believe she did it on purpose," muttered Aunt Lou disgustedly. While Granpa chanted amorously to his giggling wriggling neighbour: [368]

> "Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, Baker's twins!
> It ain't no use tryin' to gobble up your sins!
> We all can spot 'em,
> And wonder how you got 'em!"

"Father!!!" Mrs. Johnson had overheard, and was shocked beyond measure at her wicked old parent.

Jinny had the wedding-ring; and would much have preferred the threepenny-bit, which fell to Mr. Johnson's share; wiping and pocketing the coin, he remarked waggishly that it would help pay for this dinner, which, as it was, had left him a Ruined Man. And then Aunt Lou took offence, and said there were plenty of invitations just as good that she and her father might have accepted if they'd known Matthew grudged them a morsel of bird and a fragment of pudding; and even if he only said it in fun, it wasn't at all funny to make one's guests feel uncomfortable, especially at Yuletide, which ought to be a season of peace-on-earth goodwill-to-men. Then Mr. Johnson apologized; and Aunt Lou, softened, wept a little, was pressed to a second helping of plum-pudding, and all was harmony again.

Violet Baker had found the old maid's thimble under her spoon, but managed to conceal it; Tommy Cox was being very attentive, and there was no sense in putting him off from the start, so

to speak.

At last, when the pudding-plates were removed, and replaced by mounds of oranges and figs and dates; when port gleamed duskily in every glass, and the nut-crackers were freely circulating, Mrs. Johnson gave the anxiously awaited signal for the crackers to be pulled. Then indeed, pandemonium reached its height; then indeed, every head, old and young, was drunkenly crowned by paper cap or bonnet; and: bang! bang! bang! the squibs exploded up and down the [369]
table. The cloth was one glittering litter of green and red transparency, all mixed up with the orange-peel and silver paper. Luke and Jinny had each a musical instrument at their lips, and squeaked and squawked ceaselessly, their cheeks blown out and purple with the exertion. Vi Baker and Tommy Cox had their heads very close together over a finger-bowl, in which they were experimenting with those Japanese puzzles that open out in water; his arm was around her waist; and she, transported by the hectic screaming excitement of Xmas, was content to leave it there. Granpa, who had donned a rakish gilt crown, between whose spikes one could glimpse the gas-light reflected in the naked polish of his cranium, was busy making a collection of mottoes, riddles and sentimental verse, from the crackers, and reading them aloud. From the kitchen below, quavered the third repetition of "Good King Wenceslas." Balaam Atkins whispered to Letty, in a tone pregnant of mournful meaning: "I wonder—if I might venture—to ask you—to pull with me, Miss Letty?"—Then, utterly abashed, realized what construction might have been put upon his innocent demand; and dropped the cracker, and went down after it, and remained obliterated for quite a period of time. And Mrs. Baker, wearing a washer-woman's bonnet, which had an air strangely and horribly appropriate, was dancing,—yes, actually dancing, with Aunt Lou Cubitt; all enmity forgotten in the sudden discovery that forty years ago they had met at the same terpsichorean school, where little girls in frilled pantaloons learnt to jig and reel and polka.—And: "Do you remember the Bluebell Schottische?" cried Aunt Lou; which led to the pleasing exhibition just mentioned, of two middle-aged ladies gathering up their skirts, and prancing and twirling down the narrow space of the room between the wall and the row of chairs.

"I used to be light as a fairy," panted Mrs. Baker, regaining her seat. [370]

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson exchanged a mute dialogue of glances, which might be curtly translated as: "When?" "Now." And Mr. Johnson, glass in hand, rose to his feet.

"Speech! Speech!" cried Tommy Cox, thumping on the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen—and friends," began Mr. Johnson, making a fine distinction. "I must hurry up with what I'm going to say, because I can see the gas is goin' down, and I haven't got a penny for the metre—leave alone for the meat!" Here he made a great show of being terrified of Aunt Lou's disapproval; but she, mellowed by port, merely smiled benignly; and he went on: "And I wouldn't like to talk to you in the dark, my friends, and lose sight of your beaming faces wreathed in happy smiles, as my pal Will Shakespeare once said,—or was it Granpa Cubitt? 'Pon my word, I'm getting mixed with all these poets."

