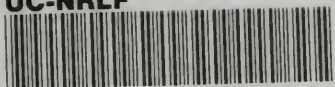


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A MAN OF HONOUR

A TRAGEDY

In Four Acts

By W. S. MAUGHAM

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TO
GERALD KELLY

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“Ich übersah meine Sache und wusste
wohin ich wollte”

ECKERMANN, *Gespräche mit Goethe.*

GENERAL PREFACE

. . . . For Clisthenes, son of Aristonymus, son of Myron, son of Andreas, had a daughter whose name was Agarista : her he resolved to give in marriage to the man whom he should find the most accomplished of all the Greeks. When therefore the Olympian games were being celebrated, Clisthenes, being victorious in them in the chariot race, made a proclamation ; “that whoever of the Greeks deemed himself worthy to become the son-in-law of Clisthenes, should come to Sicyon on the sixtieth day, or even before ; since Clisthenes had determined on the marriage in a year, reckoning from the sixtieth day.” Thereupon such of the Greeks as were puffed up with themselves and their country, came as suitors ; and Clisthenes, having made a race-course and palaestra for them, kept it for this very purpose. From Italy, accordingly, came Smindyrides, son of Hippocrates, a Sybarite, who more than any other man reached the highest pitch of luxury, (and Sybaris was at that time in a most flourishing condition ;) and Damasus of Siris, son of Amyris called the Wise : these came from Italy. From the Ionian gulf, Amphimnestus,

son of Epistrophus, an Epidamnian ; he came from the Ionian gulf. An Ætolian came, Males, brother of that Titormus who surpassed the Greeks in strength, and fled from the society of men to the extremity of the Ætolian territory. And from Peloponnesus, Leocedes, son of Pheidon, tyrant of the Argives, a decendant of that Pheidon, who introduced measures among the Peloponnesians, and was the most insolent of all the Greeks, who having removed the Elean umpires, himself regulated the games at Olympia ; his son accordingly came. And Amiantus, son of Lycurgus, an Arcadian from Trapezus ; and an Azenian from the city of Pæos, Laphanes, son of Euphorion, who, as the story is told in Arcadia, received the Dioscuri in his house, and after that entertained all men ; and an Elean, Onomastus, son of Agæus : these accordingly came from the Peloponnesus itself. From Athens there came Megacles, son of Alcmaeon, the same who had visited Croesus, and another, Hippoclides, son of Tisander, who surpassed the Athenians in wealth and beauty. From Eretria, which was flourishing at that time, came Lysanias ; he was the only one from Eubœa. And from Thessaly there came, of the Scopades, Diactorides a Cranonian ; and from the Molossi, Alcon. So many were the suitors. When they had arrived on the appointed day, Clisthenes made inquiries of their country, and the family of each ; then detaining

them for a year, he made trial of their manly qualities, their dispositions, learning, and morals; holding familiar intercourse with each separately, and with all together, and leading out to the gymnasia such of them as were younger; but most of all he made trial of them at the banquet; for as long as he detained them, he did this throughout, and at the same time entertained them magnificently. And somehow of all the suitors those that had come from Athens pleased him most, and of these Hippoclides, son of Tisander, was preferred both on account of his manly qualities, and because he was distantly related to the Cypselidæ in Corinth. When the day appointed for the consummation of the marriage arrived, and for the declaration of Clisthenes himself, whom he would choose of them all, Clisthenes, having sacrificed a hundred oxen, entertained both the suitors themselves and all the Sicyonians; and when they had concluded the feast, the suitors had a contest about music, and any subject proposed for conversation. As the drinking went on, Hippoclides, who much attracted the attention of the rest, ordered the flute-player to play a dance; and when the flute-player obeyed, he began to dance: and he danced, probably so as to please himself; but Clisthenes, seeing it, beheld the whole matter with suspicion. Afterwards, Hippoclides, having rested awhile, ordered some one to bring in a table; and when the table came in, he

first danced Laconian figures on it, and then Attic ones; and in the third place, having leant his head on the table he gesticulated with his legs. But Clisthenes, when he danced the first and second time, revolted from the thought of having Hippoclidides for his son-in-law, on account of his dancing and want of decorum, yet restrained himself, not wishing to burst out against him; but when he saw him gesticulating with his legs, he was no longer able to restrain himself, and said: "Son of Tisander, you have danced away your marriage." But Hippoclidides answered: "Hippoclidides cares not." Hence this answer became a proverb. (HERODOTUS VI. 126, *Cary's Translation.*)

This play was first performed by the Stage Society
at the Imperial Theatre on February 22, 1903, with
the following cast :

BASIL KENT	H. GRANVILLE BARKER
JENNY BUSH	WINIFRED FRASER
JAMES BUSH	O. B. CLARENCE
JOHN HALLIWELL	DENNIS EADIE
MABEL	GERTRUDE BURNETT
HILDA MURRAY	MABEL TERRY-LEWIS
ROBERT BRACKLEY	NIGEL PLAYFAIR
MRS. GRIGGS	HENRIETTA COWEN
FANNY	GERTRUDE DE BURGH
BUTLER	A. BOWYER

A MAN OF HONOUR

CHARACTERS

BASIL KENT

JENNY BUSH

JAMES BUSH

JOHN HALLIWELL

MABEL

HILDA MURRAY

ROBERT BRACKLEY

MRS. GRIGGS

FANNY

BUTLER

TIME : *The Present Day.*

ACT I—*Basil's lodgings in Bloomsbury.*

ACTS II AND IV—*The drawing-room of Basil's
house at Putney.*

ACT III—*Mrs. Murray's house in Charles Street.*

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A MAN OF HONOUR

THE FIRST ACT

SITTING-ROOM OF BASIL'S LODGINGS IN BLOOMSBURY.

In the wall facing the auditorium, two windows with little iron balconies, giving a view of London roofs. Between the windows, against the wall, is a writing-desk littered with papers and books. On the right is a door, leading into the passage; on the left a fire-place with arm-chairs on either side; on the chimney-piece various smoking utensils. There are numerous bookshelves filled with books; while on the walls are one or two Delft plates, etchings after Rossetti, autotypes of paintings by Fra Angelico and Botticelli. The furniture is simple and inexpensive, but there is nothing ugly in the room. It is the dwelling-place of a person who reads a great deal and takes pleasure in beautiful things.

BASIL KENT is leaning back in his chair, with his feet on the writing-table, smoking a pipe and cutting

the pages of a book. He is a very good-looking man of six-and-twenty, clean-shaven, with a delicate face and clear-cut features. He is dressed in a lounge-suit.

[There is a knock at the door.

BASIL.

Come in.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Did you ring, sir?

BASIL.

Yes. I expect a lady to tea. And there's a cake that I bought on my way in.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Very well, sir.

[She goes out, and immediately comes in with a tray on which are two cups, sugar, milk, &c.

BASIL.

Oh, Mrs. Griggs, I want to give up these rooms this day week. I'm going to be married. I'm sorry to leave you. You've made me very comfortable.

MRS. GRIGGS.

[With a sigh of resignation.] Ah, well, sir, that's lodgers all over. If they're gents they get married; and if they're ladies they ain't respectable.

[A ring is heard.

BASIL.

There's the bell, Mrs. Griggs. I dare say it's the

lady I expect. If any one else comes, I'm not at home.

MRS. GRIGGS.

Very well, sir.

[*She goes out, and BASIL occupies himself for a moment in putting things in order. MRS. GRIGGS, opening the door, ushers in the new-comers.*

MRS. GRIGGS.

If you please, sir.

[*She goes out again, and during the next few speeches brings two more cups and the tea.*

[*MABEL and HILDA enter, followed by JOHN HALLIWELL. BASIL going towards them very cordially, half stops when he notices who they are; and a slight expression of embarrassment passes over his face. But he immediately recovers himself and is extremely gracious. HILDA MURRAY is a tall, handsome woman, self-possessed and admirably gowned. MABEL HALLIWELL is smaller, pretty rather than beautiful, younger than her sister, vivacious, very talkative, and somewhat irresponsible. JOHN is of the same age as BASIL, good-humoured, neither handsome nor plain blunt of speech and open.*

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

A MAN OF HONOUR

MABEL.

Look pleased to see us, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

I'm perfectly enchanted.

HILDA.

You *did* ask us to come and have tea with you, didn't you?

BASIL.

I've asked you fifty times. Hulloo, John! I didn't see you.

JOHN.

I'm the discreet husband, I keep in the background.

MABEL.

Why don't you praise me instead of praising yourself? People would think it so much nicer.

JOHN.

On the contrary, they'd be convinced that when we were alone I beat you. Besides, I couldn't honestly say that you kept in the background.

HILDA.

[*To* BASIL.] I feel rather ashamed at taking you unawares.

BASIL.

I was only slacking. I was cutting a book.

MABEL.

That's ever so much more fun than reading it, isn't it? [*She catches sight of the tea things.*] Oh, what a

beautiful cake—and two cups! [*She looks at him, questioning.*]

BASIL.

[*A little awkwardly.*] Oh—I always have an extra cup in case some one turns up, you know.

MABEL.

How unselfish! And do you always have such expensive cake?

HILDA.

[*With a smile, remonstrating.*] Mabel!

MABEL.

[*Oh, but I know them well, and I love them dearly. They cost two shillings at the Army and Navy Stores, but I can't afford them myself.*]

JOHN.

I wish you'd explain why we've come, or Basil will think I'm responsible.

MABEL.

[*Lightly.*] I've been trying to remember ever since we arrived. You say it, Hilda; you invented it.

HILDA.

[*With a laugh.*] Mabel, I'll never take you out again. They're perfectly incorrigible, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*To JOHN and MABEL, smiling.*] I don't know why you've come. Mrs. Murray has promised to come and have tea with me for ages.

MABEL.

[*Pretending to feel injured.*] Well, you needn't turn me out the moment we arrive. Besides, I refuse to go till I've had a piece of that cake.

BASIL.

Well, here's the tea! [MRS. GRIGGS *brings it in as he speaks. He turns to HILDA.*] I wish you'd pour it out. I'm so clumsy.

HILDA.

[*Smiling at him affectionately.*] I shall be delighted.
[*She proceeds to do so, and the conversation goes on while BASIL hands MABEL tea and cake.*]

JOHN.

I told them it was improper for more than one woman at a time to call at a bachelor's rooms, Basil.

BASIL.

If you'd warned me I'd have made the show a bit tidier.

MABEL.

Oh, that's just what we didn't want. We wanted to see the Celebrity at Home, without lime-light.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] You're too flattering.

MABEL.

By the way, how is the book?

BASIL.

Quite well, thanks.

MABEL.

I always forget to ask how it's getting on.

BASIL.

On the contrary, you never let slip an opportunity of making kind inquiries.

MABEL.

I don't believe you've written a word of it.

HILDA.

Nonsense, Mabel. I've read it.

MABEL.

Oh, but you're such a monster of discretion. . .
Now I want to see your medals, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] What medals?

MABEL.

Don't be coy! You know I mean the medals they gave you for going to the Cape.

BASIL.

[*Gets them from a drawer, and with a smile hands them to MABEL.*] If you really care to see them, here they are.

MABEL.

[*Taking one.*] What's this?

BASIL.

Oh, that's just the common or garden South African medal.

MABEL.

And the other one?

BASIL.

That's the D.S.M.

MABEL.

Why didn't they give you the D.S.O.?

BASIL.

Oh, I was only a trooper, you know. They only give the D.S.O. to officers.

MABEL.

And what did you do to deserve it?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] I really forget.

HILDA.

It's given for distinguished service in the field, Mabel.

MABEL.

I knew. Only I wanted to see if Mr. Kent was modest or vain.

BASIL.

[*With a smile, taking the medals from her and putting them away.*] How spiteful of you!

MABEL.

John, why didn't you go to the Cape, and do heroic things?

JOHN.

I confined my heroism to the British Isles. I married you, my angel.

MABEL.

Is that funny or vulgar?

BASIL.

[*Laughing.*] Are there no more questions you want to ask me, Mrs. Halliwell?

MABEL.

Yes, I want to know why you live up six flights of stairs.

BASIL.

[*Amused.*] For the view, simply and solely.

MABEL.

But, good heavens, there is no view. There are only chimney-pots.

BASIL.

But they're most æsthetic chimney-pots. Do come and look, Mrs. Murray. [BASIL and HILDA approach one of the windows, and he opens it.] And at night they're so mysterious. They look just like strange goblins playing on the house-tops. And you can't think how gorgeous the sunsets are: sometimes, after the rain, the slate roofs glitter like burnished gold. [To HILDA.] Often I think I couldn't have lived without my view, it says such wonderful things to me. [Turning to MABEL gaily.] Scoff, Mrs. Halliwell, I'm on the verge of being sentimental.

MABEL.

I was wondering if you'd made that up on the spur of the moment, or if you'd fished it out of an old note-book.

HILDA.

[*With a look at BASIL.*] May I go out?

BASIL.

Yes, do come.

[*HILDA and BASIL step out on the balcony, whereupon JOHN goes to MABEL and tries to steal a kiss from her.*]

MABEL.

[*Springing up.*] Go away, you horror!

JOHN.

Don't be silly. I shall kiss you if I want to.

[*She laughing, walks round the sofa while he pursues her.*]

MABEL.

I wish you'd treat life more seriously.

JOHN.

I wish you wouldn't wear such prominent hats.

MABEL.

[*As he puts his arm round her waist.*] John, some body'll see us.

JOHN.

Mabel, I command you to let yourself be kissed.

MABEL.

How much will you give me?

JOHN.

Sixpence.

MABEL.

[*Slipping away from him.*] I can't do it for less than half-a-crown.

JOHN.

[*Laughing.*] I'll give you two shillings.

MABEL.

[*Coaxing.*] Make it two-and-three.

[*He kisses her.*]

JOHN.

Now come and sit down quietly.

MABEL.

[*Sitting down by his side.*] John, you mustn't make love to me. It would look so odd if they came in.

JOHN.

After all, I am your husband.

MABEL.

That's just it. If you wanted to make love to me you ought to have married somebody else. [*He puts his arm round her waist.*] John, don't, I'm sure they'll come in.

JOHN.

I don't care if they do.

MABEL.

[*Sighing.*] John, you do love me?

JOHN.

Yes.

MABEL.

And you won't ever care for anybody else?

JOHN.

No.

MABEL.

[*In the same tone.*] And you will give me that two-and-threepence, won't you?

JOHN.

Mabel, it was only two shillings.

MABEL.

Oh, you cheat!

JOHN.

[*Getting up.*] I'm going out on the balcony. I'm passionately devoted to chimney-pots.

MABEL.

No, John, I want you.

JOHN.

Why?

MABEL.

Isn't it enough for me to say I want you for you to hurl yourself at my feet immediately?

JOHN.

Oh, you poor thing, can't you do without me for two minutes?

MABEL.

Now you're taking a mean advantage. It's only this particular two minutes that I want you. Come and sit by me like a nice, dear boy.

