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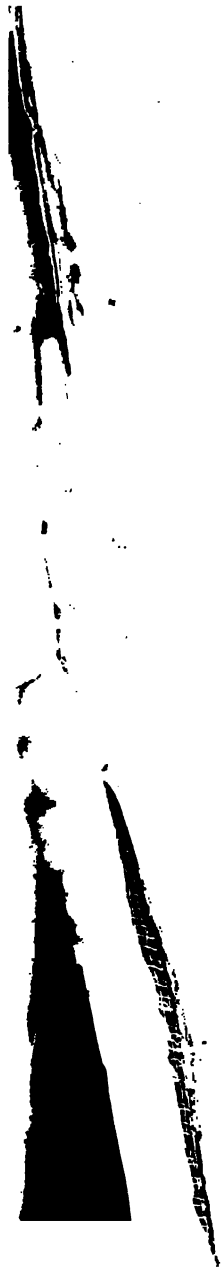
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JULIA TAKES
HER CHANCE

by

CONCORDIA MERREL





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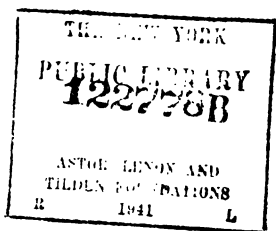
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NEW YORK
THOMAS SELTZER

1921

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JULIA TAKES HER CHANCE



Julia Takes Her Chance

CHAPTER I

FRIDAY at three!

I just can't realize it. But here it is in black and white. A letter from Pelman Barclay, the great actor-manager, asking me to call on him at His Highness' Theatre, on Friday at three.

I feel as if I'd been shot into the very middle of the craziest dream. Especially as this letter came by the same post as one from my tiresome guardian, telling me that not only can I not act now, but that I never will be able to!

You see, last night, I, Julia Grey—Judy, for short—quite an ordinary, humdrum sort of a girl, without one single relation to call my own in the whole wide world, existing on the income from a tiny legacy, and plodding away at typewriting and shorthand, in the blind conviction that nothing more exciting than a secretaryship could ever, ever be my career, last night, as I was about to say, I played a small part in a play done by the Little Uppington Amateur Dramatic Society and—I made a hit.

I did, so it would be downright silliness to pretend I

didn't. This morning the *Little Uppington Eagle* came out with a glowing notice of my performance—not that *that* amounts to much; our own pet *Eagle* is an unfledged sort of a bird, at best—but now comes this letter from Pelman Barclay, saying that he happened to be in the audience last night with his friends the Delameres—Little Uppington's nobbiest nobs—and had noticed my acting, and would I be so kind—so kind, mark you—as to call at His Highness' Theatre on Friday at three.

"Yes," I said to myself, "and this is where I wake up."

But I crumpled the letter up in my hand, shut my eyes and turned round three times. Then read the letter again.

"It's true, then." I gasped faintly and sat down rather suddenly, all shaky with excitement.

And now Mr. Guardian Penticott, I thought—and I tell you I thought this in three-foot capitals—how much ice does your letter cut? All the time you were forming your uncomplimentary opinions about your ward, someone, who is really qualified to know something about acting, was making up his mind to ask her to call on Friday at three.

Can't act now and never will be able to, indeed! But Mr. Pelman Barclay, the great Pelman Barclay, the one and only Pelman Barclay, noticed my acting. . . .

But goodness, the thought made me break off; if I'd known that he was in the audience last night, I'd have gone solid with stage fright.

Friday at three! Should I go? Would I ever dare? I asked myself.

And myself, my settled-down-never-to-be-uprooted sort of Self, replied instantly:

"Of course not! The idea's absurd. You'll do some-

... N N N N

thing silly, make a complete ass of yourself—why you're not even *pretty!*"

And for a moment I was crushed, but lo and behold! a New Self seemed suddenly to take possession of me, a Self that asked:

"Why shouldn't I take this chance? And if I choose to take it, even if I choose to risk making an ass of myself, just what is going to stop me, any old way?"

"But," argued the Old Self, bent on raising obstacles, "you've nothing on earth to wear!"

"Great Peter!" replied the New Self, "haven't I my blue taffeta? It's last year's, I know, and needs new collar and cuffs and a hair-cut round the hem, but hang it all, I'm not going to be beaten by a little thing like that. It's my acting he's interested in, not my clothes."

"Your acting," scoffed the Old Self. "Pooh! who d'you think you are all of a sudden—Sarah Bernhardt and Mary Pickford rolled into one?"

But my New Self was just glowing with one of those fear-no-foe-in-shining armor sort of feelings, and it was up and at it in a second.

"I don't think I'm any old thing in particular, but I do know that this is the first and only chance I've ever had, and that I'm jolly well going to take it!"

So I did.

And I went.

All on my own. I hadn't told a soul about it, because, if you tell one Little Uppingtonian anything, it sort of gets Marconied round to all the rest, and I thought, supposing it should all turn out to be a howling fiasco, how perfectly awful I'd feel if everyone knew about it.

I didn't look so bad, either. Not that I looked anything to shout about; I didn't. My Old Self was right when it said I wasn't even pretty; I'm not, but the old

blue taffeta came to the scratch like a good 'un, and my little close-fitting hat had been awarded a new woolly bob—for conspicuous gallantry in the face of three seasons and all sorts of weather.

I got to the theatre with five minutes to spare. Then I realized that I hadn't a notion as to where I ought to apply. I wasted a lot of precious time in finding out, and finally fetched up at the stage door.

The potentate in charge was large and fat, and he'd a dear little sort of a partitioned-off place all to himself, with pigeon-hole shelves behind him, and a counter—for leaning on—in front. He was busy reading the tabs of a big bunch of keys he held, and looked up casually and tilted up his chin by way of inquiring my business.

"I w-want to see Mr. Barclay, please—Mr. Pelman Barclay," I said, hoping that my voice wasn't betraying my undignified excitement.

"Mr. Pelman Barclay is Mr. Barclay," he observed. "There ain't but one of 'im," and he returned his attention to the keys. "'Erbert," he suddenly yelled, "nip up with this 'ere key, an' give it to Mrs. Judd in the wardrobe."

A grimy hand was thrust through a doorway at one side; it took the key and disappeared. "Yes," said the fat man, "there's only one of 'im, but there's plenty of your sort—the sort that wants to see 'im."

This was distinctly not the sort of reception I had anticipated. It was past three now, and the precious moments were steadily ticking away—a habit moments have—and I was already late for my appointment!

"I—I'm Miss Julia Grey," I explained.

His answer was not encouraging.

"What if you are?" he inquired amiably.

Now I hadn't by any means pictured everyone con-

nected with the theatre lining up and waving flags in my honor, but I certainly had thought that my name would awaken some sort of an echo. But not it! The potentate went on looking like an amiable feather-bed.

"I've an—an appointment to see Mr. Barclay at three," I said.

"So 'ave' alf a roomful of others!" he said cheerfully. Then: "Let's have a look at your card."

"My—card? Oh, you mean——" and I produced a personal visiting card, but he took it and flung it on the counter.

"No, *no*, no!" he said, each negative more scornfully weary than the last. "Your appointment card. Didn't you bring it with you? You 'ad one, I suppose?"

I shook my head.

"No, it was a letter—a letter from Mr. Barclay, just asking me to call. Please do let me go in. I shall be late."

"Oh, there's no 'urry for a couple of hours yet. You've got the letter with you, I presume?"

Alas! He presumed too much. I hadn't. It was on my dressing-table in far-off Little Uppington. I really nearly cried with vexation.

"No-no. I left it behind," I stammered.

The potentate's face changed and became very severe.

"Mr. Barclay ain't seein' anyone 'cept strictly by appointment. Sorry, miss, I have me orders," and he eyed me suspiciously.

Good gracious! Did he dare to think I'd invented the letter so as to wangle an interview with Mr. Barclay? I looked at him indignantly.

"You couldn't nip back 'ome and fetch it along and nip back 'ere, I suppose? Where d'you live?" He evidently had a heart, but what a dismal suggestion!

Little Uppington seemed as far distant as the Fiji Islands.

“There—there’s no sort of question of n-nipping,” I faltered out, swallowing hard and grinding my teeth fiercely. It was necessary, I can tell you, with things just all going wrong!

But suddenly I observed that the potentate’s fat face was seriously damaged all across by a beaming smile. He was looking down at that card of mine.

“Little Uppington!” he said, in a new tone. “*That* where you come from?”

I nodded, mystified.

“Why, bless me, miss, d’you know Sam Tonkins? Fat chap—has the corner grocery.”

I nodded yet again, utterly bewildered.

“Well, I’m own brother to him!” he said, in a tone of one who imparts simply stupendous news.

Light and hope began to dawn.

“Own brother! Ever heard him speak of Ted? Well, that’s me, Ted Tonkins—that’s my name!” he further enlightened me.

“Oh, Mr. Tonkins, how very, very pleased I am to meet you here,” I cried, almost hysterical with relief. “Of course I know your brother! Why, I’m registered for butter and sugar with him!”

To think I should ever live to bless those ration cards!

Across the little counter we shook hands like long-lost reunited pals.

“Ere, ’ERBERT!” he yelled, so suddenly that I jumped. The owner of the grimy hand appeared. “Now, then, ’Erb, nip up with this young lady and tell His Nibs that she ’as a very special appointment to see Mr. B. Mind, now, very special!”

"Oh, thank you! Thank you very much, Mr. Tonkins," I said gratefully.

"That's all right, miss; any friend of Sam's a friend o' mine, as the saying is. You go on up, and good luck to you, too!"

I followed my grubby guide up a great many stairs and into a large room. A slight, fair young man was standing just inside.

"This young lady, with a very special appointment to see Mr. Barclay," my guide said in a low voice, and I advanced into the room, where, it seemed to my first dizzy impression, at least a hundred girls, all better dressed, all better looking than myself, were waiting.

"Name?" said the fair young man—"His Nibs," I supposed.

I gave my name. He wrote it down in a little book.

"Appointment?" he asked again.

"Three o'clock, please. Mr. Barclay wrote for me to come and see him." And I told him about the letter. He put it all in his little book, but made no sort of comment. No one seemed to be expecting me; it was really most depressing. This young man merely looked wise and secretive and mysterious, as if the fate of nations depended on his discretion, and said unemotionally:

"Sit down, please, Miss Grey, and I'll tell you when Mr. Barclay can see you." And he moved off.

Lots of the girls caught at him as he went through, and there was a buzzing of:

"I say, I've been here for ages."

"Isn't it my turn yet?"

"Three o'clock my card says."

"Look here, old bird, how much longer, what?"

To all of which he answered: "I'm doing the best I can, to be fair to everyone. It's not my fault, dearie;

it's no good blaming me. Be patient, blue-eyes. . . .” And so on and so on, detaching clinging fingers from his arms, as he went across to a door with Mr. Barclay's name written on it, and disappeared.

The girls all subsided, talking and grumbling together in little groups. They powdered their noses, arranged their side curls, fixed their hats, admired each other's clothes and talked shop, and what a buzz it all was to me! Such an utterly foreign atmosphere, and suddenly I began to realize how isolated I was.

These girls all seemed to have come in pairs. Ought I to have brought someone with me? I went hot all over as the thought struck me that perhaps it wasn't considered “good form” to keep an appointment like this all alone. Of course, I ought to have got someone to come with me. I could have got Norah Malone, my one and only chum, to come, if I'd had the sense to think of it and give her sufficient notice.

How utterly idiotic of me!

There wasn't one other girl in the room quite alone!

Evidently it made me conspicuous, too, because they all looked me up and down.

Or was that on account of my clothes? And at that thought I went one shade hotter. Which is a confession, isn't it?

I mean, I went hotter at the thought of being badly dressed than I had at the idea of doing something that might be bad form, or might even be considered, for all I knew, not quite proper!

Altogether, I was more miserably uncomfortable than I'd ever been in my life!

Then, every other girl seemed to be going in to see Mr. Barclay before me! Finally, I was absolutely the last one left. Really, it did seem strange. Then—oh, hor-

rors!—through the open door I heard a fretful voice say: “No more to-day, Denville; I really can’t——”

Then the tactful voice of “His Nibs”:

“You really do want to see this Miss Grey, guv’nor.”

“Do I, Denville? Are you sure? Who the devil is she, anyway?”

My heart was thumping with anxiety. Wasn’t he going to see me, after all? Oh, how awful that would be! How perfectly awful! And although he’d specially sent for me, he didn’t seem to so much as know my name! Certainly listeners aren’t encouraged!

But, at last, there was “His Nibs” beckoning to me from the doorway, and in another moment I was standing in the presence of the great Pelman Barclay.

Well, he is a great man, but I can’t honestly say that he looked it at that moment.

He was sitting hunched up in his chair in a peevish, shivery sort of way that simply made me glance down to see whether his feet were in a tub of mustard and water. They weren’t; they were in patent-leather boots, but he’d a cold-in-the-head sort of look.

He looked at me vaguely; hadn’t the remotest idea that he’d ever seen me before; waved a hand in the direction of a chair, and I sat down, feeling a fool, looking a fool, and praying for the floor to open and swallow me whole!

“Miss Grey is the lady you saw in *The Danger Zone*,” explained “His Nibs,” in that tactful, conciliatory tone that people use towards spoiled children with uncertain tempers.

At that Pelman Barclay sat straight and swept the lank, dark hair from his forehead with a characteristic gesture of his fine, white hand.

“Now, why couldn’t someone have told me that be-

fore?" he demanded. "You were very good, Miss Grey. Very good indeed. You cry with your throat and chin and eyes, and most girls just wrinkle up their foreheads. Ever noticed that?"

I shook my head.

"No," I replied, wonderingly.

"Well, I want someone who can cry. Denville, get Miss Grey to read Sybil Martin for me."

Heavens! I'd got to read a part! I clutched at my little handbag so that it never afterwards wholly recovered, and was on the point of protesting wildly that I couldn't—that I hadn't meant to come, anyway—that all I wanted was to get away and hide, when "His Nibs" shoved a brown-covered "script" into my hands and in a quiet voice said:

"You are to read the part of Sybil Martin—I'll give you your cues."

Horror heaped upon horror! How I got through I simply don't know. I seemed to be blind and deaf and dumb, and yet I suppose I was reading the part, for from some remote distance I heard my voice saying things, and from a distance remoter still I heard Mr. Denville mumbling other things. The room whirled round me in red and black speckles.

Suddenly I heard myself crying, sobbing and imploring, as if my life depended upon it.

Then—dizzy silence.

"All right, eh, Denville?"

From miles away Pelman Barclay's voice came through to me, bringing back reality with it. I sort of "came to," and things steadied round me.

"Thank you, Miss Grey. That's all I need trouble you for. Denville, fix things up, please. Good-bye—and thank you so much for coming to see me."

I followed Mr. Denville out, across the general room and into another office, not knowing whether I were on my head or my heels, whether I'd succeeded or failed.

Through a fog of bewilderment I managed to gather that I was engaged to play the part of Sybil Martin, a small but important part, in Pelman Barclay's next production at His Highness'; that I might consider it all quite settled; that I'd get my contract in a day or two; that I hadn't read the part at all badly; that rehearsals began next Monday; and that my salary would be eight pounds a week!

I reeled out of the theatre, tottered to the station, fell into a homeward-bound railway carriage, and collapsed into a corner. At least, that was what I felt I did; and all the way home the rhythm of the wheels made a song that went:

"You've been an' gone an' done it—*You've been an' gone an' done it!*"

CHAPTER II

I LOOKED down at the thin, brown-covered book of my "lines" that I held, labelled "Sybil Martin" on the outside, and stamped in one corner, "Property of Pelman Barclay, His Highness' Theatre," and scribbled across in pencil with—my own name!

" . . . been an' gone an' done it!" went the clanking iron song.

I should just say I jolly well had!

And now, Mr. Guardian Penticott, *Esquire*, what will you say when you hear this? Can't act, can't I? Never will be able to, won't I? Well, we'll wait and see!

First thing I did when I got home was to write to my guardian and tell him the great news. Was I tempted to crow triumphantly, or am I above such pettiness? I was and I'm not—but, I didn't, which is one up to me, isn't it? Because, in face of my guardian's letter to me, there were just dozens of snappy, scathing little things I might have said, and—oh, yes, I *thought* of them all right, but I resolutely took the "strong and silent" line; simply told him the news without any reference to his letter at all. It was a lovely composition, simply brimming with the virtuous beauty of restraint, but I'm bound to confess that it had a sting in its postscript. I simply couldn't resist saying:

"P. S.—Of course, it's a splendid start to have won

the good opinion of Mr. Pelman Barclay. Because he really is a good judge, *isn't he?*"

I'd just finished this literary effort, and was trying to persuade my jazzed-up brain to come down to tacks and settle on some really useful plans, when my chum Norah Malone turned up.

I saw her from the window, and rushed to meet her, and fell on her neck, and poured the whole story of my adventures into her ear and down her collar, and when I'd got the beginning at the end, and the end in the middle, and was gasping for breath, she stopped me firmly and said:

"Come into the sitting-room and let's hear your symptoms. You may be sickening for something."

Norah is a professional nurse, Irish, and the absolute dear of creation.

I lugged her into the sitting-room, laughing, and when she satisfied herself that I wasn't coming out in any kind of spots, she said:

"Well, now, Judy, do your song and dance again, and *this* time, let's hear the words."

So I began again, and unwound, for her benefit, the first reel of that thrilling drama, *My Sudden Leap to Fame!* and Norah was simply no end thrilled; but, however much she's thrilled, she always manages to keep that clear-brained head of hers firmly on her neck.

She has a do-nothing-to-excite-the-patient sort of manner, and just slogs out straight for essentials—partly nature, partly training, I suppose. Whichever it was, a jolly good thing for me, for whereas *I* was using up no end of mental energy in wondering what color my first-act frock should be, and how on earth I'd ever dare to face real actors and actresses, and how awful it would be if I got cold feet and "dried up" bang in the middle

of a scene, dear old Norah went straight to the first real point and said:

“Well, now, that’s fine, Judy. And listen to me, my dear—you’ll have to live in town.”

I just stared.

“In town?” I echoed idiotically.

“Well, are you proposing to trek to Little Uppington every evening after the theatre?”

I hadn’t been proposing to do *anything* of a practical nature; I’d simply been allowing my fancy to go gathering the most glorious wool as ever came off the backs of a flock of dream sheep.

“Last train leaves town at ten-fifteen, doesn’t it?” she added, in her very best bedside manner.

“Yes—why, of course! I couldn’t possibly—I never thought— And, Norah, what am I to do? They say it’s impossible to get rooms anywhere, and an hotel’s out of the question, and——”

“Ramble on, kid, if you want to, but there’s really no two ways about it,” cut in Norah, laughing. “Naturally, and of course, you come to me.”

Now, isn’t that a pal to have?

“Oh, but can I? May I? Shan’t I be most fearfully in the way?” I said, too excited to stop jabbering although I knew what the answer would be, because Norah’s little flat in Chelsea is open house to all her friends.

They are welcome to come and go as they please, and some of them even have keys, so that if Norah should be away at a case, they can get in to camp and forage.

“I don’t quite know how many there are in occupation just at the moment,” she said cheerfully. “But you won’t mind being rolled in a blanket on the kitchen floor if there’s no more congenial spot still vacant, will you?”

I laughed happily.

“Old darling, I’ll curl up in the copper if necessary.”

“Well, my case here finishes to-morrow, and I’m going to have a little while at home before taking up my next, so shall we go up together to-morrow afternoon by the three o’clock train?”

Three o’clock! My fateful hour! I could never hear it again without seeing a special significance in it!

“Righto!” I agreed. “I’ll go down to the station and order the fly to call for you first and fetch me on the way, shall I?”

Well, so it was settled, and I did all my packing that evening to be sure and be in good time, and undid it all again next morning to be sure I’d got everything in.

And I went round and round my little cottage to be sure that everything was clean—scrubbed the saucepans, scalded the milk-jugs, burnt up scraps—jolly nearly burnt my lunch by mistake—and had no end of a hectic time, feeling as if the jolly old world had suddenly turned a somersault and I was more or less suspended in space till it settled again.

The station fly—a wheezy vehicle that was running a race for disintegration with the quadruped that drew it—rattled up to the gate, and I tore upstairs, jammed on my hat, and tore down again.

Hadn’t got my gloves—tore up again. Couldn’t find my bag—tore all over the place—found it in my hand all the time.

Got, gasping, into the fly and fell into Norah’s devoted lap—suddenly remembered that I’d completely forgotten to post that letter to my guardian. I’d left it on the table.

More tearing! But I’d almost rather have missed the train than have let my guardian miss getting that letter.

At last, though, we really were off. Reached the station, boarded the train. The train got a move on, and there I was on my way to London and the first great chance.



The army of occupation at Norah's flat was evidently—and fortunately—on a peace footing, for it consisted only of Madeline and Clairette Longman, twin daughters of that Joshua Longman whose teashops “stand as milestones round the earth” (*vide* the advertisements!).

They were the weirdest-looking girls you ever saw—all dressed up in beads and embroidery scarfs and short hair and long necks, and thick stockings and sandals, and they were known respectively as “Bun” and “Butter,” as a tribute to the teashops, and collectively as the “Buttered Buns.”

They welcomed Norah to her own flat with touching cordiality, and said how pleased they were to have her stop with them for a bit!

“You know, darling,” they wailed in chorus, “we’re turned out of the studio for not having paid rent for two years, and we’ve had to write to father, which goes horribly against the grain, because he cut us off with a shilling when we ‘took to art,’ as he calls it. And you won’t mind, will you, but we’re painting each other’s portraits in the kitchen, just behind the larder door. There’s such a lovely light there. Of course, you can’t get in the larder while there’s a sitting on.”

“Oh, a detail—a mere detail!” said Norah cheerfully. “Come along, Judy, and get your things off.”

“Don’t you want to see the portraits?” asked Madeline reproachfully.

“Not till we’ve had tea,” said Norah firmly. “I’ll be fit for anything then.”

“She’s as bad as the landlord,” cried Clairette. “Isn’t she, Bun? When we told him that we’d been too busy thinking of Art to consider rent, he replied that he’d been too busy thinking of rent to consider Art!”

Norah took me to her room.

“I’m glad they’re here. I’d not like to leave you here alone, and Bun and Butter are two of the very best, in spite of their funny little ways. I’ll ask them to stay a bit.”

The invitation was received with enthusiasm over tea a little later.

“Not only do we fly to Norah for shelter, but we are welcome and useful,” said Madeline. “Butter, old dear, we have a mission to fulfil. We are to do the dragon act to this sweet young thing. She has supplied us with a really good excuse for staying, and staying, and staying, in face of all outside opposition. Butter, you must spread yourself. That’s the family joke,” she added to me.

They babbled on like this all through tea, and afterwards I went down to the theatre to give my friend Mr. Tonkins my new address and to ask him to spread it around in the proper quarters, but when I got there the stage-door was deserted.

So I thought I’d go in and try to find “His Nibs,” because it was important that they should have my address, naturally, for rehearsal “calls” and other communications.

I was just pushing open the narrow swing-doors that led to the interior when the door was pushed violently from the other side by someone coming out, and evidently in a hurry.

For the door banged towards me, knocked my hat

crooked and only just missed damaging my precious nose.

“Oh!” I gasped out, stepping back. “Oh, do, *please*, be not quite so——”

But my ungrammatical protest was cut short by the appearance round the door of a tall man, who came out looking as if he couldn't make out where the noise came from.

I just sort of crumpled half behind the door, wondering what was the correct thing to do, or if there is a correct thing to do when an impetuous man nearly brains you with a swing-door. But he'd seen me now and realized what had happened, and he was apologizing in the nicest, sincerest way, and asking if he'd hurt me, and saying how awfully careless it was of him, and could he do anything for me?

He'd an awfully nice face, with very straight, hazel eyes and a charming, easy, pleasantly-man-of-the-worldly sort of manner, and I was so dazed and confused that I just blurted out what the trouble was, without thinking.

“You see, I've moved, and I know they'll have to write to me about rehearsals and things, and they haven't my address, and Mr. Tonkins isn't here. I'm at 47——”

I'd babbled this all out like so many beads on a string, but at this point he stopped me.

“Let's go and see if we can find Denville. He's the one to give your new address to.”

The last sentence seemed to me just ever so slightly pointed, and I felt my face go pink. There I was starting in to give my address to a complete stranger. Just because he was at the theatre I'd taken it for granted that he was of the theatre, and of course he might be the merest outsider. Was there ever such a blithering little fool? But he was looking at me with a half-amused but rather sweet expression in his eyes as he said:

"Come inside and wait just a minute while I find out if Denville is still here."

He left me and returned almost at once.

"Yes, he's in the office along the corridor. Sure I didn't do any serious damage?"

I reassured him, thanked him, and he smiled, lifted his hat and was gone.

I told Norah about it when I got back to the flat, and she said, in a sharp sort of way:

"Well, he seems all right, but, kid, remember, you mustn't ever give your address away like that to anyone strange."

I laughed.

"Of course I mustn't. I know that. It was just the confusion of the moment that made me so utterly silly. And anyway, I think he was something to do with the theatre, because he just marched into Denville's office as if he owned it."

"Still," said Norah, obstinately, "I'm very glad the Buns are going to be with you. You know, Judy, I'm not out to throw bouquets or anything of that sort, but there distinctly is a kind of something about you . . . that is rather attractive. . . ."

"Oh, rot!" I said lightly. "I've no illusions about my appearance. I never have been a howling beauty and never will be."

"I didn't say anything about beauty, howling or otherwise," she retorted. "I merely remarked. . . Ah, well, it doesn't matter. I was just telling you, that's all."

"But you haven't told me. What is the kind of a something?"

She looked up at me.

"Charm, I think it would be called," she said slowly.

"But look at my eyes! So wide-set that they're abso-

lutely one at each corner! And my nose, every kind of shape, and my mouth from here to there. The only thing about me is my hair, and I must say I do rather like the goldeny-brown of my hair . . . and it curls, too, which is so obliging of it. . . .”

“All that has nothing to do with charm. Charm is a thing apart. It just happens, or it doesn’t. In your case it happened. In spite of all such obstacles as eyes, nose and mouth. And I’ll tell you another thing too, Judy, if you like,” she added.

“Go ahead.”

“Men will see it.”

“I’ve never noticed them,” I scoffed. •

“You don’t know many men, do you? Isn’t Mr. Penticott the only one really?”

“Goodness, if no man ever shows more eagerness to get to know me than Nickolas Penticott, I may as well go into a convent right away! Judging by him, I should think I must be repellent to the whole species. Do you know when I last saw him?”

“No, when?”

“September, 1914! He came to say good-by before he went to France. And such a solemn, unimpressionable young man you never saw!”

“Oh, well, you were only a kid then,” began Norah, but I laughed the question out of court.

Still, it’s rather nice to be told pleasant things about your looks, isn’t it? Specially by such an utterly unemotional old thing as Norah.

However, I hadn’t much time to think about it, for I was deep in my part all Sunday, and Monday morning’s first post brought me that thrilling document—my first call to a real professional rehearsal! Eleven o’clock I’d got to be there, so, behold me, on the very tick of the ap-

pointed hour finding my way down to the stage almost sick with excitement.

But this wasn't a rehearsal, after all. It was just a reading of the play by the author.

By ones and twos the company straggled in.

Chairs were brought and arranged in a semicircle on the stage, and everyone knew everyone else, except me; and everyone found a chair, except me; and everyone was jolly and contented and familiar and at home, except me! And I was the miserablest and loneliest that I'd ever been in my life.

Mr. Barclay sat in a chair down by the footlights, sunk into his collar and oblivious to everyone. Then the author, Murray Austen, arrived, small, bird-like, with large, round, tortoiseshell-framed spectacles, and he was followed by Denville and my friend of the swing-door.

They all went down and sat by Mr. Barclay, and then, catching sight of me, the swing-door man raised his hand and nodded and smiled, and I was so gratefull for that one friendly oasis in a veritable desert of frigidity that I waved to him and smiled and nodded back like anything, just as if we were the oldest pals.

And instantly two young men sprang up and discovered that I was chairless, and they each brought me a chair and apologized profusely for not having noticed before that I was standing.

And the leading lady even said graciously:

"There's room here by me, Miss—er——"

"Grey," I said, wondering who on earth my swing-door man could be that his greeting me should have this remarkable effect.

Then Mr. Barclay announced that the author would read his play to us—as if it were no end of a grievance—and sank back into his collar again.

And when the play had been read, and everyone had buzzed about it, Mr. Barclay brought the swing-door man up to me, saying, "Lord Henry Penryth wants to be introduced."

So he was a lord, was he? And . . . why, of course, I'd often seen his name in the papers among lists of guests at various society functions, and during the war he'd won some decorations, and I remember it being said of him that he was one of the richest men in England, but a *confirmed bachelor*, and, oh, well, you know the sort of thing that well-known people get written about them.

So that's why everyone was suddenly so polite to me, when he waved to me.

He was awfully nice to me, and we stood chatting for quite a while, and he said I'd got a splendid chance, and was to grab it with both hands.

And as the days went by we became very good friends, and I confided to him how it was the first, the very first chance of anything that had ever come my way, and I told him about my guardian writing and telling me I couldn't act, and he laughed and said:

"Oh, I suppose he's a snuffy old chap who doesn't approve of the stage?"

I looked up at him, rather amused.

"Must a guardian always be a crotchety old invalid, all dressed up in bath-chairs and respirators?"

He laughed slightly.

"Well, no, I suppose not, only that's the sort of picture the world conjures up."

"As it happens, he's quite young."

"Is he, by Jove? And how does he come to be your guardian then?"

"I was bequeathed to him. My father bequeathed me

when I was quite a tiny, to old Mr. Nickolas Penticott, and when he died, he handed me on to his son, *young* Mr. Nickolas Penticott. I'm a sacred trust and a solemn responsibility, and all that kind of thing." And I finished with a little grimace.

"And he's quite young, is he?" said Lord Henry, as if that were the point that chiefly struck him.

"Yes, and not bad-looking, of his type. I can't say that it's a type I absolutely adore."

He laughed again.

"What is a type you absolutely adore, Miss Grey?"

"I don't think I've met it yet."

"Do you see much of him, this guardian of yours?"

"Why, I hardly ever see him. I think he's so terrified of me. Well, wouldn't any man be terrified of a sacred trust and a solemn responsibility?"

"Then I'm afraid he doesn't take the responsibility very seriously."

"Oh, doesn't he, though! He keeps my accounts and pays me my income, and sends his two elderly cousins to stay with me, and when the burden of me gets really oppressive and he gets more terrified than usual he writes me the most beautiful letters, full to the edges with wisdom and warnings and dull old admonitions."

Lord Henry broke in teasingly:

"Whew! Don't ever annihilate me with such scorn, please! I'd simply shrivel up! If you could only see your eyes snapping contempt! I'll have to get Austen to write you in a scene, so that you can——"

"Oh—well," I said, laughing, a bit ashamed of myself, "it is aggravating to be told you can't act when——"

"You know you can, eh?"

"That sounds swell-headed. But what I was going

to say was, when people who really do know are nice to you about it."

"It's a fine little part, and you're going to be a success in it," he said generously.

"I mean to, if only to prove my guardian wrong," I answered gaily.

CHAPTER III

BUT that was in the very early days of rehearsals, when everything was going swimmingly, and everyone was so pleasant and sweet and pleased with themselves and polite to everyone else.

Later on I got a taste of the advanced stages, when time was getting short and tempers shorter, and everything seemed to be in hopeless chaos, and nerves began to fray at the edges. At first it had been:

“Miss Grey, move down a little further, will you?” or “Give just a trifle, Miss Grey, will you? Thanks, so much!” Now it was, “Miss Grey, for the love of Heaven get down stage at that point!” and “Miss Grey, will you give a bit? How many times am I to tell you? It’s the simplest little thing! Just a step back! A baby could do it, and yet you—— ’Pon my soul, I don’t know why half of you go on the stage!” And so on and so on, and then:

“You’re hiding Miss Carstairs!” and “It’s Miss Carstairs the people want to see, not you!”

This was the producer, Bennington-Stewart, a terrifically important person, with a habit of striding distractedly about the stage, rumpling up his hair and using the most impolite language. His aim in life seemed to be to paralyse everyone with his biting sarcasms and criticisms, everyone, that is, with the exception of Barclay and Miss Carstairs, the leading lady and a big “star” with a huge

name. When he had roared instructions at one from the footlights or the stalls, until he'd simply made one numb with confusion, he'd come thundering on to the stage, grab me by the arms, pinning them to my sides, and proceed to push me about the stage as if I were a refreshment wagon, then he'd tell me to make a gesture! I'd feebly wag one hand, the rest of my arm feeling cold and lifeless with the grip he had on it, and he'd release me, to ramp for a bit, shouting out:

"This is a big stage! One of the biggest in London! And you flap your hands like a kitten drowning in a half-pint jug!"

Goodness! How wretched I was! I began to feel that I couldn't do a thing; that I was utterly incapable; that with an enormous chance like this simply flung at me, I was failing through sheer idiocy! I never knew how awkward one could be, and once Bennington-Stewart picked on you, he never let up. It was one continual nag. I simply couldn't help blundering, and as for gestures, I just felt all hands and feet and elbows.

All my confidence was evaporating. The Longman girls told me cheerfully that that was quite all right, rehearsals always went that way, and I wasn't to take any notice of anyone, but just go right ahead and "express my art as my soul dictated." A good phrase, but the worst of it was that my soul didn't dictate.

I felt as if I hadn't got a soul. And if it hadn't been for Lord Henry my stage career would have wilted away before my first public appearance from sheer bewilderment and nervousness and depression.

But he kept my spirits going by being most sweet and encouraging.

"You're going along fine," he said. "And—a hint in your ear—Barclay thinks so, too."

“Does he?” I asked incredulously. “Well, he doesn’t show it!” I added, grumbling. But Lord Henry only laughed and told me to carry on.

Then came the first night! Oh, that first night! Shall I ever, ever, *ever* forget the agony I went through!

We’d had a perfectly appalling dress rehearsal. Everything had gone wrong, but everyone said that was a good omen, but it wasn’t a good omen for me. I felt if only I could have had a real show beforehand I wouldn’t feel so appalling now. As it was, I was miserable with nerves; cold and dizzy and—oh, just awful.

Norah was away at her case by now, but the twins insisted upon buying two stalls, and sitting in them, too, dressed up to the nines in weird striped silks and amber beads and things. I knew I’d have hysterics if I saw them from the stage.

The company were all very tense and ready to snap anybody’s head off on the slightest provocation. They wished each other luck in a mournful sort of way—all except Miss Carstairs. She was radiant, seeing friends and talking and laughing and getting telegrams and bouquets every other minute.

Then the cry of the call-boy rang down the corridor: “Half-hour! Half-hour!” and I began to tremble. When he called the “Quarter!” I was shaking from head to foot. His yell of “Overture!” made me jab a large chunk of eye-black right *in* my eye, and it wept and washed the black in a streak down my face. Then, like a relentless Fate, came his high-voiced, “First act, beginners!”

That applied to all those who were on at the opening of the play. I was one of them.

How I got into the rest of my clothes and make-up I can’t tell you, any more than I can tell you how I per-

suaded my shaking knees to carry me down four flights of stairs from my dressing-room to the stage.

Somehow they did it; somehow I was on the stage waiting for the curtain to go up.

Lord Henry came up to me, squeezed my cold hand in both his, and said, close to my ear:

“Good luck, little lady!” and went off again.

Then up went the curtain, and the glare of the foot-lights struck me full in the eyes, and beyond them a vast blackness, dotted with white faces.

* * * * *

I hadn't much to do or say, but the few lines I had to speak came from me in a flat, uninteresting way that seemed to let the whole scene down with a thump.

I was rotten, absolutely rotten!

The scene was sort of going by me, and I seemed to be chasing after it, but never, never catching up and getting a grip on it. I came off limp as a rag, and dragged myself up to my room, knowing that I'd failed.

Everyone I met was awfully kind, but in a horrible consoling sort of way. A “poor-little-girl-I-know-what-it-is” sort of way that just shrivelled me.

The second act was worse still. There wasn't a spark in me. I felt as if I were tagging after the rest, a regular “also ran,” and I noticed—oh, horrors!—that whenever I had to speak the audience thought it a splendid opportunity for getting a lot of coughing and fidgeting done.

This time, when I went off, there was a distinctly “I-thought-you-were-going-to-be-so-good” air about everyone I met.

The third act was my big scene—the crying, pleading scene which was my one really important bit; in fact,

it was the big thing of the third act. Moreover, it was all with Barclay himself. And I was bound to fail! Bound to! I felt that "failure" was stamped on every bone in me.

I hadn't seen Lord Henry since he shook hands with me at the beginning. He'd been in front, I suppose, witnessing my awful performance. I changed for my big scene. My heart like lead, hands and feet like ice, head like fire, and beginning to feel a maudlin, mushy self-pity. After all, it was my first part. I was so young and inexperienced, and all that sort of utter bilge.

Like a lamb led to the slaughter, or a martyr to the stake, I went and stood in the "wings," waiting to go on for my great scene. And as I stood there Lord Henry came towards me. *He* will be kind! *He* will understand! He will give me sympathy! I told myself mushily and turned to him quite confidently to get it all.

And did I? I DID NOT!

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, in a tense whisper. "Do you realize that you're rotten tonight? That everyone is disgusted, that Barclay is furious, and Austen nearly off his head, and the audience wondering who on earth the dud is?"

I stopped before him aghast. Here was pretty sympathy indeed!

"I—I can't help it!" I said, beginning to snivel. "I'm so young and inexperienced and—oh, it's cruel of you to talk like that!"

"Cruel be hanged! Have I got to stand by and see a good sound venture wrecked by a little fool who never ought to have gone near any stage in this world!"

Something that was not self-pity began to rise in me.

"Lord Henry——" I began gaspingly.

"Don't talk to me!" he went on furiously. "You

came here putting on airs, patting yourself on the back as Barclay's great new find. By the living Moses, he'll wish he'd left you back there where you came from!"

"Lord Henry!" I gasped again.

"Oh, keep quiet! Here's your cue coming! Go on! Go on and make a mess of it! Your guardian was right. You can't act, and never will be able to!"

At that something snapped. The ice went out of my hands and feet, the fire out of my head. I turned on him furiously:

"I can't act! Can't I? Oh, I'll show you! I'll just *show* you!"

I heard my cue, and went on all wrought up to the sky, and I flung myself into that scene and fairly bathed in it.

I forgot I'd failed. I forgot it was the great Barclay I was acting with. I just cried and prayed and beseeched, and I let my voice break, and the tears came squelching down, and I finished with my head down on my arms, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing——

I didn't hear the curtain come down, I just lay there in the tensest silence I've ever known. Then a sort of a roar broke out, a rattling of thunder, and someone pulled me up and took my hand. And I saw it was Barclay.

"They're calling! Don't you hear? They're calling for us!"

For us! For the great Barclay and ME!

When he said that "*us*" it was as if he'd pinned a medal on me.

I saw that the curtain was up and the applause was thundering round the theatre, and Barclay and I stood in the centre of the stage hand-in-hand. And the curtain went up and down six times, and still the people called.

And at last we went off, and in the wings, right in front of everyone, Barclay, all worked up, caught me and kissed me on both cheeks, and I was laughing and crying and behaving like an idiot, and, turning, I saw Lord Henry.

He had the colossal cheek to hold out his hand to me. After all he'd said! But I wasn't having any. I steadied myself down and mustered up a look of killing scorn.

"You said I couldn't act," I said slowly. "You said my guardian was right——"

To my intense surprise and indignation he laughed softly.

"Ah," he said, highly satisfied, "I thought that would do it, and it did."

I stared up at him, unable quite to take it in.

"W-what?" I stammered.

He laughed again, extremely pleased with himself evidently.

"I somehow thought that would do it. . . ."

"You did all that on purpose?" I cried indignantly.

"Well, little lady, something had to be done, hadn't it?"

"You mean to say that you went for me like that, ticked me off in that appalling way just to rouse me into going on and being good in that third act bit?"

"I was absolutely at my wit's end. You were failing, do you realize that? And I knew you only needed stinging into it. I knew it was there, if we could only strike the spark."

"Well, you did that all right," I admitted, half-laughing. "I never was so utterly furious in my life!"

Lord Henry laughed, too.

"You were, weren't you? I never saw the sparks fly

so! Regular rockets and catherine-wheels of 'em. But, you know, it wasn't really I that did it."

The coolness of him!

"Now," I said severely, "how can you stand there and tell such—such whoppers?"

"Wasn't it my saying that you couldn't act now, and never would be able to, that really did the trick?"

"Yes, but——"

"And wasn't that a quotation from that youthful guardian of yours, who is quite good-looking in his way—even if it is a way you don't adore?"

"Yes," I said again; "but——"

"Well, then, obviously it was *he* who did it, not I. That's logic, isn't it?"

"What a wickedly tricky argument!" I cried. "But it's no earthly good talking logic to me to-night. I'm not feeling the least bit logical. I'm feeling—oh, I don't just know how I'm feeling!"

And I drew a deep breath and did a sort of a duet between a sigh and a laugh.

"Then shake hands and forgive me, and allow me to congratulate you," he said, holding out his hand.

I put mine into it, suddenly feeling all shaky and inclined to cry.

"Forgive you?" I said shyly. "I think 'bless you' is more what I'd like to say to you!"

He looked down at me, his nice face sobered to a very sweet kindness, and said quietly:

"Thank you, little lady. I shall remember that."

I know I'd have disgraced myself by howling if I hadn't escaped and gone to my dressing-room, because I felt all sort of frothy and worked up. You can imagine it, can't you, after all that had happened?

I'd only a wee little bit in the last act. I had to burst

on to the stage and disturb a love scene between Barclay and Miss Carstairs, and then say a few lines about being sorry, and so on. Well, when I went on, to my utter amazement, I got a "round" of applause, which hung up the scene for quite a second or two. I was so utterly taken aback that I "dried up," and simply stood, stuttering in absolute confusion. And that got a laugh, a good hearty, approving laugh, too, as if it were an intentional touch of comedy, and that laugh brought me to my senses, and I went on as if there'd been no sort of hitch. And there hadn't, really, because, although it seemed eternities to me, it was all over in a few seconds really.

When the curtain came down for the last time, there was thunderous applause, and goodness knows how many curtain "calls." Barclay and Miss Carstairs bowed and bowed again, then the other chief members of the company went on and bowed too; and then I heard her say, in her fascinating, caressing sort of way:

"Where's the little haymaker? We mustn't leave her out." And seeing me, she came and linked her arm in mine, and said, "Come along, little harvester—the house clamors for you!"

And when the curtain went up again for the umpteenth time, there was I, arm-linked with the leading lady, and as the applause swelled up she even pushed me forward towards the footlights and pointed me out, and made a regular "feature" of me, laughing all the time.

I felt like nothing on earth, and only prayed for the stage to open and let me disappear like the demon in a pantomime; but I thought it awfully, awfully nice of her. I'd never have thought she could have been so unbending and human and jolly. She was such a very great actress.

But I couldn't help wondering what she meant by call-

ing me "the little haymaker" and "little harvester." Some stage slang, I suppose, that I didn't know yet.

All this went through my head as we stood together on the stage, she bowing and smiling, and laughing and gesticulating; I as if I were made of solid wood. I was jolly glad when it was over and I was once more on my way to my room.

It really was a sort of triumphal procession, if one can be a procession all on one's own, for everyone was too kind for any words.

And I thought gratefully that, although I'd heard a whole heap about the jealousy of stage folk, there didn't seem any sign of it here. I had made a hit, and no one grudged it to me.

Only one girl said, "Of course, it's a glorious little part," but she was instantly hooted down by about a dozen others, and there were cries of "Cat!" "Miaow!" and so on.

These were the very small parts and "walk on" people, but the important ones were just as nice in a less boisterous way, and I was on the point of melting away with gratitude and depth of feeling, when, back in my dressing-room, I happened to ask the girl who shared my room just what "haymaking" and "harvesting" signified.

"Making hay while the limelight shines," she replied. "In other words, writing up your part, grabbing applause, swelling a small part up to look like a big one, making more than the legitimate most of your part, and so on. Why?"

But I was suddenly too hot and furious to tell her.

So that was what Miss Carstairs had meant!

That was what she accused me of doing!

So that when she had apparently been so nice to me she was all the time making game of me.

Tears of chagrin smarted in my eyes. It was too bad, too cruel, because I hadn't deliberately been "haymaking." I hadn't!

But just then a message came to the door from the twins, asking if they could come round to see me. Of course, I had to send my dresser to get permission; got it, and round came the twins, visions in sage green and amber beads and rainbow-striped scarfs.

"Judy!" they cried out in unison, and then fell on my neck, one on each side, and poured incoherent enthusiasm into each ear.

"Darling, how glorious you were!"

"You're famous! D'you realize it?"

"Perched up on the absolute tip-top of the tree!"

"And oh, darling, how romantically grease-painty you smell!"

This, and a lot more, beside, they got off their chests before I shook them off, introduced them to my roommate, and told them to let me get dressed.

"Oh, do let us help! Can't I take off your shoes, or something——"

"Can't we do the handmaidens attending genius stunt? We'll simply go pop if we aren't allowed to bathe in the reflected glory."

And they were off again. "Of course," said Bun at last, fetching up breathlessly, "we must take this darling of the gods to supper, eh, Buttercup?"

"Naturally, Honeybun, and toast her in brimming bumpers."

"And charge it up to dad."

"What a blessing his name is good in every restaurant in town!"

"Will you come, Judy?"

"Rather!" I was beginning, when a knock sounded

at the door and the dresser went and fetched a note that had been handed in by the call-boy.

It was from Lord Henry, asking me to join his supper party. He'd got everyone coming—Barclay, Miss Carstairs, the author, and now he wanted me.

Oh dear! And I'd just said I'd go with the twins. I loved them dearly, but it would have been more thrilling to go with Lord Henry's party. But I wouldn't have hurt their precious feelings for the world, so I sent a little scribble explaining.

