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IN COTTON WOOL

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

SPINSTER OF THIS PARISH
A LITTLE MORE
FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE
GLAMOUR
THE MIRROR AND THE LAMP
THE DEVIL'S GARDEN
GENERAL MALLOCK'S SHADOW
IN COTTON WOOL
MRS. THOMPSON
THE REST CURE
SEYMOUR CHARLTON
HILL RISE
THE GUARDED FLAME
VIVIEN
THE RAGGED MESSENGER
THE COUNTESS OF MAYBURY

SHORT STORIES

LIFE CAN NEVER BE THE SAME
ODD LENGTHS
FABULOUS FANCIES

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

IN COTTON WOOL

BY

W. B. MAXWELL

AUTHOR OF "MRS. THOMPSON," "THE REST CURE,"
"THE GUARDED FLAME," ETC.



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FOREWORD

I would say that one of the greatest evils of our modern civilization is the steady increase of egoism. As society is now constituted, a man with a moderate but assured income can find people who in exchange for his money will perform for him nearly all the duties of manhood; and, as though he were something infinitely delicate and inestimably precious, he may thus wrap himself in cotton wool and evade the shocks and perils of active existence. And the fact that within the packing of cotton wool all the best of the man has perished, and only the husk of a man remains, seems of no consequence to any of the parties to the bargain.

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I

DO you ever think of yourself, Mr. Lenny?"

"Of course I do."

"I don't believe it."

Miss Workman smiled, nodded with vehement negation, waved her hand; and young Mr. Leonard Calcraft hurried along the sea-front, to overtake his father's Bath-chair.

"Well, Lenny, what did she want? Why did she stop you?"

At the sound of the firm footsteps, at the sight of the strong figure, the old man's dim eyes brightened.

"Oh, she was only making polite inquiries about your health, dad."

"Thank her for nothing," said old Mr. Calcraft, rather querulously. "None the better for seeing her. . . . Tell Miss Workman, with my compliments, that I'm not going to lend the room for any more of her Tom-fool meetings."

"Very well, father. . . . Certainly not, if you find it upsetting."

"Of course I find it upsetting. Surely you saw that for yourself, last time?"

The afternoon sunshine made pebbles flash and sparkle on the beach; gulls dipped and hovered above white fringes of breaking foam; and presently the breeze, sweeping with a swift unexpected rustle across hitherto

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lazy waves, sent wisps of sea-weed, bubbles of spray, and a gyrating cloud of sand over the stone wall to the eighth hole of the golf links. For a few moments all light and helpless things were driven before the cruel wind.

And really the old fellow in the Bath-chair looked so weak and frail that one might almost have expected to see him blown away too. Instinctively his big son came to the weather side of the chair, and endeavoured to shelter and protect him from danger or annoyance.

"Shall we turn now, father?"

The Bath-chair man, bending his back and slowly plodding, had taken them nearly to the end of the sea-wall.

"No," said old Calcraft, gasping, "the confounded wind catches one's breath—but I'm all right. Go on. We'll do our full journey."

When they reached the last bench and the white post, he asked for his walking-stick.

Mr. Lenny fished out an ebony cane from the side of the chair and handed it to him.

"There," and the invalid, feebly stretching it forward, gave three shaky taps on the white post. "There, my bear is free;" and he chuckled and coughed.

"Yes, dad, your bear is free."

The stalwart son had watched with a tender solicitude while this little ceremony was being performed; and he put away the stick carefully and gently, as if it had been a part of the arm that held it outstretched and shaking. All this was a diurnal rite. Mr. Calcraft had his airing in the Bath-chair every afternoon, and he was apt to come home depressed and fretful if bad weather curtailed the expedition and prevented him from "freeing the bear."

As they returned by the long sea-front his son was talking gaily and cheerily, and he listened with an attentive but perhaps condescending satisfaction. He loved this pleas-

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ant babble; it was music in his ears, and yet he sometimes cut it short with an ungracious abruptness.

"Rubbish, Lenny. . . . Don't believe half what people tell you. . . . And don't repeat compliments that have been paid to yourself."

"Oh, I didn't intend to blow my own trumpet, dad; but I thought you'd be gratified. . . ."

"Well, I'm not so easily gratified as you are. That's all about it. Don't let people flatter you. At your age you ought to know that flattery is never sincere."

He was rude to his son; perhaps merely because he was rude to everybody, and gratitude and love could not enable him to make one exception to his rule. Even in sickness and weakness, he remained what he had been in health—a hard and cranky sort of man, self-willed and obstinate, with a cynical disregard of those finer susceptibilities of thought and feeling that he himself did not possess.

He hated his infirmities, rebelled against the fate which condemned him to sick-rooms and Bath-chairs instead of allowing him to enjoy a hale and hearty old age, and he made of his tongue a sharp and redoubtable weapon, as if trying to prove that he was not yet quite impotent and defenceless.

And the struggle to avoid that outward aspect of decrepitude which invites nothing but pity showed itself very queerly in the style and material of his garments. He had a passion for robustness of costume; choosing the heaviest and coarsest things, rough pea-jackets, huge woolen capes; wrapping undyed mufflers round his skinny neck, and hiding his white hair beneath vast dreadnought caps. The caps were terrific, with their monstrous flaps and peaks; and in truth they added a touch of grotesqueness rather than force to the thin bird-like nose, the bushy frowning eyebrows, the drawn lips, and the fleshless pallid cheeks.

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Young Mr. Calcraft, for his part, was always so beautifully and appropriately dressed that, walking beside the Bath-chair throughout the changing seasons of the year, he offered a pattern and example for all other young men. His deportment moreover was as worthy of imitation as his admirable clothes; for, however slowly he paced, accommodating his stride to the restricted progress of the chair, he carried himself firmly and erectly. Altogether, he seemed to humble observers a fine broad-shouldered gentleman, as big as one might be without being too big; sun-burned and smooth of cheek; with a natural curl in his well-cut brown hair, and a reddish glossiness about the small brushed-up moustache beneath which white teeth gleamed pleasantly in a genial smile.

A marked difference here between parent and child. Too often when you touched your hat to the old bloke, he gave you a frown for your pains; but the young gentleman never failed to exchange smile against smile. And all the world smiled at Mr. Leonard.

Thus, as they passed homeward, they met many kind greetings—from fishermen mending a net, from fishermen tarring a boat; from pig-tailed maidens and an austere governess; from golfers who brandished irons, from cabmen who saluted with whips. You can't live ten years in a small watering-place without being known, and everybody knew these two.

Except that they were moving instead of stationary objects, they were as much a part of Westchurch as the church, the club, or the lifeboat house.

"He hangs on, don't he?" said the net-menders, nodding sagaciously when the Bath-chair had passed. "But see how he's looked after."

There was everything the matter with old Calcraft—weak heart, weak lungs, liver trouble, kidney complica-

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tions. As Dr. Searle said again and again, he was only kept alive by the unremitting care that surrounded him.

"In other words," said Miss Workman, "you mean by Mr. Lenny."

"Well, and so I do," said the good doctor cordially. "*I* never saw anything like it."

"*It*" was the devotion—continued during so many years—of the faithful son. The whole town understood and admired it. It was a traditional legend, and a live fact of the place, something very beautiful to contemplate—like the new view across the river, or the evening light upon the hill-side—something of which the community felt justly proud.

II

THEY lived at Number One, The Crescent—that is to say, in quite the best row of houses on the whole sea-front.

Once Mr. Calcraft had been rich; now, entirely from his own fault, he was much poorer. He had speculated rashly. Miss Workman—elderly spinster and leader of Westchurch society—professed intimate knowledge of those far-off days of extreme prosperity, and gave vivid sketches of the Calcraft family seated in a Midland shire, with mansion and park, with stables full of horses, larders full of game, pockets full of money. Oh, how sad it is when you see a well-connected, long-established country magnate jeopardize ease and forfeit grandeur by his own stupidity!

“Perhaps it is natural that common people should be reckless and ignorant, but you do expect our landed gentry to hold fast to what has come to them through inheritance—at least until Radical legislation takes it away from them.”

Fortunately, said Miss Workman, there were the tied-up funds which Mr. Calcraft could not touch—poor Mrs. Calcraft’s marriage settlement, and so forth; something considerable saved from a catastrophe that ought never to have occurred; but altogether it was a miserable business to look back upon.

Think of it. One night at dinner—lovely flowers, cut-glass, gold and silver plate all over the table—the idiotic man coolly announced that he had made a mess of things, and that retrenchment had become absolutely necessary.

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Not a note of warning before this dire announcement. Without prelude or preparation, the unhappy mother, who till then had been a great lady; the two daughters, who might have aspired to alliances with English dukes; the son who was riding thoroughbred hunters, studying politics, training with his smart militia corps, fitting himself for a splendid and useful career—the whole family were driven to the obscurity of a small sea-side town, and converted into comparative nobodies.

Young Leonard bravely submitted to this reverse of fortune. His career gone for ever, his life cut in two as though it had been a delicate silk thread snapped by a clumsy blundering hand—and yet he uttered no word of reproach. Miss Workman used to say, and all agreed with her, that it was a notable instance of courage and magnanimity. Poor Mrs. Calcraft bore up under the blow; but Leonard scarcely showed that he had been hit.

Miss Workman said further that, in spite of her cheerful demeanour, the mother died of a broken heart, and that on her death-bed she consigned the father to Lenny's care, made Lenny give a solemn vow that he would ever remain faithful to his charge.

Miss Workman could not really know what happened at the death-bed scene; but Lenny's conduct during nine long years might be adduced as evidence confirming the accuracy of her conjectures.

There never was such a son.

And Mr. Calcraft had not been lucky in all his children. The two daughters, Sarah and Jane, had defied him. One after the other they had married against his wish. It was an irreparable breach; they could never be forgiven; Mr. Calcraft could not permit anyone to mention their names at No. 1, The Crescent.

How much money did the old man still possess? But

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for that tale of bygone grandeur, a past that by its glory so eclipsed the present, people would have spoken of him as very well off. He was infinitely better off than Colonel Blacklock and other old soldiers in retreat; he undoubtedly had more than Mr. Reed or Mr. Price-Young. Fifteen hundred a year? Two thousand? It was a question often debated by the ladies at their tea-parties and the gentlemen at their golf.

No. 1 was the large corner house next to the garden of the Esplanade Hotel; unlike the other and narrower houses it had rooms on each side of the hall; and, whether considered from without or within, it impressed one with a sense of substantial comfort. Indeed, as judged by local standards of wealth and poverty, there appeared to be every sign of relative affluence. Good furniture, fine big pieces saved from the financial wreck, and books, china, pictures that had once adorned the more stately home; good food, good wine; five women-servants kept to wait upon two masters, not counting the hospital nurse who was now a fixture in the establishment—and such thick carpets on the stairs, such deep and reposeful armchairs in dining-room and library!

Mr. Leonard's bedroom and dressing-room on the second floor were spacious and airy, full of useful things and pretty things; with windows from which you looked straight out at the yellow sands and blue sea, or sideways at the dark green foliage of the ilex trees in the hotel garden. On this floor there were unoccupied apartments, and one of these had recently been fitted up as a bathroom after the most modern style: so that the son of the house enjoyed close at hand, without risk or trouble, every amenity of warm douches, cool sprays, and tepid plunges. The bathroom was a birthday present from father to son—and the old chap had been rather nice about it, trying to keep his

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plans a secret, and sparing no expense in carrying them to a successful issue.

Mr. Calcraft's bedroom was on the first floor, with a little room behind it in which the nurse slept; and on the other side of the landing stood the rarely opened door of the big drawing-room.

Downstairs were the dining-room and library, and a room for hats and coats, or for Leonard to use as his own den if he cared to do so. But in fact he preferred the library, with its air of dignity and quiet, its fine array of well-bound volumes, its marble busts, its vast writing-desks and leather fauteuils; and after 9.30 every night, when the invalid regularly retired to bed, he might consider it as his domain also. It was here that Dr. Searle, Colonel Blacklock, and other respectable elders would smoke a pipe with him now and then; and it was here that he generally received the admiring youths who came to him for counsel and aid at critical moments of their budding existence. All the adolescent males of Westchurch admired him and believed in him, and would suffer themselves to be guided by his advice when they were openly scorning the wisdom of their parents and guardians.

"Look here, Jack," he used to say, with his pleasant smile, "you drop in any night after a quarter to ten, and we'll have a good pow-wow."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Calcraft."

"Nothing to thank me for. . . . And, I say, don't call me *Mister* Calcraft—you're getting too old, or I don't feel old enough for that. Let it be Calcraft—or Lenny. Lenny is what my pals call me."

"Oh, may I?" And a blush of pleasure no doubt suffused the candid young face. "May I really?"

"Of course you may. . . . All right, then. Tomorrow evening, and we'll put our heads together, Jack.

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Two heads are better than one. I don't pretend to be an oracle, but I do know something of the world. I shall just talk to you as man to man."

"That's what I want," and again the lad blushed. "Man to man! That's where the governor and the mater make their mistake—wanting to treat me like a child for ever. . . . A thousand thanks—er—*Lenny!*"

Then perhaps some time next day before the appointed hour had come, Lenny was buttonholed at the club or on the promenade by Jack's father.

"I say, Lenny, my dear fellow, if you should ever have an opportunity, do tell that boy of mine not to be such a dashed young ass. You have great influence with him. Throw your weight into *our* scale. . . . On my word, I don't know what these youngsters are coming to. If I hadn't removed him from his school two years before I ought to have, I should write and ask his head-master to give him a dashed good caning."

Lenny laughed good-naturedly.

"You can't put back the clock, sir. It's no good talking about head-masters and canes at Jack's age. By the way, how old *is* Jack?"

"Eighteen. A stripling—a mere child—and yet he has the audacity to set his judgment against mine, and maintains that we are to discuss his future in a tone of perfect equality. Speaks of his *rights!* If you could make him understand that it will be time enough to talk of the privileges of manhood three years hence—well, his mother and I would both be enormously grateful to you."

"Very well, sir, I'll see what I can do."

Although the task of pleasing at the same time rebellious youth and domineering age might seem difficult, Mr. Leonard generally accomplished it. Doubtless great tact

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was needed, but everybody owned that Lenny's tact was inexhaustible.

And he never showed this quality more conspicuously than on those rare occasions when the drawing-room was thrown open to visitors. In this room the decorations belonged to a bygone fashion—tall looking-glasses, gilt console tables, polished steel fireplaces: nothing in it had been altered since Mrs. Calcraft's death, and no one had used it since the marriage of the second daughter. But it was so noble a saloon, running the whole depth of the house from front windows to back windows, offering such pomp and space, that its fame had reached to the farthest confines of the neighbourhood, and people who wished to hold meetings, debates, or causeries, often begged for the loan of it.

Mr. Calcraft lent the room grudgingly, and never provided tea for the company assembled under his roof in the cause of charity. A carafe of fresh drinking-water for the principal speaker—beyond that the hospitality of the host could not be persuaded to run.

But Leonard made up for all deficiencies, and by his unfailing amiability and limitless tact set the guests, however numerous and heterogeneous, at their ease. It was he who smoothed over all those little difficulties which must unavoidably be felt when the representatives of half a dozen different worlds are temporarily drawn together, but remain quite unlinked except by the common purpose of the hour. Gentry and tradesfolk cannot be expected really to amalgamate. Yet if you are trying to raise money, you must invite those who can afford to give money—whether they belong to society or not. It is very embarrassing, however, to find yourself placed between the dissenting minister whose daughters were black-balled for the

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Badminton club last year, and the coal merchant to whom you wrote the sharp but perfectly justified note three days ago.

But Leonard made everything all right.

"Mr. Mayor, I want you to sit here—to be handy when called upon. . . . Mr. Lockhart, over here, please. I know you like to be out of the draught. . . . Miss Workman! May I ask you and Mrs. Scott to take these chairs?"

At the last meeting—a semi-religious gathering convoked by Miss Workman—none but gentry, the Church of England gentry, were present; it was like a pleasant family party, with no clash of social differences; and all were of one mind in asking Lenny to take the chair.

"Very well then." Lenny deprecatingly seated himself at the small table with the water-bottle, and glanced at the audience. "There are one or two letters which Miss Workman desires me to read. . . . Or perhaps Miss Workman will be good enough to read them herself?"

He was conscious of a friendly and congenial atmosphere. These people all liked and respected him. Wherever he turned, eyes rested on him with interest, sympathy, affection. Close to him in the front row, were Mrs. Reed, a fussy untiring woman, and her two youngest daughters—rosy-cheeked, stubborn-haired bouncers, just showing their solid ankles beneath their tailor-made skirts; a little further from him Mrs. Oliver was faintly rustling the beads and sequins of her black mantle; the delicate anæmic wife of Colonel Blacklock had brought out her smelling-salts and already sought invigoration by furtive sniffs; Miss Workman, tall, thin, and throbbing with nervous energy, stood a yard to the left of him and fumbled the sheaf of letters in her gloved hands; and beyond the front row, right away to the distant windows, sat Mrs. This and Mrs.

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That with or without their feminine offspring—in fact nearly all the softer, sweeter half of the residential gentlefolk of Westchurch. And he knew them all; had known them for such a comfortably long time that they seemed to give off the restful charm one experiences when surrounded by familiar, valued, but inanimate objects.

Only three men—deaf Sir Thomas Garbett, with hand to ear even in this silent pause; the clergyman who was about to address the meeting; and Mr. Mack, the secretary of the local branch of the Church Lads' Brigade.

"This one letter," said Miss Workman, nervously and huskily, "I *should* like to read. . . . It is from a dear kind helpful friend."

Lenny bowed, folded his hands, and turned his head towards Miss Workman.

He could see himself in the looking-glass above the nearest console table—half-length, very clear and vivid,—and the reflection gave him fuller confidence, increased comfort. He noticed the easy attitude of the mirrored chairman, and felt glad that, when dressing this morning, he had chosen the serge suit and the black tie with the white spots. His blue shirt showed very nicely under the tie, and his collar—one of the new shape—was not a bit too low. It seemed just right. For the rest, he was satisfied—really a fellow of pleasant aspect, not handsome but more or less engaging, sun-burnt and substantial, blue-eyed and frank, with well-trimmed moustache and hair parted very high on the right side of the head. Until the time came for him to speak, his attention was intermittently occupied by what the looking-glass displayed.

Himself? No, that was not truly himself. That was what he seemed to others—the brightly colored, three-dimensional picture that walks with us through the world and serves as symbol for the vast internal mystery that out-

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siders can never reach. As he glanced at him again, the man in the glass had the air of an affable stranger.

His real self was the astounding, complex organization over here—this glow or throb of bodily sensations, this firm and unshakable belief in an individual intimacy, this warm circle of incoming impressions, with its marvelous storehouse of memories and clearing-house of recognitions—this widening, contracting, but always warm circle into which there were flashing even now, faint and strong, recorded and unregistered, myriads and myriads of messages.

He could no more admit the outward shape over there to be all that there was of Lenny than the deep and tremendous Atlantic Ocean would allow that it was nothing more or greater than the surface as seen by passengers from the deck of a steamer.

“Now, if you please,”—Miss Workman was handing him the remainder of the letters.

“Yes”—And he ran through the apologies and excuses of masculine Westchurch. “Colonel Blacklock regrets that he cannot be with us. . . . Mr. Newall would certainly have been here, had not business intervened. . . . Mr. Underwood, Mr. Tasker, and Mr. Malins are also unavoidably prevented. . . . Yes.” He looked up, smiling, and hazarded a little mild facetiousness. “I would not mention the word Golf; but it is, I believe, a fact that this is competition day.”

Many of the ladies laughed, in rapid comprehension and exquisite enjoyment of the joke.

“Well then, ladies and gentlemen”—Lenny had risen—“It now devolves upon me to introduce our friend the Reverend Trevenna Dale, who has come at considerable personal inconvenience to tell us about his Hoxton mission. He will enlighten us as to its aims, and, ah, its

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scope. And if I speak of his bringing light to us, I do not wish to imply that this is a dark place." . . .

"What does he say?" asked deaf Sir Thomas. "Who has got a dark face?"

"Dark place," whispered the lady by his side, "dark place."

"No," continued Lenny, "we are not altogether in a state of darkness, but we welcome further illumination"—and so on. Barely three minutes, and Lenny had sat down again. But his speech enchanted the audience. It seemed to them so neat and graceful—delivered, too, with such a charming shy geniality,—so exactly what it ought to have been, that at its conclusion there was a loud clapping of hands.

Then almost immediately a parlourmaid entered the room, bringing an oral communication for the chairman.

Mr. Calcraft's compliments—and could they conduct their meeting without applause?

Lenny explained simply and candidly. "It is my father. This is one of his bad days. He did not sleep last night, and is resting now—and, as the house isn't too well built, I fear that any unusual noise penetrates to him."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Workman, "so inconsiderate of us! I'm sure I voice the general feeling when I say that we would not disturb him for worlds."

Then the meeting went on in a quiet and sober fashion. Mr. Trevenna Dale was listened to with hushed interest, and he fancied with some enthusiasm too; but, as the actors say, "he did not get a hand."

Nevertheless old Calcraft was grievously upset. At dinner he quarrelled with his chicken broth, and banished his milk pudding in hopeless disgrace.

"Tell that woman downstairs that I begin to think she

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wants change of air. . . . Tell her to go to South Africa and cook for our poor starved Tommies, or the Boers—or the Hottentots. She's not fit to cook in a gentleman's household." So much was to the parlourmaid, flying with the pudding. Then he addressed Lenny. "She must be got rid of. I won't stand it. Give her notice—from me—to-morrow morning."

"Yes, if you decide so—and no doubt there are as good fish in the sea. . . . But I must confess that I think Parsons—on the whole, dad—does us fairly well."

"Rubbish," said Mr. Calcraft, becoming more angry than before.

"She gives us greater variety than the others ever managed."

"I don't want variety. I'm not like you—I don't happen to have the digestion of an ostrich, and I won't submit to slow poisoning to oblige you or Parsons or anyone else."

After dinner, while Lenny lingered at the table to smoke a cigarette in solitude, an urgent summons came to him from the library. Mr. Calcraft, said the parlourmaid, was refusing to take his drops.

Lenny found the hospital nurse standing by one of the big armchairs and feebly offering the rejected wine-glass, while the invalid, sunk deep in the chair, his snowy head just showing over the leather back, shuffled his thin legs and spluttered wrathfully, exactly after the manner of a naughty child.

"No, I won't," he repeated. "I won't."

"Oh, you'd better," said the nurse. "Hadn't he, sir?"

"Yes, dad, if I may venture to advise——"

"You can keep your advice to polish your boots," said Mr. Calcraft, sinking still lower in the chair.

Lenny shrugged his shoulders and smiled; then he indi-

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cated to the nurse by signs that she was to put the glass of medicine on a table and leave the room.

"I'll read *The Times* to you now, father;" and he unfolded the day's paper and soon began to recite the latest news.

The voice was music; really the words did not greatly matter; but at this time all that the newspapers could tell one was of absorbing interest. The South African War had just opened the first scenes of its interminable drama, and already one began to guess that the plot contained tragic as well as comic elements. Gradually old Calcraft raised himself in the chair, sat erect, and, with eyes that faintly glittered, watched the reader's calm face.

Presently, during a pause, he pointed to the adjacent wine-glass.

"Give that to me now, Lenny. . . . Yes, I'll drink it—for your sake." . . . Then he drank his medicine, and, making a grimace, handed the glass back to his son.

"Bravo, father."

"All right. . . . You're very good to me, Lenny. I don't know what I should do without you."

"Shall I go on reading?"

"No, let us talk a bit. I'm tired. I've been upset. I'll go to bed half an hour earlier—if that nurse has finished her supper."

Old Mr. Calcraft went to bed, and young Mr. Calcraft spent the rest of the evening at the little local club.

It was quite late when he returned to the Crescent, and softly and cautiously let himself into the hall of No. 1. The deep silence of night filled the house; through the staircase window pale moonbeams streamed down from a wind-swept sky, and shed a pallid ghostlike radiance on

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the wall. With no other light than the grey moonbeams, Lenny slowly ascended, stepping noiselessly over the thick carpet, pausing to listen on the landing outside his father's door.

He undressed quickly; and then, before turning into his snug bed, he wrapped himself in a thick quilted dressing-gown, came out from his room, and listened again.

All silent—yet slowly and cautiously he once more descended. Unrecognized instincts drew him, unanalysed thoughts pushed him downwards.

The sound of rhythmic breathing at one of the lower doors told him that at least the nurse was sleeping comfortably. But was father all right? He wished to know, he must know, if he himself was to sleep without worrying dreams and abrupt awakenings.

Very cautiously he turned the door-handle and went into the invalid's room. Fire in the grate, the night-light burning, and the warm air faintly impregnated with the odor of a liniment; and father, as it seemed, safely wafted away to the kind land of nod—all well! As Lenny stood looking at the back of the fleshless head, the wisp of white hair that obtruded from its nest of pillow, the flannel jacket that guarded a bony shoulder—as he looked with yearning pity at these familiar external objects, he *was* governed and swayed entirely by instinct.

To shelter what has been strong and is now weak—does any other duty make so poignantly intense an appeal to that protective instinct which is implanted in every human breast, whether male or female?

“What is it? Who the devil is it?”

The white head turned, struggled to raise itself from the pillows.

“It's only I, dad. . . . I'm awfully sorry if I woke you.”

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"No, Lenny." And the invalid's voice changed from harsh alarm to weary softness. "I wasn't asleep."

"Why can't you sleep?"

"I don't know. I'm very tired. . . . Perhaps I'm too old to sleep. . . . I doze, and then I wake. . . . Old people never sleep long—till they sleep for ever."

"Father, don't—don't speak like that."

"Very well. . . . Good-night, Lenny. Thank you for looking in. Good-night—my dear boy."

III

PERHAPS if Leonard Calcraft had been a shabby, long-haired, bilious-looking young man, his filial piety would have made less stir in the world. At any rate, it would have seemed more natural to chain such an ill-favoured milksop to the slowly turning wheels of a Bath-chair.

But Leonard was large and grand to the view; brilliant, many-sided, able to shoot, to ride, to play bridge and snooker pool; in the phrase of Westchurch ladies, "quite a man's man."

And how beautifully he dressed, and what a prodigious wardrobe he unfolded to the admiring gaze of the lads who vainly strove to dress after him and up to him! No matter how great the occasion, he rose to it—soared at once to the highest, the most tremendous necessities. On wet regatta days, when the drenched sight-seers cowered beneath inadequate umbrellas, there was Lenny clothed from head to foot in yellow oilskins; at the hunt ball, when local youths all felt ashamed of their dingy unornamental black, there was Lenny in red swallow-tails, brass buttons, and white facings; and when the Mayor gave something like a state dinner to the officers of the Fleet, and one hated oneself for being a mere civilian, there was Lenny in full *uniform*—scarlet and gold, sword and sash, the glorious garb of his old militia.

Naturally, if the young gentlemen were affected by these splendid splendours, the young ladies did not feel untouched

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by them. All the nice girls—and there were so many in Westchurch—had a try for Lenny, made their poor little effort, and owned themselves beat.

Their mammas had warned them not to look in that direction. It is no good crying for the moon. Lenny would never marry while his father lived—and you know the proverb about creaking doors. Lenny, although always spoken of as young, was getting on; and old Calcraft, unlike that dear witty king, made no apologies for being such an unconscionable time dying.

Perhaps nowadays daughters as well as mothers understood that it was useless to entertain tender hopes with regard to Mr. Leonard; if they fell in love with him now, they did it at their own proper peril; for they had all seen the lamentable failure of Alma Reed. And where Miss Reed had failed, how could the rashest or most conceited anticipate success?

As was known to all, her acquaintance with Lenny had opened in the most thrillingly romantic fashion. She was out driving with her rich friend Mrs. Kendrew of Lywell Towers. Mrs. Kendrew, in common with most of the nicest best-bred people of the neighbourhood, had a great liking for Alma; loved to get Alma as a staying visitor at the Towers; and was well-pleased to drive her phaeton and ponies into Westchurch and drive home again with Alma by her side. But on this occasion, while making their homeward journey, the usually well-behaved ponies ran away with the phaeton.

It was far out on the London road, no living soul in sight except Mr. Lenny, who looked very big and important as the ponies came thundering straight at him.

As he remembered, he did it nearly all without thinking. Before he knew that he was doing anything, he had the nearside pony firmly by the rein and less firmly by the

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bridle, and he was being dragged along in the midst of a wild clatter and hum. Then came a flash of thought. They were swinging towards the ditch, and now again they swung away from it—either he would be thrown down, or he would pull ponies and trap into the ditch, bang on top of him. He was nearly down—but saved himself from the fall—threw back his weight—and went slithering on, ploughing up the gravel surface of the road, with a sensation of pins and needles like giant fireworks in the soles of his feet. And then, as it seemed to him, the ponies had stopped of their own accord, and Mrs. Kendrew was excitedly saying that he had saved her life.

The episode made much talk—although he himself would never discuss it. But he could not avoid the fame it brought him; and, naturally enough, the ponies, as they became matter for legend and history, were always growing bigger. They were a pair of cobs;—they were a pair of carriage horses;—they were two hunters, full of beans—two great tearing devils who ought never to have been put in harness, and who perhaps had never felt the irksome restraint of collar and trace until that day.

Mrs. Kendrew did not cease to say that he had saved her life; and incidentally, of course, he had also saved the life of Alma. Perhaps one might expect that in the circumstances the younger of the ladies should have the stronger feelings in relation to her heroic preserver.

Anyhow, girl friends very soon began to report that Alma Reed was going for him hammer and tongs. Lenny walked with her, danced with her, skated with her; dined frequently at her father's house, and would go to any tea-party where he could be sure of finding her among the guests.

She was a tall girl, slim and graceful, with grey eyes, dark hair, and the white, almost opaque skin that some-

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times goes with this colouring; but what made people of both sexes, especially the old and the young, say that Alma Reed was so fascinating and attractive, was the charm of characteristic individuality. She was different from the local girls. She dressed differently, had a certain typical style of her very own; so that other girls, peering and chattering outside millinery windows, would point and say, "Look at the one with the velvet bow and ostrich feather. That's an Alma Reed hat, isn't it? . . . But it wouldn't suit *me*. I couldn't carry it off."

And all her circumstances and environment aided in establishing her unique position. To begin with, she was a Catholic, and to the minds of good stout Anglicans there hung about her the glamour and mystery of Rome, and something vague and awe-inspiring of an esoteric faith that you don't quite understand. Again she was motherless, and her father seemed the sketchy unsubstantial sort of person who could never count as a parent. Her stepmother and stepsisters belonged to the Protestant Church, so she was therefore separated from them by creed as well as by birth. Thus, when you saw her in the midst of the noisy family life of Haven Lodge, she appeared to be isolated and alone; and not very happy, one might surmise, although hiding any private sorrows very carefully from inquisitorial eyes.

The second Mrs. Reed was a busy, planning, purposeful woman, eagerly intent on the upbringing of Alma's four young stepsisters; providing them with innumerable tutors and governesses, instilling such useful and neglected arts as cookery, carpentering, clear-starching; and telling all the world—strangers in railway trains, anybody who would listen—the full scheme of her maternal endeavours. "I want to fit my girls to be good wives if they ever get husbands, and yet render them so self-reliant and capable that they

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can take care of themselves if they are left on the shelf. Don't you think I'm wise?"

Of course if the listener was a total stranger she had merely to agree; but if she was a friend she would feel bound to say, "My dear Mrs. Reed, none of your girls will be left on the shelf. *They'll* be snapped up quick enough when their time comes."

"I don't know," Mrs. Reed would reply. "There are more women than men in the world. Look at Alma. See the fuss that people make about her—and yet not a single offer. That would be a lesson, if I needed one. But no, I said from the beginning, 'Here is your problem. Four girls to bring up. They can't all go off. There are more women than men in the world. Train them so that they will never feel disappointment.' Don't you think I'm wise?"

Perhaps one could truly detect a sub-acid flavour in Mrs. Reed's reference to the stepdaughter, or perhaps the slight unkindness was an imagination of Westchurch. "She is not appreciated at home"—that was what everybody said.

To masculine guests, dining at Haven Lodge for the first time, Alma came with a perceptible but pleasant shock of surprise. She was something rather better than you had expected. You were weighed down by the commonplace embellishments of the drawing-room, already after five minutes exhausted by the exuberant energy of the hostess, overwhelmed by the too substantial young ladies, and perplexed by the too shadowy father; the arrival of Dr. Searle and Mr. Lockhart did not rouse your spirits; the presence of Father Marchant, the Catholic priest, gave dignity but no relief; and then, just before dinner was announced, you became aware that Alma had come into the room. She was talking to Father Marchant—she had made him a pretty little reverence, and he was beaming at her with paternally

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affectionate pleasure. She was shaking hands with Dr. Searle, with Mr. Lockhart, and the faces of both these gentlemen lit up. Then it was your turn—a murmur of introduction from the host, “Oh, ah, yes, you haven’t met my eldest girl, have you?” Or a few short sharp sentences from the hostess, “Late as usual, Alma! Do you know Mr. Jones? Very well. Mr. Jones, this is Alma.”

And probably Mr. Jones wished that he might sit next her at dinner. She looked at him so kindly and so frankly, saying something amiable and nice, seeming calm, gracious, so much better bred and more refined than the rest of the household—“a creature of another race,” as Miss Workman put it. “Altogether too good for the lot of them, and not in the least appreciated by a single one of them.”

But enormously appreciated outside the home circle. Miss Workman’s tea-parties at her rooms in Medina Terrace were notable events of the winter season; the most distinguished residents were asked twice or three times between October and May; matrons of secondary importance were glad to receive one card; very many were not asked at all, and it was always a sore point with them.

“Oh, yes, they told me at the confectioner’s that Miss Workman was giving a party this afternoon. And you are going! Lucky person! How very nice. . . . Oh, no,” and perhaps there would be a toss of the head, and a laugh with considerable bitterness behind it; “I assure you, although I have known Miss Workman a good number of years, she has never honoured me with an invitation to her parties. . . . The room’s not large? No, so I understand. It is an excellent excuse. Good afternoon. I *hope* you will enjoy yourself.”

But whoever else might be left out at these delightful and select gatherings, Alma Reed was always there. Miss Workman even consulted her convenience before fixing the

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dates. "Alma dear," she used to say just before the party began, "will you preside at the tea-table and see that the maids wait properly, and then I can circulate freely and have a few words with everyone in turn. And keep an eye on me, dear—and give me a hint if I seem neglectful or abstracted."

Non-residents—people from the Esplanade Hotel, and sometimes people of distinction and quality—were immediately presented to Alma. "Dear Alma," said Miss Workman, "give Lady Emily a cup of coffee, and let me make you known to each other. You will get on so well together."

Sometimes, but not often, quite at the end of the party, Alma would sing to the selectest of the select guests, who lingered for this treat at Miss Workman's request. She sang very prettily—in a sweet and full contralto, for which natural taste had done much and regular training very little. At home nobody ever wanted her to sing.

If by chance there was a strange young gentleman attending the party, some convalescent schoolboy brought by his mamma, Alma's song invariably finished him. He had felt it coming on, in the midst of his great shyness, while the tall young lady handed him tea-cups or buns, and talked to him in so jolly and easy a style, asking how and why he caught those stupid measles, and emitting a sympathetic ripple of laughter when he summoned all his courage to tell her a school anecdote. But now she gave him the *coup de grâce*.

As she sat down at the piano, he could see that, although braver, she was really as shy as himself. She hated having to sing; but she was too much of a ripper to refuse, since the old hag begged for it as a favour. Then he watched her recover confidence—it was a beastly grind, but she meant to go through it. A smile, like a flicker of light

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about her lips; a faint pinkness where all had been whiteness; a resolute lift of the graceful head, as if all that dark hair was something heavy, and not beautiful, to be thrown off, forgotten;—and then there came rolling through the warm air waves of soft overwhelming melody. It was like the bugle call on the field-days with the cadet corps, stimulating, disturbing; it was like a sword of flame, piercing, penetrating, burning; it was like a poison extracted from concentrated essences of sweetness, sending a deadly sugared ecstasy all through the veins—it made one feel as if lengths of velvet from an endless web were being pulled over one's head; as if one had been caught in a net made of beaten gold and spun glass; as if one were a tiny little boat being blown out into the middle of a dark purple sea under a blazing crimson sunset sky. And the young gentleman, gaping, gasping, blushing, unnoticed in a corner, recognized by all these signs that it had truly happened. He was desperately in love—at first sight.

All schoolboys worshipped Miss Reed.

And perhaps a stepmother might be forgiven if the sound of so much praise produced a certain amount of internal acidity. "Oh, yes," said Mrs. Reed, "I agree with every word. In many respects Alma is a paragon. . . . My own four will never be paragons. That is why I am giving them a workaday education, and not cultivating the airs and graces. Don't you think I'm wise?"

She and the younger Miss Reeds used to speak facetiously of "Alma's trumpeters." Three people especially were loudest and most persistent in chanting her praise: Miss Workman, the Catholic priest, and Frances Shipham. Frances was the independent, self-supporting, journalistic girl who always spent Christmas at the Garbetts'. Frances adored Alma. And, coming straight from London, where she was supposed to consort with the brightest spirits of

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the art world, she boldly said that Alma was the cleverest and most accomplished person she had ever met.

Well, then, when Alma and Lenny were seen with linked hands at the skating rink, or standing at the bend of the sea-wall with shoulders almost touching as they looked out across the sunlit waters, a good many observers thought that on the whole she was worthy of him. And when they saw her again and again talking to Mr. Calcraft in his Bath-chair, seeming not only to be suffered, but liked by him, walking alongside the chair to the very end of the parade and there helping him to free his bear—when they saw this, they would indeed have been ready to wager any stake that Alma Reed had won the great prize.

But all this was long ago. Suddenly it appeared that Miss Reed gave it up as a bad job. She had left West-church for ever. Unhappy at home, she went to London and joined forces with Frances Shipham. It was understood that they lived together. Alma had some small independent means, derived from her Romish mother—a hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty a year; and she was acting as one of the secretaries to some public organization.

Together with the loud-voiced grief of Miss Workman and other staunch friends, there had been some rather nasty unfriendly talk about Alma. People in small seaside towns *will* talk, and girls are willing to say anything when struggling to give a jocose turn to their usually vapid conversation.

Alma is *emancipated*, don't you know; quite up-to-date now—religious and all other scruples melted in the glare of the great city. Don't you believe it? Well, very likely it isn't true.

Matrons did not encourage such chatter. They said to their Marys and Kates, "I would prefer that you should not speak of it at all."

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Talking to one another they said "Yes, Alma—or so I am given to understand—is living with that queer young woman, Miss Shipham. They are two bachelor girls—you know what I mean, latchkeys and no chaperon. Personally, I am glad that, having completely cut herself adrift, she does not return to Haven Lodge. It would be very awkward to know how to act. For I am particularly anxious that Mary should not be imbued with any of these modern notions."

"Yes, that's exactly what I feel about Kate."

IV

THE colder winds had interfered with Mr. Calcraft's outings; the sea-front saw him but rarely, and then only in brief glimpses of sunshine; he had become like the old man on top of the barometric toy, who creeps out of his house to mark fine weather and pops in again at imperceptible signs of storm.

One evening after he had been confined to his bedroom all day, Lenny came to him for a few minutes' chat.

"How's the cough, dad? Easier?"

"Not a bit."

"Any news in the *Pall Mall Gazette*?"

"Only bad news."

The papers provided lugubrious reading at this period—ugly scenes from the Boer war, things going badly for England; everything falling; stocks and shares, reputations and traditions, hopes and dreams, all, all falling together.

Lenny could not stay more than a few minutes, because he was due at the club billiard-room to play his second heat in the winter tournament. But he had something to say to his father—something of weight.

Although the bedroom was very hot, old Calcraft sat crouching close to the fire with a shawl round his shoulders and blankets round his knees. The nurse, seated on the other side of the hearth, was knitting, but would go on reading aloud whenever her invalid told her to do so. Lenny sent the nurse out of the room, and approached the subject that he wished to discuss.

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"Father, I've been thinking whether I oughtn't to go out there, and take my share in this rough-and-tumble."

"What are you talking of?" said Mr. Calcraft querulously.

"South Africa. The war."

"Oh!" Mr. Calcraft looked up quickly, interrogating his son's face, and then he looked back at the fire. "What can I think about it, my boy? What do you think yourself?"

"Well, of course, I should like to go. But, on the other hand, I don't like to leave you."

"That's very good of you." Mr. Calcraft did not raise his eyes again.

"Of course I am past the age."

"How do you mean?"

"Well—thirty-five last birthday. If military service was compulsory, they would not take fellows over thirty-five."

"Just so," said Mr. Calcraft; and there was a long pause.

Nevertheless, as Lenny explained, the age difficulty was not insuperable. He had no doubt that he could rejoin his old militia regiment—he was sure that they would be glad to have him back. They were to be embodied almost immediately, and after a month's training—according to newspaper correspondents—they would be despatched to the seat of war. He spoke wistfully of the old corps, seeming in imagination to see the bustle of preparation, the camp, the ship, and finally the open veldt.

But then, as he looked down at the invalid's white hair and tremulous hands, he spoke very gently and tenderly, and his gaze was softened and veiled by a perceptible moisture.

"Of course," he said tentatively, "if you feel that you could get on without me—if you would not miss me——"
And there was another long pause.

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"Lenny," said his father, in a shaky voice, "I should miss you. I should miss you most dreadfully."

"That was what I was afraid of," said Lenny.

Then it was tacitly decided that Lenny would not leave his post. No more words were spoken, but it was understood that the invalid should not be deserted.

After his son had gone from the room, Mr. Calcraft sat staring at the fire without moving. His eyes were full of tears, and his hands shook pitiably. It seemed as though this talk about the war, and the dread of losing his constant companion, had greatly shaken him. But he burst into an unreasonable fit of anger when presently the nurse returned and began to talk to him about local matters in a lively vein.

The invalid had been very trying throughout the day, but he was most trying of all in this last hour; and the news passed up and down the house that Mr. Leonard had somehow distressed the old gentleman.

Next morning bright sunshine streamed into both of Lenny's rooms while their occupant, sauntering backwards and forwards between the two, slowly dressed himself. The bath, certain gymnastic exercises before and after it, shaving, anointing his hair with perfumed oils or washes, the thoughtful selection and laying out of suitable garments—all these tasks added together consumed a long time. But in this quiet back-water of life there was no pressing reason why one should get afloat early in the day.

Bath and exercises were done; he was in drawers and vest now; and he idly ambled to and fro, picking up a silver-stoppered bottle, stooping over a receptacle that held his coloured socks, or sliding out a shelf of fancy waistcoats, amusing himself rather than going on with his labour.

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The sunlight brightened everything, fought the shadows, and drove them from the farthest recesses; so that the whole dressing-room seemed as gay as it was comfortable. The door of a vast wardrobe bore a panel of looking-glass, and when it swung on its hinges, there came a flash across the floor and upward to the ceiling, as of a moving rainbow. Lenny closed the door and stood meditatively looking at himself in the glass.

Beneath the silk vest his chest and shoulders showed finely, and from it his neck rose round and strong. He patted his chest, and, drawing a deep breath, made it swell out larger. Then he began gently to stroke his bare arms. The muscles and flesh felt as if they were moulded into one substance, solid, hard, firm, and yet the skin was soft as satin—as smooth to the touch as a girl's skin. He folded his arms, to see the effect of enhanced size given to the fore-arms by this attitude. Posed thus for a few moments, he reminded himself of a picture of a prize-fighter.

Then, leaning a little forward, he studied his face in the glass. Wonderful how long one can preserve the summer sun-burn when one lives by the sea! December already, and yet his cheeks carried the even, polished tan of August, a dark-toned rich glaze—such as you see in choice tiles or well-painted pieces of porcelain—which the autumn winds seemed merely to have fixed, instead of turning it red and brick-dusty. He brought his head close to the glass in order to investigate his eyes and their orbits, and turned it to study the hair on his temples. The eyes were clear, full colour in the iris and no stains or vein-pencil-lings in the white, and all round them one could scarcely trace the little lines marked by the years, the emotions, the passions; just a few grey hairs feathered the curl that had been so cruelly clipped on each side of the smooth fore-

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head, but no more than he had seen there five years ago. Really, nothing to complain of—at thirty-six. He smiled at the glass before he turned away from it.

The kindly sunshine had drawn him towards the window. With its curved façade and southern prospect the Crescent was like a sun-trap, and this morning not the least wind struck it. The window ledge was quite hot; the sunbeams made another bath, a delightful shower of soothing, vivifying flame.

Down below, all was sparkling brightness and gaiety. He looked at the friendly jolly little place lying at his feet and smiling up at him. The esplanade and empty band-stand; the piled beach and stretching sand; over there a pleasant confusion of wooden rampart, upturned boats, extended nets, and wound cordage; the grassy mound that gave shelter to the club premises, and above their red roof the flag-staff that indicated the position of the new life-boat house—how well he knew it all, and yet how fresh and pretty it seemed in its familiarity and insignificance!

The harbour was out of sight; but beyond the houses you had the broad estuary, with the sandy ridge of the islands, and the further shore, hill-topped, wooded, faint now at its nearest point, and growing rapidly fainter as it ran away westward to fade in the golden mist far out at sea. Fishermen's boats with brown sails one after another came round the point, and gently drifted off towards the deep fields where to-night they would snatch their harvest; and two clumsy brigs beat about the islands, standing off and on as they felt for the channel or waited for the tide—like two blind men groping at the door behind which lay rest and shelter. In the silence and the sunlight the whole scene seemed so calm and peaceful that one could scarcely believe there might be storms here, or anywhere else in the world.

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The peace of it crept into his heart, and he sat lazily basking by the open window.

Miss Workman had once asked him if he ever thought of himself; but that was palpably a ridiculous question. Since we ourselves are at once the source, the bed, and the driving energy of the only stream of thought we really know, how can we hope that its swift unceasing flow shall ever be untinged by the colour of personal elements?

In a sense Lenny possessed considerable range of thought. He was imaginative, with great power of mental visualization; his thought roved freely through the past and the future—and things unseen were almost as vivid and clearly defined as the seen things.

It might be said that he had fully what is described as one particular attribute of genius; for him, as for the master minds, the past remained open, accessible, permanent; nothing of it was forgotten; all that he had once lived through he could live through again—was indeed forced to do so, in certain episodes, against his will.

He remembered voluptuous thrills given to him by women just as he remembered pleasures of the table, or the healthy rapture of a gallop between the fence he had leapt and the fence that lay before him. In a moment the past was present—the unveiled quivering mystery of alcoved darkness; the diffused glow of satisfaction beneath the shaded candles of a restaurant; or the thud of flying hoofs, the wind of swift motion, the tense delight of violent effort, in the bright winter sunlight of the Midland pasture. To the impulse of awakened memory every sense organ responded with startling promptness, gave off again a fresh wave along the once-travelled path of reception, until the co-ordinated group of images, sensations, thoughts, was again firmly established as a whole.

“What is it? Don’t come in.”

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A tap at the door and a voice outside had interrupted his reverie.

"Your shirts, sir."

One of the maids had brought a tray of shirts, and was standing outside the door. He opened it a couple of inches and talked to her.

"Have you aired them?"

"Yes, sir, I've shown them to the fire."

"But—I say—I want them to be more than *shown* to the fire. I want them to be properly introduced. I want it to be a regular acquaintance;" and he laughed cheerily.

"All right, sir;" and the girl laughed too.

"Good people are scarce, you know;" and they both laughed.

Then he shut the door, and went on with his dressing. As he pottered about the room he felt extraordinarily happy and light-hearted—at peace with the universe and every living creature in it.

He was a long time dressing—but why hurry? This golden sunny day would last—not a threatening cloud from zenith to horizon. The tranquil night's rest had restored his supply of nerve-force; he felt fit and hearty; his sun-bath at the window seemed to have filled him to the brim with genial sympathies, pleasant fancies, evenly balanced hopes.

V

AFTER breakfast he did a little shopping in the town—one of Dr. Searle's prescriptions to be taken to the chemist, cigarettes to be ordered from the tobacconist, a jacket to be tried on at the tailor's;—and, wherever he went, he enjoyed an unusual sense of gaiety and contentment. The respectful salutations of tradesmen and the amiable greetings of friends seemed to carry on and intensify the kindly work of the sunshine: they enhanced one's internal store of warmth and well-being.

In twenty minutes he had talked to more than twenty people. This morning it appeared as though he was known to everybody, gentle or simple, and the attention of those whom he himself did not know seemed quite natural, even when quite unexpected. However small the stage, we like to feel that we are occupying the centre of it; and no matter how little important our part, there is a pleasure in the thought that for the moment we are dominating the scene, concentrating the gaze of all eyes, obliterating the general interest in the rest of the characters.

Popular, widely-recognized, promptly welcomed, Lenny could easily have indulged and fostered the illusion that he was the central figure in the town's life, or the favourite actor of its daily drama. Just now, while he sat at breakfast, these streets were dark and silent; but now the curtain had gone up, lights were turned on, *he* had appeared.

And the scenic background before which he moved seemed to him more than adequate: it was charming. Passing from High Street to Duke Street, he had a glimpse

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into Nelson Square, and thought he had never seen it looking so pretty. The sunshine struck against the red-brick tower of the church, the white windows and green shutters of sedate houses, and the topmost branches of the bare trees above which rooks cawed and fluttered; and in the shadow thrown by the church some children were crossing the road and coming towards him. Presently, as they advanced, the sunlight fell upon their faces, and the shadow receded to their waists, to their ankles, so that they seemed as if they were wading through grey transparent water.

He had paused to watch them; and to his surprise he found that one of them, the smallest, was crying.

"What's the matter, my dear?" He patted her tear-laden cheek, and then turned to the others reproachfully. "Why is she crying? Poor little thing—I hope you haven't been unkind to her."

"Oh, no, sir. She cries for nothing. She don't know what she's crying for—mother'll tell you just the same."

"See now!" He was stooping over the child and smiling at her. "If I give you this to buy sweeties or something nice, will you be happy again? . . . There. That's right."

The child had taken the silver coin, and, clasping it tight, instantly checked her tears and lamentations.

Two ladies—Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Oliver—called to Lenny from the opposite pavement. Unobserved on the threshold of Randles' drug store, they had been witnesses of his gentleness and generosity.

"That was *like* you, Mr. Lenny—always trying to make people happy;" and Mrs. Oliver beamed at him.

"And you know the right way to children's hearts," said Mrs. Scott appreciatively.

"Poor little beggars," said Lenny in a light tone, dis-

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regarding unnecessary and uninvited compliments. "I hate to see 'em blubbering—always makes me think they have been ill-treated. . . . We shall meet on the front?"

He went down narrow sloping Harbour Street, between the queer little flint houses with their bulging bow windows and squat doorways. The street was so narrow that it made a long dark peep-hole to the sea; and here, walking for the first time in shadow, Lenny felt something cold and uncomfortable.

It was the distant formal recognition of Father Marchant, the Catholic priest, who emerged from one of the humblest of the flint houses. This Mr. Marchant was a tall old man with a clear-cut, clean-shaven face and the bloodless, ivory-tinted complexion that seems to suggest the ascetic renuncements of priestly duties, celibate vows, and vegetarian habits; he had a great air of dignity, even of stateliness, on ceremonious occasions; but, as Lenny knew, he could and did often unbend, would laugh, tell jovial anecdotes, take a hand at cards or play a romping game—in a word, could be as jolly as anybody else. Lenny used to meet him at dinner at the Reeds', and in the old days they always got on well together.

Yet from him had come the only snub or rebuff that Lenny had ever received in Westchurch. The priest was getting up some fund, to which apparently heretics as well as the faithful were invited to subscribe; but when Lenny cheerily offered his subscription, it was refused. Lenny laughed and shrugged his shoulders good-humouredly. You can't quarrel with a man for letting you off cheap when you thought you were bound to stump up—least of all with a frocked and collared senior. And indeed Mr. Marchant gave him no excuse for a quarrel.

"Thank you," he said; "but really I don't feel justified. Our fund—it is, strictly speaking, connected with the

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church—is doing excellently; so I should have no excuse.” And he was courteous in replying to a further inquiry of Lenny’s. “No, it is not exactly our rule—and every rule, Mr. Calcraft, has exceptions. But in this case I can only thank you, while declining to avail myself of your assistance.”

After this Lenny had often pondered upon the matter, seeking some explanation of how and why the priest should have become so hostile to him. Or was it, after all, a mere fancy of his own?

To-day, however, he could not be in doubt. They met face to face on the narrow pavement, and, as acknowledgment of Lenny’s cheery good-morning, the priest took off his hat and silently bowed. The stately salute was accompanied with a glance that seemed rather stern, very cold, and unquestionably inimical. Mr. Marchant could no longer be counted as a friend.

Not that it mattered, either way—only, coming after so much welcoming friendliness, striking one who had been steeped in the genial atmosphere of popularity, it produced a slight but wide superficial chill.

Very soon the sunshine warmed him again. He was out in the open now, on the esplanade, with the delightful breath of the sea like an innocent caress softly touching his face; and he quickened his footsteps, threw back his head, and swung along jauntily. There was a real friend in sight now—young Gerald Dryden, gesticulating and talking volubly to three girls who leaned their backs against the wooden rails, and laughed so loudly that one could hear them when fifty yards away.

The receding figure of Mr. Reed, who with vague dreamy air and shambling uncertain gait had just passed by on his way to the golf links, told Lenny what the young people were laughing about.

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Perhaps the only salient or concrete fact that shadowy Mr. Reed offered for the consideration of the world was his golf. He furnished a rare instance of a man who would never, could never learn the game. He had taken it up fifteen years ago, when the links were opened, and had been getting worse ever since. At first he had a handicap of eighteen; then at his request he was advanced to twenty-four; and then the committee gave him a handicap of thirty, to enable him to play with the ladies. Now no one of either sex would play with him, He played alone, every day—never practising,—simply attacking the course in solitary ardour;—and the joke was to calculate his real handicap on form, getting the caddies to count his actual strokes for the completed round. The caddies always counted, but they could make only an approximate return—because there were so many have-backs, miss-fires, and lost balls. Nevertheless their report supplied sufficient data for the maintenance of an old-established jest, and it had been recently decided that Mr. Reed's authentic and justifiable handicap was two hundred and eleven.

But the little group at the railings had ceased to laugh before they were joined by Lenny. From discussion of the father they had drifted to the subject of his daughter. The young ladies had endeavoured to be funny on this subject also, talking lightly and disparagingly of Alma Reed, and the young man had burst forth in her defence.

"Oh, Mr. Leonard," said one of the girls, "do come to our rescue. He *is* being so rude."

"Oh, surely not?" said Lenny, smiling at them all.

"But, he *is*," said another girl—"hideously rude."

"Well," said Mr. Dryden bluntly, "it's better to be rude, than spiteful and malicious—any day of the week."

"Oh," and the third girl gave a little squeak of protest.

"How horrid he is! Mr. Lenny, don't let him go on."

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But the young man would go on. He said nothing could be so horrid as saying unkind things behind people's backs, and he continued his enthusiastic praise of the absent Alma.

The girls winced beneath the masculine eloquence, and Lenny smiled at them sympathetically. They looked not exactly pretty, but seductively fresh and clean; the breeze blowing through the railings was just strong enough to plaster their cloth skirts about their firm legs, to set their Tam o' Shanters flopping, disarrange their hair, and make their faces glow; a knitted scarf of mauve colour streamed out like a signal pennant till its owner with graceful movements gave it another turn round her neck.

The young man confronted them in an attitude of almost wrathful vigour, his black billycock tilted to the back of his head, his honest but perhaps rather common face suffused with a hot blush, his mouth opening and shutting even in moments of silence, and a contraction and expansion of his wide nostrils alternating spasmodically.

"And couldn't she sing?" he went on, very loudly. "By Jupiter, could any of you dare to sing after her? . . . And—and do any of you go about among the poor as she did? Ask down there," and he pointed violently towards the harbour, "in Rose Cottages or Haven Lane, what they thought of her—and if they don't miss her. Or ask the people who fancy themselves. Ask the nobs," and he swung round and pointed in the other direction. "Ask Miss Workman—whom you're always sucking up to. Ask Miss Workman what she thinks. I bet she's of my opinion—and you shall have it, for both of us. You were all beastly jealous of Alma Reed, and you're none of you fit to tie her shoe-laces;" and he blew out his cheeks and snorted.

"Oh, really," said Miss Malins, the oldest of the girls.

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"I'm not going to stay and be abused like this. . . . Good-morning, Mr. Calcraft."

The other two girls laughed constrainedly and followed Miss Malins; but the girl with the mauve scarf paused to fire a parting and obliquely aimed shot.

"Mr. Lenny, please teach him manners. I don't think he's a bit nice—in spite of all your recommendations."

But for the fact that Lenny had vouched for him, young Gerald Dryden might never have been accepted on equal terms in the higher society of Westchurch. As the son of the local auctioneer, he could scarcely aspire to such honours; moreover, many social critics, condemning his free and easy manner, his noisy tones, and confident way of carrying himself, classed him as a bounder. However, he was an ardent admirer of Lenny; and Lenny, perhaps touched by a devotion that was as sincere as it was artless, shielded and protected him from the effects of adverse criticism, gave him useful hints as to dress and deportment, and insisted that he should be admitted a member of the club.

"Hullo, Lenny," Colonel Blacklock had said. "What's this about young Dryden? D'you really mean it?"

"Yes," said Lenny. "He's all right—quite a good sort."

"Lenny says he is all right"—the news flew round. "Colonel Blacklock says he is all right." . . . "They have elected him to the club, so he *must* be all right." Thenceforth he was considered all right by everybody.

Admirer and protector walked along side by side now, and all the world might see the terms of complete intimacy that existed between them. The elder gently reproved the younger for his recent warmth, and added that it was always a mistake to excite oneself about nothing.

"Yes," said Dryden, cool and collected again, "I made

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an ass of myself. I don't care. Those girls are such rotters." Then, linking his arm with Lenny's, he asked a question. "Lenny, when you were my age, had you ever been in love?"

Lenny laughed. "My dear boy, at least a hundred times."

"Can you remember the first time—the first person who ever bowled you over?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"Well, the first person," and Gerald Dryden hesitated—"the first time I fell in love—it was Alma Reed."

"Really?"

"But the funny thing is this—I'm in love with her still."

"What—does absence make the heart grow fonder?"

"Yes." And Dryden told Lenny how sweet and kind Miss Reed had been to him when he was a boy of fourteen. He had met her for the first time one Christmas holidays at a semi-public juvenile ball. "The mater took me, and—well, Alma Reed saw that we were feeling jolly well out of it. I couldn't dance; and the mater was too shy to push herself forward. So Miss Reed—it's dashed cheek of me to call her Alma—came over to us, and was awfully jolly to the mater, and made the other boys talk to me."

"Yes. Go on."

"After that I was her slave. And she never knew it, but often spoke to me—if I saw her in the street, anywhere,—asking me what I intended to do and to be—and so on."

"Yes? I am enormously interested, Gerald."

Gerald glanced at his friend, and hesitated.

"I was half mad with jealousy of you, Lenny. . . . She showed—or I thought she showed—that she was very fond of you. . . . But you didn't think much of her."

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"Pardon me," said Lenny, "I had, and I still have, an immense respect for Miss Reed."

"Have you?" And the young man looked at him with cordial affection. "But you didn't stick up for her just now."

Lenny shrugged his shoulders. "Is it ever worth while noticing that sort of thing? I didn't hear what they said—but I guess very well what it amounted to. Frankly, when girls talk of another girl in that style, they are beneath contempt."

"So they were. I as good as told them so, didn't I? But I wish you had let 'em see you thought the same."

"I fancy they gathered that, from my silence."

"Of course," said Gerald, musingly, "she had a rotten time at home. They were pigs to her. I don't wonder she chucked them, and went to live on her own. But I wish she'd come back and *show* herself sometimes. That might put the lid on half of all this cackling."

And then Gerald with sentimental diffidence spoke of what he called his dream. If ever he were independent and prosperous, he would go and fish out Miss Reed and ask her to marry him.

Lenny stopped short, and laid his hand on Gerald's shoulder.

"Gerald, take my advice and renounce your childish dream. Give up that idea."

"Why?"

"For many reasons."

"I don't see any of them. . . . I've been in love with her for eight years—I shall never get her out of my head."

"To begin with, Alma is much older than you."

"I don't mind that. It is my chance. Probably when I am ready, she'll be much older still—and then it may

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not seem to her that she is so completely chucking herself away, if she says yes."

"But it would be an unsuitable alliance. Gerald, take it from me. If you hold to this idea, you will meet with certain disappointment."

Young Dryden's face clouded, and he looked at Lenny searchingly.

"Does that mean you don't think she is—you yourself believe the talk?"

"No. Certainly not."

The earnestness and decision with which Lenny gave this assurance promptly changed the troubled, darkened aspect of Gerald's face to an expression of youthful self-confidence.

"Very well. Then I intend to go on with it. A man is all the better for a fixed ambition—a guiding star—you know what I mean,—even if he fails in the end. I shall steer my course for the star."

"Then remember, when the disappointment comes," said Lenny very impressively, "I warned you—that is, I gave you my strong advice. . . . But what nonsense all this is!" And he laughed. "You and I can't keep ourselves, much less keep wives."

"Not yet, Lenny—but one day."

They had walked far out beyond the sea-wall and the links, to the grassy slopes of a rising cliff, and now they turned and came homeward at a slower pace. Nearly all the way back, till they reached the band-stand, they were talking of Gerald's future.

Gerald spoke sadly and regretfully of another of his dreams, one that he had already been forced to abandon. "The governor" would not let him be a soldier.

"And perhaps," said Lenny gently, "your father is wise

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in thwarting you. It seems to me, the army is *no* profession."

"A man can *make* it one. Look at your pal George Verinder. See what he has done. And think of what is going on at this moment. It's the beginning of a new era—everybody says so."

Then the young man explained that he had defeated the governor in some terrible family debates. No power on earth will ever make him consent to follow in the paternal footsteps as an auctioneer. This point at least is settled. He is going to be an electrical engineer.

"That I don't mind. It's honest straightforward work; and if you have to hide anything, it's only your live wires—and you conceal them for the safety and convenience of the public. But the other thing's rotten—all underground—won't bear inspection. It suits the governor because he has been at it all his life, but it wouldn't suit yours truly;" and Mr. Dryden junior contemptuously hammered the railings with his stick. "For the last time, gentlemen—going—gone! No thank you."

Lenny smiled, but nevertheless reproved him for adopting so scornful a tone when speaking of a parent.

"Yes," said Dryden, "I thought you'd say that. But, you know, all fathers and sons aren't the same. There never has been any real affection between my governor and me."

"No?"

Lenny of a sudden had become absent-minded, and he was staring at Dryden's brown boots.

"What are you looking at?" Dryden asked uneasily. "What's wrong?"

"Not brown boots, Gerald, with a black bowler—*black* boots!"

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"Is that so?"

"Yes," said Lenny gravely. "I was just thinking how nicely you were dressed—but the boots spoil it. Quite right, if you were wearing a Homburg hat, but not with a hard felt—a *black* hard felt. . . . Another thing! I always think it's a dangerous experiment to wear a silk tie with what I call a knock-about suit. . . . You see, Gerald, you are such a fine, well-set-up chap, that you ought to do yourself justice."

Dryden blushed, but he was profoundly pleased. He thanked his friend with warm gratitude for these hints. Then he laughed joyously.

"How is it, Lenny, that when you say anything, I like it—whereas, if any other fellow said it, I should merely want to kick him? How do you always contrive to gild the pill, and make a snub seem as pleasant as a pat on the back?" Admiration and regard shone out of his eyes as he looked at Lenny. "It's what we all feel—what old Verinder said—it sums it up. You're a tip-topper."

"Bosh! I think you have all entered into a conspiracy to spoil me." They were drawing near the club, and Lenny glanced at his handsome gold watch. "I am going in, to run through the illustrated papers; and I've only just time before luncheon. Father doesn't like me to be late."

VI

HE was very fond of the little club, in which for years he had enjoyed a supreme influence, and where he was always welcomed with acclamation, no matter how frequently he visited it. As a fact, he was an assiduous attendant.

"Where's Lenny Calcraft?" members used to say of an evening. "I thought he'd be with us before now. Nearly ten o'clock!"

"Perhaps he isn't coming to-night. The old boy may be worse. . . . Ah!"

"Hullo, Lenny! Talk of an angel! We'd almost given you up."

Before sitting down to the card table, he often reported progress to Dr. Searle.

"Father was very restless this evening. Nothing appears to interest him. He has lost his pleasure in being read aloud to."

"Has he taken the cough mixture? . . . Very good. I will look in to-morrow morning. Don't worry yourself;" and then Dr. Searle would go to the billiard-room, and Lenny to the card-room.

If nights were wet and boisterous, Lenny used to approach his goal by back streets, going behind the Crescent instead of in front, and reaching the club's side entrance without exposing himself to the full fury of the tempest.

On one such night during this winter time, when the

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wind was roaring, and rain was driving, and Lenny had come by the backway, the club seemed to him most extraordinarily snug and pleasant. There was noise and laughter and vivid light issuing from the billiard-room, while a soberer mirth and a more subdued radiance came through the open doors of the card-room. To-night all internal doors were open, and all windows hermetically closed, in order to give members a little ventilation without allowing them to be blown out of their chairs. There were two bridge tables actively engaged, and Lenny's arrival made up a third. Colonel Blacklock, Mr. Price-Young, and Mr. Underwood—all oldish men—had refused to cut in till now; they shunned the chance of partnership with certain juvenile and erratic performers, and they loved to play with Lenny.

The cards fell from dealers' hands with a light patter on the green cloth, as of leaves from some choice and carefully tended shrub, falling in a hot-house; the window sashes rattled angrily, a trembling vibration ran across the wooden floor, fierce gusts buffeted walls, roof, chimneys; and the contrast between the cold violence out there and the warm peace in here seemed to add a delightful zest to one's amusement, and to draw the whole sheltered community into a closer circle of intimacy, kindness, and cheerful feeling.

Shadwell, the steward—an old and faithful servant—carrying round the first tray of drinks, gave trite expression to the general sentiment when he said to Lenny, "I'd rather be indoors than out of doors to-night, sir."

"Yes, by George," said Mr. Price-Young, "I agree with you, Shadwell."

"Never knew it come on to blow so quick, or so hard, sir. It's fit to blow the house down."

The card-players laughed and chaffed; after each rubber

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there was a chorus of chatter; everybody wanted to pay for everybody else's drink, and old Shadwell was kept on the trot.

Then there was mild excitement, and temporary interruption. Shadwell failed to answer the bell; someone said he heard voices shouting outside in the darkness; someone said he thought he had heard guns. Players at two tables got up, pulled curtains aside, and peered through the wet window panes. One or two men laid down their cards, and went into front rooms to inquire or see for themselves what was really happening.

Then, all at once, young Dryden in his shirt sleeves, with his billiard cue in his hand, came shouting at the open door of the card-room.

"It's a wreck! A wreck!" And, still shouting, he disappeared.

"What an infernal row they're making!" said Colonel Blacklock. "Whose card is that? . . . I suppose I mustn't ask to see the last trick?"

"No, I'm afraid not," said Lenny.

No one at his table had stirred! and presently the noise and excitement came to an end. The players at the other tables sat down again; the cards fell lightly and rhythmically; the steward brought in tray after tray of drink, and slowly but delightfully the snug and comfortable evening wore itself out.

When members were going home, the wind, even in back streets, was so tremendous that Colonel Blacklock felt glad to accept the stalwart arm of Lenny Calcraft.

"Thank you, my dear fellow! Something solid to cling on to."

And Lenny confessed that, measuring himself the other day, before starting some new exercises, he found his forearm and the biceps quite unusually well-developed.

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"Solid all through," said Colonel Blacklock. "By Jove, it's like walking home with a Martello tower."

Next day all the town was talking about the wreck, and the splendid rescue effected by the lifeboat. No lives lost;—and seven lives saved—by the heroism and promptitude of these lifeboat men. The shipwrecked sailors had been fed, and clothed, and sent on their way to London, before Lenny got up; but the local heroes remained, to sun themselves in the kind words and kinder looks shed upon them by admiring citizens. All praised their action; and Lenny himself joined the chorus late that afternoon.

The wind had abated, but the sea still ran high; clouds were racing overhead; and sea gulls, driven inland by the gale, flew low and warily, while Lenny in his tarpaulin coat stood outside the big doors of the lifeboat house and talked to the weather-beaten men. The men surrounded him, nodding their heads, grinning, and pointing across the waves to the black, dismasted, broken-backed vessel. Promenaders stopped and made an outer ring; Lenny formed the attractive nucleus of a growing crowd; the concentrated eyes of the public watched him.

He clapped a hero on the shoulder, he called another "my lad," he mingled humorous chaff with the seriousness of his praise, and the little crowd applauded.

"Famous, my lads! Upon my word, you have made us all proud of you."

He was groping in a waistcoat pocket now, and he brought out two or three sovereigns, and distributed them among the men; and once more the crowd applauded.

This substantial recognition was moreover received in the best part by the men.

"Oh, sir," said their spokesman, "it was nothing, sir;

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no more than our duty. I'm sure none of us thought a minute when we got the call. The luck was in being able to get to her in time. But I'm sure it's very kind of you, sir. Thank you, sir. And I'm sure we all appreciate your liberality and kindness, sir."

Lenny went into the club feeling full of a very generous glow; sympathy, kindness, and enthusiasm, warming him through and through. There were several members in the front room, including Colonel Blacklock, and they were all still talking of the wreck. Lenny, chiming in, began to relate how much impressed he had been by the modesty of these rough fellows.

"They did it last night, and they'd do it again to-night, if they got the call." And he hinted at the donation and good words with which he had rewarded them. "Yes, I told them what I thought."

Somehow the members would not listen: they cut him short. They were talking, but it was not of the lifeboat men that they talked.

"Oh, yes—just so. But it's young Dryden who has shown himself such a tip-topper. I didn't think he had such grit in him. . . . By Jove! Say what you will, it was a clinking fine thing to do. The young harum-scarum devil bangs out of the club just as he was, in his shirt sleeves, and is the first man into the boat—he and Jones, the butcher, were the volunteers; and without them the boat could not have been manned."

Lenny walked into the card-room, and heard the card-players talking of young Dryden between the rubbers. Then he went into the billiard-room, and heard the billiard-players talking about him unceasingly. Then he retired to the writing-room, where, conspicuously displayed on the mantelpiece, there was a large placard with a word in capital letters—Silence!

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But soon he was joined by Colonel Blacklock, who altogether disregarded the placard.

"Lenny," said the Colonel, affectionately holding him by the lapel of his coat, "you were right about it—absolutely right. You are always right."

