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Author: Harold Frederic

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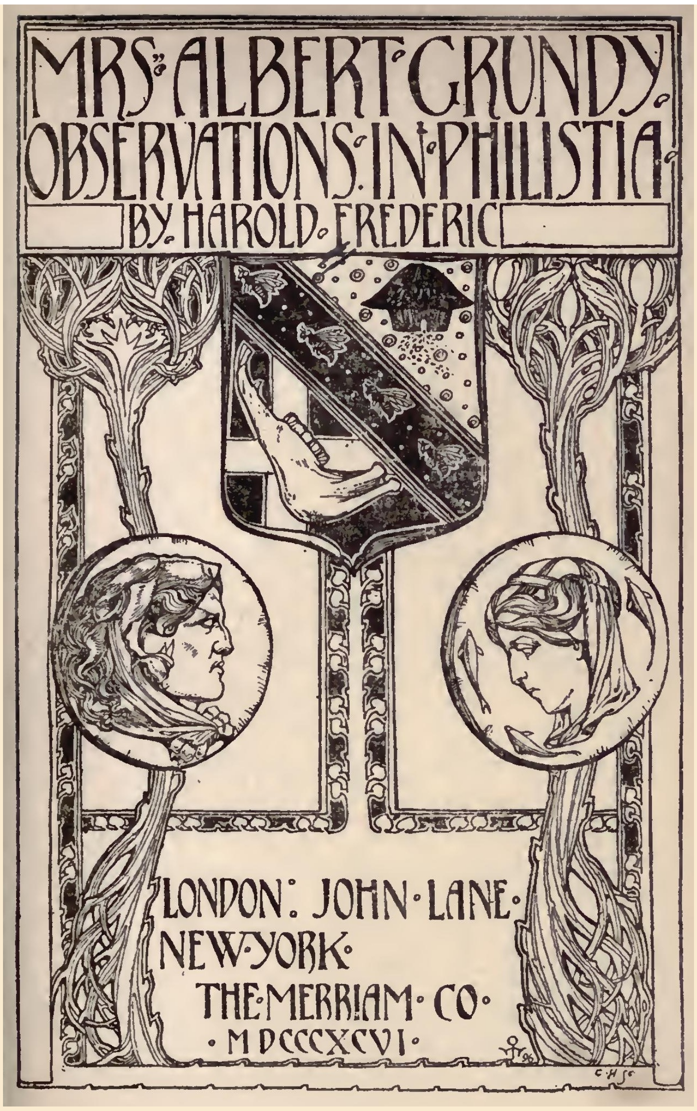
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MRS ALBERT GRUNDY—OBSERVATIONS IN PHILISTIA ***

MRS ALBERT GRUNDY—OBSERVATIONS IN PHILISTIA

By Harold Frederic



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Presenting in Outline the Comfortable and Well-Regulated Paradox over which She Presides, and showing its Mental Elevation

I suppose about the name there is no doubt. For sixty years we have followed that gifted gadabout and gossip, Heine, and called it Philistia. And yet, when one thinks of it, there may have been a mistake after all. Artemus Ward used to say that he had been able, with effort, to comprehend how it was possible to measure the distance between the stars, and even the dimensions and candle-power, so to speak, of those heavenly bodies; what beat him was how astronomers had ever found out their names. So I find myself wondering whether Philistia really is the right name for the land where She must be obeyed.

If so, it is only a little more the region of mysterious paradox and tricksy metamorphosis. We think of it always and from all time as given over to Her rule. We feel in our bones that there was a troglodyte Mrs Grundy; we imagine to ourselves a British matron contemporary with the cave bear and the woolly elephant But her very antiquity only makes it more puzzling.

There is an old gentleman who always tries to prove to me that the French are really Germans, that the Germans are all Slavs, and that the Russians are strictly Tartars: that is to say, that in keeping-count of the early races as they swarmed Westward we somehow skipped one, and have been wrong ever since. There must be some such explanation of how the domain which She sways came to be called Philistia.

I say this, because the old Philistia was tremendously masculine. It was the Jews who struck the feminine note. They used to swagger no end when they won a victory, and utilise it to the utmost limit of merciless savagery; but when it came their turn to be thrashed they filled the very heavens with complaining clamour. We got no hint that the Philistines ever failed to take their medicine like men.

Consider those splendid later Philistines, the Norsemen. In all their martial literature there is no suggestion of a whine. They loved fighting for its own sake; next to braining their foes, they admired being themselves hewn into sections. They never blamed their gods when they had the worst of it. They never insisted that they were always right and their enemies invariably wrong. They cared nothing about all that. They demanded only fun. It was their victims, the Frankish and Irish monks, who shed women’s tears and besought Providence to play favourites.

And here is the paradox. The children of these Berserker loins are become the minions of Mrs Grundy. By some magic she has enshrined Respectability in their temples. In one division of her empire she makes Mr Helmer drink tea; in another she sets everybody reading the *Buchholz Family*; in her chosen island home her husband on the sunniest Sundays carries an umbrella instead of a walking-stick. Fancy the wild delirium of delight with which the old Philistines would have raided her homestead, chopping down her Robert Elsmeres, impaling her Horsleys, and making the skies lurid with the flames of her semi-detached villa! Yet we call her place Philistia!

I know the villa very well. It is quite near to the South Kensington Museum. The title “Fernbank” is painted on the gate-posts. How well-ordered and comfortable does life beyond those posts remain! Here are no headaches in the morning. Here white-capped domestics move with neat alertness along the avenues of gentle routine, looking neither to the policeman on the right nor fiery-jacketed Thomas Atkins on the left. Here my friend Mr Albert Grundy invariably comes home by the Underground to dinner. Here his three daughters—girls of a type with a diminishing upper lip, with sharper chins and greater length of limb than of old—lead deeply washed existences, playing at tennis, smiling in flushed silence at visitors, feeding contentedly upon Mudie’s stores, the while their mamma spreads the matrimonial net about the piano or makes tours of inspection among her outlying mantraps on the lawn. Here simpers the innocuous curate; here Uncle Dudley, who has seen life in Australia and the Far West, watches the bulbs and prunes the roses, and, I should think, yawns often to himself; here Lady Willoughby Wallaby’s card diffuses refinement from the summit of the card-basket in the hall.

To this happy home there came but last week—or was it the week before—a parcel of books. There were four complete novels in twelve volumes—fruits of that thoughtful arrangement by which the fair reader in Philistia is given three distinct opportunities to decide whether she will read the story through or not. Mrs Albert is a busy woman, burdened with manifold responsibilities to Church and State, to organised charities, to popularised music, to art-work guilds and the Amalgamated Association of Clear Starchers, not to mention a weather-eye kept at all times upon all unmarried males: but she still finds time to open all these packets of new books herself. On this occasion she gave to her eldest, Ermyntrude, the first volume of a novel by Mrs ————. It doesn't matter what fell to the share of the younger Amy and Floribel. For herself she reserved the three volumes of the latest work of Mr ————.

She tells me now that words simply can *not* express her thankfulness for having done so. It seems the selection was not entirely accidental. She was attracted, she admits, by the charmingly dainty binding of the volumes, but she was also moved by an instinct, half maternal prescience, half literary recollection. She thought she remembered having seen the name of this man-writer before. Where? It came to her like a flash, she says. Only a while ago he had a hook called *A Bunch of Patrician Ladies* or something of that sort, which she almost made up her mind not to let the girls read at all, but at last, with some misgivings, permitted them to skim hastily, because though the morals were rocky—perhaps that wasn't her word—the society was very good. But this new book of his had not even that saving feature. Respectable people were only incidentally mentioned in it. Really it was quite *too* low. The chief figure was a farm-girl who for the most part skimmed milk or cut swedes in a field, and at other times behaved in a manner positively unmentionable. Mrs Albert told me she had locked the volumes up, after only partially perusing them. I might be sure *her* daughters never laid eyes on them. They had gone back to the library, with a note expressing surprise that such immoral books should be sent into any Christian family. What made the matter worse, she went on, was that Ermyntrude read in some paper, at a friend's house, that this man, whoever he may be, was the greatest of English novelists, and that this particular book of his was a tragic work of the noblest and loftiest order, which dignified the language. She was sure she didn't know what England was coming to, when reporters were allowed to put things like that in the papers. Fortunately she only took in *The Daily Tarradiddle*, which one could always rely upon for sound views, and which gave this unspeakable book precisely the contemptuous little notice it deserved.

It was a relief, however—and here the good matron visibly brightened up—to think that really wholesome and improving novels were still produced. There was that novel by Mrs ————. Had I read it? Oh,

I must lose no time! Perhaps it was not altogether so enchanting as that first immortal work of hers, which had almost, one might say, founded a new religion. True, one of the girls in it worked altar-cloths for a church, and occasionally the other characters broke out into religious conversation; but there were no clergymen to speak of, and the charm of the other's ecclesiastical mysticism was lacking. "To be frank, the first and last volumes were just a bit slow. But oh! the lovely second volume! A young Englishman and his sister go to Paris. They stumble right at the start into the most delightful, picturesque, artistic set. Think of it: Henri Régnault is personally introduced, and delivers himself of extended remarks——"

"I met an old friend of Regnault's at the Club the other day," I interposed, "who complained bitterly of that. He said it was insufferable impudence to bring him in at all, and still worse to make him talk such blather as is put into his mouth."

Mrs Albert sniffed at this Club friend and went on. That Paris part of the book seemed to her to just palpitate with life. It was Paris to the very letter—gay, intellectual, sparkling, and oh! so free! The young Englishman at once set up a romantic establishment in the heart of Fontainebleau Forest with a French painter-girl. His sister was almost as promptly debauched by an elderly French sculptor. But you never lost sight of the fact that the author was teaching a valuable moral lesson by all this. Indeed, that whole part of the book was called "Storm and Stress." And all the while you saw, too, how innately superior the national character of the young Englishman was to that of the French people about him. One *knew* that in good time *he* would have a moral awakening, and return to England, marry, settle down, and make money in his business. Side by side with this you saw the entire hopelessness of any spiritual regeneration in the French painter-girl or any of her artistic set. And this was shown with such delicate art—it was so *perfect* a picture of the moral contrast between the two nations—that the girls saw it at once.

"Then the girls," I put in—"that is to say, you didn't lock *this* book up?"

Mrs Albert lifted her eyebrows at me.

"How do you mean?" she asked. "Do you know who the author is? The idea! Why, the papers print whole columns about *anything* she writes. Every day you may see paragraphs about the mere prospect of books she hasn't even begun yet. I suppose such blatant publicity must be very distressing to her, but the public simply insist upon it. *The Daily Tarradiddle* devoted an entire leader to this particular book. I assure you, all my friends are talking of nothing else—many of them people, too, whom you would not suspect of any literary tastes whatever, and who *never* read novels as a rule. But they don't regard *this* as a novel. They think of it—I quote Lady Willoughby Wallaby's exact words—as an exposition of those Christian principles which make our England what it is."

Setting forth the Untoward Circumstances under which the Right Tale was Unfolded in the Wrong Company

Much has been written about that variety of "cab-wit" which occurs to a man on his way home from dinner: the brilliant sallies he might have made, the smart retorts which would so bravely have reversed the balance of laughter had they only come in time. We are less frank about the other sort. No one dwells in type upon the manner in which we marshal our old jokes and arrange our epigrams as we drive along to the house of feasting.

No doubt the practice of getting up table-talk is going out. The three-bottle men took it to the grave with them, along with the snuff-box, and the toupee, and the feather-bed, and other amenities of the Regency. There never was but one diner-out in the London of my knowledge who was at pains to prepare his conversations, each for its special occasion and audience, and he, poor man, broke down under the strain and disappeared from view. The others are too lazy, too indifferent, too cocksure of themselves, to go to all this bother. The old courtly sense of responsibility to the host is perished from among them. But none the less, the least dutiful and diligent of all their number does ask himself questions as the whirling rubber tyres bear him onward, and the cab-mirror shows him the face of a man to whom people ought to listen.

The question I asked myself, as I drove past the flaring shop windows of Old Brompton Road the other evening, was whether the Grundys would probably like my story of Nate Salsbury and the Citizen of South Bend, Indiana. A good deal depended upon the decision. It was a story which had greatly solidified my position in other hospitable quarters; it could be brought in *apropos* of almost anything, or for that matter of quite nothing at all; it had never been printed, so far as I know, in any of those American comic papers which supply alike the dining-rooms of Mayfair and the editorial offices of Fleet Street with such humour as they come into possession of; and I enjoyed telling it. On the other hand, the Grundys were old friends of mine, who would never suspect that they had missed anything if I preserved silence on the subject of South Bend, and who would go on asking me to dinner whether I told new tales or not; moreover, their attitude towards fresh jokes was always a precarious quantity, and I had an uneasy feeling that if I told my story to them and it failed to come off, so to speak, I should never have the same confidence in it again.

When I had entered the drawing-room of Fernbank, shaken hands with Mrs Albert Grundy and Ermyntrude, and stolen a little glance about the circle as I walked over to the fireplace, it had become clear that the story was not to be told. Beside the half-dozen of the family, including the curate, there was a tall young man with a very high collar, shoulders that sloped down like a Rhine-wine bottle, and a stern expression of countenance. Uncle Dudley whispered to me, as we held our hands over the asbestos, that he was a literary party, and the son of old Sir Watkyn Hump, who was a director in one of Albert’s companies. The other guests were a stout and motherly lady in a cap and a purplish smile, and a darkling young woman with a black velvet riband around her thin neck, and a look of wearied indifference upon her face. This effect of utter boredom did not visibly diminish upon my being presented to Miss Wallaby.

I have an extremely well-turned little brace of sentences with which to convey the intelligence to a young lady that the honour of taking her down to dinner has fallen upon me—sentences which combine professions of admiring pleasure with just a grateful dash of respectful playfulness; they brought no new light into Miss Wallaby’s somewhat scornful *pince-nez*. Decidedly I would not tell my South Bend story *that* night!

But all the same I did. What led up to it I hardly know. It was at the ptarmigan stage, I remember—or was it a capercailzie?—and young Mr Hump had commented upon the great joy of living in England, where one could enjoy delicious game all the year round, instead of in a country like America, where the inhabitants notoriously had nothing but fried salt pork to eat for many months at a time. Perhaps it was not worth while, but I ventured the correcting remark that there was no season of the year when one couldn’t have eighteen edible varieties of wild birds in America for every one that England has ever heard of. Mr Hump preened his chin about on the summit of his collar and smiled with superior incredulity. The others looked grave. Mrs Grundy whispered to me warningly, over her left shoulder, that Mr Hump had made America his special subject, and wrote most vigorous and comminatory articles about it almost every week. I was painfully conscious that Miss Wallaby’s cold right shoulder had been still further withdrawn from me.

Well, it was at this grotesquely inauspicious moment that I told my story. It is easy enough now to see that it was sheer folly, madness if you like, to do so. I was only too bitterly conscious of that when I reviewed the events of the evening in my homeward cab. It was *apropos* of nothing under the wide sky. But at the moment, I suppose, I hoped that it would relieve the situation. In one sense it did.

Baldly summarised, this is the tale. Years ago the admirable Nate Salsbury was on a “one-night-stand” tour with his bright little company of comedians through the least urban districts of Indiana, and came upon South Bend, which is an important centre of the wagon-making industry, but is not precisely a focussing point of dramatic traditions and culture.

In the vestibule of the small theatre that evening there paced up and down a tall, middle-aged, weasel-backed citizen, his hands plunged deep in his pockets, doubt and irresolution written all over his face. As others paid their money and passed in he would watch them with obvious longing; then he would go and study once more the attractive coloured bill of the Company, with its bevy of pretty girls in skirts just short enough to disclose most enticing little ankles; then once more he would resume his perplexed walk to and fro. At last he made up his mind, and approached Salsbury with diffidence. “Mister,” he said, “air you the boss of this show?” “What can I do for you?” asked Nate. “Well—no offence meant—but—can I—that is to say—will it be all right to bring a lady to your show?” “That, sir, depends!” responded the manager firmly. “Well,” the citizen went on, “what I was gittin’ at is this—can I be perfectly safe in bringin’ *my wife* here?”

“Sir,” said Salsbury with dignity, and an eye trained to abstain from twinkling, “it is no portion of my business to inquire whether she is your wife or not, but if she comes in here she’s got to behave herself!”

