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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ROMANTIC
LADY ***

Transcriber's Note.

A list of the changes made can be found at the end of the book.

The Romantic Lady
by Michael Arlen



The Romantic Lady

MICHAEL ARLEN

By MICHAEL ARLEN

*These Charming
People
The Green Hat
"Piracy"
The London
Venture
The Romantic
Lady*

*The
Romantic Lady*

*by
Michael Arlen*



NEW YORK
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THE ROMANTIC LADY
— B —
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

WALTER PAYNE, Esq.

"A VERY ABLE MAN"

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I: THE ROMANTIC LADY

THE ROMANTIC LADY

11

I: THE ROMANTIC LADY

NOËL ANSON and I had been great friends in our first youthful days, but our lives and ambitions had led us so contrarily that we had not seen each other for more than six years when, on the night two weeks ago, we happened to meet at the Club. We had both, of course, so much to say that, as often happens, we babbled on quite inartistically, spoiling many a good story in the gay, breathless exchange of reminiscence and experience; from all of which, however, clearly loomed out these great cardinal facts of our lives, that we had both married; my wife, who was a perfect woman, I explained, I had had to leave behind in New Zealand to take care of her old father; while his wife, who was also a perfect woman, he chivalrously insisted, had thought fit to divorce poor Noël some six months before.

But there was one story, anyway, which Noël Anson did not hurriedly spoil. He kept it long inside him—until that hour after ten when our corner of the smoking-room was entirely our own, and until he safely knew that I had talked enough to be able now to remain comfortably silent and attentive. Dear Noël, he dearly loved to tell a story!

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"You are the very first person to hear this," he began untruthfully; and the calm grey eyes of my friend Noël Anson merged into the luxurious stare with which the raconteur hypnotically fixes his prey all the world over. Even thus must the gentle Marlow have transfixed his hearers as he led them inexorably through the labyrinth of Lord Jim's career, and through many another such intricacy of Conradian imagination.

"It's old, older than the stuff that hills and Armenians are made of," he said. "The ageless tale of the inevitable lady sitting alone in the inevitable box of the inevitable theatre to which our inevitable young man has gone to wile away a tiresome evening. History supplies the formula, it is only the details for which I'm personally responsible.

"There I sat, one night years ago, alone in a stall at the old Imperial; grimly smoking, and watching the footlight favourites 'getting-off' with a stage-boxful of rowdy young men who hadn't the grace even to try to imitate the few gentlemen who might at one time have been good enough to know 'em—until, on a moment, my eyes circled round the upper boxes and fixed on a marvellous lady in white, amazing and alone and unashamed....

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"One has grown into the habit of using phrases trivially, but when I say that I caught my breath at the sight of that figure through the smoke, I mean that I actually did. There she suddenly was, a wonderful fact in a dreary place! A candle lighting even the dimmest recesses of that mausoleum! She, in contrast to all around, was real, exquisite life....

"And, of course, there was to her beauty the added attraction of the curious, as you can well understand. For there simply was not the slightest trace of the *demi-monde* about her, nothing at all to suggest that she might at any moment be the mistress of a great shopkeeper—as, the deuce take it, there well might be about any woman who had the effrontery to sit so shamelessly alone and—and *soignée* in front of a box at the Imperial! I mean, it was not the sort of thing one's sister could do and look dignified about—in fact, it is some very special and subtle quality which will prevent a well-dressed woman looking like a courtesan under certain circumstances. French women say English women haven't got it, and English women say French women have got nothing else. But this dark-haired, immobile, alien woman had just that quality—well, of utter 'rightness'; she was impeccable, you understand. It was more than an impertinence not to take for granted that she herself had walked into Cartier's and bought that rope of pearls around her throat... For although she was in one of the upper boxes, I could see her quite clearly.

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"But 'desirable'—that's the word for the particular creak in the hinge of one's mind as it enfolds the beauty of such a person—desirable! You wanted to stretch out a long graceful arm above the heads of all the stuffy people around you and catch her up, not by force, for she must yield; and then, as you brought her close to you, what happened would depend entirely on the sort of woman she was and the sort of man you were....

"Of course one couldn't let this sort of thing go on without, anyway,

trying to see about it. In the first *entr'acte* I made a dash for that ginger-haired old boy by the box-office and got him to send a page-boy with a note. It naturally wasn't all done in a breath, for the note had obviously to be a note of the finer sort, it had to convey a very particular impertinence which wasn't an impertinence simply because it was so particular. You must know what I mean.... Oh, it had to be just right! You must be neither too casual nor too ingratiating. You must not write it either in clogs or in carpet slippers, but in a happy mean, in the most exquisite pumps that were ever contrived by Lobb. You may think I'm exaggerating, but really I sweated blood over those few lines—how, how did one know that one might not miss the best thing of a lifetime by a *gauche* word!

"I sent it off at last—the central idea of it being that I greatly desired the honour of her presence at supper, while apologising for my monstrous cheek in asking for her presence at same, and that I was sitting in the third seat from the end of the third row of the stalls.... Which, by the way, reminds me! It always pays to take a stall, for imagine writing to a marvellous woman who may have spent her maid's quarterly wages on a box and saying that you are sitting in the dress-circle—the dress-circle, mind you! It sounds so odd—anyway, I breathe again when I think that I might have missed a perfect thing by sitting in the dress-circle. One isn't being a snob, but an opportunist.

"I received my answer in the second interval ... amazed, excited. Yes, she was a foreigner by her writing; just a couple of cold lines saying that I could call at her box at the end of the revue.

"Preliminaries are of course always tiresome, but these were perhaps less so than most, simply because one was so in the air about her, and so much readier than usual to be appreciative.... And, mind you, rightly, as it proved. She spoke English charmingly well, but just incorrectly enough to be recognisable as a 'distinguished foreigner.'

"Almost on my entrance she began to apologise for her 'rudeness' at neither accepting nor declining my invitation to supper in her note.

"'But let's be amazingly candid,' I suggested, on her note. 'You wished, of course, to have a look at your host, before—'

"'But no, I wished to have a look at my guest,' she said, quickly. And by the slightest flutter in her voice I guessed for the first time that she was frightfully shy. Personally, I never felt so unattractive in my life, all prickly hot and affected—as one gets, you know.

"'You must understand that I have a charming house,' she explained. 'And if you will not think me too insincere, I will say that I should be very flattered if you will take supper with me....'

"I was still standing. She had turned towards me in her chair, and was looking up at me. She smiled up at me, with a pretty pretence at pathos, and very lightly her fingers just touched my arm....

"'Please, will you not mind my depriving you of the pleasure of showing me how charming a host you can be? And anyway, it is so much more important for me to show you my qualities as a hostess. I have something of a reputation for that, I must warn you.'

"That quickly found note of intimacy, how fascinating it is! This woman could turn a drawing-room into an adventure, and an adventure into a drawing-room, all by a particular quality of—what is it? eye, voice, manner, ancestry? God knows! But all, all a snare and a delusion....

"Her electric brougham took us away from the deserted theatre. I was of course too interested in my companion to notice where we were going. I had a vague idea of Piccadilly, that's all.... She was very amusing. We had stepped off the ice too quickly, if indeed we had ever been on it, to get back to it in any way, and the twenty minutes or so of that gliding motion passed in one pleasant moment.

"'But perhaps you would prefer me to be haughty,' she said suddenly, 'or how do you say it—county? It would perhaps be more becoming in a woman who does not yet know the name of her guest?'

"'You drive me into a fatuous corner,' I said. 'For what on earth can I answer but that you can well afford not to be county or any stuff of that kind?'

"She turned her eyes quickly on mine; suddenly, she was very serious. She brooded on me for a swift, palpable second.

"'You really, really mean that you do not think me—ah, it is very delicate!—well, you don't think me "cheap" for letting this happen, like this? But,'

she laughed as suddenly, 'but forgive me,' she said. 'I was not trusting my own judgment.... And besides you have just said that your father is a Bishop!'

"It was as she was about to step out of the brougham that she said: 'It has a charm, our adventure. You are so delightful a partner, you "play up." It is most unusual in men.... And perhaps, too, you are good at forgetting?'

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"Am I being threatened?' I had to ask.

"But no, you are being trusted!' she said, very gently....

"I followed her into the house a little shamefacedly; taken, as it were, out of my stride. There seemed, don't you see, to be no tattered edges about this woman, there was a finesse about her every emotion and movement, it was as though every mood and motive had been polished to perfection before it became articulate in word or gesture. She was deplorably civilized.

"The house was of the sort that one would have expected of her, though I can't specify what that was; and exactly where it was, as I've said, I didn't realize, though it couldn't have been a hundred miles away from Hyde Park Corner.

"I am not much of a hand at describing rooms, so I can't tell you much more of the room into which I followed her than that it was large and seemed just right. What I mean is that I wasn't taking much interest in antique furniture at that moment, but if anything had been wrong or jarring in the room I would have been on it at once,—so it must have been a perfect room. Simplicity stunt on Howard de Walden lines, you know, with Whistler and Meryon etchings scattered here and there about the pale walls, and a certain suggestion of black and gold lacquer somewhere, which I can't now exactly place, unless it was a tall boy or something of the kind.

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"As we entered the room, and she was putting her cloak, white stuff and ermine, and other things on a chair, I saw particularly the glitter on the table which meant supper—and as she turned I suppose that I must too obviously have shown a hint of *gauche* surprise; and indeed I was surprised, for the table was laid for two! She had caught me out, and rather unfairly, and for a second the divine person watched me quite severely—a severity that amazingly broke into the most absolute and whole-hearted laugh that I've ever had the misfortune and fortune to see on any face. Its abandon and gaiety were quite delightful, but I don't ever wish repeated the prickly discomfort of being so utterly laughed *at*, as she laughed at me so helplessly standing there.

"But she mended it, a quick simple gesture towards me changed her from a possible enemy into a—well—comrade.

"'Fool man!' she said. 'Did you really think that it was you who had, how d'you say it? "picked me up"? Don't you know that it was decided this morning that you should come to supper with me, decided quite, quite, early? Or some one like you, perhaps not so charming—but then I have been so lucky.... Are you very angry with me?'

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"She was very close to me, smiling, intimate. Pure coquetry, of course,—but what perfect *technique*! You knew that she was playing, but that did not prevent the blood rushing to your head; and she was so clean, so much 'one of us'! Perhaps she expected me to kiss her at that moment, in fact, I could scarcely resist, for I always try to be a little gentleman and do what is expected of me; but I didn't kiss her then, for I felt it was the wrong moment, it would have to come about differently. Besides, I don't like your scrappy kisses.... But she was waiting.

"'Anger isn't exactly one of my emotions at the moment,' I said, stupidly enough. 'But will you please be very gentle with me, because never, never have I met any one like you?'

"'I will make a note of that and refer to it when you make a fool of yourself. Ah, but I know you very well, you are a cautious person who will make a fool of himself only when it would be folly to be wise.'

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"She was close to me, it was dangerous, and I can only bear a certain amount of that kind of thing, for my sort of restraint is due entirely to a desire for, well, greater efficiency.... But why will women do that, why will they step in where men fear to tread? I only speak from my own paltry experience, of course, but the only two real affairs I've had would have gone sadly awry if the women had had their way, if it hadn't been for my mania for organisation.... But I couldn't stand there another second, holding my breath over that face, that scent. She was wearing an

orchid, too, and an orchid takes its scent from a woman's body, you can't really smell it except when it is entangled in a woman's breath. It was an exquisite, damnable addition. I had to break loose.

"Encouraged as I am being to enter for the correspondent stakes,' I said impertinently, 'I am being most awfully neglected as a guest.'

"The darling, how she laughed! She had the kind of large soft mouth that's made for laughter—until one day you find it's made for tragedy.

"Not then, nor later, did I see any servant about. But the table was admirably arranged. I am a commonplace enough person, I think of food in terms of *cantaloup* and *caviare* and damn the labour question; one would be a charming person if one had ten thousand a year. And so, though I would have been surprised if the supper had not been good, I was surprised that it was so good; for women, as you know, are rather bewildering in their choice of food, generally I don't trust 'em, but she—how well she had plumbed the particular male beastliness which I, anyway, affect! Oh, her age? About that of Mary Stuart when Bothwell and Swinburne fell in love with her....

"It was as we sat down to supper that I really looked round the room for the first time, and noticed a full length portrait in oils on a wall by the door; of a very distinguished-looking person indeed, in the toy uniform of some foreign cavalry—Italian, I imagined. But, gorgeously decorated and hilted as he was, his chest emblazoned with the ribbons of orders (merited as much by his birth as by any action, one thought), there was a great air of distinction about the man which discounted as well as harmonised with his ridiculous trappings. The slim, perhaps too waisted, figure bore a thin hawk-like face, which with its perfectly poised mixture of ferocity and courtesy would have carried its fortunate owner as easily into the heart of any schoolboy as into the *boudoir* of the most unattainable lady; and sweeping *moustachios* somehow added prominence to the long, delicate, very arched nose—surely the nose of a Roman person, I ventured to myself at the end of my long glance. And as I turned to my hostess, she explained quickly that the decoration was her husband.

"A very charming and considerate person,' she said, 'who apologises for being neglected by me.'

"Over supper I began at last to lose my shyness, for I had been very nervous, you know. As one only too rarely is.... She had the quality of making one talk, of making one feel that one was on the top of one's form. Oh, that insinuating art of unuttered flattery which makes one weak and sincere and terribly reckless.

"You are very terrible, you make me almost articulate,' I simply had to say, as we rose from the table. 'You see the only really nice things about me are my admirations, and I admire you so unreservedly....'

"Perhaps it was just at that moment that I first kissed her. Yes, it must have been then, for she had a way of accepting those shameless remarks with such an air of pretty surprise that I couldn't have resisted the impulse—and anyway, I didn't want to, the thing could go its own divine way without any more officious restraint on my part.

"I found then that she had that rarest of generous gifts, the power of graceful admission.... You, old man, who have loved beautiful things, must know how rare that is, how often one is jarred by that meanest sort of pride which denies, refuses to admit, the influence of another. Oh, the insaneness of generous people, the indecencies of decent people! Am I phrasing a sensation too absurdly if I say that I was *comfortable* with this woman whom I had known for less than two hours? And when I had kissed her, and kissed her again, for hers was not the riddle to be solved by one touch of the lips, the thing did not take on the air of a *liaison*, it was not a surprising and stolen pleasure, it was just natural.

"Slowly she unpinned her orchid and threw it among the elegant debris of the table.

"You crush orchids,' she said. She didn't smile. She looked up at me very thoughtfully.

"But you must know that this is all wrong,' she said. 'It should not have been like this at all. When I decided this morning that you must come to supper with me it was on the distinct understanding that you should not touch more than the tips of my fingers—and they were manicured so well this afternoon, too! Look.... Oh, no no! It is too late, now that you have crushed my orchid it is too late to be so deferential. And anyway, I did not intend that you should kiss even my hand until you were going away

—and I imagined you going away very disappointed and full of quite pleasant regrets that I was a cold woman in spite, oh, in spite of everything! Come, Noël Anson, defend yourself. Give me reasons why you should not be disappointed. I am very serious.' And I realised that she was indeed serious.

"But why d'you say that?' I asked quickly. 'Must the thing be exactly as you planned, can't anything be altered—oh, I know that sounds fatuous, but when you look like that one feels helpless! I was right. You are very terrible.'

"I *know*, that's all.' she said. And she slowly raised her arms and put her hands on my shoulders. 'Do not be a fool, Noël Anson,' she said gently. 'Life is not so easy. There is no romance without reality. I am warning you, because I am afraid.'

"And will you tell me when a warning has prevented a fool from being foolish? And besides, I like being a fool. And *I* am not afraid. I'm not even afraid of your answer if I ask whether you love me.'

"She laughed, but so lightly that she didn't break the tension—you know that infernal laugh?

"But that is a leading question!' she protested.

"And that is a dangerous way of answering it,' I had to say, though anything else would have done equally well, for I hadn't mind for words. She had lost her laugh and her eyes held mine. We stood there looking at each other.... As men and women will, when they know everything and nothing of each other. She was close to me, amazingly kissable! But I didn't, instead I picked her up in my arms and carried her to the door, and out into the strange hall, and up the strange wide staircase of this unknown house, up....

"But if my impulse was to carry her, hers was certainly to let me. Do you understand that, or am I cheapening her to you? Oh, but one was so uncertain yet certain about her, it was so good to be with a woman with whom one could lose one's head and be sure that she wouldn't lose her dignity—until that moment when she, like every one else, must become self-conscious. And that moment came, on the landing upstairs, when her fingers suddenly tightened around my arm. I let her stand, gently, and she whispered something, just two words, into my ear, but I didn't catch them, they are lost words.... She opened a door.

"In there she suddenly turned on me, and shook my arm. And a sudden, queer darkness about her face made me wonder if she was angry.

"Oh, you are so inevitable, aren't you!' she cried, but the exclamation ended so surprisingly in the air, somehow so high up in the air, that I've never yet been able to bring it definitely down to earth and discover its meaning; unless it was that—I don't know.... She was so strange, so different from the other women who had filled and emptied one's life, and it was difficult to tell her moods from her emotions. But there was nothing spurious nor counterfeit about her, she was not unreal, she wasn't even the closely-knit but far away dream that beautiful women sometimes become in those terrifying, intimate moments. She was the most essentially feminine woman that I've ever met, she was so real.... That white oval face with the large, so large and so articulate eyes, set in a mass of soft black Southern hair which I myself had unpinned and let fall over her shoulders despite a shy murmur from her—why, desire is a cheap word to express the passion to possess that, the living symbol of the loveliest woman of all time! Yes, yes, I was supremely ridiculous. I still am....

"A second or a century later, at the end of a long, long silence, for me an infinity of happiness, she moved her head away from me and asked me to light her a cigarette. I gave it to her, and waited. I knew so well, you see, what was coming. I had been watching her, I had made a feast of all the movements of that amazing face. It was a sad face, wonderfully alive, but sad; and its sadness became fixed, her eyes were large and held no curiosity at all. I noticed the lack of curiosity in them, because one is so used to meeting it in women—they want to find out! But she, perhaps, in her splendid conceit, had found out, she *knew*, and she was sad—had she not said downstairs that she knew? I didn't care then whether she knew or not, for then life was before me, the present and the future were in exquisite certainty; but now, as I waited and watched her draw her cigarette, I looked back on that future, and was really terrified of the present. There are moments of ice-clear sanity in all of us—you must know those moments?—when you realise with helpless vividness what you can and what you cannot do, what you simply cannot alter. And so

with this moment and this woman; she was inexorable, I could not alter her, I could do nothing but wait—for the epilogue to that prelude played long ago downstairs, when she had put her hands on my shoulders and told me that she was warning me....

"But perhaps you will think me very vain?' she asked at last, very quietly.

"Because you are thinking you will make me wretched by what you are going to say?'

"Oh, you are too quick!' she murmured. And she raised her head on her elbow and looked at me.

"Dear Noël Anson,' she said, 'our lives go different ways. To-day we had never met, and to-morrow it must be as though we had never met. For life is not a romance, it is a reality, and it is much stronger than our—inclinations? And even if I loved you it would be the same, I should be saying what I am saying now, because in me there is something much stronger than love, much more inevitable.... Please, you must believe me, it will hurt me if you do not believe me. I am not playing any more. I do not play with memories of crushed orchids, because it is only fools who think there is no pleasure in being serious ... just sometimes.'

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"It is no use for me to say any more,' she said, 'because if you like me very much then, anyway, you will be bitter about me—and if you do not like me very much then you will only think me (how is it?) an odd sort of woman.... I command you, and I put you on your honour to obey, that when you leave this house you will go into the brougham waiting for you without looking to see the number of the house, nor the name of the street, so that you will never see me again, you man.... But it is now very, very late, you must go, Don Noël, you must go! And take with you my blessings—Adieu!'

"But I can only repeat her words to you barely and crudely. I can't hope to give you the tragic gesture of impotence in her voice, and the way her voice grew lighter and lighter until it seemed to become part of the air, as impalpable, as mysterious. And at the end her voice had died down to almost less than a whisper, her 'adieu' had fainted between her tongue and her lips, it was only a wisp of a dying word. It was strangely as though she were rehearsing something she might have to say sometime.... She was only rehearsing. I waited.

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"Oh, but isn't that enough!' she almost cried, suddenly. 'Have I not done it quite, quite well, or do you want me to think of something else—something more ... more dramatic?'

"Please, please do make it easy for me, Don Noël—do go away, please!' she begged. 'This is so difficult, so much more difficult than I.... It is not a tragedy, this, remember! It is an incident, and the incident is finished, that's all. Don't please let me make a tragedy of it—by apologising! You see, my Noël, I am so weak, so weak. I feel such a bad woman, such a brute.... And you can never understand why, never.... Forgive me, and go!'

"Her very last word was almost brutal in its defined meaning, it held no uncertainty; but I didn't move at that moment. I remembered that I did not know her name.

"A few moments ago, before you spoke, I had a dream,' I said. 'And in my dream I was told that you would tell me your name, the name that will explain the initials under the coronet on your hairbrushes. The adventure would not have been so complete without a coronet, so I looked to see if one was there, and behold! it was there. I am such a snob, I would like to know your name.... And then I would forget it.'

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"That was a false dream,' she said. 'You will not know my name, you will not know where this house is, you will not know anything. Don Noël, you will be an English gentleman of the kind we find in books, you will not remember or know anything that I do not wish. You will not look at the number of the house, nor at the name of the street. That is my wish.'

"She was quite, quite cold. Just like a woman who has had a love affair which has lasted an eternity but cannot outlast another second. How wise she was to let me see that—oh, well, anti-climax! She knew that men do not fall of their own accord from great heights down to Mother Earth, they must be pushed over—ever so gently, gently.

"It is getting light,' she murmured.

"But as I rose she confessed her affectation; she threw her arms round my neck and brought my face close to hers.

"You fool man!" she said. "Why do you hurt yourself and me? Why did you just say that this was an adventure? This has not been an adventure, it has been a love-affair.... And always remember that I asked you to forgive me. Always."

"When I was at the door I had to turn round. I had feared this moment of going, and I had made up my mind to go quickly and be done with it. But I make a bad actor, and artistic effects can go to the devil for all I care. With my hand on the knob I had to turn round.

"I can't go like this," I said. And I walked back across the room, and looked down on her.

"I can't. It seems wrong," I said.

"Perhaps, then, it was not worth it?" she asked, so tentatively!

"It will always have been worth it.... But there *is* something missing, isn't there?"

"But, of course, Don Noël! There is much missing, for it is an unfinished romance which will never be finished. You do not understand—this is life!

"I know. You are a baby, like all really nice men, and you want a piece of chocolate to eat as you go away," she said. "Bring your head down—yes, down, down, Noël—and I will give it to you.... Listen, you! It is decided that you will never see me again, is it not? And that you will keep your promise not to look where this house is, so that you will never, never find me again? But, my dear, will you please believe that I am ver' ver' sorry, that I would like to see you many, many times before this stupid "good-bye." For it is not every day that people like you and I meet, we could laugh and cry so well together.... A long time ago, as we came into this house (and we came in because we had to come in, my Noël) I asked you if you were good at forgetting. But you have been such a dear that I now give you permission to remember—me! And that is the end of my vanity and your love affair, Don Noël, for now you must go away, out of the house into the night from which you came—oh, so wonderfully! Go—adieu, adieu."

"And this time I did not turn round at the door, but went out of the room and out of the house, into the pale darkness of the early morning. The squat shape of the electric brougham was there, waiting on ice for me; but the bent figure of the man in the driving-seat seemed asleep, he certainly did not hear me until I was opening the door of the cab, when I gave him my direction. And I stepped in. The thing glided softly away, and I lay back and closed my eyes....

"I don't know how what I've told you has impressed you, I may indeed have made the thing seem farcical; it had begun as a—well—casual adventure, it had ended—ended! with me sitting back in her brougham, seriously, abjectly miserable! My feeling was one of deadly and unutterable flatness—just that. From my own lips had come a promise that I would let something go, something which I wanted more than anything else in the world, something which would never come back! I would never see her again! Everything but that one agonising certainty was in utter blankness. I was very flat, everything was grey....

"The brougham soon drew up at my door in Mount Street. I got out and stood by the footboard, rather absentmindedly fumbling in my pocket for a pound note to give to this obviously very confidential chauffeur. He was still huddled up in his seat, his peaked cap well over his eyes, his coat-collar turned up over half his face. Only his nose was really visible, and that dimly. I was vaguely staring at it as I picked out a note, a little piqued by the fellow's utter lack of interest in me. I had only stood there, say, four seconds or so; he hadn't looked at me once, wasn't even going to wait for the tip, for I saw that he was releasing the lever to move off—when suddenly, staring at that nose, I realised with a shock that I had seen it before. The car was almost in motion when I said, sharply, amazedly:

"But you've shaved off your moustache!"

"The car stopped. The man deliberately got out, and stood on the pavement beside me. I am pretty tall, but he was even taller. I could see his face clearly now—yes, it was he! looking almost cadaverous without his sweeping *moustachios*, but still very distinguished. He was smiling at me, with a strange urbanity.

"This is very awkward," he said, or rather murmured; his accent and voice were distinctly foreign.

"Very," I agreed hotly. I was angry, shocked. 'It's so awkward that I

wonder how you put up with it.'

'I can do one of two things,' he went on, ignoring my bad temper, but looking intently at me. 'I can either kill you, or I can explain.'

'He looked about forty, and there was a courteous and fatherly air about him which I found intensely irritating. But any manner would have been irritating in my absurd position.

'You have a perfect right to do the first, of course,' I rapped out. 'But may I suggest that you do both, and the explaining first, if you don't mind. I think I'm rather entitled to one, don't you?'

'He considered me for a moment.

'As you will, then,' he conceded. 'If you will get back into the cab I will explain in there. I have found the night air rather chilly.'

'His manner infected me. 'If you will accept my hospitality for a moment, please come inside. And perhaps a little firewater....' I suggested vaguely.

'He accepted my invitation with a bow, and followed me into my flat. In the sitting-room he unbuttoned his heavy coat, and stood with his back to the empty grate; a tall, slim, decorative, and dangerous gentleman. He made me feel like a baby in arms, but I stifled my irritation. I poured out two stiff whiskies.

'Only a touch of soda, thanks,' he answered my inquiry.

'It was clever of you to recognise me by my nose,' he said. 'But the Casamonas have been proud of their noses for so long that I, the last of them, find it a little hard to have to conceal mine even for a few minutes. And as for my moustache, to the absence of which you referred so pointedly, that has been gone for some time. That portrait of me which you saw was painted a long time ago, and since then I have become subject to colds in the head. And I found that my *moustachios* became frequently *mal-soignés* after the continual application, however delicate, of a handkerchief. I begin to concede that there may, after all, be some defence for that "tooth-brush" parody of a moustache which you, *par exemple*, can so charmingly affect.'

'No, he wasn't laughing at me. He was just talking courteously on about whatever had come first. But I couldn't bear it.

'Eh—about that little matter,' I said absurdly, feeling more and more like a tradesman.

'Yes, of course,' he instantly agreed. He drained his glass, put it delicately down on the table, and then turned to me.

'If you will forgive a pointed question—did you keep your promise not to look where the house was?'

'I had given up being irritated, it was so clearly no use.

'Of course I did.' I answered abruptly.

'Good! How charming it is to meet in life what one is tired of meeting in books—for you are exactly like the English gentlemen in Mr. Oppenheim's novels who always lose secret documents and find beautiful wives. I envy them, and you—but oh, my dear sir, I do wish you were a little more wicked and human!'

'Are you complaining of my being too good!' I burst out, amazed.

'He saw the point, and for the first time really laughed.

'I see that I must get to my explanation quickly,' he apologised. 'May I sit down? Thank you.... That lady, as you have guessed, is my wife. Or, more correctly, she was my wife until two years ago. Since when she has been so only in name. I use the language of convention so that you may the more quickly understand me.... She loved me, but she ceased to love me. It happens thus. And though I love her still, it is without fire or passion; it is not the love of a possessor, but of a connoisseur. I love her as I love a vase, a marble, any really beautiful thing. You understand?... We married four years ago, in Paris. She is of the best Sicilian blood, but a rebel, an *aristo* in revolt. She believes in only one law, and that is the law of lawlessness. We met without the formal courtesies of an introduction—if I may draw a parallel, as you and she met a few hours ago. And again, since I am as sensitive a person as yourself—it is our charm, my dear sir—the same happened to me four years ago as to you to-night. The night took wings, and carried us away to the very pinnacles of wonderful adventure—she and I, king and queen of more than one world! To the very pinnacles of that enchanting adventure towards which

the poets and philosophers of ages have been vainly scrambling, that adventure for which cities have been sacked and battles won. You, too, have been on those heights, and you know. In most men's lives those heights are never attained, but you and I have been supremely fortunate. *I regret nothing....* Night became morning, romance became life. The adventure ended. And I found myself in the street, with her last command ringing in my ears, not to look where the house was, to forget—everything! The Seine seemed alluring to my agony.... But I am Italian, I have at least the courage of my passions, and so I broke my promise. I called the very next afternoon. And how can I express to you, even now, my great surprise at the warmth of my reception! For the fingers with which I had given the *concierge* my card had trembled with fear—had she not commanded me never to see her again! But it needed only one second of her presence to soothe my fear, she was so gay, so cordial, so quite delighted to see me! No word of any promise, no word of last night, passed her lips—we had met before, that is all! But we were not long together before another joined us—a short *chic* little man, of an agreeable air. He looked that rarest of all human beings, a banker from whom it would be a pleasure to borrow money. And as he came towards us I wondered if this was yet one more slave of this marvellous lamp, but she introduced him to my bewilderment as her husband. And then—imagine it—presented me to him as her future husband! All in the most casual and un-ostentatious way, as though she were performing a mere formality; and as such, indeed, this amazing husband accepted it. For instead of knocking me down, he bowed politely and took my hand. As for her, I didn't dare look at her, I was so embarrassed. But when at last, as tea was served, I did look, she smiled at me, and I knew that her smile was to say, "This is your punishment for breaking your oath. I am so sorry...." The husband did not stay for more than five minutes; obviously he did not wish to intrude. But before he left us he turned to me, and with the most charming deference, said: "You will find everything arranged. Madame will explain. I beg you to accept my sincerest wishes for your happiness." And then his lips touched her fingers, and he left us—to let himself be divorced so that Madame could marry me, who had never dared even to dream of such supreme happiness. And so it was that we married.

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"I am sorry to be so tiresome and detailed, but the worst is over. For the rest of my tale is a commonplace in the history of the world—you realise? She tired of me. Gently, but remorselessly. As such wonderful women will, you know. It is no use kicking—no man, neither Hector, nor Adonis, nor Machiavelli, can supply the deficiencies of the sphinx. She smiles and says "no," she says "no" even to the wisdom of Solomon, and besotted man sprawls at her feet and murmurs frantically that, anyway, it is better to be miserable about her than to be happy about any one else.... Yes, my friend, men have been known to say that to women. I myself have said it more than once, but I only believed it once. That was two years ago. But it was no use, her love was as dead as though it had never been—I was a man, I had become a God, and now I was a man again. And so the revolt of man ended in submission, and I had to acquiesce in her mere affection for me—that affection with which all splendid women enshroud their dead loves. And how much in oneself dies with their dead love! Why, there dies the ritual of love, the sacrament of sex! for sex can be exalted to a sacrament only once in a lifetime, for the rest it's just a game, an indoor sport....

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"You see, such women as she make their own laws. It is not her fault, nor her arrogance, it is ours, who are so consistently susceptible. Physically she belongs to the universe, not to one single man. She never belonged to me, I was just an expression of the world to her. She has never belonged to any one, she never will—for she is in quest of the ideal which even she will never find. And so she will go on, testing our—our quality and breaking our hearts. Men have killed themselves because of her, poor dear, and I too would have considered it seriously if I had not found that she ranked suicide high in the list of supreme impoliteness from men to women.

"I had suggested that she should divorce me, but she would not do that, for she complained of a nervous fear of being left alone in a house. We were in Rome then, and we could envisage no possible husband for her from among our acquaintance—so she begged me to continue in my capacity for a while. Of course, I was only too pleased.... In the end we hit upon the only way out of the *impasse*—that she should do what she had (so successfully, she sweetly said) done before, and risk the adventure; and if the young man was acceptable, and broke his solemn promise, and came to see her, then he would be made to suffer the

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penalty of his weakness—happy, wretched youth! But I would not let her take the risk without some guarantee as to her safety, for even adventures can sometimes become unpleasant, and so I insisted that I should be her chauffeur for the occasion—and from beginning to end of the adventure, I insisted. To which she replied, smiling, that it would not always be the same—"you will not be kept waiting long," she said.