Whereat there was great applause, and Granpa was patted vigorously on the back.

"Who has added so richly to the evening's entertainment," said Mr. Johnson, in an inspired sentence all by itself. Then he recommenced:

"I think I can say, in which my wife joins me," (cheers) "that nowhere in England, no, nor yet anywhere else, has a merrier party sat round any table, nor had a merrier Xmas." (Chorus of assent.) "So may you all enjoy the best of luck till we meet over our next plum-pudding."

—A groan from Jinny, to whom the thought was agony. And, amid the cheering and tattoo of feet which followed the host's oratory, Balaam Atkins, suddenly coming to the fore, begged to propose a toast to The Ladies. Leave being vociferously given, he gave utterance, in precise, rather [371]
lugubrious tones, to the following rollicking bit of sentiment:

"Your eyes!
My eyes!
Your lips!
My lips!
Our eyes have met!
Our lip—not yet!
Here's hoping!"

Then he sat down again.

"Here's hoping!" cried Tommy Cox, clinking glasses with Vi Baker, and then with every other lady present. The rest of the gentlemen gallantly followed suit.

Mr. Johnson had remained on his feet, to intimate that he had not yet finished what he had to say. A meaning smile signified that something of importance lay behind his silence. So, by unanimous consent, voices were hushed to allow him to proceed.

"I am profiting of the festive occasion," spoke Mr. Johnson, "and may I be propheting truly" (interval for laughter; and for the pun to be explained to Aunt Lou, who was almost asleep), "to make an announcement that to some of you will be a surprise, and to some won't. It's this: Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to fill your glasses and drink to the engagement of my only daughter with Mr. Sebastian Levi, here present."

The enthusiasm was tremendous. Vi Baker came round the table to embrace her friend; Aunt Lou collapsed from sheer astonishment, and was heard vociferating that she had never dreamt of

such a thing. Granpa composed an appropriate rhyme—threw it off with no trouble at all—which was forever lost to the world, because Jinny and Tommy Cox were relieving their overcharged feelings in a prolonged bout of hip-pip-pip-hurrahs! And Balaam Atkins took the news like the gentleman he was, and with a terrific effort, managed to ejaculate: “I hope you will be very, very [372] happy, Miss Letty.” But Letty unfortunately did not hear him, in the general hubbub surrounding her.

“Before calling on my future son-in-law for a reply,” shouted Mr. Johnson, over the tumult, “I want to make him a little Christmas-box. I want to make it here, in front of you all. It’s the custom of the country, and I speak of the best country in the world, which is England” (“Rule Britannia!” yelled Tommy), “that the lady shall name the day. Well, I’m going to reverse that process. I’m a bold man, and I’m going to give Mrs. Grundy a rouser. Me and my wife and my daughter are going to sit mum, while the bridegroom now fixes the date of the wedding. It may be that he’ll say in a month; or it may be that he’ll get scared of the noose of matrimony—or shall I call it the noose-ance?” (loud laughter) “and plead for six months’ extension of liberty. Or it may be he’ll say to-morrow,—one never can tell with these fiery-headed young chaps how much delay they can stand!” (more laughter) “I just hope he’ll remember that young ladies need a little time to get together their frillies,—at least, so I’ve been told.” (“Go on! as if you didn’t know!” from Mrs. Baker, rather over-excited.) “Sebastian, my boy, it’s up to you.” Mr. Johnson sat down.

Amid acclamation, Sebastian was hauled to his feet. Letty gave his hand an encouraging squeeze.

“For he’s a jolly good fel-low!”

started Tommy Cox; in a burst of gruff enthusiasm, Luke joined in; and then the rest of the company.

“—And so say all of us!”

... They were silent now, waiting for Sebastian.

