



The
LITERARY SENSE

E. Nesbit

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THE LITERARY SENSE

BY

E. NESBIT

AUTHOR OF "THE RED HOUSE" AND "THE WOULD-BE-GOODS"

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TO
DOROTHEA DEAKIN
WITH
THE AUTHOR'S LOVE



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THE LITERARY SENSE

THE UNFAITHFUL LOVER

SHE was going to meet her lover. And the fact that she was to meet him at Cannon Street Station would almost, she feared, make the meeting itself banal, sordid. She would have liked to meet him in some green, cool orchard, where daffodils swung in the long grass, and primroses stood on frail stiff little pink stalks in the wet, scented moss of the hedgerow. The time should have been May. She herself should have been a poem—a lyric in a white gown and green scarf, coming to him through the long grass under the blossomed boughs. Her hands should have been full of bluebells, and she should have held them up to his face in maidenly defence as he sprang forward to take her in his arms. You see that she knew exactly how a tryst is conducted in the pages of the standard poets and of the cheaper weekly journals. She had, to the full limit allowed of her reading and her environment, the literary sense. When she was a child she never could cry long, because she always wanted to see herself cry, in the glass, and then of course the tears always stopped. Now that she was a young woman she could never be happy long, because she wanted to watch her heart's happiness, and it used to stop then, just as the tears had.

He had asked her to meet him at Cannon Street; he had something to say to her, and at home it was difficult to get a quiet half-hour because of her little sisters. And, curiously enough, she was hardly curious at all about what he might have to say. She only wished for May and the orchard, instead of January and the dingy, dusty waiting-room, the plain-faced, preoccupied travellers, the dim, desolate weather. The setting of the scene seemed to her all-important. Her dress was brown, her jacket black, and her hat was home-trimmed. Yet she looked entrancingly pretty to him as he came through the heavy swing-doors. He would hardly have known her in green and white muslin and an orchard, for their love had been born and bred in town—Highbury New Park, to be exact. He came towards her; he was five minutes late. She had grown anxious, as the one who waits always does, and she was extremely glad to see him, but she knew that a late lover should be treated with a provoking coldness (one can relent prettily later on), so she gave him a limp hand and no greeting.

"Let's go out," he said. "Shall we walk along the Embankment, or go somewhere on the Underground?"

It was bitterly cold, but the Embankment was more romantic than a railway carriage. He ought to insist on the railway carriage: he probably would. So she said—

"Oh, the Embankment, please!" and felt a sting of annoyance and disappointment when he acquiesced.

They did not speak again till they had gone through the little back streets, past the police station and the mustard factory, and were on the broad pavement of Queen Victoria Street.

He had been late: he had offered no excuse, no explanation. She had done the proper thing; she had awaited these with dignified reserve, and now she was involved in the meshes of a silence that she could not break. How easy it would have been in the orchard! She could have snapped off a blossoming branch and—and made play with it somehow. Then he would have had to say something. But here—the only thing that occurred to her was to stop and look in one of the shops till he should ask her what she was looking at. And how common and mean that would be compared with the blossoming bough; and besides, the shops they were passing had nothing in the windows except cheap pastry and models of steam-engines.

Why on earth didn't he speak? He had never been like this before. She stole a glance at him, and for the first time it occurred to her that his "something to say" was not a mere excuse for being alone with her. He had something to say—something that was trying to get itself said. The keen wind thrust itself even inside the high collar of her jacket. Her hands and feet were aching with cold. How warm it would have been in the orchard!

"I'm freezing," she said suddenly; "let's go and have some tea."

"Of course, if you like," he said uncomfortably; yet she could see he was glad that she had broken that desolate silence.

Seated at a marble table—the place was nearly empty—she furtively watched his face in the glass, and what she saw there thrilled her. Some great sorrow had come to him. And she had been sulking! The girl in the orchard would have known at a glance. *She* would gently, tenderly, with infinite delicacy and the fine tact of a noble woman, have drawn his secret from him. She would have shared his sorrow, and shown herself "half wife, half angel from heaven" in this dark hour. Well, it was not too late. She could begin now. But how? He had ordered

the tea, and her question was still unanswered. Yet she must speak. When she did her words did not fit the mouth of the girl in the orchard—but then it would have been May there, and this was January. She said—

"How frightfully cold it is!"

"Yes, isn't it?" he said.

The fine tact of a noble woman seemed to have deserted her. She resisted a little impulse to put her hand in his under the marble table, and to say, "What is it, dearest? Tell me all about it. I can't bear to see you looking so miserable," and there was another silence.

The waitress brought the two thick cups of tea, and looked at him with a tepid curiosity. As soon as the two were alone again he leaned his elbows on the marble and spoke.

"Look here, darling, I've got something to tell you, and I hope to God you'll forgive me and stand by me, and try to understand that I love you just the same, and whatever happens I shall always love you."

This preamble sent a shiver of dread down her spine. What had he done—a murder—a bank robbery—married someone else?

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she would stand by him whatever he had done; but if he had married someone else this would be improper, so she only said, "Well?" and she said it coldly.

"Well—I went to the Simpsons' dance on Tuesday—oh, why weren't you there, Ethel?—and there was a girl in pink, and I danced three or four times with her—she was rather like you, side-face—and then, after supper, in the conservatory, I—I talked nonsense—but only a very little, dear—and she kept looking at me so—as if she expected me to—to—and so I kissed her. And yesterday I had a letter from her, and she seems to expect—to think—and I thought I ought to tell you, darling. Oh, Ethel, do try to forgive me! I haven't answered her letter."

"Well?" she said.

"That's all," said he, miserably stirring his tea.

She drew a deep breath. A shock of unbelievable relief tingled through her.

So that was all! What was it, compared with her fears? She almost said, "Never mind, dear. It was hateful of you, and I wish you hadn't, but I know you're sorry, and I'm sorry; but I forgive you, and we'll forget it, and you'll never do it again." But just in time she remembered that nice girls must not take these things too lightly. What opinion would he form of the purity of her mind, the innocence of her soul, if an incident like this failed to shock her deeply? He himself was evidently a prey to the most rending remorse. He had told her of the thing as one tells of a crime. As the confession of a crime she must receive it. How should she know that he had only told her because he feared that she would anyhow hear it through the indiscretion of the girl in pink, or of that other girl in blue who had seen and smiled? How could she guess that he had tuned his confession to the key of what he believed would be an innocent girl's estimate of his misconduct?

Following the tingle of relief came a sharp, sickening pinch of jealousy and mortification. These inspired her.

"I don't wonder you were afraid to tell me," she began. "You don't love me—you've never loved me—I was an idiot to believe you did."

"You know I do," he said; "it was hateful of me—but I couldn't help it."

Those four true words wounded her more than all the rest.

"Couldn't help it? Then how can I ever trust you? Even if we were married I could never be sure you weren't kissing some horrid girl or other. No—it's no use—I can never, never forgive you—and it's all over. And I *believed* in you so, and trusted you—I thought you were the soul of honour."

He could not say, "And so I am, on the whole," which was what he thought. Her tears were falling hot and fast between face and veil, for she had talked till she was very sorry indeed for herself.

"Forgive me, dear," he said.

Then she rose to the occasion. "Never," she said, her eyes flashing through her tears. "You've deceived me once—you'd do it again! No, it's all over—you've broken my heart and destroyed my faith in human nature. I hope I shall never see you again. Some day you'll understand what you've done, and be sorry!"

"Do you think I'm not sorry now?"

She wished that they were at home, and not in this horrible tea-shop, under the curious eyes of the waitresses. At home she could at least have buried her face in the sofa cushions and resisted all his pleading,—at last, perhaps, letting him take one cold passive hand and shower frantic kisses upon it.

He would come to-morrow, however, and then— At present the thing to compass was a dignified parting.

"Good-bye," she said; "I'm going home. And it's good-bye for ever. No—it's only painful for both of us. There's no more to be said; you've betrayed me. I didn't think a decent man could do such things." She was pulling on her gloves. "Go home and gloat over it all! And that poor girl—you've broken *her* heart too." This really was a master stroke of nobility.

He stood up suddenly. "Do you mean it?" he said, and his tone should have warned her. "Are you really going to throw me over for a thing like this?"

The anger in his eyes frightened her, and the misery of his face wrung her heart; but how could she say—

"No, of course I'm not! I'm only talking as I know good girls ought to talk"?

So she said—

"Yes. Good-bye!"

He stood up suddenly. "Then good-bye," he said, "and may God forgive you as I do!" And he strode down between the marble tables and out by the swing-door. It was a very good exit. At the corner he remembered that he had gone away without paying for the tea, and his natural impulse was to go back and remedy that error. And if he had they would certainly have made it up. But how could he go back to say, "We are parting for ever; but still, I must insist on the sad pleasure of paying for our tea—for the last time"? He checked the silly impulse. What was tea, and the price of tea, in this cataclysmic overthrowing of the Universe? So she waited for him in vain, and at last paid for the tea herself, and went home to wait there—and there, too, in vain, for he never came back to her. He loved her with all his heart, and he, also, had what she had never suspected in him—the literary sense. Therefore he, never dreaming that the literary sense had inspired her too, perceived that to the jilted lover two courses only are possible—suicide or "the front." So he enlisted, and went to South Africa, and he never came home covered with medals and glory, which was

rather his idea, to the few simple words of explanation that would have made all straight, and repaid her and him for all the past. Because Destiny is almost without the literary sense, and Destiny carelessly decreed that he should die of enteric in a wretched hut, without so much as hearing a gun fired. Literary to the soul, she has taken no other lover, but mourns him faithfully to this hour. Yet perhaps, after all, that is not because of the literary sense. It may be because she loved him. I think I have not mentioned before that she did love him.

ROUNDING OFF A SCENE

A SOFT rain was falling. Umbrellas swayed and gleamed in the light of the street lamps. The brightness of the shop windows reflected itself in the muddy mirror of the wet pavements. A miserable night, a dreary night, a night to tempt the wretched to the glimmering Embankment, and thence to the river, hardly wetter or cleaner than the gutters of the London streets. Yet the sight of these same streets was like wine in the veins to a man who drove through them in a hansom piled with Gladstone bags and P. and O. trunks. He leaned over the apron of the hansom and looked eagerly, longingly, lovingly, at every sordid detail: the crowd on the pavement, its haste as intelligible to him as the rush of ants when their hill is disturbed by the spade; the glory and glow of corner public-houses; the shifting dance of the gleaming wet umbrellas. It was England, it was London, it was home—and his heart swelled till he felt it in his throat. After ten years—the dream realised, the longing appeased. London—and all was said.

His cab, delayed by a red newspaper cart, jammed in altercative contact with a dray full of brown barrels, paused in Cannon Street. The eyes that drank in the scene perceived a familiar face watching on the edge of the pavement for a chance to cross the road under the horses' heads—the face of one who ten years ago had been the slightest of acquaintances. Now time and home-longing juggled with memory till the face seemed that of a friend. To meet a friend—this did, indeed, round off the scene of the home-coming. The man in the cab threw back the doors and leapt out. He crossed under the very nose-bag of a stationed dray horse. He wrung the friend—last seen as an acquaintance—by the hand. The friend caught fire at the contact. Any passer-by, who should have been spared a moment for observation by the cares of umbrella and top-hat, had surely said, "Damon and Pythias!" and gone onward smiling in sympathy with friends long severed and at last reunited.

The little scene ended in a cordial invitation from the impromptu Damon, on the pavement, to Pythias, of the cab, to a little dance that evening at Damon's house, out Sydenham way. Pythias accepted with enthusiasm, though at his normal temperature, he was no longer a dancing man. The address was noted, hands clasped again with strenuous cordiality, and Pythias regained his hansom.

It set him down at the hotel from which ten years before he had taken cab to Fenchurch Street Station. The menu of his dinner had been running in his head, like a poem, all through the wet shining streets. He ordered, therefore, without hesitation—

Ox-tail Soup.
Boiled Cod and Oyster Sauce.
Roast Beef and Horse-radish.
Boiled Potatoes. Brussels Sprouts.
Cabinet Pudding.
Stilton. Celery.

The cabinet pudding was the waiter's suggestion. Anything that called itself "pudding" would have pleased as well. He dressed hurriedly, and when the soup and the wine card appeared together before him he ordered draught bitter—a pint.

"And bring it in a tankard," said he.

The drive to Sydenham was, if possible, a happier dream than had been the drive from Fenchurch Street to Charing Cross. There were many definite reasons why he should have been glad to be in England, glad to leave behind him the hard work of his Indian life, and to settle down as a landed proprietor. But he did not think definite thoughts. The whole soul and body of the man were filled and suffused by the glow that transfuses the blood of the schoolboy at the end of the term.

The lights, the striped awning, the red carpet of the Sydenham house thrilled and charmed him. Park Lane could have lent them no further grace—Belgrave Square no more subtle witchery. This was England, England, England!

He went in. The house was pretty with lights and flowers. There was music. The soft-carpeted stair seemed air as he trod it. He met his host—was led up to girls in blue and girls in pink, girls in satin and girls in silk-muslin—wrote brief *précis* of their toilets on his programme. Then he was brought face to face with a tall dark-haired woman in white. His host's voice buzzed in his ears, and he caught only the last words—"old friends." Then he was left staring straight into the eyes of the woman who ten years ago had been the light of his: the woman who had jilted him, his vain longing for whom had been the spur to drive him out of England.

"May I have another?" was all he found to say after the bow, the conventional request, and the scrawling of two programmes.

"Yes," she said, and he took two more.

The girls in pink, and blue, and silk, and satin found him a good but silent dancer. On the opening bars of the eighth waltz he stood before her. Their steps went together like song and tune, just as they had always done. And the touch of her hand on his arm thrilled through him in just the old way. He had, indeed, come home.

There were definite reasons why he should have pleaded a headache or influenza, or any lie, and have gone away before his second dance with her. But the charm of the situation was too great. The whole thing was so complete. On his very first evening in England—to meet her! He did not go, and half-way through their second dance he led her into the little room, soft-curtained, soft-cushioned, soft-lighted, at the bend of the staircase.

Here they sat silent, and he fanned her, and he assured himself once more that she was more beautiful than ever. Her hair, which he had known in short, fluffy curls, lay in soberly waved masses, but it was still bright and dark, like a chestnut fresh from the husk. Her eyes were the same as of old, and her hands. Her mouth only had changed. It was a sad mouth now, in repose—and he had known it so merry. Yet he could not but see that its sadness added to its beauty. The lower lip had been, perhaps, too full, too flexible. It was set now, not in sternness, but in a dignified self-control. He had left a Greuze girl—he found a Madonna of Bellini. Yet those were the lips he had kissed—the eyes that—

The silence had grown to the point of embarrassment. She broke it, with his eyes on her.

"Well," she said, "tell me all about yourself."

"There's nothing much to tell. My cousin's dead, and I'm a full-fledged squire with estates and things. I've done with the gorgeous East, thank God! But you—tell me about yourself."

"What shall I tell you?" She had taken the fan from him, and was furling and unfurling it.

"Tell me"—he repeated the words slowly—"tell me the truth! It's all over—nothing matters now. But I've always been—well—curious. Tell me why you

threw me over!"

He yielded, without even the form of a struggle, to the impulse which he only half understood. What he said was true: he *had* been—well—curious. But it was long since anything alive, save vanity, which is immortal, had felt the sting of that curiosity. But now, sitting beside this beautiful woman who had been so much to him, the desire to bridge over the years, to be once more in relations with her outside the conventionalities of a ball-room, to take part with her in some scene, discreet, yet flavoured by the past with a delicate poignancy, came upon him like a strong man armed. It held him, but through a veil, and he did not see its face. If he had seen it, it would have shocked him very much.

"Tell me," he said softly, "tell me now—at last—"

Still she was silent.

"Tell me," he said again; "why did you do it? How was it you found out so very suddenly and surely that we weren't suited to each other—that was the phrase, wasn't it?"

"Do you really want to know? It's not very amusing, is it—raking out dead fires?"

"Yes, I do want to know. I've wanted it every day since," he said earnestly.

"As you say—it's all ancient history. But you used not to be stupid. Are you sure the real reason never occurred to you?"

"Never! What was it? Yes, I know: the next waltz is beginning. Don't go. Cut him, whoever he is, and stay here and tell me. I think I have a right to ask that of you."

"Oh—rights!" she said. "But it's quite simple. I threw you over, as you call it, because I found out you didn't care for me."

"*I*—not care for *you*?"

"Exactly."

"But even so—if you believed it—but how could you? Even so—why not have told me—why not have given me a chance?" His voice trembled.

Hers was firm.

"I was giving you a chance, and I wanted to make sure that you would take it. If I'd just said, 'You don't care for me,' you'd have said, 'Oh, yes I do!' And we should have been just where we were before."

"Then it wasn't that you were tired of me?"

"Oh, no," she said sedately, "it wasn't that!"

"Then you—did you really care for me still, even when you sent back the ring and wouldn't see me, and went to Germany, and wouldn't open my letters, and all the rest of it?"

"Oh, yes!"—she laughed lightly—"I loved you frightfully all that time. It does seem odd now to look back on it, doesn't it? but I nearly broke my heart over you."

"Then why the devil—"

"You mustn't swear," she interrupted; "I never heard you do that before. Is it the Indian climate?"

"Why did you send me away?" he repeated.

"Don't I keep telling you?" Her tone was impatient. "I found out you didn't care, and—and I'd always despised people who kept other people when they wanted to go. And I knew you were too honourable, generous, soft-hearted—what shall I say?—to go for your own sake, so I thought, for your sake, I would make you believe you were to go for mine."

"So you lied to me?"

"Not exactly. We *weren't* suited—since you didn't love me."

"I didn't love you?" he echoed again.

"And somehow I'd always wanted to do something really noble, and I never had the chance. So I thought if I set you free from a girl you didn't love, and bore the blame myself, it *would* be rather noble. And so I did it."

"And did the consciousness of your own nobility sustain you comfortably?" The sneer was well sneered.

"Well—not for long," she admitted. "You see, I began to doubt after a while whether it was really *my* nobleness after all. It began to seem like some part in a

play that I'd learned and played—don't you know that sort of dreams where you seem to be reading a book and acting the story in the book at the same time? It was a little like that now and then, and I got rather tired of myself and my nobleness, and I wished I'd just told you, and had it all out with you, and both of us spoken the truth and parted friends. That was what I thought of doing at first. But then it wouldn't have been noble! And I really did want to be noble—just as some people want to paint pictures, or write poems, or climb Alps. Come, take me back to the ball-room. It's cold here in the Past."

But how could he let the curtain be rung down on a scene half finished, and so good a scene?

"Ah, no! tell me," he said, laying his hand on hers; "why did you think I didn't love you?"

"I knew it. Do you remember the last time you came to see me? We quarrelled—we were always quarrelling—but we always made it up. That day we made it up as usual, but you were still a little bit angry when you went away. And then I cried like a fool. And then you came back, and—you remember—"

"Go on," he said. He had bridged the ten years, and the scene was going splendidly. "Go on; you must go on."

"You came and knelt down by me," she said cheerfully. "It was as good as a play—you took me in your arms and told me you couldn't bear to leave me with the slightest cloud between us. You called me your heart's dearest, I remember—a phrase you'd never used before—and you said such heaps of pretty things to me! And at last, when you had to go, you swore we should never quarrel again—and that came true, didn't it?"

"Ah, but *why*?"

"Well, as you went out I saw you pick up your gloves off the table, and I *knew*—"

"Knew what?"

"Why, that it was the gloves you had come back for and not me—only when you saw me crying you were sorry for me, and determined to do your duty whatever it cost you. Don't! What's the matter?"

He had caught her wrists in his hands and was scowling angrily at her.

"Good God! was *that* all? I *did* come back for you. I never thought of the damned gloves. I don't remember them. If I did pick them up, it must have been mechanically and without noticing. And you ruined my life for *that*?"

He was genuinely angry; he was back in the past, where he had a right to be angry with her. Her eyes grew soft.

"Do you mean to say that I was *wrong*—that it was all my fault—that you *did* love me?"

"Love you?" he said roughly, throwing her hands from him; "of course I loved you—I shall always love you. I've never left off loving you. It was you who didn't love me. It was all your fault."

He leaned his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands. He was breathing quickly. The scene had swept him along in its quickening flow. He shut his eyes, and tried to catch at something to steady himself—some rope by which he could pull himself to land again. Suddenly an arm was laid on his neck, a face laid against his face. Lips touched his hand, and her voice, incredibly softened and tuned to the key of their love's overture, spoke—

"Oh, forgive me, dear, forgive me! If you love me still—it's too good to be true—but if you do—ah, you do!—forgive me, and we can forget it all! Dear, forgive me! I love you so!"

He was quite still, quite silent.

"Can't you forgive me?" she began again. He suddenly stood up.

"I'm married," he said. He drew a long breath and went on hurriedly, standing before her, but not looking at her. "I can't ask you to forgive me—I shall never forgive myself."

"It doesn't matter," she said, and she laughed; "I—I wasn't serious. I saw you were trying to play the old comedy, and I thought I had better play up to you. If I'd known you were married—but it was only your glove, and we're such old acquaintances! There's another dance beginning. Please go—I've no doubt my partner will find me."

He bowed, gave her one glance, and went. Halfway down the stairs he turned and came back. She was still sitting as he had left her. The angry eyes she raised to him were full of tears. She looked as she had looked ten years before, when he

had come back to her, and the cursed gloves had spoiled everything. He hated himself. Why had he played with fire and raised this ghost to vex her? It had been such pretty fire, and such a beautiful ghost. But she had been hurt—he had hurt her. She would blame herself now for that old past; as for the new past, so lately the present, it would not bear thinking of.

The scene must be rounded off somehow. He had let her wound her pride, her self-respect. He must heal them. The light touch would be best.

"Look here," he said, "I just wanted to tell you that I knew you weren't serious just now. As you say, it was nothing between two such old friends. And—and—" He sought about for some further consolation. Ill-inspired, with the touch of her lips still on his hand, he said, "And about the gloves. Don't blame yourself about that. It was not your fault. You were perfectly right. It was the gloves I came back for."

He left her then, and next day journeyed to Scotland to rejoin his wife, of whom he was, by habit, moderately fond. He still keeps the white glove she kissed, and at first reproached himself whenever he looked at it. But now he only sentimentalises over it now and then, if he happens to be a little under the weather. He feels that his foolish behaviour at that Sydenham dance was almost atoned for by the nobility with which he lied to spare her, the light, delicate touch with which he rounded off the scene.

He certainly did round it off. By a few short, easy words he accomplished three things. He destroyed an ideal of himself which she had cherished for years; he killed a pale bud of hope which she had loved to nurse—the hope that perhaps in that old past it had been she who was to blame, and not he, whom she loved; he trampled in the mud the living rose which would have bloomed her life long, the belief that he had loved, did love her—the living rose that would have had magic to quench the fire of shame kindled by that unasked kiss, a fire that frets for ever like hell-fire, burning, but not consuming, her self-respect.

He did, without doubt, round off the scene.

THE OBVIOUS

HE had the literary sense, but he had it as an inverted instinct. He had a keen perception of the dramatically fitting in art, but no counteracting vision of the fitting in life. Life and art, indeed, he found from his earliest years difficult to disentwine, and later, impossible to disentangle. And to disentangle and disentwine them became at last the point of honour to him.

He first knew that he loved her on the occasion of her "coming of age party." His people and hers lived in the same sombre London square: their Haslemere gardens were divided only by a sunk fence. He had known her all his life. Her coming of age succeeded but by a couple of days his return from three years of lazy philosophy—study in Germany—and the sight of her took his breath away. In the time-honoured *cliché* of the hurried novelist—too hurried to turn a new phrase for an idea as old as the new life of spring—he had left a child: he found a woman. She wore a soft satiny-white gown, that showed gleams of rose colour through its folds. There were pink hollyhock blossoms in the bright brown of her hair. Her eyes were shining with the excitement of this festival of which she was the goddess. He lost his head, danced with her five times, and carried away a crumpled hollyhock bloom that had fallen from her hair during the last Lancers, through which he had watched her. All his dances with her had been waltzes. It was not till, alone again at his hotel, he pulled out the hollyhock flower with his ball programme that he awoke to a complete sense of the insipid flatness of the new situation.

He had fallen in love—was madly *épris*, at any rate—and the girl was the girl whose charms, whose fortune, whose general suitability as a match for him had been dinned into his ears ever since he was a callow boy at Oxford, and she a long-black-silk-legged, short-frocked tom-boy of fourteen. Everyone had always said that it was the obvious thing. And now he had, for once, done exactly what was expected of him, and his fine literary sense revolted. The worst of all was that she seemed not quite to hate him. Better, a thousand times better, that he should have loved and longed, and never won a smile from her—that he should have sacrificed something, anything, and gone his lonely way. But she had smiled on him, undoubtedly she had smiled, and he did not want to play the part so long ago assigned to him by his people. He wanted to be Sidney Carton.

Darnay's had always seemed to him the inferior rôle.

Yet he could not keep his thoughts from her, and for what was left of the year his days and nights were a restless see-saw of longing and repulsion, advance and retreat. His moods were reflected in hers, but always an interview later; that is to say, if he were cold on Tuesday she on Thursday would be colder. If on Thursday he grew earnest, Sunday would find her kind. But he, by that time, was frigid. So that they never, after the first wildly beautiful evening when their hearts went out to each other in a splendour of primitive frankness, met in moods that chimed.

This safe-guarded him. It irritated her. And it most successfully bewitched them both.

His people and her people looked on, and were absolutely and sadly convinced that—as her brother put it to his uncle—it was "no go." Thereupon, a certain young-old cotton broker appearing on the scene and bringing gifts with him, her people began to put pressure on her. She loathed the cotton-broker, and said so. One afternoon everyone was by careful accident got out of the way, and the cotton-broker caught her alone. That night there was a scene. Her father talked a little too much of obedience and of duty, her mother played the hysterical symphony with the loud pedal hard down, and next morning the girl had vanished, leaving the conventional note of farewell on the pincushion.

Now the two families, being on all accounts close allies, had bought jointly a piece of land near the Littlestone golf links, and on it had built a bungalow, occupied by members of either house in turn, according to any friendly arrangement that happened to commend itself. But at this time of the year folk were keeping Christmas season dismally in their town houses.

It was on the day when the cotton-broker made his failure that the whole world seemed suddenly worthless to the man with the hollyhock bloom in his pocket-book, because he had met her at a dance, and he had been tender, but she, reflecting his mood of their last meeting, had been glacial. So he lied roundly to his people, and told them that he was going to spend a week or two with an old chum who was staying up for the vacation at Cambridge, and instead, he chose the opposite point of the compass, and took train to New Romney, and walked over to the squat, one-storied bungalow near the sea. Here he let himself in with the family latch-key, and set to work, with the help of a box from the stores, borne behind him with his portmanteau on a hand-cart, to keep Christmas by

himself. This, at least, was not literary. It was not in the least what a person in a book would do. He lit a fire in the dining-room, and the chimney was damp and smoked abominably, so that when he had fed full on tinned meats he was fain to let the fire go out and to sit in his fur-lined overcoat by the be-cindered grate, now fast growing cold, and smoke pipe after pipe of gloomy reflection. He thought of it all. The cursed countenance which his people were ready to give to the match that he couldn't make—her maddening indecisions—his own idiotic variableness. He had lighted the lamp, but it smelt vilely, and he blew it out, and did not light candles because it was too much trouble. So the early winter dusk deepened into night, and the bitter north wind had brought the snow, and it drifted now in feather-soft touches against the windows.

He thought of the good warm dining-room in Russell Square—of the gathering of aunts and uncles and cousins, uncongenial, perhaps, but still human, and he shivered in his fur-lined coat and his icy solitude, damning himself for the fool he knew he was.

And even as he damned, his breath was stopped, and his heart leaped at the sound, faint but unmistakable, of a key in the front door. If a man exist not too remote from his hairy ancestors to have lost the habit of the pricking ear, he was that man. He pricked his ears, so far as the modern man may, and listened.

The key grated in the lock—grated and turned; the door was opened, and banged again. Something was set down in the little passage, set down thumpingly and wholly without precaution. He heard a hand move along the partition of match-boarding. He heard the latch of the kitchen door rise and fall—and he heard the scrape and spurt of a struck match.

He sat still. He would catch this burglar red-handed.

Through the ill-fitting partitions of the jerry-built bungalow he could hear the intruder moving recklessly in the kitchen. The legs of chairs and tables grated on the brick floor. He took off his shoes, rose, and crept out through the passage towards the kitchen door. It stood ajar. A clear-cut slice of light came from it. Treading softly in his stockinged feet, he came to it and looked in. One candle, stuck in a tea-saucer, burned on the table. A weak blue-and-yellow glimmer came from some sticks in the bottom of the fireplace.

Kneeling in front of this, breathless with the endeavour to blow the damp sticks to flame, crouched the burglar. A woman. A girl. She had laid aside hat and cloak. The first sight of her was like a whirlwind sweeping over heart and

brain. For the bright brown hair that the candle-light lingered in was like Her dear brown hair—and when she rose suddenly, and turned towards the door, his heart stood still, for it was She—her very self.

She had not seen him. He retreated, in all the stillness his tortured nerves allowed, and sat down again in the fur coat and the dining-room. She had not heard him. He was, for some moments, absolutely stunned, then he crept to the window. In the poignant stillness of the place he could hear the heavy flakes of snow dabbing softly at the glass.

She was here. She, like him, had fled to this refuge, confident in its desertion at this season by both the families who shared a right to it. She was there—he was there. Why had she fled? The question did not wait to be answered; it sank before the other question. What was he to do? The whole literary soul of the man cried out against either of the obvious courses of action.

"I can go in," he said, "and surprise her, and tell her I love her, and then walk out with dignified propriety, and leave her alone here. That's conventional and dramatic. Or I can sneak off without her knowing I've been here at all, and leave her to spend the night unprotected in this infernal frozen dog-hutch. That's conventional enough, heaven knows! But what's the use of being a reasonable human being with free-will if you can't do anything but the literarily and romantically obvious?"

Here a sudden noise thrilled him. Next moment he drew a long breath of relief. She had but dropped a gridiron. As it crashed and settled down with a rhythmic rattle on the kitchen flags, the thought flowed through him like a river of Paradise. "If she did love me—if I loved her—what an hour and what a moment this would be!"

Meantime she, her hands helpless with cold, was dropping clattering gridirons not five yards from him.

Suppose he went out to the kitchen and suddenly announced himself!

How flat—how obvious!

Suppose he crept quietly away and went to the inn at New Romney!

How desperately flat! How more than obvious!

Suppose he—but the third course refused itself to the desperate clutch of his

drowning imagination, and left him clinging to the bare straw of a question. What should he do?

Suddenly the really knightly and unconventional idea occurred to him, an idea that would save him from the pit of the obvious, yawning on each side.

There was a bicycle shed, where, also, wood was stored and coal, and lumber of all sorts. He would pass the night there, warm in his fur coat, and his determination not to let his conduct be shaped by what people in books would have done. And in the morning—strong with the great renunciation of all the possibilities that this evening's meeting held—he would come and knock at the front door—just like anybody else—and—*qui vivra verra*. At least, he would be watching over her rest—and would be able to protect the house from tramps.

Very gently and cautiously, all in the dark, he pushed his bag behind the sofa, covered the stores box with a liberty cloth from a side table, crept out softly, and softly opened the front door; it opened softly, that is, but it shut with an unmistakable click that stung in his ears as he stood on one foot on the snowy doorstep struggling with the knots of his shoe laces.

The bicycle shed was uncompromisingly dark, and smelt of coal sacks and paraffin. He found a corner—between the coals and the wood—and sat down on the floor.

"Bother the fur coat," was his answer to the doubt whether coal dust and broken twigs were a good down-setting for that triumph of the Bond Street art. There he sat, full of a chastened joy at the thought that he watched over her—that he, sleepless, untiring, was on guard, ready, at an instant's warning, to spring to her aid, should she need protection. The thought was mightily soothing. The shed was cold. The fur coat was warm. In five minutes he was sleeping peacefully as any babe.