JOHN.

Now what have you been doing that you shouldn't?

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] Nothing. But I want you to do something for me.

JOHN.

Ha, ha! I thought so.

MABEL.

It's merely to tie up my shoe. [*She puts out her foot.*]

JOHN.

Is that all—honour bright?

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] Yes. [*JOHN kneels down.*]

JOHN.

But, my good girl, it's not undone.

MABEL.

Then, my good boy, undo it and do it up again.

JOHN.

[*Starting up.*] Mabel, are we playing gooseberry—
at our time of life?

MABEL.

[*Ironically.*] Oh, you are clever! Do you think
Hilda would have climbed six flights of stairs unless
Love had lent her wings?

JOHN.

I wish Love would provide wings for the chaperons
as well.

MABEL.

Don't be flippant. It's a serious matter.

JOHN.

My dear girl, you really can't expect me to play
the heavy father when we've only been married six
months. It would be almost improper.

MABEL.

Don't be horrid, John.

JOHN.

It isn't horrid, it's natural history.

MABEL.

[*Primly.*] I was never taught it. It's not thought
nice for young girls to know.

JOHN.

Why didn't you tell me that Hilda was fond of Basil! Does he like her?

MABEL.

I don't know. I expect that's precisely what she's asking him.

JOHN.

Mabel, do you mean to say you brought me here, an inoffensive, harmless creature, for your sister to propose to a pal of mine? It's an outrage.

MABEL.

She's doing nothing of the sort.

JOHN.

You needn't look indignant. You can't deny that you proposed to me.

MABEL.

I can, indeed. If I had I should never have taken such an unconscionably long time about it.

JOHN.

I wonder why Hilda wants to marry poor Basil!

MABEL.

Well, Captain Murray left her five thousand a year, and she thinks Basil Kent a genius.

JOHN.

There's not a drawing-room in Regent's Park or in Bayswater that hasn't got its tame genius. I don't know if Basil Kent is much more than very clever.

MABEL.

Anyhow, I'm sure it's a mistake to marry geniuses. They're horribly bad-tempered, and they invariably make love to other people's wives.

JOHN.

Hilda always has gone in for literary people. That's the worst of marrying a cavalryman, it leads you to attach so much importance to brains.

MABEL.

Yes, but she needn't marry them. If she wants to encourage Basil let her do it from a discreet distance. Genius always thrives best on bread and water and platonic attachments. If Hilda marries him he'll only become fat and ugly and bald-headed and stupid.

JOHN.

Why, then he'll make an ideal Member of Parliament.

[BASIL and HILDA come into the room again.]

MABEL.

[*Maliciously.*] Well, what have you been talking about?

HILDA.

[*Acidly.*] The weather and the crops, Shakespeare and the Musical Glasses.

MABEL.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] Oh!

HILDA.

It's getting very late, Mabel. We really must be going.

MABEL.

[*Getting up.*] And I've got to pay at least twelve calls. I hope every one will be out.

HILDA.

People are so stupid, they're always in when you call.

MABEL.

[*Holding out her hand to BASIL.*] Good-bye.

HILDA.

[*Coldly.*] Thanks so much, Mr. Kent, I'm afraid we disturbed you awfully.

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands with her.*] I've been enchanted to see you. Good-bye.

MABEL.

[*Lightly.*] We shall see you again before you go to Italy, shan't we?

BASIL.

Oh, I'm not going to Italy now, I've changed all my plans.

MABEL.

[*Giving JOHN a look.*] Oh! Well, good-bye. Aren't you coming, John.

JOHN.

No: I think I'll stay and have a little chat with Basil, while you tread the path of duty.

MABEL.

Well, mind you're in early. We've got a lot of disgusting people coming to dinner.

HILDA.

[*With a smile.*] Poor things! Who are they?

MABEL.

I forget who they are. But I know they're loathsome. That's why I asked them.

[*BASIL opens the door, and the two women go out.*

JOHN.

[*Sitting down and stretching himself.*] Now that we've got rid of our womankind let's make ourselves comfortable. [*Taking a pipe out of his pocket.*] I think I'll sample your bacey if you'll pass it along.

BASIL.

[*Handing him the jar.*] I'm rather glad you stayed, John. I wanted to talk to you.

JOHN.

Ha! ha!

[*BASIL pauses a moment, while JOHN looks at him with amusement. He fills his pipe.*

JOHN.

[*Lighting his pipe.*] Nice gal, Hilda—ain't she ?

BASIL.

[*Enthusiastically.*] Oh, I think she's perfectly charming. . . . But what makes you say that ?

JOHN.

[*Innocently.*] Oh, I don't know. Passed through my head.

BASIL.

I say, I've got something to tell you, John.

JOHN.

Well, don't be so beastly solemn about it.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] It's a solemn thing.

JOHN.

No, it ain't. I've done it myself. It's like a high dive. When you look down at the water it fairly takes your breath away, but after you've done it—it's not so bad as you think. You're going to be married, my boy.

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] How the deuce d'you know ?

JOHN.

[*Gaily.*] Saw it with mine own eyes. I congratulate you, and I give you my blessing. I'll get a new frock-coat to give the lady away in.

BASIL.

You? . . . [*Suddenly understanding.*] You're on the wrong tack, old man. It's not you're sister-in-law I'm going to marry.

JOHN.

Then why the dickens did you say it was?

BASIL.

I never mentioned her name.

JOHN.

H'm! I've made rather more than an average ass of myself, haven't I?

BASIL.

What on earth made you think . . . ?

JOHN.

[*Interrupting.*] Oh, it was only some stupid idea of my wife's. Women are such fools, you know. And they think they're so confoundedly sharp.

BASIL.

[*Disconcerted — looking at him.*] Has Mrs. Murray . . . ?

JOHN.

No, of course not! Well, who the deuce are you going to marry?

BASIL.

[*Flushing.*] I'm going to marry Miss Jenny Bush.

JOHN.

Never heard of her. Is it any one I know?

BASIL.

Yes, you knew her.

JOHN.

[*Searching his memory.*] Bush . . . Bush . . .
[*With a smile.*] The only Jenny Bush I've ever heard of was a rather pretty little barmaid in Fleet Street. Presumably you're not going to marry her.

[*JOHN has said this quite lightly, not guessing for a moment that it can have anything to do with the person BASIL proposes to marry. Then, since BASIL makes no answer, JOHN looks at him sharply: there is a silence while the two men stare at one another.*

JOHN.

Basil, it's not the woman we used to know before you went out to the Cape?

BASIL.

[*Pale and nervous, but determined.*] I've just told you that you used to know Jenny.

JOHN.

Man alive, you're not going to marry the barmaid of the "Golden Crown"?

BASIL.

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Jenny was a barmaid at the "Golden Crown."

JOHN.

But, good Lord, Basil, what d'you mean? You're not serious?

BASIL.

Perfectly! We're going to be married this day week.

JOHN.

Are you stark, staring mad? Why on earth d'you want to marry Jenny Bush?

BASIL.

That's rather a delicate question, isn't it? [*With a smile.*] Presumably because I'm in love with her.

JOHN.

Well, that's a silly ass of an answer.

BASIL.

It's quite the most obvious.

JOHN.

Nonsense! Why, I've been in love with twenty girls, and I haven't married them all. One can't do that sort of thing in a country where they give you seven years for bigamy. Every public-house along the Thames from Barnes to Taplow is the tombstone of an unrequited passion of my youth. I loved 'em dearly, but I never asked 'em to marry me.

BASIL.

[*Tightening his lips.*] I'd rather you didn't make jokes about it, John.

JOHN.

Are you sure you're not making an ass of yourself? If you've got into a mess, surely we can get

you out. Marriage, like hanging, is rather a desperate remedy.

[BASIL is sitting down and moodily shrugs his shoulders. JOHN goes up to him, and putting his hands on his friend's shoulders looks into his eyes.]

JOHN.

Why are you going to marry her, Basil?

BASIL.

[*Springing up impatiently.*] Damn you, why don't you mind your own business?

JOHN.

Don't be a fool, Basil.

BASIL.

Can't I marry any one I choose? It's nothing to you, is it? D'you suppose I care if she's a barmaid?

[*He walks up and down excitedly, while JOHN with steady eyes watches him.*]

JOHN.

Basil, old man, we've known each other a good many years now. Don't you think you'd better trust me?

BASIL.

[*Setting his teeth.*] What d'you want to know?

JOHN.

Why are you going to marry her?

BASIL.

[*Abruptly, fiercely.*] Because I must.

JOHN.

[*Nodding his head quietly.*] I see.

[*There is a silence. Then BASIL, more calmly turns to JOHN.*

BASIL.

D'you remember Jenny?

JOHN.

Yes, rather. Why, we always lunched there in the old days.

BASIL.

Well, after I came back from the Cape I began going there again. When I was out there she took it into her head to write me a letter, rather ill-spelt and funny—but I was touched that she thought of me. And she sent some tobacco and some cigarettes.

JOHN.

My maiden aunt sent you a woollen comforter, but I'm not aware that in return you ever made her a proposal of marriage.

BASIL.

And so in one way and another I came to know Jenny rather well. She appeared to get rather fond of me—and I couldn't help seeing it.

JOHN.

But she always pretended to be engaged to that scrubby little chap with false teeth who used to hang

about the bar and make sheep's eyes at her over innumerable Scotch-and-sodas.

BASIL.

He made a scene because I took her out on one of her off-nights, and she broke it off. I couldn't help knowing it was on my account.

JOHN.

Well, and after that?

BASIL.

After that I got into the habit of taking her to the play, and so on. And finally. . . !

JOHN.

How long has this been going on?

BASIL.

Several months.

JOHN

And then?

BASIL.

Well, the other day she wired for me. I found her in the most awful state. She was simply crying her eyes out, poor thing. She'd been seedy and gone to the doctor's. And he told her . . .

JOHN.

What you might really have foreseen.

BASIL.

Yes. . . . She was quite hysterical. She said she didn't know what to do nor where to go. And she

was in an awful funk about her people. She said she'd kill herself.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] Naturally she was very much upset.

BASIL.

I felt the only thing I could do was to ask her to marry me. And when I saw the joy that came into her poor, tear-stained face I *knew* I'd done the right thing.

[*There is a pause. JOHN walks up and down, then stops suddenly and turns to BASIL.*]

JOHN.

Have you thought that you, who've never needed to economise, will have to look at every shilling you spend? You've always been careless with your money, and what you've had you've flung about freely.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] If I have to submit to nothing worse than going without a lot of useless luxuries, I really don't think I need complain.

JOHN.

But you can't afford to keep a wife and an increasing family.

BASIL.

I suppose I can make money as well as other men.

JOHN.

By writing books?

BASIL.

I shall set to work to earn my living at the Bar,
Up till now I've never troubled myself.

JOHN.

I don't know any man less fit than you for the
dreary waiting and the drudgery of the Bar.

BASIL.

We shall see.

JOHN.

And what d'you think your friends will say to your
marrying—a barmaid?

BASIL.

[*Contemptuously.*] I don't care two straws for
my friends.

JOHN.

That's pleasant for them. You know, men and women
without end have snapped their fingers at society and
laughed at it, and for a while thought they had the
better of it. But all the time society was quietly smiling
up its sleeve, and suddenly it put out an iron hand
—and scrunched them up.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] It only means that a
few snobs will cut me.

JOHN.

Not you—your wife,

BASIL.

I'm not such a cad as to go to a house where I can't take my wife.

JOHN.

But you're the last man in the world to give up these things. There's nothing you enjoy more than going to dinner-parties and staying in country houses. Women's smiles are the very breath of your nostrils.

BASIL.

You talk of me as if I were a tame cat. I don't want to brag, John, but after all, I've shown that I'm fit for something in this world. I went to the Cape because I thought it was my duty. I intend to marry Jenny for the same reason.

JOHN.

[*Seriously.*] Will you answer me one question—on your honour?

BASIL.

Yes.

JOHN.

Are you in love with her?

BASIL.

[*After a pause.*] No.

JOHN.

[*Passionately.*] Then, by God, you have no right to

marry her. A man has no right to marry a woman for pity. It's a cruel thing to do. You can only end by making yourself and her entirely wretched.

BASIL.

I can't break the poor girl's heart.

JOHN.

You don't know what marriage is. Even with two people who are devoted to one another, who have the same interests and belong to the same class, it's sometimes almost unbearable. Marriage is the most terrible thing in the world unless passion makes it absolutely inevitable.

BASIL.

My marriage is absolutely inevitable—for another reason.

JOHN.

You talk as if such things had never happened before.

BASIL.

Oh, I know, they happen every day. It's no business of the man's. And as for the girl, let her throw herself in the river. Let her go to the deuce, and be hanged to her.

JOHN.

Nonsense. She can be provided for. It only

needs a little discretion—and no one will be a ha'porth the wiser, nor she a ha'porth the worse.

BASIL.

But it's not a matter of people knowing. It's a matter of honour.

JOHN.

[*Opening his eyes.*] And where precisely did the honour come in when you . . . ?

BASIL.

Good heavens, I'm a man like any other. I have passions as other men have.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] My dear Basil, I wouldn't venture to judge you. But I think it's rather late in the day to set up for a moralist.

BASIL.

D'you think I've not regretted what I did? It's easy enough afterwards to say that I should have resisted. The world would be a Sunday School if we were all as level-headed at night as we are next morning.

JOHN.

[*Shaking his head.*] After all, it's only a very regrettable incident due to your youth and—want of innocence.

BASIL.

[*With vehement seriousness.*] I may have acted like a cur. I don't know. I acted as I suppose every other man would. But now I have a plain duty before me, and, by God, I mean to do it.

JOHN.

Don't you realise that you've only one life and that mistakes are irreparable? People play with life as if it were a game of chess in which they can try this move and that, and when they get into a muddle, sweep the board clear and begin again.

BASIL.

But life is a game of chess in which one is always beaten. Death sits on the other side of the board, and for every move he has a counter-move. And for all your deep-laid schemes he has a parry.

JOHN.

But if at the end Death always mates you, the fight is surely worth the fighting. Don't handicap yourself at the beginning by foolish quixotry. Life is so full. It has so much to offer, and you're throwing away almost everything that makes it worth the trouble.

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] Jenny would kill herself if I didn't marry her.

JOHN.

You don't seriously think she'd do that. People don't commit suicide so easily, you know.

BASIL.

You've thought of a great deal, John—you've not thought of the child. I can't let the child skulk into the world like a thief. Let him come in openly and lawfully. And let him go through the world with an honest name. Good heavens, the world's bad enough without fettering him all his life with a hideous stigma.

JOHN.

Oh, my dear Basil . . .

BASIL.

[*Interrupting.*] You can bring forward a thousand objections, but nothing alters the fact that, under the circumstances, there's only one way open to a man of honour.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] Well, it's a way that may do credit to your heart, but scarcely to your understanding.

BASIL.

I thought you'd see at once that I was doing the only possible thing.

JOHN.