"And it happened as she said, for in the two adventures before this of yours I was indeed not kept waiting long. Not for more than an hour, in fact—in each case the wretched young man had a good supper and left immediately after, wondering how this most unattainable of women had ever come, so informally, to invite him. The first happened in Vienna, the second in Paris—they bored her utterly to death, she told me. And thus the occasion for the promise, the pivot of the adventure, as you realise, never arose in those two cases. But in yours, the third...'

"Yes?' I asked eagerly.

"The night air was certainly chilly,' he demurred gently.

"He was silent for a few long minutes. I waited intently. And then he leaned forward towards me, and put a hand lightly on my knee.

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"Young man, will you forgive an impertinence?' His eyes held in them the kindest light; my silence answered them, and he continued: 'I am perhaps twelve or thirteen years older than you, so I may be allowed the liberty of advising you—about something in which I am an expert. Never, never try to find the house to which you went a few hours ago—never, I say! And I say it because I like you, and because I know that she is the most enchanting woman in the world; and if *she* likes you, so she is the more enchanting—and the more dangerous! As she was dangerous to me.... You forgive the liberty I have taken?'

"He let his quite solemn speech balance in the air for a long pause, then got up and, very lazily, stretched his arms over his head. And a delightful, intimate smile passed over his lean face—the man had a large share of the divine essence of childishness.

"You know your 'Trilby'? he asked lightly; and murmured into the air:—

'Hélas! Je sais un chant d'amour,
Triste et gai, tour à tour!'

"As he went to the door I sat on in my chair; circumstances somehow waived aside common politeness. I just stared after him—to meet his eyes, for from the door he turned round just to say:—

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"I did not mean to jeer at your honesty in keeping your promise to madame—please never think that. On the contrary, I sincerely admire you—and congratulate you! For you have avoided a marvellous misery.... Good-night, Sir Lancelot. Adieu!'"

The Italian's exit seemed to bring Noël Anson's tale to an end, and yet so abruptly that I could not but wait for a final ending. He waited, but threw the end of his cigarette into the dying fire, and continued silent.

"And so you never saw her again, and lived unhappily ever after?" I suggested at last. But I wasn't prepared for his quick, pitying stare. He heaved himself up from his chair.

"You damn fool!" he said. "Didn't I tell you all through dinner that I was divorced six months ago!"

"But your promise—you told him—"

"The first thing I did when I left that house," he explained firmly, "was to look round at the number on that door...."

II: FAY RICHMOND

THE influenza epidemic of the winter of 1918-19 will for me always be memorable for a strange coincidence, which could in no way have happened but for that plague's overwhelming rush; and together with that I remember vividly the grieved face of a homely matron, as she spoke to me that January afternoon on the hushed stairway of a nursing-home in Beaumont Street. It was, I suppose, one of those unreal incidents which are so essentially part of that life which realism likes to depict, that a realist may often fail to translate them into his tale (after that very old man, blind to the thing under his nose), whereas a romanticist will, perhaps, with a debonair gesture, give them their true part in the histories of his creatures.

Thus, this tale, sown however dismally, takes to itself the air of a romance; not mine indeed, nor Howard Wentworth's, the well-known playwright whom it intimately concerns, but Fay Richmond's. I call her by that name even though it was lost, in the way that women must lose the most apt and adequate names (as only names can be), on her Italian marriage some twenty years before Howard told me about her. He was curiously infatuated with it; I remember him repeating it, delicately, and pronouncing it a beautiful name, not unworthy of the meditation of Mr. George Moore by his fireside in Ebury Street.

"No, it was too fitting a name to last," he said. "A girl with such a name couldn't but die or get married young.... Can you imagine an aged spinster called Fay Richmond? It could only be the name of a lovely girl, but it could never live much more than twenty years except in a novel by, well, Disraeli or Meredith; unlikely enough shades, you'll say, the bedizened and the tortuous, to be joined together even in sentimental discourse about a girl's name, with whom I've already bored you sufficiently...."

"But I haven't met her yet!" I protested actively from my side of the fireplace, in his room in the Beaumont Street nursing home.

Influenza had already gripped and released me, so that I was now in an irritatingly robust state of health in which to visit a less fortunate friend who had succumbed to its second wave; for that second wave was more virulent and more treacherous than the first, mocking its victim into partial convalescence and then, with a jeer and a snarl at the ambuscaded wretch, fixing again upon the damaged lungs, so inexorably that there was only the one release. And thus Howard Wentworth, who was thought, even by himself, to have cheated the thing, in the end died; not ten days after that afternoon when I had sat listening to him, as he lounged in the happy *déshabillé* of convalescence, and was reminiscent about a girl called Fay Richmond.

The difference in our years had not prevented an acquaintance ripening into a steady friendship. What I liked about Howard Wentworth was that—unlike so many Englishmen of middle years—he was *not* young for his age. He was completely, sincerely, and normally over 45, which was so refreshing of him among the crowds of 38's to 42's passing all the way from Coombe to Sunningdale of a Sunday morning.... And it was after our occasional dinners in his house in Upper Brook Street that I would be interested by a solitary photograph in a plain sandal-wood frame; one could not help contrasting its prominence on the grand piano with the total absence of any other photograph in that austere house—austere, in spite of that slight Chinese element of tapestry, strange green horsemen and the like, which even the best of celibates are nowadays growing to affect.

I used to wonder, quite shamelessly, who the girl with the sad, sincere face was, and whether my host and she had loved unhappily; for the girl's eyes were large and sad, and the firm set of her young mouth had not tried to obey the exhortation to smile; which must, indeed, have been given very hesitatingly, for there was a frightening sincerity about her face. You felt, looking even upon the poor mockery of a likeness, that you would have to dance very well indeed before you begged the favour of such as she to dance with you. You imagined to yourself fine arrogances behind those young eyes, to attract and appall you in a venturesome moment....

But, of course, I could not ask my host about her, I had to wait; until, on his reported convalescence, I went to see him in Beaumont Street, and I suppose too obviously noticed the sandal-wood frame on the dressing-

table. He smiled:

"It always seemed to go with me," he said. "And I don't quite know why, as I don't remember ever having made a point of it. But Briggs somehow got into the habit of treating it like a toothbrush, so that it now goes with me even for weekends. I don't think I've even really looked at it for years and years.

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"Though, I suppose, I've always got the feeling that it's there," he said, "or that she's there...."

"No," he corrected himself quickly. "I can't aspire to that consistency. Even in a sentimental mood with you sitting there trying to look as though you had come to amuse a sick man, whereas you've come to be amused, and well you know it...."

Then it was that he told me her name, dwelling on it.

"As a preface, I was a very sane young man," he went on, smiling. "I know I must have been, because when I try to find in my youth even one among those rare mornings in which a giant wakes up with the feeling that he could break a lance for a fair lady that day, I can't find one. There never was one, I never woke up so recklessly. And the fact that I may have grown to have that feeling when it's too late and I'm too old to joust carelessly is neither here nor there; it can't bluff me into thinking that once upon a time I, too, could have followed His Grace of Dorset into the river for a Zuleika Dobson—or, more splendidly, for a Fay Richmond, no conjurer nor coquette! For I know dismally that my wildest youth couldn't have shared in that fantasy of love—I was too sane or too stupid, whichever you like. And that's why, instead of being the chief actor, I am only a humble observer in the only play that has ever really mattered in my life...."

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"One February afternoon, about six years ago, I drove past two people on the Route Corniche between Nice and Monte-Carlo. I was driving alone, a noisy Mercèdes. And I had just swung round a corner on to a straight stretch, when ahead of me I saw a man and a woman come out of the garden gate of a villa. The woman had on a white dress. I looked at it until I was abreast.... And I don't know how I got round the next corner. I don't know if she really recognised me as I whirled past, if she really smiled—perhaps it was only a mocking game that the sun had played on a woman's comely face! Indeed, I thought she had smiled, that old, gentle smile.... For me the whole thing was just a sudden stare, and then a long acute, acute pain. The sort of pain that fixes on the heart and mind, with a doubtful smile to crown its ache.... Wondering about that smile, as of a ghost in a white dress, all the rest of my way on that fiendish, lovely mountain road, I suppose it wasn't my fault that car and self didn't add one more wreck to the credit of Les Alpes Maritimes.... I hadn't seen Fay Richmond for fourteen years, and I have never seen her since then.

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"I was about twenty-eight or so when I first met the Richmonds, *mère et fille*, in London. Old General Richmond had died a few years before—perhaps luckily, before the Boer War rats got at his reputation as a strategist.

"I had already two fairly successful plays to my name; and so, among the thousand and one people of my first drawing-rooms, I can't remember exactly how I met Mrs. Richmond, unless it was at a bridge party, for she was a fearsome player even at that early stage of the damnable game. Fearsome she was, I said; but only in spades and clubs. She is the only woman I've never really been terrified of in my life, bless her dear kind heart! A huge, vast woman, with a vast expanse of genial face, and fair hair, and a rumbling rasping voice that caught you behind the shoulders and made you smile sheepishly. She had no right to be a woman, she ought to have been a stockbroker, with a terrified, adoring little wife and a large place in the country. I'm not exaggerating, she wasn't fat, she was massive—simply exuding luxury, terror, and kindness. Yes, that rumbling, rasping voice said the most encouraging things to a not-very-conceited young playwright; who, I like to think, fascinated by the kindness of that vast terror, perhaps stood behind its chair all that afternoon and watched it take the odd trick, or know the reason why not, my dear partner?...

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"And not very many days later, on a lazy afternoon one October, he was sending in his name from the doorway of a house in Rutland Gate, vaguely hoping that she was not at home so that he could wander about the Park for an hour or two. But within the next few minutes he was in an unconventional little grey room upstairs, certainly not the usual drawing-room of this large house, in half-hesitating talk with a girl who

had followed him in.

"He had swung round, as guiltily as one always does from the examination of a strange room, when he heard the door open behind him; and expecting, prepared for that large woman, he was suddenly struck shy, absurdly stammering, when a slight thing, a girl, came towards him with a smile and flushed cheeks and some quick nervous words. It was surprising how slight she seemed! Her words and her flush showed him that she was much more shy than he—why, she was only a girl!—and this pulled him together into his experienced self, before he entirely missed what she had begun to say.

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"My mother told me—' she was saying, but she had misjudged her distance, and was now so close to me that she had to break in with a 'How d'you do?' and shake hands.... Then her eyelids fluttered, quite, quite sincerely. But, beneath them, the brown eyes were apprising me steadily all the time—she was one of those sweet things who valiantly pretend that they can judge for themselves! Well, she would have to like me, I decided.

"You see,' she was going on quickly, 'when your card came up, mother said at first that she wasn't at home—'

"Thank you,' I said, and we both laughed like shy children.

"You know I didn't mean—oh, dear, it's very difficult!' she broke in helplessly. 'And I haven't even asked you to sit down yet!'

"But I don't know if I'm to be allowed to stay!'

"Why, of course, you are going to stay!' she said, surprised into a decisive manner. 'I'm just trying to explain.... Do sit down, please!' We both sat down. She took a deep breath:

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"Mother said she wasn't at home at first, because she is lying down with a headache and a bad temper. But then she changed her mind—even a headache can't ever prevent mother from changing her mind—and said that she couldn't turn you away from the door the very first time you called, as you might never come again, which—'

"Yes, I would,' I interrupted.

"But you wouldn't dare contradict mother like that if she were here,' she retorted; and then covered her suddenly heightened flush with a little tremor of a laugh. It wasn't quite a laugh—rather like a happy gurgle, you know, if that doesn't sound too stupid. And it made one want to smile all over.

"Shall I go on where I left off when you interrupted?... Which, said mother, would be a pity, because you were a nice young man and had quite good manners for a man who couldn't help having gone to Oxford or Cambridge—'

"Heidelberg,' I corrected softly.

"Well, I'm glad mother doesn't know that, because she generally doesn't like eccentric people.... And then she told me to come down and receive you, and give you tea, and make such a fuss of you that you'd have to pretend to be amused, anyway.'

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"I suppose she caught me with a whole-hearted smile all over my face, because she added, 'And you are pretending splendidly,' in a shy, mischievous way. Then again that tremor of a laugh, with just a little mocking wave in it. And now, too, laughter was playing a fluttering game with the inevitable shyness in the tortoiseshell eyes. Yes, they were just brown eyes when she first came in, but now they were tortoiseshell in the pale October light. These things happen.

"It was rash of me to begin to try and tell you about Fay Richmond, because I find I am groping for the threads. And there is something almost irritating in trying to modulate one's thoughts to the facts of an intimacy which has been at the back of one's mind for so many years, but which only lasted twelve months. That's all—just about twelve months from that afternoon which I've been describing to you at such terrible length; on purpose, indeed, because in groping to fit a memory with a face and a voice I have got to go back to the very beginning, to re-live that first impression of that first meeting; which ended only with a suddenly returned nervousness, itself the herald of my returning formality. As I took my leave I had the happy feeling that I had found a friend—you know that feeling? as you walk away from a house which you had entered never dreaming of the unusual smile with which you would be leaving it? It happens so seldom....

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"From that time I saw a great deal of them—or rather, as much of them

as of any one, for I did more writing at that period of my life than at any other. I was still young enough to have the luxury of having something to say, or thinking I had, which is as enjoyable. Mrs. Richmond was really fond of me, God only knows why. And genuine in her affections as in all else, the ordinary barriers of time between acquaintance and friendship counted for nothing with her; and so I found myself, very delightfully, to be almost an 'old friend' of the family within less than a month!

"Perhaps it was just this unusual development that put me in the wrong channel; for there were Fay and I, with the embracing presence of her mother between us, or upstairs about to come down—how often she was, carelessly, 'about to come down!'—calling each other by our Christian names within, perhaps, the fifth time of my seeing her! While there was another young man, much more often and with more right at Rutland Gate than I, who, I know now, could not have called her by her Christian name, nor she by his, until the moment came when he simply couldn't help calling her by it. And that, after all, is what a Christian name is for! Certainly not to be scattered about in casual familiarity.... What a feeling, not to have called her 'Fay' until, one day, I simply had to! It's an emotion I missed, with other things....

"You will find it scarcely believable when I tell you that I went there, for most of that time, just as much to see the mother as the daughter! I simply can't remember hoping, when I rang the bell, that Mrs. Richmond would be out or lying down, and that I must 'pretend to be amused' with Fay—a joke, by the way, not easily released by any of us in that pleasant house! Mrs. Richmond was quite right in trusting to her affections, as good people often are right; and she herself said once, 'One very seldom places confidence in the wrong people.'

"No, this unfinished romance would never have happened if, several months before I met her, Fay Richmond had not been engaged to marry the Marchese Vitiali. It would not have happened because Mrs. Richmond was a sensible and practical woman, and because I was quite an ineligible young man, having no money, and, as she once remarked, only the most erratic prospects.

"'And for a woman to marry a man who lives by his pen is as dangerous an adventure as to marry a man who lives by his sword,' she ponderously added in the course of this same conversation; which of course held no strictly personal quality in it, but had sprung, one afternoon early in our friendship, from her coming down and finding Fay and me in a happy mood together.

"'One of the pleasant things that have happened,' she said embracingly as she came in, 'since this girl was clever enough to get herself engaged, is that now we can have ineligible young men about the house—can't we, Fay?'

"Even I could see that she wouldn't have answered but for the silence of two people.

"'Yes, it's fun to have friends,' Fay said, almost shortly. And for the first time in that house I felt a twinge of embarrassment. Something, a faint idea, brushed me in the face, vaguely. It's exaggerating a vagary into a phrase to say that I could almost feel it leave a faint red mark, like a flush. But it's quite poignant, even now.

"Yes, I suppose I *have* brought in her engagement as a sort of casual incident instead of as the real fact of her life. But, don't you see, that is exactly how it seemed to strike one, entering that house at a mid-way hour, so to say? Why, as I see it now, I think it was weeks before I actually realised the fact of her engagement! Her *fiancé* was nearly always there, of course; but not acutely so as her *fiancé*! He wasn't momentarily present, I mean.... And I don't think that it was entirely an excessive good breeding or a lack of point of view which so blurred the outlines of his position in the house. The Richmonds seemed, rather, to have peculiarly enveloped him, his whole foreignness, his demonstrativeness, and his dark good looks. So that it wasn't, perhaps, unnatural that some time passed before I realised anything other in the handsome young Italian than a charming and cultured—one might almost be pardoned for adding, decorative—addition to an already luxurious household. Accepting him as part of the family he seemed to just grow, in his capacity of lover, into my consciousness; as, I guessed, he must have grown with time into Fay's life—that rich and eligible young Roman! He, born with all the good things of life, having entered it with a letter of introduction, as it were, from the god who awards the silver spoons, had managed to happen on yet one more! And, with it all, he was still so very likeable....

"There seemed, through all those earlier months, to be a grim sort of silence sustained by the mother and daughter about Vitali. It grew queerly on one, this silence, after I had accepted him as part of the Richmond household; and I impudently put myself to inquiring into it. Not, of course, that I often saw Mrs. Richmond and Fay, or either of them, alone, for as I've said he was nearly always about the house, had just left or was just arriving.... I chose to think it a little strange that so ardent a *fiancé*, as undoubtedly he was, should be treated so utterly as part of the family—strange, or if you like, more than flattering for a foreigner in an English house! And, happening on what I've already described as that grim sort of silence about him, I found a more subtle reason to account for it than this whole-hearted acceptance of him into the family as a lover and a gentleman. Its very quality of grimness, which seems a little absurd in this context, gave one the key to Mrs. Richmond's queerly and almost insensibly working conscience, and—as I stretched the limits of my conceit—to Fay's dim understanding of it and its cause. Surely you can see the pathos of a situation in which a mother and a daughter, very really loving one another, seldom referred to an approaching marriage because they both vaguely saw in it a contradiction to their mutual understanding? It couldn't have been more definite than that, else my tale would run differently.

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"I can see Mrs. Richmond, now, fumbling in her generous mind, through that time for a real and deep content at her daughter's marriage with the Marchese Vitali, whom she liked so much. She, who would indignantly have denied that she could ever force or more than mildly persuade her daughter to a choice of a husband, must have felt a plaintive discomfort in doubting if her genuine desire for Fay to accept him had not influenced a daughter, who placed her mother's happiness beside her own, over just that fraction which helps indecision into assent.

"That Fay's concession of herself was not more abandoned than an assent I came to see through the window which an intimate household, unused to secreting its intimacies except by way of good breeding, almost forces upon the privileged third person. It didn't vividly strike one, as such a fact vividly should, that Fay was in love with her *fiancé*; not, I mean, that admirable sort of "in love" of young people, however undemonstrative, which makes the third person, on leaving its happy presence, want to clutch at the heart of the first pretty woman he sees so that he too can share of the beauty of a beautiful world.... But the opposite, the flatness of a forced emotion, certainly didn't strike me; love was there, I suppose, but of that pale kind which so often doesn't outlast, even in the purest mind, its consequence of marriage. The third person didn't have the acute feeling that he had blundered, ever so little, on them in a room; or that, once there, he should quickly leave them. There was a "grown-up" atmosphere about her in Vitali's presence which, I once realised, was quite lacking when he wasn't there; which was terribly seldom.... Of course, when I did come on them together, as happened sometimes when I called in the afternoon and Mrs. Richmond was 'lying down,' I generally found a way to retire quite early—but entirely because of that other party to the approaching marriage, the charming Vitali, whose eyes made no secret of a fact which, after all, there's no reason to conceal from a celibate woman.

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"I had nothing from Fay about the preliminaries, as I came to be curious about them. She never spoke of yesterday, very seldom of to-morrow; all her words and laughter were for the present moment, when you were with her and were held captive by the deliciously sincere brown eyes, which could mock so faintly—and, if she chose to play with you, act so plaintively! Perhaps it is because I, even then, had put her on a velvet cushion in a glass case, to admire and enjoy her especially, but she certainly did seem a figure quite apart from her own generation of just-emerged *débutantes*—usually a tiresome barley-water stage for a girl, when she hasn't yet quite dropped her girlish giggle for her woman's smile. I never thought of her in relation to the other maidenly things one met in drawing-rooms round about, even when she was herself there as one of them, and by a quaint mixture of shyness and self-possession made one mentally describe her by an unusual epithet for a girl—she looked gracious! But then that was suitable, for parties and such-like were different to these nowadays. It was much less difficult then than it is now to tell a lady from a *demi-mondaine*; girls hadn't yet learnt, or pretended they hadn't, to be sophisticated before getting married. One played more ping-pong in those days.

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"So it was entirely from Mrs. Richmond that I learnt of Vitali's approach, and of her own motherly share in it, and was able to piece together my theory of the good lady's vague discomfort at it all. He had appeared in

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London about two years before to take up the vaguest post at the Embassy here, but with just a little more than the usual social advantages of the ordinary attaché. Mothers' hearts could not but beat a little frenziedly in the presence of his fortune and his very agreeable person; and his title, however Italian, held a long and honoured tradition. Mrs. Richmond was quite a dear in her self-directed sarcasm, and there was a real tenderness in her reference to the *parti* which her daughter had won—because, after all, the prize had melted before Fay into the most graceful of begging suitors; had so wantonly fallen in love, her mother explained, that only the severest exercise in breeding had restrained her from feeling superior to more commonplace mothers. From the first he had lain, so to speak, on the door-mat, quite pitifully. Fay, who had just 'come out' had quite definitely refused his first proposal—any Englishman would have run to join the salmon in the Hebrides after that girlish refusal! But not so Carlo, who loved without false pride, like the Venetian suitor he was; he ran no further than that door-mat, and there he stayed; looking not in the least ridiculous in a position which tarnishes the dignity of most spoiled young men, but rather grew in it, to one watching kindly more than ever acceptable. Indeed both liking and approving him, Mrs. Richmond had watched his suit kindly and carefully from the first and had favoured it as well as she could; and more than ever after his rebuff, for Vitiali was emerging so admirably from the dangerous test that, so she affirmed, she had never in her life learnt so much as then about the best way in which a young man can win a young woman.

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"And, after all, it's not every day that you will be loved so well and so eligibly,' she had told Fay; and I gather that the rumbling voice must have held a certain weight of impatience in it that day. Because, beside the initial one, there were so many advantages which the tiresome girl didn't seem to see; such, for instance, as the very important one that the southern climate was good for her delicate health,—a cause for great anxiety ever since a very severe attack of bronchial pneumonia in her sixteenth year; in fact, just because of that, they would anyway have to spend a considerable part of every year in the south.... Not of course that any advantage of any kind could or should sway a definite dislike into anything more amiable—but where, incomparably instead of dislike, there was a genuine fondness which the slightest touch of time's finger might throw into love, it was irritating to see a girl's whim assert itself so contrarily!

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"And who, in the end, but Fay herself had proved it to be a whim, when, some eight months after he had first declared his suit, Carlo had found himself accepted as whole-heartedly, Mrs. Richmond affirmed, as once he had been refused? Although, of course, Fay was of a very undemonstrative nature—which perhaps was just as well in a mate of this Italian gallant, who was himself quite demonstrative enough for one household!

"But there was to be no hurry about the affair, Mrs. Richmond had decided from the first; and I could imagine her bustling that decision about her mind, as a sort of anodyne for she didn't quite know what. They had been engaged already six months, and she, watching her only child's happiness very, very carefully, had gained from her care not less than certainty about the felicity of Fay's choice. There was in Carlo no note that jarred, as there often is even in the best of men; besides, he could so perfectly accommodate one's every mood, and yet lose not a fraction of his dignity in such complaisance; for, having so absolutely thrown himself at Fay's feet, she hadn't really been able to help allowing him to stay there—'as who wouldn't?' Mrs. Richmond demanded comfortably.

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"No, there was to be no hurrying. Carlo had been persuaded by her determination—Mrs. Richmond rather stressed her influence here—and the marriage would not take place for another six months from then; for she preferred that Fay should have reached a decent one-and-twenty before setting out on the conquest of Italy.

"But she is an odd girl, with a terrible capacity for loyalty—I suppose that's the word,' she added. 'With more loyalty than a human being can comfortably hold, I sometimes imagine.' A note of self-deprecatory anxiety in her voice conflicted oddly in one's ears with the 'happy-ever-after' tone of her previous sentences; and to help her out of her ensuing silence, I ventured that surely it was just Fay's loyalty (if that was the word), which even a stranger could feel, that made her so unusually, well, attractive for her years.

"Of course, of course....' Mrs. Richmond assented heavily; then turned in

her chair directly round on me. 'But, my dear man, don't you see that when it's carried to excess it can make a very treacherous quality? When, let's say, it becomes a leading principle in life for a girl who, after all, needs only a working amount of it, all sorts of troublesome things might happen—I mean, of course, that it's just conceivable as a theory in a foolish moment such as this.... Poor Howard! to be burdened by a mother with her child's virtues for lack of any real faults! It's a sweet thought, that way.

"You see,' she said wistfully, 'people sometimes break after the strain of too much loyalty—I've adopted that word now. They don't take things easily enough, until, one day, they suddenly break and take things too easily! I've seen it happen, a dear sweet woman.... I'm talking so intimately to you because I expect you to understand, and not be too brilliantly conclusive to yourself about it. Of course you know that I am not talking directly of Fay, for it's absurd to suppose that there ever could be a strain on her loyalty about anything, but about my own theories. I've got lately into the habit, from so much watching, of doing her introspection for her, just as I still like doing her hair for her sometimes—for it's a shame that a mere maid should have all the fun, isn't it?'

"But, after all, it was not to run so smoothly for dear Mrs. Richmond; her half-articulate anxiety—I can't really call it self-reproach—seemed to have held a parallel justification in its subject. Fay, knowing nothing of her good mother's shouldering of her burden, had done her own introspection as well as she could by herself; and came, as girls will, upon its results inconveniently as the marriage grew nearer—instead of having thought of it all *before* as her mother had done for her!

"I had a very good view of the pattern they unknowingly worked between them because, in my curious too-quickly developed position in that house, I was again made the *confidant*. I was, 'Since mother has quarrelled with all her "in-laws," the only sensible man about the premises,' Fay herself said once; a bloodless and unenviable prerogative so unsuitable to Vitiali's temper that he had never troubled to stoop down to claim it from the heights where his good fortune had enthroned him. For who, able to be something better, would trouble himself to hold the mean place of 'the sensible man about the premises?' I've never been lured into it since, anyway.

"It was about a month later that, after a week in which I had not seen them, I called one afternoon and came face to face with Vitiali by the drawing-room door, which he had just closed behind him.

"I'm so glad you have come, Howard,' he said, with his affectionate smile, retaining my hand in his; we were great friends, you understand. 'I have just left Fay, looking exactly as though she were going to write a book or a tragedy. Oh, so serious!

"Come on, quickly,' he said, catching me by the arm and hurrying me to the door. 'Let her see you before she takes a pen in her hand—let her see a man who actually has written something, and take warning.

"Of course, you don't look like an author, old man,' he soothed my protest. 'You look just like any one else, but more sympathetic. That is why I am asking you to make Fay look not so serious—Oh, it's terrible, that quiet Fay seriousness!' He held me at arm's length with a sudden gesture. 'Can you make a woman laugh?' he asked.

"I can do nothing else,' I answered.

"Then, Howard, I shall count you not a good friend if Fay is not smiling all over her face when I come back to-night to take them out to dinner.' He had a delightful way of mock solemnity, which seemed to suit particularly his dark mobile features.

"Quick, now, before she takes up that horrible pen!' and he opened the door and thrust me into the room. 'God be with you,' he whispered behind the closing door.

"What poor Carlo had helplessly called her 'seriousness' I had remarked about Fay just lately; and the forced comedy of my entrance to combat it was part of the woe-begone air with which he usually tried to appease and lighten it.... It was, as I had noticed, as though a fleeting shadow of thought, in brushing across her face, had been seduced to stay beyond its first impulse; and there's nothing in the world so satisfying to watch as a young serious loveliness, so it be without guile. I, as sometimes the four of us sat at the play (when of course I was Mrs. Richmond's companion in particular), in a side glance at her would catch the shadow of that thought, and it was as a delicate engraving on a lovely face; and

I'd wonder what problem that dear mind was trying to work out—of course, bravely! You see? She was the sort of girl to induce a generous epithet about her every action, the sort that even great writers seldom show as anything but lay figures, simply because it needs a rare personal quality to create a perfect description of beauty together with simplicity and genuineness. I can't even attempt to do that, I'm content just to envy my youth her company, and curse it for its commonplace vigour which, ambitious in a busy world, thought of that girl as a playmate, instead of—oh, instead of as a mate!

"I'm here, to-day, as a clown,' I said, as I walked towards her at the writing table by the window. They affected quills in that house, and as she turned round in her chair she had the end of one thoughtfully between her teeth.

"You don't have to be a clown,' she denied, quite vigorously. 'Even though Carlo did make a speech to you just outside—and isn't he a sweet when he's fussed!'

"And with reason. For the point of his speech was that you had been pulling a long face at him, and no decent Italian likes to have his women pulling long faces.'

"It wasn't at *him*, Howard. Could any woman pull one of those faces you refer to at Carlo? Obviously he's too dear to be treated as an ordinary man....'

"Well, I did say I was only a clown,' I murmured humbly.

"No, to-day you are an uncle, Uncle Howard,' she said, puckering her eyebrows as though in examination of me for that post. 'Yes, you've got to be the sort of uncle that real uncles never are.'

"This is one of my serious days,' she explained. 'I'm sorry, Howard, but it is. I'm not old enough yet to have a plain day, so I've got to put up with a serious one instead now and again. There's no sugar or chocolate on any of the cakes I think about to-day.'

"I remember a tale by a man called Henry Harland about a woman who once had a plain day—' I was beginning vaguely.

"You mustn't remember it because I'm not a bit interested in her,' she stopped me. 'If you please, we will discuss myself Entirely. Do you mind very much, Howard?'

"Not very much,' I said.

"And suddenly she jumped up and caught me tightly by the arm, the whole smile and impulse exquisitely childish. 'Oh, my dear, what shall I do when I'm married to a foreigner and no strong, silly, sensible Englishman about the house to play with!' Quick words they were, tumbling over one another—and then she let go my arm, for that inevitable flush was tingeing her cheeks.

"You see, one thinks of that,' she went on, more sedately. 'It simply creeps over me, the thought of who poor Fay is going to talk nonsense with in the "near future." It's difficult to talk nonsense with most people, isn't it? Yes, say it is.... You know you get that feeling yourself, Howard—you know very well that it isn't with every chit of a girl you can talk the sort of stuff you do with me. Just try, anyway, and see what you get!'

"Of course, I can with Carlo too,' she said. 'But it's different. Rather like work. Why, it took me months and months to make him understand that I didn't hate him when I laughed at him! And one only really laughs at people one's very fond of, after all.... I suppose it's different because he's in love with me,' she added, and waited for me to find a query in her eyebrows; but I didn't answer it.

"Italians are very odd,' she said. 'I know all about them now. They simply mustn't be laughed at—it's a sort of threat they hold over you, poor dears! I'm always making a sunny day into a rainy day for Carlo.... When I said "foreigner" I didn't, of course, mean to imply that he was an ordinary foreigner,' she added very decidedly.

"Even if he had no money,' I agreed, 'he could never be anything worse than an "alien." With a face like that he simply couldn't be "undesirable."

"What is it, Fay?' I asked suddenly. 'You've got the air of a woman "leading up to something." There is an important look in your eye.'

"She smiled a little plaintively. 'It's not very important,' she said. 'I'm worrying about myself, that's all. To-day, and yesterday, and other days before, I've been wondering whether I am or am not going to marry Carlo.'

"But, Fay, of course you are!' I was startled enough to cry.

"Yes,' she nodded. 'That is exactly what mother would say, except that she would say it in a bigger way; but she doesn't know.... I'm worrying about it a lot, Howard. I simply don't know which to do.'

"She had startled me into the attitude of uncle she had desired of me. I stood on the hearth, just by her chair, and really felt very serious. Suddenly, and with both hands, she had given me a responsibility. She had half turned a key and shown me a place of discomfort for three people whom I was really fond of. And I wanted, intensely, to help—not only Fay, but her mother. If this was only a passing indecision I decided that her mother must never hear of it, for I already knew of her infinite capacity to worry herself.... But it doesn't matter what in particular I said. I probably bent over from my place on the hearth, and spoke into her eyes, telling her that this wasn't a game. She simply must make up her mind—now! To go on doubting was, after all, so unfair to Carlo!

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"It can't all be so indefinite,' I urged rather impatiently. 'I mean, my child, that you must know whether you do or don't like him enough.'

"But I do, I like him frightfully,' she protested. 'You don't quite understand, Uncle Howard. I'm not worrying so much about his part of it as about mine. I'm sure about him, you see. He is the sweetest and dearest young man in the world, and I know that I can be happy with him—even though he does look sulky when I laugh at him. But Italian sulks are so much more attractive than the home product.... Yes, I like him very, very much, and I know very, very clearly that I'm not in love with him—'

"She was too sensible a girl for me to take up that cue in the conventional way; but there was no other way in which to answer it, so I didn't.

