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·  
BERNARD CAPES

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**BAG AND BAGGAGE**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

JESSIE BAZLEY

*Truth* says:—"Dignified, passionate, and full of insight."

"Told with all the cunning of a fine artist."—*Pall Mall Gazette*.

"Compels attention."—*Morning Post*.

"The book undoubtedly will satisfy many readers."—*Globe*.

"A very powerful and interesting work."—*Scotsman*.

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# BAG AND BAGGAGE

BY

BERNARD CAPES

AUTHOR OF

"LOAVES AND FISHES," "PLOTS,"

"FROM DOOR TO DOOR," "AT A WINTER'S FIRE"

ETC.

LONDON

CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LTD.

1913

THE HISTORY OF THE

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FROM GRAVE



# BAG AND BAGGAGE

## “THE SOFT SERAPHIC SCREEN”

### I

PAPA was immensely proud of Ellen; and Ellen appeared a thing to merit papa's pride in her. Though but turned nineteen, she possessed the wit and accomplishments of bright maturity. She played with precocious brilliancy, she was an inspired needlewoman, the light of her young vivacious intellect made glad the conventional dreariness of a commonplace house in a second-rate London Square—St. Charles's, Ladbroke Grove Road, to wit. And Ellen was pretty and Ellen was good. She a little suggested a Botticelli Madonna. Though her smooth heavy hair was of a dim golden tint, an impression as of delicate silveriness, very frail and pure, was what one carried away from her. There was something there ethereal; her complexion made one think of a pure cloud ever so faintly rosed by morning; her blue eyes smiled half-misted. The one definite note of colour on her face's comeliness lay in its brows, which were comparatively dark and beautifully modelled. Unaffected, admirable, blithe, Ellen was widowed papa's one treasure, his passion and solace. Day by day she was never out of his mind; the fair spirit of her

irradiated each page of the ledgers he turned, and made Jacob's ladders of their columns of figures ; it illumined the stiffest City fog, and accompanied him all the way home from work, like a tiny fairy link, glowing ardent as he approached his own door.

Papa, Mr. Vosper by name, was an accountant, not in a large way, and the hieroglyphics of a life of calculations, not wholly professional, lay scrawled pretty intricately over his face. In person he was a spare nervous man, with a habit of stiffness, which was only, like the simulation of death in certain insects, the instinctive self-protective attitude of a shy nature. In all his days he had never got really accustomed to life, or ceased to apprehend from it some shocking discovery. Only when at home with his girl had he the feeling of a sure sanctuary gained from the unexpected. He was like a free man there, understood, un-shadowed, cheerily secure within a bodyguard of domestic sympathies. He expanded ; he enjoyed ; he relished, the last thing at night, his pipe and his toddy. It was only abroad, in the thick of his fellow-men, that he felt nervously isolated.

Trusted Ellen was his housekeeper. She jingled the keys and cheapened the mutton. He never asked an account of her ; his implicit faith would have shrunk from such an innuendo. Nor had he ever the least reason to question it. They did very well on a small income, and a household strictly limited to themselves and one general servant. Ellen was as thrifty in her management as she was priceless in herself.

Curiously, for all her delicate attractions, the girl had never been asked in marriage. There must have been some reason for this other than her youth and her father's straitened circumstances. Sweet and

comely paragons are not to be found a'begging, as a rule, in a world of amorous susceptibilities. Her verbal readiness, that little smart accent on perfection, may possibly have accounted for philandering youth's remissness. Feminine wit is like a pin in the waist of decorum, a trap and a warning to the adventurous. Once pricked by, it is twice shy. Or the remissness may have been due to something deeper—an instinctive recoiling of subconsciousness from subconsciousness in the face of a discovered secret, unguessed at on the surface of things, where all appeared so seductive and so fair.

I cannot tell how that may be; only, it seemed, men admired and would not be committed. Perhaps Ellen minded, and perhaps she did not. In any case she bore her young virginity serenely. It had its own compensations and absorptions, and she found in them as yet a sufficient antidote to the loneliness of life.

Ellen's blue eyes were, as I have said, misted waters. Their pupils, normally small as the little patches which are used to emphasise beauty, in times of excitement dilated to an extent which quite altered the character of her face. It was then as if the patches, vulgarly enlarged, were throwing the surrounding soft tints out of tone. A hotness came about the lids and sockets; her lips and bosom appeared to swell; the secret, whatever it was, seemed throbbing to reveal itself. And this condition occurred more and more frequently as the girl approached womanhood. Her father, not failing to notice the phenomenon, dreaded to put it down to ripening adolescence. It really affected him poignantly in its bearing upon the question of the forced separation which matrimony would entail upon

them both. If it signified a state of feeling, an unconscious exigency, then it might be that his prospect was a melancholy one. But he hoped it meant no such definite development. The thought of existence without his Ellen was unsupportable. She mothered him, she petted him, she amused him. What should he do lacking her devotion, her home virtues, the little dinners she saw cooked for him, the fond hand that replenished his toddy-glass? He thought there would be nothing for him, did she desert him, but to kill himself; that some day perhaps he would tell her so, and leave the conclusion to her.

It agitated him vaguely in this connexion to notice how, on occasions, these hot-eyed moods of the girl seemed to carry with them an exaggerated fondness for himself. Whimsically sedate, Ellen was not exceptionally given, as a rule, to exaggerated demonstrativeness. Wherefore the apparently increasing demand of her emotions for some approximate vehicle through which to express themselves struck him as distressfully ominous of the change he dreaded. Yet he had no will but to respond, since, for the time being at least, it meant more endearing happiness for himself.

This peculiar, one might have said impassioned mood met him one evening unexpectedly. It was long after dinner, and Ellen had just left the drawing-room on some errand. She had been, for her, a trifle dull, unresponsive and disinclined to talk, and Vosper was sitting alone, pondering a little anxiously, and always in its relation to that haunting dread, the problem of the young lady's silence. An impression as of porcelain in silver filigree, of a white embroidered frock, pale limbs, and slender neck holding at staid

poise the graceful head above, remained fondly in his mind, and he was seeking in himself reassurance from that quietly normal vision, when the girl returned to the room transformed. The interval had wrought in her that now recurrent change, and her eyes were glowing. She went to the piano, played off, by heart and with rapid brilliancy, de Bussy's " Jardins sous la pluie," collapsed towards the end in a crash of discords, and, crying with a laugh, " My memory has broken all to pieces ! Did you hear it ? " jumped up and stood humming and vaguely fingering a pile of music on the instrument.

" Papa," she said suddenly ; " I will fetch you your grog now, and it will loosen your little tongue and you shall talk."

She went, and returning in a few minutes with decanter, syphon and tumbler on a tray, mixed the paternal drink, and, placing it on a table handy, sat herself on the floor by her father's chair, and leaned caressingly against his knees.

Vosper smiled gladly over the rather premature indulgence, and, taking an enjoying gulp of the whisky and soda, settled himself for an hour of gossip and cosiness.

" How you can like it ! " she said. " The very smell makes me shudder."

Vosper, pulling bright-eyed at his pipe, smiled luminously.

" From childhood we like what is kind to us," he said. " An aunt of mine, the ugliest that boy ever had, I thought beautiful. That was because she gave me pleasure, like nasty grog."

" Does it give you pleasure ? What does it feel like ? "

“ It feels like, after a day of depression, getting a big cheque.”

Ellen laughed. At the sound, Sultan, the monstrous black Persian, who was lying asleep on the hearth-rug, raised a lazy head, and, regarding his mistress a moment with narrowed eyes, got suddenly to his feet, and, running to her, fawned and rolled himself beside, inviting her caresses. With her fingers buried in his thick fur, Ellen spoke on dreamily :

“ Poor little man ! Does it take so little to make the world rosy to you ? ”

“ Yes, so little, Nell ; and in spite of reason, which tells me, even while I sip, that the vision is but an illusion of the moment.”

“ Why aren't you sipping all day, then ? ”

“ My dear ! What an immoral suggestion. Besides, the more one sips the faster the vision fades. It is a mere cobweb thing, the structure of a psychologic moment.”

“ Like gossamer, with the dew on it. And when the sun dries the dew, the thing seems gone. But it must be there all the time, you know, although you can't see it.”

“ O ! I dare say the world's tapestried with dreams ; but what's the good to one, when they are mostly invisible ? ”

“ And this—this stuff, just gives you the eyes to see for a little ? What *do* you see ? Let me look into them.”

She put up her arms, drew his head towards her, rosily smiled as she regarded it upside down, and, pressing her lips to his in that inverted position, released her prisoner and subsided into her former attitude.



“Go on,” she said. “What *do* you see? What are you seeing now?”

“O! I can’t explain,” answered the father. “You know me, I dare say, better than I know myself. Just try to imagine.”

“Very well, sir, I will. You see this shabby room—it is a little shabby, dear, isn’t it?—like an Arabian boudoir. Its common paper is a mosaic of creamy marbles; its curtains hang in heavy folds, as soft and rich as sleep; there are great drowsy rugs on the paved floor, and on the chairs and sofas. Little splintered stars of light, of a hundred colours and all melting into one another, come glowing through the windows. The sound of the world outside is like the far-off murmur in a shell. You lie lapped in a half-waking dream, that is always palpitating on the verge of some delirious discovery; the anxieties, the heart-breaking struggles of existence, its nervous horrors and cruel rebuffs—they have all passed away and become as nothing. Anything lovely and ecstatic seems possible—a scent of incense creeps in at the curtains—and then they part noiselessly, and a naked foot——”

She cried out; the cat hissed and sprang away, bristling its fur and swearing; Ellen nursed her left hand, flushed and whimpering a little.

“The wretch!” she said: “he bit my arm. Look! he has actually made it bleed.”

Vosper got up, and knocked the ashes of his pipe out on the grate. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet.

“O! your imagination runs away with you,” he said, as he came back. “Bitten you, has he? You had better suck it. I’m afraid I’m not capable

of such exalted flights, my dear. If I were to try and explain what I really felt, I should say no more than a blissful nothingness. There's a virtue in rosy oblivion, isn't there? and it's all, I think, I'm conscious of." He refilled his pipe as he spoke. "You had better bathe it, hadn't you?" he said. "Ring up Annie for some warm water. By the by, when does she go? The sooner the better. You haven't heard of another yet, I suppose?"

Ellen sat on the floor, binding her handkerchief about her arm. The flush had gone from her face, leaving it unusually pale. But she could laugh again, upbraiding her assailant.

"No, don't bother: it's only a scratch. O, you naughty vicious fellow! Nobody shall love you any more. Did I pinch him? Well, it was an accident. Annie goes on Tuesday, papa."

Vosper had his second glass of toddy after Ellen had gone to bed. It failed to renew the glamour of the first. Perplexity had once more possessed the man, never *abnormis sapiens*. The eternal puzzle of things returned to darken his reflections. He wondered why so unexacting a man, one who asked no more than to be left by Fate to the simple enjoyment of habit and his harmless comforts, should be singled out, as it seemed to him, for the perpetual resolving of distracting problems. There was this Annie, a good girl—and a personable, worse luck. She had elected to give notice quite suddenly and unexpectedly, and in very enigmatic terms. She had better go, she had said to Ellen, before she was suspected. That had sounded suggestive enough to the master to make him anxious to get rid of a possible embarrassment; and so, in so far as she could understand or be enlightened,

had thought the young mistress. But the girl was an accommodating girl and a capable cook, and now the discomforts, possibly the disasters, of a new regime were to be gone through with again.

And then these odd moods in his girl, and the more ruinous change *they* portended ! Great as was his love for his Ellen, he could sometimes have felt as if his proper destiny lay in the peaceful shelter and self-abnegation of a monastery.

## II

ELLEN, her domestic duties over, often on fine mornings used to go and sit in the Long Walk in Kensington Gardens, taking a book with her. So we find her on the day succeeding that night of Sultan's misbehaviour.

Her slender forefinger marked the place in Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, Chapter V, at which she had stopped reading. The book lay in her lap, and she sat on in a mood of pleasurable languor, conscious of little but the sun's warmth and the pleasant smell of grass and greening trees. Emotion was inactive within her ; the pretty picture she made was innocent of the least self-consciousness ; she was content just to sit and to vegetate.

Of a sudden she was aware that a figure, definitely detaching itself from the other moving shapes in the camera obscura of her dreaming mind, had paused to regard her. She started slightly and looked up.

She had a misty impression of having seen the woman before, here, in this very place ; of having encountered such eyes fixedly regarding her, coming, and going, and returning, with an expression in them

as of some haunting desire to challenge or be challenged. It was like the sense of a dream already dreamt, of a shadow associated with a past shadow, but whether also of a dream or of some forgotten reality she could not decide. Seeing herself observed, the woman hesitated, passed on, stopped, and suddenly returned with a resolute air.

"Forgive me," she said. "I fancied that I knew you. Would you mind telling me your name?"

She was not prepossessing in appearance, or of scrupulous cleanliness as to her dress and linen. She had a drawn discoloured face, and, in overblown contrast with it, an hypertrophied neck and bust, too full for their supporting frame. A modish hat was set at an angle upon her head; but its folds were thick with dust, and the hair beneath looked staring and uncombed. 'Style' clung to her like a threadbare habit, running down into a couple of once showy trodden-over shoes with paste buckles. For the rest, the incessant flurried movement of the flexuous lips, the little spasmodic cough, the mucid vacancy of the shell-fish-like eyes with their inflamed rims, pointed, significantly enough to discrimination, to one clear explanation of her aspect and condition.

Ellen, surprised out of her reverie, sat up, and, in a little flutter, gave the information asked. A spasm caught the woman's face, so ugly and convulsive that the girl started to her feet in fear.

"Let me call someone—a Keeper," she said. "You are feeling ill—you——"

The other stopped her, gasping, entreating :

"No, for God's sake! It is nothing. Don't be frightened. I am taken this way sometimes. If I might sit by you a moment——"

She was so obviously distressed, so patently clutching for a straw of human sympathy, that a sudden rush of compassion overswept the girl's first panic, and she recovered herself with a rather tremulous smile.

“Yes, please do,” she said. “The bench is yours as much as mine. There. Will it distress you to talk? You thought you knew me, you say?”

The woman panted, as if fighting down a tendency to collapse.

“It was a mistake,” she whispered—“of course—what else could it be?”

“I don't know,” said Ellen. “I fancy—it occurs to me—haven't you already, at other times, seen me here, and——”

She paused for some response; but none came. Suddenly the stranger half-turned, facing full upon her.

“Do you know what brought me to this?” she said, breathing quickly, her hand upon her bosom.

Ellen, palpitating a little, shook her head.

“Drink,” said the stranger. “I'm a drunkard. Can you realize what that means? Most of my life I've been one. It was in my blood; it may be in anyone's; but I knew it, and yet I courted temptation. The depression—and then the glow, the heavenly moment—that was it—and, after all, damnation. It may be in anyone's, I say. A thousand million times better not to invite the risk.” She was putting evident restraint upon herself to speak quietly, though the agitation of her nerves still showed in her voice. Her accent and intonation, Ellen could not but help noticing through all her perturbation, were those of an educated woman. “A thousand million times,” she repeated.

“ Was there never anyone to help you—to point it out ? ” said the girl gently.

“ Never anyone—in the right way,” answered the stranger. “ If there had been, I might, who knows, have been saved. But righteousness touches no heart to shame. It needs pity and wise forbearance to do that.”

“ Is it too late, even now ? ”

The woman, not answering for a little, seemed as if pondering the inexplicable question.

“ Is it ? ” she said presently. “ God knows ! If one were strong enough—as a warning and example—to find some resolute purpose, and prevail through it. To be a use in life—a saviour where one had been a slave—not despised and tolerated, but welcomed as a power. God knows, I say ! I think I would accept any service, however humble, that promised me that position. Experience teaches, they say. Why should not mine ? If I were accepted for it, looked up to for it, I think I might, even now, take my stand upon a rock and rule the very devil that had enslaved me.”

Her voice had gathered strength from repressed emotion as she ended. But through all the incoherence of its utterance the dim clue it followed was plain enough to the perceptions of the child who sat beside. And within those young perceptions was already forming, half unconsciously at first, a response, impulsive, beautiful, to the cry of a smitten sister.

Ellen's was a peculiar mind ; mature beyond its years, perspicacious, original, self-reliant. The girl, after her first fright, was not shocked in her near neighbourhood to this fulsome sinner so startlingly imposed upon her. Rather she found her case attractive, in a way no man could understand. The woman

had nothing but her vice to recommend her, and it was the one thing that did. She would likely have been mean and small without it, a thing of conventional observances, of orthodox respectabilities—a standard example of the unsubmerged nine-tenths. But her vice, in degrading, had exalted her above herself; it had brought her into line with the essential tragedy of life—the curse of predisposition. God made the leper before he called our pity to him. Disease and ugliness had to be created to be cured. It seemed a paradox of divinity that man should have to straighten God’s deformities. Ellen did not like this trait in the Almighty, though she would not have said so; but she was always ready to rebuke it by example.

Women are called illogical; yet, for all their professed religionism, their instinct, more than man’s, revolts in practice against such divine irrationalism. That is why their sympathies can embrace the unloveliness which to the masculine perception is simply repulsive; why, in moments even of unconscious ecstatic mutiny against the bullying of Providence, they can suck the poison from the wounds inflicted by it. They speak devotion of their fervour, but they mean rebellion. We have heard of and shuddered at such acts; but in their spiritual essence they are of regular occurrence. Women are not nauseated, as men are, by the visible tokens of misery and disease. The cruel illogic of such human sores appeals to them above their foulness.

To cure—even here! What if Providence had capriciously appointed her to physic this one of its own created monstrosities—had thrown them together for the purpose? She took no credit for the

thought. It came on the most natural of womanly impulses. And perhaps, after all, it proceeded from an utterly mistaken conception. But, as to that, she must speak what her sex urged, giving herself no time for reflection. She put out a caressing hand; her eyes were shining, her voice full.

“I am so sorry for you,” she said. “I am so sorry. If I could help you in the way you suggest, I should be glad and thankful.”

“Help me,” said the woman—“*you?*” She looked into the hot young face, bending ravenously towards it. “How could *you* help *me?*” she said.

Ellen blurted out. “If you meant what you said?”

“Meant?” cried the woman: “Meant? My God!”

“You must not mind,” said the girl, in a soft voice, “if I take you at your word. When you talked about accepting any service, however humble, were you speaking——?”

“I was speaking from my soul,” interrupted the other. “Why, what am I to hold my head up? I would be a charwoman, a kitchenmaid, and thankfully, on such terms of welcome. But who would take me on *any* terms?”

“I would, and I will,” said Ellen, looking up, “if you will let me.”

Her fearless eyes challenged the sodden face.

“*You!*” repeated the woman, lost in thick amazement. “How?”

“We want a servant,” said Ellen—“our present one is going—she is going next Tuesday. I live alone with my father, and our life is a very simple one. I do not like to suggest it. I would never have dared



but for your—for what you said. But if you would not think it degrading, I should so like to have you—on that understanding, I mean—that you should be looked up to for what you had gone through. If it helped you to regain your strength of will, your self-respect—the obligation would all be mine—it would indeed; it would make me so glad and happy. Will you come? Will you give yourself that chance? I am sure, for my sake, you would not betray the trust I put in you.”

“For *your* sake!” The woman looked stupidly on the ground. Her face worked, then suddenly unlovely tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“There are plenty of lady-helps in these days,” said Ellen.

“Well, let me be called so,” muttered the other; “but not out of pride, God knows.” Presently, wiping her eyes with a soiled handkerchief, she spoke spasmodically, gaspingly, from behind its folds. “I don’t know what to say. If the effort, after all, were beyond my strength. Do you realize what you undertake? If I dared—O, if I dared! Rash and impulsive, like—but you mean it; I can see it in your beautiful eyes. Only—there is so much to consider—such nerve to find—and I haven’t got it now. But perhaps—where do you live? Will you tell me that?”

Ellen gave her address. The woman rose to her feet, still quivering and sobbing, a pitiful repellent sight.

“Give me a little time,” she said; “and then—if I come at all, I will come—not like this. I never thought, in approaching you, that my purpose—but there may be a God after all. Would you get to hate me or love me? You mean so sweetly—dear love, you mean so well; but I know; I can foresee. Will

you let me come if I can, and not hold me ungrateful if I fail."

"I shall expect you," said Ellen, also risen to her feet, and smiling brightly. "On Tuesday I shall expect you. You won't disappoint me, I am sure."

The woman gazed at her a moment in silence, with eyes half inspired, half horrified; then, muttering what sounded like a blessing, turned, and, with jerky unsteady steps, went off through the Park.

Ellen also turned, and made her way home. She felt in an odd state of exaltation, which, for the time at least, blinded her to the mad irrationality of the step she had taken. To have burdened herself, on a momentary impulse of charity, with a responsibility so tremendous! To be introducing into her father's house, that ark of domestic security, a potential wild beast, about whose antecedents she knew less than nothing! Yet the thought somehow did not trouble her. She felt, in some strange way, that she was about to make for herself such a friend as she had never yet known.

She hoped she had secured a servant to take Annie's place, she told her father that night. It was to be a lady-help, an experiment, and he was to remember to comport himself accordingly. He asked for no particulars. He was content to leave to her independent judgment all such domestic transactions. It would only have worried him to be consulted and made responsible in such matters.

### III

ON the Tuesday evening, by an accident, whether diabolic or providential remains an open question,

Vosper returned home earlier than usual to find his daughter absent. He let himself in with his latch-key, and was hanging up his coat and hat in the hall, when he staggered slightly, and put a hand to his forehead. The vision of a woman, seen through the open door of the dining-room, moving softly here and there as she laid the table with glass and cutlery, caught like a cold hand at his heart. His face turned as pale as wax; he swayed, and clung to the wall an instant. As he stood, the woman came out quickly and accosted him.

“Hush!” she said: “I had dreaded but hoped against this. Come in here, before she returns.”

She took his sleeve, and he obeyed her, stumbling in a physical vertigo.

“Take something,” she urged. “Quick! you must recover yourself.”

She moved, as if towards the whisky decanter which stood on the sideboard. He stayed her with a feeble gesture; his tongue clacked inarticulate against his dry palate.

“You need not fear,” she said. “I should not be here if you had need to.”

“*You*—the lady-help?”

He spoke at last, small and thick, like a man recovering from a stroke.

“Yes,” she said. “Listen to me.”

“You have given it up? Is that what you mean?”

“For the last week,” she answered; “and, God help me, for ever.”

A little guttural laugh, or sneer, came from him; and then he cried out, like one half mad, “Clara!”

“Yes, you hoped I was dead,” she said. “You

never hoped it as I did myself. But not now. I have a purpose in living."

"Have you? My God! how did you find me out—find your way here?"

"Do you suppose I ever sought you? You might have known me better, if it had been in you to see and understand. When I left you, it was by my own act, and never to return."

"And yet——" He made a frantic gesture with his hands.

"The purpose drew me," she said; "I had no choice. I had come upon her in the Park—our child—my child—and I had to speak. How many years ago was it?—and I knew her—I knew her—would to Christ I had not. What have you told her about me?"

"Nothing to your shame. We never speak of you; she believes you dead; and she was too young to remember. Some instinct in her, I think, keeps her away from the subject. Perhaps she thought you wicked."

"And you let her?"

"I never said so. I have sought all these years only peace from the past; and now—O, my ruined dream—this thunderbolt—no rest or comfort any more! My child and I had better be dead."

"Listen—do you hear? Your comfort shall not suffer for me. You have only to be silent and let things take their course. Look at me."

He raised his drooping head; his glassy eyes obeyed the summons, mutinously but irresistibly, from under their fallen lids.

"When I first spoke to her," said the woman, "I was at my worst. You had never known it, could never picture it—you, whose loathing had already

found in the thing I was a beast beyond redemption. But there were lower depths ; through all this waste of years I have descended to them. You would have shuddered to see the result—aghast—hating and cowering. But she—my child, mine—could smile on me, the hundredfold debased, and put out her pretty hand, and bid me have courage and come to her and be healed. I could have fallen at her feet—her own mother—think of it ; and I promised—I promised to make the effort. She knew nothing of me—she need never learn that truth. Nor would you have known me again—your wife—so battered out of recognition. Yet you knew me now—you never doubted for one instant ; and I ask you, shall not that change speak for my resolution ? Even in these few days I have done something to qualify myself for the task I have undertaken. Yet I hoped against hope that you would not know me, so that I could have served her, unwatched, unsuspected, in the passion of my secret. Well, you will have to share it.”

She was changed, as she had said. No term of purer life could now undo the ravages of the years ; yet, that rankling thorn once removed, the intumescence, the delirium caused by its poison had subsided, leaving her sane and in a measure mistress of herself. She was ghastly pale, like one who had been bled almost to death, but it was the pallor of a convalescence from once disfiguring disease. A spectre of her old self, she had returned to recognition, and to the renewed haunting of the unhappy soul who had fondly believed her to be laid for ever.

The inhuman tyranny of this revisitation awakened in Vosper a fury of which he was normally incapable. Its cruelty seemed on a par with that which tenderly

nurses a murderer and would-be suicide back to life in order to make him fit for the gallows. His little fancy home, which he had so laboriously built up stone by stone from the ruins of former days, had crashed in a moment about his ears. That fool's paradise, into whose securer fastnesses he had imagined himself to be surely penetrating, had, like the dreamy perspectives of a stage landscape, brought him up with a shock against a brick wall. It was an unheard of, a monstrous persecution. Even Job had been allowed to rebuild permanently on the ghastly wreckage of his house.

"Never, before God!" he broke out, with hysterical violence. "I will not endure the thought of such a conspiracy between us, or suffer your presence here on any terms whatever. You must go as you came, now, this instant, before she returns."

"And what would she think of me?"

"What does it matter what she thinks? You are nothing to her, I conclude, but a 'case'—an abstraction of a vice she does not understand, but which I know to be ineradicable."

"It is like old times to hear you say so," responded his wife stonily.

"Is it not true?" he burst out. "Do you not illustrate its truth in every line of your face? Do I not know what would certainly follow, were I mad enough to listen to your plea? To serve her, my unsophisticated girl—psha! There is only one way, were that really your desire, and you know it—to keep yourself eternally out of her life."

"It was for the child's sake I left you; I tell you it is for the child's sake I return."

"For her sake, great God! Are *you* the one to under-

stand and advise her—or I, her father, who have watched over and cherished her welfare all these long years ? ”

“ It is I, I think.”

“ You may think it ; but not here.”

“ Yes, here, Henry. I am resolved.”

He read it in her face, and before that inexorable sentence felt the will in himself already beginning to sweat, to yield its first fury, to turn whimperingly to a thought of compromise. With tears of self-pity in his eyes, he essayed an appeal to her better feelings.

“ Cannot you be satisfied, Clara,” he said, “ with having wrecked my life once already ? You owe me something—remember that. Have you ever considered, for one thing, what it meant to me, financially, when you left ? I never questioned your right to your own small estate, though its withdrawal left me miserably provided against the hard problems of existence. But I faced them, and I conquered ; and I have met the burden of the years as a man should—a stiff struggle ; yet, I had hoped, earning its late reward in some measure of peace and security. And now you would prove my efforts all in vain ! ”

“ You can have it, what is left of it, for your own again.”

Her forced impassivity goaded him once more to madness.

“ I do not want it,” he cried—“ the price of blood ! You shall not stay, and ruin all I have done.”

“ Very well,” she answered ; “ if you are resolved, I will confess myself to my daughter, and leave the issue to her.”

He flung his hands to his temples, and, holding

them so pressed, went to and fro distracted. He knew, surely enough, what that issue would be.

“What do you propose to do, if you remain?” he said, stopping and facing her wildly. “Tell me that.”

“What I should have proposed,” she answered, “had you not recognised me—my duty to my service. I am your lady-help, Henry; you need never consider me in any other light. I will never betray you or myself: have no least fear of it. You need not allude to me, speak to me, recognise my existence, if you will. A very little custom will make it all quite easy. I have no friends; I go under an assumed name; there is not the least chance of anybody discovering the truth. If there were, this change in me would be my sure disguise. But there is not. You may live the life of peace and comfort you desire. I will not disturb it. I will not, if you will accept my solemn word, drink one drop of anything but water so long as I am here.”

He stood staring gloomily at her while she spoke.

“Will you not?” he said at last. “But I think I know better. I think I know what it will be. And God help us all, I say.” He walked to the door, turned—“Tell her, when she comes in,” he said, “that I am busy in my study, do not want to be disturbed until dinner. I must dress my wits somehow to face this ghastly masquerade——” and he left the room.

#### IV

ELLEN, for some reason best known to herself, said nothing to her father about the interview in the



gardens, nor did she make any mention of the weakness to which their new acquisition was, or had been, subject. Possibly, on reflection, she had come to realise, a little guiltily, the rashness of her impulsive act, and was shy of inviting any criticism of it. Or some reluctance to betray the confidence reposed in her may have acted as a deterrent. She was well acquainted, of course, with her father's constitutional sensitiveness to domestic worries, and knew that any imposition of such upon his tranquillity would only make him irritable without help to herself. For any or none of these reasons, therefore, she kept silent, abiding, with a little trepidation, perhaps, the vindication, or otherwise, of her bold experiment.

In the meanwhile he, for his part, remained as necessarily tongue-tied ; though the strain of secrecy superimposed on anxiety wrought in him a state of ' nerves ' which seemed sometimes almost to verge on hysteria. Ellen thought him in these days in a very upturned frame of mind, moody, unreasonable, or subject to odd ebullitions of excitement. He did not seem to favour the new *ménage*, if one were to judge from the difficulty he appeared to experience, from the very first night, in accepting with any sort of accommodating grace the lady-help's ministrations. He was embarrassed in the woman's presence, and suspicious in her absence. He betrayed his feelings towards her in constant complaints and innuendoes to the girl, not in any way specific, but coloured by an intolerable fretfulness. He was a man indeed who could neither submit nor revolt with courage. His daughter, almost wearied by him at last, became more confirmed than ever in her policy of silence. She was endowed, morally, with a will the antithesis of his.

Poor wretch ; he had, it must be admitted, some justification for his attitude. Dogmatic in the few beliefs he could comprehend, he was persuaded, and had always been persuaded, that no redemption was possible in the case of congenital drunkards. The psychology of such minds betrays invariably a strong self-cosseting instinct, and their creeds will always be found to embrace the least worry or agitation for themselves. Vosper could not sleep, or eat, or enjoy life adequately under the perpetual sense of impending disaster which haunted him. He was convinced that that disaster was only a question of time ; that there would come a day when all the horror of his earlier experience would be renewed in an intensified form. It was impossible to be himself under the circumstances ; and he made little attempt. He lived his days in the spirit of an imprisoned martyr to some preposterous cause, nervous misery underneath, at the best a false gaiety on the surface. The thing could not go on so, and fail to end in some hideous catastrophe.

Yet it went on, as the troubles of irresolute men will ; and even in time assumed the guise, or the disguise, of a just endurable habit. The first dislocating tension of the secret relaxed, as day followed day and no evil ensued, and gradually a weak spirit of resignation began to possess the man. Truly, the situation, child hiding from father and father from child, was a grotesquely artificial one ; yet for a drama's length it managed to carry conviction.

One ameliorating influence lay in Ellen herself. The girl, after the coming of the woman, seemed for a time much less subject than she had been to those fits of emotional excitement which had latterly affected her. She was even abnormally quiet in her conduct—

more like the sweet child of old whom she had been seeming to repudiate. The father, in his new mood of tremulous reassurance, thought that he detected in this recovery a probable explanation of the state which had preceded it. The girl was of an age when the natural fondness in her was beginning to crave a more liberal outlet than the monotony and solitariness of her life could supply. The feeling, he admitted, was unconscious and perfectly wholesome, and, in the case of a sweet disposition like hers, could easily be directed into pure channels, and find therein a complete satisfaction for its desires. So it was that this affection, seeking itself a vent, and finding an insufficient one for its volume, had resulted in a sort of moral congestion producing moodiness and excitement, until, in the relief of discovering a new subject for its exercise, it had again begun to flow readily, and to resume its ancient sedateness. Ellen's accumulating amiability, in fact, had found in this work of redemption a way of escape for itself.

The child was mothering the mother, and finding emotional easement in the process—so decided the father. Was it even conceivable that, in the end, she would prevail with her? Despite his obstinate convictions, the self-indulgence in the man began gradually to pet a weakly optimistic fancy, not for the woman's sake, but because its realization would relieve his own mind of a load of apprehension. For that reason he could have lusted to find his dogmatism falsified. He began to glow a little over the picture of his girl, serene, endearing, persuasive, fighting his battles for him, while he himself lay secure, gathering a thread of hope even from his own undisturbed tranquillity. He never ventured so far as to face in

his mind the consequences of a possible cure. It was always enough for the moment that he was left to enjoy it in peace. Whenever he saw his wife, her appearance seemed to be vindicating her promise. For the rest, she adhered strictly to the letter of her undertaking, and never voluntarily approached or addressed him.

And then, quite swiftly and unaccountably, it appeared, came a change.

. . . . .

That spring was marked by very hot and oppressive weather. In our temperate climate any reasonable accession of warmth is always—whatever the complaints over the preceding cold and wet—speedily resented as an affliction, especially by women. The lovely ardour of an April sunshine produces amongst them more complaint than gratitude. Ellen was a true child of her climate; she loved, like a cuckoo flower, to feel the sun only so long as a cool wind blew and her roots rested in moisture; she loved, like a primrose, to drink in the glow from the tempering ambush of a copse. But when human duties and errands had to be faced, her petals wilted in the heat and she became sapless.

It may have been on this account that she seemed presently to fall flaccid, and gradually more and more so as the heat intensified, until her mood settled into one of almost habitual nervous depression. She became silent and absent-minded; she appeared unable to rally her spirits at all; and, in proportion as she drooped, so did her father's apprehensions return upon him with redoubled sickness. What was to account for her state? Did it derive from the con-

scious failure of her attempt to redeem a lost soul? All his earlier alarms revived in the thought; a tetchy anger returned to possess his mind; he began already to feel wickedly abused in his trust and indulgence. One night, when she was sitting with him in this mood of silent dejection, the burden of his wrongs seemed to become to him in a moment unendurable. He strode to the grate, knocked out the ashes of his pipe on the bars, and faced upon the girl in a passion of aggrieved protest.

“ What is the matter with you ? ” he said.

She looked up exhaustedly, a little surprised. “ Nothing, papa,” she said.

“ Nothing ! ” he snapped. “ Then what has put you into this state of mind ? Don’t pretend, or ask for an explanation. You know perfectly well what I mean. Has anything happened to depress or disappoint you ? ”

“ No, nothing whatever, papa.”

“ Good God ! ” he burst out. “ Is nothing owing to me ? Must I always be the one to find cheerfulness and sympathy, as well as food and clothes, for my family ? To come home night after night from the killing wear and tear of business, and find this more killing atmosphere waiting to receive me ! Are you unhappy ? Do you want anything ? Whatever it is I will not have it conveyed in this spirit. Do you understand ? I say I will not have it. Have I not worries and anxieties enough already, without your adding to them tenfold by your behaviour ? It must end, I say.”

“ It shall end,” she answered. She had risen to her feet; her eyes were bright, her face a little flushed. “ I can’t answer for myself, papa; but I *do* know what

you mean, and it is hard on you. It shan't happen any more. There, I am good again."

There was a wink of moisture on her lashes, as she ran out of the room; but all was sparkle and merriment when she returned presently with the tray of grog and tumblers, to mix her father his nightcap. Seeing her so transformed, his anger and agitation were assuaged in a moment.

"I didn't mean, my darling," he began—but she stopped him, a hot little palm on his lips.

"No, not another word," she said. "Don't I know, goose? It was a shame, and I am never going to be naughty any more."

She went to the piano, and rattled off piece after piece till the glasses rang. Vosper was quite comforted and reassured. It would have been too cruel at this pass to have his dream of new-dared contentment shattered.

From that night Ellen was herself again; and more, the fits of depression were succeeded by an even exaggerated recurrence of those earlier moods of emotion and excitement. Vosper observed, and was not yet satisfied. A haunting sense as of something unnatural in his neighbourhood kept him at a perpetual tension of uneasiness. Things were not as they should be; and still his mind harped on the only solution of the riddle comprehensible to it. One morning, at breakfast, looking across at the sideboard, a thing struck him. The whisky decanter was always left exposed there, and his glance had fallen on it. Surely, he thought, his last night's peg or two had not so reduced the quantity it had held. He seemed to remember that the bottle had been quite full at first; now it was half empty. He was conscious sometimes

of his indulging a little beyond what health or wisdom dictated ; but surely not to this extent.

A shock of half enlightenment, followed by a shiver of vindictive terror, shook his heart. When his wife came in presently on some duty, he regarded her hatefully from under covert lids. She was very pale, with a grim set look about the lips ; but her actions betrayed no sign of conscious guilt. He would know presently, he told himself, and there for the moment he left it.

That night, at dinner, he asked Ellen, in as guarded, as natural a manner as he could assume, if she was satisfied with her new experiment. She answered, ‘yes, quite.’ Had she discovered, he said, no drawbacks, no weaknesses, no *habits*. He had thought it just possible that there might have been some such explanation of the woman’s willingness to accept a service so comparatively unprofitable as theirs. There frequently was in these cases. Ellen knew of none. She did not favour the bottle, for instance, he asked. Ellen had no reason to suppose so.

The guileless unsophisticated child ! Before he went up to the drawing-room, Vosper most carefully measured the quantity of liquor in the decanter, making an exact mental note of the point in the cut-glass to which it reached. Later, when the girl brought up his grog, he looked to verify his calculation. The whisky stood lower by a couple of finger breadths than he had left it an hour ago.

His hand trembled a little as he lifted his glass. His face had gone white ; there was a sick feeling at his heart. But he managed to conceal his state from Ellen while she played. The girl, saying she had a

headache, went to bed early ; and a little later Vosper rose.

He was shivering all over ; he poured out and swallowed a wineglassful of the raw spirit ; then opened the door, and went very softly, swaying a little, downstairs. In the kitchen, he shut himself in with the woman and faced her.

“ Liar ! ” he said : “ liar ! ”

His voice was hoarse ; he swallowed with difficulty. She stood before him motionless, her eyes staring into his.

“ So, you have found out ? ” she said.

He could have struck her in his fury.

“ You devil ! ” he breathed. “ Was I not right ? Did I not know ? And this is all you have to answer for your broken promise ? ”

She seemed to try to speak and to fail. Her failure, as implying fear and conscience-guiltiness, stimulated his own shaking nerves, and lent him courage.

“ I have watched the spirit decanter of late,” he said—“ you won’t ask me to say more. To bring the curse back upon me like this—no truth, no shame, in the presence of your own child—to abuse her trust in you ; to make beastly capital out of her innocence, her pity, her inexperience ! Now you know what I have to say. To-night, as it is late, I will not turn you out. But to-morrow—be gone before I return, and darken my life no more.”

She inclined her head : “ I will be gone to-morrow,” she said, her lips just moving ; and, hesitating a moment, he turned and left her without another word.

It was over, and more easily than he had dared to hope. He went back to the drawing-room, gulped down a final glass of spirit, and, for safety’s sake,



carried the decanter with him to his bedroom, where, the racing of his heart presently subsiding, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

V

ELLEN came down to breakfast late. She felt very languid and inert. Her lips were dry; her eyes had blue rims round them and little thready red veins in their corners. There was something very wistful about her appearance. Sickness, headache, even a cold, borrow a certain pathos for themselves from youthful prettiness. They can awaken a sympathy in the male observer which no adult domestic ailment is able to reach. He finds somehow in them a tender appeal to his pity, his emotions; his instinct leans caressingly, maybe, towards the fever which is at once a danger and an opportunity. Perhaps that is it, or perhaps it is that personable youth can idealise the disfigurements which make such unattractive prose of its elders. Not presence, or dignity, but only sweet immaturity may achieve poetry in a sneeze or a snuffle.

Ellen had Sultan, the great Persian, in her arms when the lady-help came in with her coffee. Her hot face was buried in the creature's fur; she nuzzled and fondled it. As the woman put down the tray on the table, the cat sprang from its mistress's embraces to the floor, where it stood arching its back and moaning. Ellen, her eyes alight with a sudden fire, put out an inviting hand. The cat started from it and spat. Ellen, half-rising, spat back, venomously, uncontrollably. In the act, she saw the woman, subsided into her chair, and sat regarding the other from under heavy lids, smiling, defiant. The woman stood

motionless, leaning her hands on the tray as she had deposited it.

“Is papa not down yet?” said Ellen.

“He is down and already gone,” answered the other in a low voice. “You are late; but even so he left unusually early.”

“Did he? Well, I think I am glad.”

“And I,” said the woman.

She gave a heavy sigh, released her hold of the tray, and, coming round, stood above the girl.

“Beastly,” she said. “Was it not?”

“He made me furious,” said Ellen. “I couldn’t help it.”

“No, I know, I know. What shall we do, dear?”

There was a sudden intense grief in her voice.

“Nothing,” said Ellen. “It is no good. You can do nothing for me.”

“No, never again. He has noticed at last, and I am to go. He thinks, of course, it is I, and I did not undeceive him. We had a scene last night, after you were in bed, and I am to be gone before he returns.”

“Why did he think it was you? I had told him nothing.”

“But he knows, nevertheless—enough, a million times, to make him suspect. Leave that, dear, for the moment. What will you do without me?”

“What I should do with you, I suppose.” The girl was crouching in her place, her forehead leaned upon her hand. “It is no good, I tell you. It might be, if I wanted to stop; but I don’t. I am horrible, a hypocritical devil—I see that; and yet I don’t want to be cured. It is quite useless.”

“He must find out when I am gone.”

“Yes.”

“ And you don't care ? ”

“ No. I must have it or die.”

“ Better die, then.”

“ So I often think.”

The woman put her hand to her face a moment, made a gesture of wildly forlorn renunciation, then bent lower over the sullen figure.

“ Ellen,” she said ; “ you questioned why he should suspect me. Because I am his wife, dear, and you are my child.”

In the tense silence that ensued, the voice of a hawker, crying some squalid murder and suicide, passed outside the window and drifted away down the square.

“ The curse was on me already,” said the woman, “ when we were married. It divided us at last when you were a little thing. He let you suppose I was dead : would to God I had been. And then the years went on, and I was carried helpless and hopeless with them. When I first came upon you in the Park, I I knew you, Ellen—I was sure ; and as surely I saw that the curse had been transmitted, that you too had been marked down for destruction. I had that upon me at the time to end, swiftly and surely, my miserable life : I have it upon me still. But in the sudden prospect you opened out to me, not of hope for myself, but of help and warning for my child, I saw at least a respite. If I could do for her sake what I had failed in so utterly for my own, I might yet win, I thought, salvation for us both. Your father was the one difficulty, the one terror ; but in the end I dared to face him, claiming mercy because of my resolve to win redemption. We met when you were out—it was a fearful moment—and he would not believe me ; he would have refused my prayer and driven me from the

house. But in my desperation I threatened to reveal the truth to you ; and then he gave way at last. And I stopped on, hoping and fearing, Ellen, and—O, my God ! you know, you know."

The girl rose from her chair, steadying herself by the back. She was white to the eyes ; her lips looked stiff and grey. She whispered something.

"What is it, darling ? I can't hear."

"I said—O, poor papa !"

"Yes. What will you do ?"

The poor thing put out her hand.

"You know. Give it me."

The woman felt in her bosom, and their fingers met.

"Only a few drops," she said—"nine or ten. Leave the bottle there. I shall follow you presently."

She cried out, as her daughter turned from her.

"Your mother, Ellen !"

The girl paused a moment.

"Yes," she said—"I hear. But why are you ? We shall know—both of us—by and by. It is he I am thinking of. I could never understand why it was—I wanted so to be good—and it would end by driving him mad. There is no other way in all the world. It is not the first time I have thought it ; and now I am sure."

Not once the word on her lips—no response, no solace to that mute agony. The mother held out her arms, and closed them on eternal vacancy ; she heard the steps go up the stairs, the bedroom door close softly ; and then all was silent.

"She has done it," she whispered. "It was the only way to save her—not to become like me—not——"

She broke into a sudden whining laugh, and threw herself face downwards on the table.

. . . . .

Vosper hardly dared to return home that night. The sick misgiving of an unforceful nature was upon him ; he dreaded to find his will defied and the woman still in evidence.

The house seemed very quiet when he entered it. It was a still, oppressive evening. Somewhere in the square a belated barrel-organ was droning a popular waltz. The commonplace sound was somehow tonic in its effect upon him, and, in an access of resolution, he closed the door and hung up his hat.

“ Ellen ! ” he called, half-fearfully : “ Ellen ! ”

“ Up here,” answered a voice.

His heart seemed to stop ; for a moment he had a mad impulse to open the door and fly ; then a revulsion of feeling seized him—after all he was master here—and he ascended the stairs quickly, peremptorily, his pulses hammering, desperation giving him strength. On the landing stood the figure of his wife.

“ Why are you here still ? ” he panted. “ Where is Ellen ? ”

“ I will show you,” she said, softly. “ She looks so pretty and so peaceful.”

Something horrible seemed to catch in his throat. He staggered, and she caught his arm. The next moment they were in the bedroom together.

“ Look,” she said—“ how at last she lies at rest. She killed herself, Henry. I gave her the means. I was only waiting for you to tell you. Was it not well done ? ”

He swayed back and sank into a chair against the

wall. His head dropped forward, his whole body sagged; speech and motion were paralysed in him at a blow.

The woman had crossed to the farther side of the bed, on which lay the strange white thing, the little silvery madonna vindicated at last. The mother's face was bent over the sleeping picture with infinite tenderness. She spoke on, low and thrilling, exculpating, pleading, denouncing, to the shadows, to herself and to him :

“ If we have got—somehow—into the wrong world, the best thing is to leave it. I have thought, that our vice, perhaps, Ellen's and mine, might be no vice, elsewhere—the thing, the normal thing, in some other place—not eccentric, not beastly, fitting into the order and a part with it—only wrong here. And we don't mean it—we don't mean it at all. We try to adapt ourselves; but our nature comes from somewhere else—we have strayed—we don't remember. They say one man's food is another man's poison. Why not one's world—our world's—Ellen's and mine? We intended no harm—we tried so dreadfully—and we couldn't without help.” She bent lower, and went on, in a soothing moaning voice: “ He was not strong enough for us, this man, dearie. There is no cure in hate and disgust. And he would not be denied his own—it comforted him—he had not the strength to resist, the unselfishness to forbear. With that warning before him he should have kept it away from you—its very shadow—its fumes—the visible token of what it means to him. But he would have thought that hard, unjust—such a little matter, yet so much to him, who never felt, never knew. And so all the time he failed to see, to understand, what one look had

been enough for me to read. Someone will tell him how I tried with you—how I tried and prayed—strong at last, where he could not be strong—loyal to my promise—shielding you until the end was plain—not to be evaded—the damning hopeless end. My own, my child ; my own, my child ! You knew what it meant to me, to see it, smell it there, always within my grasp, and never to touch it. There was only one way at last—let him know that—and we took it. All else was despair—no prospect but hell ; and so I spoke the truth, and you turned to it. Your own mother, my baby, that gave you life—ah, from the breast that—so pretty, so quiet lying there. All day I have sat here watching you, by your little cradle, and you have never stirred. But always the smile—the smile that waits for me alone when you wake.”

The voice tailed off into unintelligible murmurs, which, to the mute terrific soul of the figure opposite, became merged in the low thunder of the distant traffic, of far inarticulate cries, of obscene laughter rising from deep vaults of death. He sat listening in an enormous trance, a prey to the supremacy of fear, like a man walled in, swathed in stone, yet conscious of hideous whispers obscurely penetrating to him. How long this state lasted he never knew. It was punctuated presently by other sounds, nearer, more definite—sounds like the thin wail of wind, the sobbing of rain, the tapping of small nails into coffin wood. The discordance increased—whirled into a universal crepitation, in which all its parts were mingled and confounded—ran suddenly to attenuation and an end—and was nothing but the whine of a barrel-organ, fulsome, importunate, like the voice of a persistent beggar.

Vosper, uttering a horrible scream, staggered from his chair, staggered round the bed—and saw her. She was prone on the floor, shapeless, inanimate; but her limbs still twitched, and out of the huddled shadows stood a white hand, as if mockingly inviting, the fingers yet crooked about a tiny bottle.

Fear in that extremity forgot itself. There was only one thing for him to do. He wrenched the bottle from the convulsed hold, and, clutching it with both hands to his throat, reeled from the room. Twice, thrice, in his stumbling rush downstairs, he approached the thing to his lips, and as often, shuddering from the deadly odour of almonds that reached his brain, put it away again. In the hall at last, he glared about him frenziedly, saw the open door of the dining-room, hurried in, turned to the whisky decanter on the side-board, seized it, and, putting it to his mouth, gulped down the raw spirit as if it were water. Pausing at last, he gave a long shuddering sigh, stood swaying a few moments; then, raising his hand as if to send the poison crashing into the grate, recollected himself, and, placing the little bottle gingerly on the side-board, turned, ran to the front door, and, opening it, tore from the house on his way to the police-station.



# “BENEATH DARK WINGS”

## CHAPTER I

### THE FROZEN POND

“**T**HROUGHOUT my early artistic development,” once wrote Laurence Derrick to a very intimate friend, “I suffered from a peculiar difficulty—an inability to see things as all others appeared to see them. I had always to force myself into line, as it were, with alien perceptions in order to be understood; to distinguish between the positive and the adventitious in recognised forms; to define for myself the limits of the actual as patent to the common view. This difficulty ceased in me with the cessation of celibacy; but while it lasted it was a very definite one, bewildering and distressing at times, though blessed with some rare compensations. Thus, to my abnormal vision, every human being was possessed of an aura, a luminous emanation, varying in its density, and eloquent somehow of the nature it enshrined; and every beast was likewise adorned, though in a lesser and duller degree. Moreover, I seemed ever conscious of a spiritual environment, now perilous, now sympathetic, but generally emotional, whose invisibility found me entirely without the scepticism common to those who believe in no evidence but such as their senses afford them. And, again, I could hear things inaudible to most.

“Now, the capacity for hearing, as for utterance, does not cease arbitrarily on a given note—that must be patent. Then where need it cease, for those who have, literally, ears to hear? Are there such? I suppose that, for the ‘general,’ attenuated sound, like attenuated atmosphere, means, beyond a certain point, death. Nevertheless, when I tell you that I could once distinguish the low intercourse of the spirits of the dead, you will most certainly question my sanity.

“But, question it as you will, you must understand in what manner my constitution affected my art, and with what infinite caution I had to realise and prune that art’s early exuberances. All that was not to be done in a day, or in a year, or in many years; and no doubt it was the gradual process of elimination which gave my etchings their characteristic quality, since I could not at once learn to see ‘sanely’ with other men’s eyes. I am married now; I have exchanged the vision for the reality; my art, I hope, is sounder and stronger for its loss; yet there come times when I could regret the older faculty, and, for the sake of that seer’s atmosphere, could barter much present rationality. And so, what then? Why, the dolefullest void where is now the essential presence.”

The change to which the letter refers occurred at an acute crisis of Derrick’s life, and physiologists, for their part, found a sufficient explanation for it. It is quite unnecessary to attempt to trace here its anterior evolutions. Up to a certain date the man was a brilliant Fantastic; after that date he was a brilliant Rationalist—no more needs to be said. We all remember how he was called the Meryon of London, and what prices we were willing to give for good examples of his earlier period. He was, indeed, the very genius of

etching, to which he brought a soul nearly akin to that of the wild French visionary. Only Derrick's visions found something beyond gloom and terror in his 'City of Dreadful Night.' His Saxon blood saved him.

This is by way of a prelude to a strange episode in the artist's career here recorded.

. . . . .

On a certain still afternoon in mid-winter a man loitered along the "Mud-cliffs" of Norfolk, at about the point where the coast-line bends definitely to sweep westwards under the Lynn Deeps and Cross-Keys Wash. Land and sea, it was all a desolate prospect attuned to a desolate soul. During the whole twenty-five years of his young life Laurence Derrick never remembered a time when he had held other than aloof, in all that stood for instinctive comradeship, from his fellow-creatures. He was born to loneliness and self-sufficiency—a virile, potent spirit, nevertheless, and no truckler to Destiny. Already at this early age he was famous, and without a shadow of arrogance. Socially a shy man, in all that pertained to his art he was the embodiment of independence and individuality. You seemed to read it in his large absorbed eyes, which were the fine feature of a face otherwise lean, hollow-chapped, and somewhat breathless in suggestion. In figure he was tall, gaunt, strong-shouldered, and in habit inclined to slouch. His "London Visions" had at this date won him the very first of reputations as an etcher.

He had never as yet worked but in black and white. There had been no reason and little opportunity for his doing so. This wandering tour, in fact, marked

the beginning of his departure from a hitherto unbroken rule. For the first time he was essaying to express his visions in water-colour. Something in the aspect of his surroundings had won him to the attempt—the grey tones, the little-defined contrasts, the still predominance of white and shadow in the picture. If a man sought to emerge from the thralldom of ink and paper, he could not do it by more cautious and gradual means. He was feeling his way.

Presently he paused on the edge of the cliff and looked about him. His 'tools' were slung in a case over his shoulder; his hands, a good stick gripped in one of them, were bare; he was not the man to concede a point to the rigours of frost and fog. There was little to cherish in all the view but a sense of stark isolation. Melancholy is the reigning spirit of all that haunted, crumbling coast. Old solitary churches, old ruined memories of an age-long-foundered life possess its league-wide desolations. It is thick with dreary ghosts, whose shrouds come washing inwards on the curl of the tides. One may stroll for miles on the cold sands or the harsh over-cliffs and never meet a soul.

All this was congenial to the solitary man. He liked loneliness, he liked desolation. The mystery of a grey-green sea flowing from under a curtain of mist absorbed his fancy; the scream of sweeping gulls stimulated it; he looked abroad over a dim frost-locked landscape, and marked without a shiver the fleece of snow that carpeted it. Then he turned southwards and went on.

Suddenly, in the growing mist, he came upon a railed-in track which crossed his path. The fence was of the slightest and rudest, but it appeared to betoken a private way from a point above the shore to some place inland. Moved by a perverse impulse, the

artist entered and took the track, leaving the coast behind him.

As he proceeded, a sense as of some undefined exclusiveness in the spot increased upon him. The track narrowed, and became a cutting between low banks, became a lane, became a gorge. Stunted bushes appeared on its banks, and presently trees, ever increasing in density. And then in a moment, as he turned a corner, a wooden gate barred his way.