My dear Basil, you talk of pity, and you talk of

duty, but are you sure there's anything more in it than vanity? You've set yourself up on a sort of moral pinnacle. Are you sure you don't admire your own heroism a little too much?

BASIL.

[*With a good-natured smile.*] Does it look so petty as that in your eyes? After all, it's only common morality.

JOHN.

[*Impatiently.*] But, my dear chap, it's absurd to act according to an unrealisable ideal in a world that's satisfied with the second-rate. You're tendering bank-notes to African savages, among whom cowrie shells are common coin.

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] I don't know what you mean.

JOHN.

Society has made its own decalogue, a code that's just fit for middling people who are not very good and not very wicked. But Society punishes you equally if your actions are higher than its ideal or lower.

BASIL.

Sometimes it makes a god of you when you're dead.

JOHN.

But it takes precious good care to crucify you when you're alive.

[*There is a knock at the door, and MRS. GRIGGS comes in.*

MRS. GRIGGS.

Some more visitors, Sir.

BASIL.

Show 'em in. [*To JOHN*] It's Jenny. She said she was coming to tea.

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] Oh, the cake was for her, was it? Would you like me to go?

BASIL.

Not unless you choose. Do you suppose I'm ashamed?

JOHN.

I thought, after all you've told me, you might not care for me to see her.

[*JENNY BUSH and her brother JAMES come in. She is very pretty, with delicate features and a beautiful complexion: her fair hair is abundant and very elaborately arranged. She is dressed smartly, rather showily. It is the usual type of barmaid, or tea-girl, a shade more refined perhaps than the common run. Her manners are unobjectionable, but not those of a gentlewoman. JAMES is a young man with clean-shaven face and a*

sharp expression. He is over-dressed in a very horsey manner, and is distinctly more vulgar than his sister. He talks English with a cockney accent, not invariably dropping his aitches, but only now and then. He is over cordial and over genial.

JENNY.

[*Going up to BASIL.*] I'm awfully late, I couldn't come before.

JAMES.

[*Jocosely.*] Don't mind me. Give 'im a kiss, old tart.

JENNY.

Oh, I brought my brother Jimmie to see you.

BASIL.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

JAMES.

Nicely, thanks. Pleased to make your acquaintance.

JENNY.

[*Looking at JOHN and suddenly recognising him.*] Well, I never! If that isn't old John Halliwell. I didn't expect to see you. This is a treat.

JOHN.

How d'you do?

JENNY.

What are you doing here ?

JOHN.

I've been having a cup of tea with Basil.

JENNY.

[*Looking at the tea-things.*] D'you always drink out of three cups at once ?

JOHN.

My wife has been here—and her sister.

JENNY.

Oh, I see. Fancy your being married. How d'you like it ?

JOHN.

All right, thanks.

[*BASIL pours out a cup of tea, and during the following speeches gives JENNY milk and sugar and cake.*

JAMES.

People say it wants a bit of gettin' used to.

JOHN.

Mr. Bush, you're a philosopher.

JAMES.

Well, I will say this for myself, you'd want to get

up early in the morning to catch me nappin'. I didn't catch your name.

JOHN.

Halliwell.

JAMES.

'Alliwell?

JOHN.

[*Emphasising the H.*] Halliwell.

JAMES.

That's what I say—'Alliwell. I knew a fellow in the meat trade called 'Alliwell. Any relation?

JOHN.

I don't think so.

JAMES.

Fine business 'e 'ad too. There's a rare lot of money to be made out of meat.

JOHN.

I dare say.

JENNY.

[*To JOHN.*] It is a long time since I've seen you. I suppose you've quietened down now you're a married man. You were a hot 'un when you was a bachelor.

JAMES.

[*Facetiously.*] Don't make 'im blush, Jenny. Accidents will 'appen in the best regulated families. And boys will be boys, as they say in the Bible.

JOHN.

I think I must be off, Basil.

JAMES.

Well, I'll be toddlin' tco. I only come in just to say 'ow d'you do to my future brother-in-law. I'm a fellow as likes to be cordial. There's no 'aughtiness about me.

BASIL.

[*Politely, but not effusively.*] Oh; won't you stay and have some tea?

JAMES.

No, thanks. I'm not much of an 'and at tea; I leave that to females. I like something stronger myself.

JENNY.

[*Remonstrating.*] Jimmie!

BASIL.

I have some whisky, Mr. Bush.

JAMES.

Oh, blow the Mister and blow the Bush. Call me Jimmie. I can't stand ceremony. The way I look on it is this. We're both of us gentlemen. Now, mind you, I'm not a fellow to praise myself. But I will say this: I am 'a gentleman. That's not self-praise, is it?

JOHN.

Dear me, no. Mere statement of fact.

JAMES.

Well, as I was saying, I know I'm a gentleman. It's a thing you can't 'elp, so what's the good of being proud about it? If I meet a chap in a pub, and he invites me to have a drink, I don't ask him if he's a Lord.

BASIL.

But you just take it.

JAMES.

Well, you'd do the same yourself, wouldn't you?

BASIL.

I dare say. But will you have a drink now?

JAMES.

Oh, bless you, I know what it is to be engaged. I don't want to disturb you canary-birds. Me and 'Alliwell 'll go and have a gargle round the corner. I see you've got a public nice and 'andy. [*To JOHN.*] I suppose you're not above goin' in there now and again, eh?

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] He came into the "Golden Crown" every day of his life, and chance it!

JOHN.

I'm afraid I'm in a great hurry.

JAMES.

'Ang it all, one's always got time to have a drop of Scotch in this life.

BASIL.

[*To JAMES, handing him the box.*] Well, take a cigar with you.

JAMES.

[*Taking and examining one.*] If you are so pressing. Villar y Villar. . . . What do they run you in a hundred?

BASIL.

They were given to me, I really don't know what they cost. [*He lights a match.*] Won't you take the label off?

JAMES.

Not if I know it. I don't smoke a Villar y Villar every day, but when I do, I smoke it with the label on.

JENNY.

[*Laughing.*] Jimmie, you are a caution!

JOHN.

[*Shaking hands with JENNY.*] Good-bye and—my best wishes.

JENNY.

Thanks. You didn't expect I'd marry Basil when I used to mix cocktails for you in the "Golden Crown," did you?

JAMES.

Come on, 'Alliwell, Don't stop there gassing. You'll only disturb the canary-birds. So long, old tart, see you later. Ta-ta, Basil, old man.

BASIL.

Good-bye—Jimmie.

[JOHN HALLIWELL and JAMES go out, JENNY goes up to BASIL impulsively.]

JENNY.

Kiss me. [*He kisses her, smiling.*] There! Now I can sit down quietly and talk. How d'you like my brother?

BASIL.

Oh—I hardly know him yet. He seems very amiable.

JENNY.

He's not a bad sort when you know him. He's just like my mother.

BASIL.

[*Raising his brows.*] Is he? And—is your father like that too?

JENNY.

Well, you know, Pa hasn't had the education that Jimmie's had. Jimmie was at a boarding-school at Margate.

BASIL.

Was he?

JENNY.

You were at a boarding-school, too, weren't you?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Yes, I was at Harrow

JENNY.

Ah, you don't get the fine air at Harrow that you get at Margate.

BASIL.

Shall I put down your cup?

JENNY.

[*Placing it on a table.*] Oh, thanks, it's all right. Come and sit by me, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Seating himself on the arm of her chair.*] There.

JENNY.

[*Taking his hand.*] I'm so glad we're alone. I should like to be alone with you all my life. You do love me, don't you, Basil?

BASIL.

Yes.

JENNY.

Much ?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Yes.

JENNY.

I'm so glad. Oh, I don't know what I should do if you didn't love me. If you hadn't been kind to me I should have thrown myself in the river.

BASIL.

What nonsense you talk.

JENNY.

I mean it.

[*He passes his hand affectionately over her hair.*]

JENNY.

Oh, you *are* so good, Basil. I'm so proud of you. I shall be so proud to be your wife.

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] Don't think too well of me, Jenny.

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] I'm not afraid of that. You're

brave and you're clever and you're a professional man,
and you're everything.

BASIL.

You foolish child.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] I can't tell you how much I love
you.

BASIL.

I'll try with all my might to be a good husband to
you, Jenny.

[*She flings her arms round his neck and they
kiss one another.*]

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

AN INTERVAL OF ONE YEAR ELAPSES BETWEEN
ACTS I. AND II.

The drawing-room in Basil's house at Putney. In the wall facing the auditorium there is a door leading from the passage. On the right two doors lead into bedrooms, and opposite these is a bay window. The same pictures and plates decorate the walls as in the preceding Scene; the writing-table is between the side doors. JENNY'S influence is noticeable in the cushions in the wicker-work arm-chairs, in the window curtains and portières of art serge, and in the huge chrysanthemums of the wall paper.

[JENNY is sewing while JAMES BUSH is lounging in one of the arm chairs.

JAMES.

Where's his lordship this afternoon?

JENNY.

He's gone out for a walk.

JAMES.

[*With a malevolent laugh.*] That's what he tells you, my dear.

JENNY.

[*Looking up quickly.*] Have you seen him anywhere?

JAMES.

No, I can't say I 'ave. And if I 'ad I wouldn't boast about it.

JENNY.

[*Insisting.*] What did you mean then?

JAMES.

Well, whenever I come here he's out for a walk. . . . I say, old tart, could you oblige me with a couple of sovereigns till next Saturday?

JENNY.

[*Pained to refuse.*] Oh no, Jimmie, I can't manage it. Basil made me promise I wouldn't let you have any more.

JAMES.

What! He made you promise that?—Ugh, the mean skinflint.

JENNY.

We've lent you so much, Jimmie. And ma's had a lot, too.

JAMES.

Well, look here, you can manage a sovereign, can't you? You needn't say anything about it.

JENNY.

I can't really, Jimmie. I would if I could. But we've got a rare lot of debts worrying us, and the rent will be coming along next week.

JAMES.

[*Sulkily.*] You can't lend it me because you won't. I should just like to know what Basil spends his money on.

JENNY .

He's had a bad year—it's not his fault. And I was so ill after the baby died, we had to pay the doctor nearly fifty pounds.

JAMES.

[*With a sneer.*] Well, it was a wonderful fine thing you did when you married him, Jenny. And you thought you done precious well for yourself, too.

JENNY.

Jimmie, don't!

JAMES.

I can't stick 'im at any price, and I don't mind who knows it.

JENNY.

[*Impetuously.*] I won't have you say anything against him.

JAMES

All right—keep your shirt in. I'm blowed if I know what you've got to stick up for him about. He don't care much about you.

JENNY.

[*Hastily.*] How d'you know?

JAMES.

Think I can't see!

JENNY.

It's not true. It's not true.

JAMES.

You can't get round me, Jenny. I suppose you 'aven't been crying to-day?

JENNY.

[*Flushing.*] I had a headache.

JAMES.

I know those sort of headaches.

JENNY.

We had a little tiff this morning. That's why he went out . . . Oh, don't say he doesn't care for me. I couldn't live.

JAMES.

[*With a laugh.*] Go along with you. Basil Kent ain't the only pebble on the beach.

JENNY.

[*Vehemently.*] Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie, sometimes I don't know which way to turn, I'm that unhappy. If the baby had only lived I might have kept my husband—I might have made him love me. [*The sound is heard of a door being closed.*] There's Basil.

JAMES.

Good luck to 'im.

JENNY.

Oh, Jimmie, take care not to say anything to make him angry.

JAMES.

I'd just like to give 'im a piece of my mind.

JENNY.

Oh, Jimmie, don't. It was my fault that we quarrelled this morning. I wanted to make him angry, and I nagged at him. Don't let him see that I've said anything to you. I'll see—I'll see if I can't send you a pound to-morrow, Jimmie.

JAMES.

[*Defiantly.*] He'd better not start patronising me, because I won't put up with it. I'm a gentleman, and I'm every bit as good as he is—if not better.

[*BASIL comes in, notices JAMES, but does not speak.*]

JAMES.

Afternoon, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Indifferently.*] You here again?

JAMES.

Looks like it, don't it.

BASIL.

[*Quietly.*] I'm afraid it does.

JAMES.

[*Becoming more aggressive as the conversation proceeds.*] Are you? I suppose I can come and see my own sister?

BASIL.

I suppose it's inevitable.

JAMES.

Well?

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Only I should be excessively grateful if you'd time your coming with my—with my going. And *vice versa*.

JAMES.

That means you want me to get out, I reckon.

BASIL.

You show unusual perspicacity, dear James.

JAMES.

And who are you with your long words, I should like to know?

BASIL.

[*Blandly.*] I? A person of not the least importance.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] Well, I wouldn't put on so much side if I was you.

BASIL.

I observe that you have not acquired the useful art of being uncivil without being impertinent.

JAMES.

Look 'ere, I'm not going to stand this. I'm as good as you are any day.

BASIL.

That is a fact I should never dream of contradicting.

JAMES.

[*Indignantly.*] Then what 'ave you got to turn up your nose about, eh? What d'you mean by sneerin' and snarlin' at me when I come here?

JENNY.

[*Nervously.*] Jimmie, don't!

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] You're very eloquent, James. You should join a debating society.

JAMES.

Yes, go on. That's right. You seem to think I'm nobody. I should just like to know why you go on as if I was I don't know what.

BASIL.

[*Abruptly.*] Because I choose.

JAMES.

You can bet anything you like I don't come 'ere to see you.

BASIL.

[*Smiling acidly.*] Then I have at least something to be thankful for.

JAMES.

I've got a right to come here as much as anybody. I come to see my sister.

BASIL.

Really, that's very thoughtful of you. I was under the impression you generally came to borrow money.

JAMES.

Throw that in my face now. I can't 'elp it if I'm out of work.

BASIL.

Oh, I haven't the least objection to your being out of work. All I protest against—and that very mildly—is that I should be expected to keep you. How much did you want to-day?

JAMES.

I don't want your dirty money.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] Have you already tried to borrow it from Jenny?

JAMES.

No, I 'aven't.

BASIL.

And she refused, I suppose.

JAMES.

[*Storming.*] I tell you I don't want your dirty money.

BASIL.

Well, then, we're both quite satisfied. You seemed to think that because I married Jenny I was bound to keep the whole gang of you for the rest of your lives. I'm sorry I can't afford it. And you will kindly tell the rest of them that I'm sick and tired of forking out.

JAMES.

I wonder you don't forbid me your house while you're about it.

BASIL.

[*Coolly.*] You may come here when I'm not at home—if you behave yourself.

JAMES.

I'm not good enough for you, I suppose?

BASIL.

No, you're not.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] Ah, you're a pretty specimen, you are. You mean skinflint!

BASIL.

Don't be abusive, James. It's rude.

JAMES.

I shall say what I choose.

BASIL.

And please don't talk so loud. It annoys me.

JAMES.

[*Malevolently.*] I dare say you'd like to get me out of the way. But I mean to keep my eye on you.

BASIL.

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

JAMES.