"I don't quite follow you," said Lenny coldly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean about *him*—when you said we mustn't pill him. . . . Upon my word, I can't get over this performance;" and the Colonel chuckled and rolled his head. "Quite the military instinct! What they taught us when we were youngsters. 'March straight for the sound of the guns. Go, straight as a dart, to the danger zone.' Well, that's what the young dog did, didn't he? Dashed straight for it, without waiting to put on his coat! And he was in the thick of it, fighting hard, while you and I, old boy, were comfortably marching in the opposite direction." And the Colonel chuckled again. "Makes one feel small, eh? Never mind. We can't *all* go; and I have grandchildren to look after, and you have got a father."

Lenny did not attempt to analyse his feelings, and probably they were quite unanalysable. When he thought of Dryden's prompt and courageous action, he felt again that generous glow of sympathy and enthusiasm;—but this time it was for the deed, and not for the man. His heart had warmed to the rough sailors; it grew cold to the young engineer. Why? There was no envy, no malice; really no base thought at all. He admired young Dryden, he admired him enormously. He felt as if from now onwards his admiration would be always increasing; and yet—he disliked young Dryden. He liked him yesterday, he disliked him to-day. Very curious, and quite unanalysable. Only one explanation suggested itself—

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surely an explanation to be rejected as absurd. Is it perhaps a mysterious law of life that one cannot like the man who, however innocently and inadvertently, gets the better of one? But how could the law, if it existed, apply here? Well—young Dryden had done the thing that he ought to have done himself

VI

AFTER much broken weather the sun was shining again. At noon the day became so bright and dry that one could safely sit on the beach. Lenny had come down the steps from the parade to light his pipe behind one of the wooden groins; and in this shelter, with the sunlight bathing him and the breeze faintly singing above his head but never touching him, he reclined almost at full length, puffing the fragrant tobacco, fingering the clean pebbles, and lazily thinking.

The small waves rolled so fast towards him, swept up the beach with such vigorous motion, collapsed and dragged their remnants away with such a deceptive aspect of individuality, that it seemed impossible to believe that each hurrying crest and following trough did not indeed move onward, but was merely an uprising and down-falling of water in which every atom hovered over the same stationary spot. And his thoughts were like the waves, seeming to roll right away, but really in one place all the time.

He thought of exploits by which people gain the praise of crowds. This war—what possibilities it offered for quick fame, easily achieved glory! Had he gone out there, he might have distinguished himself and come home famous. Mentioned in despatches,—D.S.O.,—more even? A Victoria Cross?

Why not? Given the opportunity, you would make the effort in a white-hot fury of excitement. It would be like a fast thing with hounds. And one particular thirty minutes

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came back to him with extraordinary vividness. It had been very late on a November afternoon, when a long blank day had sent most of the field home in low spirits; there was a touch of frost towards dusk; one could smell the fallen leaves beneath the trees; and suddenly hounds were running like blazes. His horse seemed to go mad with joy. Bang, crack, whack—that timber had been hit uncommonly hard, but he is free of the copse; he is sailing over firm turf; then a scramble after a deep drop—Lenny felt again the nasty checking jar and the infinitesimal pause,—but those hindlegs are under him again; he is flying straight in the wake of the flying pack. Not another moment's doubt or trouble. Thirty minutes, and the splendid end had come—a kill in the open and only one man up. As he remembered the scene, his blood flowed more richly through his veins. . . . Now the other men are here—red perspiring faces all round him—frank hearty congratulations uttered by friendly voices. “By Jove, Lenny, you were in your element. You fairly streaked away, old chap. We only saw your coat-tails.”

Well, that was how he would distinguish himself in war—rapidly—if the lucky chance came. At worst it would seem nothing greater or more difficult than stopping a pair of runaway carriage horses.

Then he thought of the bronze cross won by his great friend George Verinder. Nothing easy or quick about *his* exploit!

He and a small number of cavalry had been surprised in a hollow among hills, and so knocked about by the well-posted foe that a *sauve qui peut* seemed likely to ensue. But George, apparently, had rallied them; had slowly and methodically extricated them from this devil's hot-pot; got them clear off, and then had ridden back alone—into the hot-pot again—to find a trooper who had shouted

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imploringly as he fell. George knew that the troops under his command were safe now; he was risking his own life, not their lives.

Gone for thirty-six hours! Putting the wounded man on his horse, walking beside the horse amid a rain of bullets—walking through a night, hiding through a day;—discovered and attacked, with sputter of revolver fire beating off a dozen riflemen, and again getting clear; staggering on into another night, without food, without drink, without warmth—in imagination Lenny could see it all. While he thought of those thirty-six hours, it was as if his brain contained one of the new American cinematograph theatres about which people were beginning to speak. An endless thread of animated pictures spun out before his introspective eyes. No, not endless; for here is the last of the film, the final picture.

Camp fires burning pale at dawn, the challenge of a sentry—George has reached the British lines; and the dying horse still carries a live man. Oh, what steel-bright courage, what indomitable resolve, what infinite capacity of endurance, went to the doing of all this!

And he thought of the long-standing friendship between George and himself. It would be a terrible misfortune to forfeit the affection and esteem of such a knight-like friend as that.

George Verinder was not in any way connected with Westchurch; he belonged to Lenny's earlier history, and was known to Dryden and other club members only as the brilliant guest who once came to stay for a month at No. 1, The Crescent. He and Lenny had served in the same militia; it was then that the regard was born and grew to such strength as to survive the dulling effects of time, separation, and changed habits. After those militia days they were parted. One of them had gone with a

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sword in his hand to conquer the world, and the other had slowly paced to and fro on a concrete path by the narrow sea and carried an old man's walking stick.

Lenny's pipe had gone out; in his recumbent position it would not draw properly. He raised himself, sat cross-legged, and, picking up a handful of pebbles, threw them from him with a slow reluctant gesture that typified the phase of his thought.

But he had voluntarily given up the hope of going to the war; and he must not regret the loss of a dream.

Then, perhaps for the first time, he thought distinctly and consecutively of all he had sacrificed to filial love.

The hunting with those jolly red-faced companions; the shooting, the fishing, the whole programme of rural sport; the life in London with wild bloods and costly sirens, facile courtships and swift surrenders, late nights and later mornings, life illuminated by a candle that is being lavishly burnt at both ends; then the period of wider aims and more extended hopes, reputation, public importance, marriage, home—all that he had been taught to expect ultimately as quite his own, all of it had gone from him.

And as exchange the long dull years in this little hole of a place—numbing and deadening oneself with its futile amusements, insipid vapours of old maids at tea-parties, garrulous twaddle of old men on club sofas. To think of it—plainly to recognize the vapid monotony, the measureless emptiness that can be contained in infinitely restricted space, made one feel the sick yearning of an eagle chained to a perch, or a lion barred in a cage. Again the mental pictures began to flash and pass. The world as it seems when you look at it through prison bars, and the world that is open and free—these formed the new series of his thought films. Travel, exploration, adventure, the renewal

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of youth that comes to those who boldly seek and drink at Nature's hidden fountains, that wine of life which is sweeter and stronger when Danger holds the cup than when we take it from the hands of Fame—how much, how very much he had offered in willing sacrifice to his love!

Two warmly-clad children, followed by a nursery governess, passed in the sunlight at the water's edge. The little boy trailed a rope of sea-weed, swished it on the running foam, released it and retrieved it; the little girl laughed and danced; and the governess told them both to be careful not to get their boots wet.

Ah—the paramount sacrifice! As he watched the children he thought of the greatest thing he had surrendered—little hands to link themselves about his fingers, treble voices to call him father, small faces to show him in their upturned glance the magic mirror that contains the future and the past.

That immortality of fatherhood—why, in one sense at least, he had given not only his life, but life everlasting.

Yet he did not grudge it. He got up, stretched himself, and climbed the steps to the parade. As he walked along the well-worn track, his thoughts began to flow smooth in their customary channel. When he thought of his father, the sense of curbed strength and balked aim at once faded; his mind was suffused with softness and gentleness; and it was as if from a thousand invisible traces of the Bath-chair wheels there rose as many guiding lines to hold him steadfast in purpose and direction.

That was his duty—a duty which he must perform because it had become an instinct,—to guard and protect the strong man whose strength had turned to weakness. All the firmest part of his nature was irrevocably bound to the self-imposed task. That was the real interest of

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his life; and if he were shut out of it, there could now be no true comfort for him. The mere recollection of his father's dependence upon him always seemed automatically to melt his heart, to fill his breast with a warm suffocating pain, and—as it had done now—to bring tears into his blinking eyes.

And the bad temper, the frequent rudeness, the occasional harshness, all aided in the maintenance of an absorbing dominion. Such manifestations of power issuing from absolute impotence completed the poignancy of the appeal to one's magnanimous forbearance.

He felt altogether at peace again. Walking on more briskly, nodding to acquaintances, but not stopping to talk, he remembered how easily he had shaken down in the narrow orbit described by fate, and considered the manifold compensations of his lot. The friendly jolly little town, the surrounding atmosphere of kindness, the immunity from personal care and worry! Truly he had been able to make himself comfortable enough. At first the allowance given to him by his father was moderate, almost exiguous; but the allowance had been increased until it became a very ample one; of late it might be counted almost as a fund without other limit than his own discretion. And it was all of it spending money—everything found for one at home, not a penny deflected to household charges. So that a waistcoat dive always brought ready gold to the surface, and one could be large—if in a small way. He liked to deal open-handedly with little claims, to tip handsomely, to head testimonial lists, to stand thirsty people long drinks.

Then he thought of further solaces: those visits to London at fairly regular intervals; two or three nights at a time spent far away from the stuffiness of sick-rooms, the smell of medicaments, the society of hospital nurses—solaces unspeakably greater than he had ever merited.

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Then, all at once; with a further flash of memory, he thought of the luncheon-table that was now probably being laid by skilful hands in the cosy dining-room at No. 1. He looked at his watch—a present from his father, monogram on one side, crest on the other. Yes, nearly lunch-time!

What the watch said merely confirmed the information of the clock—a gift of Nature—that he carried inside him. He felt quite hungry—really sharp-set. And had there not been some talk yesterday about a particular dish that Parsons was to attempt as an experiment?

He walked home cheerfully and jauntily.

No, he must never forget the sacrifices. Ungenerous to do so. Fulfil one's proximate and pressing duty—what else matters?

Besides, in truth, nothing to complain of!

VIII

THAT feeling of the sacrifice justified, the duty obeyed, the task fulfilled, was strong upon him during the next few days. With it had come a pacification of the nerves, a more evenly balanced rhythm of the pulses, and perhaps unconsciously he nourished and encouraged its growth in order to continue and increase the benefit he was deriving from it. Certainly it filled his whole mental field when he began to speak sentimentally of the past to his father.

A cold wet morning, the invalid out of bed and dressed, but unlikely to venture downstairs—Lenny came into the bedroom, took the bowl of arrowroot from nurse, and himself waited upon her irritable patient. This wretched meal might very likely prove to be Mr. Calcraft's breakfast, luncheon, and dinner; for he was suffering horribly from the defective processes of his digestion.

Lenny did not consider whether the moment was opportune, but, assuming that he would be sure of a sympathetic response, allowed his thoughts to brim over into verbal utterance.

"Father"—and really he was like a man who thought aloud,—"I have been brooding upon all these years that we have spent together, and I felt that I regret nothing."

"What should you regret?"

Old Calcraft was nursing the bowl on his lap, blowing at the hot gruel, and occasionally taking a cautious spoon-

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ful. Now he put the bowl on the little table at his side, and stared at Lenny.

"I only mean, the thought comes that I might possibly have been better employed." As he said it his eyes grew moist, and he took his father's hand and pressed it. "But I know, I feel that I *couldn't* have been better employed than in looking after you."

His father grunted. Then he grasped the bowl again, and went on sipping.

Lenny went on talking, sentimentally, affectionately, devotedly.

"Rubbish!" cried old Calcraft, with a splutter and cough. "Do you want to make me choke by ramming such chatter down my throat? Can't you see that I'm trying to swallow this trash that I hold in my hands—this nauseating muck—this abominable filth—to which I am condemned by my infirmities, and cursed bad luck, and the damnable cruelty of fate?"

Then of course Lenny knew that he had chosen a moment unfavourable to a sentimental subject.

But the subject did not rest there. Mr. Calcraft returned to it later in the day—at dusk.

"Well, dad," said Lenny breezily, "I hope you have picked up a little appetite for tea."

The old man sat deep-sunken in his chair by the bedroom fire; his hands on the arms of the chair were shaking; his shrunken face was like a parchment mask with dusky shadows on it, and out of the deepest shadow his eyes glittered wrathfully.

For a month he had been the prey of irrepressible fits of anger. The ruin of the digestive organs created, according to Dr. Searle, a fearful state of affairs. The food that would not consent to be assimilated, set up a chemical

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laboratory for the production of poison, which went streaming through the impoverished blood and sent black waves of poisoned fury to the higher centres of the brain. That was the physiological explanation of tantrums that had nearly broken the nurse's heart.

As Lenny was aware, the nurse had been severely tried. The patient forbade her to wear the hospital dress; and when rules and regulations were quoted and there was a question of writing to ask Sister's permission, he said disrespectful things of Sister. "I'm not going to have that apron and Tom-fool cap bobbing round me to please Sister. I'd as soon have a mourning mute messing about the room, or an undertaker following my chair. Either you'll dress yourself like an ordinary young woman, or you'll pack and go home to Sister by the next train. . . . Which is it to be? . . . Very well, here's a sovereign. Go out and buy yourself a bonnet."

Then, when the poor soul appeared in the bonnet, it was—"Lord save us! Why, the idiot has converted herself into a Salvation Army girl. Where's your tambourine? Where's your tambourine?"

It made Nurse Ferguson cry. She sobbed as she told Lenny about it.

"He said a bonnet—or I shouldn't have bought a bonnet. I've never worn a bonnet in my life."

"I know," said Lenny soothingly. "But, don't you see, father used the old-fashioned word. Father doesn't understand the difference between bonnets, and hats, and toques, and all that. But you mustn't let it distress you. Bear with him—he's very fond of you really."

By some such tactful words Lenny consoled the weeping nurse after she had suffered so much rudeness. Now it was Lenny's turn to suffer.

"Never mind my tea, Lenny," said Mr. Calcraft, "no,

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nor my appetite either. But attend to what I say. I propose to have a few serious words with you."

"I am all attention."

"Thank you. Then will you be good enough to explain precisely what you meant by your remarks this morning."

"Oh, well," said Lenny, smiling deprecatingly, "my meaning—if I had one—was surely obvious; but perhaps I had better have kept it to myself."

"Please explain the obviousness. I am old, and slow of wit."

"Father, why are you making yourself angry? I spoke in all affection—and my wish was simply to reassure you."

"Ah! Well, I cannot allow this tone of patronage—which I've noticed once or twice before to-day. You and I, Master Lenny, must understand each other. I'm not dead yet. I'm still the master in my own house."

"Have I ever disputed your authority?"

"Possibly not—but I require respectful usage as well as tacit obedience. I'm not going to be treated as a mummy or a dummy—a something broken and done for, and laid upon a shelf,—to which the common courtesies of life are only granted out of compassion."

"Father!"

"Yes, and please to remember I'm something more than your father. I'm your host too. And you're a guest—not even a paying guest, but a person maintained in idleness because it happens to be my pleasure not to live altogether alone."

The blood had rushed to Lenny's face; now he became very pale, and very grave.

"Father, these are not words that I ever expected to hear from your lips."

"Oh, you'll hear more words from my lips, and, whether you like them or not, they'll do you good. You've been

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getting above yourself of late. You want taking down a peg or two."

"Father, you are carried away by anger;—you are making yourself ill;—and I must not answer you. Please don't say any more."

"Oh, but I will though."

"Don't drive me to answer you—to say things I should regret. Father," said Lenny beseechingly, "if you and I were to quarrel, it would be the end of the world to me."

"I dare say it would. But you won't quarrel with me. No," and Mr. Calcraft laughed scornfully, and began to cough. "No—you know on which side your bread is buttered."

"And that sneer is your thanks—my recompense after all these years?"

"Rubbish—stuff——" Mr. Calcraft was temporarily checked by the cough.

"I was vain enough to believe that you relied on me—needed me."

"And so I did. So I do. I frankly admit that if left to myself in this large house—this comparatively large house,—if quite by myself, with only servants, I should be lonely—very lonely. I am grateful to you for your company—the little of it that you grant me; but what I won't stand, what I shall never stand, is the assumption that you are doing everything for me and that I am doing nothing for you."

Lenny turned, and moved a few steps towards the door.

"Stop. Don't turn tail. Now we've begun, let's have it out like men."

"Father, you're not yourself, or you wouldn't, you couldn't say these things to me." Lenny had turned again, and his words bubbled out vehemently and rapidly. "How can you and I weigh the facts of our dual existence as if

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they were matters of common business—like tradesmen making up an account in a ledger, till they can strike a balance and estimate the amount of credit and debit? If I said how you've wounded—cut me—I should go on to tell you the truth.”

“Fire ahead. *I'm* never afraid of the truth.”

“Then strike the balance by yourself, at leisure—think quietly of what you've had from me and what I've had from you, and see where the debt lies and how much it is. I'll not ask you to pay it. For you couldn't pay it—no, not if you lived for a hundred years.”

“You have had the run of your teeth, clothes to wear, money to jingle in your pockets—what more could you have got elsewhere?”

“It isn't what I might have got elsewhere, it is what I have given up here.”

“What have you given up? Name any single thing.”

“Well—the war for one thing. You didn't want me to go.”

“You didn't want to go either.”

“Father!”

“Of course you didn't. When you came humming and hawing about it, I twigged in a minute.” Mr. Calcraft coughed almost to asphyxiation. “I—admit—didn't—want to lose you; but would not—selfishly—oppose a real desire——”

“You have said more than enough, sir. I'll listen to no more.”

“Yes, sir. . . . We're 'sir' now. Very good. So be it, sir.”

Lenny's hand was on the door handle. He looked round at his father, who was leaning forward in the arm-chair, with the firelight on his face.

The face was distorted by passion. The blackest wave

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of the poisonous stream flooded the nearly worn-out but still active brain. Forehead veins swelled ominously, sunken eyes glittered balefully, knotted hands twitched spasmodically; but old Calcraft went on talking, only hesitating in order to choose words with the keenest cutting edge and the sharpest and most direful point.

"Didn't want to go, sir. And now, if you please, try to shift the onus—or blame—or disgrace—on me. . . . Want to bully and blackguard me, when I call you to order! . . . Sir, you are like some doctored Tom-cat who hasn't the pluck to go and risk its fur by fighting at night, but because it is given a soft bed to lie on and spiced food to put in its belly, gets impudent—yes, takes it all as a right, and has the damned impudence to spit at its master, and scratch and claw the hand that feeds it."

Lenny had opened the door. He stood on the threshold, seeming very big and erect as he looked at his father and spoke to him in a low husky voice.

"I think you must yourself feel now that you have said all you wished to say to me. You told me they were to be serious words—and I accept them seriously."

"Lenny," cried his father, "come back." Suddenly the unreasoning fury had waned, and in an instant it died out altogether. "Lenny," and the familiar name was uttered now with a tone of piteous entreaty, "Lenny, don't go. I didn't mean it—I didn't mean one word of it."

But the door closed, and old Calcraft stretched his hand towards it with a frightened gesture.

IX

TRULY it seemed like the end of the world to Lenny. Something incredible, terrific, overwhelming had occurred; all static laws had ceased to act; each of Nature's forces had broken loose from the compensating control of her other forces, and the disruption of the universe was the immediate consequence.

He walked fast along the parade, through the gathering darkness, through the boiling turmoil of his thoughts.

His mouth was hot and dry; his eyes were smarting; there was a hard lump in his throat. He squared his shoulders, arched his chest, moved his legs with a firm strong swing; but inwardly he felt empty and lacerated, as if nearly all that was soft and tender had been scooped out of its case of skin and bones, and the torn remainder was draining his last drops of blood. This sensation occupied the whole trunk area below the throat; but above it, right through the head to the tightened scalp, there burned a fire which every now and then blazed into fierce explosions. This upper phenomenon was the burning sense of injustice, with periodic luminous recognitions of its vastness and intensity.

"My reward, yes"—He was muttering the words aloud—"It has come to this then. So this is what I am asked to submit to finally."

When a man has been bitten by a mad dog, he cannot for a little while recover his composure and take a calm view of the incident from the dog's point of view. Be

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he the most philosophic and kind-hearted man alive, he will not *immediately* begin saying, "Don't blame the poor creature. It knows no better. It meant no harm." So, analogously, Lenny could at first make no excuses for the sick, the practically dying man who had taunted and insulted him. At first the uttermost effort that he could achieve in the direction of equanimity was by opposing a sort of angry contempt to the memory of his wrongs.

What does anything matter? If we ourselves are big enough, all that strikes us must seem small. Gratitude is the payment demanded by weak fools. The strong and the wise comprehend that their intrinsic value is not enhanced by praise or decreased by censure. One ought not to mind ingratitude. If you do your duty, that should be its own reward.

He walked faster, as if flying from the spot where he had undergone his pain. Instinctively he had turned his back to the sunset and was hurrying eastwards. Out of the east the blackness of night was slowly emerging; and the dark gloom, as it spread and came towards him, harmonized exactly with the obscure background of his expanding thought.

He stared at the sea; but already the darkness had swallowed it, and only the sound of breaking waves told one that it was still there. He stared at the golf links—they too had disappeared; not one familiar contour visible. But staring to that side he had a strange conception of trackless space, and insurmountable difficulties. A chilling wind crept across the sandy waste, whispered in the bent grass, and sighed as it passed away. It was as if one were standing on the edge of a mighty desert, in the darkness of which lay mysterious depths tenanted only by savage beasts of prey—and for a moment a fanciful idea presented itself. The golf links symbolized the unexplored

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wilderness which he must now boldly enter, and across which he must fight his way. Good-bye, safe snug little Westchurch! The hour had come for him to go forth into the wide world.

Yes, he could not continue the task of self-immolation, now that everything which justified the sacrifice had been destroyed. To recover his self-respect, he must grasp at this chance of freedom. He must go—and wrestle with destiny single-handed. Somebody else must pick up the burden that he was laying down. One of his sisters—either of them—it did not matter which—must come and take care of her father. A companion was required, but any companion would do. The old man had said so himself—by implication, if not by explicit statement. Love counted for nothing. “Very good—be it so, sir.”

He turned abruptly, and gazed at the west. Against the last angry red glow of the sky, the church tower loomed black and grim; one could make out the lines and curves of huddled roofs; to the understanding eye the shape of the sea-front, the ridge of the hill, the whole plan of the little town made itself perceptible. Many, many times he had seen it at such an hour as this, and yet now it seemed new and strange. It was the sense of impending farewell that had changed the aspect of familiar things, and given a symbolic significance to the smallest and the greatest of them.

He looked at the increasing luminance of distant lamps on the parade, and thought of our feeble hopes—so soon kindled and so soon extinguished. He looked at the faint clustered lights of the fishermen’s boats in the estuary, and figured them as stars fallen from their high position, glimmering in the measureless void before their final coldness and death.

Out of that last fancy came sadness.

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Such violent emotion as he had been sustaining could not last long. The explosions of revolted self-esteem had already ceased. The fire sunk, and where it had burned there was coldness, blankness, sadness.

He walked back with slow short paces from the darkness by the golf links towards the lamplight on the parade, and at each step nearer the house that had been his home he was thinking more calmly and more logically.

It is bitter, most bitter to be misunderstood, to have one's highest and finest intentions distorted into the shape of base motives. He could hear again his father's rasping voice as it barked out the scornful, cynical, cruel accusations. "Oh no, you won't quarrel with me. . . . *You know on which side your bread is buttered.*"

And about the war! The injustice, the cruel cruel injustice of saying that he did not himself want to go.

Then, like an uninvited guest, like a common outsider grossly and peremptorily thrusting his way into a party of great and august people, a memory came into the active zone of his mind. He remembered the gayness, the lightness, the unquestioning happiness with which he had sprung from his soft bed on the morning after he had irrevocably decided to stay at home. Why had he felt that unusual elation of spirits? Could it possibly be that after all he was happy because——?

No, that thought was unthinkable.

He had returned to the lamplight now, and his shadow moved slowly by his side, swept away from him, and stretched far in front of him, till the next lamp sent it dancing over his bowed head to drop behind him again. And the lamplight took up its own special function in the symbolical turn of new thoughts. It typified warmth after cold, solace after pain.

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There was only one person in all the world who ever really understood him. *She* never misinterpreted motives. To her, distance and proximity, yesterday and to-day, were all one; her regard annihilated space, her faith was unending as time itself.

He stopped close to a lamp-post and brought out from its hiding place the last letter that he had received from her. Gold clasps on the pocket-book flashed in the light, but he had to raise the unfolded notepaper to the level of his eyes before he could read the half-remembered sentences.

"Dearest, I go to and fro in the midst of five million people, and they are all ghosts, shadows, in an unreal city, because one man, my man, is not here." . . . And so on, very sweet, showing intense love; soothing him, warming him, re-filling his veins with blood. . . . "Take care of your health, my own darling. Though such a splendid fellow outwardly, you are not truly strong."—*There!* The only person in all the world who by instinct had detected the truth! "You cannot take too much care of yourself—for my poor sake, if for no other reason." . . .

And, as he read, he was seized with an immense longing to be again with the writer of the letter—to be soothed by the caress of her slender fingers, to be fired by the contact of her pressed lips, to be set vibrating, thrilling, ecstatically throbbing by the murmured music of her sweet low voice.

Before Mr. Calcraft would permit his nurse to undress him and put him to bed, he ordered her to ring the bell for the parlourmaid.

"Oh—Mary—is Mr. Leonard in the house?"

"No, sir."

"Did he dine at home?"

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"No, sir. He came in—rather late—to change his clothes, and he told us to clear the table."

"Oh! Do you know where he is?"

"I think he is at the club. Did you wish him sent for, sir?"

"No. . . . That's all, Mary. . . . Now, Miss Ferguson, help me to bed."

He was awake when the latchkey turned in the lock, and presently he heard ascending footsteps. They passed his door, and went upwards without stopping.

He lay listening, and waiting; but the footsteps never descended again. That night Lenny did not look into the sleepless room.

They did not meet until the luncheon hour next day. Mr. Calcraft had come downstairs for the mid-day meal, and was seated at the head of the dining-table when Lenny came into the room.

"Good-morning, father."

"Good-morning, Lenny."

Lenny seemed unwonted pale, and his father quite abnormally red. They both spoke stiffly, with the forced politeness of two strangers who did not like the first look of each other.

"I saw Lady Garbett just now, and she particularly asked to be remembered to you."

"Did she? That was very kind of her."

The two maids were busy with hot dishes to be handed, as well as cold dishes to be placed on the table, and they remained in the room for some time.

Old Calcraft, raising his eyes from untasted food, shot a wondering but gratified glance at his son. Lenny was eating heartily; except for the slight pallor, he appeared

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to be much as usual; and, the constraint wearing off, he consented to make conversation by talking of indifferent matters. Then it could not be so very bad, after all.

But as soon as the servants had left them to themselves, Lenny resumed his stiffly formal air, and announced that he was going to London this afternoon for the purpose of transacting business. Presuming that his father could spare him, he intended to stay in London for four or five days at least.

"Yes—of course. I—I have never wished to tie you by the heels. Certainly, go. But, Lenny," and the old man looked at him appealingly, "this isn't sulkiness? You are not deserting me because—because I gave you the rough side of my tongue yesterday?"

"Oh, no. I am called away by certain business arrangements that I have had at the back of my mind for a long time—and, in fact, they cannot be any longer delayed."

"Very good. . . . But to-day is Saturday—and Saturday does not seem the most suitable day for business. By the time you get to London all the offices and shops will be closed. Wouldn't it be as well to wait till Monday—to start the business?"

"No, I fear I can't put off my journey. As it happens, Saturday suits some of my purposes admirably."

"And do I understand that, at the end of these five or six days, you intend—you promise to return?"

"Oh, yes," said Lenny, slowly and enigmatically, "whether I have arranged everything or not, I will come back then. I mean, even if my arrangements are not finally completed, I shall return then."

Mr. Calcraft pushed away his plate, and stared at the table-cloth. There was a silence, during which it seemed that he summoned all his pride and braced himself for an

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extreme effort. Lenny would not break the silence; and at last Mr. Calcraft raised his head, and spoke again.

"Bon voyage, Lenny. . . . May I ask you to have the kindness to touch the bell? I want Miss Ferguson—to take me upstairs."

X

WITH a first-class compartment to himself, a foot-warmer to prevent his feet feeling chill, and magazines to keep his mind occupied, Lenny had got through three-quarters of the journey swiftly and easily. But now, as the train slackened speed and approached its last stopping-place twenty miles from London, he was devoured by a fever of excitement and anxiety.

He moved from side to side of the carriage, rubbed the misty window-glasses with the cuff of his fur coat, and peered at shapeless objects as they flitted past in the almost opaque obscurity. Bridges, high brick walls, signal lamps—yes, these were the outskirts of the junction. Excitedly he let down a window, and allowed the cold night air to blow fiercely against his heated face, while he gazed ahead at the illuminated focus of a dim perspective that seemed to be rushing with the wind towards him.

A wide opening fan of metals, more bridges, huge signal-cabins, dozens of red and green lamps—a vast confused space of light and darkness, in which his eager eyes were seeking as yet vainly; then the long, the interminably long platform—gas-light reflected in wet asphalt, flaring before book-stalls, casting monstrous shadows of piled luggage and rolled milk-cans, porters shouting, inspectors scribbling in note-books, half a dozen humble passengers trotting after the third-class coaches as they slowly glided by; but still no sign—no slightest sign of her.

His heart sank; he felt sick with disappointment; his

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forehead in a moment had become clammyly frigid. She had not been able to come out here to meet him. His letter had not reached her early enough—he knew that she would have come if she could. But some diabolical engagement had prevented her: he would find her note of explanation waiting for him at his rooms in Albert Street. Perhaps she might not be able to meet him till to-morrow, or even till Monday. . . . Ah!

Suddenly he saw her—a tall figure in a dark cloak. The guard, obeying instructions, earning the promised tip, had found her, was hurrying her along the platform to the carriage door.

“So you came—you came. I—I began to be afraid.” Lenny was breathing so fast that he could scarcely speak: “How long did you have to wait?”

“Nearly an hour.”

“Poor darling. Did it seem long?”

“An eternity. But I didn’t mind—heaven was to be mine at the end of it.”

The train was moving again; in clusters, in bunches, and then one by one, it dropped the station lamps behind it; soon it had run out into the kindly darkness. It glided faster, gaining speed, flinging away all lamps that it passed now as though they were sparks from the furnace; and the compartment was a brilliantly lit, neatly upholstered boudoir—a small magic room that flew through the night and defied the prying scrutiny of all external eyes, to which it had become merely one link on a long serpent of fire.

“Lenny, my king. Are you glad to see me?”

“Yes, yes. Take off your veil. Let me feel your dear face against mine.”

His joy made him husky; his haste made him grudge wasted words. He had flung open his fur-coat, had pulled

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her on his knees, and was folding her in a rapturous embrace.

This was what he had been yearning for. The sensation of holding her tight against him instantly created a massive and diffused contentment; and the deep peace of it was shot through and through in all directions with fiery darts of bliss. At last they two were together, and all the rest of the world ceased to exist. Immense mental relief mingled with the physical rapture—she was still his, whatever else he had lost.

The strength and fragility of her supple body, the soft glow of her eyes so close to his own, the feel of her face, firm and cool at first till it quivered and warmed beneath his caresses, the well-remembered fragrance of her hair, the sweet voice whispering love each time that he released her lips—all these things combining and fusing sent a manifold message of delight to thrill voluptuously, to beat tumultuously, to flow ineffably in his brain, and nerves, and blood.

“My own Lenny. . . . My sweetheart. . . . My dearest boy.”

He stifled the voice with kisses. He held her closer and tighter, and still that curious mental peace deepened as the embrace grew more passionately intimate. Nothing else matters: this is all.

“Angel of my life. . . . Alma—my Alma.”

Appasement, confidence, unutterable satisfaction—in each flying moment she gave back to him some elemental comfort that had been taken from him. It was as if he had been a stately mansion recently knocked to pieces, and now she was building him up again; or a wounded man whose wounds she was making whole; or an empty box from which valuable stores had been taken, and into which she was pouring the most priceless treasures.

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"Lenny, are you glad—are you really glad to see me?"

"Alma! I've no words to tell you how glad. . . . Sit over there—and I'll try, I'll try to say how I have pined for you."

He was contented, satisfied, ready to watch her sitting opposite to him—willing to chat and laugh about insignificant topics, or to talk seriously of the restaurant at which he proposed to dine—while she was still clinging, whispering, and passionately desiring.

XI

THEY spent the whole of Sunday together, and now, after dinner at a quiet and unfashionable restaurant, they had returned to his rooms.

Situated in one of the short cuts from Bond Street to Hanover Square, these furnished apartments were both convenient and comfortable, and Lenny occupied them during all his visits to London. He had tried other houses, but never felt quite so much at ease as here in old Albert Street. The landlord and his wife catered exclusively for bachelor gentlemen, understood their ways, and knew when to offer attention and when to efface themselves.

Altogether there were three sets of rooms, and each identical in plan: sitting-room in front, bedroom at back, the two rooms communicating. Lenny used to ask for the first-floor rooms, and, if he could not get them, he would accept the second floor, or even the third—anything rather than again go vaguely hunting for suitable accommodation elsewhere. He was on the second floor this time—furniture less luxurious than down below, but better than up above, and cost half way between.

“Has your pipe gone out, Lenny? Shall I get you the matches?”

“No, don’t move. I’m all right.”

He sat smoking in an armchair by the hearth. Alma Reed sat on a footstool, with arms stretched across his knees, and while he lazily and luxuriously puffed at his pipe she had been looking intently into the fire.

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"There," she murmured, "that was an unlucky break. These coals, Lenny, must be very good or very bad—they burn so fast, and they split into such extraordinary shapes. . . . They are showing me wonderful—most wonderful things. There, what a pity! Another unlucky break. My picture has gone."

"What was it?"

"A valley between high mountains—terrific peaks, higher than anything in Switzerland—and a roaring torrent below a ledge that formed the only path for human feet. It was terribly dangerous—it made me dizzy to think about; but you and I were walking along it, hand in hand, quite safely."

"Oh, I say. It makes me dizzy to hear about it."

She laughed and looked up at him.

"I shouldn't be afraid, with *you*, Lenny."

Then she looked back at the burning coals; and he, watching her, thought for a moment of the last face that he had seen with firelight on it. When his father spoke the bitterest of many bitter words, his face was illuminated by just such a red glow and yellow flicker. Lenny drove away the memory of it. Futile recollections would mar this exquisite comfort of unthinking rest.

"Then it's all settled about to-morrow," he said cheerfully. "Sure you can manage it?"

"Absolutely sure. Another long day with my darling. . . . Lenny, even now I can hardly believe it's all true—that you are really with me, that I have been with you—that I am still to be with you."

"And you won't get into a row about it? They won't make a fuss?"

"No—not that I should care, if they did."

"I'm afraid you work too hard."

"Oh, no. The work occupies me—if I can't say it

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amuses me. Yes, on my honour, I like the work. But of course a holiday will do me good."

It had been arranged that she was to play truant from the offices of her Organization, and if the day proved fine they would go out of London to some pretty place like Richmond, Kingston, or Windsor. They would walk in a park, stroll by a river, or stare at state saloons and monarchs' writing-tables. If it rained, they were to stay in London, and see pictures or listen to music. They would be together—it didn't matter where.

"What excuse will you send them?"

"I shall say I'm ill—one more lie on your account, Lenny;" and she laughed again.

Her laughter had in it certain tones that he remembered in her singing voice. It was a natural ripple of musical sound, with an unexpected drop and deepening of the note that affected one strangely. It forced, as if infallibly, a sympathetic response; made one vibrate and echo, and yet perhaps left one ignorant of its cause and meaning. One was expressing sympathy, but with what? Not with mirth only. To-night while he laughed with her, he felt vaguely sorry for her.

"Now I've a picture tame enough and flat enough to suit the least romantic. Lenny, the coals have shown me Westchurch—dull, stupid, odious little Westchurch."

The room was bright and cheerful; through the open door of the bedroom he could see the light of another fire flaming gaily; everything about him suggested restful peace, securely sheltered pleasure; and yet, while he thoughtfully looked down at Alma's pretty face and graceful figure, a queer bothering kind of sadness invaded his mind.

As pretty as she had ever been? Yes, every bit—but perhaps a little thinner, more worn, and perceptibly older. Oh, without doubt, the slow passage of the years had left

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their indelible print. That heavy tress of dark hair threw its shadow on the curve of a narrowed cheek; the delicately modelled nose seemed in the slightest degree longer, and sharper of outline; the chin had lost roundness and fullness; and some quality of courageous pride and candid child-like defiance had vanished from the firm setting of the closed lips. Looking at her shoulders and the puffy loose sleeves of her blouse, he noticed how slender were the wrists emerging from the sheath of unnecessary fabric. Then he scrutinized the white neck bending forward, seeming to droop from a low collar. She used to wear high collars, when her neck was a trifle solider and bigger. Changes? Yes, some slight—very slight differences between the girl of twenty-three and the woman of twenty-nine.

But all the original charm must surely be there—increased, intensified, multiplied by familiarity and custom. Yesterday she had at once evoked the ancient raptures. And now if for an instant he doubted the potency of her spells, it was because the long day had tired him.

He reached out his hand and let it rest softly on the nape of her bent neck. He could remember the first time he had done this, and the thickening rush of emotions that the action and its acceptance had produced in him—the triumphant thrill of the proprietor, as intuitively he comprehends the meek submission of the thing possessed.

And he felt it again now—a fainter and more languid delight, but essentially the same as the old joy.

His long day had naturally engendered fatigue. He was too tired to go on smoking; his pipe was finished, and he did not trouble to refill it. He could not have sustained any animated discussion—such as his companion loved—on large abstract questions; but he enjoyed their quiet desultory talk about small finite things.

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"Lenny, you can't have exhausted your budget of local news. Does nothing startling ever happen nowadays?"

"No—really nothing at all."

"No wild horses to run away?" And, smiling, she looked up at him. "No opening for sensational exploits?"

"Well—no, nothing."

He had been on the point of telling her how Gerald Dryden went out in the lifeboat, but he checked himself. It would be a longish tale, and he felt too tired to begin it. She would get excited, and make him supply endless details.

"Lenny, what do they say of me nowadays?"

"My pretty Alma, how should I know? I never listen to their gossip and twaddle."

"Frances Shipham told me that when she was there last Christmas, they were still slandering me—not to her, of course."

"Alma, I sometimes wonder—is Frances altogether discreet?"

"Yes—altogether."

"I wonder."

"Don't wonder. Frances is as true as steel."

"Sometimes I have thought too—why don't you ever come down and show yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because you don't want me to, for one thing."

"Alma! . . . Well, I'll tell you exactly what I feel. It's cowardly, but I have thought—I confess it—that your coming might create difficulties. You would be plied with questions. If you gave a doubtful answer, somebody's suspicions might be aroused. . . . And, well, you know how greatly I dread anything that might threaten our friendship."

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"Yes," she said slowly, "they wouldn't quite understand our friendship—at Westchurch."

"No. Whereas it is safe here. Nothing can interrupt it. In London people are too busy to bother about other people's affairs."

"How true!" Her laughter had a different note, and it grew light instead of deepening. "Lenny, I insist on your giving me some news of my home." She raised her head, shaking back the weight of hair as she used to do when playing the first bars of a song accompaniment. "It is what the banished heroine demands in melodramas," and she smiled at him. "I ask you, Leonard Calcraft, to tell me something of my dear old *home*. . . . How is papa's golf getting on?"

"Oh, it's marvellous," and Lenny laughed gaily. "They say his handicap is three hundred and five."

"And how is my energetic step-mamma?"

"More energetic than ever."

"Poor dear!" And Alma imitated Mrs. Reed's hurried bustling manner. "One must not flag or neglect one's duties when one has four unmarried daughters. Don't you think I'm wise?"

"Oh, very wise. They must be prepared for disappointment."

"And now for a real friend—my best friend—perhaps the only friend left to me in Westchurch!"

"Miss Workman?"

"No—dear old Father Marchant."

Lenny's face grew sombre, and he spoke gravely.

"Alma, have you ever told Father Marchant that—that we are such pals?"

"No. But he may have guessed."

"How could he guess?"

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"Oh, our priests guess everything—they *know* everything."

"Do they? But how?"

She had been kneeling, with her elbows on his knees; and while she talked, she twisted her fingers about his watch-chain. Now she subsided to the footstool, and sat with her hands folded on her lap.

"In my case, Lenny, the guessing would have been a simple matter. You see, after I left Westchurch Father Marchant used to write me letters of advice, and he gave me an introduction to another director—an old friend of his—Canon Langley-Rees—at the Hebden Street church."

"You mean for confessions, and all that?"

"Yes."

"I see. That made a link—a channel of communication. But, Alma, I thought the seal of the confessional was so sacred. Surely this Canon What's-his-name wouldn't write and tell Mr. Marchant things that you had confessed to him in the most sacred and secret manner?"

"No. But he would write and tell Father Marchant that I hadn't confessed anything at all." She was looking into the fire, as if she could see new pictures. "I don't go to confession now. I haven't been once since—since we became such pals."

"Ah! . . . Yes, I think you have hit on the right explanation. Marchant has been putting two and two together—and he would trammel your freedom, if he could. But he can't—he can't do that, can he?"

"No."

She got up and stretched herself. As she raised her arms above her head, and the wide sleeves drooped, he again noticed the slenderness of her wrists. She must not allow herself to grow any thinner.

"Lenny, it is time for me to go. What is the time?"

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"Nearly eleven."

"Well, then—I suppose. . . . Have I worn out my welcome? You don't ask me to stay."

"What would Frances think? Isn't it more prudent not to relax our rules? You know I *want* you to stay."

"On your honour? Then suppose I take you at your word? . . . No." She shook her head, and with a flattened palm brushed back the loosened hair above her ears. "No, I was only chaffing. . . . But I may come back early to-morrow?"

"We said ten-thirty—didn't we?"

"And I am to be with you all day? That's certain, isn't it?"

"As certain as day succeeds to night."

She went into the bedroom to put on her hat and coat; and presently he followed her. She was in front of the dressing-table glass, with raised hands pinning and arranging her veil. He came and stood behind her, put his arms round her, and held her firmly.

"I feel that I can't let you go after all."

"Then don't let me go—keep me here."

"I feel I want to." While he said the words he released her, and she, turning, put her hands on his shoulders. "But, Alma dear, I feel that I mustn't allow you to stay—even a little while longer. Frances will be sitting up for you."

"No."

"Then who would let you in?"

"I have my key."

"But I do feel it would be folly to abandon our rules. They have made the position so secure—almost unchallengeable—no valid cause of complaint for anybody, really. One imprudence—and we are in a false position. I do feel that—always."

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"Do you know what *I* feel? I am being turned out of paradise, Lenny!" She had thrown her arms about his neck; she was clinging to him, trembling from head to feet, and suddenly she burst into tears. "Lenny," she sobbed, "do you ever realize what you are to me?"

"My sweetest girl!"

"Do you think—or understand one thousandth part of it? All night I shall lie awake. I shall think, Why am I banished—why am I lying wretched and alone, when my king is here—when he has come to me out of the darkness and the distance—and—and the black despair of empty weeks and months?" And she sobbed and clung most pitifully.

But soon, very soon, she was dabbing the wet veil with a handkerchief, readjusting her hat, and glancing at the table to find her gloves.

"It's all right, Lenny. Don't be disgusted with me—or angry. . . . Go down, and see if they can get me a cab. . . . Women *like* crying—once in a way, you know—not too often. And I was really only crying because of my happiness—a little overstrung, you know, by your coming up so unexpectedly, and to-day's treat—and to-morrow's hope. . . . There, I'm *quite* all right now."

She smiled at him reassuringly, and he went downstairs to get the cab fetched.

He was dead tired, and he slept like a log. The landlord, bringing letters, tea, and bread and butter, at nine o'clock next morning, had difficulty in waking him.

For a few moments Lenny was under the illusion that the warmth of the bed, the wintry sunbeams, the faint perfume of infusing tea, all belonged to Westchurch, and that he was shaking off the heavy but delicious numbness

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of slumber in his own home. Then he sat up, drank the hot tea, munched the nice strange-flavoured bread and butter, and stared at the three envelopes on the tray. Two of them most uninteresting, circulars re-addressed by Mary, but one that stirred his pulses to a rapid beat and made him wide awake—an envelope that bore his father's shaky handwriting.

The letter had been written late on Sunday, just in time to catch the evening post; and, as Lenny read it, he was completely overwhelmed by the emotional stress of surprise, pleasure, and remorse.

. . . . "It has been mild and bright here, but I have had no inclination to go and free the bear. The sunshine cannot lure me while you are away." . . .

Lenny's throat tickled, his eyes smarted, his ribs seemed to bulge outward from the internal pressure. Those two sentences wiped away the rancorous aftertaste of pain. They were an irresistible enticement to magnanimous oblivion of past cruelty. Falling on the paper from that shaky hand, they had gathered a tremendous force. And more was to follow.

. . . . "It breaks my heart to feel that there is estrangement between us. If you wished to punish me for a few hasty words, my punishment has been very severe. Truly I think that anything should be forgiven to a man in my state.

"But you would not forgive; and now you don't even leave me my pride, for I am compelled to implore you to forgive me and come home. I promise that I will never offend you again. The lesson has been learnt. Henceforth fear as well as love will restrain me." And consciously or inadvertently the writer repeated one of his phrases. "My sunshine is gone when you are away."

Lenny sang as he dressed himself. A vast burden had

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been lifted; he felt light as air. All trace of resentment had gone; all his hard thoughts had melted and were flowing in a stream of tender sentiment. Had he wished to do so, he could now scarcely have recalled the stout decisions and boldly-sketched plans that he carried with him on his journey to London.

When he closed his eyes while washing, the long-cherished mental pictures reconstituted themselves, flashed and glowed, grew vivid and constant in slightly altered shapes—the weak old man who leaned upon his strength, who laid down pride to plead for love, who stretched out praying hands to implore pardon and peace.

He felt healthier and heartier than in any moment since Friday afternoon. A prodigious appetite spurred him as he attacked his breakfast in the front room, while the landlord began to pack his things in the back room.

He was reading the newspaper and he looked round with a start when Alma, unannounced, suddenly appeared.

“The door downstairs was open, and there was nobody about, so I came straight up.”

She spoke joyously, and her eyes were glowingly bright as they beamed at him through a new veil. She was charmingly dressed in brown, with pheasants' feathers shining on a small brown hat, and brown fur dangling round her throat. A quick walk had brought the pretty pink tints to her face, and her lips seemed warm and red; altogether she seemed to have recovered the youthfulness that he had missed last night. She seemed to him very much younger—exactly like the Alma Reed who hurried along the sea-walk to meet him on bright mornings five years ago.

“Heaven and the clerk of the weather have been kind to us. It is a glorious day. It shall be Windsor, Lenny.” She was raising her veil. “Lenny, aren't you even going to kiss me?”

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"Of course I am."

"Lenny, what is it?" She had drawn back, and she looked at him inquiringly. "You have something on your mind. What is it?"

"Well, the fact is, there's something I want to tell you. . . . Let's come over here."

They sat side by side, close together, on one of the cushioned window-seats, and he told her of "disquieting news" that he had received from Westchurch—his father not getting on well, requiring attention, worrying himself dangerously.

"But he was all right when you left him. You said yourself he was unusually vigorous. He can't have taken a bad turn so quickly. Has Dr. Searle written to you?"

"No, he wrote himself."

"Then don't be alarmed. If he were really ill, Dr. Searle would have written."

"Yes, that's true. Oh, no, I don't think he is actually ill yet; but he is worrying himself—*making* himself ill. He needs me there—and, Alma, he begs me to get back to him."

"When?"

"Oh, *he* doesn't name any time; but I feel myself that it's my duty—that I ought to go at once—to-day."

"No," she said firmly. "You can't go. It is *my* day. You have given it to me."

"Alma!"

He looked at her reproachfully, and he noticed the swift change of her aspect. In place of the colour and animation, there was a stone-like, obdurate pallor; and as she went on speaking, her voice sounded harshly, unnaturally, with a quite unrecognizable tone.

"You have duties to me as well as to him. Is he everything, and I nothing? . . . Your word of honour—

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doesn't that count either? You said as certain as night succeeds to day. How long is my night to be?"

There was something rigid and ungraceful about the attitude of her body—the bosom retracted and seeming flat, the elbows drawn back awkwardly and pressed in to the sides; and when she changed the attitude, she did it with a spasmodic jerk, turning round abruptly to the window sashes and staring stonily downward at the narrow little street.

"Alma."

She did not answer; she did not move again for a considerable time. During this long pause he watched her thoughtfully. In the full light of the window she looked old, almost haggard; a bluish tint that habitually surrounded her eyes had widened and deepened; her lips seemed bloodless, and disfigured by a persistent contraction at the corners.

"Very well." She had risen abruptly and walked across to the fireplace, and she spoke without looking at him. "I yield to the inevitable. I am not a child. I mustn't cry and pout—and make myself a nuisance because I'm deprived of a holiday. . . . Oh!" She swung round and pointed at the bedroom door. "There's somebody in there."

"It's only Steel—my landlord."

She was startled, and a little colour showed on her cheeks, while she whispered breathlessly.

"Has he been listening?"

"Oh, no."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, he's busy—he won't hear what we're saying."

Lenny had not stirred from the window-ledge, and presently she came back to him, knelt between his legs, and put her gloved hands on his breast.

"Lenny, my darling, I won't be a selfish little beast. Of

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course you must go. Yes, I tell you to go. But promise me that this sort of thing isn't to continue for ever."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean this—you are obeying claims that you consider paramount. They override all other claims. But some time they will cease—in the natural course of events they must cease sooner or later."

He winced and shivered; but she went on without regarding his silent protest.

"Swear to me that the time is coming when I shall be with you always—that *my* time shall begin directly you are set free."

"Alma, don't speak so callously of—of father's death. I simply can't bear it."

"Very well. Then I'll put it like this. Do you swear that if you were free *now*, you would place me first in your life?"

Her voice vibrated with intense feeling; in her whole manner there was resolved purpose.

"My dear Alma." He was gently patting her hands as they pressed and trembled against his waistcoat, and he answered slowly, hesitatingly. "You ought to know that nothing but necessity would take me away from you to-day."

"Yes, but it's not to-day. I'm not thinking of to-day any more. I'm thinking of the thousands of days that lie before us."

"And happy days, Alma." His hesitation increased, and he spoke very slowly. "But one's future is, necessarily, a closed book. Nothing is ever gained by attempting to turn its leaves; and—it may be cowardly—but I always have a superstitious horror of——"

"No." The word came like a cry of pain, and as she went on speaking her intensity had an almost tragic note. "That's all right for you, but not for me. One thing in

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the future is certain—a page we *know* is there, so we needn't open the book to look at it. Even if I hurt you, I must say again what I mean. One day—ages ahead, perhaps—you will have the power to make our companionship permanent, unbreakable.”

“Alma—my pretty Alma—don't get so excited. Can you doubt that I wish for the companionship? Haven't I shown it—unceasingly?”

“Yes, I don't doubt you. But I must understand—I must know from your own lips again and again, if I ask you. I am building—I have built my life on your promises. I must feel solid ground under me.”

Then he pacified her by a renewal of all such promises and vows as she seemed to be craving from him; and in a moment the tragic mask was dropped and she again smiled.

“Now, I'm quite happy. And you can leave me with a light heart. Go home happily, and come back to your troublesome Alma as soon as you possibly can.”

He stooped and kissed her forehead. “My unselfish little girl. It is sweet of you to let me go—to forgive me for breaking a promise.”

“I should be a wretch if I tried to detain you. And what kind of treat would it be for me, if I knew that my darling's thoughts and inclinations were miles and miles away?”

“Yes, but I do wish you could have a little treat all the same. Would Frances be available? Now that you have taken the day off, it seems such a pity to waste it.”

“Never mind about me. I shall amuse myself all right.”

Mr. Steel the landlord tapped at the bedroom door, and after a discreet pause opened it.

“I've strapped up everything, sir, except the dressing-

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case. I've left that unstrapped for anything you might have forgotten."

"Oh, thank you. Much obliged."

Alma had moved to the other window and was looking down into the street. She waited until she heard the bedroom door closed, and when she turned to Lenny she was smiling rather piteously.

"Then it was all settled, Lenny, before I came. You had quite made up your mind to go. Mr. Steel was packing while we were debating."

"Yes—because I knew that as soon as my generous unselfish girl understood the situation, she would herself tell me to go. And you did tell me. You never fail me—so I relied on you."

She moved quickly to him, and once more embraced him.

"Rely on me always, Lenny—rely on every little bit of me, just as surely as you rely on yourself. I am all of me yours—all that there is of me—in this world or the next."

She saw him off at the railway station, and stood near the steps of the dining-car till it crept away. His last glimpse of her was very pleasant. She stood quite still, smiling, not waving her hand in the style of common folk; she had the self-possessed graciously sedate air of charming well-bred people; and she looked pretty as well as graceful in her neat brown frock and brown fur—altogether a life-companion of whom no one on earth need feel ashamed.

It was an express train, due to reach Westchurch at 2.50; the luncheon served in the car at 12.45 was excellent; and by 3.30 Lenny walked along the concrete path beside the wheels of his father's chair.

"Not tired, dad? Feel up to your full journey?" He

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talked buoyantly and continuously. The reconciliation was absolutely complete. "Then we'll free the bear together."

"Yes, yes, Lenny, my bear shall be free—now that I have you to help me."

XII

JOURNEYS to London were out of the question for a long time now. The winter passed away in an atmosphere of steam-kettles, poultices, and embrocations: the state of Mr. Calcraft's health had undergone a perceptible change for the worse, and there was great anxiety. Dr. Searle said, "We can only wait and see what the summer does for him."

The summer did nothing for him. And another winter opened badly—grievous complications, heart, lungs, and stomach all co-operating in mischief, the miracle of how the patient was kept alive becoming every day more miraculous. His career had dwindled to its narrowest bounds; for weeks he remained in his bed, for months he never came out of his room.

Everything must be readily forgiven to such a sufferer. However outrageous the things he said, they could arouse no resentment now; querulousness, unjust insinuations, blind rages, and violent abuse, merely moved his nurse and his servants to a deeper pity.

So far as Lenny was concerned, there had been nothing to forgive. Whoever got the rough side of the master's tongue, it was not Lenny. Mr. Calcraft had kept that solemn promise never to offend again. With Lenny, throughout this slow-creeping time, he had been soft and gentle always. That is, except once, when for a few moments—a very few moments—he relapsed into rudeness.

It was on one of his best days, and he had suddenly begun to talk of the future.

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"Lenny, I think it right to tell you that I am doing something more for your two sisters than I had intended."

"What is that, father? Do you mean to have them here?"

"No, no, God forbid. I'm too old, I'm too ill, it's too late for family reunions. Jane was always a nuisance. And I can never really forgive Sarah for her first marriage; although I believe this other fellow—Holway—her second shot—is a good deal better than the first. Quite a decent chap, as far as I can make out."

"Then what is it, father?"

"I am talking of what is to happen after my death—my will."

Lenny shuddered at the ugly sound of these words, and protested that he did not want to hear anything about testamentary arrangements.

"No, but it's right you should know. Your sisters have each had a solid lump of money. It was my money in the beginning, you know—settled by me when I married your mother. I may add that it was a silly settlement—settlements generally are. Much better keep your money in your own hands—but that's beside the mark. Of course you will have your settled lump when I die. Your sisters took their lumps on marriage—and that's what made them so infernally uppish with me. However, I won't go back to that. They pooh-poohed me and marched off with what they could get. Well, I meant that to be all they ever would get; and I meant to give you the rest, whatever it may come to. It seemed fair to me. You have done so much more for me—so infinitely more for me than they." He looked at Lenny, blinked, and raised a frail hand to shade his eyes. "But then, when I thought it over very carefully, it didn't seem fair—or fair, but not generous. You see, you are still the gay bachelor; the probabilities

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are that you will never marry. You will have sufficient anyhow. But as to those two fools—well, there are children growing up, and so on, and so forth. So I decided that all three of you should share alike.” He dropped his hand, and looked hard at Lenny.

“Father, I really cannot bear to think of what I hope is not going to happen for a very long time.”

“Don’t be an ass,” said Mr. Calcraft irritably and rudely, committing his one and only relapse. “Your thinking about it won’t make it happen any the sooner; and there is always a suspicion of humbug when one gets a sentiment in answer to a business question. Do you object? Do you think I am treating you shabbily?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” protested Lenny.

“Thank you, Lenny,” said his father in a soft and apologetic tone. “You see, I have trusted you in this matter. It is what I wish, and I felt pretty sure—I felt altogether sure—that you would respect my wish, whatever it might be.”

Sometimes there was a remission of the more distressing symptoms, a respite or stationary period, when Mr. Calcraft showed what might be mistaken for definite improvement; but Dr. Searle’s expert eye saw very plainly that the slow down-hill progress was quite unchecked.

It seemed to Lenny that gradually a shadow had descended on the house, making a perpetual twilight, even if the sun was shining its brightest or the electric lamps blazing most profusely. The shadow was in his mind also, filling every unexplored recess of it; his thoughts never flashed or glowed, but worked feebly, gropingly, under the greyness and darkness of a prevailing dread.

Little by little he had dropped his customary habits. He went no more to the club of an evening. As if sym-

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pathetically, his own existence had contracted to the same limitations as those of the cherished invalid, so that the house held him a prisoner too. Outside of it nothing contained any real interest for him.

"Come, come," said Dr. Searle, "this won't do at all. You must rouse yourself and take exercise, whether you like it or not. Think where we should be if you were to break down."

"Yes," said Lenny, in a forlorn voice, "I don't want to break down."

Obedying the doctor, he used to go for lonely walks along the concrete path by the sea; feeling at times like a ghost who takes an automatic promenade through the scenes of a half-forgotten life, and wishing that like a ghost he could frighten people and make them run away from him. He had no such repelling power. People stopped him, to press his hand, utter kind inquiries, and add consolatory phrases which increased the weight that already lay upon his heart.

Friends bored him, and strangers could not interest him. Ordinarily he would have been curious to learn about the well-dressed nice-looking woman who regularly promenaded with her maid on fine afternoons.

Once or twice in passing she glanced at him, and the transient glance seemed to express faint surprise or interrogation. It was as if she had unexpectedly seen a new feature in the landscape, something finer or larger than she had been prepared for by previous investigation of the neighbourhood.

Her eyes did not linger. Nevertheless, that notion of a mute inquiry conveyed by a pretty woman's glance would ordinarily have been sufficient to awake in him a faint pleasure, interest, or hope. There would have been some sort of reaction to the stimulus. Now there was nothing.

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He knew that she was staying at the Esplanade Hotel; for he had seen her in the garden. One morning, as he stood at his dressing-room window, she walked up and down a path with a book in her hands. Then the maid came out, carrying shawls, and established her mistress upon one of the sheltered seats, wrapped the shawls round her, and left her reading the book. Lenny watched her dully. The sky was blue above the glistening green of the ilex trees; the garden seemed full of sunlight; he thought vaguely that this must be like a winter day in Italy; and yet, for him, there hung a shadowy veil over the whole view, so that there was no real colour or life in anything he looked at. Presently the garden seat was empty. While he had been thinking about the Mediterranean, the strange lady must have gone indoors.

She proved to be a Mrs. Fletcher. One afternoon on the sea-front he encountered her walking with Miss Workman, who stopped him and immediately made the introduction. Then they all three walked on together to the garden entrance of the hotel, and there stood talking for a few minutes.

She was a woman of any age between twenty-three and twenty-seven—plump and round in outline, not tall, but yet not what one would describe as short. Lenny noticed that her figure, though so fully developed for her size, was exceedingly well-proportioned. Examining her more closely while she spoke to Miss Workman, he saw that she was fair-haired and blue-eyed, with a delicate transparent complexion in which the rose tints flushed and faded rapidly.

“Good-bye,” she said, smiling at him and offering her hand. “Please take pity on me, and come in to tea any day you feel you ought to do a charitable action.”

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Directly she had gone, enthusiastic Miss Workman began to praise her.

"Isn't she delightful? So charming—so fascinating? Do go and see her. She was particularly anxious to meet you, and *I* was most anxious to bring you together. She is accustomed to the great world, and naturally can have nothing in common with most of the people here—and it is so sad to be thrown entirely on oneself, as she is."

"Isn't her husband with her?"

"Her husband is dead. She has been a widow for over two years."

It seemed churlish totally to disregard the appeal of a disconsolate stranger; and so Lenny, after waiting for an afternoon when Mr. Calcraft was drowsy and inert, performed a charitable action by drinking tea with Mrs. Fletcher.

The waiter, an old friend, conducted him to her private sitting-room, where he found her all by herself, playing patience to beguile the dull hours; and she welcomed him with obvious pleasure.

"Oh, Mr. Calcraft—how really nice of you!"

At first they stood in the large bow window, and talked about the agreeable outlook and the fine sunset.

"We rather pride ourselves on our sunsets," said Lenny. "They are quite a specialty."

Already dusk was falling. A silver greyness enveloped the islands, and the western hills rose out of a shadow that stretched right across the land-locked waters of the estuary; but their undulating ridge was still clean-cut, hard of outline, like a piece of painted scenery.

"Beginning to fade," said Mrs. Fletcher, "in the light that she loved, on a bank of daffodil sky. But that would have to be a red daffodil—and there aren't any. . . . Oh, yes, it is all very pretty, but——"

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Then she explained that, tired of Egypt and the Riviera, she was trying to spend a winter in England, and beginning to think that she must give it up as a bad job and bolt.

"These English watering-places are too *triste*. How do you contrive to exist here, Mr. Calcraft? . . . I'm told you are the uncrowned king of Westchurch—and that you reside among your loyal subjects throughout the year. I suppose you have amusements and amenities that are not accessible to casual visitors—of the inferior sex."

Certainly she was elegant as well as good-looking. Standing by her in the window, he became conscious of considerable personal charm. She had a quick intense way of talking, and an eager way of listening with arched eyebrows and parted lips—conveying an idea that the rapidity of her thought was outrunning your words, and that you must speak faster if you wished to keep up with her.

"How stupid they are not to bring the tea! You do take tea, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm like Mrs. Gamp—or Dr. Johnson—very fond of tea."

"Dr. Johnson wouldn't have cared for many cups of Esplanade Hotel tea.—You shall have our own brew. I sent my maid out to buy some real tea, after one dose of the stuff supplied by the management."

"I'm afraid," said Lenny, with polite solicitude, "that they are not making you very comfortable."

She gave a little sigh, and shrugged her plump shoulders. "They mean well," and she smiled. "I always think that is the most damaging thing one can ever say by way of criticism. When you hear that people mean well, doesn't it immediately open wide vistas of incompetence and failure?"

The waiter brought the tea-things, and her own maid came in and prepared the tea.

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Evidently, thought Lenny, she was very well-off. The maid seemed a most superior young woman, discreetly splendid in attire, with quite the style and manner of a lady. As he knew, this first-floor suite of rooms was the "Esplanade's" very best and most expensive. And all about the room he could see lesser indications of affluence. The patience-table was one of those costly toys that fold into a small compass, and cost a prodigious amount for doing so; and he noticed a large cut-glass bowl full of Parma violets, a writing-desk of purple morocco with gold fittings, a small Sèvres clock that unquestionably did not belong to Mr. Nield the proprietor. Then there were innumerable photograph frames, bright-coloured pieces of embroidery, and a silver cigarette box—all the things that rich women laboriously carry about with them, endeavouring always to reproduce their old environment in new places.

She insisted that he should occupy what she said was the only easy chair in the whole hotel, and, while waiting on him very prettily at tea, she again thanked him for his visit.

And all at once, as he sat sipping and munching, he was very glad that he had made the effort to come here. Her atmosphere was pleasant to him; the fact that she now did most of the talking saved him from trouble; the altered aspect of the room since she had decorated it was delightful. The whole thing was very soothing and restful.

When tea was over, she opened the silver box, gave him a cigarette, and lighted one herself.

"I know," she said, slowly, after puffing out a little cloud of smoke, "that you have anxieties—great anxieties; and if I don't speak of them, it isn't that I'm unsympathetic."

She did not look at him as she said this, and he felt grateful to her for her delicacy and reticence.

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"You understand, don't you? Expressions of sympathy from strangers are bothering, if they aren't impertinent." Then she passed lightly to easier ground. "What an old dear Miss Workman is, isn't she?—and very fond of you, Mr. Calcraft. But, of course, you have been very good to her."

"Good to her? I've never done anything for Miss Workman in her life."

"You've always been kind to her, and in some lives kindness is everything,"

Each minute the room was growing darker. The plate-glass windows had become faint squares of dull silver, and all the space of the large bow was vague and shadowy; but the fire burned cheerily, and made of the hearth a sort of cosy corner with shadow walls on either side.

"Do you mind the twilight?" she asked, as if guessing at his thought.

"Oh, no."

"I love it. I hate everything sham, including artificial light."

She had settled down in the chair opposite to him on the other side of the hearth, and there was a pleasant silence during which their acquaintanceship seemed to be ripening so swiftly that it would soon develop into friendship.

When she spoke again, it was meditatively, and as if to a person with whom one might let one's thoughts fall just as they presented themselves, without waiting to arrange them in logical sequence. And he answered her in the same tranquil unlaboured style.

Thus they smoked their cigarettes and chatted for a little while, and then she swung the talk into very wide fields indeed—immortality, the riddle of the universe, ethics and morals.

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"The new religions are as stupid as the old. . . . I suppose you have done with all that ages ago—religion?"

"I'm afraid I have," said Lenny.

"But do you believe in anything? Mr. Calcraft, is there anything to believe in?"

Lenny got up from the easy chair, stood with his elbow on the chimney-piece, and talked—and was astounded to hear how well he talked. Psychology, metaphysics, philosophic doubt and scientific conjecture—it all came glibly rolling off his tongue, and seemed as if, should that be necessary, it could go rolling on at the same high level of excellence for ever.

". . . . So I adopt the waiting frame of mind. I draw no conclusions. I say, The evidence is inadequate. You men of science, you theologians, you dreamers of dreams, have laid before me no proofs. So I say I will wait for the proofs. You may be—you may—er——"

Unexpectedly he hesitated and began to flounder. He had noticed her patent leather shoe on the fender, with the firelight shining against it. While listening to him, apparently with rapt attention, she had drawn away her skirts in order to warm her feet, and had exposed the stockings and ankles. Somehow the slight action, together with the faint rustle of her silk petticoat, caused him to lose the thread of his eloquent discourse.

"Yes—er—as I was saying," he went on lamely, "they may be all right, or they may be all wrong."

"I'm sure your attitude is the correct one."

Then, without perceptible transition, they were discussing the relations of the sexes.

"It has always seemed to me," said Mrs. Fletcher, "that everything is made so absurdly difficult in our modern civilization. Instincts are hidden, pretences are exhibited; we suppress all that is natural, we cultivate all that is

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spurious; we fetter ourselves with such a preposterous load of conventions that what should be the simplest matter on earth has become the most supremely complicated problem of our existence. If two people—sane adults—of opposite sexes happen to please each other, it is—or it should be—a question that solely concerns themselves. Yet they are not allowed to settle it, to find the normal answer or solution, but all the world wants to meddle in it. . . . Am I shocking you?"

"Indeed, no."

She was surprisingly outspoken, but with so much boldness of thought she permitted herself no license as to words. There was neither indelicacy nor innuendo. He seemed to recognize the emancipation of intellect—a mind that would not be held in chains. And for him there was great charm in the noble freedom of talk with this brilliantly clever woman,—in the twilight,—in the darkening room.

"Of course," she continued, "I don't believe in free love. That's all nonsense. And I don't believe in the marriage lease—five years' term, and thence onward year by year, subject to a quarter's notice from either party. No, that's nonsense. The children—and a hundred other reasons! . . . But I do say there's something hopelessly wrong in our modern system. Half of these loveless marriages ought to be *avoided*. And—and the marriages that fall to pieces, the—the marriages that fail—the—the marriages that aren't marriages at all—ought to be *prevented*."

Suddenly he had detected emotion behind the even quality of her voice—strong, unmistakable emotion.

"Mr. Calcraft, this is only the second time I've ever spoken to you, and now I'm really going to shock you. . . . *My* marriage was a hideous failure. I never loved my husband."

The fire had burnt low and the whole room was nearly

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dark; and it seemed that the little waves of sound sent by her voice through the darkness changed themselves to pulsations as they reached the listener.

"Tell me how it all happened."

"It is too like the first chapter of a penny novelette. I was a nice clean girl—a jolly girl, everybody said,—without a nasty thought,—or a thought to trouble her. Plenty of money. I mean, more than enough of my own to rub along all right by myself. . . . They married me to a rich man. And it was torment, torture, from the very first day. How shall I say it—not in novelese? He could not be the husband that a young girl should expect. His life was over; mine was beginning. His notion of a wife. . . . He ought not to have married at all. . . . Well——"

She paused; and Lenny saw dimly that she had turned in her chair and picked up something from a side table. Then she made movements with both hands. Memory assisted him to guess that she had taken some of those violets out of the big bowl, and was smelling them or rolling them between her palms.

"Well, it just meant that my heart was crushed, and torn to pieces, like this."

Lenny, bending towards her, spoke very gently and soothingly.

"Poor little girl."

Mrs. Fletcher spoke coldly and abruptly.

"Turn on the light, please. . . . You'll find the switch close to the door."

Lenny obeyed her, and the electric light blazing forth swept all the shadows out of the room.

"I don't want you to suppose there's anything to be ashamed of, Mr. Calcraft."

As he came back to the hearth-rug, he was blinking fool-

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ishly. But he thought that, on the whole, it was rather fine of her. She wished him to see the look in her eyes; she would show him her face with the full light upon it; he must not imagine that this was a confidence of the dark.

"No," she said firmly, "it was a stiff course; but I ran straight. I kept my bargain—all that the Church tells one—to the letter."

She held her head high, and he fancied that the look in her eyes now suggested quite the finest sort of pride.

"But to generalize"—and she spoke lightly again. "Why aren't these things prevented in our class. They don't happen in the humbler walks of life. Poor girls aren't kept in ignorance. They know all about the pitfalls—their mothers tell them. However they act, they don't act blindfold. But with us—among people who pretend to be educated, cultivated, intelligent—there's a horrible conspiracy of silence with regard to all that's essential for a girl to know, to understand thoroughly, before she runs the tremendous risks of matrimony. And I mean, in regard to the love matches, almost as much as to the marriages of convenience. Our girls are as ignorant of what they are trying to obtain as of what they are renouncing. Not one in a thousand is capable of making a rational choice."