"But I'm not an idiot. I don't quarrel with that especially,' she said, 'because I will probably never like any one I can marry half as much. No, it's quite easy to just marry Carlo, he fits in so well.'

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"Well, if that's so, I wonder what on earth we are talking about!' I had to say. And she shook her head at me helplessly.

"You make an awfully good uncle, Howard, you are so terribly stupid! Didn't I tell you ages ago that this discussion was to be limited strictly to Fay? So Carlo, for the moment, is just a man who has bought a ring. I, the Queen of Sheba, come to Solomon for wisdom, but with one fat worry instead of jewels and things....'

"How surprised she would have been if I had said, 'My dear, even Solomon was not more grateful.' But I wanted to.

"I seem very meek and mild, but I'm really very full of myself,' she explained shyly. 'I've been introspecting, you see, and of course I've made an awful mess of it. Knowing oneself doesn't help, it simply complicates.... I've found, for instance, that once I do a thing—well, it's done! It's like a thing written in a book (or in a play by you!), always there, by me. I mean that once I've stuck myself to a thing, I am—do you mind?—a "sticker." I don't change or break away—I can't. And it's very frightening and discouraging to realize that, because it sort of cuts away from under the feet all the trap-doors which other people can escape through. I feel very pathetic ... and even you don't know what I'm talking about.'

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"But I do, Fay, I do!' I said quickly. And I knew even better than she, with her mother's self-deprecatory confidence on 'loyalty' in my ears!

"The feeling,' she went on encouraged, 'is that, not quite like other people, once I'm married—well, just suppose that I even in the least bit wanted to get unmarried again! I couldn't. It's like a Roman Catholic marriage, for ever and ever. Of course,' she added quickly, sincerely, 'it's the very dimmest nightmare. I'm quite happy to marry Carlo, and I can't really imagine that I could begin to be unhappy with him—but just suppose! I'm much too fond of him even now to want to hurt him, and as I grow fonder of him I shall never be able to hurt him. Never. His eyes wouldn't let me....'

"And as I looked at her I couldn't help thinking that the world would be a splendid place if women realised the responsibility of being loved as did this girl. For that, mainly, was what it was, the burden of the responsibility of being utterly loved for the first time.

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"But I didn't give way to that sort of thing. I seem to remember talking a great deal of sense that afternoon, but sense which I tried to frame illogically enough not to appear too disagreeable. I simply can't help

feeling a little proud of my own share in that afternoon. I remember that I said quite sternly that it was very strange for a girl like her to have wandered so far ahead, strange and not very fitting. 'Because, don't you see, Fay, it's all very unfair to Carlo and to your own affection for him? You say you are frightfully fond of him, you let him feel that you are, and then, if you please, your mind goes searching on ahead concocting plots as to what you will or will not do when you are not so fond of him. If you are fond enough of him now, as you say you are, it's simply dishonest of you, Fay, to go on playing draughts with those vague doubts about a very vague future. It's the sort of thing women do when they are thinking of marrying a fourth husband.... If you go on like this, when you are an old woman you will be very superstitious and quite unbearable. For it's not much more than a superstition now, and you are treating yourself very cruelly to make it the keystone of your "serious day." I've never felt less sympathetic about a thing in all my life!'

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"And so I went on, bartering my mess of pottage for the homely position of 'Uncle' Howard. And as she looked up at me and listened, her eyes grew not so serious, until they laughed outright.

"'Oh, dear, I'm sure you're right,' she said at last; 'but I don't in the least agree with what you say.... But anyway I've gained something by boring you with it all, Howard. The whole thing seems so very unimportant and silly now I've told it to some one else.' And then she added, with a manner: 'The serious day has nothing further on which to proceed, so ... let's have tea! And muffins! It's simply impossible not to have muffins today, Howard.'

"She was a dear, that girl! And a little later, as I walked up Piccadilly towards my flat, I suddenly found myself staring hard at an empty 'crawler,' with the tremendous thought in my head that it was a great shame that England should lose such a girl to a foreigner and a foreign country! It began to seem wrong, somehow....

"I saw very little of them between then and the marriage. August and part of September took them up to Scotland, while I stayed in London and worked. How I must have enjoyed working in those days! And when they came back I was busy with the production of a new play, and they too, I supposed, with the usual preparations. But Vitali used often to drop in at my rooms at odd hours, and I asked him once if Fay had ever looked serious enough since that afternoon to write a tragedy; he showed his teeth in a smile, and said that I must have done her a great deal of good that day, 'Because, my dear Howard, she has never been gayer and more light-hearted as lately. I am very happy....' He could say those things, he had a way of charming you with his simplicity; and, anyway, there is nothing more charming in the world than a cultured foreigner—except, of course, a cultured Englishman.

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"Two nights before the wedding day, after ten o'clock, Fay rang me up on the telephone. 'I hope I am disturbing you,' she began sweetly.

"'I just want to know, Howard,' the voice said, 'if you really are coming to see me married.'

"'Well, I've intimated to your mother my decision to be present, and I've committed myself in writing, what's more.'

"'Don't be silly, my dear! Whoever takes any notice of what *you* write? You write much too well.'

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"'It's only that I had a vague idea,' she explained very gently, 'that you wouldn't be there.' Then, somehow, there was a short silence. That telephone silence, full of dim murmurings and the attention of two people!

"'Why?' I asked abruptly.

"'Don't be snappy with me, please, Howard,' the voice begged. 'I just wanted to know for certain, that's all.'

"'Queer things happen sometimes on a clear telephone about half-past ten at night. Voices seem to take their clothes off....

"'Well, as a matter of fact,' I began slowly.

"'Yes?' It was scarcely a word, but a light low tremor of a question.... I put my lips very close to the mouthpiece and formed my words very clearly:—

"'Why don't you want me to come, Fay?'

"'I'm not sure about the little gasp, but only about the little voice, after a long second, saying, 'I don't know why, Howard.'

"Now that you've asked me I realise that I never intended to come,' I confessed. 'And I'm damned if I know why, either!... If I come at all I shall be among the crowd outside, admiring you and Carlo.'

"But aren't you quite, quite sure that at the last moment you won't regretfully find it impossible to come at all?' the voice seemed to plead.

"I'm beginning not to be sure of anything to-night,' I said fretfully.

"Poor Howard!' Ah, I knew that voice, the firmer one with the little caress of mischief over it! I made a quick grab at it.

"I say, you're going to write to me quite a lot, aren't you?"

"Not one line,' she answered firmly.

"But, Fay, you can't disappear from my life like that!' I protested heatedly. 'Of course you are going to write to me, aren't you?'

"I don't intend to,' she said sweetly, 'but I suppose I will, sometime.... Don't you know, Howard,' the voice asked, as though getting farther and farther away, 'that you don't deserve a letter from me, ever?' No words of mine could hold that voice near, it was disappearing, a faint thing growing fainter, like phantom in a wind.

"And you don't deserve ever to see me again.... Good-bye, Howard.'

"Fay!' I cried. Her name seemed to be on the wall before me, a written word. And I couldn't reach it, couldn't! Her receiver clicked—like a far away door clicking behind some one who has left a room empty of all that matters. And I was realising that only then! There was no more Fay Richmond! That voice over the telephone, with an unrealised shade and quiver in it, had wrenched aside in my consciousness what the eyes and body of that voice had seemed to leave intact for so long! As though a sudden ray of sunshine had awakened a man whom an alarm-clock had left sleeping. There was no more Fay Richmond! I didn't go to the wedding.

"I haven't, even now, the least sympathy with myself. Nor would I have with you, say, if you had grossly bungled your affairs in the same way. It's a deficiency for which there is not the shadow of an excuse, that mean, ungenerous, deficiency which blinds a man to the necessities of his own happiness—until, since life is always farce or melodrama, it's too late!

"She did not write to me. The 'sometime' of her concession faded with the months into a dream, perhaps to come true, sometime!... I wrote only once to her, a dishonest letter, which I did my best to fill with the spirit of my past—and how long passed!—'avuncular' relations with her. And yet nothing happened since the day when the Queen of Sheba had come to Solomon with 'one fat worry,' nothing at all! Not even the first syllable of a word of love—not, by a thousand miles, even the shadow of an attempted or desired kiss! Only, to account for it all, a voice on a telephone one night, a so familiar voice changed by magic.... Changed in itself or in my mind? I simply didn't ask! But, however it was, from that strange thing the god worked a stranger, for I knew that when she read that letter she would know that it was dishonest, unreal.

"She must have known! Or else, sixteen months later.... That 'sometime' letter of hers had come at last! A treasure, stamped from Vienna where (so Mrs. Richmond had written me from Tonbridge, her new home since the disposal of the house of Rutland Gate) Carlo was now attached. It was a very short letter something like this:

"I am coming to England for a week,' she wrote, 'to see mother in her new home in the country. But, if you don't mind, there are other folk I would like to see, too!... Carlo is getting more and more of a personage, and simply can't leave Vienna, so I won't be able to stay away more than a week, from next Thursday as ever is, Howard! But as I don't know what day I will be in London, you will please institute no inquiries about me until you hear from me. I will ring you up at about 10:30 on any of my seven nights, so that we can arrange to meet somewhere. Of course, I could write to you, but I want to wonder, as I take up the receiver, whether you will recognise my voice. But you won't dare not to, will you, Howard?' That is only a reason in a letter, I said to myself, for I can hear her adding, 'And so, my dear, if there's anything gay enough to keep you out after ten-thirty on any of those nights, then you will miss Fay—now won't you?'

"Thursday came. And then came those other days and nights, and passed! Each one tingling with hope, until half-past ten, and then—oh, it's a misery unlike any other, that waiting for a bell that doesn't ring! It is a cruel game to play upon a man, that exaltation of hope to hear a

voice, and then that helpless misery, with no remedy but what he can find in cigarettes. I paced many miles of carpet those six evenings.

"Thursday again. I dined alone, and then, telling Briggs that he could take his evening out, opened a book, and read grimly. I can't remember anything in my life like the bitter, dismal anger of that night. It's a vivid sore even now, that last vigil by my fire with mind and heart telling me that I had been cruelly played with, like a beast in a cage. I didn't love the less, I couldn't; indeed it was my love that was measured by my bitter grievance.... And even if I do hear her voice to-night, I wasn't spared from realising, it will be too late to see her—to arrange to meet somewhere,' she had written!—for she will be leaving to-morrow.

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"One can act very well in one's own bitter company. Even as the clock in my little hall struck the half-hour after ten I pretended to read grimly on.... I've explained all this waiting to you because it seems to reflect quite importantly on my behaviour that night. It can't but account for it in a sort of way—and as for excusing it, well I don't care a button for that!

"I suppose it was about a quarter of an hour later that the door-bell rang. Briggs was out, as I've said, and I had not the faintest intention of answering it, for it could only be a casual caller wanting a drink. But the bell rang again, furiously—and this time, without a second's hesitation, I threw aside my book, strode into the hall, and flung open the door.

"'You beast!' I said with all my heart, quivering.

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"There she was, in the half-darkness of the open doorway, a grey-hatted woman, with a little face thrown up to laugh, laughing at me! And I may have been laughable indeed, with face suited to that unrestrained outburst. I didn't wait for her to speak, I stretched out a hand and drew her by the arm into the hall, and kicked the door to. And she just smiled! with her head a little to one side, she stared up at me, as I still held her arm, and, I suppose, glowered down at her—like a child examining the giant who has caught her. And then, at last, she spoke:

"'I wondered what my welcome would be,' she said softly, 'but I never expected this particular one.'

"Her voice broke my impulses into pieces, as a silver hammer might break coarse grass. I let go of her arm.

"'And of all the welcomes I'd prepared for you, Fay,' I said humbly, 'this particular one never occurred to me. Please—'

"But she didn't seem to be listening, the large, serious eyes were still examining me, my face.

"'Why, Howard, you're quite changed!' she exclaimed. 'You aren't the same Howard at all, the one who used to come to Rutland Gate!'

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"'Well, you see, that telephone call last century....' I explained vaguely.

"She nodded her head comprehendingly.

"'Ah, yes, that one that should simply never have happened!' she murmured.

"'I'm frightfully glad to see you again, Fay,' I said, as though irrelevantly, and gravely held out my hand. We shook hands.

"'I just thought I'd call and see you before I left England,' she said as gravely. 'And I might add that though I find your hall quite charming, it's very unsatisfactory as a reception-room.'

"But she didn't go straight in, she stopped on the threshold of the room to look round at me with a sudden, excited smile.

"'You silly Howard, don't you realise that this is a wonderful adventure, because I've never, never been in your rooms before!' And once in the room she looked slowly round, until her eyes fixed on her own portrait on my writing table. She pointed a finger at the discovery.

"'Why, there's Fay Richmond!' she exclaimed.

"'A girl not unworthy to be put beside you, Madame la Marchesa,' I bowed gallantly.

"'Don't!' she almost screamed. 'I've been hearing that sort of stuff from Italians and Austrians for a year and a half—and I simply can't bear it from you, Howard, even in fun.'

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"'Anyway, it's a wretched sort of compliment,' she added, 'because that girl wouldn't dare hold her head up beside me—would she now?' And she looked me intimidatingly full in the face.

"Well, I suppose you have grown just a little,' I conceded. 'Though I can't possibly judge between your looks until you take off your hat—like a dear?'

"It was easily done, a light grey felt thing with a rakish brim—a travelling hat, I realised with a shock! My eyes followed it as she threw it on to the table, and my mind lost all the ease which I had managed to collect. She saw that, I suppose, for as she patted her hair she was looking at me with a queer, understanding, hopeless smile.

"Fay, you're not going—just now?' I blurted out.

"I called here on my way to the station,' she told me very evenly.

"I couldn't help it, I said again, 'You beast, Fay!'

"But you don't understand, my dear' she protested quickly; and with an adorable gesture she stretched out a hand, three fingers of a gloved hand, and ran them thoughtfully down my arm. 'Won't you understand at all? Why I've come to see you on my last night in England instead of—instead of on my first?'

"She seemed to plead, a suppliant before me staring cruelly down at her. I didn't understand.

"If I had seen you on my first night,' she tried to explain, 'why, I might have been tempted to go on seeing you, again and again, for ever and ever, Howard!... Oh, don't you understand?' And she asked that with a sort of breathless, childish pleading in her voice—illuminating even to my bitterness! But I couldn't, just then, let a pleading voice make me forgive so easily.

"And so, in case you might be tempted,' I said, like any cad, 'you come to see me on your way to the train!'

"But my train doesn't go until 7 o'clock in the morning,' she said.... A slave to that wonderful moment, I took her and kissed her lips.

"Those few hours explained Fay Richmond—the girl I had known so well, the woman I loved.... And who loved me! There lay the unforgivable wonder."

And for the first time, on that passionate regret, Howard Wentworth broke in on his tale. With elbows on his knees and hands clasped, he leant forward in his arm-chair (one of those creaking wicker things which only poor men and rich nursing-homes have) and earnestly pointed his haggard convalescent face at me.

"But it's simply impossible to carry on that explanation, the method and the conviction of it, to you," he said. "In fact, if you will look about you at methods of expression, you will find that it's just there that life takes its leave of literature—just at that point where, in this instance, one impulse kissed another! It is as though life and literature had been travelling companions a good way, both helping the other—until at a cross-road life, with a sudden realisation akin to contempt, goes off on its own different road, a boundless and secret road where men and women passionately tell God what, on that other cruder road, they can't tell their fellows.... Sex, of course, is generally the most convincing explanation of inconsistencies—but it's not, by an exquisite subtraction, quite enough! It is only people who cannot go one better who live and love and lie in terms of sex alone; because, after all, there are additions to it, not so definite, perhaps, but more satisfying—and more lasting! So, anyway, the memory of one night tells me.

"That night was, as you realise, an amazing inconsistency in the Fay Richmond I've told you about. But if you will look even at that photograph you will see that such sincerity couldn't really be consistently sincere without, just once, being inconsistent to itself. I know that that sounds rather like a remark made by a young man after a liqueur brandy, but somehow it's very true.

"Hours later, as though she had suddenly awoken to a memory, she asked me very seriously if I remembered how there had been no sugar or chocolate on any of the cakes she had thought about on a certain afternoon? 'And all my long self-conscious speech, which you listened to so brutally well that I almost hated you—even though I didn't know for certain then that I loved you! And when you were going away, d'you remember, I was smiling "all over my face" like Carlo wanted me to, and being a frightfully jolly person? But afterwards I cried, Oh, how I cried! I liked you so much, and I liked Carlo so much—but so differently!...

"It was all arranged that I should marry Carlo,' she said, 'and then you came along and just ruffled the surface of things—but ever so slightly! If

you had kissed me you might have ruffled them too much, things might have been different, and now I would still be an honest woman instead of just a helpless creature in your arms, never, never wanting to leave them to go back to the world, where there's no passion for me....' Her voice was lower than a whisper, a murmur in my ears, and I would have preferred it to fade entirely into the silence it scarce left, for she was hurting us both with what she said.

"But the whisper went on, telling me how bitterly she had been hurt because I had been to see them so little in the weeks before the wedding—and how, missing me, she had found out her own secret.

"If you had come to me then and said, 'Fay, come away with me,' I suppose I would have thrown over Carlo. Yes, I suppose I would, but I'm not sure, because it would have been so frightfully difficult to have hurt him, the dearest man in the world! He would have died.... But it doesn't matter what I would have done or not done in that wonderful moment, because it never came—it was quite hopeless to hope that it would! I felt that right in my bones, I felt that you were a hopeless person to love, and very, very far away. Oh, so far away you seemed to be, Howard! And getting farther and farther every day, a cold, friendly figure coming to see us now and again, like a character in a play who has nothing to do but watch and make a sensible sort of joke when the real people get over-excited. And so I let everything go on, quite terrified and miserable, wondering what to do. It wasn't the idea of marrying Carlo that made me terrified or miserable, it was the thought of losing all hope of you—the thought of putting a husband between me and all hope of ever being loved by you.... But I let those last days pass, one by one, full of prophecy about myself, like a tragic figure in the Bible; and I didn't lift my voice, I did nothing at all, I let each day pass. I suppose it was because I was so hopeless about you, and laziness must have had something to do with it, too! That special sort of laziness which tells you that one effort is easier to make than the other—it was easier not to hurt Carlo and mother. But I couldn't resist just telephoning to you at the last moment to let you know what a pig you were, and, if you liked me at all, to make you see that the whole thing served you jolly well right. But I suppose I didn't control my voice very well and so gave myself away—though I didn't mind, really, because I had it firmly fixed in my mind that it was too late, I was going to marry Carlo whatever happened. And something did happen on that telephone, vaguely—I found that you did like me quite a lot after all, you poor man! And all this time that I've been away, a respectable married woman, I've been building up the romance of my life on a break in your voice—growing more and more certain that you loved me, until I had to come back to England to find out. And when you opened the door I found out....

"On my way to St. George's to marry Carlo,' she said, 'it seemed as though I had to wrap you up in a parcel, and go round by Westminster Bridge and drop you into the river. Yes ... and that's what I did, really, Howard dear. I have lost you, and you me, even though you are beside me now, a figure in a dream from which I shall wake up—just in time to catch my train! And that train is going to take me such a long way away from you, Howard, that we will be dead and buried and reincarnated before it can bring me back to see your beloved face again. It seems to be that sort of train, my dear....'

"Of course, I said things, I protested, I implored. It simply couldn't be that I was not to see her again!... There was misery enough, but there was no heart in my entreaties, for I knew all the time that what she said must be, and why it must be. It was the only right thing in a wrong business, that last cruelty. Oh, I knew, I knew! And there was a quality of fatalism about Fay's voice, which made its softness as hard to pierce as adamant. I was quite dull and flat, listening to her numbly, so that her words seemed to write themselves vividly in my mind, unalterable words never to be forgotten, each one like a fate in itself.

"It was more than martyrdom to an idea, it was a principle of living, that determined her to that course, the inevitable course; something in her much more human than can be found in such philandering with oneself as martyrdom, and that's why it was so inevitable, why I couldn't fight against it heartily and actively. It was simply that her whole being, the very insides and outsides, was in revolt against the treachery of any change in the road she had, however undecidedly once, set herself to travel; it was not possible for her to burn a single boat even on the certain chance of finding a palace in the romantic land—and so it was like a Roman Catholic marriage, as she had told me that afternoon, ages ago, when I had been so seriously concerned about her indecision to

marry Carlo!... My dear old man, hers was an aristocrat among souls!

"It was past six o'clock, and I was in an arm-chair watching her do her hair at the dressing-table, when she suddenly let it fall again over her shoulders, and came and knelt by the arm of my chair, and said: 'I'm not a very tiresome woman, really, because I know quite well that often in your life you will be saying beautiful things to beautiful women—but you will think it awfully bad luck if they believe you, won't you, Howard?'"

"'I had to come to see if you loved me,' she said, 'and to make you my lover, all mine, for once and always. Always ... just like that! It's a long word to repeat, always, but I do make it sound convincing, don't I, dear? Please, I want you to believe that I'll love you always.... Of course, I know that one day you will sit up and take notice of the thrill in a woman's eyes, you won't be able to help it, and it's only right that you shouldn't. But it won't be like this. She won't have all of you, simply because you can't help always being mostly mine, the girl whom you once took no notice of except to give her advice. It will be no good your trying, Howard. I can hear you saying one day soon, when you want to see me very much, "My God, I must end this damnable wizardry"—damnable wizardry is exactly how you will put it, but even swearing won't help you at all. You will try to worship strange gods, but it will be a self-conscious business, perhaps good for your vanity but not for your soul. You can't ever love again like this, my Howard, you simply can't help loving Fay all your life. Those, roughly, are my orders, anyway ...' she whispered into my ear, her fair hair tumbling over my face, punishing me."

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"I had ordered a cab earlier in the night. Her maid, to whom she had made some excuse, was to meet her at the station. But Fay wouldn't even let me accompany her part of the way, she insisted on saying good-bye at the open door, the door which I had opened so fiercely so long before. Two lives, after all, had been lived since then. She stood there, in the open doorway, her eyes sad and remote, and touched with something as old as this earth of ours is old, and a smile was crucified on her face; and she whispered:

"Pour un plaisir mille douleurs. L'amour est mort, vive l'amour!"

"And then she went away.... I know no more of Fay Richmond."

Howard's tale ended, I think, not too soon, for he had already talked too much for his returning strength. He lay back with closed eyes, perhaps he was asleep, as I stealthily left the room.

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It so happened that I did not see him again. As I have said, although he was convalescent at that time, he had a relapse, and died about ten days later. I rang up frequently to inquire, but more than a week passed before I had time to call at Beaumont Street. My young brother, for whom I was entirely responsible, had fallen ill in the meanwhile, and my time was anxiously spent, first in helping to nurse him, for nurses were not easy to find, and then in helping to find a nursing-home with a vacant bed, for nursing-homes were full; one had to die and vacate his bed before another could fight the wretched plague in it.

When at last I called at Howard's nursing-home and asked for him, the maid said she would ask the matron. But I said I would go up to see the matron myself, and was going upstairs to her room when I met her descending. As she saw me she shook her head gently and told me that Mr. Wentworth was not allowed to see any one, he was very ill. The crisis had not passed yet.... She was a sweet, white-haired old woman, on whose kind face grief had never been disciplined into that geniality which makes matrons sometimes horrible.

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"I'm afraid for him...." she added inconclusively, sadly. And then she said: "I have spent most of my life among sick and ailing people, Mr. Arlen, but this has been the saddest time of all. Terribly sad it's been! Only this morning a dear sweet lady, who only came in two days ago.... An English lady married to an Italian, and she was just spending a day in London on her way to Tonbridge where her mother lives, when...." I am almost certain that there were tears, repressed rebellious tears in the kind eyes. "I think her dying has affected me most of all," she added apologetically. "She was such a sweet, beautiful lady!"

As I put up my umbrella against the rain outside I thought to myself that it was like the end of a tale by a sentimentalist, for he had compromised with the angels and brought together in the end, a Juliet unaware of Romeo, the bodies of a man and woman who had loved so unhappily and so incompletely. I heard a tired voice saying bitterly, "I know no more of Fay Richmond."

III: CONSUELO

AS far as I could see in the dim light of the Hallidays' hall, whose house in Cheyne Walk I was just that moment leaving after one of their too crowded and rather tiresome parties, the owner of the voice which had asked me from the stairs if I was walking "Mayfair way" was of about my age, too near fifty, and of a genial and polished air, rare in these days of careless manners and—can one say it?—mannered carelessness; the sort of man who had long since overcome his shyness on meeting strangers, and, at a glance, seemed without that wretched self-consciousness which so gets between a man and his power to entertain; altogether, a cultivated and comfortable person, I thought.

But I am afraid that I was not in the best of tempers that night; for as we walked away from the house I made very little attempt to justify my companion's courteous invitation to share the walk. We had turned into the King's Road on our way Eastward before his talk, which had almost died down in the face of my wretched monosyllables, abruptly began again with:—

"A tragic pity, that Carew business!"

At that I quite woke up.

"What! Did you know her?" I asked, and immediately felt ashamed of my complete boorishness.

"Oh, ever so slightly," he gently waived my question; then turned to me, as though confidingly: "but just well enough to be terribly shocked at the sort of death she chose for herself.... As aimless, foolish, and certainly as useless as you like, she had after all lived a wonderful, perhaps a beautiful life—only to die as any damned bankrupt might die in a 15th floor-flat in a Manhattan block!"

The sudden bitterness in his voice made me look sharply at him, but he was too quick for me, and retrieved himself with a frank and altogether engaging smile which deprecated his involuntary—as he naïvely showed it to have been—seriousness. By this time I had quite recovered from my bad-tempered stupor, and was acutely interested. I just waited.

"Curiously enough," he said, after a short silence, "when I read about her suicide in the paper the other day it was not so much about her that I thought, as about an incident which arose from my acquaintance with her, years ago.... But are you sure I am not being very tedious?"

"Each word you say is shortening this walk," I answered quickly; how seldom can one dress the truth in purple and fine linen!

"Well, then," he went on genially, "in connection with Consuelo's name came to my mind an incident in which an acquaintance, almost a stranger, stood me in better stead than a friend has ever done. I have never seen him since, I have never thanked him—nor cursed him, as I will explain—for his startling help in that really cruel emergency. But I can't give you the incident without its background; for standing alone it means almost nothing, it is just a trick, one of destiny's sleights of hand. It takes its colour from a, well, imperfect passion, its background. And its background is Consuelo Carew, as I knew her twenty years ago.

"I met her just after she had married my friend Tristram Carew. She may have been, at the outside, twenty years old, then, but though there was nothing of the precocious young minx about her, she was more fully developed, more complete, than any other young woman of that age that I am now likely to meet. The only thing that was clear about her was her complexion. She wasn't what we mean by a 'girl' except in freshness, colouring, and zest—and what an amazing, embracing zest for life that was! She never lost it, she can't ever have lost it, it was her very being. I almost believe that, if we but knew the secret, this last impulsive stupidity of hers might somehow take on the splendour of an enthusiasm—but for what, for what?

"Tristram Carew was of my age, we had been friends at school and had gone up together to Balliol. And we had come down only a very few months before he ran amok and married the local parson's daughter, the beautiful Consuelo Trent. I was living in London at that time, and was too busy—I forget what about—to go down to Wiltshire to stay with him, and so I never saw him or her in the 'engaged couple' state. But I tried to imagine him in the role and drew a good deal of innocent amusement from my imaginings—for Tristram, somehow, very definitely didn't fit

into the picture as either fiancé or husband. But though I laughed, I was fond enough of him to be a little anxious—one didn't see how it could turn out happily, come what would! For when I say that Carew ran amok in marrying, I mean that in the ordinary way he was intelligent enough about himself to know that his devil's temper and insane jealousy would ruin the life and sour the love of any young woman who had the misfortune to marry him.

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"Though, mind you, no woman could be blamed for being carried away by the man. That presence of his, that shock of auburn hair, those wild eyes, and that infernally fluent tongue—why, the deuce take it, I, his best friend of that time, spent my days in loving him and being jealous of him! And though it sounds a fatuous thing to say about oneself, I haven't an atom of jealousy in my nature—I'm quite proud to say that I've never in my life envied any man his particular luck since that Saturday, down at Tristram Carew's place, on which I first met his young wife Consuelo, on their return from their honeymoon, and envied him his possession of her. But then that probably because I've never met another Consuelo.

"Consuelo wasn't made for a comfortable happiness, you understand. But neither was she strange, nor exotic, nor bizarre, nor Belladonnaish, nor any of those things that make a man think twice before introducing a woman to a superior sister at the Bath Club—but even so no man, unless he were a Tristram Carew, would too easily dare to marry her. I don't know why, but it was so, for since she divorced Carew she has had the pick of a thousand lovers, but not of many solid husbands. It sounds a cruel thing to say, but I don't mean it cruelly; it is just interesting as an instance of the curiously similar effect which one woman may have on a thousand different, very different men. You just loved her—and if you weren't turned down at the start you were certain to be turned down after a while; and then you went your way, and you knew why Menelaus had made such a nuisance of himself about Helen, for, like him, you had known, and loved, and had been loved by a marvellous woman; but, unlike that persistent Argive, you dimly realised that if she turned you down in the quick end, then that was probably your fault—and, anyway, it is only an indecent sort of man who quibbles about the pain after the pleasure. And for many years after that, long after you had married a steady young woman, you were Consuelo's devoted friend—and, by God, she was your devoted friend too! I never knew a woman break so many hearts and patch up so many quarrels as Consuelo; but it is generally the sort of woman who looks on fidelity and infidelity as moods rather than principles who makes the truest and sincerest friend....

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"But I envied my friend Carew overmuch, as even my English denseness about these things found out soon enough. She loved him for six months, and she detested him for years. And she grew to hate him so bitterly that Tristram Carew, the most jealous and unrestrained man I ever knew, was at last persuaded to let her divorce him. For, mind you, that woman was strong. She had personality at the back of her power to charm—and a rare, dangerous kindness which makes it impossible for one's love for her to be goaded into dislike. There wasn't a drop of affectation in her, she was just an almost perfect type of that 'modern' woman who has held her place in the life and poetry and prose of ages, from the wife of Uriah to Mary Stuart, and onwards to Consuelo; women born with just that mixture of essential breeding and adventurousness which will turn the heads of most normal and decent men, and leave them gaping and grovelling and smiling at their own damn-foolishness in thinking that such a woman could ever have loved them! I said 'normal and decent men' because it seems almost invariably to be the poor old *sahibs* who fall in love with this type of woman—while the outsiders step in and take them, and leave them. Anyway, it seems always to be your 'manly' man who odes the grovelling and the effeminate man to be the master of women. Just a theory, of course....

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"But I've been wandering disgracefully all over the place, for I set out to tell you that, at the end of a few years, Tristram at last realised what a mess she and he had made of it together, and then, dear fellow that he really was, he sat up and swallowed his gruel, and put her in the way of divorcing him, as a gentleman should.

"But all that, of course, happened much later. My life touched theirs, or hers in particular, if you like, only in the first year of their marriage, when I used to see a great deal of them during the season at their house in South Audley Street; and more week-ends than not I spent with them at Carew's place in Wiltshire.... He was a very queer sort of fellow, full of odd enthusiasms and intolerances, un-English in his incessant contempt for the regularities and pretences of life, though English enough in his

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hearty manner of showing that contempt. He was strange, too arrogantly made to care much whether he was found acceptable or unacceptable by others, and therefore a man without friends, because, poor fool, 'he preferred his own and Consuelo's company'; and even so he didn't love his young wife half as much as he would have done if he weren't certain that she worshipped him—though that childish contempt for happiness, as it can be called, was well punished in those wretched years later on, when his six foot odd of manhood must have made begging grotesques on the floor while she, perhaps pitying him, was as cruel as only a surfeited woman can be cruel—and, my God, how cruel!... The man's nature, being what it was, then, you can well understand that, quite literally, he had no friends, and that I was about the only man he could rub along with, the only man that he liked, in fact; while, as for myself, although in the ordinary way I couldn't have borne his particular sort of arrogance too long, I would have suffered all the one-eyed giants in the nether-world for the sake of being near that chit of a girl, as she was then; and as, indeed, she always was, except to the men who bored her with too much love.

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"Besides, if one has set out to be a cad for once in a way, one may as well do the thing properly—so I had to get on with Tristram, or else no Consuelo! Of course there's nothing in the world to be said for my behaviour, it was rotten-bad. Instead of running away, I hung on, and did all I could to make my friend's wife love me one tenth as much as I loved her. And you will notice that there was no limit to my utter rottenness—I not only tried all I could to snatch the man's wife, but accepted his hospitality as a means to that end. If I ever heard of any son of mine doing the like of that by a friend, I'd send him to the deuce without a penny—and, anyway, the young cub wouldn't have such an excuse, such a marvellous excuse as Consuelo!