You know what I mean. Jenny has something to put up with, I lay.

BASIL.

[*Containing his anger.*] You'll have the goodness to leave the relations between Jenny and myself alone—d'you hear?

JAMES.

Ha, that's touched you up, has it? You think I don't know what sort of a feller you are. I can just about see through two of you. And I know a good deal more about you than you think.

BASIL.

[*Contemptuously.*] Don't be foolish, James.

JAMES.

[*Sarcastic.*] A nice thing Jenny did when she married you.

BASIL.

[*Recovering himself, with a smile.*] Has she been telling you my numerous faults? [*To JENNY.*] You must have had plenty to talk about, my love.

JENNY.

[*Who has been going on with her sewing, looking up now and then uneasily.*] I haven't said a word against you, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Turning his back on JAMES.*] Oh, my dear Jenny, if it amuses you, by all means discuss me with your brother and your sister and your father and your mother, and the whole crew of them. . . . I should be so dull if I had no faults.

JENNY.

[*Anxiously.*] Tell him I've not said anything against him, Jimmie.

JAMES.

It's not for want of something to say, I lay.

BASIL.

[*Over his shoulder.*] I'm getting rather tired, brother James. I'd go, if I were you.

JAMES.

[*Very aggressively.*] I shan't go till I choose.

BASIL.

[*Turns round, smiling blandly.*] Of course, we're both Christians, dear James; and there's a good deal of civilisation kicking about the world nowadays. But, notwithstanding, the last word is still with the strongest.

JAMES.

What d'you mean by that?

BASIL.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Merely that discretion is the better part of valour. They say that proverbs are the wealth of nations.

JAMES.

[*Indignantly.*] That's just the sort of thing you'd do—to 'it a feller smaller than yourself.

BASIL.

Oh, I wouldn't hit you for worlds, brother James. I should merely throw you downstairs.

JAMES.

[*Making for the door.*] I should just like to see you try it on.

BASIL.

Don't be silly, James. You know you wouldn't like it at all.

JAMES.

I'm not afraid of you.

BASIL.

Of course not. But still—you're not very muscular, are you?

JAMES.

You coward!

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Your repartees are not brilliant, James.

JAMES.

[*Standing at the door for safety's sake.*] I'll pay you out before I've done.

BASIL.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] James, I told you to get out five minutes ago.

JAMES.

I'm going. D'you think I want to stay 'ere? Good-bye, Jenny, I'm not going to stand being insulted by any one. [*He goes out slamming the door.*]

[BASIL, *smiling quietly, goes to his writing-table and turns over some papers.*]

BASIL.

The only compensation in brother James is that he sometimes causes one a little mild amusement.

JENNY.

You might at least be polite to him, Basil.

BASIL.

I used up all my politeness six months ago.

JENNY.

After all, he is my brother.

BASIL.

That is a fact I deplore with all my heart, I assure you.

JENNY.

I don't know what's wrong with him.

BASIL.

Don't you? It doesn't matter.

JENNY.

I know he isn't a Society man.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] No, he wouldn't shine at duchesses tea-parties.

JENNY.

Well, he's none the worse for that, is he?

BASIL.

Not at all.

JENNY.

Then why d'you treat him as if he was a dog?

BASIL.

My dear Jenny, I don't. . . . I'm very fond of dogs.

JENNY.

Oh, you're always sneering. Isn't he as good as I am? And you condescended to marry me.

BASIL.

[*Coldly.*] I really can't see that because I married you I must necessarily take your whole family to my bosom.

JENNY.

Why don't you like them? They're honest and respectable.

BASIL.

[*With a little sigh of boredom.*] My dear Jenny, we don't choose our friends because they're honest and respectable any more than we choose them because they change their linen daily.

JENNY.

They can't help it if they're poor.

BASIL.

My dear, I'm willing to acknowledge that they have every grace and every virtue, but they rather bore me.

JENNY.

They wouldn't if they were swells.

[BASIL gives a short laugh, but does not answer; and JENNY irritated, continues more angrily.]

JENNY.

And after all we're not in such a bad position as all that. My mother's father was a gentleman.

BASIL.

I wish your mother's son were.

JENNY.

D'you know what Jimmie says you are?

BASIL.

I don't vastly care. But if it pleases you very much you may tell me.

JENNY.

[*Flushing angrily.*] He says you're a damned snob.

BASIL.

Is that all? I could have invented far worse things than that to say of myself. . . . [*With a change of tone.*] You know, Jenny, it's not worth while to worry ourselves about such trifles. One can't force oneself to like people. I'm very sorry that I can't stand your relations. Why on earth don't you resign yourself and make the best of it?

JENNY.

[*Vindictively.*] You don't think they're good enough for you to associate with because they're not in swell positions.

BASIL.

My dear Jenny, I don't in the least object to their being grocers and haberdashers. I only wish they'd sell us things at cost price.

JENNY.

Jimmie isn't a grocer or a haberdasher. He's an auctioneer's clerk.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] I humbly apologise. I thought he was a grocer, because last time he did us the honour of visiting us he asked how much a pound we paid for our tea and offered to sell us some at the same price. . . . But then he also offered to insure our house against fire and to sell me a gold mine in Australia.

JENNY.

Well, it's better to make a bit as best one can than to . . . [*She stops.*]

BASIL.

[*Smiling.*] Go on. Pray don't hesitate for fear of hurting my feelings.

JENNY.

[*Defiantly.*] Well, then, it's better to do that than moon about like you do.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] Really, even to please you, I'm afraid I can't go about with little samples of tea in my pocket and sell my friends a pound or two when I call on them. Besides, I don't believe they'd ever pay me.

JENNY.

[*Scornfully.*] Oh no, you're a gentleman and a barrister and an author, and you couldn't do anything to dirty those white hands that you're so careful about, could you?

BASIL.

[*Looking at his hands, then up at JENNY.*] And what is it precisely you want me to do?

JENNY.

Well, you've been at the Bar for five years. I should have thought you could make something after all that time.

BASIL.

I can't force the wily solicitor to give me briefs.

JENNY.

How do other fellows manage it?

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] The simplest way, I believe, is to marry the wily solicitor's daughter.

JENNY.

Instead of a barmaid ?

BASIL.

[*Gravely.*] I didn't say that, Jenny.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] Oh no. You didn't say it, but you hinted it. You never say anything, but you're always hinting and insinuating—till you drive me out of my senses.

BASIL.

[*After a moment's pause, gravely.*] I'm very sorry if I hurt your feelings. I promise you I don't mean to. I always try to be kind to you.

[*He looks at JENNY, expecting her to say something in forgiveness or in apology. But she, shrugging her shoulders, looks down sullenly at her work, without a word, and begins again to sew. Then BASIL, tightening his lips, picks up writing materials and goes towards the door.*

JENNY.

[*Looking up quickly.*] Where are you going ?

BASIL.

[*Stopping.*] I have some letters to write.

JENNY.

Can't you write them here ?

BASIL.

Certainly—if it pleases you.

JENNY.

Don't you want me to see who you're writing to?

BASIL.

I haven't the least objection to your knowing all about my correspondence. . . . And that's fortunate, since you invariably make yourself acquainted with it.

JENNY.

Accuse me of reading your letters now.

BASIL.

[*With a smile.*] You always leave my papers in such disorder after you've been to my desk.

JENNY.

You've got no right to say that.

[*BASIL pauses and looks at her steadily.*]

BASIL.

Are you willing to swear that you don't go to my desk when I'm away to read my letters? Come, Jenny, answer that question.

JENNY.

[*Disturbed but forced by his glance to reply.*] Well, I'm your wife, I have a right to know.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] You have such odd ideas about the duties of a wife, Jenny. They include reading my

letters and following me in the street. But tolerance and charity and forbearance don't seem to come in your scheme of things.

JENNY.

[*Sullenly.*] Why d'you want to write your letters elsewhere?

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I thought I should be quieter.

JENNY.

I suppose I disturb you?

BASIL.

It's a little difficult to write when you're talking.

JENNY.

Why shouldn't I talk? D'you think I'm not good enough, eh? I should have thought I was more important than your letters.

[BASIL *does not answer.*]

JENNY.

[*Angrily.*] Am I your wife or not?

BASIL. :

[*Ironically.*] You have your marriage lines carefully locked up to prove it.

JENNY.

Then why don't you treat me as your wife? You seem to think I'm only fit to see after the house and

order the dinner and mend your clothes, And after that I can go and sit in the kitchen with the servant.

BASIL.

[*Moving again towards the door.*] D'you think it's worth while making a scene? We seem to have said all this before so many times.

JENNY.

[*Interrupting him.*] I want to have it out.

BASIL.

[*Bored.*] We've been having it out twice a week for the last six months—and we've never got anywhere yet.

JENNY.

I'm not going to be always put upon, I'm your wife and I'm as good as you are.

BASIL.

[*With a thin smile.*] Oh, my dear, if you're going in for women's rights, you may have my vote by all means. And you can plump for all the candidates at once if you choose.

JENNY.

You seem to think it's a joke.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh no, I promise you I don't do that. It's lasted too long. And God knows where it'll end. . . . They say the first year of marriage is the worst; ours has been bad enough in all conscience.

JENNY.

[*Aggressively.*] And I suppose you think it's my fault?

BASIL.

Don't you think we're both more or less to blame?

JENNY.

[*With a laugh.*] Oh, I'm glad you acknowledge that you have something to do with it.

BASIL.

I tried to make you happy.

JENNY.

Well, you haven't succeeded very well. Did you think I was likely to be happy—when you leave me alone all day and half the night for your swell friends that I'm not good enough for?

BASIL.

That's not true. I hardly ever see any of my old friends.

JENNY.

Except Mrs. Murray, eh?

BASIL.

I've seen Mrs. Murray perhaps a dozen times in the last year.

JENNY.

Oh, you needn't tell me that. I know it. She's a lady, isn't she?

BASIL.

[*Ignoring the charge.*] And my work takes me away from you. I can't always be down here. Think how bored you'd be.

JENNY.

A precious lot of good your work does. You can't earn enough money to keep us out of debt.

BASIL.

[*Good-humouredly.*] We are in debt. But we share that very respectable condition with half the nobility and gentry in the kingdom. We're neither of us good managers, and we've lived a bit beyond our means this year. But in future we'll be more economical.

JENNY.

[*Sullenly.*] All the neighbours know that we've got bills with the tradesmen.

BASIL.

[*Acidly.*] I'm sorry that you shouldn't have made so good a bargain as you expected when you married me.

JENNY.

I wonder what you do succeed in? Your book was very successful, wasn't it? You thought you were going to set the Thames on fire, and the book fell flat, flat, flat.

BASIL.

[*Recovering his good temper.*] That is a fate which has befallen better books than mine.

JENNY.

It deserved it.

BASIL.

Oh, I didn't expect *you* to appreciate it. It isn't given to all of us to write about wicked earls and beautiful duchesses.

JENNY.

Well, I wasn't the only one. The papers praised it, didn't they?

BASIL.

The unanimity of their blame was the only thing that consoled me.

JENNY.

And one of them advised you to study an English grammar. And you're the fine gentleman who looks down on poor things like us!

BASIL.

I often wonder if the reviewer who abuses you for a printer's error realises what pleasure he causes the wife of your bosom.

JENNY.

Oh, I've learnt to know you so well this last six months—since the baby died. You've got no cause to set yourself up on a pedestal.

BASIL.

[*With a laugh.*] My dear Jenny, I never pretended to be a golden idol.

JENNY.

I know what you are now. And I was such a fool as to think you a hero. You're merely a failure. In everything you try you're a miserable failure.

BASIL.

[*With a slight sigh.*] Perhaps you're right, Jenny.
[*BASIL walks up and down; and then, stopping, looks at her for a moment meditatively.*]

BASIL.

I sometimes wonder whether we shouldn't be happier—if we lived apart.

JENNY.

[*With a start.*] What d'you mean?

BASIL.

We don't seem able to get on very well. And I see no chance of things going any better.

JENNY.

[*With staring eyes.*] D'you mean to say you want to separate?

BASIL.

I think it might be better for both of us—at least for a time. Perhaps later on we might try again.

JENNY.

And what'll *you* do?

BASIL.

I should go abroad for a while.

JENNY.

With Mrs. Murray. Is that it? You want to go away with her.

BASIL.

[*Impatiently.*] No. Of course not.

JENNY.

I don't believe it. You're in love with her.

BASIL.

You've got no right to say that.

JENNY.

Haven't I? I suppose I must shut my eyes and say nothing. You're in love with her. D'you think I've not seen it in these months? That's why you want to leave me.

BASIL.

It's impossible for us to live together. We shall never agree, and we shall never be happy. For God's sake let us separate and have done with it.

JENNY.

You're sick of me. You've had all you want out of me, and now I can go. The fine lady comes along, and you send me away like a housemaid. D'you think I can't see that you're in love with her? You'd sacrifice me without a thought to save her a moment's unpleasantness. And because you love her you hate me.

BASIL.

It's not true.

JENNY.

Can you deny that you're in love with her?

BASIL.

You're simply mad. Good heavens, I've done nothing that could give you the least cause to be jealous.

JENNY.

[*Passionately.*] Will you swear that you're not in love with her? Swear it on your honour?

BASIL.

You're mad.

JENNY.

[*With growing excitement.*] Swear it. You can't. You're simply madly in love with her.

BASIL.

Nonsense.

JENNY.

Swear it. Swear it on your honour. Swear you don't care for her.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I swear it . . . on my honour.

JENNY

[*Scornfully.*] It's a lie! . . . And she's just as much in love with you as you are with her

BASIL.

[*Seizing her wrists.*] What d'you mean?

JENNY.

D'you think I haven't got eyes in my head? I saw it that day she came here. D'you suppose she came to see me? She despises me. I'm not a lady. She came here to please *you*. She was polite to me to please *you*. She asked me to go and see her to please *you*.

BASIL.

[*Trying to compose himself.*] It's absurd. She was an old friend of mine. Of course she came.

JENNY.

I know that sort of friend. D'you think I didn't see the way she looked at you, and how she followed you with her eyes? She simply hung on every word you said. When you smiled, she smiled. When you laughed, she laughed. Oh, I should think she was in love with you; I know what love is, and I felt it. And when she looked at me I knew she hated me because I'd robbed her of you.

BASIL.

[*Unable to contain himself.*] Oh, what a dog's life it is we lead! We've been both utterly wretched. It can't go on—and I only see one way out.

JENNY.

That's what you've been brooding over this last week, is it? Separation! I knew there was something, and I couldn't find out what it was.

BASIL.

I do my best to hold myself in, but sometimes I

feel it's impossible. I shall be led to saying things that we shall both regret. For Heaven's sake let us part.

JENNY.

No.

BASIL.

We can't go on having these awful quarrels. It's too degrading. It was a horrible mistake that we ever married.

JENNY.

[*Horror-stricken.*] Basil!

BASIL.