The answer to that was another knock at the door. "Letters, telegrams, diamonds, bouquets and proposals of marriage——" Bun was beginning ecstasically to murmur, when the dresser opened the door and Lord Henry's own voice said:

"Can I see Miss Grey a moment?"

"Why, Buttercup!" cried Bun. "It's Harry Beaufort!"

And the twins made a dive for Lord Henry, each grasped a hand, and said:

"Harry, you dear old darling! How are you? What ages and ages since we shook your cheerful old paw!"

Harry Beaufort? What on earth were they talking about? I thought, mystified.

"Good heavens!" said Lord Henry. "It's the Longman twins! But you—you were kids when war broke out. Is it you Miss Grey is going to supper with?"

"Yes."

"But I want her in my party."

"That's all right, old pin," said one of them easily. "We'll all come."

"Just what I was going to suggest," he said, laughing, and he called out to me:

"That suit you, Miss Grey?"

"Oh, lovely!" I cried out.

"Right, then; twenty minutes from now. *Au 'voir!* *Au 'voir,* you crazy kids!" and he went away.

"Crazy kids, indeed!" they said indignantly, coming back. "But, Judy, you never told us you knew Harry Beaufort."

"I didn't know I did," I replied. "That's Lord Henry Penryth."

"Oh, of course, I remember. He was a lord, wasn't he, Bunny? But he always called himself 'Harry Beaufort' at the dramatic society we all belonged to before the war. We've known him for ages and ages, but we haven't seen him since war was declared. But Judy, he's a pal worth having, the best and whitest—isn't he, Buttercup?"

"You can bet your sweet life on that, Honey-bun!" was the emphatic reply.

And, somehow, it pleased me enormously to hear Lord Henry spoken of like this.

* * * * *

The supper party was a big success; very "exclusive," of course—by which I mean that only the important members of the company were present. That sounds like one for myself, doesn't it? So perhaps I'd better say that everyone else was important. Pelman Barclay—and, of course, Denville—Cynthia Carstairs, Murray Austen, the author, and a few friends that I never really succeeded in sorting out.

Everyone was in high spirits, and as jolly as could be over the success of the play, and we had no end of a time of it. The only cloud in the proceedings, so far as I was concerned, was that Miss Carstairs was so super-amiable to me.

After the incident about haymaking I began to look with a wary eye on her pleasantness.

But she gave me nothing to really get hold of; she joined in the congratulations, and when Barclay very sweetly raised his glass to me and said a kind little word or so, she swelled the incident into a general toast of what she was pleased to call "the success of the evening," and then called for a speech from me; and I couldn't for the life of me tell whether she was doing it just to embarrass me and make me make a fool of myself or not.

But, after all, what reason had she to resent me, or to grudge me my one little bit of glory? She was such a great and wonderful actress, and had such an absolutely unassailable position, and—why, I was less than nothing compared!

I couldn't make it out at all, but I might have spared myself all my puzzling and questioning for I was all too soon to find out the real significance of her charming manner towards me.

It was late when we got back; later still when I managed to persuade the twins, now wrapped in wondrous kimono wraps, that they could not take up their abode permanently perched upon my bed, and close on dawn when my over-excited brain decided to shut up and let me sleep.

CHAPTER IV

I AWOKE to the sound of a loud knocking on the front door and sprang up, flinging a wrap around me. But the twins were before me, and came in together, bringing a telegram.

“Here’s an offer of a leading part from some rival management!” they cried excitedly. “And here are all the papers. Such topping notices!”

But I was reading the telegram. Gracious! a rehearsal call for noon, and here it was past eleven already!

“No answer!” I said, beginning to hustle up. What on earth could they want to rehearse any more for? I wondered. I dressed quickly, and while I hastily drank a cup of tea, the twins read me the notices. They’d been out and got a copy of every paper ever published I should imagine from the heaps they were surrounded by.

“Topping notices, aren’t they?” they asked beamingly. And they were, too. Of course Barclay and Cynthia Carstairs got most of the nice things, but practically all the critics had managed to find that they had a few glowing adjectives left over to bestow upon me. And it was a jolly feeling. The *Little Uppington Eagle* seemed a very unfledged sort of a bird, now.

My spirits rose so that they broke all previous altitude records as I wended my way blithely to the theatre.

Barclay, Miss Carstairs, Lord Henry, the author, and one or two others were on the stage.

"All here?" rapped out Barclay. "Then let's begin. First act, please!"

Well, I'd had little enough to do in the first act, but I had considerably less at the end of that rehearsal.

Quite half my lines were cut clean out, others shortened, altered, modified, the humor wiped out of them.

Second act the same. Because I was so bad in these two acts, I thought to myself. Well, I deserved it.

But when it came to the third act, it was just the same. More so, if anything. And I hadn't been bad in that act. Utterly bewildered, I read through the new version, a skeleton thing, which seemed to be nothing but gaps. I tried it this way and that way, and it seemed to fall as flat as a pancake.

"Much better—much, much better!" called out Miss Carstairs from where she was sitting near the footlights. "Now it takes its proper place in the play. And, Miss Grey, if, when you begin to realize that Mr. Barclay is not going to allow you to see your lover again, you could turn your back to the audience, it would be so much more effective; less stagey, more actual!" she said sweetly—oh, so sweetly!

"And, Pelman, don't you think those lines, 'You don't mean it—you *can't* mean it!' are unnecessary?"

Oh, she was simply carving up my part into little snips! There was absolutely nothing left of it. I knew that my expression of horror was one of the most effective things in it. And she ordained that I was to turn my back!

I knew that those lines were some of my very, very best, and she just sat there and cut them out! The cruelty of it! The utter, cold-blooded cruelty of it!

But suddenly Murray Austen got up, running his fingers distractedly through his hair.

"Hang it all, I wrote those lines because they fit the part, and I want the part to speak them. With all due reverence for your art, Miss Carstairs, I do want the part to speak them!" he repeated doggedly.

"Yes, really, Cynthia," put in Barclay, "you are leaving the child nothing to handle."

"Oh, well," said Miss Carstairs calmly, "if she can't handle the part, I've no doubt there are others who can. Miss Glidden, for example, seems a clever, intelligent girl!"

My heart stood still while this great actress so spitefully tried to wreck my first and only chance. The Miss Glidden she mentioned was a nondescript sort of girl who'd be what's called "safe" in almost any part, but *good* in none.

"I, for one, shall be extremely sorry if Miss Grey doesn't play the part," said Murray Austen instantly. "Bless his heart!" I thought gratefully, for mine, by this time, seemed just broken in two.

After all my success, all the jolly-niceness of everyone, to find myself up against this!

"Oh, I've no sort of objection to Miss Grey in the part, so long as she maintains a sense of proportion. But you must admit that her show last night was distinctly lacking in this quality," said Miss Carstairs. Then to me, in that slow, caressing way, smiling sweetly: "I'm quite sure that Miss Grey realizes that I am speaking only for the good of the play as a whole."

And everyone murmured politely:

"Oh, quite!" "Of course!" "Naturally!" and I thought, oh, if only I dared to say right out just what I thought!

Well, the end of it was that my poor little part was cut, altered, modified, reduced to utter insignificance, all to fit a jealous whim of this great actress.

While I stood, dumb and hot with fury and nearly choking with unshed tears, and tried to be thankful that I was allowed to play what remained of the part at all.

And everyone just calmly submitted to it. Just sat down and let her ride rough-shod over them! Even Barclay himself. I found out the reason later, but at that moment I ragingly wondered how they could all be such cowards. The rehearsal over, they drifted away, Lord Henry had scarcely spoken to me, and now just nodded casually to me as he went out with Cynthia Carstairs.

"Why couldn't he have stood by me?" I thought angrily.

Only the author came up and sympathized, and he was moved mostly by the fact that it was his play that had been so ruthlessly mangled.

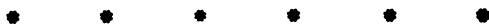
"She's jealous—jealous of you, Miss Grey. You committed the unpardonable offence—you made a striking success—and my poor play has to suffer in consequence!"

"And my poor part," I said, my lips trembling.

"Ah, well! Ah, well!" he said angrily, and took himself off.

I went back to the flat, broke the news to the twins, and then shut myself in my room and cried and cried and cried!

And no stage effects about it this time, you'd better believe. My spirits may have broken altitude records an hour or two ago, but they'd crashed badly since and were chanting "in memoriams" now.



I didn't see, I just absolutely did *not* see, how I was

going to go on the stage and play that awful travesty of my darling little part. I went down to the theatre feeling utterly wretched, and tried to console myself with moral reflections, such as "pride goeth before a fall," and so on, but they didn't bring any consolation because, as I told myself fiercely, it hadn't been pride—gladness, gratitude and a jolly, heady feeling of having *got through, won*, made good, but not pride.

My head had been among the stars perhaps in the first giddy moments of success, but it hadn't been turned.

Oh, it was bitterly, bitterly unfair! And to think that Lord Henry, who'd been so friendly, should have calmly stood and let it happen!

* * * * *

Everyone was pretty flat that night. They mostly are on the second night—reaction from the excitement of the first, I suppose.

Barclay "dried up;" Miss Carstairs was "fluffy," and there's nothing so infectious—it ran like 'flu through the whole company. My big scene went for absolutely nothing. The curtain went down on wretched, aimless, half-hearted applause. Barclay fumed away to his room, and the slamming of his dressing-room door echoed all through the theatre.

A few minutes later he sent for me.

He had nearly twenty minutes' rest at this point, and when I was shown into his dressing-room he was before the mirror, touching up his make-up.

"Sit down, Miss Grey," he said, and I sat on the edge of a couch. His dressing-room was beautifully appointed.

Denville and the dresser, Barclay's own personal man, withdrew to an ante-room.

"Miss Grey, you realize, of course, that you have made

a very favorable impression with your playing of this part. Well, as a little token of my appreciation, I want to make your salary twelve instead of eight pounds. It gives me great pleasure to tell you of this personally," he added, but he didn't look as if it gave him great pleasure. He looked downright discomfited, and kept his eyes on his own reflection in the mirror.

I was wretched and hurt and angry, and this was the last straw. My voice shook, as I said:

"Thank you, Mr. Barclay, but I'd very much rather not take it."

"Come, don't be proud—that's foolish," he said, with an attempt at raillery.

"Oh, it isn't pride," I replied; "but I am perfectly satisfied with my present salary, thank you, very much."

And I rose to go, but he said impatiently:

"Sit down! Sit down!" So I sat down.

"Now," he said, "tell me why you won't accept this offer?"

And then out it all came, all, every bit, in a single sentence.

"Do you think that four pounds a week extra is any—any—any compensation?" I cried out hotly.

He was silent, and I half expected him to be angry, but he wasn't. When he spoke again, it was very gently.

"No, child, I know it's not," he said, as simply as if we were fellow-workers on a level with each other.

And as I looked at him I knew perfectly well who'd thought of giving me this rise in salary—Miss Carstairs!

And I tell you the thought burned hot and strong in me. Of course, one couldn't say anything more direct, and, anyway, it wasn't necessary, for we both knew that we completely understood each other.

This time, when I rose, he let me go, just saying:

"It hurts, I know it hurts, but everything passes, and even the sting of this will in time."

He had a fine, melancholy-toned voice, and it rang very truly kind as he spoke to me. I blessed him, too, for his tact in not pressing the salary question. He realized that the offer was tantamount to an attempt at "buying me off," and that such an offer seemed nothing more or less than an insult to me. So he just accepted my refusal without further comment and with perfect understanding. However others may have found Pelman Barclay—and there are always stories against great men—he was always the best ever to me. Somehow, my little interview with him cheered me up a good deal. I wasn't quite so devastatingly miserable after that, and when I left the theatre later on, I felt almost cheerful.

I got round the corner to the nearest tube, and to my astonishment found it closed, and a placard, "No trains," hung on to the gate. "What's it all about?" I thought to myself; evidently not so very much to myself, though, for a woman standing by said excitedly, "It's the strike! They said they'd do it all of a sudden like this! And now they've been and done it! There ain't no 'buses neither, and I've got to get all the way to Hoxton! Pad the hoof, I suppose," and she moved off.

I supposed so, too, and, oh dear, Chelsea seemed the very dickens of a long way off! Partly because I wasn't very familiar with the way, of course. Still, there was nothing for it, so off I set. And now it was just the time when people were leaving the theatres, and there was a regular stream of them beginning to pour along the streets, and such a lot of chattering and excitement, and laughing and joking, everyone taking it as a sort of a picnic.

Motor cars went by absolutely crammed inside, and

with all sorts and conditions of people clinging on outside, apparently just "sticking" like flies to a honey-pot.

One gallant little two-seater was carrying nine people. How it did it goodness only knows. It all began to be so interesting and amusing that I was half-way down Piccadilly before I realized it. Then suddenly I heard a voice call out:

"There's that girl! Bless us, what's her name! Hi! Stop! Jenkins! Go and ask her to come and have a lift. No, not that one—the one in the grey hat—the little one——"

And a moment later someone touched my elbow. I turned and found a chauffeur standing there.

"Her ladyship says can she give you a lift, miss?" he said. And looking round bewildered I saw a fine, big car draw up at the curb, and a mannish-looking, grey-haired woman, leaning out, saying:

"Come along! Here's a jolly business, isn't it?"

I went towards her, still utterly bewildered, and she opened the door of the car and said:

"Get in and let me take you home. Far to go?"

"Only Chelsea," I replied, thinking that this stranger had one of the nicest, "squarest," most confidence-inspiring faces I'd ever seen.

"I saw you on the stage last night. Harry told me to watch out for Barclay's new find. I'm Harry's aunt—Cordelia Beaufort. Squash in!"

So I did, and squash was the right word, for the car was crammed.

"Such luck to meet you this way," she went on. "Find room? That's right. I was going to write to you—Miss—what is your name? There's Harry been talking of no one else for the past three weeks and I've such a

rotten head for names. I can't——" she broke off, laughing jokily.

"Grey," I said, through a mouthful of ermine from the collar of her evening wrap.

"Well, Miss Grey, I was going to write you to call on me. Will you do it?"

I hardly knew what to say. Harry, of course, was Lord Henry, and this was his aunt, Cordelia Beaufort—Lady Cordelia Beaufort. I've often seen her name in the paper; she organized a huge canteen for overseas men in the early days of the war, among other things. But to be asked to call on her was rather overwhelming. Besides, I was angry with Lord Henry.

"Oh, thank you—it's very kind of you," I stammered out. After all, I wasn't angry with Lord Henry's aunt—I shouldn't think anybody ever could be.

"Well, when will you come?"

"Whenever——" I began.

"Oh, have a mind of your own!" she laughed. "What day do you like best? See, this is Thursday. Friday's unlucky, Saturday's *matinée*, Sunday I'm full-up, Monday I'm recovering from Sunday. Say Tuesday next, at four, shall we?"

"I—I'd love it," I said, joining in her friendly laugh.

"That's settled then. Now, is Jenkins going right? You give him wireless directions through the glass, while I see if I've a card in my bag."

I directed the chauffeur to turn down a narrow little street off King's Road, Chelsea, and then turn again into the still narrower street in which was Norah's flat.

"Quite close to me," said Lady Cordelia. "See, here's my card. Don't forget, will you? And send me your home address to put in my book, will you?"

The car drew up, and I squashed my way out to the pavement.

“Good night, and thank you so very much,” I said.

“Good night! So glad to have met you. Home, Jenkins!”

The car backed and “chunked” and shunted and finally turned and went humming off, and I went into the flat.

By the light in the hall I looked down at the card in my hand.

LADY CORDELIA BEAUFORT,
16 Cadogan Terrace, S. W.

What a day of adventure! I breathed a deep sigh. Then the twins came out of their room, fell upon me, chattering nineteen to the dozen, and peaceful meditation was impossible.

The twins, wrapped in gorgeous kimonos, welcomed me as if I were the long-lost heroine in the fifth act of a melodrama.

“Darling! We’ve been wondering where on earth you could be——”

“And what on earth could have happened!” they said, doing their celebrated duet act, one in each ear.

“And why the car?”

“And whose?”

I clapped my hands over my ears.

“Ring off at the exchange, for mercy’s sake!” I said, laughing. “The lines are crossed!”

“Bunny, she mocks us! I suppose she’s been having luxurious suppers with the sons of multi-profiters, while we poor, ill-used lambs——”

“Have been taking the temperature of the humble hot-water dish every five minutes.”

"Cheers!" I said. "Because I haven't been having supper; I've been having adventures instead, and I'm starving."

They hustled up at that, and in the nice, little sitting-room I started on my nice, little supper, telling them the story of my life between mouthfuls.

There's one great thing about the twins—no one could truthfully call them lethargic; they are always ready to go all up in the air at the first hint of anything out of the usual. And up they went at the first half-dozen words, their highly colored fancy caught instantly.

"Oh, Buttercup!" cried Bun. "And to think we weren't there to see it all! I *do* think they might have arranged their old strike when we were miles from home——"

"Shut up, Bun! Yes, Judy, and then?"

"Oh, then I was picked up and given a lift home by Lady Cordelia Beaufort," I said very casually.

The twins stared.

"Cordelia Beaufort!" they cried. "Why, that's Harry's cousin, or grandmother, or—or something."

"His aunt," I told them, as if I'd known Lady Cordelia all my life.

"But what an extraordinary coincidence!"

"No coincidence at all. She'd seen me on the stage the first night, and recognized me, and sent her chauffeur after me."

"Oh, Bun, why can't we make a sudden wild leap for fame, and be recognized by the peerage as we slink along Piccadilly?"

They sighed deeply, and I proceeded to pile up the agony of the situation.

"I'm going to have tea with her on Tuesday," I an-

nounced. That did it! They were fairly off their heads with excitement.

"Why, Ju, you're made; you're simply made if she takes you up!"

"She knows absolutely everybody who is anybody!"

"Except us. You forget that, Bun."

They broke off, laughing.

"Of course, she'd heard of me from Lord Henry," I added.

"Did she say so?"

And, absolutely without thinking, I told them what Lady Cordelia had said about forgetting my name, in spite of Lord Henry having talked of "no one else for weeks."

But the effect of this perfectly innocent remark upon the twins was most surprising.

"He's been talking of nobody but you for weeks?" asked Bun.

I laughed.

"Lady Cordelia said so," I replied.

The twins looked at each other, hesitated, and finally said:

"We feel like mothers towards Judy, don't we, Bun?"

"Like—like grandmothers, Buttercup."

"Shall we tell her, then?"

"I think we ought."

"She may be thinking—oh, all sorts of things!"

She was right there! I was! I was thinking, in the forcible vernacular of the day, that they must suddenly have gone sheer up the pole!

"You know, darling," began Madeline, in the tone of one saying, "Look at the pretty dentist! *He* wouldn't hurt you, would he?" "You know, darling, he doesn't mean anything!"

"Doesn't mean anything?" I replied. "What doesn't? Who doesn't?"

"Harry doesn't," she replied.

"You see," put in Clairette hastily, "it's your acting he's interested in, not you. I don't mean to be offensive, and of course he may like you a good deal; we feel sure he does, don't we, Bun?"

"Quite sure."

"But we know Harry, and although he is, without doubt, one of the very, very best, we know that . . ."

"He's a confirmed bachelor."

I stared at them, wondering what on earth they were driving at.

"A confirmed bachelor," I echoed.

"*Most* confirmed," said Madeline.

"The confirmedest ever," added Clairette, with more and more emphasis.

I just stared and stared and stared. Had they really gone crazy?

"Half the girls in town have been trying to marry him for ages," went on one of them, really, I don't remember which.

"And heaps of times," went on the other, "the rumor's gone round that he really *was* beginning to like some particular one better than another, but——"

"Nothing has ever come of it!"

"Well—I'm—BLOWED!" I said, sort of "coming to" out of my utter amazement. Then I felt my face go hot, and, really, I was rather furious.

"Do you imagine for one single second that I've been trying to marry him, or have ever dreamt of trying, or would ever WANT to try?"

And I rose in my wrath and thumped the table in the very best Hyde Park orator style.

“Whew!” said Bun. “We’ve been an’ gone an’ dropped a bomb in the ammunition dump this time, and no mistake!”

She said it so comically that we were all obliged to laugh, and I sat down again, laughing limply.

“Darling,” they implored, “don’t be angry. Only we’d hate you to go and smash up your heart for a confirmed bachelor, or anything of that sort.”

“We were impelled by the best intentions.”

“Blitherers!” I said, laughing again. “Don’t be so too utterly ridiculous again!”

“Very well,” they said meekly. “We won’t.”

And peace was declared.

But, oh, Great Peter! Has he been thinking things of me?

Has he been watching out for signs—danger-signals—that I am trying to marry him?

And it only occurred to me then that, of course, he was a terrific match for almost any girl who wasn’t actually a princess of the blood. And, of course, he’s had a fearful lot of spoiling and attention, and there’s been heaps of speculation about him, and dozens of girls, and girls’ mothers, must have hoped and schemed and angled for him. How utterly horrid! Enough to make any man a confirmed bachelor. But bother the twins! I wish they hadn’t told me!

The next great thrill in my programme was going to have tea with Lady Cordelia Beaufort on Tuesday. Oh, no; the very next really great thrill was getting my salary on Friday night. My first salary—and not a bad one, either.

Then there were one or two minor ones. For instance, to my absolute surprise, Lady Cordelia sent a car to take me to the theatre and to fetch me back, as the strike

seemed likely to continue. I wrote and thanked her of course, really rather overwhelmed by her thoughtfulness, while the twins ecstatically declared that I'd "clicked—clicked good and proper with one of the most influential hostesses in London!"

I hadn't seen Lord Henry at the theatre since my part was cut—at least, not to talk to; just once or twice in the distance, but we merely nodded to each other, and neither made any effort to speak.

I don't know what his reason was, but to be quite truthful about mine, I must confess that I was the tiniest bit huffed with him. I did think he might have stuck up for me a little and not let Miss Carstairs take *all* the innerds out of my part. Surely he could have done something about it, made some sort of protest.

Especially as he had always seemed anxious to help me and to give me every chance to shine my very brightest.

I wondered whether I'd see him at Lady Cordelia's on Tuesday.

The twins said I was sure to, because Lady Cordelia absolutely idolized Harry, and he practically lived at her house. I half hoped I would see him there, and half hoped I wouldn't. I didn't like feeling huffed with him, because we'd been really good friends in a superficial sort of way, and it's horrid when things get upset like that.

Especially at a theatre. It makes such a difference to you if you can count on a smile from everyone; and I could, so far—even Miss Carstairs showed her teeth when we met.

Behold me, then, setting forth, on that famous Tuesday, in my best bib and tucker, for my first adventure into Society with the big S.

Behold me approaching Lady Cordelia's rather imposing door, being admitted by a regular old pomposo of a footman, and being solemnly announced by him from the drawing-room door in a non-committal tone that clearly said that he took no sort of responsibility for me. To my horror, and more than horror, the room was full of people!

I'd expected a quiet, informal little tea with Lady Cordelia alone, but here was a veritable *sea* of faces, worse, far worse than those faces one saw each night from the stage. At least, there one had a row of friendly footlights between oneself and them; here there was a long stretch of highly-polished floor, islanded with small rugs, and I had visions of stepping on one of them and sliding for miles.

From a remote distance Lady Cordelia's jolly voice came to me.

"Nice one! I'm so glad you've come. Don't be afraid of the floor. Most people make a comedy entrance into my drawing-room the first time!"

She came toward me, holding out her hand. The friendly clasp of her rather mannish hand made things steady round me. Even the shining floor seemed less formidable, and the number of faces distinctly shrank to half.

"Here she is!" she went on, introducing me in a general sort of way to the company. "Everyone's dying to meet Pelman Barclay's great new find."

I sat down in a daze, conscious of friendly smiles and interest on all the faces round me.

I was given tea and things. I haven't a notion what they were. I only knew that I ate them and made an unholy lot of crumbs, and Lady Cordelia had me to sit

beside her on the couch. I couldn't think of a thing to say, and was very hot and miserable.

It hadn't occurred to me that everyone was watching me with real interest, and that, although I was so utterly floored with shyness, in their eyes I was a person who'd really done something, and in whom shyness or any other characteristic was all sort of part of the fun, as it were.

It made me realize what a quite considerable success I had made on that first night of the play. I, in the inmost me of me, didn't feel the slightest bit different. I was still the unsophisticated little Jane from Little Upington. But here—and as I drank my tea and spread those awful crumbs, the thought came to me in a flash—here I was simply a new actress, backed by the weight of Barclay's name, hailed by the critics as having "brilliant powers," the cause of the most sensational applause of the evening. And most of the people here had been in front on the first night.

And the thought gave me courage. I felt my face cool down, and raised my eyes to look around me.

At that the ice broke, and for the next hour I went through a solid course of real petting. It was an extraordinary sensation, I can tell you.

I got asked so many questions about my work, and what I felt and how I liked it, and what Barclay was like to play with, and whether I was happy, and what I intended to do next, and so on and so on, that I felt there would soon be a shortage of answers.

A little group of people got me sort of cornered, and ringed around me till I began to wonder whether I ought to wear a ruff round my neck and hop on my hind legs and answer to the name of Toby, and die for the King and balance a lump of sugar on my nose. Honestly, they all looked at me as if they expected me to do tricks.

“My dear,” whispered Lady Cordelia, in a quiet moment, “everyone’s crazy about you. So let them buzz, and when they are gone we’ll have a nice, quiet little chat to ourselves.”

The guests did begin to thin out after a bit; most of them gave me their cards and begged me to come and see them. I got shoals of invitations and heard scraps of their comments to our hostess as they made their adieux.

“My dear ’Delia! *Too* scrumptiously artless for words!”

“Perfectly ’lightful to meet a success who is unaffectedly shy!”

“Charming, Cordelia—utterly charming!”

My head began to buzz, but I kept it straight and level, in spite of a feeling that it was all rather ripping to be made such a fuss of.

Presently Lady Cordelia called me to her and said:

“Geraldine Maidstone has just come, and she’s frightfully excited to meet you.”

“Oh, I thought to myself, “this means more parlor tricks!” And, really, I felt the tiniest bit tired of the idea. I’d gone through an afternoon of it, and it had been a new, heady sort of sensation; but, honestly, I felt I’d had enough for one day. I didn’t mean to be ungrateful, or to pretend that I hadn’t liked it, and, yes, been flattered by it; but—oh, well, I’d better get it over, I suppose. And that was the frame of mind I was in as I confronted Miss Geraldine Maidstone, and Lady Cordelia introduced us to each other.

CHAPTER V

GERALDINE MAIDSTONE was quite a young girl, a few years, I guessed, older than myself; tall, frank-eyed, good-looking in a boyish sort of way, and awfully well-tailored.

She held out a direct, well-formed hand, smiled and said in a breezy sort of way:

"I've only just come. I've simply been aching to meet you." And she made room for me beside her on the sort of window-seat she was sitting on.

We sat side by side, half-turned towards each other.

"You gave a ripping show the other evening, if you will let me say so."

"Thank you," I said.

"Ripping—simply great! I don't howl easily, but you made me howl all right."

I laughed.

"Did you howl yourself?" she went on.

"Oh!" I groaned inwardly. "It is going to be just the same old 'Toby' business."

"Well, yes," I said aloud. "It makes you, you know."

But Miss Maidstone was regarding me with absent sort of eyes.

"You know," she confessed suddenly, "why I'm so keen to know you is that you are Nicko Penticott's ward. Nicko is a great—er—pal of mine."

"Oh!" I thought, my attention stiffening suddenly,

“this is something new, after all!” And, perverse and small as it may seem, now that I found I wasn’t to be the centre of attraction, I was just the smallest bit in the world peeved.

“How very strange!” I said aloud.

“Yes, isn’t it?” she agreed. “He took me to see your show on the first night. Had the dickens of a job to get seats; but when Nicko is set on anything, he generally sticks at it till he gets it. Haven’t you noticed that?”

“I—really, I don’t know him well enough to say.”

“But he’s your guardian, isn’t he?” Her eyes looked a bit surprised.

“Yes; but he’s never done much guarding,” I replied, laughing.

“Oh!” she said, and there was a tinge, I thought, of relief in the word as she said it. “Well, he was absolutely determined to take me to that show that night, and to get good seats, and he got them.”

It gave me such a funny feeling to hear my guardian talked of in this way. My rather “stodgy” guardian, as I’d always called him in my inmost thoughts.

Miss Maidstone didn’t seem to think him stodgy.

“Nicko,” too! Fancy anyone in this world ever having such a frivolous pet name as “Nicko” for that sober, fully-alive-to-his-responsibility sort of man! Somehow, it had never occurred to me that he might be a perfectly human person, even though he *was* my guardian.

“How did he like the play?” I asked casually. It had been on my tongue’s tip to say “me,” but I changed it quickly to “the play.” I wasn’t going to display the slightest interest in his opinion.

“He thought Barclay simply great, and Miss Carstairs, too; and he liked the play, and said he thought the man who played the lawyer very good.”

“He’s a lawyer himself, so he ought to know,” I said, laughing slightly.

“And he liked the girl who played the maid, and thought the man who did the sort of second-most-important part most excellent; and, of course, no one could help adoring Miss Carstairs’ snippety little dog.”

So, I thought, he’d criticized everyone in the cast but me, right down to Miss Carstairs’ “snippety” dog!

He was no end of a critic, evidently.

“And it wasn’t until the end of the third act—your big crying scene—that he turned to me and said, ‘That girl’s my ward.’ And I was all up in the air and longing to meet you, because Nicko didn’t seem able to tell me anything much about you, and, you see, it came as a bit of a jar, because, although I knew him so well, I’d no idea, up to that minute, that he’d got a ward.”

“I guess, perhaps, he likes to forget it,” I said gaily. She laughed.

“Nicko’s awfully clever, don’t you think?”

“I believe so. I’ve always heard that he’s a wiz at his work.”

“It’s true, too. And he’s such a delightful, amusing creature.”

“Y-yes, I suppose so, when you get to know him,” I said hastily.

“It’s too absurd to think of him being a guardian.” Miss Maidstone looked at me critically. “I simply can’t get over it. He’s so young and jolly, and—oh, all that sort of thing!”

I gave her a quick look, and as she met my eye, to my astonishment, she flushed.

Goodness, I thought, I’ve hit on a Romance—with a capital R! This girl is in love with my guardian!

The sheer idea of my guardian and ROMANCE! It simply took my breath away.

"He's extraordinarily handsome, too, isn't he?" went on Geraldine.

"Oh, very," I hastened to agree. "In his way," I added. "But, really, you know him much better than I do. I'm only his ward by special bequest, and, to tell the truth, I fancy he finds it an unholy nuisance, being guardian to anyone."

"Yes," she said candidly, a touch of eagerness in the agreement. "He certainly did seem to be the most casual kind of guardian. But it was so odd—really ridiculous of him not to tell me sooner about you. He sat and watched you act for two whole acts, as mum as an oyster on the subject, then all of a sudden burst out with the news, as if he'd just remembered it."

"At the end of the third act, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

I didn't say any more, for that had given me an idea, and told me something I rather wanted to know.

Now, I had heard nothing from him, hadn't known up to now that he'd ever been in front, and I did just the least bit in the world want to know whether he had changed his mind about my acting. Wouldn't you?

After such a letter as he wrote to me?

Well, this told me. Because, you see, up to my success in the third act, he hadn't even owned to knowing me at all. But after that he claimed me as his ward. So perhaps he thought that, after all——

"Miss Grey, do come and see me."

Geraldine broke in on my thoughts.

"Thanks, I'd love to!" I said, coming out of my abstraction.

"I've a flat in Knightsbridge, and I'm at home on Thursdays. Do come one Thursday, will you?"

I repeated that I'd be charmed.

"Don't forget, now," she added. "*Thursday!*"

"I'll remember," I said, and we exchanged cards. She rose, and once again repeated the invitation for one Thursday, and with a very decided accent on the day. I thought she seemed a trifle insistent upon the Thursday, and was a bit puzzled.

"It's the only day that I'm really certain to be there," she added, as if she herself felt that her insistence needed a little explanation. And then it suddenly dawned on me.

Of course, of course! Thursday is her regulation At-home day, and it is the one day that Nickolas Penticott avoids. Most men avoid At-home days.

She didn't want me to meet him, yet she wanted to know more of me.

I nearly laughed aloud.

If she only knew the utterly dull, uninteresting light that her fascinating "Nicko" appeared in to me! How utterly ludicrous! Besides, he was evidently sufficiently attracted by her to satisfy her, you'd think.

I mean, he'd fussed a good deal to get those good seats at the theatre for her, and I can well believe he had trouble to get them—had to wait until some were returned, or something, because Pelman Barclay's "first nights" are huge social events; and he was evidently on the best of terms with her, and certainly, if he were attracted by her, there could be no possible danger in me, because we were such utterly, utterly different types. Besides, it was all too absurd! To me, he wasn't a person at all; he was just "my guardian," an abstract quantity

who only materialized, as far as I was concerned, in the form of irritating letters of advice and admonition.

When Geraldine Maidstone had gone, Lady Cordelia and I had the room to ourselves, and she *was* so nice to me. Her interest in me, I saw at once, was something more than mere curiosity in someone who'd made a "hit." After we'd been talking a moment, I said:

"I really must thank you again for sending the car for me every night; it was most kind."

"Oh, my dear, you force me to confess that it wasn't my idea at all; it was Harry's. So don't fit me up with a halo I don't deserve."

"Oh," I said, suddenly stammering, "that w-was kind of him."

And what made me stammer in such confusion was a memory of what those wretched twins had said about him being the confirmedest-ever bachelor! And just at that palpitating moment in he came, his very self.

He saluted his aunt very affectionately, and then shook hands with me. I was still feeling a bit frigid with him, and conversation lagged. I rose to go, and Lady Cordelia wanted me to have the car, but it was such a little way and I really preferred to walk. Then Lord Henry said he'd come along with me if he might, and I had to say he might, of course, so along he came.

We'd walked a short distance when he said:

"Now, please, I want to hear everything."

"Everything about what?" I asked.

"Your part, and all that," he replied.

"Oh, you saw what happened; you were there," I said, with a touch of resentment in my voice.

"And I stood aside and let it happen, eh?" he put in quickly.

I flushed and hesitated, then :

“Well, you did let it happen, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. And, do you know, I’d let it happen again. I’d be obliged to, and I’ll tell you just exactly why.”

We walked in silence for a moment; then he said :

“If I hadn’t allowed it to happen, it would have meant that Cynthia Carstairs just walked straight out of the theatre and didn’t come into it again. She’s done it before, and I knew she’d do it again. And we can’t afford to lose Miss Carstairs.”

“Why should she resent me so much?” I cried. “I’m nothing—nobody!”

“But you are very definitely a potential somebody, and as such you are a menace to all established somebodies.”

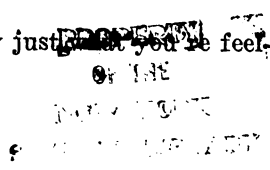
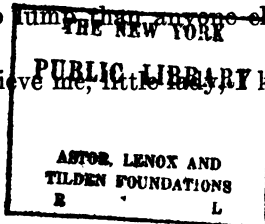
“But Mr. Barclay didn’t mind my success. He was lovely to me about it.”

“Barclay is a very rare man; in the first place, he is a man, and in the second he is, perhaps, the supreme dramatic artist of his day. He is far, far greater than Miss Carstairs could ever be; great enough to be above jealousy. And, anyway, the success of an actress doesn’t menace an actor in anything like the same degree that it menaces another actress. Now, there’s no one just like the Carstairs, and she knows it, so she can do anything she likes.”

“Well, it’s cruel, unfair, and—and unworthy,” I said hotly.

“I know, I know; but, unfortunately, it’s so, and we’ve all got to lump it, and just at the moment you’ve got more to lump than anyone else.” He gave me a quick look.

“Believe me, little lady, I know just what you’re feel-



ing," he said kindly; so kindly, that tears started suddenly in my eyes.

"You can't know!" I said fiercely. "No one could know. It just appears to other people as if I were mad at losing the praise and the applause, but it isn't that. It's something—something—— Oh, much more—much bigger—something right inside me that feels as if it must be allowed to express itself the right way. I have to deliberately be bad in my part! You can't possibly know!"

He let me get it all off my chest without interruption; then he said:

"Well, perhaps I don't absolutely know, but anyway, I'm sorry, so is Austen, and so is Barclay. But Cynthia Carstairs has a big box-office following; also, she has big backing for this part. That's a little bit of secret history—that everyone knows, as a matter of fact! So, you see, we can't afford to offend her. Barclay has had a long run of wretched luck, and this has just got to turn the tide, or there won't be any tide left to turn. We've had a splendid reception and ought to go well, but without Carstairs we'd be nowhere. You see how it is, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, in a low voice. "I see how it is, but I can't help minding—minding. Oh, most awfully."

"Course you can't; but just stick it. Everyone recognizes that you're the real stuff, and you'll have better luck next time. I knew this would happen—I know what Carstairs is. That was one reason why I was so anxious that you should make your success good and solid on the first night. I knew she'd never allow you a second!"

"Isn't it horrid! Isn't it absolutely horrid!" I exclaimed

He nodded, then:

“And just another thing. I want to be quite frank with you. Why did you turn down Barclay’s offer of a rise?”

“Oh, did he tell you?” I asked quickly.

“I knew he was going to make it, because I was present when Carstairs proposed it,” he began, but I put in sharply :

“Then that’s why!”

“What’s why?”

“Because it was Miss Carstairs who proposed it!”

“But you didn’t know that!”

“I guessed it.”

“And, anyway——”

“Can’t you see that money is no sort of compensation?”

“Yes, I can.”

“But if I were to take it, it would be as good as admitting that it was, and that I was satisfied.”

“That’s so.”

“Why,” I added, laughing just a wee bit bitterly, “it wouldn’t even have been judicious from the standpoint of business policy, to be so cheaply bought!”

He turned to look at me very straight.

“Don’t get too worldly-wise, little lady. I didn’t like to hear that tone in your voice. It doesn’t suit you!”

I felt my face go hot under the friendly scrutiny of his nice eyes.

“But I do like you for refusing that offer; that was entirely like you. And from every point of view you were perfectly right,” he added.

We turned down the narrow little street that was notable for being the home-street of *me*.

“I’m glad you think I was right. And—and I’ll try

not to get that tone in my voice—truly.” I laughed slightly, and we reached the main door of the flats.

We paused.

“Will you come up and see the twins?” I asked.

“No, thanks. I have to see Barclay for dinner.”

He raised his hat and held out his hand. I put mine into it, and he looked down at me smiling.

“Have you forgiven me?”

“Oh, yes, of course. I was just sore about it all, that’s all.”

“Then we are friends again?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, *au ’voir!*” and he left me, and I went upstairs with a feeling that all in a sudden second of time something had definitely happened to my friendship with Lord Henry Penryth.

It is one thing to be friendly with a person at the theatre, in the theatre, and simply because of the theatre, but quite another thing to be friendly with them away from it. He’d evidently felt it, too, because his manner was different in a subtle sort of way. My world was certainly opening out before me. What an afternoon! Lady Cordelia—that buzz of people, Geraldine Maidstone—my guardian! And Lord Henry Penryth.

“Little Uppington,” I said to myself as I opened the door with my key. “You’re fairly going it!”

The next few weeks simply buzzed by.

Such a whirl that I can hardly remember what it was all about.

I seemed to be tremendously occupied with social functions, and went from one festive affair to another. Lady Cordelia had a huge circle of the most varied acquaintances. There were enormously rich people, comparatively poor people, titled people, smart people, go-ahead

people, old-fashioned people, actors, actresses, writers, painters. Oh, it was a liberal education in humanity just to go to one of her big receptions.

“My dear,” she used to say to me. “Study everyone; you never know what sort of parts you may be called upon to play, and all the hot air that ever was blown about stage art condenses down to this: that you’ve got to go to Nature for your types.”

Well, I had any amount of opportunity for acting upon her words of wisdom, for everyone was most kind, and I got invitations for luncheons, shopping expeditions, teas; cosy little early dinners before the theatre, gay little late suppers after; nobody seemed to mind that I couldn’t repay hospitality on anything like the same scale.

The twins and I used to give small rags up at the flat, but nothing very ambitious, naturally.

Still, they were very good fun, and everyone enjoyed them. It was so different, they used to say.

Lord Henry said he wouldn’t miss one of our parties for anything, and certainly he won top marks for regular attendance.

And for being a real, helpful dear, too. I got absolutely to depend on that man. He was the kind of man you could go to in any difficulty and be sure of respectful attention and sound advice.

* * * * *

It was all extremely jolly, being a success and a “personality,” and all that sort of thing, and I’d be a hypocrite of the deepest dye if I pretended otherwise, but I jolly soon found out that success isn’t everything by a very long shot.

It began by a sort of a fed-up feeling, a feeling that I’d had enough of the sweets and would be glad of a

plain, wholesome diet of good old "roast and boiled."

And once that feeling set in, others rushed to back it up.

For instance, it suddenly occurred to me that if I were still Judy Grey, of Little Uppington, very few of these people who made such a fuss of me would have noticed me at all.

It was simply because I had made a success on the stage that they were so interested. I looked round at all these new friends who were so willing to be kind, and said to myself:

"It's all very well, and some of them are dears, but they're none of them my *own* folk."

And it's a lonely sort of feeling that you've no one kin to you in the whole world, not even so much as a cousin four or five times removed. Especially when your life begins to get exciting and eventful. You feel the need of "people" then, to share things with. I've heard girls grouse about their families, how bothering and tiresome they are, and all that sort of thing, but if they knew what it felt like to be without a family, without a relation, with no blood-tie in the world, as I was, I guess they'd make the most of the families they'd got, and see the best in them, instead of the worst.

The only person who remotely "belonged" to me was my guardian, and he took no notice of me!

Coming to think of it, that struck me as being distinctly rotten luck. How dared he be so casual about me! No one else was, and it wasn't that he felt no interest in the stage; he did, or he wouldn't have taken such trouble to go to the "first night." And it wasn't that he couldn't be charming enough when he tried, to other people, anyway. Geraldine Maidstone appeared to find him most attractive.

Now, what earthly right had he to go around being charming to everyone but me!

Even if he'd written to me, slating me fiercely, it would at least have argued that the only person who "belonged" to me felt some interest. But not to send a line of any sort! As his one and only ward I felt that I distinctly "owed him one!"

And when I paid my promised visit to Geraldine Maidstone I felt it more than ever. Because the very first thing I saw when I entered her drawing-room was a large framed photograph of my guardian—Nickolas Penticott, dressed in flannels, and with a tennis racquet and a broad and beaming smile.

And the next thing I noticed was *another* photograph of him sitting on a breakwater, dangling his legs in the sea.

And the third thing I noticed was a silhouette portrait—you know, one of those little profile affairs, all black on a white ground—of him, very sedate and respectable. Certainly, his profile is his best aspect; in fact, it was rather above the averagely good.

The fourth thing I noticed was Miss Maidstone herself, holding out her hand and saying how pleased she was to see me.

Goodness! How long had I been staring round the walls at pictures of my guardian? Not long, evidently, for no one appeared to notice anything strange in my behavior. Geraldine Maidstone was very jolly to me, but certainly did try her very level best to pump me about Nickolas Penticott. She seemed to think that I could tell her heaps about him if only I would.

She supposed, in a rather over casual way, that he must have been in love heaps of times. Was he generally considered susceptible? And so on and so on, and when I

assured her that I knew nothing, she said, petulantly:

“Really, it hardly seems possible that you, being his ward, should know so little of him!”

Honestly, I think she almost didn't believe me. Anyway she dropped the subject; but if only she could have known what I was thinking, as I wended my way home again, she might have been convinced, for it went something like this: How dare he, how positively dare he—my one and only guardian—give photographs of all shapes and sizes to other people, when he is so utterly neglectful of me!

And I felt awfully humpy and sort of homesick. You can't be really homesick when you've never had a real home, I know, but it's the only word that comes near to describing the feeling I had. And anyway, I had a home, in my dreams, a lovely home in the country, all got up in sprigged muslin and chintz, and ingle-nooks and window-seats, and big, airy rooms with low-beamed ceilings and leaded windows. And there were smooth lawns and neat paths all round it and borders all a riot of color, and the scent of roses and lavender and the hum of bees and the song of birds were in the air. And there was a family in that home, too; the father and mother that I only knew by the faded pictures of them in an old-fashioned locket . . . and brothers and sisters that I'd never had. . . .

So perhaps I was homesick for these. Silly? Well, I'm willing to admit it; but a dream is better than nothing.

CHAPTER VI

THAT evening at the theatre, the girl who shared my dressing-room asked me suddenly:

“Seen the *Daily Pictorial* to-day?”

“No,” I replied. “Why?”

“Oh—thought perhaps you might have——” she said casually.

And when I went on the stage, and was standing in the wings, the man who played the sort of second part said:

“Nice notice you got this morning, Miss Grey!”

“Notice?” I said. “When?”

“Innocence!” he scoffed. “What a thing it is to have a friend at court! Especially at the dramatic critic’s court!”

I hadn’t the remotest notion what it was all about, but no one seemed to believe that, although quite a number spoke to me about the mysterious notice, and when I got back to the flat that night I found the twins in kimonos and a high state of excitement, and they each flourished a paper in my face and began the usual incomprehensible duet; then they read extracts from the two papers at once, and finally calmed down and told me what it was all about.

Boiled down, it came to this: That the dramatic critic on the *Daily Pictorial* had revisited His Highness’ Theatre, and after a glowing appreciation of Barclay’s acting,

he desired to know why the part of Sybil Martin, played by a "new and brilliant young actress, whose acting was certainly *one of the outstanding successes of the first night,*" had been so mutilated as to be almost unrecognizable?

When Madeline had read this out to me, flushed and shiny-eyed with elation, Clairette started in to do her bit. She'd got a copy of *Round Town* in her hand, and read out these cryptic words:

"Things we are dying to know. Just what the young actress who recently scored a brilliant success at one of our foremost theatres thinks of the leading lady, and precisely what the leading lady thinks of the young actress!"