The thing was a mouldering ruin, a mere pretence, its statement of privacy a scarce decipherable legend. Derrick, scorning to construe, pushed by and continued his exploration. This was the back entrance, he convinced himself, to some long-deserted estate, and likely no one would interfere with him.

The trees thickened as he advanced, and massed themselves in a loftier tangle of sprays. The track of melancholy sky between their tops seemed contracted to a width no greater than that of the melancholy path he trod. On all sides reigned a profound sad silence ; he seemed to be entering into the dead recesses of something long excommunicate ; the biting crunch of his footsteps in the snow smote upon his nerves like a desecration. Still he pressed forward.

Now the very murmur of his spirit environment seemed hushed, as if his progress were being breathlessly watched and followed. Suddenly the lane of thronged trunks distended, opening out into a wide circular gulf among the trees ; and in the midst lay a broad pond or mere, hard-frozen and set with withered clumps of rushes.

It was winter manifest—a voiceless unpeopled solitude locked in ice. Derrick walked yet a score paces, and on the instant stopped. He had reached

unexpectedly the opening to a second track or avenue, which entered the close amphitheatre at right angles to the other ; and, looking up this new approach, he saw a house at its farther end. The building was not so far away but that he could distinguish, or thought he could distinguish, its forlorn and abandoned character. No smoke rose from its chimneys ; no sign of life was visible about it anywhere. Decided as to its tenantless condition, yet willing to compromise with appearances, he stepped back out of sight of its windows, and quickly became absorbed in the prospect before him.

It was the pond that held and fascinated him—the ‘composition’ to be wrought out of that lifeless material, as a sculptor hews form out of marble. If he could realise the dream of fast-locked silence it evoked—the grave, the mausoleum of buried water ! The surrounding woods and thickets offered enough contributory colour to suit his new-born purpose. For the foreground a blackened sluice, controlling some subterranean rivulet, stood up in effective position. A convenient log presented itself hard by. Derrick seated himself on it, and was quickly at work, oblivious of everything but his subject.

The short noon closed about him as he painted. He was eager only to forestall the approaching twilight. He may have been engaged for an hour, when a consciousness of some neighbouring presence seized him in a moment. Simultaneously with the thought, a low deep growl sounded in his ears, and he started and turned his head.

A man, holding a great hound in a leash, was standing close behind him—so close, that for the instant Derrick’s heart leapt as in the shock of a betrayal.

Then he laughed, lowered his block, and slewed round upon his seat.

“ Hullo ! ” he said.

The man backed immediately, dragging the hound with him, and stood staring. He was a sullen-looking, thickset young fellow, in gaiters and corduroys—some sort of a Keeper in suggestion. His face was ruddy by nature, but impressed, so Derrick could have thought, with the yellow patches, like finger-marks, which betokened fear. He relieved his mood, whatever it was, by kicking the mastiff, which still grumbled ominously.

“ I’m trespassing, I suppose,” said the young man. “ Does it matter ? ”

The Keeper passed the back of his hand across his mouth, and made, it would seem, some obvious effort at self-mastery.

“ Aye, it does,” he answered low, and immediately cursed the threatening beast, as if to regain control over his own voice. “ Who may ye be, by your leave ? ” he said, looking up.

“ An artist.”

“ And how came ye here ? ”

“ By the lane from the sea.”

“ The lane ? ”

The man moved slightly, as if to consult the betraying footprints, and then returned to his former position, from which he looked down stupidly on his own approaching tracks, appearing to compare the two. He was so long, and apparently so dense over the business, that Derrick lost patience.

“ There was nothing to mark it private, you know,” he said.

“ That’s a lie. There was the gate.”

“ Rotten.”

“ So you seen it, anyhow. Belike you'd been before.”

“ No.”

“ That may be true or it mayn't. What's your name ? ”

Derrick told him, unperturbed. “ I'm staying in the village—Wanborough,” he added, “ at the Dark Horse Inn. You can test my veracity, if you please.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. Somehow the scared look had not left his eyes.

“ What were ye sitting painting—here, of all places ? ” he demanded, hoarsely for all his effort.

“ The place appealed to me,” said Derrick with cool surprise. “ You would know why, if you were an artist.”

“ If I——” the word seemed to stick in the man's throat.

“ Come,” said Derrick, rising. “ The offence is no great one. If I've made a mistake it's soon put right by my going.”

“ Ah ! ” The man stirred on the instant, and blocked his way. “ No, you don't. You'd best be warned, between me and the dog. Where you come you'll bide, bating Miss Bruna's leave.”

Derrick paused, between dudgeon and astonishment. “ O ! shall I ? ” he said. “ And who is Miss Bruna—your mistress ? ”

“ Aye, she be,” said the man doggedly—“ and the mistress of ' Coldshot,' though you may come to question it.”

“ Question it ? Why, in the devil's name ? Is this ' Coldshot ' ? ”

“ Don't you know it is ? ”

Was the fellow crazed ? “ Well,” said Derrick, with



a grunt of resignation, “ take me to your mistress, and I’ll apologise in person.”

The Keeper nodded grimly. “ Go you before,” he said, “ and I’ll follow.”

“ Which way? Towards the house, I suppose. Very well.”

He set off, and the other shadowed him. There was no disputing a madman, and so accompanied, he thought. But the situation struck the young man as odd in the extreme. He could only conjecture that this forlorn-looking wilderness was the stronghold of some jealous eccentric, impoverished, or perhaps a miser. Such spirits were wont, traditionally, to be suspiciously resentful of intruders.

He tramped on, provoked yet queerly interested. There was something in the adventure, in the ghostly solitude of the place, in its remoteness and neglect, which touched his phantasmal nerve, and kept it agitated and expectant. As he approached the house, he found reason to qualify his first conviction as to its abandonment—but only to qualify, no more. That it was in some sort inhabited showed in at least one quarter, where there were blinds and curtains to the windows and other signs of occupancy. Yet for the most part the air of sad desertion which characterised the grounds dwelt and brooded hereover.

It was a fair large structure in itself, oblong in form and built of antique red brick. A stone coping with balusters and a shallow parapet ran the length of the roof; a double stairway, stained and green, descended from a doorway on the first floor to the disordered garden. It was with a little jerk of the pulses that Derrick suddenly perceived a couple of figures coming down these steps.

He did not hesitate, nevertheless, but walked straight on until he encountered the advancing pair, who were obviously crossing the garden to meet him. They stopped at the ridge of a low terrace, and he stood a foot or two beneath, looking up at them. One of the two was a woman—she might have been some three or four years older than himself; the other by his garb appeared a Catholic priest—a fat, genial-looking body, with a hint and perfume of snuff about his rounded habit. Derrick, prompt and decisive, raised his hat, and addressed the former :

“ I have been caught trespassing—unwittingly, believe me. Pray accept my apologies, and at the same time my congratulations on your possession of a very efficient watchdog.”

His voice faltered on its note of hardly concealed irony, as he stood, his face raised. The eyes, suddenly bent down to encounter his, had made an easy and imperious capture of him on the instant. Cold as grey agates, the lashes that rayed from them were nevertheless ink-black—a wonderful contrast. The woman was lithe and tall in figure; her face was of an even pallor, like cut ivory; passion and mere prettiness seemed blended in it—the mingling of the Latin with the Saxon. But there was something more—a sense of indescribable sorrow, of emotion fettered and imprisoned, which affected this man of abnormal sympathies like poignant music. He stood without another word, awaiting her response.

None followed; but, her eyes instantly travelling from him to the block he held exposed in his hand, she gave a quite perceptible start, and glanced, wide-lidded, at the Keeper.

“ Aye,” said the man, “ an artist. He was sitting *there*, when I come upon him.”

She seemed to breathe an inaudible word or two ; and then her gaze, intense, haunting, re-sought the intruder. Suddenly she put out a hand. The action releasing the cloak she had clutched about her throat, its hood fell back, revealing a night of winged hair.

“ Let me see,” she said. “ The pond ? ”

Derrick, thrilling throughout, placed the sketch in her hand. She stared at it, eagerly, hungrily, then made a motion towards the priest. He came and glanced over her shoulder, smiled, shrugged, and said something in a low voice. Then once more she fixed the artist with that strange concentrated look.

“ You were sitting *there* ? ” she whispered. “ *Who* are you ? ”

He was less taken aback, perhaps, than most men might have been under the circumstances.

“ My name is Laurence Derrick,” he said. “ I am sorry to have offended ; but I took the place to be deserted.”

“ Do you want to go ? ”

“ Want ! ” His eyes might have expressed his astonishment. “ I am putting up in the neighbourhood,” he said, “ at the ‘ Dark Horse.’ I should be back there before nightfall.”

“ Go, then, if you will.”

He was too amazed to answer ; he bowed and turned.

“ No, not that way again,” she cried quickly.

The Keeper interposed. “ Here, master,” he said, “ I’ll show you out.”

He motioned the intruder to follow him by way of a side path which, penetrating the thickets, brought them round to the front of the house, and thence,

through darkling shrubberies, to the rusted gates of the estate and so into a lonely by-road.

“Follow that,” he said surlily, “and ye’ll make Wanborough.”

“Good night,” said Derrick. The man did not answer ; and he went wondering on his way.

## CHAPTER II

### A WEIRD DISAPPEARANCE

NOT many visitors favour Wanborough in the best of the season ; in winter, but a wandering castaway or two. It is a salt, remote, wind-blown little place, one of the many, remnants of a once-swarming life, that dot at long intervals that stretch of eroded coast. Loneliness, quietude, grey antiquity are its settled features ; it is dominated by one old, old church tower, ashen and lofty ; and its lanes, its cliffs, its wastes of sand, are sown with ghostly secrets. In the houses there are noises at night, not to be accounted to rats or gusty chinneys ; in twilight rooms presences are felt, and the touch of soft cold fingers ; in the deep troughs of the waves outside gleam shadows of ruins and sudden deriding eyes. The dead scream in stormy weather on the buried ramparts of the old towns for miles away. They lie where they fell when the sea caught and overwhelmed them, lapping up a principality in a night.

From the first Derrick had been fascinated by the place. Its haunted solitude had no fears for him. His soul could not, for its own ease, reach too far beyond the pale of the conventional vulgarities and the conventual securities. He felt freest in isolation

—he was an unusual man. This atmosphere, barren to others, fruitful to his peculiar art, seemed to him full of strange potentialities, one of which had now been surely realised. In what other place known to his memory could he have alighted on so odd an adventure?

The thought of it dwelt with him continually. He was for ever standing in spirit and looking up into a pair of cold fathomless eyes, and pondering on their secret. What was it? He was to learn in a little. The knowledge was to come to him in the most commonplace way possible.

He was sitting that night in the bar-parlour of the ‘ Dark Horse,’ a very old-time hostelry, whose eastern wall abutted on the churchyard, where the tower was and the dead. Amongst these last was numbered one Jonathan Ball, a wife-poisoner, who lay age-long buried in the shadows, a piece of cake in one hand, a poker in the other, symbolic of his crimes and of the destination they assured him. The frost lay hard and sparkling in the moonlight above his grave and the other stalagmite headstones. It was bitter cold outside, and Derrick, though commonly unsociable, could appreciate the contrastive comfort of an inn snugger. He smoked, sipped at his glass, and from time to time addressed a word or two to the crinkle-faced landlord, who suggested nothing so much as a dried Norfolk biffin. Once he suddenly asked a question that had long hovered on his lips :

“ Is there any story connected with the place called ‘ Coldshot ’ ? ”

The landlord stood at the moment half in and half out of the parlour door, and Derrick had supposed him to be alone, until his question evoked an answer, not from him, but from an unsuspected stranger who, it

seemed now, had come briskly into the shadows of the tap beyond. This person put his head suddenly round and into the opening, and replied for the other :

“ Yes, there is. Good evening to you, sir.”

He looked an educated quidnunc of a fellow, and was in fact the bailiff or steward to some neighbouring estate. He had a sharp face, with restless lips and eyes, and a muffler about his throat ; and his lean form was buttoned into a thick tight-waisted overcoat.

“ O ! ” said Derrick. “ Good evening. I wonder if I might hear it ? ”

“ No objection in the world,” said the stranger. His speech was dry and staccato ; he put his hand over the counter, and, unbuttoning the bar door, walked in. “ Ah ! ” he said ; “ it’s like slipping into bed out of the cold. Been sketching, sir ? ”

Derrick was not aware of having seen the stranger before, but the stranger knew all about him. The young man nodded. “ At the place itself,” he answered ; “ but it seemed I was trespassing.”

“ Caught at it, eh ? You got in through Haggart’s Lane, I suppose.”

“ Where ? ”

“ From down by the coast ? ”

“ O, yes ! I supposed the place, from its appearance, to be deserted.”

“ You would—” the stranger peered at him, quick and curious—“ and it might as well be, for all the care she takes of it.”

“ Who’s ‘ she ’ ? ”

“ Miss Salvetti ; Bruna her name is—queer name, isn’t it ? The place belongs to her, I suppose.”

“ Why do you suppose ? ”

“ Ah ! There’s the story. She had a brother once

—Lotto—queer name again—a boy of fourteen. He was the heir-at-law ; but he disappeared.”

“ Disappeared ? How ? ”

The stranger shut his lips like a trap. He reopened a corner of them to say, “ Wish you could explain,” and closed all tight again.

“ Well, give me the chance,” said Derrick. He glanced significantly from the well-conditioned stranger to his own glass and back again.

“ Don’t mind if I do,” said the bailiff. “ Rum, by your leave. Nothing for something’s a bad principle.”

“ Join us, landlord,” said Derrick, relieved, and in a minute fragrant harmony prevailed.

The stranger did not smoke ; but he took snuff, and he rolled his liquor approvingly round in his mouth while he revolved his subject.

“ Where were you caught ? ” he said at last.

“ I was seated on a stump, sketching the pond.”

“ Ah ! the very place ! ” He cogitated yet a little ; then opened out, speaking in quick, abrupt sentences : “ It was ten years ago, I should say, pretty well to a day. Those people had only been there a year or two—the girl, her mother and the boy. I don’t know where they came from ; but ‘ Coldshot ’ was the mother’s property. She was Anglo-Irish ; but the father, deceased, was Italian, as you might guess. The mother died, too, first year of their coming, and the orphans were left in possession. They weren’t much liked in the neighbourhood—strange people, and papists at that. There was thought something uncanny about them ; and devils of tempers the two had. They were left alone mostly ; and there they lived. But I get to know things ; and what I learnt of them was nothing to their discredit. Ever studied the wars of

Italian independence—the late sixties and thereabouts ? ”

“ Not much, I must confess,” said Derrick.

“ Ah ! ” said the stranger. “ They happened inside my time, and I have a curiosity about most things. The end for the Pope came in '70, when the national troops entered Rome, and the foreigners and all marched out with the honours of war. But there had been a bit of a scrimmage first, and a few were accounted for on both sides. Grandfather Salvetti was one of them—a papal Zouave ; and ever after his memory was revered in the family as that of a martyr. The girl, Bruna, though an after product, held it in the most passionate regard. She was a real fanatic—due to her convent-training, no doubt ; and she never ceased to look for the time when Italy should return to its senses and its allegiance, as she considered it, and restore to the chair of Peter its temporal sovereignty. A queer obsession, eh—and in these times ? But she stuck to it, and Lotto, her brother, was destined by her to his share in the glorious restitution. She dedicated him to the Vatican and its service—to be a soldier of God ; and it was his refusal to be so disposed of that affected their mutual relations—that was responsible for some almighty rows between them, in fact. It was said she got to hate him ; but I don't believe that.”

The stranger paused, to roll another relished sip round his tongue.

“ The boy was a queer uncanny creature,” he went on, “ rather an unholy gowk to look at, and an artist like yourself. He saw things and painted things, it was said, that no one else this side of reason ever imagined. But, whatever was his capacity, or want of



it, the sister held the whole business in furious scorn. She wanted him to be a soldier, like his father and grandfather, and when he wouldn't she just made his life a burden. And at last it came to the final rumpus between them—and then something happened.”

“ Yes,” said Derrick, impatient of the repeated parentheses.

“ It was on an evening like this,” said the narrator ; “ only the snow was thicker on the ground. The boy had gone down to that pond to sketch ; and he was never seen again.”

“ Never seen ? ”

“ That warn't all,” put in the landlord shrewdly. “ There were summut odder.”

“ You dry up, Coombes,” said the bailiff sharply, “ and leave me alone to tell my story.” He touched Derrick's knee with long impressive fingers. “ His footsteps, sir, were traced in the snow from the house to the stump on which he sat, and there they ceased. They neither branched off in any direction, nor did they return the way they had come. But a second track there was—the girl's. And *her* footsteps were traced from the house to the stump and back again.”

He drew up his shoulders, took snuff, and challenged comment with a look.

“ It had snowed,” began Derrick ; but the other stopped him :

“ Here, but not there ? No, sir, there was no snow after—none. There were the footsteps and there they ended. Bruna never denied her part. She admitted they had quarrelled ; that, further maddened by his persistence in going to paint after the row, she had followed him in the twilight ; that there had been a second furious scene between them, and that then she

had left him and flung back to the house. She said all that to explain how she was no murderess."

" Good God ! "

" Why, there had to be some sort of enquiry, of course ; and naturally suspicion fell on her. But nothing was discovered, and to this day no trace of the boy has been found. He just went so far, and disappeared. There lay the track of his footsteps and hers as far as the stump, and beyond and around that just virgin snow—not a trace, not a sign of him anywhere. He had melted into the air, it seemed."

Derrick sat frowning awhile.

" She was *seen* to return to the house alone ? " he asked presently.

" That was so," answered the stranger.

" And yet she was believed to have killed him ? "

" The thing, you see, had to be accounted for somehow."

" How could she have disposed of the body by the way, and never betrayed a sign ? "

" God knows. She didn't dispose of it, of course. There was no body to dispose of. The boy hadn't been murdered. He had vanished inscrutably before her arrival on the spot, and her story of an altercation between them was fiction. Assume all that, if you like. Does it make the mystery less inexplicable ? "

" It is monstrous."

" What ? "

" That she should have been allowed to suffer on such evidence under such an imputation."

" Well, you asked for a chance to explain ; and there are the facts."

" Viewed through the mists and exaggerations of ten years, remember."

The stranger made a dry sound. “ I accept the implication,” he said, “ on behalf of myself and fellow-asses.”

“ Surely you were not convinced of her guilt at the time ? ”

“ I have stated the case plainly, sir. I am no believer in the supernatural. There was the testimony of the quarrel, of the tell-tale footprints, of the boy’s disappearance. I don’t pretend to go beyond them.”

“ And they are sufficient, in your opinion, to justify the social ostracism to which the unhappy woman has been condemned—for I take it that that is the true meaning of the strange household, of the banned and neglected estate.”

“ The ‘ unhappy woman,’ bear in mind, stood to profit by the lad’s decease. She became sole inheritress of the property. Yet one must admit she doesn’t seem to have taken much advantage of her opportunity. She’s nursing the place belike against her brother’s return some day. Think what you please. In any case she had the temper to stand to her guns, and I admire her for it ; but it’s hardly to be supposed that the mystery tended to an improvement of her already bad relations with her neighbours. She was virtually proscribed, in fact, and she’s lived apart and alone ever since.”

“ Alone ? ”

“ There’s Blackadder and his mother—a hard-fisted couple who stuck to the girl throughout ; and there’s Father Appleyard—not much to recommend in any one of them.”

“ Not in the priest ? ”

“ O ! there’s no harm in him—a sort of comfortable lay cleric, a family chaplain of the old order. He

knows which side his bread's buttered, and he doesn't quarrel with it. They all hive together in a wing of the old house."

The stranger finished his rum, added a fortifying pinch of snuff, and rose.

"There's the story, sir," he said, "and resolve it if you can. We shall be curious hereabouts to have your explanation. In the meantime——"

"In the meantime," said Derrick, "you damn a poor soul by default. Why not start on the other assumption?"

"What assumption?"

"That she's innocent."

"Of course she is. Only, where's the boy?"

"Must a wrongfully accused man produce the real criminal in order to save his own neck?"

"Had to once, you know. Ever seen the 'Lyons Mail'? I don't say it's right; but Society's more conservative than the law, and every bit as irrational. Good night to you."

Derrick went to bed and to sleep, and hunted all night about the margin of a frozen pond, close by whose icy levels the waters of a blackened sluice, remote, deep-sunken, kept up a perpetual low thunder.

## CHAPTER III

### A SURPRISE INVITATION

'*His* footsteps were traced from the house to the stump and there ceased'—*hers* went forth and back. There was the strange problem which was to haunt this strange man for many a day to come.

Why should it haunt him? What concern was it

of his ? An ancient story now, so put away, so staled under the dust of a whole decade, that anyone seeking to disinter and restore it to its once significance must needs start at a great disadvantage. Perhaps it was a natural predilection for old things, for their mellowness and their mystery, for the tone which past deeds no less than past materials acquire from long keeping, which was in some sort responsible for Laurence Derrick's feeling ; his constitutional solitariness would certainly have assumed for itself no more than an abstract interest in the chief person of the drama. If for the moment she possessed his soul, it was because of her prominent place in the picture.

So he supposed ; and what was the value of his supposition ? Legend and fact have too often declined to distinguish the possession of an artist's soul by his subject from material passion. Pygmalion, no doubt, felt at first no more than an abstract interest in the figure he foresaw embedded in the ivory. It was when he began to shape substance out of the shadow that he began to realise that his model was his own transcendent desire. So Laurence unconsciously entertained the image that was to come to possess his soul with the passion of its loveliness.

Yet, at the outset, its beauty did not so much affect him as its mystery. Was this woman sinned against or sinning ? He did not much care. The hot blood already kindled in him could have found equal satisfaction in either conclusion. He did not recognise his own mood, of course ; it represented to him no more than the fascination of his imagination by a *subject* ; but he was possessed by an odd determination to claim that subject as his right. The very sympathies of shyness and social ostracism—theirs in common,

though for a different reason—appeared to justify him. And for this reason the comparative remoteness of the tragedy only the more thrilled his veins. It invited his intent into an atmosphere of privacy and mystery long secluded from the outer respectabilities.

Now, for some inexplicable reason he was so confident of this moral right of his to penetrate, and again penetrate the forbidden, that not only was he undisturbed by any qualms as to how to effect his purpose, but, the way to it being suddenly offered to him unasked, he accepted the concession with an air that implied that that concession was immaterial, though welcome as a formal courtesy. And yet the offer came to him in a surprising enough manner.

The day after his adventure opened with no abatement in the quiet rigour of the frost. Derrick, having breakfasted, was preparing himself for a day-long tramp over the snowy wastes, when a message was brought in that Father Appleyard begged a word with him at the door. Perhaps his heart was conscious of a momentary jerk and heat. They passed as instantly, and he went out leisurely to answer his visitor.

The priest, looming large in the mist in a great frieze overcoat, and with a round clerical hat of dark felt put back from his head like an extinguished halo, greeted the artist with an ineffable enlargement of the smile that was habitual to his round impassive face. His eyes were half-buried in jocund wrinkles, his nose was small, his little juicy mouth seemed to eject phrases, like cherry-stones, with a delicate relish. He put out a plump gloved hand, and touched Derrick on the arm.

“ Pardon me,” he said ; “ an artist ? *The artist ?* ”

Derrick nodded. " We met yesterday," he said.

" Exactly," answered the stranger. His smile positively shone. " You are coming again ? "

" My reception was hardly encouraging," said Derrick ; " but, if this is an invitation, thank you, and yes."

" You will find excuses, I know," said the priest, " for the faithful steward. You were interested in the place ? "

" Very much so." For some reason the young man was not moved to expansion.

" You are already acquainted with it, perhaps ? " suggested the other smoothly.

Derrick glanced at him, and marked with surprise an expression on his face which he would have read as one of sly innuendo.

" If I was," he replied, " it must have been in dreams alone."

Something impelled him to the answer ; and, even as he made it, a startled sense of its truth, of his already unconscious recognition of its truth, passed through him. The place, now he came to analyse its impressions, *had* appeared vaguely, mystically familiar—an instance, no doubt, of that illusion commonly attributed to a lost beat in one of the twin brain hemispheres.

Father Appleyard, his eyes almost closed, tapped him again, and indulgently, on the arm.

" There are dreams, my dear," he said cryptically, " that constitute a truer evidence than fact—your own artistic conceptions, for example. You observed the manner of your dismissal yesterday ? "

" How could I fail to ? "

" But misread it, doubtless. Was it not conditional

on your own wishes? The lady would have been proud to have you stay—to come, to go, at your enti-ar convenience. I bring that message from her. Believe me that ‘remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow’ though we be, we are not, even in ‘Coldshot,’ so unenlightened as to be ignorant of the reputation of Mr. Laurence Derrick.”

The young man bowed curtly. Compliment made him impatient and uncomfortable; for what had searching self-criticism, the only one that he valued, to do with flattering phrases? Yet there seemed to him here some significant relation between the idle blandishment and the message it adorned. For some mysterious reason it was designed to induce him to return; he felt the strong purpose behind the apparent casualness; and to what did he owe the unaccustomed grace?

He could not guess. It was all an unfathomable riddle. And yet the purpose pulled with his own, which was as incomprehensible and as equally compelling. He had intended to return, with or without leave, and he welcomed the invitation merely as a happy solution of a difficulty. A spirit of cool assurance in this matter had unaccountably mastered him.

“Then you know of his moods and eccentricities,” he said unceremoniously, “and can comprehend something of the appeal that this sad wilderness of a place, with its haunted atmosphere, must have for them. Yet I must not respond to a permission so liberal, if given, perhaps, under a mistaken assumption. I am a stranger here, sir, but accident has made me acquainted with the story of ‘Coldshot.’”

The fat priest quite closed his eyes, and nodded serenely once or twice.



“ The admission,” he said, “ does you infinite credit, but without the least prejudice to our understanding. You are welcome to the run of the grounds.”

“ Then, in that case,” said Derrick, “ the sooner I revisit them the more profit to me.”

“ We will walk back together, by your leave,” said Father Appleyard, “ if your young impatience can accommodate itself to my slowness.”

Derrick laughed slightly, and the pair set forth to cover the two or three waste miles which separated them from Haggart’s Lane. They returned in the tracks of the heavy clerical footprints—a fact so suggestive in the light of a recent admission, that the artist could not refrain from an occasional conscious glance at his companion, who for his part would respond with as conscious a smile. Yet no word reminiscent of the tragedy was suffered to pass between them, and they talked, when they did, on indifferent subjects.

Derrick had no reason to suspect a studied subtlety in the good Father’s attitude. If it had not been for that suspicion of a deep purpose underlying the courtesy, he would have judged the man frankly on his undisguised candour, would have believed him to be what he seemed, a complaisant, comfortable ecclesiastic, long mellowed in an easy and prosperous sinecure. Father Appleyard was quite open about his position—which he had held, it seemed, for some six years only; a significant fact—and about the Christian sympathies which had maintained him in it through much sorrow and misrepresentation. He went no nearer the tragedy than that; but he expatiated prettily on the errors of heresy, and on the passion of the Good Shepherd to recover strayed

sheep to the fold. The subject bored Derrick after a time, and perhaps too palpably, for a silence had fallen between the two as they passed by the ruined gate, and entered into the frozen recesses of the woods beyond. Nor was it broken until they came out into view of the lonely mere and the stump where the artist had erstwhile sat. And there Derrick stopped.

"I have not exhausted the subject," he said. "I will remain here, by your leave."

The priest bowed. A strange look, or so Derrick thought it, had returned to his eyes.

"You are to please yourself, my de-ar," he said. "Orders have been given, and you need fe-ar no interruption."

He commented briefly on the suggestive melancholy of the scene, recommended the artist to peace and felicity, and, with one lingering odd scrutiny of him and of his surroundings, went off through the trees. Derrick sat down to work.

He worked long and absorbedly, losing himself, as was his wont, in his subject. Perhaps something of the mysterious tragedy associated with that white and brooding solitude may have affected his conception of things. He wrought again in colour, and in colour so weird and startling in its unusualness, that many might have convicted him of a deliberate desire to impress by wilful distortion and perversity. But he never conceived like other men. He saw what was unrevealed to most.

The mist, where it shrouded the sheeted ice and obscured the farther banks of trees, thinned after a time, letting through little splinters of gold and emerald. He caught and recorded the fairy change, but in a fashion all his own; and, as a thing of his

own, he stood up presently to regard his work, placing the block against a stone. As he stooped and recovered himself, the sensitive mechanism of his nerves announced a neighbouring presence—something utterly motionless and silent. He turned and saw the woman.

She had come upon him unheard over the snow. A grey hood, as before, was clasped by one hand about her throat. Her eyes stared from its shadows like unearthly stones. But she was beautiful—he understood that now. The slender contours, the ivory complexion of her face had been moulded in the creative heat of passion. Derrick, with that strange feeling of mastery and possession still affecting him, walked straight up to the apparition.

“ Would you care to examine my work ? ” he said. “ It owes to you, you know.”

Her eyes engrossed him. Their gaze still fixed on his, she just stirred, and her lips moved. He understood her to answer “ yes.”

“ Come, then,” he said, “ and tell me how it affects you.”

He moved, and she followed mechanically, walking like one in a dream. She seemed to stumble slightly as he stayed her at the requisite point of view.

“ It stands down there,” he said, “ against the stone.”

Then for the first time her gaze passed, with an obvious effort, from the artist to his work. She stared long at the latter, her breast rising and falling. Some strong emotion seemed repressed in her when presently she looked up; some inscrutable appeal seemed shadowed in her eyes.

“ It is,” she began in a low voice; then hesitated,

and went on—"I think I understand: I am sure I understand—at last."

Strange enigmatic words; but meet to this strange adventure. Derrick was conscious of queer little thrills in his veins as he listened. There was a low music in her voice that impressed him like some old haunting. But he felt little faith, nevertheless, in her professed appreciation. He laughed slightly, and moved to recover his block.

"There," he said, "I mustn't tax your courtesy, or risk depriving myself in your eyes of a fair reason for my intrusion. It was rash of me to invite comment."

In the very act of stooping, it gave him a start of surprise to feel her hand upon his arm, quick, impulsive.

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "Leave it a little. It will come to me—I shall understand. How can you expect the teaching of genius to prevail all at once with lesser souls? But I can feel in myself the birth of the larger knowledge—I long for it—it is awake, only—O, have patience, please!"

She had backed from him again. There was distress in her eyes, in her voice. What mystery it all was; and she its most haunting protagonist—the dark angel of these white-locked deeps! But into that impersonal view was already sinking a seed of human emotion, that should presently germinate and absorb the soul of that it possessed.

"Look, then," said Derrick, his whole body suddenly flushing; "devour; absorb; it is part of myself—let it become part of you."

He spoke as if some brain intoxication had seized him on the instant. Her gaze passed to his face again, and dwelt there.

“ I have learnt to learn,” she said low. “ Suffering has been my master. Will you come again ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Many times ? ”

“ Yes. Day by day, until you dismiss me.”

“ I will be very quiet. I will not disturb you. May I come and watch ? ”

“ If you will be true to your word—if you will keep aloof. I shall not know you are there when once I am at work.”

He was the master, she the servant. With one low-spoken word of thanks—no more—she turned and left him.

## CHAPTER IV

### DREAMLAND

To the unnamed friend of an earlier chapter Derrick once came to deliver his soul in writing. The section of the narrative which follows is given in his own words. It suffices to say, without enlarging on the reason, that no misuse of confidence is entailed in their publication :

“ And so began this strange episode. I was made free of the haunted estate ; I became one of its grave and wandering familiars. Day after day I entered upon my silent task there, and for so many in succession that the weather changed and rechanged while I wrought—from frost to thaw, from cloud to sunshine and again to chill—and I was able to realise its solitude under innumerable aspects. The place was of no extravagant extent ; but such as it was it was an epitome of all loneliness and isolation. Its voices were

the voices of a primeval freedom ; no act of man came to alarm their age-long security ; the wild-fowl winged, the rabbits loped in unhurrying, half-inquisitive fashion from any chance disturbance. And between myself and this bewildered corner of nature grew such a charm of intimacy that I came to feel as if to withdraw myself from it would be like the tearing of a mandrake up by its roots.

“ But it was the pond that most enthralled my imagination, and thereby I oftenest sat to sketch. Perhaps it was the ghostly associations of a particular spot that quickened my best inspirations. Anyhow it was to the familiar stump that I chiefly resorted ; and thereon worked and dreamed—yes, dreamed.

“ Many thoughts came to me meanwhile ; many problems—first of all the problem of my welcome ; but that was unanswerable. The riddle of the dead tragedy was most constant to my mind. Much I pondered it, and, unobtrusively, the nature of the ground about. The black sluice, when the thaw unlocked and the spring of swelling waters flushed it, gave no answer. It stood yards away from the spot where the footprints had ceased. In fresh weather a draught of salt air would flow up the valley, by which I had entered, from the sea, and, owing to some disposition of the ground, take a wide curve and blow across the pond. I wondered if such a draught, but of phenomenal proportions, had by chance caught up the boy and whirled him from his place on to the ice, through which he had crashed and sunk. It seemed a preposterous solution ; but it was my only one ; and the persistent course of the air-current gave it at least a colour.

“ It was certainly the oddest situation imaginable,

this of mine. I never went, was never invited, into the house ; but my attendance without its precincts was regular.

“ Now and then, but with a certain air of guilt, as if he were infringing regulations, Father Appleyard would come and stand by me awhile, and discuss theology in that rosy complaisant way of his with the affected intonation. He gave me the impression always of seeking to reclaim a strayed child through the easiest of platitudes ; but he was alert all the while, and on the least hint of discovery would vanish with a speed incommensurate with his bulk.

“ Once or twice, but at a distance, I saw the Keeper Blackadder and his dog ; and, on a single occasion, a hard-featured woman with him whom I took to be his mother. The two were conning me furtively from cover ; but they ventured no nearer, and never once was I approached by either. Truly the oddest situation, was it not ?

“ And now, my friend, like the suitor who discusses commonplaces, circling ever nearer and nearer the poignant essay, I poise and strike.

“ She kept to her word—but what profit was that to me ! Though my soul were rapt in its creations, though my hand moved mechanically to give them shape, I felt, and always felt, her presence the moment it was there. However light her footfall, however stealing her approach, the instant was recorded in every nerve of my being, and thenceforth I wrought consciously and haltingly. I had utterly misjudged my strength when I gave her leave to watch ; the thing could not go on, it was impossible. What predestination, I thought, was in this sympathy ; what threat, what demoralisation ?

“ And one day, moved beyond endurance, almost to despair, I leaped from my seat and turned upon her.

“ ‘ You are usurping my rights,’ I cried. ‘ I will be master here or nothing ! ’

“ She stood away a little ; her face was quite white ; her hand went to her bosom.

“ ‘ You are master ! ’ she whispered ; ‘ I know it.’

“ Her beauty took me with a sudden shock. I caught my breath like one who realises for the first time the presence of an apparition. Then I laughed and threw down my brushes.

“ ‘ Artists,’ I cried, ‘ are unmannerly reptiles—I bite the hand that warmed me. It is my nature ; I have no other excuse. But for the future you must not be silent. I would rather hear the words from your mouth than lose my soul in its converse with yours. Do you understand ? ’

“ ‘ I have been very blind,’ she said.

“ ‘ Then,’ I answered, ‘ come with me, and perhaps I will open your eyes. Let us walk together, and I will teach you all I know by precept rather than example.’

“ And so began our real intimacy. It was an intimacy of woods and skies, of wildernesses and secret places. This woman, once eased of her shyness, impressed me as a vivid personality, imbued with a strong native force of character which circumstances had humbled and time subdued. Often I fancied that she had to exercise great self-control in the subordinating of her views, especially her religious views, to another’s ; but the conquest invariably came, and in a manner touching to one who could understand. She deferred against her beliefs ; in general I seemed to construe in her a pathetic invitation to confidences I could not fathom, a wistful implication of apology, of



entreaty for forgiveness, as if she were indirectly seeking to atone for some earlier misconception as to my personal art and its aims and significances.

“ Why need I continue, to you who know the truth? This woman, I called her—love forgive me! What formal phrases, what cold analysis, to disguise the passion which had swept riotously into my soul—it seemed to me all in a moment. O . . . there is something indescribably moving in the moral and physical submission of a woman to a man younger than herself. Bruna was my senior by some four years, and my comparative immaturity lusted for that riper fruit.

“ I thought I had reason to believe that it need not lust in vain; but ever and ever I postponed the lovely proof. I guarded even against hinting at my own feelings; I was wilful and despotic. How Destiny sought to fool me through my own masquerading, which served no more than, by prolonging my self-confidence, to double-edge the blow when it fell! I told myself, strong in my assurance, that I must learn the truth as to her innocence or guilt, and from her lips, before I spoke. The knowledge of it was not to influence the fact of my passion, but only its character; yet the first overtures for a complete understanding must come from her. She could not in reason—though the subject had never been touched upon between us—suppose me ignorant of the scandal which had made of her locally an outcast.

“ And so, like a tyrant, I bided the ecstatic moment, foretasting it a thousand times in thought. Guilty or guiltless, this woman existed body and soul for me. I was already drunk with the transport of her possession. When I put out my hand she would come.”

## CHAPTER V

## THE THUNDERBOLT

ONE day Derrick made a little water-colour sketch of Father Appleyard. It was the oddest thing, full of subtle modelling and strength, but seen by him as no other man would have seen it. In this picture the good Father's roses became tawny petals, and his lips and cheeks pale green. He might have been some jolly Triton of the Mere, and he looked dismayed on his own presentment.

"Is this really how you see me, my de-ar?" he asked.

Derrick laughed. He had been early inured to the mockery of the Philistine, had had to run his full gauntlet of everyday criticism before the irresistible force of his imagination had wholly captured his public, and this essay in a new medium had merely, he concluded, brought the battle upon him again. He would prevail, no doubt, as he had already prevailed in another field, and in the meantime any untutored criticism was instructive.

"Does it look so strange to you?" he said. "Well, I suppose no two men's visions are alike."

The priest, absorbed in contemplation, did not answer him for a little.

"No," he said at last. "No. This vision, at least, must be wholly singular. I have only, in my experience, encountered one other example of it."

"Then it isn't singular," said Derrick. "What other example?"

Father Appleyard looked at him queerly. Once

more there was that suggestion in his expression of a sly innuendo.

“ If you don't know, I don't,” he answered, with an odd chuckle. “ Is it finished ? ”

“ As far as I propose to go.”

“ Then may I show it to Miss Salvetti ? ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ You invited it, did you not ? My daughter cannot accuse me of intruding upon your privacy unasked.”

“ You can assure her as to that.”

The chaplain, securing the sketch delicately, nodded and walked away.

Derrick, left alone, sat down again, but not to work. The air was very still, with a moist exhausted quality in it that seemed enervating. But he was not one to succumb to climatic changes ; his listlessness was due to a moral paralysis which appeared to stultify all further artistic effort in him. It had been creeping about his nerves for days ; he had proposed the portrait, indeed, as a desperate means of escape from its insidiousness ; and now, it seemed, it could no longer be ignored. How was he going to force the crisis ? that was the insistent problem that had risen to haunt him.

He had said to himself that she should be the first to speak ; and yet she showed no sign. She was sweet, humble, deprecating to him as ever ; she treated him as the master and tyrant of her destiny ; but still their dear converse remained impersonal. No word of passion had been spoken between them ; for all her lovely lowliness she seemed obstinately bent on denying him the invitation his heart so gluttonously craved. She would not let him into her past,

however blissful she made the present for him, and he wanted that past for his own, with all its potentialities for emotion. How was he to capture it, to bring it to a voluntary surrender? The days were flying, this life could not go on for ever.

And even as he pondered, between tenacity and irresolution, he saw her form among the trees. She was waiting there, dutifully, on his will, and his will rose and acknowledged its slave, fiercely, exultantly.

Then he noticed for the first time a strange emotion in her face. It was like the dawn of some coming revelation; it affected him like the promise of rain and flowers in springtime; his soul rose in him to meet and answer to it. There was an early bird singing in the still copses. In a hush of rapture he stopped her to listen to it.

"It speaks what I cannot explain to you," he said presently.

"Will you try to?" she answered, hardly above her breath.

"This antiquity," he said, "this meeting in its midst. It has all happened before; but when, when? It cannot have been, I know; and yet it was. I felt it the first day I entered—that it was all somehow known to me and very dear."

She put a sudden hand upon his arm; she was looking at him with wide-opened questioning eyes; her bosom rose and fell in quick-drawn spasms.

"No dream," she whispered. "Believe it, whatever strange shadow may have fallen between your present and its memories. I have seen the portrait you painted to-day—yes, I have seen it. Will you come with me?—I want to show you something—something very particular and secret. It may remind you; it——"

She was agitated all at once. An intense entreaty spoke in her every word and movement. “ You will come with me, will you not ? ” she repeated, with a little half-uttered sob.

“ Yes,” he muttered, all amazed. “ I will come.”

He stumbled. His heart was throbbing fire, his brain reeled and danced. She gripped his hand in her hot wet palm and led him on—out of the wood, towards the house. It stood large in the grey mist, a silent shrouded phantom. A feeling of the unreality of all things stole into Derrick’s being ; he seemed to mount on air. Then came vacancy and shadow.

They were in the house, and alone. No sound or sign of other human being reached them from anywhere.

“ We are alone,” she whispered. “ Not many are needed to take care of this little corner in which I live ; and those few are absent. I sent them away that we two might be together. But you shall see. I have kept it all unchanged—shut away but unchanged, and you are the master of it.”

There was a thrill of feverish triumph in her voice. “ Come with me, come,” she said, “ and I will show you.”

He had no vision for his surroundings ; he knew only that he was following her up a dusky stairway, that thick pulse still hammering in his heart and brain, and that suddenly they were in a little white bedroom—her own. There were soft curtains there and flowers and fragrance. The sweet atmosphere stole into his senses and intoxicated them ; his blood raced in his veins and half blinded his sight. He saw her dimly—she was down on her knees by an opened drawer—and the madness in him was moving to leap and claim her

thus, when she rose to her feet. Her eyes were strangely shining; she held a square of paper in her hand: "Look," she said, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

He took the thing from her: it was a portrait of her younger self in water-colour, very singular, very clever, showing much in common with his own method of work, yet as wholly individual. He looked up from the image to the original.

"Does it not recall," she began—and seemed to stop perforce from the beating of her heart.

"It is an inspiration," he said, "as instinct with life and truth as most portraits, unaccountably to me, miss them."

"But——"

He laid the sketch softly on the table: "But," he echoed her, "what is this to do with the dream that was to find here its fulfilment?"

She was dumb all in a moment. The dawn of some mortal fear, as yet but in its inception, was slowly chilling her gaze as it encountered his. His ardour seemed to be burning hers to ashes, which spread white on her cheeks. A silence like death had fallen between them. Suddenly, and in an instant, she cried out. It was the uncontrollable shriek of the soft thing that brings the crouching beast upon her. She writhed one moment in Derrick's arms, then ceased to struggle.

"No, no," she said hoarsely, "I did not mean it; no more did you. Could any hand but one have painted those two portraits, mine and the priest's? There are things in them—it is impossible not to believe it—you are only pretending—only punishing me. Say it, say it. I have suffered; I have learnt; be merciful with me in your triumph."

He felt the entreaty, enigmatic as it was, like fresh fire. His clasp hardened about her.

“ Riddles,” he said. “ Whoever painted this portrait of you, it was not I. But what does that matter? It is the original I claim for my own—her past, her present, her future. The two last I hold in trust; the first still waits to be mine. I want your past—do you understand? I want your past, Bruna, that we may be wholly one in passion and sympathy.”

And, even as he spoke, looking into those horror-stricken eyes, the truth, supreme and amazing, burst upon him like a thunderclap. The uncouth boy, with his odd and uncanny art that no one, his sister least of all, had been able to comprehend; the vanishing; the unbroken silence of the ensuing interval! A hundred little disregarded clues were gathered all at once into his hand; a hundred little cryptic utterances became clear in the flash of that revelation. He felt stunned, as in a lightning shock. Very slowly his grasp relaxed, like that of a drowning man, and he let his pale burden slip from him upon the bed. Then he stood back, his arms crossed, his brow bent in a mocking and dreary frown.

“ Tell me,” he said, still incredulous, “ who painted that portrait of you.”

“ My brother Lotto,” she answered.

He gave a little sighing laugh.

“ And you took me—all this time you have taken me—for that portrait’s painter? ”

She crouched away from him on the little white bed. Her eyes were full of horror and resentment—yes, resentment. That cut him to the soul.

“ You must go away,” she said. “ Cannot you understand? If you are not Lotto, you must go away.”

"I shall not go," he answered sternly, "until you have explained—until you have expiated, maybe. You have brought this upon yourself; you have fooled me quite wantonly and unjustifiably. How are you going to atone?"

She was silent, hiding her face from him.

"I know now," he went on, "that you were suspected cruelly and unjustly; but, guilty or innocent, my passion had been prepared to accept you, my whole being to mingle its essence with yours. Do you understand the irredeemable thing you have done—to have diverted the blood of my life into your own veins, and now to have severed us apart and disowned me? What right had you ever to think me other than I called myself?"

She answered, half turning her head. There were tears and rebellion in her voice at once: "Why did you imply you were master here?"

"Because you implied it."

"You spoke of an old-felt familiarity with the place."

"Such fancies often come to us—to me, at least."

"How was I to know? And besides, there were many things—your way of painting——"

"You knew my name, by your own admission."

"Your name—yes—but, ten years ago! and I thought, if he had wanted to conceal himself, the disguise was only natural! It was just so he had worked—like you. My heart seemed to stop when first I saw the similarity. And then the place—there by the pond—and your age—your appearance even! I thought he had come back; that he had forgiven me; that all would be explained at last, and that my long bitter punishment for a pride so soon repented must



be near its end. And when you did not seem to understand, I thought perhaps that memory had really died in you, as it will in some, that you had returned to the dreadful spot by a sort of instinct, and that perhaps the portrait would somehow restore to you the broken thread of things. Lotto was always so strange, so unlike other people, and I had never ceased to hope that some day, by his unlikeness, I should be able to trace him and learn the truth. And to me—to all of us—it seemed that you must be he come back at last—the very spot; the strange way of seeing things; and, in the end, the portrait. I never doubted after that.”

He stood listening to her gasping, broken utterances. He understood everything now; yet, through all his bitter disillusionment, a wonder over that quality in his own work which seemed to strike others as so markedly singular that even the uninitiated could not mistake it made itself felt. Well, whatever it was, it had served him here to tragic purpose.

“ Look at me,” he said; but she kept her head averted.

“ Look at me,” he said again. “ What, are you afraid to face your victim ? ”

Half-blind, shading her eyes with her hand as she crouched, she obeyed trembling.

“ What is all this explanation to me ! ” he said. “ I made no pretence; I never masqueraded. Give me back myself.” She did not answer. “ Does it concern me for you,” he said, “ that you have stolen my soul under a misapprehension. I want it back. Give it me.” Still she did not speak. “ It is a dire responsibility,” he continued, “ that you have incurred. The debt I have owed and constantly paid to my art—will

you undertake it for me? Or will you give me yourself in atonement?"

"No, no," she whispered. "You are not Lotto. You must go away."

"I could say, I will not leave you for the very reason that I am not Lotto. He had no rights like mine. Do you dare to rob me of my soul, of my art that is my soul, and refuse me all restitution? You dare because, with the ineffable meanness of your sex, you know that you can trust to my honour as a gentleman not to enforce a return. But no such scruples need stand in the way of my cursing you for what you have done."

She sat upright; she was white to the lips.

"You will not!" she said. "Have mercy. You can have me if you will."

He dwelt one moment on her ashen face.

"No," he said; "I refuse you;" and he turned and left the room and the house.

## CHAPTER VI

### MISS DOLLY PATTERSON

MISS DOLLY PATTERSON was a very pretty, large-eyed, kissable-mouthed slip of a girl—one of the kind of whom the variety stage seems able to produce an endless supply. She was reasonably educated, naturally tasteful and affectionate; she satisfied the smaller æsthetics in a man, and her present distinction lay in her being engaged to be married to the famous but retiring young artist, Mr. Laurence Derrick. She had had other distinctions in her short time; her face

had blossomed out of more than one academic canvas, had smiled in the pages of popular weeklies, had figured on postcards. She had only needed a voice, indeed, to make her completely irresistible ; but there unfortunately she was wanting—in everything but the tact to conceal her deficiency. So long as she did not uplift her tones she was more than endurable.

Laurence had already known the girl as a professional model, and had now re-alighted on her at a psychologic moment. Her softness, her prettiness, her irreproachable ordinariness in fact, had appealed like balm to his exacerbated emotions, and he had straightway fluttered and flattered her by an impulsive proposal. Offended pride had its part, no doubt, in the impossible contract ; but the hunger newly created in his being was principally responsible for it. Passion is a prolific weed when once sown in virgin soil, and, though it may never flower, assumes thenceforth and for ever the biologic cast. The hopeless necessity of the feminine had intruded itself into Laurence’s philosophy.

It was a tempered philosophy nevertheless—as yet, at least. It sought to borrow in a normal courtship no more than a sense of rest from recent storms. There was no temptation here to the unconventional or the tragic. He was famous, well-to-do, and quite persuasive of tongue where he chose to be, and he might easily have made of the affair either or both. But it really was not worth the while. The commonplace remains always its own best protector ; it becomes so unspeakably vulgar in intrigue. Dolly, indeed, was wholly safe in her gentleman lover’s keeping. To cultivate her nymph-like prettiness like a flower was his easy interest. He hardly thought of her but in the

abstract, as one thinks in midwinter or the dog-days of the time of daffodils and primroses. He wore her gratefully in his buttonhole, and her small cool fragrance never reached his inner senses. Those he had shut angrily away; he congratulated himself mockingly on his present bondage as a positive relief from the heroic strain; and, as to the future, he ignored it. For the rest, his engagement had excited only a minimum of interest in the outer world. Solitary, uncommunicative, unsocial, he followed no schools and belonged to no cliques. He was always a law unto himself, and he still persisted in ordering his life entirely after his own pleasure and convenience. He had not foreseen, of course, love's novice as he was, the small exactions and tyrannies to which his surrender to the feminine would subject him.

These were perfectly reasonable, nevertheless. Dolly was already something of a popular favourite, she had scored a triumph in her engagement, and she mutinied against the constraint which would have deprived her of the glittering fruits of it. She wanted all the world to know of her selection by so distinguished a lover; the compliment gave her caste, and—though she would never have confessed to or even recognised this sentiment—publicity seemed to assure her a sort of protection against something that was dark and inexplicable in that lover himself. Derrick often puzzled, and sometimes frightened, his little butterfly model. Naturally. The contract was an utterly ludicrous one, and he had no right whatever to propose it.

He had enjoyed the petting, the coquetry, the fragrance at first; he had not tired of them yet; but his subconsciousness already uneasily foreshadowed a time when, a certain labour to which they had won

him being accomplished, their appeal might appear to have served its purpose, and those drained and flaccid blossoms might display no longer the power to charm him. In this task—one to which he had been coaxed only after considerable pressure—had consisted, perhaps, his faith's temporary support. Would his faith and the task end together? He was painting Dolly's portrait, in short.

The concession had been made against his own inclination, and with some natural concern for his reputation, to appealing blue eyes and seductive lips. Some Art Society was organising a portrait show of beautiful women on a distinguished scale, and Miss Dolly would give her little boots to figure therein—a vanity quite harmless, since its purpose was to exalt her lover, she told him. And after a while, with a laugh of resignation he had consented; and now in this early autumn of the year the portrait was nearly finished.

Dolly had not been allowed to see it—not once. That had been made an inflexible condition of the agreement. She came and she sat in her professional off-hours, but of what was going on on the positive side of the canvas she was wholly and deliciously ignorant. She dreamed of bewitching things, of course; she had just sufficient imagination to 'visualize' a long room, and a rapt group of visitors concentrated about a particular point on its walls. Love and Genius in combination must surely be producing something to justify such a vision, and she indulged it to its full. She was going to be made famous as she had never been yet—as a lady as well as a beauty, the chosen of an inspired gentleman-artist.

Derrick knew nothing about the girl's relations; never troubled himself with a thought of them; just

dreamed and drifted. But, in deference to imaginary respectabilities, he always insisted upon Dolly's being accompanied during the sittings by an adoring professional friend, Miss Vickers. His house and studio were near Queen Anne's Gate—an antique quiet locality, and remote for all its environment—and there he buried himself and was mostly to be found if wanted. And there one afternoon he laid down his brushes and breathed Amen to his task.

Dolly jumped up, and Miss Vickers gave a half-hysterical giggle.

“Finished?” cried the former, “really and truly at last?”

Derrick wheeled the easel, promptly, with its face to the wall.

“Just one more brush over to-morrow morning,” he said, “and in the afternoon you shall see it.”

Dolly's mouth fell.

“I can't come to-morrow, Laurence,” she said.

“Then the next day.”

“Won't you show it me now? I have been very good, haven't I?”

“You will have to be gooder. You know that what I say, I say.”

He looked at the rebellious pouting face. Had some change really overtaken it with the completion of his labours? Certainly it looked fretful over the disappointment, but was that wholly enough to account for the change?

“You look funny, child,” he said, with a little odd laugh. “What has happened to all your artless prettiness and sweetness? I wonder if I have worked the soul of them into my picture, and left only the ugly bones and ribs of temper behind?”

“ I wonder,” she said, then turned on him—Miss Vickers was helping her on with her jacket—and stamped her little foot. “ I wish you wouldn’t say such things. If you won’t let me see it, you needn’t take a pleasure in frightening me.”

“ I was only trying to account for the alteration. You can easily put me in the wrong by smiling.”

But Dolly could not smile. Her plumes were ruffled. She was often doubtful in her small heart of her capacity for understanding, and assimilating her own nature to this strange mysterious spirit whom her young beauty had captivated. And irony, however playful, is always alarming to little minds. She got into her things, and departed with the briefest of adieux.

“ Poor little elf,” said Derrick to himself, when she was gone. “ There will be a note from her to-night, all ill-spelt penitence and supplication.”

In the dulling light he wheeled the easel round again from the wall, and looked long and intently into the painted face. Had there been after all some fantastic truth in his mockery? It seemed to him suddenly that all that there was of spiritual beauty and significance in Dolly’s aspect he had stolen and adapted here to an ideal impossible of association with the little pretty empty-headed creature. Like the lyrical rhapsodists of past days he had borrowed from Nature rose-petals, and violets, and scraps of coral and crystal, in order to materialise an inexpressible figure of his own imagination. And whence he had ravished were there only flowerless stalks remaining? Poor Dolly, to be so abused!