Past the heat and the uproar and the odour of food, past the coarse laughter and good-humoured jokes, the grinning capped faces, and the disorderly table, Sebastian glimpsed it clearly, his Vision ... never before as clearly: a lean stripped figure, striving, battling, forcing itself against [373] the rushing winds of earth; hands clenched, jaw pushed forward ... yes, surely it was Stuart’s face he saw!

—These others should share the vision with him. He was about to sacrifice to it—these others should understand why. He knew now to what point he had been goaded through all the sweetness of the past weeks, through all the gabble and gobble of the past hour. He knew. He wasn’t going to flinch. Boring a hole in the wind with the thrust of one’s own body.... If Stuart could do it, he could.

The first notes of his voice startled his hearers; it seemed pitched somehow in the wrong key; neither jocular nor embarrassed:

“I can’t fix a day for the wedding, as Mr. Johnson has asked me to. I—there won’t be a wedding. My engagement with Letty is broken off.”

—Suddenly he wanted to laugh. Granpa’s face, just opposite, looked so funny in its dropped amazement, the gilt crown at a crooked angle on the shining poll.... Everyone’s face was funny—staring—staring—round eyes and open mouths wherever he looked—like waxworks. Letty ... well, Letty was beside him. He need not see her unless he turned his head....

“You all think me quite mad,” Sebastian went on, after a pause. “Well, and I think you mad, all of you. I’ve been thinking so all through dinner. Because you can’t see anything beyond the dining-room table, and what’s on it. If I married Letty, I should have to sit for the rest of my life at a dining-room table, looking at the food. It would be warm and comfortable and satisfying, and in time I should grow as mad as you. I very nearly did. But I’m sane now—and I’m bitten with the horror of getting all one wants, and going on getting it, and not wanting any more. Giving up [374] Letty now, I shall want her my whole life long ... for I love her—do you understand that? Of course, you think one shouldn’t speak of love except to be funny about it—but you’ve got to realize that I love her, every bit of her; that I love her, and I’m giving her up—and oh, God! how it hurts.... How good that it should hurt....”

He bowed his face on to his hands, unable for an instant to grapple with the swift salt cruelty of self-torment. From beside him, came the sound of soft weeping. There was to be no splendid help from Letty, in his renunciation; quite simply, she laid her head down on her arms and sobbed, because she didn’t know what was the matter with Sebastian,—oh, what was the matter with him, that he should be so unkind?

Luke was gazing, wide-eyed, mouth gaping; he had not understood a single word of Sebastian’s discourse, but, nevertheless, his soul was one flame of admiration. A half-fearful hope of happiness was stiffening the limp spirit of Balaam Atkins. But Mr. Johnson, on whose brow a ponderous wrath had gathered, burst out, almost apoplectic with rage:

“Let me tell you, sir, that if you’re not a lunatic, you’re a blackguard. You’re behaving like a blackguard!”

Sebastian raised his head: “I’ve told you that I want her,” he cried fiercely; “is that behaving like a blackguard, not to take what you want?—But you’re thick, every one of you; thick with food and drink. Can’t you get clear of your flesh for a moment, and get a grip of—of—— Look here, this is neither my creed nor my credit: it’s another man’s ... he’s *done* it, I tell you—stripped himself of love, because it’s better to desire than to possess. If you’re strong enough.... If you’re strong enough. I gave up my solid income, and my solid position in the world,—didn’t that show you I [375] must have had some keener leaner ideal than just welfare? Or did you merely think me possessed?... But it’s splendid, I tell you, to be possessed; possessed by the truth; driven by it—hounded—tortured—till you cast away all goods, all ties,—run a race against your own luck—outstrip your own luck—just for the fun of it—throw off the bondage ... bondage of great deeds....”

He was repeating Stuart’s catch-phrases now; flinging them out mechanically, hoping they would sting some blind understanding, where his own eloquence had failed.

And then his mood changed, as he discovered it didn’t matter if these people understood or not; he had done his part; done what Stuart Heron had done before him: cut away love....