"There, Ju! If that doesn't mean you and the Carstairs woman, I'll eat my very newest hat, and Bun's too!" cried Clairette in huge glee. They were the most unselfishly appreciative creatures I've ever seen. The way they gloated over the successful moments of my career was quite touching.

"Oh, Judy, you lucky one! How famous you are getting to be! Personal 'pars,' what? And fancy having real live critics fighting your battles for you this way!"

"You'll be snapshotted on your way to the theatre, and have strangers coming up and snipping buttons off your coat for souvenirs! Oh, it won't end here, you'll see!"

And it didn't. Not by miles. This was only the beginning. Nearly every day after this some little comment was made, either quite openly or very thinly veiled, about the situation between Miss Carstairs and myself! Fancy! That great actress and—me!

I soon began heartily to wish that my champions in the Press would in mercy leave me alone, because no one believed that I hadn't "fixed" it, and it was most uncomfortable for me at the theatre.

Even Barclay himself looked at me in a curious way, as if he were trying to make up his mind whether I were a designing minx or not. One day I heard him say to Miss Carstairs: "You'll do it once too often, Cynthia." And Miss Carstairs said something I didn't catch.

Then the "publicity" man—the man who arranges the "booms" and "puffs" in the papers—came and asked me for a photograph. I hadn't got one, and so had to go and have one taken. I went through all the ordeal of doing a dozen different poses, some smiling, some soulful, some merely passive, you know the sort of thing, and when the proofs arrived for me to choose from, only one came along. A letter with it explained that an assistant had dropped the case in which the negatives were placed, and this was the only one that had survived the treatment!

Of course, he offered to make another appointment, but seeing that the publicity man was entirely satisfied with the one, I ordered a dozen copies of it and let it go at that.

I thought it was a horrid thing. So touched up and smoothed out and sweet and characterless; pretty, of course, a photographer can make almost anything pretty, but not the least typical of me.

Lord Henry all this time kept rather aloof, and I didn't see him to talk to until one afternoon, when he called unexpectedly at the flat.

Then, after greeting me very gravely, he said abruptly: "Are the twins out?"

"Yes; they've gone to the Melton Galleries to see the

exhibition of Cubist war pictures. Did you want to see them?"

"No; I really didn't to-day—I wanted to see you!"

"Well, come in and have tea," I said, and led the way into the sitting-room.

As a rule, Lord Henry used to sink into his favorite chair, an adoring twin on each arm of it, and looking round the room, used to say, "What a nice room it is!" But to-day he went across to the window and stood looking out.

"Anything serious?" I asked, after a silence. He turned quickly.

"I want to know something."

"What is it about?"

He paused, and in that pause I knew. It was the wretched newspaper business.

"Oh, I know!" I broke in. "You needn't tell me. You want to ask me just how much I know about the comments in the papers!"

"Yes," he admitted frankly; "I do. The critics have been very busy on your behalf lately, haven't they?"

"I know they have, and I do wish I knew how to stop them. I don't like it one bit."

"You don't, eh?"

"Well, did you think I would?"

"That's what I wanted to be sure about. It's been worrying me a good deal.

"Worrying you?"

"Well, such advertisement often does more harm than good, and I don't want you to wreck your career by any mistakes."

"Then you've been thinking, too, like everyone else, that I've friends among the critics, and that it's to please

me they've been making attacks on Miss Carstairs, have you?"

There was a silence, then he said, his face rather flushed:

"I didn't exactly think it."

"If you didn't, why did you have to come to me for assurance?"

He reddened more deeply still.

"Well——" he began; but I interrupted.

"Don't you think you might have trusted me, after all that you told me, not to be so utterly mean as to——"

I began; but he broke in:

"All I told you?"

"Yes, about Miss Carstairs being so essential to the play and all that. Don't you think that my gratitude to Mr. Barclay alone is sufficiently sincere to keep me from doing anything that might dish his plans? Let alone my friendship for you!"

Lord Henry looked at me a moment, his nice eyes troubled and sorry.

"Do you know," he said at last, "that all that never occurred to me?"

"Then it ought to have occurred to you!" I flashed.

"I realize it. And I'm sorry—frightfully sorry. There's no excuse. But I wish you would believe that I was thinking more of you than of anyone. I was afraid that this Press business might do you harm with Barclay."

He looked at me again then.

"Are you going to forgive me?" He asked it so straightly, without a hint of persuasion, just simply as a direct question, that my crossness vanished all of a sudden.

"Of course I am," I said, laughing slightly. "Oh, but it isn't a question of forgiveness—it hurt, that's all."

"I'm sorry," he said again; then, in a slow, puzzled way, as if he didn't understand it himself: "But I'm glad, too."

"Glad that you hurt me!" I cried, in indignation.

"No; glad I was able to. It's rather nice to feel that someone minds sufficiently to be hurt."

I stared at him a minute.

"But you've got heaps of people, haven't you? Relations, I mean."

"Oh, yes; but—well, that's hardly the same thing, somehow."

"Well, think of me. I've only got a guardian, who never even comes near enough to be hurt!"

He laughed.

"I think you're entitled to choose another and more satisfactory guardian," he said. "How would I do?"

"Ah, you've set up a new standard, and I must know first whether you are capable of being hurt by me," I replied teasingly.

But his mood didn't follow mine. He just continued to look at me, and then said, in the same puzzled way, very slowly:

"I believe I am."

"You've passed with honors," I told him gaily. "And, honestly, I've often thought lately, that you are much more what *he* ought to be than he is!"

"That's settled then," he said, and he held out his hand. We solemnly shook hands, then our eyes met and we laughed together.

"Oh, I'm forgetting tea;" I cried suddenly. "Clean forgetting it. Do sit down, and I'll get it in two minutes!" And I vanished into the kitchen.

When I brought in the tea and had dispensed it, he said:

"Now, listen here. I want you to understand. I was very worried about this Press business, because I particularly don't want your popularity with Barclay upset just now."

"Do you think it has been?" I asked anxiously.

"No; I don't think so. And, anyway, I'll tell him how you ticked me off this afternoon about it." He looked at me, laughing. "You know, it's possible that *A Voice from the Past* may come off comparatively soon. . . ."

"Oh!" I cried in dismay.

"You've nothing to worry about," he went on, "because, like a good, attentive guardian, I've my eye on a topping part for you; and this time Cynthia Carstairs won't have things so much her own way, because Barclay has been the biggest draw in this thing. So buck up, little lady, and hit out for the high places with all your might."

I did buck up at that. He was a real comforting, encouraging dear; and we had one of those jolly half-hours that are entirely occupied in making ripping plans for the future.

When he left, he just said:

"This is all quite between ourselves, and nothing has been definitely arranged. But you can depend upon your guardian, little lady, to watch over your career——" He broke off, laughing, and we shook hands again and parted.

He evidently did speak to Mr. Barclay about the newspaper business, because, although the great man said nothing definite, he was suddenly more friendly than he'd ever been, and so long as he knew that I hadn't been so

sneaky, I didn't care what anybody else thought, much.

Of course, it all served to get me well known, to make me something of a figure in the theatrical world. Certainly there must have been few people by that time who read the theatrical news at all who hadn't at least read my name. It gave me an odd feeling every time I thought of this. When you've been a perfectly ordinary, everyday sort of girl all your life, it gives you a funny sort of start to realize that in a small sort of way you're quite well known; that thousands know your name, and some even recognize you in the street or in tea-shops or on board the humble bus, or any other old where. I wonder, if ever I get famous, whether I shall ever be able to *feel* famous. Don't believe I shall, and it must be a queer feeling anyway; rather uncomfortable, I should think; like always remembering what the etiquette book says about good manners, when you're at a party. No, I don't think I could ever feel famous. I believe Miss Carstairs does, though; but then, of course, she is, and that may make all the difference. Anyway, she seems to have forgotten how to be a real person any more. I wonder whether being a famous one is a really satisfactory substitute? I wish we could have days of being somebody else, really being them, thinking their thoughts, seeing with their eyes, then we'd really be able to understand what they felt, and I'd dearly love to know just what Cynthia Carstairs felt the day she spoilt my part for me. And I'd like her to be able to know just what I felt too. She might have seen then, that I wasn't trying to grab, that I was only honestly bent on doing the very best in my power; and I might have seen that it wasn't all spite in her, but just the vain whim of a thoroughly spoilt woman. If ever I *am* famous, I'll remember what I went through, or at least I hope I shall.

But just then I began to get rather anxious about my chances of being famous, because very soon after, the rumor that the play was coming off began to trickle round and grew and grew until it became a settled piece of theatrical news. And still I heard nothing at all about the part Lord Henry had said was to be mine.

The great Barclay began seeing people up in that sky-high office of his during the morning, and one was always meeting strangers when one went to fetch letters or happened to arrive early on matinée days. But I heard nothing of acutely personal interest to myself. My confidence in Lord Henry was great, but the question meant so much to me that I couldn't help getting anxious as the days slipped by and nothing happened.

One evening Barclay said: "I shall be wanting an interview with you soon, Miss Grey," and smiled in an understanding way, so my spirits rose again; then they hadn't forgotten, and everything was all right. But a fortnight passed, and the "notice"—that the play would end in a fortnight's time—was posted, and I wasn't called for that all-important interview.

Then I began to notice all sorts of things that seemed full of significance, especially with regard to Lord Henry.

Something certainly seemed to have happened to Lord Henry. His manner was changed in some subtle way that I couldn't understand. He was much more often at the theatre now, and I saw a great deal of him, but he was ever so silent and serious always; not a bit like his usual genial self.

Could I have offended him in any way, I wondered? But searching in my mind and going over and over our conversations together, trying to remember faithfully each word and look, I honestly couldn't see in what way I could possibly have hurt him.

Then I suddenly hit upon what I thought must be the truth; that he had begun to doubt my ability to play the part he'd promised me, and didn't know how to break it to me. . . . Yes, that must be it, for nearly all the time that I was on the stage he would stand in the wings watching me, with his eyebrows all frowned together over his nice hazel eyes, and he had a deeply thoughtful, considering sort of look. And it wasn't a pleased look at all, so I felt sure he was noticing new faults in my acting, faults, perhaps, that didn't matter so very much in this part, but that might show up dreadfully in the other one.

Three or four evenings and two matinées of this sort of thing began to wear my nerves. I don't know anything more harrowing than to play a part feeling that criticizing, disapproving eyes are on you from the wings. I'd much rather that the whole audience rose in a body and hooted.

As I came off the stage after my last scene at the Saturday matinée he stopped me and asked me to have dinner with him between the shows. Now I'd often had tea with him, and once or twice dinner, so there was nothing strange or out of the ordinary in the suggestion, but to-day he asked me so seriously, so almost solemnly, that I saw it must be a special occasion. And I knew why it was special, too! He was going to screw up his courage to tell me that I wasn't good enough for that new part! Well, anything to get it over and be sure, so I said I'd go.

That dinner for two was one of the dullest affairs imaginable. Lord Henry hardly spoke a word except to the waiter. He just sat staring down at the table-cloth, or across at me in a funny, fixed, reflective sort of way. Oh, if only he'd say it and have done! Being kept in suspense like this was awful. Once or twice he opened

his lips and drew in a breath as if he really were going to up and at it, but the effort faded before it properly began, and he didn't say anything. When it was time to get back to the theatre he drove me round, and we parted, he going to the office, I up to my dressing-room, feeling pretty blue, I can tell you.

I didn't see him again until just as I was leaving; it was in the corridor leading to the stage door and I had a hand on the famous swing door, when I heard him coming along behind me. I turned, and on an impulse I said abruptly:

"I know what you wanted to say this evening at dinner, Lord Henry, and . . ."

"Do you?" he broke in quickly.

I nodded.

"Yes; and I know it's difficult to say it, but you needn't be afraid to . . . to tell me. . . . You needn't really. . . ." And with that I slipped through the door and out into the street.

Well, I told myself, His Highness' isn't the only theatre in London, nor its management the only management, and if I wasn't wanted there, there were others to go to. And surely, the success I had made would be a recommendation and a help. Even if I had to tour, I oughtn't to have any difficulty in getting some sort of a living on the stage with the good start I'd made. But I didn't want to leave His Highness'. I loved it and was happy there. And I'd counted on getting that new part. Lord Henry oughtn't to have promised it to me so definitely if he only meant to take it away from me later. And what had I done so suddenly to make him change his mind? My part went better than it had when it was first cut to bits; I'd worked it up into something, at least now. Yes, certainly it went better; I was playing it

better; I felt sure I was. Then what had I done? And why the change?

I could hardly sleep that night with thinking of all this. Everything had seemed so straightforward and certain, and now it was all up in the air and uncertain again. I told myself I'd been a fool to expect a repetition of the tremendous luck I'd had in getting taken on at His Highness'. An absolute, inexperienced fool. This was the sort of history that so rarely repeats itself.

And I'd got my living to make in sober earnest. With prices going up and up, my little income from my father's legacy seemed a most inadequate one, but it was all I had in the world to depend on. I simply must supplement it in some way, and my chances had seemed so gloriously good.

By the time I'd put in an hour or so of this kind of thinking that leads simply nowhere, I was so sleepy that I couldn't think any more.

I turned over and snuggled down into the pillows, saying wearily:

"Oh, well, I'm not really sure; perhaps that wasn't what he meant, after all."

And—it wasn't.

CHAPTER VII

THE TWINS were going to spend Sunday with "father," the celebrated Joshua Longman of teashop fame, and they had a great time from eight to eleven getting into perfectly ordinary, well-cut coats and skirts, high-heeled, patent boots of fashionable shape, and modish hats.

"Father doesn't approve of art in any form," they explained, "so we have to do this kind of thing occasionally, just to please the old boy. He likes us to look just like everybody else—respectable, he calls it."

"You look extremely nice," I said.

"Oh, do you think so?" said Madeline, disappointed in me.

"Without the vestige of a scarf or the sign of a bead?" said Clairette.

"Yes," I said firmly.

"What rotten taste. We excuse father because he started life as the proprietor of a coffee-stall. . . ."

"He thought he'd reached the pinnacle of success when he started a good pull-up for carmen. . . ."

"And of course that makes him awfully particular. But you've no such dazzling past to live up to. . . ."

"So there's no excuse for you. . . ."

"Bun, these unholy boots!"

"Buttercup . . . this collar!"

They wailed together for some time, and finally de-

parted, pulling on the most lovely long white gloves, which must have cost pretty nearly the price of a coffee-stall per pair!

I leaned out of the window to wave to them, and looked down, straight on to the top of Lord Henry's sleek head, as, hat in hand, he met and greeted them.

All three looked up, nodding and smiling, and after a moment the girls went off down the street arm in arm, and he turned into the entrance of the flats.

I came away from the window and stood for a second stock still in the middle of the room, until his ring at the door made me move with a start.

"Now for it," I said, as I went out into the hall.

He was nervous as he came in, and began talking very quickly about more-or-less nothing at all, which wasn't the least typical of him, and then when we were in the little sitting-room together, he stopped abruptly and was suddenly as silent as he had been talkative.

I longed to say:

"Just tell me, and get it over and put me out of my misery as quickly as you can!" But I didn't; I just sat opposite to him and waited.

Suddenly he leaned towards me, laid his hand on mine, and said in an odd, low note:

"I've got to ask you . . . got to tell you. . . . And you said I might, didn't you?"

"Yes, you may, of course . . ." I said, wishing he wouldn't try to be kind about it. It seemed to make it just so much the harder to bear.

"It . . . it's difficult . . ." he began.

"But you must do it, mustn't you?" I broke in. "I mean, it's a thing that's just got to be done . . . just got to be said, isn't it?" And I tried to smile naturally.

He raised his face and looked up at me.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I've tried not to say it, but I have to . . . I can't help myself. . . ."

"Oh, I know! I know!" I broke out. "Please, please just tell me. Don't, for mercy's sake, try to be nice about it. However you say it, it means the same!"

And, to my disgust, the tremble of tears was in my voice—just the one thing I didn't want—to appeal to his pity. But I couldn't help them—they would come!

Lord Henry's face wore a look I never want to see in any man's face again—so incredulous, so puzzled, and through it all, so awfully, awfully hurt.

He drew his hand from mine sharply.

"I'd no idea you'd take it like that," he said, his voice unsteady.

"Did you expect me to be glad?" I cried out, all the nerves of the last few days quivering out.

"Well, naturally, I'd hoped you would," he said, with a funny little twisted smile. "Especially when you told me that I might . . . that I needn't be afraid to tell you. . . ."

I stared, and my heart seemed to turn over and bob up again with a thump.

"Isn't it—haven't you been wanting to—to tell me about the part?" I stammered out at last.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I did want to speak about the part, for one thing."

"I knew it! You don't want me to play it, do you?"

"No, I don't," he confessed.

"What have I done? How have I changed? Has my acting gone off? Or—or what?" I asked.

"Your acting has improved, if anything."

"Then why am I no longer to have the part? Why don't you want me to play it?"

"I don't think there's any reason *now*," he said, try-

ing to speak quite steadily, and not succeeding very well. "I hadn't thought the idea would be so—well, so repellent to you, that's all!"

"Goodness! did you expect me to like losing it?" I cried out nervily. "After all I've hoped and after all you said about it?"

He leaned over and caught my hand again.

"Was it only the part you were thinking of?" he asked.

"What else were you talking of?" I retorted.

He laughed shakily.

"Oh, a whole world of other things!" he replied; and then again: "Was it only the part you were thinking of? Really? Truly?"

"Of course it was! I've been thinking of it for days and days and days. I could see that there was something up. I could see you'd changed your mind and didn't want me to have the part. And I just wish you'd tell me why and have done with it!"

"I will!" he replied, rising to his feet. "It's true, I don't want you to play that or any other part——"

"Why?" I put in.

"Because I want you to marry me instead!"

I sat perfectly still, not daring to look up. Was I awake or dreaming? Real or unreal? The little room echoed with his last words.

"Marry me instead. . . . Marry me instead. . . ."

I had thought last night that perhaps, after all, it wasn't about the part that he'd tried to speak, but I hadn't remotely dreamed of this.

"Marry me instead. . . ." How those three words went ringing through my head, so clear and insistent that they seemed to ding my very brain away. . . . Just when I wanted to think as I never had thought before!

Just as I wanted my mind to be its very best and surest, and my emotions their clearest. And all I could think of saying was:

“W-what?” in a voice so low that the stillness was hardly fluttered.

And I looked up as I said it, and he looked down at me, and quite quietly he said:

“Didn’t you know I love you, little lady?”

I swallowed hard, and shook my head.

“Well, how should you? I didn’t know it myself until quite a few days ago,” he went on. “Are you going to send me away, or make me the happiest man alive?”

Send him away? Was I? I didn’t know—I didn’t really! Send him away? What would my life lately have been if it hadn’t been for him? What would it be if I sent him away? Shouldn’t I miss him most fearfully? ‘Course I should! But, marry him! Oh, dear, my heart was thumping so that I couldn’t seem to hear or think or see.

“But, you—you can’t want to m-marry me,” I blurted out at last.

“Can’t I? Why?” he asked, still standing there aloof, unmoving.

“Because you’re such a confirmed bachelor—the confirmedest ever,” I went on, like a fool.

He was down on his knees beside me in a moment, his shaky laughter close to my ear, his arms ringing round me, but not holding me close.

“You blessed darling—so I was! Mayn’t a man change? Mayn’t he, when the sweetest eyes in all the world look up into his? Oh, Judy, you’ve got my heart right in your two little hands. What are you going to do with it, dear?”

He always had the nicest kind of voice, but now, when it was all out of control and very low, and breaking slightly as he finished, it just lifted me up on a wave of feeling and swept me along.

"Oh, I—I didn't know," I whispered.

"Couldn't you care for me? Couldn't you? Lord! you sweet thing, how I love you! Couldn't you care for me a little?"

And before I knew what I was saying, I said:

"You know I like you—you know I always have liked you—only—but—oh dear! This is all so—so awfully—"

But marry him? No! I couldn't—I wouldn't! I didn't want to! The thought filled me with sudden, unexplainable panic. I wanted to get up and run.

But somehow I didn't have the courage or the strength; his arms were closing round me like fate. His eager, ardent eyes were looking into mine with a little touch of fear that plucked at my heart, and his shaken voice, with all his soul in every broken note of it, throbbed through and through me.

"Am I too late, dear? Is there some other, some luckier, man?"

I shook my head.

"Then you are going to give me hope? You are not going to be angry with me for telling you? You said I might, you know." He smiled as he spoke, and his voice was so low that I only just caught what he said, and somehow, just as he said them, the words were the loneliest, most pleading things I'd ever heard, and raising my eyes, I saw in his face all that this meant to him. For all his friends, his busy, brilliant life, his riches and his interests, if I sent him away he'd be just utterly lonely. . . . And loneliness is the most awful thing. . . . A realization of my power over him made me catch my breath. . . . How

awful . . . how perfectly awful to be able to give pain or joy by the mere utterance of a yes or no! And to this utter dear of a man, above all others. This man who'd been so perfectly good to me. . . . Oh, which was I to say?

I didn't want to say either. I wanted to think—to go right away all by myself—away from those pleading eyes of his—out of hearing of that lonesome tone.

But his arms closed round me, and he crushed me all up anyhow till I could hardly breathe. I'd never been loved before and it was almost terrifying.

“Oh, please,” I faltered out, and he loosed me quickly.

“My dear,” he said tenderly, “wa. I rough and horrid? I love you so, that it's gone clean to my head.”

I tried to draw my hand away—tried to utter some sort of—oh, I really don't know what. Some sort of plea for breathing space, perhaps, but he was saying:

“I'm proposing dreadfully badly, aren't I? But what can you expect from the confirmedest ever bachelor?” and he laughed again.

“Well, they did say that of you,” I said, feebly defensive.

“They reckoned without you. Oh, my dear, I know I've never done a single thing in the world to make me worthy of your sweetness; I'm older than you, Judy, too . . . ages older, darling . . . but give me the chance and I'll make you happy. . . . I will really. . . . Tell me I haven't missed the best in life. . . . Tell me . . . ah, everything I want to hear. . . . Judy . . . Judy . . . is it to be . . . yes?”

And touched beyond all endurance, I stammered out:

“It's . . . oh, it's yes . . . if you want it to be, so dreadfully badly.”

He held me for a moment in silence; a long, long mo-

ment, as if he couldn't believe what had happened and were trying to; then he laughed unsteadily and drew away.

"Give me your hand—your left hand. Does this ring fit you?" And he slid a seal ring from his little finger, and tried it on my third one. "Not so bad, is it? We'll go and get another one to-morrow. This is just to show that you're mine, my very own girl, and that I've the right to punch anyone's head who dares dispute it!"

He bent his head and kissed the ring, and then the finger it was on, then, lifting my face in his two hands, he very gently touched my forehead with his lips.

"I think I'm the thankfullest man alive, Judy; that's all," he said quietly.



And that's the secret history of that great social event, the engagement of Lord Henry Penryth and Miss Julia Grey. And almost anyone could have told me more clearly than I could tell myself, just how it had come about. It seemed to have just happened; something had caught me up, swept me along at a pace too quick to realize and here I was, engaged; the future Lady Henry Penryth. Nothing I could do could make it seem real.

"It can't be true . . . it simply can't be," I'd say to myself, and then, with a look at the big cluster of diamonds and sapphires that had taken the place of the little old seal ring:

"But it *is*; this is the outward and visible proof."

Still, in my heart of hearts I didn't, somehow, believe it.

Harry—yes, I called him Harry now—was a perfect dear of a fiancé. The better I knew him the more sweet and good and altogether fine he appeared.

"I always thought Harry would be the most complete Benedict some day," Lady Cordelia said to me, "but really, I began to wonder when. And, child, I'm glad it's you that have worked the miracle, and not one of the petted spoilt beauties, whose main idea in life is to have a good time. Harry's too good for that."

"Harry's too good for almost anyone," I replied, teasing her.

But Lady Cordelia pinched my cheek, and looked down very kindly into my face.

"You can't perhaps realize just all you mean to him, but give him all you can, child; for he's terribly hard hit; and his isn't the first mad passion of a boy—it's the great, big love of a man, and of a very fine man, too."

Somehow, when she said that, I drew a quick little breath, and didn't feel like teasing any more, and somehow, too, I wished she *wouldn't*.

"You know, dear, Harry hasn't ever been a waster, and he doesn't give his emotions lightly. He always has taken things seriously—from measles upwards."

She paused and laughed slightly, then added:

"So now that he cares, I know he cares with every atom of him; with his whole heart and strength. . . . Something to have won, eh, Judy?"

"Yes. . . . Oh, I realize it, Aunt Cordelia. . . . I do indeed. . . ." I said uneasily. I did wish she wouldn't. I didn't want to be told how dreadfully much he loved me. Was it shyness or . . . what? Don't most girls like to be told how deeply their lovers care? Or do they all feel as I felt then?

For I had that funny little panicky feeling that I'd had the day I got engaged . . . that little feeling that I wanted to get up and run. . . . Why, I couldn't have told.

"I think he's the best man I've ever, ever met, and I'll truly try to do . . . to be . . . to make . . ." I faltered and stopped.

"I know you will, dear. . . . I know you will," she said tenderly, and her mannish face quivered as she leant forward and kissed me.

She did love Harry.

Of course, the twins were absolutely ecstatic with delight, and equally of course they'd "known it all along." They *would!*

"But, Judy, what are we going to do?" they cried.

"Oh, I know you'll miss me——" I began.

"*You!*" they interrupted. "Yes, so we shall; but we meant him! It's been the scandal of the season the way we adore that man, and we'll never find another like him."

I laughed.

"Oh, well, you couldn't both have married him, you know, so the question would probably only have sown dissension in the family."

"That's true," agreed Madeline, winding her arms tight round Clairette. "It might have caused a rift between us, Buttercup, and no man, not even Harry, would be worth that, would he?"

"Certainly not," said Clairette, winding her arms round Madeline. "So on the whole we are very glad to have the question settled for us out of court, so to speak. And, Ju darling, you'll let us be first bridesmaids, won't you?"

But, of course, that was a question I had to settle with Aunt Cordelia, and naturally there were dozens of unmarried Beaufort and Penryth cousins and things who'd got to be considered as well.

I got shoals of letters and telegrams and telephone mes-

sages congratulating me. One, a perfectly charming little note, from Nickolas Penticott himself. And a most fervent long letter from Geraldine Maidstone. I think she was thoroughly relieved that her beloved "Nicko's" tiresome ward was safely engaged to another man!

Of course, this finished my stage career; it ended with the end of the run at His Highness' Theatre.

"And now," Lord Henry remarked, as he drove me home from the theatre on the last night, "you can just go right ahead and apply yourself to preparations for becoming Lady Henry Penryth without delay, because if you think I'm going to wait long, you are highly mistaken."

"Lady Henry Penryth!" I thought, and my heart gave a little hop of excitement.

"Lady Henry Penryth! *Your ladyship!*"

How queer it was to look ahead and hear myself in imagination being addressed in this impressive fashion. What a very great lady I'd got to be; should I ever, ever be able to live up to it all? The huge establishments, and tribes of servants, and dinner-parties and house-parties, and balls and receptions, and—goodness only knows what beside.

Oh, Little Uppington! Funny, stodgy, stick-in-the-mud Little Uppington! How very, very far away you seem now!

Lady Cordelia was determined that my wedding with Lord Henry was to be the event of the autumn, so, consequently, before I knew where I was, I found myself up to the eyes in plans and preparations.

First and foremost, as far as I was concerned, came trousseau. Oh, visions of *crêpe-de-Chine*, tailor-mades, and the latest thing in hats! Ceremony, reception, guests,

and so on, I left to Aunt Cordelia, who simply waded in up to the neck and revelled in it.

Before I could start, though, I had to find out how my money matters stood. During the war I'd earned my living in various more or less dull war-works, so I thought that if my guardian would arrange for me to draw on my capital I'd be able to manage quite nicely. I'd an old-fashioned prejudice against running up trousseau bills to be paid by my husband after our marriage. I wanted to manage it all on my own.

So I rang up my guardian on the telephone and asked him about it, and this conversation proved to be one of the biggest surprises of my life. I began with the usual greetings and inquiries after his health, to which he responded formally with all his characteristic stiff sort of courtesy. Then I told him my little trousseau difficulty, and when he had had time to digest the situation I added:

"I was thinking that perhaps I might draw on my capital for such a very special event."

There was just the slightest pause before he said:

"It is not a procedure that I regard with any favor, as a general rule——"

"I wasn't thinking of making a general rule of it," I put in.

"No, and seeing that you are so soon to be in a position in which money matters won't count, perhaps . . ."

"Oh, thank you. . . . I felt sure you would agree with me."

"Please remember, though, that it is only the very special circumstances that make me approve of this course."

"I do . . . indeed, I do. And I'm perfectly sure that if you say it is all right, it is all right." This wasn't

flattery; it was simply the truth, but quite suddenly, and with an entire change of tone, he challenged it:

"Now, what makes you think that?"

"Oh," I began, slightly taken aback, "because you are so tremendously wise and . . . and business-like and cautious and . . ."

"Everything else that is dull and depressing, eh?" he broke in.

I nearly gasped with surprise.

"Well, no, not everything," I replied, quite unconscious of the fact that I'd emphasized the everything in a most uncomplimentary way.

"But most of 'em. All right. I accept the verdict."

It never had occurred to me that any conversation with my guardian could make me sit up and take notice, but I quite began to enjoy this little encounter.

"No, no," I protested. "You are wilfully taking what I said the wrong way."

"I have a legal, and therefore an accurate mind," he said.

"Still, you might know I wouldn't be so . . . so impolite. . ."

"I don't see why I should know that; I don't know much of you, do I?"

"No, but you know I'm a good and dutiful ward."

He didn't answer immediately, so I went on:

"You do know that, don't you?"

"I was just trying to remember how you have ever proved it," he said.

"Are you frowning very severely as you say that, or smiling?" I demanded, really not quite sure.

"I utterly decline to answer such an irrelevant question. But what I was going to point out was that before you can be dutiful you must have some duty imposed. . ."

"Goodness!" I interrupted. "You have got a legal mind! That sounds like a dictionary on its best behavior. . . . Haven't I always done everything you've ever told me to do?"

"Oh, everything," he admitted.

"Well then?" I said in triumph.

"But I've never told you to do anything," he reminded me quietly.

Could this be my guardian? My rather "stodgy" guardian? But at least that made one thing quite clear to me; he certainly wasn't frowning severely. Very well then, I might take it that he was smiling. . . . My guardian!

"I met a very great friend of yours the other day," I said suddenly, the remark coming out of a clear sky, and prompted by goodness knows what; I didn't.

"Geraldine Maidstone?" he inquired.

"Um."

"Yes, she told me. She has taken a great fancy to you, by the way."

"That so? How could you tell?"

"She was so tremendously interested in you; wanted to know all about you."

"And asked a heap of questions?"

"Yes."

"And you say she likes me?"

"Well, you needn't dispute it."

"You have a legal and accurate mind, Mr. Guardian," I reminded him. "It would ill become me to dispute. . . ."

"I say, you're quite grown-up now, aren't you?" he broke in.

"Quite," I replied, laughing.

"Funny, isn't it?"

"Funny?" I said questioningly, and then something

came to me in a flash, and without giving myself time to think, I'd said it.

"Funny, well, perhaps. But not half so terrifying, is it?"

He laughed; a small, self-conscious laugh it was, too.

"Well, this isn't business, is it?" he remarked, switching off, after the cowardly manner of man when he is disconcerted.

"No, and that isn't an answer," I retorted.

"What was it you said that required an answer?"

"That's sheer evasion. . . ."

"Oh, yes, something about being terrified, wasn't it? Who was supposed to be terrified?"

"You."

"And about what?"

"Me."

He was silent so long that I said:

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing," he said casually. "I was giving you the last word, that's all."

"Politeness? Or because you couldn't think of one to say yourself?"

He laughed again.

"Your cross-examination is most able," he remarked.

"Yes, but it fails in one essential," I replied.

"And that is?"

"That it never manages to elicit an answer."

"Well, really you ask such awkward questions. You want to make a man, who has been a soldier for over four years, confess to being terrified by . . ." He paused.

"A horrid little flapper wearing pigtails and long, thin, black-lisle legs," I finished for him.

"Exactly—I mean, not at all."

Somewhere along the wire our laughter mingled. After which we settled down to business.

“Trousseaux are tolerably expensive affairs, aren't they?”

“Tolerably.”

“How much would you like to . . . er . . . draw from your capital?”

“May I leave that to you, please, Mr. Guardian? Then you can draw any sum that, in your judgment, I can afford. Is it a very complicated procedure?”

“Oh, no, not at all. . . . If you will leave it entirely to . . . my discretion, I can easily manage it for you.”

“That is so kind of you. Won't you come up one day and have tea with me?”

“I'd be delighted. . . .”

“Are you very busy now?”

“Up to my eyes.”

“Then ring up later on, and fix a day when things slack up a bit. . . .”

“Right—and thanks.”

“Good-by, then.”

“Good-by.”

It was quite a long time before I could really convince myself that it had been my guardian, my grave, my serious, my rather stodgy guardian, that I'd been talking to.

CHAPTER VIII

THINKING of it afterwards, I couldn't help comparing this conversation with the last I'd had with Nickolas Penticott, that fateful September of Nineteen-fourteen, when he'd come down to Little Uppington, dressed in very new and very smart and very correct khaki, to say a formal and dutiful good-by to his sacred trust and solemn responsibility.

Miss Georgina Kennedy, his cousin, a spinster of doubtful age and an unimpeachably orthodox outlook upon life, was living with me, doing the dragon stunt, and we all three sat stiffly in my little "parlor" and drank tea, and talked hopefully about the war being over in six months. At least, Miss Kennedy talked thus, in good, stilted phrases, while my guardian, balancing a tea-cup and saucer on his knee, made monosyllabic replies, and I fidgeted and munched bread and butter, and hadn't one word to say for myself.

When he left, he just told me briefly that he'd left my affairs all in order, and that if he shouldn't happen to come back I'd find them so. Then we shook hands, feeling awkward and solemn, and he went. And when he came home a year later on leave, Miss Georgina had gone home to nurse her sister, Miss Amelia, who had sometimes shared the dragon responsibilities with her, but who now had developed into a sort of permanent invalid,

and I'd gone on the land, and was way down on a farm in Wales.

So to-day's little exchange of lively comments was no end of a surprise to me. How he had changed! Or was it more that I had changed? Looking back to that farewell tea-party, I guess I must have been a fairly gawky proposition. I certainly wasn't a brilliant conversationalist. I laughed as I remembered his sudden discovery that I was quite grown-up now. It was evidently an enormous relief to him.

He called the very next morning while I was out shopping, and when I came back and the twins told me about it I was quite disappointed. I'd been really quite thrilled at the idea of meeting him again.

It was rather a scoop for me having turned into such a dazzling success, and I thought I'd like to show myself off before him a little. A ward who had suddenly blossomed into the future Lady Henry Penryth was *some* ward, wasn't she?

Evidently the twins had made him very welcome, and begged him to wait for me, but he couldn't. He left a fat envelope and a message for them to give to me.

The envelope contained a wad of bank-notes, and the message was that he'd brought it in this form as he thought probably it would be more convenient for me, and that he'd fixed it quite satisfactorily, and that I could now just go ahead.

Ahead I went, and the ecstatic twins went with me, whenever Harry would let them. Life became one dazzling round of dressmakers, shoemakers, furriers, hat shops, "undie" emporiums and jewellers; these, with Harry, who simply wanted to give me every blessed thing I liked the look of. He absolutely took charge of me, drove me about, did everything, saw to everything,

thought of everything, until I felt that I was being luxuriously carried through life.

And it was going to last, too! For the rest of my life I was going to be absolutely safe and cared for, with no peace-disturbing questions as to careers and incomes, and how to make last season's one and only gown look like next season's, and all those sorts of worries. And with this perfect dear of a man, who was so utterly thoughtful and considerate and kind. Oh, life seemed pretty good these days—good and easy and care-free.

And—this is an awful confession—it was rather nice to think of being Lady Henry Penryth. Yes, it was! And I must confess to the truth, even if you do think me a snob. I'm not, truly—at least, I'm not a snobby snob; but when you've been nobody all your life, the thought of being somebody, all of a sudden like this, is rather thrilling, and I didn't stop to think or to look ahead into the future.

I'd had enough of having to do that, and now I didn't have to, I wasn't going to! I never seemed to have time, anyway, for all the time Aunt Cordelia was planning the most gorgeous wedding for me, she was training me to be that all-important creature, a Society bride. She drilled me about the guests at the reception; you know the sort of thing—who took precedence of who, and all that, and when I was to receive congratulations, and who I was to be most particular not to offend—touchy old aunts and great-aunts and cousins of Harry's.

And then we got to the important question of who was to give me away.

There was only one person qualified to do it; my guardian. Of course. So I rang him up again.

His consternation when I told him what I required of him was positively comic.

"Oh, but I say—I can't, really. It isn't a bit in my line!" he said.

"But," I argued, "there isn't anyone else qualified to do it. There's no one else I belong to!"

"That's all very well, but it's a frightful responsibility. Besides, I've never given anyone away before."

I laughed lightheartedly into the mouthpiece.

"Well, seeing you've only one ward, you'll probably never have to do it again. Isn't that a great consolation?"

"Please, I say, don't laugh!" came his voice again. "It's a frightfully serious question!"

"After all, you know, you are my guardian," I reminded him.

"Yes, I know I am, but . . ."

"And it's the last thing I shall ever ask of you in your official capacity."

"Yes . . . but . . ."

"Besides, think how awfully relieved you'll be to get rid of me."

"That isn't quite fair," he protested.

"Indeed, I've always sympathized with you about it. It must have been most irritating for you to have a sacred trust thrust upon you in this way."

"Not at all," he murmured, politely conventional. "The whole point is that I've never had to do anything of the sort before, and . . ."

"But it celebrates your happy release. . . . No more sleepless nights; no more anxious days; no more grey hairs . . ."

"Oh, if you won't consider the question seriously. . . ." he said, annoyed.

"No, please . . . please, I didn't mean it; I'm sorry,

and I'll be as serious as the very . . . That is, I'll be as serious as *you* are," I said, correcting myself hastily.

"Not very happily put," he remarked, his tone still a little huffy.

"Please, Mr. Penticott, do this for me. You see, I've no one else," I said, as seriously as even he could have wished.

"Well, if you are so set on it . . ." he began, capitulating grudgingly.

"I am," I broke in quickly. "You see, before you can be given away, you must belong to someone, mustn't you?"

"Sounds good logic."

"Well, and you're the only person I ever have belonged to since I can remember. . . . I've got no one else, you know, Mr. Guardian . . . and it's so soon now . . . and . . ."

"Very well," he interrupted. "I'll do it, of course. But I warn you that I shall probably make a complete ass of myself, and be a blot on the whole show."

"Don't worry," I soothed him. "Lady Cordelia assures me that no one will look at anyone but the bride. And thank you so much. Good-by, Mr. Penticott."

"Good-by . . . but, hang it all, I wish . . ."

But just what it was he wished, I didn't hear—though I guessed—because he put down the receiver, and that finished things.

What a funny, surprising sort of man my guardian seemed to be! I'd never have thought he'd have taken that attitude towards the business. I fancied that he would be simply no end elated at the idea of getting rid of his ward, and willing to do anything to help. You never do know what people will do or say or think until they've done it, or said it, or thought it, do you?

Everything went swimmingly right up to the very day before the wedding. Oh, that day before! Shall I ever, ever, ever forget it? It was one long series of little distracting worries and disasters.

Lady Cordelia had told me to rest, so that I should look radiant on the day. Rest! Ye gods! With a telephone in the house and everyone on earth apparently using it!

The twins brought me breakfast in bed, and left me, with the blind drawn down, to sleep, while they went out to get some of the final touches for their dresses. And no sooner were they out of the house than ting-a-ling-a-ling! went the 'phone. Up I got to answer it.

A distracted bridesmaid informed me that her dress had come home at least two sizes too small. She could hardly get into it, and certainly couldn't appear in public in it. I took this with calmness and good cheer—it was the first mishap—and rang up the perpetrators of the outrage, telling them how important it was, and begging them to do what they could. My bridesmaid, in a very bad temper, had evidently already been on to them, giving them "what for." So they were in none too sweet a mood, and took a good deal of persuading. However, I mollified them at last, and as the future Lady Henry Penryth, no doubt my word carried weight, and they promised to do their uttermost. I breathed again and got back to bed. No sooner was I safely there than:

Ting-a-ling-ling!

Up I got again, and put the receiver to my ear.

"Hallo!"

Madame Jonquil, who was making the wedding-dress, this time. In voluble half-French, half-English, she almost sobbed into the 'phone that some never-to-be pardoned fool in her work-room had cut—*Mon Dieu!*—

actually *cut* the exquisite old lace that Lady Cordelia had lent for the dress! A mistake—of course a mistake! The girl mistook it for the modern variety that was to flounce the underskirt. But that such idiocy should be allowed to live! And in *her* work-rooms! Holy blue! That——

I nearly howled myself. That exquisite lace that had trimmed the wedding frocks of various feminine Beau-forts for goodness only knows how many generations! What would Lady Cordelia say? Cut! Good heavens! *Cut!*

“And it is unlucky—oh, of an unluck most misfortunate!” went on the distracted Jonquil, piling on the agony, in her Entente-Cordiale language.

I jammed down the receiver, not wanting to hear any more, and wishing I hadn't heard as much. Unlucky? Well, of course, it was unlucky to cut a piece of centuries-old-lace!

I couldn't go back to bed after this, so I lit the geyser and started my bath.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Ting-a-ling-ling-ling! I flung a Turkish towel bath-gown round my dripping form and went to the 'phone again.

It was Lady Cordelia. Now for it! I thought. Naturally, she'd be furious—of a fury great and to be understood, as poor Jonquil would have put it.

“Hallo! Yes, it's Judy speaking.”

“Oh, my darling child,” came her wailing voice. “Have you heard?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Isn't it too, too awful?”

“Indeed and indeed it is!”

“What shall we do? It will utterly spoil the effect.”

Of course it would! Oh, I didn't know—I simply didn't know!

"Find someone else, I suppose; but, Judy, who? That's the question!"

"Yes, and that won't mend it! Oh, Aunt Cordelia, I wouldn't have had it happen for the world!"

"Mend it? Mend what?"

"The lace—the lovely, darling old lace!"

"Oh, child, don't worry about that. That's done and can't be helped. But listen here. Teresa Beaufort won't let her little boy be Cupid! She's afraid of draughts—at the last moment like this. Isn't it too, too bad!"

"Then you're not furious about the lace!" I cried, picking a wet wisp of hair out of my eye. "What a darling you are, Aunt Cordelia!"

"Nonsense, dear! Besides, I *am* furious, and Jonquil's an old fool; an old fool and a fat one into the bargain. . . ."

I laughed, on the verge of hysterics.

"Oh, my dear, don't laugh!" her distracted voice implored. "It's nothing in the whole, wide world to laugh at, I assure you. There's not another boy in England like little Beau. Besides, he's *the* smart thing for weddings."

"I know, dear Aunt Cordelia, I'm dreadfully sorry about it."

"Lady Melicent Goode, Genevieve Preston, the Talbot woman, Jenny Jutland . . . they all had him at their weddings. And now, shall it be said that they had smarter, more picturesque weddings than Harry Penryth? Afraid of draughts, indeed! At the last minute like this!"

And in sheer exasperation, she rang off, and I went back and finished my bath.

I was just doing my hair, when ting . . . ! it began again. I flew and picked up the receiver, almost shaking it with irritation.

“Hallo!”

Another bridesmaid this time.

“I say, Judy, they can’t get the shoes to match the frocks, and they’ve never let me know till now. What are we to do?”

“Wear boots!” I cried in desperation. “No, no! I didn’t mean it. Get ordinary pale blue satin, and if they can’t be all alike, they must be different!” And I rang off, utterly refusing to enter into any argument.

“Goodness!” I groaned. “This is worse than a dress rehearsal! Oh, who would be a Society bride?”

There was nothing further to report on the line in that section for quite some time. I got a teeny-tiny lunch ready, even had time to eat it, before the enemy started activities again.

This time a familiar voice sounded.

“Hallo! That my girl? I haven’t rung up before because Aunt Cordelia told me you were to rest!”

“Rest! Oh, Harry!” And I told him.

“Then I’m coming right around to take you out to tea!” he said firmly. “This time to-morrow, darling, the awful busines will be over, so cheer up!”

“I’ll get my things on,” I replied, gratefully.

But, before he arrived, I learned that the florist who was responsible for the bridesmaids’ bouquets, and my own, couldn’t get the “Golden Glories” all one shade— that another bridesmaid had suddenly discovered that shepherdess hats were the *one* kind she never had been able to wear, and that she wasn’t going to appear looking a fright for anyone, forgetful of the fact that styles and

colors had been most carefully discussed and agreed upon weeks ago!

Then Lady Cordelia rang up again to say that the best-man was down with "flu," and that if something didn't happen quite according to plan soon, she'd be in her little green grave. And where was Harry? Was he with me? If so, would I tell him about it at once? He was probably on his way to me, so I said I would. Then the twins came in, footsore and weary, having scoured London for—oh, something, I've really forgotten what, but they were very upset and voluble about it. I told them I didn't care if they never got *anything* again, I wasn't going to hear another word about it. And when Harry appeared, I cried out:

"Oh, Harry; don't ever ask me to get married again, will you?"

And, laughingly, he promised not to. We went out together, to a tiny, quiet little tea-place, where there wasn't the least sign of bustle, and we just sat side by side and drank tea without speaking at all, hardly.

Somehow one does feel silent and shaky on one's wedding eve, and Harry was a dear; so awfully sweet and understanding. We had a really peaceful two hours together, and he took me home again in the early evening, just as it was getting dark. He only stayed a moment or two, to say good-night.