He wondered if it were really so; if, after all, this were not Dolly Patterson, but something as infinitely

remote from her, though dressed in her roses and moulded to her girlish grace, as his own soul. To him the thing was beautiful in a haunting way; he worshipped, impersonally, his own creation, he was proud of his success; but was it Dolly? For the first time he rather wished for an outside opinion, since no other than himself had as yet seen the portrait. It was always his odd way to keep his studio shut to friends and foes alike.

And then his thoughts swerved, as they often would swerve against his will, to a past poignant experience. He had never again, from that day, more than half a year ago, until now, experimented in colour—its use was too directly associated with a grievous memory. It was Dolly, with her little persistent coaxing vanities, who had induced him to break his resolve, and this picture, the first of its kind he had ever attempted, was fair fruit of the concession. Was it destined to prove that his art, as he had once declared in his wrath, had been consigned with his soul to another's keeping? Passion's hyperbole: he was angered to recall it; but the memory necessarily entailed another. Would there still be evident in his painted work those qualities which had before appeared so singularly patent to the initiated and the uninitiated alike? He marvelled what those qualities were. For himself he could form no conception. They must represent something altogether apart from any individuality that his black and white productions might exhibit, since, to the vulgar, those productions were hardly to be differentiated from any other man's. But what were the mysterious qualities? Spiritualised, idealised, though it might be, this face before him was yet, in its material aspects, the face of an ordinary woman,



rendered as it would be natural to him to render any other human face.

In a little he abandoned the problem, and lost himself in darker reflections.

But so Destiny ordered things that, happening that same night to chance, when in a very restless and dissatisfied frame of mind, upon a hall where one of a series of popular discourses on science was in the act of being delivered, Laurence Derrick was moved, by some impulse towards self-forgetfulness, to enter the place and take a seat, having done which he was incontinently caught spell-bound by the subject which the lecturer was at that moment in process of introducing. The very first words the newcomer heard uttered riveted his attention.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE LECTURE

" THE difficulty," the lecturer was saying, " in identifying cases of colour-blindness consists primarily in the difficulty of convincing its victims that they are mistaken in anything but the accepted classification of terms. They are disposed to imagine that an incomprehensible fuss is made about certain distinctions of tone, which distinctions are to them so nearly imperceptible as to deserve no more than the faintest shadow of a title to the name. Thus, to the colour-blind person many shades of dark blue, dark red, dark green and brown are to be grouped indiscriminately among the blacks. The pure blues and pure yellows they see as we see them ; it is the reds, and the combinations of colour into which the reds enter, to

which they appear wholly insensible, or insensitive. The reason, though not the explanation, of this shortcoming is readily demonstrable by way of the prism. Let us seek it there.

“ Now we know that of the rays proceeding from the sun, some produce heat, some light, and some a peculiar chemical action as demonstrated in photography. Of all, about a fifth part is lost in absorption by the atmosphere—or we believe that it is so lost. It is possible that here and there one of us might, if he could realise his own distinction, tell a different tale. There are always among us examples of what we should call abnormality—natures, that is to say, which in one way or the other do not seem to conform to the prescriptive rule of things. We can refer the strangeness of such, if we like, to their chance unconscious appreciation of, and sensitiveness to, the supposed lost solar rays. They may see things which we cannot see, have a sixth sense which we do not possess—or perhaps be deficient in one which we do possess. It is impossible to test the truth, since, all life being a compromise with terms, we can each of us have no true idea of the value which any other of us attaches to terms. We can only, for general purposes, measure our fellow-beings by our individual standard, and judge their visions and sensations by our own. You and I may use the same term to signify a very differing impression, and to the end of time never suspect, or find it possible to suspect, the fact. Language, it is said, obscures the truth : perhaps we were encouraged in it for that very purpose, that we might of ourselves weave before the jealous face of the unknown that veil whose texture only thickens the more words we make about it. Certainly much talk has not made God clearer to us ;

certainly some dumb animals see what we cannot see. It is conceivable, at least, that a little supernatural insight might yield some startling results to most of us. Do I see you, for instance, as my neighbour sees you, or again, as you see yourself in the glass? It is impossible to tell, and the speculation is an idle one; but there it is.

“ In one direction, however, science, though at a late day, has been able to penetrate the compromise, and to adjust the balance of terms between differing conceptions. We know at length the pathology, so to speak, of colour-blindness, and its bearing upon the solar light rays. It is a very simple matter, and easy of exposition. Here it is :

“ A ray or pencil of white light, as transmitted from the sun, is found, on its decomposition through a prism, to have consisted of an admixture of coloured components, themselves only more or less pure in the primitive sense. Now the primitive, or primary, colours, are, according to the accepted formula, red, yellow and blue, which, being mixed in the relative proportions of three, five and eight, represent white or solar light. Pass this ray of light, now, through a crystal prism—that is to say a transparent medium of a greater density than the atmosphere—and it will be seen to fray, like the fringed edge of a woven fabric, into its constituent parts, each of which parts has, however seemingly accidental its position and juxtaposition, its inflexible relation to the common design. Thus, the disintegrated ray, being interrupted, after its passage through the glass, by a screen, will be found to exhibit that invariable order of hues which constitutes the solar spectrum, or rainbow, the sequence of which descends from the red or uppermost edge, by

way of orange, yellow, green, blue, and indigo, to the lowest, which is violet.

“ So far, so plain. But, now, how are we to account for the fact that this violet, which should consist of an admixture of the blue with the red, figures at a point remotest from the latter ? The explanation lies in one of our compromises. There are, in fact, *no* actually pure or primitive colours in the spectrum, and for this reason. The ray has not been wholly, but only partly decomposed in its passage through the prism, and there remains a residuum of both white and coloured light which affects every part of the spectrum. In that the three primary colours will still most vividly assert themselves ; yet it will be understood that at their best they are all faintly diluted ; while the secondary and tertiary colours are either combinations of the primary with one another or combinations with combinations.

“ Very well. Now, from the three primary colours subtract one, and consider the result so far as human vision is concerned. Its absence must influence all the rest, must it not—and not only in the direct admixtures but in the compound admixtures. Robbed of the very essence of its trinity in unity, the spectrum becomes an indeterminate affair, lacking, so to speak, its hypostatic union. And that is exactly what it does lack to the colour-blind person.

“ I have intimated already that it is the red rays to which this person is insensitive ; and that is invariably the case. Other undiscovered instances there may possibly be of a blindness to blue or yellow ; investigation has so far not revealed any. It is an incapacity for distinguishing the red rays which marks the colour-blind subject as we know him. Their place is

taken for him by a neutral tint, which may be described as a visible nothingness. Consider what the lack, in all its bearings, must signify to a person so constituted ; and yet he is unconscious of his want. Owing to that aforesaid compromise with terms, he has learnt to adapt his understanding to the accepted classification of tones and colours, while secretly in his heart, perhaps, marvelling over the minute, hardly discernible differentiation ; but he does not know that anyone else sees other than himself. Yet what, according to our vision, must the world mean to him, what a melancholy wan affair—of soft cool half-tones at its best, perhaps, but bloodless, and always smeared and stained with brown, like the streaks of decomposed sunset in a Japanese print. Still, his vision may have compensations unknown to the rest of us. Let us fervently hope that such is the case.”

The lecturer then went on to discuss notable instances of people afflicted with the blindness, and the means and accidents which had led to an analysis of their cases. The matter was absorbing, and was developed at much greater length than any epitome of it could here satisfy. One particular case out of many impressed itself singularly on Derrick’s mind : it was that of a lad who, on being shown a portrait face in which the lips and cheeks had been intentionally painted green and the rest of the flesh brown, had discovered nothing out of the common in the representation beyond the evident heat of its subject, who, he remarked, had obviously walked himself into a rare glow before he sat.

Derrick laughed, with the rest of the audience, over the instance, accepting, as each did, his own sense of its ludicrousness as evidencing his personal normality.

But later, on his way home, he stopped suddenly, as if in the shock of some stupendous revelation, and stood a moment staring before him and gnawing his forefinger.

That 'Compromise with terms.' The possible 'compensation' to one so afflicted. 'They may see things which we cannot see.' The strange qualities in his own painted art, so plain to others, so indecipherable by himself!

Did he see visions? He had sometimes wondered over the inexplicable blindness of chance associates to effects manifest enough to him; he had always on such occasions attributed it to a sort of robust Philistinism—an insular shyness of the poetic and the emotional. But supposing they had really failed to see what he saw—had lacked the essential faculty? Did it follow in that case that he was colour-blind?

For an instant he positively staggered; then he pulled himself together and went on his way. It was absurd, impossible! He knew what red was; he knew what a sunset was; he had never found much difficulty in differentiating between tints and tones however delicately anæmic. It was preposterous to suppose that he did not see the world as it was and people as they were to the common view. He had never dreamed of such an amazing condition in himself. Nor could it be there; he *must* have discovered the truth before now.

He uttered a sigh of incredulous, trembling derision as he opened his door and turned into his own dark house. His footsteps instinctively made for the studio—for the portrait. And then he stopped and set his teeth.

"No," he thought, "I will not look at it again

until she does. Dolly shall decide the question for me.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### PENDING THE VERDICT

DURING the whole of the following day Derrick moved and felt like an accused man, who, remanded and released on bail, tries to gather from that concession a sense of hope and reassurance, and is yet, while assuming an air of nonchalance, conscious all the time of a sick underlying apprehension. Perpetually he told himself, as the other might have done, that his sentence, even at the worst, would not be morally a capital one ; that he could survive its shock ; that his constitution would not even be materially affected by it. Where would it leave him ? Why, exactly where he was now, with the sole difference that others would have learned of a defect in him of which he himself would still exist unaware. Was that any great matter ? His was always an independent self-sufficient nature ; he was wont to go his own way, giving little heed to criticism and comment ; such as he was, normal or abnormal, he had made his name, and could continue, on the same lines, to add to it. What difference would it make to him if he *were* proved colour-blind ?

So he would argue, and brighten, and think he had dismissed the subject ; so might the bailed one have cocked his hat and strutted. Yet regularly the hot mood would be succeeded by the cold one, and the depression and the apprehensions would all have to be fought with again.

What *did* it matter to him, then, when the truth was faced ? Why, surely this : that, if so convicted of such

an affliction, he, an artist to the depths of his being, would know himself for the first time defrauded of his full birthright of beauty ; would for ever be straining his soul to attain the light which to all others was a simple condition of their existence. Ignorance is only blissful so long as it is unconscious of its own limitations ; but here would be a limitation which, did it exist, must be accepted as final. He had understood so much from the lecturer. The thing was incurable.

And so, all of a sudden, he would recall " Clever Alice," and her lamentations over the axe stuck into the ceiling of the beer-cellar, " O, if I marry Hans, and we have a child, and he grows up, and we send him into the cellar to draw beer, the hatchet may fall upon his head and kill him ! " May—may ! He had not been proved colour-blind yet. He had allowed himself to imagine a most preposterous bogey out of a turnip and a candle. His fears for the time being were dissolved in gigantic laughter.

Still, he was restless and purposeless. He wished to-morrow and Dolly were come. He could not bring himself to believe in the incredible thing, and yet all day its shadow pursued and worried him. There was some imperial function in process, and the streets were full of soldiers, National and Colonial. The sight, while it lasted, distracted his thoughts and helped him to forget himself. At evening he turned into a theatre, and, burying himself in a dusk corner, watched his little sprightly fiancée disporting herself on the stage. She was very happy, very pretty, very commonplace. It seemed a monstrous tyranny to wed her away from all that gay froth and sparkle, to wean her to a life of purpose. Her cheeks were flushed with triumph. Flushed ? Had he not loved and appreciated every



shade of that mantling rose ? - Colour-blind, indeed ! For the moment she was the best of the best she had ever been to him. He forgot the portrait—his art—its cruel exactions. And then she looked across and saw him, and her face appeared to change. It yielded him again what was already his, what he had taken from it, and the residue seemed but poor cheap stuff. He lowered his eyes and would not look more.

At the end of the act he left the theatre, and sauntered aimlessly abroad. Chance bore him at a late hour in the direction of Piccadilly, and invited his thoughts to a certain Bohemian sketching club—of which he was a very casual member—which was situated in a street not a hundred yards away from Burlington House. A visit to the place might help him to kill time ; there were some lively spirits among its habitués. He entered, and found one of the weekly suppers just tailing to its end in an atmosphere of stale smoke and exhausted ribaldry. Most of the company were gone ; a few lingered, red-eyed and inclined to incoherence, amongst the ruins of the feast. These symposiums were famous among a certain set. The majority of the members attracted to them were brilliant resourceful young artists, all more or less connected with journalism. Talent coruscated in their ranks, and was not allowed to hide itself under a bushel. A competition of some sort was organised for each supper, and an inflexible condition of attendance lay in contributing to it. Any refusal entailed appalling penalties ; but the general cleverness was such that refusals were unknown. Inability was the only peril ; one having full license to say what one liked and drink what one liked, the brain could not always command the hand. But impudence generally prevailed somehow.

Derrick was greeted with cheers on his appearance, in homage to his distinction. He had condescended once or twice to join the jolly uproarious crew, and his contributions to the order were still remembered and reverently cherished. He went round the table now, examining the work of the evening, while one or two of the few gay spirits left hovered unsteadily in his wake.

“Candle-smoke again?” he said. “I see, I see.”

It was one of their humours. Supper finished, each, at a given signal, would smoke the upper or the under surface of his plate over a candle flame, and draw thereon, with any instrument he chose, a time picture on a stated subject. The results were often astonishing. The souls of these young fellows lay in their finger-tips, delicate as antennæ. They would produce exquisite effects with them while their lips above were exchanging, perhaps, quite unsavoury badinage.

“The subject was soldiers, it seems,” said Derrick; “suggested, I suppose, by the events of to-day.”

“Mod’n—they had to be mod’n, you dow,” said one of his satellites nosily.

“O, had they? That’s modern enough, anyhow—and that. Wilson, isn’t it? One can’t mistake his hand. I say, that’s pretty strong. Pity to waste such talent on such a subject. This is Vigors, of course. What a touch the fellow has! And this—by Jove, here’s the cleverest thing I’ve seen! It’s positively an inspiration.”

“It ought to be good. It’s Eric Norman’s.”

“Norman’s, is it? He tops the show, then. But where’s the modernity in it, anyway?”

“That’s all ride.”

“O! Is it?”

Laurence knew the man's work, as it was impossible that he should not, though he had never met the man himself. Norman was in the way to be one of the most brilliant black and white young artists of his generation. He had come to the front latterly with a bound, after, it was said, years of struggling obscurity. There was always something rather fantastic and cruel in his work, despite its humour. He had that odd uncanny twist in his brain which, as in the case of Hood, could find fun in a street-accident and nothing unsavoury in the juxtaposition of skulls and roses.

The figure which Derrick regarded appeared to be that of a sort of Jacobean halberdier ; it certainly suggested nothing modern ; but whatever it was it was sketched in in a masterly manner.

“ How's it all right ? ” he said.

“ It's wud of the Swiss guard at the Vatican,” answered his informant—“ so Norman declared. We had to take the thig on trust. Norman said he ought to dow anyhow, as he'd been destined to join the corps himself at wud time. Probably he was gassing drunk. But it's good, isn't it ? ”

“ Yes, it's good.”

Derrick felt suddenly giddy. Some wandering vagary had got into his brain like a whiff of chloroform. He put down the plate and turned abruptly.

“ Hullo ! ” he said : “ I didn't know it was so late. I must be off.”

He wanted to get out into the air again, and to be by himself. A sensation as if some ghostly ‘ shadowing,’ suspected all day, were about to declare itself in a staggering fashion had seized upon his nerves. He felt as if, were he to miss his chance of escape, he would in a moment be hemmed in and caught power-

less. There were strange things going on around him—plots brewing—weird surprises hatching. Outside, he took in draughts of the night as if it were fresh cold water.

“That’s better,” he whispered; “that’s much better.”

## CHAPTER IX

### THE VERDICT

IT is astonishing how women will succeed, by persistence, in gaining the male suffrage for fashions loathed and ridiculed of masculinity in the first stages of their introduction. Nor are artists always amongst the most irreconcilable of their critics. Glancing back over a generation or two, one can recall some of the extravagances which were greeted on their first appearance by a storm of derision, and yet survived to conquer the most virulent of their lampooners and caricaturists. The truth is, of course, that, in our monstrously developed civilisation, custom can reconcile us to anything but Nature. She was a fashion that went out with Eve, and is the only one that has no more chance of resuscitation than the first innocence. Remoteness from her is, indeed, the keynote of ‘style.’

Given, then, his contemporary thesis in the shape of some chaotic enormity, it becomes the business of the artist to extract from it a figure of grace, his more or less success in doing which, through earning him the applause and the sincerest flattery of fashion, induces in him an attachment to his own creations, so that what he began by deriding he ends by admiring.

So it was with the preposterous hats and the scant

habiliments of our present era ; and I for one confess that, so far as they are concerned, I have learnt to exchange my scorn for respect—qualified, of course, as all good taste should be. Dolly wore them, and wore them, under Laurence's tuition, to a monstrous pretty effect. He thought she never looked so well as when her shapely young figure was dressed for walking. There was an angle to her hat which, in its relation to the slim frock beneath—both designed by himself—reminded him of Kiyonaga. He never desired to kiss her so much as when out-of-doors.

This feeling penetrated him to quite poignant effect on that afternoon chosen for the girl's first view of her own portrait. As she came in, stylish, *endimanchée*, with her friend, a pang like remorse smote into the man's heart. What were the next few moments to reveal? How was he going to be paid for his use or abuse of this confiding daintiness, which he had toyed and played with for his own purposes, conventionally honourable though those might have been? All the morning he had been wandering restless, unsettled, unhappy—and unhappy because of whom? Why, for himself alone. He dreaded, for all his philosophy, the hovering verdict—not as it might affect his little unsophisticated judge, but solely as it might bear upon his own disillusionment or reassurance. He felt that he had sacrificed this pretty innocent, and perhaps cruelly and vainly, on the altar of his art. He only really valued her as a 'property.' It was a base æstheticism which could so convert living flesh and blood to its own selfish profit.

For an instant he was almost impelled, in a rush of emotion, to leap and grip the little fairy figure in his arms ; to lavish upon it the heat of passion which he

felt to be its due ; to kiss the honest eyes, and breathe into the pink ears the tale of his penitence, of his remorse, and of his assurance that he valued Dolly for herself, and not merely because her youth and beauty were at once a salve to his wounds and an inspiration to his art. But the moment passed, and for ever.

“ Well, Laurence,” she said ; “ here we are. Are you going to ring up the curtain at last ? I feel just as nervous as if it were a first night.”

She looked it, indeed. Her face was quite pale ; and she turned away after speaking. Some barrier, shadowy, inexplicable, had risen between them, and she could no more surmount it than he could. Never affinities, they were estranged already without knowing it. His ironical reflection on that last day of the sitting still dwelt like a shadow in her mind.

“ Then the sooner the ordeal is over the better,” he said.

He led the way to the studio and they followed. The picture stood draped on an easel. He placed himself by it, and just uttered a warning :

“ Before you pronounce, think first of the affection that has gone into it, and of the art second. My point of view may seem an odd one to you, Dolly ; but, such as it is, believe wholly in the love that guided its choice.”

Then he pulled away the cloth, and stood, with eyes, that he dared not lift, looking down. A long silence ensued.

“ Well ? ” he said at length.

“ I think——”

The voice was the girl's—but so utterly strange and little. A spasm seemed to grip his heart. There

followed a pause, a quick rustle, and then a sound, ominous, devastating. He looked up.

She had turned away from the picture—turned towards Miss Vickers, in whose amazed indignant eyes was reflected the sentence patent in her own. It had come. The incredible thing had actually happened, and he was convicted and condemned.

And the next moment Dolly had thrown herself into the friend's sympathetic arms, and was weeping convulsively.

Laurence took a single step forward, and stopped. Every emotion in him seemed suddenly frozen stark; his voice when he spoke was as cold and hard as a devil's.

“ It's all right,” he said. “ You needn't be so overcome. You don't like it, do you ? ”

He addressed the honest friend's eyes, the only lively feature he could see over Dolly's shoulder. Miss Vickers shook her head.

“ What do *you* think ! ” she answered. And then her sympathetic wrath overflowed. “ It's a beastly shame. To have kept us on tenterhooks all this time, expecting something that was going to make us the talk and envy of the town, and then to show us this caricature ! I didn't think it of you, Mr. Derrick.”

Laurence laughed.

“ Does it really strike you as so awful ? ”

Miss Vickers jerked her head in mute scorn of the cruel impertinence of such a question. “ Come, darling,” she said. “ We had better leave Mr. Derrick to the enjoyment of his practical joke. The love that guided his choice, indeed ! If that is how his love sees you, the less you have to do with it the better.”

She was a loyal Vickers ; once opened out she gave her tongue full license. Caressing and comforting the

victim, she led her by degrees to the door. And Dolly made no resistance, nor did Derrick move a finger or speak a word to detain her. Once, before she left, she half turned her eyes, blinded with tears, as if, in the kindness of her little heart, to essay some apology or explanation; but the effort was too much for her, and she disappeared with her friend. Laurence, waiting like a figure of stone, presently heard the hall-door boom upon them, slammed by the indignant Vickers. Then he turned, and stood for an hour staring at the portrait.

## CHAPTER X

### DECISION

IN strange contrast to that stormy exit, Miss Vickers's face next morning suggested nothing so much as the countenance of the rosy Eos. Risen flushed from its virgin bed, it regarded Derrick with an expression that was at once authoritative and propitiatory—an aspect indicative of the mission that had brought the loyal little lady early and hot-foot to the artist's door. She came as outraged beauty's representative, a sort of ex-official sollicitress, to expostulate and finesse, and she obviously strove her very best to be diplomatic. Laurence, whom she encountered, fortunately, in the act of going out, was not, it seemed, surprised at her appearance, nor disposed to quarrel with her on any point whatever. His manner was serenely friendly, accommodating—savouring, even, of the patiently polite, not to say the abstracted and the apathetic.

“Tell me frankly the purpose of your visit,” he said by and by. “It will save time.”

The little deputy, thus adjured, gathered courage.



"Dolly feels that it can't go on," she said; "at least not on existing terms."

"She wishes to put an end to our engagement—is that it?" said Derrick.

"It is the prospect of the beauty-show—first and foremost," said Miss Vickers, hesitating a little. "The thought of figuring in it—as *that*, you know——" she gasped and stopped.

"Come, my dear," said Derrick, smiling; "out with it, plump and square! *As what?*"

"It reminded me of nothing so much," said the friend, in a burst of desperate candour, "as a decomposed mermaid."

Derrick laughed outright.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to send it to the show. Will that do?"

"It's something," said Miss Vickers, obviously relieved. "But is it really, Mr. Derrick, as you see Dolly?"

"Yes, really."

"That makes things difficult—I'm afraid. It can't be very pleasant, now can it, to picture oneself as looking like that in one's own lover's eyes."

"Well, I suppose not—as you describe it."

"You wouldn't like, I suppose——?"

"I'm ready to accept my dismissal."

"O! But wouldn't you rather the initiative came from you? It would save your face, wouldn't it? And if you were to return by me her letters——"

"I see, I see. Pardon my obtuseness. The risk of my bringing an action—just so. Certainly, my dear, you shall have the letters; and you can tell Miss Patterson, formally, from me, that I release her unconditionally from her engagement?"

He rose, and the little deputy rose.

“ You are a real gentleman,” she said gratefully. “ I dare say it’s only our innocence in matters of art, but——”

“ Not in the least,” said Derrick. “ It’s my ignorance—I confess it with the utmost humility. Assure Miss Patterson that not only shall the portrait be withheld from the exhibition, but that it shall not be shown, if to anybody, as a portrait of her. No one would ever guess, if I did not tell them ; and, more than that, I shall probably destroy the thing before another day is past.”

He procured the compromising letters, dropping a kiss on the little odd illiterate bundle before he delivered it, and dismissed the deputy, grateful and elate. And then he sank into a chair and went into a fit of laughter, mirthless, sardonic, which seemed to jar his soul to its depths.

“ Well,” he said, “ thereby ends that pretty, fantastic, moving and utterly impossible little idyll. And now for the real tragedy to which it was a prelude.”

He got up, pulled himself together, and went out into the street. He had a purpose—to find and crave an interview with the scientific gentleman who had first opened his eyes to the possibility of their own inclusion among the abnormal visions of mankind.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SENTENCE

“ I AM afraid there is little doubt about it, Mr. Derrick. The spectrum lacks for you in a most essential respect. I wish we could believe otherwise.”

Cold, courteous, dispassionate, a polished scientific

formula from his clear unwinking eyes to his thin deliberate hands, the judge pronounced sentence.

The shutters were so closed as to admit of a single ray of sunlight falling upon a prism placed aptly to receive it, and to bend thence its segregated parts upon the surface of a white screen hung opposite. Half shadowed, half revealed in the twilight thus formed loomed a confusion of books and instruments and vessels of gleaming glass. Upon a table near by was disposed an array of coloured wools. They had been used in the test experiment, and to destructive effect. Broadly speaking Derrick had failed to identify, according to the accepted understanding, any of the hues into which the quality of red entered directly or indirectly. The blues, yellows and greens had been rightly named by him, but classified according to an order strangely differing from the orthodox. Other tests had produced a like result.

He took his sentence standing, and like a man.

“ This defect, this lacuna,” he said quietly, “ bears no relation, you tell me, to the ordinary qualities of human vision ? ”

“ None whatever. It occurs among the longest and the shortest sighted people.”

“ It is marvellous, is it not, how one can live to the age of twenty-five, and never so much as suspect one’s own shortcoming ? ”

“ Hardly, I think, when you consider the compromise we have to make with existence. That alone is the common factor, to which all widely differing intelligences have to adapt themselves. Dalton, the propounder of the atomic theory, was no younger than yourself when he first became aware of his defective colour sense ; Pole, a well-known engineer,

was nearer thirty when he made a like discovery. Thousands, no doubt, have lived and died in complete ignorance of their misfortune—if so we must regard it. But need we? In such a case as yours, for instance, Mr. Derrick? You have shown us that the condition is not detrimental to the possession and development of the most sensitive and delicate of artistic faculties. You will be unwise if you let a consciousness of that condition affect your work.”

“ You suggested the other night some imaginary compensation to persons so afflicted—a sort of sixth sense.”

“ Imaginary—yes.”

“ I have just finished the head of a girl—in colour, a departure for me. If you can make the time to come and criticise it—from *this* point of view, that is—you will be doing me a real service.”

“ I will come certainly. It will interest me immensely in the connexion.”

Half an hour later the two stood together in Derrick's studio. The man of science dwelt a long time before the portrait, profoundly abstracted and absorbed. Presently he turned round, a light in his eyes.

“ It is curious,” he said; “ a most striking similarity. This is the work of a colour-blind person, but possessed of a vision beyond the common understanding. No technical knowledge is needed to recognise the fact. It impresses at once, as something quite unusual, yet obviously the actual presentment of a thing penetrated and *seen* by him, invisible, or at best greatly obscured to us. I have only once before in my experience come across a parallel case—that of an artist, and a very original and inspired artist like yourself; of about your own age, too. He

was colour-blind, and being somehow led to suspect the fact, showed me some of his paintings. They exhibited all the qualities and the spiritual *insight*, if I may so express it, of yours ; and all the typical shortcomings—the green complexions, the absence of light, as we regard it. The resemblance is most singular and striking. He abandoned colour from that time—it would have been vain for him, indeed, to persist in seeking to convince through it—and took to black and white work, in which he has since come to excel. You must know his name. He is at this day one of our most famous draughtsmen.”

“ Of whom do you speak ? ”

“ Of Mr. Eric Norman. He—is anything the matter ? ”

“ No, nothing whatever. Only I think I had already suspected him of being the man. How long ago was that—when he first came to you, I mean ? ”

“ O ! a considerable number of years—some eight or nine, perhaps. He was a mere boy at the time, but even then extraordinarily gifted. I have traced his career at intervals since, through the public prints, and only wondered that he did not sooner attain his present position. But the light of certain stars is long in reaching to the earth.”

Derrick did not answer ; and his visitor turned again to the picture.

## CHAPTER XII

### A VISIT AND A REVELATION

IN an upper room of a terrace at Hammersmith overlooking the river a young man sat drawing.

It was night, and an incandescent lamp, shrouded by a green shade, burned steadily on the table. A green shade, moreover, was pulled low down over the draughtsman's eyes, and those, and the light of the lamp, were concentrated upon a block of considerable size tilted at a slight angle in front of him. The young man worked on the block with a rapid unfaltering hand. Every line he added to his composition had the force and value of a personal signature; one might have declared that, put to a draft, it could not fail to be honoured across the drawer's own bank counter. He built up his picture like an inspired mason; he never paused to alter or erase. The thing just came out, beneath the heat of his genius, like a design already deposited there in invisible ink. And yet, whenever he lifted his face, it appeared the face of a sawney, large in the nose, shallow in the chin, and with a suggestion of viciousness in its weakness.

The subject at which the artist worked represented a feast in Mediæval Italy. Men, risen from their seats, were portrayed in various attitudes of horror, anger, or obscene curiosity. One, the noble giver of the feast, sat slinking and sweating at table, peering up, with a furtive grin, at the figure of his chief guest, who, standing in the foreground, held aloft in his hand a poisoned cup, which he displayed menacingly to his host. On the same arm of this figure, and chained to its wrist, writhed a pet monkey, convulsed and dying from having dipped a piece of bread in the cup and eaten of it, so timely warning his master. The few partisans of the intended victim were shown pushing forward to rally about their lord.

"It tells its own story," said a voice over the worker's shoulder.

Eric Norman hardly started. His room was free to his associates, and he was habituated to sudden interruptions. He was one of those who can keep their hands and tongues going at the same time.

“ Wonderful ! ” he answered jeeringly, without looking round. “ That’s just what it’s meant to do.”

“ It is destined for that competition I read about in an illustrated weekly, I suppose ? ” surmised the voice. “ I saw an advertisement of it. Every picture was to be a sort of *lied ohne wörte*, wasn’t it, and prizes were to be offered to readers for the best rendering in words of the scene depicted ? ”

Attracted by something unfamiliar in the tone, the worker glanced round, started, and instantly pushed his chair about so as to command the speaker.

“ Hullo ! ” he said. “ Who the devil are *you* ? ”

“ My name’s Laurence Derrick,” answered the intruder. “ Do you mind my introducing myself ? I found your address and looked you up. I was shown in by someone, but I suppose you didn’t hear ? There was a waggon passing at the time.”

The other had thrust the shade up from his forehead to grotesque effect, revealing beneath a couple of colourless eyes in slightly inflamed sockets. He saw before him a man of about his own age, but of very different moral and physical calibre ; and the laxity in himself took instinctive umbrage at the sight.

“ No, I didn’t,” he said drawlingly. “ Honoured, I’m sure, Mr. Laurence Derrick. But you won’t mind my saying I’m infernally busy.”

The creature had no *savoir-faire*, it was evident. He exhibited all the insolence of a favoured freak.

He countered, with a stupid boorish laugh, the fixed interest with which the stranger was regarding him.

“ I’m sorry,” said Derrick ; “ but I come on business—after a kind.”

“ O ! in that case,” said Mr. Norman, throwing down his pencil with a very ill grace, “ take a seat, will you ? ”

Derrick, his eyes never leaving the weak petulant face, acquiesced. He sat by the table, leaning his arms on it, so that he could command the full under-range of the lamplight.

“ This,” he said—he just signified with his hand the picture on the block—“ is a good popular idea—for those who are satisfied to contribute to it. But even genius must live, mustn’t it ? What made you sketch that Swiss Guard at the Club the other night, now ? ”

The sudden transition, the sharp irrelevancy of the question, appeared to have an instantly stupefying effect on the man addressed. He sat gaping after his way and breathing nosily, like one under a narcotic. He suggested a person suddenly alive to the fact that he was being stealthily drugged for purposes of robbery, yet unable to rally his nerves or his courage to fight the insidious thing.

“ Was it really inspired, as I was told,” continued Derrick, in a cool measured voice, “ by a one-time dedication of yourself to the Papal service ? ”

Mr. Norman found his speech in a gasp :

“ Upon my word I don’t see what that’s got to do with you ! ”

“ We’ll come to that,” said Derrick. “ It has its bearing on my ‘ business,’ equally with a sympathy I should like to claim from and extend to a fellow-



sufferer. I learned certainly to-day, for the first time, Mr. Norman, that I am colour-blind—as you are.”

“ How do you know I am ? ” The man sat all amazed—as, indeed, he well might be.

“ I want to propose something to you,” said Derrick, ignoring the question, leaning well forward, and speaking in a low impressive tone. “ It is suggested by this picture of yours. A good subject would, I think, be weird disappearances. Supposing we worked at it together ? What do you say ? ”

“ I don’t say anything.”

“ I dare say you know my name.”

“ I dare say I do.”

“ Very well. Here is a situation that occurs to me as apt for illustration—and speculation. An artist (he happens to be a colour-blind artist, by the way, and also, strangely enough, to have been destined for the Papal Guard) is seated sketching by a lonely mere. It is winter ; there is snow upon the ground, and, printed in the snow, the track of the artist’s footsteps leading from an adjacent house to the stump on which he sits. Presently come other footsteps, those of a woman, which take the same course, stop at the stump, and thence return to the house. But the artist’s footprints do not return. They cease at the stump ; there is no sign of them elsewhere in any direction ; but the artist himself, when sought for, cannot be found. He has disappeared—utterly and mysteriously disappeared—and the woman, illogically enough, but since she was the last one known to be with him alive, is suspected of his murder. What is the matter, Mr. Eric Norman ? ”

The other was on his feet, pale as death, gasping like a man winded.

“Murder?” he whispered hoarsely.

Derrick rose and confronted the agitated figure, his lips set, a stern light in his eyes. The clue which had come to him so strangely, which he had followed so thrillingly, with such a heat of daring hope, had really and actually led him to the truth. He was certain of it at the last.

“Murder,” he repeated. “That possibility never occurred to you, I suppose, Mr. Lotto Salvetti, when you elected to disappear from ‘Coldshot’ and leave no sign.”

The creature wreathed and unwreathed his fingers, looking furtively up and down.

“No,” he said. “The impulse came to me in a moment. As you seem to have heard of it, I’ll tell you the truth. We had been quarrelling—we were always quarrelling. She hated me—she did not understand me—we were leagues apart. I wanted to get away—to end it all—to live my own life. And just then came a strange thing. It came floating in the dusk up the valley from the sea—a huge grey bubble—and in a moment I saw that it was a derelict balloon. It came blown in on the current that always sweeps up that valley—blown in from the sea, where its occupants had been lost. Weeks afterwards its remains were found, miles away, floating in the water; I read all about it in the newspapers. But even when it drove upon me I saw that its car was wrecked, hanging loose; and it came right over my head. There was a rope with a little anchor dangling from it; I was very light and strong, and just then, as it hung in the turn of the air-current, I made a jump at the rope, hardly knowing what I did, and caught it and pulled myself up, resting my feet in the anchor. Then the

thing dipped for an instant, but immediately it rose again, and carried me away across the ice. I was horribly frightened, and I clung on. The wind lifted it still more, and we passed over the trees, making for the sea again. I thought I was lost ; but right down on the shore it dropped enough for me to let go and fall into the sand. I saw the balloon bound up and vanish away into the darkness. For a long time I lay where I was ; then presently a thought came to me. I had disappeared without leaving any clue to my whereabouts. Why not seize the chance to sever myself for once and for all from the life and the vocation I hated ? I got up and walked for miles along the shore, always near enough the sea for the tide to wash away any trace of my footprints. All night I walked ; and at dawn, coming inland a little, I got a stupid countryman to give me a lift in his cart to Cromer, where I took the first train to London. How do you know about it ? How have you traced me ? Who told you my real name ? I have made my own life since, my own reputation. It has been a long, cruel business ; but I have got through with it, I have not complained, and I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“ And *her* life ? ”

Derrick blazed upon him, so that he shrunk.

“ I never dreamt of such a thing. Murder ! It’s too ridiculous. Why, where was the body ? ”

“ Is there anything too illogical, too extravagant, for calumny to fasten on ? I know your sister—never mind how. Never mind at this stage by what fantastic processes I have come into your history, and been conducted to this goal. She has suffered ; through ten years she has not ceased to suffer for your act ; has not ceased to agonise for your return,

some day and somehow—to crave your forgiveness. Your forgiveness, good God! Do you understand? It is you who must end her long martyrdom.”

The young man whined: “Her martyrdom? You pitch it pretty strong. It had its compensations, didn’t it? I left her everything for herself; I never asked for a penny; only to be left alone to go my own way—and a jolly hard one at that. I think, perhaps, she got the best of the bargain.”

“Think what you like—I think of her, and she of you alone. She has touched all these years no more than just her needs. The rest she nurses and hoards against your possible return. Now listen to me. You will go down, and reveal yourself, and confess the truth. What ensues is no affair of mine, but that you shall do.”

“O! shall I?”

“Or else—mark me—I will go and bring her to you. You shall be brought to bay, and exposed, for what you are and have done, before all your world.”

“Very well. You needn’t get so excited. If I must go, I must, I suppose.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### AFTER THE RAIN

“My de-ar,” said Father Appleyard, “all religion is safe in the hands of a good man. We may trust our souls to the honest heretic, so long as he be no heretic from love.”

“I am none at least,” said Derrick. “Driven from its substance, I sought its shadow, and even rested in it for a time. I will confess, Father.”

“ *Absolvo te,*” said the priest. “ Thou hast atoned and art forgiven. She is at peace, my son.”

“ So am I not. He has come ? ”

“ And gone. All is well between them.”

“ And for me, who was guilty of the crime of innocently appearing what I was not ? ”

He waited long for an answer, but none came. Before him slept the mere, placid and golden in the noon sunshine. He had reached it by the familiar track, to find the good Father patiently anticipating his arrival in the old place. It was all so still, so glowing, so peaceful, that it seemed as if the grass and sedges of to-day were but the seasonable flowering of the frost of near a year earlier. It was so silence grew and blossomed without a movement in this haunted place. Some emotion, some quick consciousness startled him, and he looked round.

The priest was gone—had vanished in a moment like a shadow. But in his place there stood another shadow ineffably wistful and pathetic. Derrick raised his hand and beckoned, and the shadow came to him.

“ What is it ? ” he said. “ You have something to ask of me ? ”

She lifted her face and hands, praying to him :

“ You seemed to me what I had dreamed he might become. O, it was a dream ! Let me keep my dream.”

He caught her hands in his. “ You sent for me : I have come : for what ? ”

“ Take off your curse ! ”

“ I never cursed you.”

“ Unsay what you said. Is not this shame enough to plead for me, to satisfy you ? ”

One intense moment he lingered, then took her to his heart.

“What is my vision of you?” he said. “Answer first. Do you realise it?”

“It is the vision of love,” she whispered. “What else matters? Take me, forgive me, for that alone.”

. . . . .

“The change,” wrote Derrick, to the friend first mentioned, “was slow, imperceptible in its process, but definite. It began with the first dawn of my honeymoon. There was something in the sky—I had acquired a new sense—but it was long, long in developing, long in maturing. And it seemed not so much a sense, after all, as an enlarged appreciation of beauty. Incurable? Well, so it may be for those, who, unlike me, have never drunk of the deep waters of a woman’s love.”

And there we leave him.

## JOHN DARLING'S ATONEMENT

### I

A MAN of thirty and a young woman of eighteen, depressed from a rather aimless saunter in the wet, had paused, as by common consent, at a point where a field-path gave upon a stile, and thence upon rain-drowned flats. Behind them, half reluctantly abandoned, stood the comparative covert of hedge-rows and a small coppice or two, rising blurred and phantasmic in the twilight ; and in front yawned the desolation of a wild and shelterless marshland. Perhaps the contrast touched a dread sympathetic nerve in the girl. She appeared to shrink back from that sodden pool of blackness before her, in a panic something like a sleep-walker's, who wakes from warm sheets to find herself bewildered in the open night. Her vision was strained, looking out into it. She saw vague and indeterminate monsters there, writhing up and dissipating like smoke in the rain, and her heart was sick with alarm.

She sat on the stile, her skirt rolled up over her petticoat, her feet tucked under it. She was a fresh wholesome young body, inclining to plumpness, with pretty hair and blue honest eyes ; but she was of a social grade obviously lower than her companion's—a farmer's daughter, in fact—and that may have accounted for the trouble. He leaned against the stile-post, preoccupied, holding an umbrella over her

head. There was positively nothing of the rascal about him. As a matter of fact he was a very good fellow indeed—even particularly good and particularly soft-hearted. But he was of an affectionate nature and impulsive, was this John Darling—one might guess it from his mobile thin face and flying colour—and apt sometimes on a quick call of the blood to disregard the laws of moral property. Professionally he was a school-proprietor.

The girl suddenly spoke and emotionally: "I wish I had gone out with mother last night, as she wanted me."

He glanced at her and away; but there was nothing to answer.

"You've made me a woman, John, and a sad one," she said.

Her under lip trembled; she couldn't fight it off: "Won't you marry me, dear, dear John?" she cried, and broke into tears.

Fiddle-de-dee! There was never anything questionable but a trifle too much confidence between these two. He laughed, if rather drearily, as, holding the umbrella with his left hand, he hugged his right hard about the sweet and homely waist.

"What is all this foolish talk, Peggy Pretty?" he said. "To-night if you like; to-morrow if you like; any time you like, and you know it."

Of course she did. It was her sin to have wronged him by a thought—her staunch, upright, unchangeable true love. It was those menacing spectres out in the mist that had frightened her. Her sobs were jerked out of her in spasms, as she pressed him and pressed him to her heart. And presently she was releasing him rosily.



"Indeed, to-morrow wouldn't be too soon for me," she said ; and hung her pretty head.

"Well, so we've got to talk," he answered ; and wrapped her about with his love under the umbrella. As they sat together on the stile, they were a pair of as inseparable sweethearts as the world might boast. There could be no sin between these two, unless a very exacting devil should quote a mutual excess of good-nature for one. John Darling, for all his social and mental superiority, loved and had long loved his Peggy with a constant confidence in himself and her. Neither of them could conceive such a thing as a real misunderstanding with the other. The question was the slip—and at a very ruinous crisis, too.

That was the matter, the crisis. God knows (and John Darling) how many forlorn and neglected love-children (save the word), and disliked step-children, and other such encumbrances there be in a single county of the land ! Mr. Squeers provided in his own way for some of these ; John Darling provided in his, which was quite another—a kindly school and shelter for the poor waifs of fortune. But John lived at a later date than Wackford, and had the advantage of that gentleman's history to instruct him in how not to take advantage of other people's slips. And yet, at the last, he had made a slip of his own.

It seemed the moral of all his ill-founded philanthropy. He was not really fit to be the guide and mentor of youth. And heaven, through a long series of warnings, had appeared to imply the same. His establishment, fairly prosperous at first, had slowly and gradually decayed. Children died, or were withdrawn from his care ; others did not come, or only in ever diminishing number, to replace the departed.

His school dwindled, and his receipts. At last he was left with but a couple of forlorn hopes, and those took diphtheria. Farmer Pretty (that was Peggy's mother) began to look askance at him—a gentleman was a gentleman, but blood manured no crops—and it was at this pass that he had gone to Peggy to release her, and had bound her indissolubly to himself instead.

“ I am just ruined, Peggy,” he groaned. “ I have got ten pounds in the bank—hardly enough to pay the nurse ; no prospect of remittances, if these poor things escape my hands ; brokers waiting round the corner. I shall have to close the school, unless——”

“ Unless what, John ? ”

“ Never mind. I'm not every way a villain yet.”

“ But you're going to marry me—you promised.”

“ What a daft loveling ! Do you want me now, a beggar ? Will your mother want me ? ”

“ Yes—O, yes ! if she knew.”

“ But don't you see you must marry me without her knowing—bind yourself without her knowledge to a beggar ? ”

“ I'm ready, when it's John.”

“ Dear illogician ! I wonder if ever a woman yet, even on her death-bed, allowed illogic to her sex. But, if she did, you may be sure she recovered, to refute her own concession before too late. Very well, we'll go and be married to-morrow three weeks, at the Registry Office.”

“ I wish it might be the church ; but it can't be helped, I suppose.”

“ And then we'll go and sing along the streets for our wedding breakfast.”

“ I'll sing for you blithely, and dance for you, John.”

My heart's dancing already. If we've done a wrong, it's the sweet way to mend it, my true, true lover."

And they parted on that. But the man's heart, as it bore him back to his lonely ruin of a home, beat heavily and fiercely in one. Fate had been ungenerous to him, pelting him to the very ground with his own excess of kindness.

The house stood lonely on the edge of a wet and weedy tract of common. Clear and near, it seemed, the lights of the town, half a mile away, twinkled and stretched themselves. It was a fairly large building, with a shrubbery about it; but rents were moderate in that remote place. The rain splashed in the porch; there was only one light in a window high up. Darling let himself in with a latchkey, and, pausing a moment in the deserted hall, struck a match and kindled a lamp. The worn carpet on the stairs, going up before him into darkness, spoke of many little feet which had learned to romp lightly there under his kind and merciful regime. It was all very bitter.

A decent woman came down the stairs and accosted him. There was warning in her face.

"Well?" he said.

"One's dead, sir," she answered.

"Which one?"

"It's little Claude Destrelle, sir."

He shrunk back. He had loved this boy above others—loved him the more for his late utter repudiation, it would appear, by one who had formerly held herself responsible for his keep and welfare. The pittance miserly withheld had only served to substantiate the child's forlorn claim on his own rich heart. It was a minute before he could speak.

"And the other?"

“ He’s bad ; but he holds on. He’ll do, I think.”

The last of all ! “ I must make an attempt to reach poor Claude’s kindred,” he said, and turned into his study. Yet, once there, he did not write, but sat vacantly brooding in the lamplight. “ What a child ! ” he thought. “ What a child !—no understanding in her but through love. Shall I kill myself—and abandon her to the worst, damned coward that I should be ? ”

Quickly, impulsively, he turned a key in his desk, and took out a letter. It had reached him that morning—the sequel to an earlier one, briefly acknowledged by him. It was dated from a London square ; but was penned in a thin rather foreign-looking hand. He had received in his time many such queer communications from secret correspondents—peremptory, or illiterate, or insidious, or all together, but suggesting without exception a common moral of guilt seeking to evade its own consequences. It was part of his business, and a necessary penalty of it.

But this letter was peculiar, inasmuch as it appeared to run on lines of repentance, or restitution.

“ I refer myself again,” it said, “ to the boy registered at your school under a name and circumstances, of which you write to decline the deconviture, unless proof of my further claim to know. Very well—these facts only lately reach me after a person’s death, and I am ask to mend a wrong the way after all the most natural to me. I am ready, then. It shall be very plain. It was my wife place the child at your school, unknown to me ; and now she repent and die, after telling me your address and that was all. Then the convulsion seize her. I sign you my name down at foot ; and hers of the unmarried was Destrelle. She may

have name the child one or the other, or no name at all at your choice. That is for you ; but she will have name herself, and that is enough. Now I desire in particular only to give the effect to her wish ; and I desire also to remove the child from your so excellent care. It shall be well acknowledge."

John Darling's left hand rested on the letter after he had re-read it. His right supported his forehead, the elbow crooked on his desk, while he pondered. A fat-bodied, spider-legged clock on the mantelpiece struck eight.

"It shall be well acknowledge"—an empty claim to advance in the light of what had happened at the intense psychologic moment. That was his demon luck—the last scurvy spite of fate. And yet he had had a peculiar fondness for this abandoned waif ; had always lavished upon him a plenitude of the kindness with which his heart was stored. Would that count for anything ? He looked round the sorry room ; he thought of the mean and tattered appointments of the dormitory upstairs in which the little quiet body lay—no subject for barter any longer. What was in all this to vouch for any especial tenderness or consideration ? At the last his moral evidences were no better than Mr. Squeers's.

There was no definite guile in him at the moment. If one had asked him, as Peggy Pretty had asked earlier, what he had meant by his reservation on the question of closing the school at once, he would have answered, and quite truthfully to himself : "I don't know. I don't know in the least what was in my mind." And he didn't know. The "slip" was all paramount in him. He must save his honest love the consequences of it, at whatever cost to himself—that

necessity obscured all other issues. But it also—which he did not recognise—made him desperate; and desperation is the devil's opportunity.

A sharp quick ring at the bell startled Darling from his reverie. He heard the little maid plod up from the basement, shuffle along the hall, and let someone in. The next moment his door opened. "Mister Fairmon," announced the girl, and shut in a stranger with him.

Darling rose. He saw before him a middle-aged spare gentleman, obviously late from the road, for his slim boots were thickly muddied, and his soft felt hat, which he held in his hand, was sparkling with rain-drops. There was something essentially foreign in his appearance—in his vivid eyes, in his bottle-brush of a head, in his black small beard, pointing in an outward curve, like a scorpion's sting. He bowed, with a sweep of his hat to his breast, and drew his heels together.

"Mr. Darling?" he said, in a soft very caressing voice, as if the hope of his life were realised; and his teeth, white and flawless, emphasised his gratification. "I am too happy."

John Darling had a surprised intuition. Here, without doubt, was his unknown correspondent arrived in person.

"M. de Vermond?" he exclaimed.

"The same," answered the stranger. "Ah, forgive me—the impatience of the agent of restitution! I could not wait, I could not rest even, till I back my enquiry in the self-person. The boy—he is with you—here?"

The schoolmaster, looking down, fumbled some papers with the tips of his fingers.

"It is unfortunate, sir," he said; "it is grievously

unfortunate, admitting the justice of your claim, that you come to consult me at a terrible crisis. The boy is here ; but—but he is dangerously ill."

Why did he temporise with—beg the question? Perhaps he could not have told you, of his own knowledge, even then. M. de Vermond started and stared. The veneer, even in a moment, was warping.

"Ill!" he exclaimed angrily. "But you never——"

"You had to justify your right to know, sir," said Darling stoutly.

The stranger pondered his face a moment darkly.

"Well," he then rapped out, with impatience. "I am waiting."

"Assuming your right," said John, "it is my unhappiness to inform you that diphtheria has broken out in the school. Luckily, prompt isolation, and—and removal, have limited the seizure to two cases, of which one, I regret to say, has ended fatally. The other——"

"The other, sir," interrupted the stranger, "the other, it is so, then, is the subject of my visit?"

John Darling did not answer—he could not, in fact; something was choking him. The voice—he already hated it, as if it were the devil's—pursued and penetrated him remorselessly.

"Will he recover?"

"How can I tell?"

"Is there at least one chance?"

"One in ten, or fifty, or a hundred. How can I tell, I say?"

In an instant, to his shocked amazement, he felt his hand seized in a vehement grip. The soul of the man was looking down on him out of fiery windows.

"Seize that chance!" cried M. de Vermond. "It

can be done—yes. Throw yourself—you, I say—your courage, your conscience into the pool, and win that life for me. I tell you, sir, on the day you surrender it into my hands, sound and well, I give you money, one thousand pounds, straight in your pocket. That is for a bargain. What is the stuff to me? pouf! But this child, he is much. I say it, and I mean it.”

The monstrous thing had come; it faced him naked and terrific—the temptation which he had not had the moral force to strangle in its birth. He knew himself now—knew not only his own heart’s bitterness, but its corruption. From the moment when the nurse had said to him about that other, “He’ll do, I think,” he had been really lost—he recognised it. He tried to assert himself; to repudiate the implied insult of a bribe; to express his indignation somehow. He could only gasp and blink in the blaze of a stupendous prospect. Where had been a blasted heath was a smiling pasture. An old song he was fond of ran perversely in his head. Music has a way of haunting troubled minds with a phrase of itself repeated over and over again. “At her cottage door Mary stood and listened,” it went. Poor Mary! she was waiting for William to come back and reassure her—which William, honest lad, elected to do. What a tranquil pretty scene the sequel conjured up!

Darling could not speak a word, while every second’s tick of the spidery clock on the mantelpiece seemed to be knitting an impenetrable web about his moral sense, and securing it from escape.

“Ah!” said the stranger, releasing his hand at last, “you accept the challenge—that is good. Now take me to see this boy.”

John tried to murmur something about danger, in-



fection, and the like. The other pushed him impatiently towards the door.

Up in the ghostly dormitory they found the little flushed life at its battle. A screen hid the dead. The nurse, sewing at some linen, rose and stood, still busy, by the bed.

The stranger stared greedily at the face on the pillow.

"How, then, do you call him?" he whispered to Darling.

The schoolmaster silently entreated silence, and withdrawing when the other would follow him, returned softly to the hall. There he turned desperately at bay.

"Charles Smith," he said.

M. de Vermond's brow went up cynically.

"He was register so?" he asked. "By Madame de Vermond?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" he shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "A characteristic selection, *juste ciel!* But she lack, ever and always, the imagination."

John Darling clutched suddenly and passionately at a floating straw of self-justification.

"You will not object to tell me, sir," he said. "Your wife—possibly in some fit of anger, of some insane jealousy or revenge—did this thing, deprived you of your own, during your absence from her?"

M. de Vermond nodded gravely.

"I never saw it. I was away, yes, when it was born. She will not let me know, or confess but at this last. Now, by your good office, it shall be mine for the first time."

"Shall it? But if it comes to pass indeed, you

will be good to it? Yet how can you be so certain?"

"He will recover, yes, through you. I know she shall not have the fruits of her deed to follow and console her. That would be reversion of the divine justice. Remember the thousand pounds."

He was gone with the words. Mounting the stairs, only half consciously, Darling returned to the dormitory.

"Nurse," he said, "you can rest for the night. I am going to battle out this case myself. That gentleman you saw was Charlie Smith's father, and I have made myself responsible to him for the boy's life."

She protested; he insisted. In a little he was alone with the sick. He was prepared for any manifestation of the powers of terror and disease. Charlie Smith's life against his own.

Now, in the murmuring watches of the night, he would often find his voice rising softly with the wind, clothing itself in its moanings to apostrophise the insensible figure on the bed:

"Charlie, Charlie," it appealed; "you are going to a beautiful house and someone's loving care, Charlie Smith. You will have money and fine clothes, and you will come to call him father—you upon whose poor little lips the gracious word has never learned to shape itself. It is sad for me, Charlie; but you know, if I had not agreed, if I had not pretended you were the other, ruin would have fallen on me, and you would have been transplanted elsewhere, perhaps into a hard and cruel soil. For *she* does not care, Charlie, the unnatural authoress of your poor little being. And now, when I write and tell her you are dead (as I shall do, though, for both our sakes, you must get well,

Charlie)—when I write and tell her (and she does not even know by what name I have called you), she will give a sigh of relief, and answer that you are best put under the merciful ground without delay, but that she must not challenge scandal or discovery by being present. I am so certain of it, that the possibility of her arriving, and refusing to identify little Destrelle as her son, gives me no alarm whatever. Sleep and get well, Charlie boy.”