A solitary note of laughter fell upon the air when I had told this story, and on the instant Uncle Dudley, perceiving that he had made a mistake, dropped his napkin, and came up from fishing for it on the floor red-faced and dumb. All else was deadly silence.

“I—I suppose they really weren’t married at all?” said the curate, after a chilling pause.

“Marriage, I regret to say, means next to nothing in most parts of America,” remarked Mr Hump, judicially. “The most sacred ties are there habitually made the subject of ribald jests. I have been assured by a person who spent nearly three weeks in the United States some years since that it is an extremely rare experience to meet an adult American who has not been divorced at least once. This fact made a vivid impression on my mind at the time, and I—ahem!—have written frequently upon it since.”

“I suppose the trouble arises from their all living in hotels—having no home life whatever,” said Mrs Albert, with a kindly air of coming to my rescue.

"Who on earth told you that?" I began, but was cut short.

"I confess," broke in Miss Wallaby, with frosty distinctness of tone and enunciation, "that the assumption upon which the incident just related is based—the assumption that the la—woman referred to would probably misconduct herself in a place of public resort—seems to me startlingly characteristic of the country of which it is narrated. It has been truly said that the most valuable test of a country's actual, as distinct from its assumed, worth, is the respect it pays to its women. Both at Cheltenham and at Newnham the idea is steadily inculcated—I might say insisted upon as of paramount importance—that the nation's real civilisation rests upon the measure, not alone of chivalrous deference, but of esteem and confidence which my sex, by its devotion to duty, and its intellectual sympathy with broad aims and lofty purposes, is able to inspire and command."

"But I assure you," I protested feebly, "the story I told was a joke."

"There are some subjects," interposed Lady Willoughby Wallaby, the fixed smile lighting up with an angry, winter-sunset glow her inflamed countenance—"there are some subjects on which it is best not to joke." As she spoke she wagged a mitted thumb at her hostess, and on the instant the ladies rose. Mr Hump hastened round to hold the door open as they filed out, their heads high in air, their skirts rustling indignantly over the threshold. Then he followed them, closing the door with decision behind him.

"Gad, Albert," said Uncle Dudley, reaching over for the port, "I don't wonder that the pick of our young fellows go in for marrying American girls."

"Pass it along!" remarked the father of Mrs Albert's three daughters, in a voice of confirmed dejection.

Annotating Sundry Points of Contact found to exist between the Lady and Contemporary Art

Scene.—*Just inside the door of a studio.*

Time.—*Last Sunday in March, 5 p.m.*

1st Citizeness. O, thank you *so* much!

2nd do. *So* good of you to come!

1st do. I *so* dote upon art!

2nd do. So kind of you to say so!

1st do. Thank you *so* much for asking us!

2nd do. Delighted, I'm sure! Thank *you* for coming!

1st Citizeness. Not at all! Thank you for—for thanking me for—Well—*good-bye*. (*Exit—with family group.*)

Husband of 2nd Citizeness (*with gloom*). And who might *those* thankful bounders be?

2nd Citizeness (*wearily*). O, don't ask *me!* I don't know! From Addison Road way, I should think.

1st Citizeness (*outside*). Well! If *that* thing gets into the Academy!

Family Group. Did you notice the ridiculous way her hair was done? Did you ever taste such tea in your life? How yellow Mrs. General Wragg is getting to look in the daylight. Yes—there's our four-wheeler. (*Exeunt omnes.*)

The above is not intended for presentation upon any stage—not even that of the Independent Theatre. It has been cast into the dramatic mould merely for convenience' sake. It embodies what I chiefly remember about Picture Sunday.

It has come to be my annual duty—a peculiarly hardy, not to say temerarious, annual—to convoy Mrs Albert Grundy and her party about sections of Chelsea and Brompton on the earlier of the two Show Sabbaths. I drifted into this function through having once shared an attic with a young painter, whose colleagues used to come to borrow florins of him whenever one of his pictures disappeared from any shop window, and so incidentally formed my acquaintance. My claim nowadays upon their recollection is really very slight. I just know them well enough to manage the last Sunday in March: even that might be awkward if they were not such good-natured fellows.

But it would be difficult to persuade Mrs Albert of this. That good lady is wont, when the playfully benignant mood is upon her, to describe me as her connecting link with Bohemia. She probably would be puzzled to explain her meaning; I certainly should. But if she were provided with affidavits setting forth the whole truth—viz., that my entire income is derived from an inherited part-interest in an artificial-ice machine; that there are two clergymen on the committee of my only club; that I am free from debt; and that I play duets on the piano with my sister—still would she cling to the belief that I am a young man with an extremely gay, rakish side, who could make thrilling revelations of Bohemia if I would. Of course, I am never questioned on the subject; but I can see that it is a point upon which the faith of Fernbank is firmly grounded. Often Mrs Albert's conversation cuts figure-eights on very thin ice when we are alone, as if just to show me that *she* knows. More than once I have discovered Ermyntrude looking furtively at me, as the wistful shepherd-boy on the plains of Dura might have gazed at the distant haze overhanging bold, unspeakable Babylon. I rarely visit the house but Uncle Dudley winks at me. However, nothing is ever asked me about the dreadful things with which they suppose me to be upon intimate terms.

It seemed for a long time, on Sunday, as if an easy escape had been arranged for me by Providence. At two o'clock, the hour appointed for our crusade, a heavy fog overhung everything. Looking out from the drawing-room windows, only the very nearest of the neatly trimmed firs on the lawn were to be distinguished. The street beyond was utter blackness.

At three o'clock the ladies took off their bonnets. It was really too bad. Uncle Dudley, strolling in from his nap in the library, suggested that with a lantern we might visit some of the nearer studios: "not necessarily for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith." Mrs Albert turned a look of tearful vexation upon him, before which he fled.

"There's this consolation," she remarked presently, holding me with an unwavering eye: "if we are to be defrauded out of our expedition to-day, that will furnish all the more reason why you should take us next Sunday—*the* Sunday. You have often talked of having us see the Academicians at home—but we've never been."

"I remember that there has been talk about it," I said; "but hardly that the talk was mine. Truth is, I don't know a single Academician, even by sight."

It was clear that they did not believe me. Mrs Albert continued: "Lady Wallaby expressed surprise, only last evening, that we should consent to go about among the outsiders. She and her daughter *never* do."

"Outsiders!" I was tempted into saying. "Why, they can paint the head off the Academy!"

Miss Timby-Hucks simpered outright. "You do say such droll things!" she remarked, somewhat obscurely. "Mamma always declares that you remind her of the *Sydney Bulletin*."

"Whom *do* you take to the Academy Show Sunday?—or perhaps I oughtn't to ask," came from Ermyntrude.

"No, we have no right to inquire," said Mrs Albert; and I turned to the window and the enshrouded lawn once more.

All at once the fog lifted. The bonnets were produced again. Nearly three hours of daylight remained to us. Tidings that the horse was too lame to be taken out only staggered Mrs Albert for the briefest fraction of time. There were still four-wheelers in Gilead. Besides, if the driver happened to be sober, he would know the streets so much better than their stupid coachman. This would be of advantage, because time was so limited. We should have to just run in, say "How-d'ye-do," take a flying look round, and scamper out again, Mrs Albert said. By firmly adhering to this rule, she estimated that we might do sixteen or seventeen studios.

Heaven alone knows how many we did "do." Nor have I any clear recollections of what we saw. A confused vision remains to me of long hall-ways lined with frames and packing-cases; half-an-acre, more or less, of painted canvas, out of which only here and there a pair of bright eyes, a glowing field of poppies, or the sheen from a satin gown, fixed itself disconnectedly on the memory; hordes and hordes of tall young women helping themselves to tea and cakes; and always the pathetic figure of the artist's wife, or sister, tired to very death, standing by the door with a wearied smile on her lips, and the polite falsehood, "So good of you to come!" on her tongue. I wondered, I remember, if she never forgot herself and said instead, "So kind of you to go!" But under Mrs Albert's system there was no time to wait and see.

Once, indeed, we dallied over our task. Mrs Albert encountered a lady from Wormwood Scrubs of her acquaintance, who was indiscreet enough to mention that she had been asked to stop here for supper. The news spread through the petticoated portion of my group as by magic. Miss Timby-Hucks came over and asked me, so audibly that the artist-host had to blush and turn away, if I didn't think it would be a deliciously romantic experience to sup in one of these lofty studios, with the gaslight on the armour, and the great, solemnly silent pictures looking down upon us as we ate. Mrs Albert lingered for some time looking at this artist's work with her head on one side, and eyes filled with rapt, dreamy enjoyment—but nothing came of it.

It was after we had been back in Fern-bank for an hour or more—our own cold repast nearly over—that Mrs Albert thought of something. She laid down her fork with a gesture of annoyance. "It has just occurred to me," she said; "we never went to that Mr Whistler's, whose pictures are on exhibition in Bond Street. Everybody's talking about him, and I did so want not to miss his studio."

"I don't think he has a Show Sunday," I said. "I never heard of it, if he has."

"O no, it is only these last few weeks that anybody has heard of him,"

Mrs Albert replied. "I read the first announcement about his beautiful pictures in *The Daily Tarradiddle* only the other day."

"Whistler? Whistler?" put in Uncle Dudley. "Why, surely *he's* not new. Why—I remember—he was mixed up in a law-suit, wasn't it, years ago?"

"O no, Dudley," responded Mrs Albert; "I was under that same impression, till Lady Wallaby set me right. It seems that was another man altogether—some foreign adventurer who pretended to be able to paint and imposed upon people—don't you recall how *The Tarradiddle* exposed him?—and Mr Burnt-Jones had him arrested, or something—O, quite a dreadful person. But *this* Mr Whistler is an Englishman. I read in *The Illustrated London News* that he represented modern British Art. That alone would make it quite clear it was a different man. I did so want to see him! Lady-Wallaby tells me she has heard he is extremely amusing in his conversation—and quite presentable manners, too."

"Why don't you ask him to dinner?" said Mr Albert Grundy. "If he's amusing it's more than most of the men you drum up are."

"You seem to think *everybody* can be asked to dinner, Albert," the lady of the house replied. "Artists don't dine—unless they are in the Academy, of course. Tea, yes—or perhaps supper; but one doesn't ask people to meet them at dinner. It's like actors—and—and non-commissioned officers."

Affording a Novel and Subdued Scientific Light, by which divers Venerable Problems may be Observed Afresh

It is my opinion," said Uncle Dudley, stretching out his slippered feet, and thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat—"it is my opinion that women are different from men."

"Several commentators have advanced this view," I replied. "For example, it has been noted that the gentle sex cross a muddy street on their heels, whereas we skip over on our toes."

"That is interesting if true," responded Uncle Dudley. "What I mean is that all this talk about the human race is humbug. There are *two* human races! And they are getting wider apart every few minutes, too!"

"Have you mentioned this to any one?" I asked.

Uncle Dudley went on developing his theme. "I daresay that for millions of years after the re-separation of the sexes this difference was too slight to be noticed at all. The cave man, for instance—the fellow who went around hunting the Ichthyosaurus with a brick tied on the end of an elm club, and spent the whole winter underground sucking the old bones, and then whittling them up into Runic buttons for the South Kensington Museum: I suppose, now, that his wife and sister-in-law, say, didn't strike him as being specially different from himself—except, of course, in that they only got plain bones and gristle and so on to eat, whereas all the marrow and general smooth-sailing in meats went his way. *You*, can't imagine *him* saying to himself: 'These female people here are not of my race at all They are of another species. They are in reality as much my natural enemies as that long-toed, red-headed, brachycephalous tramp living in the gum-tree down by the swamp, who makes offensive gestures as I ride past on my tame *Ursus spelous*'—now, can you?"

I frankly shook my head. "No, I don't seem to be able to imagine that. It would be almost as hard as to guess off-hand where, when, and how you caught this remarkable scientific spasm."

Uncle Dudley smiled. He rose, and walked with leisurely lightness up and down in front of the chimney-piece, still with his palms spread like little misplaced wings before his armpits. He smiled again. Then he stopped on the hearth-rug and looked down amiably upon me.

"Well—what d'ye think? There's something in it, eh?"

"My dear fellow," I began, "what puzzles me is——"

"O, I don't mean to say that I've worked it all out," put in Uncle Dudley, reassuringly. "Why, I get puzzled myself, every once in a while. But I'm on the right track, my boy; and, as they say in Adelaide, I'm going to hang to it like a pup to a root."

"How long have you been this way?" I asked, with an affectation of sympathy.

Uncle Dudley answered with shining eyes. "Why, if you'll believe me, it seems now as if I'd had the germs of the idea in my mind ever since I came back to England, and began living here at Fernbank. But the thing dawned upon me—that is to say, took shape in my head—less than a fortnight ago. It all came about through being up here one evening with nothing to read, and my toe worse than usual, and Mrs Albert having been out of sorts all through dinner. Somehow, I felt all at once that I'd got to read scientific works. I couldn't resist it. I was like Joan of Arc when the cows and sheep took partners for a quadrille. I heard voices—Darwin's and—and—Benjamin Franklin's—and—lots of others. I hobbled downstairs to the library, and I brought up a whole armful of the books that Mrs Albert bought when she expected Lady Wallaby was going to be able to get her an invitation to attend the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn's Biological Conversaziones. Look there! What do you say to that for ten days' work? And had to cut every leaf, into the bargain!"

I gazed with respect at the considerable row of books he indicated: books for the most part bound in the scarlet of the International Series or the maroon of Contemporary Science, but containing also brown covers, and even green "sport" varieties.

"Well, and what is it all about?" I asked. "Why have you read these things? Why not the reports of the Commission on Agricultural Depression, or Lewis Morris's poems, or even——" but my imagination faltered and broke.

"It was instinct, my boy," returned Uncle Dudley, with impressive confidence. "There had been a thought—a great idea—growing and swelling in my head ever since I had been living in this house. But I couldn't tell what it was. As you might say, it was wrapped up in a cocoon, like the larvæ of the lepidoptera—ahem!—and something was needed to bring it out."

"When I was here last you were trying Hollands with quinine bitters," I remarked casually.

"Don't fool!" Uncle Dudley admonished me. "I'm dead in earnest. As I said, it was pure instinct that led me to these books. They have made everything clear. I only wanted their help to get the husk off my discovery, and hoist it on my back, us it were, and bring it out here in the daylight. And so now you know what I'm getting at when I say: Women are different from Men."

"That is the discovery, then?" I inquired.

Uncle Dudley nodded several times. Then he went on, with emphasised slowness: "I have lived here now for four years, seeing my sister-in-law every day, watching Ermyntrude grow up to womanhood and the little girls peg along behind her, and meeting the female friends who come here to see them—and, sir, I tell you, they're not alone a different sex: they're a different animal altogether! Take my word for it, they're a species by themselves."

"Miss Timby-Hucks is certainly very much by herself," I remarked.

My friend smiled. "And not altogether her own fault either," he commented. "But, speaking of science, it's remarkable how, when you once get a firm grip on a big, central, main-guy fact, all the little facts come in of their own accord to support it. Now, there's that young simpleton you met here at dinner a while ago: I mean

Eustace Hump. Do you know that both Ermyntrude and the Timby-Hucks, and even Miss Wallaby, think that that chap is a perfect ideal of masculine wit and beauty? You and I would hesitate about using him to wad a horse-pistol with: but there isn’t one of those girls that wouldn’t leap with joy if he began proposing to her; and as for their mothers, why, the old ladies watch him as a kingfisher eyes a tadpole.”

“Your similes are exciting,” I said; “but what do they go to show?”

“My dear fellow, science can show anything. I haven’t gone all through it yet, but I tell you, it’s wonderful! Take this, for instance”—he reached for a green book on the mantel, and turned over the leaves—“now listen to this. The book is written by a man named Wallace—nice, shrewd-looking old party by his picture, you can see—and this is what he says on page 285: ‘Some peahens preferred an old pied peacock; a Canada goose paired with a Bernicle gander; a male widgeon was preferred by a pintail duck to its own species; a hen canary preferred a male greenfinch to either linnet, goldfinch, siskin, or chaffinch.’ Now, do you see that? The moment my eyes first lighted on that, I said to myself: ‘Now I understand about the girls and Eustace Hump.’ Isn’t it clear to you?”