—“That the memory of love shall be like a sword-blade,” he muttered half-aloud; but the words meant nothing—they tasted dry. Letty’s sobs were each a separate pang in his heart. The Vision, having spurred him to the culminating burst of exaltation, now deserted him altogether. He did not know any more for what strange reasons he had performed this strange act. But since the master knew, that was sufficient; the disciple was content to follow blindly. He would go now and lay his shattered world as a tribute at Stuart’s feet ... where he had already laid his father’s disappointment ... his own ambitions. His shattered world at Stuart’s feet.

He pushed back his chair, and stumbled to the door. Nobody tried to stop him. He had paralysed the happy Christmas party, so that no sound broke through the leaden silence ... even Letty was quiet now. Sebastian groped among the overcoats hanging from the hall rack—so many overcoats—he was quite incapable of recognizing his own. Did it matter, after all? But still he took down first one and then another from their pegs, and replaced them, stifled by the musty folds. A wreath of holly, which encircled the mirror set in the rack, tumbled to the ground. Sebastian [376] picked it up, stood in a dazed fashion, the thorns pricking his fingers: was there no end to the damage he was doing these people’s Yule?

Mrs. Johnson led her weeping daughter from the dining-room, and up the stairs. They passed Sebastian as if he did not exist.

... “Oh, mother, how could he, in front of them all, say that he didn’t love me any more?”...

So much for Letty’s comprehension of motive. Sebastian laughed hysterically, and banged the hall door behind him. Half-way up the road, he looked back, and saw Luke signalling to him from the gate. He went on. Could not be bothered with the boy. Stuart—he was going to Stuart.

Disappointedly, Luke turned back into the house. On the threshold he was met by Jinny:

“Everybody’s so horrid. Wasn’t he a beast to spoil all our fun? Luke, do let’s get away from everybody for a bit, till they’ve calmed down. I’ve bagged some chocs from the table.” She displayed them, moist and brown, clenched in her hot hands. She looked very pretty, in her bright pink dress and coral beads. Luke surveyed her a moment. Then he said:

“I don’t want any chocs. And I’m not ever going to see you again, Jinny, old girl. At least, not if I can help it”; he remembered the proximity of her dwelling.

Jinny dropped her spoils; and, crimson with anger and surprise, gasped out:

“Well I never! You potty *too*!”

“No,” retorted Luke, kicking with his foot against the top step, “I’m not potty, and nor’s he. You girls don’t understand, that’s all. There are things we can do better without you. Things!” he repeated darkly, wondering the while what they were. “Girls are soft——”

“We’re not soft. Soft yourself!” [377]

“I don’t mean that sort of soft. And the more we care for you, the finer it is of us to break with you.” He had grasped this much from Sebastian’s outburst. “So you see, Jinny——”

But Jinny was neither as submissive as Letty, nor as responsive as Peter, under similar treatment.

“Break with me, indeed!” tossing her curls indignantly, while the big pink satin bow at the nape of her neck, perked out in aggressive sympathy; “well, you *have* got a cheek on you, Luke Johnson. Got to be on with a girl before you’re off with her, *I*’ve always heard. And you were never on with me, that I’m jolly well sure. No, nor likely to be,—a great gawky lumpy-faced boy!”

She picked up her coat, which was lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the hall-stand, and flouncing past her stricken sweetheart, marched down the four steps of Town House, and up the four steps of Arcadia, next door.

—Luke made a sudden forward dive over the stone parapet that divided them, and caught Jinny awkwardly by her skirt:

“Let me go!” she twisted round, that he might not see the tears which scalded her eyes.

“Jinny,” his voice was low; “it’s—I was only joking, y’know. It’s all right about the panto tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Not so sure.”

“Jinny!”

“Oh,—I suppose so!” she detached herself from his grasp, and vanished indoors.

Luke had not been able to pull it off, after all. Not quite.

CHAPTER IX
THE MASTER

“Mr. Heron is dressing, sir.” The butler at Careton House Terrace looked with some disfavour at the dishevelled wild-eyed young man, who at 7 p.m. on Christmas Day, rang such frenzied peals at the bell, and asked for the son of the house, in such strange husky tones. It wasn’t usual; and the butler’s reply contained a tinge of severity mingled with its formal respect.

