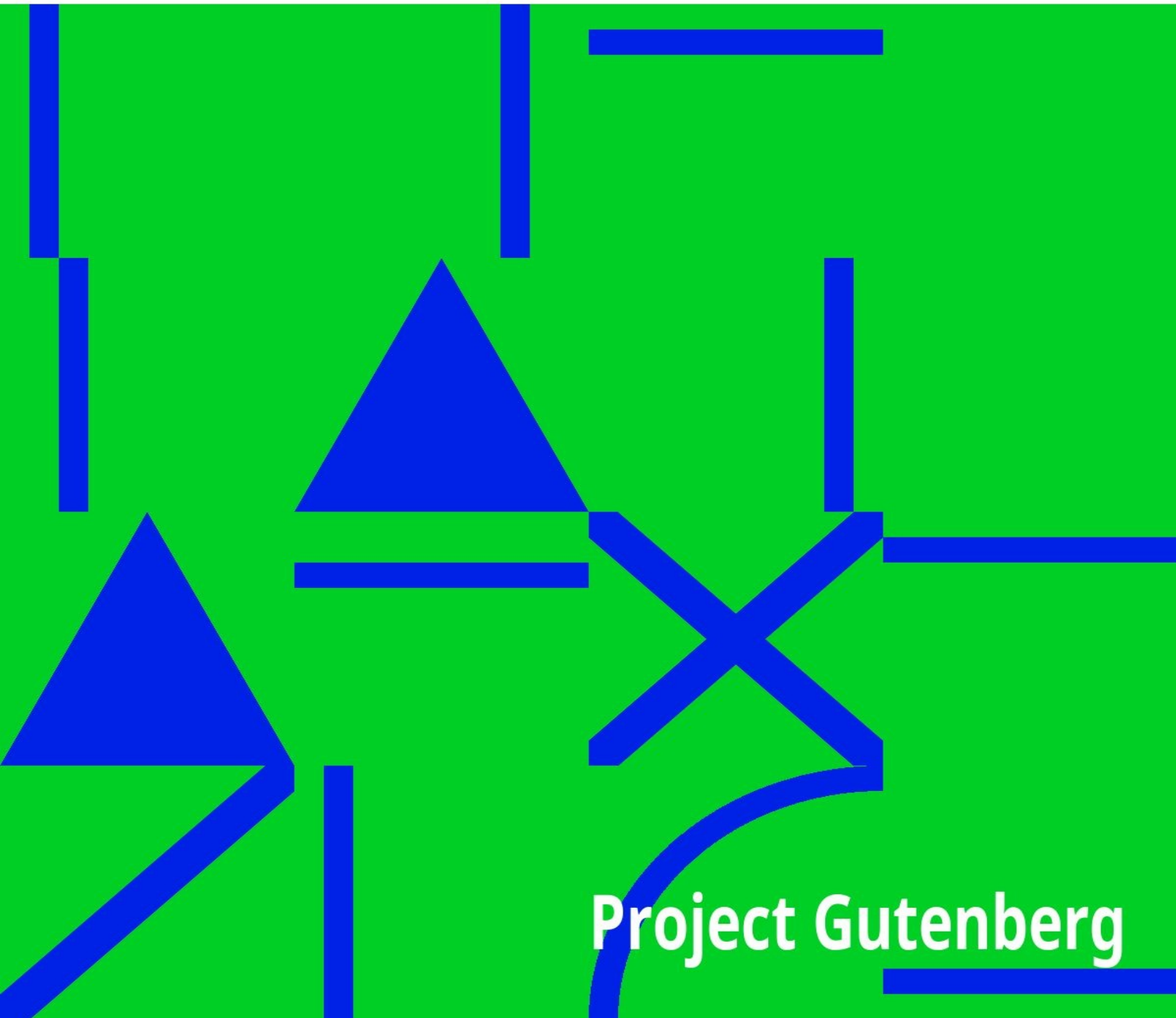
The Gay Adventure

A Romance

Richard Bird



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THE GAY ADVENTURE

A ROMANCE

By RICHARD BIRD

Author of **THE FORWARD IN LOVE**

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
F. VAUX WILSON

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TO BETTY

My book the Critics may abhor—
The Public, too. But, all the same,
This Page at least is Golden, for
It bears the imprint of your name.

It was Beatrice at last!

CONTENTS

THE GAY ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

THE IMPOVERISHED HERO AND THE SURPASSING DAMSEL

Mr. Lionel Mortimer was a young gentleman of few intentions and no private means. Good-humored, by no means ill-looking, and with engaging manners, he was the type of man of whom one would have prophesied great things. His natural gaiety and address were more than enough to carry him over the early stages of acquaintanceship, but subsequent meetings were doomed to end in disillusion. His cheerful outlook on life would be as much to your taste as ever; but the want of a definite aim and an obvious inability to convert his talents into cash made you shake your head doubtfully. A charming fellow, of course, but unpractical ... the kind of man who is popular with all but match-making mothers.

He lived in two rooms in an obscure street off the Strand, and at the time when we make his acquaintance he has just finished a meal that stamps the lower middle classes and the impecunious—to wit, high tea. For the benefit of gastronomers it may be stated that it included herrings, a loaf of bread, some butter of repellent aspect, and strawberry jam. Lionel has lighted his pipe and seated himself at the window to enjoy as much of a June evening as can be enjoyable in a London back street. He has not emitted three puffs of smoke before a tap at the door heralds the entrance of his landlady.

Mrs. Barker, a woman of commanding presence and dressed in rusty black, came into the room. She did not utter a word, not even the conventional remark that it was a fine night or that the evenings would soon begin to draw in now. With a funereal but businesslike demeanor she began to remove the débris of the meal, at intervals giving vent to a rasping cough or a malignant sniff. Of her presence Lionel seemed oblivious, for he continued sitting with his back to the door, gazing with apparent interest into the street. This, perhaps, was curious, for the street was but a lane with little traffic and no features worthy of note. Nor was the building opposite calculated to inspire the most sedulous observer, being merely the blank wall of a warehouse. Not a single window relieved the monotony, usually so painful to the artist or the adventurer. And yet Lionel

puffed at his pipe, gazing silently in front of him as if at a masterpiece by Whistler.

When the landlady had transferred the tea-things to a tray, shaken the crumbs from the table-cloth into the empty grate and folded it, she nerved herself for a direct attack. Placing her arms akimbo—an attitude usually denoting truculent defiance or a pleasurable sense of injustice—she pronounced her lodger's name. Lionel started, as if made aware of her presence for the first time. He took his pipe from his mouth and turned with a pleasant smile.

"Good evening, Mrs. Barker," he said with careful politeness. "A fine night, is it not?"

She assented with an ill grace. Without giving her time to add to her appreciation, Lionel continued in suave but enthusiastic tones:

"Oblige me, Mrs. Barker, by observing the manner in which the sun strikes the opposite wall. Notice the sharp outline of that chimney-pot against the sky. Remark the bold sweep of that piece of spouting—a true secession curve of which the molder was probably completely ignorant. Again, the background! That dull gray monotone——"

This rhapsody was interrupted by Mrs. Barker, whose artistic education had consisted in a course of free-hand drawing in a board school and a study of the colored plates issued by the Christmas magazines. It was hardly to be expected that she should wax enthusiastic over the warehouse wall.

"It's no good torkin, Mr. Mortimer," she said; "I want my rent."

"But how reasonable!" returned Lionel with increased brightness. "How much does it come to? Certain tokens of copper—silver—gold—with some trifling additions for food, fire, etc.——"

"One pahnd three sempence for this week," snapped Mrs. Barker. After a pause she added constrainedly, "If yer please."

"Why! you are even more reasonable than I expected," cried Lionel. "If I please! How could a man refuse anything after so polite a prelude? If I please! My rent, if I please, is one pound, three and sevenpence; and I must admit that the sum is paltry. If I please to exist (and up to the present I have been delighted to fall in with the schemes of Providence) I can do so for some twenty-four shillings a week. It includes," he added hopefully, "the washing?"

She nodded grimly and stretched out her hand. Lionel, with an easy smile, waved her to the door.

"To-morrow, Mrs. Barker, if you please. At the moment I regret to say that my funds do not amount to the necessary sum. To-morrow I make no doubt that ____"

Mrs. Barker interrupted with brisk invective. It appeared that Lionel was several weeks already in arrears. She, it seemed, was a lone widow, earning her bread by the sweat of her brow, and she would not be put upon. The position had become intolerable: either he must pay his rent or leave the next morning.

"Let us consider the state of affairs," said Lionel, unruffled. "You, it appears, need your money—or rather, my money—and I can not gainsay the moral claim. You have attended to my simple wants in a manner beyond praise, and I would cheerfully pay you your weight in gold (after the pleasing custom in the East) had I the precious ore. But at the moment my capital"—he searched his pockets—"amounts to sixpence ha'penny; hence the deplorable *impasse*. My profession holds out no prospect of immediate or adequate reward: briefs are lacking and editors slow to recognize merit. I have pawned such of my wardrobe as is not necessary to support the illusion of an independent gentleman. What do you suggest as a solution of our difficulties? It is repugnant to both of us that I should live on your charity. I am open to any bright idea."

Unluckily the landlady was not an imaginative woman. She could suggest nothing, save that Lionel should pay his rent or leave. The method of raising money was left entirely to him, but the necessity was insisted on in forcible terms.

"An ultimatum?" said the lodger thoughtfully. "Well, I can not blame you. As you have no illuminating schemes, Mrs. Barker, I must rely on myself. But rest assured that you shall be paid. What! I am young and strong; my clothes, thanks to judicious mending and a light hand with the brush, will pass muster; we are in London, the richest city in the world. I will go out and look for a fairy godmother."

At this resolve Mrs. Barker broke into cries of protest. With a feminine distrust of her own sex she declared that no such creature should pass her threshold. For fifty years she had lived respectable, and it was her firm intention to die in the same persuasion. Lionel raised a deprecating hand.

"You mistake me," he said in gentle reproof. "It was but a manner of speaking inspired by the recollection of Cinderella. Being, however, the masculine equivalent of that lady of romance (or shall we say, 'Lob Lie-by-the-Fire'?) and out of deference to your sense of propriety, I will strive to acquire a fairy godfather. Till to-morrow, then, Mrs. Barker."

He rose and politely held the door open. The landlady, carrying the tray and table-cloth, left the room in dudgeon.

As soon as she had gone Lionel's face lost something of its optimism, and he began to whistle a tune in a minor key. It was a music-hall refrain, originally scored in quick time and the major clef, a gay lilt of the streets. Modulated by Lionel, under the depressing influence of Mrs. Barker, it became a dirge, incredibly painful to the ear. This even the whistler recognized after a few moments, and with a laugh at himself and his misfortunes he seized his hat and went out.

He was by no means clear as to his immediate intentions. Save that his urgent need was money he had no definite idea or plan. How to compass the few pounds necessary to discharge his debt and make sure of a roof was at present beyond his wit, seeing that the situations for men like him are not picked up in a moment. He had been expensively educated at a public school and Oxford, and had a bowing acquaintance with the classics and a tolerable knowledge of law. For three years after taking his degree he had led a pleasant life, eating dinners, reading law and writing. By his pen he had made some sixty pounds a year; by the law—nothing. His father had given him an allowance while he lived, but eighteen months previously his business had failed and the consequent worry had driven him into the grave. His wife had died in giving Lionel birth. After his father's death Lionel perforce had put forth more strenuous efforts. He had even written a novel and sold it for thirty pounds. One or two plays lay in his desk or managers' muniment-chests, and a number of pot-boilers were soliciting the favorable consideration of callous editors. It had been a precarious though interesting existence, but he had kept his head above water until the last few weeks. Now he was standing on the curb in the Strand, wondering amiably what he should do.

"My best chance," he thought, watching the stream of traffic that never failed to fascinate, "would be to write a loathsome article, topical, snappy and bright, and try to sell it for spot cash. I do not think it would be much good studying the advertisements and applying for a post as clerk or secretary. I hate the notion of

being a clerk.... There is envelope-addressing, I believe, but I write a villainous hand ... nor do I care to call upon my friends and expose my unhappy condition...." (Since his father's death Lionel had naturally given up his old way of life and dropped out of his usual *milieu*.) ... "No; I think the loathsome article is clearly indicated. What shall I write about? 'How It Feels to be Out in the Streets?'... 'The Psychology of Landladies.'... 'At a Loose End—A Curbstone Study.'... How odd that I am desperately in need of money and hate the thought of sitting down to earn it! How much pleasanter would it be to stand here and wait for an adventure—for the fairy godmother who troubled the conventional Mrs. Barker! After all, it is not impossible.... A horse might take fright and bolt ... the driver lose his head ... a beauteous damsel sits wringing her hands in the carriage. I seize the opportunity, spring forward and check the maddened steed, escort the fainting lady home in a cab, and then—ah! Boundless Possibilities."

He smiled, lighted a cigarette and pursued his idle fancy.

"She must be, of course, the sole heiress of a millionaire. In his gratitude he would wish to reward me. But seeing that I am no vulgar fee-snatcher he would ask me to stay and dine. Over the walnuts and the port (how long is it since I drank good port?) he would learn my story, and with unusual delicacy say, 'Well, some day I hope I shall be able to help you to a job.' I leave his house, warm, full-fed, hopeful. The next morning he sends his car round, and I am whirled to his palatial city office. I enter—the great man is up to his knees in documents dictating to a staff of typewriters and gramophones. He spares me three minutes. 'Good morning, Mr. Mortimer. I find I need a secretary—salary a thousand a year. Oh! a bagatelle, I know, but you would have opportunities. Politics, perhaps. Anyhow, a beginning. Care to connect?' I accept with diffidence. 'Good. Take your coat off. Next room you'll find ...' I am a made man. Then the daughter—I had forgotten her, dear thing!—already touched by my heroism, might look favorably upon me; and who knows——?"

At this point his musings were broken by confused shoutings and whistles. Looking up, Lionel saw with amused surprise that for once fate was playing into his hands; his dreams were coming true. An open brougham, drawn by a terrified horse, was approaching at an appalling speed. The coachman, crazed with fear, was standing up, tugging vainly at the reins, white, and shouting. In the brougham, pallid but calm, sat a girl of about twenty-three. Her lips were slightly parted, but no sound came from between them; courage held her erect, motionless and silent. The traffic divided before the swaying brougham like waves before a cutwater. When it was fifty yards distant the coachman lost all

control of himself and with a scream of fear leaped from the box. He came down On his feet, staggered against a portly merchant—who went over like a ninepin—and lurched heavily on to a policeman preparing to make a dash for the horse's head. The constable fell with the man, and the pair, hero and craven, rolled comfortably in the kennel, clasped in each other's arms.

Lionel, thus favored by destiny, fitted his hat more firmly to his head and prepared to make his fortune. In his early youth he had read that the best method of stopping a runaway is to run in the same direction. Remembering this, he set off at full speed; and by the time the horse was level with his shoulder he was running almost as fast. With a judicious leap he sprang at the reins, clutched them, stumbled, recovered and still ran. He was strong of arm and at least twelve stones in weight. The horse, already half-repentant of his lapse, was not inclined to support so heavy a burden at his mouth. A few yards more and the heroic part of the episode was over. Several officious touts were holding the horse's head, and another policeman was preparing to make notes.

Lionel, panting from the unusual exertion, turned to look after the lady. She, who had behaved with such admirable composure while danger was imminent, now that it was over, lay in a faint. As he raised her in his arms he noticed with satisfaction that she was certainly beautiful and her clothes expensive and tasteful. "Ha! ha!" he thought whimsically, "a secretaryship! Governor of a Crown Colony at least! I must take a flat to-morrow!" He bore her into a chemist's shop that stood conveniently near, and placed her in a chair. While the chemist was applying sal volatile in the genteelest manner, Lionel was wondering whom he should ask to support him at St. George's.

It was not long before the lady recovered her senses, and she opened her eyes with a ravishing sigh. She was naturally bewildered, and Lionel—partly because he wished to reassure her, partly because she was very pretty—knelt and took her hand.

"There is no need for alarm," he said persuasively, with the purring note that some women find sympathetic. "You fainted; that is all."

She gave the ghost of a shudder: "I fainted?"

"Yes. The horse, ran away, but there was no accident."

"The coachman—is he hurt?"

This thought for another in the midst of her own recovery flushed Lionel's being like a draught of wine. Hitherto she had been merely a pretty aristocrat and (apparently) a delightful girl. Now she was more—a divine human whom he longed to kiss, caress and call "You darling!"

"No," he said. "He fell softly. Upon a constable, I believe."

She was nearly herself again, and gave a little laugh. "Let us hope he was a fat one," she said. And then, after a pause: "Who stopped the horse?"

"Oh, I was lucky enough to do that," he replied with an assumed jauntiness, wishing he could feel it was an every-day business. "It was not hard."

"Others appeared to think differently," she replied with a grave admiration that pleased him.

"Then, madam, they can not have seen you," he smiled. Really, the affair was being conducted on correct lines.

She mused for a moment, chin in hand.

"... I think," she said presently, "you must be rather an unusual man." Lionel tried to look as if he disagreed. "Yes, I think so.... And I suppose I owe you my life.... I wonder what reward...."

It must have been the devil that prompted Lionel to say, "One pound, three and sevenpence"; but by an effort he choked back the horrible words, and stammered that he was already repaid.

"No," she demurred, smiling, searching him with her eyes: "that is hardly fair. I wonder if you would like ..." She glanced round. The chemist's back was turned: he was groping for some drug upon the shelves. Lionel was still upon one knee, his face upturned, his eyes drawn as by a magnet. She leaned toward him; her face came closer and closer yet, in her eyes a world of gratitude and fun. Her hair almost brushed his cheek, and he shivered. "I wonder if——" At that moment the chemist turned, and she finished the sentence persuasively, "—if you could get me a cab? I dare not trust my horse again to-day."

Lionel rose stiffly.

"Do you prefer," he asked, fixing the unhappy and bewildered chemist with a glare of anger, "a hansom or a taxi?"

"A taxi, please."

Lionel withdrew. He ordered the coachman, dusty and degraded, to drive home. The policeman, who had salved the discomfiture of his over-throw by hectoring the crowd and cuffing the nearest urchins, obligingly blew his whistle. A minute later a taxi came up.

CHAPTER II

BEHIND THE SCENES

It was one of the great moments in Lionel's life when he handed her into the prosaic vehicle. From the chemist's shop to the cab was only a few feet, but for that paltry space the young man felt as a king must feel when he makes a royal progress abroad. There was no cheering from the crowd that had gathered, hoping for blood, or at least bandages; but the whispers ("That's him! That's him! Torfs! He's all right!" etc.) thrilled him with a sense of self-importance to which he had long been a stranger. He found it a little difficult to refrain from raising his hat and bowing his thanks to the kindly creatures. As for the lady, she walked on air and seemed unconscious of an audience.

The cab was reached all too soon. Lionel waved aside a cloud of would-be helpers, and with a sigh of misery opened the door. The lady got in; but just as he was on the point of shutting himself off from every hope, she leaned forward.

"There is room for two!" she breathed.

It was a fine thing for him that his hand was upon the door, for the invitation shook him as the wind the rushes. The crowd, the pavement, even the gross material substance of the constable, reeled before him. He heard but dimly the voice of the chauffeur asking whither he was to drive. "To Heaven!" he muttered, and then recklessly, "Or hell, if you like!" The chauffeur looked anxiously at him, fearing he had suffered mentally from his exertions. Lionel caught the suspicion in his eye and steadied himself. "I beg your pardon," he said brokenly; "I was repeating some poetry of my childhood—*Paradise Lost*—Milton, you know. Can't imagine what put it in my head. Drive round and round the park."

"Which park?" asked the man gruffly.

"The farthest and biggest," said Lionel, and clambered in.

They drove for several minutes without a word being spoken. Lionel was so amazed by the aptness and desirability of the adventure that he could not utter a word. He could only think, "What a perfectly topping girl! How will it end?

What shall I do—say—think? She is the most charming creature I have met; she invites a kiss—might I?... Be careful, Lionel! Your fortune is at stake! The secretaryship! Mrs. Barker and her rent! A false step would ruin all! Besides, she is such a dear ..." These and a hundred other fancies flickered through his brain.

The strange lady was silent, too. It may have been that she felt she had been a little imprudent in her invitation to the cavalier, hero though he was. Leaning back against the cushion, she gazed pensively out of the window at the streets and traffic, lost in thought. Her companion stared fixedly at the stolid back of the chauffeur: that, at least, was real and a corrective.

It was the lady who spoke first, and with a sympathetic engaging accent, nicely calculated to stir the most sluggish blood.

"Well?" she said.

Lionel awoke from his trance and turned. "Ah!" he murmured, and seized her hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed it with a passionate reverence. "Ah!" he said again, and "Ah!" punctuating the exclamations with tender salutes.

"You should not do that," reproved the lady, though her voice betrayed neither astonishment nor indignation. "It is foolish." She laughed musically.

"Foolish!" echoed Lionel with a fine contempt. "Madam, it is anything but that. If this be foolishness, then youth and joy and a careless heart are folly, and woman is folly——"

"I thought that men were agreed upon that," she said.

"Cynics and pedagogues may hold the heresy," admitted Lionel, "but not the happy, the young and the wise."

"Your youth and happiness are patent," she retorted, "but how am I to be sure of your wisdom?"

He laughed.

"If you accept my youth and gaiety, I have good hopes of convincing you of that."

She withdrew her hand from his ardent clasp, as if he had been too presumptuous, or at least premature. Lionel cursed himself for a coxcomb and hastened to make his peace.

"You are not angry?" he asked anxiously. "I have not offended you——?"

"No," she said, after an infinitesimal pause. "I am ... not ... angry."

There was a query in her tone that restored his self-confidence, a quality of which he had usually good store. With a resolute movement he took her in his arms. Possibly she was too amazed to protest; certainly at first she made not the least resistence to the onset. It was not until his lips touched hers that she gave a little cry as of shame. "No, no!" she pleaded. "You must not ... my husband ..."

Lionel was a man of the world, but as chance would have it, he was a man of honor, too. He dropped the lady like a hot coal at the appalling word, and sat back rigid in his own corner of the cab. His companion, mastered by emotion, covered her face with her hands. Presently she peeped between her fingers and repeated his words, almost his accent.

"You are ... not ... angry?"

"I am never angry with a woman," he replied; but the lie was obvious. She laid a soft hand upon his arm.

"You have not told me your name yet," she murmured. "I must always cherish in my memory a brave man who is not too brave to be a gentleman."

He moved uneasily, reflecting that *noblesse* sometimes finds it difficult to *oblige*.

"I am called Lionel Mortimer."

"I am called Beatrice Blair. Lionel ..." she went on with a reflective sweetness, and he started as if stung. Her hand restrained while it aroused him. "No: you must not mind that. I call you Lionel because"—she turned aside as if struggling with her feelings—"I am a mother. My little boy is called—was called Lionel."

"I am sorry," he said sincerely. "Go on."

"You must think hardly of me." He shook his head. "Yes, you must—it is only natural. But I should like you to know the reason why I asked you to——"

By this time Lionel was in a very good humor with himself. Warned by his recent heroism and virtue, flattered by the interest shown in him by this delightful creature, he was prepared for anything.

"I never ask a woman for a reason," he said, smiling. "I have the most complete

faith."

"How old are you?" she asked; and when he answered "Twenty-seven," she laughed.

They drove in silence for a space; presently she asked what time it was. He put his hand to his pocket and then withdrew it. She had observed the action—"Your pocket has been picked?"

"No," he said frankly. "As a matter of fact, I pawned my watch a week ago."

"Then you are poor!" she cried impulsively. "Oh! I beg your pardon,—I did not mean——"

Lionel was never disconcerted by his lack of means, and the chuckle was perfectly honest as he replied, "Distinctly poor. I am glad to think I can still create an illusion of wealth in an artificial light, but really I am worth very little."

"You do not mind?" she said, her eyes dancing.

"I admit," he said, "that I should prefer to be well off. But, being poor, I see no use in making myself unhappy. I should prefer to pay half a guinea for a stall rather than a shilling for the gallery. Still, I contrive pretty tolerably to enjoy the play."

"You are a philosopher," she approved.

"A poor man can't afford to be anything else."

After a pause she said, "It must be getting late. Will you please tell the man to drive to the Macready Theater?—the stage-door."

He opened the window, smiling to himself. "An actress!" he thought; "the young man's dream of an adventure! This is absurdly conventional." After directing the chauffeur, he sat back, wondering what the end would be, content to wait on fortune. The lady, too, did not speak again until they had almost reached their destination. Then she took a purse from her satchel and said with friendly good-humor, "This is my frolic, and I wish to pay for it. Please!"

Lionel was too well-bred to interpose bourgeois objections. Besides, it was a case of necessity: his sixpence-ha'penny had been burning a hole in his pocket for the last ten minutes.

"Fair lady," he said lightly, "I would if I could, but I can not. Five shillings will be more than enough."

She gave him half a sovereign, and he wished he had been a street arab to whom she could have said, "And keep the change." This, however, was clearly impossible, nor did it appear to enter the lady's head. After he had paid the man she received the balance with a careless gravity. He raised his hat.

"You are not going?" she asked in surprise.

"Unless I can be of further service."

"But that is why I have brought you here! You have not heard my reason yet, and you must—at least in justice to myself. This is only the beginning: you can be of the greatest service if you will. Come!"

Lionel followed her through the stage-door. Adventure beckoned, and he was not the man to disobey the seductive finger. True, the lady had a husband—a scurvy thought—but he had proved himself as strong as she. And she was deucedly pretty.

They passed the janitor, who touched his hat to the lady, and went along a passage. Then up a flight of stairs and down another corridor, where sundry couples were lounging and chatting between their entrances. It was evidently a costume play, and the sight of doublets, rapiers and helmets was a pleasant thing after the drabness of the threshold. Illusion again threw her veil over the crudities of life; romance sounded the horn of hope and hallooed Lionel to the pursuit.

The lady stopped suddenly before a door. This she opened and entered the room beyond. Lionel followed, closed the door, and looked about him. He was no stranger to the regions "behind," for in his younger days he had been the friend of many actors and actresses not a few. With the dressing-rooms of the men he was well acquainted,—those dingy color-washed chambers, lighted by flaring gas, divided by racks for dresses, equipped at times with but the washing-basin, stifling of atmosphere, with little room to turn about in. In his younger days, as has been observed, he had savored the delights of these unromantic barracks, and had thoroughly enjoyed the experience; now he was blasé.

Of the women's dressing-rooms he was ignorant, but in truth he was far from curious. He supposed they were something of a replica of what he had seen

already,—four or five creatures herded in a bare loose-box, in the intervals of painting and dressing, engaged with talk of frills or scandal. The private dressing-rooms of those great creatures, the leading men and ladies, were still a sealed book. He had never known (oh, horrid thought!) a "lead," and he surveyed the present room with interest.

There was little to reward him, for it was a very ordinary room, quietly furnished with two or three easy chairs, a dressing-table covered with "making-up" apparatus, a number of photographs scattered about in various coigns of vantage, a wall-paper of a warm terra-cotta tint, a soft carpet to correspond. A brass curtain-rod divided the room in two, but the curtain was not drawn. "Will you sit down?" said the hostess; "I must leave you for a moment. Try that chair in the corner,—it is the best. And do smoke—the cigarettes are close to you on that little table."

With a swift movement she pulled the curtain along its rod and disappeared behind it. There followed a slight clicking as if she was switching on more light; then a soft rustling and the sound of her voice humming an air from *Carmen*. Lionel obediently lighted a cigarette and patiently awaited events.

In less than ten minutes she drew the curtain and stood before him again. But now she was a different creature. Her Bond Street costume had disappeared, the twentieth-century had gone. The piquant head was covered only with the dark masses of hair that gleamed seductively. She was clad in a sort of peignoir, a loose flowing robe of Oriental texture, crimson of hue, with dull gold braiding and tassels. Her face was rouged and powdered, but in the brilliant electric glare it seemed neither out of keeping nor meretricious. As she stood, holding the drawn curtain with one hand, she looked as if she had stepped straight out of the pages of the *Arabian Nights*.

"Do you like it?" she asked carelessly, sure of the effect. Poor Lionel, on most occasions ready of tongue, who took a pride in never showing surprise, could only murmur "Admirable!" With this, however, she seemed content, and sat down in a convenient chair.

"Luckily, it is a straight make-up," she said, taking a cigarette and lighting it. "As a rule I use grease-paint, but to-night I was in a hurry and made-up dry. I want to talk. I am not on for a while, and my dress can be slipped on in five minutes. I mean to tell you as briefly as I can my history. It is your due."

Lionel made a noble gesture of dissent. "I am sure," he said chivalrously, "it is

all it should have been—"

She interrupted with some acerbity. "That is not my reason. I have nothing either to excuse or condone. But as I have already put you to considerable trouble, and mean (if you are willing to help, me) to put you to still more, it is but fair that you should know all."

Lionel bowed as gracefully as he could.

"I will make it as short as I can," she continued. "There is much that is strange and improbable in it, but I beg you to keep silent and forbear to question me until the end. I was born in a little village on the southeast coast. I was a twin, the other child being a sister, the replica of myself. My mother died when I was only two years old. When I was seventeen I was kidnaped by a tribe of Rumanian gipsies who wished to be revenged on my father. He had prosecuted some of them for poaching on his land. I was smuggled to the coast, and then across to the continent.

"I do not mean to waste time in lingering over details immaterial to my purpose. Were I writing a book I could fill a volume with the strange incidents of my abduction and wanderings. But as time is short I will come to the point at once. We journeyed by slow stages across the continent, and of course I was jealously guarded the whole time. My English dress was burned, my skin stained a brownish hue. Whenever observation threatened I was immured in a small black hole, made at the end of one of the caravans by a false partition. The police failed to trace me, for the gipsies had been cunning enough to stay some weeks in England after my capture to throw my relatives off the scent, keeping a strict watch upon me. So with this inadequate résumé you must realize that we have passed through Germany, Austria, Rumania, Bulgaria and Rumelia. We crossed the Turkish frontier, and I still had no plan of escape. Oh, yes! I had tried—once! The threats they used on my detection were more than enough to prevent me trying a second time.

"At last we reached Constantinople, where we stayed a night in a huge caravansary. I was too well watched to be able to write a letter. The next evening I was sold to a Turkish officer of the sultan's body-guard. Blindfolded and gagged, I was put into a kind of sedan-chair under cover of darkness and carried to his palace. I was escorted to a fine suite of apartments, furnished in the eastern manner, but lit with electric light. By this time I was so inured to tribulation that I slept peacefully the whole night.

"The next morning the lord of the household arrived. He salaamed profoundly and plunged at once into the business of the day. 'Fair lady,' he began—and I was surprised at his excellent English and supreme courtesy—'believe me when I say that I regret your sufferings. But as I am not the man to beat about the bush, I make bold to inform you, with all possible respect and determination, that you are destined to become my wife.'

"I was not unprepared for this, but replied firmly that I would never marry any one against my will. I added that I was a British subject, and that as soon as my plight was known I should be rescued and vengeance exacted.

"He laughed pleasantly. 'This is not England,' he said, 'and you will never be rescued. Let me put the matter plainly. I have bought you to satisfy a whim. I have long wished for an English wife, because I happen to admire English women more than any others. I have made efforts to contract an alliance by orthodox methods, but have not succeeded. Set your mind at rest, however; I intend no violence against your lovely person. If you refuse me, you will remain a prisoner in a gilded cage, but no harm shall come to you.'

"'But why——' I began. He waved his hand.

"'Because I could wish that you might learn to love me. At present I can not expect it; for the future, who knows? I am a bachelor by choice—you need have no western fears of polygamy. I am rich, young and powerful. And I hope that you will find out that, though of another civilization, I can fulfil your idea of a gentleman. For the present your jailer and lover bids you farewell.'

"He left me in a state of stupefaction. For some days after this I saw nothing of him. I was treated with the utmost respect, as if I were mistress of the household, but I was a prisoner. I was allowed to walk in the spacious high-walled garden; but devoted slaves were close at hand to prevent my communicating with the outer world.

"After a week had elapsed, Lukos—for that was my master's name—began to pay regular visits to my chamber. He exerted himself to the utmost to interest and charm, but as yet he never mentioned love. He would talk of a thousand things—books, philosophy, the drama, even of fashion—and being most versatile and accomplished, I found him excellent company. I did not feel much resentment, for I had begun to learn the world and understand his point of view, but I was inflexibly opposed to a marriage by force. I was resolved to die a captive, if necessary, rather than yield.

"This went on for two years. You start? It is true. No breath of my imprisonment reached the embassy—much less my home. For a captive, my life was easy, and during the long months my hopes had died, though my determination was as English and stubborn as ever. Lukos was equally persistent in maintaining his original attitude—gentle, persuasive, polite, though now he often urged his suit. I admit that in other circumstances I might have yielded, but pride kept me strong.

"But I must hurry on—"

As she said these words there was a knock, and a dresser entered.

"Twenty minutes, Miss Blair," she said, without a glance at Lionel.

"More than enough," said the strange lady, but she rose as she spoke. "You will stay to hear the end, Mr. Mortimer? I am on for most of this act, but if you find it interesting, please stay and smoke. You must excuse me."

"By all means," said Lionel, rising. "Shall I—?"

He looked toward the door. "Oh, no!" she replied, and drew the curtain once more. Then she and the dresser disappeared behind it. A brief interval elapsed and she came forth dressed to play her part. She threw him a bright smile as he sprang to the door. "You must theorize till I come again," she said cheerfully, and he smiled back. The dresser followed her mistress, and he was left alone.

CHAPTER III

CONFIDENCES

"This," thought Lionel, as he waited for her return, "is a queer business, a very queer business indeed. Here we have the indispensable ingredients for an adventure—night, a pretty actress, and an impecunious young man who has played the Noble 'Ero. What happens? The lady sweeps the 'Ero off in a chariot, takes him to her dressing-room, behaves with surprising propriety (quite like an ordinary mortal, in fact), and proceeds to tell him a tale worthy of a writer of feuilletons. What does it mean? What is the idea, the general scheme? The tale must be lies,—pure, unvarnished buncombe, in the language of the vulgar. It is too much to swallow a kidnaping, a tour through, let me see ... Germany, Austria, Rumania, and, h'm ... h'm ... Bulgaria and Rumelia; a bashi-bazouk in Constantinople, a forced marriage—I suppose that's bound to come—and all the rest.... No, my delightful charmer, this really is a little bit too much ... your emotional faculties and the life of the footlights have led you astray...."

But he shook his head, dissatisfied. The simple explanation that she was telling lies was too simple. It explained nothing. The remembrance of her delicious personality sent incredulity to the right-about. Her gracious presence, dignified, commanding, womanly; her brilliant eyes, shining with purity, sympathy and truth; her force of character that revealed itself in every tone and gesture; her pretty hands ... these and a hundred other witnesses battled in her favor. "Besides," he thought, striving to weigh all evidence impartially, "what possible object could she have in lying to me—to me of all people? She knows I am poor and useless for purposes of blackmail. She is too ethereal a creature for a vulgar intrigue—of that I am as sure as that I am neither mad nor dreaming. No; the bare hard facts go to prove that she is telling the truth. Again, why should she lie to the 'Ero who has saved her life? Surely the 'Ero may bring that forward with justice.—'Not guilty, my lord!'" he said aloud, acquitting the fair defendant with a convinced enthusiasm, for he was really glad to believe the new goddess a goddess indeed. Then for a moment doubt returned: "But this room—this girl—the whole adventure is so fantastic, the tale so unlikely, that I can hardly ... Lionel, enough! It may be true, and the evidence is in her favor. Be content to wait on events. At least, it is a variation from the normal—an agreeable break in

the monotony of Mrs. Barker and the world. Let me seize the moment, enjoy my brief hour, and allow the future to take care of itself. At worst, I can be no loser at the game ... no ... unless I fall in love with her.... But that must not happen ... it *must* not happen.... Still, I could wish she had no husband!"

The wish being vain, if not immoral, he laughed wryly at himself and picked up a book that he found lying on the mantelpiece. It was a little volume of light verse, and it whiled away the time until his hostess reappeared. This was about half an hour after her exit. She entered, radiant with triumph.

"Has it seemed long?" she asked, pulling back the curtain and drawing out a chair.

"An eternity," he answered smoothly enough, rising and closing the door. "And now the rest of your wonderful story, if you are not too tired."

"Not at all," she said; "but it sounds odd to hear you call it 'wonderful.' To me, who lived it, it seemed inevitable and ordinary: even now it hardly seems wonderful. But this is waste of time. I must try to hurry the crisis.... Let me see, where did I stop?... Ah! I remember now....

"Well, I lived two years a prisoner, and time dulled my pain. Escape was hopeless, and I tried to be as cheerful as I could. No news reached me of the outer world—I did not even know whether my father and sister were alive. That was hard, but I, too, learned hardness from experience.

"One morning Lukos came to my room as usual, but not in his usual spirits. I rallied him on his dulness (oh! we were good friends, in spite of the anomalous position; that is really the least surprising feature of the story!), but he did not respond. When at last he walked toward the window and had stood, gloomily at gaze, for several minutes, I felt alarmed. He had never been in such a mood before. 'Lukos,' I said gently, 'what is the matter?'

"In a moment he was at my feet, pouring forth a torrent of words. 'Heart of my heart!' he cried in tones that would have racked a devil; 'can you ask! You know that I love you, for my eyes and soul have spoken. I bought you as merchandise, with little care; I have learned to love you as a woman should be loved, with all the strength of my being, the force of my spirit, the frenzy of a madman that rejoices in his madness! For you I would do anything—I would tear the sultan from his throne—I would seize every mosque in the empire to found a new religion, the worship of yourself! I am your master, and yet the meanest of your

slaves! You can stir me with a quiver of your eyelashes—'

"'Yet you will not set me free,' I said, pitying, but justly reproachful.

"'No,' he groaned. 'I love you so much that I will not climb the heights of renunciation. I love you enough to respect your defenselessness, but I *can not* let you go to be, perhaps, another's. Oh, lady of my soul, can you not be merciful? Can you not unbend from your divinity and love me? Star of the West, can you not illumine an eastern desert, for I love you—I love you!'"

"Mountebank!" said Lionel with a fine contempt. He disliked Lukos.

"He had a poetic nature," pouted the lady. "Besides, we Occidentals, colder in spirit, less imaginative, must make allowances for exotic passion. I confess that his words moved me. But I took his hand and said, 'It is impossible, my friend.'"

"Ah!" said Lionel, taking fresh courage and a cigarette.

"My words," she continued, "seemed to carry conviction. I felt a hot tear fall on my hand, and there was silence. The next moment he stood up and salaamed gravely. 'Lady of my dreams,' he said, 'you have conquered. I will let you go ... at a price!'

"'What is the price?' I asked fearfully. He looked like a martyr.

"'My life,' he replied. 'I can give you up, but I can not live without you. You are free, but I must die.'"

"Damned actor!" burst out Lionel, in the depths of despair, for he foresaw the end. "I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon—but——"

"He really *meant* it," said the lady with some petulance. "Please control yourself while I finish. Of course I could not think of allowing him to kill himself, so I reasoned with him. It was useless, for he was resolved. I even offered, at last, to resign my freedom and remain with him on the old terms: again he refused. 'No,' he said; 'it can not be, Dispenser of Delight. I have suffered too much. You must marry me or bid good-by to Turkey.'"

"So you married him?" said Lionel gloomily. He had forgotten all his earlier doubts.

"Yes. I could not bear to think of his suicide, for I liked him very well. Besides, I had grown less sentimental during my two years of 'life,' and believed I should

find more happiness in such a union than in many that are supposed to be made for 'love.' But I must admit that romance found, and still finds, a corner in my heart. The primitive idea of marriage by capture is even now immensely popular. You see, the figure of Lukos, passionate, brave, reckless, fiery, ready to kill himself——"

"Oh, say he was a demigod," interrupted Lionel with bitterness, "and let us pass on."

"All these Byronic attributes," said the lady calmly, "combined to whip my reluctant liking into a passable resemblance to love.... Well, I let him go—as far as the door. As he was opening it I made my decision and whispered '*Lukos!*' He turned, looking like a magnificent tiger, crouching for a spring. A light gleamed from his eyes, rivaling the flash of his jeweled sword-hilt. With a bound——"

"Quite so—quite so!" said Lionel uncomfortably: the idea of being audience to such a love-scene was most repugnant. "I see—I see ... of course he would be immensely pleased—in fact, quite another man. Well, you married him——?"

"The next day," said the lady. "The Patriarch of Jerusalem, who happened to be visiting the city at the time, made us one. And then I settled down to what I imagined would be a peaceful and happy life.

"And it was happy. Of course I now had as much freedom as I wished, and in a short while moved in the best European society in Constantinople. No hint of my story got abroad: it was understood that I had met Lukos in London. I wrote to my sister, telling the whole story and enjoining secrecy. She replied affectionately, giving me at the same time the news of my father's death, three months earlier. She suggested a visit, but various trifling incidents—such as influenza and a craze for Christian Science—continually postponed it until it was too late. Lukos and I also promised ourselves a trip to England, but that, too, never came about.... My little Lionel——"

The listener bounded in his chair. Then, recollecting himself, he apologized.

"—My little Lionel was born a year after our marriage. He lived three weeks.... At the moment, I was stricken; but in a very short time I felt that he was fortunate. The end came thus—

"A month later Lukos entered my room one afternoon with a grave face. 'My wife,' he said, 'you must be brave. We leave Constantinople to-night.'

"'Why?' I asked.

"He explained hurriedly. It seemed that for months past the sultan had been intriguing with a foreign power against Great Britain. Lukos had got wind of the negotiations and knew the policy was fatal. He recognized that the interests of Turkey were bound up with those of England. He resolved to foil the sultan's plans. Two courses were open to him—a revolution and a new dynasty, or a disclosure of the plan to England. Averse from plunging his country into civil war, he resolved to try the latter first. After assiduous bribing he secured a draft of a secret treaty between the Porte and the other Power, but within twenty-four hours suspicion fell on him. He was warned that arrest was imminent. Flight was imperative.

"'Disguise yourself as a *pustchik* (water-carrier) and go on board our yacht at once,' he said. Then, drawing a bundle of Cook's vouchers from his pocket, 'Take these in case anything happens. And this, too—it is the treaty. If anything happens to me, do not wait: fly to England and take the treaty to the English Foreign Office. I can not go with you now—there are duties to be done first—but I hope to join you. If I do not come by eleven o'clock, weigh anchor. I shall have died for my country. You will do this for the sake of Turkey?'

"My eyes filled with tears, but I knew that I could serve him best by obedience. 'Yes, Lukos,' I said, and his eyes spoke his gratitude. We embraced and parted.

"I reached the yacht safely and found that steam was up already. The afternoon and evening passed like a heavy dream. At half past ten Lukos had not come. A quarter to eleven, and I was still alone. At eleven o'clock I wept (for I had grown to love him well), but I was true to my promise and ordered the captain to start. We reached Brindisi in due course, and there I determined to go overland to England, sending the yacht back in the hope that it might still be useful to my husband if by any chance he escaped. I did this, and in a very short time found myself in London."

"And took a taxi to the F. O.?" said Lionel with interest. Really, it was a most exciting story.

"No," said the lady. "The day I reached town a note was left at my hotel—I had been dogged! It was written in Turkish and ran, 'The day the British government receives your communication, that day your husband dies.' There was neither address nor signature. It proved that I and my schemes were known, but—it proved that my husband was still alive.

"This gave me hope. With the treaty as a lever I might yet free Lukos. I have been working to that end for six months—ever since I came to England. It is a slow business, this diplomacy, but I am beginning to have strong hopes. And now I think it is almost the time to strike."

"But you must be careful," said Lionel anxiously. "With such a document——"

She smiled faintly.

"Twice already they have made attempts." She opened a drawer in an escritoire near at hand. Within lay a small but serviceable revolver. "See! I always go armed. Of course it is useless to approach the police—that would sign Lukos' death-warrant at once.

"But to return and finish my tale.... As soon as possible I wrote to my sister. I did not go to her, not wishing to involve her in my perils. I explained as much of the situation as I could, hinted at high politics, and begged her not to see me till I gave the word. She was puzzled, but obeyed. She wrote back a loving letter, the most important feature of which was the news that my share of my father's estate (eight hundred a year) could be drawn on at Coutts'. Already a handsome sum was to my credit, for I had not required any money while Lukos and I were together. So with this sum and Lukos' notes at my disposal I was in no need of money. But I soon found that I needed a hobby to keep me from thinking too much, and that brings me rapidly to the stage.

"'A hobby' under such circumstances must sound curious: really, it is mere common sense. The paths of diplomacy I discovered were very steep, the movement of the wheels was very slow. When I had done everything possible and could think of nothing else, I had a great deal of time on my hands. Painting and music were not to my taste; acting was, for I had always had, like most young people, a liking for the stage. Also, like most young people, I believed I had the dramatic instinct. I got to know a manager—with money things are easy—and he gave me a small part, a few lines, in a new play. There was nothing in that, but what followed was really my one piece of luck. In return for a consideration he allowed me to understudy the lead, never dreaming my capacity would be tested. A fortnight later my principal slipped on a fruit-skin and broke her leg. (The incident gave rise to a correspondence on the Banana Fall in one of the cheaper papers.) I played the part that night, and, unlike most young people, my belief in myself was justified. I was a success. The manager, rejoicing that he need not look for a new principal, plumed himself on his discernment, and

'boomed' me for all he was worth.

"Well, I was a success; but naturally I had to pay the price. In this case the price was my sister's affection. From the first she had objected to my going on the stage: it was a case of conscientious prejudice, and that is one of the stubbornest things on earth. She had written daily letters of appeal, and all my arguments were useless. I do not wish to dwell on this ... enough to say that there grew an estrangement ... now, we do not even write...."

"Strange," said Lionel thoughtfully, "how even the best can be obstinate. I hope that time may——"

"That reminds me!" said the lady briskly, shaking off her sadness and glancing at the clock, "I shall be on again shortly. Will you do something for me? Thank you —I was sure you would. At a quarter to eleven go out and get me a cab or a taxi. Now, it is important that we should not be seen leaving the theater together—there will probably be spies. Oh, yes! I know it sounds absurd, but in this you must be guided by me. Get the cab and drive back by devious ways to the stage-door. There wait for me. I shall be ready by eleven-fifteen at the latest. That is all.... No! I forgot the reward!"