“Absolutely,” I assented. “You ought to read a paper at the Royal Aquarium—before the Balloon Society, I mean.”

“And then look at this,” Uncle Dudley went on, with animation. “Now, you and I would ask ourselves what on earth such a gawky, spindling, poor-witted youngster as that thought he was doing among women, anyhow. But you turn over the page, and here you have it: ‘Goat-suckers, geese, carrion vultures, and many other birds of plain plumage have been observed to dance, spread their wings or tails, and perform strange love-antics.’ Doesn’t that fasten Hump to the wall like a beetle on a pin, eh?”

“But I am not sure that I entirely follow its application to your original point,” I suggested.

“About women, you mean? My boy, in science everything applies. The woods are full of applications. But seriously, women *are* different. As I said, in the barbarism at the back of beyond this divergence started. With the beginning of what we call civilisation, it became more and more marked. The progress of the separation increases nowadays by square-root—or whatever you call it. The sexes are wider apart to-day than ever. They like each other less; they quarrel more. You can see that in the Divorce Courts, in the diminished proportion of early marriages, in the increasing evidences of domestic infelicity all about one.”

I could not refrain from expressing the fear that all this boded ill for the perpetuity of the human race.

Uncle Dudley is a light-hearted man. He was not depressed by the apprehensions to which I had given utterance. Instead he hummed pleasantly to himself as he put Wallace back on the shelf. He began chuckling as a moment later he bethought himself to fill our glasses afresh.

“Did I ever tell you my cat story?” he asked cheerily, testing the knob to see that the door was shut. “Once a little boy came in to his father and said: ‘Pa, we won’t be troubled any more with those cats howling about on our roof at night. I’ve just been looking out of the upstairs window, and they’re all out there fighting and screaming and tearing each other to pieces. There won’t be one of them alive by morning!’ Then the father replied: ‘My son, you imagine a vain thing. When increasing years shall have furnished your mind with a more copious store of knowledge, you will grasp the fact that all this commotion and dire disturbance which you report to me only signifies more cats.’”

At this juncture the servant came in with the soda-water. We talked no more of science that evening.

Touching the Experimental Graft of a Utilitarian Spirit upon the Aesthetic Instinct in our Sisters

I HAD strolled about the galleries of Burlington House for a couple of hours on Press Day, looking a little at pictures here and there, but for the most part contemplating with admiration the zeal and good faith of the ladies and gentlemen who stopped, note-book in hand, before every frame: when some one behind me gave a friendly tug at my sleeve. I turned, to find myself confronted by a person I seemed not to know—a small young woman in an alpine hat and a veil which masked everything about her face except its dentigerous smile. Even as I looked I was conscious of regret that, if acquaintances were to be made for me in this spontaneous fashion, destiny had not selected instead a certain tall, slender, dark young lady, clad all in black and cock’s-plumes, whom I had been watching at her work of notetaking in room after room, with growing interest. Then, peering more closely through the veil, I discovered that I was being accosted by Miss Timby-Hucks.

“You didn’t know me!” she said, with a vivacious half-giggle, as we shook hands; “and you’re not specially pleased to see me; and you’re asking yourself, ‘What on earth is she doing here?’ Now, don’t deny it!”

“Well, you know,” I made awkward response—“of course—*Press* day——”

“Ah, but I belong to the Press,” said Miss Timby-Hucks.

“Happy Press! And since when?”

“O it’s nearly a fortnight now. And most *interesting* I find the work. You know, for a long time now I’ve been *so* restless, *so* anxious to find some opening to a real career, where I might be my genuine self, and be an active part of the great whirling stream of existence, and concentrate my mind upon the actualities of life—don’t you yourself think it will be *just* the thing for me?”

“Undoubtedly,” I replied without hesitation. “And do you find focussing yourself on the actualities—ah—remunerative?”

“Well,” Miss Timby-Hucks explained, “nothing of mine has been printed yet, you see, so that I don’t know as to that. But I am assured it will be all right. You see, I’m *very* intimate with a cousin of Mrs Umpelbaum, who is the wife of the proprietor of *Maida Vale*, and in that way it came about. Lady-reporters never have any chance, I am told, unless they have friends in the proprietor’s family, or know the editor extremely well. It all goes by favour, like—like——”

“Like the dearest of all the actualities,” I put in. “But how is it they don’t print your stuff?”

“I haven’t written any, as yet. The difficulty was to find a subject,” Miss Timby-Hucks rejoined. “O that awful ‘subject’! I thought and thought and thought till my head was fit to burst. I went to see Mrs Umpelbaum herself, and asked her to suggest something. You know she writes a great deal for the paper herself. She said they hadn’t had any ‘Reminiscences of Carlyle’ now for some weeks; but afterwards she agreed with me that would not be quite the thing for one to *begin* with. She couldn’t suggest anything else, except that I should have a chat with my dressmaker. Very often in that way, she said, lady-reporters get the most *entertaining* revelations of gossip in high life. But it happened that just then it was not—not exactly convenient—for me to call upon my dressmaker; and so *that* suggestion came to nothing, too.”

“I had no idea lady-journalism was so difficult,” I remarked, with sympathy.

“O indeed, yes!” Miss Timby-Hucks went on. “One can’t expect to be *en rapport*, as we journalists say, with Society, without spending a great deal of money. There is one lady-reporter, Mrs Umpelbaum told me, who has made quite a leading position for herself, solely through hairdressers and American dentists. But I don’t mind admitting that that would involve more of an outlay than I could afford, just at the moment.”

“So you never got a subject?” I asked.

“Yes; finally I did. I was over at the Grundys’, telling my troubles, and Uncle Dudley—you know, being so much with the girls, I always call him that—Uncle Dudley said that the fashionable thing now was interviews, and that lady-journalists did this better than gentlemen-reporters because they had more nerve. By that I suppose he meant a more delicate nervous organisation, quicker to grasp and absorb fine shades of character. But that hardly helped me, because whom was I to interview, and about what? *That* was the question! But Uncle Dudley thought a moment, and was ready with a suggestion. Everything depended, he said, upon making a right start. I must pick out a personality and a theme at once non-contentious and invested with popular interest His idea was that I should begin by interviewing Mr T. M. Healy on ‘The Decline of the Deep-Sea Mock-Turtle Fisheries on the West Coast of Ireland.’ If I could get Mr Healy to talk frankly on this subject, he felt sure that I should chain public attention at a bound.”

“Superb!” I cried. “And did you do it?”

“No,” Miss Timby-Hucks confessed; “I went to the House and sent in my card, but it was another Irish Member who came out to see me—I think his name was Mulhooly. He was very polite, and explained that since some recent sad event in one of the Committee Rooms, fifteen I think its number was, it was the rule of his party that, when a lady sent in a card to one Member, some other Member answered it. It prevented confusion, he said, and was not in antagonism to the expressed views of the Church.”

“Talking of nothing,” I said, leading the way over to a divan, on which we seated ourselves: “you seem to have finally secured a subject. I assume you are doing the Academy for *Maida Vale*.”

“Yes,” replied Miss Timby-Hucks with gentle firmness; “you might say I have *done* it. I have been here since the very minute the doors opened, and I’ve gone twelve times round. I wish I could have seen you earlier. I should so like to have had your opinion of the various works as we passed.”

“It is better not,” I commented. “There are ladies present.”

The lady-reporter looked at me for a furtive instant dubiously. Then she smiled a little under her veil. “You *do* say such odd things!” she remarked. “I am glad to see that a great many ladies *are* present. It shows how we are securing our proper recognition in journalism. I believe there are actually more of us here than there are gentlemen-reporters—I should say gentle-men-critics. And it is the same in art, too. You can see—I’ve counted them up in my catalogue here—there are this year two hundred and forty-four lady-artists exhibiting in this Academy three hundred and forty-six works of art. Think of that! Fifty of them are described as Mrs, and there are one hundred and ninety-four who are unmarried.”

“Think of *that!*” I retorted.

“And there are among them,” Miss Timby-Hucks went on, “one Marchioness, one Countess, one Baroness, and one plain Lady. I am going to begin my article with this. I think it will be interesting, don’t you?”

“I’d be careful not to particularise about the plain Lady,” I suggested. “That might be *too* interesting.”

She was over-full of her subject to smile. “No, I mean,” she said, “as showing how the ranks of British Art are being filled from the very highest classes, and are appealing more and more to the female intellect. I don’t believe it will occur to any one else to count up in the catalogue. So that will be original with me—to enlighten my sex as to the glorious part they play in this year’s Academy.”

“But have you seen their pictures?” I asked, repressing an involuntary groan.

“Every one!” replied Miss Timby-Hucks. “They are all good. There isn’t what I should call a bad one—that is, a Frenchy or immoral one—among them. I shall say that, too, in my criticism; but of course I shall have to word it carefully, because I fancy Mr Umpelbaum is a foreigner of some sort—and you know they’re all so sensitive about the superiority of British Art.”

“It is their nature; they can’t help it,” I pointed out. “They try their best, however, to master these unworthy emotions. Sometimes, indeed, their dissimulation reaches a really high plane of endeavour.”

“They have nothing at all on the Continent like our Royal Academy, I am told,” said Miss Timby-Hucks. “That isn’t generally known, is it? I had thought of saying it.”

“It will be a safe statement,” I assured her. “You might go further, and assert that no other country at any stage of its history has had anything like the Royal Academy. It is the unique blossom of British civilisation.”

Miss Timby-Hucks seemed to like the phrase, and made a note of it on the back of her catalogue. "Yes," she continued, "I thought of making my criticism general, dealing with things like that. But I've got some awfully interesting figures to put in. For example, there are sixty-eight Academicians and Associates exhibiting: they have one hundred and thirty-five oil paintings, sixteen water-colour or black-and-white drawings, eight architectural designs, and twenty-three pieces of sculpture—a total of one hundred and eighty-two works of art, or two and sixty-seven hundredths each. I got at that by dividing the total number of works by the total number of Academicians. Do you think any one else will be likely to print that first in a daily paper? Mrs Umpelbaum told me that *Maida Vale* made a special point of new facts. I don't think I shall say much about the pictures themselves. What *is* there to say about pictures by the Academicians? As I told mamma this morning, they wouldn't be Academicians if they didn't paint good pictures, would they? and good pictures speak for themselves. Of course, I shall describe the subjects of Sir Frederic's pictures—by the way, what *is* a Hesperides?—and some of the others: I'll get you to pick out for me a few leading names. But I shall make my main point the splendid advance of lady-artists—I heard some one say in the other room there'd never been half so many before—and the elevating effect this has upon British Art. In fact, mightn't I say that is what makes British Art what it is to-day?"

"It is one of the reasons, undoubtedly," I assented, as I rose. "There are others, however."

"Ees, I know," said Miss Timby-Hucks: "the diffusion of Christian principles amongst us, our high national morality, and the sanctity of the English home. Mrs Albert said only last night that these lay at the very foundation of British art."

"Mrs Albert is a woman of discernment," I said, making a gesture of farewell.

But Miss Timby-Hucks on the instant thought of something. Her eyes glistened, her two upper front teeth gleamed. "O, it's just occurred to me!" she exclaimed, moving nearer to my side, and speaking-in confidential excitement. "I know now how that lady-reporter manages with the hairdressers and dentists. She doesn't pay them money at all. She mentions their names in the papers instead. How dull of me not to have thought of that before! Why—yes—I will!—I'll put my dressmaker among the Private View celebrities!"

One likes to be civil to people who are obviously going to succeed in the world. I forthwith took Miss Timby-Hucks out to luncheon.

Relating to Various Phenomena attending the Progress of the Sex along Lines of the Greatest Resistance

My own idea," said Uncle Dudley, "is that women ought to be confined to barracks during elections just the same as soldiers."

"I was quite prepared to find *you* entertaining views of that character," remarked Miss Wallaby, with virginal severity. "Men who have wandered about the less advanced parts of the earth, and spent long periods of time in contact with inferior civilisations, quite generally do feel that way. Life in the Colonies, and in similar rude and remote regions, does produce that effect upon the masculine mind. But here in England, the nerve-centre of the English-speaking race, the point of concentration from which radiate all the impulses of refinement and culture that distinguish our generation, men are coming to see these matters in a different light. They no longer refuse to listen to the overwhelming arguments in favour of entire feminine equality ——"

"Oh, *I* admit *that* at once," broke in Uncle Dudley. "But do women nowadays believe in equality among themselves? In my youth they used to devote pretty well all their energies to showing how much superior they were to other women."

"I spoke of the masculine attitude," said Miss Wallaby, coldly. "Viewed intelligently, the gradations and classifications which we maintain among ourselves, at the cost of such infinite trouble and personal self-sacrifice, are the very foundation upon which rests the superstructure of British Society."

"I admit that, too," Uncle Dudley hastened to put in. "Really, we are getting on very nicely."

Miss Wallaby ignored the interruption altogether. "The point is," she went on, "that the male mind in England is coming—with characteristic slowness, no doubt, but still coming—to recognise the necessity of securing the very fullest and most complete participation of my sex in public affairs. As the diffusion of enlightenment progresses, men will more and more abandon the coarse and egoistic standards of their days of domination by brute force, and turn instead to the ideals of purity and sweetness which Woman in Politics typifies. It has been observed that one may pick out the future rulers of England in each coming generation by scanning the honour-lists of Oxford and Cambridge. How happy a day it will be for England, and civilisation, when this is said of Girton and Newnham as well!"

"I spent a summer in the State of Maine once, some years ago," said Uncle Dudley. "That's the State, you know, where they've had a Prohibition law now for nearly forty years. The excess of females over males is larger there, I believe, than it is anywhere else in the world—owing to the fact that all the young men who are worth their salt emigrate to some other State as soon as they've saved up enough for a railway-ticket. The men that you do see lounging around there, in the small villages, are all minding the baby, or sitting on the doorstep shelling peas, or out in the backyard, with their mouths full of clothes-pins, hanging up sheets and pillow-cases on the line to dry. The women there take a very active part in politics—and every census shows that Maine's population has diminished. Shipbuilding has almost ceased, farms are being abandoned yearly, the State is mortgaged up to its eyebrows, and you get nothing but fried clams and huckleberry-pie for breakfast—but, of course, I suppose there *is* a good deal of purity and sweetness."

Miss Wallaby rose and walked away from us; the black velvet riband around her neck, the glint of gas-light on her eyeglasses, the wearied haughtiness on her swarthy, high-nosed face, seemed to unite in saying to us that we were very poor creatures indeed.

"She's been down to the Retired Licensed Victuallers' Division of Surrey, you know," exclaimed Uncle Dudley, "making speeches in favour of the sitting Member, old Sir Watkyn Hump."

"Ah, that accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nut," I remarked.

"Well, no," my friend mused aloud, "I fancy *young* Hump accounts for that. See—she's gone and cut him out from under the Timby-Hucks's guns."

It was at one of Mrs Albert Grundy's evenings at home, and Uncle Dudley and I now had possession of a quiet corner to ourselves. From this pleasant vantage-ground we indolently surveyed the throng surrounding Mrs Albert at the piano end of the room, and stretching off through the open double doors into the adjoining chamber—a throng of dazzling arms and shoulders, of light-hued satins and fluffy stuffs, of waving feathers, and splendid piles of braided hair, and mostly comely faces wreathed in politic smiles. Here and there the mass of pinks and whites and creams was broken abruptly by a black coat with a hat under its sleeve. Dudley and I idly commented upon the fact that almost all these coats belonged to undersized elderly men, generally with spectacles and a grey beard, and we noted with placid interest that as they came in—announced in stentorian tones as Mr and Mrs So-and-so—their wives as a rule were several inches taller and many many years younger than themselves.

Then it was entertaining, too, to watch Mrs Albert shake hands with these newcomers. She knew just at what angle each preferred that ceremony, keeping her knuckles well down in welcoming the more sophisticated and up-to-date people from about Cromwell Road and the Park, but elevating them breast-high to greet those from around Brompton way, and hoisting them quite up to the chin-level with the guests from beyond Earl's Court, who were still in the toils of last year's fashions.