And Charlie slept, and Charlie recovered, and Charlie's guilty mother answered exactly as John Darling had foretold. And one day Charlie was taken and left at the big house in the London square with the man who was not, and could not be, and yet assumed that he was, John Darling concluded, the boy's father. But, as for John, though he parted from his charge with tears in his eyes, he had also, be it remembered, a cheque for a thousand pounds in his pocket.

## II

Is there not something aggravating to Providence in a too-uncompromising probity? Possibly, since human nature is said to reflect it, to be built after its likeness, there may be. Anyhow, an aphorism despite, scrupulous honesty, which the world has kept poor, begins often to prosper from the date of its first lapse from perfection.

It was certainly the case with John Darling. That thousand pounds launched him on a full tide of success—and through no signal capacities of his own, moreover. In fact, he invested it rather rashly; but everything turned up trumps. In a year he was floating on a steady keel.

He had heard nothing in the interval, had perhaps shrunk from hearing anything, about Charlie Smith. He hoped and trusted that the boy was living to justify the sacrifice of conscience he had made on his behalf. As to M. de Vermond, the class of client he represented owed, as a body, after all, a large measure of atonement to that small submerged tenth, a fraction of which he, John Darling, had devoted his past life to reclaiming. If the bereaved, and possibly not guiltless parent, was only doing late justice indirectly, he was still fulfilling a moral obligation. Charles Smith might have no direct blood-claim on him ; yet the ties of brotherhood, and fatherhood and motherhood, dated from our first parents, of whom was original sin. In accepting him, the man had only accepted a principle which he had too long evaded. He, John, himself had been justified, through Providence, in affording him this means to redemption.

So he salved his conscience, and prepared himself—yes, himself—for the liberal duties of parentage. Would *he* have been content to compromise with Fortune for a changeling ? No ; he yearned with all his heart for his dear Peggy's blood-pledge of affection ; was jealous of the very dreams which filled her waiting-mother's eyes with a joy of things beyond him ; hated himself for the secret which barred all real confidence between them, and blackened the prospect of the innocent trust to come. As the time approached, he grew very disturbed and unhappy.

He had engaged for the occasion the nurse who had formerly served him. She came one night, when he was sitting miserably alone. He had some supper ready for her ; but she could hardly touch it at first for a story she had to tell him.

"O, Mr. Darling!" she broke out; "to think how you were mistaken in the case of that poor little Charlie Smith!"

His heart seemed to stop for a moment. Then, "What about him?" he forced himself to demand.

"There!" said the good woman; "don't take on, sir. I know the kindness of your heart, and the goodness of your intentions."

"My intentions!" he repeated dully. He believed she had discovered.

"To hand the poor mite over to a loving father," she went on. "O! a pretty father! He starves and frights and tortures the child—revenge on him his hate to the dead mother, who bore him, against the bonds of wedlock, to a better man, and then hid him away, lest her guilt should bring disgrace upon her lover. But she confessed on her death-bed, and begged her lawful husband to care for the child! and he undertook it, the devil. O, the dog! the black heart! Charlie's grown a little ghost of terror, they do say—those that have chanced to get a glimpse of him. It was a friend of mine told me, Mrs. Barker, that nurses in the next house."

"Why don't they set the law on him?" He hardly knew his own voice.

"He defies them to prove anything. And the child denies he's hurt," said the woman; "a lamb, under that wolf's teeth."

"Well, I will save him," said John Darling, and he rose to his feet.

"God bless you!" she cried. "I knew you'd never rest, hearing it."

No, never again, until he had righted this monstrous wickedness—his own. His sudden staggering sense

of responsibility to it made him feel physically sick. He reeled a little before he could recollect himself; and then he recovered his nerve, and more than his normal nerve, with a shiver. The spur to instant impulse was praiseworthy here. He must admit the fraud to M. de Vermont, restore him his thousand pounds, and abide by whatever consequences might ensue. Peggy would insist on that restitution, if she knew—no doubt about that. No doubt, moreover, that he could never look his own child in the face until he had made it.

Straight upstairs he went, and stood over his pretty wife where she rested in a chair. He must not kill her heart before the coming ordeal. He must not seek for any relief of his anguish through confession and absolution. Time enough for that when she was strong to hear him—strong in a divided love. His task was a one-man's task—the utmost for endurance. He opened upon it with a loving smile.

“Peggy,” he said, “don't be disturbed; I must go to London immediately. A former pupil of mine is in need of me. But you won't be alone; nurse has come.”

Her eyes took a momentary startled light; but relapsed almost instantly upon tenderness.

“I understand,” she said. “Well, you are better out of the way.”

He must not, even at that, disabuse her, protest at her mistake. He must not appeal to her, as his whole emotional soul yearned to do, not to misjudge him, but to bear him, his faults and weaknesses, always gently in mind, if anything should occur to make their separation a long, or even a final one. Though his heart bled to evoke this scene, his love

was strong to reject it. His atonement must be single and complete. He parted from her as though he were going on a pleasant journey.

. . . . .

There was a suggestion of something stark and deadly about the atmosphere of the house in the square; but not until John Darling had noticed the attraction its windows seemed to possess for the eyes of casual loafers and lingering errand-boys, did he gather the reason. The blinds were down; the house was a house of mourning.

Not for the boy! that were an incredible spite of Fate; but his heart was half-suffocating him as he mounted the steps to the door. A little news vendor stopped breathless to watch, and envy him.

It was opened to his ring, and to his instant confusion, by a policeman. The man accepted him with the stolid, unself-committing suspicion of his office. Every citizen, in the constabulary eye, is guilty of something, even if it be of nothing more than his not being a policeman.

"M. de Vermont," said Darling, finding his voice; "I have come to see him, on business."

"No good," said the officer.

"The business is of the last importance," urged John.

"He couldn't attend to it, not if you was the First Commissioner," said the policeman. "He fell down and killed himself yesterday morning."

John reeled. The policeman—first-aid graduate—put an arm like a stove-pipe about him, hooked him into the hall, and shut the door.

“What made you do that?” he said. “What’s your name and business? Come, now!”

John gulped out both. He had been schoolmaster, until a year ago, he said, to the little boy Charlie Smith.

The admission obviously reassured the officer. He had even heard about him, in a manner, it appeared, from the child.

“Doctor’s the man for you, sir,” he said. “It’s him’s got charge of the boy.”

He gave the name and address of the gentleman who had been M. de Vermond’s professional adviser. As he spoke, he had his eye on John, and on John’s own wandering vision.

“Ah!” he said; “a queer lot, ain’t it?”

Darling acquiesced mutely. The hall in which he stood was empty and carpetless. So he had found it on the occasion of his former visit, when he had been shown, by a snuffling and moist-eyed old harpy, down its echoing length, with the blind doors on either side, into a little study at the back, where M. de Vermond, eager and gloating, had received him and his charge. Now, however, the door nearest him was open, and through the opening he caught glimpse of pictureless walls, dusty boards, and, thronged upon the latter, a confused gathering of motionless forms, some bronze, some marble, a few sheeted; but all seeming to express, in their cold and inhuman scrutiny, the haunting of a demented mind.

“Was what they call a collector,” said the policeman. “Gave his whole fortun’ to it, it’s said. The house is full of nothing but them figures and busteses—not a washun-stand that’ll stand. Drove him off of his head in the end; and no wonder. Was sup-



posed he'd put himself under one of them sheets on a pedestal, to frighten the boy in the dark, and that he'd frightened himself to death instead, a' doing of it. Anyhow, he were found lying there with his neck broken, *and* the door locked on the inside, *and* the key in it."

He took off his helmet, looked into it for understanding, and put it on again without having found any.

"A queer thing," he said. "I've examined a' many dead eyes, but none equal to his. What they must a' seen before he went down like that, eh? You'll find the boy at the doctor's. You'd better go there."

. . . . .

John stood the poor little man at his knee.

"You shall find father, and mother, and a brother, too," he said; "or"—he corrected himself—"a sister. Come with me, my child."

"He made me sleep among them, locked in alone," wept Charlie; "and—and they made faces at me, sir."

The fearful deadly frost had melted in him—was yielding to the unforgotten glow of his old kind master's understanding and sympathy.

"Yes, yes," said John pitifully. "But it's all over, Charlie, and you're coming home with me."

"It is the best way," said the doctor. "The old life; the old influences. You must hold yourself accountable for him, that's all, in event of his being wanted at any time. A very pitiful case, upon my word. The man was mad on a grievance; but I never guessed it had gone to those lengths. He was plausible enough, when questioned. And so this is

poor madam's wastrel? dear, dear! And he was exacting retribution of him. It's always the innocent ones that have to pay for the guilty in this suffering world. Well, I can see no objection to your taking the boy; and the sooner and farther the better."

"Come, Charlie!" said John Darling; and together they went out into the night—the little sobbing fellow and the remorseful man.

They were going to tell Peggy and the baby all about it—to confess and ask forgiveness for one of them.

"Now, I'll own to you, Charlie," said John. "He was not your father at all, and you were not his son. And, worse than that, I knew it before I sold you to him. But I thought he would be kind to you, Charlie; I never dreamt of anything else."

"I want to be *your* child again," said the boy.

"And so you shall," cried John; "first heir, from this moment, to my love and my luck. I owe it all to you, Charlie Smith."

He felt momentarily elated, as in a glow of success—the boy restored to him, that terrible confession uncalled for. His possession of the bribe wronged no one, unless a bloated treasury. The madman, he had learned, had died kinless and intestate; his collection was to count among the national windfalls of the year.

Yet, in the midst of his vainglory, a phrase, breathing from somewhere very faint and hollow, seemed always pursuing to overtake him. It followed like a funeral dirge; it mourned in lapses of the wind; it was here, there, nowhere—and suddenly it was singing, shrilly articulate, in his brain, "*The innocent who pay for the guilty.*"

The doctor's words. It came to haunt him throughout the long journey; it was shrieking itself in his ears, more raucously emphatic than ever, as, holding the little boy by the hand, he stole up like a thief to his own front door.

"One's dead, sir."

The old dreary formula. Had he asked, as before, and received the inevitable reply? Diphtheria was it; or what? The wind, and the voices, and the roar of the train had got into his head.

"Which one?"

He believed that he had put the question—old and monstrous and monotonous, it seemed. And yet, as a fact, not he nor anyone had spoken at all. Only the nurse, with that eternal face of warning, stood conning him in the dim-lit hall.

"And the other?"

Again the mute enquiry.

"She holds on. She'll do, I think."

She?—who? The words were real enough this time—unmistakable—jarring him from his trance. He almost screamed his question:

"Who'll do? My wife?"

The nurse nodded.

"She fights to win. It were born dead, sir—the poor blessed mite!"

The man knelt down on the hard floor of the hall, and wrapped his arms convulsively about Charlie Smith, and dropped his head on the boy's shoulder.

"Neither brother nor sister at last," he said brokenly, "but, God help me, a mother yet, and my Peggy, my Peggy, a son. O, pray for me, pray for me—little man—wronged so much. He will listen to *you*—a child—having that—the innocent hostage—in

His hands. Only once—O, my God! O, Charlie! ask for a mother—just when you need her—fill the empty place. For your sake—for hers—not mine. Don't speak of *me*—for yourself, Charlie—He'll listen then. Stay here—pray—O, pray, little boy, pray—while I creep—into the dark—there——”

And in the dark the little emissary of mercy found him by and by, and, being commissioned, brought him his Peggy's message to come to her—to forgive *her*, because she had failed him, and answered his great longing with a gift of death.

But it was life for them all from that moment.

## THE KING'S STAR

### I

**M**AÎTRE JEAN BICHE stood, with a very black and evil expression of countenance, looking over the parapet of Notre Dame Bridge. He was in that mood when violence of some sort seems the only redress for an outraged self-esteem. It was just a question with him whether he should kill himself or another—deprive the insensate world of an inspired poet, or of an uninspired patron of poetasters. So he put it, there being no such merciless critic of his fellow-minors as an unappreciated rhymester.

And yet he might have solaced himself with the reflection that the approval of an insensate world would be the reverse from reassuring to a conscious genius. But there is no reasoning with an insulted poet.

It must be understood that Maître Jean, sensualist, decadent, and, at this last, by right maturation of a diseased egoism, a homicidal maniac, was quite earnest in his sense of injury, and quite deadly in his resolve to come to some kind of terms with Fate upon it. Notoriety was really the thing he craved—he called it appreciation. Tuneful from the first, his compositions, when only a poor sizar at the 'Collège des trois langues,' had instinctively assumed a metrical cast, and had merely awaited the authority of a Mastership

of the Arts to expand into the full-blown song. And he had gained his degree, and thereafter had indulged his bent, seeking a living and a living fame in one ; but with singular ill-success. Though he sang high and low, no one would employ him above a trumpery figure ; and here, at thirty years of age, he was sunk into a mere tavern-strummer, begging his bread, like Homer, from door to door. Odes, hymns, eclogues, rondels, pasquinades—they all came within his scope—or so he thought—and he must exchange the best of them for a mug of wine and a bed in the midden. It was an unexampled infamy ; but it had to be endured. And then one day there had appeared, unexpectedly, a potential patron, and his embittered soul had been exalted at a bound to unstable heights.

It was just a stranger in a tavern, a magnificent dandiprat, who had clapped him on the shoulder over some neatly-turned epigram, and had sworn by his beard that Father Ronsard must and should hear of him ; that the King himself must hear ; that at a turn of the wheel he should find himself enrolled among that select company of Court songsters which wove a maze of melody about the branching corridors of the Louvre.

Jean Biche had listened petrified. Ronsard ! the incomparable Ronsard, whom for years he had hated and envied and depreciated with all a poor man's spite of the successful ! In a moment he found this great rival just and noble ; in a moment he saw himself recognised, applauded—nay, lifted to pre-eminence. If, he reflected, in a glow of condescension, the Court emoluments were something less than princely, they would compare at least favourably with his present takings. Charles IX was credited with keeping his

poets, like horses, on moderate oats, lest they should become over-blown and unfit for service. What of that, to one who had often drummed an accompaniment to his own couplets on his own empty stomach? He inflated his starved chest, he flushed and simpered; when the stranger insisted upon seeing such specimens of his art as he had about him, he protested, with an affectation of lowliness that was already vanity spurred and mounted. The two parted, after an appointment made at *The Mewing Cat*, the nobleman vowing, in a heat of tearful sentiment, that he would consider it the deed of his life to set those broken shoes of Maître Jean on the first rung of the ladder of fame. And after that, being, in truth, gloriously drunk, he had gone away and forgotten all about it.

Jean Biche—living meanwhile in the clouds, and feeding almost exclusively on wind—kept the appointment with punctuality, and found no impulsive patron awaiting him at *The Mewing Cat*, which was just a jolly tavern in the Rue de la Juiverie on the City Island. Nor did any 'come to arrive,' and in the end he had to sing for his supper. Thereafter he haunted *The Mewing Cat*, and always in vain; but, still living on the glamour of that meeting, and finding for himself a hundred reasons why its renewal was unavoidably postponed, he presently, in his new glorified self-confidence, began to conceive the possibility of touting for favour at the fountain-head on his own account. Why should he not submit his goods, so highly recommended, to the Sieur Ronsard himself, and so dispose of the encumbrance of a "middle-man"?

And he actually did it in the end, with a rhymed petition to the Prince of Poets, subject, younger-brotherly, adulatory, craving his interest to find him

a Court patron, and even intimating the highest. After all, when it came to a question of asking, the King could give most. And then, in trepidation, but still uplifted, he awaited his answer.

None was vouchsafed him. He wrote again, and yet again. Finally, he addressed the fountain-head itself, the royal Castalia. And last of all he became importunate.

Then of a sudden one day a palace minion appeared in *The Mewing Cat*, and, enquiring for M. Biche, as the poet rose white and breathless staggered him with a boisterous blow on the back, and, throwing a packet on the table, roared out with a laugh, which all might hear :

“ Is it, my faith, the grasshopper ? ‘ Poor songster ’ thou namest thyself, and the King is in no mind to contradict thee. But call not any more under his windows, M. Biche, thy stinking sprats, or by his honour, he swears, he will have thee and thy burden cast into the Seine.”

That, to be sure, was a rude way of rejecting a manuscript ; but, in the sixteenth century, contributions, even, so to speak, to the Magasin du Louvre, were not returned accompanied by a printed form, or by a polite intimation that they were found unsuitable to their purpose. The unlucky poet, thus publicly gibbeted, gave one gasp, rigidly sat out the ensuing raillery, and presently crept forth, a soul wounded beyond endurance or extenuation.

Now men who have learned to live without hope will sometimes lose their reason in the reaction from a brief draught of it. Maître Jean could have borne the persistent neglect of Fortune ; he could not bear her meteoric favour—a glimpse of glory shown only



to be withdrawn. As he stole on, there was murder in his heart. He must take some life, if it were a life no less abject than his own. His nerves twitched to kill. It was falling dark, as he threaded his way amidst the huddle of low tenements and brawling alleys which covered the island, his hands plucking together behind his back, his eyes perpetually on the ground. He saw a red stream from some dyer's vat pour into the kennel, and he lolled his jaw at it, hanging out his tongue as if to lap. On the Pont Notre Dame he paused, and looked over the parapet into the water. Its gloomy rushing fascinated him, and he bent lower.

To plunge, and be swept whither? He dragged at his jaw hungrily a moment. It was soft and pursy, for all his half-starved condition; it dropped heavily from a weak mouth and vealy cheeks spotted with dissipation. His forehead looked low by contrast, and the hair brushed back from it, and sleeked at his neck into meagre drakes-tails, was of an indeterminate ginger colour. Hugging his mangy black mantlet about his shoulders, he bent so low as to imperil his balance.

A soft hand fell upon his shoulder, and he glanced about, momentarily startled, to find himself hemmed in by a little band of cut-purses. There was no mistaking them, Thrasonic, determined-looking fellows, with a light of mischief in their eyes. He rose erect, laughing drearily and ironically.

"Messires les Enfants de la Malte," he said, "I recognise you very well. Behold in me, your purposed victim, a wretched poet, driven by hunger to emigrate to the unknown shore, and awaiting only the appearance of M. Charon's ferry-boat in the stream

below to depart. Can anyone oblige me with a denier for the passage? That given, he can cut my throat, with infinite pleasure, and so, having relieved my conscience of the single scruple which yet hampers it, step into so much of my shoes as the stones of Parnassus have left me."

They chuckled loudly; and one swaggered forward. He was a sickly-looking, weedy young man, with a silly intolerant face, and a rudimentary beard.

"I know this M. Biche," he said. "A wretched poet, i' faith—he speaks it. If any man obliges him, he is my enemy—the enemy of Bras-de-Férule. Hell will be penalty enough without his rhyming. Live, good Mr. Biche, live and prosper, we entreat thee, and presently carry thy lyre to heaven where the peacocks sing."

The band went on its way, Bras-de-Férule leading; and Jean Biche, with a taste of bile in his mouth, bent again to the river.

That miserable jest, twice uttered within the hour! Was there truth at the bottom of it? The self-conscious genius in him disdained an answer. Left to be its own solitary judge at the last, his soul swept away all bounds of moderation, and pronounced itself single, majestic, inscrutable. He was great—the greatest poet of his own or any time. He retracted his every obsequious compliment to the lesser, but more fortunate men. Fortunate? Of course. They spoke the common thought to common minds. It was all a vast conspiracy of the vulgar to keep the world for themselves, and the worthy from recognition. The golden age was ended, the gods were withdrawn; and he, comparable with Astræa, must no longer linger out a starved exile among a soulless people. But, for all

that renunciatory heroism, his heart burned with hatred, and the gangrene of vanity was eating up his reason. He stooped over the parapet.

To plunge, and be swept whither? To be dragged, like a dead fish, distended, blind-eyed, from the indifferent water, and be cast for carrion into a nameless grave! For all his merit—after all his dreams and ambitions! The thought was fuel to his madness. Could he not achieve something first, something in any way remote from his calling, which should set him apart from his fellows, if only by the measure of a giant infamy?

A star of gas seemed to burst in his brain. He raised his head quickly. In the near distance he could see twinkling the long lights of the Louvre skirting the quay and shortened in perspective to a fiery arrow. He raised himself, his teeth showing, and shook a sardonic fist across the water.

“Fame!” he muttered ravenously, “fame! The King might provide it me yet, if I were to kill him for it!”

“My faith! but that is a very good reservation!” said a low voice at his elbow.

He turned, with a mortal start. There were two men, cloaked and mysterious, standing as close to him as confessors. In his absorption he had let them come upon him without a sound. The slighter of them had spoken, and he spoke again in a cultivated voice:

“I say, Maître Biche, that is a very good reservation.”

“Messires!” gasped the poet. “Messires! You know me?”

“Surely,” said the gentlemen. “Who does not know Maître Biche?”

The singer made a comprehensive gesture with his arms, emotional, piteous. 'All Paris!' it expressed.

"Alas! What is one to expect, with such a precentor to set the tune?" said the stranger.

"Yes, that is true," muttered Jean Biche.

"Incontrovertible," purred the other. "The Louvre is an indulgent parent to mediocrity. I prefer St. Germain, for my part. But doubtless, Messire, I speak to you in enigmas."

Jean Biche strove to answer, but could not. The gentleman touched him softly on the chest. "Listen, then," he said low. "I am in the service of Messire the King's youngest brother. I know the esteem in which he holds you—'As Apollo to Marsyas, so is Jean Biche to the Abbé Ronsard; so is natural music to acquired.' Those were his words. 'Were I King,' saith he, 'I should know whom to crown.'"

He stepped back a pace, and again approached, speaking in the same soft tone:

"Messire, as it chanced, I was with His Majesty to-day, when he sent his lackey to insult you. 'Carry this to the swollen frog,' he said, 'and bid him take warning lest he burst emulating the bull.' Ah! that stings; but no wonder. I heard; I followed with a friend; we were concealed witnesses of the result; we guessed the effect on a wronged and sensitive mind; as soon as we could escape observation, we pursued, we tracked you, we are here!" He broke off with a dramatic gesture, and added almost immediately, sighing profoundly: "Ah, Messire! if only the Duc d'Alençon were King!"

"Messires," said the poet hoarsely. "I am a desperate man. What do you want of me?"

"A poet-laureate of the truest," said the stranger.

Jean Biche laughed with dismal derision.

"A laureate of the dead? It happens to fall in with my humour—with my complaint. Your recipe for Fame, then? You want me to kill the King."

The stranger looked round hastily. There was no one within hearing.

"A laureate, on my honour," he said, "and of the living. It were a stroke that would let loose a swarm—a hornet's nest of partisans. Once delivered, you would lack no seconders. It were to win your place, had you the courage to dare it."

"And, if I refuse?"

The gentleman seemed to smile; he shrugged his shoulders. "Then very clearly," his manner intimated, "we are two bloods to one poor devil, we have given you our confidence, and the river is down there."

Jean Biche sneered bitterly.

"I hate all the world," he said, "and most, naturally enough, him who stands for the crowning expression of its insolence and inhumanity. This alternative to suicide I had myself contemplated. Your suggestion, at least, gives it a new perspective. Do with me what you will, gentlemen. I await only my instructions."

Those, however, did not, for the moment much interest him. The absorbing thing was that he was committed finally to that lesser apotheosis of infamy. He did not pretend to guess on what pretext. These Valois were always plotting, in brotherhood together, or against one another. Some rumours had reached him, as they were wont to filter through, much attenuated, to the *canaille*. D'Anjou, the heir-apparent, being disposed of temporarily in Poland, it would have been

beyond reason to suppose that d'Alençon, the youngest and most restless of the three, would not take some advantage of his absence. And, in fact, it was whispered that the boy Duke—boy in all but seasoned villainy and dissimulation—was suspected of a leaning towards the Huguenots and the *Politiques*, as towards the party most to be relied on in a contingency. This shadowed-out conspiracy, no doubt, confirmed in some way the justice of that rumour. He did not know, or care to know how. These things were always going on, and were only regarded by the proletariat according as they affected the prices of bread and salt. There were only two classes in France, the task-masters and the tasked. A third, which had laboured to evolve itself—the class of reputable traders—had recently been annihilated.

A sort of mad exaltation had seized Jean Biche. He was going to be great beyond his wildest dreams. He saw red in the early stars, in the lights beginning to twinkle through the steaming murk of the river. He wanted to put his head into the *Mewing Cat*, and shout that the Angel of Destruction was close at hand. In truth, what with hunger, vanity and despair, his reason was gone by the board. Only a madman's secrecy kept his lips closed, and his smiling eyes from betraying the vision that filled them. He committed himself to his destiny, blindly, indifferent as to whither it carried or where deposited him.

At the end of the bridge were a couple of horses tethered to the rails. Doubtless their owners had awaited the passage of the Children of Malta before they trusted them there. One, a heavy bay roan, the larger cavalier mounted, and bade Maître Jean in a suppressed voice follow him *en croupe*. In another

moment they were off, pounding, by way of a score of tortuous lanes and noisome alleys, towards the open country to the north-west of the city. They rode in silence, hurriedly, like men too profoundly moved for speech. Five miles from the walls, at a turn of the road, the lights of a little tavern suddenly twinkled upon them from a lonely covert. And here, at a low word from the other, the bigger horseman wheeled to a stop, and intimated to his fellow-rider that they had reached their quarters for the night. Jean Biche acquiesced, with a shrug and an inane chuckle, and descended; while the first cavalier, uttering a single "Bonne chance!" continued his road—to the Château de St. Germain-en-Laye, standing yet nine miles distant on its Montagne-du-Bon-Air, as the Revolutionists came to call it.

## II

HIS MAJESTY was at the Louvre, his brother of Anjou in Poland, playing sulkily at sovereignty, the Duc d'Alençon was in the Château of St. Germain, plotting against things in general, and against his absent brother in particular. The King of France showed signs of breaking; he had never been himself since that little affair a year ago with the class of "reputable traders" on St. Bartholomew's day. What an odd thing it would be, were he to die unexpectedly and Anjou well out of the way!

Messire le Duc d'Alençon's little eyes twinkled over the prospect sometimes. He had taken some pleasure in managing his own small Court, with its serious and gay, its alchemists and its adventurers; yet he had always felt his capacities meet for the higher task.

Supposing, only supposing, he should happen to have thrown in his lot with the stronger party (which at the moment seemed the Huguenot) at the date of the King's death? The difficulty was merely one of coincidence. What a pity 'one could not procure coincidence.

"It is possible, even that, Messire," said the Comte de la Mole, who had been closeted with His Highness for some minutes.

He was just off the road, and still booted and spurred. His handsome evil young face had a smiling leer on it, as, with one hand on hip, he pulled with the other at the point of his little 'stiletto' beard. The Duke looked at him without speaking.

The Château was very silent. It seemed to sleep among its woods and terraces without a thought of change or disturbance. Most quiet of all was this little chamber set in its heart, this muffled closet with its queer jumble of retorts and alembics and astrolabes, set staidly amid a litter of arms, and dishes of sweetmeats, and books both lewd and learned. D'Alençon was the *original* one of the brothers—the most daring, the most fearful, and again the most mischievous. He was only eighteen—one of the handful of boys which controlled the destinies of his time. Self-interest, convictions such as he had, inclined him to the Protestant side. M. le Comte, on the other hand, was at heart a religious Huguenot. The balance of events at the moment appeared to favour the Protestant cause. If only a leader, a princely leader, could be found to take advantage of that moment!

"It is possible, Messire," said de la Mole, "even to procure coincidence."

The Prince, sitting in a great chair, with his hands



clasped, thrust out his feet and looked down at them. He was a little strong square man, very sallow and pitted with smallpox. His short wiry black hair, brushed violently back from his forehead and temples, his white teeth and set inscrutable smile, proclaimed the Italian in him. His doublet and breeches were of black velvet slashed with crimson, and the ruff at his neck might have been cleaner.

"I must accept your word for it, my dear Joseph," he murmured. "And what is Coincidence doing at this moment?"

"Coincidence, Messire," answered the cavalier, "is at this moment, I trust, drinking away the last of his reason under the care of my friend Lavollé."

The Prince just raised his eyes, and lowered them.

"Should I know Coincidence?" he asked.

"Hardly," said M. le Comte, "though I took pains to assure him otherwise. No more, in fact, than I knew him myself. Coincidence, naturally, assumes many disguises. In this case it was that of a strolling poet, who had apparently been petitioning royalty, and had met with a rebuff. The result came to hand in a certain cabaret, where I happened to be having a draught. I fancied I recognised Coincidence at once; but, to make sure, I followed him, when he went out, after a discreet interval and after having procured his pseudonym from the landlord. I found Coincidence deliberating between self-destruction and regicide, and so I was confirmed in my suspicion. I offered him, by your favour, Messire, the position of Court-poet."

"I do not wish to know his pseudonym," said the Prince suddenly.

"There is no need," answered de la Mole with per-

fect coolness. " I should prefer not to know it myself ; but that cannot be helped. The essential point is, would you, sir, Coincidence serving, be prepared to slip out of St. Germain, and place yourself under the protection of M. Guitry and those assembled with him ? "

The prince rose, much agitated.

" When, my dear Joseph," he said ; " when ? "

" To-morrow night, Messire, on the instant receipt of a message from me ? "

" To-morrow—so soon ? " His breath came quick. " To-morrow ? "

" To-morrow, Messire," said the Count quietly, " is a Court ball. His Majesty, in a recrudescence of that whimsicality which he exhibited of old, is designing to play a trick upon the company. Thou hast heard speak of the Children of Malta, that notorious band of rogues and pickpockets ? Well, so hath His Majesty, it seems ; but he is not content with hearing. He must see them, speak with them, learn of their arts and methods at first hand. You know his humour. La Chambre is deputed to procure a representative half score of the gentlemen, who will be let loose unknown among the throng to exercise their trade, His Majesty pledging his word to confirm them their spoil, and to lead them away, at a given signal, to his private apartments. I have secret information of the trick, Messire."

D'Alençon stood, yellow-white, his tongue secretly moistening his lips, his eyes on the ground.

" Well ? " he whispered.

" I say, Messire," continued the Count, " it would be reasonable to suppose that Coincidence would seize so promising an opportunity to vindicate his title to fame."

"His title, first, to admission," muttered the Prince. De la Mole shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course," he said; "but, where Destiny contrives! I can only guess; but let us imagine, say, that Coincidence has conceived the idea of entering with the band of cut-purses itself; that he has been instructed how to identify the King by the diamond star on his cloak; that he follows among them, when all withdraw, supposing his comrades to be, not the thieves they are, but fellow-conspirators, prepared to rally about him when he does that which shall raise him at a stroke to the topmost pinnacle of fame?"

He paused, and for a terrific moment silence held. Then the Count, himself looking down, murmured ineffably:

"The poor Coincidence! Likely he will not live to suffer for his mistake. It were best, indeed, he should not. He is a crazy fellow, Messire—a fatalist, like the proper child of Destiny. And in the meantime"—he shrugged his shoulders again, with an inexpressible meaning—"I have thought it best to isolate Coincidence, lest, like the smallpox, he should mark some of us with his disease."

D'Alençon glanced up, with haggard eyes.

"I do not want to know where. You have said too much already. Why did you dare to bring in my name?"

"As a guarantee, no more, Messire," said the Count imperturbably; "and since the promise it implied was an incentive. But it would carry no conviction uttered by his lips—granted that they were not silenced at once, which is improbable. Any murderer can cite Inducement; but that is not to say Inducement is guilty of the deed done in his name. Else,

when we swore by God we should make the Almighty an accessory to our sins. Be tranquil; we have supplied no links here to connect his name with yours."

The Duke, listening very intently, protested with a pallid face.

"He will be supposed one of them—one of the thieves. The King will suppose it."

"The King will suppose nothing, Messire."

"That is all one. *They* will be all one in the retribution exacted."

"A parcel of rogues, sir—the better for everybody. There is no confessional-box so inviolable as Montfaucon."

The Prince whined pitifully: "I do not like it."

"Nor I," said de la Mole. "It is purely a matter for Coincidence—that is the difficulty; insuperable, I fear. Those who consort with rogues must take the risk of their company. For myself, I venture to prophesy no more."

He spoke very smoothly; he was furtively weighing his confederate all the time. Suddenly the Duke came to him. His eyes were staring, the palms of his hands were wet. "Joseph, my friend," he said, like one about to choke, "tell me, in the name of God—you believe my brother to be a dying man?"

De la Mole was silent a moment.

"Guitry is at hand and prepared. It is of Coincidence we speak, Messire," he then said coldly.

"But, he could not, in any case, live long?"

"Long is a relative term, Messire, like short and tall. The day is our only metre for measuring time."

"It were a small sin, Joseph, to forestall the inevitable by a metre or so—a mercy, even, to cut short the tale of miserable days to come?"

"Coincidence, Messire, is only another term for Providence."

The young Prince clapped both his hands to his ears; then, turning in a desperate way, made with his right a gesture of dismissal. De la Mole understood it, and, without another word, silently left the room.

The moment he was gone, d'Alençon fell upon his knees at a prie-Dieu, and broke into a soft hysteric babble of prayer, hardly to be distinguished from blasphemy. He acted for the best; France was in danger; the reformed religion alone promised her tranquillity; he had no part in this; he did not want to reign; it was Providence in the guise of Coincidence that used him for its helpless instrument; he preferred peace and the pursuit of his hobbies to all the lustre of a kingly *apanage*; he would go into a monastery.

In the midst he paused, sobbing, and looked up.

"I wonder if Guitry is to be trusted?" he muttered, with a catch in his breath.

### III

THE young Charles IX of France was not only a poet in himself, but the cause that poetry was in other men. That should have made him a proud king, yet there must have been times when the sycophantic swarm of grasshoppers drove him to regret his own gift. He could discriminate very clearly between the real and the pretentious, and he did; yet it is doubtful if in earlier days he would have put his foot so savagely on the poor charlatan, Jean Biche. The truth was that conceits once amusing to him had become intolerable. His whole nature had been warped in a day.

Yet he was always at heart a poet and romantic.

The fact accounted for much that seemed contradictory in his character—love and cruelty, sincerity and dissimulation. He was for ever enacting a story within himself, and in the glow of it was easily moved, easily inflamed. It could become such an intense reality to him as even to affect his health. When he fired an arquebus from Louvre windows, he was playing a part into which his imagination had entered. He awoke to find his chimera actuality—as a sleepwalker might who, dreaming of wings, casts himself to the floor—and the shock of the discovery killed him.

Policy had found this imagination of his a sensitive instrument on which to play, and had tortured it unscrupulously. Left to himself, he might have been for his circumstances a good king, just and reasonable; but his bad friends, finding that strain of fantasy in him, worked upon it to their own ends and to his madness. Terror of the Spaniard, abject conciliation of the Spaniard, was the keynote of the devil's music which, throughout most of his reign, piped through the corridors of France. It was a strain mystic and elusive, but it found the bulk of the kingdom dancing and following to it. Uncursed of its infernal provocation, that carnage which choked the gutters of Paris had, perhaps, never occurred. Most certainly it would never have occurred to Charles the poet to sanction the deeds of Charles the madman. But Charles the poet was the last person allowed a voice in the matter.

The young king was a bard of the right succession. He had once written and dedicated to the Sieur Ronsard—whom he cherished, and had presented with an Abbacy among other gifts—some lines, of which the following may poorly serve for a rendering :

“ Though we be kings, I may not set, as thou,  
My anointed crown upon another's brow ;  
May never, like the sweet birds, hope to win  
One soul. My powers end where thine begin.  
Beauty and passion live upon thy sigh.  
Death I can give ; thou, immortality.”

But that was long ago, and in happier times—times when he could hunt, himself unhounded of that pursuing conscience, and write of the greensward with a woodman's love. In those days his restless spirit had had its purely boyish side, a turn for adventure, a fondness for 'larks' and practical jokes ; in these days—well, he remembered, maybe, how when they had gone to kill his dear friend the Duc de la Rochefoucauld in his bed, the victim had kicked out, laughing at his assailants, taking them, even as they stabbed him, for a disguised party from the palace, bent on one of those midnight frolics His Majesty loved. That might well have seemed to sound the knell of thoughtless hours, sickening him from all such jests in the future. He was no longer, said one, “ the gentle king, benign and gracious. He is utterly changed. And there is nowadays a malignance in his face where once dwelt charity.” His reason was a poisoned thing, in fact, and conscious of but few unsuffering moments. But in one of these, moved, perhaps, by some ancient strain of curiosity or adventure, he had devised the trick already mentioned to be played upon his company. It was a flash of the old *espèglerie*, a lucid thought recovered, a hundred years forgotten ; and it lasted out its purpose.

. . . . .

La Chambre had succeeded in gathering his half-score of rogues, and His Majesty received the band in

private audience. There were Bras-de-Férule, Pérignon of the webbed fingers, called the Duck, Mazas the Pounder, and seven others. There was an air of confident swagger about them all, which, under the royal safe-conduct, was not subdued. The King was immensely interested.

“ You are welcome, gentlemen of industry,” he said. “ I give you the term with apologies.”

“ *N'importe !* ” said Mazas, who was a good-humoured red tun of a man. “ It is something to be given anything. In these hard times we must take what we can get.”

“ Well, it is no more than you deserve. Yet, do not abuse the times ; you seem to have done very well out of them.”

“ *Pardi,*” said the Pounder ; “ we have a large family to maintain.”

“ That is true,” answered the King ; “ and la Chambre there has none. Pick his pocket for him.”

“ You speak too late, Messire ; it is already done,” said Pérignon with an air of dignity ; and, to Charles’s huge delight and the Captain’s mortification, he produced the latter’s purse from his bosom. La Chambre wanted to reclaim it.

“ No,” said the King. “ If you will keep such fine company, you must pay your footing.” He addressed Bras-de-Férule, who appeared to be the leader. “ This is all very well, but I doubt your capacity for the finer task.”

“ And what is that, Messire ? ” asked the young man. He caressed his scrap of beard, impudently, after the King’s manner ; and indeed, he was not unlike the King, only he was much more conceited.

“ To pass muster among gentlemen,” said Charles.



"Indeed, Messire," answered the other, "if they do not take us for their betters, call me a sot and depose me. Your fine fowl respect none so much as him that plucks them cleverly. The King should know it."

La Chambre looked aghast; but Charles only sniggered.

"Well," he said, "arrive in a body, and the porter at the wicket will have orders to admit you. You will see me in the room, and at the proper time will be given the signal to follow. *En attendant, Messires!*"

He rose, when he was alone again, and the transient excitement left his face, and left it haunted and haggard. He went up and down, stooping, coughing a little, and involuntarily his hand sought his throat, in the way Bras-de-Férule had mimicked. Once he paused at a mirror, and looked in it a moment. It showed him the very figure of exhausted self-repression, worn, tragic, pitiful. The wistful eyes, the lips compressed on too much pain, the thin straggle of hair, born of an arid soil, the deadly nausea of life. "God!" he whispered; "to be cursed at twenty-four with the wrinkles of sixty!" He had withered where he stood, in the struggle to be himself, to maintain himself, in the spell of the evil arts which were transforming him. He may have been as yellow as he was painted, but he was, no more than Malvolio, as black in his natural mind.

#### IV

It was significant of Jean Biche's condition that the exalted madman in him never once sought to penetrate the anonymity of either of his tempters. From the moment when he had surrendered his soul to them, he

felt himself as if carried along on a wild wind of Destiny. When he left the tavern, he had truly meant to kill himself; it had needed very little to divert his murderous hand to another. Self-destruction is the last resource of the egoist, because it appears the most complete means left to him of wreaking his vengeance on a world which refuses to take him at his own valuation. He wants to kill, and, in his monstrous vanity, himself seems the most irreparable loss he can inflict on his fellows. But, his mood being homicidal, it is well for others to interpose no alternative. It is often only accident which makes the suicide instead of the assassin.

M. Lavollé was careful to apply no febrifuge to this fever of egoism. He put fuel to it, rather—material, at discretion; moral, without stint. He did not want collapsed nerves at the last; so, whenever he thought he saw a sign of physical exhaustion he prescribed stimulant, and of mental, flattery. All the time he kept himself and his victim apart and incognito, in a little room of *The Crowing Cock*; and, before dusk had fallen, on the evening succeeding that of their arrival, he had reason to congratulate himself on the success of his treatment. For by then the last rag of reason had been removed from his victim, and Jean Biche stood dressed up to play his part of Coincidence.

He never thought or cared to know whence his clothes had come. They had reached the tavern mysteriously, and they appeared of a quality meet for his essay. They were rich, but unobtrusive—purple and black and gold—and there was the mask for his face, and the little deadly poignard to be hidden in his bosom, since arms were not allowed to be carried at the Court festivities. He swelled like a turkey, thus

arrayed. There was a fire in his brain and in his eyes. "The King, Messire," he said, "once writ a poem to the rogue Ronsard, in which he claimed the command of Death." He struck his breast. "*I* am already greater than the King."

He believed it, poor wretch. He strutted, and ogled himself in a scrap of glass. What if, after the deed, they were to recognise it, and make *him* King? He had an idea already he was striking for his crown.

Presently, mysteriously as the clothes had come, there were horses waiting at the door, and they mounted and rode off for Paris. Dismissing their steeds in the Rue St. Honoré, to one who had sprung up oddly to receive them, they descended, and proceeded on foot, by way of the Rues des Poulies and Petit Bourbon, to the Louvre Quay, where, at the gates of the courtyard, Lavollé halted his companion in good time, just as the links were being lit. He was not for the ball himself, but he had an observation to make, and a direction to give. Very soon the company began to arrive, and it was not long before a group of ten men, all compact, presented itself at the wicket among the crowd.

"It is they," he whispered, "thy confederates. Secure thine entrance, appearing to be one of them, and afterwards make no sign till the moment comes. Follow, and mark well, and luck go with thee," and he vanished.

There was a momentary block; a word and a sign were exchanged, and the next instant, treading on the heels of the Children of Malta, Jean Biche found himself, confident, triumphant, crossing the stones of that yard which, a year before, had swum in the blood of the massacre.

Thence his progress was all an intoxicated dream—of shining corridors, jewels and white bosoms, satin that whispered as it flowed, perfumes that stole the senses. And lo! he was in a great marble chamber whose ceiling, crusted with gold, was upheld by giant women, and whose spaces, lit by a thousand tapers, formed the reservoir into which all this river of splendour was discharging itself. The Salle des Cariatides! For a moment the assassin's brain reeled, not in any relenting of his purpose, but in terror lest a scene so gorgeous and unfamiliar should bewilder him and paralyse his arm from action.

. . . . .

They danced the pavane that night, a very stately measure derived from the peacock; and the Queen-mother, a magnificent old *nourrice* of a dame, sharp-eyed, firm-mouthed, as upright as a penguin, came to look on. She stood up on the daïs, immensely solid and immovable, clapping her hands in benevolent condescension, and approving in a full superior voice every more felicitous pose among the performers. But she withdrew early, and then the King, who had been seated apathetic in his chair of State, came down and mingled with his company. He was masked, as all were, and constantly moved among a little cloud of courtiers. His habit was of white satin, and the short cloak dangling from his shoulder was of ivory velvet, and conspicuous for the single diamond star fastened on it. Jean Biche, catching sight of the token for the first time, felt a sudden stab of ice in his heart. It passed, and, in the reaction, he became tenfold intoxicated with self-importance. The rising tumult of voices, the licence which grew with the hour, found

their exaggerated response in his brain. As a parrot squawks or a canary sings the louder the more the human uproar swells about it, so, conscious of the growing excitement, his own rose to a delirious pitch. He swaggered until he capered ; he played the gallant in such ridiculous caricatura as to attract the notice and the laughter of those near him. He thought he was making an impression, and so he was ; he thought he was showing his natural fitness for a part soon to be a part of his common experience. He was amply humoured, because, at a masque, antic often hid a meaning. Maybe, too, some rumour had got about of strange company in the hall. Once in his gambols he backed into a young lady somewhat violently, and received for his pains a suspicion of a kick from her attendant cavalier. He turned, mad on the instant, to resent the insult, and saw a plump merry young woman wincing from him. "Beware," whispered a friendly voice in his ear ; "it is the Queen Margot."

He stood like an angry gawk.

"Messire," she said saucily, "appears to fancy himself at tennis because there is a ball."

A burst of laughter greeted her sally, and she moved on. But from that instant his mood changed to one of black and vengeful hatred. He would come to prove to these arrogant coxcombs his title to a better respect. This insolence should be brought prostrate before him.

Thereafter his fury of excitement burned like a banked-in fire, the hotter and more ominous for its repression. He moved darkly from group to group, sinister, watchful, unclean. A thousand fantastic grievances haunted his wild and wandering fancy, or were gone in an instant to give place to that crowning

exultation. But, whatever his mood, he never forgot to follow the movements of his victim, or to hold himself prepared for his cue. In these stealthy observations, he noticed a peculiar trick the King had of lifting his hand to his throat, as if it troubled him; and presently he fell to imitating him in this, with the confused fancy that it might help others to interpret the natural royalty in himself.

During all this time he instinctively avoided contact with his fellow-conspirators. It was his policy, he believed; and, whenever he identified one or other of the forms he had pursued on his entrance, he would look another way, with even an elaborate affectation of uninterest.

And it was this fantastic delicacy which, in the end, almost defeated his purpose; for, happening to turn from a bulgy, hot-faced cavalier, upon whose heels he had literally trodden at the wicket, he failed to observe that the moment had come, and that the man was actually then on his way to the assignation.

He gave a mortal start. The great doors at the south end of the hall stood open; the King had already passed through; a little group of men was in the act of following. A spiral of fire seemed to spring from Jean Biche's soles and to go roaring up to his head. With his eyes full of blood, going half-blindly, he pushed his way, furiously, impatiently, through the intervening throng.

"Let me pass!" he panted. "I belong to that company! I must follow!"

It was a little before the removal of the masks. A pause had occurred in the festivities; and from here and there about the room small wails and cries were audible.

“ My belt ! ” “ My collet ! ” “ My silk cloak ! ”

All made way for the rude fellow, less interested in him than in the sudden disturbance. But even so he did not gain the door until the last of the conspirators had disappeared through it. The guard, on his application, passed him by, believing him to be one of the privileged ; the doors closed behind him. He saw a wide and noble stairway rise before him, and already high on it the last of the company he pursued. He did not ask himself on what pretext so many conspirators had gained admission to the King's private quarters. He was ignorant of the ways of palaces, and it was enough for him that everything corresponded with the information given him by Lavollé. Pausing only one moment to gather breath, and secure his poignard in position, he stole catlike up the great staircase in pursuit of his prey. There was no one for the moment in sight. Majesty, with its ushering lackeys, Intrigue with its padded footfall, had turned the corner and vanished. Jean Biche followed.

He could hardly control the gasp forced from him. For there, standing alone in the short dim-lit length of corridor before his eyes, was the King himself. There was no mistaking the figure, stooping, hectic, with the hand at his throat, and, over its shoulder, the white velvet cloak with the diamond star. Slipping out his blade, Jean Biche took soft steps, one, two, and sprang.

. . . . .

Charles was delighted with the success of his practical joke. The skill of the Children of Malta, the éclat with which they played their rôle of fine gentlemen, the magnificence of their ‘ get-up,’ justified their most arrogant boast. Being in the secret, he could follow

to a certain degree their tactics, and was witness of more than one dexterous "pass." Above anything it astonished him, and sent him into fits of laughter, to observe some mortified exquisites mulcted of their beautiful satin mantlets, and going disconsolately "in their waistcoats like lackeys." He could not understand how it was done, or whither the filched property vanished; and, when at length he had given the signal, and withdrawn his confederates away to his private closet, a question as to this method of theirs was the first on his lips. Pérignon, the serenely fastidious, answered him, while his comrades were emptying their sleeves, pockets, and other receptacles of some three thousand crowns' worth of 'swag' in money and jewels.

"It is easy, Messire."

"I know," said Charles. "*Un fou avise bien un sage*; but, for myself, I do not see how it is possible so to rob a shrewd man, without his knowing."

With the word, conscious of a *look*, he clapped his hand to his shoulder, and burst into a neigh of laughter. His own cloak, diamond star and all, was gone.

Pérignon stepped back a pace, and said, with unexampled impudence, while he raised his voice:

"The fool sits here. Behold the King enter!"

A scream from without answered him on the instant—a cry piercing, sudden, mortal. The whole company, thieves and monarch, started, listened a moment, then rushed forth pell-mell. There, on the matting of the corridor, lay Bras-de-Férule, writhing in the agonies of death, the King's mantlet on his shoulders, a poignard pinning it fast between the blades. And over him stood a masked figure, frantic, exultant, the light of madness in its eyes.



"I have killed the King!" shouted Jean Biche.  
"Long live the King!"

His voice wavered even in its utterance. His vision had encountered the living monarch. In that instant his reason returned to him, conscious, overwhelming. He threw up his arms, with a piteous bleat.

"Poet," he cried, "save thy brother!"

With an oath, Mazas the Pounder took a single step forward and struck him full in the face.

He dropped, never to rise again.

## TONY'S DRUM

### I

SOMEWHERE on the heights of Malplaquet a bugle sang out in the dead exhausted evening. Sergeant Garrow, kneeling in the brushwood below, cursed the whine of it with picturesque vehemence :

“ Why don't ye come and give us a haul, ye braying jackass,” he panted, “ instead of standing up there and boasting of your wind ? ”

The wail, in its passing, seemed to release the babel of mournful sounds it had for the moment subdued—sobbing of wounded horses, crying of wounded men, all flowing over the lip of the plateau above, and mingling confusedly with the wind in the leaves and the rush of a little river, vocal in the thickets deep below.

It was the evening following that day of dreadful battle which had cost us twenty thousand lives for the gain of a position not worth negotiating. Our troops could boast that they had won his camp from the enemy for the sake of a night's lodging ; and there they lay in it, their fires spotting the heath, their anguish testifying to their gain. The woods of Lanière and Taisnière under the hill were spilled full of dead men, and sentries almost as torpid watched the captured entrenchments.

Sergeant Garrow, staggering up the ravine-side with

a little smitten drummer-boy in his arms, had fought to within hail of the plateau of Malplaquet, when he found that his endurance had reached its limit. He put his burden gently down against a tree, and, half falling beside it, squatted haggardly, his chest labouring.

"Lad," he whispered presently, "I'm spent. I can carry thee no farther, lad!"

The boy was beyond answering. He lay huddled among the roots, his drum still slung at his side, his wounded chest exposed. It had been smashed by a round-shot, and his friend's rough surgery had been able to make nothing of the injury. But the doctors were all at work above.

The sergeant panted as if he would never get his heart again. He could only squat and gasp, praying for help. Presently there came up through the wood an officer, taking the steeps in his torn galligaskins as vigorously as if he had never fought all day. It was Captain Hugomort of the 4th King's Own, a soldier who had the reputation for possessing the toughest rind and the softest heart in all Her Majesty's army. His strength was as prodigious as his humanity, and his cheery ugliness as prepossessing as either. He stopped, leaning one hand against a tree, and breathed himself. The sergeant rubbed his fingers in the grass before saluting.

"Only a wounded drummer-boy, sir," he said apologetically, in answer to the unspoken query. "A bit of a thing; but beyond me."

The other nodded comprehendingly.

"What is he doing on this bloody hill-side of Flanders? He should have been in bed by rights, miles away in old England."

He stooped, and peered into the lad's white face ; then, as gently as a mother, lifted the little broken body in his arms, and carried it up to the plateau. It was cold September weather, and the camp-fires, after the false heat of the day, were welcome. Hugomort, motioning for room, laid the child down in the heather by one, and bent over him. The sergeant, wearily following, came and stood beside.

"Dying!" he said. "No need for a doctor, sir."

"Who is it?"

"Truelove, sir. A main spirited lad."

Again, far away over the heath, a bugle sounded—ineffably mournful—the Last Post. The drummer-boy's eyes opened ; his lips moved. Hugomort put out his hand, commanding silence.

"What is it, my child?"

"The drum—give it to daddy."

He could hardly hear the bodiless whisper. There was not a moment to lose. He stooped low, and spoke his faithful promise :

"Before God I will, manny—and with my own hands, if God wills."

A smile, like a faintest ripple, crossed the boy's face ; his shattered chest rose once, and fell ; his eyes rolled back, and Hugomort got to his feet.

"Unbuckle it, sergeant," he said, in a subdued voice. "He's gone."

## II

THE Hugomorts were a race of strong men, but this Captain Roger was an Anak among the Anakim. He was so huge and gristly, it was said, that bullets rebounded from him like peas, and bayonets pricked him no more than thorns. He fought through the

Marlborough wars, receiving many wounds of a kind, and, after the capture of Douay, accompanied his chief back to England, where, standing enrolled of the heroes, he had to suffer a siege on his own account, the missiles being feminine and multifarious. In the end, to the scandal of his name and of society, he made a ruinous *mésalliance*; but that offence, so far as it affects posterity, has long mellowed into the distinction conferred by dead and gone romance. Disgraces, once poignant, become in their remoteness the pride of race, and Mrs. Roger's portrait owns at this day a distinguished position to itself on the walls of the great gallery at Hugomort. It is in an oval frame, and exhibits, at half-length, the figure of a very fresh and blooming young woman, having the brown curls and humid artless eyes of the Kneller convention. She wears loosely on her head a little stone-blue hood surmounted by a straw *paysanne*, a trifle 'raked,' which sports a primrose-coloured ribbon; and her right hand presses a bunch of lavender to her bosom, as to the white and fragrant shrine of innocence. Her darker blue bodice is laced and square-cut, showing a frill of smock, and there is a suggestion of pretty wistfulness about the whole picture which is curiously winning.

Well, that is the portrait of Betty Truelove, the lavender-girl, who was married to the Captain, when—being only a younger son of the younger branch of Hugomort—he had little more than his commission to justify his folly. But of that he never repented, claiming, even, a sort of supernatural sanction for the happiness that came to him with the love of his beautiful wife. And this is how the thing happened.