Oh, you must see that as well as I. We're utterly unsuited to one another. And the baby's death removed the only necessity that held us together.

JENNY.

You talk as if we only remained together because it was convenient.

BASIL.

[*Passionately.*] Let me go, Jenny. I can't stand it any more. I feel as if I shall go mad.

JENNY.

[*Full of pain and anguish.*] It's nothing at all to you.

BASIL.

Jenny, I did my best for you a year ago. I gave you all I had to give. It was little enough in all conscience. Now I ask you to give me back my freedom.

JENNY.

[*Distracted.*] You only think of yourself. What is to become of me?

BASIL.

You'll be much happier. It's the best thing for both of us. I'll do all I can for you, and you can have your mother and sister to live here.

JENNY.

[*With a cry of grief and passion.*] But I love you, Basil.

BASIL.

You!! Why, you've tortured me for six months beyond all endurance. You've made all my days a burden to me. You've made my life a perfect hell,

JENNY.

[*Gives a long groan of horror and dismay.*] Oh!
[*They stand facing one another, when the housemaid, FANNY, comes in.*]

FANNY.

Mr. Halliwell.

[*JOHN comes in. JENNY, after taking his hand, sinks down on a chair, paying no attention to the following conversation; she stares in front of her, quite distraught. BASIL tries with all his might to appear calm and natural.*]

BASIL.

Hulloa, what are you doing in these parts?

JOHN.

How d'you do, Mrs. Kent? I've been having an early lunch at Richmond, and I thought I'd just drop in on my way back. As it was Saturday afternoon I thought I might find you.

BASIL.

I'm sure we're delighted to see you. [JOHN gives a side glance at JENNY, and slightly raises his eyebrows.] But you've only just come in time, because I've got to go up to town. We might travel up together.

JOHN.

Certainly.

JENNY.

Where are you going, Basil?

BASIL.

To Chancery Lane, to see my agent on business.

JENNY.

[*Suspiciously.*] On Saturday afternoon? Why, he won't be there.

BASIL.

I have an appointment with him.

[JENNY does not answer, but is obviously unconvinced. JOHN, somewhat embarrassed, exerts himself to make conversation.]

JOHN.

I was thinking as I came along that one must lead

quite an idyllic existence in the suburbs—with the river—and one's little garden.

BASIL.

[*Ironically.*] And the spectacle of the fifty little houses opposite all exactly like one another.

JOHN.

And the quiet is perfectly enchanting.

BASIL.

Oh, yes. The only vehicles that disturb the peaceful seclusion are the milk-cart and the barrel-organs. It's quite idyllic.

JENNY.

I think it's a very nice neighbourhood. And you get such a superior class of people here.

BASIL.

I'll just go and change. [*Looking at his watch.* There's a train at 4.15.

JOHN.

All right, hurry up.

[*BASIL goes out of the room. JENNY at once springs to her feet and goes towards JOHN. She is distracted and hardly knows what she says.*

JENNY.

Can I trust you?

JOHN.

What d'you mean?

[She stares into his eyes, doubting, trying to see whether he will be willing to help her.]

JENNY.

You used to be a good sort. You never looked down on me because I was a barmaid. Tell me I can trust you, John. There's no one I can speak to, and I feel if I don't speak I shall go off my head.

JOHN.

What is the matter?

JENNY.

Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?

JOHN.

Of course.

JENNY.

On your oath?

JOHN.

On my oath.

JENNY.

[After a momentary pause.] Is there anything between Basil and Mrs. Murray?

JOHN.

[Aghast.] No. Certainly not.

JENNY.

How d'you know? Are you sure? You wouldn't tell me, if there was. You're all against me because I'm not a lady. . . . Oh, I'm so unhappy.

[*She tries to restrain her tears, she is half-hysterical. JOHN stares at her, surprised, at a loss for words.*

JENNY.

If you only knew what a life we lead! He calls it a dog's life, and he's right.

JOHN.

I thought you got on so well.

JENNY.

Oh, before you we've always kept up appearances. He's ashamed to let you know he regrets he ever married me. He wants to separate.

JOHN.

What!

JENNY.

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, don't look so surprised. You're not an utter fool, are you? He proposed it to-day before you came in. We'd been having one of our rows.

JOHN.

But what on earth is it all about?

JENNY.

God knows!

JOHN.

It's nonsense. It can only be a little passing quarrel. You must expect to have those.

JENNY.

No, it isn't. No, it isn't. He doesn't love me. He's in love with your sister-in-law.

JOHN.

It's impossible.

JENNY.

He's always there. He was there twice last week and twice the week before.

JOHN.

How d'you know?

JENNY.

I've followed him.

JOHN.

You followed him in the street, Jenny?

JENNY.

[*Defiantly.*] Yes. If I'm not ladylike enough for him, I needn't play the lady there. You're shocked now, I suppose?

JOHN.

I wouldn't presume to judge you, Jenny.

JENNY.

And I've read his letters, too—because I wanted to know what he was doing. I steamed one open, and he saw it, and he never said a word.

JOHN.

Good heavens, why did you do it?

JENNY.

Because I can't live unless I know the truth. I thought it was Mrs. Murray's handwriting.

JOHN.

Was it from her?

JENNY.

No. It was a receipt from the coal merchant. I could see how he despised me when he looked at the envelope—I didn't stick it down again very well. And I saw him smile when he found it was only a receipt.

JOHN.

Upon my word, I don't think you've got much cause to be jealous.

JENNY.

Oh, you don't know. Last Tuesday he was dining

there, and you should have seen the state he was in. He was so restless he couldn't sit still. He looked at his watch every minute. His eyes simply glittered with excitement, and I could almost hear his heart beating.

JOHN.

It can't be true.

JENNY.

He never loved me. He married me because he thought it was his duty. And then when the baby died—he thought I'd entrapped him.

JOHN.

He didn't say so.

JENNY.

No. He never says anything—but I saw it in his eyes. [*Passionately clasping her hands.*] Oh, you don't know what our life is. For days he doesn't say a word except to answer my questions. And the silence simply drives me mad. I shouldn't mind if he black-guarded me. I'd rather he hit me than simply look and look. I can see he's keeping himself in. He's said more to-day than he's ever said before. I knew it was getting towards the end.

JOHN.

[*With a helpless gesture.*] I'm very sorry.

JENNY.

Oh, don't you pity me, too. I've had a great deal

too much pity. I don't want it. Basil married me from pity. Oh, I wish he hadn't. I can't stand the unhappiness.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] You know, Jenny, he's a man of honour.

JENNY.

Oh, I know he's a man of honour. I wish he had a little less of it. One doesn't want a lot of fine sentiments in married life. They don't work. . . . Oh, why couldn't I fall in love with a man of my own class? I should have been so much happier. I used to be so proud that Basil wasn't a clerk, or something in the City. He's right, we shall never be happy.

JOHN.

[*Trying to calm her.*] Oh, yes, you will. You mustn't take things too seriously.

JENNY.

It isn't a matter of yesterday, or to-day, or to-morrow. I can't alter myself. He knew I wasn't a lady when he married me. My father had to bring up five children on two-ten a week. You can't expect a man to send his daughters to a boarding-school at Brighton on that, and have them finished in Paris. . . . He doesn't say a word when I do something or say something a lady wouldn't—but he purses up his lips, and looks. . . . Then I get so mad

that I do things just to aggravate him. Sometimes I try to be vulgar. One learns a good deal in a bar in the City, and I know so well the things to say that'll make Basil curl up. I want to get a bit of revenge out of him sometimes, and I know exactly where he's raw and where I can hurt him. [*With a laugh of scorn.*] You should see the way he looks when I don't eat properly, or when I call a man a Johnny.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] It opens up endless possibilities of domestic unhappiness.

JENNY.

Oh, I know it isn't fair to him, but I lose my head. I can't always be refined. Sometimes I can't help breaking out. I feel I must let myself go.

JOHN.

Why don't you separate, then?

JENNY.

Because I love him. Oh, John; you don't know how I love him. I'd do anything to make him happy. I'd give my life if he wanted it. Oh, I can't say it, but when I think of him my heart burns so that sometimes I can hardly breathe. I can never show him that he's all in the world to me; I try to make him love me, and I only make him hate me. What can I do to show him? Ah, if he only knew, I'm sure he'd not regret that he married me. I feel

—I feel as if my heart was full of music, and yet something prevents me from ever bringing it out.

JOHN.

D'you think he means it seriously when he talks of separation?

JENNY.

He's been brooding over it. I know him so well, I knew there was something he was thinking over. Oh, John, I couldn't live without him. I'd rather die. If he leaves me, I swear I'll kill myself.

JOHN.

[*Walking up and down.*] I wish I could help you. I don't see anything I can do.

JENNY.

Oh, yes, there is. Speak to your sister-in-law. Ask her to have mercy on me. Perhaps she doesn't know what she's doing. Tell her I love him. . . . Take care. There's Basil. If he knew what I'd said he'd never speak to me again.

[*BASIL comes in, dressed in a frock-coat ; with a tall hat in his hand.*

BASIL.

I'm ready. We've just got time to catch the train.

JOHN.

All right. Good-bye, Mrs. Kent.

JENNY.

[*Keeping her eyes fixed on BASIL.*] Good-bye.
[*The two men go out. JENNY runs to the door and calls out.*]

JENNY.

Basil, I want you a moment. Basil!
[*BASIL appears at the door.*]

JENNY.

Are you really going to Chancery Lane?
[*BASIL makes a movement of impatience and goes out again without answering.*]

JENNY.

[*Alone.*] Oh, well, I'm going to see that for myself.
[*Calling to the MAID.*] Fanny! . . . Bring my hat and my jacket. Quick!

[*She runs to the window and looks out at BASIL and JOHN going away. FANNY appears with the clothes. JENNY hurriedly puts them on.*]

JENNY.

[*As FANNY is helping her.*] What time is it?

FANNY.

[*Looking up at the clock.*] Five minutes past four.

JENNY.

I think I can catch it. He said 4.15.

FANNY.

Will you be in to tea, mum?

JENNY.

I don't know. [*She runs to the door and rushes out.*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

THE SAME AFTERNOON.

[A luxuriously furnished drawing-room at MRS. MURRAY'S house in Charles Street, Mayfair. Everything in it is beautiful, but suggests in the owner good taste rather than originality.]

[HILDA is seated near a tea-table, elaborately gowned, and with her is MABEL. MR. ROBERT BRACKLEY is sitting down, a stout, round-faced man, clean-shaven and very bald; about forty; he is attired in the height of fashion, in a frock-coat, patent-leather boots and an eye-glass. He talks very quickly, in a careless frivolous fashion, and is always much amused at what he says.]

MABEL.

What is the time, Mr. Brackley?

BRACKLEY.

I shan't tell you again.

MABEL.

How brutal of you!

BRACKLEY.

There's something unhealthy in your passion for information. I've already told you five times.

HILDA.

It's very unflattering to us who've been doing our little best to amuse you.

MABEL.

I can't imagine what's happened to John. He promised to fetch me here.

HILDA.

He's sure to come if you'll only wait patiently.

MABEL.

But I hate waiting patiently.

HILDA.

You shouldn't have let him out of your sight.

MABEL.

He went to Putney after luncheon to see your friend Mr. Kent. Have you seen him lately?

HILDA.

John? I saw him at the Martins yesterday.

MABEL.

[*Slyly.*] I meant Mr. Kent.

HILDA.

[*Indifferently.*] Yes. He called the other day.
[*To change the conversation.*] You're unusually silent,
Mr. Brackley.

BRACKLEY.

[*Smiling.*] I have nothing whatever to say.

MABEL.

That's usually when clever people talk most.

HILDA.

Are you doing anything now?

BRACKLEY.

Oh yes, I'm writing a play in blank verse.

HILDA.

You brave man. What is it about?

BRACKLEY.

Cleopatra.

HILDA.

Dear me! Shakespeare wrote a play about
Cleopatra, didn't he?

BRACKLEY.

I daresay. I haven't read it. Shakespeare bores
me. He lived so long ago.

MABEL.

Of course there are people who read him.

BRACKLEY.

Are there? What do they look like?

HILDA.

[*Smiling.*] They bear no distinctive mark of their eccentricity.

BRACKLEY.

The English are so original.

MABEL.

I think I shall go and ring up the flat. I wonder if John has gone straight home.

BRACKLEY.

Do. I'm growing very uneasy about him.

MABEL.

[*Laughing.*] You absurd creature.

[*She goes out.*]

HILDA.

You talk more nonsense than anyone I ever met.

BRACKLEY.

That's my stock in trade. You don't imagine people would read my poems if they knew that I was sober, industrious, and economical. As a matter of fact I lead the virtuous life of a clergyman's daughter, but not a reviewer would notice me if he knew it.

HILDA.

And the little things that the indiscreet read of in the papers. . . .

BRACKLEY.

Are merely another proof of my passion for duty. The British public wants its poets to lead romantic lives.

HILDA.

Are you ever serious?

BRACKLEY.

May I come to lunch with you on Thursday?

HILDA.

[*A little surprised.*] Certainly. But why on Thursday?

BRACKLEY.

Because on that day I intend to ask you to marry me.

HILDA.

[*With a smile.*] I'm sorry, I've just remembered that I'm lunching out.

BRACKLEY.

You break my heart.

HILDA.

On the contrary, I provide you with the materials for a sonnet.

BRACKLEY.

Won't you marry me?

HILDA.

No.

BRACKLEY.

Why not?

HILDA.

[*Amused.*] I'm not in the least in love with you.

BRACKLEY.

People who propose to marry should ask themselves if they can look forward with equanimity to breakfasting opposite one another for an indefinite number of years.

HILDA.

You're very unromantic.

BRACKLEY.

My dear lady, if you want romance I'll send you my complete works bound in vellum. I've ground out ten volumes of romance to Phyllis and Chloe and heaven knows who. The Lord save me from a romantic wife.

HILDA.

But I'm afraid I'm hopelessly romantic.

BRACKLEY.

Well, six months of marriage with a poet will cure you.

HILDA.

I'd rather not be cured.

BRACKLEY.

Won't you be in to luncheon on Thursday?

HILDA.

No. *[The BUTLER comes in.]*

BUTLER.

Mr. Halliwell, Mr. Kent.

[BASIL and JOHN appear, and at the same moment MABEL comes in from the room in which she has been telephoning.]

MABEL.

[To JOHN.] Wretched creature! I've been trying to ring you up.

JOHN.

Have I kept you waiting? I went down to Chancery Lane with Basil.

[JOHN turns to shake hands with HILDA and BRACKLEY, while BASIL, who has said how d'you do to HILDA, comes down to speak to MABEL. The conversation between MABEL and BASIL is in an undertone.]

BASIL.

How d'you do. You must scold me for keeping John so long.

MABEL.

I didn't really want him, you know.

BASIL.

[*Pointing with his head to BRACKLEY.*] I say, who is that?

MABEL.

Robert Brackley. Don't you know him'?

BASIL.

The poet?

MABEL.