"Smart woman, that sister of mine!" said Uncle Dudley. "See the way she's manoeuvred her shoulder around in front of the Timby-Hucks's nose, so as to head her off from getting in and being introduced to the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn. And—hello! by George, she's won!—there's the Dowager Countess of Thames-Ditton coming in! You'll never know the anguish, my boy, that was caused by the uncertainty whether she would come or not. Emily hasn't been able to eat these past four days, expecting every moment the knock of the postman bringing her ladyship's refusal to come. The only thing that enabled her to keep up, she said, was fixing her mind resolutely on the fact that the aristocracy are notoriously impolite about answering invitations. But now, happy woman—her cup is fairly running over. This is a great night for Fernbank. And—look!—hanged if that girl isn't trying to edge her way in there, too! See how prettily Emily managed that? Oh, Timby-Hucks! Timby-Hucks! you've put your foot in it this time. You'll never figure on the free-list for *this* show again."

Misfortune indeed claimed Miss Timby-Hucks for its very own. Mrs Albert had twice adroitly interposed her well-rounded shoulders between that enterprising young woman and social eminence—the second time with quite obvious determination of purpose. And there, too, behind the door, young Mr Hump bent his sloping shoulders and cliff-like collar humbly over Miss Wallaby's chair, listening with all his considerable ears to her selected monologues. Ah, the vanity of human aspirations!

Casting an heroic glance over the field of defeat, Miss Timby-Hucks's eye lighted upon our corner, and on the instant her two upper front teeth gleamed in a smile of relief. At all events, *we* were left—and she came towards us with a decisive step.

"I've hardly seen you since the Academy," she said in her sprightly way to me, after we had all shaken hands, and she had seated herself between us on the sofa.

"And how did your article come out?" I asked politely.

"Oh, it never came out at all," she replied. "It seems it got left over too long. The editor *said* it was owing to the pressure of interesting monkey-language matter upon his columns; but *I* believe it was just because I'm a lady journalist, and so does the cousin of Mrs Umpelbaum, the proprietor's wife. It must have been that—because, long after the editor gave this excuse, there were the daily papers still printing their criticisms, 'Eleventh Notice of the Royal Academy,' 'The Spring Exhibitions—Fourteenth Article,' and so on. I taxed him with it—told him I heard they had some still left, that they were going to begin printing again after the elections were over—but he said it was different with dailies. All *they* needed were advertisements and market reports, and police news, and telegrams about the Macedonian frontier, and they could print art criticisms and book reviews whole years after they should have appeared, because nobody ever read them when they were printed—but weeklies had to be absolutely up to date."

"Evil luck does pursue you!" I said, compassionately. "So you haven't got into print at all?"

"O I'm not a bit cast down," replied Miss Timby-Hucks, with jaunty confidence. "There's no such word as fail in my book. The way to succeed is just to keep pegging away. I know of one lady-journalist who went every day for nine weeks to interview the Countess of Wimps about her second son's having been warned off Newmarket Heath. Every day she was refused admittance—once she got into the hall and was put out by a brutal footman—but it never unnerved her. Each morning she went again. And she would have succeeded by this time, probably—only the Countess suddenly left England to spend the summer in Egypt."

"Yes, Wady Halfa *has* its advantages, even in July," said Uncle Dudley. "It is warm, and there are insects, but one is allowed by law to kill them—in Egypt."

Illustrating the operation of Vegetables and Feminine Duplicity upon the Concepts of Maternal Responsibility

I FELT that I was on sufficiently intimate terms with Mrs Albert Grundy to tell her that she was not looking well. She gave a weary little sigh and said she knew it.

Indeed, poor lady, it was apparent enough. She has taken of late to wearing her hair drawn up from her forehead over a roll—the effect of mouse-tints at which Nature is beginning to hint, being frankly helped out by powder. Everybody about Fernbank recognises that in some way this reform has altered the whole state of affairs. The very servant who comes to the door, or who brings in the tea-things, seems to carry herself in a different manner since the change has been made. Of course, it is by no means a new fashion, but it was not until the Dowager Countess of Thames-Ditton brought it in person to Fernbank that Mrs Albert could be quite sure of its entire suitability. Up to that time it had seemed to her a style rather adapted to lady lecturers and the wives of men who write: and though Mrs Albert has the very highest regard for literature—quite dotes on it, as she says—she is somewhat inclined to sniff at its wives.

We all feel that the change adds character to Mrs Albert's face—or rather exhibits now that true managing and resourceful temper, which was formerly obscured and weakened by a fringe. But the new arrangement has the defects of its qualities. It does not lend itself to tricks. The countenance beneath it does not easily dissemble anxiety or mask fatigue. And both were written broadly over Mrs Albert's fine face. "Yes," she said, "I know it."

The consoling suggestion that soon the necessity of giving home-dinners to the directors in her husband's companies would have ended, and that then a few weeks out of London, away somewhere in the air of the mountains or the sea, would bring back all her wonted strength and spirits, did no good. She shook her head and sighed again.

"No," she said, "it isn't physical. That is to say, it *is* physical, but the cause is mental. It is over-worry."

"Of all people on earth—*you!*" I replied reproachfully. "Why think of it—a husband who is the dream of docile propriety, a competency broadening each year into a fortune, a home like this, such servants, such appointments, such a circle of admiring friends—and then your daughters! Why, to be the mother of such a girl as Ermyntrude———-"

"Precisely," interrupted Mrs Albert. "To be the mother of such a girl, as you say. Little you know what it really means! But, no—I know what you were going to say—*please* don't! it is too sad a subject."

I could do nothing but feebly strive to look my surprise. To think of sadness connected with tall, handsome, good-hearted Ermie, was impossible.

"You think I am exaggerating, I know," Mrs Albert went on. "Ah, you do not know!"

"Nothing could be more evident," I replied, "than that I don't know. I can't even imagine what on earth you are driving at."

Mrs Albert paused for a moment, and pushed the toe of her wee slipper meditatively back and forth on the figure of the carpet.

"Yes, I *will* tell you," she said at last. "You are such an old friend of the family that you are almost one of us. And besides, you are always sympathetic—so different from Dudley. Well, the point is this. You know the young man—Sir Watkyn's son—Mr Eustace Hump."

"I have met him here," I assented.

"Well, I doubt if you will meet him here any more," Mrs Albert said, impressively.

"The deprivation shall not drive me to despair or drink," I assured her. "I will watch over myself."

"I dare say you did not care much for him," said Mrs Albert. "I know Dudley didn't. But, all the same, he *was* eligible. He is an only son, and his father is a Baronet—an hereditary title—and they are *rolling* in wealth. And Eustace himself, when you get to know him, has some very admirable qualities. You know he *writes!*"

"I have heard him say so," I responded, perhaps not over graciously.

"O, *regularly*, for a number of weekly papers. It is understood that quite frequently he gets paid—not of course that that matters to him—but his associations are distinctly literary. I have always felt that with his tastes and connections his wife—granting of course that she was the right kind of woman—might at last set up a real literary *salon* in London. We have wanted one so long, you know."

"Have we?" I murmured listlessly, striving all the while to guess what relation all this bore to the question of Ermyntrude. I built up in my mind a hostile picture of the odious Hump, with his shoulders sloping off like a German wine-bottle, his lean neck battlemented in high starched walls of linen, and his foolish conceited face—and leaped hopefully to the conclusion that Ermyntrude had rejected him. I could not keep the notion to myself.

"Well—has she sent him about his business?" I asked, making ready to beam with delight.

"No," said Mrs Albert, ruefully. "It never got to that, so far as I can gather—but at all events it is all over. I expect every morning now to read the announcement in the *Morning Post* that a marriage has been arranged between him and—and—Miss Wallaby!"

I sat upright, and felt myself smiling. "What!—the girl with the black ribbon round her neck?" I asked comfortably.

"It would be more appropriate round her heart," remarked Mrs Albert, with bitterness in her tone. "Why, do you know? her mother, for all that she's Lady Wallaby, hasn't an 'h' in her whole composition."

“Well, neither has old Sir Watkyn Hump,” I rejoined pleasantly. “So it’s a fair exchange.”

“Ah, but *he* can afford it,” put in Mrs Albert. “But the Wallabys—well, I can only say that I had a right to look for different treatment at *their* hands. How, do you suppose, they would ever have been asked to the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn’s garden-party, or met Lady Thames-Ditton, or been put in society generally, if I had not taken an interest in them? Why, that girl’s father, old Sir Willoughby Wallaby, was never anything but chief of police, or something like that, out in some Australian convict settlement. I *have* heard he was knighted by mistake, but of course my lips are sealed.”

“I suppose they really have behaved badly,” I said, half interrogatively.

“Badly!” echoed the wrathful mother. “I will leave you to judge. It was done here, quite under my own roof. You know Miss Wallaby volunteered her services, and went down into the Retired Licensed Victuallers’ Division of Surrey to electioneer for Sir Watkyn. Do you know, I never suspected anything. And then Miss Timby-Hucks, she went down also, but they rather cold-shouldered her, and she came back, and she told me things, and *still* I wouldn’t believe it. Well then—three weeks ago—my Evening At Home—you were here—the Wallabys came as large as life, and that scheming young person manoeuvred about until she got herself alone with Eustace and my Ermyntrude, and then she told her a scene she had witnessed during her recent election experiences. There was a meeting for Sir Watkyn at some place, I can’t recall the name, and there were a good many of the other side there, and they hooted and shouted, and raised disturbance, until at last there was one speaker they would not hear at all. All this that girl told Ermyntrude seriously, and as if she were overflowing with indignation. And then she came to the part where the speaker stood his ground and tried to make himself heard, and the crowd yelled louder than ever, and still he doggedly persisted—and then someone threw a large vegetable marrow, soft and very ripe, and it hit that speaker just under the ear, and burst all over him!”

“Ha-ha-ha!” I ejaculated. “The vegetable marrow in politics is new—full of delightful possibilities and seeds—wonder it has never been thought of before.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Albert, with a sigh. “Ermyntrude also thought it was funny. She has a very keen sense of humour—quite too keen. *She* laughed, too!”

“And why not?” I asked.

“Why not?” demanded Mrs Albert, with shining eyes. “Because the story had been told just to trap her into laughing—because—because the speaker upon whom that unhappy vegetable marrow exploded was—*Eustace Hump!*”

Containing Thoughts upon the Great Unknown, to which are added Speculations upon her Hereafter

It is not often that I find the time to take part in Mrs Albert Grundy’s Thursdays—the third and fifth Thursdays of each month, from 4 to 6.30 P.M.—but on a certain afternoon pleasant weather and the sense of long-accrued responsibility drew me to Fernbank.

It was really very nice, after one got there. Perhaps it would have been less satisfactory had escape from the drawing-room been a more difficult matter. Inside that formal chamber, with its blinds down-drawn to shield the carpet from the sun, the respectable air hung somewhat heavily about the assembled matronhood of Brompton and the Kensingtons. The units in this gathering changed from time to time—for Mrs Albert’s circle is a large and growing one—but the effect of the sum remained much the same. The elderly ladies talked about the amiability and kindliness of the Duchess of Teck; and argued the Continental relationships of the Duchesses of Connaught and Albany, first into an apparently hopeless tangle of *burgs* and *hausens* and *zollerns* and *sweigs*, then triumphantly out again into the bright daylight of well-ordered and pellucid genealogy. The younger wives spoke in subdued voices of more juvenile Princesses on the lower steps of the throne, with occasional short-winged flights across the North Sea in imaginative search of a suitable bride for the then unwedded Duke of York, if an importation should be found to be necessary—about which opinions might in all loyalty differ. The few young girls who sat dutifully here beside their mammas or married sisters talked of nothing at all, but smiled confusedly and looked away whenever another’s glance, caught theirs—and, I daresay, thought with decent humility upon Marchionesses.

But outside, on the garden-lawn at the rear of the house, the *Almanach de Gotha* threw no shadow, and the pungent scent of jasmine and lilies drove the leathery odour of Debrett from the soft summer air. The gentle London haze made Whistlers and Maitlands of the walls and roof-lines and chimney-pots beyond. The pretty girls of Fernbank held court here on the velvet grass, with groups of attendant maidens from sympathetic Myrtle Lodges and Cedarcrofts and Chestnut Villas—selected homesteads stretching all the way to remote West Kensington. They said there was no one left in London. Why, as I sat apart in the shade of the ivy overhanging the garden path, and watched this out-door panorama of the Grundys’ friendships, it seemed as if I had never comprehended before how many girls there really were in the world.

And how sweet it was to look upon these damsels, with their dainty sailor’s hats of straw, their cheeks of Devon cream and damask, their tall and shapely forms, their profiles of faultless classical delicacy! What if, in time, they too must sit inside, by preference, and babble of royalties and the peerage, and politely uncover those two aggressive incisors of genteel maturity when they were asked to have a third cup of tea? That stage, praise heaven, should be many years removed. We will have no memento mori bones or tusks out here in the sunlit garden—but only tennis balls, and the inspiring chalk-bands on the sward, and the noble grace of English girlhood, erect and joyous in the open air. # Much as I delighted in this spectacle, it forced upon me as well a certain vague sense of depression. These lofty and lovely creatures were strangers to me. I do not mean that their names were unknown to me, or that I had not exchanged civil words with many of them, or that I might not be presented to, and affably received by, them all. The feeling was, rather, that if it were possible for me to marry them all, we still to the end of our days would remain strangers. I should never know what to say to them; still less should I ever be able to guess what they were thinking.

The tallest and most impressive of all the bevy—the handsome girl in the pale brown frock with the shirt-front and jacketed blouse, who stands leaning with folded hands upon her racket like an indolent Diana—why, I punted her about the whole reach from Sunbury to Walton during the better part of a week, only last summer, not to mention sitting beside her at dinner every evening on the houseboat. We were so much together, in truth, that my friends round about, as I came to know afterwards, canvassed among themselves the prospect of our arranging never to separate. Yet I feel that I do not know this girl. We are friends, yes; but we are not acquainted with each other.

More than once—perhaps a dozen times—in driving through the busier of London streets, my fancy has been caught by this thing: a hansom whirling smartly by, the dark hood of which frames a woman’s face—young, wistful, ivory-hued. It is like the flash exposure of a kodak—this bald instant of time in which I see this face, and comprehend that its gaze has met mine, and has burned into my memory a lightning picture of something I should not recognise if I saw it again, and cannot at all reproduce to myself, and probably would not like if I could, yet which leaves me with the feeling that I am richer than I was before. In that fractional throb of space there has been snatched an unrehearsed and unprejudiced contact of human souls—projected from one void momentarily to be swept forward into another; and though not the Judgment Day itself shall bring these two together again, they know each other.

Now that I look again at the goddess in the pale-brown gown, these unlabelled faces of the flitting hansoms seem by comparison those of familiar companions and intimates.

I get no sense of human communion from that serene and regular countenance, with its exquisite nose, its short upper-lip and glint of pearls along the bowed line of the mouth, its correctly arched brows and wide-open, impassive blue eyes. I can see it with prophetic admiration out-queening all the others at Henley, or at Goodwood, or on the great staircase of Buckingham Palace. I can imagine it at Monte Carlo, flushed a little at the sight of retreating gold; or at the head of a great noble’s table, coldly poised above satin throat and shoulders, and stirring no muscle under the free whisperings of His Excellency to the right. I can conceive it in the Divorce Court, bearing with metallic equanimity the rude scrutiny of a thousand unlicensed eyes. But my fancy wavers and fails at the task of picturing that face at my own fireside, with the light of the home-hearth painting the fulness of her rounded chin, and reflecting back from her glance, as we talk of men and books and things, the frank gladness of real comradeship.

But—tchut!—I have no fireside, and the comrades I like best are playing halfcrown whist at the club; and these are all nice girls—hearty, healthful, handsome girls, who can walk, run, dance, swim, scull, skate, ride as no others have known or dared to do since the glacial wave of Christianity depopulated the glades and dells of Olympus. They will mate after their kind, and in its own good time along will come a new generation of straight, strong-limbed, thin-lipped, pink-and-white girls, and of tow-headed, deep-chested lads, their brothers—boys who will bully their way through Rugby and Harrow, misspell and misapprehend their way into the Army, the Navy, and the Civil Service, and spread themselves over the habitable globe, to rule, through sheer inability to understand, such Baboos and Matabele and mere Irishry as Imperial destiny delivers over to them.