"No, I agree with you there completely."

"If ever I marry again—and I don't think I ever shall—I shall choose rationally. I shan't shilly-shally—or miss the chance of happiness because of any ridiculous conventions. I shan't even wait for leap year. . . . I shall boldly propose to the man, if I think I have found him. I shall say, 'I like you, and you seem to like me. I have so much per annum, and I understand you have so much. Now can't we make a couple for whom there ought to be a fair prospect?' And if the man said No, I shouldn't bear any

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malice. And if he said Yes, and I discovered that I'd made a mistake, well, I should only have myself to thank for it. I shouldn't feel the added pain of thinking every minute of the day that those who ought to have protected me had betrayed me." She picked up another little cluster of the violets, inhaled their perfume, and laughed softly. "Mr. Calcraft, how do my advanced views strike you?"

"They strike me as enormously interesting. Please go on."

But just then there came a dull reverberation as of distant thunder. It was the hotel gong warning inmates to dress for dinner.

Lenny looked at the Sèvres clock. Good gracious! He had been here two hours. He hurriedly prepared to take leave.

"Good-night, Mr. Calcraft. It was kind of you to come. You'll come again, won't you?"

She had risen to shake hands. She was looking at him very frankly, and her blue eyes seemed to be searching for some mute answer to a doubt, or instinctive confirmation of a wish. It was the inquiry that he had seen before, but now greatly intensified.

"I shall love to come again. But really I must apologize for paying you such a lengthy visitation."

"Oh, don't!" And she laughed and shivered. "Visitation! It is cruelty to words to use that one—it is so tired; it has been worked to death."

"Yes, I ought to have thought of something more original;" and, as he took her hand in his, he also was laughing.

She looked at him more intently still, anxiously.

"Well, it is of importance in these circumstances—because, with a new acquaintance, a commonplace phrase *frightens* one. You *are* a little different from other people,

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aren't you? . . . You know, I shouldn't have talked to everybody as I talked to you."

"You have honoured me—and I feel the honour."

She had allowed her hand to rest in his, and, while speaking now, he exerted the faintest possible pressure or retaining force. She did not withdraw the hand; but instantaneously it seemed to become very limp and very small, so that it slid away and he let it go.

"You came to me, Mr. Calcraft, wearing a mantle that I admired more than I can say.—I mean, I had been listening to the praises of your friends. Miss Workman had given such testimonials—such absolute guarantees that you were one of the elect. . . . Good-night."

He went away carrying something of her atmosphere with him—an intermittent pulsation, a vaguely disturbing note of interrogation, a faint perfume of those Parma violets, seemed to linger with some persistence. There was a certain charm about her; but it occurred to him that in spite of the healthy plumpness, the delicate cleanness of complexion, and the firm tone of voice, she belonged to the neurotic type of women. And he reflected, moreover, that a considerable egoism was indicated by such a lot of talk about herself.

He did not see her again at the hotel. She gave a tea-party, but he was not able to attend it. Then some necessity or inclination obliged her to leave Westchurch. Miss Workman told him of the imminent departure.

"You'll go to the station and see her off, won't you? She'll be touched by it."

"I will, if I am able."

And he was able. He went to the station, and brought a pretty bouquet of flowers for her.

"Oh, thank you," said Mrs. Fletcher.

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He had presented his bouquet at the door of the carriage, where she stood surrounded by her Westchurch friends. The little group broke up—Miss Workman and the others drawing away to let him speak freely to her.

“Thank you,” she repeated. She had given the bouquet to her maid, and again she was looking at him with that searching question in her blue eyes. “But are you *really* of the elect, or are you after all a little like other people? Look!” And she pointed to bunches or bouquets of flowers on the seat of the carriage. “From the hotel proprietor! From the clergyman! From the doctor!”

She wore an astrachan jacket, and an astrachan toque that made her fair hair seem fairer—golden against the black; and in one of her breast buttonholes there was a small bunch of Parma violets—flowers that she had bought for herself. She asked Lenny to visit her when he next came to London, and he scribbled the address on a leaf of his pocket-book.

“That’s very businesslike! Only it robs you of an excuse. I should be glad to see you again—but will you really come?”

“Yes, I shall be charmed to do so.”

“Is that a promise, or another stereotyped phrase?”

“It is a promise that I make to myself, not to you.”

“Oh, that’s much prettier;” and she laughed.

But he did not intend to keep the promise.

XIII

IT was in the spring of another year, and old Calcraft's tongue, the rough side and the soft side of it, was passive for ever.

Lenny would not believe it, when they came down to the library and told him that all was over. He rushed upstairs to his father's room; but one glance at the inanimate face was sufficient. Dr. Searle drew him out of the room, supported him downstairs, and re-established him in the library. His limbs were shaking, his lips twitched, his teeth chattered—it was as if he had been exposed to insupportably cold air, as if an arctic breath had issued from that frigid mask and frozen him.

He sank into an armchair, and sat huddled, crouching, gasping, with hands that dangled loosely between his knees.

"There," said Dr. Searle, "take it as easy as you can. I will attend to everything. I mean, don't give a thought to the necessary arrangements. . . . That's right, Mary. Down with them."

Already the servants were pulling down blinds in all the rooms.

It was a bright April morning; the whole sea-front gay and vivid in the sunshine. All could see the signal of woe. As the blinds came down, it was as if the house had closed its eyes and become stiff and blank beside the live houses.

It seemed to him that the shadow had deepened to a blackness as of night. He felt dazed, crushed, broken,

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beneath the shock of his calamity; but now and then he was shaken by reflex unthinking spasms of grief. And these exhausted him so completely that he began to doze towards the end of the long silent day. Servants had brought him food from time to time, and he had eaten; but he had not smoked, or even noticed that he was not smoking. Then servants came to ask if he wanted anything more, and he said "No." Then they asked if they might go to bed, and he said "Yes."

The knowledge that he was quite alone now, that all the life of the house had ceased, seemed to rouse him, and to wake him. And now for the first time memories came pouring into his mind. The memory of sounds especially distressed him, and more than all others, the sounds that his father used to make—the cough, the shuffling footstep, the voice itself when the bedroom door was opened by the nurse. Habit had made his ear quick to catch such sounds, however faint. He moved his chair nearer to the fire, and looked round the empty room. It was here in this library that he had sat on so many nights of late, not reading, not even smoking, just waiting. At any moment he might be wanted—to stand by the bedside during a prolonged attack of the devastating cough, to telephone to the chemist for another oxygen cylinder, to dash off in a cab and bring Dr. Searle.

And now there could be no sound to disturb him; there would be nothing but this appalling, freezing silence.

He turned his head, and for a little while watched the bookcases and wall behind which the staircase led upwards to the landing and the closed door. What if the dead man should appear to him? The idea came as a hope rather than a fear. He moved his lips and whispered "Father"—and he repeated the word. In imagination he could hear the slow tread on the stairs; could see his

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father enter the room, and slowly shuffle towards him, looking exactly as he had looked during these last months. But then a cold wave of horror broke the image. What if his father should appear to him as he was now—with the terrible expressionless mask, the shut eyes, and the sunken mouth?

He made up the fire, and presently it blazed and roared, while he sat shivering before it. He could not go upstairs to his own room. He could not face the closed door, and that central zone of silence.

The housemaid coming to do the library next morning was startled to find the fire alight, and more startled still to see Mr. Leonard asleep on the sofa. He had fetched rugs from the hall, and spent the night there.

In these sad days between the death and the funeral, all things seemed vague and dreamlike to Lenny. Very little thought was possible; but there were intervals of true feeling and understanding. The extent of his grief submerged him. It burst upon him with hysterical storms, and flowed high above his head. Then it seemed that he came, or was dragged, to the surface; and for a little while he was able to think in some sort of reasoning fashion, instead of emptily brooding, after the manner of a sorrowing dog who has lost his master. And the intervals of thought grew longer, and the thought became clearer. Each time that one of them occurred, the sense of reality was restored to him in greater completeness. But he could exercise no control over the thoughts themselves; they came and they went. One moment he would be thinking of his father, and the next moment he thought of what was going on outside the darkened house. Then he would cross the room without intending to do so, and peep from behind the blinds. Once he stood for a considerable time, cautiously

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looking out at the sunlight and the movement. Westchurch was excited to-day. A cruiser was lying at anchor—little boats were going to and fro. An unusual number of people had gathered on the parade. It was almost like Regatta day.

Then again, in a moment, he was torn by a swift comprehensive survey of his loss. Never again would his father see the bright and gaily thronged parade; never share in the sunshine; never feel the air as he slowly rolled in the Bath-chair; never, oh never, free the bear. And the grief was intensely, torturingly real. He thought of all that he had done for his father, and it seemed to him so little, so miserably little. Yet the slight duties had seemed much when he performed them. Now for several moments he was filled with remorse that they had not been more.

And then inexplicably, illogically, without connecting link, came a vague idea of relief at the freedom from unceasing cares. With it there soon mingled a strange sense of importance, and some rapidly forming notions as to how he would use his freedom. The money would make him extraordinarily free—the whole world open to him. Perhaps this was conveyed in mental pictures rather than in definite thoughts. Scenes and places flashed into the sphere of consciousness, now dim, now vivid, vanishing and giving place to more pictures; no sequence; no arrangement beyond the underlying thread of logic that bound the whole picture gallery together—the possibilities of changing, moving, palpitating life, given to him by his father's death.

Dr. Searle was doing everything; nevertheless facts demanding personal attention sometimes forcibly dragged Lenny to the surface. There were letters that only he could answer. Painfully incongruous problems to which no one else held the key! Almost the first letter that Lenny

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found himself able to read was from a friend of his in London. Years ago this friend had put his name down for a London club; and he now wrote to say that the candidate would almost immediately come up for election, and that he ought to do a little canvassing. Lenny was compelled to reply to this.

"Your letter," he wrote, "has come when I am in deep trouble. My dear father passed away on Monday night."

Then he stopped to think. Perhaps it might be wrong to speak of his father to this man who never knew him. But he went on, the pen writing words as if without assistance, and he found unexpected comfort in the frank expression of his grief.

"He and I have been all in all to each other, living alone in this quiet little place since my mother's death thirteen years ago. You will understand that at such a time I can do nothing. My life is all shaken to pieces. In the future there is only one thing certain for me." The pen was writing easily and rapidly. "I shall travel for at least a year or two. There are many countries that I have long determined to visit. They all lie away from the beaten track, remote from civilization; where, as the saying is, the tourist goes with his life in his hand, and is at once reduced to the primitive conditions of hunting for and killing his evening meal. In other words, I have determined to go to Nature for the only consolation that is possible."

He was surprised, while he wrote, to discover that he had this definite intention, but he immediately recognized it as unquestionably there.

"I must take my chance at the club, and if elected, shall certainly accept the membership. With many thanks." . . .

Other facts that one could not escape from were the tailor who made black clothes, the undertaker who required

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to know the probable number of mourners, and the solicitor who came to talk business.

Lenny had never cared for the solicitor; but this Mr. Newall had long been his father's trusted adviser, and when he craved for an interview, it could not be refused. He was sandy, bearded, spectacled, with a rather dictatorial manner; but reputed clever, and known to be honest and good-hearted.

"Well, well," said Mr. Newall, in a friendly abrupt style. "Money matters, money matters—one can't get away from them, whatever one's inclination."

Then he gave Lenny a brief sketch of his late client's financial circumstances. He mentioned at once that Lenny was entitled to a capital sum sufficient to bring him £500 a year. "That, as of course you know, comes to you under a settlement. But I see you do know. Well, beyond that, the money that your father could dispose of as he pleased amounts roughly to £30,000. And, of course, the lease of this house, furniture, personal effects. There was, so far as I am aware, no life policy."

Lenny shuddered.

"No life policy as far as you are aware, either. Well," said Mr. Newall very kindly, "if you can pull yourself together, it will really be wise, and I think will do you good. What is it that the King in *Hamlet* says? 'Your father lost a father; and his father too before him lost another father.' That's not quite the quotation. I forget how it runs. . . . But to stick to business. You may rely on me for the correctness of the figures I have given you. The management of things has been in my hands, and I don't think your father ever acted without my advice, although he often disregarded it. He made good investments and bad investments, but you may take it from me that the market value—it's all personalty—

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stocks, shares, and so on—is somewhere very near £30,000—there or thereabouts.”

“I haven’t given a thought to it,” said Lenny.

“No, I dare say not. But I have just told you, and you can take that as the position of affairs. And now,” said Mr. Newall, firmly and impressively, “I would like to have a few words with you about your father’s will.”

“But isn’t that rather premature?”

“No, I don’t think so. You know all that rubbish about waiting till the funeral is over, and then reading the will in a semicircle of becraped relatives, with trays of sherry and seed cake handy at their elbows, belongs to the story books, and not to life. In this case there are good reasons for considering matters without unnecessary delay. I particularly wanted to have a quiet chat with you, to *sound* you—to get at your views before I am tackled by your sisters and your brothers-in-law. . . . Of course those two gentlemen will come here with their mouths very wide open, gaping to see what is going to drop into them. Well, nothing is going to drop in. They and your sisters are left completely in the cold. You take everything.”

Lenny said the solicitor was under a misapprehension. He knew that his father in his latest will further provided for the sisters. The solicitor must have got hold of a previous will.

“No, I haven’t,” said the solicitor curtly. “Your father *intended* to make such a will, but he never did. He was always putting it off, changing his mind about details. I suppose I have a hundred letters from him in the office, and at least a dozen drafts. But he always stopped short.”

“But,” said Lenny, “there was no question as to what he wished. He told me so himself.”

“My dear sir,—what a dead man wishes is not of much account in the live world.”

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Lenny drew himself up, and puffed out his cheeks. Then recovering his composure, he spoke with considerable dignity. "It is of account to me, Mr. Newall, and I shall consider it a solemn duty to give substance to the wish."

"You will?" said Mr. Newall, looking at him shrewdly. "Well, it's uncommonly good of you, if you do, and I, for one, shall think that you will be doing a thundering good thing. But I must, don't you know"—and in spite of the solemnity of the occasion, Mr. Newall smiled facetiously—"I must warn you that what you say now and during the next few days will be used against you. And a further warning I may give—from my own experience, generous intentions such as you have expressed are usually warmer, stronger, altogether bigger than they might be if people waited for a little reflection before they spoke."

But Lenny was solid as to his intentions. He would carry them out in due course. It should be share and share alike all round. The solicitor, who was nothing if not businesslike, suggested that this was too big a way of doing things. The ladies had received their lumps many years ago, and had enjoyed the annual interest therefrom ever since. Whereas Lenny himself would only get his lump now, with no interest. He thought that if Lenny calculated the amount of interest that had accrued in each case and deducted it from the third part, giving himself the benefit of these deductions, it would be doing handsomely—no—handsomely was not the word—he would be doing magnificently—more than one man in a million would do.

Lenny, however, was obdurately firm. What the solicitor considered extravagant generosity, appeared to him neither more nor less than a pious duty.

"Very good," said Mr. Newall. "I shall take your in-

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structions later on, and whatever you tell me to do, I'll do like a bird."

Then the interview was at an end, and Mr. Newall withdrew.

Lenny sighed wearily; but, curiously enough, what the solicitor prognosticated proved correct. This ordeal *had* done Lenny good. Somehow it had dispersed a little of the crushed sensations. It had filled him with a new notion of power. It had swung him out of vague reveries into the realm of prompt actions.

The two sisters and one of the husbands had arrived; and the other husband would be here directly. This meant that the funeral was very near. These people, together with an old bachelor cousin, had taken rooms at the Esplanade Hotel, but they came in and out at No. 1, The Crescent in an aimless and distressing manner. They made too much noise about the hall; they spoke too loudly in the dining-room; they were incongruous, worrying, unwelcome.

Lenny had a sudden difficulty in recalling the married names of Jane and Sarah. Then when he remembered that one was Mrs. Holway and the other Mrs. Kent, he was temporarily in doubt as to which was which. They both kissed him, and one held his hand and pressed it with a semblance of affection; but, in fact, they seemed to him not real sisters, but two fussy strangers—hard, self-engrossed, rather vulgar strangers. It was too long since he had last seen them. He could not pick up the thread of old kindness.

Their deterioration of intellect and their loss of good manners showed itself plainly in all that they said with regard to the suddenness of their bereavement.

"Of course," said Mrs. Holway—yes, that was Sarah—

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“we were prepared for it some time or other, but now, quite without warning—I think, Lenny, you might have found time to drop one warning note;” and she explained, or implied, that so far as she was concerned, her father’s death could not possibly have occurred at a more unseasonable and difficult epoch. It appeared that she was in delicate health, about to be a mother, and obliged to consider her condition carefully. This journey, according to her doctor and her husband, was really an act of imprudence. However, she had felt that she could not stay away.

Then, again, Mr. Holway was passing through a state of anxiety at his business house. As Lenny knew, he was a manufacturer of plated goods in rather a small way, and Sarah said that labour troubles which larger concerns could easily withstand were sometimes disastrous to lesser enterprises. Nevertheless, Holway would be here late to-night, or early to-morrow morning.

“So, you see, Lenny, no conjunction of affairs could well have been more unlucky. And, oh, the food at this hotel of yours! It really is shamefully bad. I don’t mind it so much for myself, although I ought, of course, to be getting the fullest nourishment just now; but I really am afraid of it for him. If he turns up this afternoon, couldn’t you arrange for him to dine here with you?”

Lenny said he feared that would be impossible.

“Why?” asked Sarah. “I should have thought that a little dinner here for you four men—of course you could not ask my husband without having Charles Kent and Mr. Burleigh also—would have been rather nice for you all. It would have cheered you all up a bit.”

Jane Kent, the other sister, had suffered a misfortune which in her mind, apparently, altogether overshadowed the greater but more natural bereavement. She had lost her principal trunk on the journey, and she talked of noth-

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ing else. The lost box contained, besides her blackest dresses, a hundred necessary and desirable objects. She sent her husband to the railway station six times during the day—sent him forth again every time that he reappeared.

“Go and telegraph to the traffic manager.”

“I have done so,” said Charles.

“Then telegraph to the station master at Woodford Junction.”

“I saw it,” she said, as soon as Charles had disappeared. “I saw it myself on the platform at Woodford.” And she closed her eyes for a moment. “I saw the three initials distinctly. I could not be mistaken.”

Then after a time Charles returned, and whispered dolefully.

“No news.”

“Charles,” said Mrs. Kent with great energy, “they *must* find it. You take it too coolly. Make a row about it. Show them that you will not put up with their nonsense. The thing is monstrous; they *must* find it. Tell them I saw it on the platform at Woodford,” and once more she shut her eyes. “All by itself. Stuck up on end—the three initials absolutely plain.”

It had come to be the day of the funeral. Bright and gay. Another perfect April morning; the last snow on the hills melting, the first flowers in the valley budding. And that new sense of importance was strong upon Lenny—dressed in his faultless black, ushered by the obsequious mutes—as he entered the first of the mourning coaches and slowly moved off behind the car with the masses of white wreaths hiding the coffin.

Mr. Holway, Sarah’s second husband, sat by him; but he was nobody, less than nobody. Lenny had chosen him for companion, thinking that his presence would be more

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sufferable than that of the box-hunting brother-in-law, Charles Kent—and it seemed almost too lordly and kinglike to ride in a coach quite by himself, though the mutes would have encouraged him to this pomp. And now, as the coach with occasional stoppings and jerkings rolled away from the sunlit steps, Lenny experienced a certain satisfaction in the companionship of Mr. Holway.

He was a short, heavily built man, of about fifty—grey-haired, reddish-faced, and square of head. He spoke in the Midland accent that Lenny remembered as peculiar to the farmers and yeomen of the country round his old home. The tradespeople of the towns had all dropped the accent, and learnt to clip their words after the cockney fashion. Altogether, Mr. Holway produced the conviction that one had to deal with a perfectly honest, upright, commonplace person, whose businesslike self-reliance was tempered by innate good nature. His hands were broad and rough and stubby, like the hands of a carpenter or mechanic; and Lenny, glancing at them, observed the preposterous discrepancy of size exhibited by the thin, neatly folded black kid gloves. Mr. Holway, as yet, had not attempted to put on the gloves, and Lenny hoped that he would not make the attempt.

There were crowds of people at the corner of the Crescent, and all along the sea-front till the small black procession turned towards the railway bridge. Cabmen on the rank took off their hats; boys with butchers' carts pulled back their ponies, and kept at a respectful distance; and a policeman peremptorily stopped a greengrocer's van, and would not allow it to pass. Eyes staring, and it must be confessed, voices talking much too freely. Lenny heard and did not wish to hear.

"Who is it?"

"Why, old Mr. Calcraft from No. 1."

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"What! I thought they had called for him more than a year ago." "Look at the flowers! Look at the flowers. Look at the flowers." "Why they've dressed up the old bloke like a Jack in the Green."

And some talk inside the coach. Mr. Holway asked his question with blunt honesty. "Is there anything coming our way? I suppose not. We neither of us expected it."

Then Lenny in carefully considered words explained that anything that does come will be through his generosity. His father had wished something to come, but had failed to secure his wish. However, Lenny means to carry out the wish as far as lies in his power. It will certainly be something for each of the sisters—something handsome—something as big as what is coming to himself.

Mr. Holway had taken off his black hat, and wiped his forehead. "Well, we shall be very much beholden to you." And he drew in his breath, and seemed to swallow. "I'm not the sort that asks favours of other people, and I've stood on my own legs so far, without any outside props; but you know your sister—well, she's your sister—a large family, and not got to the end of it yet, so it seems. She'll be grateful—no question about that—and I shall be grateful for her sake. But we ought not to be talking like this. I was forgetting the occasion. Your poor father—well, I never had the pleasure of knowing him."

They had got to the gate of the cemetery, and no more talk was audible inside or outside the coach.

The last rites had been performed; the mourners had come back to the house. The dining-room and hall seemed full of people.

Somebody suggested that the blinds might now be pulled up. But Lenny would not allow this.

Dr. Searle and Mr. Newall were eating cake and drink-

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ing wine. Mary, without instructions, guided by conventional impulses, had put out cake-dishes, decanters, and many wine-glasses. It was the terrible assembly of black-garbed relatives and friends that tradition has ordained for these occasions; it was like a well-set scene in a drama of typical middle-class life. Only one thing was wanting to complete the resemblance, and all at once Mrs. Holway asked for what was missing.

"I suppose now," she said, in a hard and rather hostile tone, "that somebody will have the kindness to read the will to us."

"No, no," said Lenny, shaking his head sadly.

But Mrs. Holway was not going to be put off with nods and negatives. If there was any mystery, she desired to get to the bottom of it. Coming close to her brother, she whispered excitedly:

"Does this mean that we are cut out? Yes. I suppose that's it.—Oh, I was quite prepared for it. That's it. You have feathered your nest, Lenny, and taken care that nobody else should be remembered."

Holway put his stubby hand on Sarah's arm and forcibly drew her away. Then he talked to her in a corner of the room, and caused an immediate change of voice and demeanour.

"Lenny, Lenny!" She had come hurrying back, and she kissed her brother with exuberant love. "Lenny! What a wretch I was to say such things. Lenny! How can I thank you? But I might have trusted you. You are my own brother. Blood is thicker than water. But I do say God bless you—and my children's blessings for this noble deed."

She kissed him again, and for the first time Lenny saw tears in her eyes.

"And you are doing it for Jane too! May I tell her?"

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May I relieve her mind by the knowledge of your goodness? Oh, may I tell her without delay?"

Lenny gave her permission to tell Jane, and in a moment Jane also was thanking him for his munificence.

"Oh, Lenny, Lenny! How can we ever thank you sufficiently?"

But just then Charles Kent rushed into the room. He had disappeared immediately after the ceremony at the grave-side, and now he came back hot, breathless, and unbecomingly noisy.

"Jane!" he called loudly, "it's come!"

"No?"

"Yes—it arrived directly after we left the hotel."

"Where is it now?"

"In the hall of the hotel."

"Did you see it yourself?"

"Yes, with my own eyes."

She hurried off with him, talking volubly.

"I must find out if it is intact. They may have rifled it. No receipt must be signed until we have ascertained if it is intact and uninjured."

She left the house without saying good-bye to anybody. Everything seemed to have been driven out of her mind by her excitement and pleasure at the recovery of the lost box.

Very soon the other mourners also went away, and Lenny was left alone with his household.

"Now shall I pull up the blinds, sir?" asked Mary.

"No," said Lenny, "wait till to-morrow morning."

XIV

THE blinds were up, the windows were open; air and sunlight poured into the house. The shadow had gone.

And the grief gone with it? No, assuredly not. But he was astounded by the ease of mind that he was enjoying. He sat at breakfast eating heartily, feeling calmly contented, thinking steadily of the various affairs that called for attention, and stoutly determining to polish off all this new work as rapidly as possible.

There was plenty to do, plenty to occupy his thoughts; and thus, during long hours, the grief could be forgotten. But he often wondered afterwards at the temporary disappearance of the sorrowful mood, and almost regretted as disloyalty the fact that he had let it slip away from him.

Truly it seemed as though the absence of the outward stimulus destroyed the inward emotion. It was the sight of his father, the sound of the weak voice, the touch of the shaky hand, that had kept the emotions active. After death, there was still the terrible presence lying mute behind the closed door—now there was nothing.

People were being excessively kind to him, and after a little while he found that he could see them without discomfort. They all advised him not to give way to grief, to rouse himself, to take his part in life. But no one said all this so forcibly as Dr. Searle.

“Now look here, Lenny,” said the doctor. “You ought to understand that a new chapter is beginning. All that old chapter is over and done with, and it’s no good looking

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back on it. Don't be offended with me, but it's my duty to speak out. The time has come for *you* to take care of yourself. You have been taking care of *someone* else for so long that you may not see the necessity. It is imperative that you should now spare yourself."

"I have a good deal to do still—and chiefly for others."

"Well, cut it short, and take it easy as soon as possible, or we shall have you breaking down, and breaking down badly. I know what the strain of all these years has been. Well, you have finished the job, and finished it nobly. Now give yourself a chance."

"I was never conscious of any strain."

"No. But *I* saw it plainly enough. Most people would have broken down under it. It is the sort of thing that drives weaklings into the madhouse. We doctors see too much of it. It ought not to be allowed—young, healthy people subordinating themselves, sacrificing themselves to permanent invalids. Invalids are always tyrants, and as they grow older they grow more merciless."

Lenny held up his hand, and protested against what seemed a cruel aspersion.

"Very good, Lenny; I will say no more. And you can take all I have said as reference to patent facts that come under my observation. You are a strong man, and you have been able to support what cripples and destroys many spinster daughters and hard-up nieces who are made to act as unpaid nurses year in and year out. I tell you, their bodily health goes, their mental health goes. I've seen it again and again. They wind up bloodless, nerveless, or idiotic."

The doctor had spoken very impressively, and Lenny for a little while sat looking at the library carpet. Then he raised his eyes, and made a quite unexpected confession.

"It's good of you, Searle, to take so much interest in

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me. Indeed, I know what a friend you are. Well, just now, when I said that I had never felt the strain—that was not quite correct. I did feel it off and on.”

“Of course you did.”

“Once I was a little anxious about myself. I was sleeping badly, and I had dull feelings in the head—not exactly headaches, but a sort of oppression.”

“Of course. Just so. Just what I should have guessed.”

“It didn’t amount to anything, but it did make me rather nervous, and I didn’t want to bother you—so, one time when I was up in London, I consulted a specialist.”

“What specialist?” asked Searle sharply. “Who?”

“A man called Ashford in Brook Street. Somebody told me that he was very clever.”

“Oh, yes, he’s clever enough. But not the only clever doctor in London, or in the country either.” Dr. Searle for a moment or two seemed huffed. “Well? What did the talented Ashford give you in exchange for your two guineas?”

“He said there was nothing much the matter with me, but I seemed a little run down.”

“Ha! Well, I hope you felt you’d got your money’s worth.” Then the slight huffiness passed off, and Dr. Searle resumed his friendly, familiar manner. “All right.”

“It was simply that I didn’t want to bother you.”

“But if you’d told me first, I could have sent Ashford the usual preliminary information. Specialists aren’t magicians, you know. They are not above taking any assistance that the family watch-dog can offer them.”

“I’ve always had supreme confidence in you, Searle. As I think you know.”

“Thank you, Lenny. Well, now, as I said, the past is all over; and what you have to do is to forget it. You

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ought to get away from here. You want change of air, change of scene. You want to make a new start."

Then Lenny told the doctor what he had already told the man who wrote to him about the club election. He intended to go away, and to stay away for at least a year. He had quite made up his mind to travel; to seek adventure.

"Yes. Excellent," said Dr. Searle. "A voyage round the world is the very thing indicated."

Lenny often recalled the gist of this conversation. Indeed, he could not forget the seriousness of Searle's air when describing the dangerous character of the experiences through which he had passed. And the more he thought of the doctor's words, the more he felt their truth. He had mercifully escaped from many dangers. His constitution had been severely tested. Perhaps, even now, he had not fully recovered from the effects of the long-maintained ordeal. To a certain extent, some of Searle's portentous words haunted him, made him yearn for personal freedom, for absolute peace.

The desire for rest naturally increased his resolution to settle all business matters with decisive speed. Newall, the solicitor, told him there were no difficulties. All was plain sailing in regard to his succession.

This was comforting. But even though the solicitor might do his work promptly and effectively, he could not relieve the client of all business cares. There were so many questions that he could not decide quite alone. He was compelled to ask for instructions, and it sometimes seemed that, in spite of fair promises, Lenny was expected to do a lot of the work himself.

It would be absurd to keep this large house, which could be of no use to a man wandering about the globe; and, indeed, he could not in any event have afforded to retain

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it. The lease therefore must be sold—perhaps the furniture too. Or the furniture might be stored for future use. But then again, it would be scarcely worth while to store the larger pieces of furniture. There would not be room for them in any house that he would be likely to take later on. His means would never permit him to enjoy even a fairly large house again. Then there were all the servants—what could be done with them? They must be paid off and disbanded. And then there was this tremendous problem of the share-and-share-alike arrangement—the realization or transference of the immense amount of property that would be required for the endowment of Jane and Sarah.

The secret of Lenny's magnanimous scheme had leaked out locally. It was known that the sisters had been cut out of the will, and, as the local people said, Lenny had reinstated them. Out of sheer generosity, he was dividing the fortune into three, when he might have taken the lot; and as this was truly Lenny's intention, he could not contradict the rumour. One or two friends had attempted to broach the subject with him, and, although he would not of course talk about it, he was tacitly accepting all the fame and all the praise.

Who had been indiscreet enough to let out the secret? If it was Mr. Newall, he became silent thence onward.

Jane and Sarah left Westchurch on the day after the funeral; so they scarcely had time to publish it.

But the publication did not matter. Lenny could be neither embarrassed nor annoyed by it, for he himself had put the simple fact on record.

One letter of condolence, which he valued more than all the mass of correspondence that came pouring in, was from his old friend George Verinder. George wrote with most touching sympathy. He had heard of Mr. Calcraft's

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death by the merest accident. Happening to meet Gerald Dryden in a train on the underground railway, he had been informed of Lenny's sorrow. In the letter he said charming things, as well as kind things. And he concluded in a way that was peculiarly characteristic of his own lofty and chivalrous temperament.

"From something your poor father once told me, I understand that you will be well off: He said with pride and joy that he would leave you at least £2,000 a year. That is a lot of money—golden keys to open stiff doors. A man can do a lot of good or a lot of harm with £2,000 a year. I am sure you will do as much good as you can."

Lenny, in replying, explained how he was dealing with his father's fortune.

"I felt that I could do no less. He had trusted me by telling me his wish, and from that moment it became a sacred trust. . . . That is how things stand. So you see, dear old boy, far from having £2,000 a year, I have reduced myself to £900 per annum at the very outside. Of course this is enough for anybody, and I hope that it will allow scope for doing more good than harm."

George wrote back enthusiastically, almost one might say rapturously. . . . "It may seem a small thing to you, my dear old Lenny, but it would seem a very big thing to most people. But it is the *right* thing. That was enough for you to know." Then came more praise. "There was never anybody like you, Lenny."

In a postscript that George added to this letter, he spoke of Gerald Dryden, and in doing so, paid further compliments to Lenny.

"I was very glad to hear from Gerald Dryden that he had got on so well. He seems to have been lucky, and to have dropped into a really good thing. Already a partner in the firm, and making his way fast! You know how

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I took to him, that time when I was with you at West-church. He then seemed very promising material, and you have 'shaped him.' He struck me as a really fine fellow, with the soundest ideas on all essentials. I tell you this, because I know it will please you to feel that he is doing you credit."

Time was gliding by. May, June, and now July; the tourist season had begun; and still Lenny had not yet quite come into his own.

Although Mr. Newall produced sums of money on account, the bulk of the money was not yet accessible to its owner's control. But these cash payments of £100 or so at a time gave one a foretaste of the larger fulfilment that was approaching.

Lenny noticed a peculiar quality in the sovereigns that he now carried loose in his pockets: something that, to the touch, made them feel different from exactly similar coins that he had fingered in the past. The old money had been given to him; this new money was his very own. But then with the novel feeling came a hitherto unexperienced care. This fund was not inexhaustible, and he could not replenish it merely by making a request. Now and then he reviewed the extent and limit of his resources with a painstaking exactitude. £500 a year to begin with; then £30,000 capital—a little more, really; for the estate would realize a thousand or two more than Mr. Newall had anticipated. £30,000, capital, should yield £1,200 a year, income. But the £1,200 was to be divided into three. £400 a year for Jane; £400 a year for Sarah—that would leave him with £900 a year for himself, all told. If his father had not changed his mind, if he had carried out his original and firmly established intentions, he would almost have succeeded in doing what he told George Verinder with

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so much pride he earnestly wished to do—that is to say, he would have left his son something very near £2,000 a year. Yes, £500 and £1,200 a year makes £1,700. Those two odd thousands and the proceeds from lease, furniture, personal effects, etc., would have brought it very nearly to the desired figure.

What a tremendous difference! Lenny thought of it lengthily and seriously. £2,000 a year would have made him feel quite rich; £900 a year seemed merely to place him in the position that he had always occupied. Yes, in sober truth, what with board, lodging, and everything else found, and practically unlimited pocket-money, he had always been living at the rate of about £900 a year.

Never mind. The trite old proverb offered itself as immediate consolation. It's no good crying over spilt milk; and one ought to make the best of things, not the worst of them.

He resolved to make the very best of things: to cut his coat according to his cloth; to keep a wise check on expenses; to govern the future by prearranged plans, rather than allow himself to be ruled by the hazard of unforeseen circumstances.

But for the time being he purposely allowed himself an unrestricted license. Even though Newall's cash payments should properly be considered as capital rather than income, he decided to dissipate them freely. They were so little in amount, anyhow, that he could safely disregard their classification in business terms. Besides, he felt sure of himself. He was not the sort of person who would ever gamble or fritter away the capital on which the security of his whole life depended. Though slightly extravagant for the moment, he felt certain that he could pull up short whenever caution became necessary.

Thus, during the warm June weather, he enjoyed many

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of the pleasures that affluence can bring. And the first of these was an almost unthinking generosity.

He gave large presents to poor people, without troubling himself to ascertain whether they were also worthy people. The pleasure lay in the ready gift and the explosion of grateful thanks. He wanted nothing for himself just now. He could not take any part in social amusements. He did not feel disposed for the company that he could obtain at the club. But he liked to walk about in his black clothes; to talk to humble folk, and to hand out sovereigns which surprised and delighted their recipients. He liked, too, to sit at the big desk in the library, and write cheques—cheque after cheque—five or six before noon. One for the hospital, one for the lifeboat, one for the fishermen's shelter—one, two, three more for illiterate correspondents, who had ventured to crave some slight aid.

Great satisfaction in this beneficence—delightful sense of playing Providence on a small scale! When he had closed the cheque-book, he went off in dreams, thinking of what one might do with vast wealth. If he were a millionaire, he would not build schools, endow institutions, or found universities. There was something cold and cheerless about such systematic and remote charity; there could be little glow or warmth of personal pleasure, when one aimed at such distant benefits—to educate unborn children, to succour sick people who were as yet young and robust, to reach one's hand through darkness and time to do a doubtful good after one had been consigned to the grave. No, the real pleasure would be reaped by personally intervening in people's fate. For instance, supposing that among his acquaintance there were a nice young man and a nice young woman who wished to marry, but who were precluded from doing so by want of means—that would be the sort of case to tackle. "You are really fond of each

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other? You are longing for each other? But fate has ordained that you are to wait indefinitely. All the freshness and joy of life is to be taken from you before you are able to consummate your natural and very proper hope. Very well, here is £400 a year. I have settled it upon you. You may marry to-morrow." That would be to act Providence, oneself. It would give one the fullest measure of gratification that can be extracted from the exercise of power. And one would have the certainty of the direct good one was doing.

He had this fascinating notion of personating a kind destiny as he interviewed his servants one after another. He had felt that something substantial must be done for each of them, however much it cost, before he finally closed the house; and he now tackled the matter.

Miss Ferguson, the nurse, had of course gone back to Sister. But he sent a present after her. The cook and two of the maids could be polished off with a handsome donation; but there remained the two maids who had been longest in his father's service—Mary, the old parlourmaid, and Ethel, the nice attentive housemaid who for many years had acted as Lenny's valet.

Ethel presented an occasion for exactly the kind of interposition of which he had been dreaming. She stood before him blushing while she confessed that it was the desire of her heart to cease sweeping and valeting, and go and keep house for the extremely attractive young man who was waiting to lead her to the altar. Lenny, seated at the big desk, encouraged Ethel to open all her heart to him, and by gentle questioning elicited most of the facts necessary to enable him to form a judgment. Ethel's sweetheart was a grocer's assistant, and he thought that with a very small capital he would be justified in opening a shop on his own account. He even had a shop in his eye. It

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stood at a corner among all those new workmen's houses on the other side of the railway.

"And how much capital would be necessary to set him up?"

"He talks of £150, sir. But I have savings of my own, and I don't see but what we could do it for less than that."

"Very good, Ethel. I will inquire into the matter, and if I find that he is all that you think him to be—well, I'll provide you with the capital."

"Oh, sir!" Ethel gasped, and then turned pale. Surprise and joy overcame her.

"There, there!" said Lenny magnificently. "Thank me some other time. You have always been a good girl, Ethel,—a very good nice girl,—and I should be sorry to part with you without first showing that I valued your fidelity."

Then it was the turn of old Mary. Summoned to the library, she stood before him in a convenient position near the big desk. Mary did not blush; she looked at her master frankly and affectionately.

"Mary, we must part. But we shall part good friends, I hope."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"You were a faithful servant to my father, and he valued you; but he did not mention you in his will."

"Oh, no, sir! I'm sure I never expected it."

"He relied on me, Mary. He knew that it would be my wish to carry out his wish. And although he never said what he did in fact wish to be done, I know that he would wish me to treat you handsomely."

Then he began to ask his questions. Old Mary had no sweetheart. Oh, no, she had left all that nonsense behind her a long time ago. She said she was one of the regular old maids, and she didn't feel ashamed to say so. "The men, unless you get a good one—and the good ones are

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mighty rare, sir—aren't worth the trouble of bothering about 'em. That's my opinion," said Mary, stoutly; and without a suspicion of sour grapes in her voice or manner.

Then he asked her which would she like, some money down, or a small annuity. Mary chose the annuity without a moment's hesitation. She hoped to find another place, and to go on working till she got past work; but the knowledge of certain provision for old age would make her extremely blithe and happy.

Lenny therefore instructed his solicitor to purchase in due course an annuity of £50 a year for Mary. It would cost a lot of money, but it was one of the things that *had* to be done.

These interviews and munificences had given him very great pleasure; but now, all at once, he became tired. The effort of cheque-writing exhausted him. He felt unable to write the shortest letter. Extraordinary fatigue and weariness on certain days rendered him incapable of doing anything except sit in his library, or take an evening stroll along the sea-front.

The month of July opened with great heat, and he began to suffer from headaches. The tourists seemed to have arrived earlier than usual this year; perhaps the heat of London had prematurely driven them to search for cool air; but they didn't find it at Westchurch. Lenny's headaches bothered him; those words of Dr. Searle's haunted him. He felt nostalgic longings for escape.

August was cooler, and Lenny took longer walks now—but always alone. His bereavement had broken all the old habits of lounging and talking with Westchurch boys and girls, and he could not take up the habits again. It seemed to him that Westchurch and its whole residential

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population belonged to that chapter of his life which Dr. Searle said he ought to consider closed for ever.

Novelty was the tonic medicine which he now urgently required. New acquaintances, and not ancient acquaintances, were the material amongst which he must seek and find companionship.

A letter that announced his election to the London club set him thinking. It was a thoroughly good club, and the fact that he had been elected without taking the least trouble rather gratified him. Apparently, his name, and what his proposer and seconder had been able to say to his advantage, had proved ample guarantee. The clubhouse was a stately building situated near the bottom of St. James's Street, and in his mind's eye he compared its grand façade with the front verandahs, the red-tiled roof, and the glass doors of the little club here. He remembered how, walking up and down St. James's Street, he had caught glimpses of the hall and staircase, and how, knowing that one day he would become a member, he had noticed the sort of men who went in and out. They were an extremely good sort; prosperous, substantial, even distinguished-looking; not very old and not too young, just the sort of fellows one likes to associate with. He knew the man who proposed him, and the man who seconded him, but he doubted if he was personally acquainted with a single other member. So much the better. In his present state of mind, that was exactly what he wanted—heaps of agreeable strangers with whom to exchange fresh and entertaining ideas.

The stimulating effect produced by chatting with a complete stranger was brought home to him very forcibly one afternoon towards the end of August.

He had walked round the back of the golf links, and was on his way to the sea again, when he came through a

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circus encampment in the corner of the common near to the gas-works. This was the traditional spot for such itinerant performers. His path led him close by the huge circus tent, and he paused to study the characteristic scene. Then he wandered among the vans, interested and amused by everything that he saw. The vans were of all sizes—some quite gigantic; and from one or two there issued an oppressive mangy smell of wild beasts in captivity. There were trucks too, already packed with the brightly coloured woodwork that composed the decorated cars used just now in the circus procession. Draught horses dragged their hobbles as they nibbled at the dried grass, and beyond a clump of gorse bushes he could see a couple of picketed elephants. Nearly all the grooms and attendants were engaged in the performance, but Lenny noticed two or three decent-looking women, and a man with a little camp fire and an iron pot who was evidently cooking his afternoon meal.

The sun shone brightly, but it was not too hot out here. In the tent the heat must be unbearable, yet the audience did not seem to mind it. One heard loud garish music, the slow thud of a cantering horse, and every now and then a roar of laughter, and the clapping of hands.

Three little boys from the cottages by the gas-works had lifted the canvas, and were lying on the turf, spell-bound, fascinated, although in this position they could obtain no more substantial delights than the sound of music and laughter, and the smell of earth and dust.

While Lenny was watching the little boys' backs, the pay-box custodian came round the canvas wall from the entrance, and shouted angrily:

“Run away, ye young devils! What d’ye mean by it? What d’ye think you can see there? Run away before I fetch a stick and warm you up!”

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Lenny would not allow the boys to be driven off so brutally. He told their enemy that they were to go inside; gave them money for admission, and they darted away to the entrance with a chorus of treble thanks.

Then the cooking man came and talked to Lenny. He was a queer weather-beaten fellow, with rings in his ears, eyes as bright as a bird's, and an odd way of jerking his head for emphasis.

"You settled that little difficulty, sir." And the man grinned amicably. "We can't afford to put anybody on the free list nowadays. Times are not what they were in our profession."

"No, I suppose not."

"You won't see much more of us, sir. We're a nakranism." And the man grinned more broadly. "Know the word, sir?"

"Yes," said Lenny, smiling. "I think I know the word."

"Greek, isn't it? That's what the bloke as told me about it said it was." And the man went on to describe a mealy-mouthed visitor, who had come to see the circus at a town on the sea-coast sixty miles away. "He steps outside during the ongtrack—you know, the take-it-easy—and gets on the jaw, friendly-like, same as you and me are doing now, and says, 'My friend, you mayn't know it, but you're a nakranism.' 'What's that?' I ses. 'Oh, Greek,' he ses, a word sinifying what's past its purpose.' See? Well, I sized it up he meant we were a bit of a nuisance, coming into the town any time of night or morning, and interfering with traffic by our mid-day procesh. But he goes on, 'Other nakranisms are kings and queens.' 'Oh,' I ses, 'leave it at that, ole pal. I don't mind if I'm in sich good company.'

"But he goes on again about the circus itself. He could get it off the tongue pretty nippy—a scholar, I mean.

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Well, he ses, 'A whole lirture 'as grown up about you dwellers in tents, you caravan folk, you gypsies.' 'Gypsies be damned,' I ses. 'Don't you call names, mister.' And I looked him pretty straight up and down. You know, sir. Showin' 'im I meant business if necessary. Lord 'ow 'e squirmed—apologisin', askin' me not to be 'asty, but keep my temper and listen. 'Oh, yes,' I ses, 'I'll listen; but don't you make no mistake. Everybody as understands a 'orse, and rides in a cart, isn't a gypsy, any more'n everybody as wears a top 'at and a black coat isn't a gentleman.'

"Then the man laughed heartily, screwed up his face, and nodded his head.

"But there's no two ways about it, sir. We're a dam' nuisance on the road. We got our big trolly with the Britannia stuff hitched acrost the road for two hours this morning, between 'ere and the harbour."

Lenny gave the man a cigar. The man pleased him. He seemed so entirely natural, and with such an individual turn of philosophy and humour. He was hard and wiry; inured to toil; a creature of activity, who eats little, sleeps little, and yet is always mentally and physically fit. Moreover, Lenny had an intuitive comprehension that although no doubt he would fight and drink and lie, and possibly even steal, he was, nevertheless, fundamentally a real good sort.

"Thank you, sir," said the man, as he took the cigar. "I shall put this in my face and smoke your 'ealth on the next erppropriate opportunity."

Then the man began to tell anecdotes, leading off with a very old story—about a drunkard who involved himself in a nocturnal altercation with an elephant. Confused by the similarity between the two ends of the animal, worried first by the tail and then by the trunk, he had at last

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hiccupped out this threat, "You two-tailed blackguard, if I knew which was your head I'd punch it."

"You have heard that before, sir. Chestnuts, eh?"

But then the man told tales that were fresher and more diverting—about personal experiences, the young ladies who performed in the arena, the boss and his missus;—and gradually Lenny was amused. The man's dryness and shrewdness tickled him, and he laughed. Finally something the man had said made Lenny laugh with intense enjoyment. Indeed he could not stop laughing; and the man was so naïvely pleased with his success that he continued to press the point of the jest. Lenny's eyes were full of tears, his chest began to ache; he was almost doubled up by laughter. Really it seemed like an hysterical access, or a long-delayed explosion of emotional energy. At last he pulled himself together, wiped his eyes, and became preternaturally grave. He had suddenly remembered his father's death. The incongruity, the heartlessness, the cruelty of laughing so soon, brought a painful feeling of shame and regret. He took leave of the man at once.

"Good-day to you," and he spoke now with a rather pompous sympathy, "and good luck to you. I am afraid that on the whole yours is a hard life."

"Well, yes, sir; but after all, it's *life*. We're on the move. That is the great thing, isn't it, sir, to feel you're free even when you are a slave?"

Lenny gave the man half a sovereign; slipped it delicately into his brown hand.

"Oh, I wasn't cadging, sir. But I thank you. It's thirsty weather."

Then presently he ran after Lenny.

"Sir! This ain't a tanner, it's 'alf a thick 'un. You've made a mistake."

"No mistake," said Lenny. "Good luck to you."

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He could not get this chance talk out of his mind. He could not forget the fit of laughter. Next day he had a bad headache, and still he thought of the stranger's idle words.

To feel free even though you are a slave! But what about being free, and yet feeling yourself a slave?

He was free, and he must enjoy his freedom; that was imperative. Dr. Searle said so. There was risk, there was danger, in the failure to emancipate himself from care and worry.

Moved by a sudden impulse he went around to the solicitor's office, and told Mr. Newall that he was to complete all Calcraft business without further instructions.

"Finish it," he said peremptorily, and yet querulously. "Finish it as best you can. Get rid of the house, sell the furniture—do the best you can for me. I *must* be free, I am worn out. I am leaving for London to-morrow morning."

Of course there had been great talk in Westchurch as to what he would do. Would Westchurch lose him altogether, or might it hope to retain him as something that it could still count on as more or less its own? No doubt, sooner or later, he would tell his old friends what he had decided. But he evaded all leave-taking—he simply could not face it. He was too tired.

Early promenaders on the front saw that the blinds were down again at No. 1, The Crescent. It gave people a shock; but tradesmen's boys were able to say that nothing dreadful had happened. The house was merely shut up. Thus Westchurch learned with consternation that it had lost him.

XV

HE had been in London five weeks, and still he had settled no arrangements for his tour of adventure.

He was staying at one of those great hotels near Charing Cross; and, walking from his hotel to his club, he often stopped outside the windows of the tourist agents, looked at the pictures of ocean liners, read notices about transcontinental trains, and dreamed of far-off and once mysterious lands that have become so easily accessible to modern travellers. He intended soon to go into the agents' office and demand specific information, but he put off doing this from day to day.

He liked his club—liked it more and more, liked it immensely. It was spacious, splendid, reposeful; and excellently managed by a vigilant committee and an untiring secretary. Everything in it, large or small, pleased him: from the vast silent library with its ingenious book rests and luxurious couches to the weighing machine in the hall with its small padded seat and the volume that invited members to enter their weights for future reference. He was picking up acquaintances too. He had done wonderfully well in this respect.

“Good-morning, Calcraft.”

“Are you for a game of billiards, Calcraft?”

“Dining here to-night, Calcraft?”

These recognitions, so promptly secured, were most pleasing to the ear. Once as he passed through the long coffee room, nine members at different tables greeted him. All

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the servants knew him already. There was never the slightest trouble about his letters or telegrams. He felt altogether comfortable—so far as the club was concerned.

But in other respects he still experienced discomfort. There was a perpetual burden on his spirits, and it prevented them from rising to the pitch of lightness that one might reasonably have expected ere this. He continued to feel uneasy about the general state of his health. There was nothing the matter with his appetite, and he slept well; but there had been recurrence of the dull head pains, an aching heaviness that seemed like the physical counterpart of an oppressive idea.

He told people, if they made polite inquiries, that he felt anything but well. He told Mrs. Fletcher so, when she remarked that he looked thinner.

She lived in a new red-brick house close to Sloane Street; and after she had twice reminded him of his promise, he fulfilled it by paying a ceremonious call.

A tall young footman opened the door, and a charmingly dressed maid-servant ushered him up the stairs. His first rapid glances of inspection persuaded Lenny that this was a home of really considerable affluence. The house was much bigger inside than he had anticipated while standing on the front door steps. A nice square hall, oak panelling, blue and white china; half way up the shallow stairs a picture by Tadema; on the landing a much-engraved and popular Burne-Jones, and a Leighton that he remembered from childhood; at the threshold of the drawing-room he had an impression of varied treasures, as in a bric-à-brac shop—and he understood exactly why there was this queer combination of smart footman and female butler. The footman was a necessity, to drive out with the carriage; but Mrs. Fletcher, as an unprotected woman living by herself, would not be bothered with the supervision and government

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of men-servants. Obviously she could afford to keep half a dozen men, had she desired to do so.

That was his thought as she came across the rich and pretty room to welcome him.

"*Enfin!*" And she looked at him with the interrogative expression that had nearly faded from his memory. "I am doubly fortunate, since you never announced your kind intention. I might have been out."

"Or might have said you were out;" and the visitor smiled gravely. "That is the custom with you fine London ladies, isn't it?"

"It's not my custom—and I'm not a fine lady. Whenever I'm at home I'm always glad to see any one who comes. But I never ask people to come—unless I want to see them. Sit down, and let us have a talk before anyone disturbs us."

She had a dress of grey velvet, the bodice cut rather low, with a lace collar; and round her neck, half hiding beneath the lace, there was a single row of large pearls. Her eyes seemed bluer and her lips redder than he remembered; but his memory received a sudden stimulus when he noticed again that faint sweet odour of violets. There were none of the flowers pinned to her breast to-day, and he could not see any of them about the room.

"You got my letter," she asked—"the one I ventured to send you at Westchurch?"

"Yes, it was quite the nicest I received."

"What can one say at such times?"

"You said everything possible."

He did not in fact recall a word of the letter; but he knew that all the words had been neatly turned, well chosen, and full of sympathy. And she was extraordinarily sympathetic now, dropping her voice as she spoke of the bereavement, and softening the outlook of her blue eyes. He felt much more drawn to her than when he spent those two hours

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at the Esplanade Hotel; and the notion came to him vaguely that if to-day she indulged in confidences, he would be permitted to give any sort of expression to his soothing or consolatory attempts. There would be no abrupt checkings or withdrawals or proud reticences.

"I couldn't help writing to you—I was thinking about you. I know what it meant to you. . . . It must have been a terrible blow."

They had seated themselves side by side on a highly decorative French sofa; but at this direct reference to his grief he got up, as if automatically, and slowly walked about the room.

"Yes, terrible;" and he spoke in a low meditative tone. "The blow was most terrible. . . . I thought it was more than I could bear. I thought I should never get over it."

"I understand. I was sorry—very sorry."

Her voice had dropped to a whisper: it was soft as a caress. The depth of her sympathy delighted Lenny.

"My whole life seemed to tumble to pieces. There seemed no reason why I should go on living."

"Oh, don't say that."

"It was what I felt. But then—then I began——" He left the sentence unfinished. Moving to and fro, he had found himself in front of a Venetian mirror, and his thought immediately wandered. A large, well-built man, looking sad but dignified; a sun-burnt, well-groomed man, with moustache accurately trimmed, hair perfectly parted, rather high, on right side of head; a well-dressed man, with thin black lines on the peep of shirt below the black tie and the pearl pin—himself! He turned from the glass, and touched his coat and waistcoat explanatorily. "Each time that I see these black clothes, the thought of their significance brings back all my sorrow—as though it were yesterday."

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"Don't think of your black clothes," she said, softly and kindly.

"No, I must try not to;" and he slowly returned to her, and stood by the sofa.

"Shall I describe how you are dressed?" She had half closed her eyes, and was looking up at him. "You are wearing that mantle, Mr. Calcraft. It is grander than before. Its folds are deeper; it sweeps along the ground, and makes you so majestic that I am almost afraid of you."

He flushed slightly and stared down at her. What on earth did she mean? Her mystical compliment gratified, but confused him.

"I told you," she went on, smiling, "that the praise of your friends and your own good deeds had woven a mantle for you—and that I admired it. Well, you have provided further material for the loom, and the mantle is larger—and I admire it still more."

Then he understood that she was alluding to his munificent endowment of the sisters. Miss Workman no doubt had supplied this information.

"Oh," he said, with some embarrassment, "you mustn't believe all you hear. One's friends get a trick of exaggerating, and they talk a lot of nonsense."

"You have been lucky in your friends, Mr. Calcraft. . . . Please sit down. I want you to tell me what you are doing, what you intend to do. . . . I mean to remain in London as long as I can—until the fogs drive me away."

Lenny resumed his place on the sofa; but the arrival of another visitor made him get up directly.

The newcomer was a fat, placid, sumptuously attired woman of middle age. She seemed to be quite an old friend, or possibly a relative; for she kissed Mrs. Fletcher and called her "my dear Helen."

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"Don't go, Mr. Calcraft."

Lenny, having risen, did not propose to sit down again. He politely lingered for two minutes; and then, feeling that he had duly honoured his introduction to the fat lady, he judged that he was at liberty to withdraw.

Mrs. Fletcher came out to the landing, and talked to him at the top of the stairs.

"It is difficult," said Lenny, affecting the air of an amateur, "to pass these lovely pictures without stopping. This is a splendid thing—Leighton at his best."

"Do you like it?" she said carelessly. "I never cared for the English school. My husband was a collector—but we had no tastes in common."

"No? But I am sure all the pretty furniture is your taste. I think the whole house is charming. That fine hall is such a feature. I thought at once, it is like a country house in London."

"Oh, no. It is like a London house and nothing else," and she laughed, and gave her little shiver of pretended alarm. "Why *will* you say these things?"

"On my honour, I mean them."

"No you don't. It would be too dreadful if you did. You know perfectly well you were using the cant phrase. This is the pattern medium-sized house of the last decade; there are thousands exactly like it, and a million people, observing the familiar pattern, have said 'How unusual! Such a nice hall—quite a little country house in the middle of London!' *You* oughtn't to say what everybody else says. Be firm with yourself, and throw away all your battered old stereotypes."

"You are very severe—but I must try to enlarge my vocabulary."

"No, cut it down. Very few words are enough for what one really thinks. . . . Good-bye, Mr. Lenny—I

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mean, Mr. Calcraft;" and then she paused to laugh. "Do you know, I thought it was your only name at first. That dear old soul, Miss Workman, spoke of you as Mr. Lenny."

"Yes, my pals always call me Lenny. I like it." And he added, from force of habit, scarcely aware of what he was saying, "I wish you'd call me Lenny."

"Oh, but we're not pals;" and she looked at him smilingly and frankly. "Perhaps I will, one day—if we ever reach the stage of being pals. But I don't believe in forcing the pace at the beginning of a friendship."

Yet perhaps truly, although he did not recognize the fact, she had forced the pace to a considerable extent already.

"Good-bye, Mr. Calcraft. But you'll come and see me soon again, won't you?" And it was then that she said he had grown thinner. Her eyebrows were arched, and the blue eyes expressed a close attention. "You mayn't know it, but you're thinner."

"Am I? I'm anything but well."

Her last words had gratified him enormously. He derived a most flattering pleasure from the idea that she had carried a mental portrait so faithful and accurate as now to be ready at her service for purposes of comparison with the bodily presence.

"Don't let yourself get ill. London is a very healthy place. By the way, you haven't told me if you intend to be here for long. You haven't said a word of your plans. What *are* your plans?"

"They are all in abeyance. I am quite chaotic just now."

"Well, let me know when you have made order in chaos."

Then she laughed once more, lightly, pleasantly, and went back to the neglected fat lady.

Lenny, going down stairs, heard the rustle of her silk petticoat, caught a glimpse of her shoes and ankles, and smelt the perfume of violets.

XVI

AFTER all, what is the good of making plans for the immediate future, while the great problem of one's whole life remains unsolved?

The St. James's Street club was peculiarly attractive to Lenny on Saturday afternoons. At the luncheon hour the coffee room had more people in it than at any other period of the week; and as soon as luncheon was over many men went straight to the billiard room and the card-room, and stayed there comfortably and jollily, even when the weather was fine and warm. They told servants to shut out the daylight, and they made their own sunshine—the brightness and warmth created by relaxation of mind, congenial companionship, and idle amusement.

But one Saturday afternoon, when September had nearly run its course and the club was delightfully full, Lenny with reluctance tore himself away from the crowded billiard-room, and went forth into the open air.

“What! Not going, Calcraft?”

“Yes,—but I hope to be back before long.”

A cab took him northward and westward, further and further from the club, and in every half mile his spirits sank lower. He dismissed the cab outside a block of cheap flats in a desperately uninteresting street near Paddington railway station, and wearily entered the commonplace building. No lift—he slowly climbed the stone staircase, stopped outside a well-remembered door, and rang the electric bell,

“Is Miss Reed at home?”

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"No, sir," said the maid-servant. "She has gone out."

"Oh!"

"Miss Shipham is in, sir."

Then he heard Frances Shipham's voice close at hand. "Is that somebody for me?" said Frances shrilly. "Somebody from the *Girls' Roundabout?* . . . Who is it?"

He felt compelled to answer, although he would have preferred to hurry down the stone stairs.

"It is Lenny Calcraft."

"Oh, come in, Mr. Calcraft."

And he was constrained to accept the invitation and join Miss Shipham in the principal room of the exiguous little flat.

"How unfortunate!" said Frances. "Alma hadn't a ghost of an idea you were coming. She'll be so dreadfully disappointed. Oh, I *wish* you'd told her to expect you."

"I was uncertain if I would be able to come—so I didn't like to make an appointment, for fear of breaking it."

"If only you could have come a little earlier! Alma hasn't been gone above thirty minutes. I believe she half hoped that she'd get a wire from you—but then she gave it up."

"I might possibly overtake her. Do you know where she was going?"

"She didn't say. She very often walks across to the South Kensington Museum. She is fond of Kensington Gardens—sometimes she goes into the old palace."

"Would she be alone—or was she going to meet anyone?"

"Oh, no;" and Frances shot a quick penetrating glance at him from behind her pince-nez. "If you find her, you'll find her quite alone."

"Then I think I'll walk that way—on the chance."

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But he was not allowed to escape without having a little talk with Alma's friend.

"Stop one minute," said Frances. "I must show you a new photograph of her. I had it done. I wanted a really good one, for myself. There," and she handed him a photograph frame. "I call that a very good one, don't you?"

"Yes—excellent."

"Of course it doesn't do her justice."

"It seems to me an excellent likeness."

"I'm glad you think so." Miss Shipham took the photograph from him again, and, with her head a little on one side, examined it at close range. "It's like, and *unlike*. It hasn't caught her *look*. The expression is somehow too determined, too self-reliant. What I miss is that sweet trustful expression—something in dear Alma that always reminds me of a child. But perhaps it wasn't the photographer's fault. Alma perhaps wasn't *looking* herself." And once more Miss Shipham glanced quickly at Lenny's face. "The fact is, Mr. Calcraft, Alma hasn't *been* herself of late."

"No?"

"No. I have felt rather anxious about her. . . . I don't want to detain you; but won't you sit down for a minute?"

Frances Shipham was a thin, freckled, sandy young woman; and Lenny thought that at no time of their acquaintance had he seen her so untidy and unprepossessing as now. Her hair, badly parted in the middle and carelessly drawn back into a great blob on the neck, flopped loose over her ears. Two buttons or hooks of her blouse had come undone; one part of her short skirt was much lower than other parts, and a queer hiatus caused by this irregularity showed beneath her leather waist-belt; her shoes, much trodden down at heel,

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were shockingly old and shabby; her right forefinger was stained with ink—even her pince-nez sat awkwardly and lopsidedly on her thin nose.

As he knew, she was really a refined, cultivated creature, a lady by birth, accustomed to the ways of good society, and she could smarten herself up surprisingly for a restaurant dinner or an evening at the play; but the Bohemian influences of the newspaper world had made her neglect her personal appearance in this fearful manner when out of the public eye. Her voice was high-pitched, and her utterance as a rule rapid—she gabbled quite clever thoughts just as she wrote them down on paper, putting them into vivid journalistic style as fast as she could. This afternoon, however, she spoke slowly and jerkily, without any fluency, seeming to seek for phrases, and to hesitate and check herself frequently, as if apprehensive of saying too much or desirous of enticing questions in regard to her exact meaning.

“I’m sure you know how intensely I admire—and love—Alma; but perhaps you don’t know how much it has been to me to have her here—as the dearest friend and best companion one could possibly have.”

He sat silent on the very uncomfortable three-cornered chair she had offered him, smiled, nodded his head in sign of acquiescence; but gave no aid when she hesitated, and asked no questions when she paused. He had a sudden recollection of a silly juvenile game called the Stool of Repentance. You are forced to sit and listen to various impertinent remarks—and good play at this game consists in taking everything calmly, and not losing your temper.

Yet if Frances Shipham was being impertinent now, it was in a very subtle and indirect manner. She merely sang the praises of Alma Reed, as she had always done for many years.

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"She is so versatile, so brilliant—an ideal companion. Of course when two women are cooped up together perpetually, there must be *some* friction—little jarrings of temperament—an occasional tiff—differences of opinion that lead to absurd wrangles:—that is, *ordinarily*. But Alma can't sulk—it is an impossibility to her. Her mind is too big."

He nodded his head and smiled. In truth he scarcely listened. The aspect of the room was carrying him away to hours spent in it long ago. It was very much as it had been when he first saw it. The same writing table—Miss Shipham's laborious corner—with litter of printers' proofs, file copies of the *Girls' Roundabout* and other feminine journals; the cheap artistic armchairs, cushions, and curtains; the rickety bamboo bookcases, crushed by the weight of massed volumes; the black and white sketches—originals of newspaper illustrations—framed and unframed, against the sage green wall;—and, yes, there were the portfolios and drawing boards that appertained to Miss Shipham's strange hobby of map-making. Nothing changed; but here and there small additions perceptible: trifles that belonged to Alma—presents that he had given to her,—a china bon-bon box, a bronze pin tray, a Swiss eight-day watch in a Japanese case.

The room with its principal contents was indelibly printed on the soft matter of his brain. It would be there—revivable or inaccessible—as long as he lived. While he remembered anything, he would remember it as the setting of a little scene that had been of importance—a crisis or turning point—in the wonderful unfolding mystery of that vast dramatic pageant, the life-experience of Lenny Calcraft.

"The finest nature I have ever known." Frances went on with the song of praise. "I spoke of quarrels and misunderstandings—but personally I *couldn't* quarrel with

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Alma. I should be miserable if I thought a misunderstanding had arisen. I wouldn't rest one moment till I had cleared it up. I should never forgive myself, Mr. Calcraft, if I ever made Alma suffer."

"No, no. She has often said how kind you are."

"I do my best—but—well, one has to be careful with such natures as hers. She is extremely sensitive—extremely proud, of course, too. Honestly, I have done all I could. I have tried not to be selfish—to make her happy. But—but Alma is not very happy."

"No? She wrote to me—most cheerfully—only two or three days ago."

"Ah—but there it is. People like Alma are too proud to complain—however one treats them."

"But, Miss Shipham, I'm sure you treat her with the utmost consideration."

"Yes—but I am not everybody."

"No, no—of course not." Lenny moved uneasily on the stool of repentance. "I've always been rather afraid of those people."

"What people? Oh, the Hygienic Home Association! Between you and me, Mr. Calcraft, I think her work there has been of great value—especially just lately. It is very hard work—she is so clever that they keep her slaving at their new pamphlets—she is responsible for half their pamphlets;—but on the whole I'm glad of the work. It has occupied her thoughts—and has prevented her from brooding on any private causes of sadness. If you ask me why I say that——"

Lenny did not ask her. He had risen from the three-cornered chair; and, holding out his hand, he apologized for being in a hurry.

"Please tell Alma I called, and was very sorry to miss her."

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"Yes, I'll give her any messages. . . . What were you going to add?"

"You might say, I'll settle something definite for next Saturday."

"Oh! Won't you be able to take her out anywhere to-morrow?"

"No, I fear—not to-morrow."

"Of course," said Miss Shipham, staring at him through the tilted pince-nez, "I hope that you'll be lucky and find her now—this afternoon."

"Yes. Let me see. Where did you say was the most likely place? Kensington Gardens?"

"Yes—or in the palace. They don't shut the palace till five o'clock. Failing the palace—I should try the museum, if I were you."

As he walked along the raised pavement by Paddington Station, he thought Frances Shipham had permitted herself to be impertinent, troublesome, and interfering. Then, at sight of a prowling hansom, he thought of something else.

Promptly hailing the cab, he drove straight back to the St. James's Street club.

XVII

THE burden on his spirits was Alma. Nothing else. During those long empty years she had been of inestimable value—a solace, a support, the unfailing source from which he derived strength to endure the fatigue and vapidness of life; but now she was simply useless to him. He was fond of her, but he did not want her. That summed it up. It was a weariness to meet her. He dreaded each meeting.

One morning in the club library he thought, with a serious analytical effort, of all these things. He had just fetched *La Vie Parisienne* from the table of foreign journals, and was about to look at it, when the oppressive recollection of Alma suddenly spoiled his quiet enjoyment. He took a chair by one of the windows, let the paper slip from his hand, and looked down into the street. There was the world, rolling by—the wide world open to him; and yet here was he, sitting motionless, and suffering the old prison-sensations; *not* free, far from it; chained—behind bars—confined in narrow space; still feeling like the eagle on a perch, or the lion in a cage.

Gradually the animated view of St. James's Street grew dull, grew blank, and vanished. His gaze had become introspective. And before he moved again, he saw in vividly clear pictures the whole past history of his relations with Alma Reed.

An empty road and horses galloping towards him,—the runaway phaeton,—the heroic deed! That was the

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beginning of everything. She wrote to thank him for preserving her life, and old Reed wrote to ask him to dinner.

He found pleasure in looking at her, in talking to her, in hearing her voice. All that he could see of her, all that he could guess about her, gave him delight—her tallness and her slenderness, her white skin and her dark hair; her cleverness, her kindness, her romantic enthusiasms; her quick intelligence and her slim waist; her gracious smile and her long legs; her way of walking, of laughing, even her way of eating dinner. Merely to sit by her side at the Reed banquet was the cause of such satisfaction that he could patiently listen to her idiotic father while he explained at interminable length a new theory of the golf swing. So long as Alma would go on smiling, fingering breadcrumbs, or trifling with a dessert fork, Mr. Reed might go on chattering his otherwise intolerable nonsense.

Thus he had started the pleasant little flirtation. On Sundays he used to wait for her outside the Catholic church. He could see it all now, bright and strong, and full of detail—the whitewashed wall with a patch of loose plaster, the three broad steps before the entrance, the doors with frayed black leather, and the gold cross high in the sunlight. As he stood on the steps, he smelt the incense, heard the Latin song and the strange music—felt, as so many good Protestants feel, the charm of an alien faith, the seductive splendour of Rome, the insidious fascination of something glorious but incomprehensible. And then, among the throng of meaningless faces and ungainly figures, pretty, graceful Alma came out to him. She had been steeped in the mystery; the glamour lay upon her; so that she remained grave and silent, with slow regular breath, and eyes not yet shining. And they walked away together, feeling quite alone, though the common Sunday crowd brushed their elbows.

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Then there was the dance at the Esplanade Hotel. He could see her now—dressed in white, looking very young and slender. She had a pretty chaplet across her brow, some arrangement of silver leaves and bands that made her hair seem darker; silver beads and veilings about the white shoulders; nothing of ornament on the white neck and bosom—but her eyes shining like immense liquid gems. When they left the hot and noisy ball-room and went down the quiet corridor, they passed a glass door through which one caught a glimpse of the sea. It was calm and unruffled, with moonbeams making a silver path across its depths—and he told her that she herself was like moonlight on a dark sea. He remembered just how he said it—a happy thought finding ready utterance. Tawdry decorations, Chinese lanterns, palms—and, at the end of the corridor, the screened sitting-out place that he sought.

Freshness, pureness, youth, trustfully and momentarily yielding to his wish and his will—that was the import of all the brain messages as he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was the lightest and most unsensual embrace; and after it they stood smiling at one another, happily and innocently. He was like a man who has abandoned his habit of strong drink, and found himself refreshed and inspirited by a draught of sparkling water.