Of course. They say he'd have been given the Laureateship if it hadn't been abolished at Tennyson's death.

BASIL.

[*Tightening his lips.*] He's rather a low blackguard, isn't he?

MABEL.

Heavens, what the matter with him, poor man? He's Hilda's latest celebrity. He pretends to adore her.

BASIL.

Don't you remember the Grange case that he was mixed up in?

MABEL.

[*In tones of surprise.*] But, my dear Mr. Kent, that was two years ago.

HILDA.

Mr. Kent, I want to introduce you to Mr. Brackley.

BASIL.

[*Going up.*] How d'you do.

[*JOHN comes down to his wife.*]

MABEL.

Wretched creature!

JOHN.

I say, Mabel, is Basil often here?

MABEL.

I don't know. I met him here last week.

JOHN.

Why the Dickens does he come? He's got no business to.

MABEL.

You brought him yourself to-day.

JOHN.

I didn't. He insisted on coming—when I said I had to fetch you.

MABEL.

Perhaps he came to see me.

JOHN.

Fiddledidee! I think you ought to speak to Hilda about it.

MABEL.

My dear John, are you mad? She'd jump down my throat.

JOHN.

Why does she let him hang about her? She must know she's turning his silly head.

MABEL.

I daresay she wants to prove to him that he showed very bad taste a year ago. It is rather annoying when you're attached to a young man that he should go and marry somebody else.

JOHN.

Well, I don't think she's playing the game, and I shall tell her so.

MABEL.

She'll snub you awfully.

JOHN.

I don't care. . . . Look here, you make a diversion so that I can get hold of her.

MABEL.

How?

JOHN.

[*Dryly.*] I don't know. Exercise your invention.

MABEL.

[*Going towards the others.*] Hilda, John is clamouring for some tea.

HILDA.

[*Coming down.*] Why on earth can't he help himself?

JOHN.

My native modesty prevents.

HILDA.

That's quite a new trait in you.

[*HILDA sits down and pours out tea for JOHN. He looks at her silently.*]

HILDA.

You've been lunching at Richmond?

JOHN.

Yes. . . . Then I went on to Putney.

HILDA.

You've been making quite a day of it.

JOHN.

[*Taking the cup.*] I say, old gal—you're not going to make a fool of yourself, are you?

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes.*] Oh, I hope not. Why?

JOHN.

I thought it might have slipped your memory that Basil was married about a year ago.

HILDA.

[*Freezing.*] What on earth d'you mean? [*Calling*] Mabel.

JOHN.

One moment. . . . You can give me a little conversation, can't you?

HILDA.

I'm afraid you're going to bore me.

JOHN.

[*Good-humouredly.*] I assure you I'm not. . . . Isn't Basil here rather often?

HILDA.

I wonder you haven't learnt to mind your own business, John.

JOHN.

Don't you think it's rather rough on that poor little woman in Putney?

HILDA.

[*With a suspicion of contempt.*] I went down to see her. I thought she was vulgar and pretentious. I'm afraid I can't arouse any interest in her.

JOHN.

[*Gently.*] She may be vulgar, but she told me her love was like music in her heart. Don't you think she must have suffered awfully to get hold of a thought like that?

HILDA.

[*After a pause, changing suddenly both voice and manner.*] And d'you think I've not suffered, John? I'm so unhappy.

JOHN.

Do you really care for him?

HILDA.

[*In a low voice hoarse with passion.*] No, I don't care for him. I worship the very ground he treads on.

JOHN.

[*Very gravely.*] Then you must do as you think best. . . . You're playing the most dangerous game in the world. You're playing with human hearts. . . . Good-bye.

HILDA.

[*Taking his hand.*] Good-bye, John. You're not angry with me because I was horrid. . . . I'm glad you told me about his wife. Now I shall know what to do.

JOHN.

Mabel.

MABEL.

[*Coming forward.*] Yes, we really must be going. I've not seen my precious baby for two hours.

HILDA.

[*Taking both her hands.*] Good-bye, you happy child. You've got a precious baby, and you've got a husband you love. What can you want more?

MABEL.

[*Flippantly.*] I want a motor-car.

HILDA.

[*Kissing her.*] Good-bye, darling.

[*MABEL and JOHN go out.*]

BRACKLEY.

I like this room, Mrs. Murray. It never seems to say to you: now it's really time for you to go away, as some drawing-rooms do.

HILDA.

[*Recovering her serenity.*] I suppose it's the furniture. I'm thinking of changing it.

BRACKLEY.

[*With a smile.*] Upon my word, that almost suggests that I've outstayed my welcome.

HILDA.

[*Gaily.*] I shouldn't have said that if I didn't know that nothing would induce you to go till you wanted to.

BRACKLEY.

[*Rising.*] You know me like your glove. But it really is growing monstrous late.

HILDA.

You mustn't go till you've told me who the fair charmer was I saw you with at the play last night.

BRACKLEY.

Ah, the green-eyed monster !

HILDA.

[*Laughing.*] Don't be so absurd, but I thought you'd like to know her yellow hair was dyed.

[*BASIL looks over the pages of a book, somewhat annoyed that HILDA takes no notice of him.*]

BRACKLEY.

Of course it was dyed. That was just the charm of it. Any woman can have yellow hair naturally : there's no more credit in that than in having it blue or green.

HILDA.

I've always wanted to make mine purple.

BRACKLEY.

Don't you think women ought to be artificial ? It's just as much their duty to rouge their cheeks and powder their noses as it is for them to wear nice frocks.

HILDA.

But I know many women who wear horrid frocks.

BRACKLEY.

Oh, those are the others. I treat them as non-existent.

HILDA.

What do you mean ?

BRACKLEY.

There are only two sorts of women in the world—the women who powder their noses and the others.

HILDA.

And who are they if you please ?

BRACKLEY.

I haven't examined the matter very carefully, but I understand they are clergymen's daughters by profession. *[He shakes hands with her.]*

HILDA.

It's so nice of you to have come.

BRACKLEY.

[Nodding at BASIL.] Good-bye. . . . May I come again soon ?

HILDA.

[Looking at him quickly.] Were you serious just now, or were you laughing at me ?

BRACKLEY.

I've never been more serious in my life.

HILDA.

Then perhaps I shall be in to luncheon on Thursday after all.

BRACKLEY.

A thousand thanks. Good-bye.

[*He nods to BASIL and goes out. HILDA looks at BASIL with a smile.*]

HILDA.

Is that a very interesting book ?

BASIL.

[*Putting it down.*] I thought that man was never going away.

HILDA.

[*Laughing.*] I suspect he thought precisely the same of you.

BASIL.

[*Ill-temperedly.*] What an ass he is ! How *can* you stand him ?

HILDA.

I'm rather attached to him. I don't take everything he says very seriously. And young men ought to be foolish.

BASIL.

He didn't strike me as so juvenile as all that.

HILDA.

He's only forty, poor thing—and I've never known a coming young man who was less than that.

BASIL.

He's a young man with a very bald head.

HILDA.

[*Amused.*] I wonder why you dislike him !

BASIL.

[*With a jealous glance, icily.*] I thought he wasn't admitted into decent houses.

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes.*] He comes here, Mr. Kent.

BASIL.

[*Unable to restrain his ill-temper.*] Don't you know that he's been mixed up in every scandal for the last twenty years ?

HILDA.

[*Good-humouredly, seeing that BASIL is merely jealous.*] There must be people in the world to provide gossip for their neighbours.

BASIL.

It's no business of mine. I have no right to talk to you like this.

HILDA.

I wonder why you do it ?

BASIL.

[*Almost savagely.*] Because I love you.

[*There is a little pause.*]

HILDA.

[*With a smile, ironically.*] Won't you have some more tea, Mr. Kent?

BASIL.

[*Going up to her, speaking with a sort of vehement gravity.*] You don't know what I've suffered. You don't know what a hell my life is. . . I tried so hard to prevent myself from coming here. When I married I swore I'd break with all my old friends. . . . When I married I found I loved *you*.

HILDA.

I can't listen to you if you talk like that.

BASIL.

D'you want me to go?

[*She does not answer for a moment, but walks up and down in agitation. At last she stops and faces him.*

HILDA.

Did you hear me tell Mr. Brackley to come on Thursday?

BASIL.

Yes.

HILDA.

He's asked me to be his wife. And on Thursday I shall give him an answer.

BASIL.

Hilda!

HILDA.

[*Earnestly.*] It's you who've driven me into it.

BASIL.

Hilda, what are you going to say to him?

HILDA.

I don't know—perhaps, yes?

BASIL.

Oh, Hilda, Hilda, you don't care for him?

HILDA.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] He amuses me. I dare say we should get on very well together.

BASIL.

[*Passionately.*] Oh, you can't. You don't know what you're doing. I thought—I thought you loved me.

HILDA.

It's because I love you that I shall marry Mr. Brackley.

BASIL.

Oh, it's absurd. I won't let you. You're making us both utterly wretched. I won't let you sacrifice our happiness. Oh, Hilda, I love you. I can't live

without you. At first I tried to resist seeing you. I used to pass your door and look up at your windows; and the door seemed as if it were waiting for me. And at the end of the street I used to look back. Oh, how I used to want to come in and see you once more! I thought if I saw you just once, I should get over it. And at last I couldn't help myself. I'm so weak. Do you despise me?

HILDA.

[*Almost in a whisper.*] I don't know.

BASIL.

And you were so kind I couldn't help coming again. I thought I did no harm.

HILDA.

I saw you were unhappy.

BASIL.

I should think I was unhappy. For months I've dreaded going home. When I saw my house as I walked along I almost turned sick. You don't know how fervently I've wished that I'd got killed in the war. I can't go on.

HILDA.

But you must. It's your duty.

BASIL.

Oh, I think I've had enough of duty and honour. I've used up all my principles in the last year.

HILDA.

Don't say that, Basil.

BASIL.

After all, it's my own fault. I brought it on myself, and I must take the consequences. . . . But I haven't the strength, I don't love her.

HILDA.

Then don't let her ever find it out. Be kind to her, and gentle and forbearing.

BASIL.

I can't be kind and gentle and forbearing day after day, for weeks, and months, and years.

HILDA.

I thought you were a brave man. They wouldn't have given you that medal if you'd been a coward.

BASIL.

Oh, my dearest, it's not hard to risk your life in the midst of battle. I can do that—but this needs more strength than I've got. I tell you I can't endure it.

HILDA.

[*Tenderly.*] But it'll get better. You'll get used to one another, and you'll understand one another better.

BASIL.

We're too different. It's impossible for it to get better. We can't even go on as we have been. I've felt that the end was coming.

HILDA.

But try—try for my sake.

BASIL.

You don't know what it is. Everything she says, everything she does, jars upon me so frightfully. I try to restrain myself. I clench my teeth to prevent myself from breaking out at her. Sometimes I can't help it, and I say things that I'd give anything to have left unsaid. She's dragging me down. I'm getting as common and vulgar as she is.

HILDA.

How can you say that of your wife?

BASIL.

Don't you think I must have gone through a good deal before I could acknowledge to myself what she was? I'm chained to her for all my life. And when I look into the future—I see her a vulgar, slatternly shrew like her mother, and myself abject, degraded, and despicable. The woman never tires in her conflict with the man, and in the end *he* always succumbs. A man, when he marries a woman like that, thinks he's going to lift her up to his own station. The fool! It's she who drags him down to hers.

HILDA.

[*Much disturbed, rising from her seat.*] I wanted you to be so happy.

BASIL.

[*Going towards her.*] Hilda!

HILDA.

No—don't. . . . Please!

BASIL.

If it weren't for you I couldn't have lived. It was only by seeing you that I gathered courage to go on with it. And each time I came here I loved you more passionately.

HILDA.

Oh, why did you come?

BASIL.

I couldn't help it. I knew it was poison, but I loved the poison. I would give my whole soul for one look of your eyes.

HILDA.

If you care for me at all, do your duty like a brave man—and let me respect you.

BASIL.

Say that you love me, Hilda.

HILDA.

[*Distracted.*] You're making our friendship impossible. Don't you see that you're preventing me from ever having you here again?

BASIL.

I can't help it.

HILDA.

I ought never to have seen you again. I thought there was no harm in your coming, and I—I couldn't bear to lose you altogether.

BASIL.

Even if I never see you again; I must tell you now that I love you. I made you suffer, I was blind. But I love you with all my heart, Hilda. All day I think of you, and I dream of you in the night. I long to take you in my arms and kiss you, to kiss your lips, and your beautiful hair, and your hands. My whole soul is yours, Hilda.

[*He goes towards her again to take her in his arms.*]

HILDA.

Oh, no, go away. For God's sake, go now. I can't bear it.

BASIL.

Hilda, I can't live without you.

HILDA.

Have mercy on me. Don't you see how weak I am?
Oh, God help me!

BASIL.

You don't love me?

HILDA.

[*Vehemently.*] You know I love you. But because
of my great love I beseech you to do your duty.

BASIL.

My duty is to be happy. Let us go where we can
love one another—away from England, to a land
where love isn't sinful and ugly.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, let us try to walk straight. Think of
your wife, who loves you also—as much as I do.
You're all the world to her. You can't treat her so
shamefully.

[*She puts her handkerchief to her eyes, and BASIL
gently takes away her hand.*]

BASIL.

Don't cry, Hilda. I can't bear it.

HILDA.

[*In broken tones.*] Don't you understand that we
could never respect ourselves again if we did that

poor creature such a fearful wrong? She would be always between us with her tears and her sorrows. I tell you I couldn't bear it. Have mercy on me—if you love me at all.

BASIL.

[*Wavering.*] Hilda, it's too hard. I can't leave you.

HILDA.

You must. I *know* it's better to do our duty. For my sake, dearest, go back to your wife, and don't let her ever know that you love me. It's because we're stronger than she that we must sacrifice ourselves.

[*He leans his head on his hands, and sighs deeply. For a while they remain in silence. At last, with another sigh, he gets up.*]

BASIL.

I don't know any longer what's right and what's wrong. It all seems confused. It's very hard.

HILDA.

[*Hoarsely.*] It's just as hard for me, Basil.

BASIL.

[*Broken-hearted.*] Good-bye, then. I dare say you're right. And perhaps I should only make you very unhappy.

HILDA.

Good-bye, my dearest.

[He bends down and kisses her hands. She stifles a sob. He goes slowly to the door, with his back turned to her; and then HILDA, unable to endure it, gives a groan.]

HILDA.

Basil. Don't go.

BASIL.

[With a cry of joy.] Ah! Hilda.

[He clasps her passionately in his arms.]

HILDA.

Oh, I can't bear it. I won't lose you. Basil, say you love me.

BASIL.

[In a madness of joy.] Yes. I love you with all my heart.

HILDA.

I could have borne it if you'd been happy.

BASIL.

Now *nothing* can separate us, Hilda. You belong to me for ever.

HILDA.

God help me! What have I done?

BASIL.

If we lose our souls, what does it matter? We gain the whole world.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, I want your love. I want your love so badly.