"Reward!" he echoed, puzzled.

"You forget you saved my life," she replied, smiling. "Close your eyes—promise you will not open them till I give you leave. You promise?"

"Yes," he laughed, still not understanding.

He closed his eyes and waited. With a mischievous smile she bent forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Lionel started. In a moment doubt was forgotten —forgotten the husband. All he knew was that a heavenly creature had deigned to kiss him. "Your promise!" she cried warningly, and by an effort of pride he kept his eyes closed. But he stood up, his arms held out. There was dead silence for a moment, and then—

"Am I still bound?"

"You are free," she said merrily. He opened his eyes, to find the reality more alluring than the dream. He seized her hands. She could not help shrinking a little, though her eyes shone defiance.

"Why did you do that?" he breathed, aflame.

She smiled mournfully.

"Forgive me," she pleaded in tones that disarmed him.

Lionel remembered his rôle as a man of honor and dropped her hand.

"I beg your pardon," he said, but a little bitterly. She lowered her eyes.

"It is I who should beg yours. I must go now. Eleven-fifteen!"

Feeling that romance was somewhat overworked, he replied, "Right ho!"

CHAPTER IV

BREAKERS AHEAD!

At eleven-thirty Lionel found himself enjoying a tête-à-tête supper in a Bloomsbury flat. He had obtained a cab, as commanded, and the lady and he had driven home together. There had been no adventures, no spies, no melodrama. In unromantic silence had they gone, for after the thrills of the afternoon and evening neither had been in the mood to talk. On reaching her flat, which was on the first floor, the lady had let herself in with a latch-key, and they had gone straight into the prettiest little sitting-room imaginable. Here a cold supper, simple but excellent, was laid: a bottle of hock and a siphon of lemonade were the only liquors visible. They supped together, talking briskly of various themes, but Lukos and the treaty were not mentioned till they had finished. When they had established themselves in armchairs and lighted a couple of cigarettes the lady said: "And now let me tell you what I want you to do. But first of all, will you please ring for coffee?"

Lionel obeyed, awaiting with some curiosity the expected newcomer. Would it be a smart maid, a mysterious man servant, or a crone with a history in every wrinkle? His doubts were speedily resolved. The door opened without noise, and there entered the most charming parlor maid the heart of man could wish. She was, of course, in a maid's livery—the black and white that is so simple, serviceable, and that can be so picturesque. Her figure was the trimmest imaginable, her eyes were a dusky brown, her hair was of jet. The last was arranged in a coiffure that a thoughtless man would have judged unstudied, but a schoolgirl of fifteen would have known its value at a glance. The features of this disturbing damsel were not faultless—the nose, for example, did not perfectly succeed, but her eyebrows looked as if they had been drawn by a painter, the mouth promised a treasury of kisses, and the complexion bespoke an air less rude than London's, for it shamed the most delicate of roses. Lionel was obliged to remind himself that the mistress had first claim on his affections.

"Clear the things, please, Mizzi," said the lady, not marking the stupor of her guest. "And then bring in coffee."

("Mizzi!" thought Lionel. "Then she is a German or Austrian. And I called

myself a Teuto-phobe!")

The supper was speedily cleared and the coffee brought. The lady sipped reflectively for a few moments, and then plunged into the business.

"What I want you to do," she said abruptly, "is to help me break into a house."

Lionel was almost proof against surprises. You must remember that he had had some years of monotonous wear-and-tear at the hands of the world and at times longed for an adventure as some men long for drink. But he prided himself on his self-control, and had felt sure that he would meet any adventure with an assumption of ease, however joyful he might feel within. So far he had done pretty well: he had stopped a runaway horse, rescued a charming actress, spent a few thrilling hours in her company, and on the whole had kept himself in hand. But to be asked in a matter-of-fact tone to help in committing a felony was almost too much for his sang-froid. However, he remembered that good fortune has its price, and that great achievements need great sacrifices. Besides, she was so adorable, and he hated to back out of any enterprise.

"By all means," he said with a wan cheerfulness. "When shall I start?"

She laughed.

"That is so nice of you—not to ask why. I will tell you a little more, to assure you that our burglary is perfectly honorable. *We* start presently—in a day, two days, a week—I can not tell. The fact is that I think a crisis is approaching. I am sure that very soon a favorable opportunity will present itself to make use of the treaty. Some little time ago I determined to hide this document: it was no longer safe to keep it in my own hands."

"Why not a bank——" he began.

"My friend, you have no *idea* of the importance of the affair. Probably the bank would have been safe, but governments do not stick at trifles when the destinies of nations are at stake. Almost certainly a colossal bribe would have been offered, and even bank officials are human. So I resolved to be simple, original and daring. I hid the treaty in a house not far from here. How it was done I will tell you another time. What I want you to do is to help me regain it. I would go alone, but now I have begun to think it better to have an aide, in case I fail. You realize what it may mean if we are caught? A prison—for you must not explain. Can you do that?"

"I am ready," he said with a laugh. When she looked at him like that he felt that nothing mattered. Besides, it would be a thrill.

"Good," she said with enormous appreciation. "And now I am going to bed. I am very sleepy."

He rose, gloomily wondering when he should see her again. "Well," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "good night."

"You are going?" she asked in surprise. "But why? I want you to stop here."

Lionel's heart bounded, and then he looked at her. He was tempted to stay, for she was unlike any other girl he had ever met. But that very reason made him pause. He knew he wanted to kiss her and that he must not. He thought he was not in love with her, because he ought not to be. He knew that he would be in love with her if Lukos were dead. And because he felt that she mattered, he was resolved not to hurt her.

"I am sorry," he said, dropping his light tone. "I should like to, but—no!"

"Why not?" she asked, looking steadily at him. He looked as steadily at her.

"Convention," he said frankly. "If I stop here and people get to know, you will be slandered. That is why."

She was silent for a moment and then said softly: "You are better than I thought.... You must certainly stop. As for 'people'—well, I know the world and its miry ways. I know and I do not care."

"Your friends?" he suggested, rejoicing in her.

"I have only acquaintances, and they do not matter. Will that satisfy you?"

He fought against the temptation with a jest, for he felt that the pretty creature could not really know: "You forget the disappointment of Mrs. Barker."

She repeated the name wonderingly and he explained. "My landlady. If I do not return she will imagine I have run away to cheat her."

It was a poor jest, but only a jest, and he was benumbed at its effect. The lady frowned terribly upon him. Anger swept her lovely features like a thunder-cloud.

"How could you?" she cried in heavenly wrath. "How paltry! How pitiable! I knew you for a cheerful gentleman, but to find you a trivial scoffer——"

"Why, what have I done?" he stammered, amazed. "It was a mere joke—a laughing phrase—a word——"

"Done!" she echoed. "We were both upon the heights, and with your phrase—your joke—your word, you drag us down to the abyss of banality again. I——"

Her petulance annoyed him.

"Really, madam," he said bitingly, "I am sorry to have spoiled it—to have 'let down the scene,' as they say on the stage. But as I seem to have offended you I shall take my leave."

"If you do," she cried, "I shall never speak to you again. I swear it!"

He stood irresolute. After all, she looked such a darling when she was angry....

"Well," he said, temporizing, "if I stay for a while, will you promise to be sensible?"

"Never!" she flashed, stamping her foot, and darted from the room.

Amusement and anger struggled for the victory in Lionel's heart. "Confound her for her folly!" he thought, and then, "Bless her for her inconsequence!" He sat down and lighted a cigarette, expecting her return at any minute, determined to stick to his resolve and sleep at home.

When twenty minutes had passed he reflected, "She is standing on her dignity. How foolish!" Ten minutes later he murmured, with a pained accent, "She is human after all." By the time his fourth cigarette was half-consumed he had fairly lost his temper. "This is not good enough," he said; "I will let myself out and call to-morrow. If she refuses to see me, at least I shall have kept my self-respect. No woman shall treat me like a dog."

Grumbling, he opened the door and went quietly out into the hall. He listened for a moment, waiting to give her the chance to reappear and part as friends. There was no sound: if it had not been for the light still burning in the hall he would have sworn that the household had gone to sleep.

With a sigh he put on his hat and opened the inner door. He anticipated no trouble with the outer barrier, but in this he was wrong. It was padlocked, and flight was impossible. His sense of humor conquered resentment, and he smiled. "I give in," he thought: "well, I have tried to be a good boy." He hung up his hat

again and returned to the sitting-room. Then he rang the bell. As he had expected, it was answered by the maid.

"Monsieur wishes to retire?" she asked, with a polite sympathy for a handsome man.

"I should prefer to be let to go home," he said pleasantly, "but I suppose I'm to be kept a prisoner."

The maid looked puzzled.

"Madame has locked the door and gone to sleep this half-hour. I dare not wake her for the keys. Besides, she expects you to remain."

"Then will you show me my room, please?" he said, accepting defeat. Whether Mizzi was as innocent as she seemed he could not decide, but now he was determined to let things take their course. She held the door open for him, and as he passed he caught an amused twinkle in her eyes. He yearned to give her a good shaking and say "Explain!" and presently kiss her heartily, for she was exceedingly attractive. This impulse he controlled, and the next moment found himself in his bedroom.

"Breakfast is at half past nine," said Mizzi, as she drew a curtain. "At what time does monsieur wish to be called?"

"Oh ... about nine o'clock ... thank you ... good night."

"Good night, monsieur," said the maid demurely as she tripped to the door, and then a lamentable accident occurred. It was due to the eccentricities of modern fashion. For several years Lionel had carried his handkerchief secreted in his cuff. As Mizzi stepped daintily past, the handkerchief, which had been working loose, fell to the ground. He and she stooped together for its recovery, and their heads approached nearer than was discreet. Her fingers reached the handkerchief first, and she restored it as they were rising. This was pardonable, but she ought not to have looked him in the face. Her eyes telegraphed "I like you," and his, something more. Without judicious reflection Lionel clasped her. "You are a perfect darling!" he whispered, "and I simply must kiss you—it is what you were made for."

"Oh, monsieur!" gasped Mizzi, "it is a scandal!"

"Yes," agreed Lionel, "I suppose it is. But it would be a graver scandal not to kiss such a bouquet of charms. There, my attractive morsel—another ... a butterfly salutation on your charming eyes, and ... good night."

Mizzi, with a stifled laugh, kissed him lightly in return, freed herself and escaped. Lionel, his sleepiness a thing of the past, sat down on the bed.

"Dash it!" he thought, wagging his head, "I oughtn't to have done that ... but it was exceedingly pleasant ... exceedingly pleasant ... yet I ought not to have yielded to temptation, for I was under the vague impression that I was in love with the maid's mistress. If so, I was disloyal, a creature of no account. Let us see whether there is not something to be said for the defense....

"Suppose I do love her—the mistress, I mean—I must not kiss her, because she is married. Doubtless it would be a fine thing to be loyal to the husband, the lady and the ideal—in short, neither kiss her nor any one else. In a word, become a sort of grass-bachelor.... A hard matter, for I am not cast in the ascetic mold, and Mizzi's lips are devilish tempting.... Suppose, now, the husband died (and I regret that I can not regard this contingency with disgust) and there were at least a sporting chance of my stepping into his shoes—oh! of course not at once, but later—later—why, then I could face permanent loyalty and temporary asceticism with a light heart.... But to go through the world refusing all sweets because my favorite sweet has been appropriated, surely that were foolish.

"Again, am I in love with her? Can one fall in love so suddenly, outside the realm of fiction? Is there not a great truth in the popular ballad that treats of 'a tiny seed of love'? Surely love is a seed, planted by chance or design—for example, by a match-making mama? The seed needs opportunity for gradual growth—the sun of frequent intercourse—the rain of timely separation—the fertilizer of presents of flowers and bonbons—before it can grow to a splendid harvest.... This harvest of mine can not be love; it must be passion. If so, it must be crushed.... She is too perfect to sully even in thought."

His brow grew gloomy, and he paced the room with feverish steps.

"No!" he said presently, "I feel pretty sure it is not passion pure and simple—or impure and complex if you like. Critics may sneer, but I can not help thinking it may soon be love, if it is not that already. Wherefore, I had better fly to do her

errands as soon as possible.... But I can not accept the ascetic ideal ... yet. Hypothetical Mizzis may cross my path, and if they do I feel sure I shall kiss them, but the moment I see a possible chance of winning *her*, why, then I shall be very good.

"... 'Myes ... not very lofty ... but I want to be honest, and feel pretty sure that is what I shall do.... No doubt I shall not be happy, but...?"

With a dissatisfied growl he began to undress, and soon he was in bed. To quiet his uneasy conscience before he fell asleep he muttered, "And of course I shall do anything she tells me."

The unheroic but truthful pleasure-seeker then gave an unromantic snore.

CHAPTER V

THE PLOT THICKENS

A knock on his door roused Lionel at half past eight, and he sprang up clear-eyed and joyous to meet the sun. The events of the previous day sped pleasantly through his brain; and now that the morning was upon him and the London sparrows twittering optimism, he could not dwell seriously on the indignation of his hostess. "Oh, it is bound to be all right!" he said to himself, stropping a razor that he found on the dressing-table and whistling a merry tune. The cold tub strung him to a higher mood, and as he plied the towel he broke into song. "*Horchen Sie doch!*" said Mizzi approvingly to the cat, as she prepared breakfast and heard the melodious strain: "*Er ist ein braver Kerl, der sich nicht erzürnt. Er ist ein lustiger Geist, wirklich. Die anderen habe ich zum Besten.*" No doubt she was right.

Lionel breakfasted alone. Mizzi said that her mistress begged to be excused for an hour; after that she would be ready. The maid lingered a moment more than was necessary after bringing in the coffee, and seemed markedly assiduous for his comfort. But Lionel did not detain her in conversation; he had no intention of elaborating the *affaire* of the previous night. What amusement fell to his share he was ready to accept with a youthful zest, but he was old enough not to pursue happiness too zealously nor to magnify trifles. A kiss was well enough, provided it embarrassed neither the recipient nor himself. He was never a man to raise false hopes or win success by lies or a pretended love. His philosophy embraced the theory that girls, or some of them at least, liked being petted, and he was not averse from the kindly office. Only, there must be a clear, if unspoken, understanding that he was not to be taken *au sérieux*. This philosophy, of course, did not apply to Beatrice Blair: she was altogether outside routine. He was a butterfly, if you like, but at any rate honest.

So when Mizzi hoped that monsieur had slept well, he said gravely, "Perfectly, *ma p'tite*," and asked for the morning's newspaper. She brought it, with a pout of resentment, and as she handed it to him discovered a fly on his collar. This she was allowed to remove with the most absolute decorum; but when the operation was finished and she smiled persuasively, he stroked her hair paternally and said,

"You must not be foolish, my child." Mizzi retired with a heightened color, and he sat down with satisfaction to the cricket reports and deviled kidneys. To tell the truth, in spite of his arguments he felt slightly ashamed of the momentary swerve from loyalty.

His hostess appeared in due course, looking exceedingly pretty and self-possessed. She was dressed smartly in blue, a color that contrasted favorably with her hair and eyes. Lionel thrilled with gladness at the sight of her, for in brief moments of doubt he had thought that perhaps his imagination had played tricks: the night and artificial lights might possibly have lent her a fascination that would pass with the dawn. Could there indeed be so delightful a creature in London? These doubts, it must be insisted, had been exceedingly brief; still, they had had existence, and the joy of seeing them dissolve like frost in sunlight made life more desirable than ever.

There was no embarrassment at the meeting. Both were highly civilized, educated, up-to-date; with a kindred instinct of what to admit or ignore, a knowledge of the times when silence or speech was best. The lady made no reference to the *impasse* of the night before, and Lionel was too full of the present to dwell churlishly on the past. Instead, they talked cheerfully of trivialities for a time, and then Miss Blair announced her intention of going out to do some shopping. "I will not ask you to come with me," she observed smiling, "for I can guess how bored you would be. But I shall be with you again for lunch. For the present, au revoir."

Lionel, who would cheerfully have carried a score of parcels or hat-boxes for the pleasure of her company, had no choice but to acquiesce. There was no pressing reason for returning to his lodgings—indeed, there was every reason for staying away until he could earn some money. True, there was no immediate prospect of acquiring any; but at least he was in the middle of an interesting experience, and he had promised to help in a burglary. So with a fine disregard of circumstances he chose the most comfortable armchair and the lightest novel he could find, and put the cigarette-box within easy reach. Thus he passed an unprofitable but pleasant morning.

Miss Blair returned soon after one o'clock, and they had lunch together. In the afternoon they went for a drive in a hired motor to Thames Ditton. They stopped there for tea and got back to Bloomsbury about seven. Lionel was put down at the flat and Miss Blair went on to the theater, from which she returned late at night. Supper followed, and then they smoked and chatted for half an hour

before going to bed. Lionel had expected to hear more of the conspiracy and projected felony, but nothing was said. Wherefore he kept silence, awaited events, and went to sleep, wondering whether a farce or tragedy was being played.

This uneventful life went on for several days, during which he had plenty of time to study his hostess. He learned nothing more than he knew already. A brilliant and charming personality, grave or humorous as occasion demanded, apparently sincere in her conviction of a great conspiracy, devoted to her absent husband, resolute to strike when opportunity offered—such was Beatrice Blair. When he was in her company he could not doubt her; alone, he could not help wondering what this Arabian Night might mean. The utter fantasy of it all bewildered him, but even if false he could not conceive her motive. In the end he usually came back to the conclusion that the apparently absurd was true, and always that at all costs he would see it through to the end.

Her attitude to him was that of a gay comrade. There were no more "gratitude" kisses—no hint of danger. She had referred only once again to his act of stopping the runaway horse and her wish to do something to show her thankfulness. This he had laughed at; now that the opportunity had come he was loath to use it; but in a subsequent conversation she had learned that he had written several plays, all unacted, perhaps even unread. One lay at that moment in the office of Ashford Billing, a prominent manager; she knew him, and promised to spur him to read Lionel's play himself. Lionel thanked her, but did not build any castles on so flimsy a foundation. He had been knocking at managers' doors too many years to have any illusions.

So day followed day without anything to break the pleasant monotony. Lionel and Beatrice were rapidly cementing a friendship that was more than a friendship to him. Only the remembrance of Lukos kept him from showing something more of his real feelings—the remembrance of Lukos and the aloof friendliness of Beatrice herself. There was but one fly in the amber of that perfect week, and that was the attitude of Mizzi.

Since the morning after his arrival Mizzi had waited on him with an air of courteous disapproval. She had been as polite as ever, as demure and piquant as could be wished, but she had been less communicative, less *sympathique* with the stranger. Even in the presence of her mistress there was a suggestion of frigidity that was galling to a sensitive man. Lionel grudgingly admitted that perhaps he had been a little to blame, but, illogically enough, he resented the

atmosphere of respectful condemnation. More than once he had tried to dissipate the unhappy misunderstanding, to restore things to a more friendly—but not too friendly—footing. In this he had not been successful. To his cheerful and carefully composed commonplaces Mizzi made the briefest of answers, and on one occasion there had been a distinct toss of the head and an unmistakable sniff. "Women are so unreasonable," he said to himself complainingly, after a sustained effort that fell flat; then with a pang of compunction, "Some women, I mean. I do wish Mizzi would be sensible.... It is very trying."

Matters came to a head after he had been Miss Blair's guest for nearly a week. It was a Saturday, and his hostess went to the theater directly after lunch to get ready for the matinée. Lionel, provided with one of her cards, was to follow her and see the play, for as yet he had not watched her on the stage. The experience proved delightful, for the play was good and her acting excellent. After it was over he went back to the flat alone, for she meant to rest in her dressing-room until the evening performance.

Mizzi opened the door to Lionel, and when he asked her to bring tea she said, "Immediately, m'sieur," in the most correct of tones. Disapproval still hung heavily about her, mixed, as it seemed, with something of compassion. Her attitude was almost that of a perfect mother to a well-meaning but erring child. "Hang it!" thought Lionel, as he waited in the sitting-room, "she has no business to behave like this. I have a good mind ... a jolly good mind to..." He fell into a reverie and gloomily whistled the opening bars of Chopin's *Marche Funèbre*.

Presently the maid brought in tea. She set the tray on a little table, placed a cake-stand within easy reach, paused to make sure she had forgotten nothing, and then asked, "Is there anything more, m'sieur?"

Lionel, who had come to a resolution while waiting, roused himself.

"Yes," he said decisively, "there is. Will you be kind enough Mizzi, to tell me why you surround me with the wet-blanket of your wrath? It is very depressing to a sunny nature."

Mizzi looked at him with a frank pity in her eyes. "It is because I am sorry," she replied.

"That is no explanation," said Lionel briskly, glad to perceive a thaw, however slight. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because you are a fool," observed Mizzi with a gentle pensiveness.

Lionel started; he had not expected this. To be called a fool by a friend of one's own age and sex is an every-day matter that causes no uneasiness. To be called a fool by a withered graybeard need not leave a sting, for there is the comfortable reflection that the graybeard may be repeating a mere formula, and that he, too, enjoyed being a fool in his day. To be called a fool by a youthful enemy is only to be expected, and the epithet betrays a palpable lack of judgment in the user, an epithet that returns like a boomerang upon himself. But to be called a fool by a pretty woman is a distinct ordeal. Lionel was shaken.

He contrived to compass a laugh. It was not an infectious cachinnation, but still it was a laugh. "Will you tell me why I am a fool?" he asked in a moment.

"Certainly," said Mizzi, still in the same gentle tone. "It is because you are the slave of my mistress."

"Excuse me," said Lionel politely, "but I have no wish to discuss her. You may go."

At this the maid lost some of her admirable self-control. "Bah!" she cried, "you are the same as the rest! Show a man a pretty face and a pair of dazzling eyes, and he is blinded! You think her perfect——"

"I know she is," he interrupted, "though why I should trouble to say so to a servant——"

The thrust was cruel, but he felt she had deserved it.

"A servant!" she repeated, sparkling with anger. "A servant! Yes, it is true—but an honest true woman that knows not how to tell lies like her mistress——"

"That is enough," said Lionel, taking her with a gentle firmness by the arm. "My tea, I fear, must be getting cold."

As soon as he touched her the virago subsided. She made not the least resistance as he led her to the door. But as he was opening it she looked up with appealing eyes. "Ah, monsieur!" she whispered piteously; but he was in no mood to be melted. He shut the door upon her, and did not see the rainbow of smiles that played over her face the moment she was in safety.

"She is jealous," mused Lionel, pouring out a cup of tea; "I did not think she

would have been so silly."

He wagged his head sadly over the frailty of human nature, and then an unpleasant thought struck him—the accusation of her mistress. "Lies" had been the charge—an ugly word—and on the face of things somewhat plausible. Again he reviewed the arguments for the defense—the lack of all apparent motive for deceit, his uselessness from a blackmailer's standpoint, and the rest,—and the strength of them gave him fresh courage. The strongest argument of all, the remembrance of Beatrice herself, almost clenched the matter. *Almost*, for he was cautious, and had some knowledge of the world. Still, he was young and hopeful, and the obvious jealousy of Mizzi was an additional reason for discounting her assertions. "Lies or not," he concluded, "it is too amusing to let slip. Besides, she is such a dear...."

The object of his devoted suspicion returned soon after eleven that night, a little tired, but full of kindliness and mirth. "Oh!" she cried, as she entered the room, "I hope you haven't waited supper for me. If so, you must be ravenous——"

"Of course I waited," said Lionel. "Shall I ring?"

"But why hasn't Mizzi set supper?" asked Beatrice, pausing in the act of taking off her hat.

"I don't know," said Lionel carelessly. "It is true we had a slight difference, but surely——"

She caught up his words. "A difference! with my maid!"

Lionel cursed his stupidity in silence. The unlucky words had slipped from his mouth unheeding. He stood dumb.

"What was the difference about?" asked Beatrice frigidly. "Did you try to kiss her?"

At this stroke of feminine intuition Lionel felt himself to be in deep waters. He was no lover of lies, and to this peerless creature a lie would be doubly treacherous. On the other hand, something was due to Mizzi: not only had he tried to kiss her—the feat had been successfully accomplished.

"Do you think," he asked reproachfully, "that the moment your back was turned I could transfer my worship to another?"

"I think it quite possible," said the lady with a twinkle he did not see.

"Then, madam," returned Lionel in his best wounded manner, "let me tell you what happened. I rang for tea. Your maid served it with a certain coldness of manner. I asked the reason, and she accused me of folly in being devoted to you. She even hinted that your words were not wholly to be relied on. I at once led her from the room."

"Without a kiss?"

"I held her at arm's length," said Lionel proudly.

Beatrice said "H'm" in a meditative manner, and then, more briskly, "Please ring the bell."

Lionel obeyed, and waited in some distress. Suppose Mizzi were to excuse herself by relating the incident in which he had been a partner! Would he be cast into darkness on the instant? What a Nemesis for how trivial a misdemeanor! He heard the bell ring again, as the impatient Beatrice pressed the electric button, and sweat broke out upon his forehead. A crisis was imminent. Still a third time the relentless tinkle sounded, and he was without plan, excuse, or counterplot. He woke from his anguish to hear the lady speak.

"She must have gone out, I suppose ... but we must make sure ... perhaps ... will you come?"

He followed her, grateful for the respite, and at a loss for the meaning. They went into the hall, and thence to the kitchen. No one was there. In silence they knocked on the bedroom door, but received no answer. Beatrice opened the door and peered within. She switched on the electric light and they advanced. In the center of the floor stood a portmanteau, strapped and labeled. Lionel lifted the label and read the inscription aloud. It was to a warehouse in Camden Town.

"She has gone!" said the lady in a whisper of tragedy. "*She has gone!*"

"And a good riddance, too!" returned Lionel with a vast cheerfulness. "But she might at least have laid supper first."

"You do not understand," said Beatrice tensely. "This is no ordinary desertion. It means, I fear, that she has joined my enemies."

Lionel's good breeding was not proof against the suddenness of this. He sat

down abruptly on a convenient chair and laughed.

"No, no!" he cried. "That will not do, madam. That is—forgive me—too crude, unworthy of your talents. Reflect! Your servant runs off in a petulant fit, and lo! you exclaim that she has been suborned by the Ottoman Empire! That is sheer melodrama."

Beatrice gave a smile that was grave and reproachful.

"You forget," she said gently, "that I am an actress."

The sweetness of the reproof, the ironical self-criticism, convinced him of her sincerity more than any rhetoric could have done. "I beg your pardon," he said humbly, taking her hand; "tell me more."

"She has deserted me," said Beatrice quietly. "With her I made my one great mistake—natural, but irreparable. I thought her true, and one day, when I was in need of a woman's sympathy and help, I told her all ... all, even to the hiding-place of the treaty. It is too late for regrets or fears. Now we must act."

CHAPTER VI

THE HISTORY OF HENRY BROWN

Mr. Henry Brown was a man of forty, an age that is supposed to be the prime of life, though most of us would prefer to be ten years younger. At forty one has shed most illusions, but at least there is the consolation of having arrived at a workable philosophy. For some of us this philosophy may mean simple acquiescence; for others an attitude of pleased contemplation, like a yokel smoking his pipe, leaning on the gate of a summer evening. Those of us who are married and without the philosophy of our own are fortunate in having one—if not several—provided by a wife. And her philosophy, grounded on practical common sense rather than a study of the metaphysicians, is of much more value to the world than abstract thought. She is, in short, better adapted for keeping us up to the mark.

Henry Brown was unlucky enough to be a bachelor. This was through no fault of his own, for as a young man he had dreamed his dreams of a snug little home, a cheerful wife, and chubby children, who were always to remain at an age not exceeding nine. His dreams, with their usual perversity, had not been realized, though on more than one occasion he had made efforts to find his ideal. There had been, for instance, the daughter of a chimney-sweep, a virtuous and charming creature. There had been a policeman's niece, whose boast it was that she could "slip the bracelets"—her own expression—on a refractory subject as quickly as a professional thief-taker. There had been the relict of a fish-and-chips salesman, and quite a number of others, equally alluring and disappointing. In his early youth he had dallied with them all, but he had never got beyond the dallying stage.

The reason had been always the same. It was not that he had failed to find the ideal: not at all! The quarry of the moment had always seemed the most peerless of her sex—with a mental reservation giving the policeman's niece the pride of place. It was simply because he could not afford to marry. Girls would "walk out" with him with pleasure. They would give him every encouragement until ... until the fatal truth became known. It was not that his immediate supply of cash was pitiable: it was because he had no "prospects." He had no trade, being

merely the driver of a cab. Now it is possible for a cab-driver to marry and bring up a family, but it was a perverse fate that all the girls to whom he paid attention looked somewhat higher in life. And Henry Brown was unable to satisfy their aspirations. He was deep in the groove of cab-driving by the time he was twenty-three, and could conceive no other calling at which he might succeed.

Of course he might have tried to win a wife with less social ambition, but he made only one effort in this direction. At twenty-five he fluttered after a lady who seemed a promising helpmeet. She was a milliner's assistant, and swore to wait till Henry Brown had saved enough to start a home. She waited six weeks, and then, in a fit of romance or madness, married a scavenger.

This, in a commercial sense, had been the making of Henry Brown. Soured by his experiences, he had resolved to hold aloof from Woman and devote himself to Thrift. Some men might have taken to drink; but a strain of Scottish or Jewish blood, coupled with a human desire to show the world he could do something, compelled Mr. Brown to save. For something like thirteen years he lived carefully and put money by. Then came a chance legacy of five hundred pounds. With this and his savings he determined to hazard all, cease to be a wage-slave, and start in business as a cab-proprietor on his own account.

He had the luck to start just as taxicabs came in, so he had no old stock left on his hands. He bought two taxis at first and learned the business thoroughly, driving one himself for three months to save money and get experience. Gradually he extended his operations, and by the end of four years he had twenty taxicabs under his command. He still lived carefully, though in comfort, and when he arrived at his fortieth year he rubbed his hands. "Well," he said to himself one day, "I've done it. I might begin to think about choosing a wife now." It was significant that he said "choose": in his youth he would have said "seek" or possibly "sue for."

Mr. Brown went about the business with a methodical earnestness, buying in the first instance a new lounge suit and an appropriate tie. He also discarded pipes as being vulgar, and took to threepenny cigars instead. Thus habited, if the expression may be allowed, he would take his walks abroad after office hours or on a Sunday afternoon, wondering where and how he should meet his future wife.

Business, which naturally had tended to harden him, had left, nevertheless, a good deal of shyness untouched. His uneventful bachelor life, too, had done

nothing to eradicate this; and it is a painful fact that he had spoken almost to no woman, save his housekeeper or customers, for a dozen years. This may read oddly, but it is not so odd as it looks. A man with little money, his way to make, and a sense of disappointment, is not anxious at first to extend his circle of friends. When he has made some progress, then it will be time enough, or so he thinks. But it is not always time enough, as Henry Brown found to his cost. His few friends were bachelors like himself, and when he began seriously to think of marrying he was puzzled how to set about it. He despised the idea of using a matrimonial agency, and he felt himself too old and respectable to pick up chance acquaintances in the street. But Cupid, who disdains no servitor, however aged, gave him his chance at last, and a better chance than he had any right to expect.

An attractive young woman, apparently foreign but speaking good English, called one day to order a taxi. Mr. Brown, who booked the order himself, was distinctly struck by her appearance. He was not so absurd as to fall in love at first sight—an unusual proceeding, *pace* the penny-a-liners,—for the cautious routine of years is a fetter not lightly to be broken. But being, so to speak, on the alert for a possible mate, he now took more than a business interest in his customers. He noticed, therefore, that this young woman was certainly pretty, neat and decided, and he put her down as a lady's maid in a "superior" house. He made no advances on this, their first meeting, but he could not help wishing that she would come again soon. "She has a Way with her," mused the cab-proprietor after she had gone, "and I must say I like her; and her dress was nice, though plain. Well, a plain dress doesn't run a husband into debt." He was painfully ignorant.

She came again a fortnight later on a similar errand, and this time Mr. Brown dared to unbend from his official attitude and remark that it was fine weather. The young woman agreed with a charming smile, and Mr. Brown caught himself thinking quite seriously about her more than once during the day. He wondered if he might ask her the next time she came to go for a walk one day. Would it be proper—the Thing? Would she be pleased to look on him as a mature Don Juan, laying snares for her pretty feet? Would it be "rushing it" too much, and would she build extravagant hopes thereon? For Henry Brown was careful and, remembering his early love, did not intend to commit himself until he knew a little more about her. He was most certainly not in love, but he was thinking about it. And when a man of his age and in his position thinks about it, any nice presentable girl who comes his way may safely speculate on a formal proposal,

provided sufficient opportunities offer themselves or ... are offered. This may not be romance according to the rules of fiction, but it is life.

However, for three weeks there were no opportunities, and the pretty damsel did not bring her sunshine into the cab-office. This did not plunge Mr. Brown into the depths of despair or anything so foolish. He went about his business as usual, a little distrait it may be, hoping occasionally that he would meet her again, and in idle moments revolving schemes to achieve this end. The difficulty was that he did not know where she lived, for on both occasions the taxi had been ordered to be at a hotel, and had driven once to another hotel and once to a theater. (He had casually questioned his drivers on the subject.) Hence he had nothing to go on, and had to wait on the chances of fortune.

But a third meeting came at last, for he had the luck to meet her in a tea-shop. She happened to sit down at the same table, and with a desperate diffidence Mr. Brown recalled himself to her. The young woman was very obliging and perfectly at her ease. Oh, but yes! She remembered him perfectly—his cabs were so much nicer than other people's—and after a becoming hesitation she allowed him to pay for an ice.

From that time he was in the toils. In the course of their conversation he ventured to ask where she lived. She did not take any notice of the question, and he was too shy to press her. But on parting, a casual whisper thrilled his receptive ear: "I always promenade on a Sunday. If you really wish, I shall meet you at the steps of the National Gallery at half past two. You are discreet, *nicht wahr*?" Mr. Brown, who translated the concluding phrase as a term of endearment or at least friendliness, began to feel that life was well worth living. He met her on Sunday, and they had a decorous but wholly satisfying promenade in the park. Tea followed, and he escorted her part of the way home. From that date the Sunday walk became an institution, and even an occasional visit to the theater of an evening was allowed.

It would be tedious to follow the affair in detail. Suffice it to say that at the end of three months Henry Brown found himself sincerely in love. He had not made a formal offer as yet, fearing that the lady's heart was not sufficiently *intrigué*. He was immensely satisfied with the change in his life and new comradeship, which he hoped would develop into something warmer. But, afraid of being too precipitate, he contented himself with making her presents of flowers, chocolates, or an occasional piece of jewelry of the Mizpah type. He trusted that his personality, generous handling of the case, and time ("Giving her rope

enough to hang herself" was his well-meant but unfortunate metaphor) would dispose her to favor his suit. The lady appeared perfectly content with the situation; she accepted his gifts with careless thanks and a charming smile, enjoyed the promenades, but was sedulous to keep him away from a definite statement or even a plain-spoken hint of his feelings. Was she a designing creature who wished to get as much as she could from him before saying "No"? Or did a nobler emotion possess her? Was she judiciously probing his character and sounding the depths of her own feelings?

However this may have been, there is no doubt that both were content with the present. And on a night in June, some three weeks before the events of the last chapter, Henry Brown might have been seen seated opposite his friend in a cheap Soho restaurant. They had just finished supper, and both were smoking. To be honest, Mr. Brown did not altogether approve of the cigarette, but he had never dared to object. "Besides," he thought tolerantly, "these foreigners.... But what I wonder is, when they marry do they take to a pipe? If so, good lord!..." His distress vanished as he looked again upon her: she was too pretty to disapprove of. "A bit of Orl right," he reflected; "if only I dared ask her and she said 'Yes.'"

The time for separation came at last, and Mr. Brown sighed as he helped her put on her coat. On the steps of the restaurant they paused, for it was raining. "You must have a cab," he said decisively; and then, hesitating, "I wish you would let me see you home for once."

She glanced up.

"For this once, just a little way."

Her partial acquiescence surprised him, for hitherto he had never been permitted to escort her home in a cab. As a hansom drove up in answer to the whistle, he wondered if it might be taken as a sign. With bounding pulses he thought, "Shall I risk it and ask her?" And then, with a return of sanity, "No; better wait and not spoil it." He handed her in carefully, stepped in beside her, and asked what address he should give. "Oh, Trafalgar Square," she replied carelessly, "and then St. Paul's if necessary."

He obeyed, wondering what she could mean.

The cab had scarcely started before she turned to him and said demurely, "You must think this strange—immodest, almost. But I have a reason. First of all, I wish to thank you for your many kindnesses."

She paused, and he was understood to murmur, "Not at all. An honor." She continued:

"But there is a question I must ask, and I beg a truthful answer. Why have you so befriended a poor and humble girl like myself?"

At this question Henry Brown performed a *volte-face*. A moment before he had resolved to wait. But being in love, encouraged by an excellent supper and some Chianti, and fired by the graciousness of his divinity, he threw caution to the winds. Though in the privacy of his office he had more than once rehearsed the scene and prepared effective orations, beginning "Miss," "Honored Ma'amselle," and "My dear Miss," he merely said, "Well, it's this way, you see: I love you."

The age of "This is so sudden" has passed away; hence it was not unconventional for the girl to affect no surprise at the announcement. She was conventional enough to turn her head for a moment and appear to be thinking deeply. She also obeyed the rules by observing presently, "But that is foolish." Mr. Brown, his devotion crystallizing into a sensible effort to win her, forgot his shyness and enlarged on the pleasing theme.

"I beg to differ," he said steadily, though his heart was beating fast and the roof of his mouth was curiously parched. "I don't consider it foolish at all. I have loved you for a goodish time, and I want you to be my wife. I am not a boy, miss, as you know. I'm a serious man of forty, for it's no use trying to hide my age or my seriousness. I have enough to keep us both in comfort, and—and I really love you very much."

She was looking at him with an expression that was kind and not at all embarrassed.

"Listen!" she said, more steadily than he. "I thank you very much. I guessed that you liked me, but—but I am not quite sure of you."

"Of me!" he repeated in amazement. "Why, I—I swear that I love you. What are you not sure of? My income? (Excuse me for mentioning it, miss.) You can look at my books if you like. My character? Any of the neighbors would speak for me ——"

She waved her hand impatiently.

"It is not that. Only I am not sure that you love Romance."

He started.

"Romance! I dunno ..." he said blankly. "What are the symptoms? I know I love you right enough, but Romance...."

"Exactly. I do not know. I like you—oh! very much indeed. Sometimes I think I love you, but then a doubt creeps in. Suppose, I say, he has not a soul!"

"Oh, come!" remonstrated the other. "You ought to know better than that. Why, that's pretty near atheism! I go to church——"

"It is not that kind of soul," she explained. "I mean, a sense of adventure—of excitement—in a word, romance! To marry a man without romance would be insupportable; life would be too dull. If only I could be sure that you had romance, I might...."

"Try me," said the practical Henry. "I must say, miss, I don't exactly see what you mean. But I'd do anything to please you. Tell me how to set about this romance idea and I'll do my best."

"You mean that?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

"Yes," he replied stoutly. "Anything in reason."

"Or unreason? The true romance knows no reason."

Mr. Brown, against his better judgment, but compelled by her attractions, said, "It's a bet!"

After this momentous decision there was a silence. The lady sank back in her seat and began to meditate with a pleased smile. Henry Brown, a whirl of conflicting emotions, looked gaily out into the street. It was depressing to the view, wet, dirty and forbidding; but to him it was the antechamber of Paradise. At last he was by way of realizing his ideal: his frequent failures and persistent struggles were presently to be crowned with fulfilment. In a burst of noble emotion he resolved to give the cabman a sovereign. He turned his head once more to look at his charmer and caught sight of a little white hand lying carelessly on the seat. It suggested a happy idea; and with a respectful tenderness he lifted it and pressed it warmly.

"Oh! you must not!"

"Beg pardon!" he said, though he was sensible enough not to drop the hand; "it

was this romance idea that put it into my head. I hope you don't mind."

"But we are not promised!"

"On Trust, eh?" he said cheerfully. "Well, I suppose I must wait till I can say Paid For. You've been thinking of some scheme to try me, haven't you?"

"The scheme is ready," she replied gravely. "I was wondering whether you are strong enough to obey. It may mean danger...."

"Fourteen stone and in fair training," he said complacently.

"Ridicule...."

"I shan't be laughed at more than once."

"Perhaps ... prison."

"Crumbs!" observed Henry Brown, stiffening. "My dear—beg pardon—miss, I mean. You're not one of them anarchists?"

"No. I have done nothing wrong. Only, events might put you in a false position. You might be accused and be obliged to be silent. Would you flinch from prison in a good cause?"

For a disgraceful moment Henry Brown wished to say, "The cause be blowed," but happily his eyes met hers. Innocence, reinforced by pretty features, has an easy prey in besotted experience. She lowered her lashes in virginal confusion and appeal. "I'll do it!" said Henry Brown, setting his teeth. "That is, if you're on the square."

She clapped her hands.

"Oh, thank you! thank you! I promise that I am on the square. Really, I am a victim.... What I want you to do is to become, for a short time, a kind of detective."

"A detective!"

"An amateur. If you can leave the guidance of your business to another for a time."

Her hand touched his again, possibly by accident.

"N—yes," he said, determined. "Yes, I mean—yes."

"I shall tell you the story another time. For the present I shall say that it has to do with some papers. I may ask you to follow and watch a man. I may ask you to get back for me the documents. I may—I do not know. It may even be necessary for you to leave London for a brief space. For the present we can do nothing, but will you hold yourself in readiness to act at a word—a sign—a telegram from me?"

Things were developing more rapidly than Henry Brown liked, but he was a man of his word and—she was a delightful creature.

"I will."

"Thank you," she breathed, and this time plainly pressed his hand. He seized it and returned the pressure, feeling like a knight of the middle ages. (Or a middle-aged knight?) "And you are content to do this without reasons—explanations?"

"If you'll give me one excuse," he said craftily.

"*Bitte?*"

"I don't know what they call it in your language," said Henry, and hesitated. A shred of bashfulness still hung about him, but he was growing up fast—expanding like a flower beneath the sun. "May I explain?" he asked courageously.

"But certainly!"

So Henry kissed her.

"For that excuse," he whispered with a new-found eloquence, "I'd do more than you ask."

She laughed and imprinted a feather upon his cheek.

"So you have a soul after all!" she said happily. "I congratulate you and ... myself."

The last word was inaudible; indeed it was not meant for the new henchman of Romance.

CHAPTER VII

MR. HEDDERWICK'S FIRST ADVENTURE

"Alicia, my dear," said Robert Hedderwick to his wife, as he was smoking after dinner, "shall we talk about our annual holiday?"

His wife, a determined lady of forty-five—six years younger than he,—put down her knitting.

"By all means, Robert, if you wish. But I do not know what there is to discuss. It is not yet July and we never go away till August, so there is plenty of time."

"But why should we not go away in July this year?" he suggested, somewhat diffidently.

"Why should we?"

"Well ... it would be a change...."

"A most undesirable and unnecessary change," said his wife decisively, picking up her knitting again. "August is the hottest month, and August in London would be unbearable. Besides, change for the mere sake of change is childish. You might as well suggest our going somewhere else than Cromer."

"Well ... er ..." said Mr. Hedderwick nervously, "why shouldn't we? Cromer is a charming place—charming; but we have been there twelve years running. Don't you think——"

"Cromer suits my health. And yours," Alicia added after a moment's thought. "And mother would be disappointed if we didn't go. You don't seem to have thought of that."

Her husband opened his mouth to say "I have, my dear," but changed the words to "Oh ... ah ... yes ... of course." Then he got up, walked to the window in rather an aimless fashion, and stared out. Presently he began to whistle.

"Please do not whistle, Robert," said Alicia reprovingly. "You know I can not endure it."

"I beg your pardon," said Robert submissively. "I forgot."

"You want something to do," observed his wife, as one who gives an order. "You've done nothing but smoke since dinner. Why don't you go and dig in the garden?"

"I—I don't feel like gardening."

"Or read. Where is your book that——"

"I—I don't feel like reading."

"The truth is, you don't know what you *do* want," said Alicia firmly. "You men are just like children when you haven't got a definite task. Until you retired from the business you were always perfectly happy. Now that your days are free you don't know what to do with yourself. Here! come and hold my wool for me!"

She laid her knitting down on the table and picked up a skein of white wool that lay near. Her husband, with a resigned expression, mutely held up his hands. The wool was placed over them, and then, after strict injunctions not to stir, or get tangled, or drop an end, or breathe too audibly, Mrs. Hedderwick began to wind it into a ball.

As the uncongenial task went on, Robert reflected disconsolately that his bid for freedom had not met with much success. He had had hopes that this year at least Alicia would have consented to go to some other place for their holiday. He was tired of Cromer and wanted a change. Also, he was not enthusiastic for another holiday spent under the wing of Alicia's mother, Mrs. Ainsley. She was too like her—he checked the heretical thought and substituted "too determined"—to make him anxious to renew her acquaintance more often than he was obliged. "Obliged...." The word buzzed unpleasantly in the brain. His prophetic instinct told him that he would be obliged to yield to Alicia's wishes. If he ventured to suggest once more that Eastbourne or Brighton might be preferable to Cromer, he knew too well what would happen. Alicia would say firmly, "No, Robert; you know We settled on Cromer, and it would be silly to change Our minds now." Supposing he dared greatly and put his foot down; supposing he said, "I will *not* go there: I will go to Brighton!" what would happen? He knew perfectly well that he would never have the courage to be so rebellious as all that; but he kept playing with the notion as one plays with temptation in daily life. If only he dared! He might say, "I will *not*, Alicia!" and then bolt from the house. It would be rather fun, an adventure, to run away ... all by himself. *By himself!* what a

holiday that would be! He laughed aloud at the thought.

"I see nothing amusing in the wool being tangled," said Alicia's voice reprovingly, and he jumped in alarm.