After his return, the Captain, as may be supposed,

was too much occupied for a long time to think of discharging his commission to the dead drummer-boy's father. But he had by no means forgotten his promise ; and so it chanced that he started at length to vindicate it within a few days of the anniversary of the battle of Malplaquet. He had already ascertained, from the regimental rolls, the address of the home he sought ; and he now rode forth from London, with the drum in a bag at his saddle-bow, bound for the little village of Mitcham in Surrey where the Trueloves lived. He had dressed himself soberly, as befitted the sad occasion ; but indeed it wanted more than the dark blue riding-coat, with its deep cuffs and skirts turned back with buff, than the little plain hat and heavy military jackboots which he wore, more, even, than his strong companionable face, to mislead the world as to his natural distinction. He looked the fine gentleman, and was not to be mistaken for a lesser because he was riding with a drum at his knee to fulfil a big man's vow to a trumpery little soldier-thing.

His way took him by fields, and long rolls of common haunted by Egyptians, and again by fields, to the pleasant village of Tooting, five miles south-west of the City ; and thence a branch road to Reigate brought him at the end of a couple more miles to the place he sought.

It was a mellow and a glowing day, and Hugomort's soul felt one with the quiet sunshine. How, in the Low Countries, had not these characteristic English sights and sounds haunted him !—the deep pastures, the sweet-breathed cattle, the maidens with skins like apple-blossom and soft merry voices. He drank in the scene as if it were fresh warm milk ; he expanded his huge chest, and took enjoying draughts

of the air, which was as fragrant as if the very pillowy clouds had been stored in lavender. Lavender! The whole place smelt of it. He remembered now that Mitcham was the lavender-garden of England. Destiny could not have allured him to a sweeter spot.

At a reputable inn, *The Old House at Home*, standing about midway in the single long street, he dismounted, and, dismissing his horse to the ostler, entered, carrying his bag with the drum in it, to bespeak a meal and make an enquiry or so. He found the landlord properly communicative, and, over a good rib of beef, asked his simple question as to the habitat of the Truelove family. The answer sounded the first note of a complication. He looked up explanatory :

“ I speak of the drummer-boy's father.”

The landlord nodded his head. Every particular of village sayings and doings was docketed and pigeon-holed in that enormous knowledge-box. Even the way he held his hands clasped under his apron suggested his possession of secret evidences.

“ Of Tony the drummer-boy's father,” he repeated. “ It was Tony, the naughty lad, that broke his daddy's heart a'running away to the wars.”

Hugomort's eyes opened.

“ Dead ? ”

“ Strook dead,” said the landlord. “ He never rightly got over it.”

The Captain paused in his eating, and sat back.

“ Let us be clear on that point,” he said. “ The father Truelove is dead ? ”

“ Six months gone,” said the landlord.

“ Tony the drummer-boy's father ? ”

“ Tony the drummer-boy's father.”

“ He died of grief ? ”

“ Of grief, sir. A wild boy was Tony, but dear to his daddy’s heart. He run away and joined the red-coats. But, a month before they Marlborough wars begun, back he comes, with his fine laced frock and his drum, to say good-bye to his daddy and his sister Betty.”

“ Well ? ”

“ His daddy was away, sir, over to the great sheep-fair at Dorking, and he never saw him. But that Tony filled out his furlough as befitted him. How he kep’ us alive, to be sure—a young spark ! I call to mind,” said the landlord, looking out of the window, with a glassy contemplative eye, “ his thrashing young Jakes, twice his size, to within an inch of his reason, for breaking in his drumhead with an ash stick. Lord, what a boy ! ”

The Captain had resumed his eating.

“ He was killed at Malplaquet,” he said. “ And his father died of the news ? ”

“ It finished him,” said the landlord. “ He’d been ailing sore, ever since he’d learnt how the boy had come and gone without his seeing him.”

Hugomort cut another slice of beef.

“ Well,” he said ; “ is there anyone to represent the family at this day ? ”

The landlord gave a snort, sudden and alarming.

“ Charles Truelove, the eldest,” he said shortly.

The guest glanced up, surprised.

“ Why do you speak of him in that tone ? ”

“ A devil,” said the landlord briefly.

Hugomort asked for information. He learned, to his interest, the following facts : that the father Truelove, early left a widower, had been a prosperous wool-



stapler in the village, and that, of his three children, Charles, Betty and Tony, the eldest had turned out reprobate, a gambler and falsifier of books, while the youngest, a born adventurer, had slipped from the parental control to follow a recruiting sergeant. Now, it appeared that, the moment the woolstapler was dead, his banished first-born had turned up from nowhere, dropping from the sky like a vulture, to claim his share of the spoil (which was considerable), and that, to the astonishment of everybody, a will had been found, dated before Tony's birth, which, barring a trifling provision for the daughter, left everything, all the profits of which the testator might die possessed, to the black sheep. It was a stunning fact, but indisputable, and Charles, whom all had supposed disinherited by a later Will, was in possession of the property. Nor was that the worst.

"The daughter?" said Captain Hugomort.

"Was offered a provision by her brother," said the landlord indignantly, "on terms that would have disgraced a poplolly; but she preferred her independence with poverty, and none to blame her. She bides with a cook-maid, once her father's servant, in a cottage nigh to the common, and they eke out a hard living with selling of lavender brooms and sweet water to the travelling folk."

The Captain, a satisfied man, put down his knife and fork.

"I fancy she is the one for my money," he said.

"Anan?" quoth the landlord.

"Never mind," said Hugomort. "Bring me a pipe, and a glass of right Nantes."

He pondered over the story, lazily, while he smoked. It appeared to him that his commission, defeated in

the male direction, could not be better discharged than in the feminine. Betty should have the drum.

He was in a curiously impressionable mood, full of fancies sweet and warm. Perhaps the good beef and brandy had something to do with it ; but in addition, it seemed, the spirit of the lavender had got into his senses, and was throbbing there towards some emotional expression or demonstration. His brain was steeped, his heart muffled in lavender ; some fragrant personification of the flower appeared to hover on the threshold of his soul, like a little butterfly Psyche with trembling wings. And then suddenly he looked up, and there outside the window stood the very substance of his vision.

There was a great waggon halted there—one of those tilted huge-tyred farm-carts, drawn by six horses, with bell-hung yokes to the hames of their collars, which catered for the humbler class of travellers—and, pleading softly hither and thither among the alighted passengers, was a young girl, with a basket on her arm and a little phial of sweet water in her hand. She was dressed even as in the picture, and her face was a garden of pinks and roses, a parterre which seemed to astonish into sudden violence a big semi-military ruffian, in enormous boots, and with a sword hanging from a greasy shoulder-strap, who had alighted with the rest.

“Curse me pretty,” cried this fellow, “if I ever saw a kiss more sweetly invited !”

Hugomort did not hear the words ; but he understood their import through the little panic scuffle that followed, and hurried out just as the bully had got his arm about the child’s waist. He caught the

fellow by the neck, as a dog catches a rat, and flung him to the ground.

The swaggerer, half-stunned for the moment, rose the next, with a howl of fury, and felt for his sword-hilt. But the Captain, forestalling him, wrenched away the blade, and, snapping it across his knee, took the ruffian fairly by his scruff and breeches, and lifting him high, rolled him into the waggon, and bade him, on pain of being broke, dare again to lift his hand to an officer and gentleman. Then, leaving the man quite cowed and whimpering, he strode back through the obsequious admiring throng, and, lifting his hat, with the grand air, to the subject of his protection, says he :

“ You are upset, my child, and no wonder. Pray accept of Captain Hugomort's escort to your home.”

And she looked up into his strong ugly face, with her wet eyes blinking, and hung her pretty head and went with him.

### III

AND that was how Captain Hugomort found his wife ; but not all at once. At the sweet beginning of things he imposed himself as a lodger on the two women, Betty and cook-maid Hunston, with the professed view of showing them a new way to self-help. They lived in a little old cottage on the skirt of the common where the turn of the road took it, and spent all their working-time in expressing oil from *lavandula vera*, and distilling it, and treating it with spirits of wine until it sparkled into crystal perfume. Also they made brooms in season of the blossoming heads, and, a little later, sachets of the dried ones ; and out of these, when all was done, they squeezed a margin of profit, sufficient, with Betty's small provision, to keep them going.

This was, in fact, an idyll of lavender, having, for its central figure, it seemed, the very Chloris of sweet flowers. So she appeared to Hugomort, all fragrant, all soft, all endearing. He lived in an atmosphere of lavender and loving witchery. But she meant no arts, and was in truth at his mercy. It was a perilous time for her. This god who had come to her in her need!—she might have resisted his noble condescension; it was his Herculean strength that took her, and at once, by storm. She never thought for a moment of questioning his assumption of a right to protect her. Fortunately for her romance's happy consummation, nobility, drugged and drowned as it was in sweet sensuousness, kept its instinct for cleanness. Maybe, also, superstition helped to support it through a temptation or so.

Well, the Captain, as I say, took a lodging with the two women, and from that moment some curious things began to happen. He did not on the first day mention anything as to the object of his visit; but he hung the drum in its bag from a nail on the wall of the tiny room allotted him, and slept that night in lavender-scented sheets, and dreamed of lavender eyes, and of lavender-shadowed arms coming about him. And in the morning he woke up, and saw the drum on a chair at his bed-foot.

He was surprised, of course. He was as sure as sure could be that the thing had been ensconced in its bag when he went to bed. Someone must have entered his room unheard during the night, and removed it. But, why? It seemed a senseless act. He dismissed, however, for the moment the subject from his mind, and got up and dressed. His tiny quarters delighted him, seen in the fresh morning.

They looked over a little garden, lush with dewy flowers; and thence flowed the common in grassy billows. And even sweeter and more lovely than remembered dreams appeared his nymph, velvety from slumber. His soul began to throb to her with a sensation it had never yet experienced.

That day he entered himself into the confidence of both these girls—there was something in him that invited women's trust—and presently he went out and returned with the drum.

“What is there about this to invite curiosity?” he said, holding it forth with a smile.

They shook their heads guilelessly.

“Has either of you seen it before?”

They looked one at the other enquiringly, and answered, “No,” with obvious bewilderment. He was convinced, but puzzled. And then his eyes softened, and his voice, as he approached Betty Truelove.

“Nay, little mistress,” he said; “but your heart must rally itself to the pain it is my hard fate to inflict. You have seen it, indeed, for it was your brother's.”

She did not move; but her face flushed, and her throat swelled. Perhaps she had already half anticipated the truth. “Little Tony,” she whispered, and that was all.

In gentle vein, then, he told them of the battle, of its fortunes and its heroisms, among which he counted very kindly the little drummer-boy's uncomplaining death. “He thought only of his daddy,” he said, “and of his sorrowful pride in receiving this last token of his boy's patriotism and affection. Alas! it was not destined that I should vindicate my promise to the letter; but to thee, my child, as to love's trustee, do

I make over its reversion. Take the drum, and cherish it."

She received the soldierly toy from his hands, like one half blind ; and, as she so held it, he left her.

Later in the day, confident in his own true sympathy, he ventured to touch upon the subject again, and she opened her heart to him, like a flower to the sun.

"He was ever his father's love," she said. "He could dare with him as might none else. It was a bitter thing they might not meet when he came to say good-bye—bitterest for the elder. The child, like children, was thoughtless, and gloried, as well he might, in his importance. He was always a fighting nature, and resourceful as he was bold. Well I remember how, the day before he left, he had his drum broke in some quarrel ; but he found means to restore it, the wild clever child. He was a little thing to be killed."

Hugomort dared to enclose the young scented hand in his. She shook slightly, but submitted.

"I marvel," he said, like one pondering. "I marvel."

"At what ?" she whispered.

"How one," he said, "so infatuated as your father, could so have sinned against the darling of his heart ?"

She understood him, and hung her head.

"O ! not sinned," she pleaded. "He must have meant the best. Who could have foreseen the cruel stroke that bereft us in an hour ?"

"Himself," he answered sternly, and looked at her. "Tell me ; did you never hear talk of a later Will ?"

She shook her head ; and he passed to other subjects.

That night he went to bed in love. His passion was like a fever, and kept him awake and tossing. He

knew that he had discharged his task, and that no reason remained to him to stop. Yet the very thought of going was a torture. She slept, he knew, in the little room against his. O, that the frail wall would mist away and reveal her to his arms! Yet he cherished her sweet innocence too well to wish it his at any price but the lawful. And what had he to offer her there? Just his own ugly self and his commission, supplemented by a sorry small allowance. But he must have her somehow—he must, or die.

He hardly slept all night; not a thing stirred in the little quiet house; and when the morning stole into his hot eyes, there was the drum standing on the chair at his bed-foot.

He uttered an ejaculation; he leapt to the floor and stood staring. Then he went and touched the thing gingerly. Tony's drum—not a doubt about it.

Presently, while he was dressing as in a dream, he heard voices in the garden, mingled of angry and pleading. He looked from the window, and saw his soft goddess bending before the wrath of a lowering, dissipated-looking young man, who reviled and threatened her. His heart flamed; but, guessing the truth, he forbore for the moment to interfere. But by and by, making an opportunity, he questioned cook-maid Hunston as to the brother. He learned enough to fire his soul with indignation—too much and too offending to be set down here in detail. But, briefly, it seemed, the provision originally offered by young Truelove to his sister had been made conditional on her becoming the price of silence to a brother-blackleg, who knew enough of Master Charles's past to make his tenure of the present particularly insecure. So it was rumoured, and so believed; and

now, it appeared, the persecution was acquiring a fresh virulence through the entry of the Captain himself upon the scene, and the girl had been taunted and insulted on the score of her supposed protector. Indeed, Mrs. Hunston, with weeping eyes, begged him to spare her mistress by going.

“ I shall do nothing of the sort,” he said. “ I am going to marry your mistress myself.”

“ Dear heart alive ! ” cried the girl, and sat down plump upon a chair.

He saw Betty, who had been avoiding him hitherto, in the garden, and ran out to her. She was making a show of unconcern ; but her lids were swollen with weeping. Yet his first thought was a diversion.

“ What of the drum ? ” he said.

She glanced up at him, astonished, and so away.

“ Was it you brought it to my room last night ? ” he demanded.

She stared at him again, going as pale as a lily, then suddenly began to run. He followed and caught her.

“ It was there this morning,” he said.

“ I never put it.”

“ Didn't you ? ”

“ O ! how could you believe it of me ? ”

“ It must have been your friend, then ? ”

“ She slept with me. She never moved. I know.”

“ What ! were you awake too ? ”

“ Let me go. I cannot keep from crying.”

He lifted her in his arms, making nothing and everything of her in a breath, and carried her into the cottage parlour. And there he sat down with her, holding her close.

“ Child, isn't this sudden—this love of yours and mine ? ”



She wept, and whispered without coquetry :

“ You give me no chance.”

“ You shall be taken away from here, Betty, from the struggle and the shame.”

“ Alack ! ” she said ; “ the shame will go with me.”

“ You think it shame, then, to be my wife ? ”

She stopped her breath, listening, all at once.

“ That was settled,” he said, “ the moment I saw you in the street. You threw lavender in my eyes, child. It is all a pastoral of lavender, and I have gone into the sweetest garden in all the world for my flower-wife.

“ We have forgotten the drum,” he said presently.

“ It is a strange thing.”

She looked up at him, trembling.

“ You are sure you did not come and fetch it yourself ? ”

“ Betty, Mistress ! ”

“ In your sleep, I mean ? ”

“ Even in my sleep if I had come I could not have gone. Make it sure to-night, at least.”

“ If I could be sure it was not you.”

“ I have said what I have said. Put it in its bag and sleep safe.”

#### IV

INTO the warm ecstasy of Hugomort's dreams crept a strange sound, the far-distant roll of a drum. It seemed to come from a vast remoteness, to swell gradually into a low thunder, and so to fade out and cease. Now, sleeping as he was, it came to him suddenly that this very night was the anniversary of that

on which, a year before, he had climbed the hill of Malplaquet to find a little dying drummer-boy stretched among the trees. And the scene rose so vividly before him that in a moment he was there again, toiling up and up, making for the plateau. And even as he reached it, he saw that its heath, far and near, was all sown with blossoms of fire, thick and melancholy as corpse-candles. But not a solitary form of all the wounded and dying remained on the plateau. The place was one vast sepulchral emptiness; the souls of the fallen were fled; only the sound of the flames, flapping and reverberating, broke the desolate silences. But, little by little as he gazed, another sound crept into his brain, at first hardly to be distinguished from the fluttering of the fires—a throb, a mere pulse beating in the deep heart of stillness. It waxed and grew; its hurried tremor was resolved into a definite crepitation; it swelled out of the black distances nearer and louder—the roll of a drum. For the second time! Whence and with what purpose was it making towards him? The fires had died down. Standing in that blind oblivion, a fear, such as he had never yet felt, stole into his heart. The drum came on. Its voice by now was overmastering, hollow and resonant as if sounded in an empty room.

A room! With a shock he leapt to instant realisation of the truth. It *was* a room. He was lying in the cottage all the time, and the sound was in the house—in the adjoining chamber—outside his door, furious, triumphant, deafening! God in heaven! How could they be sleeping through that appalling racket? It seemed to shake the building; it increased in volume; yet he lay as if spellbound, unable to move limb or lid. It came on—it was upon him—with a final

thundering crash it passed into his room—and at once ceased in a flurry of soaring vibrations.

In that instant light seemed to flash into the sleeper's eyes, and, with a cry, he broke the spell that held him, and leapt into consciousness. Bright dawn was stealing through the window, and there on the chair stood the drum.

Wild-eyed, his skin still wet with the terror of his dream, Hugomort leapt from his bed, and approached the thing. Its batter-head appeared as if still palpitating from the blows rained upon it—it seemed to heave and writhe with pain. Merciful Christ! was *something* imprisoned within? In an access of horror, touched with fury, the waker seized his sword, and, severing the straps and cords, wrenched off at a blow the upper hoop, and let it drop to the floor. The drum was empty; but on the under side of the head revealed ran lines of legal script, footed by a signature. Hugomort dropped on his knees to read. *A Will!*

A Will, drawn, signed and attested in London, revoking all former Wills and codicils, and leaving everything of which the testator might die possessed, conjointly, and with sole reversion to the survivor should either child die unwedded, to Elizabeth and Anthony Truelove, the testator's beloved only daughter and his youngest son.

. . . . .

And so Tony the marplot made restitution. Fishing among his father's papers, he had found and appropriated the opportune parchment, to replace that burst by Master Jakes. He knew quite well what he had done; hence his dying concern to have the document returned.

The sequel is to be found in the Hugomort Memoirs. Mrs. Roger, it is related, made a handsomer provision for her scoundrel brother than he had ever designed for her ; but luckily he did not live long to enjoy it. As to the drum, I have told the story as the Captain authenticated it ; but the supernatural business was, of course, discredited by his relations, who attributed the discovery of the Will simply and solely to their kinsman's native shrewdness. In the marriage which followed, he was considered, as inevitably, to have disgraced himself ; but he outlived all that, and quadrupled the small fortune his wife brought him, and made otherwise a big name for himself. But, from first to last, he never, to his renown, addressed his wife on paper but as his sweetest fondest lavender-girl. He had her painted by Sir Godfrey in the dress she had worn outside *The Old House at Home*, and to this day a bunch of lavender figures in the family crest.

## JOHN FIELD'S RETURN

JOHN FIELD'S father had been a man of considerable business acumen, a forceful, wide-grasping figure, one of the most noticeable of his time in Capel Court. It will be admitted, I suppose, that luck is a foremost factor in the success of a stockbroker ; but why do some men habitually command it and others fail to ? Putting aside the Buddhistic theory of pre-existence, with its demised rewards and atonements, it would seem as if luck were no other than the definite sum in certain human entities of a multitude of inherited qualities. One is not lucky because one is virtuous, or has been virtuous in a former life, but because there happens to have come together in one a cluster of ancestral propensities, each congenial to each, and all together forming the character most apt to command luck.

It is not for me or for anyone to analyse these constituents ; yet somehow, I think, we are instinctively conscious of the lucky man when we meet him. Maybe it is that same instinctive recognition which partly makes for the lucky man's luck, inasmuch as we are naturally inclined to invest our trust in such a child of Fortune ; so that after all, perhaps, it is not so much his definite qualities that we are to search for the reason of his success as our own confident sympathies towards that in him which virtually ensures success.

Anyhow, John Field the elder *did* possess the indefinable something, and he prospered greatly on the strength of it. He was physically big and strong enough to have illustrated the Spanish proverb that 'Good luck gets on by elbowing'; but indeed, though a certain genial arrogance characterised his operations, his effective strength lay much more in an infinite foresight and grasp of opportunity.

He lived well and long and died without fuss, leaving his fortune and his business to his only son and partner, John Field the younger.

Now this John was a man of a very different constitution. With no congenital equipment like his father's, he was yet not so much a fool as a failure. While existing and surviving within that protective shadow, he had had no particular reason to suspect the fact; it was only when he succeeded to his inheritance that certain doubts in him grew gradually from misgiving to conviction.

He was already a man of forty-seven when left alone in the world, by temperament a sybarite and a confirmed bachelor. He was rather a retiring soul, home-loving, and inclined to the solitary discussion of costly wines and meats. Gastronomy, indeed, may have been called his favourite study, though he indulged it with the secrecy of a shy man. So long as his father lived he had accepted unquestioningly, or without apparent criticism, the provisions of an abounding table; when committed to his own resources, he began to experiment, tentatively and timidly at first, on the fruits of his private observation. He had unobtrusively accumulated in his time quite a little Epicurean library, from *The Cook's Oracle* of Dr. Kitchener to the *Please'm the Butcher*

of our own day, and this he now disinterred from its omnigenous lurking-holes, and allotted the dusk end of a shelf in the dining-room bookcase. With some nervous diffidence, also, he effected a reform in his menage, and substituted for the capable cook of his father's reign a veritable *chef de cuisine*—an artist trained in the dietetic studios, so to speak, of Voisin's and the *Bœuf à la Mode*. These temples of gastronomy, with others of their distinguished kind, had always been among John junior's most quietly favoured resorts during his rare trips abroad.

John Field had been well educated. Perhaps, after all, since some sort of mental employment is almost imposed upon one who has been, he simply developed, in cultivating the art of the palate, along his line of least resistance. Education makes us aspire, but it fails in teaching us to what. That, in order to the satisfaction of a vague intellectual hunger, we must find out for ourselves. Some resolve the problem through the eyes, and collect pictures; some through the ears, and study Wagner; others through the nose, and grow carnations. There is food for taste in each of these, and surely there is also food for taste in a taste for food. Indeed, epicurism may be said to command all tastes, since a good dinner enhances the æsthetic values of all art, whether musical, spectacular, or literary. In the respect of his hobby, therefore, John Field might have claimed distinction as a virtuoso. He had as fine a collection of cooking recipes as anyone in the kingdom.

In person, Mr. Field was a short meagre man, one of those starveling figures whose dimensions of capacity seem hopelessly inadequate to the strain put upon them, and who yet can absorb a Gargantuan repast

without a sign, moral or physical, of inconvenience. Such paradoxes, however, have their exact antitheses in the minute appetites that amass flesh; and both, I suppose, turn upon constitution. It takes more dressing to recruit a poor soil than a rich one. In any case, there is nothing more certain than that a glutton is not to be known by his waist.

Small side-whiskers, large blind-looking blue eyes, an habitual smile, more wistful in suggestion than humorous, a shrinking manner—such in John Field comprised the negative features of an uneventful personality. He could not look people in the face, he seemed nervous, timid, and as if always groping among problems whose solution eluded him. Yet, underneath all the shy commonplace and reserve there was something—some little blot on the man's soul, a rather appalling little thing it was—of whose existence no one even guessed.

John Field was forty-seven, I say, when he succeeded to his father's coffers and business; and, despite the fact that he had been for long years a partner in the firm, the latter statement is made advisedly. He had been a partner, indeed; but for all practical purposes no more than a sleeping one. Within the protecting shadow of that vast personality he had played at speculation, rather, in truth, as children used to play at the game with cards and counters. But, during the whole period of the association, he had never once originated, or dreamed of originating, or been invited to originate a move of his own. He had been just the passive instrument in a despotic hand.

He had been hardly aware, even, of his subservience. Those who are bred in the shadow of power assume,



naturally, something of its hue. It was only when stripped of his borrowed covering that he realised his own anæmic nakedness. That he himself, and no other, was John Field and Son came upon him with something the shock of a sleep-walker's sudden awakening to a consciousness of his own lost isolation.

A friend once told me of an experience he had had. It was on the roof of a crawling omnibus, and the night was dense with fog. Suddenly there was a swerve, a crash, a desperate reining-in. The driver, utterly bemused, had taken the footpath for the road, and had pulled up only timely against a wall of shadowy brick. My friend, thinking it his best policy to alight, descended, and stood a moment to consider his way in the obscurity. During that moment, the driver, recovering his course, drove off, leaving my friend stranded at what, it occurred to him, was a curious elevation. And then he discovered the reason. He was standing on the parapet of a bridge which crossed some railway at a giddy height. A single step backwards, and he had gone crashing into eternity.

Now something of the shock and horror of that experience was John Field's, when the jog of his life's easy routine was exchanged in a moment for a consciousness of terrific poisoning on the verge of an unguessed-at abyss. He got off the parapet, so to speak; but his wits from that hour were never perhaps wholly at his command. A constitutional inability in him to think things out increased, until, from dread of itself, it became quite morbid in its character. This, however, was only the case as regarded his official responsibilities. Privately, he remained quite rational in the pursuit of his hobby.

Unfortunately the two could not be entirely dis-

sociated, since the official had to supply the substance of the domestic. The firm of John Field and Son had never identified itself with the gilt-edged method of business. It took huge risks and built on huge profits. Wars, loans, taxes, monetary abundance or monetary scarcity, the fluctuations occurring in all human affairs from the fall of a ministry to the rise of a Mahdi—where safer firms cautiously exploited the legitimate accidents of such, Fields plunged and won through, as through the waters of Pactolus, breathless but dripping with gold. It was just a question of the Head's genius—or of his constitutional luck. He had an inspired way with him which carried daring to a triumphant finish. The thing was personal and not transmissible ; that was its fatal flaw. Its genius once departed, the House remained committed to a policy of brilliancy which it had no exceptional light left to supply ; and in consequence it fell, and swiftly, upon dark times. By quick and quicker process the luck that had habitually characterised its ventures under the old regime came to be not so much diluted, or even ended, as reversed. The fortunes of Fields began steadily to decline, to roll down—presently to the accompaniment of a heavy crash or two. And, suddenly, John Field the younger found himself staring aghast at the prospect of ruin. He only, perhaps, began fully to realise his own inadequacy when he realised that amazing fact. He had had so little need hitherto to think for himself that he had failed utterly to grasp his incapacity for effective thought of any sort.

One morning he sat at his office table, his right hand supporting his chin, his left toying with a pen, his round eyes vaguely contemplating a vision of the

things he ought to have done to have reversed the disastrous order of a late settlement. Already he saw himself in imagination "posted" in the great hall, a "lame duck." And then his mind wandered away to a recipe he had just secured for the *Docce Piccante* of Florence—a peculiarly delectable dish which he had long coveted. Had he any right at last to indulge himself in these ruinous extravagances? The thought was prostration. He had no more power to forgo his hobby than a drunkard his whisky, a millionaire his free libraries, a magistrate his joke, though he had to pawn his hat to achieve his desire. As he sat, he spoke wistfully, without raising his eyes, to Harding, his chief clerk, who stood near by silently regarding him.

"This is very bad, Harding. Everything seems to go wrong with us since my father's death. And yet the character of the business remains unaltered."

The clerk uttered a sound that might have signified protest or assent. In point of fact he could have qualified the statement by a reminder that, though the business remained the same, the Head was different. A fleeting impulse, also, to cite an instance, from *Æsop's Fables*, of the injury that might be caused to certain members through a disagreement with their principal, he abandoned as too suggestively personal. And yet it would have been a telling illustration. They, the establishment to wit, were being threatened with a loss of livelihood through the gastronomic obsessions of this—well, one of the many names that Prince Hal called Falstaff.

Harding, a man of mature age and solid conservative principles, had risen to his position more through worth than brilliancy. John Field senior had not

desired brilliancy in his employés ; he had provided that in himself ; it was the solid reliable qualities he had sought. This chief clerk was, as regarded speculative business, almost as incompetent as his present master himself to take the initiative—only with a difference. He could not advise where to venture ; but he could tell where not to. That, however, was only a negative instinct, and little in request. While being as much in the confidence of John Field as was possible with so shy a man, he neither imposed nor was asked his opinion on momentous matters. But he saw, had for long seen, how things were going, and, in anticipation of the end, he was putting out cautious feelers towards problematic berths. He did this, to give him his just dues, with no unkind motive. He had a liking for his thewless employer—even a respect, though tempered with the business man's contempt for a visionary ; but he felt no conscious capacity in himself for setting the wrong right, and he had the interests of a growing family to consult. There was never any invitation to human sympathy, moreover, on the part of this dull reserve. It was impossible to fathom it, whether for depth or shallowness.

“ Does it not ? ” continued John Field, “ or does anything strike you as different ? ”

“ Only the driving force behind the machinery, sir,” said Harding impulsively. The words were out before he could temper them.

John Field glanced up and down—an instant of startled intelligence ; then resumed, more busily than ever, that idle scratching with his pen.

“ O ! ” he murmured ; “ yes. I think I know what you mean. And yet the rules of heredity, Harding. It ought to be in me somewhere.”

The clerk was silent, and the restless fingers scratched on, 'blind tooling' with an inkless pen on blotting-paper, the empty hieroglyphics of an expressionless soul. Presently he began to murmur again, as if in self-communion :

"Perhaps I have been trying—all this time—to keep something from myself—the fact that others guessed the secret which I trusted to luck to hold inviolate. But where is luck—what has become of it?—that is just the question. I know it at home—sometimes—but not here. Not mental incompetency, but mental limitations—yes, that is it, mental limitations. And why?" His head bowed lower, as if in conscious incoherence, and his lips whispered on: "I don't understand; yet I foresee; I follow; but always on the threshold the footsteps die away. You don't guess what it is to hunt eternal chimeras, and then to find something tangible, gross, on which one's intellect can fasten tooth and nail—a certainty—yes, literally, tooth and nail."

He ceased, and not knowing where else to look, the clerk's eyes sought the floor. He was taken completely by surprise in the shock of this unwonted, this unexpected self-revelation. There was something wrong here, he thought; some congenital aberration hitherto unsuspected by him, and which might account for much.

And, as he stood, he heard a sudden violent sound, and started to the vision of his employer transformed, translated—a little suffering agitated figure, sprung upon its feet and apostrophising Destiny in a torrent of emotion :

"Why is it not in me, my father's genius? But I say it is, it is, only plugged in—stifled behind some

monstrous obstruction. I feel it struggling for vent—bursting to rend the darkness ; only the barrier is too dense. If I could once force it, once tear a way, my mind would be free to follow its own clues to ends as triumphant as his. They are there, those clues—I see them, touch them—and they lead me always, always up to the impenetrable wall and there stop. Why will it refuse to be pierced—why will it not let me through to the things I follow—Harding, why will it not ? It keeps my intellect a prisoner, and doomed eternally to feed on the husks it can gather for its hunger ? Harding ! ”

His vacant eyes were alight, his lean chest heaved, his voice was broken with emotion. It was like the bursting of some immured mental reservoir, never suspected until overflowing. Greatly shocked and concerned, the chief clerk took a step towards him.

“ There, Mr. Field, sir,” he said. “ Come, come. You are overwrought ; you imagine things ; we shall see our way to an improvement by and by. We have a great deal of prestige to build upon, and we will be more circumspect in the future. Try to command yourself, sir.”

His words, a long habit of self-obliteration, wrought their effect upon the sufferer. Gradually his voluble distress subsided, and he came to speak in a calmer tone.

“ Yes, yes, Harding. I think I am unduly upset, perhaps. Only I understand what no one else does. It is here, all the time ” (he put a hand to his forehead) ; “ but something intervenes and closes the outlet. If I could only break a way through ; if I could only gather how to do it——”

The other interrupted him : “ What you want,

sir, is a complete rest for your brain. It is bad for that to force conclusions. Let it vegetate, and they will come of themselves. The green shoot, you know, if watered and not disturbed, will make its way up through the hardest ground."

"That is very true, Harding—very comfortingly put. What shall I do?"

"If you take my advice, sir, you will cut the office for a week or two. We can manage without you. Go away to some quiet restorative place, and leave no address with anyone. No correspondence, no worry of any sort."

"I think I will do as you say. If I do not turn up to-morrow, you will understand I have taken your advice. God bless you, Harding."

The clerk, leaving the room, shut himself into his own, sat down, and shook his head. "Mad," he thought. "Not totally unexpected, either; but its suddenness took me off my feet. I must accept this breathing-space to look round me. I'm sorry; but, whatever the block in his brain, it's likely to stick there. We shall go from bad to worse. If I had dared to let him know, there's another crash imminent—those B Annuities—smoke and ashes. He'll be best away from it all." He hummed awhile, softly tapping his fingers on the table as he pondered. "What can be the psychologic explanation? That starting on a clue—to nothing; and yet the feeling of a goal? I wonder if it's true; I wonder if he really inherits so much of his father as to get on the track of great things that he's unable to develop? And then his mental refuge—if I read him right—the *intellectual* occupation of the table, good Lord! To 'epicurise' oneself into oblivion of one's abortive aspirations! It seems an

odd way ; but every man knows his own resources best, I suppose."

It will be observed that, for all his retiring disposition, John Field had not succeeded in hiding his foible from the world. But Harding was really distressed and perplexed. He foresaw fresh disaster, without having a conception of any means possible to avert it ; and he prayed only that his employer, did he decide to take his advice and a holiday, would read of his loss in the papers, and so spare him, Harding, the pain of having to announce it to him.

Well, at least, it appeared, John Field *had* adopted his recommendation and withdrawn into some pastoral obscurity ; for, for the next week, his place at the office did not know him, nor did he vouchsafe any message or communication whatsoever to give a clue to his whereabouts. And then came the expected *débâcle*. A mortgage bank, largely propped by speculative financiers, stopped payment, and the house of Field was shaken to its foundations.

Harding steered through the mad waters as well as he was able, but he knew it was only a temporary escape, and that they must end on the rocks. He felt exhausted, hopeless, and he longed for some strong capable hand to take the tiller and the responsibility out of his own. On the morning of the ninth day of his chief's absence, on going into the latter's room for some papers, he saw John Field sitting in his accustomed chair.

To say that he was startled would express indifferently the shock that this unexpected apparition gave him. He had heard nothing of his employer's arrival ; had neither expected him nor been warned by him of his intended return. And then the thought



of the inevitable discussion between them made his heart turn suddenly sick.

"God bless me, sir!" he exclaimed, falling back a step. "This *is* a surprise—they never told me. Are you better—recovered?"

"Yes—well."

There was a tone in the voice which answered that Harding had never heard before. It suggested somehow the clearer cleaner enunciation which an operation for adenoids might have induced. And then suddenly John Field turned round in his chair, with a gesture as quick and peremptory as it was unusual. He looked pale; but the habitual vagueness of his blue eyes was replaced by an odd alertness, which seemed positively to scintillate as if in the glow of some inner fire.

"Shut the door," he said; "shut the door, and lock it."

Harding obeyed mechanically. He felt himself somehow on the threshold of a stupendous revelation.

"Something has happened," said John Field, as the chief clerk turned to face him again. "I am through, Harding—I am through with it."

"Through, sir?"

"The obstruction—you know what—it is gone."

"Gone? But how——"

"It was organic, as I always supposed it to be. Never mind the process—more successful than I ever dared to hope. The question now is one of time. We must hurry, hurry, Harding."

"Demented, at last and completely," thought the clerk. "I understand." Then he pressed out with his hand the trembling of his lips. "Mr. Field," he said, "I must say it, I am afraid. No hurry will ever

overtake what is gone beyond redemption. Have you not heard ? ”

“ Yes, of course, I saw it in the papers. But you talk foolishly when you speak of ‘ beyond redemption.’ Nature, Harding, abhors a vacuum. We cannot lose but she compensates—often with disproportionate riches. Cut out the killing canker, and earn life of her tenfold renewed. I have been with her and studied her methods. Let the bank go with the rest. They were the buds sacrificed to divert all growth into the perfect blossom. I have a hundred schemes, understood at last, to bring us gold. Only the time is short—or may be. We must hurry if we want to reap the harvest. There are plans to formulate—arrears of long months to make up. Come here to me.”

All amazed, yet conscious of some compelling force, or atmosphere, the chief clerk obeyed. He still believed his master mad, yet he had no power to resist his will. As he approached, John Field, already bent over his desk, looked up.

“ They never told you,” he said, “ that I had returned. I wished to enter unobserved. I desire the knowledge of my presence to be withheld from all but yourself. These enterprises I have in view—they are vast and absorbing, and they need the utmost concentration of my mind upon them. I appoint you my instrument and mouthpiece in them all. Say nothing of my initiative ; say nothing of my return ; but be secret and trustworthy. When you seek me I shall be here—locked in and alone. Wait upon me quietly, and never concern yourself as to my coming and going. Ruin will ensue upon any failure of yours to respect my confidence. Be faithful, and golden days are in store for us all.”

Harding, scarcely able to articulate, murmured his assent to the compact. His brain felt giddy. Surely, if here was a confirmation of his suspicion, madness expressed itself in a lucidity, a force of decision, which had never characterised the normal being. Moreover, being but human, that confident promise of wealth rang in his head like a golden clarion. How could he believe it other than a sane promise? So are we constituted. In the light of potential gain, all extravagance becomes reason to us. Like one in a dream, he bent above the sitting figure.

An hour later he issued from the room, closed the door softly, gave a little stagger, and made crookedly on tiptoe for his own sanctum, into which he shut and locked himself. He then deposited a sheaf of papers he carried upon his desk, and sank giddily into a chair.

“Who could have believed it possible?”—so his thoughts careered. “It has happened—it has actually happened—and here is the genius of the old man returned upon the house. What did it: what brought it about—the bursting of some mental ligature; some internal explosion, like the purging of a foul tobacco-pipe with fusees; or some operation was it? Will he ever tell me; shall I ever know? Only it has come to pass—that is the astounding thing. These schemes”—he put a hand, fondly, tremulously, upon the papers—“there is wealth in every one of them—foresight, certain calculation, brilliancy. They restore the odour of the past; they are the John Field and Son of my first knowledge.”

Presently he rose and went about his business. For a week he went about it, and always like a man in a dream. In the markets, while the schemes ma-

tured, he trod, confident and victorious, the pavements of a golden past ; back in the office he was like one entering the portals of some hushed terrific temple. It felt so to him, he could not have explained why. There seemed always a tremendous atmosphere brooding within the familiar place—an atmosphere which transformed all things into unreality, and weighed upon the spirits of the most flippant clerks. And during the whole time John Field remained shut up in his room, accessible to him alone, going and coming—if, indeed, he ever went—unguessed at and unobserved, directing operations, and planning out the harvest for his reaping.

One day—it was the day of all others to witness the first garnering of the ripened crop—Harding, coming out from a whispered consultation with his chief, and hearing the door, as usual, locked softly behind him, was aware, as he stood with his fingers yet on the handle, of a clerk advancing hastily towards him down the corridor with a newspaper in his hand. There was a look of terror in the boy's eyes, a scared pallor on his face that arrested the other instantly.

“What is it, Jessel?” he said, as the intruder came near. “Good God! why do you look like that?”

“Read, Mr. Harding. See, there, sir.”

He held out the paper, an early evening edition ; his voice shook ; he cleared his throat nervously. Harding, conscious of a vague panic at his heart, took the paper from his hand, glanced at the heading signified, and stood suddenly rigid.

“Half-way down the last column, sir,” whispered the boy ; and Harding, clinching himself to the effort, read :

“ *Tragic end of a well-known stockbroker.* Early this morning a gamekeeper, while making his round of Lord Pamplin's Stanbury estate, discovered the body of a well-dressed man lying in a copse within a few hundred yards of the main road. A revolver was grasped in the deceased's right hand, and every evidence pointed to its being a case of suicide. The body had evidently lain where it was found a considerable time, probably a week or longer. At present it remains unidentified.

“ *Later :* The body has been identified, from papers discovered upon it, as that of a Mr. John Field, a well-known stockbroker in the City. Mr. Field had latterly been staying at the *Clayton Arms* in Stanbury, from which hostelry he disappeared, without giving notice, some eight or nine days ago. It is believed that financial difficulties were responsible for the unfortunate gentleman's rash act, to which he was driven on the receipt of newspaper information as to the failure of certain gigantic operations on the Stock Exchange. Mr. Field is supposed to have gone straight from the inn to the spot where the corpse was discovered, and there to have shot himself through the head. Jewellery and money were found intact upon the body, which, according to medical testimony, must have lain undisturbed where it had fallen for at least a week. The inquest is fixed for to-morrow.”

The paper rustled and fell from Harding's hand.

“ That's non,” he said thickly ; “ lookle, you Jes—loo——” like a man with incipient lockjaw. And then, clutching first at his throat, he threw himself on the door with a thin scream.

“ Mr. Harding,” cried the boy aghast. “ What are you doing ? It's fastened. He can't be in there.”

Harding snarled round.

“Did I say he was, you fool? What—have you felt it too? Are you suggesting? What if I heard something. I must get in here—Jessel, I must. Come and put your shoulder to it.”

Scared, the youngster obeyed. But first he turned the handle.

“Why, it’s not locked!” he gasped, and opened the door.

Harding staggered, and came erect. He looked round the room. His face was like chalk, his eyes like grey flints in it.

“No, it’s empty,” he said, in a crowing whisper. “Of course it is. It was jus’ my fancy—jus’—my fance——”

## THE CORNER HOUSE

SOME three years ago two men, both preoccupied in thought, went by one another on Vauxhall Bridge. The next instant, the one making for the Surrey side halted on a subconscious recognition, wheeled about, and, returning hurriedly on his tracks, accosted the back of the retreating figure :

“ Is that you, Gethin ? ”

The other started, turned round, and uttered a pleased exclamation :

“ O, Acheson ! I didn't see you. What good luck ! ”

“ Eh ? O, yes, of course ! ”

“ I'm on my way to look for lodgings. You can come and advise me. ”

The first speaker hesitated, glanced at his watch, and raised a lean anxious face, the lenses of whose spectacles, catching the just kindled lamplight at an angle, looked suddenly like dead, upturned eyes.

It was a dripping, sodden November evening. Rain fell drearily ; every buttress and lamp-post had its fibrous reflection underfoot, as if the pavement had grown transparent, revealing the deep roots of the things embedded in it. The heavy air floated with umbrellas, like a last swarming of antediluvian bats ; labouring omnibuses were packed to suffocation ; to anyone looking over the parapet, the barges slowly forging through the arches below appeared like sub-

marines crawling dim and phantom-like in abysmal waters. A dull depressing squalor characterised everything—the faces of passers-by, the sordid brick of the houses, the streaming windows of the cheap shop-fronts. In the dropping mist of the rain one could see myriads of blacks being slowly precipitated to the pavement. It seemed impossible that a feeling of solidity could ever be restored to the texture of things.

Acheson looked at his watch again before he returned it to his pocket.

“Why, the fact is,” he said, “I—I was going home to tea.”

He was a small spare man, more callow than clean-shaved, with a sensitive neurotic face and a hungry expression. He looked older than his friend, though, as a matter of fact, the two were much of an age, young men of twenty-five or thereabouts. He was as boneless as the other was compact and strong-ribbed. Friendship could not have offered a greater physical contrast. The handbag which Gethin carried with ease would have weighed Acheson to the earth. Holding that in one hand, and his umbrella in the other, the former had nothing but a foot to kick out in invitation.

“Come and have tea with me?” he said. “You won’t abandon an ancient chum, unassisted, to these wildernesses?”

A vision of a cosy fireside in the Wandsworth Road, of a singing kettle, and a dish of hot poached eggs, to be discussed over a volume of Myers’s *Human Personality*, passed wistfully for one moment before Acheson’s consciousness. He yielded it, the next, with a sigh. Curiosity, after all, was a dominant factor in his being; and he wanted to hear what had brought



Gethin so unexpectedly from his native Woking to seek lodgings in this unattractive quarter of London. He succumbed, with a feeble grace.

“O, certainly!” he said. “Where shall we go?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“Where?” he said. “I am a stranger—a country cousin. I leave myself in your hands.”

Crossing to the Middlesex shore, and chatting somewhat spasmodically under the general weight of things, they soon found a humble caravanserai, which was at least good enough to offer them warmth, dryness, and a sufficiency of creature comfort. But they were both men of small means, and accustomed to accept the amenities of existence as they could afford them.

It had been in the mind of each, perhaps, to postpone all intimate discussion until they were thus snugly ensconced and isolated; but, now that the moment was come, a mutual consciousness of something difficult and rather barren in the situation stepped between. They talked, after the first brief exchange of enthusiasms, in that rather forced galvanic way which often characterises the re-meetings of once intimate friends, whose interests and sympathies have long ceased to be one. Goodwill could not quite restore a confidence which had been largely due to circumstance and environment; nor could the fire of an ancient devotion penetrate through this distance of time with more than a very qualified warmth. As they secretly recognised the shadow, Gethin and Acheson yielded themselves a little sarcastically to its chill.

They had once been fellow-draughtsmen in a local architect's office, and Acheson had been the first to break away. That was some five years since, when a measure of interest, together with his own personal

tastes and qualifications, had procured him the post of free-librarian in an important London centre. That was the best he had coveted, or ever intended to covet. He had no ambitions, but a vast psychologic curiosity, and the post assured him a perpetual sufficiency of the means to feed his intellect, and keep his body going. Years of study had not tended, perhaps, to qualify him for the continued friendship of the athletic, somewhat grim young giant by his side. He was painfully conscious of the fact as he glanced furtively from time to time at Gethin's face, and calculated the effect upon it should he suddenly rise and declare the necessity of his getting on homewards.

"You haven't told me yet," he said presently, in his high, rather strained voice, "what has brought you from home, looking for lodgings in this particular part of London?"

"Why not this as well as any other, Acheson?"

"O, well, if you put it that way, really I don't know."

Gethin laughed.

"As far as I know my London geography, it's handy for me."

"O!" said Acheson. "Why is it?"

Gethin laughed again annoyingly. He was rather inclined to that form of humour which sees fun in perfectly natural ignorances.

"Isn't Victoria Street in this neighbourhood?" he said.

"Yes; but——"

"And isn't Wrexham's in Victoria Street? That's to be my office for the future—I *hope*."

"Architects?"

"Yes, architects."

"You've left Pettigrews, then?"

"Yes, I've left them. What was there to keep me, when a better berth offered? I've had to wait longer for one than you."

"Well, I can only hope it's as satisfactory, now it's come."

"O, as to that, old man, *my* ambitions always widen with my prospects! But I'm only on probation for the moment. It's an opportunity, and—well, I've got to find lodgings for a month."

"If you want an inexpensive quarter——"

"I do."

"Then this is certainly as good as any."

"So I supposed. But there was just one other reason—ridiculous, but enough to influence me."

"What was that?"

Gethin leaned over the table, his arms crossed, a curious smile on his face.

"Acheson," said he, "do you still make a hobby of all that supernatural business?"

"I don't know what you mean by a hobby. I assume the necessary interest of the subject to any intelligent mind."

"I see. You are still a corresponding member of the Psychological Research Society?"

"O, yes!"

"Well, do you know you gave me quite a turn, meeting me on the bridge like that."

"Did I? Why?"

"Because, as it happens, a friend and neighbour was the last person who met my father before he disappeared for ever—and it was on Vauxhall Bridge."

Acheson nodded surprisedly, but he was patently not much impressed by the coincidence.

“ O, I don't say there's anything in it,” said Gethin ; “ only it struck me. It was the memory of that first meeting, in point of fact, which led me, absurdly enough, perhaps, to seek this way round to my improved fortunes. *He* was going to look for work, too. I dare say you remember something of the story.”

“ Something. Tell it me again.”

“ There's not much to tell. It's fifteen years ago, and I was a boy at the time—a boy at school. We had been in fair circumstances, and then it all stopped suddenly. Canstons, the big Army contractors, smashed up, and my father was in it, and his savings were in it. We were near ruined, in fact, and I don't think my mother took it very well. Between ourselves, there were scenes at home. He left that, at last, on the chance or offer of work in London—went off one day after tiffin, and never turned up again. From that moment to this we have never set eyes on him, or gathered by so much as a word a clue to his whereabouts. He just disappeared from mortal ken.”

He paused, and there followed a short silence.

“ They vanish sometimes,” said Acheson presently. “ There have been authentic cases.”

“ Relations came forward,” continued Gethin, as if he had not heard him ; “ I had to put my young shoulder to the wheel, and we scraped along. But it was funny.”

“ Was he—have you any reason——” began the librarian ; but the other took him up.

“ The last man in the world to commit suicide—a cheery soul, like his son ; indomitable, I might call him, without conceit. Besides, the neighbour who saw him, who met him on that bridge, testified to his

buoyant, hopeful mood. He was on his way then, like myself, to look for lodgings. Acheson"—he bent forward very earnestly, and touched his friend on the arm—"it was a wet November evening, like this."

He waited for the inevitable comment, a little surprised that his friend did not immediately respond, as expected. Acheson chewed the offered coincidence again, reflective; and his verdict once more was that it was untenable.

"If my studies teach me anything," he said, "it is the folly of jumping in such matters to hasty conclusions. A tempered scepticism is the first equipment of your rational psychist. Coming from Woking, if you don't go on to Waterloo, you must get out at Vauxhall. In electing deliberately to do so, you made your own coincidence."

"But the date and the weather, man?"

"Both suggested that course to you. Now, if some accident had turned you out at——"

"And the meeting on the bridge?"

"No analogy whatever. You have asked me to help you to find lodgings, you see; and, if you are serious——"

"You bet I am. I don't want to vanish, like the baseless fabric of a what-d'ye-call-it."

"You see? localised from the outset. No; depend upon it, Gethin—you'll forgive my saying it—there was some perfectly human and natural explanation of your father's conduct."

"O, of course, you mean some discreditable attachment. I shouldn't have believed it of him, but I confess that that's the view my mother took."

"H'm, I take it for granted that every enquiry——"

"Yes, yes. O, yes; of course!"

He answered a little impatiently, and sat frowning, and drumming his fingers on the table.

“ Well, if you are ready,” he said suddenly, looking up.

“ Quite ready,” said Acheson, with a sigh of relief, and got to his feet.

Gethin paid the reckoning, lifted his bag thoughtfully, and they passed out into the street together. Swift darkness had descended while they loitered, and the rain was falling more hopelessly than ever. There was no wind, but the air was opaque with a very fog of water, through which the flare of the shops and the jets of the lamps burned with a dull miasmatic glow, which, in the light of passing vehicles, seemed to be constantly throwing off from itself a multitude of little travelling globes, which sped on like fen-candles into the murk, and were one by one extinguished. The houses looked gigantically tall and unreal; there was little human in suggestion about the shapes of the few foot-passengers, as they hurried past them, muffled, grey and dripping, into their dreary selves. Gethin gave a gasp of disgust.

“ Look here,” he said; “ I’m lost. I hold by you to convoy me into some harbour of refuge.”

Acheson considered a moment.

“ There are plenty enough of every sort,” he said, “ both right and left. It’s a heterogeneous quarter. Mansions rub shoulders with dosshouses hereabouts. But we must strike a line and take our chance. Your first point is a lodging for the night. If it doesn’t suit, you can look again to-morrow. Supposing we turn down here for an experiment. It’s sure, by its looks, to reveal a harvest of lodging-cards as thick as blackberries. Shall we go ? ”

“ O, anywhere ! ” said Gethin, in a depressed voice.

They turned into a blank little street, making in the Horseferry Road direction. Quiet and dismality swallowed them almost on the instant. The sound of traffic died down behind them ; their own footsteps spoke louder ; the rain and the fog claimed them to complete isolation. Not a creature seemed to be abroad here ; and the squalid ranks of houses they passed were, for the most part, lightless and lifeless in suggestion. They plodded along, painstakingly scrutinising the fronts. The crop of cards, if it had ever existed, was gathered or rotted away. Not a casual invitation greeted their groping eyes ; but, one by one, as they advanced, the recurrent lamps brightened to a nucleus, made dismally emphatic the meanness of their surroundings, and drowsed and dulled again as they fell behind. They turned off at an inviting angle, and again turned, and yet once more.

“ Where are we ? ” said Gethin suddenly.

His companion stopped.

“ Why, that’s the funny part of it,” he said, in a most unhumorous voice.

“ You don’t know ? ”

“ The rain and this obscurity are so very confusing,” pleaded Acheson. “ If we could only find a policeman, now——”

They stood, as he spoke, at the corner opening of a frowsy, melancholy little square, with a patch of degraded garden in its midst—at least, so it looked. Opposite them was the blank side-wall of a house—the first, it seemed, of a terrace. A street-lamp diffused its melancholy halo at the kerb of the pavement hard by.

“ Perhaps the name’s written up there,” said Gethin. “ I’ll go and look.”

He crossed the splashy road, and went round to the front of the house.

“ Here we are,” he called across to Acheson. “ Come over. A chance, anyway.”

Acheson followed and stood beside him.

“ Where ? ” he said.

The light from the lamp fell full upon the corner house. It was one of a four-square terrace, as they had supposed. A shallow flight of steps led up to its door ; the sill of its ground-floor window stood about level with the tops of the area-railings in front.

“ ‘ Lodgings for a single gentleman,’ ” said Gethin, “ and a reassuring light behind the blind. It doesn’t look too pretentious. Shall I try ? ”

“ Lodgings ! ” said Acheson stupidly. “ There ? ”

“ Can’t you see it ? ” answered Gethin impatiently. “ Shall I try, I say ? ”

“ O, there’s no harm in trying,” said Acheson. His voice sounded quite strange to himself.

With something of a flounce, Gethin ran up the steps. As he did so, Acheson backed to the lamp-post, and put an arm involuntarily about it. Standing thus, the falling curtain of light dazzled his eyes, and blinded them for the moment to what followed. He was aroused by hearing his friend speak close beside him.

“ It’s all right. She can take me in provisionally, anyhow. I’m about done, and I shall chance it. What’s the matter with you ? Has the tea got into your head ? ”

Acheson came away from his support, reeling a little.

“ No, no,” he said. “ I’m glad—I won’t detain you.” And he fairly bolted away into the darkness.



Gethin looked after him a moment ; then shrugged his shoulders, and turned to his new quarters. " Poor old Peter," he muttered. " What's come to him ? I don't believe he's quite all there."

His landlady was waiting for him at the door. She was a little lean woman, haggard to deathliness. The wolf of hunger, it was evident, had gnawed her ribs and nozzled in the blue places of her eyes. She was all spoiled and drawn in appearance, and her voice was as lifeless as her face. She motioned him into the hall, coughing in a small distant way.