“I’ll go up to him.” Brushing past the astonished retainer, Sebastian rushed up the two flights of stairs; and, without knocking, entered Stuart’s bedroom.

Stuart, in evening-dress, was standing before the mirror, and polishing his eyeglass. “You, Levi? Why, what’s the matter?”

Sebastian stood just within the door, limbs and tongue alike paralysed of movement. There was so much—so much he had need to say to Stuart: the words buzzed and beat in his brain like swarms of hornets. All through his headlong passage through the deserted streets, he had been working up and up to this moment. He wanted to shout what he had done, and how he had done it; he wanted to assure Stuart over and over again that he regretted nothing, no, not even Letty; that he was grateful to the master for rescuing him from happiness, pointing out to him the cold path among the stars.... Stars? but they weren’t cold; they were throbbing hot—green and blue and red—like the glistening paper that was wrapped around a cracker ... and they were jigging [379] and squibbing and somersaulting in front of his eyes—tumbling wheeling stars ... or were they sobs? Ridiculous! one couldn’t see sobs.... Somebody had been sobbing lately, he knew....

He took an uncertain step forward, held out his hands towards Stuart,—then reeled over into a chair, head dropped on to his arms.... He had to thank Stuart—was thanking him now—heard his own voice babbling the phrase over and over again.... “Curse you.... Curse you....”

He had not meant to say it. He had meant to say exactly the contrary: “I’ve done what you once did; you showed me the way; you——” But things were happening to him now totally beyond his own volition. The exultation of his deed accomplished transported him, maddened him, to strange contortions of speech, outside all reason:

“Curse you.... Curse you....”

In silence Stuart stood looking down upon the boy. He guessed what had happened; had anticipated, ever since their last conversation, that Sebastian would come bursting in upon him, to relate that he had smashed with Letty. It was better so; the two would never have understood each other rightly. And yet—wasn’t it a pity, after all, to have destroyed an idyll? A sudden remorse swept over Stuart; and with it, an awful desolation of uncertainty: What had he been doing with other people’s lives?... His metaphysics dropped away from under his feet, leaving him treading upon a void. For one wont to be so quietly sanely self-confident, the sensation was horrible. He could not remain any longer where he was, in the same room with ... with the wreckage. Stuart left Sebastian; went slowly down, and into his study. He was entertaining a large party of family and friends that evening at the Carlton; was already due at the Restaurant; [380] felt disinclined to start. He strolled to the window, and looked out; the street wore that blank forlorn look which falls upon chimney-top and pavement on Christmas Day. Only once before had Stuart been so utterly miserable, so incomplete in himself, clutching for some outside reassurance that he existed at all; he had gone to Merle then, and laid his head in her lap, and she had asked no questions. But now Merle was on her honeymoon in France. And, besides, it was not Merle he wanted....

He crossed the room to the telephone. Was there any reason why he should not get what he wanted most? Only his theory—slippery ball on the summit of which he had insecurely balanced himself. It would be rather fun to jump off his own theory, and kick it away, hear it go bounding and bouncing on its course! Great fun! argued leprechaun.

—“Trunk. 904 Thatch Lane.”

It took some time before the connection was established. Stuart sat on the arm of a chair, and looked hard at the receiver. Presently the whir of the bell shrilled in his ear. It startled him, even though he was waiting for it so intently.

“Hello!”

... “Hello!” Evidently the maid at Bloemfontein.

“Can I speak to Miss Kyndersley, please?”

It never struck him that she might be out. She would not be out. That sort of thing had always happened right for him and Peter.

“Yes, sir. What name?”

“No name.”

After a pause, Peter’s voice:

“Hello!”

“Hello—Peter!”

She knew at once. He could tell that by the silence. That was like Peter; she would not reply till in [381]

control of her tumbled feelings.

At last: “A Merry Christmas to you, Stuart!”

Her mocking accent, in a vivid flash of memory, brought her image to his mind, as he had first seen her: Cavalier poise of the head; boyish figure wrapped close in a bronze cloak, shimmering gold where the light caught it, umber in its shadowy folds; a tingle about her movements, as of some hazardous quest in the air. His master-maid!… And what had he to do with loneliness now?