"I was not laughing at that, my dear," he said appeasingly. "I was thinking of something else."

Alicia sniffed, but maintained a fortunate silence. When she finished she said, "I am going out to take the sewing meeting for an hour or so. Will you be in?"

"Yes, my dear," said Robert cheerfully, and a few minutes later he heard the front door close.

Left to himself, he walked to the window and resumed his idle staring. Remembering that now he was a free agent he began to whistle again, a trifle mournfully, for he was meditating on life. This, for the average man, as a rule, begets melancholy—particularly if it is his own life he reflects on.

Robert Hedderwick had been chief cashier in a big store for more than fifteen years. He had earned two hundred and fifty pounds a year (with an occasional bonus) for some time, and on the whole he had enjoyed his work. At least it had always been interesting, and had given him that most necessary of all things—regular and definite occupation. And though at times he used to wish he was a partner or had more prospects, still he had been contented. Then at the age of fifty an uncle had died and left him a handsome competence. Alicia at once had made him forswear the office and set up as a gentleman of leisure. Not that he had been unwilling to obey. At first he had welcomed the relief from thraldom. It was a luxury to be able to lie in bed a little longer, if he wished, without feeling "I must get up *now*, or I shall miss the eight-fifty." It was a luxury to sit at ease in his strip of garden on a fine morning and read the newspaper. It was not unpleasant to think that his former colleagues were saying, "Lucky chap, Hedderwick!" what time they were under the eyes of their master.

But these and similar luxuries palled after a time, and he began to grow, not exactly discontented, but restless and vaguely unhappy. He had no hobbies, save reading, and none but the ardent student wishes to read throughout the day. He felt himself a little old to begin photography, stamp-collecting or wood-carving; still, recognizing the need of some occupation, he tried to do a little gardening. The strip of land at the back of the house was small, being some thirty yards long by twenty broad. Two-thirds of this was grass, which he mowed

conscientiously once a week: the rest was given up to flowers. As Robert knew nothing of flowers, he employed a man to do what was necessary in the way of digging and planting. When the serious business of horticulture was finished he would employ himself in cutting off dying blossoms, uprooting weeds and watering. But the sum total of his labor in the little plot did not amount to more than four or five hours a week.

His wife was an active—too active for the vicar's wife—supporter of Saint Frideswide's Church, and when her husband became one of the leisured classes she did her utmost to spur him to a like interest. He obeyed passively, became a sidesman, and in due course vicar's warden. He was not, to use the vicar's words, "a keen churchman," being on the whole an optimistic pragmatist rather than a devotee of dogma. But he was a good man, cheerful, kindly, with some harmless vanities. He liked, for example, to take the alms-bag round and lead the procession of collectors. He would complain of the trouble entailed by the organization of the annual treat or the parish tea, but secretly he appreciated the occupation and the importance thereof. These things helped to fill a portion of a vacant existence, but they were not enough. He felt that he was rusting.

This evening "melancholy marked him for her own." It had been a day more vacant of incident than usual, and he was almost bad-tempered. The thought of the recent defeat by Alicia rankled, and he turned over in his mind schemes by which he could outwit her and procure a holiday in Brighton. "It's all very well," he grumbled to himself, "but I don't see why I should continually knuckle under. I've been too easy-going. It's time things were put on a different footing. I wonder if ..."

He was still wondering when Alicia returned, and the solution of his difficulties was not yet. Alicia, who was in an aggressive good-humor, commented on his dulness. Robert replied in a tone that she characterized as "snappy"; she also made the inevitable suggestion that he had eaten something that disagreed with him.

"*Good lord!*" said Robert, goaded at last beyond caution and fear. "Who wouldn't be snappy, doing nothing half the day, and the other half doing what he doesn't like? Nothing ever happens here—it's like being a fly buzzing in a tumbler. He can't get out, though he can see all sorts of interesting things through the glass."

"You ought to be thankful for your many mercies," said his wife coldly: she knew the treatment for the case. "Instead of grumbling like a child, you had

better go to bed. That is, if you have finished supper."

At that moment Mr. Hedderwick had one of the strongest temptations of a blameless life. He yearned for the courage to say, "Oh, damn the supper!" but broke into a perspiration at the mere thought. Instead, he had the grace to be astonished at his mood and weakly answered, "I think I shall, my dear." As he opened the door his helpmeet suggested he should not forget at his private devotions to ask for a contented spirit. Rebellion returned, and he banged the door.

He soon forgot his troubles in sleep; in fact, he did not even hear his wife come to bed. He slept dreamlessly, despite the suggestion that he had committed an error in diet, until a quarter past one. Then he awoke quite suddenly, with a dim idea that something was happening. He sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes, and listened: no, there seemed to be nothing ... everything was still: only the regular breathing of his wife, fast asleep, was to be heard. "I must have been dreaming," he thought, preparing to lie down again. And then he heard a subdued, but distinct, noise down-stairs.

Robert experienced a chill that crept, via the spine and nape, to his brain. The short hairs on the back of his head felt as if they had begun to bristle. A ghostly cowardice flooded his being, penetrating to the uttermost recesses. "Good lord!" he thought, "it must be a burglar!" His first instinct was to lie down and draw the clothes over his head; his second, to jab his wife sharply in the ribs: company in the imminent peril was his prime necessity. Both these base impulses he controlled. Though elderly, he felt himself still a man; and despite the fact that he had no audience, no public opinion to make heroism easy, he realized that his part must be played alone at all costs.

As he came to this resolve his natural apprehension subsided: he felt calmer, more collected. Sitting up in bed, he listened with strained ears. For a moment there was silence; then came the quiet but distinct opening of a door below. His misgivings had a solid foundation; and with a dismal determination Robert cautiously got out of bed.

Why he did not wake his wife he hardly knew. Perhaps it was chivalry, perhaps a subconscious sense that she might spoil the fun. Yes, that was the odd phrase that formed in his mind once the temporary panic was subdued. With a wry smile—remembering his previous complaints of a vacant life and his thirst for adventures—Robert tiptoed cautiously to the dressing-table. Here he made a

swift and partial toilet. He slipped on a pair of trousers, a coat and some boots—for in the midst of his apprehensions he had a foolish idea that the burglar might tread on his toes. Then without noise he opened the top right-hand corner drawer, where he kept his collars and handkerchiefs, and took out a small revolver. As he handled the stock he felt his new manhood glowing like champagne in every artery. Life! He had begun to live.

How did it happen that a harmless churchwarden and retired cashier possessed so lethal a weapon? Simply, it was due to a mixture of precaution and romanticism. He had always thought a burglar *might* come, and deep in his composition lay a vein of adventure. It was fine to have a pistol—a loaded pistol—even though never used. It gave a sense of power and desperation. He sometimes fondled it and dreamed of defending himself against a marauder or a mob. But such demonstrations took place only when his wife was out.

Robert took the pistol in an unshaking hand and conveyed himself quietly from the room. He was not in the least frightened now; indeed he was beginning to enjoy this new sense of being master of the situation. Quietly he crept down-stairs, as close to the wall as possible to prevent creaking. At the foot of the stairs he stood still and listened.... There was no sound. But from the keyhole of the drawing-room came a little pencil of light. Behind the door was—what? Robert cocked the pistol, opened the door, and with a little gasp of triumph said, "Hands up!"

CHAPTER VIII

A TALE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

There were two people in the room as Mr. Hedderwick opened the door, a man and a lady. The latter, he noted with amazement, was in evening dress, a light cloak being thrown over it; the former wore the ordinary morning dress of a man about town, neat, though a little shiny, and on his head was a top hat. At Robert's command he turned with a violent start: the lady started, too, but in a moment recovered her composure and laughed. "Good morning," she said cheerfully: "I can't say this is an unexpected pleasure, for that would be only a half-truth. And now, what are you going to do?"

Robert, considerably taken aback at the character of his prisoners and his own reception, paused a moment before replying. He was breathing a little noisily from pure excitement, but still he was careful to keep the pistol at a threatening angle.

"Well," he said slowly, "in the first place I warn you that I shall shoot if you move——"

"Of course," she agreed brightly, "that would be the most sensible thing to do. But we have no intention of being so foolish. It seems that you hold the whip-hand, so—shall we sit down and discuss the situation?"

"By all means," said Robert, gaping. "You will find that armchair the most comfortable."

She seated herself, and her companion was about to follow suit. But he checked himself, picked up a gaily-colored rug from the sofa, and with a smile said, "There is no need for even a jailer to catch cold." He threw it lightly across to Robert, who caught it with a blush. He wished foolishly he had put on a collar. Then the man sat down and looked at the lady as if waiting for instructions. Robert followed his example, taking care to interpose the table between them in case of a surprise.

"And now," said the lady again, "what are you going to do? Send for a policeman?"

It was the obvious course, but Robert on a sudden felt that it would be impossible. When he had valiantly left his bed, seized his weapon and prepared to capture a burglar or two, he had in mind merely the vision of an ordinary hooligan. The reality upset him. He needed time to adjust his ideas.

"I suppose I must," he said apologetically. "I am exceedingly sorry, but really, you know——"

"Oh, we quite understand," returned Beatrice (for of course it was she and Lionel) with a frank camaraderie. "It must be a painful position for you as well as for us. But perhaps, before deciding, you would like to hear the reason of our visit?"

His eyes brightened; he grasped an idea.

"Excellent!" he said. "I have the satisfaction of having frustrated your design, and honestly I am not in love with the notion of giving you in charge. Besides ..." he hesitated as if ashamed, but decided on candor, "my life is a trifle dull, and if you can tell me a really interesting tale, well ..."

"Sir, you are a sportsman," observed Lionel; and Beatrice added persuasively, "A perfect dear!"

"Flattery is useless," he replied. "I don't want that. Tell me a good tale, and perhaps ..."

"I will tell you all," said Beatrice. "If we were captured I had meant to keep silence; but your generous offer compels a change of plan. You shall have a frank truthful——"

"I do not insist on truth," said Robert, stroking his nose, "but it must be interesting." He stopped, aghast at his own depravity. Then he laughed gently. "Morality is hard to achieve at this hour. But come! A good tale!"

Lionel smiled. He had faith in Beatrice as a story-teller, even if he was a little doubtful of her other qualities. He settled himself on the sofa, prepared not only to hear but criticize. As for Mr. Hedderwick, he was so eager that he laid down the revolver on the table and leaned forward on his elbows. To all appearance he might have been a boy listening to a true yarn of pirates and savages.

Beatrice, without effort or hesitation, began to speak. A second Scheherezade, she was fighting for her husband and her own freedom, and everything conspired

to lend her aid. She had a thrilling story to tell at first hand; she had the dramatic instinct and an appreciative audience. Not only Mr. Hedderwick but Lionel, too, listened with rapt attention. The tale lived, as told by her, bearing the stamp of truth and humor in every syllable her lips uttered. And Lionel, keeping guard over himself with a loving suspicion, noticed that in no particulars did she depart from the original version. He cursed himself that any shred of doubt could still cling about him. Did any cling? Surely not, and yet.... Pish! it was not merely disloyal—it was ludicrous: the two stories were identical. Had the first been lies she must now have betrayed herself.

Not that she told her story in such detail as she had to Lionel: there was not time for that. The *précis* of her life and adventures lasted no more than half an hour: all that mattered was there, but the smaller details were absent. A touch here, and the kidnaping was painted in a dozen words; a line there, and she had swept them to Constantinople: a paragraph depicted Lukos with a master hand—a few vivid sentences described the flight. Then came the stage, her meeting with Lionel (five pages to the rescue, the taxi deleted altogether, and three lines to the dressing-room), and lastly, the treachery of Mizzi. She brought her story down to the moment of their capture, not forgetting to tell how they had effected their entrance by means of skeleton keys. "And that is all," she said at last, drawing a breath of relief.

"Not quite all," said Mr. Hedderwick with rounded eyes. "Lord! what a tale! what a life! Compared with this ..."—his eyes wandered discontentedly round the room, and he did not finish the sentence. "But go on—go on! Tell me why you hid the papers here."

"Partly by chance, partly design. I meant to hide them in a stranger's house, thinking they would be safest there. One evening as I walked this way I saw a machine in front of your door. It was a vacuum cleaner! That decided me. It meant that after they had finished there was no likelihood of your carpets being lifted for some time."

"My carpets!" gasped Robert. "What the——"

"Oh, do *wait*!" said Beatrice pettishly; and he collapsed, as was only fitting. "I came next day and the cleaner had gone. During the morning I made discreet inquiries as to your habits and mode of life. In the evening I hired a cab, drove to Kensington to put any possible trackers off the scent, changed into another cab and drove back here. At seven-thirty I called. You were out, and your wife said

you would not be back for at least half an hour. I asked if I might wait, as my business was important. She hesitated, but consented, my sables being a guarantee that I had not come with any designs on your plate.

"However, to my disgust she insisted on remaining in the room and discussing trivialities. Of course, as long as she remained I was helpless, and my well-meant hints were disregarded. I was in despair; but presently the cook burst in with a woeful tale of a scorched petticoat, and the situation was saved. Your wife darted out to survey the damage, and the next moment my precious papers were hidden beneath the carpet.

"Mrs. Hedderwick returned within a very few minutes, full of apologies and (I fear) regrets that she had left the room. I did not prolong my visit. On the plea that I could not wait further, and promising to call again, I managed to escape. If you wish for proof, look under the carpet beneath your chair."

Mr. Hedderwick sprang up like an eager schoolboy. He seized the poker, inserted it under the carpet, and with a crackling wrench prized up a yard or two. With trembling fingers he tore it back still farther, and then his face fell. He stood up, a disappointed man. "There is nothing here," he said accusingly. "This is an anticlimax to a capital tale."

Lionel did not move, but his face darkened. During the recital he had felt a warm glow of faith pervade his whole being, a glow that was not diminished by the contemplation of Beatrice. By the time she had finished he was a devout adherent, and now the shock of disillusion swung him back once more to the certainty of doubt. He did not speak, but his eyes sought hers in a question he could not put into words. The lady alone seemed unembarrassed. She gave a regretful sigh.

"There is no anticlimax," she said. "Rather it is the thickening of the plot. Of course they have been taken by Mizzi. Has she been there recently—yesterday?"

"Not that I know of," he returned blankly. "It's possible, I suppose ... anyhow, it's not a bad idea for ... for a story, but...."

"I see you disbelieve still," said Beatrice with a calm disdain. "I had no idea men could be so stupid. I suppose there is nothing for it but to wake Mrs. Hedderwick and ask her."

The churchwarden sat down suddenly, as if his knees had given way. "Wake

Mrs. Hedderwick!" he repeated in a ghastly voice: "wake my wife! Oh, no! It is impossible—quite out of the question!"

"Not at all. She will know whether any one has called here, and in justice to my veracity you must ask her. I insist! Remember our freedom is at stake."

Mr. Hedderwick rose, pale but determined.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely. "Will you please go at once? I have not the least intention of prosecuting, and I swear that I believe your story. Only will you *please* go at once?"

Lionel chuckled, amused and grateful.

"This is hardly fair, sir," he said. "You forget that we want information as to where those papers may have gone. If your wife could tell us whether any one has called and what his or her appearance——"

"No, no!" quavered the unhappy Robert. "I can not consent! You must find out elsewhere. I can not have my wife roused! I—I would not have her here for a thousand pounds!"

"Indeed, Robert!" said a deep voice from the door. The churchwarden leaped round in a trice. He saw his wife, in the majesty of a dressing-gown, a poker in her right hand, standing in the doorway. His bowels turned to water. "Alicia!" he groaned.

"Yes," she said with a pleasurable severity. "What does this mean?" Her eye roved austerely and there was a dead silence. Robert was temporarily annihilated, Beatrice serenely impassive, Lionel amusedly dividing his attention between the two ladies. Presently Mrs. Hedderwick's brow cleared, as if a light had dawned upon her. She began to speak again in a voice that was almost cheerful. "I see!" she said: "it is a new idea, Robert. I suppose these are some of your friends, and this is a kind of breakfast party. I am very sorry that you did not give me earlier warning, or I would have had the dining-room ready. My husband," she said, turning confidentially to Beatrice, "is a man, and naturally does not realize that bacon can not be fried in a moment, and that eggs will not cook themselves. Toast, again, needs a little care; and coffee I always say is worthless unless one looks after it one's self."

"Alicia!" interposed the miserable Robert, "I do wish you'd be reasonable. For heaven's sake——"

"Kindly do not swear, Robert," said his wife, turning ferociously on him. "If I have made a mistake, I am sure it was but natural. If this is not a breakfast-party, pray what is it? A man of your age would not indulge in *suppers*"—she gave the word an emphasis that insinuated Cremorne—"so what can I think? I hear an unusual noise—I come down-stairs and find my husband hobnobbing with a strange gentleman and his ... friend ... whom I *have* met, but——"

Lionel rose, but Beatrice was wiser and forestalled him.

"Your surprise and indignation are only natural, Mrs. Hedderwick," she said coolly, "but they will be abated when you learn that our untimely visit is in connection with a police affair."

Her instinct was right. Curiosity conquered the churchwarden's wife, where an appeal to pity or kindred emotions would have failed. She relaxed her frigid attitude and said, "Indeed?"

"Yes," pursued Beatrice. "I can not tell you all at present, but be assured that if it ever comes into court your evidence will be of value." Mrs. Hedderwick smoothed her dressing-gown and determined to appear in the witness-box in mauve. "Will you just tell us this: did any stranger call here this evening?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Hedderwick, divided between resentment and a thirst for knowledge. "A lady, or at least a female, called and inquired for my husband."

"A lady!" ejaculated Mr. Hedderwick. "This promises well——"

His wife's eye compelled him again to his seat. "I think, Robert, if you evinced less interest in such a subject it would be more seemly. The female in question asked if she might wait, as she wished to beg a subscription for an anti-suffragist league. I am in sympathy with such an object and allowed her to remain. In the course of our conversation she referred to an article on dress in one of the women's papers. I happened to have the journal and offered to fetch it; she agreed, thinking that the plate of a new blouse might suit my style."

"So you left her alone!" broke in Lionel.

"For a bare two minutes. When I returned she was still there. We discussed the blouse for a while, and presently she said that she must go, but would return later."

"Plagiarist!" said Beatrice with a smile. "Did you happen to notice how she was

dressed?"

"I never notice such things," said Mrs. Hedderwick with dignity. "Dress is not one of my foibles. But after she had gone I picked up a handkerchief which I suppose she had dropped. It was marked——"

"Wait!" said Mr. Hedderwick suddenly. "What is her name?" he asked, turning to Beatrice.

"Whose, Robert?" queried his wife.

"Oh, bother!" he said, irritation lending him courage. "Your maid's."

"Mizzi Schmidt."

"And the initials, Alicia?"

"M. S."

Mr. Hedderwick, his head full of romantic notions of chivalry, forgetting the urgent need of circumspection, rose. He advanced toward Beatrice, raised her hand, and, to the horror of his wife, kissed it solemnly. "I beg your pardon," he said; "there is no anticlimax. Now that you know Mizzi is the thief you will want to be off. Good-by and good luck."

They took him at his word and rose.

"Good-by," said Beatrice in the most ordinary voice. "Thank you so much for your help—and yours, too, Mrs. Hedderwick. So sorry we had to break into your house. Good-by. Now, Mr. Mortimer!"

"Good-by," said Lionel; "thanks most awfully. I felt you were a sportsman as soon as I saw you."

They were in the hall by this time, and the magnanimous churchwarden was already opening the door.

"Not at all," he said. "I've had a most interesting night. I wish you'd let me know the end of the tale some day."

"If it is a happy ending, you shall," said Beatrice. She halted a moment, motioned to Lionel to pass out before her, and then turned. "If you see us again, be careful never to recognize or speak to us; it might mean danger—not only to you, but us."

He smiled but said nothing. Beatrice and Lionel moved away in the light of the early dawn. Mr. Hedderwick closed the door gently and stood deep in thought for a moment. "What an adventure ... what a splendid woman ... what a jolly chap!" his thoughts ran. "How different their life from mine! Here am I, tied to the same holiday year after year ... afraid to call my soul my own ... why, why should I not have a holiday on my own account—a holiday ... by myself for once. Something new ... something out of the common...."

"Robert!" said a threatening voice from the drawing-room, and he leaped. "Come in! I have something to say to you!"

The tone told him what the "something" would be. His thoughts raced furiously during the next twenty seconds, but he had wit enough to answer, "Yes, Alicia! Wait till I have locked the door!" Then with a swift but silent movement he slipped on a greatcoat and hat and stealthily opened the door again. He peered out.... Yes, there was hope and an object, for he could see, some hundred and fifty yards away, the figures of Beatrice and her escort. With a gasp Mr. Hedderwick muttered, "*I will*!" He pulled the door to behind him and set out furtively, but with a resolute swiftness, in pursuit.

CHAPTER IX

ENTER TONY WILD

Tony Wild, whose address was The Albany, and who enjoyed an unearned income of two thousand a year, stood on the steps of the Tivoli Music-Hall at half past ten, smoking. His face, which was passably attractive, had temporarily lost its usual good-humor, and he puffed his cigarette slowly as if it was more of a task than a pleasure. This, indeed, it was; for he had consumed seventeen since getting out of bed at ten o'clock that morning, and he smoked more from habit than anything else. He was a young man of twenty-six who pursued happiness, or rather distraction, on the accepted lines: dinners, dances and the stage formed his daily round, but with the zest of youth or cynicism he constantly searched for new thrills. Experience was his god, and it must be confessed that he had had more than a fair share of sensations. He had been jilted, married (luckily it proved a bigamous union; as his "wife," a Covent Garden chorister, had nothing but her prettiness to recommend her; and Tony had been immensely relieved when her husband reappeared after serving seven years at Portland), made a descent in a submarine, gone up in a balloon, and driven a car in the Gordon-Bennett race. He had flown in an aeroplane once for the sake of a new thrill, but subsequently determined that it would be a pity further to risk two thousand a year. These were but a few of his distractions. The only experience he had never tried was work.

On the whole, he had enjoyed himself. There were times, of course, when he felt that life was a little empty, a little dull; but on such unfortunate occasions he made haste to bring himself up to the scratch by searching for a fresh adventure. His most desperate expedient up to date had been to enlist, but the discipline and routine of the barracks made even ennui seem desirable, and he bought himself out after twenty-four hours of agony. This evening he was feeling distinctly dull, for the day had been singularly profitless. A solitary breakfast at eleven had been followed by a perfunctory glance over *The Daily Mail*. Even that stimulating sheet had failed to rouse him, and an afternoon swim at the Bath Club had been terminated by sheer boredom. Dinner at his club had failed to produce any congenial spirits, and in desperation he went to the Tivoli.

A few of the turns he enjoyed in a mild and deprecating fashion, but at ten-thirty he found himself on the steps, bitterly reflecting on the defects of modern civilization.

"London!" he thought moodily, "a city of six million people, and not a thing for me to do. Shall I go to bed?"

It seemed a confession of weakness; besides he was not in the least sleepy. So he discarded the unworthy thought, and set out on an aimless ramble through the streets. There is always something to look at in London, something to interest, even though it be but the policeman directing the traffic; and Tony soon found his languor past and good-humor returning. He liked being among a crowd of people, watching, speculating, enjoying. The Strand was one of his favorite haunts, especially at night when the lamps were lit and the theaters discharging their motley audiences. In Piccadilly Circus at eleven o'clock, Shaftesbury Avenue, Aldwych, or the Strand, a man need never feel bored, though he may feel rebellious.

Tony walked slowly on, stopping occasionally to observe the people. He looked at his watch presently and found that it was past eleven. "Early yet," he reflected; "what's the use of going home? Shall I try the club or a longer walk? The Embankment ... a nocturne of lamps and water ... and ... yes! that would be a new game! Forward!"

He turned down to the right and soon found himself by the Thames. Here he proceeded to practise the new game which had just occurred to his active brain. It was simple, if ghoulish, for he merely did his best to imitate a would-be suicide. Turning up his collar and setting his hat a little on the back of his head, he plunged his hands deep into his pockets and assumed an expression of despair. Then he walked slowly along, at times glancing at the river and ostentatiously avoiding the eyes of chance policemen. Presently he stopped, leaned both his elbows on the parapet, and stared gloomily at the Thames. His maneuvers were crowned with success, for a constable soon approached and told him in a kindly tone to move on. Tony replied in a sepulchral voice, and in a few moments was deep in conversation with his preserver. A fictitious tale of cards and drink exercised the powers of his imagination pleasantly enough for ten minutes or so, and when they separated it was with a mutual glow of satisfaction. The policeman thought he had saved a brother, Tony had enjoyed himself for a brief space. It did not occur to him that critics might consider his game morbid or in bad taste. Had he been questioned he would have said, "No doubt you're

right, but I was frightfully bored."

After this episode he walked across Waterloo Bridge to enjoy the view, and then returned leisurely to Piccadilly. He was not in the least sleepy, so he determined to extend his walk indefinitely. "The great charm," he reflected, "of being a bachelor with plenty of money is that one can do exactly what one likes without being questioned. If I return at six o'clock in the morning, Pettigrew will admit me without a murmur and ask if I want breakfast. Now, if I had a wife, it is possible that she would take no interest in my midnight ramble.—No! she would take too much interest and fear the worst.... Well, where shall I go? I feel in excellent trim.... Shall I walk to Bolders Green—Whitechapel—the Elephant and Castle? Strange names beckon me.... I remember reading of Hackney Marshes as a little boy ... shall I go and see if there are any marshes? Or shall I make for St. John's Wood and see what Lord's looks like in moonlight, where

> A ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,
> And I look through my tears on a soundless clapping host,
> As the run-stealers flicker to and fro?

Yes; let's try Lord's!"

We need not follow Tony in his walk. It is enough to say that at four o'clock he found himself, still wakeful, in Covent Garden, watching the market-men at work. After enjoying the sight he wandered idly up to Oxford Street, and presently the Euston Road. He walked down this till he reached Euston railway station, and here he paused to enjoy the freshness of the morning and the quiet of the streets. "Gad!" he thought, "what a shame to lie in bed till ten o'clock. Why haven't I tried this jape sooner? This is the sort of time when one thinks of the country and hates London. If only there was a train here I'd go away for a day or two and try it." An idea struck him and he smiled. "Well, here is a station. It might be amusing to go and see if there is a train starting for anywhere. I think I will. I'll make a vow to take a ticket by the first train available and get out wherever the country looks interesting. That at any rate will be something new."

He entered Euston station at a quarter to five. A sleepy ticket-clerk told him that the first train went at five-seven, and asked whither he meant to travel. "Oh, give me a ticket that costs five shillings," said Tony: "I don't much care. No, dear fellow, I'm not mad, and I've not been drinking. A five-bob ticket, please."

The clerk complied with an ill-used air. Tony received his ticket and went to find

the train. As he laid his hand on the door of a first-class compartment it occurred to him to look at the ticket. It was a third-class. Instead of being annoyed, Tony laughed. "A night of thrills!" he murmured:

"I haven't traveled third for years. Is there any chance of my having fellow travelers? I should doubt it."

There were some ten minutes before the train was due to start, and Tony occupied the time in looking out of the window. There was not much to engage his attention, save a few porters handling newspapers and other parcels, but presently a man appeared making for the train. Tony glanced at him with a languid curiosity. The newcomer was dressed in a correct morning suit and silk hat. He also carried gloves and a stick. But though he looked like a gentleman and carried himself with an air, Tony's eye detected signs of poverty. The coat was shiny, and the hat, though carefully brushed, had little luster. "What the deuce is he doing here at this time, and in such clothes?" thought Tony. Then he burst into a noiseless laugh. "The pot and kettle!" he reflected, chuckling: "I had forgotten that I am still in evening dress!"

He sank back in the seat to laugh at himself more thoroughly, and the man in the silk hat passed by the window. He made his way into the next compartment, and unfortunately there was no corridor. Tony was debating whether or not it was worth while to get out and join the stranger on the off chance of learning something new, when the whistle went. But before the train had begun to move, a face appeared at the opposite window. A man was climbing up the footboard from the line. The next moment the door was opened, the man entered, shut the door behind him and sat down. He was a man of some fifty years, dressed rather oddly. His bowler hat and overcoat were good, but he wore no collar. Tony looked at him contentedly; after all, this walk was producing experiences.

"Good morning," he said mildly: "do you usually enter a train on the off side? I ask merely from vulgar curiosity."

The man laughed, panting a little from his exertions. He did not look like a criminal; indeed he appeared distinctly meek. He seemed happy, too.

"No," he replied. "This is the first time in my life. I am going on a holiday. May I in return ask you if you usually travel in evening dress in the morning?"

Tony smiled.

"No; I too am going on a holiday."

"To Shereling?" asked the man amiably.

"I don't know."

"You don't know."

"No; I was dull. So I took the five-shilling ticket and the first train. I have no notion where I shall get out."

"What a splendid idea!" cried the other enthusiastically, much to Tony's astonishment. "Most of us are so bound by convention that we plot and plan for weeks: often we even go where we don't want to."

"Why?"

The other hesitated.

"Domestic pressure," he said with a smile. "You seem an understanding sort of chap, so I don't mind telling you that. This year—last night, to be candid—I resolved to burst my shackles for a time. Certain ... events ... hastened my decision. I am going to Shereling. I left in rather a hurry—you see I have no collar. I suppose I shall have to wait till we get to Shereling now before I can buy one."

"There's no hosiery department on the train," said Tony: "railway companies are very unimaginative. If there were, I'd buy a decent suit to travel in. Do tell me why you came in in that unconventional way."

"Sorry," said the man, "but I can't do that. It's all right, you know: I have a ticket."

"Of course," agreed Tony politely, and relapsed into musing. Here was a perfect windfall with enormous possibilities. Decidedly he must not lose sight of his new companion; he would get out at Shereling, too. Tony studied him from half-shut eyes: he looked a decent little chap—almost jolly ... rather like a schoolboy off for a holiday, expecting some excellent pleasure and glorying in the prospect. Also, he was mysterious and secretive, though to outward appearance he was a prosperous business man in a small way—a head clerk or under-manager perhaps. There was something in his face, too, an innocent zest, that appealed to the blasé young man. "Yes, old cock," thought Tony, "I must freeze on to you,

whether you like it or not."

After a silence the old cock began to crow, and soon there was a brisk conversation in progress. They talked chiefly of trivial things, but held each other's interest nevertheless. Tony's outlook and the newcomer's were wide asunder, as also were their experiences. It was the elder man who asked most of the questions, the younger who was responsible for the answers. But they found a bond of union in a Pepysian interest in the novel and unusual, though each approached it from a different standpoint. Tony was a master of external knowledge and sought for something fresh; the other, a babe, welcomed the stalest facts as discoveries from a new world.

"I wish," he said, and with a sigh, "that we were going to travel together for a while." Tony's heart leaped. "You are an interesting young man ... but no! that is impossible—it would never do."

Tony did not reply. He felt sure that the fish was almost hooked, but he did not wish to spoil things by seeming too eager. But he resolved that ere the journey came to an end he would land his fish and spend a few days in his company. He did not think there would be a slackening of the interest: if there were, why, he could easily go back to town. Meanwhile——

The train pulled up.

"Hallo!" said the elderly man. "This train is billed as a non-stop to Shereling. Why on earth——"

He leaned out of the window and beckoned the guard.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"The strike," the guard answered. "You see, sir, there are ten or fifteen thousand men on strike here just now, and it seems they've got a little out of 'and."

"But what," asked Tony's companion, effectually filling the window,—"what has that to do with the trains? Why——"

"You see, sir," continued the guard with an apologetic air, "they've got a bit out of 'and. I don't know the rights of it—they do say they're underpaid, though the employers say they spend their wages on whippet-racing. Anyway, they're out ——"

"But the *railway*, man. What——"

The guard coughed.

"Some of them's a bit 'asty, sir, likewise uncontrollable. It seems that they broke into the publics about midnight and 'ave been making a night of it, so to speak. They've sent for the soldiers, but they 'aven't arrived yet. And they've tore up some of the track. The breakdown gang is repairing it, but it will be an hour or so before we can get on."

"D'you hear that?"

"Rather," said Tony, getting up. "Let's go and have a look. I've never seen a raging mob."

"Better not, sir," advised the guard. "The town's not safe."

"They may listen to me," said Tony with simple grandeur. He turned to his companion. "Do you feel like playing with fire?"

The little man's eyes sparkled and he breathed quickly. He hesitated a moment with natural caution. Then——

"Yes," he said briefly. "Dash it! I—I feel as if I were beginning to live!"

Tony laughed and opened the door. The guard sighed.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "don't say I didn't warn you. Anyhow, I'd advise you to leave your money behind and your watches, too."

"The man's a perfect Solon," said Tony, feeling in his trousers pocket. "Here, guard, seven pounds three ... and a watch. If I perish, you may keep them, but remember that the watch needs winding night and morning."

The guard gazed dumbly at the evening dress. Then he turned to the other man, "You anything, sir?"

"N—nothing that matters," was the confused reply. "Come on! let's make a move!"

"Broke!" thought Tony. "But he hasn't tried to touch me yet. What a day out!"

CHAPTER X

HOW TO DRESS ON NOTHING A YEAR

The two men left the station and began to walk sharply toward the town, which was close at hand. The first street they entered was deserted, but evidence of the strike lay open to the shamed sky. Lamps, it is true, still stood erect, but their glass was shattered; missiles and rubbish littered the roadway, shop-windows had not a pane left whole, and here and there makeshift screens of boards replaced or protected the windows. It was a scene of ruin, complete and piteous. The most curious feature was that not a soul was in the street: everything was still and lonely.

In the next street a similar spectacle met them—ruin and solitude. In a third, the same. In a fourth, the same. It was as if a battle had taken place, or rather as if the town had been sacked and cleared by an invading army, which had passed on like a destroying angel, leaving signs of its progress, and signs alone.

"This is deuced odd," was Tony's comment—"deuced odd. The ruin does not surprise, for everything is possible in this age of Socialism. But is the spirit of curiosity dead? If so, *that* will be 'the end of all things.' Surely everybody can not be murdered or afraid to come out. Surely we shall light upon at least one brand from the burning—some pathetic, interesting, interested spectator. If it were but a man drunk in the gutter...."

"Yes, it's rum," agreed his companion. "But listen! I think I hear a noise over there to the right. Shall we go and see?"

Tony stopped, friendliness in his heart.

"I think you're right," he said. "But look here! Judging by what we've seen, these chaps won't stick at trifles. Personally I don't much care what happens, so long as I can get interested; but you're different—you're an older man. Hadn't you better try the station?"

The little man blushed.

"Damn it, sir!" he began, and then stopped. "I beg your pardon—I haven't sworn

these twenty years, but I feel somehow different to-day. What I mean is that I'm not a graybeard yet, and if you can be interested, I can. Come on!"

"All right," said Tony, warming to him. "Awfully sorry I said that. I say, you *are* a sportsman——"

The other blushed again, but this time with pleasure. "Thank you. That is the second time I have been called a sportsman within twenty-four hours. I ... I rather like it, Mr.——. By the way, have you any objection to telling me your name?"

"Not a bit, if you'll tell me yours."

The little man considered a moment, and then——

"My name is Hedderwick," he said frankly. "I feel I can trust you to keep your own counsel."

"Of course. Mine is Tony Wild."

They had been walking quickly in the direction of the noise, which every minute became clearer. At last, guided by their ears, they entered a street where their curiosity was satisfied. At the farther end was a seething crowd of men, a few women, and a rabble of gutter children. They were the strikers, or some of them, all excited and not a few drunk. As the guard had said, they were evidently somewhat out of hand, and the looting of the public-houses had not tended to assuage their wrath. Fired by their alleged grievances, liquor, eloquence and the electricity of a mob, they had spent the last few hours in wrecking the town. The police had done all that was possible to stem the attack and vindicate law and order, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Reinforcements and soldiers had been telegraphed for, and were even now marching, but for the time being the local forces had retired to talk over the return match and exchange of lint and arnica. The strikers were in possession and thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Tony, whispering to his companion, "Keep close and don't get into arguments: pretend to be a labor leader, if you like!" pushed his way slowly through the crowd. Robert, his heart bumping with fear, interest and excitement, followed him; he was afraid, but not too afraid, and he felt that his holiday was proving a success. When they reached the center of interest, after a tardy but good-humored progress, they were rewarded with a sight neither had hoped for.

The thickest of the crowd was swaying round a large shop. It was termed the

emporium, and almost merited the title. The happy anarchs had smashed every atom of the plate-glass, careless of the rate-payers, and then had proceeded to abolish such of the fittings as offended their esthetic sense. In the center of the window-space, standing on a chair, was a cheerful striker, conducting a kind of auction. More strictly, it was a charitable distribution, for no one made any effort to pay for the goods received. The shop was a miniature Whiteley's, embracing everything from a perambulator to a parachute, and it was odd to watch the incongruity of some of the articles distributed. One man, for example, was given a child's feeding-bottle, and accepted it without demur; with a bellow of approval he seized it by the rubber tube and whirled it round, shouting, till the tube broke and the bottle flew off at a tangent. Another received half a pianola—the whole was too much for him to carry, and kindly friends helped him to bisect it with clubs and bars. A third, bemused with beer, staggered off with a dozen volumes of *Comparative Religion*, murmuring brokenly. "Suthin' f'r the kids to read," and dropping at intervals his burden in the mud. It was a pleasant illustration of good feeling and unselfishness.

A few moments after Tony and Robert had penetrated to the front, ready-made clothing was being distributed with a lavish hand. The auctioneer would seize a suit, or a part of a suit, from the nearest peg, and with humorous or profane comments throw it to one of the crowd. "Who wants a waistcoat?" he was crying presently; "a regular fancy article, double-wove, stamped on every bleeding yard! Just the thing to fetch the girls! Just the thing to wear of a Sunday! and when the bloom's orf you can use it as an 'earth-rug or a tea-cozy! Just the thing—here y'are!" and he flung it to an outstretched hand.

"Now's our chance if we want a change!" whispered Robert. He meant it as a joke, and trembled as he saw Tony's face light up with amusement. "Don't be a fool!" he whispered at once. "These chaps are simply mad——"

"Could you oblige me with a suit?" asked Tony suavely, but in the clearest tones. The crowd turned at the university accent. Hitherto they had been too busy to notice the new arrival, but as they observed the opera hat, the smart broadcloth and starched linen, they recognized the presence of one of the upper classes and looked black. A murmur arose, growing in strength and hostility, and a voice suggested with painful clarity the dissection of his internal organs.

Tony took in the situation: another minute, and grumbling threats might be exchanged for action of an unpleasant kind; there was not a moment to lose. "Let me show you a thing, comrades!" he said brightly; and before the smoldering

wrath could burst into flame he took off his hat and smote it. The fabric collapsed with a ridiculous *klop*, and the crowd, taken by surprise and ready to laugh at the mere trifle, roared. Tony spun it into the air with a careless grace, far over the heads of the throng; and as all eyes were fixed on its trajectory he pushed his way forward. "A moment, please!" he urged, shouldering on toward the shop. "By your leave, sir! Excuse me, friend! Beg pardon, brother!" And behold! he was standing beside the auctioneer.

The latter glared his enmity, refusing to budge, but Tony took no heed. All trace of boredom gone, his eyes aglow with eagerness, he gesticulated for silence. The strikers, not wholly recovered from their surprise, postponed, at least for the time being, the suggested vivisection, and waited for Tony to justify himself. He was a fluent speaker, and lost no time in beginning.

"Comrades!" he cried, "you see me as I am! I am in the unhappy position of being without a hat and in evening dress. Unlooked-for events put me in a train this morning, and it was not until the train had started that I realized my absurd costume. What was I to do? Chance settled the question. Chance brought me here into your delightful neighborhood, and what do I find? A good fairy, as it were, distributing clothes for nothing!" At this point a voice called for "Cheers for the——fairy!" which were heartily given. The fairy, unused to badinage, retired from the rostrum, and Tony was quick to jump up. "You see, comrades, that I got a rise: may you soon get the same—may you get what you are asking for!" A tornado of cheers covered his corollary, "viz., six months hard," uttered in an undertone. Feeling was shifting a little in his favor now, and he swept on. "Here, I thought, is my opportunity! I am an outcast, dressed in the ridiculous garb civilization imposes on her sons—the pampered scions of the aristocracy! You have seen me discard my allegiance to the dukes: the crushing of the hat was symbolical. I hate the petty trammels of the curled and scented darlings of the rich! If you wish—if you will allow me to annex one of the admirable and useful suits of reach-me-downs—nine and elevenpence ha'penny off the peg—I will discard the remnants of an obsolete feudalism. My coat shall go! My waistcoat! Even my——"

A prude cried "Shame!" Tony seized upon the word liked a practised ranter.

"Yes!" he cried warmly, "it *is* a shame that I should be forced to wear these loathsome garments when self-respect urges me to assume a manlier garb. May I take it that I have your assent? I put it to the meeting that I forthwith st—take what I want." He paused for breath, but they were dumb before this

extraordinary creature. He hurried on. "Carried unanimously. Thank you, comrades, for this mark of appreciation and esteem. Behold!" He tore off his coat and waistcoat and trod upon them. "See how I trample the badge of servitude! Observe!" He discarded his nether apparel, knowing that he could not stick at trifles: the crowd's mood might turn if he gave it time. Luckily, his audacity was rewarded, for the audience roared with brutal joy at Tony's remarkable appearance. Without hesitation he snatched a suit from several that hung at hand, selecting the quietest he could see, talking furiously as he put it on. "And what now? See! a transformation! A man clothed in sensible dress! Hurrah for the social revolution! Hurrah for communizing the means of production and distribution—especially distribution! And all the rest of the dear old claptrap," he added sotto voce as he leaped nimbly down.

In the thunderous applause that followed the impassioned harangue Tony slipped his arms through Mr. Hedderwick's, and they were allowed to make good their escape. They walked in silence till they were clear of the crowd, and then Robert paused.

"Mr. Wild, you were simply splendid!" he said in awestruck tones. "You're one of the best chaps I've ever met."

Tony chuckled, tired but pleased.

"Not a bad effort, was it? But, by jove! I was in a funk half the time."

"So was I," confessed Robert. "I began to think I might have to use this." He pulled a revolver out of his pocket and showed it. Tony crowed with pure joy.

"Good lord, man! You've got a *pistol*! How perfectly splendid! What on earth do you carry a pistol for? Do tell me—*please*!"

Mr. Hedderwick walked on in silence for a minute, evidently weighing some problem. Presently he gave a gulp of decision.

"Mr. Wild," he said, "I haven't known you very long, but I seem to have known you for years. What I've seen has interested me—impressed me, and I like you. You know a little about me, that I'm off for a holiday on unusual lines, but unless you agree to my proposal I shan't tell you any more. You, it appears, are a free agent, young, with nothing to do. I think we might enjoy ourselves much more together than apart. In any case, if we found it didn't suit we could separate. If you feel like adventuring for a few days I think there may be a little fun. I can't

promise it, but I think so. If you agree, I'll tell you the rest when we get to The Happy Heart."

"One question," said Tony, "and don't be offended. Do you want any money?"

Mr. Hedderwick thought for a moment and frowned. Then he smiled.

"I have two and eightpence in my pocket," he said frankly. "I came out in a hurry. I could get more if I wanted, but I don't mean to try, for I have no wish to be traced yet. I'm not a cadger or a confidence-trickster. If you care to finance me till we return, so much the better for me. If not, well, I'll do without and rough it somehow. I don't mean to miss my holiday."

Tony smiled. This Hedderwick seemed an admirable fellow.

"What and where is The Happy Heart?" he asked.

"An inn at Shereling where I mean to stay."

"Forward, then, to The Happy Heart. I wish I'd bagged some boots, too. These pumps are simply cruel."

They set out once more toward the station.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE HAPPY HEART

The landlord of The Happy Heart stood leaning against his door-post, smoking a churchwarden. He was enjoying his tobacco and the summer morning, and occasionally directing a bovine thought to the identity of the solitary guest at present lying in bed up-stairs. The said guest had arrived two days before with a view to golf, for the Shereling links were well known. The Happy Heart was rarely without a golf enthusiast, since it was the only inn in Shereling, the local squire (at present yachting) owning most of the land in the neighborhood, and refusing to let "his" village become an abiding-place for tourists. Wherefore the neighboring town of Dallingham, six miles distant, reaped a golden harvest, and its hotels were out of all proportion to its population.

The guest up-stairs, to return to the landlord's vaguely moving thoughts, was a man well over seventy, but active for his age. An olive complexion hinted that he was no Briton, but the testimony of the green-keepers went to prove that his English was "floont"; and of the magnitude of his tips the odd-job man of The Happy Heart could not say enough. A man of seventy may be excused for showing reserve or desiring quiet, and the landlord did not think it curious that the visitor divided his time between the links and his bedroom: the man was certainly a gentleman, perhaps an aristocrat, and there was no doubt that his money was good. The only thing that bothered the landlord was—why had he brought no servant? It did not occur to him that solitude to the great may be worth more than the benignities of a valet.

The landlord shaded his eyes with a browned hand and looked down the road. There was nothing to be seen. With an effort that was mental as well as physical he turned himself upon the axis of the door-post and blinked in the other direction. Here the figure of a man rewarded him, walking steadily but without hurry toward the inn. "One of they golfing chaps from the station," was the landlord's first thought; "he must be mortal keen to come so early." His mild surprise changed to blank amazement as the stranger drew near. "Top hat, gloves, et setterer," he muttered. "A swell an' all! What's he doing of here?" He was still ruminating when the stranger halted, surveyed the tavern sign, and

entered. The landlord followed him into the parlor.

"A quart of beer, please," said Lionel, sitting down with relish on the nearest bench. The landlord, his surprise in no way lessened by the order, went and drew the beer. He placed it before his customer, and then said, "You're early astir, sir."

"Ten o'clock early?" said Lionel. "I thought that country people called that late."

"Not if you come by train, sir, as I suppose you did. A friend o' mine—Jeggs the farmer—drove by here twenty minutes agone. He said that the first train, the five o'clock, had only just come in, being delayed by the strikers. I suppose you came by that?"

"Yes," said Lionel, "I did."