“Alma,” he said, “you *must* call me Lenny *now*. It would be silly not to.”

She laughed before she answered.

“You take a great deal for granted—Lenny.”

And then they went back to the ball-room, and danced, and danced, and danced.

That first kiss was like the delicate seal upon a preliminary treaty of mutual confidence and affection. Nobody inquired what his further intentions might be. Nobody interfered with either of them. On Sundays the family

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worshipped at the Parish Church; on week-days old Reed played golf and Mrs. Reed educated her children. It was easy to get hold of Alma by herself whenever one wanted to.

Then the thing broadened, deepened, and became difficult.

Haven Lodge had once been a solitary farmhouse standing in the midst of open fields that stretched from the town to the river. Now it was surrounded by roads and buildings, almost the poorest part of Westchurch; but some attributes of its peaceful agricultural past lingered about the old house. An orchard and a paddock still remained to it; there were clipped yew trees on either side of the iron gate; and fine red-brick walls of an ancient kitchen garden secured it from the observation of passers-by in River Lane. The lane was Lenny's meeting-ground. Alma used to come through the orchard to join him; and, turning their backs on the fashionable sea-front, they would stroll down unfrequented paths to the river.

He remembered his last stroll with her as well as if it had occurred yesterday instead of seven years ago. A May morning, and a faint white haze on land and water, with the promise of sunshine quivering here and there. The orchard was full of pink blossoms; and, while he waited for her, a branch of lilac kept slowly swaying its beauty and gently flinging its fragrance above the top of the garden wall. There was nobody in the lane to watch them, and they strolled along hand in hand, turning their heads and laughing because she said they had lost their shadows.

They sat upon a baulk of timber in a little sandy hollow by the river, still hand in hand, and talking easily and happily. Then the sun began to shine on them, and the whole scene became astoundingly pretty. The broad river and the wooded hills, the white sand, the green grass, were

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all of a pearl-grey tint; next moment there came sparkles and flashes across the water, and the land glowed warmly; in another moment the true colours showed themselves, and numberless unseen things burst upon the eye—barges and a tug at anchor, little toy houses on the further shore, and a diminutive hurrying train. But even then the tints, though bright, were transparently pure—it was all like the most delicate water-colour drawing. And for a little while the atmosphere played tricks with this charming picture, bringing back the greyiness and indistinctness, turning bright tints white again, making outlines quiver tremulously beneath the impeded sunshine.

Alma's face was very pale, and her lips trembled. "Oh, Lenny, look. Oh, Lenny!" Her voice came in a whisper of joy.

They sat talking; and all at once he recognized that the flirtation had gone down a wrong turning. It was she, and not he, who was taking things for granted. Speaking of the view, she said something which plainly implied a conviction that there was no reason why both of them might not sit side by side, just like this, and look at the view together, twenty years hence.

Childishly, very childishly, she had taken it for granted that he was a marrying sort of man, and that he had already selected her for his mate. Her childishness had landed him in unexpected difficulty. It made him very uncomfortable—but he was compelled to explain matters there and then.

She gasped with surprise, she stared at him stupidly, she would not believe it.

"Lenny! What do you mean? Aren't you really fond of me? Don't you want me to be with you always?"

Oh, yes, he was very fond of her; and he wanted her perpetual society;—but, alas, in this life, one cannot have

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all that one wants. And he explained how for him marriage was an impossibility. It would break old Calcraft's heart.

"Have you asked him?" Even now she could not believe it.

"No, I know it. He relies on me—it would be a breach of trust for me to do it."

They got up and they stood face to face—she very pale, and he rather red. And she continued to stare at him in stupid wonder. Then her face became redder than his, and she scrambled up the sandy bank and walked fast, almost ran towards her home. He overtook her, held her arm, and gently restraining her, walked by her side.

"Alma, I didn't understand—I never guessed—that you were looking so far ahead. Why must we bother about the remote future, if we are so happy together now?"

"Don't speak to me, please," said Alma, trying to shake off his hand, trying to break away from him. "Of course," she gasped, nearly sobbed, "I oughtn't to have met you in this way. I oughtn't—oughtn't to have let you kiss me. Now of course I can never see you again."

"Oh, why not?"

He did not see her for three days. Then they met by chance on the sea-front and he was shocked by the alteration in her appearance. She looked as though she had been recovering from a long illness. They stood talking for a few minutes, and she told him that she was about to leave Westchurch. Her friend Miss Shipham had invited her to come and live in London.

"Oh," he said lamely, "this is quite a new idea, isn't it?"

She did not answer, and there was an awkward pause. Then she said something that gave him acute discomfort. She was looking at him intently, and she spoke quietly and seriously, as if uttering the most natural question in the world.

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"Lenny, why have you done this to me?"

"Done what?"

"Made me so fond of you—when you didn't mean anything, but just to amuse yourself."

He felt extremely uncomfortable—much as he used to feel when he shot a pheasant and failed to kill it. The poor fluttering maimed bird, unable to fly, unable to die, is a horrible evidence of your clumsiness so long as it remains in sight.

He talked heavily of the enigmas of one's life. One is not free; one is at the mercy of surrounding circumstances; one tries to do one's best, and yet now and then one blunders. Presently he asked if she thought she would like London better than Westchurch; and she told him that it had become impossible for her to stay here any longer, and that no doubt London would suit her very well.

"I understand. . . . But what are you going to do up there?"

She would find work, she said, to occupy all her time.

"But what kind of work? Have you decided what the work is to be?"

She looked at him before she answered.

"The work! Why, to try and forget *you*, Lenny. That's what I must do—even if the work takes me the rest of my life."

Gone—and a very faint sense of relief. No other way out of it. He could not be sorry that she had gone.

Then came regret, slight at first, but steadily growing stronger. He missed her—more and more. The hot summer was enervating. As he walked along the esplanade, he felt an excessive weariness—in all the town there was not a single girl worth looking at. And always he was seeing her ghost. A graceful figure at a distance, an Alma

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Reed hat, long legs approaching rapidly—he felt his heart begin to beat. Could she have unexpectedly returned? Oh, no. The gracious ghost, drawing near, disintegrated—the odious living reality, as it passed, nearly turned him sick.

He did not write to her. But he obtained Frances Shipham's address from Lady Garbett, and went up to London for a week-end.

A stifling July afternoon—so hot outside in the street that the empty hall struck cold. He paused to wipe his forehead, hesitated, and then slowly climbed the stone stairs to Miss Shipham's flat.

Frances was out, the maid-servant was out, Alma opened the door to him.

"Lenny!" It was a little cry of surprise, reproach, almost of fear. "Oh, Lenny, why have you come?"

In Miss Shipham's poor little room she looked different again—an Alma with new attributes, both of strength and weakness; more of a woman, less of a child; someone whose mind had developed and whose body had suffered during great pain. Her hair was done differently, and it was the first time that he observed the faint blue circles about her eyes. Standing by the table and resting her hands on a large portfolio, she seemed to droop as if very tired, or exhausted by the hot weather.

"Yes, this is my new home." She spoke in staccato tones; and he noticed the movement of her bosom beneath the black blouse, as of a person who is breathless. "Lenny, you oughtn't to have come." She kept repeating this. "Lenny, I don't think you ought to have come."

He said he would go away if she told him to do so; but he pleaded for permission to stay just for a little while.

Then, nervously, she showed him Miss Shipham's absurd maps, opening the portfolio and turning the big sheets in both hands.

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"Aren't they wonderful? Social economics, you know. Every line, every shade of colour has a meaning—textile manufactories, iron, coal mines. That's the poverty line—the whole district inside the line—desperately poor! You can see it at a glance—if—if—you—have the key—if you have the key."

She was stooping over the table, with the back of her neck exposed, and he had gently touched her hair. Then he put his hand on her neck; and she did not move.

"Alma!" His hand softly pressed upon her neck and held it, and she did not move.

That was the thrill of his life—the never-to-be-forgotten ecstasy—when beneath his hand she remained quite motionless, except for the shiver or wave of fear that seemed to run along her spine.

"Lenny—don't. You oughtn't to do it."

He had taken her from the table, and was holding her in his arms by the wall while greedily he kissed her face and lips.

"Yes—and you must kiss me too. Kiss me, Alma."

Very soon she obeyed him.

"Is it wicked of me? Lenny, will you hate me now?" And for a moment she clung to him. "I tried to get on without you. But I felt as if I should go mad or die."

She seemed to become limp in his arms, and suddenly he understood that she was giving herself to him absolutely—no terms, no conditions, surrender.

He remembered every one of his thoughts, as gaily, joyously, he walked away from the ugly pile of flats.

He realized the full extent of his good fortune. He had obtained, almost without an effort, that which most men in vain crave for, sigh for, faint for, from adolescence to senile decay—the perfect mistress. Already he had

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sickened against the travesty of love that is a matter of bargain and sale. A necessity perhaps, if you can get nothing else; but fatiguing, stupefying, enervating; dust and ashes for which you pay the most extravagant price.

But he determined to taste his raptures cautiously. Everything should be considered; rashness ought to be avoided; certain rules must be laid down. They were desirable for her sake as well as for his own. And he would be always kind and gentle with her; always grateful to her. And some day, in the dim future, he would assuredly put everything right, by—— But even then, during the first glow of his delight, he shied away from the future.

When he got back to Westchurch, he found the whole place transfigured, radiant, smiling. The heat no longer oppressed him; he marched up and down the parade lightly and untiringly. Everybody seemed amusing and jolly. It was the glorious secret, that henceforth he carried with him, making the world appear harmonious, entrancing, magical. Alma was waiting for him in London. He might go to her whenever he pleased. She was counting the days to his return.

And so, year after year, she made him happy and contented: his life could not be dull or meaningless while it held the hidden treasure of her love.

Whatever he might think of the gross traffic of sensual joys, he knew, or fancied he knew, that he was a man who could not safely deprive himself of some sort of association with women. When he had not the reality, longings for imagined delights bothered him. But a little of reality satisfied him. Thus he had swung always between the weariness of fact and the torment of fancy, until with Alma he found the just equipoise and was at peace.

He adhered to what he called their rules—extracting all the bliss that may be enjoyed without danger of diffi-

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culty, complications, embroglios, or an expansion of the secret leading to discovery. Perhaps he refused to weigh the possibility that there was something very mean in caution so one-sided. Perhaps he purposely shut his eyes to the knowledge that she suffered under his prearranged limitations, his moderated transports, and his abrupt reticences. But certainly he never for an instant admitted the idea that he was taking everything and giving nothing in exchange.

XVIII

HE moved in his chair, looked down at St. James's Street, watched people on the opposite pavement. Then once more external objects faded, and he resumed his train of anxious thought.

Alma's trick of taking things for granted! Yes, that lay at the bottom of all his trouble. At first there had been no bargaining, no promises of any kind whatever. But again Alma was taking things too much for granted. Her desire was to be with him—that was her recurrent phrase,—to be with him, whenever possible or convenient now; to be with him always, later on. And to this he agreed. He had felt—for a long time—that he could never exist without her.

At first she did not talk about the future; she was entirely contented in the present. Hers was a character very difficult to understand. It was firmer and stronger than he would have guessed. He had anticipated that there might be remorseful doubts, occasional repinings, frequent reminders about the conventions and proprieties which she had consented to ignore. But no, to his surprise, she betrayed no disquiet, no self-consciousness. As far as he could penetrate the workings of her mind, she was proud of herself—prouder, a great deal, than in the early days of their acquaintance. She had adopted the doctrine that he was fond of quoting to her. Great love justifies everything. She admired him for his filial devotion, even when it grievously upset her first childish hope. Well then, she

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seemed to think that she had joined now in Lenny's sacrifice, as well as aiding him to continue it. She too had sacrificed herself to the old gentleman in the Bath-chair.

But when the Bath-chair should become empty? Why, then of course the sacrifice would terminate for both of them. All impediment to their union would naturally be removed.

During the early stages this was never said in words. Certainly the word marriage was not uttered by either of them. Probably to her mind it went without saying. The greater included the less. Why not? The companionship was to be rendered permanent; and, if only for convenience, they would legalize the bond in the usual manner. As he understood most thoroughly, her mind was devoid of schemingness or artful stratagem when she thus began to imply the existence of a promise which he had never made. And, as he knew well, he had accepted the implication. His silence was itself a pledge.

He was frowning now, very gently biting his upper lip, and thinking most strenuously. The outside world had altogether ceased to exist.

Yes, he was pledged to marry her. Not a doubt of it. But supposing, for the sake of argument, that he wished to get out of it for good and all, he could almost say there had never been an explicit promise. Tacit admissions, if you like, but never the word itself.

Then he remembered how the word *had* been used. Not only vague talk of where they might live some day, what kind of pretty house they would occupy, what species of friends they would select for their social circle, but also specific, unchallenged, compromising scraps of sentimental chatter.

"Lenny, when I am an old married woman, I shall ask

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you to bring me to dine at this restaurant. As a birthday treat perhaps! We won't dress—we'll come just as we are now, and sit at this very table. And our past will spring to life, and we shall feel as if it was all happening again. You will look round the room, and make sure that there is no one here who knows you; and I shall tremble a little, in fear that anybody will recognize me; for a moment we shall forget that there's no need to hide ourselves, that the universe is welcome to see us and envy our happiness. When we think of that, we shall laugh; and I shall slide my hand beneath the table cloth and touch your knee—like this, Lenny."

And he had not checked her. He had allowed her to talk in this style many more times than once.

Then he remembered what perhaps he had often subconsciously tried to forget. That morning at his rooms in Albert Street, when he was hurrying home to the dear invalid and she came and made a scene, he had himself used the word. A mistake! But his emotional stability had been upset; he was full of joy; the reconciliation with his father had shaken him by its promptness;—and then when she made such a fuss, he said anything she wished, to pacify her. He endeavoured to recall his exact sentences. No, it was not worth attempting to do so. He knew that on that occasion, so far as vows and pledges were concerned, he had compromised himself.

He frowned more deeply, and bit his lip a very little harder.

He was arguing the case on both sides—merely exhausting suppositions. Suppose, to continue the argument, he were to back out completely, with what terms would she be fairly entitled to reproach him? A complete withdrawal would be a terrible disappointment to her. Poor Alma! His heart ached when he thought of her enduring all the

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pain of so colossal a disappointment. She was immensely fond of her old Lenny.

And it seemed to him that he was as fond of her as he had ever been. If not quite so fond, at any rate very nearly. Only, he no longer wanted her. Why?

Difficult, almost impossible to answer. Roughly—logic of facts,—because she had sustained him under his severe trial; and now the trial was over, he required no sustentation. His one desire now was for repose; and the form that this idea of repose was slowly assuming appeared to him as escape from all claims of other people, all care for others, all anxiety that did not strictly relate to himself. In the way of altruistic solicitude, he had so to speak shot his bolt. He felt literally incapable of beginning again—even on the smallest scale. The marvellous, long-continued achievement of protecting and tending the dead man had drained him of energy. There was not an ounce of it left to meet fresh demands.

As to the solace of love, and the advantages, if not the necessity, of female companionship—well, perhaps he was entering a new phase. The old life had exhausted him, the new life must restore him; and he imagined, *felt* that an element, even a main factor, in the restorative process would be the charm of novelty. Yes, novelty—strange scenes, untried pleasures, unfamiliar faces. On his travels he would meet many women—all of them strangers, of different race, of alien habits, of unusual seductiveness. Some love might come before he got home again. Without emulating the sailor's ambition and finding a wife at every port, a man going round the world with money in his pockets cannot fail to meet eyes that will languish and hands that are willing to interlace.

He thought about marriage generally. Of course, if Alma had substantial means of her own, were even fairly

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well off— Can anything be gained by blinking a fact that every man of the world readily, unhesitatingly admits? The foundation of happiness in the marriage state nowadays is an ample income. Life is so horribly expensive; and when want comes in at the door, love flies out of the window. A cynical proverb—but the dreadful truth of it confirmed by the most casual observation of one's friends' experience.

Supposing that he persisted in the quixotic plan to denude himself for the benefit of two ungrateful sisters, he would then have only a bachelor's income left. How *can* one marry on nine hundred a year? Swiftly he was confronted with the uninviting pictures of a dual household conducted on such narrow funds. A horrid little flat—scarcely better than Frances Shipham's; ill-cooked food, unbrushed clothes; perpetual economy, never-ending calculation; impossibility to afford cab fares, theatre tickets, restaurant meals. Half a dozen times in the year he might dine at his club—the coffee room three-shilling dinner—and feel that he was indulging in reckless extravagance. For months they would be forced to scrape and save, if they wished to lay by enough for a summer holiday. And then one of them would fall ill, and the doctor's bill would blow their seaside trip to blazes. They would sit gasping through the August heat, creep out at night for a penny ride on an omnibus, grow paler and more nervous and irritable every day. . . . And then perhaps would come to them the blessing of children. The *blessing*—in such circumstances! That would finally sink them beneath the merciless pressure of poverty. Moves to cheaper quarters; resignation of club; shabby garments, bursting boots, broken hearts;—two fools who once refused to be guided by common sense, and are now what you see before you: a slatternly, fretful, middle-aged woman and a ragged, unkempt,

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hollow-cheeked, despairing, elderly man. Oh, what a horrible picture!

If Alma were rich instead of being poor— But what is the use of conjectural fancies, when hard facts stare one in the face?

Gradually the resolution had formed itself. This marriage must be postponed. For more than a year—for considerably longer than would suffice for the foreign tour. The doubt concerning his health was a valid excuse. What did Dr. Searle say? These headaches! Vital need of caution.

As the determination strengthened, all seemed to become lighter, clearer. The oppressive sensations were swiftly passing away from him. He had knocked half the weight out of his burden, and with one firm effort he could throw it off entirely. He would explain to Alma that on the score of health he must delay.

He looked down into St. James's Street. It was bright and gay, full of well-dressed people bustling joyously. The marriage must be postponed—indefinitely.

XIX

YET he postponed announcing the postponement. For five or six days he continued to think of it, and his resolve was always growing stronger. He merely shirked an ordeal. But then Alma precipitated matters.

She wrote to him; and portions of her letter were so prettily expressed that they brought moisture to his eyes. He was touched by her candid sincerity, as well as by her unselfish affection.

"My own sweetheart,"—As he read it he could hear her voice—"You are making me most miserable. Why don't you come to me, why don't you summon me, why am I left quite alone? What should naturally have brought us together seems to be pushing us apart. I know how deeply you still mourn your father's death; but why may not I, who grieve for you, grieve with you? Why are you holding me outside your sorrow?"

"Or is it something else, some other trouble that you keep back from me? Yes, I think it is something more than your grief. You have some trouble, and you won't trust me to share it. Last time we met I saw it, I felt it—a shadow on your dear face. And you went away with it, as if from a stranger who might not read your thoughts, or as if from a friend in whom you had lost confidence.

"But, my darling, when have I ever failed you? Why should you leave off trusting me? Do come to me. Do trust me. Tell everything to your poor sad little Alma."

He was in for it now. He made an appointment with

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her for the afternoon of the following Saturday. She was to come to his hotel at half-past three.

He received her in a private sitting-room; and while he walked about it and nervously awaited her arrival, he thought it was the most odious room that he had as yet been compelled to make use of. Its luxuries and ornaments were so purely of the hotel type, so little homelike.

"Ah! . . . Come in, Alma. Here I am."

At sight of her he felt himself wavering. She was all in black. She wore mourning for his sake. She looked so pale and unhappy, and she came to him with such a pretty, graceful haste.

But he must pull himself together, and attack the business in hand.

"Lenny. My Lenny." She had raised her veil to kiss him—with the gestures that he had seen a thousand times,—and now she was pointing to the door that obviously communicated with adjacent apartments. "May I leave my hat in there?"

"That is not my bedroom. They couldn't give me two rooms together. I am sleeping on the third floor."

She looked at him, flushed, and became pale again.

"Alma dear, let us sit over here;" and he indicated a hideous sofa covered with bronze stamped velvet. "You asked me to tell you everything—and I'll do so. But I fear what I have to say will distress you."

They sat side by side on the sofa. Automatically he had taken her hands in his, and he noticed that they were trembling.

"Yes," she whispered. "Tell me, dear. You—you frighten me by your seriousness."

Then he began about his health—describing in vague terms its very unsatisfactory condition.

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"I endeavoured to make light of it. I didn't speak of it to anyone—not even to Doctor Searle—until a little while ago. Then I mentioned what a specialist had said, and how I struggled not to take a gloomy view, myself; but——"

He could not go on. Her face had become ashen grey, her eyes were distended by fear, she trembled convulsively.

"Oh, my darling," she whispered, "what is it? What do they say is the matter with you?"

"Well, the doctors don't seem to know;" and he coughed, to clear his throat. "But they advise me to be very careful—to avoid nervous excitement—to spare myself as much as possible."

"Yes, yes—no doubt that's wise. But, Lenny—heart of my heart—do they hint at specific danger? Do—do they seem to apprehend some disease that they don't yet name?"

"No." And the words were forced from his lips by pity. "Alma dear, I mustn't alarm you unnecessarily. I don't myself think that it is anything really dangerous."

He was observing her closely. Her fear was entirely unselfish. It was fear for *him*. As yet she had not a single thought for herself.

"No, no," she said rapidly. "Of course nothing really dangerous. Dear heart, how could it be—when you are so big, so grand, so strong? And, Lenny,—I'm not frightened now—and we shouldn't let doctors frighten us. They can't always be relied on—their judgments, I mean. But tell me exactly the sort of things they said."

With a great effort she was regaining calm; and the effort was for his sake. She was still full of alarm; but she bravely strove to conceal it. She wished to put courage into him. He could read her thought quite easily, while she asked him breathlessly eager questions.

"Yes, yes," she said frequently, with assumed cheerful-

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ness. "Oh, I won't believe—I *don't* believe there's anything whatever the matter with you. Why *should* there be? No, no—my darling is just feeling the effects of his sorrow; but it will pass off, Lenny. Time the healer! Time heals all wounds. But, Lenny, we'll go to other doctors—we'll get high and mighty opinions;" and she smiled, slid her arm round his neck, and gently sought to draw him to her.

"Oh, I have confidence in Searle. And doctors at the top of the tree aren't always the best—Searle said so himself."

"Yes, but my Lenny is so precious." Her arm was about his neck—supple and warm and slender. Her voice had a new note—something full and deep, suggestive of the motherly protective tone. "My Lenny is like a king—if he is ill or thinks that he is ill, all the doctors in the land must consider his case, must sharpen their wits, and drag out their finest stores of learning to cure him."

And his resolution wavered again. Her unselfish care for him was profoundly touching. Other friends he might find—temporary friends in every port,—but where and when would he find such a friend as this?

Nevertheless he once more pulled himself together. He had prepared himself for difficulty; and it would be sheer weakness to renounce the attempt, just because a tone of her voice seemed to vibrate along brain-paths that had been worn smooth by habitual use. He summoned all his strength; and the determination, reinforcing itself, reached a further point than anything he had hitherto acknowledged as its ultimate aim. He must be done with the whole thing. Now that he had begun, he must finish the work.

"My dear Alma, I want no more doctors. I am absolutely *sure* that I ought to act on the advice that has been given to me."

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"Yes—of course. What do they advise?"

"First of all, I am to go away. Searle thinks it is quite necessary—to get complete change."

"Yes." Her arm tightened. She brought her face nearer to his; and now he saw the birth of a fear for herself.

"Yes, yes," she repeated. "But for how long?"

"Oh, a longish time—quite a long time."

"Am I to go with you?"

"No, dear. That is out of the question."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, the fact is—as I understand my state of health"—He again cleared his throat, and paused. "I am not well enough to look after anybody else. The advice is, to take things easily, to rest, and recuperate."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, right away—probably all round the world."

She had raised her other arm, and she locked her hands behind his neck.

"Lenny, take me with you. Think what it would mean to me if you left me here to wait for your return." She spoke fast, and with breathless anxiety. "I should be in unceasing dread. You say a long time. It would be a year, I suppose. And in every minute of it I should be thinking of you. Is my darling better? Is he worse? Letters would come so slowly. There would be months when I should have no news of you. I couldn't, I *couldn't* live through such a year."

"I fear there is no help for it. I honestly feel that I ought to go."

"Yes, but not without me. Think! It is just when you are needing me most, that you suggest our being separated. You may fall ill—really ill—far away, among strangers. Oh, I *couldn't* bear it. You must take your Alma to nurse you, to watch over you, to guard you."

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"My dearest girl, how can you possibly go with me—unless you go as my wife?"

"Then take me as your wife. Why not? No one on earth would think there was any disrespect to your father's memory in our marrying so soon—we have waited for years—what can a few months matter now? Besides, no one need know of our marriage. We can keep it secret till we come back."

"Alma," he said, heavily and sadly, "you don't understand the position."

"Then let me understand."

She said the words slowly, in a changed voice. She was watching his face intently; her fingers seemed to become loose upon his neck, and she drew her hands away.

"Well, I fear—in fact it is unavoidable—that this journey—voyage—upsets all old plans—and wishes. It—and my health too, of course—necessitates delay, postponement. It puts off our marriage.—I should be mad to marry at the present time. . . . Dearest girl, I can't pretend that what I have to say won't distress you—as it does me. . . . But with regard to the future— Well, I doubt if I can ever marry. I doubt if I should ever be really justified in marrying."

While he spoke, her face drooped lower and lower, till she raised her hands and hid it.

"Lenny!"

Her voice came as a wail of pain.

He had explained things at length; and now she was lying on the sofa silently weeping, with her arms stretched out over the cushioned end of the sofa, her face still hidden. The pretty Alma Reed hat lay on the floor, trailing its black feathers in the dust.

He looked at the back of her head—the masses of dark

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hair so gracefully bound and coiled. He was dreadfully sorry for her; but it seemed better that she should have her cry out undisturbed. And what consolation could he offer, since his determination remained unshaken?

He himself was sitting near the fire, which he had just replenished with coals. Watching the tongues of flame that darted forth and then retreated, he thought of how firelight had associated itself in the memory of many important hours of his life. So often when he had been undergoing a stress of emotion, firelight flickered on a wall, a ceiling, or somebody's face.

He stared vacantly and wearily about the room. Everything appeared to him abominably ugly—this thick carpet that smelt of dust; the dingy brocade and the grubby muslin of the curtains at the window; the rickety round table that concealed its uneven legs beneath a sage-green cloth; the imitation Sheraton sideboard, displaying spurious china vases, a sham fern, and a painfully real wine list. All so ugly! And the ugliness of the room seemed to harmonize with and increase the ugliness of his task.

It was a long business. Presently he went over to the sofa, and began to stroke her hair.

“Alma dear!”

She made an inarticulate moan.

“Alma, don't cry. Stop crying—and let us talk quietly.”

He was very tired; but he thought that the worst of it was over. Then, to his surprise, she suddenly sprang up from the sofa.

“I can't bear it. I won't bear it.”

She was pacing to and fro, now wringing her hands, now waving her arms—looking haggard, dishevelled, half insane; and the next moment it seemed to him that he was back at the very starting-point, and that the thing must be begun all over again.

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"Alma, do calm yourself."

As she turned to him, the violence of her pain translated itself into violent gestures. Her face was distorted by twitchings, she gasped and struggled for breath, and then there came a rush of words poured out in passionate revolt against his decision.

"I won't submit to it. You are not ill. That's just an excuse—a cruel trick, a senseless invention. You are tired of me—and you snatch at any pretence. Oh, yes—it's too shamelessly transparent. Very likely there's somebody else—Yes, that would be a reason. And I count for nothing, if you can make me submit—but I won't submit."

"My dear girl—how can you say such things?"

He would not have recognized her. She raged and wept at the same time; she pleaded and stormed, mingling piteous prayers with wild accusations. The accusations were most painful.

"Alma," he murmured, "I *respected* you. At least give me credit for that. No one can say there was anything really wrong between us."

Her tear-stained face twitched and quivered; and she laughed, as it seemed to him, hysterically.

"You respected me—but, my God, at what a cost to me!"

He sat limply on the sofa, his hands loose between his knees, his eyes staring at the dusty carpet. He felt dazed by her energy, and shocked by something of the virago perceptible in these passionate recriminations.

"And it isn't true, Lenny. *Respect!* You dragged me down to an infamous obliteration of self—you made me do vile things."

"Alma!"

"You have unsexed me almost,—forced me to stamp

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out every natural instinct,—broken me in to a low slavery, instead of opening my life to wide joys and noble hopes.”

“I—I simply don’t understand you.”

“You have held me on the threshold of marriage—of Nature’s union—for seven cruel years, while all that was best in me was fading, dying—and now you are tired of the plaything you’ve destroyed.”

“No. Alma, I swear——”

“Nothing *wrong!* Lenny, if you throw me over, I shall hold myself lower and cheaper than the women of the streets. They would never have been so subservient.”

“You knew my circumstances—not a free agent. You knew I was fond of you.”

“Fond of me! And love was to justify everything. We both said it—our love—to last for ever. You are mine—nobody else’s: just as I am yours. And I won’t give you up. You can’t make me.”

She looked tragic and terrible; and he pitied her. But this thing must end—he was more determined every minute. His head had begun to throb and ache—the drain upon nerve currents was unbearable. These symptoms prevented the possibility of further wavering. A dim instinct of self-preservation seemed to drive him and sustain him. Soon he would be through the crisis. Such an outburst from a naturally gentle and docile creature could not last long. But he understood clearly that so long as it continued, there would be a plain contest between them. One will must triumph; one must yield.

“Alma dear—if only we could talk quietly, if you would listen to reason.”

“Lenny, have mercy.”

There—in another moment the end of the storm had come. The violent gestures ceased; her features were composed again almost to the old symmetry; tears streamed

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down her cheeks; and the words had no other sound than that of a prayer.

“Oh, Lenny, don’t do it. Be true to me. It’s too wicked—too monstrously wicked.”

But the task was not over yet. Now she lay on the sofa again, writhing, twisting about, sobbing convulsively, making a dreadful noise. Her grief was like the howling and wailing of a beaten child—her sobs were as loud as screams.

“Alma, for Heaven’s sake, stop. Control yourself. People will hear you, if you go on in this way.”

Indeed he felt a very real anxiety lest this should happen, and he implored her to check her lamentations. It was just about tea-time; at this hour ladies would be returning from afternoon calls, and taking off their wraps; they would be going in and out of the rooms all along the corridor. One of them would hear the noise, trace its source, and then go racing down to the bureau, and tell the clerks that a man was maltreating a woman in Number Forty-two.

“Alma, I beg of you. Please——”

He could not silence her, and when there came a tapping at the door he sprang towards it full of consternation.

“Alma, jump up. Go and stand by the window. . . . Turn your back. . . . Don’t let anyone see your face;” and he opened the door just sufficiently to let himself out into the corridor, and immediately shut the door behind him.

But it was only the floor-waiter, inquiring if he should serve tea in the sitting-room, or if the lady and gentleman proposed to drink tea and enjoy the music downstairs in the lounge. The waiter did not appear to have heard anything unusual; his manner betrayed no signs of wonder; but Lenny was so confused that, instead of promptly get-

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ting rid of him, he told him to bring tea and cakes for two.

Then there was a long silent pause, a truce to the pitiful conflict, while Alma sat on a chair by the window, with her back turned to the room.

The waiter brought tea-things, fetched a white cloth from the ugly chiffonier, very slowly laid the table; and after what seemed an immense time brought the tea.

She would not drink her tea; she refused to eat her cake. The meal remained untouched. Lenny could not feed alone—he smoked a couple of cigarettes, and went without the nourishment and stimulant that he undoubtedly required.

It was nearly dark now. For a long time he had been sitting in an armchair by the fire, with Alma on his lap. She had wound her arms round him; and her wet face pressed against his, so that he was bathed with her tears.

“Lenny,” she whispered, “I shouldn’t survive it. Truly I believe it would kill me—or I should kill myself.”

“No, no. One should never say such things, even though one doesn’t really mean them.”

“But I do mean them.”

She withdrew her face, laid her hands on his shoulders, and made her last appeal.

“Are you angry with me? If so, forget—forgive. One doesn’t think what one says, when one is fighting for one’s life. That’s what I’m doing, Lenny. I must fight for life—for more than life. But in all else I’m the same—your little Alma, your servant, your slave.”

There was just sufficient light to see her face—the white oval that narrowed so quickly to the soft chin, the delicate nose, the pretty, sensitive mouth with the pathetic droop at the corners of the quivering lips. How well, how long

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he had known its changing expressions that passed swiftly as sunshine and shadows beneath the dark cloud of hair.

"Alma, I shall be grateful to you as long as I live."

"Yes, but let me live too."

She was tragic still; but it was a tragic sweetness. The other, the tragic violence, he had been able to withstand; but this melted his heart completely, lacerated his tenderest feelings. Her voice seemed to vibrate deep inside him, and she was caressing him all the time that she pleaded so despairingly.

"If you don't want to marry me, let us go on as we are."

"No, that wouldn't be fair to you."

"Yes, it is what I ask. I'll never complain."

"Oh, no—It would spoil all your chances of happiness. I have to think of you as well as of myself. I am not everybody."

"You are. You are."

He was torn with pity. And as she went on, in the same sweet tragic tone, he felt astonished by her power of language. It seemed as though anguish gave her a strange eloquence. But nothing could really shake him. An obstinate deep-seated instinct of self-protection was steadily controlling him. Even now he felt those cerebral sensations of immense fatigue—a fullness, a closeness,—a heavy, throbbing discomfort throughout his head. He *must* be done with it.

"Lenny, my love, my life, don't leave me without hope."

She slid from his lap to her knees, knelt between his legs in her characteristic attitude, and raised her hands to his breast. The flicker of firelight played about her hair; and his pity for her became burningly, torturingly intense.

"I'll be brave, Lenny. I won't worry you. I have

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waited. I will go on waiting. . . . But I want to know that we shall be together towards the end of our lives. Perhaps not married even then; but together, under one roof, when the shadows begin to close in on us. Then when the darkness parts us, if it is I who go first, I'll wait very near—always near you—till we can pass together into another existence."

"My sweet Alma!"

"You and I have found each other in this maze of life. It is fate—our joint destiny—and we shouldn't try to break its thread. We have comforted each other. Two little sparks that were drawn together, to make a tiny flame in the eternal night! Don't let us be false now to what the vast unseen powers have decreed. . . . I don't believe in God as I used to do—Lenny, you don't believe. You took my faith from me. *You* were my religion. . . . But there *is* something—some guiding force—some ruling law that we cannot safely defy. . . ."

"Alma, you are making it so horribly difficult."

Kneeling, she seemed such a fragile thing—the thing that loved him. Her fingers pulled and pressed, seemed to drag at his heart-strings.

"Alma dear, what more can I say? I have lain awake night after night, trying to see any other way out of it. But I couldn't."

"Lenny—my sweetheart, my own one."

His head throbbed dolorously, his whole brain was hot and full, his thoughts flashed erratically. The task had become insupportable. It was like beating off a dog that swam behind a boat. Such things happen—merciless brutality! How are they possible? But self-protection? Safety? Men are forced to abandon their dogs sometimes, in order to save their own lives.

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"Alma!" His voice was hoarse and strained. "There's no help for it—none whatever. We can't go on. It must be good-bye."

Finished at last. He had just put her into a cab, and was coming back through the crowded hall. He felt dazed and confused in the midst of the noise and animation that surrounded him; and he sank wearily upon a divan behind a pile of luggage, to rest himself.

A gay scene. He watched it stupidly—porters bringing in more and more luggage; a stream of visitors from the continental train; Americans, Frenchmen, Germans, sending telegrams, shouting names, clamouring for the bureau; the huge golden gates of the lift opening and shutting, disgorging established residents, swallowing exhausted travellers; young girls, already dressed for dinner, waiting with obese mammas near the door of the vast coffee room; young men hurrying towards them, carrying white fluffy cloaks, laughing, offering nosegays, chattering of theatre tickets; the string band striking up with a soft crash, and gliding smoothly in a valse tune; music, laughter, bright light, the pulse of life beating strong.

He got up, and, moving heavily, joined the rapid stream of people that still flowed towards the lift.

He was done—dead beat. He gave up all thought of going to the club; dined, very simply, in the hotel grill-room; and went to bed immediately after his coffee and liqueur.

XX

IT was over. But all next day, Sunday, he was thinking of her, in imagination seeing her. Would she go out? Would she lie on her bed, face downward, weeping? Would Frances Shipham sit by her side and pat her hand, and vainly try to console her, by saying that her loss was no real loss; that she was lucky to escape from someone who had never been worthy of her; that it was a blessing in disguise? Of course she would tell everything to Frances Shipham, and Frances would be tremendously indignant.

He quite expected interference from Frances; would not have been surprised had Frances come down to call upon him at the club. But no one came to the club; no one attempted to trouble him any further.

He felt almost sure that Alma would write to him—a last letter of farewell,—a long sad letter that would cause pain in the reading. Very likely she was writing it now, blotting it with her tears; or perhaps already it was in the hands of the postman. She would send it to the hotel, or possibly here to the club.

He had finished the task for ever—that was his first thought, when he woke on Monday morning. Everything over and done with. But, somehow, he did not yet feel quite easy in his mind. The burden gone, yet some discomfort remaining—perhaps only the memory of past weariness.

No letter from Alma came to the hotel, and there was no letter waiting for him at the club. He read the newspapers, lounged about the library, strolled from one room

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to another, but did not care to go out of doors. He talked to one or two members, but found that his mind wandered; he could not pin his attention. When a man told him an amusing anecdote, he failed to laugh at the right place; he stared with a fixed smile on his lips, but no intelligence in his eyes. "You don't see the point, eh? It was his mother-in-law—the person he met, don't you know, when he opened the door, was his mother-in-law." And the story-teller himself laughed heartily. "It struck me as devilish good." Then Lenny laughed too, confessed he had been slow to see the point, but said that the anecdote was undoubtedly devilish good.

Some vague unformulated idea—something sinister and ugly seemed to be lying in the background, dulling the edge of all his perceptions. Going downstairs for the purpose of weighing himself in the hall, he thought of her. Poor girl! She would be at the office now, working—working hard; and he seized at the notion suggested by Frances Shipham. The work would occupy her; she would not suffer while at work. . . . But perhaps she had not gone to work.

He forgot his intention of weighing himself. He passed the machine without looking at it; went into the morning-room, and roamed from table to table, picking up the leather-covered journals, and putting them down again, mechanically. Had Alma gone to work? He wished that he could know for certain.

It was after lunch, and he stood by one of the telegraphic tape instruments, watching the long paper ribbon as it clicked out and fell like an endless snake upon the tessellated pavement. Soon a servant would come and make the snake all straight and tidy, cut it into regular lengths, and pin them on one of the news boards. Lenny picked up the ribbon, let it slide through his hand, and

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idly glanced at the printed words. General news, not Racing or Stock Exchange! This would go on the centre board.

Suddenly a word on the tape seemed to glow like fire. Suicide!

Lenny felt as if he had received a paralytic stroke, as if his head was bursting open, as if that dark thought that he had been harbouring all day had exploded into an overwhelming conflagration. Was it chance or fate?

He lifted the tape with shaking hands, and read the whole of the message. "Suicide and gallant attempted rescue. 11.45. Well-dressed young woman threw herself over London Bridge. Fireman G. F. Smith, of tug *River Queen*, dived overboard, and brought body to shore, but life was already extinct. Body now lying at Tower Steps Mortuary; not yet identified."

His hands, jerking spasmodically, had torn the tape. For a moment he leaned against the wall, and with difficulty prevented himself from falling upon the instrument. All strength had gone out of his legs, every drop of blood seemed to be drawn away from his heart. He thought that he was going to faint, or to have a fit.

Presently, however, he was safely seated on a couch in the morning-room, wiping his forehead with a silk handkerchief, and trying to think sanely and quietly about the unknown woman who had jumped from London Bridge.

Impossible! Utterly impossible. Not for a moment longer would he entertain this abominable nerve-shattering fear. She never could or would do such a thing—never, never. Then the fear shook him again. Why had he been so uneasy yesterday and to-day? It was the possibility of some such appalling catastrophe that had lurked for thirty-six hours in the dark background of his mind. And the clammy horror made him break into another cold per-

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spiration, as he remembered her own words—"Don't leave me without hope. . . . It would kill me—or I should kill myself." But she did not mean what she said. Women say these things, but they never mean them; never, never. Then he distinctly felt his heart stop beating, and he was almost certain that this time he really would faint. He had remembered her answer to that consoling idea. "But I do mean it."

The minutes seemed as long as hours, but gradually he was recovering possession of his faculties. He was succeeding in his effort to rid himself of baseless fears.

A diabolical coincidence—one of those tricks of chance by which facts appear suddenly to blend with fancies. When one is in a morbidly anxious state, the mind loses all power of rejecting improbabilities. It will accept as the truth any circumstance, however unlikely, provided that the circumstance bears the colour or matches with the drift of one's previous thoughts. Why London Bridge? Miles away from her place of business—out of the line of any direction that she could possibly have taken when going from her home. What should she want in the city? If any bridge, it would have been Westminster Bridge. Then he remembered the words of description on the tape. "Well-dressed young woman." That, of course, meant some poor soul just decently clad, but belonging to the humbler classes—a shop girl—a work girl—a waitress. If it had been she, they would unquestionably have described her as a lady. They would have made a fuss about it, instead of recording it as a distressing but quite usual occurrence. Poor young women—they are going over bridges almost every day.

Soon he was able to get up from the settee, to walk quite steadily into the hall, and to look at the tape again.

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Yes—"Body not yet identified." Never to be identified, perhaps. Tower Steps Mortuary! Of course one could go there and see for oneself—but that thought struck cold, and made his legs feel very weak again.

The fear had altogether gone. He was upstairs in the billiard-room; and he stood with his back to the fire, warming himself. There were half a dozen people in the room. A member had craved permission to finish a game that he was playing with the marker.

"Yes, yes," said Lenny, "of course. I don't want to play myself, and I always enjoy watching a good game. How many points is he giving you?"

"Fifty in the hundred. . . . By Jove—he has missed it!"

The marker had broken down at a long losing hazard, and Lenny asked him the amount of his break.

"Thirty-seven, sir."

"Well done."

The fear had completely gone. He was ashamed of himself for being so readily upset. It was his anxiety for her ultimate welfare that had rendered him so morbid and sensitive. Nothing could better prove how great his fondness had been than the rapidity with which he had been upset by an idea of danger befalling her. But it was an insult to her to suppose, even for a moment, that she would commit so enormous a sin. She might threaten it, but the natural loftiness and balanced strength of her mind would infallibly prevent her from carrying the threat into execution. While he had been shaking with unfounded horror, no doubt she was quietly working at the office of the Association—perhaps so absorbed in her labours that every thought of him, every thought of her life outside the office, was completely shut out. At this moment she

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was there—really only a mile away from him—quietly, comfortably working.

He had gone downstairs again, and he was now in the secluded lobby behind the hall, where members did their telephoning. There were two or three instruments, each contained in a small glass room, so that you could shut yourself up in a neatly-contrived silence, while you talked about private matters to distant friends. It was all very simple and easy. But Lenny had provided himself with one of the servants—a clever page-boy—to assist him. The boy was in the box working the instrument, and Lenny stood at his elbow, instructing him as to what he should say now that he had obtained the correct number.

“Is that the Hygienic Home Association? . . . Yes, sir,” said the boy, “it’s them.”

Then Lenny prompted him, and the boy did all the talking.

“We want to inquire about the new pamphlet. The Garden City pamphlet. Is it published yet? Can we speak to the secretary who attends to the pamphlets. . . . Is Miss Reed there? Can we speak to Miss Reed?”

The boy turned round. “He says hold the line. Miss Reed is somewhere in the building. They are fetching her.” And he offered the receiver to Lenny.

Lenny refused it. “Wait,” he said, “till they say Miss Reed is there, then I will take it.”

There was a long pause. Lenny had brought out his silk handkerchief, and he was drying the palms of his hands. He continued to roll the handkerchief, and rub with it, until the boy turned to him again.

“Here you are, sir; she’s at the wire now.”

Then Lenny took the receiver, put it to his ear, and heard her voice.

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"I am Miss Reed speaking. Who is it? . . . Who is it? . . . Who is it?"

Her voice! No one else's. He would have recognized it among millions of voices. He pushed the receiver back into the boy's hand, and whispered the next prompting.

"Say: 'It doesn't matter. We want the new pamphlet, but we'll call for it.' . . . That's all. Hang it up. Cut it off. That's all. . . . Thank you. I'm much obliged. Many thanks."

Lenny put the handkerchief in his pocket, and went upstairs again—to the library this time.

The sound of her voice had affected him strangely—so distinct, yet so remote. Something mysterious and wonderful in this communication with a familiar but invisible person—almost what one might conceive as characteristic of a ghost's voice. Had she been really dead, he might have imagined hearing her thus speak to him—a few words—quite unmistakably her voice, and then silence.

He chose a writing-table in a corner, and began to write to her. It was a difficult letter. He knew what he wanted to say, but the difficulty was to find exact expression—not to say too much or too little. He intended that the gist of the letter should be an answer to one of her most poignant entreaties—"Don't leave me without hope." His recent fear, although fundamentally absurd, pointed to the wisdom of doing all that he could to guard against its possible recurrence. He had perhaps been imprudent, even unkind, in so firmly closing the door upon the future.

He made several false starts. Indeed, a lot of the nice club notepaper lay in the waste-paper basket before he got fairly going. Then emotion gained on him, and he began to write faster. . . . "My reason for insisting that

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we should take our parting as absolutely final was consideration for your future happiness. Since I could not assure it myself, I wished to leave it quite untrammelled; it seemed to me that it would be very wrong if I held out hopes which I probably would never be able to fulfil. Of course, later on, in a few years, if my health ceased to trouble me, we might meet again and renew the companionship which has been so sweet in the past. But how can I ask you to wait for what would be a vague chance? To accept such abnegation on your part would be the height of selfishness on mine, because the indefinite link with me would preclude you from making fresh ties. I know such an idea is far from your mind now. But remember what you said yourself. Time is the great healer. Time heals all wounds."

The pen seemed to be driven for a little way now by a most generous impulse.

"And do not doubt that I am, and shall ever be, grateful to you. I feel—bitterly enough—that without intending to treat you badly, I have been an unlucky influence in your life. But, Alma dear, we are all such puppets of fate. My own fate has been hard in many respects, because it has always seemed to me that I was deprived of the power to govern events, however trivial, and I have drifted inexorably on currents that I did not select, and could not escape."

He paused, and blew his nose. That last sentence, though long and slightly involved, struck him as fine.

"Since Saturday I have thought of you very often, and with hesitation I now suggest that if you really wish to build on the frail chance that fate may once more bring us together, I do not feel strong enough to persist in asking you not to do so. You are stronger than I am—I have always known it,—less susceptible to ups and downs of

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temperament and changes that are induced by the fluctuating hazard of circumstance."

He paused again. That sentence could not be improved.

"So, dear Alma, I must leave it to you after all. You must choose whether there shall be this small hope left, or no hope at all. I will endorse your choice, whichever it may be. Send me a line then soon, to say if it is *au revoir*, or good-bye."

Nothing from her next day. Nothing on the day after—till late in the afternoon. Then, returning to the hotel about tea-time, he found her letter waiting for him. He took it with the bedroom key from the clerk at the bureau, and, instead of going upstairs, walked hurriedly into the lounge.

The band was playing its lively dance music, the whole place was noisy and crowded. Lenny carried his letter from the lounge to an empty drawing-room, and sat down all by himself to read what Alma had to say to him. But he did not immediately open the envelope. He held it in his hand, turned it about, studying the well-known handwriting, thinking of the hundreds, the thousands of letters that had been written to him in the same hand.

So many—so very many of them! They used to lie on the table in the hall at Westchurch. Whenever he came in from a walk, he looked at the table to see if there was one there. He liked them best when they came in the morning; when the servants brought them to him with his tea and bread and butter. Of course the whole household must have recognized the fact that he had a regular correspondent up in London. Perhaps some of them had tried to guess who this assiduous letter-writer might be. Certainly his father must have noticed the letters, and drawn his own conclusions. None of them knew the hand-

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writing. None of them ever pierced the little mystery.

And he remembered how one day, after luncheon, he had told Mary that if any letters came for him, they were to be sent upstairs to his bedroom, and not left lying about in the hall. That had been a wise foresight—guarding against an accident. There was to be a drawing-room meeting; Mrs. Reed and her daughters were expected. One could not be too careful. Had the stepmother happened to catch a glimpse of one of Alma's letters, it might have set her conjecturing; suspicion might have been roused; two and two might have been put together—the fat might have been in the fire.

At last he opened the envelope, unfolded the paper, and read her answer. Two words only, in the middle of the page. He sat staring at them, and thinking about them, for a long time.

“Good-bye. Alma.”

XXI

REALLY and truly over and done with now.

On these bright autumn mornings the whole world seemed again to smile at him—that cheerful smile of autumn, like the pleasant, casual greeting of a jolly companion, nothing passionate or oppressive or languorous in it. The air was crisp and light—just warm enough to make it agreeable, just cold enough to make it stimulating. His footsteps were firm and strong, with more springiness than he had felt for ages.

Between his early breakfast at the hotel and his proper breakfast at the club, he used to take a stroll—up the Haymarket, through Piccadilly Circus, then a peep of Regent Street, across behind Burlington House, and then southwards,—not a long ramble, merely sufficient exercise to sharpen the edge of one's appetite. The flower girls at the Circus with great baskets of chrysanthemums made a little market that one would had been glad to patronize; pretty students with portfolios under their arms trotted along Burlington Gardens, and one felt inclined to pat them on the shoulder, and praise them for being good girls, and hurrying to their lessons so nicely. Bond Street, as he turned into it, seemed fresh and clean as the seaside, reminding him of his old Westchurch—and to complete the memory, a fishmonger who was squirting water over the marble slabs of the shop, saluted him. "Fine morning, sir."

Yes, thought Lenny, it was good to be alive on such a morning.

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He stepped out briskly down the slope of St. James's Street, and the gentle incline made walking so pleasant that he went past the club-house. The old palace had such a mellowed splendour, with the sunlight flashing, and brown leaves flying over the wall of Marlborough House. There were soldiers in the cloister, and many more in the quadrangle. Then came the inspiriting beat of a drum, and then full music, the sonorous brass that he used to hear when he was a soldier himself for a month or two in every year. These martial strains tempted him a few yards further away from his destination.

He stood on the pavement of Pall Mall, looking through the gates to the open sunshine in St. James's Park. Cabs with luggage passed by—going to Victoria, to catch the boat train very likely. The cabs and trunks set his mind working, brought him a series of vivid mental pictures. Down there was the road that led to the wide world—Como . . . Venice . . . Naples . . . The East . . . , Japan. All these places practically belonged to him; a man may go almost anywhere nowadays. The wide world had become his possession because he was free.

He enjoyed breakfast at the club. Nowhere else had he ever met with such a blending of grandeur and comfort. As a rule there were not more than six breakfasters dotted here and there through the quiet expanse of the magnificent room. In spite of its great size, it was always warm. Fires blazed in basket grates; sunbeams fell genially from high windows, and struck rainbow tints out of the rich carpet; servants moved with silent alacrity, and one seemed to feel bigger, robuster, more important, as one sat in nearly solitary state and glanced with condescension on all the surrounding pomp. Gilded columns, crimson walls, silver plate, enormous dumb-waiters—wherever one turned one's eyes, something noble and impressive. And the way the

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servants laid the dishes on one's table, with such a sense of the importance of their work, with so much tender care for the well-being of their masters. Toast snatched from the toasting machine piping hot, muffins with boiling water under them to prevent them from cooling, and an odorous fizzle issuing from the principal dish. A superior servant brought one the *Times*; it bore the club stamp in faint blue on the front page; it was bound like a book with a bow of green cord,—seeming as if it were a special edition printed for oneself,—recalling the satin programmes supplied at theatres for kings and princes.

Very few members in the club after breakfast: one had the quiet empty rooms to wander about at will. Outside the plate-glass windows London wooed one, and all day long London now seemed to Lenny so sufficingly pleasant. He walked and he drove; and, walking or driving, he thought that he had never till now really appreciated the charm of this vast town. He had liked it always, but he had never regularly lived in it. He had been a visitor; now he was tasting some of the fascination that is reserved for habitual residents. At twilight he came back to the club again. External air cold now, but the club was warm and bright—full of members till dinner time. He drank his tea in the library, basked in the luxury of silence after so much jolly chat, finally stretched himself on one of the couches, sank into snug repose, passed through oblivion to elysium.

Lenny had broken his prison. Without effort he was travelling—round the world. But no sense of fatigue in such dream wanderings. He woke after an hour with a delicious sense of restored energy. Upstairs in billiard-rooms and card-rooms, the friendly hail-fellow-well-met comrades were still assembled, talking, laughing, playing, but at about 7.30 the happy palace began to empty itself: married

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men were going home to dinner; bachelors were off to their attics to put on their dress clothes.

"Hullo, Calcraft, you look fairly bobbish."

"Thank you, Beckford, I'm as jolly as a sandboy."

He was pleased by the welcome that had been accorded to him in the billiard-room. Presently someone asked a question of somebody else.

"Are you dinin' here to-night, Wilmington?"

"Yes, I am," said Sir John.

"I think I'll join you," said Mr. Enfield.

Then Sir John asked Lenny if he proposed to stay.

"Yes, I am."

"We might share a table?"

"Delighted."

Mr. Enfield had rung the bell, and was asking the waiter for a telegraph form. "I must send a word home to tell 'em not to expect me."

Then two other members asked for telegraph forms. Two other wives were to learn at the last moment that they would dine to-night without their lords.

The waiter offered Lenny the case of telegraph forms; but he declined it with a smile. Not necessary. Excuses not required. Only himself to please. No, *he* is a free man.

Sometimes, when passing the windows of the tourists' agency in Cockspur Street he wondered why he had never made those inquiries about through fares, sleeping berths, and luggage registration. He was himself surprised to find that he had not gone away. The month of December had begun, and yet here he was still.

But of late he had been deeply involved in business—business of a distressing nature. On Sunday night, in the hotel smoking-room, he made the acquaintance of a very

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interesting man—or rather of an interesting group of men. This Mr. McAndrew was a Scotsman who had Americanized himself by twenty years of industry and adventure in the United States. He had made and lost fortunes, but now, as he described it, he was “on top of the wave; going strong and big in copper.” The other men were hangers-on of the chieftain, but solid respectable people—a banker from Manchester, a well-known Member of Parliament, a newspaper editor, and a manufacturer of wire. Lenny saw them from time to time, listened to their stories, and was amused by their vigorous hard-headed talk about politics and finance. Mr. McAndrew, the chieftain, seemed to take to Lenny, enjoyed his society, asked him to a large dinner, at which Lenny was impressed by the substantial character of the guests. There were several Members of Parliament, a young man from the American Embassy, and a popular actor. Obviously then, Mr. McAndrew was all right. A person of real weight, not a blown-out impostor. And his all-rightness was further confirmed by what one of the city members of the club told Lenny of his reputation on the far side of Ludgate Hill.

Finally McAndrew offered a tip, or bit of friendly advice, on which Lenny promptly acted.

The advice came at an opportune moment. Lenny was now in possession of all his property, but he had not quite completed that scheme of personal denudation. In fact he had not yet got very far with it. Up to now he had transferred the large sum of £5,000 to his sisters, or in other words a hundred a year for each of them. They ought to be able to get four per cent. safely. £5,000 gone—a very large sum, but small in comparison with his original intentions, which ran to the enormous figure of £20,000.

But already the sisters were growing impatient. They

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wrote most churlishly and ungratefully to Mr. Newall, the Westchurch solicitor, urging him to hurry up, to fulfil promises, to give them their money without delay. Lenny was wounded and annoyed by the tone of these letters. His sisters, after their first hasty acknowledgment of his munificence, were taking the whole thing as their right. Really, they spoke now as though the money belonged to them. It disgusted him; but, nevertheless, he had determined to make another payment in their favour. He would give them still another £1,000 apiece. And after that he really must have time to consider matters carefully. He would make this payment in cash, and the money now lay at the bank. It was just at this point that McAndrew offered him the chance of a wonderful speculation. He suggested that Lenny should buy 2,000 or 3,000 £1 shares in the Nemorna Bay Amalgamated Copper Mines, which now stood at about ten shillings each. He was genuinely to buy them and to hold them, and eventually they would go racing up to £2 or £3 each. Lenny jumped at the chance. It was as though a fairy had brought the thing to him. By this means his generosity would cost him nothing—indeed, he would be a richer man at the end of the whole transaction than he was at the beginning. He sold out stock, and used the proceeds, together with the cash at his bank, for the purchase of 5,000 Nemorna shares, and wrote to Mr. Newall, informing him that for the moment the other matter must wait. After all, it was not pressing.

Then came some anxiously dreaming days. He thought of all the possibilities of his adventure. Dividends of twenty, fifty, a hundred per cent.; a boom; the shares at £5 or £10 each—a little fortune! McAndrew and his friends had told him that he was really to hold the shares, and even to be prepared for them temporarily to go down

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—down to nothing. They explained that the price of eleven shillings at which they could now be procured was a chancey sort of quotation, and bore no true ratio to their value. Adverse criticism, a bad report from touring busy-bodies as to the industry generally, or some pompous warning against rash speculation in a paper like the *Times*, would be sufficient to knock down the price to zero; but it would soon bound up again when the real facts were known, and Lenny was not to be in a hurry even then. He was to hang on and make his golden harvest with his friends. They urged this strongly, and he gathered that they would consider it a dirty trick, if he failed to hold on. They further pointed out that, as a man of means, he could not go wrong. At the worst it would be a lock-up investment.

But one morning Lenny woke to a nerve test that proved too much for him. He had somehow omitted to look at the over-night newspaper, and thus had not learnt what most people knew yesterday. The day's paper gave him disastrous tidings. "Sensational slump in copper. . . . something like a panic. Heavy fall in well-known securities!" Amalgamated Nemorna had gone head over heels into the abyss. His eyes almost started out of his head as he read the quotations—eight and six pence, five and nine pence, three and eleven pence.

Lenny was panic-stricken. He simply could not stand it. He jumped out of bed, threw on his clothes, and rushed downstairs to telephone to his stockbrokers. When purchasing, he had employed McAndrew's brokers; but his own people must sell for him. To his horror he discovered that neither the Stock Exchange nor the office of his brokers was as yet open; he had to wait, suffering agonies. But at last he got into communication with the office, and a most agitating conversation ensued.

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"Nemorna Bay Amalgamated! Nemorna Bay! Nemorna!" Lenny was bellowing the name of the copper mine, and the stockbroker's clerk was saying he could not hear it. When the clerk had got the name, he said, "Well, which is it you wish us to do—to sell the things or to buy some for you? I can't quite hear."

"To sell! To sell!" yelled Lenny. "Sell the lot as fast as you can."

"We'll do what we can, sir; but it is very probable there may be no buyers. Anyhow, we have your order now. We quite understand."

"I'll come down to the office," roared Lenny.

And immediately after his breakfast in the hotel restaurant he hastened to the city to inquire if the brokers had succeeded in unloading for him.

One of the partners suggested that perhaps Lenny need not be in such a hurry.

"From what I hear there is nothing against your property, and I should strongly advise you to stick to it a bit. You are selling now at the very bottom of the market, and I really think you ought to give it a chance."

"I want to cut short my losses," said Lenny. "I can't stand the anxiety. I ought never to have touched the thing. The fact is, I am not a gambler by nature."

"No. Quite right," said the partner. "But really, some of these copper things are doing so well that they very soon will be classed as investments and not speculations."

But Lenny insisted on unloading; and it was after this, when taking stock of his affairs, and facing the loss he had incurred, that he saw plainly how impossible it would be to carry out his intention with regard to the sisters. All the money of the instalment that he had

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proposed to give them now, and a great deal more of his own, had been blown to the four winds by these copper idiots. However, it might be a lesson to him if he rigidly abstained from such folly in the future.

McAndrew and the middle-class bounders who toadied their chieftain and made a little court at the hotel, would possibly resent what they might be pleased to consider as a shabby trick. In fact, Lenny felt sure that they would be angry if they discovered that he was no longer hanging on. But he avoided them—he never wished to see their faces again.

It became the duty of Mr. Newall of Westchurch to explain to Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Holway that they had better rest content with what they had already obtained, and not count on anything further. Mr. Newall, when writing, made no comments on the instructions he had received. Perhaps he thought that Lenny had done enough. Perhaps he never expected him to do so much. At any rate, he never expected him to do any more. Although not by any means a cynic, Mr. Newall often boasted that he knew human nature.

London in December was as pleasant as, if not pleasanter than London in November. Lenny could not tear himself away from it. He just enjoyed himself, without doing anything important. Such tasks as getting his hair cut, buying winter boots, and ordering new clothes at his tailor's occupied him sufficiently. He had noticed that the best sort of people in London did not wear mourning for long. After some consideration he selected the patterns for three pairs of grey trousers, and on the delivery of these goods he was well contented with the result of his labour.

In the afternoon of the first day on which he wore a

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pair of the new trousers, he was slowly and meditatively strolling up St. James's Street. He could not make up his mind whether to do something, or not to do it. Mrs. Fletcher had written to him several times, reproaching him for his neglect of her. Should he go and look her up this afternoon? He thought of the red-brick square and the beautifully appointed house with the countrified hall and shallow stairs. Instinct seemed to be telling him not to go, but presently he hailed a cab and went there.

"How well you are looking, Mr. Calcraft!"

"I am very well. Never felt fitter in my life."

"Then why have you treated me so badly?"

She looked very nice, and she appeared to be very pleased to see him.

XXII

A PLEASANT intimacy had arisen between Lenny and Helen Fletcher. In the course of three or four weeks they had become almost pals. During this jolly time just before Christmas they were together quite a lot.

It amused him to carry her parcels when she was shopping, to drink tea with her in dimly-lit Bond Street tea-rooms, to drive about with her in the darkness of her tiny brougham. They spent evenings of great elegance—dinner at a smart restaurant, stalls at a new play—“*en camarade*,” as she described it. She insisted on paying her share of the expenses—would do so. One cannot contest such a point with a woman, especially a rich woman. She was really rich—she dressed so splendidly, by day and by night. No one need feel ashamed of being seen with her.

Lenny also dined often at her house, where he enjoyed the lulling spell of a refined atmosphere. Wealth and cultivation! She lived in the midst of all the things that money and taste can procure for one. There were never more or less than eight people at her dinner-parties: four charming well-bred interesting women, three entirely uninteresting men—and himself.

He was beginning to know many of her friends, and he liked them well enough; but he was not much taken with her relatives. She had an uncle and several male cousins who were constant visitors, and who, it seemed

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to Lenny, exhibited objectionable traits. They belonged to a class that he had always disliked—the suavely pretentious, quietly swaggering people who possess neither rank, wealth, nor the distinction won by useful careers, and who nevertheless insidiously convey their belief that they are in all respects suitable companions for kings and emperors. They are gentlemen by birth, and therefore the equals of all above them; whereas all below them—the vast majority of the human race, in fact—must be treated with sublime contempt. Helen Fletcher herself was absolutely devoid of pretension. Though so clever, she did not even betray a snobbishness of intellect; she merely disregarded everything and everybody that failed to amuse or interest her; she went through life straight ahead, her own way. But this uncle Granville Yates, a pompous elderly civil servant, and cousin Pritchard, a briefless barrister, were, in Lenny's opinion, innate snobs—snobs to the backbone; sycophants and hangers-on too—liking Mrs. Fletcher for the presents and good dinners that she freely gave them,—hoping perhaps for still greater benefits, and jealously watching her and endeavouring to keep her all to themselves if possible.

Moreover, Lenny perceived their hostility to him—a hostility shared by all her male visitors, whether family connections or simply friends. Doubtless they observed that the hostess treated him with particular deference and attention; probably most of them were would-be courtiers of the rich and attractive young widow, and they dreaded a rival in every good-looking stranger who came to the house.

During dinner, while Helen was present, they asked him questions artfully designed to belittle his importance. If he spoke of his past experiences in the hunting-field, they inquired where he was keeping his hunters this year

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—and affected a surprise when he said that he had no horses just now. If the subject was shooting, they wished to know if he had ever shot any big game—and so on, the endeavour being to detract from his importance.

When left alone with them after dinner, he felt the hostile intention very strongly. They talked in a familiar, free masonic manner of things that he did not know about, of people with whom he was unacquainted; then turning and apologizing, they ostentatiously assumed the duty of hosts to the newcomer who had been left out of the conversation.

“I was forgetting,” said Granville Yates, “that this would be all gibberish to you—er—Mr. Calcraft;” and he hesitated, in order to show that as yet the name did not slip off his tongue easily. “But of course you haven’t known my cousin long, have you?”

“No,” said Lenny, “I have not had that privilege for long.”

“No—so I understood. And it *is* a privilege—though perhaps, as her uncle, I shouldn’t agree with you so readily. One oughtn’t to praise one’s own folk;” and Mr. Yates pretended to be genial and expansive. “Don’t move. I’ll come and sit by you. Fill your glass. This port is some that poor Fletcher bought years ago on my recommendation, so I can vouch for it. . . . You never knew Fletcher, did you? But of course not. You just told me——”

Whenever he was there, Mr. Yates played the part of host after the ladies had gone from the dining-room; but there was also a cousin Donald who affected great airs of proprietorship.

“Have a cigar, Calcraft?” he said condescendingly. “I’ll get them out,” and he went over to the sideboard. “Have a big ’un, or a little ’un?”

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"Neither, thank you," said Lenny, producing his cigarette-case, and carefully inserting one of his own cigarettes in a paper holder.

"Give me a small cigar, Donald," said old Yates. "I mustn't let you fellows sit here too long, you know—or the fair Helen will be sending for us. She relies on me to bring you upstairs in half an hour at the outside."

Helen treated Donald—Lenny never learned his surname—as a most innocent kind of tame cat, telling him to ring the bell, put coals on the fire, fetch the cards for bridge, and sending him about the house on messages. He was a pallid clean-shaven young man, with lank dark hair plastered back from his low forehead—not an ill-looking person by any means; but his charms, such as they were, left Helen altogether cold. Lenny felt quite sure that Donald was desperately enamoured of his pretty cousin, and he felt equally sure that she for her part was rather amused by this old-standing devotion, and rather sorry for the unfortunate young man who entertained such hopeless ambitions. Donald himself in all probability understood that his case was hopeless. But he could not keep away from the house; he watched jealously; it would be poisonous pain, almost death to Donald, if he saw somebody else win the glorious prize.

One evening Donald distinctly attempted—in the homely phrase—"to put off" the intruder; although he began by telling Lenny that Mrs. Fletcher's income was over six thousand a year. Think of it—and Lenny did think of it. Something like an income! But so much money—as Donald explained—placed her in a somewhat distressing situation. On the one hand she was exposed to flatterers; and on the other hand she was rendered suspicious of the integrity and genuineness of all mankind.

"Yes," said Lenny. "I suppose every pretty woman

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must have flatterers; but I fancy Mrs. Fletcher is aware that some at least of the adulation she receives is altogether natural and real."

"No, she can't believe it," said Donald earnestly. "She has become thoroughly suspicious. It's a pity."

Lenny puffed his cigarette in silence.

"I often tell her so," Donald went on. "A great pity—to get these warped ideas. But she has been unfortunate in the people she takes up with—she's so enthusiastic. At first all her geese are swans. It's a family joke with us. Who is Helen's new favourite? Don't you know, sometimes it's a singer, a poet, a piano-player—sometimes just an ordinary social acquaintance; but at first they are perfection, and we are all told to bow down to them and worship them—until all at once she gets sick of 'em, finds they aren't the demigods she expected, and drops 'em like a hot potato. Then they go away and say she's fickle. That's what people do say about her—because they see how she takes people up and drops 'em. But it isn't fickleness. It is the warp that her situation has given to her character. The one thing she values now is getting her own way, whatever the whim of the moment may be—she has a horror of *ennui*, can't brook the idea of being led, or even guided. That's why she hasn't married again—and why we all say she never will marry."

And then old Granville Yates, sliding his chair nearer, joined in this transparent putting-off game.

"No," and Mr. Yates nodded his head significantly. "You are right there, Donald. *Rem acu tetigisti*—as we used to say at school. And between you and me—no disloyalty implied, mind you—I'm not sure that I would envy Helen's second husband. You didn't know poor Fletcher, did you, Mr. Calcraft?"

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"No, I had not the pleasure."

"Of course not. I remember you told me so. A queer fish! *Not* a happy marriage—I betray no secrets in saying as much as that. But since then our young friend has made up for lost time. She has enjoyed her freedom. It has become the breath of her nostrils. . . . Helen is a magnificent creature."

"Magnificent," echoed Donald, in a tone of gloomy enthusiasm.

"But Helen," continued Yates, "has her faults. Number One—that is the number that Helen is disposed to begin and end with. In the last three years she has been spoilt—by the world, and by herself. And she is now in many respects like your typical spoilt child;" and he laughed tolerantly and good-humouredly. "No, at the present time—and I say it again, without a disloyal thought—Helen might prove a difficult person to run in double harness with."

Then Mr. Yates resumed the manner of a deputy host.

"Any more wine, Mr. Calcraft? . . . Then put away the cigars, Donald—and let us go upstairs."

But an evening soon came when officious cigar-distributors and self-elected deputy hosts suffered a severe snub. Perhaps Mrs. Fletcher guessed that her honoured visitor, although he uttered no complaints, was treated with insufficient courtesy during her absence. Anyhow, she made a demonstration in his favour which caused Lenny to swell proudly and contentedly.

She was looking her very best that evening. Before dinner Donald had drawn Lenny's attention to the fact. She wore a dress of red velvet—a stately, glowing, queen-like robe, in which she looked taller than usual; the red colour, as Lenny observed, made her neck and shoulders seem dazzlingly white, enhanced the delicate porcelain

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tones of her complexion, but, curiously enough, did not clash with her blue eyes; and for final touch of splendour there was a broad network or coif of diamonds bound across her fair hair. Truly she seemed quite a startlingly pretty woman.

"Isn't she magnificent?" whispered Donald. "She ought to be painted in that dress. I begged her to be painted by Sargent—but she wouldn't. She doesn't care for modern art."

Lenny took her down to dinner; and after dinner, when she and the other ladies were going out of the room, she stood on the threshold and looked back at him, smiling.

"Mr. Calcraft, I leave you in charge. Don't let Uncle Granville sit all night drinking his horrid port, because it isn't good for him. And don't let Donald fill the house with cigar smoke. Bring them up soon. You may all smoke cigarettes—but not cigars—upstairs."

That—in the words that suggested themselves to Lenny as descriptive of the phenomenon—fairly put an extinguishing cap on Uncle Yates and Cousin Donald.

Donald glowered at him, Mr. Yates shrugged his shoulders, and then both of them drank feverishly of the half-forbidden port.