BASIL.

Will you come with me, Hilda? I can take you to a land where the whole earth speaks only of love—and where only love and youth and beauty matter.

HILDA.

Let us go where we can be together always. We have so short a time; let us snatch all the happiness we can.

BASIL.

[*Kissing her again.*] My darling.

HILDA.

Oh, Basil, Basil. . . . [*She starts away.*] Take care!
[*The BUTLER comes in.*]

BUTLER.

Mrs. Kent.

[*Jenny enters hurriedly, as he gives her name.*
The BUTLER at once goes out.]

BASIL.

Jenny!

JENNY.

I've caught you.

BASIL.

[*Trying to be urbane—to HILDA*] I think you know my wife.

JENNY.

[*In a loud angry voice.*] Oh, yes, I know her. You needn't introduce me. I've come for my husband.

BASIL.

Jenny, what are you saying?

JENNY.

Oh, I don't want any of your Society shams. I've come here to speak out.

BASIL.

[*To HILDA.*] Would you mind leaving us alone?

JENNY.

[*Also to HILDA, passionately.*] No, I want to speak to you. You're trying to get my husband from me. He's *my* husband.

BASIL.

Be quiet, Jenny. Are you mad? Mrs. Murray, for God's sake leave us. She'll insult you.

JENNY.

You think of her, you don't think of me. You don't care how much I suffer.

BASIL.

[*Taking her arm.*] Come away, Jenny.

JENNY.

[*Shaking him off.*] I won't. You're afraid to let me see her.

HILDA.

[*Pale and trembling, conscience-stricken.*] Let her speak.

JENNY.

[*Going up to HILDA threateningly.*] You're stealing my husband from me. Oh, you . . . [*She is at a loss for words violent enough.*]

HILDA.

I don't want to make you unhappy, Mrs. Kent.

JENNY.

You can't get round me with polite words. I'm sick of all that. I want to speak straight,

BASIL.

[*To HILDA.*] Please go. You can do no good.

JENNY.

[*Still more vehemently.*] You're stealing my husband from me. You're a wicked woman.

HILDA.

[*Almost in a whisper.*] If you like I'll promise you never to see your husband again.

JENNY.

[*With angry scorn.*] Much good your promises will do me. I wouldn't believe a word you said. I know what Society ladies are. We know all about them in the City.

BASIL.

[*To HILDA.*] You *must* leave us alone.

[*He opens the door, and she goes out, looking away from him.*

JENNY.

[*Savagely.*] She's frightened of me. She daren't stand up to me.

BASIL.

[*As HILDA goes.*] I'm so sorry.

JENNY.

You're sorry for her.

BASIL.

[*Turning on her.*] Yes, I am. What d'you mean by coming here and behaving like this?

JENNY.

I've caught you at last. . . . You liar! You dirty liar! You told me you were going to Chancery Lane.

BASIL.

I have been to Chancery Lane.

JENNY.

Oh, I know you have—for five minutes. It was only an excuse. You might just as well have come here straight.

BASIL.

[*Angrily.*] How dare you follow me?

JENNY.

I've got a right to follow you.

BASIL.

[*Unable to contain himself.*] What d'you want here?

JENNY.

I want you. D'you think I didn't guess what was going on? I saw you come in with Halliwell. Then I saw him go out with his wife. Then another man went out, and I knew you were alone with her.

BASIL.

[*Sharply.*] How did you know?

JENNY.

I gave the butler a sovereign, and he told me.

BASIL.

[*Looking for a word to express his contempt.*] Oh, you . . . you cad! It's only what I should have expected you to do.

JENNY.

And then I waited for you, and you didn't come. And at last I couldn't wait any longer.

BASIL.

Well, you've finished it now.

[*JENNY catches sight of a photograph of BASIL, standing on a table.*

JENNY.

[*Pointing to it.*] What's she got your photograph here for?

BASIL.

I gave it to Mrs. Murray before I was married.

JENNY.

She's got no right to keep it there.

[*She takes the photograph and flings it violently on the floor.*

BASIL.

Jenny, what are you doing ?

[JENNY *digs her heel into it savagely, viciously.*

JENNY.

[*Hissing the words.*] Oh, I hate her. I hate her.

BASIL.

[*Striving to contain himself.*] You drive me perfectly mad. You'll make me say things that I shall regret all my life. For Heaven's sake, go.

JENNY.

I shan't go till you come with me.

BASIL.

[*Beside himself.*] I choose to remain.

JENNY.

What d'you mean ?

BASIL.

Look here, until to-day I swear to you before God that I've never done anything or said anything that you couldn't have known. Do you believe me ?

JENNY.

I don't believe that you're not in love with that woman.

BASIL.

I don't ask you to.

JENNY.

What!

BASIL.

I said, until to-day I've been absolutely faithful to you. Heaven knows, I've tried to do my duty. I've done all I could to make you happy. And I've struggled with all my might to love you.

JENNY.

Say it out if you've got anything to say, I'm not afraid to hear.

BASIL.

I don't wish to deceive you. It's best that you should know what has happened.

JENNY.

[*Scornfully.*] Now for another thumping lie.

BASIL.

This afternoon I told Hilda I loved her. . . . And she loves me too.

JENNY.

[*With a cry of rage.*] Oh!

[*She hits at his face with her umbrella, but he wards the blow, and, snatching the umbrella from her, throws it away.*

BASIL.

You've brought it on yourself. You made me too unhappy.

[JENNY, *panting and bewildered, stands helpless, trying to control herself.*

BASIL.

And now it's the end. The life we led was impossible. I tried to do something that was beyond my power. I'm going away. I can't and I won't live with you any longer.

JENNY.

[*Frightened at herself and at what he says.*] Basil, you don't mean that?

BASIL.

I've struggled against it for months. And now I'm beaten.

JENNY.

You've got me to count with. I won't let you go.

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] What more d'you want? Isn't it enough that you've ruined my whole life?

JENNY.

[*Hoarsely.*] You don't love me?

BASIL.

I never loved you.

JENNY.

Why did you marry me ?

BASIL.

Because you made me.

JENNY.

[*In a whisper.*] You never loved me—even at the beginning ?

BASIL.

Never.

JENNY.

Basil !

BASIL.

It's too late now to keep it in. I must tell you and have done with it. *You've* been having it out for months—now it's my turn.

JENNY.

[*Going up to him and trying to put her arm round his neck.*] But I love you, Basil. I'll make you love me.

BASIL.

[*Shrinking from her.*] Don't touch me !

JENNY.

[*With a movement of despair.*] I really think you loathe me.

BASIL.

For Heaven's sake, Jenny, let us finish with it. I'm very sorry. I don't wish to be unkind to you. But you must have seen that—that I didn't care for you. What's the good of going on humbugging, and pretending, and making ourselves utterly wretched?

JENNY.

Yes, I've seen it. But I wouldn't believe it. When I've put my hand on your shoulder, I've seen that you could hardly help shuddering. And sometimes when I've kissed you, I've seen you put out all your strength to prevent yourself from pushing me away.

BASIL.

Jenny, I can't help it if I don't love you. I can't help it if I—if I love some one else.

JENNY.

[*Dazed and cowed.*] What are you going to do?

BASIL.

I'm going away.

JENNY.

Where?

BASIL.

God knows.

[There is a knock at the door.]

BASIL.

Come in.

[The BUTLER enters with a note, which he gives to BASIL.]

BUTLER.

Mrs. Murray told me to give you this note, Sir.

BASIL.

[Taking it.] Thank you.*[He opens and reads it as the SERVANT goes out of the room, then looks up at JENNY, who is anxiously watching him.]**[Reading.]* "You may tell your wife that I've made up my mind to marry Mr. Brackley. I will never see you again."

JENNY.

What does she mean?

BASIL.

[Bitterly.] Isn't it clear? Some one has asked her to marry him, and she means to accept.

JENNY.

But you said she loved you.

[He shrugs his shoulders without answering.]
JENNY goes up to him imploringly.

JENNY.

Oh, Basil, if it's true, give me another chance. She doesn't love you as I love you. I've been selfish and quarrelsome and exacting, but I've always loved you. Oh, don't leave me, Basil. Let me try once more if I can't make you care for me.

BASIL.

[*Looking down, hoarsely.*] I'm very sorry. It's too late.

JENNY.

[*Despairingly.*] Oh, God, what shall I do? And even though she's going to marry somebody else, you care for her better than any one else in the world?

BASIL.

[*In a whisper.*] Yes.

JENNY.

And even if she does marry that other man she'll love you still. There's no room for me between you. I can go away like a discharged servant. . . . Oh, God! oh, God! what have I done to deserve it?

BASIL.

[*Touched by her utter misery.*] I'm very sorry to make you so unhappy.

JENNY.

Oh, don't pity me. D'you think I want your pity now?

BASIL.

You had better come away, Jenny.

JENNY.

No. You've told me you don't want me any more. I shall go my own way.

BASIL.

[*Looks at her for a moment, hesitating; then shrugs his shoulders.*] Then good-bye.

[*He goes out, and JENNY, looking after him, passes her hand wearily over her forehead.*

JENNY.

[*With a sigh.*] He's so glad to go. . . . [*She gives a little sob.*] They've got no room for me.

[*She takes up from the floor the photograph on which she stamped, and looks at it; then sinks down, burying her face in her hands, and bursts into a passion of tears.*

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT.

THE NEXT MORNING.

[*The scene is the same as in the Second Act, the drawing-room at Basil's house in Putney. BASIL is sitting at the table, with his head in his hands. He looks tired and worn; his face is very white, and there are great black lines under his eyes. His hair is dishevelled. On the table lies a revolver.*

[*A knock at the door.*

BASIL.

[*Without looking up.*] Come in.

[*FANNY enters.*]

FANNY.

[*Subdued and pale.*] I came to see if you wanted anything, sir.

BASIL.

[*Looking up at her slowly, his voice is dull and hoarse.*] No.

FANNY.

Shall I open the windows, Sir? It's a beautiful morning.

BASIL.

No, I'm cold. Make up the fire.

FANNY.

Wouldn't you like a cup of tea? You ought to 'ave something after not going to bed all night.

BASIL.

I don't want anything. . . . Don't worry, there's a good woman.

[FANNY *puts coals on the fire, while* BASIL *listlessly watches her.*]

BASIL.

How long is it since you sent the telegrams?

FANNY.

I took them the moment the office was opened.

BASIL.

What's the time?

FANNY.

Well, sir, it must be 'alf-past nine by now.

BASIL.

Good Heavens, how slowly the hours go. I thought the night would never end. . . . Oh, God, what shall I do?

FANNY.

I'll make you a strong cup of tea. If you don't 'ave something to pull you together—I don't know what'll' appen to you.

BASIL.

Yes, make it quickly, I'm thirsty. . . . And I'm so cold.

[A ring at the front door is heard.]

BASIL.

[Jumping up.] There's some one at the door, Fanny. Hurry up.

[She goes out, and he follows her to the door of the room.]

BASIL.

Fanny, don't let any one up beside Mr. Halliwell. Say I can see no one. *[He waits for a moment, anxiously.]* Is that you, John?

JOHN.

[Outside.] Yes.

BASIL.

[To himself.] Thank God!

[JOHN comes in.]

BASIL.

I thought you were never coming. I begged you to come at once.

JOHN.

I started immediately I got your wire.

BASIL.

It seems hours since the girl went to the post-office.

JOHN.

What's the matter?

BASIL.

[*Hoarsely.*] Don't you know? I thought I had said it in my telegram.

JOHN.

You simply wired that you were in great trouble.

BASIL.

I suppose I thought you'd see it in the papers.

JOHN.

What on earth d'you mean? I've not seen a paper. Where's your wife?

BASIL.

[*After a pause, almost in a whisper.*] She's dead.

JOHN.

[*Thunderstruck.*] Good God!

BASIL.

[*Impatiently.*] Don't look at me like that. Isn't it plain enough? Don't you understand?

JOHN.

But she was all right yesterday.

BASIL.

[*Dully.*] Yes. She was all right yesterday.

JOHN.

For goodness sake tell me what you mean, Basil.

BASIL.

She's dead. . . . And she was all right yesterday.

[*JOHN does not understand. He is greatly distressed, and does not know what to say.*]

BASIL.

I killed her—as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands.

JOHN.

What d'you mean? She's not really dead!

BASIL.

[*In agony.*] She threw herself into the river last night.

JOHN.

How awful!

BASIL.

Haven't you got something more to say than how awful? I feel as if I were going mad.

JOHN.

But I can't understand! Why did she do it?

BASIL.

Oh—yesterday we had an awful row . . . before you came.

JOHN.

I know.

BASIL.

Then she followed me to . . . to your sister-in-law's. And she came up and made another scene. Then I lost my head. I was so furious, I don't know what I said. I was mad. I told her I'd have nothing more to do with her. . . . Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it.

[He breaks down and hides his face in his hands, sobbing.]

JOHN.

Come, Basil—pull yourself together a bit.

BASIL.

[Looking up despairingly.] I can hear her voice now. I can see the look of her eyes. She asked me to give her another chance, and I refused. It was so pitiful to hear the way she appealed to me, only I was mad, and I couldn't feel it.

[FANNY comes in with the cup of tea, which BASIL silently takes and drinks.]

FANNY.

[*To JOHN.*] He ain't slept a wink all night, sir.
 . . . No more 'ave I, for the matter of that.

[*JOHN nods, but does not answer; and FANNY, wiping her eyes with her apron, leaves the room.*

BASIL.

Oh, I'd give everything not to have said what I did. I'd always held myself in before, but yesterday—I couldn't.

JOHN.

Well?

BASIL.

I didn't get back here till nearly ten, and the maid told me Jenny had just gone out. I thought she'd gone back to her mother's.

JOHN.

Yes?

BASIL.

And soon after a constable came up and asked me to go down to the river. He said there'd been an accident. . . . She was dead. A man had seen her walk along the tow-path and throw herself in.

JOHN.

Where is she now?

BASIL.

[*Pointing to one of the doors.*] In there.

JOHN.

Will you take me in?

BASIL.

Go in alone, John. I daren't, I'm afraid to look at her. I can't bear the look on her face. . . . I killed her—as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands. I've been looking at the door all night, and once I thought I heard a sound. I thought she was coming to reproach me for killing her.

[JOHN goes to the door, and as he opens it, BASIL averts his head. When JOHN shuts the door after him, he looks at it with staring, frightened eyes, half mad with agony. He tries to contain himself. After a while JOHN comes back, very quietly.]

BASIL.

[*Whispering.*] What does she look like?

JOHN.

There's nothing to be afraid of, Basil. She might be sleeping.

BASIL.

[*Clenching his hands.*] But the ghastly pallor . . .

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] She's happier than she would ever have been if she'd lived.

[BASIL sighs deeply.]

JOHN.

[*Seeing the revolver.*] What's this for?

BASIL.

[*With a groan of self-contempt.*] I tried to kill myself in the night.

JOHN.