"And did you see anything of the strike, sir?"

"No," said Lionel; "I stayed in the train—in fact, I slept all the way, being tired."

The landlord, seeing that the other was in no communicative mood, withdrew, after begging him to ring the bell if he wanted further refreshment. Lionel, left to the kindly solitude of the parlor, put up his legs on the bench with a sigh of relief, took a draught of the beer, and lighted a pipe.

He was very tired, in spite of the sleep he had spoken of. With the exception of that brief and disturbed period in the train he had not slept for some twenty-six hours, and in addition, he had been through sundry diverting experiences. The successful burglary had been a strain, and after he and Beatrice had got back to the flat they had spent the next three hours in discussing and planning. They had searched every room, nook and cranny for some trace of Mizzi, some clew as to where she might have flown. Of course it was useless: not a scrap of paper—not a single compromising document rewarded their efforts. Only some blackened ashes in the bedroom grate hinted at possibilities. She had left nearly all her clothes and personal belongings, and her boxes were unlocked as if to invite inspection. She had simply disappeared—gone, like one in a melodrama, "out into the night."

It was of the utmost importance to trace her, but what could be done? It was obvious that detectives should not be employed, for a hint of official interference might mean the death of Lukos. Beatrice and Lionel must do their own detection, and they spent their brains on the problem, apparently so hopeless.

Even the cause of Mizzi's disloyalty was anything but clear. It might be that she was in the pay of the sultan, or it might be that she wished to be revenged. But why revenge? Beatrice, with a twinkle that made Lionel feel qualms of conscience, suggested jealousy; but the suggestion was thrown out in such an airy spirit that he felt she did not really believe in it. He himself preferred to believe, and did believe, that the more sensational hypothesis should be adopted. She must be a spy, who meant to get a good price for the famous papers. But why had she not stolen them before? Perhaps she had been in treaty with the enemy but had failed to get the terms she wanted. It did not seem adequate, but it was the only solution they could suggest.

Assuming, then, that she had stolen the papers to make money, what would be her first step? Beatrice—and Lionel agreed with her—thought that she was too clever to deal with underlings: she would go as near to the fountainhead as she could, to the Turkish ambassador himself, for he was a known adherent of the old régime. She would go as soon as possible, the next morning—*i.e.*, about the present, what time Lionel was drinking beer in The Happy Heart,—but a dim recollection was beating in the brain of Beatrice that she had seen something of importance in the society news of a few days past. They searched the flat for every newspaper, and at last found the sheet they wanted. Hope beating at the doors, they scanned the column that Lionel never read, but that Beatrice studied first. Yes! there it was—the justification of her memory for seeming trivialities. "His excellency the Turkish ambassador has gone for a few days' golf to Shereling." Beatrice threw the paper away in flushed triumph, thought deeply for a few moments, and then said, "You must go there. Mizzi may follow and try to succeed at Shereling. Watch and do the best you can. I shall stay in London in case I am wrong, and keep an eye on the embassy. If she is at Shereling, try to get the treaty. I must leave you to work on your own lines. If I hear anything I shall wire to the local inn. Will you?"

Of course he said, "Yes. Is there anything else?"

"Money. No—do not protest. This is life and death, and both cost money." She ran to a little safe and returned, her hands full. "Here are notes for a hundred pounds or more. You may have to bribe. Do not refuse—it is for Lukos!"

Lionel longed to say, "Madam, my life and fortune are at your disposal. Let there be no mention of money between us." But seeing that his stock of ready cash had dwindled to twopence-halfpenny (he had bought a packet of ten cigarettes the day before, and now cursed the extravagance), he could only say, "As you will."

"Thank you," she said softly, and laid her hand on his head. He thrilled, and she administered a necessary antidote. "It is for Lukos!"

"Oh, hang Lukos!" he groaned in spirit; and then in swift repentance his thoughts mumbled, "No, no! Bless Lukos—dear old Lukos! Poor old chap!"

After this there had been nothing but idle conversation until the hour of his departure approached. Once Beatrice fell into a fit of musing and presently she said, "What a fool I was to tell Mizzi!" A younger man might have said, "Not at all: it was perfectly natural." Lionel, older, more self-reliant, and more honest, replied simply, "We all make mistakes," for he thought her folly almost incredible. She felt this—they were more than *sympathiques*—and said, "Ah! if you knew! I was very lonely one night ... lonely and sad ... I had to talk to some one, and believed her a true friend. You can imagine my self-reproach." He could, and felt himself more than justified in pressing her hand.

Presently there had been some suspense, for when the time came for him to leave the flat, at half past four, Beatrice had peeped from the window and imagined that she saw a man watching the house. Lionel peeped too, but could see nothing. Nevertheless they had waited another ten minutes, as long as they dared if he was to catch the first train. But at length he resolved to risk a spy, and after a brief, tense, but outwardly calm "good-by" he had left the house. By taking a cab he reached Euston in time, and at last was established in the train. So far as he knew, he had not been followed: the only stranger he had noticed had been a man who was in the train before he was on the platform, so from him there could be nothing to fear.

And now he was in The Happy Heart, resting after a dusty three-mile walk from Shereling station, drinking good English beer, far from all thought of Oriental craft and scheming. He was in Shereling, on the second stage of his fond adventure. What was to be the first step?

In spite of the rest and beer he felt discontented, and glumly wished that Beatrice were at hand. To what end? To advise, direct, console, or soothe? He hardly knew, but darkly suspected that it was for the weaker reason. Idly he allowed himself to remember the touch of her delightful fingers, cool, nervous and alluring: the seduction of her hair, the brilliant command of her eyes. But it was not these only that inspired his grateful remembrance: it was also her lovely personality, her courage, her charm, herself. Of course it could not be love; that was absurd. It was a flame kindled by the sympathy of a comrade—the kind of

comrade he had never known. Possibly the fact that he had not enjoyed any extensive woman-friendships during the recent years had made him exaggerate her qualities: she might be rare, but could she be so rare as he thought her? Supposing he met some other delightful woman soon, might not the pleasant image of Beatrice lose something of its luster? He shook himself impatiently; it was a foolish thought. Other women might be delightful, charming, desirable, but there could only be a single Beatrice. How pretty she was! How—and here the figure of Lukos beckoned a grim warning: "It is time you put your shoulder to the wheel, my ... *friends*!"

"All right, old chap—*all right*!" said Lionel petulantly to the shade. "Don't be in such a beastly hurry. It's not love ... it's not love, I tell you. Just a superlative esteem for your splendid wife.... Your *wife*," he added with a martyr's sigh. And then he raised the tankard, feeling that it ought to hold Tokay. "Here's to her!" he murmured, drinking deep. He put the pewter down, but raised it again. "And to you, old chap!" he added generously. "... Hullo! there's none left. Beg pardon."

As he finished, the door opened and admitted a chubby little clergyman, who sat down with a courteous "Good morning!" Lionel made haste to remove his legs from the bench. The landlord followed close upon the heels of the newcomer. "Morning, sir," said the landlord respectfully. "Will you take anything?"

"Draught cider. Half a pint," said the clergyman briskly. The landlord disappeared, and he turned, smiling. "You should try the cider of The Happy Heart," he said—"that is, if you have not done so already. I allow myself that as a concession to the flesh."

"And a sensible concession, too," replied Lionel heartily. He was pleased that a gentleman in Holy Orders did not think it undignified to drink in a common "pub." "I have been drinking beer, and very good it is—or was. But I must try the cider, if I remain here."

"Staying long?" asked the other pleasantly. And when Lionel said, guardedly, that he had not quite settled yet, the clergyman did not pursue the question, but passed on to other themes. "I am the local parson," he said chattily. "My name is Peters." As he spoke the landlord came back with the clerical cider and a telegram.

"Does your name happen to be Mortimer, sir?" he asked. "Because if so, this here telegram is for you."

"It is," said Lionel in some surprise. The wire could only be from Beatrice, but he had not expected any communication from her as yet. With a brief apology he opened the yellow envelope and read its contents. It was all he could do to keep from betraying his astonishment. The wire read as follows:—

> "Hope you had pleasant journey. My suspicions deepen. Try stay Arkwright twin. Suspect even her. Wait further wire.—BLAIR."

He read the telegram three times, but it was not till the third reading that he grasped the import of "Arkwright twin." He knew no one of the name of Arkwright, nor had he ever claimed acquaintance with a twin. "The nearest I could do is triplets," he thought. "Johnson of the House was a triplet, I remember, but that's no good to me.... Who on earth...?" And then he recalled Beatrice saying that she had a twin sister who had disapproved of her stage career. Of course it must be she. He had been so accustomed to think of his preceptress as Beatrice Blair that he had almost forgotten it must be a stage name. And so she was really an Arkwright—rather a pretty name on the whole, though unworthy of her high claims; failing Beatrice Blair, it ought to have been Rosalind ... Rosalind what? Rosalind Roy ... Rosalind Gay ... Rosalind Ebbsfleet ... Rosalind Wise.... He smiled as his thoughts played with a score of dainty conceits. He was roused to common sense and depression by the remembrance that she was really Mrs. Lukos. But was Lukos a surname? "Let's hope not," he reflected sourly.

"No bad news, I trust," said the chubby clergyman, with a polite but ecclesiastical inflection.

"No—no," answered Lionel abruptly. He abandoned Rosalind completely and tried to arrange his thoughts. "By the way, do you happen to know any one of the name of Arkwright in the neighborhood?"

The chubby clergyman looked interested.

"I do and I don't," he said, pulling his chair close to the table and leaning on his elbows. "A Miss Arkwright lives at The Quiet House. She has been the tenant for only two months, and nobody has seen her yet."

"What!"

"It sounds odd," said the clergyman with the smile of one who has an interesting story for a virgin audience, "but it is true. She calls on nobody, and denies herself

to every caller. She is never seen in the village except when driving in her motor, and I am sorry to say that she does not come to church."

"But surely something is known of her,—through the servants, for instance——"

"She has a housekeeper, I believe, who makes friends with nobody; a dumb gardener and a dumb footman. A little extraordinary, eh?" He rubbed his hands with zest. "But it is true none the less. Of course, all sorts of gossip have been greedily accepted. I never listen to gossip—one has to think of one's position—but some things can not be hid.... They say she takes motor drives at night,—every night. I do not credit the 'every'—exaggeration is so prevalent. I always believe less than half what the villagers tell me—that is, what drifts round to my ears."

"But what does she do all day?" asked Lionel. Clearly this was a queer state of affairs.

"I do not know. Her grounds are large. Perhaps she gardens."

"You do not think there is any fear of ... of a scandal?" asked Lionel in a pained voice, anxious not to wound.

"I trust not ... I trust not. I have no reason to think.... Of course, things *do* look odd, and my wife says ... but, no! I am sure she must be wrong. I ... I hope so."

"Mrs. Peters has heard——?" hazarded Lionel. The clergyman shook his head with dignity.

"Nothing. Nothing. My wife called, but was refused admittance. Naturally she, as the vicar's wife, felt a little hurt...."

"Of course," agreed Lionel. "But no other friends come? Nobody in motors?"

"I believe not. I should have heard,—it would have drifted round to me in the course of time."

"Nobody stays here, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes—golfers. One is here now—an excellent man,—old and of foreign origin, I believe. He calls himself Beckett; but he has told me (in confidence) that he is here for rest, incognito. He may be somebody of importance—an excellent man, however. He gave me a guinea for our restoration fund the day I showed him the church."

"The ambassador!" was Lionel's swift conclusion; and then aloud, "Has he been here long?"

"Three days. For golf. We have played a few rounds." He smiled at some hidden joy. "He is not very good, for even I can give him a stroke a hole. Uncommunicative—very, but interesting, a gentleman, and I should say a seeker."

"Ah!" said Lionel, getting up. "Well, I must go on. Can you tell me how to find The Quiet House?"

The other gasped.

"You are going to *call*!" He recollected himself and apologized. "I beg your pardon, but ... go straight down the road ... the prettiest house on the right. By the way, if you are staying here I should be happy to take you round the links. Or show you the church——"

"Thank you," said Lionel. "You are very good, but I don't know how long I shall be staying."

"Well, come round and smoke a pipe after dinner," suggested the clergyman. His eagerness to secure one who knew Miss Arkwright was poorly disguised. "I would say, come and dine, but Mrs. Peters...."

He left it to be understood that Mrs. Peters' permission must first be obtained. Lionel could hardly restrain a smile. "Thank you," he said; "I can not promise yet, but I will remember. Good-by."

He left Mr. Peters rejoicing over a fresh piece of news that had "drifted round," which he meant to retail to his wife at the earliest opportunity. As he sat down again to finish his modest allowance, Tony Wild and Mr. Hedderwick made an unobtrusive appearance. They had watched Lionel turn the corner before approaching, for Robert was not anxious to meet his late visitor by daylight.

"Good morning, sir," said Tony. He turned to his friend,—"What's yours? Mine is beer, and lots of it!"

"Mine's bed," said Robert, and sat down with a yawn.

CHAPTER XII

CROSSED ORBITS

There are few things more restful than watching other people working hard, and the sensation is doubly piquant when one is sitting in the shade watching the worker toiling beneath the sun. Mrs. Peters was sitting in the shade; and though she would have denied the suggestion of idleness (for was she not picking the names of likely helpers for the imminent bazaar?), it was not unpleasant to observe Brown, the odd-job man, mowing the lawn. He seemed willing, though of course you must remember he had been taken on only two days ago, and besides, knew that the mistress had her eye on him; sober, too, refusing beer in favor of lemonade—but there! that might be hypocrisy, for there is always something, and these quiet men are often worse than the patently unsteady. Probably he gambled.... Still, at present he was undeniably working, and he had sense enough to oil the machine every quarter of an hour.

The vicarage lawn was big enough for two tennis-courts, with a little over for croquet in miniature or clock-golf. It took, theoretically, an able-bodied man an hour and a half to "run the machine over it." The optimistic phrase was the vicar's, who had not run the machine (or its predecessors) for twenty years. A succession of practical runners made the sum come out differently; and one rebellious soul—"of course, my dear, a radical chapel-goer"—had invited his employer to shove the qualified mower himself and see if 'e could do it in a qualified howerananarf. The sporting offer was not accepted, but the idealistic standard maintained. It was, in fact, a grass-cutting bogy who had never been beaten yet.

"Be careful, Brown," said Mrs. Peters, preparatory to a departure indoors, "to gather up *all* the grass and put it in the sack. It looks so untidy if you leave any lying about."

"Yes, ma'am," said Brown respectfully; "I'll be sure to do so. I ought to finish in half an hour or so."

"Less, if you *work*, Brown," said Mrs. Peters reprovingly. She knew he had been mowing for little over an hour, but discipline must be kept up. Besides, does not

Browning say, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?" Without waiting for possible protests she went into the house.

The odd-job man smiled.

"She's all right," he said softly to no one in particular. "Oh, lor', *yes*!... *She's* all right."

He whistled softly, but without obvious discontent, and made a change in his labors. Giving the machine a well-earned rest, he began to gather up the cut grass from a square of canvas that lay extended on the ground and stuffed it into the sack referred to by Mrs. Peters. This task brought him near the tall privet-hedge, reinforced by a four-foot paling, which sheltered the vicarage garden from the road. He had hardly accounted for a dozen armfuls when a voice from the other side of the hedge said, "Good morning."

Regardless of Mrs. Peters' late instructions, the odd-job man dropped a generous portion of grass and stood transfixed. "So you've come!" he said quietly but distinctly. "For goodness' sake let's have a look at your pretty face!"

The privet-hedge parted, and a damsel of twenty-three smiled upon the gratified Brown.

"Is that better?" she asked.

"Lots," replied the odd-job man, pressing closer to the hedge. "But I tell you what would be better still——"

"Yes?"

"I shall have to whisper it...."

The damsel, full of innocent curiosity, bent forward to listen. The odd-job man, congratulating himself on extraordinary cunning, bent forward and essayed a kiss of welcome. The intended recipient, however, seemed to be possessed of a sixth sense or instinct, for, when his lips were on the point of meeting hers, she drew back with a melodious cry of surprise. The kiss was too late to be checked, and unhappily was bestowed upon a bunch of privet.

The odd-job man mildly whispered the equivalent of "How very annoying!" and then remonstrated in a louder tone. He pointed out that he had not seen his visitor for a week, and that under the circumstances the least she could do, etc.

"Ye ... es," agreed the damsel, parting the hedge once more, "it is true, all that you say. But you forget that you have not earned it yet."

"Holy Moses!" said the odd-job man, appealing to the heavens. "Here I chuck my job in London at a word—or, rather, a letter from you! I come down here got up as a laborer; I hang about the blessed village till I'm sick for the town and you again; I get taken on here to work—and, mind you, it *is* work, though I don't grumble at that. And it's all for to keep an eye on a chap I've never seen."

"And not for me?"

"You silly chu—I beg your pardon, miss—that is, my dear! What I do mean is, who are you gettin' at? Of *course*, it's for you, and I'm going through with it. But I do think you might give me a bit of encouragement like, when you come at last ____"

He paused; there was the sound of steps coming down the road, and he had no wish to be overheard courting. Thus drawn back to real life, conscience pricked him, and he wondered if there was any danger of Mrs. Peters reappearing. In a panic he looked over his shoulder.... No! the lawn was deserted: he still had time. But when he turned to the hedge he was surprised to see his love with her head pushed right through the privet, scarlet from excitement. A hand, too, appeared, enjoining caution and silence.

You must have recognized ere this that Brown, the odd-job man beneath the thrall of Mrs. Peters, was none other than Mr. Henry Brown, cab-proprietor, under different auspices. You will remember, then, the type of man he was but a few chapters ago, middle-aged, reserved, cautious and a little unenterprising. But you will not forget that love had made a change in his habits, outlook and élan. He was younger now, more alert, audacious and full of guile. So you must not be surprised that when he saw his lady beckoning, appealing to him to come closer, be careful, not talk, but observe—when he saw her head (and it was a very pretty head) framed in harmonious privet—when he saw this gift of fortune, you must not be surprised that he accepted it. He drew near and kissed her very quietly but very heartily. She, for some obscure reason wishing to remain unseen, did not dare to withdraw her head or box his ears. All she could do was to bite her lip and stamp her dainty heel, while she remained, ostrich-like, in the hedge.

The footsteps passed, but before they began to grow fainter Henry Brown repeated the salutation. "Couldn't help it!" he said meekly, answering the sparkle in her eyes. "You shouldn't tempt a man. Now, what's the row?"

She was too excited to rebuke him; the moment was too precious to be lost. "You see him?" she queried, pointing to the retreating figure of Lionel, who was on the road to The Quiet House. "Well, that is the man you are to watch! That is he from whom you are to recover the document!"

"The deuce it is!" said Henry, gazing after Lionel with interest. "Well, he's big enough to give trouble...."

"You are not afraid?"

"Not particularly," he said with a slow smile. "It's not a job I hanker after, but I've promised you to try, and I will try. You'll tell me, I dare say, what you think the best way of setting about it?"

"Of course. You are far too stupid to think for yourself. And now, good-by!"

"I say, you're not going! And I had such a lot to talk about ... that wedding, for instance...."

"What wedding?" She paused, chin in air.

"Come! that's a good 'un. Ours."

"Pstt! the assurance of these male creatures!—As if I would marry a man who kisses me by force! No, Mr. Brown, do not count on that. Do what you have promised first, and then I will think about it. If I choose, well ... If I do not choose, well ... I promise nothing."

"That's a poor sort of bargain."

"It is no bargain: I do not bargain. I give an order. Good-by. Oh, I will write to you——"

"Thank you—thank you——" he began.

"To tell you what to do. I shall not be far, but you must not attempt to see me without my leave."

She turned on her heel and marched down the road. The odd-job man whistled in amused dismay. "They're all alike," he muttered as he turned to his work again and met the vicar's wife. She was coming from the house and wore a severe expression.

"Did I hear you talking, Brown?"

"I can't say, ma'am," he answered stolidly. She frowned.

"Be good enough not to equivocate," she commanded. "*Were* you talking?"

"I often talk aloud to myself," said Henry mildly. He was an honest man and did not take kindly to lies, even of the whitest. Mrs. Peters frowned again.

"Indeed!" she said icily. "Do you mean to say you were not talking to a young woman through the hedge?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Henry, "I was. I suppose I'm allowed to rest for a minute now and then."

"Rest is a very different thing from philandering. That I can not allow. It looks very bad from the road to see the vicarage servants gossiping or worse through the hedge. Remember, Brown, it must not happen again. I can not understand one of our village girls——"

She paused interrogatively, but Henry was not so silly as to fall into the trap. He began to oil the machine, and even Mrs. Peters did not like to ask pointblank who his sweetheart was. Instead, she finished with a snap, "—making herself so cheap."

She went back to the house again. Henry straightened up and glared after her. "They're all alike!" he said again; but how he could include two such different people as Mrs. Peters and his adored in the same condemnation is hard to understand. The words of the sentence, it is true, were identical; but the inflection hinted at a great gulf fixed between the two offenders. Possibly they were charged with different offenses.

"They're all alike...." Are they? Does the same essential lurk beneath the surface? Supposing we could dissect Mrs. Peters, Alicia, Mizzi, Beatrice Blair, and a thousand Ermyntrudes or Sallies, should we find the same germ of woman? Take Lionel's evidence, if it were available. You might safely assert that to him Beatrice was different from and superior to any other woman you could produce. Henry Brown would as stoutly hold the same of his anonymous sweetheart. Mr. Peters and Mr. Hedderwick we may hope would take an identical line, or at least they would have once. But these are, or have been, lovers, the blindest of mortals, and their evidence is too partial to be trustworthy. A cynic like Pope would tell you that every woman is at heart a rake, and might find a score of others to support him. A Shaw might produce a monster like Ann Whitfield and

brazenly say she was typical. A Chesterton would talk of women being sublime as individuals but horrible in a herd. A son might say that his mother was perfect, but he, too, would be partial. What is the truth about woman? Only a woman can say, and she would find it hard to take a detached view. Probably truth was partly expressed by the odd-job man in words—wholly expressed by his words and inflection. They are human and feminine if you probe deep enough, but there are variations, unimagined harmonies and discords for the seeker. "They're all alike"—with a difference, and no man can learn the whole truth from a text-book. The text-book can give him elementary rules which may serve him well, but he must be prepared to find plenty of exceptions. The student, however, need not fear monotony.

But while we have been indulging in cheap philosophy Mr. Brown's sweetheart has got well down the road, following at a considerable distance the footsteps of Lionel. Evidently she is in a good humor with the world, for she hums an air that has a sprightly sound as of the boulevards or cabarets, and she stops to pick a wild rose. She is smiling at her thoughts—possibly at the lamentable lack of self-control exhibited by her lover, possibly at the remembrance of the grass still to be mown and neatly gathered. And as she is in a good humor, self-possessed, and the air is of the balmiest, is it wonderful that she should smile absently on a good-looking stranger sitting by the roadside, smoking a cigarette? Surely not, as the stranger is Tony Wild, who has left Mr. Hedderwick exhausted at The Happy Heart, while he strolls out to examine the lie of the land.

"Good morning," says Tony courteously, raising his cap. He does not get up, for that might frighten her away. "Can you tell me which is the road to Hetton-le-Hole? Forgive me asking, but...."

"I have never heard of it," says the lady, with a smile that shows she penetrates Tony's elementary artifice. "I am sorry.... Good morning."

Tony deliberately flicks the ash from his cigarette.

"What a bore!" he observes with a fluent laziness in his voice, and of course the lady can not continue her progress while he is speaking. It would look so prudish. "I was awfully keen on seeing Hetton-le-Hole, but nobody here seems to know the road, so I suppose I shall have to give up the idea. I say, don't you find life rather a bore?" It was an abrupt change of subject, but there seemed no inconsequence as the words dropped idly from his lips. He appeared to be talking at random for an obvious purpose, but with an unaffected sincerity.

"Nothing to do, I mean, and not a vast amount to see. One day following another, and so forth, you know...."

"Heavens, no!" replied the lady with an amused contempt. "There is so much to see—to ask—to think about! What can a young man like you think of himself if he is bored at ... at twenty-six?"

"Good shot!" said Tony. "I say, please forgive me being so forward and pushing and all that, and do sit down and talk to me. I should be tremendously gratified, and I'd do my best to amuse you."

"I have stayed too long already," she said with a crisp note of rebuke. "I have neither the time nor the wish to stop and relieve the tedium of bored strangers. I hope you will soon find the road you speak of."

She turned and went on her way. Tony smiled good-naturedly; really, she had been quite lenient, though he had hardly deserved all she said and implied. She was more than pretty and was evidently no fool. A lady? N—no ... but ... was it worth following up? Should he try to engineer a small flirtation or be content with the fair promises held out by Mr. Hedderwick? N ... no ... Yes! She had spurned his lightly-proffered homage to her charms, and amour propre would not allow him to give in without a struggle. He was only too willing in most things to step aside of his own free will—things so soon lost their interest; but to be forced to play the part of rejected spectator, that could not be permitted. His eyes followed her smilingly. "I bet she turns and waves!" thought the despicable Tony. "She's a charming lady's maid who likes fun, respects herself, and means to be treated with correctness—when she chooses. She will turn and wave before reaching that bend in the road. And *I* will be stand-offish and refuse to reply. A perfect cause of offense, with a delightful misunderstanding to follow. *But*, I shall follow her secretly along the hedge and find out where she lives. Admirable!"

She had gone some little distance, but still did not turn round. Worshipers of beauty, modesty, good feeling and decorous behavior, rejoice! She did not turn round! Her gay *svelte* figure marched bravely along, virginal defiance in her shoulders and the swing of her tailor-made skirt. The fragments of a gallant whistle floated back to Tony, and he murmured "Bravado!" with an uneasy doubt. The curve of the road was close at hand now: a few more yards would carry her past in triumph, and the sex be vindicated. Tony was in painful agitation, for his knowledge of woman and powers of swift diagnosis were at

stake. Three yards were left—two—hope seemed dead. Then, alas! she stopped and a smile crept to his lips. But she did not turn round—there is still a loophole for the sex,—she did not turn round! All she did was to open her reticule and take her handkerchief from it. As the handkerchief was withdrawn a bit of pasteboard was caught in its folds and fell—unnoticed?—on the road. Tony waited with vast contentment until she had turned the corner. Then with a light heart he followed and picked up the card. He read the inscription with amused curiosity. It was, "Miss Arkwright, The Quiet House."

CHAPTER XIII

RATHER STAGY

After Beatrice had bidden Lionel good-by in the early dawn she did the most sensible thing possible: she went to bed. But it is one thing to go to bed and another to go to sleep, as many a sufferer—from insomnia, love, indigestion, or kindred ailments—has found to his cost. You feel weary, oppressed with the want of sleep, let us say, yawnsome—in a word, ready to drop off the moment you are between the sheets. But, if a white night be inscribed in the book of Fate, how changed the mood as soon as the light is out! At once, almost, you lose that sense of impending slumber and become wide awake, clear-eyed and keen of brain. Something occurs to interest your mind and you meditate perspicaciously thereon. Another thought succeeds, and another, and you grow more wakeful every moment. Soon you begin to say, "I must go to sleep now," and resolutely try to refuse to think. But resolution is vain before insomnia. Eyelids may be tightly shut, but the masked eyeballs still peer vigilantly into the void: hands may clench themselves in the hopeless effort to compose the will and induce the wished-for slumber: the alert body may strive to cheat itself by observing the accustomed ritual—first on the right side, then left, then right again—in the expectation of influencing mind by matter: droves of sheep may be counted passing through innumerable gates—poems recited till the very thought of verse revolts—numerals repeated by the ticking brain—but still you are far from the haven. It seems that

> "Not poppy, nor mandragora,
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world"

could bestow the most blessed of all boons. And at last you give up the unequal struggle and try to make the best of it.

Failing drugs—and one has to be a smart society lady, a broken man or woman, for them—there are various palliatives. You may turn on the light and read till sleep comes with soothing fingers upon tired brows. Or, if young and enterprising, you can go for a walk and see the dawn. Or sometimes an impromptu bedroom picnic—bread and cheese and a bottle of beer raided thief-

wise from the pantry, taking great care not to let the stairs creak and alarm the house—may have excellent results. These, and a score of similar expedients, may be recommended with assurance to the patient. And if they fail, at least they have passed an hour or so more pleasantly than in mere acquiescence.

Beatrice lay awake, sorely against her will. She knew that sleep was what she needed, and would need still more within some fourteen hours. The strain of acting, followed by her preposterous adventure at the magnanimous churchwarden's, had used up more of her nervous resources than was desirable. Sleep was therefore the obvious thing. But alas! it proved the impossible thing, too, and she lay restless, aglow with thought, waiting impatiently for what she knew would not come.

What did she think of during those hours of frenzied vision? Was it of Lukos, waiting in an eastern prison for the news that would set him free to join her? Was it her dead son, the little boy she had spoken of to Lionel? Or Turkey, the land of her adoption, struggling for freedom, enmeshed with perils, the slave of diplomatic and selfish adventures? Her art—had it a place within those weary wheels of thought; her success on the stage, the triumphs of the footlights—illusory, but so real in seeming, so satisfying and complete? Or Lionel—did he whip her straining fancies to a wilder effort toward the goal? Something of all these may have engaged her, for each was inextricably interwoven with the others. Lukos—Lionel—the sultan—Mizza—the Hedderwicks—the ambassador—a hundred minor characters, "supers" in the drama of her life, wheeled hither and thither, mocking, defying, questioning. The horrible lines of Wilde burned in letters of fire upon the wall:

> "Slim shadows hand in hand:
> About, about, in ghostly rout
> They trod a saraband:
> And the damned grotesques made arabesques,
> Like the wind upon the sand."

Each must have had his place in the drama, but the important question was, who played the lead? Lukos or Lionel—honor and faith or ... inclination? Yet that is hardly a fair way of putting it: she must not define her interest as inclination, hinting at something more potent. Interest one may admit without qualification: Lionel had saved her life, was an attractive and pleasant young man, and had been her guest for a week. Of course Beatrice was interested; she would have been hard or inhuman otherwise. But did her inclination show signs of becoming

something more? Could she honestly say in the stereotyped phrase that "he was nothing to her?"—nothing being the antithesis of everything. In that sense she could say it, for he was certainly not everything. But was "nothing" exact? Ah!...

At least she must have found comfort in the reflection that she had sent him away on an errand that would avert all danger, if successfully carried out. She had been ... weak ... once or twice, but such a weakness may find a ready forgiveness, considering the circumstances and the expiation. Which of us, oh, censorious reader, would have been as strong as Beatrice?

Still, she could not sleep, and for the present that outweighed all moral hesitations and scruples. At seven o'clock she gave up the unequal contest, dressed and went out for a short walk. The air calmed her, and she gained a respite from the self-examination for an hour. Then, after making an effort to eat some breakfast, she sat down to smoke a cigarette and think again about Lionel. What was he like, the real man, the true Lionel? Was he a man to be trusted, a man to be relied on, the sort of man, so to speak, one would like (supposing it were possible) to marry? Lionel as a husband.... "Husband" brought a smile, a blush and a frown to the face of Beatrice, and it is to be hoped that the shade of Lukos noticed the blush as well as the smile. "Heavens! and I have only known him a week!" thought Beatrice with self-chastisement: "besides ..." Precisely! There are so many "besideses" in real life.

But undoubtedly, and without any disloyalty to shades, living or otherwise, he was the dearest of boys. He had behaved extraordinarily well throughout—extraordinarily well, for actresses have unique opportunities of studying man's weakness—not only in the cab and the dressing-room, but during the week of voluntary imprisonment. Polished, controlled, devoted without being tiresome, he was certainly the dearest of boys. Human, too, and humanity was a quality that appealed to Beatrice; nor did he lack a sense of humor and romance. But she had only known him for a week, and could she possibly form an adequate judgment in such a period? "He may be acting all the time," she thought with a dismal pucker of the forehead, "and I ought to know how easy it can be to act. What a fool I am to worry over things!"

She threw away the half-smoked cigarette with a petulant gesture and continued to worry. The remembrance of Mizzi flashed across her mind—her prettiness and Lionel's evasive declarations. These had been glib enough, no doubt, but glibness and dexterity were not sufficient to lull the suspicions of Beatrice. "He is a man," she argued angrily, perversely pleased in lashing her apprehensions,

"and a bachelor. What else could one expect? Of course, he may not have kissed her, but.... If he has, well ... what right have I to...."

Her petulance increased with every moment, and when the bell rang about ten o'clock she felt more like a naughty ill-tempered child than anything else. Remembering that now she had no maid, she controlled herself and opened the door. Her face cleared, for on the threshold stood a man she liked, her manager.

"Hullo, Ashford!" she said. "Come in! I'm glad you've come, for I'm bored to tears."

Ashford Billing, a smartly-dressed man of thirty-six, entered. One would hardly have guessed him to be connected with the stage, for he had a mustache, was well-groomed without over-emphasizing the fact, and had a pleasant look of self-reliance without swagger. He was tall and lean, as if he was accustomed to keep himself in hard condition, and though an American you could scarcely have guessed it from his speech. Four years in England, during which time he had studied to erase transatlantic idioms and intonations with a view of playing on the stage, had been crowned with almost complete success. Only a stray word, a phrase occasionally, showed that he was not a native-born.

"It's an early call, Miss Blair," he said pleasantly as he followed her into the sitting-room. "Partly business and partly pleasure. Which will you have first?"

"Oh, pleasure," answered Beatrice carelessly: "I'm tired of business. Will you smoke?"

"No, thank you. Well, I'll plunge into the pleasure right away, though there's some business in it, too. You know I'm not the man to beat about the bush, so I'll ask you straight out if you're still in the same mind as you were six months ago?"

Beatrice made an irritated movement of her shoulders.

"Oh, bother!" she answered. "Fancy calling at this hour to ask me that!"

"Sorry," said Ashford Billing. He did not appear at all excited, though his eyes gleamed. "My time's hardly my own just now—working day and night over the new production, provincial tours and syndicates. And you never seem to be at home at reasonable hours—I called twice last week, but Mizzi said you were out."

Beatrice blushed, and turned to the window to hide the blush. She remembered

her instructions to Mizzi.

"So I thought I'd come now on the off chance," continued Billing. "Dear Miss Blair, I may not appear romantic or in earnest, but I am. I'm a plain man and want to marry you. You refused me once, but I don't like giving up altogether. Is it any good?"

"Not a bit," said Beatrice decisively. "Sorry, Ashford: I like you awfully, but not that way. So you must take that as final."

"I will for the present," he answered, looking gloomy for a moment. Then he brightened up. "But at the risk of offending I warn you that I mean to ask you again later on, in case you change your mind. In the American dictionary there's no such word as 'impossible.'"

Beatrice was roused at this.

"Look here, Ashford!" she said, biting her lip, "don't you talk to me like that! It's no good, and I won't have it! You'll make me lose my temper in a minute. I've never encouraged you, though I've always been fond of you in a friendly way."

"Then still there may——"

"You've as much chance," said Beatrice, with flashing eyes, "as a bob-tailed dog in fly time! There's one of your own Americanisms for you, and I hope you like it!"

Ashford Billing could not help laughing, though Beatrice seemed in a thoroughly bad temper.

"Say, that's fierce!" he said, relapsing. "Where did you hear that?" Then he became graver. "But I won't worry you any more. I'm sorry ... but I guess I'll study to improve my manners."

"Let's get to business," said Beatrice, sitting down. "I'm tired to death of this. What is it you want?"

"Well," he said, following her example, "I came here for two things. The first was to ask you to be my—oh, yes! good enough! I know that's a back number now. For the present, anyway. If that didn't materialize I wanted to know if you'd care to tour the provinces in *A False Step*. You know we close down in a week, and I'm going to start the tour—number one towns only—in the autumn."

Beatrice shook her head.

"No; I'm going to take a rest."

"You'll have lots of time to take a rest before the tour starts. Why not——"

"Look here, Ashford! You seem to think that I don't know my own mind in anything. I've already refused your offer for a London shop, and I don't mean to think about the provinces. See? I won't be worried any more—I'm——"

She paused and suddenly burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands. Ashford Billing, long accustomed to the vagaries of leading ladies and hardened in a rough school, was completely taken aback. He had known Beatrice for a fine actress and a finer woman—a woman who had charm, good looks and character. To see her break down for no apparent reason was not merely distressing—it was a shock.

"Say, little girl," he said kindly—and there was no hint of disrespect, though on other occasions he was scrupulous in his use of "Miss Blair"—"I'm real sorry. I didn't know you'd feel bad about it. What's the trouble? Can I be of any help?"

Beatrice recovered herself, feeling extremely ashamed.

"It's only nerves," she replied, drying her eyes with vicious dabs. "I didn't sleep last night. That's all. Give me a cigarette."

Billing opened his case and gave her one, looking gravely at her. There was something behind this, he thought, but what it was he could not guess.

"I won't worry you any more," he said quietly. "I'd have liked to book you for that tour, but I guess you know best. You've had a tiring season—long runs are the very deuce, though they pay the manager. You take that rest you talk of and make it a good one. But let me know when you feel like getting to work again."

"Thanks, Ashford," said Beatrice, smoking quickly. "You're a good sort. But, honestly, I'm thinking of giving up the stage altogether. I'm getting sick of it."

Billing, who had had the kudos of giving Beatrice her first chance, felt his heart sink. But, realizing that this was not the time to urge mature reflection, he held his peace. Beatrice talked idly a few minutes, trying to appear natural, but the effort was great.

"Where are you going for a holiday?" she asked.

"Flying," he answered. "Across the channel, perhaps. I've never done it yet."

"What a queer boy you are," she said, looking at him fixedly. "What on earth made you take to the aeroplane?"

"Why on earth did I take to the sky?" he laughed. "I did it to advertise my first production over here. It was the right goods, too, for every one talked about the actor-manager-air-man. When I found how exciting it was, I couldn't stop. That's all."

"You're odd creatures, you men," said Beatrice, musing. "I should have thought that managing theaters was exciting enough."

"Change of excitement—just like falling in love with a new sweetheart," he smiled.

"Ah! that sounds like a man! Tell me, Ashford, do all men run after every pretty face they see?"

"You want me to give away trade secrets, eh? Well, I suppose most men do ... until they're hooked."

"Ashford! *Hooked!* How loathsome!"

"I beg your pardon ... I was thinking as a cynical bachelor. What I mean is that I suppose most men swear off the pursuit once they've promised."

"And never relapse?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The decent ones don't, but even they sometimes have a bit of a struggle. Take an extreme case: suppose a decent chap gets engaged, and force of circumstances keeps him apart from his divinity for ... years...."

"He ought to feel bound in honor not even to think of another!" flashed Beatrice.

Billing sighed.

"He ought, but he's up against a tough proposition. At least, the decent one tries...."

"Men are horrible," she said wearily.

"Pretty horrible," he agreed, "but there's an amazing lot of unseen goodness hidden in the dirt.... Men aren't so bad ... some men. But we're getting too serious. I must be off. It's been a bad morning's work for me." He smiled—not very whole-heartedly, but still he smiled. "You refuse both my offers. But you'll let me know if I can ever do anything, won't you? That's merely friendly."

Beatrice did not smile, but she looked appreciatively at him.

"Thanks, Ashford," she said. "Yes; I've just remembered one thing you can do. Read a play by a friend of mine."

He groaned in comic despair.

"All right!" he said, "but don't make me promise to produce it. Remember this is my living!"

"No; I only want you to read it. If it's bad, say so like a man: don't put the poor wretch off with the usual sugary criticism. And don't let it lie for months with all the rest of the lumber. You managers are cruel to authors, and you've had this one lying idle a long time."

He did not deny the charge, save by a smile.

"I'll read it this week, sure," he said. "What's it called, and who's the author?"

"I forget the name of the play. The author is a Mr. Mortimer."

She said the name quite easily and without a blush, but Billing on the instant thought, "Who the devil is he? And what does she want to push his play for?" But he did not allow his face even to hint at surprise. He just held out his hand and said good-by, as naturally as if he had not been rejected without any hope of a future recantation. For though he professed optimism, in his heart he felt that Beatrice was not for him, and the knowledge hurt.

"Good-by," he said cheerily. "Mind you have a good holiday, and come back to work soon."

"Good-by, Ashford," she said, trying to keep back some unnecessary tears. She had known him for some time and guessed what he was thinking. He, she was sure, was at least one of the men who tried. "You're a good sort. Good-by."

Then she telephoned to a garage: "I want my car at two o'clock!"

CHAPTER XIV

A RISE IN THE WORLD

The Happy Heart was an ideal resting-place for a tired man, whether town or country-bred. To the former it made the stronger appeal, for there could be no greater contrast than between The Happy Heart and the flaring brazen public-houses which offer solace to the dwellers of the pavement. These attract by their fierce pledges of light, warmth and the stimulated oblivion of the moment; The Happy Heart draws the heart-strings alike of the physically tired and mentally jaded. Apart from the promise of good liquor—and all who go to Shereling can rely on the promise being fulfilled—it makes an esthetic appeal. For it is still an old-fashioned country tavern of the prettiest type, destined to make even the total abstainer wonder whether he be so absolutely in the right after all. It boasts a porch, over which a Virginia creeper spreads its amorous leaves; rose-bushes waft a welcome and the sure hope of peace to plowman or golfer after the day's striving. A meditative cow, apparently an artistic fixture, chews the cud in a field hard by from day to day. Smoke curls lazily from a huge and ancient chimney, as much as to say, "Be of good cheer! I come from the kitchen!" And there is, too, one of those signposts you see sometimes in the south,—a pillar placed separate from the inn itself with a swinging board above. The superscription, by the way, was due to the fancy of the squire's wife. When the squire entered into his inheritance and married he had had dreams. He wished to be like Dogberry and have everything handsome about him. His wife, a pretty imaginative creature, had imbued him with ideas for the betterment of his dependents, and he had tried to fulfil her wishes. He inclined to the practical side, and to him was due at least half the credit for the improved housing and sanitation of Shereling. She, practical enough, thought that estheticism should show an equal growth; and to her shade the visitor does reverence when he admires the profuse planting of trees, the village library with its good pictures, the addition of a tower to the church, and a fine organ. Last, but not least, she persuaded her husband to have the inn called The Happy Heart, instead of The Bull and Dog.

In this desirable residence Tony and Robert Hedderwick sat at two o'clock, enjoying their cigars after a copious lunch. Robert had slept the whole morning, and now felt a new man. Tony was tired, but disinclined for bed,—there had

been too much to interest him up to the present, and he felt there might be more to come. This was such a new sensation that he had no trouble in propping his eyelids till the evening, and he listened with zest while Robert prattled cheerfully of his incredible adventures. They had, of course, agreed to work as partners, so long as tedium kept away: they were mutually attracted, and already more than friendly. Confidences had been exchanged: Tony had repeated to the envious churchwarden some of the tamer episodes of his dilettante existence; Robert had tried to cap them with his burglars and Alicia.

"But you ought to let your wife know something," suggested Tony. "She may be worrying."

The churchwarden looked a little uneasy. "If I write I might be traced by the postmark," he objected. "I suppose I might send a letter saying I'm all right to a friend, and get him to readdress it. But even then there's a danger...."

"There's danger any way," said Tony, smoking thoughtfully. "From what you tell me, I should think Mrs. Hedderwick would not hesitate to use detectives if she thought it necessary. I should hardly think it would be long before they picked up your trail, unless you communicate with her. Really, you know——" He broke off suddenly and laughed. "No! don't write; I've got a better plan. I won't tell you now, but keep it for a little—till a dull hour comes and we are hard up for something to do."

Robert, naturally curious, begged for enlightenment, but Tony was adamant. Changing his ground, he declared that there was no hurry for a day or two,—or at least for a few hours. Mrs. Hedderwick would probably take a couple of days to make up her mind to use the police, and meanwhile they were better employed in seizing the thrills of the moment. Tony got his way, of course: he was accustomed to lead and exact obedience. Personality and class-consciousness, coupled with a humor that appealed to his victims, made the task easy.

"I haven't told you yet," said he, after silencing Robert's objections, "what I did with my morning. Well, I looked round and got the general hang of the village. More, I followed our mysterious friend—let's call him Billy,—and from a distance saw him enter The Quiet House. (Queer place that, by the way. Surrounded by a brick wall ten feet high,—couldn't get a glimpse inside except through a gate.) The landlord tells me that he hasn't booked a bed here, so it looks either as if he meant to leave Shereling or stay at The Quiet House."

"A good job, too," commented Robert. "It wouldn't do for him to see me. Of course I should be recognized at once, and that would make him suspicious."

"Quite so," agreed Tony. "If he hung about here you'd have to stay in bed all day,—rather a depressing prospect when fun is promised. But if I were you I'd give a false name to the landlord. If Billy heard of Mr. Hedderwick it would make him think of things."

Robert had an instinctive repugnance to the plan. In some obscure way it savored of criminality, and the shackles of convention were still not wholly broken. But in the end Tony again triumphed, and the blameless Hedderwick was dubbed Bangs. He did not particularly care for the choice; but as Tony said he looked the perfect essential Bangs and that any other name would be unthinkable, Robert gave way.

"Oh, and I saw some one else," continued Tony when the point was settled. "A remarkably pretty girl. She, too, entered The Quiet House—some time after Billy. I had seen him safely in, and was waiting by the roadside when she came along. She snubbed me—quite properly,—but was kindly careless enough to drop a card. It bore the name of Miss Arkwright, who, I understand, owns The Quiet House. But somehow I don't feel sure that the card is hers."

"Why?"

"Dunno," said Tony with a dissatisfied air. "I haven't any reasonable evidence. A kind of intuition, I suppose, more than anything else. Somehow she doesn't *look* an Arkwright,—she hasn't got an Arkwright personality. Now, you simply exude Bangs at every pore,—*you're* all right."

"What was she like?"

"Bangs being a respectable married man, mere good looks have no interest for him." ("Oh, but they have!" interrupted Robert with a naif eagerness.) "Well, they oughtn't to, then. As a matter of fact, she was deucedly pretty, and—good lord!"