The vision is not wholly joyous, as it with diffidence projects itself beyond, into that further space where new strange other generations walk—the girls still taller and more coldly tubbed, the boys astride a yet more temerarious saddle of dull dominion. Reluctant prophecy discerns beneath their considerable feet the bruised fragments of many antique trifles—the *bric-à-brac* of an extinct sentimental fraction that had a sense of humour and could spell—and, to please mamma, the fig-leaves have quite overspread and hidden the statues in their garden. But power is there, and empire; they still more serenely loom above the little foreign folks who cook, and sing to harps and fiddles, and paint for their amusement; such as it is under their shaping, they possess the earth.

So, as the sun goes down in the Hammersmith heavens, I take off my hat, and salute the potential mothers of the New Rome.

Glancing at some Modern Aspects of Master John Gutenberg’s ingenious but Over-rated Invention

It was very pleasant thus to meet Uncle Dudley in the Strand. Only here and there is one who can bear that test. Whole legions of our friends, decent and deeply reputable people, fall altogether out of the picture, so to speak, on this ancient yet robust thoroughfare. They do very well indeed in Chelsea or Highgate or the Pembridge country, where they are at home: there the surroundings fit them to a nicety; there they produce upon one only amiable, or at the least, natural, impressions. But to encounter them in the

Strand is to be shocked by the blank incongruity of things. It is not alone that they give the effect of being lost—of wandering helplessly in unfamiliar places. They offend your perceptions by revealing limitations and shortcomings which might otherwise have been hidden to the end of time. You see suddenly that they are not such good fellows, after all. Their spiritual complexions are made up for the dim light which pervades the outskirts of the four-mile radius—and go to pieces in the jocund radiance of the Strand. It is flat presumption on their part to be ambling about where the ghosts of Goldsmith and Johnson walk, where Prior and Fielding and our Dick Steele have passed. Instinctively you go by, looking the other way.

It was quite different with Uncle Dudley. You saw at once that he belonged to the Strand, as wholly as any of our scorned and scornful sisters on its comers, competing with true insular doggedness against German cheeks and raddled accents; as fully as any of its indigenous loafers, hereditary in their riverside haunts from Tudor times, with their sophisticated joy in drink and dirt, their large self-confidence grinning through rags and sooty grime. It seemed as if I had always associated Uncle Dudley with the Strand.

He was standing in contemplation before a brave window, wherein American cheese, Danish butter, Norwegian fish, Belgian eggs, German sausages, Hungarian bacon, French vegetables, Australian apples, and Algerian fruits celebrate the catholicity of the modern British diet. He turned when I touched his shoulder, and drew my arm through his.

“Sir,” said Uncle Dudley, “let us take a walk along the Strand to the Law Courts, where I conceive that the tide of human existence gets the worst of it with unequalled regularity and dispatch.”

On his way he told me that his gout had quite vanished, owing to his foresight in collecting a large store of the best medical advice, and then thoughtfully and with pains disregarding it all. He demonstrated to me at two halting places that his convalescence was compatible with rich and strong drinks. He disclosed to me, as we sauntered eastward, his purpose in straying thus far afield.

“You know Mrs Albert is really a kindly soul,” he said. “It isn’t in her to keep angry. You remember how sternly she swore that she and Fernbank had seen the last of Miss Timby-Hucks. It only lasted five weeks—and now, bless me if the girl isn’t more at home on our backs than ever. She’s shunted herself off, now, into a new branch of journalism—it seems that there are a good many branches in these days.”

“It has been noticed,” I assented.

“She doesn’t write any more,” he explained, “that is, *for* the papers. She goes instead to the Museum or somewhere, and reads carefully every daily and weekly journal, I believe, in England. Her business is to pick out possible libels in them—and to furnish her employers, a certain firm of solicitors, with a daily list of these. They communicate with the aggrieved people, notifying them that they *are* aggrieved, which they very likely would not otherwise have known, and the result is, of course, a very fine and spirited crop of litigation.”

“Then that accounts for all the recent——”

“Perhaps not quite *all*,” put in Uncle Dudley. “But the Timby-Hucks is both energetic and vigilant, and she tells me she is doing splendidly. She is very enthusiastic about it, naturally. She says that while the money is, of course, an object, her real satisfaction is in the humanitarian aspects of her work.”

“I am not sure that I follow,” I said doubtingly.

“No, I didn’t altogether myself at the start,” said Uncle Dudley, “but as she explains it, it is very simple. You see business is in a bad way in London—worse, they say, than usual. The number of unemployed is something dreadful to think of, so I am told by those who have thought of it. There are many thousands of people with no food, no fire, no clothes to speak of. Most people are discouraged about this. They can’t see how the thing can be improved. But Miss Timby-Hucks has a very ingenious idea. Why, she asks, do not all the Unemployed sue all the newspapers for libel? Do you catch the notion?”

“By George!” I exclaimed, “that is a bold, comprehensive thought!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” cried Uncle Dudley. “I am immensely attracted by it. For one thing, it is so secure, so certain! Broadly speaking, there are no risks at all. I suppose there has never yet been a case, no matter what its so-called merits, in which the English newspaper hasn’t been cast in damages of some sort Nobody is too humble or too shady to get a verdict against an editor or newspaper proprietor. Miss Timby-Hucks relates several most touching instances where the wolf was actually at the door, the children shoeless and hungry, the mother prostrated by drink, rain coming through the roof and so on—and everything has been changed to peace and contentment by the happy thought of bringing a libel suit. The father now wears a smile and a white waistcoat; the drains have been repaired; the little children, nicely washed and combed, kick each other’s shins with brand new boots, and sing cheerfully beneath a worsted-work motto of ‘God bless our Home!’ I find myself much affected by the thought.”

“You had always a tender heart,” I responded. “I suppose there would be no trouble about the Judges?”

“Not the least in the world,” said Uncle Dudley, with confidence. “Of course the Bench would have to be greatly enlarged, but there need be no fear on that score. There is a mysterious but beneficent rule, my boy, which you can always count upon in this making of judges—no matter how hail-fellow-well-met an eminent lawyer may be, no matter how intimate his connection with newspapers, how large his indebtedness to them for his career—the moment he gets on the Bench he catches the full, fine, old-crusted judicial spirit toward the Press. The scales fall with a bang from his eyes, and he sees the editor and newspaper proprietor as they really are—designing criminals, mercenary reprobates, social pests—to be lectured and bullied and put down. O, you may rely on the Judges! They are as safe as a new Liberal peer is to vote Tory.”

“But the ‘power of the Press’?” I urged. “If the newspapers combine in protest, and——”

“You talk at random!” said Uncle Dudley almost austerely. “I should say the most certain, the most absolutely reliable, element in the whole case is the fact that newspapers do not combine. Whenever one editor gets hit, all the others grin. One journal is mulcted in heavy damages: the rest have all a difficulty in dissembling their delight. You read in natural history that kites are given to falling upon one of their kind which gets wounded or decrepit, and picking out its eyes. Well, kites are also made of newspapers.”

“And juries?” I began to ask.

“Here we are,” remarked Uncle Dudley, turning in toward the guarded portals of the great hall.

"I have a friend among the attendants here, a thoughtful and discerning man. I will learn from him where we may look for the spiciest case. He takes a lively interest in the flaying of editors. I believe he was once a printer. He will tell us where the axe gleams most savagely to-day: where; we shall get the most journalistic blood for our money. You were speaking of juries. Just take a look at one of them—if you are not afraid of spoiling your luncheon—and you will see that they speak for themselves. They regard all newspapers as public enemies—particularly when the betting tips have been more misleading than usual. They stand by their kind. They 'give the poor man a chance' without hesitation, without fail. They are here to avenge the discovery of movable types, and they do it. Come with me, and witness the disembowelling of a daily, the hamstringing of a sub-editor—a publisher felled by the hand of the Law like a bullock. Since the bear-pits of Bankside were closed there has been no such sport."

Unhappily, it turned out that none of the Judges had come down to the Courts that day. There was a threat of east wind in the air. "You see, if they don't live, to a certain age they get no pensions, and their heirs turn a key in the lock on the old gentlemen in weather like this," explained Uncle Dudley, turning disappointedly away.

Detailing certain Prudential Measures taken during the Panic incident to a Late Threatened Invasion

I HOPE," said Mrs Albert, "that I am as free to admit my errors in judgment as another. Evidently there has been a mistake in this matter, and it is equally obvious that I am the one who must have made it. I did not need to have this pointed out to me, Dudley. What I looked to you for was advice, counsel, sympathy. You seem not to realise at all how important this is to me. A false step now may ruin everything—and you simply sit there and grin!"

"My dear sister," replied Uncle Dudley, smoothing his face, "the smile was involuntary. It shall not recur. I was only thinking of Albert's enthusiasm for the——"

"Yes, I know!" put in Mrs Albert; "for that girl with the zouave jacket——"

"*And* the scarlet petticoat," prompted Uncle Dudley.

"*And* the crinoline," said the lady.

"O, he did not insist upon that. I recall his exact words. 'Whether this under-garment,' he said, 'be made of some stiff material like horsehair, or by means of steel hoops, is a mere question of detail.' No, Albert expressly kept an open mind on that point."

"I agree with you," remarked Mrs Albert coldly, "to the extent that he certainly does keep his mind on it. He has now reverted to the subject, I should think, at least twenty times. I am not so blind as you may imagine. I notice that that Mr Labouchere also keeps on referring, every week, to another girl in *her* zouave jacket, whom *he* remembers with equal fondness, apparently."

"Yes," put in Uncle Dudley, "those words about the 'stiff material like horsehair' *were* in *Truth*. I daresay Albert simply read them there, and just unconsciously repeated them. We often do inadvertent, unthinking things of that sort."

Mrs Albert shook her head. "It is nothing to me, of course," she said, "but I cannot help feeling that the middle-aged father of a family might concentrate his thoughts upon something nobler, something higher, than the recollection of the charms of a red petticoat, thirty years ago. That is so characteristic of men. They cannot discuss a question broadly——"

"Think not?" queried Uncle Dudley, with interest. "You should listen at the keyhole sometime, after you have led the ladies out from dinner."

"I mean personally, in a general way. They always particularise. Albert, for example, allows all his views on this very important question to be coloured by the fact that when he was a young man he admired some girl in a short red Balmoral petticoat. Whenever conversation touches upon any phase of the whole subject of costume, out he comes with his tiresome adulation of that particular garment. Of course, I ask no questions—I should prefer not to be informed—I try not even to draw inferences—but I notice that Ermyntrude is beginning to observe the persistency with which her father——"

"My good Emily," urged Uncle Dudley, consolingly, "far back in the Sixties we all liked that girl; we couldn't help ourselves—she was the only girl there was. And we think of her fondly still—we old fellows—because for us she was also the last there was! When she went out, lo and behold! we too had gone out, not to come back any more. When Albert and I babble about a scarlet petticoat, it is only as a symbol of our own far-away youth. O delicious vision!—the bright, bright red, the skirt that came drooping down over it, not hiding too much that pretty little foot and ankle, the dear zouave jacket moulding itself so delicately to the persuasive encircling arm——"

"Dudley! I really must recall you to yourself," said Mrs Albert. "We were speaking of quite another matter. I am in a very serious dilemma. First of all, as I explained to you, to please the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn I became one of the Vice-Presidents of the Friendly Divided Skirt Association. You know how useful she can be, in helping to bring Ermyntrude out successfully. And of course everybody *knew* that, even if we *did* have them *made*, we should never *wear* them. That was *quite* out of the question."

“And then?” asked Uncle Dudley.

“Well, then, let me see—yes, next came the Neo-Dress-Improver League. I never understood what the object was, precisely; it was a kind of secession from the other, led by the Countess of Wimps, and I needn’t tell you that she is of the *utmost* importance to us, and there was simply *nothing* for me to do but to become a Lady Patroness of *that*. You were in extremely nice company—there were seven or eight ladies of title among the Patronesses, our names all printed together in beautiful little gilt letters—and you really weren’t committed to anything that I could make out. No—*that* was all right. I should do the same thing again, under the circumstances. No, the trouble came with the Amalgamated Anti-Crinoline Confederacy. That was where I was too hasty, I think.”

“That’s the thing with the protesting post-cards, isn’t it?” inquired Uncle Dudley.

“That very feature of it alone ought to have warned me,” Mrs Albert answered with despondency. “My own better sense should have told me that post-cards were incompatible with selectness. But you see, the invitations were sent out by the authoress of *The Street-Sprinkler’s Secret*, and that gave me the impression that it was to be literary—to represent Culture and the Arts, you know; and that appealed to me, of course, very strongly.”

“I have always feared that your literary impulses would run away with you,” Uncle Dudley declared gravely.

“It is my weak side; I don’t deny it,” replied his sister. “Where letters and authorship, and that sort of thing, you know, are concerned, it is my nature to be sympathetic. And besides, the Dowager Lady Thames-Ditton was very pronounced in favour of the movement, and I *couldn’t* fly in the face of that, could I? I must say, though, that I had my misgivings almost from the first. Miss Wallaby told the Rev. Mr Grayt-Scott that a lady she knew had looked over quite a peck or more of the post-cards which came in one day, and they were nine-tenths of them from Earl’s Court.”

“Yes,” remarked Uncle Dudley, “I think I have heard that the post-card reaches its most luxuriant state of literary usefulness in that locality. It was from that point that they tried to rush the Laureateship, you know.”

“Well, you can imagine how I felt when I heard it. It is all well enough to be literary—nobody realises that more than I do—and it is all very well to be loyal—of course! But one draws the line at Earl’s Court—at least, that part of it. I say frankly that it serves me right. I should have known better. One thing I cannot be too thankful for—Ermyntrude did not send a post-card. Some blessed instinct prompted me to tell her there was no hurry about it—that I did not like to see young girls too forward in such matters. And now—why—who knows—Dudley! I have an idea! Ermie shall join the Crinoline Defence League!”

“I see—the family will hedge on the crinoline issue. Capital!”

“You know, after all, we may have to wear them. It’s quite as likely as not. The old Duchess of West Ham is President of the League, and she is very influential in the highest quarters. Her Grace, I understand, *is* somewhat bandy, but she has always maintained the strictest Christian respectability, and her action in this matter will count for a great deal. Just think, if she should happen to take a fancy to Ermyntrude! That Miss Wallaby has thrust herself forward till she is actually a member of the Council, and she is going to deliver an address on ‘The Effect of Modesty on National Morals.’ She told our curate that at one of the meetings of the Council she came within an ace of being introduced to the Duchess herself. Now surely, if *she* can accomplish all this, Ermie ought to be able to do still more. Tell me, Dudley, what do *you* think?”

“I think,” replied Uncle Dudley musingly, “I think that the scarlet petticoat, *with* the zouave jack——”

Mrs Albert interrupted him with sternness. “Don’t you see,” she demanded, “that if it *does* come, the dear girl will share in the credit of bringing it in, and if it doesn’t come, I shall have the advantage of having helped to stave it off. Whichever side wins, there we are.”

Uncle Dudley rose, and looked thoughtfully out upon the fog, and stroked his large white moustache in slow meditation. “Yes—undoubtedly,” he said at last, “there we are.”

Dealing with the Deceptions of Nature, and the Freedom from, Illusion Inherent in the Unnatural

There was once a woman—obviously a thoughtful woman—who remarked that she had noticed that if she managed to live till Friday, she invariably survived the rest of the week. I did not myself know this philosopher, who is preserved to history in one of Roscoe Conkling’s speeches, but her discovery always recurs to me about this time of year, when February begins to disclose those first freshening glimpses of sunlight and blue skies to bleared, fog-smudged and shivering London. Aha! if we have won thus far, if we have contrived to get to February, then we shall surely see the Spring. At least the one has heretofore involved the other—and there is confident promise in the smile of a noon-day once more able to cast a shadow, albeit the teeth of the east wind gleam close behind that smile.

It was a day for a walk—no set and joyous rural tramp, indeed, with pipe and wallet, and a helpful spring underfoot in the clean hard roadway, and an honest, well-balanced stick for the bell-ringing gentry who shall come at you on wheels from behind—but just an orderly, contemplative urban ramble, brisk enough for warmth, but with no hurry, and above all no destination. And it was a day, moreover, for letting one’s fellow-creatures pass along with scant notice—a winter-ridden, shuffling, mud-stained company these, conscious of being not at all worth examination—and for giving eye instead to the house-fronts in the sunshine, and radiant chimneypots and tiles above them, and the signs of blessed, unaccustomed blue still further up. There was, it is true, an undeniable disproportion between the inner look of these things, and this gladness of the heart because of them. Glancing more closely, one could see that they were not taking the sun seriously, and, for their own part, were expecting more fogs next week. And farther westward, when stucco, brick, and stone gave way to park-land, it was apparent at sight that the trees were flatly incredulous.