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"There's a lot of stuff talked about 'unrequited love,' and how men can go on loving a woman even though they get kicked downstairs by the butler every time they mention it; you know what I mean. Most men I suppose, are like you and I, we couldn't go on and on loving a woman who made simply no return for it, who 'repulsed our advances,' as it were. For one is human, after all, and, love or no love, I can't think that any woman ever repulsed a man's advances for long without, in the end, also repulsing him back to his club and his cocktails. All this, of course, is my way of telling you that Consuelo liked me well enough in her way, else I wouldn't have loved her so unwisely. Of course she liked me! What young woman won't like a young man who, without being too repulsive to look at, and with a certain reputation for polo and scholarship (as I had then), pesters her insistently with besotted but cynical attentions, in which there is no pretence of that platonic limitation which is all that any good woman should expect from her husband's best friend?

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"'You more than like me,' I suggested to her once, (with that conceit peculiar to gentlemen when they're alone with women who they know won't tell on them to other gentlemen) and she answered that I amused and flattered her, and that she liked my particular way of being in love—though God knows there was nothing 'particular' in it except my contemptible behaviour to Tristram. But that was said later on, for as I told you she stayed in love with her husband for a whole six months, and even then she didn't react violently, but gently—just enough to keep him in his place, and to allow her to sit up and take notice again of other young men. And as I happened to be the only other young man on the spot, in whose eyes, only too obviously to her, lurked more than the pure light of friendship, I—well, damn it, that's prologue enough, isn't it?

"There wasn't the smallest jemmy missing from my burglar's outfit, you see; I had been waiting and watching, and with more cunning than you could believe possible in a common-or-garden Englishman; until one afternoon, when I was having tea with her in South Audley Street, I grabbed her up and kissed her....

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"My cynicism, if it was cynicism, was born of my knowledge of Consuelo, for being in love without idealising, I really knew Consuelo. I knew her very well, what sort of a woman she was and what sort of a man she liked, and under what conditions. I had all her moods and preferences and tendencies tabulated in my mind, together with footnotes, extensions and derivations—but not possible results! Poor, poor Consuelo!

"I knew, you see, exactly what sort of a man Consuelo found dull and dismal—that is, when she was bored at home and had begun to cast her eyes abroad for her amusement; and if there is one man more than another whom a certain sort of woman finds bitterly dull, that is the

friend of the husband who loves but dare not love the wife, because he is a friend of the husband—a good and sufficient reason for the likes of you and I, but not for our young woman, who finds the 'beef-and-beer' type of man quite too devastating. Of course only a very few, deplorable, charming women are like that; and we friendship-respecting men wouldn't take much notice of 'em, if they didn't, cussedly enough, happen to be the most attractive of their sex. Most women, thank the Lord, have a very real respect for men's friendships—but we are not talking of 'most women,' we are talking of Consuelo, who was neither a witch nor a whore, but whose fault and misfortune simply lay in her having no anchor in any sort of code of respectability.

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"To get back to the actual point (which is always the most boring part of any story, don't you think?), one somehow didn't get much 'forrarder' with the affair. She just didn't seem to love me that way, and was too much of an artist in life to deceive herself with a forced passion when she had already tasted with Tristram, and might perhaps again taste, the real, the consummate thing. We fenced with foils, then, and she had the thrills without the wounds. But it was a very special game, with very queer rules and restrictions, which I learnt from her gradually as we went along; and so played the game as well as I could, for all my deadly seriousness. But it was an unfair one, there was nothing in its rules to provide for certain contingencies which might leave one of the players helpless and beaten before the game even began; it was unfair, because, like death, it was played with loaded dice—she simply didn't love me enough!

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"Then again, after those first simple six months of domesticity, something developed in Consuelo and she began to change every day; she began to grow into what she later became in the eyes of an interested public, a 'leading beauty' of the day. Leading beauties are quite common these days, one has only to sit any day in the Ritz *foyer* at lunchtime to see a crowd of the slim, oval faced things; though God knows whom they 'lead' nowadays, unless it's photographers and publicans. But thirty or forty years ago, as you know, they were quite rare and wondrous; just three or four of 'em, and by Royal Appointment as it were, and people used to stand upon the chairs along Rotten Row to have a better view of them as they rode or walked by. Well, Consuelo began to grow up like that, and as she only too perfectly looked the part there were only a few disgruntled 'old friends' like myself who complained of the change in her, and how she was being taken from us by a crowd of deplorable women and vapid young men who ought never to have been allowed to leave school. And already, at her ridiculous age, she had a mild reputation for breaking hearts in a casual sort of way.... Tristram, of course, wasn't at all of her way of thinking, and tried to hold her back, but she just smiled at him and told him not to be silly; she had not then begun to dislike him, she felt very tenderly about him, as a woman sometimes does feel about a *ci-devant* lover, even if he also happens to be her husband.

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"So, in that time of sudden development into 'the beautiful Mrs. Carew,' it wasn't unnatural that our affair remained, well, indefinite, and that from being 'the only other person' I became one of a crowd of crawling young men—and not all so very young either! I may have been a little more favoured than any one else, in fact now that I look back on it I see that I was, but at the time I didn't notice it, and I was bitter.

"Thus and thus, we drifted on for about three months—until I lost my temper. At that time I had rather a good thing in the way of tempers; it didn't explode suddenly and pass away into the lumber room of past follies, but it simmered and waned and waxed and seethed for a dangerous two weeks or more—and when it died, many other things somehow died with it. My extravagant love for Consuelo Carew died with my first and last fit of brooding temper at her indecision. Indecision indeed! Poor fool that I was, I didn't see that she was undecided because she didn't love enough, and that, being the absolute slave of her emotions, her decision would be born the very same moment as her love—poor, happy devil, whoever he might be, might have been!

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"'You can't run a team,' I had said to her bitterly at the opening performance, as it were, of my dangerous state. And, mind you, I thought I had some right to my bad temper, because all this time she had been saying that she loved me—but, but, but the memory of her love for Tristram was so recent, and remembering how utterly she had loved him made her cautious of trusting too blindly to this repetition of that same emotion; 'for it seems quite the same, so I suppose that I must love you,' she said so sweetly that I can't blame Jupiter for withholding his

thunderbolt. If I would only wait.... But I had, and wouldn't any more.

"Those two sour weeks contained the last phase of the game. I was fixing her down to that eternal 'something definite,' and I took a real, cruel pleasure in frightening her—for she was fond enough of me to be frightened at my strange lapse from the door-mat, ox-eyed amiability to which I had so far treated her. That was the only time I was ever near to being top-dog in the affair, those two weeks when I had her in a corner and made her gradually realise that it must be 'one thing or the other'; and that, best weapon of all for such a woman, I was past the stage when I would mind very much if it was 'the other.' She knew that I had the bit in my teeth and was going to run away, even if I had to live as a celibate ever after—which, believe me, is what I seriously told her I must become!

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"I say that she was frightened at my sudden twist, but I am not at all sure if it was fright; it may have been just a pretty pretence of it, for she was too polished, too 'right,' to let an old friend go without showing him that she would miss him—'so marvellously much, you dear!'

"But, fright or pretence, no regrets at losing me could influence her in the least to yield to what, when the time came with some luckier wretch, she would yield with such whole-hearted abandon that I can quite understand how she sincerely thought, and sometimes said, that each new lover was her last and ultimate fate....

"The strange incident to which I referred at the beginning of my long and tiresome tale happened on the last night of those two weeks, which was also the last night on which I ever mentioned the word 'love' to Consuelo Carew; in fact, I did not see her again until ten or eleven years later.... Tristram, Consuelo, myself, and a crowd of others were staying down at the Portairleys' for a long week-end. During the last ten days in which I had so far retained my loss of temper I had thrown caution to the winds, I had got absolutely reckless in the way I badgered Consuelo—and Tristram for the first time began to suspect that there was more than friendliness in my feelings for his wife. She begged me to take care, for Tristram let loose meant hell for some one, and that some one would not be Tristram, for he was a good head taller than any bad-tempered man has a right to be. He had no more than a faint suspicion, but that faintness was fierce enough to be fanned into manslaughter at the smallest provocation. I'm not a coward, but it really is unwise to play the fool with unreasonable people like Tristram, and so on the Friday and Saturday at the Portairleys' I stepped warily and curbed my dash a good deal. And everything was all right until Sunday night after dinner....

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"I don't remember who the others of the party were, except, of course, just the man of the incident; and I'm not even quite certain if the man I have in my mind was that one in particular, because I had no means of knowing exactly, as I will explain. Anyway, the one I mean was just a vague young man like myself, whom I had never happened to meet before, and would have scarcely noticed then if I hadn't felt that he was in love with Consuelo; not so hopelessly or helplessly, either, as becomes a discreet gentleman.

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"I don't know if you know the Portairley's place? The summer house is about two hundred yards west of the house, at the end of a narrow, twisting gravel path which suddenly turns to its very door; and it is almost entirely shut in by shrubbery of sorts, and, at that time in full bloom, caressing its walls and roof were the sprays of lilac trees—how well I remember the scent of 'em that wretched evening!

"On Sunday I woke up in a state of chronic irritation against the young man; and as the day wore on became gradually more reckless again, until, at about ten o'clock at night, I somehow managed to inveigle Consuelo out on to the pretty, pretty lawn—and from there to the summer house wasn't a long way for an immaturely bitter man to drag an unwilling but careless young woman!

"We sat there, and between puffs of my cigar, and quite thoughtfully, I told her exactly what I thought of her; all the pent-up emotions of nine damnable months loosed themselves from my mind, and overriding my every decent instinct, found a brutal expression on my lips. Are you too 'sophisticated,' I wonder, to let me suggest that sinful thoughts have their own special punishment? that they react too articulately, they force themselves out in the end in a bitter wash of words—perhaps cleansing? That was my punishment, anyway, to *have* to say those things that night, while she listened and looked horribly sorry. And, you know, she *was* sorry.... I had it all my own way, and, in my vile state, I must have said all the bitter and beastly things that a man can say to a woman; but she only

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listened, maddeningly! I can't now imagine why she didn't rise and leave me; and then I may have crawled after her, or I may not—I don't know.

"Then, in the sudden reaction quite common, I believe, in such scenes, I began to take all I could of the worthless, surface things a woman, if she sets her teeth, can give a man; but she didn't even trouble to 'set her teeth,' she seemed more unattainable, more mocking, the more my lips touched her. She somehow made a doll of herself, and let me maul her about as I liked—but so uselessly, for though I ruffled her and myself I simply couldn't ruffle that smile! It was there right through, symbolic of my helplessness, a very sweet and tender smile, but sad, for she was pitying me. And at last she said very quietly: "If ever I had loved you, dear, and perhaps I may have, I wouldn't now be loving you any more. Because, don't you see, you have been doing all you can, you've emptied out all your box of tricks into my unworthy little lap, you've been working away ever so hard at making me love you—and even though the moon is shining through that window, and the scent of the lilac is sweetening this musty little place, I simply can't, my dear, feel romantic enough with you to dream that your kisses are the fairy-tales they should be. They are just kisses, and perhaps very nice in their way, but they don't mean anything. They don't mean rare things. Kisses which aren't fairy-tales never do.... I'm so, so sorry, you know (that cheek is getting worn away, but do try the other one, I'm told it's just as good) because I realise what I'm missing, for you would make a perfect lover, bless you. But, as it is, when your silly heart is mended again, some luckier woman will be grateful to me for having taught you to love properly, and for having brought out in you that particular mixture of brutality and delicacy which would be so thrilling if only it thrilled me! And after all the nasty things you've been saying to me it's pleasant to imagine some one sometime thinking quite nice thoughts about me...."

"What can one do with that sort of woman! More than twenty years have passed since then, and I suppose I've collected an odd bit of sense here and there, as one does—but in such a circumstance I should be as helpless now as I was then. It would have been easy enough to give up the chase if she had shown a real distaste, physical, mental, any way, for me, but she didn't—there she was, quiescent in my arms, and I, for the first and last time in my life, was as unrestrained as a Dago.... And it was just at that moment, worst moment of all, that we heard steps on the gravel path by which we had come. We heard the steady, crunching sound, and pulled quickly apart, staring at each other. They were coming nearer, there could only be one goal for them, the end of the path—at the open door! Only a few seconds divided those steady steps from us, there was nothing to be done. Consuelo was feverishly trying to tidy her hair. It was impossible to do the one obvious thing, to get up and close the door and hope that the intruder would turn at the end of the path—impossible because the door was unhinged and useless, and because, we knew, the intruder could only be Tristram Carew, for whom a closed door would mean certain proof....

"We waited breathlessly. For the first time, I noticed my crumpled, burnt out cigar, and I was going to throw it on the floor when I remembered just in time that the sight of its ruffled, unsmoked state would give the show away. Just beside me was a little window, its glass long since smashed out. The steps were perhaps five yards away now, and I blessed the winding path which hid us from him until he was actually at the very door....

"Consuelo suddenly whispered fiercely, 'We must talk, you fool,' and began talking about something as loudly and as casually as she could. And then, and then, as I lifted my arm to throw my cigar out of the window into the shrubbery, a hand came in from outside, from below, just a hand, and very, very carefully, for between the fingers of that hand was a cigar with a long ash. I didn't think, I hadn't time to be surprised at the amazing fact of it; threw my cigar away and gently took the cigar from the fingers. I knew what it meant—that long undisturbed ash! My God, how gentle I was with it, my whole soul went out into the care with which I brought it towards me! I didn't even see the mysterious hand disappear, I hadn't time to think of it....

"Consuelo hadn't stopped talking during that second or so, for the incident was only a matter of that. We were about two feet apart on the bench. I held my cigar as prominently as I could, just above my knee, and prayed that the ash wouldn't drop for just another fraction of a second—and I passed a box of matches to Consuelo, whispering her to strike one. Tristram was just at the last turn of the path to the door, in one more step he would be facing us.

"Hallo!" I interrupted Consuelo's flow of gibberish. 'I wonder who that is!'

"And as I said it Consuelo struck a match—and the giant of a man filled the doorway! Striking the match was an obvious thing to do, for any one in the doorway had his back to the moonlight and was therefore indistinguishable to us—and besides the light of the match would help the moonlight to show him my excellent cigar-ash! But I was damned frightened—Tristram's face, in that sudden dim light, wasn't angry, his eyes weren't wild, but heavy, sullen. Oh, one can't express these things in words. He wasn't melodramatic, he was cold, too cold. His eyes were on me, not on her.

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"Hallo, Tristram!" I just managed to say. And then, with a flash of absolute genius, Consuelo backed up with, 'But don't please ask him to join our happy party, for he looks so bad-tempered that he might spoil your cigar-ash just out of spite.'

"And that *was* genius at that crucial moment. It cut the ground from under Tristram's feet, he looked surprised—and he saw my cigar! The moment was passing. A long cigar-ash and even the shortest love-affair can't go together, even to the most suspicious mind—and Tristram, thank Heavens, had his moments of extraordinary simplicity. I raised my cigar.

"Oh, damn!" I said. The ash had at last revolted.

"There you are, I told you he'd spoil it!" Consuelo said quickly.

"I haven't even touched the thing!" Tristram protested—and we both really breathed for the first time since, two or three minutes before, we had heard the steps on the path....

"Well, that's all there is of it, the incident, and you must forgive me if I've taken a tiresome long time to get to it. Tristram, she, and I sat on in the summer house for an half-hour or so, talking rather constrainedly, but, anyway, peacefully. He showed that he had lost his trust in me, that he at last realised our friendship was over; his suspicions weren't more than allayed. But for the time being he simply hadn't anything to work on, for it wasn't so very unnatural that Consuelo, old friend as she was of mine, should sit by me in the summerhouse while I smoked my after-dinner cigar; and I wasn't going to give him another chance, because in that half-hour during which we sat on there I realised that Consuelo really wasn't for me, and that I was only making a fool of myself without advantage to anybody—and I decided with the last bit of strength I had left in me to do what I did the next morning, to run away. And, as I said, I didn't see her again for about ten years, and then very casually....

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"As we sat on there for half an hour or so I couldn't of course lay my hands on the young man who had been eavesdropping outside the window and had stood me in such amazingly good stead. But it really was a strange and wonderful thing to do—to have even thought of doing that particular thing! And still more wonderful for such a little cad to have done it, for of course he was a cad to have been there at all. I knew that it simply couldn't have been any one else but the young man whom I've mentioned as being in love with Consuelo. He must have seen Consuelo and I steal away into the garden, and followed us down to the summer-house, and sat there in the shrubbery under the window, listening to every word we said and calmly smoking his cigar—that priceless cigar! And then, when he heard the steps on the gravel path he had the wit to know that the climatic conditions in the summer-house were about to become unsettled—and, on a noble impulse, did what he did, and then faded away. I didn't see him in the morning, as I left by the earliest train. What could one say, anyway? He was a cad, and a gentleman, that's all."

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We had turned into Clarges Street, and were almost at my door. As he finished I took his arm.

"You are wrong about his being a cad," I said, "because he didn't follow you two out to the summer-house at all. He was there a good five minutes before you—not in the summer-house but just behind it, for, poor fool, he was trying to choose the most perfect lilac bloom for the most beautiful and imperfect lady in the world. And when she suddenly turned up with the horrible young man who had been drifting round her all day—well, he just sat down on the ground under the window, cursed life and cursed women, and smoked his cigar. I didn't stay to listen, I was too angry to move, that's all. You see, she had given me an appointment to meet her in the summer-house at ten o'clock that night...."

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We were at my door. He smiled, a little self-consciously, through the short silence.

"You will please forgive me," he said, almost nervously. "And for more than accusing you falsely, or for boring you with the yarn at all. For I certainly wouldn't have told it to you so, well, intimately, if, up in the Hallidays' drawing-room I hadn't half recognised you. Very dimly, of course.... One's memory plays one queer tricks sometimes, doesn't it? To retain, however dimly, and vaguely, a face seen twenty years ago! And so I followed you out.... So Consuelo had told you to meet her at the summer-house that night!

"I can almost understand now," he said slowly, "how she died as she did. Life on those lines must have got too complicated.

"Good-night—my friend!" he said.

IV: THE ROMANCE OF IRIS POOLE

I

ONCE read, in an essay by a writer whose considerable achievements in contemporary literature seem to warrant a certain knowledge of the craft of tale-telling, that it is only the trained artificiality of writers—their technique, so to say—that enables them to begin their tales from a certain point and go directly on to a certain ending. While the truth of the matter is (he writes), as you can easily verify from the narrative of any peasant in any inn, that the tales that are spun from life cannot be complacently fitted along a straight line of narration, but incline to zigzag unaccountably from one point of memory to another; until the tale fulfilled, or rather, fulfills itself by these deft and disordered touches of the realism of memory. For, to quote the simile that is almost *de rigueur* as a cap to these grave abstractions, "the figure in the carpet" can be said to have no beginning nor middle, and so on....

The plain fact of the matter is that, in spite of the sternest intentions, I have the greatest difficulty in nailing my mind down to a clear and ordered conception of the sequence that even the most facile publisher will demand from this history: in ever and again wrenching, as it were, my memory from its erratic piracies, and in beguiling it to sit soberly astride the course of events as they occurred or were told to me. Even though they didn't actually and consistently occur, these events—not, I mean, in the usually accepted sense of things "occurring." They were all so deeply consequent on inside things! and most of them happened inside....

Thus, as I try to shape my shadows as truly as I may, my memory is ever and again confronted by a few nights—mainly three, and very bonfires of nights they seem to me, with their high lights and sinister heat colouring all that came before and all that happened after; though, indeed, to two of us there was very little left that could happen after that third, and last, night.... That last night! Of the many things that can be lost in one night, Roger Poole lost as much as any man can lose, Antony Poole lost more than any man should lose, and Iris—and I—but even a tale cannot play spy for ever, it must surely end somewhere. (And yes, it must begin, too).

Then that other night, which I could rightly call the first, for it was the one which very definitely sent the ball rolling down the slope. And, though I should preface that rolling by first describing that slope and that ball, I see that I must let part of this particular bonfire have its way, else they will all get together to hinder and confuse me. That man Antony never did know how to wait, and so I must tell of the night of his return before even the day of his going away. An unfortunate night it was, even apart from his connection with it, because of my heavy and stupid depression about something that time, in all decency, should have persuaded me to face resignedly.

An hour or so after a midnight one late June, I was walking slowly up Piccadilly; in no hurry to reach my destination, whither I would eventually take a taxi—for Regent's Park is always far enough, but even further on a moonless and rain-heavy night that England must have grabbed from one of our less desirable and more stifling colonies. I was walking on the outer edge of the pavement, with my head bent, as shoddily happened when my mind was clouded—when in crossing the end of that little passage that leads into Albany-courtyard, I was arrested by the stealthy and hurried sound of a scuffle. From first to last the affair took but a few seconds. At the far end of the dim recess two figures were locked together, swaying this way and that and then parting to allow freedom for blows—the which, I could judge, were exchanged with the heartiest ill will; and all in silence, but for quick pantings for breath and the shuffle of feet. There really is an unholy kind of interest in watching two men, presumably of one's own kind if stiff white shirts meant anything at all, fighting in relentless silence, and maybe, in deadly earnest. The slightly smaller one—they were both tall figures—seemed to be getting much the worst of it, but I certainly wouldn't have interfered if I hadn't seen a posse of policemen coming towards us from Vine Street on their usual way to their beats.

"Time!" said I. But it was time enough without my saying so, for one last and not very heavy blow had doubled the smaller against the window of Woodrow's hat-shop; and the other, a giant of a man, picking up his top-

hat and ramming it on his head as though it were a Crusader's helmet and without a glance at his crumpled antagonist, briskly walked towards me.

"England's come to a pretty pass when the education of gentlemen has to fall to interested amateurs like myself," he began from a distance. "Eh, Ronnie?"

But I had recognised him without his use of my name, and was staring at him with such bewilderment that he broke out into one of those guffaws I knew so well.

"Antony!" I cried.

"Myself as ever was, old man!" and he clapped me on the shoulder heartily. "I saw you out of the tail of my eye, while I was teaching that young man Spartan history—and, thought I, no luck could be better."

"But when did you get back, and where from?"

"This very afternoon, and from Mexico—where else? And damme," he turned on me to add bitterly, "why the devil should you be so surprised at my coming back to my own country?"

But I could parry that kind of thing from Antony well enough.

"For one reason," said I, "because you yourself told me that you were probably never coming back."

"Never! Well, my friend, isn't two years as good as your 'never'? I'm learning that there's only one bigger lie than 'never,' and that's 'always'—for instance, I was *never* coming back to England, and a few of my friends were *always* going to be pleased to see me."

There was a large and full-flavoured kind of bitterness about Antony that seldom quite failed in its appeal to my heart, albeit sourly, and I was about to give the lie to his accusation when he turned his eyes back to the dark passage muttering, "And that was one of 'em." But the luckless wretch had disappeared while we talked, to ponder maybe upon the weight and quality of that word "always," and with a muttered request from me "not to be a fool about his real friends" we walked on towards the Circus. I had been made shy and nervous by Antony's boisterous realisation of his position in England, and now found it difficult to say anything which somehow or other wouldn't remind him of it. Just like the man to be so infernally touchy and talkative about it, I was thinking, when he said:—

"You actually are the very man I want to see, Ronnie. I've got enough questions to ask you to last a day or more, but I dare say a lunch will see them through—though that of course depends on where we lunch ...?" That was ever the way with Antony, he never tried to hide the fact that he wanted something from one—though, thank Heaven, it was now only a lunch!

"You had better come and lunch at my flat to-morrow," I suggested—with my heart in my mouth lest he should scent a possible insult in that seclusion. But he accepted easily enough.

At Piccadilly Circus, where I called a taxi, he said he must leave me as he had to go down to the Carlton: which thankfully relieved me of any embarrassment as to how to be rid of him at that moment. As he went he called back to me, "Don't tell all London that I'm back, there's a good fellow." A quite unnecessary request, I found it on my lips to answer; for the name of Antony Poole, as himself knew very well, would meet with but a grim welcome in any house in London.

II

On the surface, and a good deal below the surface, there was nothing at all to be said for Antony. I had often wondered what thoughts about himself must pass through his mind in solitary moments when he viewed his life (for he was not so insensitive but that that necessity could never have come upon him)—just thirty-six years of life, which had four years before that night finally ended its reckless social passage in the utter loss of everything a man holds essential to the self-respect with which he must face the world! Not, however, that any loss could ever intimidate Antony into facing the world with any other manner but that with which some imp had plagued his birth: a blend of blustering indifference, dangerous humours, and a ripe and racy geniality. But even so there must be some moments of terrible reckonings in his soul, I always thought, when he realises his folly in so spoiling the good life his could have been and had looked to be; when, console himself with his "bad

luck" as he may, he reaches a point of self-knowledge that tells him, with his own brutality, how there is a degree of failure that simply cannot be condoned by "bad luck."

I had known Antony for so long that my view of him in his manhood was always brightened to his advantage by my school-day memories of him; those of a gay and careless companion, with sufficient head but little inclination for work: ever more rowdy and reckless than his companions, a good sportsman and a good man at most games, and very popular among those whom his fancy had not led him to treat as enemies. It was maturity (or whatever queer development took its place in him) that went to Antony's head, so that he began to run amok as soon as he left Sandhurst; something seemed to grow up in him that spiced his old faults with new outrage, and quite hid what good there was in him. His, I then found to my astonishment, was the most makeshift mechanism that God ever put into a man—for I had never dreamt of such complex weaknesses in my Antony of old! Who would have thought that this man, inches more than six straight feet of him, with his good looks, his loud and easy geniality, and a certain aptitude of mind that expressed itself in an understanding laugh where your clever man would have been puzzled—who would have thought that this man who laughed with the laugh of the middle ages was so shoddily made that his every organ and moral attribute were as though held in place by oddments of string? For never was there a man so consistently and appallingly weak to do battle with himself, to compel himself to a sanity of living and a balance of thought: a weak man, in that wretched word's most wretched and active sense.

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But the key to him lay just further than that weakness: that he would have suffered, and indeed did, any torture rather than reveal it—the indetermination and moral cowardice of those, without exaggeration, giant fibres. This, I grew to realise, was the secret of the contradiction that was Antony—this pose of strength where he himself knew he was weak: the most penalising pose that ever bolstered a man's vanity the more completely to wreck him. For the world might have allowed Antony a certain length of forgiveness if he could have been brought to reveal himself as he actually was, if he could only have bowed his head and revealed the hesitations of his nature, and his contrition; if he could even for just once have foregone the childish vanities of bluster and bravado with which he thought to carry through every escapade. He thought to outwit punishment, but instead he did the most difficult thing of all, he outwitted sympathy....

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And since eventually such a pose as his must make indecency a fact where it had once only been vaguely suggested, so Antony actually became, in the course of time, the rogue and outsider that his crooked vanity had once made him parade as a pose. For, be you ever so arrogant, nature has been proved to have its laws for men as well as for beasts, laws not astral but severely human, that never cease to confound alchemists of every kind to their own hurt; and it is obvious that a man may not play the fool with his soul without covering it with the verdigris of his own folly—that sourness of heart and crookedness that stole gradually on poor Antony, so that in his thirties he was, to stretch a likeness, like a Hyde to the Jekyll of his schooldays.

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The advantages of a commission in the Brigade, of a name sufficient to ensure a reasonable amount of credit and consideration, those details which can so warm the cockles of even a philosophic heart on a dull afternoon, and a little more than the usual pittance that falls to the younger brothers of pukka baronets, warranted, surely, a very fair prospect. And yet, in a few years' time, he had finally convinced people beyond a shadow of doubt of what they had so far only disliked to guess, of his complete failure to be either an officer or a gentleman.

No man could be more noticeable in appearance than Antony, nor more adequately fulfil the name by which he was often known, Red Antony; for he was very tall and stoutly built, rather foppishly dressed, and as consistently ginger as any man could well be—moustaches, eyebrows that no brushing could tame into regularity, hair which waved back from his forehead in a most attractive ginger but ordered profusion; and a complexion appropriately coloured, and always so clear and fresh as to seem to give the lie to the certain dissipation of the night before. A very fine looking man, Red Antony, if you liked that kind of looks; but so noticeable that his own appearance, no doubt, took a hand against him, labelling his escapades with its prominence so that once pointed out he was never forgotten; and men and women could cross the street in good time to avoid the difficulty of acknowledging or of cutting him.

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It was an accumulation of escapades, many of which had been

overlooked but for his manner of braving them, that had led to his final extinction—which was long seen in coming. A thousand little and unpleasant things were known and more than whispered about him. He was a man of red-hot tempers, which there was no restraint in him to keep within bounds; his weren't the rages that burnt inwardly and grew in brooding, but in their sudden heat must burn outwardly, devouring everything with no care nor heed for even primitive restraint. (There have been times when I've been rather afraid of Antony myself.) And so, from his great height of stature and violence, he had outrageously insulted men in return for a fancied slight. He had committed follies, when drunk, which his companions had hurriedly disavowed. He had, as if by rote, done the one thing a man may still not do and remain this side of Styx, despite all that we hear of the present laxity of etiquette—had been unable to pay his gambling debts, and then paid them with worthless cheques. He had been the centre of innumerable brawls in which, if ever a woman's name was concerned, it was never to Antony's credit; had been twice a corespondent and not once a husband—an apparent failure to act upon his obligations which does no man any good; and from the second (the first had too obviously been the result of carelessness) he had emerged in so discreditable a light that, on top of all his past follies, Antony Poole was no longer a name to be mentioned in any ordinary English company.

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That was four years before that night I met him on Piccadilly, when he was thirty-two. He still continued for two years in England, Heaven alone knew why! No one sought him, he was seldom seen—except by me, and later, another. His elder brother, Roger, had not spoken to him for years.

It was about a year before he finally left England that I began to see Antony in his best light; and pretty closely since, in the precarious condition of his affairs and reputation, it was mostly in my flat that he could enjoy that company which presented him in this new and improved light. He was in love, and he was making love: furtively and hopelessly as to manner, for what girl would dream of marrying him! And who ever stood more firmly upon his honour than he who has been proved to have none?... But in his heart there was hope, I am sure there was hope in his heart, else Antony would not have been Antony.

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A queer man. For all his appalling rudeness and brutality on a thousand occasions, he could be so very courteous and simple when he was moved to it; could turn a tale, rather candidly it's true, but very amusingly, and had altogether a very diverting way with him in company that didn't offend his absurd feelings or ruffle his dangerous vanity—though even then he couldn't help a, well, cunning satire that might more profitably, for him, have bit into paper.

It is in recalling this time that I feel most uncomfortable, because of the ridiculous position in which my own weakness placed me. During the previous few months I had fallen into the habit of wanting to see Iris Portairley every day—or rather, she had graciously allowed me fall into that habit. And that, indeed, was the only encouragement I had from her, the pleasure which she showed that she had from my company; so that, if we had not happened to meet for some days over lunch or dinner at the same table, she very often managed by some contrivance, say of a tame chaperon, to come to see me of an afternoon. Deliciously often though she managed her contrivances, I was always surprised to see her, who had so many more amusing things to do! And with the carelessness of a man ten years my junior I accepted the pleasure of her company without inquiring of myself whither I was being led. The truth was that it depressed me to think of what might come of it, for the back of my mind could never be entirely rid of an ugly high wall at the far end of my meadow....

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And yet I chartered ill luck to my suit, or pretence of a suit, by aiding and abetting Red Antony in his quite impossible and absurd pretensions! Though, in justice to the man, he must have realised clearly how very impossible they were.

The excuse for the anomaly was in the queer sympathy (and a very conscious one) that Antony always had the power to raise in me; and particularly at that time, when he was so definitely an outcast, forced to solitary meals in the grill-rooms of those *maitres d'hôtel* who still gallantly pretended to believe in his signature at the foot of a bill. I simply couldn't bring myself just then, whether for my own or Iris's good, to deprive him of the solace he found in her occasional company at my flat, generally at some odd hour between three to seven—more often nearer seven, for Antony allowed that I could shake a cocktail very prettily. And though, from a tentative beginning (if that word could ever

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be applicable to Antony) it became a bare-faced intrusion on my privacy, even so I hadn't the heart to forbid, or definitely to discourage, the apparent coincidence of his visits with hers; "apparent," for Antony at this time never said a word of his admiration, nor gave any other hint of gratitude for my complaisance than in an added pressure of my hand as he left. Antony was a noisy man, but never by any chance did he make a noise about anything one really wanted to hear.

It was a very uncomfortable business—for me, I mean. And, as I had let it go on, quite impossible to cut short; since nothing less drastic than an order for ejection, if even that, would have penetrated the thick skin that Antony could so conveniently wear when he chose—and with no better result than a "misunderstanding" with Iris who, thanks largely to me, had come to have certain views about Antony which materially differed from the world's, and even stronger views about deserting one's friends when they were "down and out." There's no end to difficulties when a woman takes her standpoint on the highest pinnacles of the code that men have arranged between themselves for their own convenience and woman's confusion.