He broke off and jumped to his feet in a listening attitude. Robert did the same, for in the porch they heard the voice of Lionel—or "Billy," as they had named their anonymous friend—in conversation with the landlord. The two men were discussing the weather, and Tony and his partner looked frantically at each other for a plan. In another minute Lionel might enter the parlor, and there was no

escape. The door was but a yard distant from the porch: the window opened on the road. To leave the room by either egress might mean discovery, and for Robert to be recognized by Lionel would ruin all. That is, it might effectively put an end to the development of the adventure, for if "Billy's" suspicions were awakened he might take the first train back to town. At least he would be put on his guard, and that would make things more difficult than ever. It was imperative that Robert should be hidden from sight. But where? He could not be concealed under the table, for no cloth lay upon it, drooping decorously over the edges. There was no cupboard large enough to contain the bulk of Bangs. No friendly screen, the time-honored refuge of the dramatist, stood in any corner. No Falstaffian basket was there to promise aid. The room was a Sahara in view of the unhappy arrival of "Billy," and beads of perspiration stood out on Robert's brow as he waited, without a plan, helpless as a trapped rabbit.

Tony's friends used sometimes to complain that he put them in impossible situations. The charge was not unjust; but, as Tony would point out when accused, he was equally ready to sacrifice himself if circumstances demanded it. It was unfortunate, no doubt, that Fate seemed to prefer the immolation of a friend, but that was not his fault,—it was Fate who should be reviled. This was an occasion calling for presence of mind, resource and unflinching discipline. If the adventure of his life was to be carried through successfully, no minor considerations—such as friendship or soot—could be allowed to weigh. With a strong gesture he pointed to the old-fashioned hearth and capacious chimney. "Up you go!" he whispered. "Look sharp!"

Robert recoiled. "No! no!" he whispered piteously. "Not that! Surely——"

He was not allowed to argue. In another moment Robert felt himself led, as in a dream, to the fireplace. The next, and he had a foot upon the massive iron bars. Luckily there was no fire laid, no coal to disturb and proclaim his bid for obscurity. He looked up into the cavernous darkness and groaned in spirit; that was the first time he regretted his mad flight. Then, helping himself by projecting bricks, searching for insecure crevices with his toes, he began to climb the few feet necessary to safety.

By the time his ankles were the only visible evidence the hearth was covered with soot, and Tony looked anxiously round for something to remove it. As chance would have it, a broom stood in the corner of the parlor, left there by a careless servant after the morning's tidy-up. Triumph in his eye, Tony seized it and approached the hearth. But on getting there his purpose changed; temptation

was too strong. Pushing the broom up the chimney, he used it as one uses a ramrod, helping the murmurous Robert in his upward path. "Excelsior, old friend!" whispered Tony, for an ankle could still be seen. "Excelsior!" and he thrust with frenzy. The only response was a muffled sound that floated down, a subdued kind of blasphemous choke. It filtered into the parlor as "Orpgh," but Tony did not relax his efforts till the ankle had disappeared. The next moment Lionel entered the room, followed by the landlord. The latter gave an astonished grunt as he surveyed Tony, hands and face smudged like a Christy Minstrel, and even Lionel's breeding found it hard to restrain a laugh.

"There has been a fall of soot, Mr. Glew," observed Tony blandly. "I found this broom, and was just going——"

"Lor', sir, don't you trouble," said Glew, scandalized that a guest could so demean himself. "The servant'll do that presently. I was just saying to the missus a week ago come Thursday that we should 'ave to get our chimneys cleaned soon. We'll 'ave to set about it in earnest now, and no mistake."

"I suppose you send over to Dallingham for a sweep?" suggested Lionel, sitting down. The landlord chuckled.

"Yes, sir, when the squire's at 'ome. 'E makes us. But when 'e's abroad, why, we do the old-fashioned way—light a batten of straw and burn the flue clear."

A slight scuffle proceeding from the chimney seemed to hint that Mr. Bangs had heard. Could it be that he feared lest they were going to clean the flue in the old-fashioned way now, or was he merely suffering from cramp? Whichever it was, he shifted: the noise was unmistakable, and the fall of more soot made the landlord shake his head.

"I doubt there's a bird got down the chimney," he said, scratching his chin. "Those jackdaws or young rooks do sometimes. Give me the broom, sir, and I'll soon have him down."

Tony's hand tightened on the broom.

"Let me," he said suavely. "There's no need for two people to get black." Without waiting for a reply he approached the fireplace and thrust his weapon strenuously aloft. It was no time for half measures, and Tony felt obliged to be as realistic as possible in the interests of his friend. Realism, however, may be carried to excess (as Mr. Bangs pointed out later with no little heat), and the

fluttering of the mythical bird would have drawn tears to the eyes of humanitarians.

"It's no good, sir," said the landlord, dismally observing the soot; "it's out o' reach. I fancy I'd better get that straw and ha' done with it."

"That's rather too cruel, landlord," said Lionel from his seat. "I don't like the idea of smothering the poor beast."

"Put it this way, sir," said Glew, who was an amiable fellow; "is it better to smother it or leave it there to starve? My way 'ud take five minutes—yours a couple o' days. Well, sir?"

"I suppose you're right," said the soft-hearted Lionel, "but I don't half like——"

"Don't you worry," struck in Tony, who was beginning to get anxious. "I tell you what! It's a big chimney and I'm pretty slim. If you'll let me go up to-night after the pub's closed, Mr. Glew, I'll strip and climb. Of course we mustn't leave it there, and smothering doesn't appeal to me."

"You're a decent chap," said Lionel, moved to admiration. Tony modestly murmured "Not at all," and hoped the landlord was satisfied. But he was not. The very ideer! One o' his guests a-climbin' the chimney! No! he'd send the boy up. Hi!

Things were now looking very black in more than one sense, and the disciple of romance in the chimney had serious thoughts of a descent. But as the landlord opened his mouth to bellow for the boy, the man from up-stairs—"Mr. Beckett"—passed the door with his golf-clubs slung over his shoulder. He looked in and said, "I'm going up to the links, Mr. Glew. Dinner at seven-thirty, please," in a polished voice that carried a hint of an alien accent. Then he went on.

Lionel determined to follow. He had been to The Quiet House that morning and had learned that Miss Arkwright was away. She would be back, however, about four. The door had been answered by the dumb footman spoken of by the vicar, who had exhibited one of those dials that stand on hall tables—"Out—in at...." So Lionel had come back, meaning to kill a couple of hours at the inn. But when he saw the man "Beckett" it struck him that he might as well waste those hours on the links. He might possibly get into conversation with this man, whom he felt sure was the Turkish ambassador. Every thing pointed to it,—the newspaper

paragraph—the accent—the assumed name (for he had confessed it to the vicar)—the age. Supposing this to be so, he might be worth watching. If Beatrice were right in her suspicions and conjectures, it was quite possible Mizzi would follow him to Shereling and seek an interview. Mizzi, in point of fact might have already made an assignation—she might even be waiting on the links! Supposing he found them ... well, at least he would have verified suspicions, and could chart his course by certain knowledge. Yes, he would follow on the off chance.

He did not take as long to make up his mind as we have taken to describe it. The reader, if kindly-hearted, should be glad of this; for meanwhile the unhappy Bangs has risked exceeding the proverbial allowance of "a peck of dirt" to be swallowed in a lifetime. Lionel, then, went out, leaving Tony to deal with the landlord. He sighed with relief, for at least the most important character had disappeared.

"Mr. Glew," he said winningly, "I have a little surprise for you. May I close the door for a moment?"

"Cert'n'y, sir," said the other, staring. His bovine gaze followed Tony as he walked to the fireplace, stooped down, and said gently, "*Come, birdie, come!*"—a song of his childhood flitting suddenly across his brain. To make his meaning perfectly clear, he added, "It's all right, Bangs. You may get down from the table!" Then he discreetly retired a few paces and waited. He had not to wait long.

"*Mygoard!*" said the landlord explosively, and indeed there was excuse for the expression. It was caused by the extraordinary entrance of Mr. Bangs. He clambered down painfully for a few feet, but just as he reached the bottom his foot slipped and he sat down emphatically, facing them, in the grate. The appearance of this gnome, silent, save for a strange wheezing that rasped its way through a soot-slaked windpipe, baffled description. Tony looked at the figure with a mournful compassion, and the landlord rocked drunkenly against the door.

"You see, Mr. Glew," said Tony soothingly, "it happened like this. My friend—who, I am sure, will corroborate me as soon as he has had a drink,—my friend and I had a dispute about chimneys. He averred that they often concealed a 'priest's hole,'—one of those hiding-places for Popish priests we read about. I disagreed, and our dispute became so heated that we even staked money—Mr.

Bangs, on the probable existence of such a chamber here, I on the negative side. He is an enthusiast, and nothing would content him but the immediate settlement of the question. So, despite my protests, up he climbed. Just as he was about to descend, you and the other gentleman entered. Conceive the position! He naturally had no wish to be discovered in such a situation, and waited, hoping the parlor would soon be empty. Your suggestion of the batten upset all calculations. Now, I am sure you will spare his feelings and say nothing of this. All he requires is a hot bath. You quite understand?"

The landlord gave a crow of assent. But as he went down the passage a deep rumbling, suppressed but distinct, betokened that he could not regard the situation seriously. When the door was closed Tony turned apologetically to his companion-in-arms.

"Awfully sorry, old chap," he said, "but it was one of those things that had to be. You quite see that, I hope?"

"*Krwx!*" said the gnome, weeping. "*Krwx! airp—krwx!*"

CHAPTER XV

A CHANGE OF LODGING

At the club-house Lionel put his name down for a week's membership, thinking it might be useful. He learned from the local professional in the course of a short chat that there were only some half-dozen players out that afternoon, all being men. Mizzi, therefore, had not assumed the disguise of a golfer, though she might be waiting somewhere on the horizon at an appointed trysting-place. The ambassador drove from the first tee while they were talking: he was playing a solitary game against bogey, who—judging from the first three shots—appeared likely to win. The fact that he did not take a caddy might mean anything—a sense of shame or an expected meeting with Mizzi. Lionel, that he might have a reasonable excuse for keeping him under observation, borrowed some clubs from the pro. on the plea that his own had not yet arrived. He had not played golf for years, but trusted that some of his ancient skill might still remain,—enough, at least, to justify his appearance on the links.

The scheme, however, produced little, for there was no sign of Mizzi. Lionel played slowly, keeping a methodical hole behind all the way. At the fifteenth, however, he caught up with his quarry. In a moment of ill-judged enthusiasm, and fired by the thrill of a superlative brassie-shot, he went all out for his third. It was a long hole—bogey five—and there was a deep bunker guarding the green. Lionel, after some consideration, took the mashie in preference to the iron. It was a mistake, for the green was farther than he thought. He made a beautiful full shot that flew straight but fell short, deep in the heart of the bunker. "Spoilt it!" thought Lionel with natural melancholy. "Ah! well! Not so bad, considering I haven't played for so long."

As he walked on he remembered with a pang that he had forgotten the ambassador. In the pleasure excited by a perfect drive, a perfect brassie-shot, and an ill-fated, ill-judged, but clean full mashie, he had lost sight of the other's existence. Now he was nowhere to be seen. "Confound it!" thought Lionel uneasily; "what a kid I am to get carried away by the game! Has he holed out and gone on, or is he by any chance in that bunker?"

He hurried forward, now thinking only of the chase; and as he drew nearer he

heard curious sounds proceeding from the grave of so many hopes. Voluble, emphatic and distinct utterance in an alien tongue floated through the abashed ether, and with a sigh of relief Lionel approached and stood on the brink of the pit.

It was a deep sandy hollow, shored up on the farther side with stout banks of timber, and at the bottom stood the ambassador cursing his ball. So intent was he on this futile but human act, that he did not observe his audience above. Lionel stood and watched, not ill-pleased that an aged arbiter of the peace of nations could on occasion show some feeling, real if regrettable. Presently the exasperated diplomat ceased his objurgations, swung his niblick once more and tried to get out. He struck once and the ball bounded heartily against the timbers, falling back at his very feet. He smote again and a shower of stinging sand whipped sharply in his face. "*Whee!*" he said distinctly, and Lionel's cheek tingled in sympathy. He swung a third time and with neat precision played a flint-stone well on the green, laying it dead. Being a man of obvious determination, though limited skill, he tried again, and yet once more. Then, with uncouth barbaric cries, which Lionel rightly guessed to be in the Turkish language, he lashed flail-wise at the ball. It rolled, leaped, hopped—grew vivid with excitement, but still it never left the bunker.

He gave it up at last. This cunning diplomat, this indomitable statesman, was obliged to own himself defeated. Picking up the ball, he deliberately took a knife from his pocket and tried to cut it in half. This proving impossible, he flung it away, resolved that nevermore should he be troubled with this particular disturber of the peace. Then with a resolute quiet action, he broke his niblick across his knee. Lionel, hoping to get into conversation, left his eyrie and joined him in the pit.

"My turn now, sir!" he said with a fictitious cheerfulness. "I hoped the green was twenty yards closer. This is a beastly place to get out of."

It was a false move. Had he waited till the other had done a hole in three, or at least made one good approach, Lionel might have found him good-humored, conversational, entertaining. But at the moment he was not himself. With a contemptuous "*Allez au diable!*" the ambassador looked sourly on Lionel and climbed slowly up the hill. Lionel, disappointed but not resentful, watched him drive from the next tee.

He followed him round without result, and in the fulness of time saw him leave

the golf-house and walk dejectedly home. After watching him enter The Happy Heart, Lionel made his way peacefully to The Quiet House, hoping Miss Arkwright would have returned. In this he was not disappointed, for the silent footman bowed in answer to his question and held the door invitingly open. Lionel accepted the unspoken welcome, entered and was shown into the drawing-room. The footman placed a chair and motioned that he should sit down. Lionel obeyed with a vague feeling that something was amiss. Was it the silence of the footman that gave him an uncanny impression, or was it the atmosphere of the house? He had heard of presentiments of ill under similar circumstances and had disbelieved them all, but now it was different ... he was uneasy. After sitting uncomfortably in his chair, half expecting it to play some goblin trick upon him, he got up and began to look at a picture hanging above the mantelpiece.

He was still busy with his scrutiny when he heard the door open and close again behind him. Turning at the sound, he saw a lady standing perfectly still in the middle of the room. Lionel gasped, and almost fell. "*You!*" he quavered, sure now that wizardry was at work. "*You!*"

"Please sit down," said a grave voice. "I am Miss Arkwright."

Lionel pulled himself together with an effort, but he did not sit down.

"No," he objected steadily. "I am sorry to contradict you, but that is not true. You are playing a trick on me for some reason that I can not understand. But I swear that you are not Miss Arkwright."

The lady smiled, as one who soothes a maniac.

"Indeed?" she said courteously. "Then perhaps you will tell me who I am?"

"You are Miss Beatrice Blair," said Lionel in a hard voice. He was bitterly disappointed, and no wonder.

"Beatrice Blair?" repeated the other, with an astonishment that could not but be genuine. "Whom do you mean? Who is Beatrice Blair?"

"She was playing last night at the Macready Theater," returned Lionel with a patient dignity. "How she contrives to be at Shereling at this hour, mystifying a poor wretch whose only fault is a too ardent devotion, I can not explain."

This he thought rather a fine speech, and he was relieved to see the clearing of

her brow. But he was mistaken as to the cause.

"The Macready Theater!" cried the lady in a tone of satisfaction. "Ah! I can guess now. You must mean my sister, of course. There can be no other explanation. I know she is"—she shuddered daintily—"an actress, but I had quite forgotten her nom de guerre."

"Her ... sister ..." repeated Lionel dully. "Why, yes ... I thought I was calling on her sister ... I wished to see her—not Miss Blair again...."

He sat down, unable to realize it yet.

"Did you not know we were twins?" she asked, clearly anxious to help him.

"I had heard ... but I did not expect...."

"To find the resemblance so striking? I have not seen my sister for years, but when we were younger strangers often mistook us. We were mutual replicas. I imagine from your surprise that the resemblance is still very marked."

"That is the feeblest way of putting it," he answered, still staring as if fascinated. "You are identical in every feature—eyes—hair—even the voice...."

"Perhaps you might find that we differ in disposition—in character——"

He interrupted bruskly, forcing himself to accept the incredible.

"Excuse me; but I can not imagine any one so perfect as Miss Blair."

The lady sighed. "She is on the stage."

"Good heavens, madam!" said Lionel with scornful candor. "Does the stage spell infamy to you? I thought that attitude was *vieux jeu* now."

"I may be old-fashioned," she said primly, "but I am under few illusions. Of course I would not even hint that my sister is likely to tread the downward path" ("Oh, *lord*!" he groaned in spirit)—"one of our family must have sufficient firmness of character to rise above even *her* environment. But we know the old proverb of pitch and defilement; can she honestly hope to retain her bloom unsullied?"

"Have you ever—I won't say 'met an actor or actress,'" asked Lionel in polite wrath, "but, been to a theater?"

"Certainly. Three pantomimes and *Our Boys*."

"But that is—how many years ago?"

"It was a revival of the play," she said with a blush, and Lionel was glad to notice that she had at least one human trait. "I am thankful to say that I did not laugh."

"And you rest your condemnation on that?" he asked, disgusted that so pretty a creature could be so narrow.

"On that, on what I have been told, and on the ridiculous number of post-card favorites that I see—often in deplorable dishabille—in every stationer's shop. I have deliberately come to the conclusion that the stage is immoral. How, then, can I avoid condemning my sister's lamentable choice of a career?"

Lionel rose, pale with anger, forgetful of his errand.

"I am sorry to hear it," he said with absurd dignity. Of course, he ought to have laughed and talked about the garden. "I am sorry you persist in such a hasty condemnation of a noble profession——"

"And of Miss Blair," she put in with a sly jealousy.

"If you like," he flung out. "I can not allow any one—even you—to criticize her. I regret, therefore, that I shall not be able to stop the night."

"I was not aware," she said with an unmoved countenance, "that I had given you an invitation."

Lionel was so taken aback that he sat down abruptly in his chair. Then the humor of the situation came to his rescue and he laughed outright. The lady, too, though she made a gallant effort to control herself, failed miserably. In a moment the pair of them were united by the most perfect bond (save one) that earth knows—the mutual appreciation of a jest.

Lionel, as the waves of their mirth broke gently into ripples and presently dissolved in the foam of smiles, realized how foolish he had been. When he set out first for The Quiet House he had taken it for granted that Beatrice had telegraphed to bespeak her sister's hospitality. It was only too clear now that she had not done this, either through forgetfulness, pressure of work, or procrastination. He had simply assumed that Miss Arkwright would receive him

as her guest, and the conversation had been too briskly controversial to allow him to think. Now he was doubly annoyed at his clumsiness: he had behaved like a boor and had sacrificed the interests of Beatrice to an ill-timed chivalry. His cue was submission at all costs for Beatrice's sake.

"I apologize," he said with a frank good humor. "I thought your sister had already engaged your good offices on my behalf." He noticed hopefully that Miss Arkwright's eyes still twinkled with amusement. Clearly she was not all prunes and prisms.

"I have heard nothing," said the lady much more sweetly. "No doubt she meant to write, and forgot. Poor Beatrice! She was always harum-scarum."

To a sensitive man this might have implied a lack of confidence in the protégé of Beatrice, and Lionel moved uneasily.

"I hope," he said humbly, "that you will forgive me. I trust that you will allow me to prove my good faith—that——"

"I shall ask you to dine and sleep?" she said bluntly, though a charming smile softened the crudity of her words. "Well, Mr.——?"

"Mortimer. Lionel Mortimer."

"Mr. Mortimer, I do not doubt your word for a moment. I should enjoy cultivating your acquaintance and hearing some first-hand news of my sister. But I fear it is impossible. You see there are the proprieties to be considered. I am a single lady, and perhaps...."

To Lionel this was an astonishing view of the case. After his unconventional week at the Bloomsbury flat he was poorly qualified to appreciate the apprehensions of Miss Arkwright. His brain told him idly that she was perfectly right, but his heart merely insisted on the abyss between her outlook and her sister's. And, as usually happens, the heart found the readier audience.

"Quite so—quite so! But surely you——"

"Are old enough?" she suggested helpfully, plunging him deeper.

"No—no! I did not mean that! I only meant that surely you have a housekeeper—some person of mature age, much older—oh! *much* older than yourself—who would save the situation?"

"Well," she admitted with an exasperating coyness, "I have such a domestic, it is true. Mrs. Wetherby is sixty. Do you think that would do?"

"Admirably!" cried Lionel in triumph, caring nothing for his recent buffets. "Admirably! Mrs. Wetherby shall protect you with the armor of a centurion—or of a Lord Nelson," he added scrupulously, remembering that the pre-dreadnought era would carry more conviction. "The thing is arranged! I shall stay after all!"

"Thank you," returned Miss Arkwright with a demure twinkle. ("Is she a prude? Oh, is she?" he reflected, watching.) "Of course, I shall be delighted to do all I can for a friend of Beatrice. You really *do* know her?" she asked in pretty appeal, as if frightened at her own rashness.

"If you like," said Lionel, luxuriously recalling his wonderful week, "I shall paint a word-picture of her charms. I shall tell you how her eyes shame the starlight—how her hair can enmesh the hearts of all beholders—how her lips ____"

"I do not think I need trouble you," interrupted his hostess rather distantly. "No doubt Beatrice is an attractive young person——"

"*Young person!*" he repeated, horror-struck. "Beatrice Blair a *young person*! Profanity! Please, please do not——"

"I shall leave you to think of a better description," she said, with a smile of pity that held no scorn. "I have some letters to write, and I fear you will have to dine alone. You must excuse me, but it is inevitable.... Do you mind ringing the bell?"

He obeyed, and a moment later the footman entered. "Take this gentleman to the blue room, Forbes," said Miss Arkwright. "See that he has everything he wants." The footman bowed and held the door open for Lionel. "Dinner is at half past seven. If you are dull before then, please go to the library. But perhaps you are not a reader? Perhaps you are of those 'whose only books are——'" She checked herself, as if remembering her own correctness or the immobile Forbes.

"They taught me only wisdom—the best wisdom of all," said Lionel, answering the unfinished quotation. Then he went out, wondering.

CHAPTER XVI

A LETTER AND SOME REFLECTIONS

"BLOOMSBURY, LONDON.

"DEAR MR. MORTIMER,—Long before this reaches you my sister will have received a telegram introducing you properly. I am so sorry that I forgot to wire before, but I have been so harassed and busy that I never thought about it. A true woman, you will say—I can almost see your superior smile as I sit writing here, yet I dare to hope that the smile will not be too superior, that a touch of pity will creep in when you remember that my worry is for a husband's freedom. If only I can save Lukos—but it is foolish to waste time on 'if's.' I *mean* to succeed, and you have promised to help me. You have my heartfelt gratitude already.

"Thank you for your letter telling me of your arrival at The Quiet House. Do not be discouraged that you have not seen Mizzi yet, and that you have been unable to approach the ambassador again. I have been working very hard and am not dissatisfied with the results, though they would look paltry if I committed them to paper. My information leads me to think that we are on the right track—that Mizzi *is* the guilty party—that sooner or later an attempt *will* be made to sell the document—and lastly that we must suspect every one. Yes, *every one*! Even my sister, perhaps, and that brings me to the more important part of my letter.

"I have not seen Winifred for some years, but from the hints you gave me in your letter I gather that she is of distinctly prepossessing appearance. (Isn't that how the police reports usually describe it?) My pen hesitates whether to write 'Be on your guard' or not. Shall I?... may I?... But it is written and must stand. Oh! do not imagine that I am distrustful—I *know* you can be relied on—I *know* you can be true and firm and faithful: but my heart fails when I remember that you are a man; encompassed, too, by perils you hardly perceive, snares almost impalpable. Forgive me! I have no right to speak like this.... I know you are honorable ... but the greatness of the stake forces me to utter my warning—to foresee danger which may be remote—to leave no stone unturned to insure a triumph—to guard against any

weakness, however venial or trivial, which may make my path—and the path of Lukos!—more difficult.

"This is a rambling letter. It is midnight, and I have had a tiring day. Forgive me and understand; or, if you can not understand, forgive! I urge you again to watch my sister carefully.... Heavens! it seems a perfidy; but the life of Lukos!... Watch her, I say again. I have grave cause for suspicion, though she does not guess I suspect. Why she, above all others, should betray me I can not tell. I had hoped that—but this is weak and futile. *Watch her carefully.*

"You say that up to the present nothing has happened. It may well be that nothing will happen for a time. In any case, you are of the greatest service by remaining at The Quiet House—on guard! Stay there at all costs, till you hear from me again. Do what *she* tells you—play the hypocrite if need be—strive to conciliate her, but *watch*. I have London under my eyes.

"So much for the chief business. As for news, the play ceases very shortly and I may be able to arrange a meeting, when we can talk things over. On the whole, I am happy, being busy,—at least as happy as I can expect to be until.... Oh! by the way, since we parted I have had another offer of marriage. Such a nice man, too. But if only men could be satisfied with being true *friends*.... Some men can, I know, but the rest ... I am tired. Good night, my friend.—Your friend,

"BEATRICE BLAIR."

Such was the letter that Lionel was reading for the fiftieth time since, a fortnight past, it had come to The Quiet House. It gave him little information and less comfort. From the formal "Dear Mr. Mortimer" ("Hang it! I couldn't *expect* 'Lionel'!" he told himself savagely) to the distant intimacy of "Your friend Beatrice Blair," it was unsatisfying to a devoted adherent of romance. Yet what else could he ask for? He was not in love—no! he was not in love, for there was a husband! Besides, Beatrice would be the last person to lead him on when.... Stay! there had been temptation on her part in the cab and in the dressing-room. Yes, there *had*; there was no sense in pretending to himself that there had been no encouragement: there *had*. Charity (a word, by the way, which the Revised Version has altered to "Love") on the instant said: "Coxcomb! She led you on to engage your services for Lukos. A pardonable deception." "Very well," grumbled Lionel, admitting the justice of the argument, "let it be so. But it seems a little

rough on...?"

Leaving this, he turned to other items, trying to read some new shades of meaning into the too-well-remembered words. She was working hard—good: she was fairly happy—good: he must stay where he was—good: watching—good: Lukos—Lukos—again Lukos ... h'm ... yes, good—certainly good. The beggar was her husband, after all. Good. The sister was pretty—a smile: he must be on his guard ... h'm ... perfidy ... a traitor ... of prepossessing appearance ... could she be ... jealous?

"Coxcomb!" said reason again: "look at the end—'Your *friend*.' Then, too, there is 'another proposal ... such a nice man.' Jealousy? Ha! ha!" Lionel swallowed the pill with a bad grace and put the letter away.

He had been at The Quiet House for a little more than a fortnight, and up to the present he had achieved nothing. Mizzi had made no sign, the ambassador was invisible, no further instructions had come from Beatrice. Yet he had been interested and amused, studying the character of his hostess and waiting, Micawber-like, for something to turn up.

His position was the oddest conceivable. Since Beatrice's telegram ("She introduces you," said Miss Arkwright, "at the price of five and threepence. You must be an exceptional man!") he had been more than a guest, almost an old acquaintance. He had been accepted without question, treated as an equal, hall-marked with the stamp of an Arkwright's approval, because the Arkwrights, it appeared, prided themselves on their hospitality. It was not for the sake of Beatrice alone that he received so warm a welcome: she was a lady to be mentioned with reserve, being "on the stage." But she was an Arkwright, and a guest vouched for (especially at five and threepence) by an Arkwright was a person to be considered.

This at a price, and a curious price at that. "In some things I am a faddist," Miss Arkwright had said the morning after his arrival. "I admit it freely. I am glad to welcome you here, Mr. Mortimer, but if you stay you must give me your word not to go outside my grounds during your visit. The garden is large—the village uninteresting, so your curtailed liberty will not be much of a deprivation. You think me insane, perhaps? Well, I have reasons for my wish,—personal reasons into which I can not enter. That is the only stipulation I make: can you accept it?"

He said yes, for refusal meant a lodging at the inn, where he could not watch her.

In his letter to Beatrice he told her of this extraordinary whim, and asked whether she thought it better to agree or to pack up and go. Her "stay at all costs" was sufficient answer, and though he hoped this did not mean "If need arise, break bounds and your word," still he meant to do it if necessary. The life of Lukos and her happiness were worth more than a detective's honor.

But up to the present there had been no question of breaking bounds. He could see nothing of Mr. "Beckett" nor Mizzi, but he was obeying Beatrice. And it was not unpleasant even for a detective to enjoy luxurious idleness, a perfect garden and the society of a charming woman. For she was charming, despite her fads and bigotry. She was well read, exceedingly pretty, and could talk. The mornings she spent in writing and arranging her household affairs. After lunch she gave herself up to him entirely. Tea they usually had together in the summer-house. About five she always excused herself, and Lionel dined alone. He was given to understand that she was busy on a history of the Arkwright family and could work best at night. Consequently he never saw anything of her again till breakfast.

This naturally struck him as one of the most suspicious features of the case. Suspicious—not in the sense that Miss Arkwright was an Ottoman conspirator, for that he had been instructed to expect; but suspicious for a deeper reason. More than once during the first week of his stay he had caught himself wondering, "Can she be, by any chance, Beatrice herself, masquerading as her own sister?" It was a solution that suggested itself to a mind seeking explanation of extraordinary things, extraordinary people. It was the most natural suspicion in the world, considering what he had gone through. He rejected it at first as being preposterous and disloyal, but common sense and a dislike of being victimized made him return to the idea and weigh it from day to day.

In the end he discarded the theory. It was, he thought, too enormous a deception to be carried through with success: even Beatrice, actress though she was, could not have the histrionic powers necessary to the feat; such a *tour de force*, continued from day to day, was impossible. Besides, Miss Arkwright and her sister were different in many points. They were, it is true, identical in voice, feature and carriage, but their outlook and ideas were far asunder. Winifred Arkwright obviously hated the stage, while Beatrice Blair was an actress; Winifred seemed timid in some respects, Beatrice radiated courage; the latter had never mentioned religion; the former was a Christian Scientist; Beatrice adored asparagus; Winifred's weakness was kidney beans. These, and a hundred other variations, trivial in themselves but overwhelming in the mass, gave him heart of

grace and a fresh faith in his lady of the stage.

But despite all this he claimed that Winifred *might* be Beatrice. It was almost unthinkable, but still it *might* be so. What gave the coup de grâce, at least for a time, to his vain imaginings was a copy of *The Times*. It has been said that Miss Arkwright always left him after five: this would have given her time to motor to London and play at the theater if she had been Beatrice Blair. But Beatrice herself had written that the play was soon to be taken off: when he saw an announcement in the newspaper that the Macready Theater was closed, he wondered if his hostess would join him at dinner that night. If she *did*, why, it would be a damning fact. But she did not, either on that or any subsequent day. He breathed more freely, and went on waiting as patiently as he might.

The task of learning the house, grounds and personnel did not take long. The servants were an aged cook, whom he never saw; a gardener; Forbes the footman; and the housekeeper, Mrs. Wetherby, a silent faded woman of over sixty, whose recreation outside her duties was the game of patience. A sad and oppressive creature, she, whose life had been a tragedy. The details were not given, though Lionel gathered that it had been a very ordinary tragedy, but enough to wither her life and make her shun her kind. Both the men servants were dumb—an odd circumstance, but Lionel was getting used to oddity. He expressed surprise one day, hoping to draw out his hostess. She was frank about the matter: "They are dumb, poor creatures, but their affliction is my gain. Most servants gossip or argue. Mine do neither, and that is why I was at some pains to engage them. It works very well, though a stranger is naturally surprised at first."

The more he saw of her, the more he admired. The primness of her attitude, when he began to know her better, struck him as being anything but ineradicable; she was in some things exceedingly human. They were talking one afternoon of Christian Science, and Lionel asked her if she really believed there was no such thing as pain.

"Of course," she said promptly. "Pain is merely ignorance."

"Then you must admit," he said, "that there can be no pleasure."

She was puzzled. "How so?"

"Everything must have its foil. Good requires evil as its negative, or there is—nothing. So to feel pleasure one must postulate pain. Otherwise you are incapable of pleasure."

"Oh, but I'm *not*!" she said impulsively, and laughed.

"Then where are your science and your logic?"

"You mean I am a woman and illogical." She parried, evading the dilemma. "When you understand our true position you will realize how fallacious are your arguments. Now, what do you think of *Pendennis*?"

He laughed again, but talked Thackeray willingly enough. When, a few moments later, she idly plucked a rose and pricked her finger on a thorn, giving a little cry, he said humorously, "Ignorance, not pain!" She disdained to notice him, but smelt the rose luxuriously. "The illusion of pleasure?" he suggested, pressing the thrust home. Her eyes sparkled with indignation, but he smiled into them unafraid. They were getting on capitally, he felt, and it was pleasant to find Miss Arkwright so much of a woman. She would pay for flirtatious treatment, he thought villainously, reflecting what a shame it was that lips so alluring should be unkissed. Lionel, you may have observed, was an adaptable creature. Fickle? Surely not. He had mapped his course and was steering strictly according to compass. While Beatrice was still a grass-widow the more innocent paths of dalliance showed no warning board, "Trespassers will be Prosecuted." They were not applauded, it is true—and here he readily confessed his weakness,—but they were not forbidden. So why, in the strict execution of the charge laid upon him, may he not try to persuade Miss Arkwright to take a less frigid view of life? The reader, virtuous soul, may censure: I can only record. Yet, too, it was something in the nature of a drug to his conscience. When he had time to think (and he had plenty of time for that) he loathed the idea of being there under false pretenses, playing the spy. It was all very well arguing that it was for the sake of Beatrice, but it would have been an easier task if Winifred had not been so charming. She was too charming, but it had to be done.... Of course, he ought to have refused a hint of dalliance, but one step leads to another, and man is frail. Besides, it had not gone very far ... not far enough to hurt either him or her.

One mundane detail must be given in this chapter. The morning after his arrival he had written to London for a supply of clothes. For the credit of the Blair side of the family he felt that some of Beatrice's notes ought to be spent on an adequate wardrobe. They came the day after, giving color to the excuse that his valet had got drunk and pawned the contents of his flat two hours after his leaving London. Miss Arkwright did not seem to think it strange; anything might happen in that wicked city. But she considered the Homburg hat a little "too continental." This was before her education had begun in earnest.

CHAPTER XVII

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE

It is all very well to be urged to suspect, for, within reason, nothing is easier. The world, in the process of our education, deals out so many hard knocks that speedily we begin to look with dubious eyes on every stranger—sometimes, alas! even upon our friends. We suspect the motives of Smith, who recommends a first-rate cigar: does he get a commission? We suspect Brown, who asks us to drop in any evening: has he a marriageable daughter? Jones lauds the latest novel: is he the anonymous author? Robinson advises the purchase of Consolidated Stumers: is he trying to make us "hold the baby"? Suspicion is epidemic. What the world wants is a host of missionary spirits to say, "For goodness' sake do drop suspicion for a while and believe in your fellow man! Smith really does imagine himself a judge of tobacco; Brown, as a matter of fact, thinks you quite a pleasant chap, and his daughter is engaged; Jones never wrote a line in his life, save on a check; and Robinson for once has inside information. Give suspicion a rest!" Ah! if only the other fellow would!

Lionel had been told to suspect, and at first found the task no harder than you or I should find it. But apart from the strong inducement to forego suspicion—viz., the physical and mental attractions of Miss Arkwright—every day made it more difficult to sustain the suspicious attitude. The early surprises—the "out of bounds" rule, the dumb servants, the seclusion of his hostess and the like—gave him plenty to wonder at, rich food for a seeker of garbage. But usage made the odd seem ordinary, and Miss Arkwright always had an explanation. The servants had already been accounted for; the prohibition of the village might be a whim (though of course he was not satisfied with this), her own seclusion he guessed, from a hint here and there, was due to a disappointment in early youth. But it was really custom that staled the infinite variety of the first surprises; he had to accept the routine of The Quiet House, and could not be expected to whip up a daily supply of suspicions. One can imagine, perhaps, a Jew in a medieval baron's dungeon waking peacefully and asking his jailer, "What is it to-day, Cedric? A tooth out, the strappado, or the rack? Just a tooth? Good."

The analogy is anything but exact, for Lionel did not get a succession of thrills.

The daily wonder as to *why* she forbade him the village; *why* she did not receive any local god, parson, squire, or doctor; *why* she did this or that, dwindled imperceptibly. He did not consciously relax: he had to adjust himself to the new conditions; but the effort at adjustment grew less laborious, and soon was in some danger of ceasing altogether.

Not that he abandoned his vigilance. Beatrice had enjoined him with unnecessary and vain repetition to watch her sister. He gladly obeyed. The English language is susceptible of many interpretations, and who could dogmatize on the precise value to be attached to the word "watch!"? Lionel "watched" all the time, but his watching at the end of a fortnight was very different from the early vigils. He learned nothing from watching, save that Winifred Arkwright was a delightful creature, with hair of such and such a color and softness—eyes of such and such a sweetness, and so forth. Things, you observe, of no importance from Lukos' point of view, though a chronicler is bound to state them, however briefly.

They became good friends. There was no hint of boredom on either side, no suggestion that the visit was being prolonged a little queerly. Lionel, you may be sure, did not offer to go: he was obeying Beatrice (who had not written again, though he sent a daily bulletin to London), and was in no hurry to study fresh characters. It was no ill reward of virtue to find a replica of Beatrice to keep his devotion alive. A brutal phrase,—too brutal. His devotion was there, hidden below the surface, but necessarily quiescent as long as Lukos lived. That might be for years; therefore, why not sun himself in Beatrice's rays by proxy? A statue can partly compensate for the loss of an adored: even a photograph is better than nothing. But a real woman,—a living replica ... Lionel thought himself in luck. He mentioned this in one of his letters, hoping to show how strong and faithful he was. He did not mention it to Winifred. Even a lay figure has feelings.

A lay figure ... was she merely that? The question came to him more than once during that peaceful fortnight. He faced it without a blush, and up to the present had always been able to give an affirmative answer. His memory of Beatrice and the unnecessary warning in her letter enabled him to watch, admire and lightly dally with the rose-weaved chains. He laughed at the warning: he was a man, of course, and no stronger than his fellows; but fancy being in danger of falling in love with Miss Arkwright! In love—real, genuine love ... absurd! Why, he was not in love with Beatrice. Was he? N ... no.... He was a free man—hurrah!

At the end of ten days he could utter the mental hurrah with a braver note:

Beatrice was a darling, whom he hoped to see again soon. But in love? No. In love with Miss Arkwright, then? (In his mind he now called her Winifred.) No. Of course not. Absurd. Was she not a lay figure?.... Stay!—that was hardly the choicest of expressions, hardly respectful or considerate. She was a delightful lady whom it was his painful duty to watch. But one must not speak of her as a lay figure: that is crude, elementary ... containing a grain of truth, one admits, but likely to be misinterpreted by the vulgar herd. "A peerless proxy" would be more in keeping.

And the proxy, what of her? How had she fared during her unusual fortnight? Patently, anything but ill. Under the sun of Lionel's sympathetic kindliness her virgin coldness melted. They talked together on every subject—men and women, books, art, music. Their views often clashed, but interest is sustained by conflict; complete agreement makes conversation a superfluity. Their conversation rarely descended to small talk, though more than once it became almost a quarrel.

A quarrel of friends, be it understood,—a quarrel that left no bitterness behind, but made the next meeting more stored with interest, explanation, withdrawal, even partial conversion. Their chief debatable country was the stage; and at last Lionel had the happiness of winning the admission that the stage had possibly improved of recent years. A great admission for her! He paid his debt handsomely by a promise to read a book (five hundred and thirty-seven pages, eight volumes) on Christian Science. She gave him the book next day. Alas! it now reposes in the present historian's drawer, the leaves still innocent of the paper-knife.

So a pretty comradeship sprang up between a cloistered lady and an ineligible worldling. The latter had never a penny, had not so long ago vowed himself to the service of another, declared upon his honor that his heart was no one's, lived for the moment on a false-won hospitality. What would be the end of such a revolting character? A queer sort of hero, in very truth; but the world is an asylum of lunatics seeking happiness by a host of roads. You who condemn the road of Lionel are asked to remember the stony paths he had trodden without complaint. Let him settle any difficulties of conscience for himself, and be not too hasty in your judgments. Let him at least have his fortnight of so-called happiness. If it be not in accordance with your ideas of the summum bonum, remember that it is not his. A fortnight in an oasis need not be grudged when the desert lies behind and before. If he has not learned wisdom you may be sure that he will ere long. Rub your hands, gentlemen, and look forward to a rare feast of disillusion and disenchantment! Possibly there may be an exposure, disgrace,

even a prison if we are lucky and have patience. And if you can spare a little pickle for the rod, be good enough to pass it up!

As for the other characters in this rural comedy—or melodrama if you prefer it—their lives have been equally uneventful during the last fortnight. Tony Wild and Mr. "Bangs" are still occupying rooms at The Happy Heart, chafing at the lack of events. They have allowed it to be understood that they are on a holiday, seeking peace. They have thoroughly explored the neighborhood, and failed to find a hint of interest in any of the Shereling inhabitants. Even the tap-room yokels have not produced a stimulating curiosity, and higher society is lacking in the village. The squire is away, and medical and legal needs, it appears, are supplied from Dallingham. There is Mr. "Beckett," it is true; but he plays golf, spending the rest of his time in his bedroom, repulsing all overtures of friendship. There is the vicarage, of course, and Mrs. Peters has been prevailed upon to invite them to dinner, for the vicar is a friendly soul, anxious to make the most of the social crumbs dropped rarely in his path. Tony and Robert have dined there, and been round two or three times to smoke a pipe and inspect the roses; but Mrs. Peters does not diffuse an atmosphere of comfort, and the vicar himself is an exhausted fountain after an hour. A kindly, cheerful little man; but sixty minutes' prattle is as much as Tony can bear. Robert might find a longer period congenial, but he is perpetually ill-at-ease under his cognomen of Bangs, fearful of betraying himself, inclined to blush without apparent cause. Indeed, if it were not for Tony, Robert might have given up the pursuit already. Not that he means to go back home as yet: liberty is still precious; and adventures, or at least unfettered repose, may be sought at Brighton or Eastbourne before he returns to nonentity. But is it worth while waiting at Shereling, where the mysterious Billy is never seen, where the remembrance of the strange lady is daily growing fainter? It looks very much as if that bright spark of romance has been extinguished: how can he hope to blow it into flame once more? Tony, the incomparable Tony, the man of many schemes, has nothing to suggest: he only says "Patience," and Robert is growing restive.

But why does Tony depart so far from his usual attitude as to say "Patience"? As a rule, an adventure or an experience can hold him but for a day or two,—a week is almost unthinkable. And now, at the end of a fortnight, he still says "Patience"—unruffled, imperturbable, productive of threadbare platitudes as to the building of Rome, apparently hopeful. The simple reason is that Tony has not seen his card-dropping divinity again, and he hates being balked.

In a word, the pair of them had waited, watched and spied for fourteen days

without result. There had been night vigils as well as by day, but nothing had been learned. After dusk set in they had sometimes watched for hours, Tony hiding in a ditch near the front gate, Robert at the back. The gossip of Miss Arkwright's nocturnal motoring had reached their ears, and they had built something on this. But never a motor had they seen approach The Quiet House. One dreadful night they watched till dawn broke clear and stark, but two colds in the head were all that came to birth. Their watchings were a failure.

Miss Arkwright and "Billy" might never have existed. The servants were useless. Only Forbes and the gardener issued from The Quiet House, after their day's work was over: both were dumb. Incorruptible, too, for when the ingenious Tony produced a pencil and paper, meeting the gardener on the road as if by chance, holding half-a-crown for a lure, the man made signs that he could not use a pencil. Forbes was of stouter stuff. Tony waylaid him one evening at half past nine. Thoroughly disheartened by this time, regretting that he had offered the gardener so small a sum (for he had afterward imagined that the man might have been playing a part), Tony unmasked his batteries. "Look here, my man," he said bluntly, "you are a servant at The Quiet House. I want some information and am willing to pay for it. If you'll just write down answers to a few questions I'll give you a five-pound note." Forbes' eyes glistened, and he took the pencil. Tony's heart leaped as he saw him diligently scribing. He snatched the paper and read, "I am sorry, sir, but I can not write." Tony swore, as Forbes passed meekly on. He was not used to being beaten by a servant.

To-day they were at the vicarage for tea, and tea alone. The hospitable vicar had suggested dinner—lunch as a *pis-aller*. But his wife said, "No," and he was obliged to submit. The previous dinner had caused domestic friction, and Mrs. Peters did not mean to run any further risks. She was a lady who had the not wholly unworthy wish to make a fair show in the flesh: they entertained seldom, but when they did entertain she was resolved to do things well. Soup, chicken (boiled or roast), cold lamb (palpably uncut and not an economical remnant to bring the blush), at least three sweets, and certainly cheese-straws,—these were the least a self-respecting woman could offer to the vicarage guests. The vicar, being a sensible man, would have been quite pleased to "present" (like Mr. Frohman) a simple meal. Soup, a joint with the usual supporters of potatoes and boiled celery—his own failing—a bramble tart, and a bit of Stilton,—these were the cates he deemed worthy of kings. But the housekeeping pride of his lady forbade so inelegant a repast. "I like my guests to see that I know how things *ought* to be done and *are* done, Charles," she said in a final tone: "I will *not* have

people saying that the vicarage ..." and the rest. The vicar had given way with a sigh, reserving himself for the battle he knew must follow.

It had come at once. Mrs. Peters, profuse to lavishness over the more solid items, betrayed a feminine false economy over the wine. There ought to be wine, of course. Though she was a teetotaler herself, still she knew that her guests should be offered the juice of the grape. But on the desirability of spending large sums for liquid that would vanish in a twinkling she held strong views. "You need not *dream*, Charles, of wasting money on expensive brands. I saw some invalid port at the grocer's this morning...." But here her husband showed himself unusually pig-headed. He grew rigid at the words "invalid port." "No, Clara," he said resolutely; "I won't have that at any price—even the grocer's. I believe in good things, or none at all. I'd sooner drink water than poor wine. We can't afford good port, but we *can* afford good whisky or cider. Those it shall be." He was deaf to reason, though his wife begged him, with tears in her eyes, not to be so inconsiderate.