"The last time, sweet!" he whispered. "The last time I ever have to say good-by to you. Do you realize it?"

I didn't. I hadn't realized anything. I'd just gone on being whirled along without being really clear about anything. Perhaps I ought to have thought more. Perhaps I ought to have considered. But then—I wonder if any girl ever can!

"After to-day you're mine!" he went on. "Ah, Judy,

can you ever know what you are to me?" And standing there in the dim, unlighted hallway, my hands held fast in his, he told me—but I'm not going to tell that bit; it wouldn't be cricket. But I can tell you this, that I felt small and awed, and awfully solemn, and horribly inclined to cry, for I was looking right into the heart of hearts of as fine a man as ever breathed. And I had the queerest feeling that I'd no right to hear it; that I was eavesdropping; listening to something utterly sacred that was meant for someone else—a sort of "third person" feeling. Then he was bending his tall head and pressing his lips to my hands, and then he was holding me close in his arms covering my face with kisses.

Then he was gone. And I was left standing in the dark, hot tears streaming down my cheeks, and saying almost out loud:

"Harry, Harry! I didn't know you loved me like that—oh, I didn't really!" And my heart was pounding as if I were suddenly afraid of something, and didn't know what.

* * * * *

It must have been just on ten o'clock that night when the telephone bell rang for the last time. The twins had gone to bed, and I was in a silk wrapper, sitting before the fire, toasting my toes, when the shrill sound made me start.

"Hallo? Julia Grey speaking. Who is it, please?"

And the voice of my guardian replied:

"I rang you up this afternoon, but you were out."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I was having tea with Harry. Was it anything important?"

"Well, yes, rather."

"What about?"

"This giving-away question."

"Oh, goodness! Mr. Penticott, *you're* not going to let me down, are you?"

"Let you down! Well, I'd be sorry to, only——"

"Only what?"

There was a pause, so long a pause that at last I said:

"Are you there?"

"Yes. See here, Julia, I don't want to preach, but it's a frightfully serious matter—getting married, I mean."

"I know it is. But, after all, it's I that am getting married, not you."

"That's just it! If it were I, I should at least know what I was about."

"Don't you think I do?"

He replied, doubtfully, "I suppose you do."

"Well, then?"

"Oh, well, this idea of having to give you away has brought it home to me very forcibly that, really, I don't know what I'm giving you away to."

"You're quite depressing. Have you any grudge against Harry?"

"Great goodness, no! For any sake, don't take it that way. I've always heard of him as one of the best."

"He is," I put in. "One of the best!"

"Even so, I wonder if you fully realize what you are doing? I mean, Lord Henry Penryth is a great and dazzling match for any girl——"

"Mr. Penticott!" I cried indignantly. "Are you suggesting that I am marrying Harry for those reasons?"

"No, no, no! Don't take everything the wrong way. Only I'm worried. Are you sure you really care the right way? It's got to last a lifetime, you know. Any girl might be carried away, dazzled, and all that sort of *thing*, by the prospects of such a life as you will lead.

Only—oh, just try to understand what I'm trying to say, and understand it the right way."

I was so surprised that I couldn't think of anything to say. It was his turn to inquire:

"Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here!" My voice sounded very subdued.

"Well, d'you get what I'm driving at?"

"Yes, I get it."

"And is the marriage really for your happiness?"

"Yes, yes; of course it is."

"Are you happy?" he persisted.

"Yes; of course I am!" This with a touch of sharpness.

"But it's got to be something more than just 'happy.' Julia, it's the biggest thing there is. I must know that it's all right before I have a hand in it . . ."

His voice was very earnest, and as he said that a big, vague feeling arose in me; a big, vague longing for . . . oh, I didn't know what . . . and a big, vague rebellion against . . . oh, something . . . nothing . . . everything! . . .

I caught my breath sharply, and a whole tangle of words clamored on my lips . . . but they died away, too confused and muddled up and incomprehensible for utterance.

I laughed shakily.

"It's . . . it's all right. . . . Only, how did you know . . . what it's got to . . . to be? . . . And . . . all that. . . ."

"Men have their ideals," he growled.

A vision of Harry's face as I'd seen it that evening through the half-light rose before me.

"Please stand by me. . . . Please . . . oh, please don't fail me," I faltered.

A pause, then:

"Very well. And forgive me, won't you?"

"Forgive you? I . . . I think it was rather nice of you . . ."

I winked a tear out of each eye. One's wedding-eve is a most emotional time. And how seriously he took it. He was right, of course, but who'd taught him? Geraldine Maidstone? The thought scurried through my mind.

"Then I may depend on you?" I said aloud.

"You may."

"Then, good-night, Mr. Guardian!" I said, smiling uncertainly, forgetting that a smile wouldn't "get over" on the 'phone. But he evidently heard it in my voice and knew just the kind of smile it was, for his tone answered it exactly as he said, gently:

"Good-night—and—all the best!"

"Th-thank you," I faltered, and slammed down the receiver, turned out the light, and fled to my room.

I crept into bed in the dark, and as I lay staring up into it, a confusion of words went ringing in my ears.

Bridesmaids' grumbles, dressmakers' despair, florists' apologies, then my guardian's voice:

"It's the biggest thing there is . . ."

And Harry's, all tender and broken with deep feeling. . . . Aunt Cordelia's, saying:

"His isn't the first mad passion of a boy—it is the great big love of a man. . . ."

And at last, my own, trembling with tears, and on an odd note of apology:

"Harry, oh, Harry!"

And I pulled the bedclothes up over my face. . . .

CHAPTER IX

I AWOKE with a start to find that it was full day, and that the mellow autumn sunlight was pouring a stream of gold through my window.

My wedding-day!

The remembrance came to me with a jolt, and I sat perfectly still, not thinking exactly, but sort of caught up by it and trying to realize it. My wedding-day! My brain turned the three words round and round and round again.

"It's a dream," I said to myself, half aloud. "Just nothing but a dream." And then, still half aloud, still in that murmuring only half-conscious way, I found myself adding: "Nothing but a dream—a bad dream."

I'd said it so absently, sort of off-handedly, as one does say these hackneyed things, that for a second I didn't seem to know I'd said it at all. Then I caught my breath sharply, and said, in a whisper:

"Bad? Bad? Did I say bad?"

And then it burst over me like a storm of awfulness that not only had I said it, but I'd meant it.

I clapped a hand over my mouth and stared wide-eyed, utterly horrified, before me, and I couldn't think or move—I seemed just struck dumb all through.

I'd meant it. I'd meant that my marriage with Harry was like a bad dream. . . . Well, then . . . I didn't want

to marry him. . . . Yes, that's what it amounted to, and could anything be more dreadful? How can I ever make you understand what I went through that morning, when, with no earthly reason to back me up, I suddenly realized that I didn't want to marry Lord Henry Penryth.

There wasn't a word to be said against him; not the least vestige of a syllable . . . but I just didn't want to marry him; that was all there was to it, and, my goodness, it was enough!

Oh, I know what you'll say—and you have justice all on your side—that I'm whimmy and moody and didn't know my-own mind, and never ought to have let him think that I cared. . . .

That thought made me hide my hot face in my hands.

I'd let him think I was glad and happy. And, surely—oh, surely I had been glad—surely I had! If I hadn't I never could have done it. Surely—surely——

Oh, but there's no surely about it—I just hadn't considered, just hadn't thought. I'd let myself be caught up on a wave of feeling—let myself be swept along on it until here I was in this awful position.

And there was no reason for it. Harry was everything he should have been—except the right man for me. And just think how wonderfully lovely Aunt Cordelia had been to me!

And how all their friends and relations had taken me to their hearts in the most welcoming way. How could I be so ungrateful, so horridly, cold-bloodedly ungrateful! I railed at myself in this way, trying to bring myself to a different frame of mind, but all my brain could answer was:

“I can't help it! I don't want to marry him! I don't—oh, how I don't!”

Why don't I? I did once, surely? Or have I never

wanted to, without knowing it? And, anyway—why, why? There's no reason.

"Yes, there is," said my brain again. "I don't love him; never have; never could."

And I took my face out of my hands again and sat very still, thinking. The perfectly awful tumult in my mind stilled, too, and I said, almost calmly:

"No, I don't love him."

And then, after another long thinking pause:

"That's why I felt as if I oughtn't to hear what he was saying last night—as if it wasn't really mine to hear. That's what I wanted to say to Nickolas Penticott—that vague, terrifying feeling I had when he asked if I were really happy, meant all this—it was this trying to make itself clear, trying to put itself into words."

Oh, if ever any of you have been carried away as I had, by all those mixed emotions that assail you when a man you like most awfully suddenly tells you that he loves you so much that he wants to marry you; if ever any of you have let yourselves drift this way, without looking into the future, without realizing that just liking a man most awfully isn't even first cousin to loving him enough to make it last for always, you'll understand just what I was feeling that sunny autumn morning of my wedding-day.

I hadn't meant to play fast and loose—indeed and indeed I hadn't. I thought I was happy, I did really, and all those little half-feelings I had which, I see now, ought to have warned me, seemed so faint and vague, so utterly indistinct and unrecognizable, as if they'd been buried all this time so deeply that they'd only just come, with this terrifying rush, to the surface. If only one could see things at the time as clearly as one realizes them later!

What was I to do? And why couldn't I love Harry as he wanted me to love him? There didn't seem to be any reason, except that I just didn't, and had only this moment known it. There wasn't one vestige of a grievance. He'd been the best and dearest. I just didn't, that's all. And that's no reason, is it? How could I go to a man and tell him that? Besides, it was too late now—this was my wedding-day. Besides, again, I'd promised—given my word! No, there was nothing, nothing in the world to be done but to go through with it.

How was I ever, ever going to forgive myself!

* * * * *

A knock at the door roused me with a start. I dashed my hands over my eyes and lay down, every instinct in me calling out to me to hide the awful truth.

"Oh, Bun dear," I called, as steadily as I could, "is that you? Come in, of course!"

The door opened a bit and a head appeared round it, a head in a neat nurse's bonnet.

"Norah!" I cried, and I flung out of bed, ran across the room all in my striped slumber-suit, dragged her into the room, and gave her a regular bear's hug. "Norah! Oh, you utter darling! I am so glad, so—so terrifically glad to see you!"

Then, all of a sudden, the tension in my mind snapped, and I burst into tears, my head down on her shoulder, and I couldn't say a word, while she stroked my hair and said:

"There, there, little old kid!" over and over again till I calmed down a bit.

"Oh, I'm such a f-fool!" I stammered at last, remembering desperately that I mustn't give myself away.

"*I was so afraid you wouldn't be able to g-get here!*"

I don't know whether Norah accepted that as the reason for my display of overwrought feeling. I think that all she thought was that it was the natural upsetness and excitement of a bride-to-be on that nerve-racking occasion—her wedding-day. Anyway, all she said was, in the old professional sort of way:

“Get into a dressing gown at once. And just look at your bare feet!”

I laughed shakily. It was so refreshing to hear her friendly bullying again, but was that all those clear, sensible eyes of hers had seen? My dressing-gownless state and slipperless feet? I didn't know and couldn't guess. I only knew that I wrapped a kimono round me, jabbed my feet into shoes, and swung round on her, unable to endure silence.

“I'll have to get a move on, you know,” I said, my voice quavering with feverish excitement, with which I fondly hoped to mask the dreadful truth. “Oh, Norah, to think it's my wedding-day! Doesn't it all seem——” I began bravely enough, but couldn't get on—just couldn't; the words stuck fast in my throat and refused to be uttered. “Anyway, I'm glad—oh, so awfully glad that you are here,” I ended feebly.

“I couldn't let you know,” she said, in her comfortingly, ordinary, common-sense sort of way. “You see, I had to arrange for a nurse to take my place, and she only turned up last thing last night.”

“So long as you're here, I don't care. Everything, absolutely everything, has been going wrong.”

And I rattled out the story of yesterday's disasters as fast as I could, dreading above all things—silence. I didn't want to think, or to let her see. I just wanted, since there was nothing else to be done, to go through with it without dwelling on my own thoughts.

“Oh, well,” she said comfortingly, “so long as it all comes right in the end——”

I was startled by this; it came so aptly into my thoughts, but she didn't seem to mean anything special.

“Oh, it'll all come right in the end,” I cried. “Of course it will! It must!”

I was conscious of talking rather wildly, so I snatched up sponge and towel and whirled away to the door.

“I must go and tub,” I cried. “The car is coming for me at nine. I'm going to Aunt Cordelia's to—dress, you know, and I simply mustn't be late. Oh, and Norah darling, shout to me and tell me all the news while I'm having my bath, and I'll—I'll shout back.”

And I went out.

“It's a dream—just only a dream. Oh, if only I could wake out of it and find that it hadn't happened!” were the words that went swinging through my mind. But what was the good of that? It had happened, it had, and I'd got just to abide by it.

* * * * *

When I was dressed, Norah and the twins pestered me to eat some breakfast, but could I? I could *not*. The toast nearly choked me, and the coffee wouldn't go down.

It wasn't one bit of good; I just absolutely couldn't.

Punctually at nine came Lady Cordelia's car, and Norah and I bundled in. The twins were going straight to the church.

The church! How the very thought of it caught me up and made me gulp. I had visions of crowds and crowds of guests inside, and rows and rows of casual sightseers outside, and myself making some awful, ridiculous blunder, saying the wrong thing at the wrong *moment, or tripping over my train.*

I found myself squeezing tight on to Norah's hand as she sat beside me in the car.

Aunt Cordelia made Norah welcome in her own jolly, cordial way, and took me wholly into her arms.

"Everything's all right, child," she said. "Major Brereton has been roped in to do best-man duty. Beau Beaufort's mother has relented. The bouquets are glorious, the dress a dream, and the bridesmaids don't seem to know what ill-humor means! So rest assured, little bride. The sun is shining." And she kissed me tenderly.

And I flung my arms round her neck and kissed her with more feeling than I ever had, and my heart aching and aching as if it couldn't bear much more.

I have a recollection of going upstairs, feeling as if my feet were lead, an awful, wild impulse in me to cry out: "I can't—I can't—I won't be married!" And knowing that all the time they were the very last words in the world that I should utter.

Lady Cordelia was lending me Marie, her French maid, for the dressing operations; she said she could manage for herself.

Norah sat in a deep chair to watch the transformation of an ordinary girl into that dazzling, fairy-like thing—a Society bride. And it was a transformation, too!

Marie was an artist at her job; she had that "knack" that is simply everything in dressing, and as I watched in the long, three-fold mirror, the slow, sure changes her deft fingers wrought, I became so interested and fascinated with her cleverness that I almost forgot my troubles. But Aunt Cordelia coming in, swaddled in a dressing-gown, her hair every way, brought them back with a rush, by holding up her hands in amazement and saying:

“Why, child, you’re simply lovely! I don’t wonder that boy of mine loves you so. We’ll show everyone that the bride of his choice can knock them all higher than a kite, even if she isn’t a Beaufort or a Penryth!”

Dear Aunt Cordelia, if you could only have known how each word stabbed right through and through me. I felt my face go hot, then pale, and I had to look down; my eyes couldn’t meet the admiration and affection in hers. Her boy! How she did love Harry. Oh, if only—if *only* I could love him, too!

“Look at yourself in the mirror, little one,” she went on. “Aren’t you a vision?”

I looked, and then nodded, trying to smile, for she was right. I did look a vision, and the dress was a dream. A shadowy, pearly, misty dream of indescribable loveliness. Softest satin, cloudy tulle, little glints of silver, like a pool showing through morning haze, and cascades, sheer from neck to far beyond heel, of the lovely, mellow, old lace. The veil was an elf-embroidered, cobwebby thing, caught by a wreath of blossom and silver leaves around my head and right down to the very tips of my silver-worked shoes—high-heeled and dainty. There wasn’t one thing at fault, except the heart that beat beneath the snowy, gleaming folds.

Why couldn’t I be happy? I thought rebelliously. Why should I look so radiant and be so wretched? Why should it be that I, of all girls, had to miss the best and highest life has to offer? Why couldn’t I have known my own heart sooner?

A final touch to the veil, a dexterous twist to a fold hère, a little pat there, from Marie’s hand, and I was finished. The transformation was complete; the quite ordinary girl had been turned into a Society bride, to be *petted and made* much of. Envied—*envied!* It was

such a great match. Harry was a dear. Oh, if only he wasn't! If only I could give myself one reason for not loving him!

Aunt Cordelia brought me to earth again.

"Now, dear, I must carry off Marie, just to finish me. Oh, I know I am of *small* importance, but I must be just presentable, mustn't I, little bride?"

And she smiled as she went out, followed by Marie.

Somehow, I don't exactly know why, I was afraid of being alone with Norah; perhaps because I knew her so intimately and there was no sort of restraint between us, and I feared that this sheer lack of strangeness might enable her to see all that I was striving to hide. So, as soon as I was alone with her, I turned from the mirror and said rapidly:

"Do I really look nice, darling? Or is that just a part of the dream, too?"

That last was out before I could stop it, and I bit my lip quickly.

"The dream, kid?" she asked.

I laughed unsteadily.

"Oh, well, it doesn't seem real, does it? Not one least little bit. Lady Henry Penryth. Me! Imagine it, if you can."

I felt a spot of color burning in each cheek, and knew that I looked unnaturally bright and "sparkly."

"And do you think I'll get through all right? And not make any idiotic mistakes? And remember everyone's proper titles and ranks and precedences and things? Oh, Norah, doesn't it make Little Uppington seem miles and miles and miles away?"

Suddenly I became aware that Norah was looking at me steadily, a curious little "thinking" look that made me catch a sharp breath.

The sparkle all gone, I just felt as if all of a sudden I sort of tumbled all to bits.

“Don’t!” I cried sharply.

“Don’t what?” asked Norah slowly.

“Don’t look at me like that! For goodness’ sake don’t!” And my voice was shrill and harsh and ragged. I’ve never heard anyone’s voice sound just the same, and it’ll ring in my ears just as long as ever I live.

For an instant a little fear flickered in Norah’s eyes; then she said, not quite in the old matter-of-fact way:

“What’s up, kid?”

I pulled myself together with an effort.

“Nothing; nothing, of course! What could be up? And what made you think anything was?”

“You,” she replied. “You looked and sounded a trifle odd.”

There was a silence; try as I would, I couldn’t make my brain think of anything to say to break it.

Suddenly Norah’s voice again:

“Judy, are you happy?”

Again I caught my breath.

“Why, of—of course! Haven’t I everything to make me?” I managed to say. “Haven’t I?”

Then Norah came towards me, something inexorable and fate-like in her determined step. She caught me, a hand on each shoulder, looked down steadily into my eyes, and said:

“Judy, do you want to marry Lord Henry?”

I tried to look up at her; tried to steady voice and lips to tell the concealing fib, and couldn’t.

“I—of course—I——” I began, but Norah shook me roughly.

“The truth, please! The truth now, if you never speak it again!” she said intensely.

And out came the truth; out came all I felt all I suffered, all I dreaded, in one word:

“No!”

We stood together, breathing quickly, her hands still gripping my shoulders, for one of the longest moments I’ve ever lived through. Then she relaxed her hands and released me; she moved a step away, and quite smoothly through the silence came her voice—matter-of-fact, professional as ever:

“Then, of course, you mustn’t!” she said.

“Mustn’t?” I whispered through unsteady lips. “Mustn’t? Why, I’m due at the church in half an hour.” My voice trembled on the very brink of an hysterical laugh.

“If you were due at the church in half a minute, I’d still say you mustn’t,” she replied.

“Norah, you can’t mean that! I’ve promised—it’s all arranged—I can’t! Oh, I can’t do anything now!”

And I clenched my hands tight together, high up at my throat.

“Something has got to be done, Judy. You have just to steady yourself and think, and,” she added, “face it.”

“But what am I to do? What can I do? There’s nothing to be done now. Don’t you see that there isn’t?”

“The door to freedom is not closed yet,” she said.

“Oh, but it is!” I cried. “It’s closed by my promises, closed by all those waiting guests, all that array of presents. All this, and this, and this.” And I touched my veil, my engagement ring, and my gown.

“No, it’s not!” she replied decisively. But I went on, unheeding.

“And it’s closed most of all by everyone’s wonderfulness to me—Aunt Cordelia’s utter dearness, and—and

because—oh, Norah, because I've let Harry love me so." And I covered my face with my hands.

"He does love me, Norah," I faltered through my fingers. "You don't know, but I've seen it in his eyes, heard it in his voice, and I've let him, I've let him——"

"I know all that," she said stubbornly.

"And it isn't the calf-love of an impressionable boy, it's the steady, hurting sort of love of—of a man."

All unconsciously I quoted Aunt Cordelia, and it seemed as if I really understood what she meant for the first time, now. Now, at this eleventh hour.

"Oh, I can't do anything now! But isn't it awful, Norah? I never knew I didn't want it till this morning—I didn't, honestly. I thought I was perfectly happy, and I'm not. I'm wretched. But I can't do anything now—so late—I'd be too utterly, dreadfully ashamed."

"Judy," she said very seriously, "you can do almost anything—almost anything—do you understand?—with less shame than you can marry a man who loves you, letting him think you love him, when you don't. That is one of the great, unpardonable deceits. You mustn't be guilty of it."

I'd known Norah for ages, but I'd never before heard her speak like this, with such deep feeling and conviction. It steadied me a lot, and I raised my face.

"I believe you're right," I said slowly. "But what can one do? It seems awful, impossible, to fail him now. He's been so splendid to me. To—to turn him down at the last minute like this is to make—a fool of him. How can I do it?"

"Isn't it failing him still more and making a still greater fool of him to marry him, pretending to care?" said Norah.

I was silent, then:

"But the people will all be there, and the presents—hundreds of them, Norah, and the gossip and wonder and comment. Oh!" I shuddered.

"What do they count beside your life and his? Re-adjust your sense of values, Judy, and you'll see that they are all superficial trivialities compared with the fundamental question of 'for better or worse.'"

"But he will suffer, he will be so desperately hurt!"

"I'm afraid he is destined to be hurt; that cannot be avoided; better now than later."

"Then there is Aunt Cordelia——"

"Yes, but it is you and Lord Henry who chiefly count. You have got to do the straight thing by him, and by yourself. Not the thing that is said to be straight according to superficial codes of honor, but the thing that really and truly and deeply is straight."

Again I was silent. I could find no answer. And I knew that what she said was true. Of course, there would be gossip and comment, and a nine days' wonder, but what was a nine days' wonder against a whole lifetime of mistake?

I dropped my hands to my sides.

"Well," I said, in limp surrender, "tell me what to do."

Norah sat looking at me thoughtfully, saying, only half aloud:

"If you start explanations, they'll be countered by shocked incredulity, appeals to your sense of fairness, and the worthless, but nevertheless terribly strong argument of 'What will people say?' Even the best of women, even Lady Cordelia herself, wouldn't be able to resist using them. And you'd give in; I know you would."

I laughed—a miserable sound, quite shockingly unlike a real laugh.

"The straightest thing to do would be to tell Lord Henry quite squarely that you don't want to marry him. But that's impossible." She glanced at her wrist watch. "He'll be on his way to the church."

With what utter calm she discussed it, as if she were diagnosing a case! But it was the very best attitude she could have taken, because it cut out sentimentality, overwrought emotion, and all those unsteady things that make clear thinking impossible, and if I never thought clearly again, I'd got to now.

"Now, Judy, you are quite sure you don't want this marriage to take place?"

"I wish—oh, how I wish I weren't! Yes, I'm sure—"

"Then there's only one thing to do." And she rose from the bed, crossed the room, locked the door, then came quietly to me.

"Now, then," she said sharply, "get out of those things at the double. Hurry! There's not an instant to wait!"

Mechanically, as if I were hypnotized by her command, I obeyed her and began ruthlessly tearing off that white, misty loveliness that had been my wedding-gown, while Norah unhitched my veil and flung it aside.

The dress slid from my shoulders and crumpled to a ring round my feet. I stepped out of it, leaving it lying, kicked my little Cinderella slippers off, and stripped off my stockings.

"Now get into your ordinary things," she ordered, and I obeyed.

"Not your hat," she went on, helping me into my costume coat. "You'll wear this." And she took off her nurse's bonnet and put it on me, pushing my hair back with quick fingers, and deftly tying the strings into a great spreading bow beneath my chin.

"Now my cloak—quick—and you're ready."

Her cloak was off her own shoulders and round mine almost as she spoke.

"Let the veil come round and fall across your face carelessly," she said, arranging it for me. "Now go, and leave the explanations to me!"

She unlocked the door, looked out into the corridor, and then took me in her arms and kissed me.

"God bless you, kid!" she said, her voice a little uneven. "Good-by, dear!"

I clung to her an instant, then darted off along the corridor, and down the wide staircase.

Half-way to the hall I stopped suddenly, with my heart thumping up into my throat, for, down below, a manservant had just admitted—my guardian! And he was all dressed up in frock-coat and shiny hat and things, all ready for the "giving away" part of the ceremony that had so disturbed his peace of mind.

I crushed back against the wall, praying and praying that he wouldn't raise his eyes, and saying sillily to myself in that way one does say utterly irrelevant things at tense moments:

"He looks more like the bridegroom than the 'giving-away' person!"

Oh, goodness! What would he say if he saw me? After the way he'd protested against "having a hand" in the ceremony. After the way I'd forced him to against his better judgment. After all the warnings he'd tried to give me over the 'phone!

"And I believe it was you," I said to myself, addressing his unconscious back. "I believe it was you who really brought the trouble to a head, with your doubts and questions!"

All this went through my head as, with eyes absolutely glued to him, I watched and watched.

He didn't look up, and as the man showed him into the morning-room, the hall was, for the moment, deserted.

Plucking up all my courage, I made a dash for it, gained the front door, opened it soundlessly, and pulled it to again without quite shutting it. Then, once in the street, as if all the imps of misfortune were after me, I took to my heels and ran and ran and ran!

CHAPTER X

I JUST ran blindly for a time without stopping to think where I was going and without stopping to wonder what people would think of me.

Nothing mattered, save that I wasn't going to be married after all; at this moment that was the only point that counted.

The only thing I did do instinctively was to go away from Aunt Cordelia's house, along sundry little side streets, places that I hardly knew.

Turning a corner, I found myself in Sloane Street, and there, looking towards the square, I saw the church!

The church I was to have been married at.

And just lines and lines of cars arriving and driving off again to wait.

And an ever-increasing crowd gathering outside, waiting to catch a glimpse of the bride.

Waiting to admire her gown—waiting to wish her luck—waiting to envy her—waiting for ME!

I gave a little gasp and fled up towards Knightsbridge, the veil of Norah's bonnet flapping round in front, hiding half my face.

A crawling taxi came my way and I frantically hailed it.

"Just take me into the Park and drive round a bit," I said breathlessly.

I leaned back into the corner, with tears of relief coursing slowly down my cheeks.

It felt so safe to be hiding in the dimness of this rather musty taxi, which was soon meandering round the Park at the regulation eight miles an hour.

I bucked up presently, wiped the tears from my face, pressed my hands over my eyes and said:

“Now, then, pull yourself together and think, think, think.”

And, believe me, I *thought*.

Sheer pressure of the awful circumstances made my brain work nineteen to the dozen.

First of all, I went through the details of the dreadful thing I'd done—looking at it squarely in the face, seeing it in all its enormity, and honestly, not even trying to excuse myself.

There was no excuse, I knew that, but there was no going back now, even if I'd wanted to. And I didn't want to; I knew that much, as surely and definitely as I'd ever known anything.

I'd run away at the last minute and landed a lot of people who loved me, and whom I loved, in the most embarrassing position.

I'd dreadfully hurt a man who'd never been anything but perfectly sweet to me, whose only fault was that I didn't, couldn't love him.

I did, just then, begin saying to myself: “Perhaps after all, he won't feel it so very badly,” but I stopped right there, knowing that it was just a cowardly shirking of my responsibility in the matter; just a feeble attempt at a get-out and not the least true.

He would be hurt.

Terribly hurt.

Last night had told me that.

But "to marry a man who loves you, allowing him to think you love him when you don't, is one of the big, unpardonable treacheries." What was it Norah had said? Anyway, it was true. Anything was better than that. Even this. And that brought me round to the present and the question of how I was to proceed. A few minutes' reflection brought me to this conclusion: that I had so utterly and completely done for myself that I could never show my face again! A knock-down sort of conclusion to be forced to, as you may imagine. But true. Oh, yes, beyond all question, true.

Everyone concerned would be so terribly upset and angry.

What could I ever say to make them understand?

And then—another startler!—if I go back to the flat, how am I to avoid meeting people?

I couldn't, of course. I'd be meeting them all over the place.

Even the baker-boy and the milkman knew of my engagement! *Everyone* knew of it.

It wasn't as if I'd been engaged to marry Mr. George Jones. Harry was Lord Henry Penryth; quite another matter. And at Chelsea I'd always be seeing Lady Cordelia, and heaps and heaps of people I'd met at her house. So, another knock-down conclusion—I couldn't go back to the flat!

I paused a moment to let that sink in. "Well, *what* then?" I asked myself. Another period of thought.

If I remained anywhere in London, I was bound to be recognized. I knew so many *stage* people beside all Aunt Cordelia's friends. And—awful thought—ever so many people I didn't know at all knew ME! You can't appear,

with, or without, success, on the most famous stage in London without that happening.

Goodness! How the situation was piling up around me!

Hundreds and hundreds of people I'd never seen or dreamed of knew me by sight. And not only right in London, but from the suburbs all around.

And that wretched Press campaign had made my name conspicuous and forced me on to the attention of the people, quite apart from the announcements and chatty little comments that had appeared from day to day concerning my engagement.

So, you see, one way and another, I'd hit the popular imagination from almost every possible angle. I'd simply been forced to hit it, and now, just at a time when I simply prayed to be able to go away and hide, I had to realize that I was probably one of the most talked-of, one of the best-known girls in town. My brain began to reel with the difficulties that were besetting me.

"How am I ever to get away from it all?" I said, half aloud.

And that sprung another conclusion on me.

I just must somehow or other get away from it all. I must really run away; not only from a marriage ceremony, but from all my life as it had been lately.

I must go into new surroundings—start a new livelihood somehow.

I had it! *Typewriting!*

I sat suddenly straight, beginning to see daylight.

Of course, I'd be a bit out of practice, but I was good at it, and I'd soon get back my speed. But, and I slackened all limp and crumply again. Typewriting meant London. There was no particular chance for it anywhere else.

Suddenly, like a flash of light, the idea came to me.

I must become someone else! Take another name, put on, as far as possible, another appearance. Change myself in every possible way. Make Julia Grey do a vanishing trick, and let—who should it be, rise up in her place?

Yes, who?

That was an important question—to choose a new name. See, it had better be a name that fitted my initials, because of the markings on my things. Julia . . . something beginning with J. . . . Well, say “Jane”; that’s a good sound name. And to take the place of Grey? Godfrey? Green? No, I had it: Graham. Sounded something like my own, and if at some tense moment I should forget and blunder into Grey, I could easily add the “ham” to it. That looks ridiculous written, but you know what I mean, don’t you?

Jane Graham! A good, sensible, no-sort-of-nonsense-about-it kind of name; excellent for a business girl in its untrimmed severity. Well, that’s one thing settled, anyway.

I opened my bag and took out my note-case and counted my fortune.

I’d a goodly little wad of paper money left from my trousseau expenses, and jolly glad I was at that moment that Nickolas Penticott had let me have it in notes. Ready money would come in very handy, and I’d enough to carry me on for some time, if I went as carefully as I could. But I foresaw expenses; for one thing—clothes.

I parted the nurse’s cloak and looked down at the pale grey costume I was wearing, perfectly cut, beautifully braided and buttoned, with a finish that simply yelled Hanover Square, for I’d gone a terrific bust on this cos-

tume. A lovely suit, but no earthly use for my purpose. Well, I'd have to get something else, then.

Something plain and serviceable and undistinguished. Something that would make me, outwardly at least, just like a hundred thousand other wage-earning girls.

Then I looked at myself in my little vanity mirror. What could I do about my face? Could I do anything? No, one can't, you know. There you are, as Nature made you, for better or worse, and this morning my face was distinctly my misfortune. Not that it was a bad face in its way, but—it was too well known. Far, far too well known for my peace of mind. Other aspects of one's appearance one can alter, but your face ye have always with you, so to speak, and sometimes it becomes a nuisance.

But, wait a minute. What about one's hair? I pushed back the little nurse's bonnet. My hair was certainly distinctive, with its gold lights among the brown, and its obliging habit of curling without assistance.

Suppose, only just suppose, that I redded it? What would I look like? I tried to picture it, and decided that it would make an enormous difference to my appearance. Well, I'd have it done, then . . . but oh, my nice goldy-locks! . . . Couldn't be helped. And what was a little matter of color going to be allowed to count, against the situation I was in? Not a great deal, you may believe. Moreover, when it had been henna'd to a flat, unvarying red, I'd plaster it down with brilliantine and brush the curl out of it and wear it dragged off my face; right off, so that not the trace of a bend was left in it. Now, where should I go and have it done?

One of the girls at the theatre used to go with me to Truefitt's, but that wouldn't suit this occasion. Then where? Once you have anything to hide, how awfully

difficult life becomes! Each step of the way has to be thought out and seems simply beset with problems, and of course my dread of being recognized made me exaggerate things.

However, finally I decided that the City was the part of London least likely to be dangerous, and I told the driver to go citywards.

When I saw a small, decent-looking hairdresser's, I stopped him, got out, paid and dismissed him, and went into the shampoo department, and, as casually as I could, demanded a good, strong henna shampoo.

Tense as the situation was, I jolly nearly wept when I looked in the glass and saw what the henna had done! These little vanities die hard, don't they? Still, I'd other things to think of, and allowing a wee drift of the new red hair to show from the edge of my bonnet, I went out of the shop as coolly as if it were the most everyday sort of occurrence. I was seized with a sort of desperate calm, that made me set about working out my plan in a cool and methodical way that surprised me when I looked back on it all.

There's no telling what depths of cunning one can descend to, until one simply has to.

Happening to pass a clock, I saw that it was twelve o'clock, and my heart gave a bound. It was just an hour and a half since I'd fled from Lady Cordelia's. They knew now. The wedding had been stopped and some explanation made. The guests had wondered, exclaimed, gossiped, conjectured, and gone on their various ways.

Poor Norah! Poor, dear, sweet, plucky, loyal Norah, to take on such a ghastly job!

Harry? He knew now, too.

The thoughts went racing through my mind.

What had he said?

How had he looked?

Oh, one could guess easily enough. How awful to have the power to hurt anyone so!

My next move was to buy one or two papers that were likely to advertise rooms to let, and take them into a Lyons' teashop to study them over a cup of coffee.

One was the *Telegraph*, and I scanned its long columns of "To Lets" without seeing a useful thing. But, in turning the paper, a headline caught my eye. It ran, in big type:

"MARRIAGE OF LORD HENRY PENRYTH TO-DAY"

I felt my face go scarlet, and eagerly read all that was said about it. Just a statement of time, place, and personalities. Who he was, who *I* was, who the bridesmaids were, and so on.

My other paper was a picture paper. In that—my heart did a somersault—I saw a reproduction of that photograph I'd taken for the publicity man at the theatre.

"MISS JULIA GREY, to marry Lord Henry Penryth to-day," was the legend underneath it.

Oh goodness, wasn't it awful?

Why had they got to make such a fuss of it just because Harry happened to be a lord?

Still, one thing comforted me a good deal. The photograph wasn't, and never had been, the least bit like me!

"And," I reflected, "it's the only one there is, so that's good."

I didn't find anything satisfactory about rooms to let, but I did see an advertisement of a firm in Holloway which, judging by the little sketches displayed, could provide me with exactly the type of outfit I wanted.

So, my coffee finished and my bill paid, I made my way to Holloway.

It seemed an awful long way, because I only knew the West End of London.

Straight from Little Uppington I'd gone there, and there I'd stayed. However, I went to Holloway, penetrated the very interior, and then I found the outfitters I sought.

A look at the windows showed me that they could give me what I required to a T. But how was I to go in, in a Hanover Square costume, and get one of these neat little, comparatively cheap suits, without arousing curiosity and comment?

Well, it had got to be done, that was all, so in I went, made for the girl I best liked the look of, and said:

"Do you think it would be possible to buy a coat and skirt for—for a friend, without her having to come and try it on?"

Taking her into my confidence in this way brought out all the girl's instinct to be helpful, and she answered brightly:

"Oh, yes, I think so, miss. Come this way and I'll show you some."

I followed her to a big department full of racks and racks and racks of coats and skirts.

"What was it your friend was wanting?" she asked.

"Just a plain, business-like coat and skirt for—for office wear," I answered.

"Something in brown or navy?"

"Navy, I think."

She showed me one or two styles, then said:

"You can tell me the measurements, I suppose—bust, hip, length?"

Mercifully I could. My trousseau-getting had im-

pressed my own measurements unforgettably on my memory.

I gave them glibly.

“Oh, then I’m sure I can find you something suitable. Quite a stock size you’ll want. Here’s a neat little costume, serviceably made, and—how much did you want to give?”

She was such a nice, helpful, friendly girl, and took so much trouble, so cheerfully, that I quite enjoyed the buying of that rather scrubby little suit. And I never had to open my cloak and display my swanky Hanoverian get-up once. That mythical friend and knowing my own measurements got me out of that difficulty.

I left the shop dangling the big parcel on my finger.

Then I went to a draper’s and bought some underclothes, and to a second-hand trunk shop, and got an imitation leather suit-case—one couldn’t go to rooms without any luggage—and having put all my parcels into my second-hand suit-case, I stood on the pavement, wondering what to do next. I hadn’t the foggiest notion where I was in relation to any other part of London, but a ’bus came along and drew up quite close to me, and looking up, I saw *Highbury* on it, and on the impulse of the moment I boarded it, and hoped for the best.

I alighted at Highbury Station, thinking that sounded likely, somehow, and took a ticket to Hackney. I didn’t know a thing about Hackney, except that I felt sure no friend of Lady Cornelia’s did, either.

I looked about for rooms at Hackney, but though I tramped and tramped, there was nothing doing.

Not a room to be had. So I went back to the station and took a ticket to Forest Gate, because it sounded so cool and refreshing and nice. And it was nice, and I quite decided to live there, only Forest Gate didn’t want

me. I had no better luck there than I'd had at Hackney.

But at Forest Gate a landlady asked me if I'd tried Wanstead. No, I hadn't.

She suggested that I might do so. Wanstead Flats, she said, was as likely a place as any.

Wanstead Flats!

"But," I said, "I don't want a flat, only rooms!"

"Oh, that's the name of the place! You pass through the Flats on your way to Wanstead."

Goodness, didn't it sound depressing? *Wanstead Flats!* And at first sight it was, rather. Rows and rows of little houses all alike; rows and rows of privet hedges; rows and rows of little gates; rows and rows of slate roofs; rows and rows of Nottingham lace curtains, parted in the middle to show a depressed-looking plant in a painted bowl. Rows and rows of—oh, I don't know; but with free, unbuilt, and open Little Uppington and picturesque Chelsea in my memory, it seemed as if everything here was in rows.

Still, I found a room—a little bow-windowed room, with an uncheerful outlook, *no* furniture, very ancient raggy-looking carpet on the floor, much-mended scraps of lace curtain at the window, but, none the less, a room!

And clean and sweet-smelling into the bargain.

This Eldorado was owned by a stout, clean, cheery woman, who told me that her husband was out of work and that she'd been fairly put to it to make ends meet, and had had to sell the furniture, and hadn't been able to afford to have anything done to the room, but such as it was I was welcome to it for six shillings a week.

"I'll fix you up with a bed and a few things till you could get your own bits of sticks in," she suggested. There was a hearty, straightforward air about her that

I liked, and as a beginning, she fetched a plain little cane-bottomed chair.

“What about—about references?” I asked uncertainly.

“Been nursing, haven’t you? Well, I can take your sort on trust,” she answered. I felt my face go hot.

“Oh, but I’m not——” I began, but stopped. Even if it was deceitful I’d got to make the most of it, but I *hate* fibbing, don’t you?

Still, my landlady saved me a lot by taking many things for granted.

“Giving it up, are you?” she said. “Well they do say it’s very tiring work, and you don’t look all that strong, if you’ll ’scuse me mentioning it.”

“It’s very nice of you,” I began.

“Oh, I’m not a bad sort, taking me all round,” she broke in with a jolly laugh. “And it’s a good way round, too, ain’t it?” she added, looking down at her considerable bulk. “You do the level by me and I’ll do the level by you, eh?”

It dawned on me then that six shillings a week would mean a lot to her, and that she wasn’t disposed to raise difficulties in the way of a “let.” Jolly lucky for me!

“All right,” I said, suddenly deciding, “I’ll take it.”

And I sat down somewhat abruptly on the scrubby little chair, realizing with a shock how deadly tired I was.

“A good old cup of tea is what ’ud do you good,” said my landlady, “and if you’ll just step down into the parlour you shall ’ave it.”

Over tea, Mrs. Henty—that was her name—and I became quite well acquainted.

“Anything you like you can do to that room. I ain’t a one to raise objections. Be ’appy your own way, that’s what I always say. I can put you in a good, clean bed, which you’re welcome to till you gets your own.”

I thanked her.

"I'll have to look around for something," I said. "You see, I did want to find a furnished room."

"I know, but things is difficult these days, ain't they? It's a question of take it or leave it in everything now. Now, I'll run and light you up a bit of a fire; that'll make your room a bit more cheerio, won't it? You stay here till I fix it up a bit."

"Oh, Mrs. Henty," I said. "Suppose I pay you a week's rent down now, in advance, shall I?"

"Well, it never comes amiss, does it?" she said, smiling broadly. "I'll write you out a receipt for it."

That little business matter settled, she went off and attended to my room, and when she called me to go and look, I found a bright little fire burning in the grate, and a highly-colored hearthrug before it, made of bits of colored rags; a box in lieu of a chest-of-drawers, covered with a colored tablecloth, with fuzzy bobs round the edge, and a crinkly mirror standing on it; and a narrow, humpy-looking bed, furnished with poor but spotlessly clean coverings, against the wall at one side.

Oh, memories of Lady Cordelia's stately rooms and priceless old furniture! What a contrast was here!

"Now I'll leave you to tidy up. Oh, an' use of bath goes in with the room. There's always plenty of hot water, because, not 'aving a gas cooker, I uses the range."

Now that really was good news. I thanked her and she left me.

I looked at my watch and found that it was just on five. And I'd been trapseing about all this time. No wonder I felt just ready to drop. I hadn't noticed it while I was on the go, but now I simply ached in every limb and every muscle.

I took off the nurse's cloak and bonnet, stripped off

Hanover Square, fetched Holloway out of the suit case, and put it on. It didn't fit—how could it? But it was a spruce enough little suit. I laid one of my new, thick nightgowns on my pillow, put the other things in the box Mrs. Henty had provided, and packed my grey costume and Norah's cloak and bonnet in the suit case, and locked it. Then, Julia Grey being no more, Jane Graham suddenly collapsed face downward on to the hummocky bed, and the strain and tension of this awful day gave way to a flood of tears.

* * * * *

In spite of all my troubles, I slept like a log that night.

My bed wasn't awfully comfy, but when I'd learnt the trick of avoiding the hummocks and nestling myself into the valleys, I soon discovered that it was comfy enough; and it seemed to me that no sooner had my head touched the pillow than there came a pounding at my door and a voice saying:

"I've just brought you a bite of breakfast. It's gone the 'alf-hour!" And I woke with a start, to find that it was to-morrow morning. It took me a second or two to remember where I was, then I called out:

"Oh, how good of you! Please come in. You shouldn't have troubled! Am I dreadfully late?"—all in one breath.

Mrs. Henty put a breakfast tray beside me on the bed.

"Thought you'd be feelin' a bit peckish by this time—it's getting on for nine."

"Oh, goodness, what a time I've slept! But I was so tired!" And I stretched and yawned.

"That's all right, Miss Graham. I know you had a trapse yesterday. Here's the *Daily Picture* for you to

look at while you eat your breakfast, and there'll be plenty of hot water when you want it."

She hustled round the room in that fussy little way some women have, putting things straight which were already straight, and flicking imaginary dust off things. If there wasn't something to clean, that woman was perfectly miserable; she just fairly cleaned things thread-bare.

When she left me, I opened the paper eagerly, and my heart sank to see the whole of the middle page devoted to pictures of Harry, of Lady Cordelia, of the church, the guests arriving, the guests leaving, and all the rest of it; with me in the centre, the fold of the paper right down my face.

"Lord Henry Penryth's Wedding Postponed Through Sudden Indisposition of the Bride!" "Dramatic Postponement of Penryth Wedding!" Those were the headlines.

I sat looking at the pictures and thinking.

"I suppose they'll keep up the indisposition spoof until the nine days' wonder is over, and then just let the whole thing slide," I said to myself. "There'll just not be a wedding. But what are they thinking and saying to themselves?"

My face looked up at me out of the middle of the page, smiling and ever so sugary-sweet—thank goodness for the umpteenth time that it isn't a bit like me! Although the mouth and chin, perhaps, are a little suggestive of my own.

I covered the top of the face and examined the lower part critically.

Then hopped out of bed, got my mirror and hopped back again; and then I compared my own true-bill face with the saccharine presentation of it.

I was fairly satisfied ; but, oh, my goodness, the moment one does anything out of the narrow rut of convention, what a—well, almost a criminal one begins to feel!

And how artful and tricky one gets!

For instance, hearing Mrs. Henty's step outside on the stairs, I hastily hid the mirror, turned the page of the paper, and became dead nuts on my breakfast. And I'm sure the hurried little performance was quite worthy of my reputation as a "promising young actress!"

And this was the same girl who'd been, only a few months before, so utterly unsophisticated and "green" as to be on the point of giving her address to a complete stranger, on the strength of his having nearly stunned her with a swing door.