They say that in Ireland, where the mildness of climate has in the past prompted many experiments with exotic growths, the trees not really indigenous to the island never learn sense, but year after year are gulled by this February fraud into gushing expansively forth with sap and tender shoots, only to be gripped and shrivelled by the icy after-hand of March. The native tree, however, knows this trick of old, and greets the sham Spring with a distinctive, though well-buttoned-up wink. In Kensington Park region one couldn't be sure that the trees really saw the joke. It is not, on the whole, a humourous neighbourhood. But at all events they were not to be fooled into premature buds and sprouts and kindred signs of silliness. Every stiffly exclusive drab trunk rising before you, every section of the brown lacework of twigs up above, seemed to offer a warning advertisement: "No connection with the sunshine over the way!"

Happily the flower-beds exhibited more sympathy. Up through the mould brave little snowdrops had pushed their pretty heads, and the crocuses, though with their veined outer cloaks of sulphur, mauve, and other tints still wrapped tight about them, wore almost a swaggering air to show how wholly they felt at home. Emboldened by this bravado, less confident fellows were peeping forth, though in such faltering fashion that one could scarcely tell which was squill, which narcissus or loitering jonquil. Still, it was good to see them. They too were glad that they had lived till February, because after that comes the Spring.

And it was better still, as I turned to stroll on, to behold coming toward me down the path, with little swinging step, and shapely head well up in air, none other than our Ermyntrude.

I say "our" because—it is really absurd to think of it—it seems only a few months ago since she was a sprawling tom-boy sort of a little girl, who sat on my knee and listened with her mouth open to my reminiscences of personal encounters with unicorns and the behemoth of Holy Writ. She must be now—by George! she *is*—not a minute under two-and-twenty. And that means—*hélas!* it undoubtedly means—that I am getting to be an old boy indeed. At Christmas-tide—I recall it now—Mrs Albert spoke of me as the oldest friend of the family. It sounded kindly at the time, and I had a special pleasure in the smile Ermyntrude wore as she, with the others, lifted her glass towards me. I won't say what vagrant thoughts and ambitions that smile did not raise in my mind—and, lo! they were toasting me as an amiable elderly friend of the Fernbank household. No wonder I am glad to have lived till February!

Ermyntrude had a roll of music in her hands. There was a charming glow on her cheeks, and a healthy, happy, sparkle in her eyes. She stopped short before me, with a little exclamation of not displeased surprise!

"Why, how nice to run upon you like this," she said, in high spirits. "We thought you must have gone off to the Riviera, or Algiers, or somewhere—for your cold, you know. Mamma was speaking of you only yesterday—hoping that you were taking care of yourself."

"Had I a cold?" I asked absently. The air had grown chillier. We walked along together, and she let me carry the music.

"O—you haven't heard," she exclaimed suddenly, "such news as I have for you! You couldn't ever guess!"

"Is it something about crinoline?" I queried. "Your mother was telling

"Rubbish!" said Ermyntrude gaily. "I'm engaged!"

The wind had really got round into the East, and I, fastened my coat at the collar. "I am sure"—I remarked at last—"I'm sure I congratulate—the happy young man. Do I know him?"

"I hardly think so," she replied. "You see, it's—it's what you might call rather sudden. We haven't known him ourselves very long—that is, intimately. You may have heard his name—the Honourable Knobbeleigh Jones. It's a very old family though the title is somewhat new. His father is Lord Skillyduff, you know."

"The shipping man?" I said, wearily.

"Yes. He and papa are together on some board or other. That is how we came to know them. Papa says he never saw such business ability and sterling worth combined in one man before—I'm speaking of the father, you know. He began life in quite a small way, with just a few ships that he rented, or something like that. Then there was a war on some coast in Africa or Australia—it begins with an A, I know—oh, *is* there a place called Ashantee?—yes, that's it—and he got the contract to take out four shiploads of hay to our troops—it would be for their horses, wouldn't it?"

"Yes: the asses connected with the military branch are needed at home—or at least are kept there."

"Well, after he started, he got orders to stop at some place and wait for other orders. He did so, and he waited four years and eight months. Those orders never came. The hay all rotted, of course: the ships almost moulded away: I daresay some of the crew died of old age—But Mr Jones never stirred from his post. Finally, some English official came on him by accident—quite! and so he was recalled. Papa says very few men would have shown such tenacity of purpose and grasp of the situation. Mamma says his fidelity to duty was magnificent."

"Magnificent—yes," I commented; "but it wasn't war."

"Oh, bless you! there *was* no war *then*," explained Ermyntrude. "The war had been ended for *years*. And all that while the pay for shipping that hay had been going on, so that the Government owed him—I think it was £45,000. Of course he got more contracts, and then he was made a baronet, and could build his own ships; and now he is a lord, and papa says the War Office would be quite helpless without him."

"And the son," I asked; "what does he do?"

"Why, nothing, of course!" said Ermyntrude, lifting her pretty brows a little in surprise. "He is the eldest son."

"I didn't know but he might have gone in for the Army, or Parliament, or something," I explained weakly: "just to occupy his mind."

She smiled to herself—somewhat grimly, I thought. “No,” she said, assuming a serious face, “he says doing things is all rot, if you aren’t obliged to do them. Of course, he goes in for hunting and shooting and all that, and he has a houseboat and a yacht, and one year he was in the All-Slumpshire eleven, but that was too much bother. He hates bother.”

We had come out upon the street now, and walked for a little in silence.

“Ermie,” I said at last, “you mustn’t be annoyed with me—this is one of my sentimental days, and you know as an old friend of the family I’ve a certain right of free speech—but this doesn’t seem to me quite good enough. A girl like you—beautiful and clever and accomplished, knowing your way about among books, and with tastes above the ruck—there ought to be a better outlook for you than this! I know that type of young man, and he isn’t in your street at all. Come now!” I went on, gathering courage, “look me in the face if you can, and tell me that you honestly love this young man, or that you really respect his father, or that you candidly expect to be happy. I defy you to do it!”

I was wrong. Ermyntrude did look me in the face, squarely and without hesitation. She halted for the moment to do so, and her gaze, though not unkindly, was full of serious frankness.

“There is one thing I do expect,” she said, calmly. “I expect to get away from Fernbank.”

Suggesting Considerations possibly heretofore Overlooked by Commentators upon the Laws of Property

You will find Dudley up in what he calls his library,” said Mrs Albert in the hallway. “I’m *so* sorry I must go out—but he’ll be glad to see you. And—let me entreat you, don’t give him any encouragement!”

“What!” I cried, “encourage Uncle Dudley? Oh—never, never!”

“No, just be firm with him,” Mrs Albert went on. “Say that it mustn’t be thought of for a moment. And Oh—by the way—it’s as well to warn you: *don’t* ask him what he did it for! It seems that every one asks him that—and he gets quite enraged about it now, when that particular question is put. As like as not he’d throw something at you.” She spoke earnestly, in low, impressive tones.

“Wild horses should not drag it from me,” I pledged myself. “I will not encourage him: I will not enrage him; I swear not to ask him what he did it for. But—if you don’t mind—could I, so to speak, bear the shock of learning what it is that he *has* done?”

“You haven’t heard?” Mrs Albert asked, glancing up at me, with an astonished face, as I stood on the stairs. When I shook my head, she put out her hand to the latch, and opened the door, as if to heighten the dramatic suspense. Then she turned and looked me in the eye with solemn intentness. “What has he done?” she echoed in a hollow voice: “You go upstairs and see!”

The door closed behind her, and I made my way noiselessly, two steps at a time, to the floor above. Some vague sense of disaster seemed to brood over the silent, half-lighted stairway and the deserted landing. I knocked at Uncle Dudley’s door—almost prepared to find my signal unanswered. But no, his voice came back, cheerily enough, and I entered the room.

“Oh, it’s you!” said my friend, rising from his chair. “Glad to see you,”—and we shook hands. Standing thus, I found myself staring into his face with a rude and prolonged fixity of gaze, under which he first smiled—a strange, unwholesome sort of smile—then flushed a little, then scowled and averted his glance.

“Great heavens!” I exclaimed at last. “Why, man alive, what on earth possessed you to—”

“Come now!” broke in Uncle Dudley, with peremptory sternness. “Chuck it!”

“Yes—I know”—I stammered haltingly along—“I promised I wouldn’t ask you—but—”

“But the original simian instincts triumph over your resolutions, eh?” said my friend, crustily. “Yes, I know. I’ve had pretty nearly a week of it now. That question has been asked me, I estimate, somewhere about six hundred and seventy-eight times since last Thursday. It’s only fair to you to tell you that I have registered a vow to hit the next man who asks me that fool of a question—‘What did you do it for?’—straight under his left ear. I probably saved your life by interrupting you.”

Though the words were fierce, there was a marked return of geniality in the tone. I took the liberty of putting a hand over Uncle Dudley’s shoulder, and marching him across to the window.

“Let’s have a good look at you,” I said.

“I did it myself; I did it with my little hatchet; I did it because I wanted to; I had a right to do it; I should do it again if the fit struck me——” Thus, with mock gravity, Uncle Dudley ran on as I scrutinised his countenance in the strong light. “And furthermore,” he added, “I don’t care one single hurrah in Hades whether you like it or not.”

“I think on the whole,” I mused aloud—“yes, I think I rather do like it—now that I accustom myself to it.”

Uncle Dudley’s face brightened on the instant. “Do you really?” he exclaimed, and beamed upon me. In spite of his professed indifference to my opinion, it was obvious that I had pleased him.

“Sit down,” he said—“there are the matches behind you—hope these aren’t too green for you. Yes, my boy, I created quite a flutter in the hen-yard, I can tell you. Did my sister tell you?—she nearly fainted, and little Amy burst out boo-hooing as if she’d lost her last friend. When you come to think of it, old man, it’s really too ridiculous, you know.”

“It certainly has its grotesque aspects,” I admitted.

Uncle Dudley looked up sharply, as if suspecting some ironical meaning in my words. “You really do think it’s an improvement?” he asked, with a doubtful note in his voice.

“Of course, it makes a tremendous change,” I said, diplomatically, “and the novelty tends perhaps to confuse judgment: but I must confess the result is—is, well, very interesting.”

My friend did not look wholly satisfied. “It shows what stupid people we are,” he went on in a dogmatic way. “Why, the way they’ve gone on, you’d think I had no property rights in the thing at all—that I was merely a trustee for it—bound to give an account to every Tom-Dick-and-Harry who came along and had nothing better to occupy his mind with. And then that eternal, vacuous, woollen-brained ‘What did you do it for?’ Oh, that’s got to be too sickening for words! And the confounded familiarity of the whole thing! Why, hang me, if even the little Jew cigar dealer down on the corner didn’t feel entitled to pass what he took to be some friendly remarks on the subject. ‘Vy,’ he said, ‘if I could say vidout vlattery, vot a haddsobe jeddlebad you ver, and vy did you do dot by yourself?’ It gets on a man’s nerves, you know, things like that.”

“But hasn’t anyone liked the change?” I asked.

Uncle Dudley sighed. “That’s the worst of it,” he said, dubiously. “Only two men have said they liked it—and it happens that they are both persons of conspicuously weak intellect. That’s rather up against me, isn’t it? But on the other hand, you know, people who are silliest about everything else always get credit for knowing the most about art and beauty and all that. Perhaps in such a case as this, I daresay their judgment might be better than all the others. And after all, what do *I* care? That’s the point I make: that it’s *my* business and nobody else’s. If a man hasn’t got a copyright in his own personal appearance, why there is no such thing as property. But instead of recognising this, any fellow feels free to come up and say: ‘You look like an unfrocked priest,’ or ‘Hullo! another burglar out of work,’ and he’s quite surprised if you fail to show that you’re pleased with the genial brilliancy of his remarks. I don’t suppose there is any other single thing which the human race lapses into such rude and insolent meddlesomeness over as it does over this.”

“It *is* pathetic,” I admitted—“but—but it’ll soon grow again.”

Uncle Dudley laughed a bitter laugh. “By Jove,” he cried, “I’ve more than half a mind not to let it. It would serve ’em right if I didn’t. Why, do you know—you’d hardly believe it! My sister had a dinner party on here for Saturday night, and after I’d—I’d done it—she cancelled the invitations—some excuse about a family loss—a bereavement, my boy. Well, you know, treatment of that sort puts a man on his mettle. I’m entitled to resent it. And besides—you know—of course it does make a great change—but somehow I fancy that when you get used to it—come now—the straight griffin, as they say—what do *you* think?”

“I’m on oath not to encourage you,” I made answer.

“There you have it!” cried Uncle Dudley: “the old tyrannical conspiracy against the unusual, the individual, the true! Let nobody dare to be himself! Let us have uniformity, if all else perishes. The frames must be alike in the Royal Academy, that’s the great thing; the pictures don’t matter so much. You see our women-folk now, this very month, getting ready to case themselves in ugly hoops which they hate, at the bidding of they know not whom, because, if they did not, the hideous possibility of one woman being different from another woman would darken the land. A man is not to be permitted the pitiful privilege of seeing his own mouth, not even once in fifteen years, simply because it temporarily inconveniences the multitude in their notions as to how he is in the habit of looking! What rubbish it is!”

“It *is* rubbish,” I assented—“and you are talking it. Your sister who fainted, your niece who wept, your friends who averted their gaze in anguish, the hordes of casual jackasses who asked why you did it, the kindly little Jew cigar man who broke forth in lamentations—these are the world’s jury. They have convicted you—sorrowfully but firmly. You yourself, for all your bravado, realise the heinousness of your crime. You are secretly ashamed, remorseful, penitent. I answer for you—you will never do it again.”

“And yet it isn’t such a bad mouth, either,” mused Uncle Dudley, with a lingering glance at the mirror over the mantel. “There is humour, delicacy of perception, affection, gentleness—ever so many nice qualities about it which were all hidden up before. The world ought to welcome the revelation—and it throws stones instead. Ah well!—pass the matches—let us yield gracefully to the inevitable! It shall grow again.”

“Mrs Albert will be so glad,” I remarked.

Narrating the Failure of a Loyal Attempt to Circumvent Adversity by means of Modern Appliances

If his name was Jabez, why weren’t we told so, I’d like to know?” demanded Mrs Albert of me, with a momentary flash in her weary glance. “What right had the papers to go on calling him J. Spencer, year after year, while he was deluding the innocent, and fattening upon the bodies of his dupes? To be sure, now that the mask is off, and he has fled, they speak of him always as Jabez. Why didn’t they do it before, while honest people might still have been warned? But no—they never did—and now it’s too late—too late!”

The poor lady’s voice broke pathetically upon this reiterated plaint. She bowed her head, and as I looked with pained sympathy upon the drooping angle of her proud face, I could see the shadows about her lips quiver.

A sad tale indeed it was, to which I had been listening—here in a lonesome corner of the cloistral, dim-lit solitude of the big drawing-room at Fernbank. It was not a new story. Kensington has known it by heart for a generation. Bloomsbury learned it earlier, and before that it was familiar in Soho—away off in the old days when the ruffling gentry of Golden Square fought for the chance of buying ingenious John Law's South Sea scrip. And even then, the experience was an ancient and half-forgotten memory of Bishopsgate and the Minories. It was the old, old tragedy of broken fortunes.

Mrs Albert was clear that it began with the Liberator troubles. I had my own notion that Mr Albert Grundy was skating on thin ice before the collapse of the building societies came. However that may be, there was no doubt whatever that the cumulative Australian disasters had finished the business. There were melancholy details in her recital which I lack the courage to dwell upon. The horse and brougham were gone; the lease of Fernbank itself was offered for sale, with possession before Michaelmas, if desired; Ermyntrude's engagement was as good as off.