When he awoke it was with the light of a big horn lantern in his eyes, and in his ears the snapping of wood.

She was there—stooping beside the heaped faggots, breaking off twigs to fill the lap of her up-gathered blue gown; the shimmery silk of her petticoat gleamed greenly. He was partly hidden by a derelict bicycle and a watering-can.

He hardly dared to draw breath.

Composedly she broke the twigs. Then like a flash she turned towards him.

"Who's there?" she said.

An inspiration came to him—and this, at least, was not flat or obvious. He writhed into the darkness behind a paraffin cask, slipped out of his fur coat, and plunged his hands in the dust of the coal.

"Don't be 'ard on a pore cove, mum," he mumbled, desperately rubbing the coal dust on to his face; "you wouldn't go for to turn a dawg out on a night like this, let alone a pore chap outer work!"

Even as he spoke he admired the courage of the girl. Alone, miles from any other house, she met a tramp in an outhouse as calmly as though he had been a fly in the butter.

"You've no business here, you know," she said briskly. "What did you come for?"

"Shelter, mum—I won't take nothing as don't belong to me—not so much as a lump of coal, mum, not if it was ever so!"

She turned her head. He almost thought she smiled.

"But I can't have tramps sleeping here," she said.

"It's not as if I was a reg'lar tramp," he said, warming to his part as he had often done on the stage in his A.D.C. days. "I'm a respectable working-man, mum, as 'as seen better days."

"Are you hungry?" she said. "I'll give you something to eat before you go if you'll come to the door in five minutes."

He could not refuse—but when she was gone into the house he could bolt. So he said—

"Now may be the blessing! It's starving I am, mum, and on Christmas Eve!"

This time she did smile: it was beyond a doubt. He had always thought her smile charming. She turned at the door, and her glance followed the lantern's rays as they pierced the darkness where he crouched.

The moment he heard the house door shut, he sprang up, and lifted the fur coat gingerly to the wood-block. Flight, instant flight! Yet how could he present himself at New Romney with a fur coat and a face like a collier's? He had drawn

a bucket of water from the well earlier in the day; some would be left; it was close by the back door. He tiptoed over the snow and washed, and washed, and washed. He was drying face and hands with a pocket-handkerchief that seemed strangely small and cold when the door opened suddenly, and there, close by him, was she, silhouetted against the warm glow of fire and candles.

"Come in," she said; "you can't possibly see to wash out there."

Before he knew it her hand was on his arm, and she had drawn him to the warmth and light.

He looked at her—but her eyes were on the fire.

"I'll give you some warm water, and you can wash at the sink," she said, closing the door and taking the kettle from the fire.

He caught sight of his face in the square of looking-glass over the sink tap.

Was it worth while to go on pretending? Yet his face was still very black. And she evidently had not recognised him. Perhaps—surely she would have the good taste to retire while the tramp washed, so that he could take his coat off? Then he could take flight, and the situation would be saved from absolute farce.

But when she had poured the hot water into a bowl she sat down in the Windsor chair by the fire and gazed into the hot coals.

He washed.

He washed till he was quite clean.

He dried face and hands on the rough towel.

He dried them till they were scarlet and shone. But he dared not turn around.

There seemed no way out of this save by the valley of humiliation. Still she sat looking into the fire.

As he washed he saw with half a retroverted eye the round table spread with china and glass and silver.

"As I live—it's set for two!" he told himself. And, in an instant, jealousy answered, once and for all, the questions he had been asking himself since August.

"Aren't you clean yet?" she said at last.

How could he speak?

"Aren't you clean yet?" she repeated, and called him by his name. He turned then quickly enough. She was leaning back in the chair laughing at him.

"How did you know me?" he asked angrily.

"Your tramp-voice might have deceived me," she said, "you did do it most awfully well! But, you see, I'd been looking at you for ages before you woke."

"Then good night," said he.

"Good night!" said she; "but it's not seven yet!"

"You're expecting someone," he said, pointing dramatically to the table.

"Oh, *that!*" she said; "yes—that was for—for the poor man as had seen better days! There's nothing but eggs—but I couldn't turn a dog from my door on such a night—till I'd fed it!"

"Do you really mean—?"

"Why not?"

"It's glorious!"

"It's a picnic."

"But?" said he.

"Oh—well! Go if you like!" said she.

It was not only eggs: it was all sorts of things from that stores box. They ate, and they talked. He told her that he had been bored in town and had sought relief in solitude. That, she told him, was her case also. He told her how he had heard her come in, and how he had hated to take either the obvious course of following her to the kitchen, saying "How do you do?" and retiring to New Romney; or the still more obvious course of sneaking away without asking her how she did. And he told her how he had decided to keep watch over her from the bicycle shed. And how the coal-black inspiration had come to him. And she laughed.

"That was much more literary than anything else you could have thought of,"

said she; "it was exactly like a book. And oh—you've no idea how funny you looked."

They both laughed, and there was a silence.

"Do you know," he said, "I can hardly believe that this is the first meal we've ever had alone together? It seems as though—"

"It *is* funny," she said, smiling hurriedly at him.

He did not smile. He said: "I want you to tell me why you were so angel-good—why did you let me stay? Why did you lay the pretty table for two?"

"Because we've never been in the same mood at the same time," she said desperately; "and somehow I thought we should be this evening."

"What mood?" he asked inexorably.

"Why—jolly—cheerful," she said, with the slightest possible hesitation.

"I see."

There was another silence. Then she said in a voice that fluttered a little—

"My old governess, Miss Pettingill—you remember old Pet? Well, she's coming by the train that gets in at three. I wired to her from town. She ought to be here by now—"

"Ought she?" he cried, pushing back his chair and coming towards her—"ought she? Then, by heaven! before she comes I'm going to tell you something—"

"No, don't!" she cried. "You'll spoil everything. Go and sit down again. You shall! I insist! Let *me* tell *you*! I always swore I would some day!"

"Why?" said he, and sat down.

"Because I knew *you'd* never make up your mind to tell *me*—"

"To tell you what?"

"*Anything*—for fear you should have to say it in the same way someone else had said it before!"

"Said what?"

"Anything! Sit still! Now *I'm* going to tell *you*."

She came slowly round the table and knelt on one knee beside him, her elbows on the arm of his chair.

"You've never had the courage to make up your mind to anything," she began.

"Is that what you were going to tell me?" he asked, and looked in her eyes till she dropped their lids.

"No—yes—no! I haven't anything to tell you really. Good night."

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

"There isn't anything to tell," she said.

"Then I'll tell you," said he.

She started up, and the little brass knocker's urgent summons resounded through the bungalow.

"Here she is!" she cried.

He also sprang to his feet.

"And we haven't told each other anything!" he said.

"Haven't we? Ah, no—don't! Let me go! There—she's knocking again. You must let me go!"

He let her slip through his arms.

At the door she paused to flash a soft, queer smile at him.

"It *was* I who told you, after all!" she said. "Aren't you glad? Because that wasn't a bit literary."

"You didn't. I told you," he retorted.

"Not you!" she said scornfully. "That would have been too obvious."

THE LIE ABSOLUTE

THE tradesmen's books, orderly spread, lay on the rose-wood writing-table, each adorned by its own just pile of gold and silver coin. The books at the White House were paid weekly, and paid in cash. It had always been so. The brown holland blinds were lowered half-way. The lace curtains almost met across the windows. Thus, while, without, July blazed on lawns and paths and borders, in this room a cool twilight reigned. A leisured quiet, an ordered ease, reigned there too, as they had done for every day of Dorothea's thirty-five years. The White House was one of those to which no change comes. None but Death, and Death, however he may have wrung the heart or stunted the soul of the living, had been powerless to change outward seemings. Dorothea had worn a black dress for a while, and she best knew what tears she had wept and for what long months the light of life had gone out of all things. But the tears had not blinded her eyes to the need of a mirror-polish on the old mahogany furniture, and all through those months there had been, at least, the light of duty. The house must be kept as her dead mother had kept it. The three prim maids and the gardener had been "in the family" since Dorothea was a girl of twenty—a girl with hopes and dreams and fond imaginings that, spreading bright wings, wandered over a world far other than this dainty, delicate, self-improving, coldly charitable, unchanging existence. Well, the dreams and the hopes and the fond imaginings had come home to roost. He who had set them flying had gone away: he had gone to see the world. He had not come back. He was seeing it still; and all that was left of a girl's first romance was in certain neat packets of foreign letters in the drawer of the rose-wood table, and in the disciplined soul of the woman who sat before it "doing the books." Monday was the day for this. Every day had its special duties: every duty its special hour. While the mother had stayed there had been love to give life to this life that was hardly life at all. Now the mother was gone it sometimes seemed to Dorothea that she had not lived for these fifteen years—and that even the life before had been less life than a dream of it. She sighed.

"I'm old," she said, "and I'm growing silly."

She put her pen neatly in the inkstand tray: it was an old silver pen, and an old inkstand of Sèvres porcelain. Then she went out into the garden by the French window, muffled in jasmine, and found herself face to face with a stranger, a straight well-set-up man of forty or thereabouts, with iron-grey hair and a white moustache. Before his hand had time to reach the Panama hat she knew him, and her heart leaped up and sank sick and trembling. But she said:—

"To whom have I the pleasure—?"

The man caught her hands.

"Why, Dolly," he said, "don't you know me? I should have known you anywhere."

A rose-flush deepened on her face.

"It can't be Robert?"

"Can't it? And how are you, Dolly? Everything's just the same—By Jove! the very same heliotropes and pansies in the very same border—and the jasmine and the sundial and everything."

"They tell me the trees have grown," she said. "I like to think it's all the same. Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? Come in."

She led him through the hall with the barometer and the silver-faced clock and the cases of stuffed birds.

"I don't know. I wanted to surprise you—and, by George! I've surprised myself. It's beautiful. It's all just as it used to be, Dolly."

The tears came into her eyes. No one had called her Dolly since the mother went, whose going had made everything, for ever, other than it used to be.

"I'll tell them you're staying for lunch."

She got away on that, and stood a moment in the hall, before the stuffed fox with the duck in its mouth, to catch strongly at her lost composure.

If anyone had had the right to ask the reason of her agitation, and had asked it, Dorothea would have said that the sudden happening of anything was enough to upset one in whose life nothing ever happened. But no one had the right.

She went into the kitchen to give the necessary orders.

"Not the mince," she said; "or, stay. Yes, that would do, too. You must cook the fowl that was for to-night's dinner—and Jane can go down to the village for something else for to-night. And salad and raspberries. And I will put out some wine. My cousin, Mr. Courtenay, has come home from India. He will lunch with me."

"Master Bob," said the cook, as the kitchen door closed, "well, if I ever did! He's a married man by this time, with young folkses growing up around him, I

shouldn't wonder. He never did look twice the same side of the road where she was. Poor Miss Dolly!"

Most of us are mercifully ignorant of the sympathy that surrounds us.

"It's wonderful," he said, when she rejoined him in the drawing-room. "I feel like the Prodigal Son. When I think of the drawing-rooms I've seen. The gim-crack trumpery, the curtains and the pictures and the furniture constantly shifted, the silly chatter, the obvious curios, the commonplace rarities, the inartistic art, and the brainless empty chatter, spiteful as often as not, and all the time *this* has been going on beautifully, quietly, perfectly. Dolly, you're a lucky girl!"

To her face the word brought a flush that almost justified it.

They talked: and he told her how all these long years he had wearied for the sight of English fields, and gardens, of an English home like this—till he almost believed that he was speaking the truth.

He looked at Dorothea with long, restful hands quietly folded, as she talked in the darkened drawing-room, at Dorothea with busy, skilful hands among the old silver and the old glass and the old painted china at lunch. He listened through the drowsy afternoon to Dorothea's gentle, high-bred, low-toned voice, to the music of her soft, rare laugh, as they sat in the wicker-chairs under the weeping ash on the lawn.

And he thought of other women—a crowd of them, with high, shrill tones and constant foolish cackle of meaningless laughter; of the atmosphere of paint, powder, furbelows, flirtation, empty gaiety, feverish flippancy. He thought, too, of women, two and three, whose faces stood out from the crowd and yet were of it. And he looked at Dorothea's delicate worn face and her honest eyes with the faint lines round them.

As he went through the hush of the evening to his rooms at the "Spotted Dog" the thought of Dorothea, of her house, her garden, her peaceful ordered life stirred him to a passion of appreciation. Out of the waste and desert of his own life, with its memories of the far country and the husks and the swine, he seemed to be looking through a window at the peaceful life—as a hungry, lonely tramp may limp to a lamp-lit window, and peering in, see father and mother and round-faced children, and the table spread whitely, and the good sure food that to these people is a calm certainty, like breathing or sleeping, not a joyous accident, or one of the great things that man was taught to pray for. The tramp turns away

with a curse or a groan, according to his nature, and goes on his way cursing or groaning, or, if the pinch be fierce, he tries the back door or the unguarded window. With Robert the pang of longing was keen, and he was minded to try any door—not to beg for the broken meats of cousinly kindness, but to enter as master into that "better place" wherein Dorothea had found so little of Paradise.

It was no matter of worldly gain. The Prodigal had not wasted his material substance on the cheap husks that cost so dear. He had money enough and to spare: it was in peace and the dignity of life that he now found himself to be bankrupt.

As for Dorothea, when she brushed her long pale hair that night she found that her hands were not so steady as usual, and in the morning she was quite shocked to note that she had laid her hair-pins on the left-hand side of the pin-cushion instead of on the right, a thing she had not done for years.

It was at the end of a week, a week of long sunny days and dewy dark evenings spent in the atmosphere that had enslaved him. Dinner was over. Robert had smoked his cigar among the garden's lengthening shadows. Now he and Dorothea were at the window watching the light of life die beautifully on the changing face of the sky.

They had talked as this week had taught them to talk—with the intimacy of old friends and the mutual interest of new unexplored acquaintances. This is the talk that does not weary—the talk that can only be kept alive by the daring of revelation, and the stronger courage of unconquerable reserve.

Now there came a silence—with it seemed to come the moment. Robert spoke—

"Dorothea," he said, and her mind pricked its ears suspiciously because he had not called her Dolly.

"Well?"

"I wonder if you understand what these days have been to me? I was so tired of the world and its follies—this is like some calm haven after a stormy sea."

The words seemed strangely familiar. He had a grating sense of talking like a book, and something within him sneered at the scruple, and said that Dolly would not notice it.

But she said: "I'm sure I've read something like that in a school reading book, but it's very touching, of course."

"Oh—if you're going to mock my holiest sentiments," he said lightly—and withdrew from the attack.

The moment seemed to flutter near again when she said good night to him in the porch where the violet clematis swung against his head as he stood. This time his opening was better inspired.

"Dolly, dear," he said, "how am I ever to go away?"

Her heart leaped against her side, for his tone was tender. But so may a cousin's tone be—even a second cousin's, and when one is thirty-five she has little to fear from the pitying tenderness of her relations.

"I am so glad you have liked being here," she said sedately. "You must come again some time."

"I don't want to go away at all," he said. "Dolly, won't you let me stay—won't you marry me?"

Almost as he took her hand she snatched it from him.

"You must be mad!" she said. "Why on earth should you want to marry me?" Also she said: "I am old and plain, and you don't love me." But she said it to herself.

"I do want it," he said, "and I want it more than I want anything."

His tone was convincing.

"But why? but why?"

An impulse of truth-telling came to Robert.

"Because it's all so beautiful," he said with straightforward enthusiasm. "All your lovely quiet life—and the house, and these old gardens, and the dainty, delicate, firm way you have of managing everything—the whole thing's my ideal. It's perfect—I can't bear any other life."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," she said with bitter decision. "I am not going to marry a man just because he admires my house and garden, and is good enough to appreciate my methods of household management. Good night."

She had shaken his hand coolly and shut the front door from within before he could find a word. He found one as the latch clicked.

"Fool!" he said to himself, and stamped his foot.

Dorothea ran up the stairs two at a time to say the same word to herself in the stillness of her bedroom.

"Fool—fool—fool!" she said. "Why couldn't I have said 'No' quietly? Why did I let him see I was angry? Why should I be angry? It's better to be wanted because you're a good manager than not to be wanted at all. At least, I suppose it is. No—it *isn't!* it isn't! it isn't! And nothing's any use now. It's all gone. If he'd wanted to marry me when I was young and pretty I could have made him love me. And I *was* pretty—I know I was—I can remember it perfectly well!"

Her quiet years had taken from her no least little touch of girlish sentiment. The longing to be loved was as keen in her as it had been at twenty. She cried herself to sleep, and had a headache the next day. Also her eyes looked smaller than usual and her nose was pink. She went and sat in the black shade of a yew, and trusted that in that deep shadow her eyes and nose would not make Robert feel glad that she had said "No." She wished him to be sorry. She had put on the prettiest gown she had, in the hope that he *would* be sorry; then she was ashamed of the impulse; also its pale clear greenness seemed to intensify the pinkness of her nose. So she went back to the trailing grey gown. Her wearing of her best Honiton lace collar seemed pardonable. He would never notice it—or know that real lace is more becoming than anything else. She waited for him in the deep shadow, and it was all the morning that she waited. For he knew the value of suspense, and he had not the generosity that disdains the use of the obvious weapon. He was right so far, that before he came she had had time to wonder whether it was her life's one chance of happiness that she had thrown away. But he drove the knife home too far, for when at last she heard the click of the gate and saw the gleam of flannels through the shrubbery, the anxious questioning, "Will he come?" "Have I offended him beyond recall?" changed at one heart-beat to an almost perfect understanding of his reasons for delay. She greeted him coldly. That he expected. But he saw—or believed he saw—the relief under the coldness—and he brought up his forces for the attack.

"Dear," he said—almost at once—"forgive me for last night. It was true, and if I had expressed it better you'd have understood. It isn't just the house and garden, and the perfect life. It's *you!* Don't you understand what it is to come

back from the world to all this, and you—you—you—the very centre of the star?"

"It's all very well," she said, "but that wasn't what you said last night."

"It's what I meant," said he. "Dear, don't you see how much I want you?"

"But—I'm old—and plain, and—"

She looked at him with eyes still heavy from last night's tears, and he experienced an unexpected impulse of genuine tenderness.

"My dear," he said, "when I first remember your mother she was about your age. I used to think she was the most beautiful person in the world. She seemed to shed happiness and peace around her—like—like a lamp sheds light. And you are just like her. Ah—don't send me away."

"Thank you," she said, struggling wildly with the cross currents of emotion set up by his words. "Thank you. I have not lived single all these years to be married at last because I happen to be like my mother."

The words seemed a treason to the dead, and the tears filled Dorothea's eyes.

He saw them; he perceived that they ran in worn channels, and the impulse of tenderness grew.

Till this moment he had spoken only the truth. His eyes took in the sunny lawn beyond the yew shadow, the still house: the whirl of the lawn-mower was music at once pastoral and patriotic. He heard the break in her voice; he saw the girlish grace of her thin shape, the pathetic charm of her wistful mouth. And he lied with a good heart.

"My dear," he said, with a tremble in his voice that sounded like passion, "my dear—it's not for that—I love you, Dolly—I think I must have loved you all my life!"

And at the light that leaped into her eyes he suddenly felt that this lie was nearer truth than he had known.

"I love you, dear—I love you," he repeated, and the words were oddly pleasant to say. "Won't you love me a little, too?"

She covered her face with her hands. She could no more have doubted him

than she could have doubted the God to whom she had prayed night and morning for all these lonely years.

"Love you a little?" she said softly. "Ah! Robert, don't you know that I've loved you all my life?"

So a lie won what truth could not gain. And the odd thing is that the lie has now grown quite true, and he really believes that he has always loved her, just as he certainly loves her now. For some lies come true in the telling. But most of them do not, and it is not wise to try experiments.

THE GIRL WITH THE GUITAR

THE last strains of the ill-treated, ill-fated "Intermezzo" had died away, and after them had died away also the rumbling of the wheels of the murderous barrel-organ that had so gaily executed that, along with the nine other tunes of its repertory, to the admiration of the housemaid at the window of the house opposite, and the crowing delight of the two babies next door.

The young man drew a deep breath of relief, and lighted the wax candles in the solid silver candlesticks on his writing-table, for now the late summer dusk was falling, and that organ, please Heaven, made full the measure of the day's appointed torture. There had been five organs since dinner—and seven in the afternoon—one and all urgently thumping their heavy melodies into his brain, to the confusion of the thoughts that waited there, eager to marshal themselves, orderly and firm, into the phalanx of an article on "The Decadence of Criticism."

He filled his pipe, drew paper towards him, dipped his pen, and wrote his title on the blank page. The silence came round him, soothing as a beloved presence, the scent of the may bushes in the suburban gardens stole in pleasantly through the open windows. After all, it was a "quiet neighbourhood" as the advertisement had said—at any rate, in the evening: and in the evening a man's best efforts—

Thrum, tum, tum—Thrum, tum, tum came the defiant strumming of a guitar close to the window. He sprang to his feet—this was, indeed, too much! But before he could draw back the curtains and express himself to the intruder, the humming of the guitar was dominated by the first words of a song—

"Oh piccerella del vieni al'mare
Nella barchetta veletto di fiore
La bianca prora somiglia al'altare
Tutte le stelle favellan d'amor,"

and so forth. The performer was evidently singing "under her voice," but the effect was charming. He stood with his hand on the curtain, listening—and with a pleasure that astonished him. The song came to an end with a chord in which all the strings twanged their best. Then there was silence—then a sigh, and the sound of light moving feet on the gravel. He threw back the curtain and leaned

out of the window.

"Here!" he called to the figure that moved slowly towards the gate. She turned quickly, and came back two steps. She wore the dress of a Contadina, a very smart dress indeed, and her hands looked small and white.

"Won't you sing again?" he asked.

She hesitated, then struck a chord or two and began another of those little tuneful Italian songs, all stars and flowers and hearts of gold. And again he listened with a quiet pleasure.

"I should like to hear her voice at its full strength," he thought—and now it was time to give the vagrant a few coppers, and, shutting the window, to leave her to go on to the next front garden.

Never had any act seemed so impossible. He had watched her through the singing of this last song, and he had grown aware of the beauty of her face's oval—of the fine poise of her head—and of the grace of hands and arms.

"Aren't you tired?" he said. "Wouldn't you like to sit down and rest? There is a seat in the garden at the side of the house."

Again she hesitated. Then she turned towards the quarter indicated and disappeared round the laurel bushes.

He was alone in the house—his people and the servants were in the country; the woman who came to "do for him" had left for the night. He went into the dining-room, dark with mahogany and damask, found wine and cake in the sideboard cupboard, put them on a tray, and took them out through the garden door and round to the corner where, almost sheltered by laburnums and hawthorns from the view of the people next door, the singer and her guitar rested on the iron seat.

"I have brought you some wine—will you have it?"

Again that strange hesitation—then quite suddenly the girl put her hands up to her face and began to cry.

"Here—I say, you know—don't—" he said. "Oh, Lord! This is awful. I hardly know a word of Italian, and apparently she has no English. Here, signorina, ecco, prendi—vino—gatto—No, gatto's a cat. I was thinking of French. Oh, Lord!"

The Contadina had pulled out a very small handkerchief, and was drying her eyes with it. She rose.

"No—don't go," he said eagerly. "I can see you are tired out. Sai fatiguéé non è vero? Io non parlate Italiano, sed vino habet, et cake ante vous partez."

She looked at him and spoke for the first time.

"It serves me right," she said in excellent, yet unfamiliar, English. "I don't understand a single word you say! I might have known I couldn't do it, though it's just what girls in books would do. It would have turned out all right with them. Let me go—thank you very much. I am sure you meant to be kind." And then she began to cry again.

"Look here," he said, "this is all nonsense, you know. You are tired out—and there's something wrong. What is it? Do drink this, and then tell me. Perhaps I can help you."

She drank obediently. Then she said: "I have not had anything to eat since last night—"

He hurriedly cut cake and pressed it upon her. He had no time to think, but he was aware that this was the most exciting adventure that had ever happened to him.

"It's no use—and it all sounds so silly."

"Ah—but do tell me!" His voice was kinder than he meant it to be. Her eyes filled again with tears.

"You don't know how horrid everyone has been. Oh—I never knew before what devils people are to you when you're poor—"

"Is it only that you're poor? Why, that's nothing. I'm poor, too."

She laughed. "I'm *not* poor—not really."

"What is it, then? You've quarrelled with your friends, and—Ah, tell me—and let me try to help you."

"You *are* kind—but—Well, then—it's like this. My father brought me to England from the States a month ago: he's 'made his pile': it was in pork, and I always wish he'd made it of something else, even canned fruit would be better,

but that doesn't matter—We didn't know anyone here, of course, and directly we got here, he was wired for—business—and he had to go home again."

"But surely he didn't leave you without money."

Her little foot tapped the gravel impatiently.

"I'm coming to that," she said. "Of course he didn't. He told me to stay on at the hotel, and I did—and then one night when I was at the theatre my maid—a horrid French thing we got in Paris—packed up all my trunks and took all my money, and paid the bill, and went. The hotel folks let her go—I can't think how people can be so silly. But they wouldn't let me stay, and I wired to papa—and there was no answer, and I don't know whatever's the matter with him. I know it all sounds as if I was making it up as I go along—"

She stopped short, and looked at him through the dusk. He did not speak, but whatever she saw in his face it satisfied her. She said again: "You *are* kind."

"Go on," he said, "tell me all about it."

"Well, then, I went into lodgings; that wicked woman had left me one street suit—and to-day they turned me out because my money was all gone. I had a little money in my purse—and this dress had been ordered for a fancy ball—it *is* smart, isn't it?—and it came after that wretch had gone—and the guitar, too—and I thought I could make a little money. I really *can* sing, though you mightn't think it. And I've been at it since five o'clock—and I've only got one shilling and seven pence. And no one but you has ever even thought of thinking whether I was tired or hungry or anything—and papa always took such care of me. I feel as if I had been beaten."

"Let me think," he said. "Oh—how glad I am that you happened to come this way."

He reflected a moment. Then he said—

"I shall lock up all the doors and windows in the house—and then I shall give you my latch-key, and you can let yourself in and stay the night here—there is no one in the house. I will catch the night train, and bring my mother up tomorrow. Then we will see what can be done."

The only excuse for this rash young man is to be found in the fact that while he was feeding his strange guest with cake and wine she was feeding, with her

beauty, the first fire of his first love. Love at first sight is all nonsense, we know—we who have come to forty year—but at twenty-one one does not somehow recognise it for the nonsense it is.

"But don't you know anyone in London?" he asked in a sensible postscript.

It was not yet so dark but that he could see the crimson flush on her face.

"Not *know*," she said. "Papa wouldn't like me to spoil my chances of knowing the right people with any foolishness like this. There's no one I could *let* know. You see, papa's so very rich, and at home they expect me to—to get acquainted with dukes and things—and—"

She stopped.

"American heiresses are expected to marry English dukes," he said, with a distinct physical pain at his heart.

"It wasn't I who said that," said the girl, smiling; "but that's so, anyhow." And then she sighed.

"So it's your destiny to marry a duke, is it?" the young man spoke slowly. "All the same," he added irrelevantly, "you shall have the latch-key."

"You *are* kind," she said for the third time, and reached her hand out to him. He did not kiss it then, only took it in his, and felt how small and cold it was. Then it was taken away.

He says that he only talked to her for half an hour—but the neighbours, from whose eyes suburban hawthorns and laburnums are powerless to conceal the least of our actions, declare that he sat with the guitar player on the iron seat till well after midnight; further, that when they parted he kissed her hand, and that she then put her hands on his shoulders—"quite shamelessly, you know"—and kissed him lightly on both cheeks. It is known that he passed the night prowling in our suburban lanes, and caught the 6.25 train in the morning to the place where his people were staying.

The lady and the guitar certainly passed the night at Hill View Villa, but when his mother, very angry and very frightened, came up with him at about noon, the house looked just as usual, and no one was there but the charwoman.

"An adventuress! I told you so!" said his mother at once—and the young man

sat down at his study table and looked at the title of his article on "The Decadence of Criticism." It was surely a very long time ago that he had written that. And he sat there thinking, till his mother's voice roused him.

"The silver is all right, thank goodness," she said, "but your banjo girl has taken a pair of your sister's silk stockings, and those new shoes of hers with the silver buckles—and she's left *these*."

She held out a pair of little patent leather shoes, very worn and dusty—the slender silken web of a black stocking, brown with dust, hung from her hand. He answered nothing. She spent the rest of that day in searching the house for further losses, but all things were in their place, except the silver-handled button-hook—and that, as even his sister owned, had been missing for months.

Yet his family would never leave him to keep house alone again: they said he is not to be trusted. And perhaps they are right. The half dozen pairs of embroidered silk stockings and the dainty French silver-buckled shoes, which arrived a month later addressed to Miss ——, Hill View Villa, only confirmed their distrust. *He* must have had them sent—that tambourine girl could never have afforded these—why, they were pure silk—and the quality! It was plain that his castanet girl—his mother and sister took a pleasure in crediting her daily with some fresh and unpleasing instrument—could have had neither taste, money, nor honesty to such a point as this.

As for the young man, he bore it all very meekly, only he was glad when his essays on the decadence of things in general led to a berth on the staff of a big daily, and made it possible for him to take rooms in town—because he had grown weary of living with his family, and of hearing so constantly that She played the bones and the big drum and the concertina, and that She was a twopenny adventuress who stole his sister's shoes and stockings. He prefers to sit in his quiet room in the Temple, and to remember that she played the guitar and sang sweetly—that she had a mouth like a tired child's mouth, that her eyes were like stars, and that she kissed him—on both cheeks—and that he kissed—her hand only—as the scandalised suburb knows.

THE MAN WITH THE BOOTS

A YOUNG man with a little genius, a gift of literary expression, and a distaste not only for dissipation, but for the high-toned social functions of his suburban acquaintances, may go far—once he has chosen journalism for a profession, and has realised that to success in any profession a heart-whole service is necessary. A certain young man, having been kissed in his own garden by a girl with a guitar, ceased to care for evening parties, and devoted himself steadily to work. His relaxations were rowing down the Thames among the shipping, and thinking of the girl. In two years he was sent to Paris by the Thunderer—to ferret out information about a certain financial naughtiness which threatened a trusting public in general, and, in particular, a little band of blameless English shareholders.

The details of the scheme are impertinent to the present narrative.

The young man went to Paris and began to enjoy himself.

He had good introductions. He had once done a similar piece of business before—but then luck aided him. As I said, he enjoyed himself, but he did not see his way to accomplishing his mission. But his luck stood by him, as you will see, in a very remarkable manner. At a masked ball he met a very charming Corsican lady. She was dressed as a nun, but the eyes that sparkled through her mask might have taxed the resources of the most competent abbess. She spoke very agreeable English, and she was very kind to the young man, indicated the celebrities—she seemed to know everyone—whom she recognised quite easily in their carnival disguises, and at last she did him the kindness to point out a stout cardinal, and named the name of the very Jew who was pulling the strings of the very business which had brought the young man to Paris.

The young man's lucky star shone full on him, and dazzled him to a seeming indiscretion.

"He looks rather a beast," he said.

The nun clapped her hands.

"Oh—he *is!*" she said. "If you knew all that I could tell you about him!"

It was with the distinct idea of knowing all that the lady could tell about the Jew that our hero devoted himself to her throughout that evening, and promised to call on her the next day. He made himself very amiable indeed, and if you think that he should not have done this, I can only say that I am sorry, but facts are facts.

When he put her into her carriage—a very pretty little brougham—he kissed her hand. He did not do this because he desired to do it, as in the case of the Girl with the Guitar, but purely as a matter of business. If you blame him here I can only say "*à la guerre comme à la guerre—*"

Next day he called on her. She received him in a charming yellow silk boudoir and gave him tea and sweets. Unmasked, the lady was seen to be of uncommon beauty. He did not make love to her—but he was very nice, and she asked him to come again.