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I could only console myself with the ungenerous thought that if my own position with Iris, of "dear Ronnie" and the like, was hopeless, how much more hopeless was Red Antony's, the poor braggart who would now be invisible, be he ever so tall and boisterous, to even the most tarnished of her acquaintance. So let the man have his run, since he could never have his way!...

How he had ever met her at all, in fact, I never clearly found out, and had never the effrontery to ask; probably towards the end of his swift downward passage to those underground grill-rooms (oh, those grill-rooms of broken hearts and broken reputations!) just after Iris had come out. Be that as it may, Iris had known him scarcely but by reputation—about which, since it was glamourised by the disapproval of every one who had ever bored her, she had often asked me; so that, when one day they had happened at the same second at my door, she knew a little more than hearsay about him; and was quick to see the poor man's wretched plight, was quick to encourage his longing to talk to some one decent; giving intimacy with that generous hand that makes gentle women so much more dangerous than vampires, searching for what sweetness there lay in him so wisely and deftly as to leave him unaware of the homage he paid her, so that she could appreciate it at its fullest; and so that, after a few weeks, she grew genuinely fond of the wreck—and one day made me openly swear at my folly by suddenly saying: "I suppose there must be many people who think they have met Napoleons, only to find in the end that they are Antonys—and how very much nicer!"

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III

But there was another reason, quite apart from any far-fetched call of sympathy, for my putting a fairly good face on Antony's falling in love on my premises. I might as well, thought I, be entertained by what I had to suffer—and so there was cast a play, as though for my bewildered entertainment! Though, of course, I never at that time indulged in any such conceit, it's just the licence of thought that is occasionally apt to flow from one's pen.

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For while I watched, perforce, Antony pleading his furtive suit at some hour between three to seven of an afternoon, I could sometimes of an evening watch its parallel contrast in that world which Antony had been at such pains to offend unpardonably. For, of the husbands that had been suggested for Miss Portairley, not one had received more favour than the possibility of Roger Poole; and the idea had been much encouraged of late by the very frequent circumstance of their being of the same company....

Certainly, to that world which finds its pleasure in the sensations of other people's marriages, there was a great deal of apparent fitness about this one; for they were both, in their ways, well-known persons. Iris, of course, trivially, in these days of illustrated journals and the like, a much photographed and commented on "beauty" whose features and "recreations" were so widely known that she looked gradually to become the rumoured subject of any novel that contained the requisite amount of social indecency implied by the "modern society" of publishers' announcements; and Roger Poole, already at thirty-three a personage, "the only young man," I have heard it said, "of this degeneration with any political energy or brilliance": who, in spite of the leisure that his rumoured means might have claimed for him, had actively sat as

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member for—since he was twenty-six, was now recognised as one of the leaders of the Opposition, and certain, in spite of his youth, of office at the fall of the Liberal ministry. It was after all, so original of him to be so clever and polished and dark and ambitious without being a Jew.

The colouring between the Poole brothers was distributed in some such way as this: Antony, the younger by a year, as red and wantonly extravagant as I have tried to show; and Roger, no less tall than his brother but inclined much more to suppleness both in figure and features—he could sometimes look remarkably like a knife: of a much darker countenance, with dark eyes that were somehow sombre yet witty, and seemed always to be fevered with some secret thought. In fact, there were a great deal too many such "secret" thoughts about Roger to ensure one's real comfort in his company.

But, in spite of this more serious expression, and in contradiction to what one might have expected to appeal to a man of his very real abilities and ambitions, Roger was every bit as much of the material world as his brother—but had what Antony never had, the sanity and balance with which to measure his recklessness and indulgences. Roger Poole always knew what he was about; and, to further his ambitions, had never ceased to discipline himself, outwardly anyway, into line with the world's conventions—of which, funnily enough, if he continued his success, he would one day be an arbitrator!

But, rigorously though he disciplined himself (a really splendid dissimulation, which I who had known him so long had always watched with envy), he could not help his inclinations showing in some way—though in a way that reflected to his advantage as a figure, as it would have reflected to Antony's if he hadn't been so foolish. For they were shown in a manner, a certain air, which couldn't be described but by the help of the word "romantic"—a not unpleasing word to be used about one who has name, appearance, and ability. And he was, even to me, a romantic kind of figure. There was nothing, well, stationary about him, as there so often is about one's acquaintance; in fact, more, there was definitely a sense of movement; one somehow thought of him as a man who would always be going on to things, maybe great things. His shadow will find in him an exciting companion, one couldn't help thinking. Among one's acquaintance, each unit of whom one knew to be travelling on a certain road to a more or less certain end, Roger Poole stood out as a refreshing and unexpected person, a kind of adventurer licensed by the world; an appearance clothed in possibilities, whom it was interesting to know....

Besides, there was nothing silly nor banal about his good looks; a thin, long face of such firm lines as to give an impression of hardness, and noticeable, in an Englishman, because of its pallor; attractive, too, because of a certain saturnine quality which seemed to lurk about its expressions: an intangible *something* that made one, in talking to him, inquire within oneself a little fussily—a vastly different state to that into which Red Antony's boisterous ill humour had, in his hey-days, so frequently put one!

And so the discomfort of my position with regard to Antony allowed me to stand in the wings, as it were, and watch the only game in this world that is fairly played with "packed" cards; the two brothers, in everything but age and name as far apart as favour can well be from its opposite, at their love-making to a woman whom I loved as much as they, perhaps more, but without that visible and reckless ardour that will make a man's love at least significant to the most unloving woman. I suppose that theatricalism, such as is not difficult to find in any one's nature, may have tinged my view of the queer spectacle; but there certainly was something very sad and pitiable about it all, and made the more pitiable, too, by the inevitable course it must pursue—for there is a certain logic to everything, be a woman ever so lovely and remote. And Iris, for all her pride and looks, for all her tawny hair and sometimes too distant eyes, had really as little to say in the matter as Antony or I; for Roger Poole had a reputation to keep up, not so much with the world as with himself, the reputation of a man who always played in luck! Besides, luck or no luck, Iris had straightway fallen in love with him.

She was twenty-two, and had up to that age lived as full and as amusing a life as, one supposes, it was possible for her to live. But there must somehow have been born with her a certain *distance* of mind, which always kept her detached from any surroundings she couldn't wholly and utterly accept; a certain quality that, whether she would or would not, kept her intact and untouched, as though destining her never to accept anything which she couldn't wholly accept. Thus she had inevitably to be

rejecting much, and always; rejecting, indeed, a great deal more than she was ever given the credit for by even those who knew her very well. At first I naturally took this distance of mind from her surroundings to be yet another of the usual and tedious affectations of the "younger generation," but very soon found that it was as sincere an affectation as any that can trouble a mind and make a heart deeply restless.

It wasn't that she was superior or blasé (of being which she was, of course, commonly accused by those who were disconcerted by her reception of those trivial indecencies that pass for humour among the cultured inane); but simply that she was never lulled into thinking that the life in which she found herself was anything but a phase of her youth, and a makeshift one at that. There would, of course, be other things! And of the men who came her way, the interesting ones were mainly too old—now why is courtesy always so much older than oneself?—the younger ones mainly too foolish, and as little worth loving as they were able to love. Some day, some day, she once laughed to me, there will be darkish men with intelligent gestures....

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Well, there came one, Roger Poole. He at last was vital, giving her what she had been starved for, a sense of achievement, of movement. That expresses it so badly, for it might imply that Iris was a sycophant to success, which she never was—unlike her ridiculous but amiable mother, who thought she had a *salon* whereas she only kept a restaurant. Iris had a longing to be allowed to admire, a longing that was a fiercely integral part of her nature. And she was a woman with tangible desires, who would, one thought, lay claim to her man's body and mind with every part of her own, and with no illusions about the spirituality or intelligence of her love. Iris was of the earth divinely, and perhaps that's why she couldn't help obsessing a man's mind....

But for Roger's coming, she might have continued for years being proposed to decently and indecently by the young fops and financiers whose piracies the world so completely licences; not one of whom she would ever like enough, not one of whom could ever lead himself or her to anything but a country-house or to Deauville. So, as I imagine it, as she looked around her life, at the supposed pageantry and possibilities of it, she must have been in a state of watchful coma, just waiting, with a growing inner sadness, for that "something" to happen; that "something," that fulfilment of a longing, which would bring into actual being the woman in her—that thing compact with elemental passions and fierce desires which had so far only been present in an involuntary stiffening of her body, her spine, when a kiss, and maybe one that had faintly attracted her, had touched her. Her mind might compromise, it often desperately did, but it was as though an unhesitating iron had entered her body, so that it could never be lulled to even a pretence of acceptance. And so, as she was one night surveying the accustomed character of a crowded room, with what relief she must have realised, howsoever dimly at that first moment, that the "something" was at last about to happen, that Roger Poole was crossing the room into her life.

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She had met him only once before, four years ago, just after she had come out—and he had only just lately re-entered her world. She had, of course, often heard about him during that time, and not only in political chatter; for Roger, with a certain superciliousness, had withdrawn himself only from what he found dull and boring in life—from which Iris hadn't yet thought it worth while to rebel; unless braving an hysterical scene with her mother for a latchkey was rebellion. But as to the flouting of conventions and the like, it is easy enough to do as one likes; but so very much easier, after all, to know without doing so that the entertainment gained won't be worth while.

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Iris, many of whose friends had long since indulged their sense of pleasure as it pleased them, or as it displeased others, had never but given an inquiring side-glance to that life; and had been forced to admit to herself that she must lack some essential *verve*, for she had found as little entertainment in, say, an absinthe at the Café Royal in the company of, presumably, artists, as in the noisy dinners that are sometimes given by Argentines and other rich men to women whose jewels, at least, led Iris to suppose that it must be worth their while to attend them. It was at the only one of these dinners that she had ever gone to that an American millionaire, a fussy little man of an engaging candour, had straight away offered to give her a Rolls-Royce, and she had only succeeded in dissuading him from that intention by revealing that her mother already had a quite adequate car. Thus young was it revealed to Iris that she would make an inefficient kind of cocotte. She was always, she had once told me rather brazenly, conscious of a disturbing sense of laughter

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which, she was sure, would tiresomely interfere with her enjoyment of any of those indiscretions and adventures in which some of her acquaintance would now and then indulge; and also, had never found any reason to think otherwise of life round about studios and the like than as really a rather tedious affair, of a kind of anæmia and uncleanliness—the kind, you know, that can be cleaner without costing another half-penny—that caused in her no more and no less than a vivid feeling of self-consciousness; about which she bitterly reproached herself, for it was difficult to be rid of an idea that she ought to be a little, well, humble before these young men who were, after all, trying to do *something*. Nor did protracted meals and cigarettes and liqueurs in grimy restaurants round about Soho and Fitzroy Street with young men more or less just down from Oxford "and pretty far down at that," appeal to her as anything but a wearisome duty to that side of her mind which, so some of her friends always urged, "must surely be sick of the boredom and mental inertia of the life she led." ... But she had honestly done her best, had vividly plunged into both alternatives; and, thank Heavens, had emerged unscathed, with but an offer of an "automobile" and several of marriage—not of course from the millionaire, who very genuinely implied that he respected her too really to ask that much, but from the young invertebrates. There seems, she had long since concluded, to be much nonsense talked about the unfair advantages that rich men take, for after all they are prepared to pay very reasonably for one's virginity, whereas those young men have the cheek to ask for one's lifetime in exchange for their devastating passions.

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All this about what Iris might have done has its place because, had she strayed out of her accustomed path more determinedly, she would have seen more of Roger Poole; who—and ever with that peculiar and antagonising air of a man with a fine sense of conduct and deportment who knew himself to an exact and rigorous shade—was in the most inner background of these feverish activities, though never too feverishly; who was as much at home with our more presentable celebrities as with those less efficient; and who, in the rather different atmosphere round about St. James's, was known as a very cool and fortunate gambler; and had once been heard to make the profound paradox that "a good gambler never takes any risks"—which, it was said, had so impressed a certain very rich young fool with its apparent impossibility that he had at once married an elderly millionairess.

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Roger intended, in brief, to revive in himself and his station a certain tradition; and with no affectation, for that tradition was his very own and became him as none other could; in fact, it became him as well or as ill as it had once become the younger politicians of a past century. It had needed little perspicacity on his part to see that there was a strange defect in the young men of his generation; that they seemed quite unable and unwilling to combine their abandon with any such brilliance as might help them to achieve something, or their brilliance with enough abandon to make them seem sympathetic fellows—that, in short, they were either wasters or dons. They seemed quite unable to accommodate their pleasures and their business into one lurid whole, as did those men in the days when there were still clubs in St. James's Street and not curiosities; when men of brains or birth never so entirely forgot their self-respect or breeding were they ever so debauched, as to be wholly indifferent to the politics or culture of their country; when it was as nothing against a gentleman to have it said against him that he had seduced a friend's wife, so only he had wittily done the same to the House of Commons on the same night; when, in short, it was commonly considered the part of a gentleman to be interested in upholding or demolishing the pillars of the constitution...

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But now! there were only wasters, at best inefficient dilettanti in art and gambling, and drunkards who appalled you not by their drunkenness but by their dulness. You could walk London W. from midnight to daylight and see neither hint nor hope of your accomplished buck.... And that last description, Roger must have known, would so agreeably become the seeming contradictions of his public ambitions and private life, that from the presidency of the Union he stepped plumb into it; in solitary elegance re-created it, as it were, in the public and social eye, both of which were never far from his consideration; and having re-created it, successfully lived up to and never budged from it—until, when he was thirty-four, he again re-entered that society which he had always despised as dull but had never offended except with the most sympathetic disorders; and could now walk into it with the comforting thought that no dowager could say worse of him than a doubtful "He's a remarkable young man...."

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I knew by the little he told me that the main reason for his emergence was marriage. It was time to take a wife—but he had never bargained to fall in love with her as he did with Iris Portairley. And I've tried to explain Iris, at the age of twenty-two wanting a deal more vitality and reality than her surroundings could give her, half-consciously waiting for "something to happen"—is it very wonderful that she fell in love with him, not only with his person, but with the idea of him? It is only a very callous kind of critic who will discount reality from a love because—it is touched with glamour—for was there ever in all history a lovely reality without a lovely glamour? Since, be you ever so young, to kiss a courtesan is to kiss a courtesan, but, be you ever so calm, to kiss a lover is to make a fairy-tale....

I didn't wonder whether Iris had told Roger that she was seeing his brother. I knew very well that she hadn't—and, as Roger never mentioned even Antony's name, not even to me (and there was that rigidity about Roger that allowed no trespassing upon a distasteful subject), there was little chance of the subject ever being mentioned between them. But did Antony know of his brother's suit, so ironically parallel to his own? I suppose that he must vaguely have heard of something, from a remark he once let drop; but it could only have been vaguely and distantly, for the spirit of the thing, of his new gentleness, would have been broken much sooner if he had definitely heard what was commonly said, that Iris was to marry Roger Poole.

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I had often wondered how Antony would take the news of the engagement when it officially happened.... I left them alone that afternoon; and only re-entered the room when I had heard the front-door close to. He was sitting at my writing-table, and looked round at me without a smile, wearily.

"I thought you must have gone out somewhere, and was leaving you a note," he explained—and then, at my inquiring look, with a flash of his brazen impudence; "just to thank you for having been a good fellow, Ronnie—and a very good hand at staging a play, too!"

That was the only reference he made, then or ever, to what had gone—and with a sneer underlying it! which I had certainly answered but for the evident hopelessness that had let it out. I was angry at his morose resignation, at the weariness on his face—an ingrate if ever there was one, who thought life was treating him badly! Whereas, God knows, he had never ceased to buffet it into being his enemy. He ought to have been grateful for knowing Iris at all....

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Ten minutes later he left me, saying: "I'm going abroad, Mexico way, and I don't suppose you'll be seeing me for some time, Ronnie—in fact, there's no earthly reason why you should ever see me again." And to his suddenly outstretched hand was tacked on the glimmer of a really grateful smile; very like him that, to tack on a little gratitude to a long good-bye....

And so Red Antony went away, leaving behind him nothing in England but a question now and then in Iris and myself as to where exactly he might be and what he might be doing. And as I had often wondered why he hadn't left England long before, I never doubted but that now he had taken the step he would keep his distance—a contemptuous distance, mark you!—from it. For what, after all, was there for him to come back to?

About a month after he had gone Iris and Roger were married. I was the best man.

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IV

That was two years before. And there I am, on that night two years later, still in that taxi and running up an unconscionably high fare towards Roger Poole's house in Regent's Park; and Antony back again in England....

The intervening two years were full of an exaggeration of my state; which in itself would have no importance for this tale but for the reasons that caused it. Most of us, nowadays, seem, after all, to have developed our emotions to a more, well, civilised plane than that of mere constancy; an Armenian I know once told me that his father and mother had loved each other for fifty years, but I shouldn't wonder if that wasn't one more of those exaggerations for which oppressed peoples are remarkable, so it must be almost unbelievable that a normal kind of man could still be in a feverish state about a woman for so long a time—and with, to be frank, so little for his trouble.

But there's no cynical twist about the thing, it is very easily explained. One can't be dogmatic about the state of love, except just to say that it is full of profoundly logical contradictions. For, however serious you may be about your passions, you (you and I, I mean; not odd people) cannot for ever go on plaguing a woman who is not only so insensible to your attractions that she marries some one else, but is actually happy with him when married. A belated sense of humour must come to your rescue eventually, to point in a tired sort of way at the rather ludicrous figure you cut to yourself, fussing about with a passion that is of no earthly use to any one. Anyway, it stands to reason that the appalling certainty of her happiness must inevitably draw something from the fire of your love, so that it fades and fades—unless, of course, you are a minor poet and worried with your own sense of superiority and sonnets, in which case you will write to her a cycle of the latter explaining the former, and choosing, if possible, a date in another world when your bodies (both of which have caused *you* so much trouble) shall be rotten.

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No: an unhappy love such as I speak of must be fed so that it can continue; and, if by nothing positive, by what more acutely fed than by her unhappiness? So, since it came about that Iris was unhappy, that sufficiently explains my persistent love for her. But its exaggeration? How can I hope to give any reason for that, but in my own fatuity? How trivial it seems merely to say that there were moments, in that second year of her marriage, when Iris gave me an acute sense of nearness, of almost physical nearness; as though, in our destined journey, we were every day nearing a point where the road would be so narrow that perforce we must touch, where she and I would at last have to face each other in a complete moment....

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Not, however, that I knew anything of Iris's unhappiness for some time—it had not outlasted her honeymoon, and yet her best friend knew nothing of it for many months! Simply because, of course, it is always the most tiresome of one's friends who confide in one.... Had I suspected that she might be unhappy I might have expected it sooner. But, as it was, that first year of their marriage seemed to confirm every hope one had for its success. A vivid, crowded year it was—for Roger did do things supremely well! The original Poole money had not been quite negligible, but from all one heard "the present baronet" must have more than trebled it by lucky speculation (of course there must always be those who slur away the "s" from that word) and gambling; and his wife had brought him a considerable dowry. So that he could and did let himself go, and indulged his passion for entertaining in every sense in which that wretched word can possibly rob people of their sleep.

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The house in Regent's Park, with its large and decorous, too decorous, rooms, and gardens down to the water (is it river or lake? One only saw it at night, and then not very clearly, when it was either beautiful or sombre) became a more frequent scene of parties than any other responsible dwelling in London: a kind of holocaust of drink, cards, and dancing from which one emerged an entirely different person to the one who had entered a few hours before. One never entered that house without drinking more than one had ever drunk before, the thing was somehow in the atmosphere, and time over again one heard some poor wretch tell another that he had never been so drunk since Oxford.

But the frequent parties were not merely rowdy affairs, though rowdiness was never far absent for those who liked that sort of thing. Roger, as I've said, knew what he was about; and now there was forming around him, around the card-tables and the buffets, a small but dominating nucleus of people whose serious purposes were decently shielded, let's say, rather than submerged, by the riot and extravagance of the passing moment. He was becoming, in fact, the leader of a new old-school: and one as inimical to wasters as it was indifferent to dullards. From the, after all, considerable eminence of his means and position he was influencing the most promising of his contemporaries and juniors to what he considered a useful, sympathetic, and amusing mode of life: to think well and to live well, to live hard and to work hard.... Not, if you look full at it, a very elevating philosophy, not very original, since Haroun-al-Raschid lived and died so many years ago. But, elevating or no, it was one with a deal of practicable arrogance in it, and it is surprising how people will be influenced by anything that appeals practicably to their arrogance. And, I suppose, it is not so difficult as all that to influence people to one's own conception of life if one has Roger Poole's advantages; not only those of his means and his abilities but, as definitely, of his looks and air; and, to top it all, the possession of such a wife—an advantage more vivid and compelling than any he could find in himself.

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Of course I took it for granted that she was happy during that year! She seemed supremely content—as why, one might ask, shouldn't she be? Of all the men who had and might have come her way, Roger Poole, in spite of his indulgences in cards and brandy-and-ginger-ale, was certainly the most distinguished and eligible; and, what's more, the most courteous and considerate of husbands, who so far forgot the sardonic reticence one had thought natural to him as to seem, even in public, always to be making love to his wife.

Personally, I found that year, full of Poole extravagance, so entertaining that I think my vision of Iris, who since her marriage, and her busy household's calls upon her time, came much less often to see me in the afternoons, must have been as much confused by the gaiety and bustle always round her, as by her hypocrisy about the thing. She was, I think, as perfect a hostess as ever made a demand on one's time (for I, her old friend, was allowed no excuse by which to absent myself from any gathering whatsoever. Who else, said she, could give her the necessary confidence in herself?) She evoked gaiety. And how bald that sentence seems when I mean it to imply the elation caused in me, anyway, by the mere sight of that figure here and there about the now faintly and now brilliantly lit, whitepanelled rooms of that familiar house. And her hair, that wanton, tawny hair! It was so cunningly contrived of rich amber colours that it was always the most noticeable ornament in the richest room; there was about it some curious and wondrous quality of bedizening itself to suit and startle the various pleasures of every eye, even the most accustomed, that traced its vivid course round a crowded room.

It was not until almost the middle of the second year after her marriage that Iris again began to come more or less frequently to see me in the afternoons; but even then several weeks had to pass before I came to realise, and ever so dimly, what lay behind her quietness and silences, to understand the splendid, to me, faith which she put in my companionship.... What had from the first drawn me to her, as to one different from her tiresome and worldly friends, was that she was never noisy in her personal relations. And so, when she now again came to see me after the lapse of that feverish year I had allowed myself, I was slow to see the difference in her usual quietness and silence, slow to find sadness where I had ceased to suspect any.

She never told me anything. That was ever the worst of Iris, she never did tell one anything, anything *actual*, I mean. She said not a word about her unhappiness until one day I rather violently taxed her with it, and then she seemed surprised that I should ask so obvious a question: that I had not realised for myself the reasons for her failure to capture happiness. She actually seemed to imply that I, her friend, had eyes to see! whereas, God knows, I had little else but a heart to feel....

What a plague to us our friend's reticence can be! No one can well have suffered more from it than I with Iris throughout that time—she, so well versed in that unselfish philosophy of trusting but never burdening a friend; an unselfishness a little unfair to the friend, I think, for he is crowned with friendship's laurels without ever being allowed to pay for them with service. But such was Iris, with her philosophy of barricades.... "No one," said she, "can ever really help one, except, of course, in fetching one a taxi and the like. No one can ever help one to do the odd jobs of the heart and mind. It isn't to be expected. One must work out everything for oneself. There's no real help from outside, it must all come to us from ourselves—though when and how, for I've had mighty little of it."

But I suppose she was right in choosing her own language of silence. For one doesn't, as she said, talk about hell in the Fourth Dimension.... I grew to know quite well enough what it was all about. She could have added nothing to my knowledge but the details of disagreements and the like, which are so often apt to be as mean in repetition as in fact. And she spared me all that at the risk of my impatience—and of much more, she once confided to me later. Dear Iris! How very much good a little more conceit would have done you! you who looked so like an autocrat but never ceased to wonder at the admiration men paid you....

It was Roger Poole who mainly perplexed me. A particular conceit of mine, in fact, received now a sharp rebuff; for, owing to my long familiarity with them, it was always with something of inner superiority that I had listened to any mention of Poole extravagances, thinking that I had measured the brothers with some profundity—to discover now that I had known nothing but the outward complexion of anyway one of them! How could one view him squarely?

But how can a man ever get a whole perspective of another without, as it were, the bedroom key to his passions? *In vino veritas* may be a good enough test of drunkards by toppers, but *in amore veritas* is surely the very secret of the sphinx, be he drunk or sober. I once heard it said of a popular French Society *abbé* that "there's no man in France who is more confided in by people who hate each other"; and at the time I thought rather dismally that I had missed my vocation—for, in my small way, the same has happened to me throughout my life; and had I had an orderly mind I might have weaved the intricacies of other peoples' emotions into a famous book, instead of letting them settle into the deplorable chaos which they have always been. But I do know this, that I would know even less than I do of women if I had ever listened to what men said of them, and nothing at all of men if I hadn't listened very attentively to what women said of them. But Iris said almost nothing at all to explain the perversities of this particular man; except, once, that his nerves were as tight and taut as violin strings, and "sometimes so suddenly tuneless that it is difficult to remember what a very precious violin it really is."

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In spite of the fact that her mother was passing a very pleasant middle age in widely bewailing that Iris was wasting her youth, that Iris didn't like nor love any one, not even her husband—"that child doesn't like any one, you know! She is so contemptuous!" she'd say brilliantly—Iris, under a becoming air of inaccessibility which could rather appall one, hid an ability to love utterly—such as would quite have shocked those who inveighed against her coldness! And perhaps that hidden warmth of desire in her, the human but divine possibility of absolute surrender, must have been why her very presence in a room so often disturbed one. And now, to Roger! She had given it all to him, the whole surrender—that thing, so warmly full of potentiality, had been all given to him. A marvellous box of tricks to open, each passion to unwind its mystic and craved-for gift! If only he could have taken her love but a tithe so generously as she had given it! And she never dreaming that he wouldn't....

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Whether it was from a colossal conceit or from a meanness of vision, he seemed actually not to believe in her love—or, if this was a mad world, he seemed to want more! And he disbelieved not humbly, but with that sharpened scepticism which leaves so lasting a stain—and if he wanted more, he wanted silently, else maybe he had incited her to the bitterest rebellion of all: of telling him that she could love him no more than she already did, were she Psyche and he Cupid in Apuleius's book. He was that difficult kind of man (difficult, anyway, in a woman's first adventure) who never says "I love you," will rather say anything else than that; seeming, perversely, always to be waiting for something else, some further revelation. He was like a wall jagged here and there with sharp flints, against which Iris, in those first months, had hopefully then blindly thrown herself and her love, only to be hurt. He hurt her always, and inexplicably.... Indeed there's no pride in any love worthy of the name. Pride is just an imp, the very last of last resources, to be only used when all those gentler attributes of love have failed—for if love is humbled too far, then pride must become a part of it.

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She had felt, even before her marriage, that there were queer depths in Roger which might sometimes make him a little ... unexpected. And, of course, difficult. She might, with this man, have to waive the slight advantage a woman has in loving a gentleman rather than, say, a Dago, which is that a gentleman more or less does what is expected of him, a dull advantage, which Iris's thoughts very easily waived aside, for she was quick to allow as wide a licence for other people's improbabilities as she expected them to allow her. But she hadn't dreamt that the queerest of these, in him, could take so grotesque a shape as cruelty! For, however refined as an art cruelty may become, there is something vulgar and stupid in it as a trait, it must always be the very opposite of the immaculate—and that, as a man and as a lover, Roger had seemed to be. That idea of him, as essentially immaculate, had helped to compel her to him. And so now, hurt her as his cruelty did, it jarred and shocked her even more—that an illusion should have gone so distastefully awry!

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There was the perversity of the man—to love, as it were, upside-down. He could not accept a thing as it was, he must dominate and improve it, he in his own way! The joy and gaiety of just loving and being loved seemed to be meaningless to him—a wondrous deficiency in a man who made so brave a show of pleasure seeking! And so, jeering at her spontaneity, sneering at her "effusion"—Iris "effusive"—dominating her with his sardonic humours, he gradually subdued her. "Subduing" people doesn't depend on your strength but on the other's weakness; and Iris had the terrible weakness of being too easily saddened, too easily

influenced to credit that ever-present sense of the inutility and worthlessness of herself as compared to everything and every one; the most weakening trait of all for oneself, the most maddening for one's friends....

There was, then, this much excuse for him, that this weakness in Iris's nature acted as a kind of counterpart to his perversity. It was as though from all the world of fair women Iris had been chosen to bring out and accentuate Roger's great faults, as though from all the world of men who would have cherished her Roger Poole had been chosen as the only one who could belittle her and her love. If only she had been of a more stalwart confidence in herself, if only she had less easily given way to the subjection of herself before her high standards of worth! But, as she was, the nerve of her weakness once touched, she acted as a direct challenge to Roger's peculiar cruelty; which was of just the malevolent kind to confirm her in the belief, not only of his worthlessness, but of her own—this man who saw through her and despised her! How very treacherously your sadnesses treated you, Iris....

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Once, in that second year, after one more of those scenes which now her "coldness" caused as once had her "effusiveness," she made a rather feeble attempt to leave him, but he called her back; which, somehow, he easily could, for there was always that magnetism about him for her, compelling her to him almost bodily.... For three weeks he had left her in peace and without a sign, at the friend's house in the country to which she had gone, saying blindly that she would never return to him; and then, one day, he had turned up after lunch, and with no resistance but that of a set face she had gone back to London with him. So, in his perverse way, it seemed that he loved her, or rather that she was necessary to him; (Iris told me later that she never really doubted her attraction for him. But these things are too strange and too subtle for me).

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He seemed to have need of her presence, always. She must be always there. If she were indisposed there would be no parties in Regent's Park, since he seemed to enjoy no gathering of people in his house without her vivid presence.... I went as seldom as I could to his parties during that second year, but even so remarked how often his eyes followed her round a room, though he might not speak to her nor dance with her for hours on end; and if he did not dance with her he danced with no one else—he never had since the first time they had danced together; and, though she still lost as consistently as ever at any games of hazard that might be played, he seemed always to be brighter and sharper for her presence about the table.

He was a Pasha kind of man, Iris told me later; which would not have been so difficult to deal with if he had been consistent about it. But she never knew where she was, for he would let her be for weeks on end, while she lunched here and dined there, danced with this man and with that—and then, suddenly, blaze out into a fury of, presumably, jealousy; a cold kind of fury, in which bitter abuse was couched in liveliest terms and his opinion of her, and himself, defined with that outrageous clearness peculiar to scientists and sadists. Heaven only knows how she stood it at all—but then Heaven is our only really discreet friend, and never tells.

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V

The reason why I was so late in going to the party at Roger's house that sultry night in June was that I hadn't up to the last moment intended to go. And, as I paid off the cab before the house, was still uncertain enough to hesitate—until I suddenly had an acute feeling that I simply couldn't bear the crowd inside, all those usual and vivacious faces; that I couldn't bear the idea of the large rooms and noisy groups here and there, nor of Roger and his cultivated smile, nor of Iris in that confounded *gallère*. I may go in later, I told myself, thinking it would be a more pleasant folly to smoke a cigarette in the gardens behind the house. An ugly Victorian house, large and flabby, and an illiterate garden, I grumbled, but as I skirted the front to it I had to admit that for all its poverty and disorder it was a queerly attractive garden, a very special garden. Its hundred yards or so of length sloped in an absent-minded way down to the water, but where one would have expected an immaculate lawn for the cultivation of afternoon tea were only patches of grass traversed erratically by paths that led to nowhere in particular, and adorned by random trees and bushes that always might just as well have been anywhere else; a garden without any conscience even at night-time, and with scarcely any flowers, because, said Roger, a garden

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in London needs no flowers to be wonderful....

I blessed the little spots of rain that had been falling for some time, for there would be none of the usual wanderers about the place. There would be nothing but the garden's own silent and sombre contrast to the rattling and bumpy music that gesticulated at one through the wide open French windows of the ballroom. And the noise of that music was as the noise of a leering destiny, from which there could be no escape but only an occasional release....

A pleasant spectacle, this, from my dark station under an elm, but for a mind clouded with discontents and futile longings; the three large windows of brilliant light, in which were framed the passing figures of young people, here and there a very fair face reflecting the serious abandon of suiting steps to a tireless measure: those sidelong steps of the modern dance which I, anyway, find so much more attractive than the steps of the waltz, which is still regretted by people with listless feet and superior minds who take themselves but not dancing seriously.