Lenny knew that they were suffering, but their discomfort amused him. Why the deuce should he care for them or their feelings? They had shown no tenderness for *him*. If a fascinating, beautiful, clever creature chose in her own house to single him out for especial honour, and they didn't happen to like it—well, they could do the other thing. If they were pleased to imagine that he was a successful suitor, whose success would presently be proclaimed to the world—well, he would certainly not trouble to undeceive them.

He sat firmly and squarely on his chair, and talked to

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the fourth man with a new and solid confidence. He felt thoroughly at home, delightfully comfortable. It gratified him to know that he was so big and sleek and nicely brushed; that his clothes were so well-cut, and that his white waistcoat and stiff *piqué* shirt remained so entirely uncrumpled.

And inwardly he had a sensation of immensely increased size, and continually growing importance. A notable fact—no getting away from it—that, without trying, he contrived to make an impression now and then, not often, but occasionally, on members of the other sex. It is a wonderful power this, when you manage to retain it all through your youth and on into what most people call middle life.

XXIII

LENNY, take me to the Tate Gallery."

She called him Lenny now. One day she told him that she might thus comply with an ancient request of his, because she believed they had reached the real pal-stage. He was of course delighted.

"And I suppose," she said, smiling and arching her eyebrows, "the corollary is, I ought to be Helen. But I don't think that would do, would it?"

"Wouldn't it? No. I suppose the two cases aren't on all fours;" and he wished he could have said something neater.

Then, after a little reflection, she said that he might call her Heien when they were alone, but not before other people.

He had not particularly wanted to call her Helen. What he liked was being called Lenny. He was accustomed to it, and the sound of the pet name always had a pleasant individualistic music to his ear.

"Lenny, take me to the Tate Gallery."

"The Tate Gallery? There's nothing new *there*."

They were walking along Piccadilly, after luncheon at a restaurant, and he was enjoying the gentle exercise. It had been wet all the morning.

"Those big things by Watts—they have come into my mind, and I feel that I must see them again. Let's go at once—before the light fails. Perhaps Watts couldn't draw, perhaps he couldn't paint; but he made poems eight feet long and six feet wide, and used splendid colours in-

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stead of mere words to express his noble thoughts. Do be quick, Lenny, and get a cab."

While they drove to the remote goal, he thought with faint irritation that she was not a reposeful companion; and suddenly he remembered what that young man Donald had said of her. She obeyed the whim of the moment, and enforced the obedience of others. Evidently a certain amount of truth in that! Then his thought drifted to the past, and he recalled walks about the London streets with Alma. It had been enough happiness for Alma to walk by his side—the shop windows, the buildings, the passing traffic, provided all the entertainment she asked for. She did not abruptly shout for cabs, and insist upon dashing half across London to look at a lot of stupid pictures.

But he felt proud of Helen when at last they reached the gallery. She knew so much—so much more than the attendants or the compiler of the catalogue; she expounded the poetry of Watts with such a technically instructed rapture. And she looked so nice. In one of the rooms he admired her from a little distance, and saw that other people were admiring her too. A middle-class party—two men and three women—ceased gazing at the pictures in order to gaze at her. One of the men gaped with open mouth, and the women nudged each other—they were overwhelmed by the prettiness and grandeur of the strange lady.

And Lenny felt that he also was looking nice. Just now he had caught a glimpse of himself in a large mirror—his new frock overcoat with the grey velvet collar and the wide skirts was beautifully shaped to the waist, and it became him; the impressive dignity of his new silk hat confirmed his wisdom in demanding an unusually curly brim; the black satin scarf and turquoise pin, the soft gloves, the cloth-topped boots were all perfect. The glass had shown him nothing that he could wish to alter.

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"Helen, come here. This is exquisite."

She came to him at once, and he pointed to a small landscape—wild flowers in foreground, snow mountains in background, blue summer sky.

"Yes?" And she looked up at him, wonderingly, eagerly. "What is it that appeals to you in that, Lenny? Tell me exactly *why* you like it."

But he was only thinking what a fine couple they made—so lordly and commanding, so sumptuously attired, so full of attraction to commonplace sight-seers. He had summoned her to his side because he wished those nudging women and that poor gaping man to know that she belonged to him.

"Tell me, Lenny, so that I may see it as *you* see it."

"The light! The colour!" And he stretched out his open hand and slowly closed it.

"Ah! You are able to pull it all together. I can't. To me it is all detail—no harmony or completeness. Where are we supposed to be, to see field flowers that size? They must be close to our eyes—our heads on the ground. To me it is just a studio composition—sketch of hills, study of flowers—notes from my sketch-book, selected in leisure hours after my holiday abroad;" and she laughed gaily but contemptuously. "I dare say you are right, Lenny. And it's only my prejudice—my old quarrel with the English school."

The worst thing that one could possibly say against her as a companion was this—she lacked repose.

An excursion with her was very different from a quiet promenade with Alma. There was a certain amount of underlying strain. Helen's conversation always stimulated, but sometimes it slightly fatigued one. With Helen he was always intellectually stretched—trying more or less to

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shine, to give a fresh turn to stale thoughts, not to betray ignorance in matters of art, literature, modern science.

With Alma it had been so easy. Poor girl, at the very beginning she had placed him on a pedestal. Those maddened runaway horses did the trick; he was exalted once and for all: the hero, the superhuman being whose lightest words *must* contain some echo of a divine voice. To a lesser extent Helen Fletcher had done something of the sort. She paid him compliments—spoke of him in a symbolic metaphorical manner that was gratifying. She continued to talk of his mantle;—but he was always afraid of making a rent in it.

One morning when he came to luncheon at her house, he found her seated in a low chair with an immense volume on her lap. She scarcely raised her eyes when he entered the drawing-room.

“Lenny, look at my *trouvaille*. Stand behind me and look—but don’t disturb me—don’t wake me out of wonderful dreams.”

He went behind her chair, and looked at the illustrations in the book as she slowly turned the pages. Egyptian monuments—sphinxes, statues of kings and queens;—photographs, reproductions of water-colour drawings—all beautifully printed: obviously a very expensive affair!

“Where did you get it, Helen?”

“A shop in Regent Street. I brought it straight home—to gloat over.”

Then after turning another page she drew in her breath with a long sigh, and pointed at a photograph of two colossal statues.

“They amaze me—and they fascinate me.” She spoke in an awe-struck whisper, as if to herself rather than to him. But stooping over the back of the chair, he just caught her words. “Think of how these things were

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made! The blocks torn from the live rock. Dragged by slaves across the desert—straining like beasts—cracking, bursting, dying—and the merciless lash falling night and day on naked backs. . . . Granite! Yes, granite to carry the fashioned marble! Every plinth cemented with human blood!” Then she spoke directly to him. “Lenny, *look*. Look at this marble man and woman! Born in such horror, and yet wearing such eternal calm on their cruel stone faces!”

He could not obtain any further attention from her until she had regretfully turned the last page. Then she got up, and, still holding the book, spoke eagerly and excitedly.

“Lenny, take me to the British Museum, and let me see some of the *real* things.”

“I thought we were going to the skating rink.”

“No, no—not to-day. Take me to the British Museum the moment we have had our lunch. Ring the bell. I’ll tell them we want lunch at once.”

Instead of being a delightful leisurely repast, their luncheon was like a meal snatched at a railway station, when you know that the express will start in less than twenty minutes. She made him bolt his food; and by reason of the insensate hurry it had not been properly cooked. No time to assist digestion by quietly sipping a cup of black coffee—he was hustled from the table before he had even smoked a cigarette. No time to order her snug little brougham—frantic whistling to fetch a draughty old four-wheeler.

He was not too well pleased. He could not but remember what Uncle Yates had said. Spoilt by the world, and spoiling herself: altogether too like a typical spoilt child. And there was something he did not understand, something with which he would never be able to sympathize, in this wild ecstasy about the art of a semi-barbarous

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civilization that had passed away thousands of years ago. It struck a jarring note. He did not like it, although he could not with precision have explained why.

The museum wearied him, enervated him; but it seemed that she could not tear herself away from the stupendous evidences of human labour and human pain. "They fascinate me," she said again and again; and he was compelled to hang about among the tombs, temple friezes, and gigantic winged beasts, till his feet began to burn and ache in a new pair of patent leather boots. One circumstance only sustained him. He saw once more how greatly everybody admired her—the attendants, the policemen, the visitors, the students, all turned their heads and with or without discretion stared at her.

She had been in too much haste to dress herself carefully. She had just thrown on her clothes, the first that came handy to the maid, and yet she looked charming. Again he watched her from a little distance—she wore a long coat and a short skirt of purple cloth, ermine round her neck, and a black floppy sort of hat without a veil; but in this very ordinary costume she appeared like an advertisement or show figure of the best Parisian dress-maker; really the quintessence of mundane elegance. And she carried herself so well—the head, with upturned eyes, so beautifully poised; a hand upon a hip, in an attitude used by quite common people, yet now seeming appropriate and seductive. Automatically he drew nearer to her—he wanted to see the expression of her eyes, the delicate tints of her complexion, the gleam of white teeth between the red lips.

She took his arm, and leaned upon it while she stood in front of a vast Assyrian bull; and he watched her face until she consented to move on.

"There! Monstrous, but splendid! Lenny,"—and he

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felt an increasing weight upon his arm—"it fascinates me. The close-knit symmetry of great strength!"

"Yes. Shall we be off now?"

"Let me feel the Greek idea first. Show me the sculpture of Greece—and of Rome too."

Then arm in arm they tramped through more and still more galleries, long avenues of stone and plaster—gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs, wrestlers, water-carriers, sling-throwers, and what not else that one had seen a hundred times and never wished to see again. His only amusement was watching her face. But her scrutiny of the nude antique men vaguely troubled him. It set him thinking of incongruous matters; his mind wandered, and he started when he heard her voice at his elbow.

"Strength and grace," she was murmuring. "Can you ever have real grace without strength behind it? . . . I think that's what fascinates me in bulls."

He watched her face. It bore the connoisseur's expression—eyes half closed, head very slightly on one side.

"Oh, Lenny, what a nuisance!"

"What?"

"They are turning on the artificial light. I hate artificial light. I should like to be here when it was so dark that one could only just make out the form and size of things. I would like to be here at night—in total darkness—shut in, all alone, with the work of the mighty dead. . . . What dreams, what wonderful dreams one ought to have—lying at the feet of the gods, quite alone in this cemetery of Olympus!"

At last he plainly requested her to come away.

"Helen, it is getting late—past tea-time. Where shall I take you for tea?"

"Let's have tea here. Ask the way to the refreshment room."

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"Oh, they would give us a horrible tea."

"No, it would be all right. And after tea, let us see the Cretan frescoes. There are urns and vases too—heaps of things dug up the other day in Crete."

"Good-bye, British Museum," he said to himself, when passing through the forecourt. "Catch me again if you can. Once bit, twice shy."

No, he was not well pleased with Helen that afternoon.

But he was much pleased with her, very proud of her, three nights later when she called for him in her little brougham, took him out for dinner at an hotel, and thence to a theatre.

She was quite at her best to-night. She had the diamond coif to decorate her pretty hair; and when she removed a magnificent sable cloak, he saw that she was wearing the red velvet dress. Manifestations of admiring surprise were plainly perceptible. Diners at other tables could not repress their curiosity. Lenny felt that he and his lady were all to nothing the smartest couple in the whole of the smart hotel.

And it was the same thing at the playhouse. Everybody who saw them seemed to exhibit uncontrollable admiration. They sat in the stalls, with their elbows touching, their breaths mingling as they whispered to each other, their hearts beating to a sympathetic rhythm while they listened to the talented actors and actresses. It was a charmingly clever play—it satisfied the intellect, it stirred the emotions; it made you laugh, and it made you cry. After the poignantly sad third act, there were lumps in their throats and tears in their eyes.

"You are like me," Helen whispered. "You yield to the illusion, though you know it *is* an illusion."

"Yes—quite pathetic! Almost too sad."

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But, as Lenny had prophesied, the fourth act made everything all right. No more tears, no more laughter—some tender smiles, and a delightful consciousness that all was ending, had ended, happily. When the curtain descended Helen's face was glowing and her eyes were very bright.

"Lenny, take me somewhere to supper."

"Rather. Where shall we go?"

She held his arm, as slowly they made their way out of the theatre, and whispered in so low a tone that nobody else could possibly hear her.

"Take me somewhere wrong—to a place where I oughtn't to go—where the naughty people go."

"My dear girl, they go everywhere nowadays."

She laughed, pressed his arm, and went on whispering.

"Show me the brazen abandoned women who have such power over you weak men—the shameless creatures who stick at nothing."

"Helen, you are shocking me."

"Yes, I'm doing it purposely. I'm trying to shock you. It is the play—the play has excited me. I would like to keep up the excitement, and not drop down at once to the flat dull level of everyday life."

He took her to another fashionable restaurant—a most sumptuous and sagely conducted place of entertainment. The other idea was not quite good enough. But he determined to humour her whim by pointing out reputable members of society, giving them fictitious names, and declaring them to be steeped in the most terrible naughtiness.

However, by the time they were established at their supper-table, her mood had changed. She had become silent and sentimental; she scarcely glanced at the surrounding company, but looked at Lenny with softened eyes.

By his directions, the waiter had moved their chairs so

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that they sat elbow to elbow again, instead of facing each other across the little round table.

More champagne, more cutlets, more music—Lenny felt blissfully contented. Here, as at the theatre, many people were admiring his companion. But she had eyes only for him.

“Lenny! I have a communication to make.”

He stopped in the act of helping himself to a second cutlet. His ear had caught the note of real emotion.

“Don’t look at me. Go on eating—and then no one will guess that we aren’t talking of quite ordinary things.”

The band played, people chattered loudly, knives, forks, and plates clashed and clinked; and amidst all this noisy confusion she continued speaking to him in a low and rather tremulous voice.

“I don’t suppose you remember it, but I told you once what I should do if I found the man—the man that perhaps I was seeking for. . . . Lenny, I think I have found the man.”

“Have you?”

“No, don’t look at me.”

But naturally he disobeyed her. Her eyes were glowing very softly; her red lips had parted in a smile; her whole face was full of light—like a pretty painted lantern with the concealed lamp shining through the delicate paper case.

“Yes, I am almost sure. But he is slow to make me quite sure. He is dreadfully slow to take hints—he hangs back—he won’t answer to the spur. So I am obliged to ask him a direct question. . . . Lenny, do you like me—a little?”

“No. I like you a great deal.”

“How much? I want to know—because I like you enormously.”

Her horses were cold after so much standing, and they

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pranced home at a spanking pace. In the snug darkness of the little brougham she had opened her fur cloak to enable him to get his arm round her waist comfortably; and all the way home from the Embankment to Sloane Street, except when garish light momentarily invaded their dark shelter, he was kissing and fondling her.

An hour later in the bedroom of his hotel, he noticed that a perfume of violets still clung to his clothes.

XXIV

HE lay late in bed next day, thinking of these remarkable occurrences.

Helen Fletcher had proposed marriage, and he had accepted the proposal. When he first woke, he scarcely believed it. How *could* such a thing have happened? Was it possible that after telling Alma he would never marry, he had already engaged himself to another woman? He was filled with wonder—really could not understand it.

From Alma's point of view, the unexpected event might seem to indicate treachery, falsehood, meanness. He could not bear the idea of Alma's hearing about it. But of course all the circumstances were so entirely different. This was a rational affair, the union of two worldly well-to-do people, the marriage of convenience.

Then for a little while he thought of the material advantages offered by the marriage. Six thousand a year, with about fifteen hundred of his very own—it would mean a life of consummate ease, spent in that atmosphere of refinement which he had thought so charming. He would be master of that well-appointed house, host at innumerable dinner-parties, a person of real importance. If he wished, he could hunt again, shoot again; he could be a yachting man, or a racing man; he could patronize literature and the drama; he could undoubtedly afford to enter Parliament.

And then he wandered off into philosophic meditations. How marvellously complex is this mysterious blending

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of what seems so like free will and what is palpably predestined! Marvellous—when one honestly tries to shape one's life, and thinks one is doing so, it is all the time being shaped for one. That was what he had always maintained—we are puppets. He had said so to Alma; and all that had happened last night, all that was to happen this morning, bore out his theory. Soon he would dress, and by one o'clock find himself on the steps of that red-brick house; and in the pocket of his coat there would be a little case, which he would have procured at the Army & Navy Stores; and in the case there would be an expensive jewelled engagement-ring—for his affianced bride. By no possibility could he have guessed yesterday what to-morrow's task might be; and by no possibility, now that to-morrow had become to-day, could he evade the task. Destiny! A big word, but no smaller one big enough for the phenomenon. He had never plotted to marry Helen—never. But would poor Alma understand how unavoidably he had drifted into this arrangement?

Before he got out of bed he had determined that it should be a very quiet wedding, without guests or reception, without even any announcements in the newspapers. Alma's knowledge of the curious and surprising fact should be delayed as long as possible.

Wonder became a component now in most of his thoughts.

Helen was very, very fond of him; and he had not been prepared for so exuberant a demonstration of her fondness.

She told him that the first time she saw him, she had felt *something*—not anything powerful or distressful, perhaps only the awakening of a faint sensation or the birth of a vague idea; but, whatever it was, it proved sufficient to make her wish to see him again.

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"And that, Lenny, is neither more nor less than the way nine women out of ten begin to fall in love."

The word startled him. It set him wondering. As he had understood the character of her mind, and the whole intention of her life, he assumed that love was scarcely an appropriate word—at any rate, so early. It was a word that might be used after marriage—but surely not so soon as all this. Convenience, suitability, the licensed friendship of two sensible people who had decided to join forces—as he understood, these were the principal considerations that had influenced both contracting personages. No matter!

Then, she explained, she had heard the legend of his devotion to his father; and it was this that had really won her. She had thought, "What a husband such a son would make!" And she had felt that she would be safe in thinking about him—and she had liked thinking about him.

"Then when you came to me in your black clothes, looking so sad and seeming so august, I felt quite sure I was right." She laughed gaily and happily. "I had found the man—and I meant to get him, if I anyhow could."

A compliment—a prodigious compliment! Who would not be gratified by such an avowal? But it occurred to him—fleetingly—that if at this period he had guessed the exact nature of her thought, he might perhaps have been a little more wary. No—not wary, but circumspect; perhaps he might have examined his own thoughts more closely—might have taken time to look round the subject in all directions.

With wonder he noticed extraordinary changes in her. Sometimes it almost seemed that she was another woman. During her sentimentally affectionate moods, she showed

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no trace of the old restlessness. She spoke slowly and purringly, instead of eagerly or abruptly; she did not want to dash about London, was content to sit quite still; she was meek, docile, delightedly submitting to his wishes.

Engagement to be kept secret, wedding to be quiet, without fuss or publicity—yes, his word was her law. She would take pleasure in whatever pleased him.

When giving expression to this submissive frame of mind, she used little phrases that he never should have believed would fall from those red lips.

“Lenny, I want to ask your permission to do something. . . . When we are married, will you ever allow me to go about by myself? . . . Will you forbid my smoking cigarettes?”

It charmed and soothed him when she talked in this manner. It seemed to augur so well for the future, to promise just the tranquil joys that he desired.

While in one of the compliant moods, she insisted on telling him all about her money. Donald had not exaggerated. It *was* six thousand per annum.

But it soon appeared that some of this really ample income was already disposed of—not available for themselves. A number of her husband’s poor relations were dependent on her bounty; she made annual allowances to many indigent hangers-on.

“In a small way,” she said, “I did what you did on such a large scale. . . . No, don’t attempt to deny it. I *know*. Miss Workman told me—and, Lenny, I loved you for doing it.”

And as well as relatives there were old servants.

“Yes,” said Lenny. “That’s a claim one can’t escape from. I had to provide for my poor father’s staff.”

She spoke of doing things in a small way; but when she

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went on to particularize, it seemed that she had mortgaged her resources in a preposterously large way. There was no end to her allowances and pensions.

"I feel, Lenny, that I could never stop them. But of course all these people are old. They will die, and then the money will be free again. It is a lot of money to be going out every year to people you have never seen—but I don't think you'll mind. You won't mind?"

"Mind?"

Certainly he did not mind—but, as a mere matter of arithmetic, she had with a few words reduced that noble income of six thousand to little more than four thousand.

"Sure, Lenny?" She was looking at him deprecatingly.

"My dear Helen, can you suppose that I should have the effrontery to dictate to you how you are to deal with your money?"

"No, but it isn't *my* money any longer. It is *our* money. That's why I am bothering you with all these details;" and she spoke very eagerly. "Now that I have a lord and master, I am not even a half partner in the firm. I shall never draw on our funds without first asking leave."

He was touched by her eagerness to arrive at this clear understanding. It struck him as unselfish, chivalrous, really fine; and he immediately showed his appreciation by rewarding her with some slight endearments.

He stroked her fair hair, exactly as he used to stroke Alma's dark hair—with a gentle cautious touch that could not disarrange it.

Then, after a minute, he put his hand round to the back of her neck, as he had done so often with Alma—perhaps wishing for one of the old thrills, or proposing to analyse the effects of a new sensation. But the caress produced such an effect in Helen that he could not go on quietly thinking about himself.

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She shut her eyes, threw back her head, and gasped ecstatically.

"Yes, do that, Lenny. Oh, I *like* that. Hold me as if you would never let go of me. Be rough, and fierce, and dreadful to me. . . . Say it, Lenny,—'I have got you.'"

"Yes, I have got you."

"Oh, but much more fiercely than that. Say this—as fiercely as you can. . . . 'I have got you, Helen, you little wretch; and you shan't get away from me.'"

He had let his hand drop from her neck; but she made him put it back again, and to satisfy her he was obliged to repeat the idiotic words that she had invented for him.

He considered all this very silly and childish—and, if the truth must be confessed, not altogether nice. He was quite glad when the parlour-maid came into the room and rendered any further endearments impossible.

Wonderful—after all, he was going on that tour of adventure, and *with* a companion. He had talked so much of his intention to penetrate far-off countries, that Helen knew all about it. She embodied it in her own plans. The tour—lengthened, rather than shortened—should be their honeymoon.

She said it would be the most entrancingly original honeymoon; indeed, the glory of the idea threw her always into a mood that seemed the antithesis of the docile, soothing mood which he so much preferred. When she talked of their travels she became excited, fantastic, and fatiguingly romantic. She could not sit still. She sprang up and down, jumped all round the room, and came jumping back to deluge him with her enthusiasms.

"I am *longing* for it. I pine for adventures—with you, Lenny. . . . We'll go far, far, far—won't we, Lenny?"

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Shall I tell you some of my dreams? . . . I see us sleeping in the desert—beyond beyond. People warned us that we ought not to go so far—it would not be safe. And now our caravan has broken down—the drivers have deserted us—the camels are dying of thirst. In the moonlight you show me your bottle of water. ‘Only half a pint, Helen, between us and what is happening to the camels. But don’t worry, old girl, we’ll sleep sound to-night—even if it is to be our last night on earth.’ And I shan’t worry, Lenny; we’ll sleep as sound as two tired babies in their cots.”

“I wonder!”

They were the only words that occurred to Lenny,—and he eked them out with a feeble titter.

“Another dream. . . . It is night, and we are in a Chinese junk. There is a whisper of *pirates*; and you have just told me that you are not sure of the fidelity of our own crew. In the silence I hear you cock your revolver; and we snuggle so close together that we can hear our hearts beating. The boat glides through the darkness; and we wait—for the cast of the great dice-box, for the chance that was decided by the stars millions of years ago, for destruction or escape. Red death is in the air; monstrous impalpable shapes are flitting all round us; the forces of this world and the next are at war for *our* sakes. And I shall love it. Do you understand? I promise. I won’t disgrace you.”

“I doubt if we can get as far as China,” he said slowly, but with an affectation of lightness.

“Very well. China, or somewhere else—what does it matter? Somewhere we’ll act what dull souls here in England can only *dream*.”

“Oh, yes,” he said slowly, but smilingly, “we’ll have all sorts of larks.”

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"That's what I mean. We'll drink deep of life—won't we?—before we settle down as Darby and Joan?"

His wonder appeared to be intensified each time that he thought of the mysterious workings of destiny. He remembered what Alma had said about the unseen powers. Were there any unseen powers? If so, it really seemed as though they had put their heads together, and in their inscrutable wisdom pondered over the problem of Lenny Calcraft.

They had certainly taken him in charge. But could he absolutely bank on the wisdom of their scheme? Could he be quite sure that they were doing the best thing for him by pushing him into Helen's arms?

Wonder was beginning to change to doubt.

FEBRUARY had come; and they were to be married in March.

It annoyed him when he learned that their engagement was no longer a secret. Helen said that her inquisitive women friends had guessed it. Anyhow, the cat was now out of the bag.

What her friends knew, of course her relations must also know; and so Cousin Donald and the rest of them had all been informed of the fact that the prize was irrevocably gone. Lenny never saw Donald again; probably the heart-broken young man had not fortitude enough to stand by and watch the felicity of his hated rival. But old Granville Yates, making the best of a bad job, endeavoured to cover his mortification with a firm face.

"Calcraft, I congratulate you;" and Mr. Yates shook hands effusively. "You're a lucky fellow—a very lucky fellow. But it didn't altogether astonish me. No, I was one of the first to see which way the wind was blowing;" and he tried to laugh jovially. But that he could not do. The laugh was little more than a grimace; and he looked at Lenny rather piteously, seeming to say without spoken words—"Now be a sportsman. Let bygones be bygones. You have won, and you can afford to be generous. Don't grudge an old chap a good dinner now and then; and, above all, don't run your pen through his name on the Christmas Pension list."

"Many thanks," said Lenny, shaking hands, and show-

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ing himself magnanimous as a conqueror should be. Indeed, neither to Mr. Yates nor to anybody else did he exhibit any vulgar elation in his triumph.

It annoyed him exceedingly when Helen explained that, in spite of her desire to please him, the wedding could not be as quiet as he wished.

"Lenny," she said, "I'm afraid we can't get off quite so cheaply."

And she told him that all her friends advised her of the impropriety, the practical impossibility, of avoiding some little fussification. Friends would be wounded if they were not allowed to attend the ceremony at the church; and a few of them at least—her really old friends—must be asked to the house.

"Just to say good-bye, and wish us luck, Lenny."

"Oh, hang them and their wishes," said Lenny, with petulance, even with rudeness. He was inwardly fuming, and could not hide his annoyance. "Tell them to send their wishes by post—or keep them till I ask for them."

"Lenny!" She looked at him in surprise, but, although protesting, spoke meekly. "Why are you so cross with me? Don't be unkind."

"I'm not cross with you—I'm cross with all these gaping jackasses who want to shove their noses into our private affairs."

"Lenny! It is so natural. Why do you object to letting people see us hand in hand? Are you ashamed of your wife? Lenny, it isn't kind—when I am so proud of you that I would like the whole world to see us getting married."

He thought she was about to burst into tears, and he was compelled to stifle his irritation and to speak in a gentler tone.

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"My dear Helen, don't be absurd. If I seem upset, it is because I dislike having my arrangements interfered with by outside pressure. And I thought you and I were of one mind: we were to decide for ourselves; we were not to be trammelled by mere conventions. Besides, if it comes to conventions, I have the best of all reasons—I am in mourning. My poor father has not been dead a year. But there are other reasons—beyond that—and just as good."

"Very well, Lenny. Only I wish you'd tell me the other reasons."

Of course he could not tell her the real reason—Alma. He wished to spare Alma unnecessary pain. She was not to hear of the marriage. It would be the bridegroom's duty to send advertisements to the newspapers after the ceremony had taken place; but he had decided to omit the performance of this duty.

Yet he knew now that he would be beaten. Helen would somehow get round all his objections to publicity. She and her friends would finally have their own way.

No elation. He went about his work dully and heavily. He was buying his trousseau; but he had little pleasure in what should have been so interesting and amusing. It was a large trousseau. Naturally he required an immense amount of clothes, since he had to fit himself out for all countries and all climates.

Sometimes when sitting at a hosier's counter or standing before a tailor's cheval glass, his mind wandered.

"A shade fuller in the back, sir?"

He did not answer the tailor.

"These are quite impervious to cold, sir. . . . How many pairs, sir?"

He had not heard the hosier's words. His mind was

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occupied with things more portentous than lounge jackets or silk under-garments.

Sometimes, too, when selecting small articles, such as neckties, pocket handkerchiefs, or socks, he had a sensation of total powerlessness.

"Which one, sir? . . . You chose the dark green, didn't you, sir?"

He did not know what colour he had chosen, and he could not choose again. It was as though he had been suddenly deprived of all freedom of choice, and he stood face to face with the inevitable. It was a question for destiny, and not for him. Fate, which was doing everything else for him, must do this also. He was in the hands of fate: an impotent puppet until the unseen powers pulled his strings.

"Thank you, sir. . . . Yes, I thought you said the green."

He had said nothing. Fate had decided for him. The green or the blue?—he accepted the tie, just as he was about to accept the wife that had been given him.

But such fancies had a quality of volume and massiveness that almost inspired awe. The surrender of volition and the yielding to extraneous duress caused dolorous qualms. He felt as a child might feel, after paddling within reach of nurse, when it is swept off its feet and finds itself in deep water.

This marriage—the most tremendous event of his life—was being accomplished mechanically.

Lacking in repose! He could not disguise from himself that, the better he knew her, the more positively was he assured of the fact. Temperament, training, habit, had each had its part, no doubt, in producing her now characteristic excitability. She was one Helen to-day;

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to-morrow she would be another Helen. When you rang the bell and went upstairs, you could never correctly guess which Helen you were going to find—the meek one, the dashing one, or the fantastically romantic one.

Plainly she was a creature of violent ups and downs, with far too many moods, without any permanent attribute except instability. And intellectually she let herself go much too freely—almost every idea to her became for a time an engrossing idea. He thought of that impetuous rush to the Tate Gallery, of the irksome afternoon at the British Museum, and of her wild ravings about African deserts and Chinese junks. Whatever the whim of the moment, it was strong enough to run away with her.

And there were things that vaguely distressed him. Some of her ideas occasioned disturbance—as though they were beating at the doors of his mind, trying to force their way into the sanctuary, and meaning to turn everything upside down when they got inside. If she had an undrilled army of vagrant thoughts, she ought at least to keep them within the limits of her own dominions, and not allow them to go raiding across her neighbour's frontier.

He had never been able to understand her queer notions concerning Egyptian and Grecian sculpture;—and perhaps there was something lurking there which he would not wish to understand, even if he could.

But she was very fond of him—almost pathetically fond of him. Yes, but the trick of *asking* for kisses, instead of *waiting* for them! There was vague discomfort about that: it was paralysing rather than stimulating. He did not like that sharp application of the spur in love-making, as though he had been a sluggish horse not galloping at his fences fast enough.

She could not assume the existence of latent emotion; she

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demanded outward manifestations; and she sought to control where she should merely submit.

Here it was again—the demand for what should have been left to his impulse, a reversal of customary procedure, too much activity in the traditionally passive agent.

He knew it was coming, directly the visitor began to take leave. They were in the drawing-room; and that same fat lady, encountered by Lenny when he paid his first ceremonious call, archly and laughingly withdrew; saying she would be a wretch if she stayed longer, she knew that two were company and three were none—or other equally silly words to the same effect. Helen escorted her to the staircase; and Lenny remembered how she had escorted him and left the fat lady behind. He fidgeted nervously while listening to Helen's voice outside on the landing.

Ah! She was returning. She shut the door, came slowly across the room to him, and looked at him with half-closed eyes.

“Lenny—we are alone at last.”

He put his arms round her, and kissed her. Then he began to stroke her hair.

“Is that all?” Her eyelids drooped still more, and she continued to smile. “Lenny, you don't know how to make love—not a little bit.”

“Don't I?” His voice sounded flat and toneless. Her smile enervated him. It seemed to have in it something if not mocking, distinctly bothering.

“You don't realize my dreams. You are not the impassioned prince of the fairy books, and you are not the bullying overpowering lover of modern problem plays;—but you are very sweet, dear Lenny—the only lover I want.

. . . But, Lenny, we'll keep our youth—our emotional

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life—for a little while, won't we? We won't be *too* rational? We won't let old fageyism overtake us—directly?"

It enervated him.

For the second time, and in the same place, a wonderful coincidence! Lenny was in the hall of the club; and once more the stream of his thoughts and the sequence of external facts seemed to run together, and for a time to flow as one.

He had been talking to two jolly members near the news-boards, and they turned their heads to greet a man who was coming down the stairs.

"Hullo, Kindersley! How goes it?"

"Oh, I'm better—I'm picking up again;" and the man paused to rest.

Then he slowly and painfully came down the last few steps into the hall. Lenny did not know the man, had never seen the man before; and he watched him, as with many pauses he dragged himself across the hall towards the morning-room corridor. A cripple—livid face, sunken eyes, bald head, contorted limbs; a poor wretch of middle age, but decrepit as a dotard, leaning on his stick, shaking, gasping for breath!

"Poor old Kindersley!" Lenny's two friends talked to each other about the crippled man. "Always thinks he's better—but he never will be."

"No. I swear you'd scarcely recognize him. I never saw such a frightful wreck."

"And so rapid—all in a few years. D'you remember the way he used to race up those stairs—two steps at a time?"

"*Three* steps at a time—like a boy just let out of school."

"What," asked Lenny, "is the matter with him?"

"Rheumatism, neuritis, nervous exhaustion—done for!"

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"Er—was it an accident?"

Lenny asked for information, simply because he could not help doing so. It seemed to him that he knew already what his friends were going to say, that he had dreamed this conversation many years ago, and had vaguely remembered it ever since.

"An accident?" And one of his friends smiled at the other. "Well, that's a question. The doctors tell him it is constitutional. But in my opinion, it *was* an accident—an accident that he ought to have avoided."

"Er—how do you mean?"

Again Lenny was compelled to inquire, although seeming to know well—too well—all that could be said about Kindersley's sad case.

"I mean, he put off marrying until he should have put it off altogether."

"Yes," said the other man, "and chose the wrong sort of wife."

They went on talking; and Lenny felt a curious prickly inward heat, and then a cutaneous coldness.

It appeared that the wife chosen by Kindersley proved to be a merciless little beast—a pleasure-loving young woman, who required unceasing attention, who kept her husband on the dance, made him rush about after her, gave him no rest. And Lenny's friends nodded their heads and smiled sagely. "Oh, I know the sort."

"So do I, old boy."

"Insatiable. . . . I may be wrong; but that's *my* opinion, whatever the doctors tell him. It was marriage that broke up Kindersley. . . . Comin' to lunch, Calcraft?"

Lenny nervously fingered his moustache; his face was invaded by a dullish pallor; he stood staring at the distant swing doors through which the cripple had vanished.

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That night he scarcely slept a wink. He kept the electric light burning. He had made up a big fire, and yet he felt cold, shivering and tossing beneath all the thick blankets and the eider-down quilt. He was so thirsty that, having finished the siphon of soda-water on the table by his bed, he got up and began to drink the contents of the washing-stand carafe. He had emptied that too before the daylight came.

Something had upset him—it was quite obvious.

And all night his mind worked busily—could not by any effort be prevented from working. Hour after hour he thought of Helen.

Desperately excitable, avid for pleasure, unable to rest or to permit other people to rest!

He did not go to see her next day. He felt too tired to do anything except sit about in armchairs, or loll on couches. He was so unaccustomed to sleeplessness that one bad night seemed to have produced an incredible fatigue. He hoped, however, to recover himself by long hours of deep slumber; and to this end he dined early—eating very little, but drinking copiously—and was safe in bed before ten p. m.

He could not sleep. The second night was more terrible than the first. Really his distress became acute.

He thought of his future wife. Of course she had many good qualities; but there were things about her that he did not like—no evading the discomfort of this certainty. And beyond the realm of certainty, all the doubts, interrogations, surmises?

She was a restless woman. She was an unbalanced, neurotic, self-assertive woman—a companion who would require unceasing attention, who would keep one on the dance, who would eventually wear one out.

He sprang up in bed, gulped some soda-water, and

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sniffed the warm air. Something was haunting him and intensifying his discomfort. He could not get away from it now, any more than he would be able to get away from it year after year for the remainder of his life. And he did not like it, had *never* really liked it.

All these harassing ideas, together with the want of sleep, seemed to bring him into a state of semi-delirium. His mind began to work erratically and explosively. Old discarded notions and brand-new imaginations blended; memory without warning pushed aside conjecture, and was itself thrust into the dark background by luminous intuition; past, present, and future became jumbled; but each thought, no matter what its fuel, seemed to flash and blaze with a brightness as remarkable as its transiency.

He was walking in tight patent leather boots amid the tombs of the Pharaohs—soon she would be making him gallop all round them on a thirsty camel. Now she was looking at him with half-closed eyes and asking him how much strength he possessed behind his grace and symmetry. He was getting her out of trouble on a Channel steamer, and she was getting him into trouble on a Chinese junk. They were lying out together under the stars; they were sitting side by side at brilliantly illuminated restaurants; they were standing face to face in dim hotel apartments. But wherever they were, far or near, in the past, present or future, he could not get away from that eternal perfume of violets.

Why would she persist in using it? Why not ask him which scent he preferred—if any at all? Certainly not that insidiously penetrating muck! But no—in spite of all fair promises,—her whim was to rule and guide every decision, great or small. Too self-centred! A diffusive wave of just irritation moderated the flaming condition

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of his mind, and gave some slight argumentative continuity to the thoughts.

What was it that old Granville Yates said so tersely? Number One is Helen's law! She talked too much about herself—he had noticed that, the first time she ever spoke to him freely. Self, self, self! He remembered how, drinking tea with her at the Westchurch hotel, he could hardly get a word in edgewise. It was all I—I—I!

And with another and a bigger wave of irritation, there came back to him nearly the whole of that twilight conversation. She had told him the tale of her disappointment after marrying her first husband. . . . Who and what was Fletcher? What could be said against him? Her own relations described him as a queer fish. If that was the worst they could say of him, it didn't amount to much. Not a bad fellow at all, very likely. Older than Helen, of course—and she made that out a crime. But he left her all his money when he died.

Dead! Fletcher died. Was Fletcher *worried* to death?

Suddenly he jumped up once more. Some of her words, uttered when the room had become quite dark, now sounded in his ear again, with a new and intolerably irritating import. Word for word, the exact words—this was the worst she herself could say of Fletcher. "He was not the husband a girl had the right to expect."

What the devil *did* she expect in a husband? She had better marry one of those mammoth bulls at the British Museum.

Logic was gone again. He pulled the thick bed-clothes to his chin, and lay thinking about her. He felt hot and cold, full and empty, enormous and microscopic. And he thought of her as a creature deadly and dangerous—beautiful, catlike, terrible . . . the tiger . . . the snake. . . . the basilisk.

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And then thought ended. Fancies, imaginations, memories, seemed to be swept out of his mind by a force that was stronger than thought. Something tremendous and majestic had arisen, and all yielded to its sway.

Lenny grew calm in presence of this sovereign power. Its voice spoke to him throughout every fibre and cell of his weary frame. "Lenny, O beloved one,"—deep down to his toes, high up to the top of his head, everywhere, the voice was speaking—"I am the over-lord of all the instincts, to the meanest of which the loftiest of the thoughts are but servants. I am the instinct of self-preservation. Now I issue my decree. . . . Escape. At all costs, escape. Escape."

He wrote to her at immense length. It was an extraordinarily difficult letter to write, and the only way seemed to be by making it long. He started at it immediately after breakfast, and despatched it in a cab about lunch time.

Then, assisted by the hotel boots, he began to pack his trousseau. He was going on the honeymoon before the stipulated date—and he was going alone.

He got her reply during the evening; and he read it as he sat, tired but comfortable, by the bedroom fire.

. . . "Am I wrong to answer you? Would it be more dignified to accept your astounding communication in silence, and never let you know how much or how little it had hurt me? Or should I quote that sentiment of melodrama which, however worded, always evokes a round of applause? 'The man who strikes a woman,' etc. When you were filling all those pages with quite unintelligible excuses, did you think for a moment that the worst blow a woman can receive is one directly aimed at her pride as a woman? And did you remember how I of all women would probably suffer most under such a blow coming from you?"

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What a number of questions! Wherever he looked, he saw notes of interrogation. Her letter seemed to bristle with them.

"It was *I* who asked for love, and it was you who said you had love to give. I began by being unconventional, and I will be unconventional to the end. I won't reproach you; but I insist on having an explanation."

That was rather fine of her. No reproaches, no recriminations. Considerable dignity!

"You speak of a mistake, but you don't in the least let me know the nature of the mistake. If a mistake has been made, I suppose it is I who have made it. Yet I cannot believe it. I cannot have been mistaken in you all along. And yet again, the man I took you for could scarcely treat me in this manner."

And once more he thought that there was something very fine about her. She had many estimable qualities—candour, straightforwardness, generosity, amongst others.

"Dear Lenny, when I first read your letter, I thought there could be only one possible explanation. I thought you must be mad. But I now see that this was my pride struggling to defend itself. . . . No, I will hope that there is truly some misunderstanding between us, and that it may yet be cleared up.

"Of course, if you have changed your mind, I shall not ask you to change it again. Certainly, if you don't want to marry me, I don't want to marry you. But I do ask—as my right—that you should tell me the real truth.

"Come and see me to-morrow morning, and we'll talk like sensible people. Come early—10.30."

But at 10.30 next morning he was in the boat train somewhere between London and Dover.

Every mile that took him further away from her made

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him feel lighter and more comfortable. The mental relief and the sense of freedom were infinitely greater than after he had got rid of Alma; and, thinking now with deep gratitude of how he had been led by devious ways and dark places, in danger, in fear, but finally delivered, he understood that when fate seemed stupid, it was because he himself failed to interpret its ultimate intentions.

He could see clearly now. He understood that all his uneasiness was caused by a wise repugnance to thralldom. There had been too much of that in the past. Dr. Searle said so. Doubtless his was a mind that, for its development, required absolute freedom; and mysteriously and wonderfully he had now worked through the long battle to achieve the fullest emancipation that is possible.

The sky and the sea smiled at him;—smooth crossing, delicious luncheon, flying express;—lights and more lights, the town of light—Paris! He stayed in Paris two or three days—to repose tired nerves and taste his happiness. Oh, the joy of novelty! No friends, no acquaintances, a land of strangers. What cutlets, what coffee, what sleep in the odd French bed!

He strolled along the boulevards, he drove about in the jolly little coupés, he went to places of entertainment. Lounging round the big hall at the Folies Bergères, he saw himself, cloudily but splendidly, through the haze of tobacco smoke, in several looking-glasses. A robust, princelike figure—stiff shirt, white waistcoat, silk hat becomingly cocked; the man of the world; the cosmopolitan, who is never less alone than when alone.

It is difficult, however, to keep quite to oneself at the Folies Bergères. He paid a few bocks, for the good of the house and for the honour of old England; he laughed and he chaffed; then he went back to his stall, enjoyed

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the ballet, and admired the charming agile dancers. He could still admire pretty women.

With pleasure he recognized that the sensuous side of his nature, which lately had seemed asleep, was reasserting itself. Mrs. Fletcher had induced a numbness, almost a paralysis, in all normal impulses; but now they were again becoming operative. He had not forgotten how to make love.

After a happy day or two he was fortunate enough to secure the services of an accomplished courier-valet; and with this useful attendant he soon left Paris for the South of France.

XXVI

A HAPPY time, a restful time. Lenny had a feeling that, like a flower too long deprived of sunshine, he was blooming late. Another feeling was that the Riviera had been made for him. It was Westchurch on a grander scale, with gorgeous white-towered casinos instead of humble low-roofed clubs, and royal or serene highnesses performing the social functions of Miss Workman.

He did truly love the azure coast. He played baccarat—as a modest “*debout*”—at the Cercle Nautique, Cannes; he risked a few cart wheels and shot a few pigeons at Monte Carlo, rode donkeys among the olives behind San Remo,—and thoroughly enjoyed himself. Days that shone out brightly on memory’s still vivid page were those of the Mentone Regatta, when, wearing his white ducks, he lunched on the yacht of an affable Grand Duke; and the Nice Carnival, when, wearing his snuff-coloured flannels, he rode in a winning carriage with an extremely affable French actress. On each occasion he felt that he had blossomed into something very big indeed. His name appeared in the *New York Herald*—he was somebody.

He spent the month of May on the Italian lakes; and then ran through the Alps to Switzerland for the summer. This admirably managed republic pleased him: nothing could be better devised than all the arrangements for the convenience of tourists, so long as one had the sense to remain on the beaten track. Of course if you wandered

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off it, you were *asking* for annoyance. But Lenny never did so. He climbed the summits of the highest mountains that can be reached by cog-railway, explored the wildest and most romantic gorges that are open to ordinary wheeled traffic; and not once, but again and again, convinced himself that the Swiss still hold the record as hotel-keepers. After three months he was able to say—in fact said it at many tables d'hôte—There is no nation in the world that has a clearer comprehension of the meaning of the word Comfort.

A happy time. No accident or real trouble—and only two small events that proved even temporarily distressing. One was the loss of his valet. He had to leave the poor fellow lying dangerously ill at Lugano, and for a little while afterwards he was harassed by the thought that perhaps he himself had caught the infection; but no such misfortune befell him.

Moreover, he found that, although he at first missed the assistance to which he had grown accustomed, he was able to get on very well without it; and he had spent so much money on the Riviera that he was not sorry to economize. He did not therefore re-engage the convalescent.

The other little event was the astounding announcement that he read, by the purest chance, one wet day in August. He was at an hotel high up above the lake of Thun, and idly looking at a stale copy of the *Times* he came bang upon it. Really for several moments he could scarcely believe his eyes.

“DRYDEN—REED. On the 3rd inst., at the Church of the Blessed Virgin, Hebden Street, London, Gerald Dryden to Alma Reed.”

Alma *married!* Alma the wife of young Dryden! Well, upon my word, what next? Wonders will never cease—

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but this beats everything. The news was so startling that it really upset him.

There was a brevity, an aggressive abruptness, about the wording of the advertisement that he felt to be peculiarly distasteful. It seemed to Lenny characteristic of this strong-willed, assertive, and socially ignorant young man. He ought, of course, to have described himself properly, said who his father was—without necessarily mentioning the auctioneer's business,—and not merely given the bare names—Gerald Dryden—as though they were world-famous. Ridiculous ignorance of ordinary forms and common usages. Likely to bring ridicule on his wife. She of course should also have been adequately described—"Alma, eldest daughter of Jervois Reed, Esquire, of Haven Lodge, West-church." Almost brutal ignorance!

But that was like Gerald. He would never learn—no matter what trouble one took with him. Too obstinate and opinionated. He seemed to listen attentively to what one said, he declared himself grateful for advice, but he never acted on it consistently. He was consistent only in his own narrow ideas. Pigheaded. Impossible to turn him from his purpose. And Lenny thought of that conversation in which Gerald had unfolded the childish dream of his life. How unshaken he had remained after all one's efforts to shake him! Because he had been in love with Alma as a schoolboy, he was to be in love with her for ever; he made a silly dream the guiding star of his whole existence; all the world might change, but he would still be constant. Such rubbish—such utter rubbish! Yet he conceitedly and fatuously laughed at all difficulties or obstacles. Alma knew nothing of his infatuation—he did not mind about that. He was not anxious for her to know. He relied solely on

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himself. He must first earn money, and a long time might pass before he made sufficient money—he did not mind about that either. He would never cease to wish for Alma as his wife, and in the end he would get her for his wife. And he had done it. The thing was so astounding that it affected one with the same creepy sensation, as when one hears a well-authenticated ghost story.

Then Lenny thought of Alma. Certainly he had not wished that she should perpetually continue single for his sake. No, he had been altruistic enough sincerely to hope that she would some day meet with a good husband—a husband worthy of her. It had caused him pain every time that in imagination he saw her still fretting for him. But the haste—the almost indecent haste—with which she had consoled herself! Off with the old love, and on with the new. Here had he been suffering all sorts of anxieties, while she was quietly and secretly plotting this marriage. Not a line from her to acquaint him with her intention.

And it seemed to him that he held in his hand and was now reading the kind of letter that one might have expected she would probably write, "My own dearest Lenny, perhaps this is the last time that I shall ever address you in the old way; for I am about to do something which may appear to you as very strange. When I see you again, I will explain all the reasons that have decided my course of action; and until I get this opportunity I ask you to suspend your judgment." . . . But no, not a line, not one word of explanation.

What a marriage! How on earth could she have discovered anything to attract her in Dryden? It was a mystery that he felt he would never fathom. Incredible!

And again he thought of the young man who had once been his admiring *protégé*. So commonplace, so un-

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polishable, so second-class. Of course, Gerald Dryden had many good points—courage, determination, perseverance. Great energy of purpose! Perhaps in that lay the key to the enigma. Unwavering aims and dogged self-conceit—with no better stock in trade, quite stupid people sometimes obtain a large measure of success. Gerald had succeeded—he was no less successful in his matter-of-fact business than in his romantic dream. He had earned the money; he had won the wife.

Suddenly Lenny thought of the wreck and the rescue; and the memory of old thoughts mingled with these fresh thoughts. He remembered how he felt then that Gerald had somehow frustrated him, cheated him of an opportunity, and generally got the better of him. He vividly recalled the past feeling. It was the beginning of dislike, when there came into his mind the unwelcome thought that young Dryden had done the thing which he ought to have done himself.

XXVII

FOUR years glided by, and in this time Lenny had passed through many phases. He was an inveterate Londoner now—who frankly admitted that London was good enough for him, and who did not mean to run about the world in search of anything better.

“Sir,” said Lenny, adopting the Johnsonian turn of speech to do honour to so important a theme, “London is more than the centre of the universe: it is a magnet that draws everything to it. If you stay quietly in London there is nothing that you won’t see there, sooner or later. And above all, in London a man can lead his own life without observation or interference. He may be very good or very naughty.” As Lenny said this sort of thing he used to smile meaningly. “Yes, sir, no one cares a twopenny damn what his neighbour is up to—and, between you and me and the post, he may be up to some very strange tricks. For though you hear a lot of talk about the wickedness of Vienna, Buda-Pesth, and Constantinople, they all take a back seat to London.” And, making this point, Lenny rolled his head roguishly, and his smile broadened into a complacent chuckle.

Either, then, Lenny had tasted some of the evil pleasures of the vast town, or he was not unwilling that listeners should suppose so.

Outwardly he was much the same as ever—less soldierly in his bearing perhaps; shoulders not so square, and inclined to slouch; possibly a suspicion of incipient paunchi-

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ness. But these slight changes were not perceptible to himself. The only changes that the looking-glass showed him were those of which he fully approved. For instance, there was a certain indescribable print of time upon his face that seemed to have added distinction to what had been merely handsome. The sun-burn had gone, and he did not want it back again; he was habitually pallid, and he liked the pallor; the short curly hair on each side of his forehead was quite grey, but he considered the greyness an immense improvement. One day, caressingly passing his hand over the top of his head, he had a scare. The hairdresser, however, reassured him. "Going bald? Certainly not. A *leetle* thin on top—that's all." The hairdresser advised him to wear his hair longer, and to brush it straight back over the weak spot. He had done so ever since, and he thought the new style most becoming.

On all state occasions—that is, whenever he had dressed himself with especial care—he enjoyed the old pleasant sensation of being at once large, imposing, and fascinating. Thus, when dining at the club before a first night of a fashionable theatre, he used to talk big because he felt big.

"I'm going round the corner to see Wagstaff's new piece. None of you fellows coming, I suppose? I go myself, because I like to see my plays before the critics have told me the plots; but to-night I don't expect great things. I began by supporting Wagstaff, swearing he was the coming man, championing him through thick and thin—but he has disappointed me too often. Still I like to be there, don't you know."

When he came downstairs after dinner he used to speak of his motor-brougham in a very lordly tone.

"Is my car there? See if my car is there."

"Yes, sir."

But while the club servants helped him on with his muf-

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fler and fur coat he would relax in dignity, and talk to them with the same easy, chaffing, kindly manner that used to delight Mary and the other maids at No. 1, The Crescent.

"Thank you, Collins. Many thanks;" and he wrapped the muffler round his neck. "Good people are scarce, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Gently with the coat. These satin sleeves are meant to slip—but they *don't* slip."

"No, sir."

"Now, where are my gloves? Thanks. I'll put them on here, in the warm. It's only round the corner, and I have ten minutes in hand."

At the theatre, questions were sometimes asked about Lenny.

"Who is that man at the end of the second row?"

"Haven't the remotest idea."

"I see him regularly at first nights. He's always alone. I've never seen him speaking to a soul."

Perhaps it often happened that Lenny met no acquaintances among the audience, but whenever he got into conversation with a genial stranger he was ready to talk freely.

"What do you think of it? Won't do—that's what I venture to say. I've seen too much of this class of work. Very pretty, no doubt; but too namby-pamby—too *tame*. Nothing to grip the public. I don't pretend to be a critic," and Lenny smiled oracularly. "But I've dabbled in theatrical enterprises—wasted more money than I care to count—so possibly I know as much about it as some of the newspaper gentlemen. Anyhow, I've *bought* my experience and knowledge, such as it is."

When he got back to the club, he said this all again. And when at last his motor-brougham took him home to

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Albert Street, he would tell his landlord the story of the new play—that is, if Mr. Jackson chanced to be sitting up for him.

He lived in dear old Albert Street, but not at the same old house. His rooms on the first floor, over a picture-dealer's shop, were better than any suite at Steel's; and the fact that their situation was a few doors further from Bond Street rendered them quieter.

"It's surprising, sir," said his landlord, "what a difference it makes. Gentlemen who've lodged at Mr. Steel's tell me you can't sometimes hear yourself speak. But no one has complained of the traffic here."

The landlord and his wife were thoroughly nice honest people. Jackson had been a servant in noblemen's households; and Mrs. Jackson was a country woman, who contrived to keep open channels of communication with her rustic family, by which she drew supplies of unimpeachable new-laid eggs, spring chickens, and honey in the comb. They had earned and deserved a reputation for doing their lodgers wonderfully well.

Lenny in the first instance took his rooms by the week. The arrangement was a make-shift or stop-gap until he could find more suitable accommodation. He was looking about for an unfurnished flat, in which he might install himself permanently. But he never found what he wanted, and he often used to say to Mrs. Jackson, "I really don't know what to do, Mrs. Jackson."

Then one day, in homely pleasant fashion, she said, "I know what I should do, if I was you, Mr. Calcraft."

"What is that, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Why, stop here, of course. I'm sure we do our best to make you comfortable."

"I'm sure you do," said Lenny cordially.

"And of course you could make any little additions you

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pleased—I mean, like altering the rooms or putting in any of your own things,—in which case I answer for Mr. Jackson that he'd meet you in a fair spirit."

That solved the problem, and lifted another burden from the mind of Lenny. He installed a new bath—not so grand a bath as that birthday present at Westchurch, but adequate; and he bought a splendid throne-like bed and a new dressing-table. The dressing-table was as fine as a woman's, with a double-winged looking-glass, innumerable bottles, pots, and boxes, and two silver-gilt trays for his tortoiseshell brushes and combs. Very little new furniture was necessary to improve the sitting-room—an immense sofa, an armchair with foot-rest and book-rest similar to those at the club, a few cushions, and two or three of those ingenious electric bells on strings that you can trail about and ring, wherever you are, without disturbing yourself; and really that was all.

Here then, with his faithful Jacksons, Lenny had been long established. This for him was *home*.

At times he lived splendidly, but always he lived cautiously. He knew what he was doing; although, as he fancied, he might appear to others to be reckless and lavish. But after what seemed extravagance came retrenchment. As he said himself, he was always able to draw in his horns. For instance, he hired this motor-car for the dark muddy months only, and dispensed with it throughout the summer.

A man may launch out boldly when he has mastered the secret of pulling up promptly. The great thing is to control your expenses, whether great or small. Don't be too proud to act as your own accountant. Lenny kept accurate accounts of all his outgoings—entering in his diary the amount of all cheques to Self practically broke the back of this job—and so he regularly knew how he stood

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at each period of the year. So much already gone since January 1, and only so much more to go before December 31.

He never boasted, or pretended to be rich. Indeed he perfectly understood that, although one's vanity may be tickled by the fact that friends suppose one is possessed of large means, it is not safe to foster this erroneous belief. More will be expected of you; in the end it will be said that you are mean.

"No," he used to confess quite frankly, "I am one of those unfortunate people with a fixed income—and a small income at that. Nevertheless I manage to rub along on it comfortably enough. So, as the pious old ladies say, I've much to be thankful for!" and he would laugh good-humouredly.

But now came a year in which Lenny laughed less often. Why? He did not know. He could not understand the cause of his increasing melancholy. He endeavoured to think about himself with greater earnestness, hoping thus to bring to light and remedy the matters that were vaguely troubling him.

Once he thought he had discovered a possible explanation of his curious psychic state. His life was *narrowing* instead of *widening*.

But how to open up larger vistas? If, as was perhaps true, one had slipped into a groove, how to get out of it? Except for a month at the seaside during summer's extreme heat and two or three week-end trips, he never left London; and, much as he liked London, he now admitted to himself that there was a monotonousness in its delights. He had, perhaps unfortunately, neglected all chances of making a mark in general society. The fact was, he had grown shy of society—that is, of dinner-par-

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ties, tea-parties, evening receptions, and so on. Numerous as are the social circles of this comprehensive London world, they intersect each other so embarrassingly. He had wished to avoid all circles in which he would be likely to meet Helen Fletcher or any of her set. But how was that possible? Almost every house that welcomed him would be also just the sort of house to contain Mrs. Fletcher lurking in a back drawing-room, or old Granville Yates, or that loutish Donald, coming down the stairs. Helen, he believed, had never said a word to his discredit; but he knew, as a fact, that those people of hers—cousins and friends—had gone about traducing him in the most disgraceful manner.

More than once he had seen Helen herself—outside a Bond Street shop, at the private view of a picture-gallery, and on the platform of a railway station; and each time the sight of her had upset him. She did not see him, because he slipped away too quickly.

In the spring of this year he felt a nostalgic yearning for a peep at funny little old Westchurch. He had a sudden conviction that Westchurch would be tonic medicine to him. Just to stroll along the front and sniff the air would do him good. And a glimpse of all the old faces would cheer him enormously.

But no—not so. He had forgotten. The old faces would look back at him. Here again slanderous tongues had been busy; his fame was darkened; the legend of youthful virtues had died hard, but it was now stone dead. Very cruel. His own flesh and blood had turned against him. That sister—Sarah Holway—took her children to stay one winter in lodgings on the parade, and while there had said simply outrageous things about him. Dr. Searle—the only person with whom he had remained

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in touch—wrote and reported the regrettable damage to Lenny's reputation. Searle was bursting with indignation, but powerless to assist his friend. "Everybody believes her," said loyal Searle, "because she is your sister, and no one will listen to me."

At the time, Lenny felt so strongly that he wrote to his sister's husband, demanding apologies, withdrawals, even threatening libel actions; and the man Holway had written a very decent reply. He said he did not share Sarah's views, and he would beg her to refrain from expressing them so injudiciously. He offered thanks for the money received by his wife as a free gift, and further added that she was not truly in need of any more money. He himself was prospering with his business. Lenny appreciated Holway's sensible, straightforward statements. Holway was quite a good sort. But unhappily the mischief had been done, and it could not be undone.

And as Lenny recalled these things, there was sadness—great sadness—in the thought that he could never, never go again to dear little Westchurch.

He was still very fond of the St. James's Street club—yet the club had in certain respects disappointed him. It had provided many companions, but no friends. None of them would ever call him Lenny. Often he had tentatively tried to make them do so—introducing his pet name in anecdotes: "‘Ask Lenny Calcraft,’ that used to be the cry. . . . ‘Look here, Lenny Calcraft,’ he said to me. All my pals called me Lenny. I liked it." But these new pals would not take the hint.

Outside the club, he had somehow lost his hold on the old friends of early days, of the hunting-field, of militia trainings. The indurating effects of time showed on all the men he had once known. It was not worth speaking

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to them. A nod in the street—given grudgingly,—and they hurried on, selfishly preoccupied with their own personal affairs. It was not worth nodding to them.

Even his friend of friends, George Verinder, the man he respected more than other men, had turned cold or forgetful. They never met now, and they had ceased to write to each other.

The sense of sadness and loneliness deepened throughout this year. He thought of himself with intense pity—alone in the midst of a crowd. These words had presented themselves unexpectedly, and he was continually echoing them. It seemed that he had never understood the pregnant meaning of the phrase till now. It exactly hit off his own case.

He had a notion of spending Christmas out of London. Advertisements of seaside hotels that provided Christmas festivities for their guests seemed rather attractive, and he vainly endeavoured to find somebody at the club willing to join him in a three-days' excursion. But nobody would go with him; everybody was engaged. It seemed that he was the only person among the six million inhabitants of London who was thrown quite on his own resources at this season of good will. He was compelled to eat his Christmas dinner at the club.

A most lugubrious business—the great building empty of life; nearly all the servants away, and the few who remained on duty resenting the necessity that kept them from their happy homes. Only two other members in the huge coffee-room, and not even sitting together; making two camps at widely separated tables, like two mariners shipwrecked on a desert island, who had not yet encountered each other. One was Admiral Ritson, a sufferer from chronic asthma, who never had breath to speak to anybody; the other was a man called Porter, who from inclination

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always appeared silent, reserved, self-contained. Lenny saw the head waiter bring a small plum-pudding and show it to Porter before cutting it. The cook had decorated it with a little flag and a sprig of holly. A piteous and feeble reminder of rejoicings which only made one feel sadder. Porter closed the magazine that he had been reading and glanced at the pudding. He betrayed no emotion, and it seemed to Lenny that he was one of those priggish unsocial people who like being alone, and who would not open a conversation with strangers even on a desert island.

However, downstairs in the gloomy smoking-room, Porter did speak to Lenny. He and Lenny drank their coffee together, sat all the evening together, and enjoyed an extremely pleasant conversation. Old Admiral Ritson had withdrawn to a distant corner, where he fell asleep, snored stertorously, and now and then coughed and gasped.

Porter was thin and grey-haired, about fifty-five years of age, neat and prim as to his attire, and with a manner that might unquestionably be set down as priggish. He talked, too, rather sententiously, and he had queer little finical gestures. But he proved to be a man of high intelligence, an instructed man, a well-read man: altogether so sympathetic and agreeable a conversationalist that Lenny, before the evening was over, became extremely confidential, in fact unbosomed himself of many little troubles.

"The other day," said Lenny, "I read an article in that magazine," and he pointed to the current copy which Porter was still nursing, "by a fellow who had stumbled on something that has often struck me. He maintained that the happiest people are people who give themselves up to hobbies. No matter what the hobby—golf, stamp-collecting, autograph-hunting—it serves its object if it occupies a fellow, and keeps his mind off the strain in leisure hours."

"Oh, quite," said Porter.

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"Developing the theory myself, I have come to the conclusion that what we all want is *outside* interests. We get too much engrossed in the ordinary business of life, and we don't sufficiently cultivate new interests; but I'm sure that from time to time one *requires* a new interest."

"Quite," said Porter.

Lenny had already noticed Porter's frequent employment of the word "quite;" and he now observed how by giving it a different intonation Porter was able to make it sufficient for every purpose. He said it with such sincerity, sympathy, and comprehension, that it sometimes sounded as pleasantly as a long speech would have done.

"But what interests? Where is one to unearth them? One gets into a groove, one becomes *blasé*, one has seen so much that one begins to think there is nothing worth seeing."

"Quite."

"Take myself as an example. I was a hunting man—hunted regularly for years; but then was obliged to give it up—could not afford it. Later on, when I came into a little money, I might have managed it again. But, somehow, I never did. No one was keener than I used to be, yet I didn't seem inclined to take it up again after a lapse of years. I shirked the effort. The fact is, there are many things that one would do if the effort of doing them didn't put one off.

"Oh, quite."

"I myself had a reason for avoiding unnecessary fatigue. My doctors had advised me to take things easily. For a number of years my health has not been what it ought to be; nevertheless, I dare say it was good enough to have stood a few days with hounds. I don't say six days a week, or heavy days. But you can get plenty of fun without overdoing it. I see now that the notion of weak

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health was an excuse—I mean, an excuse that I made to myself to explain my *vis inertiae*, or laziness. The fact is this, and there's no getting away from it—the more you save yourself from effort, the less capable you are of making an effort."

Porter said "Quite" with so much sympathy, and such a full comprehension of what Lenny meant, that the conversation went on more pleasantly than ever.

"You agree with me? You have probably felt it yourself? But, again, about interests in one's life. I have several times tried to find them. Take the theatre. I go to first nights; sometimes I'd rather not go, but I do go all the same. I like to keep up my interest in the drama. A little while back I interested myself in theatrical speculation—in a modest way—you understand; musical comedy—that is the paying thing nowadays. . . . Would you mind pushing the matches across? Thank you."

Lenny lit another cigarette, and puffed at it reflectively.

"Yes," he went on, smiling, "musical comedy. Three or four other men and myself put up our money. Not much—say a hundred or two hundred pounds apiece, to back one of these musical comedies. We sent it round the suburban theatres; meant to take a West End theatre if we could make it pay. It didn't pay, but it was fun, you know. Very amusing." And Lenny chuckled. "I suppose I've lost several hundreds in that sort of way, but I don't regret it. I got my money's worth. Naturally the syndicate had certain privileges as backers of the show. One went behind the scenes to see how the young ladies were getting on. Very amusing—some of those little musical comedy actresses. Always on the look out for a capitalist—meaning to be stars one day, and grateful to anyone who will push 'em along." And Lenny rolled his head roguishly and chuckled once more. "I don't say

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that one had *les droits de seigneur*; only, you understand, one was somebody in the theatre—not a negligible quantity.”

But Porter did not say “Quite.” He looked serious, as though his intuition had failed him, or for the moment he had fallen out of sympathy with his companion.

Lenny changed the subject, and went on talking.

“And many other things I’ve tried—more as a duty than a simple relaxation. A little racing. Once I had a flutter on the Stock Exchange—but I burnt my fingers at that. Once bit, twice shy—never tried it again. So there you are. One exhausts things. One has experiences, and then there is nothing new in repeating them. As I say, where is one to find fresh interests? It’s all very well talking about them, but they are like birds—deuced difficult to put salt on their tails.”

“Quite,” said Porter.

Lenny went on talking, really unbosoming himself with complete candour; and it was not till the end of the evening that Porter began to exchange confidence for confidence.

“For a long time,” said Porter, “I’ve had a little hobby.”

“You have, have you?”

“I find great interest in it.”

“You do?”

“I don’t know if it would interest you to hear about it.”

“Enormously,” said Lenny, stifling a yawn.

Then Porter told him how he had interested himself in some work at the East End of London. It was an organization set on foot by various kind people to provide entertainment and amusement for those who would otherwise never have obtained either. The organization had established itself in a horribly poor parish, obtained the use of a large hall, and with the assistance of local and visiting clergy had supplied a happy evening once a week for all

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the poor souls who cared to avail themselves of this brief respite from the pains and cares of their normal lives.

"It humanizes them," said Porter. "No question of that. They love it. But it humanizes me too. It has opened my eyes—it has given me food for thought. It lifts one out of oneself. Of course that's a selfish way to look at it."

"I don't see that," said Lenny. "You are working for others; it's only proper that you should have some reward."

"Well, I take my reward," said Porter sententiously. "And I consider it a big reward."

Then he paused, and flicked away some cigarette ash with a finical gesture.

"Would you care to come down with me some Saturday evening?"

"I should," said Lenny, jumping at the idea.

"If you're in search of novelty, you will find it."

"I *am* in search of it," said Lenny eagerly. "Delighted to come with you."

"Next Saturday?"

"Delighted."

"We might dine here quietly—say seven o'clock, and go on together. I always go by the District Railway to Whitechapel and then——"

"I'll drive you in my motor-car."

"Oh, thank you. That will be very convenient."

"Well, it's a convenience to have a car. At any rate at this time of year. I feel it costs a lot of money, but I do feel it's a great convenience, as well as a luxury."

"Quite," said Porter.

XXVIII

LENNY delighted in his East End visits. Everything was so strange, so fresh, so extraordinarily simple.

He enjoyed his second visit better than his first, and his third better than his second. Soon he had become so fond of the Happy Evening Association that he counted the days, and thought they moved slowly, till Saturday came round again.

On one side of the big hall there was a raised stage, and a piano; on the other, a gallery with an organ; tables and benches were arranged along the walls, and in the middle of the floor there were movable arrangements for games, such as bagatelle boards, parlour skittles, and so on; and beneath the flaring gas-jets, in an atmosphere that grew warmer and stuffier every half hour, you might expect to see assembled any number of people from eighty to two hundred. They were old and young, of both sexes. Workmen of all the lesser trades, a great many girls from neighbouring jam or soap factories, young men belonging to the Y. M. C. A., and lads and boys who wore the belt and cap uniform of some sort of church corps, formed the élite of the weekly gathering. Beyond these there was a small but noisy contingent of respectable costermongers, with a few portresses or market carriers; the rest consisted of vaguely indefinite toilers, women who sank with a sigh upon the nearest bench, men who leaned against the walls, and often seemed too tired to do anything else.

Members of the Committee mingled freely with the

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guests, quietly and unobtrusively keeping order; and visitors like Lenny hung about and made themselves generally agreeable.

Lenny, introduced to various members of the Committee, found them all to be the kindest and pleasantest people. There were charming well-bred women, who brought friends, took a peep at things, and then went away; other women who stayed longer were of the bustling energetic sort, accustomed to what they were doing, and doing it in the most businesslike manner; and there was always a full supply of clergymen. These were of all denominations, for the Association was non-sectarian, the religious element being studiously kept in the background. Lenny at once made the acquaintance of a jovial Catholic priest and a Wesleyan minister, and to his surprise and pleasure, he was claimed as an old friend by one of the Anglican parsons. This was a Mr. Trevenna Dale, who said that he had once delivered a lecture in his, Lenny's, drawing-room at Westchurch. Lenny did not in the least remember him, but he was delighted to meet him again.

The entertainment opened with a little address from one of the parsons. But Lenny and Porter did not arrive in time to hear the address. Then came games, talk, and whenever it could be arranged, songs, dances and recitations. Mr. Porter recited—atrociously,—several of the clergymen recited almost as badly, and one of the costers danced a most admirable breakdown. One evening Lenny found the benches all set out in lines before the stage, and a member of the Committee made the gratifying announcement that two music hall artists had very kindly volunteered to give an example of their art.

These performers, a man and a woman, were obviously of the most humble rank in their profession, but they entirely satisfied the audience. The humour of their

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songs was very broad; but the jam girls laughed vociferously, the Christian young men stamped their feet, and the church boys were howling, suffocating at the jokes. Lenny, looking round, saw that the Committee ladies were unruffled, that the parsons did not mind; they were beaming tolerantly; and the Catholic priest covered his face with a newspaper, pantomiming shocked modesty, and laughed as loudly as anybody there. It was a contagion of mirth. Soon Lenny gave himself to the cheap fun, and laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

During intervals, when the music hall artists were not making one's sides ache, Lenny had snatches of serious discussion. One of the Association organizers surprised him with a few startling facts. And a fat middle-aged clergyman talked both philosophically and instructively.