—“Peter, I want to take you home from Euston to Thatch Lane—to-night—at once. May I?”

A low gurgle of laughter:

“But, dear, I’m due in ten minutes at the Lorrimers’. They have a party.”

“And I’m due since half an hour at the Carlton. I have a party. Peter … will you come?”

“To your party?”

“No. My God, no. Baldwin will look after all that. To Euston?” Silence again.… He was sure she had gone away from the receiver:

“Peter! Peter! Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Will you come?”

“Yes, Stuart.”

Quarter of an hour later, and his car was whirling him through the grim portals of Euston Station. The grey fogs clung thicker than ever about the great outer hall. The porters moved about like hobgoblins in a dream. Speechless and voiceless they all seemed, and yet the vaulted roof echoed and re-echoed with ceaseless hollow shouts. By dint of enquiries, Stuart found out that the 5.17 from Leaford, four stations further down the line than Thatch Lane, due at Euston since 6.20, had probably not yet started on its languid career, and need certainly not be expected at Euston till [382] somewhere in the environment of nine o’clock. The giant clock pointed with its hands to three minutes past eight.

“That ull be the next h’in from Thatch Lane, sir. We’re bound to be a bit h’unpunctual Christmas-time. There’s the mails, sir. And people leavin’ their ’omes. An’ it’s a bit thick on the line further down, maybe. Thank you, sir.”

Throughout his life, Stuart vowed he did ample penance for his crowded sins, by this interminable period of waiting. He had forgotten now all about Sebastian; all about his remorse; the blanket of desolation had lifted from his spirit. He was merely one concentrated throb of impatience. Occasionally he dogged station-masters or signals, in the hope that these might be induced to render up their prey. Their prey was the 5.17 from Leaford. But they were immutable. Once he worked, feverishly, at an automatic machine, inducing it to yield box after box of matches, in order to feel that he could, of his own accord, make something *move*, even clockwork. Ghostly trucks clanked up and down the platforms; drifting wraiths asked him if he knew when and where impossible trains started for impossible places; he strove to give them all the help in his power, in order to placate the dark gods of Euston.

At twenty-five minutes past nine, the red eye of an engine glimmered far down the stretching parallels of steel; and Stuart was informed that this, in all probability, was the Leaford 5.17. Not even now would the porter commit himself to a certainty; this was the season when freakish spirits controlled the great terminus.

The linked cubes of light drew up beside the platform; doors opened, and people tumbled forth, an ever thickening crowd.

—Then Stuart saw Peter. She was walking swiftly in his direction. He moved forward to meet her. [383] Silently, side by side, they went on to the barrier.

“We must see at once about your train to Thatch Lane,” said Stuart at last, in strictly matter-of-fact tones.

She replied gravely: “Yes, we mustn’t miss it on any account.” But her lips twitched a little at the corners.

Stuart’s star, evidently again in working order, manœuvred that the 7.41 to Leaford, stopping at Thatch Lane, should be girding its loins for departure, just as the pair strolled on to number four platform. They found an empty first-class compartment. The train still lingered; the guard seemed loth to wave his green flag; toyed with it, instead, and exchanged light badinage with the stoker. Stuart felt incapable of uttering a word till they were actually moving. Only the gathering speed could put an end to this intolerable strain. He examined the coloured photographs above the seats. The engine breathed heavily, crawled a couple of inches.… Stuart’s nerves jumped with relief!… then the 7.41 settled again into comfortable lethargy. It was only twenty to ten.

“Are you most interested in cathedrals or waterfalls?” came Peter’s cool voice, from the corner where she had ensconced herself. Stuart continued a dogged interest in the photographs. Cool?—he knew she was aflame, even as he. But they could both maintain their imperturbability … for a few moments still.

After a little more coy reluctance, the engine decided firmly that this really wouldn’t do! and with

a jolt and a shiver, tore headlong from the temptations of Euston, into the spectral beyond.

Stuart turned and looked at Peter.... She held out her hand:

“Give me a cigarette.”