Oh, Harry—dear, dear Harry, how I do wish Fate hadn't brought you through that swing door at just that moment! If only Fate didn't have to go and do these awkward things! If only—oh, a whole heap of things which didn't help in the least.

Above all, if only I could have seen him and explained. Would he have understood? What was he thinking and saying? And suddenly it came to me that, above everything, he'd be worrying. Everybody would; by this time they'd be worried sick about me.

Norah would explain as well as she could, and she'd think I'd gone back to the flat. They'd all think that. Perhaps Harry or someone would go to the flat to see me, and I wouldn't be there; then they'd think that I'd just gone for a walk to think things over, and that I'd be back later, and all day they'd be thinking that. And then, round about late afternoon, they'd stop thinking and begin hoping. Hoping I wouldn't be long; hoping I'd be back by supper-time; then just hoping I was all right, safe, well, and that nothing had happened to me.

For, in spite of all I'd done, they did love me; and even if they hadn't, they wouldn't want any harm to come to me, and would be most frightfully anxious.

It came home to me then how fearfully unfair I was being. Apart from the first big, necessary cruelty of letting a man who loved me so, down so dreadfully, there was no sort of need to inflict these other hurts, anxiety and fear. . . .

But what was I to do? There was only one thing; I must write, without giving an address, just explaining all I possibly could. Who was I to write to? Harry himself? Yes, I thought so. In the first place, I believed he'd be the most ready of them all to understand, and to believe that I hadn't just been playing fast and loose with him. And, anyway, didn't I owe him at least some sort of first-hand explanation and apology? I did, indeed. . . . If only he could have known how deeply I was sorry.

I dressed quickly, borrowed writing materials from Mrs. Henty, and on very cheap notepaper, with a perfectly villainous pen, I began a letter to Harry. And, oh, it was the most difficult letter I've ever written in my life!

It was only the fact that the penholder had already been chewed by some person or persons unknown that prevented me from making a meal of it, and the amount of paper I wasted in making false starts!

How could I begin? "My dear Harry." No, he wasn't mine any longer. Then how about just "Harry"? I thought it over.

No; it sounded offended as if I'd a grievance. Then it would have to be just "Dear Harry," like an ordinary friend that you'd never had any sort of crisis with. But, somehow, when I began to write, the words turned them-

selves round the other way, and I found I'd put "Harry dear." And that seemed right; he was still Harry, and he was still dear to me, and even if he were too furious to care any more, I wanted him to know that.

I'm not going to tell you word for word what I wrote, but I told him that I had no excuse to offer, except that I truly, truly hadn't realized what I was doing till that last morning. How, even then, I'd meant to go through with it, and how it was only at the very last moment that Norah had shown me how treacherous and impossible it would be to marry him without wholly loving him. I told him how very much I cared for him, and always would, and how he'd been the very, very best in the world to me, but that in spite of all his goodness and kindness and utter darkness, I didn't love him, and knew now that I never could.

Then I just told him that, although I sent no address, he wasn't to worry about me, that I was quite all right; but that I was never, never, never going to show myself in his circle again.

And I asked him to tell Lady Cordelia this, and to give her my heartfelt apologies for the trouble I'd caused. It was ever such a long letter, and I tried as hard as I could to explain clearly what I felt; at least I owed him honesty.

When I'd finished this composition and addressed and sealed the envelope over it, I felt almost light-hearted again, and the thankfulness I felt that I was still Judy Grey—or, rather, Jane Graham—made me realize more and more clearly what an utter and tragic mistake my marriage to Harry would have been. Better to hurt him bitterly for a time than to wreck both our lives for always.

I put on my coat and a black velvet tam I'd bought, and slipping the letter into my pocket I went downstairs.

I had a short discussion of ways and means with Mrs. Henty, and told her I'd have my lunch out as I'd be some little time. You see, I meant to go into town to post my letter, so that the post-mark should be Charing Cross or Piccadilly, or something utterly non-committal like that.

That decided, Mrs. Henty produced a photograph, and with great pride showed it to me.

"That's Minty," she said. "My girl—doing well for herself she is, doing short-hand and typewriting for a wholesale tinware firm in the Midlands."

I duly admired the picture of a rather plain but clever-looking girl.

"She's a sharp one, she is. 'I mean to get on, mother,' she says to me, and get on she has, though I says it."

"She looks as if she'd get on," I said politely. "Short-hand typewriting is what I've got to do," I added.

"Ever done any?" she asked me.

"Oh, yes. I'm fairly good at it. I expect I've lost my speed while I've been on the——" I pulled up sharply.

"On the nursing business," she said.

I gulped, which stood for agreement in her eyes evidently, for she went on:

"Where you going to start?"

"I haven't got a post yet," I replied. "But I must set to and look for one." Then I added: "I've got just a little money to be going on with that I saved out of my——" I pulled up again.

"Your nursing job—just so——" And she sat thinking a moment. Then she said: "You won't be too proud to take a suggestion then, I'm reckoning?"

"Indeed I wont! Have you one to make?"

"Well, my Minty started with the 'Stanmore Type-

writing Exchange,' in Robsart Street, off Holborn. They taught her, and then let her work in the office. And then they began hiring her out to different firms, and one way an' another she got in touch with these tinware people she's with now, and they found her that satisfactory that they wanted to make a permanency of her, and there she is to this day."

"She did do well," I said admiringly. "Do you think it would be any good going to the Stanmore people myself?"

"Don't see why not! 'Course, there's not every girl as'll do as well as my Minty—but you can't expect everything, can you?"

"I'll go there this very day, and could I mention you? Tell them that you sent me?"

"That's right—you do," she said heartily. "Tell 'em I'm Minty Henty's mother; they'll know who you mean all right. Wait a minute, I've got the name of the manager somewhere." And she began rummaging in the table drawer—we were in her neat little parlor—and took out an old-fashioned "blotter." In this she found what she wanted.

"Here you are—Mr. Josiah Kendrick. Ask for 'im. Best to go to headquarters straight away. An' you say you're a friend of Minty Henty's mother. He'll know her all right."

"Thank you. It's very, very good of you. I am so grateful."

"That's all right. We got to do what we can for each other in this world. Would you like me to get you a kipper or somethin' for your tea? A kipper's tasty."

Oh, memories of Aunt Cordelia's elegant spreads! A kipper!

But I said quickly that I'd love a kipper; and she wished me luck, and out I went.

I felt that I'd distinctly struck lucky with regard to Mrs. Henty. Her little house might be shabby, her idea of something "tasty" might go no further than the humble kipper, but I felt that within her more than ample bosom beat a heart of solid gold. And, after all, before the days of Aunt Cordelia's caviare sandwiches, the humble kipper had been a star turn on my Little Uppington supper table.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN I got near town and the old haunts, I was miserable with the fear of meeting someone who might recognize me, and the "criminal-hiding-from-justice" feeling was strong upon me again. The first thing I did was to post my letter to Harry at a pillar-box off Piccadilly, then I went Citywards, had a very moderate lunch, and then hied me to Holborn and the somewhat dingy-looking offices of the "Stanmore Typewriting Exchange."

The offices certainly did look dingy, but inside they had a promising air of briskness and business that looked good.

I asked for Mr. Josiah Kendrick, and was taken to his room.

Mr. Kendrick was a keen-eyed, ferrety little man, with sandy hair, a hook nose, and a thin-lipped, cautious sort of mouth. He had a snappy way of talking, too, calculated to inspire terror in any but the bravest of the brave.

He asked me what I wanted, as if my going there at all were a personal affront.

I told him as briefly as I could what I'd come for, and who had sent me, and he said:

"Henty? Henty? Don't know the name!"

"Miss Henty. Minty Henty was with you for some time, I believe."

"Minty Henty! Sounds like a beauty chorus! Oh, ah, yes. I remember—she left about six months ago," he added suddenly. "Well, so she sent you, did she?"

"Her mother, it was," I replied.

"All the same to me. Well, what can you do?"

"Typewriting and shorthand."

"What is your speed?"

I thought it only fair to confess.

"It used to be pretty good, but I'm out of practice now," I replied.

"What do you think you can do now? Shorthand. A hundred and twenty?"

"A hundred and twenty words a minute! Oh, no!" I cried, utterly aghast.

"Well, what then? A hundred? Eighty? Here take this down and let's see."

He shoved a scribbling pad and a pencil across his desk towards me, took out his watch, looked at it a minute or so, then said:

"Ready? Then go!"

And he dictated a fictitious business letter to me. I was fearfully out of practice, but I did my best. Suddenly he stopped, put up his watch, took the pad from me, and counted the rather meagre result.

"H'm, seventy. Not much good, but you're careful, anyway."

"I'd soon pick up on my speed," I said.

"Think you would?" He snapped the question at me, but behind the snappiness was a tone that was not unkind, and his small eyes looked at me in a summing-up sort of way that was yet not unfriendly.

"I'm sure I would," I replied, more confidently. "I was fairly good at it—not so long ago. It will just mean pegging away at it for a bit."

"Type this for me," was all he said, and once again he took out his watch. "Use that machine over there." And he pointed to the one he meant.

I fixed the paper in and waited; then he did some more dictation, stopped, took the page from me and counted again.

"H'm—only forty. Still, it's well done, and you're careful. No mistakes and a good touch. Some people count that above speed. And I'm bound to admit that speed ain't everything. When can you start? Monday week?"

"Yes—any time."

"All right; Monday week at nine. Salary, two pounds a week as a beginning. May as well give you a month's trial, anyway—you're the sort of looking girl we want. What name?"

Coming so suddenly, I was off my guard.

"Ju-Jane Graham," I stammered.

"JuJane? Curious name. Can't you make it plain Jane? Better for business, you know."

"Yes. Plain Jane—so it *is*—plain Jane," I explained eagerly. He wrote it down with Mrs. Henty's address. Then said:

"All right. Monday week at nine. Good-day!"

Thoroughly fuzzled up and furious with myself for making a hash of my name, I said:

"Th-thank you—er——" And then I was attacked by one of those ridiculous spells of tongue-tiedness that comes upon you at moments when you particularly wish to be at least lucid, if you can't be actually impressive. I have a vague memory of wondering whether I ought to say: "Good-morning," "Good-afternoon," "Good-day," or "Good-by," and ended by saying something that sounded perilously like "Good boy!"

I got out into the street as quickly as ever I could, and just as my face was beginning to cool down, I turned the corner and ran into a newsboy calling out an early edition of an evening paper, and there on the newsbill he carried in front of him I read:

“Sudden postponement of Society wedding!” in big letters.

Goodness! How I hopped! I bought a paper, and it was the same old story. Hadn't the papers anything more interesting to get excited about? I thought resentfully, and I got back to Wanstead just as fast as ever I could.

“Here, at least, I'm safe!” I thought gratefully, as I opened the door. Mrs. Henty had given me a key, but she called to me as I went past the parlor.

I went in and found her with this morning's *Daily Picture* on the table before her.

“What a to-do about this 'ere wedding,” she began, and I felt like wilting away in my tracks. “Taken ill on her way to church, the bride was; fainted right away, they say she did. An' him a lord an' all! Don't it seem too bad? An' see this picture”—she showed me the all too familiar picture of myself.

“Yes,” I said, as casually as I could.

“Well, can't you see the likeness?”

“The likeness?” I echoed, swallowing hard.

“Yes; well, probably you wouldn't see it, but, my word, I do.”

“D-do you?”

“'Spechully about the lower 'alf of the face—there!” She covered up the top of my pictured face, just as I'd done it this morning. “That mouth and chin. If it ain't the spit!” And she looked at me, expecting me to see what she meant, and I saw, oh, yes, I saw! The

likeness around the mouth and chin seemed positively pronounced now, as I stood with my heart pounding fast and my face very hot.

"Y-yes. I suppose there—there *is* a likeness," I stammered.

"Why, it might be 'er," she cried.

"Her? *Who?*" I asked sharply.

"Why, my Minty! 'Sprised you can't see it. Just such another refined, superior-looking girl she is as this pore young thing in the photo."

"Why, of course!" I cried, weak with relief and past caring whether my agreement was strictly true and in accordance with my private opinion, or whether it wasn't.

"How stupid of me! But, of course, I've only seen the photograph of her, and that isn't the same as seeing her herself," I went on.

"Ah, I thought you'd see it when it was pointed out. Well, 'ow d'you get on?"

I told her of my interview with Mr. Josiah Kendrick.

"There, ain't that great! I knew if you was to mention Minty, you'd get took on," and she just beamed with pleasure.

I didn't tell her that Minty had had little or nothing to do with my success, or that it had taken Mr. Kendrick several minutes to recall her to his memory, and as we sat down to our kippery tea we discussed my plans, her plans, and the remarkable talents of her Minty with the greatest friendliness.

Next day I broached the subject of reconstruction with regard to my room, and found Mrs. Henty as good as her word. She'd said I could do what I liked to the room, *and she'd meant it.*

So behold me, enveloped in a huge apron, sleeves tucked

up, doing great deeds with a large brush, a pail of distemper, and a pair of steps.

The walls had, fortunately, been distempered before, but they were that billious yellow hue that house-painters call a "nice, bright stone." It may once have deserved both adjectives, now it deserved neither; it was simply and unaffectedly horrid. Still, I found that a pleasant grey "took" on the yellow ground most excellently, and with Mrs. Henty's occasional help and more than occasional advice, and by dint of working till I was ready to drop, I managed to get the walls done. And very nice they looked, too.

Friday and Saturday I spent in running up some bright chintz into curtains, and getting them, with their poles and rings, fixed at the window. This was an enormous improvement. When it came to getting a few "bits of sticks" for myself, my heart nearly broke and my bank account along with it! The price of things was simply appalling. I managed to buy an "arty" sort of bed, made of wood, broad and low and with curious curved ends, "after the Greek style" the man in the shop where I bought it assured me it was. He hazarded this from the fact that the bed had been built for an artist who had used it in a picture, for girls in flowing draperies to recline on. Anyway I got it, and it had quite a pretty effect and didn't look the least like a bed in the daytime, when it had a discreet covering of brown casement cloth and a few brilliant cushions thrown around. I got some matting for the floor, a rocking chair—cheap, because rocking chairs are not in fashion; this one must have been the original one that Mrs. Noah rocked the baby animals to sleep in—and two very gay little rugs, all bright reds and blues and blacks, called, as a mere matter of form, Turkish.

I worked like a black, in the way one does work when one is trying to "down" memories. I had to forget that I had ever been on the stage, that I'd ever made any sort of a success, that I'd been petted by crowds of people who were only out to give me a good time; and I had to forget that success had been well within my grasp, because if I didn't forget that, I could never reconcile myself to the sort of unexciting life that I'd just started on. Above all, I had to forget that I'd hurt a dear friend and a dear man; the tone of her voice as she told me how that man cared; and the look in his eyes as he told me the same thing himself. Oh, I'd a heap to forget, so I worked away at my room, telling myself that all my glorious prospects were to be cut out from now on. I must start afresh and plod away at my new job, and—hope for the best.

So, you see, I'd been right in those far-off Little Upington days, when I'd reckoned on a secretaryship as the very highest I could attain to.

"And you'll be lucky if you're ever anything more than a clerk," I told myself.

What with one thing and the other, as Mrs. Henty would say, my week and a half just skimmed by, and almost before I realized, "Monday week" was here, and I was starting forth upon my first day of my new job.

The first few days were just as awful as the first few days in any new job always are and always must be. You feel such a silly sort of outsider. Every other girl in the place seems at home there and cleverer than you, and you think, in despair, that never, never, never will you be able to adopt that air of easy familiarity with your surroundings that they have; never will it seem natural to you to come slamming into those swing doors every morning and out again every evening, never will you

cease to be awed cold by the mere mention of "the boss."

And yet in a week's time the atmosphere seems just as much yours to breathe as anybody else's, you slam the doors as merrily as the next one, and you sometimes refer to that terrifying great one, the boss, as "old something or other." In this case it was "Candy," a corruption of Kendrick, and because, as one girl explained to me, he was so singularly sweet tempered—she *didn't* think.

In spite of that unpromising tag, I didn't find him such a bad one to deal with, a bit strict and inclined to slave-drive in a wild, hectoring sort of way, but when you got used to it and learned the dodge of steering clear of the danger spots in his temper, you managed all right.

In three or four weeks' time things were going swimmingly. I worked very hard and carefully, and soon found my "pace," both in typewriting and shorthand, coming back to me, so that presently I was quite a proficient clerk. In fact, I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I soon realized, by the fact that Mr. Kendrick gave me so much work that needed especial accuracy, that he looked upon me as one of his good investments.

At first I was awfully bucked about this; one likes to do things well, somehow, whatever the things may happen to be, so it seemed to me that I'd struck lucky, and for three or four weeks I moved between Wanstead and the office, the office and Wanstead, like a well-regulated pendulum that wouldn't have dreamed of wanting anything that wasn't strictly in order.

I really began to settle down in good earnest.

That adventurous person, Judy Grey, was safely buried in the limbo of the past—whatever a limbo may be—and that sedate, entirely well-behaved young thing, Jane

Graham, had resolutely and definitely taken her place. I handed myself daily bouquets for my smartness in having hidden myself so securely away from all my old life and its associations. My "old life!" How absurd that sounds! Simple, ordinary, everyday me, having an "old life," as if I were the heroine of a problem drama and had just got to the great moment in the third act!

But—and now begins the great grouse—at the end of six weeks, or perhaps two months, my work had become so much a matter of routine that, really, it cost me no more thought; at least, no more thought that was in any way interesting. The newness was off the whole thing now, and one or two stark facts of the situation began to stick through. One was that there wasn't one girl among the crowd at the Stanmore offices of whom I could make a real, close pal. They were interesting, amusing and ever so varied in type, but somehow I didn't find one that I could get beyond superficiais with; not one that I could picture myself going in for a real good "heart to heart" with.

And one does long to get it all off to someone, sometimes, doesn't one? You know what I mean by "it"—all those little things you think and say and feel and plan to do, and discuss with some friendly person, if there is one handy; not necessarily things of any very impressive importance, but things that, if you have to keep them all to yourself, get sort of heaped up in your brain and become a real burden to you. And then, being a careful worker, about which I'd been so bucked, carried, I was soon to find, its own, peculiar penalty. It made Mr. Kendrick give me all the stuffiest kind of things to do; balance sheets, company reports, contractors' estimates; things that are too dull for any description, and *yet that cannot be dashed at; they have to be deadly*

precise and neat. In fact they are simply sheer, unadulterated grind, and I seemed to get miles and miles and miles of them to do.

Days of grind are all very well if there's someone congenial waiting to welcome you at the end of them. Someone you can talk to and laugh with and get refreshed by, but who did I have? Mrs. Henty! A good, dear, motherly soul, and a brick to me always, but not . . . oh, well, you know what I mean. I *talked*, of course; that is to say, I used my tongue, but you can do a lot of that without every *saying* anything, can't you? And that's what I seemed to be doing all the time. The only real talks I ever had were with myself, and one does get so deadly sick of one's own conversation after a few weeks of nothing else.

"You ain't lookin' over bright," said Mrs. Henty to me one evening, as she was cooking the kippers for tea. . . .

"Oh, I'm all right," I replied, trying to make the words sound sincere.

"You don't never seem to go out anywheres; I always thinks it does a body good to get out and about a bit."

"There doesn't seem anywhere particular to go," I said. "And the weather isn't at its best just now, is it?"

"Oh, I goes up to London and has a look around the shops sometimes. Up west, you know, where you can see the fashions and so on. And Henty and me we goes to the pictures when he feels up to it. Pore fellar, he don't often feel up to much; gassed, he was, you know. And the effects is cruel lasting."

"It's dreadful. I think you're wonderful; the way you get on with things and . . . and go on . . . getting on with them, if you know what I mean." I laughed slightly at a loss to know just how to express my meaning.

"Keep on keepin' on—that's the matter for us, my

dear. But what I was goin' to say is, you oughter get out a bit more. 'Ave a bit of pleasure while you're young; it don't last so almighty long, all said and done. Ain't you got a boy?"

I shook my head.

"No," I said.

"Well, there; a nice-looking girl like you, too. Don't that seem odd, now. But ain't you ever kep' company?"

I hesitated. "Kep' company!" Lord Henry Penryth! The phrase seemed ridiculously incongruous. And yet, what a good expression it was after all, and what a sensible plan too. "Walking out," "keeping company," "getting engaged"; three stages of courtship . . . well, at least the first two gave you a chance of getting to know the man, and, incidentally, your own mind. . . . If I'd walked out and kept company, I'd never have got engaged. I'd have had time to find out that I didn't care enough. . . . And I'd still be on the stage, and on the high-road to success. . . . And none of the tiresome disasters that had befallen my career would have happened. . . . I was silent so long that Mrs. Henty spoke again.

"I didn't mean no offense, I'm sure," she said.

I started.

"Oh, I was thinking, that's all. . . . I wasn't offended, truly; only thinking and . . . and remembering."

"Ah, then there 'as been a boy. . . . I'm sorry. . . . But never mind, Miss Graham, dear, there's as good fish in the sea as ever . . ."

"Oh, yes, I'm not unhappy at all . . ." I put in hastily.

"What 'appened? Was it another girl?" she asked with mingled curiosity and sympathy.

"No. . . . Oh, goodness, no . . . nothing of that sort. . . . *I just didn't want to get married, that's all.* At

least, I didn't want to marry that particular—er—boy. . . .”

“Well, it don't do to be in a 'urry. . . . The offers my Minty's 'ad and 'er only just turned nineteen, too, you'd never believe! But she ain't in a 'urry; so much so, that I always tells her, 'You'll get left, my girl, that's what,' I says. But it ain't just any boy as is good enough for my Minty. Was he in a good persition?”

“Yes . . . very. . . .”

“Good money?”

“Oh . . . yes . . . quite. . . . But money isn't every-thing, is it?”

“Not by long chalks and that's a fac'. Look at me an' Henty. Never a wry word betwixt us, these getting on for twenty years. It's the man as counts in the long run; not but what a tidy bit put by for a rainy day ain't very 'andy——”

“That's so, of course.”

“But all said an' done, it's the man that counts. You may lose your money—an' of course, you *may* lose your man . . . but I've generly noticed that the ones anybody 'ud be glad to lose is just the ones that's everlasting in the way. It's the good ones as get took.”

She sighed deeply, and then a curious expression came into her jolly, round face; an expression almost dreamily tender, and yet with its usual background of matter-of-factness—an altogether indescribable expression, and she said:

“If you can find a man as you'll be proud to give his meals and his children to, you're all right. These kippers is done to a turn.”

And the meals and the children and the kippers were all in one breath. And if it hadn't been for that curious look, that sort of shining look that lit up her plain face,

she might, from her mere tone, have been discussing whether it wasn't about time to have the chimneys swept.

I fled to my room with an odd, tight feeling in my throat and a stinging in my eyes. Romance and Mrs. Henty! Romance and that good-natured, matter-of-fact, hard-working, grinding woman! Plain, too, and far too fat. . . . And Henty . . . Whom I scarcely ever saw . . . thin, sallow, sandy-haired, with a comical "Old Bill" sort of moustache to match! Romance, and that couple! Yet it had lasted "this getting on for twenty years!" Some Romance!

When she came up bearing my modest tea on a tray, the shine was all gone from her face, she was just her ordinary self again, but her words stayed with me. And stayed with me and stayed with me! At all sorts of odd moments during the following days, they'd suddenly go ringing through my head. . . .

Romance! Precious little of it in my life! Why couldn't I have loved Harry? Didn't it seem sheer perverseness of destiny, to offer me romance accompanied by every worldly comfort, and then to make it fail in the most essential thing of all? To show me the gracious figure of romance; to let it come to me, hands bountifully laden, and then to make me rub my dazzled eyes and find that after all it wasn't *my* romance at all. His, perhaps, but not mine. Poor Harry!

Oh, for that dream-home of mine. With its lawns and fragrant borders, its neatness and sweetness and sense of peace. With brothers to tease and sisters to pet and a father to wheedle. And a mother with gentle eyes, wise lips and a kind breast to cry on.

If romance, with a big R, didn't come my way, it certainly was all around me. I hadn't noticed it particularly before, but now other people's romances seemed

to be thrust upon my notice. The girls at the office all seemed to have their "boys," and they were always discussing jaunts that were going to happen, or that had happened or that might happen.

One girl left to get married, and there was a whip round for a present for her; and she showed us the patterns of stuffs for her wedding-dress and her trousseau things, and how many she was having of each, and all that sort of thing. She hadn't been able to find a house, but they were going to start in rooms and "chance it."

"Well, my dear, what's the good of waiting for the houses that don't get built?" she observed. "You're only young once, and what's the good of letting time get on till you're old; that's what I say."

And that evening I looked long and earnestly in my mirror. Was time getting on with me? After all, I'm twenty-one. . . . And at that I shook myself and laughed aloud. . . . Goodness! what a Methuselah, with a face as lineless as a babe's!

Another girl got engaged, and another was at that disquieting point in her romance when she might get engaged at any moment, and made no bones about letting everyone know that she'd be engaged if the particular man in question gave her half a chance; she openly confessed to being crazy about him. She always seemed to be getting interesting 'phone messages, and no one could help hearing her cheery replies; they usually went something like this:

"The Coliseum? Won't I just! I adore the Russian dancers! Where shall I meet you? Call for me? Right-oh! I'll be ready at seven! *Will* I be ready? Course I will! What? Well, I like your cheek! Good-by!"

One girl arrived in a huge state of excitement, because

she was going to two dances in one evening. There was a regular buzz about it.

"Who you going with?"

"Oh, Gerald, of course. Him and me've danced together all the season."

"Anything in it?"

"What, Gerald and me?"

"Oh, no!" very sarcastically. "You an' Gerald, of course."

A general laugh.

"Ask no questions and you'll be told . . ."

"Stuck-up cat! What you going to wear, anyway?"

"What ho! . . ." very mysteriously.

"No, come on; tell us."

"Pink crêpe, dearie, with silver fringe and forget-me-nots. . . ."

"Sweet, my dear. Won't you have a time?"

"Trust this baby!"

"Two dances in one evening! Some gets all the luck!"

And then a whole chorus of laughs, and sighs of envy, and I joined in that chorus, too. Not that I particularly wanted to go to two dances in one evening, but . . . Oh, well, I never did anything, *any* evening. . . .

Wanstead—office; office—Wanstead. Tick-tock; tock-tick. . . .

Goodness! how monotonous it all became!

I'd never been particularly sentimental before; about love and all those things, I mean. Of course I had my ideals and my hazy sort of hero, who was to come along some day, some far distant day, and oh, all the sort of dreams and hopes that all girls know, but I'd never been in any sort of hurry for my hero to come along. I'd been fairly busy since I was grown-up, and never had been the slightest morbid—^vtoo jolly healthy, I suppose.

But now, I began to feel that if that hero of mine didn't buck up and come along soon and rescue me, there'd be precious little of me left to rescue. I'd just wither away in cold despair.

And that nice little dream-house of mine suddenly developed a dream-gate; a dear, little gate, simply made for a dream-girl to wait at. And sitting, staring into the fire, I'd see that girl waiting by that gate, looking up along the straight white road that led right away to the rim of the world, right into the blaze of the setting sun. And sheer out of the heart of the sunset, a dream man would presently come riding. . . .

He rode in such a blur of happy radiance that she could never see his face, but he was making straight down that road—to her. . . .

And she knew that this was real romance; her romance, his romance, their romance. . . .

Here was the man she could be proud to give . . .

Oh, Mrs. Henty, bother you! Why did you ever say it? And the dreams were scattered by a shaky little laugh. . . .

And what's the matter with me, anyway?

CHAPTER XII

I'M LONELY; that's what it is; just utterly, starkly, unrelievedly lonely.

It was the mashed potatoes that brought it home to me. That doesn't sound sense, but it's true, nevertheless. And things often happen that way, now that I think of it. We've most of us got camels' backs, when it comes to the last straw, and the mashed potatoes were the last straw. Liqueurs and metaphors shouldn't be mixed, I know, but oh, dear, good-tempered, kind-hearted, willing Mrs. Henty, I hope some day that you will find someone to forgive you for those mashed potatoes, because I don't feel that I ever can.

I had borne everything else without noticing how threadbare my nerves were getting. The discomforts of my makeshift home were many and varied. Winter brought draughts that I simply couldn't get rid of. I'd sit bang over the fire, wrapped up as if for a polar expedition, and freeze on one side and scorch on the other. When a week of rain brought the damp through my ceiling, I had visions of having to hoist my umbrella as well.

Then it became plain to me that, with regard to breakfast and tea, Mrs. Henty's mind began with kippers, went on with kippers and ended with kippers, except when it did a rash leap, as a stupendous treat, to sprats.

I woke in the morning to a gas attack of cooking kip-

per, and returned in the evening to be anæsthetized by frizzling sprats. . . . But I bore this. I also bore my every Saturday's midday meal of fried chop, smothered, as nothing since Desdemona ever has been smothered, in a made-up gravy composed of paste, heavily disguised in Worcester sauce. That Worcester sauce! Hrs. Henty told me, beamingly, that she "swore by Worcester sauce," and I nearly bit my tongue off trying not to retort that I swore *at* it. All this I bore with calmness and fortitude.

But when it came to those mashed potatoes, watery, not enough cooked, soaked, soggy, and dotted with greyish, semi-translucent lumps that simply stuck in your gizzard; when it came to having to eat those lumps time after time; when it came to there never *not* being lumps . . . Well, that finished me.

I rose from my lunch one Saturday with tears streaming down my face, saying weakly:

"I can't stick it . . . I just can't. . . . I'm wretched, and uncomfortable, and just utterly and absolutely lonely!"

And that was the first time I'd ever put a name to it, so you see, it was the mashed potatoes that did it. When you discover a name for a thing, it sometimes sort of settles it. I just sank into loneliness, sheer, dreary, drab loneliness, as if there was no further hope for me. I got caked in it, caked to the very eyes. No need even to wonder why I didn't feel the least inclined to skip like the little lambkins for joy in living; I knew; I was lonely. And there's no cure for loneliness if you get no chance of seeing other people. . . . Ergo, there was no chance for me. Any spirit of adventure that may have existed in Julia Grey was weighed down beneath the sense of hopelessness that filled poor Jane Graham. Poor Jane!

Office—Wanstead; Wanstead—office, that was the burden of her song of life.

Yes, and what a merry, exciting little jig it all of a sudden became!

Especially the office theme! For one afternoon, one cold crisp afternoon about five o'clock, who should come into the office but—my guardian. My guardian! My goodness! When I saw his good-looking profile through the glass entrance door I felt my face go hot and my jaw drop; most unbecoming, but it did, really.

And what do you think my first crazy impulse was? Why, to jump up and go to him and shake his hand, or fling my arms round his neck—I can't guarantee that it wasn't that—and say:

“Mr. Guardian Penticott, take me away, take me far away, and don't let me ever come back!” But I didn't, of course. All that fine impulse dwindled down to nothing, and I just sat and stared. And stared, and stared. Luckily for me, all the other girls were staring, too!—my guardian certainly was a good-looker—so there was nothing outstandingly conspicuous in my performance.

He had to go bang through the office where we all worked in order to get to Mr. Kendrick's room, and as he evidently knew his way about here, he went straight ahead without turning to the right or to the left. Which was another bit of luck for me, because there I was for him to see, if he happened to look. He disappeared into Mr. Kendrick's room, and I was still staring, open-mouthed after him.

A growing chorus of whispering and giggles brought me back to the present, and I became conscious that the girls were making fun of something, and looked round puzzled to discover what. I soon did.

“Struck all of a heap, wasn’t she?” said one, in a whisper.

“Well, dear, he’s some boy, isn’t he?” said another.

“Never know which I like best—young Mr. Penticott, or Wallace Reid on the pictures . . .” said a third.

“*She* knows,” laughed the first one again. “Young Reid wouldn’t have a look in with her . . . judging by the seraphic ’spression of her. . . .”

“Bit of an oodle-oodle, isn’t he, dearie?”

This question was directed straight at me.

“What on earth are you . . . t-talking about?” I demanded, endeavoring to speak naturally.

“Mr. P-Penticott, my innocent sweet one,” came the reply, with an imitation of my inadvertent stutter.

“Don’t talk rot!” I retorted. But they kept it up with whispers and looks and smothered laughs and nudges, until I felt inclined to shriek. I just wanted to get up and say:

“If you really want to know—he’s my guardian!”

And I’m not at all sure that I mightn’t have actually done it, if Mr. Kendrick hadn’t come out of his room carrying a sheaf of papers.

Instantly every girl in the office was intent on her work.

He came to me, saying:

“Here, Miss Graham, get these letters done at the double, and in your best style. Penticott and Penticott, you know; very important clients.”

He lowered his voice for this last bit of information; he had a way of taking us into his confidence like this, which, somehow, made the girls do their best.

But that I should have been chosen!

When my hands were shaking with nervousness, and my head spinning with excitement!

However, nothing to do but to take the letters and set to.

Penticott and Penticott, solicitors!

Goodness! Did I need telling! But how the name danced on the page before me, so that I almost spelt it wrong!

And, horror piled upon horror, should I have to take the letters in to Mr. Kendrick when I'd finished them?

Or would he, by some kindly miracle, happen to come for them himself?

I clicked away, these awful questions ripping through my brain, and had finished them and was putting them together, thinking, with my heart in my boots, that I would have to go, when Mr. Kendrick appeared, and I went limp with relief.

"Finished them, Miss Graham?" he asked, a bit sharply. I suppose I had been a fair time over them, but he didn't know what I was going through.

"Yes, Mr. Kendrick," I replied—gave them to him—and he took them back into his office.

A moment later Nickolas Penticott reappeared, and I didn't have any mad impulses this time; I'd come to my senses since his first entrance, and only prayed now that he wouldn't see me.

He didn't; he didn't look my way; I was watching him, although I was bent low over my machine, intently examining its innerds. Anyway, he'd only have seen the top of my new red head, which wouldn't have been much of a give-away.

He went straight out, jamming on his soft hat as he went, and with his going the tension in me snapped; something in my brain seemed suddenly to give way and I nearly burst out laughing. Believe I would have done so, too, if I hadn't been so dreadfully near to crying.

Why couldn't he have been the sort of guardian he might have been? A guardian I could go to with all my troubles? I could have gone to him about Harry then, and he could have seen me through it, so that all this needn't have happened. Even now, if he'd been that kind of guardian, I really could have followed my impulse and gone to him, and begged him to get me out of all this rotten dullness, if it were only to the extent of a jolly little lunch or dinner and theatre . . . or some other quite ordinary little treat.

I was so sick of hearing the girls talking of *their* treats and having none myself. I was so sick of the dull work of this dingy office, of the kipper breakfasts and sprat teas, of the daily journey to and fro, of the penny-careful way I had to live, of the lack of some stimulating brain to sharpen my own against, of the . . . Oh, of the everything and everything and everything!

For a second the office spun round me, and the great rebellion against the narrowness and loneliness of it all started throbbing and tumbling and pounding through and through me.

Jane Graham had to take a back seat while Judy Grey came out of the past and stormed and ranted and fairly swopped up the centre of the stage. There was no denying her. She'd got to do her little bit, and she did it, and she never stopped doing it, either, and she and Jane Graham were scrapping all the way home.

"You must be careful and circumspect and do nothing rash," said Jane.

"Careful and circumspect be bothered!" said Judy. "If something doesn't happen soon to break the dull monotony of it all I'll go sheer, stark, staring mad! I'll tell 'em all who I am, or something—anything to create some sort of sensation!"

And all night long I could hardly sleep. There does come a time when you simply want to open your mouth and yell, doesn't there? Well, it had come to me. I was fed up, and it didn't seem fair, and I didn't see how I was to stick it.

The sight of my guardian and the thought of the lovely little jaunts he could plan for me, if he'd been the sort of guardian one could have confided in, made my present loneliness rise up all round me as if it would crush me.

Naturally, I raged and stormed against it.

"Say, kid," said one of the girls to me next morning, "have you swallowed a rocket? You look as if you might go all up in the air any minute!"

And I felt like going, then and there.

* * * * *

I'd prayed for "something to happen," hadn't I? Well, it happened! Oh, it happened all right, like a bolt from the blue, and that very day, too!

Mr. Kendrick called me into the office, just about eleven o'clock, and said:

"I've just had an urgent call over the 'phone for a typist. I want you to go, as it's important work and requires care."

"Yes, Mr. Kendrick," I said, and awaited further orders.

"Their typist has failed them, and it's up to you to make good as a substitute. See?"

"Yes, Mr. Kendrick," I said again.

"Mind you, it's particularly important, and I don't want you to go letting me down."

"No, Mr. Kendrick."

"Well, go at once then; quick as you can make it. Here's the address. Tell 'em where you come from, and

take the 'Corona' with you in case they use a machine you don't know."

I took the letter-heading he handed me and looked down at it.

If I had swallowed a rocket I'd have sworn that it went off at that moment, for I was "all up in the air," I tell you. The room simply buzzed and whirled, and sparks and stars were going off in showers around me—so it seemed—but presently they stopped and things began to settle down and get steady round me, and I found that all I'd been doing actually was looking down aghast at that letter-heading. And I was still doing it as if hypnotized by what I read, which was this:

"Penticott and Penticott, Solicitors, 60 East Temple Chambers," and beneath that decorous engraving a scribble in Mr. Kendrick's writing: "Ask for Mr. Nickolas Penticott."

Oh, something was happening all right! Well, I'd asked for it, hadn't I? But, gracious, I hadn't meant this! What on this earth should I do?

Should I go on strike, defy my employer, and flatly refuse to take the job on?

Or should I put on my hat and coat and make a wild dash for it?

Disappear again?

Or—well, or what?

But through this wild tangle of absurdly-fantastic alternatives some part of my brain was evidently keeping quite cool, for I heard, as if it didn't belong to me, my own voice saying calmly:

"Very well, Mr. Kendrick."

And still, to all outward appearances, quite cool, I turned and left him. But if I appeared cool I didn't feel it, believe me. I was bang in the middle of one of

the biggest panics of my life. I got on my things, packed my dinky little "Corona" typewriter, and started off, feeling that if I didn't start I'd make some sort of a scene in the office—lose my nerve or something. As I walked through the crowded street my brain was working sixteen to the dozen, but in a wild, crazy sort of way.

My guardian of all people! And I'd got to go and type his wretched letters for him! What should I say?

How should I explain?

Should I ever, ever be able to arouse enough sympathy in him to make him understand why I fled from my wedding with Lord Henry? Especially as I'd made a fool of him, too, by being so insistent that he should give me away, and letting him turn up all dressed up and no bride to give away, after all.

Goodness, what explanations to have to make to a man when you were proposing to be his secretary for a day! And I'd thought myself so safe! Could any scrape that I could ever have imagined equal this one for downright awkwardness? What would he say when he saw me? The run-away bride!

I'd reached the entrance to his chambers, had read his name on the plate, and had just made up my mind that I couldn't—I couldn't—I must turn tail and run for it—when suddenly my own pet spirit of adventure popped up its head and started my heart beating a beat or so quicker, and through the racket in my pulses I heard it hurry me on with words that came into my brain something like this:

"Go on with it! No matter what happens, or what he says! Go right on with it! It's a change! It's a break! It's an adventure! It's something even more; it's a chance . . . a chance you may never get again; so waltz in and take it, and trust to luck."

I forgot that I was angry with my guardian for not being the kind of guardian I thought he ought to be; in fact, I forgot that he wasn't that kind! I only remembered that here was an adventure. After weeks and months of appalling, soul-destroying dullness, here was the gleam of excitement.

So—in I waltzed.

A few moments later a small boy in buttons was showing me into the presence of Mr. Nickolas Penticott.

Now, you know, if I live to be a hundred, and if I spend from now to then trying, I'll never be able to give you a real adequate idea of what I felt when I went into that office and, standing just inside the door, stared across the room at Nickolas Penticott, and found, what was ten thousand times worse, that Nickolas Penticott, seated before his desk, was staring across the room at me!

And I'll never forget it, either!

It seemed as if that room was the longest room in the whole wide world, and everything in it graded down in lines of perspective to that brown-haired, grey-eyed man at the other end of it, who just sat and looked at me as if he'd nothing else to do in all creation.

It was all very well to be full of courage and beans, and to put on a devil-may-care air while I was still on the other, the outside, of the office door; but quite another to be this side, face to face with discovery and the necessity for explanations. Then it became a really palpitating moment, and I wasn't quite so cock-a-hoop. I felt my heart beginning to go it at the double, and my knees had that silly feeling of not being quite sure what their job was.

When I saw him open his mouth to speak I just shut my eyes, gritted my teeth, clenched my hands, and said to myself, "Now for it!"

From what seemed like at least a mile distant came my guardian's voice, and his first words were:

"Good morning!"—very pleasantly spoken.

I drew in such a gasp of surprise that I think I must have absorbed half the atmosphere of the room, opened my eyes once more, and emitted a sigh of relief.

"Good-morning!" I replied, as steadily as I could.

And with the snapping of the tension that room seemed suddenly to telescope down to an ordinary-sized office, the floor felt real and solid beneath my feet, and looking once more full at Mr. Nickolas Penticott, I saw that in his wide-set, grey eyes there wasn't the ghost of a shadow of recognition!

The truth came through to me like a flash of light.

My guardian, my one and only guardian, didn't know me! Could it be true? Could it?

Feeling dizzy and relieved and bewildered and surprised, and a lot of other mixed up things besides, I ventured nearer to the desk.

"You are Miss——" he said, putting it as a question.

"Graham," I replied, supplying the name with praiseworthy self-possession.

"From Mr. Kendrick," I added.

"Quite so," said my guardian. "Was it you who did some letters for me yesterday afternoon, when I came to your office?"

"Yes."

"Good. I asked specially for you—whoever you might be." He looked up, smiling nicely. "I was delighted with the way you did the letters. They are so clean and clear—really quite excellent."

"I'm glad to have satisfied you," I murmured.

"My secretary was taken ill very suddenly yesterday afternoon, and had to go home, so I'm rather landed."

"Exactly!" I said, because he seemed to pause for me to say something.

His manner was most awfully nice; he must have seen that I was nervous about something—if only he could have guessed what!—when I came in, and he seemed to be doing his best to put me at ease.

"I'll do my best," I said suddenly.

He looked up quickly.

"Thank you. Er—yes; I feel sure you will!" he said courteously.

Was there ever such a situation?

Such a ridiculous, crazy, upside-down sort of situation! All this time I'd been standing quite near him, and yet he didn't know me! Didn't know me from Adam—I mean the real me. He, my guardian, took me, his ward, to be his legal, paid secretary, for one day, at least, without having the remotest suspicion of who I really was!

"Naturally," he said, "I shall keep your work as simple as possible, seeing that you are to be here so very temporarily."

"The less you have to teach me, the greater value my day's work will be to you, of course," I replied.

"Yes, that's what I mean. We'll keep to ordinary letters and things of that sort. There's enough of 'em, anyway—Jove, how the stuff does accumulate!"

He looked round his huge desk rather distractedly, where two big bunches of letters were piled.

"Last night's—this morning's," he said briefly, indicating first one, and then the other, heap. "We'd better tackle them in their order. But wait just a moment."

He pressed a bell on his desk and in response a door was opened in the shinily-varnished partition that divided his office from the outer one, and a young man, whose pale, wise-looking face suggested lumps of dough put

haphazard together, thrust his head and shoulders into the office.

“Yes, sir?”

“Oh, Lester, this is Miss Graham, who has come to take Miss Selwyn’s place for to-day. Do what you can to help her and put her wise, will you?”

The doughy one said he would, and beckoned me with a jerk of the head.

I followed him into the outer office, and he introduced me to the table, the typewriter, the pen, pencil, and eraser, as well as the note-books and divers other effects of the lamented Miss Selwyn.

Then he proceeded to point out to me various books, ponderous-looking volumes, on different aspects of our venerable law questions, which might be wanted, and at the same time he coached me as to some of the peculiarities of my employer. It all seemed so absurd, so dream-like, that I’m afraid I didn’t pay quite all the attention that my grave, pasty-faced colleague seemed to expect.

Mr. Penticott liked this or that; Mr. Penticott wanted things done so, and not so; Mr. Penticott generally saw his clients privately, and only called his secretary should he happen to want her.

And should a client be announced at a moment when she was engaged in Mr. Penticott’s office, Mr. Penticott would almost certainly expect her to leave him, unless he definitely said anything to the contrary. Mr. Penticott— Goodness! How that man seemed to love that name! I nearly shouted out:

“Shut up, for any sake! Why, he’s my guardian!”

But I didn’t, and the stream of instructions flowed merrily on.

I took off my hat and coat and began hanging them on the peg behind the door.

Mr. Lester was well into the question of deed boxes, their habits and customs; but I wasn't listening, I was thinking and wondering. I was thinking furiously, and wondering just how it had happened that Nickolas Penticott hadn't instantly recognized and claimed me as his ward. And that put the wilting thought into my head that perhaps he had, and was just biding his time; or perhaps he wasn't quite positive, and was just waiting to make sure.

If that were so, I'd be on pins all day. Oh, to be at the other end of this day, with it all over and done with one way or the other! Surely he must know me!

My red hair couldn't have changed me to that extent. Besides, very little of my new red hair showed beneath my close-fitting velvet hat, but all my face did—and after all, he'd seen that before. . . .

But steady on, was it so all-fired marvellous, after all?

When I came to think of it, just exactly when had my guardian last seen me?

On the stage at His Highness' Theatre!

Of course!

In a rather heavy make-up, my eyes lengthened and blackened by art, my lips curved into a Cupid's bow that was certainly made and not born; my color heightened and my gold-brown hair curling in a tendrilly way all around my face.

And the time before? On the stage, too. At the famous performance of the Little Uppington Dramatic Society! And, of course, I was made up on that occasion, too.

And before that? Why, goodness, not since that awful tea-party when he came down to Little Uppington to say good-by—September, 1914!

Naturally, I must be enormously changed, for it's just

the years between flapperdom and twenty that change you most, isn't it?