H'm !

[*He takes the cartridges out and puts the revolver in his pocket.*]

BASIL.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, don't be afraid, I haven't got the pluck. . . . I was afraid to go on living. I thought if I killed myself it would be a reparation for her death. I went down to the river, and I walked along the tow-path to the same spot—but I couldn't do it. The water looked so black and cold and pitiless. And yet she did it so easily. She just walked along and threw herself in. [*A pause.*] Then I came back, and I thought I'd shoot myself.

JOHN.

D'you think that would have done any one much good ?

BASIL.

I despised myself. I felt I hadn't the right to live, and I thought it would be easier just to pull a trigger. . . . People say it's cowardly to destroy oneself, they don't know what courage it wants. I couldn't face the pain—and then, I don't know what's on the other side. After all, it may be true that there's a cruel, avenging God, who will punish us to all eternity if we break His unknown laws.

JOHN.

I'm very glad you sent for me. You had better come back to London, and stay with me for the present.

BASIL.

And if you know what happened in the night? I couldn't go to bed. I felt I could never sleep again—and then, presently, I dozed off quite quietly in my chair. And I slept as comfortably—as if Jenny weren't lying in there, cold and dead. And the maid pities me because she thinks I passed as sleeping a night as she did.

[A sound of voices is heard outside in altercation. FAINT comes in.]

FAINT.

Please, sir, Mr. James.

BASIL.

[Angrily.] I won't see him.

FAINT.

He won't go away, I told 'im you was too ill to see anybody.

BASIL.

I won't see him. I knew he'd be round, curse him!

JOHN.

After all, I suppose he has a certain right to come here—under the circumstances. Haden't you better see what he wants?

BASIL.

Oh, he'll make a scene. I shall knock him down. I've suffered too much through him already.

JOHN.

Let *me* see him. You don't want him to make a fuss at the inquest.

BASIL.

I've been thinking of that. I know the stories he and his people will make up. And the papers will get hold of it, and every one will blackguard me. They'll say it was my fault.

JOHN.

D'you mind if I have a talk to him? I think I can save you from all that.

BASIL.

[*Shrugging his shoulders, impatiently.*] Do whatever you like.

JOHN.

[*To FANNY.*] Show him up, Fanny.

FANNY.

Yes, sir.

[*She goes out.*]

BASIL.

Then I shall go.

[*JOHN nods, and BASIL goes out by the door next to that of the room in which JENNY is lying. JAMES BUSH appears.*]

JOHN.

[*Grave and cold.*] Good morning, Mr. Bush.

JAMES.

[*Aggressively.*] Where's that man?

JOHN.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] It's usual to take one's hat off in other people's houses.

JAMES.

I'm a man of principle, I am; and I keep my 'at on to show it.

JOHN.

Ah, well, we won't discuss the point.

JAMES.

I want to see that man.

JOHN.

May I ask to whom you're referring? There are so many men in the world. In fact, it's very overcrowded.

JAMES.

Who are you, I should like to know?

JOHN.

[*Politely.*] My name is Halliwell. I had the pleasure of meeting you at Basil's rooms in Bloomsbury.

JAMES.

[*Aggressively.*] I know that.

JOHN.

I beg your pardon. I thought you were asking for information.

JAMES.

I tell you I want to see my brother-in-law.

JOHN.

I'm afraid you can't.

JAMES.

I tell you I will see 'im. He's murdered my sister. He's a blackguard and a murderer, and I'll tell him so to his face.

JOHN.

[*Sarcastic.*] Take care he doesn't hear you.

JAMES.

I want him to hear me. I'm not frightened of him. I should just like to see him touch me now. [*He sidles viciously to JOHN.*] H'm, you tried to keep me out, did yer? Said I couldn't come to my sister's 'ouse—and kept me waitin' in the 'all like a tradesman. Oh, I'll make you all pay for this. I'll get my own back now. Measley set of West End curs, that's all you are.

JOHN.

Mr. Bush, you'll be so good as to keep a civil tongue in your mouth while you're here—and you'll talk less loudly.

JAMES.

[*Scornfully.*] Who says so?

JOHN.

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I do.

JAMES.

[*Less decisively.*] Don't you try and bully me.

JOHN.

[*Pointing to a chair.*] Won't you sit down?

JAMES.

No, I won't sit down. This ain't the 'ouse that a gentleman would sit down in. I'll be even with 'im yet. I'll tell the jury a pretty story. He deserves to be strung up, he does.

JOHN.

I can't tell you how extremely sorry I am for what has happened.

JAMES.

Oh, don't try and get round me.

JOHN.

Really, Mr. Bush, you have no reason to be indignant with me.

JAMES.

Well, I don't think much of you, any 'ow.

JOHN.

I'm very sorry. Last time we met I thought you a very amiable person. Don't you remember, we went and had a drink together?

JAMES.

I don't say *you're* not a gentleman.

JOHN.

[*Taking out his cigar-case.*] Won't you have a cigar?

JAMES.

[*Suspiciously.*] Look here, you're not trying to bluff me, are you?

JOHN.

Certainly not. I wouldn't dream of such a thing.

JAMES.

[*Taking a cigar.*] Larranaga.

JOHN.

[*With an acid smile.*] Nine pounds a hundred.

JAMES.

That's one and nine apiece, ain't it?

JOHN.

How quickly you reckon!

JAMES.

You must be pretty oofy to be able to afford that.

JOHN.

[*Drily.*] It does inspire respect, doesn't it?

JAMES.

I don't know what you mean by that. But I flatter myself I know a good cigar when I see it.

[JOHN *sits down*, and JAMES BUSH, *without thinking, follows his example.*]

JOHN.

What d'you think you'll get out of making a row at the inquest? Of course, there'll be an inquest.

JAMES.

Yes, I know there will. And I'm lookin' forward to it, I can tell you.

JOHN.

I wouldn't have said that if I'd been you.

JAMES.

[*Quite unconscious of the construction that may be put on his last words—full of his own 'grievances.'*]
I've 'ad something to put up with, I 'ave.

JOHN.

Really?

JAMES.

Oh, he's treated me shockin'! He simply treated me like dirt. I wouldn't 'ave stood it a minute, except for Jenny's sake. I wasn't good enough for 'im, if you please. And the way he used to look right through me as if I wasn't there at all—Oh, I'll be even with 'im now.

JOHN.

What are you going to do?

JAMES.

Never you mind. I'm going to make it hot for 'im.

JOHN.

D'you think that'll do you any good?

JAMES.

[*Springing up.*] Yes. And I mean to. . . .

JOHN.

[*Interrupting.*] Now sit down, there's a good chap, and let's have a little talk about it.

JAMES.

[*Angrily.*] You're trying to bamboozle me.

JOHN.

Nonsense.

JAMES.

Oh, yes, you are. Don't try to deny it. I can see through you as if you was a pane of glass. You people in the West End—you think you know everything.

JOHN.

I assure you. . . .

JAMES.

[*Interrupting.*] But I've had a City training, and you can lay anything you like there ain't no flies on me.

JOHN.

We're both men of the world, Mr. Bush. Will you do me a great favour as a—friend?

JAMES.

[*Suspiciously.*] That depends on what it is.

JOHN.

It's merely to listen to me quietly for two or three minutes.

JAMES.

I don't mind doing that.

JOHN.

Well, the fact is—Basil's going away, and he wants to get rid of the furniture and the house. What d'you think it's worth, as an auctioneer?

JAMES.

[*Looking round.*] It's a very different business what a thing's worth, and what it'll fetch.

JOHN.

Of course, but a clever man like you. . . .

JAMES.

Now then, no bluff. I tell you it won't work with me. . . . D'you include plate and linen?

JOHN.

Everything.

JAMES.

Well, if it was well sold—by a man as knew his business. . . .

JOHN.

If you sold it, for instance?

JAMES.

It might fetch a hundred pounds—it might fetch a hundred and fifty.

JOHN.

That wouldn't be a bad present to make to any one, would it?

JAMES.

No. I think I can agree with you there.

JOHN.

Well, Basil thought of giving the entire contents of the house to your mother and sister.

JAMES.

To tell you the truth, it's no more than he ought to do.

JOHN.

The condition is, of course, that nothing is said at the inquest.

JAMES.

[*With a sneer.*] You make me laugh. D'you think you can gag me by giving a houseful of furniture to my mother?

JOHN.

I had no such exalted opinion of your disinterestedness, Mr. Bush. I come to you now.

JAMES.

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

JOHN.

It appears that you owe Basil a good deal of money. Can you pay it?

JAMES.

No.

JOHN.

Also it appears that there was some difficulty with your accounts in your last place.

JAMES.

That's a lie.

JOHN.

Possibly. But altogether I fancy we could make it uncommonly nasty for you if you made a fuss. If dirty linen is going to be washed in public—there's generally a good deal to be done on both sides.

JAMES.

I don't care. I mean to get my own back. If I can only get my knife into that man—I'll take the consequences.

JOHN.

On the other hand—if you won't make a fuss at the inquest, I'll give you fifty pounds.

JAMES.

[Jumping up indignantly.] Are you trying to bribe me?

JOHN.

[Calmly.] Yes.

JAMES.

I would 'ave you know that I'm a gentleman, and what's more, I'm an Englishman. And I'm proud of it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I've never 'ad any one try and bribe me before.

JOHN.

[Indifferently.] Otherwise you would, doubtless, have accepted.

JAMES.

I've got more than half a mind to knock you down.

JOHN.

[With a slight smile.] Come, come, Mr. Bush, don't be ridiculous. You'd far better keep quiet, you know.

JAMES.

[*Scornfully.*] What do you think fifty pounds is to me?

JOHN.

[*With a sharp look.*] Who spoke of fifty pounds?

JAMES.

You did.

JOHN.

You must have mistaken me. A hundred and fifty.

JAMES.

Oh! [*At first he is surprised, then, as the amount sinks into his mind, grows doubtful.*] That's a very different pair of shoes.

JOHN.

I don't ask you to say anything untrue. After all, it's not worth while for a man of the world like you—a business man—to give way to petty spite. And we don't want to have any scandal. That would be just as unpleasant for you as for us.

JAMES.

[*Undecided.*] There's no denying that she was hysterical. If he'd only treated me like a gentleman, I shouldn't have had anything to say.

JOHN.

Well?

JAMES.

[*With a foxy, keen glance at JOHN.*] Make it two hundred, and I'll say done.

JOHN.

[*Firmly.*] No. You can take a hundred and fifty, or go to the devil.

JAMES.

Oh, well, 'and it over.

JOHN.

[*Taking a cheque out of his pocket.*] I'll give you fifty now and the rest after the inquest.

JAMES.

[*With a certain admiration.*] You're a sharp 'un, you are.

[*JOHN writes out the cheque and gives it to*
JAMES BUSH.

JAMES.

Shall I give you a receipt? I'm a business man, you know.

JOHN.

Yes, I know; but it's not necessary. You'll tell your mother and sister?

JAMES.

Don't you fear. I'm a gentleman, and I don't go back on my friends.

JOHN.

Now I think I'll say good morning to you. You can understand that Basil isn't fit to see any one.

JAMES.

I understand. So long.

[*He stretches out his hand, which JOHN shakes gravely.*]

JOHN.

Good morning.

[*FANNY comes in by one door as JAMES BUSH goes out by another.*]

FANNY.

Good riddance to bad rubbish.

JOHN.

Ah, Fanny, if there were no rogues in the world, life would really be too difficult for honest men.

[*FANNY goes out, and JOHN walks to the door and calls.*]

JOHN.

Basil—he's gone. . . . Where are you?

[*BASIL comes out of the room in which is lying Jenny's body.*]

JOHN.

I didn't know you were in there.

BASIL.

I wonder if she forgives me ?

JOHN.

I wouldn't worry myself too much if I were you, Basil, old man.

BASIL.

If you only knew how I despise myself !

JOHN.

Come, come, Basil, you must make an effort. . . .

BASIL.

I've not told you the worst. I feel such a cad. There's one thought that's been with me all night. And I *can't* drive it away. It's worse than anything else. It's too shameful.

JOHN.

What *do* you mean ?

BASIL.

Oh, it's so despicable. And yet it's too strong for me. . . . I can't help thinking that I'm—free.

JOHN.

Free ?

BASIL.

It's treachery to her memory. But you don't know what it is when your prison door is opened. [*As he speaks he grows more and more excited.*] I don't want

to die. I want to live, and I want to take life by both hands and enjoy it. I've got such a desire for happiness. Let's open the windows, and let the sunlight in. [*He goes to the window and flings it open.*] It's so good just to be alive. How can I help thinking that now I can start fresh? The slate is wiped clean, and I can begin again. I *will* be happy. God forgive me, I can't help the thought. I'm free. I made a ghastly mistake, and I suffered for it. Heaven knows how I suffered, and how hard I tried to make the best of it. It wasn't all my fault. In this world we're made to act and think things because other people have thought them good. We never have a chance of going our own way. We're bound down by the prejudices and the morals of everybody else. For God's sake, let us be free. Let us do this and that because we want to and because we must, not because other people think we ought. [*He stops suddenly in front of JOHN.*] Why don't you say something? You stare at me as if you thought me raving mad!

JOHN.

I don't know what to say.

BASIL.

Oh, I suppose you're shocked and scandalised. I ought to go on posing. I ought to act the part decently to the end. *You* would never have had the courage to do what I did, and yet, because I've failed, you think you can look down on me from the height of your moral elevation.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] I was thinking how far a man may fall when he attempts to climb the stars.

BASIL.

I gave the world fine gold, and their currency is only cowrie-shells. I held up an ideal, and they sneered at me. In this world you must wallow in the trough with the rest of them. . . . The only moral I can see is that if I'd acted like a blackguard—as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done—and let Jenny go to the dogs, I should have remained happy and contented and prosperous. And she, I dare say, wouldn't have died. . . . It's because I tried to do my duty and act like a gentleman and a man of honour, that all this misery has come about.

JOHN.

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I think I should put it in another way. One has to be very strong and very sure of oneself to go against the ordinary view of things. And if one isn't, perhaps it's better not to run any risks, but just to walk along the same secure old road as the common herd. It's not exhilarating, it's not brave, and it's rather dull. But it's eminently safe.

[*BASIL scarcely hears the last words, but listens intently to other sounds outside.*

BASIL.

What's that? I thought I heard a carriage.

JOHN.

[*A little surprised.*] Do you expect any one?

BASIL.

I sent a wire to—to Hilda at the same time as to you.

JOHN.

Already?

BASIL.

[*Excited.*] D'you think she'll come?

JOHN.

I don't know. [*A ring is heard at the front door.*]

BASIL.

[*Running to the window.*] There's some one at the door.

JOHN.

Perhaps it's occurred to her also that you're free.

BASIL.

[*With the utmost passion.*] Oh, she loves me, and I—I adore her. God forgive me, I can't help it.

[FANNY *comes in.*

FANNY.

If you please, sir, the Coroner's officer.

THE END.

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