Cider it had been, and Mrs. Peters had felt ashamed. The sight of three men quaffing deeply of the plebeian beverage gave no comfort: they were doing it to spare her feelings, of course, and she resented the unspoken charity. Besides, she did not greatly care about her guests. Mr. Wild seemed singularly purposeless for a young man, and there was a half-veiled mockery in his speech that grated. Mr. Bangs was clearly of inferior breeding and did not seem at ease. He talked little and nervously, starting at the mention of his name. "He can not have a past," thought Mrs. Peters grudgingly, "but he is certainly not used to the society of gentle-people. I do wish Charles would not ..." The dinner was not a success, though the vicar enjoyed the post-prandial smoke and small-talk.

So (leaving our muttons to return to them) they were at tea to-day. Or rather, they had finished tea and were taking idly on the lawn. The vicar was lying comfortably in a basket-chair, trying to color a meerschaum. Mrs. Peters was busy with embroidery. Tony and Robert in deck-chairs were smoking too, contributing their quota to the conversation. To complete the picture, Brown, the odd-job man, was delving holes destined to receive the posts of a pergola. Mrs. Peters' eye wandered from her work and dwelt frigidly on him.

"By the way, Charles," she said, "did you ever speak to Brown about that young woman?"

"What young woman?" asked the vicar lazily. Mrs. Peters recounted the incident.

"No, my dear," said the vicar. "You could not tell me her name: all you had to go on was a voice, and I could hardly catechize him on that. Besides, it may be a worthy attachment."

"Very possibly," agreed his wife, though her tone was skeptical. "I have no objections to that. But while he is at work ..."

"Awful word!" said Tony, for the sake of saying something. "I wonder what work is like—real continuous work, I mean."

"We can offer you plenty," said the vicar cheerfully. "The lawn wants cutting. You could trim the hedge, too, and——"

"No thanks," said Tony with a shudder. "Any other time I'd be glad, but just now I'm too busy."

"Of course, Mr. Wild, my husband was joking. But don't you think that an idle life...? Would not work—literary work, for example—be a good thing for a young man?"

"I'm too old to begin," said Tony wearily. "Now, a hearty young spark like my friend Bangs——"

The spark flickered into a feeble flame of protest and died away.

"You're wrong, Mr. Wild," said the vicar, taking his pipe out. "Work is the best thing. You'd realize it if you tried it. Of course, now you're on a holiday——"

"*Am* I?" said Tony. "I'm a kind of bear-leader to Bangs. I'm simply full-up with work, looking after him—arranging schemes for his comfort—keeping him out of mischief. Aren't I, Bangs?"

Robert smiled in a deprecating way. "You—you exaggerate a little. But—but ——"

Mrs. Peters disliked the cynical frivolity Tony imparted to the conversation. "Would you mind telling us the nature of some of these arduous duties?" she asked coldly.

"Oh, there's a gay lot," said Tony, reflecting. "I've had to order lunch, for example: Bangs has no ideas. Then I organize walks ... and deal the hands at piquet in the evenings ... and ... by jove, yes! I promised to help him telephone to-day, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Not a bit," said the vicar, the sole possessor of a telephone in Shereling. He rose and stretched himself. "Come along now."

But Robert remained in his chair, looking decidedly uneasy. "No, no!" he said with a frightened manner. "It is nothing. It will keep for a day or two. There is really no necessity...." He began to stammer and blush, aware of the eye of Mrs. Peters.

"You promised!" said Tony reproachfully. Then turning to the lady he said, "Come, Mrs. Peters! You can't say that I lack energy now! Here am I, thirsting to get work, and old Bangs keeps me back. And only yesterday he said that nothing on earth should prevent him from at last—at long last——"

"All right," interrupted Robert, in terror of what Tony would say next. "Come along! Come along! Where is the telephone, Mr. Peters?"

"In the dining-room," replied the vicar, wondering. "I'll show you the way."

They went into the house, leaving Mrs. Peters on the lawn, deeply stirred. "That man *has* a past," she determined. "He looked simply terrified. I wonder if I ought to ask Charles.... I wonder if it would be right to.... And they are strangers ... one never knows...." She thought sternly for a moment and then got up, resolution in her countenance. "It's a duty," she murmured—"a positive duty. And Charles is so weak."

The martyr to duty was going to listen at the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

TONY AT WORK AND AT PLAY

If the telephone had been in the vicar's study Mrs. Peters might have watched in vain; for to acquire accurate information through a keyhole needs practise or unusually keen ears. But the vicar wanted perfect quiet to prepare his sermons, and it was agreed that the instrument should be placed in the dining-room. This suited Mrs. Peters admirably, for there was a dumb-waiter between that room and the pantry. Standing on the other side of the hatch (which she raised with caution a couple of inches) she could hear all that passed, secure in the reflection that a screen concealed the hatch and butler's tray. This is what she heard as soon as the vicar had left the room.

"Mr. Wild, I *told* you that I would rather not——"

"Duty, Bangs, duty! Remember that! You've allowed your unhappy wife to mourn——"

"No, no! I thought it better not to write just yet, in case——"

"Pure funk, and nothing else. No, Bangs; you *ought* to let her know—you ought to have let her know before this. Besides, there's no danger: she can't spot where you are."

("Then there is a mystery!" reflected Mrs. Peters, warm with the satisfaction of a justified eavesdropping. "He has left his wife!")

"N—no ... but ..."

"Seriously, Bangs, you must telephone. Every day you delay brings a possible pursuit closer. Come now! Shall I ring up?"

"No, no! Wait half a minute while I think of something to say. How shall I begin? Shall I——"

"Oh, the usual sort of greeting from a husband to a wife: 'Good morning, little bunch of fluff!' Or, 'Cheeroh, beloved armful!' Any pet name—look here, you'd better let me——"

A confused sound hinted to Mrs. Peters that a struggle for the receiver was in progress. It ended speedily in a victory for Mr. Bangs. His voice quavered a number—"Bloomsbury, 843B." Mrs. Peters made a mental note.

"Hello ... hello ... are you 843B? Yes?... Who's that? *Hello!* Who's that? Oh, it's you, Jane ... tell your mistress—*hello*! You silly girl, it *is* me." ("She's had a fright, Mr. Wild. I ought to have broken the news more gently.") "What? Do speak up ... yes ... yes ... you've sat down on the porcelain bowl on the hall table? Confound!... what for? What *for*, you clumsy ... oh! I frightened you ... oh ... oh ... I see.... Well, go on.... Yes ... no, perhaps it wasn't altogether your fault ... yes.... All right ... all right, that's quite enough. I know you're sorry ... yes.... Tell your mistress I want to speak to her.... She's in the kitchen? Well, go and fetch her. Don't hang the receiver up. Yes ... yes....

"She's gone to fetch her, Mr. Wild!"

"The plot thickens, Bangs, I say, shall I take the receiver and telephone? Rather a lark, you know, your wife expecting you and hearing me instead."

"No, no!"

"I won't address her in terms of affection, if that's all you're afraid of. Besides, I should rather like to hear what she says to her peccant husband."

"Not for anything, Mr. Wild.... Hush! here she is.... Is that you, Alicia? *Wheeee! Wheee!*... I'm exceedingly sorry, my dear ... no, I wasn't laughing—something wrong with the wire.... Well, how are you?... That's good ... I do hope you haven't been worrying.... What?... Oh ... oh ... ah...." ("She says I'm not worth worrying about!" "Cover it UP, you fool! She'll hear you!") ... "Eh?... no ... nobody else here, my love ... quite alone—quite alone ... the wire...." ("What's that? Magnetic storm?") ... "Magnetic storm, Alicia! Plug's not firmly in, perhaps.... Well, you're all right, then? Anything else?... Oh, *me*! Oh, I'm in capital form.... What?... Yes, that's all.... What?... Oh, I thought I'd better ring up to let you know how I was getting on.... Yes ... yes ... I shall come back presently.... No ... no ... *absolutely* no.... I can't possibly tell you my present address ... but you needn't worry. I'm *quite* all right ... eh?... No ... I'm not unfeeling—this is just my holiday. I shall be back in a few weeks. I send you my love. Good-by."

"That do, Mr. Wild?"

"You might send a kiss, eh? Usual thing ... try again—I bet she's not left the wire."

"Hello ... hello! You there, Alicia?... *Wheeee!*... I just rang up—*wheee*—to send you a kiss.... Good-by."

"So we've set her mind at rest, Bangs. You lost your funk pretty soon!"

"Well, Mr. Wild, somehow ... it's not quite the same thing talking to Alicia from a distance ... I felt quite brave!"

"Perfect hero!... Now we've settled that, let's go and find the dragon in the garden."

They found the vicar, but not the dragon, who was lashing her tail in the pantry, impotent, speechless, aflame with anger. To hear herself called a dragon, and by a pair of unprincipled adventurers! One of them, it appeared, was a man who had run away from his wife; the other, an idle fribble who might be anything. "Thank Heaven I have no daughter in the house!" thought Mrs. Peters in a paroxysm of resentful propriety. "Who could feel safe with such men about? And this comes of Charles picking up chance acquaintances in a common tavern! Oh, I must go and tell him—expose them at once! The impudent hypocrites!"

On the threshold she paused. Was it because, despite her justification, she did not feel anxious to mention the vigil in the pantry? Or was it due to a wifely consideration for a husband's weakness? She chose to believe the latter. "Charles will not have the moral courage to expel them from the vicarage!" she reflected. "He is pitifully craven in such matters. I must manage it myself.... I had better wait and watch.... They may have any designs.... Perhaps I had better wait, and then ..." A smile, terrific in severity and menace, writhed her lips. Some signal act of vengeance was evidently maturing. "Yes! I will wait!"

On the lawn she found Tony. Compelling herself to speak without undue hostility, she learned that the vicar had carried Robert off to inspect the greenhouse. Mrs. Peters, on the plea of a message, followed. She could not trust herself with Robert or his accomplice. "Is it he who has led Mr. Bangs astray, or the other way about?" she wondered viciously. "They both seem to be *most* undesirable; but Mr. Bangs is older and ought to know better. Besides, he has a wife." Had she known of Tony's matrimonial vicissitudes she would have fainted.

The odd-job man had just finished his digging, and Tony strolled over to exchange a word: he never despaired of finding interest in the most unpromising material. Chats with para-orators, enthusiastic Salvationists, members of the Junior Turf Club, constellations of the stage, even housemaids taking in the milk, —all might be, and often were, instruments in the warfare against boredom. All were fish for his net. But it must be confessed that his catch had hitherto been of little value. He had bought a few centimes' worth, paying for it with numerous rouleaus, and he was beginning dimly to wonder if it was not rather an extravagant method of exchange.

"Done?" he asked laconically, and Henry Brown smiled with content.

"That's a good job jobbed," he replied. "Shifting earth is healthy, sir, but it takes doing."

"D'you like it?" said Tony; "I mean, d'you find it interesting and all that, or do you pant after the higher life? More wages and less work, and so forth, I mean?"

The odd-job man shrugged his shoulders.

"It's my job, sir," he said philosophically. "I can't say it's amazing interesting, but it's my job, and it's got to be done."

"Got to be done," repeated Tony, musing. "I suppose it has ... by some one. Thank goodness it's not to be done by me. Tell me, Brown, what do you really think of work? Does it bore you or what? Do you think it's a good thing, so to speak? You needn't mind speaking out—the vicar can't hear, and I'm a man of the world and all that. Tell me, does work bore you to tears?"

The other smiled.

"Work's kept many a man straight, sir," he said. "I should be sorry to be without."

"You really *mean* that?" asked Tony in surprise.

"I do, sir. Don't you think the same?"

Tony did not answer, but reflected for at least a minute. Then he took off his coat and turned up his shirt-sleeves with a whimsical smile. "I haven't worked for years," he said: "kept myself fit with developers and other horrors. Lend me your spade, will you? I want a new thrill."

Brown laughed, but obeyed. Tony began to dig, steadily and resolutely, at a spot where another post was to be planted. He did not attack the task too vehemently, as many an amateur would have done, for he had brains. But he dug faithfully, and at the end of ten minutes he was more than hot. He did not give in, however, but dug on till the task was accomplished. Then he threw down the spade, wiped his forehead and stretched himself. Brown watched him curiously.

"Had enough, sir?"

"For the present, yes," said Tony. "One mustn't suck pleasure to the dregs. But I'll admit it's not a bad sort of notion on the whole, this work. In small doses it might even be admirable—a kind of *apéritif*, you know. But, regarded as a habit ... that would need further consideration. Where can I find a tap?"

"Behind that fence, sir...."

Tony went to cleanse his hands, leaving the odd-job man chuckling. "Rum customer," he murmured: "a very rum customer, indeed. Oh, very rum! Everything's rum, when you come to think of it—more than rum.... Things seem to get rummer every day...."

Tony thought the same as he stood drying his hands upon the grass and a handkerchief behind the fence. The tap was screened from the lawn by the aforesaid fence, from the road by the privet-hedge. And as he dried and mused, steps, the light tapping of small feet, could be heard approaching on the other side of the hedge. From a subconscious strategy—caused by a deep-set mysterious instinct—he waited till the steps had gone past. Then he peeped through the hedge and nearly whooped. For, retreating, he observed the neat figure of his damsel of the visiting-card. Joy was excusable, for he had not seen her again since their encounter.

His first impulse was to whistle. This he checked on the score of vulgarity and bethought him what course would be best. Should he break through a weak spot in the hedge, leaving comrade Bangs to his own devices, or should he make formal but hasty adieux and pursue in the hope of overtaking? The latter was clearly the more correct procedure, but Tony's heart yearned regretfully over the girl in the road. She looked such a perfect pet! Luckily he was not called on to make an immediate decision, for she stopped a few yards farther on and gazed around. Tony concealed himself in such a way that he might still keep an eye upon her. What was she waiting for? He was not left long in doubt, for she gave a low but melodious whistle. The whistle was answered in the same key.

"Brown, by all that's wonderful!" muttered Tony. "The lucky dog! No wonder he doesn't find work dull."

If he expected a love-passage he was disappointed. The girl, as soon as her whistle was returned, flung a piece of paper over the hedge and walked quickly away. Tony gave the odd-job man time to pick up the billet and presently strolled round, still drying his hands.

"Clean, sir?" asked the odd-job man stolidly. After all, the privet was thick and Tony might not have seen.

"Yes, thanks.... I say, Brown, I've been thinking over what you said about work just now. It seems to me that there's quite a lot to be said for it."

"Yes, sir?"

"I should like to know more ... to hear a little more about the practical side of the question before making up my mind as to its intrinsic worth. I wonder if you'd care to smoke a pipe and try the cider of The Happy Heart with me to-night?"

"Thank you, sir," replied Brown, betraying no surprise, "but I'm afraid I'm too busy."

"To-morrow, then...."

"Busy to-morrow, sir, too."

"Sunday an off day?"

"To be frank, sir, I have a young lady...."

"Ah!" said Tony, hoping to hear something. "I won't press you then. I wish you luck."

"Thank you, sir."

There was a brief silence that Tony felt oppressive. He was the first to break it.

"Been engaged long, Brown?"

"No, sir. Not very long."

Another silence. The impenetrability of these yokels is not exhilarating. Tony felt chilled, disappointed. He tried again.

"I suppose it's almost as engrossing as work, Brown?"

"Yes, sir; almost."

He said it without a smile, as if he was quite serious. But Tony suspected him of being guileful. Clearly it was useless to prolong the conversation. He sighed.

"Well, I must look for my friend. Good-by, Brown. Do come and talk to me about work sometime, when the lady is otherwise engaged."

"Thank you, sir."

Tony moved off to find Robert. He was discovered in the kitchen-garden, pretending to admire vegetable-marrows. Mrs. Peters was hovering grimly in the rear, a silent watchful figure. The vicar was dilating on the excellence of marrow jam. After saying good-by, Tony and Robert went off to the inn. The vicar turned to his wife with a smile.

"Quite a pleasant afternoon, my dear. I like Mr. Bangs. Mr. Wild, too, is amusing, though cynical. But we mustn't judge too harshly—perhaps he has had a disappointment and his cynicism is half-assumed. Undoubtedly humorous and clever. Some of his shots hit the mark."

"You think so?" said Mrs. Peters icily. "I dislike them both. Mr. Bangs, to say the least, is anything but *quiet*; Mr. Wild, I am sure, is a man who has had a gentleman's education and lapsed. Superficially clever, perhaps, but vulgar. You made a mistake in taking them up."

"No, no, my dear! Be a little more charitable——"

"A *great* mistake, Charles. But you always think you know best. What I insist on is principle. Nothing can compensate for the lack of that. Principle above cleverness——"

The vicar laughed good-naturedly.

"Why! what a dragon of virtue——"

He got no farther. Mrs. Peters suddenly assumed so dreadful an aspect that he shrank aghast and began to fumble for excuses.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PLOT AGAIN THICKENS

At the end of three more days Lionel was feeling a little ill-used. There was still no word from Beatrice, and the watching brief he held began to look like a permanency. A sinecure, you remark disparagingly, or (with an envious inflection) a soft job. Lionel had a roof above him, luxurious food, money in his pocket and a pretty hostess: he would be a churl who grumbled, a witless being who did not know when he was well off.

But nevertheless he grumbled. He wanted to be up and doing. Dalliance was delightful, no doubt, and he could thoroughly enjoy so pleasant a pastime. But he required a soupçon of the serious to edge his palate for frivolity, and not a single olive had been sent him from headquarters. Beatrice might have written, surely: not necessarily a letter, but a note, a telegram, even a picture post-card was not too much to have expected. After all, he was a human being trying to do her a good turn. She might, if she liked, consider him in the light of a dog; but even a dog demands an occasional pat.

Yes, Beatrice had been a little inconsiderate. When they met again he would subtly convey that she had not been quite so perfect in her handling of the case as she might have been. Not blame—oh, no! that would be too severe. But a touch of respectful and adoring frigidity—a hint of polite and ardent disappointment, that was the note to be struck. It would add to the subsequent reconciliation, or rather readjustment. Iced champagne, in short, followed by liquor brandy. Finally (perhaps ... who knows?) a mixture of the two, compounding that exhilarating beverage, king's peg.

But that could only be drunk post-mortem.... Poor, dear old Lukos.... Well, for the present he must sport the blue ribbon....

But a dog will have its pat: if the mistress will not give it, another may; and who can blame the devoted creature if it lingers piteously hard by a stranger? Again, why blame the stranger, moved doubtless by a kindly and an unselfish impulse? Why blame Miss Arkwright, in short, for growing daily more cordial, more appreciative, more anxious to oblige with the pat? Lionel was obeying the orders

of Beatrice, to watch and do the bidding of his hostess; he could not be expected to damp her graciousness, check her enthusiasm: had he done so, he might have sealed the source of some important information. He must endure the pat, suffer it, permit, accept, not refuse; but ... welcome?

He was talking to her in the garden one afternoon. They had begun the conversation on some trivial theme, soon tossed aside for a subject of substance. It was not long before they were on the time-worn topic, the war of the sexes. Miss Arkwright, it appeared, was a suffragette—not militant, certainly, but convinced and ardent. She expressed surprise that Lionel did not take similar views. "For you," she said sweetly, "are a reasonable fair-minded man. And I should think," she added mischievously, "that you have many friends who might convert you."

"It isn't my brain that wants conversion," he replied meditatively. "Most of the arguments are on the women's side. Logic tells me they should have the vote; feeling—and by feeling I don't mean prejudice or bigotry, but something deeper—recoils from the idea of women in parliament. And it would mean that in the long-run. Let us keep them out of the dirty work."

"They might cleanse the stables."

"I'd rather not. We're cleansing them gradually, one hopes: at any rate, it's not a woman's job."

"Our view is that *all* jobs should be women's."

"Impossible." He shook his head. "I'm one of the old-fashioned believers in the home as woman's sphere——"

"And the thousands of unmarried workers? You forget them."

"Hard, I grant you, but they're a minority. Most women have the home sphere. Mind, I don't believe in inequality as regards laws: they should be the same for both."

"Yes," she said with a bitterness that surprised him, "look at the inequalities of divorce, for instance."

"We'll discuss that presently. Look for a moment at the reverse of the medal. Hasn't woman got the pull in influence? Can't she sway men without the vote?"

"A pretty woman or a clever woman can. Not the others."

"Ye—es. Sex counts."

"So you leave us the weapon of the coquette? That's what it amounts to. Is that a desirable weapon? Besides, it's double-edged."

"Rather a crude way of putting it," he said a little uncomfortably. "Nature has given you a power you can use for good. Why not use it?"

"But is it so powerful?"

"On dit."

"What do *you* think?" She bent forward, leaning to him, smiling audaciously in his eyes. Lionel would have been more than human if he had not felt flattered. This delightful creature, whom at a first meeting he had thought prudish and narrow, had developed amazingly. Companionship for a fortnight with a gay man of spirit and address, who did not lack a generous nature, had brought the bud to blossom. Now as she smiled on him with inviting eyes he felt strongly tempted to complete her education with a kiss. He temporized.

"What does it matter what I think?"

"It may matter a good deal," she said with a meaning he could not fathom.

"Tell me."

She explained herself curiously. Instead of speaking she was silent for a moment, as if choosing a course. Then with a friendly abandon she rested her hands lightly on his shoulders and said, "No. You shall tell me." Then she waited for the inevitable kiss.

Man is a strange animal. (I apologize for this truism, but, really, Lionel himself must be my excuse.) A man may be a savage, a knave, a brute, but beneath every human bosom there lurk some seeds of nobility, however few and atrophied. Juvenile literature abounds with *loci classici*. The thief who breaks into the night nursery is subdued by the innocent prattle of Baby Tumkins; the drunken osler in the "Pig and Whistle" is sobered by the consumptive angel who lisps, "Daddy, dear daddy, do come home!" The blasphemous ravisher, mad in the hour of victory, is tamed by the sight of a locket ("Heavens! how came this here? Tell me, girl!") and drops his prey with an oath that is half a prayer. And so on ... one

need not accumulate examples.

Lionel did not kiss Miss Arkwright. Though he had dwelt on the possibility, hoped for it, almost schemed and certainly desired; though he had decided that his grass-bachelorship permitted such a kiss as was now offered, he refused. Why? Partly, no doubt, because a kiss won by half-forceful methods is worth more than a tribute freely offered; partly because the offer tends to congeal the blood and curb the desire—the ideal has stooped and taken a few inches off her goddess statue; partly, too (the moralist will be glad to note), because he remembered Beatrice.

Seeds of nobility? One must suppose it. Perhaps a sense, dim-recognized, that the cheapening of ideals by frequent draughts at wayside fountains lessens the value and appreciation of the ultimate prize. Men find it hard to resist a drink. If they could look forward with assurance to the final realization of their hopes there would be fewer loveless marriages, fewer abandoned maidens, fewer degenerate men. But they feel that youth slips by—the ideal woman is hard to find, harder to win: why not sip the pleasant fountain that will slake them for a moment? So, *vogue la galère*! We will have one swig before we die—a good swig to drown regret: if we find it is not Veuve Clicquot but only muddy ale, at least we can get drunk on one as well as the other.

These profound reflections did not present themselves so lucidly to Lionel as to the temperate reader who never gets drunk—never so much as sips. He comprehended them vaguely, unconsciously almost, in the thought, "Oh, damn! she's not Beatrice—she's not Beatrice—I can't." A man of unsettled purpose, you perceive, who had mapped his course of pleasure and then forsaken it, vacillating, lukewarm, halting between two opinions. "The evil that I would, I do not!" he thought in humorous astonishment at himself; and then aloud, "I am at a loss for words."

He felt rather a fool, but was pleased to note that Miss Arkwright looked neither ill-at-ease nor disappointed. He searched her countenance for a hint of contempt, but found none. Dropping her hands with an unaffected laugh she said, "You are duller than I thought, Mr. Mortimer. Come! let us go and see if they have brought tea out yet." They turned, and suddenly her face flushed scarlet. She drew in her breath sharply. Forbes was coming across the lawn, followed by the ambassador.

She ran forward and shook hands, murmuring something Lionel did not hear.

Then, as Forbes retired, she introduced the two men: "Mr. Mortimer—Mr. Beckett." Lionel surveyed the ambassador with curiosity, his late-lulled suspicions once more awake. What was he doing here? Mr. Beckett returned the scrutiny something in the manner of a jealous lover who would like an explanation of a stranger's presence. But he was a diplomatic gentleman, and it was with a slight laugh, merry and sincere, that he held out his hand.

"We have met before," he said in a friendly fashion, "but under less happy auspices. Mr. Mortimer, you saw me under a cloud. I was exceedingly rude. You who are a golfer will readily find excuses, I hope. I am very sorry."

Miss Arkwright's eyes looked anxiously upon them. When had they met and where? How odd that he had never mentioned it once! She must hear the story of their meeting; and "rude"—what did he mean by that?

Lionel smiled and referred her to the ambassador. He, genuinely anxious to atone for a foolish contretemps, did not spare himself in the recital. Miss Arkwright laughed gaily over the tale.

"Men are so silly," she said merrily as he finished. "Fancy getting angry over a game of golf! And all by yourself, too! If there had been some one to vent your rage upon——"

"Alas, there was!" said Mr. Beckett, with a whimsical glance at Lionel, who, despite himself and his suspicions, felt drawn toward the enemy. It was a friendly party of three that walked toward the summer-house.

On the whole, tea was a successful meal. Miss Arkwright led the conversation—monopolized it, almost; hardly pausing for replies, agreement, or contradiction. She looked splendid, her color heightened with pleasure, excitement, or kindred emotions. Lionel, who had studied her attentively for no short period, had never seen her in such a mood. She was gay and charming, unusually ready with the froth of sparkling small-talk. Any one meeting her for the first time would have believed her a clever *flaneuse*, a butterfly with brains and beauty, living solely for the moment. But Lionel, who knew her better and had some secret knowledge of her possibilities for intrigue and conspiracy, found himself questioning. Was she nervous? And if so, of what?

Mr. Beckett had little opportunity to display his social gifts. The abilities, doubtless great to secure his present office, perforce lay hidden. But the few sentences he uttered, by way of confirmation or its opposite, were enough to

show him as a man of original thought, some wit, and in close touch with the affairs of nations. An old man, he bore his years lightly; though the mask of frivolity he assumed out of compliment to his environment was occasionally dropped in moments of repose. At such moments he appeared tired—not physically, but of mundane trivialities.

At last Winifred rose. "You know my routine," she said brightly to Lionel: "I must vanish speedily. No! don't move. Stay here and smoke. I shall escort Mr. Beckett——"

"You still, then——" began the ambassador, rising at the hint. She interrupted him bruskly.

"Still—still—still! Are we not always 'stilling'? I wonder that a man of your experience finds anything remarkable in that. Oh, do not interrupt!"—for he made a deprecating gesture, opening his mouth to speak—"I will hear no excuses for banality. 'The ringing grooves of change' is pure fallacy; change is absent; only the grooves remain. We are what we are. As it was in the beginning, is now, and—do I shock you?" she asked abruptly, turning to Lionel.

"Surprise; not shock," he smiled.

"Then you owe me a debt of gratitude. Surprise is one of nature's best gifts, but at our mature age she is parsimonious. Don't you agree, Mr. Beckett?"

He, too, smiled, but mournfully.

"I have more need to count my birthdays than you," he said. "If your surprises are few, how many can I hope for?"

"*Nil desperandum!*" she said cheerfully and less self-consciously, taking him, comrade-like, by the arm. "Come and find your motor: perhaps a surprise is waiting—some ragamuffin may have put a penknife through the tire!"

"I hope not!" he said more briskly. "As it has only just come from London this afternoon to take me back after my holiday, I don't want to be balked at the outset. Well, good-by, Mr. Mortimer."

"Good-by," said Lionel, shaking hands. "No chance of seeing you down here again presently, I suppose?"

"Who knows?" said Miss Arkwright vivaciously, taking the words from his lips.

"A dashing adventurer like Mr. Beckett, whose only serious business is golf ____"

She did not finish the sentence, but led him off, protesting that the slander was ill-deserved. Lionel watched them disappear, heavy with thought.

Miss Arkwright did not come back. He was glad of her absence, for he could only think, and think, and think again what it all meant, trying to find some key to the perpetual problem. There were Beatrice, Winifred and the ambassador forever whirling through his brain, suggesting, perplexing, questioning. Where was the clew? If only he could put his hand on some definite idea, some shred of coherence in the whole amazing scheme! Beatrice had warned him that her sister and "Mr. Beckett" were conspiring. Good: that was definite, and the ambassador's visit was proof of fellowship—in what? High politics? The life of Lukos? It seemed so unlikely in this pleasant English garden, but the facts were stubborn. Then he had not heard from Beatrice. He had thought she and Winifred might be identical.... Stay! he had discarded that.... Let us begin again from another point. Why had Winifred invited his amorous interest? She—but Beatrice had warned him—unnecessarily, had been his foolish thought—against the wiles of Winifred. Her seductive friendship had been simply a trap ... but, no! the remembrance of his recent delectable danger, the sincerity of her—love? the faith of her eyes—all denied a trap. Winifred could not be a conspirator; at worst she must be a half-hearted conspirator who had begun to sympathize with her enemies. But if that were so, she must soon be on the side of Beatrice, of whom she would speedily be jealous! His brain reeled.

The sum of his perplexed musings was that he must keep his eyes open,—a poor result for so much mental effort. That, however, was all he achieved by dinner-time, and he sucked small comfort therefrom. "I am not made for detective work," he reflected gloomily as he played with dinner. "I went into this adventure too light-heartedly. I thought it a game.... So it is, and deucedly exciting now, but I don't seem to have mastered the rules. A blind man in a total eclipse looking for something that isn't there,—that's Lionel Mortimer, Esquire. Old man, you'd better have a drink."

Sensations were crowding thick upon him. His uneventful fortnight was to bear a heavy interest within a few brief hours. In the library, after further futile pondering, he tried to distract his thoughts with books. It was a failure; he could not concentrate his attention on printed words for more than five minutes together. Always he came back to Beatrice and the ramifications reaching from

Constantinople to London and thence to Shereling. With a grunt of dissatisfaction, he got up at last at eleven o'clock and knocked out his pipe upon the hearth. As he did this he heard a slight crunch as of a foot upon the gravel. He turned quickly toward the French window and saw that he had forgotten to draw down the blind. He saw something else as well. For a brief second Lionel had a glimpse—the barest glimpse—of a white face pressed against the pane, *watching*. The face vanished almost before the retina had time to record the impression, but he knew two things at once—it was a man's face, and a man he had never seen before.

Lionel did exactly what you and I would have done. He stood stock-still for a moment, his heart clop-clopping against his ribs as if intent on bursting its way through to the light, hammering a Morse message—"You are badly frightened, you are badly frightened, you are badly frightened." "Yes," said Lionel, after three seconds' pardonable collapse, "I *am*; but I'll try to frighten the other chap!" And with laudable swiftness he ran to the window, threw it open and called, "Who's there?"

Of course there was no answer. With a thawing of the faculties he ran back, seized the poker and turned off the light. Then he stepped outside to look for the night-prowler, longing for some tangible flesh to beat into a pulp.

The night was starless. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. Not a bird twittered a hint of ambush. Not a sound on gravel or swish of dew-laden grass brushed by a spy's foot promised vengeance. Aglow with eagerness now that action was possible and a clew at hand, he walked round the house, eyes and ears alert for the marauder. There was nothing to be seen. It was only too clear that the watcher by night had escaped the moment he was seen, and no good purpose could be served by a random pursuit in the dark. Lionel went back to the library, secured the windows and lighted a fresh pipe.

Of course he could not arouse the house. If, as seemed certain, this watcher were a Turkish spy, it would be absurd to enlist Miss Arkwright's aid. Better to say nothing, still watch—but even more narrowly—and ... go to bed.

It was a quarter to twelve when he went up-stairs, still smoking. His bedroom lay at the end of a short passage. Anxious not to disturb any one at that unseasonable hour, he took off his slippers at the foot of the stairs and advanced in his "stocking-feet." Without the slightest noise he tiptoed along the corridor. Just before he reached his room another door was opened, very quietly indeed, upon

his right. A line of light cut the blackness, and Lionel stood still involuntarily, without purpose, waiting, expectant of something, he knew not what. The door opened wide, and a girl in a pretty pink dressing-gown came out. It was not Winifred who threw up her hands at the sight of the waiting Lionel. It was Mizzi.

CHAPTER XX

THRILL UPON THRILL

This time Lionel had himself well in hand: he was ready for anything. It was no occasion for tenderness or chivalry: brusk silent action was the cue. Seizing the stricken Mizzi by the arm with one hand, he clapped the other over her mouth to prevent a scream. Then half-pushing, half-dragging, he forced her along the few remaining yards that separated them from his bedroom. She struggled at first, but soon realized her helplessness and allowed him to have his way. When he had her safely inside, Lionel locked the door quietly and sat down in high feather on the bed. He felt he was beginning to earn his salary at last.

"Do sit down," he suggested politely. "We must have quite a long conversation before we part. I can recommend the armchair."

Mizzi shrugged her shoulders philosophically and obeyed. She was breathing a little quickly from the capture; but Lionel noticed that she was as charming as ever, and his heart harbored a rebellious thought. "Hard luck that I seem to be always trying to snare a pretty girl!" he mused. "Well, it must be no nonsense now, my friend. Saint Anthony, forward!" He studied Mizzi's face attentively for a minute, and then asked bluntly, "Now, will you kindly tell me what you have done with those papers?"

"What papers?" she asked with surpassing innocence. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Oh, don't be silly!" he said impatiently. "Why need we beat about the bush? You know well enough. Explain."

"I know this," she said viciously, "that you find me coming from my room, fall upon me like an Apache, drag me here at this unseemly hour and lock me in! And you ask me to explain! The explanation is due from you. Have you never heard of *les convenances*—what you English call Mrs. Grundy?"

"She's snoring now," he smiled. "I shan't wake her."

Mizzi rose with dignity and marched to the door, nose in the air. "If you are a

gentleman," she said scornfully, "you will release me at once."

"Afterward," he replied without moving. He sensed his triumph already.

"After what?"

"Your explanation."

She sat down again and looked keenly at him, as if trying to divine the strength of his determination. "I have nothing to explain," she said presently. "If I had, you could not compel me. If you attempt it I shall scream."

"Quite worth trying," he said urbanely. "Start now. I haven't the least objection."

Mizzi remained silent for several minutes, debating the point. Then she laughed frankly, as if admiring his coolness. "Ah! that's better!" he approved. "Now, perhaps, we shall get on."

"But no!" she said quickly, "I shall not scream, because I am quite capable of taking care of myself. But I will tell you nothing. What next, monsieur?"

Lionel got off the bed and began to fill a pipe in leisurely fashion. "You don't mind me smoking?" he asked formally. "It always helps me." He struck a match and lighted the tobacco, apparently preoccupied. "What next? you ask. This. Have you ever seen that Pinero play, *The Gay Lord Quex*?"

She shook her head, puzzled.

"Ah! that's a pity, for I am going to borrow a hint if you are difficile. If you refuse to confess I mean to keep you locked up here till the morning."

"And then?"

"Then I shall ring for my shaving-water. And where's your character?"

She bit her lips. "I mistook you for a gentleman."

"Ah! that was the fault of the top hat. I'm really a detective and can't afford the luxury of sentiment."

Mizzi nibbled a finger-nail, and watched him with sparkling eyes. It was clear that she was not at ease, that she had not expected to find him so ready with a plan, so determined in dishonor. Being a woman, it is probable that she did not altogether blame him. Lionel smiled, reading her, as he thought, like a book.

"Well, what is it to be?"

She made a disconsolate gesture.

"You are too strong," she said, and smiled in pitiful appeal. "Ah, monsieur! once you would not have——"

"That line is useless," said Lionel brutally. He was playing for high stakes and could not afford to waste a trick. "Once I flirted and had the pleasure of a kiss. Never again, my pretty schemer! So don't try it on!"

She looked bewildered.

"You misunderstand me cruelly. But as I am to be beaten, let us get to business. What do you wish to know?"

"Where are the papers?"

She did not attempt to parry now. "They are not in this house."

"That is a lie."

She shrugged again.

"Monsieur is not discriminating. I tell you the truth. I took the papers and have hidden them. They are not here. If you like, here are my keys"—she held them out—"you may search my boxes."

He looked steadily at her. There was no wavering in her tone, no weakness in the eyes or mouth. Belief was imperative.

"Very well," he said. "Where have you hidden them?"

"I will not tell you that."

"You know the penalty?"

"Yes, and I do not care. I tell you so much, but not that."

Her voice was so inflexible, so cold and so indifferent that he felt defeat at hand.

"Leave it for the present, then. Have you sold them?"

"No. They would not pay the price."

"And you are waiting till they increase their offer?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps!" he echoed. "But you mean to sell them?"

She smiled faintly.

"Perhaps. I may have stolen them for other motives than money. Enough that I stole them and will not tell you where they are."

He changed his line of attack.

"To-morrow I will have you arrested for theft."

"No," she demurred. "You have no proof—no witness. The papers will *never* be found unless I choose. Besides, you dare not have me arrested: you know this is not a police matter."

"True," he admitted, for her knowledge made it useless to bluff. He paused and thought, Mizzi smiling maliciously from the armchair. The pendulum of victory was swinging to her and she could afford to smile. "Look here!" said Lionel, remembering another weapon. "Will you sell me them? I'll give you your price."

"I will *never* sell them to you," she said, still with inflexible determination. "Do not suggest it again, please. It would be a waste of time."

Lionel was baffled, beaten at every point in the game, and he knew it. "Confound it!" he thought savagely, "I fancied I held the key of the situation in my hands, and I am no further on. I am deeper, in fact, for I know that Mizzi is here and I do not know why.... Ah!" he cried suddenly, determined to have one thing decided for good and all. "You have won to-night, I allow—I have no hold on you to make you confess—but there is one thing that you have done for me—one suspicion that your presence here has made almost a certainty—one resolution of a doubt that I can thank you for, however painfully—"

"And that is?" she asked with polite interest.

"This. I have come to the conclusion that the whole business is a game. I don't understand it in the least, but it's a game none the less, and I have been a dupe. I am sure now that Miss Blair and Miss Arkwright are the same person. What do you say to that?"

Mizzi did not so much as flicker an eyelash. She looked at him with a lazy amusement.

"*Herr Gott!*" she said with a scorn that seared his unbelief forever. "If you think that you will think anything. Miss Arkwright and Miss Blair the same!" and she went off into an uncontrollable peal.

Lionel would have dearly liked to shake her, but in the midst of his defeat he realized with a glow that she had won a Pyrrhic victory. "She won't tell me what I ask her," he thought deliriously, "but she has convinced me of Beatrice's innocence. That is something at all events!" and he, too, began to laugh so infectiously that Mizzi stared in amazement. They laughed like two good friends, and it was in an excellent humor that Lionel at last got up.

"Congratulations!" he said courteously. "You have beaten me, I confess. I can not give you in charge, unfortunately, and I do not see that any good purpose would be served by keeping you here all night. If I did, I would do so without hesitation. But I warn you that I shall ask Miss Arkwright to-morrow for an explanation of your presence."

"I hope she will give you one," said Mizzi, rising with twinkling eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Mortimer. I hardly expected you to be generous, but I felt sure you would be sensible."

He laughed good-humoredly and walked over to the door, she following with a demure air that was something of a trial to Saint Anthony. He fitted the key, turned it, and opened the door with a little bow. The bow was never perfectly finished, for framed in the doorway he beheld the figures of his hostess and Mrs. Wetherby. They had evidently been on the point of knocking, for Miss Arkwright's right hand was raised in the air: the projected knock had assumed the similitude of a blessing—or a curse.

Mizzi fell back in unaffected horror. Lionel, the sport of fortune, was past surprise. He only stood and waited.

"*Mizzi!*" said Miss Arkwright—one can not think of her as Winifred in such a deplorable situation: she radiated outraged respectability. "*Mizzi!*"

The unhappy innocent was almost incapable of speech. Before Miss Arkwright's cutting dissyllables and Miss Wetherby's damnatory mien she was crushed. Lionel felt really sorry for her. "It is not my fault, madame," she mumbled.

"Believe me, it is not my fault! This gentleman trepanned me. I am innocent. Is it not so, Mr. Mortimer?"

"She speaks the truth," said Lionel calmly. "I kidnaped her and locked her in. I suppose that sounds unlikely, but it is a fact: I alone am to blame. Does one apologize for this sort of thing? If so, I am very sorry, but——"

Miss Arkwright silenced him with a gesture. Her looks were serpents, her attitude was a virgin horror of man. She pointed imperiously to the corridor. "Go!" she hissed (yes—yes: "hissed" is melodrama, but she *did* hiss), and Mizzi scuttled whimpering into the darkness. For a moment there was silence, but when the luckless girl had disappeared she turned again to Lionel. "Now, sir, be good enough to give me your key."

"My *key*!" he repeated in amazement. "Why?"

"Because I mean to lock you in for the night," she said sternly. "Without that degrading precaution we can not feel safe."

Mrs. Wetherby said nothing, but nodded a grim approval.

"I recognize your claims as hostess," replied Lionel amicably, "but, really, this is carrying the thing too far. I am not the vulgar intriguer you suppose—I merely kidnaped that charming——"

"If you refuse," interrupted Winifred with basilisk eyes, "I shall ring for Forbes and have you turned out of the house at once. Do you understand?"

Lionel sighed.

"I ought to have known," he said, "that a woman judges by emotion, not reason. In the morning perhaps I shall be able to convince you of my innocence." He gave her the key, which she snatched with unnecessary vehemence. "Good night. Thank you for an uneventful evening."

She ignored the insolence, which he justified to himself by her unreasonable suspicions. Leaving him in a nonchalant attitude, she swept out like an offended princess, her satellite following in an eloquent silence. Lionel heard the key turn dismally in the lock, and then the sound of footsteps retreating down the passage. He laughed gently to himself.

"Good lord, what a muddle!" he said, "and what an evening! First, the face at the

window (what a title for a melodrama!—Dash it! I've seen it already on the posters!); second, the appearance of Mizzi; third, discovered by Winifred. Climax after climax, and I was beginning to think myself bored. *Bored* ... ye gods!... all I need at the present moment is bed: I've done enough thinking to scour my brain-pan for a year."

He undressed rapidly and got into bed. As he pulled the clothes about him he chuckled, remembering Winifred's face. Then he grew grave. "Sacked to-morrow, old boy!" he muttered. "Marching orders at breakfast and no mistake! But before I go I'll ask her straight out what little Mizzi is doing here." And then he turned over and was soon asleep.

But the horn of plenty still had some gifts to shower upon him: the god of mischances had not yet exhausted his store of thrills. About five minutes, as it seemed, after his retiring—it was really an hour and a half—Lionel was roused from a deep slumber by a knock. He sat up in bed, blinking heavily, wondering if his senses had deceived him, whether he was dreaming or awake. For a moment he sat listening, and then the knock was repeated, distinct beyond the possibility of mistake. "Confound it!" he muttered in an ill temper; "they might give me a night off now.... To-morrow I'll hang a placard on my door—'Conspiracies attended to from nine A. M. to eleven P. M. Kindly note hours of consultation.'—Hello!" he said aloud; "is anybody there?"

The door opened a few inches, but no one entered. Lionel was too bored to speculate whether it might be Mizzi, Winifred or some unknown Oriental with turban and simitar. He was prepared to accept anything, if only he might be allowed to go to sleep. "Hello!" he repeated; "who is that?"

"Me," said the voice of Miss Arkwright. "Are you asleep, Mr. Mortimer?"

"Yes," said Lionel, grinning in the darkness—"sound asleep."

A species of cluck was heard from outside the door, but whether the strange sound indicated amusement or wrath he could not determine. He was wide awake now, determined to exact vengeance for his cavalier treatment.

"Some one," continued the voice, "is prowling round the house. A thief, I suppose. He seems to have a ladder."

"Oh!" said Lionel, in the dispassionate tone of the village idiot. "Oh!"

Again there was silence, save for a repetition of the curious cluck. Presently

Winifred said in a voice that trembled with indignation, "Is that all you have to say?"

"You might give him my kind regards, and ask him to leave this room untouched," said Lionel, beginning to enjoy himself. He could picture Winifred biting her lip. "Good night, and pleasant dreams."

"You are a *man*, and my guest," said the voice bitterly, "and you leave us at the mercy of a possible murderer——"

"Not a guest," he corrected, "but a prisoner. If you require a man, why not ask Forbes? You were ready enough to use him just now."

Again there was silence. When she spoke again it was in the meekest of tones—so meek, indeed, that he scarcely recognized it as Winifred's.

"Mr. Mortimer, I am very sorry. Please be generous. I threatened you with a weapon I did not possess. Forbes sleeps in the village."

Lionel could not repress a laugh. He had been bluffed, but bore no malice. Enough of vengeance had been exacted. He could accept the capitulation without loss of dignity, for Miss Arkwright—most properly—had been obliged to ask his help.

"A moment," he said, "and I shall be with you."

Jumping out of bed, he hastily put on his dressing-gown in the dark. Then he opened the door and joined Winifred in the corridor. She was in a dressing-gown, too, and looked charming *en déshabille*, her glorious hair unbound. But no time was allowed for more than a glance of admiration. Taking him by the arm, she hurried him along, explaining how she had not gone to sleep, but had lain thinking. "My light was out, of course," she said; "and this marauder, whoever he is, must have thought all the household asleep. I watched him cross the lawn and presently bring back a ladder from the potting-shed. He reared it against the window of an empty room. I at once came to you. As soon as he has discovered his mistake he will probably try another."

"Then shall I go down-stairs and capture him as he descends?" suggested Lionel.

"Let us see first from the window," she said. "We must make sure."

They entered her bedroom together and walked softly toward the window. The

blind was up.

There was no moon, but the faint promise of the dawn lent a dim light, by which objects, grotesquely shadowed, could be distinguished. When they reached the window Lionel saw the top of a ladder resting against the sill.

"You're right!" he whispered. "Now, I'm off outside!" He turned to go, but was detained by a pressure on his arm.