He entered, with a cheery stamp. Half-perished oilcloth was on the floor, and a cheap paraffin-lamp burned sickly on the wall.

" A beastly night," he said. " Which way, Mrs. Quennel ? "

She took the lamp from the wall, and, holding it high, revealed the foot of a squalid stairway going up into darkness.

" On the first floor, Mr. Gethin," she said, holding her other hand before her mouth to cough.

He followed her up, commanding his nerves with an effort. Fatality had evidently appropriated to him a refuge in the last stage of decline. But it was a refuge, and cheap.

He was satisfied so far. The room was poor, and its appointments refined to attenuation. But the linen on the little iron bedstead was fresh, and the small grained washing-stand scrubbed to barrenness. There were a cane-bottomed chair or two, and some dingy lithographs on the walls.

" A sittin'-room ? " said the landlady weakly, behind her hand.

" We'll discuss that to-morrow," answered Gethin.

“ Meals ? ”

“ Not now,” said the lodger. “ I’m going to turn in and go to sleep, early as it is. I’ve had a tiring day.”

She went to strike a light and kindle a candle on the little dressing-table. Her movements were as bodiless as her voice. Gethin, watching her blankly, was urged to ask a question :

“ Any other lodgers ? ”

She turned, with the lamp again in her hand. Her fragment of a face appeared, in its glow, to jerk and waver in the oddest way.

“ One, Mr. Gethin,” she said. “ But he keeps to his room when he’s at home, and locks it when he goes out. You won’t be troubled by him.”

He was about to disclaim any *arrière pensée* in his enquiry, but desisted in sheer depression. He wanted somehow to get rid of her, and be alone. She chilled him.

And, almost before he realised it, she was gone, and the door shut.

He undressed wearily, extracted his nightshirt from the bag, and dived under the sheets. They were thin but innocuous. Then, leaving, for some unconfessed reason, his candle burning by his side, he settled himself to sleep, and opened his eyes again suddenly, with a start.

“ She called me by my name,” he whispered, “ and I’ll swear I never told it her ! ”

In the discussion of that amazing problem, his mind swayed, flickered, and suddenly went out. Health and bodily fatigue were on his side, and he sank into a profound sleep.

He was awakened suddenly—it might have been after many hours—by a consciousness of voices mur-

muring in his neighbourhood. Alert on the instant, he sat up, in immediate possession of his full faculties, and waited, listening. Two people, he was convinced, were talking just outside his room door—one, his landlady; the second, by his full hoarse intonation, a man. Gethin held his breath.

“My God,” the deep voice was saying, as he first realised it, “I daren’t do it!”

“Be a man!” answered the other, shrill and sibilant, fearful in its tenseness. “Break it in before it’s too late, and save us from death and ruin!”

“I daren’t,” repeated the former speaker. “It might happen on the moment. I’ll go for the police. Come away, Martha, in God’s name!”

“And leave the new lodger?”

“I’ll wake him first.”

Gethin sprang out of bed, as the door was flung wide; and there was the figure of a great, white-faced, shadowy man standing in the opening. Wild fear was in his eyes, entreaty in his shaking hands. The lodger had only time to notice that he was bulky in his build, in suggestion something like a respectable ex-butler, and that he was in hat and overcoat, when the figure had withdrawn, and was appealing to him from the outer darkness.

“Come along, sir, in God’s name, and run for it!”

On the instant Gethin was out, and in the passage. Breathing, sobbing, palpitating forms seemed to urge and shoulder him this way and that.

“What is it?” he cried. “What’s the matter? I don’t know where I am—I don’t know what you are talking about!”

“You’ll soon know unless you hurry up,” said the man’s quavering voice in the darkness.

Gethin, groping out, felt the wall, and put his back against it.

"I'll not move," he said loudly, "until I know what all this means!"

The woman's thin hurried voice took up the tale, small and toneless, as if she were speaking the other side of glass:

"It's Danby, the lodger, sir. He's one of those dynamiters, it seems. We never knew or guessed—he kept himself so secret in his room, and locked it when he went out. He was arrested this very evening, with an infernal machine in his possession. George, my husband here, saw him taken with his own eyes."

The wall felt suddenly cold against Gethin's back.

"What dynamiters?" he said. "I didn't know there were any of them about now." He set his teeth. "But in any case," he added, "if he's taken, he's taken, and there's an end of him."

The woman trembled on:

"The thing, it seems, sir, went by clockwork—and *there's a ticking going on in his room now*. You can hear it quite plain if you put your ear to the door."

Gethin laughed—on a rather hollow note.

"Is that all? Why, you don't suppose, even if it was true, that he would go out and leave one of those things maturing in his absence?"

"Some accident may have started it, sir—a rat or a mouse. There's plenty hereabouts."

"Come," said Gethin decidedly; "we'll break in. That's nonsense, you know. If he was such a fool——"

"They're all fools, sir."

"We'll break in, I say. Where's that big husband of yours? Now, Mr. Quennel?"

“ I won't go near it ! ” said the hoarse frightened voice from the stairhead.

“ Then, here goes,” said Gethin. “ Where's the room ? ”

He came away from the wall—felt himself quickly and softly induced, rather than directed, towards a door. Touching it, he bent his ear, and listened. Sure enough, a little sharp regular pulsation came from within, indefinite in quality, but quite appreciable in that still fog-ridden house.

“ It's inconceivable,” he whispered, “ but we'll soon solve the mystery.”

The lock was a cheap affair ; the door, which opened inwards, of the flimsiest ; the lodger muscular. He put his broad shoulder to the essay, and, getting purchase with his bare feet, bore on the wood with one mighty heave. There followed a crack, a ripping sound, and, to Gethin, a sudden wink of light and a jerk—nothing more. But the sensation was so instant, and so physically and mentally disintegrating, that, for the moment, he could conceive no thought of himself but as a sort of pyrotechnic bomb, which had been shot into mid-air, had burst, and was slowly dropping a multitude of coloured stars. These, as they fell, went out one by one, and, with the quenching of the last, consciousness in him ceased altogether.

. . . . .

Somebody was speaking to him ; some application, distinctly physical in its nature, was being made to his body. It felt like a boot. He opened his eyes languidly, and encountered the vision of a face bent above him. It was an official face, and mature, surmounted

by a blue helmet, and the expression on it was unsympathetic, not to say threatening.

“Come, sir, what are you doing here?” said the police sergeant. “You must get up, please, and give an account of yourself.”

Gethin, accepting the offer of a proffered arm like a bolster, scrambled to his feet in a hurry. He understood on the instant what had happened. The bomb had actually exploded as he broke in the door, and he had been knocked insensible. A mercy, at least, that it was no worse. He clung on to his support a little, feeling somewhat dazed and shocked. It occurred to him, then, with a thrill of gratification, that he must have the constitution of a cat, not only to have survived that appalling experience, but to be standing, as he was, in his normal condition of body. And then something tickled him suddenly, and he lapsed into a shaking giggle. To have been asked to give an account of himself sounded so inexpressibly funny under the circumstances. It was as if *he* had manufactured the bomb. But, in the midst, the element of tragedy in the business struck and sobered him. He backed, and shook himself into reason.

“What about the other two?” he said. “Are they hurt?”

“Eh?” said the officer blankly.

“The others,” persisted Gethin—“the landlord and his wife, who were with me when I broke open the door? Are they maimed—mutilated? Good God, man! they aren’t killed?”

The sergeant, curiously contemplative of the speaker, stood, one thumb hooked into his belt, the other hand slowly fondling his chin.

“If I was you,” he said at length, thoughtfully

and oddly irrelevantly, "I'd take a red-herring and soda-water for my breakfast."

Gethin stared, flushed, and put the question a second time :

"I ask you, are they killed?"

"O, yes! They're dead all right—dead and buried, too."

"Buried!"

Gethin clapped a hand to his head. Had he been insensible longer than he supposed? But, in that case——

"When?" he asked faintly.

"It will have been in '85," said the officer, watchful of him.

Gethin's brain seemed to stagger, and recover itself with a crick. For the first time a sense of something unspeakable in his surroundings was beginning to penetrate it. Weak dawn, while he lay, had come into the house, revealing its structure. Now, in a moment, he understood that there was more of that visible than was compatible with decency or reason. The whole interior of the building, seen from his place in the passage, seemed a shattered ruin. Walls were broken, ceilings torn, doors sprawling dismembered, lights blown out of windows, stair-rails snapped, black abysses formed in the flooring. All that, in itself, was comprehensible. The odd thing was that an indescribable air of antiquity seemed to characterise the wholesale dilapidations.

"This house was blown to pieces," was all he could think of saying.

"Blown to pieces," echoed the sergeant; and added remonstrantly: "Come now, sir, pull your wits together!"

"When?" said Gethin.

"Fifteen years ago, to a day."

"To a day?"

"To a day. I ought to remember. I was on duty hard by at the time."

Gethin felt suddenly sick. He leaned back against the wall.

"I suppose I got muddled up in the fog," he said faintly, "and took refuge in this house, and went to sleep and had a dream."

"That was it, sir, no doubt," said the sergeant encouragingly.

"Untenanted, eh?" said Gethin.

"Avoided like," said the sergeant. "It's never got cured of its bad name."

"For fifteen years? Great God!"

He came away from the wall.

"I think I should like to get out of it—into the air," he said.

"There's your bag and umbrella," said the officer, "at the door of that room. Ain't you going to take them?"

He accompanied Gethin down the stairs. In the lower quarters, age-long dust and grime showed visible on all sides. The very edges of the shattered panes were green with decay; canopies of cobweb festooned the ceilings. Gethin breathed out a volume of relief as he found himself in the square, looking up awestruck at the blackened deserted building.

"How did you suspect me?" he asked the sergeant.

"Saw the front door ajar, and muddy footsteps going through the hall and up the stairs."

"You think I was drunk, don't you?"



"We'll call it a bit taken, sir."

"A small offence?"

"Very like," said the officer drily. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

Gethin, biting his lip, looked at him a little pallidly.

"I wish you'd tell me," he said. "Who was it blew that up?"

"Name of Danby," said the sergeant promptly, relieving his throat and coming erect again: "a dynamiter, one of the 'eighties lot. He was the cause of it, anyway—left a charged machine working in his room there, while he went out to deposit another, a blind one, which he'd picked up by mistake. They arrested him with it on him."

Gethin found a momentary difficulty in asking his next question:

"Any lives lost—here, I mean?"

"They accounted for three," said the sergeant; "those two Quennels that you spoke of, and a third, unidentified. He was supposed a chance lodger; but he was mutilated beyond recognition, and none ever claimed him. They say you can see the marks of his blood on the wall now. I don't know; I never had the curiosity to look."

"Thanks," said Gethin. He turned away, quite white. "I don't know where I am," he said. "I suppose you won't mind taking half a crown to put me on my way, and in recognition of your services?"

Weeks later, Gethin ran across Acheson in Victoria Street, and accosted him. Acheson had a queer look to greet him with, guilty and anxious in one.

"Probation satisfactorily over?" he asked.

“That’s all right,” said Gethin. “I stopped you to tell you something, and to ask a question. I’ve found out what became of my father.”

Acheson gasped, and murmured something inarticulate.

“Acheson,” said his friend, “what was the matter with that corner house the other night?”

The large spectacles seemed to disc as Acheson looked up.

“Don’t you know, Gethin?”

“What did you see in it, I say?”

“Why—why, I didn’t see what you saw, that’s all.”

“Not the lights and the bill? Well, good-bye, Acheson.”

The librarian ran after him.

“Gethin! Would you mind telling me? The P.R.S.—I’m a corresponding member—I——”

Gethin shook him off good-humouredly:

“Not a bit of it, my friend. You lost a rare chance of securing evidence at first-hand when you deserted me so basely that time. You’re not a practical psychist, Acheson—too much of the tea-and-crumpet ghost-seer about you. You prefer to take your spirits on trust. Besides, you libelled my father. Good-bye!”

## THE HAMADRYAD

### I

JUST outside Winton in Hampshire, if you leave the town due west, you come, climbing all the way, to a scarce noticeable bifurcation of the road, the right prong of which is nothing less than the original Roman thoroughfare to old Sarum. Making straight, after its kind, for its destination, this antique track (for it is little more at this date) conducts you from the outset into an immense solitude of downs, over which it passes in a long series of dips and rises, now by grass, now by hedgerows, until, at some three miles distant, it runs into timber very quiet and remote. Here is the wood of Lamont, notable for its strange flowers and insects, for its grassy glades and tangled coverts. These are nowadays jealously 'preserved'; but in the time of which I write—which was many years ago—a kindly tolerance admitted to their peaceable enjoyment all who were indisposed to abuse the privilege accorded them. But, even then, the place was so removed, and so devoid of attraction to the commonplace wayfarer, that few came to take advantage of its liberties, and those few mostly botanists or entomologists.

One September evening, in a year long past, a young man—an aurelian, to use the older and prettier term—came trudging over the downs to spend a ghostly vigil in Lamont. He carried in his pockets a

dark lantern, a bottle of beer and sugar mixed, a brush, a nest of specimen boxes, and a little phial of chloroform, with a square or two of blotting-paper to finish. Such was the necessary paraphernalia of a moth-trapper by night, when the rarest and most beautiful species are to be secured. Young Mirvan had no other equipment about him but a hazel stick, which he swung regularly as he strode along.

It was a still and lovely night, with an autumnal keenness in the air which was both sweet and bracing. Low in the sky hung a full moon, so radiant and so large in seeming, that it appeared like the glowing sail of some fairy craft, just risen above the horizon of billowing hills, and reflected in their milky greenness as in water. Nearer, the undulating spaces were all sown with shadowy furrows and dense clumps of gloom, with here and there the spark of some distant homestead starring the slopes. No sound, but the occasional short bay of a dog, faint and far, broke the stillness. The lonely road and the lonely moon-drowned country possessed, and were possessed by, the solitary walker.

So detached from the world, his heart should have beat with a corresponding serenity. He was engaged in a pursuit which he loved, both for its environments and its curious interests. He had already one of the finest collections of lepidoptera in the county, and he asked nothing better than to be left in peaceable enjoyment of his hobby. But, alas! that was no longer to be. For family reasons he was to make, in a few days' time, a *mariage de convenance* with a cousin whom he did not love, and who regarded him merely as a necessary step to affluence and a position. Between the young mystic, the half-recluse and self-

sufficer, and the near soulless girl of the world there could never be anything in common, and Mirvan felt that his days of irresponsible dreaming were numbered. This was to be his last night-visit, he felt, to the ghostly woods of Lamont, and, so far as that side of him was concerned, the thought was like a death-bed sorrow. The mystery and the loneliness of things had never before appeared to him so beautiful.

At the bottom of a long slope, so filled with misty greenness that it seemed to him as if he were walking into the sea, he turned into a close lane, which, at a few hundred yards' distance, brought him to the skirts of the wood, into which he passed with a sure knowledge, and was soon fathoms deep in foliage. Finding and traversing a silent glade or two, he presently, always easily ascending, came out into a clear grassy space, beyond which stretched the high woods all bathed in moonlight. And here, conscious even in his depression of some return of the accustomed glow, he felt for his brush and bottle, and stole in among the broken shadows. Selecting some likely trees, he painted their trunks here and there with patches of his mixture, and afterwards, having so treated as many as his memory might retain, withdrew to a neighbouring oak, and, seating himself among its roots, gave himself over, while he waited, to wistful meditation.

He was in a singularly emotional mood. His isolation in this world of leaf and moonlight ; his passionate sense of strange delights, half hidden, half recognised, to be forgone ; his dread of the bondage to come, all wrought upon him to a moving degree. He had never before so felt the haunting mystery of trees—their high-whispered secrets, the strange things they

harboured, the way they disposed themselves to screen from mortal eyes the movements of things still stranger. He could have imagined the woods, for some reason, busy with unseen life; have imagined that an inarticulate giggle of voices, now hushed, now faintly audible, was whispering somewhere in their recesses. A silent white thing rushed past him, and it was only when it stooped, and rose again, that he recognised it, or thought he recognised it, for an owl. Once his eyes, unconsciously fixed upon a curious luminous halo in the grass a little distance away, were astonished into a belief that the thing undulated—was in movement. He was startled into rising and seeking the place; but discovered for his pains no more than a ring of white funguses, on whose surface the moonbeams seemed to boil and quiver. As he returned to his seat, tiny travelling sparks appeared to run from him in all directions, like glow-worms suddenly galvanised into activity. He rubbed his eyes, bewildered and a little agitated.

“I am a bit overstrung,” he thought, “and my fancy is playing tricks with me. I must rouse myself and do something. It is time I examined the trees.”

Taking his nerves resolutely in hand, he lit his dark-lantern, and, directing the light in front of him, advanced towards the trunk most nearly in his path. As he approached it, a drift of floating gossamer seemed to interpose itself within the glow, and, wreathing fantastically a moment, display a little shadowy face and disappear. To say that he was not conscious of a shock and thrill would be to underrate his sensibility; but, though, in the sudden start he gave, he nearly dropped the lantern, his feeling was one of astonishment rather than of fear. And, in the same

instant, all supernatural tremors were lost in the excitement of the collector, for the light of the bull's-eye had fallen full upon a great moth resting drunk and stupefied upon the wet bark of the tree.

It was a rare specimen of the rarest of all moths, the Clifden Nonpareil, which covers with fore-wings of marbled silver-grey the most beautiful under-wings of banded black and violet. The prize was a splendid one for a lepidopterist, and, as Mirvan dropped softly to his knees to make ready his box with a fragment of chloroformed blotting-paper, his heart was thumping as if it would suffocate him. He was hardly breathing, indeed, as he rose again prepared, and saw the big moth still motionlessly awaiting its capture. Holding the light steadily focussed on his prey, he advanced his right hand with the box in it—and instantly another little hand slipped in between.

It was like a flower, as soft, as semi-transparent—hardly more than a child's in size, but moulded to a ripe perfection. As Mirvan advanced the lantern, it disappeared.

He stood for some moments quite motionless ; then, with a sigh, softly closed the shutter, and let the sense of moonlight regather about him. Even now he was so far from panic-struck that he could think with some vexation of his arrested deed. With the quenching of the light the silver moth had become one with the silver bark on which it lay.

And then, suddenly again, came the web of gossamer, drifting between with its fantastic convolutions, until it seemed to catch and wind itself about the tree. And, in the same instant, Mirvan was aware of the shadowy shape of a girl, standing by the trunk, and clinging to it as she regarded him.

At the first, he could separate her no more than the moth from the bark against which she rested ; but presently the sense of a bewitching child-face, half shy, half alluring, of a faint glow-worm mist of hair, of limbs like rounded stones gleaming through dark water, grew upon him from doubt to certainty and from certainty to rapture. His inquietude from the outset had never approached fear nearer than its boundaries in a fearful joy. Now, at a leap, it had become an overmastering emotion of desire, a passion to absorb and possess. He forgot himself ; or, rather, himself was gone—the thing of prescriptive conduct and staid conventions. All sorts of primitive impulses raced in his veins ; long-buried impressions of hills and woodlands, of sweet midnight pursuits and thymy contacts glimmered in his brain. Melodious voices seemed to whisper from the thickets, only to become, when he turned to answer them, the murmur of far-running waters, or the rapture of bird song in some distant copse. He knew it, he thought. This was life in its heyday of joy and mystery. His heart throbbed with a delirious ecstasy ; and in the midst he heard her speak.

“ Spare my pretty moth ! ”

Was it a voice, a dream, a breath of music on the night ? Quite overcome, he extinguished his lantern, and, throwing it on the grass, leaned towards the vision.

“ It is the spoil of my life,” he whispered. “ At what price, you lovely thing ? ”

She seemed to laugh, putting her finger to her lips. Burning all through, Mirvan advanced a step. As he did so, the shape, winding its pale arms about the tree, as if it appealed to it for protection, appeared to dissolve and vanish where it stood.



He uttered a little despairing cry. What had become of her? In the agony of that impossible loss, he leapt and ran round the tree. He trod upon his lantern, and, stumbling, caught at the trunk. It seemed soft to his hand, warm and palpitating. In an access of emotion, he threw himself upon it, gripping and striving as if he would bear it down. "Your secret!" he panted; "yield it!"

And suddenly it seemed to melt beneath him; soft arms came about his neck; a voice sighed in his ear: "Captured! O, captured! A moth for a moth, you dearest!"

Intoxicated with bliss, he set his lips in the darkness to lips as sweet as wine.

From that dream, as from a deep swoon, Mirvan awoke to find himself lying on the grass in the grey dawn. The wood was all about him, quiet as death. Not a whisper broke its silences, not a thing seemed stirring in its thickets. He got to his feet, and stood in a dazed way, thinking it was time for him to be turning homewards. Once he started, and paused and came back. And a second time he started, and checked himself, and returned to the oak, and stood looking at it with glazed eyes.

"Was it all a moonstruck dream?" he murmured. "For your part in it, thanks, anyhow, dear oak."

But the oak did not respond by so much as a quivering leaf.

## II

MIRVAN dutifully married, and kept to his marriage bond, found no more joy in his state than he had

anticipated. His wife's was a small nature, dull and exacting, incapable of passion, save in its squalidest aspect of jealousy. The secrets of his soul were locked from her; and, though she could never have sympathised with them revealed, the thought of something withheld filled her with a perpetual sense of injury. She seemed always seeking for a proof of his hidden depravity of heart and mind.

At the end of a year a girl baby was born to them. Mirvan, after the first natural interest evoked by the knowledge of his being a father, took little notice of it. It appeared an ordinary unexciting child, and, though pretty, the farthest from precocious. When two years had passed it was still as speechless as on the day of its birth—in actual vociferation even less emphatic. He began to wonder, with only a faint stirring of curiosity rather than of concern, if it would ever come to articulate.

But on the morrow of the child's second birthday a curious change was announced. That night Mirvan had passed in a strange mood of agitation. He could not sleep; it had seemed to him that something was in the house—something not belonging to it. It was only at dawn that he had lost consciousness, under, as it appeared to him, the whispering branches of an oak tree. The nurse coming into the room, pale and startled, was the first to awake him to a sense of realities. She showed a disposition to cry. Would her master and mistress come at once, she said. Baby was sitting up in her cradle and talking.

They rose, and followed her out. That sense of estrangement between them made the mother hasten to claim the first right to her child. The best her narrow nature could exhibit was all devoted to this possession.

She stopped, with a gasp, when she entered the night-nursery. The tiny being was seated up on her pillow, taking voluble stock of all the wonderful things about her. Her speech was ludicrously pretty, but comprehensible only in fragments. It was the look of sudden intelligence in her eyes that was the oddest part. It was baby, but indescribably developed between a single sleeping and waking.

Mirvan stole a look at his wife. A certain revulsion of feeling in her was patent to his soul. He, on the contrary, felt such an attraction to the child as he had never known before. From that day she was his constant delight and companion ; and from that day, as he was aware, his wife hated him.

The nurse could not be induced to stay, and another was procured. But, indeed, her post was a sinecure. The child was always with her father ; her elfish prattle followed his footsteps all day long. When she came near her mother, it was to be coldly repulsed, and often to answer pertly, " Baby not love you " ; to which the woman would reply : " I don't want your love. You are no child of mine."

And thus another six months passed by ; and every day of it added to the infant's precocity and strange beauty.

One evening Mirvan, thinking to interest his little daughter, took her into his study to show her his collection of moths and butterflies. But the sight of the first drawer of specimens, as he pulled it out and lowered it for her inspection, had a startlingly opposite effect to that which he had anticipated. She turned pale, shrinking back a little.

" How are they made to settle so still behind the little window ? " she whispered.

“They do not settle; they are dead, baby,” he answered, amused.

“Dead!” her face was going white. “Who killed them?”

“Why, I did,” he said. “I caught, and drugged them to death, then put pins through their bodies, and stretched out their wings, and left them to dry.”

She gave a single gasp; and then her infant fury broke. She screamed at and reviled him; she beat him with her little hands. She cried that he was cruel, cruel—that he was worse than the fox and stoat, that only slew for food—that she would never, never love him or speak to him again. Finally, she ran from the room in a storm of tears, and he heard her stamping up to her nursery.

Mirvan was utterly amazed, and more than a little distressed and troubled. All that evening he was haunted with a sense of guilt; and by and by, unable to sit out his depression, he stole upstairs to visit his rebellious little girl in her cot. She was lying to all appearance fast asleep, the sheet covering her face to the hair, and, unwilling to disturb her, he just dropped a remorseful pat on the counterpane, and left the room.

It thundered all night; and the next morning he was awakened, as once before, to find the nurse in his room.

“Please, ma’am,” the girl was saying, “I think there’s something wrong with baby. She won’t speak, and I can’t seem to make her understand.”

He was up before his wife this time, and out and in the nursery. As he stood staring, with a dead feeling at his heart, his wife brushed past him, and fell on her knees beside the cot.

“Baby!” she whispered in a voice of rapture. “It is mother’s own darling come back again.”

“She don’t seem to hear or understand,” said the girl; “and there’s something odd-looking about her.”

The mother had the child in her arms, kissing and fondling her. She looked round fiercely at the speaker.

“You are a fool,” she said. “You can go.”

But, indeed, from that moment the child never spoke or heard or saw again; and from that moment Mirvan gave himself up, wholly, patiently, remorsefully, to her care. He knew that those who have been once borrowed and returned by the fairies must never be allowed to reveal their experiences or to recognise their playfellows in all their time to come.

## THE VOICE

THE day had been wet and mellow after a longish drought. The soil sucked at the warm flood, as a thirsty horse swills at a trough, drawing in its satisfaction quietly and intently; the cottage windows twinkled under their brows of dripping thatch; the hills, misty and phantasmic, seemed to roll like leviathans in a fog of descending water. And it was under such circumstances of weather that I first saw Balmworth.

One could not conceive a village more faithful to its etymology. It saunters down a gentle slope, half a mile long, from the hills to the sea; slips without a stumble into a tiny cove—landlocked for nine-tenths of its circumference, and green as an aquamarine set in a loop of silver chalk—and elsewhere and on all sides is made comfortable in its place with cushions of velvet down. Coming from the little station-village of Flock—itself a drowsy portal to the hills—one ascends a three-mile rise, traverses a short tableland, and goes straight down, smiling, into the harbourage of the tranquil valley. What does it concern one that those slumberous green pillows which contain it are neighboured on either side by populous and popular “seaside resorts”? The hills are ramparts as well as boundaries, and the vulgar, confined to char-à-bancs and high roads, essay to storm them but fitfully. Their flying visits but serve, in fact, to accent

the peace, as the casual rush of a motor-car outside lonely windows leaves a profounder silence in its wake.

And the inhabitants are all in keeping. Here are no sharks of landladies, hungering to feed on the inexperienced adventurer ; no maximum of cost for a minimum of service ; no cracked pianos at a shilling a thump ; no castors estimated in the weekly bill at a figure which would keep a furrier in pepper for a year ; no priceless china, cheapened from the nearest crockery store, and put up on brackets to be accidentally broken, and paid for ; no charge for the attendance which is ever lacking ; no suffering protests, no extortion, no inflated prices whatever. No fleas, I would fain add ; but that would not be true. Yet even they feed delicately, with ever a gentle consideration for the provision of the only man in the place who sells Keating.

Balmworth, to be sure, lets lodgings (indeed, in the "season" it is so greatly affected by those who love not the swarming warrens of August that it is difficult to secure a bed there), but on an artless Arcadian plan. It is as ready to take in the houseless traveller as it would be to be taken in by him. Any Jeremy Diddler so inclined might steal his dirty week's toll of its hospitality. Its landladies tot up their bills, all wrong, with infinite travail, and finally beg the good graces of their lodgers to help them to screw and pummel the items into some correspondence with the totals. They smile ; they confide ; they are on pleasant personal, but not in the least self-obtrusive terms with you from the outset. Supercilious or baronial-nosed people discomfort them. Sometimes they entreat your acceptance of a basket of blackberries or rosy apples. They are mostly the wives and mothers

of the boatmen, to whom appertaineth the conduct of the Cove, sailing and fishing, the letting out of craft, the exploiting, in short, of little Balmworth as a sea pleasure-garden.

It is a very quaint and pretty basin among the cliffs, is this Cove—something like Mother Carey's Peace-pool. It is just a mile in circumference; and the land's fond arms, not quite meeting round it, leave open a narrow water-way, through which pleasuring steamers can creep in in all but stormy weather. They do not trouble one much. The life of the Cove congregates all the morning about the eastern side, to which they do not come, and where cluster the little white bathing-huts which are the real lodgings of Balmworth. For this pool of translucent water, on whose floor sixteen feet down one may see the weeds swaying pale as if in moonlight, is very grateful to the bather; and there be those who will camp all day among the little huts, that they may undress and plunge at pleasure.

Opposite the water-way above mentioned sweeps up a mighty forehead of chalk, mottled like old ivory, which, descending gradually as it curves either way about the Cove, ends at the entrance in horns of stratified rock. In the western arm of this curve is gathered the business material of the place—boats, nets, lobster-pots, prawn-chests, lugworms and lumber. It is significant that never a life-belt is to be seen there, unless in the shed where the men of the coastguard keep their trim black boats with the brass fittings. Balmworth pays no tax to the white-horsed farmers of the sea, and that for a simple reason. When the wind blows enough to imperil small craft, no sailing-boat can make the outward passage of the water-way. Even in calm weather so narrow is it that the



tripper-steamers have to slip in with caution. Meet that such a place, so secure, so unvexed, so child-like in its character, should be haunted, if at all, by a child's voice.

Perhaps it was the cluck of choked gutters, or the soft trample of the rain on the road, or some small, inarticulate converse of unseen talkers that deceived my hearing ; but, as I walked, while the hills sunk fading about me into night and water, I could have thought, and more than once, that something ran beside me, a little thing that begged in a little voice, as a small trained mendicant might do, and sobbed and sniffed to rouse my unresponsive sympathy. The impression was so faint, so unreal, that my only wonder lay in its imposing itself on me so persistently. I sought to associate the fancy with the sights and sounds about me ; but it would not so be put away. It ran and babbled, sometimes in front of me, sometimes at my side—not words, but their shadow ; no face, but the uplifted glimmering blotch of one, which, when I bent to canvass it, was always a stone in the road.

I felt no distress, but a certain curiosity. That the delusion was a delusion I never had a doubt. The key to the enigma was all that lacked. But I was confident that I should find it sooner or later.

I went on placidly, descending to the Cove. The lights of an inn, of cottages, met me right and left. And then I was going down a narrow gully ; and then came a pool of ashy water.

It lapped out of the mists, reaching vainly for the rank of little boats which lay thereby, drawn up on the shingle. Grey wet and desolation held all this quarter of the Cove. Not a light twinkled from the

coastguard station, perched high aloft on the butt of the western horn. It was just a minute section of beach and sea, half veiled, half disclosed in the drowning fog. Not a sign of life was in evidence but the figure of a solitary boatman, roping up his craft for the night.

And then, all of a sudden, the voice had become articulate, and I saw the dark form of a little girl go bounding down the stones to the lonely figure.

“ Bill, Bill ! ” she cried, “ *do* let me pull ! O, Bill, *do* let me pull ! ”

The tone pierced as shrill, as hollowly treble through that sodden desolation as the cry of a hawking seagull. Yet the figure among the boats took no notice of it whatever.

“ Bill ! ” wailed the child ; “ *do* let me pull ! ”

The figure worked on stolidly. “ Is he stone deaf ? ” I thought.

She danced round him, crying and entreating—always in that piercing young voice. He could not fail to see, even if he had not heard her. Suddenly he rose to his height, his task finished, and came clumping up the shingle towards me. In the same moment the figure of the child seemed to go down into the waters and disappear. I uttered a shout and pounded to the spot. Not a bubble, not a ripple betrayed the place of that noiseless plunge. The tide came in, wrinkle over wrinkle, without a break. I beat back and forth, peering, calling, but with no avail. Finally I desisted, and went up the beach to the man. He, at least, though I had questioned it at first, was no ghost. I felt that I was shaking through and through as I approached him. No doubt he thought me demented.

But, if he did, he made a successful pretence of unconcern, as he stood soberly lighting his pipe. His face in the act was revealed to me, glowing and shadowing, as he pulled at the match. It was the face, indisputably, of a kindly, rugged soul, humane, earnest, unguileful—an expression of that spirit of simple gravity which comes of long association with the awe and mystery of the sea.

“ I thought I heard a child calling down there,” I said, commanding my voice with difficulty. “ But there wasn’t one, of course ? ”

“ Bless you, see,” he said, in a curiously small, indrawn way for such a bushy man, “ this isn’t no night for children.”

“ No,” I replied, “ a black night—no sort of weather for one’s first visit to your Cove.”

“ I’ve never known the like,” he answered, looking up at the sky. (They never have.)

His atmosphere invited frankness.

“ What’s your name ? ” I asked. He told me. “ And your Christian name ? ”

“ Bill, see,” he said. So he pronounced “ Sir,” quite mincingly.

He was going up the village, and I was suddenly anxious for his company. I refrained, even, from looking over my shoulder as we left the boats and the whispering crescent of beach.

“ Ah ! ” I said ; “ that was the name I thought I heard the child call—Bill.”

“ Yes, see,” he responded heartily.

“ ‘ Bill,’ I thought I heard her say, ‘ *do* let me pull, Bill.’ ”

“ Ah ! ” he said ; “ that’ll be little Miss Vera.”

“ Little Miss—but you said you didn’t hear her ? ”

“No, see,” he answered simply. “I can’t do it; but others can. She visits us time and again by their showing—the little drowned spirit of her.”

“How was she drowned?” My voice seemed something apart from me.

“Had set her heart,” he said soberly, “on pulling of a boat all by herself—was always a-crying on me to let her. But I had my orders. She was a bit what you’d call wilful, see; and one evening—it might have been like this” (he had forgotten his former statement)—“she give her lady mother the slip, and run down to the boats, and had one out, all with her own hands, before a soul knew she was gone.” He stopped a moment, blowing at his pipe till it scattered a very shower of sparks into the wet. “I picked up her little body myself,” he said. “There it was in the water, as quiet as sleep. She’d just run the boat off of the beach, and herself with it. So she’d never had her pull after all. God rest her pretty spirit!”

I saw him later, in the tap of *The Pure Drop*. He was having his temperate pot and pipe before turning in, and was taking his earnest share in a political discussion. The visitation lay, if it lay at all, quite simply and un harmfully on his mind. Surely that was the right unsophisticated way to accept it. The responsibility for haunting lies with the haunter. As for myself, I have not learned to appreciate Balmworth at a figure less than its due because of that infinite weirdness of my introduction to it. It is a rare haven on a noisy coast; its voices murmur either out of sleep or death. But that one shrill small voice I have never heard again.

## THE POISON BOTTLE

“AS well look for green peas in March as for sentiment in a Government analyst,” says Sergeant Dyce in his autobiography; yet that that phenomenon may occur is proved in the personal reminiscences of the late Professor Ganthony, some extracts only from which have appeared in the public prints. From what remains we are free to select the following passages, in irrefutable testimony to the existence of that verdant spot in the constitution of the great pathologist; and it is with the purpose rather to vindicate their narrator’s memory from a charge of moral insensibility, than to recapitulate the evidences in a pretty recent *cause célèbre*, that the choice is made. The allusion is to what the reader will remember as the Footover Poison-bottle case.

As curious and touching a case as any in my experience, says the Professor, was that of young Langdon. I refer to it particularly, because circumstances brought me into unwonted association with some parties to the affair, and to the knowledge, connected with it, of as strange an instance of youthful clairvoyance as might be related.

Young Harry Langdon was the heir presumptive to the Langdon baronetcy and estates, at that time enjoyed—save the irony of the term—by his great-uncle Sir Hugh Langdon, who was a childless widower and paralytic. The boy was, I understand, a particu-

larly bright intelligent youngster of fourteen at the time of his death, which was due to poisoning by cyanide of potassium. I received officially—here follow some details which may be omitted—and attended the inquest in due course, to give my evidence. It was plain enough, for all my concern in the matter ; painfully plain, moreover, it appeared, from the ex-professional point of view. The boy, with his little sister Marjory, had been on a visit to Langdon Court, South Hampshire, a county famous for its lepidoptera. Naturally he had started to make a collection of butterflies—bug-hunting, in the modern vernacular ; and had secured for his lethal purposes one of those squat wide-mouthed bottles—containing a deposit, to about a tenth of their depth, of inspissated cyanide of potassium—which are used by collectors to kill their insects when netted. This bottle had been found upon the poor young fellow's dressing-table, incident upon the discovery of its owner's body lying dead in an arm-chair near the fire-place. The cork was out ; the stuff at the bottom showed unmistakable signs of having been prodded and raked at, and the boy's own penknife, smeared with the poison, lay beside. Circumstantially the case was clear. Moved by one of those reckless explorative appetites to which youth is subject, attracted, no doubt, by the sweet almondy or peach-stony savour of the stuff, he had dared to taste, and had paid with his life for his mad temerity. The supposition was quite plausible. Indeed it is a frequent matter for wonder with me that unconsidering youth does not more often than happens fall a victim to the thousand temptations, in the way of insidious foods and drinks, which assail it.

My evidence, I say, was clear and unequivocal. The

only other, of local importance, was contributed by William Brash, Sir Hugh's butler. It is necessary, before detailing this man's sworn testimony, to say a word as to the circumstances surrounding the case.

These two children, Harry and Marjory, were, it appeared, the only offspring of a widowed lady of adequate but not considerable means. The boy had been educated in virtual ignorance of his presumptive title to the baronetcy, and his fateful visit, with his little sister, to the Court, had been his first and last. It seemed that Sir Hugh, with the perversity of a sick-grained valetudinarian, had fought, until nearing his end, against the acknowledgment of his heir in the person of a remoter scion, and had only succumbed to the inevitable when that became obvious. Then, with what grace he could recover, he had sent for the children to visit him, and, from making a virtue of necessity, had come to take a delight in the bright fearless boy. The end had been at least as great a shock to him as to his household at large; to the mother it had come, of course, as a potential death-blow.

Langdon Court lies pretty sunk and secluded among the heathy environs of the New Forest. Its owner, at the period of the calamity, was living in a considerably self-restricted state, and much of the house was shut up. Visitors, the few who came, were accommodated in a wing of the building remote from the neighbourhood of the nervous and suffering invalid, and but few servants were kept. Of these few, William Brash was the principal. He had been in Sir Hugh's service some two years when I saw him. He was a slow, large man, reserved of speech and with a very quiet manner. His face was round and impassive, with close black eyebrows, and a projecting lower lip. He had extra-

ordinarily thick hands ; and, when he turned, one saw a regular tonsure, like a monk's, sunk in the crown of a very thicket of hair. It was due to an old scurvy, I believe, and not to natural baldness. It is his evidence to which I now come.

William Brash deposed to his pleasant intimacy with the deceased, who, he declared, with some hesitancy of emotion, was as handsome-spoken a young gentleman as one might wish to serve. The visit of the young lady and gentleman had extended to a fortnight when the disaster happened. During the last week of this fortnight Master Harry had developed an extraordinary interest in butterfly hunting, and, latterly, had got him, Brash, to procure him a poison-bottle, the one in question, from the local chemist in Footover. He had obtained it to command, had duly signed the book, and had handed over his purchase to the young gentleman on the evening preceding that morning of the fatal discovery. He was perfectly sure of the circumstances in their every detail. He had returned rather late, and had gone straight, by direction, to Master Harry's bedroom, where he found the boy busy in writing letters. He had placed the bottle on the dressing-table, and was about to withdraw, when Master Harry had detained him with a request for stamps, having none of his own, and it being too late to disturb his uncle. He had gone and procured the stamps desired from his own room, had returned with them to the young gentleman, and had seen him place them on his letters, which he had handed over to him, Brash, there and then, to put with the night post. They had been five in number, and had been addressed, one to his mother, and the other four, he thought, to provincial dealers in insects, of whom Master Harry,



by his uncle's sanction, had more than once already bought specimens. He had then bidden the young gentleman good night, and had retired to his own part of the house, which was comparatively distant. The boy had been placed by himself, rather remote, in the west wing of the building. It was a housemaid who, coming with the hot water the next morning, had made the dreadful discovery. And so the matter ended. Incidentally it was demonstrated that the bottle still held its poison-label firmly attached, though some reference, unjustifiable, I think, was made to the inconspicuous position of the warning. The remainder of the evidence was of a piece with that quoted, and in the end the jury gave in their verdict of death by misadventure.

But before this happened, there had occurred one most curious little scene.

I suppose the minutest enquiry into cases of sudden and violent death, even where the face of the circumstances surrounding them appears plain as day, is persistently to be advocated; elsewise any suspicion of laxity in this respect would surely encourage the wrongdoer. Instances have occurred within my knowledge where a scrap of purely formal testimony, so regarded, has put an entirely new complexion upon hitherto accepted facts; and I have known more than one conviction result upon a chance insinuation offered at the eleventh hour. Nevertheless, it was, I confess, with a certain qualm that I heard the deceased's little sister called upon to give her atom of formal evidence, and a word of protesting pity was near coming to my lips when I saw the child brought forward by a servant. She stood up there before us all in her black frock, the most pathetically attractive little body one could

imagine, with her solemn round face, full of fear and trouble, and the plentiful brown hair rolling down to her shoulders. The coroner, of course, designed to be very brief and gentle with her. His questions merely touched upon her knowledge of her brother's propensities in the matter of reckless experiments with forbidden things, and of any possible previous instance she might recall in which he had made himself ill by a venture of the like sort. Her answer, soft and infantine, took the court like a shock of electricity. Hal wasn't like that, she said ; Hal didn't kill himself ; it was Cousin Francis killed Hal.

I think for a minute a bluebottle in the pane had the silence all to himself. Then the coroner bent forward very quiet and serious.

"My dear," he said, "aren't you talking wildly? You must tell me who is Uncle Francis."

The little girl's lip came out and her lids down. She twined her fingers together. The attendant maid bent to catch her faltering whisper, and answered for her :

"She says she saw him look into her room that night when she was asleep, sir ; and he had a bottle in his hand, which he shook at her, and then went on with it to Master Harry's room."

"When she was asleep?"

"I expect it was just a bad dream, sir—not that night, but since."

"I expect so too. Who is this Uncle Francis?"

But, before answering that question, the maid had to be sworn in.

So I describe her ; but I had erred, it seemed, in my estimate. Miss Roper was, in fact, a sort of governess-companion in the Langdon, the visiting Langdon, household. She had not accompanied her charges at the

first ; but had arrived a day or two before that which was to terminate their visit, and had remained to represent the bereaved mother, hopelessly stricken down in her home, at the inquest. She presented the appearance of a sallow, dull-faced young woman, with hard steady brown eyes gleaming over dusky crescents, and with small-boned limbs. She was so austere dressed, in a habit approaching that of a hospital nurse's, that my mistake was natural. Her accent was refined, but her speech reserved almost to lifelessness.

Her evidence amounted to little ; but it was conclusive. Uncle Francis was her employer's deceased husband's half-brother. She knew little of him—certainly little to his credit ; but his character, for good or bad, could be nothing to the point, inasmuch as he had emigrated to America some eighteen months before, and, to her sure knowledge, was there still. Once, on the eve of his departure, he had visited the Langdons for a few days, when, it was true, the little girl had developed against him one of those instinctive antipathies to which children are wont ; and she supposed that this haunting impression was to account in the child's mind for the fancy which had overcome it under abnormal conditions of terror.

So we all thought ; and there the matter ended. The verdict was delivered, with all the appropriate expressions of sympathy, the poor small body put to sleep in the family vault ; and, a day or two later, the little girl was taken home by her governess.

Now circumstances, which are neither here nor there, had detained me in Footover ; and, so it chanced, my arrival on the platform was coincident with that of the two travellers. I observed that the woman recognised me ; but I had no thought of her taking any

further interest in my presence until we entered the Basingstoke train, when I found her deliberately following me into the compartment, an empty one, which I had selected. She acknowledged my formal bow with a salutation as grave, but showed no intention to speak, until, presently, the little girl fell asleep in her arms. And then, all in a moment, she seemed to flash into an intensity of being, and, looking across, addressed me in a low hurried tone.

“ Please to pardon me ; the time is so short, but, to me, so opportune. I want to know so much. He died of that poison ? There is no doubt whatever about that, is there ? ”

Professionally I am insusceptible to surprise—habitually on my guard against it. My pulses just gave a little surge and regulated themselves.

“ You heard the verdict given,” I answered quietly. “ In my opinion it was a just one.”

She seemed to gulp, putting a hand to her bonnet-strings as if to adjust them. My demeanour, I am sure, gave no token of the wonder within.

“ We shall see,” she said. “ If there is a God of Vengeance not too jealous to make a woman His instrument, we shall see, perhaps.”

I did not answer, while she struggled to control herself. Presently she tightened her arm, inexpressibly fond, about the sleeping child.

“ As I love this stricken one,” she said, much more quietly now, “ so by many degrees of priority did I love the other. So frank, so brave, so sensible, and to commit the act of a gluttonous lunatic ! Did I know him or not ? He never took the poison of his own free will.”

I was startled from my reserve.

"You must hold your tongue," I said sternly. "You are suggesting nothing less than murder."

"Nothing less," she answered.

"Then," I said, "I refuse to listen to you. If you have knowingly withheld any evidence——"

"None," she broke in. "But why did this child have her dream?"

At that I was as much relieved as disturbed. I believed that the poor woman's mind was unhinged by the catastrophe. I sought to humour, to mollify her.

"You yourself supplied the reason, a very plausible one, I think," I answered.

"I!" she said scornfully. "Was it my policy, do you suppose, to speak my suspicions? There are wicked powers that can be exerted from a distance—even half across the world. It has never occurred to you, I am sure, that by the removal of our darling, this man, this Uncle Francis, becomes the heir presumptive to the title and estates?"

I stopped her peremptorily.

"I will listen to no more. Lunatic nonsense—you must forgive me. I——"

The train began to slow down. She leaned forward a little.

"If," she repeated low, "He will condescend to make a woman His instrument. Mad I may be—such grief could not keep its reason—but the mad can hate. Look in the papers."

I protested; she hushed me down, ineffably sweet and tender in a moment with her waking charge. At the last, as she left the carriage, she turned her head.

"Look in the papers," she repeated, "and perhaps, presently, you will come to see."

I did, and to recognise the truth that it is better for the wrongdoer to have a score of blood-hounds on his track than one vengeful woman.

Some months had passed, and the case in question was long dismissed from my mind, when, taking up my paper one morning, my eyes were confronted with the announcement, "Footover Poison-bottle Case: Starling Sequel: Arrest on a charge of murder," in thundering headlines. I stood open-mouthed a moment, then settled myself to peruse. Before I had read a dozen lines I was already profoundly absorbed; at the finish of the first paragraph I was murmuring to myself, "This is to be my case again"; and, in fact, a communication from the police reached me within the hour.

The contemporary public knows the end; to the new generation, for which I write, a précis of the processes by which that end was reached may be not without interest. The inquest had excited considerable comment, and a plentitude of moralising on the inefficiency of the by-laws affecting the sale of poisons. That was all beside the mark, as the following explanation will show. It was elicited, at length, before the magistrate, under examination and cross-examination; but, for the sake of brevity, I condense it into narrative form—a simple matter in reality, since the evidence of the witness-in-chief, Miss Roper, was all that counted in the first degree. It was given with a curious deadly precision—the matter of which I can reproduce, but hardly the manner—and is to be summed up as follows:

*"William Brash, arraigned before Mr. . . . on a charge of procuring the death of Henry Langdon by poison, Barbara Roper, witness for the prosecution, gave evidence:*

“ In the horror of the discovery we had all come into the room, the butler, the other servants and myself. After the first paralysing shock was overcome, I began quietly to take notes. The uncorked bottle stood on the dressing-table, and I looked into it. A faint odour, like almond or peach-kernels, rose to my nostrils. It occurred to me that the marks in the stuff did not tally with the shape of the penknife-blade, opened ostentatiously beside. They had a distinct, though irregular, elliptical form to my eyes, as though produced by the point of a very small scoop or spoon, and afterwards roughly effaced by a sharper instrument. I said nothing about this at the time, but was resolved to go unobtrusively about my observations. I started with two equipments for my task—an utter incredulity as to the deceased’s inclination to so insane a deed ; an instinctive prejudice or antipathy against the butler. They should have disqualified me, you will say. That is for the defence to prove.

“ It was very shortly after—no farther than the next day—that I got upon my clue. I had occasion to go into the butler’s pantry, and found William Brash there, smoking. He was to go to his master, and I remained behind. A coat of his, which I had seen him wear after hours, was hanging behind the door. I felt in its pockets and discovered in one of them a curious little instrument, a sort of smoker’s combination tool, which consisted of a pipe-stopper, pick and cleaner, the three fastened together by a single pin or swivel. The last was in the form of a miniature spoon, and I put it to my nostrils. Barely, but just distinguishable, the same odour was there to be recognised—the odour of peach-stones. From that moment I knew that William Brash had murdered Harry Langdon.

“ There remained the method and the motive. I had my suspicions about the latter ; the former, in the meantime, was to be my practical concern. It was quite incredible—to me, at least—that the boy would have allowed the butler to persuade him into tasting a spoonful of the stuff ; how, then, and how insidiously, had it been administered ? I thought over all the points of the butler’s sworn testimony, and decided that it was unlikely that so finished a scoundrel—granting that my theory was correct—would have lied on questions of evidence open to easy proof or disproof. No, he had told the truth, in all its essential details, and to the truth I must look for a revelation of the truth. What was negotiable therein ? ‘ *He had found the boy busy in writing letters.*’ As in a flash of diabolic light, the heart of the mystery was revealed to me.

“ He had written five letters, had borrowed stamps for them, and had had them posted. Within a day or two, in fact, answers to four were returned. I secured, privately, the addresses of the senders ; and when, having left the court, I was free to act, I visited those addresses. Not one of the senders, as I feared, had preserved the envelope containing his original communication. That was unfortunate ; still, my case was clear without such confirmatory evidence. The fifth letter had been written to the boy’s mother, and I knew that my employer, Mrs. Langdon, never willingly parted with a scrap of her son’s writing. In that one instance the envelope had been preserved, and its testimony was sufficient. As I held it before me, in the privacy of my room, I knew that my theory was justified, and that I had hit upon the truth. The stamp was much discoloured, *and it still emitted a faint scent*



*of peach-stones.* I maintain that William Brash never delivered the bottle at all to Henry Langdon living ; that he probably put the boy off with some excuse of his inability to procure it, and, afterwards, going to his own room for the stamps, smeared their backs with the mixture, and, returning, handed the poisoned paper to his victim, who, passing it over his tongue, was led to encompass his own death. I maintain that the knife and bottle were placed in the position in which they were found after the consummation of the deed, that the remoteness of the room lent itself to the act, and that, according to the medical testimony, the nature of the poison, rapid and deadly in its effects, rendered the perpetration of such a horror practicable. And I maintain, finally, my firm belief that this murder was committed by William Brash not on his own initiative, but at the instance and instigation of another who shall be nameless."

It was the case, exactly as she had said it. Such intuition and deadly persistence struck every one of her hearers, I think, appalled—not least the man in the dock, who collapsed before the terrific figure of the vengeance he had evoked. There was a tremendous scene in court. Pressed as to her last statement, the witness referred to the little girl's vision. "She dreamt it," she said, "on the very night of the occurrence. I implied otherwise at the inquest ; but that was for a purpose. I designed to lead those interested off the scent I was following." Cross-examined, she admitted that her antipathy to Uncle Francis, born into existence on the one and only occasion when they had met, was inexplicable according to natural laws. He had been quite debonair and courteous. She was willing

to acknowledge that the association of the child's nightmare with the fact of her having ascertained that the person in question had been seen in William Brash's company, on the occasion of his final visit to the Court before emigrating, might have served to antedate her prejudice, at least in the measure of its virulence. But as to his somehow complicity in the deed she declined to alter her opinion.

And she was right again. The *dénouement*—which was for psychologists rather than for sober analytical chemists—was a tremendous business. William Brash, in the hope, the mistaken hope, of his being accepted for King's evidence, made a full confession while awaiting his trial in prison after the magistrate's commitment. It was a very cruel plot he revealed—a plot of calculated and quite inhuman treachery. The murder and the method of it had been circumstantially planned between him and Uncle Francis, now the actual next of kin, fully eighteen months before, the early doom of the paralytic, and the probability of his having his great-nephew over to visit him, having been clearly foreseen. It was William Brash who had first persuaded the boy into starting his collection of insects. His reward for the deed was to have been more than substantial. I never took greater pleasure in helping to hang a man than I did in knotting the noose about that gross criminal neck.

Uncle Francis disappeared—absorbed into the wilds of his adopted country. I once saw a tinted photograph of him, and that was all. It showed a small, neat, red-haired man in a white waistcoat ; and if ever one might imagine a weasel in human shape there was the picture of him.

## CAMILLA

### I

THE village of Gorseley lay among the South Downs five or six miles distant from the Hampshire capital. Camilla, coming over the hills towards it, met, one after the other, two horsemen, each of whom stopped to put to her the same question :

“ How is Mrs. Brodhurst ? ”

“ O! ever so much better, thank you. She seems quite herself again.”

The first speaker, the young local doctor, Mr. Marks, nodded cheerily, with a “ That’s capital,” and passed on his busy way ; the second, Mr. Robert Spurling, Vicar of St. Woolnoth’s, dismounted and walked beside the young lady.

“ She has not asked for me, I suppose ? ” he said.

He was an ascetic young man, tall, dark, eagle-featured, much under the neighbouring Keble influence, and intensely in earnest. He had the passions of a dogmatist, a perilous equipment, and not a vestige of a sense of humour.

Camilla shook her head, shook her chestnut ringlets momentarily over her face ; for this was the era of neat partings, and dropping curls, and little cosy bonnets of a Quaker cast. She had rolls of fur round her neck and round the hems of her plain brown dress and long-skirted jacket ; and at her throat snuggled a bow of ribbon as blue as her eyes.

Mr. Spurling walked on for some moments in silence, with compressed lips. He was a bachelor, contemplating matrimony, and ardently attracted to this fair neighbour, who had not been so long in his parish as to stale of her romantic novelty. But there were objections. The mother was little better than a heathen, and obstinately deaf to the call. There were associates, moreover—or, to speak correctly, one associate—of a particularly undesirable character. He felt that, even if accepted, he would be at an ungodly discount in such a household—soiled through his connexion. Only the girl herself (she was twenty-seven, by the way) was elect—a sweet rose to have blossomed from such a stem. She seemed in all things dutiful, submissive, a lovely tranquil mind, a pastoral saint. He pictured her the very shepherdess of quiet thoughts; he dreamt of the lambs she might sanctify to him. He could riot in imagery, like all passionate zealots, and that was his danger.