"Look at the faces, Mr. Calcraft. They all have the same expression—trustfulness. If people will only understand them. Treat them the right way, and you can do anything with them."

"Yes, they seem awfully jolly. I've spoken to several, and I want to speak to a lot more of them."

"Your friend, Mr. Porter, understands them. He has been of the greatest assistance to us here."

Then there was another song; and after the tumultuous applause had ceased, the fat parson and Lenny resumed their chat.

"Yes, Mr. Calcraft, see for yourself. This is the raw material—how good, how fine it is really; if it could be moulded, and directed into noble growth, instead of being warped and crushed and trampled under foot! Think of the wretchedness of their lives—and now hear them laugh. You don't hear such laughter west of Aldgate. You never saw an evening party in Mayfair to which people came with such a solid intention of amusing themselves."

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"No, they do seem awfully jolly."

"Who was it, Mr. Calcraft, who said that man is properly a laughing animal?"

"I forget for the moment," said Lenny.

"It's true. It's wonderfully true. Laughter is the great medicine."

Certainly it was a medicine that benefited Lenny. He felt much the better for it. These happy evenings became the main interest of his life. It seemed to him—without groping to the base of the thought—that the whole organization, the good priests, the kind ladies, the nice serious young men were working for his benefit—to provide him, Lenny, with happy evenings. He gave a few sovereigns from time to time, and received effusive thanks.

And the freshness lasted. Always something new—a confidence of a coster—a religious confession of a tardy convert—secrets poured into his ear. Once a girl talked to him of her love affairs. This was at the amusing magic lantern show, when for a time the slides would not work properly, and the lecturer, losing his temper, was mildly chi-iked by some of the audience. The girl, a thin pasty-faced little thing from the soap works, sat close to Lenny, her head scarcely reaching above his elbow.

"I'm only seventeen," she declared artlessly. "I ain't in an 'urry. There's two after me. I can pick me choosin'; and they ain't great shakes, either of them—too much wrapped up in theirselves."

It made Lenny laugh. These girls were artless, different from any feminine types he had yet studied.

"'Ullo!" said his neighbour, "the fur beginnin' to fly. Pity they don't turn on the lights."

Then the magic lantern show was interrupted by two young ladies right at the back, who had disagreed. A few

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shrill words, and a distressing sound. One of them had slapped the other's face.

They were hastily separated, and one heard members of the Committee talking—little scraps of talk, to which all listened.

"Oh, Kate! How very unkind to strike a friend!"

"No friend of mine."

"No, nor never wanted to be. Why don't she be'ave?"

"Kate! Kate! This is not nice of you." Lenny recognized the voice of one of the clergymen—"You disappoint me sadly."

Curiosity took Lenny round to observe as well as to listen.

"All right, my girl." The assaulted one was loud now. "This don't end 'ere. When I tell Alfred 'ow you've served me, I bet my boots he'll pay you."

Then the clergyman spoke again.

"Nellie, Nellie, you fill me with regret. What an ugly threat! Are you so cruel and vindictive that you would spread the quarrel? She has not really hurt you. It's only the insult you feel. Come, forgive."

Other members of the Committee clustered round, and chimed in on the same note.

"Not kind. . . . Not Christian. . . . Shake hands. . . . Kate, you must first apologize."

And now Kate, the aggressor, ascended to great heights. "There! Tit for tat. Give it back—I'll take it." In a glow of enthusiasm, she was thrusting forward her plump face, offering it for a blow.

"No, no," said the clergyman, "certainly not. Shake hands at once. You are disturbing everyone."

And indeed, cries were coming from all parts of the audience. "Stow it, you two. . . . Cheese it! . . .

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d'ye hear? . . . Smack 'em both, guv'nor, till they let up."

Then the performance went on again. The girls bore no malice; they were artless, they thought little of smacks—as Lenny soon had an opportunity of learning.

There had been talk of a special supper, or high tea, with cold meat, cakes, oranges, and so forth. Lenny jumped at the idea, subscribed liberally, and looked forward with eager anticipation to the supper night.

On this occasion the hall was gay with cotton flags; festoons of coloured paper hung from cross beams; paraffin lamps blazed upon the ranged tables. And the coarse food looked dainty and appetizing to all the hungry guests. How they ate! Lenny and the Committee were walking up and down behind the tables, carrying cups, handling plates, cracking little jokes—in a word, playing the part of host to the best of their capacity.

After supper, when the tables had been removed, there were romping games; and Lenny, consenting to be blindfolded, found himself in the position of Olivia at Farmer Flamborough's, when the town visitors spoiled sport and put her to shame.

"Some one be'ind you, sir. . . . That's me. . . . 'Ere I am, sir. . . ." Voices of boys, and of girls too, uttered the words; and resounding smacks followed. "All in fun, sir. . . . No 'arm. . . . 'Ere I am again, sir." There was no interruption by unsympathetic visitors to extricate Lenny from his predicament. The game played itself out. At last he pulled off the bandage, with a young woman fairly held.

His collar was limp, he was hot and tired, but jovially elated.

He felt the delightful conviction that he had become popular. After the supper, when his name was mentioned as

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a generous subscriber, there came a burst of thunderous applause. Not for the money, but for his genial company, they liked him. Impossible not to feel that he was welcome down here. Faces lit up on his appearance. When speaking of future events, his humble friends said, "You *will* come, won't you, sir? You will be here too, sir. We rely on you, sir."

Three or four boys especially made a friend of him, told him their troubles, seemed to invite his advice; and he talked to them earnestly, pointing out pitfalls in the path of youth, removing little doubts, smoothing unmovable difficulties.

"No," he used to say, "I don't know what is going to win the Grand National, and I shouldn't tell you if I did." And he laughed and nodded his head. "The only tip I'll give you is this, and it's the best tip you'll ever get—Don't bet—never make another bet as long as you live."

"Why not, sir?"

"I'll tell you. Because it's a fool's game, a mug's game, an utterly rotten game. And I ought to know, because I've done it myself."

Then he and the boys would laugh together.

"Suppose you win, the money will do you no good." And he went on more seriously than before. "I'll tell you the only money that's worth having—the money that you honestly earn. It's the only money that ever does one real good. Say you pick up a tanner here and there—I mean extra, by bets, or cadging, or tricks. What do you do with it? I know. You just trot off to the nearest public house with it. And there's another fool's game for you. Don't drink." And he turned to one of the boys. "This is to your address, Dick, old chap. We all know your little weakness, and we mean to cure you of it. And you mean to cure yourself. You have told me so. Well,

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stick to that. And you other chaps can help him—by example, and by grabbing his coat tails, and pulling him away, if you see him going down the wrong turning.”

A strange clergyman overheard him once delivering some such homily.

“Mr. Calcraft,” said the stranger, “may I shake hands with you? It did my heart good to hear you just now. You have the exact knack of speaking to them. You go straight at them. You did them good.”

And the boys themselves said so, with pride and affection.

“I done what you told me, sir. I never been near the pub sence last week. Nothin’ ’as parst my lips but non-alco’olic bevridges—and I believe the wust is over. I’ve conquered meself—thanks to you, sir.”

It was one of these especially friendly boys who spoke to him about their favourite singer. A young lady visitor had just warbled somewhat feebly, and the boy condemned her attempt.

“Don’t think much of it, sir.”

“Well, Tom,” said Lenny, in a confidential whisper, “I’m inclined to share your opinion.”

“Ever hear Mrs. Dryden sing, sir?”

“What Mrs. Dryden?”

“A very nice lady as used to sing here pretty reg’lar. Oh, it’s prime, is Mrs. Dryden’s singing.”

“Is she—er—young?”

“Oh, no, sir. Not what you’d call young, but very nice.”

Lenny asked more questions, and another of the boys presently told him that this Mrs. Dryden, whoever she was, would soon come and sing to them again.

“I ’eard say she was a-comin’ next Saturday but Rev’ren’ Mr. Hardie, he wasn’t sure about it.”

On the following Saturday Lenny hurried Mr. Porter through his dinner, and they arrived quite early. It was

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a crowded night, and one had to wait a long time before the entertainment began. Lenny did not move about the hall to-night. He sat at the end of one of the benches, quietly waiting. He was far from the outer door; and the performing visitors, as they came in, were received by the Committee and conducted to a little room, from which they emerged upon the platform.

At last! Mrs. Dryden's turn now. At the announcement there is terrific drumming of feet, loud whistling, and violent hand-clapping.

"Silence, please! Hush. Silence!"

A tall woman in a black dress, with a pale face and a fringe of dark hair under an Alma Reed hat—the woman who had loved him. His own Alma, no one else—and now a stranger, another man's wife.

She began to sing; and he was suffused with a pleasure akin to pain. Her voice affected him more than he would have believed possible; it poured out floods of gentle melancholy; it evoked a hundred tender memories; it swept him back into the past, whether he wished to go there or not.

She sang again; and his sensation became entirely pleasurable. What an astounding episode! Exciting, stimulating. Just the sort of thing that writers make a lot of in their books and plays—a chance meeting, after long years, between a man and a woman who once were lovers. She was older—that went without saying; but to his eyes she was almost as charming and graceful as ever. Certainly she sang just as well. She was his own lost Alma. Yet here was he sitting near her, and there was she standing close in front of him; and she did not know that he was anywhere within a thousand miles of her. No instinct had warned her of his proximity.

She sang three times. Then enraptured boys and girls broke from the ranks of benches, wildly applauding, tum-

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bling over one another, as they rushed to the door at the side of the platform through which she must pass on her way out of the hall. The boys got all round her, when she came down the steps from the little side room.

"Thank you, ma'am. . . . Sing to us agin, ma'am. . . . Do sing agin. . . . Oh, it was just lovely, ma'am."

Members of the Committee were also thanking her; and when Lenny joined the group, one of them took him by the arm, and made a friendly introduction.

"Mrs. Dryden, let me introduce a new and valuable recruit—Mr. Calcraft, who has been so kind and helpful to us."

With difficulty he persuaded her to let him drive her home in his motor-car. It was raining; and a rather officious clergyman assisted him in forcing her to accept this kindness. Mr. Porter must find his way back by the underground railway—Lenny left no messages for him.

The car moved slowly through the crowded streets, which were now at their busiest. The Saturday night market of the East End was in full swing. Lamplight filled the car, and Lenny watched the delicate profile beneath the big hat. For a little while both remained silent; but he felt an extraordinary contentment. It seemed to him that she had scarcely changed at all; the years had not touched her; she was just as she used to be when he sat by her side like this ages ago.

But in those days she did not speak hardly and coldly, like this.

"Well, Lenny, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I am thinking of the amazing chance that has brought us together—Whitechapel, of all places in the world."

"I suppose we had to meet somewhere, and some time—and it's just as well to get it over."

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"Dear Alma, do you mind it? I have so often wondered about you—longed for some opportunity to get news of you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really and truly. And now, tell me one thing. Are you happy in your new life?"

"Perfectly happy, thank you."

"Oh, I am so glad."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am—overjoyed." And then Lenny sighed. "I wish I could say the same for myself. . . . By the way, you haven't told me where you and—er—Gerald live."

"Knavesmere Gardens. That's just off the Bayswater Road. But please put me down anywhere convenient to you, and I'll get a cab."

"Alma! Of course I shall drive you to the door—the very door."

Presently he made inquiries about Gerald, and Alma reported that her husband was both healthy and prosperous.

"Capital," said Lenny. "I should like to see Gerald again. I hope you will let me do so. I should enjoy having a talk over old times."

"Would you? That rather surprises me."

Then after a pause Lenny asked another question.

"Have you told him about me?"

"Yes—a little."

"Not all?"

"No."

"Dear old Alma! I only ask because—well, one wants to know how one stands. They say that, even when reticence would be wise and proper, wives never keep anything back from their husbands."

"I'm afraid I'm not that sort of wife."

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"Ah! Then I may take it, Gerald just knows the main fact that you and I were regular pals?"

"Yes—regular pals."

She would not thaw, she would not unbend. Her voice had a metallic hardness; and once when she laughed, her laughter sounded unmusical. And worse than all this, she flatly declined Lenny's proposal to visit her at the house in Knavesmere Gardens.

"Why not?" he pleaded. "Gerald and I are old friends. What could be more natural?"

"No," she said resolutely, staring straight in front of her.

"Oh, why? It would be a comfort to me—if I might see you sometimes."

Then she turned to look at him.

"Lenny, I think you are the most incomprehensible person that ever lived."

"Why?"

"Only *you* would have asked the questions you have asked. No one but you would want to come and see me—I mean, no one but you could suppose that I should wish for such a guest."

"Well, I won't press it, if it would be painful to you."

"Painful!" And her voice deepened. "No—but it would be simply wearisome."

He took her to her door, and watched her while she went up a flight of white steps out of the little front garden. It appeared to be a funny old-fashioned box of a house; but it was all dark now—no light showing from any of the windows. She let herself in with a latch-key, and she never looked round or waved her hand.

Except for this omission, it seemed quite like the old days—when, after an evening at the theatre, he used to drive her home to the ugly building that contained Frances Shipham's flat.

XXIX

A FEW days passed, and then to his surprise Lenny received a very nice letter from Gerald Dryden. "My dear Calcraft, Alma has told me of how she met you slumming. Do come to dinner to-morrow, eight o'clock. Not a party—only ourselves."

Lenny was delighted. Alma had managed this after all. She had not truly thought his presence would bring weariness with it, but she had dreaded opposition or reluctance on the part of Gerald. It had taken her a day or two to overcome some little difficulties, and now she had succeeded. This meant, of course, that she *did* want to see him again. Splendid! A gleam of light.

He dressed himself with scrupulous care—white waistcoat, newest example of shirt, latest form of tie, and his very choicest studs. Although he knew that buttonholes were not strictly speaking in fashion, he provided himself with some lilies-of-the-valley and a pink rose for the silk lapel of his coat. He wanted to look his very best to-night.

Dryden received him kindly, if not cordially; but there was a certain irksomeness and constraint that was difficult to get over. Alma seemed very shy. Lenny purposely left her alone, addressing himself to Gerald, and saying how much he admired their charming little home. The house was, in fact, very pretty; small and compact—really like a country house in London, with all kinds of graceful prettinesses that were undoubtedly due to Alma's good taste.

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At dinner they talked of Westchurch. Gerald and his wife had spent Christmas in the family circle of Haven Lodge; and a slight relaxation of restraint was caused by a fortunate allusion to old Mr. Reed's favourite pastime.

"Does your father still play golf?"

"He never played golf," said Alma, with the flicker of a smile.

"Oh, surely. He——"

"He used to try to play, and he still tries."

Then they all laughed, and in Alma's ripple of mirth Lenny heard the old music; free now from that metallic sharpness.

Throughout the meal he noticed that Gerald called him "Calcraft" instead of "Lenny," and that Alma did not use any name at all.

Gerald had not improved externally, and inwardly he seemed to have been hardened rather than softened by his success. The hair had receded from his forehead; his jaw had become, if possible, squarer and more resolute than ever. There was a broadness, a commonness, a total lack of distinction about his whole face. His clothes were badly made, his tie was all wrong; in fact he was dressed abominably, and he seemed to be aware of this, and almost vain-gloriously to boast of the fact.

Once he looked across the table grinning, and drew attention to Lenny's magnificence.

"I see you are as well turned out as ever, Calcraft. Still the buck and dandy. Do you remember how you used to go on about my clothes? But I never picked up the doggy air. Alma rags me about my shabbiness. But it's no use; I'm past reforming."

After dinner, when Alma left them, Gerald kept the guest an unconscionable time in the dining-room, and this was the most difficult and crucial period of the evening.

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Gerald smoked a big and rather rank cigar, and Lenny got through at least six cigarettes before he was permitted to go into the drawing-room.

"I say," said the host abruptly, after a silence, "I'm glad to see you. But there's something that I want to have out with you. Merely a trifle, but it's there at the back of my mind, and I want to get rid of it."

"What is it, Gerald?"

"Well, when I used to gas you about Alma—you remember—my dream and all that,—why didn't you tell me that you were seeing Alma up here?"

Lenny shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, and puffed at his cigarette before answering.

"She didn't wish it, Gerald. She had broken her connection with Westchurch, and she was anxious not to renew the links—at that time, I mean."

"Oh, I see. That's what I gathered from her."

"Yes. I wanted to tell you, of course. It was very difficult not to tell you, but I didn't feel myself a free agent in the matter."

"Well, that's all right," said Gerald, with a change of tone. "And I'm glad I spoke of it."

"I think," said Lenny, "that I can read your thought exactly. You felt that as you had confided in me with such completeness, I ought not to have held back any information which I possessed, and which might be useful to you."

"Yes," said Gerald, "that was exactly my thought. I couldn't understand it. There seemed something mysterious—almost underhand—about it."

"Just so," said Lenny. "But then, confidence is confidence. I was to a certain extent in your wife's confidence at that time, and I was placed in somewhat of a dilemma. But I have a clear recollection of how I went as far as I

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felt justified in going, when you told me of your affection; your hopes, and so on."

"Very likely," said Gerald carelessly. "That's all right. I merely wanted to have it out with you. I'm quite satisfied, and now we're all square."

After this there was a perceptible increase of cordiality on the side of the host. He talked more easily, became vaguely, if not explicitly confidential, and once or twice called the guest "Lenny."

"Glad you like the house, Lenny. It was Alma's choice. I've done the best I can for her. God bless her! The best wife a man ever had, Lenny."

Then, immediately following on this praise of the wife, he spoke again of the house.

"Of course, it's very small. I hoped, we both hoped, that it would prove too small for us before this; but that hasn't happened."

"I understand," said the guest sympathetically. "But it may happen later on. You are both so young."

"I don't know about that," said Gerald, with brutal candour. "Alma is thirty-five, getting on for thirty-six, and I've passed the fledgeling stage."

Lenny shrugged his shoulders, and gently waved his cigarette, but could not find any appropriate words.

"When she and I fixed up our contract," Gerald continued, "I was obliged to pledge myself that our young people should be brought up as Roman Catholics. It rather stuck in my throat, but I had to give way. These Roman Catholics won't budge nowadays." And he gave a laugh that was a snort of contempt. "Well, I need not have worried. The restriction hasn't troubled me."

Yes, thought Lenny, this was where the shoe pinched. No children. He tried to resist any unworthy satisfaction,

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but failed. The fact that there were no offspring of the marriage gave him pleasure.

"But one can't have everything in this world," said Gerald, as though changing the subject. "By the way, Lenny, did you know what an extraordinarily religious woman she was?"

"Do you mean was, or is, Gerald?"

"*Is*—now."

"Oh, of course I knew that she was, in the old time at Westchurch; but I fancied that with her intellectual growth she had got beyond orthodoxy, and rather shaken off the cut-and-dried forms of religion."

"No, or she has come back to them. Of course I leave her absolutely free. I never interfere with her. But if I'm anything, I'm a Protestant. I like protesting, and the worst of that Roman Catholic thralldom is that it does make people so confoundedly superstitious. Poor Alma is stuffed up with superstition—will swallow anything the priests tell her."

"Really? You greatly surprise me, Gerald, by all this. But perhaps it is not unnatural."

"No, I suppose not. But it's disconcerting—sometimes. I'm too practical, of course. But when it comes to miracles——" Dryden paused; and then going on again, he spoke so vaguely that Lenny failed to catch his drift.

What did he mean? Lenny could not understand. But he seemed to hint that Alma craved for some sort of miracle in her own life. Then all at once Lenny guessed, rightly or wrongly, that Alma had been on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, or that she wanted to go there, with a view to achieving something miraculous.

No doubt that was it. There it was again. The pinch of the shoe. The mutual discomfort that infallibly arises in childless marriages.

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At last, after what seemed at least two hours, the host allowed the guest to rejoin his hostess. Alma was reading by the drawing-room fire, and she looked up with a smile.

"Here we are," said Gerald jovially. "Now tip us a stave, old lady."

Alma looked at the guest interrogatively.

"Yes, do please sing," said Lenny: "I should love it."

Alma meekly took her place at the piano, and began to sing; and Lenny sat listening, with bowed head and folded hands. Her voice began to vibrate inside him; he was full of indefinite sadness.

"Do sing something else," he said, when the first song was finished.

"Do you know *All Souls' Day*?" asked Alma.

"No, but I should love to hear it."

Lenny's thoughts were active until she came to the end of *All Souls' Day*. And the thoughts grew sadder and sadder. Alma, his own Alma—and he thought of all that he had lost in losing her. Ah, that was the perfect solace, if only it could have been continued. No other woman would ever be to him what Alma once was. He tried to banish the feeling of regret by observation of surrounding facts. Gerald was a common fellow—utterly unworthy of her. Dreadful for her to be mated to this clown. She was such a thoroughbred. More now than in those far-off days at Haven Lodge, she seemed like a creature of another race—a swan among ducklings—the princess in captivity.

As at the East End, Alma sang three times.

"Do you know *The Green Trees Whispered*?" she asked.

"No," said Lenny.

"I doubt if I know it myself, but I'll try it if you like."

"Do, please."

Gerald had picked up the evening paper, and Lenny,

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seeing he was absorbed, kept his eyes fixed on Alma's face. He was thinking. All this—the house, the piano, and the singer—might have belonged to him. They could have run to such a little house as this—certainly, if deprived of the blessing of children. Then he would have been the host and Gerald the visitor. And he thought of the room upstairs that he would never see: Alma's room—with the wardrobes where she kept her hats. Her dressing-gown would be hanging now over the back of a chintz-covered chair, her slippers close by, and all about the unseen room there would be her pretty little things.

Alma seemed to be troubled by his ardent gaze. She faltered, and then stopped.

"No, I don't really know this. Haven't practised it. I'm sorry."

Then she left the piano, said good-night, and moved towards the door.

Lenny hastened to open it for her. She let him hold her hand for an instant, and then turned to her husband, who had put down the newspaper, and was giving her some domestic order.

"Alma, don't touch the upstairs switch."

"Very well." And she went out into the snug little hall and up the stairs.

The evening was over, and Lenny would have gone away, but he was not allowed to do so yet awhile. Gerald insisted on taking him to his own private den on the other side of the hall, making him drink whisky and soda, smoke more cigarettes, and suffer almost insupportable boredom. Once Gerald took him out of the room, back into the hall, to show him a wonderful switch-board—something patented by Gerald's firm—an ingenious contrivance by which one could control every lamp in the house, and light them and extinguish them just as one pleased. That was a fair

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sample of the whole of this interview,—terribly boring. Lenny yawned behind Gerald's back. But, however bored he might be, he did not dare to hurry off. He must establish his footing, because he wanted to come again.

For the most part, Gerald was recounting his career, and the enterprises in which his firm had engaged. Tramways at Buenos Ayres—power station in Mexico—mills on the Danube—idiotic technical twaddle.

"Yes, Lenny. I'm making money, but it's slow work. I've been deuced lucky—lucky to be taken on as a partner—lucky that the other partners were such old chaps. Tired men, all three of them; glad to give me scope. The business was all right, but going to sleep when I came into it."

Suddenly Lenny thought of Porter and his trick of saying "quite." After that it was easier. Lenny gave Gerald a "quite" in every pause, and Gerald appeared to be thoroughly satisfied.

"But I shan't go on for ever. I shall slack up directly I have made enough. It's the old story: I have only one aim—Alma. It's all for Alma, and, please God, I mean her to have a good time of it before long. She is such a brick, she never grouses. But it's mighty dull for her. I'm obliged to leave her continually. I can't help it."

"Quite."

"That's one of the troubles in married life, when you don't belong to the leisured class. If a man's got to work, he can't be always trotting his wife about. Yet if he doesn't do it, people say he is neglecting her. Alma never says it, never hints it; but she is thrown on her own resources. She doesn't make friends readily. She used to, but she doesn't now. Then, being so much alone, she slides into all this religious fervour and excitement." . . .

Really Lenny had ceased to listen—he was thinking of the room upstairs. In imagination he had forced his way

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into it now. He could see it. A reading lamp and small circle of bright light. Alma reading in bed. All her pretty hair loose—a narrow white face in the midst of a dark cloud—just as he used to see it. And soon—it must be soon; this couldn't last much longer—the door of the room would be opened, and she would lift her eyes and say "Is that you, Gerald dear?"—instead of saying "Is that you, Lenny dear?"

XXX

LENNY went no more to the Happy Evenings. He had another interest in life.

Without delay he called at Knavesmere Gardens to thank Alma for her hospitality; and, hastening to pay his social debt, he invited her and her husband to dine with him at a smart restaurant on the following Sunday. Gerald seemed pleased to accept this invitation, and the little party went off charmingly. Then Lenny proposed a night at the play. He had bought four stalls, and he wished the Drydens to see this piece—it was a great success, and, as he understood, very amusing. Would Alma ask one of her women friends to make up the quartette? Dinner, of course, to be provided by Lenny before the dramatic treat.

Several visits were necessary to complete all arrangements; and in the end the party was a trio and not a quartette. Alma had not been able to find any woman friend available.

After this Gerald's business called him away to Germany for three days; when he came back, it was only to be called away again; and during these absences Lenny saw for himself the absolute truth of all that Gerald had told him. Poor Alma had been left alone in the house, without amusement or companionship; at whatever hour one called, one never met any of her friends there; she seemed to possess no real friends; she was thrown entirely on her own resources.

Yet she resolutely declared that she could not renew an old friendship which would infallibly relieve the monotony

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of her long dull days. She did not like receiving visitors. She had occupations; and occupations are better than amusements. She hardly ever felt dull.

She said she was happy—thoroughly contented; and he admired the steadfast courage that supported her while she uttered this boast. Poor girl, she knew that she had made her bed and must lie on it. She would never abrogate a woman's natural pride and own that it was not a bed of roses. Very fine, this, essentially fine—just what one might expect from Alma.

Nevertheless he had determined to help her in spite of herself. Their friendship—a certain amount of it—should and must be renewed.

For him there could be little true pleasure in it—*no* pleasure, one might say, that was free from pain. But he gave himself freely to the varied feelings it aroused—regret, remorse, vague yearnings, unformulated hopes. And already he had gained something. The whole affair was interesting, absorbingly interesting. Of late when waking of a morning—unless it was Saturday morning, with a Happy Evening in view,—he had been at once conscious of a mental lassitude and emptiness; and his whole body seemed to echo the whisper of his mind. Another day, but why get up at all? What's the use of a day? *Cui bono?* Now, however, he woke with a vigorous briskness of thought. His body felt purposeful, quite eager to relinquish the warm bed. Each day brought its work with it. He had something instead of nothing to do.

And soon he began to feel that once more he was being guided by wise instincts. Alma might make him sad, but all the time she did him good. Alma linked him with his vanished youth—the careless sunlit epoch of hope and strength and joy. The sight of her lips, the sound of her voice, and, above all else, the touch of her fingers, carried

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him straight back. Alma could, and before long would, make him feel almost young again.

It was slow, arduous work. But Lenny had now found the lever that would move her—not very much; but still it did move her. Pity—that sweetest and most gentle of feminine qualities. By the constant appeal to all that was compassionate in her nature, he had achieved progress.

One afternoon—a nasty foggy afternoon—he was left waiting in the drawing-room for a considerable time; and when at last she appeared, she told him explicitly that he must not continue to pay her these visits.

“Alma, dear, may I ask you one question? Does Gerald object?”

“No. Gerald is much too busy for me to bother him with any little worries of mine.”

“Gerald, I honestly believe—from what he let fall—would be only too glad for anybody to come here now and then, and cheer you up.”

“You do not cheer me up. Besides, you altogether misinterpret whatever Gerald may have said. I can’t have your car standing out there every afternoon—people would begin to wonder.”

“I’ll never bring the car again. I’ll come in a cab. I’ll walk. I’d walk right across London for the joy of seeing you.”

“Lenny,” she said seriously, “are you going to force me to tell the servants that you are not to be admitted? I must do it, if you force me. . . . Please go away; and please don’t come here again—at least until my husband asks you.”

She had not sat down; she had not even shaken hands with him; and now she turned her back, and went to the window.

Lenny followed her, stood beside her, stared forlornly at

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the little front garden, the car, and the foggy roadway. And then chance aided him, and gave him a useful hint, just as he was despairing of ever making a substantial step forward.

Outside the window something attracted Alma's attention and diverted the train of her thoughts. It was a flower-seller—a wretched, skinny, ragged woman, who offered pots of yellow tulips, and was being repulsed by Lenny's chauffeur. She picked up the weighty basket that held her stock of flower-pots—quite a dozen of them—and limped past the garden railings. Seen thus, vaguely in the fog, she looked like some miserable ghost—a piteous figure from purgatory—a weak sinner doomed to carry a monstrous burden through the dim under-world.

“Oh, poor soul!” said Alma; and her voice was eloquent with pity. “I don't believe she has sold a single one. She has been up and down the road since ten this morning. Oh, I must send out and buy one. Lenny, ring the bell for me.”

Lenny did not ring the bell. Hatless, he dashed out of the house, dismissed his car in passing, ran after the ragged woman, and bought all her flower pots.

He came back to tell Alma, and to crave her acceptance of this handsome supply of yellow tulips.

“You were quite right,” he said cheerily. “She hadn't got rid of one—and only a shilling apiece, poor dear! I gave her a sovereign, and told her to keep the change.”

“That was kind of you, Lenny—really kind.” Her eyes were moist and bright; there was colour in her pale face; her voice had a full note, and a pause, if not a break, that gave him a faintly delicious thrill.

He sat down on one of the chintz-covered chairs; and while the flowers were being delivered and she was out of the room, he thought. A sovereign well spent—a good in-

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vestment! This had been a turning-point, a crisis, a trifling event that might have tremendous consequences. "Lenny," he said to himself, "take care. You are playing with fire." Well, if so, he must go on playing with it.

But it was not a comfortable thought, and, for that reason, he immediately dismissed it. Chance had prompted him. He had his cue now. Pity! If she was so sorry for any poor beggar in the street, she would be sorry for him.

When she returned to the room, she didn't send him away. He knew that she would not be so obdurate. She allowed him to stay for quite an hour, and all through the hour he talked about himself.

He told her of his loneliness, his reveries, his bad health, and his melancholy. Speaking of the sadness, he took some splendid imaginative flights. He said the sadness was like a dark sea, rolling through the years towards him; and he felt like a man standing at the foot of an unclimbable cliff, while the cruel waves slowly mounted the shore to engulf him. No escape possible.

"So I live in the past now, Alma. Can you wonder? I have nothing to look forward to,"

He saturated himself, and he tried to saturate her, in sentimentality. She *must* pity him; she *should* pity him. And in itself the talk was so valuable. It was doing him good. It eased him and soothed him.

"Lenny, what can I say? I don't know *why* you should be sad; but if you *are* sad, of course I'm sorry that you are."

There! She had said it. How could she help saying it? It would have been unnatural if she, of all people in the world, did not sympathize with him. He kept the conversation swinging along, on the same topic, and every minute he felt more forcibly that, so long as they talked

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like this, he would as it were have the whip hand of her. The logic of facts seemed to be arguing for him. After all, *she* had married; and *he* had remained single. This obvious reflection, which would perpetually present itself to her mind, must tend to influence her, to placate her, to soften her.

It was fortunate that no whisper of Helen Fletcher had ever reached her. He recognized that, had Alma known anything of that entanglement with Mrs. Fletcher, his task would have become twenty times more difficult.

Not happy, although she swore she was. But he meant to make her confess the truth. He felt that until he should have beaten down her reserve and wrung this confession from her, he would never enjoy the charms of open and unembarrassed talk. There were so many questions that he wanted to ask her. Years ago there had been such absolute frankness between them, ideas held in an intellectual partnership, a unique communion of mind with mind. And it would come again; it was surely coming.

Festina lente—he often repeated these classic words,—hurry slowly, hurry slowly. And indeed his progress in the last two weeks had been remarkable.

She had consented to go out for walks with him, or had consented to allow him to accompany her when she went for walks. At first there was no prearranged plan. Their meetings seemed to occur by chance. He had learnt her habits, and if he guessed that she was going to such and such a place—Kensington Gardens, the old palace that she still loved, or the Regent's Park,—well, he went there too, turned up accidentally. But then her pride and loyalty revolted against even the semblance of dissimulation; she insisted on putting everything in a clear light; and thenceforth, if they met at all, it was to be by definite appointment.

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"If for a moment I thought it wrong, I wouldn't do it," she said firmly.

Wrong? What a notion! If two lonely people taking exercise for the benefit of their health may not join forces and stroll together—two old friends,—why, what *may* one do?

The candid explanation delighted Lenny. Another turning-point or crisis safely negotiated. A step forward in the line leading towards those purely intellectual gratifications for which he craved.

They were companions who often walked side by side—but still at arm's length, so to speak. Keeping vanity out of the question, one could not but suppose that after the isolation to which she was accustomed a willing escort must prove an agreeable novelty. It really made no difference whether Dryden was away or at home—in Berlin or in his Queen Victoria Street office: he was always up to the eyebrows in business, and of no practical use to his wife. Lenny, when thinking of him, employed one of his favourite thought-counters. Gerald was a negligible quantity.

Gradually he succeeded in winning her to the sentimental meditations that he himself found so tenderly soothing. Our past—that is the field for sentimental exploration; let us open memory's gate, and enter it hand in hand. The mists hang over it—Alma, do you remember our morning walks?—but the sun will presently burst through the white veil and show us wonderland.

The past was drawing her. He felt sure that she too lived much in the past. He did not pretend to believe her when she denied or protested. She was always thinking about the past, although she said that one ought not to think of it.

"The past is over and done with." When they were

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speaking generally, philosophizing, she often said that sort of thing. "I shall never agree with you, Lenny. One's dead past should be left in its quiet sepulchre. It should not be revived by oneself—at any rate. If it rises like an ugly phantom, and stalks after us—that's another matter. But we shouldn't look back. It's weakness to look back. We should look forward. All our duties lie ahead, and none of them behind us."

And once, trying to confute his arguments, she said something that interested him intensely.

"Lenny, I have *authority* on my side. At a time when I was very miserable—scarcely knowing what was right or wrong—and those much wiser than myself were directing my conduct, they taught me this great lesson. We are *not* to torment ourselves by looking back." . . .

"I understand," he said softly. "Alma dear, I have read all your thought."

"I don't think you have. In fact I know that you couldn't possibly do so."

She had flushed. She turned away her head, and, unconsciously quickening her steps, walked so fast that he could hardly keep up with her.

But he felt sure that his intuitive surmise was correct. She had been alluding to that dark period when, losing him, she fell back into the hands of the priests, and Gerald Dryden came courting her. And the priests had advised her not to tell Dryden *too* much. She would have made a clean breast of everything; but those wiser than herself restrained her.

He felt a momentary glow of veneration and gratitude. Rome may have her faults; but there is something sublime and tremendous about her—a wisdom that rides with such steadiness over the troubled seas of life, a doctrine made for all time, a faith which discriminates so infallibly between

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essentials and non-essentials. And, say what you will, her priests are nearly always men of the world.

Lenny did not venture to pursue the subject; nor did he boast of his clairvoyance; but he thought that sooner or later he would be questioning, and she would be answering freely. Nothing could possibly be more interesting than to get her to fill in all those parts of her life that were blank to him. Some day she should give him the exact words of what the priests had said to her, and of what she had said to Gerald; and in exchange he would give her a minute record of all his emotions immediately after the parting. Perhaps he would even describe his state of fear when he fancied that she had committed suicide. Or perhaps he wouldn't describe that. He was not sure whether he would or he wouldn't. He would decide when the proper time came.

Meanwhile he persistently adhered to sugary sentiment. He made her speak of Haven Lodge, of her family, of Father Marchant's church.

"You must have been glad to be among your people again."

And she said that she had felt very glad.

"By the way, your stepsisters! Any of them off the shelf?"

Yes, she said, one of them, Gladys, had married a soldier, and gone to India. Mrs. Reed was rejoiced at this happy event.

"And your father?"

"Father notices nothing. Father has aged. Oh, Lenny, I saw such a difference last Christmas. It went to my heart."

Then he made her speak of her dead mother. In the past he had never shown any curiosity about this lady; but now he craved for the very fullest particulars, and Alma,

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after a little hesitation. told him many things of the parent whom she had greatly loved and greatly missed. She spoke sweetly—her eyes growing moist and dark, with lashes blinking; her voice taking the deep tones to which he liked to listen, breaking as she uttered the last two words of the story.

“Poor mother!”

“Yes, and poor Alma! Oh, how I understand what she was to you!” and he nodded his head, until his hat came right forward on his forehead. Then readjusting the hat, he continued mournfully, “Alma, do you remember something that you once said to me—I shall never forget it—about our joint destinies, how they were interwoven? Well, isn’t it a curious thought—that we had each of us lost our mother, we were both motherless, when you and I first met?”

XXXI

HE had torn the confession from her.

Days were drawing out now; the tardy spring began to show signs of its approach; and one afternoon, when the air was peculiarly mild and soft, they sat for quite a long time on a bench in Kensington Gardens.

Alma had been talking of her husband's manifold virtues, and she went on talking as though she would never get to the end of them. Really it became like a Biblical song, or a rather tedious doxology.

"He is so good that he has made me think better of all mankind. If you only knew how he worked, never sparing himself, driving himself, flogging himself. And it is all for me—he would tell you so himself. And I do *nothing* for him—never have been able, never shall be able, to repay him for his generosity, his—his love, his unceasing goodness."

"And yet," said Lenny quietly, "you are not happy with him."

Of course she denied it; but the hour had come for persistence, and he pressed her more persistently, until at last she acknowledged the truth.

"Then no—I am not altogether happy."

"Ah!" And he gave a sigh of satisfaction. "That is what I feared."

"If you think there's any disloyalty to him in my telling you—you're mistaken."

She had hastily brought out her handkerchief, and was wiping her eyes.

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"Dear Alma, it overwhelms me to see you in this distress."

"All right. D-don't be overwhelmed, Lenny. It's nothing to do with you, anyhow."

She put away her handkerchief; and, though her lips trembled, she looked at him resolutely.

"But I think it is everything to do with me—your oldest friend. If I haven't the right to sympathize with you, who has? And if you mayn't confide your secrets to me, why——" He broke off; he could not go on with these vague generalities; he must be frank and open. "Alma, why did you marry him?"

"Why? What a question! Only *you* would have asked me."

"I never could explain it. Literally, it surpassed my comprehension."

"I dare say it did."

"One hazarded guesses, of course. I suppose it was this terrible feeling of loneliness—from which I myself am now suffering."

"Yes, something of that kind." Her voice for a few moments became hard and metallic. "I was feeling just a little lonely, slightly neglected, rather tired of myself. I did it to escape from myself. . . . And I haven't succeeded." Her voice suddenly softened, and was again melodious to the ear. "I don't even make him happy—not as happy as he ought to be;—but I try, Lenny. That is my life—the rest of my life: to be true to him."

"Just so. Still I don't understand how you convinced yourself—I mean, quite at the beginning—that there was any fair prospect——"

"You don't understand? Then let me enlighten you as far as I can."

He was watching her with acute interest. She sat

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very upright and rigid; and her eyes distinctly flashed at him.

"Yes, enlighten me," he whispered soothingly.

"I'd rather tell you more about *him*—but you won't really understand that either."

"Alma! It's unkind to suggest——"

"Can you understand that the love of a good man is something so rare and strange that we women can't afford to reject it lightly? Can you understand that Gerald never loved any other woman but me?"

"Yes, yes—Alma dear."

He was rather scared by her earnestness. But it seemed that, having started her, he could not stop her; and unfortunately in her excitement she was speaking a little too loudly. However, there was nobody within ear-shot.

"I was his dream—isn't that worth boasting about? I was his star—bright to him, no matter how faint to all others; and he steered by his star. He came to me through the darkness—was always coming, though I never knew, never guessed. . . . These were the flattering things that he said when asking me to be his wife—and he *meant* them. They were true then. And they are true to-day. Do you understand that?"

He watched her intently. Her eyes were truly flashing, her cheeks were full of delicate colour, the tones of her voice deepened and swelled with violent emotion; and she had lifted both her hands to the front of her jacket. He noticed that the hands trembled; and they seemed to press against her bosom, as though she were vainly trying to keep back the flood of distress. He was dreadfully sorry to see her agitate herself in this manner, and to such an extent; but he thought that she looked extraordinarily pretty—almost as pretty as she had ever looked.

"Gerald loved me. Can you understand that? Gerald

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wanted me—this worthless *me.*” And the fragile, gloved hands pressed and shook. “This poor broken Alma—buffeted by fate—picked up and tossed aside by men—this rag of a woman was to *him* a thing to be held high—to be cherished, to be worshipped—the woman who he believed could make him happy. . . . Now can you understand?”

“Yes. I *do* understand that his affection—which I don’t doubt, which I never doubted—would have great influence with you.”

The handkerchief appeared again, and she dabbed at her eyes.

“And if I am unhappy, it is only for his sake. Lenny, I have failed him. There’s the bitterness.”

“Alma, don’t give way. I’m sure you reproach yourself without cause—quite without cause.”

“He wanted children—every good man does. And I haven’t given them to him. He tries to hide his disappointment—he is so chivalrous and brave that, if he could help it, he would never let me know what a cruel, cruel disappointment it has been.”

Lenny was intensely sorry for her. He watched her and admired her. Such a splendid nature—refined gold. Oh, how could fate be so unkind to his poor little Alma!

“Lenny, it’s the discrepancy of years too—one can’t get over it.”

Her voice was quiet and low of tone; she had clasped her hands upon her lap; and, instead of being rigid, her figure seemed to droop from the slender waist—like some graceful flower, beaten down by a storm that is now over. He noticed the pathetic quiver at the corners of her mouth; her whole aspect had that air of tragic sweetness that he remembered well.

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"I am so much older than Gerald. The ugliness of age has touched me already."

"No, no."

"Yes, it has. He doesn't see it yet—or he is struggling against facts. He is brave and staunch—he *won't* see it. For a little while he'll succeed, he'll conquer facts. . . . But in ten years the tragedy will begin. This is merely prologue. He will wake one day, and see the old, faded, sexless wretch to whom he has tied himself. And I shall see his eyes resting on every young woman that comes our way—the parlourmaid, the girls who bring my dresses from the shops, the daughters of his friends. He won't do it basely or treacherously, but because he can't help it—in sheer relief, just to rest his eyes with youth and freshness and joyous life after they have looked for so long at staleness, dryness, deadness."

"Alma! These ideas are morbid—simply morbid. Not the least ground for them."

She was staring straight in front of her, and her voice grew softer and softer.

"I think I shall tell him to snatch any joy he can find. I shall say, 'Gerald, you have been good to me; and you must not be unhappy because of your goodness. Your wife has failed you. Take mistresses now. I won't mind—I won't suffer—I will be glad, if you are glad.'"

"Alma, how can you talk like this?"

"But if I had borne him children, there could be no tragedy. I should look forward without fear." She was still staring, as though across the paths and grass she could see in the distance all that she spoke of. "Little things—little things!" And her voice was so faint that he could only just hear it. "Little things—weak and yet strong! They would make small doors all over his heart, to run

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in and out of—and everywhere a child can pass is big enough for its mother to creep through.”

Lenny looked round in all directions. There was nobody near. He very gently patted her clasped hands.

“You are so sweet, so good, that I wish—most truly—that you could have been happy in this marriage.”

She made no answer. It was as if her thoughts had taken her far away, and she could not yet listen to his words, however well chosen they might be. But he continued, in a gentle consolatory tone.

“That is much for me—of all people—to be able to say. It proves how dear you were to me, that I wished your happiness—even with somebody else. . . . Alma, do listen to me. . . . You must not entertain all these painful ideas. I said just now that they were morbid; but I might have said with equal truth that they were delusions—simply delusions. Gerald is the luckiest of mortals—to be envied.”

“Is he?”

“Yes, to be envied—to be envied more than perhaps you would like me to say.”

She was not listening. He withdrew his hand: there was no pleasure in patting her if she did not know he was doing it.

“Alma dear, do rouse yourself. Throw off these uncomfortable sensations.”

She raised her head, and turned to look at him again. Her eyes were dark, with deep shadows around them; and her face seemed narrower, the features pinched as if by cold.

“Yes, Lenny. What were you saying?” And she shivered.

“I am telling you that you’re not to fancy you’re getting

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old—or in any way losing your charm. No one would see it so well as I, if it was true. But it isn't true. No, there is all the fascination that there ever was. To *my* eyes you are still quite a girl."

"Lenny, it is getting late. I must go now."

"Yes, we'll go. But just one minute. I have so loved this confidential talk. It was what I pined for. And I've so much to say—to cheer you."

"I don't require cheering."

"Alma, this isn't kind. . . . Frankly, I see now exactly what you mean about the discrepancy of years. That *is* true. And I therefore don't attempt to contradict it. He is younger than you. That's a pity. And I understand how completely it destroys what ought to be the greatest joy of marriage—the perfect companionship. . . . Oh, Alma! *Ours* was the ideal companionship."

"Was it, Lenny?" And once more there came the sharp metallic ring in her voice.

"Yes," and he nodded his head, and sighed. "Oh, Alma, what a mess we have made of our lives!"

"*We?*"

"Well—I. The mistake was mine. I admit it. Oh, what a hideous mistake it was!"

"Lenny, it is getting cold. I can't sit here any longer." And she got up from the bench. "Don't trouble to see me home. Really I would rather you didn't."

"Let me go as far as the gates—at least to the gates. Don't banish me to loneliness and sadness sooner than is necessary."

He walked by her side, talking smoothly and easily. He felt wonderfully peaceful and contented; but presently, speaking of Gerald, he said something that she considered derogatory or disparaging, and she flashed out at him again.

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"Lenny!" she was rebuking him indignantly, even wrathfully. "You forget who I am. You insult me, as well as your friend."

But Lenny did not mind. For a little while it was quite like a lovers' quarrel—one of those trifling disagreements in the past, a temporary flare-up on her side and a calm waiting attitude on his, nothing serious; for they never really quarrelled. And now all this carried him straight back to the dear old days.

"Alma," he said deprecatingly, when he thought she was nearly pacified, "don't be huffed by my frankness."

"It isn't frankness: it's rudeness—and utterly horrid of you."

"When I said that Gerald was a bore, truly I didn't mean to be unkind. Good gracious, who isn't a bore sometimes? I dare say I bore people myself. It is purely a matter of sympathy—it is a question of companionship."

"You and Gerald got on very well at Westchurch."

"Yes—exactly. There, Alma! You know how much I liked him—but it wasn't companionship;" and Lenny laughed good-humouredly. "How we used to tramp up and down that parade? But with Gerald one couldn't *talk*—he was like a child toddling by one's side, and prattling about his little hopes and schemes. And it is the same thing now. He runs on without a pause about his own affairs—very interesting to *him*, of course. It is all what I did yesterday and what I intend to do to-morrow. Well, that isn't *conversation*."

They were near the gates, and Alma stopped short.

"Lenny, I think it is horrid of you to speak of Gerald in this way—and if you do it, I can never meet you again."

"I won't do it. Sooner than do it, I'll forget that Gerald exists."

"Good-night. No, not a step further."

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He did not insist; he thought that he had made a very big step already.

Next morning he received a letter from her. She wrote to say she had come to the conclusion that nothing could be gained by their meetings, and they must therefore cease. She was sorry that he felt so lonely and miserable, but she could not assist him to regain his peace of mind. She advised him to try the effect of change of air, and to occupy his time with some kind of regular work; and, as he understood her meaning, she hinted at a hope that chance or thought might one day direct him to seek consolation where she herself had found it. That meant religion—the bosom of Rome—and so on. Then she wound up by praise of Gerald, and a request that Lenny would not take too seriously what she had let fall about certain regrets in her own life.

He did not reply by another letter. *Litera scripta manet*—one had not forgotten all one's Latin. He went to see her, and made a poignant appeal to her compassion. She was doing him good; she was taking him out of himself, leading him towards equanimity—he implored her not to cast him back into outer darkness.

XXXII

HE was the victim now of an intense longing for one of the old embraces. He scarcely knew when the longing began, or when he first recognized that it was there; but, once having gained status as a plain fact, it strengthened and grew more imperious at every meeting. While he was with her its repression was a difficulty that poisoned all his pleasure; while he was away from her its indulgence filled the whole realm of his imagination, mocking him with intangible bliss, enervating, exhausting, almost sickening him with recurrent series of thought pictures.

And the longing made him meditate more boldly than was his custom. Logic of facts again! All mental activity is sustained by a physical basis, and intellectual gratifications cannot stand quite alone. Communion of minds may be the highest joy; but a companionship of the opposite sexes that contains nothing more substantial is a phenomenon so unusual that one may surmise it to be repugnant to Nature's laws. Then he remembered something, directly bearing on this argument, that he had once read in a translation of a learned German book. Even in friendships between rough unemotional men, all those outward manifestations of regard, such as gripping of hands, slapping of shoulders, and digging one another in the ribs, serve a useful purpose and have their function in nourishing the jovial sense of affectionate good-fellowship.

Then he remembered something else that he had read or heard. Given favourable opportunities, if a woman has once been really yours, you can always make her yours

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again. And something else still. The first lover has an irrefutable, almost invincible claim upon a woman's heart. Something mysterious, perhaps inexplicable about this, but probably a lot of truth in it—the impress of an image when the mind is plastic—a chain forged, which may be *hidden*, but cannot be *broken*.

Gerald Dryden was in London now; but he would soon be going to France—to Lyons, to Marseilles, and to another town. Once, as Alma related without a word of complaint, he had been away for eight months—working through the republics of South America, a commercial traveller touting for orders. What a husband! Nearly always away, and when at home making himself a wet-blanket, showing his poor little wife that she is not all-sufficient, depressing her because he has not obtained all his wishes.

But Lenny had promised to forget Dryden. Only the thought of those eight months opened out wide regrets for lost possibilities. How many afternoons and evenings in eight months! Why had he permitted the separation to extend through so many wasted years? He should have made some effort to discover where she was and how she was. He ought to have written to tell her about himself. It was *wrong* not to write to her.

She had yielded to his importunity, and they continued to go about together. Several times she talked to him seriously and very sweetly of his future. Why wasn't he more ambitious? Why didn't he go into Parliament? Or if he could not afford that, there were other things that he could do—there are so many useful things that can be done by a man who is not compelled to work for his living.

“Lenny, I'm certain that you would be the better for a settled purpose and a regular occupation.”

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He did not of course reply that just now he had both. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at her.

"My health! I greatly doubt if my health would justify——"

"But, Lenny, your health seems all right," and she glanced at him searchingly.

"Do I *look* all right, Alma?"

"Yes, on the whole, I think you look quite well—strong, I mean—healthy."

There was melancholy in his smile, and he shook his head. "Then, Alma, I am like a damaged watch—its face looks all right, it goes all right for a little while, and then the movement ceases. Alma, the mainspring of my life is broken."

"I don't believe it—I—I shall never believe it."

Her tender care for his future gratified him; but it was to the past that he wished to confine her attention. It was the past that would aid him now. It was the past that insensibly would draw them together.

And gradually, perhaps unconsciously, she submitted to his controlling purpose. They glided into the phase of Do-you-remember?—the phase that is so common and so entrancing when friends renew association after long years.

"Alma, do you remember Miss Workman pouring out the hot water for you?"

Alma used to have command of the tea-pot at those pleasant little parties; but once Miss Workman replenished the silver vessel, and talked politics at the same time—and she went on talking and pouring. No one could check her. She flooded the tea-table, she emptied the kettle, she nearly scalded Mrs. Blacklock.

They both laughed, like children, at the memory of this trivial episode. The long years had given value to the feeblest jest. And so it was with other reminiscences—some

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magic property attaching to that which is irrevocably vanished made small matters appear vastly important or significant.

"Lenny, do you remember Mr. Tucker's poodle?"

"Of course I do."

Alma softened perceptibly during such childish chatter as this; but she hardened if he tried to evoke less innocent recollections. She would not pass on in memory from Westchurch to London. She would not remember any events, however amusing, in the time that had elapsed between her leaving Westchurch and her marrying Dryden.

On a Sunday late in March she consented, after much persuasion, to go a little way out of London with him. He suggested Windsor—they would go by train, because from the first she resolutely refused to make use of his motor, and he had got rid of it two months earlier than usual. Windsor, she said, was too far off, but they might perhaps go to Kew Gardens. He did not remind her that Kew was one of the spots they had often visited in the blank unremembered period.

It was a dull, cheerless day, and the gardens showed them bare trees, flowerless beds, stretches of wet grass, and very little else. Grey mist creeping up from the river, no sunlight, no colour, and no laughter—they walked along the damp paths through cold and empty woods, and the all-pervading sadness of the hour and the place possessed them.

A few people were scattered here and there about the glass-house; but the expanse of wild garden was deserted. For a while they were quite alone, wandering aimlessly beneath gaunt beeches and gloomy firs, pausing to peer down dim vistas and to watch the dark water of a small lake. And it seemed to him that Alma, as she grew sadder, soft-

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ened more and more. He succeeded immediately when he tried to make her speak of the obliterated epoch. He had asked her about her old work at the London offices; and she told him of its drab monotony, the weariness of pamphlet compilation, the repetitive annoyance caused by stupid inquirers who could not comprehend the simplest theories of the Association. And, talking, she walked slowly, languidly, and seemed so pale and limp and tired that his whole being yearned over her. His own Alma—so sad then, and so tired now. Oh, cruel and unjust fate!

Very gently he slipped his arm through hers and supported her. She still talked of the time of dear Frances Shipham, of the newspaper contributors, the queer women who came to the flat; and presently, when they paused at the turning of another path, he took her hand and held it in his.

A sad, but most delicious ramble, with the dusk falling and the mists rising—they walked close together, side by side, like two ghosts of lovers.

And he found that he might gently press her fingers before he relinquished them; he might rest his hand upon her shoulder—but when he slid the hand from her shoulder to her neck, she stopped him. She always stopped him.

“Lenny, don’t.”

“Oh, Alma,” and his voice sounded hoarse and shaky, “oh, be nice to me—be nice to me as you used to be in the dear old days.”

Then it was as if she awoke out of a dream. She pushed his hand roughly from her, stepped back, and almost glared at him.

“Lenny, since you can’t understand, I’ll never see you again.”

“Alma,” he murmured imploringly.

Truly he did not understand. Just now it seemed to

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him that he had succeeded in exercising the power that must logically be his; she had felt the chain of habit constraining her to submission; what she had been in the past she was about to become again—the servant of his wish. But now everything seemed to have broken loose. She had snapped the chain, and was angrily trampling it under her feet.

“Alma, why won’t you be nice to me?”

They went home sadly and silently. No more reminiscences—and not one smile. He suspected that he had not hurried slowly enough. And, trying to read her thoughts, he guessed that she had suffered his slight caresses mechanically—too much engrossed by the conversation to notice them; and, angry with herself for this lapse of attention, for being as it were thrown off her guard, she was harshly punishing him.

Nevertheless something that she said while upbraiding him made his pulses throb, and sent a flame of pleasure rushing through his veins. The words and their tone combined to change a reprimand into an entreaty. He could not afterwards recall the exact words, but they seemed to pray him not to urge her further. Then he did possess power over her, and she dreaded the power?

She said that she would see him no more; but she relented. He had felt sure that she would relent. Obviously she must enjoy these outings: in the utter loneliness and boredom of her life she must crave for relief.

On a bright April morning they went down to Kingston—another place that for him was hallowed by tender memories. They would walk by the water’s edge, see the trees in the Home Park, have tea at the old shop near the market square; and then come quietly home—just as they used to do.

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The sun shone, the air was soft and warm, and Alma looked sweetly pretty. She wore a brown frock, with a plain countrified hat—not one of her big feathered hats—and through the white spotted veil her eyes gleamed brightly, and her cheeks had a glowing pinkness. They sat opposite to each other, and though there was nobody else in the compartment they talked very little. Nearly all the way from Waterloo to Kingston, he was silently watching her and admiring her.

“Alma,” he said, towards the end of their journey, “I wish I had a looking-glass to show you yourself at this minute. You wouldn’t talk of being old. Your eyes are flashing like sunbeams on glass, your face is full of rose petals.”

“Lenny, why do you flatter me?”

“It isn’t flattery. In that veil, you are quite absurdly young; you are a girl of eighteen—you are Alma as I first saw her.”

“My veil! It’s my veil, Lenny—that hides the ugly truth.”

“No, the glorious truth.”

She smiled sadly, and spoke sadly. “Time won’t stand still for us. Everybody is getting old. I told you how I felt it at Westchurch—every face so changed. My father—Miss Workman—Dr. Searle—every one of them grown so old—so old.”

Lenny looked at her anxiously, and asked if she thought that he too showed any signs of age.

“Oh, in your case it’s of no consequence.”

“Why? . . . Ah, that means you do see changes. Tell me candidly. . . . Describe me. Tell me what I am like—I mean, if I were a stranger, what would be your impression? Describe me.”

And he went on talking eagerly and anxiously. He

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had asked her to describe him, but in fact he described himself.

"My hair is grey, at the sides; but I'm not bald. I'd rather be grey than bald. Many men are bald quite young. I'm solid; but it's muscle, you know—not fat. I feel just the same as I always did—honestly, not a day older—except in the one thing that I get tired more easily."

"Yes," she said, "perhaps that is all that I notice—just the something different;" and she turned her head, and looked out of the window.

"Yes, I am often tired. But not now, Alma. Never when I'm with you."

He was satisfied. She had not flattered him. She would not pay him the tiniest little compliment; but he had the pleasant conviction that in her secret heart she thought, if he had changed at all, he had changed for the better. She, quite as well as himself, could see that the grey hair, the pallor, and the few lines about his eyes added distinction.

They walked through the picturesque town, and along that formal parade by the quiet, locked Thames. Trees on the other side of the water had vernal tints; the sky was a faint blue, flecked with cloud; the sunlight shone feebly on the land and brightly on the water; and the air wafted towards one indefinite promises and caressing hopes. They sat upon a bench and glanced idly at people passing to and fro, nursemaids and children, young men and young women, lovers and friends. At a distance the bridge glittered whitely above barges in tiers, an anchored steamer, and two punts with red sails. A ripple and then a wave ran across the sunlit water as a noisy tug went by; and after it had gone there was a splashing and flopping noise as its wash struck the stonework of the shore.

"Very well kept up—this parade," said Lenny, glanc-

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ing at the strips of grass, the shrubs, and iron railings. "A great amenity, for residents as well as visitors."

Except that it was beside a river instead of a sea, it might have been the Westchurch parade. The scene, harmonizing with his thoughts, held him in the happy past.

"Alma," he said abruptly, "raise your veil. I'm sure it's hot and stuffy for you. Enjoy the air."

But she assured him that she experienced no inconvenience from the veil.

"Yes, do. I ask it as a favour. Humour me in this. A fancy. I'll explain it presently;" and he got up. "Do it while I walk on a little way. *Please!* And you are to sit here until I stop and turn. Then jump up and come to me—with your veil raised."

He nodded his head, smiled gaily, and walked away. Without once looking round, he walked along the parade for about three hundred yards. Then he stopped and turned.

A small black figure on a remote seat—he stood watching it intently. It had moved; it was coming towards him; it was changing from black to brown. He watched with breathless interest.

Quite young—a tall slender girl, swinging long legs in a splendid graceful rhythm of health and strength; a dark-haired unveiled girl, carrying her small head defiantly high;—*his* girl, his own lost Alma, exactly as she was years ago, fresh and young and sweet, coming to him on bright mornings along the dear old esplanade.

Then, as she got quite close and stood before him, smiling in the sunlight, he saw all the change—havoc, ravages, a glowing picture destroyed by time. For a moment he could see it, and then she was almost unchanged again. And truly it amounted to nothing—features slightly pinched, hardness of outline, lack of blood colour in lips,

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and some smooth polish or white lustre of the skin now not discoverable,—nothing really and truly.

“Lenny, why did you make me do that?”

The words were music—thrilling and stirring as the sound of brass and cymbal. That was exactly how she used to speak to him: “Lenny, you oughtn’t to have made me do it. . . . Lenny, don’t make me do what I know isn’t right.”

“Dear Alma,” he said enthusiastically. “You have restored every illusion for me. The sight of you links me with my youth—brings my happiness to life once more.”

There was nobody else in their compartment during the homeward journey, and for a little while they sat side by side.

“Alma, look—the river again! How pretty!”

And indeed it was a pretty peep—a grey stream, another old bridge, and a wooded hill, all faint and soft in the evening light.

As she leaned forward to look at it, he put his arm round her waist and tried to draw her to him. But she became rigid, unbending; and when she turned her face, he saw that it was stern and cold.

“Very well,” he said humbly; and he withdrew his arm. “Don’t move. I won’t do it, if you tell me not to.”

She had got up, and for the rest of the journey she sat opposite to him.

“Why do you desert me, Alma, when you see that I obey you—however hard it is?”

He was sick with disappointment; his shoulders drooped; he looked like a man worn out by heavy physical exertion. She was staring out of the window at flat park-land and tall trees; but she glanced at him as the train entered a shallow cutting and slackened speed.

“Thank you, Lenny.” Her face had suddenly softened,

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and gently and compassionately she laid her hand upon his knee. "It was good of you to understand that you must not ask for impossibilities."

Her hand had gone before she finished speaking. But at her touch the longing for the forbidden delights tortured him. It was nothing to him that she had lost or was rapidly losing her beauty, that she was old, with weary eyes, pinched cheeks, and bloodless lips. It was he and not she who felt the chain of habit, cruel and unbreakable, dragging him irresistibly; contact with her revived in one moment seven dead years; a thousand recorded sensations added themselves together to give thousandfold force to the present sensation. The most lovely woman in the world could not so have affected him. Had they all come thronging to madden and allure, had the women of history emerged from twenty centuries and wooed him with the siren-spells that captured kings, overturned thrones, and enslaved whole peoples, he would have rejected them as useless in this his great need.

XXXIII

LENNY had done an odd thing. Without any intention of permanently shifting his quarters from Albert Street, he had taken rooms at that big hotel near the Embankment where he had once stayed for so many months.

His rooms were some of the best in the hotel, what they called "a separate suite," on the ground floor—that is to say, you approached them through level corridors from the front hall and the public saloons; but when you got into them, you found that by reason of the sloping site you were two stories up on this other side of the building. They were thus charmingly quiet, well away from the bustle and movement of the hotel's main life; beautifully furnished, too, and with a view that, although restricted, gave one a pleasant glimpse of the river and railway bridge. One might enter them, if one pleased, by a back entrance and a silent unfrequented staircase. They were very expensive—but Lenny did not mind that.

He enjoyed the isolation and mystery of the back part and the animation and gaiety of the front part of the hotel. He used to sit about in the hall or the lounge; then retire into his retreat, and think—and always his thoughts were of the intensely interesting past. It was here, under this vast roof, that he had gained experiences and developed faculties. In that grill-room he had eaten simple little dinners—a soothing memory. In that smoking-room he had met McAndrew and his gang of toadies, the sharks who might have ruined him if he had not pulled up short—an

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exciting memory. "Yes," he used to think, "I was here at the time when I was beginning to get over my great grief, and when the whole world smiled again, when I felt so full of hope and joy and ebullient energy."

And it seemed to him that once more a wise instinct had directed him in this whim of his. Although by temporarily abandoning Albert Street he had not obtained a real change of air, he had given himself a change of scene, and the change was doing him good. The association of ideas, the memories, and the thoughts, all assisted in carrying him back to happier days; and he felt younger, more hopeful, more energetic than he had felt for a long while. If for no other reason, it would have been well worth staying here.

But he had another reason. He wanted to get Alma to come to tea with him. He yearned to be really alone with her—shut in, surrounded by four walls, behind doors that would not be opened unexpectedly, in a small castle of his very own, where he would be able to talk without dropping his voice for fear of listeners, to take her hand, hold it, and yet not have to guard against prying, inquisitive eyes. He longed, he pined, he craved for this bliss of uninterrupted talk and unobserved gestures. Nevertheless he hesitated to ask her for the boon. She would refuse; and perhaps be worried, even alarmed by such an invitation. He must trust to chance.

And the chance came. So many opportunities gliding away,—absolute freedom of days and weeks,—her husband, who had been busy in France for a fortnight, returning to-morrow;—but now on this Saturday afternoon the natural opportunity presented itself.

They had gone to a morning performance at the theatre—that pretty little playhouse by the railway bridge, close to his hotel. Alma wore black to-day, and he thought he

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liked her better in black than in any colour. She loved the play, and thanked him delightfully for bringing her to it—he said that it was a piece that she really ought to see.

The fable and its setting charmed one—an incident in the lives of some sailors and marines, honourable ambitions and kindly self-effacements;—you could hear the brave hearts beating, while the sea-breeze blew clean and fresh in an atmosphere of valour and integrity. You could not be surprised that the play was a huge success. Lenny also said he loved it—it brought a lump into his throat and made his eyes wet. And above all, he praised the tone of it. “At once manly and gentlemanly,” he declared, with epigrammatic enthusiasm.

Then, when the play was over, he said he would give her tea at the nearest hotel, and hurried her away.

“Lenny, isn’t that the place where we said good-bye? Oh, I’d rather not go there. Oh, anywhere else.”

But, persuading her that it was the only place available and convenient, he led her round the building to the back entrance.

“Lenny, this isn’t the same place?”

“Yes, yes it is. We can get in easier this way—avoid the crowd.”

Then he ushered her up the quiet staircase, and led her into the sitting-room of his fine expensive suite.

She looked about her in surprise, and then told him that she could not have tea with him in a private room. But he implored her to grant this favour.

“Alma, just for once. I’ll ring the bell—I’ll get tea in two minutes—and we shall be comfortable here, not stared at, all by ourselves.”

“Lenny, don’t make me. It isn’t right. If anyone knew——”

IN COTTON WOOL

"Who can know? Don't be so conventional. Alma, I have been praying for this—you and I alone—to talk, to be quiet, by ourselves."

The door of his bedroom stood open, and he pointed to it.

"Go and put your hat in there."

"I'm not going to take off my hat."

"Oh, yes, take off your hat;" and he went on pleading. "Yes, for this once, let it be like the old days."

"No, the old days are gone. I don't care to be reminded of them."

"I want to see your pretty hair. Oh, Alma, be nice to me. Take off your hat and your coat—and let me believe that the past has come again. Give me the illusion for one brief hour."

"Lenny, I mustn't stay here. Please don't ask me."

Then she uttered a frightened cry.

"Lenny! Don't, don't be cowardly—don't make me ashamed that I ever knew you."

He had clasped her with both arms, and he was kissing her face in a furious ecstasy.

"Alma—darling girl—don't struggle." She was struggling desperately. "I must . . . I can't help it. You love me still. Why not?"

He could not control himself. He was like a man half dead of thirst drinking at a pool. He was violent and remorseless as a starved beast grasping its prey.

"Lenny!" And she continued to struggle.

"You belong to me. Fate! What you said yourself—the unseen powers!" It seemed to him that the strength of his desire had endowed him with terrific and incredible powers. He was a giant, and something weak and small as an insect was opposing her will to his. "Alma . . . My Alma. . . . My own sweet Alma."

IN COTTON WOOL

The daylight had not yet faded, but grey mists rising from the river hid the last rays of the setting sun; beneath the railway bridge motionless shadows deepened and grew black; and here in the room, when Lenny turned from the windows, shadows surrounded him—shadows that flitted, hovered, and danced, as flames darted and sank on the hearth. Twilight, shadows, and the flicker of fire—how those things haunted him during the important hours of his life! It seemed to him that the past had returned fragmentarily; two chapters of his marvellous history, trying to repeat themselves, had got mixed—the opening of a blissful chapter was being followed by the end of a painful chapter.

All this that was occurring now had occurred before in this very building—but higher up, on another floor, in a cheaper and more commonly furnished apartment. The episode had become exactly like that of their parting.

Here was Alma lying on the sofa, with her face upon her arms, in exactly the attitude he remembered; and weeping now—but not passionately as then, no noisy sobs; a quiet flow of wretchedness and hopelessness, as though life itself was flowing from her.

And here was he, just as then, vainly endeavouring to cheer and comfort her. He patted her shoulder, and she did not stir. He murmured affectionate words, and she did not answer. He stooped, and put his face against hers; and she did not offer the slightest resistance. Her face was cold, her very tears were cold.

“Alma dear, why will you go on crying?” And he sat on the edge of the sofa, and gently raised her. “Alma, look up.”

He took her in his arms, and she was limp, passive; motionless, except for a spasmodic trembling that shook her unceasingly.

IN COTTON WOOL

"Alma, speak to me. . . . Alma, my pretty Alma, stop crying."

Her cold wet face lay upon his breast; and her hands hung straight and loose—like a dead woman's.

"Speak to me, Alma."

Then, when at last she spoke—in a low moaning voice,—it was without moving, without looking at him.

"Lenny, how could you? Oh, why did you make me come here? Oh, how could you be so merciless?"

"Alma, it's unreasonable to——"

"Oh, if I had known this would happen, I think I should have killed myself."

"No, no. Nothing has happened."

"Everything has happened." Her voice was dreadful to hear—so toneless, so lifeless, so bitterly sad. "Once you left me crippled, bleeding . . . and I didn't die. I struggled to my feet. I was standing again on dry ground—not crawling in the mud. And you found me. . . . And now you have knocked me down to the dirt again."

"Alma, you break my heart."

She went on, as if talking to herself. "I had made my peace with my Church—I was safe with my husband—I was learning to walk through this cruel world with fixed eyes—I was beginning to see beyond the misery of life." And she moaned and shivered. "O Mary, Mother of God, have pity on me. . . . O Mary, Mother of God, intercede for me."

Presently he put her in an armchair by the fire.

"There, you'll be more comfortable. . . . Warm your dear hands. . . . And, yes, we'll have a little light."

He turned on the electric light, and, drawing a chair to the hearth, sat down near her.

IN COTTON WOOL

"Now, dear, we can talk quietly. And first I must implore you not to distress yourself like this. Truly it is unreasonable—quite without cause."

All at once she gripped the arms of her chair and sat up.

"I must put on my hat. I must go away."

"Alma, darling, don't rush off in this mad way."

"Yes—I must."

"Think. You can't be seen looking almost distraught—your dear face all tear-stained—your pretty hair all anyhow. Someone would see you."

"What does it matter who sees me now?"

"Alma, of course it does."

"Let me go."

"I can't let you go—until you are composed—until we have settled things. For your own sake, dear. Really we must talk quietly."

Then for some time they sat staring at each other.

"Alma," and he spoke hesitatingly and anxiously, "what are you going to do?"

"I must go home."

"Yes, but you won't give way to baseless fancies?"

"I must think. . . . I ought to pray—but I feel as if I should never be able to pray again."