"It won't be a bankruptcy," said Mrs Albert, lifting her face and resolutely winking the moisture from her lashes. "We shall escape that—but for the moment at least I must abandon my position in society. Dudley is over to-day looking at a small place in Highgate, although Albert thinks he would prefer Sydenham. My own feeling is that some locality from which you could arrive by King's Cross or St Paneras would be best. One never meets anybody one knows there. Then, when matters adjust themselves again, as of course they will, we could return here—to this neighbourhood, at least—and just mention casually having been out at our country place—on the children's account, of course. And Floribel *is* delicate, you know."

"Oh well, then," I said, trying to put buoyance into my tone, "it isn't so had after all. And you feel—Albert feels—quite hopeful about things coming right again?"

My friend's answering nod of affirmation had a certain qualifying dubiety about it. "Yes, we're hopeful," she said. "But a fortnight ago, I felt positively sanguine. Nobody ever worked harder than I did to deserve success, any way. I only failed through gross treachery—and that, too, at the hands of the very people of whom I could never, *never* have believed it. When you find the aristocracy openly actuated by mercenary motives, as I have done this past month, it almost makes you ask what the British nation is coming to!"

"Dear me!" I exclaimed, "is it as bad as that?"

"You shall judge for yourself," said Mrs Albert gravely. "You know that I organised—quite early in the Spring—the Loyal Ladies' Namesake Committee of Kensington. I do not boast in saying that I really organised it, quite from its beginnings. The idea was mine; practically all the labour was mine. But when one is toiling to realise a great ideal like that, one frequently loses sight of small details. I ought to have known better—but I took a serpent to my bosom. I was weak enough to associate with me in the enterprise that monument of duplicity and interested motives—the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn. Why, she hadn't so much as an initial letter to entitle her to belong——"

"I am not sure that I follow you," I put in. "Ladies' Namesake Committee—initial letter—I don't seem to grasp the idea."

"It's perfectly simple," explained Mrs Albert. "The idea was that all the ladies—our set, you know—whose name was 'May' should combine in subscribing for a present."

"But your name is Emily," I urged, thoughtlessly.

"Oh, we weren't exactly literal about it," said Mrs Albert; "we *couldn't* be, you know. It would have shut out some of our very best people. But I came very near the standard, indeed. My second name is Madge. You take the first two letters of that, and the 'y' from Emily, and there you have it. Oh, I assure you, very few came even as near it as that—and as I said to Dudley at the time, if you think of it, even *her* name isn't *really* May. It's only a popular contraction. But that Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn, she had no actual right whatever to belong. Her names are Hester Winifred Edith. She hasn't even one *letter* right!"

"Ah, that was indeed treachery!" I ejaculated.

"Oh, no, that, was not what I referred to," Mrs Albert set me right. "Of course, I was aware of her names. I had seen them in the 'Peerage' for years. It was what she did after her entrance that covers her with infamy. But I will narrate the events in their order. First, we collected £1100. Of course, our own contribution was not large, but Ermyntrude and I hunted the various church registers—we don't speak of it, but even the Nonconformist ones we went through—and we got a tremendous number of Christian names more or less what was desired, and our circulars were sent to *every one*, far and near. As I said, we raised quite £1100. Then there came the question of the gift."

Mrs Albert uttered this last sentence with such deliberate solemnity that I bowed to show my consciousness of its importance.

"Yes," she went on, "the selection of the gift. Now I had in mind a most appropriate and useful present. Have you heard of the Oboid Oil Engine? No? Well, it is an American invention, and has been brought over here by an American, who has bought the European rights from the inventor. He is in the next building to Albert, in the City, and they meet almost every day at luncheon, and have struck up quite a friendship. He has connections which might be of the *utmost* importance to Albert, and if Albert could only have been of service to him in introducing this engine, there is literally *no telling* what might not have come of it. Albert does not *say* that a partnership would have resulted, but I can read it in his face."

"But would an oil engine have been—under the circumstances—you know what I mean——" I began.

"Oh, *most* suitable!" responded Mrs Albert with conviction. "It is really, it seems, a very surprising piece of machinery. After it's once bought, the cheapness of running it is simply *absurd*. It does all sorts of things at no expense worth mentioning—anything you want it to do. It appears that if it had been invented at that time, the pyramids in Egypt could have been built by it for something like 130 per cent, less than their cost is estimated to have been—or something like that. Oh, it is quite extraordinary, I assure you. Albert says he could stand and watch it working for hours—especially if he had an interest in the company."

"But I hadn't heard that there were any new pyramid plans on just now—although, when I think of it, Shaw-

Lefevre did have some Westminster Abbey project which——"

"No, no!" interrupted Mrs Albert. "One of the engine's greatest uses is in agriculture. It does *everything*—threshes, garners, mows, milks—or no, not that, but almost *everything*. No self-respecting farmer, they say, dreams of being without one—that is, of course, if he knows about it. You can see what it would have meant, if one had been thus publicly introduced on the princely farm at Sandringham. All England would have rung with demands for the Oboid—and Albert feels sure that the American man would have been grateful—and—and—then perhaps we need never have left Fernbank at all."

My poor friend shook her head mournfully at the thought

"And the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn?" I asked.

The fire came back into Mrs Albert's eye. "That woman," she said, with bitter calmness, "was positively not ashamed to intrude her own mercenary and self-seeking designs upon this loyal and purely patriotic association. Why, she did it almost openly. She intrigued behind my back with whole streetsful of people that one would hardly know on ordinary occasions, paid them calls in a carriage got up for the occasion with a bright new coat of arms, made friends with them, promised them heaven only knows what, and actually secured nineteen votes to my three for the purchase of a mouldy old piece of tapestry—something about Richard III and Oliver Cromwell meeting on the battlefield, I think the subject is—which belonged to her husband's family. Of course, my lips are sealed, but I have been *told* that at Christie's it would hardly have fetched £100. I say nothing myself, but I can't prevent people drawing certain deductions, can I? And when I reflect also that her two most active supporters in this nefarious business were Lady Thames-Ditton—whose financial difficulties are notorious—and the Countess of Wimps—— whose tradespeople—well, we won't go into *that*—it does force one to ask whether the fabric of British society is not being undermined at its very top. In this very day's paper I read that the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn has hired a yacht, and will spend the summer in Norwegian waters—while we—we——"

The door opened, and we made out through the half-light the comfortable figure of Uncle Dudley. He was mopping his brow, and breathed heavily from his long walk as he advanced.

"Well?" Mrs Albert asked, in a saddened and subdued tone, "Did you see the place?"

"There are five bedrooms on the two upper floors," he made answer, "but there's no bath-room, and the bus doesn't come within four streets of the house."

Introducing Scenes from a Foreign Country, and also conveying Welcome Intelligence, together with some Instruction

It was at a little village perched well up on one of the carriage-roads ascending the Brocken, a fortnight or so ago, that I received a wire from Uncle Dudley. It was kind of him to think of it—all the more as he had good news to tell. "Family lighted square on their feet," was what the message said, and I was glad to gather from this that the Grundys had weathered their misfortunes, and that Mrs Albert was herself again.

The thought was full of charm. It seemed as if I had never realised before how fond I was of these good people. In sober fact; I dare say that I had not dwelt much upon their woes during my holiday. But now, with this affectionately thoughtful telegram addressing me as their oldest friend, the one whom they wished to be the first to share the joy of their rescued state, it was easy enough to make myself believe that my whole vacation had been darkened with brooding over their unhappiness.

It had not occurred to me before, but that was undoubtedly why I had not liked the Harz so much this year as usual. Now that I thought of it, walking down the birch-lined footpath towards the hamlet and the telegraph office, the place seemed to have gone off a good deal. In other seasons, before the spectre of cholera flooded its sylvan retreats with an invading horde of Hamburgers, the Harzwald had been my favourite resort. I had grown to love its fir-clad slopes, its shadowed glens, its atmosphere of prehistoric myth and legend, as if I were part and product of them all. Its people, too, had come much nearer to my breast than any other Germans ever could. I had enjoyed being with them just because they were what the local schoolmaster disdainfully declared them to be—*Erdzertrümmerungsprozeszuribekanntevolk*—that is to say, people entirely ignorant of the scientific theories about geological upheavals and volcanic formations, and so able cheerfully to put their trust in the goblins who reared these strange boulders in fantastic piles on every hill top, and to hear with good faith the shouts of the witches as they bounded over the Hexentanzplatz. Last year it had seemed even worth the added discomfort of the swarming Hamburgers to be again in this wholesome, sweet-aired primitive place. But this year—I saw now clearly as I looked over Uncle Dudley's message once more—it had not been so pleasant. The hotel boy, Fritzchen, whom I had watched year after year with the warmth of a fatherly well-wisher—smiling with satisfaction at his jovial countenance, his bustling and competent ways, and his comical attempts at English—had this season swollen up into a burly and consequential lout, with a straw-coloured sprouting on his upper-lip, and a military manner. They called him Fritz now, and he gave me beer out of the old keg after I had heard the new one tapped.

The evening gatherings of the villagers in the hotel, too, were not amusing as they once had been. The huge lion-maned and grossly over-bearded *Kantor*, or music-master, who came regularly at nightfall to thump on the table with his bludgeon-like walking stick, to roar forth impassioned monologues on religion and politics, and to bellow ceaselessly at Fritzchen for more beer, had formerly delighted me. This time he seemed only a noisy nuisance, and the half-circle of grave old retired foresters and middle-aged *Jàger* officers who sat watching him over their pipes, striving vainly now and again to get in a word edgewise about the auctions of felled trees in the woods, or the mutinous tendencies of the charcoal-burners, presented themselves in the light of tiresome prigs. If they had been worth their salt, I felt, they would long ago have brained the Kantor with their stoneware mugs. Even as I walked I began to be conscious that a three weeks' stay in the Harz was a good deal of time, and that the remaining third would certainly hang on my hands.

By the time I reached the telegraph station I had my answer to Uncle Dudley ready in my mind. He liked the forcible imagery of Australia and the Far West; and I would speak to him at this joyful juncture after his own heart. It seemed that I could best do this by giving him to understand that I was celebrating his news—that I was, in one of his own phrases, "painting the town red." It required some ingenuity to work this idea out right, but I finally wrote what appeared to answer the purpose:—"*Brocken und Umgebung sind roth gemalen*"—and handed it in to the man at the window.

He was a young man with close-cropped yellow hair and spectacles, holding his chin and neck very stiff in the high collar of his uniform. He glanced over my despatch, at first with careless dignity. Then he read it again attentively. Then he laid it on the table, and bent his tight-buttoned form over it as well as might be in a severe and prolonged scrutiny. At last he raised himself, turned a petrifying gaze on through his glasses at me, and shook his head.

"It is not true," he said. "Some one has you deceived."

"But," I tried to explain to him, with the little German that I knew scattering itself in all directions in the face of this crisis, "it is a figure of speech, a joke, a——"

The telegraph man stared coldly at my luckless despatch, and then at me. "You would wish to state to your friend, perhaps," he suggested, "that they seem as if they had been coloured with red, owing to the change in the leaves."

"No, no," I put in. "It must be that they *have* been painted, *are* painted, or he will not me understand."

"But, my good sir," retorted the operator with emphasis, "they are *not* painted! From the door gaze you forth! What make you with this nonsense, that Brocken and vicinity are red painted?"

"Well, then," I said wearily, oppressed by the magnitude of the task, "I don't know how to word it myself, but you can fix it for me. Just say that I am *going* to paint them red—that will do just as well.

"But you shall not! It is forbidden!" exclaimed the official, holding himself like a poker, and glaring vehemence through his glasses. "It is strongly forbidden! When you one brush-mark shall make, quick to the prison go you. In Germany have we for natural beauty respect—also laws."

Reluctantly, but of necessity, I abandoned metaphor, and in a humble spirit telegraphed in English to Uncle Dudley at his club that I was very glad. Even as my pen clung in irresolution on the paper over this word "glad," the impulse rose in me to add: "*Tired of Harz. Am returning immediately*."

"When the same here is," remarked the operator, moodily studying the unknown words, "in Brunswick stopped it will be."

I translated it for him, and added, "I go from here home, to be where officials their own business mind."

He nodded, not unamiably, and replied as he handed me out my change: "Yes, I know: England. So well their own business there officials mind, that Balfour to Argentina easily comes."

Walking up the hillside again, already quite captive to the fascination of the morrow's homeward flight, I met at the turn of the path a family party—father, mother, and two girls in the younger teens—seated along the rocky siding, and gazing with a common air of dejection upon a portentous row of bags and portmanteaus at their feet. The notion that they were Hamburgers died still-born. Nothing more obviously un-German than these wayfarers was ever seen.

"I hope, sir," the man spoke up as I approached, "that I am right in presuming that you speak English!"

I bowed assent, and even as I did so, recognised him. "I hope *I* am right," I answered, "in thinking that I have met you before—at Mr Albert Grundy's in London—you are the American gentleman with the Oboid Oil Engine, are you not?"

"Well, by George!" he cried, rising and offering his hand with frank delight, and introducing me in a single comprehensive wave to his wife and daughters. "Yes, sir," he went on, "and I wish I had an Oboid here right now—up in the basement of that stone boarding-house on the knoll there—just for the sake of heating up, and shutting down the valves, and blowing the whole damned thing sky-high. That would suit me, sir, right down to the ground."

"Were strangers here, sir," he explained in answer to my question: "we'd seen a good deal of the Dutch at home—I mean *our* home—and we thought we'd like to take a look at 'em in the place they come from. Well, sir, we've had our look, and we're satisfied. We don't want any more on our plate, thank you. One helping is an elegant sufficiency. Do you know the trick they played on us? Why, I took a team of horses yesterday from a place they called Ibsenburg or Ilsenburg, or some such name, and had it explained to my driver that he was to take us up to the top of the Brocken, there, and stop all night, and fetch us back this morning. When we got up as far as Shierke, there, it was getting pretty dark, and the women-folks were nervous, and so we laid up for the night. There didn't seem anything for the driver to do but set around in the kitchen and drink beer, and he needed money for that, and so I gave him some loose silver, and told him to make himself at home. We got the words out of a dictionary for that—*machen sie selbst zu Heim* we figured 'em out to be—and I spoke them at him slowly and distinctly, so that he had no earthly excuse for not understanding. But, would you believe it, sir, the miserable cuss just up and skipped out, horses, rig and all, while we were getting supper! And here we were this morning, landed high and dry. No conveyance, nobody to comprehend a word of English, no nothing. We haven't seen the top of their darned mountain even."

"What I'm more concerned about, I tell Wilbur," put in the lady, "is seeing the bottom of it. If they had only sense enough to make valises and bonnet-boxes ball-shaped, we could have rolled 'em down hill."

"There'll be no trouble about all that," I assured them, and we talked for a little about the simple enough process of getting their luggage carried down to the village, and of finding a vehicle there. I, indeed, agreed to make one of their party on quitting the Harz, that very afternoon.

"And now tell me about the Grundys," I urged, when these more pressing matters were out of the way. "I got a wire to-day saying—hinting that they are in luck's way again."

"Is that so?" exclaimed the American, at once surprised and pleased. "I'm glad to hear it. I can't guess what it might be in. Grundy's got so many irons in the fire—some white hot, some lukewarm, some frosted straight through—you never can tell. The funny thing is—he can't tell himself. Why, sir, those men of yours in the City of London, they don't know any more about business than a babe unborn. If they were in New York they'd have their eyeteeth skinned out of their heads in the shake of a lamb's tail. Why, we've been milking them dry for a dozen years back. And yet, you know, somehow——"

"Somehow—?" I echoed, encouragingly.

"Well, sir, somehow—that's the odd thing about it—they don't stay milked."

Disclosing the Educational Influence exerted by the Essex Coast, and other Matters, including Reasons for Joy

Sit down here by the fire—no, in the easy chair," said Ermyntrude, with a note of solicitude in her kindly voice. "Mamma won't be home for half an hour yet, and I want a nice, quiet, serious talk with you. Oh, it's going to be extremely serious, and you must begin by playing that you are at least one hundred and fifty years old."

"That won't be so difficult," I replied, not without the implication of injury. "It will only be adding a few decades to the venerableness that I seem always to possess in your eyes."

"Oh!" said Ermie, and looked at me inquiringly for a moment. Then she seated herself, and gazed with much steadiness into the fire. I waited for the nice, serious talk to begin—and waited a long time.