They walked on together, without a word spoken between them, until they topped the hill and descended towards a copse beside which stood the sailless blackened hulk of a windmill, burnt out in some forgotten night of long ago. It was a February day of noisy winds and hammering showers soon spent. The branches of the trees were strung with drops like rainbow buds; in the little wood the leafless shafts of the birches stood up like silver scaffolding poles, raised ready for the building of the coming spring. All the world was bright with joy and promise; only the windmill blotted the green and blue, a *memento mori*, the skeleton at the feast. It hung, a cindery anomaly, in the vicar's vision; how could he wed a woman whose loved mother was doomed to eternal perdition?

“ I am deeply sorry,” he said suddenly. “ I had hoped to entreat a claim upon her consideration other than that proper to my office ; but so long as she remains obdurate and deaf to the appeals of religion my lips are closed. I bid you a very good day, Miss Brodhurst.”

The implication was unmistakable. He had spoken with the prescriptive assurance of his cloth—as a vicar, contemplating wedlock, to a penniless parishioner. These people were poor, but they baffled him—the mother so independent, the girl so orthodox. And yet she, the latter, never seemed distressed in her mind. He supposed she had very little. She had actually smiled on him as he remounted to leave her.

Truth to tell Camilla would have married him if desired. Filially, she did most things that she was told. Nevertheless there were some idiosyncrasies in her that he never suspected—an odd vein of resolution for one ; for another, a sense of what he wholly lacked—humour.

She went past the copse, past the windmill, and down the hill to the main road, striking which at a half-mile from the village, she came to the Dingle-nook, her cottage home.

A fat unclean Frenchman of middle age, heavy of jaw, fierce of eye, with close-clipped scalp and a smudge of black hair on his upper lip, met her at the door. He was in a baggy suit of brown ‘ dittoes,’ so called, soiled and large of check, and a limp full collar, innocent of stock or tie, embraced his wattle-like neck.

“ *A la bonne heure !* ” he said, in his vibrant overbearing voice : “ She is well, the little mother ; she has never been so well. Come in and see.”

She was well, the worn-out invalid, in the sense that

suffering is well over. It was the leap of the guttering candle-flame. That night an express reached Dr. Marks, who lived in a farther suburban village, summoning him to the cottage. Camilla came from the death-room as he hurried up the stairs. Her eyes were tearless ; there was a lost amazed look in them.

“ Too late ? ” he whispered.

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

He took her hand and led her to the little room below, where the Frenchman, white and agitated, paced the carpet. There Camilla sank into a chair, her pathetic eyes fixed upon the ungainly figure. The doctor left them together while he went upstairs again.

## II

IT was February of the year 1859 when Camilla was thus orphaned. The Brodhursts, mother and daughter, had come to settle in Gorseley towards the latter part of 1857. The mother, an incurable invalid, had been medically ordered, it was understood, complete rest and seclusion ; hence their arrival in the remote village, casually recommended to them.

The sentence, to one of Mrs. Brodhurst's constitution, had been virtually a sentence of death. She had known herself from the first incapable of supporting the ennui of an existence so “ stale, flat, and unprofitable ” ; yet life, or the residue of it which remained to her, had not seemed worth economising. It was merely to prolong a pain which, like an unassuageable toothache, could be ended at a single wrench. And she regarded her certain doom unemotionally. *She* was not, she said, going to complain of her ejection from an entertainment into which she had been dragged, kick-

ing and squealing. She had cried when she was born ; it would be the highest inconsistency to snivel over her departure. Moreover, Camilla, perhaps for the first time in *her* life, was realising her natural habitat.

That last pretext, given with some good-humoured contempt, may have come the nearest to the truth. The mother and daughter were, in all essential characteristics, poles apart, the one nervous, brilliant, *spirituelle* ; the other simple, placid, unassuming. Camilla, in her mother's philosophy, had always figured as a rather negligible prude, oddly lacking in originality. The girl amused her, but for her negative rather than her positive qualities. She appreciated her sweetness, of course ; she loved her prettiness ; but the two were never comrades in the intimate sense, and they lived their lives together rather as employer and " companion " than as parent and child.

But the asperities of conscious wit are wont to soften with age, and the mother had come, perhaps in the prospect of the wider light, to recognise dimly in Camilla certain qualities of uncomplaining self-sacrifice and self-effacement to which she had hitherto been blind. The girl, the woman, had endured long in her service, trusted but unconfided-in, hating in her heart, she suspected now, the life of social restlessness and cabal to which she had condemned her, longing for the quiet of uneventful places. Possibly, had Camilla been suffered her bent earlier, she would have realised herself, would have married. It might not be too late yet ; she might discover, in the atmosphere of rural orthodoxy, that soul's affinity which all the crowded life of cities had been unable to produce for her—poor and unrecommended as she was. It would be right to make a virtue of necessity by giving her the

chance. And so the two had arrived at Gorseley ; and almost immediately Mr. Spurling had come into evidence.

Mrs. Brodhurst had laughed, rallying her droll Camilla on her conquest. But she was disposed to do little more, least of all to concede another point to her own sacrifice. She had done all that could be expected of her in this pastoral self-immurement ; she was not going to cease to be herself for all the orthodox divines in the world. She should have left herself behind, indeed, had she wished her magnanimity to bear fruit. As it was, she shocked the vicar infinitely more by her heterodoxy and neglect of spiritual observances than ever Camilla gratified him by her pious dutifulness.

But indeed the world had always stood paramount in the good lady's interests. Born St. Marie, the daughter of Bourbonist refugees long settled in England, she had married in 1830 Commander Brodhurst, who, ten years later, had been killed at the bombardment of Acre. Left a widow then, with a little daughter of nine and a quite inadequate pension supplemented by some scant private means, she had forthwith plunged into political intrigue, as a means of relief from that *tædium vitæ* which is imposed upon the necessitous. The little house in London, towards which she had finally gravitated, had become a petty centre of conspiracy—mostly talk and innocuous—which made some bright spirits, madam herself among the rest, a whetstone for their wits. It had amounted to a pocket *salon*, in fact, of a political complexion, and there were hatched, for plots, whole nests of wind-eggs. No wonder that in such an atmosphere Camilla, right daughter of her father, the plain seaman and Churchman, had found herself out of her element. And yet



her simple nature had halted between sorrow and gladness when the decree, banishing her mother—by then a hopeless invalid—from active life was issued ; and she had found infinitely pathetic that adaptation of the inevitable to her own late-considered interests. Beneath her quiet exterior was always a most wistful filial worship.

Pathetic, in its conception, indeed, might have been the mother's resolve ; unfortunately Mrs. Brodhurst had not the nerve to maintain the self-sacrificial pose. She might make a virtue of necessity ; she could not make a grace. Shrewd, caustic, witty, a woman of the world having infinite interests and vivacity, the atmosphere to which she had committed herself proved sterilising beyond her worst expectations. Mr. Spurling in himself was an epitome of its solemn dullness, its narrow respectability, the capacity of its insignificant minds for bearing monolithic prejudice, social and spiritual. She had come here to die, but not to be tortured to death ; and she was very soon crying out on, and " crying-off," her own martyrdom. It was the Chevalier du Garde alone, who saved her to reason and to resignation.

He was there, in the cottage, one day, and thenceforth he remained—a rather gross unparticular *gaillard*, with black eyebrows that met, a fund of anecdote, and an excited witty tongue. Camilla, coming home from a walk, had found him already established as a guest. Recovering from her first amazement, she had been given to understand that the Chevalier, a friend of her mother's but unknown to herself, had heard of their retirement, had come to call and was now to remain, on Mrs. Brodhurst's invitation, indefinitely. The two, it appeared, had been acquainted in London, and suffi-

ciently intimately for the stranger to have ventured to bring with him a big decayed old valise, containing as much wardrobe as might serve for a week-end visit. But the visit had been prolonged, without any addition to the wardrobe, and, at the date of Mrs. Brodhurst's death, had already extended to over a year.

This odd intrusion had seemed to justify itself, Camilla thankfully admitted, in its effects. It had reconciled Mrs. Brodhurst to her fate, had restored to her some interest in an existence doomed, as it appeared, to an early and dreary extinction. The two cronies played piquet together, talked incessantly, dissected characters and anathematised existing Governments. They were at one, it seemed, in their criticism of all social, political and religious institutions; their human sympathies ran parallel—so much so that, in the opinion of Mr. Spurling, the coincidence of their principles, or want of them, amounted to no better than an exchange of heterodoxy from single harness into double. He had been gravely concerned before; he was now scandalised; and he made Camilla the scapegoat of his indignation.

And Camilla herself—poor Camilla? It was wrong, perverse, unmaidenly, she knew; yet in some naughty corner of her heart she had got to like the Chevalier. He was an unscrupulous, derisive creature, apt at innuendo none too refined; but his detractions, while she disapproved them, made her laugh, and somehow, she could not tell how, he seemed, after the manner of his countrymen, to understand women. Thus the most feminine of Camilla's sex, even to the saintly, betray themselves in their relish of a little sly back-biting. He had shocked and frightened her at first; he appeared, indeed, to take a mischievous pleasure

in bringing the blush to her cheek, in holding her native prudery up to ridicule ; but she always felt that inherent sympathy under his ribald banter. Even his slovenliness, his uncleanness, his disregard of conventions had ceased to offend her after a time, no less than his tolerant contempt for herself, from which, however, there grew a real tolerant affection. She amused him, as she did her mother ; and perhaps, better than the parent, he recognised in her that underlying vein of humour which could find expression on occasion. He had never forgotten a certain retort of hers upon some sly pleasantry uttered by himself : “ I would rather, for my part, that people should ask why a man had not married me than why he had.”

“ *Hein!* But that is famous ! ” he had cried in his harsh, jeering voice ; and from that moment he had loved her.

### III

THE funeral was a week over, and Camilla and the Chevalier remained on at the Dingle-nook. One morning Mr. Spurling was announced. The girl, white, large-eyed, came down in her black frock to greet him in the little parlour. He faced her with the orthodox expression of commiseration, but strangely penetrated by some subtler emotion.

“ You are comforted, resigned to the Eternal Will ? ” he asked her.

“ I shall never be resigned to my mother’s loss,” she answered low.

“ God,” he said, “ may even constitute that your gain.” His eyes burned upon her ; his lips were dry ; but he put force upon himself to control his passion—for it amounted to no less. “ Conceive,” he said, “ that

clearer, holier understanding in whose light the repentant sinner beholds the actions of her past. Would she not rejoice to recognise the fulfilment of your happiness in her loss? I think so; I think she sees at last and comprehends."

Camilla made no answer; and he went on: "But, in duty to the enlightened dead, a task still remains to our hands. There are tares to be gathered in and burnt, obstacles to be removed. There I may help you—more, I am commanded. And first as to your material circumstances. The pension ceases, I presume?"

"Yes, it ceases," said Camilla.

"I venture to ask," said the Vicar, "on the strength of information voluntarily offered. It was not your mother's way to make a secret of anything. To do her justice, she was as perfectly outspoken about her worldly as about her spiritual affairs—as about her principles, if one may call them so, religious, social and political. A Legitimist, I think, and true child by temperament of her wild nation. And what beyond the pension?"

"Very little, I fear," said Camilla. "But I hope, between us, we shall have enough to live on."

Spurling breathed out a soft echo of astonishment, "We shall have?"

"The Chevalier du Garde and I," explained the young woman.

"You propose living together?"

"It was my mother's wish," said Camilla. "I promised her, when—when she was dying."

"It cannot possibly be. It must not be, I say." He had come even prepared for some such thunder-clap; yet the directness of it took his breath away. "Do you understand what you are suggesting? It is

incredible that the man should have so lingered on under the circumstances. But he must go now—or you must go.”

“My mother,” whispered the girl; but he interrupted her.

“Your mother was not the fittest judge—you oblige me to say it. I have the reputation of my parish to consider—the welfare of my flock. Where is this man? I had better see him himself.”

She barred his way. There was a look in her eyes, if he had only understood it.

“Mr. Spurling, I promised. I will not break my promise. You might kill him, for I will tell you the truth—he suffers from advanced heart disease, and the shock of my mother’s death has already terribly affected him. And there is something more which I will take upon myself to confide to your honour. The Chevalier is a political refugee.”

“From what?”

“I do not know.”

The Vicar shook his head.

“I do not suppose you do; but it all makes no difference. I can hardly characterise as I should desire the moral insensibility which could impose such a task on you. The man must go.” He stopped, gathering at last some faint understanding of the emotion in her face. “If only for my sake,” he said, in a changed hoarse voice, “you will not re-erect a fallen barrier between us. Need I speak more plainly?”

“I shall never leave the Chevalier till he dies,” answered the girl dully, steadily. “I pledged my word to my mother that I would not.”

He was greatly angered. He had fancied that last plea irresistible, and his personal vanity was offended.

He was really very much in love with this beautiful creature who had come so overwhelmingly into his life, and the surprise of opposition where he had looked, the great obstacle being removed, for submissive dependence, added fuel to his fire.

“ You will not ? ” he said. “ We shall see. In the meantime, as pastor of my flock, and accountable to heaven for its incorruption, I must not appear even to condone by silence a situation so scandalous. I warn you from my fold ; my Church declines you ; should you persist in attending it, it will be at the risk of a public denunciation.”

“ I may not come to celebration ? ” she asked, her voice trembling a little.

“ No,” he said ; “ I speak for the Divinity you affront,” and, taking up his hat, he left the cottage.

#### IV

THE man who speaks too confidently for God, at heart implies his own omniscience. Dogmatism is arrogance ; it is Humility that can hold all good human faiths in her arms. Spurling’s passion, like his belief, was dogmatic. Its narrow self-sufficiency could conceive no legitimate worship but its own. He loved in the one right way, and his love was not to be questioned or its way disputed. His passion, being controverted, could have burnt this obstinate heretic in its own fierce miserable fires. Condemned to feed upon itself, it waxed gross, abnormal. From the morning of his interview with Camilla he never knew a happy moment.

It was, if he had known, the affront to his “ professional ” vanity which most poisoned. The condescending minister in him had been flouted, and by a

comparative stranger. It was not thus the elect of his cloth were wont to suffer rebuffs—least of all in the homes of incense-proffering virgins. For the moment he believed he hated the girl, with a purely righteous hatred.

Unhappy sophistry. How could one righteously hate what one so passionately desired? The fate of the man exorcised of the single unclean spirit was coming to be his. It maddened him presently to find how literally the girl accepted her sentence. She kept away from the church; she avoided all contact with himself. Yet she remained impenitent, faithful to her dishonourable undertaking. So he decreed it, and so, presently, in his most torturing possession, he believed it. She was true to her trust. Why, when the Church by which she held had pronounced against its inviolability?

Presently it ceased to be with him a moral question at all; it became solely a question of his will against hers—a combat merely animal in its temper. He lusted for conquest and possession. He must have her or perish.

All this time he had refrained from giving effect to his threat of denunciation. More, he had used his authority, indirectly, to excuse, to defend her position. It was the fruit, he implied, of a promise thoughtlessly exacted; it would end with the recovery and departure of the foreigner.

And then one day he learned casually that Camilla and her charge had given notice to quit possession of the cottage, and that in a month they would be gone—together.

The news quite crushed him for the instant. She would go—she *could* go, retorting thus effectively upon

his interference? Well, he had brought it upon himself, and the conquest of will was to her, the creature all apparent gentleness and submission.

That night he was more like a wild animal than an orthodox divine. The one evil spirit was replaced by the seven, and he knew himself for what he was, a soul rent and demented by jealousy. Yes, jealousy—jealousy of the gross ungainly creature, who had come to illustrate in himself the penchant of the softer sex—the softer sex!—for grotesqueness and abnormality. A witty tongue, a flattering imagination had counted with Camilla above all the claims of moral excellence. He even bethought himself that there might have been a *double entente* in that plea of heart disease, that it had expressed a heart affection of another and corrupter order. To what was this travesty of devotion due—to the girl's up-bringing; to her misdirected enthusiasms?

He fell suddenly and mortally calm. A thought had crossed his mind, so new, so startling and yet so inevitable, that he was amazed it had not occurred to him before. The Chevalier was a political refugee. Very well: he, Spurling, had not abused the trust which had informed him of the fact. But would it be abusing any trust to enlarge, for his own purposes (of retaliation, in fact) on that restricted confidence? He declared not, his eyes glowing with fanatic vindictiveness. He got out certain references—papers and periodicals, which had survived from last year's litter.

The Orsini plot—that was what he wanted; the plot which had closed abortively, in the month of January, in the attempted assassination of the Emperor Napoleon in Paris. Three bombs had been thrown, killing or mutilating a number of people; but the



Emperor himself had escaped. Most of the principals and their tools, all Italian malcontents, had been seized and dealt with at the time ; a few, it was believed, had got away. The plot had been devised in London, and matured there about the date of Mrs. Brodhurst's flight to the country. That lady, no doubt, was not to be suspected of participation in it ; but, as to her sympathies—that was another matter. She had intrigued ; she was a violent Bourbonist ; what more probable than that she would have been willing to give asylum to one implicated in the affair, and flying from its consequences ? *And the Chevalier had appeared in Gorseley coincidentally with the hue and cry.*

Mr. Spurling took a sheet of note-paper, and wrote a brief letter to the head of the detective force in London.

“ There may be something or nothing in it,” he muttered, his face very white. “ At least there is no harm in trying. She does not know the worst. It may open her eyes to the man's true character. I owe it to myself, to her, to end, if possible, this scandal.”

So his passion and his conscience were reconciled.

## V

CAMILLA came down to the little parlour, to find two men, the Vicar and a stranger, awaiting her. The former, biting his lower lip, bowed stiffly, gloomily.

“ I am sorry,” he said, “ to hear of this sudden attack ; sorry in the necessity of calling you from your self-imposed duties.”

“ The doctor is there,” she answered, and no more. But there was an alert look in her quiet eyes, a spot of colour on her cheek that he found it difficult to interpret.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I cannot regard our visit as inopportune, seeing the issues that hang upon it. This gentleman"—he signified the stranger—"is a detective officer from Scotland Yard. He has been making some enquiries lately in the neighbourhood—with what result I give you my honour that I do not know."

"Yes," she said, in the same even tone: "We suspected as much. The heart attack was directly due to that apprehension—that fear."

"I would not," he said, "have had that so. Yet the admission, in a way, implying, as it does, some suggestion of knowledge, makes my task easier. Have you any suspicion, Miss Brodhurst, as to who it may be that you have been harbouring in your house these long months?"

"I do not suspect. I know."

"You do? And who——"

"It is Francesca Villani. She was implicated in the Orsini plot."

The detective uttered a sound as of a man happily vindicated in a theory. But Spurling uttered no sound—no word. He stood completely dumb-stricken.

At length, drawing a deep breath, he spoke, with difficulty:

"Francesca, did you say—did I understand?"

"That is so, sir," put in the detective. "Francesca Villani—an Italian, safe enough. I have a warrant here for her arrest. I had to keep close, you see, about my suspicions, until confirmed. She was supposed to have taken up some sort of male disguise, and your letter gave us the clue."

Spurling made an impatient gesture, as if to silence him.

“ A woman ? ” He said it with a little groaning sigh, never taking his haunted eyes off the girl’s face. And she regarded him as steadily.

“ Yes, a woman,” she answered.

“ How could I know ? ”

“ You could not. I myself only learned the truth the night my mother died.”

“ Why did you not tell me ? ”

“ I had no right. I had vowed to her. It was not to be for long, she said, since Francesca was already doomed. The wonder was she lived on at all. O, it was pathetic—those two ; and——” her voice quivered a little ; but she fought down her emotion. “ So brave, so bright, so stricken ; but one gone the other could not stay long—and she died an hour ago.”

“ Died ! ” He almost cried it. The detective checked himself in a hurried movement, and stood aghast.

“ Did you think,” said Camilla, “ that I should have confessed otherwise ? I have not broken my trust. You may know at last, since it no longer matters. You may know everything if you will—just as I received it from Francesca’s dying lips. She had lived in Paris a great deal, but she was in London when the horrible attempt was made. She had taken no part in it, and the knowledge of her name being implicated almost killed her. It was Italian independence for which she plotted ; she knew that no good cause was ever won by crime. Is there anything more you would like to be told, Mr. Spurling ? ”

He took a step towards her, his hands entreating, his chest heaving.

“ I only did what my duty demanded,” he said. His voice was quite broken. “ Camilla ! ”

The girl, her eyebrows raised, looked from him to the detective, and back again.

“I am sure of it,” she answered; “and that you may have thought you were justified in your estimate of what I was capable of. You did quite right, holding such an opinion of me, and quite right in sending for the police to help you in resolving a moral difficulty. And I dare say, anyhow, that poor Francesca would not have lived another week.”

All her forced composure seemed to go out of her with the word, and she turned with a little cry to encounter the figure of the doctor who at that moment entered the room. Marks seized her hands into his, bade her instantly to be seated, and stood, his right arm over her shoulders, while she leaned her head, with closed eyes, against him.

“Sorry, Spurling,” he said. “But you must say whatever else you’ve got to say to me. I know all about it, necessarily, you see—have known for a day or two. Well, the poor woman is dead, and beyond our righteous machinations. But for the question of this lady’s disinterested devotion to a trust, I hold myself answerable. Miss Brodhurst has been terribly overtaxed of late, and I say that the thing must end. You will understand, I’m sure, when I tell you that she and I are to be married.”

TO GAY



## AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

### I

MISS MARY WATCHETT, a young Colonial heiress, had written—from Westminster—to Lord Riversdale, at Kensington, asking him to recommend to her, if he could and would, a capable man secretary. Miss Watchett was new to London and, comparatively, to moneyed independence. She felt a little deafened and confused amid the roar of harpies that enveloped her; she walked, like Tennyson's youthful sceptic, but far less rancorously, with her head "in a cloud of poisonous flies," and it taxed all the resources of that staid young cerebrum to preserve to itself a rational regard of things in the thick of the tumultuous swarm.

Miss Watchett, clear-eyed and constitutionally sedate, had applied to the Viscount in this matter of a secretary because her father, Jack Watchett, of Sydney, had once advised her, when in any difficulty of the sort, to do so. He and his lordship were past school-fellows, and chums in the pre-colonial days, and Jack, himself a hard-headed man of business, had always retained the profoundest admiration for the other's practical abilities. Wherefore, foreseeing the inevitable home-sickness that would overtake his Mary when left alone, he had instructed her as to her best friends, as he regarded them, in England, amongst

which best he had put foremost the shrewd unemotional man of the world who had once been his inseparable ally.

But that was long ago. A faith in race kinship dwells warmer in the Colonial than in the insular breast, and many figures had supplanted Jack's in the affections of his lordship since their separation. Riversdale's reception of the girl's letter was significant of the different point of view; it expressed the faint boredom of the aristocrat over the injudicious resurrection of dead intimacies long laid and quite pleasantly forgotten. He tossed the epistle over with a snort to his eldest hope, Lord Kilmeston. It was true that he was ill with an aggravated form of gout at the time.

"Answer that for me," he said, "and do your best for the girl. She is the daughter and heiress of a one-time friend of mine—deceased, it seems. She had much better have remained at home; but, since she's elected to come to England, we must be civil to her, I suppose. Only I'm not going to be called upon to father her interests. Watchett was a good fellow, but rough, and his progeny have scant attractions for me."

The young gentleman read the letter.

"Who the deuce *am* I to recommend?" he demanded.

"Recommend the—don't worry me, sir," roared his father. "Keep her away, that's all; I won't have her here. You might apply yourself for the post, you idle young rip. It would put your hands to something useful for the first time in their existence."

The heir rose, a light in his eyes. "By Jove," he said, "a good idea. An heiress, and with that intimate



opportunity to examine my ground before committing myself! I believe I'll do it."

His father called furiously after him, but he was gone.

## II

MISS WATCHETT sat curiously conning an anonymous letter which had reached her by the second morning post. She was alone in her boudoir—a cosy room, one of a commodious suite which she had taken on the second floor of Queen Anne's Mansions, St. James's Park. There were advantages about these Mansions to a much-pestered and solicited moneyed maiden, the greatest being that all visitors had to run the gauntlet of the hall porter's extensive bureau on the ground floor. Others comprised an excellent restaurant, a staff common to all inmates of the huge pile, privacy as much as one liked and security unruffled. You might keep your own servants, or none at all; you might take your meals in public or have them served to you in your rooms; there were no rules, no 'hours', no obligations of any sort. And all this suited Miss Watchett, who had enjoyed her fortune long enough to appreciate its penalties. She kept a companion, for companionship's sake; otherwise the conduct of her domestic affairs lay to the staff, who came and went softly, dusted, made the beds, ordered all things comfortably, and for nine-tenths of her time, if she chose, left her in undisturbed seclusion. The only 'rift within the lute' jarring on so much harmony lay in the applicants, the supplicants, the beggars and impostors who, in spite of all precautions, managed to win through to the front-door knocker, which they kept in a pretty constant state of agitation. It was

principally on their account that the young lady had come to desire the services of a capable male secretary.

Miss Watchett sat thoughtfully conning her letter. It was not, of course, the first received by her of the anonymous kind ; the point was that it touched, and humorously, upon a definite problem. She read it through for a third time :

“ Your application to Lord Riversdale *re* a male secretary has been received. His Lordship, being ill at the time, handed it over to his son, Lord Kilmeston, to answer. Lord K. will recommend the bearer of his reply to you for the post in question. But, take warning : the bearer will be no other than Lord Kilmeston himself, passing under an assumed name—that of Mr. Charles Lorry. He, Lord K., has devised this intimate means of satisfying himself as to the possible desirableness of an heiress. Beware the snake in the grass. A well-wisher.”

Miss Watchett replaced the letter in her lap.

“ O, indeed ! ” she said.

### III

MR. CHARLES LORRY, humming a confident little air, knocked smartly at the door of the flat. It was opened to him by a neat young woman, having on a tucker and apron of blue cotton.

“ Can I see Miss Watchett ? ” he demanded.

She replied, in a soft composed voice, by asking him his name. He gave it freely, adding that he brought a letter of introduction. At that, bidding him enter, she shut the door, and put out her hand.

“ Yes ? ” he asked.

"The letter," she replied.

"I'll give it myself."

"O, no! You must let her decide if she will see you! We have a number of impostors to guard against."

He flushed up to the roots of his hair. He was tall, well-built, patently an aristocrat—a fact which the companion noted with some secret curiosity. There was an air about him of that prescriptive self-confidence which can take liberties with the most charming grace in the world—and resent them, with an equally compelling *savoir-faire*.

"Take it to her, if you will be so good," he responded frigidly, and she tripped away, perfectly unconcerned, leaving him standing on the mat. In a few moments she returned.

"Yes, she will see you," she said. "Please to wipe your boots first."

He scraped the soles for quite two minutes, while she stood by.

"Thanks for reminding me," he said. "Do you think that will do; or had I better take them off, and walk in my socks?"

"The carpets are new," she said. "Follow me, please."

He obeyed, positively shaking his fist at the serenely unconscious little thing. She conducted him into a pleasant well-furnished room, where at a littered table sat a lady writing.

"Here is the person, Miss Watchett," said the companion, and, without another word, went out and shut the door.

Mr. Lorry stood for some moments speechless and unregarded while the heiress finished her letter. He

felt in himself a curious tingling emotion associated somehow with a long-forgotten experience of a certain study, not uncomfortable, a head master, and a sensation of guilt shortly to be exchanged for another and a worse. When the lady looked up at last, he instinctively shivered. She held his letter in her hand—a shapely but large white hand, he observed, capable of wielding a rod effectively.

“From Lord Kilmeston?” she said. “You are acquainted with his Lordship, perhaps?”

“Intimately,” said the applicant, with a little conscious smile and flush, which the other did not fail to notice. She was a rather spacious young woman of a golden aspect. Her hair, her eyes, her pince-nez were all of the precious colour, tone contrasting with tone. Even her nice plain frock was of a warm citron hue. For the rest her complexion was of a serene pallor, her manner self-possessed, her brow severely calm—decidedly, all in all, an imposing figure; but attractive.

“His Lordship”—she referred to the letter—“acting for his father” (“He is ill,” interpolated the visitor murmuringly), “warmly recommends the bearer of this note, Mr. Charles Lorry” (“Myself,” intimated the visitor, ingratiatory), “for the post of secretary to Miss Watchett. She will find him sober, ingenious, and the best of good fellows.”

The lady replaced the letter on the table—leisurely, and looked up—suddenly. Mr. Lorry was biting the rim of his hat, and grinning over it. His expression sobered instantly.

“The best of qualifications, no doubt,” she said, steadily regarding the abashed face, “particularly as franked, indirectly, by my father’s old friend, Lord

Riversdale, to whom I had applied in my difficulty. He would be the last to misunderstand me, would he not ? ”

“ Of course,” answered the young gentleman, feeling a little hot. “ Why should he ? ”

“ O, I don’t know ! ” said the heiress. “ Only in Australia one’s recommendations to a post commonly consist in one’s capacities for it. These are rather abstract virtues, are they not ? but no doubt it is different in England. Can you spell ? ”

The abruptness of the demand made him jump.

“ Madam,” he said, with dignity, “ I have had a public-school education ; I have been at a University.”

“ Can you use a typewriter ? ”

“ I would scorn to say no.”

“ Are you proficient in languages ? ”

“ I will confess I have an insular shyness of blowing my own trumpet. But I know some out-of-the-way words.”

She rubbed her lips delicately with a snowy wisp of a handkerchief.

“ You see, it is this way,” she said. “ I have a large correspondence. It is one, perhaps the greatest, of the penalties of wealth.”

“ I feel that, for my part, I could suffer a worse,” said Mr. Lorry, with some emotion, “ for half the consideration.”

“ It reaches me—from everywhere,” continued Miss Watchett ; “ and it has to be answered—mostly unkindly. But you understand ? ”

“ Fully.”

“ You would have to undertake the bulk of it for me. Then there are the personal applications——”

“Leave those to me,” decided the visitor firmly. “There I should be upon my own ground.”

“They are really the first consideration,” said the heiress. “They interfere intolerably with the repose and retirement I desire for myself, and to command which I have arranged to dispense with all service here save that which is absolutely necessary. The Mansion servants do their daily work in the rooms and then go. For the rest of the time I, and my paid companion, Miss Clare Normanby, are alone here together. She is a valuable auxiliary; but what with the correspondence, the unwelcome calls, and the vigilant attendance on personal and household duties expected of her by her employer, her engagement is overtaxing her resources, and I have been reluctantly compelled to consider the necessity of an addition to our *ménage*.”

The gentleman bowed, but a little coldly. There was already something illuminating, he felt, in this speech. That “paid,” purse-proud and insolent, stuck in his gorge. A first faint flicker of commiseration for the staid little figure that had let him in stirred somewhere in his depths.

“The wages I could offer you,” said Miss Watchett, “would be fifteen shillings a week. Hours ten to four.”

He stared and gasped. Then recollected himself.

“I should call that munificent,” he said joyfully. “If it were only for the delight of serving you, I——”

She interrupted him, holding up her hand:

“There is one of them at the door now—if you like to go and prove your ability.”

He hurried out, and into the hall. Miss Normanby was in altercation at the front door with a stranger

who refused to be dismissed. The girl looked doubtful and a little distressed.

“ Surely, young woman, she will not decline to see me,” the visitor was protesting; “ to refuse of her abundance a stiver to the necessitous ? ”

He was attired like a mouldy clergyman, and his nose was red.

“ Allow me,” said Lorry, and very gently he interposed.

“ Who’s necessitous ? ” said he.

“ Sir,” said the stranger sourly, “ I collect for the Novelists’ Evangelical Mission.”

“ I know you do,” said the young gentleman; “ and that you do nothing else. I have seen you before, and introduced you to your own name in a certain Cautionary List.”

That was a shot in the dark; but master Charles was a knowing man of the world. It went home, and the clergyman vanished, softly and instantly, as if he had seen a Boojum.

“ Thank you,” said the companion. “ I suspected, but I couldn’t be sure.”

Charles returned to the heiress.

“ I foresee I can be of some use to you,” he said.

“ Do you wish to accept the post ? ”

“ By all means.”

#### IV

“ WERE you the sole amanuensis and chucker-out, really, before I came ? ” asked Mr. Lorry of the companion one morning. He had been at his task a fortnight now, and was enjoying it immensely on the whole. There was an originality about vigorous occupation which was an increasing charm to him.

He looked up from his table, and from voluminous correspondence, to canvass Miss Normanby, who was busy arranging flowers about the room.

"Why should you doubt it?" answered the lady. "You were introduced to me in the act."

"I have a picture, by Du Maurier, in my mind's eye, that's all," he said. "It is of a very little footman, a three-foot-six child, waiting to escort his mistress, a young lady of magnificent proportions, home from a party. I hope Miss Watchett is careful not to tread on you, at least."

She glanced at him swiftly, and away again. He detected a tiny flush on her cheek, and it gave him an odd wilful pleasure to believe it a flower of his growing. They had come to be on quite familiar terms, and he delighted in, while he patronised, the little desirable soul. She exhaled a sort of quiet purity, and though she was no more than bluntly passable in looks, a certain fragrance of mind and little body, coupled with a sweet complexion, atoned in her for most defects.

"Did you intend a double-meaning in saying that?" she asked him.

"Please don't interrupt me. How do you spell eligible?"

"How do you?"

"O! that's weak."

"Well, how do public schools and universities spell it, then?"

"I am not allowed to say. They don't like these things talked about. Do tell me."

"I don't know."

"I mean two l's or one?"

"Put two and make a blot."



“ Impostor ! ”

“ Isn't that rather the pot calling the kettle black ? ”

“ Eh ? ” He looked up, a sudden startled light in his eyes. “ What do you mean, madam ? ”

She was busy at her task, with her back presented to him.

“ Why, *are* you not one ? ” she asked, quite innocently, without turning round.

“ This,” he said, “ must not stop here. Give the charge a name.”

“ Did not you tell Miss Watchett,” she said, “ that you could use a typewriter ? ”

“ Never.”

“ That you were master of several languages ? ”

“ Words, madam, I said—words not in common use.”

“ And you cannot even spell.”

“ How do you know, when you confess you can't yourself ? ”

“ But that is not the worst. I suppose it has never occurred to you that Miss Watchett might all this time be perfectly well aware of the trick you are playing on her ? ”

He rose in very real perturbation.

“ Trick ! ” he cried. The shock was quite unexpected.

She whipped round on him, produced a letter from her pocket, and presented it :

“ Would you like to read that ? It may enlighten you.”

He took it from her hand, read it through with an amazed face, and gave a little gasp. It was the anonymous missive.

“ I knew nothing about this,” he said stupidly.

"Who," she answered; "supposed you did? Do you guess who wrote it?"

"Yes, very well."

"And his, or her purpose?"

"I'll ask him by and by. Just mischief, I expect." He expelled a huge accumulated sigh, and gave his chest a thwack. "*Ouf!*" he said. "A staggerer! Did she, Miss Watchett, authorise you to show it me?"

"O, no!"

"Then, why——"

"It seemed cruel to me—somehow—to leave you in the dark, fancying yourself such a wag."

"O, you overcome me with gratitude! Will you tell her now how you have opened my eyes?"

"I should never dare. I don't know how she would take it. I had no business to touch the letter; but the temptation came suddenly."

"You were in her confidence in the matter?"

"Yes; but she never actually prohibited me. This is a secret between you and me. She must take her own course; and, anyhow, I'm not going to spoil sport, Lord Kilmeston."

Even as she spoke, Miss Watchett herself came into the room. She glanced from one conscious face to the other, and her lips tightened.

"I could wish, Miss Normanby," she said, "that you would interrupt Mr. Lorry less frequently at his work. And do, pray, hurry up with those flowers. You have a dozen things of more importance to attend to."

## V

MR. CHARLES LORRY had been getting on—so far as his main purpose, a critical appreciation of the heiress,

was concerned—very well, better than he had ventured, for all his assurance, to expect. He was a handsome and attractive young man, possessed of a considerable fund of the calm impudence associated with that class of beings, *fruges consumere nati*, who unite in their agreeable selves the sense of untroubled appropriation and Quixotic honesty. He had from the first regarded the outcome of this business as a foregone conclusion. He would succeed in prevailing with the heiress, did she prove worthy of his regard; about that he had never allowed himself a doubt. On the other hand, it would be the simplest matter to chuck up his engagement at short notice, leaving things exactly as he had found them. He certainly wanted a rich wife; but, to do him the right justice, money without respect and affection had no appeal to him. It disturbed him now, only in degree, that he must play his game self-consciously.

His opportunities for an intimate study of Miss Watchett had given him plentiful food for reflection. It had been satisfying, at least, to find Jack's daughter an indubitable lady, cultivated, clever and accomplished. She talked well, played well, looked well, and her bearing was beyond reproach. As against those recommendations there were some apparently inherent qualities which repelled him. She had no sense of humour, for one thing; but that was not the worst. She was intolerant and hard—so hard in her judgments that he often wondered over his own secretarial indispensability, inasmuch as the nine-tenths of her correspondence which turned upon appeals she ruled inexorably into the waste-paper basket. He always hoped that she might, on reconsideration, disinter a selection, but she never did—in his presence, at least;

and anyhow, the wholesale immolation simplified matters.

She had begun by treating him personally with an abrupt hauteur which had seemed designed for his humiliation ; but it had not been very long before his persistent charms had begun to win their way with her. He had become conscious of a softening in their relations, at first hardly perceptible, but presently confessing itself in a regard which he could not mistake. It was the swift and swifter melting of virgin snow in the beams of an ardent Spring. And at last she was patently making love to him.

He accepted that fruition of his scheme as yet with philosophy, since he had by no means made up his own mind in the matter. It distressed him keenly, for one thing, to observe how, correspondingly with the heiress's hardly-veiled approaches to himself, her manner towards the companion became more and more disagreeably distant. She had always been the most exacting, the most inconsiderate of employers towards this kind devoted little helpmate ; she now seemed to take pleasure in finding fault with her, while she heaped the most intolerable burden of duties on the young shoulders. The thing came to amount to a positive persecution, which could have only one end, apparently designed—the dismissal of a hated incubus.

Did the child figure as such, indeed ? Jealousy, supposed master Charles, was not excluded from commanding white presences and majestic bosoms ; and he was attached to the little creature ; he sympathised with and pitied her. Still, not to be over-conceited, he was no more than madam's munificently paid secretary ; and he might be mistaken.

And then came the revelation about the anonymous letter, and in its light things which had been obscure appeared plain. Miss Watchett had known all along ; Miss Watchett had been melting, perchance, in the golden sun, not of love but of a coronet. He did not know whether to thank or to curse that rather vicious young scatterbrain, Mr. Vivian Plunkett, who had been present when the little plot was hatched, and who had written (of that he was certain ; he could not mistake the rascal's handwriting) the anonymous letter in question. Certainly he himself held no brief for Miss Clare Normanby ; and certainly Miss Mary Watchett was, in many respects, quite a seductive young *parti*. He stood at the fork of the road. Which way was he to take ? The question was decided for him quite abruptly.

## VI

THERE had been a painful scene, ending, as anticipated, in a notice to leave being given to the companion. Miss Watchett, after delivering her fiat, stood panting a little, as if overcome by, or ashamed of, her own vehemence ; Miss Normanby, who had said little in her personal defence, remained pale but composed. It was the man whose heart was blazing in a fume of indignation.

Now there are within us certain germs which, though living, only awaken and become active in the shock of unforeseen accident. In the same way an emotion, failing its particular provocation, may lie dormant in us for years or for ever. So it happened with master Charles. The blow, though half expected, dislodged and quickened in him the germ of something so amazing and unexpected that it posi-

tively took his breath away. He felt as if a mist had been swept from his eyes, leaving his choice of a road quite startlingly clear—so inevitable, indeed, that it seemed impossible he could ever have doubted it. He faced the heiress quietly, but his eyes looked curiously large and his lips oddly red.

“Miss Normanby is to go to-morrow, then,” he said. “From to-morrow you will please, also, to employ another secretary.”

He heard her exclaim and gasp as he turned his back on her. He took no notice, but walked stiffly up to Clare Normanby and stood before her.

“I had not understood up to now,” he said, “what had come to move me so intensely in the sight of my fellow-bondslave subjected to her daily martyrdom. I know at last. I had come here to prevail with the employer: I end by being vanquished by the employed. In the prospect of her loss I realise my own. My dear, I wasn’t aware, but you have become indispensable to me. This fortnight has finished my education. I am not worth much in any way; but I can keep a wife, and I ask you to give yourself to me. You are worth a thousand heiresses, and I will try to make you as happy as your sweetness and virtue deserve.”

He was conscious in himself, while speaking, of a sort of delirious self-abandonment, like that of an unharnessed horse let loose to roll and flounder in a meadow of spring flowers. A sudden astonished voice recalled him to his senses.

“You came here, Mr. Lorry, to prevail with the employer!”

He faced about, triumphantly regarding the injured goddess.

“ You know, madam, you know,” he said ; “ and I know that you know. I have seen the letter, whose writer, believe me, I shall be careful to call to account for his abominable abuse of a trust. Yet I have to thank him in one way for opening my eyes to a double truth, to which, without his interference, I might have remained for ever blind—the impotence of wealth without a heart to recommend itself ; the inestimable value, above all material advantages, of a lovable goodness. And now to confess. I am not, Miss Watchett, what you think me.”

“ Do you not mean, Lord Kilmeston, what, without the letter, I *should* have thought you ? ”

“ No.”

Even as he spoke something happened—something so morally dislocating that for the moment his brain reeled in the shock of it. Miss Clare Normanby, with a tiny rippling laugh, ran past him and threw herself upon the shoulder of Miss Mary Watchett. In the same instant the oddest expression made itself seen on the heiress’s face. It was like nothing so much as suppressed merriment.

“ Explain yourself, please,” she said—with difficulty.

“ I am not Lord Kilmeston.”

“ Well, I am not Miss Mary Watchett.”

A silence followed—brief, but too enormous for measurement. Then, out of a mist and thunder of stupefaction, Mr. Charles Lorry became conscious that two faces were curiously regarding him. He laughed ruefully.

“ Hoist with my own petard,” he said, and fell dumb.

“ O ! ” said the golden lady, shaking a severe finger at him ; “ are you not ashamed of yourself for playing

such a trick upon two unsuspecting women? And it might have succeeded, had it not been for the letter, and an adventurer spared his deserts. Be quiet, Mary, I *will* say it. Yes, sir, this is Miss Watchett, and I am the companion. The daring insolence of the imposture! But, being forewarned, we were equal to it, and we just exchanged parts. I would have punished you for the fraud far more drastically than I was allowed; but I trust, anyhow, you have had your sufficient lesson. Now please to tell us *who* you are, and why it is that Lord Riversdale deigned to lend himself to so gross an abuse of confidence?"

"He didn't. Don't torture the trodden worm," cried the suffering youth. "I don't defend myself, but it was not quite so bad as you suppose. Kilmeston came and told me about his idea in the presence of Vivian Plunkett; but he wasn't really serious, and he offered to turn the business over to me if I cared to apply. I'm not over-blessed with worldly goods, and I jumped at the thing—mostly for the fun and adventure of it. I trusted to my own rotten attractions, you see; and, of course, I knew nothing about the letter, for which I'll wring that beast's nose when I see him. I'm really Charles Lorry, and—and now I'd better go."

He turned and moved, rather reluctantly, towards the door.

"And you had the assurance—the assurance," breathed Miss Normanby, "to regard yourself as an eligible suitor?"

"Well, I changed my mind—I couldn't help it."

"Mr. Lorry!"

Charles came about again. It was Miss Watchett, the real Miss Watchett, who had spoken. Her eyes were shining, her face was a little flushed.



“ Perhaps,” she said, “ your explanation—it’s not so bad—it’s not bad at all. And—and—after testing you—to see if you were base enough to aspire where you couldn’t respect, and then—I think, after all, *our* trick was the meanest, and you come out of it all—best. I only want to say that we shall be dining—alone here to-morrow, and that we shall be glad to see you. And—and there are two l’s, I *think*, in eligible.”

## A DOUBLE PRETENDER

### I

“FULWOOD’S RENTS” was, in 1750, a quite self-important little Court, and notable above the most of those which neighboured on the fashionable seclusion of Gray’s Inn Gardens. It possessed two very opposite claims to distinction—conviviality and exclusiveness. The first illustrated itself in a number of reputable houses of entertainment, which included, among others, the Castle and Golden Griffin Taverns, John’s and Squire’s Coffee-houses, and the punch-shop once kept by Ned Ward of the “Spy,” who had figured in the “Dunciad.” The second was vested primarily in Miss Arabella Pitcher’s Finishing School for young ladies.

How this last establishment had ever come to leaven the sociality of Fulwood’s was an unrelated chapter in the story of the Court. A strange lock of secrecy seemed to hold its walls curiously rigid and its wire-blinded windows curiously vacant. Its conventual mystery was even supposed a veil to something un-conformable and subversive, though nobody knew exactly of what. Certainly the vision of its half-score little Misses issuing for their daily promenade in the gardens (to which an upper passage gave them access, without need to traverse the Court), and pairing away demurely under the shepherding of Miss Nancy Bell, painted with no colours but of eyebrights and rose-buds the supposed dark enigma. But, then, have

flowers no other significance than as the frank emblems of innocence? Mr. Turpin, accepting a nosegay of pinks at St. Sepulchre's on his way to Tyburn, suggests quite another character for them.

Well, there is no smoke without fire; and let it be conceded at once that the burning heart of Miss Pitcher was really responsible for the haze which enveloped her dwelling. That stood, strait-laced and aloof, on the upper east side of the Court, in "a handsome open place, with a freestone pavement," and, as a matter of fact, was a gift to her from a deceased lawyer uncle, who had retired thither from the Inn hard by, when his association with the defence of Kilmarnock, and the other rebel lords of '47, had brought his legal career, and finally his life, to an apoplectic end. But very loyally his niece had shared, and succeeded to, his political views; whence the ardent heart, and the mystery-exhaling atmosphere thereof.

Miss Pitcher, in short, was a fanatical Tory, a white rose of the whitest; and her house was an asylum, rather than a school, for the daughters of a few of those aristocratic exiles, from the *Cause*, who could afford remittances sufficient for the meet education of their abandoned olive-branches. She was own foster-mother to Jacobitism, and suckled her charges, so to speak, on the rose-white milk of it. She enjoyed all the delights of conspiracy by proxy, and loved to think herself an object of secret uneasiness to the Government, while she shut her eyes resolutely to the growing indifference, on the part of the public, to the so-called "Pretence." All the little by-plays and innuendoes of Jacobitism were religiously practised in her house. They drank (in *orgeat*, which was a syrup of almonds and sugar) the King across the water-bottle; they

besprigged themselves fitly on Oak-apple Day ; they mourned, in white favours, on Execution. It would have been all very harmless and amusing had not the desperation of the cause at that time attached a contributory value even to such frothy ebullitions ; and so far, at least, Miss Pitcher's neighbours were justified in their suspicion of her Finishing School.

Now there was, I regret to say, one traitor in the Pitcher camp, and that was Miss Nancy Bell. Nancy and her brother had been orphan wards of the late Sergeant Pitcher, and whether it was due to his ruinous conduct of their small estate, or to resentment of his overbearing personality, or to principle, or to all together, the two detested both Pretenders, old and young. Mr. Thomas Bell, indeed, having completed his Chancery term as law student, and been promoted to the Inns of Court, could afford a political self-indulgence which was denied to his sister, who was utterly dependent on Miss Arabella, and treated, moreover, with a contempt and arrogance not infrequently shown to the victims of injustice by their wrongers. She was expected to respond, in short, body and soul, to the charity which fed her with the crumbs from her own dissipated estate. Her employer never even thought to question her loyalty to herself, or to picture her as a possible viper on her Jacobitish hearth. But there she went astray. The young lady was possessed of a tooth quite virulently venomous, although, like a viper's, it was laid back, until wanted, against the little pink roof of her mouth. She held it so, pending the arrival of that retributive day when all the wrong of which her fiery little brain and bursting heart was conscious should find its opportunity to retaliate upon her hard task-mistress. And in the

meanwhile she "under-nursed" the boarders (she was scarcely older than the eldest of them), and took their aristocratic scorns and condescensions in silence.

It must be admitted, in some defence of Miss Pitcher's treatment of her, that Miss Nancy was quite reprehensibly pretty—pretty in a way which, to a certain acid order of intelligence, is a necessary moral disqualification. For it is a feminine instinct to associate ugliness with respectability, and to be suspicious of "looks," which are never other than "mere" in Mrs. Grundy's category of the graces. Hence, with women, the grotesque fashions most prevail, while the becoming are soon discarded. Nancy, in consequence, being possessed of a loveliness which was quite independent of adornments, was a perpetual provocation to the "dressings" of righteousness. But her bloom survived, despite Miss Pitcher's efforts to depreciate it; it survived—in china complexion, seal-like eyes, and gold-umber tresses, of which no spite could discrown her—by reason, perhaps, of a spirit which was as much its inspiration as its defence. Nancy, in short, was as fearless as she was pretty, and as wideawake as she was patient.

It was this young lady's duty to chaperon the boarders (implying thereby her "plain" fitness for the task) in their daily ordered perambulations about the Gardens; but when the weather was cold or ungenial she was permitted to take her constitutional alone. Perhaps—who knows?—Miss Pitcher secretly looked to scandalous circumstance to rid her of a conscience-chafing incubus on some such occasion. I would not wrong her; but certainly the Gardens—what with pick-pockets, ring-droppers, and other expert folk of a shady caste—were become of late years no safe place

of resort for unprotected young women. Nancy, however, by reason of her strong will of innocence, moved as safe among the beasts as Bonny Kilmeny; and mostly her hours of freedom were spent with her brother the law-student, who had modest chambers in the Inn, and whose sympathy and encouragement were a never-failing tonic to her depression, while his optimism built such real-looking castles in the air that the moment of their possession by him and her, grown independent and prosperous, seemed never far distant. And, in the meanwhile, discussion of impossible methods for "rounding on" Miss Pitcher were a perpetual comfort to the two, until—lo and behold! on one desperate day the opportunity, which they had so long and so wrongly prefigured, showed itself to them in fearsome guise, and—they closed with it.

It was a chill dingy noon in September of the year 1750, and Miss Nancy was out in the Gardens by herself, hurrying for Mr. Thomas's chambers. There were a good many people about, including rather a superfluity of the sinister-respectable; and whether it were that lawlessness felt in its veins some rumour of political infection, or because the little beauty unusually charmed the bilious atmosphere, she found herself seriously molested for the first time in her experience. It happened in a moment, inexplicably and confusingly. Without a note of warning, there she was the centre and cynosure of a malapert, derisory group, being complimented and hustled. In the midst, she felt her purse go (a poor little starved account of steel beads and threepenny pieces), and a scream, half terror, half fury, burst from her lips. It had the instant effect to bring an outer circle of spectators about the inner, hemming the wheel within the wheel.

“ My purse has been stole from me ! ” wailed Miss Nancy.

“ Has it, though, has it ? ” said a tall fair-headed young gentleman, pushing his way through the crowd. He had a rather large pleasant face, big-nosed and under-jawed—not a bit, in its suggestion of massive humour, of the femininely romantic order. He wore the uniform, only lately established, of a naval officer—blue coat with white facings, hat turned up with a gold cockade, and the sword, of course. Miss Nancy received him breathless. If this was to be a cutting-out expedition, how was to end the moral for her ? But somehow his appearance gave her confidence.

He shook his finger at the crowd, in shrewd good-humour.

“ A purse has changed hands,” he said. “ ’Tisn’t in nature, is it, to expect anyone to confess to the when and how ? But I know some things out of nature. I’ve travelled the seas, as you’ll observe, and I’ve kept my eyes open. In the West Indies they practise bugaboo. I learned a little there—for instance, how to detect a thief by it. ’Tis very simple, when he happens to be present. I merely raise my hand, like this ; I cry ‘ Mumbo-jumbo ! ’ loud, as I cry it now, and, within a few seconds, as you’ll notice, his nose will begin to swell up like a blood-blister.”

He had scarcely uttered the word when a fellow in the crowd clapped his hand to his snout, recognised on the instant his mistake, threw down the purse, burst through the intervening press, and bolted for his life. The rest, to a storm of laughter, gave chase, and Nancy and her deliverer were left alone.

He recovered the purse and presented it to her, encountering her for the first time face to face. The

spirit of humour left his own. He suddenly winced in his breath, as if shot ; and indeed a little gilded bolt had struck him under the fifth rib.

Now, this is not a love-story, or I could fashion a very pretty idyll out of the meetings of the next three days. Fewer, in the times of the Fleet and Gretna Green, had often sufficed for a whole fairy-tale of courtship and matrimony.

“ Madam,” says the stranger, quite gravely, by and by, “ the debt is flagrantly mine. ’Twere ecstasy if the devotion of a lifetime might be held to liquidate it in part.”

That was to begin, one might say, almost at the end ; and Nancy, no doubt, felt the peril of such foreclosings. She was deeply engaged to her hero ; but, just as yet, knowledge had not come to leaven her suspicion of his unromantic cast of countenance.

“ If they capture the pickpocket,” he said, “ you will have to appear against him, and likely be put to some distress and impertinence. I think you would be wise to let me escort you from the scene. ‘ Possession is eleven points in the law.’ ”

She thanked him very sincerely ; and suggested that her brother’s chambers were hard by.

“ And I’m sure, sir,” said she, “ that his gratitude, joined to mine, will leave you in no doubt as to which way the obligation lies.”

He protested rapturously ; but honest Tom, when they had sought and found him, completely justified her insistence.

The next three days were all a lyric, of love crescendo, to Nancy and her knight. The weather, being bad, contributed to the Lydian measure. She learned of him that his name was Charles Edward Prince :



that he was a sea-officer to His Majesty, but at present uncommissioned ; that he loved her, in and out of reason. He learned of her that she was a pensioner on someone's bounty ; that she was poor and unhappy ; that she was a determined Whig (at which he laughed) ; that—conditionally, and in reason only—she returned his regard. That was enough. They would not ruin their idyll by offensive details.

Only once he frightened her ; and that was by proposing a Fleet marriage. When he saw her distress, he explained—thus far :

“ The back-door to happiness is the one for poor dependents, like you and me. If we sought the front, it would be shut in our faces.”

She rejoiced to learn, by that, that he was in something her own case of servitude. But she would have none of his way to emancipation.

“ I am a free-born Briton,” she said. “ If I am to marry you at all, it shall be in a church.”