For instance, my nose didn't know what a bridge was in those days, and it has a most imposing silhouette now; and my face was merely round and pink, and more or less without form or void five years ago. And now—well, I'd worked on the land since then; I'd used my hands and my brain, and I'd got tanned and hardened and generally honed to keener edges.

Oh, yes, I was a very different person now! Whereas Nickolas Penticott was already a man five years ago, so naturally he hadn't changed nearly as much.

Wasn't it all too utterly mad?

And how was I ever, ever, *ever* going to get through the day without giving myself away?

But I shook myself impatiently at that thought.

Goodness! Wasn't I a promising young actress?

Hadn't the Press, the great and mighty Press, given me permission to call myself talented? Certainly it had!

Hadn't the theatre rung with the plaudits of the "vast and glittering throng" when I'd done my little bit?

Again, certainly it had!

Well then, was I going to cave in at the idea of a trifling little job of this sort? No! Couldn't I pass a simple little test of my histrionic abilities such as this would be without making the fool of creation of myself? Yes! And, likewise, 'course I could!

Besides, hadn't he said that I couldn't act and never would be able to? And didn't I distinctly "owe him one" for that?

And at that point I gave vent to a little excited giggle, and pobby-faced Mr. Lester looked at me in pained surprise, and I suddenly realized that I'd been thinking all this in the few seconds that I stood by the door hanging

up my hat and coat and patting my sunsetty hair into demure and Janelike order.

The bell rang at that moment, two little trills, and Lester whispered, with the air of one who is simply weighed down with matters of more than national importance:

“That means you!”

I “collected myself,” as the phrase has it, and marched towards the dividing door.

“After all,” I consoled myself, “even if he should tumble to who you are, he can’t eat you!”

And in I went.

We began on the piles of letters, last evening’s first. I sat beside the desk and opened the envelopes one by one. If he held out his hand, I gave him the letter; if he said “Read it,” I read it. And then he’d tell me what to do with it. The majority of them were quite easily answered and I made shorthand notes as to their answers, as we went; but some were set aside, to be attended to later.

One made me pull up with a start. As soon as I opened it out, I recognized the writing—Geraldine Maidstone’s.

“Who’s it from? asked my guardian.

I started.

“From Miss . . . that is . . . it’s signed Gerry,” I replied.

His thoughts were on business evidently, for he said absently.

“What does she say?”

This was most awkward. I’d not been able to help seeing the beginning, which was, “Nicko, dear.” I certainly wasn’t keen to read that out aloud, and goodness only knows what the rest might be!

“Oh, of course, that’s probably personal,” he said

hastily, and held out a quick hand. I gave him the embarrassing document, and he laid it aside, his face a little hot.

"I'll see to that one myself," he said, and we continued as before.

Romance again, I thought. What an awful lot there is of it knocking around. But Geraldine Maidstone and my guardian . . . ? Now that I was here with him, and he was really being very nice to me and was turning into quite a human human-being, did I quite approve of this one? Quite a short while ago, I was bitterly reproaching my guardian, in my thoughts, for not being the kind of guardian he might have been. But now, I wasn't at all prepared to admit that Geraldine Maidstone was good enough for him. After all, he was my guardian. The only human belonging I possessed in the world.

And Geraldine had really been rather absurd. Her jealousy had been quite ridiculous. The way she had questioned me about him, and tried to pump me. Really, it almost amounted to spying on him, which is horrid. But then, jealous people are apt to be horrid where the object of their jealousy is concerned; they seem capable of descending to almost any depths. . . .

Nickolas Penticott's voice brought me back.

"Take these answers, please," he said.

And for nearly an hour he was dictating. Huge long letters some of them were, too; but, absolutely, I had to admire the way that man handed it out. Such polished sentences and rounded phrases; I've never seen anyone get over the job as he did. Sitting all the time with his legs thrust out, hands in his pockets, chin down in his collar and his eyes tight shut!

When the letters were done, he straightened up and said:

“Read them over, please.”

“Aloud?” I asked.

He nodded, and I did as he’d told me, and he listened attentively.

When I’d finished, I looked up to find that his eyes were fixed on my face.

I was so startled, because in the interest of my work I’d forgotten almost all those other disturbing questions, and my guilty conscience bringing them all back to me with a rush, I was idiot enough to blush.

I felt my face grow hot, and knew that I was looking startled and disconcerted, and what I was thinking was:

“Now I’m in for it. It’s really coming this time! Here goes!”

But Nickolas Penticott didn’t say anything.

He just turned away quickly, looking a little disconcerted himself; a movement that was an apology in itself. His good-looking face had gone rather grave, and he sat looking out of the window quite silently a moment.

He certainly had got a good profile, there could be no question about that; in fact, he was a very good-looking man, in his way, even if it was a way I didn’t adore. Great Peter! What am I thinking about?

Sitting there studying his profile, when all the time I ought to be thinking of my work and getting along with it!

I gathered the letters quickly and laid them before him on his desk, and he turned round almost with a start and glanced through them.

“Yes, quite right, thank you. Will you take them and get them ready for the post, please?”

I took them again, and departed into the outer office, wondering what he had been thinking of.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN I was leaving round about half-past five that afternoon, Mr. Penticott said:

“If I can arrange it with Kendrick, would you be willing to come to me for the rest of the week, Miss Graham?”

“Why, yes, of course,” I replied, thinking it was jolly of him to put it that way, for, of course, my arrangement with the Stanmore Typewriter Office was that I was pretty well at the disposal of Mr. Kendrick, and, naturally, my guardian knew this, so it was very considerate of him to make it a personal matter with me before going to my employer.

“Good! Wait a minute; I’ll ring up Kendrick and arrange it now.”

Which he did, to everyone’s satisfaction.

“Miss Selwyn sent a message this afternoon, saying that the doctor has forbidden her to return to me before the beginning of next week,” he said by way of explanation.

“It is very tiresome for you,” I murmured sympathetically.

“Well, she has been with us a long time and knows the work thoroughly.”

“That must make such a difference to you.”

“But you’ve done splendidly to-day, Miss Graham. I’m—er—grateful to you.”

Simple words, simply, almost shyly, spoken, but as he said them I realized just what it was about him that made Mr. Lester speak of him with such awed devotion. There was that something in his manner that is known as the personal touch.

Some employers have it, others haven't. Nickolas Penticott was one of them who had.

It's something you can't explain, but it makes you feel, well, I'll do my best for this man or go pop!

When I got home that evening Mrs. Henty greeted me with a long stare, and then said:

"Anyone been an' left you a fortune?"

"No, why?" I asked, not "getting it."

"Well, you look that pleased with yourself, that's all."

I laughed and went up to my room. Happening to catch sight of my reflection in the mirror, I, too, stopped and stared. The change in me was almost incredible.

"You aren't lonely any more," I told my image by way of explanation. "And you won't be for the rest of the week, either."

And that was one of the best feelings I'd experienced for ages.

"And I'm bound to admit that it's my guardian who's done it," I went on as I prepared for tea. "He's a dear to work for, but what shall I do when this week's up and I have to go back to the old grind?"

The thought damped me for just about a second, then another took its place.

"Anyway, you've a week before you. Take what's given and be thankful."

And I was.

* * * * *

How I did enjoy that week! I began to feel quite my own self again. The work was interesting, and I

was treated as a living, breathing creature. Not as the merest cog in a huge machine, like one was at Kendrick's office. And Nickolas Penticott certainly wasn't the stodgy, dull young man I'd taken him for. Not knowing that I was his ward relieved him of that depressing sense of responsibility towards me, and we got on famously together; we sure did. I couldn't help seeing that he liked me, and I knew that I liked him all right; I simply couldn't help it, he was so awfully nice to me. I never *meant* to like my guardian.

The pasty-faced Lester used to go out every day for his lunch punctually at twelve o'clock, and used to be back again punctually at a quarter to one. He never would take more than three-quarters of an hour for lunch, and nothing in this world, I believe, could have ever made him anything but punctual to the very tick.

My guardian used to go at about one with Mr. Penticott senior, his uncle, and the present head of the show, who had his office across the landing. He didn't worry me, though, on the score of recognition and that sort of thing, because I'd never seen him; but I'd heard that he was an odd old chap, and he'd a reputation for saying unconventional and, at times, even quite outrageous things. I went about the same time and the solemn Lester was left in charge.

My third or fourth day there, when I was getting well into the work and beginning to feel quite at home, just as Lester had taken his blameless departure, the telephone bell rang and I lifted the receiver.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Is that Penticott and Penticott?" inquired a feminine voice.

Heavens! Geraldine Maidstone! What the dickens did she want?

"Yes," I replied.

"Mr. Nickolas Penticott there?"

"Senior or junior?" I inquired wickedly.

"Junior, of course," she answered, with a little laugh.

"I'll just find out if he's disengaged. Hold the line, please."

And I was on the point of getting on to the private office wire when she said suddenly:

"I say, don't I know your voice?"

"I'm Mr. Penticott, junior's, secretary," I said demurely.

"Miss Selwyn?" she replied, in a puzzled way. "But you don't sound a bit as usual."

"No; Miss Selwyn is not here to-day."

"Oh;" a pause, then: "Has Mr. Penticott engaged a new secretary?"

Oh, jealous Geraldine! Do you think I couldn't hear the anxiety beneath that careless, off-hand tone of yours? But I certainly wasn't there to discuss my employer's business with you or anyone else, so I said again: "Hold the line and I'll find out if he can speak to you."

But she wasn't having any. She'd scented a possible new rival, and she stopped me with:

"Here, wait a minute! Where have I heard your voice? This is Miss Maidstone speaking—Geraldine Maidstone. Do we happen to know each other?"

She was determined to find out who the strange secretary was, if she could.

"It is hardly likely, is it?" I replied, more coolly than I was actually feeling. And without waiting for more, I switched off to Mr. Nickolas Penticott's line.

"Miss Maidstone is on the 'phone, sir," I said, in my best secretarial manner. "Can you speak to her?"

"Oh—well, yes, put her through. And, Miss Graham,

bring your note-book and 'Test Cases,' vol. three, please."

I put Miss Maidstone through to him and rose to find the volume he wanted, found it, gathered note-book and pencil, and went to his office. I paused in the doorway, seeing that he was still engaged on the 'phone.

"Yes, come in, I'm just ready," he said to me in parenthesis, then into the 'phone:

"Very well, Wednesday evening, eight o'clock, thank you, and—what?"

A pause, while he listened; then:

"Yes, Miss Selwyn is away for a week; ill. What?"

Another pause.

Then he laughed.

"Scarcely likely, is it?"

So she was asking if I were anyone she'd met! Scarcely likely! Oh, Mr. Guardian, if you only knew! But he was speaking again.

"This afternoon? No, I'm afraid I couldn't see you here this afternoon; too busy. The matter isn't absolutely pressing, is it? I mean, you've got the first refusal of the house, and . . . What? You weren't referring to the house? Oh, I thought you were. . . ."

No, Mr. Nickolas Penticott, she was really referring to me. She wanted to come up and see this new secretary of yours. She wanted to see whether she were pretty or plain; nice or nasty; safe or—dangerous.

"So sorry, I absolutely haven't time. 'Bye, Gerry."

My guardian finished resolutely and put the telephone down, a touch, just the merest touch, of irritation in the action. The sort of irritation that is apt to happen at the end of a busy morning. Certainly, Geraldine had definitely made up her mind about him. Had he made up his about her? That was the question. Goodness, my dear Mr. Guardian, you're in for a life of it, if you

seriously think of going into double-harness with her! Did he think of it, though? I couldn't be sure. And did he realize that she was thinking of it? Men are such funny, blind things in these ways. Except, of course, the conceited ass type of man who thinks every woman is in love with him, and he is blind in the opposite direction. I wonder what he really did think of her? Still, it was no business of mine. I hadn't any interest in it. . . . Hadn't I, though? On thinking it over, I wasn't quite so sure.

Mr. Penticott was looking through that musty-looking volume I'd brought him, and I was thinking all this as I stood by waiting his instructions. He gave them, after a moment or two.

"Miss Graham, will you just take this book across to Mr. Penticott, senior, please, and say that I've marked the relevant passage and ask him to let me know if that is what he wanted? Thank you."

I did as he told me and went across with the book and knocked at Penticott senior's door and entered.

The old man was sitting at his desk writing, and I stood quite quietly beside him, waiting for him to be ready to see me.

He stopped writing after a moment and looked up.

The most extraordinary expression came into his face, mystified, incredulous and something sort of pathetic behind it. . . .

"Julia," he said, in a curious abrupt way, and half rose from his chair. I nearly dropped the book, and for a second looked round wildly, my impulse being to turn and run for it. . . . How did he know me? I'd never seen him before. . . . The last person in the world I thought would recognize me. . . . What should I do? What should I say? . . . Had the time come when I'd

got to 'fess up? But I didn't like the idea of being sort of caught out in this way. . . . There was something sneaky in it. . . . But what was I to do? I was on the point of speaking when Mr. Penticott sank back into his chair, passing a hand over his eyes as if he'd but just waked up, then he looked at me again and snapped out:

"And who the devil may you be?"

Then he didn't know me? . . . What was it all about?

"I'm Mr. Penticott junior's secretary," I stammered out.

"Well, you've changed in a remarkable manner since I saw you last," he said.

When *had* he seen me last? Never, as far as I knew. But this last remark was explained by his next words:

"Penticott junior's secretary last week was a tall, thin woman, with an extremely clever face," he said. "That's not a description of you, is it?"

"Not . . . not quite . . ." I agreed.

"An extremely clever face and an unconscionably plain one," he added. "And that's not a description of you either, is it?"

I didn't know what to say. He'd called me Julia and yet now he didn't seem to know me. He was talking as if we were the complete strangers I'd always thought we were. . . . Yet he'd called me Julia. . . . The two things didn't fit. . . .

"Well, what do you want? What have you come to disturb me for?" he asked testily.

"This book . . . from Mr. Penticott, junior. . . . With the relevant passage marked . . ." I managed to get out, and I laid the book on his desk, open, as my guardian had given it to me.

He ignored the book, gave me a quick look and said:

"How long have you been here?"

Challenged suddenly, I simply couldn't remember how long I had been there. If he'd asked me the date of my birthday, I couldn't have told him at that moment.

"About . . . about . . . Oh, just about . . ." I began, and feeling I was making a fool of myself, I rushed on:

"Miss Selwyn is ill; I'm only to be here till the end of the week."

"The end of the week? Why only till the end of the week?" he said in his odd, staccato way.

"Well, of course, Mr. Penticott, junior, hopes that Miss Selwyn will be back by then."

"Does he?" He shot the question at me, his face wrinkling up and his eyes gimletting right through me; then: "Oh, he does, does he?" and he turned to the book on the desk.

"Mr. Penticott, junior," I ventured, after a moment's silence, while he had been looking down at the open pages, "was anxious to know whether the passage he marked was what you wanted. Can I take him a message from you?"

"Yes, you can," he said crisply. "You can tell Penticott, junior, from me, not to be a damn young fool."

I stood stock still, staring. He looked up at me sharply.

"Did you hear?" he rasped out.

"Yes . . . oh, yes . . ." I stammered.

"Then go and tell him." He waved his parchmenty hands in a touchy sort of way, as if he were irritated by my presence, so I got out of his office as quick as I could.

"Word for word, mind," he called after me.

"Y-yes, sir," I replied dutifully, and I closed his door. But I had to wait on the landing for quite a minute before I could go in and face my guardian.

What had it all been about? My head was reeling.

If he knew I was Julia Grey, why hadn't he challenged me to own it? If he didn't—and after that first exclamation of his, it really seemed that he didn't—why had he called me Julia? The two things certainly did not fit. However, I could not stand out there all day, so I went in to Nickolas Penticott's office.

"Well?" he inquired. "Was it all right?"

I again didn't know what on earth to say. I'd been given instructions by my superior to deliver a certain message, and it wasn't mine to question why, mine merely to do or die—or both, for at that moment I really felt that I'd expire.

"I . . . really I don't quite know," I replied.

"Didn't he send any message?"

"Yes . . . in a sort of way . . . but . . ." I hesitated.

"What was it?"

"I hardly . . . If I give it . . . please remember that I am only repeating his words as he . . . told me to," I said hurriedly.

"This sounds very mysterious. . . . What's it all about?"

"He said, tell him from me not to be a . . . a . . ."

"Yes?"

"A d-damn young f-fool," I faltered to the finish.

My guardian stared, just as I had stared, looked puzzled, smiled slightly, and finally threw back his good-looking head and laughed; then:

"Was that all?"

"Yes."

"*A propos* of . . . ?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know."

He looked up at me, his lips quivering.

"Do smile, Miss Graham," he said.

"Oh, may I?" I said, much relieved that he took it that way.

"You certainly deserve to be allowed to for your sheer courage. . . ."

So I smiled, broadly, and then laughed, and he laughed with me.

And it was a relief, I can tell you, after the various disconcerting little things that had happened during the last twenty minutes.

"I haven't the remotest idea what he's driving at, but I'll get it out of him over lunch," he said, still a good deal amused.

Whether he did get it out of the old man or not, he didn't say anything to me about it; but after that there was a distinctly new air between us. He was tremendously more easy with me; took a sort of friendly attitude of having complete confidence in me, as if I really were his permanent confidential secretary and utterly to be relied upon, instead of an outsider who was just in for the week. Certainly, any of the first stiff formality between us that remained was definitely done in. By this, I don't mean that his manner was ever anything beyond the manner of an employer towards his secretary but you can't go in and call your boss a . . . well, any kind of a young fool, and laugh with him about it, and still feel that inhuman sense of distance with which you began your career; the thing's impossible.

The question as to whether Mr. Penticott, senior, really recognized me, and how on earth he could do so, nagged at me a good deal, but evidently he didn't intend to say anything to my guardian about it, for obviously if he had, Nickolas Penticott wouldn't have let the matter go by. Nothing happened, though. So I didn't know what to

make of it. And as the end of the week approached I was too choked up with thinking how wretched it was to have to leave here, just as I was so comfortable and happy and interested, to have room for any other feeling.

The dull old routine of Kendrick's office was a nightmare to me, now. I heard nothing about the return of Miss Selwyn though, until my last day but one, when I asked Mr. Penticott whether he'd heard how she was.

"She seems to be getting on splendidly," he told me.

My heart sank.

"I'm so glad," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Will she be back next week?"

He looked away as he replied:

"Yes . . . I suppose she will."

"That will be good . . . for you . . ." I said.

"Well . . . yes . . . I suppose it will." He seemed to have but few conversational ideas that afternoon. As for me, I was utterly depressed. I'd never have dreamed that I could have minded so much. I just dreaded leaving. Just absolutely and utterly dreaded it.

My last day was awful. I was depressed and tried not to show it, and something was the matter with my guardian too. He was awfully touchy. I didn't seem able to do a thing right. I suppose I was a bit stupid; I know I was miserable. Three times he handed back letters to me, finding fault each time.

"I say, surely I didn't say that the 'best policy would be to completely ignore . . .' etc, etc. That's a split infinitive . . . looks rotten."

He had said it, but I didn't tell him so. Neither did I remind him that he wasn't usually so deadly particular, but the merest comma out of place to-day brought down his wrath in bucketfulls upon my poor red head.

He actually said, at one hectic moment:

"Really, Miss Graham, I'd be so much obliged if you would pay better attention to what I say . . ."

Goodness, what a wretched day it was! I jolly nearly said:

"Well, you'll have your dear Miss Selwyn back on Monday, then perhaps you'll be satisfied." But I didn't. I was too miserable to have sufficient spirit.

We'd just got to this point when Miss Selwyn herself rang up, and my guardian took up the 'phone.

"Yes? Miss Selwyn? Oh, yes. . . . How are you, Miss Selwyn? Better? That's good."

Now as he said all that, he was frowning and looking as cross as the proverbial bear with a sore head. But as he listened, the crossness lifted slowly, slowly, like light coming from behind clouds, until, actually, he was very nearly smiling.

Ugh! I thought, that means she's coming back on Monday . . . and I'm back at Kendrick's. . . . But he needn't look so almighty bucked about it. I've done fairly well . . . and the work isn't easy, and . . . But there I pulled up sharp, for he was saying in an eager sort of way:

"No, no! Don't you consider me. I'm getting along famously. You just go right ahead and get married. . . . Impatient? Of course he is. . . . When? Next week? Quick work, but I'll be in time with the silver toast-rack." He laughed! The first laugh I'd heard from him that day! What was happening? My heart beat quickly with hope and anxiety. . . .

"Yes, I'll tell Mr. Penticott, senior. . . . Now, don't you worry about me one bit. . . . Of course, I shall miss you. . . . But I'm not the first in importance quite, am I . . . ?" Another laugh, and then: "That's all right, then. Good-by, and the very best of luck. . . ."

He slammed down the receiver and turned to me, beaming, positively beaming.

"Miss Selwyn isn't coming back. . . . She's going to get married instead. . . ." he said, in a funny, breathless sort of way, and I was so overjoyed and relieved that I said:

"Oh, I am so glad . . . so very, very glad!"

He looked at me, then, his nice, sudden smile showing his white teeth, he said:

"Then I take it you'd be willing to take her place permanently—if I asked you to?" And there was the most absolutely human little touch of fun in his grey eyes as he emphasized the last words.

My face went hot, as I realized that he hadn't asked me yet. But I laughed; I simply couldn't help it, and he laughed too, and said:

"Why, you must know I'd be only too jolly glad to get you; it would be absurd for you to pretend not to know that your work is exceptionally good, wouldn't it?"

"Well, you certainly have let me understand that it was satisfactory. . . ."

"Wouldn't say much for my perception if I hadn't realized that it was, would it?"

He had an odd little habit of tacking on a question in this way.

"Naturally, you must know what you want," I said. "You must know the work that suits you and is most helpful."

"There, that's just it; you've hit it. Some people work well and correctly, and you can find no fault with them, but they don't help; they don't stimulate one's own work, rouse it up and egg it on. There's no sort of 'spark' to it, if you know what I mean."

"I think I know," I said.

"It's because they make a routine of it; their routine; their work. They think they are there to work for a man, not to help him. Makes such a difference, you know, Miss Graham."

"I'm sure it must," I said, interested. "But I've never heard it put like that before."

"Well, come to think of it, I've never before put it that way myself," he said, with a slightly self-conscious laugh. "But I think I've always felt that it could be found. It's the old question of the personal touch again, I suppose."

Just what I'd been thinking of him! Wasn't it odd he should have said it, too? And I wonder if he really knew quite how much he'd said? I mean, it would have been downright idiocy to pretend to myself, after that, that I didn't realize that unconsciously he was comparing me with his late secretary, and very much to my credit, too!

"In spite of the . . . the split infinitive? . . . and the awful punctuation? . . . and . . ." I said, forgetting to be professional.

He reddened and laughed again.

"Oh, I don't know what's been the matter with me to-day. I've been feeling rotten. Touch of liver, I suppose. Going to forgive me?"

"Of course."

"Then, about this secretary business; shall we—er—call it a go?"

And, because at that moment I was feeling considerably more Julia Grey than Jane Graham, I replied instantly:

"It's a go."

Which is an unprofessional way of accepting a business job, to say the least of it.

"I mean," I corrected myself, "I'll be very glad to accept. . . ."

"No, you don't," he interrupted vigorously. "You mean it's a go."

We shook hands and a go it was.

I was quite absurdly happy that evening. Even my draughty little room seemed a dear, cosy little place. No more Kendrick, no more loneliness; and as my guardian was giving me a considerable "raise," no more kippers for breakfast, or sprats for tea. I could afford to make other suggestions, now. Oh, cheerio! Life was beginning to look up a bit.

I settled down before the fire to think things over, and as the future unrolled before me, I pictured myself revealing my true identity to my understanding guardian; I pictured him enjoying the joke as much as I. "Couldn't act now and never would be able to!" And all this time I've been acting right under his very nose! How we would laugh together over it all. And how jolly it would be to have him for a friend. I shan't ever be all alone in the world again; we'll have the rippingest times together, as a guardian and his ward should. Even if I wanted to, it was utterly impossible to keep the truth from him for ever. Something was bound to happen to reveal it to him, and I felt I didn't much mind now when it happened. Now that I'd discovered what a real, understanding sort of person Nickolas Penticott was. Not yet, perhaps. I'll keep up the joke a little longer, but some day, I'll tell him. . . . I'd like first to prove to him that I can be a solidly useful sort of person, though. From what he knows of me, my sudden appearance on the stage, my engagement to Harry, and what must have appeared—to anyone judging solely from the superficial standpoint of appearances—my scatter-brained, impul-

sive flight on the day of my wedding; he probably thinks of me as lacking in the most enduring qualities of character, and honestly, one couldn't blame him. But now he'd been so nice about the help I gave him; about rousing up his work and egging it on, and all that, that I was loth to disturb his good opinion of me, right at its very beginning, by any revelations that might make him think my working so well for him was just another passing whim. I'd prove it was a real and permanent desire on my part to help. And it was, too.

Is there a girl in the world who isn't flattered and thrilled at the idea of being able to inspire a career? There may be dozens, but I'm not one of them. As I remembered what he'd said and how he looked as he said it, I was just filled to the brim with the glorious desire to help. Nickolas Penticott was admittedly extremely good at his job; the sort of man everyone said would be sure to get to the very head of his profession some day. Well, I was going to help him to get there; like the ladies of old who bound their ribands to their knight's sleeve before the tourney, and bade him "Go in, old son, and win," or whatever the medieval equivalent of that inspiring injunction may have been. They had their job, I had mine: Nickolas Penticott. I was going to watch over that man like a baker's dozen of guardian angels rolled into one. I was going to help him in all sorts of ways that he'd never imagined. (I didn't quite imagine them myself yet. I was just filled with the enthusiasm of being an inspiration.)

Oh, when it came to a question of ribands, those far-away beauties of the Middle Ages couldn't put a thing over me. Even if mine was only the riband of a typewriter.

Nickolas Penticott was a lonely sort of man; he'd no

particular relations beyond those two elderly cousins who used to look after me way down in Little Uppington, and that crabby little old uncle of his across the landing, so I'd got, as it were, a clear field, for taking his career in hand. Beyond this, though, he seemed to have no near tie, unless, of course, he were thinking . . . When I got to that point I pulled up short. Whatever he were thinking, I knew what I was thinking—Geraldine Maidstone.

Now, if I were going to watch his career, I'd got to be very careful to see that he didn't go and make a mess of things right at the start and in such an all-important matter as marriage. . . . The sort of wife that a promising career marries is of vital importance. She must not only make a man happy, but she must help the career as well. Miss Maidstone was an attractive sort of girl; yes, I had to allow her that. She'd any amount of that jolly-good-fellowship about her, that pally, comradely way with her, that men appear to like. I suppose it seems to them like a guarantee that there's no nonsense about the girl. But what worried me was that there was nonsense about Geraldine. The nonsense of jealousy. Why, she was the sort of girl who'd choose only the plainest maids for the household; encourage only the plum-duffiest of their women friends; and probably end by kicking up squalid scenes about his clients and his secretaries or any other specimen of the genus girl, that he so much as looked at.

Strictly from the point of view of his career, this wouldn't do. This certainly would not do at all.

What would do, when it came to that?

Ah, that was the question. And I didn't find the answer to it that evening.

CHAPTER XIV

ALTHOUGH he was such a queer, crabby old chap, Mr. Penticott senior had contrived to make Penticott junior very good pals with him. There was a strong bond of affection between the two. I don't think, though, that herds of wild horses would have persuaded the old boy to confess this, in so many words, but I saw it in his eyes. Sometimes, at unguarded moments, stirred, perhaps, by some thought or memory, there would come to his steely old eyes, as he looked at my guardian, something like the expression that used to come into Lady Cordelia's, as she looked at Harry. He used to snap and snarl and swear at my guardian like billy-o; but my guardian never seemed to mind, hardly even to notice it. He'd just smile indulgently and let the old man have his head. As this seemed to be the best method, I tried to adopt it too, but I must say it didn't come easy. There were times when I simply had to "answer back." Not that Penticott senior used to swear at me exactly, but we had one or two lively skirmishes. I never could tell how much he was in earnest, or how much he was only quizzing me.

The first time I saw him, after the *very* first time, when he'd sent me across with that preposterous message to my guardian, he looked up in his quick way and said:

"Still here, I see."

"I'm Mr. Penticott junior's permanent secretary

now," I replied, but I'm sure he knew that, really. "Miss Selwyn, of course, isn't coming back."

"Bit of a blow for Penticott junior, ain't it?"

"A blow?"

"Well, he was hoping she'd be back, wasn't he?"

Now, Nickolas Penticott hadn't seemed exactly heart-broken when he learned that Miss Selwyn was not coming back, but it was too delicate a point for me to dilate upon. Tactless old wretch to harp on it, anyway!

"Miss Selwyn was very competent," I murmured non-committally.

"Competence ain't everything."

"Oh, surely, in a secretary it is of first importance."

"Don't contradict," he snapped. "Do you know what the whole duty of woman is?"

"To . . . to be useful?" I ventured.

"Useful!" he sneered. "The world's gone all to pieces on women insisting upon being useful."

"To . . . hold their tongues, perhaps?" I went on boldly, thinking that that was just about what the cantankerous old boy would be likely to say, and hoping to take the wind out of his sails by forestalling him.

"Well, that's part of it, perhaps," he admitted. But it evidently wasn't what he'd meant.

"Then, I give it up. I don't know."

"D'you know anything?" he demanded impolitely.

"Not much, evidently, but . . ."

"But . . . but . . . but," he broke in irritably. "Don't stand there wasting my time. Get away, get away!"

And he fussed and fumed over the papers on his desk.

I went to the door, very much on my dignity. Horrid, unfair old thing, always putting one in the wrong and at a disadvantage. He just delighted in it.

"To be ornamental," he called out suddenly. "Ain't it obvious?"

I had to laugh, but "You wait," I thought to myself, "I'll pay you out." And if I hadn't bitten my lip hard I'd have said it out aloud.

But there certainly is no accounting for anything in this world, because although our next encounter certainly didn't go quite so merrily for him, I hadn't any impulse to pay him out at all.

We met downstairs in the main doorway of the office buildings. He was returning from his lunch; I from mine. He'd been having lunch all on his lone this day because Nickolas Penticott was lunching with Geraldine Maidstone, which, somehow, didn't please me too frightfully. Geraldine Maidstone was buying a house; a jolly place in the country, and my guardian was attending to all the legal part of it. It was a perfectly simple, straightforward transaction, without any of the complications that sometimes happen in these cases, but she made it the excuse for ringing him up, calling on him at all sorts of odd times, pestering him to go out to lunches and teas and dinners to "talk things over," or because she'd "just remembered something she wanted to discuss with him," and all that sort of thing. Perhaps though, it didn't pester him. He didn't seem to be exactly pestered by it. Which also didn't please me any too frightfully. Anyway, that was why I happened on Penticott senior in the doorway. He peered at me closely for a moment, as if the light dazzled him, and then said:

"It's Penticott junior's secretary. Well, this weather seems to suit you all right; sharp, though, ain't it?"

"Very," I replied, thinking that he didn't look as if the weather suited him. He looked as if the cold had shrivelled him, and I noticed that he breathed a bit

quickly as we started upstairs together side by side.

I'd noticed that my guardian always contrived to take the old chap's arm going upstairs, and give him a bit of a leg-up, with an air of not doing anything deliberately to help anyone. If Penticott senior suspected him of showing any deference to his age, he'd snarl out:

"Go to the devil, boy! Think I'm in my dotage, or what?" So carefully following the example of my guardian, I also gave the old chap a casual arm to lean on. He pretended not to notice it, just as I did, because, though he wouldn't own it, he really needed the help it gave him. He didn't say anything until we got to the landing between the two offices; there he stood a moment, looking at me with twinkly old eyes.

"And when are you going to leave to get married?" he asked.

"I?" I laughed. "I'm not even thinking of it."

"Ain't there someone thinking of it?"

"Not that I know of. If there is, he's keeping it very dark," I answered lightly.

"Now you tell Penticott junior from me, that if I were forty years younger, I'd marry you myself."

I laughed again.

"Is that a business message?" I inquired.

"That means you don't intend to deliver it."

"Yes." I said, suddenly very brave. "It does."

"I'll have you sacked for insubordination," he threatened, but he smiled as he said it.

"It isn't exactly that," I explained. "It's really because there's no truth in the message and so . . . well, it isn't a message at all. You see, even if you were forty years younger . . ."

"You'd turn me down for a better looking fellow, eh? Well, I never was much to look at; never . . ."

And right there he sighed.

"You're all alike . . . all alike. . . . The whole weight of a man's love is nothing against a pair of handsome eyes. . . ." But although he was looking at me, he wasn't speaking to me. . . . He was speaking to himself. . . . Or was it to someone else? Some other girl?

Someone he'd loved? Someone who'd turned him down "for a better looking fellow?" I wondered. Romance in that funny, wizened little old man? The romance of disappointed love, lifelong fidelity? The sorrow of being unable to forget? I wondered.

"Well, get along with you. Don't stand here wasting the valuable time of Penticott and Penticott," he growled, and turned abruptly into his office. I didn't feel a bit on my dignity this time. I was too busy thinking what a funny proposition life is. There don't seem to be any rules or regulations about it somehow. The thing you least expect is generally the thing that happens. And it happened good and plenty that afternoon, I can tell you!

When my guardian came back, he brought Miss Maidstone with him. I heard him speak to her, as he let her into his office. The dividing door between my office and his was open and I could hear what they said; something about a letter from her new landlord that she wanted.

A glance through the open doorway showed me her seated in my secretarial chair, drawn close to his, and their two heads almost touching as they looked over a bunch of letters together. She said something which I didn't hear, and he looked up and smiled; that nice, rare smile of his, that came in a sudden, sunshiny way to his lips, and made things seem brighter for its happening. I sat stock still, looking into his office, forgetful of the fact that I was eavesdropping, and that at any moment

Geraldine might turn her head and see me. I don't think I cared, anyway. I was filled with a sudden boiling resentment that they should be on such good terms. Goodness, they looked almost like—lovers. And isn't that just what I'd planned mustn't happen? Hadn't I decided that Geraldine's jealousy was enough to ruin any man's life, and his career along with it? Was he to be allowed to marry a woman who'd nag at him, and insult him by mistrust . . . who'd make his life one long cross-examination as to where he'd been, whom he'd seen, what she had said and so on and so on to desperation?

My goodness! Not if I had anything to do with it!

And hadn't I? Wasn't I his ward? His own legal left-to-him-in-a-will ward?

And wasn't it my duty, my plain, unmistakable duty to—to——

But there my noble attitude went wobbly, and I bent over my typewriter with a funny, shaky little feeling.

No, of course, I hadn't any duties of that sort. If I did do anything to prevent his marrying Geraldine Maidstone, it would be plain, unvarnished interference. There was no other name for it. I realized that in a sudden, disconcerting way.

I realized something else too.

That whereas Geraldine Maidstone was his friend, I was only his secretary. If I had any influence over him, it was only during business hours and strictly with regard to business matters. Whereas, *she* . . . She influenced his pleasure hours; his free hours; her influence was all for the softer side of life; concerned with all the light and pretty things that life affords. She stood on the charming, ornamental, care-free side of things; I, on the side of sheer grind. . . .

Beside . . . she's jealous. . . . And jealousy is the very . . .

"Oh, rot!" broke in another thought, so definitely, so clearly, that I could almost have sworn that the words were spoken aloud.

"*You* can't talk. Why, you're jealous yourself!"

I glanced round the room in hasty fear that perhaps in my concentration on my thoughts I'd spoken the words myself, but Lester, the only other occupant of the room, was bent over his desk, his pale face unmovedly expressing grave diligence.

"It's all right, you only thought it," I told myself, with relief, but . . . what a . . . ridiculous thing to have thought!

But at that moment I heard my guardian and Miss Maidstone move.

Heavens! Suppose they came this way! I bent over my machine, suddenly fearfully engrossed and busy. Yes, they were coming; the door between the offices opened.

"Come through here—it's nearer the stairs," said my guardian's nice voice. And what a nice voice it was, too, and what a ripping manner he had—so frank, and unaffected, and friendly, and courteous, and—oh, well, more or less everything that a man's manner should be.

"To-morrow evening, don't forget, will you?" Miss Maidstone was saying. "Come and have dinner at the flat first. Do you good; you work too hard, Nicko."

They paused by the intervening door. Out of the tail of my eye—I didn't mean to watch them, but somehow I couldn't help it—I saw that she had her hand on his arm. . . .

What was he going to answer? Suddenly it became a matter of first importance to me. . . .

"No, I won't forget. . . . Of course, I won't. Why, it's compensation for a hard day's grind."

Compensation! Geraldine Maidstone! Compensation for a day with me. . . .

"Seven o'clock?" he asked.

"Yes—as usual," she replied.

As usual! Then he often dined at her flat. . . .

They went across the office and he saw her out.

A moment later he returned, closed the door and stood for a moment, his good, effective-looking head thoughtfully bent.

Then slowly he raised his face, and across the room his eyes looked straight into mine.

One look; just one look, but it sent the table and the books, and the office and the grave, imperturbable Lester—all reality, in fact—spinning into space.

I was conscious only of those nice eyes of his, and an odd throbbing that seemed to be beating out a rhythm in my brain.

Somebody caught a sharp breath; whether it was I or my guardian, or both of us, I don't to this day know, but it broke the spell.

Things whirled back to life, and solidified around me again, and I felt once more the ground beneath my feet. Only the throbbing went on just the same, and it was the thump-thumping of my heart.

Then he moved, and, plunging his hands deep into his pockets, strode across the room and into his office without a word.

And I sat on just as he'd left me, and there was a regular storm in that quickly beating heart of mine—a storm of some new feeling; new, and rather wild, and a little exultant. And quite suddenly I knew; quite suddenly I understood.

I was in love.

I in love with Nickolas Penticott; in love with my guardian, my "tiresome" guardian, my "rather stodgy" guardian. . . .

I put it to myself in every conceivable way in an endeavor to disbelieve it, but it was true; and I knew it.

All in a single second of time, the most ridiculously unexpected thing in the world had happened.

I shook myself, to be sure that I was awake. And began arguing it out to myself.

"I can't be really in love . . ."

"Yes, you are, though . . ."

"But when I set out this morning I had no sort of intention of falling in love during the day . . ."

"Still, you've done it."

"And, anyway, I never, never, never, meant to fall in love with my guardian, of all men in the world . . ."

"For all that, he's the only man you ever could love. . . . That's clear enough now."

"Well . . . what am I going to do about it?"

"There's nothing to be done."

"But I can't go on loving him!"

"Question is, can you stop?"

"No, of course, I can't. . . . And I wouldn't if I could. I'm in love . . . for the first and only time in my life and . . ."

"Yes, and what about Geraldine?"

"Oh, Geraldine be bothered!"

"She'll probably bother you."

"Well, let her. . . ."

"No, don't let her. . . . You've just as much right to happiness as she has. . . . Make a bid for it."

"How?"

“Tell him who you are. . . . Then you’ll have a right to his leisure hours. . . .”

“Then, perhaps, I’ll be compensation for a day’s grind. . . .”

“Jealous?”

“No . . . honestly, no . . .”

“But you were a few minutes ago.”

“Ah, I didn’t *know* then. . . . Now I do . . . and it’s something deeper than jealousy could ever be . . . much much deeper. . . . Something big, conquering, and real. . . .”

“My! . . . but you are in love, aren’t you? . . .”

“In love, and in love, and in love.”

“Go in, then, and win . . .”

“Miss Graham!” Lester’s pained voice came through to me and brought me to earth with a bump. “There’s Mr. Penticott’s bell. . . . And he’s rung *three* times.”

CHAPTER XV

I DON'T quite know how I got through the rest of that afternoon. I felt sure that I couldn't fail to make a complete idiot of myself, but somehow, I didn't. I suppose most women are consummate actresses, off the stage; anyway, my performance that afternoon certainly would have taken some beating. But I didn't tell Nickolas Penticott who I really was; the fitting moment never seemed to arrive. We were pretty busy, for one thing, and I hadn't quite decided how to do it, for another. It was rather a difficult sort of thing to do when it came to the point. Of course, I could simply have got up and announced, "I'm Julia Grey," without comment or introduction, but that seemed a very plain, bald statement. I hate being plain and bald. . . . So evening came; Nickolas Penticott went off to keep his appointment with Geraldine Maidstone; I went home to Wanstead and Mrs. Henty and the great revelation had not been made.

"But it's got to be done," I said to myself. "Or are you just going to stand aside and see the man you love throw himself away? . . ."

How do I know he'd be throwing himself away if he married Geraldine? Oh, but he would! No one could care for him and help him and understand his trials and difficulties and triumphs as I could. Geraldine didn't

seem out to help ; she only seemed out for a "good time." A pretty poor foundation for a lifetime's bargain.

I decided that to-morrow at tea-time would be an excellent opportunity. About half-past four, I always brewed a cup of tea all round, and if we were particularly busy, I used to drink mine with my guardian and continue our work at the 'same time. To-morrow, I'd see that there was something to be done at that time, something that would give me an excuse for taking my tea in his office, and while we drank it, I'd tell him.

The plan was all fixed, and at tea-time I'd got the little job all ready; it was a letter that wouldn't take long and didn't need frightfully serious attention. Just right, for when we slacked up on it, out would come my secret, and then . . . ?

All the rest was on the knees of the gods. I think if we could only remember that everything is, we'd stop wasting time over making plans of any sort whatever!

I took in Nickolas Penticott's tea and the letter I wanted to ask him about, and he looked at it and said:

"Oh, yes; let's see to this. Bring your tea in here, Miss Graham, and we'll do it."

That was all entirely according to plan, so I fetched my tea along and we settled to it. We went all through it, and I was just thinking, now it's my turn, when he said:

"You'd better just refer this to my uncle. He has the previous history of the case. I've only just taken it on. Do you mind going across with it?" So I went; and I hurried, too, because I wanted to be back again before he finished his tea.

When I entered Penticott senior's office, I had a shock. For the old man was huddled up all anyhow in his chair, his head down on his breast and one clenched hand out-

flung. For a second my heart stopped beating . . . was he asleep . . . or . . . ?

"Mr. Penticott!" I called sharply; he didn't reply, but now I noticed that he was breathing. . . .

I didn't want to raise a scene or do anything wild and hysterical, so I went to him and touched his shoulder. . . . He didn't arouse. I was trembling as I went back to my guardian's room, but I tried hard to be and to speak perfectly calmly.

Evidently, though, my face showed that something had happened, for Nickolas Penticott sprang up.

"Good God! What's the matter?" he said. "You look ghastly."

"Your uncle . . . he's ill, I think . . ." I got so far, before my guardian pushed me aside and went out; I recovered and followed. Penticott senior's own secretary and clerk had been aroused by now, and came, looking very scared, out of their room. They were both men and while one telephoned a doctor, the other helped my guardian to get the old man into a deep-seated leather covered chair, with another for his feet. He was quite unconscious, appeared to be in a dead faint. We tried brandy and water and did everything we could, but he didn't pull round.

I was kneeling beside him chafing his clenched hand, when what it held fell suddenly to the floor. A gold locket, and out of it looked . . . my own mother's face.

I stared down at it, startled. It was the same picture as the little one I had in my locket; a full-face, with big eyes slightly lowered and bands of smooth hair parting over the forehead . . . My own mother, when she was just a girl like me!

Like me? Yes, it was like me . . . very like . . . now that I wore my hair in smooth bands too . . .

A memory of Penticott senior's voice as he had called me "Julia" that first day, rang through my mind now. . . . Of course, why, of course! She was Julia too. . . . So it was my mother who had so enslaved the heart of this old man that he never, never forgot. . . . She, who had turned him down "for a pair of handsome eyes." . . . My father had been quite celebrated for his looks . . . but she hadn't turned her unlucky lover down for that. . . . They had been divinely happy, my parents . . . and my mother's death, when I was born, really killed my father. . . . How small the world is . . . how strange. . . .

I came back to the present to find myself still chafing that old wrinkled hand. . . . A moment later, the doctor came, and made an examination.

Mr. Penticott senior had had a stroke.

The rest was one big confusion. Remembering back, it seems as if the only thing that impressed itself on my mind was my guardian's face, pale and set and anxious. When I shut my eyes, I could see it stamped before me, white against a dark ground. He was terribly cut up, I could see. If only I could have done something to help! If only I'd had the right to . . .

Later on Penticott senior came round, slowly, slowly and, oh, so terribly weakly. When it was considered safe—by this time his own doctor had been summoned and was in attendance—he was carried down to a closed car, the doctor and my guardian going with him.

Not until then did it dawn on me that not only had I picked up that gold locket when it fell from Penticott senior's hand, but that I was still holding it tight in my own hand and—that it wasn't my property. I ran downstairs after them and caught my guardian in the doorway.

"This . . ." I said, breathlessly. "It fell from his

hand . . . I quite forgot . . .” I stopped and held out the locket.

He took it, looked down at it, and said hurriedly:

“Yes, it’s his . . . he may ask for it . . . I believe he cared once. . . : Thank you, and . . . good-by . . .”

To my surprise, he caught my hand and wrung it hard. Then turned and left me without another word. I leaned back against the doorway, shaking, a thundering in my pulses, tears running down my face.

The car departed, slowly, smoothly, and I watched it till it disappeared. Then I looked down at the hand Nickolas Penticott had crushed; it was still streaked redly, where his fingers had closed round it. From that moment, that hand was sort of promoted; it could never be quite the same ordinary, every-day hand it had been.