It was at their third interview that his star shone again, and again dazzled him to indiscreetness. He told the beautiful lady exactly why he wanted to know all that she could tell him about the Jew financier. The beautiful lady clapped her hands till all her gold bangles rattled musically, and said—

"But I will tell you all—everything! I felt that you wished to know—but I thought ... however ... are you sure it will all be in your paper?"

"But yes, Madame!" said he.

Then she folded her hands on the greeny satin lap of her tea-gown, and told him many things. And as she spoke he pieced things together, and was aware that she spoke the truth.

When she had finished speaking, his mission was almost accomplished. His luck had done all this for him. The lady promised even documents and evidence. Then he thanked her, and she said—

"No thanks, please. I suppose this will ruin him?"

"I'm afraid it will," said he.

She gave a little sigh of contentment.

"But why—?" he asked.

"I don't mind, somehow, telling *you* anything," she said, and indeed as it seemed with some truth. "He—he did me the honour to admire me—and now he has behaved like the pig he is."

"And so you have betrayed him—told me the things he told you when he loved you?"

She snapped her fingers, and the opals and rubies of her rings shone like fire.

"Love!" she said scornfully.

Then he began to be a little ashamed and sorry for his part in this adventure, and he said so.

"Ah—don't be sorry," she said softly. "I *wanted* to betray him. I was simply longing to do it—only I couldn't think of the right person to betray him to! But you are the right person, Monsieur. I am indeed fortunate!"

A little shiver ran through him. But he had gone too far to retreat.

"And the documents, Madame?"

"I will give you them to-morrow. There is a ball at the American Embassy. I can get you a card."

"I have one." He had indeed made it his first business to get one—was not the Girl with the Guitar an American, and could he dare to waste the least light chance of seeing her again?

"Well—be there at twelve, and you shall have everything. But," she looked sidelong at him, "will Monsieur be very kind—very attentive—in short, devote himself to me—for this one evening? *He* will be there."

He murmured something banal about the devotion of a lifetime, and went away to his lodging in a remote suburb, which he had chosen because he loved boating.

The next night at twelve saw him lounging, a gloomy figure, on a seat in an ante-room at the Embassy. He knew that the Lady was within, yet he could not go to her. He sat there despairingly, trying to hope that even now something might happen to save him. Yet, as it seemed, nothing short of a miracle could. But his star shone, and the miracle happened. For, as he sat, a radiant vision, all white lace and diamonds, detached itself from the arm of a grey-bearded

gentleman, and floated towards him.

"It is you!" said the darling vision, and the next moment his hands—both hands—were warmly clasped by little white-gloved ones, and he was standing looking into the eyes of the Girl.

"I knew I should see you somewhere—this continent *is* so tiny," she said. "Come right along and be introduced to Papa—that's him over there."

"I—I can't," he answered, in an agony. "I—my pocket's been picked—"

"Do tell!" said the Girl, laughing; "but Papa doesn't want tipping—he's got all he wants—come right along."

"I can't," he said, hoarse with the misery of the degrading confession; "it wasn't my money—it was my *shoes*. I came up in boots, brown boots; distant suburb; train; my shoes were in my overcoat pocket—I meant to change in the cab. I must have dropped them or they were taken out. And here I am in these things." He looked down at his bright brown boots. "And all the shops are shut—and my whole future depends on my getting into that room within the next half-hour. But never mind! Why should *you* bother?—Besides, what does it matter? I've seen you again. You'll speak to me as you come back? I'll wait all night for a word."

"Don't be so silly," said the Girl; but she smiled very prettily, and her dear eyes sparkled. "If it's *really* important, I'll fix it for you! But why does your future depend on it, and all that?"

"I have to meet a lady," said the wretched young man.

"The one you were with at the masked ball? The nun? Yes—I made Papa take me. *Is* it that one?" Her tone was imperious, but it was anxious too.

He looked imploringly at her. "Yes, but—"

"You shall have the shoes, all the same," she interrupted, and turned away before he could add a word.

A moment later the grey-bearded gentleman was bowing to him.

"My girl tells me you're in a corner for want of shoes, Sir. Mine are at your service—we seem about of a size—we can change behind that pillar."

"But," stammered the young man, "it's too much—I can't—"

"It's nothing at all, Sir," said the man with the grey beard warmly; "nothing compared to the way you stood by my girl! Shake! John B. Warner don't forget."

"I can't thank you," said the other, when they had shaken hands. "If you will—just for a short time! I'll be back in half an hour—"

He was back in two minutes. The first face he saw when he had made his duty bows was the face of the Beautiful Lady. She was radiant: and beside her stood her Jew, also radiant. *They had made it up.* And what is more—though he never knew it—they had made it up in that half-hour of delay caused by the Boots. The Lady passed our hero without a word or even a glance to acknowledge acquaintanceship, and he saw that the game was absolutely up. He swore under his breath. But the next moment he laughed to himself with a free heart. After all—for any documents, any evidence, for any success in any walk of life, how could he have borne to devote himself, as he had promised to do, to that Corsican lady, while the Girl, *the Girl*, was in the room? And he perceived now that he should not even use the information he already had. It did not seem fitting that one to whom the Girl stooped to speak, for ever so brief a moment, should play the part of a spy—in however good a cause.

"Back already?" said the old gentleman.

"Thank you—my business is completed."

The young man resumed his brown boots.

"Now, Papa," said the Girl, "just go right along and do your devoirs in there—and I'll stay and talk to *him*—"

The father went obediently.

"Have you quarrelled with her, then?" asked the Girl, her eyes on the diamond buckles of her satin shoes.

He told her everything—or nearly.

"Well," she said decisively, "I'm glad you're out of it, anyway. Don't worry about it. It's a nasty trade. Papa'll find you a berth. Come out to the States and edit one of his papers!"

"You told me he was a millionaire! I suppose everything went all right? He

didn't lose his money or anything?" His tone was wistful.

"Not he! You don't know Papa!" said the Girl; "but, say, you're not going to be too proud to be acquainted with a self-made man?"

He didn't answer.

"Say," said she again, "I don't take so much stock in dukes as I used to." She laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't make a fool of me," said the young man, speaking very low.

"I won't,"—her voice was a caress,—"but Papa shall make Something of you. You don't know Papa! He can make men's fortunes as easily as other folks make men's shoes. And he always does what I tell him. Aren't you glad to see me again? And don't you remember—?" said she, looking at him so kindly that he lost his head and—

"Ah! haven't you forgotten?" said he.

That is about all there is of the story. He is now a Something—and he has married the Girl. If you think that a young man of comparatively small income should not marry the girl he loves because her father happens to have made money in pork, I can only remind you that your opinion is not shared by the bulk of our English aristocracy. And they don't even bother about the love, as often as not.

THE SECOND BEST

THE letter was brief and abrupt.

"I am in London. I have just come back from Jamaica. Will you come and see me? I can be in at any time you appoint."

There was no signature, but he knew the handwriting well enough. The letter came to him by the morning post, sandwiched between his tailor's bill and a catalogue of Rare and Choice Editions.

He read it twice. Then he got up from the breakfast-table, unlocked a drawer, and took out a packet of letters and a photograph.

"I ought to have burned them long ago," he said; "I'll burn them now." He did burn them but first he read them through, and as he read them he sighed, more than once. They were passionate, pretty letters,—the phrases simply turned, the endearments delicately chosen. They breathed of love and constancy and faith, a faith that should move mountains, a love that should shine like gold in the furnace of adversity, a constancy that death itself should be powerless to shake. And he sighed. No later love had come to draw with soft lips the poison from this old wound. She had married Benoliel, the West Indian Jew. It is a far cry from Jamaica to London, but some whispers had reached her jilted lover. The kindest of them said that Benoliel neglected his wife, the harshest, that he beat her.

He looked at the photograph. It was two years since he had seen the living woman. Yet still, when he shut his eyes, he could see the delicate tints, the coral, and rose, and pearl, and gold that went to the making up of her. He could always see these. And now he should see the reality. Would the two years have dulled that bright hair, withered at all that flower-face? For he never doubted that he must go to her.

He was a lawyer; perhaps she wanted that sort of help from him, wanted to know how to rid herself of the bitter bad bargain that she had made in marrying the Jew. Whatever he could do he would, of course, but—

He went out at once and sent a telegram to her.

"Four to-day."

And at four o'clock he found himself on the doorstep of a house in Eaton Square. He hated the wealthy look of the house, the footman who opened the

door, and the thick carpets of the stairs up which he was led. He hated the soft luxury of the room in which he was left to wait for her. Everything spoke, decorously and without shouting, but with unmistakable distinctness, of money, Benoliel's money: money that had been able to buy all these beautiful things, and, as one of them, to buy her.

She came in quietly. Long simple folds of grey trailed after her: she wore no ornament of any kind. Her fingers were ringless, every one. He saw all this, but before he saw anything else he saw that the two years had taken nothing from her charm, had indeed but added a wistful patient look that made her seem more a child than when he had last seen her.

The meaningless contact of their hands was over, and still neither had spoken. She was looking at him questioningly. The silence appeared silly; there was, and there could be, no emotion to justify, to transfigure it. He spoke.

"How do you do?" he said.

She drew a deep breath, and lifted her eyebrows slightly.

"Won't you sit down?" she said; "you are looking just like you used to." She had the tiniest lisp; once it had used to charm him.

"You, too, are quite your old self," he said. Then there was a pause.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she said.

"It was you who sent for me," said he.

"Yes."

"Why did you?"

"I wanted to see you." She opened her pretty child-eyes at him, and he noted, only to bitterly resent, the appeal in them. He remembered that old appealing look too well.

"No, Madam," he said inwardly, "not again! You can't whistle the dog to heel at your will and pleasure. I was a fool once, but I'm not fool enough to play the fool with Benoliel's wife."

Aloud he said, smiling—

"I suppose you did, or you would not have written. And now what can I do

for you?"

She leaned forward to look at him.

"Then you really have forgotten? You didn't grieve for me long! You used to say you would never leave off loving me as long as you lived."

"My dear Mrs. Benoliel," he said, "if I ever said anything so thoughtless as that, I certainly *have* forgotten it."

"Very well," she said; "then go!"

This straight hitting embarrassed him mortally.

"But," he said, "I've not forgotten that you and I were once friends for a little while, and I do beg you to consider me as a friend. Let me help you. You must have some need of a friend's services, or you would not have sent for me. I assure you I am entirely at your commands. Come, tell me how I can help you —"

"You can't help me at all," she said hopelessly, "nobody can now."

"I've heard—I hope you'll forgive me for saying so—I've heard that your married life has been—hasn't been—"

"My married life has been hell," she said; "but I don't want to talk about that. I deserved it all."

"But, my dear lady, why not get a divorce or, at least, a separation? My services—anything I can do to advise or—"

She sprang from her chair and knelt beside him.

"Oh, how *could* you think that of me? How could you? He's dead—Benoliel's dead. I thought you'd understand that by my sending to you. Do you think I'd ever have seen you again as long as *he* was alive? I'm not a wicked woman, dear, I'm only a fool."

She had caught the hand that lay on the arm of his chair, her face was pressed on it, and on it he could feel her tears and her kisses.

"Don't," he said harshly, "don't." But he could not bring himself to draw his hand away otherwise than very gently, and after a decent pause. He stood up and held out his hand. She put hers in it, he raised her to her feet and put her back in

her chair, and artfully entrenching himself behind a little table, sat down in a very stiff chair with a high seat and gilt legs.

She laughed. "Oh, don't trouble! You needn't barricade yourself like a besieged castle. Don't be afraid of me. You're really quite safe. I'm not so mad as you think. Only, you know, all this time I've never been able to get the idea out of my head—"

He was afraid to ask what idea.

"I always believed you meant it; that you always would love me, just as you said. I was wrong, that's all. Now go! Do go!"

He was afraid to go.

"No," he said, "let's talk quietly, and like the old friends we were before we —"

"Before we weren't. Well?"

He was now afraid to say anything.

"Look here," she said suddenly, "let *me* talk. There are some things I do really want to say, since you won't let it go without saying. One is that I know now you're not so much to blame as I thought, and I *do* forgive you. I mean it, really, not just pretending forgiveness; I forgive you altogether—"

"*You—forgive me?*"

"Yes, didn't you understand that that was what I meant? I didn't want to say 'I forgive you,' and I thought if I sent for you you'd understand."

"You seem to have thought your sending for me a more enlightening move than I found it."

"Yes—because you don't care now. If you had, you'd have understood."

"I really think I should like to understand."

"What?"

"Exactly what it is you're kind enough to forgive."

"Why—your never coming to see me. Benoliel told me before we'd been

married a month that he had got my aunt to stop your letters and mine, so I don't blame you now as I did then. But you might have come when you found I didn't write."

"I did come. The house was shut up, and the caretaker could give no address."

"Did you really? And there was no address? I never thought of that."

"I don't suppose you did," he said savagely; "you never *did* think!"

"Oh, I *was* a fool! I was!"

"Yes."

"But I have been punished."

"Not you!" he said. "You got what you wanted—money, money, money—the only thing I couldn't give you. If it comes to that, why didn't *you* come and see *me*? I hadn't gone away and left no address."

"I never thought of it."

"No, of course not."

"And, besides, you wouldn't have been there—"

"I? I sat day after day waiting for a letter."

"I never thought of it," she said again.

And again he said: "No, of course you didn't; you wouldn't, you know—"

"Ah, don't! please don't! Oh, you don't know how sorry I've been—"

"But why did you marry him?"

"To spite you—to show you I didn't care—because I was in a rage—because I was a fool! You might as well tell me at once that you're in love with someone else."

"Must one always be in love, then?" he sneered.

"I thought men always were," she said simply. "Please tell me."

"No, I'm not in love with anybody. I have had enough of that to last me for a

year or two."

"Then—oh, won't you try to like me again? Nobody will ever love you so much as I do—you said I looked just the same—"

"Yes, but you *aren't* the same."

"Yes I am. I think really I'm better than I used to be," she said timidly.

"You're *not* the same," he went on, growing angrier to feel that he had allowed himself to grow angry with her. "You were a girl, and my sweetheart; now you're a widow—that man's widow! You're not the same. The past can't be undone so easily, I assure you."

"Oh," she cried, clenching her hands, "I know there must be something I could say that you would listen to—oh, I wish I could think what! I suppose as it is I'm saying things no other woman ever would have said—but I don't care! I won't be reserved and dignified, and leave everything to you, like girls in books. I lost too much by that before. I will say every single thing I can think of. I will! Dearest, you said you would always love me—you don't care for anyone else. I *know* you would love me again if you would only let yourself. Won't you forgive me?"

"I can't," he said briefly.

"Have you never done anything that needed to be forgiven? I would forgive you anything in the world! Didn't you care for other people before you knew me? And I'm not angry about it. And I never cared for him."

"That only makes it worse," he said.

She sprang to her feet. "It makes it worse for me! But if you loved me it ought to make it better for you. If you had loved me with your heart and mind you would be glad to think how little it was, after all, that I did give to that man."

"Sold—not gave—"

"Oh, don't spare me! But there's no need to tell *you* not to spare me. But I don't care what you say. You've loved other women. I've never loved anyone but you. And yet you can't forgive me!"

"It's not the same," he repeated dully.

"I *am* the same—only I'm more patient, I hope, and not so selfish. But your pride is hurt, and you think it's not quite the right thing to marry a rich man's widow. And you want to go home and feel how strong and heroic you've been, and be proud of yourself because you haven't let me make a fool of you."

It was so nearly true that he denied it instantly.

"I don't," he said. "I could have forgiven you anything, however wicked you'd been—but I can't forgive you for having been—"

"Been a fool? I can't forgive myself for that, either. My dear, my dear, you don't love anyone else; you don't hate me. Do you know that your eyes are quite changed from what they were when you came in? And your voice, and your face—everything. Think, dear, if I am not the same woman you loved, I'm still more like her than anyone else in the world. And you did love me—oh, don't hate me for anything I've said. Don't you see I'm fighting for my life? Look at me. I am just like your old sweetheart, only I love you more, and I can understand better now how not to make you unhappy. Ah, don't throw everything away without thinking. I *am* more like the woman you loved than anyone else can ever be. Oh, my God! my God! what shall I say to him? Oh, God help me!"

She had said enough. The one phrase "If I am not the same woman you loved, still I am more like her than anyone else in the world" had struck straight at his heart. It was true. What if this, the second best, were now the best life had to offer? If he threw this away, would any other woman be able to inspire him with any sentiment more like love than this passion of memory, regret, tenderness, pity—this desire to hold, protect, and comfort, with which, ever since her tears fell on his hand, he had been fighting in fierce resentment. He looked at the huddled grey figure. He must decide—now, at this moment—he must decide for two lives.

But before he had time to decide anything he found that he had taken her in his arms.

"My own, my dear," he was saying again and again, "I didn't mean it. It wasn't true. I love you better than anything. Let's forget it all. I don't care for anything now I have you again."

"Then why—"

"Oh, don't let's ask each other questions—let's begin all over again at two

years ago. We'll forget all the rest—my dear—my own!"

Of course neither has ever forgotten it, but they always pretend to each other that they have.

Her defiance of the literary sense in him and in her was justified. His literary sense, or some deeper instinct, prompted him to refuse to use Benoliel's money—but her acquiescence in his decision reversed it. And they live very comfortably on the money to this day.

The odd thing is that they are extremely happy. Perhaps it is not, after all, such a bad thing to be quite sure, before marriage, that the second-best happiness is all you are likely to get in this world.

A HOLIDAY

THE month was June, the street was Gower Street, the room was an attic. And in it a poet sat, struggling with the rebellious third act of the poetic drama that was to set him in the immediate shadow of Shakespeare, and on the level of those who ring Parnassus round just below the summit. The attic roof sloped, the furniture was vilely painted in grained yellow, the arm-chair's prickly horsehair had broken to let loose lumps of dark-coloured flock. The curtains were dark and damask and dusty. The carpet was Kidderminster and sand-coloured. It had holes in it; so had the Dutch hearthrug. The poet's penholder was the kind at twopence the dozen. The ink was in a penny bottle. Outside on a blackened flowerless lilac a strayed thrush sang madly of spring and hope and joy and love.

The clear strong June sunshine streamed in through the window and turned the white of the poet's page to a dazzling silver splendour.

"Hang it all!" he cried, and he threw down the yellow-brown penholder. "It's too much! It's not to be borne! It's not human!"

He turned out his pockets. Two-and-seven-pence. He could draw the price of an ode and a roundelay from the *Spectator*—but not to-day, for this was a Bank Holiday, Whit Monday, in fact. Then he thought of his tobacco jar. Sure enough, there lurked some halfpence among the mossy shag, and—oh, wonder and joy and cursed carelessness for ever to be blessed—a gleaming coy half-sovereign. In the ticket-pocket of his overcoat a splendid unforeseen shilling—a florin and a sixpence in the velveteen jacket he had not worn since last year. Ten—and two—and one—and two and sevenpence and sixpence—sixteen shillings and a penny. Enough, more than enough, to take him out of this world of burst horsehair chairs and greedy foolscap, of arid authorship and burst bubbles of dreams to the real world, where spring, still laughing, shrank from the kisses of summer, where white may blossomed and thrushes sang.

"I'll have a holiday," he said, "who knows—I may get an idea for a poem!"

He cleaned his boots with ink; they were not shiny after it, but they were at least black. He put on his last clean shirt and the greeny-blue Liberty tie that his sister had sent him for his April birthday. He brushed his soft hat—counted his

money again—found for it a pocket still lacking holes—and went out whistling. The front door slammed behind him with a cheerful conclusive bang.

From the top of an omnibus he noted the town gilded with June sunlight. And it was very good.

He bought food, and had it packed in decent brown paper, so that it looked like something superfluous from the stores.

And he caught the ten something train to Halstead. He only just caught it.

He blundered into a third-class carriage, and nearly broke his neck over an umbrella which lay across the door like an amateur trap for undesired company.

By some extraordinary apotheosis of Bank Holiday mismanagement, there was only one person in the carriage—the owner of the trap-umbrella. A girl, of course. That was inevitable in this magic weather. He had knocked her basket off the seat, and had only just saved himself from buffeting her with his uncontrolled shoulder before he saw that she was a girl. He took off his hat and apologised. She smiled, murmured, and blushed.

He settled himself in his corner, and unfolded the evening paper of yesterday which, by the most fortunate chance, happened to be in his pocket.

Over it he glanced at her. She was pretty—with a vague unawakened prettiness. Her eyes and hair were dark. Her hat seemed dowdy, yet becoming. Her gloves were rubbed at the fingers. Her blouse was light and bright. Her skirt obscure and severe. He decided that she was not well off.

His eyes followed a dull leader on the question of the government of India. But he did not want to read. He wanted to talk. On this June day, when the life of full-grown spring thrilled one to the finger tips, how could one feed one's vitality, one's over-mastering joy of life, with printer's ink and the greyest paper in London?

He glanced at her again. She was looking out of the window at the sordid little Bermondsey houses, where the red buds of the Virginia creeper were already waking to their green summer life-work. He spoke. And no one would have guessed from his speech that he was a poet.

"What a beautiful day!" he said.

"Yes, very," said she, and her tone gave no indication of any exuberant spring expansiveness to match his own.

He looked at her again. No. Yes. Yes, he would try the experiment he had long wanted to try—had often in long, silent, tête-à-tête journeys dreamed of trying. He would skip all the pitiful formalities of chance acquaintanceship. He would speak as one human being to another—would assume the sure bond of a common kinship. He said—

"It is such a beautiful day that I want to talk about it! Mayn't I talk to you? Don't you feel that you want to say how beautiful it is—just as much as I do?"

The girl looked at him. A scared fold in her brow warned him of the idea that had seized her.

"I'm really not mad," he said; "but it does seem so frightfully silly that we should travel all the way to—to wherever you are going, and not tell each other how good June weather is."

"Well—it is!" she owned.

He eagerly spoke: he wanted to entangle her in talk before her conventional shrinking from chance acquaintanceship should shrivel her interest past hope.

"I often think how silly people are," he said, "not to talk in railway carriages. One can't read without blinding oneself. I've seen women knit, but that's unspeakable. Many a time in frosty, foggy weather, when the South Eastern has taken two hours to get from Cannon Street to Blackheath, I've looked round the carriage and wanted to say, 'Gentlemen, seeing that we are thus delayed, let us each contribute to the general hilarity by telling a story—we might gather them into a Christmas number afterwards—in the manner of the late Mr. Charles Dickens,' then I've looked round the carriage full of city-centred people, and wondered how they'd deal with the lunatic who ventured to suggest such an All-the-year-round idea. But nobody could be city-centred on such a day, and so early. So let's talk."

She had laughed, as he had meant her to laugh. Now she seemed to throw away some scruple in the gesture with which she shrugged her shoulders and turned to him.

"Very well," she said, and she was smiling. "Only I've nothing to say."

"Never mind; I have," he rejoined, and proceeded to say it. It seemed amusing to him as an experiment to talk to this girl, this perfect stranger, with a delicate candour that he would not have shown to his oldest friend. It seemed interesting to lay bare, save for a veiling of woven transparent impersonality, his inmost mind. It *was* interesting, for the revelation drew her till they were talking together in a world where it seemed no more than natural for her to show him her soul: and she had no skill to weave veils for it.

Such talk is rare: so rare and so keen a pleasure, indeed, as to leave upon one's life, if one be not a poet, a mark strong and never to be effaced.

The slackening of the train at Halstead broke the spell which lay on both with a force equal in strength, if diverse in kind.

"Oh!" she said, "I get out here. Good-bye, good-bye."

He would not spoil the parting by banalities of hat-raising amid the group of friends or relations who would doubtless meet her.

"Good-bye," he said, and his eyes made her take his offered hand. "Good-bye. I shall never forget you. Never!"

And then it seemed to him that the farewell lacked fire: and he lifted her hand to his face. He did not kiss it. He laid it against his cheek, sighed, and dropped it. The action was delicate and very effective. It suggested the impulse, almost irresistible yet resisted, the well-nigh overwhelming longing to kiss the hand, kept in check by a respect that was almost devotion.

She should have torn her hand away. She took it away gently, and went.

Leisurely he got out of the train. She had disappeared. Well—the bright little interlude was over. Still, it would give food for dreams among the ferny woods. The first lines of a little song hummed themselves in his brain—

"Eyes like stars in the night of life,
Seen but a moment and seen for ever."

He would finish them and send them to the *Pall Mall Gazette*. That would be a guinea.

He wished the journey had been longer. He would never see her again. Perhaps it was just as well. He crushed that last thought. It would be good to

dwell through the day on the thought of her—the almost loved, the wholly lost.

"That could but have happened once
And we missed it, lost it for ever!"

Her eyes were very pretty, especially when they opened themselves so widely as she tried to express the thoughts that no one but he had ever cared to hear expressed. The definite biography—dead father, ailing mother—hard work—hard life—hard-won post as High School Mistress, were but as the hoarding on which was pasted the artistic poster of their meeting—their parting. He sighed as he walked along the platform. The promise of June had fulfilled itself: he was rich in a sorrow that did not hurt—a regret that did not sting. Poor little girl! Poor pretty eyes! Poor timid, brave maiden-soul!

Suddenly in his walk he stopped short.

Obliquely through the door of the booking-office he saw her. She was alone. No troops of friends or relations had borne her off. She was waiting for someone; and someone had not come.

What was to be done? He felt an odd chill. If he had only not taken her hand in that silly way which had seemed at the time so artistically perfect. The railway carriage talk might have been prolonged prettily, indefinitely. But that foolish contact had rung up the curtain on a transformation scene, whose footlights needed, at least, a good make-up for the facing of them.

She stood there—looking down the road; in every line of her figure was dejection; hopelessness itself had drawn the line of her head's sideward droop. His make-up need be but of the simplest.

She had expected to meet someone, and someone had not come.

His chivalric impulses, leaping to meet the occasion's call, bade him substitute a splendid replacement—himself, for the laggard tryst-breaker. Even though he knew that that touch of the hand must inaugurate the second volume of the day's romance.

He came behind her and spoke.

"Hasn't he come?" He did not like himself for saying "he"—but he said it. It belonged to the second volume.

She turned with a start and a lighting of eyes and lips that almost taught him pity. Not quite: for the poet's nature is hard to teach.

"He?" she said, decently covering the light of lips and eyes as soon as might be. "It was a friend. She was to come from Sevenoaks. She ought to be here. We were to have a little picnic together." She glanced at her basket. "I didn't know you were getting out here. Why—" The question died on trembling lips.

"Why?" he repeated. There was a pause.

"And now, what are you going to do?" he asked, and his voice was full of tender raillery for her lost tryst with the girl friend, and for her pretty helplessness.

"I—I don't know," she said.

"But I do!" he looked in her eyes. "You are going to be kind. Life is so cruel. You are going to help me to cheat Life and Destiny. You are going to leave your friend to the waste desolation of this place, if she comes by the next train: but she won't—she's kept at home by toothache, or a broken heart, or some little foolish ailment like that,"—he prided himself on the light touch here,— "and you are going to be adorably kind and sweet and generous, and to let me drink the pure wine of life for this one day."

Her eyes drooped. Fully inspired, he struck a master-chord in the lighter key.

"You have a basket. I have a brown paper parcel. Let me carry both, and we will share both. We'll go to Chevening Park. It will be fun. Will you?"

There was a pause: he wondered whether by any least likely chance the chord had not rung true. Then—

"Yes," she said half defiantly. "I don't see why I shouldn't—Yes."

"Then give me the basket," he said, "and hey for the green wood!"

The way led through green lanes—through a green park, where tall red sorrel and white daisies grew high among the grass that was up for hay. The hawthorns were silvery, the buttercups golden. The gold sun shone, the blue sky arched over a world of green and glory. And so through Knockholt, and up the narrow road to the meadow whose path leads to the steep wood-way where Chevening Park begins.

They walked side by side, and to both of them—for he was now wholly lost in the delightful part for which this good summer world was the fitting stage—to both of them it seemed that the green country was enchanted land, and they under a spell that could never break.

They talked of all things under the sun: he, eager to impress her with that splendid self of his; she, anxious to show herself not wholly unworthy. She, too, had read her Keats and her Shelley and her Browning—and could cap and even overshadow his random quotations.

"There is no one like you," he said as they passed the stile above the wood; "no one in this beautiful world."

Her heart replied—

"If there is anyone like you I have never met him, and oh, thank God, thank God, that I have met you now."

Aloud she said—

"There's a place under beech trees—a sort of chalk plateau—I used to have picnics there with my brothers when I was a little girl—"

"Shall we go there?" he asked. "Will you really take me to the place that your pretty memories haunt? Ah—how good you are to me."

As they went down the steep wood-path she slipped, stumbled—he caught her.

"Give me your hand!" he said. "This path's not safe for you."

It was not. She gave him her hand, and they went down into the wood together.

The picnic was gay as an August garden. After a life of repression—to meet someone to whom one might be oneself! It was very good.

She said so. That was when he did kiss her hand.

When lunch was over they sat on the sloped, short turf and watched the rabbits in the warren below. They sat there and they talked. And to the end of her days no one will know her soul as he knew it that day, and no one ever knew better than she that aspect of his soul which he chose that day to represent as its

permanent form.

The hours went by, and when the shadows began to lengthen and the sun to hide behind the wood they were sitting hand in hand. All the entrenchments of her life's training, her barriers of maidenly reserve, had been swept away by the torrent of his caprice, his indolently formed determination to drink the delicate sweet cup of this day to the full.

It was in silence that they went back along the wood-path—her hand in his, as before. Yet not as before, for now he held it pressed against his heart.

"Oh, what a day—what a day of days!" he murmured. "Was there ever such a day? Could there ever have been? Tell me—tell me! Could there?"

And she answered, turning aside a changed, softened, transfigured face.

"You know—you know!"

So they reached the stile at the top of the wood—and here, when he had lent her his hand to climb it, he paused, still holding in his her hand.

Now or never, should the third volume begin—and end. Should he? Should he not? Which would yield the more perfect memory—the one kiss to crown the day, or the kiss renounced, the crown refused? Her eyes, beseeching, deprecating, fearing, alluring, decided the question. He framed her soft face in his hands and kissed her, full on the lips. Then not so much for insurance against future entanglement as for the sound of the phrase, which pleased him—he was easily pleased at the moment—he said—

"A kiss for love—for memory—for despair!"

It was almost in silence that they went through lanes still and dark, across the widespread park lawns and down the narrow road to the station. Her hand still lay against his heart. The kiss still thrilled through them both. They parted at the station. He would not risk the lessening of the day's charming impression by a railway journey. He could go to town by a later train. He put her into a crowded carriage, and murmured with the last hand pressure—

"Thank God for this one day. I shall never forget. You will never forget. This

day is all our lives—all that might have been."

"I shall never forget," she said.

In point of fact, she never has forgotten. She has remembered all, even to the least light touch of his hand, the slightest change in his soft kind voice. That is why she has refused to marry the excellent solicitor who might have made her happy, and, faded and harassed, still teaches to High School girls the Euclid and Algebra which they so deeply hate to learn.

As for him, he went home in a beautiful dream, and in the morning he wrote a song about her eyes which was so good that he sent it to the *Athenæum*, and got two guineas for it—so that his holiday was really not altogether wasted.

THE FORCE OF HABIT

FROM her very earliest teens every man she met had fallen at her feet. Her father in paternal transports—dignified and symbolic as the adoration of the Magi, uncles in forced unwilling tribute, cousins according to their kind, even brothers, resentful of their chains yet still enslaved, lovers by the score, persons disposed to marriage by the half-dozen.

And she had smiled on them all, because it was so nice to be loved, and if one could make those who loved happy by smiling, why, smiles were cheap! Not cheap like inferior soap, but like the roses from a full June garden.

To one she gave something more than smiles—herself to wit—and behold her at twenty, married to the one among her slaves to whom she had deigned to throw the handkerchief—real Brussels, be sure! Behold her happy in the adoration of the one, the only one among her adorers whom she herself could adore. His name was John, of course, and it was a foregone conclusion that he should be a stock-broker.