That morning, on a backstair in the Inn, he won his first kiss of her. Tom was very busy above, singing and shuffling papers.

Nancy returned to Fulwood's Rents in a dream. She was awakened from it, all in a moment, to a sense of startling realities.

Miss Pitcher was the cause. She rose in her place, after the midday meal, to make a hushed and rapturous announcement.

“ Ladies,” she said, “ a transcendent experience is to be ours. It has been conveyed to my knowledge that a certain August Personage, not unconnected in the first instance with the events of '45, is at the moment risking his illustrious life in a visit to the first Capital of his inheritance ; and, desiring to assure us

in person, and as the representative of his saintly parent, of his sense of our loyal attachment to his House, is deigning to contemplate a call upon us to-morrow at midday, when he will distribute among us some treasurable mementoes of his condescension. Ladies, let us respond, with a full heart of gratitude, and a full sense of the responsibility which the occasion imposes on us, to this sweetest of affabilities on the part of our adored young Prince."

Nancy listened in dumbfounded silence. But she had the hypocrisy presently to smile and applaud. Afterwards she set to thinking.

The fruits of her thought appeared in a hurried visit to her brother early on the following morning. She risked some Pitcherian indignation and rebuke to obtain it. But the risk was worth.

The two put their thrilling, tingling heads together. The sum of their hurried discussion amounted to this: An information to be laid by Mr. Thomas, instantly and privately, before the proper authorities; an organised descent of the law at the psychologic moment on Fulwood's Rents; arrest of the young Pretender; consequent claiming of the reward (it might amount to anything up to forty thousand pounds); and, result—triumph, retaliation, independence, and a bridal dowry.

Miss Nancy went home, hugging, in prospect, her thirty pieces of silver. She was a traitor; but injured women, especially if in love, are subject to no laws of honour.

## II

Two very opposite sentiments awaited, in Fulwood's Rents, the approach of the stupendous hour. On the one side was a sort of congregated intoxication of eleven

enraptured brains—stored and smouldering censers awaiting their divinity; on the other, in splendid isolation, the single arch-traitor.

Nancy did not once repent her part during that long agitated morning. She was one of those exquisitely human natures, whose moral cuticles are as abnormally sensitive to wrong as the skins of some people are to physical pain. Her hatred of tyranny in any form took no especial count of the fact that it was of her own oppression that she had been an enforced and helpless spectator. She would have conspired quite as heartily in any impersonal case to counterplot coercion. Her hot young soul struck for the true principle of liberty, which is the recognition of one's right to live one's own life unvexed of privilege under whatever guise or disguise, and to subscribe to no laws which are not designed to secure that end. Her motto was simply the *vive ut vivas*. She would have abhorred the democracy and socialism of our own day, as she would have detested its Conservatism.

She regarded with a secret sardonic amusement the pious preparations for the great event—the daïs improvised out of boards supported on footstools, and covered with a piece of spare carpet, the selvage outward; the theatrical gilded chair, hired of a costumier in Covent Garden; the bouquet of yellow (they called it yaller, then) golden-rod. What a cataclysm, she thought, was threatening all this shoddy play-acting! and hers was to be the hand to launch the flood! The Pitcher and the Bell, the brass and the earthenware vessels, were to come to conclusions at last!

As the clock neared the fatal hour, the stress of expectancy waxed acute. One or two of the boarders giggled along the road to hysterics. Miss Pitcher her-

self grew tremulous and flabby, and uncertain in her grasp of the situation. Only the nerves of the hardened conspirator kept their tension—nay, tightened it by a turn or two of the screws. Such is the perversity of wickedness. The innocent trembles to a false charge : the guilty stiffens to a true one.

Midday struck—no Prince. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and the suspense grew intolerable. Then did Miss Pitcher, verging on tears, admit how she had always had her doubts of the reliability of Doctor King, in whose house, in Red Lyon Square hard by, the exalted visitor, as she now confessed, was sojourning. Miss Nancy, making a furious mental note of the fact, wondered only if she had somehow been betrayed to this man. If so——

A loud rap-rap at the door !

. . . . .

He was ushered in, quite alone and unattended—a tall, fair-haired gentleman-citizen in garb and appearance ; but his features ! how familiar to the devoted conners of their royal profile engraved on lockets and watchcases ! He looked, for his part, a little warm and shamefaced, and even received with obvious embarrassment the genuflections of the company, as it fell on its knees to him in rustling adoration.

“ We are to apologise ” (O, the rapture of that “ we ”) “ for this unpunctuality,” he said ; “ it was unavoidable.”

And then his eye glanced to a solitary figure in the background, which alone of them all remained erect—*and he saw before him, white, rigid and stricken, the face of her to whom he had pledged his eternal faith only yesterday in the Gardens.*

The shock was an astounding one ; but he mastered it. He even managed to play his part admirably. Majesty is wont to such contretemps, and trained to carry the worst situations with a smile. His condescension was intoxicating. He made a pretty little speech to the children ; he accepted the bouquet with a kiss to its blushing bearer ; he produced and distributed among the boarders a number of little tawdry trinkets, rings and seals and so forth, just to keep his memory green with them, he said.

Miss Pitcher corrected him daringly. " White, your royal Highness," she whispered—" the hue of your angel race."

One little miss craved his signature for her album. He hesitated a moment at that, but consented in the end. While he was writing it, a young lady advanced suddenly from the back and overlooked him (Charles Edward P., she saw him trace), and was smartly rebuked by the mistress for her impertinence. She neither heard nor was interested to hear. Her mind, her soul were all one swirl of agony. That she had unwittingly betrayed her love ; that her love was revealed this man, a love impossible to her ; that she could do nothing at last to stay, to warn him from, the consequences of her own treason !—the madness sickened her brain. Bitterly, bitterly had her bolt recoiled upon her own head. In the midst of her stunned despair, she was conscious of a second knocking at the door. " Judas ! Judas ! Judas !" she cried aloud, and struck herself insanely on the breast. A score of eyes, wild and startled, were turned upon her. She flung herself into a chair and hid her face.

Thus lying, she was aware of hurried footsteps, of agitated shrieks, of a babble of voices, of oaths and a

dreadful silence. Wrought beyond endurance, she pushed the hair from her eyes and looked up.

Huddled, gasping and hysterical, to one side of the room were Miss Pitcher and the boarders: standing facing them on the other were her brother, a gross peppery old gentleman in a great peruke, and a couple of stolid Bow Street runners; and between, quite passive and with folded arms, was the subject of all the hubbub.

The Magistrate—for such was the old fellow—had been speaking; and he spoke again.

“As to you, ma’am, I congratulate ye on your entertainment of an impostor, since it’s saved ye consequences. But I’d make sure another time, if I was you, to have me rook identified before I gave him the name of treason.”

Miss Pitcher could only gasp: “You say it is not the Prince?”

“I say it, ma’am,” said the Magistrate coolly. Then he roared: “What! ye fond old Tory! Wasn’t I familiar with his face and person as the palm of me hand (’twas in Paris in ’48, when our fine new friend the King o’ France was plotting to rid himself of Charlie)—and then to see pointed out for’m this long-nosed skittle-sharper, whom I’m not sure yet but it isn’t me duty to lay by the heels in His Majesty’s pound. Take’m for Charlie, indeed!”

Miss Pitcher screeched, with a little rally to fury.

“Not?” she cried. “Then what——!”

Reference to the trinkets, to the signature, was on her lips; but discretion choked it back timely. She was enmeshed indeed—held by every limb, and stifled from utterance. She could only look and claw in venomous silence at the discredited royalty.

Nancy, white as paper, had risen to her feet ; the stranger laughed.

“ Well, I confess I’m not the Prince,” he said.

Again Miss Pitcher screamed ; but this time not half so loud as Miss Nancy.

“ O, thank God, thank God ! ” cried the latter, and ran and threw herself into the young gentleman’s arms.

*A l’œuvre on connaît l’ouvrier.* Miss Pitcher, scandalised, outraged, infuriated, yet, oddly, a little relieved, had an instant vision of the truth. A short terrible scene followed—its main points impossible of elucidation in the presence of the law—and Nancy was ordered to leave the house instanter with her—but we will not sully the record, even if a vixen thought fit to. The Magistrate let them go, with only a dry comment on the situation : “ *Jusq’au revoir !* ” Then he turned to Mr. Thomas. “ I’d go back to me occupation of sitting on wind-eggs, if I was you, sir,” says he. “ You may hatch out another rook or so, and more profitable to ye, if ye’re lucky.”

Nancy and her lover walked across the Gardens, together but apart. Crestfallen, Tom slunk in their rear, his tail between his legs. They all made, as if by instinct, for the law-student’s rooms. Not a single word was spoken amongst them until they were closeted together. Then the “ sea-officer ” placed Miss Nancy in one chair, invited her brother to another by her side, and so, standing and facing the two, delivered himself.

“ You have heard me denounced for an impostor : I am one—in a sense. My name is truly, nevertheless, Charles Edward Prince. If I abbreviate it to Charles Edward P., I am guilty of a vulgarism, perhaps, but no fraud. My father is General Prince, who fought at Culloden, and after found asylum in France. I serve

King George ; but my sympathies are—well, with a frolic at all times. The old gentleman advised me, being on furlough, that a certain visitor might be expected at the house of our kinsman Dr. King, and implored me, by my filial duty, to help to see him through. I scented an adventure, and agreed. It is perfectly true (I confide it to your honour) that the Prince is at this moment ensconced in the house of my kinsman in Red Lyon Square.

“Miss Pitcher (you never revealed the name of your employer to me, Nancy, you know) was a Jacobite to be shown consideration. A visit to her house was on the programme. We set out this morning to accomplish it. Our way lay through Fulwood’s Rents, a very congeries of Taverns. Perhaps you know, or perhaps you don’t know, the young gentleman’s weakness. He insisted anyhow on a temporary adjournment, became enamoured of a particular bin, and was soon helpless. We were at our wits’ end. Miss Pitcher was not to be denied. At length it was decided that I, carrying the tokens, and bearing some loose likeness to the exalted principal, should go on and personate him, while my companion remained behind to accommodate matters as he could. You know the rest—all but the name of the traitor.”

“Nancy Bell,” cried the young lady ; and rose and threw herself at his feet, sobbing.

He stared ; then burst into a great laugh.

“Why, I had that notion,” he said. “But, if Mr. Thomas will lend his countenance, we’ll even now make a shift to round off this conspiracy in the Fleet, and afterwards Mrs. Prince shall tell us her story.”



## BULLET-PROOF

SO far as I know, the true story of the Bugsley Vacuum Jacket has never yet been made public. Now the death of the distinguished officer, who was associated with the patentee in the production of what has virtually revolutionised modern warfare, has removed what polite embargo lay upon the tongues of the informed, and there can be no indiscretion or ill-taste in admitting the "general" to the humours of an anecdote, which the "particular" was wont often to relate in private, with a keen sense of the nature of the laugh which it raised against himself.

The circumstances which, many years ago, led to the resignation, by Major Cheverel Manton, of his official position in Pall Mall will be still within the recollection of many. The gallant officer had pledged himself and his credit to the impenetrability of a certain bullet-proof coat designed by a Mr. Bugsley, and his strength of faith in the invention had lacked only the force to convince the superior impenetrability of his department. His demand for a trial being persistently ignored, he took, finally, the extreme step of resigning his commission, as the most practical form of protest possible against, as he considered it, the ruinous supineness of the War Office. That the result came to justify this step served the enlightened public, of course, for a delirious scandal by and by; yet, no doubt, the War Office had had its excuse, and one

even—as Major Manton himself was moved presently to admit—of a more than commonly reasonable complexion. For the fact had been that, while Mr. Bugsley was a notorious patenter of chimeras, his backer—always a “cranky,” hot-tempered man—had only recently at the time recovered from a severe influenza, and was supposed still subject to hallucinations.

Whatever the official rendering of the case, however, the evolution of the famous service jacket, from its first practical test in the Borstall explorative expedition to its ultimate adoption by the Government authorities, is a certain matter of history; and assuredly the late Major Manton never had reason to regret his firm confidence in the virtues of an invention, which compensated him with a fortune for the position he sacrificed to uphold it.

The story, as related by the Major, ran as follows:

“I was one of the officials of the Ordnance. It was part of my duties to interview cranks. Do you realise what that means—the ineffable weariness of flesh and waste of time? I dare say you have no conception of the number of people in the world who are busily engaged in trying to extract sunbeams out of cucumbers. A single day spent at the War Office would enlighten you, perhaps. I suppose that, as human nature swings at the eternal balance between offence and defence, it is natural that a disproportion of inventive genius should flow Pall-Mallwards. There is no such fruitful inspiration, of the right sort, as that which points to the most economic method of destroying one’s enemies. Of all creative cranks, the man who invented or adapted the guillotine stands, in my opinion, at the head of the poll. Bugsley, for all his versatility, couldn’t touch him.

“That man had haunted me for years—a suave apparition. You never saw him? He couldn’t survive his only success, and was found sitting at his desk dead and smiling over the post which had brought him Borstall’s testimonial to the efficacy of the jacket.

“The first time I saw him was on an afternoon in the late nineties. I had been pestered out of reason that day, I remember, and was in a bad mood for considering any further Colney Hatch patents—sights that would enable a man to kill with his eyes shut, powders that would explode automatically on the least little international friction, plugs for compressed rations to be carried in a rifle-barrel, and buttons each a receptacle for a condensed meat lozenge. I had been harassed, I say, and my temper was no doubt a bit short when Bugsley was shown in to me. There was nothing repugnant about the man; but I developed an instinctive antagonism to him on the spot. He was very short and thick and ungainly, with an enormous smiling face and knock knees. As he stood rattling the pence in his trouser-pockets, with his feet finned out, his little fat thighs pressed together, and his great beaked nose tilted up at an angle, he reminded me of nothing so much as the aldermanic turtle. I saw a calm and unctuous assurance in his smile, and snapped out at him instanter :

“‘State your business, if you please. I’ve no time to spare. A word will do.’

“He answered at once, looking sideways at the ceiling, ‘I have a little fancy—Vacuums. There’s a fortune in it.’

“That was his obsession—and he never looked away from the ceiling, but casually, in expressing it. Vacuums, vacancy, vacuity—the man’s mind was

gone on the craze. I don't know how to put it fairly. There is the jacket to speak for him ; but, before that, there were certainly other things. His single idea was that where nothing was, nothing could happen—that all strategy in warfare should be directed to enticing the enemy to waste his energies and his ammunition upon emptiness.

“ In this first case it was a design for a gun he brought. The weapon was to fire smokeless powder ; but there was an arrangement in the breech for ejecting laterally, and simultaneously with the discharge, a miniature blank shell, filled with black powder, which, bursting at a point some two or three hundred yards distant, should mislead the enemy as to the position of your piece, and draw their fire upon nothing.

“ I explained, briefly, some technical difficulties, and got rid of the man—as I thought. But not a bit of it. A month later he turned up again, smiling at the ceiling, and offered me a plan for a refracting instrument, which was to project the apparition of bodies of men moving upon the enemy from as many points as you liked, while the living troops which produced them were to be all confounded in the most diabolical and confusing way with the illusions. If I had hesitated over the first suggestion, as sincere in its way, I saw at once now the true character of the eccentric, and dismissed him without ceremony. A month later he called again, and took the ceiling into his confidence, with that eternal and imperturbable catch-phrase of his, ‘ I have a little fancy. There's a fortune in it.’ This time it was a sort of compound heliograph, for dazzling the eyes of a whole troop of the enemy's horse when either making or resisting a

cavalry-charge. I told him to go, and he went. I gave orders that he was not to be admitted again, and he was not admitted. Did that save me? Nothing of the sort. A few weeks later I was leaving the office, when a shadow emerged from a doorway, and an oily voice whispered in my ear, 'I have a little fancy, Major. There's a fortune in it.' It was for a sort of captive balloon, it appeared, to be floated, a tempting mark, over the enemy's lines, with two dummy aeronauts in the car stuffed with high explosives, and designed to spread destruction around the moment the thing should be brought down. I faced the creature decisive.

" 'Mr. Bugsley,' I said; 'I have heard many of your inventions now, and this is really the last I wish to be told about, You mustn't approach me again, and I must tell you that your genius is wasted in these directions. Your province, if you will believe me, is in the large domain of pantomime, and I should recommend you to apply at Drury Lane.'

" He smiled, murmured 'Vacuums,' and fell back. But I was mistaken in supposing I had laid the apparition of him. He took to haunting me by post, in typewritten copy; his large placid face mooned at me round street corners, or was pressed against the glass of shop-fronts while I trafficked within; he put advertisements in the papers, addressed to Major C. M., and relating, in a sort of loose cypher, the details of new lunacies. I found myself studying these against my will; I developed a sickening subconsciousness of his presence in my neighbourhood; I thought about him constantly. Bit by bit he seemed to weave his insane personality into the very fibre of my being, and I grew to loathe the imposition, as it

were, of a dual personality thrust upon me—only my Mr. Hyde was horribly benevolent, and the murderous moiety was myself. My dreams grew disturbed because of him, and my temperature constantly stood at a perilous figure. This state of things may have continued, in varying moods, for a year or two, when I got my big dose of influenza which pretty well laid me flat. I had to chuck everything, and rusticate. The demon of the complaint must be my apology for what followed.

“ You know how it takes some people, even the sanest? That is the devil of what they call its convalescence. One can endure the fever and the pain and the nausea; but the suicidal depression during recovery! One looks out on the world through warped spectacles. Everything seems to have gone irredeemably crooked, ugly; everything presents a baffling front, and nothing, it appears, can by any hope shake itself straight again. I was in a foul bad way; and one day I sat, muffled in my dressing-gown, brooding my ruin, moral and material, and eyeing a revolver, army-service pattern, which lay on a table beside me. It was loaded in all its seven chambers, and I waited only the word of the demon to take it up.

“ ‘ I have a little fancy,’ said a voice; and there he stood before me. Bugsley, and no other! That was in my bungalow down in Buckinghamshire, and how he had tracked me there the Lord only knows. But it didn’t matter. The vision had had to materialise for me, and here was its most appropriate form. I took up the revolver and arose, grinning like a lynx. There were seven chambers—four for him and three for me.

“ He had not altered by a crease, save that he

looked even stouter and stumpier than his wont. His short frock-coat was buttoned almost to bursting across his chest; his gills were swollen and his eyes projecting. He gave his bow-window a resounding thwack.

“ ‘Don’t do that,’ I said, ‘or you’ll break the glass.’

“ He smiled like one in a beatitude.

“ ‘No fear, Major,’ he said. ‘This time, I *have* done it.’

“ ‘You have,’ I said sternly. ‘On your head be it!’

“ It was his stomach I fired at, however. I couldn’t help it; the mark was so sure and obtrusive.

“ I waited a panic moment for the smoke to clear—and then I saw him. He was standing with his little legs straddled, his hands behind his back, and that ineffable smile on his face.

“ ‘Don’t mind me,’ he said. ‘Try again.’

“ A sort of dementia seized me. One after the other I emptied the remaining six chambers at the impervious figure, and then threw down the weapon and reeled to a chair, at the moment that my servant, rushing from a distance, broke into the room. The man stood appalled before the apparition of the chuckling stranger, the reeking room, and my own livid face; and in that instant the intruder had thrown open his coat, and revealed underneath—what you all know now.

“ ‘Behold,’ said he, ‘the Bugsley Vacuum jacket—bullet-proof, Major, as you must have convinced yourself. There’s a fortune in it.’

“ That was the way he excused me. It all passed for an experiment. He was a good soul, and he hadn’t left me a cartridge for my own affairs.

“ There’s the story.”

## PRISCILLA PIPKIN

*“ And the long carpet rose along the gusty floor.”*

PRISCILLA PIPKIN came on a windy evening and left on a windy morning. All night I heard the gale flapping in my blind, and dreamed of flying skirts, and at breakfast Priscilla was gone. There was no lamp alight, as usual, under an empty kettle ; no stove-brush on my chair ; no toast-rack at all (Priscilla would occasionally put my letters in it and post the toast under my bedroom door). Priscilla Pipkin, in short, had disappeared, like the baseless fabric of a vision, and left not a rack behind her.

Mrs. Hoskins, my landlady, when I rang her up to explain, explained. She had always mistrusted the girl, she said ; she wore such small boots. There was an artful hussy hid somewhere behind that print apron. Priscilla, it appeared, had come straight down from her attic that morning and give her notice—not a month’s, or a week’s, or a day’s, if you please ; but had just up’d with her nose like a silk parasole, and walked out of the house as grand as my lady. It was possible, Mrs. Hoskins thought, that a letter she had received by the early post had inspired her to this astonishing decision. But, whatever the case, Priscilla Pipkin, forgoing a month’s wages and the possibility of a tip from the lodger, was gone on the wings of the wind.

“ She’d neither stop nor explain,” said Mrs. Hoskins



bitterly ; “ but carried off her things, as she'd brought 'em, in a newspaper parcel as big as a target, and pinned down at the corners ; and what I may come to think of it all, the Lord deny me.”

I begged that for the moment she would think of it in connection with my breakfast, and asked if there were any letters for me.

“ No, sir,” said Mrs. Hoskins ; “ though the post-man come ; I hear him. But I suppose Priscilla's was the only one.”

Here was an additional aggravation. I had looked—with a confidence justified by nothing but inexperience—for a letter that morning from a certain “ trustee,” whose duty it should have been to pay me the first fourth of a yearly allowance of five hundred pounds on this, the first day of May. He had not done so—I supposed to impress me with the insignificance of my claim on his attention. He was a beast, and beastly rich—a great sweltering Cræsus, with thin yellow hair streaking his head like soap, swollen eyes, and an ill-tempered mouth, with a purse of chin hanging from it as if he kept his gold there. In his view, I knew, I was a young ass, lately estated, whom it was his grudging responsibility to supply with the means to fresh wasteful imbecilities ; and that, while I was as certain of my own young old-worldliness, of my inherent precaution and moderation, as I was of his detestable cynicism. “ But I will convince him of my business capacities,” I fumed, “ if I have to do it by quoting to his face his own lack of 'em. Just a day or two's grace first ! ”

The day or two ran into a week ; and then, desperate, I took cab to the City. To my astonishment Cræsus received me with affability.

“ You should have acknowledged that cheque, my boy,” he said. “ You aren’t come, I suppose, to ask for an advance on the next? No, no; that would never do. I can’t possibly entertain such a proposal.”

“ I haven’t made it, sir,” I said coldly. “ I haven’t received any cheque from you, that’s all.”

“ Not? ”

He sat back in his chair, one arm out on the desk, fiddling with a pen, and squinted at me, with his left eye closed, intolerably.

“ O! that’s it, is it? ” he said quietly. “ Well, you’re beginning early.”

“ Don’t you believe me? ”

“ Of course I do. But the cheque was sent.”

“ I never received it, I say.”

He touched a bell; sent a clerk for the book; showed me the counterfoil—thirtieth of April, a hundred and twenty-five pounds, pay to the order of, etc.—and threw the book, with an air of insolent finality, on the desk.

“ There it is,” he said.

“ It did not reach me.”

“ Well, I can’t help that.”

“ Can’t help it, sir? Am I to go without my money, because—because it was lost in the post? ”

“ You can sue me, if you like. The thing’s been done before; and ended, I believe, in favour of the drawer. But it’s an open question. The cheque was posted—there’ll be my letter-book to prove it—and with that I wash my hands of the matter. I dare say one of your—one of your friends will be opening an account with it by and by. Good morning! ”

What was the beast implying? That I was manœuvring to obtain a further advance on the strength

of an understanding with an accomplice? My blood boiled.

"You'll be sorry for this," I said, rising.

"All right," he said. "I'll be prepared with the sackcloth when my time comes."

I left him without another word. Outside, a paper-boy was announcing in a shrill voice: "Romance in 'igh life. Lady of quality steals a letter addressed to her 'ostess."

Like a smack, the words smote the blood to my cheek. Priscilla Pipkin!

It was she, of course. The letter, the circumstances, the informal "bolt." How could I have doubted it for a moment! Priscilla was the culprit.

I did not pause to consider in what way it would be possible for the girl to avail herself of that unnegotiable plunder. The thought of the sight, of the temptation, was enough. The draft was a potential treasure, at least. Priscilla had got it—perhaps in her pocket; perhaps enclosed in the newspaper parcel which was like a target. *En avant* for Priscilla Pipkin.

I consulted a friend of mine, Charlie Glossop. He was dead against my approaching Scotland Yard.

"Police go for the criminal; swag's a secondary consideration with 'em," he said. "You take my advice, and employ a private enquiry agent. Find out what's become of the cheque, and settle the girl after. I know a chap who's the very moral of what you want—Hawkesby's his name, Long Acre."

Mr. Hawkesby, on Glossop's initiative, came to visit me. I told him that it would be as well to keep the affair very private.

"Else why apply to Hawkesby, sir?" he said. "A fair field and no favour's all that *he* asks."

He was elaborately designed to fit the part of the stage detective—an astute, quiet person, with side-whiskers (removable); a respectable top-hat, rather narrow in the brim; a frock-coat, somewhat short, and buttoned tightly about an upright, fairly portly figure; very black brows and blue eyes underneath, impenetrable but observant. His mind was obviously scored with information about all those things which a population of four millions particularly desires shall not be known about itself. Add to this a superhuman capacity for detecting motives, a condemning guile, a power of fascinating like the serpent's, and you have Mr. Hawkesby—at least according to the portrait of himself which he sketched for me. He gave me a feeling of fearful confidence at once.

He asked me for the outlines of the case. They appeared simple to absurdity to my unsophisticated mind; but Hawkesby thought otherwise.

“Here's what I like,” he said, “a provocation to the best in me.”

“It don't seem very difficult,” I protested.

“Ah!” he answered. “That's the amateur mind. You wouldn't say it if you'd had my experience. Beware most when all seems plain sailing.” (Sherlock Holmes.) “I've built my reputation and made my little pile on that understanding, sir. What about Mrs. Hoskins, now, and *her* point of view?”

“Why, I questioned her—very cautiously, of course,” I answered deprecatingly; “and she told me that she knew nothing whatever about the girl—had taken her on at a moment's notice and without a character.”

“Of course she'd say that,” said Hawkesby triumphantly. He rubbed his chin, conning me shrewdly.

“What would you think, now,” he pondered, “of the two being all this time in collusion?”

The suggestion struck me dumb. Mrs. Hoskins, the garrulous, the fussy, but the immaculate! No; I could not, I would not believe it. Yet, from that moment, the horrible insinuation began to poison my very fount of trustfulness in human nature. Henceforth all appearances were to be estimated by their speciousness. Hawkesby had emancipated me.

“Well,” he said, “you leave her to me. I’ll turn her inside out in no time.” And he left me.

The next day an old lady called upon Mrs. Hoskins (I saw her come and go from my sitting-room window)—a tottery, whining old body, in a respirator and blue spectacles. Later, Mrs. Hoskins enlightened me, voluntarily, as to the old lady’s mission. She had come about “that Pipkin,” it appeared. The girl had applied to her for “tweenie’s” place, and had referred her to Mrs. Hoskins for a character. “And I give her a rare one, my eye,” said the landlady.

“Didn’t you ask her what was the girl’s present address?” I demanded in great excitement.

“No, to be sure,” she answered. “What should I want with it?”

“Nor her own?”

“No, sir. It didn’t matter to me.”

Was this a criminal admission? I tried to think it out. That evening Hawkesby paid me a visit.

“I’ve got some news for you,” I began at once. He winked. Some subtle quality in the act confounded and silenced me.

“I dare say,” he said. “Mrs. H. hasn’t been letting on to you about her visitor to-day, I suppose?”

“Yes, she has.”

“ And didn't you twig ? ”

“ Twig what ? ”

“ The old lady.”

“ What about her ? ”

“ She was me, that's all.”

I began to comprehend his methods.

“ Well,” I said ; “ did you find out anything ? ”

“ Something,” he answered ; “ but this Rome isn't going to be built in a day. We're getting on ; that's enough.”

I saw him constantly after this—was always either entertaining or running up against him, in fact. I acquired an infernal shrewdness in identifying him under his innumerable disguises. Sometimes it would be a bricklayer, shouldering a hod to nowhere ; sometimes an evangelical person, after the Stiggins type, distributing tracts ; sometimes an itinerant and snuffling tradesman hawking boot laces along the kerb. Once, I am sure, I recognised him under the helmet of a policeman ; and he was certainly the traveller who endeavoured to persuade Mrs. Hoskins to put her name down for a sewing machine on the hire system. The provincial and rather over-fatuus looking curate, too, whom I saw looking in upon me one day, his nose pressed against the glass of my window, was Hawkesby without a doubt, yearning to convince me of his fertility of invention.

He generally, after each of these essays, paid me a visit, bringing the comforting assurance that we were “ beginning to move now.” Then he would sound me, cunningly, on the subject of my penetration of his latest disguise, and appear pleased with my confession of recognition, though, one might have thought, it could be held rather to discount the cleverness of his

“make-up.” But he took a childish delight in the parts he played, and—so it seemed to me—was quite satisfied with their utter irrelevance and inanity, so long as I was an appreciative observer.

“You see, you’re in the know, sir,” he would confess jocundly; “but the public isn’t, and takes me at my own valuation. Bless you! I can wind ’em round my little finger. I made seventy-five per cent profit on those bootlaces.”

I began to see deeper than ever into his methods—and his “pile.” Detectiveness, if I may use the word, embraces a multitude of “pickings.”

And then, suddenly convinced, perhaps, of my thorough mastery of his *modus operandi*, he disappeared—or, at least, I saw him no more for quite a long time.

The respite, I admit, was a complete relief to me. I had come to think any atmosphere would be better than that atmosphere of exotic and luxuriant suspicion in which my scepticism of all human motives had been forced of late into a preposterous growth. I wanted to be my young credulous self again; I was ready even to waive the question of the cheque, if only Hawkesby would leave me alone to skimp and deny myself, and recover lost ground thereby. And when I thought of the bill he might be running up against me, I shivered.

But the respite was only a respite—by no means a reprieve. All too soon I was in his thrall again.

His manner had taken on a new seriousness; the weight of fresh problems and responsibilities had scored his brow with thunder. The range of his enquiries, he told me, was widening and ever widening. He left me almost in tears.

At length the end came. One day he suddenly appeared before me, his face suffused with a light of sombre triumph. The eccentric course of his enquiries, he said, had whirled him inevitably at last to the seashore. He had certain information that Priscilla Pipkin had gone to America.

And then Mrs. Hoskins came in.

She apologised ; didn't know I was engaged, and so on. But the fact was that she had done a body wrong by her insinuations, and, being an honest woman, couldn't abide to rest till she had made the truth known. She thought, in brief, the explanation due to me that Priscilla Pipkin had had her reasons for departing suddenly as she had that morning, having received by the post an invitation, or an order, rather, from her young man (recently promoted) to come and marry him at once on that first of May, parsons obliging, or for ever hold her peace. To which peremptory citation Priscilla Pipkin had incontinently succumbed, and was now in Mrs. Hoskins's kitchen, on a visit to her former mistress, the proud possessor of the surname and affections of Mr. Bertie Birdekin.

"And very modest she bears it, that I will say," said Mrs. Hoskins.

I looked at Hawkesby. He was equal to the occasion.

"A double," he whispered. "I shouldn't have thought her up to it."

Then he addressed Mrs. Hoskins affably.

"And where's this Mrs. Birdekin been living since her marriage?" he said.

"Why, that's the queer part of it," answered my landlady. "No farther away than the next street, sir, if you'll believe me."



"I believe *you*, of course, ma'am," he said, with a knowing emphasis on the pronoun, and a wink to me to imply: "*We* haven't travelled where we have to be made Mrs. Birdekin's gulls!" Then he continued aloud: "And now, ma'am, with your permission, we will wait upon this young woman."

Mrs. Hoskins looked surprised; but preceded us to the kitchen. There, sure enough, was Priscilla, in a hat with a whole cherry-orchard in it. She blushed and giggled as she rose to greet me.

"A moment," said Hawkesby, as I stuck undecided. "We—my friend here and me—have been wanting to see you, Mrs. Birdekin; very much we have."

Priscilla gaped, dumbfounded.

"Quite a romance," said Hawkesby, "upon my word—your being hooked like that, I mean, by a letter—and the only one, too, that came by that post, I understand."

"No," said Priscilla; "there were another."

"O, indeed!" said Hawkesby. "For whom?"

"For the lodger, sir."

"Dear, dear! how very strange. Would you be surprised to hear, now, that he never received it?"

"I put it under his door, sir," said Priscilla, breathing a little hard.

"Would you mind showing us, now, exactly where?"

Somehow, then, we were all trooping upstairs. I felt horribly mean and treacherous—shaken, moreover, with a premonition of scenes unthinkable to follow. It was Priscilla who threw open the door, and who scanned the room with a lost air, as if baffled in the hope that the letter, unaccountably overlooked by us, might be lying there on the threshold all the time.

"I shot it in for certain," she said, half weeping.

“It were a windy morning ; perhaps it went under the carpet.”

Hawkesby, with a smile of ineffable toleration, lifted the hem of the thing—and there was the letter.

A dead silence ensued. Then I looked for Hawkesby. He was nowhere to be seen. He had folded his tent like the Arab, and as silently stolen away. I began giggling like a maniac ; and then checked myself with a gasp.

“O ! that’s all right,” I said. “I couldn’t make it out, and wanted you to tell me, that was all ; but—but you were gone. It was unwise of you to leave us in that way, Priscilla ; but, never mind—my wedding present shall carry interest with it, now I know where to send it.”

“You’re very good, sir,” she said, drying her eyes. “Bert’s badly in need of an accordion.”

## THE MAN WHO HAD DINED TOO WELL

“**S**IT down, *Mr. Archibald Dalrymple*,” said the tea-broker, with a sarcastic emphasis on the name, as if its distinction were a mere aristocratic pretence. “Sit down, sir.”

He noticed with disfavour how the young man, despite his agitation, slightly pulled up the knees of his irreproachable trousers as he obeyed. The act brought into prominence a couple of long thin feet in varnished boots, at the vision of which Mr. Huggins sniffed audibly. He was too extreme a Tory not to be sensible of his own shortcomings, literally, in the leg and foot department. A bluff insistence on the proverbial inadequacy of clothes to prove the gentleman was his solitary refuge from a self-consciousness of his own thick inelegance, and the general incompetency of tailors to better it. It was certainly hard that this whipper-snapper, on a hundred and nothing a year, should possess, on no warrant but that of his birth, what he with all his thousands was denied—the personality of a gentleman. Therefore he was sarcastic at the expense of his visitor’s name and boots, and insulting in his use of the only counter-check at his command to all which they implied. Impecuniosity, the young man must learn, was not the less subject, because patrician, to the dictatorialness of wealth.

"It's a dirty day," he said; "and I suppose *you* never thought of doing anything but walk?"

The interview, by the way, was in his own drawing-room; the hour, midday on a Sabbath.

"I hope, sir," said Mr. Dalrymple, with an ingratiatory smile, "that you've no fault to find with that sort of providence?"

He was tall and slender, with a pale not very wise face; but, like many aristocratic unintelligences, he seemed capable of a certain fixity of purpose.

"That depends," said the tea-broker, "on what's behind it. The more you're justified in cabs and such-like ostentations, the better you'll be advised to chuck 'em."

"Honestly, *I'm* not justified in any ostentation," said the young man.

"Exactly," said the tea-broker; "and you've come, I understand, to ask me for the hand of my daughter, who is. Now, how you're going to reconcile me, as a plain man of business, to that, is the question."

"My prospects," began the suitor.

"Are without end, sir," interrupted the tea-broker. "It's the case with all of us. But they aren't the sort of asset I favour in a marriage contract. Real estate, sir; a balance at your bankers; a profitable occupation—those are the telling arguments."

He bent his heavy eyebrows on the visitor, who sat looking down and nervously roping his gloves together.

"Young gentleman," he said, "you'll do me the justice of assuming that my daughter Kate is at least as dear to me as she is to you. Only I've got a more intimate experience of her worth. Put it on the practical footing, then, that I'm not going to sell

precious goods cheap. I want my equivalent for value received—*my* equivalent, you'll understand, which is nothing less than a guarantee of her happiness at the hands of a possible vendee. Do I see that in your offer? which, of course, at the same time, I acknowledge with all politeness. I ask *you*, as a mere question of business, Would you pledge the best of your credit with a bankrupt?"

"You're too hard on me, sir. You spoke of a profitable occupation. Surely the Bar is that?"

"Surely it may be—to a publican. As to your tale of briefs, now?"

The suitor blushed.

"I've some, what you may call, good connexions, sir."

"I don't dispute it."

Consciously or unconsciously, the tea-broker seemed to glance at the varnished boots again. Anyhow, he sniffed.

"Your family's all right," he said. "I don't dispute it, I say."

"With influence, moneyed influence, to back me," began the suitor, momentarily deluded into eagerness; but the other checked him.

"So, young gentleman," he said, "*I'm* to be your bribe to Fortune? *I'm* to accept you first and make you afterwards? Why, any beggar at the gate could equal that guarantee."

The suitor's hopes, bitterly abashed, fell to zero.

"I didn't quite mean it," he murmured. "You—you spoke of Kate's—Miss Huggins's happiness. I don't—with respect, sir, I don't yield to you in that matter. However unworthy I may be, she, at least, believes it to be bound up in mine. But, perhaps, she hasn't—you don't——"

" Make your mind easy. She's taken me into her confidence. I've been treated to a deal of the sort of stuff they call fairy gold—precious glittering stuff, too, in the light of gas-lamps and romance, but dust, sir, dust in the light of day and commonsense. I know in what her happiness has laid up to now, and I know, as a practical man, that it's not going to accommodate itself all of a sudden to buses and third-class fares."

" Really, sir, you exaggerate."

" Do I ? "

" I've a small independent income."

" What return—you'll excuse me—do you make on it to the assessors ? "

" None ; I'm exempt—that is—moreover, I earn a little by literature."

" By *what* ? "

" Literature—articles, and so on, in the papers."

" O, indeed ! What's the most you've ever made out of it, out of anything, in a day ? "

" In a single day ? "

" There's no need to waste words."

" O ! I couldn't tell, really."

" A hundred pounds ? "

" I'm afraid not."

" Fifty ? "

" I can't say as much."

" Ten ? "

" No, not even that."

" What, then ? "

" I once got a cheque for two-five for a short story in *The United Family*."

The tea-broker rose, the other with him.

" Good day," said the former.

"You will give me—us—no hope whatever?" pleaded the suitor desperately.

"Young man," said Mr. Huggins grimly, "you may have heard, or you may not have heard, of a neighbour of mine called Matcham. But I won't be hard on you. Come to me at any time with the assurance that you've earned by your wits as much as a hundred pounds in a single day, and I'll reconsider your case."

"Do you give your word on that?" asked the suitor dolefully.

"I give my business word," answered the tea-broker, with a sardonic chuckle. "Only, mind, I guarantee nothing in the interval."

Mr. Dalrymple gazed at him a moment, wrung his hand fervently but respectfully, and departed in the greatest depression.

"He's not a bad chap, and well connected, too," mused Mr. Huggins, standing in the middle of the room when the door was shut; "but—all that pretence, boots and things, on nothing—and then to go and plead Matcham——!"

He pursed his lips, shook his head, and subsided into thought.

In the meanwhile a tragic issue was enacting in a little room off the hall.

"Yes, my dearest girl," said Archibald, "he refuses to hear another word until I can bring proof that I've scored, off my own bat, as much as a hundred pounds in a single day."

"Why," said Kate, looking up through her tears; "that shouldn't be so very difficult. Did he limit you to the means?"

"Certainly not."

"Borrow it of me, then."

“ My dear, is that moral ? Besides, it wouldn't be making it.”

“ I don't know. There's nothing I wouldn't value one of your precious letters at.”

“ Yes, my Kate. But don't you see how for *you* to give *me* a hundred pounds for one, would be sort of robbing Peter to pay Paul ? ”

“ Why ? ”

“ Why ? I should borrow from you to give to you. We might as well take in one another's washing.”

“ Really, Archie——! ”

“ It's a proverb, my dear, about the wives of Scilly.”

“ Well, I'm sure it's silly enough for anything. But I'd rather you'd waited till I *was* your wife.”

“ Now I've offended you. Good God ! and I've already, I'm afraid, put my foot in it with your father. I'm a failure all round.”

“ Hush ! It was thoughtless ; but don't be agitated. What did you say to him ? ”

“ He asked me how much I'd ever earned in a day ; and I blurted out, quite forgetting, the sum I'd received from *The United Family* for ' Love's Nursling.' ”

“ Mr. Matcham's paper ? ”

She looked at him aghast.

“ That *was* unwise—but——”

She dwelt a little, pondering on his eyes. Kate certainly covered a multitude of paternal sins. She was a very sweet homely girl, with just a fragrant genius for domesticity. Her surname was her least lovable possession, and even that greeted one with a hug. While she gazes in silence, we will slip in a parenthesis.



Mr. Huggins and Mr. Matcham—the latter proprietor-editor of *The United Family* magazine—were brother masons, near neighbours on Brixted Common, and deadly enemies in spite of everything. Their mutual hostility turned upon a question of land-grabbing. Mr. Huggins had arrogantly enclosed within posts and rails a strip of public green, situated beyond the haw-haw which terminated his front lawn on the Common side, and Mr. Matcham, a furious democrat, had called him a thief in consequence. That had been sufficiently offensive; but the word had carried, and had been intended to carry, a bifurcated sting, the second point of which touched upon an unfortunate occurrence which had lately further complicated the relations of the two. Mr. Huggins, present master of the local masonic lodge to which they both belonged, had, about a week before the date of this narrative, been entrusted with the care of some official badges (antiques, and of very considerable value), which he had promptly gone and lost. He had carried them home in a cab, from which he had duly conveyed them into his house (of that he was certain); and thereafter they were not. Such was his story, and such was nobody else's belief. The loss was serious, the scandal grave. There were whispers of unhallowed merriment at the dinner which preceded this catastrophe. There were whispers of a man who had dined too well. The cabman who had conveyed this man—Mr. Huggins, to be frank—home, was found and cross-examined to no purpose—by the defaulter himself, that is to say. But to others he told, in self-defence, a dark and, paradoxically, an illuminating tale of an inebriated fare who, deposited at the gates of his own drive, wrestled for some time

unavailingly with the simple latch of a swing gate, and finally, having mastered it, tacked his way housewards by a series of cannons from tree to tree. Then appeared an advertisement, offering a reward of two hundred pounds for the recovery of the jewels, *and no questions asked*. No questions asked! Scandal should think not, indeed! A disgraceful business altogether. He had never conveyed the packet into his house at all. Probably he had dropped it, getting into or out of the cab, and it had been snatched by some prowling loafer. Possibly the cabman knew more about it than he would tell; possibly, even, tea-broker and cabby were in collusion. The jewels were worth an astonishing sum, which grew in immensity from day to day. Ugly, and quite unjustified, slanders pierced to Mr. Huggins's ears, and he recognised, or believed he recognised, in their propagator his injurious neighbour. Judge if Mr. Dalrymple's ingenuous confession predisposed him in favour of *that* suitor.

Kate smiled into her lover's eyes. She was already a beautiful rebel. Unknown to her father, she had regularly and loyally taken in *The United Family* ever since the appearance of "Love's Nursling" in its pages. She referred to it now.

"Do you know," she said, "that there is a treasure-disc story running through it at this very moment?"

"No," said Archibald.

"But there is, dear; and a hundred pounds (isn't it strange?) hidden somewhere for anybody who can find the clue. Archie, it's a providence! Find the hundred pounds, and I am yours! Pa never goes back on his word."

Pa, having, in a fit of profound abstraction, forgotten the two, now suddenly awoke to his remissness, and

was heard noisily approaching. The young man stared between joy and bewilderment.

“To wring it out of Matcham!” he whispered ecstatically. “It would be a double triumph! I’ll do it, Kate; I’ll find it, if I have to turn grave-digger!”

He bolted before a portentous cough, tip-toeing away on winged though varnished feet.

That night he set to studying those current and back numbers of *The United Family*, which enshrined the clue so far as it had got. Before another fortnight was passed, he had mastered, with the final number of the story, the momentous problem. He seemed sure of the fact. He rose from his last perusal with a sort of choking gasp. The scent *appeared* to lie in so ridiculously obvious a direction, that he could not but plume himself on his own facile perspicacity in detecting it. He was cleverer, after all, than he had dared to suppose himself, than any other had seemed to suppose him to be. But, at the same time, he stood aghast before a revelation his discovery embodied. For it was patent, to him at least, *that the disc-voucher for the hundred pounds was hid somewhere in Mr. Huggins’s illegal enclosure on Brixted Common!* In a flash he understood all the fiendish ingenuity of the plan. The deadly Matcham had designed this way of testing the right of his enemy to exclude the public from the plot in question!

It complicated matters; but it must be gone through with now, since Kate was the priceless guerdon of success. So, armed with a long-handled spud, artfully concealed in a wrapping of brown paper, he took train the next morning for Brixted, and, fervently praying that the tea-broker might already have de-

parted for town, made his way, tingling, across the Common, uncovering his weapon as he went.

He was rather astonished to find its lonely acres unusually populated at that early hour. A scattered concourse of pedestrians streamed to a focus from every direction. They were mostly of the common sort, hurried and rude in action; and every one was furtively armed with a trowel, hoe, or other implement. Some, even, carried no more than fragments of old iron—a horseshoe for luck, the rusty blade of a table-knife, a two-pronged fork. One woman, with bibulous glazed eyes, held a shawl to her shaking mouth and an iron spoon half-concealed in the folds of it. She was a melancholy illustration of the catering to a hunger which knows no decency. One and all they moved on with a set eager purpose, spectres of a famished lust, hating each his neighbour in the race for gain—a sordid crew.

And then, in a moment, Archie gathered the clue to all this fevered rush, and stopped with a shock. The railed enclosure was black with swarming figures, which stooped and dug like rooks upon a new-ploughed field. He was not the first, it appeared, by a couple of hundred, to strike the obvious trail!

In the same instant he was aware of a sudden disturbance in the group. A stout and furious figure, flourishing a hunting-crop, had sprung into its midst, and, with maddened gesticulations, was scattering it in all directions. But it fled only to reform and hem in its devastator. The situation, literally at a blow, had become menacing.

Mr. Dalrymple's first impulse, in the immediate destruction of all his hopes and plans, was to turn and sneak away. Then a wiser and more generous policy

prevailed. Here was his desired father-in-law in peril. He must go to the rescue of the old man. Besides, if he could help to clear Tom-Tiddler's ground——!

In his agitation, becoming suddenly conscious of his incriminating spud, he thrust the thing in a panic up the right leg of his trousers, and stuck the end into his sock. Thus besplintered, he made anyhow for the enclosure, and, crossing the chain like a man on stilts, danced up to connect himself with the defence. That, gasping red anathema, was already, it seemed, on the verge of apoplexy.

“Ha, Dalrymple!” shouted Huggins; “I know who's work this is! What the devil, man! Are you a recruit to his ranks?”

The newcomer ranged himself alongside and panted: “Premonition, sir—couldn't keep away—dreamt you were in danger—and Miss Huggins—come to give a hand.”

“To give a hand? What's the matter with your trousers? Damned bad fit, *I* call 'em! Hoop there!”

He swung his crop, clearing a circle. He was evidently half off his head with fury and excitement. The mob came on.

“Clear out of this, you dashed old hass!” shouted a ringleader.

“Clear out of it? Clear out of my own?” bellowed Huggins. “It's private property, you dogs! I'll have every man jack of you impounded for trespass! I'll ruin you every one!”

“Don't listen to him!” cried a voice on the outskirts. “He'd no right to enclose it; it's common land.”

Vicious, glaring, spectacled, combative as a French poodle's, the face of Matcham showed through the

press ; and the next moment Matcham himself skipped up.

“ You hound,” roared the tea-broker. “ This is your doing ! ”

Matcham folded his arms.

“ It’s an honest way to make money than some I’ve heard of,” said he.

“ Corrupting the poor ! ” snarled Huggins.

“ Better than compounding a felony,” said Matcham.

Mr. Huggins gasped.

“ What do you mean by that ? ”

“ Two hundred pounds reward to catch a thief,” cried Matcham. “ *I say, Charity begins at home.* ”

With the word, the two respectable men were at deadly grips, while the crowd hooted and laughed. Shocked and horrified, Archie drove between, with such force as to separate them. The next instant—how, he could never tell—he himself and Matcham were reeling and wrestling together, the furious poodle face of the editor breathing fire into his own. Round they went in a sort of Walpurgis dance, the shrieking voice of the crowd their accompaniment ; and then somehow—the strength of the little monster was amazing—they were by the gates of the drive, on the brink of the haw-haw where it ended, and he was flung over and down. The spud cracked as he fell, lacerating his calf. He bowled like a tumbler to the deep bottom of the ditch, where, amongst the ferns and little gorse bushes, he subsided half stunned. Presently he gathered his senses and looked about him.

When, later, he was helped out, by the butler and Mr. Huggins himself, he rose to a consciousness of a cordon of gardeners and policemen ringing the empty

enclosure, and of an excluded mob beyond sullenly dispersing or lingering in baffled groups. Mr. Matcham's name had been "taken"; the field, anyhow for the time being, was won. Silently hobbling, he was assisted into the house, and deposited on a chair in the library. Mr. Huggins, near as dishevelled as himself, and infinitely redder, suddenly stood before him, his hands behind his back.

"You've caught it," he said. "Good Lord, man, nobody would take you for a gentleman to see you now. Well, I'm obliged to you, and to this evidence of what you came for."

With a quick action he brought the broken pieces of the spud from behind his back.

"You didn't find the disc?" he said, with a grin.

Archie shook his head.

"No," went on the tea-broker; "and so you're as far as ever, you see, from earning your hundred pounds in a day. O! I understand, and I say I'm obliged to you, for all you came with a different intention. But trust me to take care you don't get the chance again."

Archie rose. He saw suddenly the sweet unbidden face of his love at the door. It was all clouded with trouble and concern. He lifted his hand, and she fled to him, in the uncontrollable impulse to claim and console.

"Hey!" roared her father, starting back. "What the devil's the meaning of this, miss?"

Archie looked firmly over the head bowed upon his breast.

"Never mind the disc, sir," he said. "I claim the *two* hundred pounds reward."

Kate trembled in his arms; but he held her close

"*The*—What do you——?" gasped the father.

“ For the lost badges, sir.”

“ Where are they ? ”

Groping in his inner breast-pocket, the young man produced a small brown-paper parcel, torn and sodden. The tea-broker, as in a dream, held out his hand for it.

“ I don't understand,” he began stupidly. “ Where did you find——?”

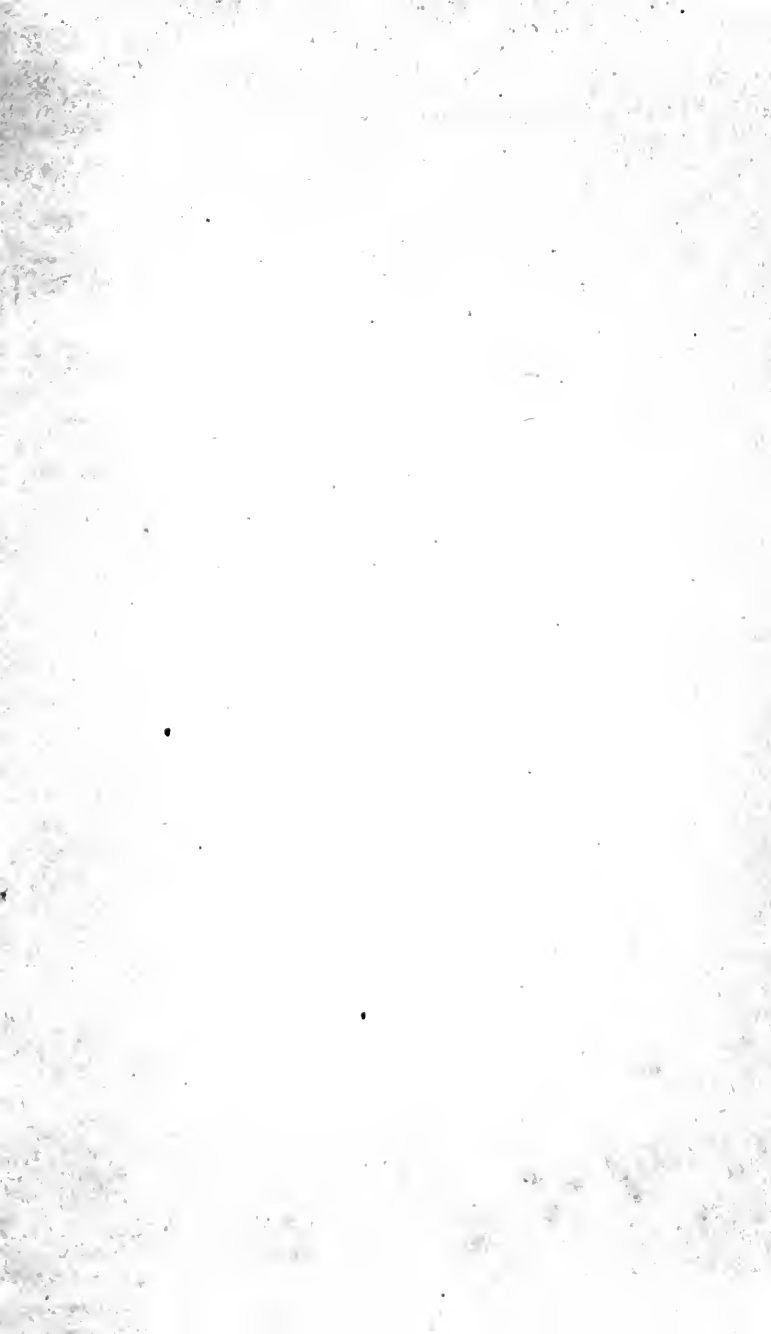
“ In the haw-haw—at the end, under the gate. There's two hundred pounds to me, made in a day. I shall have to ask you to reconsider my case, sir.”

A thrilling pause succeeded.

“ I don't remember——” began the man who had dined too well; then stopped suddenly, seemed to realise in a moment all that it meant to him both of shame and triumph, gave quite a foolish little laugh, flushed distinctly through his earlier red, and, turning, softly tip-toed from the room, leaving the two together.

Now, ultimately, adds history, Mr. Dalrymple, the public being excluded from the enclosure, rooted up the treasure-disc at his comparative leisure, which so delighted Huggins, for the final means it gave him to retort on Matcham, that he consented without further demur to a union which had never really been very remote from his wishes.





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