Grimly he obeyed; and even shielded the match for her. Twice, deliberately, she inhaled, and [384] puffed out the smoke. Then their eyes met again.... She rose, and through the partially open window, tossed the remainder of her cigarette. It fell away in a shower of sparks. Her action snapped the invisible rod which was holding them apart.... He crushed her against him. They rocked slightly with the motion of the train. Then, slowly, he loosened his grip. Her head fell back, so that her eyes were half-veiled by their lids. And he stammered:

“Your throat is as white as foam ... and curved ... like the curve of a wave!” From some dim memory the phrase had leapt into his mind, and he spoke it.

“Peter, I love you.”

“The love of a leprechaun?”

“No. The love of a man. A quite ordinary man.... Will you marry me, Peter?” he knelt crouching beside her, where she bent down to him from her seat.

“Peter, I shall always love you ... now and for ever and for all time. I want you near me, in my house, close up to me, bearing my name. My wife ... damn you, don’t laugh! I’m not pretending—I *am* an ordinary man. I refuse to be treated any longer as a freak. I want to go on a honeymoon with you, Peter, to Paris and Italy, where all nice people go. I want to be just happy. No; I want you to be happy. I’ll buy you a ring, and introduce you to my mother, and furnish a house with you, and give dinner-parties, and——”

“Stuart, are you mad?” she cried, aghast. For Stuart to behave so sanely was indeed a most alarming sign of madness in him.

“Will you marry me, Peter?”

“I might as well put on a hair-shirt for the rest of my existence.” Then she looked down at the round dark head tilted back on to her lap; met his elfish, yet strangely tender smile; and, with a [385] tightening of love which was almost painful in its intensity, tried to fix the moment—this moment within sight and sound of him—to stand for the blank moment which she knew lay inevitably ahead of her. The girl had no illusions as to the fate of those who link their happiness with something not quite human. The last six months had taught her. The memory of them was like black seas rolling foamless on to a dark shore. When the next theory seized him....

Politely she enquired after the last.

“I’ve rolled it down the hill,” Stuart confessed. “But I’ve had enormous fun with it. I’ve sacrificed to it, and I’ve argued against it—that was with Aureole and Ber——” he stopped just in time, and hastily covered his blunder: “and I’ve dangled it in front of a disciple, and I’ve treated it like a football. Really, a theory is a most excellent occupation!” And then he told her about Letty and Sebastian.

Peter listened thoughtfully:

“So they’ve broken away from each other, just as we did?”

“Something like that. I don’t expect they accomplished it as cleanly. Sebastian’s methods are inclined to be messy or theatrical. In fact, it was he who managed to put me off my ideas; he overdid them so disgracefully. And I doubt if he ever took a firm and logical grasp of them.”

“Then why—oh, Stuart, why didn’t you leave him alone?”

Stuart knitted his brows. “It was a *good* theory,” he said, in much the same tone as the Mad Hatter once pleaded: “It was the *best* butter!”

“But you’ve doubled back on it now.”

“Exactly. So somebody’s got to prove it, if I don’t. Hang it! one can’t leave theories lying loose about the world.”

“I’m thinking of Letty,” said Peter softly, flooded by pity for the girl now groping helplessly after [386] her mate, not understanding why she had been deprived of him. She, Peter, had understood at the time—it hadn’t been so hard for her. “Oh, poor Letty ... poor little lovers....”

Stuart interrupted, rather uneasily: “She’ll marry a bank clerk, and be grateful to me for the rest of her life. Really and truly, Peter, I was trying to help them. They’d have been so miserable together. People who are blind, *must* be helped.”

—The train drew up with a jerk at a station. Bewildered by this abrupt cessation to the speed at which they had been hurled through streaming space, Stuart scrambled to his feet. Grey fretting ghost-figures hurried past their window. He watched them, himself dreamily calm; it was inconceivable that anything from the outer world could break through the enchantment which held their compartment aloof and inviolate from all intrusion. Nevertheless, an intrepid hand suddenly clutched at the door-handle, turned it sharply, called to someone behind: “Plenty of room in here!”—And, before any preventive measures could be taken, two large women collapsed on the seat opposite Stuart and Peter.... And the train rushed on.