All the same, he was nice, which is something: and she loved him, which is everything.

The little new red-brick Queen Anne villa was as the Garden of Eden to the man and the woman—but the jerry builder is a reptile more cursed than the graceful serpent who, in his handsome suit of green and gold, pulled out the lynch-pin from the wedding chariot of our first parents. The new house—"Cloudesley" its name was—was damp as any cloud, and the Paradise was shattered, not by any romantic serpent-and-apple business, but by plain, honest, every-day rheumatism. It was, indeed, as near rheumatic fever as one may go without tumbling over the grisly fence.

The doctor said "Buxton." John could not leave town. There was a boom or a slump or something that required his personal supervision.

So her old nurse was called up from out of the mists of the grey past before he and she were hers and his, and she went to Buxton in a specially reserved invalid carriage. She went, with half her dainty trousseau clothes—a helpless

invalid.

Now I don't want to advertise Buxton waters as a cure for rheumatism, but I know for a fact that she had to be carried down to her first bath. It was a marble bath, and she felt like a Roman empress in it. And before she had had ten days of marble baths she was almost her own man again, and the youth in her danced like an imprisoned bottle-imp. But she was dull because there was no one to adore her. She had always been fed on adoration, and she missed her wanted food—without the shadow of a guess that it was this she was missing. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that her old nurse should have sprained a stout ankle in the very first of those walks on the moors which the Doctor recommended for the completion of the cure so magnificently inaugurated by the Marble Roman Empress baths.

She wrote to her John every day. Long letters. But when the letter was done, what else was there left to do with what was left of the day? She was very, very bored.

One must obey one's doctor. Else why pay him guineas?

So she walked out, after pretty apologies to the nurse, left lonely, across the wonder-wide moors. She learned the springy gait of the true hill climber, and drank in health and strength from the keen hill air. The month was March. She seemed to be the only person of her own dainty feather in Buxton. So she walked the moors alone. All her life joy had come to her in green elm and meadow land, and this strange grey-stone walled rocky country made her breathless with its austere challenge. Yet life was good; strength grew. No longer she seemed to have a body to care for. Soul and spirit were carried by something so strong as to delight in the burden. A month, her town doctor had said. A fortnight taught her to wonder why he had said it. Yet she felt lonely—too small for those great hills.

The old nurse, patient, loving, urged her lamb to "go out in the fresh air"; and the lamb went.

It was on a grey day, when the vast hill slopes seemed more than ever sinister and reluctant to the little figure that braved them. She wore an old skirt and an old jacket—her husband had slipped them in when he strapped her boxes.

"They're warm," he had said; "you may need them."

She had a rainbow-dyed neckerchief and a little fur hat, perky with a

peacock's iridescent head and crest.

She was very pretty. The paleness of her illness lent her a new charm. And she walked the lonely road with an air. She had never been a great walker, and she was proud of each of the steps that this clear hill air gave her the courage to take.

And it was glorious, after all, to be alone—the only human thing on these wide moors, where the curlews mewed as if the place belonged to them. There was a sound behind her. The rattle of wheels.

She stopped. She turned and looked. Far below her lay the valley—all about her was the immense quiet of the hills. On the white road, quite a long way off, yet audible in that noble stillness, hoofs rang, wheels whirred. She waited for the thing to pass, for its rings of sound to die out in that wide pool of silence.

The wheels and the hoofs drew near. The rattle and jolt grew louder. She saw the horse and cart grow bigger and plainer. In a moment it would have passed. She waited.

It drew near. In another moment it would be gone, and she be left alone to meet again the serious inscrutable face of the grey landscape.

But the cart—as it drew near—drew up, the driver tightened rein, and the rough brown horse stopped—his hairy legs set at a strong angle.

"Have a lift?" asked the driver.

There was something subtly coercive in the absolute carelessness of the tone. There was the hearer on foot—here was the speaker in a cart. She being on foot and he on wheels, it was natural that he should offer her a lift in his cart—it was a greengrocer's cart. She could see celery, cabbages, a barrel or two, and the honest blue eyes of the man who drove it—the man who, seeing a fellow creature at a disadvantage, instantly offered to share such odds as Fate had allotted to him in life's dull handicap.

The sudden new impossible situation appealed to her. If lifts were offered—well—that must mean that lifts were generally accepted. In Rome one does as Rome does. In Derbyshire, evidently, a peacock crested toque might ride, unreprieved by social criticism, in a greengrocer's cart. A tea-tray on wheels it seemed to her.

She was a born actress; she had that gift of throwing herself at a moment's notice into a given part which in our silly conventional jargon we nickname tact.

"Thank you," she said, "I should like it very much."

The box on which he arranged a seat for her contained haddocks. He cushioned it with a sack and his own shabby greatcoat, and lent her a thick rough hand for the mounting.

"Which way were you going?" he asked, and his voice was not the soft Peak sing-song—but something far more familiar.

"I was only going for a walk," she said, "but it's much nicer to drive. I wasn't going anywhere. Only I want to get back to Buxton some time."

"I live there," said he. "I must be home by five. I've a goodish round to do. Will five be soon enough for you?"

"Quite," she said, and considered within herself what rôle it would be kindest, most tactful, most truly gentlewomanly to play. She sought to find, in a word, the part to play that would best please the man who was with her. That was what she had always tried to find. With what success let those who love her tell.

"I mustn't seem too clever," she said to herself; "I must just be interested in what he cares about. That's true politeness: mother always said so."

So she talked of the price of herrings and the price of onions, and of trade, and of the difficulty of finding customers who had at once appreciation and a free hand.

When he drew up in some lean grey village, or at the repellent gates of some isolated slate-roofed house, he gave her the reins to hold, while he, with his samples of fruit and fish laid out on basket lids, wooed custom at the doors.

She experienced a strangely crescent interest in his sales.

Between the sales they talked. She found it quite easy, having swept back and penned in the major part of her knowledges and interests, to leave a residuum that was quite enough to meet his needs.

As the chill dusk fell in cloudy folds over the giant hill shoulders and the cart turned towards home, she shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked solicitously. "The wind strikes keen down between these beastly hills."

"Beastly?" she repeated. "Don't you think they're beautiful?"

"Yes," he said, "of course I see they're beautiful—for other folks, but not for me. What I like is lanes an' elm trees and farm buildings with red tiles and red walls round fruit gardens—and cherry orchards and thorough good rich medders up for hay, and lilac bushes and bits o' flowers in the gardens, same what I was used to at home."

She thrilled to the homely picture.

"Why, that's what I like too!" she said. "These great hills—I don't see how they can feel like home to anyone. There's a bit of an orchard—one end of it is just a red barn wall—and there are hedges round, and it's all soft warm green lights and shadows—and thrushes sing like mad. That's home!"

He looked at her.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that's home."

"And then," she went on, "the lanes with the high green hedges, dog-roses and brambles and may bushes and traveller's joy—and the grey wooden hurdles, and the gates with yellow lichen on them, and the white roads and the light in the farm windows as you come home from work—and the fire—and the smell of apples from the loft."

"Yes," he said, "that's it—I'm a Kentish man myself. You've got a lot o' words to talk with."

When he put her down at the edge of the town she went to rejoin her nurse feeling that to one human being, at least, she had that day been the voice of the home-ideal, and of all things sweet and fair. And, of course, this pleased her very much.

Next morning she woke with the vague but sure sense of something pleasant to come. She remembered almost instantly. She had met a man on whom it was pleasant to smile, and whom her smiles and her talk pleased. And she thought,—quite honestly,—that she was being very philanthropic and lightening a dull life.

She wrote a long loving letter to John, did a little shopping, and walked out

along a road. It was the road by which he had told her that he would go the next day. He overtook her and pulled up with a glad face, that showed her the worth of her smiles and almost repaid it.

"I was wondering if I'd see you," he said; "was you tired yesterday? It's a fine day to-day."

"Isn't it glorious!" she returned, blinking at the pale clear sun.

"It makes everything look a heap prettier, doesn't it? Even this country that looks like as if it had had all the colour washed out of it in strong soda and suds."

"Yes," she said. And then he spoke of yesterday's trade—he had done well; and of the round he had to go to-day. But he did not offer her a lift.

"Won't you give me a drive to-day?" she asked suddenly. "I enjoyed it so much."

"*Will* you?" he cried, his face lighting up as he moved to arrange the sacks. "I didn't like to offer. I thought you'd think I was takin' too much on myself. Come up—reach me your hand. Right oh!"

The cart clattered away.

"I was thinking ever since yesterday when I see you how is it you can think o' so many words all at once. It's just as if you was seeing it all—the way you talked about the red barns and the grey gates and all such."

"I *do* see it," she said, "inside my mind, you know. I can see it all as plainly as I see these great cruel hills."

"Yes," said he, "that's just what they are—they're cruel. And the fields and woods is kind—like folks you're friends with."

She was charmed with the phrase. She talked to him, coaxing him to make new phrases. It was like teaching a child to walk.

He told her about his home. It was a farm in Kent—"red brick with the glorydyjohn rose growin' all up over the front door—so that they never opened it."

"The paint had stuck it fast," said he, "it was quite a job to get it open to get father's coffin out. I scraped the paint off then, and oiled the hinges, because I

knew mother wouldn't last long. And she didn't neither."

Then he told her how there had been no money to carry on the fruit-growing, and how his sister had married a greengrocer at Buxton, and when everything went wrong he had come to lend a hand with their business.

"And now I takes the rounds," said he; "it's more to my mind nor mimming in the shop and being perlite to ladies."

"You're very polite to *me*," she said.

"Oh, yes," he said, "but you're not a lady—leastways, I'm sure you are in your 'art—but you ain't a regular tip-topper, are you, now?"

"Well, no," she said, "perhaps not that."

It piqued her that he should not have seen that she *was* a lady—and yet it pleased her too. It was a tribute to her power of adapting herself to her environment.

The cart rattled gaily on—he talked with more and more confidence; she with a more and more pleased consciousness of her perfect tact. As they went a beautiful idea came to her. She would do the thing thoroughly—why not? The episode might as well be complete.

"I wish you'd let me help you to sell the things," she said. "I should like it."

"Wouldn't you be above it?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she answered gaily. "Only I must learn the prices of things. Tell me. How much are the herrings?"

He told her—and at the first village she successfully sold seven herrings, five haddocks, three score of potatoes, and so many separate pounds of apples that she lost count.

He was lavish of his praises.

"You might have been brought up to it from a girl," he said, and she wondered how old he thought she was then.

She yawned no more over dull novels now—Buxton no longer bored her. She had suddenly discovered a new life—a new stage on which to play a part, her own ability in mastering which filled her with the pleasure of a clever child, or a

dog who has learned a new trick. Of course, it was not a new trick; it was the old one.

It was impossible not to go out with the greengrocer every day. What else was there to do? How else could she exercise her most perfectly developed talent—that of smiling on people till they loved her? We all like to do that which we can do best. And she never felt so contented as when she was exercising this incontestable talent of hers. She did not know the talent for what it was. She called it "being nice to people."

So every day saw her, with roses freshening in her cheeks, driving over the moors in the wheeled tea-tray. And now she sold regularly. One day he said—

"What a wife you'd make for a business chap!" But even that didn't warn her, because she happened to be thinking of Jack—and she thought how good a wife she meant to be to him. *He* was a "business chap" too.

"What are you really—by trade, I mean?" he said on another occasion.

"Nothing in particular. What did you think I was?" she said.

"Oh—I dunno—I thought a lady's maid, as likely as not, or maybe in the dressmaking. You aren't a common sort—anyone can see that."

Again pique and pleasure fought in her.

She never so much as thought of telling him that she was married. She saw no reason for it. It was her rôle to enter into his life, not to dazzle him with visions of hers.

At last that happened which was bound to happen. And it happened under the shadow of a great rock, in a cleft, green-grown and sheltered, where the road runs beside the noisy, stony, rapid, unnavigable river.

He had drawn the cart up on the grass, and she had got down and was sitting on a stone eating sandwiches, for her nurse had persuaded her to take her lunch with her so as to spend every possible hour on these life-giving moors. He had eaten bread and cheese standing by the horse's head. It was a holiday. He was not selling fish and vegetables. He was in his best, and she had never liked him so little. As she finished her last dainty bite he threw away the crusts and rinds of his meal and came over to her.

"Well," he said, with an abrupt tenderness that at once thrilled and revolted her, "don't you think it's time as we settled something betwixt us?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said. But, quite suddenly and terribly, she did.

"Why," he said, "I know well enough you're miles too good for a chap like me—but if you don't think so, that's all right. And I tell you straight, you're the only girl I ever so much as fancied."

"Oh," she breathed, "do you mean—"

"You know well enough what I mean, my pretty," he said; "but if you want it said out like in books, I've got it all on my tongue. I love every inch of you, and your clever ways, and your pretty talk. I haven't touched a drop these eight months—I shall get on right enough with you to help me—and we'll be so happy as never was. There ain't ne'er a man in England'll set more store by his wife nor I will by you, nor be prouder on her. You shan't do no hard work—I promise you that. Only just drive out with me and turn the customers round your finger. I don't ask no questions about you nor your folks. I *know* you're an honest girl, and I'd trust you with my head. Come, give me a kiss, love, and call it a bargain."

She had stood up while he was speaking, but she literally could not find words to stop the flow of his speech. Now she shrank back and said, "No—no!"

"Don't you be so shy, my dear," he said. "Come—just one! And then I'll take you home and interduce you to my sister. You'll like her. I've told her all about you."

Waves of unthinkable horror seemed to be closing over her head. She struck out bravely, and it seemed as though she were swimming for her life.

"No," she cried, "it's impossible! You don't understand! You don't know!"

"I know you've been keeping company with me these ten days," he said, and his voice had changed. "What did you do it for if you didn't mean nothing by it?"

"I didn't know," she said wretchedly. "I thought you liked being friends."

"If it's what you call 'friends,' being all day long with a chap, I don't so call it," he said. "But come—you're playing skittish now, ain't you? Don't tease a chap like this. Can't you see I love you too much to stand it? I know it sounds

silly to say it—but I love you before all the world—I do—my word I do!"

He held out his arms.

"I see—I see you do," she cried, all her tact washed away by this mighty sea that had suddenly swept over her. "But I can't. I'm—I'm en—I'm promised to another young man."

"I wonder what he'll say to this," he said slowly.

"I'm so—so sorry," she said; "I'd no idea—"

"I see," he said, "you was just passing the time with me—and you never wanted me at all. And I thought you did. Get in, miss. I'll take you back to the town. I've just about had enough holiday for one day."

"I *am* so sorry," she kept saying. But he never answered.

"Do forgive me!" she said at last. "Indeed, I didn't mean—"

"Didn't mean," said he, lashing up the brown horse; "no—and it don't matter to you if I think about you and want you every day and every night so long as I live. It ain't nothing to you. You've had your fun. And you've got your sweetheart. God, I wish him joy of you!"

"Ah—don't," she said, and her soft voice even here, even now, did not miss its effect. "I *do* like you very, very much—and—"

She had never failed. She did not fail now. Before they reached the town he had formally forgiven her.

"I don't suppose you meant no harm," he said grudgingly; "though coming from Kent you ought to know how it is about walking out with a chap. But you say you didn't, and I'll believe you. But I shan't get over this, this many a long day, so don't you make no mistake. Why, I ain't thought o' nothing else but you ever since I first set eyes on you. There—don't you cry no more. I can't abear to see you cry."

He was blinking himself.

Outside the town he stopped.

"Good-bye," he said. "I haven't got nothing agin you—but I wish to Lord above I'd never seen you. I shan't never fancy no one else after you."

"Don't be unhappy," she said. And then she ought to have said good-bye. But the devil we call the force of habit would not let her leave well alone.

"I want to give you something," she said; "a keepsake, to show I shall always be your friend. Will you call at the house where I'm staying this evening at eight? I'll have it ready for you. Don't think too unkindly of me! Will you come?"

He asked the address, and said "Yes." He wanted to see her—just once again, and he would certainly like the keepsake.

She went home and looked out a beautiful book of Kentish photographs. It was a wedding present, and she had brought it with her to solace her in her exile by pictures of the home-land. Her unconscious thought was something like this: "Poor fellow; poor, poor fellow! But he behaved like a gentleman about it. I suppose there is something in the influence of a sympathetic woman—I am glad I was a good influence."

She bathed her burning face, cooled it with soft powder, and slipped into a tea-gown. It was a trousseau one of rich, heavy, yellow silk and old lace and fur. She chose it because it was warm, and she was shivering with agitation and misery. Then she went and sat with the old nurse, and a few minutes before eight she ran out and stood by the front door so as to open it before he should knock. She achieved this.

"Come in," she said, and led him into the lodging-house parlour and closed the door.

"It was good of you to come," she said, taking the big, beautiful book from the table. "This is what I want you to take, just to remind you that we're friends."

She had forgotten the tea-gown. She was not conscious that the accustomed suavity of line, the soft richness of texture influenced voice, gait, smile, gesture. But they did. Her face was flushed after her tears, and the powder, which she had forgotten to dust off, added the last touch to her beauty.

He took the book, but he never even glanced at the silver and tortoise-shell of its inlaid cover. He was looking at her, and his eyes were covetous and angry.

"Are you an actress, or what?"

"No," she said, shrinking. "Why?"

"What the hell are you, then?" he snarled furiously.

"I'm—I'm—a—"

The old nurse, scared by the voice raised beyond discretion, had dragged herself to the door of division between her room and the parlour, and now stood clinging to the door handle.

"She's a lady, young man," said the nurse severely; "and her aunt's a lady of title, and don't you forget it!"

"Forget it," he cried, with a laugh that Jack's wife remembers still; "she's a lady, and she's fooled me this way? I won't forget it, nor she shan't neither! By God, I'll give her something to forget!"

With that he caught the silken tea-gown and Jack's trembling wife in his arms and kissed her more than once. They were horrible kisses, and the man smelt of onions and hair-oil.

"And I loved her—curse her!" he cried, flinging her away, so that she fell against the arm of the chair by the fire.

He went out, slamming both doors. She had softened and bewitched him to the forgiving of the outrage that her indifference was to his love. The outrage of her station's condescension to his was unforgivable.

She went back to her Jack next day. She was passionately glad to see him. "Oh, Jack," she said, "I'll never, never go away from you again!"

But the greengrocer from Kent reeled down the street to the nearest public-house. At closing time he was telling, in muffled, muddled speech, the wondrous tale, how his girl was a real lady, awfully gone on him, pretty as paint, and wore silk dresses every day.

"She's a real lady—she is," he said.

"Ay!" said the chucker out, "we know all about them sort o' ladies. Time, please!"

"I tell you she is—her aunt's a lady of title, and the gal's that gone on me I expect I'll have to marry her to keep her quiet."

"I'll have to chuck you out to keep *you* quiet," returned the other. "Come on—outside!"

THE BRUTE

THE pearl of the dawn was not yet dissolved in the gold cup of the sunshine, but in the northwest the dripping opal waves were ebbing fast to the horizon, and the sun was already half risen from his couch of dull crimson. She leaned out of her window. By fortunate chance it was a jasmine-muffled lattice, as a girl's window should be, and looked down on the dewy stillness of the garden. The cloudy shadows that had clung in the earliest dawn about the lilac bushes and rhododendrons had faded like grey ghosts, and slowly on lawn and bed and path new black shadows were deepening and intensifying.

She drew a deep breath. What a picture! The green garden, the awakened birds, the roses that still looked asleep, the scented jasmine stars! She saw and loved it all. Nor was she unduly insensible to the charm of the central figure, the girl in the white lace-trimmed gown who leaned her soft arms on the window-sill and looked out on the dawn with large dark eyes. Of course, she knew that her eyes were large and dark, also that her hair was now at its prettiest, rumped and tumbled from the pillow, and far prettier so than one dared to allow it to be in the daytime. It seemed a pity that there should be no one in the garden save the birds, no one who had awakened thus early just that he might gather a rose and cover it with kisses and throw it up to the window of his pretty sweetheart. She had but recently learned that she was pretty. It was on the evening after the little dance at the Rectory. She had worn red roses at her neck, and when she had let down her hair she had picked up the roses from her dressing-table and stuck them in the loose, rough, brown mass, and stared into the glass till she was half mesmerised by her own dark eyes. She had come to herself with a start, and then she had known quite surely that she was pretty enough to be anyone's sweetheart. When she was a child a well-meaning aunt had told her that as she would never be pretty or clever she had better try to be good, or no one would love her. She had tried, and she had never till that red-rose day doubted that such goodness as she had achieved must be her only claim to love. Now she knew better, and she looked out of her window at the brightening sky and the deepening shadows. But there was no one to throw her a rose with kisses on it.

"If I were a man," she said to herself, but in a very secret shadowy corner of her inmost heart, and in a wordless whisper, "if I were a man, I would go out this

minute and find a sweetheart. She should have dark eyes, too, and rough brown hair, and pink cheeks."

In the outer chamber of her mind she said briskly—

"It's a lovely morning. It's a shame to waste it indoors. I'll go out."

The sun was fully up when she stole down through the still sleeping house and out into the garden, now as awake as a lady in full dress at the court of the King.

The garden gate fell to behind her, and the swing of her white skirts went down the green lane. On such a morning who would not wear white? She walked with the quick grace of her nineteen years, and as she went fragments of the undigested poetry that had been her literary diet of late swirled in her mind—

"With tears and smiles from heaven again,
The maiden spring upon the plain
Came in a sunlit fall of rain,"

and so on, though this was July, and not spring at all. And—

"A man had given all other bliss
And all his worldly work for this,
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips."

Her own lips were not perfect, yet, as lips went, they were well enough, and, anyway, kisses would not be wasted on them.

She went down the lane, full of the anxious trembling longing that is youth's unrecognised joy, and at the corner, where the lane meets the high white road, she met him. That is to say, she stopped short, as the whispering silence of the morning was broken by a sudden rattle and a heavy thud, not pleasant to hear. And he and his bicycle fell together, six yards from her feet. The bicycle bounded, and twisted, and settled itself down with bold, resentful clatterings. The man lay without moving.

Her Tennyson quotations were swept away. She ran to help.

"Oh, are you hurt?" she said. He lay quite still. There was blood on his head, and one arm was doubled under his back. What could she do? She tried to lift

him from the road to the grass edge of it. He was a big man, but she did succeed in raising his shoulders, and freeing that right arm. As she lifted it, he groaned. She sat down in the dust of the road, and lowered his shoulders till his head lay on her lap. Then she tied her handkerchief round his head, and waited till someone should pass on the way to work. Three men and a boy came after the long half hour in which he lay unconscious, the red patch on her handkerchief spreading slowly, and she looking at him, and getting by heart every line of the pale, worn, handsome face. She spoke to him, she stroked his hair. She touched his white cheek with her finger-tips, and wondered about him, and pitied him, and took possession of him as a new and precious appanage of her life, so that when the labourers appeared, she said—

"He's very badly hurt. Go and fetch some more men and a hurdle, and the boy might run for the doctor. Tell him to come to the White House. It's nearest, and it may be dangerous to move him further."

"The 'Blue Lion' ain't but a furlong further, miss," said one of the men, touching his cap.

"It's much more than that," said she, who had but the vaguest notion of a furlong's length. "Do go and do what I tell you."

They went, and, as they went, remorselessly dissected, with the bluntest instruments, her motives and her sentiments. It was not hidden from them, that wordless whisper in the shadowy inner chamber of her heart. "Perhaps the 'Blue Lion' isn't so very much further, but I can't give him up. No, I can't." But it was almost hidden from *her*. In her mind's outer hall she said—

"I'm sure I ought to take him home. No girl in a book would hesitate. And I can make it all right with mother. It would be cruel to give him up to strangers."

Deep in her heart the faint whisper followed—

"I found him; he's mine. I won't let him go."

He stirred a little before they came back with the hurdle, and she took his uninjured hand, and pressed it firmly and kindly, and told him it was "all right," he would feel better presently.

She did have him carried home, and when the doctor had set the arm and the collar-bone, and had owned that it would be better not to move him at present, she knew that her romance would not be cut short just yet. She did not nurse

him, because it is only in books that young girls of the best families act as sick-nurses to gentlemen. But her mother—dear, kind, clever, foolish gentlewoman—did the nursing, and the daughter gathered flowers daily to brighten his room. And when he was better, yet still not well enough to resume the bicycle tour so sharply interrupted by a flawed nut, she read to him, and talked to him, and sat with him in the hushed August garden. Up to this point, observe, her interest had been purely romantic. He was a man of forty-five. Perhaps he had a younger brother, a splendid young man, and the brother would like her because she had been kind. *He* had lived long abroad, had no relatives in England. He knew her Cousin Reginald at Johannesburg—everyone knew everyone else out there. The brother—there really was a brother—would come some day to thank her mother for all her goodness, and she would be at the window and look down, and he would look up, and the lamp of life would be lighted. She longed, with heart-whole earnestness, to be in love with someone, for as yet she was only in love with love.

But on the evening when there was a full moon—the time of madness as everybody knows—her mother falling asleep after dinner in her cushioned chair in the lamp lit drawing-room, he and she wandered out into the garden. They sat on the seat under the great apple tree. He was talking gently of kindness and gratitude, and of how he would soon be well enough to go away. She listened in silence, and presently he grew silent, too, under the spell of the moonlight. She never knew exactly how it was that he took her hand, but he was holding it gently, strongly, as if he would never let it go. Their shoulders touched. The silence grew deeper and deeper. She sighed involuntarily; not because she was unhappy, but because her heart was beating so fast. Both were looking straight before them into the moonlight. Suddenly he turned, put his other hand on her shoulder, and kissed her on the lips. At that instant her mother called her, and she went into the lamp-light. She said good night at once. She wanted to be alone, to realise the great and wonderful awakening of her nature, its awakening to love—for this was love, the love the poets sang about—

"A kiss, a touch, the charm, was snapped."

She wanted to be alone to think about him. But she did not think. She hugged to her heart the physical memory of that strong magnetic hand-clasp, the touch of those smooth sensitive lips on hers—held it close to her till she fell asleep, still thrilling with the ecstasy of her first lover's kiss.

Next day they were formally engaged, and now her life became an

intermittent delirium. She longed always to be alone with him, to touch his hands, to feel his cheek against hers. She could not understand the pleasure which he said he felt in just sitting near her and watching her sewing or reading, as he sat talking to her mother of dull things—politics, and the war, and landscape gardening. If she had been a man, she said to herself, always far down in her heart, she would have found a way to sit near the beloved, so that at least hands might meet now and then unseen. But he disliked public demonstrations, and he loved her. She, however, was merely in love with him.

That was why, when he went away, she found it so difficult to write to him. She thought his letters cold, though they told her of all his work, his aims, ambitions, hopes, because not more than half a page was filled with lover's talk. He could have written very different letters—indeed, he had written such in his time, and to more than one address; but he was wise with the wisdom of forty years, and he was beginning to tremble for her happiness, because he loved her.

When she complained that his letters were cold he knew that he had been wise. She found it very difficult to write to him. It was far easier to write to Cousin Reginald, who always wrote such long, interesting letters, all about interesting things—Cousin Reginald who had lived with them at the White House till a year ago, and who knew all the little family jokes, and the old family worries.

They had been engaged for eight months when he came down to see her without any warning letter.

She was alone in the drawing-room when he was announced, and with a cry of joy, she let fall her work on the floor, and ran to meet him with arms outstretched. He caught her wrists.

"No," he said, and the light of joy in her face made it not easy to say it. "My dear, I've come to say something to you, and I mustn't kiss you till I've said it."

The light had died out.

"You're not tired of me?"

He laughed. "No, not tired of you, my little princess, but I am going away for a year. If you still love me when I come back we'll be married. But before I go I must say something to you."

Her eyes were streaming with tears.

"Oh, how can you be so cruel?" she said, and her longing to cling to him, to reassure herself by personal contact, set her heart beating wildly.

"I don't want to be cruel," he said; "you understand, dear, that I love you, and it's just because I love you that I must say it. Now sit down there and let me speak. Don't interrupt me if you can help it. Consider it a sort of lecture you're bound to sit through."

He pushed her gently towards a chair. She sat down sulkily, awkwardly, and he stood by the window, looking out at the daffodils and early tulips.

"Dear, I am afraid I have found something out. I don't think you love me—"

"Oh, how can you, how can you?"

"Be patient," he said. "I've wondered almost from the first. You're almost a child, and I'm an old man—oh, no, I don't mean that that's any reason why you shouldn't love me, but it's a reason for my making very sure that you *do* before I let you marry me. It's your happiness I have to think of most. Now shall I just go away for a year, or shall I speak straight out and tell you everything? If your father were alive I would try to tell him; I can't tell your mother, she wouldn't understand. You can understand. Shall I tell you?"

"Yes," she said, looking at him with frightened eyes.

"Well: look back. You think you love me. Haven't my letters always bored you a little, though they were about all the things I care for most?"

"I don't understand politics," she said sullenly.

"And I don't understand needle-work, but I could sit and watch you sew for ever and a day."

"Well, go on. What other crime have I committed besides not going into raptures over Parliament?"

She was growing angry, and he was glad. It is not so easy to hurt people when they are angry.

"And when I am talking to your mother, that bores you too, and when we are alone, you don't care to talk of anything, but—but—"

This task was harder than he had imagined possible.

"I've loved you too much, and I've shown it too plainly," she said bitterly.

"My dear, you've never loved me at all. You have only been in love with me."

"And isn't that the same thing?"

"Oh! it's no use," he said, "I must *be* a brute then. No, it's not the same thing. It's your poets and novelists who pretend it is. It's they who have taught you all wrong. It's only half of love, and the worst half, the most untrustworthy, the least lasting. My little girl, when I kissed you first, you were just waking up to your womanhood, you were ready for love, as a flower-bud is ready for sunshine, and I happened to be the first man who had the chance to kiss you and hold your dear little hands."

"Do you mean that I should have liked anyone else as well if he had only been kind enough to kiss me?"

"No, no; but ... I wish girls were taught these things out of books. If you only knew what it costs me to be honest with you, how I have been tempted to let you marry me and chance everything! Don't you see you're a woman now—women were made to be kissed, and when a man behaves like a brute and kisses a girl without even asking first, or finding out first whether she loves him, it's not fair on the girl. I shall never forgive myself. Don't you see I took part of you by storm, the part of you that is just woman nature, not yours but everyone's; and how were you to know that you didn't love me, that it was only the awakening of your woman nature?"

"I hate you," she said briefly.

"Yes," he answered simply, "I knew you would. Hate is only one step from passion."

She rose in a fury. "How dare you use that word to me!" she cried. "Oh, you are a brute! You are quite right: I don't love you—I hate you, I despise you. Oh, you brute!"

"Don't," he said; "I only used that word because it's what people call the thing when it's a man who feels it. With you it's what I said, the unconscious awakening of the womanhood God gave you. Try to forgive me. Have I said

anything so very dreadful? It's a very little thing, dear, the sweet kindness you've felt for me. It's nothing to be ashamed or angry about. It's not a hundredth part of what I have felt when you have kissed me. It's because it's such a poor foundation to build a home on that I am frightened for you. Suppose you got tired of my kisses, and there was nothing more in me that you did care for. And that sort of ... lover's love doesn't last for ever—without the other kind of love —"

"Oh, don't say any more," she cried, jumping up from her chair. "I did love you with all my heart. I was sorry for you. I thought you were so different. Oh, how could you say these things to me? Go!"

"Shall I come back in a year?" he asked, smiling rather sadly.

"Come back? *Never!* I'll never speak to you again. I'll never see you again. I hope to God I shall never hear your name again. Go at once!"

"You'll be grateful to me some day," he said, "when you've found out that love and being in love are not the same thing."

"What is love, then? The kind of love *you'd* care for?"

"I care for it all," he said. "I think love is tenderness, esteem, affection, interest, pity, protection, and passion. Yes, you needn't be frightened by the word; it is the force that moves the world, but it's only a part of love. Oh, I see it's no good. God bless you, child: you'll understand some day!"