But now I had no pleasure from the spectacle, I only wished, and heartily, that the room was empty of its music and people, empty of all but Iris ... to whom, if miracles could happen at all, I would enter suddenly and brave her startled gaze with my love-making, and take her. But the most wonderful thing about miracles is that they never happen, so I could do nothing but stare at her as far as I could disjointly see her among the moving crowd; a creature of green and gold that night, for her dress was of jade, and her hair, I thought, couldn't of course be but gold to ornament it fittingly; so that, I said, she will always be her own carnival, even in a desolate place. And once again, with that white face under hair which seemed that night more than ever barbaric in its splendour, she gave me that feeling of her as a strange thing from some wild legend, a woman of doubt and desire so consummately human as to be almost inhuman: tamed into life just for this moment, but only for this moment, without a why nor whence nor whither....

Thoughts, such vain thoughts as those, are apt to engross one's mind and very senses so utterly as to shut out for a few moments the whole noise of the world. So now, as I stood under the darkness of my tree, even the rustling turmoil of the ballroom must have become lulled by the vagaries of my thoughts, for it was out of the deepest silence that suddenly a voice behind my shoulder, as though from the trunk of the tree, asked softly:—

"And is the wise sentinel posted to keep the fools in or to keep the fools out?"

With a start I found behind me—Antony! a huge looming figure, his head bent to avoid the branches, a gleam of white shirt front and a red face, smiling impishly down at me. My utter surprise involuntarily took the shape of his simile, and I couldn't help saying: "The sentinel is the biggest fool of all, Antony, but he's going to stay outside." ...

But as I looked at him, his eyes fixed over my shoulder at the ballroom, his suddenly furtive appearance, the shameless espionage of it, angered me, and I added: "One way and another we seem to be seeing a good deal of each other to-night, don't we?"

"Um," said Antony, but his eyes didn't heed me.

"If that's your way of asking me why the hell I'm here," he said, "—then, Ronnie, the answer is that you do get in the way so to-night.

"And, anyway," he asked, "why are *you* here?"

"Simply because I suddenly thought I wouldn't go in—"

"Oh, stuff—you are in love with Iris, my boy," he suddenly threw at me. "I've acquired a taste for plain-speaking, you see," he added as I stared at him.

"What you needed was a touch of decency," I could only suggest.

"You only say that because you think you have a reputation to keep up," he said wearily. "Why on earth shouldn't you be in love with Iris if you want to be? I am."

Verily, Red Antony had changed in two years! It was never his way before to tell the truth about himself. And now ... or was it, my confusion asked, just a fancy on his part, born that moment of a desire to disturb me. His vanity had always inclined him to disturb and startle, whether by a lie or by a truth. And one is always confounded by the sudden froth of a fool's mind.

"Anyway, it's the sort of thing one keeps to oneself," I said,—lamely, I

suppose. He had so much of an advantage over one in any unseemly discussion.

"Remarkable amount of good that seems to have done you," he quizzed me, mildly. But he seemed to be taking as little heed of me as what he said to me, his attention was all for the windows of the ballroom. There was something pitiable about the way his eyes followed the scene from our vantage, as any poor alien might bitterly watch the revelries of a strange country.

"I heard this afternoon," he said, "that there was a party here to-night—and when I saw you on Piccadilly I knew where you must be going, so I suddenly thought I'd come too. Just to have a look at my betters enjoying themselves, you know.

"If you were a human being instead of a gentleman," he said steadily, "you'd be telling a man something. You'd tell him, for instance, if the marriage is a success, and if Iris is happy, and what her recreations are, and so on. Wouldn't you now?"

"Oh, Antony, what a dolt you are!" I told him. "If you'd only approach a man properly, without any of that bluff and bluster that so gets on one's nerves, one might tell you quite a lot."

In spite of that, however—"that candour peculiar to habitual liars who read novels"—I was thinking very hard about what exactly I would tell him about Iris, for Antony evoked the truth as little as he indulged in it.

"Of course the marriage is a success," I said. "And as to Iris being happy I've never seen any reason to doubt it."

"So long as she's got health, beauty, riches, sort of thing, eh!" he added with a laugh. "I just wondered, that's all. Mexico is the devil of a country for wondering in...."

I looked at my watch and saw that it was nearly three. The ballroom was deserted, and I could imagine the crowd in the supper-room.... I would make some excuse to Iris to-morrow, I thought, and suggested to Antony that we might have a last drink at my flat, so that he could tell me some of his news.

The decanter was empty and the night done when at last Antony left me—having told me many amusing tales of his experiences in Mexico and the West, in which of course he was always the first mover and main *motif*; and that he had come back to England with many good ideas of how to make certain money, if he could only find the capital. "We must talk seriously about all that one of these days, Ronnie," said he.

As a matter of fact, Antony's frequent ideas for making fortunes—out of the mugs, of course—weren't quite the silly vapourings of the usual waster, for he had a strain of financial genius which, if he could but have concentrated on anything, might long ago have made him a rich man. And so now I was less sceptical about his ability than about his seriousness.

"And is brother Roger as rich as he was?" he had asked me.

"Well, he seems to manage very well. But one never really knows about Roger," I said. "There's always rumours, of course, that he's stacked money on a horse, an oil well, or a silver mine; but he never shows any excitement about it."

"That," said Antony, "is because he's lucky. Plucky too, but mainly lucky."

...

"But about you—how on earth are you going to live? and at the Carlton?"

"For a wonder they dealt me some good cards now and then," he vaguely explained, with a laugh. "And when that's gone—well, I must make some more, that's all, Ronnie. And, bless your heart, there's always you to lend a man a fiver, so I won't starve."

I was not surprised when Antony, with his wonted casual neglect of such things, did not turn up to lunch the next day. But I was surprised to hear why—from Iris, later in the afternoon.

"And so that's why you didn't come to the party last night," she accused me as she came in.

She had been bewildered that morning by an unfamiliar voice on the telephone, but of course he had not needed to stress the fact that he was a "relation by marriage" before she had guessed who he was; and had lunched with him at Kettner's. And she was in one of those matter-of-fact moods which made it difficult to discover if she was very pleased or not by Antony's re-appearance.

"He was very nice," she said, "and full of a thousand and odd things to say, and some of them very odd indeed. Like a boy back home for the holidays, he seems...."

"The sort of boy some one I know by sight wouldn't like to meet again on a dark night in a bad temper," I threw in, reminiscently.

"My dear, you are getting very difficult!" she protested. "And you weren't very nice to poor Antony last night, maybe, for he said he had found you a trifle suspicious."

"I suspicious! Why, the man's full of it, he throws the stuff about like ink—he's suspicious even of me, the only friend he's got!"

"You had better glower at him not at me, Ronnie. And anyway, he's quite changed now, you will soon not be able to see him for tea-parties and the like! There's two lots of people in the world, he said, those who take tea and those who don't; you can either have your headache from boredom or from drink—and Antony is now going to try the first kind."

And as I stared rather satirically at her, Iris suddenly sat up in her chair and became very serious. "It's quite true, Ronnie—and if you're the man you've led me to believe you are, you will take a hand and help. The poor man realises he has made a horrible mess of his life, and he realises that it hasn't been worth it. He's tired of wandering, and he's tired of being an outsider...."

"You don't mean to tell me he said that!"

"Not in those very words," she admitted, "but he was very sweet and pathetic, and I think he might be given a chance...."

"A chance at what?" I asked bluntly.

"Well, whatever it is men are given a chance about. Don't, please, be thick-headed, Ronnie. I suppose he wants to get back."

"What, into the divorce court again!"

Iris jumped up from her chair, and there was no smile on the face she turned to me.

"I think you are being horrible about him, perfectly beastly. And you say you are a friend of his!..."

"Iris, for the Lord's sake don't let us get dramatic about Antony—and we can't do it half so well as he can, anyway." And as she turned away with that little grimace of contempt that she reserved for peculiarly tiresome people, I got up from my chair the better to defend myself. And I was getting very hot and bothered about the whole thing, too. "Don't you see that it's exactly because I'm a friend of his and know him pretty well that I know all this 'getting back' talk is simply stuff?" I put to her. "My dear, I've been 'sympathetic' about Antony for years, but it's never done him or myself any good—simply because there's never one circumstance in life when he will give up his vanities and bravadoes, he's so full of silly contempt that he will never even compromise. It's not possible to help a man who won't help himself...."

"The one after that in my copy-book was 'every cloud has a silver lining,'" Iris said dangerously.

"You are being unfair about Antony," she said. "You aren't allowing for the least change in him since he went away. And you are judging him entirely by his old weaknesses, without giving him any credit for new thoughts and—and longings...." I couldn't help grimly thinking of the quickly emptied decanter the night before, but I didn't interrupt. Iris is following a theory, I thought, and she won't find herself out until she has made a pet-dog of it and it makes a mess of her cushions.

"It's a perfectly human desire to want to get back into the world," she said. "Not, of course, the silly dull world, but that of affairs and the like. The city, for instance...."

"Anyway, Iris, your intentions are very honourable—but what are you going to do about it? How will you begin?"

"Isn't it perfectly obvious that to begin with he and Roger must make up their wretched quarrel or whatever it is?" she rather impatiently put to me. "I've always thought it absurd and childish, this civil war kind of thing, but now I think it's horrible too—the rich brother not even allowing the poor one into his house! Like silly schoolboys playing a cruel game...." she added desperately.

I laughed at that, but insincerely.

"Surely you know your husband and his brother well enough to know

that neither of them will ever do what they don't want to do! Really, my dear, it will be much better for every one, but mainly you, not to interfere between them....

"It's a silly idea, anyway," I added, "because even if Roger consented, which isn't probable, Antony would see him to blaze before he'd enter his house. I've tried 'em both, you know."

It was a little perturbing to have Iris pat my shoulder on that mockingly, and say: "There, there, everything will be all right—for who but Antony himself suggested it to me at lunch time?"

And she went on, my mind puzzled with this hard fact—Antony had told Iris that he wanted to make friends with Roger! Antony, the most obstinate braggart in the world!

"I chanced the subject, of course," Iris was saying, "and Antony agreed that it was the silliest thing in a silly life, and that he would like to put it right.... Surely they can't still be going on about that silly schoolboy quarrel you once told me about!"

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"Oh, the quarrel! the quarrel was nothing, just a lid to the thing. The trivialest thing for a blaze of temper that I ever saw. But they must have hated each other for years."

She put her hands to her ears in mockery.

"Oh, dear! You're as bad and silly and sinister as they are! I'm terribly disappointed in you as a man of wise counsel, Ronnie. Grown up men don't go on hating each other for ever and ever, simply because they are made different—"

"Or simply because they are made the same," I broke in.

"Oh, chicken-food!" Iris rudely said. "Anyway, I'm going to speak to Roger about it...."

"Well," said I, "he won't speak to you about it. He will just be silent, and let you go on speaking—and when you've finished you can begin again." I got that gibe in just in time, as between the door-mat and the door, so to speak....

And I judged that it must have been very much as I said, for when I saw Iris again she was not even decently communicative about it, so that I had impatiently to accuse her of being the kind of woman who would liefer not mention her failures. But she said she hadn't failed, "and anyway the word 'failure' seems rather portentous about so childish a matter.

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"He was like a blank wall," she explained. "Or rather not a blank one, for he's never quite that. And, of course, his sort of silence made me lose my head as usual, so that I might just as well have been prattling about the cultivation of sweet potatoes as about poor Antony, for all the good I did. And in the end he merely said he would see about it, or words to that effect."

"Or no effect," I amended, finally.

But she did not tell me till much later that Roger had listened to her speech about Antony, an extremely unusual subject between them, with such a fine show of interest as he didn't generally lend to what she said; so that she had thought the thing was going on splendidly until, when she had finished, he had smiled, and murmured:—

"I wonder what other reason there could possibly be for Antony's wanting to make it up except that we are both acquainted with my wife...."

VI

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So the matter dropped from my mind, except that I now and then gave a thought to Antony's queer idea, how and why on earth he had come to humble himself so—for that was the way the man would look at it. But I could not discover a hint of his possible motive until some days later; when, having asked Iris what he was about, for he hadn't come near me since that night of his arrival (obviously because he had no present use for me), she said he seemed to be dashing about the City seeing people, and, she hoped, profitably: "For I never see him but he has a pound or more registered on his taxi. But I daren't lecture him in case he loses his dash, and economises by not going to the City at all. For I think," she said with a hard look at me, "there's some good to come out of Antony yet."

So that was it, then—Antony actually was taking something seriously for

once! He really had brought back money schemes, big schemes of course, needing substantial backing, for like every other spendthrift he could only think in millions—and that was why he had suddenly found a use for Roger, the clever boy of the family!

But I dared not tell Iris my idea of Antony's purpose in making up the quarrel, for she was already surprised and displeased enough by what she thought my "harsh" attitude about him. "I never knew you to be so wretchedly biased," she had been surprised into saying; and so she wouldn't now give much credence to my psychologising of Antony—who was cunning enough to have realised, maybe from something she had let drop, that I was in no mood to be again used by him, and therefore did not come near me.

It was only a few days after Iris had told me of his costly vagabondage about the City that she informed me, ever so casually, that Roger was going to give a "Nigel Poole" dinner-party on the Friday night. She said it so casually that I thought I hadn't heard aright.

"A *what* party?"

"Oh, come, Ronnie! you know very well that Roger has given a dinner-party on this particular Friday of every year in honour of Sir Nigel, the founder of the house of Poole—"

"I know all about old Nigel, and that's a deal too much," I broke in. "But would you tell me where Roger has kept this annual dinner hidden, for I've never heard of it in all the years I've known him?"

"That's because of the life you lead," she pointed out. "You are too recluse, too celibate, too oblivious of the banal festivities of more frivolous but more human people. And I might add—"

"You might add, my dear, what this dinner is about and what the deuce Sir Nigel Poole, Bart., and bankrupt, has to do with it?"

"Ronnie, you mustn't be rude about my husband's family—you know very well that they go to all the best Hunt Balls and that all-their-people-are-Service-people. And as for the dinner, why! it's about nothing in particular—what are dinners ever about except a table? Poor old Nigel Poole is just a kind of plausible excuse to dress ourselves up in his period and kick our heels up a bit. The only thing that won't be eighteenth century will be the champagne, unless its corked—and, of course, you, if you are going to pull a face like that about it.

"This very moment," she said, "we will go to Clarkson's, where we will fit you up with a very fine line in gents' eighteenth-century suitings. And a wig, Ronnie, will lend an intriguing appearance to what I might call—well, you know, a rather discouraging scarcity...."

As it turned out on the Friday night, it was a very pretty spectacle. We were a square party of men and women about the long oak table, five down each side with our host and hostess at each end; and not one of us but was decked in the finery of *circa* 1780, and with a great deal more care and less anachronism than is usually remarkable in such masquerades. We men silked, breeched, sheathed, ruffled, and bewigged; and the women with their laces and powdered hair looking to my mind vastly improved upon their reality. Even Iris, her tawny hair whitened to the convention and extravagantly retreating from her ears and forehead to a pinnacle (how in the world she arranged it so I could never guess!), her little, exquisite features thus quite prominently lovely, looked less wild and more worldly, as of this world and not another; altogether of a more demure elegance—an expression which, as Roger said in brazenly asking us to admire his lady's looks, became her very prettily.

We were all, it must be understood, talking the speech of the period, as far as each could remember its conceits and mannerisms. Of course we all mixed things up a good deal—except Roger, who had insisted on it from our entrance, and was much more adept at the foolery of the verbiage. He was in the high good spirits that such make believe generally put him in; and was always seen in his best light as a host, as lavish of good humour as of wine, both, of course, flowing the more readily as the hour increased. And now his consistent and amusing use of his ancestor's way of speech added a great deal to the fun—in which Iris was sharing no less than I. Indeed, she has often told me since that she could have lived smoothly enough with Roger if all life were a masquerade—for Roger, it seemed, was a man who would take to fineness as a *beau geste*, where he would see you to the deuce in reality.

Our host, in all his finery of black silks and white laces, was sitting at the

end of the table facing the window; and on the oak panelled wall on his right, as it were dominating us all, was the only portrait in the room, a full-length of the host of our fancy: Sir Nigel, the first baronet, by Gainsborough—a very gallant but misguided gentleman, as Roger said of him. Misguided indeed, if one can judge by what mention of him can be found in the more obscure annals of his time (for Sir Nigel's fame among his contemporaries was not such as to ensure its perpetuity by even the least responsible historian); a rake who turned his coat this way and that to suit his interests just a little too outrageously even for that period, won and as discredibly lost a fortune or two; who was adjudged a sot and bankrupt, and then half confounded opinion by certain strategies of war which had nearly won us back our American colonies but for highly-placed incompetence; and in the end had surely won a higher prize than a paltry baronetcy but for his incurable passion for double-dealing, in which, as the years and the bottle took him, his wits seem to have lost much of their dexterity. His figure stared down at us now, stout, flushed, and rather blatant, and genial enough but for something dour about the cast of his eyes; and with very little such damned nonsense as cultivation about him, but a great deal of jaw.... He had come, I thought, by a rare honour: such a one as is not often lavished on many worthier shades—and, as I looked round at the glasses and the flushed faces of the company, an honour done in no other way than that which Sir Nigel himself would have chosen.

210

Much was said that amused us that night which, if repeated now outside that setting, would naturally make but a very pale and artificial show.... It was past eleven and we were still about the table, when I saw Roger almost furtively raise a glass to the portrait and carry it to his lips; but as he did so he caught my eye on him, and at once set the glass down untouched.

211

"I stand rebuked, Ronnie. It would become us all to share this toast—to Sir Nigel!" And with that he jumped up in his place and held his glass up.

"*Caballeros!*" he gravely addressed us. "There is but one thing to-night that would surprise our host on the wall and in our hearts, but would add vastly to his pleasure at our entertainment—that the ladies will toast him with us! But let it be as you sit, and in silence—Silence, the only God Sir Nigel never worshipped!" We drank.

"Nay, Sir Roger, you do me a great injustice! I was perforce often silent—and close on this very hour."

We all slewed round at the voice from the window.

"My God! The very man!" cried young Riverdale.

And it was—Sir Nigel as ever he lived, or rather, was painted! Heady with wine though we may have been—the very man himself surely stood there! The likeness was scrupulous, the resemblance of face alone, as he stood surveying us from the open window with his hat carried as in the portrait, was startling, ludicrous. The colour of the clothes, the very feather in the hat, were as though taken from the oil of the portrait; not one thing was amiss in the disguise, not even that well-dined look of Sir Nigel's time!

212

A full half-minute must have passed in startled, amused silence, while we all stared at the apparition, and he handsomely stared back at us—we all except Iris who, I saw from the corner of my eye, had not turned in her chair at the voice, but was looking straightly in front of her, a little crooked smile about her mouth. The reason for the "Nigel Poole" party, which she had suggested to Roger, was now well out! And, still in that half-minute, I twisted my head to take stock of our host standing at his end of the table—and, I don't quite know why, was amazed to see that he was not looking at Antony but at his wife, thoughtfully, ever so thoughtfully, just for a second....

Antony's smile was mainly to Roger, and after the first second he was wonderfully answered. Roger let drop his empty glass so that it shattered on the table, then strode across the room towards his brother, both hands outstretched to meet him.

"Welcome to my house, Sir Nigel," said he, and the brothers very handsomely took each the other's hands.

[I never thought to see two grown men enjoy tomfoolery so seriously as did these two brothers from this moment on.]

213

"You do me a great honour," continued Roger as he led his brother towards us, "but you also put me to a degree of shame—"

"Why, sir, I never yet shamed any man by my presence in his house!"

And the blustering cry, one knew, might as well have been Sir Nigel's as Red Antony's.

"I meant no such reflection," Roger protested smoothly. "I am merely shamed that you did not trust my hospitality some hours before, so that you could have been of our company over dinner."

"I protest, Sir Roger, that you make me too welcome! But I assure you we keep a very good table in the place I come from—" (And it was obvious enough that Antony had dined as extremely well as the heartiest of us.)

"And that, had I known of this honour, I would have asked one the less—for you, Sir Nigel, will now make the thirteenth about the table."

(I'll bet Iris never thought of that, though!)

"Egad, I play in luck to-night, then! For I'd have you know, Sir, that thirteen is a number much favoured in the place I've just left."

214

By now they had reached Roger's end of the table and stood there, the objects of our very amused attention. And a fine pair of men they made, those brothers!

"I'll present the company to you—" Roger was saying when Antony took him quickly up.

"Nay, nay—let them be! I dare swear that none will be so abashed as not to reveal themselves aptly enough!" And at that he sent a great laugh rocking down the table, a magnificent laugh, an epic laugh, explaining himself and us, waving and rocking among the multitude of glasses—which, to my heated fancy, seemed to clink as at the hail of one they knew to be their master.

Only Roger among us did not laugh, nor smile but abstractedly. He showed only concern as to his last guest's entertainment; and was now directing an amused servant to place a chair beside his own at the table, when Antony turned from us to him with the amiable inquiry: "And the fairest of all, that most brilliant ornament in a brilliant room—I take to be your lady, Sir Roger?"

Roger waved a courtly hand towards Iris to present her. But she made no sign as Antony bowed; the little smile had stayed rigid about her mouth since his entrance, it was as though an ironic hand had lightly caressed a shape upon it....

215

And Roger took a feather from Antony's impudence as the other was bowing. "I am glad you realise," said he, "that our house has now no other claim to distinction than in that lady."

And so my impossible had happened, the breach between the brothers was at last filling in! At this first, on Roger's part as though, I thought, with hesitation, almost perforce—but continued day by day to be filled in so consistently that soon the breach became, as it were, a mountain ridge: the brothers on the one side and the world on the other.

And, too, many another quarrel was tactfully smoothed for Antony that night and from that night; for there were some of our table that night whose first surprise at his entrance had held some repugnance in it, men who thought him "really a bit too much," women who weren't Wesleyans but would not have remarked him in an empty street. But Red Antony had certainly won—what little of that kind of thing there is to win—or to lose, for the matter of that. And if ever a man who was worth his weight in food and drink, that was Antony that night, on the top of his form from floor to ceiling, from midnight to daylight! And Roger only less so—just a little colourless he seemed beside this sudden brother of his. It was strange to think that I was the only one among them all who had ever seen the brothers together before—and that more than eighteen years before, in Roger's last term at school! I tried to find from his face now something of what he thought, but caught no more than an occasional sidewise smile at his brother.

216

I taxed Iris about her plot with only a laughing, "Well, it was a very good idea, anyway."

"Oh, if I could only claim the credit for it!" she feigned to sigh. "It was Antony's, you see."

The devil it was, I only thought! And as at last I went home found some unrest from the discovery, I was too drunk to know exactly why; and for all the fun of the night I went at last to bed quite bothered about the whole thing—and awoke not less so. I ought to have been pleased, of course: Antony had splendidly got his way and might now make good, and Iris might get the benefit of the new friendship between the

brothers. But one never knew what those infernal brothers were at, they both had such a damned sinister way of taking their pleasures! And I really had rather a grievance about the thing, too, I felt entitled to be hurt—for, after all, I'd been a pretty good friend to 'em both, and in long-passed years had time over again tried to bring them together and make them see the error of their ways—and here they suddenly come together without as much as a "by your leave!"

I rang Iris up at about lunch time, and a tired voice from her bed told me to go about my business and "come to dinner to-night, if you like. Roger's asked Antony...." I didn't go simply because my constitution is of this and not the eighteenth century. But I would have liked to, if only to see what those two might be at, or if they were at anything at all. And as for Iris—well, thought I (those late nights never really agreed with me, you understand), a wiser than I has said that it's in the nature of women and cats to scratch the hand that tries to free them from a trap.

VII

Iris was in a flutter. At least no other word can describe the quick gaiety of her entrance, the hidden smile in her eyes, and then, as she sat down, her sudden air of disinterested thought—for all the world as though I hadn't seen her for three days, as though she hadn't really, anything at all to tell me! As sometimes unavoidably happened when some press of work kept me dallying more busily than usual about editors, publishers, or managers—which sounds so much more important than ever the results were—we had not been able to meet since the night of the party; and I had had to restrain my curiosity about both her "relations-by-marriage" until this fourth afternoon: when, as I've said, she as nearly fluttered in as she could, and brought into my room a sudden breath of memorable moments, how long ago! when I had so often seen her with the light of a new idea, a new theory, an old book, or a new friend, in her eyes—a gay, lovely Iris, whose sanity and illusions were marvellously mixed in a wild and tender profusion, like sedate tulips and wanton poppies in a tawny sunlight. But the past two years had a little pruned her carelessness, and had made her mischief less sudden and more shapely, for she had come by a certain depth of mockery....

But at this very moment she was as she had once been, pointing out that I was one of the reasons why "girls go wrong in London. For if I had taken any notice of your pompous warnings to let Roger and Antony be as they were, I would have gone through life with a fixed idea of how horrible men are to each other. Whereas, you know, they aren't that at all—for instance, those two are quite divine together, and very pleased to have made up their absurd quarrel. And as I look at them it's very difficult to believe that all your talk about them wasn't a nightmare, or a bad short story badly translated from the Russian."

In fact it was quite remarkable, she told me, how good they seemed to be for each other; fancifully, as though each one had taken on something of the other's quality—Antony seeming to have become more intelligent and balanced, and Roger more genial, more—well—human. Which, of course, made everything much more pleasant for her....

But I had to protest when she said that Antony seemed so interested in talking and listening to his brother that he noticed her very little; that, in fact, she had been rather shocked to see that he wasn't now wasting any time over any remnants of good looks that might still be left to her since he had left England.

"He doesn't ignore me, of course. He is quite charming and courteous, and tries his best to lower his voice when speaking to one, in the old way, but—well, he's only just aware when I am in or out of the room," she added helpfully.

That aroused in me a perverse candour about something so far untouched between us, and I said: "But you know as well as I do, Iris, that you were one of the main reasons, or the main reason, why Antony wanted to make friends with Roger."

She stared at me thoughtfully, as though examining a certain mental aspect of me; but I seemed to have been wrong about the infernal man so often as far as she was concerned that I was now quite reckless about making just one more *faux pas*. "And," I added grimly, "wanted to see if you liked Roger as much or more than you—"

"All right, all right," she impatiently stopped me. "Ronnie, you've developed a great talent for seeming to give knowledge when you're only roasting chestnuts. Of course, I had gathered all that—not too seriously,

of course. There is always an indecent part of one that flatters oneself that one just might be worth fighting about—and so it wasn't difficult to work up a dim but thrilling idea that Antony might still be trying out his luck after two years; and, after you had been so beastly about him, that he might be wanting to spite Roger because of me—being a man, you know, and as common-minded as most men about such things as rivalries and revenges about women. But it's very obvious now that all that was just the froth of our diseased minds, and that poor Antony quite sincerely wanted Roger to like him—and for his own, not for my sake."

221

But as I still looked what she considered "unintelligent" about it she rather brusquely suggested that I had better "come to dinner to-night and see for yourself."

"You may have known the pair of them together well enough years ago," she said later, "but that *was* years ago. And now with so much experience, lives full of 'colour' and all that, to bridge their memories of each other, each one has discovered the other one again. Don't you think that's it? And that they've both quite naturally improved in the discovering?... Silly men, of course, not to have been decent about it long before, and saved you from nightmares and Antony from going against the world. For I'm sure he wouldn't have made such a fool of himself if Roger had been his friend. And as for Roger—why, he has actually confessed to me that he hasn't one real friend whom he likes! while all the time there was Antony under his very nose, perhaps the only man who could touch anything in him. And you'll admit that it's odd how the life Antony has led never seems to have made him a great friend, for one always thought that men who lived his kind of life in bars and places made many easy friends, even if they were only down-at-heelers. But there seems to have been something that always kept him apart, I don't know what, but something that has always given one the idea of him as a quite special and solitary outsider: a good drinking companion but a man who never really liked any one—and so people never really liked him, I suppose. And all the while he never had the sense to go to Roger and tell him not to be a fool so that he needn't be one—for you have only to be with them for a moment to realise the sympathy between them, and the similarity, too—"

222

"Oh, you've noticed that, have you?"

"Yes, you were right about that," she gallantly admitted. "It's a kind of similarity that comes to you as a shock, it's so improbable on the face of it—but, funnily enough, one seems somehow to have known of it always. But I haven't got a psycho-analytical eye, and shall have to see much more of them together before I shall understand anything more about it than that Roger is the thin edge of the same wedge—though if a wedge could have two thin ends and still be a wedge then Antony would be the other one—oh, dear, you know what I mean...."

223

Oh, yes, I knew what she meant. And though, as Iris said, many things must have been changed between them since I had known them together, yet it seemed that this indefinable sense of their likeness had not changed. It had been unlooked for and quite remarkable even to a not very observant schoolboy as I was, this similarity between such very different brothers as Poole I and Poole II. Roger, quiet, feverish, the best classical scholar in the school, a head-prefect whose authority was severely respected by every one (except Antony, who, however, never seemed to come directly into contact with it), and the first string of our racquets pair at Queens for four years; and Antony, as I've explained, the very opposite, a slacker at work but our best fast bowler and three-quarter—games, said Roger, which it made him sweat to think about. And so, as each went his so very different way, it had puzzled my schoolboy mind to discover in what lay this similarity between their natures, one whose existence had grown upon me as I had become more intimate with them: some deep down, inarticulate sameness, that was at first obscured by the great variance of their personalities, but so strong a sameness that it must show itself as one came to know them—so, anyway, I had incoherently thought at that time. And later, after we had left school, had so seldom seen them even in the same company, that I quite forgot my curiosity about the subtlety—so that when Iris now brought it again to my mind I was where I had been at school; and not likely, I thought, to get very much further.

224

But I had been really surprised to hear of the obvious pleasure they took in each other's company, of their mutual sympathy and interest. In that, indeed, the years between had made a change! For if their likeness had been ever so dimly apparent to me at school, not so any interest the one might have in the other. They neither showed any nor pretended to any,

they went their own ways with a quite unforced indifference; and it would have been better if, when they met, they had met as indifferently—but Antony seemed unable to resist an unpleasantness, to which Roger's generally silent contempt seemed a more than sufficient answer. In fact I rather sympathised with the jeers that Antony now and then flung at him as he passed, for Roger's kind of contempt seemed to have behind it enough conviction to provoke even a reasonable man to a show of temper—and Antony reasonable! But somehow or other Roger cleverly managed not to provoke him beyond the limit until a few days before the end of his last term. I can swear that he purposely brought on that burst, kept Antony's temper dangerously dangling—until after supper that night when he, somehow, finally goaded him into making a perfect ass of himself before the whole house. Poor Antony, so unfairly matched against that grim quietness!

225

But now, as I saw when I went to Regent's Park that night, it was as Iris had said, the years had made a great difference in their relation to each other. But in spite of the pleasing air of easy friendship about them—with a touch less reticent than usual about Roger and one more "lowered" about Antony—I managed to develop, as dinner went on, another very real grievance; so real indeed that, with some nursing, it lasted from that time on. It came about by my suddenly realizing that I had very little indeed to say to these brothers—an uncomfortable enough feeling about people whom one has known long enough never to worry about having much or little to say to them. But my surprise at being made aware of that constraint was heightened by another: that I had nothing to say to Roger and Antony simply because, for all their geniality, they had nothing to say to me! that they were, in fact, rather resenting my being there at all....

226

I candidly vented my grievance on Iris, who seemed somehow implicated, the next time I saw her, but she said that I was always apt to be psychic about the wrong things.

"And even if you were in the least bit right you might be a little understanding about it," she complained. "For after all, it's not very unnatural that they should be a bit put out by you—because you, see, you've known all about their little bitternesses for so many years. You are somehow the sleuth that has never been shaken off! not, of course, that you ever wanted to be a sleuth, that was just circumstance, nor that either of them has ever wanted to shake you off—very much the reverse with Antony, in fact, poor Ronnie! But if there's any strain at all it must come from that, don't you think?..."

I didn't. In fact I thought it a very poor explanation—and, anyway, I had lately been growing so impatient about the damnable vagaries of those brothers, especially Antony's, that I clutched at this as a last straw; and vowed that several moons must pass before I would again dine with Roger and Antony. And several moons did pass....

227

Since Antony's return I had discovered in myself a lack of sympathy with him that I had never before felt to such a degree, even on his most unsympathetic days. And now, as the weeks passed and he never so much as came near me, I thought of him as really beyond the limit. After all, I had done a good deal for the man, one way and another. And now, simply because he had no use for me.... There was a shamelessness about the thing that gave me a positive distaste for him, and I really desired to see him as little as possible. But it would have surprised me very much if I had known that, as a fact, I was to see him only once more, on that night a few months later.

I might have known more than I did of what was happening at this time if I hadn't been so full of that stubborn impatience about the brothers; so unreciprocative about them, that, Iris accused me later, even if she had been minded to tell me anything of her feelings and of what was happening (which would only have furiously muddled me without helping her in the least) my attitude of, as it were, "disowning" them would have prevented any such confidence.