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Mr. Penticott senior made a good recovery; at least, it was good all things considered. He would never be his old self again and would have to retire finally from business, but, within very definite limits, he would be able to get about again all right. My guardian sent him down to a jolly little place in Hertfordshire, in charge of two nurses, a valet, a cook, and a housekeeper. And I don’t mind betting he led them a jolly old life of it. And oh, my goodness, the work his sudden illness had landed on us. “Us” being the junior department of Penticott and Penticott. The old man had just embarked upon a fearfully complicated transfer of property case. A huge Dorset estate was changing hands, and the business in connection with it was simply appalling. Especially as it had to be concluded with all possible dispatch. How we worked; I think during a fortnight we didn’t leave the office before nine every evening, and then my guar-

dian worked at home, I know. He began to look awfully worn and fagged. But through it all he was the utterest brick to everyone working for him.

All thought of my own problems went sheer out of my head. I only knew that he needed help, and that, from me, he'd get it, to the uttermost ability in me. And my compensation was that he seemed to like to have me with him; seemed to find me helpful and in harmony with him. Once or twice, fagged and nervy, he got a bit snappy, blamed me for some little thing I wasn't responsible for, and generally let his temper rip a bit, but I'd wait for the storm to pass, take the blame—what did it matter?—and when the lull came just go on straight ahead, as if nothing had happened. And when it came to the evenings of such days, he'd nearly always look at me, with a little self-conscious smile and say:

"You have been very forbearing. . . . Good-night, Miss Graham."

Easy enough to be forbearing, when all you ask is to be able to help; when every beat of your heart is throbbing to a refrain of love . . . when every grateful look is a reward, and every appreciative word rings in your ears, an endless echo . . . remaining to keep loneliness and longing at bay.

One day he surprised me by saying suddenly:

"Are you free on Sunday?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering.

"My uncle has asked me to take you down to see him. He seems to have taken a great fancy to you, Miss Graham."

Because I'm like a woman he once loved, I thought; and aloud: "I'd love to go. . . . Next Sunday?"

"As ever is. May I take you down in the car?"

"Would you?"

"Yes, rather, and we'll have a holiday from this infernal grind."

"That will be rather nice," I agreed.

"I'm working you too hard. . . . I feel awfully guilty. . . . But somehow, I don't get *on* as well with anyone else. . . . You've got such a knack of making things easy. . . ." he said contritely.

"I'm . . . so glad," I said, not daring to look at him, lest he should see just how glad I was.

"But you mustn't let me slave-drive. . . . Why don't you round on me? Go on strike, or something?"

"Because . . . I don't want to," I replied.

"It's good of you to put it that way, but I'm afraid I rather pay you out for your loyalty. . . ."

"Is it loyalty to do what you like to do?" I asked quickly. "It could be called selfishness, couldn't it?"

"Oh, yes, I've heard that argument before. Along those lines every act of service, from the smallest to the greatest, could be reduced to selfishness. . . ."

"Then, by all means, go on calling it loyalty—it's a far prettier word," I said lightly.

He opened his lips to speak, shut them again with nothing said, and turned away. Then, after a pause:

"Well about Sunday. . . ." And we fell to making arrangements for the expedition.

How happy I was! And how hard I tried not to be so absurdly, unreasonably happy; it's nothing to him, I told myself. But it's a whole day with him, to me. One whole, glorious, un-business day!

And it was a glorious day, too; misty first thing in the morning, but clearing to gorgeous sunshine later on, and warm, with the fresh, capricious warmth of the first touch of spring.

We had a jolly run. Nickolas Penticott had brought

me a big fur coat of his own, and I sat beside him in the little two-seater, all snuggled up in it, my face swathed in a chiffon veil. I was glad of that veil; there comes a time when you can't keep the insane happiness out of your eyes, and I felt then that, sitting beside him, wrapped up in his coat, the prospect of a whole day with him before me, that time had come to me. It was hard enough to keep it out of my voice, when all the time I just wanted to shout and sing out that whatever was to happen in the future, I was glad now. . . Glad, and glad, and glad. . . And then some. . . .

Especially was it difficult when my guardian said, as he got into the car:

"Now then, it's a holiday. No thought of business, please; no thought of anything, except that it's a heavenly day, that the world is a mighty good place, and that you and I are free for one whole day to enjoy it. See?"

I saw, and said so, and we started off.

An hour and a half brought us into the white and green of the fresh Hertfordshire country; white roads and green pastures. Lovely! And the air, and the trilling of the birds, and the first haze of green appearing on the hedgerows. . . . Goodness, who ever wants to live in cities?

We hardly spoke at all; we were too busy enjoying it all. Once my guardian raised his head and sniffed the breeze.

"Lord! but it's good!" he said, in a voice of praise and thanksgiving.

We found Mr. Penticott reclining on a *chaise-longue* beside the open window of his big, light, airy room, swaddled to the chin in rugs and the two nurses and the valet trying to persuade him to take a cup of chicken broth. But he wasn't persuadable, and when we ap-

peared he flapped everyone else unceremoniously away.

"Well, Nick, well!" he began, in the old, grumbling way. "You've been the deuce of a time getting down here . . ." but he extended both his feeble old hands and just hugged my guardian's one big strong one.

"Say, but it's fine to see you looking so well, sir," my guardian replied, tactfully avoiding the reproach. I remained a little to one side, but the old chap called to me.

"So you came, did you? It wasn't too much trouble to come and see the ugly old man, eh?"

"I was so glad to hear that you thought enough of me to ask me to come," I replied, taking the hand he offered.

"Child, but it's like a breath of spring just to look at you. . . ." He raised his wistful old eyes to my face.

"A breath of spring and a ghost of youth," he added, with a sigh. "Sit down, both of you. What are you standing about for. . . . Are you so anxious to run away from me. . . . ?"

We sat down. One each side of him.

"Tell me how things are going, quick, before those infernal dry nurses are back to tell me I mustn't talk too much, or that I must have my sleep. They treat me like a damn babbling baby, Nick."

His language hadn't improved any, I noticed.

My guardian let him understand that the office was running smoothly, not, of course, as smoothly as it used to when the old man was there—he wouldn't have liked that!—but that we were getting on all right. After which we sat and listened to his grouching and peevish grumbling, until one of the nurses came in and ordered us out, as it was time for the patient's mid-day sleep. He protested and fumed, but submitted because he was really tired.

"Come back when I wake, ghost-girl," he said, pulling

me down and looking into my face; then, pushing me away again:

“Ugh, you’re all alike . . . all alike . . . a pair of handsome eyes. . . . Get away now . . . get away. . . . Can’t you see I’m tired of ye? . . .”

So we left.

We found out from the nurse that he would sleep until the early afternoon, say, about three o’clock; it was now just past noon.

“We’ll go for a spin, shall we?” suggested my guardian.

I agreed.

“Let’s take lunch,” he suggested further.

I agreed again, and he departed to the nether regions to make love to the cook and see what could be done.

A large packet of sandwiches and a neatly dissected cold fowl was the result, and armed with these we went out to the little car and started off.

“Jolly, isn’t it?” he remarked, as we sped along the white road.

Jolly? Oh, Nickolas Penticott, that is scarcely the word. But I replied that it was, extremely jolly, and on we went.

Spying a lovely-looking pine wood, we stopped and got out to explore.

Standing on a carpet of pine-needles he asked me:

“Good enough spot for lunch?”

And I replied:

“Is it a good enough lunch for the spot?” Not a very brilliant joke, but we laughed as if it had been. A broad, grass road, characteristic of Hertfordshire country, ran sheer to the edge of the wood, and even penetrated it sufficiently for us to bring the car within sight.

“Wrap up well and we’ll feed,” he said, and we saw

lected a straight fallen trunk to sit on, the packets of lunch between us.

"What a mad day for a picnic," he added, laughing.

"Why mad?"

"Well, to picnic sitting wrapped up in fur . . ."

"But it's a gorgeous day . . ."

"Besides . . ." he began, and stopped.

"Besides . . .?" I prompted.

His head was bent over the packages, but he looked up with a quick smile.

"It's good to be mad sometimes."

Then, as I didn't reply:

"Don't you think so?"

"It is . . . generally rather refreshing," I said.

"Generally? Are you often mad, then?"

"No . . . not often."

"But sometimes, eh?"

"No . . . not even sometimes."

"Once, anyway," he persisted.

"No," I said. "Not even once."

"Then how can you know that it is generally . . ."

"I don't know . . ."

"But you said . . ."

"I know I did. . . . But I didn't mean anything."

"You must have meant something. . . ."

"I was just guessing."

"Oh, and founding your guess upon—what?"

"Just . . . oh . . . just . . . well . . . just . . ." He laughed

"To-day?"

"Well, yes, I think it was to-day."

"Do you feel that to-day is refreshing you?"

I nodded.

"So do I," he said.

"Do you always cross-examine people like this?" I inquired.

"Cross-examine? Was I cross-examining? I didn't realize. Awful cheek, but I suppose I was carried away by my interest in the subject . . ." he broke off, laughing again, then:

"Come on, let's begin."

He stretched out a hand to the packet of sandwiches, and I did the same. He was a second before me; his hand closed on the packet, my hand upon his. Quick as thought his other hand was over mine, and for a moment there we were, playing the child's game of piling up hands, breathing very quickly, and laughing rather absurdly.

He drew his hand away hurriedly, and said casually:

"There used to be words to that game. . . . Something about pat-a-cake and a baker's man, I think. . . . Or am I mixing things up?"

"You are mixing them up a bit," I replied, as steadily as I could, and applied myself unaided to spreading out the foodstuffs.

The chicken presented a problem, which Nickolas Penticott put into words when, looking rather dismayed, he asked:

"Are you going to . . . gnaw the bones . . . or . . . or what?"

"I'm going to gnaw the bones," I replied promptly. His face cleared.

"That clears away my last doubts of you," he said.

"Oh, what were your last doubts of me?"

"I was afraid perhaps you wouldn't gnaw the bones," he replied, gravely.

I laughed.

He gave me a wing and presented himself with a drum-

stick and we tackled them with the gusto and disregard of elegance that our very ancient forefathers might have shown.

"Jove, but I'm hungry," he said, after a few moments of hunger-appeasing silence.

"You look it," I replied, with conscious superiority, flourishing a clean-picked wing bone.

"We both seem to have very fair—er—appetites," he said delicately. "Have you forgotten that there is such a thing as an office anywhere?"

I had; I'd also forgotten that there was such a person as Jane Graham. It seemed so perfectly right and natural to be picnicking in this wood with Nickolas Penticott that I was completely Judy Grey again.

"Yes, I had; you reminded me," I said.

"Sorry; forget it again, will you?"

"Will you?"

"If you make me."

"Can I?"

"Can't you?"

I was silent a moment, looking out through the lines of straight trunks, dappled with pale, spring sunlight. The office, the work, Jane Graham, all seemed but a dream to me. . . . There was nothing for me in the world beyond this wood, this sunlight and this man. . . . Should I tell him now, who I really was, and make Jane Graham a dream to him too? And put Julia Grey, the reality, in her place? Julia Grey, his ward, not his secretary; his friend, not a girl he employed. . . . Was this the fitting moment? I wasn't sure . . . but I could, at least, sound the situation. I began, slowly, a little uncertainly:

"Mr. Penticott . . . you said just now . . . something about your last doubts of me. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Were they quite the last?"

"The very last," he assured me solemnly.

"Then you've none left?"

"None at all."

"Whatever I do, or say, or . . . or . . . seem?" I persisted. He looked at me a moment.

"Are you the crown princess of some tumble-down monarchy, in disguise?" he asked.

"N-o," I said. "Not quite, but . . ."

"Nearly?"

I laughed. . . . Should I? Somehow, with the day so pleasant, with him so friendly and jolly, with business forgotten, and problems left behind, I was loth to jar in upon the peace and harmony with any startling, outside matters. . . . Couldn't I just *be* Julia Grey, and see how he liked her? Without putting him to the awkwardness of having to re-adjust his attitude towards me. The next thing he said, though, seemed to give me an opening.

"Can you explain," he asked suddenly, "why my uncle should have taken such a tremendous fancy for you?"

"It oughtn't to need explanation," I replied, but he wasn't to be drawn.

"Well, of course, the answer to that is, that it doesn't; for all that . . ."

"You'd like it explained?"

He laughed.

"Yes, please."

"He seems to think that I am like someone he once—cared for." I watched him as I spoke, to see whether the likeness struck any spark in his memory, too. But it didn't seem to. He gave me a look, meditatively twiddling the drumstick in his fingers.

"That's odd," he said, at last.

"Why? Don't you think I am like that someone?"

"Well, no, not much. Of course, I never knew her when she was a girl, but I remember her later. I know whom you mean."

"And there is no likeness?"

I leaned a little towards him, offering my face for his inspection, intent only upon the question of whether I would make my revelation or not.

He leaned forward quickly, too, and, as quickly, drew back again.

"No," he said shortly, "I can't see it. . . ."

"You didn't really look!" I protested.

"I can't see it," he repeated obstinately, without looking again. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "the woman he is always supposed to have been keen on, was the mother of my ward. . . . Er . . . did you know I'd a ward?"

"Yes," I said, and waited for him to ask how I knew.

But he didn't; he took my knowledge of this fact as a matter of course.

"Absurd idea, isn't it? I mean, do I look like a guardian?"

I shook my head.

"No. And yet, I don't know. . . . Have guardians any special look?"

"Do you know how old I am?" he demanded.

"No . . . but . . ."

"I'm not thirty-four yet."

"And she is?"

"I've forgotten . . . but she must be . . . Oh, anyway, she's quite grown-up."

"I wonder if you are a good guardian?" I said, regarding him judicially.

"Do I strike you as one who'd be slack over such a thing?"

"No . . . you don't. Only I was wondering whether . . ."

"I've always done my best to watch her interests. . ."

"And to gain her confidence?"

"I don't seem to have achieved that, judging by her behavior. . . ."

"That is one of a guardian's duties, isn't it?"

"Well, it's been so deuced awkward. It wasn't possible, considering my comparatively youthful age, to have much to do with her. . . . It wouldn't have been good for her. But I've done whatever I could."

Now, that aspect of his guardianship and the difficulties of it, had never occurred to me.

"You see, I was about five and twenty, and she round about fifteen when the arrangement started. The world being what it is, and thinking what it does, I had to steer pretty clear of her. . . ."

So that was it, was it? That had certainly never occurred to me before. I sat thinking.

"Then the war came, and naturally I hadn't many opportunities for doing much guarding. . . ." He frowned as he spoke, and looked worried; then added:

"And lately she's made it impossible for anyone to do anything for her. She disappeared, you know; ran away from a very brilliant marriage. . . . Probably you saw something of it in the papers?"

I nodded, unable to speak. Should I tell him? Should I? Yes; now or never, while he's on the subject. . . . I swallowed hard in preparation, and was just opening my mouth to speak when he broke out:

"Well, don't let's waste time talking of her. *She's* business; this day is for pleasure and for freedom from worries. . . ." and, swinging the drumstick by its nobby end, he hurled it far away, high up into the trees.

"That well-conducted barndoor fowl never thought it would make a flight like *that!*" he said boyishly.

Oh, she's business, is she? I thought, and my ardor for telling him was somewhat damped. . . . After all, he'd had a rotten grind lately . . . let him have his day off. . . . A day or two more won't make much difference. . . . And to-day is for pleasure . . . it certainly is . . . and freedom from worries. . . . If Julia Grey is a worry . . . that means freedom from Julia Grey. . . . I don't want to turn Jane Graham into a worry. . . . She's getting on so well. . . . And she's happy and she's making him happy. . . . Why disturb things? Take happiness when it offers, and . . . Oh, the arguments were good enough. . . .

"I'd like to live in this part of the world," he said suddenly. "Wouldn't it be jolly to build a house up on that big common we skirted on our way here?"

"Lovely."

"But surely you want a great big mansion bang in the middle of Mayfair, and simply seething with footmen and French maids and butlers and things."

"Why should I?"

"Isn't that the usual picture of feminine ambition?"

"Perhaps, then, I'm not ambitious."

"Oh, yes you are."

"Then perhaps my ambitions don't run along the usual lines."

"But you can't want a nice, quiet little place in the country, surely?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, but that's what I want."

"Does that exclude the possibility of anyone else wanting it too?"

He laughed.

"Or course, it would have to be in very special circumstances. I don't mean anything akin to just vegetating."

"Neither do I. But life in the country can be as wide and full as life anywhere else if . . ." I broke off sharply.

"If?" he asked.

"Oh, just if," I said hurriedly.

He kicked at the pine-needles a moment, looking down.

"There's moss underneath," he said absently.

"Yes," I agreed, as absent as he.

A silence, then:

"So you've a dream house, too, have you?" he said, slowly, still looking down.

"Yes."

Silence again, broken only by the bird-calls and the faint little stirrings of the wood.

Then:

"I wonder if everyone has?" he said musingly.

"Probably, if one only knew."

"If one only knew! But that would mean being able to read their thoughts and see into their hearts. . . ."

"Wouldn't it be fine if we could?"

"Isn't it possible sometimes to get near to it?"

"It might be with some people. . . ."

"Just two? Who were attune?"

"Perhaps . . . or . . . oh, I don't know! Perhaps not!" I cried.

"No," he said sharply. "That's too impossibly lonely! I can't endure to think that. . . . I must go on hoping that some day, somewhere, there is . . . some one." His voice dropped, and once again silence enfolded us. Suddenly he laughed.

"Tell me about your dream house. It can't be as nice as mine. Mine's got a wide lawn in front . . ."

"Yes," I broke in. "And borders all round full

of sweet williams and roses and candytuft and . . .”

“And larkspurs and wall-flowers . . .”

“And mignonette and cornflowers . . .”

“And . . . But how do *you* know? It’s *my* house I’m talking about,” he said, looking at me, whimsically.

“Yes, and I’m talking about mine,” I replied.

“Are you trying to pretend that yours is in the same street with mine?”

“Mine isn’t in a street,” I said loftily. “Mine’s in a big, open place like that common we passed. . . .”

“No, hang it, mine’s there. . . .”

“I’m sorry, but mine has always been there.”

“I don’t believe you’d ever even seen that common till to-day.”

“Well, had you?”

“No, but . . .” he was forced to admit.

“Exactly!” I said triumphantly.

“So you do think that yours is very superior?”

“I don’t know about being superior. . . . It has its good points. . . .”

“For example?”

“Oh, a big lilac bush . . .”

“That’s nothing! Mine’s got a mulberry tree . . .”

“Ah, but mine has a long, red-brick wall with plums and cherries nailed to it . . . you know, with little bits of felt . . .”

“Yes, but mine’s got a big kitchen garden for growing cabbages and kings.”

“So has mine.”

“Forgive me if I point out that you didn’t mention it,” he said politely.

“You didn’t give me time. You kept chipping in so,” I retorted.

“Chipping in! Why, I’ve been trying to speak of *my*

red-brick wall, and my plums, and cherries and my lilac bush, and you've never given me the glimpse of a chance."

"I don't believe you ever had a red-brick wall, or a lilac bush, or plums and cherries!" I cried accusingly.

"Well, if it comes to that, did you ever have a kitchen garden?"

"Do you mean to suggest that I invented the kitchen garden?" I demanded, with icy indignation.

"Well, it certainly looks . . ."

"Why, I've always had a kitchen garden!"

"With cabbages?"—suspiciously.

"With cabbages"—firmly.

"And kings?"—still more suspiciously.

"And . . . Oh, don't be absurd!" The game ended with our mingling laughter, a joyous duet, that set the echoes ringing. Then I rose.

"We ought to go back," I said.

"Yes, I suppose we must," he said reluctantly. "Enjoyed your lunch?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Is that all? Isn't it the best lunch you've ever had?"

It was hard to be practical, and prosaic and all these self-possessed sort of things, but I had to be. . . .

"Oh, well, I'd hardly go as far as that . . ." I began, when his face changed and he broke in moodily:

"All right—get along into the car."

And, as he got in beside me:

"It's the best lunch I've ever had, anyway," he said, sulky as a big boy. . . .

I gave him a quick look . . . everything in me clamoring to say that it was the best, the very best lunch . . . but something in his face stopped me, and I turned away again, heart beating fast, and sat staring down at the rutty grass road, as he manœuvred the car into the open again.

CHAPTER XVI

OH, day of memories! Oh, day of disturbing joy and happy thrill! Oh, day . . . But that's the sort of style it's going to be a strain to live up to. Get off these epic heights, Judy Grey; it was "some" day, that's all.

Blessings on my likeness to that little mother o' mine, whose everlasting memory in an old man's heart had caused it to happen! Whatever the future held, that day was mine. Mine for keeps.

But after Sunday, cometh Monday. I suppose everyone has noticed that. And Monday was a dreadfully different day.

Nickolas Penticott was late, to begin with; work was a scramble; however much you tried to catch up with it, it was always one ahead. Monday is so apt to be like this; but this was the most Mondayish Monday I've ever known.

And Nickolas Penticott seemed to be an utterly different person. Of course, one didn't expect pinewoods to grow in a lawyer's office, but . . . Anyway, he was different, and seemed anxious to impress me with the difference, too. So, naturally, I followed suit, and was different, too. And it didn't stop at Monday, either. Every day that week seemed to be a Monday, judging by its behavior. My guardian didn't seem to want me with him now. I seemed to get on his nerves. He didn't seem to find me helpful any more. Rather the reverse,

for once when I looked up, I found him staring at me moodily, and when my movement roused him, he said impatiently:

“Oh, that’ll do, Miss Graham. Send Lester to me, please.” And I was dismissed. By Thursday I was tired, and nervy, and dispirited; he was fagged out, and even the immovable Lester showed signs of wear.

That heavenly Sunday seemed to have upset everything. I had to hug its memories very close into my heart, to get any comfort from them.

Friday morning my guardian seemed to have reached snapping point. Nothing went right, and everything seemed to make him cross. I steered as clear of him as I possibly could. To be uncertain about anything, was to reduce him to the edge of weary despair; to ask a question was to ask for trouble, to wait for an answer was to get it.

Heavens! What a morning! Lester left as usual at twelve, and for the first time in my career as Nickolas Penticott’s secretary I dreaded to be alone with him. I sat on pins, waiting for his bell to summon me to his overworked, irritable presence. But it didn’t sound. I’d been doing some letters for him, and was to take them to him as soon as they were done, so when they were ready, I gathered all my courage and went into his office. To my surprise he was not at his desk. Looking round I saw the top of his head above the back of a huge, deep-seated leather-covered chair. I went across to him, and looked down at him, questioningly.

He was asleep. His head back, hands peacefully crossed on his chest, legs outstretched toward the fire, utterly and absolutely whacked to the wide; he was asleep!

His face was rather pale, his mouth a little drawn at

the corners, but his breathing was deep and even as a child's.

I don't know which I wanted to do most, laugh or cry . . . but I didn't do either . . . or did I do a little of both as I whispered, shakily:

"Oh, you *poor* dear," and crept out of the room again—Then I propped my door open and watched for possible disturbers of the peace. Only over my lifeless form should anyone reach that office of his till he elected to awake. If he never slept again, he should have his sleep out now, and all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't have shaken that determination.

What happened to the day's work, I didn't care. I wasn't going to start my machine, anyway; I'd stopped it, and the sound, suddenly restarted, might have been enough to rouse him. Although he certainly looked as if nothing short of the trump of doom could have caused the smallest flutter in his waking consciousness.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed, so did an unwary page-boy, whistling! And jolly nearly got his neck wrung, too. And goodness, how everyone who had occasion to use those stairs did seem to be clumping about to-day. I never knew before that respectable city gentlemen wore hob-nailed boots, but nothing will ever convince me that they didn't all wear them that day.

Another ten minutes, and a new step on the stairs; a step, and, as it approached, the faintest rustle of moving skirts. . . . A woman. . . . Who? A sideways look through the open doorway showed me: Geraldine Maidstone. I caught a sharp breath and drew back. . . . She'd know me . . . be bound to. . . . Well—couldn't be helped. Nickolas Penticott needed sleep, and by the living Jingo he should have it. . . . Here she comes . . . and here goes. . . . I went out on to the dingy landing,

where the light was far from good, and stood with my back towards the light of my room.

“Mr. Penticott?” inquired Geraldine formally.

“Mr. Penticott is engaged,” I said, as formally.

“Just send my name in, please.”

“Mr. Penticott is engaged,” I repeated.

“But he’ll see me,” she said, the accent well on the “me.”

“It will not be possible for Mr. Penticott to see you just now,” I said.

“Are you Mr. Penticott’s secretary?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, then it was you who went down into Hertford with him last Sunday.”

Oh, unsubtle Geraldine!

“Yes,” I said again.

A pause, then:

“Will you be so kind as to take my name in to him at once?”

This, very politely, very chillingly, and with a sort of tired superiority.

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Penticott cannot be disturbed,” I said firmly.

“Who’s he with?” she asked sharply.

“He is engaged.”

But her eyes were growing accustomed to the bad light of the dingy landing, and quite suddenly she leaned towards me.

“I know you . . .” she said. . . . “I know you . . . wait a minute . . . I’ll get it . . . Julia Grey!”

Of course it had to come, I’d always known that; and somehow now that the fatal moment was here, it didn’t seem such an unholy shock as I’d always thought it was going to be. I vaguely wondered, at the back of my mind,

why I'd ever dreaded it, and why I wasn't more concerned about it now. For I heard my voice saying:

"My name is Jane Graham, here," quite unmoved, as if nothing untoward had happened.

"I don't care what it is here, it's Julia Grey everywhere else. . . . Come into the light and let's look at you. . . ."

She caught my shoulder in her firm, boyish hand, and turned me back into my room.

I kept her to the end of the room farthest from my guardian's door. And by keeping my own voice very low, set the key for hers. Somehow people always follow this lead. You can't shout, when the other fellow's talking in a whisper.

"Julia Grey," she repeated, looking at me in astonishment. "But he said he didn't know where you were," she added.

"He didn't," I said, meeting her eyes fairly and squarely.

"He said he hadn't been able to find you," she went on. . . .

"He hasn't found me."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"My name is Jane Graham here. I thought I told you."

"D'you mean to tell me that he doesn't know who you are?"

"Yes."

She made an exclamation of incredulity; an exclamation that plainly told me to tell that to the marines.

"Do you see any green in my eye?" she asked bitingly.

"I am not concerned with the color of your eyes!"

I replied. "But I can see that you don't believe me."

"I don't. You are shielding him."

"Against what?"

"The lie he told when he said he didn't know where to find you. . . ."

"Nickolas Penticott doesn't lie."

"All men will lie when there's a woman in the case."

"But, as it happens, there isn't."

Something of the simple truth must have got through to her, for she wavered.

"Can you stand there and tell me that Nickolas Penticott, your own guardian, has been working with you day after day without recognizing you?"

"Yes."

She drew a deep breath.

"But it simply isn't possible!"

"It is true."

"Well, it is strange, to say the least of it. You must confess that."

"No, it isn't even so very strange. My guardian had not seen me for five years."

"Hadn't he? Oh, but I thought . . ."

"Yes, I know you did. You never believed me when I used to tell you that I really knew nothing of him. You are apt to be over suspicious, Miss Maidstone."

She flushed hotly.

"But why did you do it?" she asked.

"That," I replied, "is entirely my affair."

"Isn't it Harry Penryth's too?" she retorted.

"Anyway, it isn't Geraldine Maidstone's."

"You're pretty cool, aren't you?"

"Why should I be anything else? I've done nothing criminal, you know."

"For all that you don't want Nickolas Penticott to know, do you?"

It was a shrewd guess, but I countered it composedly.

"Yes, when I choose to tell him."

"It may be when *I* choose to tell him," she threatened. It was quite a polite threat; not theatrical in any way; more, indeed, a simple statement of a possibility than a threat, really. I shrugged.

"Naturally, I have no influence over you."

"Are you going to take my name in to him?" she demanded.

"No," I replied at once.

"Then I shall just go in without formality." She made a movement to cross the room, but I stopped her.

"Mr. Penticott cannot see you or anyone else," I said.

"Why? What's all this mystery?" she asked, showing real anger.

"No particular mystery; only Mr. Penticott is asleep."

"Asleep!"

I nodded.

"Asleep?" she repeated. "But why?"

"Because he felt sleepy, I imagine," I answered gravely.

"Can't he be waked?"

"I've no doubt he could be, but he isn't going to be."

"Why not?"

"Because you care too much for him to wake him at a time when he most desperately needs sleep."

"But it's preposterous to go to sleep during business hours!"

"Perhaps; but the poor man's human, you know."

"Anyway, suppose I don't care enough not to have him waked?" she said, a touch of sulky rebellion in the words.

"Then I do."

She wheeled round on me.

"What?"

"I said, then I do," I repeated.

"Look here, what is Nickolas Penticott to you?"

"Nickolas Penticott is my guardian. You know that, don't you?"

"That's begging the question. You know perfectly well what I meant."

"Yes, I do, and you put your question round the wrong way. What you really wanted to know was, what am I to Nickolas Penticott."

She reddened again.

"Well, perhaps I did. . . . Answer it that way . . . and I'll be satisfied. . . ."

"Miss Maidstone, do you think you'd ever be satisfied?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if I were to tell you now, that as far as I know I am nothing more than a highly satisfactory secretary to Mr. Penticott, would you really be satisfied . . .?"

She was silent a moment, then:

"Ye-es . . . I think so. . . . I believe you are truthful. . . ."

"Yet you have never been able to believe me," I put in.

"Anyway, Mr. Penticott is hardly the type of man to make love to his secretaries."

The words were stung from her; so was the lofty, almost sneering tone. To do her justice, she wouldn't, at any other moment, have spoken them. It annoyed her rather, when I laughed softly.

"But you'll never really believe that, will you?"

"I know Nickolas Penticott at least as well as you do, surely."

"You may, with your intelligence; but, emotionally, you can't trust any man you—care for a good deal."

"What right have you to say all this?"

"I hadn't thought about it. . . . Perhaps I haven't any right. . . . Probably I ought to apologize, but somehow, I don't think I shall."

Miss Maidstone gave a little gasp.

"I think it's the . . . the most awful cheek," she said, breathlessly. "You've no right to keep me from seeing him, and he'll be very angry when he hears of it."

"Well, that will hurt me, not you. And I'm willing to risk it."

"Do you think he will applaud you for it, then?"

"I know he needs that sleep."

"But I want to see him, most importantly."

"Then perhaps, you would like to sit down and wait till he wakes."

"I can't; I've a luncheon date to keep."

"I'm sorry; that's the only suggestion I have to make."

"It's ludicrous! Utterly preposterous! He's no business to sleep in the middle of the morning!"

"If you had seen, as I have, the amount of work that man has put in during the last fortnight, you'd understand him sleeping at any old time. And you'd be glad for him to do it, too."

"Well, I'm not glad. . . ."

"I see you're not."

"It's most inconvenient. . . . I especially wanted to see him . . . about to-morrow."

"Will you leave a message?"

"With you?"

"Well, I'm the only one here."

She hesitated, then:

"No. . . . I'll be shot if I do."

"Very well."

"I came here to see him and I mean to see him."

"And I am here to prevent it, and I tell you quite

frankly that I intend to prevent it." She gave another funny little gasp.

"I think your behavior is simply abominable!" she said, in a sort of tense, stagey whisper.

My patience was fairly elastic, but it began to sag badly now.

"And I think your selfishness is utterly amazing! He's been slaving and slaving because of his uncle's illness, and you can't have the ordinary consideration to let him rest. What d'you want to see him about, anyway? Some silly little faked-up detail about your house. Well, he doesn't want to be bothered any time with things like that and he certainly isn't going to be waked up to hear about it."

"Well!" she said, round-eyed.

"Oh, I don't care what you say! If you really care a penny-piece about him, you'll cut your head off before you'll disturb him now!"

"I suppose you care for him yourself," she said. "I suppose that's what it is all about."

I laughed quietly.

"I suppose it is," I said.

"Do you know that everyone is expecting Nickolas Penticott and me to be engaged?"

"Is he expecting it?" I retorted quickly. Catty? Well, yes, I know it was; and I'm not proud of it. If I'd thought half a second, I wouldn't have said it, but I didn't think. And I was sorry when I saw the look in her face. It was the most awfully hurt thing. And it showed me something I hadn't known before. That although she'd hoped and hoped that he cared, and had tried to persuade herself that he did, and had fooled herself into looking upon it as a settled thing, she had never in her heart of hearts, been sure.

She recovered quickly, and I must say, I admired her exit speech. She just said very quietly:

“Perhaps you would be good enough to tell Mr. Penticott when he wakes, that I am sorry to have missed him, but that our arrangement to go down to Painzey Vale to see my new house holds good, and that I shall expect him, as settled, at ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“I will tell him the moment he wakes.” I promised her. She moved towards the door. Stopped there and turned.

“Of course, you realize that I shall tell him about you? About who you really are?”

“I couldn’t expect you not to. It is sporting of you to tell me beforehand.”

She didn’t quite like that but she didn’t say anything about it.

“Then, good-morning, Miss Grey,” she said formally.

“Good-by, Miss Maidstone,” I replied, not quite as formally.

And she went.

Poor Geraldine! How she did put herself—and her acquaintances—through it! The way she must fret and fume and suffer. Why was it? Because she cared too deeply? Or because she didn’t care enough? She thought she cared, anyway, and as far as suffering is concerned, I suppose that’s good enough.

So she was going down to Painzey Vale with Nickolas Penticott to-morrow, at ten o’clock. She was going to show him her new house. How could it compare with those dream houses we had discussed that Sunday? How would the whole day compare with that one and only Sunday? And would she really tell him about me? Yes, I suppose I must count on that. Not that I really minded his knowing; I didn’t. I wanted him to know, but I wanted to tell him myself, at my own time, entirely when

I saw fit. It was my joke and I didn't want anyone else barging into it.

Besides, for anyone else to tell him seemed like being found out, and I didn't like that.

Another thing, too; only the day before, my guardian had arranged with me to put in Saturday morning, here, clearing off a bunch of work. . . . And now, he had an engagement to go down to Miss Maidstone's new house. . . . When had he made that date with her? Before or after the arrangement with me? Had he forgotten her, or had he forgotten—me?

Another thing still; did Geraldine show to him quite all the jealous temper she allowed others to see? Suppose he were thinking of her as his wife, did he know just what he was letting himself in for? A memory of his hands upon mine, that day in the woods, when we fumbled over that absurd packet of sandwiches; of his sulky face when it came to the "best lunch" question; and the little look in his eyes as we drove off again came to me suddenly. What had they meant, these things? Suppose it were possible for a time to come, when, liking two girls most awfully, a man were uncertain which he loved? Wouldn't it be possible then for quite a tiny thing to turn the scale? Suppose . . . Oh, I wished that he were not going on that expedition with Geraldine to-morrow! Surely nothing but disaster could follow his marriage with Geraldine! Or did I only think that because I wanted to?

My reverie was interrupted by the return of Lester. He always showed an absolutely pussy-footed respect for silence, but still, I said, "Ssh!" with a finger raised warningly. I explained, and he said:

"Oh! Ah!"

"I thought it best to let him sleep it out," I added, and Mr. Lester was good enough to endorse this heartily.

CHAPTER XVII

NICKOLAS PENTICOTT slept bang through till four o'clock. Then, hearing him stir, I gave him fifteen minutes' grace; after which I took him in some tea and some sandwiches that I'd been out and bought, and a chunk of rather pleasant cake.

He was at his desk by this time and looked up when I entered.

"Hullo," he said amiably. "Have I been to sleep?"

"You have, rather," I admitted, and set the little tray before him.

"I say, what's all this? Is it a birthday or anything?"

"No. I thought you might be hungry."

"So I am, by Jove. Ravenous. Anybody been?"

"A clerk from Caley and Co. with some papers you require, the post and . . . Miss Maidstone."

"Oh, what did she want?"

"To see you about something; in connection with the house, I gathered."

"Lord, how she fusses about that house!" he laughed.

"You'd think she were buying Buckingham Palace at the very least."

He began on the sandwiches.

"Why didn't you wake me up to see her?"

"I thought you needed the sleep."

"I did. I feel a new man. . . . Say, have you been doing the watch-dog act out there all this time?"

"Well, I wasn't going to have anyone disturb you, if I could help it."

"Been out to lunch?"

"Oh," I said hastily, "Miss Maidstone left a message. . . ."

"Been out to lunch?" he repeated.

"She told me to tell you that she . . ."

"Been out to lunch?" he said again.

"Oh, bother lunch!" I said at last.

"That means you haven't. Look here, you oughtn't to do these things . . ." he paused, then handed me the plate of sandwiches. "Anyway, have a sandwich . . ." he said. "And . . . why are you such a brick to me, Miss Graham?" he added, in an odd, abrupt way, his eyes not quite meeting mine.

I took a sandwich, annoyed to notice that my hand wasn't quite steady. How the variations of that man's voice had the power to upset my equilibrium!

"Am I one?" I said, smiling.

"Aren't you?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you that you've been a brick to me? And that you get what you invoke?"

He flushed a little.

"I don't see that I've done anything. . . ."

"You've made it very pleasant to be here working for you. . . ."

"And one gets what one invokes?"

"Generally."

"So when you are a brick to me, it's because you think I've been a brick to you?"

"Oh," I said hastily. "Not perhaps such a definite bargain as that. . . ."

"This morning, for instance. . . ."

"Oh, I did that for the good of the office," I said, laughing.

"The office?" he repeated.

I nodded.

"Lester and me," I explained. "You see I did so hope it would improve your temper."

He drew back laughing, and a little disconcerted.

"All right, Miss Graham, I'll remember the motive of your kindness and endeavor to justify your hopes."

Was he offended? I couldn't tell. Oh, Julia Grey, when will you remember that you must be Jane Graham in the office!

"By the way, what was Miss Maidstone's message?" he asked, after a moment.

I gave the message word for word.

He struck his forehead with his hand in horrified remembrance.

"Great Scott! I'd clean forgotten it! When is it? Ten o'clock to-morrow? So it is! I remember now. . . . Then we shan't get our morning in. What a nuisance! Only I promised a week ago to go with her, so I can't very well not go, can I?"

I laughed—I simply couldn't help it. Perhaps it was his funny, boyish manner that made me, or perhaps it was that I was glad—yes, glad—that he should have "clean forgot" that engagement with Geraldine. Or perhaps it was just pleasure at seeing him so much his old self again.

Anyway, I laughed, and after a moment he laughed with me.

"Oh, well, can't be helped. We might put in next Saturday perhaps?"

"I'm sure it will do you heaps more good to go down

into the country with Miss Maidstone," I said, resolutely cheerful about it.

And the wretched man agreed with me!

Did I like that? I did not. It gave me quite a shock to realize how much I didn't like it.

He let everyone off early that day, and just as I was going, he said penitently:

"I'm afraid I've been a bad-tempered beast the last few days."

"You've been a very tired one," I said gently, and suddenly his whole face beamed.

"You dear!" he said, and stopped, reddening. Caught up his hat and coat and made a dash for it out of the office.

And all at once the bird melodies of that pinewood on Sunday were nothing to the song that started ringing in my heart. . . .

All the way home in the train that song kept up its lilting rhythm. Just two words . . . the last two he had said to me that day. . . . And the memory of his voice and his face as he'd said them. . . . With the stopping of the train at Wanstead, other memories jarred back into my mind. . . . Geraldine Maidstone, and that expedition to-morrow. . . . Had I read his voice and his looks aright? Or . . . had I been hopelessly mistaken?

And she was going to tell him about me. . . . How would she do it? Would she make out the very best case for me? Or would she allow him to gather that my ulterior motives were very deep? What could I expect of a woman as jealous and as angry as she was?

How I wished he wasn't going on that expedition to-morrow! I turned away from the station and walked on, the thoughts chasing round and round in my mind like mice in a wheel.

But what earthly good would wishing do? And I couldn't stop him going to-morrow, and I couldn't stop her telling him . . .

Couldn't I though?

The question pulled me up short. What if I told him myself? And forestalled her . . . ? When? Right now. How? Over the 'phone. . . . The thoughts were ripping through my mind. . . .

"All right! I will then!" I said that bit out aloud, but there was no one near to hear.

Filled with this new resolution, I made for the nearest 'phone office in a bee-line, and rang up Nickolas Penticott at his home address.

"Hallo?" came a familiar voice over the wire.

I gulped; more to gain time than anything, because, now it came to the point, my pulses were doing an excited racket.

"Is that Mr. Nickolas Penticott speaking?" I inquired unnecessarily.

"Yes," was the reply. "Who is it, please?"

And I shut my eyes and took the plunge.

"Julia Grey," I said, as clearly and as steadily as I could. It seemed to take a second for the news to sink in; then:

"What!" came his astonished cry, with rows of exclamations after it.

"Julia Grey," I repeated.

"Good heavens! Where have you been all this time?" he asked; but I didn't want any questions just yet, so I said hastily:

"I want to see you, please. When can I?"

"This evening?" he suggested at once.

"No. Oh, no—impossible!"

"Well, when, then? I have a most urgent reason for

wanting to see you, too. I do wish you had let me hear from you sooner."

His voice was quite aggrieved. And chilly, too! The Nickolas Penticott that Jane Graham knew and—well, liked most awfully, had suddenly turned on the stiff and formal guardian stunt again for the benefit of his tiresome ward—that erratic Julia Grey person!

The imp of mischief—a pal of mine—began to sit up and take notice.

"But since you have turned up again," went on my guardian in the same way, "please make your own plan."

And right there at that instant, I made it! Right there, without stopping to think, I made it! Right there on the craziest impulse of my life, I made it!

"Half-past ten to-morrow morning at your office!" I said, very clearly, and then I rang off.

Oh, Geraldine! Was I a cat? Was I? Or is "all fair . . .?" You were going to split on me, you know. And, truly, I wasn't conscious of deliberately setting out to dish your little expedition. I wasn't honestly. Only, just as honestly, I'm bound to admit that, probably, way back of my mind, it was your little expedition that prompted me to make that appointment! But, you know, Geraldine dear, it's just as important to me as it is to you. Nickolas Penticott means just as much to me as he does to you. Perhaps a bit more. . . . Perhaps it isn't possible for him to mean as much to anyone as he does to me. . . . Besides . . . his voice and his look . . . and those two little words. . . . Oh, anyway, I'd done it.

To-morrow at half-past ten, I should stand confessed before him . . .

"Couldn't act now, and never would be able to. . . ."

Oh, Nickolas Penticott, you'll have to give me best now!

By bed-time I'd got the details of the dramatic scene all fixed. I was going to get to the office at ten, and be Jane Graham until half-past.

Then, all in one palpitating moment, I was going to announce myself as Julia Grey. I tell you, I was all keyed up with excitement when I went to the office next morning.

I was there at ten sharp, and at a quarter-past in came Nickolas Penticott. He seemed a bit nervous, I thought, and knowing all I knew, I really didn't wonder.

When he saw me, he looked at me and said:

"Oh, good-morning, Miss Graham! I thought I told you that I wasn't going to be here this morning?"

"Yes, you did; but there was something I wanted especially to do, so I came along. I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind? Good lord, no! It was very good of you. I was afraid I'd forgotten to tell you that I'd made an engagement for this morning, that was all!"

"No, you told me all right."

He paused a second, lingering by my little typewriting table.

"I wasn't able to keep it, after all," he said, "because I had suddenly to fix an appointment here at half-past ten. I am expecting my ward, Miss Grey. Please bring her to me as soon as she comes, will you?"

He went into his room, but didn't quite close the door, and I heard him walking up and down. Evidently he couldn't settle down until his meeting with the prodigal Julia was over.

But she'd said half-past ten, and she'd meant half-past ten. If I didn't know that, who should? So, to keep him occupied, I took in the morning mail.

He glanced through it, and I cast an eye at the clock. Twenty minutes past! Only ten minutes more! I al-

most began to quake. Just as I was turning away, he called me back. He wasn't looking exactly cross; except when he was pretty considerably overworked, he very rarely was cross, but he'd a look of sort of justifiable indignation, a look of righteous upsetness, that made me wonder.

"Here's a notification from the *Morning Mail* and another from the *Daily Post* that my advertisement in the personal column has run out, and asking if they are to continue it in the same words. Tell 'em, thank heaven, no—in your own discreet language—and be bothered to them!"

He tossed the letters across to me. I took them.

"Really," he said, in the same injured way, "when people elect to disappear they might take into consideration the trouble and anxiety they cost others."

He paused, and I stared. I've never seen anyone look so deeply injured; something had gone far past the point of merely making him cross.

"To say nothing of the expense," he went on. "Those ads alone have cost me goodness knows how much, and haven't done a penn'orth of good, although they've been in those two papers and the *Times* every day for months."

"Evidently Miss Grey doesn't read the papers, or else she wilfully ignored my appeal."

I looked down at the letters in my hand. So, these advertisements were for me, and they'd run him into goodness knows how much! I stared and stared, and felt myself sort of going solider and solider. Somehow, this didn't seem a good beginning for a joke.

"I suppose advertising is—is very—er—expensive these days?" I managed to say.

"I resent those, because they never ought to have been

necessary. One doesn't begrudge money if it's for anything within reason, but I'm hanged if I can see the force of chucking it away for a silly girl's cowardly whim! After all, I've done what I could."

"You mean about these?" and I slightly lifted the letters.

"Oh, no," he said. "I must confess, those are an irritation, but the other was my obvious duty and I am glad enough to do it; only she ought to realize that I've done what I could. . . ."

"The . . . the other?" I faltered.

He shifted slightly.

"It isn't a thing I've told anyone about, Miss Graham, only with you . . ." He paused.

I simply had to know. It was something obviously that concerned me. . . . I simply had to know. . . .

"The other?" I questioned again.

Little by little I drew it from him. Little by little the truth came trickling through to my congealing brain, until, finally, I knew and understood.

He told me that, two years ago, the legacy I'd had from my father in the shape of investments, which by a condition of the will must remain untouched, had been lost in one of the big financial failures that the war brought, and that I'd had not a penny left.

That made me catch a breath, you may imagine. Not a penny left! But my interest had been paid just the same, and I'd drawn a big sum from my capital for my trousseau expenses. Then what? How?

"Then . . . then how has she lived? Where has her . . . money come from?" I asked faintly, trying to show only an outsider's interest in the financial troubles of Miss Grey.

"Well, naturally, I couldn't let that happen," he said.