She does understand now; she has married her Cousin Reginald, and she understands deeply and completely. But she only admits this in that deep, shadowy, almost disowned corner of her heart. In the reception room of her mind she still thinks of her first lover as "That Brute!"

DICK, TOM, AND HARRY

"**A**ND so I look in to see her whenever I can spare half an hour. I fancy it cheers her up a bit to have some one to talk to about Edinburgh—and all that. You say you're going to tell her about its having been my doing, your getting that berth. Now, I won't have it. You promised you wouldn't. I hate jaw, as you know, and I don't want to have her gassing about gratitude and all that rot. I don't like it, even from you. So stow all that piffle. You'd do as much for me, any day. I suppose Edinburgh *is* a bit dull, but you've got all the higher emotions of our fallen nature to cheer you up. Essex Court is dull, if you like! It's three years since I had the place to myself, and I tell you it's pretty poor sport. I don't seem to care about duchesses or the gilded halls nowadays. Getting old, I suppose. Really, my sole recreation is going to see another man's girl, and letting her prattle prettily about him. Lord, what fools these mortals be! Sorry I couldn't answer your letter before. I suppose you'll be running up for Christmas! So long! I'm taking her down those Ruskins she wanted. Here's luck!"

The twisted knot of three thin initials at the end of the letter stood for one of the set of names painted on the black door of the Temple Chambers. The other names were those of Tom, who had strained a slender competence to become a barrister, and finding the achievement unremunerative, had been glad enough to get the chance of sub-editing a paper in Edinburgh.

Dick enveloped and stamped his letter, threw it on the table, and went into his bedroom. When he came back in a better coat and a newer tie he looked at the letter and shrugged his shoulders, and he frowned all the way down the three flights and as far as Brick Court. Here he posted the letter. Then he shrugged his shoulders again, but after the second shrug the set of them was firmer.

As his hansom swung through the dancing lights of the Strand, he shrugged his shoulders for the third time.

And, at that, his tame devil came as at a signal, and drew a pretty curtain across all thoughts save one—the thought of the "other man's girl." Indeed, hardly a thought was left, rather a sense of her—of those disquieting soft eyes of hers—the pretty hands, the frank laugh—the long, beautiful lines her gowns took

on—the unexpected twists and curves of her hair—above all, the reserve, veiling tenderness as snowflakes might veil a rose, with which she spoke of the other man.

Dick had known Tom for all of their men's lives, and they had been friends. Both had said so often enough. But now he thought of him as the "other man."

The lights flashed past. Dick's eyes were fixed on a picture. A pleasant room—an artist's room—prints, sketches, green curtains, the sparkle of old china, fire and candle light. A girl in a long straight dress; he could see the little line where it would catch against her knee as she came forward to meet him with both hands outstretched. Would it be both hands? He decided that it would—to-night.

He was right, even to the little line in the sea-blue gown.

Both hands; such long, thin, magnetic hands.

"You *are* good," she said at once. "Oh—you must let me thank you. Tom's told me who it was that got him that splendid berth. Oh—what a friend you are! And lending him the money and everything. I can't tell you—It's too much—You are—"

"Don't," he said; "it's nothing at all."

"It's everything," said she. "Tom's told me quite all about it, mind! I know we owe everything to you."

"My dear Miss Harcourt," he began. But she interrupted him.

"Why not Harry?" she asked. "I thought—"

"Yes. Thank you. But it was nothing. You see I couldn't let poor old Tom go on breaking his heart in silence, when just writing a letter or two would put him in a position to speak."

She had held his hands, or he hers, or both, all this time. Now she moved away to the fire.

"Come and sit down and be comfortable," she said. "This is the chair you like. And I've got some cigarettes, your very own kind, from the Stores."

She remembered a time when she had thought that it was he, Dick, who might break his heart for her. The remembrance of that vain thought was a

constant pin-prick to her vanity, a constant affront to her modesty. She had tried to snub him in those days—to show him that his hopes were vain. And after all he hadn't had any hopes: he'd only been anxious about Tom! In the desolation of her parting from Tom she had longed for sympathy. Dick had given it, and she had been kinder to him than she had ever been to any man but her lover—first, because he was her lover's friend, and, secondly, because she wanted to pretend to herself that she had never fancied that there was any reason for not being kind to him.

She sat down in the chair opposite to his.

"Now," she said, "I won't thank you any more, if you hate it so; but you are good, and neither of us will ever forget it."

He sat silent for a moment. He had played for this—for this he had delayed to answer the letter wherein Tom announced his intention of telling Harriet the whole fair tale of his friend's goodness. He had won the trick. Yet for an instant he hesitated to turn it over. Then he shrugged his shoulders—I will not mention this again, but it was a tiresome way he had when the devil or the guardian angel were working that curtain I told you of—and said—

"Dear little lady—you make me wish that I *were* good."

Then he sighed: it was quite a real sigh, and she wondered whether he could possibly not be good right through. Was it possible that he was wicked in some of those strange, mysterious ways peculiar to men: billiards—barmaids—opera-balls flashed into her mind. Perhaps she might help him to be good. She had heard the usual pretty romances about the influence of a good woman.

"Come," she said, "light up—and tell me all about everything."

So he told her many things. And now and then he spoke of Tom, just to give himself the pleasure-pain of that snow-veiled-rose aspect.

He kissed her hand when he left her—a kiss of studied brotherliness. Yet the kiss had in it a tiny heart of fire, fierce enough to make her wonder, when he had left her, whether, after all.... But she put the thought away hastily. "I may be a vain fool," she said, "but I won't be fooled by my vanity twice over."

And she kissed Tom's portrait and went to bed.

Dick went home in a heavenly haze of happiness—so he told himself as he

went. When he woke up at about three o'clock, and began to analyse his sensations, he had cooled enough to call it an intoxication of pleasurable emotion. At three in the morning, if ever, the guilt is off the ginger-bread.

Dick lay on his back, his hands clenched at his sides, and, gazing open-eyed into the darkness, he saw many things. He saw all the old friendship: the easy, jolly life in those rooms, the meeting with Harriet Harcourt—it was at a fancy-ball, and she wore the white-and-black dress of a Beardsley lady; he remembered the contrast of the dress with her eyes and mouth.

He saw the days when his thoughts turned more and more to every chance of meeting her, as though each had been his only chance of life. He saw the Essex Court sitting-room as it had looked on the night when Tom had announced that Harriet was the only girl in the world—adding, at almost a night's length, that impassioned statement of his hopeless, financial condition. He could hear Tom's voice as he said—

"And I *know* she cares!"

Dick felt again the thrill of pleasure that had come with the impulse to be, for once, really noble, to efface himself, to give up the pursuit that lighted his days, the dream that enchanted his nights. His own voice, too, he heard—

"Cheer up, old chap! We'll find a lucrative post for you in five minutes, and set the wedding bells a-ringing in half an hour, or less! Why on earth didn't you tell me before?"

The glow of conscious nobility had lasted a long while—nearly a week, if he recollected aright. Then had come the choice of two openings for Tom, one in London, and one, equally good, in Edinburgh. Dick had chosen to offer to his friend the one in Edinburgh. He had told himself then that both lovers would work better if they were not near enough to waste each other's time, and he had almost believed—he was almost sure, even now, that he had almost believed—that this was the real reason.

But when Tom had gone there had been frank tears in the lovers' parting, and Dick had walked up the platform to avoid the embarrassment of witnessing them.

"You beast, you brute, you hound!" said Dick to himself, lying rigid and wretched in the darkness. "You knew well enough that you wanted him out of

the way. And you promised to look after her and keep her from being dull. And you've done all you can to keep your word, haven't you? She hasn't been dull, I swear. And you've been playing for your own hand—and that poor stupid honest chap down there slaving away and trusting you as he trusts God. And you've written him lying letters twice a week, and betrayed him, as far as you got the chance, every day, and seen what a cur you are, every night, as you see it now. Oh, yes—you're succeeding splendidly. She forgets to think of Tom when she's talking to you. How often did *she* mention him last night? It was *you* every time. You're not fit to speak to a decent man, you reptile!"

He relaxed the clenched hands.

"Can't you stop this infernal see-saw?" he asked, pounding at his pillow; "light and fire every day, and hell-black ice every night. Look at it straight, you coward! If you're game to face the music, why, face it! Marry her, and friendship and honesty be damned! Or perhaps you might screw yourself up to another noble act—not a shoddy one this time."

Still sneering, he got up and pottered about in slippers and pyjamas till he had stirred together the fire and made himself cocoa. He drank it and smoked two pipes. This is very unromantic, but so it was. He slept after that.

When he woke in the morning all things looked brighter. He almost succeeded in pretending that he did not despise himself.

But there was a letter from Tom, and the guardian angel took charge of the curtain again.

He was tired, brain and body. The prize seemed hardly worth the cost. The question of relative values, at any rate, seemed debatable. The day passed miserably.

At about five o'clock he was startled to feel the genuine throb of an honest impulse. Such an impulse in him at that hour of the day, when usually the devil was arranging the curtain for the evening's tragi-comedy, was so unusual as to rouse in him a psychologic interest strong enough to come near to destroying its object. But the flame of pleasure lighted by the impulse fought successfully against the cold wind of cynical analysis, and he stood up.

"Upon my word," said he, "the copy-books are right—'Be virtuous and you will be happy.' At least if you aren't, you won't. And if you are.... One could but

try!"

He packed a bag. He went out and sent telegrams to his people at King's Lynn, and to all the folk in town with whom he ought in these next weeks to have danced and dined, and he wrote a telegram to her. But that went no further than the floor of the Fleet Street Post Office, where it lay in trampled, scattered rhomboids.

Then he dined in Hall—he could not spare from his great renunciation even such a thread of a thought as should have decided his choice of a restaurant; and he went back to the gloomy little rooms and wrote a letter to Tom.

It seemed, until his scientific curiosity was aroused by the seeming, that he wrote with his heart's blood. After the curiosity awoke, the heart's blood was only highly-coloured water.

"Look here. I can't stand it any longer. I'm a brute and I know it, and I know you'll think so. The fact is I've fallen in love with your Harry, and I simply can't bear it seeing her every day almost and knowing she's yours and not mine" (there the analytic demon pricked up its ears and the scratching of the pen ceased). "I have fought against this," the letter went on after a long pause. "You don't know how I've fought, but it's stronger than I am. I love her—impossibly, unbearably—the only right and honourable thing to do is to go away, and I'm going. My only hope is that she'll never know.

"Your old friend."

As he scrawled the signatory hieroglyphic, his only hope was that she *would* know it, and that the knowledge would leaven, with tenderly pitying thoughts of him, the heroic figure, her happiness with Tom, the commonplace.

He addressed and stamped the envelope; but he did not close it.

"I might want to put in another word or two," he said to himself. And even then in his inmost heart he hardly knew that he was going to her. He knew it when he was driving towards Chenies Street, and then he told himself that he was going to bid her good-bye—for ever.

Angel and devil were so busy shifting the curtain to and fro that he could not see any scene clearly.

He came into her presence pale with his resolution to be noble, to leave her for ever to happiness—and Tom. It was difficult though, even at that supreme moment, to look at her and to couple those two ideas.

"I've come to say good-bye," he said.

"*Good-bye?*" the dismay in her eyes seemed to make that unsealed letter leap in his side pocket.

"Yes—I'm going—circumstances I can't help—I'm going away for a long time."

"Is it bad news? Oh—I *am* sorry. When are you going?"

"To-morrow," he said, even as he decided to say, "to-night."

"But you can stay a little now, can't you? Don't go like this. It's dreadful. I shall miss you so—"

He fingered the letter.

"I must go and post a letter; then I'll come back, if I may. Where did I put that hat of mine?"

As she turned to pick up the hat from the table, he dropped the letter—the heart's blood written letter—on the floor behind him.

"I'll be back in a minute or two," he said, and went out to walk up and down the far end of Chenies Street and to picture her—alone with his letter.

She saw it at the instant when the latch of her flat clicked behind him. She picked it up, and mechanically turned it over to look at the address.

He, in the street outside, knew just how she would do it. Then she saw that the letter was unfastened.

How often had Tom said that there were to be no secrets between them! This was *his* letter. But it might hold Dick's secrets. But then, if she knew Dick's secrets she might be able to help him. He was in trouble—anyone could see that—awful trouble. She turned the letter over and over in her hands.

He, without, walking with half-closed eyes, felt that she was so turning it.

Suddenly she pulled the letter out and read it. He, out in the gas-lit night,

knew how it would strike at her pity, her tenderness, her strong love of all that was generous and noble. He pictured the scene that must be when he should re-enter her room, and his heart beat wildly. He held himself in; he was playing the game now in deadly earnest. He would give her time to think of him, to pity him—time even to wonder whether, after all, duty and honour had not risen up in their might to forbid him to dare to try his faith by another sight of her. He waited, keenly aware that long as the waiting was to him, who knew what the ending was to be, it must be far, far longer for her, who did not know.

At last he went back to her. And the scene that he had pictured in the night where the east wind swept the street was acted out now, exactly as he had foreseen it.

She held in her hand the open letter. She came towards him, still holding it.

"I've read your letter," she said.

In her heart she was saying, "I must be brave. Never mind modesty and propriety. Tom could never love me like this. *He's* a hero—my hero."

In the silence that followed her confession he seemed to hear almost the very words of her thought.

He hung his head and stood before her in the deep humility of a chidden child.

"I am sorry," he said. "I am ashamed. Forgive me. I couldn't help it. No one could. Good-bye. Try to forgive me—"

He turned to go, but she caught him by the arms. He had been almost sure she would.

"You mustn't go," she said. "Oh—I *am* sorry for Tom—but it's not the same for him. There are lots of people he'd like just as well—but you—"

"Hush!" he said gently, "don't think of me. I shall be all right. I shall get over it."

His sad, set smile assured her that he never would—never, in this world or the next.

Her eyes were shining with the stress of the scene: his with the charm of it.

"You are so strong, so brave, so good," she made herself say. "I can't let you go. Oh—don't you see—I can't let you suffer. You've suffered so much already—you've been so noble. Oh—it's better to know now. If I'd found out later—"

She hung her head and waited.

But he would not spare her. Since he had sold his soul he would have the price: the full price, to the last blush, the last tear, the last tremble in the pretty voice.

"Let me go," he said, and his voice shook with real passion, "let me go—I can't bear it." He took her hands gently from his arms and held them lightly.

Next moment they were round his neck, and she was clinging wildly to him.

"Don't be unhappy! I can't bear it. Don't you see? Ah—don't you see?"

Then he allowed himself to let her know that he did see. When he left her an hour later she stood in the middle of her room and drew a long breath.

"*Oh!*" she cried. "What have I done? What *have* I done?"

He walked away with the maiden fire of her kisses thrilling his lips. "I've won—I've won—I've won!" His heart sang within him.

But when he woke in the night—these months had taught him the habit of waking in the night and facing his soul—he said—

"It was very easy, after all—very, very easy. And was it worth while?"

But the next evening, when they met, neither tasted in the other's kisses the bitterness of last night's regrets. And in three days Tom was to come home. He came. All the long way in the rattling, shaking train a song of delight sang itself over and over in his brain. He, too, had his visions: he was not too commonplace for those. He saw her, her bright beauty transfigured by the joy of reunion, rushing to meet him with eager hands and gladly given lips. He thought of all he had to tell her. The fifty pounds saved already. The Editor's probable resignation, his own almost certain promotion, the incredibly dear possibility of their marriage before another year had passed. It seemed a month before he pressed the electric button at her door, and pressed it with a hand that trembled for joy.

The door opened and she met him, but this was not the radiant figure of his vision. It seemed to be not she, but an image of her—an image without life,

without colour.

"Come in," she said; "I've something to tell you."

"What is it?" he asked bluntly. "What's happened, Harry? What's the matter?"

"I've found out," she said slowly, but without hesitation: had she not rehearsed the speech a thousand times in these three days? "I've found out that it was a mistake, Tom. I—I love somebody else. Don't ask who it is. I love him. Ah—*don't!*"

For his face had turned a leaden white, and he was groping blindly for something to hold on to.

He sat down heavily on the chair where Dick had knelt at her feet the night before. But now it was she who was kneeling.

"Oh, *don't*, Tom, dear—*don't*. I can't bear it. I'm not worth it. He's so brave and noble—and he loves me so."

"And don't *I* love you?" said poor Tom, and then without ado or disguise he burst into tears.

She had ceased to think or to reason. Her head was on his shoulder, and they clung blindly to each other and cried like two children.

When Tom went to the Temple that night he carried a note from Harry to Dick. With sublime audacity and a confidence deserved she made Tom her messenger.

"It's a little secret," she said, smiling at him, "and you're not to know."

Tom thought it must be something about a Christmas present for himself. He laughed—a little shakily—and took the note.

Dick read it and crushed it in his hand while Tom poured out his full heart.

"There's been some nonsense while I was away," he said; "she must have been dull and unhinged—you left her too much alone, old man. But it's all right now. She couldn't care for anyone but me, after all, and she knew it directly she

saw me again. And we're to be married before next year's out, if luck holds."

"Here's luck, old man!" said Dick, lifting his whisky. When Tom had gone to bed, weary with the quick sequence of joy and misery and returning joy, Dick read the letter again.

"I can't do it," said the letter, "it's not in me. He loves me too much. And I *am* fond of him. He couldn't bear it. He's weak, you see. He's not like you—brave and strong and noble. But I shall always be better because you've loved me. I'm going to try to be brave and noble and strong like you. And you must help me, Dear. God bless you. Good-bye."

"After all," said Dick, as he watched the white letter turn in the fire to black, gold spangled, "after all, it was not so easy. And oh, how it would have been worth while!"

MISS EDEN'S BABY

MISS EDEN'S life-history was a sad one. She told it to her employer before she had been a week at the Beeches. Mrs. Despard came into the school-room and surprised the governess in tears. No one could ever resist Mrs. Despard—I suppose she has had more confidences than any woman in Sussex. Anyhow, Miss Eden dried her tears and faltered out her poor little story.

She had been engaged to be married—Mrs. Despard's was a face trained to serve and not to betray its owner, so she did not look astonished, though Miss Eden was so very homely, poor thing, that the idea of a lover seemed almost ludicrous—she had been engaged to be married: and her lover had been killed at Elendslaagte, and her father had died of heart disease—an attack brought on by the shock of the news, and his partner had gone off with all his money, and now she had to go out as a governess: her mother and sister were living quietly on the mother's little fortune. There was enough for two but not enough for three. So Miss Eden had gone governessing.

"But you needn't pity me for that," she said, when Mrs. Despard said something kind, "because, really, it's better for me. If I were at home doing nothing I should just sit and think of *him*—for hours and hours at a time. He was so brave and strong and good—he died cheering his men on and waving his sword, and he did love me so. We were to have been married in August."

She was weeping again, more violently than before; Mrs. Despard comforted her—there is no one who comforts so well—and the governess poured out her heart. When the dressing-bell rang Miss Eden pulled herself together with a manifest effort.

"I've been awfully weak and foolish," she said, "and you've been most kind. Please forgive me—and—and I think I'd rather not speak of it any more—ever. It's been a relief, just this once—but I'm going to be brave. Thank you, thank you for all your goodness to me. I shall never forget it."

And now Miss Eden went about her duties with a courageous smile, and Mrs. Despard could not but see and pity the sad heart beneath the bravely assumed armour. Miss Eden was fairly well educated, and she certainly was an excellent

teacher. The children made good progress. She worshipped Mrs. Despard—but then every one did that—and she made herself pleasures of the little things she was able to do for her—mending linen, arranging flowers, running errands, and nursing the Baby. She adored the Baby. She used to walk by herself in the Sussex lanes, for Mrs. Despard often set her free for two or three hours at a time, and more than once the mother and children, turning some leafy corner in their blackberrying or nutting expeditions, came upon Miss Eden walking along with a far-away look in her eyes, and a face set in a mask of steadfast endurance. She would sit sewing on the lawn with Mabel and Gracie playing about her, answering their ceaseless chatter with a patient smile. To Mrs. Despard she was a pathetic figure. Mr. Despard loathed her, but then he never liked women unless they were pretty.

"I ought to be used to your queer pets by now," he said; "but really this one is almost too much. Upon my soul, she's the ugliest woman I've ever seen."

She certainly was not handsome. Her eyes were fairly good, but mouth and nose were clumsy, and hers was one of those faces that seem to have no definite outline. Her complexion was dull and unequal. Her hair was straight and coarse, and somehow it always looked dusty. Her figure was her only good point, and, as Mr. Despard observed, "If a figure without a face is any good, why not have a dressmaker's dummy, and have done with it?"

Mr. Despard was very glad when he heard that a little legacy had come from an uncle, and that Miss Eden was going to give up governessing and live with her people.

Miss Eden left in floods of tears, and she clung almost frantically to Mrs. Despard.

"You have been so good to me," she said. "I may write to you, mayn't I? and come and see you sometimes? You will let me, won't you?"

Tears choked her, and she was driven off in the station fly. And a new governess, young, commonplacely pretty, and entirely heart-whole, came to take her place, to the open relief of Mr. Despard, and the little less pronounced satisfaction of the little girls.

"She'll write to you by every post now, I suppose," said Mr. Despard when the conventional letter of thanks for kindness came to his wife. But Miss Eden did not write again till Christmas. Then she wrote to ask Mrs. Despard's advice.

There was a gentleman, a retired tea-broker, in a very good position. She liked him—did Mrs. Despard think it would be fair to marry him when her heart was buried for ever in that grave at Elendslaagte?

"But I don't want to be selfish, and poor Mr. Cave is so devoted. My dear mother thinks he would never be the same again if I refused him."

Mr. Despard read the letter, and told his wife to tell the girl to take the tea-broker, for goodness' sake, and be thankful. She'd never get such another chance. His wife told him not to be coarse, and wrote a gentle, motherly letter to Miss Eden.

On New Year's Day came a beautiful and very expensive handkerchief-sachet for Mrs. Despard, and the news that Miss Eden was engaged. "And already," she wrote, "I feel that I can really become attached to Edward. He is goodness itself. Of course, it is not like the other. That only comes once in a woman's life, but I believe I shall really be happy in a quiet, humdrum way."

After that, news of Miss Eden came thick and fast. Edward was building a house for her. Edward had bought her a pony-carriage. Edward had to call his house No. 70, Queen's Road—a new Town Council resolution—and it wasn't in a street at all, but quite in the country, only there was going to be a road there some day. And she had so wanted to call it the Beeches, after dear Mrs. Despard's house, where she had been so happy. The wedding-day was fixed, and would Mrs. Despard come to the wedding? Miss Eden knew it was a good deal to ask; but if she only would!

"It would add more than you can possibly guess to my happiness," she said, "if you could come. There is plenty of room in my mother's little house. It is small, but very convenient, and it has such a lovely old garden, so unusual, you know, in the middle of a town; and if only dear Mabel and Gracie might be among my little bridesmaids! The dresses are to be half-transparent white silk over rose colour. Dear Edward's father insists on ordering them himself from Liberty's. The other bridesmaids will be Edward's little nieces—such sweet children. Mother is giving me the loveliest trousseau. Of course, I shall make it up to her; but she will do it, and I give way, just to please her. It's not pretentious, you know, but everything so *good*. Real lace on all the under things, and twelve of everything, and—"

The letter wandered on into a maze of *lingerie* and millinery and silk petticoats.

Mr. and Mrs. Despard were still debating the question of the bridesmaids whose dresses were to come from Liberty's when a telegraph boy crossed the lawn.

Mrs. Despard tore open the envelope.

"Oh—how frightfully sad!" she said. "I *am* sorry! 'Edward's father dangerously ill. Wedding postponed."

The next letter was black-edged, and was not signed "Eden." Edward's father had insisted on the marriage taking place before he died—it had, in fact, been performed by his bedside. It had been a sad time, but Mrs. Edward was very happy now.

"My husband is so good to me, his thoughtful kindness is beyond belief," she wrote. "He anticipates my every wish. I should be indeed ungrateful if I did not love him dearly. Dear Mrs. Despard, this gentle domestic love is very beautiful. I hope I am not treacherous to my dead in being as happy as I am with Edward. Ah! I hear the gate click—I must run and meet him. He says it is not like coming home unless my face is the first he sees when he comes in. Good-bye. A thousand thanks for ever for all your goodness.

"Your grateful Ella Cave."

"Either their carriage drive is unusually long, or her face was *not* the first," said Mr. Despard. "Why didn't she go and meet the man, and not stop to write all that rot?"

"Don't, Bill," said his wife. "You were always so unjust to that girl."

"Girl!" said Mr. Despard.

And now the letters were full of detail: the late Miss Eden wrote a good hand, and expressed herself with clearness. Her letters were a pleasure to Mrs. Despard.

"Poor dear!" she said. "It really rejoices my heart to think of her being so happy. She describes things very well. I almost feel as though I knew every room in her house; it must be very pretty with all those Liberty muslin blinds, and the Persian rugs, and the chair-backs Edward's grandmother worked—and then the beautiful garden. I think I must go to see it all. I do love to see people happy."

"You generally do see them happy," said her husband; "it's a way people have when they're near you. Go and see her, by all means."

And Mrs. Despard would have gone, but a letter, bearing the same date as her own, crossed it in the post; it must have been delayed, for it reached her on the day when she expected an answer to her own letter, offering a visit. But the late Miss Eden had evidently not received this, for her letter was a mere wail of anguish.

"Edward is ill—typhoid. I am distracted. Write to me when you can. The very thought of you comforts me."

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Despard, "I really did think she was going to be happy."

Her sympathetic interest followed Edward through all the stages of illness and convalescence, as chronicled by his wife's unwearying pen.

Then came the news of the need of a miniature trousseau, and the letters breathed of head-flannels, robes, and the charm of tiny embroidered caps. "They were Edward's when he was a baby—the daintiest embroidery and thread lace. The christening cap is Honiton. They are a little yellow with time, of course, but I am bleaching them on the sweet-brier hedge. I can see the white patches on the green as I write. They look like some strange sort of flowers, and they make me dream of the beautiful future."

In due season Baby was born and christened; and then Miss Eden, that was, wrote to ask if she might come to the Beeches, and bring the darling little one.

Mrs. Despard was delighted. She loved babies. It was a beautiful baby—beautifully dressed, and it rested contentedly in the arms of a beautifully dressed lady, whose happy face Mrs. Despard could hardly reconcile with her recollections of Miss Eden. The young mother's happiness radiated from her, and glorified her lips and eyes. Even Mr. Despard owned, when the pair had gone, that marriage and motherhood had incredibly improved Miss Eden.

And now, the sudden departure of a brother for the other side of the world took Mrs. Despard to Southampton, whence his boat sailed, and where lived the happy wife and mother, who had been Miss Eden.

When the tears of parting were shed, and the last waving handkerchief from the steamer's deck had dwindled to a sharp point of light, and from a sharp point

of light to an invisible point of parting and sorrow, Mrs. Despard dried her pretty eyes, and thought of trains. There was no convenient one for an hour or two.

"I'll go and see Ella Cave," said she, and went in a hired carriage. "No. 70, Queen's Road," she said. "I think it's somewhere outside the town."

"Not it," said the driver, and presently set her down in a horrid little street, at a horrid little shop, where they sold tobacco and sweets and newspapers and walking-sticks.

"This can't be it! There must be some other Queen's Road?" said Mrs. Despard.

"No there ain't," said the man. "What name did yer want?"

"Cave," said Mrs. Despard absently; "Mrs. Edward Cave."

The man went into the shop. Presently he returned.

"She don't live here," he said; "she only calls here for letters."

Mrs. Despard assured herself of this in a brief interview with a frowsy woman across a glass-topped show-box of silk-embroidered cigar-cases.

"The young person calls every day, mum," she said; "quite a respectable young person, mum, I should say—if she was after your situation."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Despard mechanically, yet with her own smile—the smile that still stamps her in the frowsy woman's memory as "that pleasant-spoken lady."

She paused a moment on the dirty pavement, and then gave the cabman the address of the mother and sister, the address of the little house—small, but very convenient—and with a garden—such a lovely old garden—and so unusual in the middle of a town.

The cab stopped at a large, sparkling, plate-glassy shop—a very high-class fruiterer's and greengrocer's.

The name on the elaborately gilded fascia was, beyond any doubt, Eden—Frederick Eden.

Mrs. Despard got out and walked into the shop. To this hour the scent of Tangerine oranges brings to her a strange, sick, helpless feeling of

disillusionment.

A stout well-oiled woman, in a very tight puce velveteen bodice with bright buttons and a large yellow lace collar, fastened with a blue enamel brooch, leaned forward interrogatively.

"Mrs. Cave?" said Mrs. Despard.

"Don't know the name, madam."

"Wasn't that the name of the gentleman Miss Eden married?"

"It seems to me you're making a mistake, madam. Excuse me, but might I ask your name?"

"I'm Mrs. Despard. Miss Eden lived with me as governess."

"Oh, yes"—the puce velvet seemed to soften—"very pleased to see you, I'm sure! Come inside, madam. Ellen's just run round to the fishmonger's. I'm not enjoying very good health just now"—the glance was intolerably confidential—"and I thought I could fancy a bit of filleted plaice for my supper, or a nice whiting. Come inside, do!"

Mrs. Despard, stunned, could think of no course save that suggested. She followed Mrs. Eden into the impossible parlour that bounded the shop on the north.

"Do sit down," said Mrs. Eden hospitably, "and the girl shall get you a cup of tea. It's full early, but a cup of tea's always welcome, early or late, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Despard, automatically. Then she roused herself and added, "But please don't trouble, I can't stay more than a few minutes. I hope Miss Eden is well?"

"Oh, yes—she's all right. She lives in clover, as you might say, since her uncle on the mother's side left her that hundred a year. Made it all in fried fish, too. I should have thought it a risk myself, but you never know."

Mrs. Despard was struggling with a sensation as of sawdust in the throat—sawdust, and a great deal of it, and very dry.

"But I heard that Miss Eden was married—"

"Not she!" said Mrs. Eden, with the natural contempt of one who was.

"I understood that she had married a Mr. Cave."

"It's some other Eden, then. There isn't a Cave in the town, so far as I know, except Mr. Augustus; he's a solicitor and Commissioner for Oaths, a very good business, and of course he'd never look the same side of the road as she was, nor she couldn't expect it."

"But really," Mrs. Despard persisted, "I do think there must be some mistake. Because she came to see me—and—and she brought her baby."

Mrs. Eden laughed outright.

"Her baby? Oh, really! But she's never so much as had a young man after her, let alone a husband. It's not what she could look for, either, for she's no beauty—poor girl!"

Yet the Baby was evidence—of a sort. Mrs. Despard hated herself for hinting that perhaps Mrs. Eden did not know everything.

"I don't know what you mean, madam." The puce bodice was visibly moved. "That was *my* baby, bless his little heart. Poor Ellen's a respectable girl—she's been with me since she was a little trot of six—all except the eleven months she was away with you—and then my Fred see her to the door, and fetched her from your station. She *would* go—though not *our* wish. I suppose she wanted a change. But since then she's never been over an hour away, except when she took my Gustavus over to see you. She must have told you whose he was—but I suppose you weren't paying attention. And I must say I don't think it's becoming in you, if you'll excuse me saying so, to come here taking away a young girl's character. At least, if she's not so young as she was, of course—we none of us are, not even yourself, madam, if you'll pardon me saying so."

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Despard. She had never felt so helpless—so silly. The absurd parlour, ponderous with plush, dusky with double curtains, had for her all the effect of a nightmare.

She felt that she was swimming blindly in a sea of disenchantment.

"Don't think me inquisitive," she said, "but Miss Eden was engaged, wasn't she, some time ago, to someone who was killed in South Africa?"

"Never—in all her born days," said Mrs. Eden, with emphasis. "I suppose it's

her looks. I've had a good many offers myself, though I'm not what you might call anything out of the way—but poor Ellen—never had so much as a nibble."