228

I saw very little of Roger throughout that time, and then only casually at the Club; for I never once went to Regent's Park—as much because I didn't want to as because he didn't ask me. But, Iris told me, neither did he ask any one else, except to cards—there were no more parties of the old kind. And the reason for that, as she told it to me one day, came almost as a shock; for when she had asked him why there were no more parties he had simply answered, because he couldn't afford them. It was difficult to think of Roger as not being able to afford things. For years one had thought of him as so rich a man without enquiring how rich, as so magnificent a spender without thinking of how much he spent—he

seemed capable of spending so much! There are men in relation to whom one doesn't think of money, it seems natural to them to have so much. But now, it had happened that he couldn't afford things!...

"And what's more," Iris said, as we were childishly wondering about this (for we were both rather stupid about large sums of money, I suppose because she was so used to them and because I had never had any), "he's been having a real streak of bad luck at cards lately. Of course, he's lost before, but he has always managed to get it back in the end and much besides—but lately, you know, as I've watched them playing, it seems to me that he was losing very heavily. But it's difficult to believe that he has ever lost much, he always seems so very unaffected by it—so unbelievably a good loser that one simply can't believe he's lost very much." And thus Roger's philosophy of surface values had at last won its share of Iris's grudging admiration, or so it seemed to me from her wistful silence. And, I remember, I wondered what kind of a man he could be who could, despite so much, so firmly retain a woman's imagination about his personality.

229

VIII

It was difficult, Iris began (when all these things had settled into the limbo of our past lives), to tell me in a matter-of-fact way exactly when and exactly why she had come to be distressed by the nearness of her husband and his brother to each other. It had just grown, by very devious ways and windings, though not so stealthily but that she hadn't noticed the discomfort of it; but, as with such things, it had seemed altogether so unreasonable and fanciful a feeling that she had never ceased trying to discourage it within herself; and it was only at the end that, with quite a burst, her fear had finally overcome her sense of absurdity, and had scattered it back to the shades that had sent it to delude her for so long—only at the very end!

230

At first and for a little time after she was, as I had seen that afternoon, happy about their friendship. She was pleased with the success of her plot, it seemed so much like a bad thing put right, one more "bogey" exorcised from this world. And, mainly, she was pleased for Roger's sake.... Ah yes, that would surprise me, to whom she had made such a fuss about wanting to help Antony! But Antony had only been an incident of her plot—she had seized this idea and given him the leading part, while Roger and she would get as much or more benefit from it than he. How the idea of using Antony's suggestion of the masquerade had come to her she didn't know, but it had come forcefully enough for her to take great pains about his disguise; the idea that it would somehow be of great good to Roger to make it up with his brother, that this new affection (she had an instinct that the brothers were really very fond of each other, but pettily arrogant) might make him more, well, tangible—to her!

231

"My dear, of course I wanted to make him tangible to me, possible to me. I always wanted that. Don't you realise that ever since I first met him every thought I had, however little I realised it, was really concerned with him and about him? My feeling for him had crept into my veins, it was as much a part of me as my voice is, and no amount of hardening my heart against him could drive it out. And, as you know, my heart grew hard enough; I had begun to close myself against him soon after our honeymoon, quite, quite tightly, as one can if one tries very hard. It was my only defence, you see, I couldn't hit back nor really leave him, for there's simply no pride in love.... And I had succeeded, hadn't I? By the time Antony came back my defences were so strong, so strong that I began to think I must have exaggerated my love as much as one has always suspected one's friends of exaggerating theirs: almost to treat my love with a bedside manner, it seemed so dim and ailing.... But it was there all the time, I suppose, love only playing at indifference, the only game that grown-ups continue to play after childhood, but never so well as children could play it if they weren't too wise to try. And as soon as Antony said he'd like to make friends with Roger and suggested how it could best be done, some part of my mind fixed on it and made a dream, of how Roger might change, wonderfully. It was just a chance, and anyway it would help Antony.

232

"I was happy about it at first, it seemed that I might have been right about Roger, perhaps he might become more tangible—until there came the little shocks, earthquakes in the air and under my feet! The first one was their sudden distaste for you, Ronnie, even though I did seem so snappy with your grievance. In Roger it only surprised me, though very unpleasantly, for he was apt to make these sudden dislikes. But in

Antony, though I didn't tell you, it shocked me, I couldn't understand it, it seemed the sort of thing a man might do in a book, a renegade kind of thing—not that he said anything in particular against you, he hadn't the face to do that before *me*; but his attitude of a kind of contempt was quite enough in a man whom I knew you had been so very nice to, even though you had always seen through him. But I thought I would wait a little while before thoroughly disliking 'poor' Antony, as it might be just one more of those freak perversities which you and I have often been so impatient about in both of them. So I didn't mind when he came to live at the house about then, and anyway I couldn't see more of him than before, for he was at dinner every night.

233

"Then came the disappointment of Roger's slacking away from the House and from everything to do with it. And though that seemed to have nothing to do with Antony (how could it?) I couldn't resist a vague idea.... Even before Antony came back he had begun to be more and more interested in the City and less in politics, but now he seemed to have become altogether a business man. There was something particularly dreary about that disappointment, for Roger's public life had never lost its glamour for me. I had always been interested in his career, and interested in him as a bright part of dull affairs. All that political stuff had seemed to become his personality so well, and besides it seemed the only proper outlook for his passion to dominate people—and now I would have to lose even that much of him! that part of him that I read about in the papers, and that had seemed to be really mine. A funny contradiction, that his wife should treasure only that part of him which the whole world knew as well or better than she....

"I showed my bitter disappointment when one day he told me he was thinking of resigning his seat; and, do you know, he actually seemed apologetic about it! It was strange, that air of apology about him, and the way he looked at me from the door as he went out, as though to say he was sorry for having let me down! Let me down!

234

"That was the first time I realised a new gentleness about him, something I hadn't seen in him even when he had made love to me before we were married. I was very young then, and thought he made love so well then because of his gentleness, whereas it was only practice, like being good at billiards. But now there was this queer air of gentleness about the way he sometimes looked at me, almost of weakness. And maybe my surprise at it made it seem even more intangible than it was, for it seemed to be nearer the ceiling than to me, I couldn't somehow reach it; and I didn't dare try to, I wanted to touch him but I was afraid—he had done the awful thing, had made my heart suspicious, which is degrading to oneself and to the person one loves. And so, at first, I mistrusted my own weakness for being hurt by him, and I mistrusted him.... But if Antony had been a different sort of man I would have blessed him for somehow or other having brought that gentleness on Roger, for of course he had something to do with it in a contrary way, I thought.

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"I suppose my disappointment at his leaving the House had something to do with my boredom at the eternal talks about business. Money, money, money. Something about Mexico and oil, as far as I could gather, that Antony had brought back to England; and I could only hope that there was a lot of oil to make up for the amount of talk about it, and interest in it.... They left together in the morning and came back together in the evening, sometimes quite late, as dull a pair of business men as ever got be-knighted; and the only people that Roger asked to the house were odd Napoleonic kind of men, very good at being 'merchant princes' I've no doubt, and the usual gamblers—who, as far as I could see, were very good at gambling, by the amount that Roger seemed nowadays to lose to them, mainly at poker.

"Roger had never talked to me about money affairs, I being old-fashioned with my affectations of stupidity. But I had realised that things were not going so well with him as they used to, that his immersion in the City and retirement from politics had a great deal to do with being temporarily hard up. He's having a run of bad-luck, I thought, and must be a little worried about it; though it struck me as strange that Roger should worry about money, for he had always such an air of complete detachment from it. But it must be that that is on his mind, I thought as I looked at him, and thus found a plausible reason for his rather feverish and seedy looks.

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"His face, as you know, was always colourless, and his eyes very bright, but he had never looked unhealthy; a kind of vitality and vividness had always made him seem very alive and well. But just lately I had thought

he looked rather too pale and haggard—and then, one night at dinner, I realised suddenly that my Roger was terribly thin, a long, thin, white-faced man with brilliant eyes—but so thin! Of course, he had always been like that, but one had thought of him as supple, not thin—and now, suddenly, it seemed to me that his thinness was the most apparent thing about him! And there, at the other side of the table, was Antony, redder than ever, burlier than ever, healthier than ever, and growing, I thought, a good deal stouter. And, resenting him, I suddenly resented his healthy good looks in contrast to his brother's nervous paleness, and—why, my dear, I couldn't take my eyes from Roger that night, he seemed so white and delicate, so quite unlike himself, unlike the man I knew! Of course, it was silly of me to be surprised at it, since he had always looked rather white and delicately made—but so self-confidently delicate that one had never thought of him as particularly so. But now a touch of worry and weakness seemed to have pruned that self-confidence away from his body, and I seemed to see what had always been there under a cover; a kind of shadow where I had grown used to a kind of tyrant....

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"I accused him of being not well, but he said that it was only that he was a little tired and overworked: 'But if everything goes well I will buy a villa near Cannes, Iris, and we will go there, and leave Antony to do all the work. Antony is a great financier, you must know....' And he left the sentence in the air, looking at him with a smile; while Antony said with a laugh to me: 'If only I had Roger's brain with which to carry out my ideas you wouldn't be able to see me for money, Iris, nor yourself for Teclas.' But you know Antony, how he could never make the most comical boast without giving one an unpleasant idea that he really believed in it—and how unpleasantly absurd it suddenly was, the idea of Antony acquiring Roger's brain just to set me up in pearls!

"That was just about a month before that night you and I will always remember. But how, my dear, was I to know or even dream of what was to come? What did I know about the fall in cotton prices and the upside downs of that oil thing, of which I heard of vaguely as Cascan Oil?...

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"All I actually did know was that Roger's health was weak, and that began to worry me to the exclusion of nearly all else; but, from his 'faded' looks, I thought he was probably right in saying that it was overwork, and I didn't dare to pester him about it, for I could trust no amount of gentleness in him to rid him of his contrary perversities—but I would take him away at the first possible moment, which, I vowed, would be very soon indeed! Oh yes, Ronnie, how many chances one gives God for saying that He knows better....

"And it was about that time of my worrying about Roger's health that I noticed that the relations between him and Antony had changed since I had had the feeling that they were so interested in each other as scarcely to notice me. But I can't express it except by saying that they seemed gradually to have changed from a great amiability to an electric kind of chaff—which, as that about Antony and finance, Roger generally led and Antony followed as best he could. I remembered then what you had told me about them at school, but there was nothing like that between them now, no jeers from Antony, and only a very kindly sort of contempt from Roger. It was contempt surely enough, that look Roger gave him now and then, but a contempt wrapped in a good-natured smile: his 'Antony' smile, I rather jealousy called it to myself, for he had never turned to *me* with that particular kind of good-nature with which he smiled at Antony. And there was certainly no such quarrelsomeness as we had all come to expect from Antony, even when Roger might sting just a little bit sharply; in fact, the remarkable thing about him, I thought, was his great deference, not so much to Roger, but to Roger's intelligence. He seemed to have convinced himself that his brother was the cleverest man in the world, and he had a way of sometimes repeating what Roger had just said tacked on to one of his great laughs, and an air about him as though to say: 'Just look what a clever brother I've got!'

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"What could I think about Antony, my dear! To me he was always charming, but charming, and quite naturally. Antony, as you know, always wore courtesy when he needed it like a rather flamboyant cloak flapping in a north wind, but to me he was always quite natural with it—just as in those days at your flat when I liked him so genuinely. But I had somehow come to mistrust him—and more deeply than one can mistrust one's friends' weaknesses while continuing to like them. And when I saw, or felt I saw, that contempt in Roger's eyes, I was more than ever uncomfortable about Antony. It seemed that Roger mistrusted him too—but that he didn't mind mistrusting him, it made no difference to his liking for him! Imagine the smoke from that dim fire, the theories that

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would chase through my head as we sat at dinner, often rather silently! And then the next moment I would wonder impatiently what the deuce all the fuss was about. They were such friends, after all!... But no sense of absurdity could so easily rid me of the feeling that Roger knew very well what Antony was about, but that he was just waiting, ever so good-naturedly, just letting things be. Roger to let things be!..."

And as Iris repeated those words about him I understood very well the reflected astonishment in her eyes. It must have been strange, Roger "letting things be!" about whom the most vivid fact had always been that he must try to colour and influence anything that he touched or that touched him, men or work or circumstance.... But, Iris said, *she* couldn't let things be! As that month grew she realised that, absurd or not, there was something strangely the matter: and that if there was ever to be any levelness forced upon their present life she must be its direct agent. But she couldn't for the moment worry about Antony; nothing could be done until some kind of solidity had been coaxed back into Roger's health, for he seemed lately so gravely feeble.

By this time, although she had not realised its every stage, all her bitterness and resentment at his past scepticisms and perversities had passed from her mind; leaving her, despite her perplexities, happier and lighter, as after the expulsion of ugly grotesques from a sacred place. Her heart had opened to him, not artificially before his new weakness of health, but from a more profound realisation of the man himself. Now that she had lost that mistrust of him, he seemed so near to her; and it was as though the past wretched two years had not been except to deepen and widen her love, this love, it seemed, that had been found good but not good enough, and so had been sealed up for a time to allow builders to shape it into a more workable intensity; and now it had grown more complete and wiser than that first impulse to utter abandon which he had roused in her, and which had never been but an electric current of unhappiness between them. Now she understood him a little better—if it was understanding him to know clearly that she could have awakened this gentleness in him long before. He was one of those men who couldn't give but must be made to. She should have plundered where she had pleaded. She should have played the buccaneer to this man who had grown so used to being taken for one.... But now, she saw, it was too late to fly the Jolly Roger, for he had come by some knowledge of himself from a hidden turning on that well-paved road which he had trod with so well-poised an arrogance; and, in yielding to what had suddenly—and yes, secretly—come, he had yielded something from his health, some part of his vitality. Yes, it was too late to play at buccaneering now. First she must coax back his full health, and quietly wait for him to realise completely her new understanding of him. No half-way fulfilment this time, in this new love-affair that she knew was coming to them! She couldn't bear that—she must wait until he knew himself, so that he could love without any of those retractions that had made such a wretched muddle of it all before.

So, letting love be as well as she could, she now disregarded any irritation she might cause, and began to "pester" him about his health: saying that whether it was overwork or not he must see a doctor. Until one evening, Antony having gone out after dinner, as she was complaining about the stupid insensibility of men to their own well-being, he said that it really was a very common complaint and not worth seeing a doctor about: just bad-luck, he said.

"But how bad-luck? Do be serious, please, Roger.... I am so tired of fantasies...."

"Just the thing itself, my dear—just bad-luck. Now why should that be a fantasy? Isn't it expressive enough, or do you think that the only serious illnesses are those that doctors get paid for discovering and the Lord be thanked for curing?"

"It's not that, but when one hears of some one being ill of his luck one thinks of a boneless, watery kind of man who thinks the world is against him because a favourite has lost him a fiver."

"But I told you, Iris, that I meant just the fact of bad-luck, not any particular loss from it." And then he explained, but ever so mildly, as though to a child who mightn't very readily understand an obvious fact.

"It's very simply, and quite logical, I think. Have you ever realised, Iris, that since you met me I have always won? Well, all my life has been like that, I have always won—I don't mean only at cards and racing but at everything that is supposed to make life worth living, those various prizes that we put our names down for. Some men take their paths in life

steadily and calculate their progress step by step by hard work, and some men just have a throw at what they most want from time to time—they may work hard to have deserved it after they have got it, but they get it by a chance, by backing themselves against the field. But that is such a poor description, for it's never such a conscious thing as that, the throw comes from a real part of one's nature. It's only a conscious trait in that awful type of "hotel-lounge" American who has many diamond tie-pins and wants every one to know that he lives by bluff and hazard, and in other fools who think that a strange glamour reflects on them from taking chances—whereas to take a chance is just the business of one's nature, it's the business of one's life, just like art or grocery. One gambles naturally or not at all, and the people who lose are mainly those who gamble for some other purpose than the mere fact of gambling, as any *croupier* in any Casino will tell you....'

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"He stopped and looked absently across at me with that half satiric smile that crept about his face when he spoke about himself—which was so seldom that I was now listening with all the nerves of my body. And then, each word very slowly and distinctly, as one might count the caskets of a fabulous treasure—

"I have always won," he said.

(I'll leave you to imagine, Ronnie, that if it is possible for any man to make such a statement without seeming to boast his good fortune, Roger so made it).

"I can't tell you any more about it than you can find from just that sentence,' he explained, 'I don't know why I've won. I don't know. But I suppose that it somehow came naturally to me to win every time I ventured—whether it was for money or anything else. Always a good seat on the front bench, and sometimes the very first seat of all.... I know how difficult it is for you not to think I'm exaggerating, for every one does exaggerate one way or the other when talking roundabout the chances they've taken. But, Iris, dear, please believe that I'm exaggerating less than people usually do when I tell you that I grew to take the fact of winning as, well, my right—as part of me, don't you see? Without very particularly realising or fostering it, it grew to work out like that....

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"Yes, my good-luck or whatever it was, was certainly a part of me,' he repeated. 'And a very important part, if one's good health is important—why, Iris, my good-luck was the very key and centre of it! It must have been.... And does that, after all, seem so fantastic? that my whole zest and confidence and vitality, everything you first saw in me, were made up of my luck? I was nothing without them, the things of my luck—and you didn't know the man, Iris, you only knew the luck. The luck was the man, don't you see? and without it the man was—well, I'm damned if I know what he was! I can't remember ever not winning, so I've never had to examine myself until lately. For, of course, I didn't realise all I have told you until just lately—I suppose I am the kind of man to prospect rather than introspect when on top of a mountain. But I realise it all well enough now that there's such a poor view from the lowest ridge. I know now what my worst enemy would never have dreamt of saying of me, that I am a bad loser—a very bad loser in its really fundamental sense. Other people may lose or win with their faces, but it seems that I win or lose with my whole being.... The fact is that I can't lose, I simply don't know how. Don't you see that I can't lose, Iris? It saps all my vitality.... Poor Iris, to be married to a man who is only a man so long as he wins.'

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"The little smile had clung to his face all the while, like a faint light about its shadows; and maybe it was the self-mockery of it that made his manner so much lighter than his words—which towards the end had seemed to fall wearily and listlessly, as though he had resigned himself to do a duty. And it must have been a deeper self-accusation than any words could express that had helped him to humiliate himself in a matter-of-fact way of explanation. For to him, Roger, what humiliation! To have realised within himself that he, of all the men in the world, was that strangely contemptible thing, I don't quite know why, a bad loser! To confess that realisation to me could add nothing to the humiliation, for Roger was never but first audience to his own acting, never but the main person in any gallery to which he might play! He stood or fell by himself, and if he fell, no other's judgment could count beside his own.

"How, then, could I tell him at that moment on what, as he was speaking, my mind had fixed—so that I could scarcely restrain the cry of my discovery, scarcely bear not jumping up from my chair to hold him to me. But to him, an egoist, realising that aspect himself, what possible consolation in telling him of my discovery? the reverse, maybe, another blow.... The vivid fact that I was intensely glad at the failure of his luck!

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All those arrogancies and dominations with which he had first charmed, then repelled, and always baffled one (they had seemed so out of one's reach to prick them, perched so confidently on a highest pinnacle of assurance): the whole of his easy mastery over life that had bred his 'confidence,' 'vitality'—I saw now that they were just the scum over his good-luck, a kind of verdigris that had made me grow to despise them, however unwillingly. 'You never knew the man, you only knew the luck. The man was nothing.' ... Poor dear, he was so sunk in that realisation that he couldn't possibly realise the vastness of the parallel one that it had roused in me: that the man was everything, the luck worse than nothing, just a slaughter-house for every quality with which my love had dowered him.

"And so, glad as I was at the result in himself from his change of luck, its result in his health lost some of its seriousness—as a thing that is explained generally does, unless it is too bad. For I certainly didn't take his explanation of it as 'fantasy,' it was quite obvious that he had his finger on the real cause of his weakness. Given the other extreme, as he had so candidly explained it, why shouldn't a man fail in health with the failing of his luck? But I felt that he was more affected by the shock of it than by its contemplation—and, after all, I didn't love him weakly, I could deal with a shock, be it ever so mental. His air of resignation, so foreign in him, disturbed me a little; but, I thought, that is a natural part of the ailment and one will deal with them both at a time. Yes, the thing would mend of itself, for it carried its own cure with it, in a new and deepening knowledge of himself. He would be better even before the pendulum of this strange 'luck' of his had swung back again; and I had no fear from what its swinging back to 'good' might bring to us both, for he was now learning the lesson of himself beyond all un-learning.

"So I thought, anyway, after I had persuaded Roger, that same night, to explain just a bit of what had been happening to him in the great world—where, it seemed, luck of sorts made such a mess of men. And indeed it was only a very little bit that he explained, for he was tired, and said that it was a long and dull history, even though it hadn't taken very long to happen. 'Exactly how long?' I asked, but he evaded that—else maybe I had known so very much more!

"As you know, when a writer wants to be done with one of his characters,' he explained, 'he sometimes throws a few bad investments and bucket-shops at the poor man and he's done for before you turn the page. Well, there are plenty of such things outside books, and I somehow seem to have happened on one or three of late. And these *debacles* always happen in the same way, if they are going to happen at all, to men whose money is mostly on paper. The paper actually becomes paper—and now even a French *gendarme* wouldn't accept as a tip most of the stuff that was once my fortune. I thought I had tried every way there was of spending money, but I had never realised that losing it was the quickest. I know now. And that's all, Iris.'

"But, my dear, it doesn't matter all that much! After all, bad-luck was never more than bad-luck seen in the Book of Job. It's inconvenient, of course—'

"It's certainly that. But, of course, all your money is quite safe and doing very well, and I'll see any creditor to hell before you dare pay him one penny of any debt of mine. I'd have you know that the best bankrupts are always very touchy about the thoroughness of their bankruptcies.... But, as you say, Iris, all that doesn't matter very much.'

"If he agreed about that, then why was he getting himself ill over it? I was going to heckle him, when he explained—and with what so far unknown deference, in him, to one's bewilderment!—that he had not been worrying about losing the money, nor so very much about the now almost certain bankruptcy: 'Although that is really so serious for me that I've got to joke about it or be as entirely silent as I have been—and will be after to-night,' he excused his levity to warn me. 'But it's actually the naked fact that these things can and have happened to oneself that has got on my nerves—which must, I suppose, be very tender nerves. Just the change of luck, you see, rather than its particular results, however serious.' ...

"But before we went upstairs he took me by the shoulder with some of his old air of authority, and warned me that he would be very disappointed if I worried over what he had told me. 'Because, after all, I didn't tell you about it because I wanted to—but simply so that you shouldn't worry so much about my health now you know that it isn't due to a weak heart or a damaged lung—only damaged luck, after all! And I may, just possibly may, find a way out of everything in the next few

weeks.'

"'With Cascan Oil?' I asked, as though it were a magic oil.

"But I didn't gather anything from his smile except that it was one of those smiles that never answer questions in the way you want them answered. 'It's certainly very good oil!' he only said.

"'And will you promise to tell me as soon as you have found your way out, as of course you will, you being you, luck or no luck?' I asked him firmly. 'And will you also promise to drop some of this air of resignation or whatever it is that has lately been growing on you? please, Roger, for although it makes you very kissable at home, I'm sure it's likely to make you quite "broke" in the great world—which doesn't care how much your wife loves you so long as it can get your money.'

"He promised to tell me—for I had fixed in my mind that as soon as he came to me with never so little brighter news I would at once snatch him away from London to some place like Tangiers, to mend his health and let the deuce take his luck, which was a plague, good or bad. And you know when he brought me news, at lunch-time two weeks later, the day before that....

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"He rang up from the City to ask me if I would be in for lunch; and it was so unusual for him to come home for lunch that I quite ran wild in putting you off, so that you developed a wonderful theory about my having found a new young man from the back row of the Russian Ballet.

"Almost the first word he said when he came in was, 'Well, that's finished.' But as he said it with almost a smile and quite undramatically I didn't expect, as I 'registered' pleasure, to be pulled up by:

"'I mean there are no more uncertainties to worry about, Iris. The rats have got at everything.'

"'Then,' I said, 'we can go away for a lovely holiday with my money. Tomorrow, for instance....' You see I never did believe much in standing on one's dignity about money and honour, for money's a messy thing anyway.

"But he was staring at me so differently, so pitifully almost, and with no smile anywhere to light his tired face, that I had to leave my holiday in the air, miserably wondering at him.

"'If it was only that kind of mess!' he said at last simply, as though I would understand by that!

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"He wouldn't talk about anything to do with it through lunch, and I had to sit there with my heart screwed up for fear of what he was going to tell me now. Oh, I loved him so as he sat almost silently facing me, his thin face set so firmly that it looked drawn on that lovely paper you find in Kelmscott books; and his eyes, those so efficient eyes, now and then playing darkly with the sun through the large window behind me.

"It was as we were leaving the table that he suddenly threw his bomb, which hasn't really yet finished exploding in me. He threw it with a sudden, quiet smile and a look over my shoulder. He threw it as though it were a marvellous joke.

"'You very thoroughly let the rats in through that window that night, didn't you, Iris?'

"And I stared at him confounded, while my fingers groped about the table for something to hold, to hold tightly.... And I suddenly saw red, a kind of blind anger tore at me to tear him:

"'Then why didn't you kick him out? Why did you let him stay on and on? I thought he was foul and that he hated you, but you knew for certain all the time—and yet you've let him stay, like a weak fool!' And I felt like screaming out my detestation of the whole atmosphere about them, the silly childish darkness of it all....

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"How shrill I must have been at that moment! But you see, all the half-conscious fears of the past months had suddenly burst true and shaken me quite beyond myself. And now I was so wildly sick to realise his lassitude—and he looking silently down from his height at me, unmoved by my anger except to that faint, irritating smile.

"'You knew he hated you, you knew he hated you,' I accused him trembling.

"'But I didn't hate *him*,' he said mildly. 'I've loved Antony, you see.'

"And then that long stifling afternoon, when he and I sat under the sunblinds of the library window and he told me from beginning to end the tale of himself and Antony. The sun in the garden to our feet, the gay and livid sunblind over our heads, and across the water the green and yellow openness of the Park—why, it was one of those afternoons that are sent to make all human and animate things seems like nonsense! And nothing in the world but Roger's clear, definite voice could have drawn so thick a line between us and its carelessness. For what he said had no contact with a day of sun, it was a tale for a winter's day with doors and windows sealed, and a bright fire to mock the shadows of the tale into dark corners.

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"He had said abruptly that he had loved Antony, as though he meant until that very moment; and now he began by explaining that it had been so ever since he could remember, and that it had grown with childhood and far beyond, this love for Antony. (And, Ronnie, you remember how, well, saturnine and rather hard Roger's face always was? Lately it had been growing softer, I thought, but now it became quite a different face altogether, almost different lines and different depths, the real face of a man you and I never knew, as we never knew of his childhood. There was nothing soft nor sentimental about the way he spoke, he was speaking of naked facts nakedly, but it was merely that the facts spoke for themselves in his voice.)

"When they were both ever so little Antony had been the favourite of the house, he was so much the impish kind of child that naturally is. And Roger had not been the least jealous, but had loved to see Antony made much of, and had spent a great part of his childish ingenuity in still further sending up his younger brother's 'stock' with nurses and parents. It had come so naturally to him to worship the pink, gay, careless little man that then was Antony—growing every year pinker and redder until he seemed just like a sunball, the loveliest child that ever a house and a dark brother were blessed with; for Roger, even then dark-haired and pale—anyway, beside that little meteor—used to despise himself very heartily, and inarticulately fumble with a theory that any one who looked as he did could come to no good in the world, whereas Antony—oh, but the world was made for Antony! God had made the world and then He had made Antony, and just thrown Roger in as his elder brother to help matters on a bit. Well, that he did, and did increasingly as childhood grew, loving to see Antony happy—who cared for nothing but his own wild enjoyments, and expected every one else to join in them; which Roger, of course, did, and nearly always bore the brunt of the results—expecting never a bit of gratitude from the young imp, and getting none, for it all seemed very natural to young Antony. But when, once in a while the chief culprit was detected and punished, then Roger couldn't bear the idea and set up such a hullabaloo that they had to deal with him as well.

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"Those were the happiest days of all, those days of early childhood, he said. No suspicions then—only games, and dark plots in dark corners, and marvellous escapades that no grown-up could ever discount by punishing. But only in those very early days. For the change came soon enough—when Roger was not more than nine, and they had their first tutor. But the change (or whatever it was, for the possibility of it must always have been in Antony else it couldn't so readily have come out) was at first so slight, and later so incomprehensible and baffling, that Roger was almost on his way to school before he could even dimly realise the cause of it.

"Soon after the tutor came, Antony had grown surly with Roger, inimical; and one day, when Roger had badly hurt his leg in climbing down a tree, had laughed with a queer satisfaction that had made Roger look at him in a shocked silence. He had been hurt by Antony's sudden repudiation of him as a comrade, had wondered how he had suddenly come to prefer his stolen games with the game-keeper's sons—but at this sudden sigh of Antony's dislike, for it could only be such that took satisfaction from his pain, he had been quite shocked in his young mind. And his sky had filled with strange and unbelievable clouds. He could only look at Antony and wonder painfully, realising very little but the monstrous fact that he was hated by some one he loved. Yes, Roger had been quite thrown off his balance by the blow from behind, and the rest of his childhood had passed like that, Antony growing to open and jeering enmity and he continuing silent, just silent....

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"And as he told me how he had borne Antony's cheek in silence, I looked at him wonderingly, for such a patience in such a boy as Roger must have been seemed, well, almost unpleasant and unmanlike. He saw what

I was thinking, and explained that it was simply because he had not known what to do, he hadn't known. He couldn't retaliate in the same spirit, because Antony's dislike formed no such parallel in him. He was at the disadvantage of loving him as before, though now it was an affection mixed with those dark clouds of wondering. His liking for Antony had never had to do with whether Antony was good or bad. In fact, as a very small child he had realised that his young brother could do strange things, and strangely, but that had never affected his admiration; those little traits went with Antony, that's all. And had so continued to 'go with him,' disturbing Roger every now and then—until, after the tutor came, he realised that those 'traits' looked to make up the whole! And that was terrible, doing away with any admiration—but after all it's a weak love that must admire what it loves; and soon Roger came to accept even that as inevitably Antony, still loving him—and waiting, don't you see, until he could find out where all this dislike came from, what all this fuss was about and why?

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"If it had only been Jacob envying Esau his birthright!" Roger exclaimed. 'But it was nothing like that, and never has been, but a much deeper and more instinctive jealousy—deep enough to make it ridiculous, but instinctive enough to make it as human as all dangerous madnnesses are. And you can imagine how instinctive, from his age when he first came by it! Then, of course, it was inarticulate and unrealised by him, but real enough to change his acceptance of me as a comrade into a dislike that grew with every month. At first he knew no more than I what it was about, but he naturally found out much sooner, and made hay with his discovery....

"I don't suppose you have ever seen it, Iris, but there is a kind of similarity between Antony and me. It's got nothing to do with body and surface, nor, as far as any one can see, with our points of view about anything. But there it is and has always been—and I can only express it by saying that the foundations of our minds must be the same; that—and can you believe it?—our real inclinations of mind are the same, or rather Antony's have always been the same as mine. There's nothing very extravagant or uncommon about that, two men *may* very easily be made that way—if Antony weren't so obviously the man he is, the child he was! But you can see the curious absurdity of such a likeness from even what you know of him—why, his very voice and face, everything about him, shout out that his inclinations are as far from mine as one man's can be from another's! And even as a child he seemed every bit as different from me, a roystering child to be a roystering man—and so you can imagine how very impossible it was for the one child to discover the secret of the other's dislike. For that dislike came from a strange jealousy, and the jealousy from that similarity—and all so confused and overlaid by every trait that can make one man different from another that the devil himself, though he had put the fantasy there, would have been hard driven to find it. And the fantasies that grip men's minds and destroy them are like mists, it is in their nature to be bodiless yet to obscure: they are like mists that come upon a field in the morning, no one knows whence, and fade no one knows whither, to come again as mysteriously in the evening. And so this jealousy had come upon my Antony—but from where, just where and why? To cloud a baby man's mind with hatred and beastly things....

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"Being that, I suppose it was quite natural for Antony's baby jealousy to date from the tutor's coming. Now, as apart from governess twaddle, we really had to work. And, do you see, Antony, who all his life has seemed a man who cared not a damn for books and learning, who even as a boy seemed more inclined to kick a book than read it, wanted to be as good as I couldn't help being at mastering things easily? He couldn't, he knew he couldn't, and that's why he kicked a book instead of reading it. That was anger not contempt; and, to fan the anger with impotence, a dim idea forming at the back of his little mind that I had been purposely brought into the world a year before him to have good time to steal all the good things of the brain that had been equally allotted to both of us; leaving him only the same foundations and nothing but impotent husk to cover it—so that he must always be the buffoon, and I—and I the one who could do well everything he wanted to! And the basis of the mind must have seemed to him to be the same, for he so *wanted* to do them, not out of rivalry because I did, but because it came naturally to him to want to. Silly and unreasonable, yes—but then so is all madness that can hurt one.