"No, no!" whispered Winifred. "I can not let you—there may be a gang—you might get hurt——"

"Nonsense!"

"I insist!"

"Then why——"

"You must *not* go! Throw something instead——"

"Absurd! I——"

"I beg you!" she entreated, and her voice was so timid that once again Lionel's heart failed. "All right!" he said. "Give me something heavy. I'll fling up the window suddenly and surprise him!"

She pressed his arm gratefully and glided across the room. The next moment she was at his side, offering the water-jug.

"Capital!" whispered Lionel. "Drench him first, then stun him with the jug. Any other trifles to bestow? Soap—hair-brushes—a boot or two? Any little knickknacks——"

"The ladder is moving!"

It was being shifted a few inches, apparently to a better foothold. Lionel seized the jug and made ready for action.

"Cigar or cocoa-nut, lidy?" he whispered joyously as he threw up the sash.

CHAPTER XXI

THE THORNY PATH

"Dinner *as* usual, sir?" said the landlord of The Happy Heart, looking into the parlor where Tony and Robert were playing piquet.

"Please, Mr. Glew," said Tony. "Seven o'clock as usual. Oh, by the way, have you got such a thing as a lantern?"

"A lantern!" interjected Robert in surprise. "Why, what——" He was checked by a kick under the table.

"I dare say I can find you one, sir," said the landlord. "We don't need 'em these summer nights, but I'll be bound there's one knocking about somewhere."

"Thanks. My friend and I are enthusiastic collectors of butterflies and moths. We mean to try for some of the latter to-night; so, if we are not in till late, you won't be surprised or imagine burglars."

"Bless you, no, sir!" said Glew, and went out to look for the lantern. As soon as the door closed Robert began to speak.

"Don't think me censorious, Mr. Wild, if you please; but, really now, was there any need for that?"

"The lantern? Rather! We may have to——"

"No—not the lantern. The—the perversion——"

"Oh! you mean the lie. Don't apologize, Bangs, old chap! you haven't offended me in the least. I like people to say what they think.—Well, the lie.... Yes, I think it was necessary. Conspirators can't stick at trifles. Besides, it's on *my* conscience, so there's no need for you to worry."

"But wouldn't an excuse——"

"Have done equally well? Possibly, though I never save the ha'porth of tar. And an excuse would have been only a lie in another form—just as culpable. But don't let's worry over this: I want to tell you of the plan of campaign."

Robert subsided, content to have recorded a protest, however mild. He loved adventure; but, being a man trained in meticulous accuracy, he did not take kindly to deception—verbal deception, at any rate. The path of an adventurer he had found a trifle thorny, trodden by a man of conscience, but still he had enjoyed it and hoped to tread it still further. But he was careful to leave most of the talking to his comrade.

"While you, Bangs," pursued Tony, leaning against the mantelpiece, "have been living the lotus life and acting slugabed, I have been working hard. Ever since I got a hint that Brown was in touch with The Quiet House I have been following him like the proverbial sleuth hound. I have discovered—at the expense of torn trousers and soaking feet—that he keeps tryst nightly with that charming bit of womanhood I spoke to once—and only once, alas! He has a private entry over the wall, having driven some large nails into the outer side, well off the beaten track. Up there the gay Lothario climbs—drops into the garden—meets his divinity, and *voilà tout*!"

"What happens?" asked Robert eagerly.

"The usual thing, Bangs. Exchange of kisses and confidences—which I, alas! can hear but imperfectly."

"But you don't listen!" exclaimed Robert, scandalized. Tony sighed.

"I have to steel myself. In high politics, you know ... but, of course, I shall never tell."

"Oh!"

The disappointment was obvious, and Tony laughed.

"No, old fellow, love's young dream and so forth must be respected. Honestly, I've only watched, hoping to get a clew—perhaps some conversation with the girl when Brown goes home. No good! No earthly good! Brown sees her safe to the house and then comes back. He stands on a convenient garden roller and climbs. Then he drops, and off home. Ditto me, disgusted, envious, lacking information. To-night I mean to move."

"Yes!"

"We'll lie in wait, Bangs, and have a word with them. A coil of rope and a sack—those shall be our only tools. While Brown is talking we'll try to slip the sack

over his head and tie him up. I don't think the lady will scream, for it seems to me that there's a kind of counterplot afoot—either against Billy, the Turkish government, or Miss Arkwright. (I still feel sure she is not Miss Arkwright, but a maid of sorts.) Now, if I'm right in my conjectures she won't be keen on advertising Brown's presence to her mistress. If I'm wrong and she *does* scream and help comes, we must bolt to the wall and clear out at once. If we succeed, we'll have a talk with her and try to find out something. I'm tired of waiting in the dark. Now, are you game to help?"

Robert wagged his head nervously.

"Of course, Mr. Wild, I'm as ready for adventure as I ever was. But—but this is a serious business. It—it might mean prison!"

"It might," agreed Tony; "but I don't think it need if we're smart. Anyhow, we must be prepared to risk a little for a great adventure. If we're cute about the sack business I think I can manage the roping part all right. You would have to hold the lady."

"B-but——"

"She's awfully pretty ..."

"That is no inducement, Mr. Wild. You forget——"

"Come, Bangs, none of your 'perversions!' I don't forget anything. How many chaps half your age would jump at the chance of capturing a beautiful anarchist!"

"I am not an old man yet, Mr. Wild," said Robert with some heat. "You misunderstand me. I love romance and can take an interest—a detached interest, of course—an appreciative and artistic interest in a pretty woman. What I am thinking of is the law. But, since you put it like that, I will come and risk it."

"Good," said Tony, concealing a smile. "Don't let your interest be too detached, old boy, or she may get away into the house. Grip her firmly by the wrists."

They spent the rest of the summer evening in maturing their plans and piquet. Having given his word Mr. Hedderwick scorned to withdraw, though it was plain that he did not relish the prospect of a night attack. Tony, in addition to the lantern, procured some rope and a sack from the landlord. "To put the moths in, Mr. Glew," he said brightly by way of explanation.

"*To put the morths in!*" repeated Glew in a dazed fashion. "To put the MORTHS in! TO PUT THE——"

He was still repeating the formula when the adventurous pair set out.

It was a quarter past ten, thirty minutes before the odd-job man was wont to meet the lady of his heart. They reached The Quiet House in some ten minutes, and then skirted the wall for a short distance, till Tony stopped with a whispered "Here we are!" It was in a bridle-path that they found themselves, about eighty yards from the main road that ran through Shereling. Tony crouched down behind a convenient clump of bramble and lighted the lamp.

"I'll light you up the wall," he said softly. "When you get to the top, hang by your hands and drop quietly down. There's soft grass ten feet beneath you. As soon as you're up I shall put out the light, for I know the way by heart now."

With a resentful obedience Robert observed the big nails that had been driven into the brickwork by the amorous Brown. Heartily wishing himself at home—or at least in the snug security of The Happy Heart—but loath to plead his years or cowardice, Mr. Hedderwick put his foot on the lowest spike, grasped one above his head, and began the ascent. To an active boy it would have been a trivial feat; to an elderly adventurer it was full of pain, and in spite of an heroic spirit he was more than once on the point of climbing down again. Something, however, forbade the refusal of the adventure: curiosity or shame held him to his word. The glimmer of Tony's lantern following—nay, leading him ever upward, shone like a beacon of promise in the dark. The thought spurred him, and it was not until he had one leg across the top of the wall that he reflected on a change of simile: the light might rather be a will-o'-the-wisp luring him to destruction or disgrace. For a moment his courage failed.

"Mr. Wild!" he whispered despairingly, "I'm——"

The light went out.

"All right?" said the cheering voice of his fellow criminal. "Good. I'm coming."

He began to follow, rope, sack and lantern coiled over his shoulders. With a groan of resolution Robert wiped the sweat of fear from his forehead and dropped lightly to the ground.

Tony joined him a moment later, breathing a little quickly from the climb. Without a word he walked cautiously forward, Robert close behind, until they

reached a thicket of elder-bushes. Into the heart of this they crept, making as little noise as possible. Presently, when Tony judged they were so placed as to be secure from observation, themselves able to observe, they halted. "May as well sit down," whispered Tony; "quite likely we shall have to wait a bit." He spread the sack upon the ground and the two of them established themselves upon it, clasping their knees.

The night, most luckily, was fine. There was no hint of rain, and little dew was falling. There was no moon, and the fitful starlight only served to display the immensity of the darkness, the monstrous tree-shapes looming threateningly on them, the overwhelming horror of The Quiet House. Black against the dark background of the sky it reared its bulk above them, seeming to menace the guilty pair with nightmare terrors, starting ghoulish fancies, prosaic fears of the police, a child's dread of the dark and all its goblins. It was so silent, powerful, unknown. Mr. Hedderwick's flesh crept with a chill that was not climatic, and instinctively he huddled closer to his companion.

"Can we smoke?" he breathed.

"No. *They* might see the glow."

"They," of course meant Brown and his accomplice; but, uttered beneath that lowering sky, those gloomy trees, in the atmosphere of intrigue and hypothetical bloodshed, the words assumed an awful import to Mr. Hedderwick. Romance cut with a keener edge across his quivering soul. He was getting his fill of adventures, and with an unfeigned zeal he now wished himself safe at Bloomsbury, even at the price of a Caudle's welcome. To think that he, a middle-aged—no! an *old* man, with a good wife—yes! a *good* wife, though sometimes a little overbearing—a churchwarden of Saint Frideswide's and all the rest—to think that he could be so harebrained and ungrateful as to embark on such an enterprise! It was incredible: he must be dreaming.... No; it was real. His right foot was in agony: it had gone to sleep.

"Ouch!" he said, stretching it. "What's the time, Mr. Wild?"

"Can't see. Daren't light a match. 'Fraid they're late. Shut up."

Time passed heavily to the unhappy man. A schoolboy, condemned to a caning, can face the prospect with a decent front if only the punishment is not deferred. "Cane me, if you must!" he would say, "but get it over and let's have done with it!" A fair request, provided the culprit be not a hardened nature whom it is

policy to keep in suspense. In such a case the Third Degree may be justified. But suppose your culprit to be a sensitive shrinking nature, to whom the waiting is worse torture than the actual pain itself, is it not a refinement of cruelty to keep him on the tenter-hooks? Robert Hedderwick was of such, a gentle, kindly, romantic, imaginative fool. You who scorn his folly might pardon, could you but enter into half his feelings as he waits amid the elder-bushes.

At eleven o'clock there was promise of incident to cheer their hearts. From the other side of the house they heard a voice call sharply, "Who is there?" No answer was returned, but before the echoes died they saw a dark figure run silently across the lawn and clamber up the wall where they had made an entrance. Breathlessly they watched, and in another moment a second figure, carrying some lethal weapon, walked sharply into the field of vision. The newcomer made a tour of the house and part of the garden, but did not disturb the anxious watchers in the elders. As soon as he had disappeared Robert whispered, "What now? Shall we go after the man who climbed?"

"No," replied Tony, whispering too. "I don't understand this. It's a different program. Looks as if something is up. Better wait."

His companion sighed, for he had hoped release was at hand. Instead, he resigned himself to waiting.

An hour crept by with feet of lead. To the amateur plotters it seemed as if time itself were standing still. Robert thought it must be two o'clock at least, but Tony's common sense guessed it to be near midnight. Once the churchwarden ventured to suggest that honor was satisfied, curiosity likely to be disappointed; why not retire? Tony refused doggedly:

"I'm going to see it through now if we wait till five o'clock. No more lost chances!"

Robert groaned and rubbed his leg.

It was half past one when Robert, half asleep, conscious of nothing but discomfort, felt Tony plucking at his sleeve. He roused himself irritably, almost forgetful of their errand. Then, in the dim foreshadowing of dawn, he saw the outline of a man on the top of the wall. He awoke fully on the instant, clutching his fellow sufferer in pure fright, staring with wide-open eyes. The man dropped nimbly down upon the grass and walked noiselessly across the lawn.

They watched him eagerly, feeling that their sufferings were about to be rewarded, wondering whether they ought to follow or wait. If the first, they might be discovered; the second, they might lose him. For once in his life Tony was at a loss. He had reckoned on Brown's arrival, but not at a different hour, pursuing a new course. What was the best plan?

Fortunately the period of suspense was short. The figure, which had disappeared for a moment round the corner of the house, came into view once more. It still moved with surpassing stealth, but now it was carrying a long unwieldy object in one hand. It was a ladder. Tony nearly whistled when he saw this ominous contrivance, and Robert quivered with a satisfying impatience for the coming drama. Were they to see a new version of *Romeo and Juliet*, or was it merely a vulgar burglary?

The man paused, surveyed the blank unlighted house, and then reared his ladder against a window. He climbed rapidly up, but after a brief inspection descended with equal swiftness. He raised the ladder with no obvious effort, carried it some little distance along, and placed it at another window. It was clear that he was correcting a mistake.

"What"—began Robert in a thick whisper, but Tony clapped a hand on his mouth, fearing lest the faintest sound might betray them. Not that there was any real danger, for the night-prowler was twenty yards away, the wind had begun to rise, and the tree branches were sighing loudly enough to drown a human murmur. But Tony meant to run no risks: he was determined to see the play through to the end. Not the quiver of an eyelash must betray them. At all costs, silence.

They saw Brown—for who else could it be?—rear the ladder, then shift it a little to get a better foundation. He tried it with his hand to make sure that it was firm. At last, satisfied and resolute, he placed one foot upon it and began to climb. The watchers held their breath, unconscious of the drama within a drama about to burst upon them. Robert was trembling, his mouth still covered by Tony's precautionary hand. Brown was on the second rung, when the window above was suddenly flung open. The mysterious Billy leaned out, jug in hand. "Good evening!" he said distinctly, in pleasant gentlemanly accents that reached the watchers in the elders: "good evening. Have a drink?"

The wretched Brown was so *bouleversé* by the unexpected apparition that he stood fast, gaping wonderfully, upon the second rung. It was lucky that he had

climbed no higher, for the cascade that fell with unerring aim fairly upon his countenance was the best part of a gallon of water. Apart from the hydraulic force exerted the wanton suddenness of the attack must have dashed him to the ground. He fell prone upon the grass, striving to disburden himself of an unwanted draft, pitiable, a spluttering ruin of a conspirator.

"*Glwhtt!*" said Robert from behind the hand of Tony. He was nigh to bursting with suppressed emotion. "*Glwhtt! oh! glwhtt!*"

Tony, too, found it hard to keep himself in hand. Despite his disappointment at beholding his fair hopes frustrated, it was no easy task to check the laugh. To see a man, bold, confident, assured of success, in one moment converted into a sodden and convulsive mass, weltering upon the lawn—it was catastrophic. If incongruity be the basis of the comic spirit, it was here with a vengeance.

"With a vengeance." The thought was impelled by the quick hurry of events. Brown, after gaspy flounderings for half a minute, recovered himself and stood erect. He shook an Olympian fist in powerless wrath toward the window, breathed a crimson oath that might have scorched the stars, and ran blunderingly toward the wall. He made for his point of entry by a straight path and dashed blindly through the elders. In his headlong course he trod convincingly on Robert's fingers, but sped on, heedless of the yelp of pain. "*Ahoo!*" whooped Mr. Hedderwick, leaping in his agony, unrecking of the consequences. "*Ahoo! Ahoo!*" He was wringing his hands in an ecstasy of anguish as Lionel came bursting from the house, a heavy walking-stick in his hand.

"The wall quick!" said Tony, seizing him by the arm. They had a start of thirty yards: Brown was over the wall and out of sight by this time, and there was still hope of escape. Had Tony been alone he would have got away, for they reached the wall well ahead of the frantic Lionel, aflame for blood. But chivalry forced him to let Robert climb first. "Up you go!" he said, thrusting the adventurous churchwarden upon the roller. There were no spikes to help or hinder on the inner wall. Robert caught hold of the top bricks and scrabbled piteously with his toes, searching for a foothold. Tony shoved fiercely from beneath, the thought of prison or the bowstring beating in his brain. With a heave of which he scarce thought himself capable he boosted Robert high in the air. Mr. Hedderwick flew up like a ball of india-rubber, rolled on to the top, and fell over the other side with a wail of apprehension. Luckily the mud was soft. But just as he touched the mud, Lionel came up with his quarry and seized him by the collar. Tony turned and struggled like a wildcat, but he was no match for the other. Lionel

shortened his stick and drove it upward. With a grunt of pain Tony collapsed. "Whew!" said Lionel, vastly pleased as he contemplated the fallen foe. "There's one of 'em, anyhow. I hope I haven't killed the brute."

CHAPTER XXII

A TELEGRAM AND SUNDRIES

The twelve-year-old son of Mr. Glew, who, in the intervals of school and expiating the inevitable offenses of youth, was utilized to carry telegrams, came whistling up the drive of The Quiet House. He rang the bell, and in the fulness of time the summons was answered by a man servant who had been engaged the day before. He was called Jones. "Hello! young cock-sparrow!" said Jones cheerfully. "Brought a wire? Who's it for? Her Imperial Highness or me?"

"Name o' Mortimer," said the youthful Glew. "Catch hold!"

"Mortimer's on the lawn, sunning himself," said Jones. "Better take it straight round."

"I'm employed to hand telegrams into the house," said the boy with all the dignity of a government servant. "It's your business to see ole Mortimer gets it."

"And it's my business to give a clip 'side o' the 'ed," said Jones, riposting. "So if you don't want a thick ear inside of a jiffy, my lad, off you go."

Master Glew obeyed, soothing his outraged independence by a cry of "Yar! red-nosed beef-eater!" as soon as he was out of reach. Jones, regretting the ungiven clip, banged the door, and the libel-loving Glew went pleasantly on his way.

He found Lionel in the summer-house and delivered the yellow envelope, waiting dutifully to see if there was a prepaid reply, hoping for a possible douceur. In this he was disappointed; for although the telegram seemed to give unbounded pleasure to the recipient, no money changed hands, and Master Glew retired, embittered and pessimistic. As soon as he was alone Lionel read and read again the flimsy slip that conveyed so much. The words danced before him in the sunlight:

> "Lukos has died of measles. Stay where you are and keep watching. Beatrice."

Lukos dead! Then the path was clear, and he was free to hope, free to pursue, to

strive with all his heart and soul to ... to do what? Why, make love to her, of course, and presently ask her to marry him. "Marry" ... The word came on him with a stunning shock, as it does to every free bachelor when he sees the wedding-ring as a reality within his grasp. However much we long to persuade the beloved object to the vow—however much we have striven, hoped, schemed and waited—still, when the time comes of a verity, and at last we can confidently say, "I am to be married to-morrow!" or next week, or a year hence—then, in the midst of our ecstasy, there comes a whisper, "*Married! Tied! Shackled!*" We welcome our chains, of course,—we would barter our souls for the lovely fetters; but there always comes, if but for the briefest of seconds, the appalling thought, "Freedom has gone forever!" Is there a single husband who, during the period of courtship, has never been "afraid with any amazement"?

The thought, the fear, came to Lionel as to the rest of us, and for an instant he felt like taking to his heels. Then he smiled as a grown-up upon a child, naturally timid and ignorant. Next, his face fell, as he harped back to his theme. He was to "make love" to her.

To a man of his stamp making love is not a difficult matter. To a man like Tony it is a second nature—the breath of life—a perennial pastime. But making love is not the same as loving, and to make love to Beatrice would be an insult. He admired Beatrice so much—respected her—was anxious to serve her, to obey her slightest whim,—thought her the best and most desirable creature he had ever known. But if he did not love her, it would be a base thing to pretend, to use her as a toy. Did he love her or not? He wanted her—oh, yes! he wanted her as he had never wanted any one else in his life. There had been others, of course, with whom he had dallied—for instance, Mizzi. There had been one or two in whom he had taken a more serious interest, like Miss Arkwright. With the latter he had more than once imagined himself to be in love—he had dwelt delightfully upon the possibility—had gone to bed reflecting, "Dash it! Beatrice has forgotten me. Winifred's a darling! Why not?" And then when the kiss had been offered, he had refused. Well, in that lay hope of a greater certainty. He had refused the kiss—had he not?—because of Beatrice. Therefore he loved her. Therefore he must make love to her. Therefore he must ask her to marry him. Marriage! Whew—w—w!

"Oh, you vacillating ass!" he groaned to himself, getting up and stretching his arms as if to free himself from the enmeshing subtleties. "Why can't you be content to believe yourself in love and go straight ahead now that the path is clear? Why can't you be an ordinary, sane, matter-of-fact lover, and ask the dear

woman if she'll marry you and help you to help her, the world and yourself? Yourself, who need it badly. Why—why—why can't you be reasonable?" He shook his fist savagely at the heavens. "Why worry your brain about these intricate analyses? Why? *Because*, my boy, she deserves certainly, and, by George, she shall have it!"

He sat down and read the telegram once more. "Poor old chap!" he thought. "Dead ... and of measles. Lord! it's hard not to laugh. A man who plotted and shook the chancelleries, in daily danger of poison or the sword, to die of *measles*! What a world of oddities! Poor devil ... I wonder how she takes it?"

The remembrance of the forced marriage led him to think that she could not feel it too cruelly. No doubt she had liked him—had even felt affection for him. But the compulsion of wedlock and the death of her only son would not but make the tie more light than usual. "Let's hope so, anyway," he growled to himself, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "Lionel, you were selfish to talk of love so soon. More especially when you don't know yet if you love her or not."

Miss Arkwright came across the lawn. There had been no more talk of his departure. Since his noble rescue—five nights agone—it had been impossible to be harsh. There had been an interview next morning in which considerable frankness had been displayed on both sides. Miss Arkwright had asked him to repeat his explanation of Mizzi's presence in his bedroom, and this he had done cheerfully enough. In return, he had inquired what Mizzi was doing there, and had accused his hostess of conspiracy. "I feel," he had said, "that it is time we understand each other. Cards on the table, please. As you may know or guess, I came here to watch you, believing you to be in the service of the Turks."

"Absurd!" Winifred had replied. "I can not explain all now, but my sister is mistaken. Mizzi applied for a situation through a registry office, and only came the night you discovered her. I have questioned her, and though I believe your explanation of her presence, it is best for us all that she should not stay.—Oh, I have taken care that she shall not suffer financially.—I am sure your suspicions of her are as groundless as my sister's of me. In any case, I have no intention of conducting an inquiry into so flimsy a charge. Now we know where we are. If you will be pleased to prolong your stay, I shall be glad. Perhaps you will learn to believe in me at last." He did not believe her in the least, but the knowledge that he was no longer there on false pretenses was no small solace, and he stayed on.

"Well," said Miss Arkwright, approaching, "let us go and look at our prisoner. Have you seen him this morning?"

"Not since breakfast," said Lionel, rising. "What is his job to-day?"

"Digging and wheeling," answered Miss Arkwright with a smile. "I am told that he shapes well."

They walked round the back of the house, and presently came upon a second lawn. Across this was laid a narrow footway of planks. As they approached a figure was seen wheeling a small barrow of earth toward an embryonic flower bed. The figure came to the end of the causeway, upset his load with a professional side-twist, and then wiped his brow. "I believe that is always done," he said apologetically to the lady, who had halted with her cavalier: "one picks up a wrinkle here and there. Your gardener, for instance, showed me how the navvies unload their barrows, correcting my natural impulse to upset it straight ahead."

"Do you feel tired?" asked Miss Arkwright critically: there was no sympathy in her tone.

"The masses are used to that," answered Tony. "In time, no doubt, I shall learn the trick of doing the maximum of work with the minimum of effort. No, I can't say I am especially tired; it's rather a healthy feeling on the whole."

"You're making a bit of a mess of the lawn," observed Lionel, his glance falling on a scarred patch.

"Ah! that was in the apprentice stage," said Tony airily. "The barrow ran off the plank, and this narrow wheel cuts. Of course I am always open to learn, and if you——"

"Mr. Mortimer is a guest, not a serf," Miss Arkwright reminded him. Tony bowed.

"I apologize. For a moment I had forgotten class distinctions. Beg pardon, mum! By your leave, sir! I must be gettin' back to my job."

He trundled the barrow briskly out of sight to where a mound of soil awaited his efforts. He was soon back, however, and another load of soil was deposited dexterously upon the growing bed.

"You're still obstinate," said the lady, smiling.

"Meaning——?" He paused, shovel in hand.

"That you won't give any account of yourself."

"Why should I?" asked Tony innocently. "I am the slave of a perfectly charming despot"—he bowed again with grace, despite his costume and the mud stains. "I am well housed and fed. I have nothing special to do. I am regaining the rude health of youth——"

"But you have to *work*!" Lionel reminded him with a laugh. "And judging from your hands I don't think you've done much of that in your life."

Tony waved one of the despised hands.

"It is a popular error to speak of manual laborers as 'the working classes.' There is such a thing as brain-work—no! I don't press the point. As a matter of fact, I am rather attracted by this kind of work—for a change. Perhaps, when I regain my freedom, I shall then take up some sort of work as a hobby."

"You can be free as soon as you like," said Miss Arkwright carelessly.

"Ah! but at a price! You want the secret of my life. I shall only tell you the tragic story when you tell me something of yours. Meanwhile I am quite content to labor here on parole. It is true that I am forbidden the village—I am not even near enough the wall to pass the time of day (is that the local phrase?) with the outside world. But until I know more I am not anxious to leave the most delightful tyrant I have ever met."

"You ought to think yourself lucky," said Lionel, "that you're not cooling your heels in jail."

"By all accounts," said Tony blandly, "I might retort with a *tu quoque*."

"What do you mean?" asked Lionel, puzzled. "What do you know of me?"

Tony shrugged.

"That is part of the feuilleton," he said. "As soon as you like, we shall exchange stories. Meanwhile, permit the horny-handed aristocrat to pass along."

He went off again, whistling, leaving his questioners unsatisfied. In spite of the mystery of his presence, in spite of the recent struggle, both Lionel and his

hostess felt an instinctive liking for Tony. It had been Miss Arkwright's idea to set him to work. After the capture Lionel suggested a medieval treatment of bread-and-water in a locked chamber. Police proceedings were naturally out of the question. But Miss Arkwright was original in her methods, and after an interview with the unabashed intruder, had given him a choice of penalties. Either he might elect for the modern equivalent of the deepest dungeon beneath the moat, or he might work in the garden on parole. She saw he was a gentleman, and suspected him of being an interesting addition to The Quiet House. So Tony was admitted to the drawing-room on an equality with themselves. The mornings and afternoons he spent in forced labor, a victim of the *corvée*; his mid-day meal and "four o'clocks" were harmoniously eaten in the potting-shed. It was curious to observe a grimy navvy enter by the back door, to appear in the drawing-room later dressed in a lounge suit, with hair carefully parted. When he played or sang to them it seemed still more incongruous, but they were all adaptable creatures and there was no constraint.

This morning it was very hot, and Lionel and Winifred went back to the hammock-chairs in the shade. The heat made the air flicker like waves, and even the midges seemed too lazy to come out. A universal torpor hung heavily in the atmosphere; one thought regretfully of slaves in offices, clerks on stools, perspiring operators in factories. For, whether it be hot or cold, work has to be done by all save the leisured classes. And even they are sometimes compelled to exert themselves either by force of circumstances or a sense of duty.

It was the latter spur that roused the Reverend Charles Peters to get to work on his sermon for next Sunday. True, there were still three days' grace; but it had been his immemorial custom to begin to write his sermon on a Wednesday, and nothing short of a new heresy in the morning's newspaper could have kept him from his desk. Whether the garden tempted him to dally amid roses, or a keen frost suggested the pleasures of a brisk walk—whether he felt *disponiert* and stored with telling phrases, or empty as a sieve with the wind blowing through—whether his digestion was in first-class order or cried aloud for a liver-pill,—whatever conditions obtained, duty and habit drew Mr. Peters to a task not uncongenial. So, on this morning he went to his work as usual, despite the heat, not slothful enough to delve in a well-filled drawer and read over some "cold meat" for his parishioners. He established himself in the dining-room—luckily, as it proved—for his study was being "turned out."

As a preliminary he threw open both windows and removed his jacket and waistcoat. Then he lighted a pipe and settled down to arrange his thoughts. He

had not been meditating for more than ten minutes when his wife came in.

"The milkman's account, Charles," she said. "Can you settle it now?"

"Certainly, my dear," replied the vicar, unlocking his cash-box. "It's extremely hot this morning, isn't it?"

"It is," agreed Mrs. Peters, waiting for the money. "But, Charles——"

"Yes, my dear?"

"Do you think it quite seemly to be writing your sermon in shirt-sleeves?"

"It's extremely hot, Clara."

"Yes. But a *sermon*, Charles!"

The vicar laughed.

"Would you have me write it behind stained-glass windows, with incense burning round me?"

"A strict Evangelical——!!!"

"I was only joking, Clara," said the vicar quickly. "Of course, I shouldn't dream of——"

"I do not think one should be flippant under such circumstances. Shirt-sleeves and a pipe! My dear Charles——"

The vicar moved a little restlessly.

"My dear Clara, the day's very hot and I'm doing nothing to be ashamed of. If the bishop of London called I'm sure he'd say——"

"Mr. Bangs," said the housemaid at the door, and Robert entered with a troubled mien.

The vicar made a dash for his discarded garments and performed a Protean act with amazing speed. His wife, true to her salt, interposed between her husband and the visitor, making a few banal remarks about the weather. She did not shake hands.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bangs," said the vicar, blushing despite his late assertions of independence. "You find me trying to keep cool under adverse conditions. Had I

known——"

"The weather is very sultry, is it not?" said Mrs. Peters, with a glare that said, "I told you so!"

Robert surveyed them with a wild and unreceptive eye. He looked, so thought the vicar's wife, like a man dogged by the officers of the law.

"I called," he said quickly, "because I wanted your advice and help."

"Certainly, if I can be of any use," replied the vicar. "Clara, my love——?"

His tone indicated a request that she would leave them. To the vicar's intense surprise, his love made no sign of compliance. "Perhaps I had better stay, Charles," she said grimly.

"But, Clara——"

"I—I should like to speak to your husband alone," said Robert, nervous but determined. "You see, it is very private——"

"Of course, Mr. Bangs. I quite understand. Perfectly natural. My dear——"

"I think not, Charles. Mr. *Bangs* will understand why."

"I don't at all," said Robert, dismayed and puzzled. "I have come here for advice and help. As a matter of fact, I have to make a confession——"

The vicar shrank.

"I do not hear confessions," he said. "I do not approve——"

"Evangelical," snapped Clara. (Yes: there are vicar's wives who snap, and she was one.)

"I don't understand," repeated Robert wearily. Then suddenly a light broke on him, and he laughed. It was his first laugh for five days. "Oh, I see! I don't mean *that* kind of confession. This is purely a personal matter—man to man."

"In that case, my love, I think——"

"No," said the resolute woman. "I am determined that you shall not be imposed on any longer. I have kept silence, perhaps too long. Mr. *Bangs*, yesterday I telephoned to Bloomsbury 843B."

"*What!*" said Robert with a moan. "You telephoned *there*!"

CHAPTER XXIII

STILL RUNNING

With a glance of triumphant contempt at the bladder she had pricked so easily, Mrs. Peters turned to her husband. "I think, Charles, that I can safely leave you now to hear Mr. Hedderwick's explanation. I have no wish to be present during a painful scene; besides, I am wanted in the larder."

"*Mr. Hedderwick!*" repeated the vicar blankly. "What do you mean, Clara? I can not understand—I have no idea—you must——"

"He will tell you," said the lady, vouchsafing nothing further. After all, she had had a fair share of the lime-light, and there was no need to risk an anticlimax. "If you had only listened to me when I warned you ... but there! men are all alike."

She swept from the room, and the bewildered clergyman appealed to the heap in the chair.

"Mr. Bangs—Mr. Hedderwick, perhaps I ought to say—will you be kind enough to tell me what it all means?"

Robert raised a stricken head.

"I thought, Mr. Peters, that things were bad enough when I came. Your wife's news proves to me that I am wrong. My name is not Bangs, but Hedderwick."

"So I gathered," said the vicar uncomfortably. "I think you owe me an explanation of your reasons for adopting a false name."

Robert glanced wildly at the clock.

"There is no time to go into details now. She may be here at any minute. But for the moment, Mr. Peters, please accept my word that I am involved in no disgrace—no shameful action. I am a churchwarden——"

"You really are?" There was excuse for the implied doubt.

"I really am, and innocent. My fault is an excessive love for romance and a temporary desertion of my wife. Oh! do not misunderstand me!" he begged, as

he noticed an ecclesiastical stiffening. "I simply ran away for a short holiday—I meant to go back very soon! Surely, surely, you can understand! You are married—I mean, a clergyman in the exercise of his duties must have a wide knowledge of the world—a certain sympathy...."

"I can understand," said the vicar thoughtfully, perhaps flattered at the tribute to his worldly knowledge. "I can not praise—possibly can not sympathize; but at least I may fairly claim to understand."

"Thank you—thank you! Well, to be as brief as I can (and every minute is precious!), my friend and I had reason to suspect the occupants of The Quiet House——"

"Ha!" The vicar pricked up his ears. "Certain hints and whisperings have drifted round to me in the course of my parochial visiting, but——"

"Please, *please*, don't interrupt. You forget the London train! Mr. Wild and I entered The Quiet House garden by night to watch——"

"Surely that——"

"Yes—yes—yes! Most reprehensible, but you do not know all. We watched, were discovered, and in making our escape Mr. Wild was captured. I have not seen him since."

"What!"

"For five days I have been alone, miserable, in doubt and anguish. I have wondered, waited, made cautious inquiries. Nothing has happened. What am I to do?"

"You suspect——?" queried the vicar in delightful horror. He felt his hair bristling in anticipation.

"I do not know ... I can not guess. They say it is high politics—the Turkish government.... A spy.... I do not know what to believe. What can I do?"

The vicar, who prided himself on being a business man, mused for a moment, chin on hand.

"Suppose," he said brightly, "that Mott, the local policeman, applied for a search-warrant?"

"I would rather not invoke the aid of the police, if possible. There may be nothing serious after all, and in that case we should look ridiculous. Besides ... I wondered if you could call?"

The vicar seemed pleased, but apprehensive.

"Of course," he said, "I would face any danger if necessary and for a good cause. But I have my flock to think of.... If matters are as serious as you suggest, might there not be a second kidnaping? One hesitates to be melodramatic, but the possibilities of...."

"They would not dare to touch a minister of the church. There would be an outcry——"

"True ... true ... but would they admit me? I have called and been denied. Do you think——"

He paused, as a motor-horn sounded from the road. The noise of the engine was plainly heard. A moment later and the gate leading to the drive opened. The vicar walked to the window.

"Who can this be?" he said in surprise. "A motor-car, and in the morning! I hope he'll be careful of the borders."

Robert joined him at the window, his heart filled with anxious questioning. As he watched the car drive slowly in he clutched the vicar's arm. "She has changed her plan!" he gasped. "It's my wife! You must hide me quick!"

"B—but," stammered Mr. Peters, "there's no sense in that! Pull yourself together, Mr. Bangs—Mr. Hedderwick, I mean. You say you have done nothing wrong. Why not face her and get it over at once like a man?"

Robert, pallid in face and soul, gripped him more tightly, his knees shaking. The desperate need of the moment scorned the veneer of discretion. "You said you understood," he hissed fiercely. "Do you always stand up to Mrs. Peters?"

The vicar avoided his eye, but his answer brought hope to Robert. "Come along!" he said briskly, going to the door. He threw it open, and was disappointed to find his wife in the hall. That way of escape was blocked. "A caller, my dear!" he said, trying to cover his embarrassment. "If I'm wanted, I shall be in here." He returned to the room and closed the door. "You're caught, Mr. Hedderwick, I'm afraid. I'm very sorry, but you'll have to face it, after all."

"No, no!" said Robert. "Isn't there another door—a window?"

"The chauffeur's outside. Yes; by jove! there's the buttery hatch. Behind the screen! Get through that and out of the pantry window! It opens on the back. After that you must look out for yourself. I won't tell any lies on your behalf, but—but I'll try to give you a—a sporting start!"

Robert breathed a blessing on his head. Then, with some ado, he lifted the hatch and crawled through. The vicar closed it behind him, heard the pantry window open with a noiseless chuckle, and then braced himself to face a pair of indignant ladies. He had not long to wait, for, a minute after Robert had gained the road, Mrs. Peters introduced his visitor. Mrs. Hedderwick glanced round the room much as a terrier who has been told there is a rat about, and without waiting for apologies or declarations, said with an extraordinary bitterness, "Where is my husband?"

"He was here a moment ago," replied the vicar, nervous, but not without a certain enjoyment of the scene. "I suppose that you are looking forward to—a reunion—a——"

"I am," said Mrs. Hedderwick with a vindictive quietness. "Where is he? Hiding under the table?"

"My dear madam," expostulated the vicar, suppressing a wish to get there himself, so alarming was her eye, "do you imagine——"

"I want to know where he *is*!" interrupted the lady, still dangerously calm and determined. "Mrs. Peters most kindly—*most* kindly telephoned to say that he was in Shereling, and she has just said that she left him here. Where is he?"

"He has gone," said the vicar dreamily, looking out of the window and wondering whether Robert had reached The Happy Heart. A good runner, he reflected, might perhaps have succeeded, but Mr. Bangs was no longer young.

"*Gone!*" ejaculated both ladies together, and for once in his life the amiable clergyman had the satisfaction of communicating dramatic and exclusive news.

"Gone!" repeated Mrs. Peters. "Oh, Charles! Where? How?"

"Gone!" said Mrs. Hedderwick, with a rising inflection. "You have helped——"

"How could I detain him?" urged the vicar, retreating behind a chair. "Why

blame me? Could I be expected to keep him here by force? If Mr. Hedderwick preferred to depart by the buttery hatch——"

"The buttery hatch."

"Let me show you," said the vicar helpfully, thinking that a reconstruction of the crime might divert a morbid interest in himself. "You see here it is, behind the screen. Mr. Hedderwick opened it, climbed through——"

"I do not believe it! It is too small for——"

"My dear madam," expostulated the vicar warmly, annoyed at having his veracity impugned, "I assure you it *was* so. Try for yourself!"

In her rage Mrs. Hedderwick raised her arm as if to strike the impious suggester. Mrs. Peters interposed, as the vicar quailed, and the situation was saved.

"Charles! What an indelicate thought! Imagine a lady like Mrs. Hedderwick *crawling*——"

The vicar had been through an anxious quarter of an hour. His nerves were on strings, and at any moment the tension might prove too strong. Had he been master of himself—had he possessed no sense of humor—had his late guest not presented so ridiculous an appearance in his exit, all might have yet been well. But the image projected upon his brain by the words of his wife (who had but an imperfect sympathy with comedy) was too much. He did not roar aloud, as he could have wished, but he buried his face in his hands and leaned upon the mantelpiece. The heaving of the shoulders gave evidence of his emotion.

"I think," said Mrs. Hedderwick, after a dreadful pause, "that your husband is hardly himself."

"I will attend to him presently," replied Mrs. Peters with menacing sympathy. "Come, Mrs. Hedderwick: I am sorry you should meet with such a disappointment. Your best course would be to drive to The Happy Heart, where I understand the fugitive is staying."

They left the room, without deigning to bestow any further notice on the vicar. He, unhappy man, pulled himself together too late. He wiped his eyes and rushed after them to offer seemly apologies. But as he reached his garden gate he saw the motor drive off. Behind the chauffeur were seated Mrs. Hedderwick and his wife. Mrs. Peters was resolved, if possible, to be in at the death.

"After all," thought the vicar when he realized that he could do nothing to reestablish himself, "why shouldn't I, too, see what is going to happen? Hedderwick suggested I should call at The Quiet House.... I might try again.... His suspicion, surely, can not be founded on fact, but at least it will be interesting—nay, a positive duty! If a fellow creature wants our services, we ought to spare neither time nor trouble—well, Brown! what is it?"

"Beg pardon, sir!" said the odd-job man, touching his hat. Mr. Peters noticed with astonishment that he was in his Sunday clothes. "I want to give notice!"

"I can't be bothered with that now," said the vicar impatiently. "I am particularly busy. Come to me——"

"I am sorry, sir, but I want to go at once," he said, interrupting the vicar.

The latter stared.

"But that's most unusual and inconsiderate. If you want to go, a week's notice ——"

"It's too important for that, sir. Of course I am ready to forego my week's wages, but go I must."

"Not a death in the family, I hope?" said Mr. Peters, subduing the impatience of his tone. "If so, I'm very sorry, and of course——"

"No, sir: nothing serious—serious in that sense at least. I am sorry to have to give notice in such a hurry, but it must be done."

"Very well," replied the vicar, resuming an every-day voice. "Legally, of course, you couldn't demand your wages; but I have no intention of standing on the letter of the law. I might as well pay you now. Let's see——" He searched his pockets for change.

"Thank you, sir," replied the odd-job man. "You're very good to be so reasonable, and I wish I could oblige you by staying. Instead, if you'll kindly put a sovereign in the poor-box for me, I shall be satisfied."

"Eh—eh!" stammered the vicar. "Has all the world gone mad this morning? A sovereign in the poor-box, from my gardener! Wh—what——"

"A little mad, sir?" smiled Henry Brown. "Perhaps there's some excuse. Good-by and thank you."

He touched his hat and left the Shereling garden forever. Mr. Peters stared dumbly after him. He could make nothing of it, however, so he came to the sensible resolution of setting out on his investigations at once. Taking a stick in his hand, he trudged toward The Quiet House. Here, by the way, he was told there was nobody at home.

Henry Brown, whistling a cheerful strain, betook himself to The Happy Heart. He found the motor-car standing outside, the chauffeur indulging in a cigarette. Voices from the parlor indicated that the landlord was trying to reason with two ladies, neither of whom seemed to be amenable to treatment.

"But he's gorn, I tell you, ma'am," said the voice of Mr. Glew despairingly. "Ran in here, he did, a quarter of an hour ago: out again in five minutes——"

"I think you are prevaricating, Glew," said the acid tones of Mrs. Peters. "Your manner is not straightforward at all this morning——"

"And we shan't be satisfied till you have shown us his room," added Mrs. Hedderwick. "So there!"

As the landlord resumed the mournful chant, apparently relying on tautological emphasis rather than reasoned argument or ocular demonstration (a suggestion that seemed unwelcome), Henry Brown smiled and passed into the bar. Addressing the Boots, a "lad" of sixty-three, who acted as barman, beater, stable-boy, or butler as occasion or the seasons demanded, he said, "Is Miss Schmidt ready?"

"B'leeve so," said the Boots. "But I'll tell her you're here."

He went out, but returned shortly, followed by Mizzi, who was dressed for traveling. "Ah!" said she, with a radiant smile of welcome. "I have not kept you waiting long, have I?"

"Five days," answered Henry, to the astonishment of the Boots. "Five wasted days. Can't think why you wanted to stay here all that time. After being——"

He paused. He was about to say "sacked," but from consideration of his audience, refrained. Mizzi thanked him with a laugh.

"Ah!" she said very cheerfully. "The separation—shall we say?—was due to—guess!"

"Dunno," said Henry, watching her fasten her glove with admiring eyes.

"Jealousy!" she flashed, with a ripple of merriment. "Think of it! *Jealousy!* Even I could have hardly credited it. But I bear her no ill-will. On the contrary, I regard her as more human and could love her still more. (Bother—*bother—r—r* this glove. Can you——?")

"But why did you wait?" he grumbled, fastening the glove and taking as long as he could for the pleasure of pressing her dainty wrist.

"I will be frank," she said, laughing temptingly. Henry dumbly cursed the Boots. "Curiosity! I wanted to watch a little longer. But I foresee the end of the play and am ready to go. Let us be off!"

"Your luggage has gone to the station?"

"Yes, and it is time we followed. Come!"

"A kiss first," said Henry, hungrily bending forward.

At this moment Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hedderwick and the landlord (the latter still emitting "But he's gorn—varnished, I tell you!") came from the parlor. They halted on observing the obvious sweethearts standing in the passage. Mrs. Peters, her finest instincts revolting from such a naked display of animalism—and in the morning, too!—at once relinquished the lacquered Mr. Hedderwick for a more congenial theme.

"*Brown!*" she ejaculated in tones that would have chilled a satyr. "*Brown!* how disgusting! Go to your work at once!"

The odd-job man could not restrain a natural blush, but he was man enough to stand his ground. The presence of Mizzi confirmed his courage and quickened his wits.

"Mr. Brown, if you please, ma'am," he said quietly but with resolution. "I've left your service and am my own master now."

Mrs. Peters, justly annoyed at being thus spoken to by a menial, changed her line of attack.

"So this is the explanation!" she said, wishing she had a lorgnette for Mizzi's benefit. She surveyed her with a severity that ought to have appalled. The survey gave her no comfort, for Mizzi was dressed to perfection. "So this is the young

woman!"

"A deplorable exhibition," said Mrs. Hedderwick dispassionately. "The lower classes—"

The young woman gave a most impertinent laugh, and said, "Come, Henry! We shall miss the train!"

They left The Happy Heart; and the landlord, who had recovered breath, but not a fresh inspiration, during the interlude, took up the tale again.

Outside, the odd-job man, whose face was flushed, swore. "I wish they were men!" he said vindictively: "if they were, I'd teach 'em a lesson in manners. By jove! I'd like to get even with——"

"Do not worry," said Mizzi soothingly. "After all, I *am* a young woman. Mesdames would give their ears to be the same."

Henry stopped dead, an idea having come upon him. With a growing light in his eye he surveyed the motor-car and the chauffeur, who in turn surveyed Mizzi with a gathering admiration. He even threw away the cigarette.

"I say," said Henry, "this isn't a private car?"

"No," said the chauffeur, glad of a chance further to admire this enchanting damsel. "General Motor-Car Company. Druv the ole gal down from London s'morning. Made me crawl, too."

"Driving her back?"

The chauffeur suppressed an instinct to spit disgustedly and said, "Yes, wuss luck." Mizzi observed them, wondering.

"What would you take," said Henry, breathing hard, "to drive us back instead?"

The chauffeur shook his head.

"I'd lose my job."

"Five pounds?" hinted Henry.

"A job's a job."

"I'll find you another."

"Garn!"