"Yes, think things out quietly. And be reasonable. I shall never cease to love you. It is our destiny—and you and I are helpless in the coils of fate. And believe what I say: you have nothing to reproach yourself with—absolutely *nothing*. If love was ever a justification, it is in our case—and it is always a justification. We are both unhappy. If we can console each other——"

"And destroy Gerald's life?"

"No, of course not."

"Betray him?"

IN COTTON WOOL

"No—he will never know, he will never guess, how much we still are to each other."

Finally he judged that her composure was restored. She was "more like herself," as he said soothingly. When he came back to the room, after going out and bringing a cab to the conveniently adjacent back entrance, she stood waiting for him. She had put on her hat and veil, and she looked quite neat and nice—ready for anyone to see her.

Before taking her downstairs, he said good-night and embraced her tenderly. She was passive, unresisting. He might kiss and caress her as much as he pleased; but he could not extract any response, and she would not give him definite promises for the future.

"I pin my faith on you, Alma. You'll see me again—I mean, soon."

"I don't know. I tell you I must think."

"Yes, yes, think it out. Then write and tell me where we are to meet."

"Please let me go. I must be alone—I must think."

"Promise me that it shall be soon."

"I can't promise."

XXXIV

FOR two days he lived in the thought of his great happiness. He had recovered her; the old sweet dominion over the woman he had always loved was once more his. He could look forward again; the time of sad retrospection had finished; the future opened out before him bright and fair. And he thought of Dryden's periodic absences—weeks, fortnights, months, when the perfect companionship would continue almost unintermittently. But at all times they would enjoy a practical immunity of risk—in this glorious active immensity of London, where each has his absorbing concerns of toil or joy, where one passes unseen among millions of heedless eyes, where, as he often said, nobody cares a twopenny curse what games his neighbour may be up to.

She had not written to him yet; but he was not afraid. Soon, of course, if she did not write or make some other sort of communication, he would grow anxious; but at present he felt calm, contented, full of confidence. He could wait patiently—or whenever necessary he could go and see her, and in quiet talk straighten out any little tangle.

Then, altogether unexpectedly, he received a brief note from Dryden. Writing at his offices in Queen Victoria Street, Dryden said:—

“Dear Calcraft, I particularly want to see you about something. Can you give me a call here any time after four and before six to-morrow or Tuesday? Till then I remain, Yours sincerely, Gerald Dryden.”

IN COTTON WOOL

This letter made Lenny rather uneasy. What did it mean? He could not understand it. Was it business—the offer of some rotten speculation, opportunity of putting money into Gerald's firm, or taking shares in some electrical enterprise? He had rather foolishly spoken to Gerald of the wretchedly inadequate revenue yielded by ordinary investments. Perhaps that was it. If so, No-thank-you must be the answer.

Or was it a ruse of Alma's? She had planned something, and Gerald was unconsciously to convey intelligence of her meaning? No, very unlikely—because Alma had a natural distaste for intrigue, for underhand diplomacy, for anything except direct methods. Then a conjecture suffused him with a warm and comfortable glow. Could it be possible that Gerald, summoned away to the other side of the earth, was turning to him as an old and tried friend with the intention of placing Alma more or less in his charge and under his care during this enforced and unusually protracted absence? Husbands do such extraordinary things that one never can say what they won't do. But no—this was too much to hope for.

Then came apprehensive doubts. Perhaps Alma was ill! This idea horrified him. Weeks of sick-bed, weeks of convalescence, eternity to be lived through before he could see her again. Thus for a little while his thoughts ran up and down the scales of hope and dread.

"Oh, there you are," said Dryden. "Sit down, I won't be a minute."

He was engaged with two clerks, winding up the day's work; and the visitor noticed his curt businesslike tone both to them and to himself.

"That'll do. Take all this with you—and tell Downes I shan't want him again."

IN COTTON WOOL

Lenny had seated himself on a chair near the wall, facing Dryden's office-table, and he stroked the nap of his silk hat. He was not quite easy in his mind. He thought that this was the most uninteresting room he had ever entered; and, as he watched the two clerks leave it, he felt an unreasoning wish that he might go with them, so that the door would shut him out instead of in. His thoughts began to work with astounding rapidity, and yet he could not concentrate them.

Dryden, getting up from his table, moved to the hearth, and stood with his hands in his pockets.

"Look here," said Dryden, and he paused.

"Yes, Gerald?"

"It's about Alma."

"Alma! Not ill, Gerald?"

"No. Not ill—but she has been a little worried. It's just this. You mayn't understand it, but your attentions upset her—they just upset her."

Lenny's thoughts worked fast but confusedly. Suddenly, on what seemed a smooth and open path, rugged and ugly obstacles had arisen. But the obstacles must be surmounted or got around. A crisis—an important hour;—all would depend upon his keeping cool, using his highest faculties, from moment to moment bringing to bear his utmost brain power. Only he felt that his heart was pumping too much blood into his brain, and the extra unnecessary supply created a throb that lessened the acuteness of his perceptions. He could scarcely catch what Gerald was saying to him.

"Yes, that's why I wanted to see you. Just to tell you——"

Gerald went on talking, quietly and firmly. In spite of painful effort, Lenny could not get his thoughts under control. . . . Someone must have seen them together—someone had advised Gerald to keep an eye on his wife—

IN COTTON WOOL

some unknown foe to himself or Alma had sent anonymous warnings. What a fiend! . . . Collected thought was impossible, but instinct began to whisper. He must not quarrel with Gerald. Whatever happened, he must avoid the irreparable breach that would result from a quarrel. He must fight for fragments, if he could not get all—he must cling to shreds and patches of his happiness. And the way to succeed in this horrible interview would be by penetrating Gerald's mind, reading his hostile ideas, meeting his objections point by point. Mentally he must put himself in Gerald's place, and attain a clear view of both sides.

"Well," Gerald continued, "that's what I had to say—and now I've said it;" and he opened and shut his mouth several times.

That was an old trick of his when excited. Lenny noticed another idiosyncrasy—the expansion and contraction of his wide nostrils. Obviously, although Gerald assumed this hard businesslike manner and spoke so quietly, he was a prey to considerable emotion. Yes, thought Lenny, it is a pill to swallow—to recognize that another man bulks too large in the existence of your wife, and to have to ask him to remove himself.

"Gerald," he said slowly, "this comes as a great surprise to me."

"Does it?"

"Of course it does. Alma and I were pals almost before you ever knew her—when you were a boy."

"Yes, I'm quite aware that she is older than I."

"And you and I have been pals—for how many years? I'm pretty well alone in the world; I never go into society—and I don't mind saying that the hours I have spent in your house have been very pleasant to me."

"Yes, but what about the hours outside my house?"

"Er, of course—whatever my own inclinations—your

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wish, Gerald, must be law. If you intimate to me that in your judgment——”

“Oh, don’t let’s have long words. Look here;” and Gerald flushed. “When I heard you were hanging on in this idiotic way, I couldn’t believe it. But I *had* to believe it. Well, I hardly knew what to do—and then I thought, ‘Dash it all, old Lenny Calcraft and I were friends—real friends.’”

“Yes,” said Lenny eagerly, “that’s just it. Always were, eh?”

“Yes, *were*. . . . So it seemed to me I ought to speak to you openly. It seemed to me the frank thing, the manly thing, the *right* thing.”

“It *is*,” said Lenny. “Gerald, I take it as a compliment, in a sense.” And he began to talk volubly, pleading for a continuance of the amiable relations that had existed for so long, not only between him and his friend, but between him and his friend’s wife. “Alma and I are so accustomed to one another—it’s a friendship that nothing has ever really interfered with;” and he urged that it would appear strange, barely explicable, if in the future there were not to be some little friendly intercourse. “And, again, an order from you to sever our relations altogether might defeat your purpose.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I mean for *her* sake. You feel, rightly or wrongly, that she is disposed to rely on me too much for company—that I have been seeing her too often;” and Lenny looked at Gerald with a candidly engaging smile. “Well—for argument accepting your view,—wouldn’t it be wiser to let me efface myself gradually—and not, as I said, because you have ordered me to vanish? Forbidden fruits are sweet. Instead of thinking less of me, she may think more——”

IN COTTON WOOL

But at this point of the argument Dryden lost his temper, and spoke rudely as well as angrily.

"Gerald," said Lenny deprecatingly, "it is evident that somebody has been trying to set you against me. But are you wise in listening to any malicious talebearer who——?"

"Talebearer! It was Alma—Alma herself told me."

Lenny had a sudden sensation of coldness and faintness. How much had she told him? Not much—but sufficient for her cruel purpose. She had asked her husband to protect her. It was the one thing that Lenny had not dreaded. The death blow to all hopes. It struck dully on his brain; making him stupid, and clumsy of speech.

"You—you surprise me. . . . greatly surprise."

"Anyhow, you know now——" Gerald flushed redder, and his nostrils were widely expanded. "And it only remains for me to ask you a question. Haven't you a single feeling of a gentleman, or are you just a dirty little cad?"

"I don't think you've any right to say that."

Gerald gave a snort of scornful laughter. "Well, that's a tame answer, if ever I heard one." And really he seemed staggered by it: he stared at Lenny incredulously. "Didn't you *hear* what I said? I insulted you. Don't you *mind* being insulted?"

Lenny moved his hat with a vacillating gesture, and spoke heavily and slowly.

"Pardon me if I say—that this sort of thing is—er—beneath contempt."

"Oh, no. I'm not beneath contempt, as you'll find out before you leave this room."

"I shall not talk to you, if you go on addressing me in a totally unwarranted tone."

Dryden laughed again, harshly and scornfully; but then he did change his tone. He was still staring, and he spoke in a voice that seemed to express incredulity, regret, pity.

IN COTTON WOOL

"Good heavens, what's happened to you, Calcraft? What is it? Where's the man that I used to know? I liked you—looked up to you—believed in you. Was I just a young ass? And were you really and truly like this always? . . . No—because Verinder believed in you too—and *he's* all right." Dryden's voice had become quite gentle, as if old feelings and old thoughts were making him unexpectedly tender and kind. "And *you* were all right, Lenny. Everybody said so. It couldn't have been collective hallucination."

Lenny shrugged his shoulders, and, remaining silent, showed some slight dignity of manner.

"But never mind all that;" and Dryden, as he said this, reverted to his hard and implacable tone. "We won't trouble about what you were then. It's a different person I have to deal with now. If we understand each other, you can go—and I don't want to see you again. And Alma doesn't want to see you either. Is that clear? Do you understand it? On no pretence whatever are you to pester and molest Alma again."

"Alma was fond of me," said Lenny heavily. "I can't think that she authorized you to give me such a message as that."

"Didn't she? Perhaps not;" and Dryden blazed into savage wrath. "But it is what *I* tell you. She was fond of you once, was she? Very good—there's no accounting for tastes, and she didn't know *me* in those days. She thought well of you—because other people did. She was deceived, with the rest of them. . . . But now she is my wife—and, good God, when I think of any fellow hesitating after I have told him to leave my wife alone!" and, as if automatically, he clenched his fists. "Look here. Do you want me to come down to that club of yours and thrash you before the servants and your friends?"

IN COTTON WOOL

"Please remember, two can play at that game."

"Yes," and Dryden glared ferociously, "would you like to begin the game here, now?"

But Lenny would not permit himself to be dragged into a brutal quarrel—from the very beginning he had made up his mind as to this, and dully and wearily he stood firm to the fixed decision.

He was tired and disgusted; all hope had been taken from him; he might just as well satisfy Dryden by giving him promises, and it did not matter how they were phrased. He would never molest Alma again.

"Molest!" What a hateful word! But every word used in this interview had been hateful.

He went away through the crowded streets feeling crushed and miserable and desperately lonely; and as he plodded along, vainly hailing hansoms and taxis that were occupied and therefore ignored him, he continued to think about some of the horrid words. "A dirty little cad!" Those were certainly the worst of them. And what stung him most of all was that adjective "little." By what frenzy of impudence had Dryden ventured to use it—Dryden, who was a considerably smaller man than himself? But he understood that the word had been used on this occasion in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense. *Little*—meaning petty or mean, and not necessarily undersized.

He was extraordinarily civil and agreeable to people at the club; smiling at members who were practically strangers, nodding and waving to the merest acquaintances, and beckoning all whom he could consider friends. And every smile, every nod, every genial word that he could thus anyhow attract, was a restorative medicine for his wounded pride. He was respected here, at all events, and he could

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never feel really lonely while he had his club to fall back upon. He would always be comfortable here.

To-night, however, the coffee-room dinner seemed vilely bad. The saddle of mutton left a nasty taste in his mouth; the wine was thin and cold and flavourless; the cheese biscuits nearly choked one. The scene in that uninteresting office had shaken him greatly—ininitely more than he guessed. Henceforth, though he did not know it, there would be a psychical battlefield inside him—a conflict must occur between the man that Dryden thought he was and the man that he still wished to believe himself; each might destroy the other; and after the fight a new self might arise and hold the ground. But by nothing short of a miracle could the confident, unvillified, unthreatened self of this morning be reinstated.

Sipping muddy coffee and an impotent watery liqueur, he thought of young Dryden. What a brute he had developed into! What an utter brute! And Alma? There was something treacherous in her turning Gerald loose against him. A betrayal. Unlike her. But, say what you will, that Romish superstition has a deteriorating influence. Alma had deteriorated.

Gradually the dead weight of the catastrophe descended upon him. He had lost her—irrevocably. She was gone from him for ever. By this fatal stroke she had cut the old bond, the chain that linked them together. A tremendous effort was needed to break his power over her—but she had fatally succeeded.

And just when he was counting on peace, just when he felt that the comfort of his future was assured! Alma *not* regained: Alma lost. Gradually the pain of it took possession of him.

IN COTTON WOOL

Dashed hope, sick regret, thwarted desire, smarting pride—these were what he lay down with at night, what he got up with of a morning. And day after day the same thing—no, not the same thing; because the pain was always increasing. Terribly as he suffered, he foretold that he must suffer more.

Alma—his lost Alma! In imagination he could hear her voice, feel the touch of her lips, see her smiles and her tears. The sight of his rooms at the hotel stabbed and lacerated him—he sent Mr. Jackson to pay the bill and remove his things for him. He wished that the huge building could be swallowed by an earthquake, that it would tumble down of its own accord, or be burned to the ground and swept away in dust and ashes, so that he might never have to see it again. At Albert Street Mrs. Jackson observed his strange depression, tried to cheer him with breakfast dainties, and urged him to dress himself and go out and enjoy the gay spring mornings. But he had no heart to go out in the sunshine. He sat for most of the day poring over relics at the bottom of drawers, or rummaging for them in trunks and tin cases—her letters and her photographs. Yes, here's another photograph, faded, spotted, brown with age—a narrow childlike face, a frank but shy smile, a crown of hair in the shadow of a large hat—Alma, his sweetly cruel, his divinely kind, his own lost Alma. Staring dully at the picture that lay faded and cold in his hand, he thought of the reality, glowing and warm, in Dryden's arms; and the pain of it was like a malignant cancer of the mind, gnawing, dragging, tearing, with teeth of fire.

At dusk he used to go out, and walk and think. He was not a man who for any length of time could safely deprive himself of feminine companionship—this old thought often mingled with the new ones. Walking in the streets,

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he saw the hundreds and hundreds of women whose company he could procure, with a little labour. He had money. He could buy in a market where prices run high but the goods are unexceptionable. He thought of charming lonely girls earning their own living, really ladies, yearning for the society of a discreet male friend, who would pass imperceptibly from the rôle of a friend into that of a protector. If he could find one of these, she might bring back his peace. But the labour that would be required in the wooing, the courtship, the seduction—call it what you please—appalled him. He thought of easier chances; girls not so well-born, less straight-laced,—girls adrift after the departure of Numbers One and Two, and ripe for a bargain with Number Three. Or these shop girls—flitting in coveys, in flocks and packs, through the dusk of St. James's Park: birds released from Bond Street cages. Very nice, many of them. He stared at dozens, hundreds. He admired the prevailing mode of their costume—close skirt, buckled shoes, coloured stockings,—all looking alike. Many were distinctly sympathetic—returning his stare, then lowering their eyes or averting their heads, provocatively, with mock demureness shamelessly inviting overtures. He spoke to one of them, walked by her side in the Buckingham Palace Road, even booked her address. She seemed ready, only too ready, to open a friendship with this dignified, grandly attired, sad-visaged stranger—but he did not pursue the business. It was no use. They were all useless to him. Alma—and nobody else.

It had become an intolerable torment by night and by day. He sat in his rooms, he mooned about the streets, pitying himself. Vague apprehensions as to the future made him tremble. His health! *What* was wrong with him? Gerald had asked the question. There must be something

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not quite right when even a dull lout like that instantly detected symptoms of an alarming nature. Wicked to throw him back on himself! He needed a constant watchful companion—vast and as yet impalpable dangers were looming ahead of him in the lonely darkness.

But *she* would have saved him. And he remembered what she had said—so prettily—about the end of their lives: together, under one roof, when the darkness began to close in. He ought to have married her. She would have given him happiness, peace, *safety*—he saw it now quite clearly; and with equal clearness he saw how despicable it was not to marry her. A mistake—a hideous mistake. And he had been warned: fate, shadowing forth the peril, had tried to put him on his guard. That lifeboat rescue was the warning. He should not have allowed Dryden a second time to do the thing that he ought to have done himself.

Not a single hope, except a sinister one. Only the blackest thoughts could show a gleam behind them. If Gerald would die, Lenny would marry his widow. He might be drowned at sea, go down with a South American liner; he might catch a fever, or be smashed in a railway accident—he was always running risks.

But no, he would not die. Not he! The brute—the odious vulgar brute. Brute—triple brute.

XXXV

LENNY was two years older; and the light falling from one of the tall windows of the club coffee-room showed bare streaks on the top of his head, over which long wisps of hair had been ineffectually brushed and plastered. His cheeks were less firm than they used to be; indeed they seemed rather flabby in texture and slightly pendulous in shape; the flesh immediately beneath his eyes was puffy wherever it was not wrinkled; and he had acquired a trick of blinking his eyes before speaking. Otherwise he appeared as splendid and imposing as ever—faultlessly dressed, with braided edges to his coat, well-tied neckcloth, black and white checked trousers, and thick-soled patent leather boots.

“No, thank you, Henderson,” and Lenny blinked and smiled. “I’m much obliged to you for mentioning it—but I really mustn’t.”

He had nearly finished luncheon, and the head waiter was tempting him to try a Strasburg pie which had come in that morning. Though some of the new members might look coldly at him, the old servants loved him. He gave so liberally to their Christmas fund; and he spoke so kindly, causing them trouble, but always thanking them.

“May I bring it, sir?”

Lenny consented. He felt that he had eaten quite enough already, and he did not much like the reputation of these foreign dainties; but when the pie was set before him it entirely fascinated him.

IN COTTON WOOL

"Thank you, Henderson."

A newish member—an unduly familiar young man—came sauntering down the room, and paused in front of Lenny's table.

"That's right, Calcraft," said the young man; and he grinned somewhat impudently. "I see you're hard at it—like so many of the nobility and gentry one meets here,—digging your grave with your teeth!"

Lenny blinked and flushed. "I believe that this is not the most digestible thing in the world; but the very small quantity I have eaten of it is not likely to give me annoyance."

The young man laughed, and passed on.

Lenny, though he had spoken courteously, was angry and disgusted. Why weren't the committee more careful? Why had they flooded the club with these young bounders? "Digging your grave with your teeth!" He thought it the most horrible expression he had ever heard. He could not forget it. Three times before bedtime it recurred to his memory.

He was not quite so fond of his club as he had once been. Already, in such a little time, old faces were disappearing, and the strange faces all seemed unattractive. Often, after coming home to dress for dinner, he did not go out again. He asked Mrs. Jackson to give him something light and appetizing which he could supplement with a snack later if necessary, and he spent the evening in his own rooms. He used to keep Jackson talking when he had removed the dinner-things, and sometimes got him to return afterwards for more talk. Jackson was a politician, and, like so many other politicians, a little too partial to the sound of his own voice. But in spite of this failing, he proved better company than Lenny could procure at the club. In fact recently Lenny had clung to him—es-

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pecially he seemed loath to part with Jackson the last thing at night. When Jackson said "Will you want anything more, sir?" Lenny would talk volubly, introduce fresh topics, and endeavour to draw Jackson into argumentative disputes. The sound of Jackson's voice might not be music but it was so much pleasanter than blank silence.

He listened with regret to Jackson's footsteps going upstairs. When he went into his bedroom, he turned on all the lights, stood still and listened. He felt vaguely uncomfortable—almost afraid. But afraid of *what?* Nothing. Afraid of being afraid—as though something inexpressibly painful were coming in the night.

And one night it came—sudden overwhelming terror. Without cause, without reason, he lay quaking and perspiring. For a little while the terror completely paralysed thought; and when it lessened and gradually remitted altogether, connected thought seemed impossible. Lenny could not think and he could not sleep.

And night after night the same sort of thing occurred. Sometimes it did not amount to very much. In a half dreaming state he was confronted with unusually vivid pictures of everything that he did not wish either to imagine or remember: the South African veldt; troops marching over mountains and through ravines; a storm at sea; a mastless brig driven upon a shore, with the lights from comfortable houses faintly piercing the darkness. Then he had the fancy that he was being dragged forward and made the central figure of these scenes. He was a person quite helpless, surrounded by monstrous perils. The morning light dissipated everything. But the worst of the whole business was the havoc to one's nerves caused by sleeplessness.

During the daytime he argued with himself. How could he be so silly and undignified? In the sunshine there was

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not a trace of all this nocturnal distress. But was that quite true? No. The thing was there, latent if not active; by a thought he could arouse a qualm. He tested himself. Suppose he happened to be walking across Westminster Bridge, and a woman clambered upon the parapet and jumped over—what would he do? He ought to dive in—but the mere notion of the dizzy height, the awful drop, the darkly running stream, made him supremely uncomfortable.

These sensations surprised and mortified him. They seemed to indicate something strangely amiss. He knew that he had started life with fully the average share of pluck. And he thought of his youth—of how he liked a row; of how he enjoyed those riots at Cleckhampton, when his militia had all they could do to hold the mob in check; of how he laughed when the tiles came rattling down, and the air grew thick with stones. And after that period, when he saw a crowd in the street, he always bustled towards it, feeling stimulated by the idea of trouble—yes, even of danger. If there was to be wrangling, violent altercation, finally a general *mêlée* of excited spectators, he felt that he must take part; he pushed his way through outer rings, meaning to pacify the strong or support the weak, anyhow to assert himself by getting into the thick of it. But now he would not do that.

He thought of his riding—the joy of a horse that took hold; the search for animals that were really big bold fencers; a point-to-point race when he distinguished himself on a brute called "Touch and Go," a sketchy performer that possessed the one virtue of speed. And he tested himself again. He could not do that now. He remembered how of late years, hacking in the Row, he did not by any means wish that his gentle hirelings should take hold. He asked many questions at the livery stables

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in Park Lane before engaging his hacks. He wanted something with good manners, and was most particular that it should not be larky in traffic. But when he got out among the motor-buses, the diabolical engines with trains of trucks, and all the other road nuisances that are now permitted to surround the Park with a belt of peril, his hands failed him. They became weak and vacillating, or he used them too much and reinforced them unnecessarily with his legs. He could not believe that any horse ever foaled would face what was slowly grinding and crashing towards him—in point of fact *he* shied, and not the horse. Yet he *could* ride. If he could do anything, he could do that. Everybody had admitted it.

He had lost his nerve; and he mused about it. Inexplicable. One could understand how a man who hunts regularly comes to lose his nerve. After several severe tosses he begins to calculate risks; large fences look larger; the memory of disaster takes the edge off his keenness. But how can a man who does not hunt at all lose his nerve—how can it be possible that, sitting in your armchair, and never being tossed by it, you yet come to dread a fall from your horse?

But all this philosophy by day did not banish the trouble of his nights. The worry continued. Then he made a startling and most alarming discovery. He had lost weight. He ought to weigh something between thirteen and a half and fourteen stone. He had always kept about that mark. Now, suddenly, six pounds had slipped away from him. Good Heavens! One of those rapid wasting diseases that attack a man of middle age and polish him off before he can make his will or ask his friends to rally round him for his last days! He dashed out of the club, bellowed for a cab, and, driving straight to Dr. Ashford in Brook Street, demanded an immediate

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interview. He was greatly surprised that the doctor did not remember him, and he blinked excessively while explaining who he was.

"I saw you some time ago. You advised me to take care of myself."

"And have you done so?"

"On my honour, I have," said Lenny.

Dr. Ashford smiled at his earnestness. "Well, then, Mr.—er—Calcraft—let me see. Let me look up your case, since you say that I saw you before."

And searching among note-books, he at last found the volume and page that he wanted.

"Bless me! Fourteen years ago. And it was your nerves then? Yes, you told me that you had worn yourself out by nursing your father. You were completely overwrought." And the doctor looked up. "But your father is dead now, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. He died ten years ago."

"But you are overwrought again. Well, now, tell me all about it."

Dr. Ashford treated the matter lightly. He said that Lenny was wearing very well. He said that he looked as strong as an ox; but unquestionably there must have been of late an excessive expenditure of nerve force. And the cure for that is a quiet and healthy life. Mr. Calcraft should go on taking care of himself. He must not racket about, or play fast and loose with his strength.

"Keep quiet—at any rate, for a time. That is the great thing. As to the loss of weight, it's nothing." And Dr. Ashford laughed. "You see, you are rich enough in that respect to lose a few pounds without being perceptibly the poorer."

Lenny went away discontented. He felt pleased at first, but on reflection he considered Dr. Ashford an ass.

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Ashford had not diagnosed the fine and delicate character of his nervous organization, so highly strung, so susceptible to slightest influences, so complex. He had addressed all his attention to matter, when perhaps, after all, it was the spirit that wanted healing. In regard to the decreased weight, what he said was the sort of rubbish with which untouched friends console a man who has lost money. Suppose you begin to lose your money; only a little at first, but then more and more. The thing goes dribbling on until it can sap away a handsome fortune.

However, he thought better of Ashford's skill after a week. Ashford had mysteriously made him all right again. No more trouble at night. This his first attack of night terrors had passed over; he was able to sleep. Nevertheless, he weighed himself at frequent intervals, carefully entering results in the volume that lay opposite the machine at the club.

When he had established himself on the red velvet seat of the machine, his face used to become excessively grave. He looked down at the little circular tray dependent from the beam, at the incised weights that fitted so neatly into the tray, and at the brass needle, of which the least movement had such portentous interest. Then, lifting his feet from the marble pavement, and making quite sure that the skirts of his jacket or coat were not obtaining support, he carefully completed his delicate task.

One day a talkative, intrusive member bothered Lenny while he weighed himself at the luncheon hour. He intended to weigh himself again after luncheon, and the second result would be the one that he would enter in the book. But this inopportune chatterbox perplexed him; he picked up the little weights with insufficient care—the ten-stone weight, the two-stone weight, and then would come the adjustment of the slot on the graduated

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beam. The man went on talking, telling some stupid anecdote, and cackling at his own jokes. Lenny had put the three-stone weight instead of the two-stone weight, and thus the scale would begin to mark with thirteen stone to its credit. When he looked for the result, he saw that the beam was down, not up. He blinked, and then looked at it again with a sick horror. Great Heavens! Had he lost a stone in the last three days? He could not now turn the scale at twelve stone. He got up slowly, almost tottering.

Then he discovered the mistake, and with a joyous cry flumped himself down on the velvet seat again. Truly he crashed into the seat like a sack of coals falling from a crane. The beam kicked; the brass needle snapped off short: he had broken the machine.

There was a cackling laugh; and genial idle members gathered round.

"What is it? Eh, what?"

"Calcraft, if you please, trying to weigh himself!" And the talkative idiot laughed prodigiously.

"Trying to weigh himself, and smashed the machine. . . . You know, old boy, this is a sensitive instrument—not intended for giants."

Lenny could hear the laughter and the chaff. He was feeling an exquisite sense of relief. Only a ridiculous mistake. No more weight lost since his visit to Dr. Ashford.

XXXVI

LENNY was another year older.

He blinked his eyes still, and he had picked up another trick. When listening to conversation, he frequently retracted his lower jaw; and this gave a gaping and vacant expression to his whole face, as of a person who cannot fix his attention. It was just a nervous little trick, of which he himself was aware, and he knew that it produced a momentary disfigurement of his normally imposing aspect. He felt, however, that Dr. Ashford had been entirely correct—there was nothing to worry about.

He had never recovered those pounds avoirdupois, and probably had lost a few more; but he did not know for certain, because soon after defraying the cost of repairs to the broken machine he ceased to use it. Weighing oneself was too agitating and disappointing, if results failed to realize one's hopes.

During all this year he had not once been out of London. He made excuses when Mrs. Jackson begged him to take a summer holiday or to grant her an opportunity for spring cleaning.

Rarely, if ever, did he spend an evening at the club nowadays. The club, like so many other things which once were full of delight, could now no longer charm him with its grandeur, luxury, and varied amenities. When occasionally he dined there, it was in morning dress, and quite early; and after dinner he came straight home for his coffee and cigar.

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He had become greatly dependent on Mr. Jackson for society. At first Jackson used to hover near the door while they talked, merely changing his attitude from that of Attention to Stand at Ease; but then he was invited to sit down and rest his legs, and now Lenny regularly begged him to bring his chair to the table, to light a cigar, to have a whisky and soda. And Jackson, accepting such condescension in a proper spirit, never encroached; next morning when he brought Lenny's neatly brushed and folded clothes into the bedroom, he was the silent respectful valet with whom the master had never exchanged six words that did not closely relate to his service. As Lenny knew—and as he said himself,—he had been trained in a good school.

The aristocracy had done much for Jackson, and he was becomingly grateful; indeed a veneration for the old established titled classes permeated all his thoughts, and perhaps formed the basis of his political faith.

“What drives me almost to desp’ration, sir,” said Jackson, “when I read the goings-on of this Government, is their wilful setting of class against class.”

“I quite agree with you, Jackson. . . . Will you kindly fetch the ash-tray from the mantelpiece?”

“Yes, sir. . . . According to what they allow these Socialists to teach a lot of pore ignorant men, the upper classes are to be pillaged as so many enemies of the people. And what does such jumped-up spouters really know of our landed noblemen? Why, they don’t move in such circles. I know this very well—I never met one of the lot as an invited guest to the house in any situation I was ever in.”

Jackson treated the matter with well-bred composure, but nevertheless was inordinately gratified, when a bachelor peer came to Albert Street and installed himself on the second floor over Lenny’s head.

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"His lordship is not wealthy, far from it, sir—or we could hardly expect to have him here; but it's a grand fam'ly, sir."

Mrs. Jackson always spoke of her new lodger as "the Earl." She told Lenny that the earl was "shaking down very nice"; he intended to go to his country seat for the hunting or the shooting, but he would come back again, and he would probably retain the rooms all through the London season.

He was a jovial-looking little man, with a round clean-shaven face and a cheery open-air voice. He gave one perhaps rather too many opportunities of measuring his vocal power. Lenny lying snug in bed used to hear him on the landing upstairs, as he passed into the very inferior second floor bathroom, doing "hound-talk," and facetiously cheering himself on to face the cold water. "Forrard—forrard, away—o! Get away on to him, Loiterer. What yer hanging about there, Loiterer?" And he imitated the crack of a whip and the sound of a horn. It made Lenny smile; but it was sometimes a little disturbing. However, one did not care to complain, because the earl seemed to be a friendly amiable creature.

When Lenny met him on the stairs he always said "Mornin', Calcraft"; and if the weather was wet, he added "Nice day for tadpoles." If the weather was fine, he said "Mornin', Calcraft. This'll worry the wag-tails, won't it?"

And some further civilities passed between them. The second floor on various occasions sent the first floor a brace of pheasants, a couple of woodcock, and some hot-house fruit.

"His lordship's compliments," said Jackson, with unctiousness, "and he begs you to accept of these birds. He has more than sufficient for his own use."

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Lenny, of course, returned compliments, together with thanks. For a little while it tickled his vanity to think that the earl might develop into a pleasant crony for evening smokes and talks; and to this end he conveyed through Jackson some sort of intimation that his lordship, if he cared to drop in, would be welcome.

The earl for a long time ignored this hint; but then one night very late he honoured Lenny with a visit. He had been out to dinner; and he came upstairs singing a popular song, stumbled somewhere on the mat near Lenny's door, and presently banged its panels.

"Put my foot in a rabbit-hole," said his lordship, laughing gaily. "How are you, old boy? What price a whisky and soda? But, mind you, if I say yes, it must be a very small one."

The visitor sat down, and Lenny gave him a drink.

"Thank ye. Here's to Foxhunting and the Ladies!" And his lordship glanced round the room, as if taking stock of all its comforts and ornaments. "So this is your little crib. But I say, old boy, you have fugged yourself in till the air is beginning to hum."

"Is it too warm for you? Shall I open one of the windows?"

"Oh, don't mind me."

It was painfully clear that the visitor had been dining, in the worst sense of the word; and for half an hour Lenny found him a most objectionable companion. He was far too familiar—he adopted a careless patronizing tone.

"Jackson told me to look in—Jackson goes on saying you wished it. So here I am. But I never saw the point of it, and I don't see it now. I'm all right up there, and you're all right down here. See what I mean? Live and let live—that's my motto. *Chacun à son goût*. Never lift hounds till they're really at fault. . . . But I like to

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do the polite to everybody. And of course I'm glad for you to have your share in anything that's goin'. Neighbours, eh. Share and share alike—so far as I'm concerned. I said so to Jackson. . . . Look here, Calcry—old boy—I've got some brandy upstairs—real fine genuine stuff; and if you catch the collywobbles through sitting in a draught, you send up for some of it. Just you ask for anything you want; and if I've got it, it's yours. I can't say more." . . .

And thus the visitor maundered on until he took his leave.

After this there was a coldness in the demeanour of the first floor towards the second floor. Lenny wanted no more visits from the earl. A pity! Because the earl, being a late bird, might have proved useful to prolong one's evening when Jackson had gone to bed.

With the utmost respect, Jackson had been obliged to make a bargain in regard to these evening conversations.

"The fact is, sir, it does not suit me to be kep' up. Mrs. Jackson she makes remarks about my smoking cigars, and will have it that I indulge too free other ways."

"Oh, but that's most unjust. I'll tell her you never exceed."

"Really, sir, if you'll allow me, I think I'd better make the bargain which she has proposed—that is, to leave you at eleven o'clock sharp."

And Lenny was compelled to adhere to Mrs. Jackson's vexatious rule; although he often looked at the clock regretfully as the hands crept towards the appointed hour.

It was not that Jackson was good company: he was the only company available. After dinner, when he had cleared the table, he put the evening newspaper over the arm of Lenny's chair, and the time seemed long until he returned. Never by any chance did the evening newspaper seem worth

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reading. Night after night, week after week, absolutely nothing of interest in it.

Sometimes Jackson had social engagements—an evening out, going to the play with Mrs. Jackson, what not frivolous and annoying. It was dreadful then—only Adelaide, the stupid little maid-servant, to talk to.

“Ah, here you are. Come in, Jackson. Sit you down—make yourself comfortable. Is it raining again?”

“No, sir, lovely fine night—as mild as what we might expect in May.”

And the talk began. Often Jackson did too much of the talking. When he got upon a narration of his service with some of the highest families in the land, it was difficult to make him stop talking.

“Four years, sir. I remained in that situation—traveling twice to the Continent with her ladyship—and never a day’s unpleasantness. In that establishment the servants, sir, high and low, were treated like human beings.”

“Quite so. Much more proper,” and Lenny would gape and look very vacant.

But then all at once some name uttered accidentally by Jackson brought Lenny to life.

“St. Vincent! Major St. Vincent! Why, I *know* him, Jackson;” and Lenny’s face lit up, and he chattered volubly. “Tall dark man—gunner—R.H.A.? The very man! I used to meet him frequently one winter—oh, good gracious, I don’t care to say how many years ago. That winter I used to train my horses over to Peterborough. It was only an hour’s journey from us—from my father’s place, I mean;” and Lenny paused and solemnly regarded his companion. “Jackson, have I ever told you about my old home—the place where I was born?”

“You have, sir, a many times.”

“Oh, very good.” For a moment Lenny looked crest-

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fallen, but then he pulled himself together, and rattled on again. He knew that if he hesitated, Jackson would again start his twaddle about the servants' hall.

One evening in April when Jackson came for the usual chat, he found Lenny staring at the newspaper and blinking woefully.

"Oh, Jackson, I have had a most dreadful shock."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes;" and the newspaper shook in Lenny's hands.

"Very sorry to hear it, sir," said Jackson sympathetically. "What might it be, sir?"

"The death of an old friend. . . . Really I don't feel up to talk. I am overwhelmed."

Left to himself, Lenny continued to stare and blink and tremble. What had upset him so grievously was the brief report of a coroner's inquest on the body of a lady who had committed suicide at a Brighton hotel. It appeared that she had herself procured the poison; but there was some attempt to show that she might have swallowed it accidentally. Her maid said that the lady had been suffering from sleeplessness, was in the habit of taking drugs, and probably selected the wrong bottle by mistake. She seemed just as usual overnight. But in the morning, when the locked door of her room was forced open, she was found dressed, sitting in a chair, stone dead. The jury returned a verdict of death by misadventure; but no one could really doubt that the poor lady had purposely killed herself.

And the lady was Mrs. Fletcher.

Lenny did not for a moment believe that there had been any accident or mistake, and wonder and pain filled his mind. It was *he* who had driven her to her death. She had never got over the disappointment; she had struggled on year after year; but it was all no good—

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she could not forget him; she could not be happy without him. He felt remorse and grief as he recalled the manner in which he had dealt with her. He had not even answered that last letter of hers. He should at least have done that—but at the time it seemed an impossible letter to answer. She never reproached him—magnanimous silence from her, whatever her friends said. There was always something fine, very fine, about Helen Fletcher. He had treated her badly; he ought to have married her; it was *wrong* not to marry her.

And why hadn't he married her? He recalled the incidents of the few months during which they were an engaged couple; and suddenly he was startled by the lucidity, the penetrating insight, the clairvoyance that he had exhibited. It had been his judgment of her temperament and character that decided him to break off the match. He had believed her to be neurotic, excitable, not quite healthily normal—well, this sad business, this appalling event, proved the correctness of his judgment, proved it up to the hilt.

He sighed heavily, and let the crumpled paper fall from his hands. Seven, or was it eight years ago? And by now, if he had married her, he would be a widower, going about in black—winding up her estate, probably, as executor and residuary legatee. But no, that was an illogical thought. If he had married her, she would not have done it. She might have worried *him* to death, but she would never have killed herself.

He sighed again, and for a little while sat vacantly gaping.

Then he thought of something very curious. Once he had suffered extreme apprehension lest despair might drive another woman to suicide. Strange that it should be Helen Fletcher, concerning whom he never had the least dread,

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who eventually gave this ghastly evidence of unquenchable love.

The news had shaken him. All that evening, and nearly all through the night, he thought of this dead woman who had loved him. Next day and for many days it was the same thing—he could think of nothing else.

He thought of her state of mind, of the horror of those last hours, when the maid had left her and she sat alone, steeling her heart to the terrific purpose; while all round her, far and near, the world lay sleeping. She sat in her chair, held the glass in her hand, raised it towards her lips, put it down again. Perhaps the purpose wavered. Perhaps she turned off all the lights, and stood for a little while in darkness—taking a foretaste of death, trying to measure the eternal darkness into which she intended to hurl herself. He trembled and turned cold as he thought of it. What must her state of mind have been when she decided that the darkness outside her was no more appalling than the darkness inside her, that the unknown was less terrible than the known, that by no possibility could death be worse than life?

In imagination he saw her just before the end, and just after it. She sat immediately facing him—she was looking at him—she had taken the fatal draught. A tinkling crash as the glass fell, a contortion of the features, a weak fluttering movement of the limbs—and she was sitting there quite still, looking at him with widely distended blue eyes. . . . It seemed painless—some doctor at the inquest said it was painless. But in the supremely awful moment, when the poison flashed through her veins, and like lightning striking a tree tore the life out of her—suppose if the last throb of conscious thought was one of agonized regret! Too late then. . . . Her eyes were glazing, her whole

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body was growing rigid—she had been quite stiff and cold for several hours when they broke the door.

She was haunting him, in the broad daylight as well as in the grey dusk. Suppose that he were to see her ghost. Suppose she stepped forward out of the shadow by the dressing-table, or lurked, hiding, waiting, in the darkness of the other room. Suppose he heard her footsteps on the stairs, her stiff cold hands fumbling at the door. If the door slowly opened—if without opening it she came through the door,—what could he say to her? Well, he would have to say, “Helen, be reasonable. This has nothing to do with me. Honestly, I cannot take the blame upon my shoulders. All this was written in the stars thousands of centuries before you and I ever met.” . . . Yes, that was what he would say.

No, he would say nothing. And why? Because his tongue would be cleaving to the roof of his mouth, his long front hair would be standing six inches high, his spine would be freezing—he would be paralysed with fear.

The terror had returned to him—after a year’s immunity. And this second attack was ten times worse than the first. It swept Mrs. Fletcher and her ghost a million miles away, it wiped out all tender memories, it swallowed his whole past.

It was the nightly comprehension of the infinite smallness of himself in relation to the infinite largeness of the universe. It was the feeling of the darkness all round us—measureless and invincible—while we ourselves are but little sparks of light, like those fishermen’s lamps on the sea at Westchurch, so feeble a ray, so soon extinguished. And the need of doing something, of struggling, of not tamely submitting, overwhelmed him by its imperative urgency.

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If this is our life, with that tremendous doom ever creeping nearer to us, how can we waste it? How can we refrain from filling it at least as full as lies in our power? Above all, if we have no religious faith to sustain us, if we conscientiously believe that this is all, and that there is absolutely nothing beyond it—then how can we squander a moment from our poor little hoard of time? It seemed to him that he could not afford the time required for eating, much less for lying in bed and sleeping.

And now the nocturnal distress had fixed itself. It was simply the fear of death and annihilation: the tremendous sentence that men ignore till the hour of execution has almost come.

And by day it was with him too, less powerful but more precise. Truly he had never before thought of death as something that concerned himself; and he supposed now that his was a typical case. Probably none of the men at the club ever thought of it. They ate and drank and laughed as though they were immortal: every day they saw others snatched from the sunlight, but they fancied that the darkness would never touch them. He shuddered as he remembered all the men who had been and now were not—noisy plethoric Sir John Wilmington, gentle Enfield, kind old Meldrew; that unhappy cripple Kindersley, dozens and dozens of live men who used to nod and smile at him. They had gone. That was what those who remained said of them.

“Have you heard the news? Clarke-Talbot!”

“No, what about him?”

“He has gone, poor chap. Pneumonia. It snuffed him out in less than a week.”

The longest life is only a brief respite from this all-embracing, all-devouring death. Then he began to count his years. Why, the better part of the respite was over

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already. Only twenty years younger than his father was when he died; and they all said he had enjoyed a long innings.

After a particularly devastating night he sat up in bed, drinking hot tea, and hopelessly considering his sad plight. He was hastening the catastrophe. If this nervous agitation continued, he would not be alive by the end of next week. And nobody seemed to care—that enhanced the grimness of his tragedy.

Jackson had just brought in his clothes, and said "Good-morning, sir," as though nothing unusual was happening; upstairs the earl was singing *John Peel* and cantering to and fro across the landing; outside in the streets people were walking and driving, going about their ordinary business. In all the wide world there was not a soul who minded.

Nobody would help him. Ashford was an ass—couldn't understand his case, never had understood it. Yet any clever doctor—anyone really worthy of the name—ought to be able to offer intelligent suggestions.

Then he had an inspiration. Dr. Searle! Searle—a clever doctor, and the only person left who was still fond of him. Dear old Searle!

He rolled over in the bed and rang the electric bell, went on ringing it until Jackson appeared.

"Jackson, the telegraph forms! A telegram to go off without an instant's delay;" and rapidly he wrote out his message to Dr. Searle at Westchurch.

"Come to me immediately. I am in great trouble.
"LENNY CALCRAFT."

Searle arrived by the afternoon train; and Lenny, who

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had gone to the station to meet him, ran along the platform, and clasped him by both hands directly he alighted.

"Oh Searle—my dear, dear fellow—you have come. Oh, how glad I am!"

"What's up, Lenny?" said Dr. Searle. "What's the trouble? Money?"

"No. Health—can't you see it? My health's all wrong."

"Oh, really?" And Searle adjusted his spectacles, and looked very hard at Lenny.

Lenny's heart sank again. Searle had grown old and stupid—he wore spectacles; he was played out, doddering. But very soon Searle began to do him good. They dined and went to a music hall together; and Searle spent the night at Albert Street, sleeping on a camp bedstead in Lenny's room.

Next day he advised and arranged that Lenny should go to the Isle of Wight, and stay for a month or so as a paying guest with a doctor there.

Lenny was delighted by this idea. To be under the same roof with one's medical adviser, to have him at one's beck and call, to know that he was giving uninterrupted care to the case—splendid!

"Oh, Searle, what a brick you are! You have made me feel ten years younger."

XXXVII

THE visit to the Isle of Wight doctor seemed to be a triumphant success. After ten days Lenny felt another man. He had almost ceased blinking and he scarcely ever gaped. All that immense distress of vague fear had gone; and he traced it now to one prime cause—the shock produced in him by the news of Mrs. Fletcher's death.

Dr. Grant, a widower with two daughters, lived in a jolly little white-walled house at the foot of the downs and not far from the sea—a quiet, secluded, peaceful spot. The rules of this modest household were those of the simple life: early to bed, early to rise; plain feeding, and as far as Dr. Grant could induce it, lofty thinking.

Lenny took to it all, as he said himself, like a duck to water. The milk puddings, the slices of mutton, and the honest Cheddar cheese, were all delicious because they were beneficial. And if at first he could have done with more of these amiable allies, he soon understood that, innocent and bland as they seemed, they were essentially similar to certain valuable medicines the efficacy of which vanishes when they are taken otherwise than in small doses. He followed his host's advice rigorously: he drank no wine, smoked very little tobacco, and cheerfully tramped along the lanes with either of Dr. Grant's daughters.

These were full-blown sandy young women, tanned and freckled, as good as gold—and not in the slightest degree exciting. Lenny had an intuitive knowledge that they said

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their prayers regularly, and wore Jaeger next the skin. Why not? Very sensible. Susan, the elder girl, managed the house, wrote out her father's accounts, and kept his books. Enid, the younger girl, played the piano, and was fond of golf. He let her recite Chopin to him of an evening while Susan made up the books in the surgery, but he drew the line when she asked him to carry her golf clubs. That is to say, he promised he would do it, but never meant to. As soon as they got down to the course, he hired a caddy, and when Enid handed him the bag of idiotic implements he handed it to the caddy.

Miss Grant had no opponent and intended to play round in solitary state, like old Reed.

"Why don't you play golf?" she asked.

"Because it would bore me unspeakably."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried?"

"No."

"You ought to take it up. It would do you good."

"Think so?" And Lenny became serious and thoughtful. Then, after she had played two or three holes, he said he would leave her to finish by herself. "I can see I am putting you off, and I observe how much you have to say to our expert friend here;" and he smiled at the caddy. "So, as two is company and three is none, I'll stroll over the hill to the sea."

But Miss Grant begged him to stay; and when he insisted on going, she abandoned her game, and went with him.

As they strolled away, Lenny rolled his head and shot a sidelong and slightly roguish glance at his staunch companion. Could it be that little freckle-face was beginning to experience rather too tender feelings in regard to the guest under her father's roof? He sincerely hoped not. That wouldn't do at all.

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Then another explanation offered itself. If partiality for his company was to be accepted as evidence of love, then the other girl must be in love with him too; for she had stuck to him yesterday as closely as Enid was doing to-day. Could it be that their father had instructed them not to allow the patient out of their sight? He believed that he had hit the right nail on the head, and he was delighted by the solicitude and attention of his host. It gave him if possible a higher opinion of Dr. Grant than he had hitherto entertained. It showed the man to be so thoroughly conscientious—sparing no pains to earn his money.

The last hour of the quiet evening always seemed especially pleasant to Lenny. It was then that he went into the jolly parlour-surgery. The young ladies were gone to bed, and the two men had a pipe and a talk together before turning in.

“How many pipes to-day?” Dr. Grant asked politely, while Lenny was lighting up.

“This is my third—no, fourth. I swear it’s not more than my fourth.”

“That’s right. Don’t overdo it.”

“On my honour, I won’t,” said Lenny, with fervour.

The maid-servant brought in barley-water and glasses on a brass tray; Dr. Grant moved about the room tidying papers and putting away jars and bottles; and Lenny, sitting cross-legged on a chair and lazily puffing out smoke, watched him with childlike interest. He was perfectly happy. He observed his host’s sandiness and baldness, the unfashionable cut of his trousers, the queer antiquated appearance of the jacket that he wore at this time of night—a funny blue flannel garment, with the heraldic arms of a college embroidered on the front,—a cherished relic of the doctor’s university days. But, however insignificant of

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aspect or quaintly attired Dr. Grant might seem, he was to Lenny's eye imbued with majesty and might. Lenny watched him reverently and gratefully—as the man who was expending skill and energy to cure him and make him quite well again.

“Well,” Grant used to say, still moving about and tidying, “how have you filled in the day?”

“Oh, I've been as jolly as a sandboy.”

Then the doctor used to sit in a revolving chair near his writing-table, and turn about from side to side; and it seemed to Lenny that the more he revolved, the more serious and absorbingly interesting he became.

Thus, one evening, swinging round at Lenny, he talked very seriously indeed.

“Calcraft, it's three weeks since you came here.”

“Yes—how time flies!”

The doctor turned to his desk and back again to Lenny.

“Now, I have come to very definite conclusions about your case.”

“Have you?” And Lenny leaned forward over the back of his chair.

“Yes. And I want to tell you—I want to impress on you in the strongest manner my firm opinion that there's nothing whatever the matter with you.”

“Oh!” And Lenny gave a sigh of relief. “That's what Ashford said.”

“Well, I say it too.”

“Searle always said it.”

“We all three say it. I say it most emphatically;” and Dr. Grant did a lot of revolving. “But of course I am speaking of the present time. As to the future—the future is in your own hands.”

“Oh!”

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"You are well now. You can continue to keep well. It all rests with you."

"With me?"

"Yes, we are all of us to a very large extent what we make ourselves. May I take the liberty of speaking with entire frankness?"

"Yes, I beg you to."

"Then I say very earnestly: Be a better man, Calcraft, and you'll be a healthier man."

And Dr. Grant went on talking in this admonitory tone for some time. It was very severe—but Lenny did not mind. Indeed he brimmed over with grateful emotion. He felt like an astoundingly virtuous boy at school who is being caned, and who while smarting and tingling recognizes that the punishment is inflicted for his ultimate good. All who struggled to promote his welfare were friends, and all who proved lukewarm and indifferent were enemies.

"By the way," said Dr. Grant, when their talk had come to an end, and Lenny was lighting his bedroom candle, "have you dipped into that book I advised you to read?"

"No not yet—but I intend to."

"I really think you might get something useful out of it."

"Do you mean to me personally?"

"Yes, I do. The writer is quite one of our tip-top men, you know—anything a man of that calibre troubles to write is worth looking at."

"Oh, I'll read it from cover to cover—I promise faithfully."

Lenny carried the candle upstairs and into his room, where it seemed at first to make but a feeble spot of light. But he looked at the surrounding shadows without the faintest sense of discomfort. There were white curtains above the bed and more at the windows—these flopping gently as the soft air came through an open lattice; a Bible

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and a bowl of primroses decorated the chest of drawers; and the odour of lavender sprigs, laid by the elder Miss Grant on top shelves of a cupboard, was clean and sweet. The whole room seemed simple, homely, curatively kind. Who could fail to sleep well in it—especially when you lay down with the knowledge that in another room, close by, you had a clinking fine doctor ready to jump up and come if you called for him?

After this third week the daughters of the house became less attentive than during the earlier part of his visit. They did not offer their society for walks, but waited for him to invite it—and sometimes even then courteously excused themselves. He was not a bit offended—he guessed that their father had warned them it might now be considered boring.

He took the doctor's book out with him, and read it during his solitary rambles. It was called *The Temple and its Guardian*, and it did not greatly impress Lenny. A mixture of ethics, psychology, and physiology, after the modern fashion, it was written tersely and lucidly enough; and the writer's message, if he had any, appeared to be a warning against the dangers of selfishness. He said that excessive selfishness was due to a loss of the sense of proportion, and in its extremest manifestations it became akin to insanity.

Very wise, no doubt, but very trite—certainly nothing new.

However, politeness to Dr. Grant impelled Lenny to skim through the volume. Fortunately the print was large; and once or twice he was genuinely interested by observing an exact parallelism between the thoughts of the author and his own thoughts. There were certain passages that absolutely echoed his often repeated reflec-

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tions. For instance—through page after page the author harped on the necessity of providing oneself with innocent pursuits. Well, he himself had said the same thing dozens of times. It had been for a long while a pet theory with him.

But, reading on, he met a passage that seemed to extend and widen the theory unexpectedly. This passage impressed him. After he had closed the book, he remembered the sentences almost verbatim: there was something enigmatical about them; they seemed to possess a significance which he could not master, but which haunted him—almost as if they too contained a thought of his own, often felt, but never expressed.

This was the gist of it:—"The entirely self-centred man is always *a man slowly killing himself*"—Lenny put these words in mental italics. "If for no higher reason, every wise man should keep alive numerous altruistic motives; he should nourish them and stimulate them; and if opportunities do not present themselves, he should vigorously hunt for any means of self-sacrifice. . . . As an example, bachelors do not usually live as long as married men; yet no observer of the world would maintain that bachelors really take less care of themselves. No, they are always taking care of themselves, and it is the care that shortens their lives. On the other hand, your married man very likely toils incessantly; he is always struggling to amass money and spending it on his wife or his children; the aim of his life is not his own comfort, but the comfort of those he loves."

Lenny wondered if there were any truth in that? Right or wrong, it certainly had no value for him. He could not apply it to his own case for the best of all reasons—because he was not himself a married man. He carried the book home thoughtfully, feeling rather puzzled to under-

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stand how and why Dr. Grant had thought he would like it.

His favourite saunter was up a cart-track, through several gates, across a slope of bare down, and into a small pine wood. The month of June had opened propitiously; there had been no rain for several days; and here, among these fragrant pines, the naked ground and the mossy banks of a ditch were alike perfectly dry. Lenny used to sit and lie here for hours. Through the tall stems of the trees, looking from the shade to the sunlight, he had entrancing glimpses of emerald sward, white hawthorns, and beyond all the silvery sea.

And here it happened that he caught a far more tremendous glimpse—a glimpse of the truth about himself.

He had been idly thinking of that book, *The Temple and its Guardian*. The Temple of course was one's intellect, or the spiritual, choicest part of one; and the Guardian was just oneself,—all the rest of one. And it behooved one to guard the temple wisely, as well as jealously—and the man said if one was too careful one made a mess of it.

Then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, he asked himself a question. Had he been less selfish than the bulk of mankind, or had he been just as selfish? And the answer seemed to come from nowhere—like a terrific shell fired from a ship below the horizon and bursting with incredible clatter over his head:

He had been more selfish.

Could it be possible? Then what had become of his early reputation, his uniquely magnificent fame? All the world had bowed down to him as the most unselfish person that ever breathed. In those days there had been plenty of self-sacrifice; he had lived not for himself, but for others—for one other, his father. And it occurred to him now

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that throughout that bygone time, while he was trampling on his own desires and inclinations, he had been wonderfully fit and hearty.

But after that time there had been very little self-sacrifice. None at all. He had considered himself only: the single undeviating aim in every scheme, big or small, had been self, nothing but self. He saw his past, from the beginning of consciousness to the present reverie—and it was all, all selfishness. Truly it was marvellous, almost miraculous, this glimpse of truth.

He was reclining on the dry bank just inside the wood; and, folding his hands behind his head, he looked upward through dark foliage at patches of blue sky, and thought with his fullest capacity. He recognized this as a crisis—perhaps the most important hour of his existence. He had come to it without anticipatory instinct. But now that it had come, instinct told him that he must exhaust its utmost potentialities. The discipline of the last few weeks, together with the agony of mind through which he had recently passed; his physical condition at the moment; the emptiness, the cleanness, the refining and bracing effects of sparse diet and cold baths—all these things had combined to prepare the way for an introspective vision of unsurpassable clearness.

His thought flashed like a searchlight, blazed like a magnesium flare, flooded like a sunburst, to show him himself and his life as they had really been. Oh, what a wretch, what an utterly selfish wretch!

He turned on the mossy bank, lay face downwards, and gave himself over to shame and grief. Monstrous and incredible—but true: for more than half his life he had been selfishness incarnate. Splendid at dawn, to what a ruin had he degenerated before the fall of night! And pity, warm and suffocating pity, mingled with his sor-

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row. In the history of the solar system was there so black a page—a degradation more heartrending?

And again he thought of the doctor's book. Never had the world been ornamented with a nobler temple—to begin with; and never had it seen so wicked a guardian. Guardian! A wallowing hog who had made of the beautiful temple the dirtiest and most disgusting pig-sty!

More than an hour went by, and he did not move. Then he turned, sat up, and once again looked at the sky. The passion of regret had passed; another, a slower phenomenon, had begun. It was the building up after the knocking down. Hope! Why should he despair? While one breathes one may hope. He might still amend his course, turn over a new leaf—of the remainder of life he might make something less despicable than the large slice of life that had gone.

And slowly there came the longing, the intensifying hope, for better and higher things. He was thinking humbly and piteously, with thoughts that were like prayers; but, growing and strengthening deep inside him, there seemed to be what there had not been for such a miserably long time—resolve.

Regeneration, a new birth, the glory of rising towards the mountain peaks just when one has nearly fallen into cavernous abysses! Kind acts, clean thoughts, days spent for the good of one's brother men—oh, if it were possible!

Butterflies hovered, and were bright in the sunshine and dark in the shade; now and then there came the clear song of a lark, and always one could hear the humming music of insect myriads. Lenny watched and listened with tender interest, with welling sympathy, for all things large or small. He would not for a thousand pounds have crushed one of the ants who were toiling so bravely to move the pine needles near his feet. Work, courage, obliv-

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ion of self—with these, ants and men may move mountains.

The hours glided away, and it seemed to him like a long purification—Nature's revivifying bath. Blue sky, gentle air, kindly earth—never before had he felt so close to elemental joy. He sprawled upon the ground, patted it, caressed it. Here, like a child returned to the universal mother, he lay on her breast, drawing comfort and peace.

Drawing hope, too. Regeneration—to achieve it should be his purpose henceforth while the respite from the darkness lasted. The longing for redemption and amendment was intensely strong. There was reality now in all his feelings—something that he himself understood to be intrinsically different from anything he had of late experienced: a current of emotion that seemed to run quietly because of its depth and volume, whereas all recent fancies were but as babbling torrents that leap and break at every rock.

The day was nearly over when he emerged from the pine wood. As he came down the cart-track to the lane, he was thinking of religion. Religious faith is a potent aid in sustaining altruistic motives. He had once believed. Could he not believe again?

In sight of the white-walled house, he glanced at his watch. Close on dinner-time! No luncheon and no afternoon tea—it was thirty years since he had voluntarily missed a meal.

That night in the surgery Lenny talked to the doctor as to a priest. He confessed himself. He was loud in condemnation of the old life, and piteously plaintive while pleading for encouragement in the fresh life.

He could not restrain his tears—scarcely attempted to do so. The tears were a part of the purifying process.

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He spoke of his doubts as well as of his hopes, and quoted those saddest of words—"It might have been."

"Calcraft," said the doctor, gently and kindly. "You know another proverbial saying, the truest of all adages. It is never too late to mend."

Lenny grasped the doctor's hand, shook it, clung to it, and sobbed over it.

"Grant, you mean that—on your honour?"

"Of course I mean it—honour bright and shining."

"Oh, my dear Grant—oh how you rejoice me! Yes, yes, I *know* now that the adage is true."

Upstairs in his sweet-smelling, homely room, Lenny did one of those two things which he had guessed the Miss Grants did regularly. He knelt by the bed and prayed.

The lowly and humble attitude seemed entirely appropriate, beautifully symbolizing his spiritual state—meek, fervent, trustful. The hardness of the floor seemed to fortify him; the bed was an altar; and the perfume of lavender was incense, mysteriously filling his bowed head with strange virtues.

He prayed to Christ the Redeemer of mankind—to God the Eternal Father—to the Holy, Blessed, and Glorious Trinity,—for aid in his new and great endeavours. And perhaps he was sub-consciously aware that he did not believe; but he did most sincerely feel that in a matter of such transcendent importance he must not miss a single chance—even an off chance. He knew that he was weak, and he wanted to have everybody on his side.

XXXVIII

HE was back again in London; and he continued to deprive himself of alcohol, to eat sparingly, and to think wholesomely. His desire for the new life had increased rather than diminished.

Walking along Pall Mall one afternoon, he was startled by seeing a very old friend. The friend had not seen him, and for a moment Lenny felt a strong impulse to slink round a corner into St. James's Square and thus avoid a meeting. Yet, no; that would be unworthy: the sort of thing he used to do, but must never do again. He wrestled with the base inclination, and, conquering it, hurried after his friend and accosted him.

"George, don't you know me? *Won't* you know me?"

It was George Verinder—the man who of all others he had loved and respected—dear old George, grey-haired but bright-eyed, erect, alert, energetic, looking like a grey-haired boy.

"What! Calcraft! I should never have recognized you."

"Am I so changed?"

"Oh, I don't know—it's such a long time since we met."

Verinder had not shaken hands, and he spoke coldly. Nevertheless he reluctantly consented to be marched off to Lenny's club for tea.

"Or anything else you prefer," said Lenny hospitably.

"Nothing but a cup of tea, thank you."

"Ah," said Lenny, "you are like me. You play light with the whiskies-and-sodas."

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George Verinder looked at him very coldly, and said that he should not be able to linger over their tea. He added that he was full of business just now.

They sat in one of the windows of the smoking-room; and Lenny thought that George without his hat looked even younger still. He was grey all over his neatly-shaped head, but there did not seem to be a sign of baldness; his dark eyes were extraordinarily bright, with a glowing fire of virile strength behind them; his brown fingers, drumming on the arm of a chair, seemed powerful as little hammers—altogether he was a man bursting with energy. And in Lenny affection was brimming upwards, clamouring to get out. He yearned for a heart-to-heart talk with this friend of his youth.

But Verinder's icy coldness froze him. He became nervous, and when the tea-tray arrived he proved an awkward blundering host.

"Er—George—two lumps of sugar?"

"None, thank you."

"Oh, dear—now I have put sugar in both cups. I'll ring for another cup."

"No, please don't. That will do excellently;" and George took one of the cups, and gulped down the sweetened tea.

Lenny sat blinking. He was struggling to be brave instead of cowardly. This was a turning-point—now or never he must begin the new life. If he could not live up to his ideal during this slight test, how could he go on hoping? He gaped once; then coughed and cleared his throat.

"Er—George," he said huskily. "I call you George—but you don't call me Lenny."

"No, don't I?" And Verinder smiled.

"Something has come between us, George. What is it?"

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Verinder looked at him questioningly, and remained silent.

"George, I wish you'd tell me."

"My dear fellow," said Verinder carelessly, "it's ancient history, not worth talking about."

"But I value your good opinion as much as ever—and I see that I have forfeited it."

"Well, if you insist—you have."

"Why?"

"My dear chap, what is it that the French say? *Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe*. Years ago I heard things about you that I denied. One thing I denied hotly. People said that you never really divided your father's property among your relations—and I said I knew you had done it, because you told me so yourself."

"George," said Lenny earnestly, "when I told you, I fully intended to do it. But in the end I found I couldn't. I did do a good bit—but not all. I blame myself—I had losses, I gambled on the Stock Exchange. Life is difficult."

"But I heard other things."

"Did you? . . . George, life is fearfully complex. I am only now beginning to get a true view of its responsibilities."

Verinder had got up; and, looking downward at Lenny, his dark eyes softened.

"Yes. Life is full of responsibilities. I am just taking some on my shoulders;" and he smiled, and his eyes glowed. "And who the dickens am I that I should venture to judge you? No doubt you meant well—even if you failed now and then." And he held out his hand. "Good-bye, old chap; and good luck to you."

"George, sit down again. Spare me five minutes—by the clock. You—you don't know what good it may do me."

Verinder laughed, almost in the old friendly way, and

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resumed his chair; and Lenny asked a question that certainly belonged to the new life.

"Will you tell me about yourself, George?"

Verinder admitted that he had been lucky, especially of late. An appointment had come to him just when he most wanted it.

"And you are a general now," said Lenny. "How grandly you have got on! *Fancy!* General Sir George Verinder! They made you a K.C.B., didn't they?"

"Yes, they gave me a gold star to use as a chest plaster; and, if I'm good, they say they'll give me a red sash to keep my tummy warm," and Verinder laughed joyously.

"And you are happy, George?"

"My dear Lenny, I'm so happy that I feel as if I couldn't contain so much happiness."

"That's splendid."

Then, throwing off reserve and speaking quite in the old delightful way, Verinder told his friend that he was going to be married on Thursday to the sweetest girl that ever lived. And as he talked about her, the look in his bold brave eyes was wonderful—so soft, so wistful, so chivalrously kind.

"Lenny, what a thing love is! She's young, she's beautiful—and yet my ugly mug hasn't frightened her. What have I done to deserve it—what *can* I do to deserve it?" And he sprang up lightly as a boy. "I really must toddle. . . . It's on Thursday. Come and see us spliced."

"Will you really let me?"

"Yes, do come. . . . And I say—I'm giving a little dinner to a few pals—only about a dozen of us—to-morrow night. Come to that too."

"Delighted. . . . Then *au revoir*, dear old George."

"Ta, ta, old chap."

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Lenny went to the bachelor dinner, in a private room of a Regent Street restaurant; but he did not enjoy it. Although George was extremely kind, doing him honour, and making much of him, Lenny felt out of it. He could not of course sit next to his host, who had a general on each side of him, making three generals all of a row.

"Here's towards you," said George, drinking wine with Lenny, and grinning quite affectionately. . . . "You know, Calcraft and I began our soldiering together."

Yes, but Lenny had stopped, and George had gone on. A grand career! And these were the friends he had made in the course of it—they were his real friends, his normal friends now. They all knew each other well, and they all were very fond of George.

Lenny felt that they were essentially different from him, and he from them. He looked at them all studiously, one after another. Ten typical non-regimental officers.

These were the men of irrepressible activity, who get seconded for all sorts of service, who cannot and will not stay with a regiment. They are physically incapable of sitting quietly in ante-room armchairs; they quickly grow tired of perpetual cricket and polo; they become slack in hunting petticoats, and even weary of killing foxes;—but they can hear guns firing, though it's half across the world, and they rush headlong to the iron music that they love. They make themselves pleasant enough when you meet them at a little gathering like this; but they would be rude to you, they would knock you down and skip over you, if you got in their way—that is, if you stood between them and danger.

George had picked them here and there, about the red parts of the map, but the bond seemed quite as strong as if they had all worn the same facings and badges. As far as Lenny could understand, most of them had served

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together in one of the Soudan campaigns. They talked a lot about the Soudan, and lamented the absence of another campaigner.

"It doesn't seem like home, without Bickers Darell."

"No, Bicky ought to have been here;" and they asked George why Bicky wasn't there. "Didn't you know he was in London? He turned up yesterday."

"Yes," said George, "I saw him this morning. I've explained to Bicky." And Lenny heard what he said to the general on his right. "Twelve, you know. We're twelve. Bicky would have made us thirteen."

And Lenny felt still more out of it. *He* was the real thirteenth. By snapping at an invitation uttered in a moment of expansive warmth, perhaps uttered almost in pity, he had taken the seat of a guest who would have been a million times more welcome than himself.

They drank George's health, very quietly and sedately. But, observing how when they sat down again they pulled their moustaches, frowned, or stared, Lenny surmised that they felt strongly and were suppressing all emotional demonstrations.

Then all at once they made a hideous noise. One of them sang what he called *The Song of the Desert Brigades*, and the rest joined in the chorus. And two of the younger men stood on chairs, and at the end of the song threw their glasses over their heads.

Lenny got away as soon as he could. He had never attended a dinner-party where he felt so much out of it.

He went to the wedding next day, saw the guests, listened to hymns and prayers; sat, knelt, and walked in the midst of a joyous crowd, feeling absolutely alone. He noticed that the company consisted of charming well-bred people, and that on both sides of the church everybody seemed fond and proud of the bridegroom. He

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watched the bride going up the aisle on her father's arm—quite a young girl, with a veil through which her face looked like a white flower seen in sunlight after rain, rather misty and tremulous. He watched her, with raised veil, coming down the aisle on her husband's arm. She and George had eyes for nobody but each other; they were both smiling; and they seemed to float, to sweep past, as if they had become so light that they were blown along on the melodious wind that had sprung up in the great church-organ.

And both during the divine service and at the subsequent reception, Lenny thought with wonder. Truly wonderful! Here was this fresh, radiant young girl giving herself to George, and nobody—except George—seemed a bit surprised. All these nice people handed her over to him cheerfully. Her parents, who had brought her up, fed her on milk puddings to improve her complexion, made her do gymnastics for the good of her figure, and bathed her in cold water to strengthen her nerves;—after all their trouble and expense, as soon as she filled out big and bloomed like a healthy white rose, her parents seemed perfectly willing to hand her over to George—to a man as old as himself. Wonderful! Suppose such a thing were happening to him instead of to George!

But the glamour of George's fame! It was his grand career that had done the trick. Such an unbroken record of success. The cross for valour; this, that and the other; everything helps in building up a reputation!

The thought came inevitably—this ought to have been Lenny's career. George and he started together—and *he*, Lenny, was the most likely one at the beginning; he was cock of the walk then; George looked up to him and admired him; officers and men of that militia regiment thought more of him than of George. Could he have done all that George did? Why not? In that far-off time,

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when he saw a pair of horses running away, he stopped them—without hesitation.

Sadness, unavoidable sadness in these reflections. It seemed to him that he was seeing his own life as it ought to have been.

There was such a pressing mob all round the happy pair that he had difficulty in getting at them to say farewell and wish them joy.

“Good-bye, Lady Verinder. *Bon voyage!* . . . Good-bye, dear old George.”

The grip of George’s hammer-fingers made him wince with pain.

XXXIX

WHEN a middle-aged gentleman wishes to cancel all the previous chapters of his history and to start the next chapter in quite a different vein, the first blank page is apt to stare at him very blankly indeed.