Mrs. Despard gasped. She clung against reason to the one spar of hope in this sea of faiths dissolved. It might be—it must be—some mistake!

"You see, poor Ellen"—Mrs. Eden made as much haste to smash up the spar as though she had seen it—"poor Ellen, when her mother and father died she was but six. There was only her and my Fred, so naturally we took her, and what little money the old lady left we spent on her, sending her to a good school, and never counting the bit of clothes and victuals. She was always for learning something, and above her station, and the Rev. Mrs. Peterson at St. Michael, and All Angels—she made a sort of pet of Ellen, and set her up, more than a bit."

Mrs. Despard remembered that Mrs. Peterson had been Miss Eden's reference.

"And then she *would* come to you—though welcome to share along with us, and you can see for yourself it's a good business—and when that little bit was left her, of course, she'd no need to work, so she came home here, and I must say she's always been as handy a girl and obliging as you could wish, but wandering, too, in her thoughts. Always pens and ink. I shouldn't wonder but what she wrote poetry. Yards and yards of writing she does. I don't know what she does with it all."

But Mrs. Despard knew.

Mrs. Eden talked on gaily and gladly—till not even a straw was left for her hearer to cling to.

"Thank you very much," she said. "I see it was all a mistake. I must have been wrong about the address." She spoke hurriedly—for she had heard in the shop a step that she knew.

For one moment a white face peered in at the glass door—then vanished; it was Miss Eden's face—her face as it had been when she told of her lost lover who died waving his sword at Elendslaagte! But the telling of that tale had moved Mrs. Despard to no such passion of pity as this. For from that face now something was blotted out, and the lack of it was piteous beyond thought.

"Thank you very much. I am so sorry to have troubled you," she said, and somehow got out of the plush parlour, and through the shop, fruit-filled, orange-

scented.

At the station there was still time, and too much time. The bookstall yielded pencil, paper, envelope, and stamp. She wrote—

"Ella, dear, whatever happens, I am always your friend. Let me know—can I do anything for you? I know all about everything now. But don't think I'm angry—I am only so sorry for you, dear—so very, very sorry. Do let me help you."

She addressed the letter to Miss Eden at the greengrocer's. Afterwards she thought that she had better have left it alone. It could do no good, and it might mean trouble with her sister-in-law, for Miss Eden, late Mrs. Cave, the happy wife and mother. She need not have troubled herself—for the letter came back a week later with a note from Mrs. Eden of the bursting, bright-buttoned, velvet bodice. Ellen had gone away—no one knew where she had gone.

Mrs. Despard will always reproach herself for not having rushed towards the white face that peered through the glass door. She could have done something—anything. So she thinks, but I am not sure.

"And it was none of it true, Bill," she said piteously, when, Mabel and Gracie safely tucked up in bed, she told him all about it. "I don't know how she could. No dead lover—no retired tea-broker—no pretty house, and sweet-brier hedge with ... and no Baby."

"She was a lying lunatic," said Bill. "I never liked her. Hark! what's that? All right, Love-a-duck—daddy's here!"

He went up the stairs three at a time to catch up his baby, who had a way of wandering, with half-awake wailings, out of her crib in the small hours.

"All right, Kiddie-winks, daddy's got you," he murmured, coming back into the drawing-room with the little soft, warm, flannelly bundle cuddled close to him.

"She's asleep again already," he said, settling her comfortably in his arms. "Don't worry any more about that Eden girl, Molly—she's not worth it."

His wife knelt beside him and buried her face against his waistcoat and

against the little flannel night-gown.

"Oh, Bill," she said, and her voice was thick with tears, "don't say things like that. Don't you see? It was cruel, cruel! She was all alone—no mother, no sister, no lover. She was made so that no one could ever love her. And she wanted love so much—so frightfully much, so that she just *had* to pretend that she had it."

"And what about the Baby?" asked Mr. Despard, taking one arm from his own baby to pass it round his wife's shoulders. "Don't be a darling idiot, Molly. What about the Baby?"

"Oh—don't you see?" Mrs. Despard was sobbing now in good earnest. "She wanted the Baby more than anything else. Oh—don't say horrid things about her, Bill! We've got everything—and she'd got nothing at all—don't say things—don't!"

Mr. Despard said nothing. He thumped his wife sympathetically on the back. It was the baby who spoke.

"Want mammy," she said sleepily, and at the transfer remembered her father, "and daddy too," she added politely.

Miss Eden was somewhere or other. Wherever she was she was alone.

And these three were together.

"I daresay you're right about that girl," said Mr. Despard. "Poor wretch! By Jove, she was ugly!"

THE LOVER, THE GIRL, AND THE ONLOOKER

The two were alone in the grassy courtyard of the ruined castle. The rest of the picnic party had wandered away from them, or they from it. Out of the green-grown mound of fallen masonry by the corner of the chapel a great may-bush grew, silvered and pearly on every scented, still spray. The sky was deep, clear, strong blue above, and against the blue, the wallflowers shone bravely from the cracks and crevices of ruined arch and wall and buttress.

"They shine like gold," she said. "I wish one could get at them!"

"Do you want some?" he said, and on the instant his hand had found a strong jutting stone, his foot a firm ledge—and she saw his figure, grey flannel against grey stone, go up the wall towards the yellow flowers.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "I don't *really* want them—please not—I wish—"

Then she stopped, because he was already some twelve feet from the ground, and she knew that one should not speak to a man who is climbing ruined walls. So she clasped her hands and waited, and her heart seemed to go out like a candle in the wind, and to leave only a dark, empty, sickening space where, a moment before, it had beat in anxious joy. For she loved him, had loved him these two years, had loved him since the day of their first meeting. And that was just as long as he had loved her. But he had never told his love. There is a code of honour, right or wrong, and it forbids a man with an income of a hundred and fifty a year to speak of love to a girl who is reckoned an heiress. There are plenty who transgress the code, but they are in all the other stories. He drove his passion on the curb, and mastered it. Yet the questions—Does she love me? Does she know I love her? Does she wonder why I don't speak? and the counter-questions—Will she think I don't care? Doesn't she perhaps care at all? Will she marry someone else before I've earned the right to try to make her love me? afforded a see-saw of reflection, agonising enough, for those small hours of wakefulness when we let our emotions play the primitive games with us. But always the morning brought strength to keep to his resolution. He saw her three times a year, when Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer brought her to stay with an aunt, brought him home to his people for holidays. And though he had denied

himself the joy of speaking in words, he had let his eyes speak more than he knew. And now he had reached the wallflowers high up, and was plucking them and throwing them down so that they fell in a wavering bright shower round her feet. She did not pick them up. Her eyes were on him; and the empty place where her heart used to be seemed to swell till it almost choked her.

He was coming down now. He was only about twenty-five feet from the ground. There was no sound at all but the grating of his feet as he set them on the stones, and the movement, now and then, of a bird in the ivy. Then came a rustle, a gritty clatter, loud falling stones: his foot had slipped, and he had fallen. No—he was hanging by his hands above the great refectory arch, and his body swung heavily with the impetus of the checked fall. He was moving along now, slowly—hanging by his hands; now he grasped an ivy root—another—and pulled himself up till his knee was on the moulding of the arch. She would never have believed anyone who had told her that only two minutes had been lived between the moment of his stumble and the other moment when his foot touched the grass and he came towards her among the fallen wallflowers. She was a very nice girl and not at all forward, and I cannot understand or excuse her conduct. She made two steps towards him with her hands held out—caught him by the arms just above the elbow—shook him angrily, as one shakes a naughty child—looked him once in the eyes and buried her face in his neck—sobbing long, dry, breathless sobs.

Even then he tried to be strong.

"Don't!" he said tenderly, "don't worry. It's all right—I was a fool. Pull yourself together—there's someone coming."

"I don't care," she said, for the touch of his cheek, pressed against her hair, told her all that she wanted to know. "Let them come, I don't care! Oh, how could you be so silly and horrid? Oh, thank God, thank God! Oh, how could you?"

Of course, a really honourable young man would have got out of the situation somehow. He didn't. He accepted it, with his arms round her and his lips against the face where the tears now ran warm and salt. It was one of the immortal moments.

The picture was charming, too—a picture to wring the heart of the onlooker with envy, or sympathy, according to his nature. But there was only one onlooker, a man of forty, or thereabouts, who paused for an instant under the

great gate of the castle and took in the full charm and meaning of the scene. He turned away, and went back along the green path with hell in his heart. The other two were in Paradise. The Onlooker fell like the third in Eden—the serpent, in fact. Two miles away he stopped and lit a pipe.

"It's got to be borne, I suppose," he said, "like all the rest of it. *She's* happy enough. I ought to be glad. Anyway, I can't stop it." Perhaps he swore a little. If he did, the less precise and devotional may pardon him. He had loved the Girl since her early teens, and it was only yesterday's post that had brought him the appointment that one might marry on. The appointment had come through her father, for whom the Onlooker had fagged at Eton. He went back to London, hell burning briskly. Moral maxims and ethereal ideas notwithstanding, it was impossible for him to be glad that she was happy—like that.

The Lover who came to his love over strewn wallflowers desired always, as has been seen, to act up to his moral ideas. So he took next day a much earlier train than was at all pleasant, and called on her father to explain his position and set forth his prospects. His coming was heralded by a letter from her. One must not quote it—it is not proper to read other people's letters, especially letters to a trusted father, from a child, only and adored. Its effect may be indicated briefly. It showed the father that the Girl's happiness had had two long years in which to learn to grow round the thought of the young man, whom he now faced for the first time. Odd, for to the father he seemed just like other young men. It seemed to him that there were so many more of the same pattern from whom she might have chosen. And many of them well off, too. However, the letter lay in the prosperous pocket-book in the breast of the father's frock-coat, and the Lover was received as though that letter were a charm to ensure success. A faulty, or at least a slow-working, charm, however, for the father did not lift a bag of gold from his safe and say: "Take her, take this also—be happy"—he only consented to a provisional engagement, took an earnest interest in the young man's affairs, and offered to make his daughter an annual allowance on her marriage.

"At my death she will have more," he said, "for, of course, I have insured my life. You, of course, will insure yours."

"Of course I will," the Lover echoed warmly; "does it matter what office?"

"Oh, any good office—the Influential, if you like. I'm a director, you know."

The young man made a reverent note of the name, and the interview seemed played out.

"It's a complicated nuisance," the father mused; "it isn't even as if I knew anything of the chap. I oughtn't to have allowed the child to make these long visits to her aunt. Or I ought to have gone with her. But I never could stand my sister Fanny. Well, well," and he went back to his work with the plain unvarnished heartache of the anxious father—not romantic and pretty like the lover's pangs, but as uncomfortable as toothache, all the same.

He had another caller that afternoon; he whom we know as the Onlooker came to thank him for the influence that had got him the appointment as doctor to the Influential Insurance Company.

The father opened his heart to the Onlooker—and the Onlooker had to bear it. It was an hour full of poignant sentiments. The only definite thought that came to the Onlooker was this—"I must hold my tongue. I must hold my tongue." He held it.

Three days later he took up his new work. And the very first man who came to him for medical examination was the man in whose arms he had seen the girl he loved.

The Onlooker asked the first needful questions automatically. To himself he was saying: "The situation is dramatically good; but I don't see how to develop the action. It really is rather amusing that I—I should have to tap his beastly chest, and listen to his cursed lungs, and ask sympathetic questions about his idiotic infant illnesses—one thing, he ought to be able to remember those pretty vividly—the confounded pup."

The Onlooker had never done anything wronger than you have done, my good reader, and he never expected to meet a giant temptation, any more than you do. A man may go all his days and never meet Apollyon. On the other hand, Apollyon may be waiting for one round the corner of the next street. The devil was waiting for the Onlooker in the answers to his careless questions—"Father alive? No? What did he die of?" For the answer was "Heart," and in it the devil rose and showed the Onlooker the really only true and artistic way to develop the action in this situation, so dramatic in its possibilities. The illuminative flash of temptation was so sudden, so brilliant, that the Doctor-Onlooker closed his soul's

eyes and yielded without even the least pretence of resistance.

He took his stethoscope from the table, and he felt as though he had picked up a knife to stab the other man in the back. As, in fact, he had.

Ten minutes later, the stabbed man was reeling from the Onlooker's consulting room. Mind and soul reeled, that is, but his body was stiffer and straighter than usual. He walked with more than his ordinary firmness of gait, as a man does who is just drunk enough to know that he must try to look sober.

He walked down the street, certain words ringing in his ears—"Heart affected—probably hereditary weakness. No office in the world would insure you."

And so it was all over—the dreams, the hopes, the palpitating faith in a beautiful future. His days might be long, they might be brief; but be his life long or short, he must live it alone. He had a little fight with himself as he went down Wimpole Street; then he hailed a hansom, and went and told her father, who quite agreed with him that it was all over. The father wondered at himself for being more sorry than glad.

Then the Lover went and told the Girl. He had told the father first to insure himself against any chance of yielding to what he knew the Girl would say. She said it, of course, with her dear arms round his neck.

"I won't give you up just because you're ill," she said; "why, you want me more than ever!"

"But I may die at any moment."

"So may I! And you may live to be a hundred—I'll take my chance. Oh, don't you see, too, that if there *is* only a little time we ought to spend it together?"

"It's impossible," he said, "it's no good. I must set my teeth and bear it. And you—I hope it won't be as hard for you as it will for me."

"But you *can't* give me up if I won't *be* given up, can you?"

His smile struck her dumb. It was more convincing than his words.

"But why?" she said presently. "Why—why—*why*?"

"Because I won't; because it's wrong. My father ought never to have married. He had no right to bring me into the world to suffer like this. It's a crime. And I'll

not be a criminal. Not even for you—not even for you. You'll forgive me—won't you? I didn't know—and—oh, what's the use of talking?"

Yet they talked for hours. Conventionally he should have torn himself away, unable to bear the strain of his agony. As a matter of fact, he sat by her holding her hand. It was for the last time—the last, last time. There was really a third at that interview. The Onlooker had imagination enough to see the scene between the parting lovers.

They parted.

And now the Onlooker dared not meet her—dared not call at the house as he had used to do. At last—the father pressed him—he went. He met her. And it was as though he had met the ghost of her whom he had loved. Her eyes had blue marks under them, her chin had grown more pointed, her nose sharper. There was a new line on her forehead, and her eyes had changed.

Over the wine he heard from the father that she was pining for the Lover who had inherited heart disease.

"I suppose it was you who saw him, by the way," said he, "a tall, well-set-up young fellow—dark—not bad looking."

"I—I don't remember," lied the Onlooker, with the eyes of his memory on the white face of the man he had stabbed.

Now the Lover and the Onlooker had each his own burden to bear. And the Lover's was the easier. He worked still, though there was now nothing to work for more; he worked as he had never worked in his life, because he knew that if he did not take to work he should take to drink or worse devils, and he set his teeth and swore that her Lover should not be degraded. He knew that she loved him, and there was a kind of fierce pain-pleasure—like that of scratching a sore—in the thought that she was as wretched as he was, that, divided in all else, they were yet united in their suffering. He thought it made him more miserable to know of her misery. But it didn't. He never saw her, but he dreamed of her, and sometimes the dreams got out of hand, and carried him a thousand worlds from all that lay between them. Then he had to wake up. And that was bad.

But the Onlooker was no dreamer, and he saw her about three times a week. He saw how the light of life that his lying lips had blown out was not to be rekindled by his or any man's breath. He saw her slenderness turn to thinness, the

pure, healthy pallor of her rounded cheek change to a sickly white, covering a clear-cut mask of set endurance. And there was no work that could shut out that sight—no temptation of the world, the flesh, or the devil to give him even the relief of a fight. He had no temptations; he had never had but the one. His soul was naked to the bitter wind of the actual; and the days went by, went by, and every day he knew more and more surely that he had lied and thrown away his soul, and that the wages of sin were death, and no other thing whatever. And gradually, little by little, the whole worth of life seemed to lie in the faint, far chance of his being able to undo the one triumphantly impulsive and unreasoning action of his life.

But there are some acts that there is no undoing. And the hell that had burned in his heart so fiercely when he had seen her in the other man's arms burned now with new bright lights and infernal flickering flame tongues.

And at last, out of hell, the Onlooker reached out his hands and caught at prayer. He caught at it as a drowning man catches at a white gleam in the black of the surging sea about him—it may be a painted spar, it may be empty foam. The Onlooker prayed.

And that very evening he ran up against the Lover at the Temple Station, and he got into the same carriage with him.

He said, "Excuse me. You don't remember me?"

"I'm not likely to have forgotten you," said the Lover.

"I fear my verdict was a great blow. You look very worried, very ill. News like that is a great shock."

"It *is* a little unsettling," said the Lover.

"Are you still going on with your usual work?"

"Yes."

"Speaking professionally, I think you are wrong. You lessen your chances of life! Why don't you try a complete change?"

"Because—if you must know, my chances of life have ceased to interest me."

The Lover was short with the Onlooker; but he persisted.

"Well, if one isn't interested in one's life, one may be interested in one's death—or the manner of it. In your place, I should enlist. It's better to die of a bullet in South Africa than of fright in London."

That roused the Lover, as it was meant to do.

"I don't really know what business it is of yours, sir," he said; "but it's your business to know that they wouldn't pass a man with a heart like mine."

"I don't know. They're not so particular just now. They want men. I should try it if I were you. If you don't have a complete change you'll go all to pieces. That's all."

The Onlooker got out at the next station. Short of owning to his own lie, he had done what he could to insure its being found out for the lie it was—or, at least, for a mistake. And when he had done what he could, he saw that the Lover might not find it out—might be passed for the Army—might go to the Front—might be killed—and then—"Well, I've done my best, anyhow," he said to himself—and himself answered him: "Liar—you have *not* done your best! You will have to eat your lie. Yes—though it will smash your life and ruin you socially and professionally. You will have to tell him you lied—and tell him why. You will never let him go to South Africa without telling him the truth—and you know it."

"Well—you know best, I suppose," he said to himself.

"But are you perfectly certain?"

"Perfectly. I tell you, man, you're sound's a bell, and a fine fathom of a young man ye are, too. Certain? Losh, man—ye can call in the whole College of Physeecians in consultation, an' I'll wager me professional reputation they'll endorse me opeenion. Yer hairt's as sound's a roach. T'other man must ha' been asleep when ye consulted him. Ye'll mak' a fine soldier, my lad."

"I think not," said the Lover—and he went out from the presence. This time he reeled like a man too drunk to care how drunk he looks.

He drove in cabs from Harley Street to Wimpole Street, and from Wimpole Street to Brooke Street—and he saw Sir William this and Sir Henry that, and Mr.

The-other-thing, the great heart specialist.

And then he bought a gardenia, and went home and dressed himself in his most beautiful frock-coat and his softest white silk tie, and put the gardenia in his button-hole—and went to see the Girl.

"Looks like as if he was going to a wedding," said his landlady.

When he had told the Girl everything, and when she was able to do anything but laugh and cry and cling to him with thin hands, she said—

"Dear—I do so hate to think badly of anyone. But do you really think that man was mistaken? He's very, very clever."

"My child—Sir Henry—and Sir William and Mr.—"

"Ah! I don't mean *that*. I *know* you're all right. Thank God! Oh, thank God! I mean, don't you think he may have lied to you to prevent your—marrying me?"

"But why should he?"

"He asked me to marry him three weeks ago. He's a very old friend of ours. I do hate to be suspicious—but—it is odd. And then his trying to get you to South Africa. I'm certain he wanted you out of the way. He wanted you to get killed. Oh, how can people be so cruel!"

"I believe you're right," said the Lover thoughtfully; "I couldn't have believed that a man could be base like that, through and through. But I suppose some people *are* like that—without a gleam of feeling or remorse or pity."

"You ought to expose him."

"Not I—we'll just cut him. That's all I'll trouble to do. I've got *you*—I've got you in spite of him—I can't waste my time in hunting down vermin."

THE DUEL

"**B**UT I wasn't doing any harm," she urged piteously. She looked like a child just going to cry.

"He was holding your hand."

"He wasn't—I was holding his. I was telling him his fortune. And, anyhow, it's not your business."

She had remembered this late and phrased it carelessly.

"It is my Master's business," said he.

She repressed the retort that touched her lips. After all, there was something fine about this man, who, in the first month of his ministrations as Parish Priest, could actually dare to call on her, the richest and most popular woman in the district, and accuse her of—well, most people would hardly have gone so far as to call it flirting. Propriety only knew what the Reverend Christopher Cassilis might be disposed to call it.

They sat in the pleasant fire-lit drawing-room looking at each other.

"He's got a glorious face," she thought. "Like a Greek god—or a Christian martyr! I wonder whether he's ever been in love?"

He thought: "She is abominably pretty. I suppose beauty *is* a temptation."

"Well," she said impatiently, "you've been very rude indeed, and I've listened to you. Is your sermon quite done? Have you any more to say? Or shall I give you some tea?"

"I have more to say," he answered, turning his eyes from hers. "You are beautiful and young and rich—you have a kind heart—oh, yes—I've heard little things in the village already. You are a born general. You organise better than any woman I ever knew, though it's only dances and picnics and theatricals and concerts. You have great gifts. You could do great work in the world, and you throw it all away; you give your life to the devil's dance you call pleasure. Why

do you do it?"

"Is that your business too?" she asked again.

And again he answered—

"It is my Master's business."

Had she read his words in a novel they would have seemed to her priggish, unnatural, and superlatively impertinent. Spoken by those thin, perfectly curved lips, they were at least interesting.

"That wasn't what you began about," she said, twisting the rings on her fingers. The catalogue of her gifts and graces was less a novelty to her than the reproaches to her virtue.

"No—am I to repeat what I began about? Ah—but I will. I began by saying what I came here to say: that you, as a married woman, have no right to turn men's heads and make them long for what can never be."

"But you don't know," she said. "My husband—"

"I don't wish to know," he interrupted. "Your husband is alive, and you are bound to be faithful to him, in thought, word, and deed. What I saw and heard in the little copse last night—"

"I do wish you wouldn't," she said. "You talk as if—"

"No," he said, "I'm willing—even anxious, I think—to believe that you would not—could not—"

"Oh," she cried, jumping up, "this is intolerable! How dare you!"

He had risen too.

"I'm not afraid of you," he said. "I'm not afraid of your anger, nor of your—your other weapons. Think what you are! Think of your great powers—and you are wasting them all in making fools of a pack of young idiots—"

"But what could I do with my gifts—as you call them?"

"Do?—why, you could endow and organise and run any one of a hundred schemes for helping on God's work in the world."

"For instance?" Her charming smile enraged him.

"For instance? Well—*for instance*—you might start a home for those women who began as you have begun, and who have gone down into hell, as you will go—unless you let yourself be warned."

She was for the moment literally speechless. Then she remembered how he had said: "I am not afraid of—your weapons." She drew a deep breath and spoke gently—

"I believe you don't mean to be insulting—I believe you mean kindly to me. Please say no more now. I'll think over it all. I'm not angry—only—do you really think you understand everything?"

He might have answered that he did not understand her. She did not mean him to understand. She knew well enough that she was giving him something to puzzle over when she smiled that beautiful, troubled, humble, appealing half-smile.

He did not answer at all. He stood a moment twisting his soft hat in his hands: she admired his hands very much.

"Forgive me if I've pained you more than was needed," he said at last, "it is only because—" here her smile caught him, and he ended vaguely in a decreasing undertone. She heard the words "king's jewels," "pearl of great price."

When he was gone she said "*Well!*" more than once. Then she ran to the low mirror over the mantelpiece, and looked earnestly at herself.

"You do look rather nice to-day," she said. "And so he's not afraid of any of your weapons! And I'm not afraid of any of his. It's a fair duel. Only all the provocation came from him—so the choice of weapons is mine. And they shall be *my* weapons: he has weapons to match them right enough, only the poor dear doesn't know it." She went away to dress for dinner, humming gaily—

"My love has breath o' roses,
O' roses, o' roses;
And arms like lily posies
To fold a lassie in!"

Not next day—she was far too clever for that, but on the day after that he

received a note. Her handwriting was charming; no extravagances, every letter soberly but perfectly formed.

"I have been thinking of all you said the other day. You are quite mistaken about some things—but in some you are right. Will you show me how to work? I will do whatever you tell me."

Then the Reverend Christopher was glad of the courage that had inspired him to denounce to his parishioners all that seemed to him amiss in them.

"I am glad," he said to himself, "that I had the courage to treat her exactly as I have done the others—even if she *has* beautiful hair, and eyes like—like—"

He stopped the thought before he found the simile—not because he imagined that there could be danger in it, but because he had been trained to stop thoughts of eyes and hair as neatly as a skilful boxer stops a blow.

She had not been so trained, and she admired his eyes and hair quite as much as he might have admired hers if she had not been married.

So now the Reverend Christopher had a helper in his parish work; and he needed help, for his plain-speaking had already offended half his parish. And his helper was, as he had had the sense to know she could be, the most accomplished organiser in the country. She ran the parish library, she arranged the school treat, she started evening classes for wood carving and art needlework. She spent money like water, and time as freely as money. Quietly, persistently, relentlessly, she was making herself necessary to the Reverend Christopher. He wrote to her every day—there were so many instructions to give—but he seldom spoke with her. When he called she was never at home. Sometimes they met in the village and exchanged a few sentences. She was always gravely sweet, intensely earnest. There was a certain smile which he remembered—a beautiful, troubled, appealing smile. He wondered why she smiled no more.

Her friends shrugged their shoulders over her new fancy.

"It is odd," her bosom friend said. "It can't be the parson, though he's as beautiful as he can possibly be, because she sees next to nothing of him. And yet I can't think that Betty of all people could really—"

"Oh—I don't know," said the bosom friend of her bosom friend. "Women often do take to that sort of thing, you know, when they get tired of—"

"Of?"

"The other sort of thing, don't you know!"

"How horrid you are," said Betty's bosom friend. "I believe you're a most dreadful cynic, really."

"Not at all," said the friend, complacently stroking his moustache.

Betty certainly was enjoying herself. She had the great gift of enjoying thoroughly any new game. She enjoyed, first, the newness; and, besides, the hidden lining of her new masquerade dress enchanted her. But as her new industries developed she began to enjoy the things for themselves. It is always delightful to do what we can do well, and the Reverend Christopher had been right when he said she was a born general.

"How easy it all is," she said, "and what a fuss those clergy-hags make about it! What a wife I should be for a bishop!" She smiled and sighed.

It was pleasant, too, to wake in the morning, not to the recollection of the particular stage which yesterday's flirtation happened to have reached, but to the sense of some difficulty overcome, some object achieved, some rough place made smooth for her Girls' Friendly, or her wood carvers, or her Parish Magazine. And within it all the secret charm of a purpose transfiguring with its magic this eager, strenuous, working life.

Her avoidance of the Reverend Christopher struck him at first as modest, discreet, and in the best possible taste. But presently it seemed to him that she rather overdid it. There were many things he would have liked to discuss with her, but she always evaded talk with him. Why? he began to ask himself why. And the question wormed through his brain more and more searchingly. He had seen her at work now; he knew her powers, and her graces—the powers and the graces that made her the adored of her Friendly girls and her carving boys. He remembered, with hot ears and neck crimson above his clerical collar, that interview. The things he had said to her! How could he have done it? Blind idiot that he had been! And she had taken it all so sweetly, so nobly, so humbly. She had only needed a word to turn her from the frivolities of the world to better things. It need not have been the sort of word he had used. And at a word she had turned. That it should have been at *his* word was not perhaps a very subtle flattery—but the Reverend Christopher swallowed it and never tasted it. He was not trained to distinguish the flavours of flatteries. He never tasted it, but it

worked in his blood, for all that. And why, why, why would she never speak to him? Could it be that she was afraid that he would speak to her now as he had once spoken? He blushed again.

Next time he met her she was coming up to the church with a big basket of flowers for the altar. He took the basket from her and carried it in.

"Let me help you," he said.

"No," she said in that sweet, simple, grave way of hers. "I can do it very well. Indeed, I would rather."

He had to go. The arrangement of the flowers took more than an hour, but when she came out with the empty basket, he was waiting in the porch. Her heart gave a little joyful jump.

"I want to speak to you," said he.

"I'm rather late," she said, as usual; "couldn't you write?"

"No," he said, "I can't write this. Sit down a moment in the porch."

She loved the masterfulness of his tone. He stood before her.

"I want you to forgive me for speaking to you as I did—once. I'm afraid you're afraid that I shall behave like that again. You needn't be."

"Score number one," she said to herself. Aloud she said—

"I am not afraid," and she said it sweetly, seriously.

"I was wrong," he went on eagerly. "I was terribly wrong. I see it quite plainly now. You do forgive me—don't you?"

"Yes," said she soberly, and sighed.

There was a little silence. Her serious eyes watched the way of the wind dimpling the tall, feathery grass that grew above the graves.

"Are you unhappy?" he asked; "you never smile now."

"I am too busy to smile, I suppose!" she said, and smiled the beautiful, humble, appealing smile he had so longed to see again, though he had not known the longing by its right name.

"Can't we be friends?" he ventured. "You—I am afraid you can never trust me again."

"Yes, I can," she said. "It was very bitter at the time, but I thought it was so brave of you—and kind, too—to care what became of me. If you remember, I did want to trust you, even on that dreadful day, but you wouldn't let me."

"I was a brute," he said remorsefully.

"I do want to tell you one thing. Even if that boy had been holding my hand I should have thought I had a right to let him, if I liked—just as much as though I were a girl, or a widow."

"I don't understand. But tell me—please tell me anything you *will* tell me." His tone was very humble.

"My husband was a beast," she said calmly. "He betrayed me, he beat me, he had every vile quality a man can have. No, I'll be just to him: he was always good tempered when he was drunk. But when he was sober he used to beat me and pinch me—"

"But—but you could have got a separation, a divorce," he gasped.

"A separation wouldn't have freed me—really. And the Church doesn't believe in divorce," she said demurely. "*I* did, however, and I left him, and instructed a solicitor. But the brute went mad before I could get free from him; and now, I suppose, I'm tied for life to a mad dog."

"Good God!" said the Reverend Christopher.

"I thought it all out—oh, many, many nights!—and I made up my mind that I would go out and enjoy myself. I never had a good time when I was a girl. And another thing I decided—quite definitely—that if ever I fell in love I would—I should have the right to—I mean that I wouldn't let a horrible, degraded brute of a lunatic stand between me and the man I loved. And I was quite sure that I was right."

"And do you still think this?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ah," she said, "you've changed everything! I don't think the same about anything as I used to do. I think those two years with him must have made me nearly as mad as he is. And then I was so young! I am only twenty-three now,

you know—and it did seem hard never to have had any fun. I did want so much to be happy."

She had not intended to speak like this, but even as she spoke she saw that this truth-telling far outshone the lamp of lies she had trimmed ready.

"You *will* be happy," he said; "there are better things in the world than—"

"Yes," she said; "oh, yes!"

Betty did nothing by halves. She had kept a barrier between her and him till she had excited him to break it down. The barrier once broken, she let it lie where he had thrown it, and became, all at once, in the most natural, matter-of-fact, guileless way, his friend.

She consulted him about everything. Let him call when he would, she always received him. She surrounded him with the dainty feminine spider webs from which his life, almost monastic till now, had been quite free. She imported a knitting aunt, so that he should not take fright at long tête-à-têtes. The knitting aunt was deafish and blindish, and did not walk much in the rose garden. Betty knew a good deal about roses, and she taught the Reverend Christopher all she knew. She knew a little of the hearts of men, and she gently pushed him on the road to forgiveness from that half of the parish whom his first enthusiastic denunciations had offended. She rounded his angles. She turned a wayward ascetic into a fairly good parish priest. And he talked to her of ideals and honour and the service of God and the work of the world. And she listened, and her beauty spoke to him so softly that he did not know that he heard.

One day after long silence she turned quickly and met his eyes. After that she ceased to spin webs, for she saw. Yet she was as blind as he, though she did not know it any more than he did.

At last he saw, in his turn, and the flash of the illumination nearly blinded him.