"Straight! I'm Henry Brown, taxicab proprietor, Bloomsbury. Is that good enough?"

"*And* a fiver?" stipulated the chauffeur, avaricious but cautious.

"Here you are," said Henry, diving into his pocket. A note changed hands, and the chauffeur assumed a bland demeanor. "Jump in!" he said concisely; "it's a bet!"

"Oh, but——" objected Mizzi, hanging back.

"*Romance!*" whispered Henry. "You said you liked it! Quick! Quick!"

She jumped in, smiling happily.

"You are a dear!"

"And you're a darling!" he said, getting in beside her and shutting the door. "Now, William, give 'em the horn and then London!"

Honk! Honk!

"Once more!"

Honk! Honk!

Mrs. Hedderwick appeared fretfully at the porch. "Do not make that exasperating noise!" she commanded. And then—"*What!* what impertinence—what——!"

"Higher up, William!" said Henry peacefully.

"Good-by, madam!" and he raised his hat. "There, my little foreigner; will that do?"

"Oh, Harry dear!"

And Harry dear had no time even to say "Good biz!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CERTAINTY—AHA!

Let us go back a couple of hours and see what has been engaging Miss Arkwright and Lionel since their interview with Tony. They are still reclining in the hammock-chair, which they have been obliged to move, more than once, retreating before the all-conquering sun. They have talked for a space, but nothing of their conversation is worthy of a recorder's pen, and at last they have fallen silent, each occupied with busy musings. Lionel, of course, has had plenty to think about since the early telegram—new schemes to mature, fresh hopes to be weighed, old difficulties to brush aside or evade. Winifred's silence, too, is not extraordinary. Apart from her secret history—and she must have a secret, to be sure, if not a dozen—there is matter for consideration in her present *milieu*. Putting aside the trivial incident of the five-days'-old attack (and an intriguer can not spend much time on trifles, especially when they end happily), there is the problem of Tony to be pondered over. But, at the worst, he can only be looked on as a light-hearted dilettante, whose greatest misfortune is the curse of wealth. Such, at least, is Winifred's shrewd guess, and we know how near the mark the arrow has fallen. Then, Lionel ... what shall she do with him? Is it better to keep him with her longer, a cheerful gentleman who seems quite content to waste his time in her company, despite the chilling fact that he appears equally content to chaff their prisoner if she is busy in the house? Or shall she send him away?

Winifred stole a glance at Lionel, pondering with knit brows, and permitted herself a smile that was unseen by him. Was she thinking of his pursuit in the garden, the hurled water-jug, or the exposure of Mizzi? Perhaps the latter; for the smile was followed by a delectable frown that did not mar the poetry of her face. It seemed, indeed, to act but as a foil, enhancing the smile that followed again like a victor,—a victor that has retreated, only to return.

As she wondered and smiled, Forbes came across the lawn and handed the morning's letters on a tray. The post had just come in.

"Three for me," said Winifred, picking up the letters. "And one for you."

Lionel took it with a lazy gratitude. What had letters to do with him this

heavenly morning, when he had had a wire to say that his mistress was free? How much better to pursue the current of his thoughts and try to make up his mind, once and for all, whether he loved Beatrice enough to ask her to marry him! Without glancing at the postmark or handwriting he murmured, "Excuse me!" and tore open the flap. The first few sentences made him sit bolt upright in his chair. "Good heavens!" he murmured, reading hastily on. His face grew dark, and the jaw set ominously the more he read. Winifred, watching him with a stealthy interest, had not yet opened her budget.

"I hope it is no bad news?" she said with a soft sympathy.

"The worst," said Lionel with a grim absence, not looking up. Presently his face cleared and he smiled. "That is," he corrected himself, with a hasty glance at her, "I mean the best. Yes, certainly the best."

Winifred bit her lip and looked away with a puzzled discontent. What did he mean? The worst and the best ... strong words for a man of his age to use. The "worst" and the "best" should only be applied to strong emotions, such as are caused by love, money, or honor. Which of these potent stimulants was at work?

"I am going in," she said suddenly. "Please don't get up. If I can be of any help in any way, you must let me know. But I ... I am glad your news is 'the best.'"

She went into the house, leaving Lionel to his letter. This was it.

"BLOOMSBURY, LONDON.

"MY DEAR FRIEND,—The cable announcing Lukos' death came to-night at seven. As soon as I had recovered from the shock I wired the news to you, but I do not expect that the telegram will be delivered till to-morrow morning. And now, at half past eight, I am sitting down to write very hurriedly, to tell you of my plans.

"I mean to go straight to Constantinople within two days. Why? To make sure, in the first instance—to find out for myself if he is really dead, and if it was 'measles' or something worse. I feel that the news must be true, but I must make certain. If it *is* true, then perhaps I can do something by way of revenge. You, I hope, will still befriend me by trying to regain the stolen papers. They may be of use to England yet. If not to England, then to me—a woman who has lost her husband. This is no time to assess my love for him, but I owe something at least to his memory, and the debt shall be paid.

"I must see you before leaving, and I hope to come down to Shereling to-morrow. Please tell my sister. You know our differences, but I am sure she will sympathize and help me. Yes; I am sure. I believe now that I was wrong in suspecting her—my information was untrustworthy, but I had every excuse. In haste.—Your friend,

"BEATRICE BLAIR."

Lionel's heart leaped as he read a second and a third time the words of comfort. At the first casual glance he could only understand that Beatrice was going out of his life, perhaps forever, and he plumbed depths hitherto undreamed of. But after the blow came the reaction and a saner grasp of the true importance of her news. He was on fire, yet coldly logical. The white heat of his heart and brain told him that here at last was hope realized, the goal reached, the attainment of certainty. The knowledge that he could not bear to lose her told him that he loved, and that his love was worthy of a declaration. He breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

Doubt of a prosaic nature was swift to follow. He loved her and must ask her to marry him. Yet, how could he ask her? He had not a penny in the world save what she had given him as her paid employee. How could he ask her to wed and coolly propose to live on her income? Lionel made short work of that. "I know," he said to himself, thinking swiftly but with honest logic, "that I am not mercenary. I would marry her in rags if she'd have me. As she happens to have money, so much the better. If by good luck she loves or learns to love me, she will not think me mercenary. Why should a pair of lovers wait when the only obstacle is a convention?—a convention good enough in itself (a proper discouragement of the ordinary place-hunter and hypocrite)—but a convention none the less. The exception shall prove the rule, for neither she nor I could be accused of conventionality."

He laughed aloud. Still, there was a kind of discomfort in the laugh, for the conventions of a thousand years or more can not be laughed away in a moment, be the iconoclast never so hardy. In spite of his honesty and brave words, Lionel, in the dim recesses of consciousness, knew that he wished he could have said, "My dear, I love you and can afford to pay for a home!" He knew that from the idealist's standpoint he was right, but the purest cups of nectar may reveal an acid in the lees. Still, he drank his nectar and was very glad.

Presently his face grew graver. "I must wait though," he reflected. "One can't

propose the moment one hears she is a widow—too indecent. Besides, she may not love me.... I must give her time.... At least, though, I'll go with her to Constantinople. If she won't think of me as a husband or lover, by jove! I'll be her dragoman! She mustn't go there alone.... And now, let's break the news to Winifred."

He found Miss Arkwright in the library and told her of her sister's intention to come down to The Quiet House. To his disgust she began to make difficulties.

"You know, Mr. Mortimer, that we do not agree on her choice of a career——"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "I know all that. But this is a serious business. She is going to Turkey in a day or two, and wishes to see me before leaving. Surely——"

"She does me the honor of suspecting me of conspiracy," returned Miss Arkwright slowly, but with a resentful gleam. "I have told you that she is mistaken. Why should a conspirator lend her hospitality?"

"She acknowledges her error," said Lionel. "You must forgive much to a woman who has suffered so cruelly as she."

"I will not," said Winifred deliberately. "I have not said much to you on the subject, but now I will not conceal from you that I have been deeply wounded."

"Are you not great enough to forgive?" he urged, fair play telling him that she had a right to feel indignation—if she were innocent! He tried in vain to find a melting in her eye.

"No," said Winifred, still very deliberately and coldly. "I am a woman, and can not forgive her lack of trust as yet. I will yield so far as to allow her to come here and see you, as she is going abroad, but I will not see her myself."

"Your sister?" he suggested, still hoping.

"No," repeated Winifred. "On that I am immovable. Be content and—leave me!"

Her voice trembled over the concluding words, and the next moment she buried her face in her hands, leaning forward over the table. There were no sobs—no tears escaping from that indomitable lady, but her attitude was eloquent of tragedy. Lionel was not so foolish as to attempt consolation. He left the room, hoping to soften her before Beatrice came down.

The morning dragged wearily, but at last the luncheon-gong sounded, and Lionel went to the dining-room. Winifred joined him at the meal, but neither had much to say. Lionel, though understanding her resentment, could not excuse it, and his attitude in consequence was chilly. Winifred, reading his condemnation, made no effort further to justify herself, and both were glad when the meal came to an end. Before leaving the room she said, "If you prefer to see my sister in the house, the library will be at your disposal."

"I prefer the garden," he replied stiffly, and he thought he caught a smile.

"Suppose it rains?"

"There is The Happy Heart."

"But your promise still holds," she reminded him.

"If Miss Blair prefers the inn," said Lionel with polite determination, "we go there. That, of course, will cancel the promise, and you will not see me again. In case she does," he added more softly, "I had better say good-by now. Thank you for many kindnesses."

"There is nothing to thank me for," she replied, looking confused.

"There is. And I wish you would give me one thing more for which to thank you," said Lionel, taking her hand. Her eyes dropped. She blushed, but did not free herself.

"And that is——?" she murmured.

"It would be a great happiness to see you and your sister reconciled."

She wrenched her hand away.

"Do not ask me that again," she replied, seeming both disappointed and pettish. "I have given you my answer already. Now, please, will you be kind enough to tell the prisoner I wish to see him. He can stop work and change. I will wait for him in my sitting-room up-stairs."

Lionel went in search of Tony. He found the latter pocketing his pipe, preparatory to a fresh attack upon the mound of earth. "Miss Arkwright says you can stop," said Lionel genially. "You may go and get clean; she wishes to see you."

"What about my work?" objected Tony. "You know, old friend—forgive me, but I seem to have known you for years—I am making quite a good job of that bed. *Exegi monumentum ære perennius!* What? That's about all I have left of a thousand-pound education. What I mean to say is that future generations may come and look at my flower bed as being the beau-ideal—the standard—the Super-bed, and so forth. Honestly, I'm beginning to be quite proud of the little chap—it's a most promising child. I say, between old schoolmates and that sort of jolly palaver, what does she want me for?"

"Haven't a notion, friend of my youth," said Lionel sympathetically. Knowing nothing of Tony, he felt nevertheless an attraction and a mutual bond. "You'd better do as she tells you."

The bed-builder arose.

"Of course. I say, do you think she'll let me stay here for a bit longer? What I mean is, has she any intention of carting me at once?"

"I haven't a notion."

"You see ... here's the bed ... some one must finish it. I should hate to think of another artist putting in his oar. The bed, in short, worries me."

"Ask her to take you on as gardener," suggested Lionel, smiling at the absurd creature.

"I wonder...." Tony moved off with dragging dissatisfied steps. After progressing a few yards he turned. There was hesitation in his voice and manner.

"I—I say, oh, companion of my infancy, I wonder if you'd mind me asking you a question? Of course, we've not been introduced and all that, and I hope you'll not regard it as a liberty, faux pas, double entendre, or what-not. But do you mind telling me if you're engaged to her?"

"Lord, no!" said Lionel, mightily surprised. "Not the least intention of trying. If that's all your trouble, go in and win. And good luck to you!"

"I say," observed Tony with a most engaging smile, "you're a blind ass, old yoke fellow of my youth; but you're no end of a sportsman. One more question—I promise that I'm quite a decent chap, though appearances are against me—is she engaged to any one else?"

"Not that I know of."

"The planet Jupiter is in conjunction with Saturn, or words to that effect. Whatever the stars are, I seem to be in luck. Oh, of course she mayn't look at me, I know. We must give her time to appreciate my many excellences—not dream of rushing things. But she has made my few days' stay so pleasant, that common gratitude——"

"No: don't spoil it!" said Lionel, reading something beneath Tony's idle chatter;

"you don't mean that." Tony looked at him and changed his tone.

"What I do mean," he said sincerely, "is that she's a perfectly top-hole creature. She's taught me a few things—not excluding work, in which she must share the credit with others—during the last few days. I want to extend the lessons. Well, I think a little soap and water might be rather a promising start. Where am I to see her? Up-stairs?"

He strolled off whistling cheerfully, bearing Lionel's good wishes. The latter was in a good humor with all the world to-day: he felt like giving a sovereign to every child, and a five-pound note to every grown-up. "If ever I make a hit with my plays," he thought, "I'll give the vicar a peal of bells and Mrs. Peters—what on earth could I give to Mrs. Peters? I suppose a calf-bound set of her husband's sermons would be the most acceptable souvenir, unless she's human enough to enjoy diamonds. Yes, I think it might be diamonds." He smiled at his happy visions, and walked back to the hammock-chair to wait till Beatrice should appear.

He did not know, of course, whether she was coming by rail or motor, and therefore did not trouble to look out possible trains. He was quite content to wait patiently for her in that delightful garden, knowing now that he loved her, and hoping she might love, or learn to love him. But though he was content and patient, he could not distract himself, or spend the lagging hours with books or newspapers. He tried, indeed, but failed. After reading a few lines he found his attention wandering: he could not compel his brain to follow the paltry adventures of Mudie's heroines, or the stupendous feats chronicled in the daily press. Instead, his thoughts flew back to that lucky rescue in the Strand, to the wondrous hours with Beatrice in the theater or in the Bloomsbury flat, to the mad adventure of the magnanimous churchwarden, to the thousand incidents of the past adventurous month. He could not read, but tobacco was no hindrance to the brave play of memory and imagination, and with a luxurious smile he lighted a pipe and drowsed. Presently, between the nicotian clouds, he thought, "I must make Winifred be friends. What scheme shall I try? Winifred is a dear, too, though she has a woman's resentment. What can I do to make them all happy—to make every one happy? Winifred ... Beatrice...."

The besotted lover, overcome with his soul's reaction, the June sun and a crowded morning, fell asleep....

He was roused by a touch upon the shoulder. He awoke and blinked lazily

toward heaven. Beside him stood an angel in a lavender linen frock, and a lavender hat with a daring touch of black, carrying a lavender parasol with a white handle. It was Beatrice at last!

CHAPTER XXV

THE GOD OF THE MACHINE

Lionel stared dumbly for a moment, not completely realizing what had happened. Then he jumped up with a wry smile. "You must think me a poor watcher," he said, inwardly cursing his sleepiness. "I was so busy waiting and thinking of you that I suppose I must have—I imagine I have—that is, I fell asleep. Did you come by train?"

"Yes," she said. It would be idle to say "in the well-remembered tones." Her voice was identical with Winifred's: her appearance, gesture, carriage—all were Winifred's; but the telepathy of love told Lionel the myriad differences between the sisters, differences impalpable, impossible to define or even hint at, but differences that were real, if psychological. "I came by the four-thirty, and walked from the station."

"Then—good heavens! what time is it?"

"Six o'clock," she said with a smile. "How long have you been asleep?"

"It must be at least three hours," said Lionel in rueful amazement. "Fancy wasting three hours of a day like this in sleep! But don't let us waste any more. Tell me all about yourself, your plans, everything. You are well?" he added anxiously, though the question was needless.

"Perfectly. And you?"

"Quite fit, thanks." And a silence fell between them. It seemed odd that there should be a silence, for so much had happened since they last met. Lionel had been living in a penny novelette, and her fate could not have been much more fortunate. Yet now they seemed to have nothing to say beyond the commonplaces of friendly acquaintanceship. It was Lionel who broke the silence.

"You must let me say that...." He stopped. He could not honestly say he was sorry for the death of Lukos, so he changed the form of his statement: "—that I am sorry for your trouble. You know it already, but I should like to tell it you.... I

suppose it must be true?"

"Thank you," Beatrice replied evenly. "Yes, I expect it is true; but, as I wrote to you, I am going to make sure."

"Is that wise?"

"Perhaps not, but I mean to go."

Lionel did not attempt to argue with her, to reason or persuade. The finality of tone and his knowledge of the woman made him give up at once any thought of such a useless effort. "But I go with her," he resolved, "either as husband or servant. And if she won't take me, I'll go on my own if I have to steal a ride under the train!"

"Did you call at the house?" he asked.

"I came straight across here, seeing you the moment I entered the gate. Perhaps I had better see my sister before we begin to talk. Our conversation may be long."

Lionel moved uneasily.

"I am sorry to say," he began, "that your sister feels anything but well-disposed toward you. She resents your suspicion, and ... and...." he stuck fast.

"Refuses to see me?" she suggested.

He nodded. "I have hopes of winning her over yet, but...."

"If she has said 'No' she will stick to it," said Beatrice, digging her parasol into the lawn. "She can be a darling, but she can also be pig-headed. What do you think of her?" she added quickly, turning upon him.

"Charming," said Lionel. "Except for this unfortunate weakness. And there is some excuse even for that."

"Do you consider her pretty?" It sounded an odd question, but oddities were lost on him now.

"Yes; very pretty."

"As pretty as I?" asked Beatrice.

"Quite," he laughed, beginning to feel more at home, "but in a different way.

And I prefer your way," he added with sincerity.

"That is a little crude," she smiled. "I expected a more delicate compliment from a man of your education. Please pay me one at once."

To be asked for a delicate compliment at a moment's notice must be much the same as if the *Punch* editor were asked for a joke instanter. You can imagine Mr. Seaman being introduced with, "This is Mr. Seaman—*Punch*, you know." "How charming! Please, Mr. Seaman, be good enough to be funny," and the resulting *débâcle* of Mr. Seaman. Lionel felt empty of all wit and ideas. He simply looked at her and shook his head.

"I am sorry ... you have silenced me."

She smiled provokingly. "Try!"

He shook his head again with a sudden sadness. As he observed her, devotedly absorbing every detail of her dress, her charming attitude, her delicate color, the dainty foot in the lavender stocking and trim black shoe pushed seductively forward, the glorious hair, and brilliance of her eyes, the incarnation of youth and joy (and he excused her that, remember, for the compulsion of her marriage), he groaningly realized that his late logic would not hold. He loved her and wanted her: he knew that he would not be mercenary in asking, but he felt he could not after all. To think of asking for such a lovely creature, without a penny of his own—he could not do it. He was wrong, he told himself, and felt that his ideals were true, but it was impossible. His face grew grim as he looked at her. The smile faded from her lips.

"What is it?" she said softly. "Is anything the matter, my ... friend?"

He was near the breaking-point, and had that moment continued he might have told her all. But an interruption—a twentieth-century interruption—saved him.

From the deeps of the air was heard a dull humming. The noise increased every moment, and Beatrice looked perplexedly about her. "Do you hear it," she asked, "that curious noise?... Like a gigantic bee...."

Lionel had heard a similar noise before and was not perplexed. "It must be an aeroplane," he said reassuringly: "it sounds as if it were quite close. Perhaps that clump of trees hides its approach."

His surmise proved correct, for in a brief space the machine soared into view

like some beautiful bird. "There it is!" they cried together, standing like two delighted children watching a kindly rock from the *Arabian Nights*. "Why! what is it going to do?" continued Beatrice, speaking as if the monoplane were a living creature. "See! it has changed its course ... it is circling round like a bird of prey."

"It looks as if he meant to land," said Lionel, "and was seeking for a suitable place. Yes, by jove! he's found it. Now watch!"

The air-man had shut off his engine, for the buzzing ceased, and he came down to earth, with a graceful swoop that enchanted Beatrice, on a bit of level pasture two fields away. "Come on!" cried Beatrice excitedly. "Let's go and have a look! I've never seen an aeroplane close to."

Lionel smiled at her enthusiasm, and they set off at a brisk pace. Leaving the garden by the little wicket at the back, they crossed the tiny stream, dignified by the name of Shere, and walked on, chatting happily till they were close upon the air-man. They could see him walking round his machine, examining it with a parent's care, pulling here, patting there, testing the tension of a wire, inspecting the engine. Suddenly Beatrice stopped short. "Bother!" she said impatiently. "I've left my hanky in the garden. I wonder if you'd mind——"

"Of course," said Lionel, glad, you may be sure, of the lightest service. "You go on and learn to fly. I'll join you in five minutes."

He left Beatrice and ran back to the garden. But in spite of the most careful search he could not see any trace of the handkerchief. He searched the lawn, the chairs, the drive, but no handkerchief was visible. "She must have lost it in the train," he thought, "or dropped it on the road. Well, that's soon remedied."

Going into the house, he rang the dining-room bell. It was answered by Forbes. "Get me a clean handkerchief, please," said Lionel. To his utter amazement Forbes said "Yes, sir," and prepared to leave the room.

"Hi!" said Lionel, and Forbes stopped, flushing a dull red. Lionel pulled himself together with an effort. "Excuse me, Forbes," said he, striving to speak calmly: "I understood you were dumb. Has the age of miracles revived, or what?"

Forbes bowed discreetly.

"Our local doctor is a very clever surgeon, sir," he replied blandly. "I think you said a handkerchief, sir?"

He disappeared....

"Cleverness, Forbes," said Lionel when the footman returned, "is not confined to doctors. I congratulate you ... on the recovery of speech."

"Thank you, sir," said Forbes with a well-bred humility. "I find it a great blessing, I own. It opens out a new world."

He held the door, and Lionel passed out, his brain sagging heavily. A few minutes later he rejoined Beatrice, who had more surprises in store. She was chatting merrily with the air-man as he came up.

"This is great luck!" she said cheerfully to the astonished Lionel. "Here's an old friend of mine dropped from the skies—yes! literally!—to pay a friendly call. Let me introduce you: Mr. Mortimer—Mr. Ashford Billing, my late manager."

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Billing," said Lionel mechanically. "I've heard your name before."

"And I yours, Mr. Mortimer," replied Billing with genuine heartiness. "It's a real pleasure to meet a man who can write like you."

"I don't understand," said Lionel. "How can you know anything of my work? It's not attracted much notice yet."

Billing laughed.

"Shall I tell him?" he asked, turning to the lady.

"Bags I!" said Beatrice, laughing: "that must be my royalty, or commission, if you prefer it. First of all, let me explain his presence. He called on me this afternoon and found that I was out——"

"*As* usual," interrupted Billing.

"And learned where I had gone from my servant. Then, being in a hurry——"

"Wanted to try to persuade her to sign a new contract," said the irrepressible Billing, "but she won't. Perhaps you can make her realize, Mr. Mortimer, that if she retires the stage will lose one of its brightest jewels."

"Oh, keep that for the publicity agent!" she begged. "I've told you I mean to retire, and that's final. I want to tell the *news*. Well, Mr. Mortimer, the impetuous man couldn't wait, so he went down to Brooklands and flew here——"

"Quicker than the train," smiled Billing. "American hustle and all that——"

"And now he tells me—as a casual item of information—that he's going to produce your play."

"*What!*" said Lionel.

"Yes—yes—yes! Isn't it splendid? Now, Ashford, you can tell the rest."

"Guess there isn't much left to tell," said Billing, still smiling. "Well, sir, Miss Blair told me about your play a month ago now. My reader reported favorably on it, and I read it myself. I think it will go, Mr. Mortimer, if I'm any judge; and when you get back to London we can fix up the contract. I hope it will mean something hot for both of us."

Lionel turned, incapable of speech, to Beatrice. He thanked her with his eyes, but more than thanks lay in them, and Billing noticed the mutual look with an inward groan. There was silence for a moment. Then Billing squared his shoulders, and in a matter-of-fact voice said, "Well, I calculate I must be getting home."

Beatrice protested. There was not the least hurry. There was no sense in this flying over to see them and only staying for ten minutes. He must stop and have dinner: why not sleep?...

"You forget I don't know your sister," he replied with a peculiar smile. Beatrice blushed. Lionel did not notice the blush. He was too busy thinking of the new vistas that opened before him even to hear what they were saying. He despised the flying man, for did not he, Lionel, tread upon the air?

"I'll arrange that somehow," said Beatrice quickly. "Ashford, you really must stop. I want to talk to you."

"Excuse me," he said with a queer smile that was not of joy, "but I guess I know better than that." His voice sank. "My dear, I wish you luck!"

"Oh, Ashford, dear!" she whispered, "I'm so sorry ... I'm so sorry...."

"That's all right," he said more cheerfully. "Now, I'm really going, never to worry you again. Hello! what's this?"

His exclamation of surprise caused them to turn and look toward The Quiet

House.

From the wicket-gate had issued the figure of a man running. He wore no hat, and though apparently elderly, was progressing at a very fair rate of speed. But he had not run more than twenty yards before another man came bursting from the gate.

"Why, it's the prisoner!" gasped Lionel, "and good heavens!—yes!" He turned swiftly to Beatrice. "It's the churchwarden! What on earth is he doing here?"

"So it is," replied Beatrice without emotion. He wondered at her self-control. "They seem to be in a hurry."

Robert was evidently in a very great hurry, but Tony had the advantage in years and sprightliness. He caught his quarry in a very short space, and seized him by the shoulder. Then the pair of them stopped, Robert obviously unwilling, and began to talk with much gesticulation on both sides. The onlookers of course could hear nothing of what was said, but from the pantomime Tony appeared to be expostulating, advising, entreating. Mr. Hedderwick seemed to be in a condition of irate panic. As a matter of fact, Tony was remonstrating with his comrade-in-arms for his cowardice, and urging him, for the sake of himself and the sex, to make a stand for the rights of man. "If you give in now, after your many heroisms with me," said Tony warmly, "I shall be ashamed of my pupil and disown him. Come! though you *have* run, it's not too late for a recovery."

"You don't know my wife!" panted Robert.

"I do—I've spoken to her for three minutes, and I can guess what she's like. I know something about women, and I feel sure that if you stand up to her now you'll be boss in your house for good. If not, she will. It's now or never."

"You—you're not joking, Mr. Wild?" said Robert piteously.

"I'm really serious. Now, come along with me and talk to these people. We'll let your wife catch us here. An audience ought to give you courage. Mind!" he added, holding Robert by the arm as they began to walk toward the aeroplane, "there must be no weakening, however terrible she may appear. Be a man, and you'll triumph!"

It was all very well to urge him to be a man, but Mr. Hedderwick had been through a very tense six hours. When he escaped from the vicarage he rushed straight for The Happy Heart. There he instructed Mr. Glew in a sentence of

some five hundred words, without so much as a comma intervening, that he meant to retire to his room at once, that he was to be denied to all callers, that casual inquirers were to be told that he had gone to the station, that on no account must any one be allowed to come up-stairs, and that information was to be given when the coast was clear. "I'll explainitalllaterglewwhenihavetimebutrememberthatit's afiverinyourpocketifIcomethroughto-daysafe," he babbled, dashing furiously up-stairs. "Right, sir," responded Glew, a creature to whom the word "fiver" was all that was necessary by way of present explanation. Robert's bedroom door slammed and was locked behind him long before the "Right, sir" had died away.

The visit of Mrs. Hedderwick and the vicar's wife made matters fairly clear to the landlord; but, true to his salt and interest, he persisted in the tale that Robert had gone to the station. His story was disbelieved. This was not to be wondered at, considering the paucity of his inventive powers and imagination; for Glew did not adduce a particle of corroborative detail to support his statement. The ladies simply declined to give him credence, and demanded to be shown Mr. "Bangs'" bedroom. Foiled in this amiable purpose, the determined pair announced their intentions of waiting in the parlor till the victim appeared. The landlord's renewed protests and offers of affidavits had no weight with them, and they sat down with an awful dignity.

At two o'clock Mrs. Peters' weariness conquered her curiosity, and she went home, offering unbounded sympathy and a bed for the night. The sympathy was accepted, the bed declined, Mrs. Hedderwick declaring she would remain at the inn, if necessary sitting up in a chair till morning.

Glew had no wish for this, and cast about him for means of getting rid of the undesired guest. At six o'clock he sent his hopeful son up-stairs, himself keeping guard over the parlor from the bar opposite. Young Glew found Robert desperate: he had not thought his wife capable of such obstinacy.

"Dad says," began the interested youngster, "that he'll go in and talk to the lady —keep her occupied like—if you'd care to risk it and slip out."

"I will!" said Robert on the instant. Anything was better than this terrible suspense. "Let me see ... there's a train in half an hour or so ... I'll go to the station. No! I won't! Wait a minute!"

He changed his resolve, partly from quixotic, partly from selfish reasons. He did not like to leave Tony to an unknown, unguessed-at fate; and he also felt very

strongly that he would like that judicious schemer's advice on his next steps. He resolved to risk all and boldly apply for admittance to The Quiet House. If matters there were really serious ... well, at all events they could not be much more serious to him than the present *impasse*. "I'll do it!" he declared with a sudden resolution. "Boy! when you get your father alone, tell him I've gone up to The Quiet House. I'll write to him from there. Now go down and ask him to talk to my—to the lady. Beg him to stand in the doorway and fill it up. I'll creep quietly past in ten minutes' time."

The boy obeyed, and after ten palpitating minutes Robert stole cautiously downstairs. True to his promise, the landlord's bulky figure blocked the parlor door, his voice raised in mournful reiteration and appeal. Robert reached the fifth step from the bottom without making the slightest noise. But the stair-rod of the fifth step had worked loose: the carpet slipped, and he tumbled down with considerable uproar. Luckily he was unhurt by the fall; but the landlord's sharp turn of the head and expression of dismayed surprise, coupled with the din, roused Mrs. Hedderwick's suspicion. "What is that?" she demanded querulously, trying to push past the landlord. At the terrific tones Robert jumped up and took to his heels.

His wife had common sense and did not attempt to follow, knowing she could not hope to catch the fugitive. She knew, too, that Glew was incorruptible. But as the landlord walked out to block the passage and observe the escape with a sympathetic eye, she turned to Master Glew and said decisively, "Here is half-a-crown if you can tell me where he has gone."

"Quiet House," said the guileless lad without hesitation, and pocketed the coin. Mrs. Hedderwick left the inn at once.

After inquiry from a passer-by she reached her destination, a quarter of an hour behind the peccant Hedderwick. She walked up the drive, and beheld the unsuspecting Robert pouring out his grief to Tony. They were sitting in the hammock-chairs.

Robert gave a cry and fled once more. Tony courteously waited and implored Mrs. Hedderwick to sit down and rest. "There is a misunderstanding," he said urbanely; "it shall be my pleasure to set it right." Filled with shame of his sex, determined to vindicate Robert's manhood and obtain for him a peaceful mastership, he ran after him, catching him outside the grounds as has already been described.

Mrs. Hedderwick, however, was not content to wait. She did not run—no! no! perish so undignified a thought: but she proceeded very swiftly indeed in the wake of Tony. "A smooth-spoken hypocrite!" she thought ungratefully, remembering Mrs. Peter's description of Robert's accomplice during their mutual vigil. "If I only get a chance I'll give him a piece of my mind, too!" She ran—I apologize: she proceeded very swiftly—through the garden, and presently saw Tony disappear in the distance through a wicket-gate. At a convenient interval of time she followed. In front of her, a field ahead, she saw Tony and her husband standing still, their arms waving furiously. In a moment they began to walk on again, toward a little group which she now observed for the first time. Mrs. Hedderwick slackened her pace, not because her desire of vengeance was cooling, but because she did not wish to appear in a panting state. She saw the two men come to the group, and some handshaking followed. "The wretch!" she thought. "Some of his wicked friends, I suppose!" A few moments later she joined them. They looked at her with interest, and she returned the gaze unflinchingly—an iron woman. Beatrice came forward. "Mrs. Hedderwick, I think we have met before."

It must be admitted that Mrs. Hedderwick behaved well. There was every excuse for a scene, and no possible excuse (unless one know his dull life) for Robert. Mrs. Hedderwick merely looked coldly at Beatrice and said, "We have, but I prefer not to remember it." Then she turned to her husband, "Come, Robert!"

Mr. Hedderwick was pale, but determined. Tony's reassuring and stimulating words, together with a short breathing-space, had put courage into him. Besides, during the last minute he had conceived an idea. So, though he trembled internally, his voice was calm enough as he replied, "Alicia, I am not coming just yet."

Tony took Beatrice by the arm. "This isn't our scene," he whispered. She obeyed the hint; and she, Lionel, Tony and Billing retired a few yards to the aeroplane, out of ear-shot. "Is it fair to leave him?" asked Beatrice; "he looked very frightened, poor little man!"

"Yes—yes!" said Tony decidedly; "he must do this on his own—sink or swim. I think he'll be all right, now that I've stiffened him. Let him alone."

Mrs. Hedderwick appreciated the withdrawal, but it did not soften her mood. "What do you mean, Robert?" she said coldly. "You are my husband, though you did desert me cruelly. You must come."

"I come on conditions," said Robert stoutly, though his knees were quaking. "I mean to be master of the house in future—to do exactly what I like and when I like—to go to Brighton, if I choose——"

"Don't be absurd," said Mrs. Hedderwick.

"I mean what I say," he reiterated. "I'm—I'm still very fond of you, Alicia, but I must be master——"

"Don't be absurd," said Mrs. Hedderwick, still unmoved. "You will come home with me to-night."

She advanced and took his arm in a wifely grasp. Robert, feeling the chains imminent, resolved to play his last card. It was his sole remaining hope of freedom. Bruskly he freed his arm. Then with incredible agility he ran to the aeroplane and scrambled into the pilot's seat. "Now, then!" he said grimly; "you admit that *I* am to be head, and I'll come down. Otherwise I'll start this infernal machine. I don't much care what happens."

"Robert!" screamed his wife, shaken out of her composure. "Oh, Robert! come down!"

"Not till you promise!" he said, fumbling at unaccustomed levers. "Here, sir! how do you start it?"

"You fool!" shouted Billing, alarmed, as chance directed Robert to the object of his search. "Stand clear!" he screamed, fearing the propeller would start and hit the bystanders. He pulled Beatrice aside, and Tony did the same for Mrs. Hedderwick. "Stop it, you fool! No!—the other lever! The machine will be up in a minute."

"Promise!" screamed Robert, like one possessed. He was playing for life now, and was past caring.

"I—I promise!" wailed Mrs. Hedderwick, as the propeller began to move, and then at last Robert obeyed the frantic instructions of Billing and stopped the engine. He descended with all the honors of war.

"You will excuse us," he said with a pale smile, taking Mrs. Hedderwick by the arm. "We are stopping at The Happy Heart to-night. Perhaps, to-morrow...."

He retired at the right moment, his wife beneath his manly protecting arm.

"There! there!" he whispered soothingly as they walked off; "it's all right now, my love! You mustn't be frightened."

"Oh, Robert!" said Mrs. Hedderwick. "How could you—how *could* you do it! I —I didn't know you had it in you!"

Robert expanded a hero's chest.

"My dear, love is proverbially blind."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE USUAL THING

Beatrice and the three men watched the passing of the Hedderwicks in amused silence. When they had disappeared from view Billing said, "Well, that's done ... and now, Miss Blair, I'm really going."

"Me, too," said Tony lightly. "I mean to have a shy for that seven-thirty train."

"Then you're determined?" said Beatrice to both men. Billing nodded with a smiling melancholy. Tony smiled more cheerfully. Though this interview with Miss Arkwright in the afternoon had opened his eyes, he was not so hard hit as the air-man: things had not had time to go so far.

"I'll just wait and see the machine start," he said. "Then ho! for the station and prosaic London once more!"

"If you like," said Billing, "I'll take you back to Brooklands with me. This is a two-seater. Unless you've a bad head for heights."

"I've fallen from too many to mind," said Tony ruefully. "My biggest drop occurred this afternoon. Thanks very much. If you'll give me time to collar a coat and a rug, I'm your man."

He ran off, leaving them chatting, but he was back in a very short time bearing the necessary articles. "I bagged the first I could lay hands on," he explained, getting into the overcoat. "I hope nobody——"

"Er—the coat happens to be mine," said Lionel pointedly. He liked Tony very well, but could hardly stomach so unblushing a theft. "Sorry, old chap, but I may want——"

Tony put both hands on his shoulders and gazed deep into his eyes.

"Little man," he said calmly, "listen to your wise old uncle. You *won't* want it. Take it from me that you *won't* want it. I'll send it back to-morrow. That will be in heaps of time."

"Time for what?" said the puzzled Lionel, smiling out of sheer sympathy with the quizzical glance. "Oh, well—take it and be hanged to you!"

"Thanks," said Tony. Then he took off his cap and advanced to Beatrice. "Good-by!" he said brightly. "Thanks a thousand times. I'll send you a picture post-card announcing my safe arrival."

"And another to say when you've started work!" said Beatrice, smiling a little mistily. "Don't forget that!"

"I start on Monday," he replied. "Don't know what it will be yet—perhaps aeroplanes, perhaps politics, possibly poultry farming. But it's going to materialize. Good-by, and—the very best!"

Billing, who had said good-by, was already in the pilot's seat. "Come on!" he grunted mournfully, knowing he was bidding farewell to hopes managerial as well as amatory. Tony climbed up behind him and tucked the rug well round. "Let her go!" he said cheerfully. In obedience to the order Lionel gave the propeller a swing, the engine started, and in a few seconds the aeroplane began to run swiftly over the ground. Beatrice drew close to Lionel and put her arm through his. It seemed such a natural thing that he felt no surprise whatever, but only a tumultuous happiness. Together they stood watching the machine as it took the air and soared up in the magic of mechanical flight. They waved a final adieu, and Tony flourished his cap.

"What would you say," shouted Billing when they had risen a hundred feet, "if I let her drop suddenly?"

"Shouldn't have cared a week ago," shouted Tony in return; "you mustn't now."

Billing grunted unintelligibly and gave his undivided attention to the pilotage....

On the dull earth below Beatrice and Lionel were walking silently toward the house. They were still arm in arm, but no word was spoken till they had reached the shelter of the garden. Then Lionel stopped and took her by the hands. "Ah, Beatrice!" he said.

"Not yet! Not yet!" she breathed, holding back and inflaming his passion the more. "Wait a little! You mustn't say anything yet! Let us approach it sensibly and in a rational balanced mood if we can." She broke from him and laughed merrily. "Let us go in and have dinner first. Afterward, we can talk in the garden."

"Tell me one thing," he said impetuously, "and I will be patient. Was there ever a Lukos?"

"I will tell you two things," she said, laughing a little wildly. "You ought to know them before you speak. With them you must be content for an hour. There was no Lukos, and Miss Arkwright and I are the same creature."

He had suspected it a hundred times, and a hundred times he had found fresh evidence to discredit the suspicion. He knew it must be true, though he could not grasp it yet. But he did not care. The fact that he had been hoodwinked and made a plaything did not trouble him in the least. All he was conscious of was that she was free. He laughed quietly, now completely master of himself.

"That will do to go on with," he said; "now let us be sensible, as you suggest, and have dinner."

The meal was a great success, despite the presence of Forbes, who hovered about them like a benignant and sympathetic butterfly. Lionel could hardly help smiling at him, remembering his recent slip and the sudden recovery of speech. Forbes seemed entirely unconscious, handing the plates with an air that was almost fatherly; and Lionel regretted the obvious necessity of his dismissal in the roseate and fast-approaching millennium. He was not impatient now, perfectly disposed to laugh, eat, drink, be merry and take a fair share in the conversation that sparkled between them. It was a talk as of old, when they spoke freely and lightly of surface themes—the play, the latest book, the morning's news—the clash of wit and opinion sounding bravely through the room.

They smoked a cigarette each over their coffee, but still the talk was of mundane matters, though neither was ill at ease. There is a telepathy of souls that can send true messages beneath the cover of human speech.

At last Beatrice said, "Let us go into the garden," and he rose briskly at the command. She allowed him to help her with her cloak, and then said, laughing: "But Tony has your coat! What will you do?"

"I shan't need one," he replied. "It's a lovely night."

"You will," she insisted. "I can't have you catching cold. I'll tell Forbes——"

"No, really," he protested, and threw open the door. "See, what a glorious night it is! There's not the least need."

She did not press the point, for indeed it was a night for lovers. There was not a breath of wind in the air, no sound of the works of man to mar the stillness. From a distant field came the dim wheezing of a corn-crake; nearer at hand a nightingale was beginning his epithalamic welcome. A light dew was falling, but nothing to hurt a lover and his lass, full of health and joyousness. The trees did not even sigh a greeting: the solemn hush made them imagine that nature herself was holding her breath in friendly expectation, waiting to hear the old tale in the newest words, ready to break out into a chorus of free congratulation. Already Lionel could hear the leaves whispering the gay tidings, every blade of grass passing on the news, the grasshoppers and glowworms waking their more sleepy fellows to tell them Beatrice was here and had said she loved him, the birds waiting happily in their nests till the first kiss sounded, and then tucking in their heads with a jolly "So *that's* all right at last!" He wanted to say "Thank you" to the world of beasts and trees and flowers, and presently to the world of men and women.

"Smoke, do!" said Beatrice, as he dragged a couple of the chairs upon the gravel. "And don't interrupt more than you can help. I'll tell you the essential facts as shortly as I can. Details we can talk over later ... if there is to be a 'later.'"

He lighted a cigarette and was silent.

"Most of the tale I told you," she began abruptly, "was all lies. Some was true. I was, for instance, well-off as regards money, when I was left an orphan at sixteen. I was brought up by some hateful relations and launched two years later. I got sick of society in a couple of years, and cut it for pleasanter paths. I tried painting, but it bored me. Then the stage—that part was true—and made a success....

"It wasn't enough. I wanted more interest, more reality in life. I didn't find it—I haven't quite found it yet, but I think I'm on the way to it. I wanted romance, too. I also wanted fun. Oh, yes! I wanted a lot, there's no doubt about that.... Presently I determined I wanted a husband....

"Does that sound odd from a girl's lips? Well, it's true, and I don't care much about anything except truth just now. I set to work deliberately to find some one I could love and who would love me. Are you shocked?" she asked quickly.

"No," he said quietly, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "Go on."

"So I went husband-hunting. Not much need, you may say, for a girl on the stage

to do that. Of course I had plenty of men running after me—some beasts, some good sorts. They didn't do. I wanted something worth loving; a man who was strong, but human; a man with a sense of humor and not too grown-up for romance—a kind of Admirable Crichton, in fact. I didn't find him—at all events, not at first.

"This Turkish tale I made up for two reasons,—one, the purely irresponsible childish enjoyment of a fairy tale—a lark, if you like! Two, for a test. If my projected benedict could swallow that—believe it, if possible, but at all events not refuse it because it looked so silly—well, he would do on the romantic side. But he had to be a man and a strong man, too; hence the invention of Lukos for a further test."

"A pretty hard one," he interposed.

"Pretty hard," she agreed, "but I meant to have the best. I tried the tale on two or three men who seemed good sorts, during a period of three months or so. They all failed for ... one reason or another. Then, by a lucky chance, you came and succeeded. That's all."

"And Mizzi?"

"My faithful helper and plagiarist. She got bitten with the romantic notion too, and set her lover a somewhat similar task. She invented the burglary."

"Tony Wild?"

"Luck," she confessed. "I worked the broad outlines of the scheme, but added to it as circumstances helped. The ambassador was an old friend, and I used his presence here to give verisimilitude. He didn't know, of course, and the day he caught you here I was afraid my schemes would be blurted out by his calling me 'Miss Blair.' Luck helped me there."

"Hedderwick?"

"Sheer madness. I wanted a new adventure that night, and risked the police court. I trusted to my wits to get us out if caught. If not, well, 'the papers have been stolen!'"

"The dumb servants?"

"The gardener really is dumb. Forbes I gave five pounds a week to sham, for

safety's sake. I couldn't risk his talking in the village. I've only had this house two months—I wanted it for perfect rest. I didn't come down here every day—just when the mood took me. I used to motor up to London at night, sometimes sending the car back empty (Forbes drove), sometimes coming myself. When you were here I used to leave the car a mile away and walk."

"Alone!"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I always carried the revolver for protection. That was true in a sense. I was never interfered with, though I had some trouble at times dodging Tony, Brown and Mr. Hedderwick. It was exciting work."

He laughed, at her courage and his ignorance of her. She laughed gaily in return.

"Is that enough?"

"Not quite," he demurred. "Why were you so angry with Mizzi that night you caught us?"

She blushed.

"Ah! I am ashamed to tell you that. One day perhaps I shall ... not now."

"I kissed her, you know," he said frankly. She sat up.

"When?"

"In London, the first night."

"Not since?"

"Never."

She sat down again.

"A proof of humanity," she smiled. "She's quite charming, I know. Is that all?"

"Not yet. Wasn't it very hard to keep up the two rôles?"

"Hard, but, not so very hard to a woman who has brains and is an actress. It was interesting, and I enjoyed watching you."

"Tell me; suppose I had kissed Miss Arkwright. Would you have forgiven me?"

The answer came quickly.

"Yes. But I'm so glad you didn't!"

"I, too," he confessed. And then, "I think that's all."

There was a complete silence for half a minute, while he struggled to find words to say to this most lovely woman. He could find none. Each knew the other's heart already, and words seemed vain and meaningless. "Oh, Beatrice darling!" he said, almost with a sob, "don't keep me waiting any longer! I want you! I want you!"

"Lal, dearest!" she said.

"And this is the end," she said presently with a little sigh. "We shall just get married and settle into stodgy conventional people. It sounds flat, doesn't it?"

"Why should it be the end? We can be happy and ourselves, too. We can still have romance, adventures, though youth passes——"

She shook her head.

"No; we shall have happiness, but never the same as this. We have been lucky and had the most splendid fun. But now, whether we wish it or not, we shall have to grow up and try to find out what life is."

"Well, we'll bargain for one adventure a year, at least," he stipulated. "Old or young, we'll have that!"

"We must earn it, Lal!" she said with a wise smile. "We've no right to such happiness unless——"

"Make me your debtor now!" he said, clasping her more closely. "Beatrice, darling, I love you! Do you realize it? I love you!"

She breathed one word, the most perfect pledge a man could hope for.

"Egotist!"

THE END

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