"Well, my dear child," I broke in upon the silence at last, "I hoped to have been the very first to come and tell your mother how deeply glad I was to see you all back again in Fernbank. But that wretched rheumatism of mine—*at my age*, you know———"

I was watching narrowly for even the faintest sign of deprecation. She did not stir an eyelash.

"Yes," she suddenly began, still intently gazing into the fire; "papa has got his money all back, and more. That is, it isn't the same money, but somebody else's—I'm sure I don't know whose. Sometimes I feel sorry for those other people, whoever they are, who have had to give it up to us. Then, other times, I am so glad simply to be in again where it's warm that I don't care."

"The firelight suits your face, Ermie," I said, noting with the pleasure appropriate to my position as the oldest friend of the family, how sweetly the soft radiance played upward upon the fair young rounded throat and chin, and tipped the little nostrils with rosy light.

"Fortunately," she went on, as if I had not spoken, "some Americans took the house furnished in September for three months—I think, poor souls, that they believed it was the London season—and so we never had to break up, and we were able to get back again in time for Uncle Dudley to plant all his bulbs. They seem to have been very quiet people. Mamma had a kind of notion that they would practise with bucking horses on the tennis-lawn, and shoot at bottles and clay pigeons here in the drawing-room. The only thing we could find that they did was to paste thick paper over the ventilator in the dining-room. And yet a policeman told our man that they slept with their bedroom windows open all night. Curious, isn't it?"

"I like to have one of these 'nice, quiet, serious talks' with you, Ermie," I said.

Even at this she did not lift her eyes from the grate. "Oh, don't be impatient—it will be serious enough," she warned me. "They say, you know, that drowning people see, in a single instant of time, whole years of events, whole books full of things. Well, I've been under water for six months, and—and—I've noticed a good deal."

"Ah! is there a submarine observation station at Clacton-on-Sea? Now you speak of it, I *have* heard of queer fish being studied there."

"None queerer than we, my dear friend, you may be sure. Mamma was right in choosing the place. We never once saw a soul we knew. Of course, it is the dullest and commonest thing on earth—but it exactly fitted us during that awful period. We were going at first to Cromer, but mamma learned that that was the chosen resort of dissolute theatrical people—it seems there has been a poem written in which it is called 'Poppy land,' which mamma saw at once must be a cover for opium-eating and all sorts of dissipation. So we went to Clacton instead. But what I was going to say is this—I did a great deal of thinking all through those six months. I don't say that I am any wiser than I was, because, for that matter, I am very much less sure about things than I was before. But I was simply a blank contented fool then. Now it's different to the extent that I've stirred up all sorts of questions and problems buzzing and barking about me, and I don't know the answers to them, and I can't get clear of them, and they're driving me out of my head—and there you are. That's what I wanted to talk with you about."

I shifted my feet on the fender, and nodded with as sensible an expression as I could muster.

"That's why I said you must pretend to yourself that you are very old—quite a fatherly person, capable of giving a girl advice—sympathetic advice. In the first place—of course you know that the engagement with that Hon. Knobbeleigh Jones has been off for ages. Don't interrupt me! It isn't worth speaking of except for one point. His father, Lord Skillyduff, was the principal rogue in the combination which plundered papa of his money. Having got the Grundy money they had no use for the Grundy girl. Now, he justified his rascality by pleading that he had to make provision for *his* daughters, and everybody said he was a good father. Papa goes in again through some other opening, and after a long fight brings out a fresh fortune, which he has taken away from somebody else—and I heard him tell mamma that he was doing it for the sake of *his* daughters. People will say *he* is a good father—I know *I* do."

"None better in this world," I assented cordially.

"Well, don't you see," Ermyntrude went on, "that puts daughters in the light of a doubtful blessing. Papa's whole worry and struggle was for us—for *me*. I was the load on his back. I don't like to be a load. While we were prosperous, there was only one way for me to get down—that is by marriage. When we became poor, there was another way—that I should earn my own living. But this papa wouldn't listen to. He quite swore about it—vowed he would rather work his fingers to the bone; rather do anything, no matter what it was, or what people thought of him for doing it, than that a daughter of his should take care of herself. He would look upon himself as disgraced, he said. Those lodgings of ours at Clacton weren't specially conducive to good temper, I'm afraid; for I told him that the real disgrace would be to keep me in idleness to sell to some other Knobbeleigh Jones, or to palm me off on some better sort of young man who would bind himself to work for me all his life, and then find that I would have been dear at the price of a fortnight's labour—and then mamma cried.—and papa, he swore more—and—and—"

I stirred the fire here, and then blushed to rediscover that it was asbestos I was knocking about. "How stupid of me!" I exclaimed, and murmured something about having been a stranger to Fernbank so long.

Ermyntrude took no notice. "I made a pretence of going up to London on a visit," she continued, "and I spent five days looking about, making inquiries, trying to get some notion of how girls who supported themselves made a beginning. I talked a little with such few girls that I knew as were in town, and I cared to see—guardedly, of course. They had no idea—save in the way of the governess or music teacher. I'd cut my throat before I'd be either of those—forced to dress like ladies on the wages of a seamstress, and to smile under the insults of tradesmen's wives and their louts of children. An actress I might be, after I had starved a long time in learning my business—but before that mamma would have died of shame. Then there are typewriters, and lady journalists and telegraph clerks—I am surly enough sometimes to do that last to perfection—but they all have to have special talents or knowledge. As for saleswomen in the shops—there are a dozen poor genteel wretches standing outside ready to claw each other's eyes out for every vacancy. I went over Euston Road way at noon, and I watched the work-girls come out of the factories and workshops, and they had such sharp, knowing, bullying faces that I knew I should be a helpless fool among them. And watching them—and watching the other girls on the street... in the Strand and Piccadilly—I told you I was going to talk seriously, my dear friend—it all came to seem to me like a nightmare. It frightened me. These were the girls whose fathers had failed to provide for them—that was absolutely all the difference between them and me. I had looked lazily down at marriage as a chance of escaping being bored here at Fernbank. They were all looking fiercely up at marriage as the one only chance of rescue from weary toil, starvation wages, general poverty and misery. In both cases the idea was the same—to find some man, no matter what kind of a man, if only he will take it upon himself to provide something different. You see what poor, dependent things we really are! Why should it be so? That's what I want to know."

"Oh, that's all you want to know, is it?" I remarked, after a little pause. "Well, I think—I think you had better give me notice of the question."

"I have tried to read what thinkers say about it," she added; "but they only confuse one the more. There is a Dr Wallace whom the papers speak of as an authority, and he has been writing a long article this very week—or else it is an interview—and he says that everything will be all right, that all the nice women will marry all the good men, and that the other kinds will die off immediately, and everybody will be oh, so happy—in a 'regenerated society.' That is another thing I wanted to ask you about. He speaks—they all speak—so confidently about this 'regenerated society.' Do you happen to know when it is to be?"

"The date has not been fixed, I believe," I replied.

The early winter twilight had darkened the room, and the light from the grate glowed ruddily upon the girl's face as she bent forward, her chin upon her clasped hands, looking into the fire.

"There is another date which remains undetermined,"' I added, faltering not a little at heart, but keeping my tongue under fair control. "I should like to speak to you about it, if I may take off my lamb's-wool wig and Santa Claus beard, and appear before you once more as a contemporary citizen. It is this, Ermie. I am not so very old, after all. There is only a shade over a dozen years between us—say a baker's dozen. My habits—my personal qualities, tolerable and otherwise, are more or less known to you. I am prosperous enough, so far as this world's goods go. But I am tired of living——"

I stopped short, and stared in turn blankly at the mock coals. A freezing thought had just thrust itself into the marrow of my brain. She would think that I was saying all this because her father had regained and augmented his fortune. I strove in a numb, puzzled way to retrace what I had just uttered—to see if the words offered any chance of getting away upon other ground—and could not remember at all.

"Tired of living," I heard Ermyntrude echo. I saw her nod her head comprehendingly in the firelight. She sighed.

"Yes, except upon conditions," I burst forth. "I weary of living alone. There hasn't been a time for years when I didn't long to tell you this—and most of all at Clacton, if I had known you were at Clacton. You have admitted yourself that *nobody* knew you were there." The words came more easily now. "But always before I shrank from speaking. There was something about you too childlike, too innocent, too—too——"

"Too silly," suggested Ermie, with an affable effect of helping me out.

Then she unlocked her fingers, and, still looking into the fire, stretched out a hand backward to me. "All the same," she murmured, after a little, "it isn't an answer to my question, you know."

“But it is to mine!” I made glad response, “and in my question all the others are enwrapped—always have been, always will be. And, oh, darling one——”

“That is mamma in the hall,” said Ermyntrude.

Describing Impressions of a Momentous Interview, loosely gathered by One who, although present, was not quite In it

Mrs Albert has smiled upon my suit to be her son-in-law.

The smile did not, however, gush forth spontaneously at the outset. When the opportunity for imparting our great news came, we three were in the drawing-room, and Mrs Albert, who had just entered, had been allowed to discover me holding Ermyntrude’s passive hand in mine. She cast a swift little glance over us both, and seemed not to like what she saw. I was conscious of the impression on the instant that Ermyntrude did not particularly like it either. An effect of profound isolation, absurd enough, but depressingly real, suddenly encompassed me. I began talking something—the words coming out and scattering quite on their own incoherent account—and the gist of what they made me say sounded in my ears as if it were a determined enemy who was saying it Why should I be speaking of my age, and the fact that I had held Ermie on my knee as a child, and even of my rheumatism? And did I actually allude to them? or only hear the clamorous echoes of conscience in my guilty soul, the while my tongue was uttering other matters? I don’t know, and the fear that Ermie would admit that she really hadn’t been paying attention has restrained me from asking her since.

But Mrs Albert was paying attention. She held me with a cool and unblinking eye during my clumsy monologue, and she continued this steady gaze for a time after I had finished. She stirred the small and shapely headgear of black velvet and bird’s-wing which she had worn in from the street, just by the fraction of a forward inch, to show that she understood what I had been saying—and also very much which I had left unsaid.

“Hm—m!” the good lady remarked, at length. “I see!”

“Well, mamma, having seen,” Ermyntrude turned languidly in her chair to observe, lifting the hand which still rested within mine into full and patent view, and then withdrawing it abruptly—“having seen, and been seen, there’s really nothing more to do, is there?”

“She is very young,” said the mother, in a tentative musing manner which suggested the thought that I, on the other hand, was very much the other way.

Ermyntrude sniffed audibly, and rose to her feet. “I am three-and-twenty,” she said, “and that is enough, thank you.” There was something in it all which I did not understand. The sensation of being out of place, as in the trying-on room of a dressmaker’s, oppressed me. The sex were effecting sundry manouvres and countermarchings peculiar to themselves—so much I could see by the way in which the two were talking with their eyes—hut what it was all about was beyond me. The mother finally inclined her head to one side, and pursed together her lips. Ermyntrude drew herself to her full stature, threw up her chin for a moment like one of Albert Moore’s superb full-throated goddesses, and then relaxed with that half-cheerful sigh which we express in types with “heigho!” It was at once apparent to me that the situation had lightened—but how or why I cannot profess to guess. Uncle Dudley, to whom I subsequently narrated what I had observed, abounded in theories, but upon reflection they do not impress, much less convince, me. Here is in substance one of the several hypothetical conversations which he sketched out as having passed in that moment of pre-occupied and surcharged silence:

Mother [*lowering brows*]. You may be sure that at the very best it will be Bayswater.

Daughter [*with quiver of nostrils*]. Better that than hanging on for a Belgravia which never comes.

Mother [*disclosing the tips of two teeth*]. It is a chance of a title going for ever.

Daughter [*curling lip*]. What chance is ever likely *here?*

Mother [*lifting brows*]. He’s as old as Methusaleh!”

Daughter [*flashing eyes*]. That’s my business!

Mother [*little trembling of the eyelashes*]. You will never know how I have striven and struggled for you!

Daughter [*smoothing features*]. Merely the innate maternal instinct, my dear, common to all mammalia.

Mother [*beginning to tip head sidewise*]. It is true that Tristram is docile, sheep-like, simple——

Daughter [*lifting her chin*]. And old enough to be enchained at my feet all his life.

Mother [*head much to one side*]. And he has always been extremely cordial with *me*——

Daughter [*chin high in air*]. And not another girl in my set has had a proposal for *years*.

Mother [*brightening eye*]. We shall be in time to buy everything at the January sales!

[Mother *smiles;* Daughter *sighs relief. The imaginations of both wander pleasantly off to visions of sublimated Christmas shopping, in connection with the trousseau and betrothal gifts. General joy.*]

As I have said, this is Uncle Dudley’s idea, not mine. My own fancy prefers to conjure up a tenderer dialogue, in which the mother, all fond solicitude, bids the maiden search well her heart, and answer only its true appeal, and the sweet daughter, timid, fluttering, half-frightened and wholly glad, flashes hack from the depths of her soul the rapt assurance of her fate. But Dudley was certainly right about the ending, as the first words Mrs Albert uttered go to show.

"Don't forget to remind me, then, about presents for the Gregory children," she said all at once, in a swift sidelong whisper at Ermyntrude. Then she turned, and as I gazed wistfully upon her face, it melted sedately, gracefully, a little at a time, into the smile I sought.

"My dear Tristram," she began, and her voice took on a coo of genuine kindliness and warmth as she went on, "of course Albert and I have had other views—and the dear girl is perfectly qualified to adorn the most exalted and exclusive circles—if I do say it myself—but—but her happiness is our one desire, and if she feels that it is getting—I *would* say, if you and she are quite clear in your own minds—and we both have the greatest confidence in your practical common-sense, and your *honour*—and we have all learned to be fond of you—and—and I am really very glad!"

"Most of all things in the world, dear lady, I hoped for this," I had begun to say, with fervour. I stopped, upon the discovery that Mrs Albert was not listening, but had turned and was conferring with her daughter in half-audible asides.

"Mercy, no!" the mother said. "They'd know in a minute that it had been a present to us. That old Mrs Gregory is a perfect *lynx* for detecting such things. I suppose their boys are too big for tricycles, else your father knows a dealer who——"

My own Ermie looked thoughtful. "It won't seem queer, you think, our bursting in upon them with Christmas presents like this—without provocation?" she asked.

"My dear child, queer or not queer," said Mrs Albert, "it is imperative. You know how much depends upon it—there are plenty of others who would be equally useful in various ways, but not like the *Gregorys*—and if there were there's no time now. If this could have happened, now, a fortnight ago, or even last week——"

"Yes, but it didn't," replied Ermyntrude. "It only happened to-day." She turned to me, with a little laugh in her eyes. "Mamma complains that we delayed so long. We have interfered with the Christmas arrangements."

"If I had only known! But—I claim to be treated as one of the family, you know—I couldn't quite grasp what you were saying about the Gregorys. I gather that our—our betrothal involves Christmas presents for them, but I confess I don't know why. Or oughtn't I to have asked, dear?"

For answer Ermyntrude looked saucily into my face, twisted her dear nose into a pretty little mocking grimace, and ran out of the room. Mrs Albert vouchsafed no explanation, but talked of other matters—and there were enough to talk about.

It was not, indeed, till late in the evening, when Uncle Dudley and I were upon our last cigar, that I happened to recall the mystifying incident of the Gregorys.

"That's simplicity itself," said Uncle Dudley. "The Gregorys own one of the tidiest country seats in Nottinghamshire—lovely old house, sylvan arbours, high wall, fascinating rural roads—in the very heart of county society, too—O, a most romantic and eligible place!"

"Well, what of it? What has that to do with Ermyntrude and me and Santa Claus?"

"If you will read the *Morning Post* the day after your wedding, my dear, dull friend, you will learn that Colonel Gregory has placed at the disposal of a certain bridal couple for their honeymoon his ideal country residence. The paper will not state why, but I will tell you in confidence. It will be because the bride's mother is a resourceful and observant woman, who knows how to plant at Christmas that she may gather at Easter."

"I hate to have you always so beastly cynical, Dudley," I was emboldened to exclaim.

Uncle Dudley regarded me attentively for an instant. He took a thoughtful sip at his drink, and then began smiling at his glass. When he turned to me again, the smile had grown into a grin.

"You are belated, my boy," he said. "You ought to have married into the Grundys years ago. You were just born to be one of the family."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MRS ALBERT GRUNDY—OBSERVATIONS IN PHILISTIA ***

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