Lenny often considered possibilities, and many things suggested themselves. How can one make oneself most genuinely useful to one's country and one's fellow-men? The regular army was not a possibility. Too late: he was too old—the authorities wouldn't take him back. But this Territorial scheme! Surely one could get something to do on the Territorial establishment—find a nice round hole where one would not prove to be a square peg? Lenny felt that he would like to help the Secretary of State. Or this Boy Scout movement, started in such a spirited manner by that brave and brilliant fellow whose energy was only surpassed by his fertility of resource. Lenny admired and would be pleased to assist the Cavalry General. Or, best of all, there was the crusade of that most magnificent of men, that eagle of war, that white-haired paladin! He still urged his beloved England to arm; he lifted his voice, and no one listened; with tongue and with pen he demonstrated the vital necessity of universal service, and the stupid ungrateful world treated its hero as a person with a bee in his bonnet.

Lenny felt drawn towards the Field Marshal. Oh, if one could help him! Yet it seemed presumptuous to fancy

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even for a moment that anybody else could succeed where that thrice illustrious prince had failed.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as characteristic persuasiveness, personal magnetism, individual charm—call it what you will. Lenny remembered his success at the East End—how he had talked to those lads, how they had clustered round him and hung upon his words, what an influence he had exerted in such a little while. Everybody noticed it.

Suddenly he began to glow with enthusiasm. Why not? He was in his bedroom, and he had been dressing very slowly; but now he moved about more briskly, flung down his collar, and marched into the front room.

Why not? One might go about the country in a van, and unobtrusively entering sleepy little towns, descend from the van at the market place—and fairly wake 'em up. One could hire halls and give lectures—popular, catching, rousing speeches. And it might be as well to have a magic lantern. As he thought of it, he snapped his fingers.

“Now, my lads, I'll show you two pictures, and ask you which you would like to be. Would you like to be this?” Snap! And the operator would shove in his slide—picture of a besotted lout sitting on an ale-house bench. “Or would you like to be this?” Snap! Another slide—picture of a smart young soldier in uniform. And a further idea—not half a bad idea! One might get two jolly pretty girls—two little musical comedy actresses; and dress 'em as *vivandières*, with a drum round each of their necks. Then at the end of the lecture he would say, very simply, “That is all of *my* talk. Let something else talk;” and the girls would beat their drums and walk up and down the platform in a coquettish and alluring fashion. Ber-r-r-ra-ra! Ber-r-r-ra-ra!

“Now,” he would say, loudly and firmly, “who's going

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to follow the drum?" . . . "I will, sir. . . . I will. . . . Me too, sir." . . . And he would come down from the platform, march through the hall, with his drummer-girls behind him; through the cheering crowd, out into the open streets.

In imagination he saw this, and much more. He saw a wide landscape sleeping in the sunlight, a white road leading up a long hill, a vast procession trailing over miles of down and valley—ploughmen are leaving their horses, the hedgerow labourer drops his sickle, the water-cress gatherer abandons basket and stream;—over the brown stubble and through the green roots they are running, to follow the faint beat of the distant drum. It is Lenny—like the Pied Piper of Hamelin—emptying the villages, just as he has emptied the towns; it is Lenny drawing all England to the banners of the brave; it is old Lenny doing what nobody else could do—he is making, has very nearly made, a national army.

He might be able to do it—or again he might not. All at once the idea struck him as childish, merely a day-dream. It would be better to attack the problem quietly—at any rate at first. One could prepare the mind of the populace by writing newspaper letters, pamphlets, even substantial books. But to write books one ought to have a store of knowledge, and Lenny felt himself deficient in erudition. One ought to be able to speak of the cohorts of Rome, the armies of Grecian republics, the *levée en masse* of—of—well, no consequence. However, one could study the subject.

And he was fascinated by this idea of long days spent in quiet concentrated study. He would sit here, using the table or the book-rest, surrounded by learned volumes; from time to time Mrs. Jackson would bring him light refreshment, and the last thing at night, finding him still at it,

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she would very likely say, "I beg your pardon, sir; but aren't you overdoing it?" And he would reply, quite gently, "No, Mrs. Jackson. One must not think of oneself, when one is working for one's fatherland."

After luncheon he went round to the London Library, and made inquiries about their system of lending books. The Library clerks told him that he might either pay an annual subscription, or become a life member by planking down a lump sum.

"Oh—ah—I see. By the year—and leave off whenever I please; or stump up, and have the right for ever?"

The clerks had put him in a dilemma. If he did not accept the life membership, it would seem that he secretly doubted whether he would pursue his studious habits for any length of time. On the other hand, it would be a pity to waste so large a sum of money.

"Well—ah, I won't decide on the spur of the moment. I'll go away and think about it."

He walked across St. James's Park, and went into the Army & Navy Stores to buy some new pyjamas.

Presently he was upstairs in the hosiery department, talking confidentially to one of the salesmen.

"Hitherto I have had rather a dread of cotton, don't you know. They say it strikes so cold. But I am now altering nearly all my old customs, and it has occurred to me that these woollen things are stuffy and oppressive—especially in this warm weather. The fact is, I perspire somewhat freely at night; so I thought——"

Lenny paused. A young woman was standing quite close and smiling at him archly. When he looked at her, she came forward and shook hands.

"Mr. Calcraft, don't say that you have forgotten Joyce Pemberton!"

"Is it likely?" and he beamed at her, and pressed her

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nice soft little hand. Nevertheless he had indeed utterly forgotten her.

"Folkestone!" she said, laughing. "You were so awfully kind to mother and me."

"How is your mother? I hope she keeps her health."

"Very well, thank you. She's here somewhere. Come and find her."

"Delighted! And then you must both let me give you tea."

Going upstairs, Miss Pemberton glanced at Lenny slyly, and after a mischievous laugh whispered "I don't believe you really remember me;" and with her arm she lightly pushed against his elbow.

Then it all came back to him. Folkestone—four years ago—on the pier. He had made the acquaintance of the young lady and her mamma, taken them for a drive, bought theatre tickets, and so on. This Miss Pemberton was the jolly flapper who pushed against him—arm to arm—in such a friendly fashion, at the concert. He had liked it then; and he liked it now.

While they passed from department to department, searching for mamma, he scrutinized his lively little companion. She was now grown-up, fully developed; yet there was something of the flapper lingering—as if unwilling to relinquish all the seductive charms of adolescence, she had her hair in a ball on her neck, and wore a short dress that showed her ankles. And she herself was wonderfully fresh and young, shedding all round her the healthy atmosphere of youth. Her mouth seemed hard—almost old—when her face was in repose. But her mobile features scarcely ever rested themselves. Great animation.

Soon mamma had been found, and they were all three seated at a table in the refreshment room, enjoying their tea, and chatting away most comfortably.

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"What a surprise," drawled Mrs. Pemberton. "When Joyce said 'Here's Mr. Calcraft,' I said '*Never!*'"

Mrs. Pemberton was a faded woman of forty-five, who must once have been handsome, and who at the present time wore rather too much powder on her nose. Obviously she was quite common—not really a lady; but she had an affectation of extreme refinement, speaking languidly and drawlingly, and yet pronouncing her words with laborious accuracy. However, she made herself very pleasant to Lenny, treating him as though he was a trusted friend.

"Joyce," said Mrs. Pemberton, "is stage-struck. I shall try to keep her off the boards; but if it is her vocation, what is one to do?" And she sighed. "Heigh-ho!"

Lenny noticed that she even pronounced the sigh. She said "Heigh-ho" quite distinctly.

"Perhaps," he said, smiling at her daughter, "Miss Pemberton may hit upon a more conventional vocation."

"Really," drawled the elderly lady, "you mustn't call her *Miss* Pemberton. We haven't reached that yet. It would make me feel so *fearfully* ancient;" and she gave a thin laugh. "No, go on calling her Joyce."

Lenny had never called her Joyce; but he did so now with pleasure. Joyce—such an unusual name, almost bizarre, but somehow attractive! Sitting smiling, with his head slightly on one side, he looked at the owner of the odd name.

She had brown hair, with a reddish tinge in it; her eyes were brownish, speckled with darker colour, very bright; her teeth were good but large, especially the two middle ones—and perhaps these big teeth occasioned the hard, almost forbidding set of her mouth, when she firmly closed it. Her lips were red and moist.

The two ladies permitted him to drive them home in a taxicab, and he saw that their house was small and shabby

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—the smallest house of a poor road between Earl's Court and Hammersmith. Joyce volunteered the information that mother let it furnished whenever she could secure a responsible tenant.

"We won't ask you in to-day," said Mrs. Pemberton grandly. "But do please come and visit us soon."

Availing himself of this invitation, Lenny paid a visit on the following afternoon, and another visit two days afterwards.

His third visit was marred by the presence of an intimate friend of the family, to whom Lenny took an instinctive dislike. This young man—by name Yorke Browning—was black-haired; and sallow-complexioned, except for his chin, which showed the dark, bluish tints of an irrepensible beard. He told Lenny that he had always been compelled to shave twice a day. Further autobiographical notes that he let fall were to the effect that he had been a solicitor's clerk, and had then gone on the stage, working first "at the halls" and now "in the legitimate"—line, low comedy. For the rest he was amiable, slangy, would-be-facetious.

He talked to Joyce in a familiar chaffing manner that Lenny considered objectionable.

"How's her High and Mightiness? How's Joycey-poicey? I say, old girl, Sir Herbert Tree is putting up *Romeo and Juliet*, and nobody knows who he's going to get for his Juliet. P'raps *you* know, eh? Sure to be some one choice. Ha-ha! What rhymes with *choice*?"

"Oh, shut up, Yorke."

Lenny learned, after a little of this sort of conversation, that Mrs. Pemberton had not been able to keep her daughter altogether off the boards. During the spring Miss Joyce had been round the provinces, playing a small part in a company of which Yorke Browning was a member; and

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now, after attending some elocution classes, she pined for an opportunity of essaying a big part before a London audience.

"There," said Mrs. Pemberton languidly. "Do leave her alone, Yorke;" and she turned to Lenny and sighed. "Heigh-ho! What *are* we to do with this child, Mr. Calcraft?"

"Give the kid a chance," said Yorke Browning, with a grin. "Let her have her *matinée*."

"Yes, thank you for nothing," said Joyce. "If you'll pay the bill, we'll talk about it;" and her eyes flashed angrily, and her mouth had that hard, almost cruel look.

"Oh, do leave her alone," drawled Mrs. Pemberton. Then, again turning to the guest of honour, she spoke sighingly of a mother's cares. "When her father died she was a little tot, Mr. Calcraft—and I was silly enough to think she'd always be the same size. Heigh-ho! These children! One day it is 'Mummy, do buy me a hoop.' And next day—as it appears—it is 'Mother, will you understand that I'm old enough to know my own mind.' Joyce has shot up like a giant's beanstalk, and she defies me. I'm sure *I* don't know what to do with her."

Lenny felt an absurd inclination to say, "Lend her to me for a fortnight;" but of course he said nothing of the kind. He looked across the small room at Joyce, whose features immediately relaxed.

"Mother," she said, rising and coming over to sit by Lenny, "you're keeping Mr. Calcraft all to yourself, and I don't call it a bit fair."

"Oh—ah—really—what?" Lenny rolled his head. "Have I—ah—been neglectful?"

Mr. Yorke Browning plunged his hands in his pockets, turned up his blue chin, and stared at the ceiling. He seemed to be at once amused, annoyed, and disgusted.

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About three weeks after this, on an afternoon when Joyce was out, Mrs. Pemberton and Mr. Browning sat at tea together and had a very serious talk about her.

"Yorke," said Mrs. Pemberton, with much less drawl than usual, "I don't quite like the way Joyce is going about with Mr. Calcraft."

"Don't you?" said Yorke. "How d'you think *I* like it?" And he laughed morosely.

"Well, although, as you know very well, I have never countenanced your engagement——"

Yorke laughed again. "Your not countenancing it would have made a fat lot of difference to Joyce, I don't think."

Mrs. Pemberton bridled, and called Yorke to order. "That is scarcely respectful."

"I mean no disrespect," said Yorke. "You've always been my friend. But, Mrs. Pemberton, we reap what we sow. Your mistake with Joyce has been not bringing her up strict enough."

"What can one do? My dear mother used to punish me severely."

"And I wish you'd done the same for Joyce."

"The times are changed."

"Well then, Joyce is a product of the times. That's just about her ticket." And Yorke laughed sardonically. "But don't you fret, Mrs. Pemberton. Joyce isn't going to come to any harm this journey. Joyce knows her way about."

"I believe Mr. Calcraft is a man of large means; and, of course, if one could be sure that his intentions are perfectly honourable——"

"I'm sorry for him if they aren't."

"Yorke! You mean you'd avenge—you'd bring him to book?"

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"No, I'd leave him to Joyce. There wouldn't be much stuffing left when she'd done with him."

"Of course if he truly wishes to marry her!"

"I'm sorry for him if he does. I'm sorry for him either way."

Mrs. Pemberton protested. She could not allow anybody to adopt this tone when speaking of her daughter.

"Oh, come off the grass," said Yorke Browning, with sudden irritability. "We're tiled in. If I mayn't speak open now, when may I? For all you know, it's your future son-in-law addressing you."

He had got up from his chair; and he walked about the shabby little room, plunged his hands in his pockets, and spoke openly.

"*Imprimis*, Joyce has got the devil's own temper. I dessay you know that better than me. Her husband will have to watch it, if he don't want his eyes clawed out. But I don't know as Joyce ever intends to marry. It doesn't come into her scheme of life."

"Yorke, how can you?"

"Oh, I don't mean the other thing either—that is, not necessarily. Joyce is a product of the times—and her theory is to spare expense. As to *me!* I'm not going to get in her light. I've been hard hit by Joyce—I was fonder of her than I've ever been of anybody; and you can't say but what *I* played the straight game with her. But the up-to-date position is this. I don't know if I'm engaged to Joyce or not. I don't know if I want to be engaged, or wouldn't rather be clean off with it. One thing—she isn't going to fool me any more. There's plenty of fish in the sea. She said to me, last Monday, 'Yorke, wait till you can come and tell me you're earning big money—and we'll talk then.' But I told her flat, 'Perhaps, when that day comes, I'll carry my big money round the corner.'"

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"Don't be hard on her, Yorke. She doesn't mean half what she says."

"No, I hope she doesn't—nor a quarter of it. I tell you, when Joyce fairly lets fly, it's blood-curdling. You wonder wherever she got the language from."

"She didn't get it from me," said Mrs. Pemberton.

"Not much;" and Yorke laughed good-humouredly. "No, the way I explain it is, that if ever Joyce hears a real nasty bit in a play or a book—a bit that most people want to forget as soon as possible—Joyce learns it by heart, and stores it up for future use."

"Oh, no, you wrong her, Yorke. It's only her hot temper. Her father was quick to——"

"Did she ever give you the true particulars of why she left the company in such a hurry? . . . No, I don't suppose she did."

And Mr. Browning related how Joyce had "let fly" with overpowering eloquence of invective at the leading lady; and how when the manager tried to come to the rescue of his ewe lamb, Joyce let fly at him also. "I tell you, it made the scene shifters shiver."

"And—and did the manager ask Joyce—to go?"

"You bet."

"Heigh-ho!" said Mrs. Pemberton. "Joyce never told me but I suspected it."

And although Yorke Browning, when speaking openly, uttered such disparaging words about his sweetheart, they were perhaps well within the mark. For, if Joyce was truly a product of the times, she offered abundant evidence that the times need mending. All that was feminine in this young lady seemed to be the instinct that sex itself is an asset, which may prove highly valuable or practically

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valueless, in accordance with the clever or the foolish method of its realization.

She firmly believed that nature had graced her person with certain charms; but when she looked at them in the glass, she was less like a maiden gladdened by the sight of her beauty than like a merchant considering his stock in trade. All this—the brown hair, the animated face, and the shapely little figure—comprised what Joyce had to take to market.

If fate was leading Lenny now, it had led him upon a perilous path. Could he have guessed it, this sordid little girl was the most dangerous, the most deadly dangerous companion to him in his present mental condition.

XL

OF an evening they often went to the play—upper circle, morning dress. London was empty now, with the dog days approaching, and one could always get seats at any theatre without the bother of booking them in advance.

Before the play they used to dine at some unfashionable restaurant where you were sure of a well-cooked dinner and a sound bottle of champagne; and, seated at their table, pleasantly hobnobbing together, they looked like a benevolent uncle and a bouncing schoolgirl niece.

“Joyce,” and he would lean forward across the table, “are you enjoying your little self?”

“So-so,” said Joyce.

“Are you sorry that you have to put up with an old fogey like me? I suppose that’s what I really seem to you?”

Joyce sipped her champagne, and smiled archly.

“Now, now, Lenny—fishing, *fishing!* Always fishing for compliments.”

“But I don’t catch many, Joyce,” and he rolled his head and blinked his eyes. “Please say that you might have had to put up with a worse escort. Say I don’t look absolutely repulsive.”

“Oh, you’d pass in a crowd;” and Joyce laughed mischievously and tantalizingly.

In her simple little frock and common hat, with eyes

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sparkling and cheeks flushed by the wine, she seemed to him rather adorable. He pushed his foot further forward, tacitly inviting her to touch him with her neat little ankles.

Of an afternoon they used to meet by appointment and walk about the streets. Once he took her to a picture gallery in Grafton Street; but Joyce was not amused. She said, "If this is an exhibition, I prefer the shop windows."

During their second walk he bought her a yellow straw hat with purple feathers. She stood stock still on the pavement, admiring it, and he said "Joyce, let me buy it for you as a present. Come inside."

She consented without demurring. Then, just as he was leading her into the shop, he hesitated and became grave.

"But, I say, Joyce, do you think your mother will like it?"

"I don't care whether she likes it or not. She won't have to wear it."

"No, but I mean, do you think she'll approve of my action in getting it for you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'd better be on the safe side—I won't tell her."

"What!" said Lenny, gratified. "A little secret between you and me, eh?"

Joyce laughed gaily. "Yes. And I don't care how many little secrets of the same kind. . . . That's only my fun. Of course I shouldn't allow you to give me anything else—at least not for ages."

Gradually she unfolded to him the bulk of her hopes and ambitions. She wanted to be an actress, a great actress, the most successful and highly paid actress of the hour.

"Believe me, Lenny, I feel it's in me. Yorke Browning says so. He says I'm mimetic. Things make an impression on me. What I've heard said I can say again. It's temp'rament. I *have* the temp'rament."

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"Well," said Lenny smiling, "I wouldn't be too sure of that. *I'm* not an actor; but let me tell you a few facts about the way the glamour of the theatre used to influence me at one period—before I reviewed my opinions and reformed them by the light of experience. I can tell you——"

"No. Another time;" and Joyce rattled on. "Believe me, Lenny, it's *in* me. I could be big—right up there;" and she pointed towards the chimney-pots. "Give me the chance, and I'll wipe the floor with some of your seventy-quid-per-week veterans." She was always slangy when she spoke of her art. "You mayn't credit me with it, Lenny; but it's there—it's there all the time."

She would not encourage him to tell her *his* hopes and ambitions; she did not evince the faintest interest in his private affairs—with one exception. She drew him out on the subject of ways and means, and finally learned the exact figures of his annual income.

"How you do go on about what things cost!" she said mockingly. "Talking of not being able to afford this and that!"

"No more I can."

"If I were you, I'd afford anything I pleased; I'd never, *never* stint myself. That's the value of having heaps of money. And you know very well you're rolling in it."

"Indeed I'm not rolling in money. I haven't more than fourteen hundred a year, all told."

"Gammon!" Joyce stopped short, and stared at him incredulously.

"Gospel truth. Not a penny more than fourteen hundred to rely on."

"Oh, that isn't much;" and Joyce pouted. "No—it can't be called rolling." Her voice had become serious in tone, and she walked on slowly; but then, brightening

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again, she spoke as gaily as usual. "Anyhow, there's a lot of spending in fourteen hundred. I only wish mother and I had half your complaint."

Lenny was not sorry to avail himself of the opportunity for frankness, because the Bond Street and Piccadilly windows were sometimes embarrassing to him. Joyce admiring expensive jewellery was adorable. Lenny felt fascinated while she stood with her little nose close to the plate-glass, and her brown eyes staring at a seven thousand guinea tiara. That was all right. But when it came to nick-nacks at anything from forty shillings to twenty pounds, it began to be troublesome. He had already bought her several trifles; and now that she knew the state of his resources, she would understand that he could not dash into every shop and bring out everything that caught her fancy.

Yet here she was again—after the revelation,—with her brown eyes glued on a small and vicious-looking sapphire bangle.

"Come along, Joyce. . . . The, ah, odour of this creosote pavement is most unpleasant—and the, ah, dust is getting down my throat."

"Well, you *are* in a hurry!"

Thinking about it afterwards, he felt that she must have her bangle—if it wasn't atrociously expensive. He went back to the shop by himself, and came away with the bangle in his pocket. He would make use of it by inducing her to give him another treat.

It was a treat when she came to his rooms in Albert Street, and she did not give him this treat too frequently.

"Joyce," he said, on the following afternoon, "come to tea with me—at my own place. I have got something there for you. A surprise!"

She beamed; and then held up a finger warningly. "But no rot!" And her mouth looked very hard and firm. "If

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I do come, it's on the understanding you don't try any nonsense."

What an idea!

He had told Mrs. Jackson to lay out tea-things for two and to provide some cakes and fruits; and Joyce was pleased with his delicacies. He left her in the front room; and then, coming back, displayed the bangle case, but refrained from immediately handing it to her.

"Oh, I *say*, Lenny. Another present!"

"Yes."

"It's too bad of you—and I told you not another for ages. . . . Well, aren't I to have it?"

"Joyce, if you're pleased with it, you must give me a kiss."

"Yes, I will."

She was pleased with it, and he had his kiss.

But after tea she put the bangle down, pushed it aside, and pouted. "It's all very well, Lenny—but, oh, if you want to give me a *real* present—to make me *really* fond of you—why don't you help me in my profession?"

"How could I?"

"Give me my chance."

And then Joyce sketched out what he might do for her. No vast sums of money would be required. It would be nothing to him—not a year's income, very likely,—if the worst came to the worst, and the whole speculation failed. He should let her have her *matinée*, and then when she had made her hit, he should get her a good engagement by investing capital in some new play. "It's done every day, Lenny. Wagstaff always finances his own plays—that is, gets somebody else to do it for him."

"My dear child," said Lenny, rather coldly. "This is a large order."

"Is it?" And Joyce smiled languishingly. "There are

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people who would be glad to do it for me—if I wasn't too proud to let them. . . . Well, Lenny?"

"I'll think about it. I can't say any more."

Doubtless he was more or less thinking about it for the rest of Joyce's visit, and when she was going he spoke hesitatingly.

"Joyce. If I ever did it——"

"Did what?"

"What you suggested. If I ever did it, I should expect you, young lady, to be very nice."

"Well, aren't I nice? Lots of people are good enough to tell me I'm fairly nice."

"Yes, but to me personally."

"So I would be—but no rot."

She returned to the subject of her enterprising proposal during subsequent visits, and once or twice she consented to sit on his knee while they chatted about it.

"Joyce," he said, "don't tease me. You promised me a kiss this afternoon."

"Yes, I'll keep my promise."

And he would have forcibly extracted a prompt fulfilment of the promise.

But she held up her finger. "Lenny, you see that door. If you can't behave yourself, I'll go straight through it."

"Oh, Joyce!"

"You must wait. . . . But don't sit with your tongue out, like a dog waiting for a bone;" and she laughed. "Though this is a case of 'Trust and Paid for!'"

"Joyce, I'm afraid you're a dreadful tease." And after what he considered adequate delay, he appealed to her plaintively. "May I kiss you now?"

"No. I said I'd kiss you—not you me. There's a great difference. . . . Now!" And she lightly brushed his cheek with her soft warm lips. "There. Good-bye. Many

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thanks. I must be off." And she got up. "Go on thinking about it; and be an old dear in the end."

"Joyce, I can't let you go." He had grabbed at her hand, and was endeavouring to detain her. "When you look at me like that, I feel there's nothing I can refuse you."

Then she condescended to postpone her departure and to sit on his knee again.

"Lenny," she said, "you *will* do it." And she told him that she relied on him absolutely; she counted it as done already; she would be heartbroken if he attempted to back out. "Dear old boy, you're going to give little Joyce her chance, and little Joyce is going to be very fond of you."

And it seemed to him that it wasn't a matter of *going to be*, but of *is*; for she was really nice, giving him a foretaste of ineffable niceness, making him throb and thrill quite in the grand old way. She continued to be utterly adorable, and remained sitting on his knee, until something unfortunate occurred.

This was the entrance of the stupid maid-servant, who had come to fetch away the tea-things.

Joyce sprang up angrily; her brown eyes blazed, and she startled Lenny with the vigour of the reproof that she administered to the intruder. She said that Adelaide ought to be ashamed of herself for so imprudently entering a sitting-room without first knocking at the door. "I never heard of such a thing!"

Lenny had become cognizant of the fact that Mrs. Jackson, whose aspect habitually exhibited cheerfulness and satisfaction, now looked at him glumly and distressfully. He did not ask her what had caused this deterioration in her appearance, but she explained it voluntarily.

She said that her husband had deputed her to speak to him about "that young person." She said everybody had

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noticed things, everybody was passing remarks about them. Adelaide, after what she had actually seen—one chair serving the purpose of two chairs—well, Adelaide passed inevitable remarks.

“We aren’t like Mr. Steel’s,” said Mrs. Jackson. “Mr. and Mrs. Steel perhaps wasn’t as particular as we are—but Mr. Jackson and myself have fought hard to keep up the good name of the house. It’s always been understood by our gentlemen. . . . Why, the Earl himself, all the time he was with us, never once done so. . . . And if I may say it, sir, such an audacious little——”

“That will do, Mrs. Jackson,” Lenny raised his hand impressively. “You may soon regret what you are saying,” and he blinked his eyes. “The young lady is going to be my wife.”

Mrs. Jackson candidly confessed her astonishment.

“Don’t you think I’m wise?” asked Lenny anxiously.

“Oh, it’s not for me to say, sir. . . . But I should have thought, if you was marrying, you’d want one that would make you comfortable like—not one that would call for looking after.”

“This is the one I want,” said Lenny. “It is her youth, as much as anything else, that has decided me to marry her.”

Truly he had made up his mind only that morning; and Mrs. Jackson was the first person to hear of it. He had not even told Joyce yet.

XLI

HE had been thinking about the theatrical speculation, and was feeling considerable repugnance to Joyce's scheme, when this other notion presented itself.

Was it too late? Was he too old to marry? He might have thought so till recently, but he did not think so now. George Verinder and he were of the same age; and with his own eyes he had seen George united to a delightful young girl.

Then almost immediately it seemed to him as the solution of all his difficulties. This other young girl—as young as George's girl—had been sent to him by destiny. It was light in darkness, safety after doubt; it was the new life taking the most beautiful of all conceivable forms.

Of course there were drawbacks. Where are there not? Joyce's mother was common, her friends were common; but, after all, one does not necessarily marry the mother and the friends. He must remove her from those influences. And, again after all, what the deuce does it matter? He never was a snob; he never had harboured any rubbish about class distinctions—he ought to consider himself thundering lucky to secure a really nice girl, with or without a pedigree. Hang pedigrees! A little hard cash wouldn't have come amiss; but you can't have everything. As to her childish ambitions—well, he would not of course allow her to go on the stage. No, there must be an end to that nonsense. He was opening up a far nobler prospect than that.

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Dear little Joyce! She was virtuous—quite unassailably so. Just a wee bit of a spitfire. How fiercely she spoke to Adelaide! But that needn't frighten him. She would settle down in her own home, with her own servants; her petulant humour would be banished by gentle influences, refined society, and, above all else, love. What a thing love is! George had said so—about *his* girl.

Lenny began to dream. Once again his thought streamed boldly into the future; and, as used to happen years and years ago, unseen things were as real as things seen.

They would live somewhere in the country. Some tiny little place without shops or pavements or traffic. A village—a fishing village for choice. Perhaps just big enough to contain some sort of club where the men of the neighbourhood could assemble after dinner; and a golf course; yes, a good golf course handy—not more than a mile or two away. Is he too old to play golf? No; men of seventy and eighty take it up. It is invigorating; it is a medicine—the doctors say so. It keeps people alive. If he find himself unable to pick up the knack of it, he can still—like old Reed—potter about the links; he can be blown at by the wholesome sea air, be toned by the genial sunshine; he can walk round after the men who are able to play, and come back sharp-set to the snug little dinner with the dear little wife waiting for him in the candle-light.

He could visualize it all most clearly—his long healthy happy day; and if he did not also visualize the dear little wife or wonder how she might be amusing herself while he was on the links, she became vivid and strong when, hastily throwing down her needlework, she tripped through the parlour to the hall and welcomed him with a radiant smile.

It was a warmly soothing dream that left behind it a dominant idea. So dominant, indeed, that it shut out all

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minor mental processes. It was lord of his mind, and the one great necessity now was to obey it with promptness. He felt that his resolution to marry Joyce was something which it would be as improper to question as it would be impossible to shake.

Miss Pemberton's poorly furnished house did not possess a telephone, so he sent a telegraphic message.

"Stay in for me this afternoon. I have important news. LENNY."

A slatternly servant, ushering him into the shabby drawing-room, told him that Mrs. Pemberton was out; and he thought himself lucky to get Joyce all to himself.

She appeared at once, looking too sweet for words, just as he had seen her in his dream.

"Well," she said, "have you made up your mind at last?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her.

She ran to him with outstretched hands. "Oh, you dear! You perfect dear!" And she gave him a kiss, without being asked for this favour.

"Joyce, my pretty one, let's sit down, and talk snugly. I have been thinking about you ever since I saw you and you were so nice to me. You are far too nice to waste your life as an actress. So I've come to the conclusion that, after all, you are not going on the stage."

"Not going on the stage! Indeed I am!"

"No. I have something better to offer you than that."

"What is it?"

He smiled at her fatuously. "My heart and hand."

Her cheeks had flushed, and the lines of her mouth grew hard.

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"Lenny, no rot. What d'you mean?"

"I mean to marry you;" and he opened his arms, with the intention of clasping her to his breast.

Joyce gave him a violent push in the middle of his waist-coat, and sprang away from him.

"Lenny, shut up. Don't play the fool about this;" and she held up her finger warningly. "This is serious. I've counted on you—solid as the Bible. I couldn't stand such a disappointment. I'd never forgive you, if you backed out."

"But my—my dear child! I—I'm not backing out; I'm, ah, coming forward."

"Gammon! You're old enough to know better than to talk such stuff." Her cheeks reddened still more, and her eyes blazed. "Lenny, I'm not good-tempered when people disappoint me—and if you make me angry, I shall tell you what I think of you."

For a few moments she paced to and fro, as if struggling to suppress excitement; and Lenny, with his mouth open, watched her stupidly. He had been so completely under the dominion of a fixed idea, that obstacles to its being converted into accomplished fact really flabbergasted him. Why should she be angry?—he could not understand what was happening.

"Lenny—I won't believe it." She had relaxed the lines about her lips, and she came to him cajolingly, and spoke with affected kindness. "You wouldn't play such a trick on your little Joyce—after she has trusted you, and shown that she is just a little bit fond of you."

"Yes, and I'm enormously fond of you. Don't I prove it by my proposal? And I'm ready—quite anxious—to tell your mother the same thing."

For a little while longer she spoke in meek entreaty.

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"He begged him not to act the giddy goat, not to talk bosh, not to evade the carrying out of what she declared was a solemn bargain between them; but he could not reassure her: he could only reiterate his explanation that the silly theatrical scheme had been thrust into the remote background by the delightful connubial scheme. He could but confess that his decision was unshakable.

And then Joyce let fly at him.

He heard then exactly what he seemed to the eyes of this young person of the other sex. She was in a white fury now, and vituperation poured from her with torrential vigour.

"So be it," he muttered piteously. . . . "Ah, Joyce, I take it—from this, ah, attack, that you would not under any conditions care to marry me."

"Me—marry you?" And she laughed with bitter scorn. "Sit down quiet on half of your beggarly fourteen hundred a year? *Me*—who hopes and intends to be drawing her hundred quid a week—yes, and more! But I wouldn't marry you—no, not if you had millions a year."

"You, ah, certainly encouraged me to hope——"

"Encouraged you! I asked you to help me—and if you'd done it like a man, I'd have put up with your slobbering nonsense as part of the bargain. I wouldn't have backed out—not till you turned me sick."

"Joyce, for pity's sake!"

He had lifted his hands to his head, and they sank again feebly. Now he stretched them out, imploring her to stop.

"I kissed you, didn't I? And I let you paw me about—though I wanted to call out for a basin. And now you won't pay the price. But I'm to marry you. Why you aren't *like* a man."

She was dreadful to see, clenching her fists, lashing herself into fiercer rage—a creature common as dirt, implac-

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ably base, compared with whom those jam girls at the *End* were gentle fairies.

"It's a hospital nurse you want—not a wife. Somebody to dress you and keep you clean—and tie a napkin round your neck when you eat your food."

To Lenny it sounded like doom speaking. It was the unpitying voice of youth denouncing age. It was the nocturnal terror personified, and torturing him in broad daylight.

"Joyce, don't—oh, please, don't go on."

"Marry you? *Me!*"

He raised his hands, with the gesture of some poor emaculate wretch whom bullies have attacked in savage violence, and who is helpless beneath the cruel blows.

"*Me!*" And she gave a horrible laugh. "*Look* at me. Put up with *you!* Why you're rotten—not half alive—dead and decaying. Just something ugly left by the roadside, because Death the Scavenger is too lazy to come and clear you away."

And he took it all as real, believed it to be a genuine and unbiased opinion—did not for a moment understand that these were scraps which she had put together from memory's store.

"Yes, that's right."

He felt dazed and shattered, and he was moving slowly and heavily towards the door.

Joyce had rung the bell, and she pointed at the door theatrically.

He sat alone in his room, huddling himself in his big arm-chair; and when the shadows deepened all about him, he did not rouse himself to turn on the electric light. The shadows were coming to him thick and fast; and he had no spirit left to go on fighting them.

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He told Mrs. Jackson that she was not to prepare any dinner for him, and that he did not desire to see her husband. He said that he was in trouble.

Mrs. Jackson came to him during the evening and begged him to take some soup or some sandwiches; but he replied that he could not eat anything at all.

"I'm sorry to see you so low, sir. Shall I send Mr. Jackson to fetch a doctor? You may have caught a chill."

"No," he said, in a dull, lifeless tone. "Doctors can't help me."

"Then what is it, sir, that's troubling you? . . . Not the young lady?"

"Yes. The match is broken off."

"Permanent, sir—or perhaps it's nothing but a little tiff?"

"For ever."

Mrs. Jackson's honest face glowed with satisfaction. "Then I do congratulate you now, if I wasn't able to this morning. It's the best day's work you could 'a done."

"Think so?" said Lenny, in the same dull tone.

He was suffering from shock rather than from grief. Two things had shaken him before this—the conversation in Dryden's office, and the death of Mrs. Fletcher; but this third thing, the scene with Joyce, had shaken him to his foundations. He felt broken, done for, as if it was no use trying to get over it.

XLII

TIME was passing; but Lenny had ceased to count it. Once or twice in the last twelve months he had been greatly worried by hints that the Jacksons intended before long to retire from business. What on earth would happen to him then? He sounded Jackson on the possibility of his retiring with them—that is, going wherever they went, remaining under their care, enjoying their society as a paying guest, if not as a lodger. But Jackson seemed in doubt as to whether this could be managed.

The fact was that Lenny's habits would probably cause trouble in any modest country household. Mrs. Jackson and the maid had the greatest difficulty to get at his bedroom and clean it before night fell. He got up fearfully late, and often did not go out all day. He would half dress himself and then meander from room to room; and when Mrs. Jackson suggested fresh air, he told her that there was nothing to tempt him into it.

"Have you given up your Turkish baths, sir?"

"Yes, I have. . . . But I don't know if one mightn't do me good. I'll go to-morrow—perhaps."

He needed a strong stimulus to draw him out of doors; but sometimes a newspaper advertisement would catch his fancy, and then, after brooding over its promises, he roused himself to definite effort. Thus, an advertisement about "manicuring in the home circle" attracted him so much that he sallied forth and procured a compact set of manicure instruments. But this purchase kept him indoors for a

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week. Hour after hour he sat polishing his nails, anointing them with pink paste, paring and tweaking them with artful little curved nippers.

He was tired of the club; and would never have gone to it if Mrs. Jackson had not driven him there. But at intervals Mrs. Jackson became obdurate. She said the time had come when she must and would give the two rooms a thorough airing and cleaning, and Lenny submitted unwillingly enough to this recurrent nuisance.

At the club, people were rude and uncouth—especially one man. Lenny talked very little, but if he could secure listeners he would still tell an anecdote: indeed he had one story that he was quite fond of telling. It was a true account of his experiences while a dentist applied local anæsthesia to the lower gums and extracted two prodigious stumps; and Lenny always wound up the story with the same words. "Absolutely no pain—on my honour—from start to finish."

But one day the rude man—the enemy—said brutally, "Can't you give that tale a holiday, Calcraft? Don't you think we've heard enough about your false teeth?" And, although the man plainly meant to be rude, not a soul took Lenny's part and reproved him.

"They're not kind to me," Lenny thought, driving home in his taxi. "They're hateful to me. They're a lot of pigs."

When he walked a little way on warm afternoons, he scrutinized the shop windows, vaguely searching for novel articles that offered comfort or safety. In this manner he bought, on different occasions, a leather pillow filled with poppies to make him sleep; some sound-resisting mats for the landing by his door; and a marvellous fire escape, which he caused to be affixed to the window of his bedroom. The

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maid-servant behaved very badly in regard to this apparatus. When Lenny wished to see if it worked properly, she flatly refused to be dropped down the canvas tube from the first floor to the back yard; and he was so huffed with her that he sent her to Coventry for two whole days.

The pillow of poppies was a failure. It did not make him sleep, and yet he attributed to it certain puzzling, almost inexplicable properties. It seemed to have a power of wafting him from side to side of the bed, or rather to give him the sensation of movement when he knew that he had not really moved.

This, however, was only one of many strange sensations that perplexed him as he lay between sleeping and waking. Strange and wonderful sensations—some of them pleasing and others distressing; but, good or bad, they possessed a common quality of intimacy, even of sacredness. They were a matter which he must not speak of to anyone. Above all, instinct told him that they were to be kept from the combined obtuseness and inquisitiveness of these doctors. The doctors had proved useless—no more of their interference for *him!* Whatever he suffered, he must support it in silence. It must be kept as a mysterious secret shared only by himself and his pillow.

His best sleep—his only true oblivion—came after the early breakfast; and it was for this reason that he lay so long abed. Surely an explanation simple enough for anybody! But Mrs. Jackson was so dense that she never seemed able to grasp it.

The reason why he dressed so slowly was also simple. He could not dress without looking at himself in the three-winged glass beneath the bedroom window; and yet, whenever he saw his reflection, it infallibly checked proceedings.

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He did not count time, but he recognized its abominable work. The nasty northern light filled the looking-glass, made it clear as crystal and merciless as a truth-telling girl.

While he lifted the first of his vests to put it over his head, he saw the pitiable shrinkage of the once superb torso. His collar bones showed distinctly; the glory of his massive shoulders was all gone. With a sigh he turned away, to put on the other vest and his flannel undershirt.

Then he would sink into a chair before the glass, and study his face. He stared at the tarnished eyes and heavy eyelids, at the grey hair, at the ugly stubble of beard that seemed white and patchy. Sometimes there were blood-shot veins in the eyes, and the lids appeared so ponderous that one wondered how they were able to flutter up and down with such rapidity. And his cheeks! Where was the smooth polish, the graceful curve, the grand solidity? It seemed that there was scarcely any flesh left upon the cheek-bones.

And he would go on growing thinner and thinner; it would be an unceasing progress—the transformation from the live face to the grinning skull.

He thought, with a horror that every day renewed itself, of our dependence on this bodily integument of bones, flesh, and viscera. It is our house of life, in which we sit enthroned, seeming omnipotent, immortal; and yet if the house falls, we are inexorably destroyed with it.

Terrible, most terrible law and doom—to watch the body droop, decay, grow weak and fragile; to feel that we depend on its force and endurance; to know that we cannot escape from the approaching wreck.

He turned his head to right and to left, staring into the winged glass, and seeing three sides of the perishable casket that contained this divine but evanescent spark—the soul of Lenny.

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One afternoon when Mrs. Jackson had banished him from Albert Street and he had been sleeping on a couch in the club library, he woke with a start out of a bad dream, and found the ordinarily quiet room full of excitement and commotion.

All the other sleepers had awakened; people were jumping up; strangers were hurrying towards him.

"What's the matter?" he asked sulkily.

"Well, you gave such a groan that we were afraid you were in a fit."

"Oh, no. I'm all right."

He assumed an odd kind of morose dignity, pulled himself together, and left the room. As he slowly descended the marble staircase, his deportment exhibited both vacillation and truculence. In the hall people looked at him attentively.

"Going home, sir? I've called a cab." The porter, having come out of the glass box, was helping him on with his overcoat.

"Er, ah, thank you, Collins. Yes, it is my wish to go home."

Upstairs a member of the committee had gone into the secretary's office, and was talking about him.

"That fellow Calcraft—they say he behaves so *queerly*, don't you know. Have *you* observed anything?"

"No; but I've heard a lot."

And the secretary mentioned certain rather queer things that Calcraft was said to have done. However, he did not think there was anything to make a fuss about.

"He very rarely comes here. Several members have given him the straight tip that he isn't wanted—and I believe he understands that he bores them."

"Then you don't think it's necessary to *do* anything? He's only a bore—not really offensive?"

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"Oh, no—quite inoffensive. Merely a bore. And of course he isn't the only one."

"Exactly."

And the committee-man and the secretary both laughed good-humouredly.

XLIII

LENNY did not go to the club again. He told Mrs. Jackson that she must contrive to clean his rooms one at a time, and not deprive him of both of them together. Now and then he sent Jackson with a written order to the club porter for the delivery of letters; but the answer brought home by Jackson was nearly always the same. "No letters at the club for Mr. Calcraft."

The world was rolling away from him: almost all of its busy inhabitants had become callously indifferent to his poor little pleasures, if not absolutely forgetful of his very existence. And, alas, among those who neglected him was the man Jackson.

Long since, Jackson had begun to shirk the evening talks, and now he totally avoided them. When feebly tackled, he made excuses. He apologized most respectfully, but there was an unmistakable purpose and resolution about it. It simply meant: No more Jackson to gossip and drink whisky with.

So now, in the hours after dinner as well as in the hours before it, Lenny was left quite alone.

One night when Jackson had cleared the dinner-table and made his respectful adieux, he returned unexpectedly.

"I beg your pardon, sir; but, you know, yesterday you sent me to ask for letters—and you never mentioned it again. Well, sir, I have to apologize for forgetting it, but there *was* a letter for you."

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"Was there, Jackson?"

Lenny was sitting in the big armchair, near the fire and he did not look around.

"Here it is, sir," and Jackson laid the letter on the small table by Lenny's chair. "Good-night, sir."

"Ah — er — thank you, Jackson. . . . Good-night."

Lenny felt tired after a muddled and distressing sort of day, and quite an hour passed before he turned from the fire and picked up the letter. Throughout the day his mind had been dull and confused—with something opaque between him and the outside world, so that his thoughts were all like prisoners in a prison.

He sat staring at the envelope. *Her* handwriting! He would know it among a million hands. And he seemed to hear her voice—remote, faint, but unmistakable.

"Lenny. . . . Lenny!"

He whispered her name. "Alma. . . . Alma!"

His mind brightened. That sound, reaching him from a far-off voice, was like a sunbeam in a darkened place, a breath of sweet pure air in a foul dungeon. And he heard her voice once more—remote, but distinct enough for him to catch the deepening note that used to stir him so profoundly.

"Lenny. . . . My own Lenny."

A last call—the voice of his good angel! Lenny's blood-shot eyes were suffused with the too ready tears. He sniffed, wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his coat, and opened the envelope.

Yes, her signature—no one else's. But, oh, how long! A screed! Four pages of it. *What* a task she had set him! His mind grew dull again. Nevertheless he settled to the work, and read on and on, slowly and laboriously—without skipping a sentence.

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“DEAR LENNY,—Perhaps this is one of the letters that had better never have been written; but I cannot help writing it. Burn it directly you have read it, and then send me one line to say that you received it. I trust you not to fail me in either of these requests.

“I have been ill; and while I was recovering, I often thought of you. And I thought you must sometimes think of me, and that it would be dreadful if, instead of getting well, I had died without telling you things that I want you to know—things that I believe you will be glad to know.”

He sighed, and slowly turned the first page. When women get going with a pen, they seem to go splashing along as if they are taking exercise, doing something for the good of their health.

“I want you to know that I am happy, absolutely and entirely happy. The past is as if it had never been; and I look forward, as far as human eyes may see, without doubt and without fear. So, dear Lenny, if you sometimes reproached yourself for causing me great pain, you need not do so any longer. And that is the thing that I believe you will be glad to know.

“I say it with a spirit of faith, though it may seem impious: you made me descend into hell; and then, after tasting more than the bitterness of death, I was lifted into Heaven. For two years after you and I parted for the last time, on the cruellest day of my life, I suffered those torments of purgatory which alone could cleanse me from sin. And then the saints took pity on me; the saints interceding for me prevailed, and a miracle was granted. At the end of those two dark years, a child was born to me.” . . .

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Lenny thought about it dully and yet fretfully. "This is all mighty fine, but what precisely is she getting at? Surely she has not so fogged herself with religion, that now she tries to make out that——" He turned back the pages, and slowly re-read enigmatic passages. Two years afterwards! Oh, all right. The other idea would have been rather too much of a joke.

. . . "My first baby was a boy, and my second is a girl; and both are splendid children, like the children of a young mother who had never sinned and never suffered. Those wiser than myself——"

"Oh, Lord," thought Lenny, "now we are going to have the priests again." He plodded on with it wearily.

. . . "And in their father's face, I see a love that nothing will ever take from me. He is happy too, and that is the crown of my happiness. So think of me like this, dear Lenny: as one who has no room in her heart for a single unkind thought of you, who has forgotten and forgiven, who, when praying for those she loves now, is able to pray for someone that she loved a long time ago."

He read it to the very end; and then placed it on the table by his side. He felt completely fagged by the labour of reading it. So Alma was happy. Capital! But he could not rejoice with her; he could not in imagination see her; he could not catch the real purport of her rigmaroling message. Happy—yes, but why worry him about it? So like a woman!

And, staring at the fire, he thought that there had been too many women in his life. A mistake. Perhaps it was the women that had tired him so infernally.

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For another hour he remained quiet and inert; then he moved restlessly. He was again thinking of Alma's letter. Why had she written to him? Vaguely he remembered something in the letter—some bothering request. What was it that she wanted him to do? . . . Oh, yes. Burn the letter. Of course—common-sense. A dashed silly letter to write—might cause one endless annoyance. Suppose it fell into the hands of blackmailers? He felt considerable indignation as he laid Alma's letter on top of the glowing coals.

There! He watched it burn. A curious sound as the heat twisted the paper—a sound like a remote voice whispering his name;—then a bright flame, and then a little smoke. And he thought, "Yes, how much that seems important ends in smoke!"

That night he was kept awake by the noise of the traffic. It was the first time he had been thus disturbed, and he recalled the assurances given to him by Jackson. The landlord had emphatically declared that no one could hear the traffic either of Bond Street or the Square.

Not hear it? What a monstrous wicked lie! What a shocking, underhand proceeding! A stream of traffic—a tremendous sea, rolling and crashing on a giant beach: two seas, one on each side of him, with two pitiless tides, setting north and south.

And in respites of quiet, when the tides ran low, this other discomfort occasioned by sounds so faint that you had to strain your ear to catch them! Whispering? Yes, people whispering all about the silent house. There! Just outside his door—two people intermittently whispering. But who were the whisperers?

Suddenly he understood. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson plotting mischief! And it seemed to him that for a long period

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of time he had entertained shrewd suspicions as to the faithfulness and integrity of these Jacksons. His landlord was a rascal, and his landlady no better. When a man has told you one thumping lie, he will tell you a devil's procession of lies.

But what little game were they hatching out there? Black treachery. It must be something very bad indeed which people are afraid to speak of in their warm bed, and can only whisper when they have crept downstairs and stand upon a patent sound-resisting mat.

"All right, my friends. You may go on whispering till you're blue with cold. A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse. Forewarned, forearmed. I'm ready for your plots now;" and he smiled, and soon began to doze. He had been strangely amused and more strangely calmed by the thought of the night air blowing about the unprotected legs of Mr. and Mrs. Jackson.

Next day he felt exhausted; nevertheless some inchoate necessity for action impelled him to attempt unusual toil. But what? During his morning sleep he had somehow lost the thread of the argument.

However, rather than do nothing at all, he recurred to an old habit. This was the dragging out of the contents of his despatch-box and a large tin deed-case. The leather box held cheque-books, pass-books, his neglected account-books, and so on; and the tin case was stuffed full of letters and photographs—memorabilia or historical records of immense interest.

In the afternoon he sat with a faded photograph in his hand, vainly worrying himself as he strove to revive dim memories. Who was this old chap, with the beaked nose, the bushy eyebrows, and the generally familiar appearance? It was someone that he had known very well. His colonel when he was in the Guards? But was he, Lenny, ever

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in the Guards? Surely he had been a soldier—a distinguished soldier—a V.C.? Or was it the Navy? Which-ever service it was, he had left it because he found the life too hard. Doctors had advised him to be careful.

The effort to settle all this produced a dreadful muddled discomfort. Then suddenly and quite unexpectedly he began to weep. He stared at the photograph with overflowing eyes. "That was my father—my dear, *dear* father!"

But the doubt as to the cross for valour soon surged up again. Surely he had in fact won it—by repelling a charge of cavalry? Horses galloping at him furiously, and unaided he had stopped them. Then, if so, where was the cross itself—the iron or bronze ornament that he had worn, and that soldier-friends used to speak of as "the coveted decoration"? He could not find it. Not in the despatch-box or the tin case—not anywhere. He hunted for it through both rooms, and his suspicions of last night grew stronger. These people—these Jacksons—were thieves. They had stolen his decoration.

Presently he summoned Mrs. Jackson, and informed her that he must give up the rooms and leave at once. He did not accuse her of malpractices, because he had just decided that it would be impolitic to do so. The need now was to escape from the den of thieves; he could call them to account afterwards.

"Have the kindness," he said, "to get the bill ready, while I pack my things."

Mrs. Jackson naturally tried to dissuade him from such a hasty and unanticipated departure; but he told her that he had good reasons for going without another day's delay.

"My reasons," he said, "are of a strictly private character—at any rate for the present. I will perhaps explain them later on. . . . Now, send me all my trunks; and

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if Jackson has a touch of gratitude or decent feeling, he will come and help me pack."

Jackson was out, and therefore Lenny for a long while received no better assistance than could be furnished by the maid-servant. And he himself was impotent to make any real progress. He emptied the wardrobes, piled the garments on the bed, but put scarcely anything in the trunks; he carried things from room to room; he created an astounding chaos in both rooms.

At about seven o'clock Jackson returned, and urged him to renounce the idea of abandoning his comfortable quarters. Mrs. Jackson also repeated her entreaties. But it was all of no avail. Lenny must and would be off.

Jackson regretfully did the packing—a slow and difficult job, because Lenny interfered with him every moment, and could not say which were the things he would take away now and which were those that should be sent after him. It was nearly ten o'clock before the packing was completed and a four-wheeled cab stood at the door.

While Jackson was bringing down the last trunk, Lenny talked to the cabman confidentially. He said that he was going to seek for lodgings, and he asked the cabman to aid him in finding them. They must be in a quiet street, and thoroughly comfortable and respectable.

The cabman said it was rather late to look for lodgings. However, after a devious and protracted drive, he pulled up in the Marylebone Road, on the north side, between Baker Street and the Great General Railway Station.

"This," he said, "seems quiet enough, sir. That long garden in front!"

By night it was a sinister-looking house.—The ground-floor windows screened with metal gauze, on which one just discerned some large lettering; scarcely any illumination, merely a gleam of red firelight from the dark base-

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ment and weak gaslight above the front door—no answer for a considerable time to the tinkling front bell.

At last the door opened, and Lenny saw his new landlord—a very sinister-looking person, pallid, thin, ghoul-like.

“What’s your name?” asked Lenny.

“Well,” and the man hesitated. “Well, my name’s Fielding. And what may your name be?”

“My name is Leonard Calcraft. We have never met before;” and hurriedly he explained his requirements.

Mr. Fielding said he must consult with “the wife”; and a small, sallow, vixenish Frenchwoman came up the kitchen stairs into the dirty hall.

“Yes,” said Mr. Fielding, after discussing matters with this woman, “the gentleman can have the top floor. It is quiet as the grave.”

Lenny instantly engaged it, and the landlord with the cabman carried up his trunks,

XLIV

BY day the house had a wickedly forbidding aspect—so meanly compressed, so closely shut, so silent—as of an avaricious person who is hiding a secret.

Once there had been a dentist on the ground floor, and his lettered sign was still decipherable, but he himself was there no more; a dressmaker on the first floor and some women on the floor above her had also gone. The house was empty of guests now, except for the lodger on the top floor.

July sunbeams pouring through shut windows of his bedroom made the atmosphere oppressively warm, but he did not mind that. On the contrary he liked the snugness. The furniture consisted of wretched valueless things; the empty trunks, standing piled in a corner, were thick with dust; the whole room was sordid and ugly;—but Lenny did not mind; indeed he observed nothing unusual, nothing that he would have wished to see altered.

Lenny is insane. Night and day, lying in the bed, he is at the mercy of his landlord and landlady. How long has he lain like this? Impossible to say. Wisps of grey hair hang over his bloodshot eyes; his beard is five or six inches in length; altogether he looks immeasurably older than when he made his precipitate flight from the good Jacksons. Certainly he must have been here for many months—possibly for years. He is neither dangerous nor troublesome;

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the dominant idea being a desire that those on whom he depends shall keep him quiet and make him comfortable.

His landlord, going in and out of the room, would say blandly, "Traffic, sir? Oh, no, sir. No traffic now. We stopped that, last March. Don't you remember? You gave the order yourself. No more traffic to pass the door, night or day, under any pretext whatever."

"That's right. That's right," said Lenny, with eagerness. "It is still my order. I must not be disturbed."

"No, sir. You shan't be disturbed."

Truly, he was an easy lodger, and an enormously, incredibly profitable one.

The landlord had soon possessed himself of all information as to Lenny's antecedents; he had taken charge of cheque-books, pass-books, and papers; he wrote a neat clerkly hand, and professed to be Lenny's authorized secretary and man of business.

Just at first Lenny had shown occasional flashes of suspicion. Ages ago, waking at night, he saw the man and the woman kneeling on the floor, and extracting the contents of the treasured despatch-box.

"Hullo!" Lenny jumped up in bed, and protested. "Don't touch that box. What are you doing?"

"Only making you comfortable, sir."

That always pacified him.

"Yes," said Lenny, sinking back on the pillows. "Yes, make me comfortable."

By playing with the dominant idea, they could induce him to accept all phenomena as natural and proper. He would affix his signature to letters, to blank cheques, to anything put before him with an announcement of benevolent intentions.

"Here you are, sir. The wife and I have a plan of

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making you more comfortable. It will cost money. But I suppose you don't grudge it?"

"No," said the lodger eagerly. "I do not grudge it."

"Very well. Sign this, please;" and a pen was put into his hand by the man, while the woman held a writing-board against his raised knees.

He signed letters without attempting to read them—letters to his bankers, asking for his pass-book and another cheque-book, instructing them to sell out English stock; and letters to his stockbrokers, instructing them to buy foreign bonds to bearer.

This, then, was the condition of Lenny when the July sun shone upon his fastened windows and he dozed in the stifling air. Alone, helpless, forgotten.

But it seemed that there was still one person in the world who remembered Lenny, and felt uneasiness because he had disappeared from human ken. She had waited a long time for an answer to a letter; but no word from Lenny ever came, and this silence was to her mind inexplicable. She brooded over the mystery; and then, looking round and finding a staunch messenger, she sent him forth with insistent commands to ascertain what had befallen Lenny.

Lenny's address was not known by officials at the club, but they gave the name of Lenny's bank; the bankers knew Lenny's address, but because of their rules could not disclose it. They would, however, supply the name of Lenny's stockbrokers; and the stockbrokers, after consideration, gave the Marylebone Road address.

So now, to the disgust of Mr. Fielding and the wrath of his little French shrew, a visitor stands at the hall door, and asks to see their lodger.

"Oh," said Fielding, "he can't see anybody."

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But it was scarcely probable that this broad-faced resolute visitor, having had so much trouble in hunting Lenny to ground, would refrain from unearthing him.

"It's no use;" said Fielding. "I couldn't take the responsibility of letting you in."

"Then I'll take all responsibility;" and with unceremonious brusqueness the visitor pushed Fielding aside, entered the hall, and began opening doors.

Soon he had found his way to the top floor, and was standing by Lenny's bedside, and looking down with pity and dismay at his haggard face.

"Calcraft! Lenny! Don't you know me? I'm Gerald Dryden."

Dryden came sadly down the stairs, to go out and bring a doctor back with him.

The doctor said that of course Lenny was quite mad, and also of course that he ought to be in an asylum. The doctor said it seemed a shocking state of affairs, and he told Mr. Fielding that it was a punishable offence to keep a lunatic in such a manner. Indeed both he and Dryden talked severely to Fielding, and asked many pointed questions.

"We knew he was an invalid."—This was the substance of Fielding's replies under cross-examination.—"He was an invalid when he come to us, but we never knew that he was mad. He always talked sensible enough, and will now, if you don't frighten him. . . . Oh, as to his money—quite capable to manage it. . . . Of course we assisted him, same as he requested us. . . . I'm sure we're more like losers than gainers by having him here. He was always borrowing money from us. Then he would pay us something on account; and so it went on. But, unless I'm very much mistaken, the account is all against him, and will show a good balance in our favour. . . . No, I haven't

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made up the account. Why should I? The gentleman was comfortable with us. He was very fond of my wife; yes, very fond indeed. And she treated him like a sister; yes, so she has."

Two hours later, when Dryden returned with a char-woman to clean the room and a male nurse to guard the patient, the landlord and landlady were gone—vanished for ever; not to be traced now or afterwards by the police. Mr. and Mrs. Fielding had made their coup, and felt satisfied to retire modestly.

Next day Lenny was certified as insane and consigned to an asylum on the outskirts of London. Dryden had summoned Newall, the Westchurch solicitor; Newall in his turn summoned Holway, the sufferer's brother-in-law; and between them they completed all formalities and arrangements with so much promptness as to be able to move Lenny before nightfall.

He was perfectly amenable, at once embracing the notion of a journey, and raving about the care that would be taken of him. According to his view of the matter, a marvellous carriage was to be brought to remove him without sound or oscillation: one of these splendid new inventions of science that permit a tired man to pass from place to place, no matter what obstacles he may have to encounter, without fatigue, without distress—in absolute comfort.

XLV

THE St. James's Street club was full for the luncheon-hour, and Holway and his three guests had just seated themselves at a table in a corner of the coffee room.

First of all they talked about their food, and then later they talked about the business that had drawn them together.

"Let me see," said Holway hospitably, "cold lamb and salad for you, Dr. Searle! But won't you begin with some fish or chicken? . . . Mr. Newall, you said minced veal! And, Dryden, pressed beef! Yours was the pressed beef, eh? And now what about wine?"

Mr. Henderson, the head-waiter, hovered attentively and offered some choice brands; but the little party showed simple tastes and would not fairly test the capacity of the club cellars.

"Well now, here we are," said Holway; "and I propose to tell you exactly how we stand."

Holway's square head had become snowy white, and the whiteness of his hair enhanced the redness of his cheeks; his stubby figure seemed as solid as ever; and he still spoke with the rustic Midland accent, but his power of language had so greatly increased that one might guess at efforts for education and culture late in life. Altogether he looked what he was, an able, honest, and successful old chap. He

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had become a member of Parliament, and could afford to join London clubs that he scarcely ever used.

"We shall never see that blackguard Fielding again," he went on firmly. "We shall never recover a penny of the money."

Then they all spoke of the Marylebone Road landlord. He was known to the police; he had served a term of imprisonment for forgery; the Frenchwoman was not his wife; and so on. Dr. Searle said he thought the bank and the stockholders were very much to blame. Mr. Newall said that there could be no redress against them.

Holway observed that they might talk for a week, but the facts would be unchanged. This scoundrel had converted the bulk of Calcraft's fortune into readily negotiable securities, and had got clean away with it; only a comparatively small sum remained—certainly not enough to yield an annual interest that would maintain Calcraft at the suburban asylum.

In these sad circumstances Holway had decided that the only possible course would be to sink the whole of Calcraft's remaining capital in the purchase of an annuity, which might provide just sufficient to keep Calcraft at a large semi-public institution in the north of England.

Searle immediately said he knew something about this institution. It bore an excellent fame.

"You've heard of it? Good. Well, then," Holway went on in businesslike tones, "I believe that's the thing—the great thing is to secure his future. For the doctors all say that, though he can't get back his reason, he may live for a number of years—when once he is safe and comfortable. . . . By the by, what are you all going to have for pudden'?" And he turned and beckoned a waiter. "Attend to me, please. I don't come here often—and I'll be glad if you'll attend to me when I do come."

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Dryden chose apple tart; Dr. Searle took some innocent blanc-mange; Mr. Newall, the hard man of law, had a creamy meringue; and, while eating these sweets, they continued to talk of Lenny.

"The doctor for the insurance company," said Holway, "employed an expression that I didn't understand. He said Calcraft's whole life had been a long preparation for madness. What did that mean? Do you suppose he had any secret vices?"

"No," said Searle, warmly, "certainly not. . . . I knew him better than anybody"—Searle's eyes glowed softly behind his spectacles—"and there was no one I was more genuinely fond of."

"I," said Dryden, "was very fond of him—in the beginning." For a moment he paused, then added stoutly, "And so was my wife."

"He had good impulses," said Newall.

"The only time I met Calcraft," said Holway, "he impressed me very favourably—something winning in his manner; and I was grateful for what he did for Mrs. Holway. . . . By the way, one of you said this was the poor fellow's club. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Dryden.

"Yes," said Newall. "He always wrote from here. He was proud of belonging to it."

And they glanced down the room, admiring its vast size and elegant proportions, its rich crimson walls and golden columns. It was full now to overflowing—a long perspective of happy lunchers; with the sunlight from the tall windows falling on bald heads, flashing in dish covers, striking fire out of cut-glass bottles. Jaws moving, tongues wagging, knives clattering—and in all the long room, from end to end of it, there was no member who missed Lenny, no member who regretted Lenny.

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But Henderson the head-waiter, hovering and supervising, had heard a familiar name, and with humble apology he joined in the talk.

"I beg your pardon, sir; but were you speaking of *our* Mr. Calcraft?" And Henderson ventured to say how much the club servants liked Mr. Calcraft. "There wasn't one of us who didn't feel sorry. . . . It was a pleasure to wait on him. There wasn't hardly a gentleman in the club that we of the staff was so fond of."

"There," said Searle triumphantly. "Everybody who knew him liked him. You couldn't *help* liking him."

Downstairs in the smoking-room, while they drank their coffee, Holway and Dryden sat together on a sofa and talked of children. Searle and Newall had asked for the August A B C guide, and were looking up a new fast train to Westchurch.

"How many have you?" asked Dryden.

"Nine," said Holway, and he chuckled.

"I have only two," said Dryden, with a pride that aped humility.

"And how old do you think my youngest is?" said Holway. "You'd never guess from the look of me. Seven years of age!"

"My youngest isn't two—and you'd scarcely credit it, but she talks almost fluently. She said to me this morning, 'Daddy.'" . . .

Newall and Searle were going. It was time for the little party to break up—they were all of them busy men, and each had work to do.

"Yes," said Holway, as they came out into the hall to get their hats, "very sad, all this. But I'm sure we've acted for the best. I don't see what else we could have done. I think there is no question he will be properly treated up there."

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And for a minute Holway and Dryden lingered near the weighing machine—that velvet seat on which Lenny used once to sit enthroned, and feel himself the central figure of the whole palace.

“Well, I must be off. Hope we may meet again;” and Holway sighed, and spoke philosophically. “How curious it is—these hours when men meet, as we have met to-day, to wind up another man’s life for him! It is like putting the word *Finis* to a book that you haven’t written yourself—that you have not even read. I always feel it like that. And scarcely a week passes that I haven’t got to do it. You know—somebody’s funeral; somebody going to have a critical operation; somebody broken down in the midst of an apparently prosperous career, and ordered to chuck everything for a rest cure. Next week the trouble is nearer home. My third boy threatened with cataract! His mother and I are taking him to Weisbaden. That is my job next week. . . . Good-bye!”

XLVI

IT was an autumn afternoon, with ripe perfumes in the air, and a sunlight so generous and golden that it even softened and gave beauty to such ugly things as mad-house walls.

The huge stone building comprised many blocks; cloisters and halls intervening, the high roof of the chapel at one end, the tower and chimneys of the laundry at the other. Just now there had been a clanging summons of bells, and out of the cloisters processions of patients came trooping to take their daily exercise. Each procession kept to itself—twenty or thirty patients, conducted by two or three attendants; tramping, plodding, shuffling round and round the extensive enclosure, past lawns and shrubberies, up and down gravel paths, in the shade of trees, in the warmth of the sun; but never permitted to go within sight and sound of the space that was reserved for the airing and recreation of the dangerous lunatics.

These had a garden to themselves; and truly they were painful to see and hear—terrible ghosts of men dancing and hooting,—an inferno, all grey and vague in the shadow of the building, behind iron rails and a sunk fence.

But the open grounds were peaceful and pretty; with flower beds, sundials, terraces—everything that reasonable people could ask for. On one of the lower terraces there were, positively, benches.

“Forgive me if I fall out of rank.” A procession coming along this terrace had reached the benches, and a tall

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bearded man was addressing the warder in charge. "But, ah, may I sit down? I am excessively tired."

"And may I sit down too? . . . *I feel tired.*
. . . We are all tired."

The warder called a halt, and the benches were immediately occupied.

Lenny had been fortunate enough to secure the best bench—the one that gave him the charming view over the wide moorland. He looked out across miles and miles of purple heather to the distant horizon, where the sky was faintly stained with the smoke of factory towns; and he thought the prospect restful and pleasing; but he grunted in dissatisfaction when another patient, Mr. Ross, came and sat on the bench beside him.

"Ah! Exactly what I was requiring." Lenny picked up a bit of stick, and with the jagged stump of it began to push back the flesh round his finger nails. "Manicuring myself," he murmured contentedly. "Manicuring! Gives a fascination—sign of good birth also." But soon he was prodding so fiercely that he tore his fingers, and the blood flowed.

"Hurrah!" Each time that the little spurt of blood appeared, Mr. Ross laughed and crowed and clapped his hands with childlike glee.

Then an attendant saw what was happening, and snatched the stick away angrily.

"How often have you been told not to do it? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Lenny's nether lip drooped, and he looked at the attendant piteously.

"Do you want to be punished once more?"

"No;" and Lenny burst into tears. "No—please."

"Very well. Then mind what I tell you—don't you touch those nails again."

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Lenny looked ruefully at the bleeding hands, and then whispered to his companion.

"That man is a beast to me."

"He is a beast to everybody;" and Mr. Ross spoke with increasing rapidity. "But I intend to free myself from his tricks. The air must be cleared of all such vermin. *Verb. sap.* I talk Latin, Greek, and all other dead languages. No matter! But how are they generated—these pests, these Jacks-in-office, and petty tyrants dressed in a little brief authority? From and by a gas—nothing else. But what gas? Give me its chemical formula in plain terms. That is my secret. Suffice it, that I can generate discharges of a potent counter-agent. Bang! Fizz! I'll blow them to Jerusalem, and further. When will this happen? That is my secret. Suffice it— But you are not listening to me."

"No," said Lenny.

"Why don't you listen to me," said Mr. Ross, with incipient rage, "when I am talking to you?"

"Because you do not interest me."

Mr. Ross was becoming furious; but Lenny displayed a dignity greater than had ever been possible to him when sane. He looked at his offended friend calmly and steadily, and he spoke coldly and firmly.

"You talk about yourself, and therefore your conversation can possess no interest to anybody but yourself. You are conversationally a bore."

"Why am I a bore?" Lenny's outraged companion had sprung up, and was foaming. "Why am I a bore?"

Lenny smiled, and shrugged his lean shoulders. "Because you are an incurable egotist."

"I am not incurable—I am going to be discharged next month;" and, overcome by resentment and fury, Mr. Ross clenched his fists and used them wildly.

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"Help!" cried Lenny. "Murder! . . . Murder!"

They were promptly separated by two warders, who at first seemed inclined to be severe with Mr. Ross. But the other lunatics told tales. "Mr. Calcraft insulted him. . . . Yes, he did. . . . He teased him."

A doctor came along the terrace, and the attendants gave their report—report adverse to Lenny. "He's always teasing them. There's no harm in Mr. Ross, if he isn't teased."

The doctor, after reflection, spoke sternly.

"Mr. Calcraft, you are in a bad mood to-day. You were restless and fussy this morning—and I warned you. Now I shall send you to bed. . . . Take him up to bed."

"I won't go," said Lenny.

"Then it will be the punishment ward."

"Then I will go to bed—but I insist on being carried there." Three warders were about him, and he swung an arm round the nearest neck. All this excitement had been rather too much for Lenny's nerves; he passed swiftly into a fit of frenzied exaltation, and became noisier and noisier. "Yes—to bed! It is my order too. Carry me to my bed—my jolly bed. Tuck me up and make me comfortable. . . . Ha-ha! Ha-ha! Fall in there, palanquin-bearers! March. . . . Oh, this is movement without oscillation." He seemed to think that he was being carried, although in truth the warders were roughly hustling him along the paths. "Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

"Less noise."

"No, *more* noise! Sound the Emperor's trumpets."

"Will you stop that row?"

"Yes—silence! Dead silence while the Emperor passes. On your faces—prostrate yourselves. Your Emperor passes from his garden to his bed."

And he was quiet till they came to the entrance of Block B—a porch like the mouth of a railway tunnel; a long

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stone passage, scarcely penetrated by the sunshine, and closed in by darkness. Here, near the entrance, Lenny saw a maid-servant, and began to shout and fight.

“Shut up, I tell you. . . . Now we shall have a job with him. . . . Run away, miss.”

“Ah, delicate houri—sylph of the honey lips—my favourite slave! Your Emperor passes from the garish sunlight to the soothing dark, but *you* may follow.”

The hoarse shouting voice struck out terrific echoes as the struggling group grew dim, and dimmer.

“Follow. . . . Follow. . . . Follow.”

A last echo; a gleam of artificial light as a door opened and shut. Then silence and darkness.



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