It was late evening: Betty was nailing up a trailing rose, and he was standing by the ladder holding the nails and the snippets of scarlet cloth. The ladder slipped, and he caught her in his arms. As soon as she had assured him that she was not hurt, he said good night and left her.

Betty went indoors and cried. "What a pity!" she said. "Oh, what a pity! Now he'll be frightened, and it's all over. He'll never come again."

But the next evening he came, and when they had walked through the rose garden and had come to the sun-dial he stopped and spoke—

"I've been thinking of nothing else since I saw you. When I caught you last night. Forgive me if I'm a fool—but when I held you—don't be angry—but it seemed to me that you loved me—"

"Nothing of the sort," said Betty very angrily.

"Then I must be mad," he said; "the way you caught my neck with your arm, and your face was against mine, and your hair crushed up against my ear. Oh, Betty, if you don't love me, what shall I do? For I can't live without you."

Betty had won.

"But—even if I had loved you—I'm married," she urged softly.

"Yes—do you suppose I've forgotten that? But you remember what you said—about being really free, and not being bound to that beast. I see that you were right—right, right. It's the rest of the world that's wrong. Oh, my dear—I can't live without you. Couldn't you love me? Let's go away—right away together. No one will love you as I do. No one knows you as I do—how good and strong and brave and unselfish you are. Oh, try to love me a little!"

Betty had leaned her elbows on the sun-dial, and her chin on her hands.

"But you used to think ..." she began.

"Ah—but I know better now. You've taught me everything. Only I never knew it till last night when I touched you. It was like a spark to a bonfire that I've been piling up ever since I've known you. You've taught me what life is, and love. Love can't be wrong. It's only wrong when it's stealing. We shouldn't be robbing anybody. We should both work better—happiness makes people work—I see that now. I should have to give up parish work—but there's plenty of good work wants doing. Why, I've nearly finished that book of mine. I've worked at it night after night—with the thought of you hidden behind the work. If you were my wife, what work I could do! Oh, Betty, if you only loved me!"

She lifted her face and looked at him gravely. He flung his arm round her shoulders and turned her face up to his. She was passive to his kisses. At last she kissed him, once, and drew herself from his arms.

"Come," she said.

She led him to the garden seat in the nut-avenue.

"Now," she said, when he had taken his place beside her, "I'm going to tell you the whole truth. I was very angry with you when you came to me that first day. You were quite right. That boy had been holding my hand: what's more, he had been kissing it. It amused me, and if it hurt him I didn't care. Then you came. And you said things. And then you said you weren't afraid of me or my weapons. It was a challenge. And I determined to make you love me. It was all planned, the helping in your work—and keeping out of your way at first was to make you wish to see me. And, you see, I succeeded. You *did* love me."

"I do," he said. He caught her hand and held it fiercely. "I deserved it all. I was a brute to you."

"I meant you to love me—and you did love me. I lied to you in almost everything—at first."

"About that man—was that a lie?" he asked fiercely.

"No," she laughed drearily. "That was true enough. You see, it was more effective than any lie I could have invented. No lie could have added a single horror to *that* story! And so I've won—as I swore I would!"

"Is that all," he said, "all the truth?"

"It's all there's any need for," she said.

"I want it all. I want to know where I am—whether I really was mad last night. Betty—in spite of all your truth I can't believe one thing. I can't believe that you don't love me."

"Man's vanity," she began, with a flippant laugh.

"Don't!" he said harshly. "How dare you try to play with me? Man's vanity! But it's your honour! I know you love me. If you didn't you would be—"

"How do you know I'm not?"

"Silence," he said. "If you can't speak the truth hold your tongue and let me speak it. I love you—and you love me—and we are going to be happy."

"I will speak the truth," said Betty, giving him her other hand. "You love me—and I love you, and we are going to be miserable. Yes—I will speak. Dear, I can't do it. Not even for you. I used to think I thought I could. I was bitter. I think I wanted to be revenged on life and God and everything. I thought I didn't believe in God, but I wanted to spite Him all the same. But when you came—after that day in the porch—when you came and talked to me about all the good and beautiful things—why, then I knew that I really did believe in them, and I began to love you because you had believed them all the time, and because... And I didn't try to make you love me—after that day in the porch—at least, not very much—oh, I do want to speak the truth! I used to try so *not* to try. I—I did want you to love me, though; I didn't want you to love anyone else. I wanted you to love me just enough to make you happy, and not enough to make you miserable. And so long as you didn't know you loved me it was all right: and when you caught me last night I knew that you would know, and it would be all over. You made up your mind to teach me that there are better things in the world than love—truth and honour and—and—things like that. And you've taught it me. It was a duel, and you've won."

"And you meant to teach me that love is stronger than anything in the world. And you have won too."

"Yes," she said, "we've both won. That's the worst of it—or the best."

"What is to become of us?" he said. "Oh, my dear—what are we to do? Do you forgive me? If you are right, I must be wrong—but I can't see anything now except that I want you so."

"I'm glad you loved me enough to be silly," she said; "but, oh, my dear, how glad I am that I love you too much to let you."

"But what are we to do?"

"Do? Nothing. Don't you see we've taught each other everything we know. We've given each other everything we can give. Isn't it good to love like this—even if this has to be all?"

"It's all very difficult," he said; "but everything shall be as you choose, only somehow I think it's worse for me than for you. I loved you before—and now I adore you. I seem to have made a saint of you—but you've made me a man."

One wishes with all one's heart that that lunatic would die. The situation is, one would say—impossible. Yet the lovers do not find it so. They work together, and parish scandal has almost ceased to patter about their names. There is a subtle pleasure for both in the ceremonious courtesy with which ever since that day they treat each other. It contrasts so splendidly with the living flame upon each heart-altar. So far the mutual passion has improved the character of each. All the same, one wishes that the lunatic would die—for she is not so much of a saint as he thinks her, and he is more of a man than she knows.

CINDERELLA

"HOOTS!" said the gardener, "there's nae sense in't. The suppression o' the truth's bad as a lee. Indeed, I doot mair hae been damned for t'ane than t'ither."

"Law! Mr. Murchison, you do use language, I'm sure!" tittered the parlourmaid.

"I say nae mair than the truth," he answered, cutting bloom after bloom quickly yet tenderly. "To bring hame a new mistress to the hoose and never to tell your bairn a word about the matter till all's made fast—it's a thing he'll hae to answer for to his Maker, I'm thinking. Here's the flowers, wumman; carry them canny. I'll send the lad up wi' the lave o' the flowers an' a bit green stuff in a wee meenit. And mind you your flaunting streamers agin the pots."

The parlourmaid gathered her skirts closely, and delicately tip-toed to the door of the hothouse. Here she took the basket of bright beauty from his hand and walked away across the green blaze of the lawn.

Mr. Murchison grunted relief. He was not fond of parlourmaids, no matter how pretty and streamered.

He left the hot, sweet air of the big hothouse and threaded his way among the glittering glasshouses to the potting-shed. At its door a sound caught his ear.

"Hoots!" he said again, but this time with a gentle, anxious intonation.

"Eh! ma lammie," said he, stepping quickly forward, "what deevilment hae ye been after the noo, and wha is't's been catching ye at it?"

The "lammie" crept out from under the potting-shelf; a pair of small arms went round Murchison's legs, and a little face, round and red and very dirty, was lifted towards his. He raised the child in his arms and set her on the shelf, so that she could lean her flushed face on his shirt-front.

"Toots, toots!" said he, "noo tell me—"

"It isn't true, is it?" said the child.

"Hoots!" said Murchison for the third time, but he said it under his breath. Aloud he said—

"Tell old Murchison a' about it, Miss Charling, dearie."

"It was when I wanted some more of the strawberries," she began, with another sob, "and the new cook said not, and I was a greedy little pig: and I said I'd rather be a greedy little pig than a spiteful old cat!" The tears broke out afresh.

"And you eight past! Ye should hae mair sense at siccan age than to ca' names." The head gardener spoke reprovingly, but he stroked her rough hair.

"I didn't—not one single name—not even when she said I was enough to make a cat laugh, even an old one—and she wondered any good servant ever stayed a week in the place."

"And what was ye sayin'?"

"I said, 'Guid ye may be, but ye're no bonny'—I've heard you say that, Murchison, so I know it wasn't wrong, and then she said I was a minx, and other things, and I wanted keeping in order, and it was a very good thing I had a new mamma coming home to-day, to keep me under a bit, and a lot more—and—and things about my own, own mother, and that father wouldn't love me any more. But it's not true, is it? Oh! it isn't true? She only just said it?"

"Ma lammie," said he gravely, kissing the top of the head nestled against him, "it's true that yer guid feyther, wha' never crossed ye except for yer ain sake syne the day ye were born, is bringing hame a guid wife the day, but ye mun be a wumman and no cry oot afore ye're hurted. I'll be bound it's a kind, genteel lady he's got, that'll love ye, and mak' much o' ye, and teach ye to sew fine—aye, an' play at the piano as like's no."

The child's mouth tightened resentfully, but Murchison did not see it.

"Noo, ye'll jest be a douce lassie," he went on, "and say me fair that ye'll never gie an unkind word tae yer feyther's new lady. Noo, promise me that, an' fine I ken ye'll keep tae it."

"No, I won't say anything unkind to her," she answered, and Murchison hugged himself on a victory, for a promise was sacred to Charling. He did not notice the child's voice as she gave it.

When the tears were quite dried he gave her a white geranium to plant in her own garden, and went back to his work.

Charling took the geranium with pretty thanks and kisses, but she felt it a

burden, none the less. For her mind was quite made up. When she had promised never to say anything unkind to her "father's new lady," she meant to keep the promise—by never speaking to her or seeing her at all. She meant to run away. How could she bear to be "kept under" by this strange lady, who would come and sit in her own mother's place, and wear her own mother's clothes, and no doubt presently burn her own mother's picture, and make Charling wash the dishes and sweep the kitchen like poor dear Cinderella in the story? True, Cinderella's misfortunes ended in marriage with a prince, but then Charling did not want to be married, and she had but little faith in princes, and, besides, she had no fairy godmother. Her godmother was dead, her own, own mother was dead, and only father was left; and now he had done this thing, and he would not want his Charling any more.

So Charling went indoors and washed her face and hands and smoothed her hair, which never would be smoothed, put a few treasures in her pocket—all her money, some coloured chinks, a stone with crystal inside that showed where it was broken, and went quietly out at the lodge gate, carrying the white geranium in her arms, because when you are running away you cannot possibly leave behind you the last gift of somebody who loves you. But the geranium in its pot was very heavy—and it seemed to get heavier and heavier as she walked along the dry, dusty road, so that presently Charling turned through the swing gate into the field-way, for the sake of the shadow of the hedge; and the field-way led past the church, and when she reached the low, mossy wall of the churchyard, she set the pot on it and rested. Then she said—

"I think I will leave it with mother to take care of." So she took the pot in her hands again and carried it to her mother's grave. Of course, they had told Charling that her mother was an angel now and was not in the churchyard at all, but in heaven; only heaven was a very long way off, and Charling preferred to think that mother was only asleep under the green counterpane with the daisies on it. There had been a green coverlet to the bed in mother's room, only it had white lilac on it, and not daisies. So Charling set down the pot, and she knelt down beside it, and wrote on it with a piece of blue chalk from her pocket: "*From Charling to mother to take care of.*" Then she cried a little bit more, because she was so sorry for herself; and then she smelt the thyme and wondered why the bees liked it better than white geraniums; and then she felt that she was very like a little girl in a book, and so she forgot to cry, and told herself that she was the third sister going out to seek her fortune.

After that it was easy to go on, especially when she had put the crystal stone,

which hung heavy and bumpy in the pocket, beside the geranium pot. Then she kissed the tombstone where it said, "Helen, beloved wife of——" and went away among the green graves in the sunshine.

Mother had died when she was only five, so that she could not remember her very well; but all these three years she had loved and thought of a kind, beautiful Something that was never tired and never cross, and always ready to kiss and love and forgive little girls, however naughty they were, and she called this something "mother" in her heart, and it was for this something that she left her kisses on the gravestone. And the gravestone was warm to her lips as she kissed it.

It was on a wide, furze-covered down, across which a white road wound like a twisted ribbon, that Charling's courage began to fail her. The white road looked so very long; there were no houses anywhere, and no trees, only far away across the down she saw the round tops of some big elms. "They look like cabbages," she said to herself.

She had walked quite a long way, and she was very tired. Her dinner of sweets and stale cakes from the greeny-glass bottles in the window of a village shop had not been so nice as she expected; the woman at the shop had been cross because Charling had no pennies, only the five-shilling piece father had given her when he went away, and the woman had no change. And she had scolded so that Charling had grown frightened and had run away, leaving the big, round piece of silver on the dirty little counter. This was about the time when she was missed at home, and the servants began to search for her, running to and fro like ants whose nest is turned up by the spade.

A big furze bush cast a ragged square yard of alluring shade on the common. Charling flung herself down on the turf in the shadow. "I wonder what they are doing at home?" she said to herself after a while. "I don't suppose they've even missed me. They think of nothing but making the place all flowery for *her* to see. Nobody wants me——"

At home they were dragging the ornamental water in the park; old Murchison directing the operation with tears running slow and unregarded down his face.

Charling lay and looked at the white road. Somebody must go along it

presently. Roads were made for people to go along. Then when any people came by she would speak to them, and they would help her and tell her what to do. "I wonder what a girl ought to do when she runs away from home?" said Charling to herself. "Boys go to sea, of course; but I don't suppose a pirate would care about engaging a cabin-girl—" She fell a-musing, however, on the probable woes of possible cabin-girls, and their chances of becoming admirals, as cabin-boys always did in the stories; and so deep were her musings that she positively jumped when a boy, passing along the road, began suddenly to whistle. It was the air of a comic song, in a minor key, and its inflections were those of a funeral march. It went to Charling's heart. Now she knew, as she had never known before, how lonely and miserable she was.

She scrambled to her feet and called out, "Hi! you boy!"

The boy also jumped. But he stopped and said, "Well?" though in a tone that promised little.

"Come here," said Charling. "At least, of course, I mean come, if you please."

The boy shrugged his shoulders and came towards her.

"Well?" he said again, very grumpily, Charling thought; so she said, "Don't be cross. I wish you'd talk to me a little, if you are not too busy. If you please, I mean, of course."

She said it with her best company manner, and the boy laughed, not unkindly, but still in a grudging way. Then he threw himself down on the turf and began pulling bits of it up by the roots. "Go ahead!" said he.

But Charling could not go ahead. She looked at his handsome, sulky face, his knitted brow, twisted into fretful lines, and the cloud behind his blue eyes frightened her.

"Oh! go away!" she said. "I don't want you! Go away; you're very unkind!"

The boy seemed to shake himself awake at the sight of the tears that rushed to follow her words.

"I say, don't-you-know, I say;" but Charling had flung herself face down on the turf and took no notice.

"I say, look here," he said; "I am not unkind, really. I was in an awful wax

about something else, and I didn't understand. Oh! drop it. I say, look here, what's the matter? I'm not such a bad sort, really. Come, kiddie, what's the row?"

He dragged himself on knees and elbows to her side and began to pat her on the back, with some energy: "There, there," he said; "don't cry, there's a dear. Here, I've got a handkerchief, as it happens," for Charling was feeling blindly and vainly among the coloured chinks. He thrust the dingy handkerchief into her hands, and she dried her eyes, still sobbing.

"That's the style," said he. "Look here, we're like people in a book. Two travellers in misfortune meet upon a wild moor and exchange narratives. Come, tell me what's up?"

"You tell first," said Charling, rubbing her eyes very hard; "but swear eternal friendship before you begin, then we can't tell each other's secrets to the enemy."

He looked at her with a nascent approval. She understood how to play, then, this forlorn child in the torn white frock.

He took her hand and said solemnly—

"I swear."

"Your name," she interrupted. "I, N or M, swear, you know."

"Oh, yes. Well, I, Harry Basingstoke, swear to you—"

"Charling," she interpolated; "the other names don't matter. I've got six of them."

"That we will support—no, maintain—eternal friendship."

"And I, Charling, swear the same to you, Harry."

"Why do they call you Charling?"

"Oh! because my name's Charlotte, and mother used to sing a song about Charlie being her darling, and I was her darling, only I couldn't speak properly then; and I got it mixed up into Charling, father says. But let's go on. Tell me your sad history, poor fellow-wanderer."

"My father was a king," said Harry gravely; but Charling turned such sad eyes on him that he stopped.

"Won't you tell me the real true truth?" she said. "I will you."

"Well," said he, "the real true truth is, Charling, I've run away from home, and I'm going to sea."

Charling clapped her hands. "Oh! so have I! So am I! Let me come with you. Would they take a cabin-girl on the ship where you're going to, do you think? And why did you run away? Did they beat you and starve you at home? Or have you a cruel stepmother, or stepfather, or something?"

"No," said he grimly; "I haven't any step-relations, and I'm jolly well not going to have any, either. I ran away because I didn't choose to have a strange chap set over me, and that's all I am going to tell you. But about you? How far have you come to-day?"

"About ninety miles, I should think," said Charling; "at least, my legs feel exactly like that."

"And what made you do such a silly thing?" he said, smiling at her, and she thought his blue eyes looked quite different now, so that she did not mind his calling her silly. "You know, it's no good girls running away; they always get caught, and then they put them into convents or something."

She slipped her hand confidingly under his arm, and put her head against the sleeve of his Norfolk jacket.

"Not girls with eternal friends, they don't," she said. "You'll take care of me now? You won't let them catch me?"

"Tell me why you did it, then."

Charling told him at some length.

"And father never told me a word about it," she ended; "and I wasn't going to stay to be made to wash the dishes and things, like Cinderella. I wouldn't stand that, not if I had to run away every day for a year. Besides, nobody wants me; nobody will miss me."

This was about the time when they found the white geranium in the churchyard, and began to send grooms about the country on horses. And Murchison was striding about the lanes gnawing his grizzled beard and calling on his God to take him, too, if harm had come to the child.

"But perhaps the stepmother would be nice," the boy said.

"Not she. Stepmothers never are. I know just what she'll be like—a horrid old hag with red hair and a hump!"

"Then you've not seen her?"

"No."

"You might have waited till you had."

"It would have been too late then," said Charling tragically.

"But your father wouldn't have let you be treated unkindly, silly."

"Fathers generally die when the stepmother comes; or else they can't help themselves. You know that as well as I do."

"I suppose your father is a good sort?"

"He's the best man there is," said Charling indignantly, "and the kindest and bravest, and cleverest and amusingest, and he can sit any horse like wax; and he can fence with real swords, and sing all the songs in all the world. There!"

Harry was silent, racking his brain for arguments.

"Look here, kiddie," he said slowly, "if your father's such a good sort, he'd have more sense than to choose a stepmother who wasn't nice. He's a much finer chap than the fathers in fairy tales. You never read of *them* being able to do all the things your father can do."

"No," said Charling, "that's true."

"He's sure to have chosen someone quite jolly, really," Harry went on, more confidently.

Charling looked up suddenly. "Who was it chose the chap that you weren't going to stand having set over you?" she said.

The boy bit his lip.

"I swore eternal friendship, so I can never tell your secrets, you know," said Charling softly, "and *I've* told *you* every single thing."

"Well, it's my sister, then," said he abruptly, "and she's married a chap I've

never seen—and I'm to go and live with them, if you please; and she told me once she was never going to marry, and it was always going to be just us two; and now she's found this fellow she knew when she was a little girl, and he was a boy—as it might be us, you know—and she's forgotten all about what she said, and married him. And I wasn't even asked to the beastly wedding because they wanted to be married quietly; and they came home from their hateful honeymoon this evening, and the holidays begin to-day, and I was to go to this new chap's house to spend them. And I only got her letter this morning, and I just took my journey money and ran away. My boxes were sent on straight from school, though—so I've got no clothes but these. I'm just going to look at the place where she's to live, and then I'm off to sea."

"Why didn't she tell you before?"

"She says she meant it to be a pleasant surprise, because we've been rather hard up since my father died, and this chap's got horses and everything, and she says he's going to adopt me. As if I wanted to be adopted by any old stuck-up money-grubber!"

"But you haven't seen him," said Charling gently. "If *I'm* silly, *you* are too, aren't you?"

She hid her face on her sleeve to avoid seeing the effect of this daring shot. Only silence answered her.

Presently Harry said—

"Now, kiddie, let me take you home, will you? Give the stepmother a fair show, anyhow."

Charling reflected. She was very tired. She stroked Harry's hand absently, and after a while said—

"I will if you will."

"Will what?"

"Go back and give your chap a fair show."

And now the boy reflected.

"Done," he said suddenly. "After all, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Come on."

He stood up and held out his hand. This was about the time when the cook packed her box and went off, leaving it to be sent after her. Public opinion in the servants' hall was too strong to be longer faced.

The shadows of the trees lay black and level across the pastures when the two children reached the lodge gates. A floral arch was above the gate, and wreaths of flowers and flags made the avenue gay. Charling had grown very tired, and Harry had carried her on his back for the last mile or two—resting often, because Charling was a strong, healthy child, and, as he phrased it, "no slouch of a weight."

Now they paused at the gate of the lodge.

"This is my house," said Charling. "They've put all these things up for *her*, I suppose. If you'll write down your address I'll give you mine, and we can write and tell each other what *they* are like afterwards. I've got a bit of chalk somewhere."

She fumbled in the dusty confusion of her little pocket while Harry found the envelope of his sister's letter and tore it in two. Then, one on each side of the lodge gate-post, the children wrote, slowly and carefully, for some moments. Presently they exchanged papers, and each read the words written by the other. Then suddenly both turned very red.

"But this is *my* address," said she. "The Grange, Falconbridge."

"It's where my sister's gone to live, anyhow," said he.

"Then—then—"

Conviction forced itself first on the boy.

"What a duffer I've been! It's *him* she's married."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Are you *sure* your father's a good sort?"

"How dare you ask!" said Charling. "It's your sister I want to know about."

"She's the dearest old darling!" he cried. "Oh! kiddie, come along; run for all you're worth, and perhaps we can get in the back way, and get tidied up before they come, and they need never know."

He held out his hand; Charling caught at it, and together they raced up the avenue. But getting in the back way was impossible, for Murchison met them full on the terrace, and Charling ran straight into his arms. There should have been scolding and punishment, no doubt, but Charling found none.

And, now, who so sleek and demure as the runaways, he in Eton jacket and she in spotless white muslin, when the carriage drew up in front of the hall, amid the cheers of the tenants and the bowing of the orderly, marshalled servants?

And then a lady, pretty as a princess in a fairy tale, with eyes as blue as Harry's, was hugging him and Charling both at once; while a man, whom Harry at once owned to *be* a man, stood looking at the group with grave, kind eyes.

"We'll never, never tell," whispered the boy. The servants had been sworn to secrecy by Murchison.

Charling whispered back, "Never as long as we live."

But long before bedtime came each of the runaways felt that concealment was foolish in the face of the new circumstances, and with some embarrassment, a tear or two, and a little gentle laughter, the tale was told.

"Oh, Harry! how could you?" said the stepmother, and went quietly out by the long window with her arm round her brother's shoulders.

Charling was left alone with her father.

"Why didn't you tell me, father?"

"I wish I had, childie; but I thought—you see—I was going away—I didn't want to leave you alone for a fortnight to think all sorts of nonsense. And I thought my little girl could trust me." Charling hid her face in her hands. "Well! it's all right now! don't cry, my girlie." He drew her close to him.

"And you'll love Harry very much?"

"I will. He brought you back."

"And I'll love *her* very much. So that's all settled," said Charling cheerfully. Then her face fell again. "But, father, don't you love mother any more? Cook said you didn't."

He sighed and was silent. At last he said, "You are too little to understand,

sweetheart. I have loved the lady who came home to-day all my life long, and I shall love your mother as long as I live."

"Cook said it was like being unkind to mother. Does mother mind about it, really?"

He muttered something inaudible—to the cook's address.

"I don't think they either of them mind, my darling Charling," he said. "You cannot understand it, but I think they both understand."

WITH AN E

SHE had been thinking of him all day—of the incredible insignificance of the point on which they had quarrelled; the babyish folly of the quarrel itself, the silly pride that had made the quarrel strong till the very memory of it was as a bar of steel to keep them apart. Three years ago, and so much had happened since then. Three years! and not a day of them all had passed without some thought of him; sometimes a happy, quiet remembrance transfigured by a wise forgetfulness; sometimes a sudden recollection, sharp as a knife. But not on many days had she allowed the quiet remembrance to give place to the knife-thrust, and then kept the knife in the wound, turning it round with a scientific curiosity, which, while it ran an undercurrent of breathless pleasure beneath the pain, yet did not lessen this—intensified it, rather. To-day she had thought of him thus through the long hours on deck, when the boat sped on even keel across the blue and gold of the Channel, in the dusty train from Ostend—even in the little open carriage that carried her and her severely moderate luggage from the station at Bruges to the Hôtel du Panier d'Or. She had thought of him so much that it was no surprise to her to see him there, drinking coffee at one of the little tables which the hotel throws out like tentacles into the Grande Place.

There he sat, in a grey flannel suit. His back was towards her, but she would have known the set of his shoulders anywhere, and the turn of his head. He was talking to someone—a lady, handsome, but older than he—oh! evidently much older.

Elizabeth made the transit from carriage to hotel door in one swift, quiet movement. He did not see her, but the lady facing him put up a tortoiseshell-handled *lorgnon* and gazed through it and through narrowed eyelids at the new comer.

Elizabeth reappeared no more that evening. It was the waiter who came out to dismiss the carriage and superintend the bringing in of the luggage. Elizabeth, stumbling in a maze of forgotten French, was met at the stair-foot by a smiling welcome, and realised in a spasm of grateful surprise that she need not have brought her dictionary. The hostess of the "Panier d'Or," like everyone else in Belgium, spoke English, and an English far better than Elizabeth's French had

been.

She secured a tiny bedroom, and a sitting room that looked out over the Place, so that whenever he drank coffee she might, with luck, hope to see the back of his dear head.

"Idiot!" said Elizabeth, catching this little thought wandering in her mind, and with that she slapped the little thought and put it away in disgrace. But when she woke in the night, it woke, too, and cried a little.

That night it seemed to her that she would have all her meals served in the little sitting-room, and never go downstairs at all, lest she should meet him. But in the morning she perceived that one does not save up one's money for a year in order to have a Continental holiday, and sweeten all one's High-school teaching with one thought of that holiday, in order to spend its precious hours between four walls, just because—well, for any reason whatsoever.

So she went down to take her coffee and rolls humbly, publicly, like other people.

The dining-room was dishevelled, discomposed; chairs piled on tables and brooms all about. It was in the hotel *café*, where the marble-topped little tables were, that Mademoiselle would be served. Here was a marble-topped counter, too, where later in the day *apéritifs* and *petits verres* would be handed. On this, open for the police to read, lay the list of those who had spent the night at the "Panier d'Or."

The room was empty. Elizabeth caught up the list. Yes, his name was there, at the very top of the column—Edward Brown, and below it "*Mrs. Brown*—"

Elizabeth dropped the paper as though it had bitten her, and, turning sharply, came face to face with that very Edward Brown. He raised his hat gravely, and a shiver of absolute sickness passed over her, for his glance at her in passing was the glance of a stranger. It was not possible.... Yet it was true. He had forgotten her. In three little years! They had been long enough years to her, but now she called them little. In three little years he had forgotten her very face.

Elizabeth, chin in air, marched down the room and took possession of the little table where her coffee waited her.

She began to eat. It was not till the sixth mouthful that her face flushed suddenly to so deep a crimson that she dared not raise her eyes to see how many

of the folk now breaking their rolls in her company had had eyes for her face. As a matter of fact, only one observed the sudden colour, and he admired and rejoiced, for he had seen such a colour in that face before.

"She is angry—good!" said he, and poured out more coffee with a steady hand.

The thought that flooded Elizabeth's face and neck and ears with damask was one quite inconsistent with the calm eating of bread-and-butter. She laid down her knife and walked out, chin in air to the last. Alone in her sitting-room she buried her face in a hard cushion and went as near to swearing as a very nice girl may.

"Oh! oh! oh!—oh! *bother!* Why did I go down? I ought to have fled to the uttermost parts of the earth: or even to Ghent. Of course. Oh, what a fool I am! It's because he's married that he won't speak to me. You fool! you fool! you fool! Yes, of course, you knew he was married; only you thought you'd like the silly satisfaction of hearing his voice speak to you, and yours speaking to him. But—oh! fool! fool! fool!"

Elizabeth put on the thickest veil she had, and the largest hat, and went blindly out. She walked very fast, never giving a glance to the step-and-stair gables of the old houses, the dominant strength of the belfry, the curious, un-English groups in the streets. Presently she came to a bridge—a canal—overhanging houses—balconies—a glimpse like the pictures of Venice. She leaned her elbows on the parapet and presently became aware of the prospect.

"It is pretty," she said grudgingly, and at the same moment turned away, for in a flower-hung balcony across the water she saw *him*.

"This is too absurd," she said. "I must get out of the place—at least, for the day. I'll go to Ghent."

He had seen her, and a thrill of something very like gratified vanity straightened his shoulders. When a girl has jilted you, it is comforting to find that even after three years she has not forgotten you enough to be indifferent, no matter how you may have consoled yourself in the interval.

Elizabeth walked fast, but she did not get to the railway station, because she took the wrong turning several times. She passed through street after strange street, and came out on a wide quay; another canal; across it showed old, gabled,

red-roofed houses. She walked on and came presently to a bridge, and another quay, and a little puffing, snorting steamboat.

She hurriedly collected a few scattered items of her school vocabulary—

"Est-ce que—est-ce que—ce bateau à vapeur va—va—anywhere?"

A voluble assurance that it went at twelve-thirty did not content her. She gathered her forces again.

"Oui; mais où est-ce qu'il va aller—?"

The answer sounded something like "Sloosh," and the speaker pointed vaguely up the green canal.

Elizabeth went on board. This was as good as Ghent. Better. There was an element of adventure about it. "Sloosh" might be anywhere; one might not reach it for days. But the boat had not the air of one used to long cruises; and Elizabeth felt safe in playing with the idea of an expedition into darkest Holland.

And now by chance, or because her movements interested him as much as his presence repelled her, this same Edward Brown also came on board, and, concealed by the deep daydream into which she had fallen, passed her unseen.

When she shook the last drops of the daydream from her, she found herself confronting the boat's only other passenger—himself.

She looked at him full and straight in the eyes, and with the look her embarrassment left her and laid hold on him.

He remembered her last words to him—

"If ever we meet again, we meet as strangers." Well, he had kept to the very letter of that bidding, and she had been angry. He had been very glad to see that she was angry. But now, face to face for an hour and a half—for he knew the distance to Sluys well enough—could he keep silence still and yet avoid being ridiculous? He did not intend to be ridiculous; yet even this might have happened. But Elizabeth saved him.

She raised her chin and spoke in chill, distant courtesy.

"I think you must be English, because I saw you at the 'Panier d'Or'; everyone's English there. I can't make these people understand anything. Perhaps

you could be so kind as to tell me how long the boat takes to get to wherever it does get to?"

It was a longer speech than she would have made had he been the stranger as whom she proposed to treat him, but it was necessary to let him understand at the outset what was the part she intended to play.

He did understand, and assumed his rôle instantly.

"Something under two hours, I think," he said politely, still holding in his hand the hat he had removed on the instant of her breaking silence. "How cool and pleasant the air is after the town!" The boat was moving now quickly between grassy banks topped by rows of ash trees. The landscape on each side spread away like a map intersected with avenues of tall, lean, wind-bent trees, that seemed to move as the boat moved.

"Good!" said she to herself; "he means to talk. We shan't sit staring at each other for two hours like stuck pigs. And he really doesn't know me? Or is it the wife? Oh! I wish I'd never come to this horrible country!" Aloud she said, "Yes, and how pretty the trees and fields are—"

"So—so nice and green, aren't they?" said he.