Stuart’s lips moved. If it were in prayer, then it was prayer of a very perverted form.

And Peter wondered, despairingly, if these were real females, or grotesque fiends sent by the

night to torment them. They seemed to her fancy, preternaturally enormous. As never before, she craved now the bruise of Stuart's lips, hard as iron; the lean, strong grip of his hands; tangible reassurance that he had indeed come back to her. If she could hold him as though he were a child, his head in the crook of her arm, if she could soothe those restless quick-moving limbs of his to a lulled content.... She glanced hopelessly at the two large women eating belated mince-pies from a paper bag. Then, in a low voice, asked Stuart if he had been present at Merle's wedding. She had read accounts of it in the papers; it had been a magnificent function. [387]

"Yes, I was there; so was the whole diplomatic world, ministerial, ambassadorial——"

"Never mind. Tell me about Jean de Cler."

"He's the right sort, I think," Stuart granted handsomely. "Grey at the temples, distinguished, chivalrous; with that inborn ease of manner which marks the blue blood of the 'ancien régime'—or something of the kind. He evidently adores Merle, and will spend his life cherishing her."

"And she? Does she want to be cherished?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "She can't help liking him—very much, I should say. And she'll be in the *milieu* which suits her best. Probably she'll think of us sometimes, and be tormented—but she was never quite a pirate, you know; she only wore the costume. The wedding-dress suited her better; I've never seen anyone look so beautiful."

"Did you speak to her?"

"For one second I pressed near enough to offer my congratulations."

"In what form?"

"I said: 'There was once a pig, Merle, who lived in a sty in Cornwall.' And she smiled.—'There were once two girls, Stuart, who sat in a trough that belonged to a pig who lived in a sty in Cornwall.' Then Madame des Essarts wafted me out of the way; I believe she regards me as an unhealthy influence."

... "There were once two girls, Stuart——" Peter understood why Merle had made no sign, had not invited her to the wedding. The jewel had definitely accepted her casket lined with pink; dared not risk the raising of the lid....

The large women had been listening with absorbed interest to the account of the wedding. Now, as the train slowed up again at the station before Thatch Lane, they gathered together their belongings, and departed. [388]

For the two in their cramped galloping space of light, the circle of enchantment joined again as though it had never been snapped. The humid night whirled past their window. Stuart bent towards the girl; took her in his arms: "Lie still, dear," ... and for the second time Peter lay still; mind and body and soul, still.

And, sighing, she wished this journey were already over—that already she were lying in bed—already asleep—and already waking at dawn to the knowledge of a world which again held Stuart.

There had been another dawn....

—"Because he did it ..." murmured the disciple.

THE END

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[389]

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Transcriber's Note

p. vii "VI Merle" changed to "VI. Merle"
p. 13 "experiments." changed to "experiments.”"
p. 35 "already,”" changed to "already,"
p. 42 "“Oh," changed to "‘Oh,"
p. 83 "châtelaine," changed to "châtelaine"
p. 83 "Hellenes" changed to "Hellenes’"
p. 122 "“Did" changed to "Did"
p. 190 "‘Tyke’?" changed to "‘Tyke’?”"
p. 241 "Bounemouth" changed to "Bournemouth"
p. 258 "you!" changed to "you!”"
p. 308 ".,.." changed to "...."
p. 357 "be brought" changed to "he brought"
p. 383 "Silenty" changed to "Silently"

The following possible errors have been left as printed:

p. 159 our own exists
p. 242 adversity?
p. 345 devot

The following are used inconsistently in the text:

afterthought and after-thought
astir and a-stir
ballroom and ball-room
bedspread and bed-spread
bonbon and bon-bon
cloakroom and cloak-room
eyeglass and eye-glass
firelight and fire-light
fireplace and fire-place
hothouse and hot-house
injun and Injun
midstream and mid-stream
tiptoeing and tip-toeing
underworld and under-world
waterfowl and water-fowl

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