“Her father was my father’s oldest friend and all that sort of thing. . . . Besides . . . one couldn’t let such a thing. . . . Oh, it was nothing, anyway.” he broke off,

He’d paid it himself! For two years Nickolas Penticott had been paying me my little income, and he it was who supplied the money for my trousseau.

From miles away, it seemed, his disgruntled voice came to me.

“To go and disappear in this hysterical way! Really, she ought to be made to realize that such things are beyond a joke.”

Beyond a joke? I should rather say so!

I could only think of what he’d told me. My income, my trousseau, this advertising—goodness! How my debt to this guardian of mine had mounted up! How was I ever going to pay it? It must be hundreds of pounds!

And I must pay it. I wanted to start fair and square with him.

A memory of that odd little look that had shown in his eyes yesterday made me repeat to myself:

“I must pay it. I must start clear with him.” Didn’t it seem the rottenest kind of fate. Just as I—he—we—were beginning to understand each other. Just as I was beginning to dream of—oh, lovely times together—this comes.

And I couldn’t even tell him who I was now. I couldn’t—it would be such a wretched start. For not only did I owe him all that money, but he considered me a wretched, thoughtless, selfish girl, who’d gone and done a wretched, thoughtless, selfish thing; all on the spur of a “cowardly whim.”

“She’s always been a load on my mind,” he said, after a little silence.

Ping, ping! sang out the clock, and made us both jump.

Half-past ten!

My joke! Ah, where was it? "Ask of the winds," and all that sort of thing, for, believe me, there was not the smallest trace of a joke left in my heart at this moment.

Again, from miles away, my guardian's voice came through to me.

"Now, I hope to goodness she's going to be in time," he muttered, and after another longish pause:

"It will be the last straw if she doesn't turn up after all. Because I've got Lord Henry coming up in about two minutes, specially to see her. I arranged it on the 'phone last night after speaking to her."

Lord Henry!

I stood petrified, rooted to the spot. Lord Henry coming here! But—but he'd know me, and ten to one he'd give me away. I certainly didn't want the truth to come out that way. What could I do? What could I say? Where could I go and hide? As in a dream my guardian's voice went on:

"Lord Henry wants to offer her a part in a new play he's interested in. A part, he says, no one could take so well as Julia Grey. It's hers for the asking, if she'd only turn up. . . . Listen! Who's that?"

The sound of someone approaching! I knew only too well that it couldn't be Julia Grey. The chances were, then, that it was Lord Henry. . . .

I looked round wildly, almost contemplating taking a header through the window. But it was too late to do anything practicable for the door behind me opened and the office boy's high voice announced "Lord Henry Penryth."

That sent the office, my guardian and me into a wild, chaotic whirl, and through it a well-remembered voice said:

“Good-morning, Penticott. Everything all right?”

And the reply:

“Well, I hope so, but she hasn’t turned up yet. I’m sorry. She said half-past ten. Do sit down. Have a cigar? We must allow her a few minutes’ grace, I suppose.”

“It’s very good news that you have heard from her,” went on Harry.

“Lord, yes; if she doesn’t let us down again,” replied my guardian, a little anxiously.

“I suppose you are quite sure it was Miss Grey on the ‘phone last evening?”

“Oh, yes; I’d know her voice anywhere. There’s no doubt about that. Oh, Miss Graham——” he called to me as if suddenly remembering my presence.

The moment had come. I’d got to turn.

Slowly, so slowly that it seemed to take eternities, I turned, and across the room I looked straight at Lord Henry.

If ever eyes sent out an S O S, my eyes did it then. But, of course, he couldn’t be expected, in the shock of the moment, to understand. Of course, of course he couldn’t; he’d blurt it out, call me Judy, or something. Ah, he’d be bound to give me away somehow.

But the seconds ticked by and I was still looking straight into his eyes and his eyes were still looking straight into mine, and he wasn’t doing any of these things; he wasn’t blurting anything or calling me anything or giving me away. He was just staring at me with a startled, “breathless” sort of look, and then there

came into his eyes a flick of something that seemed an answer to my desperate signal.

Next minute he was saying something.

“Hasn’t turned up yet? That’s too bad, but it’s early still.”

It wasn’t quite an answer to Nickolas Penticott’s last words, but it was good enough, and the tension seemed suddenly to snap round me, and although it had seemed such ages to me, it could not have been more than seconds really, for my guardian went on as if there had been no break.

“Just get those replies done for me, will you, Miss Graham?”

And I knew myself dismissed.

Somehow, I got through the doorway into the other office, and dropped into the chair before my table, limp with the reaction from the scene.

“Oh, Harry, bless you for an understanding dear!”

After a moment of blankness, while I recovered from the shock of things, I began to work, quite mechanically, my fingers doing their job on the typewriter, but my mind busy with a deluge of ideas.

Gradually they began to sort themselves out and get into some sort of order, and boiled down to their essences they came out at something like this:

Harry was here to see me, and to see me about a part, too, and he looked at me in a friendly way, surprised, of course, but not angry one bit. If he could be friends with me, after what I’d done, why shouldn’t I be friends with him?

And if we were friends, what was to prevent my having that part my guardian had mentioned?

Nothing that I could see, from a sentimental standpoint.

Well, then, I wanted that part, for one very special reason if for no other.

I knew I had it in me to be a success on the stage; well, I'd pretty well proved that, hadn't I?

And if I were a success I'd get pots of money. And I wanted money at that moment more than I wanted anything else in the world. It seemed to me I simply must have it. Because I wanted to pay back to my guardian all that I'd cost him. I wanted to clear all that up before I told him who I was, so, when I did tell him, I could start clear and level with him.

I didn't want all this wretched money business between us.

I didn't know whether it was exactly pride that made me feel so strongly about it, but I suppose that had something to do with it. Perhaps it was more that I didn't want things spoiled.

Suppose, only just suppose that that little odd look in his face and that little odd tone in his voice when he'd said those two words that kept ringing in my ears; just suppose that they really meant—oh, well, anything . . . wouldn't it be horrid, wouldn't it spoil things dreadfully to start with this irritating money question between us?

Yes, it would; it had got to be cleared off. . . . Or, anyway he'd got to see that I was at least making an effort to clear it. . . .

So I wanted that part.

But how could I get it?

Because, although Harry had come to see me about it, and here I was, I couldn't reveal myself. The part was mine for the asking, and I couldn't ask for it. What an exasperating position! Surely, though, there must be some way out. Suppose I should call on Harry later? Or telephone? It might be too late. Probably time was

already getting pretty short. Well, it must be fearfully pressing, or Harry wouldn't have come posting up here to see me the very moment of my reappearance like this. Saturday morning is a favorite morning with Pelman Barclay for settling business of this sort.

I don't know just how long I sat there thinking and clicking mechanically away at the typewriter, but it must have been a good twenty minutes or so. Then I was aroused by my guardian putting his head round the door, and saying, "Miss Graham, would you come here a moment, please? I wish to speak to you at once."

Goodness! how frigid! What had happened? I suppose Harry must have gone and revealed the truth. Perhaps he'd been absolutely cornered and couldn't help himself. Well, now for it!

CHAPTER XVIII

A MOMENT later I stood before the two men, feeling a good deal like "the accused" facing a couple of judges.

"Perhaps you would explain to Miss—er——" began Harry, rising as I entered.

"Certainly, if you'd rather," said my guardian, leaning back against his big desk. "I think I told you, Miss Graham, that Lord Henry Penryth was anxious to find my ward, Miss Grey, in order to offer her a part in the new play he is interested in?"

"Yes, you told me," I replied, my lips feeling dry and unwilling because I felt Harry's eyes were on my very pink face.

"Well, Miss Grey hasn't turned up, and it's just eleven. Time is getting short."

"Yes," broke in Harry. "We hope to start rehearsals the end of next week.—Monday week, at latest."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all, and wondering what on earth it was all leading to.

My guardian turned to me, smiling slightly.

"Lord Henry has asked me to suggest that you might—well, briefly, he thinks you are exactly the type he requires, and wonders whether you'd care to try your hand at playing the part. Er—would you, Miss Graham?"

"I? Oh!" I cried, utterly taken aback, and amazed. I hadn't remotely foreseen this.

Oh, Harry! What a muddle the whole thing is getting into! So this was your way out of a situation you didn't understand.

Nickolas Penticott seemed a good deal satisfied with my amazement: it was perfectly genuine, but didn't quite spring from the cause he imagined.

"Yes, I hinted to Lord Henry that I scarcely thought you altogether cut out to be an actress, temperamentally, I mean," he said.

And "Can't act now, and never will be able to" went singing through my head, and I only just kept myself from laughing hysterically. I just managed not to, and Harry saved me by laughing himself.

"Don't let his gloomy view influence you, Miss Graham; he said much the same to Julia Grey once, I believe."

My guardian joined in the laugh against himself.

"Perhaps it is that I don't want to lose the very best secretary I ever had. Well, hang it! You can hardly expect me to be enthusiastic about that, can you?" he said, looking at me with his frank, friendly eyes.

"No, it's very rough on you, I admit, that Miss Graham should be—if she will forgive a personal remark—so much the same type as Miss Grey."

Oh, Harry! You utter wretch!

"I simply had to risk offending you," he added. "I hope the suggestion doesn't offend you, though?"

The question was addressed to Julia Grey, *not* to Jane Graham.

"Oh, please," I said quickly. "I think it was most awfully kind of you to offer me the chance. I hope you realize that I am very, very grateful."

I raised my eyes to his as I spoke, and saw that he understood.

"Then the question is entirely up to you, Miss Graham," said my guardian.

"Then—I'd like to try—the—the part, please," I said, stammering a little.

"What! You mean you'll take it?" cried my guardian in a tone of almost comic dismay.

"Oh, will it be dreadfully inconvenient to you?" I asked, with a horrid little achey feeling at the thought of leaving him in the lurch.

"No, no, of course not! I didn't mean that at all. Please don't consider me," he said hastily, his good-looking face flushing slightly.

Not consider him! As if I could help it.

There was still heaps of work to do; I knew that. And yet . . . I must make that money . . . I thought distractedly. I was never so torn in my life. If it hadn't been for the importance of the money, I'd have turned Harry's offer down flat, and been happy to do it.

Harry was eager to clinch matters, and get away from a situation that might at any moment become very awkward for him.

"I hoped you might be able to come along with me, now, and see Barclay about the part. I don't want him to settle with anyone else."

"In that case you'd better get ready at once, Miss Graham," said my guardian. "You won't wait any longer for Miss Grey?" he added, turning to Harry.

"Do you think it is much good?" gravely inquired Harry.

"Quite frankly, judging by her erratic conduct, I think probably it isn't," said Nickolas Penticott dryly.

"And as I promised to see Barclay at half-past eleven, bringing either Miss Grey, or, at least news of her, with me——"

“Yes, exactly; then you haven’t much time, Miss Graham.”

Oh, how perfectly calmly he said it! If it hadn’t been for that sudden tone of dismay a few sentences earlier that was still ringing in my ears, I might have thought that he didn’t care a twopenny jot who his secretary was.

I fled into the other office to get my things on, and had put on my hat and was struggling into my coat when my guardian followed.

He gave me a hand with my coat in an absent sort of way, and then said very earnestly:

“Please don’t think me interfering, but are you sure that you are wise in doing this?”

“I don’t know about being wise,” I replied, a little wildly, “but I’ve just got to do it.”

“Got to?” he echoed, puzzled.

“I mean—that is, I’ve always longed to make a career for myself on the stage.”

Which was a perfectly veracious statement of my feelings up to this very minute, but *now*, with Nickolas Penticott standing before me looking at me with goodness only knows—I wonder if he knew himself?—what mixture of meanings in his eyes—well now, I simply knew that all I wanted to do in the whole world was to stay right here in the office, working for him, helping him, being with him. And if it hadn’t been for that miserable money question that stood so gauntly between us I believe I’d have blurted all this out then and there. But I must do something to settle that question first—I must.

“Really?” His voice came to me through the tangle of my thought. “I’d no idea you felt anything of the kind. But, you know, it might be possible to feel all that and still have no talent for acting, mightn’t it?”

“Yes—oh, yes! Of course it might.”

“And the stage, unless you really are marked out for such a career is—well, it’s a wretched business, I always think,” he went on. “I mean, to be third rate in any of the arts is so—so very deplorable.”

“Yes, but I don’t mean to be third-rate—I mean to get to the very top.”

He didn’t quite look at me as he broke in, saying:

“I don’t care for the idea of a stage career for any girl I like.”

The utter dear!

“You’ve been happy here, haven’t you?” he demanded abruptly.

“Awfully happy. It isn’t that a bit,” I assured him.

“Then suppose—I don’t mean to be a wet blanket, but just suppose you should fail to impress Pelman Barclay this morning, will you come back to me?”

I looked up smiling to thank him, but the smile faded and the thanks faltered, for there, in his eyes, was that odd little look again; that look that had the power to make my heart give an extra hop. I lowered my eyes quickly.

“Jove, but I hate losing you!” he broke out suddenly. “I do, really!” He moved a step or two away, then wheeled round and came back again, his white teeth showing in that singularly sweet smile of his.

“I’ve never had anyone so completely satisfactory to work with before,” he added.

Was it only that? Was it? I wish I could be sure, and then:

“Idiot!” I said to myself. “Naturally, he doesn’t want all the trouble of finding another new secretary. That odd little look in his nice eyes is nothing to do with you, as a private personality.”

“I’m so glad I have pleased you,” I said, just as mat-

ter-of-factly as ever I could, which wasn't much, anyway. "And if I should fail with Mr. Barclay, I'll be only too glad to come back to you. In fact, I don't want to leave one bit."

I began bravely enough, but ended on an idiotic quiver.

"Then why——" began my guardian impulsively, but stopped, thrust his hands into his pockets, and said:

"Naturally you don't want to lose such a glorious chance." His note of profound gloom didn't match the gloriousness of the chance at all. "It's absolutely the chance of your life. Of course, I realize that."

"And," I went on, pulling myself together severely, "suppose I should not fail to impress Mr. Barclay—suppose I should actually get this part, there used to be a girl at the Stanmore offices who'd be just as competent a secretary as myself."

His face changed. He reddened, and looked like a big, sulky boy. I went on hastily:

"I happen to know that she is free just now, and I could speak to her myself if you like. I know she is really very competent."

But at that he suddenly growled out:

"Competence be hanged, and the girl, too!"

So—so it wasn't only—it wasn't just—it wasn't—well what wasn't it? I didn't dare to stop to think. I just rushed ahead as quickly as I could. It was so very hard to feel any real enthusiasm for a stage career just at that moment.

"And I mean to get on, right to the very tip-top. I believe I have talent, and I mean to make good," I said, fearing that in another moment my resolution and courage would all break up into little bits.

"Then, of course I hope you will," he said slowly, sounding as if he didn't hope it a bit.

"I—I've just absolutely got to!" I cried. It was harder to leave than I'd ever imagined it could be.

He looked at me, puzzled again, then, with his characteristic simple directness, he added:

"Miss Graham, why have you got to?"

And before I had time to stop the words I stammered out:

"I've got to make money—I mean, I want——" But it was too late to catch back what I'd said, and I just stood before him blushing and furious with myself.

My guardian took a few turns up and down the room, then came and halted before me.

"We've grown to be very good friends, haven't we?"

"Yes," I replied, hardly audible.

"And you'd understand anything I said and not take it wrongly, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I said again.

"Then could you—do you think—just tell me why you've got to make money?"

My mind stretched out in all directions for an answer, desperately searching, and could only come to this:

"I—I owe someone a—a lot——"

"You owe? You are in debt?" He looked at me incredulously, then his face changed, and he laughed. "But it can't be anything very serious."

"It is, desperately," I assured him.

"But—see here, don't worry. How much is it?"

"I—I'm not absolutely certain to the very last penny, but it must be three or four hundred pounds," I faltered.

His eyes opened round at that.

"Three or four hundred! How in Heaven's name do you come to be involved to that extent?"

"Oh, it isn't bridge or—or poker, or anything like

that! It isn't anything horrid, really—honestly it isn't, only——” I broke off, catching a breath.

To tell the truth, I was as near to tears as I'd ever been in my life, so, rather abruptly, I crossed to my little table and began putting things in order.

“Horrid?” he said. “No, I didn't suppose it was, but——” And he broke off and turned away again.

From the other side of the room he said:

“Do you think the stage is going to clear this off for you?”

“It must. I've got to make it.”

A silence, then:

“You needn't,” he said shortly.

“Needn't?” I echoed, for lack of anything more inspired to say.

He faced me again.

“Let me help you,” he said, in the same short way.

“Let me advance you what you need. I'd be glad to——”

“You!” I cried. “You! Oh——”

“You could repay me, if you felt you must, on very easy——”

“Oh, stop! Stop! You don't know what you're saying!” I interrupted him distractedly.

“Yes, I do. Don't be offended. Take it as I mean it, and do let me do it.”

Was there ever such irony! Nickolas Penticott offering me the money with which to clear my debt to Nickolas Penticott!

“No, please don't! I couldn't really. Thank you ever so much, but I—you don't understand! I couldn't—indeed I couldn't!” I stammered out, scarcely knowing what I said.

“Besides,” I ended weakly, “it wouldn't be any good.”

"I can't see the force of that," he said. "My Warren Fishers are of the same ever-reducing value as anyone else's." He smiled, and spoke lightly, trying to put me at ease, evidently thinking that it was the mere natural awkwardness of the situation that embarrassed me, but I broke in quickly:

"No, they aren't in this case—I mean, of course they are, in any case, but I couldn't take it from you. Please don't ever, ever suggest such a thing again."

He reddened clear up to the roots of his smooth hair.

"If you think I'm just trying to be cheeky, say so," he said bluntly, hurt.

I felt my eyes fill stingingly.

"I—I couldn't think such a thing of you. You ought to know that I couldn't!" I cried, my voice shaking. "And—oh, I'd better go quickly!" And I turned blindly and went towards the door.

The sound of quick steps, a hand on my shoulder, and a voice shaking like my own as it said:

"Jane!"

I was turned forcibly round so that I faced my guardian, but I kept my eyes down, not daring to look at him.

"No, I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd think that of me," he said jerkily.

"Just don't go, though. Just stay with me always. Just give me the—the right to help you. Just—just marry me, will you, Jane?"

The words tumbled out as if they couldn't come fast enough, but I was all keyed up with the events and emotions of the day, and I blurted out before I could stop myself:

"You are just suggesting that out of kindness and—and pity, so that you can help me and——"

"No, I'm not," he said, suddenly quiet, and his hand fell from my shoulder.

"I'm saying it because I love you. I've always loved you, and I always shall."

Love me! How the words echoed in my heart! My guardian loved me! Nickolas Penticott! I nearly laughed aloud.

"Oh, you haven't thought, you haven't considered," I began, not knowing in the least how to go on. I'd got to tell him who I was now. I couldn't let him love me not knowing.

His face changed sensitively, and he looked down.

"I was forgetting," he said abruptly. "I was forgetting that you have a career to make—perhaps a brilliant career. I was forgetting that I mustn't ask you to give up that for me, even if you cared."

If I cared! Oh, Nickolas Penticott, if you could know how I cared!

"It isn't that," I said, faltering slightly. "I'm not thinking of the—the stage."

He raised his head quickly and his face was all alight.

"Do you mean that you would give up that chance? Would you? For me?" He came towards me, but I spread out my hands to stop him.

"No, don't! You mustn't until——" I broke off, then desperately: "Nickolas Penticott, do you really—really love me?"

"Would I say so if I didn't?"

"No—oh, no, only you might think you did for the moment. It might be just a—a passing attraction," I stammered.

He laughed shortly.

"Well, it isn't," he said. "I knew something had happened that day you first came here. The moment I

looked at you and you looked at me I knew that something was changed. Only I didn't know what. But I have known for some time now. . . . And Sunday, you were so sweet . . . I began to hope. . . . Lord, but I've hardly been able to think or see with . . . with you working right beside me. . . ." He came a step nearer, but I still fended him off.

"Then you mustn't say a word until you know something more," I said.

"Well?" he demanded, looking at me very straight.

"Oh, do help me to tell you! Do make it just a bit easier!" I cried out shakily. "Don't you really recognize me? Don't you, really?"

He stared as if he thought I'd lost my wits, then slowly:

"No-o."

"I'm Julia Grey," I said, and the silence snapped down upon us like a tangible thing.

He went on staring as if he didn't understand, then I saw recognition creeping into his eyes—recognition and something else that it just made me go cold to see.

"You're Julia Grey?" he said.

"Yes, can't you see that I am?"

He just stared and stared.

"So you are," he said at last very quietly, and again, "so you are."

I laughed tremulously.

"Can't act, and never will be able to," I blurted out.

"You'll never be able to say that again, will you?"

"No," he said, in the same utterly quiet way. "I'll never be able to say that again."

"I mean," I went on, conscious that I was rushing on unthinkingly, but utterly unable to stop myself, "here I've been acting for weeks in your own office——"

"In my own office," he repeated.

"And—and getting away with it," I finished, his steady eyes making me nervous.

"Oh, yes, and getting away with it."

"Well, I have, haven't I?" I said, because anything was better than silence. "I mean you were quite deceived, weren't you?"

"Quite."

"Oh, do say something original, for mercy's sake!" I cried out, near to tears. "Wasn't it a good joke—wasn't it?"

"Oh, splendid! Forgive me if my sense of humor isn't—isn't quite equal to it."

There was a short silence; he didn't move, neither did I. We just stood and looked at each other.

"So that was it; I see now," he said at last. "All the time you've been here winning my confidence, you've been laughing in your sleeve. I see now."

"You don't, you don't!" I protested. And oh, how utterly he didn't!

"I hate deceptions and I never should have thought you capable of practising them."

"Can't you see how difficult it was for me? I didn't know how you'd take it."

"I think you might have trusted me. If not just at first, at least before this. Haven't we been good enough friends? Haven't I treated you with absolute trust and confidence?"

"Yes, oh, you have, but——"

"Then you might have done the same with me."

If only he'd been furious in a noisy sort of way; if only he'd flared up and raved or done something violent, but he didn't; he just kept on that steady, quiet note that sounded so final and irrevocable, and—and finishing.

"No wonder you feel that you have a career on the stage. It's reasonable for one of London's most startling successes to feel that. And I'm sorry I annoyed you by rather losing my head just now. You'll soon be so very great a star that, of course, what I've said will seem silly presumption, and—and all that sort of thing." He turned away slightly, his face lowered and just a bit sullen.

"How you must have laughed just now when I was telling you all about Julia Grey. Oh, certainly, it's a very good joke!"

Of course, I ought to have realized that it all must have been a bit of a facer to him, to be ardently proposing to a girl one minute and to find that she's quite a different person the next.

"And last evening, over the 'phone, when you made that appointment with me here this morning. Indeed; an excellent joke!"

There was a touch of a sort of two-fold contempt in his voice now, against me as a deceiver and against himself as a fool, that fairly fired the temper of me. It was hard for him to be fair, perhaps, but I was all worked up and nervy too. It hadn't been exactly an easy day for me, had it? And suddenly I was swept away on a wave of hasty feeling.

"You said just now that you loved me. I don't believe you do. I don't believe you know what it means to—to love a—a person. If you did you'd understand, or—or try to, anyway."

I caught a sharp breath and then, and then—oh, I'm always ashamed to think of this. I said a dreadful, dreadful unpardonable thing. It just tangled out before I could stop it.

"I believe you're just thinking of those—those

wretched old advertisements and all the money you've spent on them; you think I might have let you know and saved you the expenses of them."

He turned round at that and his face was white and set, but his usually mild, grey eyes were blazing.

"Take that back," he commanded in a perfectly terrible voice.

But I wouldn't; I was past caring, anyway, and I just went on recklessly disregarding the storm signals.

"Well, let me tell you that it's just exactly to pay off that and—and all the rest, that I'm going on the stage. That's the debt I told you about. That's the money I owe, and that's why it wasn't any good for you to help me. And now I'll go back to Harry and I'll get that part, and I'll be a star—a great star, and I'll pay back every penny I owe you. And oh, I think you're horrid, horrid, horrid!"

And without waiting for anything I flung open the door and went in to Harry.

"I'm ready!" I said, a catch in my voice. "Quite ready."

Nickolas Penticott, looking a bit queer, but trying to appear natural, followed me.

I was still at boiling point but I didn't intend Harry to see anything.

"Good-by," I said to my guardian, mustering a really brilliant smile. "And I'll speak to the girl I told you of; I know she will make a most suitable secretary. She isn't the least like *me*."

And of course poor Nickolas Penticott couldn't say a thing with Harry there. Oh, I'm not a bit proud of myself; not a little bit, but I was all strung up and past caring.

When it actually came to the minute of parting I would

have given anything to take it all back, to go to him and beg him just to let me explain properly, and if he had made the smallest sign that he'd be glad to hear me, I'd have stayed.

But I went towards the door, and he said nothing to stop me. My heart was praying and praying that he would, but he didn't. He just let me go. Let me go, when one word would have kept me.

And he talked of love. Why, he didn't know the first thing about it. The first, simplest little rules. It didn't occur to me then that perhaps I'd forgotten them, too. I was just too utterly miserable to think of anything but how miserable I was.

A moment later I was on the stairs with Harry; then he was helping me into his big car and getting in and settling down beside me. And then we started off away from the office, away from the life I had liked so; away from—oh, everything that meant anything to me.

“Well, little lady!” said Harry in the old friendly way. I swallowed hard, I had to, or I'd have choked, and blinked away the mist that was in my eyes.

“Well, Harry?” I replied.

CHAPTER XIX

AND that brought me to a sense of the situation, and I remembered that here I was once again with this man that I'd treated so badly. I mustn't go on thinking of Nickolas Penticott and all my troubles.

I must shake myself out of all that, and tell Harry how sorry I am for the way I treated him, and how I know that I'm the one to blame, and that he has every right in the world to blame me if he feels so inclined.

But just in what words, I didn't know.

Where were the words that would really fit the occasion? I'd have been something distinctly more than human if I'd found the situation easy, wouldn't I?

Especially when my mind was all muddled up with the scene in the office with Nickolas Penticott, and I couldn't keep myself from wondering what he was thinking and doing, and whether he was just the least little bit sorry for having let me go, and whether it really was true that he'd said he loved me and had asked me to marry him, or whether all that was a dream.

I gave myself a shake and turned to Harry, but before I could say anything he said:

"It's good to see you again, Judy." And I stammered out:

"It's good of you to say that after—after all that I've—done."

And in my voice was the apology I'd been wondering how I should make. It had just done itself, and Harry recognized it, too, for he said:

"After all you've done? And what have you done so very dreadful after all? Just found that the confirmedest old bachelor that ever was, was no real mate for you."

"Oh, Harry, it's sweet of you, and just like you, to take it that way!"

"There's no other way to take it. Perhaps in his heart of hearts the old bachelor person knew it all along."

"If only I'd realized how utterly and unfailingly generous you are, I'd never have done it all so—so crazily. I'd have come to you and told you. Only there seemed no time. I was so—so——" I broke off.

"Of course you were. Do you imagine that I could think you'd do such a thing simply on the spur of the moment? Or for any reason but the most serious one of all?"

Nickolas Penticott did, I thought, stirring up the resentment in my heart as much as I could. For it was a very sore heart just at that moment. Harry understood, why couldn't *he!*

"And, Harry, sometimes the biggest, deepest things come to you all in a moment, don't they? Come to you so overwhelmingly that they don't give you time to think; they just make you know that you must do one thing, or you mustn't do another, as the case may be, and you've just got to obey, somehow."

"Obey, or suffer for it," he said soberly. "Best by far to obey, dear, as you did. Just tell me one thing. There's nothing in all that time—the time that we were engaged—that makes you—well, wish most fearfully that it hadn't happened, is there?"

I was silent a moment, then :

“Only that I—turned it all against you and—made it into a—a hurtful thing for you,” I said slowly.

“No,” he put in quickly. “You couldn’t do that. Whatever happened after, nothing can take that time away from me; its memories are mine for always, and—it was a very happy time for me, Judy.”

“Oh, Harry, if you only knew how I blame myself!” I said remorsefully.

“Don’t, little lady; just let me be grateful to you for the happiness you gave me, will you?”

And I whispered:

“Of course—of course!” not knowing what to say.

“Then it’s ‘as you were’ for us, eh?” he said, smiling. “Back to the days of the swing-door and the theatre. We are friends always, aren’t we, Judy?”

“Always and always, Harry,” I said gratefully, and we shook hands on it.

“Now then, let’s talk real, solid, sober business,” he said.

And for the remainder of our drive he was giving me the details of the new play and the part he wanted me to play in it, and telling me what an enormous chance it was for me. That if I played it as he thought, and Pelman Barclay thought, I could play it, I’d simply mop up London, get right away to the very tip-top, and be made for life.

“By the way,” he said, “I hope you don’t mind the innocent little trick I played on Penticott. I was just a bit up a tree about it, not to say in a fog. I could see, of course, that he didn’t know who you were, and that you didn’t want him to, but I just had to get you for that part.”

“Oh, it’s all right. And, anyway, he does know now.

I—I told him,” I stammered out, and very briefly I gave him a sort of idea of what I’d been doing since I disappeared that fatal wedding-day, and just how it happened that I was secretary to Nickolas Penticott, and how it was he didn’t know me.

And when I’d finished, I found Harry was looking at me intently.

“I see,” he said slowly, and, after a little pause: “Good chap, Penticott, isn’t he?”

“Yes—er—awfully good,” I replied.

“I’ve had occasion to meet him several times just lately——”

“About me?” I asked.

“Well, yes—generally,” he admitted. “And I think he’s a fine sound chap.”

“I—I’m glad.”

“And he’s a good-looker, too, isn’t he?”

“Yes—oh, yes,” I agreed, wishing he’d talk of anything else in the world.

“Even though he’s not a type you—adore, eh?” he added, and there was the wickedest twinkle in his eyes.

“Do you remember saying that?” he added.

I turned and looked out of the window.

“Yes.”

There was a little silence. Then:

“I wonder,” he began; and again, “I wonder.” But what he wondered I didn’t find out, for the car drew up outside His Highness’ Theatre, and Harry got out and held out his hand to aid me.

As we went up the well-remembered stairs to Pelman Barclay’s room at the very tip-top, he said to me:

“Now, remember, here’s absolutely the part of your life, and it’s yours for the asking. Wade right in, little lady, and justify our opinion of you.”

I answered gratefully that I truly would.

But I began to feel a bit shaky as I approached the great man's door. What would he think of me for behaving as I had? Wouldn't he be awfully disgusted with me? Especially as Harry was an old friend of his. Wouldn't he probably ask questions, and show wonder, and be altogether disconcerting? I began to feel sure he would for he'd always been very free and friendly with me, and had always shown a personal interest in me.

So when Harry went in, saying in a note of triumph: "Here she is!"

I followed rather slowly, not too awfully sure of myself.

And there was the great Barclay sitting in his crunched-up way in his big chair, with "His Nibs" beside him as of old, and he got up when I appeared, and said kindly:

"So glad to see you again, Miss Grey. Now, you are going to play this part for us, aren't you? And may we use your dramatic disappearance as a 'puff' for your reappearance in the play?"

I nearly gasped. So that was how it appeared to him, was it? As a good "*ad.*" for the play! Suddenly I laughed. Not that I felt like laughing; I didn't. I'd never felt less like it in my life, but somehow it did all seem so queer to be back here, discussing a play and a part and a salary that seemed huge to me. Queer in ever so many ways. Because I hadn't done it for so long for one thing and because it was so awfully flat now that I was doing it. I ought to have been thrilled and delighted; it was such a chance.

But something tugged at my heart; tugged and tugged till I could hardly endure the aching of it.

I shook myself again.

"Now, Judy Grey, don't be a sentimental fool. He's

not worth thinking of—if he couldn't understand any better than he did. You've just got to go right in, take this enormous chance, make a heap of money, pay him all you owe, and banish him from your mind for ever!"

Good, sound advice, no doubt—but did I follow it? I did not. I couldn't. Through all the arrangements about the part and all that business, thought and memories kept weaving in and out.

"What's he doing? Still stewing up in that wretched office? Oh, and there's ever so much work left unfinished."

That's the sort of thing that my mind would be saying to itself while my lips were saying something quite other.

Pelman Barclay was most awfully sweet to me. And he didn't ask me to read the part; he wanted me to take it away with me and look it over during the week-end, and see whether I'd care to play it, and as he told me that he added with a twinkle:

"We must put her up to all the tricks of the real London star, mustn't we, Harry?"

Rehearsals, he told me, were postponed for a week to accommodate the "flu" germ acquired by the promising young "juvenile."

In fact, everything was going wrong, he cheerfully informed me, which was why he was in such good spirits; when things began all wrong, the "omen" was all right.

I heard my voice doing a really brilliant laugh, but my brain was saying:

"I know the girl I suggested to Nickolas Penticott won't be really satisfactory. No one will look after him and help him as *I* could. She's competent—oh, yes. But as he said, 'Hang competence, and the girl, too!'"

Then I awoke to find Barclay impressing upon me *what an enormous chance this was for me.* How I could

now make an absolutely tip-top name, and how I'd jolly nearly lost the chance, for he'd told Harry that if I wasn't conjured up by noon to-day, he'd give the part to someone else. There was someone ready to step right into it.

Harry said:

"How tremendously lucky that you turned up just when you did!"

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Barclay. And——

"Yes, wasn't it?" I echoed. But the words came flatly, for my thoughts were:

"There's that awfully ticklish Brancombe versus Netley case only half prepared, and all that deadly contract business to go into—and Nickolas Penticott all on his own."

I shook myself again, and said with all the enthusiasm I could muster:

"It's such a magnificent case—I mean part. And it's so good of you to—to give me the—the chance."

After that I was glad enough when I'd said good-by to Barclay and fled, the brown-covered script in my hands.

Harry came with me, and wanted to give me lunch, but I couldn't; the mere thought of eating anything nearly choked me; I just wanted to get away and be alone and think, and get things sorted out in my mind.

When I got back to my own scrubby little room, I flung the play on to the table and myself into a chair, and sat for ages and ages, thinking. But it wasn't any good; I didn't seem to come to any conclusion about—oh, about anything. So I drew the play towards me and began looking it over.

It was a fine part, the one I was offered. Fine—and I could play it, too. I knew I could. And be a success.

I knew it. And yet, do you know, I couldn't get up any great enthusiasm about the prospect.

I simply couldn't; I read bits of it aloud to get my interest up. There was, of course, a big crying scene.

"Lord, I could do a crying scene right now that would knock spots off any scene that I, or any one else, could ever do on any stage whatever!" I said shakily. And then, annoyed by my own sappy conduct, I started arguing it out.

"You might take London by storm with a part like this, you little fool," I told myself angrily.

"I don't want London; I don't want anything except . . ." myself told me, rebelliously.

"But you must make money."

"Oh, yes, of course . . . I forgot."

"And pay him back all you owe."

"Yes, yes . . . every penny, I was only forgetting."

"You can't be under an obligation to him."

"No, never in this world! I was only forgetting, I tell you."

"Well, don't forget."

"I won't. I mustn't. I mean, of course, I couldn't."

The two sides of the argument ran side by side, fifty-fifty up to that point.

Then came a sudden violent clash of opinion.

"After the stuffy way he behaved over the expense of those advertisements, and the fuss he made at having to pay for them, it would be beneath your dignity——"

"He wasn't stuffy! The ads. were just the last straw, and the last straw is always a small thing, that's all; and he didn't make a fuss. He's been simply splendid to me, and—and I don't believe I've got any particular dignity, anyway. And there I've gone and left him in

the lurch with a heap of work in hand, and—and—everything.”

And there I sniffed several times, which didn't prevent a large tear from trickling unromantically off the tip of my nose on to the brown-covered script.

“Oh, my part! I must study it. I must. . . .”

But my head went down into my hands and the crying scene had begun.

* * * * *

It wasn't until the middle of Sunday that the awful thought burst on me that I hadn't been to see that highly competent girl about the Nickolas Penticott secretarial job!

Goodness! I'd really gone and left him in the lurch now! And it was Sunday. The Stanmore office was closed, I didn't know where to find the girl . . . and there was nothing to be done. He'd have to apply at the office himself and take just any girl Kendrick sent . . . and . . . Oh, what a thoughtless pig I'd been!

I went to bed late that night, and didn't sleep till ever so much later still, but force of habit woke me at my usually early hour. And I was up just as I always had been “in time for the office.”

“But there's no more office for me,” I thought disconsolately as I ate my breakfast. “No more office for me!”

But even as I thought it, I said aloud:

“Isn't there, though? And why not? Since I've left Nickolas Penticott in the lurch and forgotten to send that competent girl to him, isn't it my duty, my plain duty——”

And it's wonderful how splendid and lighthearted a sense of doing your duty makes you feel sometimes!

“But what about the money?” the argument began.

“Oh, bother the money! I’ll pay him back in service, or—or—— Oh, well, money isn’t the only thing in the world that counts.”

“But suppose he doesn’t want you for his secretary any more? Suppose he won’t have you, and turns you out?”

The thought was a staggerer, and made my heart beat furiously for a second, and made me go hot all over with sheer fright, but I set my lips and said stubbornly, although there was the least suspicion of a quiver in the words:

“Well, if he does turn me out, he does; but if he doesn’t—well, he doesn’t, that’s all. It’s just a chance and I’m going to take it.”

And off I set, speeded by the stout and hearty Mrs. Henty, who was wholly unaware of the storm of destiny-making emotion that had raged in the inmost heart of her outwardly calm and composed lodger.

When I got to the office I met the buttons-boy on the stairs.

“Mornin’, miss! The guvnor’s here already,” he said confidentially.

“Th-thank you!” I stammered, unprepared for this. I thought I’d be first; but I went resolutely in, albeit my heart thumped with every step that took me nearer to the office door.

Just outside I hesitated, then gritted my teeth, turned the knob, flung open the door, and went in.

Nickolas Penticott raised his head sharply, caught a quick breath, and stumbled up to his feet, an odd little cry escaping him.

I stood for a second as I’d stood that first day, just *staring*; then I faltered out:

“I said I’d send you a—a competent secretary. Well, I’m—I’m her—no, I mean I’m she—that is, I’m it.”

I stopped, and for another age we just stared at each other.

Then Nickolas Penticott tilted back his good-looking head and laughed. Such a queer, triumphant sort of laugh. Then, in about two long-legged strides, he was before me, his eyes were looking down into mine, and his voice, shaken all to bits, was saying:

“You’ve come back to me! You’ve forgiven me and come back?”

“Yes. My voice was less than a whisper.

“*Why*—why?”

“Because—oh, well, because——”

“My dear!”

And his arms closed round me, and I was laughing and crying together, and trying to explain into the bargain.

“No one will ever—help you as—as *I* can. And you said ‘Competence be hanged and—the girl—too.’”

He laughed again, bent his head quickly, and for a long, long moment my explanation couldn’t carry on—and didn’t matter, anyway. I was here, he was here, his arms were round me, and all the world stood breathless as our lips met.

Paradise in an office! Yes, but paradise is anywhere, where the right two people are, isn’t it?

And since Nickolas Penticott had a habit of sitting on the edge of his big desk, I was presently perched up beside him, while we indulged in the rather incoherent explanations that usually rise to the surface on these occasions.

“Darling,” he said penitently, “what a brute I was, but I didn’t really mean to be. It was just the surprise

and shock of finding out suddenly like that—about who you really are, I mean.”

“Oh, it was my fault—it was, really. I ought to have told you. And even now—even now, I haven’t done what I meant to do,” I broke in, as penitent as he.

“About what, dear? What did you mean to do?”

“I mean to—to pay you back that—all that money that you’ve let me have——”

He laid a hand on my mouth.

“Please, please don’t speak of that. I’ve been going hot and cold every time I’ve thought of what I said that day. What a mean beast you must have thought me.”

“I didn’t! I didn’t! And you weren’t! You were perfectly justified. But truly I didn’t know that you were spending money to find me, and I didn’t know about the other, either. I thought I still had my income. And all the time it was yours.”

“That doesn’t matter now, dear, does it? I mean, mine’s going to be yours, isn’t it? And——”

“But I wanted to make a heap of money and pay you back and start clear—so that there was nothing between us. And I felt that I couldn’t, I simply couldn’t face you till it was paid. And that’s why I was so keen on getting the part.”

“Still, you did face me, darling,” he put in softly.

“Oh, suddenly it came to me how silly, how silly, and—and sort of small it was to let a thing of that sort be so important. I saw things at their true values and the few hundred pounds that had seemed such a barrier suddenly dwindled down to nothing beside——”

“Beside?”

“Oh, beside all the real things, the things that matter *most*. I couldn’t just let myself lose the best in the world for a miserable few hundreds of pounds. At least I’d got

to make a bid for the best. And so I came this morning. And if you turned me out, well, you turned me out, and if you didn't——"

"And if I didn't?"

"Of course you didn't."

"How logical! And now I'll make my confession: I've been kicking myself ever since Saturday for risking losing you for the sake of my idiotic pride, or dignity, or whatever it was that thought it had a right to be incensed by your deception. And as soon as you'd gone I got things down to their true values, too; they came down with a bump and I woke up and I tell you I've been the wretchedest man alive. As if it matters what you call yourself! It's you, and all the dear charm of you, that I love, and I'm bound to go on loving you, you know, whether you're Julia or Jane."

"Please do," I murmured.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything—I mean, not anything of any importance."

"Anyway, I heard," he added shamelessly, and went on: "You know it was just as much sheer fear of losing you that made me such a beast. Because if you were going to be a great star, I couldn't hope that you'd look at an everyday man like me."

Now, I hadn't said that I wasn't going to be a great star yet! But he seemed to take it for granted that I wasn't, for one strong arm went round me and held me close to his side.

"Day before yesterday," I said, my face hidden on his sleeve, "you asked me to—to marry you. And judging by your, well, your behavior, to-day, I'm forced to the conclusion that—that you meant it."

He laughed.

"Meant it? You blessed darling! Well, rather!"

"Well, then, aren't love and marriage everyday things? I mean, haven't they got to be for always? And isn't always made up of everyday? And so, isn't an everyday man the very, very best kind of man to marry?"

"You bet he is!" he agreed enthusiastically. "If it means me and you. It doesn't take five seconds to consider that verdict. But, darling, I quite forgot. You haven't said you aren't going to take that part," he added anxiously.

"But I'm not," I put in.

"Because of me?"

"Because of you."

"Have you realized what you're giving up?"

"I've not given up anything. I've just found a better engagement, that's all. One that will have a lifetime's run."

"But there's precious little glory in it, dear."

"Isn't there? I'm not so sure."

For a while we sat silently, looking out before us with eyes that took no note of the office around us, eyes that saw sheer through its walls into the future of our dreams, then through the stillness, his voice, not quite steady, broke suddenly:

"Shall we . . . er . . . call it a go?"

"It's a go!" I whispered, and our shaky laughter mingled.

* * * * *

A ridiculously short time later we were married.

"What is there to wait for?" demanded Nickolas Penticott, and the answer to that being "Nothing," we didn't wait.

And it was a tiny, un-fussy wedding at a tiny, quiet

church. Norah was my chief bridesmaid and the twins insisted upon attending me, too; they had forgiven me sufficiently by this time for doing them out of a "real, swagger wedding," but I don't think they ever forgave Nickolas Penticott for not being a lord.

"You know, Judy, when your father began life as the proprietor of a coffe-stall, you do so love a lord," they explained. Still, they admitted that he was "adorably good-looking" and said hopefully that "of course one day he might become a 'sir'—lawyers often did."

It took Lady Cordelia longest of all to forgive me, but she did finally and wrote me the loveliest letter for my wedding-day, though she herself went out of England for the event. I *think*, so that she couldn't possibly be present at it.

Geraldine Maidstone, too, was "out of town, and therefore unable to be present," which seemed to surprise Nickolas Penticott a good deal, but it didn't surprise me one bit.

Penticott senior insisted upon being present, and was wheeled up the aisle in a bath-chair, and explained to all our friends that he had been the chief means of bringing about the happy event; and when I demanded to know how he'd worked it, he said:

"Didn't you tell me he was hoping to have that horse-faced secretary of his back again? And didn't I tell him not to be a damn young fool?"

So that was that.

Harry was there, and the real dear of creation. He'd said it was to be "as you were," and he kept his word. He's about the best and closest friend we have, and the more he and my husband knew of each other, the better friends they became. And little Nick? . . . Oh, but that's going more than a year ahead . . . but little Nick

stands a chance of being the worst-spoilt kid in the world, between Aunt Cordelia, Uncle Harry, and Great-Uncle Penticott senior. To say nothing of Aunt Norah and Aunt Butter and Aunt Bun.

Still, he's getting fat and jolly on it, and he's going to have Big Nick's eyes and nose and mouth and chin, but his mother's goldeny-brown hair, with the sunshiny lights in it. Which shows what an exceptionally discriminating boy he is, and—yes, my hair is goldeny-brown again; the red all wore off, or grew off, or something; anyway, it's off, and I'm myself again.

Pelman Barclay says sometimes, as he rides a wobbly but triumphantly crowing little Nick on his great and famous shoulders:

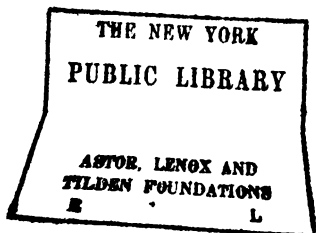
"Mrs. Penticott, I'll never forgive you for leaving the stage; you'd have made a great name, and you had the chance of a lifetime." Then, with a look round, he adds: "But, child, you chose the better part—the better part."

And in the fine, melancholy voice that can sway thousands to laughter or to tears, there is the smallest little sigh of envy.

And so, my dear guardian—my rather "tiresome" guardian; my somewhat "stodgy" guardian. . . . Oh, Nickolas Penticott! Could it ever have been I who said these things?—And so . . .

Well, anyway, here's to you!

THE END



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