And she said, "Yes."

Each inwardly smiled. In the old days each had been so eager for the other's good opinion, so afraid of seeming commonplace, that their conversations had been all fine work, and their very love-letters too clever by half. Now they did not belong to each other any more, and he said the trees were green, and she said "Yes."

"There seem to be a great many people in Bruges," said she.

"Yes," he said, in eager assent. "Quite a large number."

"There is a great deal to be seen in these old towns. So quaint, aren't they?"

She remembered his once condemning in a friend the use of that word. Now he echoed it.

"So very quaint," said he. "And the dogs drawing carts! Just like the pictures, aren't they?"

"You can get pictures of them on the illustrated post-cards. So nice to send to one's relations at home."

She was getting angry with him. He played the game too well.

"Ah! yes," he answered, "the dear people like these little tokens, don't they?"

"He's getting exactly like a curate," she thought, and a doubt assailed her. Perhaps he was not playing the game at all. Perhaps in these three years he had really grown stupid.

"How different it all is from England, isn't it?"

"Oh, quite!" said he.

"Have you ever been in Holland?"

"Yes, once."

"What was it like?" she asked.

That was a form of question they had agreed to hate—once, long ago.

"Oh, extremely pleasant," he said warmly. "We met some most agreeable people at some of the hotels. Quite the best sort of people, you know."

Another phrase once banned by both.

The sun sparkled on the moving duckweed of the canal. The sky was blue overhead. Here and there a red-roofed farm showed among the green pastures. Ahead the avenues tapered away into distance, and met at the vanishing point. Elizabeth smiled for sheer pleasure at the sight of two little blue-smocked children solemnly staring at the boat as it passed. Then she glanced at him with an irritated frown. It was his turn to smile.

"You called the tune, my lady," he said to himself, "and it is you shall change it, not I."

"Foreign countries are very like England, are they not?" he said. "The same kind of trees, you know, and the same kind of cows, and—and everything. Even the canals are very like ours."

"The canal system," said Elizabeth instructively, "is the finest in the world."

"*Adieu, Canal, canard, canaille,*" he quoted. They had always barred quotations in the old days.

"I don't understand Latin," said she. Then their eyes met, and he got up abruptly and walked to the end of the boat and back. When he sat down again, he sat beside her.

"Shall we go on?" he said quietly. "I think it is your turn to choose a subject —"

"Oh! have you read *Alice in Wonderland*?" she said, with simple eagerness. "Such a pretty book, isn't it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. She was obstinate; all women were. Men were not. He would be magnanimous. He would not compel her to change the tune. He had given her one chance; and if she wouldn't—well, it was not possible to keep up this sort of conversation till they got to Sluys. He would—

But again she saved him.

"I won't play any more," she said. "It's not fair. Because you may think me a fool. But I happen to know that you are Mr. Brown, who writes the clever novels. You were pointed out to me at the hotel; and—oh! do tell me if you always talk like this to strangers?"

"Only to English ladies on canal boats," said he, smiling. "You see, one never knows. They might wish one to talk like that. We both did it very prettily. Of course, more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows, but I think I may congratulate you on your first attempt at the English-abroad conversation."

"Do you know, really," she said, "you did it so well that if I hadn't known who you were, I should have thought it was the real you. The felicitations are not all mine. But won't you tell me about Holland? That bit of yours about the hotel acquaintances was very brutal. I've heard heaps of people say that very thing. You just caught the tone. But Holland—"

"Well, this is Holland," said he; "but I saw more of it than this, and I'll tell you anything you like if you won't expect me to talk clever, and turn the phrase. That's a lost art, and I won't humiliate myself in trying to recover it. To begin with, Holland is flat."

"Don't be a geography book," Elizabeth laughed light-heartedly.

"The coinage is—"

"No, but seriously."

"Well, then," said he, and the talk lasted till the little steamer bumped and grated against the quay-side at Sluys.

When they had landed the two stood for a moment on the grass-grown quay in silence.

"Well, good afternoon," said Elizabeth suddenly. "Thank you so much for telling me all about Holland." And with that she turned and walked away along the narrow street between the trim little houses that look so like a child's toy village tumbled out of a white wood box. Mr. Edward Brown was left, planted there.

"Well!" said he, and spent the afternoon wandering about near the landing-stage, and wondering what would be the next move in this game of hers. It was a childish game, this playing at strangers, yet he owned that it had a charm.

He ate currant bread and drank coffee at a little inn by the quay, sitting at the table by the door and watching the boats. Two o'clock came and went. Four o'clock came, half-past four, and with that went the last return steamer for Bruges. Still Mr. Edward Brown sat still and smoked. Five minutes later Elizabeth's blue cotton dress gleamed in the sunlight at the street corner.

He rose and walked towards her.

"I hope you have enjoyed yourself in Holland," he said.

"I lost my way," said she. He saw that she was very tired, even before he heard it in her voice. "When is the next boat?"

"There are no more boats to-day. The last left about ten minutes ago."

"You might have told me," she said resentfully.

"I beg your pardon," said he. "You bade me good-bye with an abruptness and a decision which forbade me to tell you anything."

"I beg your pardon," she said humbly. "Can I get back by train?"

"There are no trains."

"A carriage?"

"There are none. I have inquired."

"But you," she asked suddenly, "how did you miss the boat? How are you going to get back?"

"I shall walk," said he, ignoring the first question. "It's only eleven miles. But for you, of course, that's impossible. You might stay the night here. The woman at this inn seems a decent old person."

"I can't. There's a girl coming to join me. She's in the sixth at the High School where I teach. I've promised to chaperon and instruct her. I must meet her at the station at ten. She's been ten years at the school. I don't believe she knows a word of French. Oh! I must go. She doesn't know the name of my hotel, or anything. I must go. I must walk."

"Have you had any food?"

"No; I never thought about it."

She did not realise that she was explaining to him that she had been walking to get away from him and from her own thoughts, and that food had not been among these.

"Then you will dine now; and, if you will allow me, we will walk back together."

Elizabeth submitted. It was pleasant to be taken care of. And to be "ordered about," that was pleasant, too. Curiously enough, that very thing had been a factor in the old quarrel. At nineteen one is so independent.

She was fed on omelettes and strange, pale steak, and Mr. Brown insisted on beer. The place boasted no wine cellar.

Then the walk began. For the first mile or two it was pleasant. Then Elizabeth's shoes began to hurt her. They were smart brown shoes, with deceitful wooden heels. In her wanderings over the cobblestones of Sluys streets one heel had cracked itself. Now it split altogether. She began to limp.

"Won't you take my arm?" said he.

"No, thank you. I don't really need it. I'll rest a minute, though, if I may." She

sat down, leaning against a tree, and looked out at the darting swallows, dimpling here and there the still green water. The level sunlight struck straight across the pastures, turning them to gold. The long shadows of the trees fell across the canal and lay black on the reeds at the other side. The hour was full of an ample dignity of peace.

They walked another mile. Elizabeth could not conceal her growing lameness.

"Something is wrong with your foot," said he. "Have you hurt it?"

"It's these silly shoes; the heel's broken."

"Take them off and let me see."

She submitted without a protest, sat down, took off the shoes, and gave them to him. He looked at them kindly, contemptuously.

"Silly little things!" he said, and she, instead of resenting the impertinence, smiled.

Then he tore off the heels and dug out the remaining bristle of nails with his pocket-knife.

"That'll be better," said he cheerfully. Elizabeth put on the damp shoes. The evening dew lay heavy on the towing-path, and she hardly demurred at all to his fastening the laces. She was very tired.

Again he offered his arm; again she refused it.

Then, "Elizabeth, take my arm at once!" he said sharply.

She took it, and they had kept step for some fifty paces before she said—

"Then you knew all the time?"

"Am I blind or in my dotage? But you forbade me to meet you except as a stranger. I have an obedient nature."

They walked on in silence. He held her hand against his side strongly, but, as it seemed, without sentiment. He was merely helping a tired woman-stranger on a long road. But the road seemed easier to Elizabeth because her hand lay so close to him; she almost forgot how tired she was, and lost herself in dreams, and awoke, and taught herself to dream again, and wondered why everything should

seem so different just because one's hand lay on the sleeve of a grey flannel jacket.

"Why should I be so abominably happy?" she asked herself, and then lapsed again into the dreams that were able to wipe away three years, as a kind hand might wipe three little tear-drops from a child's slate, scrawled over with sums done wrong.

When she remembered that he was married, she salved her conscience innocently. "After all," she said, "it can't be wrong if it doesn't make *him* happy; and, of course, he doesn't care, and I shall never see him again after to-night."

So on they went, the deepening dusk turned to night, and in Elizabeth's dreams it seemed that her hand was held more closely; but unless one moved it ever so little one could not be sure; and she would not move it ever so little.

The damp towing-path ended in a road cobblestoned, the masts of ships, pointed roofs, twinkling lights. The eleven miles were nearly over.

Elizabeth's hand moved a little, involuntarily, on his arm. To cover the movement she spoke instantly.

"I am leaving Bruges to-morrow."

"No; your sixth-form girl will be too tired, and besides—"

"Besides?"

"Oh, a thousand things! Don't leave Bruges yet; it's so 'quaint,' you know; and—and I want to introduce you to—"

"I won't," said Elizabeth almost violently.

"You won't?"

"No; I don't want to know your wife."

He stopped short in the street—not one of the "quaint" streets, but a deserted street of tall, square-shuttered, stern, dark mansions, wherein a gas-lamp or two flickered timidly.

"My *wife*?" he said; "it's my *aunt*."

"It said 'Mrs. Brown' in the visitors' list," faltered Elizabeth.

"Brown's such an uncommon name," he said; "my aunt spells hers with an E."

"Oh! with an E? Yes, of course. I spell my name with an E too, only it's at the wrong end."

Elizabeth began to laugh, and the next moment to cry helplessly.

"Oh, Elizabeth! and you looked in the visitors' list and—" He caught her in his arms there in the street. "No; you can't get away. I'm wiser than I was three years ago. I shall never let you go any more, my dear."

The girl from the sixth looked quite resentfully at the two faces that met her at the station. It seemed hardly natural or correct for a classical mistress to look so happy.

Elizabeth's lover schemed for and got a goodnight word with her at the top of the stairs, by the table where the beautiful brass candlesticks lay waiting in shining rows.

"Sleep well, you poor, tired little person," he said, as he lighted the candle; "such little feet, such wicked little shoes, such a long, long, long walk."

"You must be tired, too," she said.

"Tired? with eleven miles, and your hand against my heart for eight of them? I shall remember that walk when we're two happy old people nodding across our own hearthrug at each other."

So he had felt it too; and if he had been married, how wicked it would have been! But he was not married—yet.

"I am not very, very tired, really," she said. "You see, it was my hand against—I mean your arm was a great help—"

"It was your hand," he said. "Oh, you darling!"

It was her hand, too, that was kissed there, beside the candlesticks, under the very eyes of the chambermaid and two acid English tourists.

UNDER THE NEW MOON

THE white crescent of the little new moon blinked at us through the yew boughs. As you walk up the churchyard you see thirteen yews on each side of you, and yet, if you count them up, they make twenty-seven, and it has been pointed out to me that neither numerical fact can be without occult significance. The jugglery in numbers is done by the seventh yew on the left, which hides a shrinking sister in the amplitude of its shadow.

The midsummer day was dying in a golden haze. Amid the gathering shadows of the churchyard her gown gleamed white, ghostlike.

"Oh, there's the new moon," she said. "I am so glad. Take your hat off to her and turn the money in your pocket, and you will get whatever you wish for, and be rich as well."

I obeyed with a smile, half of whose meaning she answered.

"No," she said, "I am not really superstitious; I'm not at all sure that the money is any good, or the hat, but of course everyone knows it's unlucky to see it through glass."

"Seen through glass," I began, "a hat presents a gloss which on closer inspection—"

"No, no, not a hat, the moon, of course. And you might as well pretend that it's lucky to upset the salt, or to kill a spider, especially on a Tuesday, or on your hat."

"Hats," I began again, "certainly seem to—"

"It's not the hat," she answered, pulling up the wild thyme and crushing it in her hands, "you know very well it's the spider. Doesn't that smell sweet?"

She held out the double handful of crushed sun-dried thyme, and as I bent my face over the cup made by her two curved hands, I was constrained to admit that the fragrance was delicious.

"Intoxicating even," I added.

"Not that. White lilies intoxicate you, so does mock-orange; and white may too, only it's unlucky to bring it into the house."

I smiled again.

"I don't see why you should call it superstitious to believe in facts," she said. "My cousin's husband's sister brought some may into her house last year, and her uncle died within the month."

"My husband's uncle's sister's niece
Was saved from them by the police.
She says so, so I know it's true—"

I had got thus far in my quotation when she interrupted me.

"Oh, well, if you're going to sneer!" she said, and added that it was getting late, and that she must go home.

"Not yet," I pleaded. "See how pretty everything is. The sky all pink, and the red sunset between the yews, and that good little moon. And how black the shadows are under the buttresses. Don't go home—already they will have lighted the yellow shaded lamps in your drawing-room. Your sister will be sitting down to the piano. Your mother is trying to match her silks. Your brother has got out the chess board. Someone is drawing the curtains. The day is over for them, but for us, here, there is a little bit of it left."

We were sitting on the lowest step of a high, square tomb, moss-grown and lichen-covered. The yellow lichens had almost effaced the long list of the virtues of the man on whose breast this stone had lain, as itself in round capitals protested, since the year of grace 1703. The sharp-leafed ivy grew thickly over one side of it, and the long, uncut grass came up between the cracks of its stone steps.

"It's all very well," she said severely.

"Don't be angry," I implored. "How can you be angry when the bats are flying black against the rose sky, when the owl is waking up—his is a soft, fluffy awakening—and wondering if it's breakfast time?"

"I won't be angry," she said. "Besides the owl, it's disrespectful to the dear, sleepy, dead people to be angry in a churchyard. But if I were really superstitious, you know, I should be afraid to come here at night."

"At the end of the day," I corrected. "It is not night yet. Tell me before the night comes all the wonderful things you believe. Recite your *credo*."

"Don't be flippant. I don't suppose I believe more unlikely things than you do.

You believe in algebra and Euclid and log—what's-his-names. Now I don't believe a word of all that."

"We have it on the best authority that by getting up early you can believe six impossible things before breakfast."

"But they're not impossible. Don't you see that's just it? The things I like to believe are the very things that *might* be true. And they're relics of a prettier time than ours, a time when people believed in ghosts and fairies and witches and the devil—oh, yes! and in God and His angels, too. Now the times are bound in yellow brick, and we believe in nothing but ... Euclid and—and company prospectuses and patent medicines."

When she is a little angry she is very charming, but it was too dark for me to see her face.

"Then," I asked, "it is merely the literary sense that leads you to make the Holy Sign when you find two knives crossed on your table, or to knock under the table and cry 'Unberufen' when you have provoked the Powers with some kind word of the destiny they have sent you?"

"I don't," she said. "I don't talk foreign languages."

"You say, 'unbecalled for,' I know, but this is mere subterfuge. Is it the literary sense that leads you to treasure farthings, to refuse to give pins, to object to a dinner party of thirteen, to fear the plucking of the golden elder, to avoid coming back to the house when once you've started, even if you've forgotten your prayer-book or your umbrella, to decline to pass under a ladder—"

"I always go under a ladder," she interrupted, ignoring the other counts; "it only means you won't be married for seven years."

"I never go under ladders. Tell me, is it the literary sense?"

"Bother the literary sense," she said. "Bother" is not a pretty word, but this did not strike me till I came to write it down. "Look," she went on, "at the faint primrose tint over the pine trees and those last pink clouds high up in the sky."

I could see the outline of her lifted chin and her throat against the yew shadows, but I determined to be wise. I looked at the pine trees and said—

"I want you to instruct me. Why is it unlucky to break a looking-glass? and

what is the counter-charm?"

"I don't know"—there was some awe in her voice—"I don't think there is any counter-charm. If I broke a looking-glass I believe I should have to give up believing in these things altogether. It would make me too unhappy."

I was discreet enough to pass by the admission.

"And why is it unlucky to wear black at a wedding? And if anyone did wear black at your wedding, what would you do?"

"You are very tiresome this evening," she said. "Why don't you keep to the point? Nobody was talking of weddings, and if you must wander, why not stray in more amusing paths? Why don't you talk of something interesting? Why do you try to be disagreeable? If you think I'm silly to believe all these nice picturesque things, why don't you give me your solid, dull, dry, scientific reasons for not believing them?"

"Your wish is my law," I responded with alacrity. "Superstition, then, is the result of the imperfect recognition in unscientific ages of the relations of cause and effect. To persons unaccustomed correctly to assign causes, one cause is as likely as another to produce a given effect. Hallucinations of the senses have also, doubtless—"

"And now you're only dull," she said.

The light had slowly faded while we spoke till the churchyard was almost dark, the grass was heavy with dew, and sadness had crept like a shadow over the quiet world.

"I am sorry. Everything I say is wrong to-night. I was born under an unlucky star. Forgive me."

"It was I who was cross," she admitted at once very cheerfully, but, indeed, not without some truth. "But it doesn't do anyone any harm to play at believing things; honestly, I'm not sure whether I believe them or not, but they have some colour about them in an age grown grey in its hateful laboratories and workshops. I do want to try to tell you if you really want to know about it. I can't think why, but if I meet a flock of sheep I know it is lucky, and I'm cheered; and if a hare crosses the path I feel it is unlucky, and I'm sad; and if I see the new moon through glass I'm positively wretched. But all the same, I'm not superstitious. I'm not afraid of ghosts or dead people, or things like that"—I'm

not sure that she did not add, "So there!"

"Would you dare to go to the church door at twelve at night and knock three times?" I asked, with some severity.

"Yes," she said stoutly, though I know she quailed, "I would. Now you'll admit that I'm not superstitious."

"Yes," I said, and here I offer no excuse. The devil entered into me, and though I see now what a brute beast I was, I cannot be sorry. "I own that you are not superstitious. How dark it is growing. The ivy has broken the stone away just behind your head: there is quite a large hole in the side of the tomb. No, don't move, there's nothing there. If you were superstitious you might fancy, on a still, dark, sweet evening like this, that the dead man might wake and want to come up out of his coffin. He might crouch under the stone, and then, trying to come out, he might very slowly reach out his dead fingers and touch your neck. Ah!"

The awakened wind had moved an ivy spray to the suggested touch. She sprang up with a cry, and the next moment she was clinging wildly to me, as I held her in my arms.

"Don't cry, my dear, oh, don't! Forgive me, it was the ivy."

She caught her breath.

"How could you! how could you!"

And still I held her fast, with—as she grew calmer—a question in the clasp of my arms, and, presently, on my lips.

"Oh, my dear, forgive me! And is it true—do you?—do you?"

"Yes—no—I don't know.... No, no, not through my veil, it *is* so unlucky!"

THE LOVE OF ROMANCE

SHE opened the window, at which no light shone. All the other windows were darkly shuttered. The night was still: only a faint breath moved among the restless aspen leaves. The ivy round the window whispered hoarsely as the casement, swung back too swiftly, rested against it. She had a large linen sheet in her hands. Without hurry and without delayings she knotted one corner of it to the iron staple of the window. She tied the knot firmly, and further secured it with string. She let the white bulk of the sheet fall between the ivy and the night, then she climbed on to the window-ledge, and crouched there on her knees. There was a heart-sick pause before she grasped the long twist of the sheet as it hung—let her knees slip from the supporting stone and swung suddenly, by her hands. Her elbows and wrists were grazed against the rough edge of the window-ledge—the sheet twisted at her weight, and jarred her shoulder heavily against the house wall. Her arms seemed to be tearing themselves from their sockets. But she clenched her teeth, felt with her feet for the twisted ivy stems on the side of the house, found foothold, and the moment of almost unbearable agony was over. She went down, helped by feet and hands, and by ivy and sheet, almost exactly as she had planned to do. She had not known it would hurt so much—that was all. Her feet felt the soft mould of the border: a stout geranium snapped under her tread. She crept round the house, in the house's shadow—found the gardener's ladder—and so on to the high brick wall. From this she dropped, deftly enough, into the suburban lane: dropped, too, into the arms of a man who was waiting there. She hid her face in his neck, trembling, and said, "Oh, Harry—I wish I hadn't!" Then she began to cry helplessly. The man, receiving her embrace with what seemed in the circumstances a singularly moderated enthusiasm, led her with one arm still lightly about her shoulders down the lane: at the corner he stood still, and said in a low voice—

"Hush—stop crying at once! I've something to say to you."

She tore herself from his arm, and gasped.

"It's *not* Harry," she said. "Oh, how dare you!" She had been brave till she had dropped into his arms. Then the need for bravery had seemed over. Now her tears were dried swiftly and suddenly by the blaze of anger and courage in her

eyes.

"Don't be unreasonable," he said, and even at that moment of disappointment and rage his voice pleased her. "I had to get you away somehow. I couldn't risk an explanation right under your aunt's windows. Harry's sprained his knee—cricket. He couldn't come."

A sharp resentment stirred in her against the lover who could play cricket on the very day of an elopement.

"*He* told you to come? Oh, how could he betray me!"

"My dear girl, what was he to do? He couldn't leave you to wait out here alone—perhaps for hours."

"I shouldn't have waited long," she said sharply; "you came to tell me: now you've told me—you'd better go."

"Look here," he said with gentle calm, "I do wish you'd try not to be quite so silly. I'm Harry's doctor—and a middle-aged man. Let me help you. There must be some better way out of your troubles than a midnight flight and a despairingly defiant note on the pin-cushion."

"I didn't," she said. "I put it on the mantelpiece. Please go. I decline to discuss anything with you."

"Ah, don't!" he said; "I knew you must be a very romantic person, or you wouldn't be here; and I knew you must be rather sill—well, rather young, or you wouldn't have fallen in love with Harry. But I did not think, after the brave and practical manner in which you kept your appointment, I did *not* think that you'd try to behave like the heroine of a family novelette. Come, sit down on this heap of stones—there's nobody about. There's a light in your house now. You can't go back yet. Here, let me put my Inverness round you. Keep it up round your chin, and then if anyone sees you they won't know who you are. I can't leave you alone here. You know what a lot of robberies there have been in the neighbourhood lately; there may be rough characters about. Come now, let's think what's to be done. You know you can't get back unless I help you."

"I don't want you to help me; and I won't go back," she said.

But she sat down and pulled the cloak up round her face.

"Now," he said, "as I understand the case—it's this. You live rather a dull life with two tyrannical aunts—and the passion for romance...."

"They're not tyrannical—only one's always ill and the other's always nursing her. She makes her get up and read to her in the night. That's her light you saw —"

"Well, I pass the aunts. Anyhow, you met Harry—somehow—"

"It was at the Choral Society. And then they stopped my going—because he walked home with me one wet night."

"And you have never seen each other since?"

"Of course we have."

"And communicated by some means more romantic than the post?"

"It wasn't romantic. It was tennis-balls."

"Tennis-balls?"

"You cut a slit and squeeze it and put a note in, and it shuts up and no one notices it. It wasn't romantic at all. And I don't know why I should tell you anything about it."

"And then, I suppose, there were glances in church, and stolen meetings in the passionate hush of the rose-scented garden."

"There's nothing in the garden but geraniums," she said, "and we always talked over the wall—he used to stand on their chicken house, and I used to turn our dog kennel up on end and stand on that. You have no right to know anything about it, but it was not in the least romantic."

"No—that sees itself! May I ask whether it was you or he who proposed this elopement?"

"Oh, how *dare* you!" she said, jumping up; "you have no right to insult me like this."

He caught her wrist. "Sit down, you little firebrand," he said. "I gather that he proposed it. You, at any rate, consented, no doubt after the regulation amount of proper scruples. It's all very charming and idyllic and—what are you crying for? Your lost hopes of a happy life with a boy you know nothing of, a boy you've

hardly seen, a boy you've never talked to about anything but love's young dream?"

"I'm *not* crying," she said passionately, turning her streaming eyes on him, "you know I'm not—or if I am, it's only with rage. You may be a doctor—though I don't believe you are—but you're not a gentleman. Not anything like one!"

"I suppose not," he said; "a gentleman would not make conditions. I'm going to make one. You can't go to Harry, because his Mother would be seriously annoyed if you did; and so, believe me, would he—though you don't think it. You can get up and leave me, and go 'away into the night,' like a heroine of fiction—but you can't keep on going away into the night for ever and ever. You must have food and clothes and lodging. And the sun rises every day. You must just quietly and dully go home again. And you can't do it without me. And I'll help you if you'll promise not to see Harry, or write to him for a year."

"He'll see me. He'll write to me," she said with proud triumph.

"I think not. I exacted the promise from *him* as a condition of my coming to meet you."

"And he promised?"

"Evidently."

There was a long silence. She broke it with a voice of concentrated fury.

"If he doesn't mind, *I* don't," she said. "I'll promise. Now let me go back. I wish you hadn't come—I wish I was dead."

"Come," he said, "don't be so angry with me. I've done what I could for you both."

"On conditions!"

"You must see that they are good, or you wouldn't have accepted them so soon. I thought it would have taken me at least an hour to get you to consent. But no—ten minutes of earnest reflection are enough to settle the luckless Harry's little hash. You're quite right—he doesn't deserve more! I am pleased with myself, I own. I must have a very convincing manner."

"Oh," she cried passionately, "I daresay you think you've been very clever. But I wish you knew what I think of you. And I'd tell you for twopence."

"I'm a poor man, gentle lady—won't you tell me for love?" His voice was soft and pleading beneath the laugh that stung her.

"Yes, I *will* tell you—for nothing," she cried. "You're a brute, and a hateful, interfering, disagreeable, impertinent old thing, and I only hope you'll have someone be as horrid to you as you've been to me, that's all!"

"I think I've had that already—quite as horrid," he said grimly. "This is not the moment for compliments—but you have great powers. You are brave, and I never met anyone who could be more 'horrid,' as you call it, in smaller compass, all with one little tiny adjective. My felicitations. You *are* clever. Come—don't be angry any more—I had to do it—you'll understand some day."

"You wouldn't like it yourself," she said, softening to something in his voice.

"I shouldn't have liked it at your age," he said; "sixteen—fifteen—what is it?"

"I'm nineteen next birthday," she said with dignity.

"And the date?"

"The fifteenth of June—I don't know what you mean by asking me."

"And to-day's the first of July," he said, and sighed. "Well, well!—if your Highness will allow me, I'll go and see whether your aunt's light is out, and if it is, we'll attempt the re-entrance."

He went. She shivered, waiting for what felt like hours. And the resentment against her aunts grew faint in the light of her resentment against her lover's messenger, and this, in its turn, was outshone by her anger against her lover. He had played cricket. He had risked his life—on the very day whose evening should have crowned that life by giving her to his arms. She set her teeth. Then she yawned and shivered again. It was an English July, and very cold. And the slow minutes crept past. What a fool she had been! Why had she not made a fight for her liberty—for her right to see Harry if she chose to see him? The aunts would never have stood up against a well-planned, determined, disagreeable resistance. In the light of this doctor's talk the whole thing did seem cowardly, romantic, and, worst of all, insufferably young. Well—to-morrow everything should change; she would fight for her Love, not merely run away to him. But the promise? Well, Harry was Harry, and a promise was only a promise!

There were footsteps in the lane. The man was coming back to her. She rose.

"It's all right," he said. "Come."

In silence they walked down the lane. Suddenly he stopped.

"You'll thank me some day," he said. "Why should you throw yourself away on Harry? You're worth fifty of him. And I only wish I had time to explain this to you thoroughly, but I haven't!"

She, too, had stopped. Now she stamped her foot.

"Look here," she said, "I'm not going to promise anything at all. You needn't help me if you don't want to—but I take back that promise. Go!—do what you like! I mean to stick to Harry—and I'll write and tell him so to-night. So there!"

He clapped his hands very softly. "Bravo!" he said; "that's the right spirit. Plucky child! Any other girl would have broken the promise without a word to me. Harry's luckier even than I thought. I'll help you, little champion! Come on."

He helped her over the wall; carried the ladder to her window, and steadied it while she mounted it. When she had climbed over the window-ledge she turned and leaned out of the window, to see him slowly mounting the ladder. He threw his head back with a quick gesture that meant "I have something more to say—lean out!"

She leaned out. His face was on a level with hers.

"You've slept soundly all night—don't forget that—it's important," he whispered, "and—you needn't tell Harry—one-sided things are so trivial, but I can't help it. *I* have the passion for romance too!"

With that he caught her neck in the curve of his arm, and kissed her lightly but fervently.

"Good-bye!" he said; "thank you so much for a very pleasant evening!" He dropped from the ladder and was gone. She drew her curtain with angry suddenness. Then she lighted candles and looked at herself in the looking-glass. She thought she had never looked so pretty. And she was right. Then she went to bed, and slept like a tired baby.

Next morning the suburb was electrified by the discovery, made by the nursing aunt, that all the silver and jewels and valuables from the safe at the top of the stairs had vanished.

"The villains must have come through your room, child," she said to Harry's sweetheart; "the ladder proves that. Slept sound all night, did you? Well, that was a mercy! They might have murdered you in your bed if you'd happened to be awake. You ought to be humbly thankful when you think of what might have happened."

The girl did not think very much of what might have happened. What *had* happened gave her quite food enough for reflection. Especially when to her side of the night's adventures was added the tale of Harry's.

He had not played cricket, he had not hurt his knee, he had merely confided in his father's valet, and had given that unprincipled villain a five-pound note to be at the Cross Roads—in the orthodox style—with a cab for the flight, a post-chaise being, alas! out of date. Instead of doing this, the valet, with a confederate, had gagged and bound young Harry, and set him in a convenient corner against the local waterworks to await events.

"I never would have believed it of him," added Harry, in an agitated india-rubber-ball note, "he always seemed such a superior person, you'd have thought he was a gentleman if you'd met him in any other position."

"I should. I did," she said to herself. "And, oh, how frightfully clever! And the way he talked! And all the time he was only keeping me out of the way while they stole the silver and things. I wish he hadn't taken the ruby necklace: it does suit me so. And what nerve! He actually talked about the robberies in the neighbourhood. He must have done them all. Oh, what a pity! But he was a dear. And how awfully wicked he was, too—but I'll never tell Harry!"

She never has.

Curiously enough, her Burglar Valet Hero was not caught, though the police most intelligently traced his career, from his being sent down from Oxford to his last best burglary.

She was married to Harry, with the complete consent of everyone concerned, for Harry had money, and so had she, and there had never been the slightest need for an elopement, save in youth's perennial passion for romance. It was on her

birthday that she received a registered postal packet. It had a good many queer postmarks on it, and the stamps were those of a South American republic. It was addressed to her by her new name, which was as good as new still. It came at breakfast-time, and it contained the ruby necklace, several gold rings, and a diamond brooch. All were the property of her late aunts. Also there was an india-rubber ball, and in it a letter.

"Here is a birthday present for you," it said. "Try to forgive me. Some temptations are absolutely irresistible. That one was. And it was worth it. It rounded off the whole thing so perfectly. That last indiscretion of mine nearly ruined everything. There was a policeman in the lane. I only escaped by the merest fluke. But even then it would have been worth it. At least, I should like you to believe that I think so."

"His last indiscretion," said Harry, who saw the note but not the india-rubber ball, "that means stealing your aunts' things, of course, unless it was dumping me down by the waterworks, but, of course, that wasn't the last one. But worth it? Why, he'd have had seven years if they'd caught him—worth it? He *must* have a passion for burglary."

She did not explain to Harry, because he would never have understood. But the burglar would have found it quite easy to understand that or anything. She was so shocked to find herself thinking this that she went over to Harry and kissed him with more affection even than usual.

"Yes, dear," he said, "I don't wonder you're pleased to get something back out of all those things. I quite understand."

"Yes, dear," said she. "I know. You always do!"

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

[Page 219](#), repeated word "for" deleted from text. Original read: (it will for for me)

End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of The Literary Sense, by E. Nesbit

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