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"It wasn't only work, but everything, that fanned the idea into Antony's mind, and then kept on blowing into the flame that seems to have burnt the poor fool ever since. At least *he* might have been good at outdoor

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things, games of strength or recklessness, whereas I might have been expected to be more an "indoor" man! Since he could do nothing else that I could do, he might at least have been allowed to play games of every kind better! But even there, and at first without trying to, I could do easier and better what he could only do fairly well; though later, at school, I went out of my way to rub the thing in—it had come to that by then, you see.

"I had found my Antony out, and had my answer to him. I had plumbed a little of the confused issues of his jealousy, I knew now what a large part of his hatred was made of admiration: in fact very nearly the whole of it. And, since hate exaggerates even more than love, he exaggerated to himself what little there was to admire, making me out the devil of a fine fellow—because, you see, in admiring me he was very really admiring himself! never rid of that infernal idea that I was as he should have been, as he had a right to be—but for me! Oh, no, he never belittled me! And you've seen the deference to which he kindly treats me? Well, the idea of that—not, of course, the expression—has always been there. It makes one's head reel to think of him as never but admiring one's mentality and abilities much above their reality, and hating me all the more because of that admiration simply because it kept on creating more things to hate!

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"I remember, at school, Antony was always the first in the gallery to watch me playing a racquets match—racquets, of course, being the one game the poor man simply couldn't get at all, while I played it better than anything else. And sometimes I used to look up from the court at him, sitting with his hands at each side of his face, absorbed—in what? not the game, but only in the way I was playing it—the way *he* himself was playing it! But, ridiculous as it all was, I had grown cruel about him, and let him see that I despised him as much as he despised himself; which, you know, was very much indeed—though he would have died rather than let the world see it.

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"I had been working at my contempt for him very systematically ever since the age of about fourteen. It was my only protection against him, the only way I could prevent him from getting the better of my love for him—which was always there, mark you, for there was no doing away with that, it was as natural as the lava around a volcano. The advantage had been all with Antony until then, doing what he liked with me in the way of unpleasantness; but now that I had found this contempt (which I worked at just as a goldsmith works at a golden leaf, scratching and shaping and bending and filing it until it's every bit as lifelike as the original, but a good deal heavier), I was far and away the first string in the wretched orchestra; for Antony never did know what to do with contempt but physically smash it, and he and I have never raised a hand against each other except once—I suppose because it would have been such a trivial expression for what we felt. And so, not being able to answer it, it maddened him; but so obviously that I couldn't resist doing it again and again—until one night, at the end of my last term, I went the nagging limit, and he had to throw a bread knife at me and almost killed another man. But I dare say Ronnie has told you about that....

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"After school we saw each other once in a dozen months, if then, and only as acquaintances might in the street—and who, living in London these last fifteen years, could possibly avoid the figure of Red Antony? But step by step the thing went its same way—step by step feeding Antony's first mad idea with conviction. The wheel turned to my tune, never to his ... he who would have liked to be doing things with his brain and otherwise as I was doing them, whereas he had to be a soldier! For what else is there for a younger son with no brains and a little money to do but be a soldier or curate? And Antony believed in Heaven and Hell much too vividly ever to want to tell any one else about them....

"He simply had to go his destined way, as the noisy, red, attractive and dangerous fool that the world expected him to be, and then blamed him for thoroughly being. And all the while he must have been playing a bitter game, something like chess, with himself: moving his pieces here and there in the way he would love to do in life, and then straining his eyes across the gulf at me to see if I had done in life what he couldn't even do in a game against himself—and, I suppose, I invariably had!

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"He must have had the devil of a bad time all those years, the best years of a man's life, poor Antony. You see, he took no pleasure from the kind of life he led, but there was nothing else he could do. He made no real friends—himself an unwilling fool, despising complacent fools. I don't blame him smashing up a dinner party now and then, out of sheer, magnificent boredom.... And he had as bad luck as any man can have. Nothing ever went well with him, neither the motor he was driving nor

the horse he was backing. He couldn't, somehow, touch anything but he lost by it. He never did anything without being found out—even those quite conventional indecencies which the world generally conspires *not* to find out. He couldn't make love to a woman without being cited as a co-respondent, and then in the worst light. And even so he must have been a pretty inefficient kind of lover, for the woman invariably refused to marry him after the case—which always looks bad for the man, the world having a vague idea that a touch of "chivalry" changes mud into *foie gras*.... He couldn't even make a good and dashing rake, don't you see? Dashing enough, but always at the wrong moments—because he was weak inside, he had no heart for the things he did, but was somehow compelled to do them by bravado and helpless desperation. Vanity and bravado were the secrets of the particular mess Antony made—always terrified lest people should find out how weak and hesitating he really was, and so covering up his tracks with Heaven knows what further stupidities! Ronnie is the only man who has ever guessed that pathetic part about him, and that's how, I suppose, he has managed to keep some sympathy for him for such an amazing long time.

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"Even there, about luck, the thing went the way of his mad idea about our minds. Maybe he worked himself up into thinking that "luck," a kind of smoke hanging in the air, fell on a man according to the turn of his mind (which is no sillier nor more sensible than the eminent theory about mixing cocktails after death, don't you think?). And the blessed smoke had fallen on me, while he had been done out of it! His mind turned to gambling as mine did, but he couldn't gamble well, couldn't even lose his money without his temper, and then threw after it what name he had left. He lost every penny he had between horses and cards—while, as you know, Iris, I made almost enough from both to further the land-owning ambitions of every communist in the fullest Albert Hall.

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"Yes, it certainly must have been a wretched time for him, the most wretched of a wretched life. Without even the consolation of thinking he'd had a good time for his loss of name and money, for no man ever knew himself better than Antony—nor ever concealed that knowledge more stupidly! Nothing left for him, nothing to do, nothing he could do! and still a very young man, and better looking than most. If he had only allowed the world to pity him he might still have made something of himself, but even if he had tried he couldn't have looked an atom as sorry for himself as he really was.... He had flashes, streaks of genius almost, about ways of making money, but not one bit of ability or concentration to make anything of them. His own incompetence hitting him hard, always hard, and always below the belt—poor Antony!... I heard of him sometimes as penniless, but still immaculate, and having even to bully his Turkish bath on credit. What use, after all, to look and sound like Antony and not get credit from even a Scotch tobacconist! In fact the only job he could have done at all well would have been to be paid for persuading other men's tailors into adding more suits to long bills—but I've never heard of any one daring to offer it to him.

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"I don't think he could have lived through that conscious welter of helplessness and despair but for something to hold him together. What, simply what, was there for him to live for? And even with that "something to hold him together" there was very little, but still it was a spirit of sorts, and vital enough—that dear old hatred for me! Just that, nothing else. Unbelievable or not, I'm sure that Antony, big and hefty though he is, would have wilted and faded away but for that emotion that kept him bound together. Two big men, and arrogant enough, the one's health resting on his luck, and the other's on his hatred of it!...

"But he couldn't do anything about his one real emotion. There was nothing to do about it, it wasn't that sort. Just an inevitable endless thing, leading nowhere but on forever: a part of the man himself, and the only consistent part—but, of its very nature, with no possible outlet of any possible advantage to himself. He hadn't the faintest desire to kill me, to get my money and be a baronet, or any stuff of that kind—in fact, Antony heartily despised any one being a baronet without the battlements, the men-at-arms, and the serving wenches to be a proper baronet with. None of your modern Pink Peerages for Preposterous People about Antony! In that sort of thing he was a man after G. K. Chesterton's heart, all noise and muscle and an appetite adequate to deal with a keg of rum and a round of cheese—and the whole lovely simplicity of it all run wild and sour in him because of this plaguy madness about me!

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"Perhaps you, and Ronnie too, have thought sometimes that I was rather a beast to and about him—as indeed I was, but not so much a one as I

seemed. As the contrast deepened, it became more than ever unpleasant, as it naturally is unpleasant for the one to be rich and successful and the other everything that isn't. But what could I do—without Antony sending me to blazes for trying to! Which he did once, as I'll tell you.... And all the time I couldn't help a grim sense of laughter when I thought about him, I simply couldn't help a comic view of us both. I still kept my contempt for him intact, in case I might need it again—but, as a fact, I simply did not want to see him at that time. He would have been a serious interruption, he would have got in the way of my life—and without any benefit to either of us. But not a trace of dislike did I have for him—the reverse, I couldn't think of Antony but with that consistent fondness. That early childhood had somehow written deep, ever so deep, and there was no getting away from what it had written. One plain word, "comrade" ... two very little boys who had been "comrades." And neither one nor the other had found another comrade since, not the glint or the glimmer of one. Life had passed and left childhood, mine anyway, on a magic pinnacle! never climbed since, maybe only climbed then by marvellous illusion—but climbed unforgettably it had been. And I could only think of Antony like that, what he felt for me could not make the slightest difference to that. And sometimes, you know, one longed for a comrade.... If I had thought for one moment that he could feel a tithe of that for me I would have held out both my hands to him. But I was necessary to him in a different way, I knew it was no use trying to do anything. I only tried once—just before I met you.

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"One morning I saw him in Jermyn Street as he was turning into the Cavendish. On an impulse, a very sudden one, I called out his name, so that he swung round full at me, not in the least surprised. "If you go shouting *my* name about Jermyn Street like that the police'll have you for making indecent noises. Now, if it was yours—" But I was in no mood for that stuff, and in a hurry, too.

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"Look here, Antony, if a £1000 a year is any good to you, you can have it and welcome,' I said quickly. There wasn't time for tact—and he stared at me, with all the bluff dying out of his eyes, and a queer twisted little smile.

"That's very nice of you, old man, but—' he was saying—just keeping time until he could think what to say; and then, finding it, he tapped me suddenly on the shoulder. 'But I'll tell you what, Roger. When I want it I'll come for it—and between us we'll make hay with the whole lot. Now what could be fairer than that?' And, of course out came that same old laugh he tacked on to everything he said, rattling the passing taxis' windows and making people stare to see two top-hats pretty high from the ground shaking with laughter at each other; for I couldn't help but laugh after the long time since I had seen him, he seemed so monstrously comical....

"And that was the last time I saw Antony until that night you and a draught let him into the house. But how were you to know, Iris dear? How were you to know when you married me that you were the last straw to his wretched fire, that the very fact of you so neatly fitted the last bit of coloured glass into the kaleidoscope of Poole Bros.? and that by letting him in that night, you and Sir Nigel between you, you gave him the kerosene with which to make a really efficient bonfire?...

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"Yes, loving you was certainly the last straw, Iris. And, you know, he did love you! He has told me about it since, as it's a dead thing—dead simply because Antony isn't made to love any one who can't love him. But when he met you, and hung about the street until he saw you enter Ronnie's flat—then he did love you, as he had never loved in his life, nor as he had ever thought to be able to love. If I was his first passion, you were his second and last, this hate and this love. And the passion he felt for you—maybe you would have been frightened to know of it, Iris, for Antony's were strong words—carried him quite away for those few months. There's nothing of the *femme fatale* about you, but you've certainly got a wonderful talent for obsessing men, making them want to clutch at you with mind and body—Roger, Antony, Ronnie, and I wonder who else! And from the moment Antony met you to the moment you told him you were engaged to me he was absorbed in his passion for you—for the first time he looked to be forgetting about me, was forgetting about me. If you had loved him, Iris, he would have left me quite alone, from that time on. But between his luck and himself and you and me—he lost again. And God knows what rotten furies were added to him from that moment, always a bad loser! He had passionately longed for so many things, and passionately lost so many—and, at last, you! To him, you were his woman.... Maybe he thought he could have won you but for me; and

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maybe he was right, but I don't think so, for Antony was made to capture only the surface of a woman's fancy.

"But you mustn't think that he bore the least bit of resentment against you. Oh, no, you didn't come into it after that. You were just an added inch to the height of the barricade between him and happiness. But as for me.... And, do you know, so consistent was the admiration part of his hatred that he admired my being loved, or so he thought, by you! And the only letter I've ever received from Antony is one of congratulation on being engaged to such a marvellous woman. He wrote that from Mexico.

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"If you had seemed the "ultimate island" of his bad luck, the finding of that wretched oil-spring was the penultimate. And his luck seemed to have turned, too, since he set foot in America; a few months in Texas had filled his pockets with dollars—actually won at poker! And if a man is slippery enough to win money from such a crew of toughs, and at their own game, then his luck must have turned indeed! And then, with another man, a down-at-heel engineer who was almost his servant—Antony could always find a servant but never a master, and that was his trouble—he had set out in the good old way, prospecting for a fortune in Mexico, rebellions or no rebellions. And actually found it—the oil! And how he must have thrown a mighty chest, thinking that now he would show the world and Roger of what stuff Red Antony was made.... But the only stuff that was proven was that of his luck and his oil. For as I told you, Iris, it was very good oil, but there was not much of it. And the rest, the oil that might have been, the oil that would have made Antony's millions and restored him his self-respect, had to go the way of his other failures, to add one more corpse to the shambles of who knows how many failures.

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"And then came the idea of how, after all, he could use that oil! It came from a profound despair, from a realisation that, do what he would, he could do nothing well in this world. And realising that, he came to want nothing, success and happiness or any coveted thing was too far beyond his reach. But there was one thing, anyway, that would give him a little more rest after its accomplishment, and which just might be within his reach; for the first time, in Mexico, he finally realised that if he was to live he must do something about his obsession, the very root of his discontent. He must somehow prick and burst it, so that he could live more smoothly. And how better flatten the thing out than by bringing my house and goods down on my head?...

"If a man can come by such an intention at all amiably, so Antony must have done. There was none of your melodramatic stuff about it. It merely seemed to him a clear fact that my success was pitted against his peace of mind, that we must row in the same boat or he would drown too wretchedly. He wanted now nothing from me, neither money nor influence; but, in that last year in Mexico, he very definitely made up his mind that I should have as little of either as ever he had had. So with that in his mind, and armed with his plans and his tame engineer, he came to England. And whether you had let him in or not he would have got into the house. Even Antony wasn't always to be baulked, you know. And especially in his last venture of all.' ...

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"But since you knew him so well, you must have known what he was about from the first moment,' I broke in; and, Ronnie, it was a dangerous protest, for his last few words about Antony's 'inevitability' had brought my anger against him back again. It was my love in arms against some treachery he had licenced—and even the way he looked at me, his eyes dark with pain, didn't soften the silence with which I awaited the explanation that he must make. And a helpless gesture of his hand, the very manner of his explaining, showed that he knew now, now, that no explanation could be good enough, however fully he had once accepted it; that now, and just lately, there had happened something between us that discounted all previous acquiescences to 'inevitability.' ... And he spoke now without a trace of that rather grim fantasy with which he always chose to obscure his most serious moods.

"Don't you realise Iris, that the man who stopped Antony in Jermyn Street, the man you married, was very different to the man who played host to Antony's tomfoolery on that Nigel Poole night? with you sitting there at the table, and indifference the only apparent fact about your face except its loveliness. Didn't you realise at all that I had changed, and very much? But then how silly to ask that, for you and I never talked of such things, if we talked at all.

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"In those two years my whole view of life, my ambitions, and I once had so very many! had gone awry. Or rather, they had withered, got sour, don't you see? Of all Antony's many follies his greatest was ever to envy

me my success—for the penalty of that success went with the very nature of the man who succeeded. Iris, I had to realise I was a bad winner long before I realised I was a bad loser.... I was just about realising it when I fell in love with you. And that pulled me up, indeed it did. Love for you created something worth while winning, worth succeeding about.... I'm trying to tell you that everything had been too easy for me all my life. I suppose one was always just a little rotten with sophistication, and so, as one played and won every throw, the winnings seemed so little worth while—until you came! My dear, I thought I'd have to fight for you—and you so worth fighting for, you with those mysterious cornstalks in place of hair! I didn't tell myself that I wanted to fight for you, but I must have had it at the back of my mind—for I was so disappointed, angry, when I found that I hadn't to fight, that you were as easy to win as everything else. Iris, that was terrible of you, why did you fall so easily and quickly? Why didn't you pull me up, why didn't you resist at all, at all?... I loved you, never any one nor anything more than you. And so much that I simply couldn't believe that any one I wanted so passionately could so easily give herself! The gift seemed to grow less in such giving, I couldn't believe but in the surface of the thing. If I hadn't loved you so much, my dear, I would have been very well satisfied with your love, and we would never have had those first wretched months, leading to so many more. You'll say it was my perversity that caused it all, and of course it was. But how can I ever make you believe that that perversity of scepticism and other beastliness were born of nothing but love for you, of wanting you always and always? And that being built so ungenerously, I couldn't believe but that your love was a shallow thing, just another of those gilt "prizes" that had so often been handed to one for being a "clever boy." I didn't want to be a "clever boy," I wanted to be a real one, to be allowed to play a splendid game with a splendid playmate and the devil take the truffles. And you gave me admiration! Why, damme, you almost glowered at me with admiration—and, my sweet, how terribly articulate you sometimes were with it, weren't you?

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"There have been found grown-up men to say that love can change a man's nature, whereas, as you and I know, it can only intensify his traits, sometimes the good and sometimes the bad. And, Iris, somehow, somehow, in spite of all the lovely things about you, you intensified the bad.... Oh yes, I know, I knew then, how stupid and cruel I was, but I seemed to be goaded to it. Bitter little knives, weren't they? I couldn't believe in your love, and it irritated me when I egged you on to plead it—and then it irritated me when I found I couldn't egg you on any more, when there was no making you say that you loved me. And all the time I loving you, wanting you always to be there but always. Never leaving the thing alone, full of fear that I might lose grip of it.... I'm not trying to find any excuse for my caddishness, for there isn't any, since it's easier for a murderer than for a cad to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.... And then, at last, my scepticism seemed to be justified, or rather it had justified itself. For as you became indifferent—and how indifferent you can look, Iris!—I thought to myself that of course you had never loved me, except as the "clever boy" and weren't now loving even that since you had found him out to be a bad boy as well. The most grotesque perversities can be justified if one looks crookedly enough, and so I justified the indifference I had forced on you as indecently as I had wrecked your love. And so, too, when the time came, I justified Antony.

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"You remember how nasty I was when you first said something about him wanting to make friends with me again? That was the first I had heard of his return, but with no surprise. And I was angry with you only because it seemed, suddenly, very distasteful that you should be mixed up with Antony and myself—you seemed so cold and unsympathetic that I was sure you would never care to understand the thing. But as for Antony, I really wanted to see him. And he conceived the plot, you know, to save his baby pride and vanity rather than as a means of forcing himself on to me, about which he knew there could be no real difficulty. My mind had turned to him, often, particularly since that new bitterness about you. And how far from each other you and I were, weren't we? And so I had gradually come to let Antony into my thoughts again, to want him with me. My life, it seemed to me, had not been complete without him. I didn't care whether he hated me or not, my life had been incomplete without him, he was my comrade. The world seemed to have rushed by us both and left us stranded together, as we had once been. And so I was very ready for him when he so aptly appeared that night....

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"You didn't notice, but I was looking more at you than at him when he came in through that window. I didn't doubt what he had come for, you see—those "hay-making" words so long ago.... And as I looked at you,

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your face closed, a sphinx whose only secret was indifference, I suddenly thought, "Well, we will, indeed we will!" With a vicious kind of gaiety.... Oh don't you see, in the state I was in you seemed to have justified me! You were the only person I could put beside Antony, and ever so much higher with only a real smile from you to unscrew me—but you didn't care at all, at all! A queen who didn't care enough about her kingdom even to try to rule it....

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"There's no good, Iris, in indulging any creepy feelings about Antony having come to turn my luck, by force of evil or any other such stuff. No black magic about Antony—his magic was never but schoolboy red, at its worst. And, anyway, my luck had begun to turn before I saw him; I knew it was turning because I seemed to have lost some of my confidence, I wasn't so sure of my insight. I felt worn thin, you know, like a coin kept too long in circulation.... But what Antony did do was to help matters along. His very presence helped me to let things rip, and how wildly! With luck going from bad to worse, and not the devil of a win anywhere. And good money rushing away after bad, running hell-for-leather after it, money thrown wildly to win back what had been lost wildly, like any amateur.... And Antony all the while chuckling at my elbow, as I'd sign away some more on a jumpy market. Not that I minded his chuckling! I rather liked it, in fact. I was very interested in his consistency, never before having been really face to face with this blessed obsession of his; and found myself enjoying the simplicity of it, the simplicity of this thing that had clouded his whole life, and mine too! A marvellous and deferential hatred I found it, with a large, full-blooded malice about it that was as different from the petty malice in ordinary circulation as a sabre from a paper-knife; bitter enough, of course, when in self-defence you dammed it up, but once you let it have its run a very genial and naïve part of him; and certainly the most reliable.... It was as though we were children again, and I paying for his escapades while he grinned impishly and admiringly from a corner.

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"But as we pegged away at our foolishness in the City, every bit as seriously as though we were actually making money, I kept on thinking of you. In spite of Antony and my interest in him, you came into my mind more and more. I thought and wondered about you. And I realised that I knew no more of you than if you had been a strange, beautiful woman whom I had met and loved in a lane, and who had passed me by and away with a quivering, careless look. I knew you so little that I wondered what you would think when the crash came, as I saw that it must come, probably sooner than later. I had often wondered before why you had not asked me to give you your freedom, but now I would offer it to you, and you couldn't but take it. Maybe you would marry Ronnie, I thought. And I would take Antony away with me, perhaps to the South Seas.... You see, dear, Antony seemed inevitable in my life, fatally inevitable, while I have never been able to think of you as that, but as something outside my life that I always longed to bring into it. But I had thrown away that hope.

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"I told you, didn't I, that I hadn't reckoned what a bad loser I fundamentally was until I had lost? Well, I hadn't reckoned with the deuce it would play with my health. But, my darling, if I'm grateful to anything in this world it's for that weakness, for it has given me a vision of you, it has given me the "you" that I am talking to now. As I lost all my confidence, everything about me that I had treasured, all those baubles of my luck, I seemed to feel a cloud settling about my head—and I could see you more clearly through that cloud than ever I had through daylight. You grew vivid, touchable, more than ever Iris. At last, I saw you, and I knew—oh, I knew so much that I hadn't known! And since then, Iris, I've tried, I have tried so hard, but it was too late. I hadn't dreamt of the depths of Antony's consistency...."

"It was curious, Ronnie, how he seemed to bring my temper round in a circle to that same stiffening point against him. He seemed always to end on that angering weakness, resignedly implying some hurt to us both. But I didn't understand what he meant by his 'too late,' he had said it so inconsequently. His eyes never left my face, I knew he wanted to touch me, wanted me to go to him, that very moment—but my back was stiff against him, I could not move nor speak until I had heard about this new terror to our love, that had suffered so many.

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"That oil,' he explained hurriedly, and with a sudden harshness. 'I told you that Antony had worked out an idea how to use it, didn't I? And a damned cunning swindle Cascan Oil was, as efficient a bubble as ever swindled money out of the public. Antony and that engineer got their own back on that oil right enough. And it took me in at first—me, of all people! For, when I said I didn't mind helping Antony let things rip, I

didn't mean to let him drag my name through the mud. But *he* did. And when I found the thing was a barefaced swindle, with just a plausible crust over it, and that it was only an amazing kind of chance that had so far hidden it—my good-luck again, you see, just the swan-song of it, for bubbles aren't so easy to blow as they were—it was too late for me to get out. I had to go on and try to mend it. My name was tacked on to most of the papers.... I think I must have been mad during those first few months after Antony's return not to have enquired more closely—and mad not to have realised the depths of his madness! But I had never dreamed that he wanted to bring my part of the name down even lower than his! I found it out about six weeks ago. Just about the same time that I found you out, Iris, that I found out you did love me—you do, don't you? I can't tell you any more than you can guess about those two realisations, angel and bogey to happen at the same time! But what was the use of cursing Antony? I ought to have known about him. My fault for being a fool, rather than his for being so insanely consistent. And if it hadn't been for you, for what you suddenly meant, I wouldn't have kicked so much, for there's always one way out of these things. But I did kick—Iris, I've worked in the last month as I never thought to work, to try and raise the money to pay off the holders, to stave off the certain discovery or make it better when discovered. That was "the way out" I told you about, you remember?... And I came home to lunch to-day to tell you that I've done all I could—and that now there's nothing but a miracle between me and the police.'

"I haven't any memory left for what I actually said or did then, Ronnie. And I've read somewhere that despair keeps no diary. He threw those last words at me, just threw them, as though he was past caring how brutally he got rid of them—and, at the end of the fuse he had been lighting all the afternoon, they simply burnt up my nerves. I was hysterical, perhaps.... Anyway, the very next moment we seemed to be standing together, weirdly almost fighting; but it was only that he had me by the shoulder, very close to him, shaking me a little. And I staring blindly at him, and he trembling with a feverish impatience.

"For God's sake don't go on about it, Iris, else I won't be able to bear it at all. I wish I hadn't told you now—but, my dear, I had to tell you, I had to tell you the whole thing. No one but you matters in my life—and I had to tell you why I can't matter in yours any more. Antony's got what he never dreamed to get, he's got me to hate him at last.... Oh, but that's just nonsense. He doesn't matter any more, he might be dead or alive for all I care. Nothing matters but you....'

"I think I said something about our having to run away, quickly. I must have repeated that several times, for he was staring down at me so thoughtfully that he seemed already to have run away, a thousand miles away.

"Yes,' he said, but ever so vaguely, 'we might do that. There'll be no cry for two or three days. Longer perhaps, if I can arrange things. Yes, we might run for it. I'll see.... But there will be no happiness for us now, Iris. I know.'

"But if a God had prophesied so I couldn't have believed him. All the terrors and bogeys he had called up, they faded to nothing before the sudden, active hope that he and I might be allowed to love, anywhere, what matter where.... Oh, there was no romance about it! There's seldom a moment, an ice-clear moment, when a man or woman can put one passion against the whole world, and then forget even that the world is there in contrast. That was my moment, a splendid devouring one, and never to come again. Crime, swindling?... dim silly words, beside my lust for him. I wanted him, he was my man. And I told him that no police in this world would beat my devilish cunning—and he suddenly let go of me, and roared with laughter, as though he would die unless he could laugh.

"You're splendid, Iris' he said, still laughing. 'You would change a respectable swindler into such an awful criminal that no police in this world would dare try to arrest him.' And then he came very humbly to me, and said that until a few weeks ago he had not dreamt I had a heart, but now he had found even more, that it was a flag of loyalty. But he added suddenly:

"I must tell Antony that, to make him realise what he has made me lose.' He seemed so queerly to bring his mind back to Antony, for all his 'not mattering' any more. And I showed my impatience, begging him to forget the wretched man.

"I do,' he said, 'but he comes back every now and then. You see, the fool

was so obsessed about me that he quite forgot what part you had in my life. And so he has hurt me much more than he ever dreamed he could hurt me. I must make him understand that....'

"Curiously enough, or not, I hadn't now any wild passion of resentment against Antony. Roger's way of explaining him seemed to have coloured my view of him; something of that 'inevitability' I suppose, somehow made me think of him more as an evil circumstance than as an evil man. But I did not want to see him that night, in fact my head was aching so that I was fit only for bed; and when I asked Roger if he intended to let him stay on, he shrugged his shoulders and said:

"'We will be leaving him behind us soon enough.'

"I suppose it's true that no one is ever made to suffer more than he or she can bear—but self-pity is a goading kind of master, isn't it? And those long evening hours in my bedroom that night were terrible, fighting with a splitting head and heart, and being so beaten and bruised by both that I began to feel mean and whipped, like an offender punished for some offence. But, my God, what and against whom!... Until, after a long century, I heard Roger enter his room. And I crept in after him....

"I made a fuss on the telephone about your having to come to see me the next afternoon, you remember? I insisted that you must, whether you had work to do or not, for I couldn't bear to face that long empty afternoon alone until Roger came back from the City.

"But the day had begun almost happily, for I had woken up with Roger's voice in my mind, a voice pressed so closely to me: promising me that he wouldn't give up and let things go, saying that he had learnt an old lesson about fatality, how there was no fatality but that of a man's choosing. The trouble had been that he hadn't known what to choose until too late.... And he had promised that if the worst came we would go away as far as love and the sea could take us, 'and that is ever so far westwards past Cleopatra's Needle.' And he had said: 'They will probably let me get clean away. There's some one who will let me know, anyway....' He said these things to comfort me, but the worst fear of all was the sudden one that the mind behind those dark mocking eyes might persuade him to—poor dear, I kept him long at his promising that he would not do anything against himself. Though it was not really difficult to believe him, for Roger always made so very few promises simply because he never broke one.

"He and Antony, whom I didn't see, had left earlier than usual for the City: to clear up many last things, he said. And the day grew heavier with every minute, until I simply had to have you come and help me wait, or go mad. How sweet you were to me that afternoon, Ronnie, and how much excuse you had to be impatient. But I couldn't give you a glimpse of what it was all about, how could I? For Roger had made me promise not to tell even you a word.... It must have been wretched for you, to sit about and be made nervous by my nerves, and to feel the heaviness of the trouble in the air without knowing anything of what it was all about. And those endless games of *picquet* we played, and your resigned expression when I kept on forgetting whose was the *major* hand!... Until at last we heard them come in, and I insisted on your staying for dinner, very cruelly, for it was so obvious that you would much rather not; but I wanted you to stay, you were mine and Roger's friend, and you might help. Just a vague idea that you might help, I didn't know how or what about....

"When they came in I saw that Roger was glad you had been with me and were staying to dinner. Maybe he thought you might make things go easier, for it looked to be a rather difficult dinner, just Antony, he and I. And Antony looked so glum and silent, like a tired red boy, so that I wondered if Roger had cleared things up with him too. But the dinner wasn't difficult, not difficult enough, was it?" ...

To tell the plain truth I found myself thoroughly enjoying it—a pleasant contrast to my last dinner there, when I had so resented the brothers' coldness. And, anyway, I'm afraid I was too busy recovering from my rather jumpy few hours with Iris, who communicated a mood as you or I would a piece of news, to notice much besides the fact that though Antony was more silent than usual, we three men had at a step got back to our old easy friendship.

It was close on ten o'clock when Howard came in to tell his master that he was wanted on the telephone,—which was in the adjoining room, the library, opened to the one we were in through a folding door. Roger

looked a little surprised, I thought, but got up quickly; and at a glance from him, a sort of lifted-eyebrow glance, Antony followed, leaving the door slightly ajar behind them.

From where we sat at the table we could only hear but not see Roger at the telephone, which was on the writing table just within the library door. But it seemed to be a very short call, for we only heard him say the few bare words: "Yes—right you are! Of course, yes.... Thanks very much, Carter"; and then click down the receiver. Then an unforgettable voice, strangled with laughter and venom:

"I told you days ago to burn those concession papers, and you swore you already had—and now Carter tells me that the police have just been to the office, as we knew they must, and found every blessed one of 'em in the top drawer of my desk—which was *unlocked*. O Antony! O you poor husk of a man, you graveyard of a broker—what a lot of pleasure you've had from me, haven't you? And all I can think of as a nice little epitaph for you is *Dolor ira*—but what could be fairer than that, Antony?" ...

A wild rush took me to the door, even as the house shrieked with Roger's "grief and anger." I stood dazed as I burst it wide—to see through the smoke a huge figure facing me from the corner by the window, swaying idiotically to and fro with the eyes of a thrashed child—and at the table beside me Roger, his head fallen sideways against the over-turned telephone and the smoke from the thing in his hand hanging dreadfully about him. I didn't look at the weight I suddenly felt against my shoulder, I just put out my arm to hold Iris, for I was staring at Antony. He had not seemed to see us until this moment—and now his eyes were trying to tell Iris something, they were livid with what he was trying to tell her—his eyes were accusing her!

"He didn't, I tell you," he shouted at her. "He didn't break his promise. He wanted to kill me, you see, but—he...."

His tongue fumbled with his lips for words—which never came, for with a wild backward wave of his arm as though to wipe three figures for ever from his mind, he swung round and strode heavily out through the open window. And whether or not Sir Antony, under a less conspicuous name, died in some obscure corner of the war that befell a few months later I have never heard for quite certain, and now never will. But Iris and I have sometimes preferred to think that he has met the only death that could at all have satisfied the tortured vanity of the helpless braggart.

THE END

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Transcriber's Note.

Variable spelling and hyphenation have been retained. Minor punctuation inconsistencies have been silently repaired.

Corrections.

The first line indicates the original, the second the correction.

p. 46:

'Helas! Je sais un chant d'amour,
'Hélas! Je sais un chant d'amour,

p. 92:

Thursday as ever is, Howward!
Thursday as ever is, Howard!

p. 184:

rather appal one
rather appall one

p. 243:

the world is agen him
the world is against him

p. [287](#):

"That oil,' he explained hurriedly
"That oil,' he explained hurriedly

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ROMANTIC LADY

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